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Itch

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

ITCH

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Thomas DeMarchi

2001

To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Thomas DeMarchi, and entitled Itch, 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.

Bruce Harvey

John Dufresne

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 15, 2001

The thesis of Thomas DeMarchi is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Samuel S. Shapiro
Division of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 2001

DEDICATION

For William, Kathleen and Sylvia DeMarchi.

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Last but by no means least, thanks to my friend Chuck Radke.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

ITCH

by

Thomas DeMarchi

Florida International University, 2001

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

ITCH is a collection of short fiction that explores the ways people give and receive love. The love explored is not limited merely to romance; the deep bond of friendship, the strained relationships between family members, and the quest for mending broken connections are also explored. The stories' protagonists are male, range in age from seven to mid-forties, and hail from different backgrounds: there is a fireman, a biologist/medical student, an adjunct English professor, a computer programmer, a drug addict, an attorney, a prepubescent thief.

Simple and straightforward, the plots predominantly linear, these stories present situations where ordinary people attempt to act extraordinarily in order to connect with others, define themselves through their actions, and be worthy of giving and receiving love. While there are no overtly happy endings, an implied optimism pervades each story.

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Itch

I've let the lawn go long enough. Flakes of rust spin off the hinges when I force the shed door open. I clear cobwebs draped from the ceiling to the handlebars with a sweep of my hand and wheel the mower outside where I clean the caked oil and grease from the engine base with a sock Judy left behind. I empty the grass catcher, bulging with fermented grass from last month's mowing, behind some bushes in the corner of the yard. I check the gas and oil, unscrew and pull off the blades, and drive down to the True Value Hardware store to get them sharpened. While I'm there I buy a new filter and spark plug. Anything worth doing is worth overdoing.

At home I put the blades back on, install the filter and spark plug. After topping off the gas I prime it a bunch of times and pull the starter cord. Nothing. Before I even start on the lawn sweat is dripping down my forehead into my eyes. It takes fifteen or twenty good yanks on the starter cord for the engine to turn over and whirl to life.

The grass is so high and thick that I have to empty the catcher behind the bushes after every other pass. The mown sections look like a manicured golf course and I think of when Judy and I found a golf club on the beach and took turns slicing smooth stones into the surf. With my head up my ass I roll right over the sprinkler and hose at full speed. Chunks of hose spit onto my sneakers and black smoke sputters from the exhaust. The engine rattles to a halt.

I turn the mower on its side, pull the mangled sprinkler-head out, and clear the excess grass stuck to the blades and body so I can inspect the damage. One of the blades

has a wedge taken out of it, but they still spin smoothly. I try the starter cord. Clank and clatter. I turn the mower over so it rests on the handlebars and the engine and pull hard with all my body. Gas drips onto the lawn. I wedge my foot against the bottom of the engine for leverage, grab the cord with one hand and the blade with the other. I pull hard on the cord as I spin the blade. It coughs up a little smoke and dies. I wipe sweat from my eyes and try again; this time spinning the blade and then a split-second later pulling the cord. Nothing. I hook my fingers around the blade and hold tightly. I think to myself that if it doesn't work this time, I'll call it a day. I pull the cord first. Then I spin it hard. The engine whirls to life and I feel the whack against my fingers as my hand gets sucked in. I fall onto my back as I yank away from the roar of the spinning blades, my hand gushing blood. I kick the mower away from me and it stalls out and that's when I see it –the index and middle finger on my left hand are gone. The remaining thumb and two fingers are all gashed and bloody, but intact. I move each one to be sure. To see if it's just hiding somewhere, I try to move my middle finger – the stump that once was my middle finger – and a spurt of blood springs up. A shock of pain like I just stuck a key in an electric outlet shoots up my arm, the sky turns flashbulb bright, and I fall to my knees. My ears ring. Somewhere someone screams like he's being ripped in half and I realize that someone is me. I clutch what's left of my fingers and can feel jagged bone. Blood pours down both of my hands to my wrists and elbows. I spit, look up to the sky, try to focus on some clouds, try to mantra the ringing out of my ears by repeating *“ohshitohshitohshit.”*

I run into the kitchen and with my good hand I turn on the faucet and wash off my fingers, what's left of my fingers. The blood washes easily away and I see that the index

and middle fingers are missing just below the bottom knuckle. I wrap a towel tightly around my hand and pick up the phone, punch 911.

“I need an ambulance,” I say through gritted teeth.

A calm female voice replies, “What’s the problem, sir?”

“I cut my fucking fingers off with the lawn mower,” I say to her through the pain.

My voice is limping around the octaves.

“Do you have the fingers, sir?”

I hadn’t even thought of that. “They’re outside.”

“What’s your name?”

“Chris,” I scream. “Chris Cutler.”

“Calm down, Mr. Cutler. I’ll send the ambulance,” she says. “What’s your address?” I can hear her typing something, so calm, so aloof, like all women in the face of an emergency. I picture her fingers tapping quickly against the keys and I look down to where my fingers used to be. My legs buckle. My stubs throb, but not terribly. This should hurt worse than it does, and I wonder if I’m in shock. The woman on the phone tells me to apply pressure and to find the fingers.

“Okay,” I say. I hang up.

Delicacy seems in order. Blood is already soaking through the towel, so I get another one out of the hall closet and wrap it tightly over the soaked one. I grab a zip lock baggy and tiptoe outside to find the fingers. I retch when I find the index finger in the long grass next to the mower and have to pick it up. Holding it with my good fingers is like having a tiny out of body experience. It’s stubby and soft and the nail is very short, the fingerprint an imperfect whirlpool. I drop it into the baggy and then look for

the middle finger, but it isn't anywhere around the mower or on the lawn. I look inside the mower near the blade and there's a mealy combination of grass and blood stuck to the interior of the mower, but the finger is nowhere in sight. With much fumbling, I detach the grass catcher and shake it out. My middle finger plops out into a small pile of fresh cut grass in perfect shape.

When I see my finger there I wonder what Judy would think of all this, and how I might use this accident to elicit sympathy from her. "See?" I would say to her over a guilt-arranged lunch. "There's thirty-six stitches all the way around each finger. The doctor said they'll still work, but I may never regain full sensation. "She'd say something like, "Chris, let me move back in and take care of you and your fingers," and then she'll move back in and nurse my hand. We suffer through an awkward readjustment period, I forgive her for Brad, I get some passions and interests that compliment hers, we get married and grow old together.

I pick up the finger and brush off the grass stuck to the blood. I almost drop it in the baggy to keep the other company while I wait for the ambulance, but instead, I run over to the corner of the yard and stick the finger deep in the pile of still warm, wet grass, just as I faintly hear the siren approaching in the distance. When my grandmother was dying she said, "I'd give my arms and legs for one more day of life." I figure giving up a finger for a shot at a lifetime of days with Judy is worth the gamble. I run out to the street and wave the baggy over my head like a flag. My wounded hand drips blood onto the street.

At the hospital I waffle between confessing the whereabouts of the missing finger and maintaining my ignorance. While they reattach my index finger I'm haunted by

anesthesia-induced visions of a neighborhood dog sniffing through the grass, finding the finger, gnawing it down to the bone, and burying it somewhere. Or worse, bringing it home to its owner and proudly offering it as a hunting trophy. Or what if a pair of raccoons fight over it, or a squirrel? My spirits are buoyed by my hopes of getting back with Judy, and I'm able to joke with nurses and doctors. They comment on how well I'm accepting my deformity. As a final heroic gesture I wave goodbye to them with my maimed hand and smile.

As soon as I get home from the hospital I stick my good hand in the grass pile like a pitchfork to a haystack and fling back great tufts of still-warm grass. It's still there, stiff and gray. I pick it up and blow off all the grass that isn't stuck to the dried blood. Some ants are crawling on the gashed end and I shake them off. In the house I wash it off in the kitchen sink with cool water. I dry it off with a paper towel before I place it in the zip lock baggy. It goes in the freezer, behind a box of frozen broccoli.

When I call Judy at Brad's the day after the accident to tell her what happened, she says, "Ugh. You'll be okay?" Before I can answer I hear a bell in the background and she says, "Dinner's ready. I don't know what else to say, Chris. Take care of yourself."

A month ago Judy moved in with Brad, whom she met on-line through a music collector's chat room. They both have the same interests, goals, passions, etc. They're both lawyers, both are health conscious and work out at the gym, and he lives just twenty minutes away in Ipswich. But the big connection is music. She's an avid Beatles memorabilia collector. He's into Bob Dylan. I could care less about music trivia

fanaticism and collecting, but you can't explain that to Judy —she's always found it hard to respect my taste because I own less than five hundred CDs and have only been to a handful of concerts. Brad has over a thousand hours of Grateful Dead bootlegs in addition to his over two thousand hours of Dylan stuff. Now he also has Judy's print of Paul McCartney poised at a piano, her Beatles singles collection, her John Lennon doll, Ringo Starr's autographed drumhead, and tapes of every George Harrison guitar solo.

Judy and I shared a computer, and I found out about Brad when I was online one night surfing and a little box popped up in the corner of my screen:

Instant email from Nalyd: Just listening to Dylan at the Boston Garden 1972. 'I

Want You 'just ended and I want you. Sooooo bad .

"I want you, too," I wrote back.

My suspicions were vague, but enough to prompt some action to prove myself to Judy. I feebly tried to start a Bruce Springsteen bootleg collection, but soon discovered that he was the third most bootlegged artist, behind the Beatles and the Stones. There was too much to get and I became overwhelmed and gave up when the first trade resulted in a scathing letter of reproach from a trader who said I used the wrong tape brand and didn't label the songs correctly. Also, I'd forgotten to pop the recording tabs off. There was too much to keep straight.

Judy eventually broke the news to me one night in bed after she came home from a rendezvous with a man she called "uncle."

"Who's this uncle?" I asked as I put my arm around her when she crawled into bed.

"Chris," she said, "we have to talk."

Two days later when she was moving out she didn't laugh when, as she packed away her *Yellow Submarine* calendar, I said Brad was compensating with his collection. She said, "Can't you be civil? Can't you be mature? This is our last day. Let's make it if not good at least civil."

I said, "Last days are never good. Last anythings are never good...that's why they're lasts."

"Why are you intent on making this harder than it has to be?"

"It ain't me, babe."

She glared at me. "You know I've got feelings too, Chris. This is hard for me."

"I know, I know, you ache just like a woman. See? I know Dylan too."

"I knew you'd be petty."

"Okay," I said, handing her a mono copy of *The White Album*, "I'll be civil and mature. I'm helping you pack, for chrissakes. That's pretty damned civil and mature." For a while I handed her records and tapes in silence.

"You know, you've only known this guy for, what, a few months? You're throwing away four years for a few months? Is it because of our different interests? I try, I really try to check out what interests you."

"That's the point," she said. "You have to try. Brad is just into the same things with or without me. And he's passionate about it. What are you interested in anyway?"

I thought about it for a minute, and realized she was right. "I'm interested in *you*." I finally said. "I'm passionate about *you*."

"I can't handle that responsibility, Chris. That's a lot in a relationship, but it's not enough. We should be...what's the word?...symbiotic. We should feed off of each other

and exchange things. You adopting my interests leaves me in an empty place. Plus, if you're passionate about me, you have a funny way of expressing it." She arranged a bunch of tapes in a box.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do I have to say it? You're hardly demonstrative. At least Brad —"

"Brad what?"

"Forget it."

"Come over in four years and tell me how demonstrative Brad is then."

"You're an asshole," she said evenly.

"And you're an infidel," I said, knowing it sounded ridiculous as soon as it left my lips.

She smiled. "A what?"

"A brazen hussy tart. A trollop."

"That the best you can do?"

"Silliest words I can think of."

"Would you hand me that?" she said, motioning to a stack of socks she was using to cushion her records in the box.

Here's a sample of one of their correspondences —dated six months before —I found hidden in her "Beatles Bootlegs" file she forgot to delete on the hard drive:

Yes...I agree! The Live at the BBC is the greatest live album ever recorded, even if they are live (well, and sometimes overdubbed) in the studio recordings. Also up there is the Yellow Dog CD with both Beatles' Hollywood Bowl shows...and hopefully someday the

Shea Stadium concert. Best live set ever recorded (but unfortunately not released in its entirety yet.) The Beatles in Stockholm, Sweden, 1963...the most interesting, energetic, and powerful of all their post-Hamburg live sets.

Cheers,

Judy who happens to have a definite Beatle bias

His response was:

I said Live at the BBC was the greatest live BEATLES recording of all time. The greatest live recording of all time has to be Dylan's Hold the Fort —Live in Fort Worth 1976. We should meet some time in person to debate this properly. Lunch maybe? I work in Government Center and could meet you on Newbury Street. Drop a line.

Nalyd

It's true what they say about people who lose a limb in an accident, about how they occasionally can still feel the sensations. I can still feel my finger. Just now I went to punch in Judy's office number on the telephone and I could have sworn my finger was still there because I could feel it itch, but the only thing pushing against those buttons was the breeze caused by my nub two inches away. I called my doctor this morning because I still feel sensations. He explained it to me, saying it has to do with the signals sent by the brain, and how my brain had spent the last thirty years sending and receiving signals to my finger, and now that it's gone the brain still has a memory of that finger and keeps feeling imagined sensations based on past experience.

He said, "Chris, you're a computer programmer, so think of it this way. We'd have to go into your head and erase every memory of your using your finger for it never

to feel sensation again. It's like removing an entire program from your hard drive, as opposed to just deleting a few files. Does that make sense?"

I can't be in the kitchen for long without taking the finger out of the freezer to inspect it. This morning while making pancakes I just have to pull the finger out when I go for the frozen blueberries. The finger is stiff and cold, frozen solid. Ice crystals cling to the frozen blood. Removing the gauze bandage where my middle finger used to be, I take it out of the bag and press it against the wound to see if it still fits. It's healed miraculously after two days and the frozen finger merely feels awkward and cold pressed against it. It fits, though; it looks like it belongs there, as if the incision is just a red ring and the finger's still attached. It's odd, standing here looking down at my finger and appraising it for its aesthetic qualities. It's a fine finger, I decide, a nicely manicured nail and not too much hair on the knuckle. I throw it back in the freezer.

In my bedroom is an empty jewelry box from a tie clip Judy once gave me. It's long and thin, definitely big enough. It should fit snugly. I walk back out to the kitchen, take the baggy out of the freezer and shake the finger onto the counter where it clunks and rolls like a frozen sausage link. I think, How's this for demonstrative, Judy? How's this for unpredictable? Would Uncle Brad do this for you? Would he give up his finger and offer it to you as a testimony of his love and passion? He wouldn't even give up a Dylan tape for you.

I place it in the cradle of the jewelry box, close it up and wrap it in pink paper that reads, "Surprise!" in squiggly letters. A note, I think, to let her know it's from me.

"When Van Gogh thought he had lost his dear,

he put down his paintbrush, picked up the razor, and sent his ear.

Now that I've seen my love for you will forever linger,

as a token of my devotion I give you my finger.

With Love, Chris.”

I find an old food processor box in the closet and stick the jewelry box and note inside it, tape it up, and stick an address label on the outside. Nope, I think as I walk out the door to go to UPS, Brad would never think of doing something this romantic.

“I got your little package,” Judy says on the phone, two days later. “It’s real, isn’t it.”

“The genuine article,” I say.

“I tried calling you at work.”

“I gotta go back next week,” I say.

“I’m scared,” she says.

“Don’t be,” I say. “We won’t even mention Brad when you come back.”

“When I what?”

“When you come back.”

“Do you really think I’d come back? I’m not scared of leaving Brad, I’m scared of you. Brad’s scared, too.” I hear his deep voice in the background correct her: “I’m *concerned*.”

I say, “I’m crazy without you, but I’m not insane. I thought you’d be flattered.”

“If you ever come near me again, if you ever contact me in any way, I’m calling the police.”

“Judy —”

She hangs up.

I pick up the phone and dial Brad's phone number. It rings five times before Brad picks up. "Hello?" he says.

"Judy, please?"

He hangs up.

I sit in the back of the squad car, and because of my injury the arresting officers put the cuffs on gently and let me keep my hands folded on my lap. We pull up to the station and they lead me inside to a small room with a table and two chairs where they leave me alone for a few minutes. A young officer comes in and sits across the table from me.

"You know why you're here?" he says.

"It's *my* finger," I say. "Look." I hold up my left hand to show where my middle finger used to be. My hand is wrapped with a thick web of gauze, plaster, and tape, the index finger points straight at the ceiling, my thumb and two uninjured fingers visible, a dried blood stain marking the incision point. It looks like someone screwed up a rooster's haircut. "I didn't get it from anyone else. It's mine. Is there a law against that?"

"It's called harassment, Mr. Cutler. You can't send body parts through the mail."

"I used UPS."

The officer pinches his eyes with his thumb and index finger and shakes his head. Slumping back in my chair, I fidget with the bloodstained bandage. The officer stands up and puts his hands on the table to support himself as he leans toward me.

“You’re missing the point, Mr. Cutler. The law forbids the shipping of human flesh and bone. It’s against health codes.”

“Try to understand, officer. I was sending it to her to be romantic. You know, like Van Gogh.” I pause. “There’s really a law against that?”

“Van Gogh?” The officer shrugs his shoulders. “That’s beside the point. The problem is she’s filed a restraining order against you. Do you understand that you’re in big trouble, and that if you approach her again you will be thrown in jail?”

“A man should be able to do what he wants with his own body.”

“You could cut your head off for all I care. But you can’t contact Ms. Byrne in any way, shape, or form.”

Work starts again tomorrow. I keep getting itches where my finger used to be. My finger’s not the only thing that itches; I have the urge to call Judy and explain. I pace the house, pick up and put down the phone, draw myself a bath, get in, soak. The hot water soothes and loosens up my wound. I pick at the scab, dunk my head under the water, hold my breath as long as I can.

When we first dated we laughed all the time. Judy was a crack impressionist. I’d be in the kitchen pouring over my cookbooks, stirring steaming pots, and she’d be setting the table like Charlie Chaplin, bobbing back and forth, skewering rolls with forks, making them dance. Somehow I made her laugh, too, often unintentionally. She laughed when, against character, I aped Igor while serving dinner with a dishrag stuffed onto my shoulder, creating a hunch. Or at times like when we once drove past an accident scene where two cars were mangled beyond recognition and I said, “Bad accident. Looks like

they'll need the jaws of life," and she doubled over with choking laughter. "What? They might be really hurt," I said in all seriousness, but this sent her into convulsions. She waved her hands and said, "Don't talk anymore. It's too much." When she settled down and caught her breath she said, "You're so earnest."

