

THE END OF LAURA GERMAIN: A NOVEL
(AND THREE STORIES)

THESIS

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By

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To my mother and father

PROLOGUE

Laura Germain had a dream that she mostly disregarded as a meaningless, although constant, daydream. She hoped it was the last gasp of some subconscious demon. There were variations of the dream, but for the most part she lived in a four bedroom Tudor style house with plumbing problems, drove an SUV that constantly broke down, had a dog with mange in the white picket-fenced yard, and two cats that used her antique love seat for a scratching board. She practically lived in the playroom fussing over her kids or in the kitchen pleading with them to eat their vegetables, and harbored unexciting thoughts of her rich husband coming home to the gourmet dinner she'd slaved over. Laura hated this dream and all the variations of it—her husband's infidelity, her own infidelity, even the infidelity of her mangy dog and sexless cats.

She'd been through a year of therapy as an undergraduate at The University of Miami, and believed she'd cleansed herself of the dream's craziness. The therapy was free. Student Services offered counseling sessions and, although the price was right, the time was far from productive. But then, the intern from the psych department wasn't a Freudian but a behaviorist. So the dream returned.

During this time she often repeated familiar rhetoric from upper-level women's studies classes and realized the dream was part of a collective female consciousness perpetuated by Madison Avenue and the fashion world. Or so she believed. Or so she was taught. Whether this was true or not—whether this epiphany came about because of

her continued education or whether it came about because of her failed attempts to find the perfect man—didn't matter. The dream was explained and Laura felt liberated. She also felt depressed.

The depression came and went. She slept a lot, sometimes twelve, fourteen hours a night and then only two or three. The internist had posed the possibility she might be clinically depressed, and Laura listened with mild disgust to his unimaginative and inexperienced diagnosis. She thought him a fool. A young fool. An attractive young fool who had chiseled cheekbones and athletic legs.

She managed not to think of him—the Marriage, Family and Child Counselor to be—in sexual terms for most of the sessions. Occasionally she marveled at how the outline of his quads and calves showed through his thick Levi's. She loved strong legs.

"I'm a year from finishing my doctorate," he said.

"So?" she said, and sniffled. He pursed his lips. She slumped in the sofa and saw he might be hurt. "Sorry. Congratulations. Really."

"I was thinking it'd be better if you knew me as Dr. Glenn. We can both get used to it and you'll have more respect for me."

"It's a little late for that, Chad." She crumpled the box of kleenex she held in her hands. "I just come here because I can vent and you won't judge me. And even if you did judge me, I wouldn't give a shit because this is a place where I can hear my thoughts out loud."

"Oh, come on now, Laura. You don't think I'm helping?"

"You? No. You're a body, a human being. I'll give you that. You listen, and that's all I want. A man who'll listen."

But she couldn't deny she wanted a man with strong legs, and she slept with him three days before receiving her Bachelor's degree. She decided since he was still an intern whom she never referred to as Dr. Glenn (and she was merely years from completing her own doctorate) they might fulfill mutual sexual desires and dodge the taboo before it really became one—technically they were simply students at the university.

And his legs were powerful.

She propped herself on an elbow as he slept and followed the contours of his quadriceps as candlelight flickered across his skin one night in her bedroom. She kissed his kneecap. He snored. She kissed his thigh, and he turned over in his sleep. She never saw him again.

Laura forever, silently, thanked Chad for being the turning point—or at least an episode marking the time of departure from her dream. She knew he'd move on to become a successful therapist with an office in Balboa Towers, a membership at Biscayne Racquet Club, feign devotion to his leather-skinned bleached blond wife, and become a pillar of strength and wisdom for his two point two kids. But at least she got to feel his legs between hers. And then she went celibate.

The celibacy was difficult at first. Every interview at prospective graduate schools provided her with the opportunity to resume her active sex life. She'd been accepted to three universities, all doing cutting-edge research on sleep disorders. While on visits to each campus, meeting with heads of research, professors, staff and other Doctoral candidates, she was often asked to dinner, or out for drinks, or blatantly referred

to as the prettiest candidate to be considered in years. Laura loved the attention and was mostly flattered, at first. But she had to remind herself why she wished to cut herself off from sexual contact.

During a late-Fall interview and campus tour at The University of Florida, she wiped perspiration from her forehead with a napkin. The humidity of Gainesville's inland air was oppressive—the Indian Summer heat more unbearable than Miami's August doldrums. She swatted mosquitoes while attending the barbecue at the home of Dr. Morris, the head of the Neurophysical Department, and as she squished one pest, smearing blood into her arm, then slapping at another, he made his offer.

“Sorry Laura,” he said. “But I can't give you a stipend for the first year. A research position, but not much else.”

Laura took a sip of lemonade, shooed a fly from sour potato salad, and looked him squarely in the eye.

“Then tell me why I should take Florida over any other school,” she said.

His lips went flat in a condescending smile as he reached over and patted her hand.

“It's The University of Florida. We have some of the brightest scientists in the world. If you're able to break ground here, you'll be famous. Prestige. Think of the prestige. And besides, you'll be working with me.”

He sat back in his lawn chair, spreading his knees outward, and slumped, his hips moving up in one subtle thrust. He had a dark look in his eye, and Laura looked to his wife. It seemed the woman was aware of her husband's body language, and she turned her back to them while talking with other guests.

Laura reached to her paper plate, took hold of a chicken leg, and bit into a chunk of meat. She dropped the chicken leg onto her plate. Fat and grease covered her palm. She stood and extended her hand to Dr. Morris. He hesitated, then shook her hand.

“Thanks for having me up here. I’ll let you know my decision,” she said as Morris wiped his hand with a napkin.

Pestilence, arrogance, and harassment aside, she decided Gainesville was still too close to memories of men like Chad Glenn.

Her visit to the University of Iowa proved to be somewhat the same. Iowa was briefly at the top of her list—she had, when she filled out the application, asked herself what could be so bad about being in the middle of nowhere, light-years from city life. She reasoned it would be easier to immerse herself in her studies.

On the evening following a day of touring the campus, Dr. Raftzin, a female Associate Professor, stroked Laura’s back with her fingertips and asked her out for a drink.

They sat at a sportsbar and sipped saltless margaritas. Laura scrutinized Dr. Raftzin’s close-cropped hair and buttoned down shirt, then adjusted her bottom to the barstool.

“I have to ask you something,” Laura said.

“Ask away,” Dr. Raftzin said.

“When you sort of scratched my back when we were leaving your office, what was that? I mean, it was a mistake, right?”

Dr. Raftzin took a sip through the straw in her glass, dropped her hand next to Laura's, nearly touching her.

"Women need each other here in the Midwest, Laura."

"People need each other," Laura said, and drew her hand away from Raftzin's and put it on her margarita glass. She tried to remain casual, calm.

"Yes," Raftzin said. "But you have no idea what it's like being raised in the middle of corn stalks and around pig troughs."

"We couldn't be anything more than colleagues, Doctor," Laura said.

Laura sensed Raftzin's mind drift inwardly. Rejection, no matter if it was between two women, made people reflect on their attractiveness, on their hesitance to be vulnerable, Laura thought. Laura tried to project an asexual air, as if she hadn't a body, as if her physical beauty didn't matter to the rest of the world, but she largely failed.

The next day a male staff member drove her to the airport and informed her Dr. Raftzin had a notorious reputation for sleeping with new candidates. But it wasn't lesbianism that turned Laura off to the Midwest. She'd had the opportunity to walk from her hotel room past downtown to stand alone in the Pentacrest at eight in the morning. The January wind howled at thirty miles per hour, the temperature close to five below. And although she thought this kind of frigidity—nature's disregard for anything living—might be conducive to celibacy, she stood in the wind and the water in her eyes became flash frozen while her toes went numb and hands turned purple. She bolted for the nearest shelter. Iowa wasn't for this Florida girl.

She decided on UCLA. It was three-thousand miles from her past and still very warm. The professors in the department seemed focused on her work, and asked more questions about it than the Friday night parties on Miami's South Beach.

During her flight to Los Angeles, she wrestled with overall feelings of fear and loneliness. But she chastised herself for being so emotional, for not trusting her instincts enough to realize fear has no place in the heart of a woman bent on finding answers to a few basic human questions—why do we sleep and dream? Will we ever know the *real* reasons? *We* may never know, she thought, but was sure something inside her, an inner voice, might help her understand.

And then she laughed. Who did she think she was? Madame Curie? Freud? She wanted to study dreams and other related fields, not solve the mysteries of life—she'd do better focusing on one field and not waste her boundless energy for research like she'd wasted energy on men.

She wasn't afraid of flying because it gave her time to think. But cross-country flights produced the one businessman or college student or male artist who took it on himself to be her guardian against other men who hit on her (and not himself, of course). She understood the game. She had shoulder-length dyed-blond hair, but had contemplated cutting and dying it to a dull brown so she'd be taken more seriously. Men, she'd concluded, still bought into the dumb blond stereotype and she was far from it. But why did they always seem to pick her out of the multitudes of women on a plane or riding a bus or simply sitting in the student lounge?

The time in the air gave her too much time to think about LA and the major mistake it could be. The doubts were so great that she might have enjoyed sitting next to a three-hundred-pound accordion player who hummed his favorite polkas between begging pardons for his flatulence, instead of sitting alone and fretting over living in a new neighborhood she knew nothing about, or worse, that her new colleagues at UCLA would think recruiting her was a mistake, that she was a charlatan and her theories were those of a fringe scientist, a rank amateur. And she sighed—insecurities were nearly as powerful as the *real*, whatever the *real* was, she thought.

The one man who sat reading *The Wall Street Journal* at gate thirty-nine, the one with long, strong legs and slim torso, gray sideburns and manicured fingernails—the one she decided was by far the best looking man of all the passengers in waiting—ended up boarding at the same time as she. He folded his paper and stood behind her. She found her seat on the plane and, with difficulty, lifted her carry-on up to the overhead bin. She put her purse on the seat and tried with both hands. It was still awkward and heavy. The man waited in the aisle and seemed to be amused, but made no attempt to intervene. She made one final push and shoved the bag into the compartment. She took up her purse and sat down.

The man put his valise in the overhead without much effort—smooth and clean like a tennis stroke. He loomed over her and she glanced up, catching a small reflection of her face in his belt buckle. He tucked a leather strap into the bin and latched it shut. She watched him out of the corner of her eye and latched her seatbelt. He flashed his boarding pass toward her.

“I’ve got the window,” he said.

“Oh. That means I’ve got the aisle,” she said and cringed. He was too handsome to be so casual with. She’d wanted to respond without appearing easy, wanting to be snappy instead, and hoped he’d get the edge in her voice. He wouldn’t get her sense of humor, she was sure.

“I suppose so. Unless you’d like the window.”

And then the moment came where she unbuckled her seat belt and gestured she’d get up so he might pass.

“Oh, no,” he said. “I can make it.”

And Laura wondered which way he was going to choose. Was it butt in her face or crotch? He began his crossover and for a moment, he, too, seemed to be thinking which way would be most discreet. Front or back? would be his polite way of asking, if he were to pose the question to her, but ass and dick would be his most likely way of thinking of it, she thought. He stopped and put his boarding pass in his coat pocket, then opened the overhead again, folded his coat and placed it atop his carry-on. Laura squeezed out of her seat and stood next to him in the aisle. He breezed past her to his seat.

“I could have made it in,” he said.

“It would’ve been difficult.”

“You mean difficult for you?”

“No. For you,” she said.

She took a *Scientific American* from her purse and laid it on her lap.

She could smell his cologne, but couldn’t make out the scent. It had the strength of Brut, but not the precise odor. It wasn’t Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger, not

something as trendy as those. Not Old Spice, however a man wearing an Armani suit, but flying coach cross-country, might be inclined to wear her grandfather's favorite aftershave simply because it was decades out of style and no one would suspect him of being so frugal or reaching that far back in time.

She leaned her elbow on the armrest and flipped through the pages of her magazine. She glanced past him and through the window as the jet jolted back, then smoothed out as the tractor pushed the 747 away from the gate. She inhaled the waves of cologne wafting her way and smiled. The scent was subtle, if somewhat animalistic. It had an athletic quality, but not sweet. She sniffed again and then looked up. He had been watching her.

"It's DökkenRover," he said.

"What is?"

"My cologne."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's Dutch. Or maybe Danish."

"I wasn't thinking about your cologne."

He smiled and seemed to disregard her denial.

"Do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"My cologne."

"It's distinct."

"I know. And unique. They don't sell it here in the States."

"How do you spell it?"

“Oh, I don’t know. D-O-with the little thing over it, then-K—”

“What little thing?”

“You know that funny looking O with the two dots over it.”

“An umlaut.”

“Well, you got the um part right. Uuuummmm,” he said, raised his eyebrows and closed his eyes.

He’d said all she needed to hear. He was an idiot. It didn’t matter to her if they sold the cologne “in the States” or not. Distinct implied a unique quality. She thought about asking him if it might possibly be Norwegian as well since he named two of the three Germanic languages that didn’t have an umlaut in their alphabets. She was sure the cologne—if the spelling was right—was probably German, Finnish, or Icelandic. She loved alphabets.

She was too smart for him and she knew she’d be wasting more of her valuable future time if she accepted his business card at the end of the flight (he was sure to offer it, she thought). He’d be another in a series of two or three week relationships, or worse, one who’d fly into LA every month and expect her to drop everything after one phone call. But then, she was probably being too hard on him. She couldn’t let all the men from Florida tarnish the luster of new men she was bound to meet.

“It’s nice,” she said.

“You’re nice,” he said.

She smiled, but it was forced. How did he know she was nice? And really, weren’t men like him used to women being bitches? He didn’t really believe she was nice, did he?

“How do you know I’m nice?”

“You have a nice smile,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“But does every woman who has a nice smile also have a nice demeanor?”

“Demeanor?”

“Yes. Are women who smile generally compassionate?”

“I don’t know. I never really thought about it.”

“Oh. So as far as you know, my smile could have been about anything. Right?”

“It could have.”

“I could have been smiling because I thought about my cat and how she curls her tail before I feed her.”

“You have a cat? I have a cat.”

“I don’t have a cat.”

“I had a feeling.”

“I bet.”

“Well, I did.” The man shrugged and turned his shoulder away from her. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

She’d said enough and felt she’d done her share to fulfill his expectations.

Although she was conflicted. On the one hand she might have been too critical, and on the other she was giving him too much credit. He probably didn’t think deeply enough to regard her as a bitch—the “fact,” the conclusion that all women are bitches, was probably

embedded in his subconscious—a stereotype lodged in his head by his father or older brother or best friend, while growing up. And this made her wonder about his dreams—sleep dreams and daydreams—as she often found herself wondering about others. Were his the same as she’d imagined Chad’s to be? Or did this umlaut-clueless man truly dream about a “nice” lifetime companion?

She decided to stop thinking about it. She’d reduced him to a good-looking, but less than intelligent person and that was fine for the duration of the flight. He was basically harmless and her double entendre was actually a single one to him. He’d really only wanted to get in his seat.

She watched the normal activity on the plane—becoming interested in the mini-dramas taking place. A little girl stood third in line behind others waiting for the restroom. She danced, crossed her legs, and grabbed hold of her privates while whining to her mother that she really had to go. A teen boy next in line, gave his spot to the girl and the others waiting didn’t seem to mind.

The flight attendants served beverages and sandwiches and smiled through tired eyes. People coughed, babies cried, men got up from their seats to stretch legs, and one woman in a leopard skin sheer blouse walked up and down the aisles to be seen. All the sights and sounds were enough to amuse Laura and pass the time, but after she’d seen enough, she went back to reading, then dozed, her shoulder slanted away from the handsome man sitting next to her.

A pocket of turbulence shook the plane, passengers yelped, and Laura woke and her feet settled back to the floor. A few more small shakes drew voices of concern

around the cabin while the Captain came on the intercom and instructed everyone to return to their seats and fasten seatbelts.

Laura looked around as the shaking got worse and wondered whether she would die with this group of people or if she'd die alone. But she just as quickly dismissed the morbid thought. She couldn't imagine her life being reduced to a passenger list printed on page three of a newspaper story.

The flight smoothed out, and she closed her eyes again, but couldn't sleep.

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The 747 prepared to land. Laura glanced over the grid of streets and avenues, houses dotted with the aqua blue of backyard swimming pools, and four-story office buildings that passed below the plane on its descent. She checked her purse to see if her wallet was inside, making sure it hadn't slipped out while under the seat in front of her. The handsome man turned and smiled. He hadn't said anything since her deception about owning a cat.

The jet's wheels hit the runway with a sharp, harmless jolt. A loud bang reverberated through the plastic, fiberglass, and metal of the body. Laura held her breath and then let it out as the nose of the plane settled to the concrete.

"Not exactly the smoothest landing," he said.

"Or flight," she said.

"I've had smoother," he said. "But I'm never worried when I fly."

"It's taking off and landing that are supposed to be dangerous."

"I never worry," he said.

"Never?"

“It’s not the way I’m going to die. Anyone who flies on a plane with me is safe.”

“Oh, I see.” She wanted to roll her eyes, but threw her purse over her shoulder, unfastened her seatbelt, and sat on the edge of her seat as the plane taxied. “Yeah, well, when I die, I’d like to do it without really dying.”

“A smooth transition, huh? No pain. No fear. You just disappear. Do you think you can do that?”

“Of course not. It’s about as likely as anyone really knowing exactly how they’re gonna check out. Or how they’re not, for that matter. No one knows. Not you. Not me. No one.”

She realized the conversation had become much deeper than she thought possible with him, and hoped he wouldn’t respond.

The man reached in his back pocket, took out his wallet, and removed a business card. He handed it to Laura.

“If you ever want a reading,” he said.

She looked at the card. It read Michael Honduras, Clairvoyant. And then in italics, beneath his name, but above a Santa Monica phone number, it read *Auras, Love, Career, Departed Loved Ones.*

“I don’t believe in psychics,” she said.

“Yes, you do.”

The jet’s doors opened and people rose from their seats. Laura joined them. She closed her fist on his card and stepped into the aisle. She opened the bin and removed her carry-on with a quick pull, then let the bag drop to the floor. She glanced at him, but

Michael Honduras gazed out the window. He seemed content to wait until the rush to exit the plane had subsided.

She wanted to ask him if his “profession” was why he knew she’d been curious about his cologne, but surmised he’d probably answer with a simple “of course.” And he must have “known” she didn’t have a cat because she remembered he only asked for her to confirm so, not whether she did or didn’t have one. She didn’t say anything about those two things at all, but as she stuffed his card in her purse and pulled her carry-on behind her, she glanced back again and thought she might repeat she didn’t believe in psychics. But she didn’t say anything.

Michael Honduras smiled and waved good-bye. For a moment she thought she heard him say for her to enjoy her year of celibacy.

She stepped over the threshold of the cabin’s doorway, onto the jetway, and looked back at him. He wasn’t visible anymore. She decided to forget about him and continued down the jetway along with other disembarking passengers, but felt alone as she walked.

Chapter One

Laura lived in a second-floor Mediterranean style apartment with an open courtyard. The building was in West Hollywood where a few other tenants hosted all-male parties on weekends. Some of the parties were quiet, others loud and unruly, and Laura noticed that sometimes a couple or two would wander away and tuck themselves into patio lounge chairs, lock lips, or engage in discreet fellatio. Nonetheless, she felt secure there. She liked having gay men in her apartment complex, in her neighborhood. And despite the encounter in Iowa, she didn't mind the lesbian women of WeHo—lesbians hadn't bothered her then and didn't bother her now. She was secure in her sexuality. She was heterosexual, plain and simple. Sometimes too plain, she thought, but then this made her think about the offbeat erotic fantasies she'd always had, her fetish for strong legs, thick thighs, and perfectly oval calves. The sight of a gay man in running shorts cooling down after a long run on Santa Monica Boulevard served as a catalyst for masturbation. It was safe. And she loved this about herself. How many other women relieved themselves with thoughts of gay men? Sure, maybe the fantasies helped her avoid intimacy, but she didn't really care about that.

The WeHo neighborhood had become her sanctuary and her one-bedroom apartment her cloister. She didn't mind the short commute to Westwood and UCLA, although parking was horrendous and expensive and the inhabitants of the campus

community were mostly undergraduate college students or dull, fringe film industry snobs.

In the year since she'd left Miami, she'd settled into a routine. Wake at 5:30 a.m., meditate for twenty minutes, make a warm lemon and honey cocktail, run her favorite route up the hill on Doheny Drive to Sunset Boulevard and back down again toward Santa Monica Boulevard. She loved the uphill climb. It was hell on her legs, and after a year of running in the morning, she began to see the difference it made in her calves. They'd become oval and sinewy. She loved them.

After returning to her apartment, she made a protein shake, had a sip of coffee, took a shower, and was out the door in a half-hour. She never wore make up. Even when there was a social function at the med school's banquet room, she wore a simple black dress, blow-dried her hair, and left without applying eyeliner, shadow, base, and lipstick. She parked in the parking garage on Weyburn Avenue and walked to the Medical Center's Mills Building. She arrived at seven-thirty, worked a few hours on data entry and data analysis, attended class, studied in the library, and returned to the laboratory in time to greet the subjects, the volunteers for Dr. Halifax's ongoing sleep study. Then she went home to an empty apartment, fell out of her clothes, and if she felt too exhausted to masturbate, drifted off to sleep within minutes of hitting the mattress.

It was a boring year for her.

But Dr. Halifax complicated the boredom.

Dr. Dwayne Halifax had a problem. His problem wasn't with Laura Germain, though she thought it was. He'd recruited her from The University of Miami because she

was “the brightest young researcher with unique ideas in sleep and dream study.” He’d said it many times in the lab, after a meeting, during lunch—so much that, although Laura had loved hearing it at first, she decided the compliment held less meaning after so much repeating. What Halifax probably liked about her was her brightness (which could mean her twinkling eyes or sparkling smile) and her youth, facts over which she had little control. But it was the other comments that made her begin to doubt how he viewed her. Her “butt looks good in those jeans,” he’d say as she buttoned her lab coat—stopping just short of suggesting she not wear the coat at all so he might salivate over the goodness of her denim-clad derrière.

Halifax wasn’t an aesthetically unattractive man. He had a thin face with high cheekbones and blue eyes hooded by thick, brown eyebrows. He dyed his hair, which made Laura wonder why he didn’t dye his eyebrows. He was well-published in the past, with articles and essays in *Scientific America*, *Time*, the *AMA Journal* and other, smaller, trade and medical journals. Unfortunately, he hadn’t published in nearly seven years and the book he’d been writing during that time was stalled. He’d confessed to Laura that he’d had writer’s block for the last three years. She didn’t understand how it could be writer’s block. It wasn’t a novel, it was a textbook covering much of what was already understood about sleep disorders and dreams, some of what isn’t yet understood but may be on the verge of being so, and a few of his theories she believed were outdated and mostly disproved. But the one thing that intrigued her (and endeared her to the program and Halifax himself)—then tipped the scales toward her decision to go to UCLA—was his determination to capture a subject’s dreams with digital imagery.

This idea was believed to be outlandish by Halifax's colleagues at the university and generally scoffed at throughout the scientific community studying dreams and sleep. This didn't stop Laura from moving forward. Another element, a more threatening factor, caused her alarm. She was hit with doubts about her future as Halifax walked down the hall toward the elevator.

"Walk with me for a minute?" he said. She heard a nonchalant tone in his voice. She was headed for Lab C, where the new sleepers waited and where the ones who were a few days into their time would be arriving.

"Sure. What's up?" she said.

"You look great today."

"Thanks, I think." She no longer smiled after he said this. She was tired, had slept only four hours, intermittently waking to stare at the clock. She remembered having a dream, but couldn't recall what it was about. For the last four nights her sleep pattern was the same. Sleep two hours, wake from a dream, and take the pen and pad from her nightstand to record the images. But lately she couldn't do it. Nothing came to her. She knew from study and experience that most subjects remembered dreams better after waking every few hours, and when she first arrived in the department—before working her way up to Lab Supervisor—she had the night shift, waking sleepers approximately ten minutes after they entered R.E.M. The sleepers remembered most of what they had seen. She couldn't understand why she was blocked.

"We have to talk," he said.

"What about?"

"Well, there's a new subject I want you to pay a lot of attention to."

“Someone new?” Laura didn’t understand. It was her job to screen possible candidates for their study and record the symptoms, then present a list to Halifax for his final decision. He chose the best ones after consulting with her and Tony, a rival doctoral student. How did this one slip by her?

“Yeah, a graduate student in the English department. He says he hasn’t slept more than an hour a night. He trained himself because there’s too much to read.” He rolled his eyes toward Laura. “No shit. But the guy’s depriving himself of so much sleep that he’s hallucinating during his up hours. It’s an area I haven’t delved into. I mean, it’s so simple. How could I overlook that phenomenon? Anyway, it could be the one case study to help me finish my book.”

“Oh,” she said. “Is that all?”

“What do you mean is that all?”

“I mean, is that all you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Oh, no. There’s one other thing. Nothing to worry about, though.”

They came to the elevator, and he pushed the down button.

“You knew some sub-grant money’s running out at the end of the scholastic year, right?”

They stepped toward the elevator doors. A backpack-clad student rushed by them and pushed the button for the first floor.

“I have to get outta here. I’m late for a class, sorry,” the student said. Laura and Halifax backed off, not entering the elevator. The door closed, and Laura listened to the car rumble down the shaft. Someone whistled while walking somewhere in the building. She heard the echo of footsteps and a slightly out-of-tune Elvis song, but couldn’t put her

finger on the name. Halifax whispered as the sound of the footsteps faded and was replaced by a door opening and closing.

“I was at Brezille’s cocktail party,” he said, and pushed the down button.

“Ooops,” Laura said. “I forgot.”

