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Mating call

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MATING CALL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Andrew Cohen

2006

To: Interim Dean Mark Szuchman
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Andrew Cohen, and entitled Mating Call, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Meri-Jane Rochelson

Les Standiford

Dan Wakefield, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 2, 2006

The thesis of Andrew Cohen is approved.

Interim Dean Mark Szuchman
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Stephan L. Mintz
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2006

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

MATING CALL

by

Andrew Cohen

Florida International University, 2006

Miami, Florida

Professor Dan Wakefield, Major Professor

Mating Call is a memoir set in the Pacific Northwest during the 1990s, in what Spin Magazine calls “Seattle’s Golden Age.” The story begins with my arrival in the West and a self-inflicted broken heart, a relationship I had severed due to “missing pieces.” The quest is to find these pieces, and throughout the search the memoir analyzes love and relationships for Generation X. The quest takes seven years, during which the narrative explores Seattle’s breweries and bedrooms, and the Northwest’s rainforests and volcanoes, all the while investigating interpersonal chemistry, sex, and friendship. For all the searching, the missing pieces are actually discovered by accident, when happenstance deals my heart a second blow; the quest is over, and I return East.

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Chapter 1

Down on the Upside

We went to the Sip-and-Sail because someone in our dorm knew the bouncer, knew that he wouldn't confiscate our fake IDs. It was my first semester in a small college town in Upstate New York. We were high and drunk. The bar was packed with too many people, no room to move, bodies pressing against bodies, few able to order drinks. I managed to raise my money above my head without elbowing the guy next to me, but I was invisible to the bartender, like a fan at a concert. The girl in front of me placed her palm on my stomach and slipped her hand down my jeans; she grabbed my dick and said, "I want to fuck you."

I turned to my roommate to ask his advice, to get a second buzzed opinion on her looks, and he said, "I'd do her. She's good to go." So off we went.

I was 19 and didn't have much sexual experience, only a year's worth with the girl I'd lost my virginity to, a high school junior in my hometown who was gaining wads of experience in my absence. I wasn't exactly what you'd call a ladies' man—I had spent my teenage Friday and Saturday nights playing Dungeons and Dragons in my basement—but this college of mine had a 5:1 girl:guy ratio, odds that offset the foot in my mouth.

Some girls from down the hall came to party in our suite room, playing quarters with Genny Cream, people laughing and passing out, I ended up with the blonde in my bed. The next night more of the same, except it was Miller High Life and the girls from upstairs, and I was horizontal again, staring into the black eyes of a half-Japanese girl. Two weeks later to the day, this girl's sister knocks on my door, and I'm already in bed

asleep, but she wakes me up and tells me it's her birthday, and she climbs in and we get naked and do it with my roommate passed out in the upper bunk.

This was all in my first month, September 1987.

The next year we moved off-campus, closer to the bars, a large house acting as a way station for drunken girls not wanting to make the trek back to their dorms. Like my friends, I'd had girlfriends, flings, stalkers, and one-night stands. One girl, born on 2/13/70—night of our most revered Dead show—followed me from bar to bar until finally insisting that she walk me home. She slipped out of her denim skirt and onto me, and after some drunk sex but before I could pass out she said, "You're not done with me are you?" I suggested that it was up to her, and she blew the life back into me, and we had sex until sunrise. She took it in the ass. She let me take pictures of her nude, black-and-white, and I used these for my photography class' gallery exhibit. She had soft white skin and made a killer lasagna.

It wasn't like I was some stud or anything, just lucky. In Dungeons and Dragons terms, on the scale of abilities that ranged from 3 to 18—with 18 being the top of human capability in strength, intelligence, charisma—I was a 12. High on the average side. But this college, this town, was the right place right time. By my senior year I had four girlfriends, all of whom knew each other or of each other. On my birthday, the month before graduation, I had sex with all four. Not at the same time, and not within the confines of the 24-hour anniversary of my birth, but spread out over the two-and-half-day celebration. And then school ended. Where does a 20-something guy go after an experience like that? I went to New York City, to optometry school, and I met girls in bars and girls in class and girls in elevators. But something didn't sit right. Maybe it was

a lack of growth. I developed this nervous rash, my body's way of telling me what my mind could not: I was moving in the wrong direction, sideways, not forward. I dropped out of grad school after one year and worked two jobs, saving up to backpack through Europe. I sublet my Manhattan apartment and moved home to Long Island. And there, one night, I ran into two high school friends at a bar, a couple.

“You've got to call Ariana when she gets back,” my friend said when mentioned that I planned to go to Europe in two months. The girl-half of the couple was Ariana's sister. They had both just returned from visiting her in France. “She's studying abroad, finishing her last semester in Paris.” He told me about all the great things they saw, the Louvre, the Eiffel, whatever, but I tuned him out and pictured Ariana, wondering if her brown hair still reached the small of her back.

Ariana was the first girl I had ever fooled around with: she let me get up her shirt during our long first kiss. I was 16, Ariana was 14. Her sister and I were the same age and it was at her sister's party, parents out of town, my Road Crew buddies and everyone else passed out all over their house. I helped Ariana clean up somewhere between midnight and sunrise, gathering beer cans and dumping ashtrays. It took me a million years to make the move, to lean in for the kiss—she was way too pretty for me—and we kissed for hours on the living room couch while friends snored at our feet.

I don't know why we never said anything about that night, why we didn't see each other again outside of the high school hallways. I never knew what to say to girls. I was a senior the next year, involved with someone else and attempting to lose my virginity, and I left town for college after that, and we didn't see each other again for seven years, until she returned from France. I waited a day before calling. We were on

the phone for hours when I said, “This is ridiculous, we could talk all night without stopping, and you’re less than two miles away—I’m coming to pick you up.” We drove around aimlessly and finally parked at Roxton, the one stretch of street in our town that didn’t have houses on it, a high school rendezvous for partiers and a makeout point for couples. We continued talking, about Europe and college and about who we were still in touch with from the old days, but this time it only seemed a half-million years before I leaned in for our second kiss.

We unclipped the seatbelts and fooled around until dawn, an occasional teen speeding by, honking a horn. I slid her shorts down around her ankles, and she stopped me there. “We should wait,” Ariana said, which sounded exactly right to me. She lifted her butt off the seat to pull her shorts back on; her slender body glowed orange underneath the streetlight.

Ariana Hook was the third daughter of chief editors for Newsday, the last child in a family of cyclists, and began touring New York as a baby, nestled in the seat attached to her parents’ tandem bike. Her dad was the sports editor and Ariana had his excitability, but her mom ran the education section, so this was tempered with compassion and expressed as enthusiasm. Her parents gave her the middle name of Quennell, after an ancestor who lived in what is now the Benelux region of Europe, but they were unsure if her namesake was serf or countess. She carried herself as both: reading Voltaire and Flaubert in French, but eager to drop to her knees and sift through the dirt for one of her archaeological classes. Her friends believed she had royal blood, and they called her “Will,” short for Willamina, a Germanic princess. She preferred clothes that bared the full length her arms and neck, like spring dresses and tank tops.

She gave her complete attention to any speaker, gave her time to charities during the holidays, she gave vegan meals taste. She listened to public radio and donated during pledge week. She slapped her knee when she told jokes, and laughed hard until you joined in, her shoulders rounding in a gawky way. Ariana could be very funny, with her humor at the expense of the ignorant and belligerent, satirical, as if using her wit to persuade you, using her social consciousness to convince you to see things her way: that the world could be a better place if we all took care of each other. I loved her name, her smell, and the sounds she made in sleep.

After that night at Roxton, with Ariana, I thought about her constantly; it was like somehow, while we were kissing, she had passed something into my bloodstream, and it swam there and circulated within me, and because of it she was ever-present in my mind. I quit one of my two jobs—data entry at the bank—to spend more time with her. I still worked as a photographer, sometimes more than forty hours a week, but we saw each other every possible day, which was all the time yet never enough. When the month ended, and her sister was driving her up to Buffalo for a summer grad class in archeology, I called in sick to work and squeezed into the backseat of a two-seater car for seven hours—we couldn't separate. We spent the long weekend in Buffalo and I flew home that Monday.

“You have to go to Europe,” she said, when I drove up to Buffalo two weeks later. I knew she was right. “I don't want you to resent me, ever, for keeping you from going.” I told her not to be silly. “You have to go to Europe. But, I love you.”

I said it, too. It was agreed: we were in love, and I had to go to Europe. “If—,” Ariana said, then paused, stopped, and started again: “If you don't come back, I

understand.” I told her not to be silly. I mailed short postcards with cute drawings from Europe to New York. And I also wrote her long letters with details and daydreams, and these I mailed to Tucson, Arizona, where she had moved to attend graduate school in Applied Anthropology. By the time I reached Greece, the last country on my trip, Ariana had received enough stuff to fill a scrapbook. And I was thinking of her, sitting in the sands of southern Crete listening to Neil Young, the man I turned to for inspiration, soulfulness, and advice. All of Neil’s songs seemed to reflect a different side of myself, and this is the way it had been since I first discovered his music when I was twelve. Neil said to take a chance on love, that I had to grow to be tall, that I’d better take a chance on love.

I flew back to New York and packed my car and cruised to Tucson. It was the same but it was different. Ariana and I were in love but it wasn’t easy, not like it had been in New York. When we were together, sometimes we fought. When she was at school and I was working, I imagined more fighting, a future of arguments. My imagination was always creating futures. And when one of my high school droogs called to wish me a happy birthday, April ’93, he said, “I don’t know how you do it. One girl for the rest of your life.” This was one of the futures I’d been struggling to create.

Two months later, Ariana and I were broken up for good. I told myself that we were too combative, that something was wrong. On a superficial level, I feared my decision was based on simple lust: I wanted to screw other chicks. Ariana insisted that we were still in love, that we were meant to marry and live together forever, and I handed her cosmic disbelief and shattered her reality. I broke both of our hearts believing this: she was the perfect girl, but I was missing some piece, some integral component

necessary to love. And that's where my story begins: a quest for my missing piece. Ariana drove east and I drove north. I crossed the border into Washington with a torn backpack, leaky tent, and my childhood sleeping bag. I thought about her, about us, constantly. I visited friends of my family, a couple just over thirty, and they seemed to function in complete harmony: anticipating each other's desires, making each other laugh, finishing each other's sentences. They tried to make me laugh too, but I was heartbroken and didn't know how to deal. They said that the first step in finding my missing piece was to meet someone new. I figured that I'd keep on driving until I ran out road, but my friends wouldn't let me leave: Bill said that he needed my help with his computer business, that teaching Anthropology at the community college was sucking up his time, so I agreed and found the cheapest place in Seattle, one room in an eight-bedroom house, home to drifters.

Two friends came to visit me in Seattle during my first six months, and then they split, but each left me with a recharge of mana, one of the things I needed to get over my broken heart and move on to finding that missing piece. Mornings were particularly tough because that was when my imagination duked it out with Ariana, but by lunchtime memories of the visits of my droogs had me laughing over the times we'd had. One sunny afternoon, I drove to Tower Records to find out when Soundgarden tickets were going on sale. I parked next to two girls sitting in their car with the windows down. I always did this. On buses, trains, wherever, I always tried to increase my chances of meeting women. I wouldn't force the situation, just try to be in the right place at the right time. When I got out of my car, the brunette ashed her cigarette and said, "What does your shirt mean?"

I explained to her that it was a software product for artists, though I didn't mention I had bought the shirt at a thrift store, and she said, "I'm an artist, and my boyfriend's studying art too." I liked this girl immediately: in less than a minute she had revealed her status. "My friend Bree likes to draw." She pointed to the smiling blonde in the driver's seat.

They asked me if I was there for Phish tickets and I said yes. I had never seen the band, but my friends back East were into them. We stood on line for an hour, me telling them my story, of how I ended up in Seattle, and them telling me about their school, Seattle Pacific University. I told them that I had lived in Wallingford for about four months now, that I liked it there, that all of Seattle seemed like a small town compared to New York. When I got to the register, I bought one Phish ticket and asked about Soundgarden. The cashier said that no shows had been scheduled. Bree and her friend bought the maximum, four tickets each, but there hadn't been any mention of Bree's boyfriend, which to me meant that she either didn't have one or was in the process of ending something. Probably the latter, because I'd seen this situation before, and it seemed that if she was free and clear one of the girls would've mentioned, somehow, an "ex-boyfriend."

Back at the cars, Bree's friend said, "If you're new here, then you probably haven't been to the Soundgarden, right?"

"There's a place?" I said.

"That's where the band got their name," she said. "Bree knows where it is. She can take you." I was given Bree's number. She was all giggles. We spoke on the phone. We couldn't exactly sync our schedules, or rather, mine was pretty open but hers pretty

busy. Whenever I brought up the Phish show, the fact that I was going alone, she changed the subject. Then, out of the blue, Bree called, and she waited for me to ask her out again, and I did. “There’s this place I’ve been taking my Jeep,” I said. “It’s pretty cool. Rivers and forests and cliffs and stuff. Real nice if you’re into that nature crap.” She laughed at this; she got me.

That Saturday, she parked her car at my house and we split off for North Bend, the hamlet at the base of Snoqualmie Pass in the foothills of the Cascades, thirty-five miles east of Seattle. From there, we cut into logging roads, sun-out top-down, and switched into four-wheel drive and bumped around and laughed and cranked tunes. She had heard of Neil, and liked what she heard, although she didn’t own any Neil. I said I could help her with that problem. We whizzed by trees and rocks and crossed the river several times, from the patches of forest into the clear-cut fields and back into forest. I pulled us onto a promontory and we caught sunset and I took a picture: Bree leaned back, trying to give me full access to the sunset, but I angled the camera so that I could capture the side of her face, too.

Back at my house, she came inside to use the bathroom, and when she finished and walked into my room she asked if I partied. She took out a glass pipe and some weed and we sat on my bed blowing smoke until we kissed, finally. We made out for a while and then she went down on me. “I didn’t want to leave you with nothing,” she said. “But I do have to go.” Off she went, Bree smiling, me smiling.

I called Bill to tell him about my first date with Bree, to tell him how radically different a Norwest first date was compared to a Nor’easter, but he wasn’t home. I didn’t see Bree again until the Phish show. I rode my bike downtown, partied with some

crunchy people inside the Paramount, and danced and boogied, only now recognizing why my 2/13 droogs liked this band. I had heard them, but to really enjoy Phish I had to see them, to watch how their music falls apart but finds itself to come together. When I was unlocking my bike, Bree walked by with a group of friends. She said hi, but said bye before we could talk.

Bree called me the next morning, before I went to meet Bill at a computer site. She apologized for blowing me off, told me that she had broken up with her boyfriend but that things were still weird because they were trying to remain friends, said she'd make it up to me by taking me to the Soundgarden after I finished work.

The Soundgarden was through the gates the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration center, NOAA's branch office on the shore of Lake Washington, northeast of the U-District. We walked up the hill toward a half-dozen metal pipes, some tall, some as small as eight feet. They looked like windmills—the newfangled turbine kind, not the Holland kind—but without the fan part. The breeze whistled through holes in the pipes, but it was a slow sound, deep, like a moan. It was a gray night turning darker, and the wind carried a chill. We sat in the center of the garden and huddled close, trying to light a bowl. Once lit, the pipe offered warmth.

She told me about her ex-boyfriend, that they had been a couple since high school, that they had outgrown each other. I told Bree about Ariana, about how beautiful she was, about how we'd been in love, and that I'd broken it off. When the story left my mouth, I regretted saying so much. After all, this was our second date. The wind moaned for me. It was a constant sound, not dying out when the breeze slowed; even when Bree's hair stopped blowing there was still a low moan, like a continuous sigh.

I couldn't answer Bree's question, about why I had ended my relationship with Ariana. There were many reasons, or several, or one. I wasn't sure. There was one that stuck out, one that I battled within my mind, trying to figure out if it was superficial or substantial. If I ever brought up another girl—not a specific girl, but a theoretical girl—Ariana shot me down. “We're not sharing our bed with another girl,” Ariana said. “Stop it. Stop it. Stop bringing it up.”

Ariana had heard her sister complain: her sister's boyfriend would bring up the same thing. Both Ariana and her sister had read *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, and they beat back our advances as if defending all of womanhood from lechery, as if simply our suggestions had tainted them, and to purify they'd have to meet other women in the desert and smudge each other with sage. Ariana said that there were groups of women who did this. I admired their desire to bond, sisterhood and all, but I didn't think this bond should come at the expense of my gender. If some people believed the sexes needed to be at war, fine, but I didn't believe it, and I feared dating someone who leaned in this direction.

I didn't tell Bree all about this. I didn't know what she was thinking. But the groaning in the Soundgarden seemed pained, as if whalesong traveling the depths of the Pacific, a whale separated from its mate.

I tried to think of a joke to lighten the mood, but I never could remember jokes, so I answered her question, vaguely: “Why does anyone break up? Things didn't work out.”

“One time,” Bree said, and she stopped. “I've never told anybody this. You have to swear not to tell.” I told her okay, that I wouldn't tell. “One time, I got into a car accident: I rear-ended the car in front of me. It was on 45th Street, near your house. I

wasn't going fast." She stared at her lap. "I was checking out a girl on the sidewalk." I said what. "She was walking and stopped. She opened her purse and smiled, curled her hair around her ear—her tits were fucking perfect."

Bree confessed to me that she had been fantasizing about girls for as long as she could remember, but since breaking up with her ex the fantasies had become more pronounced, more sexual. My mouth hung open in stupefaction; my mind reeled, half wondering how the conversation had drifted, or erupted, into this, half turned-on fully, and half wondering if the Soundgarden would mark the spot of where I would fall in love again. Yes, I had one-and-a-half minds; my mind had grown fifty-percent with the realization that the universe provides, that there was someone seemingly compatible with me in this respect, that Bree and I had something in common: we both believed girls were beautiful. "I've always been too shy to do anything about it," Bree said.

My brother left for college when I turned ten. I came home to an empty house every day from fifth grade on, but I wasn't exactly alone: in my brother's closet, just within reach if I stood on my tippy-toes, were two stacks of nudie magazines, fifty-high each. I had to drag a chair over to reach the uppermost magazines, and since the carpet buckled whenever I opened the closet door this procedure was tricky, even dangerous as only three of the chair's legs could find the uneven floor. But it was the first thing I did after walking home from the bus stop. Pull the carpet back, open the closet, double-check to see that the front door was locked, roll out a wad of toilet paper and take this and a magazine into my room and recline on my bed. For some reason, as if my brother had positioned the magazines in a specific order, I always made sure to return things to exactly how I had found them. By the time I was fifteen, I had made masturbatory love

with every girl on every page. Five years, one-hundred magazines dating from 1970 to 1978, at least three girls in each, and I knew their hometowns, their measurements, their turn-ons.

Of those two stacks of magazines, most were Playboy, but many were Penthouse, OUI, and Hustler, and these latter three invariably depicted beautiful women making love to other beautiful women. I thought this was the greatest thing I had ever seen. And I thought about it all the time. For my imagination, two girls holding hands on the school bus resembled two older girls holding hands on the slick pages. From fifth grade and my first erection on, slipping into daydream was as easy as breathing and almost as regular. In Penthouse, these girls held hands and walked naked through meadows and eventually turned and kissed, deeply. It seemed like the natural progression of things, what the girls did when no one was looking. I came from a family of boys; girls and their ways were mysterious, even hypnotic. I felt privileged for being let in on something so intimate—a long-haired girl peeping up from in between her girlfriend's legs with wide eyes and the smile one assumes just before laughter—I didn't share this with anyone.

I was almost 18 and still a virgin, although I did have eight years of masturbation under my belt. (You could say I was an old hand at it—a bad joke is better than no joke.) With the exception of getting up Ariana's shirt at her sister's party, I hadn't seen much in the way of physical contact. Mostly, it was just hanging out with the Road Crew talking about girls, although there were some girls who hung out and got high with us (and then left). Marci and I had been friends for almost a year, and in the two months preceding my eighteenth birthday, the time when I got my convertible out of the garage and onto the road, we had become particularly close, hanging out all the time. Still, we were only

friends and only talked. “Marci,” I said, “I think we should go out, you and me.”

“What do you mean, like boyfriend-girlfriend?”

“Yeah. I mean, like we hang out after school, talk on the phone at night. The only thing we don’t do is kiss.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. Drive me home. I never want to speak to you again.”

I drove her home, and later that night Marci called. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m such an idiot. Of course we should go out. It’s like we’ve been going out.”

“But not making out,” I said.

The next day after school, we kissed, with tongue, on her couch, for hours. And every day after that for two weeks. She was five-feet tall and ninety pounds but curvy, a mini-version of the magazine bodies, and my hands pulled at her bra and squeezed her jeans. It was ten days before my eighteenth birthday. “We should do it,” Marci said.

I sat up straight on the couch. “Yeah, we should do it some time.”

“No,” she said. “Now.”

“What?”

“We’ve been going out for two weeks. We should have sex. Now.”

“Marci, your parents will be back any minute. You’re crazy.”

“My parents went out for dinner, and after that they’re going to a movie: they won’t be back for three hours.”

She led me upstairs, to her bedroom, and asked if I had anything.

I did. Like all of my friends, I kept a condom in my wallet. It was given to me by the same guy who bought us beer. We all had condoms in our wallets for two years

running, for just such an occasion. Marci removed her clothes and I removed mine. The wrapper was so worn the condom practically fell out. I put it on. And then I entered Marci, and we were no longer virgins, and one stroke later I came.

“What?” she said. “Don’t stop.”

I pulled out.

Then, the garage door started to open. The garage was just below her room and her bed shook as the door whined. Her parents were home.

I scrambled to find my clothes, trying to wipe the *I-just-lost-my-virginity* look off my face, and Marci said, “That’s it? That’s sex?” She repeated those two questions over and over until her parents were inside the house and I had to shush her. They came upstairs to say hi, complained about the diner, and went into their bedroom to watch TV.

“I can’t believe that’s sex,” Marci said.

“We’ll practice again tomorrow,” I said, “after school.”

We practiced almost every day and got better, and those fantasies I had about two girls making love receded into dormancy, replaced by the actuality of teenage sex. We tried every position we could find, discovering our favorites and believing to have invented positions never-before-attempted-by-anyone.

I graduated high school that June, 1986, left for college in September, and Marci found somebody else to practice with, which upset me at first until I realized where I was at: College: four hours Upstate, small town in a river valley, Main Street lined with bars and clubs, 5 girls to every guy. I had made new friends, and us boys were tight—the kind of closeness, a sedated openness, that partying every day together helps to foster. When girls weren’t in our dorm suite we talked about them, and it really wasn’t until then that I

realized every guy I knew had fantasies about two girls. It made sense: these guys might've been staring into the same nudie magazines. Possibly even at the same time, though from what I could gather I had a couple of years jump on my friends. Maybe that's why I felt different. When my friends, my droogs, were coming home from fifth and sixth grade to electric car sets and go-karts, I spent tender time discovering and interpreting my relationship to girls and sex, which as far as I could tell was something hovering around awestruck, reverent, and extremely turned-on, if I had to label it. For my friends it seemed only the latter, horndogs needing to rub one off.

In college, we were the 2/13 moka boys, named after the aforementioned greatest Dead show ever, 2/13/70 at the Fillmore East. The "Dark Star" from that concert could be heard in at least one of our dorm rooms at any given time day or night or twilight. We came from all over New York—City, Long Island, Upstate cities and country towns. We sat in the community room of our dorm suite taking bonghits, arguing about proper terminology: the Upstaters called the bong bowl a "hitter." Us Downstaters, NYC and Long Island, called the bong bowl a bong bowl. We had this argument all the time, and then the conversations turned to music, and finally to girls.

Individually, we were nice guys, but as a group each of us had the potential to reach new levels of gruffness and insensitivity, this potential for callousness multiplied factorially by each additional droog in the group: two! guys held a jackass potential of 2, but four! guys landed a 24, a rating bound for belligerence. A guy could talk to a friend about a girl, possibly even have a nice conversation; it was difficult to talk to two friends, though, and impossible to have a substantially meaningful talk with three friends. When a buddy told a story about getting laid, I listened, following the lovemaking scene in my

mind, picturing only the girl and her actions and reactions, half happy for my droog and half jealous of the bastard. Add some more guys to this picture, more ears and eggheads, and the story changed from having fun and getting laid to boffing and fucking, to screwing a chick and leaving her in a puddle of jism, to cheating with impunity. It seemed to me that stories of this sort were dividing the sexes rather than celebrating the union of fornication; triumphs of these sorts, those at the expense of some girl, made me wince. Sometimes, when the pain of being a boy, a male who didn't always get what he wanted even when he wanted it so badly it hurt, when this pain surfaced and needed an outlet, I did it to: I made a beast out of myself—*Mongo like candy—Me like cunt*. But mostly, when I was cognizant of the dynamic, of the mask of combative insensitivity, I'd cringe and walk away. To me, women were the most beautiful aspect of life, and the naked female body was affirmation that life was magical, and abusing girls and referring to them as nothing more than receptacles seemed blasphemy. I found something severe in the difference between consensual degradation during the act of sex and mob degradation to pump testosterone. Two women together seemed exponentially wonderful, and blaspheming this combination seemed exponentially wrong. Maybe it was a ten-year old way of looking at things, but when the conversation became more and more sordid I opted out, preferring the world within my imagination.

Regardless, none of us, nor anyone we had ever known, had achieved the ubiquitous quad-breasted goal. "I knew this guy in high school," one of my friends said, "and he had his girlfriend—this sick hot cheerleader—and her huge-titted best friend: he had them both, together."

"You're full of shit," we all said.

“Swear to God,” he said.

Blowing smoke and talking wind.

My junior year, on a cold winter night, the kind of cold known only to the Northeast, I found myself walking through the snow to Paulina’s house with her and her friend. She would be the Paulina who would eventually move to New Orleans, the same girl I would almost visit instead of moving to Seattle. We had gone to the same college, had dated for six weeks, and on this night we were coming from a bar. My side of town had lost power in the storm, and I was going to sleep at Paulina’s. Her friend had an mind-blowing ass, an ass so lovely that earlier this night all of my friends felt obliged to tell me how lovely it was. They had bumped up to me at the bar and toasted to this ass. Her friend also lived on my side of town and she was to sleep at Paulina’s too. “We’re not going to have a threesome,” Paulina said into my ear as we left the bar. She had heard all about my fantasies; her previous boyfriends had had the same one. She insisted that all girls were tired of hearing about it, *So just stop it.*

It was chilly in the house, and we three stripped to our underwear and climbed into Paulina’s bed and pulled the comforter up to our chins. Paulina took the middle, but I rolled over her and nestled myself in between the girls. We lay on our backs. The friend placed her long fingers and long nails on my bare stomach. Paulina felt this, took the hand, pushed it away, sat up taking the comforter with her, and said, “You’ve got to be kidding.” Then we went to sleep. This was as close as I had ever come to two-girls.

Briana Whitman was the daughter of an engineer who helped to design Seattle’s tallest buildings. Her mother was a pediatric nephrologist, the only one serving

Washington, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Alaska. Her parents had money, but Bree didn't like to take it. They liked to drink, and sometimes they downed bottles of wine with their daughter, even before she turned 21. Together with Bree's older brother, they had been an earthy family: her mom wore flannels, her dad taught knot-tying classes to the Mountaineers, and they had camped regularly when Bree was younger. But her brother now lived in California and he had drifted away from the family's earthiness and was sliding into urban yuppie-dom. Bree, a petite blonde with blue eyes, had tried living in California, but found herself surrounded and lost within a crowd of girls that looked just like her—Bree was from Seattle; Seattle was the look—but had little in common with her. She dropped out of UCSD after her first year and moved back home to attend Seattle Pacific University. "It's a Christian school," she said. "They force us to go to church. It's ridiculous." Nobody at her school partied, except Bree and her small group of friends. And outside of her group, all of the girls at SPU were virgins. "Saving it for marriage. Pathetic. And backwards. I know one couple that preaches the gospel, and they insist that intercourse before marriage is wrong, so they only have anal sex."

She liked to smoke pot, listen to music, and draw. She liked sex, and orgasms came easy. One month after the Soundgarden we had shared all of these things save drawing. Bree made me a card for my 26th birthday. It had a drawing of herself and me, and in the space between us a girl in a miniskirt, but instead of having a face this girl had a question mark. We got high and made love all night and the next day Kurt Cobain blew his head off with a shotgun. My first response was, *I just got here, Kurt*. Bree and I went to the massive vigil at Seattle Center. Thousands of candles and thousands of people crying, and those who didn't cry looked like they'd shatter into pieces. People on the

steps, on the sidewalk, on the grass, wherever, and no one knowing what to do. Across town, one kid took his dad's shotgun and blew his own head off.

I knew no one. Bree seemed to know everyone. She hugged them, and then they'd give their take. Some blamed the suicide on Kurt's wife. I didn't know too much about Courtney, only that she was the singer for Hole, a drug user, oftentimes belligerent, and that I didn't like her. Some said Kurt was a coward for leaving his new daughter fatherless. Some blamed his suicide on the Man, but most of these people seemed to place the blame on heroin. It was Andrew Wood all over again, except that Wood's death was an overdose, and Wood only shook up Seattle's music scene, and unless you were really really into music you didn't know there was a scene in 1990. But everyone would discover the scene one year later when Nirvana's *Nevermind* had millions humming mulatto albino mosquito libido because it was pop, top of the charts, because they heard it all the time but couldn't figure out the words, which is very rock-n-roll. In four years, April '94, Kurt had become the #1 rock star in the world. Kurt's house was two miles from mine, and he'd been dead for about three days before his body was found. I could only imagine that it was very quiet for Kurt, that all of the voices inside of his head had silenced except for one. He wrote a suicide note quoting Neil, saying it was better to burn than fade, and then he slipped the shells into the gun. It had to have been a little awkward: shotguns are long, and to place the barrel into your mouth or under your chin and still be able to reach the trigger—I mean, that's not easy, right? If you're unsure about it you might just give up trying, no? Kurt pulled the trigger or pushed it and then he burned out, into the black. He rode the pony he fell. Kurt tried to make something with his life but couldn't make it beyond that 27 hump. He sang about anguish and

people thought they could relate and he became a rock star. He tried the drug thing, the marriage thing, the father thing, but nothing worked on the inside. His life was what he made it and then he made it death, so rest his soul away. Thing was, Kurt found rest but the ripples of his suicide made waves. Razor scrapes, drunk driving, drunken fighting drugs. I heard about it from Bree, stories from her friends, from people I knew, on the news and in the paper, and it spread from Seattle like the tremors of an earthquake, and when it reached New York my parents called and said, “Now, who is this Kurt Cobain fellow?”

Soundgarden was my band. A friend introduced me to Soundgarden in college, a band that plays Spinal Tap onstage—very heavy—“This is Seattle,” he had said. A couple of years later at the Roseland Ballroom, I watched Cornell swim, not surf, over the crowd, making his way to the soundstage during *Slaves and Bulldozers*. Fucking great band, Soundgarden. As far as I could tell, they pioneered the music scene in Seattle, before the other big bands, before Mother Love Bone, and even before Green River. Soundgarden was riotous, Nirvana offered complaints. But in one night, in one act, all of Nirvana’s angst-ridden, brooding, pining lyrics became hyper-legitimized. And then I loved every note, every song, and I read the lyrics as I listened, but I would never see them live. “Nirvana is Seattle,” I thought. Kurt Cobain was the real deal and the real deal was dead.

When Bree lay in my bed shaking, it seemed to be more fear of that ripple effect than mourning Kurt; human suffering moved her. We talked about life, frustrations and expectations, about only having one life, about living this to the fullest, and then we made love. Bree, like me, was a slave to her body: the touch of my hand paralyzed her, and

she'd lay without moving, waiting for my hand to travel, waiting for the dam to release endorphins into her blood, waiting for these to wash away any and all pains and worries about African genocides, American homicides, and Northwestern suicides.

Bree and I took solace in nature. We walked through forests holding hands. On weekends we took day hikes, sometimes we camped, and one weekend we set off with Bill and Shari. Bree, like Bill, was always ready to skinny dip. We four hit the leeward side of Mt. Rainier, Dewey Lake. Small elevation loss, a mild hike, and an easy enough gain on the return: Bill had lived up to his promise—I had made Bill swear that Bree would not receive a Trooper hazing, and I made him double promise and I made Shari witness it. Bree cooed at babies and dogs, even couples kissing in public, even acts of kindness. She was soft. By this time, I could keep up with Bill and Shari—regular Tuesday night basketball helped—but I didn't think little Bree could. So at Dewey Lake, we enjoyed peace rather than test the limits of our muscles, lungs, and psychological resiliency. Sunrise warmed the air enough to swim, even me, and it gave the snow on Mt. Rainier a yellow tint, like that of french vanilla ice cream. We continued east, into the desert, to the Gorge at George, to receive some soulful healing from Santana's guitar. Shari had thought it would be neat to stay for Rod Stewart, but Bill and I had poked so much fun of Rod that Shari was ready to leave after one song. We drove toward the mountains, turned down a side road, and set up camp somewhere in the dark. A storm came, and Bree and I kissed, listening, and then its winds and rain kept the sounds of our lovemaking within our tent.

The next morning, Bill and Shari and Bree and I unzipped our two tents at the same time: we were in a peach orchard and the storm had shaken all of the peaches from

the trees, and the ground was a yellow fuzzy orange red. “Like the beginning a fairytale,” Bree said. Or the end of a fairytale, I thought; Why couldn’t Courtney prevent Kurt’s death? Isn’t that what marriage and love is about? She had some trips of her own, seeing the darker side to life, and now he sleeps with angels too soon. I didn’t understand how someone could lose their way so badly, lose their ability to see the magic in life, that suicide would seem the only answer. I couldn’t understand it and I hoped I never would.

More sex for Bree and I. We were addicts, nymph and satyr, slaves to our bodies, or whatever people wanna call it. Maybe we were just normal 20-somethings. I could place a hand on Bree’s crotch the rest of the world and whatever problems would fade and her pussy and the sensations behind her closed eyes would become the world. Same for me when her hands touched my body: my ribs ceased their crawl toward my lungs; Bree’s hand retarded the rotation of my spine. This was our prime of life, our only life, and the opportunity to turn fantasy into reality was within our power. Whenever Bree and I were alone, and talking, the conversations were always about the same thing: Bree’s desire to have sex with another girl. She thanked me a hundred times when I told her that I’d help, that I’d do my best. The more we talked the more she wanted me there to join in. She knew this was my fantasy; we were a team.

I was hurrying to finish work one clear day, hoping that I’d be able to catch the sun set behind the Olympics. On the way to one of my clients, my first and so far only client separate from Bill, a non-profit agency helping travelers located in the YMCA, I backed into mid-seventies Monte Carlo. The big bumper dented my Jeep and left me kicking myself. Ms. Carlo made me write her a check for sixty bucks, insisting that I had

muffed the rubber of her bumper guard. This was first blood drawn from my baby Jeep and I was not feeling friendly. I was in and out of my client's in ten minutes, figuring I'd just bring the damn computer home and work on it there. It was bulky and I had to carry it in both hands, and I had to open the YMCA door with my butt and back out, and when I turned around I almost walked right into a tall, tan girl with bright blonde hair cascading down her shoulders and spring dress. She turned around as I turned around and said, as if I'd been standing there all along, "How the fuck do you hail a cab in this city?"

"Where in New York are you from?" I said.

Kathryn was born in Georgia, went to college at Bennington in Vermont, but had dropped out and moved to Manhattan to model. She had blue eyes and long legs and a large chest and resembled a Barbie Doll in every way, except her cheeks: these carried some baby fat, and it made her smile wider, and they also gave her the face of a girl much younger than 19. A Barbie with Hello Kitty tattooed on her arm.

It was her first day in Seattle, and the YMCA was all booked, and she didn't know where she was going, only that she needed a cab. I told her that you didn't hail a cab in Seattle, you called one, but also that she didn't need a cab, that I'd give her a lift. When I found out that she didn't have a place, I offered her mine. "We've got a couch long enough for you," I said.

"It's very pretty here," she said when I drove over the bridge. She put her hands up and reached for the sky, and for a second my Jeep became a roller coaster. I took us into Phinney instead of going straight home, so that we could see the orange sun set behind the Olympics from high above Ballard. We parked and watched. "The clouds are purple," she said. "So beautiful." And the sky was blue, and the jagged mountain peaks

still held snow. It was silent for a while, then I leaned over and kissed her, and she kissed me back, and then pulled away. “That was very forward of you.”

“I don’t know what’s prettier,” I said, “you or the sunset.”

She told me that was sweet and when the sky darkened we went back to Wallingford.

“You don’t lock your house?” Kathryn said.

“You’re not in New York anymore.”

“Still,” she said, “I’d feel better I left my suitcase in your room: it’s everything I own.”

I picked up some Thai and we ate watching Star Trek, and when Kathryn went downstairs I called Bree.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” I said.

“Neil’s going on tour?” she said. It was one of my lines.

“No. Her name is Kathryn.”

I told Bree about my day and when I got to the part about the kiss, I thought she seemed particularly quiet on the other end.

“Well, what happened next?”

“You’re cool?” I said.

“Totally,” she said, and she repeated her question and I finished the story. “We can take her to my parents’ beach club tomorrow. It’s Friday, can you get off from work early?”

The next day, I did most of my work at home, though I did need to go back to the YMCA to reinstall their computer. By lunchtime, I picked up Kathryn. First I drove her

to a modeling agency on Lake Union. It didn't have a sign out front, but it matched the address she read off of a crumpled piece of paper. She said that she needed to register in King County. I waited in the Jeep, and when Kathryn returned she said that she was psyched to work on her tan. "I thought it always rained here." She asked me again if it was cool that we had kissed the day before, double-checking what I had called an "open" relationship.

At the beach club, Bree had arranged for three chaises facing Lake Washington and the Cascades. When Kathryn went into the cabana to change, Bree grabbed my forearm with both hands and squeezed. "She's hot."

Kathryn came out of the cabana and our jaws dropped: yes, her legs were long and tan, and her belly taught, and her breasts large, but that flowing blonde hair was gone. In its place was cropped, platinum hair with two pink barrettes. We stretched out under the sun. "I've never known anyone with a wig," I said. Bree said it too.

"It's made from real hair," Kathryn said. "Cost me nine-hundred bucks." Kathryn said that Bree could try it on if she wanted. I jumped in the lake. Floating there, I stared at the two girls, little and big. They were talking and laughing. That night, Bree and her parents were flying to California for the weekend to visit her brother. The three of us made a date for dinner, Monday. Back at my place, I reclined on my futon and smoked a bowl and watched Trek. Kathryn knocked on my door. "I just need to get my pajamas," she said. She dragged the suitcase from the corner of the room, shut my door, and opened the suitcase against it. There were a lot of clothes inside, none of them folded. She dropped to her knees and began searching the mess. "Do you think this is pretty?" she said, holding up a lace bra. I said that I did. Then she crossed her arms,

grabbed the bottom of her blouse, and straightened her arms over her head. The blouse fell the distance from her fingers to the floor. “My tits are uneven,” she said. She reached behind to unhook her bra, took it off, and weighed her breasts, one in each hand. “See?”

“I don’t.”

She removed her hands and placed them on her hips; her breasts bounced a little, but they stood full and firm. She walked to me on her knees and repeated her question.

“I guess, a little,” I said.

She gave me a wet kiss, unzipped my jeans, and went down on me. She told me that she could do it better if I stood, so I did, and then she said, “I love to suck cock. Does that make me a slut?” Before I could answer, she continued, occasionally looking up at me, staring with her blue eyes wide.

“No, of course not,” I said. “A lot of girls like to give blowjobs.”

When I started to come, she slid me into the back of her throat and gagged, but she held me there. “None of my girlfriends have ever been able to do that,” I said.

Kathryn eased back and removed me from her mouth. She wiped her lip with a finger. “Thank you for letting me stay here,” she said.

The next day, I put the Jeep’s top down and drove Kathryn and “the kids” to meet Bill and Shari. The kids were my housemate’s younger brother and his girlfriend. They were visiting from New York, staying in my housemate’s room, off for the summer from their first year at college. My housemate was off from naturopathic med school, gone for two months. Bree and I had been showing the kids around, getting them high, and taking care of them. They had a job packing capsules of herbal ecstasy down the block for

Doctor Brains, the local madman guru, but they only worked an hour every other day. Mostly, they just stayed in bed and smoked, unless I knocked on their door and dragged them out. Today, we were off to Mt. Rainier to hike Spray Park. Bill and Shari knew that I had planned on bringing the kids, but Kathryn came as a surprise.

“Kathryn is substituting for Bree this weekend,” I said when we parked at Mowich. Kathryn didn’t have any shorts, so I had given her a pair of cut-off jeans, and when she bent over to tie her sneakers the entire parking lot stopped their business to watch.

“Usually she wears a wig,” I said to Bill on the trail. And then I told him about the night before, about what an idiot I was. “What I should’ve said during the blowjob, when Kathryn said that she loved sucking cock, was, ‘Yes, you’re a slut, now keep sucking.’” I didn’t realize it was a sex game until Kathryn had gone back downstairs and I was alone in bed. It reminded me of when I was having sex with my first girlfriend in high school, Marci, and she often said, “Talk dirty to me.” All I ever had was, “I love making love to you.” What a dork. Eight years after losing my virginity and I was still very much a dork.

“I didn’t read it right,” I said. “But Bill, it was fucking fun.”

We hiked through a thick forest of pines that wound up a ridge, and at one lookout we saw an eagle gliding on thermals, no need to flap its wings. We reached a rocky slope that led to a waterfall so high we couldn’t see its top. The water poured over the mountainside like a river, down hundreds and hundreds of feet, but by the time it reached us it fell in individual drops. We stood underneath the waterfall and washed off sweat and dirt, all of us in bathing suits save one: Bill was naked, of course, and the kids

averted their eyes. Shari closed her eyes too, but to enjoy the moment in nature.

