

Definitely Not Batman, Maybe Robin

by

Naomi Gordon-Loebl

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A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2009

Readers: Michael Shilling and Keith Taylor

For Nana,
for my mother,
and for David,
as always.

Acknowledgments

The culmination of this thesis came at a difficult time for my family. A few weeks ago, I was not at all sure that I would be able to finish this work. But love and support surged from every corner of my life. My friends and family came from around the corner and from far away, through March sunshine and April snow, by phone and Priority Mail. They came with endless pep talks and cups of coffee. They offered late night company, rides to just about every corner of Ann Arbor on last minute notice, distracting bad television to watch when I just needed a break, and of course, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Even, and perhaps especially, those who were struggling themselves, held me up through this process. I wrote this thesis, yes, but in truth it is inseparable from the many people who have gifted me with their support over the course of the last few months. I am immeasurably lucky.

Though I cannot possibly name everyone, a few specific thank yous are certainly in order. First, to Keith Taylor, whose attentive and extensive editing would have been enough, but who also offered good humor, flexibility and ceaseless encouragement at a time when I really needed it. To the wickedly talented Michael Shilling, my second reader, whose novel *Rock Bottom* is first on my post-graduation reading list. To Shaelyn Smith, my unofficial writing partner, with whom I have toured just about every café and bar in Ann Arbor that could possibly be used for writing: thank you for providing humor and company in the scary and mostly solitary process that is the thesis. To the thirteen others in the Creative Writing subconcentration who walked, ran or, like me, stumbled to

this place: the many jokes about workshop and revision made it just a little bit easier to face this thing.

To Eve Aronoff, who gave me infinite support and a quiet place to write; your generosity has been invaluable. To MAP House and the rest of my queer family, who loved me, fed me and patiently listened to me through the worst case of writers' block my doctors have ever seen. To Vanessa Diaz and Ben Odell for innumerable delicious dinners and the even more important friendship we have built. To Danny Braun: your acceptance of the fact that my thesis came before my dishes was great, and lending me your computer when mine broke down during the final week was even better; but nothing meant as much as the late-night talks and the hugs when I really needed them. You are my brother in every sense of the word. To Joanna Bock, who is my inspiration, my strength, and the best reader I have ever had: there is no language for what you have given me. Finally, and most importantly, to my family: thank you to Dad, for being the best listener I know; to Nana, for giving me this maddening craft, and supporting me in it every step of the way; to Papa, for your tireless energy and loving attention; to Ana and Sean, for the many, many laughs but also the hugs; and to Mom, for modeling a strength I would never have believed was real, had I not seen it in you.

Abstract

Definitely Not Batman, Maybe Robin is a compilation of short fiction that span a thematic and stylistic range. It includes some more traditionally structured stories as well as pieces that experiment with length and narrative style. Many of the stories are about queer people and their interactions in a largely straight world; many also grapple with themes of maturity, personal growth and self-discovery. The collection is, in many ways, a map of the author's own process of discovering herself as a writer—a history of where she has been, and a look at where she is going.

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Haircut

First step is parking the car. Luck—there's a spot right in front. Take it. Back in, easy, full turn to the right, don't wait now, the wheel should already be spun to the right when you start backing up. Now cut back—Dad's voice in my head, "Cut hard! Cut hard!"—and the nose of girlfriend's red Volkswagen Beetle just barely clears the rear bumper of the mammoth silver Jeep I'm parking behind.

Turn off the car. Get out. Can't help looking around. North Prospect Street. Amherst. Same street as it always is. Busy.

Mid-40s mom with short no-nonsense hair that says "bring the basketball inside after you're done playing, wash your hands before dinner and be in bed by ten are you listening to me Stevie?" trying desperately to hold onto three shopping bags and carry on a cell phone conversation with Dad while she unlocks her Subaru Legacy. I swear if Lizzy and me get married and have kids I am never calling her "Mom," not ever, not once, no matter what. Talk about a blow to your sex life.

Two Amherst High stoner boys, boxers riding high and dirty cargo shorts riding low, opening the door to Double D's, eyes on the prize, only five dollars and a rude waitress between them and a Double D Slam Breakfast.

Tall goofy-looking skinny guy, mid-30s, maybe, with a receding hairline and a smile the size of my left foot, only size seven but still it's a foot, Jesus that's a big smile, leaning on a meter. Talking to a short woman with curly brown hair, practically half his size, he's kind of banana-shaped and she reminds me of a plum.

Dig deep in jeans pocket for quarters, shove them fast as they go into the meter in front of the bright red Bug. Can't help but look around, wonder: Are any of these busy people looking? Laughing? Does this car make me look...? Hate this part of myself. Want to be okay with driving Lizzy's red Bug. Want to love driving Lizzy's red Bug. Want to love being a man in a red Bug, so much that they all have to love it too.

Look at the window of barbershop. Review what I will do. Hate this part of myself too. Hate it. Normal people don't review, they just do. Review. Then do it. Swing open the door, don't bother looking behind to make sure it shuts properly. This is an act. Act, Benji, act. Ben. Cut this Benji shit out. Ben. You're Ben. Be Ben. Don't check the fucking door to make sure it shuts quietly. In one motion the jacket comes off my shoulders and onto the hook by the door. Nice. Good. Look comfortable. I look comfortable. I am comfortable.

Look around. No sign of the burly firefighter who cut my hair last time. Big dude, beefy freckled forearms with blond hairs sprouting everywhere. Older, 40s maybe, old enough to think having a mustache, and only a mustache, is cool. Shaved my neck with a straight razor until I bled. Didn't realize until I pulled my t-shirt off to shower that night and saw the red-tinged neck of the t-shirt, pink, really, just a hint. Wonder if he cut me because I didn't have enough neck hair to protect my skin. Don't deserve a straight razor

shave yet. Do I not deserve a straight razor shave yet? Or maybe trying to initiate me. Maybe just rough.

What's up, man? It's R.J. I like R.J. Nice guy, younger than the firefighter but still has a good fifteen years on me, I think. Maybe 35? He's never cut my hair but he's always smiling. I like that.

Nothing, dude. Just here for a haircut. Not interested in anything else. Act not interested. Act, Benji. Ben. Act. Nothing, dude—that was good. Kind of gravelly, too. Low. My voice has already gone, a little bit. Good.

Good? Hate this part of myself. What the fuck is Good about *Nothing, dude?* But who cares. This is just a haircut, right? I'm never going to be like this in real life. This isn't real life. Just a haircut. Haircuts aren't real life. They're acting. Act.

Right here, guy. Wow. He said guy. That's sweet. Warm. I call my little brother guy. Guy. See? That's nice. So why are you acting? You're a tool. Loosen up, tool. This is R.J. He just called you guy.

Sit.

He puts the cape on me and I can look up for a minute, breathe, while he washes his hands—really?—or does whatever it is he's doing over there behind me. I hate having people behind me. Makes me nervous. Could do anything. Same reason I always hated being blindfolded to hit the piñata when I was a kid. Used to always have one, a piñata, at my birthday parties. I loved baseball, loved swinging the bat. Some dads might have worried about a daughter who was such a tomboy, might have said, "How about Pin the Tail on the Donkey this year, sweetie?" but I wouldn't know about that. My dad was thrilled to have a girl who loved baseball as much as he did. In the summer we played

baseball every night when he got home from work, and he never said no, no matter how tired he was or how much he had to do, we'd go out to the backyard and he'd throw fly balls for me to catch until my mom was leaning her head out the window and threatening to throw out our dinner if we didn't get inside that minute.

That was my dad, the one who got me a piñata every year for my birthday. He loved it, and so did I, but as soon as he tied the blindfold around my eyes I'd get freaked out, anxious, I couldn't see anyone, someone could hit me, hurt me, where the fuck was everyone if I couldn't see them? I'd get going, swinging wildly, everywhere, and I'd hear Dad laughing, going, Take it easy, take it easy. I'd take the piñata out, easy, I was a strong little motherfucker, but it was dangerous. Probably why we used a Wiffle Ball bat. One time I hit my best friend Jason in the butt and he cried for fifteen minutes and my dad tried to make me apologize to him but I didn't want to because it was his fault he'd gotten in my way, he'd been trying to get the candy out from under the piñata while I swung, and that's cheating, and no one was allowed to cheat at my birthday party. And finally I said sorry because he was crying, and I felt bad, but mainly because I loved my dad and I'd do anything for him.

Not the time to space out. Focus, guy. The chair I'm in is one of three, and they all face the rest of the shop, which is just a couch and some chairs and a big TV hanging from the ceiling. And posters, posters, posters. Purple posters, men in shiny royal purple shorts, rippling quads, soccer balls. So many posters that I'm not sure what color the wall is. I think I catch a glimpse of it behind the TV, a neutral pale yellow. The door is framed in lacrosse sticks. I like it. Someone had to have thought about this for a minute. Barber

shop interior decoration. Ha. Hey. Focus. Look straight ahead. Tighten up your neck.
Hate this part of myself.

What'll it be today?

Oh, uh, you know, one on the sides, three on the top, you know. Make some vague gestures. Throw my hands around—sides, top, ish. Not too specific. Drop hands to thighs, hard, and wince. I'm on my fourth shot, and the last one hurt like hell. Swelled up right away, as soon as the needle came out. Red and throbbing, thought it hurt like a bitch, then corrected myself. Hurt like hell. Not going to be that kind of man. Still, can't change what my subconscious thinks: muscle got red and tight and I thought, Goddamn, that hurts like a bitch.

Called Mom, scared. My leg's all swollen. Hurts. Lizzy didn't know what to do, just rubbed and said Benji, I'm sure it's fine. Mom said it was fine too. Maybe just an allergic reaction to the oil it's suspended in. Give it a few days, then we'll see. Heard her fear, though, heard her take a minute to collect before she responded. She hasn't really made her peace with this yet. She will. Will she?

Yeah, dude, yeah. He's nodding. *Sounds good. Like last time.*

What? He remembers me?

You remember me?

*Oh, yeah, definitely, man. You're Ben, right? Bob cut your hair last time—
firefighter dude. I remember.*

Oh, alright, cool. Yeah, Bob.

He remembers. I feel good. Hate myself for it but I feel good. In the club.

