

2008

Fontana Hall and Other Stories

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FONTANA HALL
AND OTHER
STORIES

By

Vincenzo Lucciola

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Honors
in
The Department of English

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Power Relations

Opening, an Introduction:

A man sits at a desk in his office. Not a cubicle in some corporate office, but his own office, in his own building. He quit his job five years ago to start a business of his own and often reminisces how nice it was to leave work behind after punching out. The man sips at his coffee and sighs. Nowadays he never leaves the shop, even if he isn't there. Day in and day out he can think of nothing more than how to make more money. The only exception to this rule is Sunday, when he awakes for an early morning breakfast and relaxes with his son. Whether he makes as good a business man as a tool maker is debatable, not obvious. Whether this is a good thing or not is also debatable, though some think it obvious. Such things are often debated.

A much younger man sits at his desk in a college classroom, daydreaming. The desk is the same as any other crummy desk he found throughout his long and erratic stint as a college student. Once, for lack of any conceivable direction, he quit college. The result of this decision left him at the mercy of his father, who immediately put him to work at the shop. After year of suffering the monotony of a machine press, the son felt too smart for the shop and declared an English major at a nearby college. The hideous days of working for his father are now over, though still close enough to haunt him in his dreams. Sometimes he can smell hot oil on his fingertips and in the cracks of his palms. He knows now what's at stake. If his dream of having an easy job as an English professor

somehow falls through, his father would be right there under the safety net, like Satan, waiting for him, except without the pitchfork (though one would have to wonder what tool tore such a perfect hole in said safety net). It should be emphasized, however, that the son now makes the Dean's list every semester.

Tuesday:

The father sits at his desk, which is in shambles. He is grumpy. His young and pretty secretary managed to annoy him before his morning coffee. The spoiled little brat never takes out the trash like I ask her too, he thinks. He knows that if her father wasn't his best employee in the tool room, she would have been ass out of the door a long time ago. This is the first and last time he'd hire anyone both young and pretty.

He is tired, very tired. He shut off the espresso machine the night before and is waiting, head buried in both hands, for the water to warm up. It was a stupid move, he knew, to shut off the machine. He also knew it was a stupid move to hire his brat of a secretary when Norman asked him for the favor. It's about time he starts listening to himself. The father rubs his temples. Too late now. Work is piling up but not getting out the door. Story of his life. The only other story was when there wasn't enough work coming through the door. It's either one or the other. A perpetual frown. None of this has anything to do with why he is exceptionally grumpy this particular morning.

The Dry Erase Board, A Back Story:

Saturday night. On the dry erase board that clings to the refrigerator via four tiny magnets, the son writes the words: "Please, PLEASE, don't wake me up early. I NEED a good morning's rest. This is CRITICAL."

On Sunday morning, after reading this, the father walks casually up to his son's door and pounds on it. "Come on," he shouts, "Get up! Let's you and me have some breakfast together!" The father claps his hands together and rubs them happily. Then he walks back to the kitchen to make a racket with the pots, pans, plates, glasses, coffee mugs and kitchen utensils.

The son wakes in a fury before his eyes even opened. Knowing the effectiveness of refrigerator notes, a part of him was preparing for the anger while asleep. The son feels he is getting sick from all of the accumulating stress, the cafeteria food, general winter discontent, dealing with his father on a daily basis and, most importantly, a lack of sleep.

The son had gone to bed sometime after 3am. His father has a perfectly consistent sleeping schedule, falling asleep at 9:30pm and waking up at precisely 6:00am. The son believes that the privilege of being able to maintain a consistent sleeping schedule gives his father an unfair advantage over him.

The week of final exams and final papers are approaching. He is on track with his studying, but barely. After a week of struggling, the paper began to move along late the night before. There is much work ahead of him and, in order to succeed at the tasks at hand (always multiple tasks at hand in school) he'd need a good deal of sleep the

following morning. Without it, he'd botch his paper for Monday and fail his exam on Tuesday. The entire semester depends on it.

Hence, the note on the dry-erase board.

Breakfast, a Scene:

The son drags himself into the kitchen, where his father is humming happily to himself and beating eggs in a bowl.

"Hope it's not too early," he said.

The son glares at him.

"I get up every morning at six for work. You can afford to wake up around 6:30 one day a weeks so we can have breakfast together."

"I woke up early the last three days."

"How early?"

"Nine o'clock."

"You call that early? Try waking up at six, then you'll know what early feels like."

"But you go to bed at 9:30 every night."

"Yep."

"I went to bed at four in the morning," he complains. "I've got a lot of work to do."

"Get the butter, I didn't take it out of the fridge."

The son opens the refrigerator and grabs the butter. He adds two more pieces to the toaster and then scrapes his knife against the already popped toast. “Dad, did you hear what I said?”

“Yep.”

The son finishes his buttering and places the toast on a paper towel. “A few hours of missed sleep can really throw you off, you know.”

“Sure can.” The father hums happily while cooking the eggs.

Plan of Attack:

Give father a taste of his own medicine, only more bitter, if that is at all possible.

The Plan, whatever it is, will commence after exam week.

That is the only solid part of the Plan of Attack.

More Story:

The son hands the paper in on time but feels bitter about it anyway. The exams were questionable. On Monday morning he is almost sick. By Tuesday it is a sure thing, and for the rest of the week his girlfriend will not kiss him.

Actual Attack:

Monday morning, six days later. Father plans on waking up at 6a.m.. The son knows this. The father depends on taking a shower to refresh himself so he can think clearly at work. The son knows this as well. Work at the shop is piling up but not getting out the door. This the son also knows. Enough of what the son knows.

At 4 a.m. his alarm goes off. He wakes up and creeps to the living room where there are a few objects of importance: winter jacket, keys and phone. The father's winter jacket is hanging on a chair at the head of the table. The son takes it and hides it in a nearby closet. The keys are on top of the table, next to the phone. He picks up the phone and sets the loudest possible alarm to go off for 5 a.m.. He snatches the car keys and presses the panic button. Then he sets them down on the table exactly as they were and bolts to his room, taking the phone with him.

The father jumps up at the blaring sound of the car alarm outside his window. For a moment he thinks he is having a heart attack because the alarm is so loud. Cursing and muttering, he hops into his sandals and runs to the living room to grab his keys. He can not find his coat. More cursing and muttering. The father wonders if there is a thief ready to hurt him as he runs out the door, scared and breathless. No one is there and the father, full of adrenaline, presses down on the alarm button with slight relief. In his pajamas he feels not only cold, but foolish. He looks around the neighborhood for a moment. "God damn raccoons," he mutters to himself and walks inside.

Fifteen minutes later he is in bed and about to drift off to sleep when the car alarm goes off again. "Jesus Christ!" the father exclaims. "Fucking raccoons!" He shakes his fist in the air, stomps to the table, grabs his keys and this time presses the button from the warmth of his own room. The father checks his heart beat. He's so tired he is dizzy and wants to sleep again but can't. It makes no sense, except for the agonizing frustration. That much, at least, makes sense.

He lays awake until, some undefined time later, another alarm goes off near his head. The father, confused and shaken, sits upright in bed with his heart near his throat. He doesn't recognize the alarm. The fleeting sensation that someone has attached a bomb to his bed comes and goes. He looks to his left, on his bedside table his phone is blinking wildly. He doesn't remember putting it there and picks it up slowly. He turns the phone around in his hand and flips it open. It's his phone, that's for sure. Unfortunately, the alarm is screaming at him and he doesn't know how to shut the damn thing off. Concerned that it might wake his son up, the father rips the battery from the phone and places both objects onto the table. This is a curious thing, he thinks. Nothing to do with raccoons, he is sure. The father rubs his face with both hands. He lies back down on his bed and continues to blink at the ceiling.

Back in his room the son is happy. This is way too much fun, he thinks. He sets his stereo alarm for 5:25. Soon, loud abrasive metal begins to play. He lets it go on for approximately 1 minute and 32 seconds before shutting it off. He resets the alarm for 5:45 and turns the volume up.

Fifteen minutes later, he grabs his towel and heads for the shower.

At 5:55 the father can't take any more of his son's music and bursts through the door, bleary eyed and salivating with frustration. His son isn't there. He stops for a moment and thinks, this is a curious thing. Then, back in his rage, the father leaps at the stereo and tears it from the wall.

In the shower, the son hears some incoherent screaming as his father pounds on the door. He smiles and continues to shampoo.

The father, eventually, is forced to skip out on his important ritual of showering and dresses for work in what could be called a fit of rage.

The son exits the bathroom to find his father looking for the winter jacket. The son stands in the kitchen with his towel wrapped around his waist and says, “It’s in the closet, where you put it last night.”

“God damn it, shit,” the father responds, opening the closet. “Of all the god damned places I could have put the....”

The son watches him stuff the jacket underneath one arm and storm out of the house.

Coda, Tuesday (again):

The father is in the bathroom of the machine shop squeezing his thumb. The cut isn’t too deep, but blood exits the wound at a steady pace. He is of course cursing and muttering, same as he has been all day long. The father nearly lost his thumb at the power saw. He was slicing a piece of aluminum in half when it hit him – this morning was not a series of coincidences. And most likely it didn’t involve raccoons. What angers him more, his son’s vindictiveness or his own stupidity is unclear. A Plan of Attack begins to form in his mind as he wraps the band-aid around his thumb.

Counterpoint

For the most part, the dynamics of the relationship had been laid out from the beginning, the parameters set. Occasionally, he would check the dials to see if anything had changed.

“Just how gay are you anyway?”

“Pretty gay, Jack,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, because he already knew.

Hanging onto his arm, she laughed and then kissed his cheek. Jack smiled as they continued to walk up the hill. It was a chilly autumn day.

Despite his best efforts, Jack had fallen in love.

* * * * *

“She would make the ideal girlfriend for me,” he told his friend one night at a bar in Boston, “Most girlfriends are like a constant distraction. A pain in the ass, you know? I can never get anything done.”

His friend lifted his glass and nodded. For a while he tried to dissuade Jack from his pursuit but it proved useless.

Jack said, “The last three girls I dated turned into a mess.”

“The right ones come and go,” his friend replied, “Same as the wrong ones.”

“You know, we sometimes go an entire week without so much as contacting each other and then when we meet, we just pick up right where we left off, just like that...” he gulped back the rest of his beer. For a few minutes they sat in silence as Jack tapped the side of his empty beer glass. “She’s really great,” Jack went on. “I mean really.”

“Except she’s gay.”

“Well yeah, but besides that.”

* * * * *

By the third time they met, he had gotten over his initial disappointment and relaxed into this new kind of relationship. By the fourth, though, she mentioned the idea of a boy-crush.

“Really?” he asked.

“Sure, why not?” She spun her beer coaster like a top. “Even a girl as gay as me could have a crush on some boys.”

Jack tried spinning his coaster as well, but his flew off the table and landed on the floor near another table. He picked it up, brought it back over and placed his empty beer glass on top of it. “So do I count too?”

“What, as a boy or as a crush?”

“What kind of question is that?”

She shrugged, “I mostly like blondes anyways.”

“You could dress me up as one, I won’t mind.”

She laughed and bought him a beer.

* * * * *

In the park, when they reached the top of the hill, they stopped to take in the scenery. The grass was still green but the leaves had already begun to change, some red, some yellow, and some already brown, as if they couldn't make a unanimous decision. Jack gazed at the scene. He wondered whether the leaves held on to their greatest moments until the very end of their lives, or if it just took them that long to think of something good to say.

Still wrapped around his arms, she pressed her body against his as a bitter wind swept by.

“Cold?” he asked.

“A little bit.”

He stood there for a few moments until finally deciding to rest his cheek against her forehead. He forced himself to breathe smoothly and steadily.

“Wanna go to a movie?” She asked.

“Sure, if you want to, but I don't think anything good is playing.”

She shrugged, “We're like 0 for 3 this month anyway.”

“I know. We gotta start picking movies that are actually good.”

She squeezed his arm, “It doesn't really matter, though. Does it Jack?”

“No, I suppose it doesn't.”

They took in the view for a little longer and then walked back down the hill holding hands. She caressed his gently with her thumb and Jack smiled at the feeling it gave him.

The Dark Night of the Soul

In the 16th Century there emerged a concept known as the dark night of the soul, a dangerous spiritual journey that could, theoretically, end in total devastation of the self. Originally, it was intended for those of the Roman Catholic persuasion. Happily, over the centuries it has become available to everyone, regardless of race, creed, class or profession. The dark night of the soul now takes on many different forms. In this story it takes the form of a large, looming castle.

A student once found out about this castle. He made it clear to his professor that he was ready to walk through it and experience the infamous dark night of the soul.

There was a committee involved. They forced him to sign papers legally relieving them of any responsibilities of damages incurred from various results. These results included (but were not limited to) failure, any and all forms of insanity resulting from failure, cardiovascular damage as a result of the well-documented existential strain the dark night of the soul possessed, amnesia and, most importantly, the dangers of success. This is how things were done at the time of this story.

The student signed warily, though it should be noted that the two i's in his name were dotted with peculiar precision.

The student was then blindfolded and brought to an entrance.

The professor said, "You must remain blindfolded and you must crawl through."

"Crawl through?"

"Yes, crawl through. Are you ready?"

He nodded and the journey began.

The student remained brave and steadfast for quite some time but eventually the strain became too much. Towards the end, through his own tears, sobs and coughing fits, he began to beg for the professor's mercy. He felt an utterly terrifying change occurring within him and was not sure he could survive until the end. Thankfully, the professor was experienced enough to help him through the final, painful moments.

Outside once again, the student stood up, took off his blindfold and asked, "Have I done it? Have I crawled on my hands and knees all the way through the castle in which one experiences the dark night of the soul?"

"Well," the professor began with an air of ambiguity, "You have achieved the aims that we had set." Then, he pointed behind the student.

When the student turned to see for himself what he had crawled through, he was shocked and angered. "But it was only a dog house!"

"Some," the professor said sadly, shaking his head, "Do not make it all the way through."

"And it's a small one at that!"

"It is not much smaller than the average size dog house."

The student began pacing. He had been tricked and felt utterly foolish. "I feel I have been made small," he said, and then pointed at the dog house. "That! That's what I have been afraid of this whole time?"

"Yes, the whole time. Are you not satisfied?"

"No. No I don't think I am. As a matter of fact I feel quite angry." The student kicked a rock, and then he picked up a twig and snapped it half.

