

r e a l i t y      s l a p

Copyright ©1992  
Neil Olliviera  
Permanent Address:  
4827 Fairway Ridge South  
West Bloomfield, Michigan  
48323 United States  
TEL: 0101. 313. 737. 9173

d e t r o i t

t h e e a r l y n i n e t i e s

Sure.

L.S.D.

lysergic acid diethylamide. . .

The shit lands on a man like a rolled-up copy of the Detroit News lands on a cockroach. A cockroach that braves the kitchen counter during daylight. Lift the paper to reveal the stain-your shit is all mixed-up and different. . .

If you have to ask me what it is like before trying it yourself, i will tell you that you are probably not cut out for the experience. At least, not for the moment. Because, no offense, it is a dumb question, rooted in fear and insecurity-two bits of baggage you simply do not want to carry along with you on an acid trip. Unless you enjoy fucking with your self. I know. I've been there.

But then again, this is only my experience; the details of which may or may not be of any use to you. And I can say this about anything, I can say this about the tofu burger i ate last night, what i think about right before i start painting, guilt, Marxism, premature ejaculation (Captain Shizzo), gun control, zen, the ethics of laughter in the twentieth century. It is a dumb question, finally, it is like asking someone for their life story. What is it like? I can't tell you that. Have you ever suspected that everything surrounding you is like a cheap, hollywood backdrop reality that can be ripped away to reveal something else? Well if you have, and you didn't particularly like that feeling, you can sit there and watch me do this drug. You can sit there and watch me do it, and if my behavior startles you, you can walk away thinking you saved yourself from a bad experience by using a little good old-fashioned observation. You can think that if you want to.

I will, however, talk about the first time it happened, the first time i tried it. I will talk about it because something very strange happened the first time, something interesting. It was only a year ago, a night like any other, no different from any other night. Except for this, the experiment i had on the agenda for the evening. Faris had given me the shit, a single hit wrapped in a tiny origami square of tinfoil with ultra-sharp creases. I popped the tab, alone, in the apartment, and after waiting through a half hour of nothing, i turned off the lights and went to bed. Hours later, i awoke in the middle of the night to the soft glow of peach-colored streetlights illuminating the slackened bows of telephone lines outside the window. Everything seemed so still, so quiet. I sat up in bed. . . and i knew that time had stopped. I listened for noises, sounds in my building, in the city surrounding the building. There was nothing. Nothing. I had the curious idea that while i was asleep, a great cosmic billy goat had come along and taken a bigass bite out of the blue apple. Everyone knew it but me; the whole world had been stunned into silence while the core of the earth bubbled and dribbled down to the south pole. I tried to laugh at the idea of it, i tried laughing, but only managed to expel a strange tittering noise that echoed about the room, bouncing off the walls. It startled me. I kept my mouth shut after that. I wasn't ready to move yet, so i just lay there, in bed, tasting the quiet metronome of no time; gauging the gathering energies that networked warmly through my crotch and demanded masturbation. Everything was the same. Everything was the same, but I could feel something moving toward me in the darkness, like a window, like a comet that comes once every 86 years. And it didn't feel ridiculous to suddenly roll out of bed, nude in the chill stillness, to sit crosslegged on the hard, thin rug. I closed my eyes, one at a time, and slipped into the warm bath of easy breathing. Slackened my arms as if to send two white rolls of toilet paper across the floor, unraveling in different directions.

At first there was only darkness-it took some time before the satellite eye opened and began to blink like a wakening salamander. And then i was weirdly watching my self sitting in the room. I was outside of my self, if you can dig it. I slowly orbited the large head-the size of it scared me, it was like approaching Jupiter. I balked like

a frightened deer and tried to get back inside-i entered through the open lolling mouth, but it wasn't the same, it was like entering a hot humid cave. I sat there like a hermit crab that had installed itself in another creature's empty shell. I turned around and looked back upon the mountainous teeth and tongue; I sat there until it became obvious that this was not the way to do it. . .

Then i moved on down the throat, illuminating the wet pink fleshy walls of the lungs-everything smelled bad and the many noises were loud and confusing and scary. I got lost in the arteries and chambers, and eventually sperlunked through a strange rocky landscape of stiff jutting hairs, taller than desert cacti. There was a warm gentle wind behind me, pushing me, and i rolled out of my left nostril and paused at the soft perspiring shelf of my upper lip. . .

Which was a relief-it would have taken six months or more to make it to my asshole. Next time, I'm going to South America, goddamnit.

I'm now alone, alone and naked to the waist in the vast empty space of the loft on Gratiot Avenue, downtown. Home. One vast plaintive room of whitewashed brick, stained in places with the ghostly gray smudges of palm and fingerprints. The building was built in the earliest part of the century as a detergent warehouse. Seven floors. 10,000 square feet per floor. Open staircase. Freight elevator. Shitty duct heating. In the 1920's, i understand, it became a speakeasy. It was one of the few large buildings on the east side whose skeletal structure survived the riots of '67. A guy who owns a lot of Greek restaurants bought the building a few years ago, and had it converted into lofts. My place, the third floor, right before i moved in, served as a crackhouse. When i first came to look at the place, a few years ago, the door had been kicked off the hinges by the police. There were bullet holes in the drywall. And every now and then, when i get the urge to sweep up this pit, i find a spent shell or two, just lying around. I looked around for cocaine. The next tenant might find some. I didn't.

A stream of seemingly cancerous moonlight cuts through the window to cast a trapezoidal pool on the bed. I am lying on the bed, waiting. Waiting to go to South America. I am already sure that it is not going to happen. I am sure of this only because I am not completely sure that it is going to happen. And this, if i remember correctly, is exactly what i need to get there. So, now

convinced, I roll over to the edge of the mattress to grab at a sweater, pulling it on over my hairy nakedness.

I am, however, tripping. I can tell. I dropped only two hours ago. The scariest thing about taking hallucinogens these days is that the shit isn't much different from how i think anyway. I mean, i look around, you know. I look around and i know that the only thing i do know is that i don't know anything. I don't know shizzy. Only when I'm on acid, I'm even more sure of this. It's a comforting kind of freedom. For me. It's liberating. It's like stripping off your clothes

and getting into a cardboard box. I am still here. I've simply exchanged realities-this one altered to slightly surreal proportions by a precise mix of chemical bonds. What else? My eyes are caked shut with the meat of sleep-a thick, gluey crust that is fun to pick off and roll between my fingers. My mouth is a petri-dish, a platter stained with the dried vestiges of phlegm that coat my tongue in a slick film. My teeth are hollowed-out stones; the urge to grit them together is irresistible and the set of my jawline feels numb-strange and unfamiliar.

Slowly, i move off the bed. Walk to the stereo and pop in a tape. The sugar-sweet vibrations of a familiar funk tune buzz around my head like a moth around an open flame. There are subliminal jazzy undercurrents within, and a brooding bassline that I feel more with my ribcage than hear with my ears. 1:37 a.m. I am definitely feeling it now; my insides are wound tight, like a warm smile. It is time now. Time. . . to make a phone call. But to who? I know who. I turn down the stereo, pick up the telephone, and carry it over to the bed. I lie down on the bed with the telephone. I take my time. I make myself comfortable. I am smiling, pushing time in front of me, doing these things. . .

So the next thing, I'm on the telephone. I'm on the phone, the tone is ringing and though it's obvious I've just called somebody, I now can't remember who. Ridiculous. My crotch is

humming. A clue? Could be. My bunghole itches too, but I hope that doesn't mean anything. My breath is hot and fierce when a sleepy voice finally comes on the line.

"'Lo?" It's Kerri. Ah.

"Baby. . ." I whisper into the phone.

"Todd." She clears her throat roughly, then wakens. "What time is it?"

I can't stop moving. I just. . . can't. I am writhing in the rhythmic grip of undulating sound that emanates from the stereo speakers, I am stricken by the obduracy of my own flesh. It is a prison, a prison of tactile pleasure and pain. The slightest movement causes shivers of ecstasy to roll over my skin, coagulating in my balls, my nutsack. With the phone locked in the crook of my shoulder, I move my hands over the smooth, round projection of my ass, pounding the mounds of my stony butt-cheeks with the heel of my hand. Delightful.

"Todd. It's two o'clock in the morning. What are you doing?"

"ÔWhat am i doing?' Why are you asking me that? Do you really want to know? Or is there something else?"

"I was asleep, Todd. . ." She turns away from the receiver to clear the frog from her throat, coughing. Then, "Waitaminute-are you in another one of your insane moods? Todd. This can't continue. . ."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I laugh, lying on my back, staring at the ceiling.

"You know what I'm talking about. . . Jesus, what's that noise?"

"What noise?" I'm rasping the wetness of my tongue over the percolated holes of the telephone receiver, drawing erotic patterns on the plastic. . .

"You're acting strange," I hear her saying as I run the receiver, lubricated with saliva, over the contours of my jeans, digging it into the curves of my body; pushing it into the crack of my ass, stroking it against the front of my crotch, conscious of the hard roll of flesh there. . .

"Ah. . . holy shit. . ."

"What? I can hardly hear you; what'd you say?"

Talking. Jesus. Who invented the shit? It's so tiresome, really. We do it so much that we sometimes forget that our mouths weren't built for it. Speech is so strange. There is definitely something insectile about it. Communicating by sound, by quivering muscles, quivering meat. Like cricket bows, or morse code. Move your teeth, your tongue, your lips, to form a language. I can think of a few other things I'd rather be doing with my mouth. . .

"I'm coming over," I finally tell her, then hang up the phone. There. Keep it basic. Like it should be. I pull my jacket and scarf from the closet and, opening the door to the foyer, I roll the bike off its kickstand, into the freight elevator.

---

If this city had a soundtrack, it would be Manuel Gottsching's "E2-E4."

I transferred the cassette from the stereo in the loft to the walkman clipped on my belt. Another drug. At the curb, beneath the lime glow of the streetlights, I gun the Suzuki to a high-pitched nasal whine, a sound that by all logic should end in some kind of explosion. I feel an odd bionic rapport with this chrome and metal monster: I pop the clutch and the bike jumps forward; kick down on the brake and the bike loyally skids to a stop. A wonderful machine, and a slightly insane one at that. I rub my crotch into the hard, unyielding mound of the gas tank. Glance down at the footrests, check out the placement of the throttle, the brakes, the twin rearview mirrors. Peep the location of everything. This thing was designed for human use. A porpoise couldn't ride this fucking thing. Even a chimpanzee would have a difficult time of it. No, you'd have to be a human to take full advantage of all the features. What would a motorcycle have to look like if it were designed to fit, say, a frog? It could be done. It could be done. I'll have to tweak on that, sometime. . .

Tonight i am commandeering a motor vehicle on controlled substances-for the second Friday night in a row. More than any

philosophy or faith, more than anything else, getting fucked up on a Friday night seems to keep death at bay. The shit just works. Driving to your girl's crib on a 1979 Suzuki 850 with three tabs of lysergic acid diethylamide sluicing through my scrambled graymeat, having numbed my mental coconut beyond the capacity required to commandeer a motor vehicle, I wonder at the algebraic odds i will have overcome—simply by getting to the joint in one piece. I whip the steering column around corners, jerk the throttle with little concern for my welfare or that of others. I cackle loudly at the comedic prospect of being pulled over. I glide in and out of traffic, thinking: this would be as good a way as any to end the movie. . .

Life-like cinema, like a film—has a beginning and an end. Everything in between is pure cinematography. I've figured it out. And the nothingness on either end? Birth and death? How to

explain it? Shit. Somewhere along the line people just happen upon a window of some kind, a window into a dream. The dream is like a room, a detour from. . . wherever you were before. And like a room, it contains walls, it has its boundaries. You make your small circumference. And if you are diligent, if open enough doors, you discover that what you discover is all you're going to get. And anything you could possibly do within your field of time after that point constitutes little more than a distraction from the wait. Fun. And you are finally made to choose, really choose, what to do with the rest of your life. With your cogito, a new intruder, the assistant director, babbling and barking over your shoulder like a pet familiar. Like a satellite. Like a remote control shot from some unseen dimension, transmitting invisible waves of reason to the bipedal construct on the ground surface.

Take tonight, for instance. There is a very good reason i am at this moment leaning my chin over the handlebars of a two-wheeled, gas-propelled vehicle at the approximate speed of 87 miles per hour. i am doing this because i am fucked up, and when i am fucked up i tend to lose what little fear i have left. What do you have left, once you've lost that bad baggage, that excess weight, that life-fat? You have one thing left: you have nothing to lose. . .

Waiting for the green light, you rev the throttle in your right fist, listening to the mechanized whine of the growling beast between your legs. Its pleasure hums through your denimed crotch. You feel the power, you glance up at the full moon framed in the rectangular window of your crash helmet, you acknowledge her smiling permissive nod, you know you have her permission to take off like a lunatic when the traffic light winks at you with its friendly hazel eye. It's so easy. With an imperceptive prod of the left ankle, you slip into first gear with a solid click of the mechanical cogs. Right now you are a compound organism of land speed, a being composed of flesh and metal. Together you can get somewhere, fast, but. . . it hasn't happened. Not just yet. This is the best part. The other cars waiting at the intersection are completely ignorant of your deadly potential. They don't know what's up. They don't know that you, say, up-ended a seven-dollar bottle of Italian red before mounting this mechanized beast, this ugly conglomerate of

ill-designed metal, this block of rusty earth-rock. How could a thing carved from the earth become the source of human destruction, they

think. You could show them. You could easily show them, you could give them the surprise of their lives, should you decide to pull off like a screaming banshee and wrap yourself around a light pole. They would talk about the shit for months, they would never forget the night you upset their logical idea of the universe. I'm tellin' you, that crazy sonofabitch was trying to kill hisself. . .

In this way, every man has one way of tweaking another human being into valuing his or her life, every man has at least one way of freeing a fellow sheep: you can die for the ontological argument. Anyone can do it. You needn't take post-graduate classes in metaphysics, you needn't know a thing about philosophy or comparative religion. You can end your own life, willfully, with everybody looking-in the course of having some fun. This is enough to get any baldhead to thinking about his part in the big picture. I myself would be forced to think: did that freak know something the rest of us do not? He might have. He just might have known some shit. . .

But if I do it tonight, it won't be on purpose. I snake the light midnight traffic along the South Lodge freeway, the downtown urban landscape growing ever nearer on the horizon. Heart pounding in the hollow cave of my chest, I have to consciously pull each and every breath, with concerted effort, through my parted lips. When I turn onto Fisher North, the exit ramp raises me over the sleeping metropolis, speckled with lights-a false and flattering view that makes you believe, for a moment, that you're in a real city. A real city, rather than this-an abandoned industrial hell that broke ground and somehow kept on growing. I downshift the bike into the lower gears, tearing the insect helmet from my head. Guide the bike with one hand, feeling the cool evening wind separate the hairs pasted down over my head with sweat.

I retain a sane speed as I navigate the honeycomb of the city to Kerri's building in Capital Park. I turn into a deserted alley behind a McDonald's, rolling past the filthy trash dumpsters with

warning signs, clearly marked for the downtrodden, in white spray paint.

DO NOT EAT FROM THESE CANS  
XXX RATS XXX

The stench of garbage is overpowering, it burns my nose-hairs. I lean the bike onto its kickstand. I bend over to pull my jeans down over my boots and, still tripping, zone out for a moment, staring into the oily puddles illuminated by the streetlights above me. The pools of water, rippled by the light wind that whips through the alley, quiver like clear jelly. I am on this drug, and so I am now hallucinating. Or. . . i am not.

The hallway outside Kerri's apartment smells of boiled hot dogs and roach spray. She opens the door, standing there in panties and t-shirt. She says something to me, but it's lost in the piercing volume of the headphones. I wish to remain mute, acting out the final scene of this cinematic evening beside a coinciding soundtrack; but do pull the headphones from my ears, detaching the cassette player slung low on my hip like a sidearm.

"What?"

"This is the last time i open this door to you after one in the morning," she says, and turns back into the apartment. I lock the door behind me, and follow her into the bedroom. She leans forward in mid-step to scratch at the back of a slender calf, then with two thumbs, pulls the butt-floss bikini briefs from the crack of her ass—a sexual, non-committal gesture that makes my mouth water.

When I enter her room, she is reclined full-length on the bed, bathing lazily in the cathode rays of the television with the sound turned down—a mute cancer. Her dark auburn curls cascade

over the pillow as she stares up at me from the bed; one hand thoughtfully stroking her pale flat belly beneath the white t-shirt. Thin legs scissored. The curved cleft of her luscious ass plainly visible through the canvas of white cotton panties.

"This is the last time you're going to open your door to me after two in the morning?" I ask her.

"Mmm-hmm," she smiles, looking up at me from the mattress.

"But that's so stupid," I tell her. "How can you say that when neither one of us is dead yet? Shit. For all we know, one of us could die and that still wouldn't mean shit."

"Well, what do you want me to say? I don't like it when you come over late when I have to work the next day."

"Why don't you just say that? That, or something interesting."

"Something interesting?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I saw a rat today," she says, lifting her head to examine her navel. "In the alley outside, while I was taking out the garbage."

"Yeah?" I move to the bed. I feel sexual apprehension stirring in the deep well of my viscera; a strange feeling that my center has dropped below the waist, leaving a knot in my intestines that pounds like a heartbeat. There is a vague rumbling in my bowels, like I have to take

a shit. The portion of my brain that controls the neuro-motor functions is focusing on the gathering energy in my lower torso, leaving the rest of me weak and trembly, like an old man's fart.

"A rat," she says. "A big one. It was. . . fucking something; a dead pigeon, I'm almost sure of it. . ."

"Fuck that shit," I say, taking her bare leg over my shoulder, my palm spread over the meat of her thigh; caressing, kneading the flesh there. I take a cursory nibble at the soft coin of flesh behind her knee, then gently roll the skin between my teeth while she watches; a sensation that stirs within me a carnivorous urge to clamp

down on her leg like a fucking pit-bull.

"Your hands are cold," she says, rolling out of my grip, turning to the television. I guess that's supposed to put me in my place, except when she rolls over on her belly I spot a large, repulsive pimple hunkered down between her shoulder blades. So like, this doesn't bother me as much as it would have, the dumb hooker. I pull my sweater over my head and slip out of my jeans, sitting on the backs of my legs in boxer shorts. I breathe deeply into my curled fists to warm my hands and turn her over to face me. I see no light of lust in her eyes as I lean down to kiss her. Brown eyes, alien eyes; Russian and Cherokee blood mixed together to form strangely epicanthic folds. But she slowly warms to the idea, inserting a flat hand into the V of my crotch, cupping my thigh. And for some reason, I am relieved.

I roll over on my back and she glances her cheek over my chest, revealed bare; an open-faced sandwich. She moves down the length of my body, alternating between light brushes of her lips over my abdomen and burrowing her mouth into the enclave of my belly; making me shiver and beat the mattress with my fists. She is at work; merging the borders between scintillating physical pleasure and pain. She is fucking with me, with the natural magnetism of close physical proximity; an irresistible force.

She falls on her back on the bed and I move to her, sliding the front of her panties down into a triangular crevice, my tongue darting in and around her jelly, separating the soft hairs.

Lurching over her, I release my stick through the vent in my boxers where it stands at full mast. I like the constricting hug of the shorts, my dick free, a wholly separate entity. She gets the idea and pulls the bottom strip of her panties to one side. We are both smiling as I dip the stiff hat of flesh into the warm, overflowing cup of her hotbox, lubricating. A slow push, and the flesh parts; our hips undulating, screwing together until I am full inside her. The terrain is familiar, (tight, hot squeeze) and we hold each other; a final innocent gesture before we start jacking up and down, sliding over the thin film of perspiration between us, fucking through our underwear.

---

She rises, taking the sheets with her, leaving me nude on the bare mattress. Swathed head to toe in the cotton spread, she goes to the bathroom, closing the door. Presently I hear the spray from the shower head.

Curled on the mattress like a slug, I lie in a dense, emotional fog. I'm thinking to myself: I came here; we fucked; it felt great. Kerri moved in with me three years ago and stayed for two years. A herculean effort. I'm still sometimes able to inspire in her a certain rabid, short-term horniness. Sometimes I can even get away with occasional overnight stay. But there's no denying the fact that we no longer gel. There is a definite rift here. . .

We had this cat. We had found it screeching in a clump of bushes outside this strip bar downtown, where Kerri works as a cocktail waitress. The valets were trying to coax it out of the

shrubbery; teasing it with a dead bird impaled on a stick. It was sometime after midnight. I'd come to pick her up in her car. We had left the car in the lot, and were walking around downtown,

hanging out by the fountain in Capitol Park, passing a joint back and forth between the two of us before the ride home, when this spectacle aroused our curiosity. Kerri, on hands and knees, had crept into the bushes while the valets stood back and stared at her plump pigeon's ass, trumpeting towards the moon.

The animal was positively screaming; a little human being in distress. Harsh, piercing screeches and throaty, alien caterwauling that penetrated my pleasant head buzz and made me wince. Unsettling. Already, I wanted to stomp the fucker.

Presently she rose from the bushes, carrying something dark and wet in her arms like an infant. "Oh look at her," she said, nuzzling the furball. "she's so frightened. . ." I looked at it. It was a filthy, slat-sided animal with a motley black coat that was splashed here and there with vomity-looking patches of tan calico. A fucking varmint. I scratched its ugly little head and it responded by purring and nuzzling against my fingers. I petted it, nodding silently and smiling to myself. The cat had the kind of beat-down urban ugliness that solicited sympathy, affection and not a little respect. A survivor. We decided to take it home and it let out a spray of sour catpiss all over the backseat on the way back to the apartment. An ugly omen.

Over the next few months the animal revealed a compulsive, antisocial nature. It would bite down, fucking gnaw for Chrissake, on any hand that reached out to pet it. At first I thought it was a simple kittenish instinct to teethe, but when the thing refused to grow any larger than it was the night we found it, I realized the cat for what it was; a surly, nomadic runt. The animal strutted about the apartment like a retired Major-General, leaving fragrant little puddles of catpiss here and there to define its territorial boundaries. At night I would lock it out of the bedroom where it would scratch at the door and manufacture its unique and horrible little cat-yowls and gobbling noises.

It was like having a child in the apartment; a defiant and mischievous midget. Even more maddening was the fact that Kerri wouldn't acknowledge the animal's bold indifference to the fact that we had plucked it from a life of urban horror and saddled it in a kept cradle. The cat wouldn't even pretend to give a fuck. Tearing up Kerri's ferns, clawing the shit out of my cactus, goddamnit. Territorial pissings everywhere, the futon in particular.

I remember the night i made the bad mistake of trying to make friends with that animal. I was lying in bed; watching television in white socks, eating a takeout falafel sandwich from Harmony Garden. The cat was sitting at the foot of the bed, staring intensely at my sandwich. She was an alley cat. She knew the taste of human food; she knew how we were living, and she wasn't taking any shorts. I didn't know it back then because i was a fucking cro-magnon, but our entire problematic relationship with the cat stemmed from the fact that the cat knew that she was a slave; this

very basic idea didn't occur to me until later, when it was too late.

Anyway, the bitch was jonesing for my sandwich. I let her watch me eat the whole shit-slowly and with obvious relish. Near the end i ripped off a piece of pita with a little hummous on it and handed it out to her. And do you know i was actually surprised when the bitch darted forward and almost took my finger off? She bit the living shit out of me. Clamped down on the tip of my forefinger, hard; one of her fangs went right down through the nail. Blood welled up and trickled down to my wrist. I watched her run out of the room with the sandwich, tail swishing, her naked pink bunghole smirking at me like the dot at the end of a question mark. Unbelieving, I hollered after her, holding my dead finger at the joint: "Ow, shit, what the hell did you do that for, you fucking hooker?"

It was really frightening. That was no little nip; that cat bit me like a straight up vicious animal. I looked down at my hand. It was shaking. And then i knew. Any animal can be vicious. Any animal, i don't give a fuck what it is, or how long it has lived around humans. Animals are composed of energy just like i am composed of energy. They enjoy shitting, pissing, playing, fucking, and eating. Yet there i was, holding out that sandwich, teasing energy with energy. You

don't ever give an animal an excuse to bite you. You don't know how that animal is living, you can't interpret the mindstate of the animal. How the hell do you that your dog is mad at you because you were twenty minutes late getting home to take him for his evening walk? You don't know. And you won't find out until, after giving him his walk, you call him into the kitchen to give him his beef jerky treat for doing his business in the bushes. Then, while patting his head and praising him in unctuous tones, you hold out the thin strip of dried spicy beef and get the surprise of your motherfucking life.

I couldn't even blame the cat for biting me. Because i knew, i knew for a fact, that the cat was hungry for what i had. I was watching the bitch slobbering for a nibble the whole time i was lying there making a pig out of myself. So i couldn't say shit. The cat could argue that it was an accident-that she was only a little eager to get the sandwich out of my hand because she was hungry. See? I gave the bitch the excuse to bite my ass.

So i couldn't righteously stab her in the leg with a pencil, or swipe her in the side with my belt, or do any of the things i wanted to do to that bitch. That time. I simply stayed the hell away from her.

But there was one thing I couldn't tolerate. The animal had a nasty habit of jumping up and clawing the shit out of anybody walking around the apartment in white socks.

"You better hold her," i'd warn Kerri, walking across the floor to kitchen for my morning orange juice. "It's for her own good; i'm not fucking around with that animal, i'll slice her motherfucking nose off. . ."

"I'm holding her," Kerri would snarl at me from the bed, cupping the struggling animal in the cradle of her arms. I could see the triangular outline of the feline head in the dark bedroom, reared up like a cobra to watch me pad across the floor.

One night while we were watching television in the bedroom, Kerri went out to the kitchen and left the door open. She was wearing nylon biker shorts and bright white ankle footies with a powder blue pompon dangling from each heel that the animal must have found irresistible. It jumped off the bed and followed after her. I hollered out a warning, but it was too late. I heard the padded gallop of cat feet across the wood flooring before Kerri let out a shriek. I rolled out of bed and came out to find Kerri doing a sort of foot-shuffling jig with the cat attached to her leg like a rat. I got a foot under the animal's ribs and soccer-lifted the fucker up and over the kitchen bar where it crashed into the stash of empty returnables on the other side. A horrible racket. The cat screamed and thrashed, batting at the rolling beer cans and finally appeared, humbled and limping, from around the corner of the bar.

Kerri shrieked, running to the animal, which was mewling pitifully. "You! She's limping! You broke her leg, you sonofabitch!"

"It isn't broken," I came over for a closer look. "Is it? Let me see. . ."

"Don't you fucking touch her!" she screamed, snatching the animal away from me. "You kicked her! How could you do such a thing?"

"What are you talking about? She attacked you, man. That animal isn't stupid; she's knows what she's doing. She knew what she was doing when she clamped onto your leg. And anyway I didn't kick her; I like, lifted her. . ."

She put the cat down where it attempted to walk back to her, dragging a hind leg that looked, I had to admit, pretty bent out of shape. It was a pitiful sight; I felt my heart give a little tug in the center of my chest. After all, it wasn't me the cat had fucked with. The bitch knew better.

"Ohmygod. Oh my god, look at her!"

"I'm sorry," I said. And i was. I was sorry that i had saved her ass instead of minding my own goddamn business. I should have let the cat gnaw her shit straight down to the bone, then made her sign a waiver before punting it through the window above the kitchen sink. . .

"Fuck you! Look at her leg! Look at it! Sorry isn't good enough!"

"I said i'm sorry, for fucksake!" I hollered back at her as she resolutely grabbed her coat off a hook near the door. "I'm going to the police," she said. "The whatever. . . the fucking animal society." She started to put on her coat.

"Ah come on," I said, a little nervous now. "I didn't mean to do it. Okay. Kerri? C'mon, man. Did i really mean to break her leg? You don't believe that shit. She bit you, for chrissakes. i freaked out, and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, now. Let's just take her to the vet and tell him she fell down the stairs or something." I tried to put an arm around her, but she flinched away from me, opening the door. She seemed eerily calm, now. "Don't fucking touch me. I'm bringing the cops. They'll take one look at that leg and fucking put you away. . ."

She slammed the door behind her. I waited for her to come back, but

I could hear her running down the stairs to the parking lot outside, where she jumped into her car and drove away.

I contemplated the situation while the cat flopped and floundered around on the floor like a wounded seal. In her current state, Kerri was just capable of doing such a thing; filching on me to the pigs. She has a voracious temper that prompts her into action without first considering the consequences. Most people do, but. . .

The last time we argued like this, she went over a series of my oil paintings with a black magic marker when I was only two weeks away from a show. She was about halfway through them when I came home, catching her red-handed and even then-the whole time I was choking

the shit out of her on the bed-she was spitting and screaming that I got what was coming to me. Obviously I did, but i didn't see how that justified the point of the thing. . .

I began to imagine fey scenarios involving the police. Handcuffs. Hot lights. Holding cells. Barefoot drunks in shower clogs, fingernails shiny with grease, asking me for cigarettes. Fuck that. I ran to get my own coat, scooping the crippled animal up in my arms as I headed for the door. . .

I was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a magazine and smoking cigarettes, when Kerri came back about an hour later. Her eyes were red and irritated from crying. She paused at the door, then registered a silly smile as she turned to close it behind her. She came into the kitchen, shuffling. Took off her coat. Tossed her car keys on the bar.

"You're laughing," I said. "Laughing?"

"I'm sorry," she said, coming over to the table to wrap her arms around my neck. "I just couldn't stand to look at her like that, you know? I know you didn't mean to really hurt her and I don't know why she has to jump on people. . . I just had to drive around for a while and cool off."

I stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray. "You should have waited, man. I really wish that you could have waited. . ."

She came over to bend down and kiss me on the forehead. "Me too," she said. "But fuck it; it's over, right?"

"Oh, it's over, all right."

She rose to go over to the kitchen. "Where's the phone book? I can't remember the name of that 24 hour pet clinic. . . ." Then she stopped, remembering all of a sudden.

"Where's Sofy?" she said, looking around. I tapped a fresh cigarette out of the box and lit it. My hands were shaking. She went into the bedroom, calling the cat's name and making little kissing noises.

"Where's the cat, Todd?" She came back into the kitchen, looming over me with her arms akimbo while I smoked in silence. "What'd you do with the cat?"

"She's gone," I said. Oh shit, i thought. Here we go. . .

"What do you mean 'she's gone?' What the fuck did you do with her?"

I shrugged. "She's just. . . gone." I looked up at her.

---

Kerri moved out about a week later. It wasn't just because I had taken the cat on a one-way ride. I mean, she still sometimes tries to dig it out of me just exactly where I dumped the fucker but she's pretty much over it. That's not exactly. . . it. But that evening did explode into a climactic symphony of mad, birdlike screamings and bellowing gutter-curses. It ended, badly, when she spotted my typewriter on the desk in the bedroom. Before I knew what was going on, she had heaved the fucker and crashed it over my head. It was a battered Royal; a matt-black twenty pound relic from the 50's and when it came down, it came down tasty.

It was the beginning of a new season. A season of badness. A bird nursing a broken wing, I continued to fraternize with the doomed clique of downtown painters, poets, literati and other

assorted criminals, but soon found that my inspiration had gone out the door with her. Unable to procure any viable ideas, I began painting a horrifying series of large, villiform abstracts. These alarmed my admirers, who had long been taken with my trademark pop-ish photo-realism studies. No small wonder, there. The fucking things looked like Walt Disney threw up on a canvas covered with Vienna sausages.

I've since experimented with acid, peyote, mushrooms, mescaline-anything to open the door, break the locks, retrieve the muse. So far it's inspired nothing more than a series of extremely creative suicide attempts. Maybe i'll segue into performance art. There's no doubt about it; it's been an extremely bad month. Last week I found myself sobbing because I was too far away from the television remote control to reach it with my toe from the couch. I had to lay there, trapped; watching the fucking Arabic Channel. . .

I miss her. I envision this woman bulldozing a straight and narrow path through life; unconcerned, not waiting for her eventual lover who will be-it is certain-a man more whole than I am. The thought makes me feel very small and sad, and I know what this means. It means i don't love her enough. If you love a woman enough, you want her to be happy, with or without you. It's when you don't love them enough-that's when they wield the power, that's when they can really drive you batshit.

I roll out of bed and move to Kerri's bedroom window-a nude silhouette against the map of the city outside. I look down to the littered cobblestone streets, contemplating a passing bus with its sad, browbeaten passengers bound for unknown ghettos, greasy tenement apartments and endless urban sorrows. As a child I would look to the sky at a passing plane coming from Detroit Metro and

always wonder the same thoughts: wishing I was on that plane, bound for somewhere, anywhere; it didn't really matter. I wanted to put my seat back and cast a careless glance at all my bridges as they burned behind me, on the ground. I wanted to eat airplane food; tear open little silvery bags of salted peanuts. . .

I'm putting on my clothes when Kerri comes out of the bathroom, running a towel briskly through her hair. "You're leaving?" she says. I look up at her, hopping up and down on one leg to get my pants on. I sit down on the couch to pull on my Timberland boots, hair hanging down over my face, sweating.

"Yeah," I mutter, pulling my sweater on. "I'm still tripping; i won't be able to sleep for a while."

"Home?"

"No. I'm going to ride around for a while." I stand up, tucking the cuffs of my pants down over my boots. She comes over to straighten my collars for me. I put my arms around her, kneading her shoulders through the cloth. Then, scumbling beneath her bathrobe, I grab a handful of ass. "Look at you," I say, my eyes playing over the sharp features of her upturned face, "you'll carry the remnants of my cock the rest of your life. I'm still in there, man." She follows me in her terrycloth robe to the door. I slip into my jacket, standing in the doorway. Leaning over to kiss her, her hair-warm and slick and wet from the shower-grazes my cheek.

"I always liked your feet," I tell her, looking down. "You have pretty feet."