“You work too hard,” he said. “Anyway, Dean Cunningham tells me more money’s being diverted out of our department. The bastard says this while he put on his coat and headed out the door. I have to come up with solid evidence we’re making progress down here. I’d love to get the Bristol/Myers corporation to take up the slack, but their execs no longer want to subsidize a Mills grant. BM’s putting up money all right, but Cunningham’s diverting it to the Longevity Center.”

“Can’t you—”

“Can’t I what?” Halifax’s voice had risen as he related the encounter, and Laura glanced around in an obvious effort to make him aware of his voice carrying. He pushed the down button to the elevator six more times and ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t really have much ammunition to convince Cunningham. I mean, the most I could say was that if people don’t sleep well, they live stressful lives, which of course leads to a shorter life span. How lame is that? Maybe we should get together with Longevity.”

“We help people. You help people,” she said. The elevator bell chimed, and the doors opened. They stepped into the car, and the doors closed.

“That’s not enough. And you know it. Publish. Make a splash. Jump through hoops, but do it now, not yesterday. And if you fuck up? Well, then you didn’t take your time. You weren’t thorough.” He fumbled with something in his pocket, his fingers pressing against the fabric in his trousers. “I need something to keep this going.”

Laura switched a manila folder she'd been carrying from one hand to the other—a list of new candidates for the study. She switched hands again, as if the three entries were three hundred burning coals. She brushed a strand of hair from her face, but it fell back down across her eyebrow.

“What if—” she began and stopped. The floor indicator's pings seemed to grow louder as the silence between them increased and the elevator descended. Halifax appeared to be lost in his own thoughts as the elevator glided to a stop and the doors opened to the ground floor.

“What if what?” he said.

They stepped out to the main lobby.

“Nothing,” she said.

“It must be something.”

“Well, I was just thinking histograms are the key.”

“What do you mean?”

“If we programmed the digital software to assign incremental shades of each basic color to even the slightest variation in movement, then we might be able to show tendencies and unify movement during R.E.M.”

“For example?”

“Well,” she said. “I've been looking at the data, the similarities between so-called nightmares for instance and the colors the subjects report were associated with an axe or a lamp or a stereo, as examples of ‘concrete’ images, versus the colors associated with the father who wants to kill his son—you know, how red his face was or how blue the shirt or the demon that snarls, et cetera. Anyway, they're amazingly similar. Sure, not

all villains wear blue shirts or all demons have red faces, but when you look at the histograms and compare them to the verbal recollections the subjects have, the connection is there. Not one hundred percent there, but sixty, seventy percent.”

“Not good enough. We’d need eighty-five, ninety percent at least. And besides this is a stretch, Laura. *How* are we going to assign colors to *what* images?”

“Animation. We get a graphic programmer from the art department to create the animation.”

“Create the images? Through animation? You mean we project our interpretations, our impressions on the software?”

“Well, yes. But—”

“That’s crazy. I want reality.”

“Reality? Dreams? What’s the difference?”

“Laura, you’re asking me to dupe Cunningham and the grant committee. I can’t. I’m not into smoke and mirrors.”

“Why not? It’ll buy you some time and maybe more money. And besides, where’s your suspension of disbelief?”

“Scientists, true scientists, don’t suspend disbelief. What you’re talking about is the literary world. And what you’ve left out is the beginning to that idea—the *willing* suspension of disbelief. And I’m not *willing* to do that.”

“Of course,” she said.

“I can’t take a chance with magic.”

“Maybe what we need is a little magic to break through to the other side.”

“What other side? What do you mean by the *other side*?”

Laura shrugged her shoulders. In the year she'd been working with Halifax she now understood he was resistant to changing his perceptions of reality. She knew she couldn't explain herself to him, let alone explain her need to bend the line between accepted reality and fantasy. She was amazed he'd made it this far in the scientific world.

"Just an idea," she said.

"Forget it. No one'll buy it. The idea stinks."

Halifax increased the pace of his step and disappeared around a corner. Laura was left behind and momentarily forgot where she was headed. She wanted to kick herself. This dismissal was more devastating than past statements like "That's quite a brilliant thought coming out of that pretty little head...." At the moment, she would have preferred patronization to condescension.

As she stood speechless in the foyer, she tried to think of things she should have said in response to "it stinks." She could have said, "so does your breath," or "since you're so fucking brilliant, I can see how you'd think my elementary ideas bore you," or simply, "go fuck yourself, Halifax." Then she realized none of these responses were particularly humorous or witty or biting. And of all things, these lame, on-the-spot unvoiced responses revealed her lack of confidence in her unique approach to capturing individual dreams in concrete, reviewable images—even if she was suggesting a little sleight of hand, even if the idea was infeasible itself.

In a matter of seconds she felt her mood change. The anger toward herself and Halifax subsided. It was replaced by wonder. She wondered why she wasn't able to hold her own with him. She'd always been able to spar intellectually and verbally with any

man. She couldn't figure out why Halifax struck her relatively speechless. She never felt in awe of anyone, let alone someone so closed-minded and sexist. She hated thinking it was possible her stifled responses indicated she was afraid of rejection and admonishment from him, her boss, a "superior." At the moment she craved an antacid because her stomach churned like bacteria multiplying in a petri dish, but she knew that even if she downed a whole bottle of Pepto-Bismol she wouldn't be cured, but might shit pink, instead. And she never wanted to be that much of a girl.

If she couldn't come up with an appropriate and well-placed insult to counter Halifax's dull but effective one, how could she put faith in any of her ideas? And then she laughed. Other students and laboratory staff passed her in the foyer, some holding the door open for her, thinking she was on her way out, but she watched Halifax through the building's glass, his body becoming smaller as he walked, hands in pockets, head down, away from Laura. She stopped laughing, but a smile remained, and she thought if anything was a stretch, it was her logic of dismissing a long-contemplated idea just because she decided not to defend herself. Nonetheless, she wished she'd had the guts to tell him to fuck off.

It neared eight o'clock in the evening. Laura stood in the foyer and watched Halifax disappear and saw the Los Angeles sky reach its highest hue of brown-orange. She was a few minutes late getting to Lab C.

She opened the file she held and the first new sleeper was the English graduate student Halifax had interviewed. Cecil Caraway.

Chapter Two

The lack of sleep the night before made Laura wish she could skip settling the sleepers into their rooms, inform the new grad students monitoring them that they were on their own without any last minute instructions, and go home to her fluffy white sheets and cuddle herself into a deep slumber. But she couldn't do that. The word the grant wasn't going to be renewed left her in a trance, sleepwalking in a way, and she rode the elevator back up to the fifth floor Lab C where sleepers and monitors and a nurse awaited her. God, didn't they have anything better to do? She sure did.

She'd rather be in her lifeless apartment than providing more fodder for the sleepers when they went home to loved ones the next day or off to work in the morning. She could hear them, "Those folks at the clinic don't know what's wrong with *me*. *I* have something *rare*. They can't figure *me* out. *I'm* suffering, but *I'll* be fine..." and so on and on. As if the only cure for their disorders lay in the pollen of some undiscovered rain forest bloom. Since they only had days left on the planet, and if their companions or coworkers hadn't seen how unique they were before they'd entered the study, the scientists at the great institution of UCLA thought them special so the loved ones better recognize it as well.

They couldn't sleep, for Christ's sake. They didn't have lymphoma, or full-blown AIDS, or bacteria turning their organs to jelly. But then, lately, Laura couldn't sleep

either. She was sympathetic to a point, and fleetingly questioned whether she was in the right place—if she couldn't sympathize with people who sought help, what was she doing here? Then she realized her resentment had much to do with what she didn't have. She didn't go home to spouse, offspring, long-time companion, dog, cat, or houseplant as indictor or martyr. She didn't go home to any of those things because she didn't have any of them to suffer in silence with or complain to. Her sympathy toward the sleepers, or what was left of her sympathy, began to erode.

But there was Billy Beau Biggins. She called him ThreeBee.

Billy Beau was a character actor who moved to LA from West Memphis, Arkansas, in the seventies—even had a series, thirteen weeks of solid work. But now he worked in a Law firm as a file clerk, driving a beaten Toyota Celica, and going on auditions in the afternoon. He was fifty-three years old. Laura felt for him, but today was different. She shuddered at the thought of seeing him for fear her honesty would surface—that she'd reveal the future of the study was in serious doubt.

She knocked on the door to Room One. Billy Beau's hearty, Southern voice boomed for her to enter. His trousers, dress shirt, coat and tie hung on an upright clothes rack in front of a two-way mirror. Electrodes were in place and Laura cracked a smile as she watched him give his hairy beer gut a pat just above the elastic of his pajama bottoms. He reached for a T-shirt and, like the sleep veteran he was, gently put it on over the wires hanging from his chest.

"Morning, ThreeBee," she said.

"You're late," he said.

Her slight smile vanished. Halifax and her loneliness were still on her mind.

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“I’m giving you shit, darlin. You know that.”

“I know.” Laura smiled with her eyes, if not her lips.

“I had a nightmare, and I’ve been dying to get it off my chest.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It was like nothin I ever had before,” he said. “A corpse, a skinned corpse. It was some lawyer, I think. Some dumb ass from the office. I was lookin at his dead body. A damn dead body with no skin, and it grinned at me and said everthing was going to be all right. All my legal troubles would be gone. Not all my *worries*. My legal troubles.”

“So, that’s good.”

“I don’t have no legal troubles.”

The sound of metal tapping glass interrupted them. A muffled, male voice vibrated through the mirror. “Laura, the clothes are blocking the camera.”

Laura put Billy Beau’s file down on his bed and took hold of the rack. As she tipped it to the side, she lost her grip and Billy Beau’s suit, except the dress shirt, slipped off the hooks. He helped her pick everything up.

“How secure are you in your job?”

“Well, they’ve threatened to fire me, you know that,” he said. He brushed his blazer of unseen lint.

“There ya go.”

“Hmmm... You know what else happened?”

“No. What?”

“The corpse asked me for a drink of water.”

“And you gave it to him?”

“Sure, why not?”

Laura picked up his file, opened it, and clicked her ballpoint pen.

“What colors did you see?”

“The body was all red and dark blue and purple and stuff. You know, just like one of them medical charts that names all the muscles.”

She began writing, and the thought crossed her mind that she was too boring, performing boring tasks, writing down data that may never mean a thing.

“Any other colors?”

“Yes.”

She stifled a yawn. “Like?”

“Well, there was this light purple. Sort of lavender.”

“Lavender? What was lavender?”

“Urine. The dead guy took a piss. The guy pissed purple.”

“You shouldn’t have given him a glass of water.”

“He shouldn’t have asked for one.”

Laura smiled openly now. Billy Beau sat on the edge of his bed. She untangled the electrodes from under his shirt and hooked them up to the monitors.

He lay back and put the CPAP mask over his nose and mouth, but didn’t flip the on switch. Laura dimmed the lights and began speaking to him in a slow, calm, and monotone voice.

“You are in a safe place, ThreeBee. Your toes are getting heavy. Feel how relaxed they are. Now the heaviness moves up through your feet to your ankles. They feel like weighted boots.”

Billy Beau wiggled his toes, yawned, then opened his eyes to wink at her before closing them again. She reached out and took hold of his hand, making a circle in his palm with the tip of her forefinger. She began in slow motion, then increased the pace, round and round.

“The heaviness moves up to your shins and calves...”

A spasm in his legs seemed to shake off any tension trapped in them. Laura sensed that she needn't go any further. Billy Beau had become conditioned to her relaxation technique. She let go of his hand and it fell to the bed, but continued circling his palm with her finger, and then stopped. She drew her fingers together in a motion similar to pulling strings out of his hand, as if removing the stress and strain from his body. And he went limp. He began snoring. She got up from the chair beside the bed and flipped the switch to the CPAP machine. Air was forced into his nose and mouth, and Billy Beau went silent.

She closed the door to Room One behind her and squinted at the bright fluorescent lights in the hallway. Tony passed her while unbuttoning his lab coat. He smirked, his beady eyes indicating his discomfort with Laura.

“Where you been?” he said. “They’re all waiting.”

“They always wait, Tony. I’m not mommy giving them a good night kiss.”

“Yeah, but they seem to like the Voodoo, sweetheart.”

Laura stopped. She'd been trying to move down the hall and not engage in a lengthy conversation with him. Saying hello and moving on would have been fine. When he began by inquiring after her whereabouts and following it up with a term of endearment, she gave up escaping and turned to him, planting both feet firmly on the carpet. With a voice as calm and nice as she could muster, she looked him directly in the eye.

"Tony, I'm not your sweetheart or baby or honey or girlfriend or anything but a fellow student, a colleague. And I'd appreciate it if you simply called me Laura."

Tony put his hands up in surrender. Laura could see he realized he'd struck a sensitive spot in her. A nervous laugh emerged from his thick throat.

"Whoa. Whoa. All right. All right. I'll call you Laura and you can start calling me Dr. Cheatham."

Amy Chin, a first-year sleep monitor, walked between them. The distance between their bodies had increased so much that Amy had difficulty passing behind either one of them.

"Laura, they're waiting for you," she said.

"I know, Amy." Laura sighed.

"Oh, and the new guy's in five instead of Mrs. Pinorini. She said she hates five so I switched her—"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it, five."

Amy shrugged and disappeared around a corner.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she said to Tony.

“I defend my dissertation at the end of the semester,” he said. He moved farther away from her. “Almost two years ahead of you, I might add.”

Laura was shocked. Tony had come in only two semesters before she’d started. Either he’d been doubling up on semester hours himself or Halifax had been grooming him and had perhaps proposed to the Dean that the extra time be counted as hours toward the degree. But how did she miss seeing that? She tried to keep her jaw from dropping any closer to her feet, and thought back to Chad Glenn.

“Why is it men have so much invested in the title of Doctor?”

He did a pirouette, balancing lightly on one foot, thumbs and forefingers together, elbows bent and then bared his teeth, forcing his lips to stay apart.

“Oh, and you don’t, sweetcheeks?”

He pushed off with his other foot, swiveling in another ballet-like turn, and entered his office. He closed the door behind him. Laura felt relieved, but unnerved. She had nothing more to say or ask, and even if she did, she knew she’d get a button-pushing answer. Instead, her head swirled with a slow burn. Her sleepwalking frame of mind resumed. She flipped the cover to the file and opened the door to room Five.

Cecil Caraway sat on the bed, staring into space. Laura entered and was confused. She looked at the chart and then at Cecil, who turned his head toward her, coming out of his thoughts. He seemed unsure, if not nervous, and stood as she closed the door. She managed a sigh, keeping it from becoming a beleaguered huff.

“You’re not Mrs. Pinorini,” she said.

“I’m CC,” he said.

“Cecil Caraway.” She glanced at the chart again. “I’m Laura Germain.”

“Hi.”

“May I call you Cecil?”

“I go by CC, mostly. In the department. It’s like De Mille. Not Beanie and..., if you don’t mind.”

Laura sat in the lone chair in the room, a safe distance from him. He resumed his seat on the bed. She glanced at his chart, but didn’t take time to read more than his name and age. Thirty-three.

“I don’t understand. Who’s De Mille and Beanie?”

“Cecil B. De Mille. And Beanie and Cecil. My name’s like the director’s not the sea serpent.”

“Yeah, well great. I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.” She looked him over.

“The e is short, like in Cecil, not long like in Cecil.”

“Wow, you really are an English major, aren’t you?”

“All media interests me. Old movies. Classic cartoons...” His voice trailed off.

Laura glanced at the chart again, but this only served to divert her eyes. During the short moment alone with him, she had taken in most of his physical features and decided he was attractive. He had long, dark, curly hair that had a few strands of gray at the temples. It all tumbled past his shoulders and was gathered in back with an elastic band. His face was thin, lips pink, but a bit on the flat side, and his dark-rimmed eyes registered little depth, although the color of blue speckled with gold seemed to sparkle for someone deprived of sleep—self-imposed or otherwise. The flicker of life in anyone’s

eyes, Laura thought, usually signified intelligence in the owner, and she hoped that Cecil Caraway's seeming lack of depth in his ocular ovals was because of sleep deprivation and not a result of a boring mind laying dormant—or worse, active—behind them.

A silence fell in the room. He looked into her face and away. He bounced his knees up and down on his toes, his ankles like springs. A clear sign of nervousness, she thought. But she wasn't sure if her presence made him uncomfortable or if it was first-day jitters. She wanted it to be more of the former and not the latter. She pulled her pen and notepad from her lab coat pocket and wrote: "Soy milk, org toms, avo, he's cute...." As she composed her impromptu grocery list, she could feel him scanning the room and sensed he might be trying to do anything not to lock onto her. At the precise moment that she crossed the T on cute, he startled her back into the room.

"You're cute," he said.

Laura looked up at him. She dipped her shoulders and stretched her neck as if trying to relieve the strain of an imaginary kink. She pulled the file and notepad up to her chest. He couldn't have seen, could he?

"What?" she said.

"I said, you're cute."

He still wasn't looking at her. His legs stopped bouncing.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. So what am I supposed to do?"

She closed the file on her notepad, putting it on the chair after rising, and moved to the digital console. She took hold of three wires, red, green, black, and began separating them.

“Did you bring something to sleep in?”

“I sleep in the nude,” he said.

“Not here, you don’t.”

“Just kidding. I brought some shorts. Is that okay?”

“Fine. I can hook this all up when you’re ready.”

She dropped the wires, reached for the file, and turned toward the door.

“You don’t have to leave. I have them on underneath.”

There was a greater awkwardness as CC, in one quick motion, removed his shirt and unbuttoned the top button to his jeans. He kicked off his faux Doc Martin’s and reached down to slide off his socks. She moved behind the console and checked the lines going in and out. Everything was secure, no loose wires or connections. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he stuffed his socks in his shoes and stood to finish undressing. His chest was smooth, with just a wisp of hair below his navel. His arms were tanned up to mid-biceps, but the rest of his skin was much lighter. His torso was V-shaped and lean, quite muscular. He was in great shape for an English major, she thought. But as he stepped out of his Levi’s, Laura saw his legs. They were spindly and extremely hairy. It wasn’t exactly a turn-off to her, but they didn’t match the muscle tone or aesthetic line of the rest of his body. She felt she could deal with it, however. His face was kind, his manner simple and easygoing. And he wasn’t a scientist.

If she were going to be interested in another man, she thought, he would have to be out of the department. Not an M.D. Forget about a Psychologist or biologist or even a computer science geek. She would prefer a History major or Art or Dance major, anyone in the liberal arts to a fellow scientist trying to impress her with how much progress he’s

making in research and application. And she felt CC had other interests beyond proving and disproving theories, finding patterns, and deciphering physiological symptoms. In a way, his interest in classic cartoons made her feel relieved.

She attached the Cardio-Respiratory monitor, R.E.M. sensor, and Cranial-Facial muscle indicator lines to his body. She thought about the contrast of his hairy legs and smooth chest and stifled herself from commenting that if his upper body were anything like the lower, he'd be shaving for days to avoid ripping out small circles of hair when the linetape was peeled off in the morning. Their faces came within inches of each other as Laura leaned over him from the front, fixing a motor line to his neck muscle. She tucked her hair behind her ear after she realized it had brushed across his shoulder. She felt a quick rush of warmth and moved to the console to plug the lines in.

"This is a waste of time, you know," he said.

"Why do you say that?"

"I can't sleep. These things'll just give you readings on my awake time."

"Let me worry about that. You'll sleep. For how long, we don't know. But that's what we'll find out. And with luck, we'll eventually find out why."

"I've been controlling it all."

"Do you want to sleep?"

"More than just about anything right now."

"Then let go. Don't try to control anything anymore."

CC lay back on the bed. Laura dimmed the lights and glanced at the two-way mirror where a single red dot shone through. The camera was on. She sat on the chair

next to his bed and became calm, serene, once her brain registered the environment of another soft sleep room and one more sleeper settling in for the night. It was as if she was the keeper of a gate and her respect for the sanctity of the room equaled that of a church and those who were about to enter another dimension became practitioners of a universal prayer. His legs twitched and his shoulders shifted. Her voice dropped low and monotone.

“Try and relax, Cecil,” she said. “Close your eyes and begin to drift...”

“I’m getting sleepy...” he said and imitated Boris Karloff swinging a pocket watch in front of a young girl.

Laura stifled a smile. “Let’s hope so.”

He closed his eyes.

“I’ll move from your toes to the top of your head,” she began. “As you relax each area, I want you to physically wiggle your toes or simply imagine your muscles becoming as heavy as water. You’re as fluid as water. The tips of your toes are like nothing...” He wiggled his toes. “Your feet, all the way up to your ankles, feel like balloons filled with water...and now your calves and shins lay on top of the bed at first, but begin to feel like part of the sheets, like part of the material...dissolving into the fibers...”

She watched his face as she took hold of his hand. A wave of relaxation seemed to spread from his legs, where she’d last had him concentrate, all the way up to his forehead. Muscles in his cheeks and jaw fell slack and his eyes appeared to sink a fraction of an inch below his eyelids. She began circling his limp palm with her finger,

moving from the outside inward and then back out again, slowly and methodically. She resumed taking his mind up the length of his body.

“Your hips feel like you’ve just run a marathon,” she said. “Your stomach muscles let go and as you move to your lungs it feels like someone else is breathing for you...a thousand pound weight is lifted from your chest and you no longer have the burden of taking a breath....” She continued the circular movement with her finger and watched as color came to his pallid face and seemed to wipe it clean of tension and stress. She slowed the movement around his palm and drew her fingers together, pulling upward, and imagined strands of strain and worry leave his body forever. He was asleep, much deeper than she thought he’d go into on the first night. His breathing became slow and steady.

She let his hand rest on the bed, tucked the file under her arm, opened the door and left the room. Amy came down the hall with more files in her arms. She held one out in front of her, handing it and the others off to Laura. “Mrs. Pinorini. Number Six.” Laura heaved a sigh and stopped in front of Room Six. She looked back to the door of Room Five and for the first time in the long while since she’d been involved in the study, hoped someone was sleeping well.

Chapter Three

At six forty-three the next morning Laura was curled up on the couch in the observation room, her flattened palm acting as a pillow against her cheek.

Amy Chin navigated the room, stepping around tripods holding digital cameras aimed through the two-way mirrors at each sleeper. Most subjects remained sound asleep and Amy glanced over to Laura, then directed her gaze from her supervisor to CC in Room Five and back to Laura once more.

CC began to stir. He yawned, opened his eyes, and stretched. He had little control of his limbs and reached out for nothing with fingers wide as his legs went straight, his toes spread and knees fully extended. Amy gently shook Laura's shoulder.

"Laura, Laura. He's waking."

Laura opened her eyes. She felt she hadn't slept at all or had slept too much. Her body was solid and slow, like concrete.

She pushed herself up from the cushions and went to the glass. CC sat on the edge of his bed and began pulling at the tape holding the sensors in place.

"You want to get in there and help him out?" Laura said.

"Me? He's all yours. You're the one who watched over him all night," Amy said.

"Yeah, well, it's been awhile."

"That's what I mean."

Laura caught the curious smile that flickered across Amy's face. It had been months since she'd stayed overnight monitoring sleepers, and she'd rarely, if ever, given any indication she was more interested in one subject than another. Billy Beau Biggins was the closest she'd ever come to favoring a case, but that was because he was such an amiable man, always smiling, and she felt a sort of *soul* connection to him (and once, when Halifax demanded she defend the inordinate amount of time she'd spent early on with Billy Beau, she'd used the term *soul*). But now, as she watched CC struggle with an impulse wire taped to the back of his neck, she felt a mix of emotions.

After leaving Miami, she'd vowed to never cross the line—the line of intelligent, sensible people—the one teachers have (never get emotionally involved with a student), the one doctors have (never allow transference), the one office people have (never sleep with a co-worker) and the one researchers have (never, ever, ever entertain the idea of sex with a subject). But CC was sexy, no doubt about it...and sharp, and seemed gentle, and—

“Is it you or me?” Amy said.

Laura stood motionless, her vague reflection staring back at her from the glass. CC finished pulling wires from his body, but one round tape remained on his neck.

“Laura?” Amy said. “Hey.” Amy reached out to her.

Laura finally woke from her thoughts and touched Amy's arm. She said nothing and left the observation room.

She sat across from him at an outdoor café table at Starbuck's and self-consciously took peeks at his face. He became more handsome to her. The simple things

caught her attention; the way he stirred his latte left and right instead of in a swirl; the masculine, thin black elastic band that held his ponytail in place; the way he averted her eyes when they connected; the expansion of his diaphragm with each intake of air and the falling of his chest when he sighed.

She watched him pick at a blueberry muffin and remembered how she'd heard his stomach rumble just thirty minutes earlier, as he finished getting dressed. He laughed when it rumbled louder and longer.

"I suppose I could use something to eat," he'd said.

"Breakfast is always good after a deep sleep," she'd said and smiled.

"Yeah, but it's only good if you have someone joining you."

His subtle invitation had its effect. She felt a rush from the compliment and wanted to hide the churning colors of her face. She couldn't avoid eye contact, so she forced her professional self to retake control. But not, of course, before accepting the invitation.

"How do you feel?" she'd said. He'd sat in a chair next to her desk with the office door closed during this first after-session interview.

She remained fixed on the whole conversation.

"Like 'The Sleeping Man,'" he'd said.

"The what?"

"Not the what. The who."

"Another cartoon?"

"Aw, c'mon. You guys around here must know about 'The Sleeping Man.' His name's everywhere in this building."

Amy Chin knocked on Laura's office door and entered. She cringed, looking at Laura, who fumbled with a pen and pad on her desk, trying to look casual.

"Sorry to interrupt. Halifax wanted the name of the file for all the compiled data on histograms," Amy said.

"Why?" Laura said.

"I don't know. He said you've been working on them, and I thought you might have it written down."

"No. I don't have it written down. It's a network file."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Of course it is. Shows how often he reviews your research, huh?"

"Yeah, go figure."

"What a pig," Amy said.

CC looked down at his hands. Laura sensed the female understanding between her and Amy amused him. He sucked in his lower lip and a smile didn't surface.

"It's under 'histograms,' Amy. Pretty simple."

