

A Passive Man

a novel by
Chris Cefalu

en-gage-ment

n.

1. Betrothal.
2. A promise or agreement to be at a particular place at a particular time.
3. An encounter, conflict, or battle.

The blues were the first thing I heard that morning as I opened my eyes and lay groggily blinking and stretching, staring at the Rorschach of cracks on the plaster ceiling of my room. I lay a moment, listening to the familiar phlegmatic vocals of Muddy Waters, whose boasts and laments were clearly audible through the thin walls of our apartment. The words were somewhat muffled but it was not hard to catch the gist of the tale. The stories were all fairly similar, and after several minutes of lying awake, the various songs began to congeal for me into a single, endless three-chord testimonial concerning women, liquor and a litany of existential complaint which always began – much like my own account begins – with five simple words: I woke up this morning.

The music was courtesy of Brian Buford, my roommate and, for all intents and purposes, my best friend in San Francisco. I know that he considered me to be *his* best friend and, as such, I was willing to concede the morning hours to his prized collection of old dead black men. The music didn't really bother me – in fact, it was not hard to see why Brian was so drawn to it. For all its crudity and repetitiveness it bore the unmistakable stamp of authenticity. I don't know whether the men who made those records were, in fact, yearning for fame and fortune like every other artist – most likely they were hoping for *some* degree of recognition and remuneration – but the point is that it *sounds* like they weren't. It sounds like they just opened their mouths and let

it come out naturally, without a thought in the world as to how it would be received.

Brian was deep into his blues phase at that time, obsessed by the mystery and exoticism of the music, and our apartment was piled with LPs bought at garage sales and thrift stores for nickels and dimes. It made no difference to me. Brian is continually fascinated by my inability to have any strong opinions about music one way or the other – for him, this is tantamount to agnosticism in a world where God's face is *everywhere* – but he also appreciates my flexibility, particularly in the morning.

I have always been slow to awaken, and the morning of my last day of bachelorhood I lay a long time, as I do most mornings, feeling my senses gradually sharpen and come into focus. As I waited to come fully to, I occupied myself with the ceiling, searching for the man with the hat. Sometimes he was as plain as day, and sometimes the cracks and holes would not congeal into any specific shape and I would be a frustrated astronomer, unable to make sense of the chaos overhead. I disdain superstition, so I would not say that I consciously considered my ability to locate the man with the hat to be a good or bad "omen," or anything similarly absurd. I will say, though, that I felt better when I was able to locate him before arising, and I mention it only to point out something I've grown more and more certain of in recent days, and that is that we do not *choose* what we believe.

I eventually grunted my bulk upright and sat, looking at myself in the mirrored closet door that afforded a full-length view of the bed. Teena was particularly fond of this

aspect of my room's geography. Many was the time I would be lying on my back, gazing up at the enormous white globes of her bouncing breasts, only to notice that her eyes were rapturously fixed on her own body in the mirror.

Whereas Teena's attitude toward mirrors is typical of your garden variety exhibitionist, mine more resembles that of a hurt and scorned lover. Once it was different, to be sure, but, as I sat that morning, hunched on the edge of the bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I was treated to yet another disappointing reminder of the primary impediment to rehabilitating my own atrophied narcissism muscle: my bloated self. Once again the reflection had let me down and I stared resentfully into it, wondering, for the umpteenth time, why I hadn't removed those ghastly mirrored panels.

Teena claims to like my body, says it's "teddy bear-esque," which I suppose is true. But as someone who has always been overweight, it is no doubt difficult for her to understand the agony of the descent to Teddy from Beauty. For I was once a pretty boy. My French-Canadian ancestors bestowed upon me a particularly dark, brooding, vaguely European attractiveness that, to my great enjoyment, proved irresistible to a wide variety of girls and women, from the townies in New Rochelle where I was raised, to the Berkeley co-eds between whose ripe thighs I nestled for four grateful years.

But it wasn't the deprivation of easy sex which wounded me the most. It was the loss of what I felt to be my true face, my own authentic exterior. Oh, I know the *reasons* behind my demise: poor food choices, lack of exercise, liquor, etc. But some part of me recoils at the unfairness of the sudden,

swift punishment for what is not new behavior. I am the same, but now I am changed. It is not fair, and I would sooner blame the mirrors than my own habits, which I am terrified I will never be able to change and so prefer not to think about.

Teena never knew me when I was still young and beautiful, and I have no friends remaining from those days, so I have no objective verification of what I suspect: that back then I was better *inside* as well – stronger, sharper, less merciful. The added bulk seems to have slowed me down in all ways. I am tired more often now, and I feel softer all around. But God, how confidently I once faced the world! Once I relished the moment of disclosure. Standing, facing each other in some darkened dorm room in Stern Hall, disrobing slowly, shyly, opposite the ubiquitous Anais Nin books. I still recall one black girl – a Poly Sci major – her afro glistening in the light from the muted TV, murmuring "oh, you so *gorgeous*," as her soft, dark hands moved greedily across my lean, tightly muscled whiteness, the television bathing us both in blue. And I smiled because I knew that I *deserved* this, that I was not "getting lucky."

On this particular morning – the morning of July 6th – the man with the hat remained elusive, and finally I got up and padded into the bathroom. Then, out to the living room where I slumped into the big purple chair and gazed out the sliding glass doors, past the fire escape and onto 18th Street. Brian and I lived in the Castro district, the holy land for homosexuals from all across America. The usual parade of preening musclemen, mincing queens, hawk-eyed hustlers and dog-walkers was moving steadily along below. It was

not my intention to land an apartment smack in the middle of "Dicksuck Central" as Brian cheerfully, and without malice, called it. But the city is so crowded and so expensive that when something opens up, a thousand hands grab at it, whatever and wherever it is. No doubt there were droves of twenty-something gay boys who would have coveted our ringside seat at the rainbow revolution. Brian and I were certainly among the least colorful of the building's residents. But one of the other tenants – a struggling (and also straight) graphic artist – happened to be a former classmate of mine, and when the place became available, a good word with the manager was all it took to hustle me into the space before anyone even knew it was vacant. This is how it's done.

Since moving to California I have gradually come to accept this as the paradigm of the future: everything overcrowded, overpriced and overrated. One of my favorite barroom topics is population growth. "Did you know..." I might drawl from my position atop the comfortable, padded barstools at Putzkammer's, ignoring the eye-rolling of Brian, who has heard all my spiels countless times. "Did you know that the U.S. population roughly *doubled* between the 1950s and the 1990s? That means that back in Eisenhower's America, there were literally half the people walking the streets that there are now. *Half.*"

It takes a moment for it to sink in, particularly for San Francisco residents who are accustomed to circling for an hour in search of parking, waiting for another forty minutes in line to be seated, only to be crammed into some table, elbow to elbow with their fellow citizens, everyone yakking into their cell phones and waving impatiently at the

service people, of whom there are never quite enough to go around.

It will be like this for most of us soon enough. California has always been a harbinger of things to come. Whenever I fly back East I am shocked to rediscover the vast tracts of largely unoccupied land across what used to be known, quaintly, as "the Middle West." We are all bunched together on the coasts, the hives growing thicker and thicker as we buzz in circles, seeking space. And we would sooner sting ourselves silly than admit defeat and move to the dreaded "fly-over" states. The city is, however, filled with people who have made the futile and foolish attempt.

"Oh, we *tried*. Trish and I cashed out and bought the most amazing four-bedroom house in Springfield, Missouri. You should have seen it. We felt like goddamn *millionaires*. But we couldn't take it. We moved back two years ago and now we're sharing a three-room flat in the Mission District with some crazy Mexican lady and her sons, I don't even know how many of them there are. But you know, we just couldn't take the *culture* out there."

As I sat, rubbing my unshaven face and staring out the window, Brian appeared from his room, all a-bustle, as is standard for him in the morning hours.

"Hey, Freddy lives!" he shouted at me as he passed, his arms full of some proof sheets. "Coffee's on," he said over his shoulder as he hurried back down the hall. "Better fuel up for the big day. Listen, you need me to do anything?"

I didn't answer because I knew he wouldn't be able to hear me over the music, and I hate conducting conversations with people who won't stay put. Instead, I poured myself a

cup of coffee and returned to the purple chair. I had slept for over nine hours but I didn't feel rested, and the enormity of what was expected of me that Friday seemed more than even Brian's Trojan-strength coffee was likely to adequately prepare me for.

After a moment he returned with some kind of leather shoulder bag in hand. "What'd you say?" he said, as he dug through it, looking for something.

"I didn't say anything. And – Jesus, will you turn that down?" I motioned to the stereo, where Muddy was in the midst of noisily declaiming, "*That's all right baby, that's all right for YOU...*"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." He flipped the volume dial. "So? Anything I can take care of? I'm meeting Jenny for lunch, but after that I'm free."

"And has Jenny the Super-Agent finally used her fabled Barnard accent to negotiate something more than free *hors d'œuvres* at the Tonga Room?"

"Now, Freddy. Just because Jenny didn't want to sleep with you on New Year's Eve is no reason to hold her in such low esteem."

"I think it is, actually."

"Anyway, it's a little premature to say for sure, but it sounds like it's going to work out with Delineate."

I looked at him closely. "Really?"

He stopped his bustling then and smiled shyly. "Yeah, I think so. Jenny thinks so."

There was a pause. "Hell, Brian. Congratulations."

He beamed at me. "Thanks. But there's still plenty of time for it to fall through somehow, so don't congratulate me yet. Now back to you. What do you need from me today?"

"You can meet me at the tux place at three and help me make sure I don't wind up looking like a goddamn waiter."

He raised his eyebrows. "Well, well. Freddy's nervous."

"Ridiculous."

He smiled fondly at me and ran a hand over his bristly blonde head. "Don't worry, Freddy. Your best man will be there. You'll be beautiful. You'll look just like George Clooney."

"Who?"

Brian's mouth opened.

"I'm joking, for crying out loud," I said. "Do you really think I'm that out of touch?"

"I'm still trying to determine exactly how out of touch you are, Freddy," he said, slinging the bag over his shoulder and heading out the door. "I'll let you know when I get it nailed down."

I met Brian about two years ago. I had been living out in the avenues, in the bleak Siberia of the outer Richmond district, surrounded by Asian neighbors who never spoke to me. I was eking out a dismal living writing for trade journals. The average person never has any reason to encounter a trade journal, though they may pick one up while waiting at the vet or the dentist's office, flip through it for a few moments and put it down immediately. If you are not a member of the target audience, reading a trade journal will have the effect of elongating time and causing your wait to seem twice as long as it actually is. It will exacerbate your boredom in a way that you are scarcely aware of, and if you give any thought to the publication you just glanced at, it will only be to wonder vaguely, *who on earth reads these things?*

I can't answer that question for certain. I *can* tell you who writes them, though: English majors. Journalism interns. Unpublished novelists. Budding screenwriters. In short: anyone possessed of a basic facility with the English language, but having not yet landed the *real* gig, whatever that might be. Trade journals are to writing what waiting tables is to acting.

The primary purpose of trade journals is, of course, to sell advertisements, while simulating a legitimate source of news and information. In this sense, they are no different than any daily newspaper, monthly magazine or network television station. So, while I might ostensibly be typing an "in-depth report on radiology," the real purpose of my article

was to cleverly insert numerous "cues" – complimentary references to, for example, Randal Diagnostic's latest Bone Densitometer. If I did not do my job well, RD would pull their ads and the whole reciprocal corporate back scratching routine that constitutes modern media would come crumbling down.

The real difference between trade journals and, say, USA Today, is that the latter is intent on capturing as many readers as possible, whereas X-Ray Hotline and their ilk are not the slightest bit concerned with attracting the attention of the GP (that's "general public" to those not conversant with what passes for trade journalese...). Consequently, there is a peculiar purity that emerges from the pages of these willfully obtuse and almost gleefully tedious rags. Like contemporary poets, scribbling away at their self-referential verse without even a shred of hope for wealth or renown, trade journalists function in a cultural vacuum that can never hope to be penetrated by outside eyes.

It mattered not that I was never even slightly familiar with or interested in the content of whatever journal I was freelancing for. Whether it was orthopedic shoes, synthetic pet limbs, organic fertilizer or industrial lubricant, I clacked away at my articles, following the script (which varied little from industry to industry) and inserting my cues.

At the time I was sharing a dreary Cabrillo Street apartment with a crippled girl named Helen. I had recently suffered through my final breakup with Anneliese, and I was at probably the lowest point of my life so far. Looking back, I can see this as a turning point of sorts. For one thing, this was when I began to get fat. It was also while living with

Helen that I first took a drink in the morning, before getting out of bed. I recall that event as an odd combination of both play-acting and sincere despair. On one hand, I was fully cognizant of the dramatic spectacle of a man groaning himself awake and reaching straightaway for the bottle. I was almost pleasantly aware of the theatrical implications of such a depraved act, and part of me hoped someone would walk in on me just as I was raising the bottle to my lips, so my shameful moment could have a properly appalled and disapproving witness.

On the other hand, morbid self-consciousness aside, the drink made me feel better immediately, almost frighteningly so, and I intuited that it is entirely possible to *pretend* to pretend, and thereby mask your true motivations. How many literate, middle-class drunks have slid into the abyss, chuckling incredulously that this was "just like the movies?"

In any case, I did commit a great many errors in judgment during this period, some of which turned out, however, to assist in dislodging me from what was clearly a fruitless situation, both professionally and domestically. For one thing, I slept with my roommate, Helen. She was a surly thing with stringy, unwashed hair and a complexion the shade and texture of recently applied white-out. I would return from work, having stopped along the way for a solitary, Hopper-esque meal at some diner, to find her sprawled on her ratty brown sofa, legs spread like a man and cheap red wine dribbling down her none-too-protrusive chin (she was a Southerner, and her bone structure did little to

thwart all of my Northern suspicions concerning intra-familial whoopee-making).

Some people persevere in the face of enormous misfortune or physical handicap and go on to inspire others with their bravery and pluck. Helen was no John Merrick, however. Polio had seemingly sapped her will to rise from the couch, let alone prove to the world that cripples have something to offer, too. I don't know her story, and in fact never developed any real sense of her intelligence. She was mightily sarcastic though, and would typically greet me with a hoarse muttering: "Well, well, it's *Frederick*," giving my name a guttural twist that reeked of some generalized disapproval.

"How are you, Helen?" I would reply. I had been quite drunk when I first rang Helen's bell in response to her ad for a roommate "who is not too noisy or nosy," and I have little memory of what prompted either of us to hitch our wagon to the other, domicile-wise.

She rarely answered my queries directly, perhaps recognizing them for the evasions they were. Most often she would sigh and take a drink, turning back to the TV as if I, like the world, had failed her again. On certain nights she would offer a question of her own. "What's it look like to you?" was a favorite, as was, "What're you being, a wise guy?"

In response, I would smile meekly as if it had all been a terrible misunderstanding, and slink off to my cell-like room. I had been too "distracted" to unpack or decorate, and, three months into my residency, was still living out of

cardboard boxes like a man who expected to flee at any moment.

The night of our coupling, I had returned home late, having just been fired from my latest trade journal gig at *Cat Care Dispatch*. I had been caught using my workstation computer to view pornography, an act which had promptly triggered what I felt to be a punishment vastly out of proportion to the crime. As I explained to my boss (a moist-palmed man named Stan who, ironically, wore the expression of one who has narrowly escaped being caught masturbating), without the occasional doses of porn, I would be rendered imbecilic by the monotony of the work. Plus, I was well aware of the compulsive e-mail checking, fantasy sports playing and online gambling occurring in the cubicles all around me. That this behavior would be tacitly allowed, while my distraction of choice was deemed an offense worthy of termination, struck me as the shallowest kind of hypocrisy. But I got no satisfaction from telling Stan off. I've never been good at such scenes, as I tend to have trouble summoning the proper moral indignation required to discharge any really vituperative verbal parting shots. Instead, he did most of the talking.

"I'm terribly sorry, Fred, I really am. But you have to understand that this is not *my* decision. It's *company policy*. I am not permitted to allow discriminatory or sexist behavior in the workplace. Surely, you understand the *legal* implications?"

"Discriminatory? Against who, for god's sake?"

"Why... *women*, Fred. What if some female co-worker were to pass by your station and decide that she is being sexually harassed by what you're doing there?"

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to acknowledge the obvious. Finally, I was forced to point it out: "Stan, there are no women working here."

"I'm aware of that, Fred. And that's a whole problem in itself, you see? What about *CCD's* work environment is failing to attract female employees?"

"The low wages and lack of opportunity for upward mobility?"

He shook his head, sadly. "Now, Fred, I don't think that's fair. You've gone from Classifieds to Editorials in no time at all. You were one of the rising stars here until this... unfortunate incident."

He was practically pleading with me to understand, to go quietly like a good guy. I realized that I was only prolonging my own misery, and prepared to depart. Stan's final words to me were, "Get yourself some help, Fred. You deserve it. For *you*."

Being fired from a job that you consider to be beneath you is an insidious indignity. The initial wave of relief (good *riddance!*) is quickly supplanted by the nagging feeling of having been kicked while you were down. It was one thing to deign to labor at such absurd tasks, but to be found *inadequate* at them as well? I didn't like the idea that I was actually diminished by the loss of *Cat Care Dispatch*, but it was difficult to keep the feeling at bay. When I turned the key in the lock of our front door, after hours of moping around the neighborhood, peering into the windows of

grubby-looking Chinese buffets, Helen was there, as always, slumped in her position on the couch, cigarette end glowing like a firefly in the gloom.

"Jesus, who died and left you doodly-squat?" was her greeting to me. Evidently my mood was visible even to a drunken, self-absorbed misanthrope.

I hesitated in the doorway a moment. "I got fired," I said.

She was silent for a minute. Finally she drawled, "I hope you burned the fucking place down before you left."

"Nope," I said.

"What'd you do?"

I shrugged. "Nothing."

"Didn't even steal nothing on your way out? A fax machine, or some pens or something?"

"Nope."

"Jesus, an amateur," she muttered.

"What was your last job, Helen?" I asked.

She smiled at this, seemed fond of me for the first time since I'd moved in. "Want some wine?"

I won't say that Helen and I grew close that night. We talked for hours, but not about ourselves particularly. Mostly, we took turns lobbing caustic remarks at whatever passed across the television screen. It was exactly the therapy I needed. Helen, for whatever private reasons – her lameness, or something far deeper – was in retreat from the world, and her absolute refusal to rise and go about her business struck me, upon my fifth glass of wine, as noble in some small way. No doubt she had some hidden source of income that financed this indolent lifestyle, but that in no way mitigated

my admiration. Financial obligations aside, few people are equipped with the capacity for genuine, ongoing idleness. It requires a powerful resistance to the gravitational pull of everything we were raised to hold dear. Watching her limp to the bathroom during a commercial break, I was slightly unsettled to observe my own desire, rearing its head like a poorly trained animal.

I poured us both another drink as she tottered her way unsteadily back from the bathroom, her bare, unshaven legs bathed in the blue light from the TV screen, and half-fell back onto the couch. Then she caught me looking at her. "Oh, ho," she said, raising an eyebrow. She was showing no effect from the alcohol whatsoever, whereas I felt the kind of urgency that only takes hold of you when you are about one drink shy of a complete inability to do anything about it. I seized her, and she did not resist.

As I buried myself in Helen, closing my eyes and burrowing into the smoky, sweaty odor of her, I couldn't help observing how far I had fallen. Helen was, in every conceivable way, the opposite of Anneliese, who I then still considered my ideal woman, despite the cruelty with which she had recently dispatched me from her life. Making love with Anneliese was an act that required constant watchfulness. Her needs were ever-changing, her responses were not telegraphed, and one would not be given a second chance at a missed opportunity. One had to be ready at all times to shift focus, vary speed or pressure, withdraw or plunge deeper at a moment's notice. It was something like speeding over a curving road on a pitch black night, where only the ten yards immediately in front of the car were

visible at any given moment. Fast reflexes and superior hand-eye coordination were a must. But the exhilaration of crossing the finish line at last obliterated all memory of whatever difficulty was endured in arriving there.

Helen groaned as I entered her the first time, but otherwise made no sound, merely kept her eyes squeezed shut, and whipped her head back and forth noiselessly. She kept her arms straight out in front of her – as if to push me away, it might seem, but for the fact that both fists remained tightly clamped around tufts of my chest hair. I quickly gave up worrying about her and submitted to my own pleasure with a greedy abandon that is entirely out of character for me. We rutted in this fashion, like a couple of breathless beasts, for what remained of the night, and when I awoke at dawn she was asleep beside me on the coach, her mouth open, hair a bird's nest atop her head, and one dirty foot – her good one – pressed against my thigh.

As I sat groggily, one hand pressed against my throbbing forehead, and the other against my sore chest, Helen opened an eye and blinked at me warily, before groaning and withdrawing to her corner of the couch.

"Well, I guess you oughta be moving out now," she yawned.

So, although I do not generally consider myself unduly motivated by sex, I had little else to blame for the sudden loss of both my job and my living quarters. As I gathered my belongings that morning, I muttered disgustedly at myself, growling and cursing like an autistic homeless person prowling through the trash. In the space of a single day, I had managed to set myself up for rejection both by a

company I despised *and* a woman who repulsed me. Gone were my alcohol-induced visions of Helen's "nobility." Each time I remembered lunging at her the night before, the unpleasantness of the memory caused me to squeeze my eyes tightly shut, as if to summon an amnesia sufficient to consign the entire episode to some darkened basement of my mind where it would trouble me no more.

However, as the day wore on and my hangover lifted, I began to see the fiasco of the previous 24 hours as a potential blessing, and a definite opportunity to start anew. I made two vows that day. One: that I would find a way to live alone, no matter the cost, and no matter how long it took me. Two: that my trade journal days were finished, and it was time to start making some real money.

I mentioned before that trade journals are used by aspiring writers as stepping stones to the grand prize (novel, screenplay, etc.). So, the question inevitably follows: to what were they a stepping stone for *me*? And here, I must confess that I, too, was afflicted with my own set of very standard-issue boho delusions. For most of my twenties, I fancied myself a sort of "novelist in waiting." I did very little actual writing though, and never produced anything near a novel. Mainly I waited, assuming that one day it would all be put to good use when I finally disgorged the masterpiece that would free me from the petty scuffling of the wage earner and allow me to assume my rightful place as one of the idle rich.

Here, my upbringing no doubt plays a part. I was continually reminded throughout my childhood that we were "not rich." It was only when I arrived at college in California

and observed how many of my fellow undergraduates were forced to work one or more jobs as they made their way through school one tuition payment at a time, that I began to realize the extent to which I had been sheltered, including from the truth about my own good fortune. Unlike so many, my college years were untroubled by financial anxiety, and by graduation I was a reasonably popular figure on campus – though not a "wheel" in any sense.

Perhaps because of my comfortable youth and early adulthood, I was never able to take the ensuing period of poverty very seriously. I knew that it was temporary, that, in some sense, I was enduring a necessary "toughening" which would be invaluable to my career as a novelist, when I eventually hunkered down to embark upon it. By my twenties, I, like most sensitive rich children with artistic pretensions, had become acutely aware of the ways in which my privilege had handicapped me for the boho life. I had not suffered, after all. What could I possibly have to say? To top it off, four years of Berkeley's faux-progressive style of educational indoctrination had left me with a vague feeling of shame for being both white and male, the twin horns of the devil oppressor in any politically correct 1990s manifesto.

At any point during my slumming with trade journals and rented rooms I could have easily called on my father for funds, which he would have certainly (albeit gruffly) provided. But I despised asking my father for money. My mother occasionally slipped twenty-dollar bills in with her letters, and although I wanted badly to be possessed of the kind of steely character that would enable me to send the

money back, in the end I always weakened, rationalizing it as a gift unasked-for, and therefore without shame.

My father made his fortune (as he most definitely *never* referred to it) in corporate law, and is now retired. Nevertheless he retains the penetrating stare and absolute assurance of a man behind whom stands ready the bottomless monetary arsenal of a transnational conglomerate's legal department, the operating budget of which dwarfs the gross national product of many countries. My father has always been a remote figure: stern, unyielding, generous without being warm, worthy of respect, but completely unreadable to me for as far back as I can remember. In the absence of information, I must assume he disapproves of me.

I am on safer ground with my mother, whose histrionic Italian temperament is a perfect foil to my father's icy Canuck reserve. I would not say I am particularly close to my mother, either, but I know she loves me very much, without reservation, and independent of anything I might say or do. You might even say that her love for me is entirely impersonal, as it is not directed at anyone I *am*, particularly, but at *what* I am: her only child. Nevertheless, her unconditional approval is a welcome refuge from the mute, blue-eyed gaze of my father, which always seems to be, lawyer-like, probing for weakness. My mother took me to see him in a rare court appearance once when I was about nine (most of his work was conducted in board rooms and in private meetings with other attorneys like himself), and I was so awestruck by the severity with which he flummoxed a

witness that I burst into tears and had to be escorted from the courtroom.

I already knew of Brian Buford before we first met. Brian had achieved a very minor sort of local celebrity owing to a music column he penned for the *Guardian*, one of San Francisco's two free "alternative" weeklies. The column was pretentiously titled, "Notes from Aboveground," and in it each week, Brian wandered the musical landscape of the city, dropping names, reviewing shows and making strained comparisons to obscure 1970s punk bands, solely (it seemed to me) for the purpose of demonstrating that he knew who they were. In short, the type of overly clever, ultrahip geek babble that usually fills such spaces. I could hardly read it, but he was one of the *Guardian's* most popular writers and copies of his reviews and columns were pasted in the windows of bars and clubs all over town. He actually got fan mail.

So when I was introduced to Brian one night at a birthday party for a redheaded girl named Ariel I'd only met the night before, I was fully prepared not to like him.

"So, you're the 'Gen-X Herb Caen'," I said, clutching my drink and giving him a superior smirk. "And what would Dostoevsky make of the latest tattooed girl band with safety pins in their designer jeans?" I was in my fourth drink argumentative mood, and felt like having a little fun with him.

But he just laughed easily and rolled his shoulders, an endearing little physical mannerism of Brian's that made him look like a twelve-year-old boy preparing to do the rope climb. "He's probably rolling in his grave at the allusion," he

said. "But fuck it, it gets me into the shows for free. That's all I care about. Ariel tells me you're a writer, too."

"Advertising," I replied tightly.

He nodded. "Good money in that, eh?"

"A lot of people can't stand the work, though."

He rolled his eyes. "Heck, it couldn't be worse than trying to find something cute to say about another band of kids from Walnut Creek trying to be Nirvana."

"If you're interested, I could probably get you some freelance assignments," I said.

He looked at me seriously. "Really?"

"Sure."

He held out his hand. "Hey, that's terrific. Thanks... Fred, was it?"

"Frederick," I said. "Frederick Locktin." We shook hands. "There won't be a lot of street cred associated with it, but if you can get the hang of it, it pays very well."

"I can write anything," Brian said, and he even managed to sound mildly self-effacing, the way someone might sheepishly admit that they knew the lyrics to every Madonna song. "And I don't care about street cred. My novel is going to take care of that."

This charmingly anachronistic proclamation was delivered with such offhand assurance that I found myself in the rare position of speechlessness. When, later in the evening, he politely inquired as to whether I, too, had any loftier literary ambitions than writing advertising copy for the latest Chevy Blazer, I quickly answered, "God, no."

I celebrated my thirtieth birthday alone in my Castro Street apartment, silently congratulating myself at having at

last achieved cruising altitude. I had more ad work coming in than I could possibly handle on my own, my financial situation was vastly improved, such that I was even able to return the occasional guilt-soaked twenty that floated through the U.S. Mail from my mother, and I was living alone at last, albeit in a two bedroom apartment that was far too expensive for me. I remember feeling around this time that my period of struggle was officially concluded, and that, having adequately "paid my dues," I could now settle comfortably into the life of a man of reasonable means, a man with a respectably grown-up job who no longer needed to check his bank balance before going out on Saturday night. And I enjoyed the novelty of my new life for nearly two weeks before the question of "what *now*?" began to settle over me like a damp blanket.

Shortly after I met him, Brian surprised me in two ways. First of all, he was an excellent writer of copy. His wise-ass, rat-a-tat-tat style of overwriting, while nauseating in the un-curtailed context of his weekly columns, proved ideal for the type of corporate nose-trumpeting I threw his way. When shilling for cars or clothing or energy drinks, clean, Hemingway-esque prose is not the order of business. Advertising copy is the textual equivalent of those terrifyingly hyper-caFFEinated morning show hosts on television. In the age of chronic attention deficit disorder, one's job as an advertiser is always, first and foremost, to grab attention by any means necessary. Brian turned out to have a true gift for this kind of work, and after testing the waters with a couple of easy assignments, he dove into a prestigious catalogue job for a local Sharper Image-type

electronics wholesaler, effortlessly cutting ahead of any number of other freelancers with far more experience, thanks to my recommendation.

The second surprise came during our second face-to-face encounter, as we were having lunch at Putzkammer's one afternoon. Brian had called that morning and asked if we could meet. On the phone, he generally sounded breathless and urgent, but as he strolled into the bar, cutting between the goateed stockbrokers and the suspender-bound software developers, he wore his usual puppy dog look of good-natured enthusiasm. You couldn't help liking him, and I observed a secretarial type smile greedily as his husky, towheaded (and thoroughly oblivious) figure brushed by her in the crowd.

He flopped down into the seat and we shook hands. "Listen," he said. "I want to thank you again for the work hook-up."

"You seem to be taking to it."

"It's great. I quit my other job today."

I raised an eyebrow. "The column?"

"No, my *other* job. I was a waiter."

"Oh, I... didn't know."

He grinned at me. "You sound like you just found out I was in prison."

I apologized awkwardly. "I was a waiter once. It didn't agree with me." This was a complete falsehood. Waiting tables was one of the many jobs I couldn't imagine performing, but I needed to quickly invent some plausible explanation for my apparent snobbery.

"It wasn't so bad. The problem was there was no time left to work on the novel."

I hesitated, not wanting to compound my previous gaffe by seeming rude. "You don't meet too many people writing novels these days," I said carefully. "It seems kind of... retro, almost."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's for sure. Anyway, I want to ask you something. Ariel tells me you have a two-bedroom in the Castro."

It took me a moment to recall who he was talking about. I had slept with Ariel only once, the night after the party where Brian and I had met. We had proved sexually incompatible and I had not called her since. I stiffened slightly now, cursing my own stupidity for not realizing that of course Brian was *her* friend as well – she had invited him to her birthday party, after all.

But Brian showed no interest in my relationship with Ariel. He had something else on his mind. "Are you looking for a roommate, by any chance?" he asked.

And so, my brief period of solitary living came to a close. Once again, as is the custom of my generation, I was sharing a small space with another human being, though there were certain differences this time around. Being the original occupant of the apartment carried with it a certain seniority. It was I who was renting the room out this time, and that small edge, that position of power would never completely vanish, no matter how long two people lived together. For his part, Brian was delighted by the place. It was just down the street from Dolores Park, a short walk to

the train downtown, and surrounded by good places to eat. But he was most amused by the Locktin decor.

"Um, Fred, you going for that kinda minimalist look, is that it?" We were both standing in the living room, Brian seeing the place for the first time.

"Well, I don't entertain all that often."

Brian examined the bare walls, observed my single item of furniture – the lumpy purple chair that I referred to as "Grimace" – and burst into laughter. "I should say not."

I explained that I had trouble summoning the energy to procure furnishings, knowing that as soon as I made a bit more money, I would likely want to replace them with something more tasteful. "I figure: why bother decorating until I can do it right?"

"Sure, sure," he nodded, greatly amused. "Heck, why bother renting at all until you can buy? Why not just sleep in the street?"

"I think you're missing the point," I said dryly.

But Brian was all good will and boyish enthusiasm. And I must confess his excitement was contagious. A passive man will always attract to him those in need of a foil or sidekick, a counterbalance to their extroversion. I have always drawn these, both male and female varieties. I don't mind. But the exhausting debacle with Anneliese taught me how the dynamic can turn on you, how they can wind up resenting you for the stability they once relied upon you for, how your control and reserve can become mistaken for distance and arrogance by the insecure and ungrounded. In the end, they will be forced to designate you a cripple in order to justify their rejection of you, never dreaming that it

is their own vulnerability that has been highlighted, unbearably so. Perhaps this is why our popular culture, so joyously free of self-doubt, insists on regarding the words "passive" and "weak" as synonyms. Muddy Waters knew the redemptive power of passivity as he watched his woman walking out the door (*that's all right for yooooou...*). But perhaps that kind of dignity is only possible for those outside of the mainstream; the cold heart of America has always pumped for the go-getter.

After Brian left to meet his agent, I rose reluctantly from the purple chair and took a long shower. A small, subtle pulse of panic had made itself felt within me since Teena and I had become engaged, and as I stood beneath the spray, I became aware of it again. It blinked like a tiny red warning light just out of my peripheral vision. Finally, I turned the water off and stood, staring at my pale, pudgy form in the bathroom mirror. For a moment I felt very alone and quite terrified, and perhaps that was why I called Teena, although we had agreed not to speak until meeting at the wedding site tomorrow.

She was not surprised to hear from me. "You suck," she said absently as she picked up the phone. I could tell she was doing something while we were talking, probably going over a list, or writing a note.

"It's a silly tradition anyway," I said.

"That's not a valid criticism, sweetie. Sure it's silly. But it's *fun*. Most fun things are silly."

"I'll concede that most of what *you* consider fun is pretty silly," I answered. "Including marrying me."

She chuckled. "Nervous?"

"You're the second person since I woke up to accuse me of that."

"So, is Brian going to help you with the tux?"

"I asked him to be there, yes. For moral support."

"And you know that the cake – "

"I know what I'm supposed to do."

We were silent for a moment. The words *look, Teena, maybe we're making a mistake here* were in my head, but I couldn't bring them to my lips.

"Fred?"

"Yes."

"I love you."

"I love you, too," I said, automatically.

"Try to enjoy this."

"Mmm."

"No, really. Try to be present. You'll only have one wedding day. Try to really notice it as it happens." She lowered her voice and I could feel that I had her full attention now. She'd stopped whatever else she'd been doing. "I know it isn't really your style, all this... 'to do'. But it's going to be so beautiful and I just know you'll thank me later for forcing you to go through it."

I thought of all the times people had said that to me before. I tried to remember if it had ever been true, if I had ever felt grateful later. I couldn't remember. I could only remember feeling, as I did now, that, whatever the outcome, it was easier to just go along with it. It would preserve my innocence on some level, and that way later, if it didn't work out....

"Fred?"

"Yeah."

"Just making sure you're still there."

"Yeah. I guess I should get going. It's past nine already."

"Okay." I could tell that she wasn't entirely satisfied with my response. "Call me again if you need to," she added.

"So, the not speaking thing..."

"It's just a silly tradition. I love you."

"See you at the altar," I said.

There was silence on the line.

"Um, love you, Teen. Bye for now."

"Bye."

There was need in her voice, but I ignored it and hung up the phone quickly.

As I dressed, I found myself thinking not of the momentous event looming in my very near future, or the day ahead, but of Brian and his agent, who would soon be sitting down to their espresso drinks at Cafe Greco on Columbus. Jenny Van Dyke was one of those grotesquely aggressive and ambitious little girls that are turned out in ever-increasing numbers by a handful of exclusive girl's schools in the East. I had grown up around the type. From grammar school on, their well-coiffed little heads are ardently bent to the task, scheming their way to the head of the class, the best sorority, the most prized internship. Jenny was fresh from a job at a major publisher in New York, where she had assisted her boss in sifting through the slush pile for nuggets of romance novel gold. Of course, all the while she was preparing for the leap, and her own agency, which she had christened Embolden Literary. Brian was among her first clients, and she had no sales as of yet.

Shaking her hand, upon meeting her at Putzkammer's one night, I was aware of her rapid assessment and dismissal of me, first as anyone with the potential for furthering her career, and secondly as a possible romantic partner. This instantaneous evaluation was telegraphed by her wide green

eyes, the animal intent of which – being only in her early twenties – she had not yet learned to completely camouflage. Eventually, she would be a formidably impenetrable foe, but at the moment there was still something of the grubby girl about her – she had not quite smoothed out the unbecomingly jagged edges of her limitless greed.

"It's nice to meet you, Fred," she said.

"I'd like to hire you," I answered.

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I'd like to put you to work, if I may."

"I'm sorry? Honestly, I – "

"Have you any janitorial experience? No matter. I'm in dire need, you see. I'm up to my elbows in it."

Now she was certain she was being teased, and I was gratified to note a twinge of color appear in her cheeks. Eventually she would learn to control these physical responses, to marshal the battalion of her body's hue and twitch in the service of the striving she was bred for.

Brian intervened before I could proceed further, however. "Let's get you a drink for now, shall we, Fred? How about you, Jenny?"

"A Gray Goose cosmo, please," she answered, turning away from me and automatically scanning the crowd for anyone she might need to say hello to.

"Give her a pass, Freddy. She's going to make me rich and famous," Brian whispered to me as we moved toward the bar.

"She's got the ankles of a peasant," I replied. "I think it unlikely that she is ignorant of the procedure by which milk is extracted from a cow."

"Here," said Brian, handing me a glass of Macallan 21-year.

I was impressed at the costly bribe. The whiskey was at least twenty dollars a shot.

"Just be good, Freddy, okay?"

I raised my hand solemnly, holding my glass aloft and admiring the way its honey-colored contents refracted the tobacco-freighted light of the bar. "If this doesn't make me good, nothing will," I said.

"I don't know why you like this place," Brian said, looking around. "These people are horrible."

But now it seemed that Brian's ship may have at last come in. I tugged on my pants and thought about what that might mean. Very little, most likely. After all, we whose fate it is to make our fortune in the jaded infancy of the 21st Century must endeavor to align our yearning to the correct mythology. The appropriate object of a young boho's anxious striving these days would be the sale of a screenplay, perhaps. Or that one's band be blessed with the coveted closing credits slot on the latest teen horror flick. Maybe (and more plausibly) one could labor toward the admittedly lower wattage of internet celebrity – someone linked to your blog from their blog, etc. But really, even these pretensions were more akin to the mindless exhibitionism displayed by the participants of reality television, or the latest white trash celebutante clamoring for Warhol's fabled fifteen minutes. Hadn't the best minds of our generation dismissed such childishness in favor of the more conclusive verdict of simply, directly, generating *wealth*?

"Novels," I scoffed as I pulled on my Pantherella socks. Who the hell read novels anymore? The notion that one could overnight be catapulted to fame and riches by virtue of something as sluggish as a *book* was a fantasy only people like Brian could sustain. Yet, clearly my friend felt himself on the precipice of some kind of life-altering event. It was heartbreaking to watch, really.

I shrugged on my wool sport coat and loaded myself down with the necessary weapons for the day ahead: wristwatch, keys, cell phone, wallet. After a moment's reflection in front of the mirror I returned to my room and put on a tie, a jaunty red silk one that Teena had bought me for my birthday. It was my own little bit of outdated affectation and I added it partly as a nod to Brian Buford, crazy dreamer that he was. Whether the precipice he stood at was real or imaginary, the one before me was very real indeed, and perhaps I felt in need of some of his brand of naive optimism. Maybe no one read books or wore ties anymore, but today we would face the future unblinking, as if we belonged there.

I swung out our apartment door and descended the stairs to the lobby at a rapid clip. I was suddenly eager to get things in motion. Maybe I was thinking this marriage thing to death. What I needed to do was follow the impulse that had led to my betrothal, throw myself into the stream and begin to swim, letting the momentum carry me along. Enthusiasm to follow shortly. Religion refers to this folly as faith, and as I pushed out of our building onto 18th Street, I began to glimpse the appeal – and the difficulty – of

indulging in such a comfort. Unfortunately, for me, as for many, it is, in fact, far more innate to doubt than to believe.

It was a lovely summer day in San Francisco, windy but warm, and although it was a weekday, the streets were, as always, full of young people who evidently had no pressing business to attend to. I, however, was encumbered with purpose, and headed east on 18th Street, toward the Mission District, where I could catch the train.

Dolores Park was filled, as always, with an eclectic cross-section of urban wildlife. There was the usual assortment of leather-clad, muscle-bound gay men, their bald heads gleaming with oil and their ringed fingers clamped firmly around studded leather leashes, at the end of which invariably twitched some tiny, rat-like canine. There were the queens, lounging in the sunlight and fanning themselves like Scarlett O'Hara, hungrily eyeing the young boys who giggled and tossed Frisbees back and forth and generally delighted in the splendor of being gay young men in the prime of life, in the eight-square-block cultural mecca of the holy Castro.