---

I'm at Union Street with Faris, smoking innumerable cigarettes and drinking cup after cup of coffee-not because it's the thing to do at this bar, but because we can't afford anything else. I keep an eye leveled at the door to see if anybody I know comes in to join the pre-club milieu of Wayne State students-bored intellectuals and pretentious art fags-that surround us at every table.

"So where's Jackie?" i'm asking.

"I don't know dude," he says, realizing that he's been smoking the filter, grinding it out in the ashtray. "We were chilling over her place and somehow got mixed up in this totally stupid debate. It was just. . . lame. So I left."

"Debate? Over what?"

He sits back in the chair and cracks a subtle grin. Tells me how they were curled together in her bed taking a catnap. How everything was all cool and nice, and then all of sudden she starts fucking with him about how his feet stink. Jackie, who lives in this greasy, roach-ridden upstairs rental in Hamtramck, a place covered with so much goddamn kipple you can't tell what color the fucking carpet is-i'm talking about a full-room ashtray for god's sake-is illing about his stinky feet.

He told her that his feet didn't stink, and I can see him there, at Jackie's: pulling apart his toes, inspecting them, then smelling his fingers. She told him he needed a shower; said he was looking like a fucking wetback. He started hollering at her that she was the funky one, telling her to just look around the apartment, which was looking just like a punk squat. I've already heard from Faris all the stories about how trashy Jackie is, but he tells me again anyway, this time about

how she chews her toenails and, this one time, how he came into the bedroom and caught her thoughtfully picking the scabs off her puss. . and eating them.

I recall seeing Jackie this one time wearing Birkenstock sandals with her worried, blood-encrusted toenails, and turn away from this tale with a grimace.

"Jesus. . ." I put my coffee cup down.

"Dig it," he says, continuing on. "So I confront her with all this shit and she starts bugging out; screaming at me, trying to scratch my face so I get hold of her and push her away except she like, flies over the bed and cracks her head on the bedknob, right?"

"Waitaminute." I stop him, horrified. "You caught her eating the scabs off her what?"

He's laughing now, lighting another cigarette. "Where's Sabrina? I need some more coffee."

"You freak; finish the goddamn story. . ."

He grins and hunches over the table, leaning into this tale of domestic urban squalor. He goes on to tell me how she rolls out of bed to the kitchen. She's in there looking for something to attack, stab him with. He becomes alarmed, listening to the fey ruckus in the next room; the sound of Jackie rattling around in the drawers and kitchen cabinets, cursing and talking to herself, while he sits naked on the edge of the stained mattress, thoughtfully smoking a home-rolled Bull Durham cigarette. So he gets up, quickly pulling on his pants with the cigarette cocked at a crooked angle from the corner of his mouth, and fully jumps out the open window, rolling around on the damp lawn, putting the rest of his clothes on, desperately slapping his pockets for the car keys. All this

time he's listening to her-armed, screaming, running down the back stairs after him. He lammed it out of there. I was at home when called me from a pay phone down the street from the bar.

Faris and Jackie have one of those nutty relationships I never seemed to be able to latch onto. Every day breeds another lugubrious episode of Sid & Nancy horseshit; insane moves, like the time he dropped over Matt Alonzo's place for a casual visit and found Jackie in the bedroom, sucking Alonzo's roommate's dick. Or that one hellish winter, the night he got arrested for trying-in his own purposeful and unhurried way-to run her over with the car. After all this, this complete shit, I had never seen them apart for more than 2 days, except for the time Jackie ran away with the bass player from Jane's Addiction and they dumped her ass in Kansas City. I was over his place when she called to borrow money for the trip back and we both laughed at her, roaring into the phone, and hung up on her before running out to get stoned.

"She's driving around right now dude," he says, nervously eyeballing the doorway. "Looking for me." He starts fiddling with a white sugar packet on the brown paisley tablecloth. "You want to get out of here?"

I stub out my cigarette. "I don't know. What's going on tonight?"

---

Later, when Sabrina comes around with the coffee, she tells us that there's a party going on in Cass Corridor, and that she gets off work in half an hour. So we do stick around, drinking coffee and eating from the huge porcelain platter of fries with Ranch dressing she managed to sneak us out of the kitchen while Joey, the chef and owner of the restaurant, was busy smoking a joint in the walk-in freezer. When Sabrina finally comes out with her coat, Faris lets me know that he's going to be riding with Sabrina in her Toyota while I follow on the bike. I warm up the bike while they go for the car, warning them not to lose me in the traffic.

I follow them down Woodward Avenue, watching the city degenerate as we ride through the East side. Past the burned-out city blocks and boarded up houses; the carnage left over from the White Flight of '67. The streets are completely and utterly empty of pedestrians. A staggering wino is a rare sight in this city. Lone cars roll through the angry clouds of steam belching from perforated manholes, like blind fish cruising through green fog.

This is a city of slow motion. Neglect breeds a return to earth. If you neglect to dust your kitchen, your kitchen will gather dust. If you neglect the dust, the dust forms cobwebs. If you neglect to clear the cobwebs, the cobwebs form a film over everything. The toaster, the blender, the refrigerator, the microwave oven-without motion, without maintenance, these useful appliances are slowly covered and eaten by time, leaving only their husks behind. This place. . . you can drive eight blocks and not see a single building that is not boarded up. There are dead storefronts, dead gas stations with long beds of dry grass poking up through the cracks in the concrete lots. There are whole factories and skyscrapers, filled with silent, dead rooms-all rotten drywood, rusted girders, broken windows and peeling paint. The dust is winning the war in Detroit. . .

Sabrina pulls up to a stoplight with her blinkers on, and it's not until I notice the police car that's been following me that I suddenly remember that i'm driving a motorcycle with out of state plates and no driver's license. There's a sign for No Turn On Red, but of course

they make the turn anyway and I have to sit there, watching these terminal fags cackling to each other in the glare of my headlight, probably stoned on Joey's top-grade weed as they drive off without me, completely unaware. The cop turns off a few blocks down, but by then Faris and Sabrina are long gone. I drive aimlessly through the wet streets, cursing bitterly inside the helmet before turning around and heading home. And later, alone in bed trying to jerk off, trying to release a hot splat of emotional tension and aiming for the familiar target of ancient, crusty stains along the edge of the mattress, the phone rings and though I don't answer it I have to stop.

---

I once read this book, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, in which there was a futuristic household appliance called a Mood Organ. By dialing any number of settings on this machine, you could control your moods, your feelings, pulling yourself out of any emotional slump at will. But I don't have a mood organ, and so it's on ugly wet mornings after a rain that I consult the Tao Te Ching:

A truly good man is not aware of his goodness,  
And is therefore good.  
A foolish man tries to be good,  
And is therefore not good.  
A truly good man does nothing,  
Yet leaves nothing undone.  
A foolish man is always doing,  
Yet much remains to be done.

Reading alone in bed beneath the knothole in the ceiling that admits the morning light from an upstairs apartment, these ancient dictums calm me; if i'm going to lay around on my ass, i might as well invest in a philosophy that will applaud the shit. Another:

Fame or self: Which matters more?  
Self or wealth: Which is more precious?  
Gain or loss: Which is more painful?  
He who is attached to things will suffer much.  
He who saves will suffer heavy loss.  
A contented man is never disappointed.  
He who knows when to stop will never find himself in  
trouble.  
He will stay forever safe

I read along, flipping through the pages, considering these proverbs and their applications to myself, and, I guess, the rest of my generation. I look around the apartment and realize that, according to the Tao, I am physically prepared for enlightenment by having much of nothing.

Gain or loss: Which is more painful?

This reminds me of last year, the nowhere year in which both Faris and I shared the same sour state of poverty and hopelessness. That was, I think, his volatile father's second year of trying to sell water purifiers. You know a guy's on his last legs when he all of a sudden starts pushing water filters. Faris' old man had fallen behind on his accountant's retainer, and the accountant confiscated all his

income statements. Because of this, Faris couldn't get his parental income figures for the financial aid forms, and when the next semester rolled around, they threw him out of the dorms. He had no place to live and he was telling me fuck it, he was gonna get a one-way ticket to Greece or Spain and forget all the shit; school, his music, his band, fucking everything. Live out the rest of his days as a disgruntled American hermit on some lonely, barren paradise of mountains, mules, dusty roads and olive trees. Maybe get hold of some fat and hairy farm girl with a Latin mustache; marry her so he could get a grunt job at her father's bakery. I could see him there-eating lots of bad pork and range rabbit while he drunkenly beat the screaming wife through the hot Spanish nights.

I have a friend named Joy; a partner at a travel agency. She had gotten me all my cheap flights to Europe. I told Faris that if he wanted, I was fairly sure I could get him an impossible price on airfare. He seemed elated. About a week later I bumped into him at some nightclub downtown. I told him I had gotten him a one-way ticket to Barcelona for \$95, but that he'd have to leave within the week. He turned to me, drink in hand and looked at me like I was crazy.

Alone, in bed, I set the Tao Te Ching aside and pick up Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil. Flipping through the dark, hedonistic ravings, I feel the peace and wanderlust inspired by Lao Tsu slowly seeping out of my center, only to be replaced with a hot kernel of carnivorous world-rebellion that kindles in my belly, making me want to get hold of a gun; a fat black automatic with a laser sight.

Confused, I put both books away (the best idea), and light a cigarette in the cold bedroom, drawing the quilt up to my chin.

---

I remember driving with Kerri to the Harbortown market near the Renaissance Center, downtown. Looking back on the scene, i can't understand how we managed to find so much to complain about. We

had nothing to complain about. We had money, but it never felt like it. We never felt like we had money. Between the two of us, i can't remember a single time we put more than three dollars worth of gas in the tank. But we had a car; you know what i mean?

And then there was the shopping, the food thing. We were constantly counting the accumulating pile of goods in the cart against the money in our pockets. We'd have to stop two or three times to pull out our money and count it. Pulling items off the shelf, putting others back, sacrificing our various treats (chocolate-caramel pudding for me, marinated artichoke hearts for her) for the more practical purchases of beans and curry rice and boxes and boxes of pasta. Monkeying around like that for two hours, sometimes. We'd huddle together as we walked down the aisles, intimidated and belittled by a phantasmagoria of food that we couldn't afford. We sacrificed, but we had enough to eat. We had enough to eat, but i never really understood what that meant. I remember that I could barely look her in the face, knowing that after this she was going to accompany me back to my, our apartment for a simple meal of scrambled eggs and cheese. We'd actually hug in the dairy section, consoling each other over the degradation of having to exchange as basic an item as butter for the cheaper box of margarine. Months later, after the break-up, it would disturb me to peruse the aisles by myself and the first time, the week after she moved out, a lump settled in my throat when I passed the dairy section with my mental shopping list of cheap purchases and I had to run past the checkout counters to go cry in the parking lot.

I never apologized to her for those days of what i then regarded as urban squalor. But I thought about it, constantly, and it did make me feel very naked having her there with me in the apartment where she could, at her leisure, observe me conduct the manic, hyperactive ritual of my days-a mad laboratory hamster. I quickly tired of keeping up appearances; shaving, pissing with the bathroom door closed, changing my underwear every day-all the semblances, signs, of

having your shit together. Little by little I began to blow my cool that summer. It's easy to forget to give a shit.

I remember this one night, the night I was horrified to find that Kerri, simply by gauging and calculating the shifting movements of the mattress, had learned to speculate and finally deduce my various activities beneath the sheets at night, which, that evening, happened to be picking the hairy flakes of shit that had crusted around my butthole, rolling them between my fingers and depositing them on the floor outside the covers. She'd only moved in a couple weeks before, and i'd almost forgotten she was there until she rolled over and grabbed me by the wrist.

"Todd. What the fuck are you doing?"

I shrugged her hand off, trying to cover up. The heinous pick-and-rolling quickly dissolved into an innocent fit of fake butt scratching.

"Fucking wooden chair gave me a rash. . . itches like hell." Feigning frustration, I slapped the mattress, flouncing over on my

back-a poor recovery. Then I waited in the dark, my asshole tight enough to pull railroad spikes, for the next thing. I could feel her staring at me, a tense moment of no-words, before she finally rolled over and went back to sleep.

I could feel a nervous bubble of air rumbling in the pit of my belly, but I relaxed, knowing that in a few minutes, if I was very careful, i'd be able to lift the covers and fan out a fart and maybe get away with it. . .

---

I really don't feel like going with Adrielle to the Chili Peppers concert at the State Theatre. But it's been a long day, and after a fruitless interview for a job-waiting tables at the Rattlesnake Club; they wanted me to get a haircut-i'm too tired to even say no. When I meet her at Union Street, she's looking great; perched on a barstool, smoking cigarettes and laughing with Dave, the bartender, and this scene eases me somewhat. She swivels around on the stool to kiss me hello and her breath is hot and sweet and smells of Jagermeister.

Adrielle is pure Cass Corridor style`: blonde hair, dry and brittle from all the pink and blue dyes of her long-gone punker days, piled high on her head in a beehive. Checkered flannel shirt, overalls and Timberland boots-stocky body with just the right kind of density, and all the right curves in all the right places. I remember her leaning against the bar at the Warehouse last year, right after that July Fourth when she got her jaw broken in a fistfight with three brothers in a Pathfinder over a minor traffic accident (she is cool like that). Her jaw was wired shut, and when she wasn't frantically pantomiming conversation at somebody, she simply stood there, silent; thoughtfully lip-nibbling the frayed ends of a single blond dreadlock.

Adrielle is a friend. She also happens to be quite hot, as a matter of fact. There's always been this uninitiated charge of lust floating between the two of us. Lust, or wishful thinking on my part. But the drugs-massive amounts of coke and smack-she was doing last summer scared the shit out of me, and so i'd never trust myself to remain alone in a room with her for too long. Instead we'd cautiously circle each other like a couple of alley-cats; with me sniffing the hot, primal vibe between us. But tonight-when I learn that she'll be moving to Chicago in two days, that she broke up with Cam, her boyfriend/dealer, that she'd always wondered why I had never asked her out before-I feel a mental shrug inside and resign myself to letting the evening progress as it will. And later on, kissing in the parked car at the State Theatre, I put a palm over her warm bare breast and feel that a pact has been made; I know what we're going to do, later on, after the concert.

The band has already gone on by the time we get inside the club, and I holler over the music, asking her if she wants a drink. She nods, holding onto my arm as we weave through the crowd to the bar, where i'm surprised to see someone I know.

"Nikki," I shout over the racket, pushing through to the bar. Nikki, sweating through her V-neck t-shirt, is splashing vermouth into a row of highball glasses, fixing drinks.

"What's up?" she hollers back, quickly wiping the beads of perspiration off her forehead with a fist.

"I thought you moved to New York," I tell her. She's looking good. Looking quite hot, as a matter of fact.

"That's next month," she says, pushing the glasses, four Manhattans, toward a couple at the bar. "That's \$16.80." Then, turning back to me. "I've had it with this shit. I landed a desk job at Rockamerica; i'm leaving in a week to find an apartment."

I ask her if she's ever been to New York and she throws her head back, rolling her eyes at me, and I spot a maddening little mole between her breasts and it's so sexy that I have to laugh a little at myself. I need a cigarette.

"Oh please. I lived there for three years; off 26th and 6th, across from the Powerhouse? I didn't think you could drag me back there but fuck; one winter in this city'll make a nomad out of anybody." Then, "Holy shit, Adrielle, I didn't see you standing there. . ."

Adrielle leans over the bar and they kiss on the cheek. Adrielle tells Nikki about her impending move to Chicago and Nikki does a little take, starts fixing another drink; some dickhead

actually ordered a Green Dinosaur. "Chicago? What about Cam?" Adrielle gives a little shrug and Nikki is suddenly swamped with thirsty assholes so we wave off and disappear into the crowd near the stage. Strobelights flicker on and off, illuminating the mad stagedivers vaulting into the air to splash into the thick of the crowd, and it's not until now that I realize that the last concert I went to was Adam Ant, in the 8th grade.

But I can't seem to stop thinking about the beads of perspiration rolling down the swell of Nikki's tan, heavy breasts, and the Pucci tights she was wearing when I first met her at Irene and Barry's Christmas party last year. After the concert, driving home with Adrielle in thoughtful silence, my head is buzzing with impulsive madness and when she pulls up to my building and cuts the engine, I jump out of the car before she can pull the keys from the ignition. I tell her to be sure and call me before she leaves for Chicago. I kiss her on the forehead. She shrugs and says okay, starting the car again, and I can tell that she is somewhat confused but not all that disappointed. I make a big pantomime of searching my pockets for my keys, waving to her as she drives off. As soon as she turns the corner i'm running across Gratiot Avenue, my breath puffing out before me in a fog. I hail a cab and jump in the backseat, slamming the door.

"State Theatre," I tell the driver. "Listen, I gotta get there by 2 o'clock; what time is it?" The driver-an old grim brother in a Red Man baseball cap-pulls away from the curb, checking his watch. "It's ten-'til, now. . ." He checks his watch again and curses softly, telling me that we have to make a little stop first. He starts drifting over to the side of the road towards a party store on the corner and I sit bolt upright in the seat. "Look man," I groan anxiously. I can't believe this

shit. "I really need to get there by 2 o'clock. I got to pick somebody up. . ." The driver turns way the hell around in his seat to look at me. "We gotta make a little stop first," he says. "Don't worry about it; you'll get there."

"Goddamn, man. . ."

He tells me to quit fucking with him; that we are going to make this one quick stop, and then we pull up to the party store and I have to sit there, silently furious, while the old fart gets out of the car; hitching up his old man's pants and mumbling to himself as he makes for the door. A couple minutes later he comes out with a bottle of something in a brown paper bag. We drive on and I don't trust myself to say another fucking word until we get to the theatre where the exiting crowd is coagulating near the entrance. Other cabs are pulling in and driving off from beneath the lighted marquee. Stuffing some bills into the driver's crooked fist, I bolt out of the cab and push my way against the flow of the crowd, back into the club. The place is nearly empty, and I can see busboys hustling here and there, picking up glasses and napkins. Onstage, roadies are busy taking down the equipment. I'm running around like a ferret, trying to avoid bumping into one of the bouncers, when I suddenly spot her wiping down the chrome fixtures behind the bar.

"Nikki," It comes out as a fucking growl for Chrissake, and I realize I must look positively primal; stalking toward her, huffing and puffing from all the adrenalin and the nervous pre-sexual butterflies batting around in my belly. She looks up from her busywork, surprised, and asks me what's going on.

I want to fuck you, i'm thinking. I want to suck that mole off your left tit. . .

"I have no idea. . ." I tell her.

She laughs a little, taking in my mad, goatish fever. "Where's Adrielle? How'd you get here?"

"I took a cab," I mutter, dismissing it. "Listen. What are you doing now?"

"Now? I don't know. There's this guy. . . I guess I can get rid of him. What do you want to-"

"Get rid of him. I'll be outside." I start for the door, patting my pockets, then turn back. "You got a cigarette?"

---

Decide to go out and buy a canvas today. I am going to do it. It started earlier this afternoon, while once again sifting through the intimidating stack of bills stacked behind the kitchen counter. The figures jumped out at me with a renewed urgency, a dire warning that demanded some course of action, direction, amelioration. . . movement of some kind.

Somebody swiped the luggage rack off the back of the bike last week. There's no other way to carry a rolled canvas on the bike, so I cross the street and catch the Warren bus going downtown. I push through to the back of the bus and grab at a metal post to steady myself as we pull away from the curb.

I cannot deal with this city in the summer. The heat bears down on the buzzing inhabitants-baking the tarmac, making every streetside trek an exercise in constitution and willpower. The atmosphere on the bus is stagnant and humid; the people are packed around me like jarred tamales. The only time the air moves is when somebody farts. Plus, this one motherfucker is standing in front of me with a Jehri Curl that smells just like frying bacon. The sweltering heat on the bus makes this even more unbearable, and I swear I can see a heat haze rising off his fucking head and I try to move away-to the rear of the bus, anywhere-but there's no room, and I keep stepping on the feet of the other passengers. So I just have to stand there and take it, and the guy smells like. . . like breakfast for Chrissake; makes me want to fix my plate. I'm practically hallucinating by the time the bus stops in front of the Art Institute. Pushing through the door to the street, I have to pull my shirt over my head and tie it around my waist like a fucking hick. I feel my scalp starting to itch. Looking in the rear mirror of the bus before it pulls off, I see that my face is starting to get blotchy with hives. I walk in a small circle; taking in the air, trying to calm down, then start walking the three or four blocks to Favor Ruhl Art Supplies on Warren. The itching slowly subsides, and I can't help but remember this one time, two winters ago, looking for a cheap flat in the Wayne State area. I had seen an ad in the paper for a one-bedroom off of Alexandrine for \$200; the shit sounded too good to be true but I decided to check it out anyway. The building was in a fucked up neighborhood, but I had lived in worse and it was nothing to worry about as long as

the actual apartment was okay. The manager didn't answer when I rang the buzzer, and so I was reduced to banging on the glass door in the lobby until the door was opened by an old cougher who pointed me towards the manager's place down the hall. The building had

patchy red carpeting, bald in places, and the paint was peeling off the walls from the heat, which felt like it was turned up to ninety. I could see the dried-up husks of dead cockroaches in the corners and the all too familiar smell of poverty was everywhere; a heavy, penetrating funk of fried food, boiled cabbage and old people. Apprehensive, I knocked on the door. No immediate answer, but I could hear the muffled alien strains of Arabic music coming from inside. I knocked again, banging harder this time, and was startled when the door suddenly flew open on its hinges.

"Yes?" The manager, an old bald guy with a bushy, vomity-looking beard was standing there in a stained, strappy-looking tank top. I momentarily lost it, standing there staring. He looked exactly like-extremely hard to deal with-Santa Claus, Kris Kringle on the off-season, and I found my mind wandering, forgetting what I came there for in the first place. He was saying something, leaning out of the doorway and I did a little take, shaking my head to clear my thoughts, and asked him about the apartment in the ad.

I got a quick glimpse of his broad, hairy back when he turned back inside to retrieve the rental applications, and then I was alone in the hallway. My head was swimming, and all of a sudden I found all of this too much to take: the cramped quarters in the hallway; the wet, stinking garbage piled near the rear exit; the rich, saucy odor of Chef Boyardee, Noodle-roni, Rice-A-Roni-some fucking kind of roni-coming from the guy's apartment, and the smell of old people everywhere, closing in on me and all of a sudden I couldn't breathe. My scalp started to itch, madly, and I had to take a piss; had had to take one since before I even came there, and then I was itching all over, scratching myself, crossing my legs in the hallway to keep from peeing myself, and then all of a sudden I was out of there, running for the door at the end of the hall but the old cougher was there; trudging slowly, too slowly, out of the building and he was in my way but I couldn't get around him, and I laughed a high lunatic laughter, braying like a bucktoothed jackass

and he momentarily stopped, slowly craning his head, his big old Buford head, around to stare at me, regarding my madness and I muttered excuse me and rudely squeezed past him in the doorway, and then I was out on the sidewalk, running for the car but then had to stop near the street, scooping up two big handfuls of snow to rub it over my face and scalp, feeling the cold dripping down into my shirt and my chest was heaving as my breath came out in a fog and relief slowly set in and I felt I had barely avoided a . . . an explosion of some kind, and only then did I begin to relax and then realize how cold it was outside, and I reached into my pockets, fingers numb, for the car keys. . .

The door chime makes a technical beep when I enter the art supply store. I am cut with an almost painful blast of air conditioning, and have to put my t-shirt back on; rubbing the goosebumps on my arms. A nod to the skinny girl behind the counter with the nose ring, and then i'm perusing the aisles, the shelves stocked to capacity with a myriad collection of small pots, jars, squeeze tubes, cans. The swirl of detail and color and the harsh, chemical stink of turpentine and liquid makes me dizzy. A deep breath, filling my lungs, and I move on. A rolled canvas is tucked gently but securely in the crook of my armpit; I've gotten this far.

"Todd. . ." A voice says behind me, and I turn around and I

forgot Dave worked here. . .

"Mayberry. What's happening?" I extend my hand for a slap, and Mayberry, a tall articulate brother who's always impressed me, a dyslexic Fulbright fellow, steps back to check me out. "What's up man? Long time, no see," he says, nodding at the canvas I've picked out in my hand.

"You about to get something going, there?"

"I don't know," I tell him. "Maybe. You know. . ."

He nods, short black dreadlocks dangling. "You still doing that thing with Futura 2000? I saw that show you guys did with Crash-when was that? March?"

I nod, running a hand through my hair, looking at my feet. "Yeah, something like that. Nah, we had a kind of falling out. I let them go ahead and run with it. You know."

We shuffle around for a minute, uncomfortable in the silence. Mayberry is rubbing at a dark stain on his paint-speckled apron. "You talked to Kerri lately?" he says, and I look up and can see that he regrets saying this. I feel bad; find myself wanting to reach out and put a hand on his shoulder, reassure him. "Nah. Haven't seen her in some time," I tell him. "You?"

"Not really. Just around the clubs and stuff; you know." He shrugs. "You guys still cool?"

"Yeah; we're alright, I guess."

"That's cool," he says, nodding thoughtfully. "That's cool." Then dismissing it, "Listen, I get a really good discount here. . ."

"Yeah? Can you hook me up?"

"Yeah sure, no problem. Just come get me when you're done, whatever, looking around, alright?"

I tell him okay and then thanks, and he goes back behind the counter and I can see him pointing me out to the girl with the nose ring, telling her who I am, and she's nodding and smiling at me and I turn back to the aisles, mildly shaken by the ordeal.

I haven't done shit since that Crash thing last summer. It wouldn't be such a big deal, if it weren't such a big deal. This is such a small town. It often takes a big city to make you remember that no one's looking, that no one is listening. "Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead." W.H. Auden said that. I don't remember where or when I became acquainted with this piece of philosophy. But I do remember that it seemed to me to be a noble and accurate suggestion of the frame of mind one should keep while conceiving, producing, and regarding art. Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead. I liked that. And furthermore, I

couldn't dispute the fact. I thought about it for a while, i took a good look around this time-savaged city. I opened up the newspapers to the movie listings, I appraised the gallery shows I had patronized over the years. I thought of my cluttered bookshelves, my constant forays to the public library. There are dead guys everywhere, they are all over the place. They are in our architecture, our music, our dance-the dead have hiked their articles forward into time, they've place-kicked us all kinds of cool shit, everything that surrounds us relies upon the ideas of someone who is no longer wasting good air. . .

And my question to Auden is: who wants to break bread with a guy who spent his entire lifetime with his head up his ass? All songs are spurious. All songs dissipate in time.

Fuck it. I'm not taking this thing home. I know that now. The canvas seems to grow heavy, inconsequential in my grip as I begin to remember the expensive and complicated process of query involved with getting a gallery booking; the photos, the bios, the slides and inevitably, the frustrating vigil by the telephone and mailbox. A wait that can last a year or more. Long enough for me to stop caring. Long enough for me to forget to give a shit. I am ready now to drop the canvas and stretch out, here, in the middle of the floor. . .

---

Nobody answers the phone when I later step into the sundrenched streets to call Faris from a pay phone. I call Kerri, but her line is busy and I slam the phone down on its hook and light a cigarette. Feeling somewhat unhinged, I catch a cross town bus over to Ron and Sabrina's. They rent a house in Indian Village. Rachel opens the door when I get there. I kiss her hello, and we go into the living room where the three of them are lazily lounging in the dark on a pile of giant patterned pillows-barefoot, listening to Bad Brains on CD and watching MTV with the sound off. The room smells strongly of jasmine incense. I kick off my shoes and flop down on the floor with my head on Rachel's lap. She plays with my hair while we all watch Sabrina, lying in Ron's lap, trying to light a Bic lighter with her bare toes.

She succeeds and lights Rachel's Camel, and we all laugh and then watch Ron-spread-eagled on the carpet, his long blonde dreadlocks splayed over the pillow-try to do the same thing with a book of matches. But he only manages to give himself a hotfoot; lighting the entire pack at once, and his whole hairy foot goes up in flames and he's running around in a small circle, screaming, and the dog starts barking at him and Sabrina manages to finally put the fire out with a pillow.

Sabrina goes into the kitchen for drinks while Ron caresses his now smooth, naked foot and when she comes back we all decide to catch a late-night dollar movie, Vincent & Theo, at the Maple Cinema in Birmingham. It's almost midnight by the time we pile into Ron's Volkswagen van for the half hour drive to the suburbs. Ron's got a CD player, and there are more pillows and beanbags in the back. The three of us pile together like cats; staring at the still stars through the skylight, listening to Smashing Pumpkins and Supercat and more Bad Brains while Ron drives.

We are all pleasantly exhausted by the time we get to the tiny theatre and slide into a row of seats. The film, a docudrama on the life of Vincent Van Gogh, is good. I enjoy the way the soundtrack fits the film, and am forced to laugh out loud at the music-grating industrial rhythms

accompanied by deafening screams of corporeal torture-that assaults us while Van Gogh sits, quietly painting in a field of sunflowers.

We watch Van Gogh's maniacal machinations flash across the screen-explosions of violent madness and drunken faggotry-and i smile, thinking that Vincent Van Gogh is one of the few human beings who make sense to me. This rare state of spiritual collusion is instantly and irrevocably curtailed when I hear this nouveau-riche yuppie sitting behind me make some kind of comment to his girlfriend on "poverty being the muse of the artist," and I have to turn around in my seat to stare at him, glaring.

After the movie we stop at the party store across the street and go in on a fifth of Jack Daniels for the drive home. I can't help grumbling out loud about how any fool can think poverty, soul-killing poverty, should be a pursuable muse to anything.

"But dude," Ron is saying, somewhat apprehensive as he appraises me in the rearview mirror, "aren't your parents rich or something? I mean, they do live in Bloomfield Hills, right?"

I talk slowly, stumbling through the words. "Yeah dude; they're pretty well off, but-"

"-but you're still hard, right?" Ron finishes for me, and they all start laughing at me, the fags, and even I have to start cracking up at this.

We're all thoroughly drunk by the time we get back to the house. Stumbling out of the van, I fall to the ground and lay there, laughing, measuring my length on the lawn while the dew slowly soaks through the back of my shirt. Inside, we all sit crosslegged on the floor around the coffee table, smoking a bit of opium from a homemade gravity bong that Ron constructed from a couple of 2 liter Coke bottles. I fill my lungs with the rich, acrid smoke and instantly, every object in the room takes on a soft, fuzzy kind of glow. I feel a gentle explosion in the back of my neck followed

by a warm pleasant buzz that rolls up and down my spine like a wave. And I lie there, feeling better than I have in days; manufacturing pleasant little humming noises in the back of my throat, and amusing myself by blowing spit bubbles for the dog, who tilts his head to stare at me, curious. Not too much later, I fall asleep doing this, and when I wake up-feeling dislocated, staring at the strange, unfamiliar ceiling-Sabrina and Ron have gone upstairs to bed. Rachel is lying next to me, asleep. I roll over and light a cigarette; staring at the little happy-trail of pubic hair that crawls from the crest of her navel, disappearing into the front of her blue jeans. . .

---

I have very few questions these days. I used to want to know everything, i remember needing to have my questions answered. But just lately I've grown tired of pretending that i'm in control. I think that i'm starting to accept the idea that i can only be pinballed in this life. I mean, there are times when you really know what you are doing, and there are times when you do not. But even when you feel like you are in control, you are not. How much can you fuck with your self, really? And isn't it, once again, the world what dictates that you do even this?

Who is Todd? This is what i used to ask my self. I used to ask my self questions all the time. I am here. I am in Detroit. That used to mean something, I used to know what that meant, I used to have a reason for being here. I knew Todd, I used to get a pretty good picture from the satellite. The man, the actor, the construct, was on task, centered in the frame as usual. Todd Speaks. He's our main guy, he's the hero, he's the one we love, right? He's the one who says the coolest shit, does the coolest shit. We love him because he's the one who says and does the coolest shit. His friends are the best friends. His friends are the best friends. He fights fear, he feels no jealousy. If he were to let fear defeat him, if he started acting like a jealous asshole. . . well, he wouldn't be the hero anymore, would he? No, he would not. Somebody else would. As far as I, my self, is concerned, i'm no longer the hero. My satellite dish has retracted, for some reason; i can't seem to get a clear picture. . .

I used to paint my self. I used to be able to get a clear picture that way, like diddling the antenna on top of a television set. But now. . . now, I guess, I've been fooled by the illusion. I've been painting the portrait of a complete asshole.

I keep thinking about the story of Art. Art King. Art King is a man, a poet, a professor at the University of Michigan; one of my old teachers from college. I was in his advanced poetry seminar. When I was in his class, Art was an editor for the Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry-one of the few ways a poet can get paid in the 20th century. Around forty-five years old.

Tall, slightly balding, bushy black mustache, hairy arms. Into ripped jeans, denim shirts (sleeves

rolled up), and dusty Timberland boots. But during the sixties, when he lived in Chicago, he was the hot young beatnik of Wicker Park. Twenty-six years old, he had a good part-time teaching slot at a local liberal arts college, and a small house with a garage. He taught during the day, and came home in the evening to tweek behind the typewriter.

Art had a wife. Her name was Eve. She was a sculptress from California. Tall, slender, long blond hair parted in the middle. Sharp, pretty face with lots of brown freckles. She ran around barefoot most of time, ate tofu, and smoked a pack of cigarettes a week. She was into jeans shorts with frayed cuffs, peach tube tops, clear toenail polish. She used the garage as her studio. Art rarely went in there. He kept the typer in the attic; that was his space.

At one point, Eve became obsessed with this block of marble in the garage. Really obsessed. She started taking her meals in the garage, and when Art wanted to talk to her he had to utilize the intercom that ran between the house and the studio. And she was never in a good mood when she had to stop what she was doing to pick up the telephone. To talk to her husband.

Art didn't sweat it. This was their thing. They were a couple of mad scientists, they understood. He sought his secrets in one way, she in another. He left her alone, he asked no questions. He worked alone as she worked alone. He ate alone as she ate alone. He showered alone as she showered alone. She often worked late into the night, and when she did finally slide into their bed, she was dusted with powdered marble and too exhausted to make love.

