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Felicia at the Beach: Stories

by

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Felicia at the Beach

STORIES

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Disclaimer: This collection is a work of fiction. The characters, actions, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, persons, or incidents is, to be honest, probably not entirely coincidental, but I think this will all be a lot easier if we just agree to pretend that it is.

A Note on the Text

This thesis began as a novella, which I referred to as a novel because, as I explained in my incredibly obnoxious proposal, "the word 'novella' sounds too pejorative." I worked on that novella for a very long time—I would guess around three hundred years, but in looking back at my calendar I see that it was actually more like six months. This perpetually-untitled work revolved around the story of Len Carrion, the hapless manager of a failing fast-food chain who discovers that one of his fry cooks is, or at least once was, able to fly. I eventually wrote seventy-one pages of this novella, and that hopeless mush of typos and Times Roman ended up containing only a single good sentence, which I will share with you now: *"Funerals weren't parties, he realized, but you did dress up and drink and get introduced to a lot of people you'd probably never see again, so really, they weren't that different."*

Pretty good, right? That sentence was around two one-thousandths of my original thesis, so apparently all I have to do if I ever want to write a great novella is write five thousand terrible ones and then extract from each of them the best thirty-one words.

But anyway. Around two months before the deadline for thesis submissions, I realized—or, more accurately, finally accepted the realization that I had long been suppressing—that, with the exception of the delightful sentence I just shared with you, every word of those seventy-one pages was bad. Like, atrociously bad. To get a sense of the level of bad I'm talking about, imagine a training manual for McDonald's employees that's been drafted by a pretentious Jonathan Franzen impersonator[1]. Oh, and the Franzen impersonator has just turned thirteen, and spends an inordinate amount of time describing the character and appearance of women's breasts. What I'm trying to say is, it was very bad writing.

With the surprising encouragement of my charming and unflappable advisor Deb Unferth, I made the impulsive decision to scrap everything I had written up to that point and, with seven and a half weeks left until the April 12th deadline, begin an entirely new thesis. You now hold in your hands the result of that decision. Despite having been squeezed and wheedled out of me in periodic bursts of frenetic, caffeine-induced mania, the stories that make up this collection are, I genuinely believe, some of the best writing I've ever done. I hope that you enjoy them, or, failing that, I hope at least that you don't find any of them actively repellent.

—*Max Nussenbaum*

1. Sophomoric footnote which, I'm sorry, I couldn't resist: when you think about it, would a book written by a pretentious Jonathan Franzen impersonator really be that different from any of Franzen's actual books?

Contents

The State of the Union 1

A Perfect Day for Bananapants 10

The Other Guys 20

Babyfreeze 22

Superhero Phobias 30

The Person at the Door 32

Faked Love/Felt Love 41

From One Ron to Another 44

Ellie, as the People She Knows Die One by One 55

Felicia at the Beach 63

A Corpse in the Car 72

About the Author 80

THE STATE OF THE UNION

That was the year all the tomato plants started dying off, and hoarders stockpiled pizza-flavored hot pockets and individually-sized ketchup packets. On late-night television, the President attempted to reassure a wary nation. "Let us turn our attention to the many other great vegetables," he said, the stripes on his necktie fuzzing together in the TV's image. "Broccoli, carrots, onions—both red and white—rutabaga, peppers." All the lanes on the highway had been turned into carpool lanes and friendless Americans, desperate for passengers, roamed the streets in search of companionship. And the smoke from the factories in the pollution-soaked cities had begun to smell delicious, like flavored chapstick or reheated leftovers. Commuters stepped from the subways each morning with their briefcases trailing behind them like puppy dogs, their nostrils open wide as opera singers' mouths.

It was the year Amy and Evan, both Jews, exchanged personalized rubber stamps for Christmas and then began to mark their respective possessions with their respective stamps. The coffee beans: Amy's; the other coffee beans, from

the different place: Evan's. The zigzag carpet, bought used and laced thick with someone else's pet hair: Amy's; the vinyl beanbag, relentlessly abuzz with the secondhand warmth of someone else's ass: Evan's. And then, one evening, after a particularly lackluster round of halfhearted sex—which, since their sex had been consistently halfhearted for months now, was more like quarterhearted—Amy's breasts and buttocks themselves: Evan's. That was the first of many last straws.

Amy worked three days a week for a company that, for a fee, assisted university professors with the implementation of psychological experiments. Today, Amy was helping to construct an experiment which would measure the effects of the presence of an attractive woman on the arithmetic skills of teenage boys. In the corner of the room, the attractive woman sat waiting, narrow-eyed and ambiguously multiracial. Amy wondered if she was married, or if she'd ever been married, or if she'd ever thought about being married, or if she'd ever used the word "married" in a sentence.

Amy's boss was a woman whose main qualification for the job seemed to be her vast collection of business attire, pleated skirts and fax machine-grey pantsuits. "Dress for the job you want, not the job you have," she'd said. "Of course, the distinction is purely academic in my case, since I already have the job I want."

"Sure," Amy'd said, nodding her head up and down like a basketball on its last dribbles.

Later, as the attractive woman changed out of her translucent tank top, Amy sat in the well-lit waiting room next to the mother of one of the teenage boys. "It's such a shame," said the mother. "What's happening to the trees. The leaves all getting smaller. And the air—just today, Dennis saw a sparrow drop straight out of the sky. Dead, just like that!"

"Dennis," said Amy. "Your son?"

"Oh, no," said the woman. "My husband. Our Peter wouldn't notice a bird—he doesn't go outside much. He likes those cheap plastic people you melt in the microwave." She turned to Amy. "Are you married?"

Amy shook her head. "I don't believe in marriage."

"Oh, honey," said the woman, her brow suddenly vast. "Everybody believes in marriage. Just look at whatshisname. You know, the celebrity."

"The one in that movie?"

"No, the other one. The one who's on all the magazine covers. He's married. And the President. He's married!"

"He's not really married," said Amy.

"He's not?"

"No," said Amy. "It was just a big scam, to get reelected. They make his wife with computers."

Amy's boss entered the room, preceded by the sound of her heels. "Halfway point," she said. "Amy, would you go tell the boys?"

Amy stood. "Won't she distract them?" The mother asked.

"Oh, no," said Amy's boss, her head ticked towards the clock. "We have the *attractive* woman for that."

Out to lunch with his mother, Evan studied the menu like the Talmud, trying to identify its font. He knew what would happen when their waiter approached: his mother would insist that they were ready, then spend four or five minutes delaying the declaration of her order. Evan would get something that came with fries and his mother would raise an eyebrow and say "Fries?" even as he asked the waiter to substitute something else.

Evan's mother was so old that her mere presence seemed to be a mockery of all other old people. She wanted only to talk about Amy, or Evan's father, sometimes alternating between them so quickly that Evan suspected the two were becoming confused in her mind. Evan had been with Amy for a long time, but not for long enough that his mother didn't remember Cheryl, who had come before Amy, and Katherine, who had come before Cheryl.

Evan's mother lathered butter on her bread roll and said, "Have you picked a date for the wedding yet?"

"Mom, we're not getting married. You know that."

"Of course, sweetie," she said. "But there's no reason you can't pick a date anyway. Just in case. It's not like you have to use it. Pick a date—March 25th, let's say—and why not a place too, while you're at it—I'm sure Uncle Aaron would let us use the farm—and then if you two do end up deciding you want to tie the knot, well, you'll already know when and where to do it."

Evan said nothing. His mother was afraid—they all were. The couple at the table next to them, the man with his napkin scrunched up like a finished soda can and the woman with those big glasses she probably didn't even need. Their waiter, with his separate-but-equal moustache and beard, the two parts reaching longingly for each other across the arc of his face. Even Amy, although she said she didn't believe any of that crap about the world falling in on itself, or about America bursting open like a bag of drugs in a smuggler's bowel. Evan's mother said that too, but Evan's mother never said what she really meant. March 25th wasn't even three weeks away.

"Your father feels the same way, you know," she said. "He's sorry he couldn't be here, but you know how work is." Evan wasn't sure he knew how work was. Once, when he was just a boy, his father had been let go and had told nobody, ris-

ing each morning just as he always did and sliding into one of the identical suits that lined his closet like little deflated people. He did this every day for weeks and weeks, until he was hired for another, similar position. Only then did he tell Evan and his mother, in the same sentence, the same breath, that he had gotten a new job and oh, also, lost his old one.

It was possible, Evan realized, that this same chain of events had repeated itself more than the one time he knew of. He wondered why this possibility had never occurred to him before. There were so many possibilities that had never occurred to him, so many possibilities that *would* never occur to him. The possibility that their waiter was really the restaurant's owner, gone undercover. The possibility that the couple next to them wasn't really a couple at all, just two friends, or a brother and his sister, or a single person across from a shared hallucination, imagined by every patron in the restaurant simultaneously.

"Amy's a wonderful girl," Evan's mother said. There was more butter stuck to the edges of her knife than there was on the piece of bread that dangled from her hand. "We like her a lot. Of course, we like anyone you like, you know that. But we'd like Amy even if we didn't have to."

Evan played with something in his pocket. He tried to visualize exactly what Amy's naked body looked like. Then, when he couldn't do that, he tried to visualize exactly what her face looked like. He had some trouble with that too, but he got it in the end, although he'd visualized her with glasses like the woman at the table next to them was wearing, and Amy didn't wear glasses like that. She didn't wear any glasses.

"Evan," said his mother. "Evan, you know I can tell when you're not—"

"I'm listening to you, mom," Evan said.

With the arithmetic experiment over, Amy's company moved on to their next assignment. This experiment would attempt to ascertain the impact of visible roadkill on the speed and tactics of highway drivers. The roadkill, which Amy's boss insisted was fake, had been provided by an independent contractor. Earlier that day, a young woman in a garish uniform had dropped off a cardboard box filled with massacred squirrels and gruesome, bisected chipmunks. Amy had stared at the box for what must've been hours, unable to look inside and unable to look away.

"I touched them," Amy's boss said. "Rubber, like fake boobs. Don't let anyone do anything stupid with them, by the way. I won't tolerate pranks."

"Right," Amy said.

"This whole experiment is a waste of time, anyway." Amy's boss leaned against her imported desk. "With the animals all dying on their own. Soon there won't be anything to kill on the road. Except other drivers, I guess." She laughed, and Amy laughed too.

The drivers they had enlisted for the experiment were all men, regular Joes with beer bellies or burger bellies or flat bellies of muscle and fuzz. A car company had rented them a fleet of identical vehicles, sedans with made-up names like Aspix or Vesteren. The loaner men were apportioned into the loaner cars one at a time, the cars in a single-file line. It was then that Amy decided to have the affair. These men were all attractive, she thought, not to her but surely to someone, somewhere, or else they were just one degree away from being attractive, scale models of attractive men, men made from the same parts as attractive men, men who would make the same noises as attractive men.

Of course, she would have to pick one of them—not one of drivers necessarily, but one of *them*, one of the world's men—and he would have to pick her

in turn. They would have to learn to recognize the secret meanings of each other's words and intonations. And arrangements would have to be made—a hotel room, or perhaps a friend's woodside cabin, borrowed for a weekend escape. She would have to make a friend who had a woodside cabin.

Now that she thought about it, affairs were a lot of work. Of course, relationships were a lot of work too, that's what everyone said, Evan's mother and the woman from the waiting room the day before and that celebrity in that magazine and the President, too, she remembered, from somewhere, although that had probably been a part of the reelection scam. Maybe that was why he had his wife added in post-production, because it was less work. But the work of a relationship wasn't work you *had* to do. You could stop doing it, if you wanted; you could take extra-long bathroom breaks and you could use all your vacation days in one big lump and you could start calling in sick multiple times a week and what were they going to do, fire you? They'd never find someone else for the job, not in this economy. And the costs of training your replacement… No, you could get away with murder, like the drivers who'd hit all that roadkill, assuming her boss had been lying about it not being real.

It was the idea of the affair, then, that was important: to permit yourself to have it and to force yourself to confess it. Because that was, after all, the right thing to do.

That night, Amy and Evan lay on their bedroom's bulge of a mattress, circumscribed by the television's stuttering light. The President was delivering an address, his wife by his side. "Americans," he said. "People of the Americas. That is, people of the United States of America. Not of the other ones, although I care about you too." The First Lady was wearing some sort of bonnet. Amy could've

sworn she saw her flicker in and out, but it was probably just her imagination. That's what Evan would've told her, if she'd mentioned it to him.

The television, according to the stamp, was Evan's. The mattress was Amy's. The labels on Amy's breasts and buttocks had been smudged off somehow, although she hadn't showered. It could have been perspiration, or her clothes rubbing against her skin, or small bugs that fed on stamp ink and made their homes in her underwear.

"The results are in," said Amy. "The effects of the presence of an attractive woman on the arithmetic skills of teenage boys are statistically insignificant." She shifted beneath the blanket. "We're still waiting on the roadkill data."

Evan reached for the remote—Amy's remote, actually, if you believed the stamp—but it wasn't where he thought it was. "My mother wants us to get married," he said. "Do you want to propose?"

"No," said Amy. "Do you?"

"No," said Evan. "Do you want to pick a date anyway?"

"No," said Amy.

"I don't either," said Evan.

"I've been having an affair," said Amy.

"I've been having one too," said Evan, even though he hadn't been.

Amy considered this. "Well," she said. "What do you want to do about it?"

"Well," said Evan. "We should probably stop."

"Stop?"