Thousands of drops seemed to hit my body simultaneously, and these actually stung, but felt great, too. Kathryn squealed.

That night, after putting the kids to sleep and falling into bed, Kathryn came up to thank me for the wonderful day. She lay naked on my futon and spread her legs. I went down on her and she told me not to, that she didn't like it, so we fucked and she pushed her breasts up and into my face. When we were done, she said that she loved it when I nibbled on her tits. I told her that my favorite position was with her on her belly and me behind. "I've never done it that way before," she said.

She went downstairs to sleep on the couch. The next morning, on my way back from Bagel Oasis, I saw her leaving in a cab. She was the only person I knew in Seattle who took taxis. After I fed the kids and had eaten three bagels myself, I found a note from Kathryn on my futon saying that she was off to a job interview. It was Sunday.

I kept a lookout for her all day, hoping I'd get to show her that position. I told the kids to let me know if Kathryn returned and went up to my room. Her suitcase was open. On top of her clothes, was notebook/journal. I didn't read through it, only the page it was turned to: 1. Move to Seattle: -\$500 2. Get license: -\$50 3. Get apartment: ? 4. Get job stripping: +\$\$\$ 5. Get tits fixed: -\$4000.

I didn't know what time she returned home, but she was asleep on the couch the next morning when I left for work, and she was still there when my day was done, at three. "Have you been sleeping all day?" I said when I saw that she was waking.

"No," she said as she stretched. "Thank you for the bagel. You're out of cream cheese." She sat up and I sat down, the couch warm with her heat. Kathryn told me that

she had gotten a job at Razzmatazz, the strip club near the Space Needle. “I went for the interview and they hired me on the spot. Have you been there?” No. “I’m so hungry,” she said. “I’m so fat.” She grabbed her waist and squeezed. “All of the girls there are skinny.”

I told her that Bree would be home soon, that we could go for an early dinner, and she asked me if we could eat Thai again.

We went local, to Lotus—even though the food was better at King and I—because I needed a drink and wouldn’t drink-and-drive. We feasted. The three of us were buzzed from Singha and spicy food, and we leaned on each other as we walked back to the house. The girls were all excited to play dress-up: Kathryn wanted to dress Bree up in the clothes she had outgrown. “I’m so fat,” Kathryn said when we were back in my room. We told her that she was wrong, and she flung clothes out of her suitcase until finding an envelope with pictures. “See? See?” She handed the photos to us. “They’re from when I first got to New York, before I was too fat to model.”

Bree and I held the pictures close trying to figure out if the gaunt, bony waif in the photos was actually Kathryn. We both said it at the same time: “You’re way prettier now.”

“Don’t lie to me,” she said. We tried to convince her that we were telling the truth, but she didn’t believe us. “I used to fit into this.” She held up an antique corset. “I bet it would fit you,” she said to Bree, and she helped Bree off with her shirt and both of the girls were giggling again. I took a picture. The girls were so into each other it was like I wasn’t even there. Soon they were kissing and rubbing, Bree standing on her tippy-toes and Kathryn’s neck angling down. It was beautiful, and my smile was for Bree, and

so when Kathryn asked me if they could be alone for a while, I said of course. I went to 7-Eleven and played *Bride of Pinbot*. Human influx. Partial Optical link... How do I look? Ball is locked. I can speak. Metamorphosis. Ball is locked. Increased pulse. Spin the big wheel.

Once I made the machine hum, I was ready for the real thing. I walked back across the street, up the stairs, and opened my door: Kathryn was on her knees and elbows with her face nestled in Bree's crotch. When she looked up and saw me, Kathryn said, "No! Not now," and she tried to lean over to push me out by closing the door.

"I want him here," Bree said.

I held the door firm.

"No," Kathryn said.

"I want it to be the three of us," Bree said.

"I want it to be the two of us," Kathryn said.

"It's okay, Bree," I said, and I closed the door.

Later that night, when Kathryn was back on her couch and Bree and I were in bed, Bree said, "I was so wet. I came so many times. But I want you to be there."

"Me too," I said.

Our sex now had an embedded fantasy element based on reality, and this fueled some great lovemaking.

All that week, Kathryn disappeared at five or six and worked until after 2am. If we saw each other, if it was just the two of us, Kathryn spoke in three-word sentences, alternating glances between my eyes and the closest door. The vibe wasn't there anymore, though I wanted it to be, and I found myself at her beck-and-call, hoping that

she'd relent and say something like, "I want to fuck you and your girlfriend." I drove her around whenever she asked, and dealt with her bullshit.

"What'd do that for?" I said, and I pulled over and slammed on the brakes.

Kathryn had snuck one of my beers into my Jeep; she took a swig and then tossed it, and the glass shattered on the pavement.

"I felt like it," she said.

"Enough of your Courtney Love crap," I said. The most profound thing Courtney had ever said was, "Wax my anus," but Mama Hole was Kathryn's idol, and Courtney's *I-don't-give-a-shit* attitude was Kathryn's mantra. Another evening, while getting ready for work, Kathryn pulled her one CD from her suitcase, Hole, and she read the lyrics, insisting that it was way better than anything Nirvana had ever written.

"It's crap," Bree said, and Kathryn's jaw dropped. She tried to speak.

"Why don't you understand Courtney?" Kathryn said. "You of all people."

"Huh?" Bree said. Bree didn't blame Courtney for Kurt's death, although her friends did, but she hated Courtney, and as far as I knew Kurt's ex was the only thing she hated.

This was June. I called my brother and wished him a happy birthday and he asked me what was wrong and I replied *Just frustrated*. He told me about his high school prom, the one girl he screwed besides his wife, the one that got away, the one he always told me about—every time we spoke—and he reminded me that I had a girlfriend and was getting laid, and that I didn't have a wife, kids, and mortgage. I told him that I had another girl going, which was probably one too many, and he laughed and said, "Must be tough; my ass bleeds for you." I could hear his wife calling him, and he said, "Gotta

go—don't get married until you're 35." I popped a beer and watched the Knicks, Game 5 of the championship against the Rockets. I was yelling the TV, at Starks, when the game was replaced with a white Bronco rolling down some highway in California. Soon I yelled at OJ, and then at the network for ruining the basketball coverage. For what seemed like hours, I had to watch Ewing's 7-foot scrunched into the corner of my already tiny TV. A blundered network PIP decision: OJ's mug and the chase get most of the screen, give a championship game the mini-box. And I'm thinking: *With fucking ethnic cleansing going down in Bosnia they interrupt the Knicks for a slow-mo chase of OJ in a white Bronco? The year of Michael Jordan's retirement, the Knicks' big chance, Game friggin' five—*

OJ's marriage hadn't quite worked out to his liking. Relationships can be peculiar. With all of the options for separation, OJ chose to end the marriage classic-medieval style: a daggering. Never took him for an old-fashioned guy. Was OJ in love when he knifed his wife? Can love cause the billions of brain cells and accompanying synapses to collectively decide, *Stabbing, to the death?* Almost exactly one year earlier, another couple had had a spat: Lorena Bobbitt stood over her husband while he slept; she cut off his dick, ran out of the house, drove away, and tossed the severed schlong into a field—Was she in love with John Wayne? Do the long June days cause the crazies to surface from the night like worms and slugs after a rain?

On Saturday, Bree and I sat on my futon and Kathryn showed us all of things she'd been buying: halters, leathers, sequins, and other stripping clothes. "I bought these boots from a transvestite," she said. They were large, with a broad high heel, and they

were covered in faux-leopard skin. Kathryn left for Razzmatazz, and Bree told me about what the two of them did the day before, when I was at work.

“I drove her around to like every thrift store and she bought so much stuff that she had to buy a suitcase, too.” Bree laughed and pointed to the new suitcase. “And she wanted to buy me stuff. She’s got a wad of like a thousand singles.” Bree passed the pipe and lighter. “Kathryn wants me to get an apartment with her, a one bedroom.”

“Go for it,” I said.

We both laughed.

Bree slept over that night, but we woke up at 4am to Kathryn, crying. She sat down at the base of the futon and Bree placed an arm around our stripper. Some guy had pulled up to Kathryn and asked her how much. “He thought I was a whore,” she said, sobbing and sniffing. “I’m not a whore. I can’t believe that bullshit. I want to kill him.” She turned to me. “Let’s go back to Aurora and find him and fuck him up.”

I told her I was out on that adventure. “You were on Aurora?”

She said that she was trying to hail a cab.

“Well,” Bree said, “there are a lot prostitutes on Aurora; he probably—”

“I’m not whore.”

The next night, Bree and I were in bed and we woke up to a beeping. It was 4am, and Kathryn’s pager was lumped into her suitcase making all kinds of noise. I pressed it a couple of times and the noise stopped, and just as soon as I lay down it started beeping again. I hit the lights and grabbed the pager. “A phone number.”

“Let’s call it,” Bree said. We called the number and pressed our heads together so that we could both hear. “This is Kathryn,” Bree said. “You paged me?”

“You working tonight?” a man’s voice said. “Can we meet?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, not tonight,” Bree said. “I have a headache.”

“I have a headache?” I said back to Bree when we hung up the phone.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Bree said. “You think she’s a call girl?”

“She ain’t delivering cookies. Pager don’t lie.”

I locked my door and we searched through Kathryn’s suitcase. Besides clothes and her Hole CD, there was her journal. Bree turned to a random entry. “It’s from New York.” *I don’t remember leaving the party, but I remember the heroin. If I stop I’ll get fat. I passed out in Central Park and woke up on a bench with a bum breathing into my ear. He smelled like pee. He was fucking me in the ass. I went back to sleep, and when I woke up again he was gone and my skirt was ripped off.*

“Holy shit,” we both said, caught up in the drama of the story but also worried for our health. We vowed to get tested for AIDS.

I went back to New York for a month and I let Kathryn have my room. Kathryn said that she would take care of my place, that she had enough money to fix her tits now and would most likely be gone when I got back. There wasn’t much she could steal, and Bree promised to check in on her whenever visiting the kids. I called Bree every week: “Do I still have a girlfriend, or did Kathryn steal you away.”

“Still got me,” Bree said.

During my month East, Neil released *Sleeps with Angels*. Neil’s record label said that he would not be holding any press interviews and I did some digging to find out why, even calling Reprise: Neil would not commercial grief; the album was his art-response to

Kurt's suicide. Neil had dozens of unreleased tunes ready for recording, but none of these were chosen: in four months, Neil wrote and released an entire album. Regarding the Neil song that Cobain quoted in his suicide note, Neil still sang it, only now it made him think about Kurt.

Neil had never heard any of Courtney's music, and only referred to Courtney as *What's-her-name*, which is how I referred to Kathryn whenever I called Bree. On one phone call, Bree asked, "Did you speak to Ariana?"

I had found a piece of driftwood when camping northwest of Seattle. I painted a hummingbird in red, white, and black on the bleached wood, adapting my bird from Pacific Northwest Native American drawings. It was for Ariana, for her birthday, and I had mailed it from Seattle to New York but had not received a response. It was my first attempt at communication with Ariana. Bree thought it was a sweet gift. I figured it was a peace offering: to be in love with someone, to be infinitely close to someone, and then to never speak to them for the rest of your life—this seemed wrong. Bree encouraged me to call Ariana when I was in New York, and I did, and I asked if she had received the hummingbird, her spirit animal and a symbol of good luck, and Ariana said that she had but she said nothing more, so I spoke: "Ariana, I felt that you and I could be friends."

"I have nothing to say to you," Ariana said. And this left me at a loss for words. What could I say? What could we talk about? The shootings on the Long Island Railroad? The death of River Phoenix? When I read about the shootings in the Seattle newspaper I had thought of Ariana—she was in New York and rode the Hicksville line into Penn. She liked River Phoenix—they were the same age, and *Stand By Me* was one of her favorite movies; I thought about Ariana when I heard that he overdosed. I

catalogued both of these events in the *To-be-talked-about-folder* in my brain, but then I met Bree, and I still thought about Ariana everyday, but not all the time, and now that news seemed old. And what could she say to me? *Seeing anyone? Find your missing piece yet?* After the long silence, Ariana said it again, “I have nothing to say to you.”

I returned from New York compressed by the claustrophobic inhibitions of my East Coast home. Everyone was getting big loans, making big plans. One month in New York and a three-wedding hat-trick: a Road Crew droog, one of my 2/13 buddies, and one of Bill’s brothers. We had reached the 26-30 bracket, the time when my friends would stop the hunt and settle down, but I was still horny was hell. “I want to blow you while you work,” Bree said after lovemaking, and I grunted, confused. “While you sit at your computer, working, I want to be there, beneath your desk.”

We talked about all kinds of little fantasies, all the while knowing that our bodies craved fulfillment of a bigger fantasy. I gave Bree my Penthouses, we watched pornos, we went to bars, we took the monorail and flirted with tourists. One time, at Pike Place Market, at an antique store, Bree’s knees almost buckled before the beauty of a salesgirl. The girl wore a short spring dress covered with sunflowers—Bree’s flower—and every time she leaned over we could see the soft whiteness of her breasts. “This antique washbasin is oak and delftware,” the girl said. “Original mirror.” The three of us stared into the warped mirror: we looked like a blurred picture, or like the birthday card Bree had made for me, only Bree was in the middle and the question mark had a face; the whiteness of the girl’s cleavage glowed when she leaned forward to imitate using the washbasin, and this is when I had to place my arm around Bree so she wouldn’t fall.

“So beautiful,” Bree said.

“The price is reasonable,” the girl said.

We were under a pressure and that had to be relieved.

I called Paulina in New Orleans and told her about our situation. We had remained in touch since college and shared our relationship stories, mostly through letters. She knew about Ariana, she knew about Bree, and I knew about the waitress she had slept with when she was a bartender in Key West. “I can’t believe I was such a prude that winter night in college,” she said, referring to when we dated and found ourselves in bed with her friend. “Too bad I wasn’t into girls in college.” Then she mentioned my ex from sophomore year, a girl everyone had the hots for. “I wonder where she’s at now.”

“Well, I’ve got a new girl for you,” I said.

“But me flying out to meet you guys?” she said. “It seems so, so—”

“Contrived.”

“Yeah,” she said. “What if it doesn’t work out, if we don’t get along?”

“Then you get to see Seattle and the Northwest.”

“I’m low on cash, and I’d have to buy some new underwear.”

“I’ll pay half of your ticket,” I said.

She brought up the American Eagle crash in Indiana and the US Air crash near Pittsburgh and said, “No survivors,” and I said not to worry. She took a breath and said, “I was going to go home for Thanksgiving.”

“I’ll make you a big dinner—my mom’s turkey recipe.”

“Okay,” she said, and then told me that she was excited to explore a whole new city of thrift stores, that she was really into Chinese dresses right now and had cleaned

New Orleans out, and that she still had a lot of closet space. It rained the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Bree and I picked Paulina up at the airport and drove her to my house and set her suitcase in my room. “I brought this for you,” she said, handing Bree a candle. *King L’flor, Witchdoctor* was printed on the side.

When Paulina went to the bathroom, Bree turned to me and pulled at my flannel: “She’s so pretty.” Paulina wore a small button-up blouse that clung to her ribs and made her chest stand out. She had a skinny frame and long legs but a round ass, and when I caught Bree staring with an open mouth I placed my hand under her jaw and gently pushed it closed. Bree smiled and buried her face in my chest. But the vibe wasn’t all there. I figured I’d loosen us up by driving to Baker Lake Hot Springs. Paulina had never been to hot springs before. An hour later, we were in Sedro Woolley, filling up: gasoline for me, wine for the girls.

I had been caught up in the task at hand, my brain working hard to please two girls, not realizing that if it was raining in the city in November, it would be snowing in the mountains. There were no cars once we cut into the mountains, and my headlights on the powdered trees and slick and shiny road were the only lights, a darkness like that of some kind of horror movie where the victims have to drive into desolation to meet their doom. By the time we turned off the paved road and up the logging road, the snow was deep. I shifted the Jeep into four-wheel drive and the girls drank the wine from the bottle and laughed as we slid around, both of them in the backseat like it was some kind of ride.

But the snow was up to my bumper and I could feel the cold on my face through the Jeep’s plastic windows. I had been up and down this road before, and I knew of only one place wide enough to turn around—assuming we couldn’t reach the parking area

halfway up the mountain—and when we reached this ledge a car was parked there, buried in snow up to its roof. The owner would have to wait until spring thaw to get the car unstuck, and this was November. And then we got stuck, all four of my wheels spinning in the snow.

The girls joked and laughed when I opened the door. *Are we there yet?* I sunk into the snow up to my knees and the cold burned through my flannel. I was wearing sneakers and jeans and two hours earlier had been staring out at the rain from the warmth of my room. I didn't even have gloves. I crawled under the front of the Jeep and began kicking at the snow, unsure if I should pack it down further or kick it away from the bumper. The heat from the engine did nothing to keep my legs warm and my wet jeans clung to my skin and I kicked like I was treading water in the middle of a lake, soon to drown, my imagination conjuring images: me hiking two miles back to the main road and then ten miles back to the nearest building, in drenched clothes shivering through the snow, while my two girls finished the wine and froze to death. I kicked, and I could hear them laughing inside, and when I climbed in and behind the wheel I cranked the heat on full and nailed the gas and we jumped out of the snow like a fox.

As long as I kept the pedal steady we seemed immune to bogging down, but this had the Jeep sliding close to the cliffs around many of the tight turns, and the drop-offs were five-hundred feet plus. The girls drank—and I declined, choosing reflexes over comfort—and they laughed, making fun of me, saying that I looked like I had just been swimming and that it wasn't fair, wondering when they'd get to go swimming too.

I was able to turn the Jeep around when we reached the parking clearing. The snow spread across this semicircle in small mounds and valleys, as if covering graves,

and when the headlights hit these mounds the snow sparkled. The girls opened the door and jumped out while I was still hypnotized by the light. They were halfway down the trail by the time I grabbed a towel and followed.

The branches of a large pine kept our clothes free from falling snow.

The hot water met our nakedness as if this was what we'd been waiting for, as if the heat on our skin, and then our bones, was the fantasy. We sat in the darkness until the water soaked up our shivers. Once our eyes adjusted, an ambient light with an unknown source was enough to make out shapes. I screwed this light up twice by taking pictures, one by timer of the three of us, and the other of Paulina standing: the whiteness of her skin glowed when the flash struck, the blackness of the water looked unreal, and her red fingernails seemed the source of a superpower.

We huddled, sitting in the pool, our butts on the soft dirt floor. My mind was half on the Jeep's tires, measuring the tread and the ground clearance against the snow, wondering if the track we'd made would be enough to ensure a safe return, but then the girls kissed for the first time and I was brought back into the present. Then the kiss was three-way, and I was hard. In the kiss, we bobbed, sometimes rising from the water enough that our shoulders met the cool air, sometimes our jaws meeting the hot water. I tasted two girls, distinctly different, and they tasted each other, and the snow poured over us, and when it was coming down so thickly that it frosted our faces, we stopped the kiss, faced the pine and watched the tree shake and bend, the laden branch letting loose its bundle onto our clothes.

"We need to go," I said. "It's coming down hard."

"Can't we just stay here," Paulina said, "sleep here?"

“We might be here until April,” I said, standing.

“I can’t take off from work that long,” she said.

Bree laughed.

We shook the snow from our towels and clothes, dried and dressed, and walked back to the Jeep by flashlight. I drove fast and the Jeep hugged the track. We hit the main road and I kept us in four-wheel drive, even when we reached the highway, wanting to keep my cargo safe. Our lump of wet clothes sat next to me, and the girls sat together in the backseat in their underwear, kissing, sometimes stopping to ask where we were. Back at the house, we jumped into the bathtub and drank another bottle of wine, bumping our bodies as we tried to wash each other, finally abandoning the bathroom, exchanging fluorescence for candlelight and tub for bed. The girls dove into each other like lionesses, and I entered from the periphery feeling like a king for the first time in my life. This fantasy was sixteen years in the making. I made love to both girls, I fucked both girls, and when I came they made love to each other and I watched. When I was hard again, I entered the fray again, and we continued like this until we were beyond exhaustion, and then we smoked and kept going, insisting on doing it until sunrise though few words were spoken, and those spoken were mostly directions, like, *Come here*, or *Roll over*, two-word commands rising above Jane’s *Addiction* and Alice in Chains. None of us said the word “No.”

A quickie in the morning, and I made stuffing and put the turkey in the oven and we all returned to bed while it cooked. Just after noon, I woke up in the middle of two girls, one blonde, one brunette, the rain pattering the roof, thinking: *I could live like this, be happy like this, mate. We could have a farm, the three of us, and I could do computer*

work from home and the girls could ride horses and till soil and gather the pigs. We would have a large bedroom, and Paulina and Bree could each have a walk-in closet.

We ate dinner and each other, celebrating Thanksgiving from my hard futon. The tryptophan and wine kept us in semi-sleep, a dreamlike daze enhanced by the endorphins flooding within. We made love three-way, and then throughout the night and the next day we took turns double-teaming, though it was more like double-worshipping.

Whenever Paulina left for the bathroom, Bree thanked me. Whenever Bree left, Paulina told me how cute she was. "I love blondes," Paulina said. When it was my turn, and they were both on their knees looking up at me, blue eyes and brown, thin lips and thick, I lost track of every one of my pains.

Friday night. Somehow, we pulled ourselves from bed and I took the girls out for dinner, for the best Salmon Panang in the world. I drove us to Bellevue, to The King and I, and we arrived before closing and snuggled into a booth. Everything, in our heightened states of sensuality, was enhanced and pleasurable: the misty rain on our faces, the twang of Neil's guitar, the coconut milk and curry. We made the same noises at dinner that we had made in bed, and then returned home and made them again. The next morning, with daylight entering the window, we bound Bree's hands and feet with a silky rope and attached the other ends to the holes I had drilled in the futon's board. There, spread, Paulina sat on Bree's face and fucked her with a wine bottle. Kendall Jackson, chardonnay. I took pictures, and when it was over, when we had untied Bree and she had stopped shaking from orgasm, she started to cry. Bree nestled up to me and cried, and when we asked what was wrong, she said, "Nothing. I'm just so happy," and she repeated this to make sure we had heard.

At the airport, Paulina made us promise to visit her in February for Mardi Gras. We promised and we kissed goodbye, in such a kiss that travelers stopped to watch despite being late for boarding.

We bought our plane tickets for Mardi Gras two full months in advance. That first week after Thanksgiving, I worked with a newfound energy and positivism; sometimes I shivered at work, an aftershock tremor, a remembrance of orgasms past, and I returned home to meet Bree to relive our fantasy through sex and talk. “I really liked it when you and Paulina tied me up,” Bree said.

“Me too,” I said.

“I really really liked it,” she said.

By this point in my career, I was pretty fluent with everything regarding computers, everything that I needed to do at least, so I spent a lot time reminiscing, often about time spent in bed. And just as often, I thought about the future: *I could live like this*, I thought while staring at computer screen; *Two girls and me, three hearts, love and sex—I could be happy*, I thought, clicking and dragging. *But where does one go once a fantasy is fulfilled?* My imagination took me deeper into the fantasy, as if only crossing the threshold of another land with still so much to explore. I imagined the bagel girl, the blonde who always wore a leather choker and who gave Bree and me extra bialys for free. She had been a fantasy of both of ours since first bite, but we had never seen her out from behind the counter.

Although sometimes we had empty rooms in the house, now it was at maximum capacity. Bjørn was away at sea, but all the other rooms were full, including the basement: Bucky Products had moved down the block into a triangular building across

from the animal hospital, and a dreadfully skinny couple had moved in, tacking up rugs to act as walls. I knocked on a rug one evening to introduce myself and when I pushed it aside the guy and the girl each wore a frightened face. Neither looked like they'd been fed in weeks, so I offered them pasta and they declined.

We had a dancer who stretched her legs in the kitchen, over her head, even when wearing a skirt; we had a constant influx and outflow of naturopathic med students; we had a guy who never spoke and ate his meals in his room, if he ate at all, didn't have a job, didn't shower, and didn't comb his hair, liked to burn garbage. And we had his opposite in the room that had a new pretty girl every three months: a tall girl from Georgia who liked to clean, a waitress who liked my cooking and always burned vanilla candles; everything in her room was white, and her lean body looked good to go, but Bree thought the same thing I did: virgin.

A high school dropout had moved into the small room, the closet without any outlets. He had purple spiked hair and wasn't shy about his cocaine problem, and he worked two jobs to support this habit. "But I'm working, you know, so I got that, and if I lose one job I got the other, wanna split an eightball?"

"No thanks," I told my housemate, "haven't touched it in more than eight years." I had outgrown that addiction. My only addiction now was sex, though I wasn't sure if it was an addiction, and if it was I didn't want to outgrow it. Sex made me feel most alive. My oldest brother had just turned 41, and he seemed more concerned with boats and fishing and with getting away from his wife.

The coke addict's girlfriend moved into the closet-sized room with him, but since he was working a lot she often had the space to herself. She liked to come into my room

to watch the Simpsons, and she told me stories during the commercials. “I’ve decided,” she said. “I’m changing my name from Jessica to Jessika.” Jessika was 17, and had been on the road since running away at 13. She made her way from Quebec to Alberta. She didn’t have a suitcase. When Jessika wanted to change clothes, she’d walk into a department store, take an outfit into the dressing room, and exchange her clothes for the new clothes, even returning to the aisles to hang her worn clothes on the rack. “Even my underwear.” Jessika found a guy to take care of her in Edmonton. He was 28 and had his own apartment, and she gave him blowjobs until she turned 15, when she met my coke addict roommate. They ran out of money in Calgary and moved in with Jessika’s dad near Vancouver, until her boyfriend decided to move to Seattle, and now she followed. “One time,” Jessika said, “I was driving with my dad—I don’t know how to drive, I mean like I was in the passenger seat, the one next to the driver, my dad—and we slid on some ice, and he hit the brakes, and my head hit the window and I was so dizzy.”

“Did it ever wear off, Jessika?”

She stared at me a long while thinking about my question. “Yeah, I guess.”

Jessika’s character in the Dungeons & Dragons world had some experience—she had fended for herself on the street after all—but her level was knocked down a couple of notches by intelligence and wisdom scores hovering around the 3 to 5 range. Still, she had a superpower. There was a picture in one of my old D&D books of a succubus. This demoness had the perfect curves known only to the girls of Penthouse, with large round tits able to cast spells of hypnosis on men and women both. The picture showed the succubus with little horns sticking up through her long hair, and I couldn’t see Jessika’s horns but otherwise she was the exact replica of that creature. If anything, Jessika’s lips

were fuller. Succubi have complete power over men; they use sex to achieve their goals, like to steal a man's soul. Jessika wasn't after any souls, but she was out for flesh, and since her boyfriend had limp-dick syndrome like most coke addicts, and since she wasn't getting any, and since I was around, it was my flesh she wanted.

"Holy shit," Bree said when she first met Jessika. "What the fuck is that?" Bree was referring to Jessika's body, in front of Jessika, and Jessika smiled and extended her hand. Bree sat on my bed and rubbed her temples. "Wow."

Bree had told me about some of the girls at her college, how un-sensual they were, how they'd never been wet between the legs and probably never would be. Jessika, in her eyes and smile, in that little gap between her two front teeth, in the way she kept her shoulders back as if to balance her tits to prevent falling over forward, with all of these weapons—Bree corroborated what I thought: Jessika was forever wet, forever ready, forever good to go.

"She's 17," I said. But she moved like a porno star, in a porno, in those seconds just before the clothes come off.

"I'll go to jail," Bree said. Bree pictured prison to be a whole bunch of Kathryns dominating flocks of Brees.

Jessika's teen spirit smelled up my room one night. She came in and told me that she'd shaved, that she'd show me, and I stopped her before she could unbutton her jeans. She sat on my lap and told me that she was moving back to Canada, in with her mom, but that she'd stay if I wanted her to. She placed my hands on her breasts—larger and firmer than I had ever felt.

"Your kid sister needs you, doesn't she?" I said. Her ear was next to my lips. I

could taste her salt on my tongue, yet my tongue stayed in my mouth.

“Yeah, I guess,” Jessika said, and she stood and told me that she’d write. And then she was out the door, out of the house, off to Canada if she could find it.

“What do you mean she left?” Bree said, and I told her to relax and let out a little laugh. “Don’t tell me to relax I am relaxed.” She was yelling, and I told her so. “I can’t believe you let her leave.”

“I can’t believe you’re upset,” I said, and I laughed again.

Bree said that Jessika was the hottest chick she’d ever seen, and I said, “Well, you’re the hottest chick I’ve ever seen, Bree.” Bree said again that she couldn’t believe I had let Jessika leave, and I said that sometimes you can’t have the hot ones.

“But we could’ve had her,” Bree said.

“She said she’d write. Assuming that Jessika can, that she knows how, she’ll be 18 in a year: maybe she’ll come visit.”

Bree and I didn’t make love that night but we did have sex. I fucked her and spanked thru, the latter at her request, and harder at her request too, until my hand and her ass were the same shade of red. By mid-December, I felt Bree’s fantasies veering, though not entirely away from mine own. She had asked me, more than once, to take her to the Catwalk. “Sparky invited us, remember?” I told her that I remembered. “I know you prefer your fantasies behind closed doors,” Bree said, “but we don’t have to like do anything—not like strip and get tied to wall for a whipping in front of ten people, not unless you want to.”

“I’m not a closed-doors-guy, I mean not only. In fact, no doors: I’d prefer a forest. Just not a forest full of people. Even better: a library. But after hours.”

Driving Bree to the Catwalk, I wondered if the vp with the “slave” tattoo would be there, if Bree would meet her, if physical pain was a substitute for emotional pain for this woman, and what kind of psychological pain this woman suffered to desire a ten-hand spanking. Maybe she just liked pain. We mentioned Sparky’s name at the door and slipped in, and Myra was there shooting pool, all two-hundred-plus pounds of her. Bree wanted to meet her. “Her?” I said. Myra had seemed friendly enough when Dik and I had met her, but I couldn’t find anything sexually attractive about her. Now she wore a leather vest, and her big arms resembled those of a fat biker. More flab pushed out from her jeans, and her freshly trimmed mullet did little to hide the fat on her neck. “How about that girl?” I said, pointing to legs in fishnet stockings, dancing alone.

Bree said that she thought Myra was hot, in a weird way, and that she’d never be able to talk to Myra without my help. She pleaded, playfully at first, but then her face seemed to sag and I gave in immediately. It was an expression I had seen a couple of times before, like when Cobain killed himself, and when this face crept out it made me nervous. So I introduced them. Myra was cordial, even formal: “Of course I remember you,” she said to me. “And who might you be?” she said to Bree, and Bree tried to squeak out a name in reply, but the music was too loud and I had to say it. Myra took Bree’s hand and bent down and kissed Bree on the cheek, then returned to pool.

“I should’ve asked for her phone number,” Bree said, “but I couldn’t speak.”

Sparky seemed to be putting things away, and he was the only one in his dungeon. He gave Bree a tour. “This is where my victims get bound to the wall,” he said, pointing to the metal rings bolted into the concrete. Bree asked about Myra, and Sparky said that he had Myra’s number, and that Bree could have it, “For a price.” He filled a knapsack

with whips and added, “Just kidding.” Sparky said that he was off to a private party. He didn’t invite us, though he did mention that he was having a party himself sometime soon, and he said to call him. We didn’t get Myra’s number that night. Bree and her two roommates planned a party for the following week. She asked me to invite Sparky and I asked her if she thought that was a good idea. I guess he could bring his whips, I said.

“No,” Bree said. “You’re right. I don’t think a bunch of hippie kids is his scene.”

“Could be,” if he brought enough rope.

We left a message on his voicemail and went on a beer run. I bought a quarter-keg of ESB and two sixes of Blackhook and a heavy bottle of Shakespeare Stout. We got back to her place, and just as I grabbed the keg Bree let out a scream.

“What?” I said, expecting to see one of her roommates dead on the porch. There was a bird at Bree’s feet, and she crouched to study it: the feathers were missing from the bird’s back, as was its skin, and it had what looked like ribs attached to a spine, and it wasn’t bleeding but we could see its blood moving through vessels.

I prodded the bird with my foot and it took one step and sat shivering.

“Oh my God,” Bree said, “help it!”

I told her that I didn’t know what to do, that it didn’t look good for Tweety, and she reminded me that I had a friend in vet school.

“I don’t think he’s up to birds yet, and he’s in the Caribbean.”

Bree moaned and I said okay okay. “We’ll get a box, we’ll take him to the animal hospital. Bree? Bree? We need a box.”

She shook herself back into the moment and we went to her room and pulled the closet inside-out to find a shoebox. When we returned, the bird was spread out across the

lawn: feathers on the grass, blowing, body in pieces, now clearly bloody, and head detached. A cat looked at us from the bushes and Bree cried.

By the time I got Bree away from the scene and onto the couch her face looked so contorted into anguish, skin completely red, that her roommates hardly recognized her. When they did, one sat at her side and the other at her feet, and they pet her and said that it would be okay. I explained what had happened, and one roommate told Bree that the birdy was better off, that he would've suffered until dying, and the other added that the bird was in shock, and Bree nodded but kept crying for a full thirty minutes. Then we cleaned her up for the party.

Bree's two roommates: Yennie, a mellow tomboyish hippiesque girl with large breasts; and Phoxodd, the pale art student who had helped to introduce Bree and me. Phoxodd still had that same boyfriend, and it was his twenty-first birthday. This was a combo party: for him, and for Bree, who would turn twenty-two the following week. The entire party crowd from SPU showed up, everyone joking about how hung over they'd be at church the next morning. Chapel was a required course. Bree had scored a half-ounce and I had used a handful to make honeyslides, and all partook. We smoked and drank and toward midnight the only ones awake were Bree, Yennie, and myself. Yennie and I lit up a bowl in her room while cleaning up, and somehow we started to kiss. We had never been attracted to each other. We were confidants and friends and shot hoops and drank beer, and I guess we were curious. And inebriated. I didn't think the kiss would go any further, but two seconds later Bree was standing at the door, and my heart jumped in the same way it did when Dad had caught me chopping cocaine in high school. We stopped kissing and Bree removed her shirt. She wore a pained smile, forced, and it

seemed to say, *I caught you, both of you, so now you must do what I say—you owe me.* She pushed Yennie onto the bed and the way Yennie leaned back on her elbows looked like a shrug, like: *Okay, I guess this is what we're doing.* Bree pulled off Yennie's shirt and then the three of us were fooling around. When we were naked, it seemed all elbows and knees, and I knew there were four breasts within reach but I couldn't get to any of them. Bree went down on Yennie and swung herself around and then they were sixty-nining, though Yennie was giving it half the effort of Bree, more fingers than tongue. I eased myself out of that tangle and watched for a while, not even jerking off. Even through the numbness of alcohol and THC, something felt forced, strange. I laughed when I compared this with our Paulina threesome—that one, for all its contrivance, felt fluid, as effortless as an eagle in flight—wings spread, flying, legs spread, fucking.

When Bree came, it was over.

We all passed out in Yennie's bed, and at some point in the night Bree and I moved to her bed.

The next morning, I poured myself a glass of carrot juice in the kitchen. Yennie walked by on her way to the bathroom and rolled her eyes. But we both laughed.

Bree didn't want another party on the day of her birthday. I spoke to her from work; she said she wanted to go to the drive-in. "It's closed for winter, Bree."

"I know, but I want to go," she said.

We had spent summer nights at the drive-in. The movies, double or triple features, didn't start until sundown. We saw *Rob Roy* around the solstice: it started after 11pm, and *Braveheart* didn't go on until 1am. I had made baked ziti and we brought the

bong and a handful of condoms. When we weren't fooling around or eating, Bree was sleeping. She said it was one of her favorite nights ever. I wanted to go there too. Recent things—her attraction to Myra, our romp with Yennie, the bird, and her forced smile—these things had me feeling a little distant from Bree.

I tried to bridge this gap. I spoke to Yennie and convinced her to take Bree out for a birthday beer at 5pm. I went to Pike Place Market and found that antique dealer and bought Bree the oak-delft washbasin. It set me back, but seemed like the coolest birthday present. I had originally bought her the new Bob Marley boxed-set—Bob was her Neil—and I figured that I could give her the Marley for Christmas instead. I had the huge antique thing set up in her room and completely wrapped in newspaper by the time she walked through the door. She tore into it and was so happy she cried. She thanked me a hundred times, and then I gave her the birthday option, if she'd like me to cook for her or take her out, and she opted for out, and we grabbed her two roommates and went to Beso del Sol and ate fajitas and drank margaritas. Mexican men in bolos and cowboy boots took the girls onto the wooden floor to dance salsa. Bree was smiling and laughing again like a little kid, but there was suffering there too, latent, waiting.

Our sex changed.

“I want you to hit me,” Bree said. I rolled her over and spanked her ass. She rolled back and propped herself up on her elbows. “I mean really hit me.”

“You don't want to be spanked?” I said.

“Well, yes, I do, but I want you to hit my face.” I gave her a playful tag that ended up in a cheek-pinch and this led to a kiss. She pushed me away and asked me to

hit her harder. I was all up for fulfilling my lover's fantasies, but this was difficult. She wanted pain, and something inside of me held back. Maybe if I knew or understood her emotional funk I would've been more inclined to attempt to replace it with physical pain, but whenever I had asked her what was wrong she'd clam up. Still, I figured my hand would be better than some stranger's, some sadist she might meet at a Sparky party. I smacked her face, and each time she said, "Harder!" She'd fall back onto the futon, then sit up and stare at me with pleading eyes. Soon I was winding back and slapping as hard as I could, the thwack-sound rising above the music, loud enough for my housemates to hear, and me so scared her little head would come off in my hands. She wanted punches too, but I couldn't do it—couldn't fulfill my lover's fantasy. The slapping replaced foreplay, and it got Bree wet, and I'd slap for as long she wanted, until she said *Fuck me*.

Paulina picked us up at the airport wearing a bathrobe and fuzzy pink slippers. Bree and I laughed at her outfit, and she told us all about the partying she'd already done. "My boss threw up in his glove compartment," she said. "He told the office manager to clean it out, she told me to do it. I figure I will, but not until next week, after Fat Tuesday." We laughed.

The city vibrated with sound and energy. Teen faces smiled; they banged cymbals and stamped feet and blew horns and twirled batons. Parades everywhere, and everyone who wasn't parading was staggering. Paulina was a seamstress, but she also worked for a record label, and she got us passes to a bigwig movie party in some Civil War mansion in the Garden District. We drank martinis from an ice sculpture waiting for John Goodman, but he never showed, so we downed our drinks and hopped in a cab.

Paulina's office manager came with us, and she sat on my lap, and when we got to the bar Paulina thanked me: "She doesn't get any physical contact; that's why she's such a bitch." The bar was in a basement of a house in a neighborhood free from zoning laws. We ended up back at her place by 5am, the three of us in bed.

"I just want to watch you two do it," Bree said.

"We want you, too," I said. Paulina nodded.

"It's coming close to that time of the month," Bree said.

I gave her the face, and Bree admitted that it wasn't really close to her period, but that she just wanted to watch us do it, and she urged us and we did it and she watched, quiet and motionless.

Thursday night we ended up at Mid City Lanes, the largest bowling alley I had ever seen. Shiny wooden lanes, balls cracking against pins, and everywhere else people dancing to live zydeco. The band had one man on spoons and another on washboard and four more played accordion and guitar and all smiled as they played. I drank Jack Daniels, Southern Comfort, and Coke, figuring the caffeine would help give me something energy-wise. Paulina danced with Bree and I watched until a curvy woman in her forties, with smiling eyes and smiling cheeks, took my free hand and led me into dancing. We danced and drank and cabbled it home and passed out spinning.

The next morning, Paulina took Bree's hand and dragged her into a closet; the girls played dress-up with vintage clothing and Paulina attempted to wipe the sourpuss off Bree's face. She dolled Bree up and we caught the Zulu parade in the rain and the girls' costumes got soaked. We drew hot water and took baths in the clawfoot bathtub and drank all afternoon. With a new costume, all sequin with matching mask, and the

afternoon sun, Bree was rejuvenated. I was drunk. We went to a party on Bourbon Street and drank more. We stood on a balcony and tossed beads down to any girls willing to show us their breasts. When we took to the streets, I was drunker. I threw one arm over Bree's shoulders and one over Paulina's, and they led me through the crowd. From this position, I could lift up either of their shirts or both, and I did, and we scored so many beads that we were practically choking. We ended up in a strip club, the Cabaret, and I bought Bree a lap dance, and Bree's smile had returned—that little kid smile, like she knows only happiness, puppies, and ice cream. Chloe danced the tables in the French Quarter, said that she had saved enough money to buy a house on Pontchartrain, said that she liked little blonde girls and Bree giggled. She gave Bree a wet kiss and Bree closed her eyes and sat back and remained in heaven for as long as their lips touched.

Paulina took Bree and me back to her place and the three of us had sex so wild that we broke Paulina's brass bed. One of the legs snapped and the bed tipped and Bree fell to the floor and pulled Paulina with her. I had to stack phonebooks under the leg to upright the bed, but it didn't screw up the mood, only changed it: we were having sex and laughing, this time Paulina and I focusing on Bree, treating her like a princess, four hands and two tongues covering her body and helping her to escape whatever it was that pursued her. No slappy slappy requested.

Paulina had costumes to sew for most of the day, so Bree and I hit the bars for an early lunch. We were in some dive by the water, sitting at the bar next to two dark-haired girls. They were friends with the bartender and were drinking for free. The one closest to us, in a baseball hat and a leather jacket way too big for her little frame, asked us

where we were from. Soon we were old buddies, and the girl, Jenna, was showing us all of her piercings and giving us a verbal tour of Louisiana. She lit up a cigarette and Bree took one too, lighting it from Jenna's lit cigarette, leaning toward Jenna like they were about to kiss. I had never seen Bree smoke cigarettes before.