The bathroom feels cool when I come up for air and take a deep breath. My missing finger itches again and I scratch at the wound, which is painful. Maybe if I call Judy she'll scratch it for me tenderly. Would she have even kept the finger? No -- the police probably confiscated it and threw it away. I lift myself out of the tub, a shower of water dripping from my body to the floor, goosebumps prickling my skin. I wonder if Judy's home now. I wonder if she's making love with Brad, or if they're in an argument, or if they have friends over to listen to a tape of Bob Dylan farting while they sip wine. I dry myself off and get dressed, careful not to catch my hand in the sleeve of my shirt.

The Ipswich phone book lists Brad's address. It's still early but getting dark. Driving there is a challenge with the bandage, but I feel a certain satisfaction in shifting, the gears sliding smoothly, my speed increasing. I flip on the car radio. Elvis Costello is singing a cover of The Beatles' "*You've Got To Hide Your Love Away*." Judy used to dance around the house singing this like she was in a karaoke competition. I turn to Classical.

This is the first time I've seen Brad's house. It's twice the size of my house, brown, double garage, landscaped lawn. I bet he's never risked it with a lawnmower. A few lights are on downstairs. I drive past and park a couple of houses away.

Quietly, I get out and gently close the car door. Acting like a Marine on recon, I scurry up the street and position myself behind some bushes beneath one of Brad's small

lighted windows. Dry leaves crunch loudly beneath my feet. A dog barks in the distance. I look into a window and see the kitchen. There's an espresso machine, a bread maker, a blender. A striped rectangle of yellow light emitting from the giant picture window to my left lies on the lawn like a blanket.

I creep over and look in.

Judy sits on the couch scratching her knee absentmindedly while she watches television. Next to the television is a massive stereo cabinet dripping with tapes. She yawns and stretches, and I notice she looks thinner. Her cheeks are sunken, accentuating her jawline and cheekbones. She's dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she's not wearing any make-up. She stretches again, picks up a coffee mug and sips. I don't see Brad anywhere and wonder if he's home. I tiptoe over to the driveway and peek in the garage windows; Judy's black Saab is the only car in there. I ring the bell with my plastered index finger and step back to wait. The widow curtain pulls back and I see half of Judy's face peek out. Her head drops and shakes. I think I see a faint smile. She says, "Did you like the police station?" She holds up one finger as if to say wait a sec. So I wait.

A chain unhooks, the door cracks open. She looks at me through the screen door.

"What part of the words restraining order don't you understand?" she says.

"I don't know," I say. Then, in a quick burst of brilliance I say, "I miss you."

"Brad's going to be home any second, Chris. If he catches you here he's going to call the cops. I should be calling them right now instead of chatting with you. You better go...now." She goes to close the door.

"Wait," I say.

She stops and looks out at me with one eye from the crack in the door. “Why did you have to get a restraining order on me?” I say. “I would never hurt you.”

“Just yourself, right?”

“You never gave me a reason. That’s what’s so hard, the not knowing.” I open the screen door.

She pulls it shut.

“Sorry,” I say, stepping back.

“You want a reason?” she says.

“Everything happens for a reason,” I say. “Nothing just happens.”

“This is just happening. There’s no reason that I can think of. There are a million reasons I can think of and they all make sense and don’t make sense. My God, your fucking finger, Chris. Leave.” She closes the door.

I knock on it gently with my good hand. “Can I at least use the bathroom?” I scream. She doesn’t respond. I bang on it violently and she still doesn’t open up or respond. I walk over to the window and bang on it. She’s on the phone.

“Is this the reason this is happening?” I scream through the window. “Am I too pragmatic?”

She’s crying and staring at the window as if she’s terrified. She says something into the phone and hangs up. “Go away!” she screams back at me.

I hold up my wounded hand to the window. “Do you want my other finger?” I yell. The dog in the distance is barking furiously.

“Don’t try to make this funny,” she sobs. “It’s not funny. I don’t want to laugh.”

“Who’s laughing?” I say.

She stands in the middle of the room shaking, hugging her sides as if she's freezing cold. She looks around, appears confused. I try to console her. I tap gently on the window and whisper words she can't hear because I'm afraid more screaming will frighten her.

Police sirens are approaching fast. Against surrounding trees and houses I can see flashing lights headed my way, and I'm reminded of waiting for the ambulance the day my fingers were sliced off. I look in the window. Judy must hear the sirens, see or sense the lights, too, because she stops shaking and stares straight at me, her face expressionless. She rakes her fingers through her hair and picks up her coffee mug, takes a sip, keeping her eyes fixed on me. I wonder how I must look to Judy, standing on the other side of a window, my face and hands pressed flat to the pane, a distorted, deformed reminder of some part of herself that's no longer there. I now know that I've gone too far, that this will inevitably end badly, but I don't run. It's too late for that, and even if it weren't I'd stay to face the consequences because despite everything – my finger, the hospital, the freezer, the police, Judy and Brad -- I still believe that anything worth doing is worth overdoing. Judy, I think, must have the same attitude, or else she'd have never left. She'd have let inertia govern her life. I look at Judy one last time, free myself from the window, and sit down on her front step, my arms resting on the peaks of my knees. When the police car pulls up the driveway I raise my wounded hand and wave to the officers so there's no chance of them missing me.

Recycling

Last night Karen wrapped her legs around my waist and brushed my teeth with her tongue. This morning she's in her bathrobe and cowboy boots, stomping my CD's to bits in alphabetical and screaming for me to get out.

It's taken me ten years to amass my collection. Arranged alphabetically along two dresser-sized mahogany storage shelves, there are over 1000 discs ranging from Woody Allen's standup to John Zorn's *Kristallnacht*. I don't even lend discs out. If one disc is misshelved or filed upside-down, I notice it immediately. Such attention to detail is an exercise in compulsion and a source of misdirected pride. If any of this had been Karen's fault I'd have stopped her before she ever got to Louis Armstrong. She's already passed Elvis Costello and gaining speed.

"You are a son of a bitch," she says. She pulls Marshall Crenshaw off the shelf and drops him to the floor. Her boot crushes him a second later.

"That's no reason to take it out on my CD's."

"Is this hurting you, Pete?"

"You know it is."

Crowded House's *Together Alone* disc whizzes past my ear.

The night had gone so well. Karen had been offered a teaching job in London for next semester. We celebrated with fish and chips at the Joe's Stone Crab. After dinner, we walked around South Beach, speaking in faux-British accents, then went home, got drunk on Guinness, and made our plans for the trip between rolls around the bed. Then

Danielle stopped by this morning and announced that her EPT came up negative, which was positive news to me. Unfortunately, this was not news I had wanted to share with Karen and the surprise sent her spinning into the CD smashing frenzy.

“Not Miles,” I say. Karen jumps up and down on *Kind of Blue* like she’s on a pogo stick.

“This isn’t fun for me,” she says. She’s a blonde with wide shoulders and long legs, the kind of woman other women call handsome. Her nose is such a perfect isosceles triangle that she often holds herself in profile when she talks to people. “I take no pleasure in this.” These last words are spoken slowly, and I hear a trace of last night’s British accent beneath her anger.

I say, “We should talk this out. Calmly.”

She throws me a savage glare that would normally arouse me. Our relationship has a history marked by the natural ebb and flow of conflict and resolution, a seesaw of minor tiffs and make-up sex. The bulk of our history is as calm and smooth as a lake on a windless day. But sometimes I would purposely misplace a bill or switch channels from *Biography* to *MTV* just to flummox Karen, trying to break that placid surface, generate a small, barely caustic ripple, ripe with potential. All I wanted was to generate a wave that was just big and dangerous enough to send us crashing into the bedroom without destroying the house. This wave, the one set off by the liquid surging through Danielle’s EPT, is a tsunami, and Karen’s expression is not one of mild disruption. This is disgust. This is hate.

The class I teach is gathered in the classroom right now. My students are used to me being late, not showing up. In fact – and Karen doesn’t know this and chances are

she'll now never know this – the college asked me to leave after this semester. I've flunked out of my own class due to absences. A semester in London with Karen could have been a fresh start for me, could have been an opportunity for me to finish my novel, recommit to Karen. Some of my students, of course, are pleased I'm not there, relieved that they don't have to hear my lecture on Raymond Carver, but the more serious ones are probably wondering if they'll have to retake the class next semester.

“Don't you see what you've done to me?” She's crying now. “I'm thirty years old. The worst part is I'm ruined for anyone else.”

We moved to Miami last fall after Karen got accepted into University of Miami's doctoral program. Her dissertation is a comparison of James Joyce's and Alice Munro's short story cycles. We met in California when we were both pursuing our masters in creative writing. I was through with my degree, with all degrees, content to work as an adjunct and take the time to finish my novel. I got an adjunct job teaching composition and intro to lit at F.I.U. Between Karen's fellowship, my occasional publication in a small journal, and my adjunct pay, we scraped by. My only indulgence, besides Danielle, was CD buying. We rented a three-bedroom apartment on the top floor of a two-family house in Hollywood. We shared the master bedroom and converted the two extra bedrooms into workspaces. We spent our days at our respective schools and our nights working on our own projects. While Karen was in her room dissecting *The Dubliners* or *Friend of My Youth*, I was in mine trying to write. We were talking marriage.

Last semester I taught three classes and wrote two hundred pages of the novel. Both my students and my supervisor wrote glowing evaluations of my teaching. My supervisor told me that a full-time, tenure track position was opening up at a Miami-Dade

Community College and that she was very friendly with members of the hiring committee. After observing my teaching, she called me into her office, sat me down, touched my hand and said, “You’re too good to be an adjunct for very long. I can make a call or two.” The three stories I’d published in college journals hadn’t paid much, but they’d caught the attention of a prominent literary agent who urged me to finish the novel so she could shop it around. I was one hundred and fifty pages from the end of a first draft. Karen was making quick progress on her degree by taking extra classes over winter break and had been offered the London job. We talked last night about subletting our apartment, traveling through Europe all summer, then setting up digs in London for the fall semester.

Danielle is a returning student, a “non-trad,” a divorced mother of two who is finally at a point where her kids are in school and she can finish her degree. She – like me -- is thirty, and has straight black hair, wide hips, and one dimple in her right cheek when she smiles. At first, I barely noticed her more than any of the other twenty-nine students in the class. She showed up on time, always turned in her essays on the due dates, marginally added to classroom discussions, and wrote better than most of her younger classmates. Up until midterm she called me Professor.

Every semester, on the day after midterm, I ask my students to write me a letter stating what it is they initially expected of the class, of me, of themselves, and whether or not they and I had so far succeeded, fallen short, or exceeded their goals. These letters help me focus on immediate problems and design future classes. Danielle wrote that so far she had learned a lot from the class, more than she expected, that her writing had improved, and that she was glad she hadn’t taken her best friend’s advice on the first day

of class and offered to sleep with me for an easy A. The next day we were sitting across from each other in my office, discussing her letter. She got out of her chair, stood in front of me, called me Pete. In the next instant we were on my desk. That was two months ago.

Danielle *was* going to get an A from me. Everyone in the class was getting an A. It seemed the only fair thing to do after I'd failed them since midterm. Sleeping with Danielle had earned the whole class an A. We'd meet in my office, close the door, turn out the lights and fumble with each other in the dark.

The phone keeps ringing, a ceaseless nag. It's my supervisor from work. I can sense it from the menacing relentlessness of the ringing. I've heard it all before. Between our tight schedules the only time Danielle and I could see each other was during school hours. At first I cancelled office hours or dismissed classes early. Then I occasionally cancelled class and we'd go to her house while the kids were in school. Word got around to my supervisor. First there'd been concern. Then warnings. The phone stops ringing.

With Karen it's love, the first adult love I've known. We can talk all night about Johnny Cash or God or *M*A*S*H*. She supports my CD buying and writing like I support her short story cycle research. We can sit for three hours at the beach, eating bagels, drinking coffee, reading the Sunday paper in silence, but when we look at each other it's as if no time has elapsed. She'll pass me a water bottle, knowing I'm thirsty without having said a word. Why did I risk Karen for Danielle? How could I, a man who alphabetizes 1000 CD's, allow himself to become a cliché?

Danielle isn't overtly attractive, is from what I can tell nowhere near Karen's intellectual or emotional equal, and has very little in common with me, unless you count the fact that we were sleeping together. So why would I risk everything – my job, my writing, my relationship with Karen – for a pedestrian romp? It's terrible to admit, but I think I jumped at the chance of a student affair out of pure curiosity and ego. I'd always entertained the idea of taking advantage of a willing student, but had never had the opportunity of actualizing this fantasy. When the opportunity arose I rose to the occasion, if for no other reason than fear it may never present itself again. It was easy, too, since Danielle was the same age. A younger student might have cried wolf, said that I'd taken advantage of her or, worse, could have gotten attached to me, taken the affair seriously. Perhaps I had the vague notion that this is just what writers did – they seized opportunities wherever and whenever they could, to gather material. The irony, the supreme delicious justice of all this is since beginning my affair with Danielle I've been blocked by guilt, my ego reduced to a festering puddle of shame. My manuscript has been collecting dust ever since.

“Karen, you're not ruined. We can work through this.”

Karen's just finished dancing on Dave Douglas and reaching for Duke Ellington. I can't take it anymore. It's not just the CD's that bother me. Seeing Karen this upset is breaking my heart, making me want to commit a murder/suicide. That wouldn't do either of us any good, though, so I walk over, grab her by the wrists and wrestle her away from the shelves.

She twists her wrists in my hands. “First cheating then battery? What next?” she says.

“You’re not accomplishing anything.” I sit us down on the couch.

“Do you think I’m trying to accomplish anything? It’s pretty fucking pathetic that I know breaking your CD’s hurts you as much if not more than my pain. Didn’t you have a line in one of your stories about respect? Something like, ‘Respect is when you treat others’ things better than you’d treat your own.’”

She’s right, of course. I’m one shallow bastard. I wonder if I’d be as upset if we were just having it out, her screaming or giving me the silent treatment. I probably would, but I just wouldn’t know it until later. It seems that that’s how life works for me – I always figure things out after the fact, like a good comeback to an insult or a witty, insightful joke at someone’s expense. Or, worse, the way I’m supposed to feel about a situation, especially a painful or confusing one like this Karen/Danielle business. Is there an official term for this condition? Emotional dyslexia? Cognitive amnesia? Chronic dipshittia?

The phone begins ringing again. I go to hug Karen but she pushes me away. I get up and turn off the phone. “I’m making tea,” I say. “Let’s just have some and talk.”

“Why don’t you answer the phone. It might be the mother of your child, your whore.”

I go into the kitchen to make the tea. Filling the kettle, I look out the window. Two cats – one striped white and orange, one black -- are sniffing around the grass. We throw scraps into the backyard all the time – bread crust, apple cores, old cold cuts. It’s our way of recycling. Better the neighborhood animals get our biodegradables than the

city dump. Something about watching animals in the backyard foraging through our scraps makes me feel connected to nature within the concrete confines of Miami. We sometimes stand by the window, me standing behind Karen, my chin resting on her shoulder, and time how long it takes for a crow or squirrel or cat to come along and drag away a strip of chicken fat or a banana peel. The black cat saunters away. The striped one keeps sniffing. I turn on the gas, and after a soft *poof*, a small blue flame explodes beneath the kettle.

Karen's back at the shelves, running her fingers along the discs. I place the tea cups on the coffee table, sit on the couch and pat the cushion beside me. "Sit," I say. "Please."

"This one," she says, pulling a Steve Earle disc out, "is a rare one, yes? A bootleg? Expensive. Tough to find." She opens up the case, takes out the disc, places it face down on the floor, plants her heel, and does a little twist. "Maybe irreplaceable? Do you think I never had any offers?" she says. She lifts up the end of the carpet and kicks the pieces of disc underneath. "There," she says letting the carpet drop. "No more problem." She sits beside me, picks up her teacup, crosses her cowboy boots on the coffee table, sips.

I haven't begun sipping mine yet. You always know the moment when water boils, but you never can pinpoint exactly when it cools down to a drinkable temperature. This is what I'm thinking as I look at Karen's exposed collarbone. Her robe is open at the neck and I want her at this moment more than ever, because I know it's over. There's nothing I can say or do to repair things. I want to cram all of the future moments that we'll never share into this one morning, into this one moment. There's no need to

explain or make excuses. It's funny how relaxed you become once you know things are over, once you've given in to defeat.

"I'm sure you have offers daily," I say, picking up my cup. Some tea spills onto the floor. "You're beautiful and smart and witty and everything a man could ever want."

"Apparently not *everything*. Too late for compliments, Pete."

I sip my tea.

"But I never accepted," she says. She puts down her cup and looks me in the eye. "You were it for me."

"This is torturing me, Karen," I say, and I mean it. This is not a delayed response to a previous fight. It's not a projection of lingering guilt. It's not a rip in the space/time continuum where I'm talking about the torture of seeing Danielle on our front step this morning. I am in this moment. I am here. I am feeling this and it's scaring the shit out of me.

"You haven't a clue." She cinches her robe closed at the neck and stands up. "You have to leave."

"I don't want to. What about London? You still going?"

"It won't be the same without you, but now it can't be the same with you, so yes. It'll be good to get away. Good for you, too." She pauses. "You'll be a daddy when I get back." Her lips quiver. She laugh-cries. She sips her tea and stares into the cup.

I open my mouth to say, no I won't. Danielle and I already discussed our options before she took the EPT. We'd made our decision. But what's the point? Whether I'd be a father or not was not the point. Danielle and I were still through, no matter what happened now, which was just fine with me. It's pathetic to say, but now that I've

experienced the thrill and disappointment of the affair, it's no longer useful to me. Have I mentioned yet that I'm a shallow bastard? The real problem is that now Karen and I are through, too, and that is not fine with me at all.

Karen says, "Remember that Christmas recital we went to in California? The one where your old friend with cancer was singing?"

"Sure. That was Bob," I say. "Bob died right after."

"Right," she says. "Bob. Remember when we danced in the aisles during intermission and Bob came out from backstage and watched us? He just sat there and watched in silence while we danced in circles in the aisle." She begins pacing back and forth. "The lights flashed and people came back in and took their seats. You and I kept dancing until the lights went down. Bob ran backstage and we sat back down." She stops pacing and takes a sip of tea. "Remember?"

"Sure." My voice cracks. "We can still have that. Dance with me now." I stand up and stretch out my arms. She starts pacing again.

"After the concert Bob came out and told us that he wished he had someone to dance with like that. He called it an unselfconscious display of love."

