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For Joseph McElroy

Man Talking

by Mike Heppner

I.

I know this probably isn't what you want to be doing right now. I think about you a lot. You're tired, maybe, distracted. You've got other things on your mind, as do I. Neither of us are really here.

We ride in tunnels. Sometimes we feel like we've got too much to do. We think there's not enough time to really excel at anything. Instead we panic through the day, and in the end there's just a feeling we cheated ourselves a little.

I find it hard to concentrate on other people. People should be funny, they should be interesting and interested in me. Everyone should be an artist--but no, that would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? My expectations can run a little high at times.

I had a conversation the other day. A woman and I were talking about popcorn. She liked the pre-popped popcorn out of the bag, and I said it always tasted stale. Then she laughed. I guess I was being funny. I said that's just my Swedish disposition, to look at the bleak side of everything. I get the feeling I've said that to a lot of people.

It's tempting to make up something about her. The whole thing is a big lie anyway--not the part about my Swedish disposition. I'm trying to say something that's useful and true--not about me so much as the both of us, I hope (how presumptuous of me) but in order to do that I have to get bogged down in all these constructions. And then the constructions take over.

A woman and I were talking about her novel. She'd written two hundred pages of the thing--I shouldn't characterize it like that; "thing" sounds dismissive. I tried giving her a pep-talk because she seemed down. Be a marathon runner, I said, not a sprinter. I offered her some movie recommendations with the promise, "I'll email them to you when I get home." Then the conversation turned to pets. The woman's cat looked just like the cat in the "Fancy Feast" commercials. I asked her if it sat on her lap while she wrote, and the life inside her seemed to dim once again.

Writing a sentence is something like having a bowel movement. It's often preceded by expectation, and they're harder to achieve as you get older. Don't count on me to be this brilliant all the time.

Resisting the construction--I could tell you about how the woman and I rode the same subway home and decided to have dinner at a vegetarian restaurant, then stopped into a bookstore where I bought her a bookmark that read *Hold That Thought*--I'd rather pause on the woman herself before burdening her with an action. She should just be a person first. To begin, why a woman? Why not a man? I suppose because I'd rather spend my time imagining conversation with a woman than a man. The men too often wind up resembling me, which isn't so bad, but it gets easy and repetitive. A woman I can build from scratch, and there's a greater chance she might surprise me.

I like to think of her as a fragile little optimist. She wears her glasses when she writes but puts her contacts in for going to work and seeing her friends--so maybe she's getting older too, maybe she's ruined her eyes at the computer. Generally she writes late at night when she can't sleep. She's asked her doctor about her insomnia but doesn't want to go to one of those clinics where they wire you up and watch you not-sleep all night and later inform you that from exactly 2:38 to 2:39 in the morning you stopped breathing or your heart stopped beating, so you have to wear a contraption for the rest of your life that keeps your airway clear or sends an electric jolt into your aorta in the event of cardiac arrest. She says she'd rather pick at her book for a few more years, then slip away in the middle of a nap, though I don't believe her. I think she's being dramatic, or maybe this is her own Swedish sense of humor.

She periodically takes weekend trips with an older sister who lives an hour to the north and works for the chamber of commerce. The sister never caught “the art bug,” as my friend calls it. Her parents are still living: mom sounds like a piece of work and dad has a history of medical problems. When he goes, I somehow don’t imagine my little optimist crying much about it. I see her spending more time alone, taking days to answer emails, keeping a void expression on her face, wearing her glasses in public.

She’s irregular about her eating, which I tell her isn’t healthy, though I’m one to talk. A Chinese takeout on the first floor of her building stays open late, and she creeps down three or four nights a week in her slippers and pajamas to order lo mein and wonton soup. She doesn’t call ahead but prefers to wait the seven minutes it takes for the man to put her order together. A map of her neighborhood hangs by the door for the delivery boys to check on their way out, and it gives her something to look at. The boys swing in and out on their bicycles, and when it rains they wear green ponchos that cover themselves, their bikes, and however many bags of takeout riding on their handlebars. She once wrote a humor piece about a white woman who tries getting a job at a Chinese restaurant and feels rejected and discriminated against when she’s not hired, but someone in her writing workshop found it offensive so she put it away.

Overall she likes the people in her workshop, and even the ones who can be insensitive at times only bother her a little. It’s good to hear the unvarnished truth every now and then, she says, though often she doesn’t know what to do with their advice. “Should I burn it?” she asks, hoping for laughs. Her teacher suggested she try writing a story from a male perspective, just to switch things up a bit, so that night she took out the piece she’d been working on and changed all the “she’s” to “he’s.”

“It’s still not working,” she told me over the phone, “and now I’ll have to lose the scene at the women’s health center. There’s at least three big laughs in that scene. Didn’t you tell me you liked it? You said it was funny, you said you laughed your head off. Those are some good lines in there. Am I wrong? Am I totally delusional, beyond-the-bend crazy?”

She takes my energy, though I don’t dislike her. I want to send her off on a great

mission, invest her with superhuman powers.

One night I show up at her apartment with plans for her future. We need to design your costume, I say.

“My costume?” she asks. She’s wearing her glasses, PJs, dirty slippers. A plate of Chinese food steams on the kitchen table, and she’s using the plastic cutlery that came with it.

“Your superhero costume. Finish your food, you need to eat, you look anemic, just tell me where your scissors are--and some paper and colored pencils. Can I look in your office?”

Her office, really just a corner of the bedroom, is set off from the kitchen by a pair of French doors. A twin mattress sits on the floor, striped sheets unmade, and a Marquez paperback--the psychedelic cover from the seventies that gentle, thoughtful women of my generation always have in their collections--lies open on the one pillow. Shoes slump out of the closet near where her little TV is arranged so she can watch it in bed.

I go to the vanity where she keeps her laptop and find what I need, trying not to choke on the detergent smell of the litter box. An interrupted story waits on her computer, a spare exchange between a man named Scott and a woman named Claire. Claire is my friend’s name too, and it worries me. It’s always a danger to identify too closely with your creations.

Back in the kitchen, I lay out the paper, colored pencils, scissors and glue. “First we need to decide on your superpowers. You can have four of them,” I say.

“Why only four?” she asks, covering her plate of food, which she’s hardly touched, with an upside-down bowl and setting it in the refrigerator.

“Four is plenty. Too many powers will make you less interesting.”

“You’re the writer,” she says dryly. She sometimes likes to punish me for the bit of success I’ve had.

We decide on three of the powers easily enough but have trouble with the fourth. Claire should eat better, so we grant her the ability to make lettuce leaves and carrot sticks appear out of thin air. For a weapon we invent a “shame stare,” which renders her

opponents so thunderstruck by the moral consequences of their actions that they're not permitted to speak for ten minutes. Because she's concerned about time, we allow her an extra hour each day; her twenty-five fit into our twenty-four.

"What else?" I ask. She's put a robe on over her pajamas; some of the nighttime chill from outside seeps through a crack where the kitchen window doesn't quite meet the old sash. "Let's have fun with this last one. Let's say you can change the color of things just by looking at them, or you've got the world's biggest toe."

"No, I don't want to waste it," she insists. She's been holding her cigarettes since I've come in but hasn't pulled one out to smoke it. "Do you want to hear some music? I've been playing this Joni Mitchell album nearly non-stop."

I take her hand and ease her back into her chair. There's something she's not telling me. "What is it? You look sad. Don't you want to be a superhero? It's okay if you don't. I just thought you might get a kick out of it."

Finally she admits, "I would like to have something meaningful to say."

"Well, that's easy. In fact it's perfect. We'll let that be your last power. You now officially have something to say."

"*What*, though?"

She wants a real answer, and I don't have one for her, so I suggest, "Let's finish drawing your costume. What size do you wear--small?"

Now she goes for the cigarettes. "Yeah, that's my size, *small*. That's how they come, small, medium, large, just like McDonald's, boy. You sure know your women's clothing, I'll tell you. You're a real expert."

I'm glad to see she's still got her sense of humor. Claire's a funny girl in person but on the page she loses it.

The next time I hear from her, she's flown on the spur of the moment to a small city in the middle of the country where an enormous casino and shopping mall attract a fair number of tourists.

"I found a cheap ticket. I had to log onto this special website at exactly six this morning, then stand in line at the airport for something like two hours. We made five

stops, but I'm here."

"Good for you," I say. I'm not much on vacations. I like my routines, the flat, predictable course of the day.

"A man next to my table had some sort of attack at dinner and collapsed. They brought an ambulance right up to the restaurant and wheeled him out. A few of us asked the manager what happened but we couldn't get any information. I'm going to check the paper tomorrow morning. Would that be considered newsworthy? Maybe if he died it would," she relays in an eager voice. Everything about this landlocked place excites her.

She stays out of town for a week; the airline charges her a penalty if she comes home early. I get a call every few hours telling me about an altercation she's witnessed in the casino parking lot or a gift she bought for her sister. She curses a lot on vacation, and I wonder why that is. She must be feeling reckless out there.

One night she calls around eleven. I should let the machine get it, but I suspect she knows I'm in. I've had two drinks and sound tongue-tied over the phone.

She says, "I won four hundred dollars! Can you believe it? It's real money too, not casino money. A man in a tuxedo just handed me four crisp one hundred dollar bills. I'm standing next to my rental car right now. I don't know whether to go back in or call it a night."

"Call it a night--and don't flash your money around, especially not in a parking lot," I advise.

"I'm not worried. If anyone fucks with me, I'll give 'em the 'shame stare.'"

Some of this is a joke, of course. Some of it's wishful thinking. It's possible I truly possess a limited power of creation, or at least she thinks I do.

I find the city less hospitable when Claire's not in it. We're more vulnerable to attack. I spend an hour one night looking at pornography online, and all I see is violence. Only lesbians ever make love. A man fucks a woman--he bangs her, nails her, blasts her in the face. "Torture" is an entire subcategory of what turns people on.

She calls on her last day of vacation to ask what I'd like brought back. "An interesting story," I say, though in truth I wouldn't mind this new Eric Rohmer DVD.

When we get together again, she hands me a shot glass she picked up at the airport.

“I also have a story for you, and it’s a good one,” she says. We’re sipping coffees in the park. “This happened on the way home. A four hour flight--I used my gambling money to upgrade to non-stop. So I’m sitting with my book and my music. I needed something to help me relax, so I put on Joni Mitchell’s *Hejira*, which I can tell you is exactly fifty-two minutes and five seconds long--I know because I looked it up as soon as I got in. Do you know that album? It’s one of Joni’s best, but much more subtle than some of her earlier work. You have to listen to it a few times to fully appreciate it.”

Claire and I are both of the age where we’re rediscovering music that first came out when we were five. At home I mostly listen to instrumental jazz, sometimes ambient new age. Nothing with words. I find I’m not interested in what anyone has to say about anything.

“So we’re coming in to land,” Claire says, “and I realize I’m on my fifth rotation. My fifth *playing*, Jack, of *Hejira* by Joni Mitchell. On a four hour flight.”

“I’m not following,” I say, but I am. My friend is crazy.

I suggest she simply lost count or forgot to adjust for the time change. Possibly her watch stopped or the flight ran long.

“You said you listened to it five times. If the album’s fifty-two minutes, that means you’d be on your fifth play at the four-hour mark. Fifty-two times four is. . . whatever it is.”

She takes a slip of paper from her purse. On it she’s written the titles of some songs along with their running times. “In four hours I should’ve been on ‘Song for Sharon,’ not ‘Blue Motel Room.’ That’s ten extra minutes. I always check my watch when we take off and land. I’m a nervous flyer, like you.”

I don’t recognize the names of these Joni Mitchell songs: “Coyote,” “Amelia.” Something about them doesn’t seem to play fair. They don’t give much away.

Later that day I stop off at a music store and buy the CD. As Claire’s friend, I need to do this. It’s like when someone you love develops a drinking problem, you do research, you buy books. You want to know more about what they’re dealing with.

I study the cover on the bus ride home. It's a black and white photo of Joni Mitchell in a cape and black beret pointing her cigarette at the camera. In the background stands a winterscape, trees holding snow. Her expression is intensely neutral; maybe she's saying, "Come with me," but in a way that suggests she doesn't really care--or she *does* care, but she'll understand if you don't want to go. Wind comes over her right shoulder, mussing her long blond tresses. Elsewhere a straight length of highway leads into a prairie of clouds. Her name and the title run discreetly across the picture's top edge; the font is thin, classical, almost Romanesque. It's not there to sell albums. I don't know what "hejira" means. It sounds Native American, maybe something to do with magic.

The bus stops to let people on and off. I hold the CD to my chest as the new passengers come on. I don't want them to see what I've got.

The back cover shows another winterscape, this time a vast lake of ice with trees on the far shore. A woman whose face is obscured stands on the ice in a wedding dress. Her posture is slumped--she looks rejected. A man in a skater's costume glides across the ice, swaying balletically and gesturing with both hands at the figure in the wedding dress. The album was made in 1976 and contains nine songs, which isn't so many.

Is Claire the woman in the wedding dress? And am I supposed to be the skater reaching out to her? That'd be a laugh. No, the man and woman are just two young kids, two models who happened to be available for work some afternoon in the mid-seventies.

I look up "hejira" when I get home and find the proper spelling is "hegira," which means, "Any flight or journey to a more desirable or congenial place." That sounds like Claire. Searching on-line mostly brings up references to the Joni Mitchell album. I don't know why I care. Claire can go fuck herself if she wants.

The booklet includes two more photos of Joni Mitchell. In one she's skating in the same cape-and-beret getup, while in the other she haunts an obscure environment, bending toward us and possibly blowing a kiss. Lyrics run in columns, and there are a lot of them.

If I wanted to learn more about the man and woman in the photo, what would be involved, what kind of research? Is there an archive where this information is stored? Did they ever get to meet Joni Mitchell, or were there two separate shoots? Claire gets me

thinking about things.

I don't listen to the album right away; instead I let it sit with my other CDs which I've backed up onto my computer. I live on the top floor of a tall building that dominates its surroundings, a white column with windows so narrow you don't notice them from a distance. The other residents are strangers to me. I afford the rent by keeping my other expenses down. I don't take vacations, do most of my own cooking, don't have especially lavish tastes. I don't want things. People, friends, give me books they've written, and I respond within a week with a nice note and a few positive observations.

From my window, I can see down into Claire's neighborhood. The blocks are congested, brown and gray building-tops making a canopy above the streets. I can more-or-less point out Claire's apartment. The bay is closer than it appears at street level, and at times a silver sun wilts above it. A blimp makes its rounds whenever there's a game.

Days go by before she reemerges. She's busy with her job, which has to do with maintaining academic records at one of our many colleges. When she's feeling morose, she criticizes her own damned responsibility. She puts in time at work and doesn't get credit for it. No one ever says thank you. She'll spend two hours at night doing a favor for her boss instead of writing. I agree, this is a problem. I tell her she needs to decide what's important. If you're an office worker, let that be your satisfaction. But if you're a writer, be selfish about that. I'm glad this is her I'm talking about and not me.

When she calls, she sounds calmer than before. Nothing about superpowers, which is good I guess.

"My dad needs more tests. Mom's worried about his diet, but I know he's not happy with the things she makes him eat. He worked hard his whole life, and now he can't have a beer with the guys. No more burgers, no more steaks. Yeah, he's had the one heart attack, but that was six years ago. I think he's doing pretty good, you know? *Give the man some credit.*"

I'm in the bath, talking on speaker phone. The door's open to the phone in the kitchen, and I have to shout to make my voice heard. "Have you written about this?" I ask. Because so many people ask me for writing advice, I sometimes can't talk about anything

else.

Claire laughs. “Why don’t *you* write about it, Jack?” she says.

I get out of the tub, dry off, finish up with Claire, then put on the Joni Mitchell CD. The music has a simple energy, the arrangements transparent: an amplified acoustic guitar, a fretless bass, some hand-held percussion. It wants to create a mood and mostly succeeds. I can see how someone could develop a relationship with this music over many years of forgetting and then remembering it. For me, it’s a bit wordy. Not masculine enough, though I don’t know what that means. I don’t care about being masculine. Maybe I could use a harder edge to the drums, that’s all.

I recognize the first song, “Coyote,” something of a hit. Joni Mitchell smiles at her own words when she sings; a phrase here or there will charm her, and she’ll laugh or slide into a funny voice. I like this part of it: there’s no reason why she can’t enjoy herself too. The second song continues the same basic approach; it’s all a bit soporific, but that’s just my own lack-of-trying. To my ear it sounds like they’ve done something to the acoustic guitar. It chimes, has a presence. It’s not just some person playing. The bassist is a well-known jazz musician who died years later in a bar fight, and here he offers sliding side-melodies that burble up between the lyrics.

I make note of the time when I start the CD. It just so happens I have nowhere to go and nothing to do for the next four hours, so I decide to put Claire’s theory to the test. Certainly music can alter one’s perception of time, but time itself? Of course not. Time simply is. Either she’s wrong or misguided or searching for intrigues where there are none, or maybe all these things. Perhaps she just needs her energy redirected. From what I gather, Claire doesn’t socialize much. I never hear about boyfriends. It’s not healthy to spend your life staring at an empty screen waiting for something wonderful to happen, as I well know.

I hear new things in the Joni Mitchell album the second time around. Electric vibes sound like pedal steel guitar, and I have to check the liner notes to confirm they’re not. Her vocal phrasing is remarkable throughout, accommodating any number of meters and line lengths. One song seems to be about nothing until I actually start paying attention and find

there's a little story there. I always assume the lyrics to a song don't mean anything, which is another case of my not-giving-enough-credit.