"Sorry to bother you." Amy turned to go out the door as quickly as she'd come in.

"Amy." Laura called out to stop her, and Amy turned back. "Cecil said something—"

"CC," he said. "You can call me CC. I mean, please call me...well, whatever." He rubbed his palms on his jeans.

"Something about Edward Mills," she looked to CC.

“‘The Sleeping Man,’” he said, and oooohhhhed his voice to make it sound like eerie music from a bad Hollywood film.

“Shhhh...” Amy said. She closed the door behind her.

“I mean, I know who Mills was—” Laura said.

“Is,” CC said.

“It’s a good thing you asked me and not Halifax,” Amy said in a whisper. “He says it’s bullshit. Office talk that’s become some stupid LA legend. And he’s probably right.”

“My god, Amy, I asked a question. You’d think I wanted to build condos on Native burial grounds.”

“Well, I heard Halifax forced someone to resign his stipend for writing a paper on him.”

“So they’re connected?”

“And I know where he lives.”

Amy and Laura stared at CC.

“I do,” he said, and shrugged.

“Halifax—” Amy said again.

“What’s he gonna do? Kick me out of the study? Last night I slept better than I have in months. Maybe I’ve found the perfect sleeping pill.” CC looked at Laura and then at his hands once more. Laura thumbed the edge of a stack of papers on her desk. Amy looked from him to her.

“Oh. Okay. I think I’ll leave now.”

The traffic on Gayley Avenue became heavier, and the sounds of brakes squealing, horns honking, and engines revving increased as commuters and students rushed to parking garages. Laura sipped her coffee and remembered she'd missed her morning run. She picked at a lightly toasted bialy with barely a tablespoonful of honey-walnut cream cheese spread over it. If she ate it, she'd have to take a late afternoon or evening run, she thought, and hated the idea of running when the smog was at its worst.

"So, is this a date?" she said.

"Yeah, our first one."

"Oh? There'll be others?"

"If we have time."

"Why wouldn't we have time? I mean, if—"

"Well, I'm almost finished with school, but we're still grad students, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, that." Laura smiled and stirred her coffee, side to side and not in a swirl. She always drank her coffee black with no sweetener.

"What if I told you I don't want a relationship?" she said.

"Who said anything about a relationship?"

"Oh," she said and felt foolish. At the moment she wanted to slip away to her apartment, slide a Mozart CD into the player, and draw a bubble bath—to do just about anything to avoid talking about the subject she was responsible for bringing up.

"I'd say nobody really wants a relationship when he or she has one. It's when a person doesn't have one...well," he said. "You're not...involved...are you?"

"I'm a slave to the study and Halifax. I'm his silent mistress. The one he comes to when his wife, i.e. his theory, isn't putting out."

Laura looked away from CC and across Gayley Avenue to a McDonald's restaurant. She watched Halifax go inside with someone she'd never seen before—a young African-American man wearing glasses. She turned in her seat and leaned forward and tried to see directly into the McDonald's, but was unable to see anything but a number of headless bodies.

“What, exactly, is his theory?”

“He's never put it on paper, really.” She spoke away from CC. Her words were flat. She had a sinking feeling in her gut, but didn't know why. “I mean,” she continued. “I came here because of the concept, not because I completely understood him. And that may have been a mistake on my part.”

“What's the concept?”

“He says it's possible to capture dreams with digital imagery. And I'd like to see it happen.”

“Oh, yeah. He said something about it when I met with him.”

“He did?” She turned back to CC for a moment.

“Yeah, but it's impossible, you know. I don't know much about electronics, but we're talking about the abstract versus the concrete and few people have really been able to blend the two. I mean, really able. And no scientists have, that's for sure.”

“Einstein,” she said.

She turned her attention toward the McDonald's once more and saw Halifax, the young African-American man, and Tony walk out. She watched them go around the corner and enter the Cadillac Diner. Tony already had been inside the McDonald's and she'd obviously not noticed. Halifax had taken her to lunch many times, but never

breakfast and, therefore, not with Tony. And then, in a short whirl, she turned to CC and felt embarrassed she hadn't been listening to him.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"When?" He licked his fingers and Laura wouldn't let herself imagine too far into the sexual implications of it.

"Right after I said Einstein was...forget it," she said. She took one last sip from her coffee. CC's latte cup was empty.

"Do you want to get out of here?" he said.

"God, yes."

"I'm feeling so good, I think I want to play hooky," he said. He took hold of both coffee cups and dropped them in a dishwasher's tub near a trash receptacle. "You want to play hooky today?"

She'd been thinking about abruptly getting up from her seat, leaving CC behind, and casually walking into the Cadillac Diner just so she could see the surprise on Halifax's and Tony's faces. She wouldn't have to say a word, just sit at the counter and never glance over her shoulder at their table. Perfect. But not really. She wouldn't be able to hear anything because they'd not share a word with her. She was sure they'd change their tone and line of conversation (once her presence was known) and then innocently invite her to join them. But she hated not knowing what they were up to. She had a feeling, of course, that it couldn't be anything good if she weren't included in what appeared to be a secret meeting, but since she wasn't sure it had nothing to do with her, she decided to fill her mind with CC.

Whatever he had in store for the rest of the day, whatever it was—diverting her attention with classic cartoons, explaining his theory on how to install a towel rack in a bathroom (if he had one, and later, it turned out, he actually held such a theory), if he simply wanted to read to her from Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* (his second favorite book), which was something he did on a subsequent date—it was all right with her.

“Playing hooky sounds fantastic,” she said. And she forgot about all the data she had to review, paid little attention to the guilt she felt for skipping her neurophysiology class, and headed away from Starbuck's and further away from the diner and toward the parking structure on Weyburn Avenue.

And the day was beautiful.

It made her think back to North Dade high school when she was fifteen years old and found her first love. She'd met Jeremy—a shy and complex boy who'd just turned sixteen, had a parent-bought car, and smoked cigarettes to look cool and hide the awkwardness of adolescence. The boy had pulled out of the underclassmen's parking lot and nearly clipped Laura with the rear bumper. She slapped the trunk of the car with her opened palm and screamed, “Watch where you're going, asshole!” He stopped, got out of the car, and apologized. He asked her if she wanted to ditch the rest of the day with him, and she went along. She and Jeremy ditched many times afterward.

During their first ditch-day, she and Jeremy ended up in Crandon Park, where they went to the zoo and had a picnic under an ancient ficus tree with its waxy green

leaves rustling against the loose brown vines. In the late afternoon, they sat propped by a coconut palm and watched wavelets from Biscayne Bay break on the gray sand.

Sandpipers skittered and poked and flew only to land a short distance away to do more skittering and poking. And they talked about their futures.

Laura imagined herself a world-respected scientist.

Jeremy is still in the Army.

It took the LA Zoo for her to confirm she wasn't in the purely scientific world of theory, research, and putting the pieces of some unknown puzzle together in order to come up with a clearer picture of our known world. She wasn't operating in that ideal. She realized egos and politics and ambition had smacked her on the back of the head. The gorillas and polar bears and elephants showed her.

She and CC watched the gorillas move from one form of shelter to another, carrying banana tree saplings with them, stripping the tough outer shell to get to the softer pith. And they chewed. A couple groomed one another, picking through hair while an infant lay cradled in its mother's lap. The elephants and polar bears didn't seem much different to Laura. They, too, appeared only concerned with food and play and a place to rest and as long as there was a companion, then life was apparently good. And for the moment Laura ignored the fact they were in cages.

She and CC leaned on a chainlink fence separating them from the elephant exhibit. They licked ice cream cones. The day was hot, and the smog from the Valley formed in a haze that rested on Griffith Park's Los Feliz hills. Laura ate her chocolate chip cookie dough vanilla and vowed no matter how bad the smog was, she must take a run when she got home.

“You went into R.E.M. last night,” she said.

“What’s that mean?” he said. But as she began to define it, he interrupted her. “I know what R.E.M. stands for, I just don’t know why we do it.”

“You were dreaming.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess I was.”

“Normally, we wake subjects when we see they’ve entered that state,” she said. “We ask them what they were dreaming about, or if they’re home, ask them to write the dreams down when they wake.”

“But you didn’t wake me.”

“No. You seemed so...”

“So, what?”

“Peaceful. Sort of *dead*.”

“Sort of dead?”

“Well,” and she laughed. She re-wrapped her cone with a napkin. “You barely moved all night, except for your eyes, and I didn’t want to interrupt. You were sleeping so deeply. I guess the scientist in me took a back seat to the girl who wishes she could do the same.”

CC finished his cone as Laura began crunching on hers. He went to a trash bin and deposited the stiff paper the cone came in. A few sweat bees buzzed around the trash, and Laura saw him dance away from them as they bounced in the air toward him. No one else seemed to pay any attention to his dance. She was amused. And she felt a moment of protective relief as he escaped a possible stinging.

“Bees,” he said. “You never asked me what I dreamt last night.” He reached out to her, but she didn’t take his hand. They moved away from the fence and Laura ate.

“Okay, what’d you dream?”

“That I was Donny Osmond.”

Laura nearly choked with an intake of breath, a bit of ice cream hitting her windpipe. She’d felt the urge to laugh, but the discomfort of trying to cough out the ice cream prevented her.

“You okay,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. She let out a couple more short coughs and calmed herself.

“Donny Osmond, huh?”

“Yeah, fucking Donny Osmond. Can you believe it?”

She saw him cringe. His shoulders went into a half-shrug and his face went pink as his smile and eyes crinkled. She felt certain he was unsure about saying the gerund form of fuck. It’s not that she’d never said fuck, or that she didn’t scream the word out when pissed off or in some other state of high emotion. It was that she’d always calculated when or if a time was right for saying it—as if there’s a proper moment when getting to know someone and you don’t want to turn him off with crudeness or give the impression you communicate best in street language, in a phrase, that you’re not a low-life idiot.

She threw the rest of her cone away and slid her hand into the crook of his arm. She gave him a gentle squeeze. He looked at her, smiling, and she could tell he felt relieved as he drew his elbow in toward his ribs in a caress of her hand.

Laura didn't take a run in the late afternoon or evening or at anytime during the night. CC came home with her. It seemed part of the natural progression and somewhere during the day, as the hours passed, she sensed neither of them wanted to leave the side of the other.

She'd wanted to get her run in, but rationalized it might be rude to have him wait alone in her apartment while she climbed toward Sunset. Her calves would perhaps enjoy the day off, she told herself, but, unfortunately, so would her thighs. Oh, why worry about it? It was only a bagel with cream cheese and a double scoop of ice cream. She threw the sugar cone away, didn't she?

She'd offered to make dinner. CC snapped up the invitation and she thought him not a stupid man. And as she stood in the hallway outside her apartment door and separated her keys, Bill, her next door neighbor came out of his apartment. He casually gave CC a once-over and winked to Laura.

"Hey Laura. Off to work," he said. He was dressed in black slacks and white shirt and carried a lime green apron.

"Have a good night," she said. But she stopped him. "Bill, this is Cecil."

Bill offered his hand and they shook.

"Like DeMille?" Bill said. Laura saw a smile cross CC's face.

"Exactly," CC said. "You have a strong grip." They held the handshake a moment longer and then released.

"So do you."

CC casually stuck his hand in his pocket and took a half-step closer to Laura. She turned the key and her apartment door opened. Bill pointed directly at her and his lips curled into a sly smile.

“I have a lot to tell you,” he said, but Laura took it to mean she’d better have a lot to tell him.

“Oh, really?” she said.

“Yes. Really. Tomorrow night. That is, if you’re not busy.” And Bill edged toward the top of the stairs. “Nice to meet you.” But CC only nodded as Bill bounced down the steps. Laura ushered him inside.

“My competition?” CC said.

“Nope. Mine. He’s gay.”

“He doesn’t look gay.”

“Look?”

“I mean, seem.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “I thought he was straight when I moved in. He was so helpful, like some guy who thinks that by doing the manly things around the house a woman will become dependent.”

“You? Dependent? That’s a laugh.”

But Laura knew her independence was like quicksand—it looked like the path was well worn, but years ago when she’d fallen into the idea of total independence, she struggled and found herself reaching out for anyone to drag her back onto solid ground. And of the many lies people live, she thought, the lie she was living—the one where she put up the façade of the strong woman, the independent thinker, the man in a woman’s

body and clothing—was the one that bothered her most because she was fearful. She was fearful of many of the things women fear and hate: rape, tired of having to prove herself beyond what any man in her position would have to prove, but most of all she was angry that she really loved having a man touch her and tell her she was attractive and want to make love to her. She didn't believe herself when she said wanting a man wasn't giving up anything. She knew better. They always turned out the same. Yet, she loved the beginning moments of a new relationship. The closeness. The care. The being on your best behavior. The sex. And so, the year was over, as far as she was concerned. That was it.

She knew they would sleep together. They'd often brushed shoulders while walking. He'd reached out for her hand when he wanted to see the birds and she wanted to see the big cats. She felt the energy pass between them, and most importantly, they picked up on each other's sexual innuendoes.

"Lucky bull elephant," he'd said.

"Think of the cow," she'd responded.

But she worried the sex would be awkward. She worried it wouldn't be very good. She worried for about a minute. Then she barely pulled the pasta shells from the cupboard, unscrewed the cap to her cheap wine, poured two glasses, gave one to him, and took hold of his other hand. She led him to her bedroom.

It was a Friday.

Chapter Four

Their lovemaking that night—and during much of the weekend—was soft. Everything about it was soft. Even when Laura saw his erection spring from the tented confines of his plaid cotton boxers, it was the softness she remembered.

If he were to describe his impressions, she felt he might avoid the obvious, occasional, animalistic quality of their sexual marathon and mention the softness of her bedroom—the curves of her body, the votive candles, feather pillows, the mattress that had caressed her every lonely night and caressed them for hours as they lay naked. And, of course, there was the unmistakable whiteness of her soft sheets. She loved white sheets. “They’re so...*white*,” he’d say.

It was also awkward. She knew it would be. How could it not? With most first encounters there’s clumsiness and apprehension, and this time was no different than many times in the past. The unwritten *Handbook of Lovemaking Do’s and Don’ts* had lain dormant in her mind: Make sure to spend time on the lesser-known erogenous zones. Don’t move too fast. Don’t move too slowly. Don’t stick your tongue in too far or too quickly or too hard. Watch the teeth. Don’t scratch. Be smooth. More foreplay. Less direct touching. Kiss the ear. Lick the neck. Naked thighs. Breathe heavy. Tickle. Tease. Build. Take hold. Mouth. In. Out.

Let your lover know this is the only moment that matters.

Early on Saturday morning, before sunrise, CC woke and stumbled to the bathroom. Laura reached out to the empty side of the bed and ran her fingers over the sheets. She closed her eyes and momentarily fell back to sleep. The toilet flush woke her once more. She looked into the darkness. He shuffled to the bed with his eyes closed. He took a deep breath and let it out, his hair hanging over his face. He brushed it aside, and sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. She pulled her knees toward her chest and curled up, anticipating his fall into the pillows. He sat there. She didn't know why, but he just sat there, upright, for what seemed like a long minute. Then he fell back and lay on his side facing her. He pushed his middle forward and they embraced. She felt his leg hair brush against her smooth thigh and noticed his penis was dry and flaccid. He nuzzled into her neck and then his head fell on her pillow. She took hold of his hand.

“You're fantastic,” he said and yawned.

She kissed his shoulder and they fell asleep together. They didn't wake until late morning.

When they woke, they stayed close to the bed for the day. There was an occasional pee break—where Laura went to the bathroom, quickly peed, then scampered back, jumped in and threw the comforter over her to get warm again—but when CC went to pee, he strolled back and sat upright on the edge of the bed for his curious, meditative minute and, only afterward, got back in to cuddle.

There was the much needed coffee and cereal in bed—then lunch in bed, and they discussed having dinner there as well. Friday night was a night of lovemaking. But this particular Saturday, Laura decided, was a day for fucking.

“What do you think is happening?” he said.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“You know....” He stroked her breast, then ran his fingers down her side. She bit her bottom lip and pulled him close as she moved her knee aside. He began playing with her, tugging gently on her pubic hair, and took hold of her by sliding his fingers down to where she wanted them to be. And her sighs became whispered moans.

“Oh, yeah...I know,” she said.

They kissed—her tongue pushing hard against his. Laura felt his tongue push back. But he stopped. He nibbled her lips and she ran her hands over his shoulders and felt his biceps. He continued with little kisses on her chin and moved across her jawline. She reached up and took hold of his face with both hands. She kissed him hard once more and he kissed her like she wanted him to, but he stopped again.

“I think I’m falling in love,” he said.

“Shhh....”

She held her finger up to her mouth and then touched his cheek.

“Well, I really think I am.”

She wanted to say it was too early. It was a day. One day. He wasn’t saying, “I love you,” that was true, of course, but no matter how starved she felt—no matter that she’d been on a sexual-love fast—she wasn’t ready to dive into a discussion of love and commitment and love and relationships and love and sex and love and togetherness and

love and work and love and priorities and love was used too frequently and too easily and....

Her clock radio switched on and for the first time since they'd been together Laura thought about the time. Why was her radio alarm going off at five-thirty in the afternoon? It was her favorite classical station, and she recognized the first few notes to one of Chopin's Polonaises, but she always woke at five-thirty in the morning. She reached over and pressed the set button and saw that she'd at sometime set the alarm for P.M. instead of A.M. She smiled, thinking she couldn't remember ever hearing the alarm in the morning—she'd always waked on her own.

The polonaise began building from its early calm notes to its quicker, forceful ones.

“So...what do you think about that?” CC said.

“About what,” she said.

“About what I said. That I really might be—”

“I'll tell you what I think...” she said and rolled over on her belly and buried her face in a pillow. She propped herself on her knees, throwing her bottom into the air. The pillow muffled her voice as she grabbed a fold in the mattress cover. “I think you should fuck me. That's what I think.”

She turned her face and glanced up to him. Strands of hair covered her eyes, but she could see him smile. The polonaise grew more rhythmic and he moved on top of her, took hold of her forearms, and pulled her up to his chest. He kissed her neck and the music pulsed louder and steadier. She threw his arms outward and fell to the pillow and buried her face in it once more. She felt him rise to his knees and she sucked in a breath

as his skin brushed the back of her thighs. He pressed his hands down, pushing her face and chest into the bed, and she sighed a deep sigh and didn't resist.

So the weekend went.

Laura gave CC one long kiss and two short pecks on the lips, then kicked him out of her apartment on Sunday night. As soundly as they'd slept on Friday and Saturday, and as much as she wanted and needed that kind of rest and attention and credited him for it, she missed her routine. She wasn't going to let a physical attraction get in the way of her morning meditation, her liquid breakfast, her run, or any other part of it. And although she slept fine Sunday night, it wasn't the same. As insane as she believed missing any man to be, she missed *him*. But she only needed to get out of bed on Monday morning—and after clearing her mind—prepare for her run by spreading Vaseline on the chafed parts of her labia to think fondly of him.

At work, she checked her mailbox for messages in the main office, then waddled into Lab C with a small amount of soreness and smiled to herself, remembering why. She noticed the lab seemed different, but thought for a moment it was just she who was different. CC had insisted she come by the English building at noon so they could picnic on a bench outside Royce Hall, and she found herself counting the hours before lunch, before seeing him again.

Lab C was full of activity. Assistants and undergrads looked busy as Laura came down the main hallway. Doors opened and closed. A Xerox machine hummed and clicked. A few sleepers emerged from their rooms. The weekend sleepers were ones she didn't know quite as well, except for Billy Beau Biggins. He'd made Lab C his personal

home away from home and even though he didn't have Laura on weekends to help him drift off to sleep, he said he always looked forward to seeing her on Mondays.

Laura sat at her desk and looked for messages that may have been left in her inbox over the weekend. And like her main mailbox, there were no messages. Nothing. And this surprised her. She was gone all day Friday—something she'd never done in over a year of work at the clinic—and there weren't any messages. She thought sure Halifax would want to talk to her about her truancy.

Amy Chin knocked on the door and entered the office with a barely suppressed grin spread across her face. She was too high-energy for this morning, any morning, Laura thought.

"So, so tell me," Amy said. She tapped Laura's forearm and bounced in her chair like a schoolgirl.

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me all about him."

"What's to tell?" Laura wanted to smile, wanted to share the details with someone, but restrained herself from saying the weekend was fabulous and just what the doctor ordered. She'd never been particularly close with Amy, but if she were going to gloat to someone over the amazing sex, she'd be a possibility. And then Laura thought she didn't have any women friends she could talk to. Amy was there, willing, listening, and practically salivating in anticipation.

"Oh, God! Tell me whatever you want." Amy squirmed.

"Well..." Laura said, then gave a sly smile. "I don't know. It was so... so—"

"Intimate?"

And Laura stopped. She felt her body sag and the smile wipe clear of her face.

“What’s wrong? C’mon, tell me.”

“It was nice. That’s all I’ll say.” And Laura turned in her seat. She scribbled on a pad on her desk.

Amy looked at the pad. Laura glanced at Amy and hoped she understood the scribbling was nothing more than a nervous way of ending the conversation.

“Oh. Okay. Well, then, business.”

“Yes, please. Business.”

“All the after-session interviews for the weekend are done, except Mr. Biggins’. He wanted you. As always.”

“All of them are done?”

“You’re almost an hour late.”

“I’m not late,” she said and looked at her watch. “Oh. Well. I guess I am.” She shrugged as if it didn’t concern her, but it did. She’d never been late before and then remembered she’d only looked at her watch in anticipation of the picnic. She hadn’t done anything different during the morning except let her mind wander, let herself go with the flow and rely on her instincts—that her routine was in motion and everything about it was perfectly timed. She wasn’t thinking of work.

Amy lowered her head and her eyes fell to the file she held open before her.

“Mr. Biggins is waiting outside for his interview,” she said. And then she mumbled. “Halifax said for me to enter the data.”

Laura sat upright, then bent her head down to try to get Amy to look at her, but she seemed to fake her absorption in a nearly blank report. Amy stood, her nose still buried in the file, went to the door, and left.

Laura sank in her chair and watched the door close. She booted up her desktop and reached for the mouse on its pad. She checked her emails and it appeared Halifax still didn't believe in them, even after her no-show. She remembered he hadn't called her on Saturday or Sunday, either. And he always called "to follow up," which meant to check up on her, and give the impression he was in control of everything under the clinic's roof.

A short knock on the door broke through her thoughts. She sighed heavily and was about to say, "What is it now, Amy?" but Billy Beau Biggins peeked in. He seemed to sense he was interrupting, his timid look like a puppy that just wet the carpet.

"I can wait," he said.

"No. No, that's all right."

He entered. She stood and propped the door open with a rubber stopper.

"You ever get the feeling everything's meant to be?"

Laura returned to her desk. Billy Beau took a seat. She clicked on the UCLA Network and waited for it to load. Clicks and buzzes from the hard drive sounded through her silent reaction to his question.

"Do you ever?" he said.

"Ever what?"

"Think things're meant to be? You know, like a person's life is predictable?"

The Network page finished loading and Laura double-clicked on her office files, then typed her password.

“I don’t follow you,” she said. “Not much is predictable in this world, Mr. Biggins.”

“*Mr.* Biggins? What happened to ThreeBee?”

She turned to him and smiled apologetically, removing her hand from the mouse and giving him more, if not her full, attention.

“What’s on ThreeBee’s mind this morning?”

“That’s better, darlin.” He paused as if to make sure she was really with him. “I dreamt I was at the Last Supper. Well, sort of like. And I was standing there in front of a guru.”

“Was it Jesus?” She glanced at her PC monitor.

“No. It was some other guru. And I was there in front of them all and they told me—”

“Sorry, but what did you see? What did this guy and all the rest look like?”

“Oh,” he said. She saw his eyes wander around the room, darting out to the hallway and then to a framed poster of some past neurophysiology conference hosted by UCLA that she hadn’t been around to attend. “He sorta looked like Jesus, but not really. And he wore this green robe...”

“Green. Good,” she said. Her computer checked and verified her password and the office files page popped up.

“And they had these mad looks on their faces. Like they was warning me. And then I saw my heart beating on the table like they was gonna eat it or something, but then

I knew they were just tellin me to take care of my heart, and they wasn't gonna eat it at all. And then I saw this swirling of colors..."^f

As Billy Beau continued, Laura reached for the mouse again. She glanced to him and smiled and nodded to give him the impression she was still focused. They locked eyes for a moment and she saw him relax as if he felt secure that her interest in the files was a secondary action. She double-clicked on Network Files, then Open Files, and waited for the list to appear.

"And then they said I was gonna be famous again, just like I was when I had my show. And then the room went all red. And I felt all this love—"

The list of files dropped down on her screen and Laura scrolled to the H's. She looked for "Histograms," but it wasn't there. She clicked out and then clicked back in again. She clicked on the menu and was sure she had the right folder and clicked on it.

"And they said I already knew the right girl for me and I wouldn't be lonely the rest of my life...Are you listening, darlin?" he said.

"Yes, got it. Red. A red room," she said, but her attention was on the screen. The same list came up.

"So they said I found me the right woman—"

"Fuck."

"What's the matter?"

"It's not here. The goddamn Histogram file isn't here."

She scrolled the list once more, and felt a rush of blood to her face as her hands began to quiver.

“Well, maybe I should just go, then. You got better things to do than sit here and listen to my babbling.”

“No. It’s all right,” she said. She got up and nearly leapt to the door.

“Amy!” she said. Her voice carried over cubicles and shook fluorescent lights. A few lab assistants peeked over partitions and just as quickly sat down again as if they were invisible. Amy stuck her head around a corner. Laura returned to her seat and gave Billy Beau a look that said this would all be over in a minute. Amy appeared in her doorway.

“What’s up?” Amy said.

“I can’t find my Histogram File,” Laura said.

“Halifax moved it to one of his Network Folders.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“I don’t know,” Amy said, and shrugged.

