

# EDITORS' FOREWORD

We are excited to present you with the Spring 2011 issue of *Euphony*, an assembly of the whimsical and surreal. Literature so often engages the darker side of human existence, but life is also comic, playful. In this issue, we examine both sides of the coin. You will be confronted with the shadows that lurk in our minds, but also with the joys and laughter of daily existence.

A couple of significant changes have been underway for the magazine. Most importantly, we revised the submission guidelines to accept only electronic submissions, and are publishing more work online so that the website may become a truly integral part of *Euphony*. The new guidelines and contact information can be found on the website or in the back of this issue.

We thank you for being part of the continuing story of the oldest literary magazine at the University of Chicago, and hope you enjoy our latest work.

THE EDITORS

# **EUPHONY**

### VOLUME 11, NUMBER 2 Spring 2011

*Euphony* is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations. Visit our website for more information.

Founded Spring 2000 by Stephen Barbara and Matthew Deming

euphonyjournal.com

Euphony is a registered member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses www.clmp.org

Printed in the United States of America by The Mail House, Inc.

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# Alexander Pepple

#### March Toadflax

Its needlepoint—through a slit in carport bricks—stitched a cicatrix of green, and grew into a crisscross of swordsticks.

It steadied and fanned out blades in days flashing a celadon fist of skeleton, spread out to a hand of flower by sunrays.

# Ed O'Casey

### **Escape Artist**

I'm frozen by the thought that, when I'm much older, I'll realize, at the wheel, I have no idea where I am or my destination; surrounded by unfamiliar trees

bearing the wrong leaves, near an unknown elementary school, arousing suspicion as I exit the car and stare along the busy playgrounds

and teeter-totters. Or worse, I might sit in my own home and fail to grasp its geography, wonder why the couch suddenly faces south,

question what south is, or gape at my dinner of fresh corpses: canaries, sparrows, and zinnias. I might pull a picture

from the mantle to decipher who this girl is, or this young woman with this man that's so strangely like the one who brushes my teeth.

I'm afraid I'll assassinate the bats roosting in the garage, the bees in the walls, the honey in the ceiling. I'll stare blankly at the reflection in her headstone

and wonder why the man in there appears so forlorn, why he appears at all. Sometimes I'll turn from it and ask where she is, whose car I'm driving.

### Kirsten Ihns

# Bombs bursting in air/gave proof through the night/that [...] was still there...

Come down with all your brisance, bright, shattering chrysolite trillings, my former nycthemeron; it was enough to set your watch by, these byways of exhalations, and the fit of fingers into the furrows of spines; complacently I woke each day unwound to lean against the proffered shoulder, yours or mine, I cannot tell which was the problem I began with, though reliably a question of trusting estuaries; the marshlands, the waste-land(s), marécageux, stretch out their tongues to lap up the miles, plain fluvial or dealing, sediment piles up any WAY OUT, say, certain signs, in places of EXIT or SORTIE, or some other name you have to know, doubt can creep in, needs just space to sleep in, though NO VACANCY might blink in the windows like eyes, are liars.

### **Rich Ives**

#### How to Find a Cat

The tree grows inside blooming in the seed continually

that's why back into the air its idea of the cat that follows

the cat's deeper idea of the cat fully conscious of our idea of the bird does not live inside

the cat doesn't see but I can see could it be the idea of the tree is that why the tree is inside an idea

next to a dead cat where I am still trying in my own absence the idea of my own absence requiring something beyond "cats" have to behave like cats categorically refuse to an idea of itself that's why the tree lives beyond the tree

the bird leaps to catch up with itself and so you should treat the bird as understanding

which it may not as we may not be our own idea of ourself and yet in the tree the single seed which

may be
is already falling
that the cat created
the bird abandoned
still growing
which I have planted now

next to a dead bird to fashion somewhere beyond which may soon be my idea but only if real cats behave like "cats" do

### Caroline Misner

### Hidden Geography

A grey barn rises from the snow, its naked boards bleached to ash, the half-lid eye of its window, blind; the other shuttered against the mist. The wind has skinned the barn of paint. It took decades to accomplish this. It is here where I hide my geography; it is here where I was born.

An impotent sun throbs behind the clouds, pale as the flesh of a peach. It is a heart that has failed though it tries beating gallantly in the matutinal light to bring this dying barn back to life.

## Elizabeth O'Brien

### Play

Here on the lawn we beat up He-man, mangled Skelator, and eviscerated GI Joe; the grass grew littered with plastic limbs.

We ran the hose 'til the lawn was saturated and stamped and splashed, making craters in the grass that never would heal.

Every day we wrestled and sometimes I won, and sometimes you, but it was always a fight to the death; we left no survivors.

My mother said to take care of my things, as if the world was not infinite, but yours bought ever more toys and we destroyed them all.

### Nolan Chessman

#### The Audition

We do not acquire language until we learn to lie. Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_, make me dumb, make me

holy in the ground a store of nuts against the future bears ahead. The redwing marks

her space with a song. The response is a reflex is an involuntary turning

toward an even creep of light. I pull my thumb from the keyhole to ask the sleeper,

Are you sleeping? I was waiting for it, all the time waiting, for the curled wing, the neck there.

# **Courtney Druz**

### Dressing

I'll tell you you are always waking up

from a broken dream.
The faceless were doing—

what?—you'll never know but it was sweet

or terrifying—no matter. You

will not return. There was a box.

You had to fill it with something, I think,

irretrievable colors like the sun,

orange yesterday, on somebody's hair.

# Michael Jones

# Jack

nimble with a knife rabbits off

trades club heart for jill's breaks straw for crown

flash master of diamond pots of none

no match for hammers spades candlesticks

### Matthew Grolemund

#### Benched

I no longer feel the bright weight of morning like static electric blood cutting veins into a glass balcony, no longer sing like birds dreaming or open like a puddle cut by the wheel, no longer play catch with the ghost children of the neighborhood or cook feasts of gut shot meat or hooked pink troutflesh dangling over a lighter, no longer let smokes burn bridges over ashtrays, pet housecats or dance for mirrors – no longer tongue teeth, fall apart for violin strokes, pocket hands or punctuate

Now I'm midday benched in a park of stray dogs and marauders, fountain change weighing down pockets, pant legs rolled and tied sneakers like boxing gloves draped from shoulders – and on my lap lie pastries, and on the bench lie pictures, and on the ground lie pebbles, and on and on

and on

# Adam T. Johnson

#### A Familiar Man

# **N**OVEMBER 28, 2010

Bonsoir monsieur, entre s'il vous plait. Parlez-vous francais? I see. I prefer English anyway, and only speak in French when I cannot think of the English for a thing. Or when I'm made excited. Or when it's day or night. Come in, come in, thank you. You are Canadian at the very least, I should think? A fellow countryman, my friend, we have much in common already. But wait and see. If you'll allow me, I'll take your coat. No? Yes, it is rather cold in here, but I'm used to it. Right this way. Do you see that wood paneling in the living room? I smashed my late wife's face against it and knocked out six teeth. I'm only kidding. I merely wanted to witness your first impulse. I say, you are a man of very little reaction.

I'm told you've written quite extensively in the area of biography. Is that so? Have you written for anyone famous? Of course, I understand. You'd cease to be the ghost writer if you told me. Have a seat there. May I offer you something to drink? Scotch, vodka, rum, you name it. Scotch? Good man. There are so few "good men" by that definition. Cheers to our health. You see, I'm no altruist. There, now we're on a sound footing.

I've been in an obsession over my own existence all my life, and especially so since I decided to commission you for this project. I'll die very soon you know. I'm 87 and they gave me six months seven months ago. As a fellow doctor, I knew they were speaking frankly to me. In my career, I lied to hundreds of families about life expectancies, but it was part of the job. "He has at least five years in him" I'd say. And then "he'd" die. You are recording this for later use, yes? *Bon Dieu!* You have been since you walked in? You should have said so.

Before we begin, I'd like to ask you how to begin. I have so much to say and so little time left to say it. I want to leave a lasting impression on the world. I've lived a full life. You'll tell it for me won't you? I can't myself. I'm no good with words.

I entered the world - what a peculiar expression - on August 3, 1923, and was raised in a small house within walking distance of the St. Lawrence in Montreal, Quebec - Brossard to be exact. I might as well ignore my youth, as I was roundly ignored in it myself, save for violence. You'll agree, won't you, that few childhoods are suitable for reliving. Mother and father were constantly battling it out to see who could leave the more permanent

mark, and the ugly mug you're looking at is mostly of their doing. Partly poor genetics, and I blame them for that too. I was bald at twenty-three and my fingers have been fat all my life, just like my toes. I would have killed ten strangers if it meant I'd be taller than five feet and a half as an adult. Would you like another glass of scotch? No? That's unfortunate. If only I could have been born a Beethoven or a Proust. It's unfair that one can be born a Beethoven and another cannot. But such is the nature of things. Shall we make a go of it then? Very well. Cheers, friend.

Where then should I begin? College you say? No, at least not right away. College came later for me. I was conscripted into the military in 1942 and landed at Normandy on D-Day. In later years, I was always gratified that I was forced into service, and did not volunteer to go and kill others of my species. Do you know that it was Canada's first ever declaration of war? They picked a fine country to do it against—Beethoven territory. We landed at Normandy, at Juno Beach to be precise, and did all we could, which was to shoot and butcher as many people as possible wearing the wrong colored uniforms. Have you ever witnessed war firsthand? It's a grand spectacle. Most of my countrymen even took themselves seriously on that beach and in the months following, as if it mattered who lived and who died. People—non-military people—hold the same general opinion—that it matters who lives and who dies. But we'll get to that later, I'm sure. Let me ask you, do you care if you die this instant? You do?

I remember floating to a shore through the break of blue and red waves where men were falling like dogs in the sand, giving to the air shrill cries before meeting the ground with their lifeless faces and limbs. I saw other men, brave men, men of mettle, praying to the sky for mercy. In our boat, a soldier jumped ship and was shot in the back while he made a vain attempt at desertion. After witnessing that much, the remaining men opted for the shore.

There was a moment after landing that a fellow in front of me was struck by a mortar round. I'd say he was 20 yards ahead of me when he was hit. His body was transformed into fragments of flesh and bone and muscle, and I remember the feeling of warm pieces of his body landing on my face and helmet like a heavy muddy rain on a hot summer day. I think he had a daughter. A feeling of absurdity struck me as I saw his body explode and as I contemplated that in the distance, another man, fighting as gallantly for his country, and his wife, and his children, was responsible for the act. And they—the killer and the killed—could probably have played a good hand at rummy together, and enjoyed a puff of cigar, and drunk the night away under different circumstances. But not on this planet, where one man is blown up by the other, which caused me to laugh. I never found the German fellow responsible. But it didn't matter, he was probably a

good soccer player and violinist before the war, and if he lived on after it, probably went to church with everyone else. Do you believe in god, *mon nouvel ami?* 

In the weeks that followed the Normandy landing, I generally kept to myself. One's worldview is astonishingly cool when the fear of death no longer lingers. I ate some, and slept some, and shot at my fellow man some. The fear of death never haunted me as it did the others. There were those who, at night, would toss and turn, and betray even in the silence of their sleeping faces the hellish worries that dwelled in their nightmares. I remember yawning under my covers at their innocence. There were those that clutched little creased and tarnished photographs of loved ones, and tucked them under their pillows, as though the memories of families they would never see again would in some manner mitigate the meanness of dying early and alone in that distant foreign land—which for the majority of us was an inevitable end. My fellows were subjected to all manner of privations, as I got along famously with my bread and butter. It was mostly an issue of expectation.