Any stereotypes you hear about men being silent are bullshit. Or, at least, there's no way they apply to all men. R.J., muscular but shorter than Bob, with a dark buzzcut and a beard like I want to grow someday, man man man, won't shut up while he cuts my hair. Over the insistent buzz of the clippers, the drone of the sportscaster, he's peppering me with questions.

So, you catch any of the game last night?

A little bit...kept it on while I was doing my homework. Lie. Don't want to be the kind of man who lies about watching sports. Want to be the kind of man who's proud to do his homework with the TV off, Bonnie Raitt and Joan Armatrading in the background. Your mom's favorite music and she taught you to love it. Can still see her singing, "My old man is another child that's grown old" to your dad as they cleaned up from dinner together. Wish you could say that: Actually, I missed the game because I was listening to Bonnie Raitt. My mom and I both love her. Someday you'll say that. For now you're fine. God understands self-preservation, right? I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Anyway, I do like sports, that's true. Lizzy took me to the basketball game two weeks ago. So much fun. Kissed her right there, lots, no one noticed. But what does being a man have to do with sports? Lizzy knows more about football than me.

Seen any good movies lately?

Um...I saw Hostel.

Hostel? Oh shit, man! I could never see that movie. I'm such a wimp, man. Me too! I saw the preview and I almost pissed my pants. Me too! Say it say it say

Dude, me too! I only went because my girlfriend dragged me, and I'm such a wimp too! I made her check the locks on the door twice before we went to sleep that night.

Check the locks! He's guffawing now, big rolling laughs coming out of the burly guy with the beard as he drags the clippers across the crown of my head. *Dude, that doesn't even make sense! Doesn't that movie take place in Slovakia or something?*

Yeah, yeah, I know. And it feels good. This strange bonding over our silly fear. It feels honest. Lean my head back just the tiniest bit. This guy is a good guy, Benj. Try to relax and then

He's at my neck. He sticks his thick fingers under the collar of my shirt, running the clippers around to make sure he gets any stray neck hairs, and I tense right back up. Scary movie bonding, wimpy man bonding, gone gone gone. He's got his fingers real close to my binder, and what if he touches it, figures out what's there? Figures out I'm wearing a compression shirt that flattens my chest until I can get surgery, then what?

So you think we'll make it to championships this year?

Try to think about what I would say. Yeah, dude, I've got a sick gut, so, honestly, wow, this shit is so embarrassing and stupid, but honestly, yeah, I wear this shirt to flatten my stomach, so I look more jacked than I am. I know, right? Stupid, right? You'd think I'd just lose the weight but yeah man I'm lazy as shit and anyway I hate cardio. Only way you'll get me running is in a basketball game, or squash, or...

And that's true. I do hate cardio. Lizzy always says, I hate that stupid crap about how men hate cardio. Like, when guys say cardio is for chicks. It's so macho and dumb. And I nod, and say yeah, it is macho and dumb. But secretly I'm giving myself points for

hating cardio. And that's fucking dumb. As if everyone who hated cardio were a man. If only it were that simple.

R.J.'s hands are gone. Getting the trimmer ready. Gonna square up my temples and sideburns. This is the trickiest part of a haircut. One time I let Lizzy cut my hair and she shaved my wimpy little sideburns right off by accident. I wouldn't let it go for a whole day. Now we just agree that she should stay away from my hair.

Whew! Is it hot in here, or what? He's a little loud about it, a little dramatic. Just a tiny bit of falsetto in "Whew!" I don't feel hot at all but I say

Yeah, a little, I guess.

He's standing in front of me, knees bent, one eye squinting, the other one wide open, checking out the haircut, examining his work so far. Exhales hard and his breath hits my forehead.

Guess I'm just hungover as shit, that's what it really is. Four too many drinks, ya know?

Yeah...I know. Little laugh, not too big. But this feels okay. Natural. R.J. He makes me feel comfortable. He's still mumbling, now out of my view, trimmer coming down my left temple, can't see him but hear his voice close to my ear.

Divas, man—What?—Those drinks are strong as shit.

Divas? Did he just say Divas? He just said Divas, right? Wish desperately for an instant replay, an imaginary friend on my shoulder, a hearing aid, God. Divas? The gay bar in Northampton?

Divas?

Yeah, man, you ever been there? I love that place.

Holy shit. Makes so much sense. That's why he's always smiling at me. Why he's so fucking friendly. Why he put his face so fucking close to mine when he trimmed my hairline, like the fucking eye doctor or something. Only the eye doctor gets that close, and even that shit makes me uncomfortable, fucking bushy grey eyebrows inches from mine. He's gay, and he's testing me. Wants to see if I'm cool with it, maybe if I'm like that too. You ever been there, that's what that means. Want to go with me, big boy. Thinks I'm a twink, probably, and I guess it makes sense, I'm the hairless boy wonder to fit the bill. He's not the first. Gay men are always hitting on me, think they can bend me over in the bathroom, no idea that I have no hairless balls to match my hairless little asshole.

It's cool, though, I'm cool with it. Gay people are my people. I still go to Divas sometimes with my friends. It's cool, I'm cool, everything cool, it's cool Benji, cool man, cool.

Yeah, it's pretty cool. Say more Benji say more say anything show him you're cool with it come on Benji come through you're cool with it, remember, be cool with it

Yeah, my girlfriend Girlfriend and I go all the time. So much better than any of the straight Straight bars here, you know? Strong drinks, nice people, good music. I'm telling you man, if you haven't been—did you say you've been?

Yeah...Benji, you asshole...Yeah, I've been a bunch. I like it too.

Can't see his face, he's on the back of my neck now with the trimmer. Guess no straight razor shave this time. Little silver trimmer sounds so loud, like a mosquito sounds when you're trying to fall asleep and it's just you and the mosquito in the room. Like it might as well be a fucking truck. This hot feeling in my ears and my toes, and this

desire to cough, or clear my throat, or do anything physical, that impulse you get when you do something you're ashamed of, or you remember something you've done that was real stupid, that you regretted more than anything, but you can't take it back so you just try to distract yourself, coughing or clearing your throat. This hot feeling in my ears, know they're red and hope he thinks it's the trimmer, not my stupid paranoia and this homophobic thing I've become. Some place inside of me telling myself I'll deal with you later, mister, I'll deal with you later. Promise myself I will. Promise promise just wish the hot redness out of my ears, for now, and promise.

Door opens. Swings open, really, so hard that it hits the wall. Big tall guy, short blond hair and a goatee, walks in. Built like Shaq's little brother, and I swear his triceps are going to rip his t-shirt sleeves right open. He looks at R.J., nods, sits down on the couch, leans his head against the wall. Waiting.

R.J. hasn't noticed anything. On to my sideburns and back to the questions

So where do you work, dude?

Sid's Bikes, right down Prospect? Hear the question in my voice, repeated back to him. Hear everyone in my life, friends, professors, all those pop psychology books in my dad's study about gender and language. Men speak declaratively, women talk in questions. Stop it, dude. Catch myself repeating it over and over in my head. Sid's Bikes, right down Prospect? Sid's Bikes, right down PROSPECT. SID'S. RIGHT DOWN PROSPECT.

Oh, no way. That's cool, very cool. You're into bikes then?

Yeah, I'm into bikes. Yeah, man, I'm into bikes. I love bikes. I dream about bikes. I wipe my bike down every time I ride, fill the tires every time I go out. I have three of

them. They have names. It's nice having the ride down to a science, cornering at the perfect angle, drafting, getting into gears so small you can mash the pedals the whole way downhill. But it's even nicer to, every once in awhile, be a kid all over again, and stand up on the pedals on the way down big hills, even if it does slow you down, and coast, and feel the wind going under you, between you and the bike, and I don't care how cheesy it sounds, you really do feel like you're flying. Know those cheesy t-shirts everyone had in middle school? I had the one that said "Baseball is Life. The rest is just details." They should make one for cyclists. "Cycling is flying. The bike is just details."

That's cool, dude. I've been meaning to get a new bike soon, now that I've got some cash saved up. I have some buddies who are real into it, say it's awesome, really kicks your ass.

Yeah, it definitely kicks my ass. You should come by the shop if you're looking for a new bike. Last Saturday I did my usual ride in under an hour for the first time. For the rest of the day I felt like my legs were still pedaling. My eyes didn't stop stinging until the next day from all the sweat. Yeah, it definitely kicks my ass.

Ever think about racing?

Man, this guy is just all about competition, hm? Teams. Collegiate sports. Wonder if he got shafted when he was in college, didn't make varsity or something.

Nah. Not for me. Not for me. Too slow for the men's team. Could never keep up with 6'4" dudes with quads as wide as my ribcage. Got the parts for the women's team but I'm not a woman, and anyway now I've got a chemical advantage. I'd love to race, but there's no team for me.

Alright, man. He picks up a towel and swats it around my face, hard, snapping it at my neck and my brow, flicking little bits of dark hair off my oily forehead. There's a tired old fan up in the corner of the shop, right next to tall guy's head, and I can feel the dusty air coming from the fan, breezing across on my scalp. Feels good.

You're all set.

Stand up, reach for my wallet, hand him fifteen and tell him thanks. Tall blond goatee gets up, stretches, starts towards the chair. Nod at him.

Dude...did you say you work at Sid's? I stare at him. How could I have not have noticed? Fuck. Specialized Allez Comp, red and white, one year ago. Awesome fucking bike, and good for the money. We had to order him a 61 because we didn't have any in stock. Huge motherfucker. His hair was longer then—shaggy and touching his ears. Came in for a pro-fit a month after the bike came in. We set the bike up on the trainer and he got up there in his spandex, blond-haired quads flexing, beast of a man pushing it as hard as he could at the back of the bike shop, sweat dripping on the red tile floor. Fuck. How could I have forgotten? Fuck.

Stand at the door of the shop, pulling my jacket on, look at him, looking at me, standing by the chair. R.J. cleaning off his clippers. Tall guy knows. He knows. Just get out of there. Say yeah and get out of there. Won't think anything weird is going on. That's just how men are. That's Just How Men Are. Silent. Don't talk much. Not weird to just take off.

Yeah.

Wait for it. Wait for it. Why the fuck are you waiting?

Dude...aren't you a girl?

Thought your name was...

Fuck. Fuck.

I remember you.

Hands on VW keys in pocket. But can't move. Move, Benji, move.

I bought a bike there last year.