I marveled at these frisky young animals who looked so uncomplicated and eager. How simple it would be to go that way instead, to opt for the straightforward gratification of one sexual conquest after another. Of course, this *modus operandi* is not exclusive to gay sexuality, but I couldn't help imagining that certain complications were entirely circumvented when one chose to frolic only with others of the same general emotional sensibility. Perhaps there were drawbacks to this as well, but god, how *easy* it appeared from a distance!

However, envious as I was of those lithe youngsters, I knew I was kidding myself to imagine I could ever have flourished in such an uninhibited environment. I am not generally adept at quick physical intimacy, and the tortoise-like speed at which I acquire comfort with a new partner (when sober, at least) is, for better or worse, far more suited to the needs of those who covet domesticity and long-term commitment than the casual thrill-seeker or nymphomaniac.

Anneliese was my one true exception, a carnivorous sexual predator who chafed at monogamy and disdained the pervasive cultural emphasis on child-bearing ("Breeders," she would snort, borrowing a derisive term from the gay lexicon), and yet sought me out as if she was able to see through my cautious skin to the impulsive swinger that lurked, dormant, beneath. This I often protested, however, and many of our fights had their origin in an ongoing suspicion on my part that she didn't truly respect who I was and what I needed (our relationship, sexual and otherwise, tended to revolve around her capricious urges). When she eventually cast me aside, the predominant feeling I had was the sickly and un-victorious one of having at last won the argument and proven myself incompatible.

The combination of the atypically mild day and thoughts of Anneleise produced a pleasantly sensual mood, and as I strolled past the park, my eyes sought out glimpses of the many varieties of female spectacle to be enjoyed. One dark-haired young girl was sunbathing in a bikini with several college-age friends, both male and female, and her reckless posture – arms thrown back to embrace the sun, hair

splayed across the striped beach blanket, one leg bent – reminded me again of Anneleise, and our many beach visits.

Naturally distractible, A. (as I called her in affectionate moments) was rendered serene by the sound of the ocean and the rays of the sun. This was in stark contrast to her usual state, which was characterized by an abnormally short attention span. The first time we went to the Cineplex together, she rose abruptly and walked out of the theater an hour into the film. When she failed to return, I searched the entire building for the better part of an hour. Eventually, the theater next to ours let out and she, along with its other occupants, came strolling into the lobby where I was alternately seething and terrified that I'd done something to frighten her away for good.

Yet the same girl who found it difficult to sit through a television program, let alone an entire movie, who grew intolerably sulky whenever I retreated into a book or newspaper (reading was, to A., an unforgivably anti-social act) was, on the beach, all languid movements and lazy yawns: a happy animal sunning herself, and capable of lying motionless for hours at a stretch. We spent countless weekends side by side on towels, at Stinson and Baker and as far north as Salmon Creek. We would talk idly and quietly with eyes closed and hands touching, the roar of the waves muting all distant noises and providing the illusion of utter privacy. I suspected that her exhibitionist streak was largely responsible for the ease with which it was possible to converse with her on those long, golden afternoons. It was then that I picked up the bits and pieces of her biography, anecdotes related in a dreamy, distracted murmur as I rubbed

SPF 50 between her shoulder blades and down the faint outline of her spine to the tiny tattoo just above the cleavage of her ass: a pistol with roses dripping from the barrel. While direct questioning often stimulated her paranoia, that was seldom the case at the beach, possibly because she was only partly paying attention to me, and was preoccupied with her own body, and the reactions it was provoking. For we were not alone after all – one is never alone in a city of 16,000 people per square mile – and a beautiful girl in a bikini is never alone anywhere.

This aspect of our sand-and-sun California cliché was always something of a double-edged sword for me. It was impossible not to revel in the reflected glory of Anneliese's beauty. For she was tremendously alluring, physically. She was slender but not particularly athletic-looking or muscular, with very fine pale skin that was reluctant to tan and burned easily if not continually layered with sunscreen. Her breasts and ass were perfectly round, as if given one or two quick pumps with some divine inflationary device. In short, she looked built for sex, and little else. While we were typically surrounded by health-conscious, yoga-toned California blondes, their tanned limbs glistening with fitness, it was Anneliese who drew the most male stares. She managed to give the appearance, wherever she was, of having just emerged from bed, and a truly gratifying erotic tussle. She oozed a kind of slovenly carnality that men could practically smell from across the room. Perhaps her appeal was best described by the bumper sticker affixed to her aged and filthy Honda CRX: You Know You Want Me Anyway.

The flip side of this pride in my girlfriend's desirability was, of course, the vulnerability inherent in it. The gazes of the men would find her, admiringly caressing her curves before moving on to me, the impediment. Then: the predatory dimming of the light in their eyes, followed by the inevitable sizing-up sneer (*what's HE got?*). That I was undeserving of the bounty at my side was a given – all that remained was to determine just *how* indisputable a fact of life I was, and whether it might be worth a try in any case. I could literally transcribe the thoughts in their thick skulls as if their foreheads bore ticker screens displaying the sequence of internal events. And so I was never able to fully relax, never able to forget for a moment the precariousness of my ephemeral, sun-soaked peace.

I was still pretty then, not having yet bloated into the Frederick Locktin of present times, but I was also acutely aware that I was not her type, if past liaisons were any indication. Her roster of prior romances seemed to consist entirely of motorcycle-riding roughneck types, judging from the tales she unfurled on the blanket beside me. Some were construction contractors, some were musicians (usually drummers), some were never definitively attached to an actual profession ("he was into speed racing"; "he was into coke,"), but all shared in common an un-Locktin-like propensity for short sentences, barroom brawls and jealous rages. It seems I was not the first to become incensed by A.'s affinity for male attention, but my predecessors tended toward more conventionally macho means of expressing their dissatisfaction. They erupted while I simmered.

As I passed Dolores Park and approached Guerrero Street, it occurred to me that I had at least preserved my dignity in that small way. I had never struck Anneliese, never allowed her to bring me down to her own squalid level, though I often suspected that was what she really wanted. Armchair psychologists might speculate that, being the product of an abusive home life (which she was), physical violence was the incontrovertible evidence she sought that I truly cared for her, etc., etc. The endless games, the endless hoops, the endless undecipherable hieroglyphics of the female cave.

Well, I dwelt in the light now. Teena was not inclined toward such clichéd dysfunction, and for a moment I felt a rush of gratitude for my relatively sensible fiancé. The small red warning light appeared just then, though, and this time there was a discernable message to its blinking: *fat girls can't afford to be as crazy as A. was.*

I blinked away the thought, but it returned to buzz around me like a hungry mosquito. It was true that I no longer had to guard against theft so zealously these days, for the plain fact was that I was no longer in possession of that which elicited larceny. Teena was in no danger of being stolen from me. If I was dreadfully honest, I had to concede that *I* was the party more likely to stray, and, furthermore, that Teena and I both knew it. It was a subtle but unmistakable thread of the multi-faceted fabric of our lives together: that it was *her* job to please *me*.

The train station at 16th and Mission was a hub of grimy activity as always. Drug dealers and the homeless mingled with Latino businessmen, tattooed hipsters and the

endless promenade of young Mexican mommies, multiple offspring in tow. There were many teenage couples as well, the Latino boys in their spotless white wife-beaters and baggy pants, the gum-smacking girls exposing midriff, thigh and cleavage with equal judiciousness, their ripe young parts displayed with businesslike precision, much the way the fruit vendors on Valencia Street always put the best apples and pears on the top of the pile, hoping you'd scoop up a bit of the rotten with the sweet.

As I crossed the red brick plaza, I glanced at a pair of young lovers necking on one of the planters near the ticket machine. They were patiently, obliviously devouring each other as the world swirled around them, as whores wobbled at their periphery and vendors hollered in Spanish, sounding simultaneously joyful and antagonistic in that Third World way.

How important was it, in the end, to be ravenously physically attracted to your mate? Despite it all, I had never tired of Anneliese's body. She was the only one that had ever been like that for me: an inexhaustible erotic resource that I could discover anew for the rest of my days. Even when I was furious with her, I wanted her. Even when I wanted nothing otherwise to do with her, even when it was glaringly obvious what I always knew at some level: that there was no future for us, and never would be. I would never have dared let myself go, would never have slackened and grown pudgy and resigned the way I had with Teena. For I was safe now in a way I had never been with A. And, despite my moods and my withdrawals, my occasional distance and my irregular affections, I knew that Teena loved me still, and

considered herself fortunate to have landed this darkly handsome, slightly teddy bear-esque but undeniably solid and reliably employed, good-enough man for her (*You Know You Want Me Anyway...*).

And sure, I wasn't exactly driven imbecilic with desire for her, but we were, in totality, more genuinely compatible sexually than A. and I had been, and we were certainly more compatible out of bed than I had ever been with anyone. In many ways, we had already settled into the mold of the companionable old married couple we would become, and, given how much less was settled for by so many, wasn't it the tiniest bit childish of me to pine for more?

So I would ignore the warning light, ignore the misgivings and the second-guesses. I would ignore the fact that, even right now, standing in line behind a 16-year-old Latina in tight striped pants, I was again reminded of my unreliability by the jiggle of her buttocks as her leg vibrated with girlish impatience, waiting for the line to move. If she were to turn and proposition me, did I know beyond a reasonable doubt that I would refuse? I did not, and could not. So I would proceed without certainty, as we all do, whether we deceive ourselves into believing otherwise or not.

The train was crowded with late morning commuters and I was unable to find a seat. Swaying from an overhead bar in the greenish subterranean light, I watched an elderly couple opposite me who were peering intently at the train schedule on the wall just above my left ear. They were clearly tourists, most likely from some barren Midwestern tract without need of mass transportation, because they were noticeably without "train legs." Each time the brakes screeched or the floor shifted as we rounded the curve of a tunnel, they nearly tumbled to the floor, mumbling apologies to the pantsuited woman next to them who calmly and contemptuously changed her standing position so as to be safely out of their sphere. Watching the couple, I realized that their problem was not one of balance but of resistance. They were trying to *fight* the motion of the train, rather than swaying with it. The proper physical bearing of a seasoned commuter is nearly gelatinous. One must sway with every heave of the deck, becoming attached to no particular posture, but allowing your limbs to reassemble as needed.

As we moved down Market Street toward the financial district, the art students and tourists disembarked and the train became more exclusively populated by people in business dress. The talk became louder and more aggressive, and the conspicuous use of cell phones and mobile devices became more ubiquitous. I was suddenly struck by a wave of nostalgia, realizing that this was the last of my morning commutes as a single worker bee. I had ridden this train to my office nearly every day for almost

three years – ever since escaping the trade journals and Helen – but some part of me had always maintained an amused distance from the lives around me. Some vestige of my boho detachment from the "bourgeoisie" had evidently survived my conversion to the Church of Financial Security, for I often looked at my fellow travelers, in their suspenders and wingtips, as apart from me, who was in their midst, yet more observer than participant somehow.

But after tomorrow, I would be a married man taking the train to his downtown office. The pieces would have settled irrevocably into place and there would no longer be any justification for feelings of superiority. Self-editing as always, I realized the hyperbole of the notion that, simply by dint of marriage, I was "one of them now, playing it safe for the sake of security," but the thought lingered. That until now I had never been a rebel in any form was undeniable. Yet, in some lingering adolescent way, I had always savored the potential for rebellion within myself, to be directed in some as yet unspecified way, toward some as yet unspecified ends. It occurred to me now that one's life gradually begins to settle into a shape, and that absent any guiding hand, the shape will find itself in the mold of one's environment.

Looking up from my reverie, I saw that we were approaching the Montgomery Street station, and on impulse, I decided to drop into my office for a few minutes. I told myself that I needed to check in one last time before the big day, but possibly I was in need of some kind of reassurance as well. Emerging from the tunnel onto Market Street, I felt better at once. The hum of efficient commerce was all around me, and even the art school kids up the street would

be forced to acknowledge the electricity in the air. We down here by the Embarcadero were not running in place on some soul-deadening treadmill, we were out there in the concrete jungle, scrapping for dollars the way man was meant to.

Brian often teased me for my inability to stay away from the office. I would even find myself heading downtown on a Sunday, when all quotidian males of the white collar world were dutifully manning the barbeque at some family cook-out deep in the East Bay suburbs, far from the madding Market Street crowd. But, sitting in the swivel chair in front of my desk, looking out over my keyboard at the skyscrapers around me, each one honeycombed with windows, through which could, on work days, be glimpsed others like me, I felt a sense of purpose and belonging that was absent in the rest of my routine. This comforting feeling – solitary yet surrounded – focused my energies in a truly gratifying way.

It helped that I had such a splendid office. As I approached it, weaving through the crowds on the wide brick sidewalks of Market Street, I reflected once again on how lucky I was to have found such a choice workspace. The building was a towering art deco remnant of old San Francisco, a Sam Spade-era structure that retained all the aesthetic frills of a bygone age when economic pressures (the primary cause of most divorces, they say) had not yet finalized the rupture between art and function that has rendered commercial architecture so unbearably dreary ever since.

I entered through the swinging doors, nodding at Arnold, the affable black man who was manning the security kiosk that day, and walked over to wait for the elevator,

running my hand along the tarnished brass rails that lined the lobby. The elevator – there was only one – was empty when it arrived, and I reflected that I was seeing fewer and fewer other tenants these days. Even in the middle of a work day, the hallways often seemed deserted, which added to the spooky, cathedral-like atmosphere. It was this stillness in the midst of chaos that had first struck me about the place. Although nestled snugly in the heart of the financial district, my building was a shelter from the storm of striving outside.

I had just flopped down in my swivel chair and was sorting through the mail when I heard the familiar jittery knock of Rufus Barnumby on my fine old oak door. Rufus always knocked as if he was not just requesting entry but signaling membership as well. They were "secret knocks": a quick rap or two, followed by a scratch and a drum roll of fingertips, maybe, and concluded by a slap of the open palm or a fisted thud. As I approached the door I could hear his tapping feet in the hallway outside, the toe of his wingtip clicking impatiently on the tiled floor like a woodpecker.

"Morning, kid," he mumbled as he glided by me, ducking under my arm which still held the open door. Before I could speak he had removed his coat, flung it over my computer monitor, and was pacing the room as if the two of us were resuming a brainstorming session that had been momentarily interrupted – which, in a way, I suppose we were. "Listen," he said, snapping his fingers as if it had just occurred to him. "The only thing is, I need some Mexican girls. Maybe four or five. That should do it. They work real fast, I'm told. Strong work ethic and all that. Yeah, definitely no more than five. Probably four, though, if they're young

and quick. Or are the older ones quicker? Those little old Indian ladies with their fingers flying... you know what I mean, and I mean no disrespect, but I need em' right away. Four. No more than five. You know where I can find some?" He peered at me suspiciously.

I kept a straight face. "The labor pool?"

His face dissembled in comic exasperation. "For chrissake, kid. I'm talking about keeping the overhead down and you're telling me to go to the bleeding labor pool."

"Ah, I see," I said, rubbing my chin. "You want something a bit more... cost-effective."

"Aye, aye." he hopped lightly onto my windowsill and lit a cigar. "Now you're on board."

Rufus was my only neighbor on the 26th floor. He was a small, wiry man who, from a distance, might have passed for dapper. But close up, his eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks were dark with bristle and his suit cleaved to his body in a way that made it look greasy and unwashed. He was also the most dedicated capitalist I had ever met. Although he gave every indication of a man whose best days were behind him, Rufus was possessed of a bottomless optimism. The good times would come again, and they were always just beyond the horizon, an operating license and a handful of investors away. In just the short time I had known him, he had been involved in a failed ice cream business, a fitness center in Hunter's Point that had been closed for sanitation reasons, several mail-order outfits, the specifics of which I was never clear on, and a nightclub which was poised to be the "next big thing" south of Market, but which never opened. Rufus had the highest hopes for the club in

particular, and never discussed its demise. I believe he had entertained visions of himself greeting the city's hippest and poshest, dispensing drinks to old friends and cronies and generally playing Humphrey Bogart at Rick's place. He only muttered darkly when I asked about it some time later, and I suspect he was milked by some of his less than scrupulous co-investors, since he never mentioned them again either.

His latest brainstorm was squeeze beams. In response to my blank look, he rolled his eyes in exasperation. "You've seen them," he said. "*Everyone* knows them. Those little round dealies that go on the end of your key chain. You squeeze them and they light up like a little flashlight."

"Oh, right," I said. "Squeeze beams."

"I've got it all worked out," he said. "Restoration Hardware is going to let me have a spot next to the register. Impulse buys, kid. You're spending a gob of money on some toaster that's been artificially distressed so's to look like it came out of an eighteenth century farmhouse, why not plunk another couple of bucks down on a squeeze beam?"

I shrugged. "I can't see why not." I had learned that when Rufus was thus smitten – in the throes, as it were, of a new investment opportunity – it was very much like dealing with someone who has just met a girl, fallen in love and driven to Vegas for a wedding, all in one night. Encouragement and well-wishes were all that were required of me in response, and that was easy enough to provide since I genuinely liked Rufus and hoped for his eventual success. Early on, though, I had mistaken our talks for an opportunity to *help* him – to point out flaws in his reasoning, potential pitfalls, etc. However, highlighting the weak points of his

plan only had the effect of momentarily deflating his enthusiasm. He would recover it later and proceed as planned, blind to any blind spots. For faith was Rufus's fatal flaw. He believed deeply in America and in the entrepreneurial system with an almost mystical reverence. And, like many mystics, it was difficult for him to keep his eye to the earth, and the endless niggling details that inevitably derailed him.

Now he sat on my windowsill, filling my office with smoke from his Swisher Sweet, and spinning his latest fantasy: a warehouse full of Mexican women, all laboring day and night (for pennies, of course) to assemble squeeze beams, the irresistible impulse appeal of which would finally put him "in the black." As always, I was offered "in on this," and, as always, I politely declined.

I watched him puffing away on his cheap cigar, the ashes covering his vest, and it occurred to me that Rufus was quite possibly the happiest person I had ever known.

"Say, Rufus. Were you ever married?"

"Sure, a couple of times."

He said it so casually I wondered if he had heard the question correctly. "Really? You were married twice?"

He blew a smoke ring. "Yeah."

"Well... what happened?"

"Whaddya mean, what happened? It didn't take."

"Well, sure, but – "

"But what? It ain't no mystery. I never should've tried it in the first place. The first one, I was just a dumb kid. The second one, I wasn't a kid anymore, but I was still dumb, I guess. Guys like me make lousy husbands."

"Why's that?"

He looked bored, like he was explaining something obvious to a slow-witted child. "It's always the same story, kid. I put too much into my work, blah blah blah. After awhile she figures out that she comes second. Women don't like to come second. But you won't have to worry about that.... Hey, wait a sec – today's the sixth, right? Isn't tomorrow the big day?"

"Yep."

"Jesus, what're you doing sitting around here? Shouldn't you be out getting your blood tested or something?"

"The blood passed with flying colors, Rufus. Teena took care of almost everything months ago."

"Good woman, that Teena. Face of an angel. Well, Christ, you oughtta be having your last blast then. Listen, I know this club – you gotta be a member to get in, technically, but the girls there – "

"I appreciate it, Rufus, but I do have a few errands to run today."

"Well, hell, let me buy you a drink at least. Come on, I was about to head out for lunch anyway."

"Okay."

"Say, kid?"

"Yes?"

"Can you loan me a deuce? I'll pay it back with double interest this time. It'll be your wedding present."

"Hey, thanks, Rufus," I said, handing him a twenty.

He smiled magnanimously. "Well, after all, you don't get married every day."

Minutes later, we were settling into a booth at Putzkammer's, Rufus rubbing his hands together like a man preparing to devour a huge meal. "Whiskey and soda," he announced to Lorna, our server.

"You look pretty relaxed, considering," Lorna said to me, smiling. When I only stared blankly back at her, she blushed and said, "When you were in here the other night, you mentioned about getting married tomorrow. I remembered it because you said it was 7/7 – July seventh. I only meant you don't look nervous or anything."

Lorna was a tall, busty girl who yawned a lot. She worked Tuesdays through Fridays during the day, and sometimes stayed late on Friday to help out if it was very busy. We generally nodded hello and made small talk as I ordered and that was about the extent of my awareness of her. Yet, evidently, I had recently shared with her my wedding plans, and who knew what else. I felt the cold sliver of alarm that always accompanied the news that I'd behaved badly and retained none of it.

The concern must have been visible on my face because she hurriedly added, "You seemed very happy," as if to reassure me. "You were telling everyone at the bar. You even bought Eddie a drink."

My eyes widened at this news. She could only be referring to Eddie Putzkammer, the owner of the place. An enormously fat, white-haired man who favored overalls and open-toed sandals, he could always be found hunched, like some dissipated gargoyle, at "his spot" – the last stool next to the waitress station at the end of the bar. He held court there

nightly, sipping at black coffee and surveying the proceedings with his beady, pig-like eyes. I had never observed him mixing in any of the revelry, or speaking to any of the customers, save a select two or three of his cronies, with whom he occasionally indulged in a game of liar's dice. From time to time, he would call one of the waitresses over and whisper something in her ear, his sausage-like finger jabbing the air as he relayed his instructions.

When, as happened periodically, Brian renewed his push for us to occasionally patronize another of the many financial district bars, or perhaps even venture up the hill to a hipper establishment where we might mingle amidst the pierced and goateed, I would remind him that "Eddie wouldn't like it if we left."

Brian was, of course, unmoved by my loyalty. "What do I care what that fat bastard thinks?"

I would patiently explain to Brian that my distaste for the owner was part of the appeal of the place that he so cavalierly referred to as a "yuppie meat market." It was something like drinking in Jabba the Hut's cantina. The malevolent presence in back, coupled with the unsavory suspender'd clientele, was a far more ideal background for unwinding after a hard day's labor than a gaggle of struggling artist types, texting each other over pints of microbeer.

Lorna drifted away to get our drinks and I glanced uneasily at Fat Eddie, who was in his usual spot, reading the sports section. Learning from strangers about things you did while drinking is a miserably vulnerable feeling. Since you

can never be certain how much of you was exposed, you can only assume that *all* of you was. It is like suddenly discovering that everyone in the bar has seen you naked. "Christ," I groaned.

Rufus was fooling with another cigar. "What?" he asked.

"Hey, Rufus, what did you mean when you said I wouldn't have to worry about that?"

Rufus smiled in anticipation as Lorna set down our drinks and vanished with a quick apologetic smile at me.

"I believe that gal has a fondness for me," Rufus said, raising his glass. "I may have to give her a tumble. Anyway, to marriage!" We toasted and he took a long, grateful swallow. "Now, what was that about worrying?" he asked good-humoredly, the wise old uncle receiving the worried young bachelor in search of wisdom.

"You said women don't like to come second, but that I wouldn't have to worry about that."

"Oh, sure. Look, Fred, you and Teena will be great together. You both want the same things."

"We do?"

"Sure, you do."

"What's that?"

"The same things everyone wants. It ain't complicated. Most people just want to be comfortable. You know what throws everything out of whack? When one party wants more than that."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Rufus."

He sighed. "You don't need to act like I'm insulting you, kid. Not everyone is cursed with passion in their life.

And that's what it is, believe me. A curse." He sighed mightily, wagging his head back and forth. "Me, I'll never be able to rest until I've made my mark. Comfort isn't enough. I've thrown comfort away a thousand times to get at *more*. You follow me now?"

"Yeah."

"You're *lucky*! You don't have some thing you're burning to do that eats up all your time and energy. You've got a good thing going with this writing biz. You seem to be doing okay with it. Marriage is just what you need. And Teena's the right girl for you." He nodded emphatically.

"You think so, eh?"

He slapped my shoulder. "You bet, kid! Don't worry so much. It'll all work out fine. Drink up!" Signaling Lorna for another round, he exhaled a stream of smoke thoughtfully toward the ceiling. "I do wish you'd come in with me, though. Now that you're getting married, a few extra bucks couldn't hurt. And I could use a man who knows how to use words. Now take this squeeze beam deal...."

And with that, and the arrival of the second drink, Rufus moved into pitch mode. I had heard variations of the pitch countless times, and only half-listened to his latest efforts to woo me into the big time. He would spend the first ten minutes of the pitch outlining the operation in loving, fetishistic detail. The irony was that, were I to consent to lend my pen to the Squeeze Beam Campaign for World Domination, I could never summon this passion (that word again) for the product that came so naturally to him.

Finally, the pitch would build to its crescendo: he would generously invite me to partake in the bounty. The

impression would be given that partners in this enterprise were carefully selected from an elite pool of potential applicants, and that, by virtue of my friendship with Rufus, I was in the unique and enviable position of being virtually pre-approved. While any number of investors were clamoring to be allowed to contribute, I would be *permitted* to get in on the ground floor, as it were. And all that would be required would be a small cash investment to start out with. It was – as always – a Golden Opportunity.

"Sorry, Rufus. I'll have to pass this time."

As always, he shook his head sadly, genuinely perplexed by my lack of capitalist verve. I have no doubt that a part of Rufus was absolutely sincere when he said that he envied my lack of Passion, my contentedness with Comfort. But, seeing him in pitch mode, his eyes alive, his hands gesticulating wildly and threatening to overturn the vase of fake flowers next to the candle in our booth, it was clear that whatever small part of Rufus secretly pined for a safer, simpler life, it would always be overruled and overrun by the dominant part of him that burned for the jackpot, and would never stop chasing it, never walk away from the table as long as he had a dollar to bet with.

Finally, I rose from the table and shook Rufus's hand. "I'll see you tomorrow, right?" I asked him as I shrugged my coat on. "You know where to go?"

"You bet, kid. I'll be there," he said merrily. He was on his third whiskey and his face was darkening by the minute as blood rushed to his Irish cheeks. In another round he'd have taken on the high-wattage sunburn that heralded another low-productivity day. However, Rufus was a master

at making temporary and lucrative acquaintance, and he would no doubt spend the remainder of the morning charming his way out of any number of other free drinks. He was already eyeing the clientele at the bar as I took my leave, so there was a chance that, at least, the overhead would remain low.

The route from our booth to the door took me along the length of the bar and past Fat Eddie, alone at his usual perch. His tiny, expressionless eyes flicked over me briefly as I went by, then turned back to his paper. Out on the street again, I exhaled, not having realized until then that I'd been holding my breath. As I headed down Market, I thought of the fat man at the bar. I imagined him closing up at night and heading home to some cheerless apartment somewhere where he lay down, wifeless and alone, to await the ticking of hours that would lead, blessedly, to another day at "his spot." The bar was obviously his domain, the center around which the rest of his life revolved, much like my own office was, for me, the place I felt most deserving of my own respect. This was something that artists like Brian or entrepreneurs like Rufus would never be able to fully comprehend, as their lives are lived religiously, in pursuit of a kind of afterlife. For such strivers, the present is merely to be stoically endured until such time as sufficient velocity can be achieved to escape it and enter the Kingdom of Success, and the true reward.

However, men like Eddie and me, having reached the apex of our modest aspirations, were forced to make our home in *this* world. We clung necessarily to routine and ritual. And, if one would have us, we married. That was the

play here, and what was to be gained by denying it? Rufus was right: it wasn't about what I wanted, it was about what I *needed*. Perhaps Fat Eddie was placed in my path – or I in his – as a kind of cautionary harbinger of what was yet to come if I clung like a coward to my independence.

But now it was time to get the cake. Having already dawdled away more of the morning than I'd intended to, I decided a taxi was in order, and managed to flag one down after only a minute or two. I slid in and gave the name of the pastry shop, which was in North Beach. The driver, a hungry-eyed Middle-Eastern sort, asked me politely to repeat the address several times while he punched it into his GPS unit. As we drove, the unit occasionally directed him, in a soothing female voice, to "please take the next left," or "proceed on this road for 2.5 miles." The driver gripped the wheel with both hands and jumped slightly each time the voice issued a new command, but he drove slowly and carefully.

I am always relaxed in taxicabs. While some people feel the need to constantly direct the driver along their own favorite short cuts, I am content to let the GPS unit direct us both. Since these units became standard, I often experience a vague feeling of camaraderie with the driver that I don't recall in the old days when cabs were operated by crusty, cigar-chewing "characters" who knew the city like their back of their bruised knuckles. In a sense, all the human occupants of the cab are passengers now, guided by the utterly indifferent voice of technology – the one-sided argument that we can only win by acceptance.

Rufus, for example, came of age before computers had infiltrated every aspect of our lives, and he, like many of his generation, is prone to "techno rage." Pounding the keyboard, ripping at his hair and berating the machine before him, which has lost a file or failed to print the margins properly, he is a perfect metaphysical absurdity. The 1950s

vision of the technological future was one in which we were freed, by virtue of the enormous efficiency of machines, from the daily drudgery that then defined the lives of office workers and housewives alike. Our days would be filled with leisure, the tedious tasks that once occupied us would now be completed *automatically*, in a matter of seconds, etc. etc. But the true gift of the Information Age has been more subtle. While our lives are, in fact, as rife with tedium and busywork as ever, we are now free to relinquish *ownership* of the work itself. It is senseless to define yourself by a task in which you are largely a passive participant, pushing buttons and dragging a cursor from left to right. To be sure, the job requires every bit as much of your *time* as any item off the "to do" checklist of an office worker of the mid-century, but it no longer requires as much of your *soul*. With several windows open on my monitor at any given moment, I am perfectly able to edit a bit of ad copy, answer an e-mail and peruse some pornography simultaneously. Between nine and five, I am no longer simply a "worker"; I am a *man* who happens to be doing some work, among other things.

Rufus, of course, sees this as yet another example of my generation's anemic work ethic, a point of view common among older members of the workforce, many of whom reside, courtesy of the "peter principle," somewhere in the nether-regions of middle management. My boss at *Cat Care Dispatch* was a fairly typical representative of this breed. But then, progress is always threatening to those who have wedded their fortunes to existing paradigms. It is no small thing for a striver to un-cling.

I sat back, slightly buzzed from the drink with Rufus (it occurred to me that I had not eaten yet today) and watched the city go by. Soon we were winding up Columbus, then turning and crawling through side streets, past numerous Italian restaurants and delis with large salamis dangling in the windows. My silent yet efficient driver let me off in front of the pastry shop, a tiny storefront at the end of a street several blocks off the main drag. It fairly reeked of what would typically be described as "quaint" in any of the "See San Francisco" guidebooks. It was the kind of place locals prided themselves on having discovered, a stubborn remnant of old San Francisco that the tourists were unlikely to stumble on. Teena had spots like this all over the city. If you needed your dry cleaning done, she would pipe up with this "wonderful little place" that you just *had* to try. She always charmed the proprietors, quickly accelerating to a first-name basis, whereas I still did not know the name of the Pakistani man who ran the liquor store near my apartment. As I leaned through the window to pay the cab driver, I reflected on how Teena would most likely have struck up a conversation with him on the brief journey, and by now they would be laughing and saying good-bye like a couple of old friends. She would be wishing him well on his night courses, or asking him to pass along her best wishes to his wife for the new baby.

A bell tinkled overhead as I entered the shop. "Hello?" I called after a moment. The wooden floor creaked beneath my feet and a *mélange* of delicious smells was in the air. Display cases were filled with biscotti, cannoli and tiramisu, and there were several lavishly decorated cakes and

pies. A curtained doorway led to a back room, from which I could hear the sound of silverware on plates.

After a moment, a small, elderly woman poked her head through the door. She was holding a napkin in one hand. "I'm so sorry!" she said. "Have you been waiting long?"

"I just arrived," I said. "I'm here to pick up our wedding cake. Locktin is the name."

"Oh...." At once, she clapped her hands together underneath her chin and beamed at me. The napkin fluttered to the floor.

"Who's there?" came a gruff male voice from the back.

The woman came around the counter and actually took hold of both my hands. For a moment I thought she had gone mad and had mistaken me for her own fiancé, come to claim her out of the mists of the past. Her eyes were moist and her hands were soft and plump and warm, like freshly baked bread.

She looked directly into my eyes. "Are you *thrilled*?" she whispered.

I was momentarily overcome by a wave of claustrophobia, and, struggling to free myself of her grip without appearing rude, answered dumbly, "I – I am, yes. Um, er... you know."

She nodded knowingly, her eyes brimming further. "I remember it like it was yesterday," she said. "I could never forget that day." I had the feeling that my presence was incidental, that she was using me as a prop of some kind. Even her phrases sounded lifted from some schmaltzy soap

opera, or perhaps a Hallmark commercial. Her grip tightened on me. I had never experienced hands as warm as hers. It was as if she had just removed them from an oven. In fact, her whole stooped body seemed to radiate a kind of heat. "I wore white, of course," she said. Then, to my astonishment, she gave me a knowing and distinctly lewd wink. It was a gesture fully in the present tense and it had the effect of confusing me further. I hadn't yet decided whether she was crazy or not, and it is difficult to relax in someone's company when that most fundamental assessment remains elusive.

"Olympia, is someone there or not?" The voice, a hoarse, no-nonsense patrician bark, was audible again from the back room.

The woman gave my hands one last squeeze. "Antonio is finishing your cake. It will be just a few minutes. Please come in."

"Oh, I don't mind waiting out here," I said. "I don't want to impose." Even as I spoke the words, I guessed the futility of them.

"Nonsense!" she gushed. "Come in, meet everyone. We're just finishing breakfast." She held the curtain aside and stood, waiting for me to enter. I felt the heat of her body again as I brushed against her in passing, and noted a quick stirring in my loins, followed by a strong sensation of revulsion, and a desire to flee the shop immediately, rather than penetrate it further. The only comparable feeling was one I'd once experienced in college, when I drunkenly let a boy give me a blow job. It was my only excursion into homosexuality, and halfway through the act I was stone sober and possessed of the absolute certainty that this was,

indeed, not for me. Nevertheless, as I was searching for the words with which to phrase my demurral, I felt my climax approaching and before I was able to withdraw, the issue was moot. The experience was an unsettling mixture of pleasure and utter distaste that was quickly replaced by a far less ambiguous feeling when I looked down and saw the greasy-lipped and triumphant smile of the physics major who had seduced me. I promptly vomited, which was, at least, a clear expression of an unequivocal nature.

Ducking through the curtain, I found myself in a square, low-ceilinged room. There were no windows and the only natural light came from a partially-opened door that led to the alley in back. The room was dominated by a gigantic, solid-looking wooden table, around which were gathered several men and women of various ages, all Italian, all looking at me with appraising, though friendly, eyes.

"This is Mr. Locktin," the woman announced behind me. I felt absurd, standing there in front of what was obviously a family meal. "I'm just waiting for my cake," I said, by way of explanation.

A small, but compact man of indeterminate age with giant bifocals framing a perfectly bald head was sitting at the head of the table. He spoke to the woman, ignoring me. "Don't just stand there, Olympia, get him a plate. Steven – move over and give him your chair. *Antonio!*" He directed the last over his shoulder, and I recognized the voice as the authoritative one I'd heard from the front room. "Bring another chair out here, Antonio!"

"I don't mean to intrude," I said weakly.

The man waved his hand as if my remark was too foolish to bother with. "You are hungry," he said. "Someone get him a plate."

Nodding my thanks, I sat down in the chair that was offered me by Steven, a baby-faced man in a bright green sweater who had obediently vacated his seat and now hovered, smiling uncertainly, behind me. Immediately, a plate appeared in front of me with an omelet-like mound on it. "Frittata," said the old man. "Still warm, I think. You drink coffee?" This, unlike the previous statement about my hunger, was a question.

"Yes, thank you," I said. Despite my protestations, I was quite hungry, and the food on my plate smelled fabulous. All around me, the men and women – various aunts and uncles, I assumed – were smiling and nodding, urging me to eat. The whole scene was such a perfectly enacted cliché of the Italian family that I nearly suspected it of being staged. The atmosphere – the tiny converted storeroom, the food, the faces of the people around the table – was instantly and reassuringly familiar to me. These were my mother's people. They even smelled the same. As a child I had often accompanied my mother on visits to her family in Brooklyn, and though we occasionally went for dinner at someone's home, most of our socializing occurred around a giant round table in the back of my uncle's delicatessen. I don't recall my father ever accompanying us on these trips, and I'm quite certain none of my mother's family ever visited us at home. I hadn't seen my Italian relatives for years, and perhaps it was this sudden feeling of regret that I had allowed myself to drift away from them, mixed with the

light-headedness brought about by drinking before breakfast, that produced the swell of child-like contentedness I experienced as I picked up my fork and speared a piece of the frittata, which I knew, even before tasting it, would be delicious.

"Ah, here is Antonio," said the old man. "This man is here for his cake."

"It's almost done." A gangly kid in his late teens with bright green hair pushed a new chair into the space next to me and Steven sat down again, looking relieved.

"This is Antonio, my grandson," said the old man. "He is our frosting artist."

"It's *Tony*," he said sullenly, glancing at me as he retreated to a small partitioned alcove in the corner, where our wedding cake evidently awaited his expertise.

I didn't like the looks of Tony. He was a tall, stooped youth, with a large lower lip that hung below his teeth, giving him the vaguely cretinous look of a perpetual mouth-breather. On his T-shirt was emblazoned the inevitable green and red portrait of Che Guevara looking fierce and passionate and arrogant. Tony reminded me of the bike messengers I often saw downtown, darting in and out of traffic, oblivious to the screeching brakes and panicked pedestrians that were left in their swerving wake.

I took a drink of my coffee, and, after a few polite questions about my wedding, mainly from the women ("it's *tomorrow!*" "Oh, how *wonderful!*"), I ceased to be the center of attention, and the people around the table returned to what was obviously the latest installment in a long-running family argument. For several moments I hardly listened, letting their

comically animated Italian voices wash over me in a soothing cacophony. At that moment, it seemed a fine thing to be joining the ranks of the wedded many. The warmth and security of this little storeroom was something that could not be replicated in an evening out with friends, or in one of the many drunken dinner parties that I often attended on holidays – parties populated with an assortment of other Bay Area acquaintances whose families were far away, or nonexistent.

No, this here – this squabbling in broken English, this food and laughter and tolerance (Tony's petulant disavowal of his conspicuously ethnic first name was received with knowing looks and fond chuckles) – this was *family*, and as I swallowed a bite of the mouth-watering mixture of egg and potato, it occurred to me that it was still possible to recreate it in my own life, on my own terms and with the woman of my choosing. Perhaps I truly was, as Rufus said, lucky. For the suffering of the wives and relations of strivers was well-documented. The families of such men seemed, if their biographies were to be trusted, to generally be shunted into that thankless category of the "something" that had to give. In the grips of their egoistic passions, how could the strivers know what they were missing? In liberal circles it was a given that "family values" were, at worst, code words for abhorrent "isms" and, at best, a mantra for squares and dullards. Maybe this was the great joke that hovered, unseen, over the life of self-indulgence: that the squares had it right all along.

Gradually, I became aware of the discussion taking place around me. It was really a debate between the old man

– Antonio was his name as well – and one of the younger men, a gaunt, forty-ish chain-smoker with a hawk nose and hair so jet black that it was obviously the result of an overzealous dye job. Now, he was jabbing the air with his cigarette and shouting across the table at Tony the elder.

"You would leave our children defenseless!" he sputtered. "Defenseless!"

"So dramatic, Paul," giggled one of the women.

The old man snorted. "Dramatic? He's hysterical. Who was ever hurt by a book?"

"You don't remember what it's like to be a child, Antonio. When I was eleven I read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and it gave me nightmares for weeks."

"So, you had nightmares, so what? You lived."

"But you're missing my point." The hawk-faced man, Paul, stubbed his cigarette out angrily and immediately lit another. Watching his face furrow in frustration, I glimpsed a lifetime of missed points and lost battles. "If a book has the power to affect your subconscious, to enter into your dreams and disturb you in that way, it has the power to do other things."

"I agree with Paulie," said another woman. "Every time you read about those serial killers, it's always something from childhood that started them off."

"What does that have to do with anything? We were talking about books."

"Helen's right," said Paul. "Her point is perfectly clear to me. It's all connected."

Encouraged, Helen went on. "Childhood is a very impressionable time is all. That's why we have to be careful

about what our children have access to. It's as simple as that, Dad."

"It's not like we're fascists here," added Paul.

"Everyone who disagrees with Dad is a fascist," joked another man. "Who wants more coffee?"

"I'll get it." Olympia scurried past, smiling at me in a motherly way.

"It's not me who's forgetting what it's like to be young," said the old man. "You think kids are so fragile. My old man didn't think we were so fragile."

"Oh, here we go," someone said under their breath.

"He used to whip us with a chain. None of this 'kids suing their parents' stuff for us."

"It's a chain now?"

"It used to be a belt."

"Look out for the belt *sander* next time...."

There was some scattered laughter.