As I was saying though, I generally kept to myself. They say that war is a very personal endeavor. I felt out of place with those who prayed together, those who struggled together, and those who laughed together in rare moments of levity. There is a herd mentality to an invading force, which is, I suppose, natural enough. It was however, a herd that I either consciously or unconsciously refused to associate with. This is not to say that I refused to participate. I did so with showmanship. When enemy fire was coming on, I put on airs of a bias toward the Allied cause. In total, I believe I put 33 Germans in their graves. I'm convinced that all of them were as innocent as newborn babies, at least in terms of a larger innocence, and that their deaths were not their just desserts. But that's war, I should say, that's humanity. Or to play the moralist, a part of its struggle.

There was a time some weeks later that we met with German forces again. It was a larger field with some trees. France gave an exceedingly beatific picture. I was tasked with operating a heavy machine gun. The Germans had flanked us, and we were surrounded in every direction but our rear. On command, I opened fire. Instantly, several Germans were sent to their deaths. I operated my killing machine on a pirouette, and was able to direct fire in every direction. My comrades were at my right and left, and advancing on the periphery of both. The scene was nothing if it wasn't anarchy, and there was no person or authority limiting my discretion with the machine gun. I took out six of my own men on purpose. I aimed the machine gun directly at their backs and gunned them down in a matter of moments. Six fathers, husbands, brothers, and uncles never returned from the war. It was horrifying at the time, but only because I

wasn't caught. Again, I experienced an intense encounter with a feeling of uncut absurdity. That I could murder with such impunity and want of consequence left me almost dumb. I cut off a fellow's ear, and have it in a jar in the basement. It's mostly dust at this point, as I never took means to preserve it adequately.

In the days following what some would call murders, I failed to succumb to what, in most men, would have been natural: a feeling of moral contrition. Yet try as I did, I could not bring myself to feel guilt. It was impossible under the circumstances, and I slept like a baby, as they say. To my countrymen, I had committed the worst of atrocities; to the German people, I would be renowned as a hero, or worse, a savior. Never acquiring a sense of nationalism in my early years, the killing I embarked upon during that ordinary day was necessarily indiscriminate. The senselessness of it, like I said, turned me near dumb. I never again raised a rifle against my countrymen.

You fancy that I was mad, I can see. On the contrary, I had full possession of my faculties and conscience. It was my *perspective* that stood me out against my compatriots, if they may be called that. If I claimed I was a man of the world, then I could hardly be blamed for failing to pick a side. Only years later did I finally atone. I have a "support the troops" decal on the bumper to my car. Do you have one? Well then, that makes one good citizen between us. Can I get you that second scotch yet? Bravo, *cher ami*, now we're talking. Tell me, my writing friend, have you ever experienced moments in which you felt utterly detached from your mind's reason? I haven't either, I'm only curious. Don't you love the way ice cracks under warm scotch? You can smoke in here, you know.

Three weeks after D-Day, I was injured. In the middle of the night in a camp on the outskirts of Saint-Lo, a wild boar rushed through my tent while I slept, driving a tusk into the back of my knee and out the front. I never found my kneecap. Did you observe the limp just now as you walked in? There's no knee there, only metal. But it's better to have one good knee than none at all, and I saw a lot of kneeless men in my time abroad. Headless men too. On my evacuation, I was able to claim the enemy got me. The pig was French, and I was an invader of territory that was more his than Hitler's. To me, it hadn't mattered that I was taken out by a pig. It only mattered that I was taken out. I feared that I would be on heavy machine gun duty again, and was afraid, not of the potential deaths I'd cause, but of my absolute indifference to them. A failure of conscience can be frightening.

They put me up—Je vous demande pardon? I'm sorry? It's down the hallway, last door on the right. Tell me, what do you think of my guest

lavatory? Isn't that fresco of St. John the Baptist on the ceiling a thing of elegance? Where were we? Yes, of course.

After what I've termed the "boar's run," I was put up at the No. 23 Canadian General Hospital, in Leavesden, near Watford. Watford is a town, or borough, as the English say, in Hertfordshire, northwest of London. It was at No. 23 that I was superintended by Canada's Nursing Sisters, or, as they called themselves, and incidentally as they were known ever since—the "Angels of Mercy". I fell in love with one of them. Actually, I fell in love with ten or eleven of them, and made love to them all in secret without any of the others knowing. When I say "made love" I mean I courted them. You envisioned something vulgar, I suppose? Well, I may have been vulgar if I had enjoyed my health, and attempted to have my way with the lot of them. For me, love is fornication and vice versa.

I remember Adelynn. *Monsieur*, you should have seen the way she bounced around the ward on the balls of her feet in front me—me, the invalid—and how she pattered her breasts against my chest in checking me for fever. I wanted desperately to tear at her clothes and hair and force myself upon her. I did not want to win her affections slowly or innocently. But I was compelled perforce to play the game. If only you could have seen me at work: the way I smiled in the sharp light reflected by the cross hanging at her neck, and quoted from the psalms to make her smile. The way I displayed a mastery over the virtues of liturgy, and did everything according to saintliness to make that little Catholic nurse swoon. The way, in short, that I did everything to make myself stand out against the room of wounded strangers.

She developed a trust in me, and even confided in me after the passage of some time. It was when she kissed my lips instead of my cheek that I knew my prey was seized and my carnal prize secured. Or so I had thought then. When I had missed her for some days, I learned that she had been raped and beaten by a deranged American soldier missing a part of his face. I was informed that in the months following, she grew wretched, cut herself with whatever sharp objects were at hand, and eventually bled and starved herself to death in a different ward in the hospital. I hated that American, not for the pain he inflicted on the girl, but for the deprivation of pleasure he caused me to endure in that dreary white-linened asylum. I wanted to spill his guts and remove the rest of his face before him. Alack, I never found the man. La peste etre sur li.

But my gracious *auteur*, I've been on this strain in a boring fashion. There're few things more mundane than a violent retribution. Let me help your glass, if you please. Thank you. I'm on my fourth, you're on your third. I have a habit of counting cocktails. It's an old habit. You can smoke in here, you know. You look like a man who smokes. You'll

pardon me, but it was Camus, not me, who said every man is responsible for his face. There, there, good fellow. May I have a cigarette?

You may, at this point, charge me as a sadist. I can tell you I'm not, and never have been. I'm speaking candidly with you, *mon cher*, and am laying it out from an historical vantage that was pure hardship and misery. Men, when pressed to physical and mental extremes, will act eccentrically, and are capable of committing what would otherwise be unpardonable doings—at least by society's standards as I know them.

I have accomplished much good in my life, as you will hear. I want my biography to bear witness to the benevolence of my years before I'm snuffed out of existence by this wicked disease that's eating at me day and night. What a fine smoke that was. My point, in short, is that I pray you will exercise your discretion in drafting my life from the recording you're keeping and the notes you're taking. Yes, mon ami, I witnessed you scribbling something when I described how I shot my fellow soldiers. I would never censor you, but you can appreciate my desire to have some of my more forthright moments left out of the book. I am, after all, a man of this community, a proud man at times, and a person of some eminence in my own family. Let us end on that note then, mon nouvel ami trouve. I'd like to drink alone. Will you leave me a cigarette or two? You're a kind sort of fellow.

# DECEMBER 5, 2010

Good evening, my friend. Come in. Why, that's a laudable headpiece. I wouldn't guess a man of your generation would take to a fedora. You have such fine hair, so delicate. It is cold out there, yes? Come in and warm yourself by the fire. I'll take your coat and scarf. Are those snowflakes on your lapel? There's a fresh scotch waiting for you on the armrest. Please, forgive my cough. *Oui*, it is blood.

If you please, I cannot to save my life recall where it was we left off. The hospital? Ah, *merci*! No. 23. Yes, indeed. After Adelynn's suicide, I thought often of my own. In my abject state in that paltry ward, I ruminated frequently on the topic of my own destruction. Morphine dripped day and night at my bedside, and at times I contemplated ingesting the whole bag. Soldiers groaned throughout the stale air, and some prayed for their deaths after lights out. Killing myself became a constant feature of my days. However, I never could bring myself to see the act through. For one, I am adamant in my opinion that any worthy suicide is performed with a pistol. But even had I the privilege of a firearm, the physical impossibility of witnessing the moments after death would have stayed my hand. Put a different way, ending my life was not worth the cost if I could not hear

the screams and laugh at the face of the first nurse to find me and what might be left of my skull and brains on the cement floor. I've always found the suicides of others humorous, and thought for some time that I was a model candidate. Tell me, *mon homme parfait*, have you ever held a gun at your temple? It's not as stimulating as you may assume. I've thought of suicide throughout my life, but have yet to escape existence by that means.

I see that you gobbled your scotch this time. Please, let me refresh your glass. That's number two for you *mon cher*. Excuse me. No, thank you. It's only a little blood now and then.

I stayed at No. 23 for six months. It was a half-year of immense inactivity and boredom, and nothing really stands out but for the constancy of surrounding agonies and the permanency of routine death. Have you ever tasted World War II hospital food in England? I assumed not. They had me in a sick ward, where they also housed the terminally ill. They feared I had caught something wild. I would shake violently and my heart would palpitate uncommonly. They never could explain it, and I never could either. I used to spit on some of the nurses in the final months. I remember cursing at them in the name of god. They'd cross themselves and pray for me. It was a low point, I admit, in my life, *monsieur*.

On my final day, a small ceremony was held where I was awarded the France and Germany Star, a Companion of the Order of the Bath, and a Military Medal, the latter two for my acts in suppressing the German onslaught at the same time I shot and killed my fellow soldiers. Of course, no one knew of that final piece of information. Excuse me, but I'll need a fresh handkerchief. Do not trouble yourself, *mon ami gentil*, this coughing is nothing to trouble yourself over. Have you finished your scotch yet? I cannot see between your fingers. No? Very well. Please, have a cigarette. Relax, *mon cher*.

When I returned from the war, I took up living with my parents, where from the military had taken me. It was nice of the government to return me to my nest. I was twenty-one years of age at the time. When I arrived home, I learned that my only sister had been killed by a drunk driver in front of my parents' house, which incidentally turned me on to alcohol. I asked why no one wrote to tell me, and was told that I would either die in the war or find out when I came home. To my parents, it was simple.

Two months after I arrived, my mother left my father, and my father's sanity left him too. I never saw nor heard from my mother again. It was clear she blamed me for the divorce, as something to that effect was left with me in a letter that she tucked under my pillow. After my mother was gone, I was thankful for my father's attention, which usually came in mocking my limp and laughing at me during breakfast on account of the

nightmares he'd heard from my bedroom. He helped me in my drinking habit at all hours of the day. He was a fine influence in that regard. I didn't return the physical abuse of my childhood to him, as it didn't seem right at the time. He had no idea that I was adding arsenic to his pancakes. Not a lethal amount, *cher*, just enough to make him cough unaccountably. Excuse me.

I never could sleep in those days, and I made all of my waking moments hazy through the use of alcohol. Cohabitating with my father, I soon discovered, was cancerous. There was a malignancy to his soul. I used to believe in a soul in those days. The war was still going on, and he talked of it incessantly. He was a menace to my advancement, and I realized that in his presence, a departure from my infantile beginnings would be nigh impossible.

I began to venture into the city. I spent all my military money on a new wardrobe and books, and put on airs of an intellectual. I'd pass my time away in cafes, reading and eavesdropping on the uninteresting conversations strangers. At night I'd run with the underworld, and would visit brothels, put up in slum houses and shoot heroine, and engage in all manner of sexual exploits that any adolescent male will admit are his secret proclivities. There was, of course, a counterculture. At the time, Quebec was enjoying "The Great Blackness." Tell me, mon Canadian compatriote, have you heard of Maurice le Noblet Duplessis and his famous orphans? Ah, you have not. Mon cher, you must seek that information on your own. Monsieur Duplessis was the front man and founder of the Union Nationale—he shot communists with a rifle from his motorcar. But pray, my friend, you are in need of your third scotch, and I my second.