"Having our affairs."

"Probably," said Amy.

"Do you want to leave me?" said Evan.

"Not over this," said Amy.

"Good," said Evan.

They lay back in bed. Either Evan had his arm around Amy or Amy was lying on top of Evan's arm, depending on how you wanted to see it. The President was saying something about the wind, and the television was showing pictures—there was either too much of it, or too little, or just the right amount but too much or too little of something else. Then on to the states: they were losing track of their borders, Iowans waking up as Nebraskans and vice-versa. And the Supreme Court: the Justices were delivering opinions about everything, the actors they thought had the prettiest smiles and their favorite restaurants in the tri-state area. The Chief Justice's was Boise Burger, which he acknowledged wasn't even technically *in* the tri-state area—but it was just so delicious.

Outside, the tree trunks swayed like drunk teenagers. In the bed, Amy and Evan reached for each other, or maybe just vaguely in each others' direction. And on the TV, the President said, "In conclusion," but he wasn't done yet, and neither were they.

A PERFECT DAY FOR BANANAPANTS

Prom: two hundred kids with vodka-filled water bottles tucked into the legs of their rent-a-tuxes and me, five-seven and pimply like a polka-dot dress, gushing sweat in the corner next to Yasmina Stellenbridge. Graduation: my mother waving like a traffic cop and jumping up and down on the gym's aluminum bleachers and my father in the hideous tie I'd made him when I was seven, locked in a desperate struggle with a borrowed camcorder. Then those first wretched weeks of summer, with my window-mounted air conditioner that churned and stuttered like it had indigestion. And then it was off to Wrentham.

"The Wrentham Summer Institute for Gifted Teenagers." My older sister, now twenty-three and an intern on Capitol Hill, had attended the program twice, over the summers of her fourteenth and fifteenth years. I hadn't been deemed gifted enough—although one of Wrentham's guilt-ridden evaluators had helpfully suggested that I was perhaps just in the midst of a "pre-gifted phase"—but apparently the standards for students were far more stringent than the standards

for instructors, and when my dad suggested that Wrentham might make for a good summer job I was caught without a comeback. So there I was, on the floor of their seatless auditorium, listening to Dr. Strauss, Wrentham's self-described "founder, director, and facilitator extraordinaire," welcome me and the thirteen other instructors to the job.

"Your task this summer will be the most noble to which any of us can aspire: to serve as a trusted guide for these young people's journey down the river of intellectual and artistic development. Your own journey this summer will be long, and it will be arduous. But at the end lies the most precious prize of all: a newfound sense of self. As well as your paychecks, which are to be held, for tax purposes, until the summer's completion."

Later, as the fourteen of us walked across the Institute's main field in a huddled pack, a guy in a scarf and a thin, glued-on-looking beard jogged up beside me. "You look young," he said. "How old are you?"

Eighteen, I said.

"This your first summer here?"

Yeah. You?

"My third," he said. "I'm twenty-two. Name's Frank."

Rob, I said. You must like it here.

"It's a shit job," he said. "And Dr. Strauss is losing it more and more each year. But, man—the girls! The girls are wild."

I looked at the girls walking beside us. They didn't look too wild.

"Not them," he said. "The students."

Aren't they… a little young?

The guy looked at me like I'd just asked him to drop his pants. "Come on, man. They know what they're doing. They're gifted!"

Wrentham had us trained in two days, assigned to the dorms we'd be living in—"Guarding with your deepest reserves of strength" was the phrase Dr. Strauss used—and the courses we'd be "assistant facilitating," which basically meant making copies and getting lemonade for the haggard high school teachers and C-list college professors who were the program's main instructors. I was to work with Eloise Haddad, was to be second-in-command of her poetry class. "I am *not* a poetry teacher," she'd explained to me. "I am a *poet* who also *teaches*."

And then came the kids—"the students," Dr. Strauss told us; we were never to call them kids—poured from their parents' Audis and Acuras in a great gushing wave until they coated the campus like sand, filling every available corner and crevice with their buzzing voices and unorthodox smells and their delicate, embarrassing bodies. Frank and I—because of course I'd ended up getting paired off with him—led our ten spindly boys back to the dorm we'd be supervising for the next five weeks.

"Listen up," Frank told the group, once we'd helped them make their beds and cram their bulging luggage underneath. "I've worked here for three summers, so I know all the tricks. No sleeping in, no sneaking out, no trying to fuck anyone. That's right, I said 'fuck.' Don't even think about it, you little pervs, or I'll have your ass back in your momma's hands before you even know what happened. Rob, is there anything you'd like to add?"

I stared at this one kid who stared at me right back, a hollow stick of a boy with vast concavities under the cloth of his t-shirt. Just that I'm looking forward to a great summer with you all, I said.

As it turned out, Frank knew what he was talking about: the girls *were* wild, with dyed hair and half-shaved heads, piercings in places I didn't know could be

pierced, bodies that seemed to grow fuller each day, that shouted, "Sure, we're only sixteen, but take us back three hundred years and we'd be married already, with our second kid on the way." They came from cities and money, from prep schools with buildings named after their grandparents and semesters abroad in Paris pied-à-terres. The boys—what few there were; apparently the gifted gene was carried in the X chromosome—came from the same places, but it was different for them. A select four or five were thick-haired and spread-shouldered; for the rest, no amount of class or experience could hide their slippery faces and Korean pop-star voices. The girls avoided the boys at first, clumping around the campus in tight-jeaned clusters of six or seven, but by the middle of the second week some of the less self-assured ones had broken off and could be seen with their hands in the back pockets of the boys' small shorts, their faces curled up as if to say, "I know, I know, but they're the only boys around."

At nights, once we'd put the kids to bed, Frank and I would sprawl across the floor of one of the dorm's unused rooms, working our way through the bottles of eight-dollar wine he kept stashed in the back seat of his Corolla. Frank would pluck aimlessly at the guitar he always seemed to have with him—the same song every time, a shaky rendition of "Yellow Submarine" with the verses all in the wrong order—and I'd pick at the letters from my sister that had been piling up in the mailroom. "Dear Rob," she'd write. "Yesterday, at the portrait gallery, I bumped into a girl from Wrentham and we both squealed so hard. Try to soak this summer in so tight it never gets out." Or: "Dear Rob, mom and dad told me about the move and I'm *so* excited. Our parents, living in London? I can't imagine it. Hope you're ready to help clean out the attic!" My parents hadn't said anything to me about moving, or, if they had, I hadn't been listening. I thought about writing them a letter, but I couldn't find any stamps, and then I forgot.

One of those nights, about midway through the summer, Frank sat up on the floor and looked at me with his tongue between his teeth and said, "You got one picked out yet?" He meant a girl. In fact, there was one I couldn't help but keep noticing, a girl named Allie who wore tube tops she filled out more than she should've and had bangs that draped over her eyes like a shaggy dog. But I didn't say anything to Frank, not yet. I just said, again: Aren't they a little young?

"They're sixteen, seventeen," he said. "You're eighteen. What's the big deal?"

You're twenty-two, I said.

"So? My mom's fifty-four and my dad's seventy. Besides, look at the way they act around us. Most of them have probably been laid more times than you have."

He was right, again: my own experience was limited to a few haphazard make-outs and an aborted attempt at oral sex in the trunk of a Volvo. But I couldn't tell Frank that, even though he could probably tell on his own, and even though I'd grown surprisingly fond of him in the weeks that had passed since our arrival.

I don't know, I said. I think you might be reading too much into this.

"Trust me, man," he said. "Like I told you: I've been here for a couple summers."

Poetry class continued as usual, with me making photocopies of Auden and Yeats and filling Eloise's mugs with coffee from the mess hall. "Please be *sure* it's half-caf," she'd say. "You may have to mix the regular and decaf yourself." In spite of their obscene t-shirts and visible sports bras the students actually were pretty gifted, working their way through forty pages of Hart Crane and composing villanelles that stuck more or less to form. And Eloise proved to be an engaging teacher, although I suppose it was easy to be engaging when you headed a class-

room of only nine, all of whom had jumped through hoops both intellectual and financial in order to be there.

So each day was class and powdery food and woodside hikes that barely even qualified as walks. The stack of letters from my sister grew ever taller, even though I had yet to once write her back. "Dear Rob, it's a good thing you're away this summer, otherwise you'd probably be getting in all sorts of trouble with those hooligan friends of yours. Just kidding—I know you don't have any friends like that. Mom and dad showed me pictures of their new flat and it is charming like you wouldn't believe." I continued to glance at Allie from afar, watching as she shimmied out of pink sweatpants to reveal bikini bottoms clinging underneath, or snuck off with the two other girls who were always around her and came back reeking of cigarette smoke and borrowed perfume.

During the last week, Dr. Strauss invited the sixteen of us to a farewell dinner at his house, where he sashayed around in a Wrentham apron and made a big show of allowing even the under-twenty-ones as much wine as they wanted. Seated at the head of the table, he drummed his glass with the edge of a knife and then raised it in a toast. "To you, our summer instructors," he said. "And to our students, those beautiful minds, those brilliant souls. We have been engaged here in a great journey, a journey that now comes to a close. I thank each of you for your time, for your effort, and for the subtle nuances you have brought to your positions. I could not do what I do without you to do what you do." That night, Frank and I stumbled back to the dorm, drunk as we'd ever been, and fell asleep in our clothes on the common room couches. One of the boys had to wake us up for breakfast the next morning.

And then it was the last night, the night that didn't count, when the students and

the instructors became engaged in a great war of attrition, one side striving desperately to sneak out of the dorms and the other striving desperately to seem like they cared about stopping them. Frank and I kept watch after lights out, guarding the dorm's front door and rigging the back one with homemade alarms. But our boys were good boys, their comic books in protective cases and their fear of breaking even the most perfunctory of rules still intact, so when an hour had passed with no disturbances we donned black sweatpants and long-sleeve shirts and headed for the main campus.

"My first summer here, I confiscated four types of liquor on the last night," Frank said. "And I saw a whole group skinny dipping in the pond."

You caught them? I said.

"I didn't say I caught them," he said. "I said I *saw* them. I watched."

In the moonlight, the contours of Frank's beard shone fuzzy and indistinct. Maybe we should split up, I said.

He said, "Good call," and then handed me a flashlight and disappeared into the woods.

I walked through the dark for a while, finding nothing. Maybe this was all a myth, I thought: the alcohol, the nudity, the mass midnight exodus from the dorms. None of the other instructors seemed to be out searching for runaways, unless they were just stealthier than us, able to make their way across the campus' unkempt field without flashlights or partners-in-crime. I'd never gone to a camp like this ("An *institute*"—Dr. Strauss corrected me in my mind), never snuck out of a dorm or even of my parents' house back home. Walking in the dark, the crickets gossiping to one another, it struck me that I was barely older than the kids I was trying to police. I had the high school diploma they lacked,

nothing more. And really, I didn't even have that—it was supposedly going to arrive in the mail at the end of the summer. Four years of legal adulthood separated Frank and me, equals here; there was only a year or two between me and these kids. I'd asked a junior to prom, before I went by myself. That was Allie's age.

Then I smelled cigarettes from a distance, over by the campus' small, oblong pond; saw their smoldering ends like lighthouses on the coast. Another irony: I'd never smoked a cigarette, never even been offered one. The ones I was about to confiscate would be the first I'd touched that weren't made of bubble gum.

I walked in the smoke's direction until I was close enough to hear voices. It was girls; of course it was girls, three of them sitting with their bare legs dangling off the dock. They wore bathing suits that, as I crept closer, turned out not to be bathing suits at all but underwear, mismatched bras and panties in solid pastels. Then one of them turned, and I could tell from the way her body tightened that she'd seen me.

"Fuck," the girl said.

The other two pivoted to face me and I could see now that one of them was Allie, bangs stuck to her forehead with pond or sweat or both, the slight swell of her stomach jutting out and then becoming flatness as it merged with the tight line of her underwear. She said something to the other two, then walked towards me.

"Well," she said. "You caught us."

You're not supposed to be out right now, I said.

"Oh, really? There was some confusion about the rules."

You could all be in a lot of trouble, I said.

"You could be in a lot of trouble. You don't think I've noticed the way you look at me?"

I stammered.

"Relax, dude. No one's gonna tell on you." She bent forward and squeezed her arms together at her front. "Here, you want a better look?"

Look, I said, I should—

"Gimme that flashlight."

What? I said.

She laughed. "I'm not a kid, Rob." And she took the flashlight from my hand—snatched, I want to say, but I know I let her take it—and pointed it at my crotch, where, I knew, she could see my erection poking through the front of my sweatpants.

We stood there for a moment, her and I. Then she turned the flashlight off and passed it back to me.

"See you later, bananapants," she said.

I found Frank back at the dorm, in boxers and a tank top, an open bottle of wine next to him on the couch. You find anything? I said.

"Nah," he said. "Some kids running around, but nothing good. They've mellowed this year, I guess. You?"

Skinny dippers, I said. Well, in their underwear. You know that girl Allie?

"The secret smoker?"

Yeah, I said.

Frank took a swig of wine and spit a laugh through his nose. "Oh, yeah," he said. "I know her. Killer body on that one."

What do you mean?

He shrugged.

Fuck you, I said. What did you mean by that?

"Well, she's been here for a couple summers," he said. "And it's like I told you—"

You've been here for a couple summers too, I said.

That last morning, my parents ambled their pastel minivan into Wrentham's main lot. "You didn't write to us," my mother said, looking me up and down to see if I'd gained any weight.

