

Jack Howland
196 Erie Street (1)
Cambridge MA 02139
jhowland5@gmail.com
(617)461-3512
www.jackhowland.com

Contemporary Fiction
74,600 words

HAPPY?

A Novel

By

Jack Howland

CHAPTER ONE

This is how I prefer to remember my friend, Grant "GG"
Goldstein.

It's winter 1976, his fifth birthday party. About
twenty of us are in his living room. The atmosphere holds
that spoiled stuffiness of running children and oil heat.

Mr. and Mrs. Goldstein have herded us together
underneath a piñata, the focal point of a broader,

politically conscientious party theme. Grant wears a napkin blindfold. He wears it proudly and helplessly, as if awaiting a firing squad. He holds a yardstick on his hip.

Mr. Goldstein's big hands rest on his son's narrow shoulders. He's actually lecturing us on Daniel Ortega or something, as if we could possibly be distracted from the piñata, this beacon of radical joy in the sky.

Eventually, he finishes his commentary. He flicks on a tape of authentic Mexican music. As I remember it, it's always too fast, too loud, and too happy. You can practically hear the tequila bottles shatter.

A number of events occur simultaneously, in a kind of Hitchcock pan. Jimmy Quintas punches Jimmy Reilly in the stomach. In the kitchen, Mrs. Goldstein drops a wine glass. Back in the living room, Mr. Goldstein barks "Wait!" as Grant shrugs out from under his dad's hand. He steps past me in one long stride of his cuffed up jeans and gashes open the piñata. He does so with a kind of reverse golf swing that spins him around 390 degrees. He stumbles across to the other side of the pile and drops on his ass.

A shower of glittering hard candy. A volley of screams. Instantly there's a little wiggling pile of hyena children. I can't get in though. I'm too slow, and I actually have to reel back to avoid Grant, who's already up and swinging wildly, at about shoulder-level, blindfold still on. The yardstick seems twice as tall as he is.

He pauses. His head tilts back and around to get his bearings. He sees me, his Dad, the carcass of the piñata. He looks down. His little hips wobble in all the action underfoot.

Now he argues with somebody below him, someone who won't or can't move. Suddenly, mid-sentence, he brings the stick over his head. There's an arcing whistling blur, followed by a shag-muffled shriek.

Apparently this has its desired effect because he's now free, swatting and kicking his way through the crowd. There are yelps and smacks. He seems to be trying to clear a path, and he's heading straight for me. He keeps looking up but I can't see his eyes. He's just a napkin head and turtleneck body. He steps on Jeff Mercy. He saddles over Jenny Smythe.

My feet pull at the floor. I turn to Mr. Goldstein, but he's fiddling around with his stereo. I turn back to find Grant and I suddenly face-to-face. I catch his eye under the blindfold. He's startled briefly, like an animal caught in a shadow. His fat lips glisten. I reach for the yardstick, but his arms come to life like a jack-in-the-box. He takes a broad, cross-cut swipe that pings the tip of my funnybone. It sings with fizzing pain as I stumble away.

There's a tonal difference to the screaming now, and Mr. Goldstein tunes in and turns around. He's turning left to right. Grant is swinging right to left. It's the same stroke that came at me, but flat-edged this time. Mr. Goldstein's glasses ricochet off his head, bouncing, spinning into the air.

"Jesus Christ!" he cries, with one hand groping for his glasses, the other trying to hold his eye together. Two rivulets of blood split fast around the knuckle of his index finger. I hear a yell from behind me and twist around, away from Grant, who's brought the yardstick over his head again, like an axe.

Now I see Mrs. Goldstein, her hair in a handkerchief, running from the kitchen with both hands in front of her. I hear Mr. Goldstein cry out, and a slight diminishing of the kid riot.

Mrs. Goldstein shoves me into an armchair. I bounce off that, sting my other elbow on the windowsill, and twist to my knees. As I do so, I watch her hook an arm around Grant's mid-section, yanking him away.

Mr. Goldstein is doubled over like an Arab in prayer. Some of the children, oblivious, still writhe all over the floor. Others just stare.

Grant nails him one last time, as his mother heaves, landing his little right heel hard on his Dad's head. I remember our eyes again meeting as she hauls him into the air, his chin over his shoulder, that small dark face and heavy curve of hair.

After that, I remember station wagons, like squad cars, hurtling into the driveway.

I take two lessons from this. The first is that most of us live only to get back at our parents. The second, that life is ultimately a comedy.

Anyway, this is how I will remember my friend, GG.

CHAPTER 2--THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1999

8:27 PM, Heatherton Hills Private Sanatorium

He licks his lips. He sets his glass on the reading table, and as he does so he says,

GIANNI: "Do you love my daughter, Will?"

ME: "Gianni, I absolutely ..."

GIANNI: "Do you know what love is?"

Actually, let me backtrack a little. You need more perspective on this event. Let's start from this morning. I'll seem more exciting this way.

9:15 AM, GG's and My Apartment

I awake. I throw up.

10:15 AM, Offices of Punk Laughlin Group

Clean out desk. Pilfer ashtray. Tell a number of final lies to Punk Laughlin colleagues. Make final, quixotic pass at Phoebe. Get hijacked by Guy Wilcox, Gina Arrington and Burt Schwartz - "the Bon Voyage Committee."

1:30 PM, The Dingbat Bar & Grill

A few laughs, a few drinks, and all of a sudden I'm drunk. You know how you know you're drunk? You know when you light the wrong end of your cigarette. At least that's how I know.

This is a richly comic moment for all involved. I myself start to cackle. Then choke. Then both. Wilcox starts swatting my back. Arrington hands me a glass of water. I do a spit-take.

Lucky for me (I guess), I don't die.

2:00 PM, The Dingbat

It's important to understand that I'm something of a celebrity right now. I'm one of the Ad game's Bad Young Men. (The "Nigga, Please!" campaign for Sable Stud Malt Liquor? With that pimp? Mine.) I've also just committed my soul to Hillman Reynolds LTD, the celebrated Big Bitch of Branding, and for an appallingly large sum of money. The actual figure has yet to be named, but it'll be big. Big-cardboard-check big. I'm a franchise player now.

In other words, these yahoos had me in their crosshairs. And even though plowed, I remain totally presentable and utterly focused. I am "functional," as it were. Take this exchange, right after Schwartz and I get high in the bathroom.

"Listen, Schwartz," I've grabbed a handful of his jacket. "What do you know about the Hillmans Reynolds test?"

See how I stick to the issue at hand? Or at least one of them? Hillman is famous for "testing" the commitment his new hires. People are thought to have perished.

"You mean, was that Parsons guy really eaten by alligators?"

"Yeah, right."

"So far as I know, that's a crock."

"Ah," I say, relieved.

"I do know that when Singer started there, Reynolds hunted him for sport on his private island."

"Oh."

"But, obviously, he survived."

"Yeah."

"We're gonna miss you, Standish."

"Well, you know, I really do hate to go ..."

"Fuck off," Schwartz burps. "Hate to leave to leave Punk Laughlin? For Hillman Reynolds?! *Fuck you.*"

3:00 to 5:00 PM, THE CITY

This diptych of hours is largely unaccounted for. I *don't* remember leaving the Dingbat. I *do* remember driving. Then thinking this blue Chevy is following me. Then doing a half-dozen U-turns and whole lot of reversing to lose the tail. Maybe also a left-hand-turn-from-the-right-hand-lane or something. I remember as well fleeing on foot, a full sprint down some kind of alley, hitting just about every puddle along the way. Water jumps up shoulder high, like a live fire exercise. Then I'm trapped briefly in a tornado of pigeons, but I somehow swat my way through.

And that's about it.

5:05 PM, Duck Heaven Chinese Restaurant

I resume recall as I violently shove my way down into Duck Heaven, a subterranean fishbowl, a bunker of red naugahyde trimmed in neon light.

I know I'm in real trouble, and I've only got a few hours left, so I head here, the spooky solemnity of Duck Heaven. This joint never fails to sooth my aching nerves.

Chan sets me up with a Coke, a General Tao's chicken, an order of fried rice, an order of spring rolls and some Crab Rangoon.

7:25 PM, Duck Heaven

I light a cigarette. Chan gives me his clever, all-knowing, all-seeing look.

"You rirry tink Chevy forrow you, Wirr?" He says, meaning: "You really think that Chevy was following you, Will?"

I realize I've already forgotten all about this. At the same time, I realize it's the least of my worries. And anyway I know it's probably just paranoia, owing to the

fact that I've been followed before (one of Blaine's Ex's used to follow and occasionally beat the crap out of me). And that I moonlight a little following other people (with GG). So it's either delusional or karmic. Or both or neither.

I don't give Chan an answer, and I don't think he expects one.

With his elbows on the bar now, he breaks open a fortune cookie.

He reads: "Your rucky number is 13, 4, 34, and 17."

He looks at me.

There seems to be no point in not humoring him.

"34." I say. "Really."

He nods sagely.

"Da goo," He adds.

Chan and his ridiculous accent. GG thinks it's a con.
I think I agree.

7:38 PM, Duck Heaven

I drum away on the bar.

GG calls on the cell. I send it to voicemail.

Blaine calls. I kill it.

I take a long look at myself in the mirror, above all that liquor, inside all that twinkling light. I think I've recovered.

Chan barks out "Moo Goo Gai Pan!" to no one in particular.

I stand. I brush off my jacket front. I hyperventilate for a moment, then push and pull my way back up into the blazing world.

8:15 PM, Heatherton Hills Private Sanatorium

As I enter the gated moors of Heatherton Hills, I can hear my heart beating.

It's quite a scene. On a distant hill, the "dormitory" stands like a crumbling abbey, the punchdrunk sun on its shoulders. The Director's Bungalow is dead ahead, the lair of Blaine's father (or "Creator," whichever you prefer). It's an English country house, sitting an acre or two off the main campus road.

A storm, coming from behind me, is brewing in its warped, antique windows.

A thunderstorm.

I'm not kidding.

8:18 PM, Heatherton Hills Private Sanatorium

On the doorstep, I roll my head, like a fighter. One way, then the other. I shake out my arms. I get in character.

*You're an Ad Man. You're a God! You're Oglivy,
Caliguilia, Polanski and Jagger!. JUST DO IT! THINK
DIFFERENT! ANCIENT CHINESE SECRET!*

I roll my head again. I jab the doorbell. A beat or two, and it opens. Gianni's two lieutenants, Bill Nutley and Tito Parker, greet me, both in their Hannibal Lecter model white scrubs.

"William."

"Nuts, how are you."

"Fine, thanks."

"Tito," I say.

Tito doesn't answer, as is his wont.

Nuts: "Come in, come in."

I enter, saying over my shoulder: "God those outfits freak me out."

"I know, I know."

"Can't you put something else on?"

"We're on call. If something happens, we have to be able to maintain the illusion between patient and staff."

"Like when you have to jab a tennis ball in somebody's mouth?"

"Like when we have to *sedate* a patient. We prefer the term 'sedate.' Right, Tito?"

Again, nothing from Tito.

"The 'illusion' between patient and staff ..." I say.

An electric smile from Nuts, revealing his silver eyetooth.

"Right," He says. "Hey you look terrific."

8:25 PM, Heatherton Hills Private Sanatorium

I'm delivered to the "parlor," where I'm left alone to sweat it out a bit. Through the big picture window, I watch the storm gather, pink lightning and viscous air.

I hear footsteps as Gianni enters, then turns on a light.

GIANNI: "Will."

ME: "Dr. Gugliotti."

GIANNI: "Please, I think you can call me Gianni."

He offers me a drink. I decline, and he pours himself a brandy or something.

GIANNI: "Please. Sit."

ME: "Thank you."

I sit. He sits. He looks at me. He smiles. Everybody smiles around here.

GIANNI: "I guess we each get a brief respite from Blaine's reign of terror this weekend."

ME: "Ha ha."

GIANNI: "Of course, I have my to-do list."

ME: "Me too."

GIANNI: "I noticed I didn't get any laundry duties at all this time around."

ME: "I think I've got them all."

GIANNI: "My duties seem fewer and fewer. [smiles again. Rubs his forehead] I suppose that's a good thing."

ME: "With the cost of dry cleaning these days ..."

Don't ad-lib, you idiot.

GIANNI: "Yes, right."

Our first pause.

ME: "Gianni, I wanted ..."

GIANNI: "Please. [the hand, the smile] I know why you're here."

A sip of brandy. Thunder. Lightning. A look out the window.

GIANNI: "Believe it or not, the weather has a powerful effect on my patients here at Heatherton Hills."

[Thunderclap. Lightning.]

GIANNI: "Weather, like music, is very emotive. Actually, one of the earliest psychiatric treatments was chamber music, [smiling, turning to me] music being so much easier to control than weather."

ME: "Hmm."

He rolls the glass, then sets it on the table.

GIANNI: "I sometimes wonder if we are not merely creatures of ambiance, if you will, as swayed as we are by what can only be defined as experiential factors. The unusual ambiance of a summer storm, or an eclipse say, can make life seem so much more like a dream than dreams like life, don't you think? It's a touch Freudian, I know."

ME: "I guess electrical storms are caused by some sort of change in atmospheric pressure or something." (I add a "whatever-the-hell-that-means" shrug.)

GIANNI: "Ah! Forgive me. You've caught me in one of my ruminative moods."

ME: "Not at all."

He licks his lips. He sets his glass on the reading table, and as he does so he says,

GIANNI: "Do you love my daughter, Will?"

ME: "Gianni, I absolutely ..."

GIANNI: "Do you know what love is?"

He asks this question innocently enough, garnishing it with that gentle, prescription smile.

ME: "... I think I do."

He brings his fingers together and to his lips now. He waits. Ridiculously, a flutter of lightning crosses the room.

ME: "... I'm sorry. I thought that was a rhetorical question."

GIANNI: "No. It wasn't."

ME: "Okay. Love is ..."

I start and stop a few times.

GIANNI: "There are those in my profession who would describe love as a kind of psychosis."

ME: "That's a touch bleak."

GIANNI: "You think so?"

ME: "Well, I mean, so many people seem to be "in love." And isn't sanity defined, more or less, by the mental condition of a majority of people?"

GIANNI: "Are you saying there's no such thing as mass psychoses?"

ME: "Ah, yes. Yes, I think I am."

GIANNI: "So Nazism, then, was perfectly rational."

ME: "Ha ha ha."

GIANNI: "You find that funny?"

ME: "What?"

GIANNI: "Would the Final Solution be somehow reasonable, Will?"

ME: "What? No!"

GIANNI: "That seems to be what you're saying."

ME: "No. No, no, no, no."

GIANNI: "Alright."

ME: "No, no, no. Not at all. No."

GIANNI: "Okay."

ME: "Okay."

GIANNI: "Continue."

ME: "With what?"

GIANNI: "You were talking about love and mass psychoses."

[Lightning. Thunder. Lightning. Lightning.]

ME: "Ah yes. [cough] Yes, maybe you're right, maybe you're right. I guess I would have to believe in mass psychoses, then. A psychoses, huh? A chemical imbalance, I

suppose. Is there a state of chemical equilibrium? Is there such a thing? I guess that's the question, then. I guess so."

GIANNI: "No, that's not the question."

ME: "No, yes, no."

GIANNI: "There's no such thing as a normative chemo-electric condition."

ME: "Or course not."

GIANNI: "Frankly, such an idea is absurd."

ME: [collusive snort]

GIANNI: "That's like asking 'When is now?' Is this now? Or was that the past?"

ME: "Exactly."

GIANNI: "Or when does life start. When does life start, Will?"

ME: "Welll ..."

GIANNI: "I think, in some sense, it starts at conception."

ME: "I do too, Johnny. Absolutely. *Pro-life*."

GIANNI: "But does it really?"

ME: "Hmm. Yes ..."

GIANNI: "To say that life starts at conception puts perhaps too light a burden on our ability to act deliberately, our will to do certain things and not others and to communicate our intentions in so doing to others."

ME: "Communication is so important."

GIANNI: "Think of it this way: If you tell me you're going to do something, should I hold you to those words?"

[Thunder. Lightning. A distant, maniacal cackle.]

ME: "... .. Yes?"

GIANNI: "Of course I should. It's fair for me to assume that you're a rational adult, that you're in control of your own actions, isn't it?"

ME: "... .. But what if I were under the spell of a mass psychoses?"

GIANNI: "That's good question. Let me ask you this: Do you feel psychotic?"

ME: "No."

GIANNI: "No?"

ME: "Yes?"

GIANNI: "You know, this reminds me of a funny story. Are you familiar with Pherozac?"

ME: "Pherozac ..."

GIANNI: "It's a drug that used to be used to treat extreme bipolar disorder."

ME: "Ahh. Okay. Right. *Pherozac*."

GIANNI: "With about 500 ccs of *Pherozac* you can induce a death like state -- no pulse, no detectable heartbeat -- that doesn't clear out of the human system for about 7 days."

ME: "Gosh."

GIANNI: "People have been buried alive, by mistake of course, after being administered the drug. Paramedics. Doctors. Coroners. None of them could tell that they were toe-tagging someone still very much alive. A couple weeks later the drug is flushed out. Often it takes with it many of the bipolar symptoms, leaving the individual, for all intents and purposes, quite sane. But of course, sanity is fleeting when you wake up to discover that you've been buried alive."

ME: "*Pherozac*. Hmm."

GIANNI: "I've got gallons of it up in the lab."

ME: "I feel fine."

GIANNI: "Ha ha ha ha ha. That's very funny, Will."

[Lightning. Lightning. Lightning.]

GIANNI: "Honestly, do you feel psychotic?"

ME: "NO."

GIANNI: "No, you don't. You feel in control of your actions."

ME: "YES I DO."

GIANNI: "Yes. Yes, you do. Which brings us back to my original question. When does life start? If it's at conception, then are we just animals? Animals conceive, but we prefer to think of them as almost helpless in the process. We, humans, *choose* to conceive a child, do we not?"

ME: "YES WE DO."

GIANNI: "Let me put it another way: You chose to impregnate my daughter, didn't you, Will?"

ME: "RIGHT ... Wait. NO!"

[Thunder. Lightning. Lightning. A scream. A momentary power outage.]

GIANNI: "No? Of course you did. You're not a dog, are you?"

ME: "I ... I ... I ... [sneeze][sneeze][sneeze]"

GIANNI: "We can't take such things lightly, Will."

ME: "[sneeze]"

GIANNI: "We have to deal with the consequences."

ME: "Dr. Gugliotti! Johnny! I don't think ..."

GIANNI: "Yes?"

ME: "I ... It's just ... I think there's a little more ... I think I should explain what we had in mind ..."

GIANNI: "Alright. What did you have in mind?"

ME: "Um ..."

He gives me an earnest look.

ME: "..."

GIANNI: "... Are you saying there's something I've missed in my characterization of our circumstances?"

ME: "Yes, well, no, but ..."

GIANNI: "Because I want to be absolutely accurate."

ME: "It's just that ... I ... See it's ..."

GIANNI: "... Yes?"

ME: "... Ah ..."

My mind snaps at words in the air.

GIANNI: "... Are you going to say something?"

ME: "I ..."

I look at him. He's in a corner of his arch chair.
He's perfectly still.

GIANNI: "I haven't missed anything."

ME: "..."

GIANNI: "Have I."

ME: "No."

[A lingering flicker of lightning, a shout]

GIANNI: "Then I'm going to continue."

ME: "Good."

GIANNI: "What I want, Will, is a commitment."

ME: "Yes."

GIANNI: "I want you to tell me you're going to do something."

ME: "Right."

GIANNI: "And I'm going to then hold you to those words."

ME: "Very good."

GIANNI: "I'm not *absolutely* unhappy about this."

ME: "Me neither."

GIANNI: "I want you to ask Blaine to marry you."

ME: "Right."

GIANNI: "I need you to do it soon. As soon as she gets back. Will you do that?"

ME: "Yes."

GIANNI: "You will."

ME: "Yes sir I will."

GIANNI: "You're telling me you're going to ask Blaine
to marry you."

ME: "That's what I'm telling you. Yes."

GIANNI: "Good."

ME: "Very good."

GIANNI: "Because otherwise it's both our asses."

ME: "Ha ha ha."

GIANNI: "It'll just hurt more in your case."

ME: "Ha ha."

GIANNI: "I'm not kidding."

ME: "Oh."

GIANNI: "So we understand one another?"

ME: [nod]

GIANNI: "Good."

ME: [nothing]

GIANNI: "Thanks for coming by, Will."

ME: [sneeze]

8:55 PM, Heatherton Hills Private Sanatorium

My memory blurs slightly here. I recall a meaty fist around my upper arm, a door slam, and a brief, squishy stumble across the lawn. I remember the rain, the thunder, the flickering silhouette of the dormitory. I remember feeling briefly like Frankenstein batting at the moon.

Before I really know it, I'm back behind the wheel and rolling downhill through a country lane, my one headlight pushing through the night. The trees flutter overhead. Quaint fencing whispers by outside my window, whining in my peripheral vision. Swerving aggressively into interstate traffic, heralded by a rallying cry of horns, I finally take a chance at breathing again. Soon the vast twinkle of the city flounces out above the road, under the ringbox blue velvet night. The storm, appropriately enough, has vanished.

My God. She's five hundred miles away and she still lords this violence over me. It's been pretty much non-stop terror since the invitation arrived. In a way, I suppose, it's fitting that these final few hours of bachelordom should be filled with terror and violence. When you get right down to it, this is more a parturition, than a mere lifestyle change. If anything, there should be more screaming and cordcutting and foreskin filleting. I'm to be born again, an American prince, after all. And she'll be my bride.

Alright? Ready to do the Blaine thing? Are you sure?
Okay. I'll give you a quick run down. You should understand

her physically, first and foremost. And to understand her physically, you need to understand her pure physicality. She's elemental. I'll never forgive myself for saying this, but there's almost an *insect* quality to the way she's put together. The tight economy of her shocking strength. The fearless legs, socketed into those rolljoint haunches. Her clenched and ready breasts. An ass you could break boards on. But then, in contrast, there's her stark, uncomplicated beauty. That's where the insect comparison ends, my friend. An inch or two taller and she'd be a supermodel. I swear. The Soviet cheekbones, the falling blue shadows they trace, they seem to give her a permanent expression of gentle, breathless shock. It's as if she's stunned by her own beauty. And those eyes that seem to breathe. Yes, her hot, wide, jet black eyes. How inadequate, these words ...

Psychologically, you probably won't be surprised to learn that Blaine is a regular five-star brothel of hokey, implausible personalities, none of whom seem to be willing to acknowledge any of the others. She is, after all, a *girl*. There's Princess Blaine and Fight Girl. It's Princess who demands the proposal, by the way. Fight Girl's the enforcer. There's the Coroner, who usually steps in when Fight Girl's through to run a little post mortem, to probe

and stab and deconstruct you, to saw open your ribs, unearth whatever she can, then tack it to the wall and explain it for your edification. There's Mommy. There's That Blaine, where she's bewildered by all the dazzling sights and lights of the Big City. She's the most irritating. Finally, most significantly, there's Modern Blaine. She's who dropped the dime on me. She's the one in Atlanta, due back on Sunday.

You should also know what Blaine wants. She wants, conveniently, more or less what I want. She wants Suburbia. Maids who come in on trains. Nannies. Paddle Tennis. Charity Balls. Foreign made stationwagons. What I want, my Suburbia, is slightly different. I think more in terms of severe pre-nups, cocaine, boxwoods, English sportscars, round robin wife swapping, and exotic babysitters. A post Boomer Shady Hill, really. But of course there's more than enough room for compromise. She wants the money and the pedigree. I want the au pair and the Jag. And we'll have it. We'll have it all. Together, really, we're unstoppable.

Here's how she told me she was pregnant. I think it's fairly illuminating. We were in my car, en route from somewhere, heading home. It was a night just like tonight.

Just like every summer night in this town. The sun was setting and the evening had begun to gentle, but the air was still seething.

"I'm pregnant." She said.

"Deh?" I answered.

"I'm pregnant," she said again, more gravely this time.

With that she turned her head back to the road. After considering the rolling scenery for awhile, she added, "OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD!"

At which point I returned my focus to the road ahead. Theretofore I'd been staring at her, and I think it's safe to assume I had a look of clinical idiocy on my face. Eyebrows peaked, mouth half open, chin retreating neckward and to the left. Altogether the kind expression that makes a psychologist give a heavy sigh, click his pen, and scribble a recommendation that you be sent off to some kind of state-sponsored petting zoo. Meanwhile, I'd drifted well into the oncoming lane, where a late 80s Ford LTD, a maroon

one, if I remember correctly, was helpfully announcing our imminent collision with a crescendoing siren of horn blare. I took evasive action. We'd fishtailed for a several seconds, our rear end considering a stage right exit, but I corrected us finally, and with a bounce, thud and gasp, we were back on to the road.

"You are?" I asked, as I gathered my breath.

"Seriously?"

"Real fucking seriously."

"When did you find out?"

"This morning at Dr. Kornfeld's."

"Holy crap."

"Tell me about it."

"Didn't you miss your period or anything like that? Weren't there any signs that something was off?"

"Of course there were signs, but my body's so screwy that I didn't think that much of it. The pill regulates most women, but it totally fucks me up."

I should say that I really can't stand her foul mouth. I don't know at what point in recent history it became appropriate for women to talk like Teamsters, but in my opinion they're not doing themselves any favors. Now, GG would say, as he did once when I made this point to him, that my opinion hardly mattered. I was, after all, a man.

"At least academically," he continued, "and you, as a man, are no longer an opinion maker. You really don't have any kind of value whatsoever. Women control everything nowadays. As they really always have. It's just more overt, now. Look at these asinine t.v. commercials your kind puts together and assaults us with. Every single man is a kind of amusing, yet mostly inconsequential, pet, no different really than a golden retriever. A couple goes shopping for a car, and the husband dances around like he's got to go potty, begging for a red sports car that goes VROOM VROOM VROOM. Then the wife decides on something sensible. He pouts for awhile but she lets him buy an electric garage door opener or electric screwdriver and once again he's

happy as can be. We're just barking idiots who bring home a paycheck and get them pregnant. Just a litter of yappy, sports-crazed breeders."

And of course, the metrics bear him out on this.

"How many weeks are you into it?" I said.

"Eight," She answered.

"EIGHT?!"

"I told you, my body is messed up to begin with, and the pill only complicates things!"

"EIGHT WEEKS?!"

"Yes."

"What were you thinking around the sixth or seventh week? That things were a little odd, but that they'd get themselves together any day now?"

"What I was thinking was that I was scared to death and didn't want to find out exactly why it had been six or seven weeks since my last period."

Naturally, at the beginning of this exchange, I'd lit a cigarette. I'd managed to absorb that in what seemed a single drag. I flicked it out the window and nearly dropped off the road again. I chained into a second, brooding fiercely until it too was finished.

"Boy!" I said.

"Yeah," she conceded.

I looked at her.

"... are you healthy?"

"I seem to be doing just fine so far," she had said, quietly.

And then we returned to my apartment and had a talk. The Talk. We were out on the porch. I remember a mosquito nose-diving into the wax of our citronella candle,

extinguishing his brief life with a hiss. And I remember looking up to see Blaine looking at me, a blend of suspicion, contempt and anticipation in her now tired eyes. Abortion, I'd realized at that moment, was not an option.

Right then and there we settled on the terms. Her terms. She'd sorted them all out ahead of time, naturally. I'd get her father's blessing. And then I'd propose to her in a suitably romantic fashion. I'd do it all soon. I wouldn't fuck around the issue like I had for the past several months. She'd be leaving for Atlanta tomorrow. She'd be back on Sunday. I had until then to get my shit in a pile.

We picked up. We did the dishes, all in silence. We smoked a couple more cigarettes on the porch. Then she gave me a coy smile and a kiss on the cheek. Princess Blaine had returned, skipping into the scene in her threadbare cotton frock, with her fistful of daisies and knock-kneed frown. This was the Blaine I could manage, largely because she only communicated in pouts and babytalk. I was totally relieved. Again we were in our summer idyll of champagne and sex. All was again tickling, giggling, spanking, "Quit it!s" and "You get over here!s" and finally, as ever, sex.

The prospect of a shotgun marriage seemed a dim possibility, a dream, perhaps even a misunderstanding. Things, all in all, felt normal again.

There's one final thing you should know. I, in fact, demand that you acknowledge this. You may even need to sign some kind of receipt. I want you to know that things didn't start out this way. Once upon a time, I was calling the shots. I was on top. Obviously, I'm not anymore, but I once was.

9:20 PM, GG's and My Apartment

Getting into our place, owing to GG's zealous commitment to home security, is slightly less difficult, though probably more time consuming, than launching first strike nuclear weapons. It's hard to tell where the locks end and hinges begin. I carry a ring of keys like a jailer.

Eventually I do get inside. The lights are all out. I tiptoe carefully into the living room, not quite sure if GG is actually home or not. You never really know if he is. Some nights he comes home at 5, he's in bed by 7, then, with a whoosh of an umbrella being drawn from its scabbard

and the rifleshot report of the door revisiting its roost, he's off to work at 4 am. Other nights, he doesn't sleep at all, just sits in the living room wrapped up in his blanket like an indian chief, surveying some casework over his ridiculous, half-framed reading glasses. On one occasion, he didn't come home for 4 days.

I poke my head around the doorway to his room, where I see his well-made bed in the violet and ivory shadows. From there I crane my neck for the living room, listening intently for a turned page or the tingle of ice. Nothing.

I straighten up, flicking the hallway light and striding purposefully past the t.v. to the bar.

I pour myself a drink. Have a taste. A moment passes, then I'm enveloped in shoulder high flames. I leap like a startled ballerina, bobbling the scotch for an eternity. In that time the flames subside, ticking and snapping behind me. My spine vibrates like a tuning fork.

And then I hear his voice.

"Where were you?" GG croons

When I turn around to look at him, he starts laughing.

"You look like Ichabod Crane."

"Yeah? Yeah?! I feel like fucking Ichabod Crane! What the hell are you trying to scare me for?"

"I wasn't trying to scare you. You woke me up."

"What'd you do with the fire?!"

"Oh, well, that I couldn't resist. I could tell you hadn't seen me, so I flicked on the remote control fire and tossed some vodka on it. You like that?"

"Yeah, it's really impressive. Good thinking. Now I might as well go throw these pants in the laundry."

"So where were you?"

"Out."

"Out where?"

"What are you, my mother?"

"Do you really want me to answer that question?"

He pauses to light a cigarette.

"Who were you with? I know it wasn't Blaine. She called while you were out. You don't have any other friends that I'm aware of ... or do you?"

"Do you want a drink?"

"Yes," he says, holding up his glass. I take it. I pour some Stoli over his remaining ice cubes and splash some more scotch in a new glass for myself.

"I'm worried about you," he begins, after turning on the table lamp. "You've been so jumpy lately."

"I think that began when you bought that starter's pistol ..." I say, hoping to change the subject.

"The .38, you mean?"

"... the starter's pistol that you're always waving around here."

"It's a .38. I have certain occupational hazards, as I've explained, and besides, we need a gun in the house."

"Of course. No, no, if anything, we need more guns in the house."

"Good, I'm glad we're in agreement."

"We should be armed to the teeth. Like the Islamic Jihad."

I twitch for a moment, trying to settle down.

"Look, is anything wrong?"

"No."

"Is it Blaine?"

"Where is that gun anyway?"

"Why? Do you want to borrow the gun?" GG says, letting his voice drop to a more conspiratorial octave, cocking his head, "*Are we talking about what I think we're talking about?*"

"Christ."

"Do you want to settle this Blaine issue once and for all?"

By this point I've slumped into the sofa, kicked off my shoes and dropped my feet on GG's stack of Atlantic Monthlies.

"I went out to the Double H to ask for Johnny's blessing."

"Ah, how quaint. I thought that's what was going on. Good old Heatherton Hills. The alma mater. So, how'd it go?"

"Well, he threatened to drug me, then bury me alive."

"Out of mercy?"

"I think out of sheer malice."

"Hmm."

"I'm going to ask you a question, and you might as well answer it honestly, because I'll know the truth either way." He rolls the ice in his glass, dips a pinky in and tastes it. "Are you ready?"

I shake my head disgustedly, and try to turn on the t.v.

"I unplugged it."

I toss the remote across the coffee table.

"Have you bought a ring?" He asks, striking his obnoxious sophisticate pose, one knee over the other, his chest bent over his thighs. It's body language like this that causes people to challenge his heterosexuality.

I look at him, think about answering, then realize there's no need.

He settles back in his chair, knitting his brow in disbelief. "I don't believe it."

"Is it really so hard to believe?"

He laughs out: "You don't have any money!"

"I know."

"You quit your job!"

"I'm aware of that."

"Good!"

"I love her, G," I say. I give him an extremely meaningful look.

"I know you do."

"You like her, too."

"Oh, please don't get me wrong. No one could be happier for you than I am that you've found a beautiful, rich, exciting woman who you've gotten pregnant and are about to marry against your will."

"Well, thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I mean, she *is* pregnant."

"Well, I guess you *have* to marry her then!"

"That right."

"No choice!"

"Right!"

"Let me ask you this: Never mind that it's the 20th century and that this isn't Appalachia and all that - Are you sure she's pregnant?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do have any proof? Has she been to the doctor or anything?"

"Yeah!" I say, "I think!"

"Have you seen any notes or prescriptions or anything like that?"

"No."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Well ..."

"Just what are you getting at, GG?"

"Well, in a lot of the casework I see ..."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Now don't get upset."

"Don't get upset?"

"Will."

"You're challenging Blaine's claim that she's pregnant?!"

"Please sit down."

"Is that what you're doing? It is!"

"It's just that ... I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"I shouldn't have brought it up."

"You're fucking-A right you shouldn't have brought it up!"

"... fucking-A right, yes ..."

A pause ensues. Eventually I continue:

"So basically what you're telling me is that - this is incredible!! -- it's a possibility, based on credible empirical evidence, that that's what Blaine is doing!"

"... Yes."

"You're saying that it's a very real possibility that Blaine is faking her pregnancy!"

"... All I'm saying is that you should really see if she's been to the ..."

"Unbelievable!"

"I'm *just* making a suggestion ..."

"Jesus H Christ!"

"... that's all I'm doing."

"So what, I guess then that I have to *dig up* some kind of *proof* that she's pregnant? That's what you're

suggesting, isn't it? Of all the demeaning, insulting things!"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"You're goddamned right you shouldn't have brought it up!!"

"I'm sorry."

"What, I suppose I'd need to find some kind of *prescription medicine* that most pregnant women would be on, like a ..."

"..."

"..."

"... like a basic, over-the-counter pregnancy supplement, Will. A Thorinine or Zenophite."

"Like a Thorinine or Zenophite!!"

"That's right."

"Zenophite? With a 'T'?"

"Yes."

"Unbelievable! I can't believe you're even suggesting this!"

"I know."

"Like a *Thorinine* or a *Zenophite*!"

"...."

"Unbelievable!"

"..."

"Just *unfucking* believable!"

"..."

"..."

"I'm going to plug in the TV now, Will."

"Fine! GREAT."

11:25 PM, GG's and My Apartment

There is a sense in which my life is extremely cartoonish, almost unsettlingly so. I have cartoonish interactions with others, like the above. I seem to be surrounded by cartoon-like people. Blaine's figure is violently cartoonish - her curves, her nails. Gianni. Chan. Chan's Dad. The weather.

Cartoons. I'm happy with as much. Simple colors, big eyes, bags of money. I can't give myself (and certainly not others) broader dimensions, more intense allegiances, complexity. My emotions burn out like matchheads. Our promises die on our lips. My memories (of love, family, mourning) mock me.

The day ends with yet another cartoonish electrical storm. It's like a high school production of King Lear. From my bed I watch through the window. It closes in quickly, over the hum and patter of the a/c. I listen to

the bolts shudder through the heavens. Then the window ignites, and I see an ungodly white hot andiron, bolting space to earth, and in another instant, a blue echo in roiling purple skies. The collie next door, Larry, howls away.

I don't want to fall asleep. These dreams will return. These terrifying, slapstick, pornographic, 8 mm dreams. I won't tell you about them. I won't. They're absurd! And the absurdity scares the shit out of me.

But nights like these make me wonder if it's any better outside, awake. Awake! These summer storms, this liquid air, the static hiss in the atmosphere. It's an open threat. It's riot weather out there.

CHAPTER 3--FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 1999

11:00 AM, En Route to Blaine's Apartment

Excuse me, won't you, I feel a touch rhapsodic. Ah,
hem ...

O Suburbia! Chesty temptress!! Dowried Dominatrix!!!
Grant me my wishes! My rich lazy yawn of purring John
Deeres and spiked saddleshoes. Of day camps, swing sets,
cocktail parties, and country clubs! Mine! All mine! Bring
on your host of lonely, embittered, horny, insane ex-wives!
Give me my Rotary Club! My League of Women Voters! Where is
my regal paunch, teasing angel!? Cupcake? I am your son,
after all. I am your Prodigal Son! I'm back! I'm home, Ma!
I was gone for awhile, but now I'm fucking back!

I inhale gloriously and beam at the world. I'm cruising northward now, in Blaine's rice-fueled Ishimushu (my Saab wasn't having any), racing through luscious lawns and shivering oak trees, kicking up a whirling rooster tail of leaves in my wake.

I hate this car, by the way. It so damn small. I wear it like an inner tube. I could probably fill it up without shifting in my seat, like sticking my thumb up my ass. And it's got no pick up whatsoever. You pin the pedal to the floor and the engine snarls up to 60 mph, all two cylinders gnashing away like beavers on amphetamines.

Still! Behold! Suburbia!

A Starbucks here! A Noodle Kiddoodle there! Boy, I feel great! What a day for a drive! Of course, for the first couple miles or so my eyes were pinned to the rearview mirror, inspecting every vehicle in eyeshot. And I'd be lying if I said that I didn't do some cautionary back and fills, as well as a few fake signals and at least one left-hand-turn-from-the-right-hand-lane. But after awhile I gave myself the all clear. It had all started to

seem so ridiculous, anyway. And now I feel terrific. Just terrific!

Let's be honest; things are actually looking pretty great. Really. Yesterday, granted, was some breed of nightmare, but it was bound to be, and I accepted it as such. I endured. Yes, I believe I weathered that storm rather admirably, don't you? These three days were going to be traumatic. I knew that going in. On Sunday, she gets back, and we close this deal. Just two days away. Got the dinner reservations. Talked to Dad. So I'm doing pretty well, all things considered.

For the sake of the record, I'll admit that I did have a rough night, dreams-wise. Again I dreamt a bloody vortex of sex, followed by sub-zero cataract of money and binary code, and after that, a bloody, sub-zero vortex-cum-cataract of sex, money, binary code and, alas, Blaine. Those are all the details I'm willing to divulge at the moment re: my dreams.

Anyway, today, we enter a break in the action. All I have to accomplish today is to fly out to Blaine's and pick up a couple dresses, then cruise over to HR's club, get my

fucking job squared away. That, and hit the gym. You wouldn't know it, but I'm a real zealot about fitness. I workout probably two, sometimes even three times a week. I lose count I'm working out so much. And I don't take any prisoners. I'm not happy unless an artery springs out of my temple and sprays narcotic attenuated blood all over the place.

Blaine has left me an errand list. I've just picked up a load of feminine products at Girl Depot and Urbania Miscellania. What the hell do they sell there, you ask? Tube tops and pipe elbows, basically. Arsenic, acid, alligator clips. Everything the modern femme fatale requires.

Incidentally, I don't know what Blaine is doing in Atlanta. For that matter, I don't know what anyone is doing in Atlanta, but most immediately I'm in the dark as far as her Atlantan agenda is concerned. Through a mist of hints and passing remarks I've been led to understand that the Double H is considering franchising down there.

My cell rings. I look. Speak of the Devil. For some reason, I guess because I feel so great, I take the call.

Blaine revisits her favorite topic of late. She's nervous, and therefore she's pissed off.

BLAINE: "She's got to be in town. You don't plan a wedding from another country."

ME: "I talked to STD. She hasn't RSVP'ed. Therefore, she's not coming."

BLAINE: "She's not coming. What does STD know? Did you talk to Farm Girl?"

ME: "Honey, would you please relax?"

BLAINE: "..."

ME: "Everything's fine."

BLAINE: "I want my ring."

ME: "Shall I overnight it to you?"

BLAINE: "..."

ME: "Relax."

BLAINE: "Talk to Farm Girl."

Dialtone.

Of course, I won't "Talk to Farm Girl." One, because I'm not Steppin Fetchit and, two, because I'm afraid of talking to Farm Girl. Or women, for that matter.

Blaine's upset because STD and Farm Girl get married tomorrow, and she thinks my ex will be there. And she's right. My ex, Vanessa Smiley, will be there. So will I. I haven't seen Van in three years, and I may still be in love with her. Fortunately, the chances of Blaine discovering this are remote, at best. I've lost the invite. Plus, these are my friends, not her's. It's unlikely Blaine will try to investigate independently either. She generally insists that others do her bidding.

I'm not sure what I expect to get out of this upcoming encounter with Van. I guess I hope to get "closure," although I fear I'll get "shame." Or perhaps, an "erection." Still, it's necessary.

Van has unwittingly galvanized everything, anyway. My bender began the day we broke up. My bender landed me my job at Punk. My job at Punk landed me Blaine. Blaine's pregnancy conveniently asserted itself a scant two weeks after the invitation to Van's wedding arrived.

I guess I want to know if I still give a damn. I've convinced myself that this somehow matters. Quaint, I know.

11:10 AM, Blaine's Apartment

With a quick scan of all four streets, I glide through a stop sign, then bank left up the alley that backs up to Blaine's comical "garden" apartment. I pull into her slot, and briefly consider bringing the car in with me, hauling it under my arm like a puppy. The chime and rattle of the rear fence gate sings as I drop under the stairs and let myself in. The door closes behind me, and everything is quiet, the air thin, still and cold. I always feel like a cop when I visit this place alone. I feel like I'm looking for something, like there's a crime scene around the corner, a galling monstrosity of blood and shattered

furniture. I also feel a little paternal, a little seizure of tenderness for my fair Blaine. The ancient oven, the ailing furniture, the pathetic, miniature t.v. plus VCR.

Like all modern, sub-30 couples, we have separate apartments, but live, for all intents and purposes, together. Essentially, she moved into my room, so we return here now only occasionally to pick up sundry items. Inevitably, I'm struck by the fact that her place has retained its original patois. About a year ago my digs underwent a radical, whirlwind feminization. Opening my medicine cabinet one bleary morning, I found a kind of meth lab in miniature. Tongs, beakers, snake venom, bat wings, oxygen tanks. Claymores, laughing gas. Everything. Formerly my medicine cabinet had been totally barren, almost clinically bacheloresque. Pry it open and all you'd ever find was a can of shaving cream and a stick of deodorant. Occasionally, when feeling unusually appealing to the opposite sex, a magazine of condoms stood proudly up there on the top shelf. But that was it. Stricken, I yanked back the shower curtain, discovering a whole metropolis of tubed personal products around the spigot, with some kind of satellite community above in the shower caddy. In the soap dish there was something that approximated a bar of soap in

size and weight, but looked more like fudge mixed with granola. And my modern marvel, two-in-one, whizbang, burn-your-scalp-clean-off shampoo *plus* conditioner had disappeared. In its place were a dozen gardeny smelling hair care products, as well as a foam starburst souvenir hanging from the showerhead. I pulled myself together and made do with what I could find. I shaved with a green, porpoise shaped disposable that I found at the rear of the shower, my razor having apparently been medivaced out. Scrubbed my teeth with something that may actually have been intended for eyebrows. After that, I stepped carefully back into the shower, where I found an acceptable shampoo (from Finland) and with this pinched under my arm like a newspaper, fingered my way around until I found a conditioner (technically, a "rinse.") I got to work. I knew basically what I was doing, but the shampoo *and* conditioner process did add almost an hour to my morning turnaround time. Exiting, I planted a wet foot in some kind of mitten, did a David Lee Roth-style scissor kick and whacked the point of my elbow on a towel rack. Climbing back up in front of the mirror, I primped briefly, then went again into the medicine cabinet, this time for my deodorant. Surely that was still there, I smirked, and was wrong and thereafter applied apple-scented Dry Debutante or something

under each arm. It wasn't until about lunchtime that I emerged.

Over the next several weeks my entire schedule was thrown into disarray. I was even late to work on several occasions. On the other hand, I was late to work on several occasions owing to a round or two of huffing, sneering, halitotic morning sex. Blaine's all about morning sex, considering it a sort of constitutional exercise that braces one up for a big day at work. So there's a tradeoff. It's not all on this or that side of the ledger. And since that first day, when I walked into what I expected to be my bathroom and instead found a kind of rainforest of pillows, quilts, and experimental toiletries, I've grown accustomed to it. I've even grown to appreciate certain aspects. The gruff, all business attitude of the loofa on the backs of my arms is particularly enjoyable. And the sands work wonders on my pores, which don't really exfoliate properly. I can barely live with my nose. It's like New Blackhead City. All I can say is this: Thank God for the apricot mask.

Xenophite. Xenophite. Xenophite. Oh, by the way, I've put her plastic draped pantsuits flat in the car. I'm now

actually in her bathroom, examining the contents of her medicine cabinet. My fingers nimbly dance through the ranks of squat, orange plastic canisters, twisting them around, holding labels up to the light. No shortage of prescription medicines here. Good working light too. The sausage coil neon bulb throws no nonsense, surgical quality wattage around.

Incidentally, no Xenophite or Thorinine was to be found in her top dresser drawer. Just the standard Claritin, contact solution and wearied diaphragm. Always happy to see that that hasn't been taken along for the trip.

I see through half her scams, but it's the other half that I worry about. And I don't think she's pulling a fast one on me here, with this kid gambit. She wouldn't fake a pregnancy. She'd *get* pregnant. That's her style. And anyway she's been talking about children incessantly for months. But I'd be remiss if I didn't check things out. Trust, but verify.

Thorinine. Thorinine. Thorinine.

Which is not to say I don't love Blaine. I do. Absolutely. Desperately. Who wouldn't? But ours is a love bound together largely by this hysterical passion, manifested most often by outright spite. That, or violence. Or, of course, Sex. As with most modern relationships, sex was with us from the very beginning. It wouldn't be too generous to say our relationship is based entirely on sex, but only insofar as Blaine is undeniably sexy. In a way, she is Sex. Not to demean or disparage her in any way, but she fizzes sex. Like an angora sweater or a Shirley Temple. I, on the other hand, sweat sex. Cold, clammy sex. Like fear, I should think. We are, in some sense, an ideal match.