Bob died alone in a hospital, which I figure is now my fate. Not that I'm dying any time soon, but things are looking pretty bleak, and if I were to be stricken with some awful disease today and given a few months to live, I certainly wouldn't deserve a faithful wife or lover sitting by my side, holding my hand to comfort me during my last moments. Faith rewards faith. Deceit punishes deceit.

"That's how I thought we'd always be," she says, "dancing through life, unconsciously in love. I guess I was the only unconscious one." She shakes her head as

if amused by her own romanticism. “Now I’ll never have that. I’ll never be unconscious again, which is good and bad, I guess. But now I’ll always be suspicious. You will be too. Bravo, Pete. You’ve ruined both of us. What’s your encore?”

She’s right, but I say, “It doesn’t have to be that way” anyway. In addition to being a bastard I’m a bit of a romantic myself. “We could work this out. Maybe in a few years we’ll be saying, ‘Remember that rough time in Florida? Are you glad we didn’t let things fall apart then? Wasn’t London a real turning point for us?’ We could say all that, Karen, if we want.”

She puts her cup on the table and walks over the CD shelves. In a perfect act of coincidence, she picks up Fishbone’s *The Reality of My Surroundings* and hurls it across the room. The case smashes into the wall and the CD falls to the floor, rolling under the coffee table like a dropped coin.

I go over and stand next to her. We look at each other for a moment and without saying anything we both start pulling discs off the shelves four and five at a time, dropping them to the floor, dancing on the cases. This feels good, and it doesn’t scare me at all.

Altruism

Rolland's house was hidden away down a dirt road off the highway. If you didn't know where to look you'd never find it. It was a little yellow two-bedroom ranch, with a stone floor and an empty above-ground pool. The yard was littered with old rusty car frames and barrels. I went there to buy some cocaine. Rolland was standing in the driveway looking up at the sky when I pulled in.

"All gone?" I said.

"Every grain," he said, wiping his nose. His eyes were sunken and he kept grinding his teeth as if he were chewing an immense wad of gum. He wore faded jeans that hung loosely off his hips, and a backwards baseball hat. Blood splattered the front of his white t-shirt, the result, I assumed, of a nosebleed. "You got any? I could use a line." Even though he was originally from Connecticut and had lived in Massachusetts for twenty-five years, Rolland had a voice like Johnny Cash -- thick, drawling, resonant. He didn't look like Johnny Cash. More like Johnny Rotten. "It's getting colder every day, but I'm burnin' up."

"Fuck, Roll, why'd you do that? It's my birthday."

He shrugged. "Couldn't stop. You know how it is. Ain't slept in three days. Not even tired." He scratched his face and tugged at his chin. "Hey," he said, "can exhaustion lead to insanity?"

"Huh?" I was thinking about where I could get some coke elsewhere. There was always Neil, but he stomped all over it with Vitamin B-12.

“You know, like sometimes I don’t sleep for a few days and I start seein’ shit like trees turn into people and stuff.” He rubbed his chest and flapped his arms. “Damn, my heart’s pounding all off-beat.” He covered his ears with his hands and went “boom, boom, boom-pah-boom, boom-pah-boom, boom.”

I knew what he was talking about. Last year we got a half ounce of solid Bolivian rocket fuel and smoked the whole thing in a weekend. By Sunday I thought our pipe was a snake and the carpet was made of leaves. We filled the pool with a garden hose and dove in, slime from the sides sticking to our skin. Pretty soon we got scared and kicked a hole in the side and flooded the driveway.

“I’m gonna call Neil. Lemme use your phone.”

“Neil’s inside.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“He doesn’t have anything. Plus, he’s relaxin’.” He rubbed his chin again, then flapped his arms. “I just stabbed him. Man, my heart’s pounding.”

“Is he dead?”

“Nah. Cindy made him some spaghetti.”

Rolland walked over to the tipped picnic bench next to the pool and put it upright. He stepped on top and flapped his arms.

I left him there and went into the house. It smelled like a pawnshop owned by cats. Cindy stood at the sink, rinsing dishes. A cigarette smoldered in an ashtray on the counter. Neil sat in a plastic-covered recliner, facing the television, a tray on his lap. He was digging into a bowl of spaghetti with one hand; the other was beneath the tray, as if

he were keeping it still. When he saw me walk through the door he slurped a few vagrant strands into his mouth. He winced.

“That hurt,” he said, looking back at the television. “What’s up, Buddy?”

“Hey, Neil. You holdin’?”

“You think I’d be eating spaghetti?”

“You really stabbed?”

He kept his eyes on the television. “Grazed me. Yeah, grazed me a bit in the old belly.”

“Big enough target.” It was Rolland who said that. He’d walked in the house behind me without my hearing him.

“He won’t go to the hospital,” said Cindy. She dried her hands on a dishtowel and took a drag of her cigarette.

“I’ll go. Just wait till this show’s over.”

“That’s what he said an hour ago, when another show was on,” said Cindy, mashing out her cigarette. “Then he asks for spaghetti.”

“By the way, this spaghetti,” he shoveled a forkful in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully, “tastes rusty. Might be the water. Maybe your pipes need replacing. My cousin, a plumber, he’ll give you a deal.”

“It ain’t the pipes, you idiot,” I said. “You’re drowning in your own blood.”

Neil smacked his lips together. “No, I think it’s the spaghetti. Just a slight after-taste.”

Cindy shook her head and said, “Will you guys just take him to the hospital?”

Rolland walked over to her and said, “Keys?”

“You don’t need ‘em now that Buddy’s here. Buddy,” she said, looking over Rolland’s shoulder, “drive Neil to the hospital, huh?”

Since I didn’t have any coke and since both of my main suppliers were here and both fresh out, and since I had nothing better to do on my birthday I figured, why not?

“Sure.”

Neil said, “Buddy, I’m going to let you take me to the hospital.”

“You’re a prince,” I said.

“You’ll be a hero. No one likes you anyway, but word will get around you saved my life on your birthday. It will be magnanimous.” He twirled his fork between his fingers like a drumstick. “Altruistic.”

Rolland was still standing in front of Cindy. He said, “Keys.” He snapped his head to the left, cracking his neck. “Did you hide my stuff last night?”

Cindy looked at me. I looked at Rolland. Neil looked at the television.

Cindy looked back at Rolland with hatred, not fear. He’d once beaten her with a blender, but here she was still with him. I’d stopped over while she was still unconscious and Rolland was trying to glue together the blender. We put cold washcloths on her forehead and when she came to I ended up sitting in the corner with a hash pipe while they made out on the couch. I didn’t understand anyone, certainly not myself.

I never hit a woman in my life, never so much as raised my voice, and I couldn’t hold on to a woman for more than a few months. I shared my drugs with them, drove them around, even cooked for them once in awhile. I made a mean steak and mashed potato dinner. They all left for guys like Rolland – uglier, meaner, stupider than me. The

nastier the guy the more the woman wanted him. And vice-versa. I truly didn't understand anyone.

Cindy walked past Rolland, turned off the television, and turned to me. "Buddy, please. Neil, get the fuck out. You ain't dying in here. Not today."

Neil said, "The show was almost over. I'm not even finished." He motioned to the bowl. He looked up. "Who's dying? It's just a graze."

He winced when Cindy picked up the tray and walked back in the kitchen.

"Hey, Neil," said Rolland. "We bring you to the hospital, what are you gonna say?"

"None of your business."

We helped Neil get out of the chair. He was heavy and left an indent in the cushion. That wasn't all he left. When he got up a thread of blood extended from his wound, which was just below his left ribs, to the plastic. A pool of blood had settled into a corner of the plastic. His pants and shirt were heavily stained too.

"That's more than just a graze," I said.

"It stays closed when I sit still."

"Oh shit," I said.

"I told him not to take the blade out," said Rolland. "It's like pullin' a cork."

I held Neil by his right elbow. Rolland was helping him on the wounded side. Rolland said, "What are you gonna say?" He snapped his head to the right, cracking his neck again.

"Nothin', okay, nothin'."

“Good.” He looked up. “Sorry I had to stab you. I thought you were holding out.”

We eased Neil into the backseat of my 1973 Charger.

This was not the way I wanted to spend my birthday. I wanted to get high. Rolland wanted to stay high. Neil wanted to get stitched up. They’d probably give him morphine at the hospital. He was the luckiest man in the car.

Rolland was the older brother of a former friend of mine, Bill, who got killed crossing a highway one night. Bill and I had a girlfriend contest when we were fourteen. We spent the summer seeing how many girls we could kiss. Bill won with seventy-eight girls. Averaged out, that’s almost one a day for the summer. It’s funny how my quantity equals quality mentality hadn’t changed in ten years.

Rolland yammered on and on about how he needed another line. Neil occasionally groaned when we hit a pothole or took a turn. My stomach gurgled. I needed breakfast. I pulled into Burger King.

“What are we doing here?” asked Rolland.

“I need food.”

“I can’t eat,” he said.

“If you’d saved me some I wouldn’t be hungry either.”

“I already ate,” said Neil. He coughed and said he could still taste the rust from the spaghetti. “And I’m beginning to think I should get to the hospital soon.”

They’d stopped serving breakfast at 10:30. It was just past 11:00.

“C’mon” I said into the intercom. “You must have some leftover sausage and hash browns and stuff under that heat lamp.”

The distorted voice informed me that they were in fact out of all breakfast items for the day, but that I could buy burgers, fries, chicken sandwiches, etc. And what size drink did I want? I ordered a cheeseburger – no pickles – and a medium Coke.

“Would you like some fries?” the voice said.

“Did he fucking ask for fries?” Rolland screamed at the intercom. I pulled forward. He said, “Do these people think we’re idiots or something?”

“What a birthday,” I said, pulling up to the pay window.

“I got a hole in my liver and you’re complaining about hash browns,” said Neil. “You don’t deserve to drive me to the hospital.”

When the girl wearing the telephone headset handed me my food I said, “You sure you don’t have any leftover bacon croissants?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “It’s 11:11.” She handed me my change and closed the window.

Rolland, who’d been squeezing his left arm since we pulled into the parking lot, said, “That’s lucky.”

“What?” I said.

“11:11. Best time of the day. No matter how you look at it it’s the same. Front, back, all over. Even in a mirror.” He opened the window and stuck his head out while we raced down the highway. I unwrapped my burger, peeled off the pickles, flung them out the window.

Neil and I went into the hospital while Rolland waited in my car. He didn’t want to be anywhere near the doctors when questions were asked. The emergency room was

packed with waiting patients and scurrying orderlies wearing powder-blue garb. I signed Neil's name on some clipboard. We sat down and waited to be called. A guy with an arrow shot through his wrist sat down next to me and picked up a magazine. He balanced it open on his lap and flipped it open, with his good hand.

Neil was leafing through a magazine and I was bored, so I said to arrowman, "Need me to sign you in?"

"All signed in," he said. He flipped a page.

I looked at Neil, who was now a grayish blue. "You okay?"

He looked up from his magazine. "Huh?" His eyes were having trouble focusing.

I jumped up and ran over to the check-in desk. A doctor was on the phone.

"My friend has to see you now."

The doctor looked at me for a second with contempt and then went back to his conversation. I stood at the counter, staring at him. He turned around. Neil walked over.

"Hey," he said.

The doctor turned around, saw Neil, and hung up the phone. Neil was holding his shirt up, exposing a giant gash just below his ribs. His torso was slicked with blood.

"Doc, I stabbed myself."

The doctor put on white rubber gloves and came from around the desk. He said, "I'm a nurse."

"No kidding? I never met a male nurse before."

"I never heard that one before." The nurse, who I thought was a doctor, bent down and inspected Neil's wound as if it were a precious gem. "You stabbed yourself?" He looked over at me and I shrugged. This was out of my hands.

“Bullshit. What happened?”

“Hey, if that guy over there can shoot himself with an arrow I can stab myself.”

“Suit yourself.” He straightened up and said, “Don’t move. I’m getting a doctor.”

The guy with the arrow came over. “I was here first.” He waved his wounded hand at us like he was conducting an orchestra. “Ah, damn.”

“Are you gonna die?” I said.

“Aren’t we all?” he said.

I heard a thump and turned around to see Neil on the floor, convulsing.

This was the early summer. Neil died. I turned twenty-seven that day.

Later that autumn I hurled leftovers out the window into the backyard for squirrels. It was time for me to discard the old, for others to fill their cheeks. Do crows fly south for the winter? If so, the ones who missed the last flight to Florida perched on the steeple of a stone church across the street from my house. I sat at the window watching them swoop down to the leaf-covered ground to dig for worms, wondering why they and I were still there, why we weren’t all kicking it on the beach.

My backyard looked like a grassy moon surface. Squirrels dug holes where leftovers landed to mark their territory like dogs pissing on hydrants. They ignored the rotting zucchini, slick with mold and slime, and the brown banana peels, so I mowed it all over, the blades mixing decay, scattering it over the lawn like a fine mulch. When I listened closely the sound of their little claws digging in the dirt was enough to blow leaves from the trees, like giant hinges creaking between yesterday and tomorrow.

A spider resides in the body of my guitar, its intricate web hums to the strums of my strings. Should I compare the fallen leaves, once flourishing with sunshine and rain, bursting with glucose, now dead and crumpled, tornadoing in the wind, to the fallen dreams of summer? Maybe not. That would be pushing things, and if I knew anything about anything, it's not to push things too far. I've done that for too long.

Ruby, My Dear

Amy had just packed her bags and moved out that morning. I was sitting in my living room, drinking gin. There was a knock at my door. I looked through the peephole. Ruby sat in her wheelchair, her gray hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, her one remaining leg pointing at the door.

"Bill's gone, Gabe," she said to the door.

"So's Amy." I clinked the ice in my glass.

"C'mon," she said, and turned her wheelchair around.

I opened the door and followed her down the hall. "When?"

"Five minutes ago," she called over her shoulder.

We went into her apartment. The windows were all open, a hot breeze blowing through the curtains. I closed the door behind me.

"I'm sorry, Ruby."

She turned around. "Remember your promise to help me when Bill died?"

"Want me to call someone?"

"I need you to help me bury him."

"The funeral home?"

"I mean *bury* Bill," she said slowly. "In the Everglades."

I looked around her apartment. There were two old sofas facing a television, a coffee table covered in glasses with straws sticking out of their mouths. The rug had wheel imprints zig-zagging in every direction. Above the entertainment center was a black and white photo of Ruby and Bill dancing at their wedding.

Ruby said, "It's what he wanted."

"Isn't that illegal?" Gin and thoughts of Amy floated through my head. I was trying to wrap my brain around what Ruby was saying.

"My husband's dead." She wheeled right up to me, her remaining leg bumping into my knee.

I stepped back. What about death certificates and calls to the coroner and police? Was there some Everglades Cemetery I hadn't heard of?

Ruby said, "Tonight, after we go to the Everglades, you'll drive me to the beach and wheel me down to the water's edge. I'm going to say that Bill and I were down there and that he wanted to feel the water. He lowered himself out of the chair and a big wave came and took him away. My wheels got stuck in the sand and I couldn't help him."

Direction. A concrete plan. Now I could see what Ruby was getting at. I didn't like it. I wanted to run back to my apartment, pour another glass of gin, turn up my music, and forget about Ruby and Bill, wallow in my misery over Amy. I said, "This won't work. They'll search the beach and the water. They'll ask how you got down there in the first place."

"I'll say you dropped us off. I'll say you've been doing that for us once a week. You don't have to stick around. Just leave me and Bill's chair there and once I know you're gone and no one saw us I'll start screaming my head off for help. Who's going to doubt an old lady in a wheelchair?" She really *had* thought this through.

I walked to the kitchen and picked up the phone.

"Put down the phone," she said. "You promised to help me. Bill's in the bedroom. If I weren't in this damn wheelchair I'd do it myself, but I am and I can't."

Her steady voice, her resolve, surprised me. Didn't she want to give her husband a proper burial? Wasn't she going to cry? If Amy and I had stayed together for the next fifty years, would she ditch my body in a swamp if I asked her? Doubtful. Amy wouldn't even go to a ball game or a Thai restaurant with me. But Amy wasn't Ruby and I wasn't Bill. Ruby had had months, years, to prepare for this. Maybe this was a proper burial in her eyes. She looked up at me and nodded.

"What can I do?" I said.

We waited until dark. After we zipped Bill up inside a sleeping bag, Ruby took the elevator down to make sure no one was around. I looked out the window to the parking lot. She was there by my car, sitting under the moth-infested streetlight, waving for me to come down, a pocketbook in her lap. I nearly called the police while Ruby sat waiting for me in the parking lot. My head was clear by that point and Ruby's plan seemed even more ludicrous than when I was tipsy. But, I supposed, a promise was a promise, and Ruby was old. And was she really asking so much of me? Aside from dragging a dead body, what was a ride to the Everglades? She'd spent a lifetime with Bill and this was what they'd decided. Who was I to spoil their plans? I couldn't even keep a girlfriend let alone sustain a marriage, so maybe love meant burying your husband in a swamp. I picked Bill up and headed downstairs.

My car was a giant old Cadillac. When I placed Bill in the trunk the shocks absorbed him as they would a pothole. He would have been heavier, and far less manageable, had he not lost his legs to diabetes. I ran back upstairs, grabbed his folded-

up wheelchair, raced downstairs, and tossed it in the trunk next to Bill. I closed the trunk and squatted down by the side of the car, panting.

"Thanks, Gabe," Ruby said. She caressed the handle of her wheelchair.

We sat still for a few moments, the buzzing of the light and bugs above us. "We should probably go now," I said.

She wheeled up to the passenger door. "Help me in."

I unlocked the door, picked her up under the leg and back, noticed how light she was compared to Bill, and put her down gently in the front seat. I folded up her chair and put it in the back seat, then got in and started the car.

We turned onto Route 95 North, heading toward Ft. Lauderdale. Ruby struck a wooden match on the dashboard, lit a cigarette and coughed. "You mind?" she said. She cracked the window. The smoke swirled out with the wind. "Don't ever smoke," she said as she exhaled. "Too late for me. My water's already polluted."

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Shoot."

"Is this really the way Bill wanted it? You don't have to answer. But you have to admit this is--"

"Odd?"

"To put it mildly."

She took a drag of her cigarette and squinted. "It was what we decided. If I went first, then you'd be talking to Bill right now and I'd be in the trunk."

"Why not the ocean? Seems more dignified than the Everglades."

"This has nothing to do with dignity." She inhaled deeply on the cigarette. "He'd be washed up by the tide. They'll never find him in the Everglades. We discussed the options."

She flicked her cigarette out the window. I looked in the rearview mirror, saw a flurry of red ash skittering across the dark asphalt.

"Please, use the ashtray."

"You an environmentalist?"

"I just don't feel like getting pulled over for littering."

