

# The Boy and Other Stories

by

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## **A Red Bicycle**

Usually his dad worked early Saturday washing the cars, working on the new ones, checking the engines. But then something happened. Instead of going to work he came into the boy's room and shook him awake. "Get up," he said. The boy got out of bed. He still felt sleepy.

"Where're we going?" he asked.

His dad was all grins. "We're going fishing."

He had wanted to ride his bike today, the new bike, the red bike that Dad had gotten for him. But fishing was almost as good. He put on his clothes and got the waders down from the closet.

Dad made him toast with jelly and drank a cup of coffee, but then he got impatient and said, "we're gonna miss all the fish," so the boy had to take the toast in the car.

"Why do the fish get up so early?" the boy asked.

"It's complicated," his dad said.

"Is it so they don't miss breakfast?" the boy asked.

"That's part of it," his dad said, smiling.

"After fishing can we ride bikes?" the boy asked.

"After fishing we can do whatever you want," his dad said.

His dad stuck his hand in the glove box until he found a cassette. He always listened to violin in the car. He had tapes of Brahms and Bach and Stravinsky.

“You’re mom got me onto this stuff,” he told the boy. She had given him the tapes a long time ago. “Stravinsky would have been a helluva fisherman,” he said, and then ran a pretend bow across invisible strings so that the boy almost believed he was playing.

They drove out to the place in the harbor where the spring ran. The tide was half out and the mud flats were showing high and black and smelling like bad breath. The boy tucked his shirt into the high-waders while his dad jointed the rod. Then they walked out onto the flat.

The mud sucked at their boots. The boy tried to keep up, but he kept getting sucked down so that he had to plant his hands in the mud and push and fight his way out. His dad walked a few steps ahead carrying the rod and net and tackle box. Every once in a while he stopped and waited for the boy to catch up.

When they came to the edge of the flat they went a few feet into the water, stirring it up so that it got all brown and cloudy. The sun was rising, and the boy looked at its reflection. He thought, “We’ll fish first, and then I’ll ride my bike.” He thought about how it would feel to ride on the new pavement on Laurel Lane. He would ride there for a while, and then he would go down the big hill and over to where Carol’s house was, and maybe he’d see her outside. Probably her sister would be there, so he wouldn’t want to stay, but it would still be good to look at her.

His dad started casting out toward the jetty on the opposite shore. The harbor was narrow enough where they were that you could almost cast all the way across on a good one. Sometimes the Mexicans were fishing on the other side. Whole families

sat out on the jetty dropping heavy line with bunker. But there was no one else out today.

“Do you see that?” his dad asked. He was pointing about halfway across to where there was some nervous water. “That’s baitfish.” Right when he said it the boy saw some little silver things come flying out of the water all at once. It was like someone threw a handful of dimes. His dad cast one right on top of the bait. When his lure came through they scattered like crazy.

“Move over here,” he said, and the boy stood to his left holding the net at the ready. He watched the lure come flying from the tip of the rod, arch up into the sky, and then dive back down into the water. His dad kept putting the lure in that same spot, reeling in through the baitfish, making them scatter. He had these thick, hairy arms, but he was gentle with the rod, touching it with the tips of his fingers.

He cast into the baitfish, and they kept jumping until finally he got a hit. The rod twitched, and he pulled back on it hard to set the hook. Whatever it was wasn’t very big. The rod barely bent at all. “You’re my net man now,” His dad said, the way he always did when he had a fish on. The boy nodded hard. He held the net up.

Even though it was nothing big he played the fish for a while, letting it take some line and wear itself out. When it got close enough the boy got the fish in the middle of the net and held it up in the air. It was a striper, too small to keep, but pretty looking. His dad grabbed it by the lip and worked the hook out of its cheek. He held the fish for the boy to see, and then he lowered it gently back into the water. For a second it lay there on its side looking stunned, but then it got going and disappeared into the harbor.

“We’ll let that one grow up a little,” his dad said.

It was getting light out. The air started to feel warm, and the mud started to stink. There were some horseshoe crabs right near their feet and the boy hoped they wouldn’t move any closer. He tried not to look at them. Instead he looked at the jetty on the other side and wondered why they never fished there. He looked for more nervous water, but everything was calm. His dad kept lofting up casts, trying to get something going. Sometimes he handed the rod to the boy and let him reel the line up.

They picked up another striper right as the sun broke all the way free from the water. It was a small one, but it was fat. His dad held it hard around the gills and twisted the hook from its lip. “A baby,” he said. “Just a wee baby, just a nothing fish, a diaper fish, just a hush-little-baby fish.” He would make songs about the fish. That was something he liked to do.

When the next fish came it was a bunker. Bunker is what the boy and his dad called them, but other men called them shad, or poggy, or greasetail, and if they were no good at fishing they called them menhaden. The boy netted the bunker. It was a pretty fish, white on the belly with yellow and green on its back, and little black spots from the tail to the gills. It’s a good fish, the boy thought. “A nice bunker” his dad said. “Now the blues and the bass have to follow it in. Then we’ll have something.” He flipped the bunker back into the water and then washed his hands.

With the line zipping overhead and the day heating up, the boy began to dream. He dreamt that there was a snowstorm. The snow covered up their house; it covered up all the cars on the lot. When the snow fell it made a sound like the chain on a bicycle. It fell and fell, and it was snow, but it was warm. The boy could hear it falling, whirring like a bicycle. He could hear it covering everything up.

The sun was all the way up when he stopped having his snow dream. It was hot, so he took off his long shirt and handed it to his dad who stopped casting and tied the shirt around the boy's neck.

His dad was saying something about Mr. Robinson. That they weren't going back to the garage anymore. There had been a fight. The boy thought about his bike. His bike was at the garage in the shed. His dad made him leave it there last weekend.

"We're gonna be moving around," his dad said. The boy wasn't sure what he meant. The bike was bright red, the color of a fire truck. His dad had cleaned it off and then locked it up in the shed.

His dad kept casting, but there were no bites. After a while he put his hand up to his eyes and started looking around the harbor. The boy did the same. He saw some gulls high above the water. They were looking for fish too. He saw a clam boat. The clammer was pushing his rig through the sand, but to the boy it looked like he was vacuuming. He looked at the jetty, but still no one was there.

"Yonder," his dad said, which was just a joking word. "That's where we'll get 'em," he said pointing, "yonder in the cove." The boy laughed and his dad reached a hand down and messed up his hair. "Get the net and we're off," he said.

They trudged back up the mud flat. They came onto the road where the car was and walked around the big curve, and then down into the trees. They went through the trees and came out on a small rock beach. At the end of the beach they waded in. It was rock and sand here, and the boy was thankful because his legs were tired from pulling his boots through the mud.

In the cove his dad said something more about Mr. Robinson. He called him a son-of-a-bitch. The boy wanted to ask about his bike, but he knew he better not. They caught a fluke, which was flat and looked like sand all over. It flopped around in the net so that the boy almost dropped the whole thing. His dad said, "Mr. Robinson can't run that place without me. Let's see him try."

The boy liked Mr. Robinson. Mr. Robinson always gave him the green army men and let him sit behind the wheel in the cars. Sometimes he took the boy and his dad to the diner for lunch. His dad said that Mr. Robinson could go to hell.

The sun was behind the clouds now, and the tide was coming in. The boy's legs had started to ache. He hoped that soon his dad would say, "Nothing biting, let's head back to the car," but he just kept casting and casting. The wind picked up and the boy started to shiver, but his dad didn't notice. He just kept throwing the line out.

It was past noon when the fish came blowing in from the Sound on the edge of a storm. It started to rain and the raindrops fell so hard that they bounced back up and hit you from both directions. "Here they come," his dad said, when he saw the frenzy. But the fish stayed just out of reach. It drove his dad wild. "Come here!" he

yelled at them. He cast as far as he could, but they were out of reach. The boy's teeth started to chatter. He was cold all over.

Finally, some bunker broke free, and the blues chased them into the cove. The rest of the school followed until the boy and his dad were right in the middle of it. At first it was just their backs breaking through the water, but pretty soon the fish thrashed right across the surface, tearing the water apart, scoring it white. The bunker were jumping into the air with their whole muscular bodies. There were hundreds of them. They churned up the water and drowned out the sound of rain. Then the bluefish started to boil up. They came up with their jaws working, biting right through the bunker.

The boy could feel the fish through his waders. They were like stray cats rubbing up against his legs. His dad was picking blues off the surface, lifting them over the other fish as they furiously shook their heads trying to throw the hook. He was laughing while he pulled them in. He didn't even call for the net. He just grabbed them around the gills and yanked the hook out until his hands were bleeding from grabbing the rough backs of so many blues.

As the tide came in it pushed the fish into the boy and his dad, and it pushed the land back. The water was half way up the boy's thighs. The boy remembered something his dad had told him. "If water gets into your waders it doesn't feel like water, it feels like bricks." Men got pulled under if they went too deep. They knew about a man who had drowned that way.

His dad was walking away from the shore, going deeper. The boy looked back at the shore, but it was far away. He watched his dad move into the deep water. He tried to yell out to him, but no sound came out. There was something warm and alive in his mouth, like a rabbit, and it was holding the sound back. He was going to disappear under the water, and the fish would swim into his waders across his bare legs.

He kept trying to talk but it was no good. He started to shrink. He was getting smaller, and his dad was getting farther away.

The boy was shrinking fast now. It had happened to him before. He had started to shrink in the funeral parlor on the red couch. That was the first time. He had started to shrink in the lot when Mr. Robinson yelled at his dad for losing the keys to the trans-am. He didn't want to shrink when they went fishing. He tried his best not to. He tried to talk, but there was the rabbit in his mouth, and he got smaller.

He was close to disappearing when his dad hooked into the big one. The rod bent nearly in half, and a look came into his dad's face. It was mostly in the eyes, like somebody waking up from a nightmare, half-crazed.

The boy was still small, but he could already feel himself growing. His dad grabbed him with one of those big hairy arms and said, "Get the net." The voice brought him back. It made him grow back to normal. He grew even a little bigger. His dad was splashing water up onto the line so that it didn't get too hot as it whirred out into the harbor. He guided the fish to the edge of the frenzy as best he could so that the dorsal fins of the other fish didn't cut the line.

His dad was talking to the fish. He was saying all kinds of things to make the fish come in. The boy started saying things too. "Get into my net," he said. "We're gonna take you home."

"Come on home," his dad said. "Come on home you goliath. Come on home with us you gorilla." The boy and his dad cheered it home, they pleaded, they asked it, and then they yelled at it when it got close.

The boy saw it first. He saw its tail cut through the surface and knock into a bunker. "He's tired. He's a tired fish," his dad said. The fish was starting to feel sluggish on the line, and his dad was grateful for the break. His forearms hurt and his shoulder was getting sore.

But when the fish saw the shore it went crazy. It knew that it was in a fight for its life now, and it pulled out some line. It started heading back into the frenzy, and his dad had to do everything he could to keep it out.

He let it run a little, pulling it off to the side, and whenever it stopped he reeled up some line. He started gaining more ground on the fish. It was getting tired. He pulled it closer and closer, but when the fish saw shore for a second time the whole thing started again. It fought like crazy, but it couldn't hold.

"You've got the net?" his dad said. He looked at the boy and the boy nodded. "You're my boy," his dad said.