The professor looked at his watch and then sat on the grass and waited patiently for the student to exhaust himself. “You must remember,” the professor began, after all the twigs surrounding them were all snapped in half, “It is not as easy as it looks to be.”

“No, it certainly is not.” The student sat next to the professor and sighed. “I have been through much, haven’t I?”

“You have.”

“And I suppose it’s possible that I’ve become all the much better for it.”

“It’s possible.”

The student looked off into the morning fog and felt ripple euphoria pass through him. They sat in silence for a little while. “You have to tell me,” the student began, “Is there really a castle somewhere in which one can experience the real dark night of the soul?”

“They are all real in their own way,” the professor replied. “But yes, there is a castle. We are, in fact, in its backyard. The castle is beyond that hill.”

“I suppose I should I start with the wood shed first?”

The professor smiled. “That would be a good idea. You will find a wood shed on your way to the castle, and after the wood shed, a small guest house.”

The student stood up. He felt hopeful and, even if not entirely confident, much lighter on his feet. He shook hands with the professor, thanking him, and then went on his way.

Mob Justice

Ramal and Elmer had been on the outs lately. For a while they developed a cheerfully antagonistic relationship, but the past few months were just plain mean. To the rest of us in the dormitory, ever since the ankle injury that kept Ramal from playing football during his third and incredibly promising year at the University of South Florida, his mental facilities had disintegrated. Ramal gained weight, maybe 30 pounds in a matter of a few months. Strange things must happen to big football players when they suddenly let themselves slide. He was fast approaching old Elmer.

As for Elmer, he might've been a barrel-chested football player in his younger days, but at this point was only a fat, old alcoholic – typified by the way his once barrel-chest had rolled down to his belly and thick patches of scruffy white stubble clung to a pair of sagging cheeks.

The university, for some reason, thought him competent enough to run Fontana Hall, an old-folks home they had purchased and turned into a dormitory due to an influx of students who couldn't be housed on campus. Since it was technically located across the street from school grounds, no unlawful conduct on Fontana Hall property affected a student's standing with the school. Therefore, we assumed it's no coincidence that Ramal was tossed there after his injury.

To Elmer, either out to prove that he was capable of policing his own building or looking for a big promotion, Ramal was a blessing in disguise or a curse awaiting fulfillment.

Always ready to cock the guns of his authority, Elmer sweat about as hard as he breathed while running around the twelve floor dormitory trying to catch the kids who broke rules he worked hard to write down and enforce. The only person he ever literally chased was Ramal. It's the black Bugs bunny story, we'd joke to ourselves, except that the real Bugs had the advantage of being skinny, and smart too.

It's generally agreed, their relationship took a nasty turn once Ramal began his parking lot stunts. Smoking in the hall way, drunk and disorderly conduct, not respecting the curfew and other minor infractions, were all things Elmer could put up with, if not enjoy. Mostly, Ramal performed doughnuts and crazy eights, depending on how empty the parking lot was at the time. Around and around in the parking lot they'd go, with Elmer huffing and puffing and pulling up his pants and wishing Ramal would fall out of his Jeep as it toppled over, crushing his body flat against the pavement.

Why anyone would chase a drunken man in a Jeep was beyond all of us. But there we stood, watching Ramal's screeching tires spill smoke into the air, and Elmer, catching his breath. This was probably the fifth time they went at it this way, and by then it'd become an event. Someone would run down the halls and knock on doors, shouting "Elmer and Ramal! Round 5! Elmer and Ramal in the parking lot! Round 5!"

This time, for the sake of efficiency, we purchased a megaphone.

People placed bets. Sodas were passed around. A scrawny kid with wide brimmed hat, Bermuda button down shirt and khaki shorts set up a ladder and stood at the top with the megaphone poised in front of his face. The popcorn popped in the microwaves but rarely finished in time. Those with enough money bet on Elmer just for fun while the poorer of us bet on Ramal. No one bet on the cops because that was unethical.

The reputation Ramal built in taking our football team to the National Championships quickly shattered when he made a winning catch during the semi-finals. Most careers are irrevocably ruined by specifically not making a winning catch. However, Ramal celebrated by leaping off the goal post with his left foot, landing with his right and breaking the ankle. The papers claimed that Ramal defied physics on the way up and then once again on the way down. At least they gave him that much.

The team did not win the National Championship.

This was the year Ramal would have been looking at a draft for the NFL and some still felt a residual respect, or at least sympathy, for the football player, which explains how he got away with so much. Yet, for all the commiseration, that unspoken line existed somewhere, even if we ourselves couldn't see it, and he was sure to be crossing it soon. Still, we hollered, whooped, and placed our bets.

So far, every time Elmer called the police, they'd swerve into the parking lot with their lights and sirens blazing, but no sooner than they'd arrive, Ramal disappeared. One or two officers would get out of a car, look around to see if anyone was hurt, and then shrug and cruise off.

At the moment, Elmer stood in the parking lot of the dormitory holding the phone up in the air to make it clear that he had called the cops.

Ramal, on the other side of the parking lot, stopped his car, opened the door and hopped up on the roof. He flipped Elmer off with both hands. "Fuck you, Elmer!" The crowd cheered. More bets were placed. Then Ramal dropped his pants to his knees and wiggled his waist, his penis flapping against one leg, then another. The crowd groaned and the betting stopped for a moment. "Suck my dick, Elmer!"

The crowd cheered once again.

No one was sure if any more bets should be placed.

The lanky young man on a ladder cleared his throat into the megaphone and the crowd recoiled for a moment. Then he took a deep breath, pressed the megaphone against his lips and commenced:

“Alright folks, it looks like Ramal’s got the upper hand to start us off this evening. He’s flapping! He’s slapping! He’s circling his waist and doing a little jig. But wait! There goes Elmer! He’s booking it for Ramal, pants hitched up high, he’s only thirty parking spaces away and it looks like he might make it!”

Ramal looked up, and said “Oh shit!” and pulled up his pants, wiggling a bit to get around his newly developed waist.

“Elmer’s closing in folks, about twenty spots! Ramal looks a bit worried. We can see light from the street lamp reflecting off of his brow. He looks left, then right. Elmer’s still closing, ten spots and Ramal’s still on the roof! It looks like he made one crotch wiggle too many tonight, folks.

The crowd held its breath as he jumped down from the roof and stumbled.

“Elmer makes the leap! He’s way high up in the air! But no! Ramal’s already up and in his jeep and Elmer makes a grab for him but only catches the side view mirror and breaks it clean off on his way to the ground. Ramal made it!”

The crowd waited a moment, took a breath, and then cheered.

Ramal laughed and leaned his head out of the window. Then he shot off, his back tires creating enough black smoke to completely enshroud a coughing and gagging Elmer. Ramal spun around the parking lot, whooping and doing doughnuts. People

walked around with sacks full of vegetables to sell them for a dollar a pop. Elmer was breathing hard. When the smoke cleared we saw that his clothes were torn and bloody. His shoulder was slumping a bit, probably due to an injury and his right hand held the broken mirror. We arched back and lobbed vegetables at him. Ramal sustained his fullest state of glory for a full five minutes before sirens were heard nearby.

Hearing this cue, Ramal sped for the exit where an R.A. was re-directing traffic with his back turned and for a moment the crowd stopped throwing vegetables at Elmer, fearing the worst, expecting nothing less.

Ramal swerved out of the way just in time but lost control of the Jeep and smashed head first into a tree. The crash was thunderous and as it rumbled off into the distance, the sirens became an almost welcome sound.

The crowd continued to hold its breath, something they'll never become bored with, and asked themselves, could this be it? The end of Ramal? Again, at the peak of glory?

The Jeep door lurched opened. Ramal shoved it open and stepped out. The crowd gasped. There he loomed, larger than life, seemingly ok, and swaying slightly. He blinked at us for a moment. He raised a bottle of Captain Morgan in the air, blinked a few more times and then took a long, long swig. The crowd cheered and hugged each other and shook hands. Hats were thrown. Beer bottles were popped open.

Elmer took refuge behind a parked Subaru to avoid the pelting vegetables. When he peeked above the hood of the car, someone chucked an overripe avocado which landed right between his eyes. "Ack!" Elmer screamed as green-brown goop splattered over his face and down he went.

Ramal raised right arm to silence the crowd. The crowd silenced. “You see,” he shouted. “You see, Elmer, you can’t kill me motherfucker!” He tried to take a step but couldn’t seem to manage.

The crowd raised an eyebrow, sensing that all was not well.

“You see!” Ramal continued, still laughing. “Fuck you, Elmer. Fuck you, asshole!” He thumped himself on the chest and fell over backwards. Then he leaned over and vomited. It was a long vomit that splashed on the asphalt and got all over his clothes. He kept trying to stand up and finish his victory speech but couldn’t seem to stop vomiting. It covered him on all sides. People in the crowd were about to get sick themselves. Thankfully, this did not happen.

Ramal finally passed out, just in time for the police to pull up to the scene.

There were four cop cars and seven police men.

We shuffled closer to the accident. Some of us wondered if we should have bet on the cops after all. Most were of the opinion that these cops needed to be watched with a sharp, imaginative eye.

We saw that one cop, who was clearly the leader of the pack, looked disappointed that Ramal didn’t vomit while lying on his back. He hooked his thumbs around his waist belt. “Aw hell,” he said. “McCarthy, go find a janitor or someone to clean up this mess.”

“Yes sir,” McCarthy replied. “I’ll go find a janitor or someone to clean up this mess.”

“And get call for an ambulance over the walkie-talkie thing.”

“Yes sir. I’ll call for an ambulance over the-”

“Christ, McCarthy, just do it will ya?” He barked, and McCarthy jumped back and scrambled away. The police officer yanked up his belt and grumbled to himself, “Always repeating every damn thing I say.” He shook his head in stern disapproval, lifted his hand to pinch his nose for a moment, and then brought his hand back to the belt, gripping firmly.

We could see that the smell of vomit, a weakness that no one in the force found out about in all of his 26 years there, was beginning to get to him. He looked around. “Christ!” he shouted at all of the other men holding their noses. “You think this crowd is just gonna hold itself back?”

They all shook their heads, still holding their noses. One of them said, in a nasally voice, “No sir, Captain McLuster.”

“You,” he pointed, “Joe. And you...” Captain McLuster snapped his fingers above his thick bushy brow.

“Joe,” the man offered.

“You’re both Joes?”

“Yes sir,” they said simultaneously.

“Aw Christ,” McLuster muttered. “Ok. Ok, fine. Joe and Joe I want you to check the body and make sure he ain’t dead. If he ain’t, I want you to search him.”

“Sir?” Joe and Joe questioned.

“I said, search the body.” McLuster whispered through his teeth. “If there’s anything on him that I should know about, I want to know about it. Now get to it. The rest of us’ll take care of this crowd until an ambulance gets here. You’ve got,” he looked at his watch. “Less than two minutes.”

Joe and Joe walked over to Ramal holding their noses and squinted watery eyes at each other.

“And make sure you keep the body sideways,” he called out after them when he was a safer distance from the stench. “I don’t want to be responsible for the son of a bitch dyin’ on account of us, especially if he was lucky enough to not kill himself in the first damn place.”

To most of us, it was clear from the dreamy look in McLuster’s eye’s after he spoke, that he was relishing the idea of Ramal’s accidental death.

Someone in the crowd became conscientious. She said, “Hey!” Then she went on, “Hey! They’re searching his body!” and she continued, “They can’t do that!”

McLuster turned and roared, “Why isn’t this god-damned crowd pushed back?” He glared at the rest of the men and his face turned red as he took a deep, deep breath, something he apparently did before hollering at his subordinates, and just as he was about to do so, a large branch fell from the tree and smashed into Ramal’s windshield. “Jesus Christ!” McLuster yelped, leaping far up into the air above the crowd.

Joe and Joe were trying to run from car but kept slipping and falling on all the pinkish brown vomit.

Ramal lay on his side, mostly unsearched.

McLuster was still in the air and the other three officers were staring upwards, waiting for him to land.

And the crowd, seizing their opportunity, whacked Joe and Joe over the head with their sacks of vegetables, knocking both unconscious. Then they dumped the rest of their vegetables out, threw the empty sacks over the other three officers and tied them up and

proceeded to spin, kick, punch, shove and do whatever else they could before the ambulance arrived.

Someone dove towards Ramal and retrieved what we knew was in his pants, while another threw an eggplant at Elmer, who finally worked up the courage to peek out from behind the Subaru again. That took care of him. Then, four hockey players glided towards Ramal, hoisted him onto their shoulders, and took him back to the safety of the dormitory. The conscientious girl leapt onto the roof of the Jeep and howled. The rest of us took whatever money could be found in the wallets of the police officers. The less conscientious of us took family portraits as well but credit cards were left, so at least some mercy was involved.

When everyone was back inside the dorm, we dumped Ramal into a tub and washed him up. Then we laid him out on a wet beer pong table and began to operate. We fixed three broken ribs, a fractured arm, pumped his stomach, and re-broke and reset his ankle in less than 45 minutes. Then we wrapped a bandage around his head and super glued two bolts to his neck just for kicks.

Dog Shit

At first the teacher was dismayed, and then disgusted, but by the end he felt a touch of admiration for the audacity of the student, who showed a marked improvement in his writing since the beginning of the year.

He read the piece again, and when he finished, he read it a third time. Mostly, it was a graphic and detailed description of dog shit that the young protagonist of the piece had to clean up. By the end of the piece, a sense of the family dynamics is revealed. His mother was away on vacation by order of a psychiatrist and his father, who was the “sole proprietor” of his own business, “worked twice the amount of hours any fair God would demand of any single, mere mortal,” leaving duties such as these up to the unnamed protagonist, a “product of an average latch-key childhood”.

All of that material was fine, some even well executed, but it did revolve around a very disgusting subject matter, with an attention to detail that left nothing to the imagination. As a recently hired teacher of a traditional Catholic school, Mr. Pollack wasn't sure if he should lightly reprimand the boy, warn him, compliment him, or ignore the whole thing altogether.

At the end of the next day's class, he asked Jeremy to hang back for a moment. Mr. Pollack made a small show of shuffling through some papers until all of the other students had marched out. Then he picked up Jeremy's short paper, placed it gently on the desk, and asked, “So tell me, what possessed you to write this?” At this the boy tensed up. “It's Ok Jeremy, I'm just curious.”