By the third play I can even sing along to a few of the choruses. I wonder what it is about this particular album that speaks to Claire. It's quiet, and Claire likes quiet. The focus is more on the lyrics than the music, which goes along with my other ideas about her. I would think music by itself intimidates her, its abstract, technical nature. Showy musicianship is another reminder of something she can't do.

She once told me the men in her workshops didn't know how to write female characters, and I said I wasn't surprised. I tried explaining it to her from a man's point-of-view. It all comes, I said, from trying too hard *not* to be sexist.

"Yes, that's the problem. A man shouldn't even attempt to write about women if he's not willing to upset his female readers. What are we, such fragile creatures that we can't take a little criticism? Anyway, it doesn't matter. Men write for men and women write for women. That's just a fact," she said.

"Oh is it? Are you interested in my opinion, or are you just venting?" I asked. She said she was interested in my opinion. "Thank you. I think women do a pretty piss-poor job of writing about men. Everyone does a bad job of writing about everyone else. And it's not true at all what you say about men writing for men and women writing for and so on. In fact, women write for women and men write for women *too*."

Claire can't believe it when I tell her unpleasant things about the book world. Even the word "story" coming from her lips makes me cringe. I'm having trouble with my story. Would you look at my story? No, Claire, I won't look at your goddamn story. I won't. Oh, give it here.

I've been listening to *Hejira* for four hours when the phone rings and Claire's number shows on Caller ID. I turn down the volume and pick up.

After some preamble, she says, "I've been looking at the paper. Wasn't *Weekend* the name of the Godard film you recommended? It's showing tonight at California House. Wanna go?"

When I get off the phone, the album's over and I've lost all track of time. My test

is a bust.

We meet at the subway stop near the theater. Claire looks pretty in her long red coat, and I kiss her cheek. I complain about her a lot, but I do like having her as my friend.

“Isn’t it nice how you can meet people in the city like this?” she asks. I’m not sure what she means, but I say yes.

We walk side-by-side without our shoulders touching. She says, “I saw two people get arrested today. One in the park and another two blocks down from my apartment. Totally unrelated, I’m sure. Have you ever been arrested? I haven’t. I mean, I’ve gotten *speeding* tickets before. I’ve been pulled over by the cops. Oo, I get so scared when that happens. You never know if it’s a real police officer, and even if it *is* a real police officer, you still never know.”

“No, Claire, I’ve never been arrested, in answer to your question,” I say, and we laugh.

The Godard is loud, long, and violent. Pop-art credits explode throughout the film; the whole thing’s a big cartoon. Some graphic talk about a sexual encounter in the first five minutes seems intended to pare down the audience. A famous tracking shot of a traffic jam goes on and on, and each car has its own little crisis--couples fighting, screaming at other motorists, getting out to inspect damage on their vehicles. All of it looks planned; we’re meant to notice the choreography. Altman spoofed the sequence eight years later in *Nashville*. The films I most admire have this same ambition and rebel abandon.

After the film, Claire asks me, “So why did you suggest *that*?”

We’re standing outside the theater, deciding where to go next. It’s after eleven and we’re both hungry. “Didn’t you like it?” I ask.

“No, I liked it. . . I guess. I don’t know what I like. I just don’t understand the recommendation.”

She wants to know what about the film reminds me of her, so I say, “It’s angry and funny, and you’re angry and funny.”

“I am? Angry and funny?”

“Sometimes. Your writing can be.” We pick a direction and start walking. Most

of the restaurants in this hip part of town look closed or about to close.

“I don’t write like that. At least I don’t think I do. Do I?”

Now she’s getting self-conscious. I want to push her against a wall and knock her around a few times.

“Your story about the pharmaceutical salesman, for example. That had an edge to it.”

She shakes her head. Here I’m trying to compliment her, and she won’t let me.

“They’re different. My writing is more witty-sarcastic. Besides, I thought you didn’t like that story. You said it felt too much like a *Seinfeld* episode.”

“It did have that quality. Anyway, I’m sorry you didn’t care for the film, apparently. I won’t take you to *Breathless* next time it’s in town.”

Another woman might change the subject, but Claire is still concerned about her story. Talk of writing ages her; I notice how gaunt her face has become, how pale her skin, the wrinkles around her eyes and jaw that look like thin wet tissue. And we were having fun up until now.

I stop her at the corner. The neighborhood feels bustling and collegiate by day, but now there are blacked-out stretches and the sound of someone kicking a can in the next block.

“I need to eat. All I’ve got is the stale taste of popcorn in my mouth,” I say.

“Stale? Boy, first the pre-popped popcorn, now this. Maybe you just don’t like popcorn.”

We turn and venture back into the light, past the theater and into restaurant row, finally spotting a bodega with its lights on. The few remaining floral bouquets out front look crumpled and picked-over--not even worth buying as a joke. Inside a skeletal boy or man mops a section of scuffed tile floor. Green light flutters dimly on packages of tampons and foot powder. At the back, hanging strips of clear plastic protect a bed of ice chips and what remains of the morning’s produce delivery. I feel eyes watching us, the boy-man lurking with his mop and yellow caution sign.

Claire finds a bag of baby carrots and a withered iceberg lettuce and takes them to

the cashier.

“You’re not buying those, are you? They’ve probably been sitting out all day,” I say.

“I have to buy them, Jack,” she explains. The walnut-faced man at the register looks at me with some concern, and I just shrug.

Outside the store, she says, “I have some salad dressing at home.”

“You do? You have some salad dressing. What kind of salad dressing?”

“French and Thousand Island and Bleu Cheese.”

“That’s a lot of salad dressing. What if I want Creamy Italian?”

“I’ve got Creamy Italian. Let’s grab a taxi, okay? You *said* you were hungry.”

Up at her place, she throws a salad together using the carrots, lettuce, and a red onion that’s been doing time in her crisper. The subway closes in an hour, so I’ll have to make it quick.

We sit at her little table and clink glasses of shit wine from the jug she keeps under the sink. I notice a blue glow in the otherwise dark bedroom and say, “You left your computer on.”

“I usually do. I like the soft light it makes on my face when I’m trying to sleep.” She talks through forkfuls of salad. “This is good lettuce. I don’t think I’ve had this good lettuce before.”

To me the lettuce is nothing special, but I keep eating. She’s brought out every kind of dressing from her refrigerator and set it on the table: not only French, Thousand Island, Bleu Cheese and Creamy Italian, but Red Wine Vinaigrette, Honey Mustard, three different bottles of Balsamic, Caesar, Ranch, Russian. We’re surrounded.

“How come you have so many?” I ask.

“Jack. I’m a single woman in my late thirties. I have a lot of salad dressings.”

The bottles are all roughly the same size and shape, and most look like they’ve been opened and poured only once. They crowd my elbows at the table, Claire’s unfriendly pets. The Bleu Cheese appears a favorite; the label is gummy from streams running down the bottle, and the little bit left has separated so there’s a film of something clear on top.

“What’s Russian?” I ask.

“It’s mayo-based. You get it on a Reuben sandwich.”

I try some of the Russian dressing on my salad. It’s okay but doesn’t really blend with my Creamy Italian. “I feel like this is some kind of personality test you’ve invented. You’re trying to trip me up. I’m supposed to reveal something about myself by picking one type of salad dressing and not another,” I say.

Here I do a riff on salad dressings that keeps us from talking about anything else for awhile. It’s a formula joke I’ve used before. Take two unrelated quantities and insist on a correlation between the two: Bleu Cheese equals latent pedophilia, Thousand Island indicates a morbid fixation on death and decay. Are you laughing yet?

Claire finishes her salad and drops her fork in the bowl. Before I can protest, she pours us both another glass of wine. The Godard film seems years ago, and I give up on the idea of going home. Claire’s place is my place for the night. We’re married, live-ins, roomies, boyfriend-girlfriend. We’re already making love.

“I should do some work tonight,” she says, “but I’m relaxed and having a good time. I wish I enjoyed it more. I *think* I like it--up until the moment I sit down to write, I think, ‘I wish I was writing now. I can’t wait to get back to my story.’ But then when I’m right there, all I want to do is get it over with. Do you ever feel like that?”

“No, Claire, not really. I don’t allow it that much importance in my life.”

She stretches her legs under the table. “See, I don’t believe you. That’s you being Mr. Cool. You act like it’s not important, but if it wasn’t important, you wouldn’t do it, would you?”

Dumb Claire misses the point. “What I mean is, I don’t look to my writing to save my day. If I’m having a bad morning, writing isn’t going to make it any better, you know?”

She doesn’t--and when I call her “dumb,” I don’t mean it like that: *Claire Is Dumb*. Of course she’s not. I simply mean she plays host to a dumb idea. Dumb can be a compliment too.

I loosen my collar and wipe the back of my neck. Management has the heat turned

Alone in the dark, I watch her in the next room blinking at her computer. Occasionally she writes something. The words come in a hurry; her typing sounds like data entry.

All night I drift in and out of sleep. Sometimes I hear Claire in the kitchen, making herself a cup of soup, pacing, doing little ballet-turns as she re-reads a page of manuscript. Loud, harsh sighs of frustration are common. I wonder what's so important that needs setting down right now.

At seven o'clock I sit up and decide it's time for me to go. Claire's changed into a skirt, blazer and heels, and I ask why she's so dressed up.

"It's Monday, silly. I have a job, unlike *some* people." She clips into the kitchen from the bathroom, and I'm amazed to see her with her full makeup on. This is the face her co-workers know: handsome, efficient, workaday. A man might notice her cleft chin and remember it later. Heavy foundation covers the circles under her eyes.

Claire asks if I want to use the shower, and I say, "Do I look like I need a shower?"

She grins. "Yes, you do."

Her bathroom isn't much more than a stall, barely room to turn around in. Cosmetics spill out of the medicine cabinet and onto the edge of the sink. There's no tub, just a curtained-off corner with a spigot and a drain. It puzzles me to think Claire can't afford a nicer place to live. I suspect that inertia has kept her here more than need. Maybe she had to move out on a guy and this was all she found.

I undress and stand under the hot running water for ten minutes, using some of Claire's Aveda shampoo. The narrow window is clear glass and looks down onto an air shaft. Flaky scum sticks to lemon-colored tile.

Once out, I reach for one of the towels hanging inside the bathroom door, find it's damp, then take the other, dry one. I feel silly putting on the same clothes I slept in. I want to plunge into my work as soon as I get home. I have correspondence to return, pages to correct. Someone's calling at two o'clock; I forget who.

Claire has arranged a dozen boxes of cereal on the kitchen table. Evidently the same rule applies to both breakfast food and salad dressings.

“The milk’s new,” she points out. I join her at the table, opting only for my usual morning cup. I feel like something’s changed between us, though I don’t know for better or worse.

“Did you get any sleep at all last night?” I ask. No, she says. This doesn’t appear to bother her. “And you’re going into work?”

“I can get by on very little.” She emphasizes these words. There’s a special meaning behind them that I’m supposed to understand.

We walk each other downstairs after breakfast. The morning is pleasantly bracing. I thank her for letting me crash at her place, and she says, “I forgot to print out my story for you.”

“I’ll see you again,” I say, and we split up without agreeing on another time to meet.

My two o’clock is a business associate from out of town. He shuffles jobs my way, easy one-offs that leave no bitter aftertaste. I wouldn’t call him my friend, but we get along fine. He’s trying for his pilot’s license, which gives us something to talk about other than work. Practicing stalls at three thousand feet over open water seems foolhardy for a father of two, but I’m sure he knows what he’s doing.

“Have you noticed something, Jack? Everyone wants to write the Great American Novel, but no one wants to read it. It’s disheartening. In fact, I’m thinking of changing occupations. I’m considering going into commercial aviation. Can you see me as a pilot for United Airlines with my hat and briefcase and extra-tall cup of coffee? With a little more training I could handle those big boys. But my wife would probably disown me, so that’s out.”

I’m thinking about Claire. I don’t want her to become this piteous figure. I want her to find herself on the receiving end of some terrific run of good luck, a fresh start in a new apartment, her insomnia a thing of the past. She should have absolutely everything she wants out of life. At least she should learn to leave herself alone. To accept what she can neither change nor control. That’s all I ever hope for people, anyway. Together she and I must resist the construction that’s closing in around us.

In the days that follow I go out on a few dates. I’m trying to be more social. Like I

say, I sometimes find it hard to concentrate on other people. One woman, a Rhianne, turns out to be both accident prone and a racist. We go to a nightclub where she lights a piece of her hair on fire while showing it to me over a candle. I pat it out with my hand, and the only harm done is a faint crematorium smell that follows us out of the club. At our next stop, a basement cafe, she trips over the last three steps descending and plows into a service cart, sending a tray of water glasses into someone's table. We stay anyway and seat ourselves far from the stairs. Rhianne isn't a drinker, so we both order fancy coffees and some biscotti.

"How's your hand?" I ask. She dabs at the cut between her thumb and forefinger with a wet cloth napkin. I like this about her, her klutziness. She's a reporter from the *Bay*, about twenty-seven by my guess. Her hair and features are very dark and her eyes have a habit of crossing. She wears a cheerful, startled expression, and there are several times during the night when I'm reasonably sure she's not listening to a word I'm saying. I decide she's fun and not to take the date too seriously.

"I'm embarrassed now. Do you think I'm very foolish? They shouldn't have put the cart so close to the stairs. Someone should be fired for this, I say. I could have a very bad infection. Look at this." She puts her hand in mine. I like that she seems to like me, and I wonder if we might do better meeting for lunch sometime.

"That's terrible," I remark, turning her hand over. The cut is minor, and her hand is a hot, moist little thing.

She takes it back and leaves her sodden, blood-speckled napkin on the table. "My mother calls me 'a walking calamity,' but it's just the way I am. I have a *no-track mind*," she says, putting finger-quotes around it. I seem to know that Rhianne and her mother are in constant competition with each other, and her father is the center of her world.

"I'm sure that's not true," I say.

"That is why I don't drink. One martini on a very special occasion and no more. Are you an alcohol drinker?"

She ought to know, considering I had a Stoli back at the club. "I don't *not* drink. It's not a hobby of mine, though."

She looks away and back, her eyes cross, and I return to focus. “It’s good for a man to drink. My father likes his. . . Seagram’s Seven? Mother pours it for him when he comes home from the office--and *no*, I am not one of those insufferable women who can’t stop talking about her parents.”

Like Claire, Rhianne should just be a person too, before I ask any more of her. She puts on a bit of an act, but I don’t think there’s much truth to it. I think she’s basically smart, serious about her job, likes to fill every hour of the day with some sort of planned activity. She earns good money and isn’t afraid to spend it. I imagine she has a niece or nephew whom she indulges with gifts. Over coffee she makes a few reckless comments about African-Americans, but I’m inclined to let them pass. I’m trying to be less judgmental these days, even about people being judgmental.

After coffee she takes my arm and we walk down by the bay. The moon is big and low; it looks out of place. I wonder if I’ve ever had a woman “on my arm” before. There’s something conventional about Rhianne, and I’m guessing she expects big things from a husband. One date is fine, but it’s possible I’m not the man for her.

“You see that building?” she says, pointing out the mid-rise tower ahead of us. It’s on the water, with balconies on every floor. “That’s where I live. I never go out walking by myself at night. The people in my building all have money--they’re good people--but one block over the neighborhood changes.”

I don’t quite know what she means--this part of town always seemed fine to me--but again I pass. I find you get more out of people if you just let them talk.

We reach her building, and she invites me up to look at her view. “If that’s not being too forward,” she laughs, already pulling me in. Her heels ring on polished white marble. The entry room is bright, with giant potted plants and twin brass elevators. A smiling security guard calls her “girl.”

“Hey, Calvin, you doin’ good tonight?” she asks, and the man says, “Doin’ a whole lot better now.”

In the elevator, she says, “I feel sorry for Calvin. He’s one of the good ones, though. You have to give him credit for that.”

Her condo on the fifth floor includes one big room with a queen-sized bed, a kitchenette, then a short hall to the bathroom. I'm rather stunned by the mess. Some clothes are on the bed, and plates on the kitchen counter haven't been put away. The whole room smells like a sandwich.

I check out her CDs while she's washing up--mostly contemporary R&B and college rock whose jewel-cases have seen some abuse. No Joni Mitchell, and it disappoints me. It ought to be in my power to put it there.

Rhianne changes her mind about that drink; this must be a special occasion. We sit on her balcony with bottles of Corona, which she says are leftovers from a party. I'm curious why she's being so coy about the drinking thing. God knows I don't care.

"Management screens everyone who lives above the second floor. They don't want any jumpers. Isn't that ludicrous? I suppose they're worried about lawsuits. Have you ever seen anyone jump off a building?" she asks. I say nothing, which means no. "It is absolutely disgusting. I used to report on suicides for the *Bay*--suicides, shootings. . . a man who kills his wife and rapes his daughter. Some people are no better than animals. After two years I told myself, 'This is *not* for me.'"

Rhianne now writes for the Business page, a section I rarely look at. She works six days a week in an environment that requires her constant, energetic attention. Flaws are not tolerated. A woman must be clever, aggressive, and immaculately put together. The pager goes off all the time. Co-workers remain enigmas even after years of being on the same team.

As an experiment I put my hand on her leg, which she seems to like. Our timing is off when we kiss; we're not used to each other yet.

"I was waiting for you to do that," she says.

The balcony's chilly, so we move back indoors and get onto the bed. Rhianne has her shirt off and I'm down to my boxers. A part of me wants sex, but what I really want is release. Rhianne is sweet but something of a headache. I'm not sure I need her in my life.

"Is this okay?" she asks.

I mutter something about not having done this in a long time, adding, "We don't

really know each other.”

She takes my head by the hair and holds it to her bare chest. “Look, let’s just have a good time. Nothing wrong with that, is there? No expectations in the morning. It doesn’t always have to be so serious.”