This shit went on for two months. And then one day, sitting behind the typewriter and staring into the beanbag ashtray full of cigarette butts, the intercom on the wall of the attic buzzed, and Art heard his wife's voice: "Art? Could you get down here, please?"

Oh shit. Oh shit, right? He got up from behind the desk and ran down the stairs two at a time. Was the shit finally done? Was she having an episode of some kind? He didn't know what to think, but he didn't like the strangled sound of her voice; had she had an accident of some kind? He ran out of the house and into the backyard.

In the garage, he found his wife, barefoot in jeans shorts and tank top, kneeling before the object she had formed. Pure white marble. Fifteen feet high, or more. A huge. . . amorphous. . . mercurial. . . formless. . . thing. It reached up near the rafters of the garage. A construct of abstract nuttiness. It twisted up and around. . . it had limbs like a tree, or an amoeba. It was beautiful, it was alien. It was almost frightening.

Eve seemed to be more than frightened by it. She seemed crazed. She got up from the floor, and circled it slowly, never taking her eyes from it. She'd run in and stroke her fingers along the surface of one of its outstretched limbs. Then back off with her eyes bugged out, both hands covering her mouth to still a scream. Then she's see something else and runs in to graze her soft cheek against the belly of this dancing godmonster, frozen in mid step-stroking her cheek against the cold white stone with her eyes closed, smiling,

tears leaving clean wet tracks down the front of her face, lighted floured with powdered marble.

"Do you see it?" she asked, running up to her husband, grabbing his lapels with both hands. "It's my soul. It's my soul, this is what it looks like. . ." She ran back to the thing. She grazed her hand along the body, down to the roots, where it seemed to wind down, curling around itself like a rattlesnake resting on a hot rock. "See? It has a tail. It has a tail, along here-i can feel it when i walk. Look. . ." She turned a slow pirhoutine, displaying it. "See?"

Her husband was stunned into silence. What could he say? What could he say?

She was laughing now, laughing and crying at the same time. "Do you see it?"

"Okay, man. . ."

"It has a tail. . ."

"I see it, honey. It's beautiful. It's beautiful. Come here. . ."

He held her in his arms. She cried hotly into the front of his shirt, her back hitching as they stood together on the canvas tarp in the garage.

And Eve was finished. Really finished. She never sculpted again. Today they have two teenaged children, a son and a daughter. They have a nice house in the suburbs of Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Art teaches at the university. Eve smiles a lot more than she used to. Her soul lives in the backyard of their house, and they haven't talked about it since.

Now this is a bullshit story. I made it up, but i made it up to serve a point, because this is the way i used to think. When i first started painting, i thought i was creating something. I thought i was being god. When i grew older, i realized that it was all just shit. Shit. You eat the world, digest it, process it, and shit it out. You shit it out in the form of paintings, sculpture, music, anger, tears, happiness-whatever, whatever. It's all shit, but you can learn a lot about yourself by rolling around in your own shit. It's not the only way for me, but it's the most effective. For a time, i believed that i could find my soul through my paintings. I worked in the hopes that one day i would be able to finally hack out an abstract expressionist rendering of my self. . .

And then i realized that this was ridiculous, that i would never get it. I would never get it because it keeps changing. It changes every minute, it changes every second. My shit is constantly in flux, molded beneath the fingers of the universe, which is god, which is everything else,

everything outside my self. Sometimes the fingers are gentle. Sometimes the fingers are less patient with my material, my makeup. I'll be finished when the universe is finished with me . . .

---

It's the middle of the afternoon. Everyone I know is either working or in classes, so it's just me and Faris; driving aimlessly around downtown, waiting for the sun to go down, for the city to wake up. Faris has this idea to drive by the Franklin Brewery Company; this new bar that just opened up off Orleans, near the Detroit River. We get out of the car and I stand there for a minute to look out across the water-lapping out in waves over the shore of broken concrete-to Canada, the twinkling lights of Windsor with its bad attitudes and bustling fish markets. The sun, a great ball of orange fire, recedes below a horizon tattooed with urban architecture, and it's not until Faris says something, calling me to the door, that I realize that our car is one of maybe five in the entire lot.

We get inside and the place is huge; all banana yellow stucco with steel girders and matt black furnishings-a vast, industrial racquetball court. The entire bar is empty, save for a few scattered waiters weaving in between the empty tables, casting hurried sidelong glances at us while they busy themselves, setting up for the dinner rush. Unfazed, Faris goes over to the jukebox while I take a seat at an unobtrusive table in one of the back corners, behind a massive, potted palm tree that reaches for the skylight. He drops some change into the squat, neon relic and it is a mistake; the music-Soundgarden-instantly blasts from hidden speakers, echoing all over the empty restaurant. Faris grins at this folly, walking back to the table. I stare at him, mildly irritated, but he just says gimme a cigarette dude and I pass him the pack. And then some cowboy-booted motherfucker, a chef, comes out of the kitchen; he leans in the doorway, drying his hands on a dishrag as he stares over at us and then turns to the bartender, who just shrugs.

I start nervously tapping my fingers on the tabletop. I pick up one of the grimy glasses at my place setting, sniffing it and it smells vaguely of. . . taco meat and Faris is looking over the drink menu on the table-tent and I tell him, "Dude, you're such a fucking bong-hit,"

but he just grins and lights a cigarette, slumping down in his chair. The chef finally goes back into the kitchen, shaking his head, and i'm beginning wonder exactly what is going on and if the restaurant

is not open or something, why doesn't someone just tell us? But someone, no one does and we just sit there, waiting for someone to come take our goddamned order. A waitress passes by on her way to the kitchen and Faris tries to get her attention- "Hey. Excuse me. . ." but she just keeps on walking, disappearing through the swinging doors, and all we can do is look at each other and start laughing.

Faris gets up to go find the bathroom. I go over to the bar where the bartender is busy polishing cactus-etched crystal shot glasses on the other side. And even though I lean over the bar with a small knot of crumpled bills in my fist, the fuckhead refuses to acknowledge my presence, and I can feel my ears getting hot. When I lean over and say, loudly enough for him to hear, "Look; I have i.d. . .", he only glances disdainfully over his shoulder. I go back to the table, pulling my jacket off the back of the chair, and then Faris comes out of the bathroom and I tell him let's go.

But outside, walking to the car in the middle of the empty parking lot, Faris turns around in his tracks, irritated, to look back at the entrance.

"Waitasecond dude," he says, pausing. "That was total bullshit. . ."

"What?"

"C'mon dude. I mean, what was that? What was that shit? I'm going back in there. . ." He starts walking back to the restaurant. I holler uselessly over his shoulder for him to give me the keys so I can wait in the car, but he keeps marching up the steps and disappears into the bar. I mutter something and sit on the front hood of the car; staring out over the river with its contained rage of filthy water and bad froth. It'll be dark soon-the sun is practically gone; an orange tang stewing behind a montage of swirling grey clouds, pregnant with their wet promise. I watch an oil

tanker-a massive, rust-colored kraken- forge purposefully across the length of the river and then Faris comes back.

I casually roll off the hood of the car and wait by the passenger-side door while he pats down his pockets for the keys. There's a folded piece of paper in his hand. I ask him what it is, and he just hands it to me across the roof of the car. I unfold it while he unlocks the door, and it's an application for employment, and I mutter across the roof, "You fucking dickhead," and he just laughs and we get into the car.

---

Later, walking through Greektown, we bump into Lisa Spindler, a photographer friend of mine, and her boyfriend Randy. "Todd-baby," she says, kissing me on both cheeks like a diplomat. "Spindler," I say, kissing her back. "What's up?" I introduce them to Faris. "We know Faris," Spindler says, leaning over to hug him. "How

are you doing, Faris? Haven't seen you in a while. . ."

"Yeah, I been out and about. Randy; how's it going?" They shake hands. Randy is a partner in a big architectural firm downtown; Spindler I've known for years. No matter where I am, she manages to send me a different photo-surreal and haunting nude self-portraits-every year for my birthday. I was eighteen years old and she was nearing twenty-seven when I first met her in New York, where she was working as a modeling scout while interning for some bigshot photographer who's name i can't remember. I ask her and Randy what's going on, and they tell us that some hairdresser friend of Spindler's is throwing a party in Royal Oak, the suburbs, and that there's going be food and that we should come. I write down the address and we all make plans to meet at Randy's later on for drinks and then go to the party together. We say goodbye, and later, walking down the street to the car, I tell Faris that I didn't know that he knew Spindler and he tells

me that she took some promo photos of him for his band's demo package. He doesn't look me in the eyes as he tells me this and I just stare at him as we get into the car.

---

Later at Randy's, Spindler opens the door wearing a slinky black dress, and without saying hello she turns around, asking one of us to zip her up. Faris does, pausing at the end to give her a soft squeeze on the back of the neck. She flirtatiously twists out of his grip and holds the door open for us. We follow Spindler, in heels, to the living room where she introduces us to this girl, Carmen; a model friend of Spindler's who just flew in for the weekend. Carmen-tall and imposing with chiseled features and a cropped red Roman haircut-daintily holds out a hand for us to shake. When she turns around to reclaim her seat on the couch Faris stares lewdly at her ass, making a serious face, nudging me in the ribs.

The house is small and strange. Randy renovated it himself-knocking out entire walls and ceilings-during the course of the summer last year. All bone white polished floors and sparse furnishings; the furniture that is there looks too expensive and delicate to sit on. Faris sits down next to Carmen on the couch and immediately starts talking to her, saying stuff, while Spindler disappears into the bathroom to finish putting on her makeup. I go to the kitchen to fix a drink, and while admiring the tasteful fleckstone countertops and ultramodern kitchen appliances, I notice a framed photograph of Spindler and Randy in the nude. In the photo he stands behind her with his mouth buried in the nape of her neck; one hand cupping her bare breast. At that moment Spindler comes out of the bathroom, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a lipstick, and catches me staring at the photograph. She picks it up, regarding her reflection in the glass while she puts the finishing touches on her makeup. "Isn't that hot?" she says, putting the lipstick back in her clutch purse. "Friend of mine took it; you remember Drake?" I nod yeah, sure and she hollers out to the

bedroom for Randy to hurry up. We go back into the living room. Faris and Carmen are laughing at something, and Spindler asks them if they want anything to drink and they look at each other and say. . . no.

Randy comes out of the bedroom dressed in black slacks and a loose-fitting black shirt, open at the collar. Spindler puts her arms around him and growls, nuzzling his throat. "You look healthy," she says, fixing his collar. "Very. . . Californian." We shake hands again. He convinces Faris and Carmen to have a drink with the rest of us, and then disappears into the kitchen to get some ice. I sit down, flipping through some old issues of Select on the coffee table, and when he comes back with the drinks, he's carrying this coconut. He sets down the drink tray and then just stands there, craftily eyeing us while he shifts the hairy coconut from one hand to the other.

Faris and Carmen try to continue their conversation, but it's kind of difficult with Randy standing over them like that, and Faris sips at his whiskey and soda and finally says, "So dude. . . what's with the coconut?" Randy laughs, picking at a tiny crack, a fault in the brown shell. "This?" he says, holding it up in front of us, and even Spindler is staring at him. "Nothing; just a little something to break the ice. . ."

He tells us that he sometimes does this when he throws a house party, just to get a bit of shit started, to get everyone comfortable with each other. He gets Spindler to stand up from her seat on the couch. Then, standing in the middle of the living room, he shoves the coconut between his legs, grasping it with his knees. He holds out his arms to her and nods at the hairy nut. "Now come get it."

Spindler laughs, getting the idea. She kicks off her heels and puts her arms around his neck, and we all start laughing as she begins to gyrate her slender hips; trying to work her legs in between Randy's to grab the coconut with her knees without letting it fall to the floor. Faris is

already on track, running over to turn on the stereo, and Spindler triumphantly steps back from Randy with the coconut pinched between her knees. Everyone is smiling and looking at Randy in this wholly warm new light, and he just stands there-laughing, basking in this moment while Spindler holds her arms out to me, beckoning me to get up from the couch. I stand up, and she puts her arms around me; I hold onto her waist, pulling her into me as we begin to grind our pelvises together. Everybody is cheering us on, laughing, and then Spindler is pumping her hips into me, fucking dry-humping me, trying to loose the coconut, and then I've got it and step back with a grin plastered on my mug. Faris is roaring, jumping up from the couch to come over, pushing his knees against mine, careful not to let the front of our pants even graze each other and I laugh at him, "You big fag," and he laughs and drops the coconut. I fall into my seat on the couch, pushing Carmen up and over to Faris for her turn. Randy and Spindler are cheering them on; laughing as we continue on in a circle, and this goes on for some time and even though i'm not ready to go, it's soon time to leave for the party.

We get to Tina's; an upper flat in a rented house in Royal Oak. The apartment is packed with campy characters; all students and models and photographers and other hairdressers. Faris and I spot

the food and share a nod, making our way to the table in the corner piled high with catered meats and cheeses, and when Spindler comes over to introduce us to Tina, I turn around with my mouth full of sliced ham and fried falafel and can only give her a rude salute. Faris is hunched over the table, fingers fluttering indecisively over the vegetable plate, and when Spindler taps him on the shoulder, startling him from his food frenzy, he turns around with his cheeks stuffed like a hamster. Tina, a short red-head in a blousy white resale shirt from the sixties, just walks away, melting into the crowd. Faris shrugs and goes back to his squirrely foraging. Everyone here is on the make. Everybody turns to the door whenever someone new comes into the party, and people are crowded into little cliques; the men screeching salutations to each other in high-pitched nasal voices, excitedly hopping up and down and kissing each other on the cheek.

I am not really given a start when I see this guy, Paul, one of the first people I began to hang out with when I came back from New York. He comes in the door with a pretty blond boy in a leather jacket and an armful of groceries from the liquor store. Pulling a bottle of champagne from the bag, he makes a flourish of kissing these regal hairdressers on the cheek before he sees me and does a little take; lowering his voice an octave and nervously straightening his shoulders. Greets me awkwardly. "Todd," he says, and I nod at him and then start to light a cigarette, and though Tina leans over from her conversation on the other side of the room to tell me I can't smoke in here, to go out on the patio, I pretend not to hear this and go over to the bar to pour myself another drink. Spindler and Randy are busy talking to a bunch of people clustered in one corner. Faris is nowhere to be seen. I lean up against the wall, sipping my vodka tonic, and though i'm a little bored, i'm glad to get out of my apartment tonight. Carmen comes over to bum a cigarette. She's a little bored also-all the guys are gay and most of the women-and we stare over at Spindler and Randy who are surprised at this also, and they just shrug at us and none of this really bothers me, only that I was feeling vaguely horny during the drive over. The music-New Order for god's sake-is a little too loud, and I ask Carmen if she wants to sit with me and talk in the foyer outside the apartment, and she says okay.

---

In the foyer, kissing Carmen on the stairs, the position is awkward and it hurts my neck, so I stand up and lean into a corner and tell her to come here, and she does and then we're kissing again, violently this time, pawing at each other through our clothing, and I can see her breasts heaving beneath her tight velvet dress. We're interrupted when more guests come up the stairs, brushing by us to get into the apartment and then Carmen, embarrassed, excuses herself to go to the bathroom. I light another cigarette and lean against the wall, listening to my rapid heartbeat and amusing myself by imagining her in the bathroom, putting in her diaphragm-one bare foot poised on the toilet seat with her dress hiked up to her crotch. Go back into the apartment. The party is

dying down; the table is littered with the remaining scraps of food, and the back bedroom is

crowded with people ferreting for their coats through a pile on the bed. Faris comes over. Informing him that Carmen is leaving tomorrow afternoon, I suggest we take her to Wax Fruit, this downtown after-hours bar, which also happens to be a short drive to my apartment. Faris nods, saying that he knows and that Wax Fruit sounds like a good idea at this point. I just stare at him, and then Carmen comes out of the bathroom and agrees to follow us downtown in her rental car, and we find Spindler and Randy to say goodbye and leave.

Faris had lifted the coconut from Randy's and later, at Wax Fruit, he's doing the coconut dance with several girls on the checker-tiled dancefloor, making a happy spectacle of himself. Quietly shooting pool with Carmen and watching Faris drunkenly grinding his pelvis into these anonymous women, I curse myself for not thinking of it first. Later, on the way to my apartment, Carmen follows me and Faris in her car and, studying the reflection of her headlights in the rearview mirror, Faris says, "Dude; I think she's into us. . ."

"I know," i'm saying, and he looks over at me, grinning and I sink down into the car seat while he turns up the radio, hunching over the steering wheel. "She's into us, dude!" he shouts, pounding on the steering wheel—a mad shaman. He can't seem to stop smiling to himself, shucking and jiving in the seat and I start laughing too. Then, mildly apprehensive, I ask him if we're going to be getting into some kind of shit tonight.

"I don't know," he says. "It looks that way, doesn't it?" He's staring straight ahead at the road when he says this.

I light a cigarette and offer him one from the box. "That is unless you wouldn't mind bailing out here and letting me run with this," I say, smiling hopefully.

He starts laughing. "Fuck that; did you see the body on that chick?" I nod silently, and don't tell him about that thing in the foyer on the stairs. But then it dawns on me that he could very well be hiding something himself. I don't believe we're doing this.

And as we pull up to the building to park the car, Faris turns to me, grinning. "Okay dude," he says, opening the car door, "but I gotta say this: if you accidentally touch me in the dark or something, i'm gonna fucking sock you. . ."

---

Derrick May called last night after Faris and Carmen left, and asked me to come over today; maybe talk a little business. It was really late when he called, and after hanging up I found that I couldn't get back to sleep and had to stay up the rest of the late-night/early-morning, playing Sega Genesis and cursing to myself.

I get to his building, a renovated warehouse in Eastern Market, in the early afternoon. He doesn't have a doorbell, so I bang on the door and the dogs inside immediately start barking as I stand there, waiting, taking in the raucous squeals and the faint smell of death coming from the slaughterhouses across the street. A brown face appears at the second story window, and then I can hear Derrick pounding down the stairs. He opens the door a crack and warns me not to let the dogs out. I follow him up the stairs, into the apartment. I pet Pooch, Derricks' little blue-eyed pup and then lean down to hug the pit-bull, Mau-Mau; a dog that belonged to me until I came back from a trip to England two years ago, broke as shit, and moved into the place I have now, a place that doesn't allow pets.

Upstairs, Derrick is busy moving his furniture around. He gets me to help him drag the desk—a massive five-piece unit from Domicile—closer to the corner window. We end up saying much of nothing for a while; huffing and panting and moving furniture around and listening to David Sylvian on CD, and i'm just starting to wonder if this is what he really wanted me over here for when he suddenly looks around the apartment and says, "Fuck it; good enough," and then asks me if I want something to drink. I ask him what he has. He goes over to the refrigerator and pulls out a clear pitcher of homemade lemonade and starts to guzzle it straight from the container. He looks at me, rudely smacking his lips, and I ask him what else has he got. He starts laughing and tells me that he loves me like a brother but nobody, nobody fucks with his lemonade, and so I get a cup out of the cabinet and put on some water for tea. I know Derricks' apartment from when I used to work here, running Transmat, his independent record label. The office was here, in his apartment, and as the label started getting busier—signing more artists and making more money—I

started spending more time in the loft and we started getting on each other's nerves and I had to quit. Since then he's pretty much chilled on the label; working as a producer and a re-mixer and, sometimes during the summer, a DJ.

The phone rings, and Derrick goes into the bedroom to answer it. I pad around the sunny loft—much smaller than mine, but infinitely more attractive: newer formica kitchen counters and fixtures, flat gray carpeting, and tastefully dark-painted walls. There's a complex tangle of recording equipment set up in one

corner: 8-track board, Mirage Sampler, a U-20 and a K-3 on rack, a Roland 808 drum machine, an SQD1 sequencer and about a dozen midi cords, all neatly coiled and banded together in a pile. I peer through the blinds, looking down on the bustle of Eastern Market: sweating workers unloading produce and bawling panicked farm animals-chickens, pigs, sheep, a few scattered overfed veal calves-from trucks and paneled wooden crates.

The tea kettle starts whistling, and I am glad to turn away from the window. I pull an Italian graphic novel, Ranxerox, from the stash of comic books in one of the bottom kitchen cabinets; begin to read, waiting for the tea to cool off. The CD plays itself out, and I rummage through a mixed up basket of cassettes, CD's, DAT tapes-looking for something to listen to. Derrick comes out of the bedroom and tells me he wants me to listen to something. He pulls a tape from one of the desk drawers and puts it on. Presently the room is filled with hard-core techno rhythms and vibrant string hit. I ask who it is and he says he doesn't know; it's a demo tape some kid mailed him from Germany and he lost the envelope and address it came from.

I sit on one of the bar stools in front of the kitchen counter, sipping tea and listening to the tape while Derrick wets a sponge and begins cleaning off the kitchen counter, busying himself and nodding to the beat, emphatically shouting "Yeah!" and "Awright!" to himself during odd intervals in the music. Somebody starts pounding on the front door, downstairs. Derrick goes over to lean

his head out the window. It's Buddy, the homeless guy Derrick who comes around once a week to clean the dogshit out of the courtyard where Mau-Mau is chained up during the night. Ten bucks. He's a good guy. Derrick hollers out, telling him to go ahead, the hose and the shovel are in the back. Then shuts the window, coming back to the kitchen, rubbing his hands on his nylon bikers shorts. He goes to the bedroom, saying he has to show me something, and then comes out with a 8mm video camera. He starts laughing, pointing the camera and panning around me while I pat down my pockets for a cigarette.

"Check this out," he says, still panning around me, filming. "I was in New York last week; got the shit off some guy in Times Square for sixty bucks."

"Not bad," I say, lighting a cigarette. He starts laughing at me.

"Fuck you, not bad. . . I robbed the motherfucker. I robbed him, and he obviously robbed somebody else, but that's-hey, look at the camera asshole." I reach for the stout black graphite ashtray at the end of the counter and look at the camera.

"We're here with ex-techno authority and well-known artist Todd Speaks," he says, clowning around, dictating for the film.

"Todd. Tell us; how've you come to such a sorry state of affairs?" he says.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

He forges ecstatically ahead, ignoring me. "Tell us Todd; have you ever experimented with drugs?"

"What?"

"Drugs, you know, drugs; coke, smack, all that kind of shit. . ."

"I've. . . experimented with drugs, yes."

"What kinds of drugs?"

"I don't know. Grass, hash, Quaaludes, acid. . ." Derrick starts laughing at me, and I crack a lazy smile behind my cigarette, continuing on. "-chaat, mushrooms; sometimes speed, or maybe diet pills if can't afford speed. . ."

"Is that all?" he says, laughing, and I pause, deliberating. "Oh yeah, and Codeine-you know; cough syrup."

"Cough syrup?"

"You don't know about cough syrup?"

He laughs again and tells me no, hell no, he never heard of it and then says, "And have you ever given any thought to what these drugs are doing to your mind? I mean, you do know that they're going to affect your mind in the long run. . ."

I pause, thinking about this. "I don't know," I find myself saying. "everything affects my mind in the long run. . ." and he find this also amusing and then says, "Todd. Tell us the truth now; have you ever had any. . . homosexual experiences?"

"What?"

"Fag, i'm asking you if you were ever a fag; or if you've ever had any fag experiences. . ."

"I've. . . who's gonna be watching this shit?"

"Nobody. It's for my private library, nobody is going to be watching this but me, so give it up; have you ever fucked anybody, a man, up the ass?"

"No," I tell him. "Not yet. Have you?"

"I'll tell you: no, I never have, not to date. Now tell us; tell us about some of the frustration you feel as an artist, trying to make it, living in Detroit. . ." And this is a good question, and i'm only too happy to start grumbling about Governor Engler and the budget cuts; complaining about Michigan being the only state in the fifty that doesn't have an ongoing grants program, and other things, but soon Derrick starts getting bored and begins filming the dogs; chasing the pit-bull around the apartment with the camera while the dog turns around with this frightened look on his face, barking at Derrick over his shoulder before he runs into the other room and hides under the bed.

Derrick comes out of the bedroom, laughing, and puts the camera on the kitchen counter while he goes for the lemonade in the refrigerator; again chugging it out of the pitcher with both hands grasping the glass container. "Listen man," he finally says, holding the pitcher on the counter. "Are you getting by? What have you been doing with yourself?"

I look down at my feet and tell him that things have been okay. I have two months left on my unemployment, and I hear that they might be giving third extensions. I just have to get my head

together; start working again. I realize that this doesn't sound very promising, and consider a lie; saying something about getting another agent or something, but then he starts talking, cutting me off. "Check this out," he says, pausing to slurp from the dregs of the pitcher, dumping the lemon-rinds in the garbage disposal. He sets the pitcher in the sink. "I just licensed the Transmat catalogue to Virgin Records, in London."

"Really? How much you get?"

"Fifteen hundred a track; fourteen tracks," he says. "They're putting them out as a compilation. They wanted me to do another original; some of that shit's a few years old."

"You're doing an original?"

"I already did it. Here-" He reaches into a drawer and comes out with a cassette tape, tossing it to me. "Take it home. I've been listening to it for the last three days, and i'm sick of the shit." I tell him okay, tucking the tape away in a pocket as he re-wets the sponge and resumes wiping down the kitchen counter with it. "The thing is," he says, not looking at me as he continues working, "I might be able to throw some work your way if you want it."

"What kind of work?"

"They got a big company over there. They pretty much know what they're doing," he says. "But vibewise, they don't know shit about techno or anything about Detroit for that matter." He pauses, searching for the words. "These songs mean a lot to me-" he says, pulling up a little feeling, making me want to laugh at him he's so sincere, "-and I want the whole shit to come

across; the music, the pictures, the artwork-everything. I wouldn't feel comfortable letting some motherfucker from Gent or Birmingham do the shit. I mean-i guess i'm trying to say. . . i'm trying to come correct. You know what i'm saying?"

I tell him yeah, feeling a rush of gratitude, starting to feel sorry for myself; realizing that I do have some friends, and that Derrick-and probably a lot of other people-have noticed that I've been pretty hard up. I get a lump in my throat, swallowing dryly, and he says, "I was hoping that I could get you to do the artwork for the CD, the album, and the first single if they put one out. I promised Haaq

and the rest of them that they could do the text, the timesteps. You'll have to talk to them and let them know what you want, but it'll be your project."

I can't seem to find anything to say. I tell him thanks, and that it sounds like a lot of fun. He looks at me for a minute, and I suddenly feel pretentious and then break down and say, "Thanks man, I really appreciate this, but don't have me do it unless you really want me to."

He puts a hand on my shoulder, telling me not to worry about it; that the guys at Virgin had seen the work I had done for him before, and had even mentioned something about getting me to do it. He tells me that they might even be interested in having me do some other things for them, if everything works out with the Transmat compilation. I tell him okay, and he smiles and then goes on to tell me how important this is to him. "I want you to go over there and run the whole show. It means a lot to me; i need you to get nutty with the shit. Haaq'll be here; i'll give you his phone number and you can fax him here to keep in touch."

I'm nodding silently and then, confused, ask, "What are you talking about?"

He stops, staring over at me. "I didn't tell you? You're going over there to do it."

"Really? On whose bill?"

He laughs and then tells me that they're paying, but i'll have to find my own place to stay. "I talked to Susan the other day and told her everything, he says. "she'd loved to have you."

I feel relieved, and then somewhat worried. I haven't written to Susan in a long time; haven't actually spoken to her since I left London, two years ago. I tell Derrick this and he tells me that he knows all that; that he spoke to her and everything's cool, but i'm a real fuckhead for not keeping in touch with her. I say yeah, starting to digest the situation, and it will feel good to get out of town, out of the country, if only for a little while. I tell him that i'll call her later, when I get home, and he says that would be a good idea and I tell him thanks again and he says it's okay and can I give him a ride to his bank in the Renaissance Center.

---

Out of all the work I've done over the years-album covers, ads, gallery shows, private sales-the most money I ever made was on a 6 X 4 acrylic and oil I did for the Absolut vodka campaign. But on the heels of that, and perhaps even more interesting was this one-off job I got when I was living in New York, doing a backdrop for MTV at their mid-town studios on Broadway. I was excited about the job. But when I turned up at the studios, on a weekend, the producer-an absolutely luscious redhead, a stern Venus in torn jeans and Spanish boot heels-pointed to a canvas that had been set up in an empty corner of the studio, apart from the hustle and bustle and said, "There you go; you're all set." She started to walk away, consulting her clipboard, surrounded by an entourage of eager interns, students, and I called after her.

"Uh. . . excuse me," I said, and she turned around in her tracks, impatient. It seemed important not to make a lot of trouble. "I know you had no idea, but I have to stretch the canvas myself; it has to be done a certain way. . . it has to be really tight so the-"

"Great," she said, cutting me off. "That's just. . . ah shit," She pivoted on her heels, looking around the studio as if there might be a spare canvas lying around someplace. Then looked over the interns huddled around her side. "Look; does anybody have a car?" she said. Hands went up. She pulled some kid out of the crowd. "I need you to give Todd a ride to Pearl art supply, on Canal. Do you know where that is?" He nodded silently, eyes staring eagerly upward. "We have an account with them; here's the number," she said, handing the kid-a sharp feral Japanese in a biker cap-a business card with an account number scribbled on the back. "And hurry up," she shouted at us from across the studio as we headed for the elevators.

During the ride back to the studios I asked the kid how he liked it, working for MTV, and he seemed reluctant to answer, afraid for his job, and so I pretty much left him alone. He did

tell me that they were only going to use my backdrop a couple of times before it went to the scrap pile. He remained quiet for a minute, silently re-thinking this, and then told me that they did keep the one by Jean Michel-Basquait, but that's because he's dead-died of an overdose not long after he finished it.

Back at the studio, I began quietly working while some guy stood behind me with a steadicam; taping me for some promo they were putting together. "Bigger," the same producer-tan, slim, massive tits-kept telling me over my shoulder, all the while I worked. "What are you talking about?" I finally asked her after the third time, and she pointed to my initials in the corner of the canvas, telling me, "Your name; make it bigger. We're not paying all this money for people to think we got another thesis project from some Parsons intern, for Chrissakes. . ."

"I don't understand," I told her, standing up from a crouch on the floor. "I thought the whole point of this thing was to get somebody like me-you know, uh. . . pop, so everybody would know

who did it just by looking at it." The producer stood there, silently waiting for me to finish. I could tell she wasn't all that impressed with me. "Don't you think they'll know. . . as it is?" I asked hopefully. Then, "I don't know. . . maybe not," and the producer softened a little, coming over to put a hand on my shoulder, speaking softly so none of the interns would hear. "Mostly likely they will, but maybe not. I have to cover all the bases; it's my job, okay?" She raised an eyebrow at me while I stared at the floor. "The ones who don't know your work will certainly know your name. . . that's as long as it's drawn big enough on the canvas so they can read it. Just do me this favor and make it bigger, will you honey?"

And so I did.

Later, after I finished, even after they handed me the check, I found it hard to believe that they could command such a massive budget for something like set decoration, and the experience gave me much pause for thought.

After changing my paint-spattered clothes in an empty dressing room outside the studio, I asked the producer out to lunch. She took one look in her thick, leather-bound filofax and started laughing at me. "You gotta be kidding," she said, and so I ended up eating alone, at the Yaffa Cafe in the Village, my favorite New York restaurant.

They tore down the backdrop two weeks later.

---

It's a late afternoon, nearing night and i'm riding around with Nate in his black Isuzu Amigo with the top down. The truck is fully stocked with all the drug-dealer accessories and cliches: chrome mags, custom farings, personalized plates, cellular car phone, and a sound system that takes up the entire back of the truck-now pumping KRS-One loud enough to rattle the windows and the rearview mirror, leaving me with a queasy quaking sensation in my bowels.

Nate is leaned way back in the driver's seat, nodding to the

beat, and I stare at him, trying to understand how he can take it and then lean over, screaming above the music; informing him that if he doesn't pull over soon or turn it down, i'm going to have to take a shit. He nods, turning down the volume, and then asks me to hand him another beer from the six-pack on the floor at my feet. I do, twisting off the cap, and then lean back in the seat, swiveling my head all around looking for cops. An unshaven, big-boned brother with a round beer belly and a massive bullneck, Nate is a Gentle Ben to those who know him. Aside from dealing-mostly coke, and massive, vacuum-packed bricks of damp, fragrant grass-he throws underground hip-hop parties at the Michigan Gallery once or twice a month. He actually called me earlier today, leaving a message on the machine to let me know that he had the balance to a painting he bought off me some time ago. It couldn't have come at a better time, and so I drove over to his place, calculating how much i'd have left over for groceries after I paid off some of the bills hanging around my head. But when I got there he told me that he didn't have the money on him; that we were going to have to run a couple of errands first. I had figured on something like this so it didn't bother me that much. I waited in his apartment, lying on his waterbed watching television while he showered and got dressed, and then followed him downstairs to his car.

Driving around downtown, we turn off Jefferson past Hart Plaza to Woodward Avenue. Nate's pager begins beeping in his pocket. He turns down the radio and tilts the face of the pager up to check the number. It's one of the calls we've been waiting for, and we decide to pull into the Elwood Bar & Grill so he can use the phone.

The Elwood, a renovated post-war diner, is pretty empty when we open the door; it only draws business during the theatre season, when people come over from the Fox Theatre across the street. A couple people sit along the bar, and a small group takes up one of the booths, but we both know Dave-all the bartenders I know in Detroit seemed to be named Dave-and a couple of the waitresses who aren't very busy. They all come over, and we talk while Nate goes behind the bar to use the house phone.

Nate comes back from the phone and sits down at the bar next to me. He tells me that the person that paged him left a pager number, and so we have to wait for them to call us back. This all sounds very sketchy to me and I sigh and try not to think about it and order a Bass Ale. The dinner crowd begins to filter in; the rococo jukebox in the corner is now blaring 1940's show tunes, and pretty soon Dave calls Nate behind the bar, telling him he's got his phone call. I watch Nate talking on the telephone behind the bar; holding the receiver in the crook of his neck, inspecting his thick, horny fingernails. After a while he hangs up the phone, and I leave some cash on the bar for the beer and we leave.