They walked the fish back. It had started to die. This time the fish was coming all the way in. They moved backward, watching the fish as it tried to swim back to sea. It swam in circles, and it made the boy sad to see the fish like that.

As it got closer the tugs stopped. It felt like a stone on the line, massive and still. The fish would come home with them. It would ride in the car. His dad brought it close to shore, and the boy went with the net. He tried to knock the fish back. Go back, he thought. It wouldn't go.

“Net him,” his dad said. The boy tried, but the fish was too big. It was a blue, and the boy could see all of its old scars raised against its pale belly. His dad dragged it back. He dragged it all the way onto shore. The fish looked up at the boy from the top of his eyes. The gills worked hard. The fish was trying to breathe the toxic air.

That night they had to move his bicycle out from the garage. The boy waited in the car while his dad and Mr. Robinson had words. On the way home his dad was quiet. “We'll keep it in the bedroom for now,” he said. The bike was bright red, and when his dad carried it up the stairs the boy could hear the gears whirring as the wheels spun.

## The Boy

There had been snow, but now the ground was wet and gray, covered with stuff that couldn't be called snow anymore. It made the cuffs on his pant legs wet as he walked up the unshoveled driveway toward his house. He had started coming home for lunch after Mom died. Dad was home, too. Dad had quit going to work at the garage. Mr. Robinson said he could have a vacation.

He pulled up the welcome mat and found the little gold key. He ran his fingers over the teeth to knock off the dirt that got stuck on them. Inside he took off his coat and put it on the hook, and then he pulled his boots off and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Soup's in the fridge!" Dad yelled from down the hall. He could hear water sloshing around in the tub. Dad had never taken baths before that winter, but Mom used to take them all the time. She would sit in the tub after dinner with her eyes shut, with the candles and the white bubbles, and her head leaned back against the tiles. She had always left the bathroom door open so he could talk to her from his room. He talked and she would listen and ask more and more questions until he didn't know what to say, but he kept talking anyway just so she would, too.

Dad had started taking baths that winter, but he always shut the door, and the bathroom never gave off the same smell it used to. It just smelled different.

The boy turned on the gas stove. It made a hissing sound before it lit. He got to thinking about Mom and Dad in the kitchen together making dinner. Dad would pick him up and swing him around until it felt dangerous and Mom even said so. She said, "Put that boy down." She wore the apron with the rabbits on it. It made him cry to think about.

He thought about whether or not there was a heaven. But when he thought about it he didn't want Mom to be in heaven. He wanted her to be there in the house. All of her stuff was still there, her nightgowns, and her boots, and her special shampoo. Sometimes he moved them around and pretended like she had done it. Dad had told him to quit it, but he still snuck small things like her lipstick and the gold chain with the cross.

When the soup warmed up it smelled bad. He didn't want any of it, so he put it in a bowl and then dumped the bowl down the sink. That way Dad would think he had eaten. He left the dirty bowl in the sink and sat back down at the kitchen table. Down the hall, Dad had gotten quiet. Soon the boy would go back across the melting snow to the brick school building.

He was no good anymore. Just him and the boy in the house now, and he was no good at it. He tried to go back to work, but Mr. Robinson had let him go. He understood why. Couldn't have him moping around the place, coming up blank in front of customers.

The boy could go live with his mom's sister, Rose, in Detroit. They already had the twins, but they would take him. He wouldn't understand it, and that would be another burden on Rose, trying to explain what had happened.

He ran more hot water into the tub. The steam rose up around him and made him drowsy. He ran the blade deep under the skin, twice on each arm. It sliced the veins, and the big artery, and the blood drained out and made him even sleepier. It ran into the water and bloomed, vermillion.

He felt like he was in bed under a heap of blankets. Outside were wolves. They came close to the house in winter, thin so you could see their ribs, and hungry enough so that they didn't scare anymore.



## The Desert

In the desert  
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,  
Who, squatting upon the ground,  
Held his heart in his hands,  
And ate of it.  
I said, "Is it good, friend?"  
"It is bitter – bitter," he answered,  
"But I like it  
Because it is bitter,  
And because it is my heart."

-Stephen Crane, "In the Desert"

Holly leaned against the kitchen counter hovering over a loaf of bread and a jar of Welch's grape jelly. It was seven thirty, and she was going to be late for school again. She plopped a spoonful of jelly onto the bread, an inert, purple lump. Morning sickness wasn't supposed to start until the eighth week, but she had been sick every morning for the past five days. Maybe things were further along than she thought. How, she wondered, could she have lost track so quickly?

After puking in the toilet down the hall, she put away the bread and jelly and walked to school. The first period bell rang as she reached the fifty yard line of the football field. Rather than rush and have to walk into class late, she decided to wait on the bleachers until second period started.

Mostly it was a drag being a sophomore. Whenever you screwed up teachers were saying things like, "You're not a freshman anymore. Do you think they are going to put up with that in college?" It seemed to Holly like no one would care if you chewed gum in college, or left class to pee. She hoped that college was nothing

like high school as she sat shivering on the bleachers. It would be another half hour before the next bell rang, and she would have to sit outside in the cold and wait it out or else face the hall monitors with their red sashes and their prodding questions.

She remembered her mom's friend Rhonda saying that a pregnant woman should get to do whatever she wants. Of course Holly knew that there was a difference between a pregnant woman and a pregnant teenager. A pregnant teenager would not get anything she wanted. She would be forced to trudge into town after school to the Planned Parenthood building and sit in an overheated waiting room, sweating profusely, listening to the implacable wails of sick babies. It was like one of Dante's levels of Hell specially made for teen pregnancy.

She walked inside when the second period bell rang. In second period biology they were learning about the social behavior of whales. "The blue whale," Mrs. Wilkins was saying, "has a pod. Sometimes there are only two whales in a pod. Sometimes the whales only see another whale once in their whole lifetime. Can you imagine that?" Holly hoped she would never have to see a whale even once in her lifetime. She wished that she and Mrs. Wilkins could be in different pods and only see each other once in their whole life. Holly would give her the finger when they passed that one time.

Babies were what interested her now. She had looked through the textbook at the drawing of the pregnant woman. In the drawing the woman had a transparent uterus. Inside a baby curled up in some sort of pre-conscious slumber, waiting to be birthed. When they got to that chapter she could ask questions that really mattered to

her like, how much does it hurt to give birth? Or, how long does it take a baby to learn to use the toilet? These were things that she thought she had an idea of until she actually thought about them. But for the time being they were learning about whales.

That afternoon in the Planned Parenthood waiting room, one of the babies was throwing up on its mother's green cable-knit sweater. The puke was like all baby puke, an inoffensive beige that somebody might use to paint a home office. The mother didn't even notice. She just went on absentmindedly rocking the baby up and down against her puke sodden sweater.

Holly wanted to go away. She wanted to go to the Southwest. She spent a lot of time thinking about it lately, getting away from Virginia, getting out into the desert. Everything in the desert was the way it seemed, sharp and dangerous and right out in the open. The desert made sense; it was part of a malevolent harmony. It was as if the earth was presenting itself and saying, "This is life."

After her checkup she walked along the road, back toward her house. It was still light outside and she thought maybe someone would pick her up, but nobody did. She thought about how this had happened.

It had happened at Mark Holden's house, but not with Mark. That was too gross for words. Mark was this skinny, long-necked senior with bad acne, which he was always picking and squeezing. He was about the last person she wanted to do it with. The reason it had happened at Mark's is that his parents have a time share in Mexico, or Bermuda or something, so Mark was always having these giant parties.

On that particular night Holly told her parents that she was going to stay at Edith's. Edith's parents were divorced and Edith lived with her mom who always went out on the weekends. "You don't know what this means to me," she would tell the girls while she was getting ready to go out. She would poke her head into the TV room and say, "You know Edith's dad hit me. Right in this room." Holly tried to picture that. Edith's dad was a little bald guy, at least ten years older than her mom. Holly couldn't imagine him hitting anyone.

"You know, I never got a chance to be your age," she would say, more to herself than the girls, "but it's not too late, you know. *It is not too late yet.*" She sounded like a self-help tape. "Just remember that, Holly. Remember that you have your whole life in front of you."

They went through this same routine every time Holly was over. Edith was past the point of embarrassment. It was as if she couldn't even hear her mom anymore. She just flipped channels on the TV, waiting for her to finish with the makeup and leave.

That night the girls waited until they heard the car pull out of the driveway and then went to the kitchen and knelt in front of the knee high liquor cabinet. While Holly was looking Edith went to the fridge and got out a container of orange juice. Holly looked at all of the glass bottles. Some were a dull green color, some clear. One was dark blue. She pulled out the green bottle of vermouth along with the clear gin.

“What are you doing with that?” Edith asked, gesturing to the vermouth. They had tried it together a couple of weeks before, and agreed it was disgusting. And there wasn’t even much alcohol in it.

“Martinis,” Holly said, trying to sound sophisticated.

Edith put the orange juice away. She would end up having whatever Holly had. “Do you even know how to make a martini?” she asked.

“Jesus, Edith,” Holly said. “Do you have any olives?” Holly had looked up martinis on Google. There were all different kinds, but it said that the traditional kind was made with dry vermouth and olives.

“Olives?” Edith said. “We don’t have any of that stuff.”

Holly got down two plastic cups from the cabinet above the sink. One was clear with flamingos printed on the sides. Edith had gotten that cup when she went to Miami with her dad. The other was for coffee. It had a screw on lid and said “Top of the Morning to You!”

Holly poured each one about half full with gin, and then topped them off with vermouth. The website had called for specific measurements, but there were no shot glasses in Edith’s house, and Holly didn’t know what a jigger was anyway. Once the drinks were poured out Edith turned on the tap and filled the bottles back to where they had been before. Holly stirred the drinks with a spoon and handed the flamingo cup to Edith. Edith eyed it suspiciously. Holly took a sip from hers and then felt like she was going to throw up.

“How is it?” Edith asked.

“It’s fine,” Holly said. “Would you just drink it?”

Edith brought the glass to her lips. The smell of vermouth made her gag. She thought longingly of the orange juice.

The girls took the cups back into the TV room and watched a show where a boy dates a bunch of middle-aged women, and then chooses which one of their daughters he would like to date. After that there was a show about women who compete to win a makeover. Two gay men and a super-model drag the women around New York City, ridiculing their sense of style, bringing them to restaurants and parties, and occasionally looking directly into the camera and confessing to the TV audience that they find these women intolerable, pathetic, almost beyond repair, but given the circumstances, they will do their best.

When they were done with the drinks they would walk to Mark Holden's house, where Edith would be glad that she had Holly as a friend. Holly was rude and confident. The other girls were all at least a little afraid of Holly, so they would be nice to Edith. They would tell Edith that her hair looked good even though she had botched the dye job and made it a hideous maroon color. They would offer both Holly and Edith drinks from their expensive bottles of liquor, which Holly would accept and Edith politely decline.

When the show was winding down, and it seemed certain that the housewife from Brooklyn would win the makeover, Holly decided to let Edith in on her plan.

"I'm going to do it with Brian," Holly said. She sipped her martini and made a sour lemon face.

Edith was annoyed at how casual Holly could be. This was a big thing. You couldn't just say it like that. You had to talk these things over.

What would she have said if Holly *had* asked. She thought about it, but there was nothing she could have said to Holly. She didn't even know who Brian was. "Why would you do it with *him*?" She asked, finally.