I take a look in her sexy closet. There's an odd, deep freezer quality about this joint, with its neat array of steel hooks and crisp shelves. The bedroom is Princess territory, obviously, but this here is the lair of Modern Blaine. It's a walk in. It's bigger than my entire bedroom. It's bigger, frankly, than the rest of her apartment. And there's a certain survivalist aesthetic to it, as if she were preparing for a Y2K scenario featuring a total retail meltdown. An arsenal of executive dressware to the left,

reams of sweaters over here, down this wall motley pants, shirts, skirts and everything else.

Her colors are interesting. Blaine isn't a Summer, Winter, or Spring. She's not even an Autumn, for that matter. I'm an Autumn, according to Mom. I stick to reds and oranges; they bring out the color in my cheeks. Blaine is no season at all. She's Moon Weather, Space Seasons, Climate Controlled UniSpring. Black. Charcoal. Gray. Light Gray. Silver. Bone White. There's that SS quality to her tailoring, too; that look you see on so many girls nowadays, especially in winter. That tight, trim black leather jacket? You know what I'm talking about. Ends just below the ass? "Modern Gestapo" is what GG calls it. You also see it in her business suits. A lean cut with a high stiff collar, ash gray lapels and a boot black turtleneck. Barbarella meets Gattaca. Yes, I love it.

I undo the rest of her joint mob style - the dressers, the closets, the fridge - in a vain search for some kind of exculpatory evidence. Winded and despondent, I belly up to her kitchen counter. I make a little cereal.

It's dark down here. Dark, like Duck Heaven. Duck Dark, if you will. It's also Duck Dank and Duck Depressing. I flip the switch near the peninsula counter, and in an ellipse of tracklight discover a brick of unopened bills. I think for a moment, consider them warily, then take them up.

I flip through the post dates. I know what I'm going to find, but I can't help myself and the shock jumps up at me like a beartrap. Not one is less than three months old. Two are from last August. Gas. Electric. Six credit card bills, a half dozen notes from the landlord. I see her in that instant, gathering them up from the fanned out mail at the foot of the door, knowing that she can't pay them, afraid in fact to even look at them, hoping, the way girls hope, that they'll *just go away*. All of sudden I'm swooning! I'm hurting and violent. How desperate I am to protect her! To have her cower behind me as I vanquish these advancing creditors/enemies. It's comical, yes -- of course! -- but I can't help it. Must all outed masculinity be comical?

Then my eyes drift back to the rings of hot light on the counter. A frame up? A con job? I flick the lights off,

then back on. The bills might as well have been spotlit and surrounded by flares. And she knows I always attack her cereal collection.

Of course, I smirk.

I see through half her schemes, as I say. So many of them are just a touch too contrived, just a little bit too ham-fisted. And somehow that fact makes me love her all the more. I smile, drag over the ashtray with a couple fingers, and ignite number nine. Ah Blaine! My heart aches.

I reexamine the envelopes for a bill from Dr. Kornfeld's office, but find nothing.

2:00 PM, Kensington Hills, SUBURBIA

I cruise up the curving drive of the Kensington Shooting Club, ushered by the neat rows of towering elms. I bring the car up on the carpet, jump out, breathe in broadly the stifling patrician stink, and toss the boy my keys. I pick up a headset in the sportshop and find HR on a small hill, a young man in a Kensington polo shirt squatting at the trap beside him. As I approach, HR empties

first one barrel, then the other. Two burst pigeons shatter in the distance.

I'm at his side. He sees me and we nod at one another. He's got the gun, an oily blue antique with ornate hammers behind two fluted, side by side barrels. It's beautiful. He breaks it open over his forearm. The shells hop out, followed by snarling white smoke. HR, with one gloved hand, plucks another couple of shells from his jacket - a Filson oil-finish number with a bloodstained game pouch that makes me admire the man in a way I almost consider inappropriate - and pokes them into the gun. He snaps it shut. The heavy wood of the stock kneading his meaty face, he settles in, his lizard eyes televised through his amber glasses.

"Pull," he murmurs. The kid yanks the trap, it's arm snaps around, and the disk lifts through the air, wobbling then straightening out on its trajectory. An instant later, it explodes in a cloud of dust, a few heavier chunks tumbling in the air. The muffled report of the gun is like an account of violence in a nearby canyon, its pitch ebbing and flowing, defining distances.

"HR!" I say, getting his attention. He turns to me, letting the butt rest on his hip, the barrel angled up, wisps of steam evaporating over each muzzle. I pause for effect, flicking my cigarette into the underbrush. He takes off his headset, pulls it down around his neck.

[This may come across as a little too Inside Baseball, but bear with me. I'm following up on some Big Advertising Ideas I'd laid on him in our first meeting.]

I say: "The question you have to ask yourself is: 'Do I buy his advertising-as-strategic-insult shit or not?'"

He hands something to the kid, then turns back to me and says (with an "Are you serious?" nod):

"Porn stars."

"Porn stars, HR."

He gives me his legendary poker face. I continue:

"Porn stars in everything. Selling everything. Porn stars everywhere. We make it a 'drive thru', one-size-fits-

all campaign for every client that walks through the door. Food, clothes, cars. Of course, they all have to be low-brow, middle market items, at least for right now. And of course, we don't *tell anybody* we're using porn stars. That'd ruin all the fun. But we make it a cookie cutter campaign, pay these chicks in trinkets and beads, make loads of money. It's advertising in a black box."

"Porn stars."

"Right."

Again he says nothing.

I say, "... Who's the guy who made Sable Stud millions by telling all the brothers to go out and 'Git Some!' HR, I had honkies drinking it. Do I get a line of credit here? Huh? Can a brother get a fucking witness?! Or are you bringing me aboard to bleed this firm dry? If I had porn stars selling Maxiroos, I would have had not only 40% of the female market, but about 5% of *male market* buying them ... by the gross ... within the year! Sex is all that matters to people these days. That and getting on TV. Who then better personifies true success than someone who gets paid

to have sex on TV? Porn stars, HR. The market's fucking crying out for it."

He stands there for a long moment, looking out into the distance, pointing with his worldly chin, his blaze orange glasses, his choppy, pumpkin-hued WASP hair.

"You realize you've already hired me, whether you're aware of it or not."

He doesn't look at me. He waits a moment, then asks: "Do you know where I live?"

I lie.

"Well, find out. Come by Monday at noon for lunch."

"I'll be there," I say, and with that, about-face and make my way down the little hill toward the clubhouse.

2:10 PM, Heading Home

I *am* the one the Ad Lords prophesied. One of them, anyway. I'm an Ad Messiah. Ask anybody.

Here's how it all happened. Basically somebody at PL owed my old man. So, when I decided it was time to get a real job, PL set me up with a desk, a phone, a stapler and a paycheck. Fortunately, I was still in the midst of my five month bender, and it wasn't long before I'd shot my mouth off in the middle of an extremely important meeting, this one with Reinhardt Beverage, PL's franchise client. I was sitting in a distant corner with strict instructions to keep my mouth shut and take good notes. When the meeting turned south, and Andy Reinhardt Jr., a ruddy little brat of merely 23, started wondering out loud where the hell the PL people were with the new ideas, I'd chimed in. "Nigga Please!" I'd said, not quite sure whether I was tossing out an idea or begging him to lighten up (I'd been watching a lot of BET at the time). In fact, I don't think I'd even realized I'd said it out loud. Every head turned, Shelly's the lowest, with eyes the size of cue balls. He mouthed: "What the fuck are you doing?" and I nodded magnanimously at him. "Who are you?" Reinhardt challenged. I'd identified myself as Will Standish, Chief Creative of Team Eight, instantly inventing a title and organization that still exists to this day. The other PL people were either too punchdrunk or dumbfounded or frightened to contradict me.

Reinhardt stewed for a moment, then his mind backtracked. "Nigger Please?" he'd asked.

That afternoon the two of us hit Henson's for two enormous steaks and about a dozen Gibsons a piece, during which I'd explained (that is, made up) the whole concept. "Do you really think all these niggers want some fat cracker telling them which malt liquor to buy?" was more or less my theme, with 'niggers and Fat crackers' operating as a motif/catechism through the entire pitch. None of which Andy bought, incidentally. He did however like the none-to-subtle racism. "Well, sure, there's that," I'd conceded.

My last recollection is of Andy on the other side of a frothy hot tub, cackling away, a Jamaican chick in each arm. I eventually made him out to be one of these pink, blotchy, indestructible Rednecks. I can only assume that he'd screwed, showered and gone right back to the office because the next morning at 8:00 a.m. I got a call at home from his secretary. Reinhardt was going with us, with me specifically. I strolled into PL at 11:15. Shelly was humping my leg by 11:17.

Three months later we had our 30-second spot. Ghetto Bar. Interior. All-Star Pimp rolls up and asks for a malt liquor. Bartender pushes across a MuscleSnake. Pimp, outraged, (this guy was great, by the way) throws his head back and slightly to the left, then barks: "*Nigga Please!?! Gimme a Sable Stud!*" Bar goes dead quiet. Record skips. Bartender hands over a cold Stud. Pimp pops it open. Throws back about half the bottle. Gasps. Murmurs. He sets it on the bar. Wipes his mouth with his entire arm. Looks around the room, then says (again, head back and left): "Damn! That good!" Party explodes. Snap fingers. Cue the bitches. Pimp smiles Deion Sanders style straight into the camera. Braying horse kicks in. Logo pops up, "*Nigga Please!?!*" in purple, neon graffiti. Fade out. I almost cried the first time I saw it.

Shortly thereafter, the *Ooh, Daddy!!* Campaign (Insensate for Men): trampy babysitter weeps inconsolably at whiff of cologne, whimpers: "Ooh! Daddy ...". After that, *Take This Fob and Shove It* (Maxiroos): lesbo couple quit jobs, hit open road, along with a trunkful of the only maxi (by women, for women) they know can trust.

Across the nation hosts of cash registers sang a deafening Marseilles. At that year's awards dinner, when I was passed over, my outraged public went nuts, crying, shouting, waving fists, jumping over tables. A *Lord of the Flies* slash "Give us Barabas!!" kind of frenzy.

The subsequent week I quit PL and put myself on the market. Rash? Perhaps. But that's me. That's my industry rep. I'm a life-taker and a heart-breaker.

And really, I mean, it's all just like falling off a log for me. Was it Beethoven who went blind (or was he struck dumb?) but still kicked out all of these apparently brilliant symphonies? Same thing here. These billion dollar ideas just sort of radiate from my brain.

5:00 PM, My and GG's Apartment

The rest of the afternoon has passed uneventfully. I'm watching television, the Dating Game specifically, until the door rattles and shoots open.

GG, a raincoat slung over one arm, an umbrella and briefcase in his hands, trundles into the room and drops

into chair. We take in the final dating round in silence. When it's over, he gets up and makes his way to his room.

"Anything good on the tube?" he calls out, over his shoulder.

"It's Nazi Night on the History Channel."

"Heydrich?"

"Goebbels."

"Again?"

I shrug.

"Shatski and I are still on tonight," he half-yells. Ted Shatski's a PI on retainer with GG's firm. He looks exactly like what you'd expect him to look like. He drives an *El Turismo*, for Christ's sake.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You still gonna join us?"

I examine my beer bottle, now empty, then call out, "Yes."

By working GG means that they're staking out "pre-divorcees." He insists that I join him on these excursions every now and then. He's convinced it will extinguish any intentions I have of getting hitched. See, GG has all but devoted his life to the annihilation of marriage. First of all, he's a divorce attorney, although, not in the normal sense. It's not merely a job, you see, so much as a vocation. GG, and he will tell you this, was born for divorce law. Some guys, when they were kids, wanted to be firemen, policeman, soldiers. I myself wanted to be a garbage man. I couldn't imagine anything better than cruising around town on the outside of one of those enormous trucks, my face smeared and unfearing. GG, since the moment I met him (the fourth grade) wanted to be a divorce lawyer. He's always considered Seth Miller, his mother's attorney, the most important person in his life, and he's modeled his career after him. (Seth died last year, at the Palm. The husband of a client beat him to death with a champagne stand. GG considered it a particularly romantic exit.)

GG is an associate at Pott Fishbien, arguably the city's premier divorce shop. Half their business, the most lucrative half, are those \$90 dollar, cash-or-credit, sign-here-here-and-here divorces, where GG has made quite a name for himself. I know of at least three cases where GG actually convinced a couple who theretofore hadn't thought of divorce at all that it was really their only option. He's sort of a divorce rainmaker. A minor bidding war broke out in the months before he graduated from law school. Pott nabbed him, adding to his salary a brand new Alfa Spider. He'll be a partner within 3 years.

He reenters, stage left.

"We're leaving at 7:00."

"Alright."

**10:50 PM, in Shatski's El Turismo, Outside the Frazier
Motor Lodge**

We reverse into a parking space, across from room 211. Shatski breaks out a thermos of coffee, and GG a pack of Camels.

I sling over the front seat and snatch a cigarette.

I enjoy surveillance. I admit it. It's like t.v. I brood theatrically in back, reclining, waiting for the show to start, ashing out a cracked window.

At about 11:00 pm a car nearly sideswipes us. Ted swears. I bounce up between them.

A brown 350SL whips into the slot and the doors fly open. Mrs. Irving Vosiovich, (Surveillance Subject 1) tilts out, slamming the door behind her and dropping her keys. She bends over to pick them up and the three of us all sit higher to get a good look at her ass. Two full thighs high above syringed, nine inch heels. Miguel Tejada (Surveillance Subject 2) makes a less rowdy, more elegant exit. He's wearing sunglasses, and a shiny, flouncy shirt.

"Is he gay?" I ask.

"Yes, he is," Shatski answers.

"Homo," GG adds clinically.

"Are a lot of these gigolo-types gay?"

"Yes, they are."

I make a mental note. You can never really tell these days who's straight and who's not. GG, for example, is considered by most to be a homo of Liberacian dimensions, and his new celibacy kick only fans the flames. However, he's absolutely straight, though his often vocalized resentment of women generally makes everyone wonder.

"Show time," GG announces, watching through the binoculars as Voisiovich finally succeeds in unlocking the door to unit 12A.

"Why the motel?" I ask, "It seems so low rent."

"Precisely," GG explains. "She's into low rent, which I must admit is kind of cute. Usually it's this joint, but

every now and then it's the back seat of Miguel's Monte Carlo."

The light flicks on, and GG hands back the binoculars again. I take a look in. It is low rent. Rayon comforter with a lime green paisley pattern. A couple oil paintings of old barns on the wall outside the head.

I watch as Miguel primps in the mirror. In the reflection, Voisiovich pries off her heels. Before I know it, she's stripped down to her birthday suit, all very matter of fact. She puts her heels back on and climbs onto the bed. She handcuffs her wrists to the headboard as Miguel disappears into the bathroom.

Then the lights go out.

"Very nice," GG says. Shatski watches with cool professionalism.

A moment passes. Then Shatski throws a switch on a radio that sits in the well between him and GG. There's static, a brief whistle of feedback, then the signal comes in clear and you can hear some rustling around in the room.

"How'd you get the mike in there? How'd you know which room?"

"Know the owner."

"... I think," GG says, turning to Shatski. "I think we're looking at a Bad Lieutenant scenario here ..."

"I think you're right," Shatski agrees, peering over another sip of coffee.

"Are they going to draw the shades? What's a Bad Lieutenant ..."

"Cue the siren!" GG interrupts, bringing the binoculars back up to his eyes quickly. Almost instantly a violet turret light races around the motel room. Shatski is readying his camera equipment again. In a single motion he flips up the steering wheel and rolls out of the car.

"Where's he going?"

"Close ups"

The door slams, chasing in some of the humid night. I follow Shatski as he crosses the street and makes his way toward the motel, crouching low along the drainage ditch. Then I hear it, over the radio. It's Miguel's voice. He says,

"Do choo know how fass choo gooing?"

GG says, "God I love this kid!"

I lunge over the seat and snag Ted's binoculars. It takes me a while for my eyes to adjust to the light.

"What's going on?" I whisper, anxiously searching the room. GG doesn't answer.

"I wasn't exceeding the speed limit, officer."

My eyes, now adjusted, find Miguel. He has a badge pinned to his shirt, a Chips type motorcycle helmet and mirrored silver sunglasses.

"NO! Choo were!"

He pauses for a moment and bends over to look at something in his hand. He's reading from a card.

" ... *Sisty-fife in a Serty-fife.*"

His head closes in on it. He twists to get some of the siren light. Then he takes off his glasses. He still apparently can't read it.

"What the hell is he wearing?" GG laughs. I now notice Miguel has chaps on, but nothing else from the waist down.

"*Choo a bad lady,*" he says, apparently adlibbing. He peers down at the card again.

GG: "What is my motivation here ..."

"*What are you doing?*"

"*Ees okay.*"

"*You skipped a line.*"

"Ees okay, ees okay, Lady ..."

"Dammit. See, this is why I give you the script in advance!"

"Ees okay, I said!"

"She writes the lines?" I say.

"Failed actress and screenwriter," GG answers.

It looks like he's got it now.

"Okay," he says. He rolls shoulders.

I now notice that Miguel has a billy club in one hand. He holds it up like a classical actor.

"Choo **were** exceeding the speed leemit."

"I was?"

"You were!"

"I was? I'm so sorry officer! It's just that I'm in a rush to get back to my sorority formal!"

"I afraid I have to write you a teekit."

"Oh no!"

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Isn't there anything we could do to keep you from writing me a ticket, officer?"

"Are you trying to bribe me with sex?"

"What do you think?"

"Chess, I think you are!"

There's a hoarse whistle of splitting air, following by a crack like a rifle shot, followed by a cry. What I see

is a pirouette of silver blue and pink, followed by a pause and then the liquid white glow of Miguel's smile.

"Officer ..." she whimpers.

"Ow!" GG.

"Choo haf busted tailight!" Miguel snarls, delivering another swat. I see now that he's hitting her high on her haunches, where her ass meets her thigh.

"We're not there yet!"

"Choo speeek when I say okay!" Miguel counters, now visibly aroused. He swats her again. She yelps.

"You're off script!"

She lashes out at him with a needle-nosed heel.

Another swat. Another scream.

"You little, wetbacked hack!" she cries.

Miguel snares one of her legs.

I drop the binoculars on the seat beside me. I just listen.

"Get off me!"

"Ow!"

"Not that, Shithead. The other one."

"Choo wanna dis?"

*"Can you ... I said ... Please ... Yeah. YES. No. No. YES!
HERE?"*

"Yeah. Right there. God! How is that comfortable?!"

*"Please? Please. Please, no ... You're ... no ... please ...
you're hurting me ... Oh yes. Just ... Please ... Don't ... Choo ...
I need it ... I do ... I've been so so so bad ... Choo have ... "*

GG comes over the seat. He stares right at me.

"This is sick," I say. The chorus filling the cabin,
the night.

"Isn't it?"

*... Oh Please ... PLEASE ... PLEASE! ... I CAN'T TAKE IT ... I
CAN'T TAKE IT ... OH YES ... I can't ... YES ...*

With cocked eyebrow he says: "This is your future,
Ebenezer."

... nnnNNNNEEEHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ... OH MY GOD!!!!!!

GG, looking back in, over his shoulder: "She can bring
a character to life ..."

"So every marriage turns out this way, is that the
idea?"

"Pretty much."

"My parents' didn't."

"Oooohhhh ..."

"She's pregnant, G."

"I know." His eyes go wide.

"I don't think it's right to bring another fatherless child into the world."

Oh GOD!! ... Shit ... Uhn, SHIT ... SHIT!!...

"Look at you? You're a disaster."

"True."

... WHAT THE?! ... DON'T STOP ... [smack] [scream] ... OH!!!

GG winces and laughs, turning back around, sinking into his seat.

You ASSHOLE!

GodDAMMIT!

Oh, GOD?!

YOU LITTLE HACK!

What are you doing now?

What?

CHOO!

WHAT!

What are you doing to me?

I CAN'T SEE YOU! LET ME SEE YOU!

She whimpers a fading melancholy note, of agony or ecstasy, and as it lingers GG briefly harmonizes with it, roughly adjusting the pitch of his voice to meet hers.

"... annddd Cut." He says, eventually, clicking off the radio and falling back. "That's a wrap, everybody."

For atmosphere, the crickets in the drainage ditch pipe away, a fugue of power drills. The fireflies burn in the air.

"I love her."

He sighs.

"... what?"

"Nothing."

"No. What?"

"Nothing, Just, [sigh]."

The driver's side door swings wide. Shatski appears, squeezing himself into the car, dropping the wheel in place. He twists the key and the Turismo comes alive.

"I went through four rolls," he says breathlessly, looking at each of us, then firing up the car and lunging out onto the Parkway.

CHAPTER 4--SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 1999**4:31 AM, My and GG's Apartment**

I've had another one of those dreams. Cigarette in one hand, coffee cup in the other, the blaze of TV light in my face, I stayed up as long as I could. My lungs percolating. My head singing like a slot machine. But I blanked out eventually, here on the couch. It's one thing the way I think of her when I'm awake. Consciousness all by itself is really more than I can manage. But unconsciousness? Sleep? I can't handle that either? Really? I don't catch a break anywhere, is that the idea?

These dreams, they're really just too appalling. That moment when she turns to me, on her back, her head falling across her bare shoulder, and she addresses me directly, that blue soliloquy. What is it she says? I never remember.

All I know is what she does. And with whom. And roughly how many times and ways. All this unwanted info is in my head, ready and waiting, when I spring back to life.

And now I'm awake again. Dramatically, I count the hours until I'll see Van Smiley. In the dark the VCR clock blinks 12:00. The real time is 4:31 a.m. It's Saturday morning. Or Friday night, as you prefer. I determine I'll see Van in exactly six hours and twenty-nine minutes. Then Blaine shoves her out of the way. In my mind she pushes her tits into place and puckers her mean lips at me. Blaine's flight arrives at 4:43 p.m. tomorrow. Sunday. She'll be here in 36 hours, 12 minutes. US Air 333. Gate 31C. Runway 5. It will come in from the South Southeast. It'll come in low, under our radar. It'll skim the waves. It's a surprise attack. It's Flight Tora Tora Tora. I'm going to have a child. I'm going to be a Father. I'm going to be a married man with a child and a wife. Unless of course I can somehow expose this pregnancy of hers as the fake one it may or may not be.

Okay. You know what? Fuck it. FUCK IT! Yeah! That's right! You got that! I'm going to tell you all about these dreams of mine. I mean, they're my goddamn dreams!

Conveniently (for you, that is) I write them down. Yeah, that's the kind of asshole I am. *The kind that writes shit down.* As craven as it may be, I know there's material in there somewhere. It feels like a commercial somehow. *That's* my thinking. You like that? Disgusting, isn't it?

Alright. Here goes. These dreams, to be quite honest with you, have got to be going around. They were inspired by our shared sexual fantasies, after all, and quite a few people are doing that sort of thing nowadays, right? This "What's your wildest fantasy?" thing? Blaine did most of the sharing, by the way. Naturally, I was appalled, as if I had any right to be. To the extent I had any fantasies at all, they pretty much began and ended with two girls and a roll of cookie dough. It's this sweettooth. Her's were all based on a Good Cop, Bad Cop scenario, but could only be accurately described as Bad Cop, Extremely Bad Cop. I just sat there galled. And that night I went to sleep galled, my jaw just swinging there, rocking on its hinges, galling away, fraud that I am.

We never really shared our fantasies again. But in my subconscious it was a box office smash. It owned my mental multiplex, playing on all 18 screens. And along the way my

corroded little head took over, doing a little editing, adding a cameo or two, and (this has always unnerved me) making each installation a period piece. These dreams grew into something a lot like a John Jakes novel, if you've ever read any of those.

Am I losing you? Let me give you some quick examples:

Berlin, 1944: *Hitler has put a bullet in his head. Stalin has reached the Reich's capital. Blaine frantically stuffs DeutscheBanc T-bills into her brassiere, the help and her SS major husband having ditched her, floating their way toward Argentina. She can hear Russian being spoken below her apartment in the streets. She grabs candlesticks, carving knives, cramming them into her medic's bag. Her blouse, the last of her concerns, is open well below her diaphragm, her black hair is pinned up haphazardly. Her look, frankly, says Sex, as it always does, only this time it says Sex with a trembling voice, hinting at an unraveling mind.*

There's a brutal, ham-fisted pounding at the door. She stiffens. Before she has a chance to move the door is launched off its hinges, rattling to the floor in a cloud

of dust. Her first thought: "I told those Pollacks to dust!" Her next thought is aborted when her eyes meet the Russian squad, or more likely platoon. They collapse into the room like Keystone cops, suffering advanced stages of mange, scurvy, rubella, trenchfoot, maybe the mumps. One of them, his face rich and swarthy in stubble, catches sight of her and absentmindedly grips the shirtsleeve of his sergeant. The sergeant turns. His eyes, deep and starved, seize her. Another soldier whimpers something, something she can tell is grateful, thank God-ish.

She unleashes a snarling whip of invective, every curse she knows. The Russians, war weary and exhausted beyond the capacity for shock, simply wait her out. One rubs the filthy hair on his head. Another picks his teeth. She finishes, breathless, heaving. One of the Russians spits out what looks like a molar, and then, without so much as a look exchanged among them, they hunker forward en masse. She reaches into her bag for the knife, but they're already there, a meaty paw wrapping around her wrist. She struggles, taking a couple savage slaps across the face, but finally succumbs to the cool nose of a revolver pressed up tightly under her eye. She looks down the barrel at all of them, wide-eyed, disbelieving.

They strip down like a swim team late for a meet. Now she's on the bed, her wool skirt in the other room, her legs arrayed like antennae, held in place by a couple of teenage soldiers. The sergeant is suddenly clambering over her ...

I won't go any further. Do you see where I'm going? Would you be surprised to learn that she winds up enjoying it? Try sleeping through that action every night.

Basically the two thematic ingredients are always: a) Treason, and b) Multiple partners. And as I've mentioned, these dreams are always period pieces. St. Petersburg, 1815: French soldiers catch her, the leggy peasant, darning her knickers. Near Lake Erie, 1570: Young Iroquois squaw weaves basket, set up on by band of Mohawks. Let's see, there's Bataan Death March, the fields of antebellum Alabama (she's black in that one), the Ardennes, Valley Forge, Pellopenesia, Guadacanal, Boer War (soldiers are black in this one), and even a home grown, post nuclear exchange scenario in which I occasionally give either her or the soldiers exotic deformities like three noses, gills, webbed feet, no eyes, etc.

Obviously, it's me. I'm the problem here. It's my psychosis that makes Blaine this monster. I have to have her behave monstrously to remind me that I'm still alive. Of course, she is a terror of sorts. She recognizes no rules of propriety if they stand between her and what she wants. She must be a legend by now in the Service industry. She must be borderline mythological, like a Berserker. Upending whole racks of thousand dollar outfits. Dressing down fruitcake waiters so loudly and bitingy that other tables choke and giggle. Smashing credit card swipers the way De Niro smashes payphones. It terrifies and thrills me. Without her I wonder if I wouldn't simply fade away.

How we met is a decent example: It was at a party. I was drunk. I'd been drunk continuously for the approximately five months. I was smoking on the porch, with the burnouts and the kegs, when this squad of ethnic weightlifter types came pushing their way towards the beer. I got bumped, lost half my drink and said either "Watch it Fonzarelli" or "Easy Fonzie," or "Heads up, Wop!" After which, I'd turned back to finish a point I was making to one of the burnouts. Next thing I know, my jaw attempted to leap from my face and get down the stairs on its own, like

it had forgotten something important. The rest of me followed. My cigarette bounced through my hair, the rear stairwell jolted over me, a naked bulb bounding across my eyes. I hit the landing like a load of coal, then passed out.

When I came to I was staring straight up, into a nimbus of heads centered on the aforementioned naked light bulb. Someone was stroking my temple, smoothing my hair. I peered up and there she was. An eclipse, a yellow thread of light outlining her hair. A crown of light! An angel?! I thought. A Madonna!? It's about fucking time! My head was in her lap. Her soft fingers traced my wounds. A roomful of blurry people leaned over me, but it was as if they weren't even there. I just smiled. I may have cried too. That touch, that woman's nurturing touch. Even through all the bruiseache, it intoxicated me. I nuzzled my battered head shamelessly into her thigh. Unsatisfied, I wrapped my arms around her waist. I nursed briefly on the heel of her shoe, after that I tried to crawl bodily into her lap. I'd forgotten all about you! Where have you been? Where did you go? She clicked her tongue. She stroked my cheek. I smiled and curled into her lap, then passed out again, contentedly, a tired child after a long Christmas morning.

When I came to again, I was in her apartment, in her room, alone. I pivoted to a sitting position on the side of the bed, aware of light and activity in another room. I waited for my head to come back together. It felt like someone had slipped a bowling ball under my right ear. My angel returned with ice in a ziplock bag, and we had our first conversation. I learned her name, and she mine. She informed me as well that it was her boyfriend, Rick Johnson, who'd cold-cocked me. I learned that she didn't like pigeons, corn on the cob, bees, or, for that matter, scary movies. I did my signature song and dance about how ours is a military family, on both sides, and that I was the first male to pass up service. She explained that she had a friend who did ROTC at UVA. A silence ensued. After a few moments, she removed the compress from my forehead and looked into my eyes, first one then the other, pushing my hair behind my ears. Then she leaned forward and kissed me gently on the forehead. And next on the cheek. And then, ever so slightly, on the lips. Our noses touching, mere centimeters apart, we paused then kissed again, gently. This time we kept at it for awhile. It got more vigorous. Soon our tongues dove in.

Shortly thereafter we had sex, and later she did this unspeakable thing with the ice bag. Now I'm no genius, but I'm no idiot either. I knew what was going on here. At least partly, I was being used to get back at this Rick guy, which was fine with me. I didn't care. The next morning I left before she woke up. She called that afternoon. I don't know how she got my number. She all but insisted on coming over. I kicked her out at midnight. She was back the very next evening.

One thing led to another. I could really have cared less. I'd call her up at 2 am on a Tuesday, gin brimming under my eyeballs, and demand intercourse. Half an hour later she'd be at the door. Raincoat, no clothes underneath. Totally predictable, true, but who doesn't want some predictability every now and then? If I was still in the mood when she arrived, well then we went at it, as young kids are wont to do. If I wasn't, I'd slam the door in her face. Naturally, this only made her want me more desperately. Meanwhile, as I have mentioned, Rick Johnson chased me around a bit, caught me on three occasions, one with a couple friends in tow, but, as I say, I was oblivious to pain at that point in my life.

But every now and then, in a post-coital sweat, we'd watch TV together. And one night I saw out of the corner of my eye that she wasn't just watching television. She was starstruck. She was seeing what I was seeing, maybe not precisely, but pretty close. She loves commercials. Soon we were watching TV together every single night, both of us enraptured, pressed low into our sofa like we were absorbing heavy G's. Occasionally we'd even forego the pre-TV screw for a quiet, intimate blowjob. And every now and then, there in the blue electric gloaming, she'd make me rest my head in her lap, my knockabout skull, and inside my buzzing bug light brain. She'd stroke and smooth my hair. Her thumb would run along my eyebrows. I'd press my cheek into her thigh and watch reruns of 90210 or Friends or Road Rules. And ... well - I won't lie to you - she'd mother me. She'd mother me, and I needed mothering. I still need it.

My grand psychoses. I know how I talk. I *know*. But she's not who I say she is. I shouldn't be so hard on her. Lord knows I've got my problems too. And there is something between us. When she presses her palm up against my forehead to check my temperature, my heart breaks. She fixes my collar and I faint. Every damn time. In her lap, she'd pieced me back together. And in a way now, I'm always

there, collapsed in her arms, battered, buggered, deboned, my limbs folded up like a tent.

**11:05 AM, Reception Following the STD / Farm Girl
Wedding, SUBURBIA**

Here's how we got here. GG shakes me awake on the couch and pushes a cup of coffee in my hand. We take his car. The wedding is supposed to start at 10:00, and it's precisely 9:57 when GG and I leap over the wings the Spider, run down Elm Street, hurdle into and across someone's well-maintained front yard, then dart up Church Street. Even from the sidewalk several houses down, at full sprint, it's a sight. The doors propped wide open on the morning, revealing the wedding party and all the various hangers on humming and buzzing around. We enter pinned to the wall, slithering around the ceremonial throng, nodding politely to those we knew, huddling into the second to last row.

Van's nowhere to be seen.

The wedding ends. We empty out into the afternoon. Nothing. All GG can offer is a shrug as he lights his cigarette. Our gang, twenty strong, circles up near the limos. STD and Farm Girl exit to some fanfare. I watch discreetly from the periphery of the crowd. I don't see her.

Nor is she at the reception, at least when we arrive. It's not a huge wedding, and I don't see how I could have missed her.

I try to relax. GG and I mingle by the bar. We speak briefly with STD's mother and stepfather, and we chat up a few of our fellow, nameless extras.

"Well," a low, oily voice purrs behind us, "Ain't this the capitol of Crackertown."

We turn around simultaneously. It's Levon Taylor, classmate, investment banker, Afro-American.

"Taylor," I say.

"Now this is weird. I was just telling Standish here that what would really put me in the mood is a good shoe shine, and, lo and behold, you come dancing over like you read my mind."

"Oh Lordy! I's afraid I dun plum forgot my ole shinebox!"

"You dun plum forgot it!"

"I's afraid so!"

GG and Taylor do their routine a little longer. Eventually, as ever, GG starts addressing Taylor as Puddin' Head and handing him pocket change. LT marvels for a full minute at each coin, his jaw swinging wide, then does a little knee-and-elbow dance of appreciation.

I see her.

"Vanessa's here," I say.

GG shoots me a look.

LT takes a sip of his cognac and says, "She is. Just showed up."

Me: "Where was she?"

Taylor: "I don't know. Just saw her get out of a car with some giant honky."

GG looks.

"My God." He says, "That guy's like seven feet tall. Is he a Viking?"

Levon: "I don't know that. I do know she's wearing a diamond the size of a basketball on her finger."

"Everything's basketball to you people, isn't it."

Levon again dances briefly, singing the refrain from Curtis Blow's *They're Playin Basketball*.

GG: "That's one great looking guy."

She and this guy are talking to an older couple. It's a fairly involved conversation. For some reason, I get the impression they're friends of her parents. I hone in on her finger. Even from this distance I can see the ring. It's lit up like a mirrorball.

Do you remember that scene in Jaws? The one where Dreyfus splays open the gut of that first shark they caught, and everything in the shark's belly spills all over the dock? Well that's what happens to me. It's like the lock to my heart springs wide and everything tumbles right out on the floor. Like throwing up.

I take one look at the Aryan with her and my face goes slack. Where'd they get this guy, Mt. Eiger? A jaw like a concrete block, hair the color of raw wood, eyes a peacock blue. He looks like a cartoon.

Levon, "The guy's name? Incredible really, it's HELMUT VON RIBBENTHORPE."

GG does a spit-take.

Levon: "That's right."

GG, cleaning himself up: "Jesus!"

We all watch. Her dress is a faint yellow. Her skin is deep brown. She glances over and smiles. Levon raises a glass.

"Van Von Ribbenthorpe," he says.

**11:10 AM, Reception Following the STD / Farm Girl
Wedding, SUBURBIA**

I fill up my drink, and then I walk right up to her. She sees me coming, and I wait at her elbow briefly until she finishes her conversation. She turns. She smiles that smile of hers, three parts affection, one part concern.

"Hi, Will," She says.

"Hi."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good."

"How are you."

"Fine, thanks."

"... Did you miss the ceremony? I thought you were going to be there."

"I did miss it. Helmut was supposed to get in this morning at 8:00, but his flight was delayed."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I feel awful about it."

"Congratulations, by the way."

"Thank you."

"Helmut's a good guy, I take it?"

"Yeah, he is."

"That's great."

The conversation sputters out here.

"I'm sorry about your parents, Will."

"Ah, thanks."

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, thanks."

"I'm sorry."

I smile.

"They were lovely people."

"So you're a television executive," I say. You were a born muse, and now you're a television executive.

"Yep. You're doing advertising?"

"I just left Punk Laughlin. I'm taking a job with Hillman Reynolds."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yeah."

"Well, congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Are you still painting anyway?"

"Not really."

"You know we've still got one of your pieces hanging at the house."

"Oh no."

"It's that one with the blocks and circles. What's it called anyway?"

"'Blocks and Circles' sounds appropriate."

"So you're really not painting anymore?"

"No."

"Hmm ..."

"Indeed."

"I think we've sold out, Will."

"Is that even possible nowadays?"

"Who tied this?"

"Grant."

"That's what I thought. I think he deliberately tries to make you look messy to make himself look that much better."

"I think you're right."

"Hold still."

"Alright."

I feel her fingers on my neck.

"There," she says, finished.

"Thank you."

"How is he doing?"

"Grant? He's fine."

"Good."

"He's celibate."

"Really."

"Yes."

"Any reason why?"

"I think he has a reason. He may have told me, but I forgot it."

"He hasn't RSVP'ed. Would you get on him about that?"

"Sure."

"I'm glad at least that you're coming to the wedding."

"Thanks for inviting me."

"Of course. Did you think I wouldn't?"

"No. No."

"You're here alone?"

"My girlfriend couldn't make it."

"Girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

"Blaine."

"Blaine."

"I think her mother and father wanted something that sounded overbearing."

"Ah. How long have you two been together?"

"Couple years."

"You only RSVPed for one to our wedding."

"Yes, she can't make it, unfortunately."

"That's too bad. Are things going well?"

"Yes."

"Good. Where's she from?"

"Heatherton Hills."

"The asylum or the suburb?"

"The asylum."

"Seriously?"

"Her father's the director."

"Really."

"Yep."

"Wow."

"Well," I say. "You look great."

"Thanks. So do you."

"I'm a wreck."

"But you look great."

"I know."

"Are you a wreck?"

"No. I was kidding. I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"That wasn't a cry for help or anything?"

"No, no."

"Good."

"I prefer the auto-erotic suicide attempt when I cry for help."

"That's right. I remember."

"My career really is an incredible success."

"That's great."

"And Blaine is everything I could ever hope for."

"That's great, Will."

"And the sex ..."

"Don't work blue."

"My life is blue. That's the only way I work."

"..."

"This guy's a good guy?"

"Helmut?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, he is."

"That's good."

"Blaine's a good girl?"

"The greatest."

"Good."

"I'm empty."

"Yeah, I am too. And I've got to mingle a little more,
I'm afraid."

"Alright."

"Good."

"Alright."

"... I'm glad you're back in America, Vanessa."

"Thanks."

**12:00 to 4:00 PM, Reception Following the STD / Farm
Girl Wedding, SUBURBIA**

The reception is a typical disaster. I drink. I dance.
I proposition Anne and Marjorie for a little ménage in the

Cloak Room. For some inscrutable reason, Helmut forces me into an impromptu little tango, this to "YMCA." Later, as I nurse a time-out cocktail, a young man crawls wordlessly into my lap and upends his ice cream cone in my crotch.

Some time thereafter, I come to in a bathroom stall. I step in a toilet. I get lost in what has to be the biggest kitchen I've ever seen. I do emerge, however, up one pack of cigarettes - KOOLS - that I find in somebody's jacket. Lighting one off a burner, I simultaneously ignite a roll of toilet paper that I hadn't spotted beforehand. I manage to defeat the fire with a few wallops from a frying pan. Right around then a bellhop - a black kid built like the Oscar trophy with a name tag that reads "LaRonald" - materializes and kills the roaring alarm. Together we return, arm in arm, to the lobby. We have a great time together en route, interrupted only when some asshole makes me sign something at the front desk. Then LaRonnie and I wind up back at the reception, GG stumbles into view and I pull a ten off him and tuck it in LaRonnie's chest pocket.

I weave around the dancefloor for a while, then beat a final retreat to the head. I stand there, urinating interminably, staring at the tile, my mind ablaze. Suddenly

I realize it's over. She's over. I'm over. I thought I was different now, and now I know.

GG rams through the door punk rock style. With his scanning eyes he locates me, apparently his objective. He props a hip on the sink - this takes a couple tries - and he lights up a smoke.

"Well, Senator, shall we adjourn to the Jockey Room and get this night going?" he asks, as I zip up. He's always saying things like this, in case you haven't noticed.

Within an hour, having grabbed Anne and Marjorie, we're in a remote booth of the Jockey Room. Almost immediately, GG passes out sitting straight up, his arms tightly folded over his chest. Meanwhile, I again engage in the simultaneous seduction of Anne and Marjorie, which goes wonderfully until *they* both pass out, collapsing one on top of the other.

I look at my watch. It's 3:13 a.m. Sunday. Today. She's coming home today. It'll be done tonight.

I sit there, nursing my final cocktail, coldly,
laboriously plotting, then my own curtain falls on the
evening.

SUNDAY, JUNE 15, 1999

6:13 PM, Airport, Gate 13C

The flight's late, and I take that as a bad sign. I can't afford too many more delays. The iron is hot. I need to whack the crap out of it. Besides, our reservations are for 7:00. It's a half hour drive to the restaurant.

Meanwhile, depressingly, everything is beautiful. It's one of those quiet, flawless Sundays, an unofficial Easter afternoon. A moratorium on all clouds, a young, virile, sleepy-eyed Sun, a dozen glittering jets gliding proudly through the sky. The terminal itself glows like a church, the tempered light falling in shafts through the glass ceiling, stirring galaxies of dust.

The drive back from the wedding had been rough, obviously. I'd spent most of it trying to arbitrate between my shaking hands and a pint of black coffee the viscosity of heavy blood. We'd left around noon. I woke up with a wild, Vietnam Vet-style scream when GG threw wide the leaden motel curtains. About 20 minutes later we hit a McDonald's drive thru. For several minutes we blinked incomprehensibly at the menu board as if it had fallen from space. With the assistance of the mesomorph at the window, we somehow ordered breakfast. After that, wordlessly, we took back to the highway. GG slumped forward, clinging to the wheel like an overboard sailor. I feigned sleep, my head wedged and reversed between seat and door. On the pair of occasions when I felt the urge to speak, GG looked at me askance, inhaling and flaring his nostrils threateningly.

Back at the apartment, I had a fitful, two hour nap, awaking in a damp knot of sheets. Somehow, through the miracle of more coffee and more cigarettes, I resurrected myself. More coffee, a few more cigarettes and I was in front of my mirror, putting on my war face.

I don't remember the last time I was so primed to do anything. I'm just itching to propose. Like a gunslinger, my fingers dance over the ring box in my hip pocket.

I know Blaine's flown first class and have assumed she'd be among the first to exit. But she isn't even among the first half. It is her laugh I hear first, and I hone in on it until I spot her, her head thrown back, her hand touching the shoulder of some suntanned, thirtysomething character actor. He sneers confidently from under an hive of unkempt golden brown hair. His green eyes are locked on my girl; they gleam, in a predatorial sort of way. Outrageously, one of his eyebrows is arched.

I move in: "Blaine!"

"Hi, sweetie," she sighs, letting her light little laugh evaporate gracefully. Is that a note of disappointment in her voice?

"This is Kent Gallahad. Kent and I had a few drinks together on the plane."

"Just killing a little time," He says, meaning 'no big deal, sport.'

"Kent went to Hamilton. He's an '87."

"That's terrific. We went to Haverhill, but great! It was really a pleasure to meet you Kent!" I have her by the elbow and, spinning her, delicately navigate through the crowd.

"Oh! Goodbye Kent!" she calls, over her shoulder. "Why are we in such a hurry?" refocusing an emotionless glare at me.

"Who was that?"

"That? Oh that was Kent Gallahad. From Hamilton."

I stride carefully over a squatting Laotian. I give Blaine thin-eyed consideration. She smiles and chins her way through the crowd. Jealousy is one of the things that holds our relationship together. My jealousy. For all I know she and Kent just joined the Mile High Club. Whenever she flies anywhere, I twitch with fear at this possibility. I feel like I'm dropping her off at an airborne Studio 54. The skies are practically teeming with guys precisely like Kent Gallahad, and she always seems to roll off a flight with one of them. Guys like this Kent who look so much more Establishment than I do, they scare the piss out of me. That's what she wants. Pedigree. Take her name: "Blaine." Ridiculous, isn't it? And no, as much as she would seem like the type, she didn't give it to herself. Daddy did. I think he'd spent so much time ministering to society types that he'd hatched a scheme to land his daughter with one of them. "Blaine" would really work out well, once her surname was obliterated by the miracle of marriage. It's fashionably asexual. It suggests pedigree of the snotty, plaid wool skirt kind. It's still a touch arriviste. I mean, it's not "Campbell," "MacLeod," or "Whitehead." Those are ideal old school girl first names. But Blaine does the trick. I think what Gianni had in mind was to pawn her off

on one of his recent lobotomy beneficiaries. I mean, who knows what she could have come out looking like. Take a look at *him*. When she turned out the way she did, though, he must have thought he didn't have a care in the world. Then I came tapping in.

"Hamilton, huh ..."

"That's right."

I think it says something about my determination that I drop this so quickly. I hone in on what binds us irreparably together:

"How's the youngster?"

"Hmm?" She's strutting miraculously down the terminal, pulling a bag on wheels from one elegant arm, one cute little fist. I take my first good look at her in days. Her long, tender muscles bound up in those trampy white stockings make me want wrap my arms around her thighs and smell her for an hour or so.

"What?" I say.

"Youngster?" She repeats.

"... Oh! I meant how's the baby?"

She's looking at me now. Her eyes jump after a moment:
"The baby!" She laughs for a moment. "Everything seems to
be fine."

"Do they have you on any kind of drugs or anything?"

"They have me on so many things," She answers quickly,
but wistfully. "I'm supposed to pick something up on
Tuesday."

"Do you want me to get it?"

"Oh no, I'll take care of it."

"I can do it if you'd like."

"Thank you, Sweetheart, but don't worry about it."

"No trouble at all?"

She smiles with intoxicating magnanimity. After which I beg for a little action, unsuccessfully pushing her toward a janitor's closet. She calls me silly and swats at me. I practically have to walk on all fours to the car. En route I inquire after a little "assisted driving," as we call it in our relationship, but she demurs, insisting that she's too tired. Like time-accelerated footage of weather, furious imaginations of all the feasible airborne infidelities broil through my head. I fight them off. I recover. I'm a fucking closer tonight.

"Well, darling, I hope you're not too tired for a little welcome home dinner courtesy of Bob Ho."

She turns and looks at me. A hand falls high on my leg. I knew Bob Ho would work.

