



The Sunday Brunch

a novel by

Joshua D. Dinman

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I. AMY

Great Expectations Dashed

1. Love and Cloves

Somewhere, someone was smoking clove cigarettes. It was probably the Japanese girls downstairs. She'd heard them all morning with their mini-skirts and their leather jackets. Living above an apartment full of beautiful Japanese girls didn't strike her as strange. Everyone in Washington seemed so attractive. Even the handyman, wrestling with the air conditioning unit on the living room floor, was handsome. Water pooled on the hardwood as he loosened screws from the chassis.

"Damn thing's busted," he declared, wiping the sweat from his ebony forehead with the back of his hand. He waited for a response but she was silent, staring out the porch door at the park across the street. The thin rectangle of brownish grass was crisscrossed with footpaths and shaded by a few straggly elms wilting in the oppressive heat. A bead of sweat rolled down the middle of her back.

A woman stood barefoot in the park holding a pair of sandals behind her back, staring at the overcast sky. Searching the gray heavens for a sign of rain, she seemed to know she was hoping in vain.

The handyman was talking. She turned to give the appearance of listening. Behind him, cardboard boxes were stacked against the wall. The scent

of the clove cigarettes reminded her of somewhere else.

"Relationships are funny that way," he said. "Excuse me? I'm sorry?"

"I was saying, there aren't many times when you can say men and women really communicate."

"Yeah, sure," she said, nodding, not understanding.

"Last night I picked up Talana, that's my girl, at her job at Macys, where she works nights, and right away she starts bitchin' at me. I knew she was tired so I let her take it out on me for a while."

She crossed her arms across her chest and listened.

He knelt over the air conditioning unit, toying with a screw. By the way he looked at the spent air conditioner she could tell it was a lost cause.

The woman would not shut up!" he continued. "So I turned to her and said, 'look baby, you've had a hard day, let's get some Chinese take-out and I'll give you a back rub.'

"A back rub! I'm just suggesting a back rub, now, and she jumps all over my shit, saying, 'Son, if you think I'm gonna put out for you after the day I had, you've got another thing coming.' I *never* said anything about sex. I swear. I'm talking about taking care of the woman, and she thinks all I want is to do the nasty."

"Sometimes it's hard," she agreed.

"That's the damn truth," he said shaking his head. "This thing is a piece of shit," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead again.

She felt like she was sweating from every pore. Her hair was pulled back in a small pony tail and her bangs stuck in strands to her forehead. Occasionally she pulled her damp t-shirt from the nape of her neck

"We was about to get into a nasty fight, when this white guy knocks on the car window, asking if I got jumper cables," he continued, staring at the air conditioner as though he'd forgotten something. "He keeps smiling like a fool, sayin' he left his car lights on and needs a jump start. I think he can tell me and Talana was fighting, 'cause he keeps apologizing and smiling. He keeps calling me 'dude' and 'man.' You know how white boys call the brothers 'maan.' Like I'm supposed to think he's chillin'. 'I really appreciate this, maan,' he's saying. 'I can't believe I left my lights on, can you dude?' he asks. So I shake my head like, 'No, I can't believe it either.' And when I talk to him, I use my best white-boy voice, and he smiles. He knows I'm dissing him, and he smiles!"

"Dis?" she asked.

"Dis...dis-respecting him."

"Sorry." she blushed.

"Na, it's o.k. Anyway Talana was trying to hold off from busting

up...laughing, at the guy." He raised his head from his work, and smiled. "This machine is *fucked*, dead, no prayer."

"The landlord said they worked," she said.

"The landlord lied," he replied. "Tween you and me, Mrs. Sellers is one lying bitch. Ain't no such thing as an honest landlord."

"It's my first weekend in Washington," she sighed.

"You picked the wrong one," he replied. "The hottest so far."

They were silent for a moment. He pretended to examine the broken unit. She wondered what to do next.

"The one in the bedroom is worse than this one," she said.

"Freon's shot in this one, so's the condenser. I can tell Mrs. Sellers you need new ones when she gets back." He shrugged his shoulders. "It's the best I can do."

She put her hands over her face and sighed. She felt like she'd just stepped from a pool.

"Do you know where she's vacationing?"

"The Eastern Shore. No phone."

"Great," Amy said.

"Sorry," he shrugged.

"It's not your fault." She sighed. "I guess I'm screwed."

"Yeah. Sorry" He smiled for her.

As he gathered the pieces he'd removed and began reassembling the unit, she asked him what happened with the guy with the dead battery.

"Oh, yeah." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I gave him a jump and he offered me cash. I acted like I was all offended by his money. Then he offered us a couple beers he had in his car, and I looked at Talana and she looked at me like, 'why not?' So we leaned against his car and drank 'till a cop came along and told us to move on." He stood and shook his head. "Sure was funny."

"Did you and Talana make up?"

"Yeah," he said bashfully. "We got some take out and some more beer, then went to sleep. I didn't get around to giving her a back-rub."

"So it all worked out."

"Yeah," he said. "Can I get a glass of water?"

In the kitchen she filled a glass with water. Cool air streamed out of the empty freezer in a mist. The ice cubes cracked when she dropped them in the water.

"Frost free," he said, pointing to the freezer. "Good thing to have in this city, otherwise you have to defrost the damn thing every two weeks in summer."

He emptied the glass without taking a breath and Amy filled it for him again.

"You might also want to think about getting bottled water," he said, wiping his

forehead with a kerchief. "D.C. water's nasty."

"I guess I'll have to rely on the fan for a while," she said.

"Yeah," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Sorry."

He gathered his tools and put them in his battered tool box. She held the door open and at the threshold he stopped and turned.

"It worked out," he said. "But you never know about next time."

"Excuse me?"

"Me and Talana. Last night," he said, turning toward the stairway.

"Yes, I suppose it did," she said, as he walked down the stairs and out of sight. She stood alone in the heat of the hallway. The odor of cumin and clove cigarettes lingered in the air.

She wanted to call his name. Instead, she whispered: "Nathan?" There was no reply. There could be none.

Downstairs, the Japanese girls laughed

2. The Sound and the Fury and Gin

Alone, she stood in the middle of the living room wondering where to start. Her shirt was drenched with sweat and her shorts stuck to her legs. She considered taking a shower, but it would be a waste of time. If only it would rain. Maybe that would chase the heat away. But even if it did rain, it wouldn't help. It would only steam up the streets like an eternal shower, fogging reflections in mirrors until you wipe the condensation away with your hand.

The smell of the clove cigarettes rose again. She imagined the Japanese girls downstairs, sitting on their porch, smoking the cigarettes without a bead of perspiration on their white foreheads. She was not built for this kind weather. She liked it when the air grew cold and the snow fell silent and slow.

While driving to Washington, she'd felt as though she was falling directly toward the equator. On the horizon she'd imagined the curve of the globe, the arched line of sky hugging the horizon. She had driven as though in a dream.

Standing in the living room she was paralyzed by the prospect of unpacking. She wondered which box held her alarm clock, which contained her towels, which held her underwear, and which contained Nathan's copy of *The Sound and the Fury*.

She'd hardly been able to think of anything else while the handyman toyed

with the broken air conditioner. It had weighed on her mind like a thousand pound albatross. The move from Pittsburgh was meant to help her forget, but the memories resurfaced as she stared at the boxes. She felt a need to hold the book in her hands, to decipher it. But she couldn't possibly read. That would involve sitting up straight and concentrating, and she couldn't possibly do that. Not with that book. Not in this heat

She unpacked a small table fan, but it did little more than stir the air. "God," she pleaded, as the blades worked up to speed. She drew her nose against the grille and pulled the damp t-shirt over her head. Then she slipped out of her shorts and took a step back to let the fan wash over her. The sweat dried across her stomach as it poured down her back. The clock on the kitchen wall said twelve noon - late enough for a drink, she thought. Luckily, the Tanqueray was in one of the boxes at the very top of the stack. She had arranged that on purpose and had bought a lime at Weisfeld's Market, the little store on the corner run by a Korean family.

Mixing a drink wouldn't require much energy, she reasoned. Slicing a lime would probably work her into a sweat again, but what's a Tanqueray and tonic without a slice of lime?

The tonic bubbled with the gin, pure and colorless, like faith. The cocktail clouded as she squeezed the lime above the glass and threw it in. The drink

fizzled and she thought of love, of the handyman and Talana, and Nathan

A piano concerto wafted through the humid air, and she wondered if the Japanese girls were playing their stereo again. The music didn't seem to fit.

Nathan had played it for her long ago.

She could not escape the past. This was her proof. Alone, mostly naked, she drank, listening to nocturnes for piano, the scent of clove cigarettes stinging her nostrils, with a drink in her hand at twelve noon.

3. Men and Love and Cars

She wanted to cry. She hated herself for wanting to. She hated Nathan. She'd always looked down on girls who mourned their failed relationships for months on end. "Don't moon over boys," her mother had told her when she was in high school. "Don't let them put you into a blue funk," she'd say. That was what she'd told her friends when they were paralyzed by their love-depressions. "Don't get upset over a *man*, for Christ's sake!"

"Men are like cars," an aunt had once told her. "At first they're strong and new and clean, but it doesn't take long before they start letting you down. In little ways at first, but they keep getting worse and worse, and eventually all you want is want to get rid of them." The aunt had been married for forty years. When Amy called that fact to her attention, she just shrugged and went back to snapping green beans and throwing them in the colander. "Life is full of shattered expectations. You learn to live with it," the aunt had said, coolly.

Her best friend from childhood, Amy Cutler, had broken off her engagement to a lawyer, 20 years her senior, less than a week before the wedding. She bought herself a new SAAB as a reward. She said it was the best idea she'd ever had.

Amy wished her life could be like Amy Cutler's. She wanted to have no regrets.

But she'd already made choices that would make regrets all together possible.

When she thought about it though, she'd still rather have a man than a car.

4. Love is Like a Fitted Sheet

When Nathan left her, she'd just about jumped right into bed with Michael. After the messy breakup, she'd only wanted physical contact. It had scared her at first, that `other' lurking inside of her who acted out of pure desire. She'd been so depressed, and yet she'd wanted contact, the touch of a man's hands on her body.

She wondered what Nathan was doing. What he was thinking at the very moment she listened to the piano drift on the air. She thought again of Michael, and winced. Why?

She had told her mother about Michael as they were folding laundry one afternoon just before she moved from Pittsburgh. Her mother had remained silent as Amy told her of the affair. She hadn't planned to tell her everything - of the physicality, her insatiability, Michael's almost embarrassed desire to satisfy her - but her mother had listened silently, folding Amy's father's undershirts. She started pairing off socks before saying anything.

"Love is like folding a fitted sheet," her mother had said, staring out the window absently. "You look at it and you think you can fold it neatly, but when you try, it's not that easy. The corners don't match, and if you turn the gather under, the whole thing looks messy. In the end, you fold it into something that looks like a rectangle and hide it under the other sheets in the linen closet."

It was the only time she had heard her mother say anything approaching the philosophical. If she hadn't felt so miserable at the time, she would have laughed at the beauty of her mother's analogy. Instead, she'd dropped the pillow case she'd been folding and started to cry. Her mother had held her hands at her sides looking at her husband's long black dress sock as if deciding whether to match it, or drop it and hold her daughter. After a moment, she'd put the sock down and held Amy as she cried

5. Ragtimes

The notes of a piano concerto floated on the humid air with more significance than the Japanese girls could ever know.

Nathan had once been an accomplished pianist, but abandoned it as their relationship deteriorated. Toward the end, she'd tried to coax him back to the keyboard, hoping it would make him love her again, hoping they would once again be the intimate lovers they'd been when he'd composed Joplinessque rags off the top of his head. She could almost hear those ghostly, lilting ragtimes. They reminded her of spirits dancing, the dead given breaths of life. The years since those nights were as long as lifetimes.

6. Caddy Smelled Like Trees

The gin clouded her head. She wanted to sit in front of the fan and read the Faulkner. The thought of reading, resurrecting Nathan, filled her with a sinking feeling. The book was a link. Every time she tried to read it, she felt a weight on her chest, a tightening; the same fear and expectation she'd felt as a child standing at the edge of the high dive gathering the courage to hurl herself into space.

She was compelled by the book, by its ragged pages and split binding. Nathan had literally thrown it at her. 'Why don't you read something with substance,' he'd yelled.

She'd hated his morally superior tone. Wasn't it he who'd squandered his talent, his gift? But then there was the fear she had been responsible, that it had been her fault that he had quit the piano. His mother blamed his unhappiness on her. In the end she began to blame herself too - that her fear that he would leave her for another woman finally compelled him to.

And what about Michael? Being with someone new left her feeling she was worth something. Nathan had once told her all men think with their penises. But hadn't she done the same with Michael? Hadn't she only wanted someone between her legs, who it was was not as important as long as there was someone there? Was possible she had?

She'd thought that once she had come to terms with it, she'd be able to walk away it all with no regrets. Now she wasn't so sure. She couldn't return to Pittsburgh. There were too many ghosts.

Now she was alone, with no air conditioning and surrounded by boxes.

She'd been so organized about planning the move. She'd planned where everything would go, mapped the floor plan out to scale, arranging little pieces of paper - bed, table, chairs, everything - moving them around like a schoolgirl arranging paper dresses on cardboard figurines. And now she stood almost naked, having a drink at twelve noon surrounded by boxes she hadn't even started to open.

The first strains of *The Firebird Suite* rose from below - a strange choice for the early afternoon, she thought. In the park, a homeless man lay in the shade of a tree. So many hopeless souls. So what if she'd never read Faulkner?

She looked again at the book. It was a hard cover edition that Nathan had borrowed from the library and never returned. At least once a week he'd come home with an armful of books, new and used. He was like a child unwrapping them, leafing through their pages as though he was examining a new toy, a penknife given to a son by a father - a wonder and a treasure.

In the middle of a horrid fight, he'd thrown the book at her.

"And what about the book?" she'd screamed, "You hold literature in such

high regard, then you steal your favorite book from the library and throw it at me.

Are you going to return it?"

He'd shrugged.

"You, the man who chides me for not respecting knowledge, the man who chewed out David for loving money more than he loves his own mother, *you* aren't going to return a library book?"

"It's public property," he'd replied.

"It is not, Nathan."

He'd laughed once bitterly.

"I used David's library card to sign it out."

She'd hated it, but she'd laughed too. How could she not have. David did love money more than his mother.

She held the Faulkner in her hand, tracing the binding with her finger. Opening it, she touched the words he'd written in the margins. His spelling was horrendous. "T's" were left uncrossed. "A's" weren't topped off and looked like "u's". She looked for some meaning in the notes, some message meant for her only, some kind of explanation.

The marginalia were maddening, they meant nothing. Somehow she thought she'd find a note written in unconscious bliss, one that read, 'Amy, how I love thee.' Instead there was a note about how Caddy smelled like trees.

She tried to read the first chapter for the hundredth time but couldn't. The words held no meaning. She was holding a part of him in her hands. It was as though he were standing over her, looking over her shoulder. She searched an underlined passage looking for something that looked important. She felt if she could break the code, she might understand what had passed between them.

It was a huge puzzle, one that even if she were able to solve, could never change what had happened. She knew that over time, the pain would lessen. She'd cry less often. She'd fall in love again. But she didn't want to.

7. Shame and Desire and the Japanese Girls Downstairs

Why had he turned to another woman? Lust? Was it a dilemma of confidence?

If she hadn't refused to see him afterwards maybe he might have returned.

Was it her looks? Over and over, she'd scrutinized herself in the mirror.

Her breasts were pendulous, her hips were too wide, her ass was too fleshy.

Nathan told her what the other woman looked like was irrelevant. But every time someone told her they'd seen him with someone else, she'd wish she had a different body.

After the first couple of months, the anger turned to relief. The pain lightened. Something changed. Late one night with Michael, she'd woken from a dream and coaxed him into making love to her. She remembered waking him, coaxing him to her, fighting the sleepy heaviness that controlled his body. She liked the fact that he was not quite awake, that she could languish in the feeling, in her victory.

The memory excited her, made her even warmer. She felt a tinge of guilt thinking of Michael- another mistake left behind. She took another sip of her drink languishing in the feeling that rose in her. She tried to remember a night with Nathan, any night, somewhere, anywhere. An evening at beach crept into her mind. She slipped her hand between her legs. The book fell to the floor,

startling her.

She was suddenly ashamed. She imagined someone watching. She imagined the Japanese girls holding clove cigarettes held between white thumbs and forefingers, watching and nodding in some cosmopolitan, approving manner. No one could have seen, but she was conscious of eyes watching. She wanted to recall memories of lovemaking with Nathan, to coax herself back into that warmth, but she wiped the sweat from her forehead and smiled to herself.

Pulling on a T-shirt, she laughed out loud, torn between guilt and desire. She thought of her friend Jenny in Pittsburgh. Jenny had slept with almost all the guys in the group at one time or another. Nathan had slept with her too, before they'd dated. After the break up, she and Jenny even compared notes. The other women in the group talked behind Jenny's back, but Amy admired the way she lived her life.

She wondered if her fiercely physical affair with Michael, had been just a cheap imitation of Jenny? She had tried some of the things Jenny suggested she do with him. She liked his surprise at what she did for him, the things she suggested.

Italian women say a woman should be her man's whore in the bedroom and his mother in the kitchen. Jenny liked so say "be a whore in both, let him buy you dinner if he wants a meal.

8. Sex and Shaving

Nathan's theory was that life was a series of great expectations dashed by the reality everyday life. He once told her that next to shaving, sex was the biggest disappointment in a man's life.

“You so look forward to the day you can shave, the day you become a man. But when you do, you realize it’s nothing more than scraping whiskers and skin from your face until you bleed. So you look forward to sex, because boy, you’ve heard incredible things about sex...99% of the guys you hear talking about pussy and about what such great cocksman they are, are just bullshit. They’re scared that if they don’t talk up their sex lives someone might think they’re queer.

“Ever have sex for a long time? It starts to get boring. You just keep going and you kinda start to get mad, you’re telling yourself, I’m gonna see this thing through to the end even if I’m not enjoying myself...”

He'd first had sex when he was twelve years old, seduced by the sixteen-year-old girl next door. He hadn't even known where babies came from, yet a sixteen-year-old had lured him into the basement of her parents' house and fucked him. What goes through a kid's mind to do such a thing? It was no wonder he felt let down by life.

Once at a Sunday brunch, sometime after the seventh or eighth bottle of

wine had been opened, he'd declared "Popular culture, MTV entertainment news and CNN, with their fifteen minutes of fame, is raising and lowering our expectations at the same time. Think about it- a kid falls down a well and the firefighter who rescues her becomes an instant hero. Two days later some sicko throws a kid in a hole and fakes the rescue just to get the attention."

Depending on the mood of the group, these pseudo philosophies were either hotly debated or cut off by the call to drink more and talk less. Looking back on those brunches, it seemed they had all been moving in a haze, their arms outstretched, groping for something they couldn't see.

9. Sweat Priorities

Pittsburgh was hundreds of miles away, degrees of latitude, sea currents away. Washington was as foreign as the moon. Outside of the three blocks around her apartment, she knew virtually nothing of the city. Only monuments, marble, damnedable traffic circles, and, in her living room- boxes.

She slit the packing tape of a box with her nail. Just cutting the tape covered her in sweat. She took another sip her drink. The gin and tonic was bitter. The glass left a ring of condensation on the cardboard. She drew a bead of condensation from the glass and traced the letter N on the cardboard. She began to write his name. Suddenly, she wanted to erase it but she knew that was impossible.

She felt guilty, dirty. She thought she could smell Michael. She felt wrong no matter what choice she made, a prisoner of her own conscience on a lumbering guilt trip from here to Timbuktu. But there was no going back. She was here

She had to sit on the floor and try to remember what was important, what needed to be done. She thought of the story about the man who wrote lists for everything. In the end he shot himself. Next to his body was a note - "Things to do to today: kill myself."

She laughed a wicked laugh that echoed off the bare floors and walls. She was flushed from the gin and the heat. Sweat poured from her pores without let-up. She needed water. She sipped her drink instead. Her hair stuck to her forehead and she brushed it back. It was too short to be put up, just long enough to put in a pony tail. Before moving, she'd cut off her long auburn hair as a symbol of her clean break. Stupid.

The "N" she had traced on the cardboard box had almost completely faded. Soon it would be unnoticeable. When she finished unpacking she would throw the box in the trash and that would be that.

She pulled on a fresh t-shirt and began to unpack. She put away pots and pans, dishes, spices, canned goods, utensils, towels, shoes, shoes, and more shoes, work clothes, casual clothes, sweats. She occasionally stopped to take sips of the gin. She rationed drinks - one for organizing coats and umbrellas in the closet, another for assembling the bed frame. She had no plan. She completed each task, took a sip from the glass, wiped her face with a dishtowel, and embarked upon another.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in passing. Her skin glistened with perspiration and was dotted with dust bunnies and dirt. She liked gliding through her new territory like a cat in a cage. Pacing, retracing her steps over and over, setting priorities in her mind, she remembered her own strength.

10. The Queen of The Playground

By three thirty she'd had enough of unpacking and poured herself another drink. The scent of clove cigarettes again wafted through the air and she felt the need to go outside. A hopeful notion crossed her mind - what if the heat were confined only to her apartment? But she recalled the woman in the park earlier futilely staring at the sky, and she knew there was no escaping the heat.

The cloves reminded her of parties back in college, of loud arguments about politics and literature, of love and sports, when everyone was high or drunk and it was like swimming in a tropical ocean with an amiable school of fish.

The scent of the cigarettes made her want to leave, run back, but she knew she couldn't. If she took a walk around, maybe she'd lose the feeling of impending doom that enveloped her

Standing in front of the mirror, she tried to make herself look less disheveled. It was too hot. Her hair was frizzed out. She put on a pair of sandals and a bra.

It seemed unimaginable, but the hallway was even hotter than her apartment. The stairwell reeked. As she stepped out the front door, one of the Japanese girls sat on the front step smoking a cigarette while holding an ice pack to her face. The white of the girl's eye was blood red, the flesh under the eye was

swollen a dark purple. The face she made, smiling and wincing, was as sad as anything Amy could have dreamed of. She smiled back bravely then turned to escape the vision.

In the park across the street a homeless man slept, snoring in a deep basso. Black flies buzzed over his head which he occasionally swept away with a restive brush of his arm. She walked past the police station and stopped to watch the children wailing in the playground bordered by its low black wrought iron fence.

The adults were segregated- white with white, black with black, while the children played, white and black intermixed in a whirl of noise. Two white women in business suits chatted, looking nervously at their watches. In a corner, a white earth-mother type tried to strike up a conversation with a pair of black nannies who gave her polite attention but little more.

Good for you ladies, Amy thought. Only one adult sat in the sandbox actually playing with the children. On a park bench three nannies in starched white dresses chattered in Spanish. Their complexions were dark and rich as coffee. She could not understand their tropical patois. The privileged white children raced about them and would continue to circle them, growing older, racing to private schools to discover the boredom of having everything given to them, and then slip gently into drugs, or worse, blind ambition.

The children ran and ran and ran as though they would never wind down. Their

bright clothes flashed through her mind when she closed her eyes. Their voices echoed in her ears, murmuring like the swells of the ocean, or like some night murmuring nurse, murmuring nothing perhaps, but murmuring. Opening her eyes she found herself staring at an immense black woman sitting on a bench at the far side of the playground. The monumental woman sat like a majestic queen, fanning herself with a small fan embossed with the name of a funeral parlor. She had been afforded the only seat with any shade, a splintered throne overhung by a sickly sycamore with limp, teardrop leaves. She was as dark as a starless night. Despite her girth, she had an air of grace and frailty of a woman lost in the isolation of her immense beauty and grace. She sat in her regal isolation, alone amid the wailing children. Amy could do nothing but watch them run circles around the stationary women. The blur of sound and vision made her queasy and she had to turn away.

11. The Pull of Tides

Crossing Fourth Street, the gin came up on her, the unpleasant taste stinging her throat. She shivered and stopped for a moment.

The brightly painted houses lining E Street paled in comparison to the colors of the children screaming in the playground. Windows and doors on the ground level were barred with intricate ironwork. Gardens were landscaped with annuals flowering in tended beds. Other yards were covered with lush ivy embracing beds of impatiens. The brick sidewalks lent to the feeling of having walked into another, more gentler time.

She turned down First Street through side alleys. She peeked in windows into parlors and sitting rooms. It was a finer world than the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. There was a sense of southern charm to the houses, quiet seclusion. Within a few city blocks were the Capitol public housing.

She felt sheltered, secure, empty in her gin haze. The heat permeated her skin. She thought of water, deep green and cool. She turned back to E Street, debating whether to return to the apartment. She thought again of the water and continued on.

At South Capitol Street the neighborhood changed. E Street led to the power station. An immense pile of coal rose beside the steam-spewing plant and

ran under the highway like a barren mountain range. Above, on the highway, cars and trucks thundered by. She crossed under the highway, her back to the marble of the Capitol office buildings. Ahead, blaring neon signs advertized fast food restaurants and gas stations. The neighborhood grew seedy. Traffic sped past her. No one walked the streets.

At I Street she turned in the direction of the river. One side of the road was lined with tenements. On the other were an elementary and a junior high school. Grass sprouted from between cracks in the sidewalk in front of the brick tenements. The walls were scrawled with graffiti. In the unmown schoolyard, two young men exchanged money for drugs. Old men and women watched her walk the crumbled sidewalk. Mothers holding babies on their hips stood in tenement doorways. On the highway, trucks rumbled by unceasingly, downshifting, roaring like dragons. Rising above the school in the distance, the power plant spewed steam high into the sky- cumuli-strata that obscured the Capitol rotunda.

An old woman stared blankly from behind a decaying screen door, her eyes clouded by cataracts. In the shade of their front stoops, people fanned themselves.

The hot breeze carried the stench of the river at low tide. She could feel the distrust in the eyes of the people who watched her. She tried to hide her fear.

She must have looked like a crazy woman wandering the streets in the middle of the June inferno. The thought of the river kept her on her way.