Jenna insisted that we had to see a plantation and we hopped into her car and drove out of New Orleans. I sat in the backseat with the other girl and Bree sat in front talking with Jenna. They were so involved in a conversation that when I said, *Hey, this is the bridge from Easy Rider, the one they cross when Hendrix's If Six was Nine is playing*, I was totally ignored. Looked like the bridge.

A row of oaks led up to an nineteenth century mansion with several broad balconies. We walked around and hung from trees and I took a bunch of pictures. By nighttime we were back in the city and going to meet Paulina. Jenna and Bree didn't want to leave each other. It was like two teenage best friends saying goodbye for the summer, one going to sleep-away camp the other staying home. They exchanged numbers and addresses and we all hugged.

I told Bree that we could hang out with Jenna again, that we could call her, but Bree seemed legitimately sad. She gave me a look that tried to explain, as if hanging out was what Bree and Jenna had been talking about this whole time, and that they had reached the conclusion that it wouldn't be possible, and that I couldn't begin to understand the impossibility of the situation.

We continued to party with Paulina until it was one long party and then we were on the plane heading to Seattle, my rolls of film proof of a good time. But when I got my pictures developed, half of Bree's smiles were that pained smile, forced and irregular,

like the skin of her cheeks was holding tight to prevent a smile. I revisited Sparky after New Orleans, but this time it was a party and this time I took Bree's roommate, Yennie. I wasn't about to go alone, and Bree was at her parents' or someplace. Plus, I needed someone to talk to and Yennie had a good ear. Seemed a better venue than a coffee shop. That, and Sparky had the hots for Yennie. She laughed this off: Yennie was barely interested in sex let alone S&M. She knew I wasn't into the public thing; we both went because we were curious to see.

It was Sparky's new house, this one south of the Kingdome, the only house on a street surrounded by warehouses. "No one can hear the screams," Sparky said after giving me directions. The place was packed with people: some sat in the living room drinking beer, some on the stairs drinking beer, and some stood in the kitchen drinking beer. Normal party. Most of the people seemed gothic, punk, alternative, leather, piercings, plastic, latex. One girl wore white pants and white shoes and a pink Izod shirt complete with little alligator, like an 80's TV show: *Growing Pains* or *Family Ties*. She said she was from Indiana and had just moved to Seattle three days ago. She said that she loved it here and was glad to have found a scene where she could be herself. When she walked away, Yennie and I exchanged looks. "If that girl's parents only knew," Yennie said, and she asked me how I thought the girl hooked up with Sparky.

I said it must've been through some weird personal ad or something. "She must've known what she was looking for. Maybe there's something in *The Stranger*."

Yennie and I drank next to the fridge and found ourselves in a conversation with a couple, two gorgeous girls, each of us sharing the story of how we knew Sparky. The blonde was young, and so pretty that Yennie and I both had trouble looking at her

without gawking. She went by the name of “Splash” and worked as a stripper. Her girlfriend looked like Brooke Shields but with a bigger nose, and Brooke did the talking.

“So,” I said, wondering what to say at a Sparky party, “you girls into S&M?”

The blonde adjusted her bra and Brooke spoke: “Splash loves pain; it’s the only way she can get off. I enjoy a spank, but none of that getting fisted in the ass stuff.”

Sparky came up from the basement and had Yennie and I follow him back down. It was painted black like the one from his other house, but in addition to the gyno tables there was room enough for a huge cross (with shackles attached) and a space where three men stood side-by-side. By Jesus’ light, I could see that the hands of these naked men were tied to an overhead beam; their legs were spread and they faced away from us, toward a wall where men and women sat staring. Sparky offered Yennie a seat next to a topless girl on a gyno table, and then he said, “Check this out.” He lit a torch and waved it across the three asses, turned and raised his eyebrows at Yennie, and then waved the torch in between the spread legs of the men, brushing the flame beneath their balls. All squirmed and one cried out. A girl sitting in front of the scene leaned into a friend and whispered and pointed. Sparky repeated the process and I squirmed when they squirmed.

“I gotta get some air,” I said to Yennie.

“I’m not staying down here,” she said.

When the Indiana Izod girl came downstairs, Sparky set the torch in a holder and gave her a hug, and we slipped by and went upstairs and out the kitchen door. The backyard was full with people: some standing, some at a picnic table whispering, two sitting in chaises in their underwear as if tanning. We walked over to the shed where a guy sat topless on a stool under a spotlight. His girlfriend stood behind him holding ice

against his nipple. Another guy kneeled before him, piercing his chest with a needle. There were four or five other needles glowing silver by the light, and they made a horizontal ladder from the man's free nipple to his collarbone. His skin stretched but did not bleed. Yennie grabbed my arm and I looked to where she was looking: a couple sat motionless in the shadow of the shed; the ends of the silver needles stuck into their torsos reflected the ambient light from a nearby warehouse.

Yennie and I sat on the lawn and talked about Bree, trying to figure out where she was at. "She's always been like that," Yennie said. I didn't agree, though Yennie had known her longer.

"Bree hasn't said anything to you?" I said. "About what's on her mind or anything?"

Yennie shook her head.

And then Bree was standing before us.

It was worse than when Bree had found us kissing, despite that we were just at the party as friends and onlookers. It was worse when questions bounced in my head: *Was Bree looking for me? Was she here as a participant? How and when did she get Sparky's new number and what else has she been up to?*

Contorted face: Bree looked like she was about to cry and not stop crying for a long, long time. She sat and pulled the sleeves of her flannel over her hands. When I went to the cooler to grab three beers, some guy tapped my arm and pointed to Bree and said that she looked bad, man. Bree asked me if I remembered Jenna, the girl in the oversized leather jacket from New Orleans and I said of course. "Her sister wrote me. Jenna's car drove off a bridge," Bree said, hardly breathing. "She's dead. The letter said

that you had taken the last picture of Jenna. Her sister wants to know if we could send a copy to New Orleans.” I told her of course.

One night, I asked her: “Bree, is there something I did, or didn’t do, or something? You don’t seem happy sometimes. I don’t know—”

“It’s not you,” Bree said.

Another night, Bree asked me to come over, so I did. The front door was open, the lights were off, Bree was alone, sitting on her floor: she had scratched her forearm with a razorblade. The cuts weren’t deep but she was bleeding. I dabbed damp paper towels at the slices.

“I don’t think we should see each other any more,” Bree said.

I didn’t know how to react so I said, “What?”

She showed me her wrists: thin scars on each. Said that she had tried in San Diego, and that her failed attempt was the real reason why she moved back to Seattle.

“You need help, Bree.”

She said that she knew, and I said that I’d help her get through this, that I’d sit with her or talk to her or drive her to a therapist, whatever it took. I held her in my arms; we slept in our clothes. The next morning, Bree said that she’d find a psychologist.

I moved down the hall into the coolest room in the house, a suite of sorts, with a smaller alcove, where I set up my rock-hard futon, and a larger adjoining chamber, where I sat on my new futon couch staring, part out the window at the Space Needle, part at the junkyard of computer parts, leaning stacks of CDs and stereo components, and the pieces of the oak desk that CCS had thrown out, those which I planned to assemble. As I fit my

room together, I looked for an answer. If Bree had tried to break up with me a couple of months earlier, I might've fought it. My first impulse was defensive, as if Bree wanted to be free of me so she could go have sexual adventures on her own. But this sentiment didn't feel right, not after seeing Bree's blood. Her problems, in her head or not, were legit. She needed something and I couldn't give it to her.

A week later, Bree showed up and asked for water. She sat on my futon couch and I went downstairs and filled a glass. Back in my room, I handed the water to Bree and she gulped it down like she had just walked across a desert. I asked if she was alright, if everything was okay, but all I got were shrugs. I asked when she was seeing her therapist and she said: "I just took some aspirin."

"You have a headache?" I said.

"No."

"How much aspirin did you take, Bree?"

She said that she had been sitting in her car in front of my house for an hour holding a bottle of aspirin in between her legs, that she had swallowed the entire bottle.

"How long ago?"

She said that it took a while, that she had just finished. "But I didn't have anything to drink and I couldn't go to 7-Eleven, I just couldn't, and now they're down. Thank you for the water." Her face resumed its sad pose, the pre-cry wince.

I took her hand and grabbed my keys and pulled her behind me and set her in my Jeep. I blew off stop signs and sped through red lights holding imaginary conversations with police officers in my mind. I parked in the ambulance spot in front of the sliding doors to the emergency ward and dragged Bree inside and told the nurse what had

happened and she called for assistance and they took Bree away. I called her parents, told them where we were, moved my car, and waited.

Her parents hugged me when they arrived and thanked me over and over. They both looked like they had been stunned by headlights on a dark mountain road. I had never seen their faces not smiling and I felt so sorry for them. I blotted moisture from my eyes before it could form into tears. Bree's mother knew everyone in the hospital and they all called her "Doctor Whitman." She disappeared and left me with her husband and he thanked me a couple of times and then he disappeared too.

What the fuck is love? Were Bree and I in love? I was pretty sure we weren't, but my heart was pounding and I couldn't sit. So I paced. I knew we were over, relationship broken, but I didn't want to lose my friend, assuming that I hadn't killed her by pouring that glass of water. It had seemed like we were compatible, like we had mating potential, then we seemed incompatible, and I wanted to know that exact point of flip-flop, but what did it matter. I never felt for Bree what I felt for Ariana, but Bree and I had something good. Had had something good. When I thought about not having this person in my life, I felt hollow.

Bree knew how much I loved bagels, cream cheese, and smoked salmon, how I could subsist on this combo. She knew I loved bagels and cream cheese with faux-bologna. "It's veggie-bologna," I had said to her. "I grew up eating a bagel-cream-cheese-bologna-lettuce sandwich every day after elementary school, middle school, high school, and then in college I took Organic Chemistry, and I learned how sodium nitrite combines with secondary amines to form carcinogens in your body, so I had to stop eating bologna, but now there's veggie-bologna, and I'm back, baby!" Bree knew about

this, knew my favorite bagel was an everything, that veggie-salami was good too, but that I liked to add smoked oysters to kick the faux-salami up a notch. She knew I loved bagels and I knew she loved the bagel girl with the black choker. Bree also loved lollipops and reggae, and dogs of any breed, especially the mutts. Countless times I'd seen Bree drop to her knees to hug a stranger's dog, offer her face and let the dog lick, and she called it *Puppy*, even if it was an old fogy. She didn't know much about cars, but she had this thing about clutches: she knew it was bad to let your foot rest on the clutch, and if I ever did she'd tell me, even beg me to take my foot away. Is this what love is? Knowing the little things about a person, things that no one else would care about but that you're proud to know? If this person disappeared from my life, through death or breakup, who would know and who would care about my campaign against sodium nitrite? If this person vanished, her parents would be stricken with insufferable pain, and I would feel a muted version of their pain every time my foot touched a clutch. She went as Raggedy Anne for Halloween and knew how embarrassed I'd be as Raggedy Andy, so she didn't even ask me to play dress-up. She never once rushed me at the video store, even if I was in there for an hour. She never once asked me to turn the music down, to stop driving like an asshole, or to wear something besides a t-shirt and jeans. Bree was a kind and kinky person and deserved help, not death.

After an hour or more, I don't know, the double doors opened and Bree took baby steps into the waiting room, her parents on either arm. The skin beneath Bree's nose, to her lips and all the way down to her chin, was stained blue, a remnant of the anesthesia used to numb her mouth when they inserted the tube to pump her stomach. Her mom approached me and leaned close and whispered that Bree wanted to stay at my house, and

she asked if that was okay. “Of course,” I said. I took Bree home and drove more carefully than I had ever driven. We talked in bed for a long time. “You always wanted a tattoo,” I said, tracing my finger around the blue stain on her face. She laughed. But it wasn’t a pained laugh: it was relief. Her cheeks shined by candlelight.

She apologized and I apologized back, reflexively.

I held her hand and felt the ridges of the thin scar on her wrist. I had kissed and caressed every inch of Bree’s body: *How could I have been so blind to miss these scars?* My fingers traced the scars, then the more recent scabs, and we fell asleep. The next morning, Bree apologized for dragging me into this and I said that I’d be there for her when she needed me. “I know,” she said.

Chapter 2

Lithium

Bree began seeing one of her mom’s friends, a psychiatrist, twice a week. I spoke to Bree’s mom and she told me that the psychiatrist had said not to leave Bree alone much. Between Bree’s two roommates and me, we kept her company. We hung out at Bree’s house. She stopped drinking but Bree still smoked, though we wouldn’t party with her. I wasn’t thrilled about her smoking, but I convinced her to at least be honest and tell her psychiatrist. I also encouraged her to take walks in the woods, and we went to the arboretum, sometimes in the rain. “My shrink says I should stay single for a while,” Bree said in her living room. I said that she wasn’t a shrink, that she was a doctor.

Then I tried to change the mood: “You can take lessons from Yennie,” I said. They both punched me in the arm. We listened to Bob sing, “Cry, cry, cry to me.”

I invented a dream-girl when I was in elementary school. She was skinny and tall and she'd appear in my mind standing in a wheatfield, her long hair the same bright yellow of hay in sunshine. At night, under the covers, I'd sing "I wanna hold your hand" to her, and one of my parents would hear me and call from their bedroom: "Go to sleep." I lived in a brunette suburb of Manhattan; this dream-girl came from the country, from where the breezes in the trees replaced the beeping horns of traffic, from where blueberry pies sat cooling on windowsills, from where girls wore white dresses on Sundays. As I grew, she grew, but she only changed in age and the dream remained the same: she always waited for me in that field. Variations of this girl appeared in the magazines of my brother's closet, but never her. And, those magazines introduced me to a new type of girl-dream, the California blonde: cutoff jeans, bikini top, white-teeth smile and tan, surfboard under one arm. The California blonde wanted to party on the beach, splash in the ocean, recline on a blanket for sunset and for making out. The country blonde wanted a hand to hold, someone to lay down with head-to-head, stare at the sky, cloud-talk in whispers above the swaying grasses about life and love and flowers and food. Two decades passed and neither of these girls had appeared in front of me. In that time, occasionally, if horny, I thought about going to the California shore, renting a surfboard and talking all gnarly, waiting for Bikini Blonde to make me an offer. If lonely, I thought about driving to Nebraska or somewhere, parking in a field and waiting for Country Girl to part the wheat, arms bare to the shoulder.

Heidi was a German Shepherd, a puppy when I was a baby, though she grew faster than I did. She was my big sister, and Mom didn't worry if I wandered down the block as a toddler because Heidi always stuck by my side, from when I was too small to

reach my arms around her neck to when my hugs could lift her off the ground. In fourth grade, I'd come home to a bologna sandwich waiting on the table, Mom at work, and Heidi waiting at the door. The poor girl had to sit alone for three hours, smelling that bologna but unable to eat it. She died one morning and I went into school and cried in class, and the teacher stopped teaching and all my fourth grade classmates came over to pat me, to share stories about when their dog or cat or fish died. Soon after, it was fifth grade, and I discovered my brother's magazines. With my brother in college and Heidi gone the house was empty and quiet. The ten-year old me could still smell my big sister German Shepard, but she was never coming back. I had my brother's closet, and all of those fantasy girls replaced loss with discovery, emotional grief with physical pleasure.

Sometimes Heidi had dreamt, and she'd wag her tail or scratch the floor with a paw as she slept. As a kid, I wondered if animals had daydreams too, because I had daydreams all the time—I wondered if it was natural or biological to imagine a slender blonde in a wheatfield and want to step into her world. Did dogs daydream about other dogs or about humans? The more biology classes I took, the more bizarre Nature seemed. In high school, dead frog legs kicked when I applied electricity. In college, when I was pre-med and taking lots of bio, Nature grew stranger: huggable hippos turned out to be the most dangerous killers in Africa; lions slept 23 hours a day and bears all winter long. I was convinced that hammerhead sharks and armadillos were both the result of some mad scientist's experiments and that cephalopods had been dropped off by spaceships during the Pleistocene Epoch. Years later, Nature still seemed crazy to me, sometimes even fucked up. Salmon died spawning, or trying to spawn. Wasn't exactly suicide. Did animals commit suicide? I knew animals got depressed: the aquarium in

Vancouver had a depressed whale, and there were debates on whether or not to mandate a *No more whales in captivity* policy. There was a depressed wolf three hours south of Seattle, at Wolf Haven, and he ran figure eights every day, and that's all he did, and he had worn through the grass in his pen creating a dirt eight. Were those Alberta bison, the ones the Indians ran over the cliffs, were they committing suicide? Maybe they had had enough, couldn't deal with their Indian neighbors and said screw it. A mass suicide: eighty bison. Lemmings, a kind of Scandinavian rat, did the same thing, but they weren't being chased: migration over a cliff, into the sea, mass suicide. The bison were following their leader, like nine-hundred people in Guyana, the Cult of the Damned, who followed their reverend and drank cyanide fruit punch while I had been drinking fruit juice and watching *Courageous Cat* and *Minute Mouse* with my dog. Motörhead released *Sacrifice* in '95, and therein insisted that the answer to life's mystery was simple and direct: sex and death. Those coho salmon in the Skagit River would've agreed: they died within a week of spawning, and the nutrients of their decomposing bodies helped to fertilize the river, assuming no eagles were around to profit from their deaths.

Steelhead spawned in the Skagit too, during different months than the coho. Their eggs hatched and the juveniles went to the ocean to rear just like salmon, but these trout didn't die after spawning: they lived to spawn again, assuming they could swim through nets, by hooks, and hungry bears. Trout kept swimming, waving fins, bellies scraping rocks, looking for food; they never lost the will to live. Cool running cleansing water kept their gills from getting dry, but it also distorted their vision, possibly preventing them from recognizing food, or a hook, or true love; they'd mate again with some other rainbow, maybe because spawning helps keep them in the present and helps

them to forget the past. It's April, 1995. I turn 27 and it feels like I'm swimming upstream. I receive cheek kisses on my birthday, but no lips, no tongue. Must keep fucking. Must find mate. Jimi Hendrix died at 27. Jim Morrison died at 27. Pigpen died at 27. Kurt Cobain died at 27, but he spawned, first. Sperm ejaculates from the penis at 27 miles per hour.

Chapter 3

Goldberry

Cam called it confidence. Dik called it mojo. I thought of it as mana, the energy force that wizards accumulate in order to cast spells. Growth in mana differed depending on the type of wizard. Good wizards accumulated mana by leading heroes in brave deeds, by increasing their fame through acts benefiting humanity. Neutral wizards had teams of workers and accumulated mana through crystal mining and transmutation of lead into gold. Evil wizards accumulated mana by raising hordes of man and beast, armies to overthrow that which is human. But mana for all three classes depended on one thing: having people believe in you.

Bree saw more of her therapist and less of me until we didn't see much of each other at all. Even though Bree and I weren't in love, our separation left me with that break-up feeling—hollow, drained of my energy force; I was mana-less, starting again at zero, weak and in need of recharge. Bree was weak too, but she was alive, and that's what mattered, and she could spawn and I could spawn, someday, though not with each other. Waking alone, I thought of Ariana, not Bree, but Ariana's life was somewhere else, with someone else. I'd heard that Ariana was engaged, soon to marry. I went on

dates and got nowhere (sexually, emotionally, whatever—no growth). Rainy nights and me watching PBS, alone, looking for answers in the animal kingdom. The lion sleeps twenty-three hours a day; he opens his mouth for a toothy yawn and looks bored. Does the guy yak have a good rap, because he'll need one if he's looking to get yakked off. With most birds, the females compete for the affection of the males, and the birdettes are aggressive; my life would be so much easier if this was true for humans. Orangutan males are solitary great apes: they don't hang with other males; maybe this is why orangutans aren't violent. Within the orangutan male's neighborhood, there will be several females living here and there in their own smaller sections of jungle, but after a fornication visit a male moves on back into solo-mode. Male gorillas are more social, with their crowd stemming from their polygamy. Compared to the mellow orangutan, male gorillas are also way more violent, both with their mates and other males. Very ape. Chimpanzees can be both social and violent as well, though with chimps it's the males who hang out and hunt together; the females tend to be solitary.

There is a great ape that's neither solo nor violent: the bonobo. One-hundred of these peace-loving primates might live together in one slice of the Congo, and the males hang out with other males yet also bond with females. They forage for fruit together, sometimes vegetables, but unlike chimpanzees bonobos don't eat meat. Also unlike their cousins, bonobo society is female-centered: matriarchs decide the few rules in their egalitarian system and males shrug and smile. They are playful, imaginative, and more like humans than any other animal: bonobos, our closest relatives, share more than 98% of our genetic profile. Unlike other animals, bonobos have sex for fun: the females produce offspring every five or six years, and in between bearing children it's time for

loving. Bonobos like sex in the morning, sex in the afternoon, and sex in the evening. They sometimes choose to copulate in a human position: face-to-face. Males get erections before meals, and the genitalia of females swells pink. If she's hungry, a female might exchange sex for food. If she's horny, girl-friends might scissor their legs, squealing while rubbing genitalia together. Bonobos also use sex to diffuse tension: if a neighbor's son is sitting on a branch that a bonobetty would like to be swinging from, the female might try to push him off, and if he tries to hold tight she might gnaw gently on his hands; but regardless of how the scenario starts it always ends the same—sex. And after, the branch is shared. It's true that the sex usually lasts for less than a minute, but there will be more: sometimes sex is used simply as a greeting. Thing is, bonobos are endangered, facing extinction.

I searched my guidebooks one sunny Saturday in May and found a long day hike, and I geared up and was ready to walk alone in the woods when Phoxodd called asking for a ride. I said that I was about to leave on a hike and she said that it wouldn't take more than ten minutes, fifteen tops. "I just need to pick up a box of charcoal pencils and my pastel set." Since meeting Phoxodd in the parking lot, back when Bree and her were getting Phish tickets, it seemed like every road in Phoxodd's world ended at art. I didn't think about inviting Phoxodd to hike: she was the kind of artist that didn't like to be outside. She had pale skin, like milk, and I'd never seen her in the sun for more than five minutes, the time it took to get from car door to house door, where she'd disappear into her room, draw the blinds, and sit at her desk painting or making jewelry all afternoon, evening, and well into the night. I'd never seen her sweat and didn't think that she could.

I drove Phoxodd to her old roommate's dorm at SPU. Phoxodd opened the door and all I saw was leg and hair: long golden blonde hair; long tan legs, the longest I had ever seen, stretching from bare feet to the frayed edges of cut-off jeans, an impossible distance, a dizzying voyage for my eyes.

A voice a between the hair and legs squeaked Phoxodd's name and hugged her. Both of these girls were my height, and although they were slender the room seemed crowded and I got dizzy and sat in a chair. Phoxodd introduced me to Camille, and then to the guy behind her, Fin. I hadn't noticed him. He was broader than me. Phoxodd grabbed her box of art stuff immediately, but she and Camille talked on and on, fast, and her thin arms got tired so she handed the box to me. Finally, Phoxodd said that she had to go because I had to go, because I was going on a hike.

"I love hiking," Camille said.

"You should convince Phoxodd to come with me," I said. "She stays inside all day, drawing."

"That's my Phoxy," Camille said. Then she said that she never hiked because she didn't have a car, so I invited her to come along with me some time. She gave me her number, we said goodbye, and back in the car I grilled Phoxodd, asked her what the deal was with the Fin guy.

"Oh," Phoxodd said, staring out the window, "you know." I told her that I didn't know and started to drive a little recklessly: this always made Phoxodd nervous. She coughed it up: "They're just scooping off each other, or him from her."

Days go by and I'm thinking legs, wondering when I'll see them, but I called Bill. "Weekend starts Wednesday. You should come up to Seattle."

“Maybe Thursday,” Bill said. The Dalai Lama had proclaimed a six-year old the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama and Bill was taking his class on a fieldtrip to a Buddhist temple to discuss the hereafter. “They need it.”

“An afterlife?” I said.

He said No, that their recent essays on the Oklahoma City bombing had made the class sullen; Bill had his students read their essays wearing mourning gray, in traditional Kukukuku fashion, and it rained that day and their world seemed colorless.

“Cuckoo, cuckoo?” I said. “Bring them to the Dead: it’ll be the most colorful scene on the Coast.

May 24th, 1995: none of my Road Crew or 2/13 droogs are in the Northwest, so I went to see the Grateful Dead at Seattle Center alone. Thousands of West Coast Dead Heads danced beneath the Space Needle or sat in drum circles or stuffed vegan burritos into their cottonmouths, thousands more went into Memorial Stadium with tickets. Some, when they realized that you could not only hear the band from outside the stadium but see them too, traded their tickets for food and/or drugs.

The following day, Yennie called and Phoxodd called, both insisting that I take them to the Dead’s second night. The first day I had practically begged them to come; the second day they were mad at me for not taking them the first day. Bree didn’t hang out with us anymore; she was getting herself together. But we did have a fourth: Bill. We met their SPU group at the show, including Camille and Fin. I rolled a joint and we smoked on the knoll beneath the Space Needle. Somehow our group had grown and the joint never made it back to me, so I rolled another, stealing glances at Camille when I could. Camille’s older brother showed up—this was the kid who dropped acid alone just

before midnight, the night of Bree's party. He was close to Bill's height, but even skinnier. He wore sunglasses, so I couldn't see his eyes, but the way he smoked without coughing, as if the smoke was only air, as if he was smoking only to hear the sizzle of the paper as it burned, told me he was tripping again. He toked, and he winced when Fin and his sister play-wrestled, and then he left.

Bill attempted to keep me distracted when Camille and Fin kissed by placing his hands together to pop imaginary seal bladders. Someone had mushrooms. Then we lost one another and found one another. Everyone danced as if they knew, as if they'd been on tour, as if this had been one of the many tours they had survived. When the show ended, we found Yennie's car towed. She had parked within two feet of a driveway, and in Queen Anne this was a punishable offense if the owner of said driveway was prick enough. Yennie's buzz was in danger. Bill did his best to keep her laughing by telling her how the different tribes of the Amazon basin took revenge on those they hated. I shelled out the money to spring Yennie's Civic and three carloads of the SPU crowd cruised back to my place to celebrate the run. Yennie begged for Phish, moaning like a crack-head and collapsing on the floor until I threw Phish into the stereo and cranked the volume. Only then did she forget about the towing and snap back to her groovy self. We sat in my room drinking beer and I continually packed bonghits in my 18-inch U.S. Bill had the youngest of our group, Camille, by fifteen years, but his age never showed, and he laughed loudest when the SPU stories went around, like he was a student from another college. Camille and Fin went down the hall to a newly vacated room, my old room, and shut the door. I packed more bonghits and cranked Jerry Band so we couldn't hear them, and when the lulls and softness in Jerry's tunes let the other room in, I switched to Black

Sabbath, Master of Reality, and by then the hippies were too fucked up to notice or care. Even Phoxodd swayed to the music, and she wasn't one for heaviness.

Somewhere in the night I learned that Fin and Camille had been on and off for several months, mostly off, and even now Phoxodd considered them off. She insisted that I take Camille hiking that weekend, before it was on again. Phoxodd said they were wrong together, that Fin was an SPU dropout turned used car salesman, and that Camille was a fairy princess and literature major, the top of her class. It was Phoxodd who had turned me on to Faulkner, and Camille who had gotten Phoxodd into Faulkner. I reckoned I would call her the next day and ask her out hiking for the day after that.

I chose Snow and Gem lakes in the Snoqualmie Pass region. The trailhead was close to Seattle and the path should've been clear of snow, or at least the level low. The guidebook said that there were many places to stop, so if Camille wasn't in shape enough to make it to either lake we could picnic somewhere along the way. The lot was full with cars and trucks; I had to shift into 4-wheel and drive over some logs to make a spot. We hiked over dirt, snow, slush, and mud, and sometimes jumped over streams. Spring thawed winter. Helios was with me: a sunny day in the Pacific Northwest. We wore shorts and I gave Camille a sweatshirt, I had brought two, and we were warm enough in the Alpine forest and warm enough across a field of snow. We stopped at large lizard rock, a dry brown island in a sea of crunchy white, and we picnicked there with Gem Lake beneath us and valleys and peaks and forests all around. Our rock was far enough away from similar rocks with similar couples to give us privacy. With the sun, we were able to remove our sweatshirts and use them for cushion. I made two peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and two veggie-bologna sandwiches and Camille ate half of each kind

and I ate the rest and she talked on and on and I ate every word. Her dad moved from California to Oso in the early 70s. He was trying to escape her mom. But Mom tracked him down an hour north of Seattle and married him before he could slip away again. Not really Oso, but near Oso, not that Oso was much of a town. Dad didn't want to settle down, and he definitely didn't want children, but home on the Stillaguamish, the most romantic of all the -ish rivers, Dad succumbed to Mom's wiles, and Mom tricked Dad each and every time until nine kids later Dad had nine more reasons to stay, and these outweighed his impulses to fly. Camille was the second of nine, eldest of six girls. They all played instruments and sang, and the twins, cello and violin, were destined for scholarships. When they were very young, Mom caught Camille french-kissing her brother—learning—and whipped both their bare behinds with a switch. Her brother liked drugs. The Crabapple clan picked wildflowers, pressed these into stained glass, and sold the product at Pike Place Market. They had been vending there for more than twenty years.

As she talked, Camille twirled her hair into two golden braids. When she finished braiding, she stopped talking and looked at the ends of her hair, and I leaned in and kissed her. She kissed me back, a little, and then said, "What are you doing?"

"This is a date. Boys and girls kiss." She told me that it wasn't a date and I said huh and asked for an explanation. She said that we were just two friends going on a hike, that she wasn't interested in me beyond friendship. She asked me about my family, if I had any siblings.

"Two brothers, but they're much older than me, so growing up it was kinda like I was an only child." I told her about Bill and his ten brothers, how close his family was to

mine, how much fun big families are, and she agreed. I told her that I was jealous of her family, that I had always wanted little brothers and sisters. “The more children, the more love,” I said. She smiled at that. “I’d like to have a litter of kids, maybe six.”

She said that she’d like a big family too, that the long-limbed Crabapples were “good breeding stock,” and I laughed and told her that I used those words all the time. Then she stopped smiling. “My dad’s dying of cancer. Mom says he’s not going to die, but I think he is, and I think Mom knows it, too.”

Camille told me about her dad, about what a cool guy he was and handsome too, and I listened to her words but also heard heartbreak: it rode the cadence of her speech like a cowboy who’d been shot, holding the reins but bound to fall from his horse. Each sentence began fast, excited-like and hopeful, as if she couldn’t wait to tell me that it was just her and dad who went to St. Petersburg, no rival siblings, and each sentence ended slow, as if each word brought her closer to the realization that father and daughter would never again travel together, and that none of her brothers or sisters would know Dad the way she had, which made her feel special but alone.

I played Risk with my droogs in New York, and I loved this game: take your armies, devise a strategy, conquer your friends’ armies. I thought that the dice rolled approximated the randomness of real warfare: with a good strategy you should achieve your objective, but the bad luck of a few bad rolls might wipe you out, the way two treacherous storms devoured two Spanish armadas and gave victory to the British, twice. Camille’s family, mom and dad and nine kids growing up on a river, had the recipe for happiness, but then there’s those dice, and you can’t predict the roll: the dice had dealt the Crabapples an unexpected blow—banditos robbing the bank, dad was just in town

buying feed, stray bullet innocent bystander, the doc gone fishin', dad riding but bleeding from the belly; the missus back at the prairie farm hanging laundry on the line—she drops her basket and falls to her knees when the bullet finds her husband even though he's twenty miles away, and the closest of the nine kids come running and ask ma what's wrong, and she says, Nothing, get back to the pigs.

I asked Camille what her dad was doing, about you know, and she told me about the hospital in Arlington and another in Seattle, and that Mom was researching an alternative treatment center in Mexico.

We walked back across the field of snow and into the forest. The late afternoon sun had increased the melt, and we needed extra oomph in jumping streams. I caught her sleeve at one leap and pulled her to firm earth, and she mock-shrieked and we both laughed. From what I had seen, Camille's round face seemed to rest at smile: a small smile, a pre-big-smile, like the smile a person might wear when a tough work-week finishes and all the bullshit is done with, and now it's night and raining, time to stretch out on the couch and eat ice cream and watch movies.

Further on, a rock wall met the trail and water poured down from the cliff above. "Kiss me under the waterfall," Camille said, and she grabbed my arms and I slipped my hands around her waist and we kissed there for a long time. Her body felt new. We fit well. I asked if we were just friends and she said, "It seemed a shame to just walk by such a pretty spot." Physically, we were eye to eye, hazel to blue. "All shall love me and despair," Camille said. A chill ran down my spine as if the waterfall had poured over me.

"Galadriel," I said, "in Lothlorien, to Frodo."

"Phoxodd told me that you were into Lord of the Rings."

“More like in it,” I said. Ariana had read and liked Tolkien. Bree had read *The Lord of the Rings* and dreamed of opening a bar called “Shelob’s Lair.” But I didn’t know many girls who had read my favorite story, and neither Ariana nor Bree could quote Tolkien to me.

Camille and I saw more and more of each other and she and Fin less and less. With the coming of summer and the end of the semester (for her), mountains and trees and trails called to us, conjuring daydreams while I stared at computer screens and Camille at schoolbooks. We were friends, only, and she laughed at my flirtations. We took Yennie backpacking in the Dungeness for her birthday and camped at the same off-trail site that Bill and Shari and I had found. The river sang in between our laughing and stories. We ate s’mores and watched the sky for shooting stars and the girls slept in one tent and I got mine. One night in Seattle, after Thai, Camille came back to my house and we were alone in my room for the first time. She took a bottle of Jack Daniels from the speaker, twisted the cap, and tilted it back. Just when I thought she’d toss the bottle or spit out the liquor, she chugged more. “A girl after my own heart,” I said.

“Ahhhh,” she said, setting the Jack back atop the speaker. Lemmy’s bass made the amber liquid dance. Camille licked her lips and scrunched her face, now tasting the whiskey. We fooled around, only kissing, but in bed. She told me that she was a virgin. She was 21. I asked her about Fin and she said that he had tried, many times, and that they had come close in the room down the hall after the Dead show, but that she was still pure. “Fin loved that about me. All guys want a virgin.” I told her not me, no offense, and she laughed. Camille was easy to laugh.

“I mean,” I said, “we’re just friends, anyways. Right?”

“Just friends,” she said.

“But if you ever want to lose it—that virginity thing—I mean, what are friends for?”

She laughed, and I told her the truth—because we were just friends after all—that I preferred girls with experience, something to bring into the bedroom. She slept over that night, in her clothes. Other nights, too; I gave her sweatpants and t-shirts. I cooked her dinner. It was like my first girlfriend, in high school, hanging out all the time under the shared pretense that we were only friends. I took Camille out to eat and I paid, but when we went out for beers and pool, we went Dutch. I made her tapes: mixed tapes and Neil tapes. Her parents had gotten her into a lot of good music, though nothing heavier than Zeppelin. Driving back from a hike one time, I turned down the stereo and caught her singing Neil. She carried a tune better than he did. Neil would’ve agreed.

I found a hike in one of my guidebooks, Boulder, and Camille said that was near Oso, near her house. Boulder fed the Stillaguamish. Camille didn’t have a car and didn’t get to visit home as much as she would’ve liked, so when she asked if we could stop by I said of course. When we crossed the bridge, Camille squeezed my hand. “The Stilly. We ride inner tubes from our house to the bridge and then we jump off.” I told her that Bill and I set inner tubes at the base of my falls in the Adirondacks and rode the Salmon downriver and under a bridge to his house.

“It’s just called that,” I said. “There ain’t no salmon swimming in it.”

She laughed at “ain’t”—Camille got me. She said turn here, and I turned down a rocky dirt driveway surrounded by a thick forest of ferns and moss-covered trees. So

many greens. Two houses sat by the river at the bottom of the driveway. The house on the right, the neighbor's, was more of a trailer or manufactured home. The Crabapples' brown house had additions in different shades of brown, built when new kids came into being. An additional mini-house, attached by a shared roof, served as both office for the family business and bedroom for the two eldest boys—when they were around—each a year apart from Camille, one older, one younger. Three dogs attacked my Jeep and I parked before turning any pets into driveway-kill. Camille jumped out before I hit the emergency brake and embraced the dogs, letting them lick her face. There, in front of her house, I met the twins, fraternal, 13, both wearing halter tops and both willing the growth of triumphantly pointed cones of puberty. Mom, blonde and skinny, looked like an older sister. Inside, under the orange light of a tired lamp, I met Dad. He had shoulder length hair gone gray and a big jaw and big smile, but his eyes were alert and sad, as if trying to drink up all the beauty of his family before his time came. He moved slowly and had a firm handshake. I sat in a cushy chair and his two youngest came into the room and sat on me, the girl in my lap, the boy on my knee.

I said that he had a beautiful home and he thanked me. He told me some stories about how he had found this place, and then how his girlfriend and future wife had found him, and how when the family started he figured that he had better go into business, quick. He shoed the kids away, and we walked through the backdoor across the lawn and into the greenhouse. There were rows of all different kinds of flowers. "Sometimes we pile into the station wagon and cruise around picking wildflowers from fields and roadsides." He told me how the market changed, with more restrictions, but with more people, too, vendors and customers. "Seattle is different city now," he said. "I don't go

in that often. Camille or her brothers run our stand at Pike Place.” Camille had told me that he only went to Seattle for cancer treatments.

Back in the house, when it looked like we were ready to leave on our hike, Camille’s mom said, “Won’t you and your boyfriend stay for lunch?”

“We’re just friends, Mom. I told you.”

“Would you and your friend like some lunch?” Mrs. Crabapple said. The way she pronounced “friend” told me that she was wiser than we were. We stayed for lunch and ate by the river and watched the four youngest Crabapples play in the water. When we said goodbye, Camille’s dad took my hand in both of his, and it wasn’t the shake so much as the look that said, *Take good care of my daughter; and if you would, please look after my family.*

Summertime rolled. We hiked, ate, drank, smoked, and when Camille could get off from her two jobs, we camped. We considered ourselves friends, but since neither of us were seeing anyone we felt it would be in our best interests to fool around. We played more and more, moving into oral sex, and Camille was dangerous in bed, flailing long limbs uncontrollably. I had regular bruises. Sometimes we only kissed, and other times we just kissed each other a goodnight kiss. Mostly, I fell asleep hard, but we laughed a lot and this seemed to dissolve any possible frustrations I would’ve had with another girl. I was charmed by the river-daughter, Goldberry, and I couldn’t have become angry or frustrated with Camille no more than I could’ve with an elf queen clad in living flowers.

We talked beneath the covers and we talked above the rattle of my Jeep going to or coming from the woods. Her eldest brother was moving from couch to couch, bed to

bed if he was lucky. Her younger brother was in jail for battery. Her youngest brother received explanations about death from her mom and dad. The twins were perfect—"A" students, helping Mom cook and clean, babysitting the youngest two, asking for nothing—and the sister one notch up from them won a dance award. Child four, Cheyenne, a professional model at 12, now 17, had been kicked out of high school for fighting. Earlier in the year, she had been suspended for fighting during basketball—beating up members of her own team when they screwed up—now she was swinging at anyone within reach.

Bill and Shari went backpacking in Japan for five weeks. It was a trip they'd been looking forward to for years, and now Bill would finally get to test his skills in Japanese. I covered for Bill at CCS, sometimes working until seven or eight at night, but other days heading home in the early afternoon. It was summer; work was slower, and the most common complaint I heard was, *I can't print*. Bill had found more clients, one, and before he left for Japan he insisted that I buy a pager, so I did. I received a couple of pages from the chief of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, the new client, but I handled each situation over the phone and didn't have to make the trek down to Tacoma. Sometimes, when Camille could take off from work, I played hooky from computers and we drove beyond my pager's range. Camille and I left Seattle one Thursday night and camped in the Olympics and took a hike in the morning, finding a meadow facing a creek. Camille lay her head in my lap and stared at the one cloud in the sky, telling me what it resembled each time it reshaped. "Now the bunny has wings—What day is today?"

"It's Friday," I said. "I'm supposed to be on-call. I hope no one's paging me."

"I'm a bad influence," Camille said. "It's a guitar now, with wings."

She closed her blue eyes and I smoothed her hair from her forehead, thinking, *If the forecast had called for rain, I'd be home with my new computer, blowing up Doom II's demons with a shotgun, and Camille would be saying, "That's so gross; can I play?"*

Camille sat up and said, "I'm hot," and she removed her t-shirt and adjusted her sportsbra. She found a flower and used it for an oracle. She did this often: "He loves me," pluck, "He loves me not," pluck.

Her hair was golden, like honey, a different kind of blonde dreamgirl than the one I had pictured as a kid. Camille was a country girl, no doubt about that, but we were a thousand miles west of the Midwestern wheatfields where I had imagined someone waiting for me. I took off my shirt and soaked up some sun. Sometimes a cool breeze found its way down from the glaciers and onto our skin.

"He loves me!" Camille said, plucking the last petal.

"Look," I said, and she squeezed my arm when she saw the doe and fawn drinking at the stream, the sunlight glistening off the water making the pair glow a golden brown. We listened to the Grateful Dead on the ride back to Seattle, because it was August and Jerry Garcia had died and Dead was all we listened to that month. Jerry's passing was like Zappa's passing for me and my friends: long-distance phone calls and toasts, and the reality of No more Dead shows. But it wasn't like Zappa for the country, because Jerry had been more popular, and the networks each reserved a thirty-second spot to broadcast images of candlelight vigils from coast to coast. Camille struggled aloud regarding her decision to take fall semester in London, and I turned the music down even though I had heard her deal before, because I knew she needed my ears: Student loans would cover the cost, but her dad was dying and there was a chance he wouldn't

make it to December and Camille's return. Dad had convinced her to pay the deposit spring semester and wait to see how things were in September.

Summer ended and September came and Camille and her father both agreed that she should go, but to me she confessed, "What will I do if he dies when I'm in England?" I told her I didn't know.