"No! That sounds wonderful."

"Our reservations are for 7:00 p.m., so well have to hurry."

"Great!"

I smile over to her. She smiles back, and together we turn to the road ahead, smiling into the future. The ring, this peacemaker, this lawgiver, burns with purpose on my hip.

6:30 PM, Returning to My and GG's Apartment

I drive aggressively (hell, heroically) the wrong way up the incline of Larchmont Street. I park under the leafy wing of an ancient cherry tree, the fallen blossoms littering the street. She's out of the car before I've even pulled up the emergency brake, the click of her heels ringing out across our oddly deserted avenue. Up the steps, some astoundingly quick work with her set of keys, and she's inside.

My briefcase under one arm, her two bags under the other, I fumble behind; she has, at least, left it unlocked. I take the stairs two at a time, as is my wont, and, at the top stair, roll around into my room. I spill the bags on the floor. After that, I hit the head desperately, my urine a school bus orange. Finished, I

primp. Clip a couple nosehairs. Tangle unsuccessfully with my hair.

Then I freeze. I hear it. The voices. The clinks. Company.

BLAINE: "I've heard so much about you."

VAN: "All of it good, I hope."

BLAINE: "Actually, I should say, I've heard so little about you. Will prefers to keep his past carefully guarded, like he's a spy or something."

GG: "Ha!"

GG!

Hindsight being 20/20, I suppose I should have anticipated some friction accompanying this brief pit stop at home. There's a Cato and Clusoe dimension to my relationship with GG. A bucket of water propped on the doortop. A yard rake, teeth up, lying in wait to bite me on the forehead. Perhaps GG himself, wedged just inches from

the ceiling, falling on my head. This is his strategy for breaking up the "terminal monotony of life," as he describes it. Almost without fail, there's something in store for me here, something catastrophic, cartoonish and/or humiliating. In this instance, it was all three.

Still, Blaine would have insisted on dropping off her stuff, anyway.

Which GG knew, of course.

BLAINE: "I was hoping I'd get to meet you at STD's wedding."

VAN: "I wish you'd been there."

BLAINE: "Oh? *You* were there?"

VAN: "Yeah."

BLAINE: "I thought Will said you two weren't going to make it."

VAN: "Oh, no. Helmut's flight's was a little late, but we'd planned on being there all along."

BLAINE: "HONEY!"

GG: "I wonder where Will could have gotten such bad information?"

I inhale stoically, then exit and proceed down the hall.

ME: "Company! Hi, everybody!"

VAN: "It's just Helmut and I."

ME: "Ah. Great."

BLAINE: "Honey? You didn't tell me Van and Helmut were at the wedding?"

ME: "Yes! Yes, they were. What a surprise!"

BLAINE: "Van was just saying that they'd planned on being there all along."

ME: "That's strange. STD told me you guys weren't coming."

GG: "Really?"

ME: "Yes, GG."

Now, read the next several exchanges closely. If you pay attention, you'll see GG's subtle genius at work. See how he discreetly yet irrevocably ruins my day.

VAN: "Actually, we may not have RSVP'ed. We have forgotten before."

ME: "That's probably it. Well, it certainly was a pleasant surprise anyway."

VAN: "Yes."

GG: "Van! Tell that story about when you and Will crashed that wedding at the Mark!"

ME: "Gosh I wish I'd known we were having company! I hate to do this, but we're actually in a bit of a hurry. We've got ..."

BLAINE: "Well, shit. Now I really wish I could have made it."

VAN: "I could have given you all the dirt on Will."

BLAINE: "There's more?"

HELMUT: "I thought Vill and GG ver there together."

GG: "We were there together. Right, Will? I drove you. We danced together ..."

ME: "GG."

GG: "In fact, for a moment, I thought I'd lost Will to you, Helmut. The way you two tore up the dancefloor."

HELMUT: "He's a good danca."

GG: "Careful, Hel. You might confirm Blaine's suspicions that we're queer. Which reminds me, why didn't you ever ask me to dance?"

ME: "Ha ha ha! Honey, I hate to be the wet blanket, but ..."

GG: "Why don't you two sit down?"

ME: "Gosh, G, thanks but as much as we would really love to stay, unfortunately I've made these reservations at Bob Ho's which are non-refundable and ..."

BLAINE: "Honey I'd rather stay here. We can go to Bob Ho's anytime."

ME: "Actually that's not true."

BLAINE: "Let's call Duck Heaven. I don't know if I'm up for a big production tonight."

GG: "C'mon! Sit!"

ME: "G!"

ME: "Blaine!"

BLAINE: "Yes?"

ME: "Please don't sit down."

BLAINE: "Honey, it's just Bob Ho's."

ME: "I'm sorry. What?"

GG: "Not to belabor the point, but why didn't you ever ask me to dance, Hel?"

ME: "'*It's just Bob Ho's*'?"

BLAINE: "It's not like it's Dean English's or something."

ME: "How can you say that?"

HELMUT: "I was drunk? I didn't know what I was doink?"

GG: "I'm afraid I can't accept that."

BLAIN: "I'd really rather stay here."

ME: "Blaine."

BLAINE: "Will?"

GG: "I mean, that's basically the Nuremberg Defense, isn't it?"

HELMUT: "Zat's all I haf."

GG: "God, I love your accent."

ME: "It's *Sunday*."

BLAINE: "You're right. You want a prize?"

GG: "Prizes?"

ME: "Honey."

BLAINE: "You two met in Germany?"

8:00 PM, My and GG's Apartment

GG orders dinner from Duck Heaven. Chan runs it over almost instantly - per GG's demands - showing up at our door looking solemn and breathless. GG forces him to do a shot of Stolli and smoke a cigarette. Chan does so as if it's his last rite. He leaves us with a nod and a lingering, tooth-licking once-over for Blaine. Oh, GG tries to sell her to him, again. Never gets old, I guess. We move to the porch, where we light a votive arrangement of citronella candles and uncork several bottles of wine. The sun sets eventually, and the pallor of the sky weakens, then assumes the bruised pink hue of the city's million crime lights.

We eat and talk. Or rather, they eat and talk. For the most part I just sit there, a ventriloquist's dummy, my lips parted in some kind of defensively perky smile, all the time secretly reeling with wild, unspoken horror as Van and Blaine so obviously hit it off.

Meanwhile, GG lectures on various subjects: the Cash Cow that is the divorce racket, tennis, the space program. Here's an example. His thoughts on love:

GG (addressing Van and Helmut simultaneously): "Yours is a truly modern love story, by which I mean I think you could sell it to a major studio. I would call it 'Two for Television.' Or ... Or maybe 'Talking Heads, Yearning Loins.' In any event, something like that."

VAN: "Only I'm not a Talking Head."

GG: "Are you sure?"

VAN: "I think so."

GG: "Oh I think we're all Talking Heads now. Just a white hot filament for a brain? Just running our mouths all day long with words fed to us by networks? Think about it. It makes sense."

VAN: "Does it."

GG: "It's basically what Warhol was saying."

VAN: "I thought he said that, in the future, everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes."

GG: "It's the same thing. Anyway, you're a fool if you don't try to sell - or, Jesus, at least option - this story. It's 'Broadcast News' meets 'The Way We Were.'"

VAN: "So Helmut's Robert Redford or William Hurt."

GG: "And you're Holly Hunter or Babs Streisand."

VAN: "Don't get bitchy, GG."

GG: "Don't you get it? Okay, let me put it in TV news terms. This is your lead: "Tonight at Ten: True Love." Only the catch is, you're the story. Not the schmuck on the street. Love has transcended television. It's Beautiful People in a Beautiful Love Story. But it's more than that. Your story says Yes! Our brains are TV tubes. Yes, we as sentient creatures have in fact ceased to be. But love - despite it all, LOVE! - has not. Love is still somehow going strong. I mean, you're living proof. You give hope to the world."

VAN: "That just maybe you too can get on TV and fall in love ..."

GG: "That's basically it, yes."

VAN: "I hope you're joking."

GG: "I hope so, too! I can't tell! I'm just talking talking talking!"

But this is merely a sideshow to the real event, the recounting of the Smiley-Standish love affair. Like a mortician lingering over a beautiful patient, Blaine draws the facts out carefully, luxuriously, each glistening organ. Each damnable, humiliating *fact*. What Van is too demure to provide, GG cheerfully volunteers, then expounds and expands upon. To be fair, he gives a reasonably accurate account of my affair with Van Smiley. All the campy vignettes: the lovers escape from the boorish world, my dread mistake, the ridiculous termination, our catastrophic, vaudevillian denouement.

There are times when I wonder if GG isn't actually the Devil. He can create disaster instantly, without forethought or design. And I don't mean disaster on a small scale. I mean multi-dimensional disaster. Disaster like weather systems. Like chaos theory. I mean meta-disaster.

For example, take the moment when he formally christens my demise. I won't get too much into it, since it's largely the focus of the story from here on out. But it starts during our exchange in the kitchen, on this same night. We're getting drinks. I make sure we're out of earshot, then begin with a hiss:

"What the fuck are you doing!?"

"Calm down. We invited them over."

"You invited them over!"

"We did."

"When?!"

"At the reception. You just don't remember, which is fine."

"I would have remembered this!"

"Oh yeah? Do you remember wearing lipstick? It happened."

"Dammit!"

"Hey, I forgot too until they rung the doorbell. What was I supposed to do?"

"..."

"WHAT WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO?"

"Don't be an idiot."

"HE HAD A MECHANICAL ARM!"

"Listen, jackass! I was gonna fucking propose tonight!
Now I'm fucked!"

"Enough with the cursing, alright?"

"Fuck that! I had everything all set-up!"

"So you do it tomorrow."

"You know how long it takes to get reservations at Bob Ho's? Huh? Four fucking months? I had to take over these reservations from Hoover. He charged me \$400."

"Really?"

"Really!"

"So you do it somewhere else."

"Where? Denny's?"

"I'm sure you'll figure something out."

I laugh.

"Listen, it's not like what's going on here is unimportant."

"What are you talking about?"

He takes a ponderous breath, "I know this is going to sound a bit rich, but I think Helmut's a little bit of prancer."

"... C'mon!"

"C'mon? Don't you remember *that*? He practically seduced you."

"That? That was nothing. YMCA was playing."

He says this very slowly: "*What he did to you you only learn in prison or in years of dancing lessons. It was like some porno version of Grease.*"

Untangling himself, he takes a bottle of wine and another deck of smokes from the counter.

I say: "I'm sure he thought it was some kind of dance contest or something."

"Sure that makes sense. You know the Brownshirts began as a homosexual outfit. Look it up."

"This is why you invited them over? Christ."

He turns:

"We've got to check this guy out. I have a professional responsibility. We," and here he does a little two-handed wave to indicate both of us, "have a personal responsibility."

"I don't have a personal responsibility."

"Yes, you do."

"Fuck."

"I'm going to concentrate on him, see if I can flush him out. Wink at him, play footsie, things like that. You do the same."

"Sure. Of course."

He moves carefully around me.

"Hey," He stops. "You'll be fine."

"I'm fucked."

"No, you're not."

I snort. He leaves.

I stand there for awhile, staring into the alley, until I'm beckoned from the porch by Van. Her voice snaps me from my daze, and I consider it. I let it echo in my head. Alone, it could have been a thing she might have said to me in our apartment in San Francisco, from another room, an invitation to join her somewhere, to be with her again in some new corner of our bunker below the city.

I wander back out to the porch, assuming my position woodenly beside Blaine. I force myself to participate, if only in a series of stilted facial expressions: frowns, knowing smiles. Winks. Nods. Shrugs. After awhile I do kick out one of my signature, pointless stories. Blaine runs her fingers possessively through the hair just above my neck.

The candles snap and bend, then right themselves with the passing of each thick summer breeze. Meanwhile GG ogles Helmut like a smitten teenager. And I watch the curve of Van's neckline as she says something to Blaine. I see the chords flex and shift above the ladle dip in her throat as she interprets for Helmut, her breath in his ear, her bright eyes thinking and listening.

11:30 PM, My and GG's Apartment

"Dimples!" I beg, through a mouthful of toothpaste. I'm being interrogated.

"Never?"

"She just wasn't into that."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Not even once?"

"Bumble Bee?"

"Ooh! Are you using the pink brush?!"

"Yes?"

"I dropped it in the toilet earlier tonight!"

"Spleh!"

"I'm sorry!"

"FugggHH!"

"Did you love her?"

"Yeag."

"More than me?"

I spit more.

"Will? More than me?"

"No! Of course not!" I gasp, between bursts straight from the faucet.

"How long did you date?"

My forehead resting on the cool sink, I say to the basin: "Honey, are you sure you're not upset that we didn't get engaged tonight?"

"Of course not, Willy."

"Because I was going to pop the question at Bob Ho's."

"That would have been nice."

"I swear I was!"

"Okay."

"I mean, *Bob Ho's* ..."

"How long did you live together?"

I am consumed with self-pity. Tomorrow she may very well destroy me.

"You lived together in your little artist's studio, drinking wine and screwing and painting. It sounds pretty romantic."

Again, into the sink: "I didn't know romance until I met you."

"...You mean it?"

"Yes."

"Why did you break up?"

"Her family fell apart, and she got scared."

"How?"

"Her Mom started screwing the contractor. Her Dad died in a plane accident."

"A plane accident?"

"Yeah."

"What? Did it crash?"

"No. Look, I don't think the details are important."

"Oh yeah? I do!"

"That's private stuff. She doesn't want me telling other people all about her family affairs."

"You still can't trust me, can you?"

"Princess?!"

"I can't believe you still can't trust me! We're going to get married, provided you get your fucking act together, and you still can't fucking trust me."

"I can!"

"You can't," she says, adding, "Who am I going to tell?"

"I can trust you. Watch. Alex ..."

"You called him by his first name?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So they must have liked you."

"Do you want me to finish telling you this or do you want me to get off on one of my 'tangents'? Frankly, I don't know how I can win here."

"It's not about winning or losing."

"It isn't?"

"Will!"

"What."

"A healthy relationship doesn't have a winner and a loser."

"Okay. Can I finish now?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to interrupt?"

"Finish."

"Her father had this midlife crisis. He started sky-diving. One day he went up, jumped out and his chute didn't open."

"Didn't he have an emergency chute?"

"He did have an emergency chute. It didn't open either."

She started to say something. Her lips parted slightly, then she drew in a breath.

"Yeah. I tried to help her, but I was too young and stupid to be of much help to anybody."

"Then she left you?"

"Flipped out and left." I move over to her. She's turned away from me, and I take her by her shoulders, feeling the terrycloth of her robe under my fingers.

"And you stopped loving her?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"The moment I laid eyes on you."

She considers this for awhile, suspiciously. Then racks her brain for more questions to ask. Finally she says, "Is it true that GG called her, pretending to be you, and asked her out and that's how you met?"

"Yes, it's true."

A pause. I think she's through.

"Goo?"

"What." She turns obliquely, her big eyes still on the floor, her lips a heavy pout.

"I love you." I say.

I lift her chin to me with two fingers. Her eyes lift to me. I smile gently, paternally. Our foreheads meet. We kiss.

"Promise."

"I promise."

Another pout, then: "Pretty pink promise?"

"Pretty pink promises with pancakes."

She hops up, in her little silk robe, and hits the bathroom. I watch.

Yeah, she says she's not upset, but she is. She's very upset. I am aware of a nameless fear, perhaps similar to what certain Bolsheviks felt when they fell out of favor with Stalin.

Sunday was always the understanding. This gets done Sunday. Now it's gone. Not only that, Van's here, well before her scheduled arrival. And Blaine has no ring.

You should have seen the little ring review. It occurred practically under my nose, Van reaching across, Blaine taking her hand, Sistine Chapel style, the rock burning like one of those underwater flares.

"Look at that, honey." Blaine had purred, staring. Van and I shared a look. Then Blaine had turned to me and smiled. That brilliant smile of hers that's really just bared teeth, a monkey threat.

"What did you just do?" I say.

In the bathroom now, she's taken something and thrown it back with a glass of water.

"Nothing."

"That better have been an aspirin."

"Well, it wasn't."

"Blaine! FUCK!"

"What!"

"I'm not up for role-playing tonight. I'm exhausted."

"You're always fucking exhausted!"

"God."

"Is it too much to ask to feel wanted!"

"Honey."

"I don't even know if I'm in the mood now!"

"You've still got your beauty mask on. You know I don't like that. I feel like I'm fucking the Green Lantern."

"Tough!"

"... Fine." I say, then add. "I'm sorry."

This is her new thing. And as with everything, it too is GG's fault. Blaine picked up this date rape routine from the last of GG's client/sex partners. She pops a roofie, or, ideally, I drop one in her drink at a bar or something, then we return here and run through a few idiot lines. She makes me carry them in my wallet now, in case she gets bored. She fears nothing so much as boredom.

At the mirror, she huffs and puffs with indecision. Finally Grade School Blaine pouts: "Okay. But brush your teeth again. With my toothbrush."

About ten minutes later, both in character:

"Please wear protection!"

"I don't feel anything then, Sweetheart, so why the hell should I?"

The Green Lantern hums for a few moments, then passes out. Fratboy collapses next to her, pre-event. He stares out the window. He considers strangling his brother as he

sleeps. He is struck by the poignancy of the aphorism: "There is no rest for the wicked." He reminds himself that he's doing this all for Advertising.

12:30 PM, My and GG's Apartment

Well, that was a pleasant little half hour. I'm wide awake now. You and me again. You realize that I've lied yet again to fair Blaine? It's so hard not to. Truth, that's a chore with this girl. I've tried to be truthful before with her, but it's about the last thing that she cares about. Strangely, I admire this in her, this flat out contempt for honesty. The truth simply doesn't exist. She's willed it into oblivion. Do you want the truth? Do you? You know what? *You can't handle the truth!* That's the truth, my friend. You just can't handle it. I can't handle it either, so I wouldn't feel too bad.

Nevertheless, I feel obligated to set at least part of the record straight. What I'm about to tell you is the truth. It's also an abomination, like most true things.

The truth is that Alex Smiley, Van's father, fell to his death in a tuxedo, from 15,000 feet, and he did so with a smile on his face. He'd worn a parachute, but wriggled out of that shortly after exiting the plane. There were a couple wild airborne scuffles with the two dive instructors. He yanked the ripcord on one of their chests, and that instructor ripped back into the sky. The other wrapped up him in a bear hug. Alex elbowed him a few times in the head. The instructor held though, until about 2,000 feet, when he realized it was pointless. You can't hold on to a man who doesn't want to hold on to you. Without a word, in a riot of whipped nylon and snapping wind, he'd pulled his own cord and suddenly vanished. Alex was alone. He smiled at this. I'm sure of it. Smiled as the earth gained definition.

I know I told Blaine it was an accident, but in reality it was anything but. It was coldly plotted, lovingly crafted. Alex, insisting it was still another manifestation of his midlife crisis, had taken up skydiving. His wife's enthusiasm, her absence of worry, couldn't have helped any. He went up a couple times a week. He took the instructors out boozing afterwards. I went out with them, in fact, one night. They wanted me to jump, but

I faked an ankle sprain or vertigo or something like that. I don't like flying to begin with. They went and came back, and we retired to a bar just beyond the perimeter of the small regional airport. Called the 43rd Aerosquadron, it was done up like a First World War airfield. We were there for five hours. Alex was manic and hilarious, which you could see in the eyes of the two instructors, Larry and Stitch, was *de rigeur*. After about six drinks, they were regaling us with stories of how anxious girls were to fuck after a first jump. Stitch even claimed that he'd had to forcibly remove a few jumpers from his cock in his day.

So it's another afternoon at the Aerosquadron that Alex asked Larry and Stitch to help him rescue his marriage. What he had in mind was for one of them to video tape him as he asked mid-air for Diane to remarry him. He'd throw back on the tuxedo he got married in. He'd regrow his moustache. He'd give them each seven grand.

In the aftermath, Van had wanted them indicted on murder charges. She didn't buy a word of their story. The cops tried to explain that these guys weren't the murdering kind. Stitch had a possession charge, Larry nothing. Larry

in fact had saved some kid from a burning trailer home in 1989.

Van hired her own attorney, ran the whole thing from her apartment in Germany. First she pursued murder two, then voluntary manslaughter, then involuntary manslaughter. Van's lawyer pressed the case for a little while, then the judge, who was a family friend, threw the thing out. She personally sent Van a letter explaining why. Van scrawled "FUCK YOU!" across it and sent it back. By that time she was spent. What she really wanted to know was why her mother wasn't doing anything.

I learned most of this from GG. He flew out to check on her, after my cataclysmic, Hindenburgesque adventure trying to hunt her down. Her attitude towards him was "FUCK YOU!" as well. It was pretty much 24/7, one-size-fits-all.

"For what it's worth," he said. He'd called from here when he got back. I was still in San Francisco. "I think she's too pissed off to be a threat to herself. It's everybody else that I think we need to worry about."

I fell in love with her one night at the beach, screened in from the mosquitoes, between hands of whist with GG and Wendy Jackson. I suppose I was in love with her already, but this was when I really lost it. She was explaining why she hated Australians. "They can't build a car!" she'd argued. "Name an Australian car! Name one?! How do they travel all over the place for two years at a time? What do they do? How do they make money?" She was so breathlessly grave, so exasperated, the blush deepening under her eyes.

It was kid's stuff. From the beginning, straight through. Paint-by-numbers material. Swooning. Flowers. Simultaneous orgasms. Boilerplate love between two children, all exploded with a single mistake, a small fuck-up at the wrong time, something I should have been forgiven for. But that's okay. It would have ended eventually, somehow, somewhere. I was a Midwestern kid with a big fake heart on my sleeve, a sour milk accent. Van was a beautiful, helpless, slightly crazy rich girl, crazy in a way only a rich girl could be. I was a bad artist. She was a broken muse. We spent summers at the beach playing cards on her porch, chain-smoking, drinking gin and tonics. We spent weekends in rocking chairs up at their house in the

Adirondacks, then canoeing at midnight to the island and screwing carefully on a blanket in the woods. That, or we'd drive up to the reservoir and go swimming. GG was with us half the time. Three Fourth of Julys in a row the three of us sat in her backyard and listened to the symphony down the road in the park. After school we moved together to San Francisco. I painted briefly. Badly. Her family fell apart. She left me, fleeing to Germany.

Van couldn't drive. This is something I always remember vividly. All the close calls, her dreamy detachment, my gasps, my stands on an invisible brake as she extemporized blithely through a four way stop. She drove so *slowly*, too. It took half an hour to get out of her driveway.

She was stalwartly preppy. For example, her clothes: wool and cotton, plaid and pearls and turtlenecks. In the winter she dressed for the ski lodge, in the summer the Cape. However, there was an atavistic, almost Puritanical quality to it. Profligate sex, indeed infidelity, drugs, BMWs, those hallmarks of post-70s Establishment ennui, they not only made her nervous, they freaked her out.

Some nights now, stuffy with booze, I can disappear and return to that first night we met, that first really cold night of winter. Sometimes it still stings in my nostrils. School was like the set of a huge Hollywood Christmas musical. At the same time, it was barren, a frozen warscape, white hot flares falling slowly through pines.

It was a Wednesday night. We were having a Christmas party in a few hours. I'd apparently been prattling on rather liberally about the unparalleled beauty, class and obvious purity of Vanessa Smiley. I didn't know her; it just seemed obvious to me. I suppose it was the work of a moment for GG, during my brief trip down to the kitchen and goaded as he no doubt was by his legion admirers, to call her up, pretend to be me, and invite her over.

Later GG had emphasized, "She said she'd *try* to swing by." He was in his jacket, pocket square and bow tie, snapping to some Bobby Darin number ("Beyond the Sea" (?)) and spinning Gail Morgan.

"She'll be here," I said.

"She might," he emphasized.

"She will. I'm sure you charmed her sufficiently."

He dipped Gail practically into my lap, considered my comment with a sidelong glance, and nodded.

I agonized through the next hour. The whole room seemed to tingle and close in, like a heat flash. I cracked my knuckles. The fat Christmas lights blinked. I tried to engage friends and acquaintances in distracting conversation. I remained inviolably sober. I crushed out cigarette after cigarette at our bar. I remember somebody throwing open a window, the brisk air rushing in, the low stars twinkling in the cold.

And I remember her entrance. Now it seems as if it were in slo-mo. I see her now gliding through the door, her hair bouncing around like a shampoo spot, that breathtaking smile.

"Hi," she said. She'd just walked right up to me.

"Hi!" I countered.

"I'm glad you could make it," I said.

"Sure!"

And after I stutter for a minute or two I say: "I hope you don't mind, my calling you out of the blue like that!"

She stops pulling at the fingers of her gloves and looks at me. Then she says: "... I'm glad you did."

We talked over a couple more drinks. And several more drinks after that, we were dancing. Everyone was already dancing; GG simply pulled us into the fray. All forty of us in our 10 x 15 little common room, all decked out in our cocktail attire. STD and Levon had started it, STD with a lampshade reversed on his head. They'd both taken tango lessons (for gym credit) that Spring. It was wildly obnoxious. I recall with some bitterness that GG cut in several times more than I felt was appropriate. In a corner later in the evening, the riot a few feet behind us, I confessed to Van that it wasn't me who called at all. It was a friend pretending to be me. Of course, she already knew all this, because GG told her.

"I was just wondering what you'd do." She smiled again.

Eventually I recovered with this line, which I thought was extraordinarily clever at the time, real Cary Grant quality stuff:

"Do you date many morons, Vanessa?"

She responds, heartbreakingly: "I find I date morons almost exclusively."

I can barely stand to write this line: "Well, you're in luck. I'm President of the chapter."

She says: "I'll bet."

And finally I wrap up the comedy with: "Well, rather than make a more elaborate idiot of myself, I'm gonna get loaded and dance some more."

She smiles. She laughs again, suddenly, briefly.

The next hour or so collapsed into a kind of sock hop. By this point Levon had somehow wired up a sprig of mistletoe to bob right over his head. He kept on saying, in his Black Power voice, "Merry Christmas White Girl!" or "I know what you want for Christmas! And you gonna git it!" He was also going up to guys, chatting briefly, then saying, "Seriously. Kiss me." Van and I danced then were pulled off to dance with others. STD somehow got his foot stuck in the sofabed. A final bottle of gin upended by Hoover for evidentiary purposes, the crowd departed for The Smiling Mutt, the only bar in town. Everything sort of blurs together in a broad skid of people and time, then Van, GG and I are back at our place. GG announced, finally, that he was going to bed. He excused himself and we sat there for a moment, slumped on that stiff old thing, staring parallel tracks across the lockerbox that served as our coffee table. "Would you walk me home, Will?" she asked, without moving.

It was frigid outside as we trundled across the fresh snow of the local high school's athletic fields. We stomped off our boots on her doorstep. I forget what we talked about there, under the naked bulb. I recall only that it ended in a long pause, the wisps of steamy breath between

us. Her eyes held mine, and she blinked heavily, expectantly, and I kissed her. Only once, briefly. After that she brushed off the front of my jacket, then looked up at me again. Before I was really aware of it, she'd disappeared through the door and up the stairs to her apartment. Then it was done.

Even now I can hear the knock-knock-knock of her boots and that door slamming up on the landing. There I am. I'm a follower, following me, the followee. I can see myself trundling back home across the snow of the high school's athletic fields, beside the blue shadows of our tracks. I follow me, the lovestruck, pausing to examine the viral-clustered stars. It's preposterous.

Graduation. San Francisco. As Alex falls from the sky, I cheat on her with some little minx from L.A. I confess. She bolts, winding up in Germany. In a little postcard vignette, I try to repair the damage.

I fly over on a Monday morning. I don't know what I thought I'd accomplish that two or three dozen phone calls and eight letters had failed to do. I can see the airport still. It's late November and cold. I remember the back of

that little hatchback cab, jolting through the thin morning traffic without any kind of luggage, staring out the window at the compressed, gothic and Bauhaus streetscape of Bonn. Then I'm standing at her door, at 133 Klapper Strasse, Flat 3A, my knuckles burning. The locks start to give. She opens the door. But light's all wrong and I can barely see her.

"What do you want." I hear her say. The way she says 'You'. It sounds weird. It sounds like a bad, low note in a tinny orchestral piece. Metal on metal.

"... I wanted to see if you were okay."

"I'm fine."

"Are you?"

"I'm fine."

My eyes had adjusted. Van is wearing a man's shirt (again), a huge one, and apparently nothing else. The collar is up under her ears, and I want, like I'd wanted nothing ever before, just to turn it down, to push her hair back with the fronts of my fingers.

I now also see a silhouette in the hall, a cameo against the robin's egg blue of a kitchen window. The glow of a cigarette tip floats near his waist. It's still early, perhaps seven a.m. I'm in the nethertime of travel.

She says: "What are you doing here?"

"I'm ... I'm in town, you know, on business."

"Business?"

"Right." I shake my head, my breath ripples in the air. "Van, I'm just worried about you."

She lights a cigarette in her small, cupped hands. She looks back up.

"Don't."

"Maybe you should come home."

She laughs.

"You realize what time it is?" She says.

"I know it's early."

"I've got to go to work."

"You've got a job?"

"Yes."

I try for a full minute, but I can't think of anything to say. I keep opening my mouth, starting, then having nothing, just nothing at all to offer. All I can think of is:

"... I guess I just wanted to see if you were okay."

"I'm fine." She exhales from the corner of her mouth, from a jutted out lower lip. So much attitude.

"Are we through?" She asks.

And, of course, we were.

I'm not sure why I needed to see her. I suppose that, in the secret movie we each star in, there was a need for resolution. For endgame. There was a kind of shame on one hand, my undeniable dramatic sense, and then over here a kind of contempt for everything. All of it added up to: "GERMANY: Will sees Van. DISOLVE."

The thing is, I'm different now. I've been to Bitch School. I'm cold-blooded. My mind is a screwdriver. My heart is a shiv.

MONDAY, JUNE 16, 1999

10:00 AM, My and GG's Apartment

My fingers seize up, but only briefly, just over the doorknob. The morning waits innocently on the other side,

but for some reason all I can envision is twister weather.
Purple air. Flying cows.

Paranoia comes in the morning. I practically drive backwards to Hillman's, my eyes spend so much time in the rearview mirror. I even get lost briefly, and bump up on at least three curbs. I also donk a mailbox and crush a big wheel. Sorry, kid.

Blaine left before I awoke. This means she's out here already. Watching. Waiting. But I'm not beyond hope yet. I think I can pull it off. Nice restaurant, a stiff bribe or two. I'll hit the phones as soon as this is over. God willing, the Hillman Reynolds test (for Advertising Aptitude) won't be today. I need to do the paperwork first. I need that signing bonus.

A couple road vodkas, a little PMA work en route - I am the Ad Messiah! I **AM** the AD MESSIAH!! - and I'm back in game shape. Twenty minutes and I'm full on, arcing broadly over HR's gravel driveway/helopad. I leave my beast twitching in the cool sun.

10:30 AM, HR's Estate, SUBURBIA

I hit the doorbell. A gong, several minutes of stone silence and the broad door swings wide, revealing a 5'10" sexpot in clear plastic heels and an approximated Catholic school girl's uniform. The aperture of my throat snaps shut defensively. She's somewhere between seventeen or twenty-seven. Her ivory hair is cut in a bob, ending right behind her ears, her skin a deep brown. She sets one hand high on the door and the other on her steep, cocked hip.

"Guh," I say, initiating conversation.

She pops a bubble, and visually inquires if there's anything further I care to add. I respond with a cheap smile from the left side of my face. Wordlessly she takes my hand. She spins, poses, then leads me in, a cigarette crushing toe-twist at the end of each stride. Somehow it's a natural little episode, the etiquette of decadence. Like a splotchy Roman emperor, I leer with pleasure at her legs, her perfect brown calves and bleached minisocks, her space stilettos scissoring around one another, clicking across the marble.

"You HR's daughter?" I manage to ask.

I'm answered with a severe eyebrow, then something like a smile. She doesn't even break stride. We pass an Akita, lounging on a couch. Though his brow furrows briefly, only his eyes follow me across the hall. The whole place has that 1977 Playboy space villa feel. It's the size of an airplane hanger.

Next thing you know, we're on his patio, a pool in the distance, stables too, a guest house here and there. HR is reading some kind of paper; he doesn't look up. A final, lingering look, her fingers evaporating in mine, and she struts away. The muscles in her legs groove away like knife blades.

HR and I are alone. We're to have brunch. Eventually he folds up his reading material, drops it in a chair, and looks at me. I can tell he's gonna be a hard-on this morning, but this doesn't matter much to me. I can manage either way.

"That you wife, HR?"

Taking a drink, "That's Angel."

"Daughter?"

"Where do you see yourself in five years, Will?"

"Jesus. Do you really want to ask me that?"

"Alright. Let me put it this way." He rolls the ice in his tumbler. I can't be sure, but I think it's a Gibson. There are cocktail onions in it. "Didn't you try your hand at painting for awhile?"

This takes me a little by surprise, but I recover:

"My compliments to whoever does your evil bidding."

He nods.

"Did I ever try my hand at painting. Yes, I did. So did you."

"So what do you think of advertising?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think advertising is sufficiently artistic?"

"Okay." I answer slowly. "I think advertising is the only art left. I think it's the only art left because it's the only form that's absolutely about money. I think music, movies and television, that's for faggots and other people who want to get back at their parents."

"That's an insensitive remark."

"I'm an insensitive person."

"So, you don't ever feel like what we do is utterly meaningless?"

"Never."

"Not even a tiny bit?"

"No."

"Like this," He smiles wetly and he rolls a fat wrist, indicating his estate, "All this shit. That it just doesn't mean a thing."

"This is the only shit that means anything, HR."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive."

"How positive?"

"I'm fanatical."

A smile, like a fissure in the earth, then a twist of pain or whimsy at the corners of his mouth.

"Would you, say, kill for advertising?"

"Gladly."

"You would."

"Of course. Frequently."

"Hmm."

"I will say, I don't think it would be the best use of my time."

He gives me a steely stare.

"I'm homicidal for advertising."

The smile returns.

I ask, "Any more questions?"

"I don't think so."

"C'mon. Throw me one that breaks."

His smile ages from weird to clever, from clever to dangerous.

"I've got this raingear here, HR. We doing the test today?"

"You've heard the rumors, then?"

"I have."

"They're all true."

"Good."

His smile turns boyish. He tells me to head downtown.
Talk to Stan O'Leary. Get set up.

###

Leaving, on the road, I place an immediate call to a
Blaine, a kind of preemptive strike.

"Yes," she answers, plainly.

I inform her that things are official.

"I want you right now," She snarls.

"Take a number," I counter.

We finish, and I glow with satisfaction.

Then a call comes in from GG. I know it's him because it's the firm's blocked line.

"Yes."

"Morning, Sunshine."

"GG."

"You drunk yet?"

"No."

"Where are you? The OTB?"

"No."

"The Y? The bus station?"

"Nope."

"An adult theater?"

"None of the above. What do you want."

"Have you had lunch?"

"I'm having it right now." I lie a little.

"Where?"

"The Five O'Clock."

"Is Mohammed there?"

"There's two of them here. The short teenage one and the one without the beard."

"Say hello."

"I will."

"You know, it's hard to say conclusively if Helmut rose to the bait last night ..."

"No!"

"Still, it's really sort of a strange situation. What I can't get over is why he hit on you Saturday, but not me."

"It just doesn't stand to reason."

"Right, I know ..."

"Yeah, well it was worth a try."

"I'm still not convinced."

"I am."

"Really?"

"Really."

"The way you two were dancing, though. I can't imagine what would have happened if the band had done something slow."

"You through?"

"You didn't get his number or anything, did you?"

"No. Done?"

"Sure! Hey, stay out of trouble!"

"I will."

"Don't accept any blowjobs from prostitutes over 5'8" without first checking out their pants."

"Check out the pants of all prostitutes," I say, "Got it."

12:30 PM, My and GG's Apartment

At home I call a half dozen extremely expensive restaurants. Taverna. Four Seasons. When I say "Two for dinner tonight" they don't exactly laugh in my face - well, one high strung ethnic type does - but rather they pause for a moment, as if expecting me to get the comedy over with and actually say something serious. Then it dawns on

me. It's a ground war now. I stiff-arm the screen door, hop in the Willmobile and beeline it for Vox.

I hustle up and down fifth. I make obscene propositions to no less than four maitre de's. The fourth accepts, but it's strictly a fall back. Ollie's. Would have been great two years ago. And who knows if Blaine will accept it. My only hope is that somebody at Hillman can get me a better set-up. The Federalist, perhaps. Or Menage. It's not that Blaine has to be proposed to in an expensive, public place, it's ... well, who am I kidding? That's it. It's that simple. Is that so much to ask?

I do have a spaced out, low-brow lunch at the Five. After that, I stop by Bookends, on the de Gaulle Roundabout. I want a library. There's nothing that says "I'm loaded!" quite the way a good library does. This is what Van's father would do-weekend hunts through dusty used book joints. I'd occasionally join him. His rig was the whole reason I wanted a library in the first place, all the steep leather chairs, the tricked out oak molding, the oil paintings, the low lights and swinging, bracket mounted steps. For a spell I find myself in the Literature section. I even entertain the idea of picking up *Paradise Lost*. I

flip through it for a few moments, reading a couple impenetrable stanzas (or whatever they're called). Then I come to my senses and replace it on the shelf, chuckling quietly as I push my way out the revolving door.

Altogether I'm not feeling half-bad. I've got a job. A res (if only at Ollie's). Who knows what O'Leary and the boys can come up with for their new young stud.

And then we have the first sign of real trouble.

12:39 PM, SOMEWHERE IN SUBURBIA

Heading home I take what I consider to be the very sober precaution of a few dozen revolutions on the Smithfield Rotary. From the moment I'd ramped in, I'd indexed the various chase vehicles in my rearview: a squad car, a clutch of taxis, two or three minivans. To my delight they all move off after an orderly 270 or 90 degree spin. One hapless imbecile in a battered F-150 does stick with me for about 3 laps, but he's so obviously flustered by the entire circular operation - his blinkers taking turns signaling this way or that, the wipers kicking in,

the hazards - that he's eventually flushed out onto De Concini Street. The whole episode has the effect of settling me down, though, and it's then that I casually look across the diameter, remark *JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!!* and have a minor stroke.

There it is, shimmering in the sun, not closing, not falling back, just pinned there, the other end of a revolving weather vein. I do three laps and the Chevy stays right with me. After the third lap, I don't waste any time taking evasive maneuvers. My method of escape is a dramatic downshift, for torque power. Next, a high RPMed heave to starboard, across two semi-unoccupied lanes of traffic. Then, amidst a hail of derisory horns, an ill-timed and ultimately unresolvable stall. I viciously stomp the clutch as I glide gently to a halt on the shoulder. Next I wrestle murderously with the ignition. Then my nerves go dead.

I watch it grow across the rectangle of my rearview. I guess expect it to pull along side me and a pistol or something to swing over the window, but instead it simply passes on, just drifts away, taking the Quincy Street exit.

I race home, running at least two lights and nearly t-boning a minivan. En route, for some mad reason, I call Chan. He gives me an exasperated, weary: "C'mon!" then he asks what I really think of the General Tao's chicken. I trip up the stairs and into the apartment, where I'm jumped by Blaine. To her pushy hips and cruel tongue I recall the episode. "Don't be fucking an idiot," is her breathy response.

As she tangles with my belt, I resolve not to do so. I can't lose focus. It probably wasn't anything. But three laps? And then the sex. We're screwing before I really even know it and it does the trick. Angry, fearful sex. Sex for self-preservation. Fuck or flight sex.

It's an exorcism. Blaine hollers like a Baptist, myself a big engine of lust. Like John Henry, I should think, driving rail spikes with brooding, savant-like intensity. Whammo! Whammo! Whammo! I feel not unlike the Russian soldier hero of my Berlin liberation scenario. God, to be missing a few teeth! The effect of a gap-toothed sneer would have horrified her! I do horrify her somewhat; those mean, shocked eyes of hers, her hands clutching my head like a crystal ball. I think she loves me more than

ever now. Now, I think there's no way she'll let me fuck up, the way she bites her lip and claws at me as I leave. And that's good. I need all the help I can get.

2:29 PM, The Hillman Reynolds Building

I'm back to one hundred percent (well, we'll say 85%; these swings are taking their toll) as the elevator throttles skyward into the cloudless blue heaven of Hillman Reynolds, Ltd. At precisely 2:29 pm the vaulted doors part.

Minutes later O'Leary says, "We'd like to pay you this."

He pushes a slip of paper across his huge steel desk.

"Not enough?" I eventually hear.

Aghast, I see myself push the slip of paper back and answer: "Hardly."

At that point, I stop breathing. I look back up at him. He returns my gaze.

A squirrely minute passes between us.

Then he hunches back over again, amends the figure, and pushes it back my way.

"That'll do," I call, pretending to examine the number critically.

Is that a five?

"Any questions I can answer about our little operation here?"

He's leaning back in his chair. It's all chrome and piping, the intestines of a Harley-Davidson.

Pressing my luck quickly, I ask if he can help me with reservations somewhere. Sitting back up, he hits a button (just one) and says to his desk:

"Two. Dinner. Charlie's."

He looks at me as he does so. I approve conspiratorially with a curled lip.

Suddenly, we're at the bank of elevator doors. I think I ask O'Leary if Angel is HR's wife or his daughter. His smile turns slightly at the corners. Another dangerous smile, just like HR's. And then I'm in the elevator and he's laughing athletically, the cords in his neck tugging and pulsing, as the doors envelop him.

I fall through two dozen floors. I exit the elevator. My eyes wander blankly across the lobby. I discover the slip of paper is still in my hand.

I'm still looking at it as I roll through the revolving door.

Then, in the bending sunlight of the Hillman Reynold Building, that fantastic mercury obelisk at my back, I simply stop.

Jesus, I think, that's practically *Airplane Money*.

My briefcase hangs limply in my hand, my regimental stripe pulses under my chin like a fat snakehead.

After a long thoughtful moment, I start carefully up Grant Street.

I call Blaine. She picks up. I say:

"Two. Dinner. Charlie's."

She screams, inspiring a brief, teenage erection on my part.

As she blathers, I try one of O'Leary's smiles, the dangerous kind, and it seems to fall right into place.

I clap the phone shut, discovering I'm at the corner of Empire and Jefferson. I'm temporarily halted by traffic.

I look up at the blue heavens. The skyscrapers seem to drape expensively over my shoulders.

I look down to discover that a small crowd has gathered around me, awaiting the light.

These are my minions!

That smile seems to metastasize over my face.

I AM THE AD MESSIAH!

2:45 PM, 7th and Armory

I've agreed to meet Nuts for lunch. I know he's a spy for Johnny. As such, I can't avoid him. And we're friends. Or rather, we jointly maintain the illusion of friendship. Besides, I get a kick out of him. The fondued hair, the gold tooth, the Charles Grodin speech patterns. He's a late era Boomer with late era Boomer insecurities. What throws me, though, is that he's from Memphis. I thought this Woody Allen self-absorption didn't play in the sticks.

I'm supposed to meet him here at the corner of 7th and Armory. I'd expected him on foot, but apparently that wasn't his understanding.

"Will!"

I look down. He's in the back passenger seat of a Heatherton Hills Buick.

"Hey."

"Need a lift?"

"Ah, sure."

I look grimly at the car.

"I know, I know," he says.

I give in. I'm really sort of glad to see him, actually, sitting on top of the world as I am.

I climb in. Tito's driving. Another HH guy's riding shotgun.

I'm fairly excited, so forgive my tone here.

"Boy, you guys are downtown in force! Somebody escape? Boy! Check out this screen! Is this so some bipolar doesn't bite your ear off?"

The car moves gently into traffic.

Nuts, who heretofore had been looking poetically out his window, turns and smiles at me.

"We're just running errands," He says. "Believe it or not, we do get downtown every now and then."

"So no one escaped."

"Thankfully, no."

"You know I have never in all these years even heard passing mention of you being downtown."

"It happens. What are you doing down here?"

"Nuts my friend I am making advertising history down here. That's what I'm doing."

"How so?"

"Just took a job with Hillman Reynolds."

"Big bucks?"

I snort.

"That's great."

"Thank you."

"That's really terrific."

"I'll be honest with you. I think they're paying me far more than I'm worth."

"How could that be?" A wink.

"It's really going to be an entire lifestyle overhaul. Maids. Butlers. Cryogenic pods."

"Wow. Good for you."

"Thanks. So," I slap him on the thigh, "Where we going?"

"How are things going with Blaine?"

"Ah. That's why you've asked me here, isn't it? Well. They're going well."

"Good."

"Yes. Listen, I am starving. What do you think of hitting Guernica? And let me raise a important question at this juncture: Will this be on the Double H tab?"

He gives me his smile, but then it fades away. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes spread like bird bones. I can tell he wants to have serious buddy to buddy talk.

"Will, I'm just going to come out and say this because I respect you."

"Okay."

"You understand?"

"I think I do, Nuts."

"When were you planning on proposing to Blaine?"

"When?"

"You understand I'm just doing my job."

"You're job?"

"Because we need you to pop the question by Friday."

"I'm asking her tonight."

"Oh! Great! Thank God."

"You need me to pop the question by Friday?"

"That's right. Friday."

"Why Friday, Nuts?"

"Because Gianni's nervous, that's why! Jesus, Will, you've really been dragging your feet on this thing! I mean, c'mon, Dammit!"

"That's why you're here?"

"Yes it is, Will. Yes."

"Wait a minute ... Is this an ultimatum, Nuts?"

"Let's just say it's a matter of utmost urgency. That's why we're insisting on this schedule."

"Insisting?"

"I know how it sounds."

"What do you mean by 'insisting'?"

"I mean that, if you don't pop the question by Friday I'll be forced to ... oh."

"Forced to what?"

"... It's ... I'm ... It's ..."

"Forced to what, Nuts?"

"I'll have to break one of your fingers. I have to break one of your fingers for each week you wait after that. Those are my orders."

"My fingers?"

The smile shifts slightly.

"..."

"..."

"You're serious."

"Yes."

"You're saying you're serious!"

"That's what I'm saying, yes."

The doors cluck.

"You're locking the doors?"

From up front: "Oh! Sorry. Habit."

I say: "So unlock them!"

Nuts says: "Will, I've got to say this: I think you need to think about just how serious a person you are. Part of you is growing inside her. You can take responsibility for that or you can run. Your choice."

"Unlock the doors!"

"It's about taking ownership of your actions."

"I don't believe this!?! Unlock the doors, Nuts!!"