"I say, let them read whatever they want," said one of the older men, portentously. "If they're old enough to understand it, it won't hurt them, and if they're young enough for it to hurt them, they probably won't understand it anyway."

"That's ridiculous!" Paul looked immensely distressed now. "Ridiculous," he said again, looking around to the others for support.

"Banning books *is* fascist." This came from Tony the Younger, in his alcove in back.

"Oh, now we hear from this one." Paul rolled his eyes.

"You're all missing the larger point," Tony went on in a voice laced with the hopelessness of the present company ever comprehending the depth of his insight. He did not look up from whatever he was doing to the cake. "It doesn't matter whether books hurt kids or not. The point is that it shouldn't be up to a corrupt, puritanical government to decide which books are in the library or not."

"Thank you, Antonio," said the old man, brushing his hands together as if to put an end to the discussion.

"What do *you* think?" Paul pointed his cigarette at me.

There was a pause, while I finished chewing a mouthful of frittata. I felt calm and at ease and yet very alert. As a child, when the family dinners at my uncle's deli went late, as they frequently did, I often fell asleep on a pile of jackets and sweaters, sometimes underneath the table, where I could listen to the rumbling voices like a spy as I stared sleepily at their legs and feet. But now I was wide awake, and to be treated as an equal. Pouring myself some more coffee, I answered, "I try not to discuss politics, actually."

It was as if I had announced a proclivity for bathing with young boys. The incredulous looks around the table were, I realized, fully to be expected. My mother had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of cousins and uncles named Paulie and Tony and Vinny, and arguing passionately about the latest political gaffe or celebrity scandal was, in their minds, the entire reason for sitting down to a meal to begin with.

I hastened to explain myself. "You see, I try to avoid getting overly involved with anything I have no control over."

Steven, beside me, said, helpfully, "It's not *politics*, exactly. It's local."

"I think it's refreshing," said Olympia, who was still hovering at Tony Senior's elbow like a servant. "It's nicer when we can all just get along."

Paul was frowning, his dark eyebrows knitted together in severe disapproval. "But it affects you, does it not? You can't say that it doesn't affect you."

"No, I admit that it does," I said. "But it's a one-way relationship. It affects *me*, but I can't really affect *it* in any substantial way."

"What is this 'It'?" barked the old man.

"It does seem a bit... abstract." Helen sniffed the air, as if catching a whiff of something malodorous.

I found myself enjoying the discussion immensely. I had never had the nerve to simply refuse to participate in the family roundtable at my uncle's store, or to explain in any detail the self-preservational logic behind my refusal. Instead, approximately upon entering my teens, I seldom elected to do more than grumble cynically from the sidelines – much like Tony the Younger was doing. I leaned back and swallowed more coffee. "Actually, I find that's the best way for me to keep the news of the larger world: abstract. That way it can't touch me too deeply."

"So, it *does* affect you!" Paul pounced on this as if he was catching me in a contradiction.

"Yes, of course it does. Which is all the more reason why I should put it out of my mind."

The old man looked disgusted. The rest of the people around the table looked politely bored. Paul was scowling, looking like he was trying to formulate an adequate counter-argument. I found myself fighting to keep from giggling.

Steven said, "I suppose if you are successful at keeping the news of the world... abstract, as you say, then it would be possible to offer an opinion that would be equally abstract."

I looked at Steven, realizing I had underestimated him. I had taken him for something of a simpleton, but now I recognized him as the family's Invisible One. Nothing he did would ever be recognized, and he had probably figured that out years ago and ceased campaigning for validation. The Invisible One was usually quieter and more thoughtful than his siblings, and these qualities, which would translate into virtues in many situations, would, in a large Italian brood, ensure a lifetime of being overlooked and underrated. My favorite uncle, Roger, was our family's Invisible One, and I felt an immediate fondness for Steven. "Yes, I suppose that's true."

"So, what do you think about the books?" Paul was certainly a single-minded man. I had debated kids like him in college. They were tedious and humorless and never knew when to stop. It struck me that he was most certainly the father of the frosting artist.

Without thinking too carefully, but instead trusting my instincts, which felt razor-sharp at the moment, I replied,

"I would say it probably doesn't matter much in the long run."

Helen seemed to awaken then. "It doesn't matter *what?* If books are banned or not?"

"And why is that, Mr. Locktin?" asked the old man, blinking at me behind his enormous glasses.

I wiped my lips with my napkin. It was just like being back at Putzkammer's, pontificating from my barstool lectern. And the theme was one that appeared to be pursuing me on this, of all days. "Well, books aren't really much of a worry these days, are they?"

"Not much of a worry? Then why are they banning them in schools? What the hell are we talking about here?" Paul held out his hands in exasperation, looking around the table as if to say, *can you believe this guy?*

"Well, I assume that many of those who are behind the ban – wherever it is – are mostly elderly people who aren't particularly computer-literate and don't realize that nobody reads anymore."

There was silence around the table. I quickly added, "I mean, of course, I don't really know the specifics of what you were discussing." I noticed I was speaking quite rapidly, and wondered if all the words had been clear. For a moment I considered repeating the entire sentence just in case.

"Nobody reads anymore?" Paul echoed my words incredulously.

"Of course not," I snapped, growing tired of him. "That's why we're seeing such a resurgence of the entirely antiquated and superfluous practice of book banning. Because the reactionary minds who endorse such a practice

know, on some level, that they are free to resume it now that no one's paying any attention."

"Then why bother doing it?"

This came from someone at the table, but I didn't notice who. I was talking to Paul. "Because censorship is never really about 'protecting the children' – that's just the excuse."

"Excuse for what?"

I wiped some sweat from my upper lip with my napkin, then dropped it, dramatically, on the table in front of me. I noticed that my heart was racing wildly. The coffee must have been very strong. "Why, isn't it obvious?" I stifled the cackle that threatened to erupt from my throat. "For *bossing everyone else around.*" I paused a moment, then added, looking directly at Paul, "Don't you think?"

I sat back and the image of my father's face floated before me. He was saying that of course I would accept the scholarship to California, that he certainly wasn't going to pay good money for me to learn basket-weaving at some fruitcake art school upstate. His face was a granite mask, and I wanted to cause it to crack, to explode in fury, to lose its cool just once. *You must hate your dad.* This from a high school friend, as we retreated down the hall to my room after encountering my glowering father in the kitchen. Me, shrugging, affecting a sixteen-year-old's idea of a worldly, above-it-all demeanor: *I just ignore him.*

"I read a book a week," one of the women said, smugly, breaking a thirty-second silence.

"He's right," said young Tony, appearing at my side, with a pink box balanced like a basketball on his palm. "You

people are all living in the past. Young people today have figured out that online, there can be some semblance of true diversity and democracy. We don't need some outdated art form perpetuated by a bunch of old white men." He smiled at me, but I didn't smile back. "Your cake's done," he said.

"Antonio's just repeating what he reads on all those websites," said the woman who read a book a week. "He doesn't even know what he's talking about."

"If you put down those stupid romance novels occasionally, Aunt Ginny, you'd know exactly what I'm talking about. Don't you know the powers-that-be *want* you to stay ignorant?"

"*I'm* the powers-that-be around here, Antonio," growled the old man. "And I'll not have you being disrespectful to your aunt."

"Ah, what's the use?" The kid turned, and stalked out of the room, leaving the pink box on the table next to my plate.

I gulped down the last of my coffee and looked around for the pot, but it had disappeared from the table.

"If you'd like to come back up front, we can get you on your way." Olympia was standing beside my chair, smiling sadly at me.

"Oh – of course," I said. "Thanks very much for the breakfast," I said to the group at large.

The old man nodded formally at me. No one else spoke. Beside me, Steven was blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. I got the impression they were eager for me to leave.

"I told Sam that I won't buy one of those computers," one of the women said in a low voice. "Do you know anyone can get pornography on them? Even children?"

"Bah. So what?" said the old man.

"I won't have it in my house," the woman said primly.

I lingered a moment, wanting to say something more, but I wasn't sure what, exactly, and anyway, it was time to leave. My feeling of well-being had vanished, however, and the two bites of frittata sat like stones in my stomach. I looked sorrowfully at the remainder on my plate; I had missed my chance now. As I turned to go, I could hear Paul muttering behind me ("Nobody reads anymore, he says..."), and I felt suddenly sick of myself, of my own pointless honesty. I had the urge for a drink, and the company of people for whom I cared nothing at all.

At the register, I paid for the cake and received a receipt from Olympia, who saw me to the door with my pink box. We had not spoken throughout the transaction, but when she patted my sweaty knuckles with her soft, warm palm, I turned and gripped both her hands with mine like a parachuter who has suddenly decided not to jump.

"You see?" I implored her. "You see what happens?" My heart was still pounding, and I was seized with that unbearable urgency known only to those who have inadvertently blundered past the safety zone with their caffeine intake. Your mouth goes dry, a cold sweat leaks from your pores, and you twitch miserably as if to shed the ill-fitting suit of your skin. Having tried crystal meth a handful of times with Anneliese, I can attest to only a scant

margin of difference between the two experiences. A caffeine overdose does, of course, lack the giddy euphoria and raging omnipotence of the speed. But the physical sensations are remarkably similar: that of being permanently frozen at the apogee of a truly horrendous panic attack.

The old woman seemed not at all surprised, merely allowed me to hold her hands and squeezed back somewhat rhythmically, a tiny, intermittent pressure, like a pulse, or a heartbeat.

"I didn't want to be rude to them, I swear," I went on, blathering at her. "If I'd just ignored him, we could have gotten along *fine*."

She murmured soothing, nonsense sounds. I found myself embracing her.

"Fucking *Italians*. I guess something about being around families makes me behave like a child, you know?"

I still didn't know whether she was crazy or not. She held me and stroked me and allowed me to gibber absurdly on her shoulder for several minutes, and I have no idea what, if anything, she understood of either the argument in the back room or my muddled confession. I sensed, as I had when I first arrived, that she was at a kind of remove from everything and everyone around her, that we were all somewhat abstract symbols of Family, Husband, Customer. Yet, there was that warmth, and a tolerance and sympathy that I wanted to believe was aimed at *me*, and not just some idea of me. In any case, she held me and comforted me, and did not pass judgment or push me away, even when my speech subsided and I merely clung to her, even when I pressed myself, tremblingly, against the indeterminate fleshy

region of what must have been her upper abdomen (she was a short woman) and burrowed there for a moment before releasing her and stumbling wordlessly into the street.

The essential neutrality of the universe was confirmed for me when I was twenty-three years old, following a night of heavy drinking at a bar in Oakland called the Knarr Tavern. I was then in my final year of college, and struggling with periodic bouts of depression, which were no doubt exacerbated by the drinking I was doing to stave off anxiety about the impending end of my school days. I was on the cusp of the six-year period that would culminate with *Cat Care Dispatch* and the crippled Helen, so, in retrospect, one might say that my anxiety was, in fact, prescient, and less the function of any real existential crisis. Regardless, it was a dilemma common to many pampered young men who are nearing the precipice of graduation, beyond which lies the terrifying expectation of self-sufficiency.

I had already rejected the idea of graduate school, as I could not stand to live on my father's dime any longer. Yet I was also plagued by the feeling that I had wasted the past five years, that I was, really, no farther along than when I'd started. I had enjoyed myself, certainly. I had sharpened my argumentative skills somewhat and indulged in a good many frivolous sexual encounters, but that night in the Knarr, looking around at my fellow students, each preparing to greet last call in their own way, whether merrily or gloomily (this depended, for the most part, on who had managed to procure female company for what remained of the night; the Knarr was a notorious meat market), it seemed that all whom I observed were miles ahead of me, that I had scarcely

budged from the starting line of the improbable race I had defined for myself.

Swilling whiskey and draft beer, I fretted over my general lack of productivity. I had not produced anything resembling a novel, though my original plan was to produce one a year during my stay in California, after which I would return to the East, triumphantly, manuscripts in hand. But the years had flitted by, and I had only a few aborted attempts at short stories to show for my time. These attempts were little more than highly self-conscious imitations of whatever writer I happened to be reading for class at the time, and the thought of them filled me with loathing, such that I kept all my literary attempts sequestered away in the otherwise unoccupied bottom drawer of my desk where I would not accidentally run across them while searching for something else.

I was, you may have guessed, vastly overdue for the news that would eventually visit me: that I was not, and never would be, an artist. However, this revelation was still some years away – the universe had another brand of divulgement in store for me first.

I recall leaving the bar around two and wandering the neighborhoods in the Temescal District that bordered Telegraph Avenue. I remember that I was smoking cigarettes that night – an indulgence undertaken only in moments of extreme self-pity, and in full defiance of my utter physical intolerance of all tobacco products – and perhaps this contributed to my nausea. After spending several unpleasant moments hunched over the rosebushes of a darkened Victorian, I wiped the vomitus from my mouth and finally

slumped on the front steps, staring vacantly and exhaustedly into space.

The street around me was empty and quiet, and no lamps shone in any of the windows. The only visibility came from the partial moon above me and one dim yellow street light which illuminated a small circle of pavement on the corner of Webster and 41st, directly across the street from where I sat.

I remember clearly the two people I observed as they entered the circle of light. They had their arms around each other, and from my vantage point I could not see their faces well, although I guessed them to be youngish, judging by their gait and the lateness of the hour. The girl was resting her head on the boy's shoulder and they were not speaking, merely strolling companionably, propping each other up on the homeward journey.

I watched them as they moved into the pale, yellowish light, were bathed in it for a moment, then continued past, re-entering the darkness where they were again mostly lost to my sight. I continued to hear their footsteps for another several seconds, and as they rounded the corner, one of them – I believe it was the girl – coughed, the noise echoing across the deserted block to where I sat, dazed.

It is difficult to properly convey the impact of such a moment of sudden comprehension as I experienced that night. Describing the circumstances of the event is essentially futile, since the circumstances were not noteworthy, aside from what they inspired in me. All I can say is that, as I watched that young couple pass through the

light of a street lamp, I became aware, in a way I had never been before, of the ephemeral nature of life, as it exists for all of us on this planet. I saw the true extent to which we were only passing through, how we each had a brief instant of light – of *life* – bookmarked on either end by countless eons of insensible black.

And *no one was watching*. This was the key: that we would take this journey under an empty sky of stars, and depart, as so many had before us, unseen in any cosmic sense. More would come and more would depart, and none with any ultimate significance beyond the tiny portion of our allotted time here: a blink of time's blind eye. This drama was enacted for an empty theater, for no reason other than that no one had stopped it so far.

It is equally difficult for me to describe the intense exhilaration that accompanied this, my single genuine mystical experience. As anyone knows who has ever debated, say, a born-again Christian, the exchange will eventually arrive at a point where, pressed for empirical evidence to support their seemingly absurd viewpoint, the Believer will finally utter, "I just KNOW it," – usually to the great disgust and consternation of the Heathen, who is laboring under the delusion that the tools of logic and scientific reasoning are applicable to the discussion at hand.

But, of course, Reason is no match for Faith, and theory (no matter how grounded in the rational) can never trump subjective experience. So, while I do not share the conviction that, for example, the historical figure Jesus was actually a divine being who was crucified for the sins of mankind, I do have much in common with the

fundamentalist followers of such a belief. I, too, am firmly convinced of that which I cannot prove in any demonstrable way – nor do I wish to, particularly.

My experience in Oakland that night dislodged me from the default position of a vaguely agnostic (but mostly indifferent) theological mindset, and placed me firmly in the ranks of the true-believer in the form of an unequivocal and deeply fervent atheism. Certainly, the globe teems with a variety of experience and perception, and while I would never attempt to dissuade someone from their view that Christ is our savior, or that the Goddess created all, or that Allah or Zeus or Edgar Cayce are the way and the light, I am, nevertheless, possessed of the unwavering conviction that they are all sadly mistaken. I can acknowledge that mine is only one subjective experience among many, most likely brought about by fatigue and distress and alcohol, and that, logically, I should put no more stock in it than I do in the earnest convictions of the clean-shaven young men peddling the Watchtower at the airport, or the A-lister extolling the virtues of Dianetics on the television. Yet, of course, I *do* put more stock in my own revelation. Deep down, I know that I am right and they are wrong. How? I just *know* it. End of discussion.

For some, a vision of cosmic indifference would certainly qualify as a negative experience, but the events on that Oakland street corner had a distinctly freeing effect on me. I looked back on that morning, in subsequent years, as the opening of a door, rather than the closing of one. It would take me some time to integrate what I'd learned into my life in any practical way, but the immediate result was a

general lessening of urgency with regard to my own personal achievement. One way to say it would be this: I felt more *fond* of life, of the world around me and the people in it. In my best moments I was able to see something touchingly brave and almost noble about the extent to which we, as a species, continued to scurry. I also felt *outside* of what I saw to a greater extent, although, as I said, my new perspective did not cause any immediate divergence from what continued to be my "path." One does not shake off all the shackles – hereditary, environmental, parental, cultural – overnight. I had not yet internalized the real truth at the core of my existential awakening: that there is, truly, nothing to "do." And so, I continued to strive, and toward the wrong goal. I still thought that doing Art would save me from having to do Work, not yet knowing myself well enough to grasp that it was actually the other way around.

I can always gauge my mental state by the degree to which I find myself diverging from the insight gained that night following my departure from the Knarr Tavern. After leaving the pastry shop, I walked over to Washington Square and sat on a pigeon shit-stained bench for some time, waiting for my equilibrium to return. The people in the square were an entirely ordinary cross-section of San Franciscans: dog-walkers, the elderly, businesspeople, students and workers. A mime troupe was practicing at the far end of the park, and a sinewy middle-aged man in jogging shorts was performing Tai Chi in front of the statue of Benjamin Franklin. Nevertheless, I found myself feeling immensely critical of everyone who entered my sphere. The faces around me

looked either vapid or cruel, and I found myself snarling at passersby, my face crumpling in nausea.

I shifted my gaze to the twin spires of the Peter and Paul Cathedral on the north end of the park, and for several long moments stared at first one, then the other of the crosses atop the towers, focusing my attention on the white of the crucifix, the background of blue sky, and nothing more – nothing human. Gradually, my heart slowed and the malevolence that seemed to pervade the atmosphere around me began to fade, like smoke clearing a room. Eventually, I was able to look at the church, the trees, the blue sky and the green grass and feel no hidden force there conspiring against me. I looked around at my fellow humans and saw only a representative sampling of arms, legs and faces, like goldfish in a bowl. They were certainly no threat to me, or anyone. They were merely scurrying along, bathed in an evanescence that they glimpsed only occasionally. Mostly, they were occupied with whatever was immediately in front of them, and this was the safest, sanest way to be, after all. I took a relieved breath. The neutrality had returned, and once again I was passive, and at ease.

I thought for awhile about canceling the wedding. I did this in what I felt was a detached, analytical way, examining the question as if it were a math problem, without feeling any real emotional pull in either direction. It was true that the occasion had, at this late date, achieved a considerable momentum of its own, like a boulder rolling down a hill. A tremendous effort would be required to slow the boulder to a stop, let alone reverse its course entirely. Plus, the countering force, the resistance, would have to be

generated entirely by me, whereas the current velocity was born of the efforts of several people, many of whom – Teena being the most obvious – would be traumatized by any sudden change in direction, and their additional resistance to any resistance *I* might summon would have to be factored in as well. There was little doubt that the path of *least* resistance was simply to go ahead with marrying Teena as planned.

I was feeling pleased with my objectivity, considering the issue in this way, and I was even growing a bit sleepy, a condition I assumed to be an inevitable reaction (Newton again!) to the magnitude of caffeine I had unleashed on my system. I felt muted and damped down, though not in an unpleasant way. I sat on the bench and was ruffled by the wind, and, as I pondered the marriage question further, idly watched some people nearby who were preparing to board a bus.

Then I saw her. Sitting up hurriedly, I leaned forward and stared across the park, my heart wearily awakening in my chest and beginning an ominous thumping. Yes, there was no mistaking that walk. It was definitely Anneliese, and her lightly twitching hips were definitely vanishing into the #10 bus amidst a crush of midday commuters. I squirmed a moment, trying to process the information, to assess it objectively. But the last passenger, a tiny Asian woman, was now boarding the bus, and suddenly I was up and running, staggering across the grass toward the bus, heaving myself up the steps with a gasp, balancing the pink cake box on one hip as I dug in my pocket for change and dropping quickly

into the first row, behind the driver, all before I had made any conscious decision to do anything at all.

As the bus moved away from the park, I slid down in my seat and stared at the plastic panel separating me from the driver, afraid to turn my head for fear of being seen. Affixed to the panel was a photograph of a severe-looking black girl reminding me to GET TESTED NOW. I read the words over and over, repeating them to myself mindlessly, as I waited to calm down.

We rumbled down Montgomery Street, crossed Market over to Mission, then jogged from street to street for several blocks, gradually inching our way toward the waterfront. At every stop, several people got on and off the bus, and each time I froze, attempting to hide my face from the line of passengers who stood in the aisle, waiting to disembark. I felt terribly exposed there in the front row, but there was no way to move without drawing attention to myself. Anyway, I remembered that Anneliese generally chose the rearmost row of any bus or train, so it would likely be impossible to situate myself where I would not be observable as she exited.

As the bus headed away from the city center, my fellow passengers grew steadily shabbier-looking. The businesspeople and students were replaced by welfare and food stamp types, along with a smattering of fragrant drunks and the occasional nutcase muttering away to himself as he staggered down the aisle. At one point it occurred to me that I hadn't checked to see if the bus had a second set of exit doors in back. Worried that she might have gotten off blocks ago, I whipped my head around and scanned the bus, which was a

great deal emptier now. But no, there was no rear exit, and Anneliese was sitting alone in the back row, staring out the window with a blank expression on her face. I turned around quickly and faced the black woman and her sexual admonition, drumming my fingers impatiently on the green plastic seat.

Then, as we were approaching Bryant Street, someone yanked the buzzer and the vehicle slowed as the driver began maneuvering us toward the curb. I heard footsteps approaching from the back of the bus, and I slumped lower, turning in my seat and cupping my hand over my eyes against the window, as if to intently study the graffiti on the warehouse wall across the street. I had no idea what I would say if she saw me. I doubted that in my heightened state I would be able to convincingly portray surprise at the apparent coincidence of our meeting. I felt it would be immediately obvious that I had been following her.

Fortunately, though, it was a moot issue. As I watched in the window's reflection, Anneliese walked right by me, her head titled slightly downward as if she were lost in thought. I remembered that about her: that, in public, she was profoundly disinterested in other people except to the extent to which they could serve as an audience for her. I suppose that, ultimately, we all consider the random faces on buses, and in parks and restaurants and movie theaters, to be functionally ornamental, an ever-rotating cast of extras kindly provided for the purpose of populating the background of our lives. But, unlike myself, who can derive a certain novelistic pleasure from observing the scurrying of the masses (from a safe distance), A. was more prone to

exhibitionism than voyeurism. Certainly, she was not inclined to peek curiously at the faces of those with whom she shared public transportation. I was quite safe.

She disappeared down the steps of the bus, and after waiting a moment I did the same, hopping curbside in a guilty, Igor-esque crouch. I looked around and spotted her, fifty feet away, making her way along the sidewalk, her shoulder bag bouncing against her hip. I crept along, feeling increasingly ridiculous as I darted from lamppost to mailbox, hunching and peering like a cartoon spy. The neighborhood we were traversing was a grimy warehouse district, dotted with liquor stores on each corner. Once, a pair of young black men passed Anneliese, walking toward me, and I watched them turn to catch another glimpse of her lightly swaying ass. I ignored them as they passed me, trying to quiet a surge of jealousy that I knew was as absurd as it was pathetic.

As I settled into my measured pursuit, I began to ponder what, exactly, I was doing here, deep in the soiled heart of SoMa, stalking an ex-girlfriend with my wedding cake, of all things, cradled in my arms like a baby I was trying not to wake. I had no conscious intentions concerning Anneliese. I had merely seen her and responded, my body moving independently of my caffeine-crippled brain, and carrying the cake and me along for the ride. Now, however, I had several moments to recover myself as I followed A. from block to block, and though I no longer felt compulsively driven to keep her in my sight, as I had at Washington Square upon her appearance, neither could I summon the decisive change of heart necessary to change direction. I kept

following because I couldn't decide not to. When she stopped, I stopped. When she walked, I walked. I kept approximately half a block between us at all times, and had she gone on walking forever, I might well have settled into a permanent career as her shadow, trailing her slender figure into eternity, carrying my pink box of slowly crumbling cake.

As it happened, I was saved from such a fate. As was the custom throughout much of our relationship, Anneliese made the decision for me. She stopped walking, abruptly, in the middle of a trash-strewn block, and turned, giving me her profile as she bent to rifle through her bag.

There was no obstacle nearby that was large enough to hide behind, and no other foot traffic on the street to camouflage my presence, so I merely froze dumbly, hoping by remaining still to avoid attracting attention. I watched her open a metal door which swung outward onto the sidewalk. She dropped her keys back into her bag and stood for a moment, as if contemplating whether or not to enter. I then submitted to a child-like impulse to close my eyes, as if that would assist in my invisibility. When I opened them, hoping to find her gone, she was still standing in front of the open door, and now she was looking directly at me with no expression of surprise.

"Are you coming up?" she called, then disappeared inside.

When I reached the door, she was no longer there. I was at the bottom of a long, wooden stairway, at the top of which Anneliese could be seen, standing in front of an open door. "I can't stay long," I called up.

"What did you follow me halfway across town for, then?" she said.

I swallowed. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why didn't *you*?"

"I - I was going to," I said lamely.

"Come on if you're coming," she said. "I need to get these shoes off."

I climbed the stairs, listening to the old wood creak beneath my feet. She waited, watching me climb, a slight smile on her face. "You're in lousy shape," she said.

"Put on a few pounds," I grunted. "Why did you act like you didn't see me?"

She shrugged. "I wanted to see what you'd do." She paused, then raised an eyebrow. "Besides, it was kind of exciting being stalked. What's that?" She gestured to the pink box under my arm.

"Nothing. A cake."

"My room's back here," she said, walking ahead of me.

We had emerged into a huge, dimly-lit warehouse space. The floor was a filthy cement, stained with oil and paint, like the floor of an auto-body shop. Here and there some rugs were thrown haphazardly across the surface, but there appeared to be no real attempt at decoration. The place bore the unmistakable stamp of mid-twenties slacker chic. Various pseudo-bohemian oddities were jumbled together: an armless mannequin splashed with blood-red paint; a street sign which read, *Beware of Pickpockets and Loose Women*; a torn poster for the 1950s film, "Attack of the 50-foot Woman"; a pile of copper piping beside what looked like

several toilet seat covers of different shapes and colors. The effect was of a flat that was being squatted in by a herd of runaway teenagers with safety pins in their noses. There was that subsistence-level attempt at hip, an almost dogmatically unsanitary aesthetic that stank of deprivation and items retrieved from someone else's dumpster.

A. tossed her coat onto a couch that was piled with other items of unwashed-looking clothing. I noticed she was wearing a very conventional-looking, cream-colored skirt and blouse, like something an executive-level administrative assistant would don for a day in the cubicle. I also noticed, somewhat uncomfortably, that she looked terrific in the getup. Clothes always seemed to... *cling* to Anneliese. A romance novel cliché, perhaps, but true, nonetheless, in her case. The affinity was not reciprocal, though; Anneliese had never been particularly concerned with fashion. She *tolerated* clothes, and that impression – that she would rather have simply gone without – was not lost on men, or on me.

"Rainard?" she called out, kicking her shoes off. They tumbled across the floor and vanished like mice under the couch. No pets were forthcoming, so I assumed a roommate lurked amidst the debris somewhere. I didn't notice the other occupant of the flat, though, until we were right on top of her. "What up, girl?" Anneliese said, as we approached a black-clad creature, wrapped in a shawl of some kind and hunched in front of a dual-monitor computer station that looked as equipped as anything I'd seen in sci-fi films. Clearly, the creature had been there for some time; candy wrappers and bits of foil from long-digested burritos and Gyros covered the desk and overflowed onto the floor

around the station. The only area clear of refuse was the keyboard, upon which rested two pale, thoroughly nail-bitten hands, like claws, in the home position.

"You back already?" said the creature.

Anneliese was removing her earrings. "I got canned."

"I told you, you didn't have to take that stupid job, hon."

A. held the earrings in her palm, as if trying to guess their weight. "Yeah," she said. Her voice sounded uncharacteristically small.

The keys clacked away without interruption, the fingers moving like the legs of a pinned insect. "I found this whole new region. Hardly anyone knows about it. It's fucking amazing. You'll love it, 'Liesie."

"This is Freddy. He's my psycho ex."

"Hardly," I said, fighting for some dignity.

"What's that you've got there?" asked the creature. She did not turn around, but her dyed-black rat's nest of a head bobbed in the direction of the pink box.

"It's a cake," I said.

"Are we having cake?" asked the creature.

"No, we're not." I said.

Rainard sighed. "I'm sorry I saw it," she said. "Now I want it."

I didn't know how to respond but I instinctively clutched the cake tighter and took a step back, away from the twin monitors which glowed like monstrous heads in the black room. I still had not seen the creature's face.

"Come on, Freddy," said Anneliese. "Later, Rain. Don't forget to eat."

"Jesus," I said, when we were out of earshot. "What on earth was that?"

We were in front of what appeared to be a sort of homemade tent or lean-to, constructed in a corner of the warehouse using various sheets of black fabric. The fabric, which was thin and gauzy, like the material of a partially see-through dress, was stretched at odd angles and fastened to the floor and the walls in some way, creating a geometrically surreal little structure. A curtain of beads served as the "door," and I ducked inside, following Anneliese, who was now removing the pins from her hair, releasing it to tumble in cascading swirls around her face and shoulders. I remembered this act – the liberation of her hair – as being one that often indicated A.'s readiness for sex, and I wondered again at her intentions for inviting me up here.

"Rainard's a gamer," she said. "She's really smart."

"Uh-huh." I said.

"She's rich too."

"I guess she doesn't want to be too ostentatious about it."

"She owns this whole flat. Her father bought it for her as an investment, and now she doesn't have to work anymore."

"What are you doing for work these days, A.?" I asked her.

"You look different," she said.

I was looking around for a place to put the cake down, but was having trouble finding a clean, level surface. "Different how?"

"I don't know," she said, sitting down on the bed. "Your clothes. You look different. Did you sell that book you were always talking about writing?"

"No, I never wrote any book," I said. "I can't believe you even remember that."

"I thought I might be in it somewhere," she said, leaning back against the headboard and stretching lazily. I watched the line of her top rise up over her ribcage as she lifted her arms.

"Maybe you wouldn't have liked how I'd have portrayed you."

"Then I could have sued you for defaming my character." She yawned. "So, I guess you're still writing for those stupid magazines."

"No, I quit all that. I write for advertisers now."

"So that's where the money's coming from."

"What money?"

"Look at you, babe. You look like one of those guys downtown."

"I guess I am one of those guys."

"It suits you."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you put your cake down?"

I placed the cake carefully on the floor. It looked immensely vulnerable there, a tiny pink box surrounded by black gauze and shadow. I faced her. "It's a wedding cake, A. I'm getting married tomorrow."

She raised her eyebrows, but otherwise didn't seem terribly surprised or concerned. "So that's why you followed me home. To invite me to your wedding." She was still

sprawled across the bed, her arms over her head, looking at me with a slight smile. The line of her top was rising. Beneath it, I could see the swell of her breasts moving up and down with her breath. "Why don't you sit down?" she said.

"I don't get it. You dumped *me*, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "You want to go over *that* again?"

"Well, I can't help but feel there should be some continuity between what has come before and what's happening now."

The same teasing smile. "What's happening now?"

I stared at her and said nothing.

"I hear all those Wall Street guys have mistresses in town."

I still said nothing, just looked at her, sprawled there, receptive and waiting.

"They take the train in from the suburbs and sometimes they have to work late, so they call their little wives and they say.... What's her name?"

"Who?"

"The lucky girl."

"Teena." Her name sounded awful, being spoken like that, in that room, in response to that question.

"They say: don't hold dinner for me tonight, Teena. I've got this big project I need to wrap up before the weekend."

I knew if she were to rise from the bed and approach me, if she were to press herself against me and bolster her argument with anything physical, I would give in – at least

for today. And if I gave in today, there was no reason I would not continue to give in on other days. But she did not rise from the bed. She lay, waiting for me to come to her, the way things had always come to her when she needed them.

"What would Rainard think, A.?"

"Why should she think anything?"

"Well, what, exactly, is the nature of your relationship with her?"

"We're friends." Her eyes remained fixed on me. "Roommates."

I felt a wave of sadness then, as I at last acknowledged to myself why I had followed her from North Beach. I had snorted haughtily at Teena's initial suggestion of a bachelor party, assuring her that I had no interest in some quintessentially American frat boy ritual involving strippers and booze and a lot of heavy joking about my last night of "freedom." But there was no denying that I had moved stealthily toward Anneliese, across green grass, up and down the steps of public transportation and over long blocks of city sidewalk, wedding cake in hand, with the intention of having my own little private bachelor party. It wasn't closure I was after, either. Standing there, looking down at her, I remembered that, hurt pride aside, I was more relieved than anything else when A. called us quits over three years ago. I had never truly envisioned any kind of future with her, and, plainly, my low-income, low-prestige slumming at the trade journals had made any future with *me* eminently undesirable in her practical eyes.

I saw clearly now that what she was to me – had always been to me – was little more than a source of infinite

carnal pleasure, and, by extension, an advertisement for my ability to attract, a hood ornament for my male vanity. I saw this, and I saw that she knew it too, had always known it, had probably known little else in her dealings with the male of the species, on down from the boys who first approached her barely pubescent self, making promises and – always – offering gifts.

I felt sad because I saw that if I was to sin here today, in this gothic loft, it was up to me to make the first move, that once again I was to be the *pursuer*. It was a role I had always played to perfection throughout our relationship, despite my other faults and despite an innate philosophical predisposition against such a role to begin with. So I was sad because she looked delicious and I wanted her, despite everything. And, despite my lofty protestations to the contrary, on the eve of my ascendance to married respectability I, like any jar-headed yahoo licking whipped cream off some dial-a-whore, twelve hours before tying the knot with his high school sweetheart, craved one last moment of genuine weakness. But if Anneliese was unwilling to relinquish *her* position of weakness, I would be unable to assume my own, and there we were stalemated. Sighing, I turned to go.

"Don't forget your cake," she said from the bed. I don't know what she was thinking – whether she thought I'd be back, or whether she truly didn't care.

"Take care, A." I said, and left her there.

I had only just emerged from the warehouse when my cell phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket, saw Teena's name, and immediately began walking, as if to put as much distance as possible between myself and Anneliese before answering the call. I picked up on the fifth ring, effecting a jaunty, "running errands" tone. "Hi there!"

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean, what's wrong? How's things over there?"

"All right, I guess. I haven't strangled my mother yet, anyway, so that's something."

"Wonderful!" I said, glad of the chance to shift the focus to her.

"Are you sure you're okay, Freddy? You sound really weird."

"I'm just walking," I said. "It's very noisy out here. I have to yell."

"How do the rings look?"

"The rings?"

"Freddy, have you been drinking?"

"No!" I took a deep breath and forced my voice to sound less manic. "I had a beer a couple of hours ago with Rufus, but that's it. Anyway, I'm on my way to get the rings now. I'm almost there. Everything's fine."

"Oh. Okay, great... no, *that* one, Mom...."

I sent up a silent prayer of thanks to the universe for providing me with a meddling control freak of a future mother-in-law. If I'd had Teena's undivided attention during

the call, things might have gone badly. Naturally, it would have been no great challenge for me to summon a reasonably legitimate-sounding explanation for how I had spent my day thus far. Any number of fictional distractions could plausibly have prevented me from obtaining the wedding rings already. But Teena had an infuriating knack for sniffing out and pouncing on even the most harmless and incidental of my falsehoods. It was one of her more tedious traits, and, in a way, was responsible for our engagement in the first place.

My first impression of Teena consisted mainly of noting the unfortunate irony of her name, for she was – and is – not a small girl. She is one of those about whom other women are fond of saying that she "carries it well," meaning that she manages to maintain a confident, even sexual air about her, despite a body that has never conformed to 21st Century America's notions of physical attractiveness. I don't mean to imply that she is unattractive, however. In fact, Teena is an exemplar of the theory that how you feel about yourself will dictate how others feel about you. She has always seemed far more pleased in her skin than I ever have in mine, for instance, and moves through the world with a straightforward assurance that bears no stain of arrogance, a balance I was never able to strike back when I still considered myself aesthetically agreeable, and was more inclined than in recent years toward vainglory.

Of course, one could easily make the argument that a fat girl will never be accused of being "stuck up," and that the more attractive you are, the more you are likely to be judged vain by those whom you eclipse. Certainly, Teena's cheerfully forthright attitude of wholesome self-regard

would be deemed distasteful in someone whose figure was more conventionally enviable. A similar double-standard also exists in the case of, say, memoirs of drug addiction, a literary genre which was immensely fashionable that year. For the economically easeful, a past checkered with compulsive pharmaceutical indulgence is merely one more symptom of their despicably pampered lifestyle, and is, at best, seen as slumming. If a junkie author has the good fortune to be born poor, however, any further deviations from the mainstream will simply pile on the street cred. Such are the freedoms of the disadvantaged in the circle dance of mutual insecurity and fantasy projection that is our consumer culture.

I was pleasantly, benevolently drunk during my first conversation with Teena, a half-shouted exchange in the corner of a hallway in the Green Street flat of one of Brian's friends from the *Guardian*. That night, she looked congenial to me in a soothing, temporary way. She had good eyes, clear skin, and excellent breasts, which were displayed to great advantage that night in a low-cut peasant blouse, a choice entirely appropriate to Teena's compact attractiveness. She looked and moved like an appealingly robust shepherd's wife, one whose sturdy legs and strong, capable hands hint at a heritage of physical labor beneath a Third World sky. She was peasant sexy.

There were many women at the party that night, and I can't say why, exactly, I chose to go home with Teena. I had the newly-acquired confidence that accompanies financial security, I was dressed in such a way as to de-emphasize my growing paunch, and, though past my prime, was probably

capable of enticing half a dozen of the winsome departmental interns who were clustered on the fire escape smoking cigarettes and declaiming loudly about local politics.

It could be that I wasn't ready for the exertion that they promised, with their flashing eyes and lithe, youthful haunches. A more flattering explanation would be that Teena engaged my mind as well as my body, since our initial conversation centered around a book of Edmund Wilson's later essays, which I had found in our host's bookshelf and had been posed, reading in the hallway – the oldest trick in the world for attracting notice at a party thronged with attention-seeking extroverts – when Teena happened by on her way to refilling her glass of Tequila.

"What do you think of that?" she asked me, in her typically direct manner.

I grasped at once that she was not coquettishly presenting me with an opportunity to pontificate – she was actually interested in my opinion. I (who had no way of knowing at that point, that Teena was, in fact, far more well-read than myself, who still retained some pretense of bookishness) offered a dismissive snort. "Not my thing, really," I said, hoping to imply a comprehensive knowledge of the thoroughly inadequate works of Wilson, who I had never read until approximately ten minutes ago.

"Really?" she said, studying me. "Why?"

I then attempted to fake my way through a critique of Wilson's dismissal of contemporary culture, which Teena absorbed, then easily dismantled, having concluded fairly early on (she later told me) that I obviously had no idea what

I was talking about. However (as I also learned later), she was impressed by the ease with which I fabricated my opinions, and by my reluctance to simply admit that I had never read the book. From this, she extrapolated some sort of complementary notion about my character, which I don't fully understand, but by then we had moved on to recalling famous advertising jingles of the 1980s, a subject on which I was on much firmer ground.

Teena was well-educated (she was in her final year at Stanford when we met), but she was not a passionate intellectual, and – like most of our economically anxious generation – saw college as the resume padding it has essentially become. Learning was a pragmatic thing for her, a means to an end, and she had none of the obsessive, fetishistic attitudes toward art that characterized the ilk in which I had once sought membership.

Whatever the reason – and "reason" probably has little to do with the aggregation of serendipity that brings two people together at a crowded party – there was an immediate and palpable rapport that was recognized by each of us fairly early in the evening. By the time we repaired to the kitchen to freshen our drinks I was certain that she would go to bed with me that night, and I felt a lack of anxiety about the impending encounter that boded well for its successful consummation. All that remained was to monitor my alcohol intake so as not to render myself insensible, and this I did, with an almost surgical precision, so that when, at last, we stumbled out into the misty San Francisco night, I was able to offer a steady arm as support for a none-too-diminutive girl who had taken perhaps one drink too many.