You didn't write to me either, I said. And you didn't tell me you were moving.

"Let's not worry about that right now," my mother said. "You have to tell us everything."

"Well, maybe not *everything*," my father said. "That could get boring. Besides, some things are better left unsaid."

I looked at Frank, who was leaning with his guitar against a dying tree at the edge of the parking lot, and he gave me a slight wave. I nodded back, and then I stepped into the back seat of the car.

THE OTHER GUYS

Name a place where I haven't hit on a woman and I'll give you a hundred bucks. DMV? Check. IKEA? Check. Funeral? Check. The normal places, elevators and laundromats, they're for second-fiddlers and born-again losers, the kind of guys who just want to be able to pretend they tried when they're avoiding conversation with the cab driver who's taking them home. Those guys are everywhere, their smiles Velcroed on, their clothes the same as the guy next to them, ordering brands of scotch they can't pronounce right and stepping outside to take phone calls that no one's on the other end of. Me and Ted, though, we're different. We only laugh if the joke's actually funny and we're not gonna start working out until the doctor tells us we'll die if we don't. It's like Ted says: once the girl takes your shirt off, it's too late for her to change her mind.

Ted's dipped in and out of so many girls it's like his dingus is a french fry and the girls are ketchup. People think the good-looking guys get all the good-looking girls, but that's not true. If you're a good-looking girl, you're getting hit on by good-looking guys all the time. You're sick of good-looking guys. What do girls

want? I'll tell you the secret, and the secret is who the fuck cares what girls want? It's about what *you* want.

Sometimes we'll be at one of those coffee shops where the drinks cost more than a night with a hooker and you can't tell for sure which of the baristas are gay and me and Ted'll sip our butt-plug-sized espressos and watch the fat-collared business guys and the thrift-store-jeaned kids stare at some hot chick like she's the chart on an eye exam, and then as soon as one of 'em works up the nerve to go over and actually talk to the girl we'll get up and go over there too and Ted'll say something like, "Sorry to interrupt, but I work for the Guinness Book and I'd like to congratulate you."

And when the kid says congratulate me for what Ted'll say, "You ogled this woman here for almost a half an hour before you deigned to talk to her like a human being. That's a new world record!"

This always makes the other woman think we're shits, makes her see us as red-assed baboons or sacks of B.O. with faces glued on, but it makes her see the other guy something worse, a pale yellow Volkswagen Beetle or one of those yappy dogs that lives in a rich grandma's purse. Still, me and Ted'll lose it, puffing out big booming laughs and slapping each other's hips like we're getting off on it. The woman'll usually shake her head and get the hell outta there, but me and Ted'll know she'll be thinking about us that night while she's lying like a cheap carpet underneath her drooping mound of a boyfriend. You wanna know another secret? I'll tell you another secret, and the secret is it's not about the woman. It's never about the woman. When you're really in the down and dirty, it's all about the other guys.

BABYFREEZE

Rose and I finally broke up because I slipped on a patch of black ice and knocked her purse over and condoms fell out of it. The condoms spilled onto the sidewalk just as I did, in packages of dark blues and reds that looked like bonbons or children's playthings. I had never seen these condoms before, had not for years seen any condoms that weren't resting sagging and embarrassed on drugstore shelves. I had been pronounced infertile the year before, in the doctor's office where Rose and I first met.

"They're just for making little balloons out of," Rose said, but that didn't explain the squashed bottle of Babyfreeze spermicidal lubricant that had also fallen from her purse. The three of us—the Babyfreeze, the condoms, and me—lay in a defeated pile on the sidewalk.

Winston, our upstairs neighbor, walked by with his miniature standard poodle. We were only a block from our apartment building. "Get off the ground, Dean," he said. "This reflects poorly on the rest of the residents."

"He slipped, Winston," said Rose. The poodle—it's name was Alistair or

Mackenzie or something ridiculous like that—was half-strangling itself on its leather leash, its eyes dripping out of its face like they'd been glued on.

"I slip too," said Winston. "Hell, I'm ninety-six years old! I slip all the time. Just this morning, in fact, I slipped while reaching for the Postum. That's no reason not to get up."

"He's right," said Rose. "You should get up."

I was pretty sure Winston was not ninety-six years old, but I got up anyway.

Winston shot a frightened look at the condoms through his inch-thick eyeglasses. I scooped them up, and the Babyfreeze, and went to throw them both away, but I couldn't find a trash can, and they wouldn't all fit in my pockets, so I gave them back to Rose, who in turn put them right back in her purse.

"Good," she said. She grabbed my wrist and looked at my watch. "It's almost dinnertime. Why don't we go inside and continue this breakup there?"

"Who said this was a breakup?"

"I'm not saying it has to be," said Rose. "Just jumping to the most likely conclusion, as shorthand. It's not binding."

"You think we're going to break up," I said. "You *want* us to break up. You probably planned this whole event."

"I guess I should leave you two alone," Winston said, but he didn't.

"Are you hurt?" Rose said. "By the fall, I mean."

I was fine. My pants weren't even dirty. I looked at Rose, and at Winston, and at the poodle, and then I sat back down on the ground.

"I think I'm going to stay here," I said.

Ours was a miraculous city of neon and noise, a city where you could get plastic containers of Chinese takeout delivered to a spot on the sidewalk for less than

twelve dollars. Rose ate with me, spooning moo shu into her mouth like an assembly-line robot.

"You're going to have to get up from there eventually," she said.

"Everything has to happen eventually," I said. "Eventually, the universe has to explode. Or maybe contract inwards onto itself."

"I think contract inwards," Winston said. "I read an article about that once. Soon we'll all be nothing but crushed matter."

"Soon?" Rose said.

"Eventually," I said.

"Eventually you're going to have to go to work," Rose said.

"Hand me my phone," I said. "Hello, job? This is Dean. I quit."

"He didn't dial," Winston said.

"He's right," Rose said. "You weren't really on the phone."

"I'll take my sick days first," I said. "When they run out, I'll quit."

"I took a sick day once," Winston said. "In 1943. I had a cold."

People milled around us, mannequin-shaped men in suits that looked like cardboard cutouts and women with heavy shopping bags that scraped across the ground. They avoided me effortlessly, without looking, as if I were a pothole.

"You'll have to get up eventually," Rose said.

Rose had gotten good news that day, in the doctor's office where we'd met. It was going to be a boy, or a girl. But the swell of imminent birth hadn't been enough to patch things up with the guy she'd come in with, and soon enough she'd passed from him to me like a bounced basketball. "We'll tell everyone it's yours," she'd said, and I'd said, "We can tell everyone it's whoever's you want it to be." But it'd turned out not to be a boy or a girl or any kind of someone, just a ruptured

mass that came too fast and too soon. Cleaning the bathroom that night, I found Rose's scrawled sheet of names in the trash next to my own, a discarded list of crossed-out Kevins. Like I said, that was a year ago.

As for my own diagnosis, it didn't bother me, because I'd never assumed otherwise. We men are set up to expect fertility from the moment those first coiled hairs emerge above our junk like steel wool—maybe even from before that. We're warned to be ever mindful of the soft, warm places where our ooze might take root and grow, to blurt our goop onto floors or into tissues or, if we've been burdened with progressivist parents or teachers who want to think they're enlightened, into hands and mouths or onto breasts and stomachs and scratchy wool blankets in the backs of soft-seated minivans. To land it anywhere, anywhere we want as long as it's not *in there*. But I didn't believe any of it, not for a moment. That this stuff that stuck like the tops of cinnamon buns could make its way into a girl's insides and emerge nine months later a baby, like a caterpillar's metamorphosis? Maybe that's how it would work for other boys, but not for me. So I wasn't surprised when my hospital-gowned ass froze to the sharp metal of Dr. Levigzen's chair and he started spouting words like "spermatogenesis" and "idiopathicy"—I had never expected anything else. Besides, my prick still stood stiff on occasions too varied to quantify. Mine was an invisible failure, a failure only of the machinery below the surface, a failure that couldn't be smelled or tasted or touched. With Rose, it made things easier. After the not-Kevin neither of us wanted to think about anything like that again for a long time.

Minutes passed, then hours, not necessarily in that order. Winston went into a nearby department store and came out with two white plastic lawn chairs that he unfolded on the sidewalk next to me and, with Rose, occupied.

"It's a fine day to sit outside," Winston said.

I thought of a picnic Rose and I had shared on one of our first dates, in those early days just after we'd met. We'd been living together even though we'd barely known each other then—Rose had moved straight from her old boyfriend's place into mine, for convenience's sake. We'd boxed up blankets and bagged lunches but at the last minute Rose, still in the early throes of the pregnancy, had lurched and gone pallid and rushed to the toilet. So I'd had my juice box and my ham and cheese in the bathroom with her, rubbing her back with my free hand while she waited for the eruption that never came. "I've been unfaithful to everyone I've ever loved," she'd said between heaves. "You should know that. Even our dog, when I was a kid. I used to go into the pet store after school and play with the other dogs."

"It's okay," I'd said, my palm soft with the sweat from her back. "It's okay."

On the sidewalk, Winston coughed and wheezed and fiddled with the clasps of his suspenders. "Winston," Rose said. "Would you tell Dean that if he'd just get up and come inside we could talk about this in private, like normal people?"

"Dean," Winston said. "Rose would like me to tell you that—"

"I heard," I said.

"Would you tell Dean that I can sit here just as long as he can?"

"Dean, Rose would—"

"Winston, don't you have anything better to do?" I said.

"Than take part in a lovers' quarrel?" Winston said. "This is better than radio! I mean, hell, I'm one hundred and three years old!"

The evening came. Winston lay snoring with his head against the back of his

chair, the poodle curled in his lap like an enormous cotton ball. Rose still wasn't speaking to me, but she hadn't left my side. I began to wish I'd brought a book, or something. Instead, I tapped my thumbs against my thighs. I stretched my back and arms. I began to make a list, in my head, of everybody who had ever seen my penis. Audrey Schubert. Emily Renscht. Ted Doltzman, my college roommate. My parents and both sets of grandparents—but prepubescent sightings shouldn't count, I decided. Kelly Nesbitt.

A cop came over. "Hello, ma'am," he said.

"Officer," said Rose.

"We've received several reports of a man sitting on the ground in the middle of the sidewalk."

"That's me," I said.

The cop nodded thoughtfully. He was a thick porterhouse of a man, with a broad moustache that seemed to be gradually creeping further and further across his face.

"You two married?"

"Boyfriend," Rose said.

"For now," I said.

The cop hooked his thumbs into his belt loops. "Well, there's no law against sitting down. You want my advice about it, though, I'd get up if I were you. There's no telling what some people do on these sidewalks."

By the next morning, a crowd had gathered. A local TV reporter came to do a story about me. "It's a human interest piece," she said. "Domestic fight leads to sidewalk sit-in. Here, would you mind wearing this mic?" The mic wouldn't stay attached to my shirt, so the cameraman lent me his. "I'm here with area resident

Don Stanton, who's chained himself to the sidewalk—metaphorically speaking—in protest of, well, what exactly are you protesting, Don?"

"My name is Dean," I said.

The story ran that afternoon under the tagline "I've Fallen and I Won't Get Up." We watched through the window of the department store across the street, where a lazy stack of discounted TVs was permanently on display. At the end of the segment they cut to a shot of Winston, who I hadn't even noticed being interviewed. "I've never seen anything like this," he said, the poodle writhing in his arms like spaghetti. "And I've sure seen a lot. Hell, I'm one hundred and fifteen years old!"

Midway through the second day, Rose said, "Winston, I'm going to show him how ridiculous he's being. Maybe, when he sees it, he'll get up."

"I'm allowed to be ridiculous," I said.

Rose said, "I'll have photographic evidence." She got up and folded her chair into a compact little pile against Winston's. Then she walked to the opposite sidewalk and took a picture with her cell phone. Winston, who was asleep, ignored the whole thing. "It's you!" She shouted. "I mean, Winston, it's Dean! Looking like a homeless bum."

"Maybe I am a homeless bum," I said. "A homeless, girlfriend-less bum."

Rose walked back across the street. "Winston, look at how ridiculous Dean looks."

Winston lay with his head lolled back on the edge of his chair, the tip of his tongue poking slightly out of his mouth.

"I said, look, Winston!"

Rose put her hand on Winston's forearm with the careful touch of someone

inspecting a piece of rotting fruit. Then her eyes went wide. “I don’t think he’s sleeping,” she said.

Of course, I had to leave the sidewalk to go to the funeral. Rose and I dressed for it together, our last act of solidarity. “Zip me,” she said, stepping out of the bathroom with her front covered, and I did. She moved out that afternoon, packing up all of her things and then, because that wasn’t enough, some of my things as well. “You know,” she said. “There wasn’t anyone else. Not yet. It just made me feel good to be prepared.”

A couple months later I started seeing one of the nurses from Dr. Levigzen’s office, the office where Rose and I had first met the year before. The nurse was the pucker-faced woman who’d handed me the plastic cup and the DVDs during that appointment where my infertility had first been confirmed. “Because of you, I didn’t even need the videos,” I’d told her, and she’d known what I’d meant. She was a large woman, not fat but built like architecture, and she had two young kids she’d raised by herself, from an ex-husband. One of them, the youngest, called me dad once, and I told him not to.

SUPERHERO PHOBIAS

You can fly, but you're so afraid of heights that you've never done it.

You can walk through walls, but you're agoraphobic.