"We will. Just hear me out..."

"Wait a minute ... This car!"

"What."

"This fucking car! Have you been following me, Nuts?!"

"No."

"Have you?!"

"Okay, yes."

"You have!?"

"It's true. I admit it. I'm very sorry about that."

"Oh My God!"

"I didn't want to, Will, but you've just been all over the map recently!"

"But this car's white. Are there blue Double H cars?"

For some reason Tito answers this question from up front: "Oh yeah. We've got a whole variety of other cars. Marked. Unmarked. We gotta Jag. We could follow you in a different car every single day if we really ..."

Nuts says: "Tito!"

"Oh My God!"

"Will. Please. Don't make me hurt you ..."

"Don't make you *hurt* me?!"

"Oh I know how it sounds. But in our business ... People don't want to let go of their beds, don't want to get in their cells, sometimes you don't have any other choice. It's the most humane thing you *can* do, more often than not."

"People? You mean patients!"

"I do mean patients. Yes."

"*Patients!?*"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to patronize you. Really Will, you've got to ask her by Friday."

"This is insane!"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't use that word."

"Why not? You're threatening to break my fingers if I don't ask your employer's daughter to marry me! I call that insane!"

"Insane? Or Honorable? Decent? Blaine's pregnant with your child."

"This is the fucking 90s!"

"So a child should grow up without a father?"

"C'mon!"

"C'mon?"

I brace his arm and shoulder.

"... Okay, Nuts. Okay. **Nuts** ..."

"Yes, Will?"

"Nuts, listen to me ... *I'm not ... I'm not even ...*"

"Yes, Will?"

"*I'm not even sure she **is** pregnant!*"

"What are you talking about?"

"*She's not on Thorinine or Xenophite ...*"

"Are those drugs?"

"*Yes. Drugs. Right. Drugs for pregnant women ...*"

He falls back in his seat and gives me a look.

"She never *wanted* children, Nuts!"

"You think she's trying to trap you?"

"*I do. That's what I think.*"

"Who's acting crazy now, Will?"

"I'm crazy?"

"The Blaine I know would never do anything like that."

"And precisely which Blaine is it that you know?
Because there's about eight of them!"

"That's not funny."

"No you know what's not funny? This is not funny!"

"You really think Blaine is faking her pregnancy."

"Yes!"

"Do you know who Blaine's doctor is?"

"I haven't found out yet."

"Gianni is Blaine's doctor."

"...He is?"

"Yes."

"...That's sick!"

"Will! Look at me. I don't want to be a goon but I will."

"That's it! Let me out of this car!"

"Ask Blaine to marry you tonight."

"Let me out of this car, Nuts!!"

"And then we can pretend this conversation never happened."

"NUTS!"

"I know you love her, Will. And she loves you. And we want you to be a part of ..."

"LET ME OUT OF THE FUCKING CAR!"

8:00 PM, Charlie's Bistro

"... They'd what." She sets her fork on the side of her plate loudly.

"... they'd break one of my fingers, Blaine! Honey?! Goo Goo! One of my fucking fingers!!"

"And you believed them?"

"Should I not have? They do things like that for a living!"

"Yeah. Okay. This better not be one of these imaginary adventures you invent to avoid asking me to marry you."

"What?! Imaginary adventures? What the hell are you talking about?"

"The lost contact? The two traffic accidents?"

"I was a *witness* to those accidents!"

Her eyes revisit the menu.

"You can't just *walk away* when you witness an accident!"

"I see."

"... You know what? That's not the point! The point is that Nuts has threatened me! Physically!?"

I hold up my hands, twisting them like agonized claws, then add "Apparently at the behest of your father!"

This hits some kind of button for her. She visibly downshifts to fight mode.

"For the sake of argument, let's take you seriously," She shrugs and frowns in a dramatic, why-the-hell-not? manner. "Let's accept the idea that my father has asked his assistant - who, by the way, has been both a client and an employee of Heatherton Hills ..."

"What!?"

"Yeah. Nuts was an addict. And a little delusional. You didn't know that, because I didn't want to tell you, because he's like family and he doesn't like a lot of people to know. Alright?"

"He was?"

"Yes. Why do think he's called 'Nuts'?"

"Because 'Nutley' is his last name!"

"Well, that's only part of it."

"How can you hire him?"

"He's not *dangerous*, Will."

"He's not?!"

"He's just a little unpredictable."

"Great!"

"I'm going to finish my point: You've got a week ..."

"Til Friday! Five ... no Four! Four days!"

"Fine! Four days to propose. You've got the ring, right?"

"Yeah!" I've got the ring alright. It's right here in by breast pocket, burning like the snout of a recently emptied 38.

"So, here's an idea, ask me to marry you."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that, sister!"

"So you'll ask me then?"

"You're goddamn right I'll ask you. I'll ask you tonight!"

"Oh you will, will you?"

"You better believe it!"

"Should I? Haven't you tried and failed five times already?"

"I've tried three times!"

"Ohhh. *Three* times. My mistake."

"And there isn't going to be a fourth, sister, because I'm closing that deal tonight."

"Are you?"

"You can bank on it."

"I can *bank* on it?"

"Yes you can!"

Her black eyes boil.

"Like money in the freakin' bank!"

A tense five minutes passes ticks by.

"You know," she sings carelessly, concluding the glaring contest, seizing and inspecting the specials card, "Rick Johnson would have asked me by now."

"What?!"

"What are you gonna have for dinner?"

"Rick Johnson?!"

"I think I'll have the surf and turf."

"HAH!!"

"Yes, that's what I'll have."

"*Rick Johnson ...*" I guffaw dismissively.

Next, I nod and smirk and even shake my head, and when she doesn't say anything further, I say, "Old Rick Johnson is never going to make Airplane Money, I'll tell you that much!"

This perks her up: "Airplane Money?"

I hadn't intended to give her even the vaguest idea of what HR wanted to pay me, but we'd reached a stage where only a fool would pull punches.

"Oh, do I have your attention again? Yeah! That's right! *Airplane Money*."

She looks at me hard, then stiffens up and reconsiders the menu: "Fuck off."

"Fine. Don't believe me."

"You don't even know what *Airplane Money* is."

"Of course I don't."

"Alright, what is it? How much money do you need to have *Airplane Money*?"

"... a billion?"

"So you're going to make a billion dollars next year."

"That's right!"

"..."

"... okay, well, what I'll make is *almost* Airplane Money."

"Half a billion?"

"My point is ..."

"A quarter billion?"

I narrow my eyes even further and jab another finger at her. "My point is I *will* make Airplane Money, and I'll make it real fucking soon!"

"I see."

"You see! Yeah, you'll see it pretty fucking soon! Two years, max!"

"Two years max, huh?"

"Max!"

"Uh-huh."

"We'll be cleaning our ears with freakin' hundred dollar bills we'll have so much Airplane Money!"

"Sounds wonderful. That's in two years?"

"Max!"

And with that our waiter materializes. I give Blaine a final withering look, and then place our orders.

We don't talk. We stew. And then the food arrives. To irritate her, I chew loudly, my mouth wide open. She tries to snap lobster juice at me, and, in fact, succeeds. After that, I load up my water glass with wine and tuck the tablecloth in my collar. It's a real passive-aggressive rannygazzoo at the second table from the southwest corner of the room.

We brood speechlessly through dinner, as well as three bottles of cabernet. Eventually, she drops her napkin on

her plate, finished, apparently not surprised that the main course has come and gone without a proposal. And you know what? I'm not about to put up with that kind of crap. I drop my napkin on my plate and give her my "Two can play at that game!" look. I feel for the ring against my chest. My God it's warm. You know what? I think it's vibrating! Is it quartz? Am I the sucker in some kind of engagement ring jip job? Oh! Oohh ... Okay, that's my heart! That's what that is. That's why I'm sweating like I am. I get it. I'm 340 over 280, I'm afraid. Oh well. An added death wish angle to this whole process will only make it that much easier to pull off.

I take a deep breath, hop back in my chair, and roll floorward. I get into position. The din of the room falls to a hush. I look up. She takes a quick drink of wine to hide a smile.

I breathe in deep again. I begin.

"Blaine, I ..."

I hear a high register digital vibrato. I'm confused for a moment, then put things together.

The phone! My cell phone!

Ignore it. Press on!

"Blaine," I begin, and there it is again, like an air raid alarm from my heart.

"Blaine, since the day we ..." and there it is again, even louder.

"Ah!" I say.

It rings again, gleefully.

"AH!"

People around us laugh affectionately. The display says "G - Cell." I shut it off. I feel the static of Blaine's glare.

"Blaine, ever since ..."

"Will!" I hear a voice cry behind me. I spin around on my knee.

"WHAT!"

"There you are! What the hell are you doing on the floor?!"

"GG!"

But he's already past me. He's got one of his divorcees in tow.

"Blaine, darling!"

He's at the table now. He's taken her hand and kissed it. I spring up.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE!?"

"Just a minute," he says, then looks in another direction and does a split finger wave. A couple busboys materialize with chairs perched on their shoulders.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!"

"Well, I thought we'd all have dinner together. I figured you were celebrating your new gig, and I wasn't about to miss that, romantic dinner for two or no. I saw that you'd jotted down Charlie's by the phone. Gave them a call, then called Gail here [now he waves his phone in the air like a wand] Located you by the ring of your phone ... I'm sorry! Where are my manners? This is my ravishing date, Gail Lennox. Gail, Will Standish and Blaine, the Goog, Gugliotti. Gail and I just settled on thirty large a month in alimony. It's scandalous, really."

Gail blushes, and GG's eyes cloud briefly with self-satisfaction. He says "Hey!" as I grab his arm and pull him aside.

"What the fuck are you doing here?!"

"What?"

"What do you think *I'm* doing here?"

He looks around: "What?!"

"I'm trying to fucking propose!"

"Oh," GG says, looking around again, as if for supporting evidence. "You are? You haven't already?"

"I was about to, but you ..."

"I mean, it looks like the dinner's already over."

"Yes, I ..."

"That's why you were on the floor? I thought you fell out of your chair or something."

"I was down on bended knee, just about to pop the fucking question when I got your fucking call on my fucking cell phone!"

"Oh!" He says. "Oh! Well, we'll get out of your way then."

"Great!"

Blaine is talking to Gail. Her eyes punch me from over Gail's shoulder.

"Listen, Will, before I go, I do have an ulterior motive for being here right now. Now, I know nothing happened last night with me and Helmut. But still, isn't it at least conceivable that he would hit on you and not me? Just to be prudent, I think we've got to put a tail on this guy. Now ..."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's getting married in on Saturday. So we've got a very narrow window. You've got nothing better to do, so I thought that ..."

"You want me to ... Are you out of your fucking mind!?"

"Not at all. Remember, I deal with this stuff all the time. You wouldn't know it from looking at her, but my date here is butch. Broke up her marriage."

"I can't follow my old girlfriend's fiancée around town!"

"Sure you can. You're unemployed."

I see Blaine rise and start down the aisle. I start to panic. Gail joins us.

"She's going to the bathroom," she says.

"Jesus! She's going to the bathroom! Are you happy now?!"

"Gail, tell Will here about how you're gay and how it broke up your marriage ..."

"Sure, I'd been taking these yoga classes ..."

"Is this your plan? Just show up whenever I'm about to pop the question?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about last night! I'm talking about right fucking now!"

"Okay, that's ridiculous. Look, I can see why you'd have certain reservations about following Van's fiancée ..."

"You're like, you're like some kind of, you're like ..."

" ... but really she could be in real trouble, Will."

"NO."

"I can't do it. You're free, and you know what you're doing, more or less."

"I said No!"

"C'mon!"

"C'mon? Are you using the 'C'mon' argument with me?"

I see Blaine emerge around the heavy cherry wood panelling that hides the bathrooms.

"Oh, God," I say.

And then he follows my eyes. He spots her and smiles at the floor. He then turns back to me and says, very carefully:

"You start tailing him, or I'm not going anywhere."

"What?!"

"I'm not going anywhere ever. I'll be on you 24/7."

"What!?"

"I'll tell her you've asked us to join you for dessert."

"You wouldn't do that."

He laughs dismissively and takes a drag of his cigarette. He never takes his eyes off me.

"Fuck! SHIT!"

"I'm kidding. I'm kidding! I wouldn't do that. I could, easily, but I won't. Just think about it."

And with that, Blaine's at my elbow.

"I picked up the bill," she says to me exclusively.

10:00 PM, My and GG's Apartment

I return, alone, and he's on my bed, in his ridiculous evening gown, a cocktail in hand. He starts immediately.

"So are you going to do this?"

"No."

His chin falls to his chest: "Are you going to do it."

"Why don't you lie down, and I'll go call the paramedics."

"This is important."

"No it's not."

"It's extremely important."

"This is your plan, isn't it? You don't want me to propose to Blaine. You want to create enough distractions to keep me perpetually off balance so I just keep screwing

up again and again and again. That, or you're trying to keep track of all my movements so you can preempt each of my proposal attempts. That's it, isn't it?"

"Why do you keep bringing this up?"

"You know I only have to get it right once. You have to be perfect."

"Didn't Abu Nidal say that?"

"The basketball player?"

"The terrorist."

"Ah."

"Would you feel any better if we kept it strictly a nine to five thing? All the hours beyond that would be totally your own."

"Let me explain something to you. I've fucked around for a long, long time. I've tried and failed to propose

FIVE times. The Caymans, the Ski Weekend, that time I can't remember ..."

"Because you were blacked out."

"Yes. Because I was *blacked out*. Are you seeing a pattern here? I haven't been a very serious person, but I'm extremely serious now."

"I think you're overestimating seriousness."

"Am I."

"What's so great about serious people? Here's what serious people do: They work, and they die. Horses do that."

"That's a powerful argument."

"Look, honestly, I resigned myself to you and Blaine getting hitched a long time ago. And believe it or not, I like Blaine."

"Good."

"What I want to do is take a long, hard look at this guy Helmut."

"Yeah and my counterpoint to that is that (a) it's insane and (b) I'm just not going to do it."

"I can't do it myself."

"Well then you're in a real pickle, aren't you?"

"I'll pay you."

"I knew it! I knew you'd try to bribe me into doing this!"

"You don't have any money."

"Oh I've got money."

"Really."

"Yeah."

"Don't you owe me two grand?"

"Are you ever going to let that go?"

"... Well, if you've got money ..."

"You'll pay me."

"That's right."

"How much?"

"\$100 a day."

"Give me a fucking break."

"\$200."

"Pfsht."

"\$200 a day. No more."

"Get real."

"Think of this way. I'll actually be financing your engagement. How's that for interference."

"Ha!"

"Two bills."

"Three."

"..."

"What am I thinking! No. No way. Fuck this!"

"..."

"I'm walking away."

"That's your privilege."

"Yeah and I'm exercising it."

"That's fine with me. I wouldn't want you to do anything you don't want to do."

"Well this is something I definitely don't want to do."

"Then don't."

"I'm not."

"Fine."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

"Three!"

"Two."

"Three bills. I can't go any lower than that."

"Two bills."

"Three and you got me."

"Two, Will."

"... "

"..."

"... What the hell am I saying? Goodnight!"

I give a violent gesture toward the door. He rises.

"Just think about it."

"Goodnight!"

FLASHBACK - GG as Psychotic Youth

Clearly GG is psychotic, huh? I mean, who would do this? Who would think of behaving this way? I am like Donald Pleasance to his Michael Myers; I know the boundless dimensions of his diabolicism, and I understand my role in life to be to keep him from destroying the world.

And I *know* he's insane. How? His parents? Yeah, it all starts with your parents. Len and Miriam Goldstein were

washed up hippies from Vassar or Tufts or Brandeis. SDS types. Len in fact actually knew Abbie Hoffman, if I remember correctly, and frequently bragged that a cop broke his nose at the convention in '68. By the late seventies slash early eighties, they'd thrown in the towel and moved to the suburbs. Nevertheless, they bristled at the very notion of middle America. Drug dealing, the Comintern, vague links to domestic terrorist organizations - that was what they wanted you to believe occupied their time. But it was all basically a crock, and in Meadowbrook - in our corner of suburbia - there was only so much opportunity for anti-social behavior anyway. Certain exotic lawnmowing patterns were considered inappropriate, if not outright provocative, in Meadowbrook.

(Incidentally, I draw a distinction between the Meadowbrook suburbia of my past and the Ordinary People/Ice Storm UberSuburbia of my future. Just so we're clear, when I say, "Suburbia," I mean "UberSuburbia.")

Still, the Goldsteins persevered, jabbing their fingers in the eye of every rule. In a way they were Suburbia's pioneers, I suppose. Len actually did try to nail GG's babysitter and was in fact beaten up rather

publicly by the babysitter's father and brother. And Miriam enthusiastically took up cocaine, disco, vodka, etc. By '85 she'd even hit rock bottom, from which she never really recovered. She disappeared that summer. GG and his father roughed it through Christmas, and when Len finally bolted, GG came to live with us (a long, complicated story). This was a couple years after they'd locked GG up at the Double H.

When he lived with us, he was always one of the family. He was my brother. He grew to worship my Dad, playing with his Academy dress swords, even applying for a nomination his senior year, only to be turned down for his blood condition. My parents adored him. My sister's hopelessly in love with him to this day, and although she's a beautiful girl, he considers her taboo. I adore him too, I suppose. I've always felt this need to protect him. That little face and that big drop of hair, I look at him and that's what I see. There's a sort of madness in it.

But if there's madness at the core of his soul, there are certainly no self-esteem issues. GG labors under the

impression that he is not only a genius, but also the most eligible bachelor for a thousand miles in any direction. His heyday was college. I think Haverhill was where he first took a good look at himself and decided he was really pretty terrific. He strutted into, then out of the lives of countless young women, leaving in his wake only destruction. Each one careening off toward drugs, yoga, booze. Returning to lesbianism. Resuming with bohemianism, academia, or Algeria. They'd swap Mom and apple pie for Bolshevism and a warm AK. All this he would do in his Tretorns, with a white cotton sweater tied around his neck. Or his loafers and his wool sweater. If someone said anything, he suddenly just beat the living crap out of them. He'd just flip out, opening up with wild violence, that little kid with his warpath eyes. But no one ever did after freshman year. By then everyone loved him.

He's my brother, really. I know how frivolous, how contrived such allegiances are, but he is my brother.

Which is not to say he doesn't have a point. My dance with Helmut was extremely unsettling. I didn't really remember it at first, but it's slowly and disgustingly resurfacing, as such things do.

11:30 PM, My and GG's Apartment

And I'm thinking about his offer, too.

Hey I need the fucking money. You weren't there at the ATM this morning, listening to its dire, panicky beeping as I tried to ram my card back down its throat.

And more importantly, it would be the path of least resistance, believe me. Don't buy any of GG's "Why do you keep bringing this up?" bullshit. He's hazing me. In keeping with his particular sociopathological idiom, this is how he expresses affection. It's our own private bachelor party. At least he's picking up the tab.

Yes, if I'd denied him this final curtain call, there's no telling what he'd do.

In fact, I think I'm done thinking about it. I think I'm gonna do it.

Hell, I basically quit my job so I could cruise by her house several times a day (cruising slowly through the neighborhood, like some hapless pedophile). Why not follow her boyfriend around for awhile? Why not watch somebody play my role, like the embittered old actor I am? See just how believable we may or may not have been?

I feel like I haven't given you enough background? Is that right? Have I been too coy about Van and I? Have I not been forthright enough? Can I be?

Well, I can at least try.

After college, we went west. We lived in San Francisco - outrageously, hilariously - as painter and muse. We lived among other such player-actors. We bought in. We all did. In Northern California, I'm afraid, you can believe anything. Yes! An Art Community! Oh Burroughs, Pervert-God of Art Americana, I invoke your spirit! Pollock! Nabakov! Butterflies in cellophane! Enormous canvases of uncontrolled color! Little girls! Cars with fins! And me! Somehow, me too!

It wasn't that I was untalented, or rather it wasn't primarily that I was untalented ... it was that I knew I could do what artists do. There's a way a painter looks at the world that kind of pulls it apart. That's what I could do. I just couldn't put it back together again. I also didn't realize that anyone could look at the world this way. You can. A world comes apart all too easily if you give it half a chance.

I say I didn't realize this at the time, but it was starting to dawn on me. On Van too. And so we just tried to ignore it. We kept believing. We staying in character. But reality still found ways to play itself out: I started to freak out occasionally. She started to cry more. She started to lose things. I started to yell at her.

God, we tried though. I remember for awhile we thought it would be hilarious if I wore an eyepatch, inviting whatever questions we could and promising one another to answer each one differently. Our first responses were fairly predictable. At a bar in Sausalito, Van told a waiter that we'd gotten in a fight and she whipped an unwound hanger across my face. The next day she told one of our "art community" friends that we'd spent an afternoon on

acid, that I'd passed out standing up, hitting my head on the kitchen counter. In the beginning we tried to stick to such standard, bohemian-type accidents. Then we got more comical. Attacked by pigeons was one of mine, as was revolving door injury. Van contributed that I'd been messing around in the yard and had stepped on the teeth of a rake, flipping the handle up into my face like a bamboo whip. We would tell anyone anything, then float away across the night in the back of a cab, laughing like stoned teenagers.

Then Van started losing her wallet. It bordered on pathological. Diners, movie theaters, trains. It wasn't like she misplaced the thing either. It would literally disappear. The incredible, vanishing wallet. At first it was funny. I made light of the whole thing in an airy, charming way. This was, naturally, entirely out of character. She'd get so pissed off, her face would turn a tight red, she'd get livid, but somehow I'd manage to calm her down. Cigarettes, stroking her hair, an idiotic yet somehow successful tickling campaign. Can you see me? Pinching at her sides with my big red lobster hands? She'd karate chop at me (she took her swings at me, too); this I would see and raise with my robot dance. That usually

worked, but if it didn't, I'd affect a kind of anger/frustration transference from herself to me by patting her on the ass incessantly with a tennis racket or something. When she'd finally focus on me, I'd drop my pants and ask her what the real problem was. Honey, what's wrong? You can tell me, Van? I'm your lover. We're lovers. That's all that matters. Tell me. She'd insist I put my pants on. She always played her part. I'd insist they were on. If she was really mad, I'd start crying before I chased her around like a lunatic.

But it just kept happening. I remember one time coming back from a show in Carmel. I was particularly high strung at the moment - half the people showing were absolute hacks, the other better than I'd ever be. Also, it'd been a room full of strangers down there. Our faux-beatnik friends. They were throwing in the towel. Of course we were running out of money, too. Van's mother had stopped sending cash a long time ago (Presumably she was spending this money on her Australian pool boy). I'd cashed my last bond.

Van couldn't make up her mind whether she wanted to go back to the gallery, now two hours behind us, and look for the wallet or just forget it. Wordlessly, I pulled over. I

didn't try to help this time; I let her make her decision. She'd sat there and stared at me. Then we went back. Miraculously, somebody had turned it in at the desk.

The real meltdown was the next time she lost it. An honest to God fight at 2:30 a.m. in the middle of Union Square. She didn't have to say a word as we came up the escalator from the subway. I heard her fumbling through her purse. I heard her stop. I turned. Her fist was over her mouth. Her eyes jumped to me. I just turned and started walking towards the apartment. She called my name. I kept going. I stopped a few paces later. I paused, I turned around, returning to her, under the Theater District style lights of Union Square, kicking things off with: "What's your fucking problem?"

Fast-forward maybe a month. I throw a fit one Saturday afternoon. I do it white-trash-style. Shirtless. Bloody. Drunk. There in our little apartment, the walls bleached utterly white by the California sun.

I break what I can - lamps, dishes, I tear apart canvases, I punch mirrors. I'm not sure if my heart's in it. I collapse in a chair, exhausted. Blaine crawls into my

lap. She puts her head on my shoulder. She snakes her arms around my chest.

She whispers "Paint me. Make me beautiful" and it's a line that so absurd that it seems for some reason to vibrate in the air, stupid and exposed, like a stunned animal. And it's a line she means. She really means it. She's trying so fucking hard. But it's also a running joke.

I say my line ("This isn't Titanic") and mean something too.

"Make me beautiful."

I can't tell if we're off-script or on.

"You're already beautiful. I can't improve you any."

"You can. Paint me. Please."

"I can't. I can't improve anything."

"I love you."

"I see things and I pull them apart. I've pulled you apart."

"You've held me together."

"Paint me."

"This isn't Titanic."

For a second there we were out in the open. And then we were back in character. It's over. The world - which I feel to this day had sat still and waited - starts up again.

I sold my first and last painting out of a miserable little gallery in the Tenderloin, a former currency exchange. Basically the place just got gutted. It was run by a Bay Area vulgarian prodigy named Terry Montini. He was part of the incoming Boho generation. (They lived in Oakland, of all places.) It was his stuff they wanted. Without any kind of warning, Montini's cache shot right through the roof. A dealer in Los Angeles called up and bought everything, included my watercolor "Sunset No. 3." (I know.) Van had convinced Montini to show it. Sunset No.

3 hung right next to one of Montini's called "Roger's Mad." "Roger's Mad" was a cartoonish and extremely oily treatment of the male midsection. Absolute precision applied to a burst of dark pubic hair, each strand a greasy spring. A long pink scar arced from the top of the hip to just below the belly button. And of course there was the dick - humble, unobtrusive - just sort of lounging around in there.

Montini had called me with the news, and to invite me over to a party at the gallery that night. I remember standing in the gallery, in the middle of the party, giving my miserable piece one last look. Van was back home, dealing with the latest (and it turns out, next to last) of her father's emergencies.

I hadn't yet met Montini in person. When I did, he turned out to be just another futureman, though shorter (the runt of some futureman litter), with one eye apparently welded shut. He was more drunk than I was.

"You know I made the whole fucking thing up."

"Made what whole fucking thing up?"

"The gigolo angle."

He sniveled briefly, then saw that I didn't get it.

He continued: "They're under in the impression in L.A. that Roger ("Roger's Mad"), Randy ("Randy's Randy"), Billy ("Billy Works") and Tick ("Tick's Got It") are all local working boys."

"Oh."

He sniveled again briefly, settled down, then said, "So you did those sunsets, huh? With the sailboats and the seagulls and all that? Watercolors? Really?"

That night, I cheated on Van. Some young thing who'd learned I was one of the artists. I met her at about midnight, about fourteen hours before Alex Smiley nose-dived out of the world (Yeah, he'd waited for Van to come home). About fifteen hours later I called Van's parents' house, desperate to apologize. She answered, and I wouldn't let her start. I told her her news had to wait. I told her what happened.

There are times when words don't seem to work anymore, when those few that escape your lips describe something that just isn't true or relevant at all. This was one of those times.

She hung up, and that was it.

12:00 AM, My and GG's Apartment (his room)

He says this over his half-frame reading glasses (he's reading *The Economist* or something).

"I need you for a week, but I'll settle for two days."

"Fine."

"Eight hours a day, for two days. At \$200 per hour, that's \$1,600."

"Yes, I know. I can multiply."

"We start early tomorrow."

"I need an advance."

"Why?"

"Because I'm out of fucking money, that's why."

"How much do you need?"

"\$600."

"I'll get it for you tomorrow."

"Fine."

"You're doing the right thing."

"Am I."

He considers me for a moment, and then he smiles. He smiles that lunatic smile.

"C'mon! It'll be fun!"

TUESDAY

5:30 AM, My and GG's Apartment

I wake in a blue gloaming, afloat in a convoy of dim nightshapes, to the toll of a sea bell. I went to sleep precisely two hours ago, having sat on our couch in a seizure of consciousness and nicotine. I count sheep. I

count cigarettes. I even try *reading*. I mean, I'm fucking tired! *I just want to go to bed*. Nothing works. I turn on the television again, defeatedly. I observe a dozen infomercials. These bright-eyed ad-cowboys, in their cotton sweaters, by their pools. The Full Frontal Pitch. Eventually my brain kicks in. I spend an hour or two trying to gauge just how serious Nuts is, kneading my knuckles until they feel like washed carrots. Next I try to estimate how serious Blaine is about this whole pregnancy angle, clutching my wallet with one hand, my balls with the other. Finally, I muse on just what Hillman has in mind, this for perhaps an hour, delicately fingering the bridge of my nose, envisioning blow after blow jumping through my falling dukes. I discover that this is not without it's appeal. I still crave punishment. And then I dream of punishment, and then I'm out.

I'm at the top of the stairs now. With my Chiuaua eyes, I look down at the front door. Before I'm aware of it I'm undoing the chain, and the bolt. I slam out the rod, reverse release the swing chain. I pull over the four by four. Slide up the low inbolt. Next I lean back the stand, disengage the steel divot in the floor. I step back and regard my work proudly. The chimes ring out again, and I

say "Ah yes," remembering the sealock and giving it a twirl, and after that, turning out the vice handle. I set the combo on the dual dial. It gives. I then reach for and twist open the knob. As I do I press the heel of my hand hard into my left eye, working it around. Eventually I look up and focus.

"Will," he says from the other side of the screendoor.

"Shatsky," I say cathartically.

"Let's go, buddy."

"Oh my God."

I groan. I try to blink, but can't. I'm too tired to blink. I take a stab at falling asleep on my feet. I succeed. I wake to,

"Will!" The screen door rattles maniacally.

"AHHH!!"

"Our perp's at the Horner. We're setting up camp at that coffee joint across the street."

"NoooooOOO!"

He flips open his cell phone. He dials it. "Yeah," he says, then pulls open the screen and hands the phone over to me. I try to shoo it away, but he wraps the phone in my fingers. I hang it up and hand it back to him. I massage my left eye again. A beat or two, then the phone erupts again, propped up in his fat, cocked hand, like he knew it would. He holds it up like a falconer. I try to shut the door and he stops it with his foot.

"It's for you."

"No, Ted."

"You said Yes last night."

"I'm saying No this morning."

"... You'll break his heart if you don't do this."

"C'moonnnNNN. NO!"

"It's not that big a deal."

"Will you turn that thing off?"

"We'll keep our distance." He says. He considers me for a moment. He then shuts off the all-too-needy phone.

"Will."

"I haven't had any coffee yet," I whimper. I plead.

"I'll buy. We'll be staked out at that coffee joint across the street."

I take a deep, deep breath. After awhile I say:

"... Shit! Shit! SHIT!!"

**5:45 AM, En Route to that Coffee Joint Across the
Street from the Horner**

Somehow I've gotten dressed. Now I'm cruising down Idaho in the shotgun seat of Shatski's El Turismo. I feel like an outpatient heading home from major surgery.

The sky is opaque, tender like the roof of a sea shell. If you could reach out and touch it, you'd feel clam flesh. "The sun isn't up yet, Ted," I complain weakly, exasperated, pointing at the horizon. Just past Webster, having cruised under a wet yellow light, TS banks left and my cheek smears over the dank passenger side window, my lips puckering in a kiss of cool glass. He brakes almost imperceptibly then hurls the car to starboard, after which we heave to a standstill. I turn the handle, exit and start out to the right, on the lookout for a Squat franchise that seems to have disappeared. A hand takes my upper arm, swings me left and there it is. I'm dropped in a seat. A gravy boat of black oil rocks elliptically under my face. I stare at it until it stops. I take a sip.

In another ten minutes I'm semi-alert. A whine of feedback, quiet and monotone, sings out under my ear. I work my nose around, then take a good look at TS. He's making narrow hawkeyes at the awning across the street, occasionally massaging his stubble with a big hand.

"You're aware I chased this guy's girlfriend all over Europe," I begin, my cup in both hands.

He turns. I nod and frown.

"I'm regarded by most of my closest friends as psychotic."

"Huh."

"Stole her mail."

"Really."

"Yep. Followed her all over the place ..."

"Hmm."

"... playing with myself ..."

"Wow."

"None of this means anything to you?"

"Not really."

"... Killed her cat."

"You probably had a good explanation."

"I didn't. I swear."

On the table, his hands turn over indulgently.

"Hmm." I concede. I fall back in the booth and bounce the back of my head on the miniature trellis work.

"What the fuck am I doing here?" I say. Then I lean over my elbows.

I turn to investigate the place. I ask, miserably:
"Are we sure he hasn't left yet?"

Shatsky's eyes address me sidelong. "It's 6:30 in the morning."

I nod, conceding the point. He's still looking at me though, something obviously spinning in his mind. He says, "You know, it can't hurt to find out." He pulls out a tiny cell phone from his down vest. He dials.

"Helmut Von Ribbenthorpe's room please ... Thank you." He looks at me. Several beats pass. He smiles to kill time, then his face goes slack and he stares at the ceiling. "Dr. Smith? This is your wake up call ... Oh my, I am dreadfully sorry, Sir. Please forgive me ... Yes. I do apologize, sir. Good day." He pulls the phone from his ear and pins a key with a sausage-sized finger.

"Well done."

"Thank you."

The cell erupts again, and Ted answers without saying a word.

"We're there. What? Okay. Okay. Alright, hold on." He holds out the phone for me.

I take it: "Yes."

"I don't know what time the workday begins in the Sudetenland, but our Aryan dreamboat should really be up and about by now."

"I see."

"Listen, we are operating under total radio silence. There's no telling who could be listening in. From now on, you'll refer to me only as *Mr. Veronica*. Your partner's *Jimmy Carter*. You're at *The Prom*."

"You're gonna go way overboard with this thing, aren't you."

"I can't explain it right now, but we have to do it this way."

"You can't explain it right now. Hmm. Yes. Well, certainly there's any number of plausible explanations."

"Gonna have to trust me on this one."

I laugh.

"I know what I'm doing here."

I snort. I breathe heavily. "So?"

"... So what?"

"So what's my name?"

"... Oh, you're," He clears his throat here. "You're 'The Mosquito!'" He says, with startling enthusiasm.

"'The Mosquito.'"

"... Don't you love it? It's so Green Hornet-ish."

"Great."

A pause. "I suppose you could make up your own code name if you don't like that one..."

"No. No, The Mosquito's fine."

"Good. It's my favorite one. That's why I gave it you. I was going to be The Mosquito myself. Mr. Veronica is a touch too predictable."

"Right. Right. Say, listen, Mr. Veronica, we're looking at six to ten hours here."

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

"I'll need my money tonight."

"Oh! Other line! Gotta go!"

"Don't welsh on me!"

"Easy, Sam Spade."

"I'm serious."

"I know you are, Mosquito."

"Good."

"Now let's be careful out there."

"Will do."

"This is Mr. Veronica. Over. Now you say your part ..."

"... what's my part."

"You say, 'This is Mosquito. Over and Out.'"

"'This is Mosquito. Over and Out.'"

A click and a dial tone.

I look at Shatski. He laughs quietly as he turns the page of his paper.

11:00 AM, Downtown

So, he doesn't leave the hotel until 10:30. We sit in that goddamn coffee shop across the street for nearly four hours. When he does emerge, Shatski and I give chase from opposite sides of the street. Saurkraut Six walks north.

We're on Beecher Street approaching D, in the Cathedral District.

At the corner, he exercises his mind briefly over the workings of this American intersection, but figures it out just quickly enough to cross. In my Disneyland sunglasses and ball cap (TS had ransacked his trunk briefly for disguises), I walk up to the intersection, where I am met by my partner. Together we watch Helmut yank open the door to the Red Rooster Restaurant.

11:45 PM, Downtown

We're watching the Rooster from Shatski's El Turismo. As the shadow tide of the Cathedral now descends from the north, Helmut emerges. He turns south, straight at us. Cursing through a mouthful of Junior Mints, I dive for the wheel well.

He passes. Shatski gives me the all clear. I get out and pick him up on foot. I keep fairly close, enjoying the convenience of the thick lunch traffic.

He ducks into the Barndoor Books just before Covenant Street.

I move to the corner to watch both exits. Shatski appears five minutes later.

11:45 PM, Downtown

Having really taken his time in the Barndoor, he heads back out on Beecher for some window shopping. Which means that Shatski and I, on opposite sides of the street, put in an hour of window-shopping as well. I spend fifteen minutes nose to nose with a cigar store indian.

2:15 PM, Downtown

He spends an hour at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Then he spends another hour drinking tea and watching cars from a table at Bennelux. He literally just sits there, his elbow on the table, his chin in his hand.

2:30 PM, Downtown

And meanwhile GG keeps calling. As does everyone else.

Take for example this series of exchanges. This is back at Smith and Covenant, just outside the Barndoor Books.

The phone rings. I pick up:

" This is Mr. Veronica. Come in Mosquito."

"YEAH!" I say, "YOU! Would you stop hanging up when I say 'Hello.'? I'm not blowing anyone's cover by saying 'Hello,' am I? You're making it very hard to play ..."

"You're supposed to say 'This is the Mosquito.'"

"I just want to say 'Hello.'"

"Why don't you want to use your code name?"

"Because it's idiotic."

"Just humor me."

A click, a deep rich tone. I hang up, and in a second it shrieks to life again.

"Hello!"

Click.

A second, then another ring. I turn off the phone.

Ten minutes later, stricken by guilt, I turn it back on again. It rings instantly.

"Hello!".

Click. Tone.

"Fuck off!" I say triumphantly, then smile at a fellow pedestrian.

I light cigarette onze. The phone rings. I look at my watch. A few more rings, a spitting curse and several furious maestro-style jabs at the air, I answer.

"THIS IS MOSQUITO!"

"Good." He says slowly, "This is Mr. Veronica."

"... Go ahead. Mr. *Veronica*."

"Wait. Is this a secure line?"

"How the hell would I know?"

"Is this a secure line."

"Yes, it is!"

"Alright. Gimme a SitRep."

"A Sit-Up?"

"A situation report."

"Ah, a SitRep. Okay. So I can play along now, is that
it?"

I hear only the gurgling sound of loudly sipped coffee.

"Okay, fine. Let's see. Saurkraut is presently in the downtown Barndoor."

"Any idea what he's looking at?"

"Well, yes. According to a recent report from *Jimmy Carter*, he's spent a fair amount of time in the Religions and New Age section."

"Some kind of wack job?"

"That's our guess."

"Has he hit Gay Lit?"

"Not as of yet, but we're hopeful."

"Anything else to report?"

I flick my cigarette into the street. "He had a feta cheese omelet at the Red Rooster."

"The Red Rooster," He muses, "Gay joint?"

"Yeah," I say. "It's a gay breakfast joint. Best gay breakfast in the city."

The phone ticks between us for a pressurized thirty seconds or so.

"... Feta. That's Greek?"

"Right."

"Not Gay?"

"Gay ... cheese?"

"Right."

"No."

The line clicks.

"Oh! Shit! I gotta go! I'll call you right back."

"Mm hmm."

2:50 PM, Downtown

"This is Mosquito."

"..."

"This is MOSQUITO! On a secure line! Come in Mr.
Veronica!"

"Will?"

"Oh! Honey!"

"'This is 'Mosquito'?"

"eh he he haa?!..." [Sneeze.]

"What are you doing?"

I gulp: "Well," [clear throat] "Ah, GG and I are just playing a little ..."

"Where are you?"

"Who is what?"

"Will ..."

"I'm ... Well, of course, I'm at home."

"I just tried your home number."

Ouch. A little quick thinking, and I come up with:

"Well, I'm on the throne."

"Lovely." She says, "Look, meet me at four at Speer & Spiegel, the west parking garage entrance."

"Okay."

"We're going to register there."

"Very good."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

3:35 PM, Downtown

"Mr. Veronica?"

I've given him a call.

"Yes?"

"You're aware I have an appointment with my betrothed at four?"

"No, I was not aware of that, Mosquito. Can you ditch her?"

"No I can't."

"Can you come back afterwards?"

"God. C'mon."

"Can you?"

"Is there an overtime rate."

"No, there isn't. So you're coming back?"

"Yeah, fine, whatever."

"Good. Your commitment is an inspiration to Jimmy
Carter and myself."

"Terrific," I say, "Over and Out?"

"Over and out."

3:55 PM, Downtown

"Hello?"

"Goddamn it! You're doing it again!"

Click.

A moment, and it rings. I take a deep, courage
building breath, then answer.

"HELLO!"

"Will?"

"... HR!"

"You okay? You sound a little overwrought."

[sneeze]

"Gezuntite. You have a cold or anything?"

"No, HR, I'm fine."

"Well, I was just calling to officially say welcome
aboard."

"Thank you. It's an honor to be on your team."

"Great. Hey, listen, come by my place Thursday at 11:00. We'll have lunch."

"Will do."

"Bring a change of clothes."

"A change of clothes. Got it."

The Hillman Reynolds test. Thank God.

"What do you have in mind, HR?"

"Well. Well, we can talk about that later."

"Great."

"Very good."

"I'll see you."

"Terrific."

"Goodbye, Will."

"Fantastic."

4:02 PM, Speer & Spiegel

I pick up a cab just south of Bennelux, leaving the job in Shatski's capable hands, then head across town to meet my beloved.

In the store, I trail her like a spotter, just behind her left shoulder. She's got a pricing gun that she holds it at her side, like a real weapon. We stalk through the joint, past spitshined cookware, through ivory bread bakers and Imported Leather by Cheka. Blaine wings a Martini set. She picks off a toaster. She spits shells all over Electronics, and really unloads, with chilling effect, in The Baby Zone. Next she runs the women's department, riddling the place like a police shooting range. She even pings off a shot behind her back, using a mirror from the makeup counter, to the cheers of a dozen perfume squirters. Later, during a brief and horrifying exchange with a sales lady in Underthings ("fucking BITCH!") she actually tries

to push the gun up under the lady's nose, before I pull her away.

Somewhere near Bedding, hopelessly turned on and scared shitless, I fall on bended knee:

"Blaine Gugliotti, will you marry me?"

"Where the fuck is the crystal?"

"Hey!" I snap my fingers up at her. "*Will you marry me?*"

"Get up."

"What?"

"Get up, you idiot."

"What!?"

"I'm not going to be proposed to in a department store."

"Why not!"

"WILL!"

"WHAT?!"

"GET UP."

She's off. I'm up.

5:15 PM, Downtown

A few tactical cell exchanges with GG and I track down Ted. He's now staked out across from the Kalorama movie theater. I arrive, and Helmut emerges almost instantly. He leans against the building and smokes a cigarette. He reads something. Five minutes later he crushes the cigarette under his toe and heads back inside. I look at the marquee.

"I don't believe this."

Now I'm on the cell, talking to GG.

I say slowly, emphatically: "What do you want me to do? He's watching a movie."

"I don't know. Improvise."

"Shall I run in and yell 'Fire'?"

"Don't patronize me. Look, we've got to just sit this one out."

"Great," I say. "You know, I have plans later with Blaine."

"That's odd. I thought Blaine was having dinner with Daddy tonight."

The gurgling coffee.

"I told you that?"

"You did."

"Ah well ..."

"Over and out?"

"Right, right. Over and Out."

8:15 PM, Downtown

Helmut leaves the theater. We follow him back to the hotel. An hour later, he shows up under the awning, in a jacket and slacks. A bellhop calls him a taxi.

"Fresh as a daisy," Shatski observes, pointing at him with half a mini donut.

His cab moves carefully through the evening traffic, the air now sweet and dim. We cross the Pequot Bridge into Richard's Hill. At Vanessa's street, they make the left.

We cruise by while Helmut pays the driver. Her house moves heavily past us, like the hull of some magnificent cruiseliner, her windows glowing across the lawn. I watch him cross the walk and take the steps before our motion makes him disappear into a hedge. I turn back into my seat.

Shatski wheels us through a U-turn a few streets down.
We come to a halt.

It's chandelier light on the lawn, I now see. From
their dining room. From a hundred years ago. Antique light.
It holds the thrall of the past.

Shatski says: "Looks like a little dinner party. I
think this is his last stop of the evening."

I agree. And then report in.

GG: "Okay, let's do this. Let's call it a day. I know
Ted has another project tonight. Meet me at the Hill Tap
and we'll debrief."

"And you'll buy?"

"Has this been that much of an imposition?"

"So you're buying then?"

9:00 PM, Downtown

The Richards Hill Tap is precisely what you'd expect it to be. It's sits half way up the gradual rise of Jay Street, right in the thick of things, facing a little cobblestone cluster of lean townhomes, a chamber in this city's Edgar Allan Poe heart. Dusty gas lamps, burnished, bicentennial furnishings. Under it's seven foot ceilings, youthful attorneys as far as the eye can see.

GG and I are in a corner, flanking a pitcher. I've debriefed him on most of the day, and I have to admit, he has something of a point. Still, I persevere with my gainsaying.

"You know what our perp did today?" I lean forward now. "He bought a German newspaper. He had an omelet. He went to a museum. And he saw a movie."

"And he went to a fabric store."

"And he went to a fabric store! I'll concede that."

"Checkmate."

I look at him balefully.

He rolls his eyes at me: "Alright. And he gets married - *Married!* - this Saturday."

"I file that under 'SFW.'"

"Okay, I'll humor you. I'll assume the 'F' stands for 'Fuck' or 'Fucking'. That would fit your vulgarian idiom."

"'SFW'. 'So Fucking What.'"

"Clever. You make that up just now?"

"He didn't even hit on you! Don't they all hit on you?"

"Normally, yes. I still don't understand your resistance."

"I mean, this isn't just some floozie we're tailing."

"I still don't understand.'

"*This is serious.*"

"How?"

"We're following our friends around."

"You mean our girlfriend's boyfriends."

"Right. Yes."

"We've followed our friends around before."

"Not our girlfriend's boyfriends!"

"No, we've done that too."

"Don't you have any reservations about meddling in Van's life?"

"First of all: It's only meddling if they find out. Secondly: this is how people express affection for one another, by picking around in each other's lives."

"I'm serious."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Can't I be serious then too? I think there's something strange about this guy."

"Sure you do."

"What do you care? You're in it for the money."

Our eyes brace one another. The messaging is unclear - betrayal, accusation, irony, regret.

I say: "... That's right."

We talk about this for another hour or two, by which time we are, naturally, blotto. This is our final exchange on the subject:

GG: "I'm putting you through your paces."

Me: "Is that what you're doing?"

GG: "Putting you through your fucking paces, pal."

Me: "Is that so?"

GG: "That's what I'm doing."

Me: "Oh yeah?" I raise my eyebrows.

GG: "Like a rat in a maze."

Me: "Is that right?"

GG: "You got it."

Me: "A rat in a maze, huh?"

GG: [Meaningful squint and nod]

And later I say:

"Four bills."

"Three hundred dollars. No less."

"Four."

"Three."

"Four."

"..."

"Fine. Alright? Happy? FINE!"

##

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17, 1999

7:04 AM, that Coffee Joint Across from the Horner

Shatski and I are parked at that coffee joint again. Helmut hasn't yet emerged, and there's just too much time on my hands.