Two weeks before Camille's departure, I cooked dinner for her and we ate her dad's brownies for dessert. Mom did all the cooking, but Dad was the best baker in the world, and he baked cakes for every birthday, which was almost every month, and cookies for the holidays, and brownies whenever his kids asked. We took one last brownie each for the road and walked down 45th to the Green Lantern. The same old timers who sat at the bar at 10am were there at 10pm, and they never paid us any mind when we came in and took over the jukebox. It had all the hits by Nirvana, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, and Pearl Jam, but I had never heard anyone choose these bands beside me and mine. We played pool for the first pitcher and I won, but Camille said that she had forgotten her wallet, or maybe lost it, and I paid for that and the second and third. "Save your money for Europe," I said, and she said that we always go Dutch for beer as we walked home.

"I guess this a date then," I said. "Our first date."

We got into bed and kissed, and when I realized that this wasn't just a goodnight kiss I wrapped my arms around Camille.

"Let's do it," Camille said.

I pushed away. "What?"

"I'm ready."

“What?”

“I’m ready,” Camille said. “I’m ready for sex. Let’s do it.”

“On our first date?” I said.

“I’m serious.”

“Camille. There is no way in Middle Earth I am going to take you out for pitchers and pool and come back and take your virginity.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying no.”

I told her that she needed to be clear-headed, that she needed to think this through.

“Why can’t we not be sober?” she said.

“You’re drunk,” I said, and I rolled over.

“I can’t believe you’re saying no. To me. I can’t believe you’re saying no to me.” I woke, maybe an hour later, although it might’ve been twenty minutes, and Camille was still talking. “I can’t believe you’re saying no to me. To me—”

“Camille, if you still want to do it tomorrow, we’ll drive the three hours to Stonehenge and sacrifice your virginity there.” I told her that we could sneak into the replica at night, light some candles, and commit the act.

At dawn, she wouldn’t take no for an answer, and with a morning woody I was less able to control myself, and she positioned her virginity on top of me and said that she was gonna do it, sit on me, so I had better get something, quick. I reached for a condom and there, with a complete lack of pageantry, river maiden became river mistress.

We had sex one more time before Camille left for London, but it was softer and slower than before, more like making love and less like rushing to a finish line, more kisses behind the ear, more caresses for soft skin, more pauses to more deeply feel the

moment, and afterwards she cried because she was worried about leaving her dad.

Camille and I agreed we would remain friends first and foremost and I encouraged her to explore her sexuality in London, if it felt right, for her sake and for the sake of our physical compatibility. I wanted her to bring new things into the bedroom; I wanted to have the freedom myself. But I missed her, our talks and our wrestling, and every girl seemed dull in comparison, second rate, and fall brought more rain. Things weren't particularly slow at work, but slow enough for me to ask Bill if it was cool to split for a while. I told him Asia; he was excited for me and asked how long. I said I didn't know, that Camille would be back in December. "That's close to three months," Bill said. I said that I'd be back before her.

I flew to Seoul, then Bangkok, backpacked north to Thailand's borders and then south, into Malaysia. I took a ferry to Sumatra and backpacked Indonesia's largest island until catching something that set me into fever. They packed me into a box and shipped me home to Seattle by Thanksgiving. I had been away for eight weeks. The travel medicine doctor at the UW hospital said I had contracted *jejuni*, a rare tropical version of the *campylo bacter*, a poultry-based food poisoning, and he called all of his med students into the room to observe my condition.

Camille had written me several postcards and a letter with a picture enclosed: her, sitting on the Tolkien bench at Cambridge, dressed in a black wool coat and wrapped in a scarf, smiling that wide smile. I had had one fling in Asia, my *jejuni* stopping me from having a second with my Swedish travel companion, a girl who ended up playing nursemaid instead, helping me to reach the airport in Jakarta in between throes. The fling was with an Aussie. I had met Beq in Koh Pha Ngan, an island in the Gulf of Thailand.

We had both gone there for the full moon party. She was on the last leg of a two-month trip before returning to Australia. She found me in a hammock suspended from two coconut palms and the next day we went on a hike and discovered a deserted beach and made safe sex in the surf from-here-to-eternity style. We partied and explored and fucked for the week and then said goodbye. I told Camille all about this when she returned from London, sitting on the floor of her new apartment, and I asked if that was cool and she crinkled her nose and looked at me sideways. She said of course, we're just friends, and we had talked about this before we left and then she asked me what the girl looked like and I told her that I had a photo album of pictures waiting, my entire trip up until contracting that rare and unpronounceable disease. She said aw, and that she missed me, and she kissed my cheek. We took baby steps back into our relationship. She spent the holidays with her family and I didn't see her. I hung with Bill and Shari, and we put candles on the bows of the kayaks and paddled around Gig Harbor, caroling yacht to yacht on Christmas Eve. Post-Christmas was slow at work, and rainy: perfect conditions to sit at my computer defending Earth, to lose track of time and days in the real world and solve the problems of my game world.

Camille was charged with stories and intellectuality from England, but her dad's condition had worsened and she was fragile and prone to darker daydreams. She asked me to take her camping, to clear her head, but January's rain pushed our plans into February, and I took her into the forest whenever possible, sometimes only to sit and talk under the umbrella of an ancient cedar.

My twenty-eighth birthday—one year closer to my early thirties, to when my spine's twisting would push my ribs into my lungs. The hump on my back had grown

more pronounced, hardened like a knotted muscle, a fist-sized bulge noticeable through a t-shirt, though not from beneath a flannel.

I had always done the cooking, but Camille insisted on making me a birthday dinner, and she got her aunt's secret recipe for some kind of pasta-chicken-bacon, and I ate it and said nothing about the bacon's sodium nitrites. I also zipped my lip about the pasta, the saltiest thing I had ever tasted: it was like eating seaweed off the beach.

Neither of us could finish our plates and both of us were parched, downing water by the pint. Federal authorities had just caught the Unabomber in Montana. "I wanna go to Montana," Camille said. I told her I'd take her to Glacier National Park, sometime.

Passover came and we went to Orcas with Bill and Shari and Yennie; us boys were going biking, the girls hiking. Shari, the modest doctor, wasn't up for naked bodies at Doe Bay, so we camped at a new place, a forest on a peninsula preserved by the Department of Natural Resources; we each slipped \$2 into the DNR drop-box and hiked the quarter-mile through the woods, Bill carrying his backpack and his bicycle's front tire. We sat around the fire and drank wine and laughed at Bill's ten thumbs: he took all night to change his flat inner tube. In the morning, I woke to my cell phone ringing, and when I realized that I didn't own a cell phone, that it had been a dream, that the sound was a bird, I found myself waking in laughter, which was great, because all that week I'd been stressing out over Skeletor.

CCS had hired Skeletor to help ease them into the Information Age. She was a social worker with a technology background, not a true computer person, and she didn't seem to pose a threat to our relationship with CCS. However, to me, she felt all-wrong. She had moved from St. Louis to get an MSW from UW, but there was nothing charitable

in her black eyes. She looked straight at me when we talked about how I had fallen into computers and about why she had chosen a Masters in Social Work, and she smiled and laughed, but both of these latter actions seemed hollow, an echo from a previous monologue in front of a mirror, and the glint from the former gesture, the eye-contact, seemed the afterglow of rapidly spinning gears. She was sickly thin, and her skin stretched tight across her bones, but there was something else even scarier: somehow, when standing before her, time and space seemed to bend in her favor; she was a witch—and not the good kind, like the naturopath med-students sprinkled around Wallingford. If we talked for too long, I got dizzy, and if I got close enough to smell her, I got sick: she smelled of lilac, but beneath this something rotted.

Bill thought I was crazy. Bill figured that he needed to win Skeletor over, that since she was planning the direction of CCS's technological growth we needed to ally ourselves with the witch. CCS invited Bill on their annual retreat, and the Friday before this weekend he told me not to worry, that by Monday Skeletor would've been won. Monday came, and Bill pulled me away from networking the African American Family Alliance in order to explain the weekend: he had picnicked with the departmental directors by a lake, roasted marshmallows, and dunked into a cedar hot tub to discuss CCS's future. No, of course he wasn't wearing a bathing suit—he had never soaked in the Northwest wearing a bathing suit, not that he even brought one—he thought that everyone else would get naked too, but no one did. And then, when it was time to end the night and return to their bunks in the cabins, Bill, upon climbing out of the hot tub, hit Skeletor in the head with his wiener.

In Middle Earth, Skeletor would've been a wraith. In Dungeons & Dragons,

Skeletor's character was a lich, the most powerful form of undead, the risen essence of a killed sorcerer who grows in power by draining humans of life experience. Prolonged melee with a lich, without magical or holy immunities, turned the wisest cleric or sharpest wizard into a blabbering idiot. Considering the pale skin stretched tight over her skull, she even looked like a lich, although liches had dull red flames glowing in their black eye sockets—Skeletor's flames were the reflection of florescent lights, a sickly white. Liches were notoriously vengeful.

For the remainder of the retreat and all the following week, Skeletor stopped looking Bill in the eye. Not long after, one of CCS's directors told Bill that Skeletor was heading up the committee to hire a permanent full-time computer person and do away with this, according to Skeletor, "financially and operationally inefficient method of contracting." Bill told me that same day and we went to Skeletor's office.

"What's this about replacing us?" Bill asked.

"Replacing you? That's not what the new position is about," she said. She pulled her legs up onto her chair and sat Indian-style. "It's just that with CCS's growth, we feel the need to have someone here 8 to 5, every day, and you two are busy with your other clients." She didn't know that CCS was 90% of our work. I saw my client at the YMCA once a month, and Bill said that he went to the Puyallup Tribe once or twice a week, although I had the feeling that he was talking instead of working, like an anthropological ethnography, possibly even off hiking or biking somewhere instead of talking.

"Between the two of us," Bill said, "we can cover an 8 to 5 workweek."

I seconded that. Skeletor increased the fold on her legs, taking one ankle and placing this on top of a knee, and then the other, until Indian-style had morphed into

yoga-style. She smiled and laughed and tried to touch Bill's arm, but her crossed legs prevented the stretch so she touched mine instead and her fingers were cold. "I didn't know you wanted the job—of course you can have the job—you've never had a real contract, a written one—we can draw up an official contract—I'd be tickled pink if you took the job."

Skeletor said that we'd have to interview for the job to make it official and she bumped someone off the schedule to fit us in. The day of the interview Bill and I sat at a picnic table on Lake Washington discussing strategy, agreeing that now was the time to ask for more money. He was charging \$32.50 an hour, I was making \$27.50, and the industry standard in Spring '96 was twice that. Still, since CCS was a charity organization, we figured \$45/hr would be fair. I wore a collared shirt, a non-flannel. There were five CCS directors in the boardroom, all of whom we'd been friends with, or friendly with, for several years, except for Skeletor. They sat at the large table, we stood at its end. Each asked their standard interview question with a smile and Bill answered with a smile and I smiled and added my part. They knew us, and they already knew our answers: have we ever worked with non-profit organizations, would we be willing to work overtime if the situation warranted it, where did we think computers were going and what did we think CCS would have to do over the next four years to address the new buzzword, "Y2K." Then Skeletor asked her question: "How many WANs, that's wide-area-networks, have you set up, if any, were these systems Microsoft NT or UNIX-based and why, and what are the most important things to consider when designing and implementing a WAN?" My heart dropped to my stomach and the room seemed to get hotter with every word of Skeletor's spell. Bill stammered, struggling to somehow make

it seem that even though we lacked WAN experience, our LAN, local-area-network, experience would suffice. The other directors besides Skeletor knew very little about computers and often, until now, thought of us as omniscient wizards. I struggled to say that I knew every computer in every office, that I knew all of the idiosyncrasies of CCS's systems, that it would take someone years to learn what I knew, but I grew dizzy as I talked and I felt the flush take my face as my cheeks warmed, as Skeletor's spell took hold; she had asked me all kinds of questions a month earlier, conversationally, about how I had gotten into the computer field, about my experience, and she had done the same with Bill—she knew the answer to this question, that we didn't have NT nor UNIX experience, and it seemed that she had designed the question specifically to make us look like inadequate fools in front of the other directors. In her short time at CCS, she had convinced the other directors that CCS needed to link its subsidiaries and smaller networks into one giant network. I had no idea how to do this, which was often my feeling with computers; I learned along the way—CCS was my classroom, my lab. Standing in front of the directors, trying to speak, a dream came back to me: Bill and I next to a giant wooden arc, a ship with an elephant-sized hole in the hull, and him explaining to me that we had to fix the ship, that he had promised CCS, and me arguing my standard complaint, that we had no experience with this kind of project, that trial-and-error flustered my brain.

Skeletor had said that this interview was just a formality, that the job was ours, but standing in front of the directors spluttering I realized the nature of her formality: prove to the other directors that we were frauds. The directors spoke to me:

“Are you okay?”

“You don’t look so good.”

“Do you need some water?”

“Here, take my chair.”

I was given a paper cone of water and a seat. I didn’t say anything until my breath returned, and even then not much, and the interview ended and we all shook hands, and Skeletor’s was cold and gripless. I followed Bill down to our office space, thinking that I had never come into contact with a lich before, never combated one. She drained me of experience points: I was reduced to an idiot, thoughts stumbling across synapses, my logic center cringing in a vast cavern of brief encounters, wincing at all of the things, those red flags, that had told me not to trust Skeletor.

“Tickled pink?” Bill said, paralleling my thoughts. “Who the hell says that?” An adventurer needs to use magic spells or enchanted weapons to attack a lich: tickling has no effect.

Camille listened to my grumbling, only interrupting to call Skeletor a bitch after each complaint. “Maybe we are frauds,” I said. “I don’t know.” Camille said we weren’t, so I explained: we had never studied computers, had never been trained in computing, and we had to try the more complicated configurations two or three times before getting it right; CCS had thought we were like Bill Gates and Paul Allen, but we were really more like Abbott and Costello.

“Who’s Abbott and Costello?” Camille said. I shrugged and she said it didn’t matter. “What matters is that you and Bill gave your all to CCS. So what if you went kayaking when one office couldn’t print? You also stayed late, worked whenever they really needed you, and you charged like half as much as other computer guys.” When

Camille wasn't at her family stand in Pike Place, or in class, she worked as a receptionist for PEMCO; she reminded me that PEMCO's computers contractors charged \$125 per hour to move monitors and replace printer cartridges.

Her words made sense but didn't hit home. Those other computer guys were professionals, Bill and I, amateurs. The industry's momentum pushed toward WANs, T1 Internet, and the security offered by Microsoft NT and UNIX. We were Lantastic experts, but the workingman's network was trading water, losing credibility due to lack of options, security, and expandability. It wouldn't be around much longer. And if I wanted to be around much longer, I'd have to take the MCSE exam—Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer exam—the MCATs, GREs, and SATs of the computer world. I could take a ten-week course in Bellevue for \$1200. But I didn't want to drive to Bellevue, or spend the money, or crush my brain with a standardized test. My other option was to bail out from computers altogether. But then I'd never get to buy that house. I had looked at two: one in Wallingford with a broad porch facing south, the other on Orcas Island, on Enchanted Forest Road, with five divisible acres, including a horse pasture and barn. Both were \$129,000, and I'd been saving and daydreaming. Even after doubling up on my Jeep payments I had saved enough for a down payment on a house. I thought of myself as a homeowner and landlord, keeping one room for myself and renting out space to med-students or, if on Orcas, waitresses from Bilbo's. The only thing that had stopped me from buying a house was worrying about earthquakes, or the One earthquake that the Northwest expected, that 9.0. I never thought that my income would stop short—I always figured it would grow—and now my daydreams were cut up from the roots.

Combat with a lich had drained me of hard-earned experience points. Soon after,

Skeletor announced that CCS had found someone for the job, and she asked if could show him around, explain the current network design and its idiosyncrasies. She had asked Bill first, but he didn't return her calls, and Bill asked me to do it, because he was hurt, felt that he'd been taken advantage of, that his years of dedication to the organization meant little to corporate decisions; he didn't want to show his face at CCS, didn't know what he'd do, didn't plan on returning.

So I said that I'd do it, return to the battleground where we'd lost Seattle, and it wasn't the three hours of pay that got me back there: CCS was, after all, a charity organization helping Seattle's disenfranchised, and they needed me one last time. The guy Skeletor had chosen was around my age; he was hyperactive and knew everything about everything electronic and couldn't stop spouting information about the technical superiority of Microsoft NT over Lantastic. He was also an MCSE. Before I left, Skeletor asked if I had gotten an email address yet. I shook my head, even though I had a Hotmail account. "You really should get one, they're great." I said that she could page me if CCS needed me, and I planned on canceling my pager, but then the homeless shelter beeped me and asked if could stop by. The director there, and my friend, both apologized, saying that it just wasn't right, just wasn't fair, that Bill and I were good people and good at what we did. "I spoke to my boss at the Archdiocese," the director said. "I told him that I wouldn't use this new computer guy at CCS—if it's okay with you, I mean, can we still call you for our computer problems?" I told him of course.

The shelter only had three computers, but his sentiment warmed me as if each of the four-hundred men in the back room had a computer. Does that make sense? Until Skeletor, I had never been scummed over to my face, and until the homeless shelter at St.

Martin de Porres I had never known the sweetness of loyalty.

A friend from home grubbed a ride from New York to Oregon, lived with his ex-girlfriend and her husband until kicking himself out, and made it to my doorstep by Memorial Day Weekend. His name was Weiss, and he was a lazy stoner, I feared slipping into his lazy-mode now that I didn't have any work. I said Hi Weiss and Bye Weiss in the same sentence, and Camille and I beat the crowds by driving east, just the two of us. She wanted to get away from people; I said I'd take her to Glacier National Park's most remote entrance, Polebridge. We made it to Spokane by midnight. Just into Idaho, Camille clutched her stomach and poked herself using four fingers. When she began writhing, I asked if we needed to stop. "No, I'm fine," she said. I told her that she wasn't fine, that I needed to know exactly how she was feeling. We had been through this before, for different reasons in different places.

"A cyst just burst in my ovary," Camille said, but she said this with a gasp of breath, like it might be the last thing she'd ever say, and she was still clutching and poking. "I'm fine."

I pulled the Jeep over and spoke softly while petting her head. She remained quiet. "Do we need to go to a hospital?" I said. Camille insisted that she was fine, and we fought over her health on the side of the highway, then through Idaho. I asked her if she still felt up to camping that night and she said nothing. I asked her if I should circle back to Spokane and she said nothing. But occasionally she'd whimper, and that was something. Our fights weren't real fights, because I wasn't a fighter and Camille laughed at herself, but we were both frustrated: me because she had used the word "burst," and that sounded horrific, and because she was an English major but couldn't communicate;

and Camille because she was in pain and her father had cancer, so she wasn't aggravated at me, just life. She won the not-fight. When we passed into Montana, the lights of a large hotel cut into the darkness. It was western-lodge style, new and huge and wooden, with hundreds of rooms, none of them cheap. I asked her if she'd feel better in a bed that night and she said yes, and we slept there and Camille was healed by morning, joking about how silly she had been the night before.

Polebridge was off some county route, twenty miles up a dirt road. We stayed in a small log cabin without electricity or running water. Polebridge had a general store and a dozen houses, but was classified as a township, hoping to achieve town status some day, no hurry though. We mountain biked into the park and through bear country and stopped in deep woods beside a still pond. A scared duck slapped its wings against the water on its retreat, and after its departure the air was silent enough that I could hear Camille's breathing. We turned to each other and said let's get out of here. We both felt a presence, like we were being watched, and we both imagined a giant grizzly thing, a shambling mound of fur and teeth.

Our path dead-ended at a clearing next to a lake: snow-capped mountains abutted the water, and the choppiness of the latter produced whitecaps that mimicked the former. It looked like the stormy seas of Alaska and the air had a chill. We hadn't seen any people since the morning at the general store. By the time we biked out of the park, the late afternoon was warm, and we picnicked on a blanket in a field. In the evening, I chopped wood, and at night we fueled our stove and huddled together. We shared warmth for the rest of the weekend.

From Polebridge, we drove twelve hours straight into Seattle, through Ballard to

Anthony's Homeport for the start of Copper River King season and Camille's birthday dinner. She said that I had already treated her to a birthday meal a week earlier, a home-cooked one, and I said that milady deserveth more than my humble hands could create. She said that she would grant me this request and allow me to treat her again. We were practicing for her graduation party two weeks henceforth: the Crabapples had rented a medieval village to celebrate the first of the family to graduate from college. The village was a staging area for the annual renaissance fair, but for the most part was slow during its off-season, which was just about all the time.

When graduation came, the nine offspring and mom had full run of the place, and after exploring we settled in the great hall for a feast. We chowed down mutton and drank ale and bards sang and jesters juggled. Camille looked royal in her bright red and black dress, a replica of a medieval Englishwoman's sewed by her mom. Camille's dad was too sick for the celebration. Soon after, he died.

I held Camille in my arms and mopped her tears with my t-shirt. The harder she shivered and shuddered the more I tightened my hug, until she could barely breathe. We lay on the couch in my room like this, spooning, with her whimpering, and if I relaxed my grip she bade me to squeeze harder by placing her palm over my knuckles. We agreed that it wasn't fair.

"I'm going home," she said, "to Oso."

"I'll drive you," I said. "Do you want me to drive you?"

She told me that her brother was driving, that he was in Seattle, and she said that there was a wake, tomorrow. "Do you want me to go?" I said. I had never been to a wake. Somehow I had been spared of this in twenty-eight years. Camille shrugged and I

prompted further. “Do you want it to just be you and your family? Do you want me there?” Camille said that she didn’t know and then decided that she wanted to be alone with her family and I said that I would wait at home, that if she needed me I would drive to her house instantly. “I’m only working one day this month,” I said, and she laughed at yet another CCS joke, but all of her laughs ended with more crying. I kissed her tears. And then she was gone.

I didn’t know what to do once Camille left. Hundreds of CDs and hundreds of tapes and I couldn’t find the music to fit my mood. My eyes scanned the rows of silent music, then the walls, finally resting on my bong. I wouldn’t smoke, just in case Camille needed me—no way would I surround myself with grieving Crabapples, that beautiful family, with eyes glossy for the wrong reason. I also couldn’t read, not without spacing out, so I booted up my computer and played Master of Magic: I was a wizard combating a sorcerer and a necromancer, buried under books in my tower while legions fought bloody wars, cutting crystals, acquiring mana, hoping one day to cast the Spell of Mastery and rule a desolate land. My mouse clicks were autonomic, my brain focused in Arcanus, no doubts, though an occasional RELOAD.

When the sun set in the real world, I didn’t notice, and then it was night, and I had farms to cultivate so that my troops were fed, temples to build to strengthen my mana, resistances to quell. All twilight and all morning; just before noon I cast the Spell of Mastery and fell into bed, my mind calculating moves in my sleep even though my foes had been vanquished. I didn’t hear the phone ring when Camille called, and she didn’t leave a message, and I didn’t know that she called until the following day, after the wake.

“We’re better, I guess,” Camille said. “It was pretty sad. My friends and family

wanted to know where you were.”

“Your friends were there? Why didn’t you call?”

“I did, once, but you didn’t answer, and I figured, I don’t know.”

When I called the East Coast and spoke to my parents, Mom said I should’ve gone to the wake. I told her that I didn’t know that friends of the family would be there and she said, “You should’ve gone.” I didn’t know what I had been thinking; I only knew that my room seemed dead-silent with my computer powered-down, no rurr of its fan; I could see myself in the black screen of the off-monitor: the reflection revealed a person who had committed the second biggest fuck-up of his life. I couldn’t sit still. I tried lifting weights. I did military presses until my arms felt like rubber, and then I curled, and all I wanted was to see Camille and be part of her family. Like Ariana’s hospital visit and operation, I had failed to be there when it counted. Like Ariana’s scar, I had winced. I was 28 but possessed the emotional sensibilities of a child.

When I saw Camille, I vowed that I would make it up to her. “I didn’t know your friends would be there. I should’ve been there.” I had been climbing my walls, agonizing over this.

“It’s okay,” Camille said. “I didn’t know what it would be like either. I should’ve asked you to come but I didn’t: it’s not your fault. That you weren’t there.”

I didn’t believe her. And I tried to compensate by taking care of her. I cooked meals, told her stories, tucked her in, made her laugh, and held her when she cried. I gave her kisses, and whenever she wanted something more, to subdue her pain, I gave her that, too. But mostly I gave Camille my shoulder and my ears. And I tried to keep up with the randomness of her thoughts. When she asked who was going to take her little

brother to his basketball games, I said that we would. When she asked how the family would find the early meadows of wildflowers, I told her that we'd grill Shari, that Shari knew all the meadows in Western Washington and the best months to visit. When she asked who would make her brownies and cookies and cakes and pies, I said that I would, that I'd put my Chemistry minor to use and learn how to bake. And sometimes I had to hold my words. One of my greatest fears in life was that my parents would not know my children, that by the time I finally married—assuming that I could actually mate, assuming my missing piece materialized—they'd be gone; Camille asked who would be the grandfather to her kids and I couldn't tell her: my fear was her reality. Camille didn't know what to do, but her mom did. Mrs. Crabapple gathered the clan into two cars and the ten of them drove to California to stay with her sister for ten days. Camille's aunt had married a doctor, a surgeon, and they lived in Malibu, on the beach, and the Crabapple kids could hang with their cousins and build sandcastles.

I had studied all kinds of sciences in optometry school. Biochemistry was my least favorite, if anything because I had trouble understanding its interrelationships. I liked Optics, which was pretty much a physics class, and Ocular Anatomy, which took us inside of the eye. Every human eye is different: behind the cornea and through the fundus is a complex network of vessels and nerves, a retinal image, and no two retinas, not even those from twins, are the same. Star Trek and other science fictions used retinal scans instead of fingerprints because looking into a person's retina is a more precise way to determine his or her unique identity. And what about looking out from the retina, through the cornea? The cornea is a lens, and its shape determines how we see.

Technically, how clearly we see—whether or not we need glasses or contacts, an additional lens to sharpen the blurred circles. But there’s more to seeing than clarity: there is perception. In the same way that glasses and contacts focus light, certain events in our lives touch our hearts and act as prescriptions. For Ariana, these events occurred when she was strapped into the seat on the back of her parents’ tandem bike. She saw the sun on leaves and shadows in the streets, children flying kites and horseback riding and others homeless and cowering next to parents with outstretched cups begging for change. Ariana saw Nature in its splendor and society in its failure and believed that if she became the best person she could be, the kindest, that if we all could, the two poles would meet, with the former sweeping up the latter; if we could take care of each other and the disenfranchised, the world would be complete, a home for all, a bicycle seat for every kid. This was her philosophy, and maybe that’s what love was—falling for someone’s philosophy, how they move and how they think.

Bree was greatly affected by death. The death of animals, the death of people. With each passing life, with the realization that someone or something’s story had ended, a slice of her own heart dissolved, dissipated, disappeared, and the resulting pain made it tough for Bree to continue day to day, and she tried to replace this emotional pain with physical pain, but that was just a temporary fix. Pain of despair was how she saw the world.

Camille’s prescription began forming when she was 12, when her father took her and only her to Europe. The eldest of his six daughters was his first princess, and daddy was her king, and ten years after he left her forever. Their time together and his departure would become the unique lens through which Camille saw the world: sunshine

of love and wildflowers to be plucked before summer's end; we only live once, and every day must be a happy day, because cancer runs in the family.

You learned how to bake for Camille, Dryad Ariana said, stepping out from behind her tree. Finally putting that Chemistry minor to use, I said. She said nothing, but took a step closer. I've only made cookies so far, I said. But Camille's sister's birthday is coming up: her mom's going to make dinner, and I'll bake the cake.

That's sweet. I wish you could taste the sweetness, I said. Do you still hate me, Ariana? I think I have to, Dryad Ariana said, adjusting the vines around her waist so that the whiteness of her round belly shined through; her child would be born in less than three months. I hope your husband knows how lucky he is. You could've had this; we could've had this.

I don't have any lenses, Ariana. My prescription is unfilled. That's why we ended.

Camille showed me pictures of the slim-limbed Crabapples, bikinis on Malibu Beach, and I showed her photos of the Enchanted Valley, and we both smiled and laughed. She kept positive through the days but sometimes cried at night, and I held her. She called me from work when her phones weren't ringing and I swiveled my chair and put my back to my computer, to whatever game I was playing. Camping helped. For her birthday, I had bought her a Thermarest, and Camille said that she preferred this mat and her sleeping bag to her bed. We stole away whenever possible, sometimes even during the week, and I'd drive her straight to work the next day, her long golden hair smelling like campfire. Weekends we were five, our party now including Yennie, Weiss, and

Soup, and we maxed-out the space in my Jeep—four people, four backpacks, and one dog. A tight squeeze, but cozy, except for that one camping trip near Yakima: we were attacked by ticks on the way out and spent an hour plucking the suckers off each other in the parking lot, but an hour wasn't enough because the girls shrieked all the way back to Seattle whenever someone spied yet another tick. After the Eastern Washington Tick-fest, we only crossed the Cascades one other time during the summer: Phish at the Gorge.

If Western Washington's weather didn't cooperate, we thought: Better to be in the woods in the rain than in the city. Weiss helped me string a tarp to three trees, wide enough that we could all sit beneath it and avoid the raindrops, high enough that we could make a campfire. Even if the entire forest seemed wet, there was always dry wood beneath the canopy, somewhere, if we looked hard enough, though the dampness made our fires extra smoky. The four of us sat coughing until the wood dried out. We had hiked five miles into Olympic rainforest and were wet to our socks.

"Let's play the Glad Game," Camille said, in her Pollyanna accent. "I'll start. I'm glad that we're all here today and not in the city, even you, Soup." She placed both hands on Soup and shook, and Soup tried to lick her arm.

"Especially Soup," Yennie said, and she offered her chin to Soup's tongue. "I'm glad we have Andy's cookies," Yennie said, reaching into the bag for another.

"I'm glad we were able to score before we left," Weiss said, packing a bowl.

"I'm glad Neil's playing the Gorge in September."

Camille preferred our camping trips over visiting home. She was the second oldest Crabapple, the elder sister, the only mature child save the twins, and the twins needed to be children now with daddy gone. Sometimes the weight of being big sister

was too much for Camille. She loved her family but didn't have any answers, only more questions. I tried to offset her burden and prop her up and we backpacked steadily, determinedly, oftentimes in shared silence, even when stopping to sleep in the sun or for a cookie break. My peanut-butter cookies were okay, and I didn't stop there. I borrowed Shari's oatmeal-raisin cookie recipe, and as I mixed the ingredients I thought of Camille, of what she liked, and I added a cup of walnuts, and figuring that she liked chocolate, added a cup of chips, too. "You bake for me," Camille said, and she twirled her hair.

"It's the 'Camille Colwyn Crabapple cookie,' the 'C-3.'" We carried batches into the woods, enough for Yennie and Weiss, and even Soup got a bite. My brother's wife gave me a carrot cake recipe, and I baked this for Camille's sister's birthday. We celebrated at their house on the river, rode inner-tubes over the rapids down to the bridge to where we jumped off and splashed around. The brownies had been Camille's dad's specialty, and I decided I'd learn how to bake everything except those.

Bill and I sometimes hung out during the weekdays. It seemed like we had made a pact, to camp and have fun this summer and take the CCS layoff as a blessing, and deal with reality in the fall. We kayaked the San Juans, we biked Snoqualmie, Victoria Falls, and the Dungeness, and we didn't speak of work. I tried to get Camille into mountain biking, but she bloodied herself a couple of times, and I decided we'd stick to simpler methods of exploring the woods. Still, she begged me to take her on the Constitution run, and I did—even though it was out of season and against the rules, closed to bikers from May 15th to October 15th—because I couldn't say no to Camille. We set out for Orcas Island the week her employer was moving offices, so she had off midweek, and even though it was July we had the back trails of Moran State Park to ourselves. She forgot a

bra but had a scarf, and she tied this around her chest to keep her titties from bouncing. On one part of the trail, we left our bikes and climbed hills of moss further into the forest, to a clearing where Camille bent over a log we were not-friends, and we made love naked in the wood, both left shuddering for the remainder of the day, agreeing that we had reached something unnamable. I'd had sex in my life—I'd fucked and I'd made love—and it was the latter we shared in the woods, my favorite moment of intimacy.

We went to her family's events together: concerts and recitals and her kid brother's summer league basketball games, and we took her two youngest siblings and family dogs hiking. Soup got along real well with these dogs. Just about every week, midweek, when Weiss was at work, I'd take Soup hiking with me. Soup liked to lay in my room while I played computer games, and if I grabbed my daypack, Soup jumped on me and beat me with her wagging tail—she knew when we were going somewhere. On the trail, she ran ahead and doubled back and kept doing this until she'd traveled ten times the distance I'd hiked. She was definitely Weiss' better half, but Weiss wasn't bad at all, and I had worried for nothing (as usual). Actually, I was the jobless stoner and he was the responsible one. When we went camping, Weiss told us all about defibrillators until Yennie and Camille and me, and even Soup, would roll our eyes, but it was cool to see him passionate about something.

I was daydreaming, staring at the one cloud in the blue sky, when who comes walking up the path but Jessika. She wore a cutoff shirt and cutoff jeans and looked like the cover of a men's magazine, the kind that 7-Eleven had to hide to prevent offending women and children. Bree would've fainted. She gave me a big breasty hug and our

sweat mixed; she said that she had moved back to Seattle, today. Her mom was renting a boat on Lake Washington, and Jessika had her own room in the bow, or stern—“What do they call the front part, the pointy part?”

I told her it was the bow and she told me that she was waiting for her visa, that her mom was a resident. “And I’m not allowed to work while I wait, so we can like hang out.” I took Jessika on a hike, but it was more like picnicking because she wasn’t in shape, or rather, she had a fantastic shape but didn’t have the lungs to hike—or maybe her breasts weighed her ribs down and, I don’t know. Each time she slipped her arms around me I pushed off and told her about Camille, about the Crabapples, about something. And then I introduced Camille to my young friend who was now of legal age. They shook hands and Camille laughed.

“Just promise me you won’t fuck her,” Camille said when we were alone.

“So other stuff is okay?” I said, half-joking. She repeated her request and I said, “I promise.” I had never heard Camille use that word, the f-curse. That was the new Camille. Adjusting to her prescription. But she was the same Camille too, and she still smiled whenever she spoke, except when talking about her dad.

One of things I enjoyed most about our relationship was that we were friends first, and there were no lies to remember or forget and then get caught up in, white or otherwise. I had always been an awful liar. If all humans have at least a potential to lie, I decided I would scrunch this potential down to the 0% range; this was easy with Camille.

Jessika asked to sleep over one night, when her mom was entertaining on the boat, and after we watched a movie Jessika kissed me and maneuvered herself on top of me, and then she pushed off and stood before me, and there in the silver light of the TV

Jessika removed her clothes. “You shave,” I said. She touched herself. “Jessika, I think you’re beautiful. But Camille is my girlfriend, and you know how I feel about her.”

Jessika slept in my bed, naked, and I slept in my clothes. It was like having a girl straight off the pages of Penthouse right next to me. I played with her tits and then stuffed my hands in my pockets and fell asleep hard and didn’t sleep well. I told Camille the next day.

“You slept with your clothes on?” Camille said.

“T-shirt and jeans,” I said.

“You poor thing.” She kissed me. “I trust you.”

Those words made me smile.

September and the end of summer was approaching fast, and just before I could have some kind of crisis regarding my career and future, Bill called and said that the chief of the Puyallup Tribe needed the Bill & Andy team. The director of all of CCS was also on an advisory board for the Puyallups—the Indians needed computer people they could trust, and this director trusted us, and I think he also felt bad about what had happened when Skeletor came into the picture. Bill said I could raise my rate to \$32.50 per hour, and soon I was commuting to Tacoma. Bill knew my take: I couldn’t be happy working for some mega-corp, helping a company produce their rubber bands and paper clips and rationalizing my position as cog in a great wheel. Working for CCS, a non-profit, had been noble, even if we got the shaft in the end. Working for an Indian tribe seemed noble too, and more in accordance with my personal chi than CCS. My interest in American Indian culture began when I was a kid. My earliest memories were of Dad

coming into my room to tell me bedtime stories. Dad didn't read to me: he made up a new story every night, drawing from his imagination, and most of these stories were based in Native America, like "How Sitting Bull got his name" and "Why Red Cloud's back was fuzzier than Standing Bear's." It amazed me that Dad could continue to do this for years and never run out of stories.

"I don't know what to expect," I said. "I told her that you were my girlfriend—not that she didn't know it from my letters—and I invited her to see the Northwest, if she wanted."

"S-u-n-s-h-i-n-e," Camille said. "Twenty-three points plus double-word score plus twenty more for using all of my letters."

Beq wanted.

I figured that as long as Camille and I were honest with each other, we couldn't fuck up our relationship and crash and burn. Or I couldn't fuck it up. She was sweet like summer blackberries ripening beside a river; I was her boyfriend and knight and protector of her mending heart. We didn't know if we were right for each other, and we questioned this openly, but we were a team nonetheless and would proceed as such until further notice. The fact that Beq—the Aussie I had had a fling with in Thailand the previous year—was now backpacking the U.S., seemed inconsequential.

Our summer shenanigans ended abruptly with the Puyallup contract, and by September 1st I was a regular in the Seattle-Tacoma commute. My drive was against the traffic grain and I always had a book-on-tape, usually a Faulkner novel that Camille picked up for me at the library. There was a used bookstore on my commute, and I

bought Camille paperbacks, placing a sticky-note on page one, writing, “Begin here.” Camille always read her books last-chapter-first. Camille and I spent most of our evenings together, but sometimes she hung out with the girls, and sometimes Jessika came over. When Jessika fought with her mom, she’d come over my house to sleep.

“Jessika,” I said. “No.”

She advanced again.

“Jessika! I said, No.”

She went down on me. Jessika deep-throated like a porn star. I couldn’t say no; I couldn’t speak. It was the greatest blowjob I’d ever had.

Sometimes, she’d nuzzle up to me and spoon and place my hand around her waist, and soon I’d touch her breasts and this sent a signal right to my dick. Firm, huge, natural weaponry.

“Jessika, please, no.” I pushed her off of me and straddled her and pinned her arms behind her head. “No!” But in this position, my erection had slipped out of my boxers and lay nestled between her breasts. She saw her opportunity and squeezed her breasts together and I was gone and soon she wore pearls.

Another night. “Jessika, no.”

“Why not?” she said. “I won’t tell.”

“Jessika, you know I care deeply for Camille, and you know we, Camille and I, aren’t sleeping with—fucking—anyone else.”

She pushed me onto my back and straddled my stomach, moved my hands around her tits, squeezed her tits through my hands, reached back and massaged my balls, took me out of my boxers, and then, in one swoop bucked up, back, and down on my erection:

having been a religious condom user, I had forgotten this sensation: the feeling of my naked cock inside of Jessika's cunt sent undulations up my spine to my fingertips, down my spine to my toes, and sent my hypothalamus into numb-y-land. And I pushed her off. Palms flat against her ribs, fingertips beneath her breasts, I pushed firmly with my hands and withdrew and backed my hips away, the lips of her pussy holding on until finally letting go with a kiss-like pucker sound. The pleasure I had vetoed produced a state of male shock akin to a giant insect bite from a truck-sized Shelob spider. I took a pillow and slept on the couch, in safety; if Jessika had remounted, I would've been defenseless. As it was, my only defense was the knowledge that Camille and I had something good.

Camille knew that Jessika slept over. She suspected that Jessika blew me and trusted me not to take it further. Because we were unsure of our relationship, if we were right for each other, Camille and I had agreed to see other people. But she wasn't seeing anyone. Sometimes we still played the we're-only-friends game, but this never lasted through the night. Our logic went something like this: If we occasionally dated someone else, we'd better know if we were a good match. Dating didn't include sex. Camille knew Jessika, knew Jessika was all about sex, but she didn't think Jessika was a threat, maybe because she knew me too, knew that it took more than looks to keep me interested and turned on; if there was ever any jealousy on Camille's part I never saw it.

After that night with Jessika, I felt as though I had passed a test—been offered the ring of power and had refused. Camille sensed this energy: I had combated a succubus and won, and I received my experience points, my mana. Level up: for me, and our relationship. On the September night when Beq's plane was due to arrive, Camille and I were closer than we'd ever been. I had always been an awful liar. Even people who

didn't know me could see right into my eyes and know. Camille didn't need to ask me if I had fucked Jessika; she knew the answer. But I told her what had happened anyway, because it felt good, a relief, and I said that Jessika wouldn't be sleeping over any more. "No," Camille said. "I have to work in the morning. Just meet Beq at the airport without me; I'll meet up with you two after work, tomorrow."

"We can go for Thai," I said.

"Just don't, you know, with her." Camille meant no sex, possibly no blowjobs, too. I reckoned I could do that. Funny, that Camille's granting me freedom had me realizing that I didn't want to fool around with other girls. Maybe I really did grow a level. Maybe this was what marriage was all about, not wanting another woman.

All I knew of Beq was our time in Thailand: chance meeting on the beach, swinging good time in the surf, sex before meals thrice a day for one week before exchanging addresses and saying farewell. Our last hut was built on a dock; during high tide we dove into the sea, and at night we did this naked and hungry. But in Seattle I had a girlfriend, and I was an ambassador and host, and maybe someday Beq might return the favor and Camille and I would have a hostess in Australia. I thought these things.

"Your hair is short," I said in the hug. She said that she had just got it done and asked if I liked it. "It brings out your smile." She looked devilish.

We downed a pitcher at the Green Lantern. I told her about Camille and she told me about this guy in LA, a new boyfriend. She had only been there three weeks, but they had met at a club and hit it off, and she was returning to LA after Seattle. "He's Jewish, like you—I think I like my boys circumcised."