Jeremy looked down, “I couldn’t think of anything else to write about.”

“Nothing other than...” Mr. Pollack waved his hand over the paper.

“Well, there are all sorts of things to write about: love, the future, school, family, but in the end it’s all the same, it all boils down to the same thing: crap.”

He raised his eyebrows, “Well I wouldn’t be so quick to judge all of literature in so cynical a manner.”

“No, no, I’m talking about me. Everything I tried to write turned out to be crap. Then I saw it on the floor one day and figured, why fight it? Why not just write about crap?”

Mr. Pollack leaned back in his chair, unsure of what to say.

The bell rang and he looked up at Jeremy, “You’re going to need a late slip.”

“Yes, for Mrs. Silva’s class.”

Mr. Pollack nodded, filled out the paper, and handed it to Jeremy.

Underneath the Porch

If there were to be a designated place for corpses to rot, it would have to be underneath our porches; the very same place where spiders lurk and hatch their poisonous little eggs, hunched in a miniature necropolis, getting fat and old like ancient kings from the surplus of insects who, as if to keep nature forever entertained, are themselves attracted to these dark and dank dwellings of the world. The catacombs of suburbia! Dirty and slimy black like the heart of a city, corruptive pieces of which are tucked away beneath every freshly painted house, surging just under our luscious green lawns; places where our cats drag in half mutilated prey to pick apart at their own leisure, to toy with broken spines until they've split or simply watch in delight as tiny, limp limbs twitch in agony, to bask in death as they bask in the sun while keeping vigil over their dominions with a sultan's grace.

If we were to look down through the wooden panels of his porch at this very moment, beneath our polished shoes and securely tied brown laces, we would see the terrified face of little Gary staring back, his features contorted and warped like a richly grotesque Halloween mask. Or better yet, if it were a framed image whose tonalities were limited to starkly contrasting black and white, you may notice, from this new vantage point, how the wooden boards, being brief in their width, create a sort of play between shadow and light over the pale skin of his face, making him look like a prisoner peering out into a world he will never set foot in again. And staring at this particular image you may ask yourself: just what could this boy be so afraid of? Well, isn't it likely that he is

afraid of what we all fear most? The notion that someone, somewhere, will somehow find out what it was that he had just done....

Perhaps he may even be a prisoner of his own fear and absolutely nothing else and, if this were the case, we as readers would be hypocritical to think of his imprisonment as unusual. For when one thinks of it, humanity would be amazed at the various intangible prison cells we generate within our own lives, either from fear or some other spectral entity such as the imagination. How incredible the architecture that exists inside our very own minds! How miraculous their paradoxical dimensions when, each time a new wing is built, instead of expanding, the space becomes more and more cramped. Imploding layers mount around the prisoner until the word movement becomes only a word; the windows begin to seal upon themselves and shut out any sense of daylight; the stink will saturate in layers along the yellow-brown walls and the feet and legs, from lack of use, will go at first numb and then slowly begin to rot so that sooner or later the dead meat, the gangrenous flesh, will spread throughout the body in terrible waves, not stopping until the brain itself has disintegrated.

Beware then, dear reader, these terrible structures which blend into the landscape so immaculately that we are sometimes unable to see them even when a friend, in order to help us avoid the pitfalls of everyday life, is kind enough to point them out. Besides, it is a perfectly normal fear for a person Gary's age, or any age for that matter. Then again it should be mentioned that this particular situation was a bit complicated by the fact that he was expecting, at any moment now, for the whole house to blow up.

If poor little Gary wasn't stuck frozen in framed time, if he wasn't trapped within this thin black and white bit of flesh we've sliced off of life (more commonly known as a

photograph) he would be in the process of imagining his fate: a stern police man, looking remarkably like his D.A.R.E. officer with that trademark expression of disappointment on his face, was leading him to his well deserved jail cell, saying “Tisk, tisk, tisk, you were always told that making magic potions with your mother’s cooking ingredients would get you into trouble—but you never listen—and now you blew up your house, and sent your brother flying so way high up in the air that when he got caught in the trees, the fire engines couldn’t even get him down, not even with their long white ladders that have that funny wheel thing spinning like crazy, sending it higher and higher up in the air... but not high enough, not high enough at all. And well, I’m sure you understand why you’re not just in *trouble*... no, no, no, not just trouble, that’s the stuff saved for little boys who act up in first and second grade... YOU, young man, are in BIG trouble.” He then beckoned little Gary, who was wearing the black and white striped prison suit with a colossal-sized black ball attached to his ankle by a rusty chain, into his cell, or pushed him anyhow, and then spoke once again. “Now I want you to go and sit on that cot over there, right in that corner, and I want you to think long and hard about what you’ve done.”

So, considering this ultimately unattractive fate, it is, perhaps, conceivable why little Gary can tolerate being under a porch with all of its terrible, rodent ridden, insect infested, dungeon like existence; after all, this place was supposed to protect and shelter him from the explosion in the same general way that a well built and expensive prison compound could protect and shelter its death row inmates during a bombing raid. But enough talk about prison and such things! Notions which could only be conjured up by a mind as foolish as young Gary’s because in due time his much wiser and older brother will come out of his room to save the day.

Right now Garrett was sitting at the edge of his unmade bed, eating some soft-batch cookies and playing videogames. A discernable pile of crumbs extended between the crumpled package on his bedside table to the space around his feet. Overlarge tube socks pounded against the finished wooden floorboards while the soiled, blackened ends flopped about. A pair of foul green shoes had been thrown haphazardly on the other side of the room.

He gripped the game controller with sweaty and clammy hands. The skin on his left thumb was sore from constantly squeezing the directional button and his eyes were becoming painfully dry and red, but he ignored it all quite heroically. Other than these minor discomforts the videogame playing was going extremely well today: reflexes top notch, secrets and bonuses all acquired, and the Mario Brother's death theme music played at a bare minimum. In fact, he had only died once in the space of an hour, and his only regret was not having kept track of a possible record-breaking length of sustaining firepower. The afternoon was proving to be a near perfect one in which he could see both proof of improvement and evidence of his mastery. This made him smile, or grin slyly, as was his case.

Then suddenly, over the exorbitantly loud television set, Garrett thought he heard his little brother screaming in a way which didn't sound playful at all. He paused the game but heard nothing. Was his mind playing tricks on him? Was his little brother daring to play tricks or did he really just hurt himself? Garrett was amazed at how, even at the other end of the house, Gary could still manage to interrupt his video games. Now he would *have* to investigate but, seeing as how the level was almost completed, Garrett needed to finish it before doing anything else.

Eventually, when Garret walked out into the kitchen his first reaction on seeing the mess was to find Gary and beat the crap out of him. This was unlike any mess Garrett had ever seen him make. There was a strange pungent smell and everything which was supposed to be in either the drawers or the cupboards were scattered throughout the entire kitchen. He saw a large pot overflowing with white bubbles making funny sizzling noises. The bubbles seemed to be dying down by now but had at some point managed to spill over the pot, onto the table, and over the floor.

Looking about the mess, and using the sharp detective skills on which he prided himself so much (all honed through years of catching his brother in the middle of his ridiculous escapades) he almost laughed out loud, despite himself, as he began to get a sense of what happened. How dumb could a little brother be? Garrett had fun imagining his brother's reaction to what really amounted to a bunch of harmless bubbles. Could that really be why he began to scream like a little girl?

At this point Gary was still frozen in fear beneath the wooden panels, but when he heard his brother's feet above him he sprang back to life and looked through the slats of his swampy prison cell. Immediately confronted with the dirty, olive green shoes, he noticed how one of the soiled laces, which were usually tucked in, had managed to escape and lay snaked upon the wooden panel, threatening in its dirty white lace way to trip up his older, unsuspecting brother; it seemed hardly able to restrain a hissing snicker while plotting to split the lips of its master; then it realized with horror and shame, as Garrett proceeded to kneel down and stuff the lace back in, that he had in fact failed to do so, and would now be forced to report the failure to its partner, who currently held the highest record to date.

Gary could see his older brother looking back at him (and we should assume that it is from a vantage point Garrett was currently enjoying) staring curiously at Gary's terrified little face; pure delight hovering momentarily above his skull like a halo whose aura etched its way along his curled lips; some of its glow reflected ominously off of his teeth.

Garrett said to him, "What the hell are you doing down there?"

Gary knew that time must have been short by now, and wanted nothing more than to succinctly tell his brother exactly what was happening but he was seething with too much tension, his black fingernails digging deep into the soft dirt, scraping the backs of bugs trying to tunnel away from the madness at the surface and he answered, "There's... there's a magic potion-bomb, inside the house," faint whisperings making its way to real sound as he continued "I made a... and it's gonna blow up..." and all Gary could think about was his big brother stuck so way high up in those trees.

But Garret was no idiot, and was quick on his feet when dealing with his little brother. He gauged the situation, estimating that it could be diffused fairly quickly and instead of saying, what bomb? Garret just stood back up and leaned against the wooden railing. He was on to the game Gary was playing. "Oh, a magic potion-bomb, huh?"

Garrett breathed on his cuticles and then rubbed them on his shirt, like some guy did in a movie he had seen once which looked really cool. He sure felt cool doing it, and knew that his little brother thought he looked cool too. Temporarily mesmerized, Gary nodded with complete and utter sincerity and Garret went on, "You mean the one out in the kitchen?"

Gary nodded again adding a little "uh huh."

“Oh, well... you won't have to worry about that anymore.”

“I don't?” Gary asked.

“No, you don't, I deactivated it already.”

Gary stared at him, thoroughly perplexed, “But you can't deactivate it 'cause it's not a regular bomb it's a... it's a magic potion bomb,” he said shaking his head in disbelief.

Frustrated, Garret gave out the aggressive sigh their parents used when they were 'this close to being *completely* fed up with you' and said, “Well then I disarmed it, fixed it, whatever, it's not gonna blow up anymore. Ok, stupid? Now come out of there.”

But brave little Gary stood his ground, “I don't believe you,” then he cowered further back behind his prison bars, as if his monstrous brother with ugly yellow and crooked teeth could somehow reach right through them and hit him on the side of the face, making his ear deep purple and painful, like Garret always did when he was angry. But Gary was mad that his brother called him stupid and shouldn't be held accountable when he added, “I don't believe you 'cause you're a stupid liar.”

At that Garrett roared out, leapt up, and slammed both feet against the wooden boards, creating a sonic wave so forceful that it heaved Gary flat against his back in the muck. Then Garrett dropped closer to the boards, beamed his fierce red eyes at Gary and said in what sounded like an evil guttural tone, “Listen to me you idiot! If you call me that again I'll lock you in the closet and tape your mouth shut and then tell mom you ran away. But if you don't come up right now and clean that kitchen we'll both get into trouble, and if I get in trouble 'cause you were making your stupid potions again I'll cut you up and bury you underneath that porch, you hear me?”

Garrett slammed his fist down once for added effect, knowing full well that he had scared his brother plenty, and that Gary would do anything he told him to. Of course, if Gary had any brains he would know that Garrett couldn't really hurt him since that would defeat the point of having to make sure Gary didn't get hurt on his own. But then again Gary had no brains. In fact all little brothers, as far as he could tell, lacked a good deal of brains. He got up and brushed himself off; proud that he took proper care of the situation. Then he walked back to the house and slammed the sliding door shut behind him.

After catching his breath (for the force of Garrett's reckoning against him not only left him breathless but also imprinted into the soft muck, which made a funny slurping sound when he pulled his limbs from it) Gary, covered with mud, did a dramatic dive-roll out onto the grass and then leapt back against the shrubs, still not quite sure of what to do in such a life-threatening situation. All he could think about was how great it would be to have one of those bomb proof suits, because then he could just fearlessly march right on in. He made a mental note to himself to get started on building one; but alas! brave little Gary currently had no such option as he crept quietly and slowly toward the house; quiet like a ninja, tip-toeing through the sliding door which he opened and shut behind him in utter silence and then moved towards the kitchen and, turning the corner, finally saw the truth behind his predicament: Garrett really had disarmed it! Wow, he thought, and felt fascinated, excited and relieved at the same time. He suddenly felt a deep need, despite how every ounce of his body told him that it wasn't such a good idea, to ask Garrett how someone dismantles a magic potion-bomb. Then of course, there was the being-chopped-up-and-then-buried-alive thing that he had to think about but... if he

did a good job cleaning up the kitchen, maybe Garrett wouldn't be so mad at him any more, and then he can go and ask him.

Yes, Gary decided that this was the best plan and immediately began the process of cleaning up his mess, which usually just means making a different sort of mess, but hopefully it would be one that did not contain within it any indication of what he had been up to. His mother would probably know that he had been making potions anyhow, as mothers often seem to know everything you do, except for when you didn't do it and got blamed for it anyways.

During his attempt to rearrange and put away everything he had taken out for this nearly disastrous experiment, Gary had to step gingerly over the small puddles of water left on the floor from his awkward use of the various pots and pans and measuring cups. Included in the mess was a large set of measuring utensils all connected by a yellow ring about the size of Gary's dirty and scraped little palm. Drinking cups—five of them—each filled with different colored juices and all in order from smallest to largest, from left to right, and also a few randomly placed glasses with strange and ugly colored mixtures concocted from various combinations. On the cutting board lay some cloves of garlic that hadn't even been peeled, some slices of lemon, an untouched lime lying next to a knife which was far too big for him to use, and next to that knife was a plethora of spices (Gary always looked forward to the part of the procedure when he could delightfully sprinkle them into the mix).

It truly is unfortunate, after all this careful preparation that the whole process was cut off in so premature a manner. To begin with, he shouldn't have started out by mixing baking soda and vinegar in the same large pot; but then again, maybe it wouldn't have

been so bad if he hadn't such a youthful tendency to overdo things, or if he was old enough to realize that half a box of this and half of a bottle of that does not always indicate small or frugal amounts, and as the mixture began to bubble and boil at a frantic rate he screamed "Oh my God! Run! Run for your lives! It's gonna blow up! It's gonna BLOW UUUP!" And on he went smashing through the blinds (lucky for him he had forgotten to close the sliding door on his way in) leaping over the porch railing and falling into the stout shrubs below, which spat him out onto the dirt; only after all of this did Gary make his fateful plunge into the muck.