She did not know what would be waiting for her there. Before she'd moved, she'd looked at maps, at the tidewaters and estuaries of the Potomac. She imagined the water could cure her, soothe her. She was pulled in its direction.

As she waited at a corner the traffic light to change, a Jeep with dark tinted windows rolled up next to her. Music pulsed from the rear of the vehicle, shaking the ground. The driver's side window rolled down.

"Hey baby," the voice called to her. "Wanna do the nasty with some fine ebony? Ever go down on a black man, hey baby?" She could see the smile of someone sitting in the passenger seat. "Whadda you say my fine lady?"

"No thank you," she said, staring at the car like a child possessed. She hoped to see someone coming to her rescue. The streets were deserted.

"No thank you?" the voice asked. "Damn girl, this ain't the queen's own castle."

She laughed nervously. "No, I guess not." She rocked from side to side, a ticking metronome. Time crawled by painfully, roasting in the cruel sun, hip-hop music pulsing from the back of the Jeep.

"You ain't from around here. I can tell that," the voice said. He shook his head.

The passenger in the Jeep showed his teeth again. The light changed. "All right,"

he said, laughing. "All right," he repeated, rolling up the window, driving off in a squeal of rubber.

12. The Man-Wide World

Her hands shook. A ringing in her ears varied in a phase dance. It took her a moment to recognize the sound - the voices of children playing. She felt immense relief. It was the last thing she'd expected to see or hear.

In the schoolyard, boys and girls chased each other. A boy fell on the crumbled blacktop, and instead of crying, stopped to examine the cuts, then rose to join the game again. Amy locked her fingers in the chain link fence and watched.

The children were playing a game of tag. Once one of the players was caught, he turned on the others, yelling some unintelligible cry. A dark skinned girl broke from the game and ambled to where Amy stood.

"Hey lady," she said.

"Hi there."

"Whatcha you watching for?"

"I was thinking of a game I played when I was a little girl."

"When was that?"

"Oh, a long time ago." Amy replied.

"Oh," the girl said. "You got any babies?"

"No I don't."

"You gonna steal one of us? `Cause if you do my daddy will find you and kill you."

"No," she said, crouching down to the child's eye level. "I don't want to steal you. I was just watching you play."

"You smell like the liquor, just like my grandpap. He drinkin' all the time." The girl paused for a moment and wiped her forehead with her hand.

"What games you play when you was a little girl?"

"Oh, I don't know. We just used to run around for the fun of it."

"That's stupid. That's a stupid game. Your game *gots* to have some kind of meaning. Else it ain't a game."

"I guess you're right," Amy replied. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The girl curtsied and smiled broadly. "Now you stay away from the liquor," she warned, her brow knit in a serious expression.

"I will," she promised.

The boy who was "it" tip toed behind the little girl.

"You're it!" he screamed, tagging her, running in the opposite direction.

The girl rolled here eyes.

Boys," she said. She smiled at Amy with all the knowledge of the man-wide world they shared, and with a weary acceptance, turned to return to the game

13. Don't Need A Weatherman to Tell You How the Wind Blow

She continued toward the river. At seventh street, she turned south, walking in the shade of high rise apartment buildings with security guards in their glass-enclosed lobbies. Rising above the tenements, the luxury apartments afforded their tenants water views and panoramas of the Capitol and the Mall. Only when they drove out of their fortified buildings did they see the foot traffic, the destitute and the poor.

From what she had seen, Washington was unlike any city she'd known - a city of masked division. Parks with nurtured grounds, roped off grasses and marble monuments hid the decrepitude of the city. The high rise apartments with their water views, hid the tenements behind them, another mask, another lie.

Restaurants lined Maine Avenue with views of a narrow boat channel, their glass enclosed dining rooms and outdoor patios perched over the still water. She could imagine tourists pouring into them never realizing the lights they saw were sparkling off the fetid water of the boat channel rather than the cool, wide Potomac.

They suffered the fate of every restaurant boasting a view - all vista, lousy food. It could have been a Howard Johnson's in Kansas City if you took away the view. One of the restaurants was skirted on three sides by a deck. If she wasn't

going to see the Potomac, she was determined to look at some water, any water. She ducked under the chain barrier and ventured onto the deserted deck. Leaning over the railing, straining her neck, she could see the confluence of the Anacostia and the Potomac rivers in the distance.

Something crawled onto her finger, and she swatted at it. A spider escaped between the planking of the deck. She'd ripped half of its web. She hated spiders, but she felt sorry. The spider would begin to reconstruct its trap within minutes, but she felt guilty anyway.

Still, there was the dilemma of getting to the river itself. There was no walkway along the boat channel leading to the river. To the north, the channel came to a head where the highway crossed over the narrow peninsula that separated the channel from the river itself. Sea gulls screeched above the bridge and the highway.

"Hey lady, the patio's closed," a man wearing a chef's outfit called with a heavy Jamaican accent. "You gotta go inside to da bar if you want a drink."

"Sorry," she replied. She felt light headed in the sun. She stumbled. The chef caught her and offered his arm in a gentlemanly manner, leading her inside the restaurant.

"Maybe you don't need a drink," he said.

"I'm unaccustomed to the heat," she said.

"Oh, yes. De heat will get you if you not used to it," he replied.

Inside, the air conditioning almost bowled her over. The perspiration on her forehead chilled instantly. She shivered.

"Take a few breaths," he said watching her. "Yes, dat's good."

She smiled wanly.

"Nester know what you need," he said pointing a finger to the ceiling.

"Mango juice," he said, turning toward the bar.

"No thank you..."

"No lady, you drink this," he said, pouring a glass. "It'll do you good."

He slid it in front of her.

"It'll make you feel much, much better."

The juice was warm, heavy as molasses. It was all she could do to finish.

The chef looked on with great expectation.

"It's very good, thank you," she said.

"See. You feel better?"

"Yes," she lied, her stomach was churning.

"You get used to the weather, you see." He smiled confidently. "You wonder if it's going to rain, eh?"

"Yes."

"It gonna rain tonight."

"The weatherman said..."

"Oh, the weatherman he looks at a computer and get everything wrong. It's gonna rain tonight. You'll see."

"I hope so..."

"I know so," he said placing his index finger on his wrist. "Lady will forget what's troubling her. You'll see."

"Thank you," she said.

"And lady," he said still smiling. "Maybe go easy on da gin."

She smiled wanly.

"Der's nothing, Nester don't know. Gotta go now," he said, nodding his head enthusiastically. "Gotta go work for `de mon.' De mon," he repeated, laughing as he headed towards the large swinging door to the kitchen.

The plush carpet cushioned her steps as she headed to the exit. Outside it was agonizingly warm. The mango juice roiled in her stomach and she had to stop and catch her breath before moving on her way.

14. Dead Fish in the Dead of the Afternoon

At the north end of the channel the smell of decomposing fish was overwhelming. A marina was filled with moored sailboats and motor cruisers. Even larger boats lay in anchor in the channel. A few large motor yachts moored in the waterway were as big as small hotels. A man in a suit carrying a bag of groceries and a briefcase hurried along the wharf. He struggled with his load as he stepped onto a boat's deck. It would be nice to live on a boat, she thought, but she couldn't believe the smell. Her gut tightened as the gin and mango juice mingled in her stomach.

Towards the bridge, gaily colored fish stands floated on barges in the channel like an outdoor carnival. Baskets filled with ice spilled over with fresh seafood of every variety. The colors were as dazzling as the smell was overwhelming. Mangy-grey men stood behind bushels of crabs and fish laid out on ice. In the water below, dead fish and crabs floated. Gulls flew crazily overhead calling in a wild dance.

"Come on baby," a toothless vendor called to her. "You look like you could use a good dose of the crabs!" He held two handfuls of squirming crustaceans. She tried to smile at the gaunt unshaven man. His skin was so white it was gray. His grizzled face reminded her of hawkers on the carnival midway,

rough and shaped by a world she could not even imagine. In the blackened teeth he showed as he laughed with his co-workers, she saw everything that was not of her world. It was as though they could see right through her, see her weaknesses and fears and laugh at her as the fish hawker laughed at her.

He lifted a crab and it pinched his rubber-gloved thumb. "Fucker," he yelled, pounding the crab against the railing as the other men laughed. The crab fell to the water, its claw still clutching the gray man's glove. He pried it from his thumb, examining it as though he had never seen a crab claw before.

"Son of a bitch," he said in Amy's direction, but she was gone, heading up Maine Avenue, hailing a taxi and hoping to get home before she threw up.

II. AMY

Sonata for the Kite Man

1. Rain

The rain came as night began to fall. In the twilight, the wind picked up and the leaves on the trees had flashed their light green underbellies. Her mother always said when the leaves flashed their pale underbellies, it was a sure sign of rain. It never made sense to her, but she said it aloud as she unpacked the remaining boxes.

"Gonna rain, the leaves say so," she said. The leaves on the willow tree rattled like muffled castanets in the austral light preceding the rain.

She had a sour taste in her mouth, a mixture of vomit and gin. Drinking cool water and sponging her forehead with a damp cloth, she watched the twilight come in yellow and red. Heat lightning flashed in advance of the storm, and for the thousandth time, she had asked aloud for rain.

The Jamaican cook at the restaurant had promised it would rain. When the first warm drops began to fall she felt giddy. She fixed herself another drink and wiped the sweat from her forehead as the rain dotted the pale gray paint of the porch.

Standing by the screen door, she watched the rain splash on the low wall running around perimeter of the balcony. The rain fell in sheets, bouncing off the pillars and dripping off the plants on the neighbor's half of the porch. She stepped

outside and sat on the little wall. The willow at the corner of the building danced in the wind and the rain. It was comforting, like the gin. The fragrant aroma of wisteria rose in the night. Petals from magnolia blooms flew by like loose pages from a book, and some stuck to the railing.

She thought the prayers left by pilgrims at Buddhist shrines. Maybe she would build her own shrine and paste pieces of paper to it with prayers to the gods to grant her something other than the dull empty pain she felt.

The neighbor's porch door opened, startling her as she envisioned the shrine she would erect in her bedroom.

"Hi there," a man said behind her back.

She touched her hair before turning to her neighbor. "Hi," she said, "I'm Amy," extending her hand.

"I'm Ben," he said, taking her hand. His grip was firm and he looked her straight in the eye. A tabby preened itself in the shadows just inside the door.

"The fat cat is Toby, and my wife Jules is somewhere in there." He stood still for a moment, examining her. She looked away, self-conscious of his stare.

2. Jules

"You picked the worst week of the summer to move, the hottest so far," he said looking at her as though he was examining a show horse, moving here and there to appraise her from different angles.

"I'm not used to it yet," she said. She sensed eyes inside the apartment watching, someone moving about.

"You're not from around here then?" Ben asked.

"No, I moved here from Pittsburgh."

"Pittsburgh's a nice city," he said, idly sitting in one of a pair of wicker rocking chairs.

"It is, but was happy to leave," she replied.

He nodded his head as he rocked back and forth. His styled blond hair was too blonde. His teeth had been bonded and his eyes were a piercing blue. He was deeply tanned, but his skin was very fresh looking. He did not perspire.

A tall, beautiful woman walked barefoot across the wood floor inside the apartment. At the screen door she paused trying to readjust the strap of her sun dress which had fallen from her shoulder. She carried two glasses that were beaded with condensation. Ben stood and opened the door for her and she shrugged her shoulder trying to finesse the strap back to her tanned shoulder. Her

eyes were deep brown and her black hair was twisted into a thick braid that hung between her shoulder blades.

"Jules, this is our new neighbor," Ben said, taking a glass from her hand. She slipped the strap of her dress to her shoulder then took Amy's hand, shaking it as firmly as Ben had.

3. Life Among Ebersols

Jules examined her as studiously as Ben had. Crazy neighbors would just make my move complete, Amy thought. Maybe they were hedonists like the Ebersols, who had lived next door to Amy Cutler, her best friend in high school. The summer when they were sixteen, they'd sat on the hill behind the Cutler's house watching the curtainless windows of the Ebersols' split level, as they performed amazing sexual feats.

Sometimes the Ebersols were joined by another woman or by several other couples - once ten people in all. She'd silently watched while Amy Cutler giggled and lit joints. Some nights the Ebersols played dominant submissive games. On other nights their enormous bed became a writhing mass of flesh - arms, legs, asses and breasts. The marijuana had intensified her unease, her every nerve ringing on end. She'd never felt as excited and embarrassed as then. Ben said something to his wife about Amy being from Pittsburgh. Jules reminded her of Amy Cutler, who had turned out almost as wild as Mrs. Ebersol. She detected the same wild spirit of Amy Cutler in Jules. She was as fascinated by her as she was repelled by Ben..

4. "So, What do You Do?"

"My father's from Pittsburgh," Jules said. "We used have to out go there every Christmas. I hated it."

"It's not my favorite city either," Amy said.

"What do you do?" Ben asked abruptly.

"I work for a photographic stock group."

"Did you do that in Pittsburgh?" he asked.

"I was a photographer's rep."

"Isn't that the same thing?" he demanded.

"Reps market individual photographers. Stock groups have images in a library they own the rights to, and market those images."

"Whatever," he said motioning with his hand as though shooing away a bothersome fly. "So the former congressman from Paducah dies and you supply the mug shot, right?"

"Kind of," she replied.

"Those pictures remind me of the photos they run with the wedding announcements in the Post." he said. "In college, my fraternity brothers and I would pick out the barker of the week."

"Barker?" she asked.

"The ugliest bride."

"You guys were a laugh riot," Jules said dryly.

"College was a gas," Ben said. "It was undeniably the best time of my life."

"Thanks," Jules said.

"You were there too."

"And I'm not here now?"

"You certainly are here," he said, taking her arm and kissing the back of her hand. "That's why I drink." Jules took her hand back and slapped him.

"Just for that, mix me another drink," she said. "Would you like one Amy?"

There was an ache between her eyes. She was tired. Her mouth was dry.

"What are you drinking?" she asked.

"Anything you want," said Ben.

She hesitated then said gin and tonic.

Ben smiled at her for a moment, then headed back into the apartment.

Suddenly the rain didn't seem so fine.

5. Love and Lying

The night was still warm and humid, but the rain that touched her skin was cool. She caught Jules staring at her. She and Ben both watched her the same way. Maybe she had picked it up from Ben. But his gaze was much more direct, as if he knew he was being rude and didn't care. Jules' stare was one more of curiosity.

"Do you want a slice of lime?" Ben called from the kitchen.

"Yes please," she shouted. She was surprised by the thinness of her own voice.

"Thanks for asking if I wanted one," Jules called.

"Whatever," he replied.

Jules rolled her eyes.

"Sometimes I can't believe I love him."

"I heard that," he called from the kitchen.

"Bitch," he muttered.

"Prick." she said.

Amy sat as still as possible.

She hated loud outbursts or angry exchanges of words. When she was a child, she was always appalled when her friends' parents fought in front of her. Sometimes they'd ask the children who they thought was right. Her parents never

bickered in public, and she refused to argue with anyone in public.

Ben pushed the door open with his shoulder. Placing Jules' drink on the table in front of her, he shot her a quick, cold glance.

"Thank you," Amy whispered.

"Yes, thank you," Jules muttered.

"Welcome," he said, turning on his heels, marching back into the living room.

Jules shook her head and took a long pull on her drink. Amy tentatively took a sip of hers. It was mostly gin with only a touch of tonic.

"Tell me why you're so unhappy," Jules said.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"You're not a very good liar."

"I'm a terrible liar."

"It takes a good liar to tell a good one from a bad one," Jules said.

"I'm a lousy liar," she replied.

"I'd rather be a bad liar than a great one."

"It *is* a distinction though..." Amy said.

"Great, they can put it on my grave stone." Jules replied acidly." She winced. "Sorry," she said. "So, tell me about the man in Pittsburgh."

Amy was silent.

"Remember," Jules cautioned, "I know when you're lying..."

"Always?"

"Yes," she replied. "That's why he gets like that." She pointed over her shoulder. "Poor boy, he's had to live with it for ten years."

"People learn..."

"People never learn," Jules replied.

"Never?" she asked.

"Never."

6. The Kite Man

Jules slouched in her chair. "I'm drunk. I turn into a schleprock when I get drunk. I depress people when I drink. Please don't let me depress you," she pleaded.

"Too late," Amy said.

"Oh don't say that. Please don't say that." She took Amy's hand. "Don't. Let's not get depressed. The rain's too fine for that."

"Don't worry. You make me feel better just being here," she lied.

"I'll take your word on it," Jules said.

There was a spark of recognition in Jules' eyes.

"Tell me your sad story," she continued. "I love sad stories."

"It's not sad, it's pathetic," Amy said.

"Then does involve a man."

"Of course," Amy replied.

Jules laughed a throaty laugh.

"He was..."

"No," Jules interrupted. "Don't tell me the same story the same old way. Tell me a beautiful memory you have of the two of you together - one that doesn't depress you or make you think of all the things you should have said or done."

Something simple, a memory, a sunny day..."

Amy hesitated.

"No thinking. Just go," Jules demanded.

"On sunny afternoons we'd go to Schenley Park and lay out in the sun.

Students from the universities would gather on Flagstaff Hill and drink beer and play frisbee. Sometimes Nathan and I would go there and stay all day long. He used to love to watch the kite man."

"The kite man?" Jules leaned forward.

"He was a professor who flew kites on his lunch hour. He had a different kite each day of the week. He'd take off his shirt and listen to music on a Walkman. Sometimes he'd smoke a pipe, just standing there flying his kites, his belly hanging over his belt. I don't know why I remember this, but the hair on his head was peppered with gray but his chest hair was milk white.

"Nathan loved him. He was like a little boy when the kite man walked out of the science building and crossed the grassy slope. Sometimes Nathan would help him get his kite aloft. They'd exchange a few words while looking at the kite, then climb the slope without words. Nathan would run down the hill holding the kite above his head, and, once it was airborne, he'd slowly walk to where I lay, watching it soar into the sky. I'd just want to hold him then. His face was always full of such wonder. I want to hold him the way you want to hold a child and

wish he'll never grow up."

Jules stood, facing Amy, staring out at a point somewhere over her shoulder. She took a long sip from her glass, swallowing absently.

"There are times when you can forgive them anything. Maybe once or twice in a lifetime. Maybe."

"More," Amy said.

"More?"

"Many times more."

"Maybe you're right. I'm not sure."

"I've thought a lot about the kites," Amy said. "Not so much the kite man, but kites. I've decided love is a lot like flying a kite. The kite relies on two things to fly- lift and tension. The wind supplies the lift and the person holding the string controls the tension."

Jules leaned closer, intrigued by the idea.

"Who's which?"

"I think the instinct for love is always there, like the wind. I could have fallen for Nathan's friend David just as easily as I fell for Nathan. I thought I fell in love with this guy Michael who I was involved with before I left Pittsburgh. The wind usually blows, it's the person who holds the string that's crucial.

"If you don't give enough slack, the kite veers out of control. Children do

that a lot. They get scared the kite will take off on them, so they keep too tight a reign. The key is to give the kite enough slack to soar. The trouble is, if you have a lot of slack and the wind drops off, the kite falls. The trees on Flagstaff hill are littered with broken kites like Christmas trees covered with holiday ornaments.

Jules smiled.

"This is my favorite part, though," she continued. "Your instincts tell you that since the kite seems to fly freely, you could cut the string and it would fly on forever. You kind of hope for it to happen but without tension, it's impossible."

"It's a nice thought though," Jules said. "Sad."

"It is," agreed Amy. "Both."

7. Love, Hope, Despair

"What is it about you that makes you so sad?" Jules asked.

"I'm not sure," Amy said. "I tell myself to snap out of it, and I do for a while, but it never lasts. I just want to curl up in someone's arms and just say nothing. But there's no one to hold me."

The rain continued to fall, the humidity was thick enough to grab and hold. Stray drops of rain fell to her shoulders.

The cat jumped to the window sill, sniffing the sweet, warm air that played on the curtains. A police car screamed down the street heading in the direction she had walked earlier in the day.

"Probably another shooting," said Jules. "It would be terrible to die in the rain."

"I don't know," said Amy. "To have the rain be the last thing to touch your lips would be beautiful."

"Not a kiss?"

"Not a kiss." Amy shook her head. "Too many implications."

Jules let out a low laugh.

"The kiss of death."

"Yes." Amy laughed.

Jules drank deeply from her glass. A drop of the gin rolled down her cheek, dripping onto her dress. A piano etude drifted on the air from inside the apartment. In the darkened living room Ben settled into an armchair. She could feel his stare. Jules turned and looked over her shoulder at the darkened room. Ben stood and walked out of Amy's line of vision. The music grew louder. Jules shook her head.

"He can be such a child. I used to think I loved that in him. Now it's just a pain in the ass."

Amy listened as the rain mingled with the faint tinkle of the piano, imagining her Buddhist shrine encrusted with pink and yellow prayer notes.

"Life would be very empty without him," Jules said, staring at her empty glass as though she didn't recall having emptying it. Standing, she swayed and fell back to the wicker chair.

"Why?" Amy Asked.

Jules licked the rim of her empty glass.

"Why what?" she asked, turning to Amy. "Why would my life be empty without Ben?"

"Why do we think our lives would be empty without someone. It seems so childish."

"I think," Jules said, again trying to stand. "It's got a lot to do with what

you said about not having someone to hold. Not fuck, or make promises to, but just hold."

"I didn't say..."

Jules continued.

"Wait." Her words were slurred. "This is fucking deep. Only in the absence of those holding arms can we really understand the loneliness of love.

"We," she turned, almost losing her balance, "we are alone in what we call love, alone in what we feel is love." She paused once again trying to work her logic through. "But, two individuals experiencing their own separate feelings of love in the same room, at the same time, in each other's arms, is...well, whole."

Amy laughed one throaty laugh.

"That is sad," she said.

"I'm drunk," Jules laughed, sitting back down on the chair. "Sad, but drunk. That's what love is though. I surprised you with the `fuck' there didn't I?"

"It caught me by surprise."

"I think it's a good word for it. It's such an empty word." She raised her glass. "F-U-C-K, Fuck."

Ben laughed from his seat in the living room.

"Hallelujah," he said.

"Come out here and sit with us," Jules called. "Don't brood in there all

alone."

Ben rose from his chair.

"Bring a pitcher of water. If I don't sober up now, I'll hate you in the morning."

Ben laughed and trudged to the kitchen. Jules and Amy listened to the rain and the sound of Ben running the water in the kitchen.

"He hates me," Jules whispered. "His little mistress told him they couldn't go on any more, that he didn't love her enough. And now he's mad at me for it."

"Oh," Amy said, not really wanting to know.

"When we were first married, we had an understanding. We could sleep with whomever we wanted, for what ever reason we wanted, which we figured could be quite useful in this city, just as long as we didn't bring it home with us.

"The problem was we were lying to ourselves that it didn't hurt knowing we were screwing people we both knew. I gave it up years ago, but he thought he'd have another go at it. I even caught them fucking in our bed a couple times, which is definitely against the rules." She paused and smiled at Amy. "I bet you're wondering why I'm telling you all this when I've just met you."

"Well..."

"I just don't care. I don't not care about Ben's little missies, mind you, I just don't care that I've just met you and I'm telling you all of this. I'm drunk and

I'm happy I'm drunk, and I envy you."

"Envy me?"

"Because you're so sad, and you just let yourself be sad and you look so pretty. I get mean and ugly when I get sad. I look like a scarecrow when I get drunk and sad and mean. I hate it."

"You're beautiful," Amy said. "I wish I looked like you..."

"A woman's envy," Jules sneered. "I hate that."

The words struck her like a slap in the face. She felt pathetic. She hated herself for letting her guard down.

"I mean," Jules said, softening. "I hate that kind of envy I, we feel for each other. I envy you for your courage for walking away."

"He left me," Amy whispered.

"It doesn't matter," Jules snapped. "Who left who doesn't mean shit. When all is said and done, you left him. You left a secure life behind you, your friends, your past. That takes courage."

"I don't feel courageous."

Jules sat up in her chair. The glassiness was gone from eyes. "In the long run courage is a relative thing. As a kid you learn about courageous people in school and you say, whoa, I wish I was that strong. What they don't tell you is that those brave people had the same self-doubt and hate for themselves we do."

"I'm not sure," Amy replied. "You think?"

"I hope they do," Jules laughed. "Else we're fucked

8. The Rats of St. Helena

"Back in college, my friend Tracy and I would get roaring drunk and scream anything that came to mind," Amy said. "Mostly we yelled about men."

"As good a subject as any," Jules commented.

"She has this terrible on-again-off again relationship with this guy Tim who's a total shit. He tortures her, shoves things in her face - his lovers, his dominance, everything. He's physically abusive, but she always takes him back."

"They always tell you to learn from your mistakes, but you never do."

"It's amazing, how people hurt themselves over and over again," Amy said.

"You know you shouldn't, but you do anyway. But the times you get up and say, 'okay, I'm not going to do this again,' those are the times when you get things done. It's like you get a window into yourself. You see things the way they are. Maybe it lasts for only a minute or two before you fall back into the lies you tell yourself, but at that moment, it's an epiphany, I guess."

Ben opened the screen door and set a pitcher of water on the table. The rain continued to fall steadily, soaking the trees in the park across the street.

"I think I'd rather keep telling myself lies," he said almost wistfully. "I think denial is important."

Jules looked at Amy, biting her lip. She poured water in Amy's glass, then in her own.

"The people in history you were talking about," he continued seriously, "they didn't learn from their mistakes. They overcame their self-doubt by denying it. They just got right back onto their horses and tried again. Look at Napoleon. He tried to conquer Europe and he failed. They exiled him and he came back and tried it again. He almost succeeded, but he made the same mistakes, and they exiled him again. He died on St. Helena plotting to do it one more time again. He didn't give up."

"He was syphilitic," Jules said, smiling at Amy.

"Among other things," he replied testily.

It was silent except for the sound of the rain. Amy drank deeply from her glass. The water was ice cold, it hurt her head, but she gulped it down.