We talked about travel, about backpacking. Even at the most desperate of times, there was magic on road, and its discovery produced an elation that needed to be experienced in order to be understood. I had met people on the road who had traveled a thousand miles more than me, with experiences that left me embarrassed for being such a greenhorn; still, there was camaraderie in these encounters, but it was brief, and those people came and went. Out of the friends and acquaintances I kept in touch with, Beq was one of the few well-traveled, and the *communitas* of the road made us kindred spirits. Our mutual inclination to throw caution out the hut window and succumb to desires of the flesh furthered this bond.

At home, Beq stripped to a black tank top and skimpy cotton panties. The activeness of backpacking through cities and countrysides, and on a tight budget, had honed my Assie friend: breasts looked larger, bum rounder, waist tauter. I tied the drawstring on my sweats and blew out the candle. We kissed because that's what we knew of each other, one week of touching, and then she tried to slip her hand into my sweats but couldn't, and when she went for the drawstring I pulled away.

“Eat my pussy,” Beq said. Her accent was magnificent.

I shook my head.

“I said, eat my cunt.” She pulled my hair with one hand and grabbed my dick through my sweats with the other.

I hated it when girls pulled my hair; a turnoff. I liked pulling theirs, if that's what they're into, but I had a receding hairline to think about, and I didn't want to think about it in bed. Maybe this offset her hand around my dick and enabled me to pull away. I said sorry. Beq was silent, and then she said, “You must really love her.” These were

fighting words for hot-blooded sluts like us. They were also feared words, the “love” part, because, somewhere in the ancient tomes it is written that Love can assuage the savage desire for flesh, can tone it down, or re-channel it toward one and one person only, somehow making it holy instead of dirty, and the mystery of the former requires faith, and that’s scary for a slave to the allure of the latter.

I almost said yes or no or shrugged, but nothing came out. Beq slid her hand down into her panties. “Too bad,” she said. “But I’m not licked yet.”

Ha ha.

I drew a map for Beq and highlighted all of the things she needed to see. I worked a half-day for the Puyallups, all the while spacing out, trying to guess as to how Beq and Camille might get along, or not get along. A 2/13 buddy from college left a message on my voicemail, saying that he was in town on business for one night, apologizing for not getting in touch with me sooner, and I called him at the Four Seasons. We talked a bit, agreeing it was cool to hear each other. He had just gotten engaged. He said that he was going to get a fancy dinner on his boss, but that he’d be free afterwards.

Beq and I went to Camille’s to pick her up, and the three of us cruised north on Aurora to Mai Thai. “It won’t be like real Thai,” I said, “but it’s damn good.”

“Remember the sandwich guy on Koh Pha Ngan?” Beq said.

“Sweet onions,” I said. “And that sauce—”

“—That sauce!”

“Best sandwiches in Southeast Asia,” I said. “I have a picture of him.” Camille had heard the stories before, had seen the pictures, had professed a desire to travel across

the Pacific to the land of scrumptiousness, but now I had a partner in selling Thailand as the greatest country on earth and Camille only groaned.

Beq started to say something, maybe, “The only sandwiches in Southeast Asia,” but her words trailed mumbly as she changed direction in mid-thought: “One time,” she said to Camille, “we were eating at a guesthouse, waiting to take an up-island ferry to another guesthouse, and right as we finished eating and had paid, Andy said, ‘Oh Beq, I need to order another red curry dish—prawns this time.’” We got out of the Jeep and the girls walked side-by-side and I trailed. “He just had to have it—showed me how hungry he was by licking his plate, and this was after devouring a huge mound of rice and vegetables and chicken—so he ordered another meal and even the waiter was shocked. The waiter called him, ‘Hěw.’ It means, gluttonous pig. We missed the ferry and I made him carry both of our packs up the beach.”

I tried to say wait, tried to talk, but the girls were now laughing, even as we sat at my table, and my words were not heard. I tried to tell them that I said “goong,” not prawns, and that I had sucked my curry through a straw, not licked the plate, but they were on to laughing about something else, this time with Camille telling the story. “And they call him that same name in Bellevue— Hěw—at the King and I.” Camille turned to me: “You said it meant hearty appetite.”

I told her that it did, that the translation was rough, but she didn’t hear: the girls were off to their next story—me and my colloquialisms, and then me and my collection of 1970’s Tolkien calendars tacked to the walls of my room.

“And that futon—,” Beq said.

“That bed is as hard as a rock,” Camille said.

“If you could call it a bed.”

“More like a board.”

“Harder than the temple floor at Nong Khai,” Beq said, massaging her neck.

There I was, worried all day about how Beq and Camille might get along and now they were old pals (at my expense.) At least their female communitas and the ensuing chatter it prompted had them talking more than eating, leaving plenty of salmon panang for ‘ol Hěw.

Chune played at the Crocodile that night. It was after ten by the time we got inside and ordered the first round. Many sweaty bodies and a lot of drinking. I had lent Beq a flannel so she’d fit in, and we all had at least one rip in our jeans. Camille swore that the drummer had thrown up and swallowed his vomit, that she had seen it happen in his face, but the music was too loud to continue that conversation. By the time my buddy came into the Crocodile, we were two steps away from becoming tanked, chowing french fries like stoners on a mission. My buddy wore a suit. He saw how we were dressed, ripped off his tie and stuffed it into his pocket. Everyone in the café gave him looks like he was the fuzz raiding a high school party, so we left.

“To be outside—” Camille said. “I can breathe again.”

“I’m almost pissed,” Beq said. “Al—most.”

And then Beq and my buddy got into a fight over pissed-drunk versus pissed-off, and it went back and forth, and just before he could say something like, *Learn the lingo or go back to Australia*, Beq put her arm around Camille’s waist and Camille’s arm stretched out over Beq’s shoulders, and the two staggered down the street like they were at a picnic competing in the three-legged race.

“I know,” Camille said to Beq. “It’s okay. He’s probably never even left New York.” She said that loud enough for my buddy to hear.

“But he’s here,” Beq said, and the girls laughed, newly agreeing that he’d probably never ever left New York and Seattle.

“Man,” Buddy said, “that accent is so grating.”

We walked behind the girls until they reached the corner, where they stopped to look up at the monorail track. We passed them and they followed us to the Four Seasons, where my buddy said we could charge room service to his boss. We drank beer, us boys at the table, the girls on the couch playing quarters by bouncing Buddy’s shoes into the garbage. We talked about his engagement—they hadn’t set a date yet—and then about a party at college where everyone took ecstasy and some idiot pissed off a balcony and onto a kissing couple who never realized what kind of shower it was.

“What are you girls doing?” I said, when they pressed up against the window to get a view of the city of tiny lights.

Camille took the curtains and drew them shut, almost ripping them down. “Now you’ll never know,” she said, and the girls continued giggling from behind the curtains. Then the giggling stopped, and the two pairs of girl-feet were no longer pointed toward the outside of the building, the window: the toes were head-to-head. I opened the curtains. The girls were kissing. Camille’s hands cupped Beq’s face, and being taller than Beq she had to crane her neck as the kiss developed, had to slide her hands to Beq’s shoulders and adjust the Aussie’s posture. Tongues played through the golden veil of Camille’s hair. Beq’s hands slid from Camille’s waist to Camille’s cheeks, and within the kiss they moved, taking baby steps, Beq walking backwards. They were heading for

the couch, but the coffee table forced an adjustment, and then it was Camille's turn to walk backward, and this proved too much for my gawky girl, and they both tumbled onto the floor, both repeating "Ow," both rubbing knees and elbows, and both laughing.

Buddy repeated holy shit many times, until it turned from some sort of mantra to hyperventilation. I asked him if he needed a bag and that woke him. "An orgy!" he said. "I love the West Coast." He began rambling, telling me that he had always wanted a threesome, all his life, and that it was cool with him that this was a foursome.

"What about your fiancée?" I said.

"What wife?" he said. "Eh? Eh?" He tried to elbow me in the ribs, but missed. "What should I do? I don't want to blow this—it's exactly what I need before I get married. I don't want to blow this. What do I do?"

Up until that night, Camille had never revealed a desire to fool around with another girl. As far as guys went, she had only slept with me. She knew about Bree and I, but she never said word one regarding what my buddy was now calling "Hot girl-on-girl action."

"Should I get ice?" Buddy said, twice. "Ice is good?" he asked, holding up an empty ice bucket.

"What do you girls want?" I said.

Girls said nothing. They looked up from the couch like I had said something bizarre, and in a different language. *We didn't know you spoke Finnish.*

I told Buddy to go down the hall and get ice.

"Camille," I said, "what do you want?" I tried reading her eyes, scanning them for signs of sadness through the drunkenness. Over the summer, she had regained some

funlovingness, her old self, but was still mourning her father. Beq's eyes were easy: devilishness. Camille's said something like, *Oops*, or *Surprise*, or *At least I keep you guessing*.

"What do you want?" Beq said to me as Buddy came into the room. He showed her the full ice bucket.

"Do you want," I started to say, but I found myself stumbling for a word—a *threesome*, a *foursome*, an *orgy*, *group sex*, *group hug*—I looked straight at Camille and asked her what she wanted, and she smiled, happy to see me so clueless.

"Are you going to put your money where your mouth is?" Beq said.

"I'll get condoms," I said. "There's a 24-hour market around the block."

That threat shut Beq up.

"Do I get the condoms or not?" I said to Beq.

As the words left my mouth, I knew the answer. I could read something in Camille's posture: she nuzzled Beq, maybe wishing it was me, maybe not, but more affectionate than sexual. In her face too: there was something sober there, not so much sadness as confusion, or maybe simply curiosity. Either way, I made the call when Buddy asked me if he should ring the front desk to see if the concierge had condoms.

"No," I said. "I think it's girls' night tonight."

He didn't like my answer. He walked into the bathroom and came out with two tiny bottles of skin moisturizer. "Lotion, ladies?"

The girls laughed at him, and then Beq took Camille's hand and led her into the bathroom. They locked the door and drew a bath. "Man," Buddy said. "That's fucking—look at all that ice." I knocked softly on the door and asked them to open up

for just a second, and Beq said no, but Camille flipped the lock. By the time I turned the handle, she was stepping back into the bath. I took a picture, the girls complained, and I told them not to worry, that the steam would probably screw up the camera, and I shut the door.

Buddy and I finished the beers, him pacing the room and me sitting by the window. He cursed his luck and then began cursing his fiancée, saying that it was all her fault, and I tuned him out. I thought about Camille, how cool it was that she had taken this opportunity (as opposed to analyzing it to death), that she was checking things out, and how beautiful the two girls looked as they kissed. Buddy caught me smiling and began yelling at me, and then I started laughing and he started laughing and we both shut up when the girls walked out in towels. They had him unfold the mattress from the pullout couch. Then they got into his bed, under the covers, and dropped their towels on the floor. Buddy sat there on the pullout couch with his mouth open. He squeezed the skin moisturizer from its bottle until he had a wad of goo in his hand, and then he walked to Beq's naked shoulder and tried to rub it in. She rolled over and Buddy got into the bed, and then she rolled away and took Camille's hand and the two naked girls walked long-legged across the carpet to the pullout couch. Buddy couldn't move when he saw the two girls naked together. Once they had slipped under the cover of the couch-bed, he tossed his covers aside and followed them, taking a seat next to Beq's ass. The girls feigned sleep and Buddy massaged Beq's shoulders. When he tried to access her back, Beq reached behind and stuck her hand in his face and pushed, like she was trying to get rid of a tongue-licking, tail-wagging dog. Eventually, he gave up and went back to his bed and turned out the light.

I slipped into bed with the girls and Beq tried that shit on me, and I told her that there was no way I was sleeping in Buddy's bed, so she had better relax or else. "Or else what?" Beq said.

"Or else I'm going to pick you up and carry your naked body to Buddy's bed, and drop you."

Camille kissed me goodnight; beyond that I was content to wait, to see what daylight would bring.

The girls were embarrassed in the morning, but not with each other or me, just Buddy, so they pushed me to take them home and we got to my house before 8am. They complained about the light, they complained about their heads, and they complained about their stomachs. So we took to the Toby and got high. I unfolded my futon couch, which was bigger and softer than the futon bed in my connecting sub-room, the cave, and we ate bagels and watched Hong Kong Phooey until falling asleep.

The girls were still sleeping when I woke, their arms wrapped around each other. Beq snored little snores. Camille's mouth was open and the flannel pillowcase soaked up her drool. Her face looked caught in the throes of ecstasy, as if dreaming erotica. The purple tapestry hanging in the window transformed the afternoon sunlight into a soft sheen of lavender, and the girls' skin absorbed this light and subdued it further. Beq's arms looked bluish, her face peaceful, as if she had frozen to death or died from asphyxiation, and I could've imagined her dead if not for her sounds. These were noises only a female could make. She resembled Theria, the thief-hero from Master of Magic, and Camille, Goldberry. My imagination had not even considered this an option: Beq

and Camille—Beq with Camille. The bed was like a painting I had stared at for many months but had never understood, only admiring the landscape and inventing a mis-story for the characters. Now I had entered into the painting's reality and I was closer to understanding the artist's true intentions.

I wanted to recreate the vibe the girls were running with last night, everything except the anti-guy part, a threesome, foursome counting alcohol. We could go to the Redhook Brewery. Beq hadn't seen it yet, and Camille was always up for a good brew and complimentary glass. Walk there, drink, laugh, walk back, all that good stuff.

Camille woke first. She put her head in my lap and I ran my fingers through her hair and she purred. We spoke in whispers, Camille laughing at herself for last night, for being such a trip, for being so complicated. She apologized for blowing me off and I said no, no, no. I told how cool it was, her exploring, and that I wanted it, sensed it, to be her time alone with Beq. We both laughed when I told Camille what I was thinking just a couple of days earlier, my wondering if Beq and Camille would get along okay. Camille hadn't wondered; it was like she had read ahead to the last chapter.

Our laughter woke Beq. She stretched and smiled and gave Camille a kiss and then I was invisible again. The kiss grew. Beq's lips traveled Camille's neck and her hand slipped into Camille's underwear. Camille moaned and Hendrix strummed. *Sand Castle Magic*. Naked girls together in my bed. *If me, the ten-year old kid, could see the now-me, would he be proud or content or happy knowing what he'd, I'd, become or achieved, or would he have only expected it?* I jerked off until I saw my opening: Camille now naked, on her back, fingers pinching the sheets like twisting nipples, arms straight as if imitating Frankenstein; Camille's long legs spread wide, socked-feet

hanging off the futon; Beq on her elbows and knees, with her face and fingers exploring the environs of Camille's pussy, searching for the most sensitive locales. Beq's round ass raised up to the sky like a grail-shaped beacon, and I slipped a condom on and pulled her underwear back and entered from behind. This new bum felt delightful, like the last afternoon of school before summer, and I leaned forward humping, kissing Beq's ear, watching her tongue trace the folds of Camille's other lips. *Melting into the sea, eventually.*

We did this every day, at night if Camille had to work. We varied the activity, but Camille never ate Beq out. Mostly, Beq and I made love to Camille, the both of us treating her like the fairy princess she believed herself to be. *The Ribald Tales of Canterbury.* We each took a side of Camille and worked our tongues to the middle. It was always pleasant to see my Aussie friend's face appear over the horizon of Camille's ribs. For the most responsible child in a family of nine, the second-eldest and designated permanent babysitter, the big sister who took care of everyone throughout her own childhood and into adulthood (if this was adulthood), Camille took to the queen treatment like a rightful heir with a lifelong desire that the kingdom pay homage by making love to her. A few months earlier she had been babysitting her siblings while mom took dad to the hospital for his cancer treatments.

When Camille had to work, I went to work. I drove to the Tribe's admin building spacing out, ignoring my book-on-tape and wearing a silly apri-sex smile. Half of the Puyallups wondered what I was up to, the other half just wanted to hang out and chat and share positive vibrations.

We were desert-bound: dear old Uncle Neily was playing the Gorge at George. It was Camille's first Neil show, and Beq had heard a lotta Neil since arriving two weeks earlier. I gave Beq the ticket I had bought for Yennie (Yennie had gone back to Michigan for a wedding). Weiss also bailed, claiming that he had to work, which was shocking; this was not the same Weiss who used to drop out of reality to tour with the Dead for two months a stretch. I had run into my ex-girlfriend, Bree, on the Ave. I offered her Weiss' ticket, warned her that we'd be going with Camille and Beq, and she said that she was excited to see Neil with his biggest fan. But her smile said something else: she was happy, but at the same time not. During those post-suicide attempt weeks, when Phoxodd and Yennie and I were hanging out with Bree nonstop, it was Bree who suggested that Camille and I would be a great match. Bree planted the idea in Phoxodd's head and Phoxodd agreed and made it happen. The creases in Bree's smile told me that she regretted speaking her mind that afternoon.

When concert-day came, I took a bottle of Jack Daniels and a bottle of Southern Comfort and poured them into the same large thermos. After three hours of driving, I could smell the liquor brewing, and when I parked and checked on our supplies, I found that the thermos had tipped and whiskey had leaked all over our camping gear. To recover from the loss, we smoked a joint and I made my way to the merchandise stand and bought one of everything on my new credit card, some charge over a hundred bucks.

We sat in the tenth row, center, and Neil Young rocked our worlds. It began to downpour, and Camille noted that it only rained like twice a year in the desert, and Neil was pissed. He was making a movie that night—Jim Jarmusch was filming *Year of the Horse*—and the harder Neil played the more it rained, as if he was battling with the skies,

and he looked up at the night and clenched his teeth, and then he began spilling wax from a giant candle and then smashing his guitar. We were drenched. Neil brought out an acoustic to either apologize for his hubris or to tame the storm clouds. The softer he played, the lighter the rain fell, until it stopped raining. I held Bree's hand throughout the acoustic set and Camille held Beq's.

We cruised to the nearest town after the show, but none of the motels had vacancies. The ground was wet from rain, our camping equipment reeked from whiskey. I drove us back to Seattle. We arrived after 4am. Bree thanked me and went home, and I went to bed wondering what the night would've been like if we had drunk all of those coonhounds and found a motel room. I said this out loud, after sex and sunrise.

"I don't like Bree," Beq said. "She's not my type."

Camille said nothing.

"She's sweet," I said. "Don't say anything about her."

"She's cute," Beq said. "Just not for me."

Beq said that she preferred tits, that Bree was flat, and Camille said that she should see my friend Jessika. "Very chesty," Camille said. "It's the Canadian water."

Beq said that she preferred Camille, then tightened her hug around my girlfriend. "I'm so constipated," Beq said. Two days earlier she was all about farts. Beq was trying to make girls ugly by showing me the less pleasant side of biology. She tried turning me off by revealing her humanness, but I was charmed by women, and would remain so.

"That's so hot," I said.

"Take us to Vancouver," Beq said. "I want to see Canada. Please?"

Camille said that her work schedule was nonstop this week, that she could use a

break from the sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. “Never rock-n-roll,” I said, and I rolled on top of her and pushed Beq away and shook and tickled Camille until she repeated my words.

With Beq in town, I had been blowing Jessika off, only speaking on the phone. Jessika thought I was angry with her, for the night when she jumped on me. I told her that Beq and I were going to Vancouver and she begged me to take her. “We can stay at my dad’s house. For free.”

Before we left, I told Camille that Beq and I would have a chaperone for the trip.

The nicely shaped Assie, the firm and full-chested Canadian, and the Brandybuck, explored Vancouver all day and napped in the park by a totem pole beneath the late afternoon sun. After dinner at a funky restaurant, I walked into a giant freezer full of beer and bought two six-packs and we spread our sleeping bags out on the floor of Jessika’s dad’s basement. Jessika and I began to fool around. I pictured her father at the head of the stairs, but the removal of her shirt and bra dispelled this conjuration. Beq watched all of this, and I tried to hand Jessika’s breasts to her, but Beq didn’t move. Beq’s eyes betrayed her desire, though: they said she wanted to dive in. Jessika was indifferent; she had never had sex with a girl before, but would’ve done anything for communitas’ sake—or more precisely, she would’ve slept with Beq if that meant she’d get to sleep with me, too.

Beq only watched, and Jessika went for my boxers but didn’t get them off, and no sex was had that night. Grandma made breakfast the next morning and we split, but we got into a fight at the border, the guard saying that Jessika was not allowed to live in the U.S. while waiting for her visa. Jessika began to cry and Beq gave the guard a piece of her mind and the guard said, “Not a word from you.” He threatened to lock Beq up in a

detention center and I pulled her away and Jessika away. I drove Jessika back to her dad's and dropped her off, crying. Once back in the U.S., Beq and I picked up the Toby I had buried at a rest stop and drove to the hot springs near Mt. Baker to soak. Back in Seattle, we told Camille the border story.

On Sunday morning, we had sex. Camille came first and excused herself to go to the bathroom. When she returned, I was on my back and Beq was riding me. Camille gasped and didn't know if she should step further into the room or leave, then she left. Beq and I finished. I found Camille on my porch drinking a beer.

"Starting early today, eh?" I said. She didn't talk, and I had to poke her and act silly until finally she said that it just came as a shock, that's all. "A shock?" I said. "We've been getting down, the three of us, for more than two weeks."

"I just—seeing you two alone—I don't know." I asked her What, and she tried to explain about relationships, and how we weren't technically boyfriend and girlfriend, but, well, she didn't know. "We weren't supposed to have sex with anyone else. Like you with Jessika."

"I've never had sex with Jessika."

"That's what I'm saying, but now you're having sex with Beq."

"But she's there, with us, and you're there. And there I am." My words weren't sounding so clear, maybe because I saw something else, like the end of me fucking Beq's end. "You just want the both us to make love to you?" I asked, and Camille said yes. "That's not fair. That's not fair to me, it's not fair to Beq."

"I'm sorry. That's the way I am, I guess. I know it's not fair. I'm such a

dichotomy.” A dichotomy, I asked. “I’m sorry,” she said, and I thought she was going to cry, so I upshifted. I told her it was totally cool, that this was new to all of us. We don’t know the rules for this kind of stuff. Beq and I will enjoy you; we will treat you like the queen you are.”

“I’d rather be a goddess,” she said, and she smiled.

“I know,” I said. “You went from virginal princess to elf-queen clad in living flowers—all loving you and despairing—I’m still working on goddess.”

That night, in bed, our roles were very clear, and over the next two days Beq and I made love to Camille and I didn’t boink my Assie. I had bartered Camille into allowing oral sex: somebody would have to eat Beq out, and Camille wasn’t going to do the deed, and thus it only made sense that if Beq could receive she could also give. They’d both go down on me, and looking at their mouths, feeling those two tongues, sent my spine into orbit. *Pains? What pains?*

When Beq was showering, Camille kissed me and then said, “Beq told me that you and Jessika fooled around.”

“We didn’t do anything. I just wanted to show Beq Jessika’s tits.”

Camille laughed. “When I asked, Beq told me that you didn’t sleep with Jessika.” A smile subdued her laugh, and then that too disappeared.

“What is it?” I said. “What’s wrong?”

“When is it just going to be us two again?” She told me that Beq had been trying to convince her to leave Seattle, to follow her back to Los Angeles. What? “She keeps saying how cool it would be to travel the States with me, how we could go to New York—and you know I want to go to New York—and how much fun we would have

fooling people into thinking that we were just friends.” I asked her when she was going. “I’m serious,” Camille said, slapping my leg. “When is it just going to be the two of us? Who are we as a couple?”

“Me and you or you and Beq?”

She slapped me again and I said okay okay, I’ll talk to her.

It was like Kathryn and Bree all over again: the more powerful, more exotic girl, attempting to take away my sweetness (my girlfriend). This had me into thinking, *Is this the way it always worked out? If I’m lucky enough to find a cool chick and make some fantasy happiness, will our third-party-girl stir subterfuge into the mix? Does everyone have an ulterior motive?*

It wasn’t super easy asking girl #2 when she was leaving, but girl #1 had requested it, and I figured this must be a rule in triad relationships. I guessed; there’s no manual for this sort of thing. Someone should write one. The next day, after dicking around in Seattle, I took Beq on an adventure. She might’ve been trying to steal my girlfriend, but when it was just the two of us the vibe was different. We hung over the rail of the ferry watching the jagged Olympics grow larger as we approached the peninsula. We talked about Thailand, how sweet the people were, and how delightful it was to stretch out on a blanket every morning and let some pudgy Thai women twist and rub and crack our bodies. *Where you going? Where you from? Massage today?*

We cruised around the mountains, picnic dined at Dungeness Spit, and ended up at the parking lot for Olympic Hot Springs well into the night. The moon was so bright that I didn’t need my flashlight to unload the bikes from the rack.

“You know I’ve never done this before?” Beq said.

“Bet you don’t say that often.”

She laughed.

“Well,” I said, “I’ve never biked through the forest by moonlight with an Assie to ancient hot springs.”

Usually, when I called her an ‘Assie,’ she reminded me how she didn’t like the term, but in the vanilla glow of the wood she smiled and took a deep breath. The 2.5 mile stretch was an old road, now fenced off from cars. The moonlight made its surface glow, along with our skin. Like at Baker, Beq complained about that the hot springs were far from sanitary, so we went from the warm pools up the trail to the hottest pools. “Sanitary enough for you now?” I said.

“I mean, people can just do anything in here—there’s no custodian.”

We spoke about other hot springs, and Thailand, Japan, Australia, and then I ferried the conversation to California and asked Beq if she shouldn’t start heading back. “It’s almost been a month,” I said, and she asked hardly three weeks, no. I told her that I could continue our threesomes every night, that I appreciated her “help” with Camille. “But she’s my girlfriend, and I really care about her, and I think we’re losing our couple-identity.” She said that she would fly back to LA, and I said, “Without Camille?” and she harrumphed. Beq left and October arrived and I worked at the Puyallups five days a week, sometimes until seven or eight at night, sometimes at the Puyallup school teaching children about computers. Camille worked a lot too, and she didn’t sleep over much, and soon we were on a plane, her head on my shoulder and my face in her hair. *I could do this*, I thought, *Maybe*. She wasn’t the country-blond from my childhood daydreams:

Camille's hair was gold, not yellow, and her rural home was on a Northwestern river, not in Midwestern wheatfields. But we had a connection; Camille was my closest friend. In the last part of *The Lord of the Rings*, around page 1000 if it's the single-volume edition, Faramir, young lord of Gondor, and Éowyn, princess of Rohan, become a couple. Their respective kingdoms are different worlds: the White City and its tall spires are akin to King Arthur's Camelot or Charlemagne's France, and its people are cultured in literature and history and the lineage of Gondor, and these things are recorded in ancient tomes preserved in the deep rows of Minas Tirith's library; Rohan resembles northern Germanic culture, even Mongol culture considering their horsemanship. The women of Rohan are tall and blonde, and like the men they are warriors, shieldmaidens, similar to Vikings. Rohan has no writing; they have no books. Faramir and Éowyn fall in love, and their union will further unite their two uniquely different kingdoms.

I came from the City, from a dark-haired land of pavement and progress, of Broadway musicals and electric performances, of warm beaches and hot summers. Camille was a country girl, a blonde in a family of blondes living on a river in a cool temperate rainforest. Everyone in her family played an instrument, and they put on their own musicals in their living room, and hers was a world of wildflowers, outdoor dogs, and chilled mist.

Camille's new apartment was a short five blocks down Stoneway from my house, though further west, toward Aurora, behind the adult bookstore. She found the three-bedroom with Phoxodd and Yennie. I did their heavy lifting on moving day, and they said I could throw a moka at their place for Neil's birthday, November 12th. I baked Neil a chocolate pecan pie with a mocha whipped frosting, and Camille and Yennie and Weiss

and I devoured it while playing Neil-Scrabble—every word had to come from a Neil song title, lyrics, or in some way relate to Neil. Camille, usually a six-letter-word girl, had trouble; she even struggled to lay down “farm” and “rust” and “Neil.” Maybe she had something on her mind: it was the kickoff of the holiday season, the first without Pa Crabapple.

The Puyallup Tribe was gearing up to open their new casino the day after Christmas, and Bill and I worked nonstop. I spent Thanksgiving with the Crabapples, and between the nine kids and mom the table was chatty and active, more than I had figured, like it had been years since their dad’s passing.

Bill and I managed to steal an overnight biking on Orcas to try out my new bike and for hot tubbing at Doe Bay, but mostly the Puyallups wore us out. The Tribe bought a riverboat casino from New Orleans, had it towed through the Panama Canal and up into the Puget Sound, and moored the boxy barge in the Port of Tacoma where hundreds of workers prepared each of the three stories for opening day. We weren’t responsible for any of the casino equipment, but the Gaming Department and their bottomless budget had me doing handstands setting up the security and human resources system. The work was steady, the money good, and I decided to blow a wad and take Camille on another trip. I couldn’t take her away from her family for Christmas, but I bought us tickets to New York for the day after. It wasn’t like, *Time for Camille to meet my family*; more like, I was going home to hang out with family and friends and figured it would be more fun with her. That, and I reckoned she would enjoy the trip.

I worked right up until Christmas Eve day, and the admin building had never been so busy: people hurried through the halls and rolled their eyes instead of stopping to talk.

When I finished, I cruised the hour home with the plan to wrap presents and get to the Crabapple's for eggnog, but I received a 911 page as I pulled into my driveway. There was a problem with the main computer in the Gaming Department, the one attached to a camera, the one they had used over the past two weeks to take more than four-hundred pictures of the casino's new employees. The Tribe had bought this computer from a specialized company and the Gaming agent who ran it, a non-tribal member, was, well, off-kilter. I couldn't talk him through the problem on the phone and he began hyperventilating until I promised to drive back to Tacoma.

Fifty-five minutes down I5, slick December nighttime rain, an occasional rainbow of will-o'-the-wispish Christmas lights in this otherwise black-and-white picture.

For some reason, the computer was dead. It wouldn't boot up, and they needed to print four-hundred badges the next day, Christmas, so the workers would have them for the casino's opening day. Without the badges, there would be no opening day. Usually, I worked alone, but on this December evening I had the director and assistant director of Gaming, two Gaming commissioners, and the guy who they were about to blame it on, all crowding into the small office that had been a prison cell sixty years earlier. When I was able to start the computer with help from a boot disk, I found that the tape backup had not worked for ten days, and since three-hundred pictures had been taken since then restoring from the backup would be futile. The Gaming agent rambled, like he always did. He was a largish man and held a black-belt in karate, but he possessed the nervous demeanor of a guilty child who had only now begun to understand the magnitude of his fuck-ups. Computers confused him, yet he was in charge of the Gaming Department's most important PC. "The backup has failed and the hard drive seems dead," I said. "I'll take it

home to my workbench and see what I can do.” They all reminded me of the urgency. I told them that I’d try to recover as many names and pictures and badges as I could.

The director pulled me out of the cell and aside. “Yeah, um,” he said, scratching the back of his neck. He was a former police chief and held a high position with the Puyallups, but he was not tribal so his job wasn’t protected. He had already been in trouble once, for tacking a life-size John Wayne cutout to the wall. Wayne was his hero, but the Tribal Council found it offensive and took it down; Wayne was no hero to the American Indian. “You have to restore the photos,” the director said to me. “There’s no way, come heck or high water, that I can get three-hundred people to show up on Christmas, retake their photos, and print the badges.” He put his hands together as if praying. He was John Wayne-sized, but when he rounded his shoulders he seemed smaller. If I didn’t fix this hard drive, the casino wouldn’t open and both the agent and director would lose their jobs.

This was the single most important task I had had since I began working on computers. I drove up to Seattle with the hard drive on the seat next to me, thinking this. Bill had flown back to New York; the task was mine alone. If it had been one of our computers, one of the computers Bill had sold to the Tribe, I would have been worried. Sometimes Bill skimmed in quality—though only to save the Puyallups money and fit their request into a budget, not to scum anyone—and drove me crazy when he did this, because it was my job to overcome the shoddiness and make things work. But the Gaming Department had gone with this specialized company for their badge computer, and the company was supposed to be responsible for maintaining their system, and the agent responsible for ensuring the integrity of the backup tape.

Once home, I called Camille and explained the situation. She made pity noises for me and in the background someone played the family piano. She asked me how I was going to fix the thingy and I told her I had not clue one. I hooked the hard drive up as a slave to my computer, and before I could even look into the problem my Norton Diagnostic, the software I had set to run automatically on my computer—a version that was far outdated, and me not wanting to shell out money for an upgrade—flashed red on the screen and began restoring the drive’s partition. My computer ran through a cycle of automated tasks and booted up to Windows and that was that. The drive was fixed.

It was too late to go back to the Tribe and the Crabapple compound was the opposite direction, so I created a folder, C:\numbnutz, backed up the four-hundred badges, removed Gaming’s drive, and loaded Civilization II onto my computer. I had bought the game but never had time to install it. You start as a tribe with a village and this grows to a town, and you train soldiers, construct buildings, research technologies, multiply, and your towns grow into cities and you spread your people across the world. Other civilizations compete for resources, raise armies, wage wars. I started at 4000 B.C. at 10pm and by sunrise I was in the Middle Ages, by 7:30am the Renaissance. I hadn’t stood in 9.5 hours. My people had built the Pyramids and the Great Library, and I was so exhausted I felt as though I had actually built these wonders.

Rather than go to sleep, I drove straight to the Puyallups, and at 8:30am Christmas Day the place was hopping, mostly Accounting and Gaming, and everyone knew my business and stopped their own to ask. “Everything’s cool,” I said, and I reinstalled the drive and the Gaming Department began printing badges. People found me down in Gaming and patted me on the back; the agents all came in and thanked me and thanked

me again. One of the commissioners said that I was the White Man who had brought Christmas to the Indians; the Emerald Queen Riverboat Casino would open. Everyone commented on my state of exhaustion, my red eyes, and everyone had words of kindness. “And on Christmas,” they said. “You poor thing,” the a/p lady said. “We owe you big time,” the off-kilter Gaming agent said.

Once the system was in gear, I made my way upstairs to Accounting because the CFO insisted that I had to see him, and I was to meet him at Payroll’s laser printer. I thought that something else might have broken, but wouldn’t you know, he had printed a \$100 check in my name, and he thanked me and smiled—the first time I had ever seen him smile. On my way out, the Gaming director cornered me. He held an open envelope, and two of the commissioners were trailing behind him waving money. When they reached him, they stuffed the money into the envelope and he presented it to me and all three thanked me, told me to get some sleep and enjoy the holidays. There was \$86 in the envelope, and a card, too. It was a birthday card, but the birthday wishes had been crossed off and everyone in Gaming had signed and stuffed some money into it. I drove home, packed, and then cruised up to Camille’s, where the beautiful shining faces of the Crabapple children gave me Christmas kisses.

I played canasta with Camille and two sisters, one wearing a dress and reindeer horns, the other wearing new pajamas and needing to slide her feet under my leg to keep her pink toes warm. I played Hot Wheels with the youngest brother, and he explained why certain cars were faster than others. I played the Nickelodeon board game with the twins figuring I’d school the girls; I had grown up watching these shows—Bewitched, I Dream of Jeannie, Get Smart—but the twins jumped at each question before I could speak,

and they knew all the answers even though they were half my age. “I told you you’d get the bronze medal,” Camille said when she walked to our corner of the living room. One twin put the game back in the box and the other twin stood and slipped her fingers into her belt-loops and adjusted her jeans by pulling them up and Camille said, “Fourteen-year olds have the nicest butts.” She slapped her own ass once and said, “And then it’s all downhill.” She took a sip of wine and said, “Show him your new jeans, girls,” and the other twin bounced off the ground and now both stood in front of us. “Turn around,” Camille said, and they did. “Don’t they have the nicest butts?”

I didn’t know how to answer this question, although I agreed.

We ate turkey and ham for dinner, and everyone smiled and everyone talked, and nothing was said about their dad. Friends of the family came over for dessert and the sixteen of us played charades. I loved games but had never played charades before—not a game a ten-year old boy could play alone in his house. Eight silent watching while eight played, one bending over backwards while the other seven screamed and screamed louder with the utmost urgency, as if Christmas would only come to the winning team. Even the little ones who didn’t really know what was going on and who couldn’t possibly get “Marie Antoinette” or “Van Gough,” screamed out potential answers.

The twins left with the family friends for a sleepover, and I got their room. Mom had told them twice to clean up their laundry, but the twins had done a shoddy job. I brushed a pair of sweatpants from the bed they shared onto the floor to join piles of small shirts and inside-out socks.

I slept deep and Camille woke me early. She asked me how I’d slept and climbed into bed with me to spoon. She felt my erection pressing against her asscheeks and

pulled her pajamas down just enough. There were no nearby condoms, so we initiated the kind of sex a couple doesn't need birth control for, and she pressed back and I pushed forward, and we did this all in slow motion breathing in muffled grunts, with the twins' wall of books behind us, their laundry ahead, and further on the crack of the open door a portal to another world, and I had one hand in Camille's hair and the other on her pelvic bone and I was pulling with both and she was shaking, fingering herself, and I could smell her cunt and something happened: the something was a chemical something, a biochemical something, an increase in serotonin, a rush of dopamine and norepinephrine, a flush of testosterone; I breathed deeper the saltiness, and I pulled Camille and she pulled me and we both shook and Cheyenne knocked on the door. We could see her blonde hair through the crack and she could see us. Camille took the sheet and pulled it over our bodies and said "Come in," even though I was still inside of her.

"Mom's gonna kill you," Cheyenne said, "if she finds out." Cheyenne stepped into the room and pretended to lift the bottom of her shirt, like she was going to get naked and join us, and then she laughed and shut the door on her way out.

Camille and I disconnected slowly, but then I saw something next to my face and moved quick, like it was a bee ready to sting.

"What?" Camille said.

The twins' idea of cleaning up their laundry meant stuffing their underwear beneath the pillows, and now the pillows were pushed aside and my face had been in their underwear, and I wanted to know if this was what I'd smelled and not Camille, so I took a panty and put it to my nose and whiffed until I had positive confirmation. The contortions that Camille's face took when I did this were, well, like, let me start again:

Camille looked at me like, well, like I had just sniffed her kid sister's panties. And then Camille leaned in for a whiff, but she didn't get too close, and she said, "Iiww."

Camille showered and I showered and we cruised to the airport amid snow flurries. By the time we landed in Syracuse, the Seattle airport had been closed for two hours and would remain closed for several days, Washington having one of its worst snowstorms in recent history. In Upstate New York, it was just the opposite. They had had a white Christmas, but now, one day later, the snow had melted and the earth was gray and brown and wet. We hung with Bill and his family, and my family, extending the celebration toward the new year. Nine of Bill's brothers were there, and one of mine and his wife and my new nephew, and Camille laughed and joked as if we had been high school sweethearts approaching our 10-year anniversary. We took long walks in the woods, listened to the creeks, and made love in the cold with our clothes on.

For New Years, we drove south seven hours to Long Island, and there Camille met my friends, and at Skud's New Year's party, at midnight, she gave the entire Road Crew big kisses on their lips. A day later, another cyst burst in her ovaries and we argued about the pain, Camille finally consenting, Yes, it was bad enough that she'd have to see a doctor. This bursting thing had happened several times since the first, since our trip to Montana, but this time Camille needed medical attention. While she was in the hospital, I bought her a large stuffed animal, a puppy, and when we drove to my childhood home, the house my parents had just put on sale because they were retiring to Florida, Camille talked to the puppy, treating it like a real dog. I showed her my old room and we shagged on the 70's shag carpet.

We went into Manhattan, to the Museum of Natural History, and I told her stories

of what the museum was like to a tripping 16-year old and to a boy of eight. We had a snowball fight in Central Park, and then tried to exchange the Letterman tickets I'd been sent, but our show-date was a month away and the box office wouldn't do the exchange so we went to see Mummenschanz, a better show than even Dave could muster, and then we cruised Upstate, late-night. Five hours north of the City, somewhere in between Keene Valley and Lake Placid, the snow came hard and the headlights lit the flurries but all else was black and I couldn't see well. We had been listening to Camille's Christmas present to me, a 10-cassette set of *The Lord of the Rings*, and I drove slow and video-taped the falling snow with this Middle Earth soundtrack accompanied by Camille Colwyn Crabapple's laughter. Back at our home in the mountains, all was quiet. Bill's family had dispersed, traveled back to their individual states. Camille and I hung out with Mom and Dad and they taught us how to play Dominoes the right way, and Dad said to me, "Hold onto this one, son."

Paulina called to wish me a Happy New Year. She complained that New Orleans was freezing but the heat in her apartment was stuck on high and her hair was frizzing out. "I'm in bathtub full of cold water and the sidewalks are frosted with ice," she said.

"You're naked?" I said.

"Drinking a mint julep," she said. "If my landlord doesn't fix my heat tomorrow I'll spontaneously combust. Can I come visit? It's my birthday soon." I said sure, but reminded her that I had a girlfriend. "I'll be good," she said. "I finally get to meet Camille." Paulina and I returned from the airport to find my living room full of people—Weiss, Phoxodd, Yennie, and Camille—and they all hugged Paulina as if they'd been

buddies for years. We went across the street to Beso del Sol and drank margaritas and shot tequila. The girls danced salsa with each other as Weiss and I ate nachos and watched. Paulina taught Camille some moves, and then Mexican guys in bolos cut in and the girls had trouble keeping up with the footwork of these new partners, even Paulina. After, we lit the Longbottom in my room and sang along to *Jane Says*. I set the camera's timer and we all huddled onto the couch. Just before the flash went off Camille said, "I'm hot," and she removed her shirt, and the shutter opened and closed with all of us staring at the topless Camille and her smiling for the camera. Then shuffling began, and Yennie went to the bathroom, and Weiss took Phoxodd downstairs to show her the jewelry he'd been making, and I was alone with Camille and Paulina and we were drunk and high.