You're Plastic Man, but you suffer from body dysmorphic disorder.

You can breathe underwater, but you're deathly afraid of fish, and pools just aren't the same.

You have the power of mimicry, able to immediately take on other supeheroes' abilities, but your high-spectrum social anxiety disorder makes it difficult for you to ever meet other superheroes.

You're invincible, but you're a hypochondriac, and you've been so careful to avoid injury that you've yet to experience your own healing powers.

You have x-ray vision, but you saw in a magazine somewhere that even so-called

"safe" amounts of radiation are still carcinogous, and you worry that if you were ever to use your power you would be subtly but measurably increasing your risk of ocular cancer. You don't even like going to the dentist, because of the x-rays.

You're immortal, and suicidal. Being suicidal isn't a phobia in and of itself, you acknowledge, but the combination of the immortality and the repeated attempts to off yourself have led your therapist to diagnose you with a wide spectrum of phobias, most of which do not exist anywhere in the DSM-IV (you looked it up) and which, you begin to suspect, are being concocted with next-to-no scientific rigidity by your pompous, attention-seeking cocksucker of a therapist.

The arachnophobic Spiderman, you fear only yourself.

THE PERSON AT THE DOOR

The person at the door explained that he was me from the future and that he had come to tell me that one day I would make out with Bex Brinckley. "You'll be in college," he said. "Of college age. It'll just be kissing, nothing further. You'll want more, and maybe she'll want more, but she'll be drunk and you'll be in Dana Feingold's upstairs bathroom and people will be knocking on the door, saying they have to pee. You'll both be drunk, actually."

I said, If you're really me, then what's my favorite movie, and also how did you travel back in time?

"Sorry," he said. "I can't tell you either of those things." Then he shook his head and disappeared. I wasn't sure if I believed him, but he had looked a lot like me, and he had disappeared, albeit in a very boring way. There had been no magic involved. He was there and then he just wasn't, like that trick my dad used to do with our camcorder where he'd put it on a tripod and have me move out of the frame while the recording was paused.

When this happened I had only made out with two people and neither of

them were anywhere close to being Bex Brinckley, who'd been wearing tube tops and eyeshadow since she was eleven. The first was Caitlin Turner, a jerky-thin softball player who'd been my girlfriend for thirty-six days in eighth grade and who'd sprouted a pair of softball-sized boobs out of nowhere almost immediately after breaking up with me. The second was Alicia Grenwick, a five-ten bleached blonde who'd spontaneously kissed me at the Halloween Dance and then later confessed that she'd thought I was someone else.

I thought about telling someone about future me, but who was there to tell? Except for Todd Troelsch most of my friends wouldn't believe me, and Todd would probably act like being visited by your future self was no big deal, like all the popular people had already talked to their future selves loads of times and didn't I realize how dumb I sounded when I talked about it like it was some major life event? So I didn't tell Todd or anyone else. I just continued to live my regular life, lying about the cool movies I hadn't seen and trying not to wear my backpack too high up, and I definitely didn't talk to Bex Brinckley, not even when we were in the cafeteria sandwich line together and she got the same thing as me, turkey and lettuce and onions and no cheese or tomato please and that was a clear opportunity to launch into a conversation right there.

Then the next day at school they made us all be quiet in homeroom and Principal Newman's voice came on all crackly over the intercom and he said first off that what he was about to say was nothing to be scared about, which of course made everyone start getting really scared right away. And then he said that there had been some bomb threats at some of the neighboring schools, "just a few," he said, but he didn't actually say how many "just a few" was, so it seemed like maybe it was the kind of "just a few" that's like when your math teacher says you're

going to have "just a few" homework assignments over spring vacation. Then he told us that the police had come and that it had turned out there were no actual bombs so we had nothing to get all worried about and we could continue to follow the day's schedule as normal. Which of course eliminated any hope there was of anyone continuing to follow the day's schedule as normal, even the teachers.

And then Todd stopped me outside Spanish and said he'd changed his mind about not going to the Freshman Overnight and not to tell anyone but he had this really strong intuition that if he went he was going to get in a fight with Allen Dawson over Erin Cosgrove and then Allen was gonna punch him and it would become this big thing that everyone would be talking about for weeks and even though he was going to end up getting punched it would be sort of badass in a way so we should definitely go.

The Freshman Overnight was this school tradition where all the freshman brought pillows and old blankets and slept over in the hallways of the school—though if you wanted to be cool you didn't actually do any sleeping, or at the very least the next morning you said something like, "Dude, talk about pulling an all-nighter for school!," even though the "dude" you were talking to had probably seen you drooling on your borrowed pillow at 3 A.M. in the corner of the gym. The school got a hundred parents to be chaperones and they were supposed to make sure nobody squeezed in two to a sleeping bag or tried to drink the chemicals from the science labs. There was a rumor that the whole event had grown out of some nuclear preparedness ritual from the fifties, but now it was just an opportunity to embarrass yourself by getting caught trying to sneak into an empty classroom with somebody or, even worse, to embarrass yourself by not getting caught trying to sneak anywhere with anybody, which is why me and Todd originally weren't going even though each of us could tell the other

secretly wanted to. Oh, and Erin Cosgrove was that girl who one time in eighth grade got a pair of those lush red sweatpants that said "GODDESS" on the butt and by mistake wore them backwards with the butt part drooping out in front so you couldn't even read what the letters said and boys were still making fun of her for it now, so much so that a lot of them didn't even notice that she'd gotten Invisalign and started wearing her mom's old jean jackets and was actually getting pretty cute.

Then when I asked Todd how he'd gotten this mysterious intuition he said it was just an idea that had occurred to him and when he saw from my face that I knew that didn't make any sense he said I wouldn't believe him even if he told me, and that's when I realized that Todd had gotten a visit from his future self too.

And then it seemed like everyone was talking to their future everyones all the time. Nobody went and admitted it'd happened to them exactly but everyone was glancing at each other with shifty eyes and whispering about people they'd never whispered about before and when Rebecca Hajib got a C+ on her math test and Mr. Hardwicke asked her to stay after class for a few minutes she said it didn't even matter because she knew for a fact that in ten years she was going to be a high school math teacher herself. And there was this one kid named Damien Holstrom who had zits all over the back of his neck and always wore a bunch of long-sleeve shirts layered on top of one another who one day just stopped showing up to school and people were saying it was because he'd found out about something really bad in his future and decided there was no point in doing anything anymore. I kept passing Bex Brinckley in the grassy parking lot at the back of the building and wondering if she'd talked to Future Bex and if

Future Bex had told her about the make-out with future me or not. I didn't think she had though because it didn't seem like any two people were getting the same information from their future selves and even if Bex did know it's not like that would really have changed anything, since if she hadn't even hugged me last year at eighth grade graduation when she was hugging *everyone* then she wasn't going to all of a sudden get interested just because she knew that she would be when she was nineteen. She'd probably see the future kiss as some horrible looming deadline that she'd to do everything in her power to avoid.

But then there was the bomb threat at the Overnight and they herded us all outside in little stuck-together clumps of kids, everyone in their age-appropriate pajamas and with their crunched-up sleeping bags dragging behind them like slugs' trails. They walked us down the street past all the fast food places and discount shoe stores and there were cop cars everywhere but none of them had their lights on and a block ahead in a different clump I saw Allen Dawson hit Todd or at least a guy who looked like Todd. Eventually the police told somebody's dad that they'd searched the school and there hadn't actually been a bomb this time either but by that point most people were too freaked out to go back inside and so we all just sat there on the curb in our clumps waiting for our parents to come pick us up. And while we were waiting Lily Kilm found me and said had I heard and I said had I heard what and she said Andrea Cohen had started sobbing and snotting because her future self had warned her about the bomb threat but she hadn't told anyone because she didn't want to seem like she was just looking for attention. And apparently she was freaking out so much that her mom had had to come and give her this pill that calms you down that she was only supposed to take on airplanes.

School was cancelled the next day and then the day after that there was another big assembly and Principal Newman hauled himself back up onto the stage and said that the school's number one priority was keeping us safe and that if any of us were scared we could come talk to him in his office and he would explain why we shouldn't be. He didn't say anything about how before at the other assembly he'd said there was nothing for us to be scared about and nobody asked him about it, probably because this time we all actually were a little scared. Principal Newman's belly was drooping out over his beltline and he kept licking the corners of his moustache just a little bit like he thought no one could tell he was doing it. Then he clicked something in his hand and a slide lit up that said "IF YOU'VE BEEN TOLD SOMETHING, TELL SOMEONE" in big letters and he said even though we thought they didn't know what we students were talking about amongst ourselves they actually did know. I guess he meant the teachers when he said "they." Then he said that if anyone knew anything about the bomb threat or about anything else in the future they should come talk to him or to the school nurse. Actually he just said "anything else," but we all added the "in the future" part in our heads. And the whole time I was wondering whether my future self knew everybody else's future self and if they had all coordinated this together or if it was just some giant future coincidence that they had come back all at once.

Then during third period Allen Dawson went to see Principal Newman and told him there was going to be a big fire in the cafeteria at lunch and so they cleared everyone out of the building *again* and we had to spend all of lunch hour outside milling around in our same stupid clumps just like before and there wasn't even a fire, not even a tiny little grease fire that didn't do anything except make the smoke alarms go off. And Todd told me that everyone was saying Allen

Dawson was just looking for attention and he probably didn't even have a future self to come visit him because he was the kind of smelly kid who was going to become a juvenile delinquent and get involved with weird drugs we hadn't even heard of and die from choking on his own vomit or someone else's vomit before he even turned eighteen.

Then things started to get really weird. There were fewer and fewer kids in school every day and people came to class smelling like beer and cigarettes who had never smelled like beer and cigarettes before. Mr. Hardwicke caught Harvey Wright and Ellen Remmenwulf in an empty classroom trying to have sex with each other and when the nurse yelled at them and gave them a hundred pamphlets about condoms and diseases they started crying and said it wasn't their fault, it was just that their future selves had told them they were going to end up married so they figured they might as well see if they could like each other now. I mean, they didn't even *know* each other. Harvey was this freshman with one of those faint pubic moustaches where you couldn't tell if it was intentional or not and Ellen was a junior who did lacrosse and hockey and sometimes you saw her running up and down the stairs after school for exercise. And I hadn't even thought about Bex Brinckley in days.

Then one night I had to come back to school really late to get a textbook I'd left in my locker. A lot of people weren't even doing their homework anymore but I was still doing mine, mostly because I didn't know what else I would do at night if I didn't do homework. When I went inside the school it was mostly dark except for a few automatic lights that flickered on and off as I walked down the hall. And there was this kid sitting on the floor in front of my locker and when I got closer I could see that it was Liam Held, who I used to carpool with to el-

ementary school until his family moved and he started carpooling with someone else. He looked so creepy in the light and the empty school and you could just tell he'd been sitting there all day.

Liam said that his future self had told him to call in the bomb threats and so he had and then his future self hadn't said anything else, just told him to wait by the lockers tonight for further instructions—that was the phrase he'd used, "further instructions," like out of a spy movie—but he'd been waiting there all night and his future self still hadn't come back. And he said did we ever think that maybe our future selves were just screwing around with us, that maybe their current lives weren't so great and they had nothing better to do that mess around with their past selves? And that that could mean that maybe our own lives weren't as lame as we thought they were. Or that maybe the people we thought were our future selves weren't our future selves at all, just older kids who kind of looked like us and were sitting in some house on the other side of town right now, thinking about us calling in bomb threats and beating each other up and waiting for hours in empty schools, and they were laughing their asses off.

No, I said, I hadn't thought about any of that.

Liam wanted to talk more but my mom was waiting in the car and the empty school at night was kind of creeping me out so I just said a quick goodbye to Liam and I got my books and left. Then when we were driving home my mom started telling me this story about my aunt and how she was up for this promotion or something but she was too timid to really make the case for why she should get it and I wasn't really listening but I started thinking about my future self and how in retrospect he hadn't looked as much like me as I'd thought. Like he'd been more like a drawing of me where the person who did the drawing wasn't very good but you could still tell it was me. And how my future self—if he even was

my future self—was kind of a dick. And how when I eventually became him—if I even did eventually become him—I sure as hell wasn't going to go back in time and tell past me about Bex Brinckley or tell past anyone to do anything stupid like call in a bomb threat or stop doing their homework. My mom was going on and on and making big gestures with her hands even though she was driving and the headlights were sparkling off the road in front of us like disco balls. And I realized that I didn't have to wait until I became my future self to decide all this stuff, that in a way I already was my future self, right now, and I was becoming him more and more each day, and I thought about that some more and I felt really good about it, at least until the next day when I came into school and heard everyone talking about how Ellen Remmenwulf had seen Todd making out with Bex Brinckley underneath the fire escape.

FAKED LOVE/FELT LOVE

Al was mad. I had said bad words—well, good words, words my head heard as fine words, or at least as words that had no place on the scale of good and bad, but words that when they hit Al's ears meant bad things. And that was what made Al mad, mad like when your skin glows and your nose holes sweat, mad like when all those cows got sick, though I heard that in fact the moo mad was the fault of the firms that they let run the big farms. Well, I got punched by Al, which made sense. When bad words flap out like bats the mouth that freed them is looked at like the jail guard who did a bad job. I took the punch like all men who can't duck take a punch. It hurt, but not the kind of hurt you can't tune out if you try. I was just glad that the bruise that came from the punch was the small kind, the kind that I did not have to fear might feed a hunch that I was trapped in some kind of worse thing where a punch was doled out each day, where it was not a What was that thing to pull.