This sounds good to me, but when she asks for a condom, I don’t have one. Time catches up with us then. The sandwich smell comes back to me, and I feel like I should get off this woman’s bed.

“Didn’t you think you’d need one?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think about it.”

“You knew you were going on a date, but you didn’t think to bring a condom?”

It still doesn’t sound so strange to me, even when she says it in this bemused, querulous tone. “Maybe there’s one in my wallet,” I say, retrieving my pants from the floor. She watches me take out my wallet, go through the bills and ATM receipts, and put it back.

I sit on the edge of her bed, wondering if I’m still allowed to look at her breasts. “I’m sorry. I thought it was supposed to be presumptuous of a man to bring a condom on a first date,” I say. Her expression tells me apparently it’s not.

“Don’t you think I’m pretty?” she asks. Three hours ago we were shaking hands outside The Cuban, still strangers, still on our nervous best behavior.

“Very much,” I say.

She then decides I’m not so bad. “Oh, I suppose you were just trying to be polite. You’re a good boy, I can tell. But we can’t have sex now. I don’t believe in abortion, and chances are you’ll get me pregnant.”

A couple with some history between them might know what to say next, but all we have is this awkward, endless silence. Oddly, I feel more attracted to her now than I did before. I know this feeling is entirely physical and has nothing to do with her, but I wish she’d take off her panties so I could see what the rest of her looks like.

We put our clothes back on and have another beer in her kitchen. I notice her attitude has changed; she’s more of a chum now. She wipes her nose a lot and cackles loud

and long while telling funny stories about work. Her body language is friendly and distant, less female-specific. Now she's just some chick on a stool cranking back the beers.

When it's time for me to leave, she says, "Let me give you something. I'm afraid I won't see you again, so I'll lend you a book and that way you'll have to call me." She hobbles over to her bookcase and takes down a paperback. "I couldn't finish this for my World Lit course in college. I don't even know why I kept it--a premonition, I guess. You're smart and you're a writer, so I think you're up to the task. I'll expect a full report in the morning, sir."

Her calling me "sir" depresses me. The book is a short novel by the French poet-philosopher Rene Daumal.

We're saying goodnight at the door when suddenly I want to stay. I can't go home to myself. In the morning we'll both have our work, then a day will pass, then a week and she'll be onto someone else.

Holding her close, I breathe into her ear, "Please, let's make love."

"We will," she promises, but it sounds pretty empty.

There's a convenience store a few blocks up the road. I could buy the condoms there. I could run outside, buy the condoms, hurry back, say hi to Calvin downstairs and make love to this unmanageable, racist woman.

I'm glad to wake up the next morning in my own bed. Vacant white sheets glow and are cool to the touch. The chrome on my automatic coffeemaker gleams. Life is unchanged from yesterday, which is fine with me. I decide I won't call Rhianne. Nothing against her, but I don't trust myself not to sleep with her.

Later that week I have a lunch date with a woman who's recently moved up from the deep south. Her name is Hannah but for some reason she prefers the nickname Hank. I refuse to call her this--it's unflattering, too much like talking to another guy. Hannah is petite, five-foot-one at the most. Walking next to her is like tottering after a child. Her eyes are dark, almost all black, and her hair is also black and shoulder-length. Milky skin gives her a slightly wan, porcelain complexion. She dresses cautiously in a thick sweater, skirt down to her ankles and cowboy boots, and I come to the early conclusion that she doesn't

like her body.

Everything's funny to Hannah. She thinks my shirt is funny (it's a blue shirt). The menu of the vanilla lunch counter we've chosen out of mutual convenience has line drawings of sandwiches and steaming bowls of soup on it, and that's funny too. At one point her checkered jacket, which she's hung up next to our booth, shrugs off its hook and slumps to the floor, and she laughs like holy heck for five minutes. None of this bothers me--I like a girl who can laugh. I feel high around her, like maybe the gas is on somewhere.

Hannah eats a lot even though she seems to weigh about eighteen pounds. She orders a Caesar salad *and* the clam chowder, twice sending the waitress back for more bread. The bread is the kind that's been sitting around in saran wrap for a day or two. Admittedly it's a cheap first date, but the lunch counter was mostly her idea. I want a bright room, no alcohol on premises, clear exit routes to the fore and aft.

I ask her about living in the south, and she says, "Oh, it's so *hot!* Humid, too, in the summer. I don't know about this cold. I don't know how you Yankees stand it."

"I'm a Yankee?" I ask. Hannah makes me feel exotic. I pay more attention to my accent, to the smart-ass way I smile at a joke.

"I fly down to visit my parents every month. I miss 'em, but we thought I needed to start over. Small towns can get complicated. My brother's stuck down there--I mean, he's just *stuck.*"

The part about small towns getting complicated worries me, but our food is here, and there's this airy feeling inside my head.

I observe her job must be flexible if she can take that much time out for travel, and she says, "I don't do much for work right now. I figure I just need a year to let things settle. My gran'ma-ma left a good bit of money when she passed on, poor thing, so I'm looking at options, laying low. Might go back to school. I'm getting a whole lot of reading done--well, *you* saw."

We met at a bookstore where she'd gone to buy a memoir by Joan Didion. She wanted to make a connection that night, and I guess so did I. Approaching her in the

Personal Essay section, eventually asking her out, felt easy and right. She was so striking, with her miniature face and big black eyes. I flattered myself into thinking most men would've found her looks too bizarre. *Call me Hank*, she said, signing off outside the store, and I said, *Oh, but Hannah is so beautiful!* She was dressed conservatively then, too. I remember another long skirt, maybe the same cowboy boots.

I ask what she wants to do when she starts working again. "I'd like to help women who've been raped or abused in a relationship," she says, and we get off the topic.

I need to be fair to Hannah, like I've tried being fair to the others. Maybe I haven't been fair to any of them. Am I fair to myself? I feel half-human, incomplete. I should talk more. It's not yet clear why another person might be interested in me.

Hannah's big on Christmas. She likes the eggnog, the Harvey's Bristol Cream with mom by the fireplace. Christmas is just a few weeks away, and she's planning on staying with her folks through New Year's. There's a Christmas Village five miles up the road with carolers and fake snow and a living crèche. Her brother, Greg, usually shows up late to Christmas dinner with last minute presents not even wrapped and sometimes with the prices still on them. As I'm hearing this, I wonder how her going out of town for Christmas will impact on us if we actually start dating.

Unlike Rhianne, Hannah pays close attention to me. She wants to know absolutely every little thing about what it's like to see your name in a newspaper, and her mouth drops when I talk about the complicated-but-yes-rewarding process of trying to stay afloat in the arts. She hasn't read any of my books, but she says she's going to order all of them online when she gets home. I tell her I have some extra copies in my office, which I'll be happy to sign. This gets a big grin; her teeth are small and polished white with gaps in between.

After our plates are cleared and we're waiting for the check, she says, "I feel like I'm sitting too far away."

I invite her over to my half of the booth. We're both dancing inside. Little Hannah fits nicely in the tuck of my arm. We share our first kiss among the short water glasses and extra packets of grape jelly and the radio playing the Supremes.

We split up after lunch, but we're on the phone again that evening, making plans to meet in a half-hour for a walk. The city park is quiet and the dimming sky an intense blue that must remind her of Christmas. She's bundled up in a red hat and black muffler, and I can't wait to catch up with her by the open gates. I bring my arms around her, and the space inside her jacket is warm.

"I told mama about you tonight," she says as we stroll past a reflecting pool and stop near a fountain that's been turned off for the season.

"Yeah? What'd you tell her?"

"I said I met this guy, and he's a published writer, and he's sweet and cute and super-smart and I like him a whole lot."

We're face-to-face, holding each other. I could rest my chin on the top of her head if I wanted. "All that, huh? And what'd she say?"

"Oh, the usual. 'Just be careful.' She worries about me," she says, expressing some sadness or fatigue I can't yet understand.

We make a full turn around the park before our faces get too cold and we duck into a subway entrance. The line runs past my apartment, but I'm not eager to bring her home. I don't want what happened with Rhianne to happen again. I want to wake up in the morning with good thoughts about Hannah, lots of good things to look forward to.

"I like your boots," I say as we wait for a subway to take us anywhere, into the city, out of the city. Her cowboy boots are brown suede with intricate gold stitch. Hannah has such tiny feet.

"I'm tired of them. It's hard to find shoes in my size," she says.

"Me too. My left foot is a quarter size smaller than my right," I say, and she looks startled. "What?" I ask, wondering if I've said something wrong.

"Nothing, just. . . mine are different too. Isn't that funny? But I'm all a mess. I used to be able to wear such pretty shoes. I'd walk around in my mama's pumps when I was nine years old."

I can see her doing it: going to the closet and gazing up at her mother's things, reaching with both hands for a pair of church shoes, sneaking a look down the hall before

putting them on. It's too easy to picture Hannah as a little girl. It's the only thing about her that bothers me.

The train comes, and we sit in a corner of the car, our arms around each other, Hannah's feet swinging high above the floor. I feel protective of her. She's a child, an innocent. She's small enough to fit inside my pocket.

At one point we have the car to ourselves, and we kiss between stops. I'm going to have to peel myself away from her at the end of the night.

As the train leaves its tunnel and passes over a bridge--I ignore Rhianne's condo across the bay--Hannah gets a crazy idea. "Hey, let's go to a country bar. There's one right on the water. We'll listen to Dwight Yoakum and I'll teach you how to line dance."

She takes me to a place called The Ol' Dog where the jukebox is all country and the clientele two-thirds women in their forties having a ball. Hannah gets carded at the door and again by the bartender who laughs cheerfully when she orders our beers. We take our drinks onto the floor where the dancing is organized and done in a big group. Hannah looks like she's practiced this particular routine before, knowing just when to turn and kick and plant her heel. I love watching her; it's all I can do beyond letting myself get shuffled around by the other dancers. Loud honky-tonk funks up the joint. There's a song about being lily-livered that Hannah and everyone else knows the words to.

During a slow dance, a woman comes up to us with, "Can I just say you two are the cutest couple ever?" We thank her.

After an hour of dancing, we take a cab home. Hannah's quiet in the back seat; she leans against me and puts her hand on my chest. "What do we do now?" she asks. We're closer to my place downtown. Hannah lives in a brownstone with an impressive address. I've been on her block before--silver and green German sports cars parked in the street, rich mothers striding along in their out-of-my-way capes and sunglasses, evidence of expensive garbage set out on trash day. Gran'ma-ma must've had a lot of money.

"Why don't we call it a night?" I suggest, and she looks disappointed.

"Tired of hanging out?"

"Not at all. I want to see you tomorrow. I like you, Hannah. I want to spend a lot

of time with you.”

She crawls up my chest, mashing me against the car door. “A woman at the bar told me you’ve got a cute butt.”

“I do?”

“Very,” she purrs, kissing my ear, brushing lightly. My head is a spiral. I don’t entirely trust my attraction to Hannah. Her face, her body, even her proportions are those of a pre-adolescent girl. It’s not that I don’t believe her age--I do. Look closely and she’s clearly a grown woman; in quiet moments, when she’s not laughing at everything, the wrinkles come out around her eyes and the corners of her mouth. Her hair’s even a little thin where she parts it. I’m just concerned what my interest says about me. There’s a self-portrait shaping up here, and I’m not sure I like it.

She goes back to her side of the cab. “You might not like me anyway. I’m trouble, Jack. You should stay away from me. I’ve had some hard times lately, and I don’t want you getting hurt.” Wiping her eyes, she tells herself, “Oh, this always happens.”

There’s a glass between us and the cab driver; he’s just the machine driving the car. “What do you mean? You can tell me. Whatever it is, I’ll accept it. Unless you’ve killed someone. . . that might be a deal-breaker. You haven’t killed anyone, have you?”

I’m trying to make her laugh. She’s my good little girl, and I want her to be happy.

When we reach my place, I say, “Let’s make a promise. You go home and I’ll go home, and we’ll talk tomorrow. You can tell me everything then.”

She nods, her eyes looking a little brighter. I think I can guess what happened. Maybe she had an abortion or she’s on some kind of medication. Either way, I still want to see her again.

She calls an hour later to apologize “-for being so dramatic in the car. You’re right--it’s no big deal and I’m acting silly. I’ll feel better in the morning. Anyway, I won’t keep you. I had a really great time, Jack. Let’s do it again tomorrow.”

The next morning my feelings about Hannah haven’t changed. It’s been a long time since a woman made such an impression on me. I like that she seems basically happy, aside from the one conversation in the cab. I can’t imagine her sitting up all night sighing

over a computer screen, like Claire. Hannah is gentle and good and likes to have fun. She's someone I could live with.

My work associate calls to say he's finally earned his pilot's license. "It's really opened up my life. You need *something*, Jack, other than work--you especially. Hobbies are good, though I know you're not the model-train type."

I tell him about Hannah; it's the first I've mentioned her to anyone, and I can't wait to get the words out.

"She sounds great," he says.

"You don't seem so sure."

"No. . . you just need to be careful. But I'm not worried about you. You're remarkably clever at not letting things affect you."

I turn up at Hannah's that afternoon with flowers and a blank greeting card inscribed "To the start of something interesting," and signed with a J. I'm not very good at writing love notes; I've been scarred by my profession and can no longer write from the heart. The card has a pastel-tinted photo of a stuffed bear in a beach chair looking out over the ocean. Hannah gives a chirp of pleasure when she reads it and holds it to her chest, but I feel that something in the card has made her sad.

We sit at the table in her bright kitchen. She has the first floor and basement, which she's decorated with country touches, lace window treatments and embroidered pillows. There's a chair in the Eames style, a hutch for displaying china plates, and a large mahogany coffee table with an inset of beveled glass. The place looks owned, not rented.

She tells me again how much she enjoyed our date. I find it odd that even at home she still goes around in a long skirt and cowboy boots. She doesn't want me to get a good look at her.

Then there's the hard part. She didn't want to tell me at first because with other guys, guys she's taken an interest in and went on one or two dates with before things got personal and she *had* to tell them, and then the guys never asked her out again, never, never once (and she won't blame me if I don't want to go out with her either--that doesn't make me a bad person, she wants me to know that (and here I admit to being more concerned

with figuring out how to balance off the rest of this sentence so that it holds up grammatically than simply letting this poor girl tell her story)), but the bottom line is--*fuck* sentence structure for once--she didn't want to tell me. *Hannah didn't want to tell me.* She's got this *thing*--she says what it's called and I don't remember. The name's not so important, is it? She didn't want to tell me because she knows what will happen next. I'll probably be very understanding. I'm a nice guy and smart and talented and good-looking (she says), and I'll make a great catch for some other girl someday. I won't end it right then and there. I'm too good for that; I have a charitable streak. I'll kiss her and tell her she's still beautiful, and maybe I'll be kind and allow her to spend a night with me--she hasn't been with a man in so long, just to be held, let alone make love--and in the morning I'll be all bright-talk and snappy one-liners, and we'll go to breakfast, the dream already starting to drift into morning realism, and suddenly I'll remember a noon appointment across town, and she'll kiss me goodbye and I'll say something like, "What are you saying goodbye for? I'll call you tonight," and maybe I *will*--nice guy, charitable, etc.--but it'll be brief, and the next call will be long and awkward and we'll hang up separately, leaving her with memories of line dancing, a card that reads "To the start of something interesting," and a promise I'd once made to sign one of my books.

I wonder if, in saying this, she's really challenging me. Daring me not to do it.

Hannah has a condition that's caused her left knee to swell with fluid, an illness most commonly associated with complications after surgery but in her case the result of a mishap two years ago in which she suffered a broken leg and damage to her lymphatic vessels. In other words, she's got this stuff in her knee that won't drain properly, so she has to wear compression bandages all the way from her foot to her mid-thigh to keep the swelling down. It's controllable but not likely to go away. She'll never be able to show her legs in public again. Sexy shoes are a thing of the past. Now there's only pain and fatigue and horrible itching under her wraps. Every time she meets a new guy, there'll be this same awful confession, the same rejection, the same healing talks with mom on the phone.

It's not so bad, I decide. At least I'd been expecting worse--not to minimize the

pain and discomfort to Hannah, of course. As far as she and I are concerned, I don't see any reason to stop what we're doing. What am I, shallow?

When she's finished, she wipes her eyes, laughs and says, "I'm a mess."

"I like messes," I say. It feels like the start of a catch-phrase. We'll refer to these conversations weeks, months, maybe even years from now.

It's no longer afternoon but early evening. We're on her couch, cuddling and drinking wine. I put my hand on her knee, feel the nubby texture under her skirt and wonder if the bandage is turning me on. It can't be. I'll have to see it first.

Claire once lectured me about the women in my books. "They're always bitches," she said. "I can feel you leering at them. You want to sleep with all of them, don't you?" When I cited the numerous examples of all the female characters I'd written, few if any I'd remotely describe as "bitches," she revised her statement. "Driven, then--ambitious, aggressive. I don't know the word for it. They all *want* something. Why is that, Jack?" she asked, and I said, "Because they're human beings."

Claire is just this person who asks me questions every now and then.

Hannah and I have finished our wine and are thinking about moving to the bed. "Is it okay if we leave the lights off?" she asks.

I say, "Of course, yes," but it really doesn't matter. I can still see in the dark.

Her bedroom is windowless--it feels like it's right in the middle of the building, surrounded by halls and other rooms. We stand several feet apart as we do our own undressing. She hesitates before stepping out of her skirt. Her bandage is thick and looks more like a cast.

"Still okay?" she asks. I really think she's making too much of this.

"Please, I want to see all of you," I say, already naked. I'm always in a hurry to get my clothes off.