"Edith, you're such a loser," Holly said. She didn't know what made her say things like that. She was always hurting other people's feelings, especially Edith's. "Jesus, I don't mean that, I'm just being a bitch," she said. "Brian's cute. Anyway, what does it matter? I'm gonna do it with someone, right?"

"Have you even kissed him?" Edith asked.

Holly looked annoyed. "Not yet," she said, "but he wants to, so...so what?" She wondered why she was defending him. She didn't care about Brian. She just wanted it to sound normal for Edith.

When they got to the party, Holly didn't mess around. She went straight over to where Brian was standing with a group of his friends. They all looked at her as she walked toward them, and then looked away when she met their glances. She leaned against Brian's shoulder and bit down on his earlobe. She bit hard as if to say, I know you're telling your friends, asshole, and then she walked into the other room to get a beer.

Meanwhile Edith didn't know what to do with herself. She just stood around feeling embarrassed. It felt like she was embarrassed almost all the time. She had worn this big sweatshirt with a panda bear on it that she didn't even like, but she

thought it made her look thin, sort of. She thought at least it didn't make her look fat. Edith smiled at some girls that she knew, but they either didn't see or pretended not to. She went into the kitchen, but Holly wasn't there anymore, she had already gone upstairs with Brian. Edith felt angry about the whole thing. How could Holly do this to her, invite her to a party and then just leave her with all these people she didn't know. She took a beer and opened it up, but she only pretended to drink it, stopping it with her lips before it could get into her mouth. After a few minutes she put the beer down and walked back to her house.

Brian was an asshole. Holly knew it, but she didn't care. She led Brian upstairs to Mark's parents' room. She had scoped out the upstairs the last time Mark had a party and decided that this was by far the best bed in the house.

She made Brian take his clothes off first. He had some hair around his nipples and a little bit beneath his belly-button. His thing was a dark purple color that made her think of a bruise.

"Now you," he said, once he was completely naked.

But Holly didn't want to take her clothes off in front of him. "I'll do it under the covers," she said.

"That's not fair," he said, "you saw me." He started to grab at her shirt, but she backed away.

"I'm taking my clothes off under the covers, or you can just forget it," she said. She pulled back the covers and climbed into the bed. The sheets felt luxurious. Maybe they were silk. She took off her jeans and her panties, and then started to take

off her t-shirt, but decided against it. Brian stood awkwardly by the side of the bed. She gave him a look that meant “come here” and he quickly slipped under the covers.

He didn't know how to touch her. He touched her body like it was a wheelbarrow. He kissed with his whole tongue in a way that got saliva all over her chin. She tried to show him what to do with her hand, but as soon as she let his hand go it felt like she was being examined by a doctor. She decided to give up. She pulled his hand away and maneuvered him on top of her.

She shut her eyes when he pressed up against it. It felt like she was being torn in two. The way he was moving around it took a lot of willpower not to push him off. She bit down on her tongue while he pushed against her. By the time the pain was no longer excruciating, the whole thing was over.

Holly got up. She went to the adjoining bathroom, locked the door and cried. Then she used one of the monogrammed towels to clean herself off. There was blood and some other stuff too, and the pain had not gone away. She ran warm water on the towel and wiped down her legs. All the while she could hear Brian whistling in the bedroom. He was probably still lying in the blood-stained sheets, naked.

She put her pants back on. Then she stuffed the towel in the small trash bin by the toilet. “Let him deal with it,” she thought even though she knew that Brian would just leave it. She walked back into the bedroom. He rose up and kissed her, thrusting his tongue against her teeth. She looked at the blood spot in the middle of the bed.

Brian went into the bathroom, and Holly went down the stairs and out the front door. She could hear the party throbbing behind her, the sea of voices under the

top forty dance music. She walked away from the house, down the street, past the newly cut lawns and the flower-lined front walks. The night had turned cold and goose bumps rose up on her bare arms. It was still early, but she felt so tired that her eyes were shutting as she walked up to Edith's front door.

Edith answered in her fuzzy pajamas. They looked so comfortable. Holly hugged her, which surprised them both. They sat up in the TV room until they heard Edith's mom pull up the driveway, and then they went to Edith's room and lay down in her bed.

Holly stayed awake. There was a dull, throbbing pain inside of her. She listened to Edith mumbling away in her sleep. Every now and then a word would come through clearly, "foreign...jogging...shirt" nothing that made sense.

Not realizing that she had fallen asleep, Holly woke up crying. It was an unsatisfying, whimpering cry. Edith wrapped her arms around Holly and nuzzled her chest.

"What is it?" Edith whispered.

"Nothing," Holly said.

"Well what are you thinking about?" Edith asked.

"I'm not sure," Holly said, "the desert or something."

She never said a thing about Brian after that night. Not to Edith—even though Edith knew—or to anyone else for that matter. She could tell from the way his friends looked at her in school that he had not been reticent. Sometimes she wanted to tell them that he didn't know his ass from his elbow when it came to sex, but she

kept her mouth shut. Brian flashed his asshole grin at her every time they passed each other in the hallway, but she just looked past him like he wasn't even there.

There was no way she was going to let him know that she was pregnant. She would have the baby and it would be hers alone. She had known that right from the start. There was nothing political, or religious, or even practical about her decision. It was just what she knew. She took a strange comfort in having this thing alive inside of her. She felt beyond harm, as if her life was not her own anymore.

It was during those first appointments at the Planned Parenthood that Holly had taken to daydreaming about the Southwest—Arizona, or New Mexico, maybe. In her head it was all the same. Sun bleached plains, giant cacti with branches that looked like big, prickly arms.

When she imagined herself in the desert it was always with the baby. She couldn't see it yet, but she felt it, pressed up against her breast, a warm lump with a heartbeat. And when she stopped imagining it, the feeling stayed with her. She carried a sense of baby-weight around with her in those months.

"You need to tell your parents," the doctor told her the first time she came in. That time the doctor had been a pretty Indian woman with one of those red dots between her eyes. "You might be surprised at how they react," she said. "It is very important that before you see me again, you talk to your parents."

Luckily, the doctors were always changing around. They were all women, mostly young. One of them was pregnant herself. None of them questioned Holly's

choice to keep the baby. Holly lied to them and said that the father was “in the picture” and that she would bring him along to one of the check-ups.

It was easy to lie to these women. Mostly because they believed her. And if they believed her, so could she, at least for a moment. She could believe without thinking, take comfort in words like “in the picture,” and “healthy living environment,” and all the other encouraging things these women said, to which Holly simply nodded, “yes, yes.”

She spent more and more time dreaming of the desert. At night she got a suitcase down from the upstairs closet and would pack and unpack it while her parents slept. It had been two and a half months. Soon she would start to show, and when she did, she would leave. She would board a bus with her suitcase and head west.

Around the time she started packing the suitcase, she stopped going to school. It was a pain to walk, and she figured she didn’t need to now that she was leaving. Both of her parents worked, so it was easy to skip. She would just stay at home and take the call from the principal’s secretary. “Yes, she is feeling under the weather,” Holly would say, doing her best impersonation of her mother. “Oh, Mrs. Price, Holly might be out quite a while. You better send her things home with Edith O’Reily.” Mrs. Price sounded concerned.

After a week of absences, Edith called wanting to know where she had been.

“Are you sick?” Edith asked. “You don’t sound sick.”

“I’m fine,” Holly told her.

“Well where have you been?” Edith asked, sounding confused.

“I’m moving,” Holly told her.

“What the hell?” Edith said. “You didn’t tell me.” She sniffled and then said, “I mean, why didn’t you tell me? We’re supposed to be best friends.” Then she had to stop talking because she had started to cry. Holly couldn’t think of anything to say. She listened to Edith cry on the other end, and then after a minute she hung up.

During the day she would take long showers. In the shower she put her hands on her stomach and tried to feel it. She could feel it from inside, but when she ran her hands up and down the smooth skin she was disappointed to discover that nothing had changed. From the inside it felt like a goldfish swimming around, or sometimes it felt like popcorn popping. She would shower until the hot water ran out trying to feel it.

If it was nice out she would sit on the back deck with a stack of magazines, glancing at the pictures, occasionally reading an article. Otherwise she spent her time watching TV or just lying around her room, thinking. It was like a vacation. She felt more relaxed than she ever had before.

She had started to pack the suitcase every night. She packed it with pants and sweatshirts and plenty of socks. Once she put in some of her mother’s house dresses. Another time she added scarves. The point was not to pack too much, but to take things that would make her feel comfortable and safe.

She had been pregnant for three months before she got the fever. It started in the morning and she hardly even noticed it, just that she felt hot, and her mouth was dry. But it wouldn't go away. She wanted to go see a doctor, but she didn't want to walk that far.

That night it got worse. Once when she got up to pee she had to sit down in the hall. Everything was spinning. Later she woke up and she was kneeling in front of the suitcase. Only she had packed all wrong. There in the open suitcase was the telephone from the kitchen, a pair of scissors, a pillow and some hair clips. The next morning when she woke up she felt a little better, but she still didn't want to walk all the way to the Planned Parenthood. It was too much even to think about. She didn't even get out of bed. She just went back to sleep.

When she woke up again the sun was shining directly on her making her feel even hotter. She flung the covers off, but she was still burning up. She got up and opened the window. Outside it was freezing. The trees had lost all of their leaves. When had that happened?

She thought hard about the Southwest. She imagined mesas covered in sagebrush. She imagined the bright, devastating desert. The day passed between sleep and wakefulness. She needed to get better. Her whole body ached and there were terrible cramps in her legs.

She made it down for dinner and sweated her way through a plate of linguini.

“Do you feel all right, honey?” her mom asked.

Holly shook her head yes. It was all she could do.

“Maybe we should bring you to see Dr. Zinsky tomorrow,” her mom said.

“I’ll be fine,” Holly said. She excused herself and went upstairs.

When she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror she was horrified. Her skin had turned grey, and her eyes didn’t seem like her eyes. They looked like they belonged to someone else. She went into her room and closed the door.

That night she dreamt she saw the baby. It had a wrinkled, purplish old man face, and a totally bald head. It was a boy. She felt so happy. Then she noticed something that scared her. The baby had her eyes, but not the way that you always hear people say, “he has his mother’s eyes.” Not like that. They were actually hers. In the dream she reached up to her face to feel for her own eyes, but they were gone, eyelids sealed together in a fleshy knot.

When she woke up from the dream she felt sicker than she had before. The room was hot. Her head felt like it had grown to an obscene size, and there were bad cramps in her stomach. The bed sheets were soaked in sweat. She wanted to get up and go to the bathroom down the hall. She wanted to get a drink of water and lay in the bathtub, but she couldn’t.

Maybe she had fallen asleep again. She wasn’t sure. At first she thought it was just more sweat, but it was sticky, and warm, and there was a bad smell. It covered the inside of her thighs and soaked the sheets. There was more blood than she knew was in her body. Panic made her silent. It slowed the world down.

They brought her into the hospital howling. She had to be held down. There was no getting her to swallow a sedative. She bit the triage nurse. Finally they got an

IV into the bulging vein under her bicep. Slowly the howls turned to a murmur. Her bite had broken skin, and left a neat row of teeth sized punctures in the fleshy part of the nurse's hand, beneath the thumb.

She was put in a room by herself. She felt woozy, and threw up, but there was nobody to clean it. The night stretched on forever, with only the hospital sounds, a hollow warbling from the air ducts and the beeping of machines. Without meaning to, she started to talk. "He would have wanted to see me," she said. Just that, over and over.