But the bruise is not the point. If there is a point it is what I said to Al which was, I think you and Pam do not love you and Pam but might in fact love those

who are not you and Pam, and I think that you know this and Pam knows this, but you have both faked it for so long what was once real has since lost all trace of truth.

Al said, It takes love to fake love, so faked love is felt love.

I said, If that's true then there is no fake. If that's true then a blank sheet from this pad is a bill worth ten bucks. I held out the sheet I had ripped from the pad, which as I looked at it I saw was not blank all the way through but had a light scratch at the top where I had tried and failed to make a dead pen work.

That is how cash works, Al said. A bill is flat tree pulp if it's five or ten or more, and deep down we all know tree pulp has no worth. Like checks and cards, cash is a pledge. I took a gov class or two, you know.

Fine, I said, but love is not cash. (I knew the line blurred at times, but now was not one of those times.) When Pam shows you forged love it's like lines in a school play. It's like how Paul still sang with John at the end when his head was full of plans for Wings. Plus, I said, it is my job to spew straight talk to a pal. Right now your mind is in twists like a gym rope.

In fifth grade I watched when you fell off that rope, Al said. I told girls not to laugh. You were more than a pal then; you were a deep love, like in the Greek sense where they thought man-on-man was love's sole true form. But now you've sunk to sub-pal. Now you wish you got from me the kind of Pam-love you call fake. For you I now feel just a blank spot where a feel should be. I see just a carved form of meat and nerves in the vague shape of where a friend once stood.

That was when I got punched, but I guess to Al it was just a fist slung at meat, like that film where the soon-to-be world champ trains in the fridge and runs up those stairs while that rock song plays that we all got sick of in like two weeks.

All this was three, four years back. In the end Al did take leave of Pam, or

Pam took leave of Al; each tale was told in its own way. I had been right in what I said and that made Al more mad at me than if I had been wrong. I moved and made new friends and I made sure one of them was named Al too. The new Al was a lone man with no spouse and few dates, and at not once in the rest of my life did I tell the old Al that in the days that led up to the punch, when he had gone for the night to see a sick aunt who lived just past the state line, me and Pam had shared a tryst that made my toes curl so hard I could not have cared less if the love she'd moaned in my ear was fake or not.

FROM ONE RON TO ANOTHER

When I told my parents that I won the $22 million Powerball, the first thing they did was get mad at me for playing the lottery.

"It's a tax on idiots," my mother said. "Reverse welfare. People should work for their money."

"Your mother's right," my father said. "You know what the chances of actually winning are? You're more likely to get struck by lightning sixteen times!"

"But I won," I said. "I won twenty-two million dollars."

"Yes," my mother said. "It's very nice."

My father said, "Have you started to think about what charity you might donate it to?"

It turned out that due to a legislative technicality I would not actually get any of the money until the next fiscal year. This was inconvenient, as I could've really used twenty-two million dollars, or even just twenty-two dollars. I was living out of an old Escalade—a nice car, but it didn't work, so I also had an old Accord, which I used to actually drive places—and I'd been supporting myself via

a series of odd jobs, each of which was odder than the last. I raked leaves for an old woman, until she realized it was cheaper just to burn them. I taught classes in pickpocketing prevention, until somebody signed up for the class just to suss out my own weaknesses and then pickpocketed me once the session was over. I composed limericks for strangers on the street, for free, and then charged five dollars if they wanted to hear the final line. Eventually the rhyme structure made it too easy to guess the final line without paying, so I switched over to haikus. *There once was a man / He was from where you're from / Five for the rest, please.* A good trick was not to make up the final line until after you got paid. You saved yourself a lot of work that way, since most people were too cheap to pay for the last five syllables.

I told all my friends that I was about to become unimaginably rich, but without any evidence none of them believed me. A local TV station had offered to do a segment about me, but I'd turned it down because I'd thought the fame might go to my head. And the state had already collected the ticket, so I didn't even have that.

"I don't buy it," Clarissa said, when I told her. "You don't seem like the type. Besides, you're a pathological liar."

"No I'm not," I said.

"See?" She said. "You're even lying about that."

Bill didn't believe me either. He worked mostly as an unlicensed massage therapist, but he was going to night school for tax law, so I asked him to estimate what the IRS might take. "This is all hypothetical," he said. "But based on last year's rates, your bill would probably come out to around twenty-four mil, leaving you…" He scrawled something on one of the crumpled notepads he was always carrying around. "…Around two million dollars in debt." Then he

snorted. "Good thing you didn't really win, huh?"

At night, falling asleep in the Escalade's back seat, I thought about what I could buy with twenty-two million dollars. I didn't have a lot of experience buying expensive things, so my fantasies had only a questionable base in actual economics. Twenty-two million dollars was enough to buy a mansion, and then tear it down and build a better mansion on the land. Twenty-two million dollars was enough to get the people who mated dogs to create a new crossbreed and name it after me. Twenty-two million dollars was greater than the GDP of the former Soviet Union, and twenty-two million dollars, if you got it in quarters, would weigh more than the entire Earth. It would even weigh more than Bill, who himself tipped the scales at close to three hundred pounds. "It's for the massages," was his excuse. "My clients like the pressure my bulk provides." I couldn't help but assume that this technique was, among many others, part of the reason he remained unlicensed.

Back when I still read the papers, I used to see those headlines about the horrible fates that inevitably befell all lottery winners. "LOTTO WINNER BROKE, FRIENDLESS JUST ONE WEEK AFTER BUYING TICKET." "LOTTO WINNER LOSES ARMS, PENIS IN MEGA-MILLIONS ACCIDENT." "LOTTO WINNER STILL FATED TO EVENTUALLY DIE ALONE, JUST AS WE ALL MUST." And the guys with the winning tickets always seemed to be the worst caricatures of the poor, a social Darwinist's wet dream: unshaven, cigarette-munching nineteen-year-olds who spoke earnestly of their plans to double or wait, maybe triple their money by using all the lump sum of their winnings to buy even more lottery tickets, or toothless, sag-bellied pregnant women who slid out another kid during the on-camera interview and kept right on talking about the heated seats and six-speaker surround they were going to

get in their new trailer. And then there was the cavalcade of hangers-on and suckers-up that sprouted from the forgotten crevices of every winner's past, high-school girlfriends looking for reimbursement and long-lost children who, if they really were who they claimed to be, would've been conceived when the winner himself was around nine years old.

I'd expected this to happen to me, even begun to consider the different people who might contact me—Bess Lindgren was a good bet, Bess with whom I'd been partnered in a disastrously aborted round of Seven Minutes in Heaven during my freshman year of high school, as was Arnold Wasserwurst, a former neighbor who'd twice attempted to sue me for not scooping up the poop of a dog I didn't even have. But because no one except my parents believed that I'd even won the lottery in the first place, this this potential freeloader thing turned out to be a non-issue. Joking around, Clarissa and Bill would ask me to pick up the tab for lunch and I, lacking as yet any actual winnings, would have no choice but to force a straight-edged smile as Clarissa put down her credit card. Clarissa was the only one of us with a real job, the kind that gives you a check every month with your taxes automatically deducted. She worked at the front desk of the Schecktown Public Library, a job that, as she described it, consisted mostly of cold-calling residents with overdue books and asking them in her most fake-nice tone of voice to pretty-please bring them back. Usually the missing book had been ruined, dropped in the bath or vomited on by a kid, or else the person on the other end would deny that they'd ever borrowed the book in the first place and the call would reach an unresolvable impasse, a Cold War standoff. Clarissa would tell them they wouldn't be able to borrow from the library again until the book had been returned and they'd say fine, I've never even used your crappy library in the first place, I don't even know how to read.

Sometimes, when hanging out in the back of the Escalade got boring, I'd drive the Accord to the library and hang out there. I didn't really like to read, but I was worried that if I didn't at least scan the pages of a book every now and then I might forget how to do it. Besides, the library was where Clarissa was. Whenever she asked me I told her that I definitely wasn't in love with her, but she didn't believe that either, and she was probably right not to.

Growing up, my parents always told me that money wasn't important, but I think that was mostly a justification for not letting me have any of theirs. My dad had made a small fortune in the early nineties, buying one-room Manhattan apartments for people who were moving to the suburbs and still wanted to keep their 212 area codes. But my parents believed it was psychologically destructive for a kid to grow up rich, so they socked away most of their wealth in a series of mutual funds and savings accounts whose details were a closely-guarded secret, and they raised me in a mimicry of what they believed an American middle-class upbringing was like. In January of each year my dad would retrieve the latest figures from the Bureau of Economic Analysis and adjust our own funds to precisely reflect that year's statistical mean income for a family of three. Then, every year around my parents' anniversary, I would be sent to stay at a friend's house while they took a weeklong vacation during which they indulged their every diamond-coated, caviar-moisturized, one-percent of the one-percent whim. I was never allowed to know exactly what transpired on these vacations, although once, when I was fifteen, my dad accidentally let slip something that I believe was a reference to some kind of sexual act involving a very exclusive Tokyo restaurant's high-end sushi.

This belief—that I should grow up as normal as statistically possible—ex-

tended into my adulthood as well. My dad was a zealous promoter of the 100% estate tax movement, the idea that parents should be able to leave nothing of real economic value to their children. After the real estate bubble burst he'd spent most of his time founding and directing the Center for Empty Wills, a political organization dedicated to furthering this cause. So far the CEW had only one policy success to point to, a bill that would have raised the estate tax in Kentucky by three percentage points and that languished in committee after the State Senator who sponsored it fell off a bridge. This, needless to say, was a big part of the reason I was currently living in the trunk of an engineless SUV. Although, as the CEW's slogan used to go, before it was changed in legal settlement: "We must each build our own yellow brick road."

Meanwhile, there was a whole month to go before the start of the next fiscal year, and I was rapidly running out of money. Clarissa was always offering to lend me something—"Just a little bit, to tide you over"—but I was worried that accepting one of her loans might someday interfere with my secret plan to marry her, or at least to get her to marry me. I tried offering up a special, two poems for eight dollars and fifty cents, but the market for haikus had dried up. Maybe everyone who wanted a custom poem had already gotten one, or maybe, with the economy picking up steam, people were moving on to sonnets and other, more expensive forms of verse.

Noticing my stress, Bill offered me a free massage. "It's really been getting to you, man, huh?" He said, shifting his wobbling bulk across the flat of my back. "You know, what with the lying about the lottery and all."

"I wasn't lying," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Just like you weren't lying when you told me you were in

love with Clarissa."

"I wasn't lying about that, either," I said. "I really am in love with Clarissa."

Bill pressed his pudgy elbows into my back. "Yeah? Then why don't you tell her that?"

"That's a terrible idea," I said. "The last thing you want to do when you love someone is tell them—they might ask you to stop."

Bill had wanted his massages to have a sauna component, but the Korean man he rented his room from wouldn't allow it, so we had to settle for just turning up the heat as high as it would go. We were both gushing great torrents of sweat, Bill's hairy belly sticking to my hairless back through the thin material of his t-shirt. "How's this?" He said, shifting again. "You feel the stress vanishing?"

"I don't know," I said. "What does that feel like?"

Bill shrugged, I think—with my face smushed into the table I couldn't see him, but that's what it felt like. "Everyone's reaction is different. One woman said it was like watching a bird fly out of your stomach. Like that thing in *Alien*, but beautiful."

"I've never seen *Alien*."

"Yeah, me neither," Bill said, after another moment had slunk away. "That's probably not it. She was a bad tipper anyway."

On Sunday, I called my parents from the library's pay phone. It had been exactly one week since the last time I'd talked to them—every time I talked to them was exactly one week since the last time I'd talked to them. My parents believed that once a week was the appropriate amount of time to speak with your grown son, and it was easier for me to remember to call them if I kept to a tight schedule.

When he picked up, the first thing my father said was, "I hope you're not let-

ting the money change you."

"What money?" I said. "I haven't gotten any money yet."

"That's what your father means," my mother said. "Money can change you even if you don't have it. It's the thought that counts, really."

"We didn't let money change us," my father said. "No, sir. Except for maybe that one time in Caracas…"

"Hush," my mother said. And to me: "How's your limerick business going?"

"It's haikus now," I said.

"Well," she said. "Here's a poem we wrote, for you: Roses are red, violets are blue, you are our son, whom we love."

"That doesn't even rhyme," I said.

"I read in the paper that poetry doesn't have to rhyme these days," my mother said. "Rhyming is out right now in the poetry world."

My father said to her, "Why didn't you just end it with 'You are our son, We love you?' "

The phone on its hook, I went over to the front desk, where Clarissa was chewing on the edge of a piece of paper.

"When my lottery winnings come in, I'll buy you a library of your own," I said.

"I don't want a library of my own," she said. "I don't even like libraries."

"Then what do you want?"

"Well, for one thing, I want you to admit that you didn't really win the lottery."

"Clarissa," I said. I took her hands in mine—in a comic, exaggerated way, to show that I meant it as an in-joke between platonic friends, even though I se-

cretly didn't. "Clarissa, I swear to you, I really did win the lottery. I won twenty-two million dollars. I'll prove it to you in a month, at the start of the next fiscal year. I'm getting Bill his own massage parlor." Now I was going to have to get Bill his own massage parlor, which I hadn't actually been planning on doing. "I'll buy you a library anyway, and if you don't like it, I'll pay for a wrecking crew to demolish it and build something else."