Hannah shocks me in bed. I'd been expecting shy, but Hannah is not shy. She's loud as all hell. She likes changing positions, changing rooms, even changing her personality from time to time. Her only modesty is her bandage, which she refuses to take off. Now that we've seen each other naked, I wonder if we'll ever wear clothes again. We

do it in the shared basement next to the upstairs tenant's laundry, in front of the kitchen window, doggy-style in the living room with her arms braced against the coffee table. When we're not actually fucking, she's describing all the things she wants me to do to her next time. By midnight I'm exhausted but still dutifully plowing away. My orgasms are nothing anymore. I've already had almost all I want of her.

"I told you I was trouble," she laughs.

We sleep until ten, have a quick, good-morning screw, then jump into the shower. She insists on separate showers; she needs to remove her bandage, and she doesn't want me to see what it looks like underneath.

"What does it look like?" I ask. I don't have a visual in mind.

"It's horrible," she says, waiting for me to step away from the bathroom.

She's in the shower when the phone rings and a man leaves a short message. His voice is gruff and southern, and he calls her "Hank." I assume it's her brother, the one who got stuck. Funny, I'd forgotten all about Hank. Hank's not *my* Hannah. He must be looking for someone else.

The shower cuts off, and she spends a quarter hour reassembling herself, finally emerging in another long skirt, long-sleeved blouse and cowboy boots. I rush up and hold my body against hers, kissing her face, her neck, the pit of her throat.

She laughs but pushes me away. "Damn it now, I just made myself all pretty," she says. My little slut has gone off-shift.

Between more kisses, I say, "Someone called for you. I think it's your brother."

She plays the message and hits the erase button before it's finished. "Yep, that's him. You want to take a shower so we can get some chow?" she asks.

When I'm dressed and ready, we walk out into the autumn sun and go for a late breakfast. Hannah is just as much fun as ever, and I'm glad there's no awkwardness between us. Sex sometimes tips the balance between people, and it's hard to go back to being relaxed and unselfconscious. Not with her: she's the same cheerful pixie as before, laughing at our waitress' name (her name is Mary), at the hanging sign for "Fresh Pies" swinging under an exhaust fan. She makes a stack out of syrup and butter packets and I

knock them down with my finger.

While we're eating, she says, "I have to tell you something. I wasn't completely honest with you this morning. That person who called is not my brother. He's a boy from back home, and we went out for a few months. He's nothing. We haven't been together in just ages, but he's still got a crush on me and I didn't want to say anything because I'm so into *you* now, Jack. He's harmless and I feel sorry for him. He doesn't have any friends, so I let him call me if he wants. But I'll tell him to stop if it bothers you."

I like that she calls him "boy," and I wonder if she thinks of me as a boy too. Maybe it's a southern thing. "It doesn't bother me," I say.

A message is waiting from Rhianne when I get home. She's sorry she hasn't been in touch, but work has been crazy lately. I don't know what to do. I suppose I could call, agree to meet for coffee, then mention I'm seeing someone else. That way I could return her book and say goodbye in person. But even that much seems disloyal. I'm taken now. Rhianne needs to just go away.

I erase the message and tear up her number.

Hannah and I see each other regularly in the weeks before Christmas. We usually stay at her place; my apartment, being so high up, puts added pressure on her knee. Airplanes bother her too, but the flight down to her folks' house is only three and a half hours. Her trip home is looming, and I'll have to go without her for a whole week. I don't ask to join her for Christmas and she doesn't offer. It feels like we haven't been dating *quite* long enough.

The night before she leaves, she finally lets me see her knee. Honestly it's nothing. Her skin is a little red, but that's mainly from the bandage. I suppose you'd notice more of a difference if she didn't wear it at all. She still keeps it on when we make love, which is often. By now we've shown everything to each other in bed. We keep our eyes locked and cry out in throaty voices that must embarrass the people upstairs. They're part of it too; our sex has a muted, less edgy quality when we know no one else is home.

She wakes at a dead hour of the morning and begins to fret, pacing the rooms of her apartment and rechecking her bags to make sure everything's packed. I'll be taking care of

her plants while she's gone.

"I'm scared," she says when I come upon her in the living room.

"Of what? Of flying?" I hate to fly. I don't even like the idea of someone I care about being up in the air.

"No, I'm okay with flying. I'm scared you're not going to like me anymore when I get back," she says.

Her flight leaves at nine, and she calls that afternoon to say she got in safely. She and her mother are waiting for her dad to come home so they can all go out to dinner.

"I get sad seeing my old room--all these pictures of me when I still looked like a normal human being. There's me in shorts. There's me and Greg when Greg took me to homecoming sophomore year," she says.

"Your brother took you to homecoming?" Greg is thirty-two, never married, and has a daughter in high school. Usual story--wanted to play ball but couldn't get some key element of his game up to snuff. Hannah's parents have learned to love him for what he is, basically a local kid who hasn't done anything particularly wrong or right with his life.

"I was so embarrassed that night," she laughs. I wish we were both lying on her bed, going through her photo albums together. "I'm serious, no one would ask me out! They used to call me 'Li'l Bitty Pity' because I was so little."

"That's not very nice," I say. I'm sitting on the floor in front of her open closet, holding one of her cowboy boots in my lap. "So what are you going to do after dinner?"

She leans away from the phone to say, "Be right there, mama! Oh, just meet up with some old friends. Flying tires me out, so I'll probably tuck in early."

We connect twice more that day, the calls tapering off as the week goes on. I divide time between apartments, using my place mostly for sleep. Hannah's bed is softer than mine and sometimes gives me a backache. Also I prefer my own bathroom; it's got a small Jacuzzi and the water doesn't have that old plumbing taste.

Three days after Christmas, I hear from Claire. A novelist is reading at the cultural center, and she asks if I want to go. I hesitate at first. Though Claire and I have never been more than friends, it's true I spent the night on her futon, and I want to give a full account

of myself when Hannah gets back.

“I printed out my story for you,” she says, as if that decides it.

We meet at a vegetarian restaurant in walking distance of the reading. She’s exhausted from seeing her parents over the holidays. “I haven’t slept in three days, which is par for the course. And when I say ‘I haven’t slept in three days,’ I mean it. Maybe four hours total.”

“That can’t be healthy, Claire,” I say. We order tea. Claire already knows what she wants, so I quickly decide on a garden salad.

“Things aren’t good at home. My dad’s given up on his diet. Mom thinks he’s trying to kill himself and I don’t know whose side I’m on. Also-” She sets her dark glasses on the table. Her eyes look like another pair of dark glasses. “He’s been acting strange in other ways. Mom wouldn’t go into the details. She just kept saying, ‘I’m not twenty-eight anymore.’ Hey, I think it’s great if he still finds her attractive. *Give the man a frickin’ break.*”

While we’re catching up, I tell her about Hannah. I have to get it out there; I don’t like keeping secrets, and Hannah feels too much like a secret. Claire’s expression is inscrutable throughout. Her sandwich comes, and she chews with her mouth open.

“What does she do?” she asks, and I have to admit Hannah is between jobs. I think she used to work in an office or something. She mentioned wanting to help sexually abused women. Isn’t that good of her?

“Which means one thing, Jack. It means *she*’s been sexually abused, or raped or what have you.”

“Really? I didn’t know that’s how it worked.”

“Not always, just sometimes. Look, I’m not being critical of her. That’s fine, I’m sure she’s a wonderful person. It’s not that she wants to work in a battered women’s clinic. It’s that she’s telling you this on an early date.”

I don’t remember saying anything about an early date, but I suppose she’s right. Hannah and I have only been together seven weeks. All of our dates have been early ones.

Claire gives me a little kick under the table. “I’m just yanking your chain, buddy.

Seriously, I think it's great you've met someone--shalom and mazel tov. What's she look like? Is she cute?"

Describing Hannah is a challenge, but I have a picture in my wallet. Claire studies the photo, getting her thumbs all over it. She's wondering why I'm going out with this woman who looks nothing like her. "What is this, her confirmation picture?" she asks, and I snatch it away.

From there we walk to the reading. It's so cold out I almost put my arm around her. On the way we pass a convenience store, where she buys some Motrin and a bottle of water. "Headaches," she says, gulping down two pills outside the store. "Comes from not sleeping."

"Time to see a doctor for that," I advise. I'm lucky I've always been a good sleeper. It's easy for me to lie down and let go of the day.

We reach the steps of the cultural center, but it's too early to go in. A poster has the author's old, wizened face squinting at the camera. He hasn't done anything with his hair; it's just a windblown mess. The expression on his face says, *I'll give you exactly five minutes of my time*. He's no one I know personally.

"If I ever publish a book, it's not going to have my picture on it," Claire says, sizing up the poster. The author's craggy forehead is as big as her torso. "I think it's a compromise. Don't you, Jack? Don't you think having your picture on your book jacket compromises it?"

"No, why?" I ask. She's just trying to fuck with me. Her questions don't mean anything. She's unhappy and wants to take it out on someone else.

The reading is well-attended, with lots of college kids making a clamor inside the hall. Claire and I are more or less alone in this group of twentysomethings who all seem to know each other. Books for sale are stacked in a great quantity beside a table offering concessions, little plastic cups of white wine for six dollars. I buy a drink for Claire and one for myself. Like it or not, she's my date for the night.

"Are you going to buy his book?" I ask.

She takes the top one down from the stack, reads some of the flap copy and says,

“I’ll pass. I’m only here because I wanted to ask him about his quote in the *Bay*.”

She’s referring to a provocative statement made by the author about female genital mutilation in Africa. “Don’t ask him about that,” I say.

“Why not? He’s here, it’s his little shindig.”

“It’ll only make people uncomfortable.”

“So? That’s his whole point, to make people uncomfortable,” she says, returning the book to its stack. I’ve always liked the sight of multiple copies of the same book arranged in columns or on shelves. My own books are yellow and green and blue and black. One looks fun, like it might have a scene that takes place at a concert. It’s the kind of book you’d expect to turn up with the old tenant’s trash. Books fill a space, their object-value often exceeding their content-value. Good ones become yellow and acquire rips and nicks from multiple moves. They’re memories, mirrors, false starts, resolutions. They’re one more thing to mourn six months after the house burns down.

“So, does your girlfriend have a *su-thern ac-cent*?” Claire asks. She’s finished half her wine, and there’s pinkish lipstick on her cup.

“Yeah, she’s got a southern accent,” I say.

She snorts. “Oh, god. She’s not a horrible right-wing Republican fascist fuckhead, is she?”

“Not so far as I know,” I answer stiffly.

The author shambles out to do his thing. He’s fine, really; I don’t have anything against him. I’m sure he’s pocketing a nice speaking fee, plus a per diem. Dinners paid for by the publisher. Given the choice I’d opt for the Surf and Turf, maybe a Caesar salad or a half dozen cold oysters to start. Wine? Yes, let’s: two glasses of the mid-priced Merlot. An afternoon worth of phone interviews in a room on the twenty-sixth floor of some Hilton or Doubletree. You want to be polite, not condescending or self-impressed. They’re expecting you to show a little arrogance, so work on that. Be a guy. Be realistic about yourself. Admit that it’s half bullshit, anyway. Order a gin on the rocks at the hotel bar after the reading and charge it to Random House. Turn in at midnight--your publicist will be calling around nine, but don’t expect her until a quarter past. She’s on her cell,

taking her kids to school. She's not really all there, but she's glad to hear you had ninety-eight people at your promotional event. She'll call you again when you get into the next town. She wants to know what you've been wearing to these engagements. The suits make you look old-fashioned, though she admits that's part of your charm.

The author reads a funny chapter from his book. I'm envious of his sentences, which have a nice rhythm and aren't afraid to tackle syntactical complexities I generally avoid. For me a sentence typically has one objective, then gets tired early and has to stop. He uses a lot of words I don't think I've ever written, like "assuage." I'm not clear on "assuage." It makes me hungry for something dry and spicy, like lamb kebabs. The word "kebab," on the other hand, I don't mind--it's a thing and it's real and it's out there, and you either dig it or you don't.

After the reading it's time for questions and answers. Many of the questions are declarations of love in disguise: one audience member wants the author to know how reading one of his books on a train trip from Vancouver to Chicago changed her life; another wonders if the author knows the work of a certain Czech essayist, then gives him a list of book recommendations that embarrasses the man on stage and annoys most of the audience. The author looks like he's ready to go. He's primed for that drink back at the hotel. He's gotten to where he can mistake his liver for a pulled abdominal muscle, that's how much it's declined over the years. If only they knew how little there is to the man beyond what they read on the page. An hour every morning returning emails, then writing until noon--hoping for at least a sentence or two that lives up to expectations. A light lunch, maybe just a handful of chips and half of the sandwich his wife couldn't finish last night. More writing from one to four; the rough stuff rarely sings the way it does after multiple rewrites, but that takes time and energy--mostly time--and the author has less of that these days. He swears every book will be his last, wanting to get a rise out of people, his agent, his writer friends. He wants them to say, "No, no. . . you'll pull through." Four to five is the anxious hour. His desire to crack open the gin bottle is the most keenly felt emotion all day. The first drink is strong enough to get him wasted by 5:20. Golf is still on, even afternoon talk shows on some channels. Late phone calls get ignored--he knows

what he sounds like after he's had a few. By seven he's switched to beer, which he's decided is even healthier than booze. He's fat and too old now to work it off. Being drunk doesn't even feel like being drunk anymore; it's just the disorientation he experiences every night before bed. Sleep is a series of harsh dreams that bark at him until he wakes up sweating, the blood settled on one side of his body. Morning comes and his wife swoops around like a superhero, running chores up and down the stairs, hauling heavy equipment out of the garage, fielding fifteen phone calls before noon. She makes it all possible for him, gives the genius his space. They were the same age once, but now he feels so much older than she. Maybe they have grandkids. The oldest, a boy, wants to be a writer, but granddad doesn't know which of his books he can suggest that's age-appropriate. The one with the anal rape? The bit where the chick gets it in the ear? It's all pornography. All he can offer is advice: do well in school. Keep up with your reading. Study the classics. Get an English degree and spend a year bumming around. Don't write, just watch. Marry a girl from a wealthy family, someone who doesn't want to compete with you. Then work hard--expect a lot out of yourself. Don't lose sleep when your peers fall to the wayside; you're not one of them. When you're old you'll have a stack of books with your name on them and the comfort of knowing someone's always thinking of you. But the boy is only eleven years old and wants grandpa to read his story about a brontosaurus named Kim.

Claire asks an insinuating question about the author's quote in the *Bay*. The room falls silent; it's her scolding tone of voice that stops them more than her words.

The author responds haughtily, adding a little joke for his fans' sake. People laugh, relieved to see their hero is winning. They all hate Claire and, I suppose, me by association.

After the reading, when we're back outside the center, Claire has the exchange all turned around in her head. "Did you notice how he didn't take any more questions after mine? The old guy couldn't even speak. You were right again."

"They were wrapping up anyway. He looked pretty tired," I say.

"He wasn't tired, he was *stunned*. I'm sure he's not used to people talking to him like that. He's used to college kids puckering up and kissing his shriveled asshole." She

demonstrates “asshole” by bringing her thumb and two fingers together.

“Maybe. I don’t know anything about the man’s career-- and what do you mean, I was right again? How can I be right when I didn’t say anything?”

We’re on the steps of the center, alone in the cold and splotches of streetlight. The kids from the reading swarm off to their next destination. They still believe in something when they see a man on stage reading from his book. Maybe they see themselves up there in five or ten years. Most of them will be disappointed, like Claire. They’ll collect their rejection slips and eventually decide the whole thing’s a joke. Even books will be spoiled for them. They’ll stop paying attention to writers their age and younger, and the only books they’ll read will be nineteenth century because there’s no arguing with Tolstoy.

“The ‘shame stare.’ You called it, Jack. You were right about the Joni Mitchell album, right about the carrots and lettuce appearing out of thin air, and now this. That’s three for four.”

We walk north from the cultural center, looking for a quiet place to drink and talk. The bay is in sight, and the elevated train crosses the bridge to the other side. We’re huddled in darkness. Patches of black ice on the pavement look sexy, like crinkled black leather.

The Cuban is open late, but just as I’m wondering why I don’t feel like going in, Rhianne bursts out of the club with two other women. She’s cheery, loud, and teetering on her feet; so much for only drinking on special occasions.

Claire and I are a corner away, and I steer her up a side street. “Someone you don’t want to see?” she guesses correctly. This new street doesn’t look promising; it’s mainly offices shut down for the night. Some loose piece of sheet metal is banging in the wind.

I explain that Rhianne and I had a date in late October that didn’t quite work out. I should’ve called her but I didn’t.

“Instead you met this other girl,” Claire surmises, her mouth and chin buried under the neck of her coat, “and you figured, ‘I’m all set, why bother?’”

“Yep. Terrible of me, isn’t it? This preceded by years of celibacy, I might add.”

“Oh, I’m not judging. I’m just fascinated by your life, Jack.”

We find a Greek restaurant, order coffees and a plate of French fries to make it worth the waitress' time, and I fill Claire in on the rest of the Rhianne story.

"How many women have you slept with?" she asks, though I've said nothing about sleeping with Rhianne. We're more or less alone inside the restaurant. The lights are turned high, almost to interrogation levels.

"A few," I say, then ask her the same question. "Or is this one of those things women can ask men but men can't ask women?"

She smiles enigmatically and takes sudden interest in her fries. I imagine her sexual history compares roughly to mine. I'm guessing there was a boy in high school, another quiet brainiac. They dated for a few months senior year before sex ruined it. It became all he wanted from her, and she grew to miss the two of them playing Yahtzee and watching classic movies on TV with her parents.