Teena lived on Russian Hill, which was a brisk, twenty-minute walk from the flat where the party was now petering out. As we set out on foot, huddled together against the moist chill of the night, I became aware of how comfortable I already felt with this girl I had only known for a fraction of a Friday night. Even then, I think I felt an inevitability settling around us, though my intentions were still decidedly short-term. I had already recognized that Teena was not a candidate for occasional, no-strings sex. She was obviously interested in a relationship, which ruled out my seeing her after tonight, when I fully intended to sleep with her. Very late at night, given a sufficient nudge by the combination of natural chemistry and artificial intoxicant, the movement toward sex assumes a velocity of its own that is difficult to interrupt. A level of urgency sets in that is often in inverse proportion to the overall wisdom of the act. The first night I slept with Anneliese, I was so worked up I could scarcely remove her brassiere. Her mildly contemptuous laughter did not deter me in the slightest; I was headlong in the pursuit of my goal and had long since jettisoned the encumbering ballast of pride.

I was nowhere near as rabid this time around – I was older, and the girl was fatter – and Teena could easily have forestalled me, had she demurred convincingly, or placed undue emphasis on follow-through. As it happened, she simply behaved as if it was assumed that we were together now, for the night and beyond. By never actually giving me the opportunity to decline, she managed to effortlessly bypass my typically male "reluctance to commit," as it would likely have been deemed if it had ever come up. But it did

not, and, according to the mythology of our relationship, that was that, instantly and mutually. "Love at first sight," Teena says, when telling our story. "Just like in the cheesy movies." For all practical purposes, she is right. After that night, we were *we*, at the expense of the increasingly endangered *I*, whose days (I saw now) were most definitely numbered.

Now that that number had dwindled to one, I couldn't help recalling how rapidly things had progressed between us, right from the very beginning. We had been a couple for almost one year the night we decided to marry. The setting was *La Mediterranee*, one of our favorite Castro eateries. By then, Teena was spending four to five nights a week in the apartment I shared with Brian, and the ostensible topic of conversation at the restaurant that night was whether or not it would be prudent for her to give up the Russian Hill apartment and move in with Brian and me full-time. At some point she asked, half-jokingly, whether it wouldn't make more sense for us to just get married.

If I were to choose one symptom in particular as evidence of how little I have changed since childhood, it would be that my first instinct in personal relationships is almost always to avoid conflict. I am uninterested in exploring the all-too-obvious Freudian cause and effect (distant father, emotional mother, only child, etc.), but of fascination to me, in as detached and objective way as I am able to muster, is how frequently I take the longest, hardest way around to achieve stability. It only occurs to me in hindsight that the truth would often have been a much more effective tool. It seems painfully obvious to me now that if I had simply, directly explained that I didn't feel ready to make

that level of commitment, Teena would have respected my honesty. But I elected to take a different path.

What I did, after pausing heavily to finish chewing my *dolmas*, was to go into a ridiculous song and dance about the *institution* of marriage itself: the discredited premise behind it, the anachronistic needs it fulfills, and so on. In short, I disgorged the standard recitation of your average high-school freshman, whose worldliness, on the timeline between Point A (revelation that Santa Claus does not exist) and Point B (loss of virginity) falls somewhere nearer the former.

Teena listened to my inane babbling, wearing the same expression with which she had observed my fumbling ad-libs concerning Edmund Wilson. At last, to both our relief, she interrupted me.

"I don't believe you, Freddy. You're too intelligent to really believe this nonsense about 'institutionalized control systems,' and 'the government keeping tabs on us,' whatever that means. I think you're avoiding the real issue."

"What is the real issue?" I said, defensively. Inside, I was thinking, *She knows. It ends tonight.*

But, while her instinct for deception is as unerring as anyone I've known, Teena was no mind-reader. And when she smiled tolerantly and said, with heart-breaking certainty, "You're just scared, Freddy. So am I," and covered my hand with hers, I knew that I was not going to tell her the truth.

Yes... the truth. But, as I gripped my wedding cake in one hand, and my cell phone in the other, listening to my future wife bicker with her mother about place settings on the other end of the line, the truth was something less than

absolutely clear. After the day I'd had so far, and the unsettling encounter with Anneliese, Teena's voice sounded like home to me: safe and reliable and without hidden agenda. She loved me without reservation, and that love was a kind of fragile egg I felt duty-bound to protect, somehow. In a very real sense, that *was* my love for her: that sense of duty, of protectiveness, of obligation. *That* was what she had elicited from me, right from the start, and that was the way I felt best equipped to reciprocate her feelings. Whatever definition I might care to affix to it, the fact remained that Frederick Locktin had never felt that before, about anyone, and he liked the way it felt to feel it.

"I got the cake," I said suddenly.

"How does it look? Do you think it's too small?"

"No," I said. "It looks great."

"You don't think we should have gone for one of those big, triple-decker deals? I don't know, Freddy, maybe it would have been easier to just go along with what my mom wanted and do the whole church thing with all the conventional hoopla...."

"Aha!" I said.

"What?"

"You're rattled, too. It's getting to you. You're second-guessing silly things like the cake."

"*Silly?*"

"You know what I mean. The cake is just a symbol, like the rings are a symbol, like the whole event is a symbol. It's *all* representational. It's all, like you said, hoopla that stands in for the indefinable."

"You sound a little disparaging of the hoopla, Freddy."

"Not at all." But she was right. I did sound disparaging.

She went on, still sounding worried. "Isn't it important to choose the *right* symbol, though? We don't want to symbolize the wrong thing."

I chose my words carefully. "I don't know if there is a right and wrong. I think *we* decide that. If I'd been too poor to buy you a beautiful engagement ring, I'd have gotten you whatever I could afford, and it would still be beautiful to you because of what it represents. I would hope, anyway."

"You know it would. But since you *have* the money, I'll take this big old rock, thanks." She giggled.

"Anyway, all I'm saying is that since the *act* of marriage is essentially a symbolic event, there's no point in becoming overly critical of any one component of the event in terms of how it might look to *others*. That doesn't matter. What's important is not the cake, it's what the cake *means*. The underlying, you know... stuff. And that's about us, not them."

"My god, Freddy. That was maybe the most romantic thing you've ever said to me."

"I'm a little light-headed. I haven't really eaten yet today."

"I love you," she said, wonderingly, in that tone of discovery that she used sometimes with me. Teena discovered love again and again, like an amnesiac child. I often envied her the piquancy of her emotions, the surge and swell of them.

"I love you, too." I said. "I should probably go."

"Get something to eat," she said. "And don't drop the cake."

"I'm aghast," I said. "I would defend it with my life."

"Well, I guess if we'd had the cake my mom wanted, you would have needed a hand truck to lug it around."

"It's nice and small and light," I said. "Fits right there under my arm."

"Call me later, you crazy husband."

"You're premature," I said. "I'm still just your crazy fiancé."

"I know," she said. "I'm practicing." She paused. "It's not really so indefinable, is it, Freddy? We've got a word for it."

"Words are just symbols, too. You can only define them with other words."

"I like the word 'love,'" Teena said. "It sounds like the way I feel. It doesn't feel representational."

"That's because you're a literary romantic," I said. "It's all those Jane Austen novels you spent your golden California girlhood swooning over. You fell in love with the *idea* of love in books before you ever experienced it in real life. For you, the word preceded the feeling."

She laughed. "I should never have told you that. I was trying to impress you. I thought you wanted one of those East Coast girls who had memorized the Harvard Classics in prep school."

"Little did you know."

"*Very* little. You never even read Jane Austen. Not that it stopped you from sneering at her for over an hour."

"My opinion is unsullied by exposure to the subject. I think it retains a certain purity that way."

She giggled again, then grew serious. "What about you, Freddy?"

"What about me?"

"You know. The word. Love."

I hesitated. "Love works for me," I said.

She sighed, laughing. "I guess I exceeded my romantic quota for this conversation."

"I should go, Teen. I'm starving. And the rings, in all their hoary symbolism, await."

"Okay. Call me later. Love you."

"Love you."

"Bye."

"Bye."

I hung up, feeling the way I'd felt after every phone call with Teena so far that day: like I'd barely averted a disaster. The cell phone, and the perpetual, compulsive communication that it has fostered, seems, on the surface, to be the brainchild of the feminine ideal. Yet, there is also a paradoxical *reduction* in intimacy that is inherent to the technology, and therein lies – I suspect – its appeal to the other half of the population. As has been the case for many of our generation, a large percentage of the early phase of courtship between Teena and me took place on the phone. The first, trembling disclosures that lay the groundwork for intimacy frequently took place with me in my darkened office and her hunched in the stacks of a library miles away, both of us with earpiece mashed to ear canal as if to absorb the digitalized purr of each other's endearments, to upload

them to the central cortex where they would be stored forever.

I sometimes wonder if our relationship would have progressed as far and as fast as it did if it had been conducted solely in physical proximity, face to face and eye to eye. I remember reading a survey once which indicated that American couples had been having progressively less sex since the 1970s. Among the posited explanations for this dispiriting phenomenon were – in chronological order – women leaving the home for the workplace, the dissolution of the traditional family dinnertime and the fast food chains that sprouted up to fill the space. These factors, in conjunction with the sedentary nature of most computer-era jobs, culminated (according to the article) in the current preponderance of obesity among the lower and middle classes. In short: we were copulating with less frequency because we found each other generally less enticing. Perhaps the cell phone arrived just in time to rescue the bloated human race from utter indifference to each other. When Love is truly blind, we need only our imaginations, stimulated to the point of frenzy by the omnipresent media, to keep the wheels of romance turning. Phone sex may have been rendered obsolete by the internet age, but phone *love* may yet be the future.

The treeless warehouse district gave me no shelter from the midday sun, and I grew overheated as I retraced the route back toward Market Street. I had no stomach for a bus ride at the moment and no cabs were in evidence, so I trudged along, huffing and puffing, tie loosened, my dark

wool sport coat slung over my shoulder and the cake under my arm.

As I walked, I was thinking of a discussion Anneliese and I had once had about love, or its verbal expression, anyway. It had been a particularly tranquil moment for us: side-by-side on the couch, in front of the window, in my apartment – me engrossed in the newspaper, she in a magazine. At one point I stopped reading and rubbed A's thighs fondly. Her skin was warmed from the rays of the afternoon sun which had been moving steadily across our laps as we sat, and I remember feeling unusually content that afternoon, relaxed and placid. I recall muttering something affectionate as I moved my palm questioningly upward, to which she responded by yawning lazily and adjusting her position to allow me greater access.

For some reason I felt compelled to say, not without humor, that I took that to mean she reciprocated my feelings.

I remember the look she gave me, an eye-rolling expression of deep boredom. Crossing her leg away from me and picking up the magazine again, she said, "It doesn't always have to be automatic, you know."

"What's that, A.?"

She sighed, obviously too bored for words. "The whole... 'I love you' thing."

"I'm not sure I'm following you."

She put the magazine down then and mimicked an exchange between an insipidly hygienic couple: "'I love you.' 'I love *you*.'" She brushed her hair back impatiently. "It's like a damn door swinging back and forth. It doesn't *mean* anything when it's just *automatic* like that."

"Yes, I suppose it can be exhausting, being inundated with affection. You have my deepest apologies."

"Oh, now you're hurt."

That night in bed I was still sulking, but she rolled toward me as if nothing had happened, and though I would have preferred to withhold my response, to do so would have accomplished little. She would have rolled back over and gone to sleep, and I would have denied myself the one consistently fulfilling interaction our relationship afforded me. Several minutes later, though, when I was on top of her, I seized a shock of her hair and gave a brutal yank, feeling the adrenaline surge through my veins, shortening my breath and causing my heartbeat to accelerate abruptly, like a jump-started engine. Whatever consequences I might have anticipated from this impulsive bit of bush-league brutality, it did not occur to me that she would orgasm immediately, eyes wide open and staring with amazement into mine, her heels locked behind my back and gripping me with an urgency that had only been hinted at so far. This she did, though, and her unexpected fervency had the effect of abbreviating my own journey and spurring me on toward a climax which could scarcely be called premature, as she had crossed the finish line and collapsed in exhaustion by the time I began to round the final bend. This marked the end of what Anneliese later, mockingly, referred to as our "vanilla period."

My surroundings were improving measurably as I neared the financial district. The hollow-eyed homeless were gradually replaced by a more highly-calibrated brand of pedestrian. The shuffling aimlessness of storefront loitering

gave way to the tattoo of purposeful heels en route to lucrative encounters. The crowds thickened and I merged with them like a stray rejoining the fold. I have no animosity toward the down-on-their-luck segment of our city, but I make no apology for my disinclination to mingle among them. Regarding slumming, what little spark I had once fanned was now thoroughly snuffed.

A vaguely victorious feeling began to dawn on me, spurred, I think, by spurning Anneliese and her passive propositions, by putting space between us solely by my own physical power (on my own two feet, if you want to get carried away with the symbolism). Here I was, heading north (Up!) toward the city's gleaming core while she languished in entropy to the south. It occurred to me that what I was feeling smacked distinctly of that loathsome new age term *closure*. Yet, there it was. Over the last couple of years, the demise of my relationship with A. had settled on me like soot, besmirching me ever so slightly with what I'd taken to be a permanent stain. Yet, as I turned on Market and navigated my way down those familiar red bricks, I was aware that today I had achieved something far more lasting than the final fling I had been gluttonously skulking for. No, I had come to terms with something larger.

By sheer dumb luck – though I'd initially mistaken it for the very opposite – I had evaded the fate befallen by Rainard. With a chill, I realized that I could very easily have ended up there, in some absurd West Coast perversion of a Soho loft, footing the bill for my sullen princess, not even knowing how truly lost in the dark I was.

As a kind of test performed for myself, I pulled out my phone and redialed Teena's number.

"Yes, Freddy?" she answered.

"I just wanted to say something," I said.

"Okay?"

I took a giddy breath. "I love you."

There was only a second or two of silence. Then she giggled. "I love you too, honey. What on earth...?"

"Don't ask questions. That's all I wanted to say. I'm going to go now."

"If you're going crazy, it certainly is a sweet kind of crazy."

"Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I love you, Teen."

"I love *you!*" Right back at me. Just like a blessed, beautiful swinging door.

"Bye."

"Good-bye."

I snapped the phone shut and returned it to my pocket. Anneliese had rejected me as an imperfect benefactor, but the truth was, she was fundamentally unsuited to the role she was trying to play. Because a true courtesan must maintain at least the *illusion* of imminent reciprocal generosity. A., however, had a core of selfishness that would always recoil at the necessary reciprocations – verbal, symbolic, otherwise – inherent in *any* relationship. Because she could not give, she would be forever frustrated in her quest to take. And it felt fine – this last time – to leave *her* behind.

It was in this buoyant state that I impulsively phoned my parents and invited them to lunch. The two of them had arrived late the night before and were now installed at the St. Francis, on Union Square. My mother answered their cell phone on the first ring, sounding worried as always. She has never shaken the notion that cell phones are to be used in emergencies, and assumes that anyone utilizing one is either in a hospital bed or – best case scenario – stranded at the side of the road in need of a lift.

We agreed to meet in half an hour at a place called *Joule*, a restaurant on Bush Street I'd never been to, and I hung up, feeling I had regained whatever equilibrium had been lost in the course of my stop in North Beach. I felt somewhat lightheaded, but no longer jittery or anxious. I shrugged my coat on, having passed once more into the shadow of skyscrapers, like entering the sunless forest floor of a mighty grove of redwoods. As I was buffeted along by the ceaseless flow of worker bees, I reflected on how much more tiring it is to navigate the long blocks of skid row, without peers to prop you up. Entering the stream of foot traffic on Market was like stepping onto one of those moving sidewalks at the airport. Your pace was set for you by the others, and you found yourself very nearly a passenger on your own feet, propelled by the movement of the herd.

Checking my watch, I saw that it was about half past one. I had plenty of time to grab some lunch with my parents and still meet Brian at the tux place at three. Then, all that remained was the rings. As I walked, I dialed the jeweler's

number, feeling immensely efficient in my multi-tasking, as my surroundings dictated.

The jeweler replied, in a guttural, Eastern European accent, that they were open late today – until eight.

"And my rings are ready? Name of Locktin?"

"Yes, Mr. Locktin, let me see...." I heard a rustling sound, and I pictured an elderly Jew, balancing the phone on one rounded shoulder while he adjusted his rimless spectacles. "*No*," he suddenly barked. "I know what I'm doing!"

"I believe you," I said, with a smirk. But he did not hear me; the phone had evidently fallen away from his ear, for his voice was more distant now, and another voice – a female one – could be heard in answer. I could not make out her words, but the tone was clear enough.

With a noisy clattering, he was back on the line. "I apologize, Mr. Locktin. We have your rings right here. Everything is *fine*."

I had the idea that the last had been directed to the dissenting party at his elbow and not to me, but I thanked him politely and told him I would be by before eight.

"Very good, sir," he said gravely, in butler tones.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrived at the restaurant, a schizophrenic establishment that served French cuisine amidst the dark-paneled private-club atmosphere of a Midwest steakhouse. I had no doubt who had chosen the spot, given that the place did everything but stencil "Welcome, lawyers!" on the menu. Glancing around at the tables from the darkened entryway, I spied what appeared to be half a dozen firm-expensed client lunches in process. I

immediately spotted my father, who always sat facing the door. I had been hoping to arrive early, in time to wash up a little in the restroom and possibly have a drink in preparation for the family lunch, which I was now second-guessing somewhat as a possibly ill-considered improvisation on my schedule. But I was unable to duck into the bar before his eyes locked on me, like a bird spying prey from the night sky. I gave a wave and made my way to their table, determined to preserve the jaunty tone I had affected on the phone.

"Frederick!" My mother reached for me, half-standing up from the rounded booth, and I was obliged to offer an awkward, partly stooped hug. I shook my father's hand and slid into the booth, slightly out of breath from the walk.

As usual, my mother monopolized the conversation for the first several minutes with a fluttering of excited chatter. How was Teena? Had I seen the dress? Did she look just gorgeous? How many people were coming? When would they meet her parents? My father interjected little, except when prodded for confirmation of some detail or another, and I answered rapidly, in single syllables, waiting for the initial wave of motherly interrogation to subside.

At one point I let slip that Teena's mother was over at her place now, helping her.

"But how do you know that?"

"I spoke to her earlier."

My mother's mouth expanded into an incredulous red circle and she inhaled sharply. "You *spoke* to her?"

My father grunted, "Why on earth not?"

"They had *agreed*...."

I said, "Well, the tradition actually just refers to the day of the wedding itself...."

My mother shook her head firmly. "Our family has always done the day *before* as well."

"It just didn't work out," I said. "Too many last-minute logistics."

She sighed. "That's why people have wedding *planners*," she said. "You pay someone to worry about the details, so you don't have to. Ah, it was such a *lovely* tradition." Now she had the distinct appearance of a woman preparing to weep, but I knew she could not maintain this downswing, and within seconds she perked up. "You're still having the orange blossoms?"

"Yes. And just to maintain a strict adherence to Italian tradition, I will be sweeping into her village on horseback to kidnap her."

"How are you fixed for money?" My father asked suddenly, with a hint of exasperation, as if he had reached the limits of his ability to endure such inanity. It has always been like this in our family. Female concerns are tolerated, more so on occasions such as weddings, which are deemed to be in their domain, but the men reserve the right to cut through the nonsense at any moment and demand the floor. My mother visibly receded at the sound of my father's words. She hunched forward over her soup, which had been neglected since my arrival, and began to eat. Her time had run out.

I took a drink of water before responding to my father. This classic stalling technique would have been

rendered doubly effective if I'd had the whiskey I now urgently desired, but there was no sign of a waiter yet. I imagine there are people, somewhere, who can receive questions of a financial nature from their parents with placid goodwill and equanimity. As I slowly swallowed the iced water, I tried to imagine the tone such a person might strike. I decided that an attitude of bemused tolerance best suited my purposes here. "We're fine. The wedding isn't terribly expensive and we're not doing a honeymoon yet."

"No honeymoon?" My mother looked as if I'd kicked her in the stomach.

"We're planning to get away later in the year," I said lightly. "I'm swamped with work right now, and Teena just started this new job...."

"So, work's going well, then?" I had intended the last comment for my father, and was gratified to see him take the bait. He couldn't have cared less about the honeymoon, although my mother still looked disturbed.

"Sure. Lots of clients. Word's getting around, I think. Since that Levi's job, I keep getting calls for catalog work. I've had to start referring out on some of the smaller, web-based stuff."

My father nodded, and plucked a piece of bread from the basket. His face did not betray him, but I could tell he was pleased. My mother patted my arm, and just then the waiter appeared. We all ordered drinks and I ordered a twelve dollar cheeseburger; I felt the need of meat. My father ordered his usual steak, and my mother waved her hand at the waiter, as if she didn't want to impose. "I'll just have a salad," she said.

After the waiter had gone, my father looked at me speculatively. "So, there's money in this, then?"

I nodded, and said no more. Up to this point, I'd succeeding in remaining more or less detached from the conversation, as if it were occurring only in the abstract, and was, therefore, no threat to me.

He looked at me a moment more, studying me with those keen, cerulean eyes which protruded slightly, seeming to strain forward in their sockets. Those eyes, and the heavy black Canuck eyebrows that partially obscured them, invariably gave his audience the impression of having failed to measure up in some critical way. Those who worked for my father tended toward a state of semi-permanent anxiety. When I was in high school, one pretty young secretary only a few years older than myself had confided to me that she found herself holding her breath whenever she spoke to him. "He always seems so angry!" she said.

As I sat there across from him, now in my early thirties, fully solvent and about to be married, I found that I was not yet invulnerable, as I'd hoped. My father's gaze – and what I glimpsed there – had effortlessly obliterated my detachment, had highlighted its fragility and made a mockery of my overconfidence in scheduling this lunch to begin with. Not that he did any of this in malevolence, or even, I think, consciously. Unlike the sweetly pliable creature with whom I had taken great (and pleasurable) pains in order to properly distinguish my immensely appreciative nature from that of her stony employer ("Oh, Freddy, what if he *knew*?" was the giggling, half-hearted protestation I remember most clearly from our handful of storage room fumblings), I had never

discerned anger in the man. Anger entailed a certain loss of control, which my father viewed as a form of personal liability. No, what I saw there was less human, a kind of pitiless dissecting of weakness and frailty that was ongoing and utterly without malice, in the way an animal harbors no antipathy for the smaller animal it devours.

I do not necessarily believe that my father felt that way about *me*, specifically. I believe that he was simply a lawyer to the core, and that he could not relinquish his nature any more than a musician, once retired from the concert hall, can cease to be musical. Thus, the great struggle of my formative years was to not take my father *personally*.

"Oh, is that the cake?" My mother exclaimed, having noticed the pink box on the seat beside me. "It's so small!"

"It's just a small ceremony, mom," I reminded her. "A few friends and close family. Nothing out of control."

"I'm sure it will be fine," she said bravely. "Teena will look wonderful. She has such a lovely *face*."

There was a pause in our conversation, while I struggled to regain my prior lofty perspective. Fortunately our drinks arrived just then. I gulped half of mine down and felt better instantly.

"You look a little tense, dear," my mother observed. "I guess the day before a big day like this is always a little crazy. So much to consider."

As I had been since childhood, I was once again torn in my loyalties. On one side sat my father, remote and imperturbable, eliciting my respect, but very little of my love. My mother sat beside him as always, literally pulsing with emotion, a raw wound of a woman who was nearly

always on the verge of either great joy or copious tears. I had no more idea than I'd ever had of what had brought the two of them together. I had never seen them express any but a perfunctory affection, and that usually in public situations where its omission would have been conspicuous. It was as if they had made some bargain long ago, and now were each grimly fulfilling their end. In all of Brian's blues lore, the deal with the devil necessarily entailed riches worthy of pawning the soul: fame, wealth, talent. But, try as I might, I could only discern one item of any conceivable value that their union had begotten: myself. But we can never know our parents, and the fact that I had not given up trying seemed to me an indication of my own lack of maturity. Still, once more I found my childish self tempted by the brimming empathy in my mother's eyes. I did not respect it particularly, but I moved toward it as I always had: in weakness.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm not always exactly certain about the whole thing," I said, gritting my teeth with self-loathing.

"What whole thing, dear?"

I waved my hands airily. "You know... marriage." As if it was a generalized philosophical quibble. Not quite sure about the *concept*, old girl.

My mother calmed immediately. She was at her most actualized when allowed to minister to another. In that sense, her choice of my father as a life-mate was as doomed as that of the nymphomaniac V.A. nurse who falls for the impotent soldier. "You love this girl, don't you?" she asked.

"Well, *sure*, but...."

She nodded, assured. "That's all that matters. The rest will work itself out."

I fidgeted with my straw, like a five-year-old rebelling against his Brussels sprouts. "It's just that... I can't seem to shake this feeling that I'm making a mistake. Like, I'm just doing what I'm *expected* to do, you know? And I'm going to miss my chance to, to...." I was even regressing to a pre-teen level of articulateness.

"To what, dear?"

I took another large gulp of my drink. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm saying, exactly." My mother squeezed my hand, nodding emphatically, though I doubt she had the slightest idea what I was talking about. Still, I was *sharing*, and that was the currency of her Italian heart.

But my father's patience had run out again. "For god's sake, Marie," he rumbled. "I can't believe you're still encouraging this from him."

My mother ignored him. "You were always very sensitive," she said to me. "Even as a baby. You took everything so *hard*."

I leaned back sullenly. We were no longer in a restaurant in San Francisco on the day before my wedding. We were back in New York and I was fifteen years old, arguing with my father about quitting the swim team. He took a dim view of my passive, directionless rebellion, and so did I, for that matter. But I was also tired. Tired of floating in that cold water like a dead fish, while the coaches yelled themselves hoarse from the dry sidelines. I knew, further, that I was meant for something more, and that I would not find it thrashing in the water with the other

goggled sophomores. It was this idea that aroused my father's scorn the most, which perhaps accounts for the tenacity with which I clung to it.

"I suppose *you* never had any misgivings about a single thing," I said, the spitting image of my teenaged self. At the same time, I recognized the cadence of my sarcasm-laced invective, but for the moment could not place where I had recently encountered it.

My father paused then, looking around the room as if perhaps there might be another lawyer who could fill in for him for the duration of this tedious drama. At last, resigned, he turned back to me. "That's just it, Frederick," he said quietly and wearily. "We *all* have misgivings. About anything important. It doesn't make you special. It makes you normal. Everything you're feeling is perfectly *normal*. As to this nonsense about 'doing what is expected'..." His mouth puckered with distaste, and I thought he was finished. But he took a deep breath, as if to quell the nausea, and finished, simply: "That is what a man *does*." He saw the waiter approaching with our food and took the opportunity to slip in the last word. "Christ, Frederick, you're thirty-two years old. I've never seen anyone cling for so long to so little." He picked up his fork and knife and began to arrange his napkin in his lap. I guessed that my audience was over.

But there was more. The instant the waiter was out of earshot, my father continued in the same dry, impersonal tone, as if he were thinking out loud, or idly addressing a bored classroom, repeating a lecture he'd given for decades to a group he knew to be only half-listening. "I suppose it is partly our fault. We took it as our solemn responsibility to

instill in you the notion that you were *special*, that you could do anything you wanted to do. We did you no service, I see now and saw then...." Here, he shot a withering look at my mother, who was staring down at her salad, though making no move to pick up her fork. "Though I held my tongue." He went on: "That we were not alone among our generation in this folly is little consolation to me. I had taken this marriage, slipshod as it appears to be in conception, to nonetheless constitute a sign of maturation on your part. I hope, for your sake, that I was not mistaken."

With that, he picked up his knife and fork and began to eat his steak, methodically cutting identically-shaped fragments and chewing slowly and deliberately, without any evident pleasure. I offered a few more sarcastic remarks, but I could get no more out of him. My father treated conversations as closing statements. Once delivered, it was out of his hands. He assumed you would deliberate and come to your own verdict in due time, and after making his point he was not inclined toward further tampering.

I was left in the distinctly unsatisfying position of having been accused, yet denied the right to speak on my behalf. In this court, the prosecutor was also judge. I sat for a moment, my untouched hamburger in front of me, listening to the clink of my father's silverware on his plate. All around me were people who also had parents. Many of them were parents themselves, or would be eventually, and some of them might conceivably have possessed the wherewithal to summon a conciliatory tone for the situation at hand. Certainly, I could have reverted to my previous pose and agreed breezily with my father's pronouncements, making

sure to insert a subtle but unmistakable note of amusement in my response, before changing the subject to something else entirely. I could have salvaged my dignity by refusing to embody the role of browbeaten son, and denying him the role of disciplinarian. I could have taken an even higher road and seriously considered the merits of his remarks, possibly asking a sincere follow-up question that was laced with no condescension or defensiveness. I could have endured the uncomfortable silence for a moment, then ignored him for the remainder of the meal and instead favored my grateful mother with a prolonged discussion of bridal minutia. The objective observer could doubtless devise any number of responses befitting a mature thirty-two-year-old man, who is fully capable of engaging, as an adult, in a graceful and dispassionate manner with his admittedly difficult (and perhaps even amusingly cantankerous) father.

I, however, rose from the table and stalked out in what can only be equitably described as a huff.

And though I moved over plush carpet and past leather booths and uplit hunting trophies, I was really fleeing down the hall of our Westchester home, past the framed pictures of me at various stages of toothlessness, past the guest bathroom and through the door of my bedroom, which, amidst the teary imploring of my mother and my father's curt, answering bark ("let him *go*, Marie....") I slammed most righteously.

I was half a block away before I realized what I lacked. Cursing myself, I backtracked and stood across the street from *Joule*, partially hidden by the menu board for a Chinese take-out place. I immediately ruled out retrieving the cake while my parents were still inside, so I was left with the only other option: waiting, and hoping that neither of them had noticed the pink box, and if they had, that they would not take it with them when they left. If that was the case, I would be forced to either intercept them or wait and somehow recover the cake later. I rubbed my eyes and set up watch, my stomach growling at every gust of wind, which carried to my nostrils the tantalizingly greasy whiff of chow mein.

The wait gave me the chance to reflect on the conversation – one-sided though it was – between my father and me. The emotional retrogression I had experienced during the encounter was chagrining, but I was still capable of a reasonably sober assessment after the fact. My burst of adolescent rage had spent itself quickly, evaporating as I hit the sidewalk. Now I was left with the weary feeling of inevitability that only family can engender: that suspicion of roles predetermined, and the futility of fighting it. No one else has the power to fix you in time as do the ones who have known you since the beginning of yours. Perhaps this is the charm as well as the curse, though on this day I was more inclined toward the latter description. I imagine, too, that one's feelings on the matter depend a great deal on the palatability of the role one is assigned within the family

structure. I thought once more of my uncle Roger – our family's Invisible One – and how he had gradually learned to cope with, and even profit by (having discerned the freedom inherent in being unseen), the place he occupied. My role appeared to be solidifying into The One Who Won't Grow Up, and as distasteful as I found the label, I was able to objectively appraise its appropriateness, now that I was once again safely out of the immediate sphere of paternal influence.

I dismissed most of my father's martyred, self-aggrandizing remarks around my upbringing. This picture of young Freddy's self-esteem being painstakingly nurtured by his devoted parents was a daft fiction. But there was a kernel of truth in the accusation that bothered me.

That, eventually, I would do something *worthy* was an assumption that had been with me as long as I could remember. Thinking back, I felt that it had most likely been born not at home, but during those first crucial years of schooling where, along with being categorized by *others*, we learn to self-categorize as well. Certainly, by the time the Powers That Be determined me eligible for the GATE (Gifted And Talented Education) programs, I had already formed my own self-image in relation to the others of my age group. Lessons they labored over came effortlessly to me, particularly those involving language or writing, where it was laughably easy to literally stun teachers with my prowess. It was a facet I could turn off or on at will (though my weakness for puns won me little affection with peers or elders). Throughout my primary education and well into high school I was occasionally accused of plagiarism, usually by

younger teachers who I believe indulged in a pitiable sort of competition with their brighter students. My term papers were nearly always composed in a single sitting on the night before their due date, to the envy and astonishment of my college prep-level friends, who had started their "outlines" months in advance.

It was confirmed for me at every step of the way: IQ tests, quarterly evaluations, SAT tests, college entrance exams... all placed me in the upper percentile. However, though I surely have his gene pool to thank for my linguistic dexterity, it was soon apparent that I was without the animalistic striving that had defined my father's life, from his early years as a brilliant young law student to his twilight as a revered (and feared) senior partner. I lacked the urge to kill, to maim, to crush others that I may rise. I was not fond of working in groups, or of submitting to a higher authority, and I did not covet luxury in the form of material items. I was not lazy, but I did not relish work for the sake of it. If it failed to engage my interest, I would put in the minimum required effort to pass – no more. The most consistent criticism from my teachers was always: "Fails to live up to his potential." It was almost inevitable that I would be drawn to the arts.

Yes, of course: the obviousness of it. As I watched the restaurant entrance for signs of my departing parents, I saw clearly that my own personality traits and a private school education that prided itself on being progressive and "nurturing" (of the "let the student design his *own* lesson plan" variety popular in upstate New York, circa the 1970s) had combined to leave me little other choice. It was never

assumed that I would follow my father into law, and my essentially passive emotional makeup meshed well with what I glimpsed of the writer's life. It seemed to me that artists were not subject to the incessant candidacy that characterized the business world. I had no gift for selling myself, and no talent for delighting in others. But, as a successful author, I could bypass the rabble and their eternal jockeying for position, and ascend to a throne of my own design. I could get there without getting dirty.

But it was more than that. For one imbued with the need to feel bound for something, the artist fantasy was a perfect fit: always waiting in the future like a life raft, validating what might look to the unimaginative like floundering (*gathering material*, if you please...). No matter how long I waited, it was never too late to save myself. I had a destiny that asked nothing of me but that I sustain my faith in it. In that way, my sense of myself as fated for specialness was no different than another's conviction that their death was only the prelude to an everlasting union with Jesus in the golden afterlife. And who can disprove either theology?

I was no longer a believer, but some vestige of the old rituals remained in me. From the beginning I had intuited marriage to be the death of something. It seemed I still stubbornly coveted the freedom I had no further use for, and indeed had never used to produce anything more timeless than a hangover, for posterity's sake.

At that moment, my mother emerged from the restaurant and I ducked into the Chinese restaurant to avoid being seen. As I watched through the window, my father joined her on the sidewalk and the two of them stood for a

moment, their heads rotating like ducks in a pond. I had the sudden impression that they were looking for me, although surely they must have assumed I would be long gone by now. Still, they were both scanning the street carefully, and I couldn't imagine what else they might be searching for. At last, they began to walk down the hill toward Union Square. I noticed, with relief, that they did not appear to be carrying the pink box.

"May I help you, sir?" An elderly Asian man in a black and gold jacket stood before me.

"Oh. No, thank you. I'm just... waiting here."

"You will not be eating?"

"No, I'll be leaving in a moment."

He looked puzzled. "I see." He did not move.

I crouched down and peered between two Chinese characters that were painted in red on the window. My parents had paused at the corner and my mother appeared to be fumbling with something in her purse. A few more steps and they would be safely out of sight.

"Sir?"

"Just one second." My mother had something in her hand now. They were still at the corner. My father's arms were crossed and even at a distance his posture telegraphed impatience. A second later I jumped as my cell phone rang, its muffled digital tinkle emerging from within my coat, which was slung over my arm. I located the phone in the right front pocket, pulled it out and looked at the screen. It was my mother calling.

"Sir, I'll have to ask you to wait outside."

"Please!" I held up one hand. There was the slight possibility now that, exposed on the sidewalk, I would not only be seen, but heard. I waited, my fingers drumming on the LED screen, for the ringing to cease.

"Sir, I must ask that you either come in or wait outside. I'm afraid we cannot permit loitering in here."

I turned to face the man. "Loitering? For god's sake, I'm just waiting here for a moment. I'm not bothering anyone."

"Yes, sir, I understand. But this is not a waiting area. It is a *seating* area. If you are not waiting to be seated – "

"Okay, okay, I get it. Come in or get out. Commit or run away. Shit or get off the pot. The universe is not sending me very subtle fortune cookies today." I was aware of being terribly light-headed, and the smell of the food coming from the dining room was tantalizing. I had the urge to be seated after all, but felt I had already burned too many bridges here.

Meanwhile, the man was backing away slowly. "Yes, of course, sir. I understand."

"You keep saying that," I snapped. "But it's highly unlikely."

His eyes widened then and he backed into the dining area, watching me all the while. Then, without another word, but with many bows and reassuring smiles, he was gone, I assumed to phone the police.

I turned back to the window. My phone was silent now and my parents were no longer visible. The coast appeared to be clear. Maintaining a Groucho Marx crouch, I crept out the door and hurried across Bush Street, dodging traffic and whipping my head left and right. It seemed

tremendously important that I not be seen by my parents. I would deal with them later, at the wedding, when I had regained my composure and had eaten something.

In a flash, I was back inside *Joule* and moving swiftly across the dining room. Our plates had not yet been cleared from the booth, and the cake was there on the seat where I'd left it. I snatched it up and noticed my burger sitting untouched beside my mostly empty glass. I laid my palm across the lukewarm bun. It occurred to me that I had left without paying, and that my father must have picked up the bill for my uneaten lunch. I replayed my departure in my head, mentally inserting an addition to the scene: Frederick contemptuously throwing down a wad of bills and sneering, "Lunch is on *me*," before exiting. However, I remained unsatisfied with the overall effect: that of a tantrum being thrown. It didn't help that, at that moment, it came to me who I had been channeling earlier in my sarcastic rejoinders to my father. It was the youthful frosting artist, Antonio, Jr., he of the Che shirt and the muttered, unconvincing superiority. It was not a pleasant realization, but what was done was done. I took my cake and left the restaurant for the second time.

As I headed toward Union Square to catch a cab, my phone rang again. I ducked warily into a doorway but it was Teena this time.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Just had lunch with my parents at *Joule*," I said, resuming my stroll. "On my way now to be outfitted. I hope they still have the Lard Ass Special in stock. I doubt I could squeeze into one of those James Bond numbers."

"Oh Freddy, cut it out. You're just a little roly poly. I don't *like* those skinny little boys with their ribs sticking out. Do *you* want one of those anorexic little media waifs?"

"Of course not, dear."

"So, how was lunch?" I noticed that her tone sounded oddly perfunctory, as if the question was issued mainly to keep me talking.

"Super," I said, electing to omit the details of that particular rendezvous for now. "My parents are a blessing that unfolds daily."

"Mmm...." she said vaguely.

Yes, something was amiss. The tepid response to the Locktin wit was a definite red flag. "What's up, Teen?"

There was silence on the other end of the line, and I felt my hollow stomach contract into a knotted bag of tension. *What did she know?*

"Freddy," she began, her voice constricted with the effort of holding back tears. "I have to tell you something."

And then, suddenly, somehow, I knew what she was going to say.

"What?" I said, dully. "Tell me." I stopped walking and leaned against a brick wall, watching two pre-teen girls in Catholic school uniforms waiting for a bus. They were talking excitedly with each other, their lips and limbs moving without self-consciousness, school books slung in brightly-colored packs over their thin shoulders, their concerns unknown to me, yet envied just the same. Soon the hormonal poison would flood their veins, urging them to mate, to achieve. The bus would come and take them away forever. They would crumple, defeated, into adulthood like everyone else. In a properly detached and passive state, Frederick Locktin would have espied this Rockwell-esque scene as a minor point of cosmic interest, notable only for the glimpse it offered of the endless, turning wheel. In my current condition, it seemed a deplorable tragedy. I could feel the sky darkening above me.

"Freddy, I'm pregnant. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I wanted to be sure."

I had seized up momentarily, but the path was revealed before me now; I gratefully embraced a virtuous anger. "How long have you known?"

I could sense her recoiling from my tone, which had been as cutting as I could manage. "Ten days."

"Oh, I *see*." I was walking blindly now, forgetting to keep an eye out for my parents, whose hotel I was approaching. I felt quite exhilarated, having unexpectedly been presented with a license for blameless rancor. I went on clubbing her with my voice. "And why now? Why tell me *now*?"

She was crumbling fast, her words escaping between the foreshocks of a fast-approaching seism of teary shame. "My mother made me. She said she'd tell you if I didn't! I know I should have told you, but I was afraid you'd...."

"I'd *what*?"

She was caught now, forced to verbalize it and risk making it real for both of us. "I was afraid you'd call off the wedding." Saying the worst seemed to calm her, though. The sniffing continued, but the hysteria had abated for the moment.

"And wouldn't I be well within my rights to feel that way?"