Quietly wiping and scrubbing now, Gary thought about how blessed he was that Garret had saved the day (sometimes it is good to have an older brother around) and Gary made a decision right then and there not to make any more potions until he learned how to disarm and dismantle anything, just like his older brother could. For now though, he would have to focus on how to clean up all the smelly white stuff, some of which had even gotten into the dog's food and water bowls, and also onto the pieces of paper which he had written down what potions could do what things in what we may consider extraordinarily specific and unlikely circumstances. These notes had gotten wet enough so that some of the blue ink from that nifty fountain pen he had used now stained the tabletop; when he tried to clean it up with a paper towel Gary had to rub so hard that he hurt himself before the stains came off; he probably shouldn't have neglected soap.

Gary looked around and realized that nothing significant about the mess had changed. The problem may have been that he did not really know the most effective way to start, or it could have been that he needed some help with this difficult task, and it wasn't long before he was off and drifted into a wonderful Fantasian fantasy; wonderful

because in his version of Fantasia all of the pots and pans and measuring cups and utensils knew how to clean themselves up, put themselves away and, more importantly, they all worked properly—not recklessly—while he danced about and waved his magic wand (a large fork he had put on the countertop earlier on). Oh, glorious friends! How wonderful it is that you work so well and so diligently! I heartily encourage you to keep up such noble work! But sadly, I must leave you now good friends. No, do not weep! For I must go on a mission for knowledge, knowledge which could alter the fate of the entire world! I must, by all means necessary, learn how to dismantle-or-whatever a potion bomb. And with that Gary's magician cape transforms into an army general's outfit with many stars and stripes (all for bravery and ingenuity in times of duress) as he marches straight to Garrett's room.

Gary opened the door as silently as possible but before he so much as peeked inside, his brother, with his almost supernatural sense of perception said "Go away, I'm on a tough part." His back was facing Gary as he rapped furiously on the controller like he always does, his body jerking this way and that, and though Gary couldn't actually see it, he could imagine his tongue sticking slightly out of tightly pursed lips.

But Gary just stayed, there rocking back and forth on his heels, eyes glued to the floor and his hands behind his back; trying with as much patience as he could muster to wait until Garrett paused the game or finished the level but eventually gave in to his spastic impulses. "If, if after I clean up, if I do a good job, will you show me how to..." and then Gary's eye's opened wide and his spine went cold as he heard the worst possible collection of sounds that could be heard at any given moment: the Mario Brothers death theme.

“No!!!!” Garrett howled, “You killed my guy! Get out! GET OUT NOW!!!”

Garret hurled the controller down, springing fast to his feet and leapt on top of the bed, looming over little Gary so that his shadow swallowed him up as the little idiot stood there with his mouth agape; his arms were spread wide, fingers curled with terrifying strength and hostility while his face burned red as the electric stove; he reared his big pointy yellow teeth back and Gary could see them drip slime; hungry with the idea of ripping into his flesh.

Gary slammed the door shut and bolted off, or scrambled as was his style, tumbling against the hallway walls, legs and arms flailing wildly as he went bounding around corners. He could hear Garrett pursuing, feet hitting the floor powerful and fast, and panicked as he imagined big monster fingers reaching around his neck to squeeze it into a pulp and making his head fall off that he would have begun screaming prematurely but was cut short as he, not realizing the sliding glass door was closed, slammed face first into it and fell back onto the floor, whacking the back of his head.

For a moment he saw little white spots floating in front of his eyes and for a moment things went dim. Lucky for him Garrett was in the hallway with troubles of his own, having tripped over one of his shoelaces, he is currently holding his shin and going “Ssss-ahhh, ssss-ahhh...”

Unaware of this slight turn of luck Gary leapt up, shook off the dizziness and, just after his eyes regained their fearful wideness, threw the door open. He tried once again to make the jump over the rail and clear the bushes at the same time but instead caught his foot on the top rail and fell face first into the bushes before scrambling up to dive back under the porch.

Such was Gary's fate in life. That is, to live in a constant state of fear and panic, often manifesting from his own fertile mind, though sometimes not, but always beginning and nurturing itself there. Perhaps at some other, undisclosed point in time Gary was once a prison guard himself, one who delighted in the torment of others, who kept them shaken and cold and dirty behind their own slats, prisoners who's fears were not created out of their own imaginations but by the looming monsters on the other side, sitting cross legged behind a desk, picking and sucking at their ugly yellow teeth.

From
FONTANA HALL

Three weeks into his first semester, it occurred to Guy that sometimes mistakes happen, other times they progressed. He worried about his inability to pay attention in class, his inability to get there on time, and his startling ability to put homework away before opening a textbook. In a haze of freshman optimism, he signed up for morning classes. Guy regretted that after the first week. After the second week, he regretted not buying a T.V. for his telecourse on Oceanography when his father was around to do it for him. Guy was convinced that he'd be responsible enough to visit the library once a week and watch the videos of missed classes.

He did it, once.

Guy woke up late for his first class and didn't have enough energy for the second. He dragged himself to the cafeteria for breakfast and, after a few cups of coffee, decided to catch up on his Oceanography class. It was a responsible thing to do, and the thought filled him with pride and satisfaction. Thinking that he finally found out how to succeed in school, and to an extent in life, Guy made it to the library with his inspiration still burning.

“Hi,” he said to the pretty girl sitting behind the large desk.

She flipped her hair to the side. “How can I help you?”

Guy filled out a list of video requests and the girl disappeared around a shelf full of books and video cassettes for few minutes, while Guy stood there tapping his feet.

“Sorry,” she said, rounding the shelf. “They’re all checked out.”

Guy wasn’t sure if he heard her correctly. “Did you say they’re *all* out?”

“Yes, they’re all out.”

Guy wished he had brought more than his notebook and pen. He sat and wrote down some thoughts, but his mind raced from all the caffeine and he tried browsing some books instead. Within five minutes he went back to the desk. “Do you think I could put a hold on the videos and come back in a couple of hours?”

“Sorry, but it’s first come, first served.”

Guy shrugged and thanked her. He tried to wait around and read but the experience had put him in a foul mood. The injustice of it all, he thought. It was almost as if someone didn’t want him to succeed at anything.

He went back to the cafeteria, even though he wasn’t hungry and filled up a Styrofoam cup with watered down coffee. At the tables, he spotted Nabil and Elijah, two kids he met and got to know over a game of pool. They motioned for him to sit at a long table filled with girls, all of whom looked really good in their morning clothes, with their tufted and frayed morning hair, which he knew they touched up just enough to look good. Even the more unattractive ones were cute and looked somewhat unattainable.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he spied an unfamiliar face. Everyone at the table lived on the third floor and he recognized them all except for her. How had he not noticed a girl as beautiful as her? He wished for Nabil or Elijah to join in on their conversation so that Guy could, by default, be a part of it as well and get a chance to say something to her. It was so deceptively simple, he thought, to strike up conversation in college. A simple “Where are you from?” and “What’s your major?” held as much

potential as anything else. Then again, for all he knew, she might want to ignore the next person lame and unoriginal enough to start a conversation in such a manner.

At this point Guy was at a loss for what to say but knew that if he didn't say something right away, he'd never get another chance. The first thing Guy did was ignore her as quickly as possible. This way, she couldn't ignore him first. The less he spoke the less likely he was to screw things up. He tried to pay attention to the conversation he was having with Nabil and Elijah but the idea that some taller, leaner guy with a better sense of conversational would come along any moment and sweep her off the table gnawed on him as he ate breakfast. Ignoring her proved impossible and Guy stole glances whenever he could. More than a few times he was nearly caught.

Guy was in the middle of telling Elijah and Nabil about the first time he drank malt liquor with his friends. Half way through his story the girl suddenly perked up, slammed her hand on the table, and pointed at Guy. "Did you just say 'wicked'?"

Guy was taken aback for a moment, not just from the fact that she was speaking to him or the fact that she was pointing a finger at him or even from the intensity of her green eyes, but mostly from the enthusiasm of the question. He wasn't sure if she asked because she liked people who use that word or hated them.

He shrugged and looked helplessly at Nabil. "I don't know, did I just say wicked?"

But before Nabil could answer, she shot another question at him. "Where are you from? You from Massachusetts?"

"No, Rhode Island."

“Oh my God!” She exclaimed with a smile, “I’m from Worcester, Mass.” She flipped her hair back and turned towards him.

“Well, Providence,” he said, “To be more specific.”

“I haven’t met anyone from up north yet, which is kind of surprising.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Guy paused for a moment and thought of introducing Nabil and Elijah, but continued, “So how come I haven’t seen you around before?”

“Oh, I just moved down from the twelfth floor yesterday.”

Nabil chimed in, “Made a lot of friends pretty quickly huh?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. I’m Katie by the way.”

Guy introduced himself, as well as Nabil and Elijah. They continued their conversation for a little while longer before she looked at the clock. “Oh, I have to get ready for class or I’m gonna be late. It was nice meeting you.” Katie stood up and said good bye to some of the other girls at the table and then looked at Guy, “Don’t be afraid to stop by sometime.”

For the rest of the day Guy hung out with Elijah and Nabil and forgot about the library or any need to see those videos.

* * * * *

The next afternoon he arrived at her door with a smoothie in his hand, saying sheepishly that he went out to get one and thought she might like one as well. Katie accepted it with a smile that nearly made Guy blush. He continued to buy her things when he could, but was careful not to overdo it. They’d go out to eat together and

whenever she became adamant about paying for herself, or even paying for him, he argued only once, maybe twice.

Guy helped to organize her room one day so that it could be a better space to hang out. He impressed himself by shifting the desk on his own to divide the room in half. For the first few weeks after she moved in, many boys hung out in the room to drink, play cards and flirt with her. They were mostly awkward but occasionally they'd go too far and become disrespectful. She handled it all with an unwavering sense of humor while at the same time making it obvious that they were getting themselves nowhere. Guy, on the other hand, hardly flirted with her at all. He was never really sure how to behave around her, so he behaved well. Often times he just wished for nothing more than to be holding her and kissing her, but he didn't attempt either. All Guy knew was that he didn't want to make a pass at her and risk the possibility of screwing up the relationship.

They could talk for hours, moving from one subject to the next, leaving some good conversations unfinished because better ones would come up. Occasionally, they went for rides in her Chevrolet convertible, which she loved to drive with the top down.

“Where should we go this time?” Guy asked.

“Want to do something nice and cliché?”

“Nice and cliché? Like what?”

“How about to Clearwater beach in time for the sunset?”

By the time they got to the pier the sun was already halfway set, but the purple and orange colors splayed themselves out against the sky for long enough to make the trip worthwhile. To Guy, the trip was worthwhile regardless of the sunset.

“So, Guy began, leaning against the wooden rail of the pier, “How come you don’t have a boyfriend?”

“Because I don’t want to.” She looked over the side of the pier, towards the beach. “Let’s go sit in the sand for a little while, come on.” She took his hand and they walked over to the beach together.

Katie let go of his hand and sat down. “Have you dated many girls?” she asked.

“A few.”

“Any bad break ups.”

Guy thought about it. “No, not really. I think I was always the one doing the breaking up, now that I think of it.” He watched her scribbled small designs in the sand.

“Katie?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry if I brought up some bad memories or something. I was just trying to make conversation.”

“No, it’s alright. Anyways, they’re not memories I’m trying to forget.” She wiped away her first design and then began another. “You... learn things, you know? About yourself.”

Guy began to smooth out the sand in front of him. “Like what?”

“Like life teaches its lessons bluntly but you can only learn them gradually.”

Guy thought about it. “I guess that’s a pretty insightful way to look at things.”

“My sister said that to me once, and it helped me out of a pretty bad funk.”

“Is she older or younger?”

“Older.” Katie stood up and wiped her hands against her pants. “Alright, enough of this nonsense. I’m hungry. Let’s get something to eat. I’ll buy this time.”

“But it’s my turn to pay.”

“You can pay next time.”

“I’ll take you somewhere nice, then.”

“Deal, but not too nice.”

Guy’s grades were slipping steadily from spending so much time with Katie and he couldn’t have been happier. He knew the debt he was collecting but refused to let it bother him. When Katie kicked him out of her room to do homework, Guy would go off and do his homework as well. Most likely he would skip the next class to hang out with her, but the fact that he took to doing home work on occasion made him feel like he was making progress.

One evening Guy was sitting in Katie’s room. She was getting herself ready for work and putting on make up.

“You like working at the restaurant?” He asked.

She shrugged, “I don’t think so. No, not really.”

“Then why don’t you quit?”

“I probably think about quitting every Friday and Saturday night. But I’ve been there for a while and they give me the hours I need. Besides, it’s good money and I walk off with cash. That’s hard to beat. ”

“Better than an office job I guess.”

“You bet, ugh,” she shuddered, “I hate office jobs.” She began applying eyeliner. “So how come you don’t have a job.”

“I’ve been looking for one.”

She turned and looked at him bemusedly. One eye had no eyeliner on it, “Like hell you do, I haven’t seen you applying for any jobs.”

“How would you know? I could be doing nothing but filling out applications when I’m not hanging around here.”

“Oh come on Guy, who’re you kidding?”

“Yeah, I hate applications, and I don’t really want to work.”

She laughed and shook her head, finally finished with her make up. Guy stood up and was about to leave the room when he picked up a DVD from her table and looked at it. “Das Boot?”

“Oh, that. I rented it a couple days ago because someone told me it was good. I haven’t seen it yet.”

“No?”

“No, but if you want,” she said, pausing to toss her purse onto her shoulders, “When I get back from work we can watch it together.”

“But won’t it be late?”

She shrugged and then smiled, “You can sleep over if you promise to behave.”

* * * * *

Out in the parking lot he spotted Elijah and Nabil getting a case of beer out of a car. Nabil walked around from the driver’s side with two plastic bags. He held one in each hand and each looked stretched to the point of tearing from the weight of the bottles inside.

Guy hadn't seen either of them in a few days. "Hey fellas, what's going on?"

"Guy!" Nabil shouted, his eyes were bloodshot and the lids hung heavily. "Where you been man?"

Guy shrugged, "Been busy. Trying to catch up with school, you know?"

"That sucks. Elijah and I are gonna start up a game of RISK tonight, you should come by my room."

"That sounds good. Hey, either of you guys have a light?"

Elijah shifted the case of beer so that it rested more comfortably on his belt, "Yeah right here," and reached awkwardly for the lighter and managed to get it out of his pocket but was unable to hold it up.