I call Blaine. I get her coming out of the shower. I'm calling to firm up our dinner plans for tonight (for the third or fourth time). After which I demand to know whether Nuts has been sequestered or not. I get a murky, complicated response that ends with an explanation of her plans for the afternoon. Slowly it dawns on me that, at some point within the past 24 hours, the Wedding Machine has been set in motion.

She explains that today, after meeting with a *caterer* and a *planner*, she'll be registering. This she will be doing on her own, since I "slow her down." What places are you hitting? I hear myself ask. I tune out after the sixth or seventh name. When she finishes, I ask just how big she anticipates our wedding to be.

"About medium."

"What's medium?"

"Smallish."

"Can you give me a number?"

"I've reserved the Cathedral."

"The Cathedral?"

"Don't worry about it."

"THE CATHEDRAL?"

"Don't worry about it. Daddy's taking care of all that."

I get more info: The reception, as it turns out, will be at the Double H. In the courtyard with the gazebo, off the West Ward. Nothing sets a mood like the sounds of waltzes, songbirds and wailing maniacs commingling in the summer night.

Finally, I get a date: August 2.

It's all too real.

7:45 AM

Hel is still fast asleep, apparently. I'm wide awake with panic. I try to focus on the money, on Suburbia. Tudor or Colonial? I consider. Hard True or Clay? Boxwoods or ... Well, Boxwoods, obviously. I think about the Big Bitch and my Big Paycheck. My Airplane Money. My G-5 Money. Yes, indeed. All those auxiliary zeros floating through my head, the sheet music to a sweet lullaby. It kind of helps.

See I had this dream last night. I think this has a lot to do with why I'm so wound up.

Here's what happens: I'm trying to pop the question, but I can't get the words right. I just scramble them up. I can't say: "Will you marry me?" However, I can say: "Will you bury me?" As well as, "Am I scaring thee?" and "Are you really me?" "Can't I set we free?"

Cute, huh. And profound.

So I start crying. My mouth is just going. I look down at it as if it's some kind of cruel joke.

I look up at her, and she's aghast. And the next thing I know, as I'm prattling on, her breasts start to grow,

expanding like balloons on helium tanks. She can barely keep her head above them. Now she's terrified too.

"Ain't it funny, see?!"

"Kill You, Bury Me?"

And that's when I leap back into the real world. I rocket back in, punching through white hot atmospheres, throttling down to Earth, springing up in bed like Linda Blair.

So that's the dream. Now, its interpretation.

Proposal anxiety explains a lot here, obviously, but it's the breast thing that really scares me. These tits, they're telling me something. I know this, I read this so clearly because Blaine's tits are always saying something. I mean, they won't shut up. They're already so assertive, these tits of her's. There's so much going on there on her chest, so much more muscle than gland, bunched up muscle, waiting to pop. As ridiculous as it sounds, her tits are somehow *politicized*. They're *agitprop*. They're *provo*. They're *splinter group*. Yes. They're saying: You're on the clock, Pal. A bomb clock. A Launch clock. A rising

barometer of pounds per inch. Hear the hull buckle? Hear it moan? You're too many fathoms down, Dipwad. You're running out of time.

7:55 AM, That Coffee Joint

Of course, my anxiety could be moot, really. If Hillman kills me tomorrow, that is.

In most cases, of course, the Hillman Reynolds pledge period is fairly mild. I mean, HR's a zealot, and he demands zealotry in his minions, but he's not totally *unreasonable*. I know Sheldon, before his stint at Hillman, had to carry a brick in his briefcase for a full year. I suspect that HR, being a good judge of character, could tell that Shelly couldn't hack much else. So maybe I'll have to go a few rounds with him in the boxing ring. (Hillman boxed at West Point, as his publicists relentlessly point out). Happened to both Stilt Hanson and Barry Revelling. And if I know anything, it's how to take a punch.

I guess I just don't want to die. That's all I'm saying.

8:24 AM, Across the Street from the Rooster

I'm totally relieved when Helmut finally appears. He heads straight for the Red Rooster, as we anticipated. Most people, especially non-tourist out-of-towners, are creatures of habit, however quickly acquired. We de-car. I follow. He hops the steps and disappears inside. I take up position on the bench across the street. Without further ado - see this is where the weight training pays off - I do a PMA about face. It's not just physical strength that you're building with those exercises. It's mental strength. Emotional agility. I pour myself totally into the job. My "How the fuck did I get talked into this?" attitude explodes. I go professional. YeeaaAHHHG GGGHHH!!!!

With a muscular snap, I open the newspaper. I bring one knee over the other, quad over hamstring. The newspaper falls gradually, almost imperceptibly, and just as slowly my eyes rise over its rim and push across the street.

In a few minutes Shatski is at the end of the block. And a few minutes later, I fold up my paper and walk casually down the street.

8:41 AM, Downtown

Now that we're rolling, I feel a thousand times better. Yes, Helmut's shopping again. And TS and I are parked. Again. But that's okay, because we're on The Job and there's nothing like The Job to smooth your ruffled feathers. The Perp, that's the guy with Problems. You're a-okay. You've got the Butts. The Coffee. Porno, Bugs, Antennae. The whole milieu, if you will. You're all set.

We have time to kill, so I really try to wallow in the stake-out shit. I quickly find myself drawn into this one magazine of Ted's called *Maximum Screw*. It's veritable ten car pile up of dicks, tits, assholes, twats. It's like one of these 3-D visual puzzles trying to figure out what's what and what goes where. These women and men with their sleepy eyes and woozy smiles. Ted has to explain half of what's going on. And after that he lets me wear one of his fake moustaches. Instantly I'm Dutch Businessman. As such,

I describe my suspicions regarding Blaine's pregnancy. Shop talk, really. I rehash how carefully I'd gone through her apartment. Her purse and luggage. Trash. Bills. Bedsheets. I feel like I'm working multiple cases.

"But you still love her and want to marry her, right?"

"Oh yeah!"

"Well, then sometimes a little encouragement like this is a blessing."

I look at him very carefully. I guess I always thought he was smarter than this.

11:08 AM

Saurkraut Six skips down the stairs of the Rooster and starts south. (Like the alliteration? God, I'm bored.) I observe, sigh, and reach under my seat for the clipboard.

NOTE ON SUBJECT: Saurkraut is wearing a salmon-colored Oxford shirt, black patent leather shoes, white slacks. Subject also has fruity walk.

Let's be frank: Helmut looks gay. He walks gay. Pink shirt. Patent leather shoes? And the white slacks ...

I'm not one to ignore facts. But I really think you've still got to give a guy the benefit of the doubt. I mean, he's the one who's successfully gotten engaged here, not me. And if pink shirts are a qualifier, then everybody I know is queer. I mean, were it not for the shoes, this would have been a GG outfit. Plus, he's a Continental. Can I really apply my State-side template of masculine mannerisms to him? I don't think so. He does have me thinking a little, though.

So he heads toward the Hedgerows, just like yesterday. And just like yesterday the sun is up, although not yet looking for a fight.

"I've got ten bucks says he goes right on Smith."

"You're on."

I fish out the bill with difficulty and slap it on the dash. Shatski tosses up two fives. Ahead, about fifty yards, Helmut performs his pinched little strut downtown.

"C'mon, you mother fucker ..."

He hits Smith, and for a tense moment he waits out the light with the gathered squad of pedestrians.

"C'mon!"

The light changes. He crosses.

"Easy money," Shatski says. He reaches for the dash and I seize his hand. I hold my breath as Helmut hops to the curb. Suddenly, like a fullback, he leaps from a crowd and starts right, heading west on Smith.

"Ha HA!!" I cry. I release his hand and claim the cash myself. Shatski looks at me flatly.

"Teddy, do you wanna make it double or nothing he's going to the bookstore?"

"No, I don't."

"I didn't think so. Looks like you've learned your lesson." I seize my money. "You're not the first, my friend, to find out that it doesn't pay to tangle with Will Standish." My hands jump up. "Just like playing with a poised cobra, ready to strike ..."

I begin to hiss at him, but in one fell motion he drops the shift in gear and we lunge into traffic.

12:15 AM, Downtown

Helmut's speedwalking down Henny Street. He's on a collision course with the Kalorama movie theater. He's got a frappachino or something in one hand, a newspaper in the other. He keeps looking at his watch.

He takes in the 12:25 showing of *Husband, Nephew, Au Pair, Spy*.

2:05 AM, Downtown

Ted and I sit on the broad bank of the El Turismo's front seat. Separating us is a small hill of detritus, much of it knotted up, torn apart, crushed, stained, perhaps joined fold to fold by spit, snot, gum, blood or C4. Each item, for it's brief stint, undergoing a kind of torture, at times expense, stubbornly keeping time's secret. Wrappers of every variety litter the floor. Candy (Whoppers, Skittles); chips (Fritos); cigarettes (Marlboros, General Brand, Camels); magazines (*Screw, Yank, Mexican Yank; Maximum Screw, Mexican Maximum Screw*).

Thoughtfully, Ted positioned us under the dense wingspan of a Dogwood tree. By the frame of the leaves and blossoms, the movie theater is effectively cut off from about five feet up. Between us and it stands a stout, recently painted mailbox and a snubbed parking meter, blinking violation. In our little pool of dim shade, things are tolerable. Beyond, the afternoon is a bright haze, pollen and steam battling in the street.

We've been listening to talk radio and I've been educating Shatski in the intricacies of what I call the Vague Existentialist Pitch (VEP). Remember that acronym; I'm sure everyone will be using it in a year or two. This

is one of the more delicate maneuvers in modern advertising, a kind of cosmic Dick for Dollars, with just a hint of straight up TechnoCock. If done right, there is no more effective way of separating a Baby Boomer from his life savings, and even the most hamfisted attempt works on Geeks-with-Cash.

Basically a VEP promises that, with product X, there's a very good chance, much better than 50/50, that you'll Change the World. A VEP basically blows a whole lot of sunshine up your ass about just how important your schlocky job is. Usually it's B2B, usually tech-oriented. The formula is just Beatles song (or proxy) + technology + extreme sports + the Benetton gang + (perhaps) something kitschy like an elephant. This is a slight variation of the "I'm 15 Forever!" pitch, which, as you've no doubt guessed, sells Eternal Life. Personally I'd rather do porno ads all day long than write up a single VEP. I can see that TS has a similar reaction. His red and gold moustache occasionally twitches distastefully to one side or the other.

2:06 PM, Downtown

A visual of the surveillance business at ground level, so poignant in its banality:

Shatski takes a drag, then lets his forearm fall back out the window. I stick a couple GPC cigarettes up my nose and check out what I look like in the rearview mirror. He looks at me. I look at him. We both look back at the theater.

2:10 PM, Downtown

Helmut emerges. He leans back against the theater wall and just sort of starts looking around.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't ..."

"Oh my God. He's going back in."

"..."

"Ted, make him stop."

"I can't."

"TED."

He shrugs.

"If he goes into that theater again I'm going to throw up, right here in the El Turismo."

Shatski looks at his watch.

"The town's ankle deep in museums, zoos and all sorts of other cultural crap, and this guy's gonna see *Husband*, *Nephew*, *Au Pair*, *Spy* again."

"Starts in about three minutes."

"I'm calling this one in."

I dial.

"Yes."

"This is Mosquito. Are you sitting down?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Looks like Saurkraut is going to take in another movie."

"Hmm."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"..."

"This is much, much bigger than either of us imagined."

A gurgle of coffee.

"The omelets? The Bookstore? The matinees?"

Undaunted, a second gurgle.

"He hit the Barndoor again today. You know what my take is on that?"

"What."

"I think that's where he picks up his instructions."

I look at Shatski. He's opened a centerfold across his lap.

"You see what I mean? I think he picks up some kind of note that one of his handlers leaves for him in a book. It's an old Mossad trick."

"Have you been inside the theater?"

"Shatski checked that out yesterday. Mr. Veronica?"

"Yes?"

"Are you sure this line is secure?"

"... Yes."

"... I think our boy here is KGB."

"I see."

"He's doing the same fucking thing he did yesterday."

3:00 PM, Downtown

I bolt the very instant the clock in the dash of the El Turismo flips over to the next whole hour. Helmut disappeared back into the theater two hours ago, and we've just been killing time since. Or at least Shatski has. I've been working myself back into a paranoid frenzy. My monkey brain is running wild.

I have some errands to run. Dry-cleaning. Toiletry resupply. But I forego them for a rehabilitative trip to the gym. I need to cool out. (Have you seen "Gimme Shelter"? The documentary? Remember when Mick says to the crowd at Altamont "Everybody just *cool out!*"?)

I'm at the club by 3:30. My face floods red in the mirror as I work the resistance bands. For an hour and a half my carotid arteries stand up on my neck like earthworms. I do four dozen toe touches, a hundred knee

bends. Then, like something out of *Pumping Iron*, I do two hundred more. I run in place. I spin. After that, I whip a jumprope off the stand. I start double dutching. (Who am I? Leon Spinks?) I go for two flips under the same jump. Then three. Then arm over arm, at which point I loop up my toes together and hit the floor like a roped up calf. I'm unfazed, however. I bound back into the fray. I go through three headbands on the elliptical (or in my case, "vertiginous") machine. I hit the sauna. I shower. Shave. I emerge into the sun's klieglit fury.

I feel terrific as I take the Pike out to Cranston to pick up my dry-cleaning. There's an accident on Dixie Highway, so I'm stalled dead still for fifteen minutes. I take advantage of this break to check messages. There are half a dozen from GG. He argues in the first two that I have a moral duty to stay on the job. It sounds like this is his point in the next four so I delete my way through those. There's a message from Sheldon, another desperate plea. I have to light up as I listen to the next one, from HR. I'm to look at some of these ads HMG is putting out. I'm also advised that "we'll need about six to eight hours together ..." Nuts - in his sing-songy idiom - is looking for an update on my schedule for proposing marriage to Blaine

(His final line: "And ... ah ... well ... of course ... I mean, Friday's Friday. Ciao, Amigo!") Finally Blaine herself wants to know whether I prefer white or off-white.

4:40 PM, Dixie Highway

Traffic starts moving again.

5:00 PM, the Cleaner's

I'm waiting for the dry-cleaning lady to find my shirts and suits in her plastic maze.

5:30 PM, the Cleaner's

Still waiting.

5:45 PM, Leaving the Cleaner's

I'm running home empty-handed.

Our reservations are for seven, so I decide I have just barely enough time to run over to the Jimmy Drug. I hustle through the deodorant and shampoo aisles without breaking stride, barely paying attention to the brands I grab. I decide to try the line. If it doesn't move, I'll just bolt again. But it moves well enough.

6:35 PM, the Jimmy Drug

I'm checking out, punching my debit numbers into the machine and waiting for clearance.

6:38 PM, the Jimmy Drug

Still waiting for clearance.

6:40 PM, the Jimmy Drug

Now trying to get my card back from the girl behind the machine who's offered to give it a try.

6:43 PM, Leaving the Jimmy Drug

Sprinting up Burling, my card in my fist, my deodorant and shampoo still wobbling away beside the cash register.

6:50 PM, My and GG's Apartment

I'm wrestling with the door Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* style. I'm through half the locks when I hear GG on the other side. He takes on the other half and I'm inside by 6:55. I grab my briefcase off my bed (it's got the ring in it), turn around and fall down the stairs.

7:00 PM, En Route to Pancho's

I'm behind the wheel.

7:10 PM, Pancho's

I kick in the door to Pancho's.

7:12 PM, Pancho's

I fall into my chair. She's not even there yet. I take this as an instance of divine charity as I mop my brow with the tablecloth.

7:40 PM, Pancho's

Blaine arrives. You can tell usually because there's a drop in atmospheric pressure. That, or you'll start to see men dropping their jaws or checking their wallets (whatever you have, buddy, it's not enough. Trust me). If you do the math, you'll notice that she's forty minutes late. She sharks through the tables. I give her an arch smile. She returns it.

I've not been idle these past 40 minutes. No. No, I've been drinking. As it's a Mexican restaurant, I've been drinking tequila. Not too much, of course, just enough to survive. I down the last of my gasoline-and-jalapeno

cocktail, then haul my briefcase up to my lap. I've been thinking about our life together and drinking Cuevo. My fear, delightfully, has evaporated. I'm doing the right thing, I realize with a start. This girl's pregnant!

I open the briefcase. I fish around for the ringbox.

And I love her too.

I push a few files around.

She arrives at the table, like the Fifty Foot Woman. She tucks her purse/doctor's kit under arm. She grabs her chair.

I throw a few files into the air. Then all of them. I ram both arms in, elbow-deep.

It's in here somewhere. I know it.

BOOZE FLASHBACK

For purposes of dramatic tension, there couldn't be a better time to recount my run-in Saturday with Helmut. You know how drunks are, living in fear of memory. Well, memory came waltzing back into to my life about twelve hours ago. I really wanted to keep this whole episode to myself, but now ... I'm mean, really. Who gives a shit?

(STD's wedding - Saturday) The room is a wave pool of fading candlelight, twentysomethings, white linen and empty tables. The chandelier above, its electric flames the faintest amber, bobs and weaves, like overexposed, warped video footage. Only a few moments ago GG and I sang "Jailbreak" with the band. We slurred and improvised our way through most of it - and, to be fair, toward the end we were really just nodding through the verses, then really coming in strong for the chorus. This ended with a modestly heated argument between ourselves and the saxophone player. I am now leading another bunny hop. My other two bunny hops were rousing successes, but this one doesn't quite have legs. Still, the tide turns quickly. At first it's just GG and I, your basic two person bunny hop squad. GG then grabs LT, and, next thing I know, Helmut, with his mad, Teutonic war-smile, is backing me up. I give him the thumbs up and refocus on navigating. I think the song is "Celebration."

I'm pretty sure it is. You know that one that goes *Da da Da da Da da da da da da, Yahoo!* "Celebration", right? Anyway, the remaining couple dozen people undergo a simultaneous change of heart, and attach themselves. Through this song, and another ("Green Eyed Lady"?) we operate in a tight little pattern, a kind of figure eight or ampersand. Then, like the Blue Angels, we execute a sort of starburst maneuver, everyone staggering away in a different direction. I initiate it by disengaging, throwing my arms around in a broad, Capades-inspired, counterclockwise circle as I careen to starboard. GG, then everyone else, follows suit. As it turns out, I have no little trouble stopping, my feet somewhere over to my left, torso wide right, my forward motion only ceasing when I plant a nose in Helmut's sternum. I remember vividly looking up and seeing his eyes laughing over his bronze cheekbones, a phalanx of innumerable bright white teeth, real meat-eaters. He props me back up effortlessly with one vice-like hand, then starts laughing merrily, dancing, pirouetting, snapping his fingers. My face no longer registers anything beyond boorish concentration. (Remember - *please, remember* - I'm totally, totally drunk.) Instinctively, I become his partner, myself now sort of snapping and spinning around. The song finishes, and I recall an antsy hush falling over

the remaining six or perhaps twelve of us. Was the band packing it in? Was this it? I take a good look around, then refocus with some effort on Helmut. Wordlessly I claim the drink in his hand, bring it to my lips and nearly hurl again.

"Wehrmach und Ike!" he says, loud and close. His blonde hair brushed, his nutcracker jaw. A Nazi Adonis, fire and spotlights in his blue eyes.

"EHH?!"

"VERMOOSE UNT ICE!" he bellows, and, for some inexplicable reason, winks.

The remaining bile in my stomach, as if on cue, makes a desperate lunge up my larynx, but I fight it back.

The horn section explodes with a familiar couple volleys, followed by a wild cry from the crowd. Arms spring into the air like a revival meeting. I tune in: YMCA. In my head I register it only remotely. But my arms, unbidden, fly into the air of their own volition. YMCA? **YMCA!!!**

Now I don't care who you are or what your stance is in regard to The Village People, but no normal person can resist the call, if you will, of "YMCA." If you were born before 1972, it's simply part of your programming.

Like a low disco star, the mirrorball works its magic over the small crowd, disks of light roaming in their orbits, closing and dropping. First GG is spinning me, and then he himself spins off, falling into Levon's arms. Majorie and Anne are now among us. Anne and I, our hips kneading together, our double visions within inches of one another, are for a moment deep in romance. For some reason, I plunge my tongue into her ear. The first refrain chimes in, and we stumble through it. The next thing I know I'm Helmut's dance partner again. This is where it starts to get weird. The guy won't leave me alone. Perfunctorily, I do my little routine, my signature dance number, where I feign weariness with my partner, pivot and storm off a few yards only to spin around and close back in, shaking a finger admonishingly. I trip halfway across, but recover.

He's not letting go of my hand, though. I somehow escape, diving for Marjorie, who shortly thereafter runs her tongue down my throat.

Suddenly there's a hand on my upper arm and I'm twisted around. Helmut again. Jesus. An arm snakes around my waist and I'm dipped. All I can see is shimmering teeth and the x-ray of his skull in the boiling mirrorball.

"HA HA HA!" He roars, launching me back to my feet. Before I know it, we're doing a tango. I'm propelled through a cheering crowd, one hand thrust forward, the other pinned to the small of my back, my fingers wrapped in his, my feet dragging. Everyone's cheering. I spot GG dancing with private intensity inches from the bandstand, and the next thing I know I'm being thrown around in a series of big band dance moves. This ends when I'm catapulted through his legs, sledding across the floor on my chest. The crowd goes wild. I get up and beat a fast retreat to a corner, where I shamefully cabbage-patched my way to the final refrain.

That's what happened with Helmut.

THURSDAY, JUNE 19, 1999

9:57 AM, My and GG's Apartment

I'm working right now. I'm composing. I am serene and all-seeing. I am rapture, mania and creation. I'm on a fucking roll.

Earlier this morning I crafted yet another commercial for Fenn & Finney, the most recent Hillman Reynolds

acquisition. I'm not on that project, but that hardly matters. When I move now my BSD knocks shit over. Fenn & Finney, as I presume you know, claims to have an ancient, venerable clothiers pedigree. Of course, they don't. Some Albanian just made it all up, but that hardly matters. He's created a good brand; it *looks* right, and his market (the American Arriviste) has bought it. (By the way, have you noticed we're all arrivistes, here in America?) What I've thrown together is a Blue Lagoon inspired scenario, a kind of Martha's Vineyard Lord of the Flies. Decked out in his seersucker suit and bare feet, his brown corrugated guts and cornsilk hair shimmering in the sun, our late teenage tribal chief wordlessly lays down the law. Mandated (implicitly, of course. There is no dialogue) is his bedding of all the young WASP squaws, themselves in Oxford shirts knotted up under their breasts, white cotton briefs banding low across their hips. It's mostly montage work. Fingers paint ebony chests in zinc, spelling perhaps "Freedom" or "Sunshine." Girls skip through the surf like nymphs. Some beam from under porkpie hats. Some wrap their long bronze legs around freckled, frizzle-haired boy men. Some just stare at one another, thinking, anticipating, girl-on-girl. ("GOG" in the vernacular.) A flash of sand on hot thighs. A glimmer of low quality, indoor, kiddie porn

footage. It's CK redux, sure, but it's different. It's a class thing. It's not fucking runaways and tanktops. It's Farmington plus St. Paul's with a hint of Rohypnol, a pinch of X. It's the Benetton kids and they're fucking horny. The world's ready now. I end with a beach party, the bonfire, the cackles, the race down the beach. Underneath, a moonlit soundtrack of throbbing, drumming, peristaltic sexual tension.

I dotted the final period. I flourished the bottom of the page with an ecstatic, Shelly-esque S-curve underline. (Did he do that? Am I thinking of Zorro again?)

That was a couple hours ago. Right now I'm on to something bigger and better. Check this out: What about an outdoor campaign that just says "Fuck You"? Intrigued? No brands. No logo. Just a straightforward, no-nonsense insult. Bite Us. Get Fucked. Hey Shithead. Suck It. Tell Your Mom We Got Her Money. You Wanna Go? This American Company's Gonna Put Its Foot Up Your Ass. I'm not sure what this one means, but I like it: Thumb It. I'll have to think about this one a little bit more, but I'd be lying if I sat here and told you I didn't think I'd hatched another miracle.

But I'm wasting your time, aren't I? You want to know what happened last night. "Did I succeed?" in other words.

How best to recount those events ...

You know, not to belabor the point, but when I painted, I wanted to capture the distilled, simple, stunning beauty of America. It's Gorgeous George soul. It's sheer immensity. It's big, dumb, tragic strength. When I came to Northern California (well, middle California, really) I was starstruck. Who wouldn't be? A city of hills, the sandy heights of the Sierra Nevadas, the blues and yellows and pinks of North Beach, the Moorish Coit Tower (Oh God, Stop Me), quaint low life in neon below [whatever street that is], sharks, a bridge burning in the sun, a bay that trembles under the bluest, clearest sky, a seagod's private metropolis, a seafarer's paradise, a seafarer's eternal horizon. Mermaids. Homosexuals. Stevedores and California Girls. Blah-blah, blah-blah, blah.

My magnificent model, I took him by the hand, I posed him (you know, dear reader, that Buonorotti's boy speaks lazy Californian, you know he surfs. That hair's blonde.

That chest is savage tan), and I took him apart. Oh America! I was to deliver you from that chicken wire art, from all the hopelessness of rust and geometry, from all the artists who hate you. And what did I give back? I made you a monster. Not like an artist but like a villain, a Dr Frankenstein, a Mengele, I created a zombie. Stringy, meandering sutures, spare parts, morbidity, bolts, a bad bad suit with matching bad, awful, prescription shoes. Where were your blue eyes? Your Sex Wax hair? Where was all the expensive orthodontia, the Coke-and-a smile that conquered the world?

At that moment I said to myself: I'm tone deaf. I am stillborn.

At this moment, I say to myself: In Advertising, I am risen again! I'm back and I'm better than ever! Goddammit this is America! Art is Advertising! And I'm good! I am faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than any locomotive, I'm Mr Clean, Mr Bubble and the Jolly Green Giant! (I live inside you, see. I am the jingle that is the hymn that will save your soul, that will save a wretch like you. I am the one Oglivy prophesied. Just watch.)

Resuming: It's funny really. I can see that now. Allow me to punch it up for you. We'll start with me clutching the briefcase by its lapels, shaking it mercilessly, like an apoplectic prospector, like I've grabbed a live wire. This is at dinner.

A clang of silverware.

"You forgot the ring."

"It's here somewhere!"

Then I stick my head in it, but I don't see a thing. My armpits are alive like fire sprinklers. I now wear the briefcase like a hat as I pat myself down, as I clutch at my thighs and my chest and my nuts. By this point I've already searched the car and frisked the valet. I've bought all the time I could. I've made any number of unsuccessful calls to GG, praying that he'd be at home. My heart now beats the theme to Wipe Out. I've got a touch of thrombosis.

I'll be honest with you; for a moment there I thought she might stab me with her fork, the way she holds it

there, as the truth becomes apparent, her fist turning the candystripe colors of red and white, the fork up, prongs out, like a cobra. Thankfully she sets it down.

Horrifically, she picks up her knife.

It turns, catching the candlelight over its broad, meat-cutting shoulder.

Even the three fat, wetback musicians seize up. (They'd tuned in to the vibe two or three visits ago). The vibrato twang of their guitars halts the air.

You know she's thinking about plunging that thing right into me.

Her lips move, but nothing escapes. *What to do? I want to kill him. But it's illegal. Isn't it? Could Daddy get me out of jail?*

God she looks great. The pink rage of a blush in her cheeks. Swollen, parted lips. A kiss? A curse? A blowjob? Eyes as impenetrable and enveloping as a nightmare.

"Will you marry me?" I whimper. I may have been crying at this point.

A burst of lost dreams. *I can't kill him. I know that now. Murder is murder; its just too expensive. Even for Daddy.* And so she actually lifts her plate across the table and, with the knife, shoves her combo platter into my lap. It's unbelievable.

She leaves. The guitarists kick in again - *DA Da, da da-da, da da-da, Da Da* - and I have to shrug at them for a little fucking mercy. I soothe my admittedly ruffled nerves with two more pitchers of margaritas, instructing a very understanding waiter to not worry so much about the mix and to put the emphasis on the tequila. Pitcher in hand, I disappear among the lobster tanks and green, white and red bunting of the lounge. Mexican music cackles in my ears.

I don't remember getting home.

I do remember, however, appearing in my room and attacking the place like an orangutan on PCP.

GG comes home, the shower of lock noise, the blinding light of the hall coming on. I freeze.

"I just found this on the stairs," He holds the ringbox in his fingers. He looks around, sees all, then inquires: "Were you looking for it?"

I pass out. I wake up. This is maybe 4:30 or so. Solemnly I cross the wreckage to my desk. I note that I've lodged a commando knife hilt-deep in the dry wall. My closet seems to have thrown up on my bed. No matter. I sit, turning on the computer. Then these ads just start rolling out of me. It's like I've broken a fever. I'm hemorrhaging brilliance.

I won't lie to you: the relief - I can still do this! Oh God, I still *work!* - is profound.

I've taken one break, during which I observed - with cocked eyebrow, with cup of coffee - a whimpering, defeated Sheldon leave another frankly obscene offer on my answering machine. I won't even describe the terms he outlined. Suffice it to say that I do a spit-take when he describes the money Punk Laughlin is willing to drop on me if only

I'd return. Idiots. I'd bankrupt them. I'm greedy and know my price, but for chrissake (excuse me: for crying out loud) I'm not a highwayman. Besides, my heart belongs to Hillman Reynolds. Or Gould Partners. Money's nice, but it isn't everything.

Ha ha! Only kidding. I hope you're not so obtuse as to miss the sarcasm above. Money is everything, of course. It's everything, and there's nothing that isn't Money. If I may exercise a little sophomoric logic on you, of all those things that are, none are not Money. Or, conversely, Money is all things, excluding nothing. QED

Yeah, so I forgot the fucking ring. So what? Yeah. I fucked up. Okay. I get it. I take it you've never fucked up? Sometimes I do think I've got to grab everything right now, just right fucking now. I've got to grab the money and grab her, because there's no way this'll last. But these bimbos are going to storm my castle outraged-peasant-style, aren't they? Their erogenous zones are gonna go race riot hot. That's just logic, isn't it? The law of the jungle? Am I not Suburbia's tribal chief in waiting? The squaws shall stick to me like flies to ordure, will they not? And further, what sort of shape is my self-respect in if I'm

going to allow myself to be treated like this? (I mean, the combo platter in the lap?) Do I really need to jump through so many hoops? Flaming hoops, at that? The chair and whip, is it really necessary?

11:00 AM, My and GG's Apartment

I roll my neck around on its collar, before the door, then begin disengaging the locks. A half hour after that I have only the deadbolt and knob to go. I mop my brow, get up off the stairs, rotate these final two, then pull open the world. Predictably, I suppose, it's a gorgeous day. The portrait without is simply alive, like a Disney cartoon. A swarm of hummingbirds circles over there, here the shameless platinum sun mottles the breast of a maple tree, a Pleiades of apple blossoms dead center, the diminutive purple procession of lilacs along our driveway. Such alliteration. And so early. I apologize. Oh, the horror.

The horror, yes.

I'm afraid I'm comprehensively hungover. I did a shot or two (well, four) before hitting the bathroom, but they

didn't take. Gin isn't a morning drink. The shower also banged me up, particularly the curtain, which for a good minute was wrapped around my head and shoulders like a python. Which doesn't bode well. I need better omens than these. HR intends to test me today. This is my next appointment.

I'm cleaned up now, though. I open the screen door and exit. I reengage all the locks you can from the outside, then let the screen door pumpslam shut. My sense of balance is still not entirely back, so I take my time with the brick steps down to our little courtyard. Safely on groundlevel, I hit the sidewalk. Getting the hang of things, I begin my mantra. *I'm Ad Man. I'm James Bond. I'm Airplane Money. I'm Great Sex.*

I hunt my car, twitching, pulsing, hot. I give 32nd Street the quick once over. As I wait for the light, I inspect the cars lining the curb. I spot another Saab of the same year, but healthier and a different, more plausible color. Not my bloodblister maroon. My car is pretty easy to identify anyway, as it features a crack like an acid spiderweb in the windshield. *Well, I think, that side of the street's taken care of.* I spin right slowly,

careful not to aggravate anything, leaning out to assess the terrain to the south. Do I need coffee? I wonder. No. Oh God, no. Donuts? Hmmm ... And there it is. Parked successfully, I marvel.

And on it's other side, there *IT* is, double parked, spotless, its hazards on, pulsating violence like the slow, heavy breathing of a vicious beast. There's no one in the driver's seat. And there's Tito. What's that in his hand? A remote?! A walkie-talkie!? He sees me.

"Hi Will!"

I turn. It's Nuts.

"Nuts?"

NUTS!

He tries hard to hold my eyes. A smile, a perverse leer. He's setting me up! I feel the brush of fingers on the back of my right arm.

This is where having been followed before really pays off. A normal person would be paralyzed. I run immediately, double-dutching across 32nd, against the light, twin horns from opposite directions peeling around me. A stationwagon barreling south jukes right just in time, a truck hurdles over its front wheels and skids sidelong to a stop.

"WILL, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"YOU KNOW WHAT I'M DOING!"

"WE JUST WANT TO TALK!"

They're right on my tail. I see them over my shoulder. Nuts runs with a low, crabby stride, his elbows cocked to both sides, like he's carrying groceries, like a queer Broadway choreographer after his crazy star. Tito's stride is a broad bounding leap, like an astronaut running across the moon. He covers a ridiculous amount of space with each step, perhaps ten or twelve feet.

"YOU SAID FRIDAY! YOU SAID FRIDAY! YOU SAID FRIDAY!"

"WILL! C'MON! IT'S ME!"

"IT'S THURSDAY! IT'S THURSDAY! IT'S THURSDAY!"

"BUDDY!"

I dart around the brick wall at R and 33rd. Now I've got a downhill decline, and I'm flying, but I'm totally out of control too. I could really use that sense of balance here, I think. All of sudden, a blue metallic mass sparkles in my periphery, and then the Chevy banks up hard, right in front of me, bottoming out and halting on the raised entryway to an alley. I can't stop. I make my decision, and in a single stride I'm up on the hood, then the roof, it buckles with my second step, and I leap over the opening, driver-side door, I stumble to earth progressively, running with two feet and a hand. For a brief second, one foot and two hands. But I'm back up, slaloming through pedestrians, gunning downhill, and I can feel Jarhead right on my tail, out of the car.

I'm running downtown, my arms spinning circles. I'm unstoppable. My first idea is to jump in a cab, but that's not an option. Jarhead is too close. I wouldn't even close

the door in time. Run into a restaurant? They'd yank me out of there without batting an eye. Police station? Where?!

Then it hits me. The Tap. I make a wide skipping left onto Tennessee, the townhomes giving way to quaint little businesses, and I'm still going downhill. There it is, below me. I wait until the last possible moment to start slowing down, which I do by bearhugging from behind a stocky CEO type. The Tap's ancient door, is a bright red with a sheepshead knob.

A quick apology to the CEO, and I seize the door, pull it wide, and pull it back in behind me. I turn and look back out through the cased window on the street. That was my intention, anyhow, but it's so dark in here that I can't see my hand in front of my face, and the window is some kind of violet blaze of non-color. So I listen and count. My fingers wrap around the cold knob. One. Two. I hear a smatter of footsteps and I jab the door out hard. I barely feel anything though through the three inches of wood, only a slight vibration, but outside it sounds briefly like a dozen basketballs in a dryer.

I turn to the bartender, who is strangely unimpressed, kneading his hands with a towel. He even looks like he may have seen this sort of thing a couple times before.

"Sorry," I say, shrugging and smiling weakly.

"Back door?" he inquires, raising he eyebrows.

I nod. He points. I make a brief, vain attempt at locking the front door, then spin and sprint for the rear. I ricochet into the kitchen. I fly down a narrow passage between an ice machine and a horizontal fridge, whacking my knee on the corner of the broad flat grill, then skipping out into the alley, wounded, through a screen door at the rear.

I don't know what it is, perhaps the adrenaline, but the pain in my knee seems to simply evaporate. To my left the alley leads perhaps a half a mile southeast to River Street, and on my right it ends only a few feet away, spilling out onto 32nd. I go right, hoping to double back, get back to that fucking car and get the hell out of here. I take about one step right and Nuts springs into view like some kind of cat, landing on both feet and straddling the

exit to 32nd. I spin, and Tito clobbers through the screen door just like Frankenstein. Unable to simply open it, he knocks it off the top hinge with a stiff arm, kicks it off the bottom with one of his weighted shoes. The door flips over, then bends open to the left, still attached to the frame by the metal hook and eyelet as Tito kicks his way down to alley level.

For what seems like a full minute, we're in a Mexican standoff. Nuts crouched to the left, hands at the ready, dancing like a football safety in a footwork drill. Tito to my right, as tall and unforgiving as a Redwood, defending an escape to River Road.

"Hey," Nuts says, his palms turning upward, "What are you doing? We just want to talk, buddy."

Tito grunts something that I'm sure he meant to be similarly helpful, but still it comes out like a threat. I think for a moment. They're about to close in.

"Relax," Nuts says.

I gasp, hands on knees, suddenly desperate for breath.

"Hold it," I say.

They halt.

We all catch our breath. I look at Nuts. He looks at me. He laughs.

"Jesus, Will."

"Sorry."

"What'd you think we were going to do to you?"

"Sorry, I'm a little wound up."

"I'll say. You okay?"

"I think so."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus."

"..."

"I haven't run like that in years!"

After awhile I look up and say, "You guys just want to talk?"

"Just a quick chat." Nuts shakes his head dismissively.

"You're not going to break any of my fingers?"

"Ha ha! Of course not."

"Promise?"

"Promise," answers Nuts, then adds, conclusively, "It's Thursday."

"... Well," I say. "Okay."

The fight tension leaks from my muscles. We all stand up straight. Nuts bats a little dust of his whites. And then they both move in towards me.

"Oh," I remark, then point, "My shoe's untied." I then crouch down.

Nuts, being the smarter one, halts instantly. But Tito continues forward, all but on top of me when Nuts screams:

"TITO!" But he's too late, for at that very moment I leap from the earth like a ballerina and throw a handful of street dust right into Tito's mean red eyes.

"AHHhhhaHHHGFGG!!!" He says, both thick hands seizing his face.

"YOU!" Nuts spits, eyes dodging from Tito to me, about to lunge. I'm too quick, though, pivoting and balking another handful of dust in his direction. He screws his eyes shut tight. It's too easy. I step up, draw back and kick him in the groin.

"BREEEE!!!!!" Nuts wails, eyes bulging, falling forward.

With that, I dodge past Nuts and skid left onto 32nd again. I cover its length at a $\frac{3}{4}$ sprint. I bolt diagonally through the four stop at 33rd. It's right around here that the Chevy materializes, running straight at me down 33rd, captained by a grinning Jarhead. I vault over the trunk of an old Mercedes as Jarhead actually tries to sideswipe me. I sprint west up the sidewalk, and he gives chase in reverse, the rear of the Chevy high in the air. He's doing at least thirty as he passes me, then tries to wheel a reverse left into a driveway and cut me off. But he fucks up, plows over a row of trash cans. I fly right by him, and down an alley. As I turn west on to 34th, I catch a final glimpse of the Chevy, it's rear wheels spinning furiously in the air.

I get to my Saab, and, like a blessing straight from Heaven, it snarls right awake on the third try.

11:10 AM, En Route to HR's

I place half a dozen calls to Blaine as I throttle north towards HR's, all of them unsuccessful and each ending with an aggrieved message on her machine.

Next I try the entire staff of the Double H. I talk to Paige, Mandy, Pandy, Tyrone. I page Larry. I conference Lonnie and Lou. No one knows anything. A call from Larry and I'm patched through to Nuts. "Hey, Sweetheart," he says, then extemporizes luridly until I hang up.

I'm out in the cold.

So this is it, I think.

The Dust Up. It's on.

My thoughts largely follow this train: Fuck. FUCK!
Shit. Shit. Shit. FUCK. *FUCK*. FUCK!! MotherFUCKER!!!

11:30 AM, HR's Estate

I'm early, but this seems my only safe haven. Plus, I want this test. I want it now. Make me. I take his driveway at 60 mph.

When the Akita sees me, he turns his head, his tongue vanishes and his face goes slack. Behind him, her hand and cheek resting on the door, half of her hidden behind it, stands Angel. She considers me carefully, but pleasantly. Perhaps one feeling generous would suggest that there is even a hint of invitation in her blue eyes. She wears flip-flops, a long sleeved, faded blue t-shirt that's much too tight and yellow bikini briefs. Her ivory hair is clipped up on one side by a plastic butterfly pin.

"Is HR here?" I ask. I believe I am panting at the time.

The oily black sunglasses, the Ray Charles make, that sit on top of her head, she brings down to the tip of her nose. She lets her head fall slightly back to veil her eyes.

"No." She says, slipping her toes in and out of a flip flop.

"No?"

She shakes her head.

"I was supposed to meet him here. I'm early. You mind if I come in and wait for him?"

The Akita's eyes switch from me to her to me again, his brow knots.

A moment, and she pulls the door wide, swinging a hand broadly across the expanse of the foyer, as if displaying it at auction, hoops rattling down to the base of her wrist.

I all but run inside, looking for liquor.

Over my shoulder: "Do you expect him back anytime soon?"

"No."

"No?"

She doesn't answer.

I'm in the living room now, feeling up bookcases, inspecting endtables and ashtrays, looking for the secret catch that activated that hidden bar. She says something and I turn and nod at her in my animated Conversationalist mode. I spin back around and resume.

She asks: "Can I get you anything? A drink maybe?"

"Yes!" I cheer, then gather myself, "I'll tell you, Angel, I would kill for a drink."

"I'll join you."

"Right," I say. "Okay! Great!"

"I hate to see anyone drink alone."

She struts over to a corner, muscles surfacing and disappearing in her incredibly long legs, hips jabbing left, then right, then left until she's arrived near the edge of the fireplace. She hits a button somewhere, marble

recesses then parts, lights flick on, and there's the wetbar.

"Scotch alright?" She says, seizing a square-based crystal decanter.

"Perfect." I can't help myself. I'm standing on top of her, staring at the booze.

"Ice?"

"No, thanks."

"I take mine with a little ice."

"Hmm."

Without looking, still pouring her own, she hands me a heavy, fluted glass, the brown liquor rocking lazily within. I throw it back. When I look back down, she's right in front of me, now with her own drink. She holds it the way HR held his shotgun, her elbow propped on her waist, the drink in her slender fingers. Her sunglasses are higher on her nose now, and she considers me again for a moment

before reaching out and taking back my glass. She turns and refills it. I watch her do so, all her weight on her lean left leg, her right leg pointing away like a dancer.

"Angel? That's really your name?"

"Yep. Angel."

"Beautiful name."

She fiddles around at the bar.

"Angel, you're HR's daughter, right?"

She pirouettes, gives me a cute, don't-patronize-me-look, then stabs past me, pressing my drink into my chest.

After a moment, nodding and shaking my head, I follow.

I find her on the patio, with a magazine, popping bubble gum. She smiles as I sit down. We say nothing for a good ten minutes, my mind vibrating thoughtlessly. I am drinking my scotch when my cell ignites like a jack-in-the-box. My thick crystal glass rattles between my lips and

scotch curls over my chin. I spit, dab and reach for my phone simultaneously.

"Hello?"

"Will. HR. How you doing?"

"I'm good HR," I say, nodding at Angel. "Angel here's looking after me."

"Good. Excellent. Listen, Will, I am running way behind. Can we push things back an hour or so?"

"Absolutely, HR."

"And say, feel free to hide out there for awhile."

"HR, that would be fantastic."

"Need that break, huh?"

"You said it."

"I knew you would. Not a problem at all. On our team, we always run interference for one another when it comes to things like this."

"That's good to know."

"Yes it is. Make yourself at home, my friend."

"I will, HR. Thanks."

"Mi casa, su casa."

"Terrific."

"...That's how we work things at Hillman Reynolds."

"Great. Thanks, HR."

"Pretend you're me, with all my rights and privileges. Okay, buddy?"

"Gosh. That's terrific. Thanks."

"..."

"... I mean, really, thanks!"

"You got it." He hangs up.

I tuck my cell back in my jacket. For what may have been five full minutes, I'm staring at the flagstone helplessly. And in that time, I decompress. I think. I may have actually recompressed. Either way, I tune into the dizzy, broad shock I'm feeling. Those animal emotions are back. My periphery oscillates. I seem to feel every electrical event in my head, those storm fronts of wired chaos blowing across my system, touching down like sparkling hurricanes. I see some kind of fluid, something bright and green like engine coolant coursing through the grooves of my gray matter. Everything seems to stink in my nostrils. The hibiscus reeks. At fifty yards away, it's like ripe gorgonzola. Clearly, I acknowledge, I'm crazy again, right here. And then, just as suddenly, everything begins to shut down. Whatever I was thinking is instantly encrypted into some unidentifiable smattering of hieroglyphs. My head goes soft and warm.

"Did you really do *Irresponsible*?"

Angel has broken the silence. She's also brought us a couple fresh drinks.

"Hmm?" I say.

"Did you really dream up the Ooh Daddy campaign for *Irresponsible*?"

I smile wanly and nod: "And *Unreliable* and *Oversexed*."

"*Oversexed*, too?"

I smile and nod again. In an instant I feel an unbearable weight descend on my shoulders, like a load of wet sand. I'm just overwhelmed. Drowsy and dimwitted. Post-shock. It's takes more energy than I seem capable of mustering simply to speak.

"Angel," I heave. "I need to sleep. Can I borrow a guest room?"

She smiles. She sets down her drink and magazine, then rises. She can see that I'm wiped out. In fact, I'm already

half asleep as she takes my hand and guides me back into the house. We go up an elevator, and when it stops she fingers a button and the glass doors slide left. This is a drug dealer's house, I think. Isn't this Tony Montana's old place? An elevator with glass doors? She's again guiding me with her hand down an absurdly long hallway, the steel bands of HR's balcony on my left, the Akita fathoms below on the couch.

Darkly, but vaguely, something occurs to me. "Why aren't there any maids or butlers or anything, Angel?"

"HR doesn't like them. We do have a chef though. And there are twenty-one people on the cleaning crew. HR just wants them in and out. He's so paranoid."

She stops and opens a door. I follow her in. There's an enormous bed, it's like three feet off the ground and ten feet across. She turns down a corner. Then she helps me take off my shoes and socks. My shirt. My pants. She sits me gently on the bed.