In the summer of 1945, I met a man, a young man my age, by the name of Alain Fornier. He had a lame hand, and hadn't served in the war. Alain had an incredible flat in LaSalle where our friends would congregate. His parents were rich snobs. We smoked opium late into every morning. Some of the women would sit naked. Sex became ordinary and emotions were transient. You'd be surprised, *cher*, at what was happening in Montreal in that time behind closed doors.

All kinds of people would come and go from Alain's. Some of them were transcendentalists, some were naturalists, some artists, some existentialists that drooled over Sartre, and some of them were just plain stupid. I began to experiment with all kinds of ideas, but never committed myself firmly to any philosophy. There were many books in that period that shaped me. I remember several of them: L'Etranger, The Antichrist, The Metamorphosis, Fear and Trembling, The Brothers Karamozov. At Alain's, one was virtually guaranteed sex at the mention of Nietzche. A young woman is easily duped by a provocative name. And I could quote him. It was an

indulgent and cosmopolitan period of my life, and thus, one of the better periods. We were a merry band of free-thinking radicals. Yet so little of it was centered on a movement. Most people were there to inject drugs and have their vanities stroked, like me.

If I can be described as anything in that period, I was most probably an absurdist. Nihilism, I admit, had a certain draw, but left in me a kind of empty fatalism that turned me bored. While the existential nihilists were close cousins, if you will, they were so despairing and anhedonic that I could not stand for them, metaphysical and epistemological congruities notwithstanding. Absurdism offered, as I saw it, a kind of nihilism-plus. It was an incredibly simple philosophy to live by, and thus, suited me. I could write off anything as absurd. Moreover, I could get out of bed in the morning and enjoy myself. When more serious people would attempt to explain life, and give it meaning or the contrary, I would state simply, with a hookah in front of me, that they and their explanations were of equal absurdity, and that none of it really mattered, not even the argument we were having. Suicidal ideations crept in continually in the recesses of my thoughts, but I was saved by a reality that suicide too, was absurd. I was stuck between life and death. On the one hand, suicide was absurd, vet going on living was equally absurd. I concluded, as I have done since, that even raising the gun to my head is absurd, and thus, I avoid, at the very least, the ability to choose to live or die by virtue of the absurdity of the physical undertaking.

But I digress, friend. And in recalling Kafka, I've downed my scotch. Pardon me. I don't want to subject my readers to humdrum. I'm having trouble with this cough.

I moved all of my things to Alain's when my father was in America on business. As with my mother, I never spoke with my father again. I learned years later that he had been committed to an institution, where he was acquainted with a fatal stroke. It is not unique for a person to die in an institution. It happens to everyone who are and who are not institutionalized. And we all must die somewhere, you will agree. It hardly matters where. Tell me, *cher ami*, do you ever ponder how you will die and when? For the longest time I thought I'd be murdered. Perhaps I will be still. But we'll get to that later. I'm having trouble at present. I must use the lavatory, please do forgive me a moment.

I'll be okay, *mon cher*, but I am not well this evening. I've lost my acuity, and this handkerchief is soaked through with blood. We must, I am afraid, adjourn. I beg, will you leave me one cigarette? Will you leave me two? You are very gracious, friend. There's life in me yet. Until next time. *Bonne nuit*.

# ECEMBER 8, 2010

*Merci*, my friend, for returning so soon. I am in better spirits today than last we met. Yes, I still have my cough. It has worsened. There is no point in returning to the doctor. You see, I am one, and know the prognosis. I have had too much scotch too early this day, *monsieur*. I feel so vibrant and young. I am ignoring my internal pains as best I can.

You brought me a pack of cigarettes. *Mon cher*! You were too kind in so doing. You must admit, we are swell smoking partners. Please, allow me your coat. The wind is blowing so hard tonight. They are hard winters in this country. I've made a fire in the next room. Let us enjoy it. There is, or course, a scotch in waiting for you.

Before this disease interceded on us last time, I was discussing loosely the period of my life when I was living, not very lavishly, in LaSalle with Alain. I don't want to belabor that period, friend, and believe I may have been too tangential on our last meeting. I won't mind if you leave all of that out of the book. It was, apart from the heroine and sex, a rather mundane time. In point of fact, it may have been mundane precisely because of those two elements.

Alain, like me, grew disinterested in intellectual pursuits. When you've exhausted your repertoire accumulated from books, everything begins to repeat itself. There was nothing new, so to speak, and we became listless. It was not a pleasing juncture to arrive at, but a necessary one. To entertain ourselves, we'd dress in black and go out into the night and rob people. Physically speaking, women are more helpless that men, and we made them our targets routinely. We only kept knives and not pistols, and were naïve in that respect. A good many citizens carried pistols in those days. This we did for a whole summer and autumn, and we managed to accumulate something bordering on what we called a misfit's wealth. Alain spent all his take on prostitutes, drugs and suits. I managed to save a great deal, and even had thoughts of college, when the desire for intellectual endeavors began to gnaw at me as it does in men away from study. Man is not built to cease reading once he's begun.

This is fine tobacco, *mon vieil ami*. I hope you like your scotch as much. You have barely touched it. I see. You're afraid of a habit. There are worse, you know.

As I was saying, I had ambitions for a baccalaureate, and was intent on putting myself through, as it were. Excuse me, *mon cher*. I applied for and was accepted to the *Universite de Montreal*, where I soon flourished. I still lived with Alain, and kept up as well at his routs. I attended half my classes and was the favorite with none of my professors. Even the chemistry professors were communists, which was laudable at the time. A college

bachelor's life is grand, mon ami. It is the most debaucherous era of most men's lives, and all graduates pine for its return when the habit and routine of daily monotony hangs like a still noose over their days in later years.

By the second year at university, I was enrolled almost entirely in the sciences. My interest in the humanities and risen and fallen in the first year, and I accepted early in life that I'd never be a great writer or thinker. It is a superb achievement to accept in one's 20s the futility of attempting to write anything *nouveau*. I never wanted to be that frivolous 50-year-old, sneaking away from his family after dinner to work on his trifling unpublishable novel under the unforgiving light of a bare bulb hanging in the basement rafters. You, mon cher, are a superb writer, I bet. And you can't be more than 40, I should think? You don't say. *Salut, monsieur*. To your health. Let us enjoy, momentarily, a cigarette with our scotch.

In any event, I graduated with honors and advanced to graduate medical training. Medical training was fun. I had always thought myself incapable of having fun. I have some now and then. Alain and I continued to mug people to pay for things. Tuition was costly, even then *mon cher*.

I was drawn to the human body, inside and out, and longed to work with it in raw form with my very hands. I wanted to cut it and dig in it and sew it and pierce it all over. I wanted to drill into the brain, and observe it under microscope. I admit at the time I cared little for the advancement of medicine or science. I was mostly preoccupied with guts and corpses. I had no interest in the untouchable brain that occupies the work of the psychoanalytic and psychological coteries. I disfavored abstraction, and was relieved by the tangible frigidness of the hearts and lungs removed from our first cadavers.

Staring at the dead reminded me convincingly of my old battlefield. *Cher*, I surprise you? There, that was a fine smoke. If only you could see your lungs, my friend. Or mine. Our anatomy is agreeably grotesque. Or should I say grotesquely agreeable? Have you seen the inside of a human lung? I took up smoking as soon as I discovered how they operate. Medical school was an easy place to develop psychopathy. Not that I did, *monsieur*.

I graduated from medical university in 1953. When all the dust of apprenticeship settled, I was on my way to curing cancer, or as was proven with the benefit of hindsight, witnessing a great many people die of it as I strove vainly to do something intelligent. I forgot to mention, how forgetful of me, that I shot a walrus on a hunting trip in '51. Personally, it was a significant moment in time.

I maintained my life as a bachelor, and went on living with Alain for a time, until we grew apart. With my salary as a doctor, I was no longer compelled to rob people in the streets. Our ongoing conspiracy to commit crime was at once annulled, and Alain, poor fellow, could not stand for it. When I refused to rob a bank with him, he evicted me. It was a needed intervention, and I got along alright in my own lodgings. Alain was shot and killed in the robbery by a man who had himself intended on robbing the place but came out of it as a good citizen. I missed Alain terribly for some years. I had many acquaintances in those days, and very few friends. Those I had, I cherished deeply. Do you have many friends, *monsieur*? I'm glad to hear it. Here's to friends.

In my beginning years as a doctor, I was a charitable buck. I really was, *mon cher*. My fellow practitioners, many of them born comfortably into property, were a miserly bunch, and even swore over one dollar hands at the farobank. When I arrived at a state of some affluence, I sensed an amplified urge to care for the welfare of my fellow mammals—especially the homeless ones that gabbed at louder decibels in the streets. I refused to give them any money. Yet I observed in myself an urge to reduce the suffering of the less fortunate. Back then I used words such as "fortunate" in serious conversations. And so I got such men drunk when I found them. They're very interesting to talk to you know, and sometimes don't make any sense whatever, which is preferable to learning where a person grew up. I'd light fires to all of their property—usually blankets—and they'd be forced to seek refuge in a shelter, where they might better themselves. I was their saving grace. Where did you grow up, friend? I jest, but may I furnish you with another glass of scotch? That's a good *cher. Delicieux*.

In the winter of 1956 I met my first wife, Marie. I was 33 at the time and she 22. The circumstances of our meeting were nothing of fairy tale, you see, we were acquainted by a common enemy: a poor tender of bar. She was a pure vision, and loved my money so. She had complimented my gold watch at the bar. *Mon cher ami*, I was tired of facing my bed alone each night waiting for death. As long as she was attractive and made herself available for a regular regimen of sexual intercourse, I was happy. We wed eight months after our first vodka together.

It was before sex one evening that I discovered the way time works on people. We were standing in our bedroom, I in my work clothes and she in a nightgown. Embracing one another, I began to slide my hand between the opening of her gown and down between her thighs. I brought my hand up along the inner thigh to the point where the leg naturally ends. It is disgusting, is it not, *mon chet*, to hear an old man talk thus? I brought my hand to rest, and thought how unlikely it would be to engage in this same conduct with a perfect stranger. Say, for instance, Marie and I had passed each other on the street and I attempted that kind of conduct? I would be the same person, she would be the same person, yet the passage of time had not occurred for us to make what little advances eventually

lead to the kind of comfort that permitted me the liberty I was partaking of. I've always longed to make love to strangers, and not just prostitutes.

Marie was plagued by melancholy, which I discovered, of all times, on our honeymoon in Egypt. In a moment of earnestness, she disclosed that she didn't love me. My reaction was one of appreciation, even esteem. I had never dared disclose that I had never loved her either. I would have been happy going on living as such, but Marie was not so contented. Her troubles were far greater than I could possibly have envisioned. She was rooted in the position that a marriage would not work without love. I thought it ridiculous, but she stood her ground, unmoved.

After a visit to the pyramids at Giza, Marie suffered a nervous breakdown in our hotel, from which she never recovered. On their request, she moved back in with her parents. I refused to speak with her again, and sent the divorce papers by courier. I never felt shameful for leaving her in her time of need. It was pathetic, not painful, to watch her sink. Please tell me, *cher*, are you married? I must step outside, I am too warm at the moment. Please forgive me. Help yourself to the scotch bottle.

Thank you, *mon gentil ami*. My lungs are not what they once were. When you leave, you may notice by the stoop some blood in the snow. Pay it no attention. I will be just fine, I assure. In other words, I'll either live or I'll die. Thank you, *cher*.

I've known divorce to shatter men's spirits. I had a friend, Leroux Nicollet was his name, a cardiologist in my building. He came home one day to his wife in bed with another man. Remorselessly, she asked what nerve he had in not telling her he'd be home early. She left him the next week and hired a lawyer that swindled Leroux out of most of his assets. I was the one who found Leroux hanging from the rafters in his garage. We had a fishing trip planned. I felt awkward standing there in my angling vest watching him hang. Schubert was playing from a stereo in the corner.