## The Boy Leaves Home

After the funeral everybody came back to the house. Aunt Rose had swept and vacuumed and made sandwiches. The twins were there, and Mr. Robinson, and some of the neighbors, and the boy's teacher. Mr. Robinson sat with him on the couch. The boy cried into his big padded shoulder and Mr. Robinson just patted his back and said, "He was a helluva a guy, your dad."

When he finished crying he went into the kitchen to go look at Mom's rabbit apron. Aunt Rose was talking to his teacher. "He wasn't right in the head anymore," she said. "Who'd do a thing like that? And the boy," she said, "like a scared animal." His face turned hot. He left the kitchen and went back to sit with Mr. Robinson.

The next day they waited for the train under the sign that said Detroit Northwest. Aunt Rose held his hand too tight. The twins were in their matching red coats and plaid skirts, running close to the tracks until Aunt Rose yelled at them to behave. Then they looked at him the way kids look at a stray cat that's too mangy to pet. They would need to make room in the house for him, Aunt Rose had said.

During the train ride he kept his face close to the window. He wasn't really looking at anything, just letting his eyes go out of focus as the world blurred by. After a while he felt like he might throw up. He kept feeling sicker and sicker until he did throw up on the plastic seat, and Aunt Rose had to clean it with her

handkerchief. She shook her head back and forth and said, “What are we gonna do with you?”

## The Girlfriend

You read her diary, which is how you found out she had cheated on you. Afterward you went back to your dorm and started thinking about what to do next. You thought you might kill her, like actually kill her. It was the first time you ever thought about what it would be like to kill another person. You would strangle her until she went limp, and then, to make sure, you would keep doing it for a few minutes.

After a while you stopped thinking about killing her. That wasn't what you would do. You got out the pack of cigarettes that you kept in your desk drawer and lit one up. You looked out your window. It was late and the glass reflected you back, but there was nothing unusual about the way you looked. You looked exactly the same way you had looked an hour before when you hadn't known that she had cheated on you.

You got out your phone like you were going to call her, but once you saw her name highlighted in your contacts you decided against it. All of a sudden you had this fit and started punching the wall. You hit it hard enough to knock flakes of plaster down around your feet, and then after a minute it passed, and you stopped and held your hand which was all red and starting to swell up. After that you sat on your bed and felt very tired.

What can you say when you read someone's diary? You didn't say anything to her at first, but she knew something was wrong. You had gone for breakfast and now you were walking in the park. She reached for your hand, but you wouldn't let her hold it. You didn't want to say anything, but she kept asking over and over until you told her.

"Shit," she said, even though she never cursed.

"I'm sorry I read it," you said.

"Why did you?" she asked. "Didn't you trust me?"

Hearing her say that drove you wild. "Trust you!" you shouted. Everything was quiet for a minute. You were standing by the little fish pond and there was no one else around on account of the weather. It had looked like it was going to rain all morning. You started to think what it would feel like to kill her again.

Neither of you said anything for a while, and then she said, "What are we gonna do?"

"I don't know," you said.

"Well do you want to break up?" she asked.

"Maybe," you said.

Hearing that made her cry. Only you didn't comfort her, you just watched and thought, I hope it hurts.

She said it had only been the one time and she was sorry she did it. It was the summer that you weren't around and this guy kept calling her. He called her three times a day asking her for a date, and she had resisted, but then one night when she

was drunk she decided to go over to his place. It hadn't said any of that in her diary, and you weren't sure whether or not you believed it, but you let her tell it to you anyway.

You asked her who he was. At first she wouldn't say.

"Why are you defending him?" you said.

"I'm not."

"Well what the hell are you doing then?"

"I just don't want to talk about it," she said.

"You better fucking talk about it," you said. It was the second time she cried, and you felt bad about bullying her, but only sort of. "Look what this is doing to us," you said, "we can't even have a conversation. Just tell me who he is."

The next day you made her point him out so you could be sure. You waited around the campus center with her, holding on to a turkey sandwich but not eating it. Finally he came in. He wasn't what you expected. He was this little black guy. He couldn't have been much over 5'5", and he had a stoop-shouldered old man look about him. You couldn't stop yourself from imagining them in bed together. It made you sick.

He was a dance instructor at a place near the school, so you knew where to find him. You'd never fought anyone before. Sure you'd wrestled around with other guys, but you'd never been in a real fight. You imagined how it would go.

You waited for him outside the dance studio. You had this whole speech worked out that you were going to give and you went over it in your head while you stood alongside the bike racks in front of the building.

When people started coming out you got this huge adrenaline rush. You watched them come down the front steps of the building. They were smiling, talking to each other in loud, happy voices. It seemed all wrong. You walked over to some bushes by the side of the building and threw up.

You waited and waited, but he didn't come out. All of the other people had already walked off and you started to wonder if you were in the right place. Maybe he wasn't in there at all. You stood by the building clenching and unclenching your jaw. The adrenaline had begun to fade and you were losing your nerve. What the hell were you going to do anyway, deliver a speech and then punch the guy in the face?

An old woman came out of the building and that really made you not want to fight. You looked up the steps at the front doors. They didn't budge. No one else was coming out. The old woman smiled at you and walked down the sidewalk to her car.

You stood there for another ten minutes, but he didn't come. There would be no fight today. A feeling of relief swept over you. You started to walk back to your dorm. You imagined standing outside that building waiting for him every day for the rest of your life.

You thought about the talk you would have with your girlfriend. It wouldn't be good. There were a lot of things that you needed to talk about. Maybe you would

break up, maybe not. It was Friday and you decided before you did anything else you would go to a bar and drink an ice-cold beer. It had to be freezing, almost too cold to drink. You would take little sips and hold the bottle up to your swollen hand, healing it one sip at a time.



## **The Boy Learns About Sex the First Time**

It was his first day at the new school. The twins were going to walk him to the door, but as soon as Aunt Rose drove off they ran ahead so he couldn't catch up.

He was supposed to introduce himself, but he just sat in the back and didn't say anything. When the recess bell went off he sat there until someone said, "C'mon," and then he followed the other kids outside to the playground.

It was February. There was a girl standing near the fence, on the other side. He watched her, but all she did was watch the other kids. His nose started running. After a while she saw he was watching her. She said, "Do you like me or something."

The boy didn't answer. He just looked away from her, his eyes filling up with tears.

"It's OK," she said. She came around the fence. From closer up he decided she looked a little fat. She grabbed onto his hand. They started walking. The boy didn't even know where they were going. He stopped when they got to the door, but she grabbed his hand and brought him inside. The house was warm and dark and smelled like cigarettes. She brought him up to her bedroom.

"Do you know what one looks like?" she said.

He looked at the girl. She was taller than him by a little, and had brown hair and freckles. Her stomach poked out from under her shirt, and her pants were too short so that he could see her pink, scratched ankles. The boy just stood there and looked at her.

“Don’t you talk?” she asked.

He tried to say yes, but the voice that came out was such a small whisper that it was like no sound at all.

She took off her too-short pants. Then she pulled down her white underwear with pink dots on it. The boy looked away. “Does your daddy watch those movies with the girls?” she asked. She took his hand and touched herself there. It was warm.

The boy went back to school. Nobody had noticed that he was gone.

## **The Boy Learns About Sex the Second Time**

Aunt Rose was on her back, naked. Her feet were around Uncle John's back. Uncle John had his head pushed into the pillow and kept sliding back and forth making the bedsprings creak.

He left the room. He shut the door all the way and walked down the hall until he was by the side door. He opened it up and sat down on the stone steps. He was supposed to be spending the night at the O'Connors', but he had walked home because he was afraid to sleep over. Everyone else wanted to sleep over, but not him.

He had meant to go right to his room, only he heard these funny noises coming from Aunt Rose's room. He knocked on the door and no one said anything, but the noises kept right on, so he opened it up. He knew what it was.

It was too late to go back to the O'Connors'. The boy curled up on the steps so that his head was touching his knees. He imagined Aunt Rose's legs and it gave him a boner.

John walked into the boy's room, the room they used to call the den. Then he went into the twins' room, and then the kitchen. Where the hell is he? he thought, embarrassed. Rose must be seeing things, he thought. "Rose!" he yelled from the kitchen, "you're imagining things!" Only John knew better. He shuddered when he thought of the boy standing there like a silent little ghost, watching them.

. He looked in the cupboard under the sink. He stubbed his toe on something in the dark and said “Gosh” which was a reflex from his childhood. He stepped out on the side porch for a smoke.

There was the boy, all curled up on the steps. As John looked down at him the boy started bawling. John stood there for a moment not knowing what to do. Then he reached down and put his hand on the boy’s side. “Shhh,” he whispered. He picked the boy up from the steps and the boy stopped crying, but kept his eyes to the ground. The two walked back into the house together. “Sit down,” John said, turning on the kitchen light.

Uncle John warmed up some milk on the stove. The boy wondered where Aunt Rose was, even though he knew she was in her bed. He stopped crying, but now he had a case of the hiccups.

Uncle John put his hand under the boys chin and tipped his head up. At first Uncle John frowned, but then he smiled at the boy. He got a beer out of the fridge and took the milk off the stove.

The boy sipped his milk carefully. He tipped the glass toward his face with both hands. Every time he set the cup down he sawed his hand back and forth across his lips to wipe away the drops of milk. He drank slowly because he didn’t want to leave the kitchen. He wanted Uncle John to sit just where he was and watch him sip the milk.

After a while John cautiously reached out his hand and ruffled the boy’s hair, which the boy seemed only to tolerate. When the milk was finished Uncle John

walked him back to his room. He remembered what it had looked like when it had been called the den. He held the door open for the boy so that a sliver of light fell onto the bed. Once the boy was settled under the covers, John backed out of the room. He took care to shut the door silently.



## Neighbors

It starts at about eight in the morning. She has one of those Nuyorican Rosie Perez voices that comes up through the floorboards as if we were standing in the same room. “Leave me alone! Stop *touching* me!” His voice is too deep to come through distinctly, but then he is always slamming doors and throwing shit, and that comes through just fine.

Usually she ends up crying and then he impersonates her, which leads to louder crying, and then I get up and go shower. By the time I’m out of the shower there is a different kind of noise coming up from their room, the bed creaking and her saying *ay, ay, ay*.

I see him almost every day because we take the same bus to work. But I have only seen her twice. Once she was taking the trash out and I was standing by the dumpster smoking a cigarette, waiting for Craig to pick me up to go out drinking. I don’t think she knew who I was, but I knew who she was because she came out of B1, and when she said hi it was the same voice.

She was a pretty average looking girl, on the short side, dark, curly hair, penciled in eyebrows. I tried to picture her in the bedroom below mine in a pair of underwear and one of his t-shirts, long enough to cover the tops of her thighs. Her face would be scrunched up like an angry child’s, her hair loose and greasy from sleep. I finished my cigarette and crushed it on the pavement. She started back to the

apartment, and I turned to watch, denim threshing against denim, two perfect thighs walking away from me.

The guy is named Sean. I know because he puts on his Denny's nametag before he gets off the bus. He's skinny and dark black and keeps his head shaved to the skin. We don't say hi to each other. I've never heard him talk except through the floorboards, and then I can't really understand him.

I avoid going to Denny's even though it's right around the corner from the hotel where I work parking cars. It's one of those situations where neither one of us wants to talk to the other, and it's been going on so long that it wouldn't seem right to start talking now.