Laura detected a note of insincerity in Amy’s voice. She grabbed the mouse and clicked on Halifax’s Network Files. Three months earlier, while he was away on a fishing trip, he’d called for her to access his Network Files and Fax a document to a colleague—his password was simply his birth date. The password prompt came up and she entered the numbers, hoping they still worked. The files appeared on screen. Inside, she found a Folder titled “Research—Imagery.” She clicked on it and found “Histograms.” She sighed as she saw her work.

“There you go,” Amy said, and left.

Laura scrolled down and saw everything in order. Nothing seemed to be missing—as if Halifax hadn't touched the research. It was clear Halifax wanted the files under his control. She glanced at Billy Beau as she scanned the data.

“One minute, Three Bee,” she said, and smiled.

“I can go, Laura,” Billy Beau said. “I mean, it sounds to me like you got to go talk with your boss.”

“Oh, I will. I will. Not now. “

“Suit yourself, but I'd think you'd like to get to bottom of whatever's botherin you instead of settin here listenin to me.”

“It's my job, ThreeBee.” Thoughts bounced through her mind—the file ending up with Halifax didn't completely surprise her. She had to collect herself. She reached over and patted his hand. He looked down at the gesture and forced a smile.

“Your job, huh? Your job to listen to my babble or it's your job that's distractin you?”

“Both. And I don't think you're babbling. Sorry. Go ahead. I'm all yours.”

“Yeah,” he said, but his eyes looked sad to Laura.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothin. Nothin.” He drew in a big breath and leaned forward, elbows on knees, and looked directly at her. “You still meditatin?”

She glanced at the mouse and wanted to put her hand on it, wanted to double-click left. Something about the data being intact bothered her. “Yes,” she said.

“Good. I don't miss a day, myself,” he said. “And you still runnin, right?”

“Of course.” She picked up a pen from her desk and looked at him and then looked away to the computer screen. She thought about turning it off. “I’ve become a real Californian,” she said. “Much mellower. I mean, I’m really not as angry as I was in Miami. I run. I meditate. I drink Starbuck’s coffee. I have a gay next door neighbor. The usual.”

“Next thing you know, us transplants’ll be takin weekly colonics.”

She pushed the mouse aside with her pen, and then leaned forward to give him her attention. “Why do you ask, ThreeBee?”

“I suppose I just see you somewheres else. Where’s your head at?”

“I don’t know. That’s just it. I don’t know.” She didn’t want to get serious, but couldn’t help it.

“You seen a psychic yet?”

“No,” she said, became less serious, and let out a laugh.

“Well, why not?”

“Don’t believe in them.”

“Aw, c’mon. You ain’t a real Californian till you have you your own psychic.”

“Funny, but no, ThreeBee. A psychic’s not going to get me out of this rut.”

“Sometimes you have to let people help you, darlin. And if you won’t let this old, bald, fat country boy do it, then maybe my friend can help. Hell, he told me I’m this close to landin another series.” Billy Beau held his hands up with the space of a foot or more between his palms. Laura laughed again. “He’s the ‘Psychic to the Stars,’” he said.

He wrote down a phone number. She ripped the leaf of paper from her pad and tacked it to a small corkboard by her desk.

“Now you won’t forget?” he said. The phone number seemed lost among other memos and Post-It Notes on the board.

“I’ll call him today. Thanks, ThreeBee.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No. I mean it. Thanks for everything. For listening, for being a friend.”

“A friend, huh? I can live with that.”

The noon picnic with CC started out well. It was a beautiful day. A cold front had moved south from Alaska and dropped snow on the San Gabriel Mountains. The wind cleared the smog from the basin and everything was clean. Laura loved taking deep breaths on days when Los Angeles was at its prettiest—the air crisp and cool and the mountains so visible they seemed only steps away from climbing. She didn’t want to be on campus—working, in classes, dealing with Halifax or the program—and instead felt the urge to play, to get away.

She’d met CC at a bench outside the main entrance to Royce Hall. He was waiting. His head swiveled around, and for a moment she stopped walking to watch him search for her through the throng of students. She didn’t want him to see her first. She wondered if she’d feel anything while looking at him without his knowledge—relief? happiness? desire? need? When they locked eyes, he smiled. And she felt her smile break wide and her face flush with the excitement, the newness. They kissed quickly on the lips and the thought crossed her mind they were still in sync—there wasn’t the awkward moment she’d experienced with others, the moment where two people wonder

if they *should* kiss upon meeting after the first night of intimacy and if they do, would it be forced or natural? needless or obligatory?

“This way,” he said, and took her hand.

They walked down a concrete path, away from Royce, and settled on the grass outside the Art Building. He pulled two small sport bottles of lemonade and two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from his backpack. He handed one of the sandwiches to her.

“Did you think about not coming,” he said.

“No. Of course not,” she said.

CC nodded and seemed convinced. But she had given it some thought. Her insecure voice—the perpetual protector, the one that says nothing ever lasts—urged her to consider her privacy, her solitude, her need to focus on her work, her independence and not become involved. She gave the voice a minute of her time and then told it to shut the fuck up. She liked CC.

He offered Doritos and she declined.

“They’re actually good for you,” he said.

“You think?” She reached up to her head and removed an elastic band. Her hair fell freely in the breeze.

“Dextrose, monosodium glutamate, hydrogenated cottonseed oil, maltodextrin...”

He continued reciting the ingredients. She scrunched up her nose, but took a chip anyway, then bit into her sandwich. She liked the way he read off the back of the Doritos package, enunciating everything with perfect inflection on each syllable, as if he were reading Yeats. She wondered if he took his work, his analysis of literature, as seriously as he did this little recitation. When she drifted in her thoughts to how seriously she took

her own work, she noticed Halifax walking across the lawn, heading away from the direction of the medical center. He was with Tony and the young man from the diner. They climbed the steps to the Art Building's entrance and disappeared inside.

"Stop for a second," she said.

"What's up?"

She didn't respond. She stared blankly toward the Art Building. She wanted to go inside and follow them, but knew she couldn't do it without being recognized. She thought about having CC go in for her and then report back, but just as quickly rejected the plan, and decided to go with her first instinct.

CC asked again if something was wrong, but she tuned him out, as if his voice was the clanging of a distant buoy bell negated by offshore winds. She rose from the bench, focussed on the door Halifax entered, and walked toward it.

CC put the remnants of their lunch into his backpack and scrambled to catch up to her, but when she realized he was at her side, Laura pushed her arm out, stopping him in his tracks.

"Stay here," Laura said. "Please..."

She saw the hurt in his eyes, could nearly see his heart stand frozen for a moment, and the thought crossed her mind that she may have prompted some childhood memory—a rejection of a kiss he'd wished to plant on the object of a fifth grade crush, perhaps.

"You're worrying me," he said.

"Nothing to be worried about," she said. "Nothing at all. Please. Be here when I come out?"

“Sure.”

She dropped her hand from the light touch on his chest and left him standing in the sun. Students passed, but Laura walked in a straight line—others stutter-stepping, changing paths to move around her. She disappeared into the Art Building without looking back to see if CC waited for her. She needn't do so.

Laura's heart beat more rapidly as she listened to the rubber bottoms to her running shoes squeak across the old linoleum hallway floor. The dark finish on the original classroom doors was faded just over the knobs. A foot square window cut out at eye level in the wood, the faint criss-cross of wire encased in glass, offered glimpses into each room. She saw little other than students and instructors going about their business. She felt compelled to enter a suite of small offices at the end of the hall. She closed the outer door behind her and it went silent for a moment. She heard muffled voices, reached for the knob of one office door, but it was locked. She looked through the window as she knocked.

Tony opened the door and his face seemed to drain of blood as he saw her. He might well have given her a transfusion because she felt as if she was about to explode like an over heated cartoon thermometer.

“What...what do you want?” Tony said.

“Where is he?”

Tony tried to close the door, but Laura stuck her foot between it and the doorjamb. He turned away and Laura removed her foot and yelped. The door was heavy and the weight of it caused a bruise. She limped toward the wall and leaned against it, trying not to think of her injury. Halifax was hunched over a desk, the African-American

sitting in front of a monitor, his hand covering a computer mouse. Halifax looked up and he, too, went pale.

“This is all you, D,” Tony said, and picked up a file to make himself look busy.

“Hi Laura,” Halifax said as he came toward her.

She took a step inside and tried to see the computer screen. The young man in front of it had a confused look on his face, his eyes bouncing between Halifax, Tony and Laura.

“What are you doing?” Laura asked him.

The young man stammered. “Working?” he said.

“That’s right,” Halifax said. “We’re working.” He reached out, taking a gentle hold of her arm, trying to lead her away from the desk. “If you want to see me, make an appointment and we’ll meet in my office.”

Laura glanced at Tony, his face a smug flatness. He dropped the manila folder he’d been reading onto the desk and folded his arms over his belly.

“You guys suck,” Laura said. “I’m not going anywhere until I find out what’s going on.” She pulled herself away from Halifax’s grip.

“What do you mean by ‘going on’?” Halifax said.

“Why all the secrets right after you transferred my files?”

“Your files?” Tony said, and scoffed.

“I’ll handle this,” Halifax said.

He reached for her again, but Laura’s eyes flashed that he’d better watch his next move. Halifax withdrew his hands and smiled his most charming smile. Laura had seen it many times. The smile was like only one other she’d seen before, from the first, older

boy who'd told her he wouldn't ejaculate in her mouth and subsequently, later, said she was at fault for the pain that accompanied her loss of virginity.

"Let's step out," Halifax suggested with his arms wide, as if shielding her from moving inside any further.

Laura knew she was outnumbered. The young man clicked on the mouse and the flash of light against the wall as the screen went dark signaled he'd closed whatever window they were working on. She took one last glance at the three of them and turned away, Halifax following her and closing the door behind them in one quick movement.

"What's all this about?" he said.

"That's what I want to know."

"You think this has something to do with you?" He gestured back to the room with a nonchalant hand.

"I'm sure of it," she said.

"I'm helping Tony with his dissertation. If you want help from me, all you have to do is ask instead of becoming paranoid."

"Oh. And I suppose his dissertation has nothing to do with graphic art and my files missing?"

"Your files? Let me tell you something straight, sweetheart—" He stopped himself mid-sentence.

She had no need to cut him off. Her eyes flashing, her skin crawling, her nails digging into her crossed forearms were enough to show he was approaching the edge of a cliff and he best not test the ground.

“Sorry,” he said, and then went calm. She watched his face and he looked everywhere other than into her eyes. His nervousness began to affect her, disarm her in a way she hadn’t thought possible. She’d come in recklessly, impulsively, and it created a guard, a wall between her fears and Halifax’s ability to deflect responsibility. And the barrier was beginning to crack. His apologetic tone was disarming.

“I know your job is twenty-four seven. Hell, I appreciate what you do more than you think. You’re burned out, Laura. Take some time. You’ve earned it. Don’t worry about anything. Me. Tony. The sleepers. No one. Take care of yourself.”

“I need to know, though. I want to know,” she said.

“What?” he said. “Nothing’s ‘going on.’ You’re overworked. Go home.”

“But why did you put the files under—”

“Because I’m responsible for everything going on in the study. That’s why. If I’m going to get the foundation and Cunningham to back me, us, then I have to show them I know every piece of research.”

He’d come around to looking into her face, taking hold of her shoulders with both hands. Her arms fell to her sides and her body slackened a bit, his words seeming sincere.

“You promise this has nothing to do with my animation idea?”

“God. Yes, I promise. Maybe the idea has some legs after all, but no, this has nothing to do with you. We both know Tony’s not that bright.” He said the rest of his protest in a low voice while glancing back to the closed door.

He was right, however. She was overworked and felt completely burnt out. She knew she was thinking about everything other than working on her own dissertation.

And it was always clear Tony was too stupid to utilize her research or anyone else's even if Halifax were to help him apply it to whatever lame thesis he'd come up with.

"You're right," she said. "I'm exhausted." And though she felt so, her admission seemed forced, as if giving in.

"I'm on your side," he said. "You're still doing brilliant work. I have no doubt there's more to come, but for now..."

She smiled. It felt good to be acknowledged. And she welcomed the chance to take time off. She turned away from him, feeling somewhat better, but her stomach continued to churn and her palms were still moist. The queasy feeling could be the result of irrational projections. It was possible, she thought. Yet, she couldn't shake the doubts. Her only recourse at the moment, and she knew so, was to leave the building and hope she had nothing to worry about.

When she walked back outside, CC waited while sitting on a concrete bench. He snapped shut a book he'd been reading, stood, and threw his backpack over his shoulder.

"Are you okay?" he said.

She scanned the sky, her eyes settling on the horizon. A thin layer of smog began to accumulate in the still air. The beautiful, post-storm days never seemed to last long, she thought. The brown thickness would return to its normal ugliness by morning.

"Did I do something?" he said.

"God, no. You didn't do anything at all." She took hold of his hand and tried to assure him.

"Is it something I should know?" he said.

She began to walk. He tagged along, gripping her hand firmly.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.

“I guess the picnic wasn’t a good idea, huh?”

“It was a great idea,” she said, and squeezed his hand back. “It’s just such a gorgeous day and I’d rather be somewhere else, practically.”

“Santa Barbara,” he said. He dumped the empty lemonade bottles in the trash.

“What?”

“Santa Barbara. When LA sucks, and it sucks often, LA goes to Santa Barbara.”

Laura went to her office and gathered her purse and keys while CC waited downstairs. Before leaving, she stared at the number Billy Beau had written down for her. She picked up the phone and dialed. She connected with an answering machine: “This is Michael. I’m in session at the moment, so please leave your name and number at the tone. I’ll return your call as soon as I am able. Thank you.” Laura requested a reading and left the lab without saying a word to anyone about where she was going or when she’d be back.

Chapter Five

They stayed in a place that clung to the slope of Santa Barbara's Riviera. The rustic, split-level bungalow belonged to CC's aunt, who wintered in Aspen, and encouraged her favorite nephew to use the "old place" so the ghosts wouldn't feel lonely.

Laura and CC were there for five days. She loved the pier. Every morning she'd slip on her running shoes, and jog downhill to the beach. As she ran on the planks of wood, she watched the ocean swells below her, through the cracks where the boards met. Coolness rose from the water and seemed to caress her body with each stride, making her feel as if the Pacific was lifting her up and taking her out to sea. Los Angeles was no longer an hour away, but more like lightyears.

She looked at each minute of the retreat as a way of connecting with a reality she believed she'd lost. She wanted an easiness, a calmness that comes from confidence and understanding. The hustle of activity, the aggressiveness of having to prove herself, had overtaken her and she wanted to feel less threatened by what others might do to affect her life. Running every morning in the coastal mist, making love with CC whenever they felt like doing so (which was often), taking in a movie on State Street, and having a quiet dinner, had helped assure her that not everything in life is a crisis, that days of appreciating simple pleasures can give anyone the vision to overcome any obstacle.

Although it was the longest vacation she remembered ever having, she knew it was coming to an end.

On the last morning after her run, Laura sat on the balcony, drank coffee, and took in the view of the coastline, Santa Cruz Island, and the distant oil rigs. For a moment, she felt a chill, as if one of the ghosts CC's aunt told him about was beside her, speaking to her, "My baby was to be born, is to be born..." it said. She shrugged the notion off and took a sip from her mug. Ghosts weren't something she gave much credence to, and though the bungalow had creaky floorboards, with a few cold spots in the living room and den, Laura wouldn't let anything interrupt the tranquility of sitting on the edge of a cliff, staring out to the gray-blue Pacific.

But as cozy and rested and secure as she'd felt in over a year, she realized she'd run from a problem. It didn't matter that Halifax had insisted she take time off, her first instinct was to walk away, run away if she could, with the pacifist, the non-confrontational soul sitting on her left shoulder, gently urging her not to care about what she'd seen. Yet, the other soul, the one whose buttons are easily pushed—and sometimes pushed too far—sat on her right shoulder and screamed about thievery and underhandedness and getting even. She wasn't sure what she was most angry about—that they'd possibly stolen her idea or that she'd softened in the face of a revealed truth.

Damn it, though, she hated seeing Tony's smug face hide behind that file, as if he were an innocent intellectual. She hadn't thought how his attitude confirmed her suspicions, but then soothing words seemingly filtered over her left shoulder to remind her that perhaps their actions had nothing to do with her. The secret hope gave her

permission to bolt away and hide. And she liked being hidden. She liked being unseen, only to be seen again when it was important to surface or when someone had the right password to draw her out of the shadows. She stood and rested her elbows on the balcony and thought of the invisible, then realized nothing is. In history, nothing is hidden for long. Someone always scratches and snoops around and brings up forgotten facts.

And then she knew she had a plan. History was her key—not histograms, but History, and she was going to do some historical research on UCLA's Network.

She went into the bedroom and woke CC with a kiss. He stirred.

"I want to go back," she said

"But this is so nice," he said and yawned.

"Yes, it is." She kissed him again and they made love once more before leaving. She held him afterward, but he held her tighter. She broke away first and got up from the bed to get dressed, then packed her small duffel, and he did the same.

She was silent the whole time, and glad he didn't ask her where her thoughts were. She didn't want him to feel insecure about being together (as if silence somehow signified dissatisfaction with another person) because the days with him, and away from LA, had been perfect.

She finally spoke to him as he drove along Mountain Road and headed downhill. The car hugged curves and wound its way toward the Pacific.

"Is there another way?" she said.

"Through the passes," he said.

“Is it longer?”

“Much.”

“Can we take them and not the freeway?”

“Sure. Why not?” He smiled to her and she reached out and took hold of his hand.

He drove along county and state roads, through the lesser-known scenic routes of Southern California, and she was struck by the contrast in colors. The shades of dark to light shrub grass and dried mustard plants looked golden against hundreds of sprawling oaks. The trees’ leaves seemed speckled with drops of water—the sun’s rays bouncing off their waxiness—and she glanced at a few cows standing, chewing grass while others lay in the shade with hooves tucked close to their bodies.

CC’s voice was distant to her, although she heard and understood what he was talking about. He was in his last semester, defending his dissertation. During his graduate years at UCLA, he’d been to four different conferences and read the same paper on Nathaniel Hawthorne and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She hadn’t read enough of either author to decide whether his thesis was valid.

“You see,” he said. “Fitzgerald was more of a Transcendentalist than Hawthorne.”

“Really? Sounds interesting,” she said.

“Fitzgerald’s characters secretly long to rise above the opulence and excesses of the twenties. They’re dissatisfied with everything they have. And Hawthorne was more an anarchist than anything.”

“Hawthorne was an anarchist?”

“Yeah,” he said. “The only order he saw was in a Utopia, and he saw it wasn’t possible in our society. So, the only order was the disorder of the real world. Anarchy.”

“Okay, I follow what you’re saying,” she said. “But maybe they were both Transcendentalists.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, here it is a hundred and fifty years later and people are still studying Hawthorne’s work and seventy-five years later, Fitzgerald’s. They’re both dead.”

“I see what you’re saying, but it doesn’t matter that they’re dead.”

“Ultimately, yes. But it’s significant that they are,” she said.

“Right.”

She looked over to him as he said this. She felt the distance widen between them and was sure they hadn’t agreed on the same thing when it appeared they had. He headed toward Ojai, and as he went on to tell her about his dissertation, she only listened to every other sentence. She wasn’t interested in Doestoyevski’s personal, sexual proclivities. What did it matter? The Russian’s work was still read and finding a sexual link between Sonja in *Crime and Punishment* and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* was a stretch at best and something only very few people would be interested in reading, and fewer publishers willing to publish. She could see that CC was destined to be a teacher, and besides being a boring one, he’d probably not teach well.

She thought about how losing control of the histograms to Halifax had left her with only vague concepts. She hadn’t been working on her own dissertation, and what little work she’d accomplished was all tied up in her research on and theory of digital animation. Now her work was hers no longer. She hoped she could scare Halifax

enough to let her share some of the credit, then be able to write her doctoral thesis, and get the hell out of life with Halifax and life in Southern California.

They made it to Simi Valley and continued through the Santa Susanna pass, then up and over the mountains. The air was clear and the San Fernando Valley looked clean. The visibility went on for miles. CC took Topanga Canyon Pass, through Chatsworth, and skirted Box Canyon. Huge boulders dotted the foothills and sheer cliffs loomed over houses stuck in crevices.

“What a beautiful place to have a house,” she said. “The view is amazing.”

“It’s Chatsworth,” he said.

“Must be expensive to live here.”

“That’s true for almost everywhere in the Valley. The Sleeping Man’s castle is here.”

“Oh, yeah. Him,” she said.

“He’s worth like several billion.”

She smirked. “No kidding. But it’s all bullshit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Aw, c’mon. His name’s on a building in a major university, but you can’t breathe it out loud. No one’s seen him. A recluse who’s been asleep for twenty years? In a castle? What? Is he waiting for Princess Charming to wake him with a kiss?”

“Well, it’s all true,” he said. “Except for the Princess waking him. They say he’s just waiting to die. All hooked up to tubes and breathing machines and other stuff. Want to see where he lives?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Has anyone ever interviewed him?”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“So, he’s probably someone who has everything and doesn’t need the rest of the world. He could be dead and no one would know it.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“I’m not interested in rumors and exaggerations.”

“Not interested, eh?”

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“Nope.”

CC had begun the climb from Topanga Canyon, heading west. As they ascended, a road became an unmarked street, and then the street became a small pass, and on each turn, the pavement narrowed. As he drove, they exchanged side-glances. Laura bit her bottom lip to suppress a smile. He stopped at a stop sign, and they sat there. She thought he was deciding which way to turn. He leaned forward to get a fuller look at her face. He was smiling, and she strained to keep a straight face. He leaned forward more, his cheek brushing the top of the steering wheel. She looked away so that he’d see only the back of her head. She couldn’t contain herself and laughed. He laughed. And they both laughed harder.

She playfully punched him in the arm. He reached out and took hold of her hand. She gave him a firm squeeze.

“Yeah,” he said. “Not interested at all.”

“Well...” she said and shrugged and pulled his hand up to her lips. She kissed one of his knuckles.

“Okay.” He kept his foot on the brake and peered through the windshield. He looked skyward. Laura, too, stuck her nose close to the glass and could see nothing but a slumpstone wall edging the perimeter of the cliff.

“Up there,” CC said. “Behind that.”

He sat back in his seat, but she stared for a moment longer, and then relaxed.

“Now,” he said. “Which way?”

A dirt road was to the right and the pavement continued straight ahead.

“When in doubt, go forward,” she said.

CC took his foot off the pedal and the car began to shudder and shake. He stepped on the brake again, but the car shook more violently.

Laura looked to CC, and saw his face go pale and his eyes widen. He threw the gearshift in park and re-gripped the steering wheel. She looked out the window as small stones and larger rocks fell from the hillside and pelted the car. Loose limbs and other debris fell across the road.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“A little earthquake,” he said.

More stones pelted CC’s car, and a load of clay, dirt and sand slid down the side of the cliff ten yards in front of them. The slide loosened a boulder and it crashed to the pavement, rolled several feet, and then settled in the middle of the road. It looked to Laura like the rear end of an elephant, gray, and just as large. The shaking stopped.

“Holy shit,” CC said.

“A little earthquake?” she said.

He put the car in drive and eased forward, then made a sharp left, turning back toward the Valley.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Turning around.”

“Why? You can make it past.”

“And risk another one of those coming down on us in an aftershock? I don’t think so.”

On the drive back to Westwood, CC switched the band on his car radio to AM. The NewsRadio gave a brief story of the quake being centered in Palmdale, with the magnitude at 5.3. That was the end of the report—no injuries, or damages, or sound bytes of frightened citizens glad it was over.

CC stopped in front of the parking garage at Wesleyan Avenue. Laura got out of his car, opened the back rear door and grabbed her duffel bag. He turned the engine off and met her on the sidewalk. They hugged. She kissed him lightly on the lips, but knew it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy him, so she kissed him again, harder, like a high school girl who kisses an older boyfriend for all to see. She hoped the affection would leave him wanting—so he’d want to call her and keep the chase going.

“You sure I can’t drop by?” he said.

He nuzzled her neck, and she pulled him closer.

“I’m not going home right away,” she said.

“Oh.” He relaxed in his embrace.

She broke away from him and refused to give into the heaviness he projected from her simple, implied need to be alone.

“I have a few things to do on campus. I mean, we were gone and there might be some loose ends that I don’t want to become problems.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Well, sure. I understand. I guess I’ll go home and do some work, too. Alone. With no one around.”

“Oh, I see how you are,” she said.

He pouted and she could tell that although much of it was false, there was also truth behind the playfulness. He gave her a peck on the lips and she did the same to him, and they continued kissing, one after another, in little exchanges.

“Not even a cat to say hello to me.”

“Aww, poor guy.”

“Lonely.”

“Uh huh. I’m sure you’ll be fine...”

“You could come home with me...”

“We have plenty of time...”

“I love you,” he said.

She said nothing. She kissed him finally, quickly, and broke away. She reached down and then slung her bag over her shoulder.

He grunted, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the car’s fender.

“Wrong thing to say, huh?”

She took a few steps away. “No. Not at all. I love you, too.”

She cringed inside. They’d only known each other for slightly more than a week. But the lie made him smile, and she rationalized that for the moment it was a good lie. She did love him. She loved him as a human being, but she wouldn’t say so. The words made him happy and she didn’t see any harm in it.

He went to her and hugged her once more before jogging around the front of his car to the driver’s side.

“I knew you really did,” he said.

“Of course,” she said, and waved goodbye.

He drove away.

She took the elevator to the top level of the parking garage, and found her car. A layer of dust, dirt and smog dulled the paint job and clouded the glass. The wipers clamped a ticket to the windshield, and she snapped it up, opened the envelope, and read. Her monthly pass had expired. She got in, pulled the plastic pass from her rear view mirror, and saw it was true. She’d forgotten to renew her parking permit.