Seeing his cue, Guy reached out, grabbed the lighter and lit his cigarette. "Thanks, I guess I'll see you guys later." Guy said as he gave the lighter back by slipping it inside Elijah's pocket. Guy crossed the road to the Campus Quick, whose doors made the usual annoying sound when it opened. He took a quick look around, glad to see there weren't any other customers inside. He walked to the condom display shelf and quickly grabbed a 3-pack that said "Spermicidal Lubricant" before heading toward the register.

Guy decided that he didn't want to hang out with Elijah and Nabil before seeing Katie because he'd probably end up drunk by the time she came back from work. Instead, he knocked on his suite mate's room.

Brian swung open his door. "Hey Guy."

Guy held a finger up in the air. "Hold on," he said. "I've got something I've been promising you for a while."

Guy reached into his pocket to pull out the cigarette pack. When he did, the condoms came out and fell to the floor.

“You offering me a cigarette?” Brian asked. “Or are you hitting on me?”

Flushed, Guy reached down for the pack, put it in his other pocket and held out the cigarettes. “A little of both.”

“That’s too bad,” Brian took the pack, “Because I like them ribbed, and I usually smoke Reds.”

“Oh...”

Brian waived it off. “How about we make a deal? I won’t tell anyone you hit on me if you tell me who those are really for.”

Guy faltered for a moment, “They’re not for anyone, really. I just thought it’d be a good idea to have them around. Didn’t they teach you that in high school?”

Brian shook his head, “Looks we don’t have a deal, then. Come on in.” He motioned for Guy to step inside. “Feel like smoking some pot?”

Three cigarettes and hour and a half later, Guy was in the middle of a game of Dr. Wario before he finally turned down another hit of pot. Even the game, which he was usually good at, became too complex to play. “I think I’m good for now, man, thanks.”

“Yeah,” Brian said as the smoke he exhaled covered his face in a thick cloud. The only thing offering any light in the room was the television set, which gave the smoke an interesting and fluid hue as it swirled about. Brian added “I think I’m pretty stoned by now, too.” He looked down and delicately mashed the contents inside the bowl with his pinkie. Then he held it up at eye level, “The colors are really setting in now huh?”

Guy's phone rang before he could answer, "Excuse me a second," he tossed the control at Brian, "Finish this level for me will ya?" He walked into the bathroom, shut the door behind him and looked down at the phone in his hands, horrified to see Katie's name. "Hello?"

"Hey, Guy, it's Katie."

"Oh," he said. "Looks like you got out pretty early, huh?"

"Yeah," and with a quick little laugh added, "Just a little bit."

"So when should I swing by? Hour, hour and a half?"

"Actually..." she paused for long enough to make Guy nervous. He became convinced that she was going to call it off. "Sorry about that, I was looking for something. But I'm already here, in my room. They let me go really early, like 10:00, so I'm ready whenever you are."

"Oh."

"Is that ok?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's fine."

"You sound unsure."

"No, no, I just... I'm just surprised, thought you'd be back a lot later."

"I know. I'm sorry. I should've called you on my way here."

"It's fine. Just give me a bit, I'll be there soon."

"Ok, see you in a bit."

"Yup, in a bit." Guy turned off the phone and zoned out for a moment. Then he began to pace. This was not good. After a few minutes he opened Brian's door and stuck his head into the room.

“Who was that?” Brian asked, with his eyes glued to the television set.

“That?” He couldn’t think of a lie. “It was Katie, actually.”

“Oh! Hey alright,” Guy could hear the sound of the video game being paused as Brian turned towards him. “Now I get it.” He pointed at Guy’s waist. “With the condom thing, right? She’s a hottie, man.”

Guy looked around the room a moment, unsure of how to respond. “Listen, I gotta go, but thanks for smoking me up, I always appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem, thanks for the smokes.”

“Sure…” he began to zone out again, twisting at the door knob with his hand a few times before shaking himself back, “Ok, yeah, gotta go.”

* * * * *

Guy finished showering within a few minutes and then got out and dried himself off. Focusing on his high and wanting it to go away was making him feel dizzy. His stomach began to cramp and his shoulders felt tight. When he arrived at Katie’s door, he exhaled deeply, hoping to shake off the high. Through the peephole he could see that the room was only dimly lit. Guy regretted once again that he had smoked with Brian, but he was wise enough to see that chastising himself with guilt and regret wouldn’t help him in this situation. He had to play it cool.

Guy tapped his pocket to make sure the condoms were there, and then knocked on the door.

Katie opened it almost immediately. “Hey Guy,” she said, moving her right arm in a mockingly exaggerated sweep to invite him in, “Come on in.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

When he stepped inside, Guy turned to look at her. She was wearing a long sleeved shirt and red cotton pajama pants. Both looked good on her but were a little too warm even for this late in the year in Florida. “Are you cold?”

“Yeah, a little bit,” she said, shutting the door. Turning towards him, she pointed with her thumb towards the wall on her right, “Suite mate’s been keeping the A.C. really high lately for some reason. You’d think she wants to move to Maine or something.”

“Why don’t you just turn it back down?”

She shrugged, “Easier to wear more clothes.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Guy leaned on the desk and fingered the chipped wooden corner to help pass the momentary silence, letting his eye roam the floor beneath him. He looked up to see her staring down toward the floor, too, and it occurred to him just how rarely silences were between them. She looked exhausted and Guy felt more attracted to her at that moment than ever before.

“You want a beer?” She asked, still looking at the floor, “I’ve got some Heineken in the ‘fridge if you’d like.”

“Sure, that’d be great.” The small refrigerator was off to his right and as he turned down towards it he noticed a half drunk bottle of beer on the table. He looked at it, and then at her. “Looks like this party started without me.”

“Yeah,” she said, picking up the bottle. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“Are you apologizing?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

Guy shrugged, "It's only half a bottle. You're not that far ahead."

"Actually, this is my third," she pointed at two empty bottles next to Guy's feet. Then she laughed and sat down on the fold out chair. Guy insisted that she buy it the week before at the mall. The chair had two cup holders the ability to rock back and forth, which she began to do. "Yup, you have no idea what you're getting yourself into being friends with me. I just might rob you of all your innocence."

"Oh please do," he answered quickly. There was a less comfortable chair across from where Katie sat. He reached for it and pulled it a few inches closer to her before sitting down. "Or what's left of it anyways."

She rolled her eyes and leaned back further in her chair. "Anyways," she began. "School's really been kicking my ass. I deserve a beer. Speaking of which, how're your classes going?"

"Fine, I guess," Guy answered. "I mean, I go to them." He sipped at his beer. "Most of them anyhow."

"You know Guy," she began and then paused, squinting at him as if she were thinking of the exact words to use. It always made Guy nervous when she did this because it was as attractive as it was intimidating. "Apathy isn't the most attractive characteristic, you know."

He nodded quickly, "Point taken. I'll try to care about school next time it comes up."

"Hey," she put her hands in the air, "It's just something I've noticed." She looked away and added, "And I'm not talking just about school."

He took a swig from his beer and sighed, "I wish college didn't feel like the same kind of jumping through hoops bullshit as high school."

"It's like that at first," she said. "The second year is a bit better."

They remained quiet for a little while, drinking and not really looking at one another. Katie dangled her empty beer in front of her after the final sip. "Looks like it's time for another." She got up and knelt in front of the refrigerator, opening it up to look inside.

Guy couldn't tell if it was a trick of perception or not, but the moment seemed to last longer than it should have. Despite his efforts to not think too sexually, for fear that he might make the wrong move at the wrong time, he couldn't help but stare. He began with her upper thigh, folded tight against her belly, then his eyes slid along the curve that arced smoothly around to her lower back, outlined by the soft and slightly worn material of her pants, which stopped just below the sliver of dark purple underwear. There were two slight indentations in the middle of her lower back. Guy swallowed hard and tried not to think about outlining them with his tongue. Unconsciously, he licked his lips.

She reached behind her with a free hand to tug the bottom of her shirt before closing the refrigerator and then stood up.

"So, uh..." he began stupidly, trying to get the image out of his head.

"You mind?"

"What?" When he looked up he saw her holding a bottle out to him.

"Would you open it for me? Please?"

"Oh. Sure."

"There's a lighter right behind you."

Guy took the bottle, looked behind him and found the lighter quickly. He held it against the neck of the bottle, used his other hand to clasp the lighter tightly against the bottle cap, then with his other hand pressed the lighter downward. The cap popped off on his first attempt. He handed it to her.

“That’s so awesome.” She said happily. “I wish I could do that.”

“I could show you.” He opened his own bottle just as effortlessly as the first.

“No, no, not tonight. I’m no good for anything right now. And I’d be too embarrassed. I’m terrible with things like that.”

Guy looked at her for a moment, a thought forming, and then, “So, is a lack of confidence any more attractive than apathy?”

“Oh! Touché!” She clinked her bottle against his and when the bottles touched, some of her beer splashed out and landed directly on his crotch. “Whoops,” she laughed, “Sorry about that.” Katie reached out as if to wipe the beer off his shorts but then pulled her hand back and laughed at herself again. “Sorry.”

Guy was disappointed but played it off as if he didn’t notice and rubbed the spot with his hand quickly. It wasn’t a large spot, nothing to worry about really. “So you’re not going to let me show you the lighter trick tonight, are you?”

“No, but weren’t we supposed to watch a movie?” She looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“I was just waiting for you to say something about it.”

“Well there. I just did.” She got up and then reached out a hand, which he took. She pulled him up out of the chair with an exaggerated groan, even though Guy did most of the work himself. For a moment they stood close and their eyes met. Guy stopped to

think for a second too long. Before he had a chance to do anything, she moved around him and walked to the television set. She grabbed the movie, popped it out of its case and then she slid it inside the front of the T.V.

Guy stood awkwardly by the end of the bed, unsure if he should get comfortable or not. He sat on the corner of the bed opposite to where she was standing. The television was on top of a bureau in front of the bed, off to the right. Guy noticed for the first time how perfectly it was set up for watching a movie in bed. Not a bad spot, he thought. Then he looked around, trying to decide exactly how he should be sitting, or lying down.

The tape began to play, previews first, and Katie turned the volume up a few notches. She did a half turn, slid both arms inside of her shirt, and then walked past Guy and around the large desk, which blocked her from Guy's view.

He turned his head toward the sink and noticed her image reflected in the mirror. Guy felt like he was cheating by looking into it but was unable to look away. He saw arms move around behind her back as she wiggled her shoulders. An arm came out of one sleeve, reached around to the other and slipped out a dark purple bra.

They match, he thought. The bra and panties match.

“Ugh,” she said, holding out the bra. “These things are so uncomfortable.”

“What is?” He asked and looked away from the mirror.

She didn't answer him right away, but he figured that she didn't hear him since it coincided with the sounds of clinking and rattling. She came back around the desk with two beers in her hands and gave both to Guy, who popped each one open.

She held hers in the air and said “Cheers,” and then they both took a sip.

Katie walked back towards the other side of the desk. “I was just saying,” she began as she turned off one lamp, then another. “Guys are lucky. They don’t have to deal with bras and tampons and P.M.S. rages and a million other things that suck.”

Guy realized that the beer he had been drinking was unfinished, so he put his new one down and finished off the old one. “So which one of those were you talking about?”

“I was talking about bras. But they’re all bothersome, really.”

She walked back over to her side of the bed and folded back a corner of the comforter. She fluffed up the pillows as well and then looked at them unhappily. “I’ve got more pillows here, if you want them.” She reached down, picked one up from a small bin and began to fluff it up. She tossed it his way. “It’s clean, I swear. I just washed the cases yesterday.”

“I’m not too worried about it. You’ve got a hell of a lot of pillows.”

“Yeah, I like being surrounded by a mass of pillows when I sleep. My mother used to make fun of me, saying she might as well sell my mattress and just buy me a few more pillows.”

He stood up and walked to the head of the bed, which served as the bed post, and propped his pillow up on there. When he looked up, Katie was kneeling on the bed and arranging the pillows. Guy grabbed his and swung at her with it, hitting Katie on her side and coming dangerously close to knocking her off balance.

“Hey!” she shouted playfully, picking up a pillow of her own. She threw it towards Guy, who was expecting her to hit him on his body but instead got a zipper in the eye. Little white spots cut off his laughter as quickly as it had started. He dropped his pillow and held a hand up to his eye, scrunching his face.

“Oh my God! Are you ok?” she asked, half laughing, and then crawled across the bed.

Guy put his hand out to keep her back for a moment, “Yeah, I’m fine, it’s just... Ow. Fuck.” His eyes were watering and he felt a little sting somewhere below his brow.

“Oh, come here.” She reached out and yanked him closer to her. Then she held his face in her hands, gently moving it a little to one side then another, looking closely at his eye. “Stop scrunching it for a second.”

“I can’t help it.” Their faces were close and he tried not to breathe too hard but could feel her breathing through her nose.

With two fingers she gently held his eye shut.

Aside from the slight stinging, which really wasn’t all too bad, he felt that warm sensation one gets in the chair of a pretty hairdresser when she gets in close and teases the hair or massages the head a bit.

She wiped the streak from under his eye. “Oh it’s not that bad, just a scratch.”

“Yeah, on my eye.”

“Well you started it, buddy.”

Guy was still rubbing his eye, trying to get a good look at her with his other one, “Did you just call me ‘buddy’?”

“I did. Now, come here and sit down.”

He sat down and swung his legs up on the bed. She helped him position himself against the pillows as if he had been rendered helpless through some serious injury.

“Stop rubbing that,” she said, lightly slapping his hand away, “You’re gonna make it worse.”

“I can’t help it.” He blinked a few times and looked at her. “Alright, there, I’m done, see?”

A second later his hand came up again. She shook her head at him and pointed a thumb against her chest. “Next time you’ll think twice before messin’ with me.”

“I guess so.”

Katie sat down on top of her folded corner next to Guy and looked around.

“Want me to get up,” Guy asked, “So you can fix the sheets?”

“Oh I’m fine if you are. I just did this,” she grabbed the corner that stuck out beneath her, “So I can get under quickly if I get cold. But I’m looking for the beers.”

“Yours is there and mine is over there.” Guy pointed first at the bureau and then towards the sink.

“Oh, I’ll get them.”