"Yes, of course," she said.

"You've been *lying* to me, Teena. About something pretty damned important."

"I'm sorry, honey," she said. "I've been very emotional lately. I made some bad choices. But I didn't tell you just now only because I was afraid my mother would. I don't know if she really would have or not."

"I'd hope she would have."

"I told you because I realized she was right, that I hadn't been thinking clearly about it. I got all wrapped up in anxiety and feeling stupid."

"Why stupid?" I asked, aware as I did so that the dynamic of the conversation was shifting away from her guilt toward sympathy for her dilemma.

"Because it was my fault we got pregnant. I knew that diaphragm was too old. I'd had it since my freshman year, for god's sake. Anyway, I... I can't get rid of it, Fred." Here her voice gained strength in a way that frightened me,

although for the first few seconds I thought she was referring to the diaphragm. "I want to keep it. I don't mean to cut you out of the decision process, but – "

"Look," I said. "I don't know what I think about this right now. I'll have to call you later."

"Why later?"

"I need to get a cab now. I've got to get away from here. I'm right in front of the hotel where my parents are staying. They could come out at any minute."

"So?" She was puzzled. "Didn't you just have lunch with them?"

"I've got to go," I repeated, adding: "I need some time to process this."

"Freddy?"

"What?"

"Is everything... okay? I'm a total fool, and I'm really, really sorry, but we're still – I mean, you're not going to use this as an excuse are you?"

Somehow, the whole thing was on the verge of being turned around now. If the wedding did not happen, it was *my* fault, because I was using this as an *excuse*. Remarkable. Time to nip this in the bud.

"I don't know," I said, most truthfully, and hung up.

I flagged a cab in front of Macy's and gave the turbaned driver the name of the tuxedo place, which was in the Haight. He did not interrupt the steady stream of Punjabi he was directing into his cell phone, but nodded at me and punched the address into his GPS unit. As we pulled away from the hotel, I became aware of a giddiness that had been building in me since Teena's disclosure. Rather than analyzing this too carefully, I let it build further, spreading warmly within me like a shot of whiskey on a cold winter day. My mind I kept occupied by repeating to myself a fragment I remembered from the letters of Abraham Lincoln: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it." I mouthed these words over and over as my Sikh driver continued his verbal assault on the unfortunate soul who was his audience.

Gradually, as we merged with the westward flow of traffic on Geary Street, I allowed myself to contemplate the reality of the situation. I was a touch annoyed by how accurately Teena had predicted my initial response, which was, indeed, to declare the nuptials defunct. But as I followed that action out to the inevitable reactions that would result from it, I saw no ultimate benefit for myself. A canceled wedding would most likely mean the end of Teena and me, and that being the case, I needed no excuse to effect it. No, as unsettling as Teena's confession was, it did not impact the agenda for July 7th. Until the actual moment of the ceremony, I still retained the power of choice – to back out or go forth. If need be, I could summon the pregnancy

omission as supporting evidence *after* the fact, and I would hold it in reserve for that purpose. But for now I would proceed with the plan as before.

The reality of impending fatherhood had not yet taken hold of me at this point, and there was no aspect of this unexpected information that touched me in any but an abstract way. I felt nothing I could identify as gladness or dread, or cousin to either. However, a sin had most definitely been committed, of that I was sure; the scales of transgression were out of balance. Had I gone ahead with my initial (though – in my defense – largely subconscious) plan regarding Anneliese earlier today, the scales would have tipped in the other direction, and in many ways that would have been more intolerable. I am not so heartless as to be unaffected by guilt, after all. But there would have been no way to restore the equilibrium except by confession, and I suspect myself of being too confrontation-avoidant to ever pursue such a route. No, I would have lived with the guilt, and Teena would never have known. This way was much better. Teena was aware of her wrongdoing, and the way I saw it, I was now granted an infraction of approximately equal severity. Teena would know only that she had come clean and been forgiven, and my conscience would be clear in the knowledge that two wrongs may not make a right, so much as they spread the stain equally, restoring balance and, therefore, harmony.

Having never been afflicted with nostalgia for the mythology of the 1960s, I have never shared the notion, common among Brian's crowd, that what is happening to the Haight-Ashbury district constitutes a cultural tragedy. In my

friend's company I have endured many an earnest diatribe against the "yuppification" of the former hippie epicenter, but I remain unmoved. I can see little worth preserving in the sordid street scene that still sprouts stubbornly, like thistle, in the doorways and along the sidewalks of Haight Street. As the cab crawled through traffic clogged with tourists in rented cars, I noted that the neighborhood remained unchanged from the last time I had ventured into it. The pavement was thick with clumps of the same huddled runaways and hollow-eyed vagrants, clad in their tie-dye and love beads, like grimy ghosts haunting the grave of an era that had come to a close when their grandparents were scarcely pubescent. On the wind were whiffs of patchouli, body odor and weed, and in the air was a tangible exhaustion, as if even the die-hards had grown weary of the pose. The scene's sole vitality issued from the bustle of the chain coffee shops and upscale clothing stores, more of them emerging every day. It was evolution asserting itself as always, the consumer culture slowly supplanting the quaint, faded rebellion that still acted as a homing beacon for the impoverished imaginations of those luckless children.

The cab lurched to a stop and I checked the meter for the price, as the driver showed no sign of acknowledging my presence. Wordlessly, I handed him some bills and got out. As I closed the door, his voice was growing louder, each burst of verbiage punctuated by one brown fist beating emphatically on the dashboard. Evidently, his tirade was reaching its crescendo. It was impossible to tell whether he was mediating a dispute, administering discipline or raging pettily at a wife who forgot to pick up something at the

grocery store. Being surrounded by indecipherable languages turns us inward, as we are forced to concoct scenarios of our own to explain the physical and verbal inflections of our fellow citizens. In the end, though, the effort fatigues us and we simply tune out. Further and further inward we go, like moles digging to the center of ourselves. I was glad to see Brian, talking on his cell phone in front of the tux shop. The preceding hour or two had left me feeling communicationally impoverished.

He spotted me and waved. As I approached, I overheard the end of his conversation.

"Yes. I'll be here. Call when you're done. With Freddy. *Freddy*. He's getting married tomorrow." He winked at me. "Yes, *him*. I don't know. Ok, talk to you soon. Mine are crossed too. Bye."

"News from the publishing world?"

He thrust the phone into his pocket and rocked on his heels, grinning at me. "Nothing definite yet."

"Well, what did the wonder agent say at lunch?"

"Well, that's just it. We haven't *had* lunch yet. She's still doing these conference calls with Delineate and HC."

"HC?"

He giggled, his eyes glazed. I saw that he was in a mild state of shock. "HarperCollins. It seems there's... something of a bidding war happening."

"Are you serious?"

He leaned forward then and clutched me. "Freddy, I'm in a bad position here."

"I must say, I can't imagine how."

"Don't you see?" he demanded. "Before, I was absolutely blasé about the whole thing. It was exciting, sure, but Delineate is just a small indie press. If the deal falls through, it's not the end of the world. I could probably reach the same number of people by giving the damn thing away on my website."

"Okay. I still don't get why – "

"Freddy, this is Harper fucking Collins. The big leagues."

"Yeah, that's great."

He leaned closer. Clearly, he was dangerously excited. "Freddy, I *want* this," he breathed. "Now that they've dangled this in front of me, I'll be crushed if I don't get it. I've spent the whole morning practicing what I'll say to Oprah when I'm on her couch. I've been dreaming of house hunting in the Oakland hills. I'm going out of my mind."

"Excuse me, could either of you spare some change? We're trying to get something to eat."

We both turned to face the pair of youthful panhandlers who had interrupted us, their slackjawed mouths distended in monotone recitation. They could have been brother and sister, so alike were their moon-round faces, pale and blank and dirty, their eyes like faded laundry on a line. I opened my mouth to tell them to scatter, but Brian had already withdrawn his wallet.

"Here," he said, pressing a bill into each of their outstretched palms.

"Hey, God bless, man," mumbled the male half of the pair. The female simply stared straight ahead, as if we were clerks at a store she was anxious to exit. They shuffled a few

feet away and sat down on the sidewalk, just to the left of the door to the tux place.

I stared at Brian in disgust. "Why in hell do you do that?"

"It's just a dollar to me," he answered, pocketing his wallet. "If it helps someone get a meal, I can spare it."

"You don't truly believe that's their *food* fund, do you?"

"Whatever." Brian seemed uninterested. "It's none of my business."

Over by the door, the girl's voice could be heard, beseeching potential benefactors as they passed: "*Spare some change?*" I glanced over and saw that her male companion was leaning back against the wall, rolling a cigarette. They both looked entirely comfortable, as if they were relaxing in their living room after a long day.

At that moment, the door to the tuxedo shop opened and a small man emerged. "Go!" he screeched at the young couple. "Beg somewhere else! This is my place of business. I have warned you already!"

The two seated youths looked up at him calmly, as if momentarily distracted by the cawing of a crow. The boy lit his cigarette in an unhurried way. "Hey, man, you don't own this sidewalk."

The little man was obviously extremely agitated. He was no more than an inch or two over five feet tall, with a gleaming skull rimmed with gray hair, and a pencil-thin mustache that looked painted on, so incongruous was its jet-black coloring. "You are blocking my entrance," he hissed.

"I have no intention of arguing with you. I will simply call the police again."

"Did you ever think that you're blocking *our* entrance?" drawled the kid, exhaling a stream of smoke in the direction of the sputtering shop owner. "We're just trying to make a living, man, same as you."

"This is no living, what you are doing here," snapped the man.

The girl peered into the little man's face, as if noticing him for the first time. "I feel sorry for you," she said. "You have so much anger. It's poison, man." She leaned back beside her companion and they exchanged wondering looks, unable to comprehend why anyone would choose to behave in such a way.

"I have asked you repeatedly," said the man. "Now, I will go and phone the police."

"You do what you got to do, man," said the boy, distractedly. He appeared to have lost interest in the exchange. The girl had resumed her appeal to the passing pedestrians.

With the tinkle of a tiny bell on the door, the little man vanished into the shop again. Brian and I walked over and pulled the door open.

"Spare some change?"

The girl's hand was outstretched, blocking our way into the store. She had already forgotten us, or was feigning. I slapped the hand away and it did not return. It felt like a cold, rubber glove against my knuckles. The bell tinkled again as we closed it behind us. "How's that for gratitude?" I asked Brian.

He frowned. "That's exactly how I feel right now," he said. "Like I've got my hand out, waiting for it to be slapped away."

Inside, we were greeted eagerly by the proprietor, who hurried to the back at once to fetch my tuxedo. Brian and I stood in the empty store, looking around at the various components of male plumage displayed on racks and in poster-sized photographs. Like most outlets that deal exclusively in one, specialized item, the place exuded a single-mindedness that was very near to self-parody.

"Why do the men wearing tuxedos in ads always look gay? Aren't they supposed to be getting married?"

"Maybe they are," said Brian. "It's legal in a few states now."

"I think I've lived in the Castro too long. Everyone I see looks gay to me."

"Him?" Brian nodded toward the back room.

"Most definitely."

We strolled to the front of the store and watched the sidewalk traffic a moment. I was debating whether to inform Brian of the child which was, even now, readying itself to sprout eyes and lips and toenails somewhere inside the body of the woman I was to marry tomorrow. The image was decidedly unsettling.

"Those two are definitely straight," Brian chuckled. On the other side of the glass, the panhandling couple was engaged in an exhibitionist embrace, tongues probing and wasted pelvises grinding through soiled garments.

"A classic illustration of conventional heterosexuality," I said.

"You and those two, Freddy. They may already be married." He squeezed my shoulder, suddenly affectionate. "Hell, I'm babbling on about my literary woes and we're here getting you suited up for the big game. How do you feel?"

"I loathe sports metaphors," I said.

Brian giggled, watching the two street urchins, who were now fully horizontal on the sidewalk. "Who's winning there, do you think?"

"Stale mates," I grunted.

Our diminutive clerk had appeared noiselessly behind us, and when he spoke it startled me greatly for some reason. "*Those*," he exhaled somewhere south of my left ear, causing me to jump.

When I turned, he was fixing the beggars outside with a pinched grimace. "I apologize to you, sir. I hope they did not bother you on the way in."

At this close range, I could smell his breath, which was marvelously rancid, a kind of onion and stale tobacco smell, putting me in mind of the time I'd kissed my dying grandfather on his hospital bed. Perhaps mistaking my expression of distaste, the clerk continued, as if to reassure me. "It will not be long now," he sighed. "We are preparing to relocate this fall."

"Is that right?" asked Brian. I was already bored by the little man. I wanted to get my tuxedo and go.

But the owner was nodding and twitching, as if to propel himself forward in time to that blessed moment when he could at last bid farewell to Haight Street. "Yes, sir. We have secured a new space downtown. A lovely building. A classic, really. With a security guard in the lobby." He

scowled at the children outside once more. "I have great hopes for the location. This is no place for me."

"I don't suppose you get a lot of walk-in business here," Brian mused. I shot him a warning look, which he ignored. This was one of the infuriating things about traveling in Brian's company. The neglected and the underappreciated seemed to sniff out this weakness in him, this gross receptivity to their petty grievances and entirely ordinary personal dramas. They gravitated toward him, sensing a willing, sympathetic audience. Brian's *Guardian* columns were full of these sorts of exchanges. To my mind, they betrayed a sentimental affinity for the marginal and the anachronous: record store owners who persisted in dealing only in vinyl; chefs who made everything from scratch; a guy in the Fillmore who repaired and restored rotary phones. That kind of thing.

"Quite right, sir," Brian's latest subject was saying eagerly. "Quite right." His eyes went faraway, and he gazed through the window as if upon infinitely greener grass. "When my father started the business, things were very different. It was a more grown-up country. The music, the advertisements, the products... all were not aimed at teenagers. Men dressed as men, not as boys. Now..." He sighed. "Now, they wear jeans to work. They marry in T-shirts and shorts. They wear baseball hats to restaurants."

"I guess the increasing informality of the culture has a certain relevance for your livelihood," Brian prompted. He had shifted into full "man on the street" mode. I noticed him discretely fingering his breast pocket for the notepad I knew he kept there. A moment later it was in his hand, his

shorthand scribbling as yet unnoticed by the clerk, who was now, emboldened by Brian's questioning, poised on the precipice of some long-suppressed soliloquy.

"I hate to interrupt," I said. "But I *am* on something of a schedule today."

The clerk gave me a disoriented look, as if he was having trouble placing me. Then, regaining himself, he clapped his hands together and hurried over to the counter. "Of course, sir. Everything has been fitted to the measurements we took last time. Would you like to try it on?"

"By all means," said Brian.

Several moments later I stood, fully attired, as the little man fussed around me, making swift, brushing motions, like little karate chops, at my legs and shoulders. Brian leaned against a wall, enjoying himself immensely. "You look great, Freddy. Like a real gentlemen."

In fact, the outfit had worked an unexpected magic on my mood. It had been some time since I had last worn one and I had forgotten the silly thrill that accompanied the donning of a quality tuxedo. Sucking my stomach in, I admired myself in the three-way mirror, turning this way and that.

"Perfect," breathed the clerk, who had not stopped touching me. He flicked some invisible bit of lint from beneath my chin. "You will take her breath away, if you don't mind my saying, sir."

I walked to the window, my movements having acquired an exaggerated precision. I felt the material crease neatly around my body, making me feel lethal and

prosperous. Outside, the world seemed shabby and without glamour, overpopulated by rounded humans in shapeless garb. I imagined myself standing before the bay windows of a flat in Noe Valley, or a house in Rockridge, across the bay in the fashionable blocks of North Oakland. My work day concluded, I was holding a well-earned whiskey and watching the driveway for Teena's car. Was she alone in the car? Perhaps a child, after all... a well-behaved one whose nascent fortitude functioned as a kind of three-way mirror, reflecting admirable sides of me that would otherwise have remained unseen.

Meanwhile, the clerk had discovered a small smudge on one of my shoes and, waving away my objections, had insisted on giving them a fresh shine. He brought a chair over to the window and dropped to his knees in a practiced crouch, rag and polish in hand. It was quickly revealed to us, via prompting from Brian, of course, that our man had spent many a pubescent after-school hour happily supplicated before the wing tips of Penn Station capitalists. Another transplanted Easterner, lost in the California haze. And all in the service of his priestly devotion to the care and grooming of the male animal.

While I sat being attended to, a police car eased to a stop in front of the store and two officers – a man and a woman – emerged, thumbs hooked on utility belts and CBs squalling. The female cop was short, stout and dykey, while her partner looked like the craggy, corrupt Irish veteran in every episode of "The Untouchables." Neither of them seemed in any particular hurry. They yawned and stretched

and lingered by the vehicle a moment, yakking into the radio receiver. Finally, they swaggered in our direction.

"At last, they have arrived," said the man at my feet. "Some days they never come at all."

I could only hear fragments of the dialogue from my perch in the window, but what was transpiring was plain enough. The participants appeared to be tiredly enacting a familiar ritual, the movements of which were well-known to all involved. The young vagrants rose slowly, gathering their belongings without any haste, while the two officers stood to one side, looking bored. At one point the young woman faced the window as she shrugged on a faded army jacket. Her eyes met mine through the glass, and her face suddenly crinkled with hilarity. By the time her companion hurried over to see what was wrong, she was doubled over with laughter and could only point helplessly at me by way of explanation.

"One must pity them, I suppose." The man at my feet had paused his work and was gazing thoughtfully at the two young faces, now only inches from ours. "On my better days I am able." He was, however, unable to uncurl his lip as he studied them further. It remained coiled like a thin, bloodless worm below his moustache. "Another generation that refuses to mature. This perpetual childhood fantasy, it is really quite sad."

"They say that you remain a child until you have one of your own." This from Brian who was fingering a salmon-colored tux with interest at my periphery.

"Certainly not true," scoffed my shiner indignantly. "From this window, I have seen enough babies in the arms of babies to last me the rest of my days, I can assure you."

"Where did you say your new location will be?"

He brightened visibly at the opportunity to invoke the address. "Market Street," he said. "I do hope you will come visit us there." Then he named a familiar number.

I looked down at him. "You're kidding."

"Wow, talk about coincidence, Freddy." Brian was laughing delightedly. "Now you *know* you came to the right shop."

The clerk looked puzzled, not realizing he was preparing to relocate his business to the bottom floor of my building. "You know the spot, sir?"

"I do." I said. "You should do fine there. Everyone is exceedingly grown-up."

Beyond the glass, my grubby tormentors were literally incapacitated by mirth. I waited for the outrage I knew was my due, but I was unable to summon the scorn that came so easily to my future neighbor, who was now putting the final buffing on the footwear that would carry me into his version of adulthood – a fantasy world for him no less real (and no more attainable) than was the summer of love for the ragamuffins outside. I thought of the fertilized egg, floating inside Teena at this very moment. And I thought of that line most commonly uttered in praise of the great revelation of parenthood: that you are no longer the center of the universe. How willingly we humans cede center stage to the noble task of peopling the planet. I guessed that for most, placing one's *self* at center stage was an ultimately

unsustainable burden they were only too happy to abdicate. Much pressure, that. How much easier to simply transfer those expectations to that brand-new being who embodied, in your blind eyes, the unlimited potential that you yourself no longer possessed.

In a sudden flash of daydream, I saw that fertilized egg: a bloated gray grape, poised coyly, like a showgirl, on a cavernous concert hall stage and bathed in a white spotlight. As I watched from the darkened mezzanine, arms and legs appeared, protruding from its rounded body. Then: an enormous hungry *mouth*. Before the egg creature could commence its performance, though, a giant, gleaming scalpel swept from the wings like a vaudeville hook, and, in a single deft movement, scraped the stage clean. From my seat I applauded loudly, the solitary slap of my palms echoing like gunshots in the empty theater.

"Anneliese and I used to get laughing like that when we took X," I said.

"Not Anneliese again," Brian flicked a pair of dress socks at my head as the clerk looked up disapprovingly.

"We'd laugh and laugh. Then we'd spend all afternoon getting laid. It was great."

"Yep, I've been there, too," said Brian. "But it wears off eventually."

"Yes, it does."

"Then everything looks different."

"Yes."

By now the two cops had joined the children at the window and all four of the players were ringed before me like spectators at a zoo, gazing in at the spectacle of the red-

faced man in the chair, wearing a tuxedo and having his shoes shined.

"Done!" said the clerk, jumping to his feet. I looked down at my shoes, like peering into a black leather pond, and saw the reflection of my face. I was waiting for him to ask me how they felt, for I had an answer prepared. "*Tight*," I would say pointedly, my response freighted with meaning. Brian, as a novelist, would at least appreciate it, if the clerk did not. But life is so seldom novelistic; he did not ask.

Another cab ride later, Brian and I were standing on the sidewalk in front of Putzkammer's, he with my tux in a bag thrown over his shoulder (as the best man, he was charged with keeping track of it for the next twenty-four hours), and I with the cake in my hands. It had been decided that, before procuring the rings, I would join Brian for this singular moment in his career: the moment of truth. For by now the gatekeepers, in their unknowable wisdom, had resolved either to grant or begrudge entry to my friend and his masterpiece, and somewhere within my favorite bar his agent waited, pregnant with the news.

I had never seen Brian so wound up, and I couldn't help teasing him a little. "I can't believe you're meeting her here," I said. "You must finally be coming around to the charms of Fat Eddie's establishment."

"The Charms of Fat Eddie'," he repeated. "It sounds like the title of a horror movie."

"Your problem," I said, "is that you romanticize what is essentially a utilitarian environment. Bars are not intended to be works of art. Too much atmosphere distracts one from the business at hand."

"I know you treasure irony, Freddy, but did you ever hear about the kid who made a face too many times, and it froze that way?"

"But was the new face really any worse than the old?" Fleeing the Haight had cheered me immeasurably. Plus, it had occurred to me that this might be an excellent spot to make use of the "get out of jail free" card Teena had

handed me with her deception. I only needed some food in my stomach first, but both missions could be initiated with a single conversation, provided Lorna was still on duty.

"Anyway, it sure as hell wasn't my idea," Brian was saying. "Apparently, Jenny took a liking to this place. I have only you to blame, of course."

"I may have to revise my opinion of the wonder agent," I said, pushing through the swinging doors for the second time that day.

We spotted her at once, ensconced in a booth, with laptop open and wireless headset bolted to her busily nodding head. Her hand shot up, opening and closing in an odd kind of wave that more resembled a child grasping for its toy. Brian waved back and we hurried over to join her.

"I'm on hold," she said, by way of greeting. "Sit, sit."

"Hi, Jenny," Brian took her hand. "You remember Fred Locktin."

"Miss Van Dyke." I bowed.

"Yes, of course. Nice to see you, Fred," she answered smoothly.

We sat down and I looked around for Lorna, but she was nowhere in sight. Happy Hour was still a good thirty minutes away, and the bar was quiet, as if conserving its energy for the eruption of desperate mirth which was soon to come. The last few daytime drinkers swiveled idly in seats that would soon be occupied by lawyers swilling single malt scotch and arguing loudly, preening for the leggy media consultant at their elbow, who was nibbling at the cherry from her appletini and seemingly paying no attention. By five, however, that same woman would be tying knots in the

stem with her tongue, and the lawyers, ties loosened and shirt sleeves rolled up, would be making their closing arguments.

For now, though, the television was muted, turned to a sports game that no one was watching, and the atmosphere was peaceful. Fat Eddie was in his spot as always, glasses perched on his doughy face as he went over some receipts. Rufus was, no doubt, back in his office, using the afternoon to sleep off the morning in preparation for the night. I had a sudden urge to phone him, but decided Brian might resent the additional company just now. Still, it would have been enlightening to witness what Rufus and Jenny would have made of each other. They had only met once, briefly, and had sniffed around each other warily. Brian didn't dislike Rufus, but found him "sort of a sad case."

The three of us sat for an awkward moment, blinking at each other. At last Brian ventured, "Is that...?"

His agent nodded. "Yes."

"Are they...?"

At once her hand shot up, silencing him. "Yes, I'm here, Doug."

The manner in which Jenny Van Dyke delivered those four innocuous words made me feel certain she had rehearsed them, possibly with receiver in hand, while staring into the lens of a video recorder. I envisioned her studying the performance, noting errors in inflection and timbre, then going again, tiny pink tongue clamped between lips in the somber resolve to "get it right."

"Very well, then. I understand. Of *course*, Doug...."
The contrived tone continued, like a child playing at being an

adult. Of course, at some point, as we age, we become aware that we are, all of us, more or less playing at what we think we ought to be. But Jenny had not yet arrived at that revelation. She was still determined to *be* it and, therefore, remained unconvincing.

At last she punched a button on her phone and removed the headset with a dramatic flourish. "Well!" she said, smiling triumphantly. "There's one more editor who has to weigh in, but I think by the end of the day, I'm going to have some *very* good news for you."

"One more editor?"

"They have a policy of unanimity. All senior editors must sign off on each project."

A groan from Brian. "So, if this last guy doesn't sign off?"

"It's a *woman*, actually, Brian. And let's think positively, okay? We've gotten this far, haven't we?"

"Yeah." He slumped slightly, his head in his hands.

"I'm not at all sure his nerves are going to make it to the end of the day," I offered. "I think a drink is in order."

"I knew I brought you along for some reason," mumbled Brian.

There was still no sign of Lorna, so I pushed my chair back. "Allow me," I said. "Miss Van Dyke?"

"Nothing for me, thanks."

"Come on," I said. "This is a big day. Your first sale. Live it up. I'm buying."

"You shouldn't be buying, Freddy," said Brian. "Not today."

"Why not today?" Jenny had removed a pen from her handbag and was jotting something down on a post-it.

"It's Freddy's last day of freedom. He's tying the knot tomorrow."

"Really?" She looked up curiously.

"Congratulations," I said.

She squinted at me. "What?"

"That's the word you're searching for. It's the standard pleasantry, given the circumstances. Now then," I rose, and began moving toward the bar. "Either you both give me your drink orders or consign yourselves to fate."

Brian waved his hand indifferently, but as I turned, I heard Jenny chirp, "Cosmo!"

At the bar I gave our drink orders to a hulking, pink-cheeked youth I did not recognize, then stood, slapping my palms against the bar and pretending to follow the action on the television screen. When the bartender returned to take my money, I asked casually, "Where's Lorna today?"

"Not sure," he said. "Lorna leave already?" This was directed at Fat Eddie, who roused himself from his scrutiny of the morning's receipts and peered at me over his spectacles. The eyewear, I noted, gave the appearance of an affectation, the way tiny glasses often did on big men. The incongruity caused him to resemble a newly domesticated Hell's Angel, or perhaps a gone-to-seed undercover cop posing as an accountant. He eyed me a moment and I found myself squirming inwardly under his gaze. I forced myself to meet his eyes and smiled benignly, intending to convey that I didn't really care one way or the other about the whereabouts of his wait staff – I was just making chit chat.

"She's on break," he said at last.

"Oh," I said. "Sure, right. I thought she said she was working late." He did not speak, but continued staring at me over his rimless glasses. It is nearly impossible to be stared at over rimless glasses by someone and not succumb to the feeling of being disapproved of. Perhaps this explains why I couldn't seem to stop talking. "She mentioned something about it earlier, Lorna did... when we were talking. I was in here before. Earlier. Today." I stopped only because I had run out of breath. Fortunately, before I could inhale and begin anew, Lorna appeared from the kitchen.

She spotted me and smiled, and I smiled and waved back, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. She came over to the bar and stood, tying her apron on. Before I could speak, however, the bartender appeared again with my drinks. "This guy was asking for you, Lorna," he said, with no expression in his voice. He slapped my change down on the counter and knocked twice, absently, before drifting away. I wanted to hurl a glass at his impassive little putty mask of a face, but I shrugged and emitted a quick chuckle that sounded more like a cough. "Just not used to having to schlep my own drinks," I joked, only noticing, after the words were out of my mouth, how loutish they sounded.

Lorna seemed to take no offense, though. She laughed, a bit horsily, and said, "Go on and have a seat. I'll bring them over."

"Thanks, Lorna," I said, using her name for the first time that I could recall. Our eyes met briefly, and I held hers a little too long. Lorna's eyes were dark and guileless, like a calm, sleepy animal. I suspected her of being on some type

of tranquilizer, but now was not the time to ask. I broke eye contact blushing, as if suddenly becoming aware that I might have given too much away. This was a standard Locktin trick, particularly useful in picking up waitresses, bartenders and other women accustomed to dealing with the inebriated public. If they are even remotely attractive, women in such positions are hit on almost continuously, and unless they develop a deft and graceful technique of deflection, it is certain they will not last long in the profession. The only surefire way to attract the attention of such hardened veterans is to feign disinterest for an appropriate amount of time. Timing is essential here, for you must make your presence known on a regular basis, such that you have attained a familiarity that has not yet bred the contempt that all bar personnel, if they are honest, will admit to feeling toward *regulars*.

While these beacons of ritual and predictability are treated with a certain deference, by virtue of the vast sums they deposit daily in the till, and while they are likely to maintain a long-running flirtation with one or more female employees, they haven't a chance in hell of it going any further than that. Bar maids do not sleep with regulars – it makes no sense, sexual or economical – though a true pro will nurture the tiniest seed of hope in her besotted admirer, who will grandly overtip in hopes of gaining the respect he only pushes further and further out of reach with every desperate dollar. I see these men in bars all over the city, spending their way to loneliness, when outside, perfectly delectable hookers stroll the sidewalks, available for a

fraction of what these suckers will leave in hopeful nightly piles for the barmaid of their dreams.

Throughout my college years I would frequent the bars around Lake Merritt on a semi-regular basis, becoming known as a polite but indifferent drop-in, neatly dressed, who always seemed to be on his way to somewhere else, never stayed for more than two drinks, and made no passes at the female employees, who gradually relaxed their guard in my presence. Then one night, around about the time I was teetering on the verge of "regular" status, I would catch the eye of my prey and be brought up short, perhaps mid-order, by the unexpected beauty that bloomed before me in here, of all places. My curtain of reserve would drop for a moment – oh wonder of serendipity! – and when I stayed late that night, the cause would be known, the intentions obvious, and the prey flattered despite herself.

Needless to say, given my arrangement with Teena, it had been some time since I had found it necessary to employ such methods. Truthfully, they were better suited to my college-age self, who was a bit more avid, a bit more attuned to the thrill of the hunt. Still, I had unwittingly laid the proper groundwork with Lorna, who knew me as a semi-regular who ordered good whiskey and either arrived with friends or kept to myself. However, the variable in this equation was that she also knew me as a man who was to be married the next day. It remained to be seen whether this inadvertent divulgence would work for or against my recently hatched plan, but I meant to find out, and quickly, if possible.

"You're welcome," Lorna responded, her smile touched with a quizzical tint, and I knew that my message had been received. So far so good, but for the look I chanced to glimpse on Fat Eddie's face as I turned away, a knowing leer that made me feel uncomfortably transparent.

As I returned to the table, Jenny Van Dyke favored me with a chipper grin of her own. My immediate assumption was that she wanted something from me, which turned out to be the case. Evidently, she intended to enlist my support in the pep talk that was underway between her and her slightly frazzled client.

"Fred, you're a writer – help me out here. Don't you think that talent will always out?"

"I'm not that kind of writer," I said, seating myself.

"Well, sure," she said. "But in your field, wouldn't you say that the cream will, generally, over time, rise to the top? I certainly think so."

"I'd say that's true in advertising, or in most commercial applications," I said.

"There," Jenny nodded brightly at Brian, who was still looking unconvinced. "You see? You just have to have faith." She said this with the unwavering certainty of one who has never had anything but.

"There's a difference, though," I said. "In my line, I offer a valuable and much sought-after service, one which can command high fees by virtue of its necessity. That's not the case with Brian's work."

"Oh?" she cocked her head as if waiting for the punch line to the joke.

"No one needs literature," I continued. "There's so little at stake, financially, in the field, that the only ones for whom 'talent' or 'no-talent' is an issue are the writers themselves, who also, incidentally, constitute most of the readers."

"Tell that to Stephen King," laughed Jenny. She wore the bulletproof smile of someone speaking with an idiot.

"And is that the writer with whom you would compare our Mr. Buford?" I asked. Silence from the table. "Of course not. Brian writes *literary* fiction. So he is correct to worry. Even if he has written the greatest novel in the English language, he is still manufacturing a product which no longer has any relevance in our culture."

"How can you say that?" Jenny Van Dyke was clearly not accustomed to being told that her profession was obsolete. As such, she was more bemused than threatened by my comments. It takes a lot to rattle a true striver. The faith that fuels their engines is not of this terra. It is tied up in visions of destiny and entitlement that transcend earthly boundaries. Unlike Rufus, however, Jenny had been bred for success straight out of the womb, and so her facade was sturdier than his, and less vulnerable to breach by the foot soldiers of cold hard fact. "Why on earth would the big publishers expend so much capital on acquisitions if there was no market for their product? Why..., it's absurd."

"I agree," I said. "I honestly don't have any idea what prompted the big corporations to buy up publishing in the first place. There's never really been much money in it. But now that the culture has outgrown literature, I imagine the big New York houses will continue the process of

disentangling themselves from what remains of it, and concentrating more exclusively on big, flashy bestsellers and celebrity memoirs." I spotted Lorna approaching with our drinks and smiled at her, trying to catch her eye. "You're in publishing," I said to Jenny, without looking at her. "Isn't that what's already happening?"

"Well, certainly, to an *extent*, but – "

But Lorna was at the table now and we all clammed up, displaying the universal conversational modesty in the presence of the serving girl.

"Here you are," said Lorna, placing a drink each before us.

"Cheers all," I said, raising my glass. "Why don't you join us for one, Lorna? We're having a little celebration here."

Lorna gave me another wondering, yet not wholly convinced look. "Oh, I can't with Eddie here..., you know." She nodded in the direction of the bar.

"Yes, of course," I said sympathetically. "What time do you get off?"

"Six."

"Maybe we can have a drink then."

"Um, okay."

I was not being rebuffed – far from it – but she still seemed somewhat bewildered by my sudden friendliness, and I saw that the undertaking at hand looked to require a fair degree of effort on my part, for which I was not adequately fortified. I am not, by nature, suited to the exertion of will that is required for a pick-up. I have always been more inclined toward the soft sell, and overtly

predacious stratagems do not come easily to my sober self. Present circumstances called for re-enforcements.

"Lorna, I think I'll have a Guinness along with this," I nodded at my whiskey. "And could I get a steak, as well? Medium-rare?" I looked at my companions. "Anyone else want anything to eat?"

Jenny had recovered her composure and was clearly impatient for Lorna to leave so that she could deliver the devastating rejoinder she had been formulating in response to my assessment of the state of publishing. Brian was staring at me with his mouth open.

"I guess not." Smiling confidentially at Lorna, I added, "It seems I'll be eating alone."

This made her blush for some reason, and she retreated cautiously, throwing me a charmingly hesitant backward smile as she went.

Brian was still staring at me, obviously expecting some explanation for my bizarre behavior, but the little flirtation with Lorna had drained me and I busied myself with my whiskey for a moment. As I said, the role of the pursuer does not come easily to me and never did. Even in those Lake Merritt bars I required a large amount of alcohol to conduct my sorties, and I was always easily discouraged, motivated as I was more by boredom than true desire or the most potent motivation for compulsive sexual conquest: insecurity. No, my temperament is far better suited to the traditional feminine role in the courtship ritual.

"*Really*," exhaled Jenny when Lorna had at last moved out of our sphere. "I mean, you sound like one of those kids back in grad school. All that fashionable

cynicism." She wiped a strand of hair away from her unblemished forehead. "It's so *tiresome*."

The mention of the word *cynicism* appeared to revive Brian from his temporary and uncharacteristic slouch. The red flag to Brian's bullish enthusiasm, it was akin to dangling a casual endorsement of godlessness before a first year seminary student. "She's right, Fred. That old 'the novel is dead' line has been a coffeehouse staple for god knows how long."

I took a sip of my whiskey. I didn't want to get too inebriated before ingesting some food, but I was also in need of... something. On some days, the problem of striking the correct chemical balance can seem as knotty as advanced algorithms. "The line to which you're referring is generally used in the service of *artistic* criticism, is it not?"

"Sure."

"Well, *artistically*, literature may be going strong, for all I know. I really couldn't say one way or the other." The question didn't interest me terribly either, but – contrary to what some might posit – I *am* capable of censoring myself somewhat to accommodate my social milieu.

They both were smiling now. Conversationally, it is an easy matter to put people at ease. All they typically require is grounds for feeling superior to you.

"Then what are you ranting about now, Freddy?" Brian asked.

I took another sip of my drink. The late afternoon light was glancing through the windows and warming my forearms on the tabletop. I felt the cozy combination of physical quiescence and mental acuity that was the ideal

condition for barroom chatter. "What I'm *saying*," I said, "Is that there's no use pretending art is some harmless dalliance that exists for no real purpose."

"*Who*, may I ask, is pretending *that*? I mean, what on earth – " Jenny looked around the room, imploringly, as if for confirmation of the absurdity that was taking place at her table.

"Go on, Freddy." Brian took a good swallow of the whiskey I had ordered for him and wrinkled his nose involuntarily. He was a microbeer man.

"Well, I would suggest that the primary purpose of serious literary art has always been essentially *persuasive*."

Brian thought that over for a moment. "Okay, what is it persuading us to do?"

"To sleep with black people," I answered. "Or, if you are black, to sleep *only* with black people. Or only with white people, perhaps. Or maybe to sleep with a man, if you are a man. Or a woman, if you are a woman."

Jenny opened her mouth to protest, but shut it immediately. One of her breeding does not deign to argue with the insane.

"Also: To avenge your anonymity. To travel. To immerse yourself in obscenity. To abolish slavery and vote for a woman for President. To realize that capitalism is inhumane and that organized religion is corrupt. To implement the Meat Inspection Act. To pray." I went on: "To understand our connection to nature. To know that we are all doomed. To take seriously the grievances of groups of people you don't know. To enlarge your worldview. To hate.

"To beware of big-city temptation. To beware of small-town hypocrisy. To save souls and disdain colonialists. To avoid the tyranny of groups and the madness of the loner. To abstain from drugs. To *take* drugs. To take drugs and then feel bad about them later.

"To revel in war. To despise war-makers. To be an adult and also to be aware that to grow up is to die a little. To know that money is the root of all evil and to accumulate as much of it as possible. Also: to throw it away because it is meaningless. To tear down the political system and start over. To vote.

"To glorify the working class. To envy the upper class. To pity them. To go slumming. To settle down and raise a family. To live every moment as if it's your last. To know that nothing ultimately matters." I paused. "I could go on, of course."

"Now *there's* a shock." Jenny was looking at me oddly. Her mouth was open slightly and I noticed, for the first time, that her lips were abnormally plump, given her otherwise angular, even bony face. Collagen injections, perhaps. At the prep school I attended in the East, it was rumored that the girls at Mt. Whitney, with whom our high hopes and itchy bodies mingled twice quarterly at dances, were in the habit of applying Campho-Fenique to their lower lips. It was said to assist in a certain lush poutiness, as well as to combat premature ejaculation during the oral encounters that made our virginal lives worth living.

"I trust my point is clear. It is, obviously, not *one* thing that we are being persuaded to do. But all great literature has in common a desire to affect the culture at

large. To open up, to expand, to enliven, to enrich. To overcome prejudice or widen the notion of what is permissible, what is *acceptable*. This is why most artists are liberals. Because the very concept of literary art – encompassing other viewpoints, exploring personal and societal boundaries, searching for larger meaning, etc. – is a liberal concept. A conservative mind would not and could not people an imaginary universe with characters, nor be troubled to worry about what they might think or do, and – especially – *why*. God, if he exists, is most definitely a bleeding heart." This last was, of course, a purely rhetorical flourish.

"Nonsense," said Brian. "There're lots of great writers whose books have nothing to do with changing the world."

"Such as?"

He thought for a moment. "Nabokov."

"Are you kidding me?"

"You've read him?"

I snorted. "Of course." Beyond a few indecipherable pages of *Pale Fire* in college, this was a brazen lie.

"So...?"

I chuckled professorially. "We must beware most of all those who most vocally profess to abhor didacticism."

"I guess you're safe as Jell-O then," remarked Jenny, who – I noted with satisfaction – had resumed breathing through her nostrils.

Ignoring her, I continued. "What is *Lolita* but a meticulously constructed case for the artistic virtue of abolishing taboo? He, like every other novelist, is forever urging, cajoling, attempting to nudge the culture in a

particular direction." I shrugged. "Unless you think it's just a book about a pedophile."