Nod. Fuck. Now you can't leave.

Dude, you look awesome...you've bulked up for real, man. Whatever you're shooting, man, where can I get some?

R.J. laughs. Tall guy laughs. Laugh. Laugh, Benji, laugh. But it's so hard.

Shaking. Realize head feels like it's going to burst from the pain. Been clenching jaw the whole time I've been here. It's fine, man. Laugh. That's what guys do. That's What Guys Do. Laugh. It's funny. Whatever you're shooting. Whatever you're shooting. Can't laugh, though. Jaw aches. Head aches. This is not how it should be.

Pull door open, with control. Don't let it hit the wall.

Later, guys.

Walk out into the sun, rubbing hand on head. Squint at Bug, glinting red in the sunlight.

Definitely Not Batman, Maybe Robin

Shauna has big eyes that look even bigger behind her tiny glasses. She's 5'2" and we're barbacks together at Jackie's, the Irish bar up on Fifth Avenue. This is my summer job so I don't mind fucking around, but Shauna's 27 with two kids and her husband got drunk and ran their car into a pylon under the BQE in January, so I guess she has a reason. The bartender, Tammy, told me he didn't go to the hospital because he didn't want a DUI. So he died at home on the couch, holding an icepack to his concussion. That's what Tammy says, anyway, though I have to ask myself how she knows something like that, I mean, was she there? Shauna was up in Yonkers, with the kids, visiting her parents. That's where they live—her parents, I mean. Shauna lives on 89th and 3rd Ave, in Bay Ridge, cute little apartment, hardwood floors and bunk beds for the kids, Tammy says. What a shock, though, man, can you imagine? Walking in the door to find your husband dead on the couch. Tammy says Ricki Lake was on TV when Shauna walked in the door but again, I gotta wonder, how does she know that anyway? I think she made that part up just to give the story more meat.

So anyway, Shauna, we're barbacks together. The story really starts on a Friday. It's a crazy night, one of those nights where you just don't stop moving and at a certain point you stop thinking too, just start a circuit where your feet know what you're doing

before you do—refill the bartender’s ice, make the rounds of the bar and grab every dirty empty glass off the goddamn tables because Tammy’s yelling at you because she don’t have no fucking glasses, stack those glasses up to your chin, bring them back to the dishwasher, run them yourself because dishwasher’s too busy drinking tequila with the cooks in the walk-in cooler, bring out the clean glasses, bring the bartender a case of Miller and a case of Bud, one on either shoulder, head back downstairs for more ice. Those are the nights when, even if you have four beers after work, when your head finally hits the pillow at 5 am you’re still thinking, “Ice, Miller, glasses, Bud, ashtray, ice...” You can’t stop. You fall asleep while your brain is headed to the walk-in cooler for a case of Harp.

When it gets like that at Jackie’s it’s really a good sign, because when Tammy is that busy she’s making money, and when she’s making money she tips us out good. Like I said, this is just a summer job for me, but I still like to make money. My mom is a secretary and when I told her I was gonna stay home this summer I thought she’d be thrilled to hear I’d be around. I was picturing grilling in the front yard, hanging out with my mom and my uncles Charlie and Jim. She was excited alright, yeah, she’s happy to keep her son home, but the first thing she said was, okay, Mikey, where you going to work? So I walked up to Fifth Avenue and applied at Jackie’s and I think Tammy liked my eyes, she likes younger guys, and she got John, the manager, to hire me on the spot. The only condition was that, if Jackie came around, I’d tell him I have barback experience, which I don’t.

So this one night, I’ve been working at Jackie’s just about a month. Just that time when I’m starting to get comfortable, when Tammy trusts me enough to throw me a

couple beers at the end of work, knowing that I won't sell her out if the cops roll down their window on my way home and ask me what bartender was stupid enough to get a baby-faced motherfucker like me drunk. Not that I'm really drunk—definitely not, since she never gives me enough to even make me burp. She has nothing to worry about. But Tammy's paranoid, you know, and the first three times she threw me a beer, she bugged me from the time it hit the coaster right up until I walked out the door. "Mike," she'd say, "hey Mike."

"Yeah, Tammy," I'd say.

"Who gave you that beer?" she'd say.

"What beer?" I'd say. And she'd slap the wooden bar with her palm, turn around and start straightening the whiskey bottles, going, "just checking, just checking."

I'm in the cooler trying to slide a case of Bud off the shelf and balance it on top of the three other cases I'm already holding when Shauna comes in.

"I've got these," I say, balancing the three cases in my left arm and inching the case of Bud off the shelf with my right, "but if you wanna help, there's a rack of glasses that needs to get washed and Tammy's out of ice and some dude out on the floor spilled his pitcher and oh yeah, if you have time I have a cramp in my neck like you wouldn't believe."

Her fingertips are on my neck quick and they're strong and little and warm compared to the cold of the walk-in.

"Whoa, what are you doing?" I say and push the cases back on the shelf, turn around confused.

Shauna's eyes look like gumballs through those tiny glasses she's got and the ends of her lips curl up in this creepy smile that reminds me of Willy Wonka or the Penguin or the Big Bad Wolf, and I feel like Charlie or Little Red Riding Hood but not Batman, definitely not Batman, maybe Robin.

She reaches up and starts rubbing my neck again and it feels kind of good. I was joking but I do have a cramp in my neck, that's true. Then she leans forward just the tiniest amount, at least I think she does, because I feel her tits brush against my stomach and I turn around real fast and start pulling the cases back off the shelf, one by one.

See, what happened was, my dad moved out when I was 14. He was a bodybuilder and a failed entrepreneur but mainly he drank too much and when he finally moved down to Florida with some lady he met at the gym I think my mom and I were both happy he was gone. That's how I like to think of it, anyway.

My mom's the executive assistant, that means head secretary, at the American Ethical Union. She makes it alright. We've got our own apartment big enough for the two of us, and when I graduated high school this spring and got into college at Potsdam she couldn't have been more proud. But Potsdam is far—six hours if you're lucky, that's what I hear—and neither of us drives. So I decided to stay home this summer instead of moving up there early like the college offered, that way I figured I could spend some time with my mom. And then, like I said, she sent me off to find a job, and that's how I ended up getting stiff in the walk-in with Shauna the 27-year-old widow on a Friday night at Jackie's, and here's what happens next.

Shauna leaves the cooler pretty soon after I turn around and it goes down quick. For the rest of the night, there's no more neck rubs, no more hard-ons in the fridge.

Shauna and I, we finally finish restocking the last rack of glasses around 4:30 am. Then we get to drinking. Tammy's tossing High Life up on the bar, she says that's the best cheap beer there is and what do I know, I figure that's why I'm going to college, to find out more about that. So we just drink them, don't ask questions, and take smoke breaks out on the sidewalk, since Bloomberg passed that law that made smoking in bars illegal.

"Best and worst thing that ever happened to bartenders," Tammy says, "since every bartender I know's a goddamn smoker anyway." Tammy, she talks a lot, but she comes out on the sidewalk and lights up with Shauna. Newport 100s, fastest-killing cigarette in Brooklyn, I think, but what do I know? I'm just keeping the two of them company while they smoke. I've tried it but my grandpa died of emphysema and I know if my mom caught me smoking she'd have my lungs on a platter.

"So, Shauna," Tammy says. "You thinking about dating someone new anytime soon?"

Shauna flicks her butt onto the hood of the silver Civic parked at the curb, and it rolls off onto the ground that I can't see. She gathers her thin brown hair into a ponytail and I can see the tattoo she has on the back of her neck—this little Chinese character number just below the softest, finest strands of hair. One time I asked her what it meant and she looked me dead in the face and said, "blessing." And I thought, okay, that's what she thinks, but it probably really means "crap" or "69," and wouldn't that be funny, little white girl like Shauna running around with a Chinese character on the back of her neck

and she thinks it means “blessing” but it really means “crap” and I almost said that to her but then something about the way she looked at me made me keep my mouth shut, and she went back to stocking beers and I went back to staring at the back of her neck.

“My kids need me,” she says. “I don’t have time for that shit.” We go back into Jackie’s and load all the empty High Life bottles into the recycling bin, one by one so they don’t make a lot of noise.

The next night, Saturday, Shauna and I get off work at 4:15 am. Early for us to be leaving, but it’s been a slow night and Tammy’s on the phone with her ex-husband now, which means she doesn’t give two shits or three fucks when we leave, only when he’s gonna come get his fucking amp from her house and drop off the check he’s been owing her for three damn months. At least that’s what I get from overhearing the phone conversations they have every few weeks as we close up the bar. She’s pacing back and forth by the pool table, smacking her hand down on its surface every once in awhile for emphasis as she talks. After I punch out I stop at the door and say, “Hey Tammy, I’m leaving,” but she waves her hand impatiently in my direction, not even looking up, which means, “Go, kid—I’m busy.”

I wait outside for Shauna while she changes her clothes and punches out. We walk the same way when we leave, always—down 9th Street to 4th Avenue, where she gets on the R train out to Bay Ridge and I make a left to go back to my mom’s house, where I play Grand Theft Auto Vice City until I fall asleep.

9th Street is empty, totally empty. Inside the bank I can see the shiny, empty desks with their mugs full of company pens. The music school is dead too but actually I’ve

never seen anyone go in or out of that place, day or night. McDonald's is all lit up but it's closed too. I kick at an empty paper cup rolling around on the sidewalk, but I miss.

Shauna giggles, this strange, almost mean laugh like the one in the walk-in the other night. Then she kicks the cup and doesn't miss and it scuffs a few feet forward. We keep walking and we're almost to the funeral home, Joseph DiLorenzo Funeral Home, with the DL in a circle for a logo, when she says, just like that, "I think I'm going to get evicted."

I look at her but she's not looking at me, just walking, might as well be dead the expression on her face is so blank.

"Wow. Why?"

Then she looks over at me, this mix of pity and something that looks almost like affection on her face, like the way my mom looks at me when I say something stupid. Then she goes, kinda quiet, "Um...because I haven't paid my rent in two months and it's due again on Wednesday."

"Wow. What are you going to do?"

"Jump off a cliff?" More giggling. Then nothing. "Probably move in with my parents. I don't know."

Somehow I get on the train with Shauna and go home with her.