In the truck, we turn back down Jefferson and ride through the tunnel beneath Joe Louis Arena, heading for the Lodge freeway. I ask him where we're going, and he tells me Bloomfield Hills, the suburbs. On the freeway he drives very fast, snaking the six o'clock traffic, and the music is humping out of the speakers again, and the wind is tearing through the top of the truck, making my hair whip across my face. I keep craning my neck around, looking for state troopers. I turn down the volume and ask Nate, who once did a nickel at Jackson State, how he can feel comfortable driving around in this customized

pimp-mobile; he's just screaming for the cops to pull him over. He just laughs, telling me fuck that, I ain't never been afraid of the hook, and this unnerves me even more and I turn the volume back up to distract my paranoid thought processes.

I lean back in the seat, trying to relax, but my eyes keep falling to the glove compartment. It's giving me bad vibes for some reason. I have to turn down the radio again and ask Nate if there's anything in it. "What?" he says, and I tell him, pointing, "This, the glove compartment," and he just grins and says why don't you have a look and all of a sudden I don't want to look in the glove compartment and he says, "Open it," and I tell him no, I don't think so, and then turn up the radio.

We get to the suburbs and start driving slowly through a residential subdivision-palatial homes of stark, modern design with wide, winding driveways-while Nate checks the numbers on the mailboxes against an address written on the inside of a beige matchbook that says 'Elwood Bar & Grill' on the front. I can't help thinking about my parents and my two younger brothers who live not two miles from here, but soon we pull into the driveway of this big white house on a hill. Nate parks the car and cuts the ignition; the instant quiet is unsettling after the basso rumbling of the speakers. He asks me if I want to come in. I tell him. . . no. He shrugs, leaving the keys as he gets out of the truck. And when the door to the house opens, before he goes inside, I get a glimpse of the owner; an old red-faced Jewish guy with a receding mane of white hair.

---

Autumn. My favorite time of the year, last year, I spent a lot of time lying in bed at night with the windows open so I could listen to the sounds of the city, which was seeming to me like a large scale laboratory experiment, a Habitrail of homicide. Walking about the loft, the pads of my feet getting black from the bare wooden floors, I would lean out of the window, listening to the passing traffic; the jeeps of drug dealers pumping muffled hip-hop at two hundred watts that you could hear from three blocks away. One time, in the middle of the night, I heard a car pull up to the side of my building. I heard the sound of car doors slamming, and then drunken voices: caucasian, suburban, female; a rare thing in this neighborhood of bullet-proof 24-hour shrimp huts and Key's Group Burger Kings and Jehri curl salons and Arabic pawn shops. I rolled out of bed and went to the window, looking down to see a small cluster of white girls hunkered

down around a glossy black BMW. They were squatting, leaning their drunken heads to rest on the cool metal of the car; giggling to each other in the dark. I watched, not understanding what was going on until I noticed a dark puddle forming at the feet of one of the girls, the blond pretty one, and then I looked at the others and coming from each was a happy little trickle of piss, softly splashing into the street, carrying with it dead pine needles and other assorted bits of debris as it rolled into the gutter.

By chance, one of the girls looked up and spotted me quietly observing them from the window. She gasped, "Oh my god," and stood up very quickly, pulling her skirt down. And then the other two looked up and started screaming-unable to stand up or get away because they couldn't, or wouldn't, halt their piss in midstream, and they made a very big deal of hollering and flapping their arms and cursing while the first girl got the car started, and I could see lights cutting on in some of the houses all along the block.

And sometimes in the night you could hear the sound of shots, heavy gunfire, that echo and roll through the empty streets. Sometimes machine guns, sometimes shotguns, but most of the

time it was stuttering semi-automatic pistol fire, pop pop pop pop and I would think to myself; there goes another gas-faced victim. Every New Year's you have to make sure that you are safely indoors at midnight when the drug dealers all over the city pull their pistols and fire them into the starry purple heavens, screaming and howling and baying at the moon like a mongrel pack of wild hyenas.

During the cool nights when I was unable to get to sleep, it would give me pleasure to drive around the empty streets. If the bike wasn't running, I would catch the cross town Van Dyke bus, getting off at Jefferson to walk around downtown, watching the traffic belching slowly out of the Windsor Tunnel and quietly thinking to myself. Sometimes i'd walk along the brick-paved streets of Woodward avenue, past the demolished Hudson building, to the all-night triple-feature at the TeleArts where i'd take a raggedy seat-tucking my legs under me to avoid the rats. I'd sit there in the humid, dusty atmosphere, surrounded by sleeping homeless junkies and old gray bums looking for overnight shelter, and watch The Clockwork Orange or Akira or Last Tango in Paris, until I could see the morning light begin seeping through the minute cracks in the roof of the theatre, and then I would go outside to light a cigarette beneath the pool of orange light cast down from the blinking neon marquee, and watch the somber grey sunlight creep over the matt horizon. Sometimes it would make me feel good, and sometimes it would all depress me; it depended on how much money I had.

One night, waiting for the late-night bus near the Payless shoe store by my apartment, I heard footsteps nearby and found myself reaching a hand into the innards of my jacket-just to reassure myself. The footsteps stopped, followed by tittering laughter, and moments later a 40-ounce malt liquor bottle came hurtling at me out of the darkness, smashing up against the brick wall behind me. Startled, I hit the ground and came up with the .45 in my hand; a pistol I got from a friend the year before for something like sixty bucks. I waited, panting loudly in the dark, the distant sounds of footsteps receding in the distance.

I went home. Put the pistol away in a desk drawer . Got into bed. But every night after that, I found that I was unable to get any rest-distracted by violent dreams of car chases and quick death; the flat popping noise of a semi-automatic pistol and blood and skull fragments and then the pistol, laying in the desk drawer like dark curse, began to give me bad vibes and pretty soon I had to get rid of it.

---

These photographers I know invited me to this party they're having to celebrate the opening of their new studio in Ferndale, and so I end up driving out to the suburbs with Faris, Matt Alonzo, and Dave Chapman for the free food and cocktails. It's almost an hour to the suburbs; the five of us are piled into a beat-down Chevy Citation Faris picked up at his father's old used car lot. Alonzo won't let me roll down the window because he doesn't want his hair messed up before we get to the party. I reach out to turn on the air conditioner, and Faris screams, "No dude!" but it's too late, and when I flick the switch there's a nasty explosion under the hood. We have to pull over on the freeway, everybody griping out loud and looking at me like i'm some kind of idiot. I turn way the hell around in the seat, telling them to shut up, to just shut the fuck up while Faris gets out of the car to check under the hood.

Eventually he gets the car going, and we arrive at the studio, a renovated VFW hall. As we open the door, Faris warns me that there had better be some food left. We get inside, and i'm impressed; the place is one huge room of deco tile and sand-blasted red brick walls, with a winding metal staircase leading to a loft high up, near the ceiling. I recognize some people from the DIA, the Free Press and the Detroit Monthly, and know that Peter and the rest of them are milking this reception for all the PR they can get. A voice calls down from the loft above my head. I look up, and Peter salutes me with a glass of champagne. Faris, Dave and Alonzo all split up to check out the scene, and I take the stairs to the loft to go up and say hello.

Peter, all dressed in dark, soft Italian clothing, is standing in one corner of the loft; surrounded by a number of gallery reps and clients, local reporters and photographers. He puts a hand on my shoulder. I thank him for the invitation, and he laughs, introducing me to the group, telling them who I am, and I feel kind of phony standing there shaking his hand while the reporters start taking pictures of us. Peter tells me that he's glad I could make it, but he's smiling and looking at the cameras as he says this. He asks me how my work is coming along. I tell him that I haven't done anything in some time now and nobody says anything to this; this is not what they

wanted to hear, so I tell them i'm on sabbatical and this seems to relieve them somewhat and the photographers resume taking pictures.

Peter tells me that I have to do something for the studio. I tell him sure, to give me a call. He tells me that we should have lunch sometime, talk about it, and I am pretty sure that this line of horseshit is my cue to leave him alone with the press and so we shake hands again and I go back downstairs. I go over to the catered, makeshift bar for a gin and tonic. The studio is filled with pretentious art fags and models and balding well-dressed fat guys with glowing tans and long gray ponytails. I find myself wondering how Peter and the rest of them grew to command such a following when I distinctly remember that not six months ago they were all interning for the fucking Metro Times. Then I remind myself that this is a small city and that things happen exactly that way, and am able-aided by another gin and tonic-to relax and kind of forget about it.

Faris is already on the make, the gregarious bastard. I find him in one corner talking to a couple of girls, models, and he's already telling them he's in a band. I stand there for a couple of minutes talking with them, but Faris doesn't introduce me, and after making a mental note to later call the fuckhead out for this bullshit, I go over to Alonzo and Chapman on the other side of the room, talking to Bert and Richie, both DJ's at The Warehouse, downtown. Alonzo rolls his eyes around the room, smiling at me, telling me that it's a pretty good party. Chapman, with raised eyebrows, asks if I had checked out all the fine-ies, the girls in the room, and I lie, telling him that i'm not getting any good vibes from any of them. Bert belches behind his beer, telling me that you can't fuck a vibe.

Pretty soon Faris comes over, telling us that we should get something to eat before it's all gone, and we all go over to the catered tables on the other side of the room. In line with styrofoam plates and plastic utensils, I ask Faris what happened to the girls and he tells me that he's pretty sure they figured out how broke he is, that they could smell it on him. I tell him that it serves his ass right, and he just stares at me. The food-a huge spread, the best I've seen in a long time-is

looking good. We file slowly past the table, piling heavy mounds of food onto our black plastic plates because we don't want to have to wait in line again right away. There's a champagne fountain and a dessert tray and a coffee table with an espresso/cappuccino machine with this big gold eagle on the top, and dusty raw cinnamon sticks and bowls of shaved white and dark chocolate, and pretty soon the

bad vibes dissipate, and we're all looking at each other with these expectant grins on our faces. We stop to chat with the chef, whom Alonzo knows from Wayne State, and who stands behind a long endtable, busily stir-frying squid ink pasta and julienned vegetables, and sauteeing custom supper omelettes on a gas grill.

We push a couple of tables together in the middle of the room so we can all sit down together. Nobody says much while we're eating, stuffing our faces, and we start to loosen up a bit, maybe too much, forgetting all about things like the girls at the party and the priority of getting laid tonight and napkins and covering your mouth when you belch and saying excuse me and nobody's really worried about drinking too much because Peter arranged for a fucking limousine service to take anybody home that might overindulge themselves. I tell them this, and they all start laughing, looking forward to it, and Chapman, his mouth full, is shouting, telling me that I am the man, "Todd is the man. . ." We go back for more food, and pretty soon the busboys are hustling to keep the table clear of dishes and dirty glasses, trying to keep the mess from getting out of hand. One of the photographers has a backdrop set up in a corner to take polaroids of the guests at the party, and we all go over to get our picture taken together, to chronicle this night, and though I haven't yet drank that much, Faris and Chapman and Alonzo and Bert and Richie are all staggering into each other, leering into the camera and the photographer tells us that we're not all going to fit in the photo. Alonzo shouts at him, laughing, "Just take the picture dude," and he does and then, complaining to the guy that Faris is missing from the frame, that only a bit of his shoulder is visible in the corner, I have to ward them all away from the photographer, telling them, "C'mon, leave him alone, you fuckheads."

After our third trip to the tables i'm feeling full and a little bit sick; slumped down in the chair with my pockets full of assorted items, stolen to save for later: raw vegetables and tea bags and crumbly cookies. By now we are fast beginning to wear out our welcome; we have been overly aggressive with all the women at the party, and have made too many lude comments on the appearances of the other guests, pompous with their glowing tans and immaculate manicures. I am given pause when I see Tina, the woman from the party a couple of nights ago, standing with Peter on the other side of the room. She's pointing at us, saying something into his ear, and he just nods, staring at us and thoughtfully stroking his chin. Faris comes back to the table carrying a cup of mocha java with cinnamon and whipped cream and dark chocolate shavings that took him ten minutes to concoct. He raises the cup to his nose, savoring the chicory odor. Chapman reaches out in a gesture of cruelty and knocks the china cup out of his hands. The hot liquid splashes all over the floor, and Faris lurches over the table, attacking Chapman who ducks the swing, laughing, the both of them oblivious to the surrounding stares our table is gathering.

We finally have to leave when Chapman-drunkenly fake-smooching with Alonzo as he sits in Alonzo's lap-tilts the chair back too far and they crash to the floor, making a tremendous racket; upending the table with its numerous drink glasses and dirty dishes. I can see Chapman's dirty black Chuck Taylor's sticking up over the top of the table, and I hear an angry voice, probably Peter or one of the other photographers, moan out loud on the other side of the

room, "Okay, that's it," and I hurry to get the drunken assholes up off the floor and out the door, where Peter is standing, looking disdainfully at me out of the corner of his eye, and I know that I will not be invited here again. And then, practically carrying Chapman and Alonzo out to the car in the parking lot, I see Faris following behind us, eating salted cashews out of a heavy crystal dish and I ask him where did you get that and he just looks at me, grinning, and shovels another palmful of nuts into his mouth.

---

Earlier this week, while searching through the apartment for unwanted items I could possibly pawn, I found an old 35mm automatic camera I hadn't seen in some time. There was film in it; half the roll was used up, and though I really couldn't afford it, I felt compelled to have the photos developed. The thing was speaking to me in a strange way. I took the film to this guy I know at the one hour Photomat in the Renaissance Center. I told him to develop the roll, but not to make any prints until I had checked out the negatives. I gave him the film and walked to the post office on the bottom floor to check my P.O. Box. After tossing through my mail (mostly bills and vaguely threatening letters from collection agencies: Think about it. . . for the next seven years you will be unable to establish credit towards the purchase of a home or even an automobile. . . why not call us today?), I took the escalator one floor up to flip through the magazines at Waldenbooks until it was time to pick up the film.

When I came back to the Photomat, the guy handed me the plastic transparent envelope of color negatives. I held them over the light counter to check them out. Instantly I knew that the film had been in the camera a long, long time. There were before/after shots of the then-unfinished loft, taken while I was plastering the drywall and rolling the stucco; me frowning at the camera wearing a t-shirt and torn jeans shorts with paint splashes speckling my bare hairy legs. Another of Derrick, leaning out of the window of his second story apartment-grinning and giving the photographer, me, the middle finger. Another: a group shot of Faris, Ron, Sabrina, Andy Krieger and Bert-drunkenly leering at the camera during this show I had at the Willis Gallery, in Cass Corridor. There was a photo of Kerri before she got her hair permed. The flash was too bright; it made her face look very pale, and brought out the red of her lipstick, maybe too much, but she still managed to look good. There was another one of her-post-permed, looking up from beneath the sheets in the middle of the night, bleary-eyed and scowling.

I finished looking through the negatives, feeling full-like I had eaten too much fast food, too quickly. The photographs dredged up more memories than I cared to remember. I stood there

for a minute, upset, lower lip trembling. I turned away from the Photomat before the guy came back, and left the negatives on the counter.

But later-at home, feeling mentally violated, raped-I am torn by pangs of nostalgia, and have to call Kerri and tell her about the

photographs. She listens patiently to my story, and agrees it was unfair that I had put down good money to be tortured by a hellish blast from the past, and I find myself consoled by this, quieted, and am able to change the subject, putting it out of my mind. I ask her what she did last night. She says. . . nothing; just stayed home, cooking, reading. This, I happen to know, is pure bullshizzy. I happen to know this only I called her last night, and even though it was around three in the morning, no one answered the phone. I waited an hour and called back. This time someone picked up the phone on the first ring and hung it up without saying anything. I called back and the line was busy and I threw the phone up against the wall and then realized I was out of cigarettes and had to go over to the 24-hour gas station across the street. The ideas I formulated about what she might have been doing pained me throughout most of the night, and I thrashed beneath the sheets, unable to get to sleep.

She asks me what I did last night. I give her a brief outline of the party at Peter's studio, and begin to bore myself halfway through the story. Jesus Christ, is this all human beings do? Talk about the places they have been, the things they have done? Games, it's all a big game, she doesn't have the slightest interest in what I did with my evening last night. She'd have to be some kind of maniac. But we play along, me doing the talking part for the moment, her doing the listening. Even though she's inserting the proper conversational "yeah's" and "hmm's" in all the right places, I can tell she's not paying that much attention because I can hear the television in the background, tuned to MTV. I remark on how little we've really had to say to each other lately; that I feel we're missing the meat of this, our thing. She asks me what I'm talking about, and I tell her that I think that she's harboring something from me.

"Like what?" she asks, only half interested.

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

"I might, if I had anything to hide."

"I don't know," I'm saying. "I can't explain it. Last night I had a feeling that you were getting laid. It kept me up all night. You did, didn't you? Get laid, I mean."

She starts laughing. "Are you sure you want to be telling me these things? You're going to feel awfully humiliated when you come to your senses. . ."

"I mean it's no big deal; you can do whatever you want, but I hate it when you feel that you have to hide things from me. We're bigger than this whole thing, you know what I'm saying? You can't do anything really. . . wrong. You know? I got laid; day before yesterday. Want to hear about it?"

"No."

"I was at Industry and there was this one dude, this tall brother with dreds, dancing with this older woman and this other, like, hip-hop white girl. She looked like that VJ on MTV; what's her name. . . Duff."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"So I was dancing-you know me, I don't give a fuck-so i'm dancing by myself, and then I notice that the three of them are dancing nearby, and the one that looks like that chick from MTV keeps looking over at me and smiling." I pause for a minute, waiting for Kerri to tell me to

quit, but she says nothing. I know she's still there because I can still hear the television in the background.

"So later, the brother with the dreds comes up to me, asking if he knows me. I tell him no, and at first i'm thinking he's gay, but then he asks me if I want to meet a friend of his. I know he's talking about that girl, so I tell him okay, sure. He says that she went to the bathroom and that she'll be back in a minute, and then he doesn't say anything else, not even his name; just nods his head to the beat, watching the people out on the dancefloor."

I hear a click on the line. "Hey-you still there?"

"Yeah. That was my lighter."

"Your what?"

"My lighter. You know; cigarette lighter?"

"Anyway. So the girls come back and he introduces me to the one, Maureen, and then he actually buys me a drink. And i'm thinking that these people are a bunch of swingers trying to like, reel me in for the night, but then the guy goes away with the other woman, leaving me with this girl, Maureen. She's kind of short; big tits, nice ass. . . she's wearing velvet shortpants with these black stockings, and a t-shirt and a baseball hat. So we're talking and dancing, and after a while her girlfriend comes back and tells us that she's leaving with my man with the dreds. I look over, and he's standing in a corner with his coat slung over his arm, waiting. He waves at me. Maureen asks her friend if she's sure she knows what she's doing, and I don't get it; I thought they all knew each other. So Maureen's friend and the guy start to leave. The guy is making signals at me

to give Maureen my number to give to him so we can all hang out sometime, and I nod at him and then they leave."

"After they leave Maureen tells me that they only met the guy that very same night; that they were at the bar across the street when this guy just comes up to them and says, 'I'm going to Industry; i'll pay your cover if you want to go,' and this kind of freaks me out, and I start laughing at how this dude pimped me onto this Maureen chick so she wouldn't cock-block his action with her girlfriend. The dude, like, orchestrated the entire fucking evening. But Maureen knows this too, and so it's okay and we both start laughing and she tells me that maybe we should go over to her place."

"We get outside and as i'm warming up the bike, she makes a

serious face and warns me about her apartment being a mess. I tell her it's not a problem, to hop on, but then-all the way to her place-she's persistent about the condition of the apartment, not wanting to scare me away when we get inside. I ask her what's the problem. She tells me that she doesn't want me to be freaked out, but her one of her guineas pigs had recently caught wet-tail and died. She was going to have him stuffed, but she didn't have the cash so she just put him in a Ziplock baggie and stored him in the freezer until she could save the money."

Kerri finally says something, quietly, into the telephone. "Oh my god," she says.

"And that's not even it," I tell her, continuing on. "So the rest of the guinea pigs-there's like, three of them or something-had caught the disease from the one that died, and then they die, and she still doesn't have the money for even the first one yet. So she pops them all into Ziplock baggies and into the fucking freezer they go. . ."

"I don't want to hear this," Kerri is saying.

"The woman has a collection of freeze-dried animals in her refrigerator," I tell her.

"I said I don't want to hear this shit," Kerri says, louder, into the receiver.

"And the thing is," I say loudly, trying to talk over her, "the shit of it is, her roommate didn't know they were in there, and defrosted the fucking refrigerator. . ."

"You are a freak!" Kerri is screaming into the phone. "I don't believe you slept with this woman!!!"

"So now there's this dead, Jeffrey Dalmer rodent funk all over the apartment, and then the neighbors complained to the landlord-"

"I'm hanging up. . ."

"Okay, okay," I finally tell her, relenting. "But now you know I wouldn't harbor anything from you, and you don't have to hide anything from me, so tell me-who were you fucking last night?"

"Nobody!" she screams, "I didn't fuck anybody; i'd fucking tell you if I did!"

I don't say anything for a minute. Then, "Why are you so angry? Are you mad because I made you tell me a lie?"

"No! I'm mad because you just-" she swallows, trying to calm down. "I don't believe you. You're out of your mind. . ."

"Do you miss me?" i'm asking.

---

Love can be like this: pretend it doesn't hurt while you pry the hangnail away from your thumb with your teeth, slowly, while screaming with your jaws locked. You really don't see the pearl of blood that wells up. You don't taste the warm metallic tang of it on your tongue. A few days later you have a nice crust-but it continues to throb, softly, like a heartbeat above the joint. Slightly handicapped, you have to button your shirts and zip up your pants using one hand only. Examine the scab-a fleck of burnt corn beef hash surrounded by a bit of dried clear sap. Squeeze your thumb-the pearl of blood has been replaced by a bullet of pus. The more you squeeze the sooner it heals-you can only grin and bear it. . .

On good days, i can bear it. Other days, i make a hard effort to conceal the pain beneath my poker face: a gutshot lamist from the long arm of love, walking down the street with his hand pressed against his belly to keep his giblets from spilling out onto the sidewalk. . .

Saturday night. Went to watch Faris's band practice in the basement of the house he rents in Royal Oak with a few other guys. Sat on the stairs with the house cat in my lap and a rolled fatty between my fingers while the band wailed beneath the naked blacklight hanging from the ceiling in the cool, damp, concrete space. I sat there until my ass grew numb from lack of circulation, then waved off to Faris without interrupting the set, and jettied. Decided to stop at Cafe Java for a coffee to go. I was too stoned to be in a crowded coffeehouse, especially one with bright lighting, checker-tiled floors and loud music; i'm pretty sure i tweaked at the counter, trying to order a simple cup of joe and motherfucking muffin. I couldn't understand everyone's obsession with all-black clothing; everybody in there wearing Doc Martens with white socks, shouting at each other over the Black Crow soundtrack playing on the stereo. Walked up main street with a styrofoam cup in one hand, scarred black insect motorcycle helmet swinging in the other. Nothing better

to do. Couples were lined along the wall in the front of the movie theatre, waiting for their turn at the glass ticket booth beneath the marquee. Mostly couples, turned to each other and talking. In line, a cool Puerto Rican kid with baggy jeans had his girlfriend standing in front of him. He had his arms

wrapped around her, and her soft buttocks pressed up against the front of his jeans. His nose was buried in the back of her head, the lower half of his face hidden in her soft black curls. His eyes were closed, and she was staring straight off into nowhere really, not looking at anything in particular while they waited, and i could tell their minds were elsewhere. I thought: as mortals, it's the most natural thing in the world for us to act like that . . .

I was alone, walking, my pendulum was swinging slowly forward through my field of time. I dazedly wandered alone and wondered about love, what it could possibly mean. We do things ultimately because they make us feel good, but it seemed to me that the things that make us feel good were independent in themselves, and not to be strung alongside one another on a string like a bunch of pearls: love, sex, commitment. . .

Whose idea was it that the three of these concepts must come packaged together? I mean, what fucking rocket scientist. . . the shit just doesn't make any sense. It is a problem that doesn't receive enough attention in my opinion. It is a machine with a short in the circuitry, it is the triumvirate of terrible confusion. I remember when Faris broke up with Kori, the girl he was going out with before Jackie came into the picture. Korean exchange student, thoroughly Americanized, educated, strong slender build, like an Olympic swimmer, especially around the shoulders. She lived in New York, she was studying design at FIT, and Faris was sick of her constant habit of screwing around with the lead guitar player from Crash Worship. He had given her the boot; he was feeling some pain, and he had called to tell me about it. I let him talk for a little while, i listened to his feigned disaffected monotone. He was pretending like he wasn't feeling some anxiety, he talked to me as if he had resigned himself to the fact that life was just like that, as if this was a good enough explanation for him. But of course it wasn't good enough. He knew this. That much was obvious. . .

"So that's it?" I asked. "You're just going to let her walk out of your life after two years? You'll forget her; grow old, and then die without having ever seen her again. Like some movie you saw once. .

."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

I was laughing, standing over the stove, stirring a pot of Lipton Noodles n' Sauce, with veggie-burger mixed in. "It's just sex, dude. What the fuck do you care? She has a cunt, she has physical needs like everyone else, she wants to enjoy herself. It's her life. . . and she's not hurting anybody. It's not like that guy is taking something from you. Shit. You ought to be glad that she has someone to keep her happy when you're not there. . .

"Oh right, motherfucker: you and about four other people on this planet think like that. . ."

I hoped not, walking along the Saturday evening sidewalk, taking sips from my cafe caramel. Because they were everywhere. Females. Absolutely the most stunning creatures, stepping in and out of cars, strutting in little cliques through the warm autumn night. Standing outside the cafes, smoking cigarettes, laughing; smiling at me as i pass, bright mystery flashing from the corners of their wet eyes. It was ridiculous, it was crazy; they were right there, there was nothing but space between us. I wanted to decrease that space, i wanted to close the gap. I thought: there is a way of getting to each and every one of them. Like a lock, each one has her own combination. As a man, i'm no different, we are all mad, all of us, we have these expectations to satisfy, we have so many rules. . .

We're like safecrackers in the night, all of us; break the code, and you gain an invitation. It's not an easy thing to do, either. It's a difficult task, it's a hike down a rocky path paved with obstacles of all kinds, including, but not limited to: politics; peer evaluation; physical, financial,

real, and spiritual holdings. There are a lot of elements to consider, and you never really get to know what the other person is working with. Basically, it's a useless system that doesn't work very well; it has a lot of close calls to answer for, a lot of romance misses its window, we spend a large portion of our time simply orbiting and asking dumb questions that really don't mean very much in the long run. . . .

I thought: there. Right there. Ticking toward me in her suede black mules; her tight, paint-splattered blue jeans and a strappy-looking t-shirt that looked like it belonged to an ex-boyfriend. I stared at her openly, my stoned appreciative gaze safely hidden behind the twin obelisks of my black wraparound sunglasses. Why couldn't i engage this creature? Why couldn't i simply walk up to her and say, "pardon me, but you are breaking my heart, i simply can't let you continue on your way until i have a moment to get a little look at you. Wow. Wow. don't move; that's perfect, thank you. my name is Todd. Will you say it? Let me hear it roll from your lips. It's enough for most people to imagine these things. . . i'm just not like most people. Ah. Word. Word. That was. . . that sounded wonderful, that was very nice of you; thank you for taking pity on an awestruck idiot. Listen. I'm going downtown by the river. It's going to be a warm night. I'm going to drink my coffee and watch the sky turn orange. You wanna come?"

How to make a hole in the fog of paranoia that separates two strangers? It is hard. It is hard. I've pulled it off a few times, the miracle had happened before. But the world is such that i had been everytime astonished to find myself between the legs of a woman who had once been a complete stranger to me. Everyone, we all start off as complete strangers. . .

And end the same way.

One of the cats over Faris' house is about to have kittens. A small, slender, totally black cat with a naked pink neon button for a butthole. We pet her all the time, we never noticed that she was pregnant. Then one day, just everything showed. Big as a fucking

house: rub her belly now

and you can feel the palm of your hand skating over the line of semi-erect nipples hidden beneath the fur. I watch that cat. She gets my respect. She's proof that the male sex is simply ridiculous. Of course we are. We're really are kind of like big dumb slobbering dogs; pleasurable at times, irritating or dangerous at others. That metaphor didn't just come out of the side of someone's neck. somebody was paying attention when they came up with that shit. . .

So this cat is going to have kittens. Every other cat in the house is a spayed male, they couldn't have been responsible, they live out their lives as bitter eunuchs, holding court around the queen. So she must have got out one night. She was outside, and it was time, she was feeling the need. All she had to do was spread her legs and holler. That's all she had to do. Five or six of them probably showed up, fighting and scratching amongst themselves, driven to frenetic fury by the hot feverish stink of it, the promise of what that smell represented. Very little communication. basically, as a male cat, if you can fight off four or five other motherfuckers long enough to hit it, the nanny is yours. Can you imagine it: if that's how it worked for humans? It used to be like that, i'm sure. Come near my woman and i'll bust your head open with a rock. Things have changed little since then. Today it's: come near my woman and i'll bust you in the back of the neck with a bottle of Snapple. Men are ridiculous. We just are.

One of my favorite tweaks: the Smurfs. The Smurfs. Think about it-what would the world be like if there were only one human female? Tweak on that shit. Because that's what the Smurfs were all about. Smurfette was the only female: one female in an entire world population of men. What do you think the world would be like if there were only one female human? What if tomorrow morning we woke up and found that every woman in the world had disappeared-every woman except one, and every man in the world knew it? What would happen? I've asked people this. Some of them don't think hard enough. They answer: she'd be dead, she'd be raped against her will, she would be the the prize of planetary war. . .

I don't think so. i mean, i do think that everything would change. If we were to fight over her, i think that we would be very careful to keep her out of it. I think that we would be very careful not to harm her, i don't think there would be any of that "if i can't have her no one can," shit. personally, i don't think that i could conceive grabbing her away from some other fucking guy if there was the risk of causing her bodily harm. I think our greed would be that intense. I think that some of us would fight. Maybe most of us would. Others of us wouldn't waste time fighting; we'd be too busy acclimating our appearances, our beliefs, and our personalities to fit her desires for friendship, sex, love. . . hell, fucking proximity. . .

And i think that some of us would go the other route. We would try not to think about her too much. We would instead turn to other things in existence, other distractions, other points of focus, whether sexual or no. New lives would unscroll in front of some us; maybe less cluttered with things, maybe cluttered even more-it would depend on the man, his personal history, the current

circumstances and the surroundings. I think that i would be one of these. . .

Damn, i'm just sitting here tweaking, but it's starting to sound like some crazy-ass science fiction epic, right?

The funny thing is, it could actually happen. Weirder things have probably happened somewhere, some place, some time. If it ever does happen here, i'm probably the only madman on the planet who would have given it prior thought.

And a question for the female sex: what if that girl was you?

Tomorrow morning, honey. You wake up. You don't know anything yet. You don't know what's happened. You roll out of bed to get ready for work. You pad sleepy-eyed into the bathroom. The first thing you notice is that the shower isn't running. The sink ain't working either. When you go into the kitchen to check the sink there, you flick the light switch and find that

the electricity is out. What the fuck, right? You pick up the phone to call somebody. The telephone is dead, too. How long would it take you to figure it out? What going on outside the door to your apartment? What's going on in the world? You don't know. You don't know yet. . .

But they know. Every man on the planet knows there is only one left; they know who she is and where she is. It's not the kind of thing that would be on the news. There would be no news. There would be no news because all the newscasters are men, they wouldn't give a fuck about that shit anymore. Every man on this planet would secretly and instantly and finally become secret agents of their own personal governments. Which is what we are doing anyway, today. . .

How did i get started on this shit? Oh yeah, the cat. anyway, she's pregnant, she got what she wanted, she's back inside now. Inside the house where it's warm, where she can eat and drink and sleep and wait. For that time, that moment. She knows. And the proof of everything lies in the fact that the male cat isn't around. He is not there, and it doesn't seem to matter to her in the slightest. At least as far as we know. I mean, he is not there, yet she is not climbing the walls to get out of the house. She doesn't act any differently, she comes forward to get rubbed and petted, she purrs a lot. You know why? Maybe it's because his ass really doesn't matter in the long run. . .

---

Semi-drunk at American Pizza Cafe, Nate is telling me and Faris

how he recently ripped off these guys from Toronto.

"Gold Medal flour," he says, signaling Kelly, our waitress, for another Becks. "It looks just like the real thing, but the trick is you gotta smear ketchup all over the package and wipe it off after it dries."

"What? What's this about ketchup?" Faris asks.

"Ketchup," Nate says. "Coke smells just like dried-up ketchup. . ." He settles back in the chair, slowly shaking his massive head to himself. "Jesus, what a move. I better not ever get caught in Toronto. . ."

"So what dude," Faris says. "Toronto-land of the five dollar Big Mac; most expensive city in North America."

"I almost ran over a moose one night, driving to Toronto," I tell them. It's true.

Kelly comes back with Nate's beer. "Okay guys," she says friendly, not putting the bottle down on the table. "Who's driving?"

"Since when do you give a fuck?" Faris wants to know.

"You're flattering yourself, you dick. Just try to run over a couple a camel-jockeys before you wrap yourself around a telephone pole; for me, okay?" She puts the beer down.

"Very funny," Faris says. "That's pretty good." Then, "I'll run over your mother with my goddamn camel, you bitch."

"Oh Jesus god, will you shut the fuck up, the both of you?" I say, trying to tame this ill shit. Kelly gives Faris the finger, and he waves her off as she disappears into the kitchen, tight denimed rear switching disdainfully. Nate glugs from his beer, leaning back in his chair and tells Faris, "The only reason you don't like her is 'cause she wouldn't give up the nanny."