"I was watching a show on public television the other day about islands," Ben continued. "They had a segment about St. Helena. The entire island was once covered with dense forests which the colonists totally decimated. Now it's barren except for one single tree hanging onto a remote precipice."

Jules took his hand and kissed it, then placed it on her heart.

"While they were cutting down the forests," he continued, his voice now more scientifically disinterested, "rats from their ships made landfall and ran

rampant on the island, so they set cats loose to kill the rats. Once the rats were killed off, the cats began killing off the native birds who might have otherwise brought seeds from other islands to reforest the island. To add to the problem, the cats multiplied without the threat of predators and began to attack the islanders' sheep."

"I've got to pee," Jules said getting up from her chair. She stretched her arms, then touched her toes. Ben patted her rear end. She giggled and slapped his arm. He looked at her with a devilish grin. "If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, you can forget it," she said. "I'm going to sleep like a rock tonight."

Ben smiled and shrugged at Amy. He watched Jules wind her way through the living room.

"So, what do you think of my nutty wife?" he asked.

"I think she's great," Amy said, knowing she sounded like a teenager defending a less than perfect friend.

"She is," Ben said, reaching into his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes. He offered one to Amy. She declined. He lit it with a slim lighter.

An uneasy silence fell between them. Below, the door to the building opened and the Japanese girls ran through the rain to a waiting BMW, chattering all the way.

"Are they the ones who smoke the clove cigarettes?" Amy asked.

"They're the ones," he said, shaking his head. "They yammer all day long, then roar off at night in skimpy little outfits. Jules thinks they're high-priced hookers imported to entertain Japanese businessmen."

Amy laughed.

"Do you think they are?"

"Who knows," he said, shaking his head. He tapped his cigarette over the rail of the balcony. "Those Japanese can be pretty kinky though."

Once more, it was silent, and Amy thought of the lone tree on St. Helena, and of the prayer notes left at Buddhist shrines. The scent of clove cigarettes lingered in the air.

9. The Trouble With Men and Women

"In college the artsy students smoked clove cigarettes," Amy said trying to make conversation.

"I was wild in college," Ben said. "I got good grades, but I was wild."

"Do you ever wish you could go back?" she asked. "Be that age again?"

"Man I had a ball in school," he replied, "but I wouldn't want to be nineteen again. I can't stand those guys who talks about college like it was the best time of their lives. It's pitiful when people think the best's behind them.

"If I learned anything in college," he said, "it was not to lose. Winning is what it's all about, really. My father tried to instill it in me from the time I was a kid, but when it's forced on you like that, you don't really take it to heart. I guess it took being away from the old guy for me to understand what he meant. I love winning more than anything else I know." He paused for a moment and shook his head. "Jules doesn't understand that."

"I was raised to not make a fuss, don't make a scene," she said.

"That's a healthy attitude," he said caustically. "I mean, where does laying off get you? I think parents who teach their kids that are doing them a huge disfavor."

"Do you think telling a kid that winning is the only thing in life is much

better?" she asked. "No one likes a sore loser.

Ben ignored her, lost in thought.

"I think, no I know my father loved me. But he didn't know jack about kids," he said. "If I was feeling down, he'd get in my face and growl, 'get out of that blue funk. Go outside or something.' To him, going outside was the best possible therapy, especially if you didn't wear a coat. My mother would try to catch us before we went out in our shirt sleeves, but I remember more than a few winter days walking around with my father freezing my ass off."

"My mother calls my depression 'blue funks' also," she said. "It probably has something to do with their generation."

"Perhaps," he replied, not really listening. "That's the problem," he said, staring off into space. "You can know yourself better than anything, but sometimes it's hard to get someone else to understand. Jules and I fight like dogs and cats sometimes, and it's so frustrating because I know what I feel, and I know what I want for the both of us, but something gets lost in the translation. It's like a wall between us that we can see through but can't get over. I don't know," he continued. "Maybe I'm getting to soft."

"I wouldn't worry," she said, trying to reassure him.

"Do you think it's funny," he asked.

"No, not at all," she replied, trying hard not to smirk.

"Why do women think men are too full of ourselves, that we're selfish jerks, then bitch when we don't stand up for something they think is important?"

"The old double standard," she said, trying to sound serious.

"Yes," he said. "It's ridiculous..."

"The problem is that men want women to be rational like them but also want them to be sexy and womanly." she said.

"Yeah but," Ben interjected.

"But what? Which would you rather have to deal with in your office - a ditzzy woman who wore skin tight dresses, high heels, and had the intellect of a snail? Or a tough, aggressive bitch who thinks like a man?"

"That's an unfair question," Ben said. "There's got to be something in between bitch and whore."

"Sure," she agreed. "But more often than not, women feel that they can't win either way. Take lipstick for example. If you think about it, lipstick is stupid. Why paint your lips? Most women do because they care about how they look. It's important to them. My old boyfriend, Nathan, used to accuse me of dawdling in front of mirrors putting on lipstick. But if I didn't have any on he'd ask me why. Now you tell me, does that make any sense?"

"You just said yourself that it's important to you," he said.

"Whether or not it's important to me isn't what's at stake here. The point

is that men are just as ambiguous about it as women are, but they always seem to be of the opposite opinion when it becomes an issue."

"That's so typical to blame the man," he replied angrily. "Every time, that's the women's defense - turn around and blame it on men."

"I'm blaming it on human nature. It's like Avery said to me today. You know, Avery the fix-it man?"

"Yes," Ben replied, annoyed. "He probably told you Mrs. Sellers is a lying bitch."

"Yeah, he did."

"He tells everyone that," he said. "What other pearls of wisdom did Avery share with you?"

"He said it's not often when two people really communicate."

"That Avery is deep," Ben said angrily turning to watch the rain.

10. Amy on Wing

Jules called Ben from inside the apartment. She was bent over a low bookshelf playing with the stereo. The room was dark. She didn't bother to turn on a light. She crouched, resting on the balls of her feet like a baseball catcher, her knees spread as far apart as her dress would allow. She'd pulled her hair out of the braid and it hung over her face, brushing the floor as she toyed with the stereo.

"For Christ's sake Jules," Ben called from the porch. "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to..." her words were drowned out as Beethoven blared from the speakers and into the warm night. After a moment, she turned it down.

"What are you trying to do?" Ben asked again.

"I'm trying to turn switch to..." she stopped in mid-sentence as the music ceased. "How do I get the radio?" she asked.

"Do you see the knob on the left?" Ben asked.

"I turned that one last time and the music got loud," she called, her face hidden in her long hair.

"Left, not right, Jules," he said. "Thirty-seven years old and she can't tell her left from her right."

"Do you mean the one marked selector?" she asked, pulling her hair

behind her ears.

"Yes. Flip it to `radio.' Got it?"

"Now there's no sound," she said.

Ben sighed.

"You turned the volume all the way down Jules. You remember the knob on the right? That's *right* not left..."

"I know," she replied, toying with him.

He sighed.

"What's that oldies station I like when I'm drunk?" Jules asked.

"The oldies station?" Ben called.

"Yes, the one that plays disco."

"102.4 I think," he said, rolling his eyes heavenward. "She gets nostalgic when she gets drunk," he said.

The strains of "Have You Ever Been Mellow," wafted through the air. Jules stood in front of the stereo, swaying to the music. The song faded and another began.

Amy remembered dancing the shuffle with her brother in the foyer of her parents' house to that song. She must have been eleven or twelve at the time. Her parents had gone out for the evening and her brother turned the stereo up and they'd danced before he went out with his friends. Closing her eyes, she could see

him in his bell bottoms and platform shoes. That night seemed impossibly far away. It could have been a scene she'd seen in movie. But she was the skinny girl who danced with her brother that evening. The distance scared her.

"Amy?" Ben asked, facing her, his back to the porch door. "You have no idea how much I want make love to you..."

"Honey," Jules called from the living room. "Come dance with me."

"I can't help it...I want you..." he whispered insistently

"Honey," Jules called again.

Amy stared at him.

"It wouldn't have to mean anything," he said.

"I...I," she stuttered. "I..."

He frowned

"Whatever," he said, turning to go inside.

Another disco song came over the radio and Jules and Ben danced the hustle. The music was much too slow for the dance step and Jules leaned back laughing, arching her back. Her hair brushed the floor as Ben held her arms.

Amy pulled her knees to her chest. She thought of Ben's proposition. A shiver down her spine. She should have seen it coming. She was mad at herself for starting to think he wasn't so bad after all. She should have trusted her first impression.

She watched the rain fall on the park. The rain didn't seem to do anything to lessen the humidity. The air was still syrupy and warm. Jules laughed a throaty laugh and Amy turned to watch them again.

They danced well. She thought again of dancing with her brother in the foyer of her parents' house.

They had moved from that house back when she was still in college. She no longer had no place to call home anymore, no reference points left at all.

She felt a thousand miles away from Ben and Jules. As they romped around the room they occasionally stopped to kiss or touch. It was as though she'd suddenly disappeared. For the first time in what seemed like a lifetime, she was cold, colder than she could ever remember.

She wanted to close her eyes and rise, floating, gently rising above the porch; soaring above the apartment where Ben and Jules danced close to one another, lost in their vanity; she'd fly out in the warm evening rain, soaring over Marion park where homeless men drank malt liquor hunkered down beneath a tree in the rain, sitting on the park bench where the titanic maid-queen had sat earlier in the day; she'd glide over the quaint, old houses of the neighborhood, the tenements by the highway and the high-rises overlooking the boat channel where the fish market was closed for the night and rats swam in the water scavenging among putrefying fish; she'd fly over the Potomac and continue on, soaring higher

and higher without a sound until she could see the curve of the globe itself; and perhaps she would descend momentarily to gaze at the house where she grew up, down the street from Amy Cutler's house; and next door to the Ebersols where the lights in the master bedroom were darkened early for a quiet night, the Ebersols now pushing their seventies, gently sleeping, dreaming perhaps of younger days; and she might even descend over Pittsburgh, to the house where she and Nathan had lived; and she would glide above the city maybe seeing Michael or David or perhaps not seeing anyone at all before once again rising high into the sky, soaring silent and alone.

She did not want to open her eyes. Because she knew if she did, she would hear the disco beat, see Ben and Jules dancing in the darkened living room, and maybe even catch Ben looking at her over Jules' shoulder, confirming that she was, indeed, alone.

III. NATHAN

The Brunch of Fools

1. The Brunch of Fools

It was ten degrees cooler along the banks of the Ohio River than it was in the rest of Pittsburgh. A haze lingered over the muddy river as it flowed past warehouses and under steel-trussed bridges. From Ohio River Boulevard, Nathan could see black men fishing along the shore. He took his eyes from the road for a moment and glanced at Kim in the passenger seat. She stared straight ahead in a daze. Her hair flew in the wind, dancing wildly. She turned and smiled.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

A troubled look crossed her face.

"Let's see if I've got it," she said. "There's Dave..."

"Always call him David," he interrupted. "He hates `Dave.'"

"Okay. David and Suzie, they're married. Right?"

"Yeah. They're the hosts"

"Then there's Jenny. Who's she going to be there with?"

"Who knows," Nathan said.

Kim frowned.

Nathan smiled. They came to a stop at a red light and he touched her bare shoulder. A strand of her long curly hair touched the corner of her mouth. Her

shoulders were soft. He was always surprised by how soft her skin was. He felt good, though not truly happy. The light turned green. Kim smiled a full-lipped smile. She was beautiful. He felt young.

"O.k., who's left?" she asked, running her fingers through her hair as she did when she was nervous.

"Tracy..."

"Right, Tracy. We met her at Doc's that one night. Upstairs at the bar on the roof. Right?"

He nodded.

"She's at the graduate school for government people at Pitt, and has that on-again off-again thing with Tim but is also sleeping with a guy in her program. Or is that Jenny?"

"It's not the school for government people, but yes, it is Tracy." He laughed at the notion of Jenny in grad school. "Graduate school is the last place you'd find Jenny, unless she was hunting men. She barely got through her bachelor's degree."

"Barely," She poked Nathan in the ribs with her finger. "Good pun. Jenny, 'the slut' *barely* got through college."

"Who told you her nickname?"

"Who do you think?" she asked.

"David?"

She nodded.

"He's really awful, you know," she said.

"Yes, I know."

"But there *is* something likable about him."

"Yes," he agreed again.

"I'm going to get so confused trying to keep everyone straight. I wish I wasn't meeting everyone together for the first time this way."

"Why?"

"Because they're all used to seeing you with Amy at these things."

He was startled by the mention of Amy's name, at the way Kim brought her up. It was a calculated move on her part, he could tell.

"They're all going to look at me like I'm some hussy."

"Hussy?"

"Yes, Hussy." She crossed her arms and pouted, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

He smiled and kissed her hand.

"You're no hussy. Don't worry."

He couldn't remember who exactly had chistened their Sunday get-

togethers the "brunch of fools." They had been holding them more or less regularly since college. But the players had changed so often, it was hard to remember who'd said what about whom.

They'd started casually- just bagels and drinks between friends in college. In the years since, they'd become highly orchestrated affairs. Scheduling started in January with weeks of negotiations before the schedule was set.

Summer was always been especially troublesome, and this year was no exception. Only two brunches had been held in the span of three months. With summer ending, things had begun to settle down. Now he was attending Sunday brunch accompanied by someone other than Amy for the first time.

"Do you find me attractive," Kim asked, breaking his train of thought.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Of course I do. You're beautiful," he said, trying not to sound condescending.

"I wonder when I'm around your friends. Like Suzie. She has this...lightness about her, like you wish you were her."

"You shouldn't. Being married to David has aged her ten years, and they've only been married three."

"She seems to so great despite David. She has a perfect body."

"Really?" he asked.

"Oh come on, you know she does."

"I've never really noticed," he lied.

"Women notice things like that."

"I think you have a great body," he said.

She smiled and kissed him.

"I do love your body," he repeated.

"That's very sweet," she said. "But don't you see what I'm saying?"

"Not really. Look, my friends aren't so great. You don't have to prove anything to them."

"I have to prove I fit in."

"Nonsense," he said, turning his head toward the river. He did not feel like having this conversation.

2. The Plot Thickens

"What are you thinking about?" Kim asked as they drove by the antique shops and luxury car dealerships of downtown Sewickley.

"Things." he said.

"Oh," she replied, raising an eyebrow. She smiled then checked herself in the mirror on the sun visor.

He turned onto the long drive leading up to David's estate, feeling nervous. They drove under a thick canopy of sunlight dappled woods. Suddenly the trees fell away and they emerged into bright sunlight. An expansive emerald green lawn rose towards an enormous manse. Kim checked herself in the mirror again, combing her hair with her fingers. Nathan patted her hand to reassure her.

When he killed the engine, voices drifted on the breeze from behind the house.

"Let's go see who's who," he said as they walked along a flagstone path. In back, a large spread was laid on tables under a striped awning,. It looked like something out of *The Great Gatsby*. But David was no Jay Gatsby. He wore an oversized sports coat with a white t-shirt and baggy trousers. A gold chain hung around his neck and snaked under his shirt. He was thin and not too tall, somewhat less handsome than he thought himself.

Suzie was another story- five feet six or so, with long curly hair, a slight body, small chest and a striking, dark face. She stood at the edge of the patio in the sunlight talking with Jenny, who was decked out in a white flowing dress and a Scarlett O'Hara wide brimmed hat.

"Kids!" David beamed, approaching them with outstretched arms.

"Morning David," Nathan said, too robustly.

David offered his left hand, and they awkwardly squeezed hands in lieu of a handshake. David eagerly kissed Kim's cheek.

"Beautiful spread," Nathan said.

David almost glowed.

"Yes, yes. The gardener just put in those...oh hell...Suzie, what are those plants called?" he asked pointing to a newly planted bed.

"Which?" Suzie asked, approaching with Jenny at her side.

"The new ones."

"Pachysandra, I think," she said, waiving her hand as though she didn't give a damn. "Kids," she said. They shook awkward "David" handshakes and kissed without touching each other's cheeks. Jenny followed and did the same.

David took Kim's arm and led her toward the patio. Nathan turned to Suzie and Jenny.

"Well, it looks like I'm stuck with you two."

"Stuck?" Jenny complained.

"Well," Suzie said in a mocking, haughty voice.

"Bert Parks would be lucky to be stuck with you two," he said. He took their arms in his and hummed the Miss America song as they strolled toward the house.

"You like this little `menage-a-trois' don't you," Jenny said.

"Jenny! What a mind you have," Suzie mocked.

"I love her for her mind," Nathan said. The women laughed. "So Jen, who's the stud this week?" he asked.

"Nathan! Suzie exclaimed.

"You know him, actually," Jenny said, taking her arm from his. She skipped to the porch and loaded a toast point with caviar.

"She brought Michael," Suzie whispered.

"Michael?"

"Michael Hirsch," she replied, stopping, waiting to gauge his reaction.

He dropped her arm and stopped.

"You can imagine how shocked I was when the two of them waltzed in here," she whispered.

"Did she sleep with him in college?" he asked.

"No," she replied, looking at him as a teacher might look sadly upon a

dumb student. "But she slept with a lot of people in college. This is our Jenny we're talking about here."

"Let's not get too judgmental," Nathan said.

She smiled forcibly.

"We're hardly ones to talk," she said, gently and patting his hand.

"I just can't understand..."

"You never know with Jenny," she said. "Let's try to enjoy the day.

Please don't spoil things, okay?"

"Sure," he replied.

"She's been seeing him for three months. Exclusively I might add," she said, watching him watch Jenny.

"Exclusively?"

"I think she really cares for him."

"Hmm..."

"I know you guys call her the slut. She knows too."

He didn't tell her it was David who had coined the phrase, though she probably knew that too. He collected himself then took her arm again. With her other hand she wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead.

3. Enter Confusion

Tracy stood off to the side looking as though she didn't know what to do with herself. There was no sound except for the light clink of ice cubes clinking together as she swirled her drink in her glass.

"Tracy, why so glum," Nathan asked. "You look lost."

"Life sucks," she replied, raising the tumbler to her lips.

"Bourbon?" David asked.

"Damn right." Her words were slurred.

"Starting early," someone whispered. David laughed. Suzie glared at him. Jenny turned her head, trying not to laugh.

"Oh," Tracy muttered, "Tim called and said he'd be a while."

"Did we tell you? Suzie asked no one in particular. "David gave Tim a job at the Sewickley restaurant."

"Really," Nathan replied. "That was good of you."

"Yeah, mighty white of you David," Tracy said.

"What?" David exclaimed, holding his arms wide. "He didn't have a job, so I gave him one. What's wrong with that?"

"As a waiter?" Nathan asked.

"Bar back," he replied.

Jenny laughed.

"What's so funny?" David asked, though he too was smiling.

"Talk about the fox guarding the chicken coop," Jenny said.

"It's not funny," Tracy interrupted. "He's a fucking genius, and he's stuck working at one of your cheesy restaurants."

"Cheesy!" David exclaimed angrily. "I don't have to take..."

He stopped abruptly as Michael stepped from the living room onto the patio.

"What?" he asked, holding a drink in his hand.

No one said a thing. Kim glanced at Nathan with a questioning look.

Jenny stepped forward and took Michael's hand.

"Nathan, you know Michael," she said.

"Yes. How are you Michael?"

"Uh...I'm o.k.," he replied. As far as Nathan could tell, Michael was as surprised to see him as he was to see Michael. They shook hands awkwardly and Michael glanced again at Nathan as Jenny introduced him to Kim. Sensing something was wrong, Kim cordially shook Michael's hand.

4. The Naked Women

Nathan mixed a Bloody Mary for Kim. Jenny seized her as soon as he handed the drink to her. Together they stepped into the sunlight. David took Michael for a tour of the grounds and Tracy and Suzie engaged in a conversation Nathan wasn't exactly jumping to be a part of. He watched Jenny and Kim standing in the sunlight in the middle of the yard.

Jenny's virginal getup was as comical as David's GQ outfit, but more ridiculous. Somehow David was a lovable putz, a jerk sometimes, but a likable jerk. Jenny had no qualms about who she was and how she lived her life. He could respect that, but the white dress and the stupidly stunning hat wouldn't have fooled the Pope.

It was almost troubling to notice the physical similarities between the two women as they stood in the sunshine talking. You could have mistaken them for sisters. They had the same physique, though Kim was the taller of the two. Both had tanned shoulders, though Jenny was fairer in color. They shared simple, elegant facial features - slight noses, sensitive eyes, quick smiles. Both were long in figure, though Kim was more lithe. Jenny was bustier, more curvaceous. Kim had a natural grace about her while Jenny seemed almost ill at ease standing there on the expansive lawn in her white dress. Kim's long chestnut hair hung off her

shoulders in large curls, while Jenny's dirty blonde hair fell straight to her shoulders. They were both no-nonsense women, Both beautiful. And for some reason, he remembered the last line from a Cheever story: "I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea."

5. Angels, Cherubs and S & M

"David, honey," Suzie called from the lawn. "Maybe call the restaurant and see if Tim is on his way."

"Fuck him," Jenny called. "I think we should eat."

"Sure fuck him, whatever," Tracy said bitterly, waving her hand, wandering toward the woods. Suzie glared at Jenny, who shrugged her shoulders. Suzie followed Tracy and turned her around as if she were an errant toy robot. Tracy looked at Suzie as though she didn't recognize her.

"What's the deal with Tracy," Michael asked him.

"She's..."

"They're all so fucked," David commented, trudging across the patio like a little boy assigned an unpleasant task.

"Tracy can smile in a way that makes you smile too, even if you don't feel like it," Nathan said.

"She's always been nice to me," Michael said.

"I think she's reached the point where she hates being sweet," Nathan said.

"Jenny told me about her and Tim," Michael said.

"Yeah, there's a sick relationship for you, but I think she kind of invites it on herself, like maybe she's trying to wipe away the sweetness."

"That's uh, creepy," Michael said.

"Yeah, but it doesn't work. She always reminds me of the cherubs that flutter around playing harps and blowing trumpets in religious paintings."

"Jen says she can only get off on, like, rough sex," Michael said.

"Really?" he asked, stunned.

"You didn't know?" Michael asked. He laughed. "I guess I shouldn't have told you."

"No, I guess I knew," he replied.

"It always kills me when you find out something about someone that goes against everything you imagine about them," he said.

"I guess you can never tell," Nathan replied, still stunned.

"Yeah, I guess," Michael said, teetering on his feet, gravitated to Jenny. He caught her eye and she smiled broadly, waving him over. "Excuse me," he said, already half way across the lawn.

Nathan watched him make his way to Jenny. He was classically handsome. He held himself erect and pushed his chest forward a bit when he walked. If you didn't know better you'd think he was cocky.

Amy and Kim and even old ladies in synagogues told Nathan he was handsome, but he felt plain next to Michael. Though Michael had a large nose, it fit him. His dark skin seemed permanently tanned. He had a full head of curly

black hair that was somewhat unkempt, and large brown eyes, topped by bushy eyebrows that met at the bridge of his nose. A smile seemed to be permanently plastered across his lips. He seemed easy to please and eager to listen.

Nathan had known him a bit in college. Though they'd known each other on a first name basis, they hadn't been good friends. They'd run in different circles.

How Amy met him was still a mystery. He didn't even know what Michael did for a living. It didn't surprise him that Amy fell for him, though. She liked to joke that she had a thing about Jewish men.

He watched Michael and Jenny together on the grass. He thought he detected an expression of dependence flash across Michael's face, that he'd really fallen for her. Watching the two of them together, he thought about Michael and Amy and Tracy and S & M and chuckled to himself. You never know. He shook his head again and turned to the bar to mix himself another drink.

6. This Life, This Love, This Tangled Web

Jenny and Michael stood in the middle of the lawn apart from the rest of the group. She stood behind him with her hands in his pants pockets. She did something and he turned quickly, knocking her hat from her head.

He stooped over to pick it up and she jumped on his back. He pretended he couldn't carry her weight and fell to the grass. The others picked at the buffet table, but Nathan watched. David stopped at his side. "Grass stains," he said, with a malicious look in his eye as Michael and Jenny wrestled on the lawn.

"Turn a hose on 'em," someone shouted. Jenny looked back at the porch and gave them the finger. Nathan laughed.

He turned his gaze from the yard.

"Don't ignore me," Kim whispered, approaching with a loaded plate. Her tone was one of both good humor and warning. She fed him a large chunk of mellow. She kissed him.

He refreshed his drink at the bar. Michael sauntered in from the yard and poured a gin and tonic for himself. Nathan took a few steps from the patio and Michael followed.

"Look, I didn't come here just to piss you off," he said. "Jenny said you haven't been hanging around much recently."

"Look, I don't blame you," he said. "Jenny, on the other hand, should have known better."

"Better than what? Do you think she should have thought twice about getting involved with me just because of Amy? He paused and sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Maybe we both should have thought it through a bit more."

Nathan looked at him.

"Forget it." he said.

He watched Jenny listening to Suzie- who, most likely, was scolding her for bringing Michael. Kim picked at the buffet table with David.

"I know you slept with her," Michael said. "I'm not naive."

He couldn't help but laugh.

"We're all naive..." he said, not knowing what he really meant.

7. The Ghost of Amy and Irish Setters Past

Kim approached the two men. "Try the lox," she said to him. "It's unbelievable."

She fed him a small piece.

"Mmmm," he murmured.

The fish melted in his mouth. Michael smiled at the two of them.

"David said there's a flock of geese at the pond," Kim said. "Come on, let's have a look."

"O.k., let's," he replied cheerily, knowing something was wrong. They walked along a flagstone path. Every few steps she tore another piece of salmon and fed it to him.

"It's David, right?" he asked.

"Yes. He asked me to go to bed with him."

"Made a pass at you, or asked..."

"He just casually asked if I'd consider going to bed with him." She shook her head.

"I'm surprised it took him this long."

"Do you think it's funny?"

"No," he said turning to face her.

"Did he ever proposition Amy?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Repeatedly."

"What did she do?"

"She said she's treat him like a little boy who had just asked for something he wasn't old enough to have."