A digital clock sits on the bedstand. It's colon mark blinks metronomically. It blinks. It blinks. It blinks. It

blinks. I stare at it like a zombie, and then I feel my underpants slide off. Such a helpful girl. I smile complacently, as her hands push up my thighs. About then I'm back among the living. Like I've just woken up to find myself on fire.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!?"

"What?"

I've scrambled backward across the bed and only her head is now visible. Her mouth is a tiny 'o', her eyes wide and innocent.

"What? What! *WHAT?* You know what!" I say, wiggling a finger significantly. "That!"

"This? What's wrong with this?"

"We can't do it! Not this?!!!"

"I feel like fucking. Don't you just feel like fucking every now and then?"

"Well, sure," I blurt, "But you're HR's wife!"

"His *wife*? I'm his daughter!"

"You are?!"

"You thought I was his wife?" She starts to giggle as she pulls her shirt over her head.

But emotionally, now, I'm way over my skis. "This is like fucking *Chinatown*!" I cry.

Then I decide to ask, just to be safe, "You aren't his wife too, are you?"

She rolls her eyes, tosses her glasses somewhere and then wriggles out of her briefs. She's a shave job. She puts her gum on the nightstand and crawls aboard. I crabwalk backwards a few yards, as she prowls over the bed.

"Wait a minute!" I scream. She pauses.

My God, she's a sight. The peak of her shoulder? Like some kind of sex-panther! And seafaring men could calibrate

their instruments by the arc of her bare, bronze ass! I look for some kind of tan lines but find nothing, just an endless expanse of brown, supple, expensive flesh. The cute wink of a bellybutton. The pricetag-free luxury of that inner thigh, curving like a cleft note. From the corner of her mouth she blows a flutter of white hair from her eyes. Why are girls always doing that around me? I stiff-arm her as she closes.

"What?" she says, impatiently.

"Just a wait a minute." Something terrible has occurred to me. An unspeakable horror. I ask without wanting an answer.

"Sixteen," She answers. "Why?"

I become aware of a muscular seizure in my diaphragm, in essence it knots up, drawing in gallons of air and precluding the possibility of said air ever leaving. It's a violent depressurization, not unlike a submarine disaster, where all the screws punch out of their threaded moorings and ricochet around the interior for awhile until all the bulkheads give and the thing implodes.

"I'm kidding! Are you okay?! I'm twenty-six! Relax!"

I look at her. Theretofore I'd been staring with galled anticipation at my imploding chest. My breath comes back to me in staccato.

"Please calm down."

My mouth clutches at the air.

"You know what I want to do?" Her head twists slightly, and her eyes comb the ceiling.

"I'm going to get the *Irresponsible*," She says. "I'll be right back." She smiles, then shamelessly lunges forward and take my thingamajig in her mouth (pathetically, I'm at battle stations). A splitsecond of humid nirvana, during which I have a stroke, and just as quickly she's bounding off the bed.

Thirty seconds. A commercial timeout. The thirty second soul search. The hurry up offense.

Alright, where are you? Just where the fuck are you?
Am I this guy?

Now, I know what you're thinking. And, let's be honest, I'm probably thinking something along the same lines. I mean, this girl here is some kind of android blend of Seka and Pipi Longstocking. It's sick and wrong. That much is obvious, isn't it?

Okay, the Pros: If this is sick and wrong, what the hell is healthy and right? Or, conversely, what isn't sick and wrong? Is it sick and wrong that I want to screw this chick? That's sex, right? Is sex sick and wrong? It's just sex, isn't it? It's like a ... it's like a pick up basketball game. A hand of cards. Help with the groceries. I'm okay. You're okay. Sex? Sure! Why not? It's *just* a little sex. Moreover, I'm a guy. And however much we would all like to deny it, guys are *guys*. Chemically, we just can't restrain ourselves. Sure, there's GG, but that's some kind of dementia, if you want to be totally frank about it. Celibacy? Jesus Christ, it's 1999! Not 1499!! So guys are guys. And when the girl looks like this?! Guffaw. Harrumpf. Snort. C'MON!! Besides, when you get right down to it, *this* is Suburbia. Isn't it? The Late-Morning-Neighbor-Screw?

That's the very essence of Suburbia, isn't it? This is the American Dream! Extramarital sex in a huge home in a cloistered suburb with no imaginable consequences? The sprinklers humming in the distance, the thwock of the distant tennis serve, inside the cool regard of kept and pampered air. And considered from the perspective of my Art, this is practically fucking research! Sex? Of course! Yeah, I talk a good game about Advertising being entirely about Money, but any idiot knows that Money is entirely about Sex.

Now, Cons: HR. Yes, that's a potential concern. Hmm ...

And Blaine.

In that moment I see Blaine again. I see her from below. We're watching television, my head in her lap, both of us caught in the flickering light. Her fingers on my chest, the descending twist of hair as she bends to kiss me, as she runs a tear from my cheek. The flat of her thumb. My precious daydream of her in her tanktop and pajama bottoms, all knotted up in my bedsheets. How she pieced me together. How she did. I feel that pinch of emotion in my sinuses.

Am I a cheat? A cuckold, as it were? Am I a stach rapist? Am I all that? *Is there any reason not to be?* Well ... *Exactly.* Where the fuck is Blaine? *Right! Where the fuck is Blaine? You're Ad Man. What do you need Blaine for when girls like this throw themselves at you?*

*Hey! Listen to me! **You're Ad Man.***

I know what Blaine and I are watching too. It's the Century's Greatest Commercials on TNC, the old spot for Charmin toilet paper. Do you remember it? With the two rolls of paper rolling out indefinitely? The 'other brands' stop at about 75 yards, but the Charmin one just goes on forever, the TP odometer just spinning away? I'm getting choked up all over again right now. Ah that unblinking simplicity. The innocence. It's almost tragic. It says, bluntly, that this brand simply has *more* than that brand. No sex. No death. No syrupy wheedling of feminine emotives. You buy this; you get more. You know, I remember when I first saw this commercial? (See, Advertising is in my bones. Although, it's in your bones too, isn't it? It's pretty much in everybody's bones now. That's what's so terrific about it.) I was sitting beside my Mom in our

kitchen. She'd just facetiously pointed out that it was Charmin and its extra squares per roll that saw me through potty training. I can see her laughing gently to herself. About a year ago, I even had a go at recreating that ad, dolling it up for the future. My angle was a touch too Swedish avant garde though, a hint too Ingmar Stenmark. I actually had a line in it that read: "Toilet paper! Our most private diary, lockbox of all our secrets! We smear its pages with our blood, our filth, our lust, all our lies and perversions and then we simply flush it away!" Needless to say, that little number never saw the light of day. I may have actually flushed it down the toilet. Ah, such pathos.

I can't do this, I realize. I won't do it.

I can't betray my art. I won't betray Blaine. In an instant, it's that simple.

I hear Angel now, cantering down the hall, and I smile for her. I say a little prayer of hope that she'll sort all this madness out for herself someday. Let her find a reason to stay true, to resist this catting around. Maybe it'll be art. Or love. Or simple loyalty to someone who's given so

much to you. Maybe all three. As Angel skips into the room and crawls on to the bed, I smile more broadly, more patiently still; my lips, of course, never parting. She takes my cock, and I take her hand and I look deep into her eyes (from one eye to the other and back again, because I mean it). Then I begin my apology. I'm not that guy. Not yet anyway. Not today.

2:30 AM, HR's Estate

There's a tattoo of a smiley face, no bigger than a nickel, at the small of her back.

"Position swap, Jagoff!"

It's yellow, and a little faded, but it's truly adorable. It says, basically, "Hey! Relax." Not a bad message, in the grand scheme of things.

I'll tell you what, this thing here is going extremely well. That's Angel mouthing off, by the way. I'm operating from behind, and it'll take some doing on her part to disengage me back here because, from where I'm standing

(well, kneeling), things look fairly optimal. A small bead of sweat vibrates at the small of her back, among the fields of diminutive cilia. My sweat. A lock of manila hair clings to her neck, a dozen finer strands ribbon behind her ear like seashell ribs.

You know what? As it turns out, I am that guy! And well ahead of schedule. Who knew?

When she came back into the room and crawled up on the bed, I delivered my apology, as described, after which I held out for a good five minutes. She didn't have to say anything. She just sat there and stared, patiently, until I swallowed hard and said, "Just kidding." I shrugged, and we giggled briefly. She'd returned with *Oversexed*, since she couldn't find the *Irresponsible*. She doused me with it, and we both tittered at the rich irony before settling down to the business of fucking like wild forest nymphs.

At one point we are doing a tandem crabwalk across the floor. At another we affect a modified wheelbarrow/Iditerod position, way down at a corner, with myself entirely bedbound and Angel half on and half off, her arms splayed out on the carpet and her legs somewhere up behind my ears.

Angel has resumed bitching about how her hands hurt and that frankly the rest of her doesn't feel so terrific either and could we please change to some documented, officially sanctioned position. Instinctively, I pretend not to hear. That quickly fails when she manages to decradle the telephone handset and starts lasooing it around in an effort to wrap it around my neck.

"You heard your mother," I gasp parentally, staying in character. We're roll-playing the whole *Ooh Daddy* routine. "You can talk to your friends later!"

Man, she has the schoolgirl thing down. When she came the first time, she really cried it all out. She was wonderful. For a moment I really thought she was having some kind of breakdown. It worried me a touch, frankly. But schoolgirls don't know this stuff, all this, all these tricks and positions. They certainly don't. Do they? God, I hope not. And if they do: (a) Where are the parents? (b) Are they still, technically, girls? And (c) Why aren't we hitting them harder with the more exotic services/products of erotic femininity? That is an untapped market, my friend. Is there anything more outrageous?

"Hey, Fucker," She says. "I wanna change positions!!"

"Is that the kind of language they're teaching you at that school these days ..." I grunt, involuntarily, then add, "With my tax dollars!!"

She's still swinging her telephone, and her aim is quickly improving. Disengaging, I loop an arm under waist and, leaning back, attempt to haul her back up bedside. However, her legs, which I had counted on somehow remaining behind me, execute some kind of uneven bar maneuver, a sort of frantic pedaling motion. Basically, they scissor out of nowhere like an enormous bird of prey, inspiring in my mind the compelling image of a renegade heel catching the underside of my jaw. With my arm still hooked under her waist, I attempt to duck left. Now had I had a chance to think, had I been sober (After the first round we downed about half a bottle of ice cold Polandia) and had my wits about me, I'd have recalled that the bed ended immediately to my left. There's a kind of flipturn effect that kicks in. I haul Blaine over the bed like I'm sending a sack of potatoes over my shoulder, while I myself twist backward into what seems like a full minute of oblivion, finally bouncing to earth on my coccyx. I'm not convinced, as she

finds herself sailing crossways over the bed, that she ever even makes contact with the bedspread. She just looks down as it floats past, an astronaut watching the moon course by just below the lunar module. I'm aware of a certain pride swelling in my breast. The brutish strength emerging from some forgotten, elemental socket of my body; the look of nude, airborne terror that braces that lovely face.

As Angel does her thing, I somehow somersault across the threshold of the bathroom and come to a halt with two feet in the tub.

So, my first glimpse of HR is upside down.

It's strange, but I find that I tend to be more suspicious of things I see when I'm upside down. Basically, I think I know what I'm looking at, but my mind is saying, Oh, C'mon, that can't be HR. You're hallucinating. Yes. A hallucination. After all, Angel had stated in no uncertain terms that it was impossible for him to get back any sooner than four, and if he did, she'd hear the chime when he passed through the gate, which was like a mile away. We'd have plenty of time to disengage.

I smile and then he says:

"What the fuck is this?!"

That's what he says, but what gets me is how he says it. There's a certain meter to how he delivers his line, the odd syllables bearing all the vitriol, and the two even syllables just filling in space - it sounds nearly like *WHAT* the *FUCK* is *THIS!!* That resonates. But it's when he crosses the tile floor and presses the sole of his shoe against my larynx that I am truly made to believe. My eyes bulge on my forehead. Meanwhile, I again experience that diaphragm cramp. Plus the stroke. All the air available in the room seems to rush down my throat - again - and my heart sort of spins on its axis.

He's here! Plain as day! Live! Live like a heart attack!

"*WHAT* the *FUCK* is ..." He starts and stalls.

"*WHAT* the *FUCK* is *THIS*, Standish!!" He resumes, "You little cocksucker! You think you can just ..." and it trails off into laughter.

Yes, he's started laughing, and as he inspects my face he begins laughing harder still.

In situations like this, the one thing you don't want is the unanticipated emotional response. Laughter, in this situation, is just entirely inappropriate. I find you sort of cling, as it were, to propriety. *Don't laugh*, I want to beg. *Please don't*. Because someone capable of laughter in this situation is capable of anything. Grave physical trauma might not even be the half of it.

Still he laughs, turning now to take a look at Angel and pointing at me for her benefit. Oddly, it isn't the sort of wide-eyed, maniacal cackle that movies have conditioned us to take for granted in these situations. It seems like a laugh of genuine amusement. Of course I can't trust it. Who knows how the actual homicidal maniac laughs? Perhaps he snickers, rolls his eyes, *then* fires up his chainsaw, almost mirthfully.

"My God, Standish, I scared the shit out of you!"

"HR! It's not what you think!"

"Oh, C'mon!" He laughs again, his brow wrinkling.

"Seriously, we were ... we were ..." I sneeze, then hack up a golf ball of phlegm.

"Yeah!" He cheers, "Give me some kind of explanation!"

"Well," I begin, inhaling deeply and trying to look as serious as possible. Upside down. No words come out, though. Not one.

"Nothing?" He asks. His laugh is dying down.

For the first time, I think to look over at Angel. Her hair covers her face, but her bottom lip spills out heavily, I see her chest expanding and contracting, her legs together at the knee, but from there one angles forward, the other back. I see one wide blue eye through a tangle of ivory hair.

I look back at HR. He's smiling, and his eyebrows have fallen at his temples, like a tired, happy old man.

"Can't think of anything, huh?" He laughs soundlessly.

By this point, as would be expected, I'm looking for escape routes, which must have been all too obvious.

"Will, the only way out of here is through this door," His smile tightens paternally, then he nods quickly at my clothes. "C'mon. Put your pants on."

"..."

"Believe it or not, I'm not mad at you. C'mon. Get up."

I look at the clothes.

Just so you know, I'm not entirely accountable for my words through these next several minutes. Generally, I'm delivering my lines in the accelerated, high octave idiom that Chan uses when he's excited. In a way, as well, I'm as much observer as participant.

"I'll be right out here," he says. "You get dressed."

As it turns out, he's right. There is nowhere else to go. I try jamming myself into an air vent, but it's just not possible. In a minute, I meet him in the hall, clothed. My God, he's big. He drapes a big arm around me and draws me to his big chest. I shrink.

"C'mon," he says. "Didn't I say I wasn't mad at you?"

"You said on the phone that I could do whatever I wanted with anything in here!"

"That's right. That's what I said. And Will," His eyes go wide and serious. "I meant it."

"I figured you did, HR! I figured that's the way things would work out here in ... in Suburbia! I mean I'm from here but, you know, I never, well, ... eh heh HEH Hah he eh?!"

"And so it is, my friend."

He guides me to the elevator. We step in, the doors close, and I try to fade into my reflection in the glass. He stares at me, his eyes narrowing. He's nodding. I smile

cheaply back at him. The doors part. He gestures for me to go first. I do so. I think of making a run for it. Slow as I am I've got to be able to beat this guy. But there's the dog. Sitting, ears up, stiff backed.

I try some small talk. I gulp. "What's the Akita's name, HR?"

"Thor."

"Thor," I weep, "Good name." I cry, defeated.

"Drink?"

"Absolutely!"

"Scotch?"

"I don't care!"

He laughs: "No, I don't suppose you would."

He pours the drinks. I take another heavy crystal glass. I think for a moment of just cracking the thing on

HR's head. As if reading my mind, Thor silently pads up and sits again, directly in front of me.

Briefly I consider simply sucking my thumb and curling up on the floor, just babytalk and baby thoughts. Maybe I'll wet my pants...

From my pants I look up. He's giving me that look again, that proud look, like he's truly satisfied with my progress. He's leaning against the wall.

He blinks slowly and bows just a touch, gesturing gently at me with his drink.

He says: "I'm indebted to you, you know."

"Really! Well, sure! What?!"

"I'm indebted to you." He nods, this time more to himself. "I'm grateful too."

"... *Thanks?*" I whimper, fearing everything, breathing panic.

"All my life I've been doing commercials, and don't get me wrong, advertising is terrific. It really is. But I've never done anything genuinely heroic, you know?"

"Oh yeah! Sure! Huh?!"

"Did you know my Dad won the Bronze Star at Togo?"

"Togo, Oh no!" It just comes out like that.

"Vietnam was my war, obviously, but I wasn't about to put my life on the line for a bunch of fascists like the Johnson Administration."

I snort conspiratorially.

"That war was wrong," he says, emphatically.

"Was it ever!"

"But now here you are!" He says. "The answer to my prayers!"

I nod and narrow my eyes, then my brow knits involuntarily and I don't really say anything but instead kind of snuffle and whimper a message that says: *Please tell me what the hell you're talking about, please?*

"Well, you've just defiled my wife, right?"

"Who?"

"Angel."

"No, see Angel's your daughter!"

"She told you she was my daughter?"

"Yeah!" I think I may have started crying here.

"That's what she said! She said she was your daughter! Wife? No! No, no, no. She said she was your daughter! She really did! Honest to God! Your wife? Your WIFE!?" Sneeze.

"No, no, no, this was your daughter ..."

He drops a hand on my shoulder and I do a kind of hula hoop flinch.

"She told you she was my daughter?" He laughs out his question.

"Yeah."

"Oh, man."

"*She's your wife?*"

He nods, gravely, then suddenly bursts with laughter.

After awhile I have no choice but to laugh too. My laughter, however, is more canine, a choppy little hyperventillated number (I'm kind of saying "pa pa pa pa pa pa" and I can't inhale).

This somehow relieves some of my panic. HR's now out of control though. It takes him five minutes to regain control of himself. He's actually steadying himself on my shoulder. Then he throws up a hand helplessly he says: "I think she's my wife?"

I snort. I'm confused. I stare at him, laughing (*pa pa pa pa pa!*) but really thinking seriously about starting to cry again.

Then it dawns on me.

"Wife! Daughter!" He wheezes, "Who knows!? I can't even remember!"

"Wait!"

"Yes!"

"This was the test!"

"YES."

"Oh my God!"

"..."

"You're insane!"

"I am."

"..."

"I'm on all kinds of mood-leveling drugs."

"Really?"

"No. Not really. Maybe. I can't remember."

"Wait! Is Angel your wife or your daughter?"

"Does it matter?!"

"What?"

"She could be both. Did you think about that!?"

"Wait! What really happened to Whitney Parsons?"

"Died."

"You didn't kill him, you mean?"

"You got it."

"He wasn't eaten by alligators?"

He puts a hand on each of my shoulders. His eyes go wide:

"He was *consumed!* By *pneumonia!*"

"Oh thank God."

Then he goes stone serious; then I seize up; then he says:

"YOU FUCKED MY DAUGHTER!"

"Ah HE hah he heh heh HEH What? Help?!"

And just as suddenly he unravels with laughter. He's out of it for a good five minutes. Suddenly I say:

"GODDAMMIT HR!"

"She's fourteen!"

"STOP!!"

"She's a sophomore in high school!!"

I discover here that I'm actually in hysterics. I'm afraid from this point forward it's beyond me to explain how I react.

"I'M LAUGHING NOW!"

"It's about FUCKING time!"

"THIS ISN'T FUNNY!"

"NO! NO, THINK ABOUT IT. IT'S VERY FUNNY!"

"OH ... WAIT!"

"SEE!"

"YEAH!"

"HA HA HA!"

"JESUS, HR!"

"HA!"

"IT'S HILARIOUS, ISN'T IT?"

"YOU BET YOUR ASS!"

"GOOD GOD!"

"THAT'S RIGHT. LET IT ALL OUT!"

"YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE!?"

"GUILTY AS CHARGED!"

"I THOUGHT YOU WE'RE GOING TO KILL ME!"

"I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!!!"

"I THINK YOU'RE KILLING ME ALREADY!!!"

"DON'T DIE ON ME YET!!"

"I CAN'T PROMISE I WON'T!"

"I'VE STILL GOT PLANS FOR YOU, PAL!!"

"NO!"

"YES!"

"STOP!"

"I CAN'T!!"

"SERIOUSLY!"

"DON'T USE THAT WORD AGAIN!!"

" 'SERIOUSLY' ?"

"YES."

"WHY?"

"I JUST DON'T LIKE IT!"

"ALRIGHT. WHATEVER. YOU'RE THE LUNATIC."

"I'LL BE RIGHT BACK!"

"SERIOUSLY WHERE YOU GOING!?"

"I'M GETTING MY GUN!"

"NO!"

"SERIOUSLY! I'M GOING TO COME RIGHT BACK DOWN HERE AND
SHOOT YOU IN THE FUCKING HEAD!!"

"SERIOUSLY?!"

"STOP IT,DAMMIT!!"

"OOH!"

"AAH!"

"EEHH!"

"EEEE!"

"YOU OLD SHITHEAD! WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO WHITNEY PARSONS?!"

"I FED HIM TO THE FUCKING ALLIGATORS JUST LIKE I'M GOING TO FUCKING SHOOT YOU RIGHT IN THE FUCKING FACE."

"IS THAT THE TRUTH, YOU OLD ASSHOLE?"

"WHAT THE HELL KIND OF QUESTION IS THAT?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

"THE TRUTH IS FOR SUCKERS."

"ADS ARE FOR KILLERS!"

"SPEAKING OF WHICH. I'M GONNA GET MY GUN."

"SERIOUSLY?"

"STOP IT!"

"DON'T SHOOT!!?"

Suddenly he gives me a look like a real maniac, with a big underbite and tiny eyes. A flash of panic sears through my chest, then his eyebrows give at the corners, and he explodes all over again. I do the same. After a second I can't stop crying. I'm hanging on to the bar for dear life. We tangle up briefly, like old drunken sailors. Then he turns and theatrically labors up the steps.

"I'M GETTING MY GUN."

"YOU'RE KILLING ME!"

"I'M GONNA KILL YOU ALRIGHT!"

"SHOULD I JUST STAY RIGHT HERE THEN?!"

"STAY RIGHT THERE!"

He disappears around a corner. Thor sits directly in front of me still, his black eyes wide and expressionless, his mouth closed tight. I toast him. I wheeze.

And next I think: I wonder if HR really has a gun? Then I conclude quickly: of course he has a gun. At the very least he's got that antique over-under.

I laugh away the possibility of him returning and actually putting a cap in me. Then I look back at the dog.

I hear a muffled rumbling. Something falls loudly.

"YOU OKAY UP THERE!?"

"I'M FINE! THERE'S ALL THIS SKI EQUIPMENT UP HERE! DID FRITA PUT THIS IN HERE, ANGEL?!"

There's no answer. I decide it can't hurt to move a little closer to the front door.

"WILL!"

I'm near the foyer now, and I spin around, he's at the corner of the steel-railed balcony with some kind of rod down one of the barrels of his gun. It's obvious that he barely knows what he's doing.

His face screwed red and tight, he says: "SORRY FOR THE DELAY. I'VE GOT SOME KIND OF JAM ON MY HANDS HERE."

By the way, Thor has trotted up and taken position next to me again, his eyes locked on my neck.

I see the rod suddenly drop down into the barrel, something has given, and HR says: "AH! THERE WE GO."

He whips the rod out and pitches it over the balcony for some reason. It bounces to a silent rest on the carpet, smearing a wide swath of oil. This I take as my cue. I remark:

"HOLY SHIT!"

"HOLD STILL!"

"THOR!" I say. He turns back to me from the rod, and I throw my drink in his face. I bolt for the door, as he grimaces and shakes his snout.

"WHEREYAGOINBUDDY?!"

I pull leaved front door wide. I hear a scattering of paws on the flagstone, two clicks and then the puckered cluck of the barrel snapping back into place.

"WILLCOMEBACKPARTNER!"

I slam the door shut and I'm outside, when there air seems to flex and a BOOM braces the air. The other door implodes, a volcanic snout juts out of the middle, a million shimmering capillaries spindling away from it.

I run like hell, straight for the distant, brick-flanked entryway. I hear Thor whining and scraping behind the door.

The dognoise ceases and I know he's on my tail. He's pissed off too. As if it were right beside me, I hear HR, who must be on the front step now, pull back the other hammer.

"WILL?"

BOOM!! A burst of slashed dogwood blossoms rains over my ducking head, as tender as baby flesh.

"WHATSTHEHURRYBUDDY?!!"

As I sprint, the wall only about fifty yards away, I can hear Thor now, I can all but see him, his head low, his paws a snapping blur over pavement. I'm at the wall, jumping and throwing both arms over the edge. The air shivers with another report of the gun, and brick dust explodes beside me. My feet smatter and skid up the wall, struggling for a hold, I get one foot over, and it nearly comes back again when Thor leaps and gets his teeth into my shoe. I wriggle out of it and swing over, falling to earth on my side. I get to the sidewalk and just start running.

I run about a mile and a half, which is about a mile and a quarter more than I'm capable of running. Catching a bus, I climb aboard, only to discover that I've got five fifties (GG's fifties) and no change. I appeal to the bus driver's humanity, and his eyelids seem to get heavier, creating a look of both world-weariness and indomitable stupidity. Next, there's a brief altercation with several of the retards and pederasts sitting up front, all of who apparently are in a hurry to get somewhere. The doors fold

shut in front of me. The air brakes whine and the bus slowly moves away.

I think unsuccessfully for a minute, then decide to start running again. I continue in the same direction. Finally I hit a convenience store. I consider briefly calling a cab, but I need way more help than that. I buy a pack of smokes; I don't know what happened to the pack I had this morning. I flip out my cell, call Blaine, and get her voicemail.

"Blaine! I'm in real trouble, honey! I'm sorry. I need you! I love you! I need you HELP ME FUCK!"

The cab comes. I hop in. I give the driver instructions, then I try to call her again, but somebody's already on the line.

"BLAINE?"

"... Yes." A man's voice.

"GG!"

"Yes."

"It's me!"

"Me who?"

"Cut the crap!"

"Cut what crap?"

"You called me!"

"Who called what?"

"Seriously. I'm in incredible trouble. People are
shooting at me!"

"Really."

"Yeah!"

"Seriously?"

"YES!"

"Who?"

"I can't explain right now."

"Gianni?"

"NO!"

"Then I don't understand. Who would want to shoot you?"

"Jesus! It was HR! That was the test!"

"... FANTASTIC!"

"Surprisingly, it wasn't that great! Listen, can I hide out at your office for awhile?"

"What kind of gun was it?"

"What?! I don't know, a shotgun?"

"Over under? Side by side? 20? 12?"

"I don't know! Over under!"

"And he didn't hit you?"

"No!"

"Hmm ..."

"Look, I'm coming in!"

"Is he after you?"

"No. Gianni is."

"But HR was shooting at you?"

"YES."

"... Now I'm confused ..."

"GODDAMMIT!"

"Okay okay okay okay. Okay, come in from the loading dock in back. No one'll see you. I'll be back there waiting."

I hang up, and an instant later it rings again.

"BLAINE!"

"GG. You know, not even Shatski's been shot at. I just talked to him. He wanted to know if you returned fire. I told him No. Is that right?"

I hang up.

4:00 PM, the Offices of Pott Fishbien

"Holy Crap!" GG had responded, agreeably. I snorted, threw up my hands, then wept briefly. He'd turned over the keys to his Spider, without so much as a word. Next he popped the locks on his briefcase, flipped it open and withdrew the pistol. I protested briefly, though I was eventually overcome by the excitement and romance of racing around town with a Spider and a gun. He showed me how to

load it (he had a speed loader), snap the cylinder back into place, then cock the hammer. It was all fluted and silver, like organ pipes.

At first he suggested that I stay there, pointing out that he wasn't the only guy with a gun in this joint. I thanked him, but I explained that they probably thought I might come here, and I didn't want to get holed up. He considered this for a moment, then shook his head and said impressively,

"Let 'em come. Pott Fish was the only office in the Hedgerows that remained fully staffed during the Million Man March."

For some reason, this was tremendously assuring. He showed me into a kind of apartment on the firm's 35th floor, dropped a bottle of ice cold Pnin in my lap, then left me alone. I placed another four calls to Blaine, again getting her voice mail ("*I love you. Believe me. I need you. Don't do this ...*"). I did four shots, then I passed out.

9:00 PM, The Black Duck

"She's not coming." He flicks his cigarette out the window as I fall back into the car and slam the door behind me.

He leans forward to turn on the ignition.

"Don't start the car."

His hands drop in his lap. "Every minute we stay here they stand a better chance of picking you up."

"Can we just sit here for a few minutes longer?" I say it measuredly. I look at him.

"... Sure."

Our reservations were for 8:00. He'd woken me up at 7:30. Somehow I raised her on the telephone, although after "Hello" she didn't have much to add.

"Meet me at the Black Duck."

"You ..."

"Please, Blaine."

"..."

"I love you."

A laugh.

"Please."

"Whatever. Fine."

In the apartment at Pott Fish I'd taken an ice cold shower, hoping to sober up, clutching the stainless steel knobs, baring my teeth at the showerhead.

GG and I had had a minor squabble in the basement lot under his office. I'd wanted to drive. I'd demanded that I drive, in fact. Normally he lets me. He's a fabled disaster behind the wheel. This is by design, of course; he considers being a good driver a little too prole. This time, however, he'd insisted, claiming that I was too wound

up. So, as he elbowed our way across town - a series of feints, swerves, kickstops and powerslides - my already delicate emotional condition was run once again through the ringer. Miraculously, we'd rolled out to this joint right on time.

A half hour later, with no sign of Blaine either in person or by phone, GG and I sprinted out to the Double H. I sank into the wheel well as we cruised through, looking for her car. Against my explicit, hissed/spat orders, GG even did a U-turn in Johnny's driveway. Then he leaned on the horn, and peeled out.

Nothing.

We then swung by her apartment, after which we came back here. Once again, I ran inside. The maitre d' smiled with grim empathy. He hadn't seen a thing.

"Yeah," GG says now, into his cell. "Okay. Okay. We'll be there."

He clicks it shut. He turns to me: "I need to meet up with Shatski and do a little casework. You'll join me."

I let my skull fall back on the headrest.

"Alright?"

"Yes!"

"Alright." I feel the car sink into gear, then heave right into an explosion of car horns and skidding, agonized cries. Somehow I'm relieved by the fact that my life is now in GG's uncertain hands.

9:15 PM, Uptown

It's a herky-jerky suicide dive through town, jumping and starting and stalling through the glittering traffic on Tennessee. Then the silent run under the de Gaulle Roundabout. A two-wheeled left turn and we cross into the dark, bombscaped, sclerotic side streets of East Hill. On Columbus, between E and F, we skid up beside the El Turismo. I see Ted's windbreaker torso expand in the window, then the door is open, his huge head poking in.

TS: "Car's dead." He takes a long look at me.

GG: "Get in."

TS: "Where?"

GG: "Will, climb in back."

I'm too tired to put up any kind of fight. I climb back on to the ledge of a backseat. There I sit miserably on a squash racket and some kind of magazine holder that's bolted to the chassis. Ted drops in and slams the door. The car promptly assumes a sixty degree list to starboard.

"Will, get behind me."

I do so. We right ourselves by about 45 degrees.

"That's better," GG says.

"They'll be getting out of here any minute now."

"How long have they been inside?"

"Hour and a half."

"What are they talking about?"

"I don't know. It's not in English."

My head is pressed up against the ragtop and my shoulders are folded in front of me. My legs are pretzelled across the ledge. It's some kind of stunt blowing smoke out the driver's side window.

I ask, "Can we roll down the top?"

Ted answers, "It'll blow our cover."

"Just for a little while. I feel like I'm sitting in a duffle bag."

"We really can't." GG contributes.

"Fine."

"Here they come." Shatski says, grabbing a camera from between his thighs.

To the extent I can, I sit up. Between a couple cars I see the entrance to the Restaurant. This is Modernica, a "contemporary American bistro," whatever that means. Blaine and I came here once, long ago, when things were hunky dorey. Off-white Christmas lights tangle with a couple squat pine trees flanking the entranceway. A low green awning runs over the façade.

A valet pulls open the door and a little man in a lime green suit emerges. He wears violet-lensed glasses and a head of tight red curly hair.

"We're following circus performers?" I ask. No one answers.

Carrot Top hands his keys over, after a brief explanation. Behind him the door opens again, this time by the man exiting. I crane my neck forward. Helmut.

"Is that ...? Oh Jesus. No."

GG turns to me. He says carefully and emphatically, "I had to put Ted on him. You didn't leave me any choice. I had to."

"This is who Shatski followed all day?!"

"Whom. And yes."

Shatski: "For what it's worth, I think there's something here, Will."

"Of course you do. That's what you're paid for."

He laughs. GG says:

"Look at this."

He draws a photocopy from a leather envelope and hands it to me.

"I don't believe this."

"Look," he says.

I look.

"That's a page from our boy's appointment book. See?"
He says, pointing, "See right there? 'Friday the 4th,
tomorrow. 4:50 p.m. American Air Flight 344 to San Fran.
7:00 p.m. dinner at the Mark with Burt.'"

"I knew that! Van told us Sunday night!"

"Yes, but doesn't it seem ..."

"How did you get this?"

"This? Oh, you know ..."

"HOW!"

He looks at me for a moment, considering whether to
tell the truth.

"Ted and I broke into his hotel room this afternoon."

"Oh my God."

"Will, listen," he says. "We *had* to look in to this. The guy's getting married on *Saturday*."

"You say that like it's supposed to *mean* something!"

"What's he doing flying to the fruitcake capital of the world the night before his wedding? Why's he having dinner with some guy named Burt? Doesn't that strike you as a little odd?"

"No. *THIS STRIKES ME AS A LITTLE ODD!*"

"We're her friends."

"Friends don't do *THIS* for other friends!"

"Yeah, well, maybe they should."

"*WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?*"

"If this were you, and I had suspicions about who you were about to marry, I'd do the same thing."

"Wow! Thanks!"

"I'm serious."

"Wait ... Are you saying you've been following Blaine?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Did you just tell me not to be ..."

"Relax, Will."

"RELAX? Yeah, you're right. That's what I need to do. I'm a little wound up. I guess the fact that I WAS SHOT AT TODAY MAY HAVE SOMETHING TO WITH THE FACT THAT I'M NOT RELAXED RIGHT NOW."

"Who's going to check this guy out? I'm serious! *That's* what I'm talking about. Who's gonna do it? Her Mom? ..."

"GOD."

"Who's Burt, Will?"

"Who cares."

He stares at me.

I let my head fall back.

"G, I can't be part of this shit right now."

"Here comes the limo," Shatski says, getting back to business and winding the film forward.

"I can't be part of these games anymore. You know that."

"And you know that I think that everything is just one big game that you're a part of whether you like it or not."

"Please. I'm begging you."

GG drops the file in my lap. I say right to his face:
"G."

He points at the file and turns back around, starting the Spider.

"I should look through the file, is that it? FUCK!"

He doesn't answer. I look.

"Oh God." I pause, mutter something, then say, stabbing at my lap. "WHY are there fucking PLANE TICKETS in here?"

Over his shoulder: "I thought a couple of us could fly out to San Fran."

I'm talking fast again: "You mean you and I could fly out there, don't you? Yeah that's what you mean. FUCK."

I pause. Then I gavel the fist on the seat back saying: "FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!!"

Shatski says, "Will."

"That's it! EXECUTIVE DECISION! I'm going home!"

"They're getting in the limo. Watch this." Ted says.

GG turns again: "Will. Just watch this. If you want to go home afterwards, fine."

"Why are you doing this to me!?"

"I'll drop you off right after this. Just ..." He points over his shoulder.

"Look? Is that what you want me to do? Fine! What the hell, right? Could it get any worse?"

A deep blue Mercedes idles in front, and a driver has emerged, decked out in an undertaker's uniform with a Greek sailor's cap. He's holding open the back, passenger side door. Carrot Top turns over a folded wad of cash to the valet, who visibly blushes.

"There's the money changing hands!" I contribute.

Helmut, watching this, turns to get into the car. He doesn't though. He hesitates a minute, then Carrot Top is beside him, now addressing the driver. Finished, he gets up on his toes to say something into Helmut's ear. And Helmut leans over slightly to listen.

I add again (I'm losing it): "We'll probably get that French kiss we need right here!"

"Will."

"Oh, yeah! Quiet. GodDAMMIT!"

And then, like a guardrail falling slowing down to defend an oncoming train, Carrot Top's hand drops. It rests for a moment around Helmut's kidney, then it continues south, stopping fully on his ass and remaining there for four beats. He swats him twice gently. Helmut nods and climbs down into the sedan. Carrot Top follows. The driver closes the door carefully and trots around to the front.

GG turns slowly and raises his eyebrows. He says, without taking his eyes off me, "Did you get that, Ted?"

"I got it."

"That's the sort of thing you saw earlier?"

Shatski: "That's it."

GG nods gravely at me.

I let my eyes go Sambo-wide: "*Holy crap.*"

He doesn't respond. After a second I say,

"That guy's his uncle."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Why? Do you have evidence to the contrary in your file? Is he his uncle, Ted?"

"Don't know."

"Don't know, huh? You two don't know a lot of things, do you?"

"Tell me, is *that* how uncles and nephews talk to one another these days?"

"Could be."

"..."

"..."

"Maybe that's how two guys get into a car in Germany. You ever think about that?"

"That's very plausible. Ted, we should note that and put it in the file."

"Let's go." Shatski says. "They're moving."

GG turns back around, flicks his cigarette out the window, and throws the Spider in gear.

I start to get up and he guns it. I collapse back.

"I guess I'm going with here?"

"You are."

"Great!"

Nothing.

"Let me out of this goddamn car!"

They take Columbus as far as R Street, then go right, heading east. At a light near Market Square, I flip out briefly and again try to escape. My foot gets stuck, and I'm dropped back in as the car starts off again.

"FUCK! Can I get out of this fucking car please!"

"Do you see where we're going?"

I can't deny it. We're heading straight for De Concini Square, this town's gay HQ.

"Let's just see if they're going anywhere interesting."

"I'm taking the De Concini Metro home."

"Fine. We'll drop you off. Just relax."

"Relax? RELAX, AGAIN?"

We all know our destination is official when we stop at California and M. The light changes, the limo's brake lights dot out and we move straight ahead, toward the mothership. None of us says a word as we start and stop our way in. A moment later we emerge from the residential darkness into the square.

Somehow GG has managed to put us directly behind them.

"You're too close," Shatski says, "You're going to have to pass them."

"Pass them?"

"Yeah."

"You really want me to pass them?"

"Yes."

"Mmm. Okay." With that GG begins bobbing and leaning to the right. With a couple of twirling fingers he tries to negotiate a berth in the traffic beside us. He inches

forward a little, and now we're within two feet of the limo's bumper.

"Easy." Ted says.

"Maybe we should ram them!" I suggest.

GG strains way over Shatski, apparently thinking he has someone's attention. He twists in his seat, and the Spider jumps forward another inch.

TS gasps. I go dumb, stabbing a finger at the road ahead.

"HEY!" Shatski says.

"What?!"

Ted holds his hands out, offering the brief distance between us and the limo.

GG turns around and looks. "Oh. Yeah, yeah, yeah."

TS: "Just be careful."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

TS: "Think about turning on your signal, too."

He considers this for a split second, then turns to his steering column, both hands up, broadcasting unfamiliarity.

"Jesus Fucking Christ," I say, watching him. "I'm getting out right now."

I've still got around seven blocks to the Metro stop, but I'm pushing on GG's seat.

"Is that Van?" Shatski says.

I look up through the windshield. It's her. I drop back behind the seat. My mind starts spinning. She's inspecting the row of cars dropping people off in front of the Empress. She's five yards in front of the limo.

"Shit!" GG says.

"WHEN THIS IS OVER I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

"Relax!"

"FUCK YOU!"

"What's she doing here?"

It's only just occurred to me, but I phrase it like this anyway: *"Well, genius, maybe she's meeting Helmut and his fucking Uncle to see this goddamn movie!"*

Shatski says quickly: "Does she know your car?"

"Get me the fuck out of here!"

"Does she know your car." Shatski reiterates.

I answer: "YES! She does!"

GG's head appears between the seats, checking traffic in his blindspot. His wide eyes jump all over the place.

"GET US OUT OF HERE!"

"I'm trying!"

"GO!"

TS: "She's made us."

Me: "I don't care! GO!"

GG: "This guy's gonna let me in."

Shatski spins right: "This guy?"

Me: "PLEASE GO ..."

TS: "He's not letting you in."

GG's head bobs and weaves.

GG: "I'M GOING!"

His head is basically in my face, but over his shoulder I sudden see that we're way too close to the limo.

"LOOK," Shatski says.

"SHIT!" I add, fanning forward with both hands.

He turns quickly, inspects things, then turns back, this time squinting cleverly into our blind spot, like he knows what he's doing.

GG: "Okay he's letting me in!"

He whips around, grabs the wheel like a racecar driver. Fifteen feet away, I see Van staring right at us.

Shatski: "Wait!"

Me: "GO!!!"

The Spider lunges right and a wall of steel and glass closes in fast on the passenger side window.

I give a protracted silent scream.

A glance right and GG says, "AH!" He stiff-arm swerves back left and the wall retreats. I look forward now only to

see the inflamed brake lights and broad backside of the limo crawling up our hood.

Our brakes yelp, and we land on their bumper. The airbag attacks GG like a squid. I tackle the backseat, Shatski plows into the dash and is jerked back, but it's only a nudge.

A pause, only a second, then a horn chimes embarrassingly, and our rear is shoved up briefly into the air. We're tapped from behind. I bounce off the ragtop and somehow land between the front seats.

The crisis, like any crisis, ceases abruptly. The air suddenly has that distilled, solemn, anemic quality to it. I feel mute.

I roll over. My hands on my chest, I lie in state like Lenin. I think I'm okay, but everything has a kind of matchlight glow. I see that GG clutches the top of the wheel, the airbag in his lap. His mouth puckered sourly, he eyes us with a blend of suspicion and illness. Shatski's eyes fall over his moustache to me.

"Everybody alright?" Shatski says. GG says yeah. I nod. Shatski looks up.

"She's going to check out the limo," he says quietly.

"This wasn't that bad." He says to GG, after looking around. Then he pops his door.

GG looks at me. I look back.

"You okay?" he says.

I blink, then turn away.

He gets out.

I close my eyes. Eventually I hear discussions, above and beyond the dash. I reopen my eyes. I see that the ragtop is separated from the rim of the windshield. In that sliver of night, purple, ruffled clouds move briskly south, like wind in long grass.

I hear Ted settling things with the people behind us. I hear him pass, heading toward GG, who's up ahead with Van

and Helmut. I don't think she knows I'm here. I don't hear her voice.

My eyes are swollen. My heart rhumbas, a ball bouncing awkwardly down stairs. I taste bad coffee in my mouth.

A shape moves to the right, and two sets of fingers curl around the ragtop's aluminum splint. Gently, like a blanket, the top is drawn down. I see the broad, mottled back of heaven. It's pocked with ulcers of moonlight and stars.

Then, as if from my hip, Tito emerges, looming over me like a skyscraper. On the other side, now, Nuts. Against the dull sky, they're lit up, shadows moving at odd, deep angles in their lit faces.

Nuts says, "I really hate doing this, Will."

Honestly, I think it's a dream until Tito hands dive at me. I twist away but he has my shirt.

"No! No! No!" I hiss, careful not to speak too loud.

I'm hauled up and over the trunk, my pants ripping on the spindles of the ragtop. I'm in the open. I can feel her seeing me. There's a mosaic of spectators. I'm wrapped up in a reverse bear hug, my back to Tito's chest and I'm spun around.

But she hasn't seen me yet. I see her. She's beyond GG, Helmut and the driver. She's looking right at GG.

I hear a door open behind me as I'm hauled around. As Helmut, Van and GG go out of view they hear it too. Or maybe they just sense the action. I see all of them look at me, then I see Van look back at GG. Then they're gone, out of my circling view.

The Double H Chevy appears now. It's the car that hit us from behind. One biffed headlight is squeezed shut. Nuts rounds the trunk and pulls open the rear, driver's side door.

I start violently. Squirming like a dog. I try to press off Tito's chest with my feet. I try to noodle up and away. He tries to shove me in but I get a foot on the door and another on the roof. I flip around. Suddenly I can see

the asphalt just inches from my face. My legs sputter above me.

There's an avalanche of footfalls, a few clipped yells, and then Tito's hand just goes limp. My chin bounces on the pavement, my teeth clipping my tongue. The rest of me follows. Something heavy lands right next door, and I roll around to find myself nose to nose with Tito's broad head. He's lying on his chest, his palm rotated clockwise and facing me. He's out cold.

I stare at him, his flawed skull is super-defined. I see every pore, every hair.

"Stand over there," I hear Shatski order.

Another hand has me by the bicep. I'm a rag doll.

"C'mon," Shatski says, as he hauls me out, leaning back, "Up."

As I rise I see a blackjack in his free hand. I then turn dumbly toward the street and spot Nuts, glaring, but safely removed from the action.

"You alright?" Shatski says. I blink laboriously once or twice.

A knee wobbles and another hand is on my arm, a smaller one.

"Stand up, Will," I hear Van say. "Are you okay?"

I'm missing some time here, but I don't think I passed out. I look at her. My eyes slowly settle back into my head, and I start coughing. I'm not breathing yet, but I'm making progress. I hiccup.

"Are you okay?" She repeats, more a statement this time.

I look at her.

"Will," she says. I see GG now. He's right behind her, but he says nothing.

And then her fingers are touching my jaw.

"You okay, honey?"

I watch her like some dumb animal.

I say, "Yes" but it doesn't come out at first. She licks her thumb and swabs blood from the corner of my mouth.

"Yes," I repeat.

She looks up into both my eyes.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Car horns start bitching in the distance. Tito is up, leaning back against the Chevy, his head low. At once I hear people talking around us. Then suddenly, incredibly, there's a cop on a horse.

"What's going on here?" He asks.

Someone answers.

She pushes hair from my face: "What are you doing here?"

She doesn't need an answer.

The cop says, "Alright, then let's clear this up."

And then she looks over at GG. Absently her little hand falls from my chin. I think she laughs faintly.

Helmut says, "Von."

She looks at GG, and her blue eyes ache.