"Bullshit. Who'd want to fuck her anyway-everybody knows Terry gave her the herpes. . ."

"That dugout," is all Nate says.

"You two need to chill," I tell them, looking around the restaurant, trying to see if anyone can hear what we're saying. "Kelly's okay."

"Fuck you, okay," Faris says, turning to Nate. "Listen to this motherfucker; everybody in this town is okay if you got a plane ticket to London in your pocket. . ."

"Who's going to London?" Nate asks. "You going to London? What the fuck?"

"Not me dude," Faris says. "I'm going up to Grand Blanc

tomorrow; visiting my parents." I look around, and people are beginning to notice our drunken revelry, and I stand up from the table. "You tell him," I say to Faris. "I'm going to the bathroom." I bring my jacket with me because i'm out of toilet paper at home and intend to smuggle a roll out of here before I leave this place. When I get back, Faris and Kelly are at it again; Nate is just sitting there, laughing, and the

bartender starts to come around the bar, and I have to rush over to pay the check and get them the fuck out of there.

---

Outside, Faris wants to satisfy his sense of vengeance by tagging the wall outside the cafe. "No way dude," i'm telling him, pulling on his jacket, but Nate thinks it's a good idea also and they both pull out their thick, felt-tipped markers. I begin pacing back and forth beneath the streetlights, nervously smoking cigarettes and illing out loud while Faris draws a little ditty on the wall about the characteristics of Kelly's dripping cunt. None of us see the police car cruising silently down Woodward until the flashing lights cuts on and the car makes a U-turn in the middle of the street to come after us.

"You assholes," I say to Nate and Faris, dropping my cigarette, getting ready to work up some story for the cops, but then I turn around and they're both running down the street, laughing. "Shit!" I scream after them. I turn in my tracks to take off, but my knees buckle from the instant adrenalin coursing through my veins like sweet red wine and I fall to the ground. I pick myself up off the pavement and start running. I can taste the adrenalin, the metallic fear in my mouth; it tastes like coin currency, like i'm sucking on a grungy penny. . .

Listening to the police car engine revving behind me in the street, i'm thinking that any second i'm going to be pinned like a bug against the front grill; a voice explodes from the loudspeaker, "Freeze! Halt, goddamnit!" and I start running even faster, catching up to Faris and Nate when I turn the corner at the next block. They're just standing there, waiting to see if the cops is still following and i'm running, screaming at them, "Go! Keep going you freaks!!!" and they start running again, but Nate is too goddamn fat and I can see him start to reach under his jacket for something, and I scream at him, batting his arm away, "No, you fuckhead!" and I don't know if the cops saw that or not, and I tense up my back for the shots. None come, and i'm ready now to

trip the both of them into the path of the speeding police car and just end this. At the next block, me and Faris turn one way and Nate, miscalculating, turns the other. Everything is happening too fast for him to correct the mistake, and he has to amble his fat ass down the block-yelling, cursing us for a couple of sellouts, and Faris is laughing when we hit the chain-link fence at a dead-end street and vault over.

We're running through what looks like a used car lot; i'm hoping there are no guard dogs, and we keep looking over our shoulders until the we're positive the cops are gone. A few minutes later, bent over on our hands and knees, panting, I find time to

wonder if Nate was smart enough to ditch the pistol someplace.

"Did you see that?" I'm almost shouting, gasping for breath. "He was going for the gun; he was ready to shoot it out over a fucking fifty dollar ticket. . ."

Faris nods, panting. He's holding his cramped belly; i'm getting a stitch in my side too, and we both fall to the ground, rolling on our backs to rest, staring blindly up at the inky night sky, filled with stars. I roll over to look at Faris. "He's not gonna last another year, is he? Nate, I mean. . ."

Faris looks over at me, still panting. Saying nothing, he rolls back over to face the moon.

---

One night, the week before I leave, I awake with a start in the middle of the night-as if from a bad dream-for absolutely no reason at all. Rubbing the crust out of the corners of my eyes, I roll over to check the time on the digital clock on the nightstand-3:47 in the morning-and groan out loud under the weight of all that time left in the day. I lie there in a contemplative stupor, and for some reason am unable to escape the inscrutable expectation of trouble, and the impending feeling that, somehow, everything is fucked.

I try to relax and get it out of my mind, but it is out there-a great seething bubble of stagnant badness-and i'm surprised to find myself wanting to cry, hating Kerri for not being here. I remember leaving those negatives at the Photomat in the Renaissance Center and feel an instant pang of regret.

Feeling restless, I turn on a single lamp and try the radio, but late-night programming sucks in this city, and I am bastinadoed by the torrential ravings of religious zealots wherever I dial. I'm tired of listening to my limited library of tapes, and so I get out of bed to heat some water for tea. Waiting, I begin to pace about the apartment, contemplating minor worries relative to the trip-getting another passport (i'll probably have to go to Chicago for this since I lost my passport some time ago and never reported it), the foreign exchange rate, treacherous nightmare scenarios with grinning, subversive customs officials-and know that I will be getting no more sleep this night.

Later, at my wit's end trying to find something to do with myself, I do begin sifting through a drawer of old cassettes, trying to find something to listen to. Rifling through the drawer, rattling the plastic cassettes, I come across a familiar-looking tape with a blank label. I turn it over, looking for some kind of marking so I can place the thing, and suddenly recognize it as a recording

(oh my god)

I made almost two years ago, driving back from Chicago one weekend with Kerri. We spent a long hellish night driving around downtown, stoned on bad hash, trying to find the on-ramp to I-94. I had had a portable cassette player with me, and somewhere in the midst of my hallucinogenic haze I had decided to record the goings-on. Turning the cassette tape over in my hands, I begin to recall the malignant vibes of that evening, two years ago, and am hesitant to play the thing. But the nostalgia is too strong to resist; after rewinding the tape, I don the headphones and lie back on the mattress for a smoke.

And wait.

TODD: (voice on the tape) Testing, testing, one two three testing. . .

(Sounds of the city coming through an open car window: passing traffic, honking horns, police sirens in the distance. . . Mother LoveBone playing on the car stereo in the background. . .)

KERRI: (laughing) I don't believe you're doing this. . .

TODD: (dictating, to the recorder) You're listening. . . to the sounds of Chicago. On a fucked up Friday night.

KERRI: (incomprehensible, muttering) Is that thing really on?

TODD: (ignoring) Today I planned to go to Chicago to. . .

(Pause)

TODD: To try. . .wait. . .

(Pause)

TODD: Oh yeah, to try and find inspiration. . . some artistic inspiration. . . away from my apartment where the tired vibes were just. . . just plain fucking with me. Repetition. It's the only boring thing in the world, man. Waking up early this morning, I took one look at the dishes piled up in the sink, and found myself wishing I was stoned. Stoned and elsewhere; in that order. So I grabbed the old lady-

(Kerri's laughter)

-I grabbed the old lady and together we planned to take a trip, just to get away for a little bit. Or rather, we didn't plan to take a little trip. And because we didn't plan, I spent one hundred and sixty fucking dollars on a trip that should've cost me-lemme see-ten dollars for gas. . . maybe ten dollars for a drink somewhere. . . five dollars for something to eat, you know. . .

KERRI: Waitaminute. Five dollars for something eat?

TODD: Okay, so maybe fifteen. Whatever. If I gave the benefit of the doubt and said 'twenty' it would still be only what? Forty bucks. I mean, it's only a four hour drive from Detroit, right? A

little quiet time to process my thoughts, maybe get a little something going on, you know?  
Some observation, some inspiration. Some work. I mean, I am a painter right? That's what I do for a living. . . paint shit. So I want a little time off, so what. I gotta fucking die for it?

(Pause)

TODD: (sincerely puzzled) I don't understand. . . do you understand?

KERRI: Who, me?

TODD: (sigh) For those listening, that was Kerri Straughter. She's sitting here changing her clothes in a parking lot. . .

(pause)

TODD: You know what I feel like right now? Here, gimme a hit. . .

(Pause; harsh sucking sounds. . .)

TODD: I feel like one of those dirty, white-trash characters in a John Waters film. My underwear is riding high on the crack of my ass, and i'm afraid to take my shoes off because my feet are probably smelling like. . . like Fritos, for godsake. I feel dirty. Funky. I got full-body toe jam happening over here. . .

(pause)

TODD: But we're getting off the subject. I mean, how am I supposed to describe the loss of a hundred and sixty five dollars? This is a true loss; this is the kind of loss where I could've got the same result had I flushed the fucking cash down the toilet. Let me tell you what happened. We we're on our way to Chicago, driving down I-94-what are you laughing at?-we were driving on 94 West at approximately. . . at approximately ninety-five to a hundred miles an hour.

(Pause; a breathless sigh from Todd, Kerri snickering in the background. . .)

TODD: I was quite sure I had left my driver's license in the trunk. I was totally sure-I mean, I was a little bit worried at first when the cop pulled me over-but I had this visual. . .

certainty. . . that the god-damned license was packed away in my bag. But when Smokey the Fucking Bear pulled me over, I couldn't find the thing. So I end up at Calumet County Jail, just outside Chicago, and this only after waiting-in the back of a cop car-a fucking hour in a traffic jam on the freeway where some redneck had crashed his 18-wheeler into the median and just. . . just crisped himself.

So i'm in jail. I'm in jail, and I get three tickets: one for driving ninety-five miles an hour-that's. . . let's see. . . forty-five over the speed limit to you, listeners-I get a ticket for not using my turn

signal when the cop pulled me over, and I get a ticket-what was the other ticket for?

KERRI: For not having a license on-

TODD: Right, right-for not having a license on my person. Basically, you can chalk all of this up to my being the wrong person at the right time. A victim of the anti-youth, anti-fun, anti-life establishment. I mean, granted, the cop that pulled me over was a young guy and yes, he was a brother, but somehow at this point that doesn't even matter. It just doesn't.

(Pause)

TODD: I didn't deserve that shit.

KERRI: (laughing) Yes you did. . .

TODD: (amazed) I did not deserve that shit; how can you say I deserved that shit? I get enough shit as it is, trying to lead my fucking fucked-up alternative lifestyle. . .

KERRI: It's the weekend of the Blues Festival; they're looking to get the tourists on speeding tickets; that's all it is. . .

TODD: I mean, I have poverty. I have poverty, okay?

KERRI: My ass, you have poverty. And even if you did, so what? They don't know that. . . and they don't give a shit.

TODD: I have poverty. . . suffering. . . Christ, I have no future stability or security whatsoever, but the first time I see a hundred dollars in over two months. . . I go to jail for it. I went to jail. . .

KERRI: Poor baby. . .

TODD: What are you doing? No, don't touch me. . . I just want my money back. . .

(Kerri laughing)

KERRI: Well fuck you; don't go touching me then. . .

TODD: What are you talking about? I'll touch you if I-ow!!! That fucking hurt! Here; for the record, ladies and gentlemen, I just put my hand on her thigh. . . squeezing it even as we speak. . .

(Kerri giggles)

TODD: And now she just put her hand on what she thinks is my scrotum. . .

(Pause)

TODD: Listen, the evening's been confusing enough; let's not. . . ahem. . . do this.

(Todd chuckling; then, to Kerri) What are you looking at?

(Pause; voices yelling at each other in the streets in the background)

TODD: Chicago-I forgot to mention-is not cheap. It's not. In fact, it is expensive as hell. Tonight I paid eighteen dollars for two stinking rolls of film. One roll-in like, common pursuit of the fucked up vibe of the evening-got destroyed when I opened up the camera to check it. I threw it out the window, somewhere on LaSalle Avenue going towards Randolph. . .

(Pause)

TODD: How much gas do we have left? Two thirds of a tank?

KERRI: I still want to get gas so we won't have to stop. I just want to drive straight through.

TODD: She wants to drive straight through. . .

(Pause)

TODD: Kerri. . . I feel sick, Kerri.

KERRI: So do I. . .

TODD: Kerri, I can't even explain it away on tape what it feels like to lose a hundred and sixty-five dollars, Kerri. It's like I dropped it the gutter and watched it float down into the fucking sewer. . .

KERRI: There's an Amoco; now look, you're gonna have to do this. . .

TODD: C'mon, man. I can't do it. I'm still stoned. . .

KERRI: I'm not dressed. . .

TODD: And i'm not. . . sane. You don't have your underwear, I don't have my faculties; just who has the real disadvantage here? Ah shit, man. Whatever. How much do you want?

KERRI: See if it'll take six.

(Pause; car door opening and then slamming shut)

KERRI: Super-unleaded. And get some cigarettes. . .

(Break in the recording, then loud music on the car stereo behind the sound of surrounding traffic as the tape begins again. . .)

TODD: So I get back in the car, and Kerri informs me that I've missed the girl of my dreams; some hot number just sidled down the street while i was inside paying for the frigging gas. . .

(Pause)

TODD: (sigh) This is just a . . . a continuum of bad vibes. A gauntlet of shizzo. I mean, okay so I get a good song on the radio but that's hardly . . . compensation. Wait, what are you doing? No!!! Turn it back up; this'll put me back in a good mood. . .

KERRI: It's too loud; it's giving me a headache. . .

TODD: Leave it!!! Just watch the road. Look, you need to make a right, here. . .

KERRI: (desperate) Where???

TODD: Here!!! Oh Jesus, that's just. . . that's just so typical. We are hopelessly and utterly lost. This is how the whole day has been going: I say something and she doesn't hear me; I scream it and she gets mad because i'm raising my voice. . .

KERRI: Oh that's bullshit and you know it; you're just being an insufferable asshole. . .

TODD: (ignoring her, dictating to the recorder) So we're finally heading out of this fucked up city; camera poised out of the window to record the event of our exit. . .

KERRI: Which way do I go?

TODD: We want 94 West. . .

KERRI: No, we want East. . .

TODD: What? (then, into the recorder) Time-out, I have to straighten this shit out. . .

(A break in the recording; the tape re-begins in the middle of a tremendous argument with the car stereo blaring. . .)

KERRI: -OCKSUCKER!!!

TODD: (howling laughter) I don't believe this. . . you're INSANE!!!

KERRI: I was just telling you that I do know-

TODD: Again, she doesn't know where the hell she's going. I don't believe this. . . but then again, why don't i believe this?

KERRI: Oh fuck you; that's why I was asking-

TODD: Just slow down, or we're gonna miss it again. . .

KERRI: Do you MIND???

I was telling you that I don't know where we are!!!

(Pause)

TODD: While we're on the subject, let's hear what else you don't

know, Kerri. Let's add to the long and distinguished list, shall we?

(Pause; Todd's mad, tittering laughter)

TODD: Jesus. . . I just got a. . . a chill; pervading my entire body. Like I have to take a giant, emotional shit. Do you feel the same way? Do you know what i'm talking about? That helpless, senseless feeling of being lost, just driving around, aimlessly? I mean if your whole body

could just cry, literally weep; wouldn't you do it? Right now? Huh Kerri? Let's hear it, Kerri. . .

(Pause)

TODD: Is that how you feel, Kerri? (Laughing) Tell us how you feel, Kerri. Do you get a warm feeling thinking about how you didn't lose a bunch of money on this trip?

KERRI: Now that's just-

TODD: Cause as fucked up as it was, you didn't spend more than twenty-five, thirty dollars, did you?

(Pause, the wind whipping through the open window)

TODD: Shit; you didn't spend twenty dollars, Kerri. . .

KERRI: I did too. I spent more than-

TODD: Look; you spent about five dollars on gas on the way to-

KERRI: I don't want to hear a breakdown, okay? I just-

TODD: -and you spent about three dollars getting something to drink, so that makes eight. Apparently, eight dollars got her all the way to Chicago. Jack Fucking Kerouac could've learned something from this woman. . .

KERRI: That's bullshit; you counted wrong. . .

TODD: Okay, i'll do it again. . . you spent about fi-

KERRI: I don't want to hear it. Why are we doing this? Why is it important?

TODD: I'm just trying to gauge your. . . money grudge. . . against my money grudge. . .

KERRI: I don't have a money. . . grudge, because I spent-

TODD: (accusing) I know-you only spent twenty-five dollars; you have no right to have a money grudge. . .

KERRI: Did I say I had a-

TODD: I AM THE MONEY GRINCH IN THIS MOTHERFUCKER!!!

KERRI: BUT I DON'T HAVE A MONEY GRUDGE-

TODD: I SAID YOU DON'T!!! YOU DON'T HAVE A RIGHT TO HAVE  
A MONEY GRUDGE; YOU SPENT TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS!!!

KERRI: Just shut up.

(pause)

TODD: I wasn't accusing you of having a money grudge; at the  
very least, I-

KERRI: Yes you were.

TODD: (astonished) I did not!!! I was just trying to gauge your  
pitiful-ass. . . money grudge. . . against my-

KERRI: But I don't have one, you asshole!!!

TODD: That's how pitiful it is!!! You don't even HAVE one! (Then,  
leering) I have a hundred and sixty dollars worth of MONEY  
GRUDGE!!!

KERRI: What is the point?

TODD: The point. . . the point is. . .

(Pause)

TODD: I don't what the point is. I don't know what i'm gonna do.  
I don't know what the fuck i'm gonna do. . . I have no money. . .

KERRI: Money's not everything. . .

TODD: But that's where you're wrong; it's everything. Listen. I  
don't care what else  
happened-if i'd been able to hang onto the money, everything else  
would've been okay. If we still got lost, if we drove around, didn't get  
shit happening. . . everything would've been fine. That's what you  
don't understand. You forget; I am a mulatto. We black men will take  
a fistful of cold cash over a hot piece of ass, any day of the week.  
We'll take it over love, take it over  
sex. . . take it over anything. You just can't fuck with that.

(pause)

TODD: Shit, you're a white woman and you're the same way. . .

KERRI: I am not. . .

TODD: Yes you are. Think about, Kerri. What's more important  
to you than money? What would you rather have-right this minute-  
than a fat ass bankroll?

KERRI: (dreamily, proud) Happiness. . .

TODD: (cross-examining) And money would not provide you  
that happiness?

KERRI: No.

TODD: (orating) Money can buy you happiness, money can buy you love, money can buy you sex, money can buy you freedom. Happiness? Baby, you don't even have to pursue the fucking happiness because if you have the money, the happiness will find you. . .

KERRI: But that's just it; it won't find you. . .

TODD: No, it's not gonna find me because i'm a flat-broke sonofabitch. I'm out of the game. . .

(Pause)

TODD: I'm fucked up. I am fucked up. . .

KERRI: No doubt about that. . .

TODD: I mean, why don't you just drive me straight to New York. Just dump me off at Tompkins Square Park; i'll take up my new career, handing out. . . just. . . just begging for handouts. In front of the Charlie Parker house.

KERRI: (Laughing) You ass. . .

TODD: Washington Square. Washington Square Park, or Union Square or. . . Spring Street.

KERRI: You don't have the balls. . .

TODD: I'll do poetry. For money. Blues poetry.

(pause)

TODD: No. . . New Age. . . Blues. . . no, wait. . .

(Pause)

TODD: New Age Blues Poetry. New Age Black Man's Money-Blues Poetry. . . from Detroit. I'll knock 'em dead, by Christ. . .

---

Life. . . is funnier than shit. The whole time i'm listening to that tape, listening to my voice, i'm thinking: yes, that was me. I remember having that conversation with Kerri, and i remember wondering if she was out of her goddamn mind; i knew what i was talking about. . .

The thing is, i didn't know what i was talking about. I didn't know what the fuck i was talking about.

These days I keep wondering: what if people could see the course of every spent penny? What if this unwelcome telepathic gift was suddenly awarded the human race? What if you were forced to watch where this penny goes, once it leaves your hands? People would suddenly become very, very careful in terms of letting go of their loot. People with no money at all would be the only ones who could get to sleep at night. The rest of us would remain wide awake, tracking our traveled cash to streetcorner crack deals, slaughterhouses, desert battlefields in the Middle East, Clinton's underwear, Marion Barry's crackpipe. Financial transactions would be few, far between, and well-planned-to the point of obsession. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't spend a motherfucking dime. I would simply sit back and wait for money to become obsolete. I'm sure i wouldn't have to wait for very long. It would be almost funny to kick back and watch the ridiculous shit, watch all these rich people trying to make their purchases work for them. It would be a futile, uphill monkeyfuck. They'd eventually have to give up that gold nugget Rolex, that BelAir mansion, that Mercedes Benz. It wouldn't be long before they'd begin to perceive the purchase of such expensive items-so many more pennies to have to watch!-with something like a shudder of sickness and fear. It would certainly make our human responsibilities a little easier to bear. . .

But the world is not like that. A man with a million dollars in the bank doesn't have the sense to be thankful for his ignorance. The arrogance of the rich astounds me, i just can't figure

them out. A Wall Street broker will snuff down his nose when a homeless brother on the street steps into his path to plead with his palm turned white side up. The wealthy Wall-Street broker would think himself-because of his carnivorous shark-like aptitude for replicating cash-more intelligent, more wise, more worldly, and more aware than this homeless man standing in front of him. Yet the Wall Street broker relies on his boundless ignorance to enable him to have fun with his money. He couldn't very well have fun with his money if he knew how many other people could use some of that stuff, some of that money. . . people like the man standing right there in front of him. . .

See? I can't figure those guys out. Yet, some of those guys do know what they are doing. There are businessmen out there, waiting at the curb for a cab with eel skin briefcase in hand, men who-if you tap them on the shoulder and ask them, 'Ôdo you know that your life is a motherfucking farce?'-will turn to you with a smile and a shrug, and tell you: "Of course. . ."

So what happened to me? What happened to me? Everything happened to me. Shit happened, that's all.

Angst. As far as i'm concerned, only idiots, intellectuals, and assholes with a little too much time on their hands fall prey to the shit. I'm working on it, but to date I remain a compilation of all three. I am a conglomerate of confusion, the worst kind of confusion-the kind where you don't know that you're confused. Dare i even talk about it? Only because i can see it now, only because i am working on

it, only because I've been confused since then. . .

Three years ago, my stepfather's best boyhood friend, at age 60, died of a heart attack. His name was Carl. He was a tall, friendly, black man with bronze skin and balding pepper-colored hair. He lived alone, in a small house in the suburbs of Los Angeles. He was a retired postal worker. He was a rather active man for his age; I had often seen him sweating through a hectic

game of one-one-one with my step-father outside our garage when I was a kid. He liked fast cars, Corvettes in particular, and tittie bars. He enjoyed a good game of golf on the weekends. But from what I understand, he had been a meat and potatoes man since his younger days. He had had no history of heart trouble, he hadn't been to a hospital in years. It was the first coronary incident he had ever had, and it killed him. His heart seized up on him while he was moving from the kitchen to the television with a dinner tray; fried chicken, mashed potatoes with onion gravy, and a glass of cherry Kool-Aid. He fell to the floor. He exhausted the last of his strength crawling to the telephone to dial 911. He was dead before the ambulance got to the house. They record those things; 911 calls. Did you know that? How many tapes are stored away someplace, the last words of dying men and women, never to be heard by family or friends, lying dormant in some basement somewhere, the celluloid growing dusty and brittle on the reels?

Anyway. My stepfather Larry, I believe, was more frightened by Carl's passing than he let on. The night Carl died, Larry's mother called my parent's house in the middle of the night with the news. I had just moved back from New York; I was watching the house, baby-sitting the dog while my parents were out of town on respective business; Larry was in New Jersey, my mother in California somewhere. My grandmother was very upset. She told me to tell Larry about Carl, and have him call her the moment he got back home. I thought about it for a while; eventually fell asleep on the couch in front of the television. Larry got home around two in the morning. I awakened to find him angry at me because I had once again fallen asleep with the television and all the lights on. His brow was knit in irritation. I rubbed my eyes and interrupted him. I told him that Carl, his cousin, his best friend since the eighth grade, had died of a heart attack a couple of hours ago.

"What?" He didn't seem excited. It was like he didn't understand what I said, or couldn't understand me for mumbling. I told him that his mother was upset, and wanted him to call her.

"When did she call?" he said.

"About three hours ago. I'm sorry, man."

He turned to go back up the stairs. "I'll call her," he said. "And don't be falling asleep with the goddamn lights on; can you do that for me?"

That, from what I could see, was all the reaction the incident got out of him. A few days later told my mother that he wouldn't be able to attend the funeral. He had a business appointment in Toronto that had been scheduled some time ago, and couldn't get out of it. My

mother didn't understand. Neither did I. She asked me to drive down with her to Ohio, where Carl was to be buried. I didn't want to do it. The death itself didn't bother me much, or it didn't seem to. I had been to many funerals, it wasn't any different from any of the others. It's just that i'd been laying around the house, mostly on the couch in the basement, trying to get into Camus' Myth of Sisyphus, and it was getting the best of me. I couldn't get around that first line: There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. . .

I read the passage over and over again, thinking, 'what is he talking about?' I didn't understand how suicide could be a problem at all, much less one deemed philosophical and serious. It was stupid, and that was all. I kept on reading, thinking that he would eventually get around to explaining himself. But the cryptic sonofabitch never did. He talked on, endlessly, as if the reader were taking the fact of the matter for granted. I was beginning to think that either everyone knew something I didn't, or this guy didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. . .

I went with her. It was a Saturday afternoon. The funeral was in Larry's old hometown, a small town called Wooster, where his mother still lives. They have a college there, and a small downtown area composed of old-town storefronts; antique shops, dime stores, hobby shops. The shit looked like Petticoat Junction. The biggest deal in town is a Rubber-Maid wholesale outlet.

The plan was to drive straight through, three hours, pick up grandma, and go right to the funeral. But we got stuck in traffic coming off the Ohio Turnpike, and arrived too late to make the wake. By the time we got to the church in the center of the town, the cars were pulling out of the parking lot to form a small cortege behind the black hearse.

We were the last car to get to the cemetery. I remember the thick hot wind that billowed through the car when I opened the door. We had been riding with the air conditioning on for the last four hours; I was unprepared for the daunting heat and humidity. It was nearly ninety degrees. Walking toward the vinyl awning staked over the plot, I was beginning to sweat beneath my charcoal pin-stripe suit. I wasn't thinking anything. I didn't have very much to say to anyone. I didn't know Carl very well, and I knew that it would look very phony if I tried to manufacture an emotional reaction to match what everyone else seemed to be feeling. Yet I was not entirely indifferent. Most of all, I felt it was important not to disrespect the man I knew was lying full-length inside the padded bronze box.

Throughout the ceremony I couldn't help thinking: what a ridiculous way to come to an end. I hoped that one of my more good-humored friends would have the good sense to cremate me, shove me in a canvas sack, or dump me in the swamp-have me knackered for dog food-something, anything but this, when my time came. Whatever happens to you after you die, rest assured that if your consciousness remains, like a prisoner, inside the paralyzed form, I wouldn't be left to amuse myself by pondering nonsense beneath the earth for next millennium. . .

We were to stay overnight with my grandmother, and leave the next night. My stepfather would be arriving in Wooster later in

the evening. On the way back to my grandmother's, we stopped at a Blockbuster to rent some movies, since there was little else to do in town. Thinking back on it, it seems obvious that the stirring within my skull was about to come to a head; along with Romeo is Bleeding, I rented some Carl Sagan film about the birth and death of the universe, and the Stephen Hawking documentary, A Brief History of Time. I got out of my suit, and took

my dinner plate down into the basement. I turned out the lights, settled back in my grandmother's rocking chair, and prepared myself for a long evening of gratuitous sex, violence, quantum physics and cosmic bullshit. I fell asleep in front of the television, with the empty plate and silverware at my feet.

The next thing I knew, I was awakened by the sound of raucous laughter. Presently the door at the top of the stairs blew open; people, laughing, were coming downstairs.

"Look at that shit. . ." It was my stepfather and Ernie, another cousin of his. "Lil' muhfucka fell asleep in front of that goddamn television again!" They were drunk. They were each holding a couple of mixed drinks; tall, perspiring glasses, choked with crushed ice. Larry had a fifth of Tangueray clutched in one fist, with which he at odd times refreshed his glass. The women were upstairs playing pinochle, and pigeon-bitching about the drunken madness of the men. They wanted to get of the house, to this college nightclub Larry's cousin knew about (he was the football coach at the local college), and they wanted to know if I wanted to go with them. Ordinarily, I could use a drunken Saturday night with my stepfather like I needed a swift kick in the forehead. But the past events of the last few days had lent to the situation an inference that did not escape me. Larry's best friend, a man only a few years his senior, had died of a sudden heart attack. He had displayed little reaction, if any at all, to the news. He had excused himself from the funeral. And he was standing here in front of me, drunk, raring to go out and party. I went with them. . .

To make a long story short, I followed the two old dudes from the parking lot as they staggered into the joint, gave the brother at the door an exaggerated amount of horseshit about the four-dollar cover, looped and tripped their way toward the bar without paying, sat their heavy asses on a couple of stools, and began ordering greyhounds-gin and grapefruit juice-one after the other, while they craned their necks about the place, looking to chase a bit of skirt. I gave up. I got drunk on straight shots of Jim Beam and watched while my stepfather and the football coach

swayed and sweated and shook it on the dance floor with a couple of plump young hens. I don't know how the hell we got back to the house in one piece. I ducked down into the basement and passed out on the couch before my mother could see that I was drunker than a fucking monkey.

A few days later, back at my parent's house in West Bloomfield, the suburbs, lounging on the couch in the dark coolness of the basement, Sisyphus still made no sense to me. I was beginning to frustrate myself. I put the book away, found nothing on television, and eventually went to bed. But something was bothering me. I was

thinking of something, a scene from that Carl Sagan documentary I had rented in Wooster. In it was this biophysicist who had recreated the Big Bang experiment on a small scale. He had a theory about how the whole thing had gone down. He would first have to start with a sample of prehistoric air; the air that had existed on the planet before the first signs of life ever came about. During that time, of course, the planet was devoid of plant-life; the air would contain no oxygen. So the guy used hydrogen to digest the oxygen molecules in a sample of contained air. Very clever. He made a few other minor adjustments, flitting about this laboratory full of glass filters and tubes, petri-dishes, and boiling beakers of steaming pink shit. A real quack.

Finally, he had the finished product. He had taken the readings, he had sampled the sample; he had isolated a contained glass bubble of prehistoric air. Now the theory was that something had to have been introduced to this air to first bring about 'the miracle of life.' I found out later that it was in the 1950's that some other guy had exposed the stuff to electricity and found the first startling results.

The guy pulled some switch, and small bolt of blue lightning buzzed and crackled across the diameter of the glass bubble. I waited. . . then watched, mouth gaped open, as the bubble darkened, and this amber syrup began to drip down the sides of the glass. It was some kind of cellular protein, the guy explained. It was nothing in itself, but exposed to other environmental

occurrences, the process of natural selection, survival of the fittest, all that shit, and that cosmic jism could eventually evolve into humanity. Give or a take a few hundred million years.

I was astounded. I thought to myself: well that's it, then. We're all accidents. We're walking accidents, all of us. We didn't have anything to look forward to at all; this fucker just confirmed the fact. For the first time, I really began to visualize my own death. The inevitable futility of it. I was twenty-two years old. Why was it only then that had I elected to begin thinking about the concept of mortality, and the fate that is lying in wait for all of us? It was as if I had awoke from a dream. For the first time, I began to understand what Camus' The Stranger really meant. Nothing really mattered. . .

I sat bolt upright in bed. Turned on the light. I walked around the bedroom, starting to suspect the gravity of what was happening to me. It felt like madness. My younger brother was the only one home. I was afraid to talk to him about it, lest he realize my insanity and call the guys with the white suits. I felt. . . dangerous. . . to myself and others. I went into the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror. I splashed some cold water on my face. I began drying my hands with the towel hanging on the rack, and had to drop it to the floor because it began to feel like I was acting, like my whole life, anything I could possibly do while waiting, was just acting.

I went downstairs. It was late. My brother's name is Tony. He was twenty years old at the time; two years younger than me. He was lying on the couch, watching Beavis and Butthead. Ridiculous, I thought. He's sitting there watching that box like there's meaning behind it, like he's not going to die. What the hell is wrong with him, I couldn't understand it. Jesus Christ, how come he wasn't panicking?

I had to figure something out. I began, subtly, by asking him if he ever thought about death. Of course he had. But, I asked him, had he ever really thought about his own death, had he ever pictured himself in a box, had he ever considered the fact that we come out with our days numbered, and that we just don't know the number; that my number was different than his-it could be before his or after his-and that there was nothing that he or anyone else could

do about it? Did he ever think about the fact that you get a certain number of days and nights; that you live to see the last one fate has to give you and then you don't get any more? Did he ever consider the disrespect connected with the whole concept? The fact that you could go in a car crash, or even in your sleep; that you can die, instantly, without getting so much as a simple illustration of the consecutive events that brought your life to an end? You just jump cut to the next shit. Did he ever consider the fact that, after your last day, shit continues to happen, without you, and you matter no more to the rest of the world than a piece of dogshit on the road? He turned around to look at me. He sensed my madness. He wanted to know what the fuck was wrong with me. Everybody dies, he said, it's nothing to worry about. I looked at him like he was out of his mind. What the hell was he talking about? It was the only thing that mattered, it was the only thing worth worrying about. Starving children in Ethiopia, the plight of the Tutsi in Rwanda, Carl, Plato, Jesus Christ: fuck them. Fuck them all. They were just stupid, tail-chasing masochists like the rest of us-doomed to suffer out their days and then die like a carstruck animal; staving off reason to wrestle with their last breath as if they could slip past death when he came around the corner, like a flat-floated detective, to make his dirty arrest. They did, or they will, deal with their deaths in their way; I will deal with my own in mine. The whole setup was really very personal, and had nothing to do with anyone else. I realized that at that moment, if my own mother dropped dead in front of me, I would feel nothing more than a slight clinical curiosity. . .