She was silent. They walked toward the pond. Ganders paddled their way along the shore, occasionally pulling at the tender grass along the bank. The goslings followed in a single line. The adults hissed at them when they approached.

"I'm not enjoying this," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "My friends are assholes."

"I don't care that they're comparing me to Amy," she said. "But I hate it when I know I'm competing with her in your mind. I hate it when I know you're thinking about her." She stopped, looking at him with a mix of anger and sorrow and what might have been love.

"I know get catty sometimes," she continued. "But it hurts having to measure up to her all the time." She stopped and sighed. "Look, now I'm whining. I hate whiners."

"You aren't whining. You're right. I've been unfair." He crouched and pulled a fist-sized rock from the moist earth by the water's edge. For some reason he wanted to throw it at the geese. "It's just that, it's..." he said.

"What," she asked. "Talk to me Nathan, it's me." She took his hand and looked him in the eye. He felt like a school boy.

"It's not you, it's me." He sighed, debating whether he should tell her. "It's just that Michael and Amy were...after Amy and I... Look, it's my problem I've got to deal with it myself."

"Nathan," she said dropping his hand. "Do you think I didn't know. Come on."

"It's my fault..."

"It's not your fault Jenny and Michael are seeing each other," she whispered angrily. "But I'm not going to soothe your ego just because Amy didn't come crawling back to you wanted her back." She shook her head. "I think I respect Amy more than I respect you."

"Thank you," he said, looking straight at her. She held his stare for a moment then turned toward the patio.

He watched the geese quietly paddling in the muddy water. He crouched, tossing the stone in the air, feeling its heft as it landed in his palm. It was almost perfectly round, slightly larger than a tennis ball. It reminded him of the ball he and his Irish Setter Jimmy had played fetch with when he was a boy. That dog was as stupid as any he'd ever seen, but he was the most lovable dog he ever owned. He'd throw the ball and the setter would never tire of retrieving it. The

felt was completely ripped from the ball and it was always covered with saliva and bits of dirt and grass, but Jimmy wouldn't play with any other ball.

Nathan stood and cocked his arm to throw the rock, dropping it behind him as he followed through. He used to do that with Jimmy. He'd loved it when the setter would snap his head in the direction the ball should have gone, only to look back at Nathan in confusion. He'd look back in the direction in which the ball should have gone, then back at Nathan, back and forth a few times then begin to whine. At that moment, he Nathan would have taken an Irish Setter over a woman any day of the week.

8. The Book of Love

Tim walked onto the patio from inside the house, squinting at the bright sunlight.

David slapped him on the back in greeting, almost knocking him over from the force of it as the others greeted him heartily.

"God. You guys are sorry-assed mother fuckers if my arrival is the high point of this party," he said.

Jenny shook her head. "Asshole," she muttered.

"Listen you fuck," David said, "we're happy `cause we finally fucking get to eat." He smiled broadly looking around for approval. He received none.

"Schmuck," Jenny muttered.

"Oh, here, here!" Tim said as though the patio was the House of Commons. "Jolly good, Jennifer. *Schmuck*. I must remember to note your brilliant commentary."

"Food!" Nathan exclaimed, trying to diffuse the situation. "Why don't we all just grab a plate and...eat. He picked up a plate and began to load it with food. The others followed.

"Yes food!" Tim bellowed. "What a wonderful idea." He stopped abruptly as he caught Kim staring at him. He stared at her, then approached with an outstretched hand. "I'm Tim, pleased to meet you. I'm an asshole."

"Yes I've noticed," she replied flatly.

"You must be with Nathan. I can just tell. I just know it. Am I right?"

"Yes," Nathan said.

"Nathan," he said, turning to face him. "Could you please tell me why such beautiful women attracted to such a tight ass like you?"

"Take a look in the mirror."

"Oh, I'm hurt. I really am," he said, stumbling and holding his belly as though he'd been run through with a sword. He stopped abruptly and stood up straight with a laugh. "Want to know why I'm late?" he asked, spinning around on one foot. "I was supposed to be working the Sunday brunch at chez fucking David. But I fooled them. I hid behind the dishwasher and drank a whole bottle of Vodka. Stoly, I think it was. But I can't read because I'm an ignorant dish washer."

Tracy approached. "Come on honey," she said.

"Oh fuck you," he hissed. "Why do you always stick up for me?"

"Because I'm an idiot," she said standing the middle of the patio, utterly defeated.

"Hear, hear." Jenny shouted. "Only an idiot would stick up for him." She walked over and hugged Tracy, leading her toward the house as she began to cry.

"Christ," Michael chuckled, in disbelief.

Tim spun around to face Michael.

"No, I do not think I'm Jesus...Jesus! Michael Hirsch! What the fuck are you doing here? Are you and Nathan comparing notes?"

Michael's eyes bulged. He stared over Tim's shoulder at Nathan.

"I gotta work this one out," Tim continued, turning again. "The hot brunette is with Nathan, and Michael's gotta be with Jenny, and Nathan fucked Jenny, and..." he turned once again to face Michael. "Have you screwed Barbie Doll over there?"

"No," Michael whispered.

"Well if you had, boy, you and Nathan could write a fucking book." He cackled. "A fucking book. Get it?"

He turned to Nathan.

"A fucking book!" he said with his arms outstretched. "Nathan, you and Michael have been down..."

"Shut up," he said coldly.

"Why? Have I offended your..." he did not get the chance to finish his question. Nathan hit him squarely in the jaw.

"Jesus," Michael said again, with an embarrassed laugh.

"It's not the first time," Nathan stated flatly. He felt good.

Tracy rushed out on to the patio. "Did you hit him again?"

"Yes," Nathan said.

"He broke his nose once," she said to Kim as she leaned over Tim.

"Twice," Nathan corrected her.

Tracy crouched next to Tim. Someone brought a bag of ice from the bar, for his jaw.

"It's not broken," Tracy reported.

"Put him on a chaise," David said officiously.

"I think he has to puke," Tracy said. "I don't want..."

Suzie turned to Kim and tried not to laugh. "The last time I saw him this drunk, he threw up all over Tracy. It really wasn't funny," she said, holding her hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh. Michael helped guide Tim into the house.

"Don't take him to the powder room," David called after them.

"Who cares," Suzie said. "No one uses it anyway." "Yeah but it's got the nice wall paper." David whined.

"Oh for christ's sake," Suzie replied. "You are an old lady. Do you know that?"

"No I did not know that," he replied tersely. "It's not as though you tell me every other day."

"Well, you are," Suzie replied, approaching him, her anger softened.

Pushing an errant hair from his forehead, she smiled at him, cupping his cheek in her hand.

"I'll go in and check on them," he said, kissing her before sliding the screen door open.

After a few minutes David returned to the porch, followed by Michael and Tim who held a bag of ice to his jaw.

"O.k. he's had his puke, and we're all fine now," David reported. Michael looked more serious than he had before, and a bit confused. He looked around for a moment, his eyes readjusting to the light. He seemed to be shocked to see Jenny standing there on the porch in the white dress. Rubbing his eyes he approached her as though he had just woken from a deep sleep.

9. Table Manners

They helped themselves to the buffet in a single file line. Nathan loaded his plate with bacon & eggs and a bagel with lox, cream cheese, onions and capers. He added a bowl of fruit salad with cantaloupe, honeydew and watermelon, apple and orange, grapes, cherries, and kiwi fruit. He knew he was engaging in buffet overload, but so was everyone else. Tracy got a plate of fruit for Tim, though he looked too pale to eat.

"You'd think we've never seen food before," Nathan said.

"This is the way it should be," David said, placing mimosas above each place setting on the long table. Michael started to take a seat but Jenny stopped him.

"First we have to figure out the seating order. Couples can't sit together," David informed him.

"That way you can't play footsie under the table and ignore everyone else," Suzie added.

"In Jenny's case we usually have to put her at one end of the table and her date at the other," David added.

"Shut up!" Jenny exclaimed.

"She loves it," Tim said, rising from the chaise longue.

"It's alive," David said.

"Barely," he replied. He sat back down for a moment, holding his head.

Kim glanced nervously at Nathan.

It took him a moment to remember David had made a pass at her.

"Why don't we have the two newcomers sit together," he suggested.

"Great," David said. "They can talk about how fucked-up we are."

Michael shrugged.

"You're not *that* fucked up," Kim said.

"Well..." Michael said.

Nathan managed to get Tim to sit next to Kim, figuring he was too weak to give her much trouble. Jenny sat next to David who sat at the head of the table. Nathan sat next to her. Next to him was Tracy. Michael sat in between Kim and Suzie who sat at the other end of the table.

They slid easily into conversation. Nathan glanced over at Michael and Jenny caught him.

"It's not because of you," she whispered. "Okay?"

He tried to tell if she wasn't lying. She touched his hand. "I really like him," she said.

Nathan was tempted to say something nasty, but instead told her he was happy for her. He hoped it sounded sincere. She seemed to think it was.

Tim tapped his ice pack on a glass.

"I have a toast to make. It's more of an apology, I guess. I'm sorry I acted like a fool earlier. I guess I was feeling sorry for myself."

"Apology accepted," David said.

"There's more asshole," Tim said, smiling.

"Timothy!" Suze exclaimed, half-jokingly.

"Sorry," he said.

Everyone laughed, even David.

"I especially want to apologize to the newcomers. The rest of you are used to seeing me act like an ass."

"It's o.k.," Kim said. "I've been called a Barbie doll before."

"I meant it as a compliment!" he said enthusiastically. He winced and sat back in his chair. "No really, when I was growing up I had the hots for Barbie. Not that I have the hots for you..." he winced, shifting the ice pack on his jaw.

"Someone help me get my foot out of my mouth."

"Nath, take Tim's foot out of his mouth, will ya," David said.

"Why not, he put his fist in his face a couple minutes ago, for christ's sake," Tracy muttered. Her words were slurred. "First Nathan beats up Tim and now we're one big happy group."

"He did not beat me up," Tim insisted, winking at Nathan. "He was

lucky."

"No way jose," Nathan replied.

"I deserved it," said Tim.

"I really am sorry Tim," Nathan apologized. "But you were acting like an asshole."

"That's my role, asshole. You know that. Straight out of central casting," Tim said, rising from his chair, smiling.

Nathan kicked his chair back and put his fists up, weaving and dodging imaginary punches. Tim raised his fists high in the air.

"Stop it," Tracy said, "It's not funny."

Nathan smiled at Tim.

"Takes one to know one," he said, shaking Tim's hand.

"Takes one to know one," Tim repeated.

"Amen," Jenny said.

The men sat down again.

"I guess you're right. It isn't so bad," Tracy lied. "It's just considering everything..."

"Considering everything, Tim and Nathan haven't been half the asses they're capable of being," Jenny said.

Tim smiled weakly. "I'll try harder next time," he said.

"Come on," Suze said. "Let's not start..."

"No," David interjected. "Maybe we should. Let's ask Michael if he thinks we're being fake here."

"Well..." Michael started. "It's certainly been, um..." he looked to Jenny for help.

"Fucked up?" she suggested.

"Well...yeah," he said, laughing, nervously. "Kind of."

"It's par for the course," Suzie said.

"Well above par," David added.

That seemed to settle it for the moment, and they ate. The awning fluttered in the slight breeze. The patio was bathed in a greenish light. A fly buzzed about, landing on a chunk of melon on Nathan's plate. He watched it as it scurried to and for, pausing for a moment, rubbing its forelegs together waiting for him to strike.

10. Still Life: Cantaloupe with Mayfly

At the other end of the table, Michael and Suzie were hotly debating.

"You can't let it go, can you," Jenny whispered.

"What?" he asked.

"Michael," she replied. "Just because he screwed Amy after you did."

"Very ladylike Jen," he replied.

"That's what it is, isn't it? I've been with enough men to know..."

"You can say that again."

"Don't forget. That includes you..."

He smiled. He had no smart reply.

"The great equalizer," he said. He sighed. "I can't help it Jenny. I can't help the way I feel. Look at me," he said, holding his hands in front of him. "I'm shaking, and I don't know why."

"As I recall, you shake when you get excited."

"Like a French Poodle," he said hiding his hands under the table. "It's pathetic."

"It's sweet," she said smiling sadly. "I like Amy, I really do, but all that's water under the bridge now." She looked him in the eye. "Try to be nice to Michael."

"Sure," he replied, trying to sound reassuring.

"What are you two whispering about?" David asked. Kim looked at Nathan with a questioning look.

"Michael," David warned, "you better watch out with Jenny."

"Why's that?" Suze said, glaring at her husband icily.

"She just might fall in love with him," Tim said. "She'll settle down, have a couple kids, join the PTA, become a Girl Scout leader..."

"No fucking way," Jenny insisted.

Everyone laughed, even Michael. The fly landed on Nathan's plate again.

IV NATHAN

Rondo: Summer Descending

1. The Curse of Predictability

The sun began to redden the sky. The geese were raising a ruckus, flapping their wings and honking. Nathan and Kim stood on the bank of the pond, holding hands watching the sunset. He felt queasy. Her hand felt good in his. He was happy not saying anything.

"Suzie says they go crazy like this every day at sunset," she said, absently staring at the birds. "She goes inside and hides under the covers because she can't stand the noise."

"They probably think the sun will never come back," he said.

"Bunch of chicken littles," she said.

"Chicken geese," he said.

They both laughed, absently.

"Stupid," said Kim.

"Hmm." He turned, drawing her to him. They kissed. She was beautiful. She was the kind of woman that as a little boy, he'd imagined he'd fall in love with and marry. But he felt unsatisfied, unsettled. He was tired. For months, it seemed, his head ached constantly and something always seemed to be stuck in the back of his mind. He still thought of Amy. Even while holding Kim. At one time in his life he thought he could love more than one person, but he knew now that he could never hold more than one precious thing in his heart. How could he be sad with the afternoon sliding gently into dusk, a beautiful woman at his

side and surrounded by friends? Even a cynic couldn't help but be touched by the beauty of solitude. But in silences like these he felt most vulnerable. Even in Kim's presence. Especially in her presence. The geese settled uneasily on the far bank of the pond. Were they so wrong to fear the disappearance of the sun? Shouldn't we pause to question the certainties of life that summer will turn to autumn; that geese fly south for the winter; that Tracy and Tim will, inevitably have a knock out, fall down fight when either one or both are drunk, followed by one or the other (sometimes both) throwing up? And like the geese honking at the sun, once these disturbances quiet down, you almost forget they ever happened at all. He turned, pulling Kim with him. They walked barefoot through the cool grass.

"Why don't we pull a chaise onto the lawn?" she suggested. "We can cuddle."

"Sounds nice," he replied, stopping for a moment.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know," he lied. He wanted to see if she would go over the patio and pull a chaise out onto the lawn herself. Why he wanted this he wasn't sure. She smiled uneasily.

"You're weird sometimes," she said. He smiled and kissed her forehead, then headed to the patio. He sulked toward the chaises lined up against the house, and thought about the scene earlier on the patio.

Tracy had thrown up on David's newly planted pachysandra, setting off a

predictable chain reaction. David over-reacted, yelling and screaming about his plants. Suzie was upset by David's reaction and angry at Tracy and Tim for the spectacle they'd made at her brunch. Jenny had laughed, and Michael standing beside her, maintained a look of absolute bemusement throughout. Nathan wished for something different. Something not entirely predictable. Maybe that was why he didn't immediately fetch the chaise from the patio. Sometimes Kim surprised him. Other times, however, she did exactly what was expected, as though it was her role. He also knew that he wasn't the most spontaneous person in the world. As Tim liked to remind him, he could be a real tight ass.

2. Earlier That Afternoon...

Tracy threw up in the garden. Tim laughed as she knelt on her hands and knees emptying her stomach into David's flower beds. When she finished retching she pulled herself to her feet and punched Tim in the nose. The blood gushing through his fingers, he paced in small circles repeating, "I deserved that, I deserved that."

"We are so fucking weird," Jenny repeated as Suzie rushed to Tracy's aid.

"Speak for yourself," David snapped.

"My brand new pacis...pacis...what ever the fuck they're called...they cost two thousand bucks to plant..."

"Pachysandra," Suzie shouted from Tracy's side.

"What?"

"The fucking plants are called pachysandra," she hissed.

"Whatever," he snapped. "At one hundred dollars per man hour to install..."

"You plant pachysandra, you don't install them," Michael said.

"What?" David yelled.

"Plant, not install," Jenny repeated.

"For two thousand dollars they can do whatever the fuck they want! The point is, as if anyone cares, Tracy's puking all over them." He shook his head in disgust. "Everyone's a smart ass."

Kim failed to stifle a laugh as both Suzie and a bloodied Tim gave David the finger behind his back.

Jenny nibbled on Michael's earlobe.

"If you're so worried about your fucking plants, why don't you go get the hose and wash them off?" Suzie hissed. David stomped off towards the carriage house to fetch the hose.

3. The Essence of Sensuality

Nathan pulled a chaise to where Kim stood in the yard, her hands on her hips. He knew she thought he was thinking about Amy.

"Here we are," he said, sitting down.

She sighed.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied, gathering her skirt. The chaise was wide enough for the two of them to lie side by side, but she sat between his legs, her back to his chest. She pulled his arms around her waist, and in a quick movement, between her legs.

"Dirty girl," he said.

"Sensual," she said.

"Hmm. Dirty."

Yes," she said. "Do you think we'll see a lot stars tonight?"

"Probably not. We're too close to the city," he said.

"You know everything.

"Do not," he said. "Just junk."

"Have you ever been in the desert at night?" she asked

"I've been in the Rockies."

"There are so many stars they almost overlap. They seem close enough to touch."

"Hmm," he nodded. The sun sank lower in the sky, illuminating the horizon as the sky began to darken. She was warm against his chest.

"Where do you think the others are?" she asked.

"The last I checked, Jenny and Michael had disappeared..."

"Do you think they're screwing?"

"So tactful, you are."

"Well," she replied.

"Who knows," Nathan said. "David and Suzie were having a fight in the bedroom."

"Doesn't it feel like they're all a million miles away?" she asked, resting her head on his chest. "I think we should get a place like this and never invite anyone to visit."

"You feel that way, do you?" he asked, happy she felt that way.

"Yes. We wouldn't tell anyone we'd moved to the country."

"Not your mother?" he asked.

She raised her head and strained to look at him.

"Especially not my mother."

"But I like your mother," he countered.

"O.k. maybe we'll tell her but we won't invite her to visit," she said, nestling her head on his chest again. "I just want to be alone with you."

"You just say that," he teased. "You'll get bored of me."

"Never," she replied.

"Never?"

"Never."

It was silent. Only the chirping of the crickets and an occasional call of a goose stirred the warm air. A cool dampness rose from the grass. The night dew was fragrant. The silence made him uneasy. He wanted to hear something loud, something unsettling. He almost expected someone to come crashing out of the house. Instead he listened to Kim's soft breathing. Looking down at her, he saw that her eyes were open, staring off into the distance. After a moment she caught him watching her.

"I am going to tell you something and you can't interrupt me," she started without introduction. She sat up and turned to face him.

"Can I ask questions?" he asked.

"Ok, you can ask questions."

"I like this game," Nathan said.

"The last man I loved was an artist," she declared.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You can't ask that."

"But it's a question," Nathan maintained.

"That's the rule."

"O.k., new rule then, I only have to answer the questions I want to answer. No arguments."

She repositioned herself between his legs, tilting her head back to smile at

him. Her upside down face was foreign to him.

"Agreed," he said.

"You have nothing to agree to. It's law." She chuckled then grew serious once more. "The last man I loved was an artist..."

"Does that mean you love me?" Nathan asked.

"Shh."

"I think it's a fair question."

"I'll answer that one later."

"Can I answer your questions?" he asked

"No. Now let me tell my story. The last man I loved was an artist. He was very serious about his work. He said he sought only 'essences' in his art. He wanted to capture the essence in everything he created. He didn't concern himself with dichotomies or layers. He said he wanted to strip away the bullshit and find the singular essence in everything he saw. Above and beyond everything else though, he was selfish and mean.

"I met him through a friend and he suggested I pose for him. He was charming, but I was wary. Then my friend told me he never slept with his models so I agreed, but only after some more lobbying on his part.

"What was the essence he sought in you?" Nathan asked.

"Good question," she replied, turning to look at him again. "He was looking to capture the essence of female sensuality. I have to admit I was honored that he thought he could find the essence of the sensuality of all woman-

kind, in me. But then he explained he could find the essence in any woman. However, he told me, I possessed something that made his task easier. I agreed to spend as much time with him as he asked. I was young..."

"How old?"

"Twenty."

"Four years ago."

"Uh, uh. You have to ask a question."

"Four years after the fact, do you feel that much older?" he asked.

"Infinitely," she replied. "I was in school and I had grandiose allusions.

For one month, eight hours a day he had me stand in front of him wearing only panties and a bra. We scheduled the sessions around my classes, but I had to pose eight hours every day no matter what. During the first week he had me just stand there, most of the time with arms at my sides. Other times he had me hold my arms in the air, or on my hips. For hours at a time.

"After the first week he had me hold my breasts. The week after that he had me put my hands in my panties, but nothing dirty. For the next three weeks after that, he had me lay nude on my back on a board inclined on two milk crates. By then it was the middle of January and I told him he had to bring a space heater into the studio or else I'd quit. He refused. But I didn't quit."

"Why not?" Nathan asked.

"I thought I loved him." "Thought?"

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Yes, it does bother me," he replied.

"Good," she said.

"Why?"

"Because," she said. "So I lay there and let him walk around me and observe me while I froze my ass off. That took two weeks. At this point he began to do some studies. These he let me look at. They were very detailed, accurate. He knew his anatomy. I was proud he was drawing me. At the end of the third week he seduced me. I was so shocked I didn't even resist. We went to his apartment afterwards and I ended up living with him for three months. Each day I went to classes and he went to the studio. I wasn't allowed to go to the studio."

"Did he use another model?"

"He said he didn't need a model anymore. He said he had all the studies he needed. In a fit a jealousy I had a friend watch the studio one day to see if any other women went in. None did. I let my guard down. Maybe it was my vanity that had acted up. Anyway I felt privileged. He was a hero in the Boston art community. I was so blind I didn't even see that he treated me like shit. It never occurred that he could have met other lovers in places other than his studio."

"Did he?"

"Yes. I told you he was selfish. But what made me open my eyes, aside

from a dose of the clap he gave me..."

Nathan laughed out loud.

"It's not funny!" she said, laughing at herself.

"Okay, I guess it is funny," she said.

"It's happened to me too."

"Amy?"

"Before that. I was young."

"You?"

"Hard to believe," he said.

"Anyway, what sealed it was when he finished, he grudgingly showed me the painting. The essence of my sensuality, the very essence of female sexuality was this black thing that looked like a coffin hovering over a gray plain. That was it. He did a sculpture in black marble as a companion piece."

"And that made you mad?"

"I was furious. Here I'd laid nude in front of him, put my hands down my panties, froze my ass off, and he comes back with that? I was pissed. What happened to the beautiful sketches he'd done? I mean how would you feel if your sensuality was pared down and shown to the whole world in the form of a cold black piece of marble? The painting hurt even more. It was so bleak."

"So he was really saying that sensuality, sexuality really is a smooth unholdable and unloving thing. Right?" Nathan asked.

"If only he was saying that! He thought he'd captured the flame he felt in

me. I thought he hated me. I left him then and there, clap and all. He mailed the drawings to me later with a desperate note. He said he couldn't bear to look at them. He never said I was being unreasonable. I felt I had every right to leave him. The other women, if there were only women, I'll never know. But that painting was unforgivable."

"Do you still have the drawings?"

"I gave them to a lesbian friend of mine who was always coming on to me. She thought they were hot. Now I wish I'd kept them. They were beautiful. I don't think I was trying to be sexy when I was posing for them. But the drawings are so...seductive, sensual, I guess. I gave them to my friend the day I moved to Pittsburgh."

Nathan was silent. He held her close to him.

"I don't know why I told you that," she said, burying her face in his chest. "I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

"No," he said. "Everybody..." he started but he didn't know how to finish.

"To answer your question," she said, looking up at him. "I do."

"You do what?"

"Love you," she replied, repositioning her head on his chest.

"I love you too," he conceded.

Night had descended.

4. Mirror, Mirror

Kim was asleep. He'd never told her he loved her before. It seemed silly. He couldn't even say what love was, couldn't define it. Love, in the literal sense, could be pinned down and defined, as in 'I love raspberries.' But when he told Kim he loved her, or when he'd written scrawling love letters to Amy, what had he really meant? Despite how terribly Tim treated Tracy, she still loved him. Why?

Kim was beginning to get heavy. His right leg and arm were asleep under her weight. He was immobilized. He tried to ignore the feeling but his bladder wouldn't cooperate. Gingerly, he slid from under her and stood, admiring her long hair and graceful body. He tip-toed toward the patio through the lush grass. Inside, Suzie slept on one of the white living room couches clutching a pillow as though it were a lover. Nathan tripped over a matching pillow that lay on the floor. His fall was broken by the plush carpeting, and he made no more than a light thud as he hit the floor. Suzie hadn't heard a thing. The toilet flushed in the powder room and David emerged, zipping his pants. His hair was messy, sticking up at strange angles. He scratched his head.

"Great brunch," he said. Nathan wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

"Yeah, it was nice," Nathan replied.

"You think so?" he asked sleepily.

"Yeah."

David walked into the living room, stopping to pick up the pillow from the floor, and then nestled beside Suzie on the couch.

Nathan shut the door behind him and peed. It figured that David hadn't put the seat up. Yellow droplets glistened on the seat. He Nathan took a couple tissues from a lacquered tissue box and wiped it off before flushing. The idea of wiping up someone else's urine nauseated him. He washed his hands thoroughly then looked at himself in the mirror.

He looked as though he hadn't shaved at all though he had that morning. He squinted at his reflection at the crows' feet around his eyes. The lines were definitely there. The lines on his forehead were becoming more defined too. His hairline was receding and his skin was starting to slacken and gray as his father's had been. He leaned even closer towards his reflection.