I believe she's had her heart broken. The man she once loved cohabited with her for a period of years. I don't know why it ended. They were engaged, though not to the point of picking a date and making arrangements. She went on birth control for him, and their lovemaking was just to each other's liking. Not once did she feel the need to write while they were together. It was enough to work at the university, meet for dinner and ride the same bus home.

I grill her about the "shame stare." "You're kidding about that, right? I want to know if I should be worried," I say. I act like I'm not serious but I am. I feel like both of our sanities are at stake.

"I'm not kidding. I have one power left, and it's the big one."

"What's that?"

"You remember. I said, 'I would like to have something meaningful to say,' and you said, 'Fine, we'll let that be your fourth power.' Those were your exact words. I just have to wait for it now."

I'm annoyed. Here I am, fending off constructions left and right, and Claire isn't helping.

Back outside, she pulls a thin sheaf of manuscript paper from her coat pocket and

hands it to me.

“When you get a chance,” she says.

I sneak a peek at the story, which is called “My Latest Victim.” The first sentence is, “Claire had never killed anything in her life, let alone a miniature pony.”

“You said to start with a hook,” she reminds me.

“That certainly is a hook,” I admit, reading past the first sentence. “Who’s the ‘my?’” She looks puzzled. “In the title. It’s called ‘My Latest Victim,’ which is first person, but the story’s in third.”

“And that’s a problem?” she asks. I can hear her getting belligerent.

“Not necessarily, I suppose. Some readers might wonder about it, since there’s no ‘I’ in the narrative. You could always change it to ‘Her Latest Victim’ . . . or ‘His.’ I don’t know which one’s the victim yet, him or her.”

“‘Her Latest Victim.’ ‘*Claire’s* Latest Victim.’ Nah,” she decides, “I like ‘My Latest Victim’ better. You don’t have to read it if you don’t want.”

In the morning her story is on my kitchen counter, a crease preserved where I’ve folded it down the center.

I’m all nerves the day Hannah comes home. I hope she’s happy with how I’ve taken care of her apartment. Not a single plant has died. One in the den trembles like it’s cold or enjoying something deep down in its roots. I wonder if there’s a small creature living in there, like a snail.

At the airport I wait outside security for her to land. She’s one of the last off the plane, wearing a shirt I haven’t seen before, maybe one of her Christmas presents. All at once I’m back in the world of long skirts and cowboy boots. I know she sees me across the concourse, though she’s not exactly smiling. I think, *this is it, it’s over, something’s different* . . .

We’re kissing in the flow of traffic. “Sorry I’m a little out of it--we had a bumpy flight, and I’m hungry as all heck,” she says.

“We’ll get some food in you,” I say. I’ve got my arm around her, pleased to show her off. We’ve never been around this many people before. I’m proud of Hannah’s unique

look: her little body, fragile neck and shoulders, tiny hands like a child's reaching for a glass of milk.

She doesn't talk much in the cab, just keeps her eyes on the window she's cracked to let in some of the cold air. Catching me looking, she'll say, "Fresh air's nice," or "I'll be fine in a minute," or, again, "Sorry I'm out of it." I wonder if she's really sick or suffering some kind of buyer's remorse. Maybe she forgot what she liked about me while she was gone.

For dinner we pick an Italian place where she packs away a plate of spaghetti with meatballs while I talk and talk and joke and talk; I feel like I'm on a first date again. Soon she's back to her usual silly self. The word "gelati" on the menu cracks her up, and we decide it's one of those words that sounds stranger the more times you say it: gelati gelati gelati.

At the end of dinner, she says, "I missed you."

"You did? I wasn't so sure when you got off the plane. You looked upset about something."

"Naw, hon, that was just my *stum*-ach talking." Fresh from the south, there's still some country in her voice. I think about the patronizing remark Claire would make if she were here. Between the two of them, Hannah and Claire, Claire is clearly the expendable one.

Back at her apartment, she draws us a hot bath. I get naked and sneak up behind her as she feels the temperature under the faucet, still in her skirt and boots and the new shirt her mother gave her for Christmas.

"All this needs to go bye-bye," I say, helping her off with her shirt.

She laughs but stays focused on getting the water just right. "Let me know if this is too hot. Pour us a little wine?"

I dance off to the kitchen, use up the rest of an open bottle on two full glasses and join her in the bubble bath. Her bandage is off and lying in a heap. I fish her right leg out of the water and kiss her toes.

"Give me the other one," I say, but she pulls it away. "Come on--if I do one, I get

to do the other.”

There’s nothing actually wrong with her left foot; all the swelling is higher up.

“I love you with my whole life, Hannah,” I say, my heart in my mouth, edging past my lips.

Hannah gulps her wine. “You would’ve liked me better when I was younger,” she says.

After our bath, we wrap one big towel around the both of us and shuffle over to the bed. The windowless room is too dark, and I ask to turn on a lamp.

“What for?”

“I want to see you, Hannah. I haven’t seen you in a week, and I want to drink you in with my eyes.”

I switch on the lamp, which throws some shadow on one side of her face. Hannah is a sadder person with her clothes off. I can’t imagine her smiling or laughing at anything.

When we’re ready to make love, she says, “Don’t worry about hurting me. You can even do it a little harder if you’d like. You don’t have to hold back.”

“I’m not holding back,” I insist, but she says, “You know what I mean. I’m just saying you don’t have to be so gentle. You can be rough and I won’t mind.”

I’m still not sure what she wants. Have I been too gentle? I thought gentle was good.

Later that night, she confesses that her old boyfriend from back home, Dave, has been bothering her again. His parents still blame her for “turning his head around.” He was a nice kid before they met, never in trouble with the police. Her dumping him drove him to the bottle, and now he’s got a coke habit and lives in a weekly-rate hotel.

“Sounds like a real winner,” I say. This is the same person who phoned her a few weeks ago; the one who calls her “Hank.”

“He’s not. I told him when I was down there, ‘You need to stop worrying about me and get your own self together.’”

“Wait--you talked to him? You saw him?”

He stopped by the day after Christmas, and they went out for beer and burgers.

Hannah figured enough time had passed since they'd split up, and she thought it might remove some of her mystique if she said yes.

“What'd you talk about?” I ask.

“I told him about you, of course.”

“And?”

She pulls the sheet over us. “He didn't like it. That's how the men are down there. They think they own their women. I said, ‘Too bad--he's a published novelist and you can read his books in the library if you'd like.’”

“I'm sure that went over big.”

We're silent for awhile. Hannah gets up, puts on a T-shirt and returns to bed. I want to get dressed too but my clothes are across the room.

She says, “I think there's something wrong with me. It's like I have a subconscious need to hurt other people.”

“I haven't noticed that.”

Time moves across her face. “You haven't known me long enough,” she says.

She then decides she won't put up with any more calls from Dave. “He's a jerk. I don't know why I ever went out with him. He wastes all his money on drugs and this stupid car he can't afford because he doesn't have a job.”

We stop talking about it, though the conversation feels suspended.

“Do you hate me yet?” she asks, and I say, “Not yet.”

For New Year's Eve I treat her to an expensive dinner, and we both drink too much champagne. Our cab home has to stop so I can throw up. I lean out the door at an empty intersection, and the cabbie produces a paper towel for me to wipe my mouth. Who knows what Hannah is thinking.

The first week of January goes well. We've moved into a new stage in our relationship, less frenzied. We don't make love every single night anymore, and when we do it's not always such a big deal. We make more of an effort to leave the house, go to a museum, a concert, a movie. Our dates are fun--they feel like “dates.”

She cancels with me two days before her birthday, feeling exhausted from so many

late nights. I do my best not to sound disappointed. It's been awhile since I've had an evening to myself. My apartment, with its clean kitchen counter and sleek appliances, seems to wonder why I'm here.

I'm on the verge of asking Claire out for a drink when I remember I haven't read her story. It's more or less where I left it on the counter, though the crease has lost some of its crisp edge. Deciding I can handle Claire and a drink at the same time, I pour a Scotch over ice and settle down to read. Some of the sentences on the first page are plain bad, and a missing period in the second paragraph insults my intelligence. Claire has made herself into a hovering comedienne; the things her main character says are too smart and too funny, and no one else in the story seems to notice.

By the last page, I'm panicked about what to tell her. There's the standard we use when it's just one writer helping another. We make lists of things that need fixing--the transitions, obviously. The transitions are always bad. The characters all sound alike--neurotic, clever, asking for help. At no point do we acknowledge the other standard, the one that requires--sadly, inconveniently--for it all to matter a bit. So we discuss inconsistencies, red hair that turns blonde without the help of a stylist, snow in September, characters who can't seem to remember their age. We praise what little we can. It's better than the last one, we say, and of course it is. The last one was a disaster, now that we're being honest. We laugh and grab two more beers from the fridge. Returning to the pages, we feel relieved, light-hearted. No one's feelings have been hurt. We have something to do now. We can fix the transitions, fix the dialogue. The task becomes something like mathematics: see if you can get it down to twenty-five hundred words. One of us, the author, will ask, "Is it too much like John Cheever?" and the other will say, "It's better." It's possible we're a little drunk. Another draft follows; the author feels silly asking for a second read. The font has gone from Courier to Times New Roman, and this alone feels like revision. Where scenes once consumed pages, phrases like "After a long and uninteresting conversation. . ." now substitute. The author is pleased with his work, if cautiously so. Already he has an idea for a new story, which means soon we'll be thinking of this as "the last one" too.

I spend ten minutes distributing little checkmarks, which I'll tell her mean, "This is good," "Funny," or "I'm following it," but really mean, "I can't think of anything negative to say here." Then I smooth the pages and leave them by the phone.

I want to know what Hannah is doing right now. I wonder if she's heard from Dave.

To get my mind off it, I play some music. I haven't heard the Joni Mitchell album in weeks, but when I put it on, I find that my memory of it is still strong. There's the big acoustic guitar that sounds like something's been done to it, the wandering bass, the busy lyrics that follow no consistent rhythmic pattern but change meter from line to line. I'm even more curious about the two figures on the cover, the boy in the skating costume and the unhappy girl in her wedding dress. I wonder what they did after the photo shoot, if they went out to lunch or just returned to their apartments. Who are they, anyway, and what are their names? Maybe Joni Mitchell could tell me if I met her, but it's possible she doesn't follow that aspect of her career.

Hannah's birthday comes on a cold and snowy night in the middle of a work week. I've bought her a bunch of little presents: a country music CD I know she's been wanting, a funny novel about a girl from the south who gets mixed up in New York City, *Tootsie* on DVD, leather gloves, white chocolates from Godiva, sandalwood incense and a silver tennis bracelet with our names and the year engraved. Some other things too--I'm embarrassed by the miscellany. I carry the presents to her place in a "Happy Birthday" bag, each gift wrapped in turquoise paper, turquoise being her favorite color. I've signed two cards, a serious one with a long poem and a funny sexy one. The funny sexy one I inscribe with a 'J' and write "With deep love for my angel, your Jack" on the other. She cries when she reads it.

With the last present unwrapped, she lets some of the paper fall from her hands and reaches for her wine. I'm dressed for dinner in a nice sweater, pressed pants, new shoes bought that morning. Our reservation is in an hour--we'll need to hail a cab.

She sips her wine, and I sip mine.

"I can't keep these presents, Jack," she says.

I ask why not. Tears form; she blinks them away and steels herself with another sip.

It was only once, she says, the night they went out for beer and burgers. She doesn't know why she did it. He looked so hurt and lonely, and she knew it would mean so much to him. Then afterwards, lying in Dave's rented room, she realized she'd been unfair to him all these years, and that they really did belong together, having already been through so much with her knee and his problems with the law. I must look stricken because she tells me what a great guy I am, how patient I've been with her, etc. Across the city, I can almost hear Claire laughing at me.

"What about us, then?" I ask. Dumb Hannah doesn't understand this incredibly simple question, so I say, "When you came back to me, and I picked you up at the airport, and the night we spent together, and then the *whole week* after that. . ."

She hangs her head. My throat feels like it's full of glass, but not broken glass--a long, smooth glass tube I can neither swallow nor cough back up, so it stays put while my muscles reflexively clench around it.

"You hate me," she states. If anything, she's the most beautiful I've ever seen her. I remember the evening of our first date when we met for a stroll around the park in the cold just starting to blow across the bay. I felt big walking next to her. Her cowboy boots weren't significant then; they were just something cute she'd worn to please me.

Before I know it, I'm out of the house. I can't remember what just happened, but the street is cold and her lights are off. I can't bring myself to ring the doorbell. Call it my Swedish disposition, but I don't want to make a scene. I imagine Hannah refilling her wine and calling her mother: *mom, I did it again*. She's already thinking about the next life she's going to ruin. She's gotten to where she's come to expect it from herself, so that it's almost not wrong anymore.

I back down the porch steps and scan the block. The wind's picked up, and some asshole down the street keeps laying on his car horn. The fiction writer in me considers asking a random woman out to dinner, but instead I cancel the reservation and walk dozens of blocks to my part of town. I want to stay out all night, hit the bars, make a new friend--

male or female, I don't care.

At some dive I've never been to before, I get advice from a guy who's been drinking all afternoon. He says, "If you've been having problems with your heating costs, it might be your insulation. Paper insulation is a safe and economical alternative to Fiberglas, and just as easy to install."

"Thanks," I say, laying down a ten to cover my two beers. I don't want to look at the time but do. Hannah and I should be cuddling under a blanket by now.

Some time later I stumble past The Cuban and inquire with the doorman about Rhianne. He throws down his cigarette and holds a hand up to his chest. "Short girl? Middle-eastern or something? She don't come here on Wednesdays."

I don't know why I'm asking. The club is medium-crowded, and the bouncer asks if I'm coming in.

Every bar I duck into doesn't quite fit my mood. Some I haven't been to since I started dating Hannah. Guys and girls have a dart game going in one of the bars, and I watch them for awhile. The crisp twenties in my wallet have converted into damp singles and a pocket of coins.

At home I finish off two beers and pour a brimming glass of white wine, which I take with me to bed. I'm disappointed Hannah hasn't tried to phone. I wonder if she has a conscience at all. I spend an hour or so tipping around the apartment talking to myself. I'm confused, angry, and now, finally, drunk. I wake at eight in the morning with marks on my face from the bed sheets.

By the next evening, I still haven't heard from her. I wonder if I should worry, if my concern is even appropriate anymore. I can't simply pretend not to care. Maybe it's easy for her to cut people out of her life, but not me.

When I finally do call, I get the machine. I know she's screening, and it pisses me off. I haven't done anything wrong. I should be the one refusing to speak to her.

I give her a day to return my call, but still nothing. The city suddenly feels small, and I can sense her breathing at night. During the day I display my usual competence at the word processor. I stop shaving and only go outside for beer and groceries.

When the phone rings, it's Claire wanting to know when we can discuss her story. I use Hannah as my excuse. The first beer of the afternoon is a great golden promise, and by six o'clock I've already had four.

I try Hannah again the next morning, and to my surprise she picks up. "Jack," she says. She sounds tired and subdued.

I'm straight with her. I tell her I'm not angry--I understand the relationship is over. I would just like to meet for coffee so we can have a friendly, mature conversation, discuss what happened, and move on with our lives. I don't want our time together to feel like a mistake.

We meet at a coffee house in the downtown business district, where glass and transience dominate. It looks a bit like the diners we used to frequent on our breakfast dates, only this time Hannah isn't laughing. She keeps her dark glasses on at the table. Her face is drawn and even her lips are pale. I want her to order a bagel or something, but she sticks with coffee, and so do I.

She asks if I've been seeing anyone--a ludicrous question--and I say of course not. I've been very upset, I've been drinking, I've been staying at home. She looks annoyed to hear all this. She thinks I should just grow up, and maybe I should.

Finally the glasses come off. Her eyes are lowered; she's remembering something bad she did, maybe something that has nothing to do with me.

"Jack, I don't know if it's healthy for us to meet like this. I lied to Dave. I told him I was going to the library."

"Dave doesn't need to worry. You're all his now--though I wonder about the relationship, Hannah. . . I have my doubts, quite frankly, if you have to lie to the man."

"Oh, Dave's okay. I should just admit to myself that I shouldn't be in a relationship. I make everyone around me unhappy. I made you unhappy, and I'm going to make Dave even more unhappy. I should just kill myself. I'm not doing the world any good."

Her eyes flicker over the room, which is busy with working men and women grabbing quick bites before flocking back to their offices. I can feel the cold coming off of

their trench coats and jackets, which hang from hooks and posts. A table of women contains so much laughing energy that the table itself seems to vibrate. One of the women is a neat redhead with a doll's face and thirsty, pouting lips. She mostly listens as the others around her squawk and chirp.

Hannah points her out. "Do you think she's pretty?" she asks.

The game is to get me talking about another woman. "She's fine," I say.

"Have you ever dated a redhead?"

"I haven't dated many women. It's not something I take lightly. I'll go for years without a date. I've told you all this, Hannah. My life is basically solitary. I have very few friends. The ones I do have are either other writers or people who want to be writers."

Her mouth closes slowly. "Sorry," she says. I wonder if this is the "big" sorry, the one I've been waiting for, or just an incidental sorry, meant for something small and specific.

She makes a big fuss over the check. The total's only four dollars, but she wants to pay her way, down to the dime. Her little wallet is a square of purple leather with a silver clasp.

"What tip are we leaving?" she asks, picking through her change. The redhead across the room isn't there anymore; neither are her friends.

Hannah gives me two bucks in exchange for a five, then puts the five down. "I think I owe you," she says.

"You'll get me next time," I say, and we both smile insincerely.

When we're out on the street, I ask permission to call her every now and then, just to see how she's doing. There's no reason for any hard feelings. I want only happiness for her; happiness and good health.

"Maybe we could have a drink next week," I say. I don't know what my agenda is, honestly. I'm just lost, spinning, aimless.