Death was a thing I had become accustomed to. In the course of my career, I'd witnessed intense moments of loss. Divorce and death are close friends, at least in terms of their observable impacts on the shoulders of pained humans. When Marie and I were no more, I suffered no mental anguish. I did not devote myself to work or charity. I did not become involved in a political or social cause. I did not, *monsieur*, do anything ridiculous like write in a journal or construct poetry. I just was, as I had been before and during the marriage. If one had said it was megalomania, I would have replied they were correct. Is there any reason I should attempt to conceal that reality? I'm not convinced I should, *mon cher*. Do you mind, friend, if I play some Schubert on the record player?

That's it. Relax, *mon ami*, we're getting along just fine this evening, won't you agree? You know, I never noticed how bushy your eyebrows are.

They really are something. Oh, especially with that look of surprise you just gave me. Are they from your mother's or father's side? This scotch is from a fine year, you know. 1981. You have an exquisite smile, *cher*.

After the separation from Marie, I lived a bachelor's life once more. I must admit, it was a lonely time. I had never before experienced a feeling of loneliness, *le malheur était moi*. I drank to excess and started a habit of drugs again, and gratified myself with all the earthly pleasures like my days with Alain. I hit my lowest, *monsieur*, when one day I found myself sitting quietly in a church pew on a Sunday, staring blankly at a woman's breasts outlined in a white summer blouse as a priest droned on from a pulpit many yards away from me. I was heavily under the influence of an opiate at that moment.

The woman caught sight of my stare and pulled a shawl over her, concealing the arousing objects of my gaze. I did not look away embarrassedly, as men will do when caught staring, but kept my eyes fixed exactly as they had been. The woman, a plain looking woman with a round face and a plump figure, continued to make glances at me regularly, as if wondering whether my ogling stare had quitted her. It appeared I had captured her attention. After the sermon, but before mass had ended, I took my leave of the church. I've never been equipped to believe in god, *monsieur*, and was an imposter unknown to her. Outside and across the street, I waited behind a tree, curious to see her again and to follow her home.

The woman left church unaccompanied. She had a slow gait, and I had to slacken my step to keep a safe distance behind her as she walked. *Cher*, you imagine me a chaser, but times were different then, I assure. I was motivated by the prospect of seeing such a place as she called home. I eventually did, and it is the house in which you now find yourself. You're surprised, *cher*, there you are with your eyebrows again. And your smile. You are kind to humor an old man. Let us have one more scotch; I realize our evening together is nearly finished.

When can you visit next friend? I am anxious to tell you about my family, if time affords. Tonight I think I'll stay up for a while longer. The scotch will put me to sleep in time, and this Schubert record has a long while to go before the needle breaks. Please, forgive an old friend for not seeing you to the door. It is unlocked, leave it so. Tonight I would invite any stranger in. Do not worry yourself. All my enemies are dead now, with the exception of me.

# **T**ECEMBER 19, 2010

You thought, *mon ami réfléchi*, that you would find me hanging in the garage, I think? I apologize. It was unfair of me to foreshadow with the

Schubert when last you left some weeks ago. Please do come in. It is as cold as ever out there. Your cheeks are so red monsieur.

Have a seat please, by the fire. It will keep you warm, and will help us drink the pleasanter. I am not well, my friend. I fear there is little time left me. I do not fear death, *cher*, only that it will enjoin me from seeing your face. To me, a fear of death is irrational. After all, it happens to every living person. I might as well fear the moon. Please, enjoy yourself. That scotch on the armrest suits you well enough by now. Won't you give me a smile, *mon ami*? You are an attractive mammal.

Since you last left, I've been calling myself all manner of racial epithets in my head. It's an old habit, and one I did in public as a matter of course. It was a dirty little secret unknown to the passersby. I so wish I had continued to tell you about my family, as I believe I was on a good narrative last time, and am so out of my wits at present. You are sitting in my late wife's home, dear sir. Perhaps if I touch my finger to the fire. Do not worry, friend. It is old skin, and a blister means nothing at this stage in life. The fire is hot, *mon cher*. But that's a plain observation.

I've been thinking these weeks about the day I followed Sylvie from her church to this house. It was raining greatly, and I followed her without an umbrella like a madman. I've often tried to fight the elements, friend. Have you ever swung with actual rage at snowflakes falling?

She was a vision from behind. The way her long black hair cascaded down the back of her raincoat and bowed outward at the bottom of her scapulae. The way her umbrella rose and fell with her step. The way she clutched her coat together with her free hand when the wind picked up. Her subtle pronation. She hadn't turned around to notice me until she was at her own gate, ready to enter. I stood not a far distance from her and stared blankly. I cracked a smile, and took off my hat, letting the rain dampen what hair I then had. Sylvie invited me to some hot tea and a warm fire. Yes, *cher*, that very fireplace. She was a good Catholic. We were married in the church on April 3, 1962. *Monsieur*, the rest is history. We were perfectly unhappy ever after and raised five inferior children. Excuse me. I must attend to myself. This cough is at its worst yet. Forgive me.

Marrying Sylvie meant I had to play the Catholic game for some years. It meant church on Sundays and some Wednesdays. It meant prayers at every meal. It meant abstentions during lent and other nonsensical privations. It meant the feigned belief in an unknowable dictator. It meant, in short, that for the nominal fee of improvising religious devotion, I could exact a thoroughly mediocre existence as a family man. I used to scare the sin out of our priest in confessional by fabricating all manner of outrages against children.

There was something about church going that induced a homicidal predilection. I cannot explain it to this day, Alain, excuse me. *Monsieur*, you must forgive me again. I will return momentarily. Please, enjoy a cigarette. Will you pour me a second scotch? I have lost much blood today, it seems.

As a grown man, doctor, husband, and father, I was accustomed to homicidal urges. I remember at church there was this little girl in the same pink dress every week. She could not have been more than eight or nine years of age. The prospect of committing a violent act against her entered my mind, and I could not rid myself of it to save my life. That it happened in church of all places meant nothing to me. I wondered how many other men have had such thoughts.

I knew I could never harm her. You see, I am not a psychopath. How anyone is defies me. There is something so very absurd about the imbalance between the fleeting degree of pleasure enjoyed by the sadist and the extreme and permanent loss suffered by the victim and grieving relations. The urge was there, *cher*, in my life, but my reason has never left me. Say, let us enjoy one last smoke together. I am only realistic, *mon gentil ami*. This is scotch worth savoring. You are so delicate in your disposition, *cher*. Will you sit with me on the couch? You know, it is the insane who have beaten the sane by merely going on living.

There was a time when my son Francois was playing in the backyard. Behind a kitchen window, I watched him with fascination through the scope of a rifle. *Cher*, please hold me. *Monsieur*, I haven't spoken with any of my children in over a decade. *Monsieur*, my heart. I cannot make the words, *cher*. This, no, this cannot be it, *cher*. If you please, grip me tight. The blood is, this is no time for. *Mon cher*, I killed so many of my patients. Some of them even asked for it. I was merciful. You must know. *Cher*, *cher*. Let me die with dignity. Please don't record this. I am familiar with.

ROM the Montreal Gazette, December 21, 2010

Dr. Theodore Prideux, 87.

Dr. Theodore Prideux, 87, died Dec. 19, 2010, at his home in Montreal. At his request, no service will be held. Dr. Prideux was born on August 3, 1923 in Montreal to Ricard and Dion Prideux, the youngest of their two children. Dr. Prideux served honorably in World War II, seeing combat in Normandy, France. He was the recipient of the France and Germany Star, the Companion of the Order of the Bath, and the Military Medal. On his return from the war, Dr. Prideux became a doctor. He cared for

and treated thousands of cancer patients in his four-decade-long career as an oncologist.

Dr. Prideux was an active volunteer in his community, and a devoted member of his church. He served on the committees of numerous charities. His interests included reading, gardening, and spending time with his family. At the time of his death, he was collaborating with an author to assist in writing his personal memoirs.

Dr. Prideux was preceded in death by his wife, Sylvie. He is survived by five children, fourteen grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. Condolences may be sent, at Dr. Prideux's request, to Montreal author Gabriel Martin, P.O. Box 1395, Montreal, QC H2C 5H7, Canada.

# Raphaela Weissman

#### Diners

TEREMY

It was primary season when everything went wrong. At headquarters, his boss Aaron had hung up a banner that said *AS CROWLEY GOES, SO GOES THE NATION*. It was Aaron's idea of a morale booster. By September, Jeremy would ball up his fists when he arrived in the morning to keep himself from ripping it down.

"Let's have a debate," Lacey said, running a hand through his hair the wrong way, fingers first.

"We can't," said Jeremy. "We both support the same guy."

"I don't like that," she said, shaking her head, "I don't like it. I want a debate. Otherwise how will I know there's anything to you?"

She had her legs in his lap. He remembered that she liked having her toes cracked. He had to force himself to do it. In first grade, his best friend Richard used to make him snap off branches behind the art building to see the green inside. One time it made him cry. "You're just going to have to take my word for it," he said.

It took his father a month to learn her name. "Take it easy," he said once, "I knew it was an L, didn't I?"

"It's not very encouraging, that's all."

His father gave him a suit-yourself shrug. "Your mother and I never put any pressure on you to date somebody. Encouraging has nothing to do with it."

Secretly, the worst part was that he liked the name Lily better than Lacey; he knew he'd never be able to look at her up close or naked again without thinking, *Lily*.

Things started going badly before they got devastating, before the ship sank. It was hard to remind himself of that. He knew it wasn't right, but he admired politicians for their ability to spin events, to put forth the facts that would serve them best. Jeremy had his own version of his timeline with Lacey. He cut out about three months when he might have been at fault, when he might have done something wrong, so that by the time the ship sank it was effortless to just feel wounded. It almost felt good.

The last polls closed in New Hampshire at 9:00. Jeremy sat in front of his computer from 8:59 to 12:48, hitting the refresh button on CNN's website until all the results were in.

"Thanks for never saying things like, 'I've been waiting my whole life for you," Lacey said on the train ride back from Fire Island.

"Where did that come from?" he asked.

"I don't know. You're more sentimental than I usually like. I appreciate your keeping it to a minimum around me."

That night, he lay in bed and wondered if someone else might be drafting a break-up speech. Then he rolled over out of habit, because lately he'd only been able to come when he jerked off while lying on his belly.

Sometimes she didn't need to say anything to make him feel like an idiot. The silence on the other end of the line said "I'm kind of in the middle of something right now."

"I just, uh, thought you'd like to know that," he continued, coughing out the words. "That Crowley won Indiana, by twenty-one points."

He was at work, in the break room of headquarters. Another guy whose name he didn't remember was on his phone too, maybe calling a wife or a girlfriend, maybe one who cared. He grinned at Jeremy and gave him a thumbs-up. Jeremy smiled back weakly.

"Okay," she said. "I'll see you tonight." She didn't hang up just then, but he could tell she wanted to.

"Does Lacey like curry?" his father asked him on the phone.

"I don't know, actually. Tell Mom to just make whatever she's making, I'm sure it will be fine."

"You've been dating this girl for six months and you don't know if she likes curry?" He laughed. "Uh-oh."

He'd been his father for twenty-four years, and he still didn't know when something he thought was funny, something anyone would think was funny, would completely destroy his son.

They played a game on the subway, trying to guess who was European without hearing them speak. It was the thing he chose to think about on nights when his only plan was to think about her and be sad. Neither of them really ever won, he remembered, and they'd smile the whole time.

"Where's Lacey?" Richard asked when Jeremy met him at the concert. Jeremy said, "Does that mean you think I don't go anywhere without her?" Richard shook his head and said, "Dude, you need to relax."