In the mirror you only see what you want to see, or what you are most afraid of seeing; that bulge around the hip, the weak jaw line, fat legs, protruding ass. Recently he'd been scrutinizing himself in mirrors to try to see himself objectively, as strangers passing him on the street might.

A few days earlier, Kim had caught him standing in front of a full length mirror, naked, staring at himself. He'd been pleased by her reaction. She'd watched him, her eyes moving over his reflection in the mirror, allowing her eyes to roam the length of his mirror twin. He'd watched her reflection watch him watching himself. She then took off her clothes, and they had stood there, not touching, just looking. When she did touch him, he did not move. He'd remained

still until he no longer wanted to look. He then shut the door on which the mirror hung, and they'd made love without words.

5. Goodbye Columbus

Jenny was lying on the couch across from the one in which David and Suzie slept. In the kitchen someone was rummaging around. Nathan approached. The enormous kitchen was illuminated by a dim light. Michael stood with his hands on the wooden counter top of the island in the middle of the room. He seemed to be supporting his weight on his hands, as though he'd fall if he didn't. He stared down at a tall old fashioned glass. Sensing Nathan's presence, he looked up. His face was a mask of pain and queer amusement.

"Another drink," he said. His voice sounded high, tight. His smile was almost guilty. Nathan realized he and Jenny had been making love upstairs earlier. There was a look of sadness in Michael's eyes.

"Hair of the dog," Nathan said.

"Yeah," Michael laughed quietly, regaining his composure. "Join me?"

"Why not," he replied.

"David said there was gin and tonic in a pitcher in the fridge," Michael said.

"Sounds good," he said. He walked past Michael to the enormous refrigerator. Michael took a glass from a cupboard and handed it to him. Nathan poured himself a rocks glass full of the clear liquid and placed the pitcher back in the fridge. From a foil-covered bowl he fished a chunk of cantaloupe and ate it. Michael sliced lime wedges.

"Lime?"

"Huh?" he replied.

Michael gestured to the glass.

"Sure," he said. "Thanks. Want some fruit?"

"Yeah some of the melon," Michael replied. "The melon's really...great."

He pulled the bowl from the fridge and placed it on the counter. They picked at the fruit with their fingers. The chunks of melon were almost too sweet. The cold pulpy chunks soothed his throat.

"It's like something out of *The Great Gatsby*,"

Michael said.

"Or *Goodbye Columbus*," Nathan replied

"Yeah. I never thought about that." Michael said.

"I loved that book."

"Yeah," Nathan said.

Michael laughed softly then looked over Nathan's shoulder towards the living room.

"I shouldn't ask, but..."

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Michael replied.

"What?"

"Well," Michael said apprehensively. "Did you ever go to Amy's parents' house?"

"Yeah," he replied, sorry for having prodded him.

"With all her little bothers' and sisters' stuff lying around the yard? Didn't it just remind you of Goodbye Columbus?"

"Yeah, come to think of it," Nathan said. "It's been a while since I've read it, but I guess you're right."

Michael laughed, shaking his head.

"Just like it," he said. "Just like it," he repeated. "The whole thing, except Amy's not Jewish. But it was like Goodbye Columbus."

"Yeah," Nathan said a bit too sourly. "That's all water under the bridge."

"Yeah, it is, I guess."

There was an uneasy silence. Michael sighed.

"Shit," he said.

Nathan picked another piece of fruit from the bowl, motioning to Michael, asking if he wanted any more. Michael waved him off and he replaced the foil on the bowl and put it back into the refrigerator.

Together they tip-toed through the living room with their drinks in their hands, careful not to wake the slumberers. Michael paused to look at Jenny. He hovered over her for a moment, then leaned over and kissed her forehead. She stirred, hugged her pillow and settled back to sleep. Nathan thought of Goodbye Columbus.

6. The Petrovic Line

"Do you think people change?" Michael asked as they stood on the patio, looking out at the cool evening.

"Why?" Nathan asked.

"Do you think you can effect another person to the point where they're changed?"

"I don't know," he replied as Michael retrieved a chaise longue from the side of the patio. He dragged it behind him like a child pulling a toy as they strode on the blue grass. Kim was still asleep. "It's pretty difficult to escape your genes."

"I mean with Jenny," Michael admitted hesitantly. "She sat me down and told me about how she, you know, slept around a lot."

"Well...would you rather she not have told you and find out when someone like Tim gets drunk and blurts it out? That she was up front about it with you says a lot about how she feels about you."

"I know," Michael conceded, "but I guess I can't help but...wonder, you know?"

"Like someday she'll go back to her old ways?"

"I dunno, maybe," Michael admitted sheepishly.

"Look, maybe she will. But I think the real reason she uh, fooled around a lot was to assert her independence," he said. "You ever meet her mother?"

"No," Michael replied.

"She was a little Lolita who got pregnant at the age of sixteen by soldier ten years older than her. Her parents made her marry the guy before he shipped out to Vietnam. She's a pretty miserable woman who told Jenny she was little slut who would turn out just like her. My theory is that Jenny declared war against destiny by being promiscuous."

"Maybe she just likes sex," Michael offered.

"Well...that is a possibility. But I like to believe in familial pre-destination. Do you know Amy's family history?"

"No," Michael said, not following.

"Her family has its roots in the bourgeoisie in France and Italy. The Italian side of the family itself married into a wealthy Ottoman family, for business reasons. We're talking centuries of solid, enterprising people. Some great, great relation of hers came over to provision Lafayette's army and never went back."

Michael nodded his head. "And?" he asked. He waved his hand, drinking deeply from his glass with the other.

They reached the chaise where Kim lay. Nathan sat down and stroked her hair.

"There you are," she said sleepily. "What are you doing?"

"I'm telling Michael about my blood lines," he informed her. "On the other hand I am a descendant of the famous Antonin Vasily Petrovic."

"Petrovic?" Kim asked. She sat up brushing her hair from her face with her hand.

"Never heard of him."

Michael laughed.

"In 1487," Nathan continued haughtily, ignoring her comment. "Petrovic was commissioned by Ivan the great r to produce the most accurate atlas of Europe. He was the preeminent cartographer in all of Russia. With his commission, he traveled throughout Europe visiting towns and consulting with regional cartographers to compile his gazette."

"Impressive," Michael said.

"Quite," Nathan continued. "Now our dear Antonin was, to put it mildly, quite a Lothario. He was dashingly handsome, which," he added, "you can tell has been passed through the blood lines."

Michael waived him off with both hands, chuckling. Kim hit him in the leg.

"Conceited," she said.

"Anyway," Nathan continued, smiling. "In small villages he demanded to sleep with the prettiest girl in the village or he'd exclude the town in his gazette. Sometimes, to insure the town's inclusion, the town fathers would offer more than one girl."

"Men," Kim sneered.

Nathan shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps. Anyway, Antonin was meticulous with his notes, but he was also deathly afraid someone would steal his data, publish an atlas using his notes and take all the glory. So he devised an intricate code in which he made his notes. Being a man who thought there was no limit to the fun a person could have, he partied endlessly, and after months of debauchery, fell seriously ill."

"Serves him right," Kim said.

"Perhaps," he said. "Anyway, upon his return, he had two sets of intricate notes; one set chronicling his sexual conquests, the other his cartographic notes, both written in his shorthand. After months of convalescence he realized he couldn't remember the key to his code."

"Uh oh" Kim said.

"Uh oh indeed! The Czar was anxious to see his atlas and pressured Petrovic to produce the initial drawings. Antonin had no choice but to attempt to piece together a map from memory and what he could discern from his notes."

"And?" Michael asked.

"He did it."

"Really?" Kim asked.

"Yes. He was, after all, a Petrovic," he said proudly. "The maps were rather detailed, but there were a few omissions. The Iberian peninsula was omitted because he never made it that far, and some small cities were missing."

"So what's a few small cities here and there?" Michael asked.

"Paris, Prague, Vienna."

Kim and Michael laughed.

"Small villages were represented larger than major cities. He had small town in the Netherlands twice the size of Rome!"

"They must have given him every woman in that town," Michael said.

"Gross," Kim said.

"But what does that have to do with what we were talking about earlier?" Michael asked. "I guess it mean we're fated to live lives beyond our control," he said. "Sometimes I feel like Antonin Petrovic- like I should know the terrain inside and out, but I'm lost. And maybe that is how it was meant to be."

7. Kailua & Cream Cheese

Kim repositioned herself against him. The spot from where she moved her head was suddenly cold. His legs tingled under the weight of her leg. He felt both warm and comfortable and cold and vulnerable at the same time. The sun had set completely. The last of the summer's cicadas murmured and the crickets sang their phase songs.

"It sure is simple out here," Michael said.

"Simple?"

"Relaxed. Simple."

Kim breathed heavily on Nathan's shoulder. He thought he could detect a smile on Michael's face. Kim shifted her weight and murmured.

"Want another drink?" Michael asked

"Sure." Kim stirred as he gingerly climbed out of the chaise. She mumbled something and he ran his hand down the center of her back. She curled herself around the pillow he'd been using to prop up his back. He kissed her forehead.

"She's sweet," Michael said as they tip toed across the lawn.

"Yeah. I think I'm happy," he replied.

"That's the problem," Michael said. "You don't really know you're happy until it's gone."

"That's deep," he said with good natured sarcasm.

"Original too," Michael added, self deprecatingly.

The aroma of the hemlocks lining the low wall at the edge of the patio was almost overpowering. Under the awning, the tablecloths hung straight off the empty tables. Michael laughed out loud, and then pulled the screen door open.

"Just call me fucking Plato," he said.

"Fucking Plato?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah," Michael replied, still smiling. They quietly traversed the living room, and then stopped short. Nathan bumped into Michael, placing his hand on his back to steady himself.

"Shh," Michael cautioned, pointing to the couch where David and Suzie slept and Jenny dozed on the matching couch, curled around a pillow as Kim did on the chaise longue on the lawn. They tip-toed to the kitchen. Michael opened the door of one of the large refrigerators. The room was dimly illuminated with light as he stuck his head into the humongous appliance. Nathan strolled over to the bar cart parked against the wall and examined the bottles crowded on it.

"Do you know he doesn't pay for any of this?" he asked. "It all comes from his restaurants."

"I don't know. I've only met him a couple of times. He seems o.k."

"Truthfully?"

Michael pulled himself from the inner reaches of the refrigerator and peered around the door towards the living room. He looked back at Nathan.

"Truthfully, I think he's a weasel."

Nathan smiled, wondering how much of that opinion was his, and how much of it was Jenny's.

"But," Michael said, pulling a Saran Wrap covered tray from the refrigerator's cavernous belly, "he's got great digs." On the tray was lox, cream cheese, sliced onion and tomato, and a small jar of capers all artfully laid out.

"All the better to eat you with, my dear," Nathan said, though he wasn't sure why he'd said it. He felt giddy, raiding the fridge and liquor cart. He poured himself some gin. "Drink?" he offered.

"Yeah," Michael said as he meticulously sliced two bagels, one for Nathan and one for himself. "I'll have some Kailua."

"Kailua?"

"Yeah. I don't like strong drinks all that much. I like the sweet stuff better."

"So do girls," Nathan said.

"So? I'm a wimp," he replied nonchalantly. "I don't care."

Nathan laughed. "I'm just giving you a hard time."

"Yeah, well. Drinking, that's where Amy killed me. She always drank gin straight up."

"Hm. She picked that up from me."

Michael looked up from his preparations and stared at him.

Nathan poured the Kailua into a large snifter.

"Ice?" he asked.

Michael was silent.

"I loved her, man," Michael said.

Nathan put three cubes in the snifter and swirled the dark brown liquor. The cubes began to melt, diluting the thick liquid. He handed the glass to Michael who stood motionless above his preparations. Nathan filled his glass and threw some cubes in, splashing some of the gin on the counter.

"She didn't love me," Michael whispered. "I thought she did. Maybe she thought she did too." He shrugged his shoulders. "But she really didn't."

Nathan stared at the beads of condensation building on his glass and then took a sip. The gin was acrid. One sip dispelled the lingering sweetness of the Kailua that lingered in his nostrils. He didn't want to hear this. His hand began to shake. He placed the glass on the counter so he wouldn't give himself away.

"I'm sorry. But I did," Michael stated.

"Did what?"

"Love her," Michael replied. He looked straight at Nathan for a moment and then returned his attention to assembling the lox and bagel sandwiches. "She once told me we would have been good friends, you and me. I used to tell her I didn't think so." He shook his head. "I get a pain in my stomach when I think of her out there, with someone else maybe." He stared at the ceiling and exhaled deeply. "Oh god, I just don't know anymore."

"I used to say that," Nathan said. He took a sip from his glass. "Then I realized I never really knew in the first place."

"Maybe I should call you fucking Plato," Michael, said, handing Nathan an overstuffed lox and bagel sandwich.

"Fucking Plato," Nathan said, with a little laugh. He tried to figure out how to begin eating the immense sandwich. He'd felt something of the same pain that Michael had spoken of, but he was hungry too. He took greedy bites of the bagel. Cream cheese oozed from the sides of the bagel which he scraped off with his finger and spread back on the sandwich.

He took a sip of the gin and the acrid liquor mingled with the oiliness of the lox and cream cheese. It was a disconcerting combination

Michael took a sip of his Kailua and made a face.

"Kailua and lox just don't go together," he said smiling for a moment before the smile fell from his lips. He sighed. "I've never been this depressed before. Ever."

"It gets better after a while," Nathan said.

"Yeah, I know," Michael replied.

"The bottom line is it really doesn't mean that much."

"You think?"

"Sure, love is fickle," Nathan replied. "In the long run, women aren't worth it. If I could, I do without them."

"You think you could?"

"Yeah," he lied.

"Bullshit," Michael said, smiling wanly.

"Yeah, maybe," he admitted.

8. Fucking Plato

They tip toed across the living room. Michael slid the screen door behind him.

"I don't think I could live without women," he said.

An Achilles heel, son," Nathan said, smiling.

"No, I'm serious. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I didn't have a woman in my life." They stopped in the middle of the yard and he looked up at the stars.

"When Amy left, I didn't want to do anything. Nothing— eat, drink, work, I didn't care." His expression was the most pathetic Nathan had ever seen. Nathan felt a mix of pity and disdain. He'd always thought Michael was the kind of guy who didn't take much notice of anything. He'd seemed to Nathan to simply float along with the current, not too smart but happy.

He felt bad for Michael as he clumsily poured his feelings all over the yard. He probably hadn't realized how drunk he was and would regret all of this the next day.

"I was so depressed," Michael said, still staring up at the sky. "No one at work talked to me. I didn't sleep. Everybody wants to share the good times when you're the happy guy, but they never step in when something's wrong."

"True," Nathan said. He didn't realize how drunk he was either, staring at the bottom of his empty glass. It seemed as though days had passed since he'd poured the glassful of gin, when Michael had told him he loved Amy. The shock

was gone. It had been replaced by a sense of unfamiliar calm.

"I'd come home from work and collapse. I'd try to sleep but I couldn't. I lost fifteen pounds after she said she couldn't bear to stay with me. That's the way she said it. 'I couldn't bear to stay with you even more one night.' Do you believe it?"

"She always was a bit theatrical," Nathan said.

"One day I came home from work and I sat on the toilet and tried to cry." He paused for a moment. "I tried so hard but I couldn't. I couldn't even cry for god's sake." He sighed hard. "I couldn't decide whether I was too pathetic to cry, or whether I ever really loved her. I thought I did, but now I don't know."

"Maybe there comes a time when you can't cry anymore," Nathan offered. "You get on with your life. It's a cliché, but isn't that what you do – get on with life? Isn't life just a bunch of getting on with its?"

"Fucking Plato," Michael said, his head bowed.

Nathan smiled.

"Fucking Plato," he repeated.

9. Love. Love, Love

Nathan stood over the chaise watching Kim sleep. He had been wrong, he'd lied when he said he could be happy without someone in his life. Kim opened her eyes as he sat down. She hadn't been asleep and had heard everything he and Michael had just said. She held her arm out and slid over to make room for him beside her. She was warm.

"I'm sorry," she whispered in his ear.

"Me too," he whispered. He smiled at the night and decided he was a fool.

The garden was completely shrouded in darkness. A light shone weakly from a window on the second floor of the house. Every once in a while a late lightning bug lit its miniature beacon. Nathan couldn't tell if Michael was awake or asleep, lying in the other chaise. Kim rubbed the back of his hand with her thumb. From time to time Nathan smoothed her hair with his hand, letting it play through his fingers. His thoughts were sleepy and disjointed. The crickets and cicadas' song were like a nursery rhyme hummed in his ear.

"Do you think fish fall in love?" Michael asked.

"Fish?" Kim asked.

"Yeah. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't asleep," she replied.

"Is Nathan?"

"I'm awake," Nathan replied. "And to answer your question..."

"Yeah," Michael asked sincerely.

"Who the hell knows!" he said.

Kim laughed.

"No really," Michael said. "Do you think?"

"There is a species that lives in the reefs of Australia that starts life as a female and breeds as a female for years but then it becomes a male. And if it's lucky, it breeds as a male for a while too."

"You're making that up," Michael said.

"Look it up," Nathan said.

"I've looked at life from both sides now..." Michael sang.

Nathan laughed.

"Ahh, love, love, love," Michael murmured.

"I don't want to hear about love anymore. I'm tired of love," Kim said, laying her head on Nathan's chest. Her words reverberated through his body. His chest rumbled with the force of her voice. "All this talk of love. The whole day, it's been just like a broken record, like one of those radio stations that plays all those fucking songs from the fifties, *Teen Angel* and *Baby Love* and all that shit. You want to change the station so fast because all they do is whine about love. I'm tired of whining about love. I'm tired of hearing David and Suzie's whining, so unhappy being rich and married, Tracy and Tim so miserable because they're not in love with anyone except themselves. And I'm fucking tired of Amy, Amy, Amy. The two of you are pathetic.

"I just want to be. Just...be. All of us, just be these people out on the lawn enjoying a day off doing nothing. Can't we just do that. Can't we?" She laughed one angry laugh. "Goddamn."

Nathan remained silent, looking in the direction of Michael's chaise. Michael said nothing. A light in the living room switched on, bathing the patio and the lawn in yellowish light. It turned off as abruptly as it was turned on. The crickets quieted for a moment as a stray lightning bug shone its light again.

Kim nestled her head on Nathan's chest, readjusting her body against his as though she couldn't get close enough to him. In the momentary silence of the summer night, Nathan thought he could feel the earth shift on its axis slightly. As if on cue, the crickets resumed their song, and the evening grew slightly cooler as summer slipped one night closer to autumn.

V. JENNY

A New Year's Shiva

1. Death in the Quickie Mart

As Jenny stepped from the cab in front of Michael's parent's building, the snow whipped around her feet in icy wisps that skidded across the concrete concourse. The sky was leaden. It was bitterly cold. I hate this, she thought. She hated that Michael was dead, hated that she had to spend the afternoon sitting shiva with his parents. And though she was glad for their support, she hated that all of what was left of the group would be there too. She wasn't sure if she was up to it. Old ladies she'd never met before would tell her how sorry they were, okay, she could deal with that, but Amy and Nathan and David and Suze, no, they were too much. She wanted to be alone, to remember, but that wasn't in the cards. People kept calling, asking how she was, offering to run errands or drop off meals. She just wanted to be left alone.

"This sucks," she muttered as she made her way to the entrance. The slouched doorman rose from chair in the vestibule and held the door for her. Those were Michael's last words—'this sucks.' She'd sat on the floor of the convenience store holding his head in her lap. He'd looked up at her and said, 'I'm gonna die in the quickie mart. This sucks.' She'd tried not to cry. She'd told him he wasn't going to die, but by then they'd both known he wouldn't make it. She'd stroked his hair and told him everything would be all right as his blood pooled on the floor around them. Her leggings and skirt had been soaked through. She'd never thought a person could bleed so much. By the time the

police arrived he was already gone. The rest of it was a blur. She remembers someone gently pulling her away from his body and wrapping her in a blanket. She'd been freezing cold ever since.

She told the concierge at the front desk she was there for the Cohen Shiva. The girl was a shiny young blonde with a scarf fashionably wrapped around her neck. She looked at Jenny with a look of contrived sadness.

"You must be the girlfriend," she said, trying to look sympathetic. "Mrs. Cohen told me. It's so sad. I lost my brother a year last October."

Jenny stared at her blankly. *Too fucking bad*, she thought. *I don't want to bond with you, just tell me where to go.* She looked at the girl's scarf and wondered if hers looked as good. Suze had told her that it was custom to wear a piece of ripped clothing when you sit shiva to show your bereavement. She wasn't sure if she should have torn the sleeve of her blouse. What if she were the only one wearing something ripped? The last thing she needed was a social faux pas, having everyone stare at her like Michael's dumb shiksa girlfriend. She'd torn the scarf as a hedge. If it was inappropriate, she figured she could slip it off and stash it in her purse. Earlier, as she was dressing, she couldn't help but wonder if wearing pantyhose with a run in it qualified.

The concierge made a whispered phone call, and then told her which elevator to take. The lobby was freezing. So was the elevator. She remembered how the paramedic and police radios crackled the night Michael was killed. She remembered they'd left the door to the store open, the way the robber had left it

when he'd fled. Over the radio she heard a dispatcher and other police talking. The stolen car the robber had used in the getaway had skidded on a patch of ice and slammed into a wall, killing him.

She remembers hearing the police sergeant say 'Deserves the fucker right.'

The Cohen's unit was at the end of the dim corridor. The hallway was frigid too. She rang the doorbell and was greeted by a rush of hot air heavily scented with patchouli. Michael's mother Lena ushered her in. Jenny had to catch her breath it was so warm inside the apartment. Lena put her hand on Jenny's scarf as she took her coat.

"Honey, you didn't have to ruin your little scarf," she said, untying it from Jenny's neck and holding it as though it was a dirty Kleenex. "We're Reform. We're not like those crazy Orthodox. I covered the mirrors, I thought that was enough. Of course we didn't cover the living room wall, which is all mirrors, which I never liked in the first place, but that crazy decorator said it would make the room look bigger, but who knew?"

"I wasn't sure," Jenny whispered.

"About what?" Mrs. Cohen asked, almost frantically, her eyes large saucers, as though she was strung out on cocaine.

"I wasn't sure if I should wear black or rend my clothes..."

"Don't worry sweetie," she replied. "It's okay. How should you know?" She looked around frantically. "I hope there's enough food. I don't think that

caterer brought enough food.”

Another woman approached and took Mrs. Cohen's arm.

"Max, she's starting on the food again," the woman called. "Max!"

Michael's mother's face disintegrated into a mask of pain. She doubled over as if she'd been punched in the stomach and put her hands to her face.

"My baby," she cried. "I've lost my baby!"

Michael's father approached and silently said hello to Jenny before taking his wife's arm and leading her away. The woman turned to her.

"She keeps going manic about the food," she said. "I wish she'd just let it all out."

"Excuse me?" Jen asked.

"She deflects her pain over Michael into a fear that she doesn't have enough food. It's a classic manifestation." The woman cocked her head to one side examining Jenny's face, and then extended her hand. "You must be the girlfriend," she said. "I'm Audra Goldberg, from down the hall."

"Nice to meet you," Jenny said, taking the woman's hand.

"Lena said you were goyish. She wasn't kidding," she said. "Why is it that Jewish boys always go for blondes? It's a tragedy. Jews go for gentiles and gentiles go for Jews. You kids are all mixed up."

She didn't know what to say.

"My daughter married a Lubovitcher. She shaved her head," Audra said, sighing. "She never comes to visit. She says it's because my kitchen isn't kosher,

but I think that husband of hers is ashamed of me. All in all, I think I'd rather she married a gentile."

Michael's father approached, shaking his head.

"Audra, I think Lena could use you in the kitchen," he said. "I'm sorry," he said, turning to Jenny as Audra waddled across the condominium. "I'm afraid this isn't going to be easy...as if...as if anything like this could be easy..." His words tailed off and he looked deeply in Jenny's eyes. "I just try to remember his laugh. It was a good laugh," he said, staring out the window at the gray clouds cowering the low rolling suburban landscape. "It was a good laugh," he repeated.

"Yes it was," she whispered, trying not to cry.

Michael's father stared emptily at her for a moment, then put his hand on her arm lightly, as though he was afraid to touch his son's girlfriend, as if hugging might be a violation of some kind of what had been Michael's territory.

The doorbell rang and Michael's father excused himself to answer it. As he held the door open, Amy stepped from the hallway unaccompanied. She scanned the room looking for a familiar face. Her eyes were red and wet. As Michael's father took her coat to the bedroom, Amy noticed Jenny and made her way toward her, anxiously fingering the torn scarf she wore around her neck.

Jenny fought back a smile— the last two women Michael slept with, both shicksas, had torn their scarves unsure how to properly mourn their Jewish boyfriend. Michael would have thought it was hilarious. She thought of his laugh and the smile fell from her face as Amy broke into tears in front of her.

Without words the two women hugged. All eyes on the room fell upon them. The last two girls, both gentiles, who Michael had slept with. She wondered how many people in the room knew. She figured Lena had told Audra from 716 down the hall, so it was altogether possible that everyone in the room knew too.

"Oh Jen, I'm so sorry," Amy said, trying to pull herself together.

"Me too," she replied. "I never thought I'd love someone so much."

"I still can't believe it," Amy replied, "these things happen to other people..."

"Death in the Quickie Mart," Jen said bitterly, "sounds like the title of a lame made-for-TV mystery."

"I always hated that place," Amy said. "It reminds me of the bad times in college, like when you were depressed and you'd walk down there in the middle of the night for cigarettes and Twinkies..."

"Michael loved it," she replied, "I don't know why. I think it was because it was familiar. That we went all the time in college. He liked familiarity."

"What a sucky place to die," Amy said.

"That's what he said."

"He had a talent for stating the obvious," Amy replied, smiling slightly at the thought.

"He was no Robert Einstein," Jen replied, an inside joke among the group.

"I think I liked that best about him," Amy said.