"You know what the worst part is?" Clarissa said. "You can't just be happy imagining that you got *one* million dollars. Even in your fantasies, you have to have more."

The next morning there was a knock on the front of the Escalade and I saw a fat, plaid-suited man standing cautiously in front of the windshield. I was wearing nothing besides underwear, but I stepped outside anyway. If I was going to be a multi-millionaire, I had to start learning how to dress eccentrically.

"Ron Stedsten?"

"That's me," I said.

He shook my hand. "Same here. I mean, partially. I'm also Ron—Ron Redman. From state."

"State?" I said.

"You know, the one we live in," he said. He looked at the Escalade. "Some home you got here," he said.

I felt like I was supposed to ask him if he wanted to come in, so I did. He took the driver's seat—it was less comfortable, because the steering wheel got in your way, but I always thought that made it feel more fun somehow.

"Mr. Stedsen," the man said. "Let me be brief." He glanced cautiously down at my own briefs, as if considering a joke, but then righted himself and continued

on. "You have, I'm sorry to say, fallen pray to a rare and isolated instance of error on the state's part. Your winning lottery numbers—well, see, that's part of the error right there. We have reason to believe that your numbers—which are, in reality, non-winning numbers—were incorrectly and temporarily certified as winning numbers. Now, Mr. Stedsen—can I call you Ron?"

I said nothing.

"Well, Ron, am I correct in understanding that you played last week's Powerball lottery using the numbers"—here he read from a stained sheet of paper—"eleven, sixteen, twenty-nine, thirty, and five?"

I had.

"You see, Ron, the winning numbers were in fact eleven, sixteen, twenty-nine, thirty, and *fifty-one*. Now, as it turns out, the examiner who collected your entry erroneously mistook a small piece of dirt that had somehow become smudged onto the ticket just following the digit 'five' for the digit 'one.' An okay guy, this man is, though sadly not blessed with perfect vision. Of course, I'm one to talk…" He indicated his own glasses and chuckled, then stop. "The state apologizes," he said. "We find nothing funny about this."

"I didn't win," I said. "I didn't win anything."

"Oh, no! Mr. Stedsen, we at state—of course!—are not heartless people. You will receive compensation for your inconvenience, in the form of this voucher good for entry into ten—that is, the digit one, followed by the digit zero—additional Powerball lotteries." He retrieved a thin, receiptlike scroll from his breast pocket and squashed it into my hand. "You know, we're not supposed to share personal information on the job, but I had a situation like this happen to me once. Bought a scratch ticket and they said I'd won a hundred bucks, but it turned out it was only ten. Real bummer, that one."

The man hauled opened the driver's side door and stuck one leg out on the ground. "Again, state's apologies," he said. "And my own as well. You know, from one Ron to another." He did not offer to shake hands, and I didn't try.

Later that day I saw Bill, and I told him that he was right, that I hadn't won the lottery after all. I gave the other Ron's voucher to Clarissa, who bet on "1-2-3-4-5" for ten weeks in a row and lost every time.

ELLIE, AS THE PEOPLE SHE KNOWS DIE ONE BY ONE

Her half brother, first, her father's child from Marriage #1, who'd been in grad school on the other side of the country before she'd even been born and whose existence she hid from all but her closest friends—well, not *hid*, really, just failed to mention. By the time she'd even met the half brother he'd been on his own Marriage #1 and her father had been near the end of Marriage #4, having run ramshod through #2, to her mother, and #3, to the first of the not-mothers. The half brother was tall and narrow like Ellie and seemed somehow compressed, both physically and, also like her, in his movements and mannerisms. He was hit by a car while biking across the street—a Fiat, but that was all it took. Ellie found out towel-clad, skin wrinkled, at the edge of the bathroom in the house she shared with her mother, but she'd suspected, in the tub, that someone had died, when the phone had rung and rung and rung until she'd been driven to answer it still dripping, her legs half shaved.

"Carl?" She said. "Carl who?" And then: "Oh."

Tessa, next, poor chubby Tessa, busty Tessa who hated the attention her breasts got her, who was always complaining to Ellie about this boy or that boy: "Can't they compliment something else for a change?" They had been freshman year roommates, not friends exactly but intimate in the way two people become when they share close quarters. Tessa was from Louisiana and had described it like a part of another world, muggy and marshy and with the sounds of animals everywhere. Once, Ellie had awoken to the sounds of Tessa and a gurgly boy stumbling into the room, tripping over dirty clothes and books and the electric kettle Ellie's mother had bought her and collapsing onto Tessa's bed in grunts and giggles and when Ellie had reminded them that she was there the boy had turned to Tessa and said "I don't mind if you don't," and they'd continued on as if Ellie was a pet hamster or turtle, unable to understand what she was listening to. Still, Tessa had not been a bad roommate, had read with a small headlamp whenever Ellie wanted to turn the lights out, and had held her hair and stroked her back the night she'd drunk the double-strength rum the boys down the hall were always bragging about.

Tessa took a ride in the car of a boy who'd had half a box of wine—*Not the first time she's done something like that*, Ellie thought when she found out, before scolding herself for her cruelty. The boy's other passengers all stepped from the car unscathed, as did the boy himself; only Tessa was left, having crammed herself into the trunk after all the real seats had been taken. It happened their senior year, when Ellie hadn't talked to Tessa for a long time beyond the obligatory hellos that were exchanged like cash whenever they passed each other on the main field. Their school was big enough that the death of a single student didn't garner much attention. Ellie bought an outfit for the funeral but then, at the last minute, didn't go.

Her grandmother, though: that one hurt. Bess was her father's mother, one of those sprightly octogenarians who resented the word "grandma," a woman who had avoided old age for decades only to watch it catch up to her in triple-speed and then, in no time at all, take her away altogether. Ellie and Bess had conspired with each other at Weddings #3 and #5 (she'd skipped #4), grandmother and granddaughter huddled off in the corner of the ballroom and slurring invectives about the bride of the day. "She's a trollop," Bess would say, seemingly unconcerned that the trollop in question was moments away from becoming her daughter-in-law. "And that makeup! She looks like a reanimated corpse."

As a child, Ellie had believed that her grandmother might never die; as an adult, she'd hoped only to postpone her death in gradual increments, to have her grandmother live to see her college graduation, her wedding, the birth of her first child. "Well, two out of three's not bad," David said to her just after they heard, patting the swell of her belly. "And she knew Alex was on his way." Bess had approved of David from the moment Ellie had first told her about him, when she'd been a paralegal for a small New York firm and he'd been one in a rotation of couriers they'd used to transport their most important documents. "That means he's a man you can trust," her grandmother had said. "Couriers have to be very trustworthy." And she'd been right: David had been a steady and unwavering husband, a constant presence, moving with her to Cincinnati when she was offered a job there straight out of law school and then to Akron when she decided she didn't want to be a lawyer after all.

Ellie learned of her grandmother's death from her father, whose calls had grown so infrequent that, as with her half brother, she had known something was wrong even before she'd touched the receiver to her ear. "It's mom," her father said, and she had a brief, terrifying vision of her own mother crashing to the floor

before she remembered that her father hadn't called Wife #2 "mom" since Ellie had been a little girl. "She was asleep," her father said. "No one saw it coming. Just there one minute and gone the next." *Like you*, Ellie thought, but she didn't say anything.

Then David's father, a man she hadn't known well but whose death left David so shaken that she was left equally shaken by proxy. They were there when it happened, in the hospital room with the machines that wheezed beeps and the furniture that reeked of sweat and scaredness. Laura, David's sister, had taken Alex downstairs to get him something from the vending machines. The boy was four then, and loved his grandfather; it was one of the day's few blessings that he'd been out of the room when the old man had sputtered and twisted into stillness. They'd brought Alex with them only after one of several mistaken doctors had told them that they could expect a full recovery. "It's amazing what we can do to the human body these days," the doctor had said, though apparently it wasn't.

Ellie had never watched anyone die before and it took her a few minutes to realize that someone dying was in fact what she had just witnessed; David's father was semi-conscious when it happened, drifting in and out of a hazy Dilaudid sleep, although only a few hours before he'd been awake enough to joke about sneaking the two of them some of his painkillers. "For when the little one is too much to handle," he'd said. Ellie had always thought of David's father as an exceptionally kind man, sweet to David even when the two of them argued and always full of energy and wonder around Alex, telling him stories from his childhood that he'd later confess were mostly fictional. At the pits of their worst fights, it would sometimes occur to Ellie that Alex's grandfather was better with the boy than his own father was, but she never said this to David, just kept it

stored away at the back of her mind like a country with nuclear weapons it's pledged never to use.

David took his father's death hard, harder than he'd taken his mother's, or so he said—Ellie had never known David's mother, who'd found the lump, sucked in the radiation, and still found the second, fatal lump all before Ellie and David had met. Now he took to pacing at nights, although he was always careful to slump in bed with her first until she fell asleep or faked it, and to pace downstairs, where the sounds of his footsteps would be muffled by the wall-to-wall carpeting. Ellie consulted a series of web sites, the most lenient of which said that the deepest grief should last no more than ten weeks. David's seemed to last longer, long enough that Ellie stopped counting, but he faked cheer meticulously around Alex each morning and night until eventually the distinction between the fake cheer and the real seemed to blur away.

They'd prepared an answer for Alex, expecting him to ask where grandpa went after he died, but he never did. He seemed to know even then that nobody, least of all his parents, could give him an answer.

And Alex, then: who could expect the death of a child? Not Ellie, certainly not Ellie, not beyond the fleeting moments of heart-thrashing expectation she'd felt those times he'd kept on crying even after she'd picked him up, those times he'd fallen in the dirt while running towards an interesting tree or after a crowd of pigeons, the fast-forward quickening of her pulse the day she'd tightened the straps of his tiny backpack and bumped his bottom into the first day of kindergarten, the August afternoon she'd let the babysitter, a neighbor's seventeen-looking fifteen-year-old, take him to the playground without supervision for the first time. For years she'd been double- and triple-checking the belt on his car seat, scan-

ning toy packages for any crusty plastic bits that even hinted at choking, watching him like a spy by the pond or by that same neighbor's pool. But children's Tylenol? Who feared children's Tylenol? Even headaches and fevers didn't fear children's Tylenol; they regarded it as a nuisance, a minor inconvenience to be dealt with and then moved on from. Children's Tylenol had a childproof cap—this for a boy who called for his mommy to open the jar every time he wanted a pickle. Children's Tylenol was a viscous, fake-grape goop—this for a boy who ate his oatmeal plain because syrup, he said, was "too glurpy." But children's Tylenol was not in David's locked cabinet, and children's Tylenol was not on the top shelf, and children's Tylenol, the woman at poison control told her, could cause life-threatening side effects if your child drank the whole bottle.

That day became sound: shrieks like nothing she'd ever heard before, shrill and scratched and groaned and guttural all at once, the empty scrape of retch after retch after retch, the dial tone and the phone's beeps and the whines she kept imagining from the ambulance that never came, the crunch of her car over gravel and grass and the honks of traffic, David's voicemail twice and then three times and the man who shouted "Bitch!" when she shot through a red light—*If only you knew,* she thought—the screech of a skidded stop in front of the hospital, the soft murmurs of the building's intercom, the same goddamn "You've reached David Westhoff" over and over and over. The doctors explaining what they would do, the things they would put in her son, the angry machinery they would connect him to. And then the explanations only of what they'd done, the future tense gone, their scrubs and foreheads still wrinkle-free.

"We could try again," David said, much later, easily more than ten weeks later. "Women are having kids in their forties these days." But they couldn't try again, not when they'd failed the first time. It wouldn't have been fair.

Ellie's father next, finally. A heart attack. Ellie suspected sex at first, embarrassed as she was to acknowledge it, but no, he'd been jogging around the block with his wife in their ridiculous matching sweatsuits. It hadn't been entirely unexpected: the culprit was Heart Attack #3, undergone with Wife #5 by his side. "It was instant," the wife had told her, this woman who Ellie barely knew, with her immaculate outfits and chemical youth. "He didn't seem to feel any pain." This, too, was not entirely unexpected; all his life her father had never seemed to feel any pain.

Ellie attended the funeral alone. Her mother wouldn't go, not out of malice, she insisted—"I just can't be bothered." But David came, leaving his new wife and two-year-old at home and flying across the country, calling Ellie first to make sure that it was okay. "I won't come if you don't want me there, Ell," he'd said, more than once. But David had always gotten along well with her father, had seen some kind of spunk he'd admired in the inscrutable man, and he'd always pushed her to talk to him—not much, but more than she'd wanted to—and she was grateful for it now, even though each conversation had been more labored than the last, the two of them like actors in a play, her father miscast for the role.

"You look good, Ell," David said to her. "Really good. Is that okay to say at a funeral?"

"Rebecca didn't mind you coming here?"

"She understands," he said. "Rebecca doesn't mind a lot of things."

"It still hurts," Ellie said.

"Your dad?"

"No," she said. "Not my dad."

"Well," he said, shifting his shoulders. "You were there."

But still he hung a loose arm around her back, and he beamed at her from

the front pew when she spoke, and before he left he said, "Take care of yourself, Ell," and she smiled at him with her mouth bit because she knew she wouldn't.