As soon as she got up Guy wished she had just left the beers alone. The space next to him turned cold in an instant, and he worried for a moment that when Katie came back, she wouldn’t sit as close as she had. It wasn’t as close as possible, but it was nice.

“Here you go,” Katie said, handing him his beer.

“Thanks.” Guy shifted a little bit in his position, so that his body would face hers just a little bit more when she got in the bed.

Katie crawled in and moved right up against him. “How’s the eye?” she asked.

“It’s fine, I can still see.”

She faced the television and snuggled right into his arms. At the moment, all Guy could think about was how the condoms in his pocket were pressing up against her thigh.

“Ugh,” she exclaimed, “Look, we missed the beginning.” She got back up to rewind the tape, “Might have been something important.”

“Doubt it,” Guy said a little grumpily, trying to shift the condoms. He was anxious for her to hop back in again but he couldn’t very well switch the condoms to the other pocket. Why, he thought to himself, did I bring the whole god damned box?

When Katie got back in, she didn’t sit so close. He moved once or twice but couldn’t get much closer and, afraid to look fidgety, he tried to relax. Within minutes his stomach gurgled and he tensed up, afraid that she might’ve heard.

It took no less than twenty minutes before he relaxed again and he realized that he had to pee. It was about to be unavoidable. Maybe it’d be a good thing, he thought, because then he could put the condoms in another pocket, get back in, and snuggle right up against her. Guy looked over at Katie and could see that she was already nodding off. Immediately he got up, a little quicker and with more movement than necessary. Her eyes shot open and looked at him questioningly.

Guy pointed towards the bathroom, “Be right back.”

The bright yellow light hurt his eyes for a while after stepping into the bathroom. Squinting, he unzipped his fly and began to urinate. A pounding came from the door on Melissa’s side. “One second!” Guy called out. “Fucking timing,” he mumbled, and when he tucked himself back in, he should’ve shaken once or twice more. There was a bit of urine on his hand, and a few spots on his shorts. “God damn it.” Guy spun out the toilet paper, a bit too much. He dabbed his right hand and then dabbed his shorts. The stains from the beer were practically gone, but here are these new spots. He rubbed a bit harder, until the paper began to curl up and tear apart. The spots were noticeable in the bathroom,

but mostly likely wouldn't be in her room. Still, he thought, what if she could somehow tell. He threw the paper into the toilet and flushed it down.

When Guy stepped out of the bathroom he looked at Katie, who had slipped under the covers and was probably asleep. He washed his hands twice, and then dried them on the towel hanging on the side of the sink. He crept on over to the bed, lifted the covers and slid inside. He sat upright so that his thigh pressed against her lower back. She moved against him, her shoulder nuzzling against his ribs. Guy furrowed his brow and looked down at her. Katie was most certainly asleep. He thought about how he'd like to be nuzzling her, kissing her neck, or just putting an arm around her, but the awkward angle she was in prevented him from doing any of those things.

A scene played out in his head. Guy moves to a laying position and he leans into her, his crotch against her warm backside. He glides his left hand up from her hips to her breasts and, through her shirt, lightly circles her nipples with a finger. Beginning with the shoulder, he kisses his way to the nape of her neck and outlines the shape of her ear with his tongue. She cranes her neck outward slightly, as if she were enjoying it. He swells until his penis is between her thighs and she moans slightly. Then she wakes up and turns on him suddenly, and with a flash of anger says....

Guy shook the thought from his mind. He didn't want to know what she'd say to him after that. In spite of himself, blood rushed to his crotch and when his erection was full, he had to lift his knees up so it wouldn't show as much.

What if, he thought, she woke up early and saw him lying on his back, fully erect? Worse, what if he had the misfortune of a wet dream and groaned in the middle of the night? An orgasmic groan, loud and unmistakable?

Guy remained in what turned out to be an incredibly uncomfortable position until his right arm became painfully numb. The feeling in his arm didn't really bother him, though. At one point he worked up enough courage to stroke Katie's hair. He ran his fingers through a small lock of hair. Then he tucked it back, brushing his finger along the edge of her ear. At that moment he wouldn't have cared if his arm fell off, just as long as she was near him. On the television, bombs were exploding and people were yelling incoherently at each other. Torpedoes were launched. Colored buttons rang and flickered with fury.

* * * * *

The next evening, while waiting for Katie to get out of work, Guy went to the game room with Elijah to play some pool. Once again, Guy lined up everything perfectly and missed by rushing the shot at the last moment.

"Story of my life," he mumbled.

"You should have hit it a little easier than that," Elijah said, "It's more about the way you hit it than it is about force." Elijah lined up and got his eight ball in effortlessly. Guy still had four out on the table, which was an improvement on the last game.

"You wanna know how many times I hear that every time I play pool?"

"No, we've played enough games for me to take a guess." Elijah padded his pockets and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "You wanna go have a smoke?"

They went up a few floors on the stairwell to get a nice view of the city.

"So," Elijah began, lighting up his cigarette and handing the lighter to Guy, "How are things with you and Katie?"

“Fine.”

“She’s a cool girl, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, yeah she is.”

Elijah looked outward for a moment. “So are you guys dating or anything like that?”

“No, just friends right now.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

Elijah sighed, “There needs to be more Katie’s out there, huh?”

Guy nodded in agreement. “Couldn’t be enough of them.”

Elijah flung his half finished cigarette off the balcony and spit after it.

Guy parted ways with Elijah and went to his room for a few Rolling Rocks. He sat at his desk, popped open a beer and fantasized a few scenarios in which he successfully seduced Katie. The part that took the most strain on his imagination was her reaction immediately after he kissed her. It was difficult to picture her looking at him with any kind of desire.

Brian flung open the bathroom door and popped his head in. “Hey asshole, tell it to me straight. Did you bang her yet?”

“Who? Katie?”

“Ah, I knew it!” His smile was congratulatory.

“No, no I haven’t banged her or whatever,” Guy said irritably.

“Ok, ok, no need to be touchy.” He put two hands up in mock defense and then he wiggled his fingers as if to quote, “So are you *dating* her?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think so.”

Brian stared up at the ceiling for a moment, put a finger to his chin and then looked back at Guy. “So what you’re trying to say is No, right?”

“No, I mean, I don’t know.”

“Well, you should go for it if you can. I know I would.”

“Yeah but when?”

“What the fuck do you mean when? How about right now?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m working on it.”

Brian nodded and looked around the room, smoothing his black shirt over his chest absent mindedly for a few moments. “So uh, you wanna smoke a bowl or what?”

Guy shrugged, “Yeah, I guess.”

A little while later Guy went over to Katie’s room. It was relatively early and he wasn’t expecting her to be back from work. Guy was surprised when she opened the door. “Didn’t even think you’d be back yet” he said. “Want a beer?”

“Oh, thanks, but I just brushed my teeth.”

“It’s ok. I’ll drink it if you don’t want it.”

He stood there awkwardly for a moment, looking around.

“You want to come in?” she asked.

“You getting ready for bed?”

“Yeah, but it’s alright,” she looked at him curiously, “You ok? You look a little upset.”

“No it’s nothing. I’m just tired.”

“Well then why are you still standing there? Come on in.”

He stepped into the room and sat on the cooler. She sat in her fold out chair, took a bottle of water out of the cup holder, and drank from it. “Ugh,” she said, wiping her chin. “Warm water always tastes like the plastic bottle it’s been sitting in.”

“Yeah.”

“You sure you’re ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, really,” he lied. “Girl problems from back home.”

She cocked her head at him, “You never told me you had a girlfriend.”

“I don’t, I broke up with her before I came out here. She called me, you know, drunk and what not.”

“Oh boy, I know what that can be like. Looks like you’re gonna need both of those beers huh?” She sat back in her chair and played at her fingernails for a moment,

“She pretty?”

“Very.”

Katie shifted in her chair and said “So what were you up to before you came to this boring room?”

“Playing some pool with Elijah.”

“With who?”

“Elijah, you know, the kid with his room keys attached to a blue string.”

“Oh, him, I always thought his name was Leon or something.”

“He said he wished there were more Katies in the world,” Guy blurted out.

“Elijah said that?”

Guy couldn’t understand why he said that and he wanted to take it back. “Yeah, Elijah said that.”

Guy did not sleep over that night. More than a few times he thought about renting a movie to watch with her but he never did, figuring that if Katie wanted to, she would've mentioned it.

* * * * *

A few weeks later Guy sat down in front of his computer and canceled all of his classes. It was too late into the semester for any refund and the grades would remain on his transcript. A slight mark on his life, but he didn't care.

* * * * *

For most of the party, Guy sipped at his beers because he knew that, with Katie drinking the way she was, somebody had to keep an eye on things. Various people swarmed in and out all night long, congregating a few moments at a time before breaking off and moving back out into the hallway, where other groups of people crisscrossed between rooms. Guy watched the people he didn't recognize or know very well as they came in.

Late in the night, after Guy used the bathroom and took the time to wipe puddles of urine off of the toilet bowl, he came out to in time to see Elijah draw the fourth King from a circle of cards. They were playing Kings, which meant that Elijah had to all of the 36 oz of beer poured into a cup in the middle of the circle of cards. Some people cheered because they didn't have deal with the penalty of picking up the fourth King. According to the rules, he had to drink it all at once.

Elijah acted as if he didn't mind but Nabil came to his rescue, "Dude, you don't have to drink all that at once if you don't want to."

"Why not?"

"That's a lot of beer." Guy added, pointing to the cup.

He shrugged, "I could do it."

"Didn't say you couldn't."

"I've done it before, it's not that bad."

"But you don't *have* to."

"But what if I want to? I could do it, you know."

"Well then go ahead. In fact I dare you."

"Fine. I just said I would have done it anyway." He began to drink, and as the cup gradually tilted back, only a tiny trickle ran down his chin and dripped off onto the floor. He finished it to a small round of cheers. Then he belched loudly, spraying beer suds out of his mouth and onto the deck of cards. People jumped back as Elijah, with genuine surprise, held his hand up to his mouth and bolted out of the door laughing through his wet hand.

Guy looked around to see if Katie saw what had just happened. She quit playing not too long before and he found her standing in the hallway conversing loudly with a group of people, waving her hands in exaggerated and drunken movements. Guy decided not to bother her.

Elijah came back quickly with his own towel to clean up the mess, defending himself, "It was only foam, man. I didn't puke, I swear. It was just foam." He moved the cards and looked at Guy apologetically while pressing the towel down on the floor.

Guy looked at the cards, “Well, I guess those are useless now huh?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“No it’s ok, I’m just saying. You finish cleaning up and I’ll go get another pack in my room.”

When Guy made it back into the room with a fresh deck of cards, he found everyone gone except for Nabil. On the floor was a wet stain, which Guy covered up with a few paper towels. Elijah and a few other guys were off in Katie’s suite mate’s room arguing about how to give a good massage and using Katie as a test subject. Guy peeked into the room and saw them pointing at various points on Katie’s neck and shoulders and explaining to each other the best ways to get rid of knots. She just sat quietly on another cooler with her head in her hands. Guy figured that she was quiet because she had just smoked some pot, which meant she’d be ready to pass out soon. Not wanting to be too defensive, he walked back into the other room and played cards with Nabil, who was puffing away at a glass bowl filled with pot. Guy joined him and they played Blackjack. That proved boring with two people, and so they played War instead.

After some time, Nabil said, “Why don’t we go to my room for a minute, I’ve got some cigarettes and some more pot and some Captain Morgan, if you want some.”

“Sure, I’d love some at this point. I shouldn’t stay too long, but do you want to finish the game in your room?”

Nabil shrugged, “Sure, or maybe we could play something more interesting.”

* * * * *

When Guy woke up, he stumbled over to the bathroom and sat in front of the toilet in a cold sweat, waiting to throw up. He tried to stick a finger down his throat but was never able to make that work. It just made him gag and sweat more. The bathroom swirled and the tiles felt wet against his palm. When the smell of urine came to him he tried with all of his might to stand up. Guy placed his hand on the toilet seat and pushed himself up, and then he steadied himself against the wall and leaned his sweaty forehead against it.

Guy made it back to his bed, placed a trash can against it and went back to sleep. He woke up around 3:00 with a bad headache, though his stomach felt a little better. He tried drinking from the sink but couldn't stand the smell of the running water.

Guy brushed the stale taste out of his mouth and rinsed with the water that he would not drink. He wanted to throw a fresh set of clothes on before going to the cafeteria but just couldn't get himself to do it, and so he grabbed his keys and walked out of the door.

After eating he walked over to Katie's door and knocked but there was no answer. All evening long he spent knocking to no answers on her door. Around ten o'clock at night he once again raised a feeble hand but this time he froze mid-air at the horrid thought that she was in the room the whole time. A memory flooded back to him from the night before. He had stumbled from Nabil's room and almost knocked on Katie's door but then changed his mind, thinking she was already asleep and that he didn't want to wake her. It didn't occur to Guy that, since Elijah and Nabil were roommates, he should have been concerned that Elijah hadn't come back before he left.

Still, he couldn't be sure, yet he could hardly breathe. Guy tried to stare through the tiny peep hole. Were they on the other side looking out? Were they in bed, waiting for him to stop pestering them and go away for the last time? He imagined her in the bed, sheets curled up to her small, bare breast, her face poised between pity and annoyance, waiting for the knock to occur again. Then he saw Elijah reach out to comfort her. He saw her snuggle up against his chest, and the comfort she took against his body.

"Idiot," he seethed at himself through his teeth and walked numbly back to his room. He lay in bed, feeling more nauseous than he had all day. For the next week he didn't see either Elijah or Katie.

Sleep did not come easily.

* * * * *

Guy woke up with his third hangover in a row, this one less severe than the last two. He couldn't judge the time of day, but knew only that the sun was still up from the meager light that spilled through his blinds. The sun must be setting by now. His body felt like it had been in the same position for a week. Guy made a show of getting off the bed, groaning and stretching and stumbling to the bathroom to relieve a painfully full bladder.

Brian gave him a computer game a few nights before, Diablo, which Guy played well into the early mornings, switching between beer and whiskey. He could still taste the whiskey in the back of his throat and felt the beer sitting in his belly.

Guy took a shower but was too lazy to soap up and just stood under the hot water, letting it run through his hair and over his face. Then, calmly, he dressed, thinking that

today he wouldn't go to Katie's door at all but keep to himself as much as possible. He needed to restock with beer, whiskey and chips.