The girls kissed. Camille helped Paulina out of her shirt and now both were topless. The bras came off and they took turns sucking nipples and I converted the couch to a bed. Paulina pushed Camille onto her back and she hit the futon with a thwack and Camille pushed back, like they were play-fighting. "Help me tie her down," Paulina said receiving a forearm to the jaw, and I dumped the camping gear out of my backpack found rope and Paulina straddled Camille and pinned her hands down. Camille half-assly fought back, though she did land a solid kick to my ribs as I pulled off her jeans. We flipped Camille onto her stomach and tied her hands to the futon's frame, then her kicking feet, and Paulina sat on Camille's back and looped a scarf around Camille's neck. I fucked Camille from behind and steadied myself by groping Paulina's shoulders, neck, and collarbone. I pulled out and Paulina tried to jump back, to sit on my dick, and I thought, *Does that no-intercourse with other girls thing still count, that rule Camille had*

set when Beq was around? My tequila-soaked brain considered this question, dismissing it when Paulina's hand reached behind to guide my cock into her pussy. With her other hand, Paulina used the scarf as reins, and she pressed back and I thrust forward, then pulled out and reentered Camille. We repeated this, with me switching back and forth between girls, and each time I pulled out of Camille and humped Paulina Camille tried to look back, behind her, to see what was going on, to maybe see if Paulina and I were screwing, but whenever Camille tried to look Paulina pulled tighter on the scarf, choking Camille and preventing her from turning.

The girls brushed each others' hair the next morning.

"That was fun last night," they said. Camille rubbed her wrists. Paulina squirted lotion onto her hands and began massaging it onto Camille's skin.

"Did you take a picture?" Paulina said.

"I wanna see," Camille said.

Camille took Paulina thrift shopping for the afternoon, and when they returned the girls modeled their new used clothes.

Not a bad start to '97.

I held a moka for 2/13 and cranked the Dead on my stereo. Phil's bass poured out through my subwoofer like thunder and the empty beer bottles in my room danced and the entire house shook. Yennie and Weiss grooved and Camille's sister Cheyenne was there, now 20. She had been doing hard drugs, though her skin still glowed pearly white and her beauty remained precious; she was the prettiest girl I knew. Her lips were always

reddish and always pouting outward and always ready to smile at the devilry she was about to commit. Camille's mom thought that hanging out with us would be a good influence on Cheyenne. Recently, her second oldest daughter had beaten up a girl in a 7-Eleven, and Mom Crabapple was concerned that Cheyenne would be going back to jail. Cheyenne insisted that she knew the girl, so it was alright. Camille told me that Cheyenne was trading sex for cocaine, and I asked for more details and daydreamed about being a cocaine dealer.

At my moka, Camille and Cheyenne competed, each insisting they could out-drink and out-smoke the other. They wrestled on my couch, poking and pulling as if the room wasn't full of people, and the tossing of the slender arms and slender legs seemed an incongruous soundtrack to the delicate whispers of *Dark Star*. The crowd thinned before *We Bid You Goodnight*. Weiss hung out until the song ended. "Good moka," he said, and then he went downstairs, leaving me with Camille and Cheyenne.

I used the remote control on my new camera to take pictures of the three of us balancing banana Runtts on our faces to make cats' eyes. We laughed so hard with every picture that it was impossible to do anything requiring poise, so the Runtts wouldn't stay balanced, and we huddled and pinched each other and said "cheese" and "whiskey" to the camera, and then Camille said that she had to crash and she crawled into the anteroom and thumped onto my futon and left me with Cheyenne, alone. Her shirt was too small. It hugged the contours of her chest and made her breasts seem larger. Like her sister, there was a long distance between her breasts and her waist, and also like her sister, most of her shirts failed to cover this distance. She fingered her exposed bellybutton. I was close enough to smell the coonhounds on her breath. We were leaning toward each other,

playing our game, seeing who would cave in and make the first move. I had promised Camille that I wouldn't kiss Cheyenne. Her lips looked impossibly inviting, a universe within my grasp—Isildur's bane: the Ring. I leaned away, grabbed a pillow, and was about to throw it at her, but instead stood and placed it where I'd been sitting and bade her to lay her yellow-blond hair upon the flannel pillowcase. I gave Cheyenne a blanket and told her to have pleasant dreams.

Why did I always fall for the misfits? Why was I myself a misfit? I went to sleep with these two questions and woke with one answer: *communitas* of the prescriptionless.

The next morning, over bagels and laughter at the night before, Cheyenne said, "What's the deal with you two? I mean, you're not like in love, and not going to get married, so what are you doing?"

Camille and I both said, "Huh," a statement, not a question. This was Valentine's Day, 1997, and Cheyenne had planted a seed. The question percolated for several weeks, and I thought a bunch of things: Camille complained regularly about her body's pains, and she always had trouble communicating the severity of her pains, and this drove me crazy with unsurety—albeit possibly because I was unsure of my own inner pains; Camille was heavily in-debt, having racked up tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, and yet she lost money every money month, dropping it or misplacing it, washing it with her laundry or unknown; I still found other girls attractive, Cheyenne for instance, and one voice in my head said, *How could Camille be the One if I have the hots for Cheyenne*; and maybe we weren't such a good match breeding stock-wise, because beneath my skin I was a tangle of misshapen bones and hers were straighter but ever-

achy, and because cancer ran on both sides of her family, as it did on mine, and How could we spawn in good conscience knowing that our children would receive these combined genes.

Camille and I talked about it, our future, and finally agreed that we should just be friends, again. “How are we ever going to find someone to marry if we keep this up?” we both said. “Yeah, we’ll be friends—that’ll work,” we both laughed. Still, we switched back into friend-mode, “safe mode” according to Microsoft, and in April I turned 29. I envisioned this to be my most sexfull year, having all of the experience from my twenties yet still possessing my youth; 29: I would fornicate like a satyr.

I wasn’t into birthday parties, not for myself, but I threw a Passover moka in a cabin on the beach on the west coast of Orcas Island. The kitchen was small, but it had an oven and I cooked a turkey and baked carrot lembas while Camille, Weiss, Yennie, Bill, and Shari kayaked and played. Soup kept me company and I fed her scraps. I asked her to explain Heaven’s Gate but she didn’t even bark.

Heaven’s Gate was one of those weird unbelievable news things, like the networks had collaborated on an April Fool’s joke. The growth of the internet was steady, and this communication medium still new and strange, and Applewhite used it to find three-dozen followers and then convince them to move into a San Diego mansion. By late March these people believed themselves aliens. They ate applesauce laced with phenobarbitol and vodka, intending to exit their human vehicles (their bodies) so their souls could hitch a ride on the spaceship hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet. People were not this crazy: Heaven’s Gate did not happen. But Saturday Night Live aired a skit

of the suicide cultists waking up on the spaceship, so Heaven's Gate must've happened. Those poor parents who lost their children, whose children didn't believe themselves related to those poor parents. The trigger words "heaven" and "gate" would shake these surviving families forever, and the incident became their prescription, their lenses, the event through which they saw and interpreted life. Would the questions *What could we have done differently?* and *How could we have prevented this?* ever stop haunting their minds? And for the suicidees, What kind of childhood or life would lead a person to believe that his or her personal prescription included extraterrestrial birth? Okay, I myself joked about being born on another planet, and sometimes I half-believed it, but these freaking cultists, the guys, had castrated themselves before suicide. I was thinking about this, castration, trying to fathom the cultists' biographies while basting the turkey, thinking how much I could accomplish in life without my sex drive distracting me—astronaut, surgeon, President of the United States of America—when my friends burst into the cabin and popped the wandering bubble of my imagination.

Dinner was ready. We reclined as we ate, and I avoided sharing my bizarre thoughts. Over the next two days, us boys biked Mt. Constitution and the girls kayaked and chatted and we all picnicked on leftovers. Carrot lembas is just as good cold. Cheyenne would've been invited to this celebration, but she was no longer in the Lower-48: Camille's mom scraped up enough money to send Cheyenne to Alaska. Mrs. Crabapple was frightened to the bone that she would lose her second daughter, to drugs or to prison or to something yet unseen, so she registered Cheyenne in a retreat associated with their church, and there the blondeness lived, cloistered. Cheyenne would now have the help of nuns to instruct her on how to develop a new philosophy on life, one that

worked. There were boys and girls of all ages at this retreat, and some stayed for weeks and others for years.

Camille and I both wrote Cheyenne letters, and she wrote back, mostly out of boredom. I typed mad-lib letters and sent these to Cheyenne: the sentences had blanks and she filled in words, like when I wrote, *I've never told anyone this, but _____*, she filled in, "I once played with a dog's balls." Cheyenne was without TV, without inebriates, but she still had her crazy sense of humor. She also wrote me real letters, and it sounded like the nuns trusted more in the healing powers of nature than of religion, which was cool.

Religion had always been a weird thing with Camille and me. I mean, I was Jewish—by birth, by upbringing, by socialization—but I was more spiritual than traditionally religious: I pictured God as a lifeguard, sitting on the beach in a whitewood lifeguard's chair, sunglasses and a hat and cream on His nose; Camille didn't understand why I fasted on Yom Kippur but didn't go to temple. Camille was Christian, and sometimes super-religious and sometimes not; I didn't understand how she could be Episcopalian one day and then Greek Orthodox the next: her church had switched denominations, and Mom and the kids embraced their new faith by buying icon kits and painting Marys. Camille was also, like her mom, anti-choice anti-abortion, and I understood her love for babies but not the militancy of her standpoint. Although Camille never went to rallies and protests with her mom, she wished that she had.

I figured that Cheyenne's new home might be like this island in the San Juans Bill had told me about. He said that in the 1960s a group of millionaires went on safaris all over the world, and that they'd brought animals back to this private island to breed, and

that in the 70s it was like a Jurassic Park of non-indigenous species, with parrots, alligators, kangaroo, leopards, dingos—and that the millionaires wanted to hunt on their island, but the government found out and put a stop to it, seizing the island, and that it was now used by the University of Washington to treat troubled inner-city youth from all over the U.S. Bill said that this technique had great results, that the kids found a new perspective and a healthy outlook on life but didn't lose themselves in psychoanalysis or Western med therapy. Maybe when these kids saw Nature in such disarray they figured it was okay to be confused and frustrated. I hoped Cheyenne would return some day, as Cheyenne, but a less destructive version.

I cooked a birthday dinner for Camille and baked her a carrot cake and she had two slices. “Crushed pineapple,” I said. “Secret ingredient.” She said Mmm and I said, “I don't want to ruin your birthday, but I think I'm a sexual deviant.”

Camille choked and laughed hard enough to spray cake from her mouth. I told her not to laugh, that I was serious, and she laughed harder until I laughed with her.

“You and me both,” Camille said. “And everyone else.”

I gave her a look.

“Your imagination is a rudderless rocketship,” Camille said, “and your libido is incorrigible.”

I waited and then said, “And?”

“No point,” she said, picking a walnut from her plate tossing it into her mouth. She smiled, like she had just figured me out after all this time, only now discovering a label. She licked the cream cheese frosting from her finger. “It's what makes you you.”

She leaned in for a kiss but then remembered we were in friend-mode, so she chose to kiss my forehead, and I smelled the sugar, vanilla, and cinnamon on her breath as her lips passed by my nose. “Just two reasons why I think you’re the coolest guy I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, but what do you know about cool?” I said.

Camille punched my arm and I grabbed my deltoid and feigned injury.

“You just need a rudder, that’s all,” Camille said. She had turned to the back of my book; Camille knew me better than I knew myself. And I thought, *Great, now I need a rudder and a prescription: I’m moving backwards.*

Camille came back from Alaska with many stories to tell, and we cruised south to Portland and she told Yennie and Weiss and me about Cheyenne’s retreat. We were off to the Horde Festival—Neil was headlining. We sat in the beer garden talking about Princess Diana: she died a week earlier in a car accident. Camille said that Diana’s coronation and marriage had been her fantasy as a little girl, and Yennie added that Diana’s had been every girl’s fantasy life, and what a way to go, and all those paparazzi.

I downed my beer and went to buy Neil t-shirts. There were two stages at the Horde Festival, three if you could count the little one next to the vendors. This last stage was just for local bands to entertain people while they stood in line to buy things. But there I was, carrying t-shirts and a hat in both arms, and who comes onto this little stage but Neil. There were maybe ten of us standing there when he played *On the Way Home*, twenty when he finished and said, “I just couldn’t wait to play, figured I’d come out here with my acoustic.” Then he said the words I had been waiting my life to hear: “Any requests?” Now there were thirty people, some shouting out classics or hits, and me

paralyzed and mute. In my heart I held a setlist of impossible tunes, songs he'd never play, songs Neil had never played, songs I'd figured he'd forgotten, all of which I wanted to hear with every atom in my human vessel, and none which could make it out through my lips. By the fourth and last song, there were hundreds of people pushing and shouting.

The remainder of the show was heavy, Neil playing with Crazy Horse, the heaviest I had seen them perform since the Gulf War tour with Sonic Youth and Social Distortion. I headbanged in the front row.

After, we cruised back into Washington and camped south of Mount St. Helens. Camille jumped in the river and lost her underwear, yet was still wearing her shorts. "Only you," I said. We shared a tent and I told her about the wax-girl from the video store and she told me other stories about Alaska, like the one about her and the guy she slept with. I was surprised: this was the first time she had sex with someone other than me. I told her that that was great, and inside I believed it. One of the red flags I had concerning Camille was her lack of sexual experience. I prompted her to tell me all about it, and she did, about the cabin and the fire and the sauna and the hippie.

"A hippie?" I said.

"A Christian hippie," she said. And she laughed at herself, at the fact that he at 19 was four years her junior. "And he was shorter than me, too."

"Of course."

She said that they had agreed to write but didn't think anything would come of it.

"Wow," I said. "Good for you."

"Yeah?"

"Great for you. Sounds like fun."

By this time in our relationship, we never knew if we were going to have sex or not. Usually not, because we both agreed it hindered us from finding what we wanted: a spouse. We were on some sliding scale, moving closer to or further from being friends (versus lovers). Mostly, we were friends, even when one of us nestled up against the nape of the other.

I was on the fence with Ween, but Weiss insisted that if we went downtown and saw them live I would dig them as much as he did. “A concert!” Camille said. “I want to go to a concert!” I told her Ween was no Neil—no reason to get so excited. We were in friend-mode, still celibate. She found her brother at the show, unmistakable, tall and gangly with ragged hair, and I stood behind them for a while listening to Ween. The band was loud but not heavy. I didn’t even know the name of this place, it wasn’t my venue, I should be at RCKNDY or the Off Ramp or the Tractor, with some scorching guitar shaving layers off my eardrums while I surfed the crowd, hands passing me above heads—I was thinking like this and then Camille and her brother started making out. He was sticking his tongue deep down her throat and I was thinking *What the?* The hair on my skin crawled like ants. It wasn’t until after the kiss that I realized it wasn’t her brother, just some guy she knew. Mistakable. Camille recognized how pissed off I was. Never could hide my feelings. We had an agreement not to flaunt anything in the face of the other. “I’m sorry,” she said. I told her that I had thought the guy was her brother, and that now I was less confused, although if we were to remain friends we’d have to be cool. She said she was sorry again, that I wouldn’t have done that to her, that she could be stupid with boys, but that I had more experience with girls, “So of course—” Okay, I

told her, enough, forgiven, move on. The female half of my Ohio housemates managed a restaurant and hooked us up with tickets to the Sky Lounge for New Year's Eve. Weiss wore his green suit, his only suit, and Alaska wore a dress for the first time ever.

Tensions were never really high with Camille. I accepted her for who she was Day 1, our first date, when she beckoned me to kiss her beneath the waterfall and then insisted that it hadn't been a date. She called herself a dichotomy; who was I to argue. When she invited herself to the Sky Lounge, of course it was cool with me. Safe-mode Camille donned a black strapless dress. But my Ohio housemate/hostess gave me a look, like, *I said you could find a girl here, now you bring your ex, what up?*

We started with coonhounds, and then some more coonhounds, and Camille singing nursery rhymes and me turning them into Black Sabbath songs, and then we left the group. She brought me down to the lobby. Two minutes into *Three Blind Mice/Rat Salad*, a pale brunette with a lanky frame walked through the revolving door. Her lips were bright red, her tits bounced braless, and her blue eyes stared straight at me, so forcefully I couldn't look away, and she walked right up to me and opened her mouth and was about to kiss me, and then I realized—Cheyenne.

The laughter of the Crabapple sisters echoed through the lobby, bounced off the walls, and everyone turned and stared.

“I got you,” Cheyenne said, twice, and she punched my arm, hard.

“You had no idea,” Camille said.

I was thinking, Should've kissed her.

In the elevator, Cheyenne removed her wig and shook her head and her blonde hair fell into place. It was shorter now, and this highlighted the beauty in her face. Back

at the penthouse bar, Ohio and Alaska tried on Cheyenne's wig, and Cheyenne and I hung on the balcony while she smoked. I was a militant anti-smoker, veering away from anyone with a cigarette, but for Cheyenne I would break my rules. She told me all about Alaska (the state, not the girl), the snowshoeing she'd done, the cabin she'd helped to build, and the garden she tended with the nuns.

"Sounds great," I said. "It must've helped you find peace."

Cheyenne took a long drag on the cigarette. Her lips pursed, her cheeks drew inward, her cheekbones glowing under the balcony's spotlight. She blew the smoke out of the side of her mouth, away from me. "Yeah, but I fucked up again. Got into a fight with this kid. We snuck out to get beer, and we brought it back, and he insisted that we had to drink it in my room—because he's a preacher's son and couldn't get caught—and I was like, fuck that, because I was already on the head preacher's shitlist for stealing a canoe, and things got physical, and I kicked him in the face and broke his nose."

"Nice."

"I thought so. I mean, I told him to just take his half of the six and go back to his room, and I'd keep mine and drink alone, and he fucking put his hands on my tits, so I kned him in the balls."

"Of course," I said.

She elbowed me and laughed, but then she stopped and grabbed my arm. "I was doing really good for a while."

"I know," I said. "I got your letters."

"Thanks for writing me back."

We agreed that it wasn't fair, that it was this kid's fault and not hers, but he was a

preacher's son and got the benefit of the doubt. I tried to see the bright side: "Welcome back." She said thanks, said she wished her mom felt the same, and then she flicked her cigarette off the balcony and we watched it fade into the black below.

Inside, many people elegantly dressed, many people acting drunk or drunk. I sat at the bar with the Ohio couple. They were very tight, moved to Seattle together, joked together, laughed together, would marry and raise kids or hell together. I asked them what they thought of Camille, of Camille and me, and they both shook their heads. They said, No, she was too this, too that, and I felt like defending her but said nothing.

We entered the new year, '98, me closer to the April where I would turn 30. Twenty-nine, what I had thought would be my most sexfull year, turned out to suck in that regard: so far, Camille, my ex, was the only girl I had slept with, and only a handful of times. Thirty was just months away. How did this happen? It seemed like just yesterday I was a 13-year old boy sitting in the orthopedist's office with my mom, and 30 was a universe beyond comprehension. The breathing trouble hadn't started yet, but it was due between now and the next couple of years. My own personal Y2K. Sometimes I breathed extra deep, checking myself, pressing my fingers against my ribs as if a kind of examination, feeling for some aberration.

I was in a funk, spending too much time playing Civilization II and not enough time meeting potential mates or finding missing pieces. Friends back East married and I blew off their weddings.

Bill and I worked steadily, only taking off to Orcas once before the holidays. When Passover came, I cooked a small dinner for Bill, Shari, and their new baby boy.

For my birthday, I went backpacking alone; this was turning into an annual tradition. Mayorca arrived, an extension of my birthday celebration, this time with friends. Camille said that Cheyenne wanted to come but couldn't. Bill, Weiss, and me, biked; Yennie, Camille, Shari, and Baby Bill hiked with Soup. Then we did some switch-a-roo action, and the girls took our bikes. Bill and I took the kayak across Mountain Lake, me with my camera in my lap, zooming in to take pictures of the girls biking through the woods, Bill with his three-month old baby in his lap. After, Bilbos—Mexican food meets the Pacific Northwest: Dungeness Crab guacamole and singing scallop enchiladas—then Doe Bay: naked bodies, some friends, some strangers, a round of happy birthday and I was 30-years old, no big whoop. Glad to be rid of 29.

We had grown slightly estranged, Camille and me. It was difficult to be close friends and exes, but we were determined to remain both. When her birthday came, together with Weiss' birthday, we hiked the Other Hoh, a remote rainforest hike we chose to escape people. The four of us, and Soup, had to park a mile from the trailhead due to spring thaw damage, and we got a lift from some teens on four-wheelers, Soup running alongside. The forest was primordial, the trees astoundingly enormous, and our Lilliputian figures clad in shiny Gortex took baby steps into the unknown. We smoked hash and chowed the pot cookies I had baked and we became toast under the canopy, mesmerized by dripping water and moss. Camille and I shared a tent, as always, and we were more than friends this trip, for the last time.

Camille had started seeing a guy she liked. They hadn't slept with each other yet. The week before Yennie's mid-June birthday, Camille and her new boyfriend were kissy

kissy, and she joked about how he kissed with Yennie, Weiss, and I as we stood in front of Sushi Bento. “It’s like his tongue is really small, or his head is big, or something.” Cheyenne showed up and we got a table. Then Camille’s boyfriend showed and we all met him for the first time. He had long hair, like me. He was new to Seattle, arrived from Long Island of all places, there to check out the naturopathic med school, ran into Camille at Pike Place Market where she was working at the family stand. I was like, *What the fuck*, I mean: he’s in Seattle for two weeks and he meets a Crabapple that quickly? Took me years to find the clan.

Cheyenne and I played footsie under the table, and after dinner, walking back to my place, we made fun of Camille’s boyfriend’s nose: it was puglike. Camille and her boy walked ahead, and they took a second car when we drove to Golden Gardens for a fire on the beach. We tossed in driftwood until the blaze danced in the breeze. I set up the camera and the timer and ran into the picture: everyone sitting, but Cheyenne standing behind Camille, bending over, her hands on Camille’s shoulders—me running to the back row, Cheyenne’s. Just before the flash went off, I boffed Cheyenne in the ass, like we were screwing, and we were both caught laughing in the picture, though we were side-by-side by the time the flash flashed. I made a copy for Camille and one for her boyfriend.

Camille seemed happy, and I was happy for her, but thoughts and doubts entered my mind and left my mind and entered again. Camille captained an informal book club with the twins, discussing Dostoevsky and Tolstoy with her younger genius-sisters. Her socks were ever-dirty and always wet, and like me, Camille used her jeans as a napkin, and we could exchange jeans; I wore holes through my left thighs, Camille at both knees.

Also like me, she hugged hard. I knew Camille liked her hair pulled during sex, she knew I had a keen sense of smell, like that of a pregnant woman. She knew about my desire to digitize smell, an invention that would never come to be, for me, much like my TV Screen Saver. Camille knew of my fear, that my parents might never know my children, but she didn't know of my fear of marrying the wrong person. Every girl, when compared to Camille, seemed dull. She knew of the fist-sized knot in my trapezius, my curved spine, my protruding ribs, and she would've taken me despite these deformities. "I can't believe we never had sex in the shower," she had said after we'd broken up, after she had done it with her boyfriend. I had asked her if she was sure, and Camille had said, "Pretty sure, Yeah, I think I'd remember that."

I am the male half of the couple whole.

For Yennie's birthday in June, we rented a cabin near Mt. Baker. Phoxodd made a rare appearance, and when we stopped for gas I took a picture of the girls leaning against my Jeep: Phoxodd, Camille, Cheyenne, and Yennie, all looking too cool. Weiss and Soup and I gawked. Cheyenne raised her slender white arms over her head for the picture, showing off her new armpit hair. Cheyenne wasn't a hairy girl and didn't even have those microscopic-like blonde hairs that some girls have on their arms or legs, but she had pit hair, two platinum tufts, yet somehow she was still sexy. Camille had wanted to bring the boyfriend, but Yennie nixed that idea, preferring just her core friends for her birthday. She invited Bill and Shari, though, and they brought their baby and the ten of us (counting Soup) chilled in a double-sized cabin. We played basketball, boys versus girls (not Phoxodd), and Cheyenne insisted that she had to take me, saying that she'd

house me. We joked about the stakes of the game, me saying it was for a massage, Cheyenne placing her fist to her mouth and sticking her tongue to her cheek, suggesting she'd blow me if the boys' team won.

I played weekly and loved b-ball, but Cheyenne had skill and could've shined if she wasn't intent on beating me to a pulp. I was more concerned about protecting my groin than scoring. After, at the cabin's community pool, everyone swam. Cheyenne didn't have a suit: she dove in wearing a green t-shirt and skimpy panties, and the wet cotton clung to her skin, and her nipples protruded like dark emeralds on the smooth olive-colored shirt, and when she climbed out and walked the length of the pool she swung her shoulders trying to scandalize the local families. Back at the cabin we partied hard, ending up in the hot tub skinny-dipping, where Cheyenne and Camille fought like the siblings they were. "Crab-toes!" the Crabapple girls said, pinching each other's thighs using their toes. I videotaped the naked melee.

Everyone went back to work, but Yennie and I went up Baker for the views and then drove to Anacortes to take the Orcas ferry. Camille and Cheyenne had to work, but the Crabapple girls insisted that they'd meet us on Orcas to enjoy the birthday Eskimoka I had promised Yennie. Camille came first, and Yennie and I picked her up at the terminal and we camped at the DNR peninsula park. Once again, Camille said that she wanted to bring her boyfriend but Yennie said no. I said nothing. And chance expressed my sentiments: when Yennie and Camille were sunbathing by the surf, I tossed a shell and the breeze took it, and somehow it landed on Camille's forehead. "Ow!" she said, louder than the impact warranted. She wasn't too pleased when she sat up and realized I had tossed the shell, but I was so far down the beach she had trouble staying mad. We

both agreed that I couldn't have aimed, that fate guided the shell. I stood next to Camille and Yennie at the hot tubs the next night, but I stared at Cheyenne's naked body as she toweled dry. Her skin was whiter than her sister's, her curves more taught.

At our Doe Bay cabin, I told Cheyenne the story of my duck and Camille and Yennie moaned, having each heard the story more than once. But the duck was a crucial part of the Eskimoka. "In fact, Chey-fly," I said, using the play-name that Camille sometimes used, "this duck candle has only been burned during Eskimokas." I showed her the sand fleas that had jumped into the flame the night of Dik and Liza's Eskimoka: the fleas were frozen in the wax. "The candle was given to me by my roommates in college for my twenty-first birthday, nine years ago."

"Old man," Cheyenne said, taking the duck. She held it in both hands and then dropped it, and the head broke off at the neck. The girls laughed, each thinking this hilarious; I did not laugh. I melted wax and refit the head.

As Camille's relationship with her beau progressed, I saw less and less of her, which was alright enough, but I also saw less and less of Cheyenne. Me moving down the ladder to the next Crabapple daughter didn't seem right, regardless of our chemistry, or at least not so soon. But I was jonesin' for female companionship. If Camille and I had broken up in order to meet that someone special, I wasn't making progress. I couldn't even get a date. Meeting girls in bars sucked, as usual, and with my confidence down I wore a sorry-ass mask. Still horny though. I tracked Jessika down, thinking: I'm a free man, and she's got that body. We'd been in and out of contact since her border problem, and I knew that she'd snuck back into the States. She was excited when she

heard my voice and told me to come over, to her mom's boat. "I have a surprise for you," she said. Mom was out for the night, but Jessika's surprise sent me flaccid: she lifted up her shirt and showed me her round belly. Four months? "I know it's a boy, I just know it," she said. Not only was Jessika pregnant, but her boyfriend was still in high school.

"Jessika, you're what, 20? You could be arrested."

She stopped smiling, but then started up again: "But I'll be an American citizen."

That was the last I saw of Jessika.

Business started to wane, with the Gaming Department offering the only work, but things being too stressed there, people getting fired and the department moving out from the Admin building to the house next to the daycare school. Bill suggested it would be a good time to travel; I began thinking about my future. The present wasn't cutting it, the past a little too much on the painful side, but where was my future. If I went the distance and studied for my MCSE, I'd be guaranteed a career, if I had wanted to spend the rest of my life helping computers talk to other computers. To zap out of all modes of thinking, I booted up my computer and played games.

Summer came and went, some numbers, some dates, no sex, no progression in finding that missing piece. October brought the annual Bridge Benefit down in San Francisco, and seeing Neil gave me a boost. This was my third year attending. Everything else, the eleven months of the year when I wasn't seeing Neil, seemed filler. My droogs from New York were there, but we were different. As I watched Phish perform with Sara McLaughlin, Trey singing a duet with Sara, the two of them staring

into each other like they had been in love for years, singing an old Cat Stevens tune, me thinking, *This is so beautiful*, my buddies sat huddled behind me shouting at a four-inch TV set, watching the Yankees in the World Series.

I baked a chocolate pecan pie for Neil's birthday—with the mocha frosting—but it was just me and Weiss and his girlfriend. And Soup and her wagging tail. A couple of days later I walked down Stone with three slices, for Camille, Phoxodd, and Yennie. I made them sing happy birthday to Neil before they munched. Cheyenne showed up and we wrestled, and Camille said, "You're going to break something." Things were going well with her beau, but she'd lost patience for me. Cheyenne wanted a slice of pie and offered to drive me home and I hugged the girls goodbye. Cheyenne had parked in the adult bookstore lot, and when we reached her car she asked if I wanted to go inside. We scanned the rows of x-rated VHS boxes, and Cheyenne picked one up and pretended to lick the cover's pussy.

"I love porn," she said.

"Your sister hates it," I said. "One time, just when we were getting hot, Camille jumped into the shower and left me hanging. So I threw a porno into the VCR and watched a little while I waited."

"Uh oh," Cheyenne said.

"Camille gets out of the shower and sees me watching the porno and—"

"—And somebody didn't get laid that day," Cheyenne said, laughing.

She drove me home and came upstairs and ate a slice of pie. Camille called wanting to know where her sister was. "She's right here, eating pie," I said, *not me*, I

thought. Cheyenne walked to me on her knees like she was approaching to give head, and she even put a hand on my thigh, but she pushed off and stood and took the phone.

“I’ll be home soon, mommy,” Cheyenne said.

Every one of my friends, regardless of marital status, talked about the hottest girl they had ever known, fantasized about her publicly, even if she was twenty years in their past; mine was in front of me.

Just before Cheyenne left, I said, “Don’t be such a stranger.”

I stretched out on my couch and watched Star Trek. The landing party was on a planet. Its inhabitants could read minds. Just thinking violence was a crime. Man, I thought, if these people could read my mind they’d explode. I wasn’t the violent type, but, well, you know.

My Idaho housemate came upstairs and knocked and I said come in. She was the latest girl in the pretty north room. Her red hair smelled like orange juice. She sat on the couch and then switched to horizontal and we spooned. Idaho said that she had just pierced her nipples and I slipped my hand up her shirt to feel. We fell asleep like this.

Seeing me down, feeling my grouchiness, my militant vegan animal rights activist housemate invited me out with her friends. We hit some bars on Capitol Hill, me bickering with her Goth-girl friend. We always bickered, me and this chick: I was of the world of trees and rivers, she came from an indoor world, black clothes, black lipstick. She was my height, covered in tattoos and pierced to the hilt, and whereas my housemate would laugh at my jokes Goth-girl would snicker, at me, not with me. But somehow ten

of us found our way back to her apartment in the U-District, and then Goth-girl and me were alone in her room, and I was pulling off her leather choker, she was nibbling on my lips as we kissed, and then my hands were around her neck and when I tried to remove them she said, No, so I squeezed, and we fucked, and she had more piercings and tattoos beneath her clothes, and my eyes traveled all of these during sex, until we were done and she said, “You should probably go now.” I walked to 45th Street, the cold biting through my flannel. I was shivering by the time I reached Dick’s. It was 2am and all was quiet, but I found a girl there and offered to buy her burger if she would drive me home, and she did, but she didn’t take the money.

I’d had sex, but somehow this one-night stand sapped my mana, not recharged it. The Goth-girl was some kind of energy-draining wight, and the experience left me hollow, and the days continued, and I woke every morning with hard-ons for Ariana, for Bree, for Camille, and all my exes blurred into one girl, until I wasn’t sure where I was at, what city, how old, who.

Even my daydreams of possible futures seemed clouded, and I couldn’t focus on one in particular. I saw myself traveling, but returning to what? Living on Orcas, but supporting myself how? Bill and Shari returned to New York for Christmas and I played computer games, only breaking to imagine what it must’ve been like around the Crabapple’s tree: the twins warm within their pajamas, Cheyenne masturbating with a candy cane because she liked the sting of peppermint, Camille and her boyfriend laughing over charades. For New Year’s Eve, Yennie invited me to join her and her boyfriend at a party across the Sound. I was the oldest there, and when the clock struck midnight I had no one to kiss. I looked around the crowd of unknown faces, hoping one

of the pretty girls would run up to me and kiss me, lead me away. After Yennie kissed her boyfriend for a while, she came up to me, said Aw, and kissed my cheek.

I exchanged the real world for Civilization II, playing the game alone in my room, sailing the seas searching for a homeland. There was once an island called Samoa, and its people lived a peaceful, laid-back life. There were no wrathful gods to fear, and intense war and cannibalism were ancient history, all but forgotten. Suicide was unheard of, severe punishments rare. Entire villages raised children, and these kids had romantic relationships, and when the couples uncoupled there were no harsh feelings or motives for revenge. A new relationship could begin a week later without jealousy. Sexual freedom seemed natural to these people. Adultery was not an offense, sex was not a power struggle or aggressive act, and there was no rape. The Samoans simply viewed sex as a pleasurable pastime. Then Europeans discovered the island in the 18th century. (Oh to be the British sailor, shipwrecked, washing up on the shore of 17th century Samoa. Better yet: a shipwrecked husband and wife.) The changes began slowly. By the 1920s, the time when Mead showed up and began her anthropological studies, some of the old Samoan culture remained, with the boys still smiling and the girls not bound to Western concepts of modesty, dignity, and chastity. But with each continuing decade of contamination, Samoan culture lost its roots until seeming more a myth than reality.

The thing that kept me going through my down, was that Neil had announced a tour for '99. Not only a tour, but solo acoustic. I had tickets for February, for the Vancouver shows, the first two of the tour. I bought them in the U.S., and the cashier had asked me if I wanted Gold Circle for an extra \$40. He said that the proceeds went to the Bridge School, so I said, Ya, sure, you betcha, and it turned out that Gold Circle also

meant within the first three rows and included a backstage meet-and-greet pass. All of my droogs from New York tuned down my offer to visit, to come with me, instead agreeing to meet up in Las Vegas in March. There, we had Gold Circle too, although our tickets were for twenty rows back. I purchased seats for the Seattle concerts as well, no Gold Circle available, but still, if everything was filler except for Neil shows I had a nice run ahead of me to kick off 1999.

Chapter 4

Madonna

The Puyallup Tribe found a new CEO, a Puyallup, and she decided that they should hire a full-time computer person. The work was there, the Tribal offices were growing, the casino booming, and someone was needed onsite, an employee. Bill offered to expand the contract, change the contract, anything, but the Tribe and Bill both knew that a full-time employee would be needed. The Chief had this role, technically, although computers tended to work less efficiently after he had left an office. Already, he was banned from several departments and spent most of his time working on the Tribe's website, which included pictures of his fishing trips and a photo of him naked.

Human Resources held interviews but couldn't find anyone Tribal. They offered the position to me and Bill encouraged me to take it. I was 30, but this would be my first real job, my first 9-to-5 job, and I figured, *What the hell*, I'll give it a shot: there was nothing else to do, seemed like the time to put my shoulder to the wheel, be a cog, settle down, and a wife was sure to follow. This is what people did. At least I wasn't helping a logging company tear down forests; just the opposite: I would manage the computers for

an Indian tribe, help them enter this new age, hold their hand through Y2K, network their computers so that social programs would function efficiently and provide for a better life.

I accepted the job offer, told them the dates I needed to take off in February and March (for my Neil shows) and began work in January, 8-to-5 to my surprise. I made lists of all the computers that had yet to undergo a Y2K compatibility conversion, organized the network into an efficient system of pods, wrote up proposals on tasks needing to be completed, and all of my efforts went, pretty much, unnoticed. I had no supervisor. As long as everything worked, people were happy. Department directors were only concerned about day-to-day. Occasionally they'd ask if the shit would hit the fan on New Year's Day 2000, and I told them what I thought, the truth: No. I had run a test: I changed several of the computers' clocks to 12/31/99 and watched the systems enter a faux millennium without incident.

I headed north to Vancouver with two Neil shows ahead of me.

I had never seen a library as cool as Vancouver's, so bizarre, a tall corkscrew of stories. I wandered the halls all day before the show, then set off to the city's coffee shops. Here, I bought a bag of kind on the street and steamed myself while drinking chai tea. I loaded my pockets with batteries and the digital recording equipment sent to me from my East Coast friends. I didn't have Gold Circle the first night. I sat ten rows back and practically cried when Neil broke out tunes I never thought I'd hear. When I called East after the show, 3am their time, and said, *Nowadays Clancy Can't Even Sing*, my friends replied, Yeah, right. But it was true, and oh what a beautiful rendition. No one to share it with, though.

One of the droogs I'd called had recently seen Laser Floyd with his wife. When

he told me this, I pictured them there in the planetarium, leaning on each other, oohing and aahing, mellow. If it'd been us boys hitting up Laser Floyd it would've been a waste-fest of chemical abuse and inebriated belligerence. But with my droog and his wife, I pictured the lasers' flashes revealing content smiles on their faces. No testosterone, no boys making beasts out of themselves to assuage the pain of being a man, no acting tough when you'd prefer to be enveloped by beauty's softness. Was it true that a man married when he grew tired, worn out from the chase, exasperated from the brutality, weary of being alone? Was my missing piece simply a matter of fatigue?

For Neil's second show, the next night, I sat up front, third row center, thinking of the TV show from my youth, *What's Happening*, when Re-Run bootlegged a Doobie Brothers' concert and was jumping up and down and the tape recorder fell out and the Brothers were devastated. If Neil caught me taping and thought just for a second that I had commercial aspirations, that I wasn't taping simply to listen to the show over and over all night and every night, the pieces of happiness I held would shatter and all would be lost; Darkness would sweep over Middle Earth, Sauron would possess the Ring and use it to devour all that was good. But that brief anti-fantasy didn't happen. I sat and listened and smiled through every tune, mouthing the words but making no sound, not even when my tear ducts filled and overflowed. When the show ended, the Queen Elizabeth Opera House, the rows behind mine, emptied; the people departed, to drink or home or both. The first row went backstage, the second row went backstage, and the venue's host stood before us, the third row, and said, "We've run out of backstage passes, but we're doing what we can." My row moaned. Some people whined. I made no sounds, said nothing. I felt the momentum of my life and the tide would wash me

backstage no matter what. After a half-hour of waiting, they funneled us into a hallway, and then after another half-hour of standing there, they led us into a large rectangular room. There might have been close to twenty-five people in each row, so the first two rows, fifty people, had been in this room for a while, and they crowded toward the front. In the back, there were BC microbrews and wine and cheese and crackers. I stuffed my face. From what I could see up front, mostly heads, Neil hadn't even arrived yet. My former row pressed against the first two former rows until I was made the last person in the room, the seventy-fifth, the one furthest from Neil's manager and the front door.

I downed a beer and pushed cheese and crackers into my mouth, and then who should enter through the back door, but Neil. Someone said, "Hey, there's Neil," but I heard the words as if an echo, as if under water, because I saw Neil at the same time as the words were spoken, and he was directly in front of me, looking directly at me, at me, and the crackers and cheese fell out of my mouth. He almost wore a smile, or maybe he did, and he stuck out his hand, and I wiped mine on my jeans and shook his, a gentle, not firm not sappy, grip. "Thank you," I said, or heard myself say: I was on autopilot, autonomic functions now controlling my voice link. "Thank you for everything."

Neil looked at my shirt and then back up to my eyes, smiled, and said, "You're welcome." And then he was whisked away, surrounded by 74 other people, leaving me thinking, 1) he wasn't as tall as I'd expected—I'd figured him to be a giant, maybe seven feet, and 2) we were wearing the same fucking t-shirt. The same t-shirt, the Bridge School Benefit shirt from the year before, my favorite shirt, the same shirt as Neil, the one he was wearing and I was wearing both at the same time when we met. Shirt. Neil. Same. I heard the squeak of Sharpies as Neil signed autographs, these similar to

whalesong. Everything finding my ears sounded distorted. My vision blurred, ordinary objects seemed estranged: the scene couldn't have been more surreal if Jimi Hendrix had risen from the grave and walked into the room.

With all of the clatter, I heard something clear: "Neil's gotta go now," Neil's manager said. "Thanks for coming." I had seen the bright lights of flashes and instinct kicked in and my New Yorkerness surfaced: I squirmed my way through the crowd and when it wouldn't budge, I pushed or rolled, and Neil's manager repeated, "Neil's gotta go, thanks again."

The words grated my ears like the feedback of squeaky chalk on a blackboard, but I had reached Neil's flannelled back, and I said, "Hey Neil, how about a picture?" He heard me and he turned, maybe more out of curiosity than answer, and I stood next to him and handed my camera to a woman.

"It's not working," she said, trying to press the button.

"Neil's gotta go," Neil's manager said.

"Just press the button!" I said.

"Be nice to me," the woman said. "I'm trying to help you."

"Just press it!" I said, and then the flash went off and Neil's manager pulled him away and I was left holding my camera, wondering if the picture would be me yelling and Neil wincing, trying to get away from this crazed fan. I drove straight back to Seattle in disbelief from the entire happening, waited until the next day, then took twenty-three blank pictures so I could develop my film. The girl at the photo place knew me, had seen all of my pictures, the ones from camping, from backpacking abroad, even the ones of my girlfriends that nobody saw, and when she printed this picture she said it was the best

she'd seen: Neil and I stood side by side, both smiling as if two old buddies, both wearing the same friggin' shirt. I made copies and mailed these to my friends back home.