And Ellie herself? It had to happen eventually, she thought, would not exempt her from the partnership it had formed with everybody else. On a plane that plummetted, maybe—she'd make sure her own oxygen mask was tight around her face before she turned to help the woman next to her, a fat, scared woman, spilling out of her seat, scared at takeoff even, before the lights began to flicker and the plane began to bounce like a child on his grandfather's knee. Or in a subway car that careened off the tracks, scrapes and sparks of metal against metal, worse than people would imagine it when they read about the stories. Ellie hadn't lived in the city since the paralegal job, but she could always move back, she thought, could move back tomorrow. Or emphysema, death by a thousand mucousy coughs and drags of the oxygen tank, the inevitable denouement to a lifetime of smoking. She didn't smoke, had never smoked, but it was never too late to start—until, of course, it was. But then there was always old age, that trusty stalwart, a euphemism, usually, for a silent stroke or a couple dozen small cancers all at once. Or maybe, she thought, maybe I'll never die. Maybe I'll be the first of us to live forever, or maybe I won't be the first, maybe there's a whole country full of death-defiers, maybe a whole world of them, hidden among us in plain sight.

Or maybe, she thought, maybe no one ever dies, maybe everyone who's ever died has been faking it: a vast conspiracy of the secret living, paying off coroners and morticians to keep their this-life afterlife hidden from the rest of us. Maybe that's where Tessa went. Maybe that's where Alex went. Maybe, she thought, that's where I'll go.

FELICIA AT THE BEACH

Mom always told me that if I hitchhiked I would get raped and murdered, but she never said anything about picking up hitchhikers, so I let Dennis into my car and then, bit by bit, into my life, and now we were thirty-six and fatter than we'd ever been. I was still working the babysitting job I'd had since high school—Felicia, the girl I used to babysit, was a mother herself now, and I babysat her kids. We don't have any of our own. Dennis wanted to, but when you're around kids all day the last thing you want is to be around one at home, too. Sure, we argued about it, but eventually he saw that I was being reasonable. I mean, I didn't say anything when he nixed my plans to start a small garden in our backyard, even though I knew that managing an industrial chicken plant, which is what Dennis does, is nothing like being a vegetable farmer.

Mom always told me that she wanted grandkids, but mom's been dead going on ten years now. Ever the hypocrite, she was killed hitchhiking. She didn't get raped and murdered, though—the guy trying to pick her up swerved too close to the side of the road and hit her. Dad sued, but our lawyer was a drunk and we

lost the case. Which is just as well—it wasn't that guy's fault that he hit mom. Just like it's not Dennis' fault that we don't grow our own squash, and it's not my fault that we don't have our own kids, and it's not my old Mazda's fault that me and Dennis ended up together in the first place.

When we got married, it was in a trailer going fifty miles per hour. *A truly moving wedding*, the invitations said, and all the guests pretended that was funny. There weren't many. When we were going over the guest list, we'd stop at each name and think to ourselves, Is this wedding really going to be any worse if so-and-so isn't there? Usually the answer would be no, and we'd cross so-and-so off our list with one of Dennis' mechanical pencils.

The idea behind the trailer had been we met in a car so let's get married in a car, but the trailer had made unsettling noises and moved like someone dragging a piece of heavy furniture across a rug and Dennis' puckered grandmother had been in denial of her motion sickness and kept refusing our requests that she lie down. Later, after everyone had grabbed at the cake and stained the tablecloth with their spilled wine, the minister had hung his carrotlike arm over my shoulder and said he was sorry he hadn't realized it earlier but we'd actually driven across state lines well before the start of the ceremony and would we mind doing the whole thing over again? "I'm only licensed to marry you in the Dakotas," he'd said. "It's a legal thing." Then he'd sucked his teeth for a moment and added, as if this was the kind of insight people turned to religion for: "Too bad we didn't drive north." He'd said to come by his office the next day and we could get remarried in jiffy—no extra charge, even!—but it was years before we got around to it.

Perhaps I'm giving you the wrong impression. Dennis is a good person: he has legible penmanship, he's appropriately tall, and he never forgets to take the

recycling bins out to the curb when it's his week to do so, even if I make a last-minute alteration to the schedule that's taped to our fridge. One time we were walking past this jewelry store and I pointed out a necklace in the window that I liked and when he brought it home later that week in a newsprint-wrapped box I was so taken aback that I didn't even tell him I had actually been pointing at the necklace next to the one he'd given me. That's just the kind of guy Dennis is: always there to buy you the wrong necklace.

You know that foggy feeling you get when you do something you're not supposed to? Joan and Allen, the kids I babysit, were playing hide and seek, the same round over and over again. That's how they like to do it: Allen will find Joan, underneath the pile of dirty blankets or squeezed into the little square cabinet below the sink—the one that hides all the pipes—and she'll just deny it. "I'm not really here," she'll say. And Allen will play along, even though he's the younger of the two. "I guess I have to keep looking, then," he'll say. They'll do this for hours, the same thing for hours, Allen finding Joan in the same spot three, four, five times and Joan refusing to admit she's been found.

There's no role for me in this game—they babysit themselves, really. I'm left to wander the house, searching for quarters under the couch or for the white chocolate-chip blondies that Felicia makes when she's off her diets and hides when she's back on them. I don't keep the quarters, by the way. I put them in the cookie jar labeled "CHARITY" that sits at the back of the kitchen counter, cozied behind the toaster like it's too shy to come out. And I'm allowed to eat the blondies. Felicia always instructs me to help myself to anything in the house—"And I mean anything," she always says—though she probably doesn't think I know that she hides her desserts in old take-out containers, and in empty Saltine

boxes, and in the small space underneath the trash compactor.

It's not like she needs to lose weight, even: the diets are introduced and abandoned at times that I don't think have anything to do with how she feels about her body.

So Joan and Allen were hiding and seeking, their muffled giggles careening throughout the hallways, and I was in the kitchen, sitting at one of the backless stools that seem like they've been stolen from a diner and correcting the wrong answers in one of Felicia's unfinished crossword puzzles. That was when I saw it: the dangling blue clasp of what could only have been a bra, sticking out from behind the refrigerator.

I didn't touch it. Not right away, at least. Just watched it, slithering out from the back of the curved Maytag like a thick, rotten noodle, or like the scared arm of a trapped octopus. I began to imagine the different ways the bra could've gotten there: dropped from the laundry sack as the maid walked from the mudroom, perhaps stopping for a snack on her way to fold the wash; discarded by Joan or Allen, who would have treated the bra as just another plaything, too young to be aware of its intended purpose; or removed by Felicia herself, perhaps, on a sweaty August day, the kind of day where the air seems to be heating your bones under your skin and you claw away everything, shirt and bra and pants and bracelets even, your hair if you could, and you stand in front of the fridge with the door open and turn the dial as cool as it gets and pretend you're in the penguin area at the zoo, or at least someplace that has central air.

The bra was asking me to pick it up, but it wasn't telling me what to do with it once I had it in my hands. It belonged in Felicia's room, I knew that, but I didn't think I was supposed to dig through her drawers to find out which one held the underwear. Touching this bra was one thing; touching all her bras was another.

But I couldn't just leave it there, looking all awkward and distended like a hair out of place. So I scooched the fridge forward a few inches and, with my foot, slid the bra all the way behind it.

"Marvelous," I told myself.

Felicia came home later than she'd said she would, but not late enough that I could complain. "Traffic," she said, and then, once she noticed me looking out the window at where her car had been parked all day: "Bike traffic, I mean. It can be just as bad."

"I fed the kids," I told her, even though they'd fed themselves.

That night, Dennis kissed me four times like he always does, three times in a horizontal row on the forehead and once on the lips. There'd been an accident at the chicken farm—not an accident, really, just a few chickens dead of whatever diseases chickens get. I didn't tell him about the bra, but then again, I don't tell him about most bras. One time I bet him that if he was in a room with ten bras, five of them mine and five of them other women's, he wouldn't be able to pick out which were which. He said he was certain he could identify mine and when I said "Certain?" he squeezed my hand and said, "Certain." Then he'd told me that it was merely a problem of statistics, and a simple one at that: all he'd have to do would be to pick the five bras that were the same size, since the other women would almost certainly not all wear a 42B.

Except he didn't say "a 42B." He said "your size."

Babysitting for the kids was a part-time job, three days a week, but it'd been part-time for so long that most weeks those three days felt like full-time. The next day I was sitting cross-legged at the kitchen table while Joan and Allen sequestered themselves off in some opposite part of the house. Felicia's crossword was still

sprawled across the table; in seven down, I changed "CARTER" to "REAGAN." I could feel the bra humming from its hiding space, a high-pitched, bubbly vibration that blended in with the low grumble of the fridge. I imagined its tensile straps, its distended, puckered cups, the dust and scraggly grime it would've picked up during its stay on the floor. And then I was holding it in my hands, the fridge pushed out from the wall to let me reach into to the bra's old home behind it.

Don't misunderstand me—this wasn't sexual. Once, in high school, my mom had come into the basement without her usual yell of warning and found me and Jenny Schneerson with our mouths squished up against each other as tight as magnets, and a few days later she'd sat across from me at the table we only used for special occasions and explained that she didn't care who I loved just so long as I loved at all. Me and Jenny Schneerson had only been practicing for the school play's tryouts, our careful hands disguising the fact that we weren't really kissing at all, but I didn't tell mom that, not after she'd offered me the kind of unconditional warmth that I could tell even then was a rare thing.

No, it wasn't sexual when I handled Felicia's bra, and it wasn't sexual when I removed my own and stretched hers taut across my body in its place. It was smaller than mine—Felicia was smaller than me—and putting it on felt like one of those exercises I've seen older men do at the gym, with the wide rubber straps that always look like they're going to snap in half but never do.

I stood with one foot on the floor, one foot on the chair. The bra dug into my back and sides like a child holding your hand too tightly. Maybe this was how Felicia cooked her blondies: bra-clad, shirt on the counter, sashaying around the kitchen with wide swings and twirls as the smell of vanilla extract drifted from its tiny, curved bottle. Maybe this was the bra Felicia wore on the nights

she spent with men, the nights when she would call and ask if I wouldn't mind staying till one or two A.M., the nights where I would say I had to check with my husband first, even though after years of Dennis never minding the checking had shifted into just telling. "Of course, sweetie," he always said. "I can fix up for myself around here. Besides, Felicia really needs you."

Felicia had once suggested that those late nights must've been nice for me, with the kids asleep by eight and the whole house quiet and private. I didn't tell her that I never had to take care of the kids, that they took care of themselves, that for years the job had felt like I was being paid just to sit in a house. That's why I wasn't worried that Joan or Allen would come in and see me wearing the bra—they never seemed to be all that interested in my presence, or even aware of it.

You know how there's some rooms that always seem closed off to you, even if their doors are open? Before we moved in together, Dennis lived in a squat little apartment that hadn't been built to be an apartment, and his bathroom had another, smaller room off to one side, like a walk-in closet for a half-size person. Dennis told me he kept extra bathroom stuff in there—that's the phrase he used, "extra bathroom stuff." I never went inside myself. Not because he told me not to—he never told me not to do anything in that apartment—but because it felt like he didn't really want me to go in there, even though if I ever had I'm sure he wouldn't have known. And Felicia's bedroom—I'd been inside lots of times, but never like I found myself inside now. I'd been inside her bedroom like I was just checking in or passing through, even though there was nothing to check in on or pass through to. Now I was inside the way you're inside a sleeping bag, or the way you're inside a large person who gives you an enveloping hug. The way Joan must feel inside the cabinet under the sink, when she hides from Allen.

I sat against the headboard of the bed and imagined I was Felicia. It was a puffy bed, with thick pillows and blankets that had a lot of heft to them—the kind of bed you'd see in a bed catalog. You could sink into the pillows and then get up without leaving behind a curved impression of where your head had been. There was a picture of Felicia, a younger Felicia, on the bureau next to the bed. She was at the beach, sunlight making parts of her face shine white, in a button-down shirt blown off one shoulder by the wind. And underneath the shirt she was wearing the same bra I was wearing now. Felicia looked happy in the picture and I thought about how everyone always looks happy in pictures at the beach, like there's some secret agreement everyone made to always smile in beach photos, like even the depressed people had signed their names at the bottom and said okay, sure, when we're at the beach we'll just fake it. Felicia didn't seem like one of the depressed people, though. Her smile was too crooked to be anything but real. If I was Felicia at the beach, my smile would definitely be real.

When Felicia came home I was still in her bed, her bra still creasing thin red indents across my back like the stripes on a candy cane. I heard her key slide into the lock and clang into the other keys on her chain, heard the door spill open into the mudroom, sensed that she was hesitating to call out my name in case the kids were asleep. And I thought for a second that I could be her if I wanted to. I was already eating her blondies. I was already doing her crosswords. I was already using her bathroom. If I wanted to, I could stay silent as she started to shout my name over and over, make her think that I was taking a nap, or that I'd gone out back, and I could hide behind her bedroom door and then, as she came in, I could put my hands around her scraggly neck and I could hold them there as hard as I could until she wasn't really Felicia anymore. And then I could put on her clothes and get under her covers and turn on her TV, only they would be my

clothes and my covers and my TV. I could bundle up all soft and cozy and I could look at the picture of me at the beach, and if I put the old Felicia under the bed or in the guest room nobody ever used Joan and Allen probably wouldn't even notice that anything was different.