She stopped before the gate at the kiosk and handed the ticket to the attendant. He took it from her, and scanned the bar code. The gate lifted, and the green numbers read “please pay \$0.00.” The attendant smiled and told her to have a nice day. She drove off.

At home, she threw her bag to the floor, and flipped the switches to her computer. The hard drive booted up. She hit the play button to her answering machine and kicked off her shoes as she sat down in front of the computer. She heard CC’s voice. He’d called on her drive home.

“Hey, it’s me. Thanks for saying that. It helps me for...well...what I...nevermind. Just thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Then a faintly familiar voice vibrated through the speaker. It was airy, calm, and seemed to carry a disjointed confidence.

“Hello. This is Michael Honduras. You called about a reading. I don’t have any slots until next month. I do have a colleague who you can see sooner. Call me back if you’d like or call Sil El Vorshek at...” Laura listened to the number but didn’t write it down. She’d barely remembered calling him before she left for Santa Barbara.

Her computer connected to the UCLA network. She entered her password and found her personal page, and clicked on icons until she came to Halifax’s Network Files. She entered his password. It still worked. She opened the Histogram File and began reading her analyses. Not a word had been changed. She scanned the data, in quick scrolls, to the end of the file. Everything seemed to be in place. It was as if her work had only been transferred to other hands. And that bothered her. Why would he take the file and not do anything with it?

She closed the window and rebooted. The computer clicked and buzzed. She knew what she was about to do, and felt anxious. She had to get to his personal files. She changed the phone number on the default location so the network “thought” she was dialing from campus. Then she changed her username to “DH16.” The cursor flashed at the PASSWORD prompt and she typed in the first thing that came to her mind. ASSHOLE. And hit enter. She didn’t expect it would work, and, of course, a window flashed on screen telling her the password was incorrect.

She typed in Pilar, Halifax's wife's name, and hit enter again. Incorrect. She cleared it, typed in Pilar48max; the last five characters were the year he was born, and his son's name. Her own password was one made up of the same pattern—her father's name, the year she was born, and if she were going to have a son (which, to her, the chances were becoming more remote the further she immersed herself in her work), she'd name him Marcel. She liked the balance between strength and tolerance she felt the name suggested.

But this password, too, was incorrect, and her fingers ached from typing—interchanging the names and numbers. She thought of conversations she'd had with him. Names and trivia flooded her mind—his grandmother's name, the street of his childhood home, his draft lottery number during the Vietnam War years. Nothing. She realized she might be sitting at the computer for days, weeks even, before being able to glimpse into Halifax's small mind. She got up from the computer and went to her room, to her special chair.

She planted her feet firmly on the floor, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply, slowly, methodically. She began humming a clear, indistinct sound—soothing and calming, like a grandmother singing a fairy tale in some foreign, romantic language—and then tried to free her mind of thought. But couldn't.

The sound of the words, "Sleeping Man," floated into her mind and she quickly ignored it.

Thoughts flicked in and out, like moths dancing around a yellow porch light, and it was easy for her to let all of them go. All but one.

She opened her eyes and jumped from her chair and plopped down in front of the computer once more. Her fingers couldn't move fast enough. Halifax's DH16 appeared on screen and the prompt flashed at PASSWORD. She hesitated, and then typed it in. "TheSleepingMan." A second passed. Another window appeared. But the password was incorrect. She sat back in her chair and wanted to punch the monitor, but only sighed.

"SleepingMan," "The_Sleeping_Man," "ManwhoSleeps," "SleepMan," "Manwhofuckingsleeps," "FuckingSleepingMan," and "Fuckthis," were all passwords she tried. Nothing worked. Nothing worked until she simply put in "SMSMSM," and after a moment, the screen flashed.

She stared at an icon labeled "Personal Files" and opened it. She found what she'd hoped to find, and more, including one file labeled "Edward Mills."

Chapter Six

Laura woke, her body jolting as if brushing against one of the powerlines that skirt Tujunga Pass. Her eyes went wide for a moment, focussing on the digital clock, then closed again after she realized she'd been dreaming. She sat up abruptly and gathered the sheets around her body, then grabbed a pen and pad from the nightstand. The images flashed through her head—her first dream in months and the first in years that she was able to remember.

That man. That man—she wrote, scribbling across the yellow paper. She saw him clearly—as if he stood before her now, his smile held steady, unnaturally for a moment, like he'd forgotten how a smile indicated at the very least amusement and at most extreme happiness, but in *this man* the smile revealed a surprise that he still had the ability to smile at all. Laura wrote that she was the source, the reason the corners of his mouth went up instead of sagging down.

I was floating up and a way from bed—flapping my arms at my sides like a bird, flying over rooftops, looking down at the apartment...I went over the Malibu Mountains and saw the electricity and didn't want to go near it, but the lines drew me toward them...I flapped harder, faster, and flew toward the sky and felt free...free from the earth, from the ground, the brush on the hillside, the cars and smog and telephone poles. I heard people talking...nothing I could make out...but someone called me...the man...the

man...*I think he called me, but he had a woman's voice and then I was in a darkened room, candles were the only light flickering into nothing...it seemed like nothing and then he was there and he said he was happy to see me, like I'd been gone a long time and he expected me to be in that room...*

The man had a clean face...that's the only way to say it...salt and pepper hair and big brown eyes under gray eyebrows...he wasn't old, though, he was around...no, no, he wasn't old is all...I wanted to leave...and he smiled wider and told me again that he'd been waiting for me...and I told him I didn't know him...

and then I was naked or felt naked and I wanted to go, but didn't want to go, my mind saying I was naked and my legs shivering like it was all right to be naked and to want him and I looked around and there were people watching us as he moved over me and put his hand on my thigh...I turned my knee out...he ran his fingers along my skin...I touched his wrist and wanted to stop him, but I moved his hand up...he took hold of me...and I felt electricity and wetness at the same time...then I was on a bed, not my bed, but a big bed with four posters and curtains...it wasn't the same room...a different room in a huge house and the man took me in his arms, told me everything was going to be all right...but I didn't feel like there was anything wrong...and I heard voices say of course nothing was wrong, but everything was going to be all right anyway...and I saw a lamb, a fluffy white-fleeced lamb and it baaahhhhhed at me with green eyes sparkling and said hello and thanked me for what I don't know...

And so Laura wrote, her hand barely able to keep up with all she remembered. The white top sheet fell to her waist as she flipped from one page of the pad to the next. She plopped back onto the bed, naked, unaware of time or place or anything in the

world—not Halifax, not CC, not West Hollywood or her bedroom. She concentrated on the lamb and wrote thoughts of it that were not part of the dream, wondering if it was a lamb at all, feeling that the animal might be part of the animal inside her—the gentle side, the side of her that gets slaughtered by someone stronger. But she began to think it could have everything to do with her relationship with CC. As if he were the lamb and was about to bah his way past her resistance. And she made a note in the margin of the pad to “stay strong,” a reminder that no man—not CC, not Halifax, nor *the man* in her dream would ever make her succumb to what she believed she wanted. She felt she had to constantly remind herself of this. It had become a mantra.

The clarity was real, however. And while thinking of CC in relationship to the dream, she felt a chill and cringed, like someone telling her intimate details of her parent’s sex life, something she didn’t want to hear. He was about to ask her to marry him. And she laughed while writing “No fucking way” in the same sentence. She quickly dismissed the idea and Halifax entered her mind. The portal that was opened by the dream, the doorway into a part of her subconscious, assured her that he couldn’t escape and couldn’t deny her what she wanted to do with the rest of her research.

She had no other thoughts about *the man* with the gray eyebrows and salt and pepper hair, except he may have symbolized her father. But she shrugged off the notion and remembered the day her father had died.

He’d been going in and out of consciousness, the cancer eating away his organs minute by minute, the morphine only working to numb him during moments when he wanted to talk.

“We had a good run, you and me,” he’d said.

“Yeah. My friends are jealous,” Laura had said.

“That I’m going?”

“No. That you were here. That you were always here.”

Tears no longer formed in Laura’s eyes when she remembered the last conversation with him. And as she tried to find a connection between *the man* in the dream and her father, she didn’t feel sad. This indicated *the man* must symbolize someone else. She knew he did. She hoped to God he did.

She pushed the pad and pen aside and stared at the ceiling, at the wisps of plaster that appeared like a slightly choppy sea, the shadows created by the morning light filtering through blind covered windows. She heard her neighbor Bill open and close his apartment door and rush down the hallway, the weight of his body pounding his feet over the concrete, the vibration shaking the wrought iron rail as he descended the steps in a jog. She thought more about *the man* in her dream, imagined more than what she could see during it.

He was handsome and gentle. His nose curved toward full lips, and when he looked at her, his eyes seemed to narrow and go wide, simultaneously, while inviting her into them. She felt absorbed. He spoke to her in gentle tones—like a non-threatening incubus, his voice seductive. She felt as if the dream were as real as life was now, at this precise moment, where she lay back thinking of how close she was to being taken fully and completely during the night. She saw herself opening up, her body tingling with anticipation, her nipples tightening and sending waves of feeling along the nerves in her

skin. She breathed heavily, her eyes closed to him, but able to see the outlines of his body—clothed one moment, and at the next, his shirt being pulled over his head in one quick movement to reveal a masculine chest. She pulled him against her and he resisted and moved his face across her belly and hips, further and further down and in. She wanted to corral him with her legs. He touched her with his tongue—over and over again he flicked her inner thighs and she felt her wetness begin to seep out from her. Her body began to shake, slowly at first, and she looked at his face as he glanced up while pressing his fingers against her mound.

And so she imagined.

And as in the dream, she stopped just short of reaching orgasm. She felt immense pleasure in arriving at the point of release, but ceasing, keeping the intensity at a heightened point so as not to fall into the sedated state after shuddering to completion. It was a new sensation for her. She'd always gone through with the desire, but now she liked not having an orgasm—nearing completion had become more intense than the release itself. She realized she could forgo ever reaching a climax again while in the three-dimensional world. So she rolled to her side, and kissed the yellow pad before rising from the bed. She may never know the man in her dream, she thought, and she wasn't sure it was important. All things in time, she reminded herself, and in dreams there is no time at all—her years of research and listening to dreamers taught her as much. She seemed to float into the bathroom and decided on a bath to start her day instead of a shower.

Laura's first instinct on the day when she'd accessed the files was to print everything out—anything related to her work on histograms—make copies, and hold a meeting with Halifax, and Dean Cunningham. It took nearly two hours to print the research—what had become of her research in Halifax's hands—and another twenty minutes to print the history, the timeline, documenting who'd accessed the files and when they'd done so. But the meeting would have to wait. She'd printed a hard copy of one memo and a letter Halifax had sent to Dean Cunningham that detailed email correspondence between the editor of a science journal and Halifax. She waited a week, then two, and was going on her third week when CC suggested she'd waited long enough.

They were in bed. He got up, went to the bathroom and Laura heard the steady stream of urine splash in the toilet water. He flushed and came back to bed and, again, sat upright on the edge before falling back against her.

“Why do you do that?” she said.

“What? Why do I do what?” he said.

“Why do you sit there for a minute before getting back into bed?”

“Habit.”

“I gathered that. But are you saying a prayer or something? I mean, like you did when you were a kid?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You're trying to change the subject.”

“What subject?” She cuddled closer to him and knew he was right.

“You have to confront the fucker. Now. Today. You know that, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Maybe I’m—”

“Chickening out.”

“I am not.” She moved away from him and lay flat on her back. She looked to the ceiling, noticing there weren’t any shadows, and thought it must be a cloudy morning.

“I don’t get it. You have all the evidence. You know your Dean doesn’t exactly like Halifax. You have everything in place and then you stop. Why is that?”

Laura turned away from him. She couldn’t say why. All she might be able to say would be that she was following her instincts. But how could she tell him without explaining further? She momentarily doubted the time passing. If she was following her instincts, how could she be sure she hadn’t already passed up a better moment to call a meeting? Part of her wanted to be confrontational, especially since she knew she was in the right, but everything seemed trivial, nearly emotionless. She went silent and tuned CC out.

He got up from the bed, began to dress, and she watched him, but thought only of how the warm stream of air from the furnace vent caressed her body. And as good as that felt, it was only temporary. As good as it was for her to have someone who cared about her as CC did, she couldn’t shake the thought that it was only temporary. As much as she wanted to kick Halifax in the balls, she knew the pain he’d experience and the pleasure she’d feel in having done so, would be temporary. A beam of sunlight broke through the closed blinds and streaked across the ceiling and then down the wall. The shadows from

the crested plaster were long and gray and then the sunlight disappeared and so did the shadows.

“I gotta get going,” CC-said.

Laura remained silent.

“I gotta get this off my chest, though,” he said. “It’s like you have me at arm’s distance. You reach out only when it’s good for you, when you need me.”

Laura watched him buckle his belt and zip his pants. He sat on the bed to slip on his shoes, his back to her.

“You might want to ask yourself why you do that. And why you won’t reach for me when I need you. And right now I do. I need you. The timing is right,” he continued.

She took in a breath and held it. The only movement of her body was her eyes looking away from him and toward the ceiling once more—that and her heart beating quicker. She felt the displacement of weight as he stood up. She could almost feel him smile. It was in his voice, in the air.

“Well,” he said. “I guess I’m not a poet,” and he walked out of the room.

Laura remained motionless and hoped he would never be.

Over the weeks she’d become so engrossed in gathering evidence and data, then projecting how Halifax would react when confronted, that she began to lose interest in sticking to her daily routine. She no longer rose before six to take a run. She quit her morning coffee and shake and ate nothing. She didn’t notice any difference in her frame of mind or physical energy by not running or not eating. Her body always went through

highs and lows of sluggishness, but her mind was constantly sharp (thanks to her continued meditations—the only morning ritual that remained) however, and trying to predict what would happen in her life, to her career, once she revealed everything to Dean Cunningham mattered and didn't matter. In her mind, she ran through every point, counterpoint, objection, defensive pose, and defensive verbal protest that might arise from the department and she created counterpoints, counter-counterpoints, offensive stances and aggressive statements to negate the potency of them all. It seemed, finally, she was beginning to have control not only over her physical body, but of her physical world as well.

She strolled through the hallways of The Mills Building feeling as if she owned it. The knowledge that Edward Mills had endowed the sleep study program—and financed every sleep or dream study headed by Halifax or the then Professor Cunningham in the past—gave her a clear picture of the moves she would make. But she hadn't counted on one stroke of good fortune.

She sifted through the usual messages and data sheets she found in her faculty/staff mailbox and read the daily department news memo. She was stunned, at first, but then laughed out loud.

“‘Congratulations to Dr. Halifax for his article, ‘Dream Merchants and the Film World’ which has been accepted by *The Journal of American University Studies*. One of four articles he expects to publish this and in the upcoming semester.’”

For weeks she'd stayed out of everyone's way, avoiding Halifax and Tony—and it seemed they avoided her, too—but, perhaps, she thought, the Universe was finally expanding to include her. The announcement of the article gave her a slight bounce in

her step. She was sure she might benefit from him publishing her writings under his name. It truly was a stroke of luck.

She paid more attention to the rest of the memos and worthless fliers she held in her hand than the path she'd taken to her office door. Office workers stepped aside—those who'd normally be all smiles and greetings, took different paths or feigned interest in anything other than her presence. She rounded a corner and stepped to the right as Amy came out of her office carrying a box of perforated data sheets.

“Good morning, Amy,” Laura said. She recognized an embarrassed look on Amy's face.

“Oh, hey,” Amy said. Her tone was too casual.

“What are you doing?”

“Um...you didn't get the memo?”

“What memo?” Laura flipped through the papers in her hand as Amy lowered her eyes and walked away without saying anything more. Laura stopped at a sealed envelope and opened it. Inside was a handwritten note from Halifax. “Since you seem to be neglecting your duties with the sleepers, and apparently have little interest in continuing in the direction I'm taking the program, I believe Amy will do a better job in administration. Please move everything to your new desk by Friday.” She leaned against the wall and crumpled the note in her hand. Tony came out of her office with three green hanging file folders under his arm, his face screwed up in a triumphant smile.

“I see you got the memo,” he said, and walked over to an office partition and dropped the hanging file folders on an empty desk. He stood by Amy. She dropped the

box on the floor next to the desk chair, wrung her hands, and avoided Laura's opened mouth stare.

Mere months ago she might have become enraged, might have slammed doors, screamed out to the corridor that she was getting fucked over and vowed to never be anyone's doormat again, but she didn't do any of these things. She didn't complain. Didn't care. She gave thought to how others might react to how quickly things had changed in her life—how anyone might become enraged, violent, perhaps—but she had faith in her plan. She was in a unique position, one that rarely emerges in a person's life, having the ability to not give a fuck while still taking action.

She bounced to her desk and a tightlipped smile spread across her face as Tony sauntered away and Amy shrugged in a half-hearted apology. Laura decided to focus on the positive. In all of the investigating she'd conducted—in her meticulous search through Halifax's personal network—she'd only had the email from the journal's editor and it hadn't mentioned the name of the article. And now she had it. Yes, things were falling in place. She reached for the phone and dialed Dean Cunningham's extension.

"Hello, Lois," Laura said. "This is Laura Germain...yes, I'm fine, and you? Good. Good. I was wondering when Dr. Cunningham might have time to see me...yes, now? Right now? Oh, in a half-hour? Wow. Sure. I mean, great."

She hung up the phone and dialed Halifax's number. He answered and she pushed the button down on her end, cutting him off. She didn't expect him to be in his office. It was nine in the morning and he rarely made it in before ten. She dialed once more, and again, he picked up.

"Hello," he said.

“Hello, Dwayne,” she said. “It’s Laura.” She sat back in her chair and swiveled around. It felt good to call him by his first name, and she knew he hated it. His friends, even his wife, called him “D.”

“What’s up with using my first name, Laura?” he said. “Having fun?”

“Oh, yes, plenty. In fact, I was wondering if we could have a meeting right now.”

“Perfect. Your timing is perfect. I have sort of a ‘pet’ project that fits your style.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Laura said.

“My dog. I thought you might be interested in doing a study on my dog while she dreams,” he said.

The condescension in his voice filtered out of the receiver as she moved it away from her ear. She rolled her eyes skyward and felt blood pump faster through her veins. She took a deep breath in a pause and could nearly feel Halifax’s nasty smile in their silence. She exhaled and in a calm tone said, “Fuck you.”

“I’m only trying to help, Laura. Your attitude surprises me, considering how things have been lately—”

“Save it, Dwayne,” she said, and emphasized his name by saying duh with a pause and then wayne. “It might interest you to know I have a meeting with Cunningham, so I’m thinking you might want to come clean before then.”

“Come clean of what?” he said.

His voice cracked between clean and what.

“‘Dream Merchants,’ my God, you could have at least changed the title.”

“Didn’t need to, Laura,” he said. “It was written here, in my study, in the building, at the University.” He laughed a short chuckle, but made one last stab before hanging up the phone. “Besides, it’s such a catchy one. Editors love shit like that.”

Laura didn’t wait to hear the click and buzz from the other end of the line. She grabbed her files, shot out of her chair, and stomped down the hallway toward his office.

On other occasions, ones where she’d wondered about Halifax’s take on a subject or sought his advice in her approach to Dean Cunningham regarding Professor Brezille’s grading standards or simply wanted to cry on his shoulder (and it seemed like millennia had passed since then) when her life had become lifeless, she’d hesitated outside his office door. Not this time. No, she wasn’t going to hesitate outside. She’d no longer give the impression that she hadn’t the ability to solve problems, to attack them face on, that she was an emotional woman and not a confident colleague.

She opened his door with the force of a S.W.A.T. Team on a pot dealer’s apartment.

He sat leaning back in his chair, feet on his desk, a smug smile on his face.

“Knock, knock,” he said.

“You know it took all of thirty seconds to realize it might be better if you join me in Cunningham’s office,” she said.

“Why would I want to do that? It seems to me that if you’re so goddamned empowered—a trait that was obviously latent, and quite becoming, I might add—you won’t need me for whatever it is you’ve got cooked up.”

“Fine. I don’t know what I was thinking, anyway. I suppose it was the human in me who thought it was fair to throw a life jacket to another human being—and I use the

term loosely, I might add—before he drowns in his pathetic arrogance.” Laura turned away, grabbing the door with her free hand while holding the files up in a triumphant fist. “I’ve got all the proof I need, Dwayne.”

Halifax sat forward in his chair, his feet falling to the floor in a thump. He leaned his elbows on files, papers and Post-It Notes strewn across his desk.

“Are those copies of the articles? Is that what you’ve got as ‘proof?’” he said.

“Yes. And a printout from my hard drive showing when I worked on them.” She raised her eyebrows, hoping to see a worried look on his face, but one didn’t surface.

“Like I said, Laura. You wrote those articles here. You’re from Florida so you ought to know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The researchers from The University of Florida. They invented Gatorade and thought they owned it, even tried to get a patent on the formula, but it belonged to the university, and the university is a corporation. Don’t let anyone tell you anything different. What’s done on the premises belongs to them. We only work here. It’s not your work or mine, really, but I’m publishing it. Think of yourself as the guys from Florida and me as, well, as a private corporation.”

Laura laughed. She knew it didn’t matter who owned what. She’d caught him and she knew it. And though she’d thought it fair to give him a chance to retract his words, his actions, she didn’t care anymore. She no longer cared what happened to Halifax or the study or her place in it. She wanted permission for other things and only Dean Cunningham could give it to her, not Halifax, and what she had in her fist would get it.

“Is that all you think I have?” she said, and watched his face fall as she turned to go out the door.

THREE STORIES

The Afternoon

Thomas Moonvees lay on his bed, shaking his penis left and right in a wave between his thumb and forefinger. For the moment, little was on his mind—other than becoming reacquainted with the swollen main vein, the tiny bumps around the head, and the scar from his circumcision. He thought it was beautiful, even if it wasn't cooperating.

He soon became lost in the memory of his favorite cashier, the teenage girl who spoke to him at the market earlier in the morning. He remembered the inflection in her carefully chosen words. She'd wanted him inside her. She'd screamed it to him.

"Paper or plastic?" she said.

"Uh, whatever you want," he said.

"Like I care."

In his absorption, in his clear disregard for anything else that might be happening in his two-bedroom apartment, Thomas was deaf to the sharp click of the back door being opened. He was further oblivious to someone walking across the linoleum floor, keys being thrown to the counter in a clank, and the crinkling of plastic bags relaxing from a grip.

As he pumped his hand and imagined how the cashier shrieked like a cat at three in the morning, Amanda, his wife, leaned against the doorjamb to their bedroom, arms folded. She sighed. It was the sigh—not the closing of the back door, not her footsteps across the floor, not the humming of her favorite Duran Duran tune, *Ordinary World*—that brought him out of it.

Thomas felt a familiar tingling, and was ready to let go, but he stopped. With his face more red from embarrassment than lust, he hopped out of bed and threw on a dirty pair of running shorts.

“Honey, you’re home early.”

“That’s right,” she said. Her voice was flat, and the thought struck him—as he followed her out to the kitchen—that in spite of her tone, they truly weren’t at the point of indifference. He sometimes wished they were.

He moved behind her as she stood at the counter removing Grape Nuts and banana muffins from grocery bags. He hesitated for a moment, wanting to hug her, but corralled her by taking hold of the counter left and right of her waist. He nuzzled her back.

“You went to the market, too.” He kissed her shoulder.

She whirled around, holding a snack pack up, and her elbow grazed his nose. He flinched back.

“What the hell are you doing?” she said.

“I thought since you got me going—”

“Oh, please.” She pushed through him, flung the refrigerator door open, and tossed the snack pack on a shelf. The door swung wide and swayed on its hinges.

He stood silent in his running shorts; his skin all goose bumps. She snapped chicken and turkey breasts from the counter and threw them in the freezer. She removed her navy blue blazer and headed for the bedroom.

“You put the rest away,” she said.

The bedroom door slammed and locked.

He put the milk away, closed the refrigerator, and then tiptoed to the bedroom door, his bare feet squeaking over the hardwood floor. He grasped the knob with his fingertips and gently turned left and right. Yes, the door was locked. He knew that, but hoped by trying to open it, she might feel pursued as in their earlier years.

He wasn't exactly sure when that all stopped. He just knew there was a time when he would have banged on the door and wrenched the knob, not because he wanted to play his part as now, but because he truly desired to break the door down and tell her how much he loved her, how much he needed her in his life. Now he only jiggled the knob.

He turned away and looked out the bay window. He caught a glimpse of Omar, the building's manager, walking shoulder to shoulder with his sister-in-law, Melissa. Thomas bristled at the sight, then smiled, remembering how he'd once sent an anonymous note to Omar asking for money to keep quiet. He knew they were having an affair. He'd seen lingering kisses in unlit hallways and longing looks pass between them at pool parties and barbecues, but Thomas secretly admired them for their carelessness.

He watched Omar and Melissa stop at each apartment, taping a piece of paper to every door. Thomas moved away from his bedroom as he saw them approach. He heard scotch tape stretch and he flung the door open as Omar secured the notice. Thomas ripped it off.

"What's this?" Thomas said.

"We have to increase rent," Omar said.

Thomas read and then glanced up to Melissa. She stepped away from Omar and leaned against the second floor railing. She bit her bottom lip and looked Thomas over.

He crossed his arms in front of his belly to hide a spare tire, then sucked in his gut and flexed his pectorals. He felt her stare and noticed she moved her bent knee outward as she rested her foot on the bottom iron rail. He felt blood rush from his face, but tried to remain unaffected.

“You can’t do this, Omar. We signed a lease,” Thomas said.

“I already do it,” Omar said.

“You’re such a sleazebag, Omar,” Amanda said through the screen of the bedroom window. Thomas took a step out to the corridor and saw Amanda’s darkened body hiding behind a curtain.

“I don’t care what the fuck you say. You always late with rent,” Omar said. He pushed his face within inches of the screen, looking in, and Thomas sensed the words rush past his wife. The way she hid herself, and with the darkness of the room, it was difficult to know precisely where her voice had come from.