Every day, he'd walk past store windows in the garment district on the way to work, and wish he hadn't. He was thin, almost emaciated, and his bad posture made his body look like a backwards question mark. His dark hair stuck up so incongruously that he was sure he didn't even look endearing, and he wore the same glasses he'd had since he was fifteen, unalluring round metal things made for a person with no personality. He'd gone with Lacey to try on trendier new glasses with fat plastic frames, and she kept laughing at him. "I think you're stuck with those," she'd said, in a way he couldn't argue with.

Once in eighth grade when Jeremy slept over Richard's house, Richard told him about a sleepover at Greg Halsom's where they stole Greg's dad's copy of *Hustler* from his room, then put it in the middle of the carpet and all whacked off to it at the same time.

"Did you do it?" Jeremy asked.

"Yeah, but I didn't like it. Everyone else seemed totally fine beating off in front of five other guys. Can we make a pact?"

"That we'll never jerk off together?"

"Yeah."

"Absolutely."

She'd get upset about little things. She met him for brunch and her hair was wet. She was holding her scarf balled up in her hand. "It got wet," she said, pouting, in response to his kiss. "I can't think of a bigger waste."

"What are you going to get?" he asked.

"They shouldn't call people wet blankets," she answered. "They should call them wet scarves. That's much worse."

Jeremy didn't understand why Lacey and Richard didn't get along, because their taste in diners was almost identical. They both thought the one on West 4th was too expensive, and Richard said it was always filled with college kids who reminded him too much of himself five years ago. The egg salad at Soup & Burger on Broadway had made Lacey sick once, and Richard didn't like the grumpy Greek head waiter, who always ended up waiting on them and never brought a pickle on the side. Both refused to patronize any diner with a fifties theme, on principle. Both were annoyed with Jeremy's unwillingness to travel farther afield; Lacey loved a place in Hell's Kitchen where the owner had once given her free rice pudding, and Richard swore that there was something indescribably magic about the BLT at the diner which towered over the Metropolitan Avenue G stop in

Brooklyn. Jeremy told him that BLTs were a uniform creation, incapable of being ruined or improved upon. Richard called him an idiot, and Jeremy knew that Lacey would have, too, if he'd asked her.

Four days after Super Tuesday, Crowley fired his campaign manager. Jeremy was inconsolable.

He knew he could be pretty bad too, sometimes. When he asked, she said her favorite thing in the world was when two subways came at the same time, from opposite directions. "That's it?" he said. He never forgot how hurt she looked.

He remembered the moment he knew it was going to be over between the two of them. They were at the diner on eleventh and University, the one Lacey said had booths that were too small for anyone but a child to fit into. There was a lull in conversation and Lacey said, "How's Crowley doing?"

He looked up from his milkshake. The brown liquid slunk back down the straw reluctantly, like a bad idea reconsidering. "I didn't know you were interested," he said.

Then she'd just shrugged.

"Do you guys do anything besides eat?" Richard asked him once. "Do you even have sex?"

"Come on," Jeremy said, and Richard said, "You come on."

"How's your sex life going, Richie? Why don't we ever talk about that?" Richard lit a cigarette and watched him suspiciously. "Are you making any headway with Maureen? You've been dating for, what, a month, and still nothing?"

Richard took the cigarette out of his mouth and pointed it at him. "This mean thing," he said, "this is her influence. This is new."

At a party, they met a guy who said he supported Paulson, the last candidate standing between Crowley and the nomination. Lacey got a wild look in her eyes and started to fidget like a little kid who has to pee. She poked Jeremy in the side over and over and whispered, "Go get 'em! Get 'em!"

The guy lifted his drink and said, "Well, at least we're not Republicans, right?"

Jeremy said, "Amen," and clinked his beer on the guy's glass. Lacey got up and walked away.

Later, in bed, she rolled out of his spoon and faced the wall.

"You know, a lot of that women just want a real man bullshit is bullshit," she said to his clock radio, "but some of it isn't."

"You mean that guy? The Paulson guy?"

"If I were Dan Crowley, I wouldn't be happy to have you in my camp," she said. "If I were Alex Paulson, I'd consider tonight a victory."

He said, "I just don't want to fight all the time." She said, "That makes it sounds like I do want to fight all the time." He said, "You're starting to sound like Richie." She said, "That must be very confusing for you."

"You tell me," Richard said, passing him the joint. "Your best friend only ever complains about his girlfriend. He never tells any wonderful stories about her. What would you think about the state of their relationship?"

"I do tell you wonderful stories about her." Jeremy took a drag and fought off coughing with every muscle in his body. If he could cough in front of anyone, it would be Richard, but he thought, at the end of the day, no one forgives you for not knowing how to inhale. "I have. I mean, I used to."

Richard shrugged. "I guess I wasn't listening," he said, then laughed for what seemed like hours.

Before he could even kiss her when he came down to his stoop to let her in, Lacey handed him a book. "Here."

"What is this?"

"It's a book of Flannery O'Connor's short stories," she said. "There's one I want you to read."

"Now?"

"Now."

Jeremy was disappointed. He'd thought this was going to be one of those sex-right-away meetings, because it was too early for dinner.

The story was called "The Barber." Lacey found it for him, then watched a *Seinfeld* while he read. It was about this well-educated guy who goes to a barbershop in the deep south and the barber and everyone else in the shop hound him about who he's voting for in the upcoming election, so the guy goes home and prepares a speech extolling his candidate. Then he goes back the next day and everyone's like, "All right, hot shot, let's see what you've got," and he starts to read this starchy rhetorical speech he's labored over and everyone starts to laugh at him and he feels like a fool.

"Why did you want me to read this!" Jeremy said when he was finished, so loudly that Lacey dropped the remote. "Do you think I'm this guy? What the hell?"

"Relax," she said, picking up the remote and turning back to the TV like she realized there was nothing to be afraid of. "Can't I just recommend a short story to my boyfriend out of a mutual love of literature?" But there was something about the way she said it. There was everything about the way she said it. It turned out to be a no-sex meeting.

The guy on the other end of the line didn't want to hear about Crowley's voting record, apparently. He just wanted to call Jeremy a telemarketer and yell that he'd put himself on the no-call list.

YOUR CALLS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE! said the sign Aaron had put up on the wall of the phone bank room. Under that it said, Thanks to you and other Americans who care, we're going to lead this country in a new direction!

Jeremy did care. He cared so much he couldn't tell anyone, because he'd be presenting a false image of himself, because he felt like he didn't care about anything else. He couldn't tell anyone because the more he cared, the more people yelled at him and told him they'd put themselves on the no-call list.

"This crying in your sleep thing," Richard asked, "how often and how long?"

"Jesus, I shouldn't have told you," he said, rubbing the heel of his hand on his forehead.

Richard snickered his quiet snicker. "Probably not," he said.

"Do you ever imagine your funeral?" she asked late at night, staring at the ceiling and stretching her arms up over her head.

"I imagine my intervention," he said into the darkness.

She propped herself up on an elbow. "Intervention for what?"

He shook his head, knowing she couldn't see. "I never get that far."

Richard called Jeremy and told him to come over. Jeremy was in his underwear. "Now?" Jeremy asked.

"Yeah, now. What's the matter? Are you looking at porn?"

Jeremy pulled a blanket over his lap. He loved sitting around in his underwear, but hated the sight of himself. It took great effort not to look down at the unflattering triangle of his crotch and his pale, almost-hairy legs. He looked like a girl who hadn't shaved in a while.

"What kind of question is that?" he asked, balancing his phone between his shoulder and his face, which hurt. "Just because I can't drop everything right this—"

"God," Richard sighed. "I can tell, okay? I can hear it in your voice. If you called me and I was looking at porn, you'd be able to tell too."

Jeremy pulled his pants on. It was five o'clock, but it felt like the middle of the night.

He acted like a girl sometimes. He knew enough to know that. At work, waiting for his computer to restart for the second time because it had been moving slowly all day, he bit his tongue remembering what a girl he could be.

"What is your *problem*!" she'd spat at him after the party. They were on the street, trying to hail a taxi. He hadn't said anything, but sometimes she was all-knowing and all-seeing.

"Nothing. Just, whatever, that guy."

"What guy? The guy you and I talked to for like five minutes? What the fuck about him?"

"Nothing, nothing," he chanted, feeling four years old. They were trying to get a cab, which neither of them liked to do.

"No, what? What is it? Because I talked to him for five minutes, just like you, so what could I possibly have done to make you hover over the salsa all night and not talk to me?"

"What you said to him. 'Have we met?' I didn't like that."

She dropped her taxi arm and stared at him as if she was discovering something ugly for the first time, as if he'd just made a racist joke. "You didn't *like* it?"

"That's a flirting thing to say." He wanted to cry, or run into the street. At the moments he felt the stupidest, it was the hardest to stop himself.

Then she'd turned away from him, which was an insult. She wasn't supposed to choose looking at traffic over looking at him.

Jeremy couldn't figure out if he liked Maureen or not. He knew the easiest thing would be to hate her. Richard used his near-hatred of Lacey as schtick, something to oil the wheels of their friendship. Jeremy was deathly afraid of being a copycat, and Richard would call him on it if anyone would.

Once Lacey got food poisoning at the last minute, so he was stuck at a horrible dinner with just the two of them. He sat across from Maureen and devised a strategy to think of her in sexual terms so he wouldn't have to figure out if he liked her or not. The V of her neckline was uneven, so one breast peeked out more than the other. That breast was really up for it. The other was just shy, for now.

Because when Richard had told him that he didn't like his girlfriend, it felt like five or six years had been erased, like he'd failed some crucial test. And if he could just say, "Richard, I want to fuck your girlfriend," he could just shove aside some anger and keep moving forward.

He brought Lacey with him to his uncle's wedding and introduced her to his cousin Delia, whom he'd had a crush on since he was four and she was seven. He'd learned to touch himself to thoughts of her, closed his eyes and showered with her memory through four years of college, panted her name in the moments before sleep, and now here the two of them were, shaking hands, exchanging pleasantries, and Lacey didn't suspect a thing. Later that evening he wouldn't have to battle any questions or mend any hurt feelings, and there was a good chance he'd even get to have sex that night, effortlessly, squinting and imagining his cousin under him, moaning that she'd always felt the same way.

"What do you talk about with other girls?" Jeremy asked.

Lacey thought about it. "Food," she said. "We usually talk about food."

She was reading the newspaper. He was looking at her bare feet. They spent more time at his apartment, but he liked hers better, because of this little deck where they could sit on Sunday mornings and read the paper. She was in his lap and his arms were wrapped all around her, and their four legs were splayed out in front of them. Jeremy called it "the monkey hold." He didn't know why and he'd never told anyone.

She was reading an article about a celebrity who'd been diagnosed with prostate cancer. "Can you imagine," she asked, "cancer ripping through your body?"

Jeremy thought about it. He always tried to think about it when she asked him questions like that. "No," he decided. "Ripping? No. Why, can you?"

She dropped the paper in her lap and ran her fingers over her arms and legs like a spider. "Mm," she said, picking up the paper, "I guess it probably wouldn't feel like that."

"Did you and Mom remember to vote?" he asked his father, who'd come into the city for a doctor's appointment and was taking him out for lunch.

"I'm not going to answer that." His father was thin and muscular. The lines in his face made decisions that couldn't be argued with. He stirred his coffee and looked up. "So, what else is new?"

"Do you think I might be obsessive-compulsive?"

His father laughed. "I'd never thought about it before. Why, are you feeling obsessive-compulsive?"

"I don't know. I've been, um, counting things lately."

"Counting things?"

"When I'm bored. When I'm waiting for someone. I count whatever's around. It weirds me out a little."

His father shrugged. "Doesn't sound too drastic to me." He drank his coffee and smiled with the cup in his mouth. "You know, it's funny, when you asked me that, I thought you were going to say it was because of how obsessively you've been following this election stuff."

Jeremy hated multiple things about that sentence. *Obsessively. Election stuff.* "Yeah, well, ask Mom what she thinks," he said.