One of the funny things about Dennis was that whenever the two of us were driving anywhere he never wanted to stop for hitchhikers. I'd suggested it a couple times—there was the tweed-suited guy with the violin case we'd passed on the side of I-29, and the man holding the sign that just said "Take Me With You" who we'd seen on our way to visit my uncle. But Dennis said no every time. At first I'd suspected jealousy, that maybe he thought I'd leave him for another passenger. But when I finally broached the subject he told me not to be ridiculous, that of course he wasn't jealous. "It's just that picking up hitchhikers is very dangerous," he said.

"I picked you up," I said.

"Well, sure," he said. "But that was probably a mistake." And when I got really quiet after that he said, "Oh, come on. I didn't mean it like that. Just that picking up hitchhikers in general is not a good idea."

A CORPSE IN THE CAR

It was as if there were a collection of Antarctic glaciers, caught in the crosshairs of global warming and melting over thousands of years, in his bladder: that was how badly Chris Carpet had to go to the bathroom. Rest stops always made him have to urinate, with their stretches of uninterrupted asphalt like whole new grey worlds and their lonely collections of our nation's lesser-known fast food chains. And the toddlers—oh, the toddlers! Eyeing vending machines like snipers, dripping from their mothers' arms with mystery condiments spread in wide swaths across their faces, sitting with their little toddler butts in those driving simulator games, the ones with the small plastic steering wheels and the clammy seats where scores of germs copulated with one another to produce entirely new species. The game booths here were all sponsored by Westwood Chevy, the car dealership on the other side of the highway, and its vehicles were all pixillated vans and 4x4's that didn't look at all fun to drive, let alone to pretend to drive. Yes, everything about this rest stop was horrid, Chris thought. It was palatable only in comparison to the car he had left outside where, sitting in the front

seat with her bare feet no doubt on the dash, Anna was waiting for him.

There were some forms of cancer, he'd read, whose symptoms included both the perpetual feeling of having to go to the bathroom and the inability to actually urinate. Chris had thought he'd had cancer six times during the three years he'd been with Anna and, so far, had not had it once; still he knew that when he did get cancer, as he inevitably would, he would use those six previous scares as ammunition in a large arsenal of Anna-directed I told you so's. He hadn't even had to pee, originally. They whole reason they'd swerved into the rest stop in the first place was because they'd been having a fight, or, as he saw it, *Anna* had been having a fight with him and he'd been, as she put it, "refusing to engage." It seemed to Chris a deep injustice that his attempts to stall a fight's escalation could in fact be twisted into evidence that was then used against him in the very fight he'd been trying to avoid in the first place. "You don't understand," Anna had said. "Once I'm mad, the fight's already started, even if you don't know it yet." She was like that with sex, too. If, in the night, he brushed away a hand or shifted so that his back was up against hers, he was not just declining her advances but in fact rudely interrupting an act that, as far as her thoughts and emotions were concerned, was already in progress. Chris had always been proud of his ability to drive for very long distances without stopping to go to the bathroom—justifiably so, he thought—but that ability evaporated as soon as the mere thought of a bathroom stop made itself at home in his mind. Once the fight had snowballed to the point where his having pulled over had been the unavoidable next step, he'd had to hurl himself from the car and dart rapid-fire across the lot's acreage, his hand already reaching for his fly. Like his and Anna's relationship, Chris' ability not to have to pee functioned only so long as he didn't think about it.

The line for the bathroom was moving so slowly that he could swear he was

further away from it than when he'd started. There was the Bumpin' Burger in the corner with its own, customers-only bathroom, and he'd thought about buying something there just to use it: the smallest thing they sold, a single fry or a quick sip of soda. But the line over there to place your order had at the time seemed just as long as the line he was in now, maybe even longer—even though it had, of course, turned out not to be. Now Chris could see could see the man he would've been waiting behind in that line, if he hadn't altered his course of action and planted himself in the line he was currently waiting in—and that man was now sitting at one of the chintzy rest stop tables, tearing at the wrapper of his chicken sandwich. He was a small, loose-skinned man, and wrapped in several layers of baggy clothes, such that if you didn't look closely you might mistake him for nothing more than a pile of laundry.

Chris and Anna's fight had begun over nothing and had, by the time he'd thrown the door open in his linebacker's rush to the bathroom, intensified to the point where it seemed to encompass everything, slights from years past that had been forgiven long before and out-of-context quotes pulled seemingly verbatim from previous arguments. In the moments before the rest stop had so considerately made itself visible along the edge of the highway the fight had threatened even to incorporate problems that had no connection to their own relationship: issues they'd had with previous partners, resentments they held towards their parents, their concerns with society at large. Like a four-drink dinner or a particularly scary roller coaster the details of the fight were difficult to remember as soon as they'd passed, but Chris was almost certain that Anna had blamed him for the fact that people on the East Coast didn't smile and nod when you passed them on the sidewalk and that he, in turn, had tied the Earth's increasing levels of atmospheric pollution directly to specific things Anna had done. Although

he acknowledged that these claims were ridiculous, he had in the moments of their expression been entirely certain that his rage was justified, and even now he could feel the vague residues of that certainty buried someplace low inside him. Of course, it was not literally true that Anna had caused the meltdown at Three Mile Island, nor that she was directly responsible for all acid rain, but he remained convinced that these things were somehow *figuratively* true, and that Anna would understand and even agree with such claims if he could just conjure up the perfect words to express them.

He wondered, as he heard the toilet's flush and stepped cautiously forward with the other waiters-in-line, if the particularly vicious need with which he now had to urinate was somehow a form of retaliation for the things he had said during the fight. Anna would be wondering where he was now, would no doubt he certain that he was taking a long time intentionally, because he knew it would irritate her. She tended to attribute all of his faults to conscious, deliberate action and all of his good qualities to mere coincidence—not he had all that many good qualities, he acknowledged. Chris was the kind of person who had, as a child, driven away even his imaginary friends. He was the kind of person who ex-girlfriends often forgot to include when listing off their previous lovers for a new one.

Watching the line, Chris counted. There were three, four people ahead of him—no, wait, possibly five, depending on whether the haggard father occupying the spot directly in front of him was going to bring his son in with him or make him go separately. The kid seemed old enough to pee by himself, but you never knew these days. Even Anna, at twenty-six, would sometimes wake Chris in the night and make him accompany her into their bathroom, force him to stand blurry and crust-eyed at the sink while she peed in cautious, stop-and-start

drips. She claimed that she only did this after she'd woken from an especially frightening dream, but he wasn't sure. That was one of the mistakes God had made when He'd invented relationships, Chris thought: there was no way to verify your girlfriend's claims about her dreams.

The line's pace was such that if he had been watching it on a DVD he would've checked to make sure he hadn't accidentally put the player in slow-motion. The thought briefly crossed his mind that he might wet himself, but it occurred to him that for all the times he had thought that same thing he had never once come close to actually wetting himself. If he didn't go soon, though… He hadn't realized how long this would take. Soon Anna would start to get mad that he hadn't left her the keys, so she could at least have kept the radio on. "You're paranoid," she'd say. "That I'd let some stranger in, or that I'd drive off without you." It was true, Chris was paranoid, although not about either of the things he had just imagined Anna accusing him of. He was paranoid about very few specific things, really. Foreigners at the airport—not Arabs, not anymore, because everyone expected Arabs now, but Germans and Swedes, and Canadians even, if they had noticeable accents. Or that he might become overwhelmed and order the wrong dish at a fancy restaurant, have to watch in stomach-churning envy while his dinner guest consumed an entrée whose superiority to his own was so obvious as to be humiliating. And elections—the possibility that the losing candidate had gotten fewer votes on purpose, that he had allowed himself to be bribed with dark satchels of money, or the promise of a single, extraordinary night with the other candidate's wife. Mostly, though, his was a broad paranoia, a paranoia that left no area entirely untouched yet never probed too deeply into any one single thing. It was more just the general sense that at any given moment there were an infinite number of things that could possibly go wrong, and an infinite number of

ways in they could do so. His was a diversified paranoia, like a stock portfolio—not that he had a stock portfolio. It was this paranoia that most bothered Anna about him, even though in the early stages of their relationship it had been Anna's mere presence that had so effortlessly pressed that paranoia into the background of Chris' thoughts. Recently, though, she had begun to complain more viciously about his paranoia—not just as a factual acknowledgment of a partner's weakness, as she'd always done, but as an accusation leveled with the tone of a woman who has realized that the man she'd secretly hoped would one day change was never going to. These accusations, though, had served only to reinforce Chris' belief that his paranoia—especially as it regarded his and Anna's relationship—was justified. It was possible, he had begun to realize, that her frustration with his paranoia might lead to their eventual breakup, and this realization of course only increased his paranoia, until their every interaction had become a series of twisted, interlocking emotions, a jumble of maze-like paths whose causes and effects could no longer be distinguished from one another. It now occurred to him that it was even possible that she would break up with him as soon as they got home—or, worse, as soon as he returned to the car. Really, he acknowledged, he was almost as bad at predicting his own emotions and actions as he was at predicting hers—who was to say it wouldn't be him who ended things with her, in a frenetic and spit-dripping fight that they would have no choice but to launch into while still inside their moving car, the two of them trapped in a breakup cocoon, a cage of dual-occupancy solitary confinement. It was like airplanes: there was a reason you never saw people breaking up with each other on a flight.

It was the not-knowing that was the worst, Chris thought, the minutes that felt like decades when your mind spent flipping through a thousand predictions of how the future might play out. This was why ex-cons shoplifted staplers just

to get sent back to prison; this was why Rebbecah Lefkowitz, that Orthodox girl who'd grown up on his block, had never once complained about the arranged marriage she'd been groomed for since puberty. He'd almost forgotten about the need to pee, now, his anxiety about his impending return to the car was so great. (Of course, he felt the heaviness in his bladder just as strongly as before as soon as he became aware of having forgotten about it.)

Chris tried to figure out how long it'd been since he'd first gotten into the line. Five minutes? Fifteen? Ten years? He didn't wear a watch, had left his phone in the car, and had always been terrible at estimating time without a machine's assistance. For all he knew he'd been waiting in this line his entire life. He might walk back to the car to find Anna an old woman, fingers yellowed and skin turned barklike, or a corpse, even, decaying bit by bit into the passenger seat's plush blue material. Now there was a morbid image, he thought: a corpse in the car. At least that way neither of them would have to break up with the other.

He almost didn't want to pee, now, he was so horrified at what awaited him afterwards. Here was how it had to go: he would pee, wash his hands, go back to the car. There was no way *not* to go back to the car.

The door swung open again and in went the fleece-wearing father and his young son—together, as it turned out. Chris watched the kid, who was eyeing the rest of the people in the line as if trying to telepathically communicate to them that he really was capable of going to the bathroom all by himself, and had, in fact, done exactly that on numerous occasions. The kid—like those kids he'd seen playing that pair of idiotic racing games, their snot-covered fingers leaving blotchy marks on the cabinets' faded screens. Then it came to him that there was another option: the games' sponsor, Westwood Chevy. It was an insane thing to do, perhaps even a clinically diagnosable mistake to make: crossing a highway

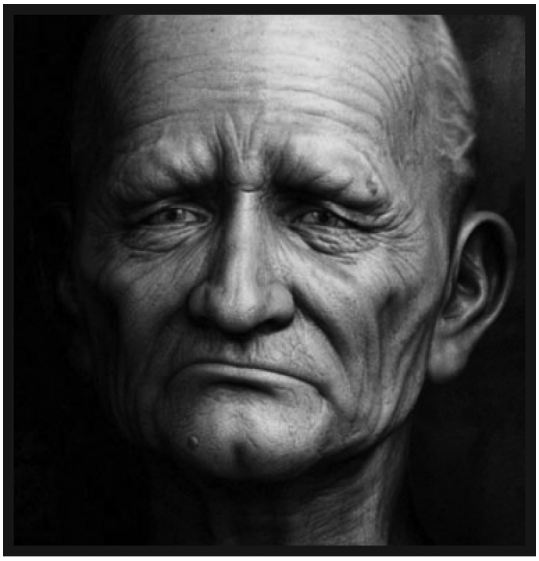
on foot to visit a sleazy car dealership. But that didn't mean he couldn't do it. He had some money saved up—not much, but probably enough to afford the monthly payment on the cheapest two-seater they had. He could leave the keys that were currently scratching at his pocket with the woman behind the counter at the Bumpin' Burger—Anna would wait for him for a long time, but she wouldn't wait *that* long, and when she eventually did come in to look for him she'd probably ask that woman, the rest stop's only visible employee, if she'd seen anyone who looked like her boyfriend, and when she did…

Well, he'd never been the kind of guy who got emotionally attached to his cars; Anna could have it.

The toilet flushed again and the father and son stepped from the bathroom, the son scrubbing his hands together like he'd been given specific instructions to prove that he'd washed them. Chris, smiling now, opened the door to the bathroom and stepped through.

It was funny—once he was inside, he didn't really feel like he had to pee at all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Max Nussenbaum (file photo)

Max Nussenbaum says "please" and "thank you" to waiters. Max Nussenbaum flosses regularly. Max Nussenbaum has an acceptable number of close friends. Max Nussenbaum never walks into the kitchen and forgets what he went there for. Max Nussenbaum has six Twitter accounts. Max Nussenbaum will tell you he loves you, baby, if that's what you want. Max Nussenbaum knows that white chocolate is not really chocolate. Max Nussenbaum rarely if ever bites himself. Max Nussenbaum's haircuts cost less than thirty dollars. When Max Nussenbaum goes to the zoo, he does not wonder what the animals would taste like. Max Nussenbaum was born before you and will be alive long after you are dead. Max Nussenbaum is sixteen feet tall.