When I try to sleep in on Sunday they are up fighting. I stay half awake and listen to the familiar sounds, the yelling, the slamming doors, the sobbing. After a while I get up, because what else am I going to do, sit around listening to them all day? I walk around the neighborhood and think that if it weren't for the apartment complex this would be a pretty nice place. There are all these old brick houses overgrown with vines. Sprinklers are going off in the front yards keeping everything green and alive. I stop to listen and I can actually hear birds singing.

I keep walking down to the highway. There's this bar Spanky's that I go to sometimes, and even though it's still morning there are already some cars out front. I think about stopping for a drink, but the thought depresses me. I know what it'll be like in there, just two old guys sipping beer and listening to whatever sad songs are

playing on the jukebox. Instead, I take a bus into the city, get a cup of coffee and go to the park. I stroll around, checking out the people, watching them walk their dogs or toss a Frisbee, or whatever they came to the park to do.

That evening I am standing outside the apartment having a cigarette and she appears next to me. She pulls out a pack of Kools, and starts smoking like we did this every night.

“You live upstairs,” she says.

I nod. We smoke for a while in silence and then she says, “Why don’t you ever say anything?”

This takes me by surprise, and as I start to think of how to answer she turns and walks back into her apartment. What is there to say? I think. What the hell does she mean?

After that everything goes on as usual. The only thing that is changing is how many cigarettes I smoke every day, up from ten to fifteen, and then from fifteen to a pack. I see Sean on the bus and he doesn’t look at me. That has always been our relationship. I wonder if it is a black/white thing, but that doesn’t make any sense, not really.

When I get home in the afternoon I open my window hoping to get a waft of her Kools. I think about what I want to say to her. I want to tell her that everyone has problems. I want to tell her that it’s none of my business, but what is she doing with him anyway? Really, what I want to tell her, I’m too embarrassed to say. And it

wouldn't work anyway, with him living below us, but it's a funny thing to think about, reversing everything, him having to lie there and listen to us.

In the evening I stand outside and smoke two or three, waiting for her to come out again, but she never does.

One day I get home from work and the cops are there at the apartment. I start walking up the steps to my unit, but an officer thrusts his hand against my chest and says, "You can't go up there."

"I live here," I say.

"We need to ask you some questions," he says, "just sit tight," and then disappears into her apartment.

I sit outside on the little brown patch of grass and wait. I smoke a cigarette, then another. Finally he comes out of the apartment and walks over to me. He pulls out a little notepad and starts firing away questions.

"Which unit do you live in?"

"B2."

"How long have you been living there?"

I stop to think for a minute. "Eleven months." God, I think, has it really been that long.

"In that time did you get to know the residents of B1?" he asks.

"No, not really," I say. "The guy works near me, but that's about it."

He makes a note and then asks, "Did you *hear* anything from their apartment?"

“Like what?”

“Like talking, fighting, anything.”

“Just the usual stuff,” I say.

He shakes his head and looks at me like I’m stupid. “Can you be more specific?”

I can’t. Or, I could, but what difference would it make? “Just the usual stuff, and I can barely hear what goes on down there anyway,” I tell him.

I picture her exhaling a cloud of smoke. She isn’t beautiful, no one would say that, but I keep picturing her face. Somehow it just works for me. No good reason. I wonder, why *don’t* you say anything?

The cop leaves, and I go up to my apartment and sit by the window. I can hear somebody moving around downstairs, probably him by the sound of it, drawers opening and closing, loud pacing between the bedroom and the kitchen. After a while whoever it is settles down, and then it’s just the nighttime bugs and my own breathing.

It’s quiet. The cops don’t come back, but neither does she, and I start to miss her. I go to work, and Sean is on the bus in his Denny’s uniform, a bright yellow shirt and black pants. I have a uniform too, black shorts and a white button-down shirt. We look like assholes.

I ride the bus into the city; I ride the bus out of the city. One night I go to a bar called Shadows and play pool until they close. Then I walk around until it’s time for me to go back to work. I start to get used to the quiet apartment. Maybe I’ll get a

TV, I think. Except the electricity bill is up since the weather turned hot and I started blasting AC, so I can't afford one. At night I still stand outside the apartment and smoke like I'm waiting for her to come back.

Then, as if my waiting worked, she does. I don't see her, but one morning they're at it like normal. "Stop it! Goddamn it, Sean, don't *touch* me!" I press my head down into the pillow and listen for a minute before heading to the bathroom. I turn on the shower and when the water runs hot I get in. I close my eyes and let it run down my face.

When I get back to my room it's not the usual *ay, ay, ay*. It's Something special, like the plane's going down, like the world might end tomorrow. It goes on and on and finally I have to leave to catch the bus. Sean isn't on it.

And I start to wonder, what am I doing here?

That night I come home after work and listen, but there is nothing to listen to. I open the window, and sure enough her smoke comes drifting up from below and makes me dizzy, and crazy, and it seems like desire will wait another day.

## **The Boy Stays Put**

After school he went around with the neighborhood boys. He didn't want to, but Aunt Rose said it was good for him, and she needed the time to herself.

They called him orphan. There were only two others in elementary, and the rest went to the junior high. Every day they went to the sump. People dumped their old broken down furniture there. The place was covered with these prickly bushes, and vines, and bits of broken glass, and used rubbers. They weren't supposed to go in, so they had to sneak over the fence, and sometimes one of the neighbors would see and threaten to call the cops if they didn't all leave. But most days no one said anything.

Once they were inside, they made teams. One team counted while the other got into hiding places. When the counting team got to a hundred someone yelled, "Manhunt!" and they went out looking.

He liked to hide. He would crouch down low and shut his eyes and pretend he wasn't there. Sometimes he heard footsteps coming close, and then he would hold his breath and pray for nobody to find him.

When it got dark someone would yell, "Game over!" and everyone else would come out of hiding, crawling muddy from behind trash piles. But he would stay crouched low to the earth with his eyes closed. Sometimes he heard them say, "Where's the orphan?" until someone said, "forget that shithead," and he could hear them climbing the fence and heading back to their homes.



## **The Boy Stays Put Part II**

It was the year the dog got run over. She was a beagle, and the twins called her Olivia, but he called her Henry. The twins would say, “She’s a girl you idiot,” but he didn’t care. He just wanted to call her something different.

She was their dog, but they never did anything with her. Sometimes they would tie her ears up with this piece of pink ribbon, but it was always him bringing her food and taking her for walks. “Henry,” he would say, and she would come trotting out of her house all dog-happy. They had a good time together going to the playground at school, or down to the bridge. When they got home he would roll her. She stretched long and worked her legs like she was running and it went on like that until Aunt Rose yelled at him to come back inside the house.

When Uncle John found her hit it was the boy that went with him to the vet. He sat up front and held her on his lap. The whole ride her tail kept thumping him on the chest. Through the flannel blanket the boy could feel a hole where the car had hit her. He got scared for her, but Uncle John kept saying, “shhhshhh,” and “It’ll be over soon sweetheart,” which made him feel OK.

Uncle John held the dog and the vet gave her the shot. The whole time her tail stayed wagging and Uncle John kept on with his “shhhshhh” bowing his head low

over the dog until her tail stopped and the vet took her away wrapped up in the blanket.

“What will they do with her?” the boy asked on the way home.

“She’ll go to the incinerator,” Uncle John said.

The dog was gone, but the doghouse stayed. When he crawled inside of it he could imagine that Henry was still there. He would say “Henry,” and then quickly shut his eyes. All the dog smell was still in there, and so was the chain and the bowl. It stayed put.

Now, instead of going to the sump with the other boys he waited to see if Aunt Rose was looking and then got down on his knees and crawled inside the doghouse. He could hear the boys go past, cursing and spitting.

The doghouse smelled like mud and like the way Henry used to smell. He would sit in one corner and close his eyes, feeling the warm spots where rays of sun made their way through cracks in the wood.

One day as the boys were walking past he heard someone say, “I saw him go in there. I swear.”

And then someone else said, “He isn’t that retarded.”

He shut his eyes tight and waited for their voices to fade.

“You wanna bet?” someone said.

He thought of Henry wrapped up in the blanket. He remembered the hole where the car had hit her. He remembered the way she had whined and seemed so far

from dying, and he wondered what it even meant to be dead. It only meant something if you were still alive, he thought.

He heard the fence open and then swing shut, and then the voices were close by. "I'm not going in there," someone said.

"You're chickenshit," said someone else.

Then a pair of hands grabbed around his arm. "C'mon retard," a voice said. "Just come out."

They dragged him by the legs. He let them. They dragged him all the way out. The boys seemed furious, and excited beyond belief. "The orphan's a dog!" someone said. He kept his eyes clenched shut. They asked him over and over why he was in the doghouse.

Someone chimed in, "because he's a shithead."

Someone else said, "I bet they make him live out here."

Finally someone said, "just leave the baby," and they did.

The boy lay on his back in the cool yard. He opened his eyes and stared up into the sky. It was a bright, blue day, the sort of day he loved sitting in the doghouse.



## Christmas Party

“I found Jesus,” Lily said. Ziggy looked relieved. “He was wedged between one of the wise men and a camel,” she said, holding up the plastic infant savior between her thumb and middle finger.

The holidays always took their toll on the couple, him because of loneliness and the dread of dying, and her because this was the time of year that alcoholism always found her again.

“Let’s skip the party,” he said, referring to the Christmas party for which they had already dressed up. She peeked at him from behind the bathroom door where she was applying make-up in the full length mirror.

“Do you want to?” she asked.

“Yes, very much,” he said.

They went anyway. When they arrived at Katie’s apartment everybody was already eating. There was ham and turkey and all sorts of small carcasses strewn about the dining room table for their enjoyment.

Right away Lily drank too much punch. He overheard her telling a man that she was the product of an abortion, and she turned out all right.

A girl watched him in a wilting, lovey-eyed way from across the room. Everyone here will be dead sooner or later, he thought. He wished that Lily would stay near him, but she was talking to a group of people across the room who he didn’t know.

Looking around, Ziggy realized he didn't know any of these people. They were all Lily's grad-school friends. He was conscious of the way he was standing by the table with the food on it and not saying anything. He pretended to wonder about the duck. He looked at it and then, picking up the large two-tined fork, examined a cut, purple in the middle with shades of brown and grey, ringed by a white layer of fat. Next he poured himself some punch and examined a wreath.

While he was pretending to be interested in the wreath he thought about the first time he had met Lily. It was three years ago at a party like this one. Except then he hadn't felt so out of place. They had both been students. He had been dating Marianne at the time, but it had already gone sour. Lily had asked him to dance. They were drunk, and after dancing for a while he maneuvered her into a corner and thought, this is love. It had been. He was sure.

He was only twenty two then and there was so much he had wanted from the future. But it was all vague, and formless, which was the shape of hope back then. Now, he thought, there was nothing in the future. He was just going to follow Lily around to places like this until she wouldn't let him anymore.

The sad, pretty girl approached him from across the room. "Freud says that all of our creative energy has simply been rerouted from the sexual acts we aren't allowed to perform," she said, "or even think of for that matter." She bit her lower lip.

This was forward of her, he thought. "Do you think that's true?" he asked.

“More or less,” she said. Then she said, “I bet you do something creative.”

Up close she was not pretty. She had acne scars on her face, and her chin had one of those second chins lurking below it.