"Yeah," she replied trying to smile. "That or his body. I'm not sure."

"I miss you Jen," Amy said.

"I miss you too," Jen replied, her eyes filling with tears. "I've missed you too."

2. Nice In Their Own Way

"They've been really nice," Jenny said to Amy nibbling on a cracker, "in their own way."

"What do you mean?" Amy asked.

She looked around, then whispered.

"They're so...loud," she said. "I hate to say it, but they're so...loud. They communicate by yelling at each other. And they get in these little digs here and there. They're not mean. They don't mean to be mean, but...they are. They throw jabs all the time. I was raised to say the nice thing even if I was thinking the opposite. They say what's on their minds. It's like they have no tact," she whispered.

Lena approached and Jenny introduced her to Amy.

Mrs. Cohen looked her up and down and then thanked her for coming.

"What a cute dress," she said. "I could never wear something like that but for you it works."

Amy thanked her.

"You knew Mikey in college?" she asked.

"Lena," Jenny said. "This is Amy."

Mrs. Cohen stared blankly.

"Amy," she repeated.

"Oh!" Mrs. Cohen exclaimed. "The one before you!"

Amy's eyes grew in astonishment.

"Yes," Jenny said, blushing, looking about to see if anyone had heard. A balding man about her age with dark, closely trimmed hair stared at them.

Mrs. Cohen examined Amy's face.

"He told me you were kind. Quiet." She seemed to take stock of Amy again, as if she were trying to guess her weight. "They say men go for women who remind them of their mothers. What do they know?" She shrugged sadly and took Amy's hand. "I'm so glad you were able to make it. I know Mikey would have wanted you here."

An elderly couple shuffled into the room and Mrs. Cohen turned. "Oh Christ," she said rolling her eyes heavenward. "Excuse me," she said, turning to greet the couple that stood in the doorway.

"Rabbi, Saralah," she said, greeting them loudly. The rabbi took her hands in his and mumbled something. Mrs. Cohen, nodded and thanked him.

Jen caught the balding man staring at them again. He hesitated as they stared back at him, then approached gingerly and introduced himself.

"I'm Jay. Michael and I were best friends in high school," he said nodding, not sure whether to offer his hand or not. "You must be Jennifer," he said, trying to look serious.

There was an awkward silence.

Amy introduced herself.

"Oh yes, Amy. Yes."

Another awkward silence.

"Lena told me," he shrugged apologetically.

"Is that good or bad?" Jenny asked.

"It's just...Lena," he replied. "Her intentions are good." He looked around then leaned closer to the two women. "She thinks she's outspoken. Her tact meter is a little off the scale if you know what I mean."

Amy and Jenny nodded in agreement.

"Let me guess," he said to Jen, "she probably thinks you don't talk enough and eat to little."

"She thinks I eat too much," she replied, her spirits lifted a bit as she remembered the way Michael would smile at her conspiratorially whenever Lena made a backhanded comment about her appetite. She felt better around this guy. He was nice. She used to not like guys who were nice, but now she appreciated that more in a man. There was an awkward silence. She watched him as Lena cross the room toward him.

"I can't believe my baby's gone," she said, extending her arms toward him. He smiled apprehensively, then asked Amy to hold his glass to accept Lena's embrace. He audibly exhaled as she bear hugged him. Jenny put her hand on his and the two of them lightly rubbed Lena's back as she wept deep, heaving sobs.

"Oh, I'm so sorry sweetie," she said , pulling herself from Jay's embrace and daubing her eyes with a Kleenex. "I just can't believe he's gone." She turned to consider Jenny, eyeing her up and down.

"I don't think I ever saw him happier than when he was with you," she said painfully. "You made him so happy sweetie."

"He made me happy too," Jenny whispered.

Lena bear hugged her, holding on so hard she had trouble breathing. Jen gently caressed Lena's shoulder. The whole room watched as she held her. The women daubed tears away from their eyes, the men stood uneasily, trying not to stare. Tears rolled down Amy's face and Jen wondered what she was thinking. Michael's father approached and gently pried Lena away from her. She could feel her face reddening, feeling the gaze of everyone in the room upon her. Jay stood in front of her wavering, as though deciding whether it was appropriate to hug her or take her hand. After a moment he pulled stray strand of hair from her face, brushing her cheek with his fingers for a spilt second. She thought she could feel the warmth of his hand even after he'd retreated back a step and retrieved his glass from Amy. She shivered looking at the cold gray afternoon outside.

"Thanks," she whispered.

He nodded and shyly whispered something in reply that she couldn't make out.

3. Like a Latin Soap Opera

"I just feel so lost," Jen said, trying to put how she felt into words. "My whole body feels like it's buzzing. My hands shake. I'm tired but I can't sleep. My heart feels like it's going to explode."

Amy winced and put her hand on her shoulder.

"It's like the feeling you get when you break up with someone. Except this is for ever, there's no chance of getting back together again. I mean you look at pictures of the person you broke up with and you cry and everything, but eventually you throw the photos out or put them in a box under the bed and forget about them." She started crying. "I don't want to forget about him though." She blew her nose with the Kleenex she held in her hand and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry," Amy said, crying too. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because this must be hard on you too," she said. "I don't know. I don't know if you loved him, it's none of my business..."

Amy squeezed her hand.

"I didn't love him the way you did...do..."

Jenny began sobbing uncontrollably.

"I didn't mean it that way..." Amy said. "I'm sorry..."

"I'm...I..." Jenny said between sobs. She hated herself. She didn't think of herself as a crier. She didn't want to be a blubbering mess in front of Amy. She'd

told herself she wouldn't be, but here she was, bawling like a baby. She took a deep, sighing breath and tried to collect herself.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come," Amy suggested.

"No," Jenny said, wiping her eyes with the Kleenex. "I need you here."

Amy was silent.

She hoped she sounded sincere.

"His blood was so warm when I was holding him there as he was bleeding to death. It was like I'd peed in my pants and I couldn't stop myself. I think I may have peed I was so scared. And I was trying to keep calm. I didn't want to scare him, or let him know I knew he was dying. But he knew he wouldn't make it. I kept stroking his hair and talking. I don't know. It's too sad to talk about."

They stood in silence for a moment. Amy turned her head and began to cry. Jenny watched her for a moment and then hugged her. She couldn't shake the thought of the irony of the two of them together, the last two women whom he'd loved, mourning together. He would have loved to see it actually -- two girls crying their eyes out over him. That was the way he was. He had such a simple ego, like a little boy's, really. There was something sweet about that. But if he were there with them he'd be crying too, mourning his own loss, bawling like a boy who's just lost his mother in the supermarket.

Amy began to sob deeply, as though the hurt was coming from an untouched source, as if she had thought of something terrible and sad that she'd hidden away and had just stumbled upon in her grief. Jenny wondered if she was

crying because she loved Michael more than she had let on, or if she was crying because she realized she hadn't loved him enough.

She let go of Amy and straightened herself up. For some reason, she felt lucid for the first time in days. The heaviness she'd been feeling lessened. Amy regarded her queerly.

"What?" Amy asked.

"It's so weird..."

"What?" Amy asked again.

"All of this. It's like a Latin soap opera."

"What is?" Amy looked puzzled, wiping her eyes.

"It's just like the brunch at Suze and David's."

"I don't follow?"

"You slept with Michael. I slept with Michael. You slept with Nathan. I slept with Nathan..."

"You slept with Nathan?"

"You knew that," she replied, hoping she did.

"No..."

"Nathan never told you?"

"No..." Amy thought for a moment. "Maybe he did and I forgot..."

"It was before you two dated..."

"I remember something," Amy said. She looked shaken, confused.

"I feel so stupid," she said.

"No. Don't," Amy insisted. "It doesn't matter," she said, distracted.

They were silent.

"What were you saying about the brunch?"

"Oh," she said, "it was typical..."

"Typical, how?"

She hesitated for a moment, but Amy's look was insistent.

"Tim showed up drunk and made a scene. He went through the litany of who slept with who and ended up asking Michael if he'd ever slept with Kim, the girl Nathan brought..."

"Kim's the blonde one?"

"Which blonde one?" Kim asked.

Amy stared at her.

"There was more than one blonde one?"

"Yeah. No. Oh I don't know, Amy. I don't keep track of his love life for god's sake."

"I know," Amy sighed. "I'm sorry."

"He was seeing this Kim woman for a while in the summer, a couple months. He seemed to really like her. I didn't like her much. She was kind of stand-offish. Michael said he liked her. He said she was strong."

"What happened to her?" Amy asked. She looked as though she didn't really want to hear the answer.

"He dumped her. He said he didn't need the pressure, whatever that

means."

Amy was silent.

She stared out the window, at the bare trees and the brown suburban laws. Directly below, the blue tarp stretched across the condo's swimming pool was covered with a light dusting of snow. It was cold out. It looked cold out. The dull pain returned to her gut. There was a lull in the murmured conversation about the rest of the room and for a moment it was too silent for her to bear. She looked out the window and saw Amy's face reflected in the glass, tears rolling down her face.

4. Sit Shiva, Get a Meal

She was actually relieved when Suze and David arrived. Tiptoeing around Amy was beginning to wear on her. At the very least Suze would distract Amy's attention enough to give her some breathing space. They looked too good, she thought. Suze had her hair up off her shoulders and wore a simple black dress and black shawl. Her pale skin glowed against her ensemble. Her curly hair was piled up on her head like some school marm in an old sepia-tone photograph. The net effect was a very fashionable take on the char girl from the ghetto.

David was a study in charcoal, casually formal in a dark sport coat, dark gray turtleneck and black pants. Though his clothes were as fine, if not finer than Suze's, he still came across as slick. His hair was too shiny, too spritzed or moussed or whatever. He never looked quite right. Maybe it was because he was so high strung, so defensive, even when someone paid him a complement.

Suze greeted Michael's parents with a genuine look of compassion and sorrow, though she'd maybe talked to Michael one-to-one only a half dozen times in her life. David stood beside her, nervously scanning the room and adding quick words of condolences that sailed over the Cohen's heads.

"Oh sweetie I'm so sorry," Suze said as she approached, hugging Jenny. She was so short that Jen looked at the top of her head as she held her. Suze's hair smelled good. She felt awkward hugging the shorter woman whom she'd known for years but had never had physical contact with before.

"I'm sorry, Jen," David said, unsure whether to hug her or not. They skirted one another awkwardly before he gave her a slight hug, patting her on the back quickly once or twice before backing away. "He was a nice guy...I liked him," he said.

"Yeah. He was...nice," she replied, unsure how to reply.

"How are you doing, honey?" Suze asked Amy, taking her hands in hers.

"I'm okay," she replied, tears welling up in her eyes again.

David hovered over the two women.

"I think Nathan's coming," he offered. "At least he said he was."

Suze shot him a look.

"What?" he asked defensively. "He said he was coming. But he's been so weird recently..."

Suze shot him another look.

"Well he has. He has," he said to Amy as if to confirm it.

Audra from 716 approached.

"You were Michael's friend too?" she asked David and Suze. "Look at you, you're all so handsome. Aren't they handsome?" she asked Jen.

"Stunning," Jen said with a smile.

"And you are?" Audra asked.

"David and Suzanne Goldman," Suze replied.

"Goldman?" Audra asked, "David Goldman? The restaurateur?"

"Yes," David replied, his chest welling with pride.

"I had dinner at the one in Greentree the other night," she said matter of factly. "I wasn't impressed."

"I'm sorry," David replied, stunned. "What wasn't to your liking?"

"The fish wasn't fresh."

"Our fish is always fresh," David bristled.

"My fish had been frozen. It was dry."

"My restaurants don't serve frozen fish," David replied in an even tone.

"We get it fresh daily."

"I'm telling you that fish had been frozen."

"That's impossible."

"I'm telling you what I know," she maintained. "Where do you get your fish?"

"From Benkowitz, directly," David replied defensively.

"That's your problem," Audra said pointing a finger at his chest. "Ever since the papa died, Benkowitz has been no good. Did you know him, he was a wonderful man."

"Yes he was," David replied graciously, "he was an old friend of the family."

"He was a beautiful human being," she replied. "But the business has never been the same since he died. I go to Wholley for my fish now."

"We also use him from time to time," David conceded.

"You didn't the night I was at your restaurant."

"I'd have to check with my chef," David replied.

"I'm telling you, you didn't get that fish from Wholley," she replied. "I can tell!"

"Oh I'm sure you can," he assured her.

"So are you going to compensate me for my meal?" she shot back.

"Of course," David said, shrugging in resignation, fishing around in the inside breast pocket of his coat. He scribbled a note on the back of a business card with his Mont Blanc pen and handed it to her as though he was bestowing the Cross of Malta upon the little old woman from 716. "Give this to the maitre di before he seats you and he'll make sure your meal is on the house."

"Such a nice boy," she replied, smiling like the thief of Baghdad. "And your wife is so lovely, so pretty, yes you are," she said, cupping Suze's chin in her hand, before shuffling away.

"I hope you rot in hell," Suze muttered, her face frozen in the place where Audra had held her momentarily.

"Suzanne!" David exclaimed.

"The nerve," Suze said, wiping her chin as if to dispel Audra's touch.

"She's just old," David replied.

"I hate greedy old people," Suze said. "Jesus, hitting you up for a free meal, unbelievable. Why did you let her do that, at a shiva, of all places?"

"Because we're at a Shiva," he hissed, staring at Jen. "Other things are more important right now."

"I'm Sorry," Suze said shaking her head in resignation. "It's just so wrong."

Jenny was always amazed how quickly Suze could turn. She looked like a little waif, so pleasant and nurturing. But she could turn hard, menacing, like an angry animal protecting her turf. Nathan said he preferred it when she showed her tough side. Michael said Suze's tough side scared him. Jenny usually preferred no nonsense women, but somehow in Suze she liked the nurturer more.

"Such a fuss because she thought her fish had been frozen," Amy said, trying to ease the tension.

"It probably was," David said, shrugging.

"Really?"

"Fresh fish is expensive," he said nonchalantly.

Maybe that's why Suze was so tough on him, Jen thought. She had to be. What a way to have to live, to have to love someone that way, always being the bad cop. Maybe that's what would have happened with her and Michael. The thought made her uneasy and she tried to push it aside.

"Leave it to David to get cornered by an old lady over frozen fish at a shiva," Suze said, cupping her husband's chin in her hand as Audra had held hers earlier. "That's my boy."

"I see nothing's changed since I left," Amy said, smiling for the first time all day.

"Nothing ever changes," Suze sighed, taking Amy's and Jen's hands in

hers while considering her husband. "Nothing ever does."

5. Nathan Looked Like Hell

By coincidence, the Cohen's apartment fell silent just as Nathan walked in. Jenny caught his entrance out of the corner of her eye and tried not to let Amy know he was there. She didn't want to spook her. Amy was anxious to see him again, she could tell. There was a sort of expectant energy in the way she stood, as though she was gravitated toward the foyer, leaning toward it like a paper clip spun around in the presence of a magnet.

Nathan looked like hell. He'd lost more weight. He was gaunt. His complexion was pale. He hadn't shaved. He seemed to disappear in his sport coat. When the conversation abruptly stopped, he took a small step back, like a stranger on the street accused of a crime by an angry mob. His look was one of guilt and remorse, as if he'd been somehow responsible for Michael's death.

David and Suze greeted him. He hugged them peculiarly. He never had been the hugging type. He usually avoided casual contact, resisted Suze's social air kisses, but now it was as though he had to lean into them to keep from falling.

She tried not to stare. Amy looked at her quizzically. Damn, she thought, she'd given herself away. Amy considered her again then spun around. Jenny thought she heard a gasp, as Amy set eyes on him.

He kept his head bowed, listening as David spoke to him. He seemed preoccupied. He may have not even been listening to what David told him. Either that or he was concentrating on hearing exactly what David was saying.

He'd been that way recently with her too. They'd had dinner together a few days after the shooting. He'd stared hard at her when she spoke, listening intently like a foreigner who wasn't familiar with the language.

Amy watched him with a mixed expression of sadness and hope. Jenny wondered what she was thinking. When you've been away from someone who you look forward to seeing after a long absence, you imagine scenarios, hopeful chains of events that in the back of your mind that you half-know won't come to fruition. How had Amy envisioned their reunion? Did she hold onto the hope that they would fall in love again, or did she envision a final parting, a closing of that chapter of their lives?

Jenny suddenly remembered she would never have that opportunity with Michael. There would be no chance meetings on the street years from now. In the past week she'd thought she'd seen him around town. As if she were dreaming, she'd close her eyes, then open them again only to find no one even remotely resembling him in the crowd. On those occasions she'd feel so weak she'd have to sit down somewhere— in a coffee shop or on a park bench until the aching feeling in her stomach passed.

Watching Amy, she wondered what she had expected, coming back to Pittsburgh for the memorial service. She hadn't come for Tim's funeral. Tracy had been pissed about that. Then again, Amy and Tim weren't exactly fond of one another. Granted, this meant a little bit more to Amy. After all, she and Michael had been lovers. But then again, hadn't Amy told him that she'd rather

chalk it up as another mistake, a sexual peccadillo that she should have never allowed to escalate into a relationship?

So what if, even just in the back of her mind, Amy thought a reconciliation with Nathan was possible? Why not? They had been good together; two very different people – he opinionated, authoritarian, intellectual if sometimes dour, and she – differential, easygoing, willing to live and let live without much introspection. Theirs was a strange mix, but they were a good fit somehow. They deserved to find each other again.

But that only made her realize again that she would never get a second chance with Michael. They would never have a reunion. Only in death, in heaven perhaps, if there was a heaven. She wasn't sure she was ready to believe in heaven yet. She put her hand on Amy's shoulder. Amy turned, her eyes a question. Jenny wanted to tell her not to be so stupid, that she may never get another chance.

"He doesn't look very good," Amy said, her face screwed up in a look that suggested that if she had nurtured a vision of their reunion, this wasn't how she'd imagined it. She turned again and stared at his withered form.

"He's so thin. He must have lost thirty pounds," she said. "I wish he'd shaved, he looks like a terrorist when he doesn't."

"He says he likes that," Jen replied, hoping she didn't sound like she knew too much about his life now. Thinking about it, she knew much more about him than Amy did. Their relationship had grown much closer over the past few

months. There'd been an intimacy, a warmth between them like an old married couple, a friendly codependence. They talked on the phone almost daily. Although she thought Michael would have been jealous by how much time she spent with Nathan, he said he understood, that he'd confided things to Nathan before too and could understand that she felt comfortable doing the same. It had surprised her because Michael could be so jealous.

But as a result of her closeness with Nathan, she had come to understand him better. Underneath his veneer of confidence, the know-it-all, Nathan was filled with self-doubt and self-loathing.

"Do you think Tim's death did it?" Amy asked her.

"What?" she replied, lost in thought.

"Do you think Timmy's death affected Nathan that much?"

"I don't think so," she replied, watching him listen to Suze. "Michael's death seemed to shake him more. Maybe because it was so sudden. Tim didn't tell anyone he had AIDS until a couple months before he died, but at least we knew he wasn't going to make it. Michael... was so sudden."

Amy said nothing.

Jenny sighed.

"The whole thing with Nathan started before that. He'd quit his job around the time you moved to DC..."

"Yeah, Suze told me that," Amy replied.

"Maybe that was it...not that you caused it, I'm not saying that..." she said.

"I know," Amy said, lying. "He always was needy, underneath. Maybe because of everything that's happened recently he's let it show more."

"Yeah, maybe," she agreed, watching Nathan as he looked across the room noticing the two of them watching him. He smiled slightly Jen, then his eyes darted over to Amy for a second. There was a look of uncertainty on his face. He hesitated, then asked Suze to accompany him over to where they stood, as though he needed her support.

He tried to smile as he approached but couldn't sustain it. He almost fell into Jen's arms. He told her how sorry he was as they held each other. He finally pulled away and turned to Amy.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he said sadly. He looked down toward his shoes. "I look like hell."

"No," she contested, unconvincingly.

"You look great," he said.

There was an awkward pause. Jen and Suze watched the two of them look at one another like two old friends who have forgotten how to say hello.

Nathan hesitated for a moment, leaning forward. Finally, they embraced awkwardly, cautiously, Nathan holding her as though she was a porcelain doll he was afraid he might break.

6. Tracy Looked Warm

Sometime during Amy and Nathan's embrace, Tracy had entered the apartment. No one had come to greet her so she stood in the vestibule, content to stand apart for a while, taking the scene in with something of a smirk on her face. Jenny noticed her, and thought she'd seen much more of that smirk since Tim died. It seemed his death had changed her in a strange way that Jenny wouldn't have expected. Before, Tracy had been filled with such self-hate. Now she seemed more self-confident, often with an expression on her face that seemed to acknowledge that she knew life was a cruel joke and all she could do was go along with it.

She was wearing Tim's black motorcycle jacket with all the zippers and scuff marks from his various accidents. She'd taken to wearing his clothes a lot too. It wasn't like she was trying to reincarnate himself in her by wearing them, but some of his cocky confidence seemed to wear off on her when she wore his clothes.

When no one came to greet her, she just took off her coat and laid it on a chair before making her way into the room. She was wearing a ribbed sweater and a gauzy ankle-length skirt. She wore ankle-high boots with thin heels, her 'suffragette shoes' as she called them. She looked warm, though Jenny couldn't

quite explain why she thought she looked that way.

I feel cold,” she thought. Tracy looked warm. She wished she felt warm the way Tracy looked.

Tracy smiled sympathetically as she made her way over. They hugged, something Tracy wouldn’t have done just a few months ago. Somehow since Tim’s death she’d become the hugging type.

“This sucks, doesn’t it,” Tracy said when they were done embracing.

“Yeah,” she whispered, reminded once again of Michael’s last words.

Tracy bit her lip.

“I said the wrong thing, didn’t I?” she asked.

“Yeah,” she said.

Everyone was silent for a moment. Suze may have even gasped.

Jen smiled, fighting back tears.

“Fuck it,” she said.

“Fuck it,” Tracy replied, smiling her weary smile again. There were crows feet around her eyes when she smiled. It seemed to add a twinkle to her expression. That and the short hairstyle she’d adapted gave her an even more pixyish quality than she already had. Perhaps an older, more world weary pixy, how Tinkerbell might look after a few hard knocks. Hardened but cute.

Amy and Tracy embraced and then Tracy held Amy from her, grasping

her forearms in her hands.

“Look at you,” she said to Amy.

“Look at you,” Amy replied. “You look great.”

“Yeah, well death becomes me, I guess.”

“How pleasant,” Suze said, rolling her eyes.

“Hey Suze,” Tracy said, ignoring her. “David. How’s tricks?”

“Tricks is good,” David replied, winking.

Tracy laughed out loud. Half the room turned and looked in their direction.

“You really are a piece of work,” she said to David, stepping forward to give him a peck on the cheek in greeting.

They were all silent for a moment.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it to Tim’s funeral,” Amy offered after a moment.

“It’s okay,” Tracy replied. “It’s not like you slept with him...”

“Tracy!” Suze admonished her.

“I meant it in the best way,” Tracy said, unconvincingly.

“I feel bad,” Amy said. “I should have come.”

“Water under the bridge,” Tracy said, softening.

It was silent again.

“So, a hell of a way to start the year,” Tracy said.

“It can only go uphill from here,” Nathan added , shrugging as though it was all he could think of to say.

“Yeah,” Jenny said, forcing a smile.

She extended her hand to Amy. She could tell Amy was about to cry again. Amy offered her hand to Nathan. He took it, looking down at their clasped hands, as though it felt right. Jen joined hands with Tracy. Tracy took David’s and Suze completed the circle taking his hand in one hand and Jen’s in the other. Tracy started to say something, the smirk rising on her lips again, but she thought better of it and rubbed the back of Jenny’s hand with her thumb instead.

7. Whine & Prophylactics

"Is that the girl who has AIDS?" Lena whispered to Jenny as Tracy and Amy stood across the room talking.

"Her boyfriend died of AIDS," Jen replied trying not to sound exasperated. "Tracy's HIV negative."

"Well doesn't she *have to* have it if her boyfriend did?" Lena asked insistently.

"I guess not," Jen replied, watching Tracy as Amy talked with her.

"Well they have to have had sex," Lena whispered. "Isn't that how you get AIDS, from unsafe sex?"

"I guess they used condoms," Jen replied.

"I thought you kids today didn't use condoms. In my day we didn't have the pill. We *had* to use condoms. I made Michael's father use them for years before we decided to have Michael. I hated them. You have to stop everything," she said waving her hand in dismissal, "and Michael's father isn't exactly skilled with his hands..."

"Lena," Jen interrupted, "I think this falls into the category of more than I need to know..."

"Sorry," Lena bristled. "I thought we were talking woman to woman. I thought we can talk. Can't we talk?"

"Of course we can talk," she reassured her. "I just don't think I can handle

talking about condoms right now."

"I just want to know how she didn't get the AIDS from that boy," she said.

"Ask her," she conceded. "I'm sure she'll fill you in."

Lena paused for a moment.

"Do you think?" she asked, as though it might be inappropriate to ask.

"*Maybe*," she said, hoping Lena would catch the touch of irony in her voice. From Lena's expression, she was afraid it went right over her head.

"I'll just go over and introduce myself," Lena offered.

"Watch this," Jen said, tugging Suze from her conversation with Nathan and David as Lena strode toward Tracy.

"What?" Suze asked.

"She's going ask Tracy why she doesn't have AIDS."

"You're kidding?" Suze asked, shocked.

"What's this?" Nathan asked, approaching with Jay, the writer.

"Michael's mother is going to ask Tracy why she isn't HIV positive," Suze repeated.

"We just had a whole conversation about rubbers and how her husband isn't good with his hands..." Jen informed them.

"I can't imagine," Suze said horrified, staring at Lena as she engaged Tracy in conversation.

"She's a piece of work," Nathan said, a wry smile on his face.

"I was fourteen the first time I met Lena," Jay said. "She insisted I call her

by her first name, asked if I had a girlfriend, and offered to buy me a Playboy. I didn't know what to say. Most of the time I still don't."