I knew it, then. I was crazier than a shithouse rat. I had read too many fucked-up books, I had smoked a bit too much marijuana. We argued down there in the basement for some hours. I won. I began to depress the poor kid. We decided to get drunk; fight off a little death together. We got down in Larry's liquor cabinet. Pulled out a bottle of scotch. We sat together with the dog on the patio deck in the backyard, and passed the bottle back and forth beneath the moonlight. I was beginning to get animated, I couldn't stop talking about it. I resolved to never sleep again. Sleep! How the hell could anyone sleep with the idea of the sunrise signifying another day gone, another day lost, another day closer to the last, another ticket ripped from reel? I thought of myself in a box, and ran into the house, up the stairs and into the bathroom. I vomited, mightily, into the

porcelain bowl. I couldn't stop shaking. I was shaking in fear of death. I was twenty-three years old. Christ, I was half dead already, and that only if I was lucky. What the hell had I been thinking? Why was I not out bungee-jumping, parachuting, writing poetry, piercing my tongue, learning Japanese, fucking sheep up the ass? I couldn't understand it. I wished that I was never born, and along with this wish came another realization; why would anyone be so cruel as to bring

another human into such a senseless existence in the first place? Where did people get off, procreating? It was murder. I would beat the shit out of every pregnant woman I saw in the street. Nobody, nobody asks for this shit. . .

I eventually drank myself into submission. I passed out on the bed. But it was the same when I woke up the next morning. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't stop tweaking, i couldn't get it off me. I went for a lot of long walks around the neighborhood. I walked around and wondered how people could do it, how they could walk around not thinking about what is going

to happen to them. I understood what Mersault meant when he said that he quickly realized that nothing mattered when he had to give up his studies. Until the night before, I had thought that perhaps he had run into a sketchy financial situation or something of the kind, something that had forced him to withdraw from school. I had been a fool. I couldn't imagine how, considering the storm howling through his skull, Mersault could even consider the idea of continuing school, when I would find myself sitting in the basement, on the couch, with not even the motivation to change the channel on the television set.

I kept telling myself that I could have spared myself this horrible trend of thought had I only had the sense to stay away from Sisyphus, from that goddamn book. But I would only have ended up thinking about it as I grew older and visibly closer to the end. I wondered: does everyone end up this way at some point? Is a man's reality nothing more than an insane, particular viewpoint he has somehow erected to effectively distract himself from his mortality? When this facade comes tumbling down, is this what people call Ôlosing your grip on reality?'

I talked to a few friends about this. They didn't seem to understand. When I asked my mother, Ôhave you ever given any thought to death?' she assured me that she had, and that it did not bother her, at least not to my level of distraction. I asked her this, and yet I sensed that she really hadn't thought about it too much. She really didn't think about it happening to her, about her ending up in a box.

I had to ask myself if what I was experiencing was something permanent, something that could never again be veiled behind a curtain of ignorance. I wondered why anyone would want to unveil the horror of it all by exposing himself to something like philosophy in the first place. Why would anyone want to awaken himself from such a sweet dream? I had had major plans for my painting, for my work. I wanted to weave a map of allegory into every canvas, i wanted to rip away the observer's reality, i wanted to make them doubt themselves, their surroundings, their prejudices, their small gods. I wanted to touch people. What shit. Where was the sense in making others feel so miserable, when society's proficiency in artfully dodging the final, horrible fact of life-that it ends-seems to be improving with every generation?

And the fact that I had in the past given headroom to the idea of having children greatly frightened me. That people can give no more than the flighty consideration that thousands give every day to the idea of creating another human being to suffer death amazed me. Because, no matter how much a man may enjoy life, he can never

really be ready to die in the end. It's a one time experience. There is nothing else like it, nothing you can practice your teeth on. No matter how much a man may prepare himself for it, in the end he's had to accept nothing more than a reconciliation with death. He thinks to himself, lying prostrate with cancer in a sunny hospital room, 'Well, I never got to see Australia, so what.'

'Well, I've never eaten Spanish paella, so what.'

'Well, I never got to walk on the moon, so what.'

'Well, I never discovered the fire ant colony that lives beneath a fallen log in the depths of the Brazilian rain forest, so what. . .'

Man has no more idea than the ant the vast path upon which he treads. Humanity should be applauded for existing in such circumstances, but you could not tell this to your average human. Most of them have been successful in erecting distractions from their demise; things like work and school, drugs, television, or Chinese checkers. Some of them go from the crib to the grave and never give a thought to death, which might have the good graces to take them in their sleep. Yes, most of us walk around, completely unaware of the staggering achievement we have accomplished simply by continuing to exist-even, sometimes, with a smile. Humans, in the face of the inevitability of death, sometimes even manage to smile. . .

Compare this to being bound, flat on your back, to a stretch of railroad tracks. The train is coming. You know the train is coming. You can hear it in the distance. You will eventually see it, and not long after that you will feel its steady rumbling through the tracks on which it runs. With your demise rushing toward you at this rate, can you possibly distract yourself by spending the last few moments. . . admiring the clouds, for instance? Or perhaps reading a magazine while you wait. Sex, drugs, alcohol, religion. . . is there anything anyone could possibly provide you at that moment, tied down as you are, to keep you from thinking about the oncoming train and what is going to happen to you when it arrives? This is what your average human somehow accomplishes, at every waking moment.

I went back to the loft downtown, took the phone off the hook for a few days, tried to get my head together. I didn't have anything to say to anyone, and I couldn't possibly leave the apartment without bumping into someone I had known before I went crazy. Eventually, it would occur to somebody to pick up a telephone, and-with the frame of mind that they were helping-turn me in to the guys with the white suits. I had what I felt to be a very valid fear of being 'found out,' and committed to one institution or another.

I read an ad in the Sunday paper that the local office of the National Institute for Mental Health was looking for local volunteers with 'obsessions and/or compulsions' for study and experimental treatment. If selected, volunteers would undergo analysis and free treatment. I called them. I talked to a young doctor named David Kreuler. I explained my problem, at some length. He told me that he would have to consult his colleagues and get back with me. He called the next day. He had spoken to his superiors, and they had come to the conclusion that my case was not adequate to their specific needs. They were looking for people who insisted upon

washing their hands every few minutes, people who snapped their fingers constantly while combing their hair in the mirror, people who absolutely had to listen to John Coltrane's A Love Supreme while taking a shit. I was useless to them. This doctor sympathized with me. He told me that, considering my degree of pragmatism, I would hardly be willing to accept anything he said as a resolution to the problem, since it was coming from the mouth of just another man who was going to die like everyone else. Also, I was probably a little too familiar with the limits of psycho-analysis; I wouldn't let him trick me, and what would be the sense in doing so? I was right; I was going to die. He suggested I see a psychiatrist, who would most likely prescribe Prozac.

He was right. What I needed was a few minutes of armchair conversation with a god of some kind. Which I wasn't going to get. It wasn't long before I had worked myself into complete tailspin. Then I picked up Sisyphus again. I don't know what the hell for; it was just a bunch of insignificant words, written by yet another human, this one already dead. Except this time, from the first sentence onward, the essay made perfect sense to me. When Camus spoke of man entering a life that is both incomprehensible and satisfying; when I got to that line, "this leap is an escape," I felt myself eluding my anguish with the attendant ease of a little kid running between the legs of a menacing playground bully. . .

I put the phone back on the hook. A couple days after that i left the apartment to get shitfaced with Sabrina and Faris. I never told anyone about it. I never told anyone about it, and i guess you can say that i do a lot less talking in general, these days. i just don't have anything left to

say, i guess. What, really, is there to say? You have to work it out yourself, you have to work everything out yourself. Some people are convinced that your actions on earth dictate your status in heaven. I say: sure; that's cool. Some people believe that we are there already, that we are here, in this place, to return again and again, life after life; that you can create a heaven or hell through your own choosing. and that's cool, too. Some people are horrified by the whole concept of existence; they walk around in the streets talking to themselves or attacking others, slobbering, munching their own fingers, tasting their own shit, bouncing off the rubber walls. I can't say anything to them, either. personally, this viewpoint makes more sense to me than any other religion or philosophy I've familiarized myself with, but what the hell do i know? I don't know anything, don't ask me anything. I had this t-shirt made, this brilliant t-shirt. a black t-shirt with a short and simple phrase stenciled across the front: "Don't ask me." And it happens. The average everyday joe will accost me in the street, on the bus, or in the bars, gesticulating with his chin toward the cryptic request scrolling across my tits and ask: "what?"

I tell him, "that's it," and walk away laughing. . .

---

I called Joy earlier today at her travel agency to arrange my ticket to London. She was pissed at me.

"The only time I ever hear from you is when you want something," she said. I paused; if you break it down, if you really want to be tedious, you can say that about anybody, about anything. "Oh yeah? Well what are you doing today?"

"Today?" she asked, unsure.

"Today. What are you doing after work?" I asked. She told me that she didn't have anything planned, and so, later that afternoon, I end up going to Ann Arbor. It's normally a nice drive on a motorcycle, but it's a dark humid day and I try to keep my eyes from staring up at the cover of threatening stormclouds rolling over the horizon. I can't get it out of my mind, the motorcycle accident I saw last year, here, on this very same freeway, coming back from Chicago with Kerri. The State troopers had set up flares all over the wet road, cordoning off the interstate highway, and were directing traffic to get off at this one exit near Ypsilanti. The ambulances hadn't arrived yet, and when we filed in line behind the traffic to get on the exit ramp, we could see the scene of the accident clearly; maybe a little too clearly. A small racing bike-one of those Japanese crotch-rockets-had rolled all over the highway to smash into the concrete median. The bike was unrecognizable, crushed into a burnt metal owl pellet, and the driver-it was bad, the worst I had ever seen-had hit the pavement so hard that the impact knocked all the blood out of what was left of him; bits of fatty white flesh were strewn like. . . chicken-parts. . . all over the road. The biggest chunk of him was no bigger than my fist, save for the decapitated head still in the helmet, and Kerri started talking to herself, "Oh my god. . . Oh my god. . ." chanting this fearful mantra, while her hands began to tremble and shake, gripping the steering wheel too hard, and I yelled at her, making her flinch, "Don't look! Just keep your eyes on the road!" and we had to pull into the parking lot of a doughnut shop, and share the joint I had stowed away in the glove compartment.

I get to the travel agency around quitting time. Joy-quietly cute, dark, Filipino, wearing lots of black Comme De Garcon-comes out of the office, locking the door, and promptly informs me that she is not going to ride on the back of the motorcycle, so I have to follow her back to her place where we drop off the bike and take her car back into the city.

In the car, diddling with the radio dial, i ask: "So what do you want to do?" She's smiling, telling me that she's not going make it any easier for me, that she just wants a little attention and appreciation, and I laugh at this and kiss her on the cheek. Then her pager starts beeping, and we have to pull over and park the car while she makes a call from a pay phone. I wrap my scarf a little tighter around my neck-why the fuck it's so cold today, this time of the year, I have no idea-and light a cigarette. I like Ann Arbor, with its hummous-and-tabouli crowd of veteran hippies and spoiled

students from the University of Michigan. The kids-fresh and clean-looking, as if they've stepped alive and breathing from a Clearasil commercial-pass by in Birkenstock sandals, and lots of Bennetton and Le Chateau. I smile at some of the girls, and they smile back, but I know these smart little bitches have a name for people like me, the raw ranks of art-school dropouts that coagulate in and around downtown Detroit; N.W.D's: Niggers Without Degrees. Remembering this, I quit smiling at them and begin staring at my feet, scowling behind my cigarette. Joy hangs up the phone and suggests we leave the car and walk around, maybe do a little shopping. I start grumbling, telling her that she knows I don't have any money to do any goddamn shopping. She tells me to just hush, to be quiet; if i'm a good boy, she'll buy me something for the trip. I start smiling and put my arms around her, propelling her down the sidewalk, laughing into the nape of her neck.

---

Later, at Urban Outfitters downtown, I follow Joy around the store carrying an armful of slinky black dresses and, for me, a couple of oversized flannel shirts by Stussy she let me pick out

for myself. I'm in a good mood; wandering between the racks of new clothes, and when Joy asks me if I see anything else I might like, I point to the love of my life-this gorgeous girl working behind the counter who I never had the nerve to talk to and who has worked here over a year-and say, "That. I want some of that. . ." The girl hears me and looks up from the cash register, and I moan out loud, making longing little puppy noises, growling at her as Joy laughs and pulls me away, toward the dressing rooms.

Later, at the cash register, i'm staring darkly at this girl while she rings up our purchases. When she asks Joy how she wants to pay, Joy hands over her platinum Amex and says, "My friend here is in love with you. . ." I start laughing, trying to play it off, but my voice cracks and I find myself saying something completely retarded about how I like-oh my god-her fucking haircut for Chrissakes. She laughs good-naturedly, but Joy keeps elbowing me in the ribs, muttering, "C'mon, quit trying to be cool-tell her you love her," and my mouth is starting to ache from all the forced smiles; i can't think of anything else to say, and I wish this girl would hurry up and put the clothes in the goddamn bag, and I hiss at Joy through the corner of my cracked smile, telling her to stop it, to quit sweating me.

---

Later that night, back in Detroit, I find there's nothing to do; there rarely is, particularly in the middle of the week, but Randy

calls and he has these passes to a private preview screening of My Own Private Idaho he got from a client. We really don't know each other very well but somehow that's all part of the fun, and when he picks me up-driving a black Pathfinder with a cellular phone-I am a little amused to see that he wears black leather driving gloves, clutching the wheel in a racing grip. We drive out to the theatre and he tells me that Spindler is out of town, in California doing a shoot for LA Times. We we talk about other things; his work at the architectural firm, new comic books, art crap. Talk goes around about music-the Chili's, Jane's, Jim Morrison-and Randy lets me in on some of his various psychedelic experiences during the sixties. We get to the theatre. Inside, a host from some local radio station is giving away t-shirts from the film. We settle into the seats, and Randy slings his cashmere topcoat over the chair in front of him so nobody can sit there and block his view.

It's still early by the time the film ends, and we decide to go over to this art reception I know about, for hors d'oeuvres and cocktails, at this nightclub in Pontiac. It's semi-formal, but I know Melissa, the girl working the line outside the entrance, and she nods me on as we go through the doors. It's dark inside, and the entire club-huge, a marbled renovated bank with a bar against one wall where the tellers used to work-is filled with an older suburban crowd. Old ladies with puffy bouffant hairdos, and their hard, money-making husbands who stroll around in sharp, custom-tailored suit jackets, smoking fatly-rolled cigars and shaking hands with everybody. I see one of the artists represented in the show, Matthew, from the Propeller Group-a local team of industrial sculptors. He's wearing this moneybelt he designed himself; a band of black leather, bolted steel and plexiglass with an actual live goldfish swimming around inside, orbiting his waist. We walk up to him as he stands in one corner, shaking hands with various members of the blue-rinse set who've gathered around to greet him. I introduce him to Randy. They shake hands, and Randy says something flattering about Matthew's work. Pulling him a little to the side, I whisper in Matthew's ear, "So who the fuck are all these old Geritol-Chuggers? Where'd you get your

mailing list; a geriatric fat farm?" and Matthew, conscious of the old money surrounding us at every side, smiles at the patrons, shaking hands with them as he snarls at me between gritted teeth, "Smile, keep smiling you asshole," and I go over to the bar with Randy to get a drink. He gets a Jagermeister shot and slams it down, ordering another. I get one too, and then Kim, this girl who used to work as the local rep for my New York agent, when I had one, comes up to me, drunk, kissing me on the lips.

"Well hello you fucking fox," she says, stumbling into me, and she has long curly brown hair and brightly lacquered nails and a tan that looks suspicious, too deep to be natural, and I look at myself in the mirror behind the bar, casually searching for traces of smeared lipstick. "Where you been?" she says, tottering like a newborn foal while I reach for a napkin. She sees Randy sitting there-older guy, clean-shaven, black hair slicked back-and turns to him while he smiles at her, mildly amused. "Hi!" she says, drunkenly swaying back and forth. I introduce them, and Kim shakes his hand and tells us both how tired she is, mentions something about dancing class. And Randy says so you dance, and she says yeah and he says, not letting go of her hand, "Really? At

what topless bar in Windsor?" and she doesn't get it and I laugh out loud, pulling him away from her, over to the appetizer bar where I fix him a little fruit salad to distract his progressive drunkenness. The food, catered, is good and I curse myself for not wearing something with deeper pockets, but manage to do alright with what I have-tucking away bits of cheese and pastry and portions of smoked salmon wrapped in cocktail napkins. Randy, drunk, is getting animated, and while craning his neck to look around the club he catches sight of what I am doing. Horrified, he brays laughter, leaning on my shoulder, drawing attention from the surrounding crowd. I start to laugh, reaching for a dish of raw vegetables-broccoli and cauliflower-and I shrug his hand off, hissing at him to shut up, finish your salad, you tweaker.

---

Later I have to leave Randy to his own devices when I spot Michelle Fox-this total hotgirl who, despite being well into her second marriage, has openly flirted with me in the past and whom, on my part, I've always wanted to fuck-on the other side of the club. She's leaning against the bar, drunkenly carrying on conversation with a small clique of old men, Birmingham types, sipping at what looks like a Long island iced tea. I leave my drink on the bar, and move behind her, waiting for her to notice me standing there. It doesn't take too long (i'm practically panting into the back of her neck), and when she sees me she turns around, screaming, and throws her arms around my neck. "Todd-baby," she whispers, nibbling at my earlobe, and then, in the same damn breath, "Get me away from these stuffed shirts, right this minute. . ." She waves a banged wrist at the old guys as I lead her away, my hand resting on the small of her back.

We go to a secluded corner on the other side of the long bar, and she turns around to give me a long hug, as if near biting my earlobe off wasn't proper greeting enough. She's pretty drunk and spills a cold slurp of her drink down the back of my shirt. But, smelling drunken availability all over her like a doggy musk, it's easy for me to keep a grinning rictus plastered on my face. She steps back to look at me, drunkenly marveling. "You look good," she tells me. I nod, trying to slip some sexual innuendo through her intoxicated fog when I tell her that she's looking hot also. She does a little take, getting it, then hugs me again for this compliment, laughing. Still holding her, I tell her that I haven't seen her in a long time, and she says, nodding, yeah, too long. She tells me it's a sad thing we haven't hung out in a while because she really likes me. I agree that this is a tragedy, and she tells me, cutting me off, "No, I mean I really like you Todd," and I look deep into her eyes, assuring her that I really like her too and then we kiss, a chaste peck on the lips, and hug again, and i'm wondering how many people in this crowd know her husband and would anybody stop me if I tried to get her outside, to the parking lot. Still holding me, rocking to and fro, she drunkenly mumbles something about how we have to get together, how I only have to catch her on the right day, and this intrigues me and we kiss again, longer this time, and I reach around to plant a hand on her plump butt; scumbling beneath the short skirt, slipping a stiff finger into the

moist crack of her ass through her silken panties and I am fucking loving this but then Jenny—a girl I've seen around, the girl Michelle came with—appears at the end of the bar. She seems to be looking for someone and, finally spotting us, mutters quietly to herself, "Oh my god," and runs over.

"Michelle," Jenny says, trying to pull Michelle away by the arm. Michelle, drunk, is standing fast—partly of her own free will, and partly because I've got a solid grip on the front of her blouse. Michelle is leaning into me, not taking her eyes off me, and people are now beginning to look over at us, but i'm panting, too drunk on lust to give a shit, and we kiss again and now Jenny is hissing "Michelle!" and finally manages, with some effort, to pry us apart. And then Jenny comes up and gives me a hug, pulling me into her and I don't know this woman, never met her before in my life and she tells me that they have to go, now, and then she turns around with Michelle in tow and they leave the club. I watch them go, lighting a cigarette with shaking hands, and then start smelling my fingers.

On the way home, Randy asks me if we had a good time, and I tell him that I had a hell of a good time; that this was my fucking night. But later, at home in bed, the way Jenny was grinding her hips into me gives me pause for thought, and I realize that she was only trying to effect the illusion that the three of us—me, Jenny and Michelle—were only "really good friends": that we hug like that all the time so nobody in the crowd would have any reason to take the story back to Michelle's husband. It slowly dawns on me that she might have been grinding her puss into me to search for the existing hard on that would confirm my devilish intentions. And that I surely did not disappoint her in that respect—had eagerly rubbed it up against her in fact. As the story becomes clear, I start to feel the first pangs of humiliation, wondering exactly how many people had seen us, Michelle and I, standing there in the corner, horsing around, and I have to put the pillow over my face, groaning out loud.

---

At Fish's, drinking Beck's while he's talking to Kim on the telephone.

"But that's just it," he's telling her, walking around, fingering the wiry telephone cord. "You can come over. What time is it—" he checks his watch. "It's fucking one-thirty. You got anything better to do on this lame-ass Sunday night? Cause that's what it is babe. . . lame."

Fish (real name: Fitsum) is a third year film student over at Wayne State. He spends a lot of time at home by himself. Maybe too much. I've only seen him a couple times since I got back from New York. He's since cultivated a maniacal foot fetish that's been riding his back like a monkey for the past three months; around town he's quickly becoming known as "Dr. Scholl." I wouldn't know for sure, but i'm betting his sheets are even crustier than mine. When I called him earlier tonight to see what was going on, Fish informed me that he was tired of hanging out with "all you laid-back art fucks," and that he wasn't coming into town unless somebody could one hundred percent guarantee him some puss. I groaned out loud, letting him know that everyone is getting bored by this tired-ass rap of his. He tells me. . . good, this is a good thing that we're all finally getting the

idea, and then he asked me when were we planning to do something about the problem. I told him that I wasn't into busting any sex moves, but that I would come over and hang out. So now we're lounging around in the patio at the house in Bloomfield Hills, where Fish's parents have satellite TV, Amiga, a Sony eight-millimeter minicam and a VCR with about a hundred tapes. The screen door is propped open to ventilate this sweltering hotbox, and Fish has an oscillating fan in the corner to keep a breeze going while he attempts to lure Kim into coming over so he can seduce her with liquor and, if at all possible, lay her down on the couch where he can pull off her shoes and socks and moon over her feet. Quite a coup for Fish, who hasn't gotten laid in a long time—a length of time he earlier described to me as, "Too long dude; way too long."

The phone call doesn't sound promising. "I got Todd over here, chilling," he says. "Why don't you just swing through? C'mon, you know Todd. . . right, that Todd. Yeah, he's a bugged out kid. You want to talk to him? He's right here. . ." He tries to hand the phone over, encouraging me to snow her, to get her to come over, and I wave him away from me, trying to

figure out how to get MTV on this fucking television.

"Uh. . . I guess he's in the bathroom," he says into the phone. "Yeah; the muse is upon him. Whatever. So are you like, trying to come over or what? What? Okay. Nah, don't even stress it; it's not a problem. You got it babe. Later."

Fish hangs up the phone and falls facedown on the couch, burying his head under a pillow, screaming.

"So what's up?" I ask him, and he mutters, muffled beneath the pillow, "No haps dude. Absolutely no haps; the bitch was faking the funk." He pulls the pillow from over his head and sits up to glare at me, reaching for his beer on the coffee table. "So what's up with you, you beast; you freak. . . I thought you had my back. Why didn't you fucking talk to her, help me out?"

"Just chill dude," I tell him. Then, "You're a manic motherfucker, you know that? You want to get laid?" I sit up in the couch, glaring at him. "You really want to get laid? Alright, give me the phone; i'll call Alena, she'll come over," I tell him, angry. "She's into it," I say, dialing. "It's her thing. She doesn't give a damn. Ordinarily i would never do this, because. . . this is not my thing. She'll come over and she's gonna want to suck my dick first but then she'll take care of you because she'll do anything anyone tells her to do—including you, you rabid little Paki." I stop dialing, looking up at him, but Fish is unashamedly delighted with this, squirming on the couch.

"We're a team; call her dude, get her on the phone," he says, and I hang up the telephone. "What are you doing?" he says, crestfallen. "What's going on?"

"You freak," I tell him, and he starts laughing, telling me so what, so what he's a freak, and I lean back on the couch, taking a swig from the beer. Fish picks up the remote control and begins flipping through the channels.

"Okay, okay," he says. "So you have my better interests in mind. Don't think I don't appreciate it. It's cool-I was way into Kim tonight anyway." He looks at me, saying nothing for some time.

"You're alright dude," he says, nodding. He swigs from the beer, saluting me with the bottle. "You're not like the other guys. You know what? I think i'm gonna make you my bitch." I look over at him and he's getting animated; I really can't tell if he's kidding or what.

"Now waitaminute, hold on," he says, raising a palm up at me. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not just talking about a screw here; we're gonna rent some movies. . . cuddle. I want us to spend some quality time together," and I say oh yeah right you fuckhead, just quit playing around and give me the remote control, and he starts laughing at me.

---

Later I have to listen to Fish's glib commentary when he puts a porno in the VCR, ad-libbing behind the vile gruntings and wet belly-slappings. He gets excited, telling me he's sure he's seen this one girl, one of the *Ôactors'*, in a magazine. He runs off to get it. I tell him don't bother, but there's no stopping him and he comes back with this black market Mexican porno mag and, I swear to god, the title reads *Black Cock*, and he's disappointed to find that the chick in the movie isn't the same one in the magazine. She couldn't be; the girl in the magazine has a dick. Fish folds up the magazine, sticking it under the couch, and then tells me he has something to show me. "What is this dude?" I holler at him as he runs back to his room. "A goddamn stag party?" but he just laughs over his shoulder and comes back with an audio cassette tape.

He wiggles it at me between two fingers and puts it in the stereo, rewinding it. "You know Jeanine, from Ann Arbor?" he says. I shake my head. . . no. He starts laughing, just thinking about it. Then goes on to tell me that himself, Eric, Raaj, Spice and Styles all fucked this girl at

Style's girlfriend's apartment while the girlfriend was out of town, about 3 months ago. Sometime in the middle of it, Fish got out of the pile-on to turn on the stereo, recording this madness, and now he wanted me to listen to it.

"Don't even think about it dude," I tell him, but he just ignores me and I say, louder, "I mean it; put it away," but he just starts giggling to himself, pressing the PLAY button. "We were at it for four hours," he tells me, and I do a quick count and we're talking about five guys, five, and I ask, looking for an explanation, "Was she drunk?" and he shakes his head, grinning. I ask him if she was stoned, and he flatly tells me, "No dude, she wasn't stoned. She was just. . . into it," and the idea is so fucking ridiculous I can't even begin to imagine it, but then I have to because the tape begins. . .

(The mid-tempo squeaking of two people fucking on a bed. A girl-sounds young, maybe early twenties-is moaning in sync with the rhythmic humping. . .)

FISH: Go Eric; yes Eric. . . give it to her, slam it. . .

(The squeaking gains pace; the girl begins crying out, bleating like a sheep. There are the sounds of bellies slapping and other voices, quieted laughter, in the background. . .)

FISH: (as the animal grunts reach a crescendo) Oh shit. Oh Shit. Lookatit, check it out. . .

(Other voices, spectators, begin laughing as Eric starts to pound her into the mattress. . .)

STYLES: Yo dog; look at her toes. . . she's curling her toes, she's gonna come. . .

ERIC: (panting) I'm coming. . . I'm gonna come. . . (then, to the girl) I'm nutting in you. . . .

GIRL: Do it. . . come inside me. . .

(Raucous laughter from the spectators as Eric groans and then the sound of jerky movement on the mattress. The girl starts laughing; relieved, panting from the exertion. . .)

STYLES: Was he good?

GIRL: Oh my god. . . (panting, laughing) Look. . . my legs are shaking. . .

(More laughter, sounds of the spectators slapping hands)

FISH: Yes Eric. . . you got it; you got it daddy. . .

STYLES: Okay, Raaj. . . Raaj is about to toss it. . .

FISH: Raaj. . . go Raaj, toss that shit. . .

(The girl gasps out loud and, after a pause, begins panting breathlessly. The mattress makes no noise. . .)

FISH: Raaj. . .

(A longer silence, followed by a burst of tittering laughter. . .)

FISH: Look at him go, man. Throwing that. . . that crazy East Indian stroke.

(Pause)

FISH: Damn, man; you fuck like. . . you fuck like a goddamn hamster. . .

(The room bursts into laughter and the sounds of humping stop altogether. . .)

FISH: Soft, dog. That shit was pretty soft. . .

RAAJ: (laughing) You think I give a fuck?

FISH: Fuck you, you're still soft. . . you know you're soft; just

get the fuck out the  
way. . . pindick.

(More laughter, followed now by the sounds of violent fucking;  
the headboard of the bed is smashing against the wall and the girl is  
crying out, her voice cracking. . .)

FISH: Spice! Spice is on line!

(More laughter. . .)

FISH: Oh shit; he's going off on that shit! Look at him!!!

GIRL: Ungh. . . ungh. . . omigod fuck. . . ummmh. . .

STYLES: (astonished) God-damn. . .

(More laughter and then the sound of a hand maybe slapping a  
face. . .)

FISH: Oh shit! Spice is going all out! Spice is the man!

(Laughter in the background, followed by a rude Bronx cheer. .  
.)

FISH: Look at him go. . . that ugly motherfucker; it's probably  
his first time. . .

SPICE: (To Fish, grunting, still fucking) Fuck you. . .

(More laughter, followed by the sound of everyone slapping  
hands. . .)

FISH: (serious) Spice. Hey Spice. . .

(No reply; just the muted sounds of fervent humping. . .)

FISH: Hey motherfucker. . . you aren't burning, are you Spice?  
Spice?

\_\_\_\_\_

Later, at home in bed with all the lights off, the visualizations  
stirred by the tape I listened to a Fish's house disturb me. I begin to

think of the time I used to spend with my own personal Pigman; an older woman, a divorcee' who lived in a big house full of empty rooms in the suburbs of Bloomfield Hills. She taught a class in illustration at CCS. Up until last summer, I used to bring my paintings over for her to critique. She was lonely and bored with herself, and looked forward to my visits. Before I would come over she would be sure to have plenty of food in the house: tea and pastry and favorite snacks of mine that only I would eat; things like canned turtle soup with sherry and lemon, and Triscuits with salmon-flavored cream cheese. We would sit together in the sunny breakfast nook, saying much of nothing while she smiled and watched me eat. I really did like her, and told her so; I told her that I hoped she didn't think she had to feed me to keep me coming around. She told me to hush, that she enjoyed doing things for me. Sometimes, during the afternoons when it was too hot to do anything else, we'd rent movies-sometimes three or four at a time- at the Blockbuster Video at a nearby strip mall. It wasn't too long before we became recognized as regulars at the place. The young guy behind the counter-a kid around my age-would get the wrong idea about us and would give me secret looks when the woman wasn't looking. I would turn away from him, not smiling back. Later, at her place, she would sit next to me on the couch in the dark cool basement, her feet curled under her like a cat on the couch, and we would watch tweaky films like The Fly or Dead Ringers on the VCR and sometimes I would get embarrassed and uncomfortable during the sex scenes, sitting there with this woman who was old enough to be my mother.

She loved to talk, sometimes keeping me jabbering for hours at a time. But we could just as well sit together in the living room with the sunlight streaming through the window, surrounded by tall, lush, potted plants, inattentively reading magazines or any books we might have been currently involved in-comfortable in the companionable silence. She would never sweat me when it was time for me to go home, and I began to think of her and the house as my own personal retreat. I would come home to a bunch of messages on the answering machine; people would ask

where I was all weekend and I would tell them nothing, that I just had to get away for a while. . .

But the woman was attracted to me, and it was becoming a problem during the evenings we'd spend in the basement in front of the giant-screen television. Evenings when she would lay her head on my shoulder and slip an arm beneath my shirt to lay a too-cool hand on my chest. She would ask how old I was, three or four times during the course of an evening. I began to give different ages each time; she never noticed, or pretended not to.

She had been divorced for 14 years.

She had reached her menopause.

She kept a vibrator in the cabinet under the bathroom sink-a big, battery-powered mother with a glistening stainless steel head.

She wasn't unattractive. She kept her hair tied tight in a bun; she never wore make-up. The miles of age showed taut, wiry flesh over the high cheekbones of her oval face. It was a weary face, a traveled face, and not all that unpleasant to look at. She made the common mistake among the older women of the Hills, trying to play down her age by dressing like a teenager-wearing lots of bangled bracelets and too-tight jeans; K-Swiss tennis shoes, and loud, over-

sized sweaters with patterned bits of sequin and rhinestones. Fooling around one day, I brought over an old pair of baggy 501's and we rummaged through a closet of old clothes her husband had left behind until we could find a plain white button-down shirt. She dressed in the loose, comfortable clothing and I took a photo of her, sitting in the patio with her hair mussed-sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes as she flipped through an old magazine.

I loved her but I didn't want her, and it began to make me feel arrogant and cruel to walk about her living room wearing torn jeans, white t-shirt and paint-splattered penny loafers. I would

catch her looking at me out of the corner of her eye, and it would make me feel very sad. I knew that we were losing it; that either way, no matter what happened, we were not going to have another summer like this one. I made a decision. She was in the kitchen one day, facing the counter, peeling Mandarin oranges for a spinach salad, when I simply walked up to her and pressed my front against her eager buttocks, my hands resting on her hips.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, but she was panting already and I let that one fly over my head. I reached around and began unbuttoning her blouse. She pulled my hand away, leading me to her bedroom. She did not look me in the face.

I followed her down the hallway, watching her ass grinding together like two flat stones. She was very old-fashioned; she wanted to turn off the lights, but I told her to keep them on. She asked if she could kiss me. I didn't say anything. I wanted to cry.

She took off all her clothes, revealing her sagging, leathery breasts. I simply pulled my pants down around my ankles and climbed on top of her. I entered her, and she gasped sharply, beneath me on the bed. I began to fuck her, and as I stroked, her soft belly made a sharp sound against mine, like the handclap on a Roland 808 drum machine. She was watery and flaccid inside; it was like fucking a lukewarm can of ravioli. I couldn't get any serious friction, and the bedsprings bounced and creaked in a noisome rhythm as I slid wetly in and out of her.