I can't really explain it and I know it doesn't make sense. Widow, single mom, says she doesn't have time for that dating shit—and me, skinny kid, only shave on Mondays, and by the end of the week all I've got are these little dark hairs on the bottom of my chin and next to my earlobe, except they don't even connect to my sideburns and you can't see them in pictures. She's got a million guys, I'm sure, who'd like to be daddy

to those two little girls—she’s gotta, she’s beautiful—and I’m sure as hell not trying to be daddy to anyone.

But none of that really matters, anyway, does it, doesn’t matter if I can explain it or not, because the fact remains—I swipe her through the turnstile because her Metrocard is empty, and we ride the R train back to her house together.

I can’t really explain it, but here’s my best shot: we get to the corner and instead of going into the train station she pulls out a cigarette and lights it, no explanation, just lights it and starts smoking. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do right now but I do know I don’t want to leave her, I’m remembering the way her tits felt on my stomach in the walk-in the night before and I’m looking at those big eyes and even though I can’t see that tattoo on the back of her neck I know it’s there, blessing. I know now that I like her, I can’t help it, who cares if her husband’s dead and she’s got two kids, she’s got gorgeous big eyes and I don’t ever want to not be around her. I can’t help it. She inhales, exhales, stares past my shoulder at something I can’t see and then she glances at my face and catches me staring at her. She smiles kind of small, kind of a smirk, all lips, the same pity mixed with affection from before, and she sighs real big and says, “Oh, Mikey. Mikey, Mikey, Mikey.”

“Yeah?” I say and I try to look away like this is no big deal but my fucking palms keep sweating right in the creases and I’m wiping them on my jeans but they won’t stay dry no matter what I do.

“Relax,” she says, that same smile on her face.

Then she kisses me and I can’t see anything and I just hope I’m doing it right because I’ve kissed girls before but never like this, never a 27-year-old woman with two

kids, man, she's done this lots of times and she's good at it too but I try to just stay in the moment and do my best and then she stops kissing me and heads down the stairs into the station, tossing her cigarette as she goes, and I know I'm supposed to follow her, so I do, and then I swipe her through the turnstile and we ride the train out to Bay Ridge together, her hand on my knee and me sweating balls.

In bed Shauna is loud and I wonder if her kids can hear her. They're asleep, I know, because when we first come in the apartment she makes me wait in the living room while she goes and checks on them in the bedroom next to hers. The living room is mostly empty, a loveseat and a couch and a big old Magnavox television set with pink unicorn stickers next to the volume buttons. There's a picture of the four of them on an end table, one of those you take at a photo studio, and her husband, I think that's him, is wearing a green plaid shirt. He's got his arm around her and I'm looking at the picture and realizing that I may be sitting on the couch he died on, icepack to the forehead, when she comes into the room and says, "Okay."

Her bedroom is small, just a bed and another TV on top of a dresser. The lights are off when we come in and she never turns them on, just puts her arms around my neck and kisses me with little wet lips. She's loud, making all these deep throaty noises at the right times and at first I'm scared, what if one of her kids comes wandering in here, but then I figure they're her kids, she knows what they can sleep through, and plus what makes me think she doesn't do this every night anyway with some other guy, what do I know, she's probably got it down to a science. So then I relax and kiss her neck, try to make it good for her. When I come it seems like she's coming too because the noises get

even louder and then they stop altogether and she smiles a hazy smile at me and gets up to pee. In the morning I say goodbye fast and ride the R train home to 9th Street. I'm back in our apartment before my mom wakes up, which is good.

On Monday, Jackie comes to the bar. Days when Jackie comes to the bar, things are different. Usually we get a pretty good heads-up. John, the manager, will be walking around the floor when I get to work, instead of back in the office jerking off or snorting some shit or whatever else he does when Jackie's not around.

"Hey Mike," he'll say, and he'll walk up right close to me and I can always smell his stale fucking breath, like it's been too long since he fucking brushed his teeth. Dude always looks like a Wall Street banker out of work, suit needs a cleaning real bad, hair needs some shampoo even worse. "Jackie's coming in today so pull your fucking pants up above your ass, okay?" Then he'll thump me on the back and keep walking, on his way to tell Tammy to try not to be quite so fucking drunk when Jackie gets here. I understand, I guess—I mean, when Jackie comes, it's John's job on the line, and he needs it. He's got twin boys and Tammy says his wife's gonna leave him any day now unless he gets his shit together. I gotta wonder how she knows that, though, because John's not really what you'd call a talker. Mostly an ass-sitter. Except, like I said, on days when Jackie comes in.

When I get to work on Monday, Tammy's wiping down the bar. When I come in she says, "You hear what happened?"

"No," I say, and I really haven't.

“Two hundred dollars went missing from the drawer on Saturday night,” she says, still pushing the towel back and forth on the old shiny wood. “Jackie’s coming in today.”

“Shit, man,” I say. “How’d that happen?”

“I don’t know,” she says, and then she finally stops and stands up straight, or as straight up as Tammy ever stands. She looks tired, like always. “Tell you one thing, though, kid. Jackie doesn’t fuck around. If you steal from him, you’re gone, that’s for fucking sure.”

So I don’t think much of it, really, except I don’t know how money could go missing around here. It’s a small place, just Tammy and the other bartender, Rich, this old divorced guy who only works a couple days a week, usually my days off. Then there’s me and Shauna and the other barback, Paul, beefy kid from Bensonhurst, I don’t really know him because he and I don’t work together much either. And jack-off John. Only John and the bartenders have keys to the register and everybody knows that, including Jackie.

“Where’s John?” I say.

Tammy shrugs, takes a drink from a Styrofoam cup she’s got stashed behind the bar.

“In the office. Probably praying he don’t lose his fucking job,” she says. “That’s what I’d be doing, anyway.”

Shauna comes in right after me, and Tammy tells her too. She doesn’t say much, just, “Shit, really?,” half-smiling the way people who’ve been through a lot of shit do when you tell them something bad. Kind of a “God is shitting on me again, huh? Big surprise,” smile. Like if it’s not one thing, it’s another, and that’s kind of funny in a sick

way, you know? It's the same smile she always has on her face and by now I'm used to it, can even see it if I close my eyes and squint. I haven't seen her since Sunday morning and we don't say much to each other, kind of keep our distance while we all stand around, watch the Yankees game and wait to get busy. Just the sight of her makes my palms sweat a little but I try to think about other things and I guess she does too because she doesn't seem to notice me hardly at all.

Jackie gets there about a half hour later. We're still pretty empty, just a couple of loners sitting at the bar watching the Yankees game and a guy in the back shooting pool by himself. The customers don't know what Jackie looks like, he comes in so rarely, and they don't even look up when he passes the bar. Tammy and me do, though. She says, "Hi Jack," and smiles, which she almost never does. He nods at her, big gray bushy eyebrows raised, and walks on past towards the office, which is next to the bathrooms. I don't say anything, just keep stocking beers next to Tammy.

"See that," she whispers. "Someone's gonna get it. Whew!" But that's all she says, and after that no one else says anything more about it until they call us in.

They call us into the office one by one. Tammy's first, and when she goes in she leaves me and Shauna alone behind the bar. Feels so good just to be next to her and I hope Tammy stays in there a long time. Except I don't know what to say.

"How was your day yesterday?" I say.

"It was okay," she says. "Got to relax with the girls. You?"

"Good," I say. Wish I had something more interesting to say, anything, really, but the truth is I just played basketball and hung out with my mom, and who wants to hear

that? So I try to think of something else to ask her but I realize I don't know anything about her, not a thing in the fucking world except that her husband's dead and I really like her, so instead I just say, "I had fun on Saturday" and hope that's good.

And I don't know how she's gonna react to that, it's a pretty dumb thing to say. But she surprises me. She lowers her voice so that the guys sitting at the bar can't hear, and she says, real sweet, "Me too." Then she touches my back, so lightly that I'm not even sure she's really touching me except I look over at her and she's smiling and then I know those are her fingers I feel through my t-shirt, and they feel nice, and I smile back, and then I really don't have anything else to say but it's okay.

The office is this tiny little room in the back of Jackie's. There's a file cabinet and a desk and there's really only enough room left for two chairs. When I come in after Tammy, though, there are three chairs—one for Jackie, one for John and one for me. The chairs are so close that John's and Jackie's knees are almost touching.

"Mike," John says.

"Hi," I say, and squeeze in to sit facing the two of them.

Now, Jackie's a big guy, and I mean big. He's in his seventies but he's still built more or less like an ice hockey player, which is what they say he used to be in college. He's 6'4" with wide shoulders and giant hands, and he's got thin gray hair that's always combed back. He wears a suit, or at least a jacket, every day. Tammy says he's Irish but that his family's been in Brooklyn for more than a century, says his grandfather's grandfather's grandfather, or something like that, came over from Ireland during the Great Hunger, ten years old, tag around his neck. Or something like that.

And the thing is, for a big old jock who owns a loud old Irish bar, Jackie is pretty damn quiet. He's nice, though, and honestly he reminds me more of my grandfather than of any guy who'd own a bar. When he comes by, he usually doesn't say much, just walks around and looks at things like a guy in a store, then goes into the office and takes care of whatever it is he's come to do.

When I sit down Jackie looks at me real nice, like I said, almost like my grandfather. And John says, "I'm sure you know what's been happening, Mike."

I nod.

"We're asking everyone individually"—the word sounds funny coming out of his mouth, John never uses big formal words like that—"if they know what happened to the money. If you do know, just tell us, because we'll find out either way. This is a small place and no one likes these things, but they happen and we've gotta take care of them"—Jackie nods—"in the quickest way possible. This is like a little family here"—Jackie nods again—"and we need to be able to trust everyone."

He pauses, and I just stare back at him, because I don't know what I'm supposed to say. He doesn't seem to know what to do with this, so he clears his throat and then, seeing I have nothing to say, keeps going.

"So, um...so, do you have anything to say, Mike?"

"No," I say. "I don't know who could have taken it. I mean—I didn't. I don't even have a key to the register—"

John interrupts me and says, "That doesn't necessarily mean anything, Mike. Tammy doesn't remember, she says she could have left it open by accident..." He stops when he sees me shaking my head.

“I really have no idea,” I say. Then I look at Jackie. “I’m sorry, sir,” and I really do mean it. “I don’t know what to say.”

Jackie smiles at me as he stands up.