"I know the feeling," Jenny said.

"Do you really think she's going to ask Tracy why she doesn't have AIDS?" Suze asked, her face screwed into a frown.

"Yes, knowing Lena," Jay said, taking a sip from his glass watching with great interest.

"What'll Trace say?" Nathan wondered.

"She'll say she didn't swallow," Jen said.

"No," Suze bristled.

"Wanna bet?" Jen replied.

"Ten bucks," Nathan offered.

"Deal," Jen said. "How 'bout you Suze?"

"I'm in for ten," she said, watching intently.

"There she goes," Nathan said, as Lena said something to Tracy in a hushed tone. Amy's eyes widened in horror.

"And..." Jen said in anticipation.

Tracy deadpanned her response. Amy laughed out loud in shock. Lena turned, ashen, a look of disbelief on her face.

"You owe me, ten bucks each," Jen said to Nathan and Suze.

"I like that Tracy," Jay said, a bit too enthusiastically.

"She'd chew you up and spit out the pieces," Jenny told him.

He looked at her as though she was kidding.

Nathan and Suze nodded to confirm her words.

Lena looked over at Jenny, with an expression that seemed to ask *what kind of friends were these?* She turned and then disappeared into the kitchen, the look of shock still painted across her face. Jenny took Nathan and Suze's money as Tracy and Amy approached.

"What was that all about?" Tracy asked, nodding toward the cash with a tired smile on her face.

"Let's just say the first round is on me tonight," Jen replied.

8. Kaddish

Without an introduction, the rabbi strode to the center of the living room and began speaking aloud. Though he was a little man, stooped, with liver spots on his hands and waddle at his throat, his voice was powerful. He spoke in that tone that clergy adopt, with a cadence that makes them seem holier, more understanding of God than you or me. He spoke with his hands clasped before him.

She had expected prayer shawls and a yarmulke, but the rabbi went unadorned instead, dressed only in a three-piece gray flannel suit. That he wore the vest made him seem austere enough, she supposed. No one wore three piece suits nowadays.

He spoke in questions, asking why traditionally mourners would rend a piece of clothing? Why cover mirrors and refrain from work? He answered himself dutifully, as though he was giving a primer on the subject to a room full of children. She already knew why. The torn clothing was a sign of grief. Mirrors were covered to vanquish vanity, to make mourners remember their loved ones, not look into mirrors to check their hair or makeup or appearance. It was all about focusing on the deceased, to think about Michael, to recite the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.

She'd already said her own version of the Kaddish. She didn't know the Hebrew, didn't know the prayer in English either. She knew the Lord's Prayer, but saying it wasn't enough, wasn't right even. She said her own prayer, concentrated preserving the memories of Michael in her mind.

The Rabbi dovened as he began to recite the Kaddish in Hebrew, his eyes closed. Michael had taken her to his synagogue a few times. The Hebrew sounded like gibberish to her, but she liked the singing. Michael knew some of the prayers by rote. Others he followed in the prayer book with his finger, mumbling as he followed along. But when it came time for the Kaddish, he closed the book, his index finger holding the page, and he recited it along with the rabbi, his eyes, closed, his body swaying slightly in rhythm.

The Kaddish was poetry, had Nathan told her when they discussed it recently. It is the prayer said by mourners after a loved one's death, but it was also a prayer in praise of God. That made sense to her as she listened to it. Just hearing it seemed to make sense that it was a prayer of both praise and loss. Nathan had also told her about Allen Ginsberg's Kaddish and she had bought the slim book of poetry at the bookstore. She thought it was wrong, dirty that Ginsberg had appropriated the prayer and wrote about *cock* and *asshole* and *getting laid*, and of lobotomies and madness and scars. Nathan had told her that Ginsberg's poem of mourning for his mother, full of ugliness and sadness was his

way of celebrating the human condition, how in between those short instances of beauty life wrenches your heart. Ginsberg's poem was his prayer and praise of his mother's sad life.

She knew she couldn't write a poem like that. Instead a few words kept circulating through her mind. *Michael, it's okay Michael, we'll be okay.* She found the words forming on her lips from time to time. At first she thought it was just her reassuring him that everything was going to be okay, a reliving of that terrible night in the Quickie Mart. But as the Rabbi said Kaddish, as Michael's father stood, listening, mumbling the words under his breath in time with the rabbi, holding his wife's hand as the tears rolled down both their faces, she realized the words in her mind— *it's okay, we'll be okay* — were Michael's. It was him telling her that everything would be right. Maybe not now, maybe not in six months, but someday it would.

The rabbi finished. He said a few words. The Jews in the room joined him in reciting the Shm'a, punctuated with an amen.

Jenny whispered, "Amen."

Michael's mother approached the rabbi to thank him. The others stood about awkwardly. David hugged Suze. Nathan and Amy's eyes met for a moment and she thought they might actually hug or at least say something. Instead Tracy approached Amy and wiped the tear from her cheek.

She heard herself saying *it's okay, we'll be okay* in her head again. It was her voice but she thought she detected a hint of Michael's as well.

Jay approached.

"You're smiling," he said with a look on his face that suggested he feared she would lose it at any minute.

"I am?" she asked, blushing.

"Yeah," he said, looking up at her eyes. "Are you okay?"

For some reason she took his hand in hers. It felt good.

"It's okay," she said aloud.

VI. JENNY

Fugue: Of Love and Life and Love

1. A Balm for Teenage Wounds

Jenny rode alone to The Saloon in a taxi. As the Shiva had wound down and Michael's parents had thanked everyone for coming over and over again, the group agreed to meet at one of their old haunts. Jenny had stayed behind, partially to make sure Lena was okay, but also because she wanted time to be alone before seeing them all again at the bar.

All those people, all those voices at the Shiva, had jangled her nerves. The more people showed up, the more unsettled she'd become. She asked the cabby if it was okay to smoke. He shrugged and lit one himself. Her hand shook as she lit her cigarette. Outside, the darkened suburbs rolled by. She could feel the chill of the night through the window despite the suffocating warmth of the cab. Christmas lights shone from streetlights and in store windows. She didn't like smoking but it was the only thing that settled her nerves. She felt slightly nauseous. Christmas carols ran through her head.

When she arrived, the others were standing near the bar waiting to be seated, their faces masks of overly cautious concern. They'd been talking about her, she could tell. The bar was crowded and stuffy. She felt a draft swirling around her ankles. She just couldn't get warm. David slipped the maitre di some cash and he sat them ahead of the group of people that was ahead of them. They squeezed into a booth and Nathan took a chair from another table and sat at the end of the table.

"Why didn't they have liquor at that thing?" he asked. "I've been dying for a drink all day."

"I thought it was a Jewish thing not to have liquor at a Shiva," David said.

"I thought so too," Suze said.

"Beats me," Nathan said.

"Look at us," Suze said. "Half of us are Jews and we don't even know the rules."

"Irish rules are easy," Jenny said. "When in doubt, we drink."

"I could live with that," Tracy said.

Nathan craned his neck, looking at a group of guys sitting at a table at the other side of the bar. He excused himself and made his way over to them, shaking hands all around, and saying something that made them all laugh. He ordered a round of drinks then struck up a conversation with a balding, overweight man who looked about ten years his senior.

Jenny watched Amy watch him. They'd hardly said a word to each other all day. There was a look of longing in her eyes. Why couldn't they just say something to each other?

At the other end of the room Nathan said something into the portly guy's ear and the man frowned. His look turned to one of shock and he almost dropped his beer. Nathan slapped him jovially on the back and sauntered away.

"What was that all about?" David asked when he returned

"Johnny Lewis," Nathan replied, pouring himself a beer from the pitcher

on the table. "We went to high school together. He was a big football star. Arrogant SOB. In gym class senior year, he and this other jackass, Nicko Gianelli, filled a tub with water and tossed it on me while I was getting dressed. I went through the rest of the day wearing wet corduroys."

"Kids are so mean," Tracy said.

"Grown-ups can be mean too," Jenny interjected.

"Yeah, well Nicko went out of his way to apologize. You could tell he felt bad about it," Nathan continued. "He said they hadn't singled me out. I just happened to be standing there so they dumped the water on me. I thought that was a pretty decent thing to do, especially for a dumb jock like him."

"Did Johnny ever apologize?" Amy asked. The sadness in her eyes was palpable.

They belong together, Jenny thought.

"Nope," Nathan said, shaking his head, trying to suppress a smile.

"Oh oh," what's the smile for?" David asked.

"Don't get mad, get even.."

"Was that what all that was a minute ago?" Suze asked, pointing at the men at the other side of the room.

"Yeah" he replied sighing.

"What did you do?" Jen asked.

"Fucked his wife," he replied.

"Excuse me?" Tracy asked almost choking on her beer.

"I was doing a freelance job at Heinz a few months ago," he said. "It turned out the woman I was working with was his wife. We were working our asses off on a new product roll out, spending like ten, twelve-hour days together. - weekends, late nights. When I asked her how her husband felt about her working such long hours, she said he probably didn't even notice she wasn't home."

"So you planned to seduce her?" Tracy asked, glancing over her shoulder at Johnny who stood apart from the crowd, looking into his beer as if he was trying to divine some answer from its contents.

"No," Nathan replied. "She's attractive, but I didn't plot my revenge or anything," he stole a glance at Amy, "you know....she had a big wedding ring, and I don't sleep with married women. But she kept dropping hints about her unhappy marriage. She'd put her hand on mine or brush up against me in the office. I don't exactly remember how I found out she was Johnny's wife. I knew she wanted to, and I thought about it – you know. I really resisted the temptation for a while. I really did. But then I thought what the hell...balm for those old teenage wounds.

"So I waited until my contract was almost up. There was a big media event to introduce the product. We did it the night of the big press conference and I was gone by the end of the week. For a while I felt really good about it. It was like I'd taken control of my life there for a few days - that, I alone, had decided my fate for once, not just let things happen to me. I kinda felt proud that

I'd laid out a plan, defined my goals and objectives, just like my doctor told me..."

"Doctor?" Amy asked alarmed.

"I've been seeing a psychologist," he replied.

"You've been seeing a shrink?" David asked, amazed.

"Yeah," Nathan replied, looking earnest. "She says I have a lot of anger issues."

"Not to mention some revenge issues," Jenny added

"Yeah, those too," he admitted. "I don't feel great about it. But I can honestly say I'm not ashamed."

2. Death at McDonalds

Jenny drank Scotch on the rocks. The whiskey warmed her a bit as she sipped it. The others were drinking beer. She wasn't in a beer mood. Beer reminded her of summers, when they gathered at the ballpark or for brunch on lazy Sunday afternoons. It would never be the same. It seemed strange to think that. It was like some short story in some magazine where the narrator declares that things will never be the same again in the small town after Boo Radley killed that man, or after Sherman marched through Georgia and burned the plantations to the ground. Maybe that was how she felt, like some terrible hand had wiped Michael and Tim clean off the face of the earth. And it seemed the weight had fallen on Nathan to try to keep the group together, and he was struggling under their collective weight. It showed on his face as he told the McDonald's story for Amy's sake.

"Tim loved this story." Nathan said, his voice trailing off. He looked melancholy. "I'd gone out to the driving range to hit a couple buckets of balls after work..."

"I didn't know you golfed," Amy said.

"So bourgeois," Tracy said, mockingly.

"I played a lot when I was a teenager. My dad and I took it up because my mom thought we should do the father son thing more." He grew more dejected. "It didn't work out so well. We never knew what to say to each other. It was my

fault I guess..." he paused looking into his beer. Suddenly he looked up and gazed at Amy and put on a brave face. "So anyway – I'd been going out to Scally's out by the airport in the evenings to hit a couple buckets of balls," he said, pausing to finish his drink, looking into his glass, pondering it for a moment.

"Do you want a refill?" David asked.

"Yes. No. No, I'd better wait," Nathan said squinting, as though he had a pain between his eyes.

Jenny glanced over at Amy. She was watching Nathan with a look of such sadness. These two people were once so connected, she thought. Now, they refused to admit they still longed for each other.

"The sun is going down," Nathan continued. "And you stand there whacking little balls into the fading light. That night smell rises from the grass, and as the sky grows darker, these huge spotlights illuminate the range. Giant moths flutter around the light poles while all around you people stand in little stalls whacking little white projectiles into the night, the air just snapping with the crack of golf balls being struck. The lights catch the ball for a moment, a perfect white orb that disappears into the black like a shooting star."

"The driving range is right by the runway so jets scream by a few hundred feet off the ground and for a minute you think you could actually bean one if you hit the ball hard enough. If aliens flew by and saw people hitting little white balls with metal sticks into the night, they'd think we're nuts. But it's beautiful in a way. Dozens of people standing there furiously whacking range balls into the

night as jets lumber by like big shiny whales."

He smiled and looked at Amy for the first time. He reached to her then hesitated for a moment. She strained toward him, leaning. He touched her cheek.

"On my way home I decided to stop at McDonalds to get a hamburger. I hadn't had one in a while and I was in a hurry to get home and shower. So I pull up to the take-out window and for a long time there's no voice coming from the little speaker. Just silence. I wait and wait and I'm beginning to lose my patience when someone finally comes over the intercom. She's hesitant and asks me to wait a minute longer. 'My lord,' she says. 'My lord, I'm sorry sir. May I take your order?'" she asks.

"You can tell she's flustered and I'm kinda of mad, but I give her my order and she says she's sorry but it will be longer than usual because 'a gentleman has just 'passed on' in the restaurant,' she says. And I say, 'passed on as in...' and she says 'as in dead.'"

"Oh my god," Amy gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Yeah," he replied. "And what was funny was the way she said it— 'The man is day-ed.' Just like that. So I pull up to the window and she hands me my Coke and fries and says the burger will be up in a minute, can I pull my car up by the door, someone will bring it out to me.

"When I pull up I can see inside the restaurant. A few people are standing at the counter staring at this old guy who's slumped in his seat leaned up against the window. A few of them are eating fries as they look at the guy like they're

watching a fascinating movie or something. Except this guy is definitely unanimated."

"They were eating?" Amy asked.

"I couldn't believe it," he replied. "And a couple of booths away from him a man and woman were sitting there eating, holding a conversation as if nothing had gone wrong."

"Gross," Suze said.

"So then I hear a siren and this fire truck pulls up to the restaurant and five guys in fire gear hop out and throw blocks under the truck's wheels...the whole nine yards. Then they go into the restaurant and stand there for a minute looking at the guy. By this time the paramedics pull up and they go into the building too. One paramedic pulls out a big flashlight and nudges the dead guy on the shoulder, like he might just be sleeping or something. Nothing. So he puts the flashlight on the table and looks for a pulse on the guy's neck. He looks up at the firemen and through the window I can see him say the word 'dead.'

"The firefighters kinda just shrug their shoulders and they all file out of the joint just as one of the workers comes out the door to deliver my burger. The fire men are laughing, telling jokes as they walk out the door, and the last one leans up to my window and says, 'you sure you still want that burger?'"

"Did you eat it?" Amy asked.

Nathan nodded his head almost apologetically

"Yeah," he shrugged. "I was hungry."

"That's why Tim loved that story," Tracy said. "The triumph of commercialism over death."

"Yeah right," Jen said, "What's he supposed to do, go home and not eat and contemplate death instead?"

"I believe it's possible, maybe even helpful, to contemplate death while eating McDonalds," Nathan said.

"But not too hard," Suze said.

"No, definitely not too hard," he replied.

3. He's Dead. He Was an Asshole.

"I'm HIV negative so far," Tracy said, reaching across the table and pouring herself another beer. "I get tested every month and it keeps coming back negative, but I know someday I'll get a call and find out I'm infected." She smiled wanly and shrugged. "But then I think, shit, I can't let it rule my life."

"That's what Tim said," Nathan commented.

"No," Tracy replied. "He'd say 'that's life,' and he kept on riding his motor cycle and smoked and drank like nothing had changed..."

"He was nicer," Jenny said.

Tracy smiled weakly. "Sometimes," she said. "He had his bad days too."

It was silent again.

She sighed heavily.

"I try to be positive and not let fear stop me," she said trying to sound positive.

"We're all going to die," David said.

"Death never takes a holiday," Nathan said.

"You never know when your number's up," said Suze.

"You could get hit by a bus tomorrow," Jenny said.

Everyone was smiling. It was a game Tim had loved to play.

"You can't take it with you," said Tracy.

"You never know when you'll crap out," David said.

"Nice tits," Amy said.

They stopped cold and stared at her as if she was touched..

"Don't you remember?" she asked.

"Fiona!" Nathan and Jenny said in unison.

"God, I forgot," David said.

"Who's Fiona?" Suze asked.

"You don't remember Fiona– the clueless wonder?" Jenny asked.

Suze shook her head.

"Short girl, thin blonde hair, real spacey," Tracy said.

Suze shook her head again.

"She wore her sweaters backwards half the time," Jenny said, trying to jog Suze's memory. "She peed in the litter box at Jimmy Taylor's apartment the night she slept with him because she couldn't find the bathroom. She burnt her neck because she tried to iron the collar of her shirt *while she was still wearing it.*"

"I remember something vaguely, but what's that have to do with her breasts?" Suze asked, somewhat offended.

"It must have been the semester when you were in Europe," David said.

"We never told you this story?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Jesus! Yes, David. I'm sure. I hate it when you treat me like I'm some kind of idiot."

David glanced about the group sheepishly.

"Look it doesn't matter. You were in Europe or whatever," Jenny said, suddenly pissed off by David and Suze's bickering.

"Anyway," Nathan continued, trying to bring things back to the subject of Fiona. "We were at a party and a bunch of people were hanging out in the kitchen talking, and Fiona was leaning over the countertop..."

"You're not telling it right," Jenny interrupted. "Fiona just happened to forget to wear a bra. She was wearing a t-shirt with a scoop neck so when she leaned over, her shirt billowed out and you could see..."

"I was getting to that," Nathan objected.

"You were leaving out important details," she replied.

"So Fiona was leaning over the counter and everything was hanging out," he continued, "and all the guys were definitely noticing it, them..."

"Everyone noticed," Amy interrupted.

"Guys were going out of the room and grabbing their friends and bringing them into the kitchen..."

"Typical," Tracy said.

"But no one said anything..." Amy says.

"Until Tim walked into the room, stared right at her and just blurted out—'nice tits!' The room went dead silent. Everything was frozen. Time stopped."

"And then she went running out of the room crying," Jenny said, "like she was all hurt."

"Weren't you the one who went after her?" David asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I felt bad for her...kinda. You have to admit, it was a rotten thing for Tim to say..."

"Even if every guy in the room was thinking it?" Tracy asked.

"What about the women?" Jenny asked. "Someone could have taken her aside and told her boobs were on display," she replied. "But no one did."

"She wanted everyone to look. But when Tim called her on it, she got embarrassed," Nathan said.

"The old 'she was dressed like a slut so she deserved to be mistreated' argument?" Jen asked.

"I didn't say she was dressed like a slut," he replied. "I meant she knew what she was doing and was enjoying the attention until Tim called her on it..."

"So now it's Tim's fault?" Tracy asked defensively.

"No!" he exclaimed.

"What I don't understand is if she got off on the attention how did that make her clueless?" Suze asked. "Stupid yes, clueless no."

"She was stupid and clueless. And poor Jenny was stuck consoling her," Amy said.

"It wasn't like anyone else jumped out of their seat to do it," Jen said. "It was like 'let Jenny console her, she dresses like a hooker half the time. If anyone should know how it feels Jenny should.'"

"I didn't mean that..." Amy said.

"But that was what everyone was thinking. I'm sorry that I didn't grow up in a big white house in a fancy suburb. 'Let Jenny *the slut* make her feel better. It's not like I thought she didn't bring it on herself. She did. But I felt sorry for her. No one else did."

"Tim had a talent for making people feel like shit," Nathan said.

"He felt he was being truthful," Tracy said.

"I think he was in love with himself..." David started.

"He hated himself," Tracy interrupted. "He acted smug, but he hated himself so much that he wanted to make people hate him. Sometimes insecure people are the ones who flaunt themselves the most. They're afraid that if no one notices them, they won't exist."

"But dying is the ultimate act of disappearance," Nathan countered.

"He thought if he died everyone would remember him, talk about him. His dying was just another way to get attention," Tracy replied.

"You know what he'd say about that if he were here," Nathan offered.

"He's not here," Jenny whispered. "He's dead. He was an asshole. He was mean and he treated people like shit. I don't care if he did it because he hated himself or not. In the end he dug his own grave." She stared blankly at Tracy, who sat with her head bowed. "I'm sorry. But my heart hurts so much it feels like it's going to explode. Michael was sweet. He never did anything to hurt anybody. He didn't have to die...his murder was so senseless. There's no reason for anything. I know that. But if we're all going to die what's the sense of being so

mean?"

"Tim could be sweet sometimes," Tracy muttered. "I know you guys never saw it. He wanted forgiveness so much. I guess I thought I could give that to him. He fought me so much. I have the scars to prove I couldn't." She looked up at Jenny. "You know what his last words were?"

"Forgive me," Nathan whispered.

"No," she corrected him. "Those were his last words to me. I was sitting on the bed cradling his head in my hands and a nurse walked in and bent over the bed to change his IV, and he said it."

"Said what?" Nathan asked.

She tried to stifle a smile, but couldn't.

"It's terrible," she said.

"What did he say?" Amy asked.

Tracy laughed out loud.

"What did he say?" Amy insisted again.

"Nice tits."

4. Kids Don't Know for Shit, Really

They decided the Saloon wasn't what it used to be, or maybe it was just that they who they weren't who they used to be. Maybe it was Michael and Tim's deaths, Jenny thought, as they stood in the vestibule debating where to go next, but maybe it was just the way things were. You grow older, your sensibilities change. She never was one for sentimentalism. Nathan tried to interest her in books and foreign films in which the author reminiscences about days past, but she could never buy into them. The past wasn't all that great. People get misty eyed over their childhoods, mistaking the ignorance of youth for innocence. Youth seems simpler because kids don't know for shit, really. That and people forget.

So they had forgotten that the Saloon was pretty much a dump. A dump with oak accents and ferns, but no different than any number of your nicer neighborhood taverns with essentially the same drunks at the bar and the usual group of guy's like Nathan's high school enemy at the other side of the room, people whose lives are eternally suspended in post-pubescent sentimentality.

The others were arguing about where to go next. David and Suze suggested Docs. Tracy refused. Standing in a bar full of recent college graduates wasn't her idea of fun, she said. She didn't want to feel any older than she

already felt. Amy suggested Chiefs. Tracy said Chiefs was beneath them. When Nathan reminded her that it was she who once stumbled out of Chiefs and projectile vomited all the way across North Neville Street, she acquiesced.

“Thanks for the memories,” she said.

“That’s what friends are for,” he replied.

She flipped him the finger.

“I want some of those maraschino cherries soaked in 151 rum,” Suze said, excitedly. Though she was the proper lady of the group she had a soft spot for Chiefs, easily the most low rent of their old hangouts.

“If the queen wants cherry bombs at Chiefs, we go to Chiefs,” David said.

“Chiefs it is,” Nathan agreed.

Then the wrangling over who drove with whom began. Amy wanted Jen to go with her in Tracy’s car. Tracy drove like a maniac, a legacy of hanging around Tim all those years, she thought. Tracy’s driving made her sick.

“I’ll go with David and Suze,” she said.

“David drives like a pussey,” Tracy said, repeating what Tim had always said of David.

“The ghost of Jeff speaks,” he said. “I may drive conservatively, but I’ve never wrapped my car around a telephone pole.”

“Yeah, well don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” she replied half-

heartedly, as though she really wasn't in the mood for a fight.

"I think you should go with Nathan," Jenny whispered in Amy's ear.

"I couldn't..." she gasped. "It would be too...awkward."

"Quit whispering," David said. "I hate whisperers."

"Look," Tracy said, growing impatient with the whole thing. "I'll follow Nathan to his place. He'll drop off his car and we'll meet you at Chiefs. That way you can all say nasty things about me behind my back."

"Trace..." Suze objected. "We wouldn't do that."

"Yeah, if we wanted to talk about you behind your back, we'd do it to your face," David added.

"Somehow, I believe you," Tracy said, half-smiling.

They exited into the cold and went their separate ways. David had parked his enormous sport utility vehicle that took up two places in the parking lot. A parking ticket flapped in the nippy breeze, underneath the wiper blade.

"Shit!" he exclaimed, pulling the ticket from the windshield.

"David, relax!" Suze admonished. "It's just a ticket."

He shook his head, disgusted.

"Typical," he said.

"What?" she bristled, girding herself for a confrontation.

Amy and Jen stood aside, eyeing each other as if to say maybe they should

have gone with Tracy after all. David sighed and shook his head again.

“I guess,” he sighed. “If the poor old meter maid has to work a night as cold as this, shit, she deserves her little \$25 fine.”

“It’s just a ticket,” Suze repeated.

He looked at her and smiled tenderly.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Not worth getting worked-up over.”

Jen shot Amy a confused look. Amy shrugged.

They climbed into the enormous truck. The seats were the softest leather she’d ever sat in. The interior of the vehicle was bigger than some of the apartments she’d lived in. David cranked the heater. The seat beneath her warmed too. Finally, she was warm.

“I could live in this thing,” Amy said, running her hands along the seats and carpets as though she was petting an expensive pedigreed show dog.

“It sure beats risking life and limb with Tracy Andretti, doesn’t it,” David asked.

“David, be nice,” Suze admonished him.

“I’m just saying...” He replied. “Geese, you know I don’t appreciate you jumping down my throat every time I say something...”

“I do not...” she interrupted.

“You do too,” he replied. “Doesn’t she?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Well...sometimes,” Amy said, timidly.

“I do?” Suze asked. “Do I? Jen, do I criticize David too much?”

“Sometimes he deserves it...”

“Oh, I know I deserve it,” David interrupted. “Even I know that. But not all the time.”

“No one deserves it all the time,” Amy agreed.

“But I don’t do it all the time,” Suze defended herself.

“You’ve been doing it a lot lately,” David replied.