“What do you do?” He asked.

She pointed to a pin on the shoulder of her white sweater. It said, *Artists Do It All Night*. He forced a laugh.

“What kind of art do you make?” he asked. He was trying to make conversation, but things seemed to have taken an unsafe turn.

“Pomo,” she said, which meant nothing to him. “Like the stuff you don’t see in museums because of the repressive power structures of the capitalist state,” she explained.

He tried not to cringe.

“I *know* you’re an artist,” she said.

“No, I’m not,” he said. He was looking around the room now, but Lily had disappeared and he felt suddenly, desperately alone.

“Well, what do you do, then?” she asked.

“I sell pennants,” he said.

“Penance?”

“No, like at football games, at the University.”

“Oh. But that’s not what you *really* do,” she said.

“Really,” he said, “that’s it.” He tried to look past her to locate Lily.

She looked hurt. “You’re smart just like everyone else here. You think you can pretend like you’re just some regular guy and not have to talk to me, but you

can't" she said. Then she abruptly walked over to a group of people standing around the Christmas tree. She said something, and pointed at him. Everybody looked in his direction for a moment, and then resumed their conversation.

At midnight the food was removed and Rufus came in wearing a Santa costume and a fake beard. Everybody applauded when he entered the room, except for Lily, who was weeping behind an oversized stuffed reindeer. It looked like a lovely place to weep.

Rufus moved a chair into the middle of the room. First he had Katie up on his lap and, to everybody's delight, fondled her breasts. She blushed and slapped his hands away, but looked the most delighted of anyone. He handed her a present, and wouldn't let her off his lap until she tore it open to reveal a pair of furry, leopard print handcuffs. Everyone laughed like crazy, like it was the funniest joke they had ever heard.

He had each of the women up one after another. They all looked either pleased or horrified propped up on his fat knee. One of them got a pair of edible underwear. Another was given a rubber fist. Ziggy imagined Rufus in one of those dingy sex shops pushing around a cart filled with this stuff. It made him shudder.

When it came time for Rufus to hand Lily her present she could not be found. Ziggy looked guiltily at her stockinged feet, which appeared beneath the reindeer's belly. He could tell from the way her toes curled that she was not done crying. Rufus looked in his direction, but Ziggy just shrugged his shoulders.

"What if I give it to you?" he shouted, slapping his knee.

Ziggy shook his head no.

Someone yelled out, "Let's burn it!" The suggestion quickly gained momentum. It's strange how things like that happen. All of a sudden everyone was cheering, "Burn it, burn it," until the whole party moved outside.

Once everyone was assembled in the small, snowy yard, Rufus tried to light the present with his Zippo. It would not light. People were holding their drinks, looking on uncomfortably. The zeal for immolation had disappeared as quickly as it had surfaced.

Ziggy noticed the woman who had talked to him earlier standing near Rufus, looking weepy and beautiful again. It was a trick, he knew.

Ziggy *was* smart, just not as smart as people had once hoped he would be. And he did sell pennants, and pins, and those big foam hands with the index finger sticking out. In the football stadium he saw people who he had gone to school with, still in college, or graduate students now, and they always shook his hand and gave him a pat on the back and asked him what he was still doing around.

He went back inside and crawled behind the reindeer. Lily was sitting down, exhausted, tearful, in a pose that only women know which involves the tucking of one leg under a skirt. Where exactly does that leg go, he wondered.

He held her hand, and she held back. Thank God she held back. She breathed loudly. When she talked it was so close to his face that her lips brushed his cheek. "Take me home," she said, neither lovingly nor with malice.

When they walked outside to the car everybody was standing around the small fire that Lily's present had become. Ziggy called the fire department. "There's a fire on the lawn of 38 Home Avenue," he said, "and it appears to be quite out of control." He paused and listened. Then he said, "Yes," and, "thank you."

Lily fell asleep on the drive home and when she woke up she was sick. He had worried about this. He gave her water and Advil and brought her up to bed. He put the bucket that they had bought for just this purpose next to the bed. For a while he stood beside her, watching as she slipped back into sleep.

He went downstairs and turned on the TV. There were movies about Christmas, about lovely, safe childhoods spent ice-skating and throwing snowballs. Everybody on TV was wearing a particular red and white sweater and eating candy canes and hanging baubles on trees. They were not playing movies about furious, drunk fathers, or leukemia.

Sitting in front of the TV, Ziggy became convinced that he was not going to die. He laughed about the party and the feeling of disaster that had gripped him there. Lily was asleep on their bed, and just knowing that made him feel safe.

"I love you," Ziggy yelled up the stairs. That is the wonderful thing about sound. It moves around barriers to reach its object. The sound of his voice travelled, ghostlike, up each stair, around the corner, through the door and came to rest in Lily's ears. The question was, could love do the same?

## **The Boy Learns to Run**

Coach Drew saved his life. Not literally. He just let the boy run. He said the boy had a good long-distance body, which meant that he was bean-pole skinny.

The boy had never played a sport before in his life. He used to run with Henry, but then Henry had been dead for years. He liked running, though. At first he was so slow that he couldn't practice with the rest of the team. He would do laps around the track while the other boys ran on the cross-country trails.

Coach Drew said it was the first time he had ever had a junior come out who had never run before. He said it took guts. The boy didn't know what to say. He had been instructed to try out by Aunt Rose after he lost his job at the A&P. He didn't want to play soccer, and no one even mentioned football, so cross-country was the only choice left.

"You're a natural," Coach Drew told him, "just get that damn slouch out of your shoulders."

He ran JV that year. He was the oldest JV guy they had. He was OK with that. That summer he ran around the neighborhood, and people would shout at him, "Run Forrest, run!" Running was the only thing he wanted to do anymore.

The following fall when he hit the trails he was faster than anyone else they had. Easily. "Jesus Christ," Phil said in the showers, "you got fast as fuck."

He ran for the Varsity that year. He made All-State. They had a dinner and Coach Drew gave a speech. He said, "This boy has heart. I've never seen anyone else like him. He's the best of the good ones."

Aunt Rose and Uncle John came. Aunt Rose hugged him and kissed his cheek and Uncle John clapped him on the back and said, "I'm proud of you."

It was easily the best night of his life.

## The Camp

Outside it was February cold even though it was still only December. All of the weather stations had predicted a hard winter, one of the worst in the state's history. In front of the clinic, the protestors were bundled up in overcoats and scarves. They were scrunching their faces against the wind, holding signs in their mittened hands that said, "Abortion Is Murder" and "Thou Shall Not Kill."

Marianne tightened her grip around my arm as we made our way through the crowd. Neither one of us looked. We kept our eyes locked straight ahead and made for the steps. As we hurried past, a middle-aged man detached himself from the crowd, walked right up to Marianne and started talking in her ear. He looked like he could have been her father: The same dark, sloping eyebrows, and the same long Scandinavian face. I already knew I would have dreams about him.

While he talked she began to shiver. I stepped between them and grabbed his arm. I told him to fuck off, and that he didn't know anything about our lives. The man squared his shoulders. We stood face-to-face like two fighters touching gloves, close enough that I could smell something sour on his breath. "I know about that life," he said, staring me dead in the eye, but pointing a pale finger at Marianne.

I knocked him on his ass. I didn't know what else to do. Just a hard shove and he fell back onto the steps. I looked at the other protestors to see how they would react, but they just carried on with their objection as if nothing had changed. The man looked up at me from the steps and for a moment his eyes seemed to close over with cataracts, but it was only the reflection of a passing cloud.

Once we made it through the door Marianne ignored me. I sat in the waiting room and they took her down the hall. I looked at the other people sitting there, fidgeting, drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups. One man held a bouquet of flowers, sad-looking Gerber daisies and baby's breath, a bad choice.

I sat there for hours. I don't know exactly how long, but it felt like hours. The room was solid white with no windows. It was the kind of place that could drive you crazy if you stayed long enough, not to mention what they were doing down the hall.

Five men and one woman. We avoided making eye contact with each other the whole time we were there. It's not the sort of place you want to meet someone. As long as you're there, you might as well be dead. I kept imagining them putting sharp things inside of Marianne, shards of glass, scissors, razor blades. Poor Marianne, I thought. I didn't let myself think about the fetus.

When it was over they told me I could come in. Marianne was lying on a cot behind a white curtain. She was wearing a blue paper gown, staring at the ceiling, cheeks flushed, looking angelic or dead. I reached for her hand, but as soon as I touched it she pulled away, hiding it under the gown. "Why don't you wait outside?" a nurse asked as politely as possible.

Things had been going so well up until I got her pregnant. She had gotten a job teaching art at the high school. I had just gotten a raise and we discussed buying

a place. But for the time being we had just decided to enjoy the extra money. We went out to dinner on the weekends, and went drinking when we felt like it, staying late, sipping our drinks and dreaming of all the good things our futures held.

Then one night over dinner she told me she was late. "I'm sure it's nothing," I said, "stress, or...you've been losing weight."

"You're probably right," she said, "but just to be on the safe side."

So we went out to the drugstore for one of those do-it-at-home pregnancy tests. We picked it out together but she insisted on waiting outside while I paid.

We had to wait until the next morning. If she was pregnant it would turn pink, and there would be a plus sign, if not just a plain black minus. We got up early. She went into the bathroom, and I stayed in bed. I could hear her opening the package, and then peeing into the toilet.

"What does it say?" I yelled into the bathroom.

"You have to wait," she said.

I got up and moved nervously around the bedroom. I pressed my ear against the bathroom door and listened. I heard Marianne sigh, and then I knocked.

"Not yet," she said.

"Let me in," I said.

"Would you just wait out there? It takes time."

I waited. I waited for what must have been much longer than it took for her to find out, and I didn't say a thing. Finally she came out of the bathroom. Her nose was running and she held the thing awkwardly in her hand, like she didn't know what to do with it.

“What does it say?” I asked.

She held it out to me so I could see the pink plus sign.

“Well, we can make this work,” I said, unsure of myself the moment I spoke the words.

“No,” she said, “we can’t. I’ve already decided.”

“I get it,” I said. And then repeated myself. “I get it, I get it, I get it...” until after a while I didn’t know what I was saying.

I waited outside on the grey steps. The protestors were gone, back to their homes or off to church, or wherever they went on Saturday afternoons. The sky was lighter now, and the temperature had dropped. After a while Marianne appeared at the top of the steps. A woman in a flower-print blouse was holding her hand. Marianne looked empty, like if I said something to her it would just pass through her body and into the unspeaking earth.

What should I have said to her? If I knew the answer to that then maybe we could heal together, maybe it would become bearable to live again. But I didn’t. I stood dumbly. Again, I tried to take her hand, and again she jerked it away from me.

We walked down the steps in silence, and when we hit the street she said, “I’m going to stay with my mom.” The words sounded rehearsed, like they had been spoken before in an empty house to no one.

“Please,” I said. “Please don’t.” But she walked off down the street and I just stood there. I didn’t even try to follow her. When she had gotten part of the way down the block she stopped and shouted, “Don’t call!” without ever turning around.

As I walked back to our apartment I had no thoughts. I concentrated on the snow that was piled up against the curb. The sun was so bright that it made the snow a new shade of white. It turned so bright that it made my eyes water to look at it.

I was still staring blindly into the snow five blocks later when I ran into Joseph. He's an artist of some kind. Once he had invited us, Marianne and I, to an opening, but I couldn't remember what for. Usually I would have just said hi to him and kept moving, but in my stupor I let him stop me and tell me some idea he had.