She laughed.

I turned on the radio and scanned through the stations. We passed a sign that read: Route 75 Alligator Alley. My headlights sliced through the darkness. We drove the rest of the way without talking, just listening to the radio.

As we drove I thought about Amy. I thought about how she'd been in such a rush to leave that on her way to the door she banged her knee on the coffee table and didn't even flinch. I thought about what she said to me -- that I was too detached, too self-absorbed, that I was too apathetic about work, our relationship, "life in general." She was right, of course, but I can't imagine that she just woke up one day, looked at me and thought that I should have more passion about being a pizza chef. She knew from the start that I wasn't and probably never would be a career man. No surprises there. No, her vague list of excuses was really a scapegoat for the real problem -- my insisting she get an abortion last year, a decision that we reached together after a short discussion over breakfast. Ever since we drove up to the clinic and passed the picket line of protestors,

Amy hasn't seen me as anything but an accomplice to murder. I wondered what she'd think of my driving toward the Everglades with Bill in my trunk.

Ruby pointed to a section of dirt used for a turnaround on the side of the highway. "Pull over here."

I pulled over, cut the engine and turned off the lights. Millions of chattering bugs surrounded us. A small hill led down from the turnaround to an aqueduct that ran parallel to the highway. A chain link fence stood between the water and us.

"You'll be quicker without me." She lit another cigarette and stared straight ahead.

I sighed, popped the trunk and got out. No headlights were coming from either direction. I hauled the sleeping bag out of the trunk and laid it by the side of the car. After slamming the trunk shut I walked around to Ruby's window and knocked. "Where should I bring him?"

She spoke through the small opening in the window, "Bring him in as far as you can and make sure he's under water."

"There's a fence." I pointed to the bottom of the hill where the chain link fence extended as far as I could see in either direction. "And there's alligators around here -- now -- probably listening to this conversation."

"Bill used to eat alligator all the time."

I thought, great, they'll have their revenge. I nearly picked Bill up, put him back in the trunk and drove home. I thought if I saw a cop along the way I'd beep and tell him I had a dead body in the trunk and did he know where I could drop it off. Instead I just stood there listening to the bugs, thinking I should be home calling Amy.

"Please, Gabe," said Ruby. Her voice cracked with desperation and defeat, as if embarrassed by this whole thing herself, as if she'd rather have given Bill a traditional funeral, that she would rather be anywhere else but here, and would I please just hurry up and get this whole thing over with because she and I were partners and we'd both promised Bill to take care of things when he was gone. I thought of the way Amy used to say, "Please, Gabe," when we argued. Ruby shook the box of wooden matches like a baby shaking a rattle.

"What if he doesn't sink?"

"He drank water all day in anticipation. The sleeping bag is old and made of cotton. Very absorbent."

"Do you want to say goodbye?"

"We already did." She shook the matchbox again.

"Beep if you see any headlights," I said. I picked up Bill and danced with him down the hill, trying not to lose my footing, trying not to slip into the fence. I hoisted it - him -- above my head and onto the top of the fence. The sleeping bag got momentarily stuck on one of the tongs, ripped free, then fell over to the other side. It rolled into the aqueduct, bobbed, spun like a log and sank. I stood there for a minute to make sure he didn't pop back up. The only thing that rose to the surface was a few bubbles, reflecting the crescent moon above. Ruby beeped. I scrambled up the hill pretending like I was zipping my fly. A car whizzed past, kicking up a backdraft of dirt into my face.

I turned on the radio and began flipping through the stations again. "Stop there," said Ruby, touching my hand before I could change the station. It was a somber solo jazz

piano piece, a ballad. Ruby closed her eyes. I pulled onto Route 95, South to Hollywood. The song ended. Ruby opened her eyes and said, "Change the station." She lit another cigarette.

I turned the radio off.

She exhaled and said, "I thought for a minute that it was 'Ruby, My Dear,' but it wasn't. Wishful thinking. Bill and I used to go see Thelonious Monk in New York in the 50's and 60's, and whenever he played 'Ruby, My Dear' Bill would squeeze my knee under the cocktail table and lean over to kiss me." She paused. "Didn't you say Amy was gone?"

"Packed and left this morning."

"I'm sorry."

"These things happen," I said, wanting to change the subject. "You're sorry? I'm sorry, Ruby. Bill *died*. Amy just left."

"How long were you together?"

"A little over a year. You and Bill?"

"Fifty-three."

"Long time." I wanted to get home to call Amy and tell her about this. There was no way to turn back the clock or bring the baby back, but maybe she'd come back and we could start over fresh. "Ruby, can I ask you something? I know you're mourning and all, so you might not want to discuss anything, but how did you and Bill make things work? I mean, Amy and I didn't even really have any problems," I lied. Ruby didn't have to know the details of Amy and me. Either way, I still wanted to know how she and Bill lasted so long. I said, "We just lived together and saw each other in the morning. Won't

it be the same no matter who I'm with? Won't I have to listen to anyone I'm with talk about shopping for fresh fruit and bargain dresses and won't she have to listen to me talk about baseball stats and how fast my modem is? Won't we just keep seeing each other at our worst? How do we overlook that stuff and agree to stay together?"

"Gabe, I've got no words of wisdom for you. All I can say about Bill and me is that we had to keep falling back into love all the time, which means we kept falling back into hate or apathy or disgust all the time, too. There's occasional bliss, sure, but there's also the most god-awful cruelty. Love fills you and kills you at the same time." She paused for a moment and then said, "I think commitment is important. And respect. Shared values. All that stuff. But the core is tolerance. You have to tolerate each other, 'cause God knows we're all fallen people. If we can't tolerate each other's failings we all might as well feed ourselves to the alligators. A year? Sometimes a year's as much time as you need. Sometimes," she said, "if it's good, if it's real good, a year is a lifetime."

I sped up as we approached the exit. I rolled down my window, filled my lungs with fresh air. I could smell the saltiness of the ocean, and I thought, if Amy and I patch things up, maybe I'll tell her all about this.

Ruby kept talking: "Bill used to play that song for me on the piano. God, he was awful."

All I wanted to do was get home, call Amy, and try to patch things up. But first we had to go to the beach.

Cats

This is about what happened to a woman that I used to date in high school, back in Peabody, Massachusetts. I guess it's about me too, in a distant way, and about one night a long time ago, but it's mostly about her. Her name was Susan Wheatly. Susan wasn't a woman then, of course; she was a girl, a young lady. It's now ten years later. The graduating high school class is meeting next month for its reunion but I don't think I'm going, despite the fact that I sent in my RSVP and confirmation check last month.

Susan had straight auburn hair that stretched half way down her back, big turquoise eyes. She was about as tall as a 1973 Dodge car hood is long, and I never saw her wear the same pair of shoes twice. But it was her eyes that knocked me out, like a Siamese cat. Cats are a good place to start.

She loved cats. A lot of people love cats, but she had this thing about cats that went beyond average affection. She owned six cats, so whenever we went to her house they were crawling all over us. She didn't seem to mind if one jumped on my back in the midst of lovemaking. And whenever we were out cruising around in my old blue jacked-up 1973 Charger and saw some feline roadkill she'd get weepy and bury her face in her hands. At first I thought it was sweetly compassionate. But after a while it got annoying, especially when my friends were in the car with us.

One May night Susan and I were out. We'd gone to dinner and a movie, your basic suburban teenage date. We parked in the Bishop Fenwick High School parking lot, our usual stop before we went home. We weren't in love, but we laughed a lot when we

were together and, for teenagers, we had good sex. We were falling for each other as far as we could.

It was a clear night, the stars like a sea of phosphorous above. Rain had fallen earlier, but had passed quickly, leaving a damp ground and clean smell in the air. My engine purred to a halt and we leaned into each other hungrily. After a few minutes of awkward fumbling, Susan pushed me away and pulled off her shirt. She unzipped her tight pants and began to wiggle out of them. I unbuttoned my shirt and leaned over to kiss her breasts. She pushed me away, smiling.

A cat jumped on the hood of my car. It was just an alley cat, a mongrel, a ratty little brownish-gold thing. I wouldn't have even bothered with it, but Susan stopped wiggling and made cooing noises at it, pressing her finger against the windshield where its face pressed. I beeped the horn. The cat shivered then meowed. Susan smacked me in the arm. I beeped again and it jumped off the hood and darted into the trees. Susan zipped back up before I could pull off my shirt, and before I could say anything her shirt was back on and the car door slammed in my face.

I got out and rushed after her and she started running. I yelled something about how if she didn't come back I'd drive around the city and run over every cat I saw. She ran faster and, looking back on it, who could blame her? I got back in the car, started it up, drove out of the parking lot and caught up with her.

She was a good way down a side street by this time, heading toward her neighborhood. The car bounced as I pulled up over the curb and onto the sidewalk to block her path. Her run had slowed to a deliberated and determined walk. She skirted around the car as if it were a puddle or a tree. I cut the engine and jumped out. When I

grabbed her arm she pulled away. Her damn cat eyes, the eyes that knocked me out, were full of tears, and for some reason that infuriated me, made me want to smack the wetness off her face. She kept walking away and I pounced at her, grabbing her arm again, this time tighter, digging my fingers into her flesh. She gritted her teeth, and her eyes got wide. She tried to squirm away, but I held fast. With her free hand she smacked me perfectly across the ear. My ear rang and I let go. She resumed her walk, rubbing her arm. I tackled her from behind, her body smacking hard against the root of an oak tree. I turned her over so she faced me and I held her arms down with my knees. A car drove by, slowed down, then drove on. Can you believe that? At the time I imagined it would stop and four huge guys would get out, run over to me and kick my ass hard. I was wishing it would so they could stop me.

Susan looked up at me, her eyes scared and defiant. I raised my hand to punch her, but I stopped. I couldn't. After sitting on top of her for a minute or so, both of us breathing hard and staring at each other, I got off. She rolled over, and in a flash of moonlight I saw that where I'd held her arm there were five round, red finger marks that would eventually bruise. She got up, walked over to my car, got in, and I drove her home in silence. She got out of the car and I literally never saw her again. After that night, I barely ever thought of her again -- until this morning when I read the paper.

Her picture took up the whole front page of the Boston Herald. Her eyes looked happily out off the page, her cheekbones stood round and high above a wide smile. According to the article, she'd been married for three years, had two children -- a boy and a girl -- and still lived in Peabody. Beneath her picture the caption read: "Susan Miller

[her married name] was found yesterday morning brutally beaten to death in the woods near her home."

The article went on to say that Susan was coming home late at night from a friend's house when she stopped at a 24-hour convenience store for milk. Two young men, both drunk, were in the store. The store's surveillance tape revealed that the men watched her as she walked around the store and made lewd comments to her when she passed them. The store clerk was quoted as saying that one of the men nudged the other as Susan left the store and said, "You know what we've got to do." They followed her home and as she pulled the milk out of the back seat the men raced up and grabbed her. They dragged her into the woods, raped her, and from the scratch marks on both men the police determined that she'd tried viscosly to fight them off. Her body was discovered within an hour of the attack, said the article, after her husband noticed the car in the driveway. He went outside and called her name, then noticed the grocery bag in the driveway. He walked over to the woods with a flashlight where he found Susan's naked body smashed beyond recognition by a large rock. The two men -- who were well known by the police from previous minor offenses -- were quickly identified by the surveillance tape and picked up before they had a chance to discard their bloodstained clothes.

Now that I remember that last night with Susan, and how badly it went, and much worse it could have gone, I'm filled with a shame that defies description. It's common, almost petty, to get philosophical at times like this, when someone you know, someone you've been intimate with, dies. That's not what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to understand why I acted the way I did that last night. And I'm trying to imagine what our lives would be like had I just been patient and let Susan play with that cat. She might

have just spent a few more seconds cooing at it, and we might have gone on to make love. We might have kept dating and eventually fallen in love and gotten engaged, married, bought a house somewhere, and built a life together. Everything could have been different for both of us had I not beeped that horn and chased that cat away into the woods. Susan wouldn't have been in that convenience store and those two bastards wouldn't have seen her, and she wouldn't have a husband and two motherless children crying for her right now.

My life is not terrible. I have a wife whom I love and we're trying to have children. We own a house. I'm an attorney and make a good salary. I have good friends and my family lives nearby.

I'm only 28. I've never felt so helpless. That night when I looked down at Susan's face when I had her pinned I felt helpless -- that's why I had to pin her. That's why I never apologized or tried to make amends.

The reunion is in two weeks. I know the scene. It'll be just like the prom, only the dates will now be husbands and wives. People's pockets and walks will be a little heavier. Before digging into the pasty chicken dinner, someone -- the former class president or something -- will make an announcement about Susan's murder. A few choked sobs will be heard, uncertain, nervous glances exchanged. An uncomfortable moment of solemn silence will be observed. Later on in the night, everyone will gather in small circles and complete strangers to Susan will exchange stories about brief conversations that they had with her ten years ago. I'll get sucked into these conversations or maybe even initiate one myself. I can't go. I can't pander to that scene.

I wonder if the two men who killed her will ever feel like I do now. Will they remember what life was like before that night? Will they wonder what part of them died along with her?

The Maybe Bin

Wait. The wait, though unbearable at times, is a comfort, a constant, dependable. Urgency absolute, attractive and perfect like imagined consummated love as opposed to actual coitus. I imagine this is the way people who long for others feel, the distance, the apprehension, the anticipation unfulfilled. And this, my last chance before the recycling bin.

A thumb pressed delicately against my edge, arching and fanning my pages, testing my weight. Absurd, this ritual, this thumbing. Back in the pile. Covered by another.

My parent, my creator, after giving birth to me and breathing life into my empty pages, saw fit to batter me around for a few weeks, to cut and paste, to add and delete, punching THE END before sending me off into this obscene world of Yes, No, Maybe. Trips in acidic envelopes to all corners of this pale country, to shabby fluorescent offices, into the hands of overweight, thoughtful, unshaved men, or intense, caffeine-fueled, bespeckled -- all of them wear wire-rimmed glasses -- women whose professional responsibility it is to find fault. My life: Previously round trip; currently one way. I am no longer worth the postage.

Weight. The pages above lie heavily upon me, and my own pages add to the weight on those below. The Maybe Bin grows daily, as if alive. A good sign, some say. To me it is just more competition, more dogs fighting for the same scrap.

The man I assume is the editor says to another that the Maybe Bin must be emptied by day's end, that the final selection must be made. A shared restlessness passes through the pile.

Coffee brewing. Pages flipping. Grunts of disapproval. Swishes into the recycling barrel or the crackle of pages being hastily stuffed into return envelopes. The weight above lessens. Hope.

I am picked up. Cracked blue irises expand and contract suspiciously. Prejudice?

"Hello! Hello!"

He can't hear me. He's too busy making quick judgments. He's forgotten me. I've been here four months now. When he first read me he smiled, nodded, and occasionally scrunched his forehead with a confused look. He circled me down there at the bottom of page two and put a question mark. Marginalia ravings. Then he wrote "Nice" in the margin next to the line, "A match stick, half burned, once used to light," and, my vanity admits it, it felt good. When he finished, he fanned me at his assistant and said, "It's okay, but I don't know if it will fit this issue's theme. Put it in the Maybe Bin."

Now the soft look of recognition. His four month old dried coffee stain on page three conjures memory. Connections. Associations. The squint becomes a gape. A flash of teeth like pearls, the great compliment, a half-inspired victory. The pen appears. Lines are drawn in the shape of tailed fish hooks. Distraction?

"Hmm," he hmms to himself. This worries me. I am convinced it is a fatal hmm. He puts me aside, gently, next to his phone. Purgatory.

"This one is from that guy in upstate New York," he says to his young assistant. He taps me with his index finger. Familiarity? I wonder if he's a practitioner of cronyism. Worse: Cynicism. A hookshot into the gaping mouth of the recycling bin.

Fingers cradle me again. There is a passage on page seven that compares the anticipation of potential love making felt by the main character to the dread felt by Christians in the holding cells of the Roman Coliseum. Waves of fear.

Sunlight creeps across the room, a phantom of hope. Doors. Footsteps. More brewing coffee. Heavy footsteps. The groan of chairs burdened by weight. Office chatter. Chinese takeout, the last supper.

"Decision time," says the editor to his assistant. "Decision time."

It is down to me and another piece on the opposite end of the desk. We face each other like foes on a battlefield.

His assistant sits beside him and picks me up. Cursory glance. The first paragraph test. She drops me and picks up my competition, her head moving in circles to the rhythm of the words. She bounces the manuscript in her left hand, picks me up with her right hand, and motions her arm like a seesaw, as if we were children going up and down, comparing our weight. "Use it," she says to the editor, dropping me beside the phone in front of him. "This guy," she says, and tosses the other story into the recycling bin with a swoosh.

From the hands of one into the hands of many. Things are going to change, I know it.

Stealing Home

My father gave my mother a monthly allowance of about \$400.00. She was expected to buy groceries, fill the car with gas, and give me lunch money for school; there was always plenty left over for her to buy *Cosmopolitan* magazine, or donate money to the collection at church every week. She kept the roll of \$20 bills stuffed in a gold satin clutch wallet hidden underneath her panties in her top drawer. She thought that was the one place I would never look -- she thought wrong. I'd peel off at least one bill a week to buy baseball cards from Alan, the old Italian guy who owned the convenience store around the corner from my house. Alan loved baseball. He was always listening to games on the radio; and he always let me sit and listen with him while I drank root beer.

The year was 1977: I was eight years old. Fred Lynn was the American League's MVP.

We'd moved to Miami from Salem, Massachusetts a year before, and I missed going to Fenway Park with my father. Even though we got to attend Spring Training in April, Florida didn't have a baseball team, and I missed going to a *real* park, the smell of Fenway Franks, popcorn, peanuts and Cracker Jack, all the things the song promises. Even the scratchy organ music. It was the year Lynn, Yazstremski, and Rice stood in the outfield, Fisk squatted behind the plate, and Eckersley stretched on the mound. The Red Sox on the downswing from a botched series the year before. We'd moved just weeks before the series began.

I knew the slippery texture of Topps wax wrapper, the stale taste of the cardboard bubble gum, the anticipation of shuffling the cards, looking for a

rookie, or a team picture. I had the entire set of cards neatly arranged in numerical order in shoeboxes on my closet shelf.

Cards weren't all I bought. I branched out and paid for ice cream and candy for the neighborhood kids: Snowcones for Tammy; toasted almond for Kenny; Pop Rocks for Alison; even cigarettes for Joey, the black-toothed teenager who, a week after we'd moved in, had stolen my Radio Flyer and painted it blue and then charged me \$1 for a ride in it. After they found out where the money was coming from, they never said please or thank you. Kenny came home with me one night so I could show him where I got the money, and we found my father sitting in a chair in my room. My 1975 American League Champions Red Sox pennant hung above his head. I had a pocketful of new cards to add to the cards that were now strewn on the bed. My empty shoeboxes were on the floor. My father's eyes were moist, his face flushed. He stared at the cards.