“Thank you for your time,” he says, and he really sounds like he means it, like he knows I didn’t take anything. As I stand up too, a good six inches shorter and way too close to him in the tiny office, he reaches out and shakes my hand, firm as hell, just like I expect.

“Thanks, Mike,” John says. “Send Shauna in, will you?”

On Tuesday, my day off, I’m getting ready to go play basketball when John calls me. I don’t recognize the number and I don’t pick up calls from numbers I don’t know, so I ignore it. He leaves a voicemail, though, and I listen to it as I leave the apartment:

“Mike, it’s John from the bar. Call me back.”

I call him right back as I’m walking down the block to the park, and he tells me that they’re letting me go. He knows I’m a good guy, he says, but they just can’t take the risk of keeping someone on who might be stealing.

“I don’t get it, though,” I say, and I don’t. “I told you I didn’t take it. Why do you guys think it was me?”

“Look, man,” John says. “I don’t want to think it was you. I hope this was just some crazy mistake and we can call you tomorrow and tell you we figured it out and you can come back to work. But for now, we don’t have much to go on.”

I’ve been walking and dribbling the basketball with my left hand while I hold the phone with my right but now I stop walking and stop dribbling, because I’m just so

frustrated and I can't dribble and talk and be this mad all at the same time. I didn't do anything. So I push the motherfucker.

“What do you mean, man? What do you have to go on? What are you talking about, dude? Why me?”

“Look, Mike,” he says. “Come on.” Then nothing but something about the way he says “Come on” tells me to wait, and I do, I sit down on a stoop halfway down the block from my house and put the basketball between my feet. The sun glares off the windows of the parked cars into my eyes, the street so bright. “You’ve been working here less time than anyone else, and”—quick with this part, like he hopes I won’t barely catch it—“Shauna says when she left on Saturday you were still in there, and she didn’t see you leave.”

Everything’s still there—the ball, the sun, the stoop, me. I don’t even know what to say, but all of a sudden it makes so much sense that it’s sick, nothing ever makes this much sense. Must have been a mistake, she wouldn’t do that, except it wasn’t, and she did. I’m thinking maybe there’s something I’m supposed to do here. Maybe I’m supposed to tell John she’s lying and I know she stole the money, except why would he believe her over me? Or maybe I’m supposed to call her and tell her I know, tell her it’s okay and I’m gonna take it like a champ. Except I don’t even have her number and I have this feeling she doesn’t want to hear from me anyway. And John is waiting on the phone for me to say something, and my mom is making dinner tonight, and the sun is still hurting my eyes.

And then I think of Shauna, and that soft fine hair above that stupid tattoo on the back of her neck, and I realize what I’m about to do, which is tell John thanks for talking

to me straight, and take care man. And then I'm gonna hang up the phone and head down to the park to play some basketball and not think too much about why.

Thanks, Get Out

For dinner that night she made not very good curried cauliflower. We sat at the long, long table and she asked me how old I was. Seventeen, I said.

Does that make you legal, she said. Her friend laughed. He ate very quietly. Yeah, I said. Just barely. But you were sixteen last summer, she said. Yeah, I said. So I committed a crime, she said. Her friend sat up a little in his chair. He made more noise sitting than he did eating.

Later she lay in bed, talking about her new girlfriend while she waited for me. She's so hot, she said. I took off my pants. Are you coming to bed, she said. Yeah, I said. I was in boxers and a t-shirt. Nice boxers, she said. My girlfriend has the same ones.

The next morning while we were getting dressed she took a picture out of her drawer. It was an ad. The model looked like she was fifteen. Isn't she hot, she said. Isn't she sexy. The model was pressing her breasts together with the palms of her hands. I wish I could do that, she said. You could, I said. She turned from me and pulled her bra above her breasts. When she faced me again she was pressing her breasts together with the palms of her hands. Am I doing it, she said. Yeah, I said. She turned around and pulled her bra back on. We went downstairs.

We sat in the kitchen spreading apple butter on cornbread. Her roommate walked in, her hands wrapped around a mug of tea. Where'd you get that tea, she said. It was in the cabinet, her roommate said. What's it called, she said. Get Regular, her roommate said.

She started laughing. What, her roommate said. That's my tea, she said. Why is that funny, her roommate said. Because, she said. Because that's my detox tea. I drink it once a year to cleanse. It's a laxative.

Her roommate put down the tea. What does that mean, her roommate said. It means, she said. It means you'll be shitting all day. It should hit you around three o'clock.

She turned and left the kitchen.

In the afternoon we worked out. She worked out and I stood behind her, throwing darts at the wall. She ran on the treadmill and watched a film about HIV in the gay black male community. The back of her shirt slowly dampened with her sweat. Her roommate came downstairs clutching her gut.

I've been sick all day, her roommate said. That sucks, she said. She didn't even look away from the television screen. How long does it last, her roommate said. Your whole life, she said. What, her roommate said. Yeah, she said. You can take drugs, though, she said. And live a fairly normal life. What the fuck, her roommate said. I know, she said. Fucking AIDS, man, she said.

What are you talking about, her roommate said. What does it have to do with AIDS. She looked exasperated and sweaty. Uh, that's the syndrome associated with the virus, she said. Acquired Immunodeficiency—

What does that have to do with the tea, her roommate said. Nothing, she said. What does the tea have to do with the movie, she said. How long does the shitting last, her roommate said. Oh, she said. I don't know, just wait it out, she said.

Twenty-four hours after the curried cauliflower we were drinking out of red plastic cups in a house off Jackson Square. She leaned on the back of my chair, her curly black hair tickling my forehead as she talked to a very tall man with glasses. I brushed it out of my face and turned the page of the Frida Kahlo book in my lap. A girl with a green shirt pushed her face up close to mine.

I love Frida Kahlo, the girl with the green shirt said. Yeah, I said. I turned the page again. Yeah, the girl with the green shirt said. Hey, you look familiar. Yeah, I don't think so, I said. Frida Kahlo stared back at me from her bed on the page. I think we're in the same Intro to Comparative Politics class, the girl with the green shirt said. Professor Walsh. I don't think so, I said. Oh, the girl with the green shirt said. I love that painting, the girl with the green shirt said. Yeah, I said. Frida and Diego held hands under my right thumbnail.

Above me she was still talking to the tall man. She was leaning on the back of my chair and her hair kept falling in my eyes. You know, she said. I love tall men. You must be six-foot-three. I bet you have a big bed. The tall man laughed. Can I get you another drink, the tall man said. Well, yeah, she said. She turned to follow him and her hair left my face.

Want a tour of the house, the girl with the green shirt said. I watched the black curly hair disappear through the door to the kitchen. Yeah, I said. Yeah, let's go. The girl

with the green shirt took the Frida Kahlo book out of my hand and put her fingers on my back.

We went up the stairs with the stained blue carpeting and the girl with the green shirt opened a clapboard door. There was a single bed and a sloping roof and a bunch of Jim Morrison posters on the wall. It's too bad you're not in my Comp Politics class, the girl with the green shirt said. We could have a lot of fun studying. Yeah, I said. The girl with the green shirt sat on the bed. I sat down next to the girl with the green shirt. I kissed the girl with the green shirt. We sat there for a moment with our tongues in each other's mouths and the door wide open. Then the girl with the green shirt pulled her green shirt off and lay back on the bed.

She was in the doorway by then. I don't know how long she had been there, but that was when I noticed her. We gotta go, she said. My fucking roommate is sick.

The tall man was downstairs waiting in his car. What's the address, the tall man said. 300 Saratoga, she said. Saratoga and Garden. The tall man drove fast and looked back at us every few minutes. We sat across the backseat from each other, as far away as we could get. Boston was empty through the window, Frida Kahlo in my mouth.

Did you have to kiss that nasty girl, she said.

Did you have to fuck, I said, then dropped my voice to a whisper and started again. Did you have to fuck the guy driving us home, I said.

Do you have to be so fucking jealous, she said.

Do you have to be so fucking self-centered, I said.

Yes, she said. And then, a minute later, as we turned onto Saratoga: you love it.

So what if I do, I said. It's still a nasty habit.

She leaned toward me across the backseat and I heard her breathe in through her nose.

What's a nasty habit, she said.

Your narcissism, I said.

She bit my lower lip until I made a bad noise. Then she laughed. You love it, honey, she said. You love it.

Is this it, the tall man said. Outside the window her porch swing was empty and the light was off but it was still her house. She leaned into the front seat and took her time kissing his cheek.

Thanks, she said to the tall man. Then she climbed out of the car. She leaned into the backseat and smiled at me. Get out, honey, she said.

School Pictures

I.

They got their school pictures back on a Friday. The girls in her class traded photos to decorate their lockers. She stuffed hers in her back pocket and immersed herself in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

At lunchtime her history teacher caught up to her on her way into the cafeteria. She had mousey brown hair, earnest eyes, big breasts. “Hi,” she said. Her voice was velvety. “I need to talk to you.”

Excited, she climbed the stairs, ready and eager for to be alone with the beautiful history teacher with the large breasts. When they reached the classroom the teacher reached into her drawer.

“These were, um—” she said, turning the photos over in her fingers. “I think these are yours. I found them hanging on the wall.”

And there she was, twirling between the teacher’s fingers, face marred by black marker.

It was the only time she ever grabbed anything out of a teacher's hands. They went into her front pocket this time. Her throat was impossibly knotted. Tears would come soon. She only had so many seconds.

“If you want to talk—” the teacher said.

But she had already begun to walk out of the room. She didn't turn around. She threw her body against the door to the stairwell, collapsed on the top step, let the convulsions take her. Out came the photos from her pocket, onto the floor went her smiling face. The word ran in beastly black ink, over and over again, across each pair of eyes. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, she said. Monkey, said the pictures.

II.

On this particular morning my mother has handed my sister and me six twenty-dollar bills—three each. “Try Macy’s,” she says. “Bigger selection.”

On the subway my sister is giddy. “Aren’t you excited?” she says.

I make a sound halfway between a groan and a snort. “No...”

“Aw, why not?” she says. She knows why not. “I’m going to get a lacy red one.”

“Ooh,” I say. “Tempting.”

I can feel my muscles tense as soon as we step off the elevator. There’s no missing the sign: “Intimates.” In front of me the racks of multicolored cotton and polyester span the entire length of the floor. They resemble a field in desperate need of harvest, each row sprouting an array of undergarments waiting to be picked and hauled off to the fitting room.