"Well, of course not," he said hurriedly, and I knew I was out of danger. "But I don't see how this connects to literature being dead. Seems to me you've made a pretty good case for it being alive and well."

"Literature can only be alive and well in a culture that is still evolving and progressing. Once a society reaches its end point – its final incarnation – the arts have nothing further to do aside from providing entertainment and escapism. Which, of course, is most of what they've done all along anyway."

"Wait a second," Jenny leaned toward me. "Aside from all that other hooey, you're actually sitting there saying that our society is... *done* evolving?"

"Freddy, Freddy..." Brian was shaking his head and laughing.

"You would agree, would you not, that societies must cease to evolve at *some* point? That nothing goes on forever?"

"Well, sure, but – "

"Is the Roman Empire continuing to evolve?"

"We're about to *fall*, is that it?" asked Brian.

"Think about it," I said. "Can you really deny that art in general is vastly less consequential than it was, say, fifty years ago? Can you imagine something as homely and primitive as a *novel* affecting the culture the way *The Jungle* did, or *The Sun Also Rises* or *On The Road*? Of course not. That's because literature has no transformative function in a culture that is no longer pushing itself to transform. What

barriers are left to break down? What taboos remain? How could a lowly novelist possibly be controversial in an age where every vaguely radical notion has either been marginalized or commercialized?"

"Preach it, brother," giggled Brian.

"Make fun all you want, but we are *done*, buddy. We are fat, happy consumers, and we will continue to be for the duration of our little experiment here. There is nothing left to persuade us to *do*, except shop and behave ourselves."

"Speak for yourself, Freddy."

"Hey, *you're* the novelist. I'm speaking more for you than me."

"So you say."

"I guess I should just get out of the book business, then," snorted Jenny. I noticed, however, that twin spheres of pink had appeared in her cheeks, giving her a vaguely heated look.

"Yes, you should," I said. "When it comes to sheer entertainment value, books can't hope to compete with the other existing forms of media. Less and less people read literature every year and that will only continue, as books occupy a smaller and smaller place in the culture's awareness. I imagine they will disappear entirely in our lifetime. Except for your Mr. King, of course, and his ilk." What I didn't mention is that I had rather enjoyed the few Stephen King books I'd read, and much preferred them to most more acclaimed literary efforts.

"And what about you?" Jenny leaned forward suddenly, the pink spheres still present, her rounded lips parted accusingly.

I caught her scent on the air-conditioned wind and felt a small shiver go through me. I smirked to cover it. "What about me?"

"Well, what are you doing about all of this, writing your little copy, making your little pronouncements? Aren't you just part of the problem?"

"Unlike you and your client here, I have no reason to view it as a problem," I said. "I'm just making a living. The fate of art troubles me not at all."

Jenny wanted badly to argue with me, but was momentarily stymied as to how to go about it. We stared at each other a moment, her normally sky blue eyes having darkened dramatically to an inky purple, and her breath coming across the table to me in little fragrant puffs. When she spoke I was startled by the venom in her voice. "I know men like you. I've known them all my life."

I had Jenny Van Dyke's full attention now, for the first time since I'd met her, and I was flattered, I must admit it. "Men like me?" I said, innocently.

"My father used to warn me about them," she said. "The funny thing was, by then I already knew more about them than he did."

"Really?"

She nodded, not taking her eyes from mine. "I think there were less of them in his generation, for some reason."

Her dark eyes considered me, moving over my body in a way that made me a bit uncomfortable. I found myself sitting up straighter and holding my stomach in, all the while trying to arrange my face in an expression of amused hauteur. All at once, I was quite excited, though.

Jenny went on, thoughtfully. "They always have very excellent reasons for *not* doing things. And they always try to make you feel foolish for being someone who *does* do things."

"Do I make you feel foolish, Miss Van Dyke?"

She ignored my question. "My father used to tell me I needed to be on my guard, because these soft, these *weak* men would be drawn to me. Because I was a strong woman. I used to hate hearing him say that, because it sounded so silly, like something from the old Women's Lib days." She smiled. "But then I saw other girls – *smart* girls – falling for these guys in college. They were always very charming, and they had a way of making you feel like sleeping with them would be a very sophisticated thing to do."

I took a stab in the dark. "But you never succumbed."

She leaned forward and I could smell her again. Her eyes pinned me and her mouth was set now, and determined. "No, I never did," she said.

My cell phone rang just then. I put my hand in my coat pocket automatically, but I had some trouble disengaging my gaze from Jenny Van Dyke's. At last I glanced down at the phone. The letter "T" was blinking on the screen. It was Teena calling.

I looked at Brian and saw that he had seen the blinking letter as well. Quickly, I snapped the phone shut.

"What the hell are you doing, Freddy?" Brian said quietly.

"How are you guys doing over here?"

I turned to face Lorna, who had appeared at my side, hands on aproned hips. It was a moment of indecision for

me. On one hand, Lorna looked to have satisfactorily negotiated the dissonance between my prior behavior and today's blatant come-ons. She was ostensibly speaking to the table at large, but her eyes were on me, and she was smiling in an uncomplicated way that made her intentions obvious. Lornas are not difficult to read. They do, however, require a measured exertion – not too bold, yet just bold enough – in order to coax them into position. Looking up at Lorna's placid visage, I felt suddenly weary of the toil that was bequeathed me by virtue of gender. And so, caught between two species of necessity, I balked.

This hesitation was all the window a strong woman required.

"That'll be all," Jenny said curtly. "We're on our way out." I felt her hand on my forearm, like a small hot spider. When she took it away, there remained a florid indentation in my whiteness, like a brand.

Lorna blinked, doe-like, at Jenny, who was gathering her purse and coat. "But...." She looked at me. "Your steak is still coming...." Her confused, questioning smile was a broken bridge that I lacked the time to repair.

"I'm sorry, Lorna," I said, standing. "You can put it on my tab if you like."

Brian looked up at us from where he remained seated, his hand curled forlornly around his half-empty glass of whiskey. His furrowed brow made him look absurdly like a child who has just been informed that mommy and daddy are going to try living apart for awhile. "Will you be back?" he asked, though it wasn't clear who he was directing the question to.

"Sit tight," said Jenny in her crisp, phony agent voice. "I'll call the minute I hear something." *Your call is important to us. Please stay on the line....*

I felt a moment of sympathy for my friend. He was having an emotionally taxing day and I knew that my behavior, first with Lorna and now with his literary agent, was causing him additional distress. Brian liked everyone to get along, and for things to stay explicit and above board; he was unequipped for infidelity in any form. These proclivities had a somewhat detrimental effect on his writing, but then, so do most admirable character traits.

However, even if I was inclined to halt in my forward progress toward Jenny Van Dyke, there she was at my elbow, hurrying me along. "Come on," she said. "Keep your phone on, Brian."

She fairly whisked me out of the bar, leaving behind Brian and Lorna, each in various states of befuddlement. As we made our four-legged way toward the exit, I noticed that Happy Hour was now in full effect. The bar was jammed with loud-talking, close-shaven men smoking foul-smelling cigars and boisterously slapping dice cups on the counter. The young bartender was racing to and fro, and the volume of the sports game on the flatscreen had been boosted to an ear-splitting level. As we passed, the entire bar area was flooded with a deafening roar of applause following some base hit or another, and again Eddie's eyes found mine amidst the chaos. His approving smirk was most likely a product of my imagination and low blood sugar; there was no reason to feel "found out," by him or anyone else. Unfortunately for the fat man, I had a great deal farther to

fall before I was comfortingly on his level. If that was the source of his malignant satisfaction, that was *his* mirage, and not my concern.

As it turned out, Jenny lived nearby, in an apartment on Nob Hill that was walking distance from Putzkammer's. Miss Van Dyke, though she was not tall, was a fast walker, and as she seized my hand and led me through the Market Street crowds, I felt something like a ponderous iron schooner, wounded in battle and being towed to safety by a plucky young tugboat.

Whiskey on an empty stomach had re-induced my lightheadedness and I relaxed into the pleasant feeling of being swept up in another's wake. Jenny was clearly not a girl conversant with half-measures. If she wanted it, she *took* it, and without apology. I looked wonderingly at my abductor, whose face was intent only on traversing the sidewalk traffic, having apparently decided that further conversation was unnecessary. Her shapely little ass twitched back and forth as we hustled along, and I was pleased to observe several passing men eying her appreciatively. Passive caboose though I was, I felt a familiar electric sizzle in my empty stomach. It was the conjoined anxiety and exhilaration of occupying a desirable position beside a desirable girl. In an earlier era of history, any one of the larger, more aggressive males in my midst might simply have clubbed me senseless and carried Jenny off to his cave, and no one would have questioned the right of his might to do so. In these civilized times, however, they were obliged to grind their teeth and hold their tongue. The blonde had done the choosing, and the only dignity lay in feigning indifference.

For myself, I was mildly concerned that I was, perhaps, *too* detached, given the events at hand. But I assumed that desire would make itself known once I was seated, with a drink in my hand, and perhaps a little something to nibble on....

"Here we are." She shot me a heated glance – our first real eye contact since we had left the bar – as we stopped in front of a posh, modern apartment building, replete with marbled steps, tiny antique mailboxes and angular, steel-framed balconies that promised to display nubile, sunbathing paralegals during the rare fogless days. The building was obviously a den of young, single professional types – judging by the decor, mostly women and gay men in their twenties and thirties.

"Nice place," I managed, releasing Jenny's hand and stepping through the gate she was holding open for me.

"I suppose," she said, attesting, with a dismissive shrug, to the temporary quality of her lodgings. "It's conveniently located. But as soon as I make my first sale...."

"Wouldn't your father spring for it?" I asked. "Something in Pacific Heights, maybe? A homey little Victorian for his favorite daughter?"

"I'm not his favorite daughter," she said mildly, leading me through the lobby toward the elevator. "But yes, he might, if I asked him." She punched the button for the seventh floor and we stood, waiting – somewhat awkwardly, as is often the case during such moments. "What about *your* father?" she asked.

The question caught me off guard. "What about him?" I said, sounding rather more defensive than I would have preferred.

"Well, he's rich, too, isn't he?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, isn't he?"

"I suppose it depends on what you mean by rich."

She laughed then, loudly.

"What's so funny?"

"Don't you know? That's the kind of answer only rich people give."

The elevator appeared and we stepped inside.

"Let me guess," she said teasingly. "You'd probably die before you'd ask *your* father for anything, right?"

I looked at Jenny then. Her face was flushed and very animated, her eyes darting to mine and back to the elevator control panel. It occurred to me that she was rapidly transforming into an entirely new person in front of my eyes. This is the aspect of discovery that compulsive adulterers become dependent on. The newness of fresh flesh is often only an adjunct to the larger intoxication of uncovering the layers of a brand-new being, and in turn being uncovered. I did not really know Jenny Van Dyke, and that she was now morphing from a grating, obsequious young striver into a blushing girl on her first date was captivating in direct proportion to my lack of prior knowledge. When you are strangers, each tentative gesture and shy, stolen glance is a surprise and a delight. In the early stages of love, we gobble down details, greedily digesting each other's history in an attempt to close that gap, to get *closer*, heedless of the fact

that, instead of savoring it, we are devouring the mystery that brought us together to begin with.

The other aspect of the Jenny I'd known that was now diminishing was her take-charge attitude. She was slouched coyly in the corner of the elevator, eyeing me from beneath lowered lashes. This was not the strident phony on the cell phone in Putzkammer's. And so, invigorated by unfamiliarity, I was momentarily roused, sufficient to grasp her manfully and wedge her lithe, gym-fit frame into the corner of the elevator with my bulk.

As we fumbled, in that clumsy, adrenaline-clouded way, through our first kiss, I witnessed a melting in Jenny Van Dyke that both aroused and worried me. She yielded to my assault with such eagerness as to suggest that the old Jenny, the one from the bar, had, indeed, been banished from the scene, perhaps with great relief.

The ping of the elevator signaled our arrival on the seventh floor, and soon we were down the hall and paused before a door while Jenny struggled to insert the key amidst my pawing. Finally, we were inside, all giggles and heavy breathing and urgency. She led me, wordlessly, to a white couch, where we continued necking. Jenny's body was familiar to me in a distantly-remembered way, the skin taut over firm little curves that reminded me of girls whose names I had forgotten, but whose physicality had become emblematic of all that drifted out of reach with the passing of time. I moved my hands over her like a blind man, memorizing her supple details for the many years to come when I would be forced to rely, increasingly, on memory.

By now, however, my initial wave of ardor had spent itself and begun to subside, and I was becoming aware of the ergonomic drawbacks of my current position. I was crouched over Jenny, half seated and half-standing at the edge of the couch where she was splayed beneath me. My calf muscle was quivering where it was supporting my weight and my back was beginning to ache slightly. I paused to catch my breath, and without opening her eyes she murmured breathily, "Don't stop...."

There was no mistaking the role I had been assigned. Clearly, I was to be the *ravager*. There was nothing to do but remove our clothing and proceed. I yanked roughly at her garments as she moaned in delight, and in a matter of moments I was gazing resentfully at her recumbent nakedness. Once again I had been the victim of false advertising and a last-minute reversion. Jenny's professional acumen was a product of skillfully aping the ultra-dominant role models in her life – most likely her father. These models told her that passivity was to be suppressed for the sake of "getting ahead." But, being a girl of the new millennium, and not one of the defeminized hordes of baby boomer women with their pantsuits and short hair, Jenny was raised to expect that she could have it all. And so she felt entirely comfortable embracing a more traditionally submissive feminine mien during our encounter.

How I envied her! Supine and receptive, she waited, like so many of her gender had before her, for me to do all the work. But, as was increasingly the case during sex, I felt an insidious kind of invisibility drawing over me and cutting me off from the experience. Below me lay a nude and lovely

literary agent, eyes closed, preferring the cinematic rapture of her imagination to the cold hard facts of pale, pudgy Freddy feasting on her from above. Often I have lain beneath Teena (she prefers to be astride, but only because the sensation of being "impaled" makes her feel more helpless) urging her patiently onwards toward a climax that, in the end, often seems strangely independent of me. But this is only my private perception. In reality, any slackening in my labor will elicit the timeless plea (order?) to "*don't stop!*"

But the crucial change that time had wrought, it seemed to me, was that once, no bedmate would have ignored me for her own reflection. Perhaps my Freudian secret is that, from Anneliese to Teena to Jenny, I have, in recent years, sought out narcissists because they allow me to remain safely unseen as they go about the business of pleasuring themselves with my second-rate body. Of course, I would trade places with them in a second if I could. I believe many men harbor this fantasy of being the conquered rather than the conqueror, of being pursued, sweated over, granted the kind of attention that females in our culture take as their due. As far as I can tell, a considerable percentage of the sex industry revolves around this urge.

Surely, the earnest, sex-positive therapist type would heartily berate me for not "communicating my needs" more effectively. But what I yearn for is not some *arrangement* wherein, come Tuesdays, I get to be the "receiver." No, that would be confusing the symptom with the disease. There is ultimately no more use in indulging my complaint than there is in wishing that women would at last outgrow their Darwinian imperative to seek out an assertive mate. And,

weary as I am of the continual obligation we males have to take charge in bed, I can take some comfort in the irony that, at least, we need no longer play the brute to *get* there. Anyway, I reminded myself, after tomorrow, none of it will matter to me anyway. This was my final fling as a bachelor, and good riddance to the whole irksome ordeal. At least with Teena, I got to be on the bottom.

It is, of course, no great revelation that excessive cerebration is seldom the path to carnal bliss, though whether the fault lay there, or elsewhere, I can't say for certain. To be sure, the one-night stand is a precarious proposition to begin with, and as I fumbled my way free of my own clothes, it became perfectly clear to me why such skirmishes are typically conducted after sunset, when night provides comfort and cover, and liquor blurs the edges just so, lending the limbs a grace they lack in the remorselessly literal light of day.

Whatever the reason, it soon became apparent to all concerned that a vital bit of weaponry was, indeed, absent from the battlefield. Jenny reached up, eyes still closed, and attempted to manually revive my flagging enthusiasm, but it was one of those moments absolutely without ambiguity for me. I knew, with deadening certainty, that it was no good, that I was and would remain, for the immediate future, quite bloodless. Muttering something about having missed lunch, I rolled off and we sat side by side on the couch, as our respective breathing slowed and returned to normal.

I occupied myself by staring fixedly at the darkened screen of a small television set which was balanced on a mahogany stand a few feet away from the couch. Perhaps if I

held absolutely still, if I didn't move a muscle or make the tiniest noise, she would go shower or something, I could creep quietly away and we could skip the inevitable discussion.

But it was not to be. Hardly two minutes had passed before Jenny exhaled a resolute, "so that's that" gust of breath, and placed her hand somewhat formally on my shoulder.

I could feel her eyes on me, but I kept my rapt attention on the television, as if I had never seen one before.

"It's no big deal, you know," she said.

So much for skipping the talk.

"Yeah," I grunted.

There was a pause.

"It's probably for the best, anyway."

"Mmm." I realized she was referring to Teena. Suddenly, I slapped my hand to my forehead. "Shit!"

"What?" Jenny sounded solicitous, as if bracing herself for a wave of guilt and self-flagellation on my part.

"I forgot the cake at the bar."

"Oh."

After another pause, she rose from the couch. I watched her pad, unselfconsciously naked, to the bathroom. My heart ached for a moment, in a way known only to those whose mindful urges have failed to be co-signed by the body, with whom the buck most certainly stops.

While she was gone, I attended to my clothing, re-buttoning and zippering until my teddy bear body was once again safely contained, restoring some measure of dignity to

my situation. Before I could contemplate a vanishing act, however, the naked wonder agent was back.

"I know just what you need," she said, raising a finger. "Don't move."

She disappeared again and I waited, the depression settling over me now like a blanket of shadow. Absurd though it may be, sexual dysfunction always takes on a disproportionately tragic hue, possibly because it seems to signify lost opportunity in a particularly piercing way. In this case, I believe my funk was doubly justified since seldom had I been presented with so propitious an opportunity to embody the devil's advocate. I was the Road Not Taken for Jenny, and she for me, and in my impotence I had blown a rare chance to avenge myself for passive men everywhere. Our lack of ferret-like gnawing for achievement had always been disparaged by the golden-thighed damsels whose fathers manned the tillers of commerce. Our clear-eyed rejection was mistaken for fear or cynicism, our soft bodies ridiculed and our explanations dismissed as excuse-making. "Guys like us" were viewed as, at best, diversions from the true path. We were, after all, not on board with the striver's holy Prime Directive: to *ascend*, ever to ascend, heedless of the laws of gravity.

In short, I was feeling sorry for myself when Jenny returned, still blissfully bare, and holding aloft a magnum of what looked like Cristal in one hand, and two flute glasses in the other.

"Champagne!" she announced triumphantly. "Come on." And she scampered into the bedroom, cradling the bottle in both arms like a baby.

By the time I reached the doorway, she was already in bed, the covers pulled up past her waist. She was struggling with the cork, her small, rose-tipped breasts squeezed between her elbows as she grappled with the unwieldy bottle.

"Here, allow me," I said. And whether a Pavlovian response to years of advertising saturation or simply the reassertion of a primeval need to feel useful in a male way, with the explosive dislodging of the cork – a satisfyingly deep *thwap*, perhaps attributable to Cristal's famously flat-bottomed receptacle – my depression withdrew at once, like a shadow fleeing the midday sun. "So, do you always keep some champagne around for visitors, or what?" I asked, filling first her glass, then mine.

"Well, I *was* saving it for Brian," she said. "To celebrate."

"Brian doesn't even like champagne."

She giggled. "I'm not sure I do either. But I suppose I should learn to."

Her remark triggered a strange mixture of emotion in me. I was unexpectedly flooded with a genuine fondness for Jenny Van Dyke that I wouldn't have thought possible an hour earlier, along with a subtle, almost wistful melancholy. There was, as well, a third strain of feeling that I can only describe as *gladness*. I knew that, beyond this afternoon, Jenny and I would likely have little, if any, contact with one another. Certainly, we would never again find ourselves in this kind of intimate alliance. It was a moment outside of our normal lives, and I do not believe either of us would have wished otherwise. But just then I was, above all,

tremendously *glad* to be propped up in bed with her, drinking champagne in the late afternoon. Just for that moment, there was nowhere I would rather be.

"I suppose you *should* learn," I said. And we shared a shy smile, the first real one since we'd known each other.

We lay sipping in companionable silence. Jenny's bedroom was mostly white and very clean. It was a pleasantly neutral space, like a therapist's waiting room. After a few minutes, Jenny rolled over and fiddled with a small CD player that was on the nightstand, and then John Lee Hooker could be heard groaning about being all alone after the sun done gone down.

"I didn't know you were a blues fan," I remarked.

"Brian has been trying to get me into it," she said. "He's always making fun of my record collection. He says it's all fluff."

"God forbid. So, what's the verdict on the old dead black men?"

"It's okay sometimes, although I wouldn't want to listen to it all the time."

"I know this one," I said. "Brian plays it a lot. It's actually pretty good."

She yawned. "They all sort of sound the same to me."

"That's probably what *they* think about *us*, too," I joked.

"I want to ask you something," Jenny said.

"Okay. More?" I nodded at her almost empty glass.

"Yes, please."

I poured and she sipped, smacking her lips like a greedy child. "Mmm. I might be developing a taste for this stuff. Anyway, what do you think of Brian's book?"

"Well..."

"*Really*, what do you think? Just between us."

"To be honest, I sort of skimmed parts of it."

Jenny wagged her finger at me in mock admonishment.

"I know, I know," I said, hanging my head in dutiful acknowledgement of what a terrible friend I was. "It just seemed like another one of those long, pointless stories about some guy – who's always a writer, of course – wandering around the city, meeting people, getting into these long arguments about art and life, and, you know, discovering love, like a pot of gold at the end." I shrugged. "I mean, I don't claim to be a literary critic."

Jenny tilted her head, gazing out the window. "You sure sounded like one earlier when you were telling me my entire career is a waste of time."

I cleared my throat. "Oh, I was just talking, you know...."

"To tell the truth, I don't know how much longer I'm going to stay with it." She stretched lazily. "Doing something with books sounded nice. It was kind of old-fashioned, but I thought maybe...." She trailed off.

"I'm guessing your father has nothing whatsoever to do with the book business?" I said.

She nodded. "He could get me a dozen different entry-level jobs tomorrow that would pay more to *start* with than I'll probably ever make agenting."

"Sounds like it would be hard to pass up that kind of opportunity."

"That's what my father does. He makes people rich."
She looked at me suddenly. "*You're* not rich, are you?"

I chuckled. "Hardly."

She was serious, though. "How do you manage it?"

"Lots of people seem to manage to avoid getting rich. Most of them, in fact."

She slumped down in the bed, propping her glass on her knee. "Well, I don't know how they do it. I feel like a failure every day I wake up."

"And you think making more money will solve that?"

She nodded. "I have a feeling I'm one of those people who needs to be rich in order to feel right. I think it's a deal-breaker for me."

"What about love?"

Her eyes crinkled at me. "Is that how it works for you, Fred? Is your voluntary oath of poverty the key to *your* successful marriage?"

"I'm not married yet," I said. "And I'm not *poor*, for chrissake. I'm just not, you know...."

"Our fathers," she finished. "Yes, I know. That's why I went home with you, you know."

"So you said." I poured myself another glass of Cristal, and drank half of it down. I noticed it was warmer than before, and a good deal less bubbly.

"But now, I'm wondering," Jenny said.

"Wondering what?"

"Wondering *why*?"

"Why?"

"Yes." She turned on her elbow to face me. "Why aren't you your father? Or mine, for that matter? You remind me of him in certain ways. I think you probably *could* be, but you don't seem to want to be, for some reason."

"Ignoring the glaring Oedipal overtones of this conversation, why, exactly, *should* I want to be?"

"Why should you want to be successful?"

"Look, Jenny. There's no oath of poverty in my life, believe me. I do just fine, and that's just fine with me." I noticed the tone of my voice and tried to concentrate on sounding amused rather than defensive. "You're just a little bit more flush with ambition than I am," I added, smiling. "Some of us aren't so hot to spend our lives chasing around after the posh apartment and the fancy car and daddy's approval."

She nodded. "Yes, that's always the case with you guys."

"Are we starting that 'you guys' stuff again?"

"I'm not trying to insult you, Fred. Honest, I'm not. But you just described yourself in terms that are very familiar to me, so I can't help putting you in a certain category."

"I'm not fond of being categorized," I said, in a way that was intended to sound joking, thought it didn't wholly come out that way.

"Well, for a guy who willingly embraces mediocrity that's something of a contradiction, don't you think?"

"Mediocrity?"

"Isn't that what you are describing? You scoff at status, but also at bohemian types. You seem to have equal

scorn for doers and do-nothings alike. You work downtown, but you're not really a part of downtown, you're just kind of squatting there, watching it all go by. You live with Brian, but you're not really a part of his world either. You're that guy in the *middle*, making comments." She waved her empty glass and I filled it silently. "But something's off about your whole shtick, Fred. That's what I'm getting at. It doesn't suit you, somehow. What happened? Did some girl break your heart or something?"

I said nothing. I was staring up at the ceiling. There was an impressive assortment of cracks and patterns in the plaster, but I did not see the man with the hat anywhere. There was only various abstract geometry and something that looked vaguely like a dog.

"Okay, I guess it wasn't a girl. Well, something's holding you back, but I don't know you well enough to know what it is. What do you think it is?"

"I think I'm starting to wish we'd just fucked without saying a word to each other."

She smiled. "It's not too late. You can make a move anytime you want."

"I wish it could just happen, without trying."

"Yeah, that would be nice." She rolled onto her back. "I know what Dad would say to that, though."

"What's that?"

"Wishes are a loser's favorite tune."

"He really talks like that? Like out of some 'how to succeed in business' video?"

"You bet." She lolled on her back, stretching her fingers out in front of her. "He could probably do a lot for you," she said. "Brian says you're very talented."

I should take her now, I thought. It would be the perfect moment. I could reach over, grab her by the hair and pull her to me without thinking it to death. Just go for it. It was a fine idea, but nothing stirred in my vital quarters. My loins remained in retreat.

"I guess they're not going to be calling back about Brian's book?" I said, looking ruefully at Jenny's slender leg, which was protruding straight up from the bedspread. She appeared to be doing some kind of calisthenics.

"It's probably just as well given the state I'm in," she said, wiggling her toes. "Jesus, I'm plastered."

"I should get going," I said. "I still have to pick up the rings and the cake." I stood up and looked down at her. The light in the room had dimmed considerably. It was dusk outside now, and down in the streets I could hear the swelling urgency of the evening commute traffic. The work day was over and everyone was making a beeline for the two bridges, and the respite of the suburbs. "Thanks for the champagne."

"Good-bye, Frederick Locktin," she said, fluttering her fingers at me from the bed. "I hope you figure yourself out."

"You too, Miss Van Dyke."

"Oh, I'm easy to figure out. I guess I was hoping I'd turn out to be a little more complicated, but I think I'm too much like my father."

"We don't get to choose, do we?"

She sighed and closed her eyes. "No, I guess not. I guess I'm glad we didn't sleep together."

"Me too," I said, stealing one last glance at her partially covered body. "How could I possibly respect myself later?"

She giggled sleepily, without opening her eyes. "You're full of shit, Frederick Locktin. But I had a nice time anyway."

By the time I had my shoes on, she was snoring. I stood in front of the hallway mirror and retied my red silk tie. Then I let myself quietly out of the apartment and, ignoring the elevator, made my way down the stairwell to the lobby. Out on the sidewalk, I hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of the jeweler's. As we pulled away from the curb, I glanced upward and spotted the one darkened window on the seventh floor. I watched the window until it passed out of sight, and if there was any regret in me, it was so small as to scarcely be worth worrying about. Rufus had a phrase for things like that. He most often utilized it when attempting to counter a potential investor's skepticism regarding the perceived financial downside of his latest scheme.

"It's *statistically insignificant!*" he would cry. And that, in his mind, settled the matter absolutely.

Teena rang again while I was en route to the jeweler's, which was located deep in the avenues, somewhere in the Sunset District. Exhausted, I punched "Ignore" and snapped the phone shut, as if to ward off the pangs of guilt that were coiling around me like tiny poisonous snakes. Of course I knew that what had occurred upstairs could not technically be construed as "cheating." It was true that my dalliance with the wonder agent, though it fell short of its initial objective, was still not exactly chaste – there had been some heated kissing, and she had been naked much of the time. However, none of what had transpired could be reasonably said to approximate the quality of Teena's deception. Still, however sternly I repeated this distinction to myself, it began, increasingly, to seem little more than a slippery bit of legalese. My father used to say that the law was not in the business of moralizing. I think what he meant was that the *feeling* of guilt was the concern of hand-wringing liberals or fire-breathing avengers, both of whom were, as far as I could tell, equally distasteful to him. *Legal* guilt was all that interested the old man, and he detested the injection of sentiment into what was, for him, an essentially dispassionate process.

As I sat, staring blurrily out the taxi window, the essence of my father's maxim began to hit home in a way it had not previously. I saw that if there is no real relationship between the rules and how one *feels* about the rules, then it stands to reason that one cannot effectively rationalize one's way out of a *feeling* of guilt, since guilt is an instinctive,

emotional response that is not susceptible to interpretation or appeal (as the rules always are). I could assure myself for days that there was no reason to feel badly for betraying Teena, since she had betrayed me first. But these assurances would not protect me from what I was experiencing now, which appeared to be all the negative emotional after-effects of adultery, minus the thrill of consummation. A lousy bargain, but one I was evidently insufficiently detached to avoid. Perhaps this is why the legal system's most adroit manipulators customarily find it advisable to jettison their consciences early in their careers. One must drop that weight before ascending, and at the moment I felt as if I weighed five hundred pounds.

It didn't sit well with me, this feeling of being compelled, puppet-like, to dance by forces beyond my control. I also resented the prominence with which parental figures had figured in my day so far. I did not like to think of myself as someone who was overly defined by my upbringing. Since childhood, it had never occurred to me that I would ever have anything resembling closeness with my parents, and I generally believed that to have freed, rather than limited, me. Here in California, many young men and women are forced, by economic necessity, into a dependence on their family that often extends well into adulthood. A lack of money makes infants of us all, and financial dependence encourages emotional dependence. Perhaps this is why so many of the younger generation seem so unnaturally bound up in their "relationship" with their mothers and fathers. Jenny's dilemma, for example, would normally inspire a certain disgust in me; I have little tolerance for girls and their

perpetual daddy fixation. But on this day, with my own father at that very moment occupying a hotel room in the center of town (not to mention the news that, barring any intervention, fatherhood was scheduled to be imposed upon *me* approximately eight months from now), it was not so easy to remain above the fray.

The whole subject made me feel squirmy and impatient. I felt myself rippling with a variety of petulant urges: to sleep; to scream; to rip the cab door open; to direct the driver to the bus station where I would purchase a one-way ticket to New York. My claustrophobia was probably exacerbated by the neighborhoods we were now traversing. I hated the Sunset District with its endless rows of identical duplexes, its suffocating domestic anonymity. Plus, it was a region permanently shrouded in the fog that rolled in from the sea, damp and impenetrable, blocking out the sun and chilling the bones, sending everyone indoors to their family dinners and Tivo'd television programs.

It was five to eight when we finally arrived at the jeweler's address. It was yet another "off the beaten path" find, recommended to my fiancé by one of her girlfriends, a breastless, gossipy girl named Joan, who had the annoying habit of halting her speech whenever I walked in the room, as if my cumbersome presence was incompatible with whatever girlish insights were being communicated. There would then be a pause, followed by a singsongy "*hi, Freddy.*" Anyway, it seemed that Joan's parents (she was *very* close with her folks, more like *best friends*, really...) had recently renewed their vows or some such thing, and this

ramshackle Victorian on Taraval Street evidently housed a jeweler who was "to die for."

The man who opened the door was not the stooped and myopic proprietor I had expected from our phone conversation. He was a large man in his mid-forties with an unruly bushel of hair on his head and his chin, and he wore a faded blue, sack-like pair of overalls, one strap of which had come undone and was hanging loose over an enormous belly. His appearance was more like that of a hog farmer than a jeweler. Upon seeing me shivering on his doorstep, he smiled sadly. "You must be Mr. Locktin. Come in, please." The accent had the same vaguely Slavic throatiness I remembered from our phone conversation, the abrasive edges of his native Russian or Polish having been polished smooth by years in the States. As I followed him into the house, I saw that his imposing first impression was already fading. His bulk was impressive, but he shuffled along like a peasant, chattering in an obsequious way, his entire bearing and manner one of implicit apology.

"My wife thought you were not coming," he said, looking at me confidentially over his shoulder as he led the way down the one long hallway that ran the length of the house.

"It's just been a busy day," I said.

He nodded. "That is what I told her. There is much to do on such an occasion. We will stay open a bit later if necessary."

"I'm sorry if I'm keeping you."

He waved a meaty hand. His sad eyes snuck glances at me when he thought I wasn't looking. "I knew you'd come," he said.

We emerged from the hallway into a large room with bay windows overlooking the back yard, such as it was. As was the case with many Sunset dwellings, the yard consisted of a small square of yellowing grass, just large enough for a couple of lawn chairs and a table. The house next door was almost close enough to reach forward and touch from a seated position in one of the chairs, and the wind made a whistling noise as it whipped through the tiny enclosed area, ruffling the branches of a desiccated hydrangea.

"My wife, Fayina," said the big man, gesturing toward a petite woman in an oversized brown sweater whose face, despite enormous, watchful dark eyes, fell – almost willfully, it seemed – just short of beauty.

I mumbled my greeting to the jeweler's wife, who nodded back silently from behind a clipboard. A dull, peasant suspicion lurked in her gaze, and, conscious of my still-inebriated state, I looked away quickly and took in my surroundings, which seemed to be an odd combination of bedroom and workshop. A long, wooden bench, strewn with debris, ran the length of the far wall. Lights were affixed to various beams, and in one corner sat a metal filing cabinet and a small roll top desk covered with paper. To my right, however, beneath the bay windows, was a queen-sized bed, unmade, with a television at its foot and several bottles of pills in broken rows atop the headboard.

My host must have seen me eyeing the bed. "We have other rooms," he said. "But they are too small. I must

offer apologies for the mess. We spend most of our time here and it is our busiest season." He bowed apologetically. "I know you are also busy. I will get your rings now."

For some reason, the red warning light returned just then, pulsing at the edge of my mind's eye, urging me to flee, to be on my guard, to... what? To panic. *You're imagining things*, I told myself. *Just get the rings and then you can get out of here.*

"*Rurik!* What are you doing?"

I looked up, startled. The woman in the sweater was glaring at her husband, who flinched at the sound of her voice but did not turn from where he stood at the work table, his hands moving swiftly over a heap of tiny felt boxes as if he was testing coals for heat.

"I am getting Mr. Locktin's rings," he said tightly.

"Why are you not looking in the other processed items?"

"I left them here." The big, soft hands continued to sweep over the boxes. I noticed how gentle he was with each, handling it in such a way as to avoid creasing or denting the felt.

"*I moved them.*"

His hands stopped then, but he remained facing forward, away from her. "Where?" he asked.

"I put them where they belong," she said, returning to her clipboard, as if the conversation was over.

"And where is that, Fayina?"

"With the processed items." Her pencil made brisk, precise scratching noises on the paper in front of her.

"I placed them here so that I could find them quickly."

She did not look up from the clipboard. I was aware of the distant ticking of a clock, and also of a trickle of sweat making its way down my ribcage. It was quite warm in the room.

"There was no need, Fayina. No need."

The pencil continued to scratch. The man, Rurik, stood, his hands hanging at his side, a look of weariness on his face so absolute that I might have laughed, but for the tension which had suffused the room. Clearly, I had intruded upon the latest chapter of some epic struggle, borne of the ill-fated romantic collision of opposing mortal particles on some far-off shore. The resulting explosion had dispersed the remains of two formerly whole humans as far as the new world, where they settled here in this mockery of a bedroom to do battle. Or so it seemed to me, who was drunk and exhausted and ready to leap to conclusions. Most of all, though, I wanted to be gone from there.

However, the other two participants in this temporary triangle of a drama showed no signs of speeding their affray along for my benefit. Rurik had stalked over to a row of tiny drawers that were built into the work table and was rifling through their contents blindly, tossing the tiny boxes here and there, unmindful of their lids, several of which popped off and fell, unnoticed, to the table or the floor. "I cannot find them!" he bellowed at last.

Slamming the clipboard down, the woman was across the room in an instant, as if responding to the cue she'd been awaiting. One hand darted into a drawer and immediately

produced a single, cream-colored box. "It is here," she snapped.

He snatched the box from her hand and muttered something in his native tongue.

She sneered at him. "Always with the foul language," she said. "That is to be expected by now." She turned to me then, surprising me greatly, as I had assumed my presence to have been entirely forgotten. "Next will come the drink," she said. "The future is without mystery."

Rurik's mouth hung open, stupidly. "How *dare* you, Fayina!" He was almost choked with rage, his dangling overall strap jouncing against the undulation of his massive chest.

"How *dare* I? Who do you think you are?"

"I am your husband. This is my house and you will not behave this way!"

She addressed me again. "This is sexism, yes?" Turning back to her husband, she smiled dangerously. "American women would laugh at you, Rurik. They would laugh at you and then they would leave you." She snapped her fingers. "Like that. Lawyers and alimony. *Your* house? Are you drunk already?"

"It does not have to be this way, Fayina," he said quietly. "It is you who makes this choice. It could be many ways, but you choose this way."

"It comforts you to think that, because you are simple. It is easier for you to pretend it is a choice. But it is not that simple for me, Rurik."

"You are not my wife," he said simply. "You are a demon." He sat down on a stool and folded his arms. "I will wait until the demon leaves."

She spat at the floor then, an impressively healthy gob. This shattered Rurik's passive-aggressive display of martyred patience, and he raised his arms again, a Kong looking for a building to scale. "*Demon!*" he howled.

At other times I might have proved capable of an ironic appreciation for the exceptional lack of subtlety the universe employs in dispatching its messengers. However, I was, by this point, far too rattled for irony, which is dependent on a certain equilibrium. In my present condition I felt supremely unequal to the demands of this hellish errand, and to top it all off I was now sweating profusely, and gripped with the ludicrous urge to ask everyone to pause for a moment while I opened a window. The whole scene being enacted before me was so over the top that, once again, I had the impression that I was the lone audience member in an elaborately-constructed theater of absurdity. The jeweler and his wife, with their Eastern European accents and mangled (yet jaggedly poetic) grammar, were straight out of some bad off-Broadway exercise in proletariat surrealism. They were circling each other now, snarling like wary dogs, and I felt this might be my last chance to interrupt before one of them produced a dagger or a vial of poison. "Excuse me," I said politely. "But could I just pay for my rings, please? I'm really not feeling well, and I have another appointment...." I smiled sickly and even mimed a glance at my watch.

I did not expect what came next. Fayina's hand opened, as if to cast a spell on me from across the room, and

then a felt box was on the floor in front of my feet, having bounced against my chest where she had delivered a flawless bull's-eye, like a center-fielder hitting the cutoff man.

I gaped across the room at her, hardly able to process what was happening. "Are you fucking *crazy*?" I sputtered at last.

Rurik was across the room now, throwing himself at my feet where he frantically scrambled to retrieve the little box. He pawed at me, blubbering apologies.

I shook him off. "Christ, what in the *hell* is the matter with you people?" I have always been slow to react, but now I felt a semi-hysterical rage welling within. It was a bilious loathing that had been building in me all day, a sort of childish compulsion to befoul, to besmirch. It would be deeply, blamelessly satisfying to vent it on these contemptible jewelers, like breaking the windows of a house that no one had lived in for years.

I drew myself up, quaking with righteousness, intending to deliver a devastating sermon on the appalling obscenity of either of these miserable people being affiliated, even tangentially, with the institution of marriage – an institution I felt, at the moment, quite earnestly and preposterously protective of. It was comparable to a feeling I once surprised myself with in school, listening to a French exchange student casually and pompously dismissing "the vacuity of American culture." I didn't necessarily disagree, but some part of me reared up in indignation at the slander, coming as it did from an outsider. We may disavow these myths of our nurture, but they are nonetheless a part of our nature.

Anyway, I suppose that night on Taraval Street was the moment when I began to take marriage *personally*. Until then, it had remained a purely abstract concept, defined by and belonging to others. But, there, in that stifling room, in the company of those two crazed and unhappy immigrants, all I could think of was the night Teena and I lay in my bed and brainstormed the inscription that was to go on our wedding bands. She held my hand tightly under the covers, and I began to get a glimmer of the holiness of the thing, not because of my belief, but because of hers. Somehow, this travesty in the Sunset District was an assault on Teena and the purity of her investment in the importance of the right word, the right symbol, even down to the right jeweler. These syllogisms had always defined Teena and me, but, just then, I was galvanized by them in a way that was brand-new to me. I believed in *her* belief. I loved *her* love. I would fight her fight.