Soon, I was off to Vegas. Weiss came with me and we hung out with Crazy Aunt Anita. She taught us her new foolproof method for beating the nickel keno machines. We met the boys from New York, along with Jay, our New Yorker based in Vegas, and Jay hooked our crew up with a limo, the driver being a friend of his with an hour off. Six New Yorkers cruising to see Neil, all with backstage meet-and-greet passes. Road Crew takes Las Vegas. We blew smoke through the limo's sunroof. We rambled about what songs Neil would play, compared our dreams to the songs he'd played on tour thus far, and then we all shut up as a hot chick with long legs and short shorts walked by, just on the other side of our tinted windows. After a long pause, I said, "Like we all didn't just mentally fornicate with that girl," and everyone laughed, some adding, "Over and over," or "In every position," or whatmayhaveyou.

The Joint was the smallest venue on the tour. The Hard Rock was jammed with people, but only a handful left the casino and went into the auditorium to listen to Neil rearrange song lyrics to fit his mood. The harmonica on *Southern Pacific* was particularly touching, and when he made it sound like a locomotive chills ran up my spine. Neil mocked the guitars that adorned the casino outside: "This right here is a working guitar," he said, referring to Hank Williams' old guitar. Oh Hank. The guitar will never hang on a wall, but it'll play tunes from *Harvest Moon*. Neil sang *My Last Trip to Vegas*. With all of us giggly, we waited backstage, drinking. Our seats had cost \$130, though we would've paid twice that. We each received a tote-bag, a Neil photo, and a t-shirt, and the proceeds went to the Bridge School. Neil was swamped with fans,

so we hung out with his wife, my friends silent or humble and me asking her if she could pull some strings and get a request or two to Neil.

“But *Lost in Space* is such a classic,” I said, “and Neil never plays it.”

“What should I say?” she asked, “Would you like some space flakes in your cereal, Neil?” We laughed, and then shook hands with Neil, and then he was gone, but we were possessed with power and light. We laughed more, and even harder when I showed my droogs that I had not only taped the show, but I had also taped our conversation with Neil’s wife and our meeting Neil, though the latter was mostly handshaking. We walked out of the Joint and into the casino and stared open-mouthed at all of the beautiful women, but we wore smiles in our gaping, like we were watching a movie in a dark theater.

We shot a round of coonhounds at the bar and then I said, “I gotta take a walk around the casino and stare at these beautiful women.” I was only a quarter-way around when I bent to tie my shoe, and I heard the laughter above the ching-ching-ching of the slot machines. Three girls, a blonde, brunette, and redhead, sat on a bench laughing, pretty much at me. I could see them through the curtain of my hair. But I was glowing, or felt like I was: I had drunk the entdraught, I had filled my ears with the purest music, I had laughed with good friends, I had shaken Neil’s hand and had yet to wash; I could run up a mountain, I could bend a spoon with my mind, I could fly.

“What are you laughing at?” I said, standing before them.

They laughed more. I tied my hair back. The curly blonde in the middle wore a fringe suede jacket, like Hopper’s from *Easy Rider*. I touched a fringe and she said, “You’re special,” something that I had believed all along but was still waiting for

confirmation. The other two girls excused themselves, and it was just the blonde and me, and I rambled on about the Neil show, how cool it was, and I told her all of the nuances in rapid fire. “You do know who Neil is, right?”

She sang a line from *Unknown Legend*, and then admitted that she didn’t know Neil was playing tonight in the Joint. She was just out with a friend trying to cheer her sister up. “That’s her with the big boobies,” she said, pointing to the brunette at the bar.

We talked some more, leaning in closer with each sentence until our lips met and we were kissing, and then my friends stood around me. “We’re going,” they said.

She looked at me, I looked at her, and we both agreed that since she had started with the girls and me with the boys we should probably end the night that way, but parting was difficult, like separating magnets, even after she had written her name and cell phone number down. My friends stood by the slots, waiting. I read the napkin: “Veronica Schwartz—you’re Jewish?” She laughed and said yes.

“My hands are on fire,” Veronica said. “When are you leaving Las Vegas?” I told her Monday. It was Saturday night. “Can I massage you tomorrow?” I told her yes. “Call me.” I told her that I would, kissed her. “Call me,” she said.

“Definitely,” I said. “At eleven.”

The limo took us boys away toward another casino. “She’s a massage therapist” I said to my droogs.

“Nice,” one of my friends said.

“Juggy,” another one said.

“Was she?” I said.

We lit up.

“She was hot,” I said, in the next casino, but it came out as more of a question than a statement. In fact, I couldn’t remember what she looked like: I had been staring so intently into her blue eyes, I had yet to scope out her body. I pulled the napkin from my pocket and checked to see that I could still read the name and number.

We gambled all night, couldn’t lose, partied all night, heavy, but I woke free from pain. I called the number half expecting a wrong number, half expecting a voice lacking the magic from the night before, but she answered and it was her and Veronica Schwartz was the same. “I want to massage you, can I?” I told her that I was staying at the Imperial Palace and gave her my room number. Jay’s fiancée worked for the hotels and had been able to upgrade us to a suite, and I had my own section of the suite complete with locking door, four-posted bed, and oversized hot tub. My friends dawdled to check her out, then left for breakfast/lunch/gambling when she arrived lugging her large leatherbound table. I locked the door and we kissed. She was prettier than I had remembered, though not what I’d call my type: her hair was curly almost frizzy, her body shapely but not skinny, and her chest large not aerodynamic. She resembled Madonna. And her movements were as polished and deliberate as Madonna’s, her stare as assured—I felt like an oafy bystander who’d stepped into a Madonna video.

She set up the massage table and draped it with sheets, the actions of her hands and bare arms as graceful as dance. When the folding and tucking brought her close to the bed, to where I sat, I intertwined my fingers with hers and pulled her toward me in slow motion, and then we started into kissing and didn’t stop. We rolled around on the bed until all of our clothes were gone and whenever I cupped her breasts I felt an odd

sensation, a realization, like I had been dating girls for years but now had met a woman. Veronica wouldn't let me move until she had kissed every inch of my body, and I watched her reflection perform these kisses in the mirror overhead, thinking, *This is too good—is she a hooker? I mean, Does she travel from hotel to hotel pretending to be a massage therapist but she's really a hooker?* It didn't seem to matter.

“I've never done this before,” she said.

“Don't stop,” I said.

Making love and reflected sex above, open fire, and when she's on top she leans back as if to balance herself and her breasts, and it's a perfect picture, magazine or porno, but this is a picture I can feel, as if the boy-me had entered the page.

We fell asleep. When I woke, I stretched to grab my camera, and I took a picture of us in the mirror above: spooning in bed, me holding her, Veronica holding her cell phone but eyes closed and quiet. She nuzzled closer. We spent the day between the sheets until she bade me to move onto her table, and then she massaged me for well over an hour. At one point, I woke drooling.

Into the evening, she asked about me and I about her and we talked openly. I even said that for a split-second I thought she might've been a prostitute, you know, visiting my room and all, pretending to be a massage therapist. She said that I had a wild imagination and ran her fingers through my hair, that she liked my imagination, and then told me that she had fantasies about sleeping with a prostitute. “A gigolo?” I said.

“No, a girl.”

I told her that I'd never met a girl who wanted to sleep with a prostitute and she propped herself up on her elbow and tilted her head like she didn't understand what I had

said. We talked about sex and I told her my virginity story and she laughed, hard, and then I tickled her to maintain the laugh.

Sometime in night, we started to say goodbye, each vowing to make this last beyond now. “It’s funny,” I said. “I just started this real-world job a month ago. Before that, I had time and freedom. Didn’t know what to do with my time, though.”

“Now you have me to visit,” Veronica said. “Make a date with me.”

“I don’t know when,” I said.

She repeated her request. I suggested Memorial Day weekend. She said that wasn’t soon enough. I said that she’d see me within the month and we said goodbye.

Veronica Schwartz was born the second of three daughters. Mom raised the girls in several towns throughout California, moving when fancy took, visiting dad in Las Vegas occasionally. The eldest sister was the talker, the youngest the fighter, and Veronica’s role was that of faerie on earth, the magic giver. As a child, Veronica believed that she could control the weather, that the California sunshine was her doing. As a teen, she toured the West Coast with the Dead, twirling. The sisters embraced their mother’s gypsy lifestyle rather than their father’s Judaic heritage. None of the girls were very good in school, all lost their virginity early. Through combinations of miraculous luck, Eastern wisdom, and rationalization, Veronica’s personal philosophy developed—*All is as it should be*. She preferred loose fitting blouses of light pastels and cutoff jeans, high heels in the city, sneakers everywhere else. She went to college in Reno, but dropped out to cocktail waitress in Vegas. There, she met a young man, a renegade from the Jewish mob, and against her father’s wishes began touring the country in his Cadillac

on business. He was well-dressed, short-tempered, and kept his revolver loaded. She was taken to the finest restaurants and spas. He put her through massage therapy school and said that he'd fulfill her dream one day, help her to open up a spa in the desert. But one night in Texas, they fought. Veronica took a taxi to the airport, and by the time her plane landed in Vegas her boyfriend was in jail: the FBI had been tracking him, caught him with a carload full of cocaine, sent him away for a long, long time. They were over.

Veronica lived in Las Vegas with her sisters, half of the time at one sister's, half with the other sister. Both sisters had husbands, both had a room for her. She never gambled, not even once. She lugged her massage table everywhere. Her clientele consisted mainly of strippers who paid large sums of cash at odd hours, and Mafioso-types and the professional gamblers indebted to them.

I told Bill all of this while biking down Mt. Constitution on Orcas, a sunny Saturday in March. First stop, Polygamous Point; moka, talk, eat smoked salmon and set out the skin hoping an eagle would ride the thermals of the cliff in front of us and pluck the skin from the rock with its talons. Then, whipping around banked turns to stop again at Fragrant Field, to sit in grass clear of deer droppings. Then, deeper into the dark woods and around hairy turns to stop and rest at Leech Lake. At each of our pit stops, Veronica was all I could talk about, and when we hopped on our bikes again I thought of new things to say, and Bill listened at our next break, and by the time we hit up the hot tubs he said that he looked forward to meeting her though he felt like he already knew her. He asked how old, and I said 30 in July, five days after his birthday. He said, "Only one year younger than you—Shari will be proud—you're coming to your senses."

I couldn't escape from my real-world job in March, so I flew Veronica to Seattle,

her first time in the Emerald City. She brought a little backpack and her enormous massage table, complete with sheets, oils, and scented candles. Her hands were on fire the night she arrived so I was treated to a two-hour massage. After, to Snoop, we did it all around the table, then lay talking to Jimi.

“I want to show you the city,” I said.

“I don’t care if your ceiling is the only thing I see this weekend.” Her eyes traced the Kwakiutl serpent dancer I had painted on my ceiling and she sang along to Hendrix.

“I’ll take you to Jimi’s grave tomorrow,” I said.

“Goodie, goodie.”

Veronica’s morning routine was set in stone: yoga then coffee. She popped her yoga tape into the VCR and bade me to yoga with her, so I did, but mostly I watched her from behind, feeling her ass with my eyes. She was all about Starbucks, so we drove around and I pointed them out until she said “That one.” We ordered, and when the girl slid our coffees across the counter Veronica said, “I love your gap.” The girl smiled, but covered her smile with her hand. Veronica took the girl’s hand and moved it away; she had a gap between her two front teeth. The girl said that she was thinking about getting it fixed, filled, and Veronica said, “Don’t you ever.” Then we left and hit up Hendrix’s grave, where three teens and one burnt-out hippie sat sharing a joint. Veronica made friends with all of them instantly, and the kids gave her paper and crayons and she made an imprint of the guitar on the headstone.

“They’re making a Hendrix museum,” I told her on the way to the Soundgarden. The wind on this top-down day whipped her blonde curls against her shiny cheeks, and she laughed for some reason. I had once seen a two-year old chase a plastic bag in the

breeze, and each time he bent to snatch the bag it blew just a little further, out of his reach, prompting the toddler to giggle to himself. This happened maybe five times. He didn't know I was watching. Veronica had this giggle. When the world was doing its thing, she had her own private laughter, during which her nose crinkled into many folds. If it wasn't a laugh, she sang to herself, but oftentimes not music, simply, "La, la, la." When we arrived at the Soundgarden, her private sounds ceased so that she could take in the garden's tones. She removed her pink sunglasses. Veronica sat in the garden holding her palms flat against an invisible wall. Sometimes she rubbed this wall clockwise, sometimes counterclockwise, sometimes her hands remained still, feeling the energy, absorbing it or lending to it or both. Reiki, she said.

She had me mimic her hands, placing mine close to hers but not touching, like on the other side of the wall. "Can you feel it?" she said. "Don't you feel it?"

I did.

The wind whistled, the pipes hummed. When the breeze shifted and another set of pipes caught the wind, the ground vibrated and Veronica laughed.

"You know," she said, "I don't usually like guys, but I like you."

I asked her what that meant and she said that she preferred girls.

"Kiss me," Veronica said, and I did. "No, like this." Our lips locked in many ways, and each time we separated Veronica made a pucker sound as if she was kissing air, as if she was still kissing or holding onto the kiss even though we had leaned away from each other. We kissed until she had me making this sound, both of us punctuating our kiss with this pucker/air-kiss, as if announcing, *This kiss is over, may many more follow*. "Now you know how," she said.

“All these years I’d been doing it wrong.” I laughed; she moved back into reiki.

Back at my house I practiced this kiss on her chest. “You have the most beautiful breasts I’ve ever seen.” They were large, not as large as Jessika’s and not as firm as Jessika’s, Jessika being ten years her junior miss, but they were magnificent, actually spellbinding, and I found myself hypnotized. I asked her if they were real.

“Of course they’re real, silly.”

We played in bed. Veronica knew the secret: that a second round of sex had nothing to do with the guy and everything to do with the girl, that there was no need to wait half an hour: that a girl could get a guy hard again in under ten minutes if she knew what to do and applied herself.

I asked her if she’d ever been married and she said No. I asked her if she saw herself as a parent, and a grandparent, and she said Yes and Yes. I asked her what she thought about threesomes and Veronica said, “I would definitely bring home a girl for my man if I thought it would make him happy.”

I took her to the TV Graveyard, the Troll, and we walked up 45th Street, and I lost her though we were only window shopping. I looked in several stores and then walked home, but she wasn’t there either. I called her cell phone, no answer. So I waited, and an hour later she came back, “La, la, la.”

“I thought I had lost you,” I said.

“Never,” she said. “Don’t be silly.”

When I landed in Vegas, she was there at the gate hiding behind the kiosk, but I saw her immediately and foiled her plan to sneak up on me and she laughed and gave me a big hug and wished me a happy birthday. We checked into the Bellagio because I felt

like splurging, and my Aunt Anita met us for dinner at the seafood buffet, even though both Veronica and Anita weren't fond of buffets. But it was my birthday trip. And I ate smoked eel and king crab legs and mussels and Veronica laughed at everything Aunt Anita said. When Anita left and Veronica and I were walking arm in arm to the show, Cirque du Soleil's O, she said, "I just love her, she's so special." Anita was full of life and Veronica recognized this. My family back East dismissed Aunt Anita's life as craziness. In the theater, we met buxom women wearing diamonds and designer dresses escorted by men in tuxedos, and Veronica seemingly knew everyone and they knew her, and moreover they were excited to see her, like Veronica was an A-list movie star and they wanted in on her next flick. The women bent to kiss Veronica and they touched her shoulder or waist, and Veronica never let go of my arm. During the show, she stared at the stage performers flying and flipping, and I kept my eyes on Veronica bouncing in her seat. After, we returned to the room for our own acrobatics. And after that, she took tweezers from her purse and plucked a few stray hairs from my ears. "Now you're perfect," she said. "My perfect man."

After making two calls on her cell, Veronica disappeared, returning to her sister's for morning yoga and to make arrangements. I played craps and lost fifty bucks. I checked out of the hotel when she returned with one of her stripper friends and a monster truck. The pickup looked tiny on the set of giant tires. The girls kissed and hugged on the flatbed for all at the Bellagio's valet to see, and Veronica thanked her friend for lending us the truck. It was light blue and had purple flair on the sides and hood and I drove the two of us out of Vegas, further into the desert, to the Valley of Fire. We set up

our tent on brown earth, but Veronica's hands were hot and she had to massage me, and not at our campsite. I carried her bulky massage table down a trail that wove in between boulders and she said, "My big, strong man." She called me this whenever I lifted something. We found our own little canyon of red rock and steep cliffs, and there she unfolded the table, spread the sheets, and stripped me naked. I was now 31. I told her about the orthopedist I'd seen at 13, how he'd said that by 31 I'd have trouble breathing, with my spine's curvature pushing my ribs into my lungs. "Do not create that," Veronica said, whispering into my ear.

She used a special oil of her own making, and she wore this in a holster around her waist, and the oil made my skin feel hot even though there was a cool breeze through our canyon. It felt like she had opened me up, like her fingers were inside of my body rearranging the muscles in my back, performing some kind of primitive yet mystical operation, like a shaman. It seemed like my spine was a fire-hose, shooting water and out of control at first, but Veronica wrapped both of her hands around my vertebra and tamed the serpent and set it right. When she reached my upper back, she placed both hands on the lump adjacent to my shoulder-blade. I called it my deformity; Veronica said the hump made room, that it created a bigger space for my bigger heart.

She placed her fingers within every nook of every muscle of my body. I rolled onto my back and she massaged my stomach, ribs, and chest, and I watched a hawk circle high in the blue sky. Veronica removed my pains. When she had finished, I was liquid, and she gave me water to add to this, and I drank sitting on a rock in the shade. A ranger came up to her as she was folding the sheets and told her that she couldn't do that here. He pointed to the table. Veronica laughed, maybe because we had just finished, and the

sound of her laughter worked as if a spell on the ranger and soon he was shaking his head, wondering what he was doing in front of this enchantress, how he had gotten here. He walked away and we walked back to the campsite. The desert was cold that night, but rather than light a campfire I spread out our mats and sleeping bags and we slipped into them and stared at the stars. “How’s your father?” I said. He had cancer.

“The same,” she said. “He’s ready to die.”

Veronica and her sisters wanted their dad to fight, but he was tired and wanted to end his life. Veronica had spent most of her life with her mother in California, but she, like her sisters, had spent her twenties getting closer to dad and his family.

We didn’t see any shooting stars that night, only blinking ones and satellites and the next night I was on a plane returning to Seattle. Veronica’s father died in May and I talked to her that evening and every night after for a week, both of us in beds in different cities. She cried and I talked. “Tell me a story,” she said, and I told her stories, most of which had me as the butt of the joke, and she laughed and said, “Tell me another one.”

She flew to Chicago to be with her dad’s parents and ten siblings. Of those ten aunts and uncles, she was closest with the youngest, Auntie, who lived in Vegas and had flown with her. I called Veronica’s cell, but I also began writing her long letters, including pictures from our holiday weekends and corny poems to make her laugh.

“Let me fly you out to Seattle,” I said one night. “I’ll take you to Orcas. It’s a healing place.”

“I’m going to stay in Chicago for the rest of May,” she said, “some of June, too.” Her voice was flat, even when she said that Jeannie Weenie was coming to visit from Michigan.

“Your favoritest person in the whole world,” I said, though they were her words.

“Second favoritest now,” Veronica said. “Will you come visit me? My uncle is getting married again—will you come dance with me at the wedding?”

“You know I have two left feet,” I said. “I’m dangerous.”

“My dangerous man,” she said. “Please.”

“Of course.”

But I had another wedding first: Cam. The girl he had met at the gym, well, she started putting out and they fell in love and set the date for Memorial Day Weekend. I flew to New York. Four of my droogs had married between Dik’s wedding and Cam’s, and I had missed all of these weddings, but Cam was Cam and I was his best man. Despite my appointed role, one of his college buddies had insisted on arranging the bachelor party, convincing me that 3000 miles was too far away to make plans. He booked a suite in Long Island’s most exclusive hotel, complete with a belly dancer and two pairs of hookers. Cam stayed out of the fray; he was done with other women. His college buddies shelled out money and fucked hookers in the suite’s second bedroom. These guys were married, and I felt sorry for their wives. They had been liars and cheats, had gotten married as some sort of higher laundry, as if standing beside one woman at the altar could erase a lifetime of scumbaggery, but they hadn’t changed.

One of the hookers said that since I was best man, I was in entitled—it was paid for—and everyone wowed and pushed and I ended up in the large bathroom with this girl thinking about Veronica and her fantasy. The prostitute took a condom from her purse and asked me how I wanted it. I told her to put it back and jerked off on her chest—I

didn't want to touch her—and when I got to Chicago the next weekend told Veronica all about it. “I missed you,” she said. Veronica introduced me to a whirlwind of family and her grandmother gave me a kiss. Her grandfather shook my hand and asked about my family and about growing up Jewish in New York and later Veronica pulled me aside and said, “He likes you. He never talks, and never ever with our boyfriends or girlfriends—only with blood family.” I figured that maybe Grandpa felt bad for Veronica, because she had lost her dad.

I stayed at a nearby motel. Veronica had her period. I stood and she dropped to her knees and blew me. Before I came, she said, “Jerk off on my tits.” The next morning, she said that we could do it now, and I said *Isn't your period just beginning?*, and she said, “We can do it now.” Veronica, in some mystical way, could control the flow of her period. “I want your monster, in me, now.” *Monster*—that's what she called my dick; I thought it a more accurate nickname for my libido.

I went to her uncle's wedding and we danced, slowly, safely. After, when she drove me to the airport, she gave me a look like, *Where are you going?*, and she said, “Now is all we have.” When I checked in at the terminal, I bought Veronica a roundtrip ticket to Seattle, so she could take a break from Chicago and visit Orcas.

I bundled my girlfriend up in fleece and we stood against the ferry railing with the wind whipping our hair into a mixed tangle of blonde and brown. We were the only two on deck, the other passengers sitting inside sipping coffee or hot chocolate. The sun set behind the San Juans and the few clouds took on yellows and oranges and then all faded to deep blue, black when we reached the Orcas terminal. We slept within the sheltering

forest of Killabrew, on soft earth beneath the pines, and woke just after sunrise to catch the early morning light from the top of Killabrew's hill. Mt. Baker welcomed Veronica from across the glittering Sound, the volcano's face stunningly white for June: several weeks earlier Mt. Baker had set the world record for snowfall in one season, more than eleven-hundred inches since November—snow so high that even some of the ski-lifts were buried. The spring thaw would be a summer thaw this year, and rivers would overflow and destroy trees and wash away earth; the forests would never be the same.

June was after biking season, not that I would've set Veronica on a mountain bike. Her movements were graceful, even light, and her footfalls seemed to leave the ground as soon as they touched, so that she left no print when walking. But her grace couldn't be used for anything more than yoga, for centering, or for strolling deeper into a forest. To ask her to break a sweat for sport would be like asking a cat to carry a load, a bird to wear a saddle, an elf to ride the bus: it was against her nature.

Veronica pointed out my seven chakras and had me memorize the names of these Hindu energy loci, and she sprinkled an invisible dust over each, and then we drove into Moran and Veronica's eyes opened wide to take in the majesty of the trees. She looked in every direction for the entire corkscrew drive up Constitution, but not bouncy and darting like a kid pulling into an amusement park, more like she had been there before, as if it was all expected, each alder where it should be and this making her content. We climbed the stone tower at the peak and I hugged her, protecting her from the wind, and in this huddle I pointed out islands and mountains, and she followed my finger to the horizon and saw Rainier an impossible distance south. "It's not always like this," I whispered into her ear. "Much of the time you can't even see the Cascades, only clouds."

When she didn't laugh at one of my jokes and seemed distracted, like she was looking for her father hiding behind a tree, I veered the Jeep and aimed us toward a healing spot. We parked at Cold Spring and hiked deeper into the forest and I told her about my biking trips the entire walk to the medicine wheel. "Sometimes that's a marsh," I said, pointing to the mud just beyond the trees. "One time, this past winter, it was a lake and it froze. I set up my camera on a stump and was about to join Bill on a log for a picture, and he slipped and did a Nestera plunge and broke through the ice."

"No way," Veronica said.

"Way. Bill's bike helmet flew off his head and slid across the ice to the middle, and he sunk into the water up to his shoulders, and he jumped out and cursed himself for being such a klutz. He stripped naked and wrung out his clothes—we still had hours of biking ahead—but Bill's thick-skinned, he likes the cold; he didn't get sick."

We walked by the mossy mounds and Veronica said, "Tell me another story."

"There's another lake further on, but it's only there in springtime. Once, Bill and I left our bikes on the trail and walked to the shore and I let out a squawk." I squawked for her and she laughed and clapped. "There was an eagle on the other side of the lake, on a treetop, but we only saw it after my squawk stirred the air. It spread its giant wings and flew across the lake. It glided toward us to check us out, and it came so close to my head that my knees buckled and I fell on my ass."

Veronica approached the medicine wheel silently, walked counterclockwise around the stone circle and sat in the moss with her palms flat against an invisible wall. I sat still as she performed reiki, and then we ambled to the adjacent knoll, to where a single beam of sunlight made the green moss glow as if underwater, and there she lay and

I on top, and we pulled our bottoms down just enough to make love.

We ate at Bilbo's that night, and Veronica made fast friends with the waitstaff it had taken me years to win over. After dinner, she hugged them all and we drove back through Moran to the DNR campground, where I loaded everything into my backpack and hauled this into the peninsula's woods. "I can carry something," Veronica said.

"You carry nothing. I only wish my back was strong enough to place you on my shoulders as well. Let's find a home in the forest."

"Goodie."

Veronica filed my fingernails and toenails by the campfire—she insisted; it was not up to me—and she kissed each before moving on to the next, and when she finished she said, "Perfect."

In the morning, Veronica raised her arms over her head and stretched and said, "Don't you just want coffee?" It was more like she was talking aloud to herself, but whenever she did this it was like casting a spell, planting a desire in a nook of my mind that had formerly been vacant. We hit up Café Olga and Veronica cradled her coffee mug in both hands. This old strawberry cannery turned restaurant/gallery smelled of cinnamon, and Veronica took deep breaths as she walked from sculpture to painting considering the labors of the local artists. We walked for a long while afterward, and spent the day at Doe Bay, Veronica performing some kind of yoga by the shore, then trading massages with the therapist there. She set up her table in the woods and gave me a massage too. She was skittish about slipping into the hot mineral baths, knowing too much about bacteria and the potential problems for women; she preferred the sauna and together we sweat within the cedar walls, then bathed beneath the cold shower. We

caught an evening ferry, and that night, before her red eye, I gave her a massage, using all of the tricks I had learned from her, and she was resistant and needed coaxing, as if we were breaking some union rule. Whereas I always preferred a deeper rub, she requested lighter and lighter until I was barely massaging at all, my touch as unobtrusive as a breeze. We drove to the airport, I walked her to the gate, kissed her goodbye, and told her that I'd take her to the rainforest next time. "Goodie, goodie," she said, though subdued, maybe sad that we were parting, that she was returning to Chicago and that we had no set date for our reunion.

The next day, Monday June 14, 1999, I went to work at the Puyallups like all Mondays: a bleary-eyed faraway stare, my mind reminiscing about the weekend and daydreaming about the next weekend. Sitting at the server, my brain continued in dream-mode. On to the next computer, this room with a window, I typed at the keyboard but looked out at the sunshine on the lawn: already the Puyallup families were hammering odd-sized pieces of plywood to construct rudimentary fireworks stands. I thought about Fourth of Julys past and the upcoming holiday, a busy time for tribal members but a slow time for Admin, a chance to break away from work, go backpacking, celebrate Bill's fortieth. Too bad Veronica was so far away. If my life was a wheel, reality being the surface where the wheel met the ground, my thoughts were like spokes, all connected to the rotating hub at the center, which was Veronica.

The CEO's power supply had gone dead. Not a hairy job, though it looked difficult to my coworkers because of the mass of colored wires hanging from the small silver box, and it was a pain to crawl around under the desk, but not difficult. I took the shot power supply out to my Jeep, put my top down because it was such a lovely day, and

cruised to the computer warehouse cranking Temple of the Dog. After joking around with my sales guy, flirting with his secretary, I exchanged the power supply and left, stopping at the corner, looking both ways, and turning north toward the highway. Just as I turned, a Subaru wagon rolled front-first out of its driveway and hit me square on my passenger door.

I couldn't have been going faster than 10mph, and he was barely moving, but standing on the side of the road and looking at my Jeep I'd have thought it was a high-speed collision. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the old man said walking toward me.

"Are you alright?" I said when I saw him limping, and I repeated it curtly when he didn't reply, but I was staring again at the damage: I had just cleaned my Jeep at a charity car wash, and now it was a mix of shiny green and dented and scarred gray metal. The damage extended from the fender, through the door, to the rear fender, and I shook my head wondering how this could've happened, both the extent of the damage and this man's incompetence: he had a clear line of sight, it was a beautiful day, why'd he ruin it, the schmutz.

"My foot slipped off the brake," he said, standing above me as I sat on the curb. "I guess I'm too old to drive."

I looked up at him, at his liver-spotted skin and white hair against the blue sky.

"My honey over there's 94 years young," he said, pointing his thumb at the woman in the passenger seat.

I asked if she was okay, if he was okay, and he said yes, and then we stared at the damage in silence. There was an actual hole in my door.

"I used to have a Jeep," he said. "A 1940 Willys."

I walked across a parking lot and called the police. They were just around the corner but took a full half-hour to show up. We exchanged licenses and I wrote down his information. James Code Jr. was born in 1912. I asked the policeman why this guy was still driving and the cop shrugged. Later, back in my office, I complained to my insurance company and then to Junior's, asking the latter why this old man was still driving. They said as long as he pays his premium, he'll get insurance. They corroborated what my insurance company had said: since Junior had received the ticket, a violation for failing to yield, he was at fault and his insurance would cover the bills. Still, I first had to find a body shop, rent a comparable vehicle, submit the bills to my company, wait for them to forward the bills to his company, whatever, whatever, and deal with it. I had traded my '94 Wrangler in for a new '99 during my down-time in December; my Jeep was six-months old, a baby.

I crawled under the CEO's desk sluggishly. Now my brain's reminiscing concerned the accident, reliving it, thinking how I might've avoided this if I could've swerved. But I had tried, and there was a car in the lane next to me, and if I'd had continued to swerve I'd have hit this car and I would have been at fault and probably more miserable. And I daydreamed of the future, thinking of how my Jeep would never be the same. I tended to be rough on my things, especially the things made tough for abuse: I drove my Jeep through rivers, up mountains, down the beach, all at reckless speeds, knowing that any fuck-up—on my part or a breakdown—could leave me stranded thirty miles from nowhere. The damage seemed cosmetic, but in my daydreams I wondered if my Jeep would still perform reliably.

After work, I cruised to my new apartment and sat on the steps staring. My new

apartment wasn't an apartment, it was a room in a house. With my daily commute and my strict hours, I wanted a bed close to the Tribe. I still kept my place in Seattle—it was only \$230/month, and I'd been living there for six years—and I found this second place, a summer rental, a weekday home (except for Tuesday night basketball), in Tacoma, in the basement of a house. A sorority house. The girls saw my Jeep and sat around me on the steps, staring, patting my back, awing. “But you're okay?” the girls said.

Except for wanting to swing at something, I was fine, the first day. The second day, I had a tickle in my back. The third day, my back was stiff. By Friday, I was in pain and couldn't stand straight. The following week, the pain leveled off and made a home in the base of my back, like a neighbor's car rusting on the lawn in between your house and his, the wheels long gone, sinking into the ground, the grass of my nerves growing around its stubbornness. I mentioned the pain to someone at work and she threw a hissy. “You have to tell HR, you have to follow procedures.” So I told HR, filled out paperwork, and HR insisted I see a doctor. The doctor took x-rays, whatever, whatever, and then sent me for an MRI. I had a compressed disc in my spine. I would not be accompanying Bill on his birthday hike this year.

Compressed discs come in many forms. Mine was shaped like a Duncan Munchkin that someone had stepped on, then had twisted their foot, then kicked. The doctor insisted physical therapy would help me recuperate, and he prescribed this in addition to pain killers and muscle relaxants. He also said that the condition was complicated by the double scoliosis curve in my spine. If I concentrated really hard, I believed I could feel my ribs pressing against my lungs. I drove my rental Blazer to the therapist every morning, then to work where I'd sit and wish for no-pain, daydreaming of

future non-hikes. My roommates reclined in the backyard in bikinis. I came home from work to watch. Coworkers felt sorry for me, I felt sorry for me. And I didn't tell Veronica. I continued writing her poems. On the weekends, I'd drive home to Seattle and sleep on my extra hard futon. The days wore on and my back pain refused to leave. The therapy did dick, so I complained to my doctor. He prescribed massage therapy, then acupuncture, then an experimental procedure combining acupuncture with electrotherapy.

The days wore on more, my pain continued, and I still didn't tell Veronica. But she knew something was up: my letters and poems to Chicago remained silly and sincere, but my voice betrayed my pain, and my lack of backpacking trips left me uncharged. She knew something was up, but waited for me to tell her. When I did, it was something like, "I'm okay, don't worry, but I was in an accident and I have a compressed disc in my spine." Then I told her the story of Junior. "My insurance and his insurance are paying for everything." She said that she wanted to fly to Seattle, take care of my pain, and I booked a flight for her, a birthday present.

I worked daily and dragged my feet. Pain became a travel companion. My MRI showed that my disc was compressed but revealed that the squished munchkin failed to touch any nerves. Still, the pain shot down my left leg and often made it numb, especially if I sat on a couch or soft chair. So I stopped sitting on soft things.

Waiting at the airport, at her gate, I imagined Veronica and me living in a desert oasis, a river winding through a clump of trees, her own resort spa, and me performing computer services over the internet. She had mud baths and a cucumber garden and I had a T1 connection. She took care of stressed-out supermodels and overworked movie stars,

and when the sun went down she dug her hands into my back and scooped out my pains.

I took Veronica into Olympic National Park for her birthday trip, and we stayed in a cabin on Lake Quinnalt and she brought her table, sheets, oil, and candles. She massaged me in the morning, she massaged me at night. She had me performing reiki with her and shook and whined if I didn't comply immediately. I held my hands parallel with hers and we sat in silence. The massages brought pleasure to the other parts of my body but didn't heal the pain in my lower back.

I woke extra early one morning and kissed Veronica's face and she remained asleep. I took my video camera and drove further into the national park. I hiked to a still lake that held inverted reflections of the dead trees at its center, and while I was videotaping I disturbed a herd of elk. They tromped across the lake; it would've been a stampede but they were in three feet of water. I felt my eyes begin to tear at the majesty of this parade, at the beauty, I felt the cool air in my lungs, and I felt no-pain. On the return hike, I protected the camera by carrying it in both hands, because Veronica just had to see this tape.

Veronica watched the video three times and clapped after each. I told her I'd take her to a giant hollow cedar after we gassed up, a tree big enough for both of us to live in, but at the gas station something went wrong: the hose slipped out from my gas tank and didn't shut off—it sprayed me in the face as I tried to block the gushing gasoline with my hands, and the dumbfuck owner came out and said, "You'll have to pay for that." Veronica sat in the car, no idea what was going down, and I walked with stinging eyes tightly shut, feeling my way inside the store, finding my way to a water fountain, thinking, *Veronica's smile and the elk: these beautiful things will be the last things I ever*

see. Veronica found me washing and I had her call Shari, ask Doc what to do, if I'd see again, and Shari said that gasoline was organic, that it would burn but I'd heal.

In August, I drove up to Oso for Camille's wedding. Her boyfriend had proposed on their one-year anniversary, somewhere around her birthday. Mom Crabapple threw the wedding alongside their river, the Stillaguamish. Yennie refused to be the maid-of-honor, refused to be in the wedding party: Yennie was against the wedding, believing the groom overly aggressive and potentially violent, a blatant mismatch for someone as sweet as Camille. "I can see you and Camille," Yennie said to me in the church, "but not him and Camille." I didn't know the groom well, didn't know if they were in love, but I knew the other facts: in the three years since her dad's death, Camille's big sister duties had doubled then tripled; Mom helped Camille purchase a car on the condition that Camille return home more often, and during these visits Mom continued to request Camille's time to take care of the little ones—basketball, ballet, recitals, soccer, babysitting. This guy, now groom, had proposed with a promise: something had happened with the naturopathic med school in Seattle and he wasn't going to attend—instead, he found another school in Hawaii, and he wanted to marry Camille and take her away from the big-sister burdens, to paradise, to flowers, to sunshine and warm waters and soft beaches. Camille couldn't say no to paradise.

Clouds filled the sky during the ceremony, but by the time we left the church and drove to the Crabapple compound for the reception the sun was strong and the men removed their suit jackets. Weiss brought his girlfriend, Bill and Shari their baby, and all of the Crabapple girls wore white, even Cheyenne who was eight months pregnant. Cheyenne glowed, more radiant to my eyes than ever, her skin illuminated by an

unknown light source, magic, and the roundness of her belly made her more beautiful, even when she stood next to me begging me to say that it was alright for her to drink. Her lips were red without lipstick, and they held their pout. Her boyfriend was there, trying to cling on, and she made fun of him whenever he went off to get her food or soda. Everyone knew it wasn't his child. Cheyenne had gotten pregnant with the preacher's son, the same one she'd gotten kicked out of Alaska for beating up, on one of his return trips to the Lower-48, and the putz had dropped to his knees, but not to propose marriage: he begged Cheyenne not to tell anyone, to abort, because after all he was training to be a preacher and this could ruin his career. Cheyenne shared the family pro-life militancy.

We all touched Cheyenne's belly and she did the limbo along with the other Crabapples. I was the wedding photographer for Camille, a wedding present, and I found myself staring at the beautiful Crabapples through my lenses all afternoon and into the night. Then she was married, another girlfriend officially gone. Bree was married. She met a guy in a bar, fucked him in the bathroom and married him. Ariana lived in Upstate New York with her husband and baby girl. This was the effect I had on my exes. They stole my t-shirts, we broke up, they got married, and if they ever heard a Neil song on the radio they thought of me.

But I had Veronica now.

Yet, I occasionally went out other girls. Not because I was horny, though. Veronica and I never talked about our relationship, never had the DTR chat—How could I have a *define the relationship* talk with a girl who believed anal sex fertilized her kundalini chakra? Instead, I was determined to figure us out on my own, and this included dates. I picnicked with a slender Puyallup girl, the angles of her face strikingly

beautiful. She seemingly knew everything about nature and stopped my stories to say something like, “Look—you see the way the momma hawk narrows her circles—her nest is nearby.”

I caught some bands with a petite Filipino girl. She was a friend, and also the office manager for Hendrix Records, one of my moonlighting clients. She knew everything about every band, like she had read the liner notes for all of my CDs, and she even knew names of obscure bassists, and our conversations about music were animated, and she had fine black hair, like silk. And I kissed these girls, to see, but I didn’t need to take it further: Veronica had attached a tantric tether to my libido, had cast lines of wonder into my thoughtstream, had sutured my pains, and her fingers had woven a cocoon around the chrysalis of my compressed disc promising healthy emergence.

I had this thing: when I broke up with Ariana six years earlier, I promised myself I would only say “I love you” to my future bride, when I was absolutely sure that a girlfriend was going to be mine forever. And I wasn’t sure, not yet. But almost, maybe. Like I was now proceeding down the right path, the hallway that would end in me finding my missing piece, an understanding that would enable me to love for keeps. I was closer than I’d ever been. I tried to find a red flag, like, *Well, her parents were divorced, and children of divorced parents, well, what can they know about marriage?*, or, *Californians can be flaky*. But Veronica’s EQ, her emotional quotient, was higher than my IQ, and she seemed to know what she was doing; that, and my feelings told me, *There’s no girl like her; she is made for you*. Veronica was not the slim, straight-haired California bikini-surfer blonde of my childhood dreams, but she was a California blonde and I was her man.

I felt no vibe with other girls, not even the sorority sisters who flirted, *I know you're brushing your teeth, but would you mind if I slipped into the bathroom, into the shower—Okay, close your eyes tight.* In September, I moved out of the sorority house and into a small home on the other side of the University of Puget Sound's wooded campus. I still kept my room in Seattle and still went up there on weekends, but I spent the weekdays in Tacoma with my three new roommates, all girls. No more Tuesday night b-ball; it had been my yoga, my centering. I was still in pain, still not hiking, and during my weekends in Seattle I performed physical therapy exercises in my room and complained to Soup, who sat at my feet wagging her tail.

I complained to Yennie too, and she introduced me to a lawyer who took my case. I didn't know I had a case until my insurance company threatened to cut me off if I didn't start feeling better. My lawyer told me to concentrate on healing and he'd take care of all the bullshit. Funny thing: if the MRI had showed that my compressed disc touched a nerve, even just little, my lawyer said I would have been entitled to six figures of cash. Funny thing being: I wished it touched; or, I felt it touch but wished this connection showed on the MRI. And funny that destiny had delivered Veronica, a mystic healer, to me, my double-scoliosis, and compressed munchkin.

I flew Veronica up to Seattle for Labor Day weekend. Magic fingers on fiery hands sought the crevasses of my interior, dug a home between my tissues, sparked kindling in the fireplace, tossed a log on and stayed the night. She told me what to do and how to sit and what to think, and when I complained about this pain or that, Veronica said, "Do not create" this or that. For all of my worries and concerns, like a future

without backpacking or being unable to raise my children high over my head, I was told not to create the image. When my imagination entered dangerous waters, Veronica served as a rudder, guiding me back to more placid seas.