"Kenny," he said, "I think it's time you went home." Kenny didn't even look at me. He just nodded at my father and walked out of my room. I heard his quick footsteps scurry down the hall, and after the screen door slammed my father said, "How much for your cards?"

I shrugged. I didn't know what he meant.

He said, "I want to buy your cards from you; you can pay your mother back." His voice was choked. "How much for your cards?" he repeated.

I started crying, but I stared at him defiantly. I said, "I don't know."

He picked up my cards and carelessly stuffed them back into the shoeboxes. I wanted to tell him to be careful, to not bend the corners, to keep them in order, but I remained silent.

After wiping his eyes, he took out his wallet and handed me a fistful of 20s.

"Here," he said. "Mom's over at the Dougherty's. Put these in her wallet before she gets home."

He picked up the boxes and pressed them between his arm and torso and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

I crumpled up the bills in my little fist. And I remembered the cards in my pocket. I stopped crying. I dropped the bills. I pulled the cards out, gently, and arranged them in numerical order. Reggie Jackson, Mike Schmidt, George Brett, and Pete Rose. No Red Sox. I placed them on the shelf in my closet, naked and exposed for anyone to see.

My parent's room was dark. I fumbled through her dresser drawer, looking for the cool satin of her wallet. Before I forced the crumpled bills in to join the others I grabbed a fresh, clean bill from the neatly rolled wad and put it in my pocket. I ran out of the house, down the street to Alan's. Kenny was there with all the kids from the neighborhood sitting on the curb, their bikes all in a row leaning on kickstands. The Yankees vs. the Red Sox crackled on the radio.

Alan leaned against the doorframe. He said, "Look who's back."

Everyone looked blankly at me, as if I were a stranger.

"Come on," I said.

I held the bill up for them to see. They jumped up and cheered just as the announcer screamed, "Another home run for Jim Rice! The Sox take the lead!"

The Afghan

"Dad," Monica called from her bedroom, "have you seen that purple and yellow afghan Rob's grandmother gave us?"

Mark was watching television in the living room. He still wore his dark blue fireman's work uniform. He hit the mute button on the remote control.

"What?" he called back.

"Rob's grandmother's afghan...the purple and yellow one."

Mark clicked off the television and walked into Monica's bedroom. She sat on the floor, Indian-style, surrounded by open boxes dripping with clothes and blankets. She held a pillowcase in one hand and a towel in the other. He saw that her Hope Chest was open, too, and that its contents -- an Italian cookbook, three china settings, a set of pine green towels, silver candle holders, a Teflon cookware set, various beddings -- were strewn on the floor. Mark folded his arms across his chest.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Monica looked up at him. "I'm looking for the afghan." She dropped the items in her hands and peeked into one of the boxes. "The one Rob's grandmother gave us when we got engaged. Do you remember if we gave it back?"

Mark crouched down and picked up a piece of the china, a teacup that rested upside-down on the carpet, and read the bottom: Epicurean.

He put the cup down and looked at Monica. "I burned it."

"You *what*?"

"In the backyard, with all his letters and pictures and stuff. Didn't you notice that it was gone?"

"I figured you gave it back to him when you two did the swap. Christ," she pushed the balls of her hands into her eyes and shook her head, "I didn't tell you to burn the afghan. I can't believe you burned it --"

"I should have burned all this stuff," Mark said, picking up the cookbook and tossing it on the bed. "All this stuff," he repeated.

Monica shook her head and smiled. "It was his grandmother's. She's eighty-six years old."

"So she's eighty-six. She probably forgot all about it. We don't owe them anything." Mark looked at Monica. "You shouldn't be going through this stuff getting yourself all upset."

"Rob called me today at work and asked me if I still had it. He was at his grandmother's the other day and she asked him where it was." She let out a giggle. "Wow, is he going to be pissed."

"What's so funny?"

Monica rocked back and forth and clapped her hands. "I'm just trying to picture Rob explaining to his grandmother what happened to the afghan!"

Mark didn't understand his daughter's reaction. "Rob called you?" Mark scowled. "Rob called you?" he repeated.

Monica nodded. "Today."

"And he said his grandmother wanted the afghan?"

"She has a right to ask for it. She knitted it."

"And gave it to you as a gift."

Monica wiped away a tear and let out another giggle. "She gave it to *us*. We're no longer us, so I guess she wants it, Dad."

"Well that's too bad, 'cause I burned it." He leaned down and took Monica's hand. "The next time he calls you, you hang up on him. Don't let him upset you this way. He has no business calling after all this time asking for a gift back." He kissed the top of her head.

"I'm not upset. But I do have to call and tell him that you burned it by mistake."

"You don't have to tell him anything. Don't call him. You don't have to give him any explanations. You don't owe him a thing. And don't tell your mother about this when she gets home tonight. It might upset her, too."

"I won't see Mom tonight; I'm going out with Mike." She looked up at her father and smiled. "Dad, I'm okay. It's no big deal. It's just an afghan."

"You're upset. You just don't know it."

* * *

Two months earlier, after Rob called off their wedding, Monica had assembled all of Rob's pictures and letters, all the ticket stubs from movies and concerts, all the dried flowers, and asked Mark to throw them into the metal trash can and burn them. She ran back into her room, slammed the door, and Mark heard her cries through the door, cries that reminded him of the sound water makes as it bursts out of a fire hose. He picked up all the remnants of their broken relationship, brought them down to the garage, and

thrown them into the barrel as she'd asked. He'd dragged the barrel into the back yard, positioned it in the center of the leave-burning fire circle, and poured a splash of gasoline on top. When he went back into the house to get matches from the kitchen drawer he could hear his wife at the end of the hall banging on the bedroom door trying to console Monica, saying, "That's right, honey, let it all out." Monica continued to wail and bang about in her room.

Mark was on his way back outside when he saw the afghan draped over the back of the living room sofa. He picked it up, rolled it into a ball, and walked out the back door. Mark went back out to the barrel, threw the afghan on top of the rest of the refuse, and picked up the jug of gasoline. He emptied the entire gallon into the barrel, dowsing everything. A small puddle formed around the base of the barrel. Just as he was about to light the barrel on fire he looked down at the afghan that had lived in his house for over a year and he picked it up. He thought of the times he'd walked into the living room and found Rob and Monica cuddling beneath it. He thought of the times he had wrapped himself in it and fallen asleep. He thought of the bond he'd built up with Rob over the four years he'd dated Monica, the time they'd gone to Maine together for a weekend fishing trip, just the two of them, and the times Rob came by the firehouse with shrimp or lobster so they could eat together and watch Red Sox games.

The afghan was heavy with gasoline and he wrung it out over the barrel, and the gasoline dripped from his wrists to his elbows where it ran off in streams. Over the years, in his experience as a fireman, he'd learned about gasoline's caustic power. Spreading the afghan out on the lawn, he got the garden hose out and sprayed it down. He smelled his hands, deeply inhaled until he became dizzy from the fumes, and he rolled

up the afghan and put it in the garage behind an old dresser he used for tool storage. He went back to the yard and sprayed his hands with the hose. He lit a match, threw it into the puddle of gasoline and stepped back as the barrel blazed to life. He stood watching while it burned for over an hour. The flames left the once-gray barrel charred, sooty.

A week later, Rob came over to the house with a bag full of Monica's belongings -- a camera, videotapes, various clothes they'd borrowed from each other -- and a check for the wedding costs Mark couldn't recover from the caterers and banquet room. In exchange, Mark was giving the engagement ring back to Rob. At her father's request, Monica had gone out shopping with her mother so the two men could conduct their business alone.

Rob rang the doorbell. Mark answered the door and silently cocked his head, motioning for Rob to enter. They walked into the kitchen. Rob was a full head taller than Mark, but Mark was stockier and outweighed Rob by forty pounds. They stood looking at each other without saying a word.

"Hi, Mark," Rob said, breaking the silence. He was holding a bulging bag in one hand and scratching his neck with the other. "This is a bit awkward, isn't it?"

"Not really," Mark said. "You got the check?"

"Yeah." Rob handed the bag over to Mark.

Mark hurriedly grabbed the bag, opened it up to inspect its contents, then put it on the floor.

Rob pulled a check out of his wallet and said, "You've got the ring?"

"Don't worry about the ring," Mark said as he plucked the check from Rob's fingers. "You'll get what's yours, Rob." He scrunched his eyes and looked at both sides of the check. He held it under Rob's nose and said, "This is good, right? Your not gonna bounce on me, are you? Or cancel it, maybe?"

"C'mon, Mark, you know me. I'd never hand over a bum check."

"Yeah, I know you." He put the check in his pocket. He picked up a manila folder off the table marked RECEIPTS, and handed it to Rob. "This has all the paperwork from the hall and the band and the limousine. It's all there. I'm not asking for anything that's not due to me." He handed Mark the bag that sat on the table. "And here's all your clothes and tapes and stuff you left over here."

Rob took the bag and put it down on the floor. "I know, Mark."

They stood silently facing each other for a few moments. "I thought I knew you," Mark finally said. "I thought I knew you, and then you pull this shit."

"Mark, don't do this --"

"Do? Do? Do what?" Mark's shoulders rose and fell. "What am I doing? You're the one who did this, Rob. What's the matter, my family's not good enough for you or something?"

"Mark, you know it has nothing to do with good-enough,"

"No, Rob, I don't know. I don't know anything. All I know is that a month ago I was calling you 'son.'" Mark was pacing in circles. "You know, Rob, I never thought you had much of a sac, I always thought you were kinda soft with your painting and your poetry, but you sure proved me wrong. This one took balls, kid. *Balls.*" He turned to the kitchen cabinet over the stove and pulled out a small box. "Here," he said. "Here's the

ring." He handed it to Rob. "Take a look at it, go ahead. We didn't do anything to it. We didn't change the stone or anything."

"Insulting me is not going to make this any easier." Rob put the box in his pocket. "I trust you."

Mark gave a half-laugh. "Insulting *you*? You know what an insult is, Rob? You coming to me and asking if you can marry my daughter, I give you my blessing, welcome you into my family with open fucking arms, call you son, we go shopping for that ring together, I help you pick it out, even offer to help you pay for it 'cause I know you're strapped. Don't interrupt me, I know you paid. Let me finish: Then we spend *six months* planning this wedding, from the caterer to the wedding dress to the invitations to getting flaming coffee for the desserts and a swan ice sculpture for the hall. I spent my time -- something you can't ever pay me back -- my time, meeting with bands, photographers, videographers, tuxedo renters, looking over banquet rooms, and at the last minute you change your mind."

"You think it was easy for me? You think I didn't think about it for a long time? Lose sleep? You think I stopped loving Monica, or you and Renee?" He shoved his hands in his pockets.

Mark looked at Rob standing before him stooped and embarrassed, and he felt a sudden pang of shame for laying into him the way he was, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Rob shifted his weight and leaned his hand on the table. Mark noticed that he'd gotten a haircut, and that he was freshly shaven, and he imagined him getting ready to come over nervously applying shaving cream and combing his hair, and it irritated Mark that Rob was already treating him with a detached formality.

"You're not a kid. You're twenty-five years old. How do you change your mind about something like this? " He paused and looked hard at the familiar pained face before him. This guy was supposed to be my son, he thought. He was supposed to spend his life with my only child, my daughter. They were going to give me grandchildren. I loved him. He thought of the times they'd camped together, the times they'd fixed Monica's car, and the gifts exchanged at birthdays and holidays. "I don't know what to think, Rob."

"I just wasn't ready for marriage. I thought I was, then I wasn't." He shrugged.

Mark snapped his fingers. "Just like that, huh?" He took a step forward and stood toe-to-toe with Rob. "You don't know what you gave up, kid. You were getting a beautiful girl who loved you, a family who would've done anything for you because we loved you too. We were going to give you the down payment for a house, a twenty thousand dollar wedding. I don't know what else you could ask for. The way you made her cry...you're lucky I've calmed down. If you had come a couple of weeks ago I would've gotten the check from you, then beaten your skull in with a crowbar."

Rob took a step back and pressed against the wall, his body wedged between the kitchen table and the wall phone. "You don't know how sorry I am, Mark. I never wanted to hurt anybody...least of all Monica. I still care about all of you, you know."

Mark took two steps back and said, "Tell you what, then, Rob. Show me how much you care and leave us alone. You don't call here, you don't write, you don't come over. You see us in the mall and you turn the other way. Let us get on with our lives. If you change your mind and want to get back together that's tough shit. You had your chance and blew it. You get over it, and let us. You understand me?"

Rob looked down at the floor and nodded.

"This is the only time I'm telling you. Next time we're not going to talk. I'm a nice guy, you know that, but fuck with me or my family and I'll bury you. Got me?"

"Just because you loved me doesn't mean you have to hate me."

"Yes it does, Rob. Don't ever call her again. You hear me?"

"Loud and clear." Rob looked up at Mark and said, "I'm sorry." He held out his hand to shake.

Mark took his hand, gave it a firm shake and said, "Now get out."

Rob picked up his bag and walked out the door.

* * *

Mark cut his truck's engine and lights and looked into the cafe. A pink neon OPEN sign hung in the window. The lights in the cafe were on and Mark could see Rob dressed in his white waiter's shirt, hunched over, wiping the tables with a white cloth. A few customers sat in booths; the stools at the counter were all empty. Rob was wearing the Red Sox baseball cap he'd bought at Fenway Park last summer when he and Mark had attended the game together. Mark turned around in his seat and looked out the back window of the truck at the afghan balled up between a toolbox and a gasoline canister in the corner of the flatbed. The afghan was dirty and discolored from the gasoline, the edges slightly frayed. The gasoline caused the fraying, he thought. He swung open the truck door and got out, his feet hitting the pavement with a clap.

He walked around to the back of the truck and picked up the afghan; it felt coarse and rough in his hands, the wool having dried and splintered from its time in the garage. Dust balls and cobwebs dangled from it. He knew that he had to give it back to truly sever all connections. Whenever he and his wife argued she forced Mark to talk things out until they'd reach what she called "closure." Closure with Rob is necessary, he thought. He'd held on to the afghan long enough, and if Rob's grandmother wanted it back, who was he to stand in the way? Monica was out on a date with another guy, for christsake, he thought. What do I need with this ratty thing? He remembered when Monica had first brought the afghan home. She'd wrapped herself up in it like a cape, spun around in the center of the living room to display its purple and yellow checkerboard design, and said, "It's so soft." And it was. Mark had spent many nights on the couch wrapped in its softness. When it got dirty he'd hand-washed it in the sink and had hung it out on the line to dry in the sun.

He looked up into the cafe; Rob was still wiping down tables. A bearded man with a baseball cap tapped against his mug and Rob smiled and nodded. He dropped his cloth and went over to the coffee urn. He brought a pot of coffee over to the man and filled his mug. They exchanged words and both Rob and the man smiled, as if they knew each other well. That man has no right sharing a familiar laugh with you, he thought.

He tossed the afghan into the back of the truck and walked up the cafe stairs. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and opened the door. A dangling bell announced his entrance.

Rob looked up from the table he was cleaning and froze. They stared at each other for a moment. Rob straightened up and dropped his cloth on the table.

"What say, Mark?" He said.

"I want to talk to you," Mark said. He hooked his thumb up by his ear as if he were hitchhiking. He said, "Outside."

"Why outside?" Rob looked like he had the day they'd done the exchange: nervous and embarrassed. He looked at the bearded man and tried to smile.

The look made Mark say, "because I have something to give you," a little louder than he wanted.

"Joey," Rob called out.

"Yeah?" a voice from the back room called back.

"I'm taking five," he said, untying his apron and placing it on a stool. "Be right out front."

"Okay."

Mark pushed open the door and walked out. Rob caught the door just before it slammed shut and stood a few feet from Mark on the cement landing.

"Where's the fire, Chief?" Rob asked. It was a greeting familiar to Mark, as Rob used to say it to him every time he saw Mark in his uniform. Mark had forgotten he was wearing his uniform, and for a moment he almost forgot why he'd come. For a moment he felt like embracing Rob, and he had to stifle a smile.

"Don't 'Chief' me, Rob. You lost that privilege when you ditched Monica."

"Okay, then, Mark. Are you here to give me my grandmother's afghan?"

"No." Mark stepped forward and pointed his finger in Rob's face. "I'm here to give you the same advice I gave you two months ago, but this time I mean it."

"So you're not going to give me my afghan back? What are you holding it hostage like the ring?"

"There is no afghan. We buried that two months ago."

"We buried it?"

"I gave it back to you that day you came over the house."

"I don't think so --"

"I don't care what you think, 'cause I know I gave it to you. That's not why I'm here anyway. I'm here to tell you for the last time that if you ever call Monica again I'll kill you. I will drive to your house, walk up your stairs, and blow your head off. She was just getting over you and you had to call today and make her upset. Do you know how she cried?"

"I didn't want to upset anybody. Tell Monica I'm sorry. But it took my grandmother almost a year to knit the thing. She asked me if I still had it. I'd forgotten about it since it was at your house. But when I looked around my house for it I couldn't find it anywhere. I only called Monica to see if you still had it. I can't believe you're threatening me over this."

"No threats...I'm promising." Mark walked over and stuck his index finger into Rob's chest. "How many times are you going to hurt her? Let her forget about you. Let us all forget about you." Mark paused and pushed his finger deep into Rob's chest. "Leave her alone. It's been two months. You call her again and *I'll* marry you. You know what that means?"

Rob shook his head.

"It means I'll have no problem spending the rest of my life in jail for killing you."
He poked his finger hard into Rob's chest. Rob let out a grunt. "You understand me?"

"I didn't call Monica to mess with her head, Mark."

"I don't care why you called her; I'm just telling you not to call her again. You are messing with our heads. Understand?"

"Yeah, I understand."

Mark put his finger in front of Rob's eye and said, "Don't make me come back here." He backed away, keeping his eye on Rob who was rubbing his chest. "We understand each other, right?"

Rob paused, then said, "So you don't have the afghan?"

"You want me to kill you now, don't you?" He walked to his truck and grabbed the door handle.

Rob called, "I just want the afghan, and I don't know where it is."

Mark looked up at Rob. He was still standing on the landing rubbing his chest, looking down at him.