Guy walked out through the sliding doors of Fontana Hall, past a pizza man who was losing in his battle to balance all of the red pizza boxes. Guy kept his hands inside his pockets, fingering the pack of condoms. It was warm and muggy outside, even though it was early December, and Guy felt a bead of sweat drip from his armpit and down his left side. It occurred simultaneously with the image of a brown haired girl getting out of Elijah's car. When she turned Guy saw that it was Katie, even though he had known that already. His choice of direction forced him to walk past them. They both looked up at the same time. Guy gave a slight wave of his hand and then looked immediately at the ground. He kept his course, never sure if they responded or not.

By the time Guy was back in his room, he had smoked two cigarettes and was about to light a third. Put the cigarette to his lips he sensed the nicotine and it made him feel queasy. He thought better of it and placed it back inside the pack. Then he took the condoms out and placed them back in the drawer. Not much luck last time, he thought.

Guy grabbed his bag of pot, sprinkled some into his bowl and took a hit. He held it, counted to seven and then released it through his nostrils. The pungent smell relaxed him almost immediately and he pulled out a bottle of whiskey from a brown bag.

Guy drank and played his computer game for a while before someone knocked on his door. He paused the game but didn't move for a moment, not sure if he really wanted to open it. When he looked through the peephole he saw Elijah standing there.

"Just a second," Guy called out and waited a moment with his hand poised on the handle. He turned it and swung the door open.

“Hey man,” Elijah began and then immediately went on, “Katie’s having a little party tonight. Well, not really a party, but Nabil’s gonna be there and I already asked Brian too. You gonna go?”

“Are you inviting people for her or something?”

He shrugged, apparently seeing nothing wrong with it. “You’re invited. Just thought I’d let you know.”

“Yeah, thanks,”

Elijah shrugged again, “See you later.”

Guy didn’t slam the door, but shut it gently and held the door knob. He breathed out once and didn’t inhale again for a long moment, until he finally let go of the handle and it flicked back in place with a loud metallic clack.

Guy made himself another drink and picked up his phone, which had been off for the past few days. He plugged it in and checked the messages. There was one from Katie: “Hey, Guy, sorry I haven’t called you lately but my exams have been driving me crazy. Hope yours are going well. I’ll have to throw some kind of little party at the end of the week to celebrate, though I’m sure everyone else will be doing something or other. Ok, call me when you get this. Miss you.”

Exam week, not Elijah, was the reason why she hadn’t been around. He was sure enough of this to feel a lot better about the whole thing. Happily, he called and told her that he was going to show up and that he couldn’t wait to see her.

Guy continued to play his game and sip whiskey for a few more hours before taking a shower to refresh himself. He found a t-shirt lying on the floor, picked it up, smelled it and then put it on. He put on a different pair of shorts, slid into his favorite pair

of sandals, checked himself in the mirror and remembered to put on some deodorant before leaving his room without the keys. He laughed at himself and shrugged off the mistake, figuring he could get Brian to let him in his room later. The door across the hall was opened and Guy waved to the people inside, even though he hardly knew them or cared to know them. With every step down the hall, Guy felt lighter and more cheerful. The reservation he felt earlier about going to Katie's room had virtually disappeared. Confidence and exuberance led the way. He would march right in there, joking and laughing, and behave as if nothing was ever wrong. Then, when the time was right, he could take her aside and tell her how he really felt. What was the point in subtlety or shyness any longer? If he hadn't missed his chance days or even weeks ago, this would certainly be the last.

Maybe, he thought to himself, even if she did spend the last week with Elijah it was only because she had the impression that Guy wasn't interested in her, and that could be easily adjusted. "Of course!" he said out loud to nobody, though there were people around. Or maybe it was only the exams, which would be all the better.

A little further up the hallway Guy stopped at a small gathering of people in front of Dena's room. She was among them, talking and laughing. For a moment nobody noticed Guy standing there and then Dena exclaimed, "Guy!" Then she threw her big arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Have I ever told you that you were my favorite?"

"Not that I can remember."

She was leaning on him now, a drunken pose that was so heavy Guy struggled to make it look natural. "Hey" she continued. "You don't want some Percocet by any chance do you? I got six left and I took too many already."

“How many did you take?”

“Six.”

“Six?”

“Yeah six, I think. Maybe five, maybe seven. What’s the difference, right?”

“Right,” Guy said, “I’ve gotta go to Katie’s room for a bit. I’ll see you around.”

“Oh Katie’s room, huh?” Dena said, smiling wiggling her eyebrows at him.

Guy smiled and walked to Katie’s room. When he knocked, it was Nabil who swung open the door. “Nabil!” Guy shouted as they clasped hands. Nabil pulled him into the room and shut the door behind him. Guy looked around and saw Elijah, Brian, Katie and Nabil’s friend Kelly. The party was smaller than he expected. “What’s up guys?” he said, looking at Katie. She walked over to Guy and gave him a hug.

“I’m glad you came,” she said, “You want a drink or what?”

“Of course I do.”

“Good. I’ll go make you a special one, don’t go anywhere.”

Guy looked at Nabil, who winked at him as Katie walked off. Then he looked down at the circle of people sitting on the floor, “So you guys want to get another game started or what?”

Nabil sat down between Elijah and Kelly while Guy sat in a spot that left enough room for Katie to sit down next to him.

She came over and handed him a red Solo cup. “Here ya go, one just for you.”

“What is it?” he asked looking up at her.

“Just a special mixed drink I made for you, but I can’t tell you the secret recipe.”

She answered and then walked around to the other end of the circle. “Excuse me Nabil.”

Katie sat between him Elijah and everyone shifted enough to fill in the space next to Guy.

Guy managed to sip his drink as his stomach turned. “Ahh, that’s the closest thing to water I’ve had all night.”

“You jerk!” Katie shouted with a playful tone to her voice, then she threw a card at him but it flipped in the air and landed no further than the middle of the circle.

“I’m kidding!” Guy answered, “It’s the best drink I’ve had all night.”

Katie stuck her tongue out at him. Guy stuck his tongue out too as she reached for another card, but Elijah put his hand on her arm.

“I’m gonna need that,” he said, smiling at her as he collected the cards and began shuffling.

She smiled back, “Right, sorry.”

“So what are we playing?” Guy asked, keeping his eyes on Elijah as he showed Katie how to shuffle and bridge the cards. It was something Guy couldn’t do.

“Well,” Brian said, “We could play asshole like every other fucking night.”

Kelly sighed, “Do we have to? Can’t we play something else?”

Nabil rubbed her shoulders. “But I thought you liked that game.”

“Yeah, I guess. But if we’re playing asshole then why the hell is Elijah shuffling the cards a million times over?” She looked at Elijah expectantly. “Come on then lover boy, pass them out.”

“Hold on a second,” he said, “I’m showing Katie something.”

“Couldn’t you show her later?” Guy asked, “Like not when everyone else wants to play a game?”

“I just want to show her one thing.”

“You just showed her that three times.”

“Fine,” Katie said shortly, she tore the cards out of Elijah’s hands and slammed them on the floor, spreading them out. “Let’s play Kings instead.”

“Last time we did that Elijah made a mess.” Guy countered.

“Shut up Guy,” she said, cutting off Elijah, who looked like he was about to defend himself. “We’re gonna play Kings first and then we can play stupid asshole.”

They played and drank. The air between Guy, Katie and Elijah cooled down once they started playing. Still, Guy felt betrayed and the more he drank, the less he could control his spite and his anger. The snide comments Guy made slid off of Elijah’s shoulders and accomplished nothing other than angry looks from Katie.

In the middle of a game of poker, Guy threw his cards down into small circle. “He’s fucking helping you cheat!” Guy shouted. “That’s bullshit.

“He’s not helping me cheat,” Katie snapped. “He’s helping me learn how to play. Haven’t you been paying attention?”

“I’ve been paying attention to him flirting with you all night.”

Katie flushed, angry and embarrassed. She placed her cards down and pointed at the door. “We gotta talk.” She stood up and opened the door, which Guy walked through and when they were both out of the room she slammed the door behind her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“What are you talking about?”

“Why are you acting like a child?”

“I’m not acting like anything. You’re the one practically ignoring me.”

“So because I’m not giving you all my attention, you have to go around making snide little shithead comments.”

“Well, you invite me here and then try to make me feel like an asshole, what’d you expect?”

“I’m not-“

“And don’t call me a shithead.”

“How am I trying to make you feel like an asshole?”

“By rubbing your thing with Elijah in my face.”

“What thing with Elijah? There’s no god damn thing with Elijah. You’re acting like a fucking child.”

“Next thing I know you’re gonna ask him to sleep over again.”

She shook her head, as if the comment was unexpected. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“I wasn’t gonna ask him to sleep over.”

“Ok. Fine then, I guess I’m over reacting....”

“And what if I did? You think if I let him sleep over I’m gonna fuck him?”

“I don’t know. You’re acting like you might.”

“You’ve slept over and nothing happened.”

“Yeah but-”

“And even if I do want to fuck him, how’s that any of your god damn business?”

“It’s not. I just don’t want you rubbing it in my face.”

“Guy, I invited you here because I like you, but now you’re acting like a meathead. You gonna go fight with Elijah next? Gonna try to win me over by acting like a complete ass?”

“So first I’m a child and now I’m a meat head?”

“Well that’s how you’re acting.”

“Alright look,” he said, waving his hands out in front of him as if trying to clear the air of the hostility but then he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Look what?”

Her arms were crossed now.

“I’m... I’m a little drunk, so I’m sorry...”

“Oh no, that’s not gonna work right now. And it’s a stupid excuse for acting like an asshole.”

“Christ,” he shouted. “Do you have to be such a fucking bitch about it?” The words hung in the air for a long time. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean....”

“I think you need to go,” she said and pointed down the hall, “I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

Guy tried to start again. “I came to this party because I wanted to tell you that.... I wanted to say....”

“Say what? There’s nothing to say.”

Guy grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her hard on the mouth. She put a hand on his chest as if to hold him back but instead let it rest there for a moment. Then she shoved him away and, without looking at him, opened the door to her room and stepped inside, letting it slam shut behind her.

* * * * *

Guy couldn't know for sure how long he stood in front of that door listening to the happy, indistinct chatter from inside. He felt numb. Eventually, a voice calling his name began to register. He turned to his left saw Dena waving him over.

"What are you doing?" she called out, laughing as if he was joking around, "Come on over here a minute."

Guy felt his feet move towards her, and his arms swaying slightly, all of which took a surprising amount of energy. He imagined this is what actors felt like as they got into character, a lucid confusion like when familiar objects slowly come into focus.

"Holy shit," she slurred. "I was, like, calling you for hours. What the hell were you doing?"

Looking at her, he was reminded of the Percocet. Beneath her eyes were saggy black bags, yet she was smiling, as if one half of her face couldn't agree with the other. "I was just thinking about something."

"Well yeah," she said, swaying and making as if she was going to say something else. She laughed instead, and then asked, "Where are you going now?"

Guy wasn't sure if she witnessed the scene in front of Katie's door. "Need to get some cigarettes."

"So, what's going on in Katie's room? You guys having a good time?"

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

"I don't know, just wondering." Dena looked at him slyly. "How are things between you and Katie?"

Without flinching, Guy said, "Good, things are good." He handed her the money, took the bag and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Oh. That's too bad."

"What? Why's that bad?"

Dena smiled and said in a teasing, sing-song voice, "Because I know some one who likes you."

"Oh you do, huh? And who might that be?"

"Well I can't tell you that now. You already have a girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"So you're not dating?"

"No, we're not dating."

"Yeah, well you're probably gonna be soon, so I guess it doesn't matter anyway."

Dena drank from her Solo cup and looked away.

For a second, Guy wanted to argue the point. But Dena was right, he thought. Tomorrow he'll talk to Katie and everything will be back to normal. And yes, perhaps they will be dating soon, so it really doesn't matter.

"Christian!" Dena ran past Guy and hugged Christian as if they hadn't seen each other in years.

Even Christian looked taken aback at the sudden embrace. "How are you?" Christian asked.

"I'm awesome. How are you?"

"Pretty fucked up thanks for asking." Then Christian looked at Guy and said, "Hey you," and hugged him as well. "How are you doing?"

“Guy was just about to go to the store,” Dena said, before Guy had a chance to answer. “Didn’t you say something before about needing to go?”

“Yeah, I need some more soda for our Captain Morgan. Hold on a sec.”

Christian walked over to her friend Jen and said something to her. Jen smiled and nodded enthusiastically. Christian drank what was left in her cup and took Guy’s hand.

“Ok, let’s go.”

They left the building together, Christian telling him a story but he was only half listening. She laughed and spoke so happily that it became infectious. Her words mattered less than their effect. Everything that happened with Katie began to fade the way an appalling thought or dream fades, leaving behind a tension that becomes more abstract over time, until one can feel comfort in knowing that none of it was ever real.

As they walked into the store, Guy immediately dropped back in stride to follow Christian. She seemed determined and decisive, as if on a mission, and Guy followed her all the way to the register, where he looked up and saw a condom display. He tapped his pockets and chuckled out loud.

“What are you laughing about?” Christian asked, blushing slightly as she handed the cashier a few crumpled dollar bills.

“Nothing, nothing at all.” Guy purchased his cigarettes and as soon as the cashier handed him his receipt, Christian hooked her arm around his and they walked off in silence.

When they reached the elevator in Fontana, she looked at him and asked, “Will you do me a huge favor?”

“Sure.”

“Jen and I put the bottle of Captain Morgan upstairs in my room, could you come with me to get it?”

“Oh I don’t know. I should get to bed soon. I’m really tired.”

“Please, will you? I hate going up there alone late at night, it’s scary.”

Unconsciously, Guy tapped his pocket. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ll go up with you.”

“And I’ll walk you right back to your room, I promise.”

“Well that’s good,” he said. “I wouldn’t want anyone to take advantage of me.”

She hugged him. “Thanks, and I promise not to take advantage of you either.”

“Well, you don’t have to promise that.”

Christian laughed and they walked to her room together. “Were you going back to Katie’s room tonight?”

“Yeah but I kind of feel like crashing. It’s been a long enough night.”

It took a few seconds of wiggling the keys before Christian opened the door.

When she turned on the light Guy noticed that half of the room was cleaned out.

“Your roommate left?”