Later, I stood fully dressed in the darkened doorway to say goodbye. She could only roll over beneath the sheets, facing the wall, her back to me. And then I left; the both of us knowing that I wouldn't be back. I never told anyone of that lazy summer in the Hills.

---

Faris is in Grand Blanc visiting his parents, so i'm surprised to see Jackie in line at the Shelter tonight, a Friday. I pull into the parking lot on the bike, and try to avert my eyes from her when I pull off the helmet, but it's too late; she sees me and comes over, and I greet her presence with an inward groan. I used to like Jackie, before she went crazy, before she started collecting mannequins and

placing them, poised in perpetuity, about her apartment like giant spooky action-figures in baroque wedding dresses.

I remember it well, the exact night I began to cultivate an apathy for this woman that would seethe in my belly like a rabid animal. We were all over Ron and Sabrina's one night last year, sitting around the coffee table playing monopoly with Ron, Sabrina- and because he had brought with him a quarter ounce baggie of hashish-Robert. The game was down to me and Faris. We had wiped out everybody else-put them all in the fucking poorhouse-and were both steadily advancing our greedy financial empires. Little red hotels were cropping up all over the board, and we leaned over the game, gloating and rubbing our hands together. The game was reaching a mad crescendo of mortgaging, property bartering and much yelling and profanity, and Jackie began to complain that she was bored, that we had been playing the game too long and that if we didn't wrap it up inside of five minutes, she was going to topple over the board and end it herself. Faris looked at her and said yeah, right, and told me to roll the dice. I rolled the dice and the feverish pace continued on. Faris was just coming past Free Parking; I owned that entire side of the board, including hotels on both Boardwalk and Park Place. He was about to embark on a roll that I was sure would land him in the shithouse when Jackie suddenly announced, "Time's up," and kicked over the board. Faris just sat there, still rattling the dice around in his raised fist, not wanting to believe it, and the entire room went silent, save for the sound of Jackie giggling from her place on the couch. Faris began screaming at her, saying, "So what the fuck are we supposed to do now, you fucking idiot???" and Jackie was saying that she didn't know, only that she was tired of watching us playing that stupid game, and I had to excuse myself to go to the bathroom and splash some cold water on my face.

Outside, at the Shelter, Jackie says hello, asking if i'm going to go inside and I tell her quickly, "I'm meeting someone." She says, quietly, "Oh," shuffling around, looking at the ground, and then asks if I've talked to Faris, and this is just too transparent-ridiculous, in fact-because he only left yesterday. I start walking toward the crowded entrance, telling her to come on, that i'll get her in and only then, filing behind me in the packed doorway, does she say anything candid, thanking me, admitting she's broke.

It's not until we get inside, taking in the ranks of poseurs who ventured in from the suburbs-gothic punks dressed in all black clothing; lots of nose-rings, checkered flannel and Doc Marten-that I begin to wonder what i'm doing here, suddenly remembering that I hate this place. It's hot, humid, way too crowded, and the films being played on the monitors mounted in the corners-early John Waters with the sound turned off-fill me with dread and ire and a sense that everything is dead. Jackie walks behind me for a short time, hollering bits and pieces of what I am sure is inane conversation at me, over the music, and it's not a difficult thing for me to pretend I can't hear her. I know she only wants to spend a respectable amount of time hanging out with me before disappearing into the crowd and, in fact, is now telling me that she has to go to the bathroom. I nod at her, snorting. She asks me what's so funny. I tell her. . . nothing.

I walk around in a black funk, mentally grumbling that other than this, there should be something to do on a Friday night. I remember driving around downtown with Derrick one night last

summer. "There it is," he said, pointing out some building we passed on Lafayette, driving through Greektown. "That is the fucking mecca of late-night activity in this city," he said, stabbing a finger out the window. "That's the only place in town where they got anything going on this late," and i'm ready to turn the car around, listening to him talk; I never heard of the place. "Really?" I said, peering back at the building in the rearview mirror. "Is there a cover?"

"It's the morgue," he told me, laughing, but a little angry. "It's the goddamn city morgue, you idiot," and I drove on, not getting it.

I pass the dancefloor on the way to the bar, and although the DJ sucks, the actual music is not bad and the drinks are cheap; I find sanctuary in the fact that i'm able to get drunk, mildly fucked up, for under six bucks. Still, six bucks is six bucks. With a three dollar tab of acid I can take a ten-hour freefall down the rabbit-hole. I have a hit on me-wrapped in a tiny square of tinfoil in my jeans pocket-and I take it out to look at it. Who would ever imagine that this innocent looking piece of paper is a passport to another dimension? A paranoid sprawl of emotional pitfalls, twisted concepts and hellish visual turbulence. Just touch the paper to the surface of your tongue, and the visions batten down like a mad legion of slaving naked midgets, all intent on hair-pulling, eye-poking, and generally getting a fair amount of mental skin under their horny little fingernails. The last time I dropped-alone, in my apartment-I found myself in bed, masturbating, anguished because I couldn't get inside my self; wishing I had a cunt, wanting to fuck my self, if you can dig it. . .

But this is neither the time nor place for this kind of experience. So when Jackie passes by in the crowd, I hand her the little tinfoil and ask her if she wants to do it. She unfolds the package, and looks up at me. "Drugs?" is all she says. I nod. She places it on the tip of her tongue, and begins chewing. "What is it?" she's asking me, "is it like grass?" I start laughing. "You never took acid before?" I ask her. She tells me no, looking a little worried. "What the hell did you think it was?" i'm saying, and she tells me that she had no idea, and tries to spit out the little piece of paper. I tell her to forget it, that it's too late to do anything about it now. She looks kind of freaked out, and I tell her not to worry, that i'll watch her. Nervous, she asks me again, desperate now, "Is it like grass, is it stronger than grass?" I tell her: "No. It's a lot. . . uh. . . bigger than that. Just let me know when you start to feel something. You'll know it when it happens." But Jackie is unsure about this, wanting to know exactly how she's going to know, and I tell her, assuring, "Don't worry about it. You'll know."

I find solace in the fact that there is now at least some kind of purpose to the evening-waiting for Jackie to trip. I do watch her, and it's not long before I begin to notice her slowing down, craning her head around the club to take everything in with a new-found dumbstruck expression on her face. I tap her on the shoulder, startling her, and tell her it's time to leave. Outside, warming up the bike to take Jackie to Union Street where she left her car, a rat dashes out of the alley, scampering over my foot, and I scream like a woman.

On the way to Union Street, Jackie is enjoying her trip,

screaming elatedly inside the helmet and squiggling on the seat; I have to keep yelling at her to quit steering me by the shoulders, to calm down for Chrissakes. We finally get to the bar and Jackie wants to go inside for a drink. But fortunately, the place is closed; I can see Dave turning the sign in the door around as we pull up.

Jackie's car-a banged-up Honda Civic-doesn't want to start, and I put the bike up on its kickstand to sit and wait. It's late. The streets are empty, and there are only a few people filing out of the Majestic-another club, the renovated theatre where Houdini was killed-across the street. Parked beneath the lime halo of one of dozens of streetlights that span the length of Woodward avenue, I can see the Renaissance Center from here-a tall monolith of glass and steel that makes a pretty picture, silhouetted against the moon. But the goddamn car still won't start, and I become anxious when this guy, a short stocky brother wearing a padded ski jacket and a pair of

purple old school suede Pumas, comes out of nowhere, asking me for a cigarette. I tell him no, sorry bro. He nods silently to himself-but doesn't go anywhere. I turn back to the street to let him know that I've dismissed his presence, but then he asks me, "Well you got a light, then?" and now i'm instantly aware, knowing that we're in for some shit, because if the guy doesn't have a cigarette, then what the fuck does he need a light for? He is advertising violence, he is telegraphing his punch. And if I wasn't here with someone-if I wasn't encumbered by this goddamn female-this would be my cue to leave, to just walk away, get the fuck out of here, but instead I

have to stand there, a torrent of adrenalin coursing through my veins, giving me a headache, and wait for the next thing.

The next thing is that Jackie does get the car started, and-not understanding what's going on-reaches over to open the passenger-side door to say something to me, and the guy finally makes his move, which is to reach inside the car and grab Jackie's purse.

These things happen; I live in a city.

I'm coming around the car for the guy, but then this other kid comes out of nowhere holding a knife-a goddamn machete for crying out loud-and he swings it in a wide arc, warning me to "Back off, motherfucker, just get the fuck back. . ." I peek inside the car, and Jackie is-oh my god-fucking wrestling with the guy for the purse. Furious, I begin speaking calmly and slowly to penetrate her hallucinogenic haze. "Jackie. . . there's a guy here with a knife, Jackie. Let go of the purse Jackie, let him have the purse; the guy has a knife, there's nothing I can do. . ." But Jackie is holding the purse with both hands, gritting her teeth, and I feel like an idiot standing there, watching this silent struggle. I step forward, but the guy is steady swinging the rusty machete at me and I almost get my fucking head cut off.

"Let go of the purse, you stupid bitch!" I finally scream at her, but she's adamant, fighting the three of us now, and the guy pulls her out of the car, into the street. Where are the cops? i'm thinking, where are all the fucking cops, this is Woodward Avenue for godsake. I look around, but there's no one besides a small clique of useless suburbanites, stupidly staring at us from the Majestic across the street. They notice me looking at them, and-afraid i'm going to

ask them for help-they quickly begin piling into their smart little Beamer.

I turn back to Jackie, and she's still struggling for the purse; has even managed to pick herself up off the ground, getting a fucking toehold in a crack in the sidewalk for Chrissakes, and i'm almost relieved when the guy finally punches her in the face, knocking her to the ground. He just walks slowly away, with the purse, already rummaging through the contents, his back to us. I run around the other side of the car and pick Jackie up off the ground. The other guy, the guy with the knife, steps to me, holding out his hand. "Keys," he's saying, and now I do begin laughing, not believing this, and find myself saying something really stupid like, "Uh. . . it's not my car man; just chill," and I take Jackie by the hand and begin backing into the middle of the street. The guy is advancing, coming for us with the knife, and I begin hollering-for the first time in my life-for help. It tastes alien, like shit in my mouth and i'm relieved when the guy turns and runs away, disappearing into the alley after his partner.

Jackie is crying, bawling into the lapels of my jacket and I grab her by the shoulders, shaking her, screaming into her face, "Are you out of your goddamn mind???" and her expression registers complete surprise-terror even, eyeballs rolling loosely in their sockets-and I realize that I could say everything I want to say to her and she still wouldn't get it-partly because of the acid and partly because it's in her bones; the suburban mentality that nothing really bad can happen to her. I try to get her into the car but now she wants to-oh please-call the police for crying out loud and I try to talk her out of it but then she begins screaming at me and I have to bang on the door to Union Street.

---

Inside, Dave has given her a shot of Jagermeister to calm her down and i'm standing around, giving everybody-Dave, Sabrina, Joey and the parking lot attendant-the story, while Jackie is on the phone with the police.

"I mean, what the fuck could I do?" i'm asking them, wanting some kind of assurance. "She didn't even have anything in the goddamn purse, right? An address book, her glasses, some birth control pills-you know what i'm saying?" Jabbering away, I light a cigarette with shaking hands, feeling like Captain Queeg. "She didn't have a dime on her. I knew that because I had to get her into the fucking Shelter," and they are all nodding at me in an ingratiating way that lets me know they can smell my hysterical panic and rancid cowardice like a freshly cut lemon, and then Candy comes up from the office downstairs where Jackie is on the phone. "How is she?" Joey asks. Candy says: Jackie is acting kind of funny. I tell them, laughing, "Yeah, well that's because she's tripping, if you can believe it. On top of everything else, she's in The Land," and I begin shaking my head; I must have been out of my mind to give her that shit. "Yeah, well she wanted to call Faris; she's on the phone with him now," Candy tells us. I can't believe it. It's three o'clock in the ; he's at

his parents' for godsake.

When i get downstairs to the basement office, Jackie is sitting behind Joey's desk, crying and slobbering into the telephone. I'm wondering what Faris is making of all this. I tell her to give me the phone, but she only begins bawling, even louder, into the receiver, still on acid, and I begin to wonder what would happen if i suddenly came at her with the plastic lobster hanging on the wall in Joey's office. I tell Jackie to relax, and then take the phone away from her. I sit on the edge of the desk and ask Faris if he got the story, and he tells me that he got the gist of it, that it sounds like we're both lucky to be alive. I tell him: no shit. He asks if Jackie's okay, and I tell him yeah, that the guy must've just grazed her or something, because the punch-and it was a haymaker; he meant to knock her fucking teeth out-didn't even leave a mark.

"I don't know what to say dude," i'm telling him. "I'm sorry I couldn't take better care of your woman. . ."

"Don't worry about it," Faris is saying. "There was nothing you could do; she'll be alright."

"I mean, he did get the purse and everything," I say, feeling every bit the chicken-shit coward.

"Yeah?" Faris says, laughing now. "Well good luck to him finding anything in that fucking thing," and I start laughing and Jackie looks up from the desk, staring at me.

---

Once in a while, not very often, the vile poisons of the city will turn on me like a bellyful of curdled cream and, not unlike a cancer, chew through the pale, autistic aspect of leading an "artistic urban lifestyle."

Sure. it happens. You can only take so much ugliness, sorrow-regarding the long line of nomads that stand outside the Salvation

Army outpost on Bagley, coughing uncontrollably into closed fists, their fingernails thick and horny, cracked, stained yellow with nicotine. There are bulletproof glass panels in the east side unemployment office on Van Dyke, put there to protect the smug civil servants from the growling, restless ranks, myself numbered one among them. There are denizens of homeless, combing the streets in perpetuity, including the window-washer who once stood at the corner of Lafayette and I-94 and who-whether you were the kind of person to press a coin into his proffered fist or curse him for a shiftless nigger-would smile at you with sad eyes and offer, "God bless you. . ." For an entire year I watched this man weather daily abuse, every day growing meaner than a kicked dog until he finally joined the rest of the angry, pan-handling masses and began carrying on gibbering conversation with invisible colleagues; fisting the air and spitting vile curses back at the passing cars, until he finally disappeared altogether-just another of the city's MIA's.

In my P.O box last week I found a mailer, a catalogue of personal ads through which the subscriber could order-deeply disturbing- a mail-order wife, for something like seventy-five bucks. "We will publish your brief personal ad in a leading Mexican newspaper for 3 days," the catalogue read. "You may hear from hundreds of eager, marriage-minded women from any area south of the border! As a special bonus offer, receive-ABSOLUTELY FREE!!!- the name and address of every girl in this photo selection!!! Send an order of \$60 or more and they are yours!!!"

Women all over the world, willing to trade their virtue for a green card, snafued in the vile machinery of an international meat-market I knew not existed. It freaked me to flip through the

photos of the women-blank, plaintive faces; probably housewives, every goddamn one of them- staring sadly up from the pages. Beneath each photo, tailor-made captions delivered lewd innuendo: "#12095: LETICIA is from Tijuana-a small town lady looking for love!!!" or "#12030: ROSA is a Latin lovely looking for good time!!!"

In the face of all these nutty satellites, each of them emanating pulsing rays of shizzo, i'll be forced to interrupt my mad, rat-like scratchings on the beaten path of life to contemplate the mad pulse of the metropolis; a half-assed rat-race run for all the wrong reasons. And from the swirling, jellied miasma of drive-by shootings, car-jackings and government cheese, these words batten down in a bid for self-preservation: YOU NEED A BIGGER FISHBOWL. . .

---

Thursday night. The nuttiest night I've had in some time, a state of emergency. I ride to the Muslim temple shop on Davison with Nate, Maurice and Ras Glorio. Earlier, Nate and Maurice came down to my apartment after helping Ras move his stuff into the space he recently rented on the top floor of my building. I could hear the music-loud dancehall reggae; Shabba Ranks or Cutty Ranks or Nardo Ranks, one of them-blaring from the apartment while they worked, shifting furniture and boxes around the room. I was just beginning to wonder what was going on when Nate and Maurice knocked on my door.

Nate, exhausted, sagged his weight into a chair at the kitchen table while Maurice peered through the levelors, looking down into the street. I busied myself, studying the open belly of the refrigerator for something to drink.

"That mother-fucker," Nate says of Ras, between breaths, panting, "has more shit than a little bit. . ."

"Dude," I say to Maurice, handing him a Coke. "You shaved your head." I run my palm over the gritty stubble; teasingly squeezing the brown skin like a ripe grape. "Motherfucker looks like Nosferatu, don't he?" Nate says, laughing. I never felt a bald head before and it feels kind of strange and nice and Maurice has to bat my hand away, laughing.

"So what's going on?" I ask Nate, and he tells me that he promised to give Maurice and Ras a ride to the temple shop before it closes at nine. I don't say anything for a while. They both know I don't like Ras Glorio very much. that's how i would describe it. i try to like everybody, i try to love everybody; i just don't like him very much. I don't see him around a lot; the last time was when I was driving around with Nate, and Ras called on the car phone to have us pick him up in Ferndale, where he had just gotten his ass kicked by a mob of skinheads.

Ras Glorio's customized, off-beat interpretation of the Muslim religion has led him into more than a few scrapes around town. Besides Ras, there are a few other guys around town who-despite their pork-eating, coke-dealing, skirt-chasing habits-claim faith to the Nation of Islam. You see them hanging around the State Theatre or Industry or Wax Fruit. They like to get mildly fucked up and then start picking on the passing hapless white boys; making lewd comments to their girlfriends, hoping to lure them outside for a fight where Ras-joined together with Skeeter, Kenyatta or Maalik-can stomp the shit out them.

Ras-thin and wiry with bad teeth and dyed red dreadlocks-can fight. I mean he can really fight. I once watched him take on three guys at once outside the Warehouse. . . damn if he didn't frighten me. I found it hard to believe that anyone could move that fast. It was all over in a few minutes. By the time security came outside to break up the fight, Ras was busy grating this guy's head-like a soft block of cheddar

cheese-against the front grill of somebody's parked Mercedes.

When Nate and Maurice asked me if I wanted to go the temple shop with them-to get a few books, maybe some audio cassettes-I found myself curious to see what the atmosphere was all about, and surprised them both by telling them sure, why not.

---

A little cluster of door chimes rings out when we open the door to the temple store on Davison. It is a small, charismatic little shop with a homey ethnic atmosphere. Huge incense sticks-like giant cat-tails-burn in a tall vase in a corner, fragrantly frying down to ash. There is a black and white television-tuned to the news with the sound off-in another corner, along with a plush, cloth-covered couch and a beaten leather Lay-Z-Boy. The soft brown carpeting is stained flat in odd spots from ancient spills, and the paint over the cream-colored walls is peeled back in

places from the radiator heat. Custom-made jewelry and the more expensive audio cassettes-recorded lectures, speeches-are kept behind a glass display counter near the cash register. There is a small cardboard display at the end of the counter advertising various skin creams, lotions and oils of Muslim manufacture. A massive bookshelf of paperbacks and record albums takes up an entire wall.

"You don't want to mess with that," Ras says to me, leering as I pull a record-The Last Poets-from the rack. "you might get the Blackness. . ." I throw him a smart-assed look, sarcastically pinching the record-like a dead rat-carefully between two fingers before I put it back on the shelf.

A small woman, dressed in all black, loose-fitting robes, comes out of the back room. "A salaam alaikum, Sister Karen," Ras says to her, displaying out of character politeness and respect, shaking her hand. She greets him back-Wa alaikum salaam-and then says hello to Maurice, and nods to me and Nate. Maurice introduces us, and Sister Karen seems unsure, shaking my hand with a light, tentative grip. At that moment Nate's pager goes off. Embarrassed, he cuts it off; putting it away in his knapsack.

Sister Karen goes to her station behind the counter, and begins pointing out the latest audio tapes and publications beneath the glass. Ras and Maurice begin to steadily increase their small piles of purchases while I continue to peruse the literature. when I turn away from the bookshelf, Ras and Sister Karen are deeply involved in a conversation about drugs.

"All i'm saying is that a brother's got to make a living for himself," Ras is saying. Sister Karen adamantly shakes her head at the floor, saying nothing. "Okay then, but check this out," he says. "What if I only sell drugs to the white man? Where's the harm in that?" Sister Karen isn't buying it: "As one of the children of Allah, you can have nothing to do with drugs, alcohol, pork

or vice. . . period," she tells him. "You must not even lay hand to these things. . ."

"But I don't lay a hand on them," he says, admitting a chuckle now. "I got people for that, you know what i'm saying?" "C'mon man," i say, putting a hand on his shoulder. "we're all peddling shit. Only the most successful peddlers can afford to hire hands. . ."

"So that's supposed to make you innocent?" Ras queries, turning to me.

"Me? innocent? Hell fuck no. But. . . it's obvious that you've been more successful with your exploitation than i have. . ."

He looks over to Sister Karen, grinning. "He lives off unemployment; whoring himself to the white man's government."

"May I ask," Sister Karen says to me, "exactly what is your nationality?"

"Spanish on my father's side" I tell her. "My mother is Asian/Afro-American." Sister Karen looks at me, not comprehending.

"My mother is half-Japanese," I finally say, and Sister Karen's face lights up.

"Ah! So you are a Nubian then," she says, nodding to herself.

"I guess so," I say. Then, turning back to Ras, "And what the hell are you doing, calling me a whore? What do you think you're doing? Granted, you aren't paying taxes. But you're still

working. You're a motherfucking drug dealer. You can call it whatever you want, but if you don't call that work, the only person you're fooling is yourself." Controlling my tone, lest he invite me outside for a thorough ass-whipping beneath the streetlights.

Ras turns back to Sister Karen. "I didn't say it wasn't work. I'm just saying. We were dragged over here by the white man, right? We didn't ask for this shit. We got to get over any way we can. ÔBy any means necessary,' right? Brother Malcolm-

"We were not 'dragged over here' by anyone," Sister Karen says. "Ras. Do you know nothing of the legend of Dr. Yacub and isle of Patmos?" Ras shrugs, grinning. "Why have you not come to temple for your lessons in the past-what is it?-six months? And do not quote to me from Brother Malcolm. Have you ever met Brother Malcolm? He is of no use to our people, being dead and in the earth these twenty years. . ."

Ras rolls his eyes to the ceiling. "I don't mean to be disrespectful Sister," he says slowly. "but how can you say that? Just because Brother Malcolm is dead doesn't mean-

"'Brother Malcolm' is dead because the Nation had him killed, dude," I tell him. Ras turns to me, silently furious. "You don't believe me? Ask Sister Karen. . ." Maurice is laughing, chuckling quietly with his chin down, staring at the floor. Unlike me, he has sense enough to keep his mouth shut. Sister Karen says nothing for a moment, gathering her words.

"We loved brother Malcolm," she finally begins. "No one wanted him dead. But he was weak. He lost faith and our people couldn't-"

"What?" Ras is saying, visibly revolted, stepping away from her a little. "Oh man; I can't believe this," He turns to me, quick to mount a defense, and i'm beginning to wish I had kept my bigass nose out of the shit. But still: how the hell could he not know?

"What the fuck do you know about it," he suddenly spits at me, challenging.

"Please," Sister Helen interjects. "That language,"

"I mean, you been going out with a white woman for the past-what?-two years or something?"

"You talking about Kerri?" i'm asking, starting to move forward, fists balled at my side. Nate steps between us. "Hold on, just chill," he says, and I shrug his hand off and stand there. "There it is. That's your whole shit, man. In a nutshell. We allow the construct. . . to obscure the view. . . of the spirit. We all do it. But dude; you're ridiculous. What about you and Sharon, you motherfucking hypocrite?"

"Young Man! That language!"

I turn to Sister Karen-"He was engaged to a white woman," I say, pointing at Ras. Sister Karen's mouth purses into a perfect O of surprise.

"How do you expect to buy your own bullshit if you can't even swallow it yourself? Shit man; you were engaged to marry the white devil."

I go on to tell Ras that I don't give a fuck what he thinks; that Kerri was a good friend to me for a long time, one of the best things that ever happened to me. Sister Karen says nothing to this; only smiles sadly down at my corny palaver. "What can I say?" I tell her, shrugging. "She's a beautiful person. . ."

Ras begins laughing at this, arms folded. I don't remember until later how Nate and Maurice became silent at this point.

"Oh yeah?" Ras says, and he injects these next words like a dripping hypo full of Draino: "Well then I guess it won't bother you to know that she's fucking your best friend, right?"

I like to keep all of doors open. This is a door; it was open with all of the rest, and so something deep inside me really isn't too surprised. Believe it or not. "You're telling me that Kerri is fucking somebody behind my back?" I warily ask, looking over at Nate and Maurice who say nothing, staring at the down at the carpet. "Are you telling me this, or are you trying to win your side of the argument?"

"Shit," Ras says. "Always the last one to know, right?" He's looking at me like i'm a little kid. "Faris," he says. "She's fucking Faris; she was fucking him the whole time you were going out with her. Probably fucking him right now. . ."

I try to say something, tell him that's bullshit, but all the air seems to have gone out of my lungs in a hot gust, like I've been shot, low, in the belly. I slowly reach around behind me, open hand fluttering blindly for a chair, for something to sit down on but there is nothing and Ras is laughing at me. I make an effort to smile, trying to-I don't know-to play along with it? Like maybe I already knew this, and it doesn't bother me in the least? But of course I didn't know this and it does bother me and I can't seem to control my facial features and my mouth inadvertently twists into a pained grimace. I look over at Sister Karen and she is nodding to herself, believing me justly served. I turn to Nate and Maurice but they won't look me in the face.

"You knew?" i'm asking them, gulping, mouth twitching. "You knew about this?" but they don't answer; silently shuffling in the middle of the shop which suddenly seems to have become very small and stifflingly hot. My heart feels heavy; tugged down into well of my viscera by an invisible, insistent fist. My asshole is spastically trembling with fear, feeling nervous and greasy and I begin to vaguely wonder if i'm going to shit my pants. Well. My fate. It's half-laughable, anyway. . .

"Look at him," Ras is saying, laughing. "He's fucked up; he can't take it-look at his face," and I consider jumping him but my legs feel funny, knees buckling under me and i'm afraid I would only fall to the floor in mid-leap. Sister Karen goes behind the counter to ring up their purchases and Ras reaches for his wallet. "Next time get yourself a black girl in that bed," he tells me and Nate finally says something, breaking the tangible silence that hangs in the air like a shit mist. "Why don't you just shut the fuck up now," he says.

---

Later, on the phone with Kerri:

"Hello?" she says, picking up the receiver.

"Hey. It's me."

"Well hello; where have you been? Haven't heard from you in-what?-has it been a week?"

"I don't know. I've been around. What are you doing?"

Tired sigh. "Nothing. Did a little shopping; just walked in the door. Listen, are you okay? Your voice sounds funny. . ."

"I'm okay. It's just that. . . shit man, I don't know. A bunch have people have been giving me this story. . . I don't know what to make of it."

"Yeah? What is it?" I can hear the rattling of paper bags as she unpacks the groceries.

"People are saying that you. . . uh. . . you fucked Faris."

The break in the conversation seems endless. I watched with grim fascination a large brown cockroach trundling a slow path up the side of the wall, long antennae twitching. "What?" she finally says. "That's crazy. . ." It sounds like she's trying to smile when she says this, but her voice cracks. "Who said that?"

I slip my loafer off and swing it at the bug on the wall. Incredibly, I miss but the impact dislodges it from its roost and it falls to the floor with a nasty chitinous smack. It lies on its back, numerous crablegs scabbling at the air before inverting itself and disappearing into a crack in the wall. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Ras told me. And then Nate and Maurice and Heidi and Ron and Sabrina,"-i'm making up names as I go along now-"and everybody seems to know about it except me. Can you tell me the truth? Have you been screwing Faris?"

But she's steady denying it, and I go on to tell her how much she means to me, telling her that i'd give anything in the world for it not to be true but that I can't help it; I believe this and I need her to tell me the truth, to make me understand. She becomes very quiet on the other end of the line and it's not until then that the truth of the situation, the real knowing, strikes me like a savage blow. She refuses to talk, saying nothing until I give her a detailed description of exactly how I found out, how I made a complete fool out of myself, and then she finally answers in the affirmative with a tiny little squeak.

"Why did you lie? Why didn't you just tell me when I first asked you?"

"Um. . . I guess I had to hear something like that, first," she says and I finally lose it.

"The whole time we were going out. . ." I say quietly. "The whole time we were going out. . . How could you do that???" I bang the phone against the wall, panting. "HOW THE FUCK COULD YOU DO THAT??? Oh my god. . ."

"What?" she says. "It wasn't like, 'Oh Faris,' or anything. . ."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I tilt my head to stare, bug-eyed, at the receiver. "You sound confused. Do you really know what you've done?" I can't seem to get enough air; panting and puffing like a locomotive.

"Oh my god. . ." i'm saying. "Oh my god. . ." A deranged litany.

"Just wait a minute," she says. "I'm trying to think. . ."

I don't have anybody now, Kerri."

"Todd; don't say that."

"I don't have anybody. . ."

"Todd! Don't say that!" she screams, crying now.

I hang up and lean against the wall, sliding to the floor. When the phone rings few moments later I take the receiver off the hook.

I leave for London in two days.

---

Friday:

What is there to say? There's nothing to say, really. I asked for this shit. Of course i did. . .

---

I made some phone calls and found that-at this late date, the day before departure-I do have to go to Chicago to get my passport. I am apprehensive about the long lines, the 8-hour wait, and other bits of insurmountable red tape relative to these bureaucratic necessities. But Kerri has been steady looking for me and I hear that Faris is on his way back from Grand Blanc, and so I get Sabrina to take me on the four-hour drive to Chicago on this, my last day.

It's four o'clock in the morning and it's going to be a gray, rainy afternoon. With my baggage packed in the back seat and the trunk (it's going to be close-we're going to have to head straight for Detroit Metropolitan from Chicago), I settle down in my seat and breathe a sigh of relief when we leave the city limits behind us, via I-94. Sabrina turns up the radio and warns me not to fall asleep, to do my job of keeping her awake. I grudgingly grunt and light a cigarette, but it tastes like shit in my mouth this early in the morning so I put it out and angrily sift through the box of tapes on the floor at my feet, then stop in mid-search to apologize to Sabrina, excusing myself for acting like an asshole; kissing her on the cheek and then re-light the cigarette, and Sabrina takes it out of my mouth, laughing at me, telling me to relax, to calm down for Chrissake.

I have to sit on my hands to keep still; wishing I had a lude-a big blue world-lude- wishing I could sleep through the rest of my life, my movie. If Sabrina wasn't driving a stickshift, i'd lie down and put my head in her lap.

I look through the windows, trying to absorb what I can of this, my homeland, before I leave. But there's nothing much to see; just indistinguishable farmland and green foliage, and this could be the road to Birmingham or Kent if we were driving on the other side of the highway. I'm bored now, bored by life. This sensation feels alien to me, and I suddenly realize that i haven't been bored in a long time. Mentally i'm already gone, on the plane, and I purposely think about seeing Darren and Dexter and Mark and Sofy and the rest of them, and I start to feel a little better,

glad that i'll be arriving late because right now I can't fathom the depressing idea of descending through the clouds to land on a gray and foggy London. This is because i'm a fucking idiot with absolutely no life skills. I've lost possession of my shit.

Eventually, despite Sabrina's warning, I do fall asleep and pretty soon she gets tired of nudging me and elbowing me in the ribs and when I wake up, hours later, we're just coming through Calumet City.

---

Chicago is not a beautiful city. We enter by way of I-94 and make our way downtown to Michigan avenue and I start to hate it, remembering hectic weekend trips from Detroit to go to the Music Box or the Warehouse or the Latin Quarter. We pass the State Building with its tall spires and complex infrastructure, watching the hot-dog venders setting up for another business day outside the

entrance. I find myself suddenly wanting a toasted bagel with melted butter and cream cheese. Sabrina is getting hungry too, and when I get out at the Federal Building, to go up while she parks the car, I promise to later stand her for breakfast.

I had the passport photos taken in Detroit-duplicate black & whites depicting a grumpy, unshaven individual-and so, after a two-hour wait in line, i'm processed fairly quickly. I explain my situation, showing the airplane ticket leaving later this afternoon, but the woman behind the counter-who, it is to be admired, could give a fuck whether or not i make my flight to London-promises me nothing. She tells me to come back around four-thirty, before the office closes. I go over to Sabrina-sitting like a brave little soldier in the crowded waiting area, reading a book she brought with her. She stands up, stretching and says, "Well?" and I don't have anything to say and we take the elevator down to the street.

We go for a small greasy breakfast at Friar's, in Wicker Park, and then call Adrielle. But Adrielle isn't home and we can't remember the name of the salon where she recently got a job as a hairdresser. I suggest we take in a movie-maybe check out the Art Institute or the aquarium-and then get a pizza at Uno's before going back to the Federal Building.

The aquarium is closed for renovation, but at the Fine Arts Theatre on Michigan where we go to see Naked Lunch, I make Sabrina laugh out loud, trying to imitate William Burrough's tired disposition and dry literary mumblings; irritating the rest of the audience-students and art fags, all of them-who turn around in their seats in the dark theatre to stare at me.

It's mid-afternoon by the time we get out of the theatre. The city is in high gear and the hustle and bustle is entertaining; alien in that it differs from the vibe in Detroit. We take the subway to Grand and State, and Uno's is packed when we get there. They take our order while we wait in line at the door for a table, but the pizza-a thick, cheesy manhole cover that smells powerfully of sweet red wine and dead animal flesh-is worth it, and we both feel pretty good by the time we get back to the Federal Building to pick up my passport.

Up until now it's been a pretty good trip, but when we get to the office on the 15th floor, the passport still isn't ready. They make us wait in another room with the other disgruntled applicants, who groan out loud as the wait stretches into one hour and then another. By now it's pretty late. We still have the drive back to Michigan if i'm to make the plane, and then the passport office closes. They lock the doors and begin turning out some of the lights, but they're still calling out names for people to come to the window to pick up their little blue books. I begin to worry, staring at the little orange sticker on my plane ticket that says: "WARNING- you have purchased a non-refundable, non-redeemable ticket; be sure to arrive at the terminal in time for departure."