"That's your problem, son. Don't make it ours. And by the way," he said as he opened the truck door, "if you tell anybody about this and I have to go to court, we'll walk in together, we'll walk out together, and then I'll walk back in alone after I beat you to death in the parking lot." He got in the truck, turned the ignition, put it in gear, and drove away. As he pulled out of the parking lot Mark looked in the rearview mirror and saw Rob walking back into the cafe.

Mark saw the Shell sign and put on his directional. He pulled up to the pumps and turned off his truck. As he filled his tank he remembered the gas canister was empty,

so he filled it to the top with high-test. He paid and got back into his truck and sped toward home.

When he pulled into his driveway he noticed that all the lights in the house were off. Good, they're both asleep, he thought. Then he remembered that Monica wasn't even home: she was out on a date. He shivered. Slowly, he opened the garage. He pulled out the charred barrel and dragged it into the back yard. He positioned it in the center of the fire circle -- in the exact spot he'd positioned it two months before -- and walked back to the truck to get the afghan and gas. After he stuffed the afghan and poured the gas into the barrel, he crept into the house to get a book of matches. He fumbled in the kitchen drawer, trying not to make a sound. Where did she put them? he thought. She was always hiding things.

Mark paused and strained to hear the soft regular breathing of his wife down the hall. All he could hear was the wind rustling the leaves outside. Looking through the window, he could see the colors of his back yard softened by the moonlight, the bright green carpet of grass now a sooty gray. The barrel slumped alone in the center of his fire circle. He took a step toward the hall, put his hand to his ear -- like the hard-of-hearing always do in the movies, he thought -- and tried to hear the sound of her sleeping. He needed the comfort of that sound, knowing that he wasn't alone. And at the same time he didn't want to hear it, because that meant she'd slipped beyond the concerns he was wrestling with. He listened down that empty silent hall, and he stood like that for many minutes, hoping she'd stir or shift the covers, and then maybe he'd go in and ask her to stop him from burning the afghan. And then he hoped Monica would pull up in the driveway, so he listened to the sounds outside. In the distance he could faintly hear the

familiar sound of a fire truck's siren rushing to some emergency, and he wondered if there was a fire somewhere and if he would get called in to help put it out.

Evolution

When I was seven I asked my mother, "Why does dad call me his little field goal kicker?" She said, "When I was pregnant with you, your father was making love to me and you kicked him." I said, "I don't remember." She said, "He does." I said, "What's making love mean?" She said, "Some day you'll find out."

"Some day you'll find out what it means to work hard for your money only to watch someone piss it away." That's what my father said as he spanked me after he found out I dumped my new chemistry set into the sewer. I had been playing chemist in my driveway when I took out a fresh beaker and mixed all the chemicals to see what would happen. The solution changed colors, going from ink blue to dusk purple to black each time I added a new liquid. I used the red plastic eyedropper to stir it up and when I pulled it out the end had melted. A few drops fell to the asphalt and smoke began to rise. I covered my nose and mouth, afraid to inhale. My mother was pregnant at the time with my younger brother, and all I could imagine was her walking over the spilled chemicals and inhaling the fumes, infecting her fetus, causing a deformity or miscarriage. I scrubbed the whole driveway with Palmolive. I put the chemistry set back in the box and ran down the street to the nearest sewer grate. I poured each chemical into the sewer one by one, then smashed the tubes and beakers against the grate, the shards mixing with the tainted water. I was so scared my hands were shaking.

My hands were shaking from the sugar rush. I'd drunk a whole six pack of Sprite from the case my father hid under the stairs in the cellar. I crushed the empty cans and buried them under some ashes in the bin behind the furnace.

Behind the furnace was a case of beer. Derek hoisted it on his shoulder and headed for the back door. I was in the kitchen drinking milk out of a carton. It was the third time in a month we'd robbed this house. Mike came out of the bedroom with his hands behind his back and said, "Look what I found." He produced a sandwich bag stuffed with grass and a large manilla envelope. I took one more swig of milk, dropped the carton on the floor, picked up a red, white, and blue campaign sign, and dashed for the door with Mike. Derek was looking around the corner of the house to make sure no cars were coming. We ran to the woods at the end of the street, climbed up into our tree fort, cracked open three beers, toasted our successful mission. I propped the sign in the corner on an old milk crate. Mike said, "Can you believe that guy's running for Mayor?" He shook the envelope until pictures of the guy whose house we'd just robbed littered the floor. Men and woman -- whole groups of them -- performing acts you only heard about from older brothers and old men behind the supermarket. One of the pictures was of Mrs. O'Brien, my first grade teacher. When I was six I had had a crush on her. I rolled her picture into a tight tube and slipped it into my empty beer can. All I could think was, pictures trap you.

Pictures trap you where you once were and act as evidence by showing what you've evolved into from a fixed point in time. That's why I bought a camera -- so I could be on

the safe side of the lens. On winter days Craig and I used to break into the icehouse near Crystal Lake Cemetery and check out the corpses waiting to be buried in the spring when the ground thawed. The bodies were stiff, ivory blue, naked, and cold, but you couldn't smell them; all you could smell was the stinging freshness of the cold. Craig stood next to a stack of bodies and I took the shot. Nobody's going to see where I've been, and nobody's going to gauge what I've evolved from.

I've evolved from a man in a boy's body into a boy in a man's body.

A man's body replaces itself every seven years. Old cells die and give birth to new. At fourteen I grew into my third body. How is it that the new body has the memories of the old? The scar I got at three when I chased a butterfly and fell off my father's loading dock, halfway through my first body, remains on my thigh. Wouldn't a new body recognize imperfections and correct them? If not, why the endless rebirth? I wondered if by the power of suggestion I could will my cells to give me bigger hands, smoother skin, smaller ears, a straighter nose, broader shoulders, longer legs, something, anything to correct my cells' perfect recollection of imperfection. Something to justify my genetic injustice.

"Justice will be served," said the football coach, "when we catch the little vandals who did this." According to the newspaper article, someone didn't like that the city had decided to cut down all the trees behind the 7-11 to pave a parking lot for the athletic field. Someone -- and it must have been a group of someones because those cement

sewer pipes are too heavy to be lifted by an individual -- systematically dropped all the pipes on top of each other, cracking them into uselessness. Someone also took all the tires used during football practice, stacked them up on the goal post and lit them on fire, sending great black clouds into the air. That same someone -- or someones, it is suspected -- also found a way to bend the goal post to the ground, like a divining rod pointing to a hidden reservoir, after the firemen's hoses had extinguished the flames. The headline read: "What goes up must come down."

"Come down from there," my mother said. "This instant." I was on the roof stargazing and by the position of the moon I knew it was past my bedtime, but I was waiting for the moon to disappear so I could see the stars more clearly. The moon casts too much light pollution and is the astronomer's greatest enemy, next to mothers who won't let their sons be astronomers because there's school in the morning.

In the morning Michelle and I get dressed, sneak out of my room and out the back door. A few stars are still visible in the bluing sky and the moon sits opposite the sun, vying for space. She tells me to pull over and park. I ask her which house is hers and she says it's around the corner. I hand her the rose I bought her the night before from the street vendor in Copley Square. She slips it inside her coat, pecks me on the lips, and runs around the corner. When I try to call her that night I find out she's given me a fake number. When I drive around her neighborhood I pass each house slowly, wondering which walls contain her, seeing if anyone's peeking out her front door at me.

If anyone's peeking out her front door at me, I can't see her, and this damn pizza's burning my hands. Kids always do this, order a pizza and disappear. Or else they send it to the house of some kid they're torturing that week, along with four other pizzas, five taxis, \$90 worth of Chinese, and an ambulance. I sense the giggles laughing at me behind my back; I feel the eyes from a neighboring house watching me. I ring the bell and wait. I knock on the door and wait. Silence. I toss the pizza like a frisbee across the yard and the door opens. A middle-aged man wearing overalls says, "Sorry, I was in the bathroom."

In the bathroom; behind the cemetery; in the woods; on the ladder of the water tower; on the roof of the church; in the cars of the salvage yard; between the rocks at the beach; under the bridge by the train tracks; in the drainage pipe near the sub shop; on the island in the middle of Devil's Dishful pond; behind closed eyes -- these are the places you go to be you.

You. You can never look me in the eye when we talk. If I were a woman I'd think you were checking out my chest, but I'm not and you're not. Flies can see you coming at them from any direction except directly above. What direction are you coming from?

What direction are you coming from? If you don't know yet, some day you'll find out. When we circled each other seeing who would throw the first punch, swearing, my hands were shaking. Whole systems of ice tunnels beneath the wet snow in my yard, and when it was time to come in I'd warm myself behind the furnace. Not a single photograph

exists of me after the age of fourteen. If I disappeared today those old pictures would trap me at that age. Darwinists still can't account for the missing link, so I still wonder what cast molded me and what I've evolved from. A man's body betrays years of punishment. If we each lived life alone would we still grow, or is it changing conditions and people that molds us? Eva never knew I loved her. If I'd had the courage to speak, we'd have slipped into the woods where I would have served her fresh fried roots every morning. The front door closed for me a long time ago, but I still sneak in the back and watch the slideshow from the shadows. Sometimes I hold my breath in the bathroom as you pass by. One day at recess, when I was eleven years old, Rosemary and I snuck into a small patch of trees and bushes behind the rectory garage. There, behind a camouflage of rhododendrons and maple leaves, I found out what it was to make love.

Resolutions

Snow had been falling steadily for a few hours when I pulled in front of Mitch's house. Flakes light as cotton and large as postage stamps spiraled to the ground. Cars of all makes and with various cushions of fresh snow were parked up and down the street. My defroster was broken and through the glistening windshield I could see refracted silhouettes swaying behind curtained windows. Father Time, actually a one-eyed snowman dressed as Father Time, stood at attention beneath a maple tree in the front yard, a long gray beard dripping from the head, a large scythe at its side. I was not looking forward to this party, this gig.

I parked my car next to a hulking snow bank at the end of the street, a good two blocks away. I grabbed my guitar case out of the back seat, slung it over my shoulder, and walked to Mitch's house unsteadily, ice and snow crunching like cracked knuckles beneath my slippery scuffed shoes. The voices grew louder and louder, a drunken cacophony echoing down the street. From a distance I could see that the banistered porch, wrapped around the house like a snug belt, was replete with dozens of guests arranged like animated notes on a stave, extending drinks, waving cigarettes, engaging in steamy-breathed conversation. Couples leaned into each other; some kissed and fondled. As I approached the house I heard cries of "Newcomer!," "Virgin!," "Fresh meat!," and a barrage of snowballs hurled my way. One brushed my right arm; another whisked so close to my ear I heard the whoosh as it passed; one hit me dead in the chest with a sharp splat. I shielded myself with my guitar and stormed the porch.

A woman I'd drunkenly kissed at last year's party - a tall permed blonde with raccoon eye makeup - was sitting in the porch swing with a short, pug-nosed brunette. It seemed to me that gaudy women were always with plain Janes. You'd think that they'd find similarly obvious women so they could move in vain, insecure packs, but maybe the vain and insecure enjoyed contrast more than competition. All I know is this woman was wearing heavier and brighter red lipstick than she was last year when we'd ducked into an upstairs bedroom after the midnight jam to kiss in the New Year. Afterwards, she'd told me her name - Kathy Brown - which was my mother's maiden name. Talk about creepy. I'd flushed her phone number the next morning. She saw me and got up. She leaned on the armrest of the porch swing, walked unsteadily in my direction.

"Ron White," she said loudly, her finger extended like a swaying baton.

I gulped. "Oh shit," I said.

"Oh shit is right." She rolled her eyes and momentarily lost her balance, took one step back, two forward. "You are a sonofabitch," she said as if that said it all. With that she walked into the house, her friend, eyeing me dispassionately, following dutifully behind. Some people laughed after she closed the door. Some stumpy guy gave me a thumbs up. A woman in a long dress, black and shiny as a Stratocaster with hair to match, flared her eyes and smiled at me. Everyone went back to conversations and drinks.

The drummer from our band, Nick, was sitting on the banister talking to a girl who looked like she was still in high school. He was tossing a tight snowball from hand to hand. Nick went to Miami University and was home for Christmas break like the rest of us.

"Happy New Year," he said. "What's up with that, amigo? She had a serious hairfarm. The eighties are over."

I shrugged. "We hooked up and I didn't call. She has my mother's maiden name. You know, the Oedipal thing."

"Sounds tragic," the girl said.

"You guys are speaking Greek," said Nick.

"Let's stop this punishment." I said.

Nick said, "Ready to jam or what?"

I tapped my guitar case and nodded. "How's Miami?" I said.

"Play percussion on South Beach every morning before classes. Nice ching and a tan. Outta there this semester. Got a programming job lined up in Silicon Valley. You?"

"A few gigs. Wedding bands. Sit in with some jazz guys a couple of times a month. Might produce a couple of locals. The usual." I held up my guitar. "Midnight?"

He nodded and then said to the girl, "Ron White. Remember that name, cause he's gonna be a star. This guy," he said, "is the only legit musician in the band. Best guitarist around. Goes to Berklee. Knows theory and shit." He threw the snowball at someone walking toward the house and then lit the girl's cigarette. "See you inside, Ron."

I wanted to tell Nick that I was giving up performing -- that my studies had made me realize I was all theory, no passion, that I'd come to accept my limitations as a composer and player, that my solid, accurate, perfectly timed, brilliant on a technical level technique sounded robotic and surgically sterile as techno - but what was the point? I could play circles around everyone Nick knew but that wasn't enough for me. I could

jump cut from jazz to rock to blues to Cajun to Japanese noisecore to ambient chamber with the fluidity of water molding to rocks in a stream, but I couldn't feel the direction of my flow. My teacher, a technically brilliant guitarist in his own right who knew something about passionless playing, told me a few days before Christmas break that I lacked the necessary madness for genius and originality.

We'd been sitting in his office discussing my final project, an original composition I'd been working on for two years. In order to graduate I had to give an open house performance at the school auditorium. My teacher had played lead guitar on some landmark sixties rock albums and had been doing studio work and teaching gigs ever since. He still wore sunglasses indoors and pulled his salt and pepper hair back into a frizzy ponytail. He'd given me a cup of coffee and asked me to strum a few lines from my composition. "Very precise. Solid." Then he'd stopped me and said, "Stop stop stop. I can't listen anymore. You're a player piano, too precious, derivative and pretentious. Too slick. You're unable to do what Miles Davis used to tell the members of his groups: learn everything, make it a part of your DNA, then forget it all. You remember everything! Can I be honest? You need a few deaths in the family. You need to lose an eye. Barring any accidents, with your attention to detail and accuracy, go to accounting school. Teach chopsticks to schoolchildren on the weekends in your living room. Write film scores for Hollywood movies. Buy a tuxedo, move to Vegas, and take up with Wayne Newton's house band. If you're particularly masochistic, buy a music store and sell instruments to people who possess what you never will. I'm telling you this as a professional courtesy. Get the hell out of my office before I spit on you. Have a nice life." Had I disagreed with a single word I'd have impaled him with his metronome, but

he was merely stating what I'd intuitively known all along - that I was a trained monkey at best. No. A trained monkey at least still had its animal instincts; I never missed a note.

I walked into Mitch's house without knocking. It was already clogged with bodies and smoke. I stood on my tiptoes and scanned the room for Kathy but couldn't spot her towering mane anywhere, which was a relief. The last thing I needed was night full of scenes with her.

As was the case the last three years, Mitch's party was an unofficial Peabody High class reunion, a kind of middle-class suburban Gatsby-ish affair. Peabody was no West Egg, though; it was just another city that had boomed as a result of urban sprawl. Given the fact that it was equidistant between the still somewhat rural New Hampshire border and the clamor of Boston, Peabody was the perfect location for housing developments, a mall and a few industrial parks. My former classmates were certainly not as witty or sophisticated as Gatsby's party guests, but they displayed the same aimless inertia that privilege - even slight privilege - brings. I hadn't seen most of these people since the previous year's party. I scanned the room and people danced, smoked, chugged drinks and stuffed food into their mouths. I moved into the dining room. Pete, the band's rhythm guitarist and keyboard player, was sitting at the dining room table with Mitch, cradling a Guinness, nodding about something Mitch was saying. A few people said hi, slapped my back, blew smoke in my face as they passed. Mandy, a girl who'd dumped me senior year because she said she thought I had bad breath, slinked my way through the crowd like a corkscrew, some skulking boyfriend in tow. She brushed against me, raised her eyebrows. "Mark?" she said, pretending to forget my name.

"Right," I said. "How you been, Sandy?"

"Funny guy." She caressed my guitar case. "Still playing with yourself?"

I was bored by this scene already, by Mandy and Nick and drunken phantoms of kissed girls past, by fading tans and future plans, by snide condescension and years-old resentments. Johnny Cash wanted to shoot a man just to watch him die. I wanted to rip Mandy's hoop earrings out of her lobes just to see her cry. It wasn't her specifically. She just cornered me at the wrong moment.

See, here was the problem: My girlfriend, Ellen, had just dumped me a few days before, which I guess made her my ex-girlfriend, and I was not feeling too kindly toward any ex at the moment. I was full of an unearned and misdirected self-pity. Couple that with the little meeting with my professor and I was not in the mood for exchanging barbs with someone who'd labeled me halitotic. Unless Mandy was already drunk, she must have been able to perceive the boredom and rage in my eyes, my slouchy indifference to this scene, this world, this life. She smiled. I yawned in her face, stretched my mouth so wide she could see my tonsils, exaggeratedly exhaled until her hair blew back.

Fanning my hand in front of my mouth, I said, "Pardon me. How's that smell?" She scowled and tugged her boyfriend away. I said, "You best have a big supply of Listerine, buddy." He squinted up his face as he passed me but I knew he was a piece of toast, a marshmallow. He knew Mandy wasn't worth it. I turned around to leave, but as I reached for the doorknob I felt a slap on my back.

Mitch's voice said, "Ron! Where the fuck you going, man? Where the fuck have you been?" He smiled, his eyes glossy, his skin pink. He rubbed my shoulders roughly, squinted into my eyes, and said, "You need a drink!"

"Quite a turnout," I yelled.

"Fuckin'-A. This is the place to be, do you see?"

Since I'd known him, Mitch had concluded random sentences with "do you see?"

It was as if he felt that he or everyone he spoke to was either an idiot or incapable of understanding his simple, declarative statements. Almost against my will I found myself seeing everything that Mitch said with clarity. If anyone were to observe those in Mitch's company, one would notice that heads perpetually nodded, all seeing a great many things.

He grabbed my coat and guitar, and motioned for me to follow him. We made our way through the maze of bodies toward the bar.

"Your coat's all wet," he said as he stopped at a closet and flung it on top of a large pile of dripping shoes, hats and coats.