When they were sixteen, Richard had wanted to start a band. He'd play the four chords he knew on the guitar, which he insisted were all the Ramones ever needed, and Jeremy would sing and play drums. Richard didn't want to hear that he didn't know how to play the drums, and said that Jeremy's classical piano lessons did not qualify him to play keyboards in their rock band. They were going to be called Under the Revenge Tree.

Lacey laughed convulsively when he told her about it. She rolled around on the sofa and kicked her legs in the air. "Stop, stop," she said.

Once, almost. At least Jeremy thought so. It was subtle—not, "Have you ever thought of what it would be like to kiss another guy?" Nothing like that. Just once, before he was with Lacey, late, drunk as he'd ever been. He was staying on Richie's couch.

"That girl hated me," he said into the cushion, tasting vomit in the back of his mouth.

"Nah," Richard said, drunk himself, sitting below him on the floor, one lazy arm slung over Jeremy's back.

"Yeah," said the cushion. "Yeah, she did. Her friend was in the other room with that guy, so she stayed and talked to me because she couldn't leave."

"She didn't hate you."

"Mmmmmm." He was going to vomit. No he wasn't. "Man, no, I don't even know what I was saying. I was saying nothing. I looked like an—" he rolled over, so that he and Richard were breathing alcohol vomit breath into each other's faces. "Like an idiot. Like one of those guys."

"No, no." Richie shook his head back and forth heavily like a sad dog. Jeremy liked to call him a cartoon drunk. He told him he should drink from a jug marked XXX and sing "How Dry I Am." "No," Richard said, "you looked good tonight. You know? You looked good."

They looked at each other without focusing, each one filling the space the other was staring into. "Thanks," Jeremy said, and Richard's arm moved up and down his back softly like a lullaby.

Once Lacey licked his toes. "Under the Revennnnnnge Treeeeeeeee," she cooed.

Richard cracked a soft-boiled egg in an egg cup with a spoon. There was something Old World about him. He had broad shoulders and wore white T-shirts and had, of all things, a cowlick, without even trying. Richard was the only guy he'd ever met who could pull off winking at girls. It didn't seem creepy; it made sense. Jeremy could imagine him punching around with his father and a pack of class acts in an abandoned schoolyard somewhere. Richard flicked a piece of egg shell at him, using his spoon as a catapult. "Think fast," he said.

"I have to go," he said to whoever was on the other line, "Crowley's picking a running mate." He hung up and tried to concentrate on the convention coverage, counting falling red white and blue balloons as he waited for Crowley to take the stage. He hadn't even looked to see who was calling. It could have been Crowley, offering him the position. He'd just hung up on a mystery.

"Or it could have been the paramedics, calling to tell you your mother just got hit by a truck," Lacey or Richie would have said. "Jesus, you and this fucking election."

The ship sank the same day Crowley got the New York Times endorsement.

"Just once," Richard said, "and we were drunk," like any of that made a fucking difference.

"But you hate her," Jeremy said, wondering what the second stupidest response could have been.

"I never said *hate*," Richard said, pulling off the nail of his index finger with his teeth in one motion. "Besides, that didn't really have anything to do with it."

"Mom," Jeremy said into the phone, "I have something to— something to ask about, or— I don't know—" then tears folded in on his voice, which crumpled into the words, "Oh my God."

His mother answered with a litany of possible tragedies. "What happened? Did you get mugged? Did someone take your money? Did something happen in New York, was it another attack? Is Lacey pregnant? Where are you? Are you okay?"

Someday he'd be a parent, and he'd think of these things, automatically, just because they were thoughts he'd need to have. He'd run out of words like his mother, then pause to let his child tell him what the real

problem was, allowing them to feel relieved and grateful and idiotic at the same time.

He called his sophomore year Broadcast Journalism professor, who told him he had no idea how to get someone into the Democratic Primary. Jeremy couldn't bring himself to say what he would have said in a movie, that Crowley was all he had. "Just please," was all he could get out before he realized he was going to start crying and had to hang up.

Jeremy called it his "descent into madness." He'd stay up until four a.m., reading stories on the Internet about spiders crawling into people's ears and leaving nestfulls of eggs. He'd lie in his bed and watch shadows forging across the walls, thinking about a *Charlotte's Web*-sized batch settling itself inside him, even now.

He didn't know how to be angry with her. "How are you doing?" she said on the phone, and he said, "How do you think?" That was as far as he could get, and he was proud of himself for it.

She wrote him some bullshit email about the fall reminding her of him. *Yeah*, *it's fall*, he wrote back, taking a page from the book of Richard, who started almost every correspondence with the word "Yeah," *and all that means to me is that soon Crowley will be President. Jeremy.* 

He couldn't bring himself to send it.

# R ICHARD

Right after it happened with Lacey, he wanted to tell someone, and the first person he thought of was Jeremy's dad. He rubbed his eyes and looked in the mirror. "That's fucked up," he said to himself.

Richard's mother told him it was a mistake to behave with his grandmother the way he did with what she called his "dopey friends."

"I don't know what you mean," Richard said.

"She's old," his mother said, slamming her hand on the horn to warn the guy backing up in front of her. "She doesn't appreciate it, she doesn't care. That joke about Yiddish wasn't necessary."

"That was funny," said Richard's father, a bowl of soup of a man who was always three steps behind everyone.

Lacey called to ask him if he'd told Maureen yet. He wasn't used to hearing her voice on the phone; she sounded tinny and far away. "Nope," said Richard. "Can I go now?"

"Are you serious?"

"About what? Yes, about both things: I haven't told her, and I'd like to go now."

Lacey made a noise with her throat.

Richard said, "You know what, I don't like talking to you very much. I thought you already knew that."

"But fucking me is fine."

"Not ever again, no. But you're twenty-five years old. I don't especially want to explain to you the difference between talking and fucking."

He hung up with a vomit taste in his mouth.

Maureen thought it was funny when he made fun of her. Once she asked him to call her fat while they were having sex, and he actually had to stop and look at her and say, "What? I'm not going to do that," and she'd slapped his arms, in a hurry, and said, "Call me a slut, then. Come on, do it, do it!"

He'd fucked her and called her a slut in the smallest sex voice he could find, imagining he were saying anything else.

In high school, Jeremy's dad had come over one Saturday afternoon to help Richard fix his car. For about an hour, Richard's dad stood in the doorway, watching them, not even attempting to offer commentary. Jeremy's dad was Superman, and his dad was the Pillsbury doughboy. Jeremy's dad was Dean Martin, and his dad was Shirley Temple.

That night, he hadn't slept at all. Thankfully, Lacey hadn't tried to cuddle with him or anything like that. Before she fell asleep she'd warned him that she might have to throw up at some point, then rolled over to the far side of his bed and curled up in a fetal position.

Richard had lain awake and watched her for a while, trying to decide if he thought she was attractive. What he liked about Maureen was her wide hips and big tits, the dopey smile and bouncy hair, everything that made her look— he knew it wasn't right, but it was the phrase that always came to mind— up for a good time.

Lacey looked like she was not up for a good time. She was, in some ways, the opposite of Jeremy—shuffling and twitching like she should be carrying an attaché case with papers spilling out of it. She was taut and restrained, in control of every hair, and tonight, for the first time, she'd been appealing. He wanted the challenge of getting near her small, round breasts, figuring her out from up close. When she stared coldly into the middle distance, it seemed like magic, like the sexiest trick in the world.

"What mutual friend?" Jeremy squeaked. His voice was breaking and he was so hot, presumably with anger, that he'd taken off his button-down work shirt and was pacing around Richard's living room in a wifebeater. Richard was actually a little scared. "What possible fucking mutual friend could the two of you have?"

"You weren't around," Richard said, bracing himself against the back of the couch. "I asked you to go, remember? You were seeing a play with your mother."

"Of all the parties in all the world," Jeremy said, hysterical, the tears flooding into his voice. Richard wanted to admonish him for trivializing a classic Bogart line, but he kept his mouth shut.

When he was six, he overheard his mother call his father "spineless." He'd sat in his room with the door closed, rocking back and forth and crying, certain his father was going to die from a disease which was stealing his body away, piece by piece.

The morning after with Lacey was what they invented the expression "the morning after" for. It was like each of them was the dead thing that was causing the morning breath smell in the other one's mouth.

Maureen turned to goop on the subway ride home. They'd gone to Barnes & Noble for a reading by a local poet. Richard would rather have watched open-heart surgery, but he was so horny he couldn't think. The guy was little and had a Southern accent; he'd twanged his way through an hour of bullshit about love and growing old and the countryside, and as he signed her book he'd looked right at her, clearly out of his element in a city where people don't look at each other, and smiled out of the side of his mouth.

It was the most audacious smile Richard had ever seen. The guy might as well have mounted her on the table, right there in front of her boyfriend and all those old ladies, right there in the cookbook section.

They'd taken a break between making out and having sex. It was the most uncomfortable ten minutes of Richard's life. It should have been the moment when they decided to quit while they were ahead.

"Are you as into Crowley as he is?" Richard asked, unable to even touch her.

"Crowley, Crowley, Crowley," Lacey said. She was drunker than he was, drunk and shrill and awful, but he knew it was going to happen. It was too late. "I support him, sure. Just, you know. It's enough already."

Talking that way felt like more of a betrayal than the sex part. It was like Jeremy was a little kid who believed in Santa Claus, and the first person to slip up and admit doubt was the one who'd ruin his life forever.

"Don't make me do that," Richard said, but Jeremy's face was sobbing and snotty and he wouldn't leave until Richard did it. So he listed the events of the evening, moment by moment, driving a knife deeper and deeper into his best friend in tiny increments. "Then she unbuckled my belt," he said, staring hard at the floor, pretending he was dreaming. "Then she blew me for a little while."

Maureen bought him *Patsy Cline's Greatest Hits* for his birthday. "Wow," he said, and she said, "You look surprised," and he said, "I guess I didn't know you were paying attention."

He felt like a girl.

There was a breach of conduct long before they put their mouths on each other. They were in some roommate's bedroom, the designated weed room, mooching off of other people and feeling bad about it. People they didn't know were on the edge of the bed and spilled onto the floor. The two of them clung to the opposite wall, forming a misshapen lump on the circle.

Lacey hugged a pillow to her body, her knees a barrier, her nose poking out over the top, her arms wrapped everywhere. Secretive, a hidden smile that anyone could tell was a smile. He sat flat against the wall next to her, his head turned so that their faces were too close. They said cute things to one another, or made them sound cute. "Are you having a good time?"

"I'm having some kind of time. Are you having a good time?"

It was the stupidest conversation Richard had ever had, as pleasant and empty as a reading primer. Sex was the only place it could go.

Jeremy called to wish him a happy birthday. "Are you kidding me?" Richard said into his cell phone.

"Look, I hate you right now but it doesn't change the fact that it's your birthday."

"Wow," Richard said. "No offense, but it's things like this that make you a world-class chump."

"Okay, well, this is over now," said Jeremy, and he hung up.

What should I have said? Richard wondered, the phone getting sweaty in his hand. Who in the fucking universe would have known what to say?

When they were nine, Jeremy's dad took them camping. Richard watched him gut a fish as if he were witnessing the formation of the universe.

When he dropped Richard off at his house, he said, "Welcome back to the wilds of Connecticut." Jeremy was in the back seat looking out the window, leaving Richard alone to share the joke with his dad. He laughed and said thank you and laughed more.

It was a Sunday afternoon in the summer. Richard put his backpack in his room, took off his shoes and walked into the backyard, in an attempt to keep some of the feeling. He stepped on a bee, howled and fell to the ground as if he'd been stabbed in the chest. He couldn't remember a time when he'd cried so suddenly, when so much had escaped his body at once.

"What is it?" his father asked, standing over him and waving his hands, a man who had nothing to do with the earth, who'd never seen a fish outside of a frozen dinner.

"Nothing," Richard screamed, holding his foot and rocking back and forth.