“I’m sorry. I guess I don’t notice,” she said, defeated. “I’ll try to be more conscious of it.”

She patted his hand. David pouted and pretended to concentrate on the road.

“Well isn’t this fun?” Suze asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“It’s still better than riding with Tracy,” David offered.

“Tracy’s driving makes me want to throw up,” Jen said, watching the darkened storefronts roll by as they headed down West Liberty Avenue toward town.

“Ever notice that the word ‘throw-up’ and ‘Tracy’ often come up together in conversation?” Amy asked. “Why is that?”

“Because they go together,” Jen replied, still staring out the window as

they approached the Liberty Tunnels. “Do you know anyone who throws-up more than her?”

“Nope,” David said.

“I’ve never thought about it,” Amy replied.

“Can we change the subject?” Suze requested. “I’m getting queasy just thinking of it.”

It was silent in the car as they headed through the tunnel. When they emerged on the other side, Suze turned on the radio. Classical piano filled the truck, emanating, it seemed, from all around them.

“Chopin,” Amy said. “Nathan used to play this.”

Jen looked at the skyscrapers of the city as they passed over the Liberty Bridge. She remembered how her father would tell visiting relatives that they were in for a treat as they drove home from the airport at night. Once you exited the tunnel the gleaming city exploded into view, its bright buildings alight in the darkness like some magical Oz. As a kid she always thought it must be magical to work in one of those mysterious buildings. Having heard stories from Tracy and others she knew who worked in town, she was glad she worked at the hospital instead. Somehow her dying patients seemed more life affirming than the tales she heard of licentious bosses and backstabbing officemates.

As they headed toward Oakland, she watched the Monogahela River roll

by. Amy and Suze were discussing Tracy, how worried they were about her. She'd never worried about Tracy. They were a lot alike—both a little self-loathing, but survivors. As they headed up Forbes Avenue through the university campus, she tried to remember herself as a student. It was all so far away, further still now more than ever.

The piano music was making her sad. She didn't want to cry again. Fortunately David complained that it was putting him to sleep and flipped the dial to a classic rock station. A 70's rock anthem blared through the speakers. It was a group that she had hated when they were current, but for some reason she liked now.

When they reached Chiefs, the small narrow bar was packed. Cigarette and cigar smoke hung in a cloud above the patrons. The smell bowled them over.

"I think I can skip the cherry bombs," Suze said, holding her hand over her face.

"Amen," Amy agreed.

They waited outside in the cold for Tracy and Nathan to arrive. When they showed up a few minutes later they stood in the frigid street and decided to meet at David and Suze's house instead.

5. House Swapping

David guided his massive truck through the streets of North Oakland toward his and Suze's new townhouse in Shadyside. Shivering college students padded down the sidewalks. It was an area where a lot of the foreign graduate students lived. She always felt sorry for the Africans and Asians in the winter. They always seemed surprised and miserable by the cold. Wisps of snow swirled around their ankles and across the street. No one else seemed to notice that they drove right past the Quickie Mart where Michael had died.

David was too busy explaining to Amy why he and Suze had moved to the city.

She was shocked by the emptiness that filled her they sped by, passing it so quickly she barely had time to take it all in. Her chest ached and she fought to catch her breath. How could David have been so thoughtless. And Suze? Instead they just kept talking about themselves.

"Oh we just couldn't stand it out there in the middle of nowhere," David said. "There's nothing to do!"

Suzy nodded vigorously.

"It would be one thing if we were older and had kids, you know for the schools and stuff, but we're young. We deserve to have fun."

"Tell me you didn't sell your parents' estate," Amy said.

"Noooo," David said, looking at her in the rear view mirror. "My parents

built the townhouse we're in now a couple years ago. We swapped houses. My folks didn't like living in the city as much as they thought they would. They kept saying it was noisier than they remembered. So I had one of those lifts put in the house in Swickley so they didn't have to go up and down all those stairs. They moved back out there and we moved into town."

"Not a bad deal," Amy said.

"We got the short end of the stick," David scowled. "The townhouse was new construction..."

"Built for crap," Suze interjected. "The walls were like paper. We had to put a hundred thousand into it just to make it livable."

"We knocked out a few walls. It really opened it up," David interjected. "We practically gutted it and started over. You'll see—it looks great."

"And Nathan lives right around the corner," Amy said, expectantly, glancing at Jen checking to see if she'd given herself away again.

"Not that we ever see him," David replied. "I think we saw him more when we were living in the 'burbs. He's been so weird lately."

Suze shot him a look, then turned to reassure Amy.

"I think he's felt lost the last few months," she said carefully. "He's starting to come around though. Don't you think so David?"

"Uh...yeah. Whatever," he said unconvincingly.

There was a pregnant pause.

"But you like living in the city?" Amy asked.

“Oh yeah, it’s a totally different world,” David enthused. “The city’s alive. Out in the suburbs everyone has kids and all they care about is soccer scores and country clubs. Plus everyone drives those horrendous mini vans...”

“We can walk to Shadyside,” Suze interjected enthusiastically. “Our neighbors are professors and artists...”

“Or the lawyers or doctors *who count*,” David added. “The junior partners and middle managers live out in the suburbs. The real power guys stay in town.”

"And the beauty of the whole thing is," Suze said, "well it's kinda sick really, but by the time David's parents die, we'll have kids. We'll sell the townhouse and move back to the other house for the schools and little league and stuff like that."

"It all works out perfectly," David said.

Jen could see him smiling in the rear view mirror, so self-satisfied as the two of them talked about their homes and the kids they didn't yet have but knew they would. They would grow obscenely old together, unfettered by the problems of the rest of the world. They were like Tom and Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, just as stupid but somewhat less harmful.

Listening to them she realized she and Michael had never talked about children. They hadn't even talked about marriage. She'd assumed they would get hitched, but thinking about it now, it occurred to her that maybe he hadn't wanted to. Maybe it had never crossed his mind. Was that possible? Why hadn't he mentioned marriage? Once when someone, Tracy or Suze maybe, asked him

when he was going to make an honest woman of her he'd just rolled his eyes and pulled her close to him. He'd never said anything one way or the other.

6. A God Who Knows You Know

They sat in the living room at Suze and David's house, on the same big sofas and armchairs they had lounged in at David's parents mansion in the suburbs during the summer's Sunday brunch. They had been re-covered in soft, butter-colored leather. The place was very modern, crisp, like a layout taken out of *Architectural Digest*, but comfortable, not like some of those places that look like mausoleums. As much as David and Suze got on her nerves, sickened her even sometimes, Jenny had to admit they had good taste.

David had offered them fancy micro-brews when they arrived. *Beer then liquor, never sicker*, he reminded them when Tracy objected to beer. She'd asked if he had Rolling Rock at least, but he didn't. She'd made a face and almost set off another scene. Fortunately she'd caught the angry look Jen shot her and she kept her mouth shut. She seemed to think that the fact she'd lost Tim gave her the excuse to act like him. She was half tempted to say it out loud, but decided being rude wouldn't solve anything.

She took some kind of Raspberry lager that tasted like cough medicine. She traded Nathan for a Czech pilsner. He'd taken hers and put it aside, pouring himself a glass of Port from a decanter on the bar. Somehow the conversation turned to religion.

"After something like this happens you have to ask yourself if there really is a God," David said.

"How can you say that?" Tracy asked.

"Well, you know," Suze answered for him. "If there is a god why does he stand by and permit so much suffering."

"Why does God have to be interventionist?" Tracy replied. She looked around. "Why do people think he has to be this crossing guard for humanity."

"I'm saying, why does he have to exist at all?" David replied. "That's what we're saying," he said, pointing back and forth between himself and Suze.

"Because," she replied, "how else could all of this could exist without something to start it all? How could there be a universe..."

"Ever hear of the big bang?" he interrupted.

"But who created the big bang?"

"What created the big bang," David retorted.

"Who. What. It doesn't matter," Amy chimed in. "You guys personalize God like he lives down the street, or lives on a cloud. He could be an it, an entity, a force."

"I like to think of God as a curious child who has put the whole thing in motion just to see how it turns out," Jenny said, holding her knees to her chin.

"Nathan, how come you're not chiming in?" David asked. "You and Tim always used to argue about this endlessly."

"Because there's no use," he replied, staring off into space. "I'm tired of talking about God. There is no answer. No one's gonna know, so what's the use?"

Tim and I spent too much time fighting over it. I mean God is what you want

him to be. You have to come to your own understanding of God. David and Suze's God is not-god. There is no God, so that's their belief, their god. Men and women act on their free will, that is, I guess if they happen to have been born in a country that allows them to have a free will. Tracy's God is the all knowing, all seeing God who controls all but doesn't necessarily step down from all high to change things. Jenny personifies god as a man-child. Shit, the Shinto god is everywhere, a presence that is in rocks and trees, fire engines, smog, bullet trains, German shepherds. In the end do you have to be a priest to have a direct line to god, or do you have to live a pious life to know God better?"

"Every time Tim and I fought, he insisted his answer was right," he continued. "His god knew all, knew Tim felt bad about hitting Tracy even while he was in the middle of beating her up. His penance was that he knew god knew he was mistreating the person he loved. When he said shit like that he didn't say it to try to justify what he did. He truly believed that was his punishment — that he knew God knew he knew." He shook his head. "That never justifies a black eye or a bruised arm. It's misguided, sick. Look, I don't care what or who your god is, just don't try to shove him down my throat."

"So what do you believe?" Jenny asked.

"Be good to the people around you, try to be mindful of them and do right by them. They're all that really matter. If you mistreat them you end up alone, unloved, uncared for. That's ungodly, disrespectful of the power that made you—whatever that may be."

7. Walking, Talking Hawaii Five-O

"My mom was such a cunt," Tracy said. "You want an argument for there not being a God. She's it. When she divorced my dad she claimed psychological abuse, then ran off with her personal trainer and didn't marry the hairy bastard so my dad had to keep paying alimony."

"Is she still with that Guido?" Suze asked. "He was so slimy."

"Yeah," she said, disgusted.

"Didn't he kidnap you once or something," Amy asked.

"What?" David asked.

"Yeah," Tracy replied. "She sued for divorce, my dad refused to give her custody saying she abandoned us for Franco the bodybuilder. So one day she showed up at my elementary school, told me to get my things, and not tell anyone 'cause we're going on an adventure. We got on a plane, I fell asleep and the next thing I knew, we were in Honolulu! A week later I was sitting at the pool at the Whikiki Hilton, watching mommy dearest frolic in the pool with that slimy Italian bastard and thinking of the ways I'd like to kill them both, when all of a sudden detectives walk onto the terrace, pull Guido out of the pool and cuff him and my mother. The cops told me to gather my things and come with them. Meanwhile my mother's screaming at the top of her lungs as they drag her away. She's telling me to run away, and I stand there waiting for Jack Lord to show up, like I'm a walking talking Hawaii Five-O episode."

"Wow! That's fucked up," David said.

"I never told you that?" Tracy asked.

"Never. How'd you get back?" David asked.

"My father was waiting at the police station. He'd had a private detective track us down."

"You could have your own little mini series on TV," Nathan said.

"Only something like that could happen to me," Tracy replied, rolling her eyes. "Now you see why I couldn't leave Tim?"

"Uh, no," David said.

"I was scarred by my childhood," she replied as though he was daft.

"I don't see the connection," Jenny said. "First of all, there were no kids involved."

"We had cats," she offered.

"Shut up!" Amy said, laughing. "There's no comparison."

"He would have killed those cats if I left him," she replied, half seriously.

"And skinned them, and cut off their heads, and put them in a box and mailed them to you," Nathan said.

"Gross," Suze said.

"Then hang himself with their intestines," Tracy said.

"Stop!" Amy shouted.

"Too bad he didn't," Jen said as coldly as she could.

"Jen!" Amy admonished her.

"Fuck him," she said angrily. "Tracy deserves to be adored, to have someone tell her everything's gonna be all right, that she's good and beautiful and sexy and makes him horny in the middle of the day when he's sitting in a boring meeting and can't think of anything else but her. She deserves someone who will hold her at night and tell her he'll make all the bad things go away."

"You have higher aspirations for me than I do," Tracy said

"Someone has to," Jen replied, perhaps a bit too harshly.

"Ouch," David commented.

"Sorry," Jen said.

"No," Tracy replied. "I don't know. I've spent my whole life looking for someone who'll take care of me, but I end up with people who treat me like shit."

"Can I engage in a little pseudo psychology here?" Nathan asked.

"Why not," she replied, punching his shoulder, "you always do."

"Thank you," he smiled. "You always end up with people who are mean to you because your mother was mean to you. You don't trust people who are nice because your dad was nice to you and even he couldn't save you from your mom."

"Duh," she replied. "Except for the fact that my father married a young chippie when I was fourteen and was so interested in fucking her in exotic places that he virtually ignored me and my brother for the next fifteen years. How does that fit into your nice little theory," she asked.

"Um...I know a good shrink," he offered.

“The one you slept with?” David asked.

“Uh, no, another one,” he offered sheepishly.

“You slept with your psychologist?” Suze asked.

“I slept with *a psychologist*, not *my* psychologist,” he replied, giving David the evil eye.

“Tracy, I still think you need to find a nice guy,” Amy said, a somewhat troubled expression on her face, like she was learning more about Nathan’s recent sex life than she wanted to know about.

“What about Jay, Michael’s friend from the Shiva?” Suze offered.

Tracy made a face.

“What did you think of him, Jen?” Suze asked.

She could feel her ears redden.

“He was nice...quiet.”

“What’s his story?” Tracy asked. “I thought he was weird.”

“Michael told me he dated his high school sweetheart all through college,” she replied. “It’s a sad story really. After they graduated she took a job in Chicago and he stayed here to go to grad school. In Chicago she joined a health club with a guy friend of hers posing as a married couple to get the lower rate. Eventually the guy friend got engaged and moved to New York. So Jay’s girlfriend told the health club that she and her ‘husband’ had gotten a divorce and they extended the married rate to her...”

“That was nice of them,” David said. “Stupid business move but...”

“David, shut up!” Suze said. “Let Jen tell the story.”

“Around that time Jay graduated from grad school and got ready to move to Chicago to be with his girlfriend, sold all his furniture, everything. Then out of the blue the guy she joined the health club with friend backs out of his engagement, and tells Jay’s girlfriend that he’s in love with her. They elope to Curacau. And Jay hasn’t dated anyone since.”

“No way!” David exclaimed.

“Poor, Jay. I thought he looked a little defeated,” Amy said, shaking her head.

“Like a whipped dog,” Tracy said. “God, that’s so pathetic.”

“He’s got a kind of ironic sense of humor,” Jen said, thinking of him again.

“I’d say he’d have to,” Suze said. “Among other things, he had no furniture.”

“I think Jen’s sweet on him,” said Tracy.

“Trace, don’t tease,” Amy admonished her.

“No. I think it’s sweet. I really do. I wish I had someone I was sweet on.”

“How ‘bout me?” David suggested.

“Please,” Tracy said, rolling her eyes.

“Watch it buster,” Suze warned David, smiling.

“What about the guys at work?” Amy asked.

“Bankers are among the most boring people in the world. I’d rather sleep with David, thank you.”

“Thanks,” David replied. “But Trace, if you want to find someone nice, maybe you’ll have to settle for dull.”

“David, you are not dull,” Suze said. “You’re just not very smart.”

“But I’m great in bed, right?” he said, patting her arm patronizingly.

“You’re the bomb, baby,” she replied.

“Michael was nice and he wasn’t dull,” Jen said. “He wasn’t too bright but he was nice. I miss him. No one was ever that nice to me.”

“Yeah,” Tracy said, considering it. “I think maybe I’d settle for nice. I’d like to try nice for once. Just to see what it’s like.”

8. Life at Lost Souls Terrace

"So how's life at lost souls terrace," Jenny asked Nathan as he refilled his glass with Port.

"Sad," he replied, looking into his glass.

"Lost souls terrace? What the hell kind of name is that for a condo?"

David asked.

"I just call it that," Nathan replied. "It's sad. I'm the youngest person living there. Everyone else is in their mid-forties, early fifties, divorced, starting over again. It's like living in a Raymond Carver short story."

"It's so depressing," Jenny said. "I wished you'd move."

"Excuse my ignorance," Tracy interrupted, "but what's Raymond Chandler have to do with your condo?"

"Raymond Carver, not Chandler," Jenny corrected her.

"Okay who's Raymond Carver?" Tracy asked again, impatiently.

"He wrote these short stories where everyone is divorced or a recovering alcoholic, or both," Nathan said.

"Well thank you for enlightening us unwashed masses," Tracy said snippily. "Now what the hell does this Raymond Carver have to do with where you live."

"What's wrong with you?" Jenny asked.

"Sometimes I hate all this literary shit," Tracy declared. "Why can't we

talk like normal people, without showing off how smart we are."

"Tim was like that all the time," David said.

"Yeah, well...yeah," she replied, sighing, realizing she might have been a bit too shrill. "Maybe that's why...I don't know, I just..."

"Isn't anyone going to say something snide about my newfound bookishness?" Jenny asked, almost hurt.

"I was wondering," Amy said. "Sounds like Nathan's been working you over."

"Other way around," Nathan replied.

"I asked him to suggest some things to read," Jenny said proudly. "I want to better myself."

"Ahh Nathan is Master and Jenny young Grasshopper," Suze said in her best Kung Foo.

"Is it all essay, or does he give multiple choice?" David asked.

"Look," Nathan replied, "I just suggest books, and if she feels like talking about them we talk."

"I makes me feel, I don't know, less like a dumb blonde," Jenny said.

"You're not dumb," Amy said.

"Just blonde," Suze added.

"Clever," she replied, smiling

"Christ so I'm sorry I asked about the books," Tracy said. "Let's talk about Nathan's condo"

"Maybe we should scrap the brunch and do a book group instead," Suze suggested.

"Work or brains instead of our livers," David suggested.

"The triumph of literature over liquor?" Amy suggested.

"No way," Tracy interrupted.

"No wucking fay," Jenny added.

"I don't think I could listen to David talking about a book without having a few drinks beforehand," Nathan said.

"Oh I'm sorry I don't have a literary degree," David said defensively. "I just have a few businesses to run..."

"Whoa, settle down big guy," Nathan said, his palms extended outward.

"This isn't the time...or place," he said, looking sadly at Jen and Amy.

"So back to lost souls terrace," Jenny said, sighing.

"Yeah," Nathan said, looking off into the distance, "weekends are the worst. The minivans start pulling up around five, mostly mothers dropping off kids for weekends with the fathers. The guys stand there hoping their kids will hug them in greeting, or won't look at the second wife or the girlfriend cross-eyed. The expressions of the parents who are doing the dropping-off, giving up these kids up for two or three days, there's this slack look in their eyes, you can see the life draining out of them as they climb back into their cars and drive away."

"Sometimes there's kids from two marriages all mingled in together for a weekend, suspiciously eyeing one another. At dinnertime you inevitably see a kid

run out into the parking lot shouting something like `you're not my mother,' as the girlfriend follows them into the night. The stepmoms just freeze there, as though the words cut right through them."

"Okay," Tracy said, trying to be light hearted, "thanks for bringing back all the memories Naith..."

"What do you do?" David asked, "if you can't stand being around your mate. If you stay, you're miserable. If you go, you scar the kids for life."

"I can't imagine hating someone so much," Suze said, taking David's arm.

"I can," Tracy said.

"My father screwed around a couple times, and my mother threatened to leave," Jen said. "But they worked it out. He learned to keep his business in his pocket, and she learned to put out more often..."

"A neat solution," Amy said, raising her eyebrows ironically.

"I don't know," she replied. "I guess they couldn't see living without each other and us kids."

"It's like the joke about the ninety year old couple who go to their lawyer and say they want a divorce," said Nathan. "The lawyer says, 'you've been married sixty years. Why do you want a divorce now?' And the old man replies, 'we wanted to wait until the children were dead.'"

"That's terrible," Amy said, laughing.

"It's just a scheme to keep the lawyers in business," said David.

"It's not just the lawyers," Nathan said. "The Realtor who sold me my

condo said ninety percent of his business is divorcees starting over again. He says he refers them to his brother's car dealership. They have a guy there who specializes in selling used cars to people who lost theirs in the divorce and have no credit."

"Great, so they get rich off it," Tracy said. "Nice. I remember the lawyers' fees and the alimony devastated my dad financially..."

"You guys are missing the point," Suze interjected. "It isn't about the money. It's about betrayed trust. It's about people hurting people they thought they loved once upon a time."

"Money's important," David countered.

"Jesus, David," she said, shaking her head. "You can be so shallow."

"Am not," he replied. "Look at those people in Nathan's condo. Sure their hearts have been broken and that's sad. No one's denying that. But add onto it the economic havoc that comes with it. Like it or not, a lot of peoples' dignity is tied directly to their finances. You lose the car or the house or your good credit. It adds insult to injury."

"I guess I never thought of it that way," she replied. "I'd hate to have to start over."

"It's a drag," Amy said.

Nathan bowed his head.

"I didn't meant it that way," she said, reaching to touch his shoulder. Somehow she couldn't bring herself to do it and stopped short, her hand hanging

in the air for a moment before she pulled it away.

“No, I deserve it,” he said. “It’s my fault.”

“Yeah it is,” Tracy said, matter-of-factly. “If you could have kept your business in your pocket maybe things would have been different.”

“Jesus, Tracy!” Suzy shouted. “I can’t believe you said that!”

“No, I deserve it,” Nathan said.

It was quiet except for the low music on the stereo. The house creaked, buffeted by the cold wind outside. The ice in Amy’s glass tumbled.

“It made me grow up,” he added slowly. “If Amy had taken me back I’d probably would have gone on treating her like shit.”

He looked up at her and she smiled bravely.

“And she wouldn’t have had an affair with Michael. And maybe Michael might not have fallen in love with Jen, and Jenny would have never known what it was like to be loved by Michael...”

“And that’s where your logic runs out pal,” Jen said, touching him on the shoulder. “I don’t know. Maybe you should have taken him back, Amy.”

“It’s all in the past,” Amy said.

“But it doesn’t have to,” Tracy interjected. “That’s the point. Look at the two of you,” she said, looking from Nathan to Amy. “You were so good together. You could be again...”

“At least you could hit the sack together,” David added.

“So romantic,” Suze said, rolling her eyes.

“I do my best,” he shrugged.

9. Two Women Descending Toward Fate

In the darkened upstairs hallway Jen stopped to look at framed snapshots arranged on the wall. The voices of the others echoed in the stairway. Outside, it was beginning to snow again—small, light flakes that floated on the air. In the dim light, David and Suze and their families smiled back at her, silently, seconds of lives caught on film. There were a few old sepia tone portraits of long-dead ancestors, the usual wedding photos, graduation pictures, and vacation snapshots. David and Suze in bathing suits in Martinique. David and Suze, Nathan and Amy on a ski slope. The whole group at a Sunday brunch back in college.

Tim was dead. So was Michael. So were the grandmas and grandpas, mothers and old aunt Eloise— the dead she had loved and the dead she had never known— regarding her with piercing eyes as she stood alone in the hallway. She began to cry again.

She had only a dozen or so photos of Michael, fewer still of the two of them together. He didn't like having his photo taken, even though he photographed well. She'd tell him he looked handsome in photos but he was always reluctant in front of the camera. He'd said that when he was in Indian Guides as a kid, they taught them that the Indians thought the camera stole part of their soul, and refused to have their pictures taken. He'd said he liked the idea of keeping your soul whole.

The Indians, he'd also told her, believed in passing through the world

without leaving traces. They were taught to bury their campfire embers and use tree branches to erase signs of their camp. They learned to walk through the forest without a sound. He said he wanted to live that way too. It was just like him to base his life on something he'd been told as a kid at the YMCA, by fully-grown white men who took "Indian" names and once a week dressed in war bonnets and leather britches.

She was angry with him for his simplicity, for living his life as the ultimate Indian Guide and leaving her with nothing. That she hated him made her heart ache even more.

Amy approached and stopped halfway up the stairs when she saw the tears rolling down Jenny's cheeks. There was a lull in the conversation downstairs. It was quiet for a moment until Nathan's laugh echoed through the hallway.

"We were beginning to worry," Amy said, her words trailing off.

"Thought I fell in the toilet?" she asked.

"Yeah," Amy said, ascending the stairs. They were silent as they gazed at the photos.

"It's weird," she said, "looking at everyone. It seems so long ago, all of it."

It was silent again.

"It was," Amy agreed. "It all feels so...weird, all of us together again."

"It feels good. Considering everything, I mean," she replied.

Amy looked at a picture of her and Nathan together at one of the Sunday

brunches.

"He misses you," Jen said. "He aches for you. He's hasn't been able to take his eyes from you since he first saw you at Michael's parents."

"Too much has changed," Amy replied.

"You need him too," she said. "You still love him. I know you do."

"It could never be the same," Amy replied.

"Would you want it to be the same?" she asked. "You're not the same girl he first met when you were freshman in college. You don't want to be that girl. You're a woman, a grown-up."

"I don't feel grown up."

"Nobody does," she replied. "But you are. You've known heartache, sorrow...but Jesus Amy, you have a second chance. Believe me, if I had a second chance, I'd trade my soul to have Michael back. You have a chance. Don't blow it."

"I want to but I don't know how," Amy said, searching her eyes for answers.

"Be kind to him. Take his hand in yours"

"I feel so pathetic," she replied. "I can't stand that I'm whining to you. I should be the one giving you strength."

"Fuck it," she replied. "You're the only one who never judged me. You were the only one who really was my friend. So let me do something for you. Lean on me if you have to."

Amy seemed to consider it for a moment, and then a thought occurred to her.

"What if we do, and he wants to," Amy looked into her eyes seriously, "you know...go to bed?"

"God," she replied. "I'd kill to be in the sack with someone right now."

"You're terrible," Amy said, smiling.

"I know," she replied. "We'd better get back, else they'll think we both fell in."

Amy smiled and took her hand. She squeezed Amy's hand and together they descended the stairs to their fates.

FIN