"Assaulted on arrival. Snowballs."

"Bastards!" He leaned the guitar against the wall. "It'll be safe here. We're all friends, do you see?" He put his arm around my shoulder and led me to the bar. "Still a vodka man?" Before I could answer he grabbed a large bottle of Absolut and poured me a tall glass full, adding a splash of orange juice. "Now that's a screwdriver," he said. He poured himself a tall glass of V.O., added a splash of Coke, and said, "I hope this year will be better than last." We clinked glasses and drank.

I said, "It has to be."

He nodded absently and said, "What that mean?"

We stood awkwardly silent for a moment; I rocked from heel to toe, heel to toe; Mitch rubbed his chin.

"Well," he declared, "this is getting fucking depressing." He tilted his head back and let out an uproarious laugh, his body shaking with mirthful self-satisfaction. His Adam's Apple bobbed and his neck veins swelled as he choked on his own loud cackle. Like his speech, his laugh was infectious, and I found myself chuckling along with him, though with less enthusiasm.

"Ha! Yes!" he choked, wiping tears from his eyes, "I'm glad you're here." He took a sip of his drink and his gaze then shifted from my face to something or someone over my shoulder. I turned to look at what had caught his attention and the woman in the long black silky dress, the woman who'd smiled at me on the porch, was standing in the doorway of the kitchen. "I just met this chick. You gotta meet her." He pulled me by the arm across the room toward the woman. She smiled as we approached.

She waited, arms folded casually across her chest, the ball of her shoulder leaning against the doorframe. She was a sturdy, calm woman in her early twenties whose skin gave the appearance of being extremely tight, as if she were shrink-wrapped. A dime-sized mole surrounded by an uneven pattern of freckles peppered the area just below her neck, a pattern that I imagined covered the exposed regions of her body from years of Cape Cod tennis matches and Lake Tahoe ski vacations. I smiled benignly and imagined that I must have already looked idiotically drunk.

Mitch let go of my arm and uncharacteristically embraced her hungrily, as if for support. I immediately took umbrage. Having just been dumped I harbored a resentment that bordered on loathing toward anyone who was about to commit to a new relationship. Fresh beginnings shouldn't be rubbed in the noses of those going through an ending. She politely returned the embrace with a few waltz-time pats, in the masculine manner a

homophobe might uncomfortably return an affectionate man's hug. Her tentativeness comforted me. I stood there, sipping my bitter drink, waiting to be introduced.

"Ron," Mitch said, letting go of the woman, "this is Debbie. Get this. It's Debbie Rainbow. She's not a prostitute, a hairdresser, a manicurist, an aerobics instructor, a herbalist, or a stripper. She's never been a cheerleader." He paused for a moment and looked at Debbie for confirmation of this no cheerleader business. Her expression remained vacant. He looked back to me and said, "No bullshit."

She reacted as if Mitch had given her a well-rehearsed cue. She extended her hand, took mine, and shook it firmly. "My name is Debbie Rainbow, and that's all there is to it."

I shook back. Mitch sipped his drink nervously, which, again, was uncharacteristic.

Mitch said, "Ron's our guitarist."

Debbie let go of my hand, folded her arms and said, "Tell me about someone who broke your heart."

"Excuse me?" I nearly spilled my screwdriver.

She looked me dead in the eye and without a hint of irony repeated, "Tell me about someone who broke your heart."

Mitch said, "She's always asking stuff like that. Debbie's a writer and is always writing about love. Right Debbie?" Mitch kissed her on the cheek. "I have to go downstairs to set up for the midnight jam, do you see? Ron, give me a hand, eh? Stop badgering the guests, Debbie."

"I'll talk about the weather, Mitchie."

We left her there, smirking at us as we pushed our way through the crowd, Mitch yelling, "I'm gonna puke!" so people would clear a path.

Once downstairs, I couldn't stop thinking about Debbie and her question. What kind of woman asks a complete stranger about broken hearts? Though I had no intention of answering her question, I asked myself whom I'd even tell her about. Ellen? If that was love you can keep it. We had met in a bar where I played weekly in a cover band. The fact that Ellen came to the bar to see us every week should have been a red flag. I was a guy playing in a cover band. She was a woman who liked cover bands. Pathetic meeting pathetic rarely yields success. Mandy? High school doesn't count since you barely know yourself, and if I know one thing about love - it's impossible to love someone if you don't know yourself. And if I stick to that definition, I'd never known love because I'd never known myself. If I had I wouldn't have gone to music school.

"Ron, give me an E," said Mitch. I plucked and he yodeled along.

We'd been playing together since freshman year of high school when we met in band class. For teenagers we were pretty good and all liked to play a wide variety of music. We had a great gimmick. Nominally, we were known as The Chameleons, but in actuality the name of our band depended on who and what album we were playing. We were specialists at perfectly mimicking other bands' sounds, so one week we could be called Nevermind and dress up like Nirvana. The next week we could be Rubber Soul or Mother's Milk or Woodface or London Calling or Blood & Chocolate. Once we were Deep Purple's Greatest Hits. Sometimes we'd perform some obscure album like David Ackles' Subway to the Country or the Bevis Frond's New Riverhead and people would think we were finally playing originals.

Forming a band gave me what all adolescents - what all people - look for: an identity. A new identity. I was no longer just the quiet, longhaired guy in the back corner of English class. I was lead guitarist in a band with popular guys like Pete and Nick and Mitch. Playing guitar came easy to me. I had talent. I could hear a song once and repeat it perfectly on my guitar. My ear had a magnetic tape memory and could transfer what I heard into my fingers with ease. After joining the band people I didn't know said hi to me in the halls. I got invited to parties. Girls talked to me.

Weekly gigs stopped the summer after high school graduation. I went to Berklee because it made sense to hone my talent; Nick went to Miami; Pete, who played rhythm guitar and keyboards, went to California to play for bands in Los Angeles; Mitch began working at his father's local Porsche dealership. We got together every New Year's for an annual jam. Since distance prevented any kind of rehearsal, we just winged it, made up a set list on the spot like the Grateful Dead, and called ourselves The Resolutions.

"Debbie's a strange one, do you see?" said Mitch, plucking an open string, adjusting his amp.

"Different, that's for sure. Where'd you meet her?" I tuned my high E string to perfect pitch. "You got any monitors?"

"The roadcrew's bringing them." He pointed to the walls. "We got E-C-H-O, echo, echo. Man, Berklee's got you all high and mighty, wanting monitors. Don't look at me like that. Be an optimist. No monitor, no monitor problems, do you see?" He went back to tuning. "Unlike you, the rest of us don't need to hear ourselves."

"I don't know," Pete said, "I could use a monitor."

Mitch plucked and popped a Flea bass line and said, "You guys are a couple of prima donnas."

Nick drum rolled and rimshotted.

Pete laid his forearms on his keyboard, filling the room with a wall of noise.

"To answer your question." Mitch put down his bass and picked up his glass, took a sip. "Debbie came in to test drive a 944 in October. I should have known she was full of shit. No one buys a 944 at the beginning of winter. But, you know, she was a hottie and it was slow so I let her drive them as much as she wanted. She came in everyday for a week. I went along for the ride, naturally, do you see?" He emptied his glass, turned off his amp, ran his fingers through his hair. "Come to find out she doesn't want to buy a car. She's writing a story about some woman who drives a Porsche so she's doing research. Research. She tells me this on the second day, but I don't care. I let her come back everyday and I ride around with her, watch her shift, let her grind the gears a little."

"You seeing her?" I said. I fiddled with my guitar, nervously blazed through a few minor scales.

"I don't know," he said. "You might call it that. We hang out, we do shit together, but she's always interrogating me like I'm material for a character. You know what we did last weekend?"

"Went to the library?" said Pete, coming around from behind his keyboards. He leaned against the sofa, stroked his black goatee.

"A poetry reading?" Nick said, fluttering another drum roll and cymbal crash.

"Visited a psych ward?" I offered.

"Not even close." He raised his voice like he was surprised by his own experience. "We went to a mortuary." He paused to gauge our reaction.

All I could muster was "No shit?"

He continued, "She wanted to interview a mortician to see what they did with people's bodies before they were buried. Did you know they drain the body of blood before the wake? She interviewed the guy like she was a cop. She nodded, wrote down notes, asked where they put the blood after it was drained. It was hot." He scratched his face.

We all nodded automatically and I suddenly realized that Mitch's latter comment exposed a side of him I'd never seen before. Being fascinated, aroused, by visiting a mortuary with Debbie brought Mitch into the third dimension. There was something exotic and sinister, human, primal about his reaction.

"Let me guess," said Pete. "They donate it to blood banks?"

"Sell it to school cafeterias?"

"They put it in the sewer. Just dump it down the drain," he said. "I got a Brita the next day."

Though we'd been friends for years, I'd always considered Mitch about as deep as a puddle in the Sahara. (If he was that shallow, what did that make me if we were close friends?) Regardless, I couldn't fathom how a woman like Debbie could become involved with him. It didn't add up. Compared to Mitch, from what I'd seen, she was complex, sophisticated, a multilevel thinker. Maybe I just assumed these things because I found her attractive and mysterious. That too was one of my problems. I was a sucker for not just pretty women but for average women as well. I'm convinced it's a birth

defect because I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't confuse depth and beauty. Words emanating from a pretty face always sounded wiser, wittier, more convincing no matter how inane or factually false. I wondered if Debbie suffered from this same condition. She must, I told myself. How else could I justify her spending so much time with Mitch? Mitch used to get confused in geometry class when counting the sides of an octagon. I couldn't decide if Mitch's character-worth had increased because of Debbie or if I'd overestimated her complexity. His body was tall and sinewy from years of basketball and weight lifting; he had a steel girder jaw line and coiled black hair; his eyes were a crystal blue and his skin was unblemished and fair; his teeth were Osmond family white and straight. He was the perfect frontman, despite his limited singing range. If he and Debbie mated, they'd have ubermodel offspring.

"I'm heading up to grab a drink," I said. "Anyone?"

Nick held up three fingers and said, "Tres cervezas, amigo."

I grabbed a beer out of the fridge and went looking for Debbie. The guys could wait. I walked from room to room, zigzagging between bodies, saying polite hellos to people I hadn't seen since last year's party. I found her in the living room. She was sitting on the couch talking to Kathy. Seated together, they were a study in contrast, salt and pepper. Music was cranked and voices were loud, so I couldn't hear what she was saying, but Kathy's hands were jabbing around, accentuating points. Her heavily lipsticked mouth twisted from a clown's smile to a bulldog's frown. Debbie sat adjacent, nodding, making mental notes, I was sure, for some wretched, baleful character. Kathy didn't realize she was just another bundle of details, no more or no less fascinating to Debbie than a corpse's blood being poured down the sewer. Debbie paid attention like

Kathy was the only person in the room, in the world. Kathy, I was sure, wasn't used to that kind of focused attention. Across from them a muted television showed Dick Clark and a snowy, clogged Times Square. Dick was wearing earmuffs and gloves and was speaking into a microphone, his ageless face grimacing at the cold. The camera flashed to the crowd. Thousands of people waved to us. Was Debbie getting the dirt on me? I walked over and stood in front of them. They looked up at me, Debbie smiling invitingly, Kathy scowling. Debbie moved her purse to the floor and patted the cushion next to her.

"Ron, c'mere, have a seat."

Even though I was the one who'd come looking for her, I wanted to give the impression I couldn't stay. "I have to get back downstairs," I said. "We're setting up."

"We won't bite. Promise." She crossed her heart. Kathy feigned a smile.

I sat down next to Debbie, cracked my beer. "Cheers."

"Kathy and I were just talking about someone who broke her heart -"

"I'm sorry, Kathy," I said.

"Keep your ego in your pants, Ron," Kathy said dismissively. "You're barely a blip on my radar."

"That's right," I said. "You can't be wounded if you've got no heart." I looked straight ahead at the television so I wouldn't see Kathy's reaction, if she had one. "Is this what you do?" I said to Debbie. "Go around to parties and ask people about stuff that tears them up?"

"Among other things," she said. "I don't limit myself to parties, Ron. I'm always asking people things about themselves. I watch people. Have you ever looked in

anyone's windows to observe authentic behavior? There's nothing more intrusive than watching unselfconscious people."

"That," I said, "isn't people watching. That's invasion of privacy. Voyeurism."

Kathy said, "People act so high-sterically when they don't know they're being watched. A lot of butt scratchers."

Debbie ignored Kathy and said, "Like right now. Someone watching us might notice how you're caught up in this conversation, so you're probably unaware of how tightly you're gripping that beer."

I looked down at my hand. My knuckles were white. I loosened my grip, took a sip. "You really a writer or just nosy?" I said. "I bet you're one of those people who just likes to say shocking things to see how people will react. I dated a girl like you once. We were at a party and she said, 'I spontaneously lactate!' just to see how people would react. She mistook shock for humor."

"Freak," said Kathy. "If that's the kind of girls you date I'm lucky you didn't call me." She stood up. "I gotta pee. Talk to you later, Debbie." She wiggled her way out of the room.

"I'm stealing that line," she said pulling a small notepad and pencil out of her purse.

"What line?" "About the spontaneous lactation." She opened the notebook and scribbled quickly.

"For what?"

"I told you. I write."

"Yeah? What do you write?"

“Anything – stories, poems. I’m writing a novel now.”

“About what? Funeral homes?”

“You’d be surprised. Gossip. Overheard conversations. Party confessions.”

“I’ll try to say something witty and brilliant. Something quotable. Some good dirt.”

“I take good lines when I hear them.”

“I bet Kathy had a barrel of zingers.”

“You’d be surprised.” She put her notepad and pencil on her lap and stretched her arm behind me so it rested on the back of the couch, like we were co-conspirators and she was about to let me in on a diabolical secret. “I write about what I don’t understand. Love’s one of those things that doesn’t make sense. It’s like faith in God. What’s that all about?”

This was not the way I understood the world. I didn’t waste my time thinking about things that didn’t make sense. If something didn’t make sense, if I couldn’t understand it, I didn’t think about it. What was the point? Did Debbie Rainbow enjoy confusion? Not me. I was stumped and suspicious. I sat there and looked at her, sipped my beer. She stared at me, not with a look of condescension, but with a mild maternal affection, full of pity and warmth. It made me feel edgy so I looked at Dick Clark again, only he wasn’t there. It was a commercial for Budweiser. I took a sip of mine and toasted the commercial.

She patted my stomach. “Empty calories, tubby. Look at this.” She rubbed her belly like she was a lamp. I expected a genie to pour out of her mouth.

I held my can up and said, “Resolution. No more after midnight.”

“And I’ll stop asking uncomfortable questions.”

I said, “At school we talk about how the Beatles created memorable melodies by opening songs with the chorus or ending songs on diminished sevenths. We trace the connection between Bach’s fugues and Schoenberg’s twelve-tone revolution. We discuss syncopation and the way Brubeck exploded jazz time signatures on *Take Five*. We don’t discuss abstract notions about mysterious leaps of faith or the unfathomable depths of the human heart. As you said, these things don’t make sense. There’s nothing to tell. No one’s ever broken my heart.” I noticed that my hands were talking as quickly as my mouth. Foam dripped down the side of my can.

“And there’s a pot of gold at the end of my rainbow,” she said.

I was flummoxed. “Excuse me?” I licked the side of the can.

She leaned back to survey me in broader scope. “Don’t bullshit me, Ron. You’re twenty-one years old. You’re not unattractive.”

“Thanks.” I began fingering scales on my pants, a nervous habit.

“You’ve known women since puberty, right? You probably knew them before that. You might be one of those guys who hid in women’s clothes racks as a child, trying to catch a glimpse up some skirts. You probably liked going to Tupperware parties with your mother so you could check out her friends. You played spin the bottle, had a crush on your babysitter, sifted through Daddy’s drawer looking for his *Playboy* mags. Admit it.”

“All we had around my house was *Golf Digest*.”

“If this were a story I’d say get on with it. You’re stalling. Tell me about someone who broke your heart.”

“Tell you what, Debbie Rainbow. I’ll tell you stories about some people I know who have broken hearts or who have had their hearts broken. Point someone out in this room. Anyone. I’ve been away for awhile so I’m not up on the latest dirt, but I’ll tell you some high school stories. I know just about everyone here and they’ve all got stories.”

“I’m asking you for your story.” She curled the words around like she was rinsing out her mouth.

“Take what you want for your book from them. I have no stories of my own.” I placed my empty can at my feet.

Debbie surveyed the room. My eyes followed hers. Brian Tully, a hulking ex-football player who last I heard was working as a bouncer on Lansdowne Street in Boston, stood talking to Mona Lambert, an ugly duckling-turned-swan who discovered after high school graduation that she had a body could be used for more than long distance running. Brian’s belly now stuck out farther than his chest, and his hair was already thinning, no doubt the result of too many steroids. Mona wore a cobalt-blue dress, sipped a wine cooler. Not good enough. Debbie moved on to Waldo Mensche. Waldo was a freakish giant, looked like a WWF wrestler, had had a full beard since eighth grade, could fit his whole massive fist in his mouth and fit quarters in each nostril sideways. She kept scanning: Gina McCain, an already frumpy housedress wearer, junior violinist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra; Kevin Carver, a lanky music fiend who interned as a graphic designer at some small record label; Sue Bishop, a girl who stayed home from school sick if she had a zit who’d now bought in to the Goth look. None of

them piqued Debbie's curiosity. Her eyes rested on some guy with scars all over his face, neck and hands, a guy I'd never seen before, a burn victim.

"What's his name?" she said. She picked up her notepad, held the pencil like she was anxious to stab some words onto the page.

"That's...oh shit, what's his name. We sat next to each other in biology class. He used to throw M&Ms in the air, catch them in his mouth."

"Were you friends?" she whispered. "Has he broken some hearts?"

I was sorry I'd even pretended to know him. His story was obviously more tragic than a broken heart. At least I imagined it was. Contrary to what they led you to believe on soap operas and in romance novels, broken hearts didn't leave you scarred inside or out. From what I could broken hearts left you more bitter and wiser. Even if a broken heart *did* leave you with emotional scar tissue, I'd take that over skin grafts any day. Had she chosen anyone else in the room, anyone less distinct, I could have said that I'd been wrong, that I'd only *thought* I knew him, that people changed so much only a few years out of high school and that it was easy to mistake a face. But I couldn't backpedal now, not after sitting a burned guy catching M&Ms next to me in biology class.