But I was given no such opportunity. Fayina was moving swiftly toward me now, having thrown down her clipboard and practically hurdled a stool that was in her way. For one fantastic instant, I thought that she meant to strike me, and I stood, frozen, watching her approach.

She advanced to within a foot of where Rurik and I stood, the two of us undoubtedly wearing identical expressions of fear and outrage. Leaning her head forward, she sniffed the air around me. I straightened instinctively, like a private suffering inspection by the drill sergeant after a debaucherous 24-hour leave. Fayina's eyes were abyssal, and her face, not entirely unattractive in repose, was clenched like a fist. I gulped, suppressing a strong urge to cover my

genitals, which felt dangerously exposed to a sudden kick or punch.

Satisfied, she drew back. "Huh," she said. "You smell just like my husband." She looked the two of us up and down. "In the dark, I could not tell you apart."

Then she was around me and on her way out of the room.

"Here!" As soon as she was gone, Rurik was pressing the felt box into my hands. "Take it and go!"

My moment of righteous clarity had passed as abruptly as it had appeared. I looked questioningly at him. "But, I haven't paid...."

"Never mind about that. Please, sir. I apologize for everything, but she will be back soon." He gently folded my fingers around the box with his huge, soft hands, and patted my knuckles urgently. "Please go!" he said. "*Run.*"

I ran, hurrying down the long hallway and out the front door. I did not encounter Fayina, and I heard no noise from the other rooms in the house as I passed them. Then, I was outside, breathing heavily in the darkness. The street was still; no cars passed and no noises could be heard, save the plaintive barking of a dog in some distant yard. I looked up at the jeweler's house. No lights were on in the front room, and the lights from the back room could not be seen from the street. The house looked unoccupied, indistinguishable from every other shabby Victorian on the street. All that had taken place inside that building no longer seemed terribly real. I didn't doubt that it had happened, but I was having trouble *incorporating* it. It seemed more like a hallucination, or a dream. Intermittent reader though I have

been, I am not lacking in literary pet peeves, one of which is when novelists describe the dreams of their characters. The dreams are nearly always meant to be fiercely *symbolic*, to reveal things about the character that the novelist is not skillful enough to reveal in other ways. I have never found my own dreams to be particularly instructive, and I am always bored senseless listening to others recount the fragmented, nonsensical bits they retain from their subconscious.

So, desiring to make sense of whatever it was that had just happened – to render it knowable in a way that dreams are not – as well as needing, urgently, to purge the bottled-up adrenaline from the ordeal, I snapped my phone open as I hurried along the silent blocks. Somebody was going to hear about this.

My first instinct was to call Teena, but I wasn't ready for that yet. Instead, I dialed Joan, gambling that she had not been in touch with Teena today, and was unaware that the bride and groom were, technically, not speaking just now.

She answered on the first ring, as if she'd been expecting a call.

"What the hell, Joan?"

"Excuse me?"

"I just picked up the *rings*, Joan. From this charming little asylum on Taraval Street."

"Freddy, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Oh. I thought you were my father."

"I'm getting a lot of that today."

"I was expecting a call from him. Anyway, you got the rings! Great!" Joan was the type of girl who liberally dispensed a brand of enthusiasm I found neither convincing nor contagious. But she was typically described by others (including Teena) as "fun."

"I was lucky to escape with my life."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I feel like I just came from visiting hours at Bellevue."

"Oh, aren't they adorable? They're so *eccentric*, aren't they? The way they bicker and all with each other. It's such a unique experience. Nothing like those horrible places downtown."

"I found it a bit unsettling, actually."

She sighed. "Oh, Freddy. Don't be such a tight-ass."

"Joan, those people were genuinely *crazy*."

"Well, they're very in demand right now. Ever since that profile in the Guardian. You're lucky they were able to fit you in. You know how many people chose 7/7 to get married?"

"Of course," I said. "These are just the kind of lunatics Brian would stick in his column. He'd think they were 'colorful.'"

"Are you okay, Freddy? You sound a little... strange."

"I've been drinking," I said. "It's my bachelor party, after all. There's a naked stripper on my knee. It's quite *extreme* around here at the moment."

"Okay, Freddy.... I'm going to get off now. My father's going to be calling. I'll see you tomorrow, okay? For the *big day*!" Her voice was now filled with the elaborate

condescension people use when speaking to the drunk or insane.

"We'll see," I muttered, and hung up. *Bitch.*

I was now approaching Sunset Boulevard, a busy thoroughfare where I hoped to find a cab. In the meantime, I opened the felt box and peeked at the rings inside. It was too dark to check the inscriptions properly, but there was a tiny cream-colored card inside, bound with a red ribbon. It was the kind of courtesy card that is included in a floral arrangement or on a box of chocolates. Turning it over, I saw that there was writing on it, an inky calligraphic swirl. I paused under a street light and squinted at the letters.

*"Marriage is the perfection of what love aimed at,
ignorant of what it sought."*

– *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Beneath that was scrawled, in normal ballpoint:

All best wishes on your special day!

It was signed: "*R and F.*"

The day I realized I was not going to be a famous writer – or, indeed, a writer of anything other than ad copy – I was sitting at my desk, downtown, surfing the web for pornography. It was an auspicious afternoon because it was my first in my new Sam Spade office. My floor was still covered with boxes and I had just set my computer up and confirmed that the DSL connection was active. Exhausted from lugging my work materials down that long hallway from the elevator, I was settled in front of my monitor, idly browsing blowjob clips, which are my porn of choice, preferring, as I do, scenarios where the man, not the woman, is the center of attention. Pornography in general tends to be focused on the man's pleasure – a pleasing inversion of most real-world sexual encounters – but too often that entails a screenful of grunting, sweating male, cramming himself into the upturned orifice of some endlessly orgasmic silicone doll. Hand and mouth work, on the other hand, is the passive man's preference.

The move into the new office was the culmination of a period of considerable exertion on my part. For a time I had played the striver, and the results were tangible: I had severed my dependence on the trade journals and was now my own boss. I had a brand-new apartment. I had money in the bank and room to breathe. In short, I had made the first tentative leap across the threshold into adulthood, leaving my admittedly half-hearted attempt at "dues-paying" behind, hopefully forever. I was lonely – I had not yet met Brian or Teena – but I felt that the foundation had been laid for a new

kind of life. I can't pretend I wasn't feeling a certain vestigial exhilaration as well. The natural high that accompanies accomplishment is the striver's tonic and I am certainly not immune to its charms. It feels good to succeed, to make money, to gain the trappings of respectability on what feels like your own terms, by the sweat of your own brow. On that day, surrounded by boxes and still abob on that wave of self-betterment, I might very easily have chosen to continue on, to allow the momentum to carry me further, into the life of compulsive achievement that is urged on us from infancy.

What would that life have entailed? I don't know, exactly. I think that with some effort I might have eventually moved deeper into the advertising underworld (overworld?), into the lair of those who mold the striver's strivings, who dictate the terms of success to our culture, broadcasting it across the wires and lines where we receive it dutifully, ever asking for more. The copywriter is merely a hired hand. There is some creativity involved, of course, but the real agenda is dictated from far above. My job was merely to parrot the substance of that agenda, to render it stylishly in black and white, over and over.

One thing I have observed about the purest strivers is their utter lack of fealty to the *means*. Brian is, in this regard, atypical due to his allegiance to literature as the vehicle for his ascendance. More representative would be Rufus, who will embrace the construction of an adult literacy center or an S&M dungeon with equal fervor, provided the bottom line is right. I believe Jenny was coming around to this way of thinking as well, having correctly discerned that her

chosen means were inadequate to her desired ends – Striver Math 101.

Yes, I might have pursued advertising with greater zeal. Or, I might have remained a copywriter and courted larger clients, bigger accounts, perhaps expanded my operation to include a staff. I might have moved away from advertising altogether. It is impossible to say, because what *did* happen, instead, was that I sat down in that chair to take a break and look at some porn, and I never got up.

I think it is, by now, something of a cultural cliché, this moment I am describing: The Moment When You Realize You Are Not Special. I would venture to say that it has even taken on the trappings of a rite of passage of sorts for men of my class and color. Because my color is white and my class is upper-middle, I am not likely to elicit any literary sympathy for whatever feelings I experienced during The Moment, nor do I think that I deserve any. In fact, the worst part of The Moment is the realization of precisely how lacking in tragedy The Moment truly is.

I remember I was watching a pigtailed blonde girl stroking away at some disembodied phallus which was floating just in front of the camera. The owner of the phallus was holding the camera to his own eye, enabling us to see what he saw: his own proudly waving staff and a pair of hairy thighs. As the scene progressed I felt myself growing aroused in a lymphatic kind of way. At the same time, something else occurred which was far more novel than a web-induced erection: I had an idea for a short story.

It doesn't matter what the idea was – I never wrote the story, after all, and I have only a vague memory of my

long-ago flash of inspiration. I reluctantly recall that it had something to do with a humble copywriter who falls in love with one of the models in a catalogue he is working on. Had I completed the tale, though, it would have been so shrouded in post-modern self-consciousness that the actual plot would have been secondary to the shrewd, subtextual commentary on "the *nature* of storytelling," or something to that effect (theoretical artist that I was, I was always fond of the avant-garde because it made a virtue of rebelling against forms I had no hope of mastering in the first place).

In any case, the novelty lay not in the idea, but in the *event* of the idea. For years I had lugged along this notion of myself as a writer-to-be, had carried it from apartment to apartment and from job to job, along with clothes that no longer fit me, clock-radios that didn't work, cell phones that had long since been deactivated and a brown bag of photographs I had taken of myself and Anneliese having sex that I never opened because I couldn't stand the way my body looked in the pictures. This delusion of mine was cactus-like in its ability to thrive for years without a drop of justification, of sustenance. Yet, it was a delusion I no longer made even the most rudimentary effort to buttress. I went months without undertaking the preliminary labor of sketching the outline of a story or poem. By the time I moved into my office on Market Street, I couldn't recall the last time I had *thought* about writing anything, let alone done it.

So, I felt a prickle of excitement at this unusual turn of events. I had a genuine *idea*. Furthermore, I had the time and the privacy to follow through on it. Yet, I made no move

to shut off the video and get to work. Instead, I placed my hand on my crotch and applied a slight, exploratory pressure. From behind my zipper I pushed back at myself, and a new idea was born concerning the best way to proceed with the afternoon. I sat this way for some time, musing on my course of action. Back and forth I flip-flopped, unable to choose between the equally compelling options of jotting down my story or pleasuring myself.

And then, out of nowhere, as if the clouds had parted and revealed an earth-bound lightning bolt intended for me alone, I experienced the second genuine revelation of my life, and the first since I was "born again" as an atheist some years earlier in Oakland. At once I knew, to a certainty, that I was not going to forgo masturbation in favor of literary labor, and I knew further that I would *never* prioritize the task of creation, would never choose to tackle it as long as there was any alternative to distract me. And given that jerking off had deterred me this time, it was safe to say that I would never be without sufficient distraction. I saw then the sad paradox: that the minute I sat down to *try*, the reality of my lack of talent became painfully obvious. It was only by abstaining completely from writing fiction that I was able to preserve the fantasy of myself as a writer of fiction. But this balancing act of self-deception could not be maintained indefinitely. Eventually our choices reveal us to ourselves. Even if they don't feel like choices. Even if they were *never* choices.

So, I was not an artist. This revelation – no less painful for being common – would ripple outward in my life, touching shores that were not immediately visible to me.

That afternoon, however, I did not grasp the true meaning of the vision I had been gifted with. Far from recognizing it as the blessing it turned out to be, I felt only a kind of hollowness, which I sought to remedy with a hurried bout of thoroughly joyless self-love. I then fell into a kind of half-sleep there in my chair, my unfocused eyes transfixed by a future that was colorless in its lack of destiny.

We do not choose what we believe, but it often requires prolonged and futile travail in order to hammer this truth home. I myself was confronted with it relatively early on, and for that I will always be grateful. I had tried to believe in myself as fated for significance, but now, in failure, I was free of that apparition. I believe that, until that afternoon in my office, I was entombed in a what was, for all practical purposes, a victim role. My doomed love affair with bohemianism was, essentially, a love affair with noble failure, much like my relationship with Anneliese contained, at its core, a sort of masochistic wallowing in being misunderstood. Neither path had any likelihood of coming to fruition, but each, in some way, allowed me the luxury of preserving my *potential*, without the distress of putting it to the test.

In any case, the curtain had fallen from my eyes. I would soon acknowledge the remainder of the equation: that, having attained a modicum of comfort in my ridiculous little career, my brief flirtation with striving in that area was pretty much over with as well. I would never reach for more, would never again succumb to the myth of my own singularity. This I knew. (How? I just *knew* it. End of discussion....) I had climbed as high as I was going to, exactly as high as the

26th floor of that lovely old building on Market Street, and there I would stay, writing my little copy and minding my own business. There was no good reason to do more, no divine scorekeeper, no gold-plated hall of fame for the big winners.

It was less than a year later that I met Teena at that party. I had struggled, in the intervening period, to maintain the clarity of The Moment, true. And some remnant of my old misguided hubris continued to rebel against marrying a fat girl and settling down. Yet, wasn't this the logical conclusion to the equation? As Rufus had astutely noted, legalizing my union with Teena would not inhibit my progress toward any exalted kismet. Marriage was not some symbolic death, some signpost signifying conformity and tedium. Those were the adolescent aphorisms of the old Locktin. Instead, the ritual would *complete* my passage into a world consistent with the beliefs that had chosen me. Jenny was right: I was still in-between, stuck halfway between the realization and its implementation. But this perpetual liminality would end soon. My resistance was simply the dying throes of an incompatible ideology. Yes, soon I would take my rightful place amongst the married men of San Francisco, sober in their self-assessment, placid in their anonymity, knowing better than to reach for the mirage of the brass ring. My fellow humans would teem around me like ants, busily nibbling, grasping for more dollars, better seats and skinnier women, and I would sit, Buddha-like, among them, possessed of the superior knowledge that, amidst the media maelstrom of our well-fed, navel-gazing, multi-channel, virtually streaming, 24/7, endlessly ironic yet

ultimately innocent, pleasure-oriented 21st Century United States of America, it is, finally, nothing short of degrading to be any other than a Passive Man.

Sunset Boulevard was teeming with traffic, but the taxis that passed were all loaded with people, and I wasn't feeling patient. At last I elected to take the bus back downtown. I had stood, waiting, at a bus shelter for only a minute or two when the L pulled up, breaks squealing, and began to disgorge passengers, mostly Asian men and women carrying groceries or briefcases. As I stood to one side, tapping my foot furiously while I waited for an elderly woman to descend to the sidewalk, I became aware of the degree to which my stolidity was slipping. I felt rigid and off-balance, as if I was grasping too tightly at everything. Standing, swaying in the florescent light of the bus, I noticed that the faces around me had, once again, lost their comforting neutrality. I felt trapped, wedged in. Again, I found myself stifling the urge to flee, to leap from the bus and head east where I could start a new life among brand-new familiar strangers. Alternately, I imagined myself transferring to a different bus and returning to Anneliese, burrowing into her dark warehouse cave and hiding there forever, risk-free. These escape routes appeared and receded repeatedly in my mind, revealing the same two equally impractical options over and over, like a magic eight ball with only two response cubes floating in the murky liquid.

An indiscernible length of time passed – faces getting on and off the bus, darkened streets flashing by, honking and swaying and muddled thoughts – and then I was standing in front of Putzkammer's yet again, pushing through those same swinging doors and into the Friday night hubbub, now going

strong in a sickly way. This was the time of night I was least fond of, bar-wise: the *peak*. The lethargic afternoon drinkers had cleared out, and the cheerfully dissipated happy-hour crowd was long gone or had been absorbed into the mindless cacophony of the nighttime rush. We were still hours away from the post-midnight camaraderie of the long-haulers and the flurry of hasty compromise and conjoining that took place in the desperate window between 1:45 and 2:00 a.m. No, this was rush hour, when everyone was on their way to somewhere *else*. I seldom ventured in at this hour, and as I elbowed my way through the throng of bodies, I felt a twinge of affrontedness, like a man finding strangers cavorting in his living room.

Due to the congestion, it took me several moments to reach the booth where I remembered leaving Brian and the cake. Neither were to be found, and the booth was now occupied by a gaggle of twenty-something club-goers who paid no attention to me, even when I dropped to my knees and peered under the table apprehensively, bracing myself for the sight of a trampled pink box smeared with frosting and footprints. However, my search revealed nothing beyond a row of shapely young legs and a trove of half-smoked Marlboro Lights. Nodding to the oblivious youth, I stood up and made my way toward the bar.

There, I was confronted with a surreal and astounding sight: Rufus and Fat Eddie, hunched over the remains of my wedding cake, scooping great gobs from the pink box with their bare hands, and leisurely licking their fingers clean.

I stood, frozen, staring at them as they went about their work with extravagant gusto, lips smacking and

appreciative murmurs abounding. They sat next to each other at the bar, their backs to me, and I remember thinking there was something horribly cartoonish about the two of them – one fat and one skinny – feeding, side-by-side, like a couple of scavengers pecking away at roadkill. A rush of nausea choked my throat and caused my words to come out in a garbled sputter. "Get.... *away!*"

But the bar was too noisy; they did not hear me. I cleared my throat and tried again.

"GET AWAY FROM THAT CAKE!"

This time my voice worked rather too well, causing several heads to snap in my direction, including two cake-smearing faces, upon which were registered great surprise.

Before either of them could speak, I strode forward and grabbed the box from the bar. It was heartbreakingly light now, mostly crumbs and pink sugar.

Rufus blinked at me, his lips greasy with cake. "Hey, what are you doing here, kid?" His speech was thick and halting and his eyes were bloodshot and squinted nearly completely closed. I realized he was dead drunk.

Holding the ravaged remnants of my cake in my hands, I felt on the verge of tears. "It's *mine*, you bastards. Teena's and mine. It's *my* fucking cake."

"Yours? Jesus, kid, we didn't realize..."

"What did you think?" I snapped. "Someone just left this out for you to snack on?" I couldn't get Teena's face out of my mind. I pictured her, tears streaming down her cheeks, as I tried to explain to her how it had happened that a couple of barflies had feasted on her wedding cake. But even as I envisioned the scene, I knew it wasn't right. Teena wouldn't

cry. She wasn't the hysterical type. She would probably take a deep breath and then say something about how the cake is only a symbol, how what matters is what the cake *represents*, not the cake itself.... But wait – wasn't it *me* who said that? So why was I fighting to keep from crying? Why were those words repeating themselves over and over in my mind? Ruined. It's ruined. You *ruined* it.

"I guess we weren't thinking. Jesus, kid, I'm sorry as hell...."

"Shut up, Rufus. Just *shut up*." I threw the box to the floor and stomped it flat. "It doesn't matter now, does it? You pretty much fucked it up, didn't you?"

"Why did you leave it here?"

I forced myself to look Eddie in the eye. "What did you say?"

He stirred his bulk, resettling himself on the stool and glancing briefly at Rufus who was hanging his head in silence. Then he fixed his beady little eyes on me and repeated his question. "I say, why did you leave it here in the first place?"

"I left it with Brian." I turned to Rufus. "Where the hell is Brian, Rufus?"

"Um, your buddy went outside to take a phone call. I don't know what happened to him after that. The waitress brought the cake over. If I'd known it was from your booth I would have put two and two – "

"Shut up, Rufus!"

He shut up.

"It's not his fault," said Eddie quietly.

I turned, ignoring him, and signaled to the bartender. "Double whiskey," I said. "Any kind."

"That's not going to help," Eddie said, in his smug little way. His voice – far from the resonant rumble implied by his physique – was a sort of reedy whine, with that nasally, congested quality common to overweight people.

Ignoring him, I snatched up the whiskey the second it hit the bar and gulped it down at once. I had been vacillating between sober and mildly drunk all day, but that drink was the deciding factor. I set my empty glass on the bar and closed my eyes for a moment, hoping that when I opened them again the room would have ceased rippling, as if it were underwater. While I waited, I filled my lungs with deep breaths, acutely aware of the whiskey entering my body, the amber liquid traveling the length of me, filling the veins along my arms and legs and congealing in a deep, warm puddle in my chest.

"Hey, you okay, kid?"

I opened my eyes. The room was navigable now, if not exactly *stable*. The two of them were watching me, Rufus with a worried look and Fat Eddie with that same superior smirk.

"You knew it was my cake, didn't you?" I said to Eddie, careful not to slur my words.

"What are you talking about?"

"You *must* have known. It's obviously a wedding cake, anyone can see that." The three of us glanced down to where the box lay, crumpled and covered with brown footprints from my own feet. "*You* know I'm getting married tomorrow."

"How do I know that?"

"Don't play dumb. Lorna said I told you."

Eddie raised his eyebrows. "*Lorna* said?"

"Yeah. She said I even bought you a drink, for god's sake."

"But *you* don't remember?"

"What's that got to do with it?" I felt better now, more level. I was no longer even terribly worried about the cake. I was philosophically disinterested in its fate. Let it go – let it all go. But the *principal* of the thing, that must not be mislaid. First, though, I needed to put the finishing touches on my equilibrium. I tapped my glass on the bar and nodded at the bartender.

"Another double?" He glanced at Eddie.

"What are you looking at him for?" I said. "I'd like another drink, please. It's nothing terribly complicated."

He hesitated for a second, then picked up my glass and poured a double shot. "Including the first one, that's fifteen bucks."

"Put it on my tab," I said, raising the glass and downing half of it. Then, I turned and glared at Eddie, as if daring him to say something. I was behaving badly and I knew it, yet I didn't seem to be able to stop. I believe I am normally a fairly amiable drunk, yet an unpleasant form of childishness had taken hold of me that I felt powerless to resist. I leaned against the bar, grinning foolishly. I believe that at that moment I *wanted* Eddie to kick me out, to hit me, to inflict some sort of punishment on me.

Instead, he looked at me thoughtfully and caught me completely off guard with his next words. "You ought to cut that out," he said, nodding at the glass in my hand.

I stared at him. "What business is that of yours?"

He shrugged, a heavy, ponderous roll of flesh. "None of mine."

"I think I understand you now, Eddie," I said. "You're one of those *moral* saloon owners. What if all your customers were to cut down? Wouldn't that present something of a financial conflict of interest for you?"

"Not cut down," he said, in that same patient little squeak of a voice.

"Oh, isn't that what you just advised me, out of the depth of your wisdom?"

"No, I mean you should *stop*."

"Really?" I said. "That's really a fascinating insight. It's quite a service you provide here, Ed, you know that?"

He went on, as if I hadn't spoke. "I've seen lots like you," he said. "*Lots* just like you over the years." He leaned forward suddenly, looking me right in the eye. "You're one of those who shouldn't drink," he said simply. He held out his hands, palms up, in an apologetic gesture. "That's all."

But by then the whiskey had hit me for real, and the words were reaching me as if from a great distance – a familiar and welcome benefit.

As a fifteen-year-old, home for Thanksgiving break from the Beresford Preparatory School for Boys, having already been initiated into the grand prep school tradition of staying as loaded as possible, as often as possible, while still maintaining a grade point average worthy of the exorbitant

tuition our fathers were footing, I stumbled in one night at one a.m. to find my father waiting in his favorite chair. Though it was obvious that he was waiting for *me*, I reacted with a breezy nonchalance so thoroughly uncharacteristic of my sober self as to annul any doubts about my guilt, assuming the old man had any to begin with. However, a half-pint stashed discretely in a gym locker represented the height of sophistication to my freshman sensibilities, and I saw no reason to curtail my newfound worldliness just because I was back under my father's purview for a few brief days.

I remember the curious absence of effect his words had on me – the first time I felt so bulletproof. It was much like that now, in the bar, with Eddie. I could hear his words and was aware that they pertained to me, yet there was no impact, no jarring receptivity on my part. It was as if the words flowed over and around me, finding no jagged edges to catch on, no exposed cavity to penetrate.

I turned then and faced the crowd, clutchers and graspers and strivers all, each one of them determined to better their situation in some incremental, insignificant way, because they had been taught that to do otherwise was to embrace failure and shame. Even the few couples who sat, arms around each other's shoulders, in the booths or at the bar, were eyeing the swirling mass of the others, wondering if it was possible they had settled too soon, aghast at the unspeakable horror of not having reached their full potential.

The drink was still in my hand. I gulped down the rest of the whiskey and thought about hurling the glass, shattering the mirror behind the bar and sending that insipid

young twerp of a bartender scampering for his life. No, that wasn't the way to do things. The idea was to let go, to stop trying so hard. Just open your hand and let the glass fall where it may. There was no use going back for the cake. Just let yourself drift on out the door, like riding the tide out into the sea. Behind me, I could hear Rufus yelling my name, but I did not turn.

Soon I was outside and gliding along the sidewalk. My head felt light enough to float right up into the evening sky, taking my dangling body along with it, like ballast attached to a mighty balloon. Across Market and up the hill I walked, aware that my phone was ringing from time to time, aware that it was Teena. I did not turn.

I swam on, through the red-light district of the Tenderloin – a neighborhood that embodied the shadow side of the "can do" impulse, attached to the belly of the financial district like a tumor, a seething microcosm of diseased ambition and noisy desperation. My office building straddled the two districts, perched at the intersection of these passion streams like a massive boulder. Those of us who preferred a view of Market Street saw fit to pay a little bit extra for the privilege. The lower-rent tenants, however, made do with the back offices, which looked down on less inspiring transactions. Rufus often regaled me with stories of the Turk Street hookers, the daily theatrics of whom were enacted in clear view of his desk, accessible at all hours to anyone seeking a diversion from the ever-shifting bottom line.

Several of these female entrepreneurs stepped in my path as I passed, offering me any number of fantasy scenarios in which I could play the inert sultan, their hungry

bodies swirling around me like bees inserting venom and extracting pollen. But I was not the demand for that particular supply; I did not turn.

There were a last few hookers clustered, like sentries, in front of the Pinecrest Diner on Geary, and then I was out of the Tenderloin and huffing my way up the hill, past the blues club on Mason where I had once accompanied Brian to a solo acoustic performance by some withered octogenarian whose between-songs repartee consisted of repeatedly mumbling, "well, all *right*." There were several middle-aged white men lined up in front of the club now, all of them waiting patiently for some vicarious jolt of genuine black earthiness.

Still, I remembered the quiet dignity of the old bluesman that night, patiently picking those same three chords and enumerating the same common tribulations. How blessed are those who are able to convert the rudiments of life into truly noble suffering. This is what you give up when you enter the cluster fuck of White America: the right to gripe about it. No one wants to hear a rich man sing the blues, and the story of a lowly copywriter and his precious equivocations will never cause anyone to nod their head and murmur, "*tell* it." I suppose we will always need our holy primitives, our pre-technology black sages to make us feel something that isn't fraught with second-guesses or qualification. That simple, undeniable heaviness in my chest, like a strangled sob, when the old man opened his mouth on the stage that night in front of Brian and me, that was a real feeling. Maybe a hundred years ago in the Mississippi delta, everyone lived from one real feeling to the next without even

thinking about it, but it has never been like that for me, and I suspect Brian, whirling from novel to novelty, paying for his true words with false ones, trying to balance it all like that, has the same difficulty. What are the *real* feelings? The ones that tell us, incontestably, who we are?

Teena was going to have my baby.

There was something Eddie didn't know about me. Garden variety though I may be, there were layers to my ordinariness he had not glimpsed. Marriage and children. Children and marriage. These were the protons and electrons of the common matter. Or... the simple, quiet dignity of the man who knows what's really important? I wasn't able to settle on a single attitude, perhaps because I wasn't certain just what my real feeling was concerning the thing, the event, the eventuality, the *child*.

More precious equivocations. I noticed, with no real interest, that I was staggering.

I topped the hill and descended through Chinatown, past the darkened stores with dangling poultry silhouettes, spooky and Third World in the empty summer night. Along the way, I played a game with myself, one I'd invented as a very young child. It consisted of envisioning myself as the sole contestant in a tournament, the fate of which was typically of an ultimate nature – a million dollars, the safety of The World As We Know It, etc. The specifics of the contest were dictated by my environment. If I was climbing a long flight of stairs, I would be engaged in the World Champion Stair-Climbing Competition. If I could climb to the top without scraping my toe once on the step above it, victory would be mine. Or perhaps the rules would dictate

that my foot land exactly in the center of each step; an inch or two in either direction and all would be lost.

Fundamental to the game's design was the assumption that my actions were being closely monitored by a panel of judges and some vast anonymous audience who uttered "ooohhs" and "aaaahhs" when there was a particularly close call.

On this particular night, it was my prowess as Curb-Balancer which would decide all. If I could make it to Broadway without allowing my shoe to touch either the gutter or the area beyond the crack where the red paint became white cement, I would be the victor, the greatest curb-balancer of all time. It was for glory alone this time around; the world was not in danger and no money was involved. Head down, arms waving desperately, I inched my way down the hill.

At the end of each block, I was granted a temporary respite, since the curb ended. I was not permitted to linger, however. I would cross the street quickly and hop back onto the curb at the opposite side. On this lack of frivolity the judges looked favorably, no question.

I was still several blocks from Broadway when I lost my balance and stepped over the line. Cursing, I granted myself one final chance, but half a block later I stumbled and was again disqualified. Pouting, I then straddled the curb and, in a most un-sportsmanlike display, clomped down the final blocks with a foot in each penalty zone.

The next hour or so was something of a blur. I wandered like a ghost amidst the Friday night crowds on Broadway, shuffling through the groups of bar-hopping

sailors and strip club patrons and assorted street people that congested the brightly-lit sidewalks. After awhile, I went into a Chinese bar around the corner from City Lights Books and drank two whiskey sours while watching the older men at the bar playing some complicated game of dice I couldn't understand. At one point the bartender, a friendly, white-haired Asian man, nodded at my cell phone, which was on the bar in front of me and had not stopped ringing. "You gonna get that?" he said.

"Eventually," I answered.

He nodded and moved off, leaving me with the impression that he understood completely.

When I began to feel on the verge of passing out, I got up and began walking again. I walked very carefully, trying not to trip or bump into anyone, and I did not look up for a long time, only watched my feet and the sidewalk and concentrated on remaining conscious. When I raised my eyes again, I discovered that I was in front of Portsmouth Square, which happened to be a landmark of great significance in the personal chronology of Teena and Frederick. It was there, on the bridge that stretches from the park, across Kearny Street, to the Chinese Culture Center, that Teena and I had our first kiss, the night I walked her home from the party where we met.

The park was mostly empty at this hour, and I spotted only a couple wizened-looking local residents walking their dogs, and a homeless man digging methodically through a trash barrel. The bridge was completely unoccupied, stray newspapers blowing between the cement benches and numerous peanut shells strewn across the red brick surface of

the bridge, left there by the old men who played Chinese Checkers on the benches during the daytime.

I had been back to the bridge with Teena several times since our kiss there – it was "our place" now, after all – but I had never been there alone. The night Teena and I found it, it had seemed a grandly romantic spot, the bridge arching over the street, hovering there in the middle of Chinatown, surrounded by all those inscrutable, creaky-looking apartment buildings, their balconies bisected with laundry lines and banners bearing symbols we could not decipher. Now, however, it seemed a windy, barren place, an excellent place to be mugged. The Culture Center was long closed, and as I stood at the entrance to the bridge, looking across, the opposite end seemed to vanish into a cave of shadow.

I wandered back and forth awhile, listlessly kicking peanut shells and staying a good distance away from the darkness on the other side. Finally, I hopped onto a bench and, from there, scrambled to the top of one of the bridge's walls, where I quickly lay, face down. The surface was flat enough and wide enough to lie comfortably without fear of falling, and after nudging myself forward with little snake-like wriggles, I was able to peer over the edge of the bridge to the street below.

There was little activity down on Kearny Street, only passing cars and a row of taxis parked in front of the Hilton. There were no bars or clubs open in this area, so pedestrian traffic was light. If I were to plummet to my death, it might be several minutes before my body was even discovered. I believe it is impossible for most men to stand atop a great

height and refrain from at least one of two things: contemplating how it would be to jump, and spitting. Lying there, I did both, neither with any great relish.

It wasn't long before my phone rang again, and this time I took it out and stared at Teena's blinking initial. I was about to answer the call when a powerful urge came over me to drop the phone off the bridge. It was a passing whim, just one of the hundreds of breezes that blow through us, unheeded, in the course of a day, and are quickly gone. However, this one would not pass. The phone rang and rang, and finally ceased, and still I held my arm outstretched, over the canyon below. I had only to open my hand and gravity would do the rest.

I was aware that there was no good reason to drop the phone, that it would accomplish absolutely nothing aside from temporarily inconveniencing me and ultimately costing me money. I do not like to believe, either, that in my maudlin drunkenness I had weakened to the point where I found myself susceptible to the allure of that which I ordinarily loathed: the Grand Symbolic Gesture. Nonetheless, the longer I hesitated, the more important it began to seem to me to do it, to let it go.

The act most definitely lacked the trappings of symbolism because, following the destruction of my phone, my intent was to go immediately to a pay phone, call Teena and make up with her. So one would be hard-pressed to make the case that, in opening my hand, I was relinquishing attachment or asserting some kind of independence. Neither could it be plausibly asserted that I was acting out some long-repressed antipathy toward technology, or some such

thing. I rather liked my cell phone, and carried it everywhere I went, just like everyone else on the civilized planet.

As I catalogued these arguments to myself, though, the urge grew stronger, not weaker. It began to seem, in fact, as if the obvious unreason of this whim was the very key to its hold on me. I can't offer any real explanation beyond that. I was very drunk, but not insensibly so. I was exhausted and malnourished, and my mood was shifting, without warning, between exhilaration and despondence. However, I was aware of what I was doing, and equally aware that I didn't know why I was doing it.

In an attempt to regain control of my behavior, I tried playing the devil's advocate with myself. After all, I reasoned, it's hardly the end of the world to drop the damn thing. So, I have to buy a new phone. Not exactly an earthquake of consequence in the vast scheme of things. Nothing is being weighed here which is not completely and totally undoable. So, why bother, really?

But this, too, had little effect, other than to make clear to me how irrelevant logical argument was to the strange compulsion which had seized me. Eventually, I reached a state of something like acceptance. I don't know why I dropped the phone off the bridge, nor why it seemed, at that moment, so important to drop it. Perhaps I sought one final instant of petty destruction before enlisting in the service of the procreative and the practical. Maybe I wanted to make the reconciliatory call to Teena, but to make it in my own way, on my own terms. Recoiling from the obvious symbolic implications of these rationales, I can only say with any certainty that, for a short time, it seemed that dropping

the phone was what I was *supposed* to do, and that whether I approved of or believed in this destiny was of little importance. All that remained was to relinquish my feeble efforts at agency and allow the future to wash over me and become the past, to do once more what I had done all my life and *let go*. Some men tie one on and break windows, or bottles, or their wife's jaw. I suppose the simple truth could be that I dropped the phone because, at the time, it was the only thing in my hand.

The shattering of my cell phone on the sidewalk was entirely inadequate to the moment, whether symbolic, nihilistic or neurotic. A tiny, anti-climactic crunch, like a bit of cheap crockware falling from a shelf, and I was out one Motorola.

Feeling more than a little foolish (the standard hangover from the Grand Gesture), I stood up too quickly, and the ensuing rush of blood to my head caused me to topple. I fell forward, my hands grasping terrifyingly at nothing but air, though a second later a gust of wind escaped my lips as my knees and abdomen made contact with cold cement. Had my belly flop been an inch farther, I would most likely have see-sawed forward and dropped head over heels, a death so clumsily ironic as to defy belief.

As it was, I was safe, gaspingly so, and my eyes cleared just in time to see a small, cream-colored object drop from somewhere below my armpit, where it had worked itself loose from my inside sport coat pocket. As I watched, it sailed past my outstretched fingers and landed noiselessly on the pavement, about two feet to the left of where the phone had hit. From above I could not tell if the box hinge

had held, or if the rings had been scattered into the gutter or the street.

I rolled to my left, off the bridge wall, and landed with a grunt on the bench below. Brushing the cigarette butts and nut shells from my sleeves, I bolted through the park, around the corner and down the hill.

But when I arrived, I could not locate the rings or the box they had been in. The phone was there, or what remained of it. The plastic casing had come loose and there were various little pieces of plastic strewn about that had been dislodged by the impact. I picked the phone up and pressed "send" repeatedly, but the cracked screen remained dark. Dropping the dead instrument, I began frantically pacing back and forth, my nose to the ground like Groucho Marx, but I could not find the little cream-colored box anywhere.

I had *seen* the box land. It had not rolled anywhere. It could not have just vanished into thin air, unless....

I stood up and scanned the corner frantically. There were some pedestrians in sight, but they all seemed too far away to have plausibly made off with the rings. Traffic was light, but this was a bad spot to stop for anyone. The curb where I stood was not easily accessible to cars, situated as it was just past the parking garage exit. Anyone idling there would risk being rear-ended by a driver exiting the garage and coming around a blind curve onto Kearny Street. Having parked in this awkward way, the person would have then had to jump out, grab the box and vanish, all in the twenty or so seconds it took me to get from the bridge to the street. Impossible.

Unable to think of what else to do, I was heading across the street to ask the drivers waiting at the cab stand if they'd seen anyone pick up something that had fallen from the bridge, when I chanced to glance behind me and saw someone in the shadows of the parking garage. From where I stood, I could not tell if it was a man or a woman. I only saw a bit of motion past the mouth of the entrance, by the cashier's booth. Then whoever it was turned left into the garage and was gone.

I hesitated, feeling increasingly panicky. With every passing minute the rings were likely slipping further and further away from me, as were my chances of recovering them. If I pursued the person in the parking garage, I might be wasting valuable time....

No. There *was* something wrong about whoever I'd glimpsed in the garage. No one had passed me on their way in, which meant that whoever it was had waited quietly in the shadows as I hunted for the rings, then hurried into the garage the moment I crossed the street. In a flash, I elected to follow my hunch and bolted back across Kearny Street, my heart pounding.

There was no cashier present, only a sign listing the rates and an automatic ticket dispenser. I darted around the booth and headed left, just in time to see a door slam shut at the far end of the first level. No one else was in sight. The air was cool and musty and my movements, as I crossed the garage, were all grotesquely noisy, reverberating off the enclosed cement space. It would be a simple matter for anyone to slip behind a pillar and hide until I was gone. After only hesitating for a split second, though, I ripped the exit

door open and was now standing on the southwest corner of the square. There were more people here, neighborhood people walking to and from the Chinese groceries and cafes on Clay Street. I scanned the crowds furiously, searching for anyone who appeared out of place, who seemed to be hurrying or looking suspicious.

The sinking feeling was returning, that the rings were gone and I had no chance of finding them. Suddenly, the city seemed massive and labyrinthine, full of billions of hidden nooks that I could never uncover, not if I had an infinite amount of time in which to search. But then, as I surveyed the block one last, desperate time, I spotted her.

Had she not turned around she might have remained camouflaged. She was wearing a faded blue bandanna on her head, and from behind she was indistinguishable from any of the numerous little old Chinese ladies who were in evidence, hurrying along the street with similar headgear. However, when her face appeared, glancing back over her shoulder, I knew instantly that she was the one. That she was the only Caucasian in sight would have been enough to cause me to look twice at her, but the look on her face was unmistakably that of one being pursued and checking on the location of her pursuer. From my position I could only see her face, bobbing a good three inches above most of the tiny Asians in her midst. It was a thin, plain face, tiny-looking beneath a mass of thick hair piled shapelessly atop her head, and barely contained by the bandana. Then her eyes found me and widened: dead giveaway. I began to run. "Hey!" I screamed. "Hey, you!"

However, my elation at sighting the thief quickly turned to frustration as I found myself unable to catch up to her. The sidewalks were crowded and navigating through the swarm of impassive Asian faces proved to be maddeningly slow. Ahead of me, in the crowd, I saw my quarry darting this way and that like a gazelle. It was all I could do to keep her in sight. After a block of pursuit I felt dizzy and short of breath, yet I could not stop to rest and risk letting her escape.

We turned up Grant Street and here I made some progress. The street traffic was temporarily blocked by a massive, double-parked delivery vehicle of some kind, and I took advantage of the impasse to sprint through the roadway, the horns of impatient drivers blaring in my ears as I jogged between the stopped cars.