A week after, he and Lacey staged this piece of shit fake date at a diner in Hell's Kitchen. *Date*— shorthand to stand in for whatever it is when you eat with someone to acknowledge you're not allowed to hate them anymore. "You wanna be Israel or Palestine?" he said as they were sitting down, and she looked at him like she wanted to say *That's not funny*.

Maureen caught him singing her name in the shower. She called him sweet. He couldn't tell her he just liked the way her vowels sounded underwater.

Of all people, he asked his mother if she thought Jeremy might be gay. He didn't tell her it was Lacey's theory, because she would have started asking questions. She was doing a crossword puzzle and thumped it on the table as if she were fed up with everything in the room. "Richard, are you trying to tell me that you're gay?"

If he were a parent, what would he have said? How did he know he wouldn't have thought the same thing? "What? No, Mom, I'm not gay, I asked if you thought *Jeremy* was gay."

His mother sighed and looked at the ceiling, beginning to formulate an answer.

"Mom," he continued, "I'm not gay. Okay? Really. I'm not gay. Mom, I'm not." He was five years old, asking her to watch him jump into the pool, knowing when he came up for air she'd still be reading the paper.

When he got drunk he acted as if he liked Maureen more than he did. It was dangerous. He felt horrible afterwards.

"Sometimes the sight of my father makes me nauseous," he said, and she said, "Oh, Richie."

She cradled him between her arm and her soft tits, nesting in an ugly white bra that made her look fourteen. He loved that bra. When she was wearing it, he made her keep it on during sex.

Richard worked at a lunchtime place in SoHo, pressing paninis for rich people. Manu, the make-your-own-salad guy, had CNN on in the back room. There was footage of a press conference, Crowley at a podium, his head ducked. "CROWLEY TO HOLD CONFERENCE ADDRESSING ALLEGATIONS OF COCAINE USE," the ticker said.

When work was over, Richard took the subway to Jeremy's apartment. He buzzed and Jeremy let him up; when he opened the door Richard could tell he had been crying. "You're a good friend," Jeremy said.

It was the nicest, stupidest thing anyone had ever said to him.

"Honestly, that thing with Lacey, it was the fucking dumbest thing ever," Richard said after a few beers. He was on the couch, Jeremy was on the floor and MSNBC was on with the sound off, kaleidoscoping through images of people frowning and speculating, calculating the damage. "I've had bad sex, but I've never had dumb sex. Jesus Christ." Jeremy stared up at him, wide-eyed, like a little boy listening to his father's stories.

The night got easier. They found things to laugh about. On TV, Crowley's collapse droned on in the background while the two of them provided the mismatched soundtrack.

When Maureen's dad asked him what he did, he said, "I'm sort of between things right now."

He thought he was being charming. He'd seen a scene like this in a movie.

Maureen's dad's face was unmoved. "What does that mean?" he asked. Richard could have been a goldfish, or a spot on the wall.

Richard cleared his throat and said he worked at Duke's Café on Spring and Broadway.

Maureen's dad leaned forward purposefully and said, "So you're not between things."

When my daughter brings some guy around to meet me, Richard thought, I will destroy him. I will fry his balls in oil.

Richard wanted to ask Jeremy about the noise Lacey had made. He couldn't decide if he liked it or not. It was a second opinion he could only get from one person.

"Fucking Maureen," Richard said. It was February 15th, and they were waiting for a movie to start. "I called her 'my funny valentine,' then she went and listened to the song and now she's mad at me."

"Who hasn't heard 'My Funny Valentine'?" Jeremy said.

"That's what I'm saying." Richard drummed his fingers on the armrest. "She was practically crying. She was like, 'You think I'm unphotographable?"

"Wow," said Jeremy.

"Yeah, I know. Well, I never said Maureen—" but he didn't know how to finish the sentence.

After his parents took them out to dinner, they had their most honest conversation. "Your dad's nice," Maureen said.

"Did you like my mom?"

Maureen shrugged. "My dad's not nice," she said, "so that's what I noticed."

"I don't know what to do about him anymore," he overheard his father say to his mother once when he was in high school. He made two fists and punched his bed over and over again.

Richard watched too many movies. Jeremy told him he thought it bordered on a disease. He'd always watched too many movies. When he was little he'd stand in front of the mirror and say things he wished he'd be able to say to someone someday. "I'm sorry, it's out of my hands," he'd say. "Your honor, my client was provoked. I've loved you since the first moment I saw you. I'm afraid it's worse than we thought."

"So since neither of you had siblings," Maureen said, "you were like brothers to each other." She looked at the ceiling and spoke slowly, as if she were calculating the tip.

"We never thought of it that way," he said. Maureen didn't understand anything.

Richard's dad went to temple on the High Holy Days. His mother didn't. When his father asked her why not, she said, "Because I don't want to," and Richard laughed. His dad stood in the doorway, dangling his keys from his finger and looking like a war orphan.

Richard thought he had made things right, but Jeremy was still moping. Still acting like a whiny little bitch, he would have said, had there not been a fresh, gaping wound to tiptoe around.

Then one day it all made sense. "We were going to break up anyway," Jeremy said, out of the blue, "before you guys did that."

"Aha!" Richard knew it wasn't the right thing to say, but it's what he felt.

He wanted to tell Jeremy about Lacey's theory. He wanted to ask him about it. But the very idea of asking made him feel like he was on her side, and that made him feel gross.

Richard waited until he and Jeremy were looking at their menus before he cleared his throat and said, "There's something wrong with Maureen."

Jeremy looked up. "Wrong with her?"

"No, not necessarily, just— I don't know— something's not right."

"That could mean a lot of things," Jeremy said, putting down his menu and looking straight at him. Richard hated that kind of eye contact; Jeremy had been trying to pin him under it for eighteen years.

"Don't be a shrink about it," Richard said, hiding behind his billboardsized menu. "Never mind."

From the other side of the booth, there were whines of protest, but Richard couldn't hear them. "Forget it," he whispered to himself, "forget it forget it."

Richard's father waited until they were within sight of the driveway to tell him that his mother had left.

"You couldn't tell me this until right now?" Richard spat. "I took the two hour train ride! I was sitting in fucking silence, thinking about what we were going to have for dinner!"

"You were on a train," his father said, with the voice of someone who's given up. "You would have been excited on the phone, with all those people around you." The side of his face that Richard could see was wet and shiny. "Nobody likes that."

He wanted to scream at his father for hours, but he was exhausted. "Can we go see whatever's playing at the mall?" he asked, and his father said okay. It was the first time he'd asked his permission for something since he was eight years old.

They saw four movies. Afterwards, all Richard could remember was that one starred Will Smith, and one was animated. When the end credits started up, his father would pat his knee and say, "Wait here," go to the lobby and buy two more tickets, then come back for him and they'd switch

theaters. After the second movie he bought them each a jumbo popcorn. It was their dinner. After the third, he bought Raisinets and Twizzlers. "Dessert," he said, as he handed Richard a box.

"I could watch movies all day," his father said.

On a different day, Richard would have pointed out that that was exactly what they were doing, watching movies all day. Today, he plunged his hand to the bottom of the box and said, "Me too."

Maureen offered him a blow job when he told her. He said, "Maureen, that's in poor taste." He'd never said those words to anyone before. Finally, a movie sentence to call his own.

Some time after his mother left, Jeremy showed up at his apartment with Marx Brothers movies. "You okay?" he asked when Richard opened the door.

"Copycat," Richard said, walking inside and leaving the door open.

Richard watched Jeremy during *Duck Soup* to make sure he laughed at the right parts. "That's creepy," Jeremy said, and Richard told him he wasn't about to start laughing, so he might as well do something to entertain himself.

Richard was out of beer and Jeremy forgot to bring any over, so at the point in the visit when he normally would have been three beers in Richard felt nauseous, and almost drunk. "People don't really do this in real life," he said. "Drop in on one another in a time of crisis. You stole it from me, and I stole it from romantic comedies."

"I thought you hated romantic comedies."

"Of course I do. It doesn't mean I haven't seen like a thousand of them. Do you know how many times a week *When Harry Met Sally* plays on TV?"

Halfway through *Horse Feathers*, Richard realized he hadn't changed his position in two hours. The entire right side of his body was pins and needles. "This one isn't very good," he muttered, half to himself. "Maybe it was funnier at the time."

"It's okay," Jeremy said quietly. Richard wanted to tell him that his opinion on the subject didn't matter, since he'd always secretly suspected that Jeremy didn't get the Marx Brothers at all. But it didn't seem worth the effort.

Jeremy slept on an air mattress on Richard's floor. He tried to insist on blowing it up himself, but Richard all but shoved him out of the way and said, "Don't you know anything about grieving? I need something to do with my hands." "Don't be one of those people who can't accept it when someone breaks up with them," Richard said to Maureen, forcing himself to watch her cry. They were at Soup & Burger on Broadway, one of his least favorite diners.

"It just doesn't make any sense," she said. "I don't get it. When did this happen with Lacey? Like months ago? Why are you telling me now?"

"Look, my mom walked out on my dad," he said. "She didn't say why. She didn't say anything. At least you're getting a reason, okay? Some people don't even get a fucking note."

The room was dark but neither of them was asleep. "Why'd your mom leave?" Jeremy asked. The floor felt far away.

"Because she couldn't deal with my dad anymore." Jeremy didn't say anything. "Because she never liked Connecticut," he tried again. "I don't know why," he said, then started to cry, silently, the only way he knew how.

It was August, the day of the big school flea market where their mothers were both manning the rummage sale tables. They were six. They'd escaped the crowds and gone to the playground, which was empty except for them. Jeremy's dad watched them from a distance, leaning against a tree with his arms crossed.

They were on the swings. Jeremy's stringy legs were pumping like crazy and he was going higher than Richard, who was small and square and couldn't catch up. It drove him crazy.

"So you don't have any brothers or sisters either?" Jeremy yelled, as if their swings were miles apart instead of right next to each other.

"Mm-mm."

"Why not?"

Richard let his feet drag back and forth in the dirt. He'd never thought about it before. Why not?

"I dunno." He looked up at Jeremy, swinging wildly. He wasn't sure how he felt about him yet— he was weird-looking, tall and gangly with glasses, and he talked a lot, in a high-pitched girly voice. Richard knew other kids made fun of him, but if Jeremy knew about it, he didn't seem to care, which Richard liked. No one made fun of Richard; they just sort of left him alone. Sometimes he thought he'd rather be made fun of, and at least be noticed.

"I don't know either," Jeremy said. "I ask my parents all the time but they won't tell me. I wish I had a brother or sister. It's boring without one. I'd teach them games and tell them what to do but sometimes I'd be nice too I think. I hope we'd be friends and not just fight all the time." Richard twisted in his swing. "I think they won't tell me because they don't like me

that much and that's why they didn't want to have any other kids. Do you think that's what it was for your parents?"

Jeremy's dad approached the swing set. "How're you guys doing?" he said. "Jeremy, you're giving this guy a chance to talk, right?" He was blocking out the sun. Richard stared up at him from the swing.

"So now we're just two lonely people," said Jeremy.
"Three," said Richard. "Don't forget about my dad."

He rode the train to Connecticut after work, as he'd done most nights since his mother left. His father picked him up at the train station, a twenty minute drive to their house. When he was little, they'd make the drive all the time, when they picked his mother up from the station if she'd gone to the city for the day. If it was late, they'd stop at Friendly's on the way home and Richard would suffer through the terrible food to get to the Happy Ending Sundae that came with the kid's meal. "That's not very nice," his father would say every time as Richard stuck his spoon into the side of the smiley faced ice cream head, and sometimes it would make Richard smile.

"How was work?" his father asked.