"I'd like that," she says, going on tip-toes to kiss my cheek. Something else I'll miss about Hannah: I liked being tall around her. An approaching subway groans under the pavement, and she hurries down a dark flight of stairs into the station.

I wait a whole week to call her. There's a winter festival in the park, including an ice-sculpture contest that every year draws some local attention. I figure it might be fun to walk around, maybe get some hot cider. We have some memories tied up in the place, after all.

I get the machine as expected, so I try sounding upbeat and off-the-cuff. I don't want her thinking I'll be crushed if she says no. The fact that I haven't been pestering her all week should count in my favor too.

A day goes by and Hannah still hasn't returned the call. It could be she's flown home to spend some time with her folks. The thought of her seeing Dave again ought to bother me, but it doesn't. Her ideas about this guy are all wrong, and she'll realize that soon enough.

Another day passes with no word. I wouldn't have called if she hadn't encouraged me. This is all part of her narcissism: dump someone, then string them along.

Though I'd promised myself not to, I give her one last try. When she picks up, she's cold to me. "It's too soon," she says.

"I don't understand. If you didn't want me calling you, why didn't you just say so?" I ask.

She's quiet for awhile. "This is hard for me," she says.

I hang up.

II.

At the end of the winter, something entirely unexpected happens: I win a book prize. Not one of the more well-known or prestigious ones, but a prize nonetheless, and my first. I'd written the book years ago when I was living with a woman. She had money and ran her own cosmetics company, which kept her out of our rented house for many consecutive days and nights. We were an obnoxious couple. I did the cooking and gave her warm oil massages, and she offered business advice that later proved sound. I don't hear from her anymore.

Messages of congratulations come in all afternoon, including emails from some people I actively dislike. They sound bemused. Something odd must have happened behind the scenes. The judges couldn't agree on a winner, and so it fell to second place. Just to be a dick, I reply to everyone with a group email, thanking them collectively. I feel like a corporation.

I stare down at my penis in the shower. It's a prize-winning penis. My fingers are prize-winning fingers, my hands prize-winning hands. The phone rings in the kitchen--another well-wisher, I'm sure--and I let it go. For the first time in a long time, I almost feel handsome.

The message on the machine is from Claire. We've been in touch off and on over the winter, mostly to discuss her story. She takes her criticism well. Nothing I say about her writing surprises her. She already knows her humor sometimes falls flat. She knows she tends to solicit compassion for her luckless main characters by putting them in no-win situations. She knows all this.

"As my dad used to say--" Her father died four weeks ago. "'Don't let it go to your head.' Though I know you won't--you're a professional. I'm sorry if I sound like I'm rambling. I've been up all weekend surfing the web. That's how I found out about your news. It's not like you're on the front page of CNN. You're not *that* important. I mean, yeah, it's a big deal, but not as big as--" I smile and zip ahead to the end of the message.

The prize comes with an impressive if not life changing cash award, plus a ceremony where I'll be expected to do a reading. My older books are scheduled back into print, so I'll see my name in stores again. I remember when my old colleagues' books first came out, how we'd go into stores and move them out of the back shelves and up to the front tables. Guerilla publicity. We'd forward each other's good reviews in case the other person hadn't seen them that morning. We'd look out for our friends. We'd advise each other to fire our agents, hire our own managers, set up a website. We were twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one.

You want to know why I started writing. I was a small kid, not terribly confident. Teachers kept an eye on me, worried I'd get lost in the shuffle. I wore tight turtlenecks,

threadbare corduroys, brown sneakers. I slept with every stuffed animal on the planet. For fun I'd put on my disco-dancing record and act out stupid pantomimes in my room. A pencil could be a microphone; two could be drumsticks. My friends and I played with our bikes after school, slammed chocolate milk, were nice to our parents, made tents and forts and military command centers out of junk in the basement. I wasn't a reader, but books intrigued me. They had weight; you picked one up and knew you were holding something. The authors themselves lived and worked in outer space. I liked how a book felt with its covers closed, how you could press it between your hands and feel something pushing back, an energy.

The ceremony takes place at the cultural center where Claire and I attended the reading in December. I'm excited all afternoon. So many days go by and it's hard to say exactly what happened. Today something will happen.

My limo driver asks about the book, and I revert to plot summary mode. Spring passes out the car window. I'm a lucky man with thinning brown hair, five o'clock shadow, and a suit that doesn't try too hard. A Tic-Tac burns between my gums and the inside of my lower lip.

At the cultural center, a woman from the agency giving the prize brings me back to a waiting room. She informs me I'm not the only person receiving an award; there's a painter too, a non-fiction writer, a photographer, the founder of a dance troupe, and assorted others. She makes a big point of telling me this; it's like she doesn't want me getting a swelled head.

Time allows for me to read a short excerpt and take questions. I follow the photographer, who talks about being tortured while on assignment. He's brought along a slideshow of pictures of children with horrible facial burns, an old woman grinning and holding a machine gun, graffiti on a plaster wall decrying the United Nations. His achievement is so much more than mine.

Claire asks me a question from the audience. The question's long and convoluted and embarrasses everyone; it's almost *not* a question.

I talk about being twenty-four and looking back over all I'd written--it amounted to

about seven hundred pages worth of manuscript sitting on a shelf in my closet--and finding that all of it was bad, every page, every sentence. Not only was the execution bad--the vocabulary strained, the diction stilted--but the attempt as a whole added up to nothing. Here I'd spent hours each week sacrificing my free time to this and had little to show for it. How could I be so deluded? I'd always felt sorry for people like me, so wrapped up in their vain obsessions. Writing was how I defined myself. The rest of my life might've been a bore--I had a job unloading trucks that brought me three hundred fifty dollars every two weeks and no satisfaction--but at least my writing was important and might actually lead to something someday.

Oddly enough, I didn't give up. I had nothing else to live for, you see, so in the absence of a close relationship or a fulfilling career or any kind of spiritual belief, I returned to my bad habits. In time my prose style got a little better, eventually improving to good enough. At no time was I particularly impressed with myself or overvalued my abilities. I realized that when I wrote a sentence, it had a certain handsome vibrancy. I understood meter and rhythm, maybe because I'd played drums as a kid. I remember setting up the used drum kit I'd bought for one hundred fifty dollars and playing along in the basement to vinyl recordings of progressive rock bands from the seventies, songs that lasted twenty minutes and changed time signatures so you really had to count time and think about what you were doing.

After the ceremony there's a reception in the same room. I have nowhere to put my little certificate so I carry it around with me. I don't know if I'm allowed one free drink or as many as I want, but I'm not charged for the first glass. I'm greeted by people who've never heard of me but now want to read my books.

"How much prize money didja get?" Claire asks.

"Less than you think but more than I deserve," I say.

Claire hasn't had much time for writing since her father died. Mom's distraught, of course, and Claire and her sister take turns keeping her company on weekends. The mother's plans for her future sound manic and unrealistic. She wants to sell the house and buy a fabulous condo. Her answering the phone has changed from "Hello" to "Martin

residence.” Suddenly she’s got all these gay friends.

“Sounds like a story,” I observe. I’m feeling light-headed from all the praise and free booze.

“Not if *I* wrote it. I can’t go for five pages without introducing some horrible plot device. I *know* this about myself--I can feel it as it’s happening. I’ll say to myself, ‘I’m going to write a simple story about a feeling I once had, and I’m not going to worry about whether it’s funny or entertaining or if there’s a hook or it’s relatable or if the characters are likeable or if it’s commercial or timely or socially relevant or if *Jack’s* going to like it,’ and I’ll be fine for, as I say, maybe *five* pages, ten at the most, but then I’ll freeze up and think, ‘What am I doing? This is self-indulgent! Real writers don’t ramble on like this. Real writers know what they’re doing. They have *insights*. They tell people things they don’t already know.’ All I know is that smart people sometimes get shafted, and smart women in particular. . . and there’s nothing insightful about that. That’s not a story. That’s not even a single paragraph.”

I wait for her to answer her cell phone. I’ve always liked watching women talk on the phone. They incline their head and forget the world around them. Sometimes they look impatient or annoyed; the person calling should’ve been here an hour ago. Other times it’s a close friend or a lover. She tells him about her day. There are no highlights--everything is value-neutral: how her meeting went, what happened at lunch, what happened after lunch, how long she had to wait for the bus. She dials the number with nothing particular in mind. It’s as much to avoid *me* as anything else.

Claire hangs up, and I ask who called. I have a right to know everything about her.

She says, “I’ve kind of been seeing someone. It’s probably a mistake. We met a few weeks ago. He’s a computer guy, sweet. I’m not his be-all-end-all, but it gives me something to do.”

I’m disappointed. I’d had this fantasy of us spending more time together, taking in another film at California House. I actually think I’d be a good match for her, if only she’d get over the writing thing.

“Good for you,” I say.

“It’s nothing. It’ll be old news by the next time you see me. I know what’ll happen. I’ll swear to myself I won’t show him my stories but I won’t be able to help it, and he’ll be nice and say it’s wonderful, and I’ll stand over his shoulder while he’s reading--see, I *know* me, I know this is *exactly* what I’m going to do, I can almost pin it down to the date and time-”

“What’s his name?”

“Jeremy. And I’ll keep prodding him--I’ll say, ‘Do you like it? Do you think it’s funny? Did you get to the part where she thinks she sees Jimmy Carter getting out of a cab?’ and he’ll say yes, yes and more yes, but I’ll know what he’s *really* thinking. He’s thinking, ‘She’s not really serious about this, is she?’ and ‘How many times do I have to say I like it before I’m off the hook?’ See, that’s another one of my problems, I can’t let anyone pay me a simple compliment.”

I feel a warm hand on my neck. It’s Rhianne, of all people; I hadn’t noticed her from the stage. She introduces herself to Claire as “an old drinking buddy of Jack’s,” and when I ask why she’s here, she says, “I’m with a friend--a co-worker, really. She writes for the Arts page. I’m thinking of changing departments. I’m finding I’m just not suited for the business world. You can’t talk to these people about anything, and the hours are absolutely unforgiving. I want my nights and weekends back. And how do you know each other?” she asks, turning to Claire. “Are you a writer too?”

“We move in the same circles,” Claire says.

I check out Rhianne behind her back, telling myself not to let her get away this time--at least let’s exchange numbers and make a date for tomorrow night.

“You were the most interesting speaker, my dear,” she says, draping an arm on my shoulder. “The painter had his moments. He reminded me of Chagall.”

Claire corrects her pronunciation of *Chagall*, though both sound fine to me. “But you’re right,” Claire says, “about the influence. I don’t have an eye for contemporary art.”

“Oh, I don’t *either*. I don’t know what I’m talking about. I’m really a very silly person when it comes to art. I have a fondness for it, but no education. At least I admire him for trying something different. It wasn’t folk art, thank God.” This seems to have

something to do with the painter being African-American. Rhianne doesn't expect much out of black people, which is why the clever ones always impress her.

Claire looks puzzled. "No, it wasn't folk art," she says.

Rhianne still hasn't taken her arm from my shoulder. I like how she's laying claim to me. All her oppressively racist talk makes me burn from the waist down. I want to teach her a hard lesson, then watch her try to laugh it off.

Claire wanders off to meet up with Jeremy, and Rhianne says, "I can't see the two of you as friends."

"She's hard to shake," I admit, and immediately feel bad for saying it.

"I'm sure she's a nice person. I could tell she didn't like me, though. It's just a sense I have about other women. They think I'm too forward when I'm really just being friendly. That's the journalist in me, too--I'm not afraid to ask questions. What can I say, I have a big mouth. My mother calls me 'a one-woman press conference.'" Again the finger-quotes. "I think she's attracted to you."

"Highly unlikely," I say, but I'm pleased Rhianne thinks so.

"A woman knows these things. The only woman she doesn't have a clue about is herself. Take you, for instance. There I was, thinking I'd met an intelligent, successful, good-looking man who seemed interested in *me*, of all things--"

"Yes, well, I'm sorry about that, and I should probably explain myself. But not here."

I ask her to wait while I make the rounds, thanking my hosts and saying goodbye to the other prize recipients. Rhianne spends this time chatting with the bartender, some thick-necked stud with razor burn and a tuxedo vest. She looks like she's talking his ear off; maybe she's flirting with him too.

Soon we're back at the same coffee bar where we had our first date. Rhianne observes the dangerous steps heading down. "I am determined not to make a fool of myself again," she says.

I decide to risk honesty and tell her everything about Hannah, including the parts that make me look bad. Rhianne's impression of Hannah is less forgiving than mine. I'm

not convinced Hannah is truly in control of her actions. I think she has the same desire for happiness as all of us, but something sabotages her plans. Maybe it's the monster inside her--a disease or chemical imbalance or just how she's chosen to respond to the shitty circumstances of her life. Whatever it is, at least it's not my problem anymore.

Rhianne and I are kissing at our table. Her tongue is warm and thin and doesn't know where it wants to be inside my mouth. When we break away, she takes a delighted look around the room to see if anyone's watching. No one is; the cafe is crowded and twilit and most people's backs are to us.

"You know, I've been thinking about you," she says. "I hated to see you run off like that, and just when we were getting to know each other."

"I'm sorry," I say, nuzzling her. It's nearly eleven and my head's swimming with caffeine. I realize I can't lead this woman on twice, so I decide to let pleasure be my guide and worry about the consequences later.

"I might forgive you, if you're very, very good," she says, her breath hot in my ear. It's no wonder people wind up fucking in public bathrooms, alleyways, backs of cabs. I feel like the past six months never happened: no Hannah, no long skirts and cowboy boots, no thinking I was in love.

In the cab to her building, she recklessly announces to the driver, "Do you see this man sitting next to me? This handsome gentleman? He's going to take me upstairs and put me to bed."

"None of that talk in my cab," the driver scolds. He's gray and elderly and seems too old for working the late shift.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a single Trojan condom. "I came prepared this time," she laughs.

Ten minutes later I'm lying on her bed with my shoes off, waiting for her to come out of the bathroom. The place is largely unchanged, except some of the clothes have been picked up and the sandwich smell is gone. She takes a long time fixing herself up; zippers zip and unzip, drawers open and close, shoes slide off and on. Needing a distraction, I glance over the photos on her nightstand. Rhianne's mother has bad teeth but everything

else looks expensive: peacock eye shadow, tight apple cheeks, high-piled hair. Dad doesn't smile for cameras, apparently.

From the bathroom, she asks, "Jack, be a dear and play those messages on the machine. I've had my cell phone off all night. Let me know if anything sounds important. I can't be bothered with business unless it's an emergency."

I play through her messages. The first two are from two different female friends who both sound like they're out drinking--those can wait--then a flurry of messages all in the same cracked and agitated voice. It's Rhianne's mother: something's wrong with Simon. Simon's at the hospital; now he's in surgery. Things don't look good for Simon. Simon has a ruptured appendix. Is Simon the father? No, it can't be--she would've said, "Your father's sick." So this might just be a cousin or even a family friend. It might be the mom's friend but not Rhianne's. Maybe he's no one Rhianne cares about at all, or even likes. This might be good news. Maybe the mom's crazy and makes deranged calls like this every night.

The messages end and Rhianne struts out of the bathroom in a gauzy pink teddy, white fishnet stockings and spike heels. Her cosmetics are done-up and her dark nipples glow through the teddy; I see her belly-button, her smooth, concave stomach, the finger of hair between her legs.

"Any messages?" she asks, kissing my ear, lapping, biting my earlobe. My eyes fix on the pictures by the bed.

Her kisses slow as she catches my expression, and we play back the messages. She looks silly in her costume, not sexy anymore, and by the fourth message she's clip-clopping off to the bathroom, returning in sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"I'll come to the hospital with you," I say.

She flatly refuses. "My mother sounds frantic enough. That will send her over the edge. Simon is her life. Only her sons matter to her. Sonya and I are afterthoughts."

Downstairs she asks Calvin at the front desk to phone a cab. It arrives in a hurry, visible from blocks away speeding up the empty street.

"Should I call you tomorrow?" I ask, opening the door for her.

“I’ll call you. . . but it might not be tomorrow,” she says. Then she ducks into the cab without a kiss or a wave goodbye.

When I get home, there’s a single message on the machine. It’s Claire, saying, “Jack, I’ll tell you this only once--*do not get involved with that woman*. And if she’s already there, throw her out.”

Rhianne doesn’t call the next morning, and I don’t have her number. I don’t know her last name either; it’s long and starts with a ‘P.’ I want to say ‘Parawindishar’ but that’s not it. She doesn’t have a byline in today’s paper; the Business section is all stock forecasts by guys in crew cuts. These are Rhianne’s co-workers, her peers. I wonder if she’s popular at work, if the men think she’s attractive or just a loudmouth.

My work associate phones to ask how the reading went. “Don’t forget to enjoy it,” he advises. “Success is so fleeting. Go buy yourself an expensive piece of home electronics. Buy a dog. Go out for sushi. Go out for both lunch *and* dinner. Celebrate. Buy some pot. When was the last time you smoked a joint? Years I’ll bet. Go to the park. Better idea: go to the zoo and throw popcorn at the animals. It’s your day. Live like a king. Be rude to a cab driver. Take a trip down to Bloomingdale’s and leave the necktie displays a mess. Pull a fire alarm somewhere. Walk up to a woman on the street and ask her to go to bed with you. I bet she’ll do it. Learn a magic trick. See if you can take your own head off and put it back on.”

That night I heed his advice and treat myself to a pricey sushi dinner. Simon must still be in the hospital, or else Rhianne’s had second thoughts. Maybe we’ll get another chance or maybe we won’t. It’s almost become boring to me.