The idea was to build one of those trash barrel fires in the park. He explained it with wild gestures, throwing his hands all over the place, nearly shouting. I barely listened to what he was saying. I looked into his large benevolent face, and was thankful that he had found me and stopped me with this wonderful idea. I nodded my head yes and he grinned thickly from under a greasy red beard.

First we went to the corner store. I headed to the coolers in the back for a six pack of Miller. Joseph browsed the aisles and then followed me up to the counter. I asked the cashier for a fifth of Black Velvet, and while he was turned around getting it down from the shelf Joseph pocketed some of the miscellany they have lying around the counter, candy bars and chewing gum, calling cards and Necco wafers. He stuffed it away in his tattered down jacket.

Afterward, we scouted around for trash to burn. Newspapers, cardboard, anything flammable. I picked up what I could find on the street, but Joseph went right to the garbage cans, elbow deep and greedy. It only took me a minute before I

was following his example. “All the good stuff’s already in the trash,” he said, and I nodded, foraging through the garbage for things that would keep us warm.

Just inside the park’s entrance I watched two boys chasing after a sheep dog as it bounded through the snow, trailing its leash. Pine boughs sagged with the weight of snow. Snow everywhere, white and reflective, covering the place up, making me think of a winter that would go on forever.

I followed Joseph deep into the park, a six pack in one hand and a bundle of garbage tucked under my arm. I could feel the fifth poking into my hipbone through my pants pocket. He took me to a place where one of his friends had a small camp of corrugated cardboard. The cardboard was stacked up lean-to style against a tree, and filled with dirty old blankets. Someone had brought a steel-blue trash barrel out there. We stacked it high with garbage and when we lit it, it burned red hot. It was great just to stand there and look into that fire and not talk.

After standing there for a few minutes I forgot about Marianne. It was like I was a kid again, nothing to worry about. I looked around at the little camp. The ground was tamped down, icy and hard looking, and some snow had been cleared away to make room for the lean-to. It seemed like a comfy place, the sort of place where you could really think.

I started to wonder about Joseph, what he did when I wasn’t there watching. “Do you ever wish you were someone else?” I asked him, breaking the silence. He grinned. Joseph was one of those guys who was always grinning. “Yeah,” he said, “sometimes I wish I were a dead guy.”

I thought about that for a minute and then pulled the Black Velvet out of my pants pocket and handed it to him. He took a long pull, and wiped down the neck with his shirtsleeve before passing it back. I took a few little sips and then passed it his way, and, following my example, he took small sips to make the bottle last. The fire had gotten hot enough to make my face sweat. We kept adding old newspapers and pine branches that had been drying inside the cardboard hut. Joseph seemed not to notice the heat. He stood with his face right over the barrel, flames jumping up and singeing his beard.

Once the Black Velvet was gone I fetched the Miller from where it was cooling in the snow. Joseph went to look for some more trash to burn and came back toting a McDonald's bag and some rotten looking tree branches. I wanted to burn the cardboard, but he said no.

“What's that girl's name?” he asked after a while. “The one you're with?”

“Marianne,” I said solemnly. I said her name the way you might say “mercury poisoning.”

“Yeah,” he said, “Marianne.”

When the beer ran out and the fire was almost dead he crawled inside the cardboard and pulled a blanket around himself. I realized that this had been his place all along. I thought about that while I polished off the last of the beer. I didn't think of Joseph as homeless, but that doesn't mean he had a home. He was just too young to be homeless. He was more like a drifter. The difference was he was an artist, and

young, and there was still some hope for him. I bent down and peered inside the lean-to. He was already sound asleep, his lips frozen in a drunken grin, a thread of spittle hanging onto his beard.

I walked from the park back to the apartment. Everything was how we had left it that morning. I picked up one of Marianne's socks and stuffed it into our overflowing hamper. I had drunk too much and had a case of the spins. I tried lying down, but that only made me dizzier. The ceiling revolved around me and I stared at the cracks in it, just the way I had stared at the snow earlier that day, only I couldn't stop my thoughts from coming anymore. Everything was in motion.

Outside it was getting dark. I didn't look, but I sensed that it had begun to snow. I imagined Joseph out there where it just kept getting colder, numbness creeping in on him, starting at his toes and working its way through his body. What the hell was he doing out there? He would pull those ratty blankets around himself and lie there shivering to death. Or maybe he wouldn't even feel it coming on. He would stay sleeping while his body gave up, his mind somewhere else, filled with faraway dreams. I couldn't stand it.

I got up and tested my balance. Not great, but it would do. I made my way down the dark stairwell to the street where the snow was falling in broad flakes, settling onto the pavement. As I walked down the block I tried to remember where we had gone into the park. It seemed like so long ago.

It only took a minute to get lost in there. There were no lights, and at this hour you could barely see a foot in front of yourself. It was like walking into a dense

nothingness. I looked around, but it was no good, everything looked the same under the snow. I walked back and forth kicking at the snow out of sheer frustration.

I thought about Marianne and what they had done to her. The child, if you could even call it that, was dead, and it terrified me to think of it. We hadn't told a soul. The only other people who knew were the nurses and the doctor, and the men and one woman who sat with me in the waiting room.

I wanted to pray for it then more than I had ever wanted anything before. But I couldn't. I stumbled around in the dark in a panic. "Marianne," I sobbed, unable to control myself. I was moving in circles. My mind was useless, filled with thoughts of Joseph and Marianne and the delicate fetus.

I wished I were back home calling up Marianne, speaking to her on the phone. I decided that once I found Joseph we would go back to the apartment and I would call her up. It didn't matter what we said to each other as long as we said something. I pushed further into the dark. The snow was falling heavier now. I pushed branches from my face, moving faster and faster until I started to feel like I was getting somewhere.

Maybe it was just chance that led me to Joseph, but at that moment it felt like a miracle. I bent over and stuck my head into the foul, human-smelling lean-to. "Joseph," I said, "wake up." He stirred and looked at me the way a person looks who is still half inside a dream.

"Don't take me," he said.

"I have to."

"Where are we going?" he asked, frightened.

And I said the only thing that occurred to me. "I have no idea."

## **The Boy Wonders What Else There Is**

He sat on the side of his bed and laced up his running shoes. “What else is there?” he wondered. The words were part of him when he woke up, but he couldn’t explain what they meant.

The morning was fair. There was mist hanging over the road that would burn off as the day warmed up, but now it made everything quiet and somehow more tolerable. He took off in the direction of the state park. If he followed the loop through the park, past the falls, and then back out onto the local thruway it would be seven miles.

After the first mile his legs lost their stiffness. His stride loosened up until it felt easy. He was moving at a fast pace, but he had the feeling he could keep it up forever. He ran across the covered bridge, his steps echoing off the aluminum roof making it sound as though there were two runners matching each others stride. He ran past the small farm where Aunt Rose bought corn and green beans.

He let his mind wander back to graduation, crossing the stage, shaking Dr. Whiting’s hand. For no reason at all he had burst into tears. He couldn’t help himself. He had cried in front of the whole high school. He kept crying all the way through the ceremony, and then afterward when everyone else was taking pictures and drinking lemonade. Every time he thought he was about to get it under control

something would set off another sob. Eventually Uncle John and Aunt Rose walked him back to the car.

On the way home Uncle John said, “Well what the hell is wrong with you?”

Aunt Rose said, “John,” in a sharp tone that meant he shouldn’t have asked.

Then Uncle John said, “Don’t baby the boy, Rose. I just want to know what the hell is going on.”

When they got home he quit crying. It had gone away just as it had come, without warning. He went back to his room and lay down. After a while Aunt Rose came in and petted his head and said, “Poor boy. Poor, poor boy.”

His breathing had gotten heavier and fallen into a steady rhythm. He could feel the oxygen working its way down into his legs, making them fresh and quick. It was the feeling that he loved most. He crossed into the park on the broad, paved road. The spruce trees rose up on either side of him. They smelled sweet, and the road was cool, cradled in their shadow.

He tried picking up the pace a little. He moved each leg slightly faster. It felt all right. He could go even faster if he wanted to, but he knew he would pay for it on the hill, so he kept his pace.

Later that night, Uncle John had come into his room. He had been drinking, and the boy could smell it all over him. He had started drinking more since the twins had left for college. Uncle John sat on his bed and squinted into the dark, trying to

make out the boy's face. He looked like he was going to say something, but then he just sighed and got up and walked out of the room.

He was coming out the other side of the park by the falls now. He started up the hill that went by the Hallandale Christmas Tree Farm. The trees were thick with sparrows, chattering silhouettes against the rising sun. It was hot enough to make the sweat come pouring out of him, and he could feel the hill biting into his speed.

Cresting the first small rise he could see the top, and past the top he could see nothing but sky. It was as if he was running to the edge of the earth, the place where the ground finally fell away. It made him feel light. And with the sun coming up and the heat of the day making itself felt he couldn't help himself. He knew that there was something beyond the hill, but he didn't believe it.



## The Body

The house had a terrace in the back. It had a front walk lined with azaleas. Elizabeth said she was in love with it. Alex, who noted the faulty plumbing and the art deco kitchen, was more skeptical, but Elizabeth eventually wore him down. He was handy after all, and liked the basement, which he would convert into a bar.

By the time the loan had come through and all the papers were signed, Alex had grown more fond of the house. He liked the wood floors, and the spacious rooms that flowed one into the next with almost no hallways. “Hallways are wasted space,” he said in his practical tone, “the design is very thoughtful. We must have twice as much space as the other houses on this block.”

The only thing he didn't like was the dead body. They hadn't noticed it when they moved in, and Carol, their real estate agent, hadn't said a thing about a body. Alex's friend Kerry had recommended her. She had helped Kerry find what everyone agreed was the perfect place. In the initial flush of excitement and the rush of moving in, neither Alex nor Elizabeth had noticed it, and if Carol knew, she certainly hadn't said anything to them.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and he was moving some new furniture past the stairs into the living room when he spotted it. “Elizabeth!” he called.

“What?” she yelled back down the stairs.

“Come take a look at this.” She detected something brooding, almost angry in his voice, and reluctantly descended the stairs. “Look at that,” he said, pointing to a spot beside the stairs. At first she didn’t see anything. Then she saw it.

“How could we have missed that?” she wondered aloud.

“I don’t know, but I wish Carol had said something.”

“Well, I do too,” Elizabeth said, exasperated.

They looked at the thing, and then at one another, but neither one seemed to know what to do. Elizabeth wanted to get back up to their bedroom where she was hanging the new drapes, and Alex, who hated to stop in the middle of a job, soon returned to the furniture. He was moving a large, pink, leather couch that they had gotten on sale. It came in pieces so that he could move it in by himself.

But while he moved the couch he couldn’t help but think about the body. It was not unusually ugly, though somewhat worse for wear. It looked, he thought, a little bit like his cousin Howard. That was the thing that kept coming to mind.

And why had they bought this couch, he thought. It was ugly by any standard. The shade of pink was gauche, too bright. It didn’t fit quite right in the living room. He would have to cram it diagonally in a corner, leaving all kinds of empty unusable space behind it, or stick it right in the center of the room.

When he was done moving it, having finally settled on the corner, he went to the kitchen where he was joined by Elizabeth. Elizabeth was the type of girl that people call a classic beauty. She was fine-boned, tall, with a slender figure and silky brown hair. People also might call her lithe, and Alex’s dad had once called her svelte, which sounded more like an insult than a compliment to Alex.