"Not close friends, but, you know, we hung out sometimes." I hit myself in the head, pretending to try to rattle his name from my foggy memory. I went through my mental list of obscure composers and players, trying to come up with a believable sounding name – Ornette Coleman? Debbie might have heard of him and besides, no one in the suburbs was named Ornette. Eugene Chadbourne? Cyro Baptista? Jaki Byard? Why did all these obscure guys have esoteric names? Tim Berne? That might have

worked had it not been such an obvious double *entendre*. Alfred Schnittke? Edgar Varese? Harry Partch?

“Bob Zimmerman.” I said. “And he’s a heartbreaker par de excellence.”

“Bob Zimmerman? Isn’t that Bob Dylan’s real name?”

How in the hell did she know that? “You might be right,” I said. “I don’t know. But it’s his name, too. Come to think of it, we called him Jimmy.”

“What’s Jimmy’s story?” She said.

I settled back into the couch, eased my body into the cushion. I looked at Jimmy, or whatever his name was. Even though the party was loud, I lowered my voice. “He got burned when we were in fifth grade. He and his brother were making gas bombs in his driveway and one of them left the gas can right next to his father’s car. Some gas spilled on the driveway, caught on fire, and was heading for the gas can. The car would have exploded if it weren’t for Bob kicking the can out of the way. When he kicked the can, though, the gas splashed all over him just as the flame hit.” I was basing this lie on the time I’d made a bunch of gas bombs in my driveway and my father caught me and made me dump them before I had a chance to light any off.

“Perfect choreography,” she said.

“I met him right after he got burned, when he still had bandages all over his face and hands and legs. It was the summer and he wore this big baggy flannel shirt all the time to hide the bandages. He wore a big baggy shirt every summer after that, still does, as far as I know. He doesn’t like to show his scars. Anyway, he was dead on the operating table for a whole minute and a half when they were working on him.”

“He told you that?” She was jotting this all down. I had her hanging on every word.

Zimmy had left the room by this time. I wanted him to come back and sit with us, help me finish this story.

“See that girl over there? That’s Becky Walker.” It really was Becky Walker. I’d kissed her behind the bushes in front of the Bali Hai Restaurant in eighth grade. “She dated Zimmy in eighth grade, his first girlfriend. Everyone was blown away that Zimmy had a girlfriend, you know, with the burns and all. And everyone thought Becky was just being nice. I mean look at her. She didn’t have trouble getting boyfriends. But I think she really liked Zimmy. He didn’t know how to be a boyfriend, though, you know? He wasn’t used to girls being nice to him and liking him.”

“Too self-conscious.”

“He *was*,” I said letting Debbie fill in the blanks. “He was self-conscious. We’re stating the obvious here, Debbie, but I don’t think he ever got any counseling to deal with his burns.”

“Criminal. Don’t worry. I’ll keep the obvious lines out of my story,” she said.

“It was criminal. She used to cook him hamburgers at her mother’s house after school all the time. I went with him over there once and she made us both burgers.” She never burned the burgers the way I did. She put them on toasted rolls with a slice of onion and ketchup. If I tried to help her in the kitchen she’d shoo me out like we were an adolescent married couple. “Becky was all right. Zimmy didn’t know how to react to her kindness. He probably thought it was charity. So, you know, he acted not abusive, but sort of aloof and neglectful.”

“Did she break up with him?”

“You know what that would have done to her dating stock? Being known as the girl who dumped Jimmy?”

Dick Clark was back on television. The camera jumped from shots of the freezing crowd to Dick and some blonde co-host. Steam poured out of their mouths and noses. Both wore headphones. A clock in the corner of the screen counted down to midnight.

“So he dumped her?” Debbie said. I almost didn’t hear her because I was watching the seconds tick away on the screen. It was 11:16, and almost time to play. The guys downstairs were probably wondering where I was, but I didn’t care.

“I guess he did,” I said. I *had* dumped Becky.

“With no therapy he thought that anyone who came along, anyone without the burn scars, could take Becky away. So he beat her to the punch by cutting her loose first.”

“Is that your expert opinion?” I sat forward and reached for my beer can. I’d forgotten it was empty.

“Motivation. A character needs motivation, Ron. You know an awful lot about Jimmy. Curious you couldn’t remember his name.”

This was one of the most perverse things I’d ever done, sitting on a couch with a strange, beautiful woman, making up transparent lies about a burned guy. The surrounding conversations covered our voices like we were in some enchanted bubble, like the falling snow was covering my car outside.

“I could tell you a lot more about him,” I said. “Like how he once hit his girlfriend with a car.”

“Are you fucking with me? ‘Cause if you are I don’t really care, as long as it’s good. Stories don’t have to be authentic, just worth telling.”

“Why would I make anything up?”

“He hit Becky with a car?” She scribbled something into her notebook.

“Nah. This was a few years later. How could he hit Becky with his car at fourteen? He didn’t have a car or a license.”

“You don’t need a license to drive a car.”

“This is true. What you say is true. But Jimmy wasn’t a lawbreaker.”

“Except for hitting his girlfriend with a car, which is probably a misdemeanor, or a felony, if he killed her.”

“This is true, too, Debbie Rainbow. But no, he didn’t kill her.”

“Just winged her?”

“A tap. A baby tap. Gently. Like this.” I tapped her knee lightly. “See, Jimmy was dating this other girl – Lynne – junior year. They used to go into the woods together with a bottle of vodka and two champagne glasses, light a little fire, and fool around in the leaves.”

“Jimmy was a romantic. I bet she lit the fire. What do you mean by fool around? Did he let Lynne see his scars?”

“How the hell do I know? Yeah, he let her see his scars. I’ll bet he did. But he waited till the fire died down a little. He brought a sleeping bag for them to wrap in. He told me this during biology lab.”

“Quite a lab.”

“This is true, too, Debbie. It was quite a lab,” I said. “Hey, let’s get a drink.” I got up. Debbie got up and put her notebook in her purse, put her pencil behind her ear, and followed me. We went into the kitchen and raided the fridge. She grabbed a bottle of spring water. I got another beer. “I’ll tell you one thing,” I said as I cracked my beer. “The last thing I feel like doing is playing guitar right now. I want to skip the New Year’s show. I want to get out of here right now.”

“You can’t go anywhere until you finish telling me about Jimmy.”

I sat on the kitchen counter, cracked my beer. “Lynne once commented about Jimmy’s best friend’s good looks. Jimmy, being self-conscious, felt threatened, like you said before. He figured Lynne might leave him for anyone better looking. Crazy, but true. This is all true, Debbie. Lynne was probably just making an off-hand remark.”

“No such thing,” said Debbie, leaning against the fridge.

“So Jimmy dumped her flat. He did it nice, though. He waited until Valentine’s day and gave her a rose. He did it at her house, walked right up to her front door, handed her a red rose, kissed her on the cheek, said see ya later.”

“So where’s the car come in? Did she ever get together with his best friend? What was the best friend’s name?”

“I’m getting to all that,” I said. I took a sip of my beer, opened the cabinet behind me to see what was inside. Spices and canned goods. “Jimmy knew as soon as he dumped Lynne that he’d made a mistake. He tried to get her back with more flowers, desperate phone calls. Let’s be honest, Debbie – he stalked her. He followed her around. You know the drill. He followed her around the halls like a dog, left notes on her locker.

He drove by her house to see if his friend's car was parked in her driveway, to see if her bedroom light was on. He called her to see if her line was busy. If she answered he hung up. If the line was busy he'd call his best friend's house to see if *his* line was busy too. His best friend's name was Will. Will Black. One time when Jimmy was driving toward Lynne's house to see if Will Black's yellow Oldsmobile was parked in the driveway he saw her bike riding down the street and he pulled up close to ask her a question. He mistakenly tapped her rear wheel with his bumper and knocked her into the bushes."

"Did she call the cops? Have someone kick his ass?"

"She got up and gave him a look of disgust. She got on her bike, rode away."

"This won't work for a story, Ron. I need to know motivation. I guess I could make that up, though."

"Speaking of motivation," I said looking at my watch, "I should be getting downstairs. Almost time to play." Debbie was up before I was, off, I assumed, to find her next story.

I walked outside into the biting cold. My guitar and coat were still in the house but I didn't care. Father Time had been knocked over and was covered with the snow that was still falling heavily. Empty beer cans littered the porch. I slipped down the stairs unsteadily, skated my way across the walkway to the street.

"Ron!"

I looked back at the house and Debbie was standing on the porch holding both of our coats. I walked back toward the house and when I reached the bottom of the stairs she tossed me my coat. She put hers on and said, "Let's go for a walk."

I put on my coat, buttoned up, and said, "Where?"

Debbie looked up at the sky, the snowflakes landing on her face. “I’m wearing heels, so not too far.” She extended her gloved hand. I reached out and she clasped my hand and gingerly made her way down the three snow-covered steps. Slipping her arm around mine she said, “Let’s go.”

I didn’t care where we were going, really. Acting as Debbie’s support, letting our steps lock into a cadence, sneaking away from the warmth of the party into the cold, snowy night exhilarated me so that destination became a secondary consideration.

Debbie said, “We’ve got it easy, you know.”

“Who?”

“All of us. Every one of the people in that party. Me, you.”

“How so?”

We were walking in the direction of my car.

“Three hundred years ago we’d have all been working on a farm or in a mine. I’m twenty-three. Three hundred years ago I’d have probably already had a litter of kids and be middle-aged. If not, I’d be an old maid. Now, instead, I spend my time reading and writing. You actually *study* guitar playing. They have majors in this stuff. Luxury and leisure. We’re all soft.”

We passed my car but I didn’t point it out. Despite the fact that it was ten years old, had a busted defroster and a serious case of rust, I figured she’d probably use it as an example of my affluence. Now I saw that I’d overestimated Debbie, probably because she looked good in her black dress. She suffered from garden-variety bourgeois guilt, a fairly common condition, I’d noticed, among the college-aged. Or at the least the college-aged people I knew. She was right, of course, about us having it better than

previous generations. But that wasn't what I felt like discussing or contemplating on a dateless New Year's Eve. Despite myself, though, I was drawn in to her pseudo-intellectualism for a moment.

"You know," I said. "There aren't even adults anymore. We all jump from adolescence to mid-life crisis." I had no idea what I was talking about but Debbie's arm tightened on mine, a gesture I interpreted as approving and meditative. The snow kept covering us. I shook my head and blew out a plume of steamy breath. "Nippy."

We walked along, the snow covered streets plowed by our feet. Debbie kept her arm in mine like an index finger wrapped around a teacup's handle. We passed dark sleepy houses, sagging sycamores and sturdy pines guarding their front yards. I thought of the party back at Mitch's house, the guys in the basement wondering where I'd gone, wondering if I was coming back with their beers, wondering when they could start jamming. Thinking of their confusion and anxiousness sent a wave of warmth through my body.

After awhile Debbie said, "You're right." About it being nippy or my half-baked notion about modern existence? "Every one of us in there, myself included, is an overgrown adolescent. Next stop is some self-inflicted angst over turning thirty. Then I'll break down – having 'lived my own life' – get married, have kids, and write books about adolescent heartbreak. It's all so pathetic, but that's where we are."

We kept walking. A few of the houses' driveways were clogged with cars. Parties welcoming in the New Year surged behind insulated walls. Groups of people – people we'd never know – drank, ate, flirted, slept, smoked, watched television to our left

and right. And we walked past them unnoticed as if invisible. Debbie stopped and pulled my arm so I'd halt.

"Here's where we're going," she said. She nodded in the direction of a small nondescript house, a single-story brown ranch set back from the street. The picture window was lit up. The rest of the house was dark. "C'mon." She yanked my arm.

"Who lives here?" I said.

"Who knows? But this is the loneliest house I've seen with a light on and my feet are tired." She let go and ran up the house's walk, hopping over a discarded Christmas tree in her path and nearly falling down on landing. A chill settled on the place where our arms had met. She reached the door and knocked loudly without hesitation.

I stood at the end of the walk and called, "Do you have any idea who lives here?"

She turned and pressed her finger to her lips, shushing me. The door opened and an elderly redhead dressed in a white blouse and blue skirt stood confidently in the window of the storm door. Something struck me as odd about her, but I couldn't see her clearly enough to be sure what. She fumbled for the door and pushed it open and that's when I noticed it: she was wearing sunglasses as big as diving goggles. "Maurice?"

"It's not Maurice," said Debbie.

"Clara?" She reached and touched Debbie's face, ran her fingers through Debbie's hair. "Happy New Year! I didn't think you'd come. Your hair's longer. Christ, it's cold. Where's Maurice?"

"He's right there." Debbie turned and pointed at me. "He's at the end of the walk."

“Maurice? I didn’t even hear the car pull up. Must’ve had the television up too loud. Come in, come in. Maurice, get in here.”

Debbie turned to me and mouthed, “Trust me.” She cocked her head for me to follow her, then she walked into the house. I had no idea what was happening, but I was cold and I *did* trust Debbie for some reason.

When I opened the door and walked in, I was immediately hit with the smell of these violet mints my mother used to eat that smelled and tasted like a cross between grape soda and moth balls. The room blazed with light and heat like a sauna. The television blared with Dick Clark and the Times Square crowd. Debbie had already removed her coat and was heading down the hall. The woman, balancing on an ivory handled cane in one hand and holding Debbie’s coat in the other, tapped her way over to me, hit my shoe with the tip of her cane, leaned forward, and planted a kiss on my right shoulder.

“What, are you wearing lifts?” she said.

Debbie motioned turned around and flapped her arms at me. “Talk” she mouthed. She stood and watched, her arms gesticulating as if she were trying to push air into my lungs to aid my speaking.

“Um, no,” I said.

“I must be shrinking,” she said. “Anyway, give us a kiss, Maurice.”

Debbie smiled. The old woman leaned her mouth toward my shoulder again. I bent forward and pecked her lips with my cheek.

“You shaved,” she said. “Good. It’s about time. Now give us your coat.”

Debbie pushed more air my way so I unbuttoned my coat and handed it to the woman. I draped my coat over Debbie's and the woman tapped her way over to a bare coat stand. She bounced them off her arm and with one hand hung them each on a hook.

"Let me help you," I offered after she was finished.

"Sit down," she said dismissively. "I'm just glad you're here."

Debbie scooted into what I assumed was the bathroom and shut the door.

Both the couch and the recliner were covered in plastic. The couch crackled when I sat on it. The woman tapped over to the chair and sat down, her crackle echoing mine. Her hand fumbled along the surface of the coffee table; she picked up a remote control and muted the television. She put it back down and I noticed that an empty champagne flute stood next to a half-eaten box of ribbon candy on the coffee table. I looked around: A bookshelf crammed with paperbacks. A silver tea set on a tray stood on top of an ornate end table. A small desk sat in the corner with some fanned papers and a glass full of pens. The walls were lined with photos of two boys, probably her grandsons. From birth to puberty – the most recent photo looked like the older was about eleven, the younger about nine – was present and accounted for in every direction. No teeth smiles to missing teeth smiles to crooked teeth smiles surrounded us. I had nothing to lose so I took a shot.

"You've got the new picture of the boys up," I said.

The woman smiled and adjusted her sunglasses. "That's a good one. Tom says he's going to need braces, but I say he's already got a perfect smile. Are they with Mary?"

Tom must have been the older one, the one with dark brown hair and a jack-o-lantern smile. Mary? Why not? “She came through, as always.”

“Mary’s a good egg. Would you be a dear and get the champagne out of the fridge? And grab glasses for you and Clara while you’re at it.”

I heard a toilet flush and a door open. Debbie entered the room and held up a copy of *Time*. “Clara,” I said, “wanna help me in the kitchen?” I stood up and grabbed her hand. “Where the fuck’s the kitchen?” I mouthed. We looked around and walked through a dining room and found the kitchen. I whispered, “What are we doing here, Clara?”

Debbie whispered, “This is better than the party, Maurice.” She giggled, something I hadn’t expected of her. “Let’s get the champagne. Her name is Rita. It’s here on the address label.” She held up the *Time* again. Rita Greene. Debbie opened the fridge and pulled out an uncorked bottle of champagne.

This had to be illegal, I thought. Impersonating relatives and drinking Rita Greene’s champagne had to be a felony, punishable by extended jail time and heavy fines. If nothing else, this was cruel. I thought making up the story about Zimmy was bad. So I said to Debbie, “This is cruel. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“What’s cruel? Keeping Rita company on New Year’s when no one else is here? It’d be cruel to leave. No one at the party will miss us. Well, maybe you, but this is a higher cause than playing guitar, something you weren’t planning on doing anyway, in case you’ve forgotten.” She opened a few cabinets. “Rita,” she called, “where are the champagne glasses?” Then to me she said, “Rita’s about as blind as you or me.”

“The cabinet next to the sink, second shelf,” Rita called back.

“What do you mean she’s not blind? She tapped me with her cane.” It was difficult to keep my voice at a whisper.

“Besides the glasses, have you seen any evidence of her blindness? Nothing’s in Braille, there’s no seeing eye dog, there are books, pictures and magazines everywhere, and she has a word find book in the bathroom with a bunch of words circled.” She opened the cabinet and grabbed two champagne flutes between her fingers. “C’mon.” With champagne and glasses in hand she walked back toward the living room. I could have walked out there and blown the whole thing open – pulled the sunglasses off Rita’s face, grabbed Debbie by the wrist and dragged her back to Mitch’s, or even opted for something less dramatic like silently putting on my coat, walking out the door, and going home. But that would have left me forever guessing, what would have happened had I stayed? Unlike the gig at Mitch’s, which would have been like every other year’s gig, I had to play this one out to its absurd conclusion. I decided to ham it up. When I walked back to the living room, Debbie was already pouring champagne.

“Maurice,” she said, handing me a glass.

“Clara, Rita,” I said, ceremoniously holding the glass up, prepared to toast.

“My children,” said Rita, “you made it just in time.”

Dick Clark was smiling broadly on the television. The clock in the corner of the screen showed it to be 11:59, and ticking down toward midnight. As I watched those seconds tick toward a new year, I swear I felt the earth shift beneath me, and all of us, me, Rita, Debbie and the millions of people in Times Square and the billions across the world were hurtling through space, spinning at a thousand miles an hour toward a brand new orbit and unknown destinies. I picked up the remote control and pegged the volume

full, just as Dick Clark and the millions in Times Square began their twenty-second countdown. Debbie and Rita raised their glasses in perfect harmony like a pair of wings ready for flight. We, all of us, joined in with the countdown, our glasses raised higher and higher as the great ball in Times Square being simulcast into Rita's living room dropped lower and lower. At the stroke of midnight we clinked glasses and each downed our champagne in one gulp.

For the moment forgot myself and everything else in the world, and I screamed, "Happy New Year!"

Debbie kissed Rita on the cheek. Rita reached out, pulled us into an intimate huddle and said, "My children, it doesn't get any better than this."