I was nearing asphyxiation when the girl made the mistake of turning on California and darting across the street. Having escaped the congestion of Chinatown, it was now a simple footrace. Ignoring the massive stitch that was burning ulcerously in my side, I kept my eyes on the blue bandanna and groped for one last burst of speed. Now that the crowds had thinned, and I had closed the distance between us, I could see my prey more clearly. She was probably half my size and weight and was moving far more efficiently than my ungainly stumbling. However, she was encumbered in a way I was not: she was clad in long, red thigh-high boots that looked to have fairly sizable heels. Had she managed to remove her ridiculous footwear, I have no doubt that she would have lost me within seconds. As it was, though, I caught up to her as she entered St. Mary's Square. I was only feet from her retreating form, and wondering exactly how I

was going to stop her (a flying tackle seemed ill-advised) when she turned abruptly and faced me. "Why are you chasing me, man?"

We stood, facing each other under the pale yellow lamps of the park. She seemed scarcely winded, although I was panting so hard it was all I could do to get a word out. "Rings...." I gasped. "Mine...."

"What rings, man?"

Still doubled over, I eyed her, attempting to look, despite my incapacitated condition, like a man who is not to be trifled with. "Don't give me that," I said. "You know what rings."

"You okay?" she asked, and gave me a speculative look. She was young, probably no more than 22 or 23. Now that I was closer, I saw that the hair piled on her head was actually dreadlocks, their stiff, matted clumps heaped under the bandana and giving her an odd, alien look. She wore, in addition to the boots, a tiny miniskirt and a plunging, sleeveless half-shirt and blouse of some kind. Her appearance conveyed a certain frank availability, and her initial impression was a distinctly sexual one, due to the garish and revealing clothing, and her youth. But her body was bony and starved-looking and her face, upon closer inspection, was pock-marked and watchful, almost animal-like.

"I'm fine," I said. "Just give them back now and I won't call the police."

"Give *what* back, man?"

"The *rings!*"

She took a step back and folded her arms. "Look, I don't know what these rings are you keep talkin' about."

"The rings you just picked up, the ones – look, what do you think, I'm stupid? Why were you running away from me if you don't have them?"

"I thought you were a cop," she said.

"Do I look like a cop, for god's sake?" I was instantly disgusted with myself for allowing her to put me on the defensive.

"Yeah, kinda," she said. "You looked crazy. You gonna hurt me?"

It was the kind of moment I have never been good at. What was called for at this point was a show of strength, a clear, unambiguous indication that it was to her advantage to relinquish the rings without delay. Instead, what came out of my mouth was a sort of pleading whine. "I don't want to have to hurt you," I said. "But I need those rings."

We both looked at each other, sizing each other up. I was now certain she was lying, and she was equally certain that she was in no danger here. Her body, which until now had looked poised to bolt, relaxed. "What do they look like, these rings you're looking for, man? Maybe I can help you find them."

"Look," I said. "They're my wedding rings. I really need to get them back. They weren't expensive or anything. They're not worth much."

"So, why don't you just go buy some more?"

"I can't just – they're engraved, for one thing."

"They gotta be worth *something*, then. If they're engraved, they're worth a lot, I bet. To *you*, you know?" She added, thoughtfully. "Maybe that's why someone took them."

"Okay, how much do you want?" I said.

She gave a very poor imitation of wounded innocence falsely accused. "Man, I don't have your rings. I told you that." She walked nonchalantly in a circle for a moment, never taking her eye off me.

I sighed. "Okay, how much do you think someone might want – whoever it was who took them, I mean?"

"I don't know. I'd have to ask my friend."

"Your friend?"

"Yeah. He knows about stuff like this."

"Stuff like this?"

"Jewelry, rocks. All that kind of stuff. He's an expert."

"Okay," I said. "Listen, what's your name?"

"Why?" She sounded suspicious.

"Why not? You don't have my rings, right?"

She shook her head, slowly.

"So, what have you got to worry about? Tell me your name so I know who I'm talking to, here. I'm Fred."

"Liberty," she said, eyeing me warily.

"Great. Look, Liberty, I'm in a real jam here, and you can really help me out. My wedding is tomorrow, you understand? So, I really need to get those rings back right away. It's very important."

"You're getting married tomorrow?"

"That's right," I said, nodding. "It's a really big day and right now I'd do about *anything* to get those rings back. I

mean, whoever helped me get them back, I'd be really grateful, you know? Because, you're right, they're not valuable to anyone else – if you took them to a pawn shop or something, you wouldn't get much for them – but they're very valuable to *me*."

"So why'd you throw them off that bridge?" she said, then turned and began walking away from me, out of the park.

"Aha!" I hurried to catch up to her. "So, you *did* pick them up!"

She shrugged. "I didn't pick nothing up. I'm just saying if someone *did*, it might have been 'cause they thought you didn't want them no more."

I nodded carefully. "Sure, I can see how they might have thought that. But *now* you can see how important they are to me, can't you?"

She was busily inspecting the moths around a streetlamp, as if we were a pair of old chums out on a leisurely summer stroll.

"Liberty, you can see they are important to me, right?"

She answered without looking at me. "If they were so important, you shouldn't have been throwing them off no bridge."

"I didn't throw them off."

"Yes, you did."

"Liberty, I didn't throw them."

"I *saw* you," she insisted. "I saw you drop them off."

I was beginning to feel like I was trapped in some kind of comic nightmare. "Look," I said. "I dropped my *phone* off the bridge. The rings just fell out accidentally."

She shook her head. "Why were you throwing your phone off a bridge? That don't make no kind of sense."

"I realize that," I said. "I just.... I've been having a weird night, okay? It was kind of an impulse thing."

She gave me a sidelong look as we walked.

"I know it doesn't make any sense, Liberty. I was a little drunk, but I promise you, I didn't mean to drop the rings. They just fell out of my pocket. Now, listen – " I grabbed her arm and we both stopped walking. Her skin was cold and her arm was very small and wiry, like a young boy's. She wrenched it away and stood staring at me, looking again like she was trying to decide whether or not to make a run for it. "I really need those rings, Liberty. It's late and I'm exhausted. Now, here...." I took out my wallet. "I have about a hundred bucks here."

"Don't give it to me, here, man," she said, backing away.

"Why not? Where should I give it to you?"

"Let's go see Tevo."

"Who's Tevo?"

"My friend." She started walking again.

"Do we really need to see Tevo?" I said, following her. "Can't we just work this out between the two of us?"

"I wanna ask Tevo," she said.

"Jesus...." I looked around, but there were no policemen in sight, and I couldn't leave her alone to find one. I thought, wryly, that this would be an excellent time to have

a cell phone. "Okay," I sighed. "Let's go see Tevo. Where is he?"

"The T.L."

"Well, how do you know he's... home?"

"He's always home. Tevo don't hardly go out, except to check on me or some of the other girls."

"So, he's... what? Your pimp, right?"

She stopped then and glared at me. "Hey, I ain't no ho, motherfucker!"

I held my hands up. "I'm sorry."

She spat at my feet. "You damn right you are. Ain't no one pimping me. I do what I *want*."

She stood, scrawny legs in those ridiculous boots planted firmly apart, hands on nonexistent hips, looking like a tiny, rabid animal. She managed to exude a certain dangerousness, despite her size, simply by virtue of her ferocity, and I was momentarily taken aback by the lightning-fast transition from conversational calm to boiling rage. I kept mumbling apologies until the violence had faded from her eyes and she abruptly turned and we resumed walking in silence.

After several blocks, my legs were rubbery, and I found myself stumbling to keep up with Liberty's surprisingly rapid strides. Even with the hindrance of her boots she was obviously a practiced walker, and beside her I felt quite out of shape. Every ten yards or so, I was forced to do a humiliating little three step jog in order to catch up with her. As we continued this silent march, an odd feeling of invisibility came over me, as if I were a sort of ghost sweeping along the sidewalk beside this runty streetwalker.

The impression was strengthened as we skirted the edge of Union Square and began encountering more people. I noticed that nearly every man we passed stared at Liberty in a blank, almost hostile way. A few smiled knowingly, but most simply stared. I noticed, too, that with the presence of larger crowds, Liberty's walk had changed. It had slowed to more of a saunter, and she kept her feet closer together, causing her whole skinny body to swivel with each step. Whereas, three blocks back, I had struggled to match her pace, now I had to force myself to slow, so as not to overtake her.

We continued on like this for fifteen minutes or so, in a zig-zagging route across downtown. When there were few people in sight, my companion reverted to a more athletic pace, tromping along like an Alpinist. When we neared a busier section, the swivel-hipped stroll reappeared and I was able to catch my breath a little.

It was not lost on me that it was she who set the pace throughout, and this only added to my suspicion that the substance of Frederick Locktin had somehow, in the course of the day, been downgraded from whole to partial, that I was only a kind of scarcely visible apparition, easily overlooked and comfortably disregarded. None of the men we passed gave the slightest notice of the overweight man in a coat and tie, huffing along beside the scantily-clad young girl. Their eyes moved over her body, sliding across her squintily as she stared straight ahead, seemingly oblivious. I was absolutely unseen.

As we cut left on Jones Street from Post, I made a concerted effort to bring myself fully into the present tense. I tried mentally inserting another in my place, imagining how

they might behave in a similar circumstance. My father came to mind, but, try as I might, I couldn't imagine him getting himself embroiled in this sort of dilemma. Thinking of fathers made me think of Jenny Van Dyke, and the admirably take-charge way she moved through her charmed life. I couldn't help thinking, somewhat sheepishly, that she would most likely have had the rings in hand by now. *My* first response was always to hesitate, to assess, to consider and then re-consider. The boldest, most impulsive leap I had ever made was the decision to marry Teena, and somehow that one choice had led, via a convoluted succession of subsequent choices and incessant consideration, to the moment I now found myself occupying, if tentatively.

I wondered where Brian was just now, whether he was celebrating, mourning or still in the agony of anticipation. Well, I would find out tomorrow, no doubt. Thinking of my friend, I realized that Brian would have found much to treasure in this particular ordeal. Here I was, after all, being guided by a dreadlocked white hooker into the heart of San Francisco's darkness, on a late-night safari to the seedy side of town to barter with a pimp for the symbols of my romantic intention. Brian would probably get a novel out of the whole goddamn thing.

I tried, halfheartedly, to summon a more adventurous attitude, but was forced to concede that all I really wanted was to be home and safe. This brief, doomed effort at intrepidity left me feeling even more disgusted and ineffectual. The fact was, I was dazed and depleted and still drunk, and wholly without hope of rising to the occasion, whatever that might mean. We were now entering the

Tenderloin, and Liberty's stroll had assumed a new swagger. She was on her turf now, and I was decidedly far from mine. My mind continued to race with moves I might make, tacks I might take, people I might yet become, but in the end, just as I remained my own sluggish self and not any number of more ideally equipped someones, I also failed to isolate and identify the elusive "something" I felt certain I should do. I wanted no part of whatever was to come, but, like a sleepwalker, I kept stumbling forward to meet it.

There is, however, a certain relief in having definitively diagnosed one's own cowardice. I knew now that I was not going to take anything by force. I was not going to seize this moment and turn it to my advantage, bending its participants to my will. I was going to meekly follow along and, when the time came, beg, barter and cajole – whatever was necessary – in hopes of getting my rings back.

We were crossing Eddy Street, when I looked to the left and saw a familiar figure flanked by two enormous amazons in sparkling miniskirts.

"Holy shit," I mumbled. "*Rufus?*"

Liberty glanced at him and continued walking. "Oh, you know him?" she said. It was the first time we had spoken in several minutes.

Rufus had not seen us, and was not likely to. Even from a half a block away, I could see that he was very near blotto. His arms were around the two women, his hands cradling their backsides lovingly as his head rested on first one enormous breast, than the other. The three of them had stopped in front of a shabby little lime-green hotel called The Vargas. As I watched, the two women expertly lifted Rufus

up the stairs, across the doorway and into the lobby, his feet kicking in the air as he was borne swiftly inside, an arm looped around each sequined shoulder.

"*You* know Rufus?" I asked, astonished.

"I don't know his name, but he comes around here all the time."

"You don't say?"

"He likes black girls," added Liberty, obviously stating his defining characteristic as she saw it.

At this hour, the Tenderloin was in the full bloom of its Friday night splendor. The sidewalks were lined with girls in outrageous outfits, beckoning to the passing cars. There were nervous-looking husband types in station wagons, slit-eyed old men in Cadillacs and, of course, the young men, often packed five or six to a car, giddy faces pressed to the window, pointing and shouting directions to the driver: "There! Look at *that* one."

All around us, transactions of various kinds were taking place, and from time to time a police cruiser would appear, moving silently by without stopping. The whole scene made me feel exceedingly uncomfortable. Unlike the boys in the cars, I was not titillated by proximity to the desperate and the dangerous, and I was beginning to realize the foolishness of following Liberty into this district. But though my every bourgeois instinct dictated that I flee to behind the safety of my own lines, some small, steely stubbornness kept me at Liberty's side, even as the streets grew grimier and I felt more and more out of place.

Finally, Liberty turned sharply into a residential hotel (the only sign out front read, simply: ROOMS) and headed

for the stairwell, ignoring the handwritten sign above what was once the desk clerk's station, now unoccupied: NO VISITORS.

"Tevo's here?" I whispered.

She looked at me, as if she was surprised to find me still there. "Yeah," she said. "You better wait down here."

"Oh no," I said. "I'm not leaving you alone. I'll come up with you and we'll talk to him together."

She bit her lip. For the first time, she appeared genuinely worried. "That's not a good idea."

I sensed some obscure advantage and decided to press it. "Well, Liberty, you can always give me back my rings and I'll be out of your hair."

She gave me a sullen look.

"Okay, then," I said. "Lead the way."

The stairs smelled powerfully of a mixture of liquor, vomit and body odor, and at the first landing, we encountered a prone figure of indeterminate gender. Whoever it was had curled themselves into a weevil-like ball and was sleeping soundly. Liberty stepped over the body without comment and I did the same.

"I guess the elevator's out of service," I said. "I have the same problem in my building." I don't know why I was making jokes. The adrenaline flooding my system had the effect of dissociating me from the moment, somewhat, making it difficult to self-censor. It came to me, with a kind of razor clarity, that, at this moment, I had not the slightest idea what was going to happen next. Also: that there was nothing remotely agreeable about the sensation.

Liberty stopped in front of a door with no number on it at the end of a dreary, semi-illuminated hallway on the fourth floor. Rather than knocking, she scratched on the door and waited. A voice from within yelled, "Come on!" and Liberty swung the door open. "It's me, T," she said as we entered.

We were standing in a plain, rectangular room. The first thing I noticed was that all of the furniture – chairs, end tables, a mattress and several lamps – was herded into one corner, just to the left of the door. There was one, large, rolltop desk back against the wall, directly opposite the door, where one would expect a bed to be, and seated at the desk was an Italian-looking young man who appeared to have been napping when we arrived. Upon first glance, Tevo, who was handsome in a meaty, auto mechanic kind of way, did not fulfill my expectations of what a pimp should look like. He was lounging behind the desk, which was covered with fast food wrappers and empty bottles, most of which appeared to be Orange Fanta. He was younger than I – probably in his mid-twenties – and clad in some type of athletic outfit, the kind NBA players wear during warm-ups. One massive gold chain dangled from his neck, but aside from that, he looked not unlike your average state college second-stringer on a partial athletic scholarship. "Who this, girl?" he said, nodding at me and rubbing his eyes.

Liberty showed no inclination toward making introductions, so I stepped forward. "My name is Fred," I said carefully. "Are you Tevo?"

He yawned, ignored me. "What the hell you doing, Libby?" he said, revealing an accent that clearly had its origins in the five boroughs. "You know better than this."

"He was chasing me, T," Liberty said. "He followed me all the way from Chinatown. I didn't know what else to do."

"Chasing you, huh? He don't look like no trick." He looked at me. "You chase her all the way down here to get some pussy, bud?" His humorous look implied the absurdity of the question.

"No," I said, emboldened by his unthreatening demeanor. "In fact, I – "

"So, she must have ripped you off, am I right?"

"Well, not ripped me *off*, exactly, but – "

"But she got away with something, eh?" He winked confidentially.

"Yes," I said.

"Okay," he sighed. "Let's see it."

I expected this part to be trouble, but to my surprise, Liberty promptly walked forward and dropped the ring box on the desk.

It was a curious moment. The rings were now roughly equidistant between the three of us, and I could quite easily have grabbed them before anyone could have stopped me. But what then?

Finally, Tevo picked up the box and, leaning back in his swivel chair, casually popped it open and removed one of the rings, turning it in his hand. "So, these are, what – twelve karat?"

"Um, I actually don't know," I said. It seemed Tevo was not exactly the jewelry expert that Liberty had described. Teena surely knew the karat, but I was not about to offer to call her and check.

"You don't know? Who are these for, your girlfriend?"

"My fiancé," I said. "Those are my wedding rings. I'm getting married tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's today," he said, snapping the box shut and closing his hand in a fist around it so that it was no longer visible.

"Yes, I suppose that's true," I said. Tevo said nothing more, so I continued. "So you see, I really need them back."

He yawned again. "No, I don't see, bud."

I wasn't sure I had heard him correctly. His affable manner continued to sustain my hope that we were simply clearing up a misunderstanding, that the rings would shortly be returned to me, and we would all go about our business. "What don't you see?" I inquired politely.

He gave me a frank look. Again, he reminded me of an auto mechanic, perhaps one who had uncovered a costly problem in the fuel line and was regretfully, yet impartially, breaking the news. "I don't see that you really need them," he said.

There was a pause. "I'm afraid I don't understand," I said at last. "I explained the situation. Those are *my* rings. I dropped them, and *she* picked them up." Here I gestured at Liberty, who was looking at the floor, like a child trying to remain invisible.

"Yeah, I got all that, bud." He scratched his head, then ran his fingers through his shiny, black hair in a brief, disinterested attempt to arrange it. "But something ain't right about your story."

Suddenly, Liberty spoke up. "Ask him why he threw them off that bridge."

Tevo raised his eyebrows. "What about that, bud? You throw something away and then decide you wanted it back?" He was jiggling the ring box in his hand as if it were a pair of dice he was deciding whether to roll or not.

I glared at Liberty. "I thought we had cleared that up. I didn't *throw* them – "

"What'd you do, exactly, bud?"

"As I said, I *dropped* them, by accident, when I dropped my cell phone."

"So, you accidentally dropped your cell phone *and* your rings? You're one clumsy motherfucker."

"Yes. *No*. I dropped the cell phone on purpose."

"You dropped your *phone* on purpose?"

"*Yes*. It's hard to explain, but – "

"Be calm, bud." His voice did not rise, but there was something implied there, a warning to remember myself that was not transmitted overtly by anything he said or did. It was something my father was always able to do, as well: to effortlessly convey menace.

I nodded in a conciliatory way and lowered my voice. "It's hard to explain, but then the rings fell out of my pocket, and by the time I got down from the bridge – "

"What bridge?"

"This was on the Kearny Street bridge."

"What were you doing there?"

"I was – It doesn't matter, I assure you. I was just just... walking. Walking and thinking."

"What, ain't you got no friends?"

"How do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"I mean, if you're getting married tomorrow, shouldn't you be livin' it up tonight? Sticking dollar bills in some chick's ass crack, or pounding shots or something? Whatever you types do the night before."

"I suppose," I conceded wearily, wondering what *you types* meant, exactly.

"I mean, dropping phones and jewelry off a bridge in gookville don't sound like any bachelor party I ever heard of." He leaned forward and squinted at me. "You sure you're telling me the truth here, bud?"

"I swear to god, I'm getting married tomorrow," I said. "My whole family is in town. Everyone is counting on me...." I trailed off, not knowing where to go from there.

"You sure you want to do it?"

I stared at him.

He held his palms up. "Hey, you don't need to give me the evil eye. I'm just asking. Maybe I wouldn't be doing you no favor by giving these rings back. I see a lot of dudes down here and most of them got some wife somewhere, don't know nothing about it, you know what I'm saying?" He chuckled merrily, enjoying his own wit.

I became aware of an irksome sensation that the room was shrinking. It was a constricting of space that seemed to be occurring in my peripheral vision, as if the walls were

inching closer. I shook my head. "I need them back," I repeated.

"So, show me."

"*Show* you?"

"Yeah, bud. You're not showing me nothing here."

The shrinking room feeling was continuing. It was as if Tevo, Liberty and I were arrayed in a tiny triangle of very bright light, beyond which was only darkness. "Well, I guess I was hoping we could come to some kind of understanding."

I heard Liberty's voice from behind me. "I told you not to come up here," she said quietly.

A surge of anger went through me then. "Like, I'm going to let you take my rings up here to sell them and just wait in the lobby?" I turned back to Tevo. "So, it doesn't bother you that your girl just *stole* from a total stranger?"

Tevo remained absolutely calm, his sleepy dark eyes fixed on me. "She ain't *my* girl. But seems to me, she just saw what she wanted and took it," he said. "Ain't that the way of the world?"

"Here – " I pulled my wallet out and dropped it on the desk. "That's everything I've got. It's more than you'll get for the rings, I'm sure. Will you please give them back, now?"

Tevo looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling. I noticed that he was no longer holding the ring box, that it was once again on the desk, just beside my wallet. "Far back as I can remember, I didn't never *ask* anyone to give me nothing," he said softly. "And I don't remember letting anything *go* for nothing either, nothing that mattered anyway." He leaned back in the chair and shook his head, as if feeling sorry for

me. "I sure as hell wouldn't drop nothing that mattered off a damn bridge where any dirty little whore could pick it up."

I shaded my eyes with my hand in an attempt to stop the closing-in feeling. "It was an accident," I said. *I was going to go call Teena and make it all right.*

I heard Tevo's slightly mocking voice. "An accident," he drawled.

– I just wanted to...

"Wanted to what, bud?"

I just wanted to do something crazy. Something that made no sense at all.

– I'm sure it's perfectly normal...

Strippers, pounding shots, it's all perfectly normal.

"What is, bud?"

We got crazy the night before my wedding. I was out of my HEAD.

– Certain misgivings....

They take the train in from the suburbs and sometimes they have to work late, so they call their little wives and they say... what's her name?

– Teena....

In the dark, I could not tell you apart. Rurik pressing the box into my hand. RUN.

That's all right baby, that's all right for yooooou...

"How's that, bud?"

It doesn't make you special. It makes you NORMAL.

– I just need a little more time....

To decide.

"What for?"

Decide what?

Liberty's voice: Just take his money and give him the rings, T. I think there's something wrong with him.

Whether I should settle or not. How much I can reasonably expect....

"He looks normal to me, girl."

Settle down. Most people just want to be comfortable.

C'mon. There's plenty others.

I've seen lots like you over the years.

"We've been over this before, girl."

We've been over this.

See how you are, T? I don't like you like this.

See how you are? You're fat and scared and you want to run. You wouldn't last ten minutes on the street with those Haight Street kids. You aren't fit for extreme. You were a nervous wreck with Anneliese.

"Like what, girl?"

I don't know. Different.

You look different. Did you sell that book you were always talking about writing?

"Different, how?"

Just different.

You were never fit for different. You're fit for riding commuter trains and writing copy and loving Teena.

"What's wrong with that, girl?"

And what's wrong with that?

– What's wrong with that?

"Nothing's wrong, bud. It's right as rain."

Right. You want to destroy something? How about this: let go of your precious special destiny. Let go of "a little more time." Let go of going over and over it.

"Show me, bud."

Drop it all off a fucking bridge.

I felt the cool metal band of my watch against my brow. On impulse, I removed it from my wrist and laid it on the table. "How about that?"

He nodded. "I'm starting to believe you," he said. "Maybe you *do* want these rings back."

I stared at him. "That's all I've got, really," I said. "Do you want to go with me to an ATM? I could get more."

He held up a hand. "We ain't going to no ATM, bud."

"So... what?"

He continued to stare at me, his dark eyes liquid in their pity for my predicament. More than pity – sympathy as well. *Empathy*. A softness that hadn't been there before.

I looked from him to Liberty, who said nothing. "I don't have anything else to give," I said helplessly.

"You're really getting married, tomorrow, bud?"

"Yes, I really am," I said.

"She must be quite a girl," he said teasingly, caressingly.

The room was the size of a closet now and we were all crushed inside it, breathing each other's stale air. "Yes, she is," I said, Teena's face swimming before my eyes. She was smiling at me, understanding me. Forgiving me, despite everything. Pretending to be literary that first night to impress me, but not caring a whit for it herself, nor for any of the numerous poses we adopt to give ourselves status in the eyes of those who know no better, including our own underdeveloped selves. That way she had of seeing through

all of that to the person underneath, the person waiting to emerge from the pose.

"Yes, she is," I said again.

"I wonder what would *she* do, if she were here," Tevo mused.

If *she* were here.

"What would *she* have to give?"

"I – I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Sure you do, bud."

His face was the only thing in the closet with me now. Liberty had vanished. It was just the two of us.

"I think it's lucky for you that it's *you* who's here, and not her," he said. "Otherwise, I'd just keep your cheap-ass rings." And then he leaned back in his chair, and as I watched, his hand slid, ever so slowly, down his chest, bumping lightly over the sun-shaped medallion that hung, suspended, at the end of the gold chain. I remember thinking that the gold was probably more than twelve karat. It looked so heavy and solid. Then his hand moved to his crotch and his thick, stubby mechanic fingers were undoing the fly in his shiny, blue warm-up pants.

"If you know what you want, bud, that's the hard part. Lots of people never know *what* they want. Or they won't *let* themselves know, you know?" He smiled with his whole mouth for the first time, revealing a row of white teeth and a single gold tooth carved in the shape of what I realized was the letter T. "They come down here on Saturday night and then they go back to the suburbs the rest of the week." He shrugged. "But once you *know*, all that's left is to *take* it."

I leaned against the desk, feeling the room whirling around me, the walls brushing against my knees and elbows. It was no longer a room, it was a coffin.

"You can do it," he urged gently. "I know you can."

At last, there was no more room. The space had closed around me and I didn't need any more time to think it over. I no longer cherished the potential I retained as long as I failed to act and, therefore, failed to fail. The rings were still on the desk, and without hesitation I dove for them, closing my hand around the tiny felt box, knowing that whatever happened, I had acted, this one time, with utter clarity and purpose, knowing that I could not allow Teena's rings to remain here without a fight, knowing that she deserved the fight more than I deserved the rings.

Then there was a tremendous, jarring pain, like colliding with an invisible wall, and I tumbled, unaware of which way was up until my hip and shoulder made contact with the floor. After that, I was still, aware only of the emptiness in my stomach and a throbbing pain in my skull, both of which grew more distant as I faded into the place where there is no more trying.

It was a wedding like many you may have been to. I realize that everyone thinks of their wedding day as unique, and I suppose each one *is* unique from the point of view of the participants. But, looking at it objectively, the whole affair was probably fairly typical of couples like Teena and me who desire to minimize the pomp and circumstance. Such ceremonies are usually described as "intimate" or "low key" and ours certainly was. The setting was a charming little garden in the backyard of a turn-of-the-century townhouse on Potrero Hill. July 7th was a lovely San Francisco day, warm and breezy and slightly overcast, although the sun poked through occasionally and flooded the garden with dramatic bursts of yellow light.

There were just under fifty people crowded into the backyard, which had been meticulously garnished with flowers and streamers and little gift baskets containing jams and jellies that had "Frederick and Teena" labels. I had virtually nothing to do with any of these frills, but found myself appreciating them nonetheless, to my own bemusement. In fact, my only complaint about the service was that it was over before I was able to really take stock of what was happening. Our joining was officiated by a woman minister from the local Unitarian Universalist church whom Teena had located somehow, and as the minister began the opening words, Teena squeezed my hands and whispered, "*be present!*" with a smile.

I can't say I was entirely present, but I did have the presence of mind at one point in the ceremony to turn and

gaze over the gathered crowd who were ringed around the tiny patio area where Teena and I stood with the minister. My parents were there, standing next to Teena's, all four of them looking stiffly formal. Rufus was there beside Lorna, who, to my great surprise, he had brought as his date. I noticed that Rufus had on a new-looking suit that somehow also managed to look as if he'd slept in it. Later, I saw him talking animatedly to my father, who was clutching his martini glass and looking very much like he yearned to escape. I'll have to ask him some time if he managed to do so without becoming enlisted as one of Rufus' latest investors.

As for Rufus, he and I spoke briefly at one point, and I assured him that I held no grudge regarding his consumption of my wedding cake. Relieved, he promptly drank several glasses of champagne, and by late afternoon could be seen sleeping comfortably in a lawn chair. Lorna I did not speak to, and I assume she left early.

My mother was crying, as were many of the women present, most of whom were Teena's relatives and girlfriends. Brian was there, too, of course. In fact, he was the first person I encountered as I hurried up the steps to the house that morning, having come, by bus, directly from the Tenderloin. He took one look at me and led me directly to the "groom's alcove" where a shower and shaving kit awaited me, as well as my tuxedo, which he had laid out carefully on the bed. As I shaved, I told Brian a greatly abbreviated story of what had happened to me.

Of course, arriving with neither the rings nor the cake – the only two items with which I had been entrusted – caused a minor stir, but in the end, it was not as big a deal as

one might assume. Temporary substitute rings were quickly procured until such time as Rurik and Fayina could inscribe a new set, and a new cake was even on the scene by the time the ceremony concluded, courtesy of a last-minute dash to a pastry shop in Noe Valley by Joan, who looked suspiciously at me, but held her tongue. After all, I had been assaulted, and was therefore blameless. In addition, I bore several ugly bruises, as well as a missing wallet and cell phone, to support my story, and amid the clucks of sympathy, no one even thought to question my veracity, or to wonder just what it was I was doing in San Francisco's red light district at one in the morning.

Awakening on the floor of that hotel room had been a predictably grim moment. I was stiff and aching and my head was particularly afflicted, suffering as it was from both physical and chemical abuse. I groaned my way to a sitting position and surveyed the empty room, which, in daylight, looked even shabbier and more dissolute. The desk was still covered with ketchup-stained wrappers, and cockroaches of various sizes and speeds scuttled over them and raced in and out of the mouths of the empty pop bottles.

Needless to say, I was alone. Tevo and Liberty had departed, leaving no personal traces, and I hazarded a guess that they had checked out of the hotel, not to return. Possibly I could locate them again if I made a sustained effort – the Tenderloin is only a few square blocks in size – but I know I will not.

My wallet was gone, as was my watch. My keys remained in my pocket, along with about forty dollars in bills and change; they had obviously not searched me. As I was

checking myself for injuries (nothing more than bruises and bumps) I noticed the ring box on its side under the desk, and for one heartbreaking moment I thought Tevo had succumbed to a last-minute charitable impulse, his normally predatory instincts having been touched by my romantic bravery. The box, however, was empty, and I chuckled at my own relentlessly literary yearnings with regard to the world. This was no quest, I was no hero and Tevo was not really even much of a villain. I slipped the little felt box in the pocket of my coat and left the room.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, I was struck by a wave of dizziness and found it necessary to sit on the curb for a moment, my head between my knees. This posture attracted little attention in the Tenderloin, and after the spell had passed, I stood up, realizing I needed to get something to eat right away.

I had never been in the Pinecrest at that hour. A 24-hour Geary Street grease pit, the Pinecrest Diner was a popular after-hours spot for bar-hoppers and club-goers in search of the post-closing time drunken snack. I had been in there once with Anneliese during a late night on the town, and once or twice with Brian who loved the place and the unhealthy-looking characters who haunted the counter, drinking pot after pot of the mephitic coffee, flirting grotesquely with the aged waitresses and haranguing any receptive customer with ceaseless, paranoid monologues.

I found a booth by the window and ordered the minced ham with eggs, along with pancakes and a side of sausage. I then devoured the entire disgusting meal as if it was the house special at Chez Panisse, even wolfing down

the hash browns, which bore a strong textural resemblance to Styrofoam packing material. As I ate, I felt a wholeness returning which seemed to have been absent for much of the previous day. When at last I pushed my plate away, I was a tired and battered groom-to-be, but no longer the mere shell of one. And I was ready, at last, to get on with things.

Before I left, I searched the tabletop, which was a schizophrenic cross-section of literary output, but among the heart-encircled lover's names, the pornographic declarations and the abstract expressionist swirls and doodles, I failed to locate my a.m. omen. Using the serrated edge of my knife, I quickly carved a small man with a hat in the lower left corner of the table. It was going to be a good day.

Unfortunately, my gluttony at the overpriced Pinecrest had left me without enough money for the cab ride to Portero. I rode the bus in a sated daze, sleepily staring out the window at the city, while two black teenagers sucked face a couple of rows ahead of me. Leaning my head against the safety glass, I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin and inhaling the pungent smell of the humans around me: sweat, cologne and cigarette smoke. The bus lurched and squealed, and from time to time I opened my eyes to check my location, but mostly I thought of Teena. It was her face that was foremost in my thoughts. She has a lovely face.

And that is mostly what I remember of my wedding day: Teena's face, smiling tenderly, laughing, upturned to me for another kiss amidst applause and the clicking of cameras. Her face was never far from me, and even when we were separated by the crowd – she chatting glowingly with her

girlfriends, and me patiently receiving some heartfelt marital wisdom from a splendidly soused Rufus – I felt her presence almost as if we were alone. We would make eye contact across the garden and she would smile, shyly, in a new, strange way, revealing a Teena that I had never seen before. And when I look at the pictures from that day I see that I have the same dopey, slightly bewildered smile on my face.

I must confess that these days it is difficult for me to relate to the man who concluded his final night of bachelorhood on the floor of Tevo's hotel room. Interestingly, the French term for "bachelor party" is "enterrement de vie de garçon," which literally means: the *funeral* of the bachelor life. In any case, that my mental state throughout that long day and night seems, only a few months later, so inexplicable to me, is probably a sign that Frederick the bachelor was ready to be put to rest, and had little remaining to offer anyone.

It's hard for me to understand now how worked up I became on that Friday before the wedding. I suppose certain misgivings are perfectly normal before such an event, but I'm glad that my "little freak out" (as Teena and I refer to it) did not entail any real sexual infidelities or lasting injury. I have never seen Tevo or Liberty again, but I see Jenny from time to time, and our interactions are always perfectly friendly. She is no longer Brian's agent, however – she quit, disbanding Embolden Literary following the sale of Brian's novel to HarperCollins. The book is due out in February, and I am in the process of concocting a suitably festive "publication party" for Brian, though he doesn't know it.

Brian has apologized to me, repeatedly, for his behavior as my best man. "I should never have let you go off with Jenny," he said. "I knew something bad would come of it."

"It had nothing to do with Jenny," I told him. "I just got mugged, that's all. It happens every day in the big bad city."

"Still, I was so wrapped up in my own little drama about the book getting published that I completely left you to fend for yourself when you were obviously in a very vulnerable state. Why didn't you tell me Teena was pregnant, Freddy? That would throw anybody off a little bit."

Actually, the impending arrival of the third member of our family ended up, ironically enough, being the catalyst for my latest project. Teena and I had only just concluded, reluctantly, that it was impossible to find an affordable apartment in the city with enough room for the baby, when word came to us via – of all people – Rufus about the house in Walnut Creek.

It seems that one of Rufus's innumerable associates was a developer who had, on the side, been generating a hefty little supplemental income by buying, restoring and selling small homes in the East Bay. However, in the aftermath of the housing market's freefall, he found himself stuck with a charming little three-bedroom place in a highly desirable area of the affluent suburb that he could not seem to unload. Rather than sell at a loss, he wanted to rent, but was wary of posting it to the general public, given how much work he had put into the place. All we had to do was plausibly impersonate the quintessential "bright young

couple with a baby on the way" and we were in. And it wasn't terribly hard to do, since that was more or less exactly what we were.

Upon first glimpsing our little postage stamp-sized backyard, Teena was evidently visited by a vision of us, as a family, hosting barbeques for the numerous other friends with children we were bound to meet. Grumbling about the place being "overrun with screaming little brats," I set about repairing a rusted old Weber we found in the storage area beneath the back steps. As a sort of passive-aggressive rebellion against the whole project, I decorated the grill with some stenciled images of various historical figures and cryptic literary slogans. There is a crude image of Che Guevara, with a balloon coming out of his mouth that reads, "Silence is argument carried out by other means." There is a thoroughly incomprehensible quote by James Joyce, and two by Kafka: "It is often safer to be in chains than to be free," and my personal favorite: "It is not necessary that you leave the house." There is also a stencil of Lincoln, above his quote about freeing the slaves, and several freehand drawings of barnyard animals.

As it happened, though, Teena loved the "Suburban Rebel" (as she dubbed our Weber model), and it was a big hit at our first official housewarming party. In fact, several people inquired as to where they might purchase a similar grill. As it turns out, child-rearing people in the Northern California suburbs are both hopelessly mechanically inept and almost entirely illiterate. And, to my amazement, they are willing to part with large sums of money in order to obtain their very own, personalized "Suburban Rebel."

Scouring the salvage yards of Richmond and Oakland, I located several more little grills, many of which still worked perfectly well or only needed minor repairs, and before long I had a waiting list half a dozen people long, of thirtysomething parents eager to purchase my homemade symbol of ironic conformity. It is the perfect hipster ornament for summertime social events, though I never mention to anyone that most of my quotes and images are simply gathered from internet searches, and that I haven't even read most of the authors that provide the source material.

Of course our location has added some time to my daily commute, but I rather enjoy the extra time to myself. I particularly like the walk home from the train station in the evenings. The weather where we live is much milder and less foggy than in the city, and during the warm months the sidewalks were alive with children of all sizes bouncing balls and whizzing back and forth on bicycles and skateboards, engaged in complicated verbal and physical rituals of self-definition. It reminded me somewhat of the city's financial district, although the wardrobe is less formal and the aggression more overt.

Occasionally, I'll have to work late to catch up on some project or another, and I will call Teena from my Market Street office and tell her not to hold dinner. This little exchange began somewhat tongue-in-cheek, with me braying, "Don't hold dinner, honey!" in my best Dagwood Bumstead imitation. But gradually, the irony morphed into sincerity, especially since Teena is home full-time now as we await the baby's arrival. She has taken to cooking a great

deal, and I often arrive home to all sorts of tantalizing odors which permeate every corner and hallway of our little house.

On those late nights, when I finally shut down the computer and head out of the office to catch the train, I always call once more to let Teena know I'm on my way. For awhile she met me at the train station and we would walk home together in the late summer dusk. However, autumn is finally upon us, with chillier winds and a dark that arrives earlier and earlier, threatening to swallow up what remains of the afternoon. Plus, Teena, who is now more than six months along, has grown larger, and is less inclined toward long walks.

So now I walk home from the station alone, but most often, she greets me by the mailbox, under the streetlamp in front of our house. I usually stand there talking with her for a few moments, catching up on the details of the day before heading in for my first drink of the evening. The details are numerous and prosaic. I see now that they will never cease, but will only multiply and knit together into an encompassing fabric within which we will burrow. It is true that on many days the routine of the daily commute feels oppressive and banal, and I trudge home, ignoring the commotion around me, lost in self-pity for how easily I allowed myself to be so trapped, what little fight I put up. But then I round the final corner and, raising my eyes at last, I see Teena standing there under the streetlight, and the larger, more abstract questions of what, hypothetically, I might (under optimal conditions and marshalling all my forces) manage to *extract* from life, contract and become smaller, more immediate concerns. I suppose I have always

dreaded what I felt would be the "shrinking" of my life, the reduction of it to these basic, domestic elements. I felt that they would distract me, perhaps permanently (tragedy!), from the more worthy issue of what might yet materialize, were I to somehow preserve myself cryogenically in a state of pure, unfettered potential.

I have always been a self-centered man, so perhaps it is that propensity for solipsism and narcissism that can be held responsible for my having gotten it so perfectly backwards. Had I realized earlier on that it is, in fact, the smallness of life that *rescues* us from the abyss of our potential, that relieves us of the burden of relentlessly striving for bigger things, I might have spent my youth in a very different manner. Then again, it's hard to say. Until recently, it never occurred to me that Locktin the Passive Man was merely a striver who had yet to put his toe to the starting line. Perhaps I, in my frozen fear, took the race more seriously than anyone. Maybe I was in the race all along and never knew it. Maybe the greatest delusion of my – or any – generation is the one that tells us we have any choice in the matter. Though we squawk and vacillate, protest and prolong, we are – slackers and strivers all – nonetheless inching our way through our brief moment under the yellow light. We console ourselves with our mantras of faith (no one's watching; *someone's* watching) when no consolation is really necessary. Meanwhile our eyes are squeezed shut, staring blindly inward, missing it all.