She went to the fridge and got out a container of passo-guava juice. Before they were dating Alex would have never gotten that stuff, but he liked it. It was one of the things he liked about her. She had fancy tastes, but she liked the good stuff. They both agreed that caviar was repellent; neither of them enjoyed martinis, which had made a big comeback. She liked fancy chocolate, fruit. They had a cuisinart, which Alex also liked very much.

“Honey,” she said to him, which was something new, “do you love our new house?”

“I love it,” he told her. He meant it. He loved it.

“About the body,” she said, a little more seriously.

“About the body,” he said back, even more seriously.

“I heard about a similar thing that happened to another couple. I know it seems like a bad sign, but we’ll take care of it.” She had always been good at reassuring him. It was one of her best qualities.

That night when they ascended the stairs he couldn’t help but look at the body. It had the same bald spot as his cousin Howard. He looked at it until she prodded him playfully and they went up the stairs to bed.

He had work the next day, so there was no time to take care of the body. It’s already been here the week, he thought, another day won’t make a difference. But at work he kept thinking about it. He thought of it getting up when they were gone. He imagined it lying on the pink couch, which he didn’t like much anyway, and now he really didn’t like it.

Elizabeth had class on Mondays. She slept late and then went to the school's library where she had a little carrel to do her work. At one she went to her seminar. She couldn't concentrate. Why was there a dead body in their new house? Things had been going well with Alex, but she anticipated a fight the moment she had seen the body. It was unfair, she thought, that Kerry had the perfect place, and that she had the body to deal with. But she was too busy with her dissertation to give it much thought.

She was studying ancient Israel, a place that some argued was only an idea. The new consensus, in fact, dismissed the Bible as relevant history. Instead, the Bible was a purely literary work, and the history could only be determined by an objective archaeological study of the Palestinian Highlands. Elizabeth did not entirely agree with this, and that was her dissertation. It was one long disagreement.

She spent all of her energy arguing against this idea and she didn't want to argue when she got home. It was just too much. She decided not to mention the body until Alex did. She was sure that he would take care of it anyway.

The rest of the week went by in the same way, and then Alex went to visit his parents over the weekend, and Elizabeth went to a conference in New York.

When Alex's parents asked about the house he said it was great. He didn't mention that there was a dead body and that it looked like his dad's sister's son. That would just upset his mom and dad and make the weekend more stressful than it already was.

On Wednesday, Alex decided, he would take the body out with the trash. Wednesday was trash pick-up day, and they would take it and then the house would

be back to perfect and they would be done with it. When he got home late Sunday night he announced this to Elizabeth. But she did not look reassured. In fact, she looked awful. Her skin had turned ashen, and her eyes were sunk back like she hadn't slept in days.

At first she nodded her head, but then she burst out crying. "It's horrible," she sobbed.

"What's horrible?"

"That thing. That thing by the stairs. It's okay when you're here, but being alone with it was horrible." She had arrived home in a cab only two hours ahead of Alex, and thought it would be fine, but it wasn't. The conference had been a mess. She was tired and hungry, and sure that her dissertation was doomed, but when she got home she couldn't sleep or eat, or even watch TV. She just stood by the stairs looking at its face.

Alex was tired and annoyed with Elizabeth for being hysterical. "You're just tired," he said, "now calm down." And then in livelier voice he told her, "I am going to get rid of it. This Wednesday it will be gone."

On Wednesday morning Alex dragged out the big brown garbage can. Then he made a pot of coffee. Elizabeth was asleep upstairs. She had not gotten better since Sunday, and had skipped her Monday seminar and stayed in bed. She had stayed in all day Tuesday, also.

He drank the coffee and then went to the stairs for the body. He wasn't sure how to grab it. He finally decided to link his arms under its arms and drag it that

way. When he got it out to the curb the garbage truck was a few houses down, so he stayed to help the garbage man load it on.

“I can’t take this,” the garbage man said when he saw what Alex had.

“Why not?” Alex said with more than a little irritation in his voice.

It was difficult to live with somebody, and to have a house. Alex dragged the body back to the house, past the blooming azaleas lining the walk. He had to be at work in half an hour, and it took him twenty minutes driving. He yelled up to Elizabeth. “Bye, Honey.” No response.

Elizabeth had heard Alex, but she didn’t feel like saying honey. She couldn’t make the word come out of her mouth without a sort of snarl. She didn’t want to say goodbye either. Instead she just lay on top of the comforter staring at the ceiling. They had painted it a color called eggshell. How irrelevant, she thought. She would not leave the bed yet. She stayed very still, but didn’t sleep. Elizabeth was doing something she had done ever since she was a child. She was reliving all of her mistakes.

She went back to high school, to the incident with Mark Halpern. When she told her best friend, Nancy, Nancy had gasped with a mix of delight and disgust. “In your mouth? What did it feel like? What did it *taste* like?” Elizabeth didn’t want to say. She had only told Nancy because she was angry. She had hated it, the feeling, like choking, and his hand pushing on her head. She had never wanted to do it anyway. But Nancy had taken it all wrong, and there was nothing Elizabeth could do about that.

She thought about the time her mother had come to a party to pick her up in the green station wagon. When she got into the passenger seat beside her mother Elizabeth said, “I hate you.” Her mother started to cry, which made Elizabeth feel awful, but she wouldn’t apologize. What was her mom doing coming into a party and driving that embarrassing station wagon with the sticker on the back that said “Question Authority”?

She went through all of high school, then through college. The time she had been taken to the hospital for drinking too much. She didn’t even know what she was drinking, something mixed with Kool-Aid in big red plastic cups. She couldn’t stop sobbing. They gave her charcoal in water, and she missed the bed pan when she threw it up, so that the nurse had to come in to change the sheets and give her a hospital gown. Elizabeth stood naked in front of the nurse, crying like a baby.

Elizabeth had collected so many bad memories that this could go on all day if she didn’t stop it. She stared blankly at the eggshell ceiling. She wouldn’t finish her dissertation. What was the point? What had the point ever been? She wondered how she had gotten there, to graduate school, to Middle Eastern Studies. It was like a dream where she couldn’t figure out where she was or what she was doing there.

Alex was halfway to work when he realized that he had left the body out. It was against the wall in the kitchen. Things were not going well with the new house. He didn’t want Elizabeth to be surprised by the body, which she thought he had disposed of. He could imagine what a surprise it would be to see the gruesome,

balding head propped against the kitchen wall. The nose had grown black, and was shiny on the tip.

He imagined her coming down the stairs and feeling relieved when she saw that it was gone from its usual spot, and then going to the kitchen for coffee, and there it would be, thrown against the wall, tongue lolling out like an overheated dog. He had messed up, but it was too late to turn around.

At work he tried calling her, but nobody picked up. He worried that she was still in bed. When they were in college Elizabeth had gone through depressions. She would stay in bed sometimes for entire days. It had happened at least three times since he had known her, and he never knew—nor would she tell him—what started it.

There was another thing bothering Alex. Ever since they found the body they had stopped doing it. They used to do it regularly, some might even say frequently. They did it at least every night, and sometimes in the morning too, and it was good. Or at least there were never any problems. Both of them went at it in a satisfied, careless kind of way. Like any sexual relationship it had had its small mishaps, its minor embarrassments, but it was satisfying.

Now Alex wondered. He wondered if Elizabeth had liked it as much as he thought she had. Was she satisfied? It wasn't him, he reassured himself, it was the body. But he kept wondering. He decided that they would have a candid talk when he got home that evening. He would bring a bottle of wine to split over dinner, which would take care of the embarrassment.

But when he got home that night Elizabeth was gone. He tried her cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. He went to the kitchen with the hope that she had left a

note, and, forgetting about the body tripped on its outstretched legs. He fell, banging his elbow on the hard yellow tiles.

It was the first time that he truly hated the thing. It was turning black and had bulging yellow eyes. Its mouth was frozen in a permanent grin. The lips stretched thin, rotting against the grey teeth. He couldn't stand living with it.

Alex brought the bottle of wine upstairs. There was no note, and he sat on the bed drinking the wine right from the bottle. It was the kind of behavior that Elizabeth looked down on, drinking straight from the bottle. Where the hell was she, anyway? It was late, almost eleven, and there was no sign of her. She hadn't even made the bed. Alex finished the wine and took a hot shower and fell asleep.

In the morning she was still missing. He called her phone again. No answer. He called in sick to work. A sick day would set him back, but he didn't care. He went down to the kitchen. The body was lying in the same place, and he almost tripped on it a second time. This time he picked it up and started to move it. Where could he put it? He put it down, pulled out one of the chairs from the kitchen table, and propped the body up in the chair. It sat in place for a moment, and then its head crashed onto the table. Alex winced.

He made coffee, but ended up pouring most of it out in the sink. He went to his car. He knew from all of the blue crates on the sidewalk that today was recycling day, but the recycling would have to wait. He drove to the university and parked next to the building where Elizabeth took her classes. It was called Huffman or Hoffman. He couldn't remember.

Alex stood around the building hoping that she might be walking in or out. No such luck. He didn't know what to do, so he walked around to the courtyard in front of the building. Some students were in the courtyard, lying on the grass, reading or talking to each other. Two years ago he had gone to a place like this, but now his life was different. There was his job, a position to be proud of. And then there was his new house. One boy was wearing a bowler hat and playing a guitar. Alex sat down on the grass.

It was time, he decided, to take a break. He would leave the house for a while. God knows where Elizabeth was. He hoped she would call soon, but he didn't count on it. Everything seemed pretty screwed up. He decided to go to a hotel for a little while to get his bearings back, but first he would need to get some things from the house.

When he got back to the house he packed his clothes and his computer. He got his briefcase out of the hall closet that had once seemed so promising. He put all of his toiletries and some kitchen supplies in the car. He paused in the kitchen for a minute to think if he had forgotten anything. He looked at the body, head bent, as if in prayer. He decided to take that too. He packed the body up with the rest of his things and then left the house, making sure to turn out all of the lights.

## Summary

Nobody gets pregnant the first time. At least the odds are against it, he thinks. And, why didn't I use a condom, he thinks. He doesn't want to bring it up with her. What if she isn't thinking about it? Would it do any good to say something? He doesn't mention it to her.

They talk uneasily after organic chemistry one morning. He suggests they get coffee and can't remember why she says no. He wonders if she knows exactly what happened.

She knows he didn't use a condom. She has to know. The thing he wonders about is if she knows he didn't pull out all the way. He meant to, but he was caught up in the bed sheets, so when he tried his leg got stuck and he fell back onto her. She didn't even seem surprised. They had been so drunk.

Still, some of it got on the sheets and they fell asleep without cleaning it off so that when he left the next morning he couldn't help but look at the stain he had left, like a sinister Rorschach blot.

A few weeks pass and he doesn't hear anything from her. She smiles at him in class one day, and then the next time she doesn't even look at him. After a month he decides he's in the clear.

He resolves to stop drinking. He resolves to run three miles every day. He resolves to cut out fast food and eat more vegetables. He resolves to call his grandmother more often. All this resolution-making is hard on him.

He wishes that she had been pregnant. He wishes that she had fallen in love with him. He wishes that it was easier to talk to another person, to touch them and really mean it. He wishes, and all the wishing just makes him want more.