“Come on,” my sister says. She pulls me by the wrist and I follow. I have never been more uncomfortable, except for maybe my last bra-shopping trip. Wary of being mistaken for a boyfriend seeking the perfect Valentine’s Day gift but also not wanting to look meek or easy to rip off, I attempt a femininely-self-assured gait that ends up looking more like a swagger with swishing hips.

A woman with enormous breasts and barely-there eyebrows approaches. I ready myself. “May I help you?” She smiles, revealing two rows of teeth that are spotless except for the one red smudge that has migrated from her thoroughly-painted lips.

“No thanks,” I say and walk past without meeting her eyes. My sister is making her way towards the fitting room ahead of me and I quicken my strange jaunt, seeking some kind of shelter.

III.

My brother is seven the first time we dress him up as a girl. Robert is my brother's name but we call him Roberta, and color his cheeks red with our mother's blush, pin his soft boy hair against his skull with my older sister's hairclips, give him tennis balls to stuff between his flat, skinny chest and the tanktop from my drawer. It's the summer and we're staying with our grandparents for a week in Massachusetts. Before dinner, with the sun still peeking between the trees that separate the house from the lake, we show him off.

My grandfather and my dad are reading the newspaper on the back deck. My grandfather is stretched out in a blue reclining deck chair, the International Section of the Times spread across his round belly. Dad sits next to him on a white plastic chair, head bent over a table made from a tree stump, deep creases between his eyebrows. The little gray hairs on the backs of his hands catch the last rays of sunlight.

"You guuuuys," my sister drawls, and taps my father on the back of his gray head. She is ten. "Look at Roberta!"

My grandfather doesn't stir. He barely moves for dinner these days. But my father raises his head, turns around, smiles.

IV.

We're on the floor of a schoolbus, horizontal, and I'm going to be sick. She's looking up at me with these buggy eyes and all I can think is God, why didn't I ever notice how buggy her eyes are? and I want to puke.

She is so silent, just looking at me with buggy eyes. I have to kiss her or I have to say something and so I say, "Did you hear that?"

"What?" she says.

"That noise," I say.

We broke into a schoolbus parked in an empty lot. So we could have sex. I should be excited because I've only done it twice but she's got her dress hiked up to her waist and all I can think is god, that's the position women give birth in. She arches her back and her hips come towards my belly button and all I can think is how well-suited for childbearing they are.

I bend down to push her hair out of her face, because what else can I do, and my belt buckle scrapes the place where the insides of her thighs meet. I wince but the rawness of the metal makes a sound in her throat, a good sound. She wraps her fingers around the back of my neck. I can't meet her buggy, buggy eyes so I look instead at the dirt on the floor. There's a lot of it.

So I kiss her collarbone. It's so light that it almost doesn't happen at all, but she must feel it because her throat goes again. She wraps her legs around my waist. My belt buckle must feel cold on her skin but she's not saying anything, just making that sound and biting my ear and I'm going to be sick because I can hear the grit on the floor as it

rubs against my jeans and it must be all over her skin, her underwear, and her eyes are buggy, they're so hungry and that scares me and I thought I wanted this.

V.

I am in her chair when she tells me to get up and I don't move, silently hoping for a "please."

She sits on me.

I think she is joking but she opens Sappho's *If Not, Winter* and prints the date firmly across the top of her notebook. Our heads tilt in the same direction, towards her desk. I try to synchronize my breathing with the rise and fall of her shoulder blades. She writes:

"I beg you / do not break with hard pains' – page 3."

My legs are crossed beneath us. I read along, anticipating the next thing she will write down. I don't know how long she will stay here so I just absorb her weight on my thighs, the freckle behind her ear. Tentatively, I touch the page:

"Who, O / Sappho, is wronging you?"

She repeats it softly. She approves. Her fingers turn white under the nails as she writes it down. She turns the page. When she finds something she likes, her satisfied grunt hums against my chest before I hear it in my ears. She writes:

"For if she flees, soon she will pursue' – page 5."

My toes are going numb. I ignore them. The tingling in my feet is nothing compared to the tingling on my wrist where her pinky rests. I wonder when I will feel my legs again. When she hits fragment 31, I try to be dry about it.

"Fun as this is—" I begin.

She doesn't let me finish. She doesn't want to give me the pleasure of being snide and so she stands. I uncross my legs and bang my knee on her desk.

"Sorry," I mumble. She sits on me again. I am surprised but not unhappy.

"You / be my ally," she reads aloud. She writes it down.

Everyone On This Plane Knows How You Feel

For some reason, Daniel loved that story.

“You want to hear that one again?” his mom would say, smiling even as she shook her head and raised her eyebrows. They would be unloading the dishwasher together at home, or he would be setting the table for dinner while she cooked. She would turn over her right shoulder and look at him skeptically, lovingly. “But it’s not really a story. You know what happened.”

“I don’t care,” he would say. And here he would smile, sometimes leaning his head on her shoulder (they were the same height—5’6”), or playfully grabbing her hand. “It’s not the same as hearing you tell it. I love hearing you tell it.”

“Well, you know...everyone was so nice to me, because I was crying, and I was pregnant—”

“No, Mom. From the beginning.”

His mom, Lisa, had been visiting David in San Francisco after he told her he had HIV. She was eight months pregnant with Daniel, and the morning of her flight back she had overslept. When she got to the airport they’d driven her to the gate in one of the airport golf carts. The flight attendants waited for her as she waddled onto the plane. The stress of almost missing her flight combined with David’s news was overwhelming, and

when she finally made it to her seat next to an already-snoring old man, she started crying, and couldn't stop. The flight attendants brought her tissues, and smiled sympathetically.

“The worst part was, one of them told me, ‘I cried all the time when I was pregnant, too. Don't worry, it's so worth it.’” She'd pause then, looking out the kitchen window into the backyard, or down at their dog Harry, whose favorite place was the kitchen and who made it his business to be there whenever anyone else was. “Of course,” she'd say, looking at Daniel, “they had no idea.” He'd shake his head. Those stupid flight attendants, they would think to themselves in unison. No idea.

“I mean,” she'd finally say, picking up the wooden spoon to stir the butternut squash, or split pea, or crushed lentil soup. His mother was always making soup. Like everything in her life, it made sense. It was filling, good for you. You could make a lot of it at once and freeze some for later.

“It's kind of funny, when you think about it,” she'd say. That was always the way she ended the story. That it was funny. “This huge pregnant woman, being driven through the airport in a golf cart, then crying her brains out for the whole flight. God, I was pathetic.”

And they'd both laughed, imagining a big, pregnant woman, crying. It wasn't really funny, no—HIV, missing a flight, a sobbing pregnant woman—no, it wasn't funny at all. But the sadness seemed far away now, a distant, already-felt, almost absurd kind of pain. They laughed because it was all okay now, because there was nothing to cry about. She had caught the flight and Daniel had been born. David had died, yes, but they had finally made their peace with that. The story had lost David. Now it was just a story about

a silly crying, pregnant woman, who really was very silly for crying on the plane. How silly she must have looked.

When he told her he was positive, his mother said it was too much. Too much, she said. He just stared back. Too much not fair, over and over, too much, not fair. And why couldn't he have been more careful. And God, hadn't one been enough. And why why. Why them. Why this family. And oh Daniel. Oh Daniel.

His name had come from David, after all. It was against Jewish custom to name a child after a living person, but she had wanted to name her son after her brother, who was alive but would never have children. So she used his initial, a compromise with God, and he was Daniel, after David.

Oh, Daniel. She had cried, clamped her teeth around her wrist like she had, rarely but enough times for him to remember, when he was a child. When he had drawn castles on the wall with the red Sharpies his father kept in the jar next to the phone, or when he was older, and failed Chemistry. It was her one odd habit in a field of normalcy, the one piece of wild in his otherwise calm, collected, practical mother. He had often wondered whether it was precisely because she was so calm and collected that she resorted to such a practice on the rare occasion of fury. He could always picture it: in the moments of extreme fear, pain, anger, the moments when he most wanted to be close to his mother, she scared him. Her eyes would widen and she would raise her wrist to her lips, bite down on it softly, a sound rising from somewhere between lips and skin. Sometimes she would pace the kitchen when she did it, teeth clamped down to keep herself from screaming at him, making the rounds of stove, sink, fridge, stove, sink, fridge, as he and

Hannah sat at the kitchen table and looked at each other, bemused, terrified.

Later he would notice the semi-circle of dashes imprinted on her skin, each one in perfect alignment (his mother had had braces for four years as a child). He wondered if it hurt. They knew when Mom bit her wrist it was bad. But they also knew they were safe. That when she finally stopped pacing, maybe went upstairs and washed her face—then all would be forgiven, and the foremost concern in their little Brooklyn brownstone would be who was cleaning up from dinner.

Oh, Daniel. Sitting at the kitchen table, she'd bitten down on her arm, looked at the floor, the tiles he'd helped her pick out when he was ten. Her arched back shook as she cried, and Daniel's father Michael stroked it, his big hand running down the curve of her spine and back up. He looked only at Daniel, eyes wet, face soft, no trace of fear or anger visible in the deep lines of his cheeks.

The first thing he said was,

“How?”

His name was Scout. He was tall and skinny, his hair dark and clipped close to his head, his skin pale and smooth. For the entire night that Daniel spent with him, his lips remained pursed, like he was forever getting ready to say something. Even when he came his lips stayed that way, the smallest groan making its way out between them.

Daniel and John had been sitting at a corner table at Otto's. They were each on their third Captain and Coke. It was late August, and the bar was not air-conditioned. Old wooden fans spun lazily above their heads, pushing the moist stagnant air in circles around the room. Daniel's t-shirt, a memento from his high school baseball team, was

wet against his back, just barely tight across his chest. He hadn't grown since sophomore year of high school, and though that was a painful reality, it was an advantage when it came to clothing. The shirt was the kind of home people lose when they get tall.

Scout's fingers had appeared first, pinching John's nipple through his thin white crewneck.

"Ow—what the fuck?" They both looked up to see Scout. He was grinning, his prominent cheekbones casting deep shadows down his lean face.