At the Japanese restaurant I order nigiri, spicy tuna roll and a side of edamame. I eat entirely more than I should. Japanese music plings and plangs in the background. I want to gorge myself to the bursting point.

A woman leaves a message while I’m out. She knows me; we were close for a time. I used to hear her voice every day. She says:

“Hi, Jack. You’re probably surprised it’s me. It sounds like you’re not home--shoot, I thought I might catch you. Anyway, I read about your award and wanted to say

congratulations. You deserve it. I've got plenty of news if you ever feel like talking."

I don't call back right away. First I get a beer from the fridge and drink it down, then take a hot bath. When I get out, I play the message a few more times. Hannah sounds older, almost haggard. She's been sitting in a dark room drinking white wine and thinking about all the bad things she's done to people. I can see it all so clearly. The lights in her apartment are off and there's no music. The TV's sound is low. It's one of those programs where couples look at houses for sale and decide between three of them. Hannah doesn't sleep much anymore, and never in bed, always on the chair or sofa in front of the TV. She lives in her bathrobe: red and white vertical stripes, two big pockets where she keeps her cordless phone, tissues and some little pills she shouldn't be taking with wine. If she does anything with her time, it's mostly read. She only chooses books she's read before: books that demonstrate, whether directly or indirectly in the form of fiction, what a bad person she is. She talks to her mother six times a day, rarely goes outside, and has her meals delivered to her.

I take another bath at four in the morning. Maybe I'm becoming nocturnal.

Another day passes and still no word from Rhianne. I've played Hannah's message about two dozen times. I know all the nuances, the feints and hesitations.

I ask Claire what to do. Of course she wants to know what happened with Rhianne, but I don't tell her much. I'm the only one who should know everything about everyone.

She asks on the phone, "Don't you find it odd she's just calling now? Look, she's obviously disturbed and a few months aren't going to change that. Don't get back together thinking she's not going to screw you again. She's a classic predator--oh my God, with that sweet little face of hers."

I get off the phone and quickly dial Hannah's number. She sounds groggy when she picks up. Our conversation is tense and pleasant, and we agree to meet in two hours at the diner where we had our first date.

"I think it's too late for breakfast," I say.

I have some time to kill, so I put on the Joni Mitchell album and open a can of

seltzer water. The music turns my apartment into the inside of a guitar. The walls are curved, the space dark and wood-scented, and strings hum and strum over my head. I hear the voice as if it's Claire's: nervy, always commenting, trying to tell me something about women.

Just as I'm leaving, the phone rings and it's Rhianne. I let the machine get it. Her brother is finally out of intensive care. It's been a scary few days, but he's going to be okay. She's sorry she hasn't had time to call and hopes I haven't forgotten her. Then she leaves her number. I can't hear what she's saying--she's not speaking clearly. The last number is either an eight or a five or a nine. The whole message is garbled. She'll just have to call back.

I'm late reaching the diner, but Hannah is five minutes later. We kiss and I pat her back, feeling her angular shoulder blades through her blouse. It must be hot wearing all those clothes in the spring and summertime. I've never known her except in cold weather.

We sit in a booth with a jukebox mounted to the wall. Narrow laminated menus stay with the table. Hannah orders what she wants, and I get a Coke.

"How's Dave?" I ask.

"We broke up. I went back home two months ago, and he wasn't very nice to me. He drank, did a lot of drugs. Then he hit me a few times, and when my brother found out he came over with a gun."

"You were living together?"

She nods. I don't feel especially sorry for her. She'd have to be stupid not to see this coming. "I'm glad you weren't hurt," I say, though I'm not sure I mean it. I'm still basically wary of her.

When I ask why she called, she says, "I don't want to hurt people anymore, Jack. You probably think I'm horrible. You probably think I planned all this, but I didn't. You just had the bad luck to meet me. I've hurt a lot of guys. It's something I'm working on. Mama says I use men to punish myself. Do you think I do that? I don't think so. I just want to make everyone happy, but it gets twisted around, and *you* get hurt, and Dave--"

"Dave is the one who hit you," I remind her.

“*Before* he hit me, I mean. And that was just the one time.”

“You said it happened a few times.”

She fidgets with the sugar dispenser. I can see this is hard for her. I want to go back to spending our nights together and walking around her dark apartment in the nude.

An hour later we’re strolling back to her place. It’s early evening and still light out. I haven’t seen this particular quality of light on her face before. She looks thoughtful and relaxed.

“In case you’re wondering, my knee’s not any better,” she says. She means it as a joke, though I don’t see what’s funny.

We turn onto her street, which is haunted by her comings and goings. Around the side of her brownstone her upstairs neighbor drags a garbage can out to the curb and goes back in without saying hello. He doesn’t remember me, although we’ve spoken. I suppose it’s been awhile. Maybe I’m not that memorable.

We step inside where the shades in Hannah’s kitchen and living room are drawn. The air’s a brown haze, and I switch on a light in the hallway. A recycler by the front door holds empty tins, spaghetti sauce jars, and four yellow-green wine bottles. I never thought I’d see this place again. Some of her plants have died or found a new home; at any rate they’re not here anymore.

I grab her for a kiss, mashing her lips against mine. Her arms reach around my much bigger body. I want to suck her breath away. We stumble and knock some books off the kitchen counter. The kissing is more like tearing or biting or chewing. I feel like I’m having my way with a bad dream.

“You hurt me, Hannah,” I say. It’s a loving whisper in her ear.

The heaviness leaves the room, and we pick our way through the dim apartment to her windowless bedroom. Her closet door is wide open with clothes and boots spilling out. Our quick, awkward and unsatisfying sex feels like a formality, and when it’s over she doesn’t talk for awhile. She doesn’t seem angry or upset; it’s more like she’s collecting herself.

Around midnight, after a bottle of wine and some TV, I ask if it’s possible for us to

have a normal relationship.

“What do you mean?” she asks. Her body draped around mine tells me she likes me, but her eyes are on the TV set.

“You know, where we have more good times than bad. . . that’s if we’re really getting back together.”

“I don’t know why you’d want me,” she says. She’s been like this more or less all night, waiting for a punishment that never comes.

“We could go on a trip,” I say. “Rent a car and drive cross country. Have we ever driven together? Not counting taxis, I mean. I don’t think so. I don’t think you’ve ever seen me drive. I know I’ve never seen you do it.”

We wind up making love again, and this time it’s looser and sad and free. Our last words before falling asleep are “I love you,” but the listening silence that follows keeps insisting otherwise.

The next morning she’s bubbling over with plans for the day.

“Let’s get breakfast. We’ll go to our regular place. I missed that, Jack, our little breakfasts together,” she says.

“You always had my number. You could’ve called me,” I say pleasantly. We’re past all the guilty feelings and confessions. Today we can just enjoy being together.

“You know what I’d really like? Let’s find a newsstand and buy a big stack of newspapers and magazines and spend the day reading in bed. You can ravish me whenever you’d like,” she says in a mock-theatrical voice. I’m pleased, but part of me still wonders if this isn’t just the flip side of her depression.

At breakfast she asks if I went on any dates while we were apart, and I say no, not really. I don’t know if Rhianne is worth mentioning.

“I had one,” she reveals without my asking. “I don’t know why I even said yes. He was an okay guy, but kind of slow. You know how some people aren’t that sharp? All he wanted to talk about was sports. . . and his truck. Oh, I heard all about the truck. Never *saw* the truck, but I could probably draw you a picture.”

“So what happened to him?” I ask. I assume he called two or three times and got

the idea.

“I told him my mother was sick and I had to leave for a few months. Terrible, I know. I’m bad at letting people go. I’m never going to see this person again anyway. He lives way out in the boonies.”

We’re so on fire for each other that we skip the newsstand after breakfast and run holding hands back to her apartment, scattering pedestrians out of our way. We’re the only people in love in the whole world. There’s a camera in the sky taking pictures of the city and it’s centered on us.

Two days pass before I return to do a little work at my place. Hannah’s sad as she sees me off at the door.

“Hurry home. You don’t want me to change into a pumpkin,” she says.

“Hannah, dear,” I point out, “the *carriage* changed into a pumpkin, not Cinderella. And no one’s changing into anything.”

My sterile apartment means nothing to me now. That bed, that Keurig single-cup coffee maker, could belong to anyone. All afternoon I blast Joni Mitchell as I chip away at my emails. I don’t miss my writing. It’s a trial I’ve put behind me.

Just when I’m ready to knock off for the day, the phone rings and I absently pick it up. It’s Rhianne.

“Look, Jack, if you’re not interested in me anymore, just say so. I’m not used to men not returning my phone calls.”

She certainly deserves an explanation, so I say, “You’re right, I should’ve been more upfront. The truth is I wound up running into an old girlfriend and we decided to give it another try.”

“I see. And was this before or after you and I. . .?”

“Oh, after. No overlap whatsoever. But I’m sorry if I’ve done anything to disrespect you or hurt your feelings. I had no way of knowing. Life doesn’t come with a instruction manual, I guess, though that’s no excuse. I should’ve at least called, obviously, and I apologize.”

She hangs up.

I can't understand why she's this angry. She and I hardly know each other, whereas I have a real relationship with Hannah. We share a history together, and Rhianne and I don't, really, just a handful of encounters and dates that didn't work out.

I mention Rhianne to Hannah that night. A relationship must be built on honesty, so I skip only the graphic details. Hannah's quiet; if she's upset she doesn't let it show.

"How long did you date her?" she asks--again, not upset, just curious, making conversation.

"Oh, we never actually *dated*. We went out on a couple of bad dates and that was it. I didn't even really like her, to be honest. She was a terrible racist--black people this, black people that. I don't know why I bothered. The second time was just because I felt depressed about you and I breaking up. I was in an emotionally vulnerable state. It had nothing to do with her."

Hannah has her own confession. The man with the truck has been calling her again. They actually went on two dates, not one. The second date wasn't any better than the first, but she felt she couldn't say no. He was a nice enough guy--no spark, but you can't have everything. And what's a spark? Sparks don't exist, just other people who happen to be available, other singles in the mix. She's told this guy, whose name is Carl--already he's an asshole so far as I'm concerned--all about us, but he still wants to be friends, whatever that means.

"You can be friends with him," I say, which is big of me.

"I don't want to lead him on. We're *not* friends. And besides, he shouldn't waste his time. He should be going out with other girls, girls who *need* a boyfriend. I don't need a boyfriend--I have you. That's his problem, he gets fixated. I'm sure there are plenty of girls who'd be interested. He's really a sweet guy. I mean, he's not smart, not like you. He's more simple-like, but that can be good too. I think most girls just want a man who's decent and gentle and doesn't think too much of himself, and he's all those things. What he really needs is self-confidence."

This sounds like more than two dates, but I don't say anything. Hannah quickly loses interest in talking about Carl. Her lips curl up into a smile, and soon she's giving me

dynamite head on the sofa.

Carl's name comes up more frequently over the next days. The story evolves; what we're calling "the truth" leaks out in cautious, neatly parceled admissions, usually minutes after we've had sex. Two dates turn into several. There was a period of time when they saw each other once or twice a week for coffee or a quick sandwich, always informally and during the daylight hours.

"No breakfast?" I ask, and she slugs my arm. She thinks I'm kidding.

"Carl is a very lonely person. He's never had a serious girlfriend before. Part of it's his personality--he wants everyone to like him, but he goes too far. People think he's creepy."

"Do you think he's creepy?"

"I think he's sad. I feel sorry for him. Why are you looking at me like that?" I don't know what she's talking about.

When the whole story finally comes out, I'm annoyed but not surprised. Hannah's started so many sentences with "The truth is. . ." that I've come to expect more lies to follow, lies and partial revelations.

"It was only once," she says. We're sitting up in bed; I've put my pants back on and she's reached for a T-shirt. "He kept begging and begging me and finally wore me down. I told him, 'If we do this, you have to leave me alone. We can't still be friends.'"

"Why not? He sounds like a decent guy. Plus, don't forget about the truck. I don't have a truck. I don't even have a car."

"You're angry," she says, and that's as far as we get that night.

Between all this, we struggle and press on. We eat, we fuck, sometimes we take a walk around the park. It's possible to ignore what's happening for hours at a time, but always it comes back, often late at night after more wine and more sex. The truth is, Hannah's been sleeping with this guy off and on for several months. Truth is, he still thinks they're dating even though she hasn't seen him in weeks. Actually, that's not quite true. The truth is, they spoke a day ago while I was at work. On the phone? No, in person. They met for coffee and she told him we were back together. That's it; that's the

whole truth and nothing but the truth except for this one part. The technical truth is they're still dating, if by "dating" you mean they haven't officially broken up. Truth is, she has real feelings for Carl. In fact--and this truly is the whole unadulterated truth with absolutely nothing left out (and I have to admire the courage it takes her to be this honest with me)--she might even be in love with him a little. With both of us, that is--with me more than him, of course, though not "more" in the sense of "more" but in the sense of something meaningless she says because she's crazy and she thinks I'm stupid.

I reach a decision about Hannah. What I realize is--irrespective of her physical problems, issues with men and the other obstacles she's had to overcome--Hannah is simply a bad person. I'm not left with much insight into her character. The writer in me doesn't like the idea of a person's essential badness. It doesn't make good dramatic sense. There ought to be reasons, extenuating circumstances. In theory we should be able to sympathize with anyone. But maybe this is the lie of fiction. Bad people exist all the time. As tempting as it is to consider the root causes, in some cases these explanations don't suffice and you're left with the person's actions, which are amoral, self-serving, and cowardly.

At least that's what *I* think.

We're arguing in her living room. I'm a terrible lover, she says, an absolute nothing in bed. She never had a real orgasm the whole time we were together. All that moaning and carrying on was just playing to the rafters.

"Not only that. . ." she says, but breaks off.

"What? Hey, you can tell me. I'm not going to slice my wrists."

"I don't know how to say this, Jack. It's just because you should know these things. You'll be out with some other girl and you'll want to know."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"It's this *smell*. You're not going to like this, and I probably shouldn't say anything. At first I thought it was my imagination, or that it might be *me*, but it isn't me, it's you."

"What kind of smell? I don't smell anything."

“I’m sure you’re used to it. No one’s probably told you before. I shouldn’t even be telling you now, but you’ll be out with-”

“-some other girl, yes, you said.” I lift my shirt up to my nose. “Do you smell it now?”

She raises a hand as if to say, “I’ll pass.”

“Is it my breath. . . what? I would like to know in *detail* what you’re talking about. No one else has ever said anything about a smell. They must be lying then. That must make you the first honest person I’ve ever met.”

She’s crying and I love it. I want to say something so nasty and true that it ruins the rest of her life, but nothing comes to mind. All I can think about is this alleged smell. I’m sure Rhianne wouldn’t have brought a man back to her place if she thought he smelled. Rhianne *liked* my smell. She couldn’t keep her hands off me.

Before I leave, Hannah says, “I really wanted to like you, Jack. I just never did. Can you do me a favor? This is going to sound weird. Can you stay away from my block? There’s not much down here anyway. I know you liked that Spanish restaurant, but there must be one closer to you. You don’t mind?”

I say nothing, which means no.

What follows might be described as *easily summarized action*. I might tell a student of writing to skim over some of these details, as we’ve seen a lot of them before. We’ve already seen this man Jack wander down the steps in stooped rejection. We’ve read about the nights of drinking and hoping for a phone call, resenting when the call doesn’t come. We’ve watched his beard grow from a thought of sandpaper to something you’d avoid if it came at you on the street. We’ve monitored the decline and subsequent rebound. What’s different this time is the man is a few months older. He’s starting not to care very much. I might tell Claire, whose writing gets bogged down with reiterative action (as opposed to accumulative) to fast forward through all this. It’s time to either change directions or let the matter rest.

So: it’s two months later. Summertime. I don’t know what’s happened to Hannah. I haven’t run into her, though I no longer avoid her neighborhood. The scruffy beard is

gone, and I've switched brands of deodorant. This new brand says it contains "the maximum level of active ingredient" to control wetness and odor. It costs a dollar more than my old brand and seems to have the same effect.

You want some weather? Sunny skies, highs in the low seventies. Baseball's keeping the subways busy, and the blimp's come out of winter storage. (I wonder if they deflate it and fold it up like a flag? No, I know they don't.) The windows in my apartment don't open, thank God, otherwise I would've jumped by now. (*Jack* would've jumped, I should say--I need to start taking the more objective view.)

Jack? Jack then. He's always been Jack. Taller. . . and *I've* got a full head of hair. Jack and I are quite different, in fact. My books certainly haven't won any prizes. Some people will think they recognize themselves, and more often than not they'll be wrong. Surely you don't need a *writer* to tell you you've been watching shadows all this time?

Jack gets a call from Claire a few days before the 4th of July. The school where she keeps records is on summer break, and it's fast approaching her busiest time. New freshmen will need their medical histories processed and their room preferences sent over to Student Housing. She's taking a week off before the madness begins.

Three hours of sleep a night just ain't cutting it anymore, so she's finally decided to give the sleep clinic a try. The building's in a creepy neighborhood and she asks Jack to come along.

"Why me? What happened to. . .?" He can't remember the name of Claire's boyfriend--Dave? Carl? No, those were Hannah's.

"Jeremy. Oh, we stopped dating ages ago."

"Ages? Claire, ages haven't *happened*."

"Five weeks then. I can even tell you the days if you're interested. Where's my calendar...?" He waits on the phone while she digs through her stuff. "Here we go--thirty-six days. But I don't want to talk about that right now, I just want to know you'll come and stay as long as you can. I'm scared of doctors and their white sterile rooms. They're going to hook me up to a machine and I won't be able to sleep anyway, but I have to try something. You'll be shocked when you see me. I look eighty years old!"