The clip of hooves. From the corner of my eye I see a shiver run over the horse's shoulder.

"Let's go, folks."

Her eyes narrow, as if she were looking into a cold wind.

"Van," I beg.

Then Helmut is leading her away. The uncle gives us a last, strange look before following them into the crowd. The limo leaves. Then Nuts and Tito, too.

I have no idea how we worked things out with the police.

9:45 PM, Uptown

I'm in the backseat of the Spider again and we're driving. I rest my head on the trunk. The filth of the city - the neon, the heat and the crushed glass - washes through my hair.

Somewhere, at a light, the car just starting to move again, I jump out. Another fucking car horn yells at my knees. I get to curb and GG's grabs my arm.

"GET THE FUCK OFF ME!"

The Spider's in the middle of the road. I see Shatski running around to the driver's side.

"Will, I'm sorry."

I light up. I take a hot drag and say, "Here's a question for you: How did my ring wind up on the stairs?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm fucking talking about."

"No, I ..."

"Don't fucking say another word because you know exactly what I'm FUCKING TALKING ABOUT!"

I say that and I flick my cigarette at his chest. He juggles a flurry of flames away. I shove him.

"Do you think I'm a fucking idiot, Grant? *You took it. YOU!*" I shout. "*You took it out of my goddamn briefcase because for some fucked up reason you don't want me to marry Blaine.*"

Shatski pulls up behind us on the sidewalk. The cars cruise in the street.

"Isn't that it?"

"Don't call me Grant," he says.

"I'll call you Grant, Grant, whenever I damned well please. You know why?"

"Don't call me Grant."

"Grant Goldstein, do you know? As incredible as it may seem, in the span of a week you've managed to ruin my *entire fucking life!* I got fucked today, and you don't give a shit! No, instead you make me keep playing your ridiculous fucking games! And because I'm an idiot, here I am! Here I am doing this little charity event for you. For poor GG. One final wild goose chase with lonely Grant Goldstein. You deranged jackass fop ..."

I don't see it coming. His fist catches me under my right ear, and I stagger around, a full 180, nearly falling over.

"GODDAMMIT!" He's shouting now, like the maniac he is.
"I told you not to call me that!! FUCK!!"

I turn. I clutch my jaw.

Now I lunge for him, but Shatski stops me. He's out of the car now, and he catches my arm, saying quietly: "Hey, hey, hey."

I jerk free. I look at Shatski, then at GG. I straighten my jacket and sleeve. I don't know what else to do, so I just start walking away. I start heading down the sidewalk.

"Will," I hear him say, underneath, half-heartedly. But I keep going. At the intersection, under this lavender sky, I start running.

The musky roar of a jetliner arcs over the night. It fills the air like moisture.

11:30 PM, Uptown

I'm on the de Gaulle roundabout, among the mutterers and boy poet-prostitutes. They move like wraiths. They are speechless, priestly. In a way, inviolate, untouchable. In another, a violation, violated, inviting violation, commercially touch-friendly. A carousel of somnambulatory basketcases and blowjobholders (fellatio facilitators, cock consultants), revolving in the crime light. Welcome to the circle jerk, friends. This is the real universe. And beyond us circles the outer orbit of steel ships, touching down only occasionally to take one of our number away, saturnian rings all the colors of the spectrum, all the colors of need. What would these x-rayed heads tell us, the heads of these buyers and sellers, if held up to the light? Would we see their fissures, their stress fractures? Would they look like ours? Or would they break differently? Is that the difference, a different angle taken by the winnowing fracture line, in that split second it grooves you out?

I actually had one of these drive-by perverts proposition me, just a moment ago. I almost cried. I would have, if I weren't so tired. The window came down, I heard it. I turned. He propositioned me. "Can I give you a lift?" This derelict consumer. A fat double chin, his eyes on my

chest, the fine primped hair of his forearm, insect hair like you see through a microscope. A consumer misbegotten. Lying to me, and me lying to him. I needed a lift alright. Yes, I need money, but our only words are lies. "No." I'd answered. On a night like this he just wants the simulacrum of affection. That's what he needs to make it to morning, and these kids, they just need a little cash. And I'm both of them. Can I have a little false affection? Just run your fingers through my hair. I've got cash. Just stick around. Can I do anything for you? Anything at all? I know what you like. Just pay me. Please. Pay me.

I remember one night in the emergency room, my teeth in my hand, waiting with the other wounded for someone to address the latest handiwork of Rick Johnson & Company. With at least another hour to wait, I pushed my eye back into place and got up to explore. Eventually I found myself in the maternity ward. Some rattled, masked nurse asked me if I was the father. "Sure," I answered. What the Hell? I didn't have anything to lose, and feared nothing at that point. I got to watch a kid come into the world. A couple kids, in fact. Twins. Mom was out cold. Apparently we'd been in a car accident. I held her hand. It seemed the only decent thing I could do.

But I'm here to tell you this, Brother. I have a fact of parturition to lay on you. We know what the score is from day one. We come into the world, take one anxious look around, blink perhaps in disbelief, rub our eyes with our small little fists, then look again and again it's the same. There at the center of the room, clutched under the armpits by the extended hands of our masked patron, we check things out. An arsenal of shunts and needles, bloodied staffers, stirrups, stumps, tubes and trashcans, blood bags and gauze pads. A swat in the back and our lungs pop open and what's the first thing we do? Hmm? We take one look around, we load up our new lungs and we scream. Yes, perhaps we give a quick, stunned gasp, but we definitely start screaming. Every last one of us. Just one whiff of the cramped air is all it takes. From there forward we just keep screaming, pausing only to wheeze, to hiccup, fuel up and resume. Us dreamers, we're the one's who consider everything in a state of suspicion, disbelief, before we turn the world on with our caterwaul. The less romantic, the realists, they *come out* screaming. A muffled, crescendoing crisis, then the head pops out and the shows on, the face red, the eyes Chinese, the mouth a little pink

oracle of ear-splitting crisis. But what kind of scream is it? Bloody murder? Terror? Hate? Outrage?

Outrage. Yes. I think it's Outrage. Capital O. As in, WHAT the FUCK is THIS?!!

These folks here this evening, this host, this gang here at this open air asylum of the night, everyone of them came in screaming, just like you. But the problem is we forget it all at some point. We forget that this is a place we're supposed to be afraid of.

I'm spending the night on the street. I want to pretend my world has ended, but it hasn't really. It just keeps moving right along, on its unfathomable trajectory. And so I've plotted my scheme. Right now I just don't have the money to blow on a hotel room (I've blown the advance GG gave me on restaurants; I haven't seen the rest of what he owes me and I don't expect to). I can't go home. Tito and Nuts are probably sitting on the side of my bed. And anyway it's just one night. My Punk check is on its way. I'm reasonably certain they won't stiff me. And once I sort out things with HR, that'll be back to normal, get that Airplane Money coming my way. If that's irreparable, then I

call Tony Gould. Things aren't that bad. Tomorrow I spring into action.

Love. No, seriously: ... Love. That's what we're talking about, isn't it? What I'm talking about? Is it? Is it still worth talking about? Can we keep a straight face while so doing? Do I love Van? I tell myself a story about a guy named Will who loved a girl named Van, but I'm not sure if I believe it. Do I love Blaine? I don't. I'll admit it. Do you? I would, if I were you. She's yours if you want her. I don't deserve her, and I'm due to self-destruct some time soon, anyway. Gravity doesn't lie. It doesn't ever give up. It eventually sucks us all six feet under. Right now I'm soaring through the sky, just like Alex. So are you.

But take her, will you please? I don't want to take Blaine down with me. Because I do love her in some way, and I don't want my fate to be hers. All of these Vaudevillian calamities that I have in store. I don't want to visit them on anyone. The only way she's going anywhere is kicking and screaming. Now, to be fair, most of the women I've dated preferred to leave me kicking and screaming, but invariably it was of their own volition. But Blaine, you've got to take her. Someone's just got to. Because I know what

I'm going to do. And she'll buy it. It's inevitable. It's always been. The providence of Suburbia, you just can't second guess it. If she's still around, I've got it all figured out. I don't have an alternative. It's a suicide bid that I'm on, albeit a protracted one. Without her, I just won't make it.

I'm holding you up now. My hands are under your armpits. Look. *Look*. You've been conned. It's a fucking sting, my friend. There's no love here. For eighty percent of you - sure, I'll be generous - there's no such thing. They just tell you that, keep you from jumping. No. No, let me amend that. They tell you that because you'll pay for it. You'll see all the movies. You'll watch all the shows. It's cash. More people are abducted by aliens than fall in love. More die of heartbreak than anything else. We all die of it. We all do, ultimately.

Look around. It's a con. It's gravity. It's *Fuck You, Pay Me*. Go ahead. Start screaming. Trust me, you'll feel better. Have a scream on me.

FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 1999

9:05 AM, Downtown

The business day has begun, and I am outside its walls. The homeless day begins too, I've discovered, only it begins much earlier. It begins at dawn.

I'm not sure if you're familiar with any of these stories about the downed Jap pilot who got stranded on an island in the South Pacific and fought WWII well into the 1980s? Scrambling around, his privates wrapped up in a parachute diaper, a banana leaf hat, hiding from passing ships and taking cover from low-flying planes? Ring a bell? That about approximates how I spend my morning. True, I was somewhat better dressed, but I did have the camo headgear, a rough concoction of dandelions, weeds and dirt that I'd acquired when I was woken and forcibly relocated from my bench by the City's Finest.

From there I go wolfman, muttering and bounding in irregular strides up and down the street. I scramble around pedestrians, jump in and out of shadows, cross through buildings only to flipturn in a revolving door and cross back. I apparently really do look the part of a vagrant, at least less-than-professional, because the doormen at these joints can't chase me away quickly enough. Basically I'm in a kind of protracted panic, expecting to be pounced upon at each turn, for then dread Chevy to leap the curb and fall on the sidewalk in front of me, her doors swinging wide around a low mouthful of steel grillwork, grimacing like a

shark, heaving like a panther, the insensate windshield revealing nothing but a smear of morning sky. Oh, they could find me! It's just not that big a town! And, I can't go home, of course. I can just see Tito, Nuts and Jarhead sitting on my doorstep like a goddamn doo-wop group. They're there, too. They're everywhere. I know it.

I ride the 183 bus for about an hour and a half before getting kicked off. (The looks of alarm I inspire as I stagger down the aisle!) I don't know why I didn't think of doing that last night. I plot an escape scheme until I fall asleep. I wake to a discussion between the driver and a toll collector type whose shoulder I'm drooling on. I bite the curb at the next exit.

I think about taking refuge at a library. Of course! I think. That's what these homeless losers do! After about an hour, it turns out, I can't find a library, not a single one. I don't know where any of these things are! Nobody else does either! I asked! Maybe they're gone. I think they may be, in fact. The city probably just got tired of getting played for a sucker all the live long day.

Eventually I do manage to find a crappy knock-off of the 5 O'Clock ("Fazzoul's") on Harrison. Here I order the one meal I've budgeted for myself today. I'm there until almost noon. That reduces my \$89 to \$82. This and one scarred credit card worth about \$400 comprise all that remain of my liquidity. My advance from GG went up like magnesium. Restaurants! They're killing me!

With a borrowed pencil and napkin I plot a rough schedule for the day's crimes. Here's what I figure is essential: a shower, clothes for two or three days (a suit, too), the tickets, Blaine, a ride to the airport. I note the list carefully, forcibly, on my napkin. I carve it in, in my tight little fingers. My first breakthrough concerns clothing. With a snap of my fingers I realize I still have a suit and a couple shirts at the drycleaners. As for getting around, I'm at a total loss; I smack myself in the head for about ten minutes hoping to jar loose some kind of idea. I can't afford a taxi at this point. That is, other than the one I'll hire to get us to the airport. Public transportation, despite my ride on the 183, is a deep, black mystery to me. Reluctantly, I settle on stealing a bike from one of these messenger/burnouts. I know this is an extremely dangerous proposition. Be a hard town to get

around in with that tribe of winged monkey-types after you. Then, like a revelation, I remember Chan. And then I have a plan.

My food arrived awhile ago. I'm almost surprised to see it there in front of me. I start experimentally (poison? a trap!?), pushing a fry through the bestilled gravy, leaving a mote in the film. It turns out I'm starving. Before I know it my mouth is about an inch from the plate and I'm raking it in. With one hand I'm shoveling in what I'll assume, brightly, is polenta. With the other I'm reaching with child-like desperation (and a little noise) for my Coke (good company—great, boorish, effective ads), landing a finger on its rim and carefully bringing it under my control. A low, loud series of gulps (guh, BREATH, guh, BREATH, guh) and I'm back at the burger, pushing it in with the heel of my hand. Eventually I discover there's nothing left. Just a blank, wasted plate. I sit up, finish chewing and swallow. I pull the napkin from my collar like a doctor just out of OR.

I collapse back in my chair. There's no one else here, not even staff. I light up. Pushing a roll of smoke into the greasefire air, I check my watch. A long minute later,

an eraserhead of ash falls into the red plastic tray. Suddenly I am again serene and all seeing. It's as if some horrible symphony (xylophones, zithers, chainsaws, nails over slate, cymbals, falling chandeliers, bouncing ball bearings) has climbed to its rabid crescendo then just disappeared.

It's raining outside. The street hums with static electricity. Cars move silently through the false gloaming, like water on wires.

Don't ask me how, but I know everything will work. I'm terrified, and I have no more choices left, but I feel lucky. I feel lethal.

I fold my plan into my blazer pocket. I pin down \$7 under the salt shaker.

2:15 PM, the Hedgerows

From across the street, I watch GG return to the office. I give him some time to get back to his desk. I

cross the street, sign in at the desk, then call him, inviting him down to the lobby.

"... why?"

"Just do it, okay?"

"..."

"GG."

"Fine." He signs off.

I give him 30 seconds, then I load into a waiting elevator, take it to nine. I say hello to Miriam at the front desk. She's on the phone, smiling and waving me wordlessly. He's nowhere to be seen. His briefcase is on a chair behind his desk. It's locked. I struggle with it furiously, prying my keys between its lips. Then I see the plane tickets. They're poking out from under a couple files like playing cards.

I ram them down my breast pocket. At the desk I tell Miriam I'll be right back, charading bathroom need. I sputter down the stairs. I hustle across a lobby.

It's as vacant as a mausoleum.

2:45 PM, Richard's Hill

From the dry cleaners I call Chan. We make arrangements. When he shows, I run out to his car. He's between deliveries. On the antenna of his Toyota, the little Duck Heaven flag whips through the air. At each and every light he gives me a sidelong, overbite squint, but I just stare straight ahead. Or else I watch the trailing traffic in my side mirror. It's begun to rain again. I step into an ankle deep puddle as I climb out of the car.

3:45 PM, Somewhere in SUBURBIA

I hang my dry cleaning from her bedroom door and hit the showers. I pack one bag for her and one for me, then I

fall into her couch for an hour of television. I kill an hour in TV land. Magnum PI gives me new hope.

My cab arrives. It's horn bleats in the silver air. A vase filled with the flowers I sent Blaine yesterday stands on the peninsula. I take a dozen roses, wrap them in shelf paper.

4:00 PM, Heatherton Hills Private Sanatorium

Blaine's office is in a little ranch style house at the edge of the campus. I leave the cab idling in the drive. Judy, who occupies the front desk, just looks at me as I pass. Blaine's eyes are on me the moment I cross the threshold into the room she shares with Andy the Fruitcake and Fat Glenda. Their faces approximate that of Judy. They know all. We're rolling.

I speak loudly, for everyone's benefit:

"Blaine, can we talk outside for a minute?"

"Why?"

Well, I think, it was worth a shot.

"Come with me. I'm helpless without you. I'm a disaster."

I think Andy gasped here.

"I've got a pair of tickets to San Francisco. I've got reservations at the Mark. It's the best, most expensive hotel in northern California. I've been such an asshole, and I want to make it all up to you."

She says nothing. Judy and Andy stiffen, trading wide-eyed looks.

"I love you more than life itself."

A half dozen skipped heartbeats and I swallow:

"I mean, I fucking love you, Blaine."

She looks to Judy, then Andy. They obviously think she's looking to them for support; Andy cocks his head at

her, reprising his look of wide-eyed significance. Next her eyes fall, and she inspects her desk.

"I've still got a lot of stuff here to do ..."

"Oh girl!" Andy cries, exasperated. My champion.

She stands up, her eyes roaming around her workspace. Two fingers pull that strand behind her ear, the other shifts papers uncertainly on her desk.

Low tires squeal to a circling halt outside. Her head snaps up and our eyes lock. A clatter of footsteps, a door bash, and a second later a dozen fists on my upper arms.

It's perfect.

"Will! Now take it easy buddy ..." Nuts urges, not without sympathy, as he walks in after his gang.

"Blaine ..." I say, my eyes still lashed to her, as I'm jostled into the plastic cuffs. (Really.)

I feel the tickle of breath and violence on my ears. As if on cue, the cab horn beeps. Someone pinches my arm high up behind my back and I twist on one toe.

"Will?!" She gasps, coming around her desk.

9:00 PM, PST, San Francisco

We get into town late (fires at O'Hare, floods at Dallas). Nevertheless, no one can seat us anywhere in town. As such, and as fraught with peril as it may seem, I've taken the 9:30 reservations GG had made at The Top of the Mark. Helmut and Burt's reservations are for 10:00.

10:00 PM, PST, San Francisco

In our hotel room, I straighten my tie and shoot my sleeves. I check my teeth in the mirror. Then I just stand there, looking at myself. Have we met?

I'd never noticed it before but my left eye is quite a bit higher than my right. Also my mouth, I discover, is

sliding glacially toward my neckline. My face is falling apart.

If Helmut is down there, I remind myself, just ignore him. Do what you have to do. Whatever he's doing is his business, not yours. If you're sitting right next to one another, or if you actually have to talk out in the lobby or at the bar, then do it. Just do it. Talk. Talk as if you're the greatest small talker of all time. How hard could it be? I hear Blaine hit the hair dryer, so I empty a little Johnnie Walker Red bottle into my plastic cup and throw it back. *Helmut! Helmut, old man, how are you!? Imagine us meeting here! You know Blaine! Curt, was it? Burt! Burt, Burt, okay. Pardon me, Burt. Is that so? Great! I'll bet! Yes, yes, yes. Well, I think tomorrow we'll hit the SFMOMA, City Lights, then we may cruise over to Sausalito for a few cocktails as the sun sets. Join us! I insist! Oh, but don't you have a wedding to be returning to? I'd love for you to join us, but I won't insist that you change your plans! Don't skip your wedding on my account, please! Ha! Unless of course you can put it back a few days? Ha! Ha! HO! HA! Great to see you, Helmut! Nice to meet you, Curt! Have a great dinner!*

The dryer switches off, and Blaine emerges working an earring into place. She looks, as ever, stunning. And I look, as ever, like a rich kid with a court date.

"Ready?" she inquires.

"Yep," I respond.

"Sure?"

"Yes."

I crush out my cigarette, grab the credit card room key, and follow her through the door. We join a couple old timers in the elevator ride down. The doors part and we follow them into the lobby. I guide Blaine by the elbow through the roiling throng of vacationers, conventioners and philanderers. We check in with the maitre de. My eyes hunt around. I check out everybody. A couple guys at the bar even make me outright panic, but I recover. No, Helmut. I become aware of a certain overcompensation of my beating heart. It's Sing-Sing-Sing in my chest.

The maitre de returns and asks us to follow him. We're unloaded at a table near the window that overlooks the Oakland Bridge and Treasure Island.

I say something meaningless. She takes up a menu.

We don't talk for awhile, and for that entire time my eyes are pinned to the left side of their sockets, watching the maitre de seat couple after couple. But multiple couples come and go, and still nothing.

I do excuse myself at one point and have a desperate little tete a tete with the maitre de.

My bottom lip pushes forward inquisitively, a palm up and out serving-style, I ask:

"We thought a couple friends of ours we're supposed to be here tonight."

"Really, sir?"

I shrug and laugh in a "who knew?!" sort of way.

"Do you having any reservations for two at 10:00?"

He disappears into the book.

"We had a couple reservations for two at 10:00, sir.
Both cancelled."

"Cancelled. Really! Any chance they bumped it up or
down a half hour?"

"We sat our last couple just now, sir. There they are
in that far corner. Are those your friends, sir?"

"Nope." I know everybody in the joint now. Still I
look again. I return to him. "So you're telling me you've
sat all the couples you'll be sitting tonight."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't have anymore coming."

"Exactly, sir."

"Hmm."

"And a reservation IS required tonight, sir."

"Hmm ..."

"Absolutely, sir."

We nod at one another for awhile then I wrap things up with a "Well, thanks."

I walk quietly back to our table. I take another methodical inventory of the place before sitting back down. Still, nothing. A few weirdos, but that's it.

I smooth my napkin over my thigh, adjusting the corners, righting the angles. I look up. The room is alive. I'm the last thing on anyone's mind.

We order. As 10:20 hits, I stir my cocktail, light up and settle back.

I exhale. She looks up, and I smile grandly for her. I turn, looking over the bay to Oakland. Over there is our target market for Sable Stud. That's where Sable Stud makes

a hell of a lot of sense. That's where you say "Nigga Please!" every day, whether you like it or not, whether you begging or buying. Or at least it used to be. Somebody somewhere told me something about all these internet types gentrifying the place. (So much change. Can't things just stay the same for awhile?)

Another few leadfisted cocktails, and I turn back. I crush out this last cigarette and smile lovingly at my fiancée. She's a little taken aback, but recovers and returns my smile. My eyes fall back to the fading embers of my Camel, smiling still. Next I check the aisle. I consider a chandelier philosophically. I'm drunk, I note, but that particular kind of drunk where you lazily hit all your cues. Brit actor drunk. I recheck the aisle, fore and aft, then nimbly roll from my chair to the floor. The air tenses. It thickens; you can hear the conversations sputter out. I look up into Blaine's eyes, and she looks down into mine. Her expression equivocates for a moment, like the Mona Lisa. At long last her smile reappears, though it's still difficult to read: love, condescension, victory, mockery? Who knows? Not a question you should ask anyway, right? Her necklace flickers in the candlelight as her fingers rise to it.

There's no hesitation, like before. No competing thoughts. No emotional cage matches. I just do it:

"Will you marry me, Blaine Gugliotti?"

Her smile peaks ever so slightly on the left.

"Yes."

And that's it.

There's a sudden and cataclysmic round of applause, like what Beethoven might have heard after wrapping up Eroica for the first time (presuming of course that he could hear). I stand, a smile expands like rictus across my face. She smiles too, batting her low eyes at the other diners. She blushes then looks up at me with what could only be described as adoration, bordering on idolatry. At this, overcome, I spin and wave to acknowledge the raving crowd ...

In so doing, I'm afraid, the floor rises up under my shoes to around knee level. Up and to the left. I try to

sit in what I believe to be my own chair, but which turns out to be that of the gentleman behind me. This is generally agreed to be a richly comic moment, and again I'm required to magnanimously gesture, this time with both hands, for the improved fanfare to die down. I kill as I very publicly mop my brow with my neighbor's napkin. And who would have been surprised if a few heart attacks hadn't been inspired as I fake some wobbly knees returning to our table.

I kiss her gently on the lips, pull back and smile.

She says: "Sit down."

I caress her cheek with the back of my fingers, like some Columbian drug lord. Then I sit, as instructed.

A couple bottles of champagne materialize, as well as a much needed shot of tequila. (To you, nameless benefactor, thanks.) I down the first one, offer Blaine the second, and upon her refusal, down that one too. As the waiter fiddles around preparing the first bottle of champagne I'm finally able to sit back and take in the scenery.

I'm encouraged by the fact that I have once again resumed breathing. Blaine does look radiant. It's undeniable. I'd done well, certainly better than I should have. And I suppose it's not too hard to admit that I love her. Somehow. I mean, I always get pissed off when other guys try to make time with her, and that has to mean something. Anywhere around six guys have kicked the snot out of me after I'd told them to take a hike, gave them a second or two to do so, then took my swing. The waiter sets down a glass of champagne squarely in front of me, and I down it, waving it under his nose for a refill. Perhaps ours is not a perfect love, but what does that mean? What's love got do to with it? What's love but a sad old-fashioned notion? Or a second hand emotion? At least our children will be wonderful. Running around in the yard. Throwing rocks at cars. Rubbing dirt in their hair. Good old kids. How could you not love them? And hey, we we're half way there. Which reminds me:

"How's this pregnancy coming along?"

"Fine." She pops a bite of bread while inspecting the desert list.

Fine. Superb. William Gugliotti Standish, if it's a boy. A touch extravagant, I have to admit. We'd comically considered the Southern / traditional "Gulgiotti Standish" for the child's name, but that sounds a little too explorer-like. At least Blaine hadn't insisted on hyphenating our names. That I would not have tolerated. Or more precisely, I would have, but she would have been in for years of passive-aggressive siege warfare. No gas in the car. Plenty of it in the bathroom.

Blaine had passed out on the flight over here, and I had, as I have often done, taken the liberty of rifling through her purse. There I found her keys, her small executive-model dildo, all kinds of make up, a French-English dictionary, etc. All as one would expect. However I also found a newly opened pack of Maxiroo Slenders, from which two were missing.

I had leaned back in that cool pressurized cabin at 30,000 feet, flicking my overhead light and examining them. Naturally, the feeling of vindication was overwhelming. I considered how exactly I was going to spring this one on her. It would require real flourish. It would require art,

and an artist's touch. I dreamed of myriad episodes, each richer than the next with righteousness and humiliation.

And then I thought, what are my options here, really? If I accuse her of faking this pregnancy, do I call off the wedding? If I keep this to myself, would it really be that big a deal? Does it really matter now?

I looked out the window, thinking. Below, small fly-over cities passed in the night, viral clusters of orange light in the black skin of the world. Tiny little lights illuminating tiny little lives. With that, I delicately returned the OBs to her purse and quietly replaced the purse under the seat in front of her. With a whisper, a crinkled nose, and GG's split fingered, come hither gesture, I ordered my first two cocktails of the day.

The waiter comes and I fold my last credit card solemnly in the bill book. I look across the table and watch her work the bread knife with a hand that now wears my ring. It's an impressive ring, if I do say so myself, and she looks so matronly, with her rigid posture and carefully innocent gesticulations. It occurs to me that, unlike most engagements, which are primarily a time-buying

tactic, I am within a month - at most - of tying the knot. And as I think about it just a touch more, a tear of sweat rolls down left flank.

But it's all so very ho-hum. Fine, I think. One last panic attack.

"Excuse me, honey," I say after awhile, deciding I need to do some self-doctoring, "I'm gonna hit the head."

"Fine."

I get up and go, elegantly weaving through tables with broad, jaunty, Dean Martin strides. My ballet grace has left me, however, and I require the assistance of a few shoulders to stay on target. I slam the bathroom door open and nearly level the attendant. Falling on the sink, one knee gives, and I clutch the counter as if in the midst of a pitching sea. I straighten up. Tucking my tie into my shirt front, I throw gallons of water on my face. Still my chest expands and contracts, expands and contracts. I glare at myself in the mirror, pearls of water falling from my lower lip. Grabbing a paper towel, I blot myself dry. Next I try to readjust my hair, which has sprung as if from a

trap in every direction, punk rock-style, when or how I do not know. I look a little like Wendy O Williams. At that point I spot the attendant observing me in the mirror.

"How are ya?" I ask, combatively.

"Fine, sir," He responds. "You alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine." I say, pausing and considering him briefly. "I just proposed to my girlfriend. She's pregnant. We'll be married in a month."

A toilet flushes, the stall opens, and a short, fat man cruises out, taking a pass on the bank of sinks. I nod at him through a pinched, nasty smile. I fish a cigarette from my breast pocket and twist a hip back on the counter.

"I'm sorry, there's no smoking in here, sir."

Involuntarily, the cigarette hanging from my lips, I find myself shrugging at the attendant as if to say *C'mon!* He tilts his head slightly, closing his eyes, and I take that as a sign of conciliation. I'm about to light up, when he starts talking again.

"You may smoke at the bar, sir."

I pause, say nothing, then slip my lighter back in my hip pocket. I straighten my tie, make another brief yet vain effort to rescue my hair, then brush past the attendant without so much as a word. I do keep my eyes on him, though, giving him one of those looks of mine that really just levels people, really getting the point across that his is one of the baser gestures I've come across in my 27 years of residency on the planet. I let my eyelids winnow to mere slits as I pull open the door and stride out. As the narrow slot between door and frame closes, the old fucker rattles his tip jar at me. I keep walking, but I can't help but stare back as it chuckles through the jaws of the door. I'm galled.

Next thing I know, a throttling tidal wave of sequin and pink silk, about ten feet high and 20 feet wide, breaks over my nose. For an instant I'm lost inside it, a child in a womb, swimming away in a kind of taffeta sensory deprivation tank, and an instant later I'm blown backwards, landing in a throne of tumbling children's plastic booster

seats. I'm aware of the auditory suggestion that whatever it is that I've run into has taken a similar spill.

Scampering up, I turn around and reach out for my victim. She's already recovering, however, delicately repositioning her heels under her, her fingers on either side like a sprinter setting in the stocks. I look at her wrists, which are so thick and plush with blonde hair it makes me pity this hapless creature just a touch. She starts to resurrect herself, pushing up on her newly grounded heels. As I watch, she elevates to my midsection, shoulders, eye-level, and beyond, a beanstalk pushing up out of the earth, the entire time reviewing the front of her dress and swatting roughly at the gathered lint and dust.

"I am so sorry for that," I say, my fingers now at her elbow. "Please forgive ..."

I continue, but then her eyes lift to meet mine, and I realize that I am not necessarily talking to a woman after all. This is San Francisco, so it really is not that far-fetched to run into a drag queen. Possible, I muse, even at

a nice restaurant like this. To be safe, I decide to resume apologizing.

"I really am sorry for bumping into you like ..." I begin again, but find myself squinting and craning my neck forward to get a better look at this person's head. I now see the fullness of her face, or his face, with the garish violet eyeshadow over heavy, wearied eyelids, the splotches of rouge, the hood ornaments hanging from his ears. Those countless teeth.

The teeth.

My hand jumps back as if from a live wire.

"Helmut!"

He says nothing, just stares.

I'm shocked, but only for a moment. I just suddenly think: *Of course.* Of course, he's a drag queen. He's everything he has to be and even a little more.

Our eyes lock. He looks like Paliacci. The make up, heels and lashes only seem to highlight an age and pain under his eyes. His lashes are too too thick. His big blue eyes are too big and too tender.

This is irony, I discover. This is irony because, in some bizarre way this moment makes all the sense in the world, and yet I didn't anticipate it. Irony tells you two things: how stupid you are, and how predictable life is.

And next I think: this isn't irony at all - this is comedy. This is a singing telegram.

"Are you okay?" I hear myself ask.

My question seems to bring him back to life. He's gone instantaneously. Just as suddenly I'm moving back to my table, zombie-like, watching him all the way. En route, I nearly shove a guy into his dinner. I apologize. I look back up. Across the room I see Helmut exchange quick words with an older gentleman I've never seen before. I watch Helmut pan the room, then spot me. Our eyes lock.

"Are you going to sit down?" I hear Blaine say.

I discover I've made it to our table.

"What the hell is your problem," I hear her hiss. "Sit down."

I look at her blankly. Her eyebrows lift.

The waiter appears.

"Excuse me, sir ..."

"Sit down, Will. Right now."

"Sir, may I speak to you for a moment ..."

Now the older guy is looking at me. He's a dead ringer for Karl Lagerfeld. Beady eyes, sunglasses and a ponytail. And now they're up. Karl is throwing bills on the table. He says something to Helmut, then moves off, but Helmut keeps his eyes on me. Helmut starts off after him.

"Will!"

"We're having a little trouble getting though to American Express ..."

At this I turn to see he's giving me some kind of significant look.

"Will!"

"Hmm?"

Instinctively I begin patting myself down, not really sure where I'm going.

"Sir, is there another card you'd like to use?"

I stare at him. I turn right to see Helmut and friend briefly accosted by the maitre de. I turn back to Blaine. Her cheeks glow with that Botticelli blight.

I turn back to see the twin doors leading out of the hotel being closed by two bellhops. I turn again to Blaine and the waiter. I note, oddly, that they share the same expression.

"Sit down, Will." Her tone is clinical now. The waiter looks at her.

I smile absently.

I bolt.

I'm out of the restaurant in what seems less than a second. The bellhops, seeing me coming, casually pull the doors apart, and I fly through without breaking stride. Through the rear window of a departing cab, over the ledge, I see Helmut's enormous, dolled up eyes watching me.

I dive into the next cab, ordering the driver to follow theirs.

The driver - a central casting character (mesh hat, Vet face, Vet sideburns) - spins and says over the seat:

"I'll need \$200 for that sort of thing."

"How's a nice watch?"

"Let's see it."

I raise my wrist to showcase Dad's Rolex.

Without a word, he turns back around, drops it in gear, and swerves out onto Powell.

There's an ethereal beauty to the evening, something that strikes me even in this aggravated state. Who was it who said that every night is a giant? Yes? Well, then this San Francisco night was indeed a giant; a giant queen all turned out and tuned up for a date.

For some reason I think you need to know this too. The Mark's cobblestone courtyard is lit up like a moonscape, and the depthless black sky above is feverish with twinkling stars. The crystalline, whip-smart clarity of an arctic heaven. Even the streetlights and brakelights blink brilliant pink, then bolder red, cascading slowly down Powell.

At the light our bow drops down with the incline. Leaning forward, I peer through down the row of cars ahead of us.

"Which one is it?"

"It's that one. Four cars up."

"Good. Good." I say, happy to see that I have someone so obviously competent doing the tailing tonight. I may have actually patted him on the shoulder.

"They've spotted us." He says.

"That's alright."

"Well, I mean they may try to make a break for it."

"Ah."

The light goes green and their wheels scream into the pavement.

"They're going," he grunts.

With this he drops the pedal to the floor, peels out, and shoulders between the two lanes. I'm pushed back into my seat by the acceleration. We weave through the holiday

traffic, riding bumpers with van, cutting across the flank of a BMW. Helmut's cab flies forward, through an opening just ahead of us. A moment, and we find and hurl through the same opening. We blow through a yellow at Van Ness, the engine crescendos densely and suddenly we're flank to flank, the sodium light vibrating through our steel sides. Their cab actually swerves in tight against us, the streetlights an accelerated ticker report flickering between us, and above it Helmut's face, wearing a slackjawed expression of dumb fear, zooming in at me, for a moment seeming no more than a foot away.

I blink, literally, and he's gone. There's a squeal of tires as their cab brakes (throwing all its weight on its front tires as it skids), then it banks left down a narrow street.

I look up to see my driver watching all this action through his rearview mirror.

"Good," he says, taking the next left and killing the headlights.

"The trick here," he says, "Is picking them back up, but letting them think they've lost you."

We're at the next cross-street. He leans forward, looking for their car. We throttle to the next street, pause, look, and continue.

"Shit," he says.

He wheels the cab to the left with a big push on the gas. We're flying the wrong way east toward the street Helmut and friend have taken. We lunge to a halt at the intersection. He looks both ways, then cranks the wheel to the right and guns it. I see them now, down the street, their brake lights dimming as they turn right.

"Is that them?"

"Yeah."

"Great! Thanks."

"You should thank their driver. He got in here, and he didn't even try to mix it up. Just stayed right on the same street."

"Oh."

"I think we're more lucky than anything else."

"Yeah, well, I seem to catch all the breaks I need."

He checks his rearview to verify the level of pathos with which I deliver this line. Even I'm surprised at how frankly I spoke.

We take the right, and we're ten cars behind them, just another cab. They aren't in a hurry anymore. Now they're taking a leisurely, conventional pace through these side streets.

With that, I hear the hollow burst of a fireworks shell above.

"Is it a holiday?" I ask.

"I don't know."

A canopy of red light spills over the windshield as a dozen streaks of fire arc to the ground. In the distance, but building, the subtle roar of revelers. Their cab turns right, then pulls to a halt directly in front of a small crowd of people, the bleeding edge of the actual party. All of them are flamboyantly dressed, so much so that it looks perfectly natural for Helmut to climb out of the door and join them. He and his friend move quickly into the crowd. We pull up right behind their cab just as they disappear. I get out on his side and hand him the watch.

"Thanks," I say.

"I'll stay here for awhile. Wait for you."

"Thanks."

I just run into the crowd. Somehow I find them. I catch up. I grab Helmut by the arm and turn him around.

I can't think of anything to say, though.

Karl has turned. He speaks.

"Is this him?"

"Yes."

"Can you leave us alone please?"

Karl has an American accent.

"Helmut what are you doing?"

"It's not vat you tink, Vill."

"Will you leave us alone?"

"Everything is what I think."

Karl grabs my upper arm. I can sense instantly that he isn't a stranger to close quarters violence.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

"Hey ..."

He looks at me, through his designer frames: "Just leave us alone please."

Without really realizing what I'm doing, I discover I have my hand in my jacket pocket, by index finger holding down the button that warms up the flash on a disposable camera. It's almost miraculous.

Instinctively, Karl seizes this arm, keeping it in its pocket.

"Seriously," he says. Other people are noticing us now.

"Okay!" I say.

"Okay"

"Okay."

He releases me. I step back.

I pull the camera from my pocket, or rather I yank it from my pocket. I get snagged in there somewhere, and much of the coat lining comes out with it, like a magician drawing handkerchiefs from his breast pocket. At all this Karl seems to seize up, like I'm about to pull a gun on them. I struggle through the fabric to find the viewfinder, frame Helmut and Karl, and snap. The flash bursts. An instant later there's another hollow burst, then a shower of pink and blue light over my head. I can almost feel the fireworks crackling down my neck.

I look down to see Karl almost on top of me. I don't know exactly how this happens, but Karl grabs my jacket. I somehow anticipate this, and am already spinning out of it. My elbow leaps free of its sleeve and I catch him square in the nose. It gives like a plastic hat. Karl crumbles. Helmut gasps and falls on his knees to him. There's blood on the street.

His broad, bare shoulders are shaking. He looks up and calls me something in German. He's crying. He's cradling Karl's head. Karl's nose looks like a piece of strawberry shortcake that someone's sat on. Helmut says that word

again, but he roars it this time. It's all the saddest, most pathetic thing I've ever seen.

"I'm sorry, Helmut," I say.

I look up. Every eye is on me. I've taken care of business Bruce Lee style without even meaning to and now I'm a killer in the sun. I'm a superstar.

Another triptych of shells bursts in the sky, and I know - we all know - they're mine. My sunshine. I'm an abomination. I absorb light.

I am sorry. I'm sorry, and I don't care, at the same time.

I feel the camera in my hand, just to make sure it's there, and I'm gone, running through a parting in the crowd just for me.

SATURDAY, JUNE 21, 1999

2:00 AM, PST, San Francisco

I've had the film developed. I think I was hoping for a mugshot, really. Skip the inconvenience of time and space and go straight to the number plate, the tie cinched halfway up around his head, the wig reversed and that hangdog, absolutely guilty, nolo contendere expression, the kind busted actors give. Instead what I got most resembled

(and you could really only guess at it) a clown, underwater, under something, submerged, we'll say, in the grass and filth of a dunking booth, perhaps a vat of vegetable oil. A sickening smear of life in a jar. Above, a phosphorescent gazebo of white fire in the sky.

There in the Safeway I stood and stared at it. Dumb. Disbelieving. I tried different distances - arm's length, half-arm's length - different angles, different squint apertures. Then I'd stared at the pictures of Blaine and I, her arms over my shoulders, older shots in the roll. Even I looked good in this one. This one you could use as an insert for one of those cheap wooden frames you get at the drug store. It had that 1977, Skiers-in-Love look. And finally I'd stared around the store.

3:00 AM, PST

I push the door open to the hotel room, finding it ajar already and seeing what I'd expected to see and not really believing it. My crap is everywhere, of course. Primarily, though, it's in the tub, along with a sizeable collection of water, as well as the contents of several ashtrays. These I quickly deduce are those of other guests

collected from a maid's cart. A couple wolverines had apparently taken my suitcase and its contents to task. A sonnet in lipstick of carefully chosen vulgarities on the mirror. (It ends with: "You're a DEAD MAN.") Altogether, it's a thorough, though quickly executed, job. A smart effort for a compact window of time.

Then I see it: a package wrapped dramatically in plain brown paper, a card attached. It's sitting beside the t.v.

I take it. I sit down on the bed. I open the envelope. Twenty \$100 bills fall across my lap, then a plane ticket (4:55 AM, UAL, back home). I read the card.

"Will,

"I don't believe in apologies. They don't undo what you've done. They're lies really; if you felt so bad about doing something, why'd you do it in the first place?

"I know you need money. You'll find herein \$2000 in cash. It's yours. There's also a plane ticket back here, plus some compelling - "damning" is perhaps to gentile a word under the circumstances - evidence implicating our

friend Helmut in some nefarious professional activity. To wit: HARDCORE GAY PORNOGRAPHY. Who knew? Ted's overseas associates came through yesterday. The tape I've enclosed is a period piece, by the way. The title's priceless. Anyway, call me a romantic, but there's another \$5000 waiting for you if you rescue Vanessa. The Spider's waiting for you back here at the Airport Valet. I know this is all very The Graduate-ish. I don't think that's a coincidence (apart from the pornography - I mean, would you believe it? What a break?). Do you believe in fate? Or movies, at least?

"I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't think she still loved you, and I didn't know that you still loved her. And I've got to admit: my heart flutters at the very idea of everything coming together.

"Work with me here. Feel it. Please.

G

PS Did you get engaged?"

I unwrap the package. It's a videotape. An English translation of a German movie. It's greasy to the touch, the colors all a bit too rich. Helmut is on the cover, shirtless, smiling, pressed tight against a few other Teutonic boys. There are riding boots. Horsewhips.

The title of the film is "Schindler's Fist."

3:30 AM, PST, San Francisco

I pack my bag, including the tape. I put the money in my wallet. I don't really know what I'm going to do, but at least I'm moving now.

I exit the room, spot two big guys coming off the elevator. I drop the Do Not Disturb sign over the doorknob.

Then I look back down the hall toward the elevators. The two guys stop, but they keep looking right at me.

I smile. They smile back.

I bolt, and they shout "WILL! WAIT!"

I don't know how I lose them.

4:30 AM, PST, San Francisco

I'm boarding the flight GG arranged. There's seems to be no point in resisting. I'm doing this because I know it's the only course of action that guarantees something bad will happen, beyond merely getting the shit kicked out of me. That, or I'm doing it for the money. Because money is money.

Also, when Blaine left, she took both our tickets.

5:30 AM, PST, Somewhere Over America

We're airborne. I'm drunk. Finally. I'm sitting next to some really weird old character. He's got one of those mysterious, unplaceable accents. He's drunk too. He's buying, in fact. I think he's hitting on me.

Right now we're talking about how great it must have been back when you could smoke on a plane. Like riding in a recently emptied gun barrel. Then we're talking about old footage of baseball games, where the stands are practically a forest fire, like steam curling through the treetops. Thousands of pennants of pale smoke twisting in the air. You ever see any of that footage? Thousands of people under the summer sun in ties and shirtsleeves just smoking away?

And then we are smoking. It's such a petty act of defiance, but what's left? The stewardess comes around. My buddy practically seduces her, however (Is he French? Spanish?). We stub out our cigarettes apologetically.

And then we light up again. "Another?" He says to me, shaking one out. I shrug and take it. His lighter bursts open and the flame leaps up and next thing you know there are two different stewardesses leaning over us. Older. Meaner. He seduces them as well, this time with an Irish brogue, however he keeps on smoking this time. I extinguish mine immediately, but he isn't about to give up so easily. Our fellow passengers are getting peevish. He tries to explain that he thought we were on an international flight, a flight to Lisbon, and had been

outlandishly misinformed, if not outright lied to, by the girl at the desk. And after that, he even tries angling that were we not technically over Canada at the moment, which would make this international air, and if you're in international air, then are you not actually on an international flight? Finally though, he caves, and everyone is somehow mollified. I can't remember how.

Now, when we light up the third time all hell breaks loose. Quite literally. The captain, co-captain, a triumvirate of outraged, pencil thin homosexual attendants and the head stewardess march down the aisle. They look like Danton and the other revolutionaries coming for the last of the aristocrats. My friend—with a kind of boozy elegance—smirks and looks at me. Our neighbors, meanwhile, have gone ballistic. My friend leans out, giving a look of grave concern. As they arrive he says, "Shouldn't someone stay up front and fly the plane?" (Is he Greek?) And then the column of scowling air personnel spontaneously levitate, en mass. At the same time, my stomach pushes up into my nose. My glass is empty, fortunately, so I don't spill a thing. The lights flicker and the captain and crew, freed from the ceiling, fall back hard into chairs and trays and people. Next the left wing bows about twenty

degrees. A bolt of lightning ignites the hull windows explosively. My friend, taking a drag, leans forward and squints critically out the window. "I think we lost that engine," he says, loudly, anxiously, facetiously. Jesus, I respond. A scream curdles the air. With a pong, and at this another few screams, the fasten seatbelts light blink on. The captain and crew are already moving laboriously back toward the cockpit, moving seat to seat, like they're fighting gale force winds. My friend and I lean out to watch. The plane stabilizes for a moment. Overhead, in pilot drawl: "Looks like we've run into a little turbulence, and we should be in it for awhile. Please note that I've turned on the Fasten Seatbelts sign." Then the PA gives out for a split second, as do most of the lights. Again. The plane seems to drop out from underneath us. The entire cabin again rattles murderously through the air. From first class, another solitary scream descends with us, refracted in a dozen notes through the decibels and pressure. We stabilize.

The next line over the PA is more clipped: "Flight staff return to your seats. Would the captain please return to the cockpit?"

Someone behind us says: "Can I have one of those cigarettes?"

My partner answers: "No."

I hand him my flask, and he takes it.

"Good thinking," He says, waving the flask in the air. Then he props himself up on the armrest, flips out his dinner tray, begins describing international shipping finance.

I'm not sure why we got as drunk as we did. I will admit it was ill-advised. As the plane shuddered across Heaven I have to admit that I threw up a couple times, and prompted by this, I'm afraid I lost it pretty much completely once or twice. Reluctantly, my friend clapped me on the back as I did so, his cigarette cocked safely above and away in his free hand.

I want to know why I'm always crying or wanting to cry or planning a good time to cry or even trying unsuccessfully to cry. I hate men who cry. And what men

don't cry nowadays? What do we do with all these crying men? Is there really that much to cry about?