"Oh shit! Scout, what's up buddy? Long time." John stood and hugged him. Scout winked at Daniel over John's shoulder. Winks are stupid, Daniel thought, but he couldn't ignore the sudden warmth he felt spreading across his cheeks.

"Danny, this is Scout. We graduated from NYU together. Scout, this is Danny—one of my best friends since we were five."

They shook hands.

David had died when Daniel was ten, Hannah nine. The cause of death was pneumocystis pneumonia. He was in the hospital for six weeks so they'd known it was coming, bought tickets from New York to San Francisco with plenty of time to spare. He had taught Daniel and Hannah to make paper airplanes, so the morning of the funeral they sat at the desk by the window in the hotel room, folding hundreds of construction paper airplanes to hand out at the service. Their mother said it was their contribution, that David would have been proud. Hannah said David would have liked the green ones best. Their mother said he would have liked all of them, because Daniel and Hannah had made them.

They gave out the paper airplanes at the door of the synagogue as people filed in. After the service, when everyone had left, Lisa and Michael followed Daniel and Hannah through the synagogue, helping them pick each paper airplane up from the bench or the floor.

“Nobody wanted an airplane, Mom?” Hannah had asked.

“Well, honey...I guess they were just a little too sad to remember to take their airplanes with them.” And they’d kept on walking through the synagogue, picking up the scattered red and brown and green folded pieces of paper.

It was sweltering in the Delancey Street train station, and though there were three entirely empty benches, they had both stood on the platform. In the bar they’d played pool, done shots of tequila and talked of nothing—movies they’d seen lately, and how much the real world sucks after college. John had been there to stave off the silence with the story about the time the drunk guy stole his quesadilla at Benny’s, and how he’d chased him ten blocks down Broadway and still never got it back.

In the train station, though, it was just the two of them, John gone to the Upper West Side. Daniel was grateful when Scout turned his back to him and stood at the very edge of the platform, gazing into the tunnel. Daniel examined him. Scout stood with his weight on one leg, hips cocked, hands mechanically rubbing his buzzed hair. His dark jeans were tight around his long thin legs, and Daniel imagined the sweat pooling behind his knees. When the white F in the orange circle finally appeared and the train rushed into the station with a gust of hot air and the loud sound of metal on metal, Scout barely budged.

When they got onto the train, Scout sat down first. Timidly, Daniel sat down one seat away. Scout slid across the empty orange seat between them and squeezed Daniel's thigh.

"Afraid to sit next to me?"

Daniel shook his head, looked at the Manhattan Mini Storage ad across the train car. "Crammed for space?" it asked. A man in scrubs was standing in the middle of a messy bedroom, underwear strewn across the floor.

"Just wanted to give you some room," he said, looking down at his hands, which were shiny with sweat and gripping the edge of the seat.

"Tell you what," Scout whispered. His fingers tightened on Daniel's thigh. Daniel looked down. Scout's fingernails were short and perfectly rounded at the tips. His hands reminded Daniel of what he imagined a surgeon's hands would look like. They looked soft, strong, clean.

"Daniel."

"Yes," Daniel heard himself say.

"I'll let you know if I need room."

Then Scout slid back across the empty seat and looked straight ahead. Daniel glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. He was leaning back against the seat, his Adam's apple protruding sharply from his exposed neck. For the remainder of the ride to Brooklyn they sat in those seats. Short, meaningless words occasionally passed between them, but mostly they watched the motionless man in scrubs.

The night he told them, Daniel walked the dog with his dad. Michael walked

Harry every night at eleven, just after he finished reading the paper and doing the crossword puzzle. Sometimes Daniel came along just to keep his father company. But mostly he came to talk. He came after he told them he was gay, when he was 16; when he'd gotten in a fight with Eric Wallace and his eye was puffed up to the size of a cue ball; when he got accepted to Union, and when he got rejected from Brown; when Allen dumped him for a woman.

They went right out of the house and walked up the block. No one else was out. Harry trotted along, happy to have two companions instead of the usual one. Daniel watched him get a good whiff of a McDonald's paper bag before Michael noticed and tugged him away. His sandy-colored tail wagged even then.

"How are you going to tell Hannah?" Michael asked.

"I already did."

Michael nodded, looking up the block at the convenience store on the corner. The three men who owned it were closing now, pulling down the big metal gate in front of it, joking to each other in Arabic.

"What did she say?"

"She cried a lot. But I think she realized that it's gonna be okay. I mean, I told her, there's all kinds of medicine these days. She knows that. She told me one of her professors is even positive. And he's open about it." He was eager to keep going. His head felt the lightest it had felt in days. Yes, it was saying. Yes, even Hannah has a professor. And he's open about it. "I mean, you guys should know this too. This isn't the eighties anymore, you know?"

Michael waved at the men, now leaning on the metal gate and smoking.

“Daniel,” he said after they’d passed the store. “Honey.” Daniel couldn’t remember the last time his dad had called him honey. “You need to be honest with yourself here. Your mom and I watched David die from this. I watched one of my students die from this—”

“That was a long time ago!” It was almost a question.

“Danny, it was ten years ago—”

“Ten years is a long time!”

“There’s still no cure.” He said it so quietly that Daniel wondered if he had hoped his son wouldn’t hear him.

They had stopped walking; Harry was pooping by the curb. When he finished Michael stooped and picked it up with a plastic bag. This was their cue to turn around. During the day Harry got a walk around the block, but the late night walk was only until he pooped. They crossed the street and walked back down the block.

“Listen. You are a healthy, strong, capable person, but you need to take this seriously. That’s the best way to take care of yourself right now. You have a long life ahead of you, and I know you’re going to live it. Just have to take this thing seriously. Have to respect it.”

He squeezed Daniel’s shoulder. An accident from his days as a machinist during college had left the fingers on his left hand permanently curved, unable to flatten out. At their straightest, the fingers looked like they were ready to throw a football. The tiniest bit of hair grew just above his knuckles. They were big hands. Daniel’s own hands were soft, small. As a child he had often wondered at how perfectly his hand fit inside his father’s, marveling at the thought that in this thing called growing up, his hand would one

day be as big. Now he knew better than to think his hands would ever be the same size as Michael's. In fact, he suspected that his hand might still fit just as perfectly.

They were giggling like ten-year-olds as they crept into Daniel's parents' house.

"Shhh," Daniel whispered when Scout knocked a bicycle helmet onto the wooden floor in the front hall. "You want my dad to come down here?"

"I don't know," Scout said. Even in the dark Daniel could make out the tiny smile on his face. "Does he have a big dick?"

Daniel punched him in the chest.

"Ow! That fucking hurt!"

"I know. Don't make me do it again. Get upstairs."

Scout took a step towards Daniel.

"Ooh, bossy," Scout whispered. "You gonna tell me what to do, honey?" The teasing, mostly comic but laced with a hint of sincerity, stirred in Daniel a resolve he didn't know he had. Suddenly his hand darted out and grabbed Scout's crotch. Scout's dick was just the slightest bit stiff inside his jeans, and Daniel squeezed, hard. He felt Scout's chin knock against his cheek and heard a sound halfway between a grunt and a gasp.

"Get upstairs," Daniel whispered.

It took them all of two minutes to get each other's clothes off. Then, with nothing to do, they paused. Daniel's eyes had adjusted to the dark and he could see Scout's body perfectly. Where Daniel was small, muscular, freckled, and compact, Scout was long, lean, smooth, with a flat stomach and a chest that was almost concave. Even naked his

body retained something of the coyness with which it had slid across the seat on the subway an hour before. Though he was on his back, he did not recline entirely, his back slightly raised from the bed, propped up on his thin arms—ready to go somewhere, even though he had just lain down. Daniel thought of the stories his father used to tell him about Cool Papa Bell, the Negro League baseball player who was so fast people said he could hit the light switch and be in bed by the time the light went out. He had always thought it would have been the most incredible thing in the world, to be that fast—right up there with flying and teleporting. Now he wondered if Scout was fast. Had he ever run track? Daniel studied the body beneath him, the stomach muscles just barely visible, tensed. If he wanted to, he could slip out from under Daniel, be at the door by the time...

Daniel stretched across the bed and grabbed the blue box from the drawer in his bedside table.

“Fuck!”

“What?”

“I’m out,” he said, gesturing at the box. He threw it on the floor and started to get up, but Scout grabbed the back of his neck.

“You can pull out,” he said. His brown eyes bore into Daniel’s. “I trust you. You’re clean, right?”

“Yeah...are you?”

“Yeah.”

At first all Daniel could think about was the time Ms. Dennis had written, “Don’t have unprotected sex. Don’t have unprotected sex. Don’t have unprotected sex” over and over again across the entire blackboard. His health class had burst out laughing, but there

was only so much they could laugh, and she was still writing, and John had turned to him and said, “Geez, Danny, you think she wants us to have unprotected sex?” Daniel had smiled then, grateful for the joke as the room filled with tension like smoke gathering at the ceiling of a bar. When he pushed into Scout, all he could see was John’s face, grinning at his dumb sarcastic joke, and he swore he could hear the chalk on the blackboard, even though there was no way he had heard it at the time. You’re not supposed to do this. This is what I’m not supposed to do. This is exactly what I’m not supposed to do.

But gradually he heard more groans escaping from the blue pillow than he heard chalk on a blackboard, and he could feel the sheets damp beneath his knees. He remembered Scout’s perfect Adam’s apple, even though he couldn’t see it on the body that moved, belly down, beneath him in the dark. When Scout reached back and wrapped a strong hand around Daniel’s thigh, imploring him, more Daniel, oh Daniel, Daniel just heaved back, pressed everything he had into Scout and then some, and there were no more thoughts, only motions, exhaustion and air.

Usually Lisa waited for Michael in bed, but when Daniel and his father returned with Harry she was sitting on the couch. *Seinfeld* was on the television and the newspaper was open on the table in front of her but her eyes were only on the door, and Daniel had the feeling that they had been focused there for a long time.

“Okay,” she said as they took off their jackets and shoes. Michael gave her a look that said wait, but she returned it with one that said no, and kept talking. “I think tomorrow we should see Dr. Stone, right? He’ll be a good place to start, Daniel, just

because he knows you well and has been seeing you for a long time. He can refer us to the right places.” Daniel could see her brain working in the lines on her forehead. “I mean, I know some people, but it was a long time ago. Everything’s probably different now. Anyway, fresh start, right?” She smiled, or tried to, but the joke wasn’t funny to anyone in the room and the effort looked so painful that Daniel thought he might cry.