We took the ferry from Seattle to Victoria, Veronica staring at the snowcapped Olympics all the way to Vancouver Island, that is when she wasn't staring at me downing the fish at the buffet like a sea lion. I had booked us a room at the Empress, the ivy-covered hotel presiding over the harbor, and there we held high tea, and Veronica forgot all about being out of cellphone range. The hotel was huge, but the room almost too small to unfold her massage table. We walked the cobblestones and Veronica made friends with street performers and laughed at the jokes they told, me smiling at the pitches her laughter reached: the sounds were like the talk between birds of different kinds. We spent the next day at Butchart Gardens, walking hand-in-hand through the blooms, practicing kisses in sun and shade. Returning to the Empress, we passed a sign for the Butterfly Gardens, and Veronica shook in her seat with excitement, so I turned off the highway and she said, "Goodie, goodie." Inside the atrium, we spoke in whispers and Veronica's eyes grew wider with every new butterfly, as if it were a family reunion: *Oh, I didn't expect to see you here.* It wouldn't have surprised me if she sprouted wings and began flying from flower to flower.

The Puyallups posted a job listing for an IT Director. The powers that be wanted to change my department around: more planning for the future as opposed to stamping out fires. At the time, the technology department consisted of me doing all of the work and the chief surfing the internet in his office. I took time off as needed because of my

back and no one hassled me, probably because I didn't really have a boss. But this new position would be my boss, and I wanted to be my boss, and I went to HR with all of the ideas I had to make things run smoother, to plan a more efficient network, and to guide the Tribe into the next millennium. No one knew their systems like me.

Tribal members had treated me kindly through the years, but HR was now headed by a white woman, and since I wasn't Tribal she didn't have to respect me. She didn't even grant me an interview. Two weeks later, they introduced me to Roland, an India Indian. Apparently, he had the management experience the Tribe was looking for: they hired him away from a hospital where he was in charge of the entire IT division. Once he was set up in his freshly painted office—one of the few rooms that didn't have dangling wires or intermittent florescent lights—Roland laughed under his breath and told me that the hospital's "IT division" had been him alone, that he didn't have anyone under him, but that he knew how to manage and manage he would.

One week later, he called me into his office and gave me a sheet of paper. "You need to read this," he said.

I did. The interoffice memorandum said that I had disobeyed his orders in setting up a computer when I should've been doing something else. I told him that a councilman had asked me to set up that computer, and that councilmen were in charge of the entire Tribe, and Roland said, "Place your initials next to your name to signify that you've received this letter." So I did. "You can go home now if you want. Take the afternoon off." I told him that I did not want and asked him what he was talking about and he said that after a reprimand like this, I might want to go home and reflect on my job.

Instead, I continued working, now gritting my teeth. If I had quit that day, the

Tribe would've been royally screwed: I was the only one who knew the intricacies of the condemned building and its makeshift network. I knew which wall sockets were iffy and which computers to reset when the spirits wrestled in the furnace room. But if I had quit that day I'd have been screwing over the Puyallups, and I wasn't mad at them, just my new boss and Whitey in HR. Still, I daydreamed about the place falling apart upon my departure, about Accounting being unable to run checks and Planning unable to print.

When I saw the chief in the hallway, I complained. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it, showing me that he had received a similar letter from Roland. Chief laughed and this turned into a cough. "Fucking asshole," he said. But the chief held a lifetime position; I did not.

I continued my physical therapy every morning, but not because I saw a change in my condition: my therapy was at 7am, and by the time I got to work I'd be a half-hour late, 8:30, and this infuriated Roland. But everything infuriated Roland. In working with the Tribe, he saw that all of their promises were not exactly met and that acquiring money, funds clearly written into his new budget, wasn't easy. Actually, it wasn't possible. So he took it out on me, forcing me to work through lunch, to work late, and I fought back, telling him that I couldn't carry anything, certainly not a computer, doctor's orders, and that crawling under desks put a strain on my back, which it did. Since the chief wasn't doing anything besides surfing, and since users felt that the chief did more harm than good, and since I was an invalid, Roland put us together: I was to do the typing and clicking work, Chief was to carry the computers and crawl under the desks. In theory, this pairing might've succeeded, but Chiefy often disappeared for long stretches only to reappear after-hours.

People at work began to complain to me. Fisheries asked if I would come out to install a new computer on their network and I asked what computer. They said that dealing with Roland had been too frustrating, that they dipped into their budget and bought a PC instead of going through IT. I told them about my reprimand, that I couldn't help them, and they cursed Roland. Accounting said they had an emergency, that the auditors' computers had been knocked off the network when Maintenance accidentally snipped a cable. I told Accounting that they had to get a work order, and they already knew about my reprimand so they didn't fight me. Instead, three accountants marched down the hall with a work order form. They complained to HR, to the CEO, and finally went upstairs to Roland and thrust the order in his face and bade him to sign it. He told them that he'd get to it when he could.

I figured it was just a matter of time before Roland crossed the wrong Indian. But he knew who he could dismiss and who he had to suck up to. I watched him kiss HR's ass, the CEO's ass, the Assistant Deputy CEO's ass, and avoid Council, kissing their asses only when cornered. They weren't too fond of him. The Council secretaries had told the councilmen and councilwomen about my reprimand for helping Council without a work order. One day, the Council Office Manager said, "If you want, I can see about getting you transferred to Council, and then Council would be your boss and not Roland." That would leave Roland with only the chief to boss around, which would be hilarious, but I told them that I wasn't ready for this, that my doctor suggested I take some time off and December seemed like the right month.

For Thanksgiving, I flew to Vegas and ate Chinese food with Veronica and her family. Seemed odd, but I had always been one for tradition, and they'd been doing this

for years. Then Veronica and I set off for Utah, Zion National Park. We stayed with friends of hers, though they split and we had the house to ourselves. Another friend, a guide, took us hiking, promising not to get into anything too strenuous because of my back. Zion looked like what I had imagined Mars to be, with lazy, bending red rocks, leaning and stretching for some forgotten reason. Whereas the Eryn Muil's razor sharp gray rocks threatened even the tough skin of Frodo and Sam, Zion Muil seemed its opposite: there were no edges to the red rocks, except those our fingers needed to find as we climbed, and Veronica's guide friend had us scaling ledges to reach deeper into the park. "Think lizard," he said. "Become the lizard." In one narrow passage, Veronica failed to think lizard, and she fell—only four feet, but into a stream, and she looked up at me with pouting lips, and I down at her, her jeans now wet from ankle to knee, and I laughed, just a little.

"Aw," I said.

She did not laugh.

She pouted further, then climbed onto a rock. I tried to point out that at least she fell there, as opposed to five minutes earlier where she would've fallen into a pond and over her head, or an hour earlier, where her falling would've landed her on rocks, and she said nothing. But the late afternoon sun was hidden by peaks, and it was cold in the desert without sun and my girl's jeans were wet, so we headed back and thanked our guide and ate Mexican food and drank Mexican drinks, and then we settled into a hammock and watched the stars. We were pressed up against one another, yet it seemed like we couldn't get close enough. We adjusted ever ten minutes or so, wrapping arms and twisting legs, giving a little squeeze or big hug. Then three words slipped from her

mouth during a whispered moan: “I love you.” I leaned away and gave her a look like, *What was that?*, and she said, “You know, in a universal way,” meaning like, She loves the moon, She loves stars, She loves people, but we both let out a little inebriated laugh: hers said, *Oops*, mine said, *Got you*.

By this time, whenever I left her, Veronica said, “Why are you leaving me?” She was frustrated or confused as to why I hadn’t moved to Las Vegas. “Where are you?” It seemed like my lifestyle of backpacking was done with, and we spoke on the phone often, staying up late talking about a new lifestyle for me: I hated most of my job, but I liked the teaching part—training the Puyallups in how to use computers—and I thought about returning to school to get some kind of education coursework under my belt, thinking I could teach computer stuff. UNLV had a terrible program, but Vegas was Veronica’s town.

For the two weeks that followed Thanksgiving, I did what I could for the Tribe and then said goodbye for a month. Roland tossed up his hands but could do nothing. My doctor recommended the break and my lawyer seconded the motion. I had spent a considerable amount of time showing Roland the ins and outs of the Tribe’s network. Now he’d have to do my job, and since he’d failed to make friends with the Puyallups this posed a problem. But his, not mine.

I flew to Vegas. Veronica’s mobster friends, or clients, or something, hooked her up with a free week at the Golden Nugget. I stood at the pool and watched her walk to the cabana to thank them. Back at the room, I sat naked on the bedspread. “Don’t touch that,” she said. “Not with your naked bottom.” She pulled me up and stripped the bed to

the sheets. What's wrong? She said nothing and I repeated my question until finally Veronica said, "I'm pregnant."

I had never gotten a girl pregnant before, though I'd practiced a whole lot. "Are you sure?" I said. "I mean, we've been using protection."

She said that she wasn't positive, but that she was pretty sure, and I asked her what she thought about that, about being pregnant, and she asked me what I thought about it. We had reached a stalemate.

My back had been particularly sore from hauling my bags through the airport. We didn't talk further; Veronica massaged me. She spent the night but left early in the morning, for yoga, Starbucks, and then a client. I played craps and lost. My head wasn't in the game and couldn't summon any luck. I thought about being a father, about the positive things that our genes would combine to create in a child, like my rational thinking and her carefree mode of living, my desire to learn and my imagination and her Eastern wisdom and good looks. I decided that if she was pregnant, and if she wanted to, we would have the child and I would be a father, but I was hoping that she wouldn't want to, that she'd prefer to abort, because I wasn't ready to marry her and didn't want to be forced into this arrangement by fate. After Ariana, I had promised myself that, no matter what, I'd wait two years before marrying a girlfriend, assuming I was capable. Enough time to be sure, to be certain of love and trust. Seemed like a logical promise at the time.

When I saw Veronica later, for dinner, I didn't share my feelings and she didn't reveal her inclination. We ate sushi and I thought about something I had read, that pregnant women shouldn't eat raw fish. We talked about plans for the immediate future, for New Years: stay in Vegas and see Santana, go to Michigan and see Metallica, or go to

Florida and see Phish. Veronica liked all of these bands, Santana the most, and back at our room she finally decided that although she wanted to see Carlos she also wanted to get out of Vegas. Michigan meant hanging out with Jeannie Weenie for the holiday. Veronica had shown me pictures of the person I had usurped on her favorites list. The girl was beautiful, shapely, a former stripper with real breasts. They had kissed and fooled around. This was the girl I had expected a threesome with, for fun and for proof that Veronica meant what she said. I had hoped to meet Jeannie at Veronica's nephew's bar mitzvah, but Ms. Weenie dicked out. Now she had a boyfriend, and he'd be there with us in the fourth row for Metallica, and then afterwards. Veronica knew my view on the band, that Metallica could've been the greatest band ever, that *Kill 'Em All*, *Ride the Lightning*, *Master of Puppets*, and even *And Justice for All*, rocked my viscera, but that they'd been sucking ass more and more with every album after, for twelve years, ever since Lars decided that the band was finally doing things their own way. I reminded her.

We chose Phish, because we both loved to jam and because this show was one of several, a four-day event culminating New Year's Eve with something never before attempted: Phish would jam in the new year from pre-midnight to sunrise. The countryside of Florida also meant we'd be semi-safe if the world blew up due to Y2K. Florida also meant that Veronica would meet my parents.

Then next day: I lost at craps while waiting for Veronica and then went back to the room instead of to the ATM. Veronica arrived at my room, our room, with a bellhop, and he unloaded her massage table and she turned to me for his tip. I told her that I was currently out of money and she looked at me sideways, no smile, and made a big deal about digging deep into her purse for a five. Then we talked about Phish, and I told her

that she'd meet some of my friends there, some good people from college, and soon she was bouncing on the bed. She said that she could get tickets from the mobsters, but that they'd cost us, and I said that the trip would make a great Hanukkah gift for her, and that I'd pay for the tickets and the plane, and that we could get a good rate if we flew on Christmas and stayed in Florida until the fifth or sixth. She said that would give us the opportunity to hang with good friends of hers and see their new baby. Then we were silent.

"Why don't we, uh," I said, "get one of those kits or go to the doctor or something."

"I know I'm pregnant," she said. "I can feel it."

I retraced orgasms in my head trying to figure out when it happened. One time, the condom broke—we both felt it: the sensation of sex heightened immediately—and I said, "This is bad" even though my dick told me the opposite, and Veronica said, *Let's be bad*. But that had happened over the summer, maybe four months earlier.

"It's mine, right?" I said. "I mean, we have an open relationship. Technically, we can see other people. Are you? Seeing or sleeping with anyone? Not that I am."

"No," she said. And at least she smiled at this. "And you know I usually don't like guys."

"But you like me, right? Still?"

Naked in bed, we stared at the ceiling. I placed my hand on her belly and said, "Ooh, was that a kick?" and she slapped at my hand and laughed.

"We're going to see Louie Friday," Veronica said. Louie? "The reiki shaman," she said. "He's going to heal your back."

We drove further into the desert and exited the highway in the middle of nowhere. No buildings, no signs, nothing. After some cracked paved roads, we took a dirt road, passing some shanty houses and finally reaching Louie's house. The garden had a few cacti, and the house itself, a manufactured home, sat beneath a lone tree in the desert. There was a sundial, a birdfeeder, and a swing, all of these things covered with dirt and webs. Louie's stomach pushed out at his t-shirt; he looked more pregnant than Veronica. He took my hand and leaned close to study my eyes. He led me into a back room and had me lay face-down on a rickety massage table. He lit a candle and told Veronica we'd need an hour, and she disappeared.

"What should I do?" I said.

"Just relax. Close your eyes."

He touched my medulla and he touched my feet, but most of the time he didn't touch me at all. Still, I imagined his hands close to my body, palms flat and parallel to my back, measuring energy or giving energy or taking it or something. Reikiing it. Reikiing it?

I fell asleep to music and woke to different music, and I had a distinct image in my mind, that of a chessboard with many pieces but some missing. I told the reiki master about this when the procedure was complete, when he bade me to sit up and asked me what I had seen. He didn't tell me what it meant.

"Your back will be completely healed in two weeks," he said.

Outside, on his porch, Veronica turned to me and whispered in my ear, "Money." I opened my wallet and she took out a hundred and gave it to Louie. In the car, I told her what he'd said to me, that I'd be healed in two weeks. The following afternoon, when

Veronica returned from yoga, we sat on the hotel bed and she said, “I’m not pregnant.” I thought you were sure. “I’m not.” Just like that, I was not a father.

I was happy to leave Vegas, both excited for our trip and having learned a lesson: living free in a casino deals awful damage to one’s bank account. The most fun I’d had gambling was when Jay took off from work and we played poker. Fun yes, but still I lost. Damn those free drinks.

Mom and Dad met us at the airport and took us back to their place in Boynton Beach, an “active adult community,” where Mom, at 65, was the youngest girl on the block. Mom liked Veronica before our plane had landed: Veronica was Jewish, my first Jewish girlfriend since the high school senior, an aerobics instructor, I had dated when I was in college. Mom had placed a picture of this girl and me in a frame and put the picture next to other family photos, not taking it down until I’d said, “Come on, Ma, we’ve been broken up for months.” Now Mom had Veronica to consider.

Mom leaned over and whispered to me, “I put you two in the same room.”

“Good call, Ma,” I said.

Veronica, of course, brought her table. Dad didn’t know what to do when Veronica grabbed it from their minivan, and decided that I should toughen up and carry it despite the compressed disc in my spine. So he said this and I carried it and Veronica argued with me and soon we were settled in like family. My brother and his wife were also visiting, and my bro’s wife had had bike accident the previous year and was still hurting. Mom and Dad refused massages—neither had ever received a professional massage—but my bro’s wife jumped at the chance. Veronica set up her table on the patio and closed the blinds for privacy. Afterwards, my bro’s wife’s eyes were rolling around

in their sockets. She was drunk from Veronica's touch, and said that she had received many massages but that this was by far the best. She pointed to the leg she had broken and said that she wanted to go dancing. My brother laughed.

We went out for dinner, and walking from the car to the restaurant I kind of cowered from the rain, using my hands to block the drops. Veronica shook her head and asked me what I was doing. I was just trying to keep my face dry; she aimed her face to the sky. At dinner, I told my parents about my idea to return to school and I thought this: *I will turn 32 in four months, but in some ways I am much younger; Dad will turn 70, and in some ways my parents are more like grandparents to me, and I hardly know them, and they love me but hardly understand me.*

I rented a car and packed up our camping gear and Veronica was upset at me for not renting a car big enough for her table. We drove to the Seminole Reservation and sat in traffic for seven hours on Alligator Alley, the local police totally unprepared for half-a-million visitors. At 31, I was over the crunchiness and smelliness of being on tour, but the peace of *communitas* kept me smiling: people danced on the side of the road, tossed Frisbees, drank, partied, cranked tunes. Veronica had wished me to violate this peace and cut onto the median's grass and pass the long line of unmoving cars. I stayed seated and listened to tunes and she walked around and made friends, and whenever the line started to move she was no where to be seen. When she did find me, I asked her about her adventures and she said, "Oh, you know, I met some nice people." Veronica wasn't much of a storyteller.

The parking lot was acres of cars, metal shining in the sun. The grounds were a sea of people, everyone high and seemingly lost, walking in no direction in particular.

Vendors spread out in avenues, drum circles sprung from the ground like mushrooms, and rows of port-o-sans flanked every area of the campground. We followed the cartoon map and made our way beneath the sun but didn't find any of my friends. None of us had cell phones except for Veronica, and her reception was spotty.

I took pictures until nightfall, and then Phish hit the stage, their music sounding better than I had remembered, their jams tighter. Several chaotic nights of this and several days of avoiding the sun and still no friends from college. The 2/13 boys were MIA. I searched the message board and put up my own messages, but there were so many people and too many messages, and I had wanted Veronica to meet some cool friends and they were absent. There were parades and parties, face painting and beer drinking, smiles and vomiting. By New Years Eve day, the crowd was thoroughly thick with sweaty bodies and flappy titties, and for those who had managed to keep perspiration down, they were covered with the dusty dirt that swirled like siroccos.

Phish had planned three sets for this day, the first two in the afternoon and early evening. The third, the feat I was awaiting, was to begin at 11:30pm, ring in the new year, and last until sunrise. "Do they know that the sun's not rising until after 7am?" I asked Veronica.

If I had been with Bree, we'd be scoping out girls, if I'd been with Camille, we'd be playing cards or other games. With Veronica, I told her stories about traveling and pressed her to reveal stories of her life. By New Year's Eve, I hadn't really learned all that much more about her past, but we were in love and that seemed enough. We still never mentioned the word, "love." Or, she said it that night in Zion, but I hadn't mentioned it as per the post-Ariana promise to myself. Bree never heard me say the

word, Camille never heard me say the word; Veronica hadn't heard it yet, but I thought it could slip from my lips the same way it had slipped from hers. The margaritas had tricked Veronica into professing her love; she hadn't meant it universally—her eyes had betrayed the intentions of her statement. It was true: love. It hurt when we weren't together. And I thought about her all the time, about what presents I could buy for her, what I could do for her, and I tried to imagine our life together in the future but I couldn't decide on a locale.

The band hit the stage, and then it was 2000, and civilization didn't explode. They played *2001* and jammed furiously. Many people passed out throughout the night, and when lights hit the crowd it looked like a battlefield, some dancing and some dead to the world. Veronica and I went back to the car and got our mats and sleeping bags and found a bunch of people grooving on a hill just beyond the actual concert grounds. Whereas hundreds of thousands were fenced in, these people on the outskirts had space to breathe and a view of the stage. The music was clear and the air crisp. Within the crowd, everyone was still sweating, but here we huddled for warmth. Fish played the vacuum and Phish played Barrett and we danced and swayed. Eventually, I stretched out in my sleeping bag and danced horizontally, alone. I had been cold, but in the bag I was warm. I wanted Veronica to crawl inside with me, so that we could make love in the new year under the stars, but she danced next to me with her newfound friends and shrugged her shoulders at my reclined movements. Eventually, she joined me and the sun began to rise and the clouds turned pink and the band kept going. I had never seen anything like it, a never-ending jam, and that's what we talked about with the diehards who were still awake, that and the wonder if the world was still in tact with Y2K a joke or fact.

Back in Tacoma after New Years, I sat around swapping stories with my housemates. For the holiday, they had watched TV and had almost downed an entire bottle of wine; they were asleep by 12:10am. For Melanie's birthday, we took her down the block to a bar, and on the way home Melmac insisted on stomping in puddles. She was a cool chick, the coolest in our house. She was born in Austria, but raised by her mom in the hippiedom of Eugene, Oregon. She was mellow yet easily excitable, especially about traveling. At 22, she had already traveled four continents, acquiring five languages. She had mapped out a trip for when her and her friends would graduate, in June, from Beijing to St. Petersburg, and then down to visit family in Vienna. I baked her a triple-funk chocolate cake for her birthday and she promised to try to bake me something for mine, though she admitted being far better at licking the spoons and mixer than at cake making.

Melanie was my confidant. Though I had her by ten years, Melmac was wise enough to encourage me to trust my feelings when it came to Veronica. She also helped me move the rest of my stuff into our house when I gave up my room in Seattle. I had lived in Wallyworld for more than six-and-a-half years. The landlord said it was cool if I still kept junk in the basement, though only for a while, and all my important stuff I moved down to Tacoma. "Melanie, this is just the beginning. I'm going to move to California."

"Huh?" she said, setting my speaker down on the living room floor. "I thought it was either stay here or move to Las Vegas."

"It was," I said. "But there's a new plan. You know I can't commit to Veronica 100%, not yet. We haven't even known each other for a year, and after Ariana I

promised myself I'd wait two years before, you know. And if I move to Nevada and establish residency, where am I going to go to school, UNLV?"

"You'd be stuck in a crappy school in a crappy state."

"But San Bernardino is close enough to Vegas that I could see Veronica three or four times a week, and with California residency, if things didn't work out, I could transfer to a better school."

I told Veronica about my idea when she came to visit around Valentine's Day. I cooked her dinner. We ate.

"I hate it when you do that," she said.

"What?"

"Scrape your teeth against the fork," she said.

"Do I?" I said. "I won't, anymore. What do you think, though, about California?"

"You'll have to quit your job," she said.

"I'm going to return to school," I said.

We went to the rainforest and stayed in a cabin. We walked in the silent woods and didn't see any animals, and Sunday we returned to Tacoma. That night, Veronica massaged my back, all of me, for three hours—the longest massage yet—and I fell in and out of sleep during the massage. By the time it was over, all I could do was fall into bed. Her silence made me feel like she was upset with me, but I couldn't figure out why—Veronica wasn't good at sharing her thoughts. Maybe it was because I had failed to fully believe in Louie, her reiki shaman, and because of that my back still hurt, and she felt it

her duty to work on this pain. I believed in power of the mind, but the pain refused to leave. Veronica took off her shirt. She had gained weight. I noticed it around her belly, and she noticed my noticing. We tried to make love, but she was hardly into it. And so I wasn't really into it, which kind of made me upset. We had sex until I finished. And we didn't speak after, and we slept without touching. I knew I was a little childish, about not talking and expressing my feelings that night or the next morning, but I also knew that long-distance relationships could be tough; I was bent on making it up to Veronica: in three month's time, we wouldn't be long-distance any more.

A couple of weeks later, she paged me. I called her back from work.

"What did you do this weekend?" she said.

"Saturday, I found a flight to San Francisco. I can fly there, take my driver's test, get my license, and begin to establish residency. No need to wait until school starts in the fall. It's cheaper if I fly to San Fran than down to LA." She was silent, so I continued.

"I spent all day yesterday, Sunday, making you the greatest mixed tape ever."

"Oh," she said.

I began to tell her all of the songs, and the significance behind each version of each song, and that I made it on a 110-minute metal-oxide tape, and Veronica was silent. Then she said: "I met someone."

My turn for silence, but she didn't break it, so I had to: "What do you mean, someone? Like a girl?" Thoughts bounced around my head: if she had met a girl, that might be cool.

"A guy," she said. "I thought you should know."

My heart rose into my throat, and then it sank into my stomach and sat there like a stone, pressing into my lunch. “I thought, you said, I thought you said that you weren’t into guys.” She was silent. “I mean, that’s what you said.” I had trouble speaking. My lips were numb and the back of neck burned.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just thought you should know.”

“When?” I said. “How?” Why.

“Two weeks ago. At Starbucks. He was playing guitar and I sat to listen, and then we started talking, and there was a connection, so I had to follow it.”

I might’ve said, What about our connection, or something, but all I could say was, “Oh.”

“I just thought you should know.”

I sat in my office agonizing, my brain spinning and heart sinking, shredding paper and snapping rubber bands against my skin until calling her back. But I didn’t have much to say. “So we’re over?” I said. It was one week before our one-year anniversary. “I was moving to California—we were going to be closer. You’ve met someone?”

“I just thought you should know.”

When we hung up again, these six words bounced around my head, and I analyzed each one as if trying to translate a foreign language. Did she even meet someone? Was she testing me? Was I supposed to move to Vegas and profess my love and ask her to marry me? Had she always been testing me, like when she said that she was pregnant? Was I supposed to propose then? I thought about scraping my teeth against the fork, about staring too long at her love handles when she took off her shirt,

about dancing within my sleeping bag when she wanted me to dance with her, but I had been so cold that night. I called again. “So, I’m not your favorite anymore?” Veronica repeated what she had said and we hung up. I felt for sure that we were right for each other, that she was right for me.

When Roland came into my office, he started to say something about work but stopped himself. “You look terrible,” he said.

I clutched my stomach and somehow mouthed the words, “Stomach flu.” He sent me home. I drove home and went to bed. Invisible bugs crawled over my skin and I wanted to peel it off. My eyes darted around the room. I had too many thoughts, all about Veronica, all either reminisces about the times we’d had, these centering around the times I’d done something wrong, or others concerning a future without her. I tossed between the sheets as if in the throes of a fever. Hours like years.

Melanie knocked on my door and I made a noise and she came in. She began to ask if I wanted to rent a movie, but when she saw my face said, “What happened? Oh my God. What happened?” Her face was sober, like she could read my eyes and determined someone close to me had died.

“Veronica broke up with me,” I said, but it came out as a whisper and left me exhausted, out of breath. The whisper sounded so ridiculous, like I was a teenaged boy and not a 31-year old man.

Melanie’s face relaxed from its urgency, her eyes said that she was relieved no one had died, and she didn’t relax enough to smile, which was sweet. She sat on my futon and rubbed my shoulder and told me that she was sorry. Then she asked me what happened, and I tried to tell her, but each small sentence left me more and more out of

breath. The world I had known was not a world, not a real world but something else, a façade, a stage, and I had no control over the story when all the time I had been thinking I possessed full control and had been fully aware. “And then Veronica said, ‘I just thought you should know’—what does that mean?”

I didn’t move from bed and I didn’t sleep until some hour just before dawn. I didn’t go to physical therapy and I called in sick to work. I tried to put on music, but when I realized that my tape deck still held Veronica’s mixed tape, and that the CD changer held five of the discs for that tape, I fell back into bed and lay shivering. Melanie came home from school and found me exactly how she’d left me the day before. She insisted that I eat, and I insisted that I couldn’t. She made me soup, left it with me for hours, and then took it away untouched. “I cook for you, for the first time, and you don’t even eat it?” she said.

“Sorry,” I said.

Seven years earlier, Ariana pointed out to me what a useless word that was. Sorry. Veronica said it to me. Neil sang that the four saddest words were “It might’ve been,” but how about, *But, I love you*—what about those, Neil. I guessed that they meant the same thing. Now I knew, finally, how Ariana had felt. Poor Ariana. Why did my reality have to destroy hers?

I didn’t SAVE GAME, couldn’t SAVE GAME in real life, so I couldn’t RELOAD and start over with Veronica. I stayed in bed. On the third day, after school, Melanie came into my room with pink and white blossoms from some tree. “It’s spring

outside,” she said. She set them on my windowsill.

“Thank you,” I said.

If I had known the pain the human heart could inflict upon its bearer, I might’ve spared Ariana and instead sunk myself into a different despair: certainly loneliness was better than heartbreak, even the dreadful loneliness that one can feel when they’re together with someone though they’d prefer not to be. Maybe that was wrong, because it wasn’t that I didn’t want to be with Ariana, it was more like, I did want to be with her, only not yet, not before finding out more about myself. Or about love.

On the fourth day, Melanie fed me soup. I sat up and she spooned it into my mouth. Butter spread thin, too much bread.

Would the questions *What could I have done differently?* and *How could I have prevented this?* ever stop haunting my mind?

Veronica called and my heart bounced around my hollow insides. I couldn’t speak. “I knew it,” she said. “I could feel your voodoo.”

I still couldn’t speak, but I whispered that I was sorry, not even realizing what I was saying.

During the fourth night, I traveled into the past, to before we had met, before I was born, sixty years into the past and two miles west: I’m a motorist driving from Tacoma to Gig Harbor, just visiting friends for a picnic, but crossing the mile-long suspension bridge the car in front of me disappears, and then I sink as if in the trough of a great wave, and I rise again roller-coaster-like, the bridge now a sin wave, the pavement buckling and metal twisting, and people are getting out of their cars, are being tossed against the rails and curbs, trying to return to the toll plaza, and I’m doing the same,

losing my hat in the wind, falling as if walking the deck of a ship during violent seas, so I crawl, and the bridge's metal and concrete and pavement curl like a corkscrew, and crack, and I make it to the toll and watch the center of the bridge and all of the cars plunge 200 feet into the Narrows. November 7, 1940.

I knew I needed help. I didn't possess the faculties to deal with something like this. The sky goes silent and cracks like glass and slowly tumbles to the ground to bounce and shatter. March 6, 2000. How is someone supposed to know what to do? If it was a cut, it could be bandaged, a break could be reset, but this?

On the fifth day, I went to Borders and bought a coffee. I gathered books from the Self-Help section, books on heartbreak and relationships, and read. All of the things, the feelings listed, were mine. Not all, but most. One book recommended writing a goodbye letter to your ex. This letter should include only the best aspects of the person, of the relationship, and your ex should write one too. Then, you should get together with your ex and read them. I drove home and called Veronica. I told her about this letter writing thing and suggested that, since we probably couldn't meet, that we could read them over the phone. She said that she would write one and call me when she had finished. I wrote mine and she never called.

I got on. I worked. Or at least, I went to work and stared at computer screens. My fingers typed, but my mind traveled backwards and forwards in time, the present existing as a blurry iota between the two. I thought about Veronica in everything I did, seeing my world through her eyes, creating this or that even though she would've told me not to. It was as if the Witch King's blade had wormed its way into my heart and I had

become a lesser wraith under control of the Nine. But I got on. I went to Orcas for my birthday, alone. I took the Thursday night ferry and celebrated turning 32 at Killabrew, watching Mt. Baker turn from phantom silhouette to yellow to orange as the sun climbed higher over the snow-covered Cascades. I had a pen and pad and began a tradition of writing myself a letter on my birthday. No particular direction; maybe just to figure out where I was at; to think about many things, and then read and rethink.

Seemed to me that there were two kinds of heartache or break: that which fate deals you, like death; and that which a lover hands you. I didn't know which was worse, though I didn't have much firsthand experience with the former, and if I had to choose, fate seemed less blameworthy than an actual breathing person. I had been that person. I had handed Ariana her beating heart, told her that I didn't want it, and in the exchange I dropped it, and she knelt before me crying, picking up the pieces and trying to reassemble a living thing bound to scar. And I had been the brokenhearted, was the brokenhearted, as fragile as a glass statue, broken and then glued back together, the recipient of cosmic disbelief, now trying to move on, albeit slowly.

My parents' fiftieth anniversary was approaching, and to me this number of years together with a mate was unfathomable, as if I was of another species, and an endangered one because I knew no one like myself. My brothers were married and each had two sons. My Road Crew droogs were married, and each had a baby. My 2/13 friends from college had achieved the same status as the Road Crew. How could it be that two people might find each other, love each other, trust each other, was beyond my Orcas morning comprehension.

The April sunshine was warm enough to force me to remove my fleece, and to

direct my mind into thinking about sunlight, like that which burned my naked skin on the beaches of Crete, that which glowed on the gentle orangutans' in Indonesia setting their orange hair ablaze, and that which penetrated Old Country Road's shaded canopy in pencils of white when Dad caved in to my boyhood pleading: "Please, Dad, can we go to the Caboose today?" I waited at the screen door, he came home from jogging, sweat-drenched and smiling, and he always said yes, and after he showered and ate granola with yogurt and fruit we set off for Huntington and Cold Spring Harbor. I forced him to roll all the windows down in our Country Squire, and I hung my head out the window like a dog. Blurred splotches of sunlight on the pavement whizzed by like premonitions of my life. *God, could it be, had it been 25 years since I'd first heard the jingle of the bells upon opening the Caboose's door?* Models and paints and figurines and trains stacked wearily on the shelves ready to fall into my hands. All of these things unmade, unpainted, waiting for the boy-me to breathe life into them through glue and paint. Dad talked with the white-haired owner and I pressed my face to the glass display and pushed the button and watched the diorama come to life: the train came out of the tunnel whistling, the lights of the town lit as if in celebration, the people frozen in joy, caught waving as the train passed by and then disappeared under the mountain.

I opened the box on our way home. Only one thing—sometimes a model, car or tank, other times a miniature infantry troop molded in bland plastic, but usually a railcar to add to my engine's load—only one thing, and just a couple of dollars, but these gifts held so much weight, and I could neither look away from the open box nor stop my mind from imagining the object coming to life, taking on a history, a present, and a future, within the world I had created in our basement.

Mom worried about her youngest, me spending time in the basement, alone on a sunny Sunday. But shafts of sunlight did make it into the basement, coming at oblique angles through the tiny sunken windows near the ceiling, where water would also build in rainy weather, and the light even managed to travel the width of the basement and reach the far wall and illuminate the dust that hung suspended in the still air, and Mom I wasn't alone: I was one of many in the village, in the valley created by the mountains Dad had built from papier-mâché. The range to my left was built for my brothers; the range to the right, for me. The train, my train, chugged through these mountains, through the tunnel, and came to rest in the village, surrounded by people, sometimes soldiers, all hand-painted by me, hours at my workbench. The paperboy waving the news, the businessman running late, the housewife in a spring dress whom I'd decided to paint blonde.

My town never had a name, and soon before I found one I discovered girls, at a very young age—and oh the powers they held over me—and my town would never be the same after this discovery.

I thought these things the morning of my birthday on Orcas Island, and I came to a conclusion: I would go home.

Camille had lost her dad, and I had held her; there was nothing I could do but hold her. Veronica lost her dad and I had told her stories. When I saw her, I held her and caught her tears. The two losses of my two girlfriends weighed as heavy omens: to disregard these would be folly. Veronica was right: The present was all that I really had. And my parents were both alive and healthy, and they loved me despite my faults. Yet, we hardly knew each other; yet, this could change. My time in the West had ended.

I thought about Veronica every day. I couldn't escape her, and she haunted my mind like a spectress. I worked for the Puyallups throughout April. I drove to Seattle to drag my junk from the basement, to sell my stuff in two lawn sales, giving whatever I had leftover to friends. During one of these lawn sales, a customer asked a simple question. He was early-twenties, a little scraggly, and he bought one of my hiking books, said he was new to the area. He asked me how to get to Seattle Center. I told him exactly, an eighth of a mile here, a quarter-mile there, via Aurora Bridge, this exit, that parking lot, Or, also exactly, down a half-mile, west and first left, via Fremont Bridge, half-mile, west, eighth of a mile, park, only \$3 all-day. I knew the names of every street and every bridge in Seattle, but the days before I learned these names were happier times. It never occurred to me that I had been living a real life in Seattle, more like I'd been practicing.

I sold my stuff in Tacoma too, and with every sale I felt freer. I offloaded my stereos, my extra bikes, my exercise equipment—everything I had accumulated in seven years of unlimited storage, everything except my CDs, my best camping equipment, some clothes, and my laptop. May came, and I gave my two-weeks' notice, packed what I still owned into my Jeep, spent my last night with Bill and Shari, and set off, East, toward the sunrise. Washington, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota. I stopped in Minnesota at Yennie's sister's farm so that Yennie could shave my head, and so I could see the birth of a foal. It walked awkwardly at first.

I loved to drive. Washington, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota. I covered each state sometimes not wanting to stop, miffed when I had to pull off the highway for gas. When I had first arrived in Washington, I thought I could be a trucker,

but returning cross-country I came to my senses: trucking was the antithesis of my profession, my identity; driving, I was either reminiscing about the past or daydreaming about the future—my mind only needed to be 5% in the present to hold the wheel straight. But like Veronica had said, *The present is all we have*. Better to live 80% in the present, save 10% for reminiscing and 10% for dreams and anticipation of the future. My first day in Washington, I was heartbroken. Being heartbroken removed me from the present; like worrying, emotional pain is not living in moment. The pain Bill had inflicted on my body, the physical torture of our hiking, biking, and kayaking, helped me to replace my emotional pain with physical pain—a winning exchange in my book. I doubted this had been Bill's intention, as if a planned parallel to some Kwakiutl practice, but who knows.

Behind the wheel of my Jeep, I realized why I had enjoyed those computer games so much: they replace the present with an alternative present; worries of love and life and profession are replaced with worries of flame throwing devils, rolling armies, and lunatic rival wizards, and vanquishing these demons was only a chainsaw, shotgun, or spell away. Games are very much in-the-moment, though it's an electronically manufactured moment.

Driving cross-country, I thought about Veronica every day, and I thought about Ariana, too. Though seven years apart, these two relationships combined to form my prescription: it makes more sense to live in the present tense. Sense, yes, but there was a weaning process, a period for grieving, an unknown slice of time before I could grab this philosophy with both hands and cruise. Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois—I hoped my prescription would be completely fulfilled by the time I reached the Atlantic. So

Veronica was there with me in my Jeep, me thinking, *Who's going to pluck the hairs from my ears?* Ours hadn't been a real relationship: ours had been a fantasy relationship, a relationship composed of vacation weekends. And in that time, she taught me how to kiss, how to relish the moment; she reintroduced me to the magic in life as I delved into the real-world job that threatened to obscure this magic. She reintroduced me to the magic of thought, and she reminded me of the uselessness of worry, that I was the creator of my daydreams, in charge of their direction. I couldn't have found my prescription without her, and thusly, I didn't know how to love until she had taught me.

I could love now; I could marry now.

Sometimes I think of a potential mate, of the qualities she'll have. High scores of intelligence or wisdom, or even charisma—and even sexual proclivities—don't seem to matter as much as a heart of gold, something that makes me feel right at home, although in reality I reckon I, we, can't afford the luxury of choosing who to fall in love with.

I wonder what my life would've been like if I had met Ariana after Veronica and not before, if Ariana and I would've married. Or Camille after Veronica and not before.

Funny, I never heeded that first red flag with Veronica: the night we met, Veronica had no idea that Neil Young was performing at the Hard Rock.

I moved in with my parents in Florida for a while, time enough to get to know one another again, to understand each other, to express our love, me ever thankful for the opportunity. I began teaching in grad school, and I discovered one of the things about this profession that feels so right: standing in front of the classroom forces me to remain in the present. Working with computers, I was spacing out, dreaming past and present and past again. But standing in front of twenty faces I can't leave the moment, otherwise

I'd have students shooting spitballs at me. Teaching also enables me to become a dungeon master all over again, this time focusing on education instead of Dungeons & Dragons. I'm still a misfit, but I have a rudder for my imagination, and I channel my efforts toward figuring out the best ways to keep my students excited to learn. And I write, and in a similar way to Kurt Cobain's suicide legitimizing the angst in all of his lyrics, but not exactly the same way, I believe writing legitimizes my daydreams.

I thought about Veronica every day all through grad school. Past loves just don't disappear so easily. Two years pass, and it's June 2002. Jay emailed me from Las Vegas. I was alone at my family's camp in the Adirondacks working on my thesis. Jay said that Veronica had tracked him down in Vegas and needed to speak to me. She said it was urgent. I hadn't seen her in more than two years and I wondered if I had a two-year old child, but I brushed the thought off and got back to work. Two weeks later, Jay emailed me again: *She says it's an emergency*. So I took a deep breath and called.

"It's so good to hear your voice," she said.

"Veronica, do I have a child?"

She said, "No, don't be silly, I would've told you." I asked her what the emergency was. "I wanted to talk to you." She said that she was moving to Lake Tahoe, told me that if I was ever in the area I should stop by, she'd cook me dinner.

As far as I knew, Veronica had never cooked a dinner in her life. I read it like this: her relationship with the guitar-playing guy from Starbucks had ended, and maybe she regretted ending us. I told her that I was glad there was no emergency, told her to take good care, told her I didn't see myself near Lake Tahoe. I smiled when I hung up the phone and I stopped thinking about her every morning.

Not long after, for no apparent reason other than time, one day, my back pain disappeared.

They say that time heals all wounds. They say a lot of things. They say Oh, he's mid-thirties and unmarried, there must be something wrong with him. I say there's something wrong with everyone—and something right with everyone—that's what makes us human. Never was a fan of They. I don't think time heals all wounds. I think some wounds run too deep to heal entirely, like the Morgul blade that bit into Frodo. But I don't mind carrying some pain. Sometimes it accentuates joy. Sometimes pain doesn't hurt so much, and it reminds me of important things, like my prescription: love, for me, must take place in the present tense.

Imagination can be a superpower. And like all superpowers, it can be used for good or for evil. With Ariana, and other girlfriends, my imagination found reasons why we couldn't work, couldn't mate—cancer runs in her family as it does in mine, whatever—when in fact we were working, and well. So I'd leave, end it, thinking I could upgrade to Girlfriend II, Girlfriend 2.0, Girl 95, Girlfriend 2000. Before Veronica, I didn't know there was a difference between planning for the future and worrying about it, hadn't discovered the difference between buying health insurance versus fathoming everything that could go wrong, every bone that could potentially break. With love, my imagination must channel the magic of the present, and in love there's so much magic.

My hesitation in marrying Veronica wasn't because I couldn't love completely, or couldn't commit, it was because I didn't trust her fully, not with my heart. And my instincts proved right. More importantly though, I realized that I have what it takes to mate, all the pieces, everything except the female half.