“How are you?” Melissa said. Thomas shuddered for a moment. He wasn’t sure she was talking to him. He looked toward his wife, to Omar, and then to Melissa.

“I’m...uh...I’m fine. How are you?” he said.

“Very good,” Melissa said.

And at the same moment Amanda screamed through the window. “We’re never late.”

“You are. You the worst tenants I have,” Omar said.

“That’s bullshit, Arsuffi,” Thomas said.

“No bullshit. You are. You are not a man.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Thomas said.

“Come on, Ohmi,” Melissa said. “I’m sure he’s fine. I’m sure they both are.”

Melissa took hold of Omar’s elbow and led him away from the window. She looked back to Thomas and winked. He stepped toward the rail, put his hand on it, and watched them walk away. He let a smile cross his face as he caught Melissa’s eye.

“We’re not paying a dime more,” Amanda said.

Melissa put her arm through Omar’s, corkscrewed her body to the side, turned toward Thomas, then smiled and waved. Thomas smiled and waved back.

“So, you two sue me. See if I give shit,” Omar said over his shoulder as he went.

“I’ve had better ideas than suing you, Arsuffi,” Thomas said, and placed his hand back on the rail after waving goodbye to Melissa.

“What the hell was that?” Amanda said.

“What? What the hell was what?” he said, then tried to plunge his hands into pockets, but realized he hadn’t any.

He closed the front door behind him as he went back inside. He heard Amanda’s heaviness stride across the hardwood floor. He went back to the bedroom.

“Honey,” he said. “C’mon. I didn’t do anything. Please open up so we can talk.” He put his ear to the door and listened.

“Take your own car,” she said. Her voice sounded muffled, distant.

The door flew open and bounced against the rubber stopper and back again. Amanda stomped out of the room, wearing jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. He realized she’d changed clothes in the walk-in closet. He marveled that she couldn’t change her clothes in the bedroom, even when he wasn’t there.

She brushed past him, closing her cell phone, stuffing it into her purse.

“Take my car? Where? Where are you going?”

“I’m going to Dr. Jordan’s.”

“Good God, why?”

“Oh, no reason,” she said.

The lightness in her voice annoyed him.

“We hardly know her. Three sessions. We’ve had three goddamn sessions.”

She stared at him, and said nothing, but the look clearly carried a challenge.

Thomas slouched in his seat, Amanda beside him. He hated the hunter green wallpaper and brass lamps and wondered if every psychologist used the same decorator who suggested the same light dimming switches, cherry wood end tables, and leafy green patterns for their comfy couches. He’d become convinced that marriage counselors—and spouses resistant to change—felt threatened by, if not violently opposed to, couples sitting across a card table from each other, in folding chairs, engaged in direct confrontation. He was in a darkened room. Amanda sniffed. Dr. Jordan’s knee length skirt was tugged appropriately to her shin. She had compassionate eyes each time he looked up.

“Emergency sessions are fine, Amanda. But we all know this isn’t the first time you’ve caught Thomas masturbating.”

“But how can I compete with that? How can I compete with...everything?”

“What do you mean by everything, Amanda?” Dr. Jordan said.

“With everything...even with that Melissa.”

“Shit. I couldn’t care less about Melissa. And I’m not asking you to compete,” Thomas said.

“Thomas, let Amanda finish, okay?” Dr. Jordan said, then turned to Amanda. “Who’s Melissa?”

“Oh, she’s a nobody, really. But she’s part of it all. She’s part of *everything*,” Amanda said.

Amanda wiped her cheeks with an already saturated tissue. Her eyes became narrower, slits cutting through puffy lids.

“It’s the History list,” Amanda continued. “That’s what kills me. There were thousands of websites on it—”

“There weren’t thousands,” Thomas said.

Dr. Jordan glanced at him and tugged at her hem. Thomas recognized her quick dismissal as she directed her attention back to Amanda. She might take a point away from him, and it was already a 10-9 round.

“I don’t understand, Amanda,” Dr. Jordan said.

“The History. You know. All the websites that you visit are listed on your browser. It’s supposed to be for convenience. You can just click.” Amanda was able to explain without sobbing. She let out a woeful sigh and turned her head in Thomas’s direction. He looked to the ceiling and imagined putting a gun to his temple for not remembering to delete the History. He felt sure she’d never forget.

Thomas noticed a small breakthrough, however. He hoped, for a moment, he’d be able to get Amanda to delay her tears when they talked alone in their apartment. He was amazed by her sudden burst of energy while describing the History list to Dr. Jordan,

how she didn't miss a beat. Maybe if she were able to find that lucidity, that voice uninterrupted by crying, they could discuss the History list at home, and Dr. Jordan wouldn't be part of it. Then again, he thought, maybe not.

"When did you see this?" Dr. Jordan said.

"Yesterday or the day before. No. The day before because I checked yesterday and nothing was on it."

"And what did you find?"

Thomas sank lower in his seat. He tried to think of ways to minimize the impact the words might have as Amanda recited the site's names—as they bounced off the hunter green wallpaper—but he ultimately shrugged to himself. He felt a sort of perverse satisfaction with the absurdity of the moment, as if inviting his wife to bring it on.

"Little Ho's dot com, TeenFantasy dot com, and NaughtyNetwork." The control she had over her emotions was fascinating. She spouted off the names with venom. "The worst ones were Just18 dot com and IWantYourCum dot com and BeastSex."

"I've never even seen Beast Sex," Thomas said. He wanted to chuckle, but knew that if he did, Amanda would burst into a new fit of tears and Dr. Jordan would try to soothe her, "There, there, Amanda, it's all right to feel this way..." and he'd rise up in the flowery couch and want to say "Jesus fucking Christ! Will you stop!" but wouldn't. At least she was talking. He'd accept small miracles.

"Then how'd it get there?" Amanda said.

"They pop up. They're," and he stopped for a moment. He knew that if he revealed this one fact, he'd be confessing his fluency with the Internet and, therefore,

how often he surfed through the various pages. But he went ahead, anyway. “They’re hidden links.”

And the room went silent except for Amanda’s sigh and the sound of her blue jeans rubbing against the upholstery.

Dr. Jordan interlocked her fingers and turned to Thomas. “I see, so you do admit to going to teen websites then?”

“It’s creepy. Like he’s a dirty old man.”

“I’m twenty-nine.”

“Perhaps you’re angry at Amanda because she’s the wage earner and you’re at home. Perhaps you’d rather be out at the office, too.”

“I’m a writer. My office is at home.”

“Well, then, what are you working on?”

“I nearly sold something to *GQ*.”

He didn’t need to look at Amanda to confirm the expression on her face. He heard her sigh. But he glanced over long enough to see her body sag and gravity force her face to fall in syncopation with her shoulders. He wasn’t the wage earner and they knew it.

“I’m not knocking the articles, Thomas. But are you writing?” Dr. Jordan said.

“Yes, goddammit. I’m writing. I just finished an in-depth look at women’s boxing. I got a response from *Sport*. And *Maxim* says they’re thinking about the article I wrote on ‘How To Iron a Dress Shirt’.”

“So you’re not published.”

“Are you, Dr. Jordan?” Thomas said.

“I never said I wanted to be a novelist. I’m a psychologist.”

“I see. One who doesn’t publish.”

“That’s right.”

The doctor stared at Thomas. She crossed her legs, folded her arms over her abdomen, and leaned slightly forward.

“Well, perhaps you’re simply angry with women,” Dr. Jordan said, breaking the silence.

Thomas sat back. He felt the upholstery with his fingers. It seemed silk-like for a moment. The colors and pattern faded away in his mind.

“I’m not angry with any of the girls on my voyeur site,” he said, and smiled.

But Thomas realized Dr. Jordan had touched upon a strand of truth. He was angry with Amanda, that was clear. And Dr. Jordan reminded him of people who believe they have life wired and everyone else is screwed up; that if everyone lived with their (changing) rules and (ignored) morals and (false) compassion, then the world would be a better place. Her attitude infuriated him. But more, perhaps the strangest thought surfacing from his subconscious, was that he felt anger toward the slut who was fucking Omar.

He hadn’t thought of it before, but he felt conflicted. He’d previously only concentrated on his personal battle with Omar Arsuffi and his brother Faramarz, and prayed for another day where he could call the police on them, but now he thought of the deep loathing he felt for her. *She* was fucking *him*. He’d often imagined her soft, pearl-white skin and bleached blond hair shimmering and bouncing against Omar’s black, hairy

chest. He'd shudder with the thought and then dismiss her as a bitch, but a very attractive one.

"Tell her why you taped the Maury Show," Amanda said.

Thomas said nothing.

"He taped 'Teens Addicted to Sex,'" she continued. "How are we supposed to make babies when he's always masturbating to teenagers? All I want is a baby. I want to work less, have a husband who loves me, and have babies. I know that's not exactly the feminist dream, but I want a family. I feel like he's still my college boyfriend."

He wanted to get up from the couch, calmly walk to the door, turn to them both and say he had no idea why he was doing what he was doing. He knew he felt a certain amount of pleasure, even if only fleeting, but however long or short, the escape was good. He liked the fact that there was no obligation afterward, no questions to answer, nothing but guilt and then only because Amanda had found out it wasn't her that he was masturbating to. But he remained in his seat. The hour was almost over anyway.

"Listen to Amanda for a moment, Thomas. She's saying you have to make yourself available if you're going to start a family. And you're not emotionally and physically available if you're masturbating all the time. You've said you want to have children as much as she, but are your actions demonstrating that?"

"No," he said.

Dr. Jordan moved her chin forward. "Tell me, Thomas. Tell me what you're thinking. The truth. Do you still find Amanda attractive?"

Amanda placed her crumpled, soaked tissues in her lap and pulled two fresh ones from the box. She seemed more composed in the last five minutes than she'd been for

the first forty-five. He caught her eye and smiled, but her look was dull and confirmed that any attraction for him was locked away. He sometimes hoped it would all come back to them.

“One of the best things about being in marriage counseling is having these four walls,” Dr. Jordan said. “This room. Nothing goes out of here. Amanda’s been extremely honest, it seems to me. Now it’s your turn, Thomas. Do you?”

“Do I what?” He watched his wife fumble with a corner of the tissue, her eyes directed toward her lap.

“Do you still find Amanda attractive?”

He knew he was doomed no matter what his answer was. If he said yes, then he’d have no reason to avoid sex with her—he’d have to admit he was afraid of having a baby, of the consequences, the office job. If he said no, then it would be admitting to his wife that he really wanted Melissa or the eighteen-year-old at the market—that this young girl, or a girl like her, was what would make him happy.

“Amanda’s my wife. If I wasn’t attracted to her, I wouldn’t have married her.”

“Yes,” Dr. Jordan said. “But what about now? Be honest with yourself. With her. After eight years you owe her that much. You owe yourselves that. If we get things out in the open, then a healing can begin.” She took in a breath and sat back in her seat. “Do you?”

“No,” Thomas said.

He thought about adding that things change, that there was a time, in their first year of college, when she was extremely talkative and annoying. He didn’t find her attractive then, either. Amanda was the student who always began the discussion in their

Lit. class, and he hated her for it. He believed he knew the material better than anyone did. Thomas often referred to Amanda's insights as "interesting" or "possible," once he gave his opinion on a work, but he never got the same acknowledgement from her. However, they became friends because they were the only two in class who discussed the literature with intelligence. And this girl, the one he swore was ugly and unsexy, became the most beautiful girl in school, one whom he'd vowed to fuck for eternity, or until she became annoying again, whichever came first.

But his answer, the sound of "no," bounced off the walls and seemed to echo before dying in the carpet.

Thomas noticed moistness in Dr. Jordan's eye, but the woman sat upright, composed. She turned to his wife. "How does that make you feel, Amanda?"

Amanda remained motionless. She no longer fiddled with her tissue. She didn't sniffle. She didn't adjust her bottom in her seat. After a moment, she scratched her nose with one quick movement, but returned her hand to her lap. Thomas wasn't sure if she was in shock or if she felt relieved by his admission—as if she'd been waiting to hear what she'd suspected all along. She shrugged her shoulders, offering no answer.

A soft red light in the corner of the room went on. The sound of an outer office door opening and closing got Dr. Jordan's attention. "I have another client."

Thomas looked at his watch. The hour was over.

"I'd like you to leave through the waiting area this time. And take a good look at the man who's out there. He's only in his mid-fifties." Dr. Jordan stood and walked across the room. She flipped a switch on the wall and the red light went off. Thomas and Amanda rose from the couch. Dr. Jordan opened the door for them, and it felt to him as

if a vacuum had been violated. Even the sound was distinct to him, like twisting the cap on a bottle, and though the seal was broken, it didn't feel like the pressure in the room had decreased. "See you next week," Dr. Jordan said.

Amanda walked past the middle-aged man without looking up, her face pointed toward the tips of her toes as she walked to the outer door.

Thomas looked directly at the man. He saw the outline of his body, lumpy and pale. He had bushy eyebrows, thin hair, and a pattern of blackheads dotting his nose and cheekbones. His hands rested on a cane and he locked eyes with Thomas, his mouth opening a bit as if he were about to ask the younger man what the fuck he was looking at. Thomas let a self-conscious smile cross his lips and turned in his step, watching as the man made an effort to pull himself out of the low, soft, waiting room chair. He watched the old man for another moment, then glanced to Dr. Jordan, and then to the door where he thought Amanda might be waiting for him, but she was gone, already down the hallway hailing an elevator.

He followed Amanda into their apartment and wanted to say something, but didn't know what to say. She slammed the bedroom door once more.

The living room became darker as the evening slowly covered the last light of day. The air turned cooler, the breeze stronger, and he went to the opened windows and began shutting them. He looked into the apartment complex's courtyard and listened to three children play Marco Polo in the community pool with Omar. Thomas closed the window, but could still hear a muffled "Marco" from Omar and the high-pitched "Polo" from his nieces.

He watched for a while. The little girls ranged in age from six to twelve. They often swam in the pool, but the other adult tenants didn't seem to mind. Faramarz, their father, owned the property. Thomas watched how Omar spit water from his mouth, trying to get one niece to squeal and reveal her position in the pool—the one who didn't respond with a “Polo.” And after a silent moment, Thomas saw that the bastard peeked through half-opened eyes.

It was pretty typical of Omar, Thomas reflected. What a cheater. Thomas knew that he and Amanda had never been late with the rent. Omar purposely closed the office early on the first of the month, then locked the outer screen door, and conveniently disappeared for the night. Those who got home after five from work and hadn't remembered to drop the check in the slot before leaving in the morning would have to do so the next day. The brothers forced late fees on their tenants and denied doing so. They insisted they were very busy men.

The brothers fought constantly. And the latest exchange of verbal and physical violence had come because of Faramarz's certainty that Melissa was sleeping with Omar. Thomas resented that they aired their differences outside closed doors, shouting down hallways, screaming threats of death across the courtyard. Everything echoed off the walls, then seemed to rush through Thomas's opened windows. However, the fights sometimes gave him an excuse not to write, and although he'd never openly admit so, he welcomed the diversions.

Thomas leaned against the window frame and saw Faramarz enter the courtyard. “MutterFucker...” Faramarz said and shook a fist at Omar. Omar told Faramarz to suck his dick, though dick sounded like “dicks,” as if Omar had two. And Thomas realized

that their voices seemed to filter not only through the closed window, but also through the bedroom door, as if Amanda simply ignored the angry shouts and refused to close her window.

Faramarz teetered on the pool's edge. Omar splashed water on his brother's slacks. The girls got out of the pool and huddled together with towels around their shivering bodies. Thomas shook his head.

"The brothers are at it again," he said, loud enough for Amanda to hear. But she didn't respond. He turned his attention back to the pool area.

Omar lifted himself out of the water. As he did so, Faramarz kicked him. Omar flinched. The wet shoe glanced off a shoulder. Omar swung his fists. The older brother grabbed at Omar's wrists and held onto him. But Omar pulled his knee up and tried to catch Faramarz in the balls. The oldest girl screamed, "Uncle, no! Daddy, no!" The younger girls turned away and cried.

"Look at that shit," Thomas said. "This isn't good. Should I call the cops again?"

Amanda said nothing.

Faramarz released his grip and tagged Omar on the side of his head. He followed with a slapping left hand to the nose. The younger brother reeled back and wiped at the blood. Then he came at Faramarz—elbows flying and feet kicking toward his mid-section. To Thomas it all looked like a bad Jackie Chan movie and he thought it would be more entertaining and more congruous if both men brandished sabers.

With the sight of blood, Thomas thought he could no longer stand and watch. He wanted to say or do something. He lifted the window open and yelled through the screen, "Will you guys cut it out!"

The brothers stopped fighting long enough to look up.

“Think of the girls, for Christ’s sake,” Thomas said.

Faramarz shaded his eyes and glared up at the window. Thomas pulled back somewhat, not hiding exactly, but hoping that what light was left outside would contrast with the darkness of his apartment and obscure his face. “That you, Moonavez?”

Omar and Faramarz called Thomas “Moonavez,” not Thomas, and certainly not Mr. Moonvees. It annoyed Thomas, and his neck hairs stiffened every time he heard the extra syllable.

“Who the fuck are you tellin me?” Faramarz said.

Thomas backed off farther.

“Come down here, mutterfucker!”

Thomas sighed. He should have simply sat and watched. Then he chuckled to himself and moved back to the window.

“I can beat the shit out of my brother if I want!” Faramarz said. As Faramarz said this, Omar ran up behind his older brother and clocked him with an opened hand.

Faramarz stumbled forward, then turned on Omar once more. Faramarz was clearly the stronger of the two and began punching and kicking his younger brother, more blows landing than not. Thomas noticed that neither of them saw the eldest girl corralling her sisters, leading them away from the scene and toward the safety of Omar’s apartment.

“Yeah, it looks like you’re both doing a good job of that,” Thomas said.

“Don’t get involved,” Amanda said. Thomas turned his attention to the bedroom door. He walked over to it and leaned against the wall. He took the knob in his fingers once more. She hadn’t unlocked it.

“They’re animals,” he said. “Someone’s got to do something when they go off like this.”

“Why is it always you?”

“They piss me off.”

“They piss everyone off.”

“They don’t get to you. Why don’t they get to you? I mean, I hate them. I don’t know if you really *hate* them.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You’ve never said that.” He reached out and flattened his palm against the door as if he could feel her face.

“Fucking Moonavez, you going to call the cops now, eh?” Faramarz’s voice came through both windows. The bedroom window closed with a slam. Thomas smiled and curled his fingers as if to massage the paint. “Come see what I do now, eh, Moonavez!” But Thomas ignored him.

“Please, open the door, Amanda,” he said.

“Daddy, no!” Thomas heard the daughter’s scream above everything else and he ran to the window.

Omar was on all-fours. His brother stood over him, blood on his pants and shoes. He pounded the back of Omar’s head, slapping, punching. Omar refused to go down any further. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth and his body vibrated with the coldness of the evening air. The little girls stood in the doorway to the apartment and cried.

“They’re so fucked up,” Thomas said. “Look what they’re doing to the girls, Amanda. Just look.”

“I don’t need to,” she said. “I *know*.”

He closed his eyes. He didn’t look at the girls anymore. He only saw a black screen in his mind.

“We’d never do anything like that,” he said, finally. He didn’t expect a response from Amanda, and nothing came. He opened his eyes again, and focused on the girls cowering in a corner.

He considered going out to stop the fight. But before he could muster up the courage to run outside, the gate to the pool opened and two police officers jogged toward the brothers, each with one hand on an unbuttoned holster and the other wielding a baton.

A paramedic arrived and began working on Omar. The younger brother waved away any help and tried to sit up. Faramarz broke from the officer’s grasp and ran awkwardly in Thomas’s direction, his shoulders swaying, his hands still securely cuffed behind him.

“I kill you, Moonavez! This is none of your fucking business!” The cop led him off, through the opened gate and out of the complex. Thomas could still hear the shouts. He looked across to the manager’s door. The oldest girl was on a cell phone, perhaps speaking to her mother on the other end, describing the chaos.

He went to the bedroom door and sat, curling into a fetal position. He pressed his ear to the wood and heard a click from the night light on the bed stand. The light crept out from under the door.

“Well, that’s over,” he said.

But Amanda didn't respond.

"I mean, Faramarz got arrested again," he said, and listened for her once more.

"His wife'll probably bail him out, don't you think?"

Whatever moment of understanding, whatever strand of connection that he imagined was there between them because of the brothers, was not there at all. For a brief second he thought about other times when he believed he was connecting with his wife. He realized it was mostly in his mind, not hers—like having a grade school crush, only to find out later it was one-sided, that the fixation never stood a chance of being returned.

He rocked in his sitting position a few times and had a slight sense of comfort, like being on a porch swing.

"Baby," he said. "I've been thinking maybe we should find another marriage counselor."

He thought he heard pages ruffling. Perhaps she was reading her book. "I mean, remember when I asked Dr. Jordan if she was married? She's divorced. Think about that." He sat still and looked at the door. "What kind of psychologist gets divorced and doesn't remain friends with her ex? Aren't they all supposed to be so, so *healed*? Don't they all *resolve* their issues? God." He thought about what he should say next and hesitated, then went ahead. "Maybe we should see someone younger. Maybe a male."

And a loud popping noise cut through the air. He detected a vibration through the floorboards, as if she'd thrown her book down in disgust. The light went out in the room.

"Look, I know I've fucked up, and I'm sorry. I want us to keep going. I really do. And I know I can work harder."

The box springs from the bed squeaked. There was a crack from the floorboards as weight became displaced. He thought he heard Amanda's light footsteps head his way. He wanted her to open the door so they could talk face to face, but dared not ask her to unlock it. He didn't want to give her a reason to do the opposite.

Her footsteps stopped at the door. She was there, on the other side, within a few feet.

"I'm not the most romantic guy in the world. Hell, I'm not even good looking. I know that. And when I married you, I married for life. The last thing I want is to lose you, you know, to be out there in the real world." He stopped for a minute to reflect on his words. They didn't sound like the words he'd been thinking about, but now they sounded right, truthful. "I don't want to be some divorced guy asking women out on dates when I don't give a shit about them. Jesus Christ."

He listened as the door moved toward him, tighter. It couldn't be locked any more. There wasn't a bolt lock. But he heard what he thought was material sliding across the door's gloss and downward. He realized that she now sat next to him.

"I want a family," he said.

"How do I know you mean it?" she said.

"All I want, all you want, all we want, is to be happy. And children can do that for you, for me..."

"Really? Do you really mean it, baby?" she said.

"Yeah, I do. I really do. I mean, the world can certainly use another Tommy Moonvees running around, don't you think?"

And he sighed. He lifted his head from his knees and rested it against the wall, then tapped it lightly—closing his eyes to the night—and tried not to think about how alone he felt.

Any Given Head

Amy sat on the examining table, her fifteen-year-old body hunched at the shoulders, and her heels tapping lightly against stainless steel. She read from a book she'd brought to relieve boredom during the appointment, but the door opened, interrupting her. A slender young nurse entered with Dr. McKay, who quickly said hello, then flipped the switch to the X-ray lamp, and began shoving dark negatives under clips. He sighed and studied the pictures while the nurse tucked a file under her arm. An insistent voice filtered to Amy's ears from across an exposed hallway.

Amy leaned to the side, corkscrewing her torso, and looked out to the waiting room. She saw a young man in his early twenties glance up from his magazine. He smiled. She smiled, and moved her knees outward in a seductive gesture. She nibbled her lower lip, saw the young man's eyes widen, and his face flush. He fumbled with his magazine, then returned to reading.

Amy saw her mother lean forward out of a waiting room chair and cross the line of sight between her daughter and the young man. Her mother frowned—while holding a cell phone to her ear—then turned toward Amy, turned once to the young man (whose nose now seemed wedged in his magazine), and back again to her daughter. Amy crossed her legs at the ankles and felt her body sag.

The nurse pulled the door behind her when she left, but not before Amy had caught a glimpse of her mother leaning back in her chair and heard her say "Governor Davis's office, please." Amy rolled her eyes, made a half-hearted attempt to get back to

reading, but realized Dr. McKay was still in the room. She put her book down on the padded table beside her.

A draft from the air-conditioner chilled her, though she'd tugged at the opening of the gown to cover her back. She studied her nails, the black polish chipped off near the cuticle, then watched McKay as he turned from the lighted panel.

"I like the colors in your hair." He turned off the lamp and the X-rays went dark.

"Thanks."

"It must take some effort to make sure you get the right contrast between black and teal."

Amy shrugged. "I don't know. I just do it." She looked down to her nails once more.

He relaxed against a counter. Glass containers filled with sterilizing liquids, cotton balls, and elongated Q-tips, clinked. She thought about how every visit began with him putting on an automatic happy face and clapping his hands together once, as if he were getting ready to address a ten-year-old.

She thought he was a handsome man, though. Old, but handsome. He had nicely trimmed, curly gray sideburns and a full head of brown hair. She wondered if he dyed it, but left in just a touch of gray for a distinguished look. His tight, compact body showed he worked hard to minimize a potbelly. She remembered the first time she shook hands with him, how masculine his fingers had felt. But today she noticed a clammy, almost liquid quality about them.

She followed him with her eyes as he moved around the table and behind her. His hands went to her neck, his fingers finding vertebrae. He gently poked and massaged

muscles, then untied the cotton laces to the gown and felt along her scapulae. “You can see where I have my fingers pressed on your shoulder blades, that one drops below the other by about two inches.” Amy said nothing. She felt his touch. His fore and middle fingers straddled the bones, pressing as he moved downward in a curved line. He came to her brassiere, but skipped over it.

“Do you want me to unhook my bra?”

McKay stopped pressing her skin, and his fingers remained on her upper buttocks. After a second he continued his examination, up and in toward her spine.

“Nope,” he finally answered. “No need. I wish there were a way for you to feel this, though. You’d understand why the surgery is necessary.”

“I already understand. But sometimes I wish I could feel it, too.”

McKay went silent for a moment. Amy picked up her book, revealing its cover.