He arrives at her place three nights later. She's got an overnight bag packed with the zipper open and a women's magazine sticking out. "I'll just sleep in these," she says, referring to her gray sweatshirt and bulky blue sweatpants. "Do you want a drink before we go? I'm not supposed to have one, but that doesn't mean you can't."

"I'm fine," he says. They have a cab waiting; the sleep clinic is inland from the bay, as far out of the city as he's been in some time.

"I guess I'm just looking for reasons to put off going. Should I bring my journal?" she asks.

He suspects the fewer distractions the better. "I'd leave it," he says.

The sleep clinic resembles a parking garage on the outside, and Jack and Claire have to be buzzed in twice, both at the front door and at a second entrance marked Patients and Families Only.

"This isn't making me any less nervous," she observes. A long corridor leads to a receptionist's station where the professionally careful and polite woman at the half-circle desk asks, "Is this your husband?"

"He's my friend. He's here for moral support. I'm not the marrying kind," Claire says.

The woman then brings them back to an observation room. There's a bed--a regular bed, not a hospital bed, and some homey if generic furnishings. The doctor on duty is rude to Jack; having him there shows distrust on Claire's part.

"You won't be able to stay once we get her settled," he says.

Jack understands. He'd prefer not to be there at all.

Claire sits on the bed with her shoes off. She has her women's magazine out and looks ready to sleep.

"What if I take off my clothes in the middle of the night and start sleepwalking?" she asks.

"That would be useful information to know," the doctor says.

Claire and Jack are left alone while the doctor attends to other business. "What do you think that is?" she asks, pointing at a steel and wire contraption by the bed.

Jack makes up something about a heart monitor. She's full of questions he can't answer: where do the wires attach to her body? What if she has to roll over or get up to use the bathroom? Jack can only assure her the doctor will explain everything.

When minutes go by and the doctor hasn't returned, Jack says, "Let's look at your magazine. I didn't know you read *Cosmo*."

She flips through pages of fashion photographs. "Sadly I do. I wonder if the women who write for these things think of themselves as writers too. I mean, obviously they are--they write words that wind up in print, which is more than I can say for myself. But do they consider themselves writers or just people who work for a magazine?"

"This is why you can't sleep, because you think too much," Jack says.

The doctor comes back with some questions. "Describe what happens when you try to sleep," he prompts.

"My mind goes haywire. I can't switch it off," Claire says.

Jack takes a seat in a corner of the room as the doctor asks, "What do you think about?"

"How I'll never be happy--never meet a man, never have children. How I'll basically die alone and without any friends. You want me to go on? I think about my father, my mom and what's going to happen to her. All sorts of cheery subjects. Life, death, the price of eggs."

Jack's face burns. This is the first he's really heard any of this.

The doctor asks, "Have you ever spoken to a therapist?"

She snorts and bobs her head. "*Long* time ago. . . another life time."

"Any physical symptoms--night sweats? Increased heart rate? Do you have trouble breathing? Numb extremities?"

She nods, but it's hard to tell if she's saying yes or no. "You're going to tell me it's all in my head, right?" she says.

"We won't know anything until we've got some data," he says. Then he asks Jack to leave while they hook her up to the sleep monitors.

Jack waits in the corridor, which is completely empty and silent. He senses other

patients behind the walls, a pervading, enforced hush. Around the corner a drinking fountain clunks on and off.

Back in the room, the doctor gives them some time alone. Wires run from the machine and down her sweatshirt; she's also got one attached to either temple.

"I hope you'll be able to sleep," Jack says. Even with the door closed it's hard to forget the rest of the building, the institutional corridors, the dicey neighborhood. He'll take a cab back into the city and grab a late dinner. Mexican. He wants to drink golden margaritas and stuff himself with nachos.

"Tell me a bedtime story," she says. He thinks she's joking but she means it. "Come on, you can come up with something on the fly."

"A story?" he says weakly. Claire has her eyes closed, already ready to listen. Pulling up a chair, he sits and thinks. He's not used to working like this. "Okay. . . there's this guy--"

"What's his name?"

"Toby. What else do you want to know? He's thirty-seven, not married, lives in California."

"All alone?"

"Yep--no, he's got a daughter."

"What happened to the mom?"

"They're divorced. *Separated*--there's still a chance they might get back together. She had an affair with a student--so I guess that means she's a teacher--and she's decided to live on her own for awhile."

"With the student?"

"No. The student's out of the picture. It's more like she's feeling guilty and wants to collect her thoughts."

By the time the doctor returns they've got some of the plot worked out. The narrative's in third person, but from the husband's point-of-view. Claire decides the story's mostly about the daughter, so it makes sense to locate the point-of-view with a character whose main duty it is to observe. Third person also provides a certain amount of

distance from the husband's lack of objectivity.

Now you're thinking like a writer, Jack says, and pats her shoulder.

The doctor holds the door open for Jack, who takes a last glance before leaving. She looks sick lying there in bed.

The phone rings at seven in the morning, and it's Claire. She's already in a cab--they let her go early.

"How was it?" he asks.

"Disappointing. I might've slept two hours. I kept thinking about our story, and then I had to go to the bathroom, and someone started talking in the hallway. . . I don't think I'm ever going to lick this."

"You've just got to give it time," he says.

"It's not like I'm not tired. I'm exhausted. I can barely keep my eyes open. I might take a pill when I get home. I just want to be able to sleep like a normal person so I can have the energy for the rest of my life. That's not a lot to ask, is it?"

Jack is silent. He doesn't know when she suddenly got to be his responsibility.

"These appointments are costing a lot of money, by the way. The doctor wants me to come back for a follow-up next week. It's all a scam. Obviously this is my permanent problem and there's nothing anyone can do about it. I'm going to go home, take a shower and then put my head down. I'll call you when I get up--that's if you're not sick of me. You're not sick of me yet, are you?" she asks, and he says, "Not yet."

She doesn't call back later that day, and he doesn't call either. He doesn't want to wake her up. That night he goes downtown to watch the fireworks, then stops off at a bar with its doors and windows open to the warm summer night and drinks one gin and tonic after another out of small plastic cups. He falls into chatting with a number of pretty blondes dressed like college kids on break, floppy hats, shorts and sandals. He's the oldest, though not by much. It feels good to know he looks like someone they'd want to talk to. Because he's flush, he buys them all a drink, and they wind up down the street dancing in some fog-filled club.

Another day goes by; one of the women from the night before wrote down her

number but he hasn't decided to call. It might hurt Claire's feelings if he did. He wonders why, through all this, they never tried dating. It could be that she's saving him for something else.

He leaves his apartment and strolls around the city for an hour. Heat-haze makes the buildings vibrate. The sun is getting to him; he feels like he's gliding.

A long message from Claire waits for him at home. "Hi, Jack. I was hoping to catch you. I guess you're out. No news here, just looking for something to do, someone to talk to. Did you watch the fireworks? I was up all night--I was going to call but I figured you were either out or asleep, lucky guy. You have no idea how lucky you are, Jack, just to be able to close your eyes and drift off. I would give anything for that. It's been so long. Sometimes I think I see things, shapes and colors. The furniture hasn't started talking to me yet, thank God, but that's next. That's right. . . around. . . the corner: boy! When the furniture starts talking to me, that's when I'll know I've finally lost it. 'Hello Claire Martin, you're a nice person!' Or, no--do it with a French accent: 'Bonjour Mademoiselle Claire. Vood you like dis tasty cookie?' 'O, yes I vood, tank you very much.' Me and my funny voices. I wonder if chairs can eat? I mean, I know they can't *eat*. But if they had a mouth they could do all sorts of things. They wouldn't just have a mouth for no reason. You know? I mean that doesn't make sense, now that we're talking about not making any sense. Now that we're finally on that topic. What kind of asshole thinks that? *That's* a person who's just crazy fucked-up. Anyway I thought I'd give you a call because I'm tired of not sleeping and I'm tired of being here by myself. . . and I know I'm rambling and I probably sound like a weirdo. It's just that I'm so, so tired. But you don't have to call back. I know you're busy. You've got a busy life. Just call sometime. It doesn't have to be today."

The author takes a long soak in the bath, puts on clean pajamas, pours a glass of tonic with a wedge of lime. He powers up the computer, writes a page and saves the file before answering his emails. He pours a second drink. As an afterthought he adds a splash of vodka and doesn't stir it in. He watches the news, fixes dinner, switches the TV over to a home decorating show and eats his microwave beef merlot in front of the set. He

sits on the toilet with a copy of *The New Yorker*. He tries thinking of a funny caption for this week's cartoon contest. He can't think of anything. Finally he comes up with "You must have me confused with someone else." He flushes, stands at the mirror, rubs his chin, decides to put off shaving until tomorrow. He considers writing another page but finds the TV more enticing. He sits through a bad movie about stock cars, then mutes the set and does twenty pushups. He lies face flat on the floor, feeling his heart beat and imagining the arteries in his neck as congested pipelines. A woman in a hardhat leads a guided tour, pointing overhead; the people on the tour represent the author's high cholesterol. He staggers up and cracks open a beer. He unmutes the set and switches over to CNN. As he watches he tells himself he's going to have a productive day tomorrow. He'll work out, write five pages, drop a line to someone he's lost touch with. He wonders if "unmute" is a word. He turns off the TV and sits in the dark for some hazy length of time. He listens for a noise from next door, a sign he's not the only one in the building. He's never been on any of the other floors, just the lobby level and this one. He wonders if he's missing something. He has one more beer and falls into bed. He thinks about going on a vacation somewhere, maybe a cross-country train trip. He ponders his age and considers what percentage of his life he's already lived. Fifty-two sounds about right. If life were a year, what month would this be, what season, what day? Perhaps today, the fifth of July. January 1st doesn't feel so very long ago. But you never know how much time you've been given. It might be October 2nd, or November 4th, or even New Year's Eve already. Here's his Swedish disposition again, putting its morbid spin on everything.

It's a week later. Her mother's there, and her sister; he's meeting them for the first time. The mom smokes cigarettes, which keeps her rail thin. She goes out frequently and returns seven minutes later, slipping the cigarettes into her bag. It's almost in bad taste, but Jack keeps this thought to himself. Sister's a huge, smothering presence, all breasts and shoulders.

"I've never seen any of Claire's writing," the mom admits, then asks, "What's it like?"

He wants to tell the truth--that it's uneven, technically a mess, overripe with jokes

and pithy expressions--but instead he says, "It's funny. Smart and funny."

"Just like Claire herself," the sister adds, and they all laugh sadly.

He's never seen Claire's eyelids before. Her dress is some Laura Ashley number. He stands over her, considering the irony of sleeping pills. As a group, Claire's friends and family seem like heavy drinkers. The men are wiry academics and the women inclined to stare into space. Some conversations have to do with Claire and others don't; all in all they're handling this rather well. They're the kind of people who cry in private--in bathtubs, sitting in traffic, stopping on the stairs while bringing up wine from the basement. Most remember Claire's dry humor and the crazy men she dated. No one's surprised, no one's saying, "But she seemed so happy!" Jack guesses the median age to be forty-five, which makes him feel young.

The mother gets tired at the end of the night; she keeps taking fresh cups of coffee and holding them until they get cold. "Claire was restless as a little girl--and hard on herself. We never scolded her about anything. Didn't need to. We'd say, 'But Claire, an A- is a *good* grade.' I hope she didn't think we weren't happy with her, because we were. No one could have asked for a nicer, sweeter, more self-sacrificing, under-confident, insecure, pessimistic, nervous, neurotic, anxious all the time--"

Sister tightens a hand around her. "Ma," she says.

Jack goes over to be closer to Claire. He wishes he could sneak her into the next room and have a bitch session about the other guests. The Laura Ashley dress, with its lace collar and floral print, doesn't do her justice. It doesn't fit her well, and it's meek and conventional in ways that don't suit her. Vaguely he wonders if she's wearing shoes.

The sister phones two days later to ask if he'd like some of Claire's books. The thought makes him uncomfortable but he feels he can't say no. He meets her at Claire's apartment; the door is propped open with a garbage bag, and a pail and a wet mop stand out in the hall.

The sister makes him a cup of coffee, and they sit at the kitchen table. "Where's the cat?" he asks.

"I've got it. Not that I need another."

Everything this woman says sounds heartless, though he realizes this isn't her fault. Good for her if she's got the wherewithal to clean up, throw things out.

A stack of papers in the bedroom intrigues him, so he takes a look. The sister goes back to wiping out the refrigerator. The bedroom is mostly empty except for the mattress, which stands on its end leaning against the wall. A box of paperbacks reveals no treasures. The psychedelic Marquez cover brings back a memory, though not of anything specific, just a general sense of Claire.

"Claire was a big reader in college. I didn't know about her sleep problem. That was news to me. Except for the smoking, I always thought of her as a health nut. But she had a way of keeping things to herself," the sister calls from the kitchen, kneeling at the refrigerator and scrubbing at the bottom shelf.

The papers include Claire's stories plus two hundred pages of a novel. Some of the pages have his notes on them; he dimly remembers writing "You just said this on page seven," and "I don't see where this sidebar is leading." He wishes he took the time to write more encouragement, but that would've meant lying to her. As a fellow human being, then, and not just a half-competent story writer with some publishing success, he could've offered more praise, could've said "I like your sense of humor," or "You have a good eye for subtle details," because as a *person* she did. He could've praised her honest intentions and not dwelled so much on the mediocre results.

Years pass. Jack continues with his writing, taking whole summers off to read and meander up and down the coast. He stops drinking, drops twenty pounds, signs up for a cardio-aerobics class that meets three times a week. His body becomes his big project. Along with aerobics he goes to karate on weekends. His instructor is a young Caucasian named Hans who starts each session with a motivational speech. He tells his students that the experience of life is ninety-eight percent physical: eating, getting good sleep and exercise, maintaining a straight posture. He puts Jack on a diet of raw vegetables and protein supplements, and within a year Jack's moved on to taking an advanced class and competing in exhibition sparring. For the first time in his life he's actually buff. He starts attracting a different kind of female, women interested in working out and skiing and not so

much in discussing narrative point-of-view. He dates a few of them, making it clear after date number two or three that he's not looking for anything long term. By the time he's officially middle-aged he looks younger and fitter than when he was thirty.

Then one day, after an evening session at the *dojo*, he waves goodbye to Hans, bangs chests with a couple guys from class and heads back to his place. Unless the weather's bad, he always walks. He likes the warm, wrung-out feeling after a solid workout. With his jacket on and his gym bag slung over his shoulder, he struts along the waterside, ready to pound out a half dozen pages when he gets home. The elevated train takes its passengers across the bay.

At the end of the boardwalk, he waits for a traffic light to change so he can cross to the far corner. The writer in him would bristle at this bad timing. This should've happened years ago, before the darkness lifted, when drink and Hannah and the memory of Claire still had a hold on him. Perhaps that's the other lie of fiction. Actions unfold according to their own time--they might take months or even years. The real tragedy is the action that's taken after the need for it no longer exists. But I suppose that happens too.

The light is slow; traffic along the waterfront roars through the intersection. I'll have a quiet night tonight, he thinks. Work for an hour, eat a small dinner and go to bed early. He's not tied down by anything, and his days and nights are just as he likes them. If he wants to spend the night in the company of a woman, there's always a number he can call. If he'd rather be alone, that's fine too. There's no anxiety. Little nuisances and disappointments don't affect him, silence doesn't bother him. He has nothing to prove anymore.

I have an image left--only one, but I don't want to waste it. Jack and Claire are in a vague and misty locale, nothing clear on the horizon, no distinction between earth and sky. All day they've been following a faint tinkling noise that never gets any closer. It sounds like chimes or strings being plucked. There's an absence of color and a pleasant chill in the air.

Claire sets down a cautious foot and glides ahead, the mist making it look like she's flying. Jack's happy just to watch, but she skates back and takes his hand, pulling him

onto the surface of what I've decided must be ice. I've seen all this before. The tinkling offers a clue--it's louder now, and a woman's voice joins in. I think she's singing about people being good for each other. At any rate it's a giving thought.

Before the traffic clears, Jack closes his eyes, smiles and steps into the street. Horns fill his ears, and his world ends in mid-scramble.

Some thoughts for writers: the best writing is that which puts the writer's sanity at risk. Some narratives move in a straight line, some in an arc. Mine start out strong and gradually lose confidence in themselves, and it's that process of losing confidence that most interests me.

I had a conversation the other day. A woman and I were talking about Savannah, Georgia. The woman said she lived there for a number of years, and I asked if Savannah was like New Orleans where they buried people aboveground. She said she didn't know, and I looked at her funny and said, "How could you not know *that*?"

We don't see enough of each other anymore. We keep to separate schedules. I send you an email and if I don't hear back within ten minutes I feel unloved.

Writing is not magic. It's nothing special. It's something you do with your fingers between the hours of ten and noon, Mondays through Fridays.

Writing will not solve the problems in your non-writing life.

People who respect and believe in you will do so unconditionally. If someone neither respects nor believes in you, fleeting material success will only mask their true feelings. What this means is: don't write because you think people will change their minds about you. You can't change their minds.

Writing that neither entertains nor provokes need not be shared with anyone.

If you show your book to one hundred people, eighty of them will start it, twenty will finish it, ten will have no lingering memory of it when they're done, nine will give you strange looks at parties, and one life will be changed for the better. That's the good news.

This hasn't stopped being a novel.

Good writing is rarely the result of the author's intentions, which are generally wrong-headed. Good writing often depends on the author's ability to trust and be led.

Three good reasons for writing a book: you enjoy doing it. You want to make a positive impact on the world. You want to bring something into being that otherwise wouldn't exist.

Three bad reasons: you want to see your name in print. You want to be rich and famous. You want people to love and admire you.

Remember, the world is not suffering from a dearth of written materials. We are, however, running short on corn.