Christian put the soda down on her table. “You mean Nikki? Yeah, her last exam was on Wednesday and her parents came to pick her up today.”

“Kind of sucks that they’re kicking us out so soon. What is it, Sunday by noon we have to be out?”

“Yeah, or they fine you or something.” She looked around the room. “Now where did I put that bottle?” She looked in places Guy never thought to put a bottle of liquor. Her desk or the floor would have been just fine.

“So,” Guy began, trying to speak in a casual tone. “You have the room to yourself for a couple days then, huh?” He noticed another full bottle of Coke on top of her desk.

“Pretty much. Oh! That’s right. We put it under the bed.”

“Why under the bed?”

“Who knows,” she said, shrugging, “It was Jen’s stupid idea. She thinks my suite mate is going to pop the lock on the bathroom door and steal it.”

He looked at Christian as she knelt down beside the bed. Her shirt rode up a bit as she reached for the bottle, showing him her lower back. She was wider than Katie, and her skin wasn’t as smooth. She also lacked the two delicate indents on her lower back.

Guy reached inside his pocket and pulled out the pack of condoms.

Christian was still leaning under her bed. He stood there dumbly while looking at the packet in his hands. He thought he should put them back in his pocket or throw them away altogether. He kept staring at the box, flipping it over to read the fine print.

“Where’d those come from?”

Guy looked up to see her smiling. “These?” he asked, looking back at the box. “They were in my pocket.”

She laughed, put the bottle on the table and walked over to him. “You carrying them around in case you bump into a girl like me?”

“Well no, I wouldn’t put it that way.” Suddenly nervous, he tried to think of a way to get off the topic but before he could blink her mouth was on his and her hand gripped his crotch. He stumbled back against the sink as she pressed her body into his. She tasted of cigarettes and rum. She unzipped his fly and shoved a hand inside his pants. It felt cold against his penis but he stiffened anyway.

“You want me to put one of those on for you?” She asked, kissing his neck and unbuttoning his pants, “Or maybe I could just....”

Guy gripped the edge of the sink tight with his left hand as she slid down and put her warm mouth over his penis. He inhaled sharply to shake off a spell of dizziness. He placed a hand on her head as she moved up and down and lightly caressed the inside of his thigh. He opened the box of condoms with shaky hands, nearly dropping its contents on her head. Then he ripped one off along the perforated edge, tore open the little package and pulled out the condom. He remembered someone telling him how to put one on. Find the tip, squeeze it and make sure to leave a bit of space at the end as you roll it downwards. This all sounded easy enough, though he never expected it to be so greasy and repelling to touch. Guy held the condom in front of him, regarding it with curiosity and disgust. It smelled terrible.

She stopped only a moment later and stood up. “I’m gonna get the light.”

Guy watched her walk to her bedside lamp, turn it on, then move over to the door and hit the switch. He continued to hold the condom out in front of him, with his pants down around his knees. She didn’t look over at him but began to take off her shirt and her bra. Guy assumed that when a girl took off her shirt and bra it would, by definition, be something sexy, but this was not sexy at all.

Guy tried to focus on what he had to do. He kicked off his pants and put the condom on as best as he could in the dimly lit room. He saw the clumsy movements of Christian as she struggled to pull a pant leg off her foot and accidentally backed into the table top.

“Whoop,” she said, and laughed at herself.

Guy laughed with her. He felt more naked than he had ever felt in his life, holding his shirt up with one hand and squeezing the base of his penis with the other, which had a funny looking rubber tube on it, not unlike a sock halfway on the foot.

Still laughing, she walked over to him in her pink and white striped underwear and said “Take off that shirt, silly.” She pulled the shirt over his head and then kissed him again, this time harder and more aggressive than last time. Guy tried to embrace her more passionately this time, running his hands lightly down her back and around her waist, where there was no shortage flesh, and then quickly up to caress her heavy breasts.

Guy tried to comprehend what was happening but the jumble of thoughts couldn't form into anything cohesive because she was pulling him towards the bed, her lips on his and her stale breath filling his mouth. He hooked his thumbs around her underwear and slipped them down, moving aside in order to take them off completely. Then he got on top of her and, after a few awkward tries, she helped him slide his penis inside her. She moaned and kissed his neck hard as he thrust rhythmically.

When she wrapped her legs around the small of his back and moved with him, he wondered if she was a virgin too. He shook the thought away, but others pressed in his mind, as if everything that he couldn't think about before suddenly flooded into his head.

Guy stopped, still inside her, and held himself up the full length of his arms. Christian looked back at him. “What's the matter? What's wrong?”

Guy looked around as if he had just realized where he was and said, “I can't... this is...” He got up off the bed and stumbled towards the sink.

“No, no, no,” she pleaded and grabbed his arm.

He could have moved away from her fast enough but instead let her pull him back onto the bed, back on top of her. He felt terrible, like somehow he owed her something and could not bring himself to reject her like this. Guy felt suddenly detached from the moment, watching from afar as everything happened. She reached down and slid his penis back into her and he began to thrust again. Her eyes were opened just enough for him to see her pupils roll back. He heard her breathe and moan, and felt her fingers dig into his back, but somehow it remained unreal.

Guy tried his best to pour himself into the act, to enjoy what he was experiencing, but when he imagined seeing Katie beneath him, everything came back into a sudden, horrible focus. Guy got back up and again she grabbed his arm and pleaded but he tore himself from her grip. The condom made a snapping sound when he pulled it off and dropped it on the floor. He moved toward the sink, trying with difficulty to maintain his balance as he pulled his pants on, picked up his shirt and slid into his sandals. Guy paused before the door and looked over at Christian, who was huddled in her bed, wrapped in the blankets and crying. He opened his mouth to speak, to say that he was sorry, but he couldn't get the words right.

* * * * *

When Guy woke up he didn't have a hangover. His pillow was moist and his eyes were sore, but he felt no real hangover. Guy groaned and wished he had a serious hangover so he could sleep the miserable day away.

Someone tapped gently at his bathroom door.

“Come in.”

Brian walked in. “Hung over or what?”

“No, not really,” Guy said as he sat up and rubbed his head. “What time is it?”

“Not too late, one o’clock, maybe two.” Brian sat on the computer chair and faced Guy. “God damn,” he said. “I feel like ass. Want to smoke a bit? Kill the hang over?”

“I said I don’t feel hung over.”

“So?”

Guy stood up and held a hand up in the air. “Gotta piss first.”

In the bathroom, as he stood there urinating, a sickly familiar scent came to him. He held his free hand up to his nose and could smell the residue from the condom. “Doesn’t it ever fucking go away?” he mumbled out loud. He walked out of the bathroom, washed his hands, and brushed his teeth while Brian busied himself on the computer.

“If you fuck a girl,” Guy asked, his mouth full of tooth paste, “And you... I mean, if you don’t finish... does it still count?”

Brian looked at him for a moment, “the fuck do you mean, does it count?”

“I don’t know, never mind.” Guy spit and rinsed his mouth, embarrassed at the stupidity of the question and his desperation to change what could not be changed.

“So,” Brian began. “I’m gonna go ahead and guess that’s what happened between you and Christian last night.”

Guy looked at Brian and could only blink. He knew, before the thought even formed in his mind, that if Brian knew, then so would others. “Oh shit,” he said.

Brian shook his head. “Man, I gotta say it, if you wanted this to be a secret, you sure picked the wrong girl.”

“I didn’t pick anybody. It just....”

“I know, you were drunk, right?” He shrugged. “It happens. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“No,” Guy said. “I gotta do something about it.”

Brian scoffed. “Like what? You can’t unfuck her.”

“Thanks Brian, that’s really fucking helpful.”

“I’m just saying.”

Guy walked over to his closet to find a fresh t-shirt, spotted one and took off the shirt he was wearing. “Do you know if Elijah stayed in her room last night?”

Brian shrugged, “No. Are you sure you don’t want to smoke?”

“Maybe if he wasn’t flirting with her so much I wouldn’t....” Guy stopped and stared off for a moment, not sure he really wanted to go about blaming Elijah. “Forget it, I’ll be right back.”

When Guy knocked on Katie’s door he could hear her inside doing something, and then he saw her look at him through the peephole.

“What do you want?” she asked through the door.

“I want to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“Can you please open the door? I don’t want to talk to you through the door.”

She opened it slowly. Guy could see she had been crying even though she hid it well. He didn’t know how to begin and just stood there for a moment, looking at her.

“He’s not here.”

“Who? Elijah?”

“Yeah, is that why you came to see me?”

“No. I came to see you because....” Guy wished he had thought this through before knocking on her door.

“You wanted to come to tell me about Christian and rub it in my face like I was doing with Elijah. Is that it?”

Guy shouldn't have been surprised, but all his resolve disappeared as soon as she mentioned Christian.

“Guy, if you were doing that to hurt me....”

“No, it wasn't that. Please don't think that. ”

“The why else would you do it? You told me how annoying you think she is. That you couldn't stand her.”

“I don't know. It happened. I don't know how I feel about it. Not good. Maybe worse than that but.... Why are you acting like I would feel good about this? I feel terrible. I can't really make sense of it.” He didn't know where else to go with the subject. Katie kept her arms folded tightly about her and shifted her weight. Guy felt horrible knowing that she was just waiting for him to go away. “Look,” he said, trying his best not to sound too emotional, “I just want to say one thing and then I'll leave you alone ok?”

She didn't move or say anything.

“If it's not already obvious, I'm really sorry and... I like you, a lot... and if I've fucked things up so bad that... I don't know. That you'd rather be with Elijah....”

She scoffed.

“Wait,” he said, and held his hands up, fearing she would turn around and slam the door shut again. “I’m just trying to say that whatever you decide you want to do is... is something I have to deal with. I get that now and I’m sorry I acted the way I did to you last night and to him, for that matter.” He paused and she looked away. Her face was rigid and her eyes were watery. He went on, “I can’t say I like the idea of you being with Elijah, but it’s nothing compared to the idea of you hating me.”

That was it, that was all he could say, and the sincerity of it struck him as the words came out of his mouth. It was the truth. She looked up at him as if expecting there to be more. “I don’t know what else to say,” he admitted.

Katie turned and shut the door.

* * * * *

Guy went back to his room and found it empty. He didn’t want to be by himself at the moment, so Guy walked into Brian’s room and found him packing some suitcases.

“Hey,” Brian said, folding a plain black shirt. “How’d it go?”

“Not good,” Guy answered, looking at the floor and holding the door handle. He felt as if he should say something more. “Not good at all.”

Brian simply shrugged, “Maybe she’ll call you over break.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“It’s not impossible. What’d you say to her anyways?”

“I just kind of apologized. What else is there to say?”

“Not much, I guess.”

Brian kept folding, producing one black shirt after another and, after a few moments of silence, Guy felt he was imposing on him.

“Well,” Guy began, “I should get to packing up some stuff of my own.”

“When does your plane leave?”

“I don’t know, I forgot, but it’s printed on a paper somewhere. You going to be around later?”

“Yeah, my plane won’t leave until late tonight. I like sleeping through my plane rides.”

“I’ll stop by a little later.”

“You do that.”

Back in his room, Guy made a pile on his bed of all of his clothes in his closet and his drawers. His laundry basket was full of dirty clothes that he’d forgotten to clean. The hamper had more clothes in it than the pile on his bed. “Shit,” Guy said to himself, and he stood there for a long time, staring at the pile on his bed and the overstuffed hamper. He looked at a piece of post-it paper hanging off the side of his desk which reminded him that his plane was leaving at ten the following morning. “Ten in the morning?” Guy groaned. He thought about staying up all night and taking a taxi to the airport in the early morning.

When Guy went downstairs to eat, the cafeteria was disturbingly empty. It depressed him and he found that he could not eat his food. The only bite he managed to take he could barely swallow. Instead, Guy drank coffee, and after his third cup he felt good enough to pack his suitcases.

Halfway through his packing, when Guy flipped open his phone to set an alarm in case he should fall asleep during the night, he saw a missed call from Katie. She left a message but he ignored it and dialed her number instead.

“Hello.”

“Katie? Hey, did you just call me?”

“Yeah,” she said in a voice flat enough to make it clear this wasn’t the phone call he had hoped for. He could hear that she was still at the airport from all of the background noise and peculiarly metallic sound of a voice speaking over an intercom.

“So does this mean that you don’t hate me then?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly, but....” She sighed aloud. “Look, Guy, my plane is boarding and I have to get on. I just wanted to call you.”

Guy waited to make sure she was finished. “Can I at least call you when I get back? We won’t be that far from each other.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been home since the spring and my mom isn’t doing so well.” She paused for a moment and then continued, “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be like this. But I’ve got to go. Take care, Guy.”

After she hung up Guy held the phone in his hand for a while. Then he dialed his voice mail and listened to her message: “Hey Guy, it’s me. I don’t know, I’m just calling because.... Well, I don’t know. Just call me back so we can talk, ok? I don’t like leaving messages about these things. Call me, ok? Bye.”

Guy hung up the phone but did not delete the message. He felt melancholy, and as he packed, Guy wondered how long it would be before he saw Katie’s face again, and what that’d be like when it finally happened.

The Failures of Hollywood Cinema

Once, I had an idea for a story.

It was a nice story, with great curves, silky hair, intelligent wit and pretty feet. The story seemed to like me and I made it clear that the feeling was mutual, though I thought it could use a bit of work.

I didn't want to hurt its feelings and so I tried my best to work on the story while it wasn't looking. I worked and worked and worked until one day I woke up and found it dead. I shook it and cried and pumped its chest because sometimes that worked in the movies. I even tried a defibrillator, rubbing the pads thoroughly before shocking the heart back to life, but it remained blue.

I dragged it out of bed, laid it out on a metal table, clamped its arms and legs down, hooked it up to a plethora of wires and what have you, and got ready to flip a large switch. Thankfully, I remembered that while this did occasionally work in the movies, the end result was never all that great.

So instead, I tore the wires apart until they sparked hysterically enough for a sappy moment, then I cradled its dead head with my arms and whispered to it while stroking its blue face. "You have to wake up," I said. "You have to wake up because... because I love you." Then I kissed it full on the lips because that's how it was done in *The Matrix*.

This did not work either.

With a heavy sigh I unhooked my story, slung it over my shoulder and carried it up the stairs. I put it in my drawer, where it's been ever since, with its great curves, its silky hair, its intelligent wit, and its pretty feet.