“*Les Miserables*. I saw the production in New York,” he said.

“I’ve read them all.”

“All of Hugo?”

“Uh huh. And all of the Bronte sisters. And Poe—”

“And let me guess, Poe is your favorite,” he said. She realized anyone might come to such a conclusion after seeing her black lipstick and iron cross hanging from a chain in front of her gown.

She shrugged once more, and he continued massaging her muscles, his knuckles kneading knots whenever he came across one. She groaned, recoiled only slightly, but gave in as a kink in her flesh softened.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“For what?”

“The surgery.”

“Oh. Yes. I guess. As long as I have enough drugs.” She laughed.

“There’ll be plenty.”

“As much as I want?”

“I told you, the PCA—” he leaned over her shoulder and smiled. She looked at him and then away. “Patient Controlled Analgesia pump to you non-meds—pumps the morphine through the IV line. When you’re experiencing too much discomfort after the surgery, all you have to do is push the button.”

“Morphine,” she said.

“Don’t worry. You won’t become an addict. It’s all computerized.”

He continued his examination, hands moving up and down, in toward the center and out to her sides. She closed her eyes. His hands felt soothing, strong, and confident. He stopped.

He went to the X-rays again and turned on the light.

“Without surgery, the body disfigures, the organs function improperly—heart, lungs, liver—and then, well, an early death, as I’ve said. I want you to have a look.”

He lifted his hand toward the girl as if inviting her to take hold. She hopped off the table and reached out, but McKay dropped his arm when he saw her come. She felt a bit foolish, diverted her eyes for a moment, retracted her outstretched hand, and then clasped them both behind her back.

“See, here... I felt your ribs—”

“It tickled.” Amy looked into his eyes for a reaction. McKay’s face was non-expressive, but she thought she detected a momentary, stunned look. He pointed to her ribs pictured in the X-ray.

“On the left, they’re separated by two and a half inches,” he said. “And on the right, in places, there’s less than an inch gap. And your spinal column, that’s the obvious thing. It’s not just a simple curvature, as your mother likes to say. But Idiopathic Scoliosis.”

He put his hand on her shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“You’ve lost three inches.”

“I’ve lost three inches?”

“In height, yes. And in time, a year let’s say, it could be six inches or more.”

Amy turned her back to McKay. She wondered why her mind never seemed to produce thoughts in the manner she believed normal. Hers were always random, non-sequitur, rarely concentrated, and always contradictory. *I’m becoming Quasimodo. Maybe it’s not such a bad thing. I’ve never seen three inches slip away. More than that scares the shit out of me. Sorta.* She broke into a grin.

“Are you all right? I know this is tough.”

She struggled for a straight face, and thought of lima beans. As a child, she hated the taste of lima beans and had learned—when her mother commanded she “wipe that smile” off her face—that if she imagined eating them, the memory of their silky texture and bitterness suppressed any involuntary giddiness, and she’d gag instead.

“You were five foot eight inches nine months ago when we measured you on your first visit,” he went on. “You’re five-five now. After surgery you’ll have them back.

Maybe a few inches more. And who knows, you may even grow as tall as Larry Bird.”

Amy smirked at his feeble joke. “Well, he was my favorite basketball player. Pick your own.” She looked up to him, almost blurting out a question, then weighed the seriousness of what had popped into her mind.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask anything, Amy.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

McKay’s eyes narrowed, forcing the deep, tanned lines on his forehead to become like small canyons, and then smoothing and fading as a thin, reassuring smile spread across his face. She couldn’t see anything more in his expression than years of bedside manner.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve had one patient die during surgery. Sometimes, some things happen when a person is under anesthesia. And even though I’ve performed this surgery hundreds of times, it’s still dangerous. But let me make this clear. The man who passed away wasn’t a fifteen-year-old, strong young woman. You’ll make it, Amy. You’ll be up and around within weeks.”

Amy remembered being under a previous doctor’s care. She tried not to think about the fiberglass and aluminum brace that had been prescribed, but it was difficult to forget. The thick brace flared out at her hips, curved inward at her waist, then went vertically at ninety degrees from the bottom of her ribcage, front and back, and fit under her armpits, but the least flattering part of the contraption’s design was the flat aluminum brace that immobilized her neck and thrust her chin skyward.

Classmates called her “the turtle.” Boys passed her in hallways and rapped their knuckles on the hard fiberglass. Amy hated the nickname and thought it immature when one boy laughed after knocking on her hard-shell back. Her chin had slipped off its padded brace and fell below the cast’s neckline, as if she were trying to make her head disappear.

The nickname followed her from junior-high to senior-high school, and she felt embarrassed and depressed when “turtle” shortened to “turt.” The name had especially affected her self-esteem because the second t sounded more like a d if said quickly. She’d hoped that upon entering a new school, she might find more compassion with different classmates. Unfortunately, a boy had called out, “Hey Turd” as she stood next to her opened locker. Her face fell and her body shuddered as she turned to the offender. She wanted to tear him apart, but instead spun on her heels, trying to avoid more embarrassment, then stutter-stepped down the hall after snapping her locker door shut. She went to the restroom, tore open her blouse, ripped at the Velcro tabs of her brace, and threw the hardware to the tiled floor in a clank. She swore she’d never wear it again.

On her first visit to Dr. McKay, she felt as if forged-steel armor had been removed from her body when she’d heard him say that wearing the brace did little to slow the progressive condition. She would have needed surgery sooner or later. He’d explained in simple terms, that her muscles were pulling in different directions and not working in harmony with her body’s rapid growth spurts, and any given head, sitting on a spinal column such as hers, would tilt down toward the collarbone. She showed increased signs of deformity, and something, no matter how drastic, had to be done.

For a short time, though, Amy believed she'd found her knight, someone to take her away from everything—from her fear of surgery, from cruel classmates. She had no idea why Joshua began to say hello. He was a boy who ate lunch alone on the steps outside the school cafeteria. Every day, she looked forward to seeing him pass in the halls. She even descended a flight of stairs between bells so she could cross his path as he left a class on the first floor. She didn't mind having to climb back up the stairs to get to her class, even if it was painful. He was cool. He had pretty eyes, and full lips set over a square, soft jaw. She noticed he seemed to smile a lot for someone who didn't hang out much with other kids.

She was shocked when she learned he wasn't going steady with any of the girls. And she was stunned when he asked her to meet him at an un-chaperoned party hidden in a Topanga Canyon city park. She'd managed to mumble yes.

On that night, as other partyers shared blankets underneath oak trees, or waded ankle deep in the run-off creek, she and Joshua shared a joint while sitting on a picnic table, their feet resting on a bench. She'd become stoned after three choking hits, but the escape from reality was short-lived as a boy walked by. "Look, the Turd's smoking a roach," he said, laughed, and stumbled away. Joshua put his arm around her and told the stoner to go fuck himself. Amy's chin dropped from her collarbone into Joshua's chest. She tried not to cry, but the tears flowed, and Joshua hugged her harder.

"Promise not to tell anyone this?" he said.

"I'm a freak. I'm a fucking freak," she said, and felt him pull her closer.

“I let old guys blow me,” he said, after a moment had passed. She slumped further into his chest. *Of course, how fucking perfect*, she thought. But the friendship was complete, and solidified by a confession in a cloud of exhaled smoke.

That night seemed light years away as Amy lay sprawled across her bed, headphones in place, a George Eliot paperback turned face down on the comforter. She blew her crimson nail polish dry through pursed lips. She waved her hands in the air, sat upright, and tossed her head left and right, making her short, thick hair shimmer and bounce. She reached out to push herself off the bed with one hand while cradling and leveling her CD player with the other. As she pushed away, the bottom of her palm crinkled an opened, hand-written letter, the torn envelope bearing overseas postmarks.

Joshua peeked through a crack in her bedroom door. He pushed it open. She had her back to him. He entered, came up from behind, and tapped her on the shoulder. She whirled and jumped.

“Goddammit. Don’t do that,” she said. She removed her headphones and draped them around her neck.

“Jesus.” He waved his hands through the air. “I could smell this down by the front door. Turn on the AC, and get some air moving.”

“What, are you crazy? That’s a luxury my mother allows for herself. Not me.”

“How’s she gonna know?”

“She’ll have an electric bill cow.”

“Then we’ll both get wasted on the fumes.”

“I think I already got a buzz going.”

Joshua drew in an exaggerated breath, blew it out, and inhaled again. She joined him, both of them breathing deeply.

“We’re idiots,” he said.

“Look what Betty Ford turned us into.”

“Turned you—I had Community Health Services.”

“Yeah, but being high is the only time I can remember having some sort of...oh, I don’t know,” she said, and removed her headphones from around her neck. As she screwed the top back onto the polish, she looked to him as he smiled weakly. She smiled too.

“Let’s see what you’re listening to, as if I didn’t know.” Joshua reached to the bed and lifted a CD off the blanket. He turned it over.

“Wagner. *Flight of the Valkyries*. Jesus Christ.”

“That was the one before. I’ve been listening to *Sergeant Pepper*.”

“How about something from this century. It doesn’t even have to be from 1990 on.”

“They all suck. Besides, John, Paul, George, and Ringo—”

“Primus. Acid Bath—”

“Oh, please.”

Joshua sat on the bed, brushing the letter aside. Then he picked it up and looked at the postmark. It read Deutsche Briefmarke, a German stamp, and Deutsches Post as German mail, at 1 Mark 51 Pfennig.

“Another one. Took him long enough, I guess,” he said.

“Shut up.”

“Can I read it?”

“I don’t know. Can you? Because I sure can’t.”

“I thought you said you knew how to speak it.”

“I know some words. He knows. I think it’s his way of forcing me to learn. I don’t understand Americans who move to Europe and forget...” She took the letter from Joshua and glanced at the words. “I remember that Schatzie is baby. Meaning, I think his new wife is having another one or just had one, but then it could be he’s calling me baby. Liebchen, but then I’m not sure if he’s calling me his love or if he loves the new baby. And I remember Apfelsaft, but I haven’t had apple juice since he left eleven years ago.”

“He’s not coming.”

Amy placed the CD player on her dresser. She sat on the edge of the bed next to Joshua.

“I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Josh.”

Amy leaned against him. He put his arm around her shoulder, and they fell back on the bed.

“Will you marry me?” she said.

“I’m gonna marry an older guy, probably a doctor, or lawyer, or something.”

Amy sighed. “I’m fifteen and already a fag hag.” She rolled away from him and hid her face in a pillow.

“That is so offensive.” Joshua slapped her on the rear.

“It’s so true, though. Why don’t I just put on another hundred and fifty pounds and really play the role?”

Joshua went silent. Amy lay there, hoping he might hug her from behind. Her phone rang. Joshua picked it up and held it out to her.

“I don’t want to talk to anyone,” she said in a low voice, and shook her head. Joshua put the receiver to his ear.

“Hello.” Joshua listened. He put the mouthpiece to his chest and whispered, “Dr. Something. Maybe it’s called off.”

Her face fell, and her eyebrows came together.

“They don’t just cancel surgeries the day before.” After a moment she said, “Do they?” Joshua shrugged. She reached for the phone. He handed it to her. Amy saw him grab a Goth mag from the carpet and slide down to the floor, his back against the bed as he flipped through pages.

“Hello,” she said. She sat on the bed, and reclined against the headboard, bracing herself.

She noticed something didn’t sound right. The speech was slow. The voice sounded out of breath.

“He says you have a strong heart beat,” she said to Joshua. He looked up to her and mouthed, “Is he cute?” She sighed, imploring him with her eyes to cut it out.

“No. He’s a friend,” Amy said into the mouthpiece. She listened. “He just left.” She gave a puzzled look to Joshua, but he didn’t look up from the magazine. Still, she pointed to the phone and put an imaginary bottle to her lips and threw her head back, but stopped, distorting her face into a confused mess, unsure what was going on.

“Are you all right, Dr. McKay? This doesn’t sound like you.” She listened again. “This isn’t him,” she said to Joshua, covering the mouthpiece. But he didn’t respond. “Is this you, Dr. McKay? What? I mean, if you want me to—” She threw her legs over the edge of the bed, sat upright. “You sound drunk.” A silence. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that, I meant you sound out of breath. Sorry. It’s just that I’ve been doing my nails and—” Her lips went flat, and her eyes narrowed more. “Red. My nails are red.” And then with a short, nervous laugh, “Crimson, crimson passion, actually—”

She reached behind her back as far as she was able. She traced forward with her thumb and across her ribcage. She then drew her thumb over her chest to her heart.

“Yes. I’m at my left...*white*...” she said, her face a confused blank as she breathed out *breast*. She listened for a moment more and pulled the receiver away from her ear. The other end clicked and then the lone, monotonous buzzing of dial tone filled the air. Thousands of questions ran through her mind. *What the fuck? Who the hell? I’m really here, though, aren’t I? My room? Josh?*

The room was a haze to Amy. She thought her mother would accuse her of lying in order to cancel the operation at the last minute. She was sure the woman would never remember the conversation in the car after the date for surgery had been set.

They’d been in afternoon rush-hour traffic; bumper-to-bumper cars and trucks inching along like one huge snake on a wavy, flat desert landscape. Gray smoke sputtered from the exhaust of an old Dodge stopped in front of her mother’s Lexus. Amy couldn’t believe she’d forgotten to grab her headphones and CD player before leaving for the appointment.

Her mother pressed SEND on the cell phone and listened while she changed lanes.

“Well, tell me what he said,” her mother said. She looked once, twice, quickly but not thoroughly, braking and turning. Amy looked at the radio, wanting to turn it on.

“Sweetheart, tell me what he said.”

Amy didn’t respond.

“Okay, so don’t tell me. I’ll call Dr. McKay.”

“You’re talking to me?”

“Who did you think I was talking to?”

“Someone, anyone,” Amy said. Her mother pressed OFF, and seemed tempted to press another automatic dial number, but instead placed the phone in the console.

“So, what did the doctor say?”

“He said, thanks for coming inside with me.”

“Maybe I’m worrying about you more right now.”

“I really feel it.”

“I’m sure you had no problem being alone with him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What do you think it means? I’m sure you just threw yourself at him.”

“Have you ever heard the term ‘projection,’ Mother?”

“Look, he’s handsome and a doctor. I understand—”

“Yeah, you understand so well...” Amy’s words trailed off. She couldn’t think of anything to say that would constitute a well-placed shot to the unprotected area of her mother’s heart, so she turned and stared at the trees lining the freeway. A half dozen

black birds glided low over the roofs of stopped cars, and landed in trees. *Black birds shitting in the dead of night, take these fucked up wings and fall from the sky. Thank you John and Paul.*

Amy watched her mother flip her turn signal, change lanes once more, and weave into the fastest moving lane. She mouthed thanks through the closed window to other drivers and then glanced at Amy.

“I’m sorry. I’ve only spent the last five years trying to get a man off death row.”

“You’re saving the life of a murderer. That’s great, Mom.”

“We don’t rape rapists. We don’t cut off the hands of thieves. We don’t beat the shit out of batterers—”

Amy had heard the argument a thousand times before and huffed out a sigh.

“My work makes it possible for you to have this operation,” her mother said.

“What are you saying? If it wasn’t for you, I couldn’t have the surgery?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any idea how fucked up that sounds?”

“Don’t you talk to me that way.” She checked her rearview mirror. “You think doctors and hospitals give their services away? If I didn’t have the security of the firm, we’d be broke. Then where would you be?”

“Better off than one of your clients.”

“Oh, stop.”

“He said that over time, without the surgery, I’d die.”

“Eventually, like everyone else.”

Amy gave her a disgusted look. “Except I’d be like twenty-five.”

“I don’t like this road you’ve taken us down.”

“God. The road I’ve taken us.” Amy’s eyes teared, but she stiffened. She saw her mother blow air between her lips.

“Look, the date is set. Dr. McKay is brilliant and you’ll make it to at least twenty-six,” she smirked.

Amy looked at her mother’s face, the slight smile. She thought it possible the woman was making an attempt to be the adult and lighten the mood.

“That’s okay, Mother. Once I’m 18 you won’t have to worry about me.”

“I care,” was all her mother said.

Amy said nothing. She reached over and pushed on the power button to the radio. Her mother pushed it off.

Amy gazed out the window and saw a man in an S.U.V., his suburban wife and two kids as passengers. He rolled down his window and shouted at another driver who had cut him off. The other driver was a Latino, his wife and two kids with him as well. The Latino ignored the other man, the windows to his mini-van shut, keeping in the air-conditioning.

Amy watched the drama on the freeway. “I want to call Dad.”

She watched her mother draw in a short breath and hold it for a moment, her hand grasping the wheel tightly, blood flowing away from her knuckles.

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t heard from him yet.”

“He’s in Germany,” her mother said, curtly.

“I know where he is. I want to know if he’s coming.”

“Do what you want. Just keep it short.”

“Is that all you ever think about?”

“It’s not that, sweetheart. It’s just...well, call him. I hate that he breaks your heart. No birthday cards. No phone calls—”

“Forget it, then.”

“No. Go ahead, call him when we get home, if it’ll make you feel any better.”

They crept along in silence.

Amy felt somewhat relieved the conversation had stopped. She turned in her seat. A moment of truce seemed to pass between them, but Amy almost groaned, thinking that a year earlier she’d have never given her mother the tiniest hope for a civil conversation. She thought about telling her this, but then her mother picked up the phone, pressed a pre-programmed number and hit SEND.

Amy resumed watching traffic. The S.U.V. and mini-van were gone. She looked left, her mother’s face reflecting in the driver’s side window. A car passed in the background and it broke Amy’s train of thought, but not before she realized how old her mother’s face appeared. She hadn’t noticed before, and felt neither sadness nor as if justice had been served. She saw the scene as a movie and remembered Charles Laughton’s *Quasimodo*. *I’ll be like Quasimodo for the rest of my life if I don’t get through this. No more turtle, said the hare, just the peasant girl Esmeralda.*

On the day of surgery Amy and her mother had ridden in silence through little traffic on the San Diego Freeway, neither of them able to talk about the nervousness they

felt, the uncertainty of the day. Her mother parked the Lexus under a tree at the far end of the hospital's parking lot. The lot was nearly empty at six o'clock in the morning.

"Why are you parking way out here?"

"There'll be shade under the tree."

"Maybe you can just drop me off."

"I don't think so. I'll be here all day."

"I meant so I don't have to walk ten miles to my death."

Her mother said nothing in response. She shoved the gearshift to the park position, and put a reflector in the windshield as Amy pulled a small nylon duffel bag from the trunk.

At the Patient Admissions window, her mother filled out last-minute consent to surgery and more insurance forms pushed toward her across a desk by a sleepy hospital secretary. She stopped to read every word on the forms before writing or signing anything. A nurse arrived—a robust, middle-aged woman who had a spark of life in her eyes. Amy followed her down a pastel blue hallway toward pre-op.

"She'll be a while," the nurse said, referring to Amy's mother.

"You don't have any idea," Amy said.

"When was the last time you had something to eat?"

"Dinner, last night."

"What time was that?"

"Seven."

"And something to drink?"

"About ten last night."

“Nothing this morning?”

“Nothing.”

“When did you last relieve your bladder?”

“I never do. I retain all my water.”

“Who doesn’t?” the nurse said.

“I don’t want to do this, you know.”

“It’s normal to be scared.”

“I don’t trust the doctor. He called me last night and was really weird.”

“Dr. McKay? I doubt that. When do you say he called?”

“About eight o’clock.”

“Then it was someone else. He had an emergency surgery from about six to ten-thirty last night.”

Amy stopped walking. She watched as the nurse continued up the hallway, her back to Amy. The nurse stopped, too, and turned to her.

“Are you sure?” Amy asked.

“Completely. I worked E.R. all day. Overtime, even. He was here, and never left the man’s side—a bullet wound near the spine. He’s one of the few surgeons the E.R. doctors trust for something like that. He’s the best. He’ll take good care of you. We’ll all take good care of you.” The nurse held her hand out to Amy.

I know it was him. Maybe it wasn’t. No. I know. Why would she lie?

The nurse finished her questions in the pre-op room, then placed a hospital gown on a gurney, handed water and a Valium to Amy, and told her to strip, put on the gown,

and take her drugs. The nurse winked as she left and drew curtains around Amy and the gurney.

She took the Valium first. By the time she'd finished tying the cotton ties on the back of the gown and then slipping it over her head, the barbiturate seemed to have dissolved in her stomach. She folded her clothes, sat on the edge of the gurney, and the nurse shuffled up to the curtain again.

"Knock. Knock. How you doing in there, Amy?"

"I feel very relaxed, thank you."

"Good. If you get a chill, hop in bed and pull the blankets around you. I've been told that Dr. McKay is on the freeway, heading here."

"Where's my mom?"

"She's still reading the fine print."

Amy looked at the clock on the wall. The surgery was to begin at seven. She shivered, her hands and feet blocks of ice. She got under the covers and let the layers of blankets warm her. She began to drift off, but tried not to do so. She wanted to be conscious of the slow, relaxed feeling the Valium produced. She loved the fluidity, the unreality of the world through her gel-like vision. She closed her eyes anyway.

"Can we let her sleep?" her mother asked.

"No," the nurse said. "I have to get this into her right now." The nurse placed a plastic bag through a hook on the end of a rod above the gurney. She screwed on a plastic needle to the end of the tube, then took hold of Amy's hand and rubbed the back of it to find a vein. Amy opened her eyes.

“Hi, Mom,” she said. Her eyes were glassy, her speech slurred, her smile sly, and whereabouts unknown. Her mother smoothed the hair away from her daughter’s forehead.

“How you doing, sweetheart?”

“Greeaaaat.”

“It looks like it,” her mother said.

“And only one.”

“One?”

“Valium.” She gave a short laugh as the nurse slipped the IV into a vein, taped the tubing down, and opened the drip valve.

“What’s in there?” her mother asked.

“Glycerin, mostly. And just a little something extra to get her to O.R.” The nurse winked at Amy. The girl was surprised to see her mother smiling.

“Enjoy it while you can, sweetheart,” her mother said, although the smile seemed to hide a worried look.

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Nothing. Nothing.”

“Tell me, please,” Amy said. She faded into more grogginess.

“I can’t do anything about this. I can’t help you.”

“I know. This feels great.” And the tube dripped away as the nurse and orderly released the brakes on the wheels of the gurney, guided her through the door, down a hallway and toward an operating room. Along the way, Amy repeatedly shivered, and her mother pulled and tucked blankets around her daughter as she walked alongside.

Amy was rolled past glass doors that automatically opened, leaving her mother behind. She waved goodbye to her and thought she might have seen tears in her mother's eyes. Amy watched the soft hospital lights pass overhead in a blur and put her arm under the covers once more.

"Where am I?" She looked around. Green tile covered the walls, a huge diffused light hung overhead. She heard much activity, the bustle of people she couldn't see moving around the room in cloth-covered shoes. Finally a younger nurse, one Amy hadn't seen before—face half-covered with a light green mask, hair tucked under a net—peered over her and said they were almost ready to make the transfer from the gurney to the operating table. All Amy had to do was relax.

"That's easy," Amy said. And she was lifted up, like a hollow corpse from a centuries-old grave, and set down onto a cold table.

"Amy? Amy?" She heard a familiar, deep masculine voice. "I want to explain what we're doing."

Amy stirred and looked up into Dr. McKay's face. His, too, was half-covered with a mask. He wore a light green cap. He held his latexed hands in the air while looking into her eyes.

"We're almost set, Amy. Dr. LaPaz will put a mask over your face and give you some Halothane gas. Try to count backward from a hundred, okay?" His voice filtered out to her, but was loud and even in tone, as if he were shouting instructions to a three-year-old child. She nodded her head. Then she sensed Dr. McKay lean down, closer to her. He pressed his thumb over her upper eyelid and lifted, peering into her pupil with a penlight. The light went out. She felt his mask and cap brush the side of her cheek, his

mouth next to her ear. *I get to see you naked.* His mask, once more, brushed her cheek as his face came away from hers. *It'll be great. You'll be great.* Her eyes flashed for a moment, but she felt paralyzed. The rubber mask was put over her nose and mouth. She did not begin counting because her whole world faded to black.

Nearly fourteen hours later, Amy lay in her hospital bed—her torso wrapped in soft gauze, absorbent cotton, and ace bandages. She could see tubes protruding from several areas of her body. A steady stream of oxygen flowed into her nose and she felt as if she were being forced to breathe. Her IV line passed through the PCA, and the needle remained fixed in the back of her hand. Her free hand rested next to the nurse's call button, the remote for the room's television, the light switch, and the PCA pump switch. But she wasn't quite over the anesthesia. She listened to a smattering of unintelligible conversation as she began to come around.

Amy felt like the hydraulic compactor of an automobile wrecking yard had mutilated her. Her head pounded in syncopation with her body, as if one enormous migraine inhabited every nerve, sliver of muscle tissue, and cell of her being. She blinked her eyes numerous times, attempting to clear her gauze-like vision. She was numb but in deep pain.

The first person Amy saw was her mother. With one hand, the woman pressed her cell phone against her ear, and the girl felt the other one resting on her forearm. Her mother moved the mouthpiece end of the phone away. "*Wie geht's dir, mein Schatz?*" *What a stupid question,* Amy thought. *How can she not know I feel like shit.* She saw

her mother move the phone back to her mouth and report to the person on other end that Amy was doing just fine.

She looked across the room and saw Joshua. She tried to smile. He smiled to her, a worried look on his face. He said nothing, but then turned to face Dr. McKay, who stood at Amy's bedside. The boy beamed, "*Ich bin doch in verliebt!*" *You're not in love with him, Josh. You're really in love with me!* Amy thought.