I know I cry for myself. I cry about me, because I'm not sure if I can think of anyone else. I'm a self-contained unit of misery. I'm a soul of mirrors. How delightful. How disgusting.

As I cried, I remember looking up at my friend, this guy, my partner. He's cartoonishly X-rayed in the strobe lit storm, rolling his cigarette like a dart, glaring bleakly straight ahead, into nothing. I elect again to be ill. From between my knees, I turn and see him. It's a drawn look, bloodless in the monster movie lighting. He's Lon Chaney. And you know what? It IS an X-ray; I DO see into his soul. It's gutted, a dead fridge on the curb. The shadows ghoulish, riven, pooling in his face so naturally, spilling like oil. All this idle time, all these air miles, have wrung him dry.

And just as quickly these shadows are chased away in the resurgent cabin light. Now it's a face more tired, far more tired than sad. In a flicker, like a shock frame from *The Exorcist*, I see GG. And then I know. I don't know

fully, but I would. I would know everything soon. I think maybe I've always known.

We're flying into the sunrise, this time-traveler and I, idling between the future and the past. Outside Heaven fades to turquoise at its edges. Above, a hard blue. The Sun presses through every porthole on the left side of the plane until we fall through the clouds.

I pass out.

10:00 AM, EST, The Airport

I awake to our fellow passengers cheered wildly, interminably, like hooligans. We're on the ground. My partner, dramatically, has disappeared.

10:10 AM, EST, The Airport

Anticipating - correctly, as it turns out - that Nuts will have arranged for Double H colleagues to meet me at the gate, I exit the skyway at a full sprint. I break two

tackles (the Jarhead and Tito, I believe), my bag clutched to my chest.

I fly down the peplemover, wipe out at the end, then recover. I repeat this a couple more times. I lose them. I'm a blur. I've been shot out of a cannon.

10:15 AM, EST, The Airport

I'm at the Airport Valet, hiding behind the counter (cost me \$100 to do so). The Spider pulls up, another \$100 to the attendant. I crouch/walk around to the open driver's side door. I get in. There's an envelope on the passenger seat. Another (bonus) \$1000. A note instructing me to go directly to Duck Heaven.

I put the car in gear, sit up, and see Jarhead and Tito spot me from the curb. I pop the clutch. I fishtail-within a curtain of tire smoke-into traffic.

10:25 AM, EST, Duck Heaven

There's this moment - after the door closes behind me, after we're again engulfed in the lobster tank solemnity of Duck Heaven - that we just stare at one another. Like gunfighters, I guess. He's hunched over the bar, playing with a deck of coasters.

"I didn't think you'd come," he says. It's either a challenge or an endearment. Or both.

"I had to," I say. "Money's Money."

Chan and his Dad stand behind the bar.

His mouth twists. There's a pause.

Chan says something. It's in flawless, crystalline American. He says: "Your lucky numbers are both 13" or "There's an ancient Chinese saying - be careful you don't become what you pretend to be" or "We'll all be Elvis someday" or "Moo Goo Cape Ann".

I look at Chan's Dad and he smiles, his eyes ballooning in his glasses.

I say, "'Schindler's Fist'?"

"I'm afraid I gave her the idea, actually. I thought I was joking - marry a gay porn star, bring him back to Mom."

"How does one find a gay porn star?"

"She's in television. She can do anything."

"But it's preposterous, isn't it?"

"I wonder if preposterous is all we can believe anymore."

"It's a life-sized revenge comedy."

"Imagine that."

"It's stranger than fiction."

"Of course it is. It has to be."

Chan's Dad says something lengthy. In Chinese. Chan responds. I join GG at the bar, and he outlines our plan.

11:00 AM, EST, SUBURBIA

GG takes the Spider, hoping to pick up the tail. Chan drives me to Van's wedding. It's supposed to start at 11:30. I'm wearing a waiter's outfit from Duck Heaven. Kind of a cross between Shaolin Monk and Altar Boy. This is supposed to be a disguise. Van is supposed to be getting ready in room 519 (GG knows all).

"Where's Brain, Wirr?"

"Brain? I don't know."

"Brain don know bout dis, does she Wirr?"

He looks at me. I keep looking straight ahead.

"What was you're last offer for Brain?" I ask. GG usually tries to sell Blaine to Chan whenever he swings by with his deliveries.

"Fo grand."

We're there. I muse out the window as he takes the left into the Overlook drive, the big hotel sitting with patrician elegance on its broad hill, clouds and a deep blue sky shimmering in its brow.

I exhale philosophically.

"I may need to take you up on that."

"I wa all da manuals," He answers quickly, weaving around back.

He stops the car at the servants' entrance and we exchange a flat look.

"There are no manuals, Chan."

I flip out and press on my sunglasses. He smiles with grim irony.

He gives a mock fly-boy thumbs up. I rock out of the car.

11:20 AM, EST, the Overlook

The Overlook is an old, Colonial-style hotel. A lovely ballroom, parqueted floors, chandeliers the size of minivans, a porch like the prow of a battleship. It's the kind of place you imagine the Roosevelts hanging around at circa 1919.

I enter. I weave through the kitchen. I'm more or less sober now.

Full speed, combat power walk. The swing door vibrates like a tuning fork when it hits the wall stop. I move left, and in only a few steps the foyer and front desk appear on my right.

I see the ancient elevator. I run to it. Stabbing the button murderously a dozen times, I look up to see five blink on. It stays there for five seconds.

I turn left, bolt three steps and almost trip into the wedding itself. I'm sort of caught and framed in the

entryway. Everyone is looking straight at me, apparently wondering where the bride is.

This isn't the main hall, but another kind of old library. For a fleeting moment I consider that this might be an entirely different wedding. This is cleared up when I hear a weary, yet amused, STD say "Oh My God" over the crowd. Then Helmut and I lock eyes.

I sputter in my place for a moment, Warner Bros. cartoon style, then I'm off again, running now. I sprint down the Oriental runner carpet, through the columns of old molding and brassworks. I take the first half of the winding stairs three at a time. The second I take on all fours. At the landing for the fourth floor I press my back up hard against the wall as my burning lungs heave, considering botulism, cluster bombs sprinkling fire through my chest, busting out a thinned filament of tissue through the seams. I take this opportunity to push my sunglasses back on. I look both ways, a dimestore spy. Desperately I try to catch my breath. This turns out to be surprisingly difficult, and is further complicated by an impromptu spat of vertigo, as the base of the stairwell lifts up at me

Hitchcock style. I succeed though. I give a final wheeze, through not just my mouth, but by nose and ears as well.

Against all reason, risking death, I'm off again. My lungs are black holes, drawing in anything and everything with an unrelenting turbine whine, a reverse scream. At the fifth floor landing, I rip open the door. No one's in the hallway. 519 is the third door on my right. It's ajar.

The room swims with denatured light, blue light filtered through gauze curtains. She's on the balcony, on the other side of French doors. I stand there as she wordlessly rattles the locks. I listen to their vibrating desperation above the air conditioning. She can't see me. She hasn't heard me either. She just stands there. I'm frozen. I catch a spasm of lockjaw in my hands and they jump wide. She says nothing, speechless as she bends and twists and leans at the doors. She's a pair of brass wrists twitching in that cold room.

She freezes when she feels my hands on the locks. She stiffens as I sweep the curtains from their sleek brass rods. Rings spinning, sliding, singing. I gather up the falling curtains like a paratrooper and throw them over the

bed. When I turn I can see her staring in, stone still, not frightened, just blind, seeing only the leaning reflection of all the sky and earth behind her. Twinkling jets and cartoon clouds coursing on invisible rails. Luxurious Par Fours, snapping tees, elegant Doglegs around jeweled seas. Someday the whole world will look like this. Her hands have fallen to her sides. I can see now that she's waiting. I twist the locks. I take the handles and pull the doors wide.

Her eyes take a moment to adjust. I can see her chase the hallucination away, the dream, distilling what she wants from what stands before her. After awhile she begins:

"So you're playing out his stupid game?"

"Yes."

"C'mon, don't you want to cry out 'Elaine!? ELAINE!?' or something. Some kind of shit like that?"

"I'm not sure what I want."

"Jesus."

"Elaine. Elaine."

"Too late. I'm already married. It already happened."

"It did?"

"Yep. Mom found out last night. You know Helmut's a ... of course you do. One of her interior decorator friends recognized Helmut last night at the rehearsal dinner."

"..."

"So we had everybody necessary here by 10, so we just did it."

"Oh."

"I'm married to a gay porn star now. Are you proud of me?"

"I love you too."

"Do you."

"I'm the one who's here."

"You're here because he put you here."

"I'm here because someone should be."

"You're here because you're a vulture."

"..."

"I'm sorry I said that."

"No."

"That's not what you are."

"I don't know what I am. I'm an abstraction."

"No, you're not."

"Tell me what I am."

"You're hurt."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"... Can you tell me what I am?"

"You're a true believer."

"How de classe."

"..."

"And you aren't?"

"No."

She looks around the room for a moment. Then down at herself.

"It's my wedding day."

"Yes."

"This was all supposed to be larger than life? Does it feel larger than life to you?"

"Yes."

"Not to me. It doesn't feel like anything. It doesn't feel believable at all."

She explains to me what happened. GG goes to Germany. They fall in love. He leaves, unwilling to betray me. Our friendship. She does a story on the porn industry. Meets Helmut. He wants to reunite with his American lover. She thinks of what GG said. She thinks of her mother. It all seems like a really good idea.

"And now I've lost my Mom," she says.

Then we decide to run away together. We say:

"You still love me, don't you?"

"I don't know."

"Can you try?"

"I think so."

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you."

"Say I love you, Van."

"I love you, Van."

"Say we'll run away together."

"We'll run away together."

"We'll do it again."

"We'll do it again."

"Say we always can."

"We always can."

But I know none of it is true. And so does she. It's a little vignette she creates for the two of us, to pretend in for a little while. Beside the towering architecture of what she created for GG, it's nothing. It wouldn't stand anyway. It was too quick; we were too desperate.

But for a moment there we were just another pair of true believers, like so many others, in other hotel rooms, on other trysts, in other towns across the USA. For a moment we were ordinary. Ordinary, but loveless, and it felt good.

Eventually, the anteroom door explodes. I turn right. The foot that kicks it open drops carefully back to earth. Nuts struts in pimp-style for some crazy reason.

"Will! Is this where you've been keeping yourself?" He says, smiling at Van as he crosses the room. Tito follows after him.

She just looks at me like this was all supposed to happen.

Nuts doesn't have to hit me or cuff or even drag me out of there, but he does so anyway. Training, I suppose. Procedure. He hauls me up, both fists crushing the lapels of my uniform. Excuse me, girlie, he says to her. His hair looks great.

11:25 AM, the Overlook

Nuts had taken a gamble and set up shop here, figuring I'd show up eventually. He has a room. Gianni's in the corner. Blaine sits on the bed.

She says: "Do you want to do this or don't you?"

"What the hell? Sure!" I burp. I'm drunk now. I've been drinking all day - albeit it discreetly; I've only just now told you - but it's only just now kicked in. I roll my shoulders. I light up.

We're married by Nuts himself, who informs me, just prior to the ceremony, that he's a minister. "In the Church of Christ the Figurine," he adds. To which I respond, "Of course you are."

My truly clever move here comes in the aftermath, when it's agreed that they'll break one of my fingers as a sort of reverse incentive to get me to sign the marriage license. I protest pointlessly and elaborately, and then have a good laugh at their expense when I have them break the index finger of my writing hand. *HOW AM I GOING TO SIGN YOUR FUCKING LICENSE NOW, MORONS?!* I cackle. Of course, this is after I finish weeping at the pain. Next I upbraid Blaine for being so ignorant of her new husband as to not know that I throw lefty, but write righty. There'd been some debate over this before my fingers are pushed into the door jamb.

Shortly thereafter it is agreed that a lefty signature is better than nothing. So, with the help of Tito and Nuts, my left hand is forced up from the floor - I'm on my knees, basically under the t.v. - and an Overlook pen pushed down into it. It's about then that Helmut and Nancy Smiley show up. Nancy looks like a scarecrow and a mirrorball. They want to know where Van is.

Nancy and Blaine do a little gainsaying for about a minute, Nancy producing some surprisingly elaborate

language, when all of sudden the lights go out and a siren kicks in somewhere down the hall. Everyone shuts up.

"What the fuck is that?" Blaine demands.

Nuts, looking at the ceiling suspiciously: "Fire alarm, I think."

"No, shit."

"Shit."

"What?"

"Who's there?!"

I notice that one of my arms is free. All I can see is the ceiling though, my head cocked back forcibly by Tito. My hand sputters across the bureau behind me. It finds and opens a drawer. Ah HA! A Gideon's Bible! Jesus! This just keeps getting better and better! I seize it. In a single motion I spin around on my knee and elbow and whip it across the room, at no one in particular. I fire it underhand like a carnival knife thrower. Miraculously it

catches Helmut full in the forehead. He weaves briefly, then pratfalls. This catches everyone's attention, just enough of a diversion for me to spring free and rip the lamp out of the wall. I swing wildly.

"WHO WANTS A PIECE OF MR. LAMP!!??" I cry, rattling it around in the false twilight. Then I pinch one of my busted fingers as I take a nose-level whiff at Nuts. It tilts from my hands as I whinny in pain. Recovering, I triple jump for the door. It seems an interminable distance, a gauntlet of enemies, but no one touches me. I'm a monster. I'm hobbling, a little like Richard III, baring my yellowing teeth and reptilian tongue at Nancy, Helmut, somebody I don't know, dragging a foot under Tito's knees, hissing at Nuts.

"Ha ha ha HA HA ha haa HAAAA!!" I yell over the psychosomatically engineered hump on my shoulder.

No ones lays a glove on me. I'm at the door. I reach for it and as if my magic it reaches out for me. In fact, it hits me in the face, throwing me back. And next, I take a blast of some kind of pneumatically generated dust in the face. I claw helplessly, snowblind and idiotic as I fall

backwards to the floor. There's a mad war yell, somebody trips over me but recovers, and charges into the room. No! No, two figures and the thrust and release of a pressurized gas, what I eventually deduce is a fire extinguisher.

Through the chaos I hear: "WIRR!?"

Then, "WIRR!"

I'm grabbed by the back of my collar and yanked. I'm so used to this now that, like a dog weaned to the leash, I get right up. Then something's scraping at my eyes. It's a momentary glimpse of someone in a tuxedo seeming to delouse the various occupants of our suite. KUSSHHH. Gasp. KUUUUSSSSHHHH. And next I'm running down the hall, the alarm pulsating, like an upset demon in my brain. It's the end of the China Syndrome, the end of every Bond film. Chan clutches my sleeve, doing a kind of two legged gallop; I stagger at his leash, holding together my bleeding eyes. We slam through an emergency door into the broad, brazen expanse of day. It's like peroxide in my eyes, but I recover.

There's the Toyota. Chan helps me into the passenger seat, but, after about fifteen seconds, it's GG who falls behind the wheel. His hands up like a surgeon, he marvels at the various controls for a second, then grabs the wheel and the stick. An explosive clutch pop, a mild swipe of whiplash and we two-wheel it to starboard, spinning 540 degrees, clipping the mirror off a Tingler, then flying around and into traffic. In a minute we're on the expressway.

"Where we going?" I can feel what I look like as I turn to him, my eyes glued up, a couple of pastrami sandwiches. And as he looks at me I know I'm right. I look like a cartoon figure, like I've unwittingly accepted a dynamite stick cigar. I'm blasted.

His eyes leave me after a second, returning to the road.

"Airport," he answers.

We hit a bump, and the back gives an unaccountably heavy thud. Our eyes meet again, more or less, and then I look in the back seat. There she is. Out cold. Her dress is

a cloud of taffeta gas swallowing the air. I look back at GG. Then return to the road.

And after awhile I look back at her. I just stare.

"I think I got to her within about five minutes of you getting nabbed."

He laughs cheaply.

"I hit her accidentally with the stun gun. Scared the shit out of me, so I ditched it."

Her dress billows up, like clouds in water. The lilac petals in her collar burst like baby's breath. Her eyes are still open, but they don't see me. I rub something from the bloodworm creases in her lips.

"My thinking is we get her on a plane to anywhere, and she just disappears."

I push her hair from her head, and I let my finger brush her cheek. I let my palm rest on her forehead, like I'm checking her for fever. It's a sick gesture. It makes

me sick, but we hit another bump and another strand, like honey rippling over a honeycomb, slides across. I push it back.

"I think you should go with her."

I watch her a bit more, and now I feel self-consciously Paliacci-esque. I feel like we're all bleeding together.

"I don't know what you told her in there ..." he begins, then laughs throatily to himself, "But it worked, my friend!"

He pauses, and I can feel him smiling proudly and shaking his head at the road.

"I should confess that this is ... well, it's basically how I wanted things to work out."

11:50 AM, En Route to the Airport

I remember the crooked part moving through her scalp, the hair pulled behind her ears. I remember it always came free, one side would swing down, hiding her face briefly, she'd lean over, we'd adjust our legs clumsily and then we'd be hidden together behind her hair, our cheeks would touch. Our blood would run together for an instant. I could feel her blood in my veins. She'd drop her forehead against my neck. I'd hold her there, breathing the rich, dense, sweet smell of her hair and skin. Later, the heel of her hand pushed into my chest, she'd tilt her head obliquely, her gray eyes in mine, a sheen across the gentle rise of her cheek, she'd replace that hair, behind her ear and she'd smile, perhaps then bite a corner of her lower lip and look out the window.

Suburbia, fair maiden, why have you forsaken me? Wicked Witch? I was your sweet prince, was I not? Can't you feel us rolling through your glass veins, a thick bead of mercury tunneling away, routing our exit, to that nexus that explodes life in every direction, like a ripped up fusebox shooting sparks that leap hundreds and thousands of miles across the earth, before conceding to gravity. You won't know where I've gone. Can't you see that? Please stop me. Look at what I'm doing. Look at what I've done! Where

were you? Stop me. Dispatch your army of winged lawn jockeys to save me! I DEMAND it! Let them cloud over this full moon with their snapping wings, let them catch my collar in their fangs and lift me back to your heaven. What have I done? Can you forgive me? I demand it. I don't deserve this. Not NOW! NOT THIS *BULLSHIT!!* I demand your forgiveness! I DEMAND IT!

I've been a coward. A coward and a fool, in the truest sense of each word. Oh! And a drunk. A boring, loud drunk. I am a drunk. I think I'll stick with being a drunk. I'm less dangerous drunk. I'm almost half-human when I'm totally shit-faced.

I knew it the moment I saw her. Or him, as you prefer. Helmut. Helmutta. It was an inkling that first surfaced when we collided. It was a claxon siren when GG arrived. This was what GG wanted all along. He didn't do all this for me. He did it for her. And I needed to witness it first hand.

I suppose it was inevitable. My distrust of other people was merely academic. Van's, like G's, was pathological, sudden and acute, a needle in your gums. In

Bonn they lived in the future. Surrounded by a foreign tongue and strange architecture, under that galvanized sky. They lived in hiding, below a landscape cleansed in acid, below the Bauhaus pillboxes, the history, the gay disco, the socialism. Two big-hearted kids; it forced them together. Of course they fell in love. What choice did they have? GG was there for four months. What else did I think was going on?

He wasn't the guy I saw, the silhouette. GG was back in the States by then. That was anyone, an incubus, a nameless predator. A demon. A messenger charged with communicating "Fuck You" across an ocean. It was all too obvious now: GG had left her because of me.

And here she was, my blushing bride, blushing blue, blue lipped, weak, exhausted. My gift from this fucking lunatic, delivered to me unconscious and wide-eyed as if by some stupid dog that relentlessly brings you dead birds.

Now we are running. And I'm not totally sure why, but it feels right, doesn't it? It feels like this is how it should end. Were it a movie or a sit-com, it would end like this, right?

It's the formula. Not language but code. Not love but sex. Not colors but fashions. Did you know you're a known quantity? You're a few dozen digits. This many zeros, that many ones. You don't think so? What in the world would make you so special? Did you fall from Heaven on a star, sweetheart? Does the name Nietzsche mean anything to you? Do you know the first fucking thing about Continental philosophy? I didn't think so. Neither do I, but so what?! It's obvious. It's as obvious as it is trite. It's every bit as fucking obvious as it is tired and been-done. Is there anything more crippling than that?

Not buying it? A little too easy? A little too cheap?
Are you sure?

11:55 AM, the Airport

The day is bright and angry. I squint involuntarily in the forest preserve that lines the expressway, the strip of ersatz Bavaria, what?, maybe half a mile wide. No wolves. No Hansel. No Gretel. Just the shadows of the night. Above, the sky is the color of cotton candy.

The trees remind me of the forests in movies that surround POW camps, bristling with wool draped Nazis and escaped airmen. Fake true trunks. Yanks. Aussies. Black guys. White guys.

The car swallows the road. It stinks of take-out Chinese. Grainy city air whistles through the window as GG cracks it.

There's a point at which, like a balloon, I just let go. The booze helps. I'm weightless, an astronaut, hovering over my seat, still pulsing into the night at the same wild pitch, but perhaps listing a little. No danger. Nothing a slight correction couldn't fix. It feels like a headcold, stuffy and dumb. Then, almost like a gyroscope, more though, like a bad drunk, I start spinning on a different axis, as confused, as complicated as the whorled insanity of a cardback. Pre-fainting type stuff except I know I'm nowhere near that. I'm tumbling through space.

Tapestries of remote anxiety, murmurs over giggles over drones. It's all so t.v., so pre-fab and post-mod, a

sampled reality and still reality, nonetheless, a womb of plush, sparking electronica.

And slowly I surface. I emerge from between stations, screams and omens flee past my ears when a heavy airport overpass swings through my hair. The sodium lights purr as we all curl like ice skaters around a bend, down a shoot and up. Now we're born again into the glee club of mile high glass and light. Turbines howl, the wind buffets us as we rise into the cool liquid night. Lines, sliding doors, silent orange sirens, trams, honeytoned instructions from sexy-yet-maternal women's voices. We stop. I exit. I smile. Someone whose sex and age I can't recognize gasps at me like I'm the Elephant Man.

My plan springs into my head fully formed, but I'm not sure when I make my decision to go with it. My hands lamely at my side, I watch GG bribe a skycap - his forearms below his gaping shortsleeves so richly black, the color of expensive soil - and together they haul Van into the hired wheelchair. It's got rods, steel rods that lift seven feet into the air and are topped with little, steel flags and the emblem of the airline.

I think I make my decision then, though, looking at those slender, bald black arms, the bill taken delicately in those long flat fingers, his nails thin and pink as raw meat. I never see his face, but his arm tells me who he is. An old man. A survivor. He pushes the money under the paperwork on his clipboard.

I think I decide then, but I don't know. I think I decided, perhaps when I saw her on the balcony. I think it was all decided, perhaps, long ago. It's hardly a decision anyway. It has no consequences. Something will happen.

12:10 PM, the Airport

I watch as GG purchases the tickets.

"New Hampsha!" He says, returning, with a nod and a wink.

"Did you put that on a card?"

"What do you think, I'm an idiot?"

12:15 PM, the Airport

The ticket agent at the gate fiddles around with our information. From the counter, GG turns to me and says, sotto voce:

"Look I don't want to tell you how to do your job or anything, but *at least consider* hijacking this plane, grabbing a couple parachutes - and believe me, they're up there - and pull a DB Cooper somewhere over the Hudson River Valley. It's really the only way you can totally vanish."

There's a delay. We retire to the bar.

GG: "Can I get you a drink?"

"You know what? Since you're footing the bill, let me get the drinks."

"Okay."

12:20 PM, the Airport

I return, pushing his glass across the table. She's next to him, collapsing across his shoulder.

"Don't you two make a cute couple."

He looks down the concourse briefly, then digs out his smokes. He turns one over to me.

He lights mine, and I say over the flame.

"I'm surprised Tito and Nuts aren't here yet."

"Oh, um, Chan slashed their tires."

"Ah."

"They slashed my tires first - the Spider's tires - so, ..."

"Ah."

"Even if they could get here, how would they now what airline or terminal or anything like that?"

"They'll figure it out."

12:24 PM, the Airport

He drops an envelope on the table.

"Here's four thousand dollars."

"Boy," I say, "You really enjoy giving me money."

I take it and stuff it in my blazer pocket like people hand me envelopes full of cash every day. I take a sip. He falls slowly back in his chair and brings one knee over the other. The cigarette arrives, ribboning, at port arms. He grins.

I half laugh, half snort for some reason. A minute or so passes, and when I look back to him his face is bled dry. He's observing the middle distances blankly, until his eyes move over to me and he says:

"You'll probably want to change your name. Otherwise, Blaine will eventually track you down."

"Can you recommend anything?"

Another drag as he considers this, as he looks meanly at me, then says: "Well, this may just be me, but I've always gone in for sports writer slash sports cartoon figure names. What you need is a one syllable first name that suggests action. For example: Stick or Jab. Punch. Dink, Donk. Dunk. Stab, Stink. And a second name that's totally generic: Johnson. Oh, the last name has to be two syllables: Johnson, Rutledge, Hanson, Burnett."

"So Dink Burnett."

"There you go."

"Dunk Rutledge."

"Mr. and Mrs. Donk Johnson."

"Please," I say, "Call me Donk."

He smiles. He leans over the ashtray and stubs out his butt.

"Stub would be a could one." I say. "Maybe Van could be Stub."

He stubs it out for extra second or so, grinding it into the glass with his orange smoker's fingers. He says to the table: "Donk and Stub Johnson."

"Donk and Stub, have you met the Franklins, Stomp and Ding?"

He's still over the table, still rolling his finished cigarette between his thumb and index finger. I let him finish up.

"You're going to have to carry her on the plane for me. Or push her on. My hand is totally useless."

"That's why I got a third ticket."

"... Do you want to go with?"

He looks up and smiles. "No," he says.

"Thanks for everything!"

"No problem."

I smile, then I say: "I'm going to go see if we can board early, with the wounded bride here!"

12:55 PM

I'm following GG and Van down the cold skyway. It's unaccountably cold. The sun caught in the plexiglass splinters in a thousand directions, needly fissures in the ice.

GG staggers once, down the decline, his right knee buckling. I seize his upper arm with the crook of my elbow.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," He says, looking briefly bewildered, but then recovering. "Just felt dizzy for a second."

We exchange the requisite nods and giggles with the kerchiefed flight staff at the entryway, then push on down. Our seats are in the final first class row. GG picks Van up from under her arms. It's a real chore for him to get her into her seat. He puts her on the aisle.

"What are you doing?" I say.

"What?"

"You can't put her in an aisle seat."

"Why not?"

"... Well, she's going to get her dress run over by the cart, and she may get spilled on."

He considers me for a moment as the sweat beads at his hairline.

"And," A revelation. "This is what I was thinking of - I don't know if you know this or not - but she's very superstitious about sitting on the aisle seat."

He still says nothing.

"Her father always sat in the aisle seat."

"Fine."

He turns around and picks her up again. He takes even longer this time, and he almost drops her. Finally though he gets her into the middle seat. He buckles her belt. He stands up and nearly goes right back down again. He seizes her headrest with both hands. He even leans into it a little.

"You don't look so good," I say.

He nods for a while, then says I'm fine.

"Seriously," I add, taking him by the arm, "Sit down for a second."

"No, I'm ... HEY, take it easy," I drag him by his elbow into the aisle seat.

Then I fall down.

I climb back up. He looks up at me. His pupils are dilated like a doll's eyes.

"Are you okay?" he says.

"I'm fine."

He tries to get up and I push him back into place:
"Just give yourself a second."

"I'm fine."

"Just a second." I raise my hands cautiously. He exhales and looks to the opposite porthole. He looks so forlorn I start laughing.

"Why are you laughing?"

"... I'm sorry."

"... You're drunk."

"Yes."

"When did you have the time to get drunk?"

"One makes time."

"But why?"

"Well, I'm about to do something here. The booze helps me pretend. Sobriety tends to immobilize me."

"Pretend..."

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you?"

"No."

"Oh c'mon! This whole fiasco? You can buy it?"

"Yeah. Why? Can't you?"

"No!"

"Why?"

"Because it's preposterous! Two estranged lovers reunited, only it's an airplane this time and not the back of a bus like the movie."

"It's not your choice to 'buy' it or not. It's happening."

"Is it?"

"Can you pretend it isn't?"

"I can't believe it! A gay German porn star? Schindler's Fist?! All the coincidences and convenient timing? I mean, it was practically fated that we should wind up here."

"This isn't fate. This is what you wanted. This is desire. You made your own fate."

"So I'm supposed to believe I somehow made this all happen?"

"Yes!"

"No, you made this all happen. With your money. And your relentless pursuit of the ridiculous!"

"Can't you even imagine something working out right?"

"You've turned us all into a game. Why should I believe it's otherwise? Why should I take it seriously? How?"

"... In some sense, yes, it's all just a game. In another, it makes all the difference in the world."

"In some sense, you make sense. In another, you merely string together words, each in itself nothing more than a sound."

"Is 'Love' just a sound?"

"I don't know. It's a 'word.'"

"Is a word just a word?"

"See this is why I hated you yesterday."

"Hate is a word."

"Yes. Yes it is."

"Belief is a word."

"Pretend is a word."

"Can you pretend you're pretending?"

"Can we pretend we're pretending to pretend?"

"You can't pretend you don't want to be here. You ...
wait a minute ..."

"You can't pretend you don't love Van."

He looks at me. I smile. His face freezes. I wink. I
fall down. I crawl into his lap.

"I've drugged you."

I laugh a little.

"Roofies. I dropped one in your cocktail back there. Actually I drugged both of us. Well, one of us has two roofies in his drink, the other just one. Immediately after I dropped in the first pill I got confused about which glass I put it in. So, I dropped one more in each."

"..."

"Blaine makes me carry them around, in case she wants to end an evening role playing Fraternity Date Rape."

"..."

"I'd originally intended to get you on the plane, clue you into the mickey I'd slipped you, let you know that I knew THE TRUTH, then punch your lights out. See I knew you'd resist my plan to join you two estranged lovers ..."

"Dramatic."

"Thank you. It came to me just like a spot. I think I wanted to sell myself on my own demise."

"And preposterous."

"Well, not everyone has a vendetta to sustain and define us."

"Is that what I am? A vendetta?"

"You both are. You're made for one another."

"What are you?"

"I am an artist of the new frontier. I use a palate appropriate for it: not language but code, not love but sex, not colors, fashions. I am defined moment to moment. As such I have no definition."

"Did you rehearse this little soliloquy?"

"No, believe it or not. Just made it up."

"You're ridiculous."

"I know."

"You're unbelievable."

"I am."

He's shrunken in his seat. I stand. He leers slowly around the cabin.

"I can feel the drugs now."

"Ah. Good. Me too."

"So I sit here, drugged up and say something like, 'I'm not going.'"

"You try to stand. I say, 'You are going,' then slug you."

"I like it. It's cheap and maudlin."

"We're cheap and maudlin. That's why it works. See everything's code."

"You've created a little tragedy for yourself."

"Close. I prefer to think of it as a commercial for my own demise."

"That's wonderful."

"Thank you."

"I can turn your little commercial into a comedy, you know."

"..."

"I don't just get up once. I keep getting up. And you keep punching me. You get flustered at my unwillingness to pass out, denying you your climatic moment of pathos."

"Yeah, that's where the drugs kick in."

"I'll turn your tragedy into a comedy."

"..."

"I'll make it a fucking Three Stooges episode. I'll trivialize everything."

"I think we both know that everything is pretty much completely trivialized already."

And Van just stares at the floor, her head on her shoulder.

The drugs hit me like vertigo. It's all I can do to keep my eyes open. I blink and blink and blink.

Then the comedy starts. GG does try to get up. And I do hit him. He tries again. I hit him again. I think he tries a third time, and I definitely hit him a third time. I keep on hitting him. No one else even shows up. No hands on my shoulders. Nothing, no one pulling me away. I bite my lower lip as I beat the shit out of him, blinking and laughing. I think I try to yank him out of his seat, but fail.

Then I'm sitting on the floor right in front of them. I look up; Van is looking right at me. I can't speak. I don't want to leave this spot. Suddenly nothing seems more terrifying than just leaving them here. They are my parents and my lovers and my friends.

There's a little bit of a stand-off with the two flight attendants who find me, a few words are exchanged. I'm put in a chair out in the terminal, at the next gate, which is empty. From there I watch the other passengers board GG and Van's flight. I watch to see if they'll be carted off the plane, but they aren't.

Some time after their flight finally leaves, I get up. I remember walking with stupid determination out of the airport, the doors opening and closing behind me. I remember that the sun is setting, and that the sky is pink. And that's it.

DENOUMENT

I live up here now, in lake house country. I live with GG and Van, over their garage/barn. They'll have a child in the Spring. GG works for a construction company. I pack bags at the grocery store. Van stays home. It's more than I can bear, really. What isn't? But my goal is to buy the kid a Ferrari. Just, of course, to get him back and forth

from high school. I'll defend him against the world. And so I work.

I've brought the gun with me, in case it turns out that I do need to shoot myself. But with each day I get stronger. I exercise for real now. The arteries wrap around my forearms like electrical cord. I've started delivering papers, too. Not a good thing, actually, because with my new found strength, I can't resist trying to shatter every glassed out screen door I can. Give me a few weeks. The bad news will explode on your front step and maybe you'll see it. I'll bring you the news. Every morning. 6:00 a.m. Will you read it?

Last week I was awarded employee of the month at the grocery store. I held it together, there before the gathered crowd, for about two minutes, and then I wept with reckless abandon. I wept like Ms. Teen America. There was even talk of calling the paramedics. Incidentally, I think the retarded girl on checkout 2 is in love with me. Me, the retard at checkout 4. We smile shyly at one another over bags of cereal and frozen dinners. You learn so much about people by the groceries they get. Whether they have children, whether they're rich or poor, whether they're on

protracted suicide bids. Occasionally I can't help myself and I secret a ten or a twenty in the bottom of the bag. I'm like one of those fairies (or was it elves?) in the shoe shop. I've noticed the line at my checkout getting longer. I've noticed the big, ridiculous smiles, too, but I always keep my eyes on my chest.

I've started drinking again, and it's made all the difference. I cackle madly with the other snowmobile jockeys up here at The Moose Drop-Inn. GG and I have made friends somehow. Lots of aggressive shoulder slugging and spit-taking and crying and cheering with these characters. I've got a nickname, even: Superstar. I gave it to myself, but it seems to have stuck. Wouldn't you want to be known as Superstar? Drunks are really the only company worth keeping, if you ask me. We drink and get all riled up about hockey. They showed the 1980 USA vs USSR match about a month ago on ESPN Classic. We practically fell into a rugby scrum of a weeping mess.

Actually, I don't really drink. I simply pretend to, and so far I've gotten away with it. I know a lot about drinking, and it's really paid off.

Somehow I've convinced myself that their child will be a boy. I don't know why. Yes, I've basically convinced myself that this kid is going to be some kind of messiah. Ridiculous, I'll admit. But it's the lies we tell ourselves that permit us to go on. Isn't it? Could be. Who knows? Who cares. In any event, it would be so much better if she were a girl. I mean, what if it is a boy? Don't something like 50% of boys turn out to be total disasters? Oh well. That's what the gun's for, I suppose. It's got manstopping power. Or boystopping power, at least. It's only a 20.

And what of suicide? Suicide, with a capital S. What the hell? A capital U-I-C-I-D-E, too. What about that? Huh? I've hinted at it, haven't I? Yes, between now and then, I had my bad little time of things, barricaded as I was in our old apartment.

Here's what happened: Sometime around when their plane touched down, I came to in a hospital bed (Tito and Nuts beat the living crap out of me in the airport parking lot. How they find me? Who knows? I just thank God they did.) I was pretty much all patched up, so I rolled off the bed, found my shoes and cabbied it home. I spent two months there. Drunk in my wounded submarine, resting at the bottom

of the deep blue sea. Somewhere above, summer droned on, but I didn't see it.

I remember one of those days just sitting there staring at GG's switchboard of locks, all those knobs and bolts and wheels. The door looked like something H.G. Wells would have dreamed up. And briefly I remember being overcome by the idea that I wasn't looking out at all, but in, looking the other way, into my head and it was impenetrable. Impossible. Steel sutures, pipe whistles, ornate needles in brass gauges. Iron vents. Iron bulkheads. The machine that dreams.

That day I bought a gun. GG had taken his revolver with him, I discovered, so I staggered out to a pawnshop on Delaware. A blue beauty gleamed in the display counter. Incredibly, they took credit cards. Unbelievably, one of mine worked.

I ran home like a kid. Then my luck ran out.

At first I tried Russian roulette. Tried it twenty odd times. Nothing. Zip. Zippity Doo Dah. Again and again I tried. I put it in my mouth. Under my chin. Top of the

head. Left temple. Right temple. Left hand. Right hand. Both hands. Bridge of the nose. Sternum. Scrotum. Nothing. Somewhere around the fortieth time, I spun the barrel and pointed it at the television. I blew a hole in it big enough to stick my fist through. The screen went puke green, an explosion like a punk hairdo, orange spikes tipped white stilting into the air. Another bullet, another spin, the barrel jammed into the divot behind my top row of teeth for just the right trajectory and ... click. *Click*. I waited all night for the cops to show, but they never did.

Meanwhile, during those black weeks, everybody and his brother stopped by to see how I was doing. It was like I was sitting shiva.

Hillman swung around to offer me a job. He'd tried calling any number of times, then he just showed up. I opened the door and he just pushed right past me. I followed him inside. We didn't say anything for about an hour, as I sat on the floor and he on the couch. He could more or less see what was going on. Then he picked up the phone and ordered a case of booze for delivery. It came at four that afternoon. We drank for three days straight.

The morning of the second day, I recounted my tale, after which he brightly remarked:

"Have you considered suicide?"

A mirthless laugh.

"And?"

Another mirthless laugh. Then I looked at him, double-take style, and saw that he wasn't quite satisfied, as if he doubted my resolve. I snorted at this, excused myself and returned with the gun.

Naturally he seized up a little when I pressed its snout to my eye. And he tried to crawl backwards out of his chair as I squeezed the trigger. It clicked, naturally. Sure enough, I subsequently blew a hole the size of a watch face in the t.v. My frustration bubbled up in helpless laughter.

"Unfucking believable!" I giggled.

"Say Hillman?" I asked him, I believe on day three.
"Was she your daughter or your wife?"

"Who?"

"Angel."

"Oh," He said, topping off his glass from the bottle
and icetray on the floor. "Angel's my daughter."

"How old is she?"

"You know I don't know," He replied eventually,
shaking his head.

After awhile he added: "What do you think? Lobsters
tonight?"

On our final evening together we drove his Bentley to
the club and took turns trying to shoot trap from a moving
golf cart. I hit two. Encouraged, I tried to stick the

barrel in my mouth. About a dozen golf pros materialized and fell all over me. It was like I was John Hinckley. And where the hell'd they come from?

Later we dropped blue crab on cars from a overpass on 65. It was the most fun I've had in years. Then, on a whim, I hit Hillman up for a hundred grand. He wrote me a check right then and there.

About a week after HR left, Helmut came by. Speaking of predictability, he and Blaine are together. You could see that coming, couldn't you? A mile away, right? Yeah, she turned him around. It pains me to say this, but I think they're actually in love. He stopped by to ask for my blessing, if you can imagine that. I'd expected him sooner or later.

On opposite sides of the apartment door, we had this exchange:

"Can I come inside, Vill?"

"No."

"Well, Braine unt I will be getting married. I sought you should know!"

"Great! I'm happy for you! Bye!!"

And a minute later: "Will??!"

Oh my God, I thought.

"I have a gun!"

"Will, honey? It's just Helmut and I. Can we come in?"

"No."

"Will?"

"Fine."

You'd be appalled to see her now. The sight of the both of them would shock and sicken you. All she wears are plaid, knee-length skirts, turtlenecks and sweaters. Helmut

wears practically the same thing. Turtlenecks, sweaters, and plaid, wool pants. They don't *always* match, but even when they don't they're still somehow *coordinated*. I dread the Christmas card. I *dread* it.

"Will ..." she starts. They're knee to knee to knee to knee, wedged in the corner of my couch. They're holding hands, a little bundle of fingers in her lap.

"Blaine, darling," I interrupt, defensively, "I'm still madly in love with you. I don't care if this brute knows it."

"Yes," Her lips purse in anguish. "Yes, I know."

"You can see, I'm really taking it about as hard as I can."

"Yes."

"I'm penniless. I'm a wretch."

She frowns gravely at me.

"I ate a squirrel yesterday."

Helmut winces.

"Yes, I know you're struggling right now." She grips his gargantuan hands tighter. "But you've got to understand that Helmut and I ... well, it's ... Oh, Will, honey! ... It's something that happens once a century, maybe. True love!"

"But *I* still love you," I say, perhaps meaning it, perhaps not.

"And I you," she responds.

"I can't go on without you."

Her lips purse further still. Her eyes drop. She nods and looks up at me again through tears and says: "I know."

"I can't go on."

"I know, honey, but you've got to try."

"Why."

"Why?"

"Why do I have to try?"

"... What?"

"I've been thinking I'll just end it."

"Oh!"

She's instantly kneeling at my chair. Her hands knot in mine now.

"Oh ... no! No, honey!"

"Jump the Saab into a shark tank. Light myself on fire like those monks in ..."

"Oh!"

The dramatic pause. The searching eyes. Fingers squirm free. Expertly, one brushes a surprise tear from my cheek.

After that she'd come by every couple days. Her disappointment when I'd answer the door looking only marginally suicidal forced me to greater and greater theatrical flourishes. I'd worn newspaper underwear twice, which I'd pathetically let fall to the ground. I was just shy of opening the door with the revolver already in my mouth or leaving a note that read: "Head in oven. Let yourself in."

But by that time I'd decided that mere suicide was just too predictable. Not to mention the fact that I apparently couldn't pull it off anyway. Instead, I wanted something more spectacular. At the very least, something on the scale of a volcano or a blimp disaster. Even Alex Smiley put on a little show. Now that's 21st century. I wanted death-defiance, a hero's exit, a fool's catastrophe.

I found GG's police scanner. I listened to it fizz while I chain-smoked, waiting for my chance. I narrowly missed two five-alarm fires, flying across town in the Saab. Houses go up quick, if you weren't aware of that already. My plan, I guess, was to charge in, allegedly to rescue a cat or something, then have a beam or set of stairs collapse on me. I should have known it wouldn't

work. I got lost tracking down a stand-off. I lived at the airport for a week full of nothing. I took a state trooper's elbow in the nose chasing down a bomb threat. Unbelievably, I even saved two children from a burning mobile home. There's this richly metaphorical moment immediately thereafter when, a child in each arm, not sure if I'm in the fire or out of it, I'm blinded by an explosion of white light. "Heaven!" I think. "It's about fucking time!" Then my eyes adjust. It's not Heaven. It's Television. It's a *news team*. They were right around the corner. They couldn't believe they're luck. I couldn't believe mine. The children, as they are wont to do when rescued by strangers, fled from me. And that was really the final nail in the coffin.

I just gave up on everything. What else could I do?

And people kept stopping by.

Nancy Smiley checked in. I didn't answer the door, so she set up camp across the street in her little 350SL. She was there for three days.

GG called and visited any number of times, flying in from parts unknown, but I'd managed to avoid him, too. I'd changed the locks, every last one. I'd called the cops, and this time they came.

Then one day, as I described, Van came for me. And when she came, I just followed her home, followed her back here to Mewanamonee Falls, or whatever this town calls itself.

We were halfway across the country, a good thirteen hours, before we spoke. I started it:

"Schindler's Fist?"

The wind snapped through every open window. In her tanktop, her narrow shoulders held the sunlight, her glasses drank the road.

She explained that she'd met Helmut doing a story on avant garde German filmmaking, all of which was "adult-oriented," apparently. He'd crossed over from hardcore. His manager (her uncle) offered her \$100,000 to marry Helmut and get him State-side.

"America's where all the money is," she said.

The uncle said Helmut was generating half a million dollars in sales a year. He could do ten times that in the U.S.

"And then I talked to Helmut, and he didn't seem to care about any of that. He was in love with an American guy. That's all he wanted. I believed him."

"So I thought about it for a day," she said. "I thought about my Mom. I thought about GG. It seemed romantic, stupid and obscene all at the same time. It seemed," and she turned to me, here. "so perfect. It just seemed to fall into my lap."

"And then there was the money." She said.

She negotiated a 2% cut on all his future earnings. Then she called her mother.

But the way she told that story, it was like it had happened to someone else. Like she read it somewhere. The way she smiled at parts, or shook her head in wonder.

We drove the rest of the way, for the most part, in silence. That afternoon, when we got to their place, we parked the Volvo on the lawn. GG stood up from a swing on the porch. I squinted at the shiny lake brimming up behind the house, through the golden leaves.

When the world ends - and God willing, it will soon - I'll be able to say this: I wasn't one of the guys pretending to have a good time. I never wanted to live forever. No, I wasn't even one of those pure spirits willing to admit that a good time was even feasible. Square Peg, Round Hole. Oil and Water. Cats & Dogs. I learned my lesson though. There are some of us left who can have fun. There are those of us still who can and should live forever, these last hunted children of the Tsar.

Van Smiley is one of Them, one of the former. A globe trotter. A Byron girl. A miracle like all girls should be.

I should have known the moment I saw her that her days were numbered. I should have known, when I saw her again that Saturday afternoon that she'd made the shortlist. GG had too. Because he never gave up. He never ever gave up.

Occasionally now, when I look at her, I'm more in love with her than I ever was, if I ever was. Occasionally now, usually when I'm plowed, I think she fell to Earth on a star. I smile and let her hand touch my cheek and promise no one in particular that they'll never get Van Smiley back.

I wonder when the world will come for us. It will. Our laughable little idyll (The loons up here are like a choir! I awake to the sweet smell of lilacs through the pines!) It all cries out to be leveled. And it will be. Because envy turns the planet. Because envy drives advertising. Because advertising drives envy. *Oh honey because they can't have what you have, but they can take it away.*

Of course we end our evenings with a sweet, summer night's vignette. I'm awoken in my rocking chair, on their porch. I squint and stretch. Someone has taken my beer and my cigarette.

She blows out the candle. She gives me kiss. With the report of the screen door, they disappear inside and up the stairs. Their light goes on. An oblique square of silver appears in the damp grass.

I rise and start home. I walk down the sandy road, the stars on my shoulders. The infinite stars and the pulsing satellites too, transmitting their twin messages of immolation and science.