“Yeah,” he said. “Fresh start.” He walked over to the couch and kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’m gonna be fine...I know it.”

She looked up at him, her eyes wet again. He tried to give her a reassuring look, but felt his forehead wrinkling, just like hers did when she was sad, or angry, or frustrated, and he knew he was frowning without meaning to. So he sat down next to her on the couch and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He knew if he squeezed her she’d cry, so he just let his arm rest there, a light, limp reminder of something—he wasn’t sure what.

It was hard, he thought, this comforting. He could feel her shoulders just barely shaking under his arm, struggling to stay still. He looked at her feet, her toes moving slightly inside her clean white socks, and it struck him that they could easily have been the feet of a child. He realized how terrified she was, shaking like Harry did when they arrived at the vet’s office. It was hard, this comforting. How had she learned it? When he was little and had nightmares about burglars, he used to run into her bedroom, where she was sitting at her desk, paying bills or reading. She would push her chair back from the desk and pull him onto her lap, whisper into his dark hair.

“Oh, sweet boy,” she’d whisper. “You’re fine. Nothing’s gonna happen to you. I’m here, and you’re safe, and nothing’s gonna happen to you, okay? You’re fine, I

promise.” He had always been sure, then, that she was right, that he was fine. He had felt like the safest person on earth when she kissed his temples. Now he wondered how she had done it. He did not feel ready to comfort her. To comfort her would be to admit that there was something real to be afraid of. He longed to climb into her lap, to feel her breath in his hair, telling him that he was going to be fine.

Instead, he leaned against her, squeezed her shoulders gently and kissed her cheek.

“I’m gonna go to bed,” he said. “I’ll see you guys in the morning. I love you both.”

After lingering hugs from both of them, he climbed the stairs to his bedroom. It was the first time in years he could remember going to bed before his parents.

He flew to San Francisco. He left no note. On the plane he did mental gymnastics, tried to tell himself it was okay. He would call soon, right? Right. He would call, sometime soon. And anyway, he was old enough to take a trip without a note, right? He was 22. David had been 37, but he was 22, and that was old enough, right? Right. And anyway, why write a note? He had nothing to say in a note. What could he have written?

Dear Mom,

I’m flying standby to San Francisco because I’m a wimp. I don’t even know his last name. I knew better and I did it anyway. I don’t want to tell

Dr. Stone. I don’t want to tell anyone.

Love,

D

He had woken up that morning at seven, his left wrist tingling from being bent under his pillow for so many hours as he'd slept. He must have been dreaming of San Francisco, he thought, because now as he lay there he could see Haight Street in the white ceiling, and the bus route, the 33, maybe, that made the u-turn on its way up Market Street. When he was a kid, visiting David, he had loved that part, always clutching David's sleeve as the bus approached Clayton and squealing, "Do you think we'll make it?" And they always had, except once, when the driver had to back up to complete the turn, and all the cars honked, and Daniel squealed more than ever, and said, "He didn't make it! He didn't make it!" And David had smiled down at Daniel in the seat next to him and whispered, "Maybe he's a new driver." When he smiled the corners of his eyes crinkled. Daniel remembered that. So he had been old enough to have wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. Daniel knew without looking in the mirror that he had no wrinkles in the corners of his eyes.

So he lay there, watching the 33 doing u-turns across his ceiling, and listening to the cars drive down his Brooklyn street. And it came to him, with a certainty that was inexplicable but that he did not question, that he would go to San Francisco. Just for a few days. Just to think. He hadn't been back there since junior year of college, when he and some friends had spent spring break at the gay bars on the Castro. Job searches could wait. Dr. Stone could wait.

Dear Mom,

Job searches can wait. Dr. Stone can wait. I'm going to find myself.

Love, D

Lame, D, he thought to himself. So he didn't leave a note. He'd call when he

landed, when they couldn't convince him not to go, when he had thought of a reason that he'd gone.

From the airport he took a cab to Haight Street and walked past the thrift shops, record stores and tearooms. The early May sun cast long, funny-shaped shadows across the sidewalk and made the metal on the bus stop sign glint, hurting Daniel's eyes. As he entered the park, an older man with a gray beard started to speak in a monotone, like a machine whose wire had been tripped.

"My name is Sonny Payne. I'm homeless, and I'm hungry. If you don't have it, I understand, because I don't have it. But if you..."

His voice faded as Daniel kept walking. He came to the playground. It was a Saturday and kids were everywhere, laughing and yelling, eating crustless sandwiches and drinking from juice boxes. He had played in this playground as a child, when visiting David. Its centerpiece was a steep stone slide that you went down with a piece of cardboard under your butt. It was faster, steeper, more slippery and more dangerous than any plastic slide. Daniel's mom could never watch him do it—she said she had nightmares about him breaking his neck every time they went to San Francisco—but David would watch him, clapping every time he came down. He would dare Daniel to go with his arms up in the air, and Daniel would do it, just for David, and shriek with a mix of fear and excitement, fighting the urge to drop his arms the whole way down. Right before they left the playground, just once, David would go with him. Their combined weight made their momentum better than any of the other kids on the slide. They would crumple into the sand together at the bottom, laughing and laughing. Then they'd get up

and brush themselves off and walk towards the benches in search of Lisa, who'd be reading her book and watching Hannah build sandcastles. And as they walked away from the slide, holding hands, Daniel could feel every kid on the playground looking at him. Wishing they had a David to take them down the slide.

Sitting on a bench in front of some flowers, next to the slide, he felt his phone vibrating in his pocket. It was his mom, calling for the second time that morning. His chest felt tight as he looked down at the phone, staring at "Mom calling" and the little animated icon of a phone, bouncing cheerfully up and down, waiting to be answered. He felt disgusted with himself. What did she do to deserve this? A dead brother and a dying son run off to San Francisco who wouldn't even pick up the phone. He tried to answer but found that his hands would not open the phone.

"Oh, tulips! But what does zat say?"

Daniel, startled, looked around for the source of the voice. Three elderly women in matching orange sunhats were stooped over behind the bench, examining the flowers. They wore colorful dresses and black orthopedic shoes.

"Purr-en-eel?"

And then a second voice: "Peeren-eel?"

They noticed him then, the man with the baseball cap pulled low on his face, watching the three French women poking at the flowerbed. He was embarrassed, and turned around, but felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Excuse me."

He turned around.

“Can you tell me ’ow you say zees word?” And she shoved a tiny plastic placard, the kind that goes in flowerpots to identify the plant, in his face. Her red fingernails were carefully manicured and her hand smelled distinctly of potpourri.

He pulled back so his eyes could focus on the placard, which was much too close.

“Tulips, Perennial,” he said. He smiled up at them.

“Peh-wrenn-ee-ull,” she said. “Oh! Perennial!”

They nodded vigorously at each other, and at him.

“*Plante vivace*,” said one of them. And they all laughed. “Perennial! *Plante vivace. Bien sur.*”

Daniel smiled, and turned back around. “Perennial” reminded him of “perineum”; he always thought that they were too close in sound, given how different they were in definition. He remembered when, freshman year of high school, he and John had first discovered “perineum.” In their minds, there was nothing better than such a specific word. They had written it on every desk they could and used it in made-up sentences.

“Hey Christy,” John would say, turning to the girl with the ponytail who sat next to them in their Trigonometry class. She was always cracking her pink gum. “Are you going to the perineum on Saturday?”

She’d look sideways at him, bored, and raise her eyebrows.

“No, John.” Then a loud sigh. “I have better things to do than go to a stupid burrenium. What is that, a loser convention?”

And they’d laugh, and bang on the desk, and one time John stuck a drawing of a butt and balls with an “X” over the space in between in Christy’s backpack, and she never mentioned it, but they always wondered where she’d been when she discovered it.

At her grandma's house for dinner? On the subway? Showing off her A in math to her mom?

Perennial, Daniel thought. Like perineum. Then he wondered if the French ladies knew what a perineum was, and if they'd ever touched one, even their own, let alone someone else's. A tulip bud, before it bloomed, was kind of like a pretty asshole, he decided. His had never been penetrated, but now that he was positive, he figured, it might as well have been. For days after the diagnosis he'd examined his penis after getting out of the shower, tirelessly seeking the small cut through which he was sure the virus had entered his body. It was absurd, of course—months had passed—and yet he had the feeling that if he could find the cut then he could find the precise point on his body where he'd gone wrong, the geography of his mistake.

On the flight back that night, Daniel cried hard. He made noises, little whimpers that escaped even his best efforts to stay silent. The woman next to him looked over her reading glasses at him and offered him a tissue. Then she went back to her Sue Grafton novel.

The flight attendant came down the aisle with the beverages. He thought she was seeking his eyes as she put the plastic cup of spring water down in front of him. She was around his mother's age, he thought, with dyed red stringy hair and gray roots. Later, while he was waiting for the bathroom, she handed him a pack of pretzels.

"Listen, honey," she said. "I couldn't help but notice." She gestured toward his seat, as if Crying was a person, now seated there in his absence. His eyes were still red, he knew without seeing a mirror. "Is it a girl? Because I wanted to tell you...you know,

when you first get your heart broken, you think you're the only one in the world who has ever experienced this pain. You feel so alone. It's awful, isn't it?" He felt himself nod.

"And the thing is...you're not alone, honey. We've all been there. Everyone on this plane knows how you feel. But listen, sweetheart. You're lucky. You're handsome. You'll find another girl. There are plenty of women out there for you, believe me." He noticed that the flight attendant standing behind her was nodding along as she stirred instant coffee in a paper cup. "I mean, it could be worse, right? So many bad things happening in the world...a little heartbreak never killed anyone." And she smiled warmly at him, like she'd just saved him, and in a way she had, and at just that moment a tall man walked out of the bathroom, and gratefully he shuffled into it, nodding in the flight attendant's direction and clutching the bag of pretzels as the new tears came.

He had left a message for his mom, asking her to pick him up at the airport. He hoped she'd come.

"Hi, Mom," he thought as he relieved himself. He washed his hands, and as he wiped his eyes with the rough toilet paper, shook his head, whispering, "You should have seen me on the plane...God, I was silly...and the flight attendants..."