Dr. McKay reached out with both hands and took hold of Amy's. He checked to make sure the IV was firmly in place. She was sure his fingers, as they grasped her hand, were hot enough to burn her. She felt him slide his middle finger forward, length-wise across her palm to the edge of her wrist, and then back again, forward and then back once more. "*Die Chirurgie hatte riesengrossen Erfolg. Ich erwarte dass wir von einander viel mehr sehen werden, meine junge Dame.*" *Of course the surgery was successful, fucker! Otherwise I wouldn't be lying here. I'd be in the morgue. And let go of my hand.* But Amy didn't have the strength to pull away. With her free hand she patted the bed, searching for the PCA pump button. She tried to speak, but her throat was swollen and inflamed. She lifted her head toward her mother while eyeing the button. Her mother put it in her hand.

And for the moment Amy knew that any given head is able to think any given thing—that in her mind lay the place most private in the world, anyone's world. She frantically pushed the button of her PCA, pumping as much morphine into her veins as the computer would allow. As she felt her blood course through her body, she lay motionless except for her thumb pressing the button over and over again, feeling warm but numb, and all Amy could think were the words, "*Sanctuary. Sanctuary.*"

No Pepper

I took my doctor's advice and got rid of the stress. All I do these days is watch ESPN until mid afternoon. Then I grab my cane, my Marlins cap, and I'm out the door to the bocce courts. I sit on the bench at the Boulevard and Ninth, and the sun casts a shadow of the coconut palm across me while I wait for the metrobus. I take it easy. I'm fifty-nine and everybody guesses older by ten, fifteen years. Maybe it's the cane—hell, my knees crack every morning and sound just like I was going at a bag of peanuts.

I'd seen Frankie a number of times before. He's the kid with palsy, and what a pisser. He'd get on board at the circle stop and say, "errow..." to everyone, kind of like that dog in that cartoon—and you either watched with sadness as he motored past all the seats, or you tried to ignore him by reading your paper or gazing out the window.

The kid dresses in shorts, shabby-but-clean Converse All-Stars, and sometimes wears a white tee shirt that says, "God's Got Me Right Where He Wants Me" in big letters across his chest. A backpack is always strapped over his shoulders. Then there's his hat—sweat-stained, with a misshaped bill, and LA stitched on front. A true-blue Dodger fan, that kid.

So this one afternoon, like most other times I've seen him, he got off at Fifty-Sixth. I watched him ease down the steps and bolt past the hiss of brakes and snap of the bus doors. The driver had to wait a few seconds more for an elderly lady with a walker to get on board. I lent a hand to her as she steadied herself over a seat and plopped down.

"Hey, buddy," I said. "I'll get off here."

It wasn't my stop. I just wondered why Frankie's eyes and smile went wide every time the bus neared this particular street corner. The kid hurried away from the curb—his legs lifting and pushing as if they belonged to a robot—and I thought he must be doing something more interesting than going to the boccie courts to listen to Joe and Sam moan about life from here till whenever. Anyway, the driver'd eased forward, but jammed on the brakes, and my knees buckled a bit as I held onto the bar. He opened the doors again to let me out.

I headed toward Frankie. He sat there in the sun, on aluminum bleachers to the left of the backstop of a silent softball diamond. He was alone. There was no one around to approach him, other than me. The kid seemed happy, as if he waited for someone or something.

I'd passed the complex many times on my way to boccie, but had never been to it. I mean, after all, it's softball. Still, though, I figured what the hey. A clean, hot afternoon. The kind you just love to play ball in—the outfield grass freshly mowed, the clay infield a burnt-orange, the pitcher's rubbers bright white.

There are six fields, and in deep center sits a two-hundred-year-old Banyan. Its aged branches spread out in symmetry toward new chainlink fences that arc skyward behind the batter's boxes and give way to team benches and aluminum stands behind home and visitor sides. One thing missing, that would make it appear more like a major league park instead of a softball field, is a sign on the backstop saying, "No Pepper."

Frankie's tee shirt stuck to his skin from sweat, his Dodgers cap dark blue at the band and lighter toward the top, his hair matted and wet. I hobbled over to the field, and sat down on a wooden bench beneath a tree. It was relatively cool and shady. Cooler and

shadier than what the kid was experiencing. But it was nearing four o'clock, and the sun began to lower in the sky, so I figured he'd be all right.

Then the ballpark began to come alive with teams taking the various fields. The one Frankie and I sat watching was part of the C league, the co-ed league. Team members tossed softballs, warmed up, and shagged a few flies. A couple of the women weren't bad.

Frankie watched every move. His body twitched, and his mouth drooled in a steady flow as the sound of metal bat on ball and ball into leather glove pinged and snapped through the air. One team assembled on the visitor's side dugout, and I could hear their captain talking about the lack of a full opposing team at the home dugout.

The captain went to talk with the ump. I hadn't noticed before, but Blue was a kid from my street—Johnny Ahman. As he and the captain talked, he turned away and, looking nowhere in particular, did a double-take at me. "Hey, Mr. Martinez," he said. "How you doin' today?" I waved hello and nodded.

They discussed the possibility of a forfeit. The home team had only six players—and they were rag-tag at best—five unathletic looking guys wearing sneakers and Levi's and a girl who was fat wearing a pair of beach sandals.

Johnny went to the home dugout and said, "You guys have to forfeit." Frankie jumped out of his seat with an unintelligible scream. His body moved left and right in aimless spasms, but his head turned toward the parking lot, his arm raised in a corkscrew as if he was trying to point to something. "Nnnnnoo. No!" he said. They all looked at the kid, and one guy said, "It's all right, Frankie. Relax, bud." Right then tires screeched

to a stop and a stereo blasted rock 'n roll. "Mooahwwy! Mooahwwy!" Frankie screamed, over and again.

I followed Frankie's line of sight. A girl about twenty-one or twenty-two bounced out of the passenger side of a pickup truck. Her blond hair was down to her shoulders, and she wore tight, thigh-length black spandex shorts and a sports bra. She had on rubber cleats and carried a glove. Her face was tough-looking, with a sneer instead of a smile, and rainbow colored sunglasses rested on her forehead. She shrugged her shoulders, apologizing to teammates for being late, walked between two cars, and stepped onto the field. She whirled past me, and her eye caught mine. I got to admit that I took a good look at those tight shorts.

The truck that brought her had no tailgate, and was rusty and bashed in at the rear passenger side panel. It had posts sticking up from the bed and piping made of P.V.C. A few galvanized and copper pipes lay across a rack. Tools, cast iron fittings, and a few empty beer and soda cans littered the bed. A kid probably in his late twenties—no shirt, his torso ripped with muscles, his face smudged, his arms tanned Louisville Sluggers—pushed a burning cigarette between his lips and grabbed a duffel bag from the back of the truck.

"Mooahwwy. Mooahwwy." Frankie wailed. He laughed and laughed and the more excited he got, the less control he had. He tried to step over the bleacher seats, but his trailing foot caught the bottom row and he fell onto the grass between the chainlink fence and stands. I got up from my bench, but Frankie sprang from his sprawled position without missing a beat.

“It’s okay, Frankie. Molly’s here. I’m here.” The girl hugged Frankie, then pulled back and brushed his shoulder of grass and dirt. “Now, look what you gone and done. You got yourself all messed up.” Frankie reached out and hugged her hard. She returned the embrace, but when she tried to break it, the kid held on tighter. His eyelids fluttered and his hips thrust forward into hers as his knees came together, locking onto her thigh.

Molly’s boyfriend walked by and dropped his duffel bag in the dugout.

“When the retard’s done dry humpin, think maybe we can get out on the field?”

“He don’t know no better, Gary.”

“Bullshit.”

Molly and Frankie were a good half a baseline from me. She bent over and stuck her behind out for everyone to see. I wasn’t alone. A lot of the guys on the field were looking. Then she sat on the lower bleacher seat and pulled Frankie down next to her. He struggled with the backpack’s zipper.

“C’mon, Mol, we got game,” Gary said.

“Give me a minute!” she said, and then mumbled, “fucker.”

Gary finished talking with the ump. Blue walked away to the visiting side, and Gary screamed at him that there was no way they’d forfeit the game. They still had three minutes to come up with a player. He stomped over the clay and stood in front of Molly.

“We got a goddamn game, Mol. What the hell’re you doin?”

“Frankie said he’s got a present for me. Don’t you, Frankie?”

The kid smiled a shy smile to Molly. His clawed hand searched for something inside the backpack.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Gary said. “We can’t drop another one, so get off your ass.”

Frankie’s face went pale as Gary grabbed her arm and pulled her up. She broke away from his grasp. Frankie’s hand came free of the backpack and as she and the guy fought, the kid held out a plastic, pink rose. But Molly was too pissed to see it. Her face was so flushed with blood that her body seemed to go cold—her nipples hardened under the sports bra. Gary raised his arm skyward like he was going to take a swipe at her. Frankie let out an unintelligible warning to Molly. I got off the bench and took my cane up, and though I can’t run anymore, I was ready to sprint over and stick it up his ass. But Gary pushed away and snatched up his glove.

“All right, then. I’ll find other players. Believe me,” he said.

“You need a girl, asshole,” Molly said. With that, Gary went to everyone in the stands, wives and girlfriends of other players, mostly, since co-ed softball rules call for each team to field at least two girls. He was turned down every time. There weren’t any men around—a few boys about six years old, but no other ball players. He looked at me, and I blew out a short breath between tight lips. He stomped away and looked back one more time as I chuckled.

Molly kissed Frankie on his cheek and hugged him once more for the rose. She stuck the stem of it between her ear and strands of hair.

Gary stood before Molly, hung his head low, and managed a smile. “I’m sorry, baby. I really am. I need you right now.”

She got up and I saw the anger in her eyes soften. The guy drew his finger from her shoulder down her arm and hand and then across her bare midriff. She moved closer to him.

“I love you,” Gary said.

“I love you, too.”

As Molly said the words I love you, Frankie’s head jerked up, and his eyes went dull. I wasn’t sure, but it was as if he’d been waiting to hear Molly say it. And when I saw Frankie slump after he realized Molly had spoken to her boyfriend and not him, well, his face became more disfigured, and he leaned forward, resting his chin on his fist like a defeated skipper.

“If you really love me,” she said. “You’ll let Frankie play today.”

“Get the fuck outta here.”

Frankie perked up and bounced his attention back and forth between Molly and Gary.

“You need a guy and a girl,” she said. “I’m the girl and Frankie—”

“Forget it,” Gary said.

“Then I won’t play.”

“I’ll take this old man here before I take the retard.”

By this time everyone in the stands and a few of the players on the field took an interest in the decision. There was no way I could play. But even though it was only softball, for a moment—with the dust being kicked up in the air, the sound of leather and ball, the sight of feet shuffling to a grounder, Johnny the ump looking at his watch and dusting the plate—I was tempted. I got a lump in my throat.

“Shit, I’d take Frankie over the old man,” Molly said.

Gary seemed to realize he was getting nowhere. Blue was about to call the game. The opposing team was pissed, as were Molly’s teammates. I sank in my seat.

Molly got up and pulled Frankie along with her. She guided Frankie by his arm to the back of the dugout. She glanced at me and the sneer was gone. The corners of her mouth went up instead of flat.

The game got underway with Molly pitching, Frankie catching—the ump, and the opposing batter helping Frankie track down the ball and get it back to her—her shirtless boyfriend scratching the dirt at shortstop in exasperated huffing. No one could deny that Frankie’s play slowed down the game.

What Molly knew—what everyone except Gary seemed to realize—is that Frankie took the game seriously. His spastic motions were still with him, sure. But the goofiness was gone, and he seemed to be in an athletic zone. The kid tried his damndest to be a ballplayer. His eyes widened when the pitch arced toward the plate. He jumped up and screamed when a grounder bounced toward the infield and batter became runner. He even caught a foul tip. The ball sort of plopped into his contorted arms, but he caught the damned thing, then clung to it so tightly I thought he’d never give it up.

The third out of the inning came on a chopper up the middle. Gary shuffled toward the ball, snagged it, made an athletic three-sixty and gunned it to first. Frankie seemed to see the beauty in this slightly less than routine play, and shouted out a surprisingly understandable “Nice play” to Molly’s boyfriend, but the guy said nothing in return.

The lineup was announced and, of course, Frankie was in ninth position. The game went on with Molly and Gary alternating stabs at one another. One moment she coddled Frankie, soothing him with shoulder rubs and kisses on his cheek, and the next minute she licked the sweat off her boyfriend's ear. After a few more displays, I shrugged it off to her youth and simply enjoyed the game.

Others on the team, many on the opposing side, Molly, Johnny Blue, spectators (myself included), everyone except the prick of a shortstop, shouted and clapped and whistled in the third inning when Frankie grabbed a bat and dragged it behind him to the plate. Molly was beside him.

"You can do this, Frankie. Just think of me. Think of..." Molly glanced around and then whispered into the kid's ear. Frankie turned to her and in a long, sort of non-southern drawl said, "I...looove ...you...Mooahwwy." She shushed him and turned him around in the batter's box to face the mound.

The pitch came, Frankie swung and missed. It was a slow swing, the bat apparently too heavy for him, and it wobbled in his hand away from the ball. More shouts of encouragement came from different parts of the field. The pitcher let a second ball fly, and it dropped toward Frankie. He swung harder this time and missed by a mile. The bat came around his back, and the barrel whipped up over his shoulder. The end caught him on the side of his head. He was stunned. Molly's heart seemed to stop. Her boyfriend let out a laugh.

"That's a strike out, Blue," Gary said. He started to take the field.

"We'll give him three," Johnny said.

Frankie put the bat on his shoulder. Johnny asked him how he was doing, and Frankie laughed, rubbed his head, and said, “I...I’m...fiiinne.” Then he leaned forward, tapped the bat on the plate, pulled the aluminum back to his sneaks, and hit the sides as if chunks of clay would fall from cleats. He put the bat back on his shoulder and his face contorted in determination. The ball came, and his eyes seemed to see it as if it were a melon. He connected, but the ping was pitiful and the ball bounced forward about ten feet. Everyone screamed for him to run, but Frankie stood there, shocked that he’d actually made contact. Then the kid tried to run—though it wasn’t much different than his walk—and he appeared to come out of his body for a moment. The sun was behind clouds, and Frankie shined.

The pitcher walked up to the ball, and underhanded it to first. Frankie’s miserable body wouldn’t let him run, really, but he moved. The kid moved. He was halfway down the line as the third out was made. Frankie’s team started taking the field, but he continued running. I thought I was the only one watching. His foot came down on the bag and dust puffed out. Frankie looked around, and a lot of the enthusiasm from others had died down. Molly and I were the only two people clapping. The kid directed his attention my way, and the girl hugged him as he turned back toward home.

“C’mon, Frankie, you silly shit. Get behind the plate,” she said.

The opposing team batted around, and the game was called on the mercy rule. An hour had passed, and Frankie’s team was behind by fourteen. Gary wasn’t going to have any of that, though. Once the inning was over, he sprinted up to Blue.

“Five more minutes. We can bat around, too,” Gary said.

“Who you kidding?” Johnny said. “Anyway, the night league’s already here.”

“This is bullshit, man,” Gary said.

Johnny ignored him.

“C’mon, baby,” Molly said. “It’s no big deal.” She touched Gary on the shoulder, calmly, soothingly, as if he were Frankie. Gary turned on her. His face throbbing and eyes wide.

“No big deal? We lost and it’s because of you.”

“Me?”

“You and the fuckin spaz.”

By this time the playing field had become dotted with members of two new teams. Gary’s teammates sighed in exasperation and walked away from him. No one wanted to get in the middle of what was brewing. Molly tromped off toward Frankie. He sat in the stands, closer to me, his eyes forever on the girl.

“We lost cause no one gives a shit anymore,” she said, shouting over her shoulder. Gary brushed by her, heading for his gear.

“I give a shit. And that’s enough,” he said. He stuffed bats and balls into his duffel bag. A couple softballs bounced off the metal bats and rolled around. He huffed as he chased after the loose ones.

“You don’t get it,” she said. “No one gives a shit cause they hate playing with you.” As Molly said this, Gary snapped a ball from the grass in front of Frankie. The kid was clearly afraid of Gary, and he spasmodically cringed.

“What the fuck’re you lookin at, weirdo?” Gary lashed out with an open hand and struck Frankie in the chest. Not a strong blow, really, but strong enough to catch the kid at the right moment and amplify his spastic momentum backward.

“Don’t you touch him,” Molly said. She went at Gary with both arms flailing slaps to his face. Gary was able to block or deflect most of it, but made his first mistake and drew his hand back. He came forward with a right and caught Molly on the side of her head, a glancing blow.

Other than Frankie and a woman sitting in the stands with small kids, I was the closest person to Gary and Molly. She raised her arms to her face, and her body turned away in what, for her, may have been a familiar defensive pose.

Gary’s second mistake was pulling back for another swing at the girl.

His third mistake was focusing on her and not on me. I shot out of the bench like out of a crouch to pounce on a good bunt up the line. I grabbed hold of one of his shoulders and spun him around. Unfortunately, I didn’t catch him before he delivered a solid slap to Molly’s cheekbone. I took him by surprise, I think, confused him, and his eyes bulged. His face turned purple as I threw my forearm into his throat and pushed his jaw back till his head pressed against the fence. I heard a few shouts of “Hey, Man!” directed at Gary from guys on the infield, but mostly I heard, “Motherfucker!” and “Asshole!” come from Molly. I put a solid grip on the inside of his right elbow, and pressed my bodyweight against him as he struggled against my chokehold. Within seconds, Johnny was there with me, along with some other guys.

“Leave me alone, man,” Gary said.

“Cool off,” I said. I pressed harder into his throat.

“Where you goin?” Gary’s voice strained as he struggled with Johnny and me. Molly reached into the duffel bag, removed some keys, and said nothing. She grabbed

Frankie by his hand and pulled him up from the bench. Gary paled, then got a second wind. His left arm whipped out, punching at us. He screamed.

“Where the fuck you goin, bitch? Leggo of me. Motherfuckers. Don’t you dare fuckin leave, Molly.” His last warning sounded more controlled, almost soft, but definitely threatening. Molly moved away, and it pissed him off enough to give one last try at her. Another two guys grabbed hold of Gary. I let go. I brushed my clothes, found my cap, and saw Molly break her defiant stride away from us.

I straightened up and reached behind to feel just how badly I’d pulled a muscle in my lower back. Gary tried to scream again, but winced in pain.

“Shit. You broke my windpipe, man. You broke my goddamn windpipe,” he said in what amounted to a hoarse whisper.

“You know who that is?” Johnny said. “That’s Bob Martinez. You screwed around at the wrong time in front of the wrong guy.”

I picked up my cane and sat on a bleacher seat to catch my breath. Everyone around seemed to be staring at me. At first I thought it was a look of respect, not awe exactly, but it was as if since Johnny knew I used to play ball in the bigs, he announced me as if I was Berra or Bench or Piazza. Maybe they should have known me. But the stares were empty.

I sat with my heart pounding and looked toward the parking lot. Molly stood at the truck and held the kid’s hand. She nodded to me and then pushed Frankie into the passenger side of the truck. Within seconds she tore out of the lot, tires squealing once more. Two dirty styrofoam coffee cups swirled up and bounced around in the truck bed.

There was talk that someone should call the cops. Gary protested, of course. And the women—if they didn't openly call for his nuts in vice grips—were in agreement that there was no question he should be arrested. Gary became all promises and apologies and his face softened with sincerity. Once the guys relaxed their hold on him, he took off like a line shot to the alley and was out on the Boulevard. Before anyone had a chance to decide who'd be the hero and go after him, he disappeared. The cops were called.

I didn't stick around. I was exhausted and headed for the bus stop. The sun was down. The clouds were a Georgia clay orange, the rest of the sky a center-field blue. The sub-tropical afternoon trade winds kicked up the hair on my neck and rustled the leaves of a paper eucalyptus as I sat on the bench waiting for the eastbound metro.

About fifteen or twenty minutes later a police cruiser pulled into the parking lot across the street. The cop got out, and I watched one of Gary's teammates go into an animated description of what had taken place. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but seeing him point left and right and up and down and poke himself in the chest like a tough guy, I understood he was taking credit for everything. Like he'd called every pitch in his no-hitter.

The cop left. I squinted down the Boulevard, hoping the metrobus wasn't too far off. I couldn't see it. For a moment I watched an at-bat on the field—a slow grounder to second, the infielder looking the ball into his glove and flipping it over to first. I heard a rumble of plastic and metal and the sharp singing of crappy brakes. Molly and Frankie sat in the plumber's truck at the light in front of me. They sucked on straws out of Slurpee cups and looked over.

"You want a ride?" she said.

“I’m waiting for the bus.”

“See, Frankie, he don’t want no ride.”

The kid said nothing. The traffic light was still red. I stood, then walked a few feet to the passenger side of the truck. I looked left once more and the bus was three blocks down, heading toward us.

“Where you kids going?”

“To the stadium,” Molly said. “But if you live somewhere on the way...shit, it’s the least I could do.”

“The stadium, huh?” I hadn’t been in years. Don’t know why, exactly, except to say that I suppose I have some resentment toward the guy who hits two and a quarter and makes like he’s a Hall of Famer.

I opened the truck door. Molly sighed and her fingers drummed the steering wheel as I stepped onto the running board and pushed up with my arms. The light had turned green. The kid spasmed in a happy sort of way and shoved over to the middle of the bench.

As soon as my ass hit the springs beneath the thin cloth upholstery, Molly floored the accelerator, our heads snapped back, and I reached to the dash for balance. Frankie laughed in a high-pitch. I mumbled “Jesus Christ” to myself.

“Well, shit, the game’s about started,” she said. “The D-o-d-g-e-r-s. Frankie loves the Dodgers, don’t you, baby.” She might as well have spelled w-a-l-k. But the kid’s ears perked up with his head swiveling around at the sound of Dodgers.

“This’ll be the fifth time we’ve seen them,” she said. “Where you live, mister?”

“Well, if I’m not imposing, if it’s not too much trouble, then a beer and peanuts is what I could go for.”

“Don’t you have a wife or someone making dinner for you?”

“No.”

“To the ballpark we go.” And her foot pressed down once more. She sped down the Boulevard, anxious to get to the Turnpike, but the traffic lights weren’t cooperating, and we hit red at every intersection. We rumbled along, then stopped. Shot forward, then stopped again, both me and Frankie battered by the push and pull of her driving. And then the kid turned to me as we sat at another light.

“Mooahway’s my my girl, girlfriend...”

“Really?” I said.

“Nah, not really. He just thinks I am.”

“Sheee says that a...a...lot.”

“Cut it out, Frankie.” She seemed embarrassed and slapped him hard on the knee.

“Fra...Frankie ‘n Mooahway...sittin’ in a...a...a twee...kay eye...esssss...”

“Cut it out. Fuck.” She was clearly, momentarily pissed. But Frankie laughed, and it made him lose what little control he had of his slobber. A long, bubbly string of saliva fell from the roof of his mouth and landed on Molly’s bare leg. I was glad it shot her way.

“Jesus Christ! Oh, man. Frankie. Goddammit,” she said.

She wiped her leg and then dried her hand on his shorts. No one said anything as she wove around cars and gunned the engine. She lifted her hand from the steering wheel, and a thread of spit extended from her index finger to the hard plastic. She

laughed and shook her head. It was infectious. Frankie laughed—howled, actually. And I couldn't help but join in.

"He's in love with you, you know," I said, once it went silent again. Frankie looked down and then to me out of the corner of his eye. He sucked on his Slurpee straw and made loud gurgling sounds.

She seemed to ignore me, not looking over, and instead blasted the horn at a slow driver. She let out a hard breath, then quickly changed lanes, and gunned it around the car. It felt wrong talking about the kid as if he wasn't there, but I also felt like I had to speak up for him.

"I mean, maybe whatever Frankie knows about love," I said. "What little he's shown. He's got it bad. It's none of my business, but—"

"You're right," she said. "None of your business. But if you got to know, Frankie's just like any other guy. He likes sex." And she shrugged.

I let this sink in for a minute. I almost didn't want to ask.

"You and him have sex?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" She reached over, slid her hand over Frankie's inner thigh, and lightly caressed him. His head went back, his eyes fluttered, his body seemed to shudder for a moment as he went into an isolated look.

"But that's all it is," she said. Without any regard for me, and in complete contrast to what I thought should be embarrassing, she rubbed Frankie for a second or two more while she drove.

"But, why?" I said.

“You said it yourself, mister. He’s in love with me.” And she looked out the driver’s side window, checked the left lane for traffic, and said, “At least someone really does.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“You mean Gary. Yeah, I love him. At least I did till today. Frankie’s just someone who needs the sex. I got no problem with that. Frankie’s my little boy. That’s all. Ain’t ya, baby?” She patted his leg, put her hand back on the steering wheel, then her voice went soft, but clear. “I’m not *in love* with Frankie. God.”

I heard her, but I felt no matter what I said, she wouldn’t hear me. I wanted Molly to see what she was doing wasn’t compassionate. It was charity, maybe, but sometimes that can be harmful.

Frankie heard her, too, though. I could tell that he became distant after Molly’s confession reached him and her hand moved away. He fell toward me. The extra weight pressed me against the armrest and torn plastic jabbed my ribs. His body went limp, and his spasms subsided. He closed his eyes. His chin rested on his neck—his head looking like a leather fielder’s glove stuck to the knob end of a bat. I lifted my left arm, he plopped against my chest, and I pulled him a bit closer. He didn’t hug me back or anything. He just lay there, not moving. And I felt he wasn’t so different anymore.

VITA

Dana Reno Andrews was born in Hollywood, Florida, on November 23, 1954, the son of Gilda Mary Lombardo Andrews and Harold Edward Andrews, Jr. After completing his work at South Broward High School, Hollywood, Florida, in 1972, he entered the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. He attended for one year. He then moved to Los Angeles, California where he began a twenty-one-year career in Film and Television writing. He worked for New Line Cinema and Weintraub Entertainment Group in Film, and with HBO, NBC, CBS, Warner Brothers, and Amblin Entertainment in Television. In September of 1994, he entered the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English in May of 1998. In the fall of 1998, he entered the Creative Writing Program at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.

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