The answer was that someone had complained of finding a hair in his Viva Roma panini. Richard had imagined laying his head on the press, using it to squeeze out a single hair and hiding it gently in a bed of mozzarella, under a tomato. "Let me tell you something," the customer said. It was the middle of lunch hour, when the smell of melted cheese and warm soggy bread hovered over the crowd like tear gas. "I come here almost every day, and I watch you make those sandwiches, and you are one of the most unsanitary workers I've ever seen."

Richard shook his head in response to his father's question.

"She called today," his father said, keeping his eyes on the road. "But she didn't really say anything. I think she was hoping you'd answer."

"She knows I work." His father nodded. "She has my cell phone number."

"Yeah," his father said.

"Where was she?"

"I don't know. She didn't say. I imagined her in a hotel. It's where she would have been in a movie."

"Yeah," said Richard.

Jeremy was pretty good through all of it, Richard had to admit. He felt bad about sending the email, bad and stupid, as soon as he sent it. When he got Jeremy's response the next day, he thought, *I deserved that*.

#### TEREMY

He dreamed he had four children and snakes ate all of them. He dreamed he was at his mother's funeral and he could see scales slithering out of the sides of the closed coffin and no one else could and when he screamed everyone shushed him. He dreamed he was watching the news and the anchor was alone at the desk with his head in his hands, sobbing.

"Four more years," his coworker Alice said to him when he came in on his last day. He guessed it was supposed to be a joke.

"How is that funny?" he said, and Alice looked at him like she'd been slapped. Alice was sweet and awkward and Jeremy had never seen anyone be mean to her. But it was true. Crowley had lost the election and he had lost his job. Nothing was funny.

He watched Annie Hall one night in his apartment with all the lights off. It was a bad idea. Diane Keaton called Woody Allen in the middle of the night and asked him to come over with the pretense of killing a spider in her bathroom, but really it was because she still loved him. "I don't know," she sobbed, slumped against the wall, touching Woody Allen's face. "I don't know, I miss you."

It was 2:00 in the morning. His phone didn't ring.

He dreamed about Richard and took it out on him the next day, when they went to Brighton Beach for chicken kiev at the tacky expensive restaurant they liked on the boardwalk. It was a late fall tradition, and this fall it felt even more soggy and pointlessly nostalgic than usual.

In the dream, Richard was dating all four TV actresses Jeremy had had a crush on in junior high. Jeremy told him that they couldn't be friends anymore, because he was so overcome with jealousy that he was afraid he'd end up killing him.

Now Richard was telling him about a movie he'd watched that weekend, something old that he hadn't seen since he was little. When he paused, Jeremy took the opportunity to say, "You know what, Richie, I don't care. I really don't."

He didn't look at Richard's expression. He stabbed his fork into the chicken and watched butter spill out onto the plate, drowning the overcooked peas and carrots like a third world mudslide.

The news about Richie's mother was not broken to him gently. But it was his fault. He visited Richard at work, to get out of the house, to see someone he knew, and decided to play a practical joke, something he'd never done before.

"Hey man," Richard said when he came up to the counter. "What are you doing here?"

Jeremy worked hard to conjure a confused expression. "Sorry," he said, "do I know you?" Before Richie could answer, he turned to the woman standing next to him and said, "I've never seen this guy before in my life." Then he turned back to Richie, grinning, knowing he couldn't make it last, awaiting his approval.

Richie was scowling. He looked like he was about to cry. Staring at Jeremy, he slammed the panini press down and walked to the back room, asking the salad bar guy if he could cover for him for a minute.

The woman next to him was looking at him pityingly. Jeremy left. What did I do? he thought. What did I do wrong?

Essential for the dreary winter months! an employee had scrawled under the sign for Vitamin D in the organic grocery store.

He could tell a hot girl had written it, because all hot girls have the same handwriting. He thought of Lacey's effortlessness, the strands of hair that escaped her ponytail and framed her face, the casual slump of her shirt over her belt and her jeans, her bunched-up scarf a natural dividing line between her smooth, smart face and her breasts, irresistibly unpretentious. And that look she'd give him when he stared at her, like she was good food or a painting—"Who, me?"

He was cleaning his desk when he found a Post-It note he'd left for himself weeks ago: *Grad school applications*. It was too late. His life was moving like calendar sheets blowing away to show the passage of time in a movie.

"How's Richie?" his father asked on the phone.

"He's holding up, I guess."

"And how are you?"

He sighed. "Holding up, I guess."

"Well, look, you can't be melodramatic about this—"

"About this? Which part of it? My horrible breakup, or losing my job, or Crowley—"

"—I was going to say around Richie. You can't be melodramatic around Richie. He's really going through something right now, you know?"

He was really going through something? Jeremy was too tired. "Okay," he said, "I won't."

They were stoned. Richard was stoned and quiet. It had been silent for what seemed like hours, then Richard said, "She could be dead."

It took Jeremy a moment to figure out who he was talking about. "She's not dead," he said finally.

"But she could be."

Jeremy didn't know what to say to that.

His father told him to keep track of the jobs he'd applied to, when he'd applied, when he'd followed up, where he'd found the listing. Instead he kept a list of the women he'd become infatuated with in the past month. The woman from Wisconsin. The woman who laughed at what I said. The girl who's sixteen. The woman who owns the coffee shop. The woman who works at the library. The older woman at the bar. The woman visiting from out of town. The woman with the broken camera. The woman who looked Scandinavian. The boring woman standing in the movie line. The friendly woman who might have been a lesbian. The woman from Alaska. The woman who sat next to me on the Metro North.

Jeremy thought about Richard's mother. Eileen. Once his dad had dropped him off at Richie's house an hour early. Richie wasn't home from his trumpet lesson yet, and Eileen had seemed happy to see him. She'd been baking a cake, and she told him he could lick the bowl and the spatula. He wanted to tell her that his mom never let him do that, but he didn't say anything. "And don't tell Richie," she added. "This is his favorite part, he'd never forgive me."

He still considered it their secret. Even now, when he saw her, when he said hello, he'd look for something quiet in her eyes that let him know she still remembered.

The email from Richard said,

Yeah, so there's no way I'm ever going to be able to ask you this in person, so I have to do it this way, even though I know that's lame. Blame it on my runaway mom if you want. So, are you gay?

Richie

He stared at the screen for a minute, then deleted the email right away so he'd never have to look at it again. He'd done it only once before, with the mass email from Crowley for America thanking everyone for all their hard work and wishing them good luck with their future endeavors.

He thought about it all day, then sent a reply email right before he went to bed. He wrote, *Not a chance*, then clicked Send. It was a Richie response, the kind that would have made him angry.

It didn't come up again, and eventually it occupied Jeremy's mind less and less. He stopped finding pregnant pauses in their conversations, looking at Richard sideways, wondering whether Richard was looking at him sideways. Eventually, like the ship that sank, it faded into the distance.

In December, he found a job.

"An ice cream parlor?" his father asked him on the phone. "Are they going to be getting any business?"

"It's Cold Stone Creamery, Dad," he said. "People like that stuff. They don't care."

He imagined his father raising his eyebrows, then lowering them, lips pursed. "I don't know from Cold Stone Creamery," he said, "but I know that when it's twenty below outside, ice cream is not what I want."

He heard some clicks on the other end of the line, then his mother's voice filled his ear. "Hello? Jeremy?"

"Yeah, hi, Mom, I'm here."

"Listen," his mother said. Her voice sounded urgent, like she was yelling last-minute instructions into one of those phones they had hooked up in the trenches. Richard would know what they were called. "Don't listen to your father, okay? You're going through a rough patch right now, a lot of people are, and there's nothing wrong with working a menial job to carry yourself along for a while. You hear what I'm saying to you? Don't go around thinking you've disappointed us or anything like that, okay? You have enough to worry about. You should know that we're on your team."

Before he even knew what was happening, he was crying. Not choked up, but full-on crying. "Thanks, Mom," he said, but he didn't know if she heard him. He hardly got the words out.

He ran into Lacey at the diner on West Fourth. Everything she was wearing was new. She saw him first, asked if he was eating alone and sat down across from him without asking if it was okay.

At least there was stuff to talk about. He told her about Richard's mother and about Maureen. Then, in spite of every voice inside of him that screamed not to, he told her about Richie asking him if he was gay.

To his surprise, she sighed a bored laugh and said, "Yeah, I gave him that idea."

"You? But-"

"I didn't really think it was true," she said, stirring the ice cubes in her soda with her straw and rolling her eyes up towards him through her long eyelashes, which used to just kill him. "I just said that to Richard as a way to, I don't know, to make myself feel better about what we did. You know?" She shrugged. "I really didn't like him, Jeremy. I didn't. It was just one of those stupid things, you know?"

Jeremy didn't know. He realized for the first time that she'd never said she was sorry. He stayed silent for a minute, waiting, as if now of all times she might decide to say it.

Instead she said, "Hey, by the way, I'm really sorry about Crowley." She reached across the table and touched his hand. Her fingers were freezing.

The waiter brought the check and Jeremy paid it, without saying anything. He didn't look at her when she moved her hand away. When he'd left exact change, he looked up at her for the last time and said, "Don't be sorry for me. Be sorry for everyone. He really would have done amazing things for this country." And meant it.

## R ICHARD

She called late on a weeknight. Richard was in bed watching a *Frasier* rerun and his father was asleep in the other room. When he heard her say, "Hi, Richie," the house felt completely silent. For a moment he thought he'd muted the TV, then he realized it was still on. He picked up the remote, then put it down and decided to keep the sound on while he talked to his mother, wherever she was. It was left over from his childhood, when he'd fall asleep to the sounds of his parents watching TV across the hall. It made him feel safe. Nothing really bad could happen while there was a canned laugh track going in the background.

He didn't know what to say. He pulled his knees up to his chest and cradled the phone against his cheek. "Where are you?" he asked quietly, almost in a whisper.

"In Danbury, with my sister," she said. "Well, not with her anymore, actually. I just found a studio yesterday."

A studio in Danbury? It didn't make any sense. Danbury was only an hour away. How could she have been so close without him knowing it?

"What—" the TV filled in his silence. His voice came back to him a little. "Mom, what are you doing?"

"Come on, Sweetie," she said. He tried to discern the sounds he heard behind her, the sounds of Danbury, of his mother on her own, but he couldn't make anything out. "You're not a little kid anymore. I wasn't happy, you know that."

It would have been okay. He might have been able to live with that explanation, lame as it was, just because he was hearing her voice and knew that somewhere down the line they'd have a mercifully boring conversation where she'd ask him what day he had off that week and what time she

should pick him up at the Metro North station. She was right, he wasn't a little kid. He was old enough to know that people did this all the time, picked up and started over again, no matter what idiots they'd made of themselves and how angry and hurt everyone would always be, a little, in ways that couldn't change.

But then she said, "And you know your Dad."

Richard felt a heat in his chest. He wanted to throw the phone at the wall. When he opened his mouth to speak, he choked on his words. When he tried again, they came out globby, wrapped up in snot and tears. "No," he said. "He's my dad."

His mother sighed. "Okay, well, I can tell this is difficult for you. It's late, I'll let you go. We'll talk again soon, okay, and figure out a time when we can see each other."

"Yeah," Richard said, and then her voice was gone and he was alone in the dark room with Frasier, thinking, I love you, I miss you.

Richard called Jeremy an elitist Manhattanite on the phone, which seemed to get under his skin, because he finally agreed to meet him at the diner next to the G train.

"My mom called last night," he said with a mouthful of BLT.

Jeremy lowered his burger slowly. "Is she— I mean, are you okay?"

Richard looked at Jeremy, who looked lost in the shiny red booth cushions, his eyes big and scared like a woodland creature. I hope he's not gay, Richard thought. He'd just go after some asshole like me and let him walk all over him. Jeremy didn't deserve that.

"I'm okay," he said, licking mayonnaise off the corner of his lip, "because you finally stopped bitching and agreed to come here with me, even though it took you a whole fifteen minutes on the subway." He took an oversized bite and shook his head. "Man, you're impossible."

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