But in the next minute my name is called. Relieved, putting the passport away in a jacket pocket, i hustle with Sabrina for the elevator. I press the button to the ground floor lobby and Sabrina asks me, apprehensive, "Are we going to make it?" I tell her: I don't know.

It is a silent, anguishing trip back to Detroit. I play it like a fucking idiot; i'm in a hurry, so i act like i'm in a hurry. Sabrina lets me drive, and i'm doing 80 miles an hour the whole way; riding the asses of other automobiles in the fast lane, cursing, snaking traffic, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. The outgoing traffic on I-94 concertinas clear through Calumet and i'm ready to shit my pants by the time we pull up to the terminal at Detroit Metropolitan, 6 hours later. If my flight is on time, if my watch is telling the truth, I have less than 4 minutes to catch the plane. The cops are barking at us to "move the car, loading zone only," and I turn to look at Sabrina and vainly wish that everything didn't always have to happen in a goddamn hurry like this. But there isn't much to say and there's not much time, and so I kiss her on the forehead and then once, quickly on the lips and then hug her and the cops start hollering at us again. I jump out of the car, grabbing the rest of my bags out of the trunk and make a run for my boarding gate-way the hell on the other side of the building.

The place is too goddamn crowded with scurrying humans following independent trajectories; it seems like every two seconds some old blue-haired biddy turtles across my path, pausing in her tracks to look for her fucking great-granddaughter in the crowd, and i'm cursing under my breath, hustling awkwardly across the marble terminal with my luggage. When I finally get to the boarding gate, the blue-jacketed clerk behind the ticket counter says to me, "Jesus, you better hurry; you might have already missed it," and I practically throw my baggage at him and run down the hallway, through the metal detectors, towards the female ticket-takers who are screaming through the boarding tube, telling the pilot to hold up, to wait for me. I drop my scarf on the ground behind me and when I turn around to pick it up, one of the girls, the boarding staff, screams at me, "Forget it! Leave it!" and I do. Fifty yards later I stumble onto the plane, sweating

and itching. It's a crowded flight; everybody is looking at me, but i'm too drained to give a shit. I slide into my window seat next to a fat guy in shirtsleeves who just stares at me as I sink down into an exhausted slouch-eyes closed, panting, cursing, fingertips spread over my brow to support my head and then he starts to smile, slowly clapping his hands together, fucking applauding me and I raise my head to stare at him, glaring, and he stops.

---

Things I remember about London: coming off the early-morning Birmingham train at Paddington station and striding through a flock of pigeons; watching as they fly up to roost in the rafters of the vast, empty space where cold blue daylight filters through the paneled skylight-a skylight paneled with wood where a number of glass panels are missing, allowing water to drip from leaks in the roof; a light interior rain. The aching age of the city-continually howling at me from the ancient urban architecture, the pitted brown cobblestone streets, the bowels of the tube stations. The fear of crossing the streets because I couldn't get used to the idea of traffic roaring along on, what was for me, the wrong side of the road. Rancid spring rolls and fatty pork sandwiches cooked from a spit by foreign-looking vendors in the bustling afternoon flea-markets of Portobello Road. The glowing fruit; fresh oranges and apples, mangoes and flawless starfruit-all neatly stocked and consolidated in white formica bins along the vegetable aisles at the Mark's & Spencer at Whitely's. Post-club wind-down dinners with Mark and Sofy and Peter in the early mornings at Lido or Tranh or Viet Huong. Late nights, driving with Mark to pick up Dan at his apartment while Dan's wife, a famous actress, screams at us; leaning out of the upstairs window to curse at Dan as we drive away. The show I had at the Bullfinch Gallery with 3-D from Massive Attack; ending up with that girl-a scrawny writer from THE FACE with pale skin and an ugly haircut. we found ourselves fucking in the bathroom with all our clothes on, ignoring the pounding fists and shouting voices on the other side of the locked door. The ranks of peddlers that show up within two minutes of a thunderstorm so they can accost you outside the Tube stations with their ten-penny umbrellas. Multitudinous nights on ecstasy at The Fridge or Heaven or The Wag; some of the best music and the worst DJ's in the world can both be found in London, England. Paying out pound coins for every beer I accidentally knocked from the hands of every drunken asshole stupid enough to stand with a drink in the middle of a crowded dancefloor. Contentedly pissing amongst the trash heaps in the dark jazzy alleyways of Soho with Darren and Dexter and Dee and Mino; drunkenly making lude comments at the passersby who stopped to stare at us. Humming to myself, flipping through the bins at Black Market Records and then later bumping into Derrick May at the station while taking the ferry to Calais. Hanging out with Wummi at the Soul II Soul shop in Kensington; she gave me one of her dreadlocks as a keepsake and I

clipped it to my keychain. Restless grey mornings at Susan's apartment in Westbourne Park, sipping tea and staring out of the second story window at the cathedral across the street. . .

---

l o n d o n

I have no business going through Customs at Heathrow, looking like i'm looking: grubby unshaven American in torn jeans, leather jacket, Chelsea boots; foul French cigarette dangling out of the crack of my parched mouth, crusted at the corners. My clothes feel heavy and somewhat damp and my underwear is riding high up the crack of my ass. It was a rough flight, and I can already feel the jet lag taking its toll; by tomorrow morning i'm going to feel like like I've been in a car crash. I mumble irritably to myself as I move along in the slow line through Customs.

The Customs officer-a small rat-faced little bureaucrat who instantly reminds me of the villain actor from Beverly Hills Cop-seems pleasant, almost complacent; but I know what this man is all about. His job, simply broken down, is something like being a sweeper on a curling team; it's his duty to scoot you along if you fit the correct profile, and to cockblock the shit out of you if you don't. In other words, he has an honest job. Basically, he does what

everybody else does, only he gets paid to do it for somebody else. It's late, after eleven in the evening and he affects diplomatic sympathy to my exhaustion from the twelve hour flight from Detroit Metropolitan while he shoots me the routine questions. I'm a little worried. The thing is, I didn't register for a work visa. England takes something like twenty-five percent of your wages in taxes; it's a lot of red tape to get a visa; it means even more waiting in lines and, frankly, I just wasn't into it. So now i'm concealing something and this guy can obviously smell it on me, like a bitch in heat. He's very good at what he does; he has a consistently rigid, disarming smile on his face and it's a while before I look around and suddenly notice that i'm the last passenger on the plane still going through Customs. He asks me why I had come over with only \$120 American. I tell him i'm here on holiday and am being taken care of at a friend's place. He trips me up when he asks if I had paid for the airfare; I tell him no before I can stop myself.

"Who paid for it then?" he asks with a sudden stabbing interest and I freeze up; Virgin Records had routed the cost of the airfare through Joy's travel agency.

"Um. . . actually someone gave it to me." Oh boy, here we go. . .

"And who would this be?" He takes out a pad and pen.

"Derrick May of Detroit." I don't know; it was the first name that popped into my head. "I used to work for him."

"Riiiiight. . . fiiiine. . ." the words liting upward as he scribbles madly upon the pad, licking his lips. "Now what does he do? Why would he give you a ticket to London?" He breaks into a wide sinister grin and I feel a nervous bubble building in my bowels. Yeah right, i'm thinking. Did you really think you were fooling anybody, you little tweaker?

"Is something funny?" he's asking me, losing the grin.

"What? No, it's nothing; I guess i'm just kinda tired. Sorry."

"Right. Derrick May, then."

"He's a musician. I used to run his independent record company."

That did it. Instant drug-possession profile.

"Right, then. Have your baggage and follow me please," He snaps my passport closed with a gesture of finality and turns to leave.

"What? Wait. . ." Shit. "It was a very small company," I tell him with some earnest, gathering my luggage. "It's really no big deal. . ."

Christ. . .

---

My things, the stuff of my life, are contained in one large suitcase and two small carry-alls. I stand idly by and smoke in silence while two men and a woman with a particularly official air (she's colder than a frozen fish-clit. . .) rifle through my shit.

I glance over at what they are doing and realize that this is ridiculous. It's ridiculous. What the fuck are they looking for? If i had a brick of coke stashed in my luggage, would i really be dressed like this? Maybe that's the point. Maybe they think i'm running a feint, a reverse-psychology play. If i had believed that i could have gotten away with it, i sure as shit would have stashed an ounce of bud someplace in my baggage. English grass is notoriously expensive and impotent. But. . . i never would have gotten away with it. You rarely get away with anything in this life; i'm convinced of this. You only get away with something by accident; when you're not trying to get with something, when you really couldn't give a fuck-that's when you get away the lot.

The female inspector pulls a jar of Molding Mud out of one of the bags, unscrewing the cap and cautiously sniffing the contents.

"What's this?" she asks and I considered a lie, just to dick with her a little bit, then think better of it.

"It's a kind of styling gel," I tell her. She wrinkles her brow; looks unconvinced.

"Gel," I say, just a little irritated now. "You know; hair crap." Jesus. I didn't bring over anything dubious, so there's really nothing to worry about except that there's always something to worry about. The guy who brought me in for the search finds something in my suitcase and turns to me, all of a sudden.

"At any rate," he says, "I can see why you didn't pay for your ticket." He smiles wryly and holds up a crumpled fax from Virgin he had found in one of my bags. It describes the layout and format of the artwork i'm supposed to do, along with a list of telephone numbers and contacts at the office in Portobello Road.

Did I really bring that thing? I can't fucking believe I brought that thing. Now they're either going to kick my ass out of the country, or tax the shit out of me when I leave.

"Oh right, that thing. . ." I say, a little too sweetly. "That's what I was supposed to do here, but they gave it to somebody else. You know."

"Oh come now," he says, more sure of himself now. "That's utter crap, that. What are you really here for?"

And so it goes; back and forth and back again and when they finally let me go, near two hours later, the Tubes going into town are closed. Dragging my violated baggage through the cavernous terminal, I exchange my currency and pop a 20p coin into a pay

phone to give Susan a buzz. No one answers. After 1:30 in the a.m and she isn't home. I'm going to have to cab it into the Center. What shit.

---

I'm radiating a disgusting vibe, so the cabbie drives along the M4 in silence while I eyeball the progression of the fare-meter with dismay. It strikes fifteen pounds and I groan out loud; we aren't even close to where we're going. We enter the West end and I direct the driver along a complicated route of compact sidestreets and cobblestone ways to Susan's in Westbourne Park. She lives in a second story flat her parents had given to her when they themselves retired to Kent. Susan works as a make-up artist with the Mandy Coakley agency; Derrick introduced me to her a few years ago when she came to Detroit to paint a mural on the wall of the Music Institute, where he was working as a DJ.

When the cab pulls up in front of the flat, the fare-box reads 22 pounds fifty. About one third of my money.

While i'm unloading my luggage from the boot, Susan comes out of the building in bare legs, wearing a football jersey and gives me a hug. We tip-toe into the apartment so as not to wake Alice-a friend of Susan's who recently had a fight with her boyfriend and so is staying over for a while. Susan has a large homey flat with high ceilings and lots of stucco. Roccoco red Asian rug laid flat over the white floorboards, strewn with tubes of oils and jars of thinner and newspapers with thin expensive camel-hair brushes drying on them. Her frameless paintings are visible in various places-sticking out from behind the couch, stacked and leaning in the corners, a couple resting on the mantle above the dead and dusty fireplace-all oils done in somber muted tones of blue and grey. You can smell the liquid before you actually see the portraits. Mostly old lovers, bust renderings, and her favorite subjects-bikini-clad, beach blanket babes of the fifties-era Vargas variety.

Alice has the guest bedroom. Leaving all the lights off, I quietly set down my luggage. Sloughing out of my heavy leather jacket, i start unfolding the sofa-bed in the living room. Susan goes into the kitchen to make tea. From the living room I can see her; a small blonde with a sloppily-cropped haircut, flitting about in silken panties and the ratty Detroit Lions football jersey

that Derrick left over the last time he stayed here. Her bare feet slide and slap along the tiled floor as she pokes around in the cupboards, sorting the dishes, rattling the silverware.

I sit on the edge of the bed to pull off my boots-and immediately begin searching in the dark for my shaving kit so I can quickly powder my stinky feet, Jesus Christ. Then lie back on the bed with all my clothes on, closing my eyes against the slat of light from the kitchen. Manufacture a thin, noxious fart that somehow smells of burnt steak; allow this foul American fog to float about the quaint and quieted English atmosphere.

"So Todd; how've you been? Talk to me," Susan calls from the kitchen.

The \$24,000 question. I spew a flume of air to the ceiling, releasing tension. Roll over, pulling the pillow over my head. Cry for maybe half a minute. Susan leans her head out of the kitchen.

"Todd? You take sugar or honey in your tea?-I forget."

---

Morning. With an inward groan, I awake to the sound of somebody in the shower. Fell asleep in my clothes. They feel stuck to me now, a second skin. My sinuses feel coated-no, caked, and I know it's going to be an odyssey just to roll out of bed to the kitchen for coffee. Mouth mashed flat on the drooled-on pillow, I open my eyes to the pleasant gurgle from the fish tank in the corner-a stream of silvery bubbles rising through the water, glittering like coins of liquid mercury. Magic.

Haven't eaten since the day I left Detroit. Even the goldfish begin to look appetizing-bloated bellies gone to fat from fish flakes, slowly navigating the circumference of the tank. Fins hanging down like baroque drapery, or the trails on a wedding dress. Little swimming brides with bellies fat enough to filet and fry.

It's not Susan, but this mysterious Alice person that suddenly comes out of the shower. Thinking me still asleep, she quietly backs out of the bathroom, soaking wet, wrapped in a terrycloth towel, and closes the door behind her. When she turns around, she is startled to see that my eyes are open, slothfully regarding her near-nakedness.

Smiles at me. "Hello," she says, introducing herself. "Todd, right?" and I say yeah, rolling over to the edge of the bed to shake her warm wet hand. She tells me that Susan left early for a job in Tottenham Court Road and will be back later tonight. "Did she leave me a key?" I ask, and Alice, shaking her head and smiling somewhat sadly down on me, tells me that she doesn't know.

Alice is a tall thin drink of water; pale white skin flowered with freckles; bright black hair cut short in a bob. Her toes-long and thin with subtly gray chips for nails-let me know that we are not going to become lovers, but her sweet face and quiet countenance assures me that we will be friends. She turns to go to the bedroom to dress, and I surprise her-halting her in mid-

step-when I cough into a fist and ask, "Listen; do you maybe want to go for a cup of coffee or something?"

---

After a long hot shower-sloughing off the thick film of industrial American funk-I walk with Alice through Portobello Road. There is the minor bustle of shopkeepers, just now setting up for the day. The orange morning sunlight reflects off the light dew that has settled over everything; beading the bright red metal newspaper vending machines on the corners, the flat lids on the plastic blue trash bins, the shiny hoods on the parked black Peugeot's, the brown cobblestone streets. London is an ugly city, but filled with pleasant vibes; a good sandwich on bad bread. Black cabs and red double-decker buses skate by in the busy streets, bringing back good memories. Alice asks me, leaning in close, smiling, "Todd? What are you grinning about?"

We seem to be the youngest people in the street. Somber grey businessmen pass by with folded umbrellas and raincoats from Burberry's, hustling for the office. Others-bald and bristling blue-collar workers with bursting red noses from endless nights at the pub, foreign-looking shop apprentices and waiters busily smoking fragrant French cigarettes to the visible offense of the Hindu housewives-all stand idly by the bus stops, waiting. A cultural smorgasbord.

After stopping at an off-license to buy my first pack of cigarettes-Silk Cuts; they are all I will smoke here since Marlboros are too expensive-we end up at a back table in a crowded little Italian coffee shop. Alice orders orange juice and I get a cup of mocha java with a side shot of espresso and a buttered scone. I take a sip from the heroin-strength mixture and sit back in the chair, pleased with the creative clutter of crap we have arranged on the tiny tabletop: cigarettes, ashtray, chrome Zippo, pastry-plates and coffee cups; a colorful collage.

Feeling good, I begin to ask Alice vague, friendly questions like, "So what's your move? Tell me about yourself. . ." She seems pleased with this mad palaver, and tells me how she met Susan at a photo shoot last year for Blue; Alice's boyfriend.

"Is he a model, your boyfriend?" I ask and she sheepishly admits that no, he's a singer, the lead singer for Politiches Schreiben. I tell her those songs bring back good memories of the ninth grade, high school. Alice asks how old I am, and when I tell her twenty-two, she seems shocked.

"How old did you think I was?" I ask her, and she tells me that she didn't know and I ask her age and she tells me that she is twenty eight. Something must have registered on my face at this because she laughs and asks me the same question I previously put to her. And though I do admit that I thought she was younger, I don't confess that I was thinking she was around maybe nineteen or something. I look into her sweet, girlishly glowing face and find it hard to imagine someone fucking her; grunting and sweating and finally coming-jetting into the spasming chasm of what must be a womanly cunt, a hot and hairy twenty-seven-year-old cunt-but I guess it must have happened because she tells me that she's been living with the guy for four years. I suddenly realize and am amused by the little happenings in the life of every woman, every woman,

and find myself suddenly wanting to see Alice's navel.

"Four years?" I ask her, and she nods slowly. I smile at this hidden side of her and this, her otherness, is brought home to me in the same way I used to moon over pregnant women in elevators when I was a little kid. It was a distracting thought; no matter how innocent they looked, that gracefully blooming belly was proof-positive that they had good cunt. The scenarios I had concocted in my perverted little pre-pubescent head. . .

I had a pregnant baby-sitter-Jan, in her third trimester-when I was a little kid; maybe five or six years old. She used to let me stay up late and we'd sit in front of the television together,

watching Beretta or S.W.A.T. or Mission Impossible. It was long summer, the summer before I was to begin kindergarten classes at the neighborhood elementary school, and I grew intrigued at Jan's progressive fatness-her womb revving up like an organic engine. One night I fell asleep on the couch and woke up in Jan's arms as she was carrying me upstairs to bed. Thinking about it now, I can't imagine what she must've thought when she reached the bed and found me unwilling to let go. Feigning sleep, I kept my arms and legs wrapped around her-clinging like a fucking monkey even when she released me and leaned over the bed to put me down on the mattress. Grinning, a horny little devil, I sniffed a puff of perfume rising from between her massive, swollen breasts; my teeny prick pushing like a hard little nail against her bloated belly. . .

Recollecting this hazy memory, I find myself dazed by a potpourri of childhood images, and it's only when the waiter comes by with the check do I finally pull myself out. "Oh shit," I mutter out loud, suddenly remembering something. "What time is it?" I ask, turning to the waiter. He shrugs; is not wearing a watch.

"Almost eleven," Alice says. "What is it?"

"I almost forgot," I tell her, searching through my pockets for some cash. "I got an appointment at Virgin; I gotta go." I pay the bill, leaving a pretty good tip, and my legs are tired when we stand up from the table. Alice says nothing, gathering her things to go and I look at her as she slings her purse over her shoulder. "Listen," I find myself saying, "do you want to come with me?"

---

Virgin runs their Dance Music department out of a tiny office in a brick-paved neighborhood off Portobello Road. We get a cab and I give Alice the money to pay the driver while

I ring the buzzer outside the front door, staring silently into the security camera mounted in the wrought-iron doorframe. The electronic latch buzzes and I hold the door open for Alice as the cab pulls away. Inside, the office is a small cluttered space with stairs leading upstairs to the second floor. Although i'm not surprised by the decor-worn, pale blue carpeting and cheap furnishings-I can tell that Alice is; most of these places are a definite anti-climax.

Right now the office is packed with cardboard shipping crates

of records and CD's. A secretary is trying to field phone calls behind a wraparound desk while simultaneously dealing with a uniformed driver from UPS who stands nearby, impatiently waiting for her to finish signing a book of pink and yellow receipts. Alice sits down on the couch behind a coffee table sloppily piled with dog-eared copies of Melody-Maker, NME and Billboard while I stand by the desk, waiting. The secretary-arrogant, pale, pimply-looks up from her phone call, the receiver locked in the crook of her neck. "Yes?" she says hurriedly and I introduce myself, telling her i'm late for a meeting with this guy, an executive in Product Development. She picks up an in-house phone and a minute later she's telling me to go on up; that he's waiting for me on the second floor.

I turn to Alice. "This shouldn't take too long," I tell her, and she says okay and I take the stairs two at a time.

---

The executive in charge of Product Development is twenty-six and introduces himself as Clive. Clive is short and cherubic, with gothic-looking dyed black hair and a five o'clock shadow that doesn't quite work for his pale round face. If this were California, he would have an immaculate manicure, a smooth affected rap and his name would probably be "Chip." Shaking his hand, I can tell by his unctuous tones that I am not what he expected either, and I get a fleeting sense of weary futility standing there; late, disheveled, anxious.

I follow him into a small office at the end of the hall. Shutting the door behind us, we sit down to an extended corporate powwow-rapping about horseshit like deadlines, materials, budget costs and overruns, my advance-all briefly interrupted when, feeling like a total ass, I go downstairs to apologize to Alice, letting her know that the thing is dragging on longer than I thought and that maybe she should go on back to Susan's.

It's early evening when I finally step out of the building. The sun is creeping below the horizon, casting an orange glow over the silhouetted London rooftops. I reach into a back pocket, unfolding the cashier's check Clive wrote to cover my advance and the first week's per diems for living expenses. Slowly, carefully calculate the amount in American dollars, then re-fold it into a little origami triangle and tuck it into my boot. Light a cigarette.

Smiling to myself, not quite ready to hail a cab just yet, I begin walking-listening to the comforting click of my harness boot heels on the cobblestone streets-towards the sidewalk flea market vendors down the block; all busily packing in their stalls for the day.

---

Later, I get home to find both Susan and Alice crowded together in the bathroom, dolling up to go out for the evening in front of the mirror above the sink. I stand in the doorway, watching them, and Susan tells me that Mark called and that we're all supposed to meet him and Sofy at Subterana in a few hours. With money in pocket-wonderful crisp new 20f bills; I've been smelling them all day-i'm extremely jazzed at the prospect of a night out. I

step between the two of them, holding each of them at the waist to pull them into me; nibbling at their earlobes, making them squeal and slap at me with their twin Kent hairbrushes.

"I'll be ready in a minute," I tell them over my shoulder, turning to the toilet in the corner. Fishing out my prick, I stand over the toilet; rolling my head back to work out the kinks in my neck. Groan out loud as I release a thin stream of fragrant piss into the porcelain bowl. Susan and Alice react to the loud splashings, halting with their lipsticks in mid-stroke to slowly turn from the mirror. Catch a glimpse of me standing there-ecstatically wiggling my toes in my shoes-and run out of the bathroom, averting their heads. I flash them a practiced evil grin and laugh out loud as they curse me from the living room.

---

There is a line around the block when our cab slows to a halt at Subterana. I can see the doorman-a vicious, limey bastard no doubt-standing in front of the entrance; indifferent to the salutations of the people in front who are all waving fistfuls of English money in front of his fat red face.

Our cab pulls up to the red cobblestone curb. Susan peeks out of the window at the queue that wraps around the block as we dig through our pockets for the cab fare. We pile out of the car and tentatively make for the entrance; standing on tiptoes, looking for Mark or Sofy in the crowd coagulated near the door. I hear a familiar voice with an Italian accent calling my name and turn to see Sofy; leaning her head outside the door, waving us in.

I point the way for Susan and Alice. We move shyly past the doorman, who just nods us on at Sofy's bidding and then we're inside. I haven't seen her in over a year and, screeching, Sofy puts her arms around me and we stand there, hugging in the foyer. People from the incoming crowd shove rudely past us and we move a little to the side, against the wall.

"Baby," I shout above the basso rumbling of the speakers, stepping back to look at her. Sofy is a feisty little girlchick with small bud-like breasts, a tight littlecracker ass and curvy

muscular legs. She hails from Rome and retains a thick lilting accent, but is all London these days, studying fashion at the University. Her attire is strictly urban armor. Dark jeans cinched tightly at the waist and rolled at the cuffs, white T-shirt and Timberland boots; a fashion soldier. Grinning at me, she does a little out-of-character pirouette; posing.

"Perfect," I holler above the music and then the doorman finally gets mad ugly, telling us to either go in or get the fuck out.

In the two years since I've been here the club hasn't changed. It's still like stepping into Taboo or the Red Zone back in New York. Cold neon splashing everywhere, making it too bright, too decorative and much too clean for anybody to get truly funky. Non-dancing

fashion victims line the upper tiers like sex-hungry vultures, pickling their fingers in expensive, fruity drinks with foreign names.

"Where's Mark?" I scream into Sofy's ear out of the side of my mouth, lighting a Silk Cut.

"He couldn't make it; he might meet us later," she hollers over her shoulder, still leading me by the hand as Susan and Alice follow, gripping me by the shirt-tails. Her eyes flash down to the cigarette pinched between my fingers. "You got a fag?" she says, and I pass her the pack as we reach the bar.

I ask her about Peter, retrieving my lighter from my pants pockets. Her face is illuminated in a halo of orange light as she leans into the flame, cupping it in her palms. "He's in Manchester," she tells me, then tugs on my sleeve, pulling me onto the dancefloor. "C'mon; I want you to meet somebody," she says and I look back to Susan and Alice, shrugging, and they nod me on.

On the dancefloor with Sofy, I find myself with only a little juice going; half-gas at best. The Dj is totally uninspiring and I stand there for a minute, looking around for this friend of Sofy's, but Sofy just jumps right in, making artful ellipses with her hips and shoulders. I have to shove around a little bit, fighting for my dance space in the sweltering crowd of rigid English contortionists. Your average, everyday Englishman is a stiff specimen on the dancefloor; they keep their arms slack at their sides, continually craning their necks around to hunt for interesting characters in the crush of hot bodies and nobody touches or dances with anyone else; they just. . . rave.

It isn't too long before I notice the surrounding crowd beginning to give me a wide berth, and I begin to enjoy myself immensely; flapping my arms about in an extravagant American fashion; beaming a smile whenever I feel myself smack somebody in the mouth or gut my elbow into a soft, anonymous belly. When I open my eyes, Sofy is gone. I keep dancing, and it's not long before I notice this girl staring at me from not too far away. She's not English; I can tell right away from the way she moves. Tan, chiseled features; maybe French or Italian with something ethnic thrown in the mix-African or East Indian, I don't know. Medium height, busty; dressed in tight cut-off jeans shorts that reveal curvy legs, ending in a pair of suede Timberland boots with thick cotton socks, bunched at the ankle. Padded, waist-length nylon military jacket with a Gaultier Junior logo stenciled on the shoulder. Leather African pendant hanging from her neck on a shoestring thong. Dark hair, slicked back and tied into a ponytail at the back of her head like the handle on a beer stein. I smile at her, and though her mouth turns up at the corners, her brow is knit with serious intent as she moves closer to me through the crowd.

The dancefloor is a dark and funky sweat box. The maddening pulse of the strobelights flash over the massive crowd of dancing, screaming youth; giving the illusion that everyone is moving in slow-motion, syncopated jumps. The racket from a four-car collision would be lost in the barrage of furiously fast techno that booms from the speakers mounted high in the corners and the girl is swaying to and

fro, blissed out and hypnotized by the beat. Our eyes meet. . . and

suddenly, without words, a sweet and silent pact is made in the middle of the dancefloor and I have her in my arms. Moving in close behind her with an arm around her waist, I hook a thumb through her belt loop, grinding my eager front into her plump butt. We sway back and forth to the beat with our eyes closed. I plant my face in the nape of her neck, taking in the doggy musk of fertile sweat and the plastic-ky odor of shampoo in her hair. She turns around, throwing her arms around my neck and we are suddenly dirty-dancing; drawing intoxicating, suggestive ellipses with hips and asses. I can feel myself getting hot-staring at her, panting lusty gusts of bad air into her face and then suddenly Sofy comes out of nowhere, pulling us apart, grinning. I find myself almost getting angry until Sofy stands on tip-toes to shout in my ear above the noise, "Do you know Carola?" Motioning with her chin to my Latin henchick.

---

Later, I stand at the bar idly sipping at an Aqua Libra while Carola and Sofy converse in rapid Italian; tossing sidelong glances at me in between pauses. I fiddle with my drink and stare out over the dancefloor as Carola says something in Italian and then Sofy turns to me and says, "She knew you were American by the way you danced. You know-" Sofy pinches her cigarette in the corner of her mouth and does a little mock-parody of my patented dancefloor chicken-strut-flailing her arms about, fisting the air, almost knocking my drink out of my hands, laughing. The imitation is good, maybe too good. Sofy had told me that Carola-also from Rome-is visiting London from New York, where goes to film school at NYU. She had originally been staying at Sofy's but they got into some kind of argument one night and Carola moved in with this guy she's seeing now; a shoe designer who has a studio in Portobello, not too far from here. Carola is a beautiful woman, and i find myself thinking: I see a space. She hasn't let go of my arm since we walked off the dancefloor, maybe twenty minutes ago. Right now she begins rubbing at the back of my neck, working her fingers into the muscles there. "What's wrong?" she asks in halting English. "You are so quiet. . ." I shrug, stabbing out my cigarette in the ashtray on the bar.

"Jet lag, man. My shit is about to shut down." I stretch out my arms above my head, almost yawning. I tell them i'm going to the bathroom and they nod and immediately begin clucking away in Italian as I turn away and forge through the crowd. I spot Alice on the dancefloor with some guy and throw her a wink, but she doesn't see me.

---

The men's room is hot and crowded. Humans have their goddamn nerve, the way we talk about the stench of monkey houses at the zoo. Because this place smells exactly like the monkey house at the zoo. Standing at the urinal, I have to take off my belt to get at my zipper. the belt is a wide leather biker accessory with a silver buckle-a little item I had borrowed out of Kerri's closet before she moved out my apartment last year. I lay it over the piping at the urinal and stare at the ceiling-letting out a spray of hard yellow stinkstream that makes me moan out loud in relief. I pull down the little silver handle to flush. When I look down to zip up, I see that

somebody has stolen the belt from right under my goddamn nose.

"Motherfucker," I sing out loud, whipping around to look for whoever might have taken off with it, but the tiny tiled room is filled to capacity with anonymous English faces-so crowded that I can't even see below my own chest height. I plow my way back into the club, grumbling and laughing at the same time.

I don't see any sign of Sofy or Carola, or even Susan or Alice. Feeling my scalp beginning to itch-the hives, no doubt-I have to push and shove my way through the crowd to the front entrance to get outside. The guy working the door taps me on the shoulder along the way out.

"No re-entry mate," he informs me, arms still folded over his chest. Which is okay; he only has me confused with someone who gives a fuck. I don't bother introducing myself or anything.

---

The cool air hits me like a Nestea plunge. I pace the front entrance among the scattered masses and the astounding queue of hopefuls that stretch around the block. I slowly begin to cool off, pacing beneath the colorless glow of a different moon-an ocean away from the one that serves as a friendly nepenthe back home.

I reach into my pocket for the deck of Silk Cuts and find myself flinching; startled at the sudden burst of feminine screams coming from the crowd coagulated at the entrance. Some girl's voice barks out a strangled cry of panic, real anguish, and I quickly hustle over to check the action. A fight has broken out in the line at the door between some skin-head and a stocky little dread with a ring in his nose. I can hear the sound of their shoes scuffling on the pavement as I push my way to the front and am amazed and instantly disappointed to see that the both of them are mostly pussy-footing it; trading lewd threats and insults while halfheartedly pushing each other around. It is obvious that they are only waiting for somebody to break it up. But the surrounding crowd is convinced. People are backed off in a wide diameter, and a couple of women-the girlfriends, probably-are actually screaming, really going into hysterics, before a paddy-wagon suddenly pulls up out of nowhere and two red-nosed constables waving white wooden batons hustle the two fake gladiators into the back of the van. It all happened so fast; I momentarily wonder if I've accidentally wandered onto a movie set.

The crowd of rubber-necks breaks up and I spot Sofy talking to a few other people down the street. I go over, hands in pockets, to meet them. Susan is there, smiling and sweating from dancefloor exertion. Her short, blonde hair is plastered down on her head like a helmet. I lean down to give her a kiss on the cheek and her sweat tastes vaguely salty on my tongue.

I get introduced around. There is a robust blonde named Susan and her boyfriend Kingsley; a tall African brother with smooth, blue-black skin and a rolling Senegalese accent. We all shake hands.

"So what's up with that thing with the paddy-wagon?" i'm saying, hands in back pockets, scratching inconspicuously at the rash on my ass; I think i'm allergic to Susan's shower gel or something.

"Oh right," Kingsley says, clapping me on the back. "Sorry you had to see that mate; never happens, really."

"What's that?" I don't get it, concentrating instead on the mad itching sensation on my ass as I scratch my buns through the back pockets of my jeans.

"You know," he says, motioning with his chin toward the club, where the spectators have broken up into loose groups. "That lot back there. . ." and I suddenly understand he means to actually apologize to me as a foreigner for having had to witness an act of violence in his country.

"It's okay Kingsley; he's an American," Sofy tells him. "He's from Detroit," she says, laughing.

"Oh right," he nods, but I can tell he really doesn't get it, and find myself marveling at this; the culture gap caused by murder statistics in my hometown-statistics that probably rival the fucking automobile production. "Listen," he says to me, dismissing it. "I just left Mark over at the studio; he's going to be plowing it through the rest of the night, but said to say hello and that he'll ring you back this week."

I tell him that sounds cool and then thanks and then Carola comes over, planting a hand on the small of my back. I slip an arm around her waist. She tilts her chin up and a chaste hello kiss suddenly happens in the charged air between us. The connection causes a minute rift in the conversation with Sofy and Susan and Alice staring at me, and I wait for somebody to say something else.

"So what's going on?" Kingsley says, looking around the group. Nobody has any ideas. It's a Sunday; nothing much else is going on tonight except for maybe Method Air and that's strictly after-hours; the place won't open for a little while yet.

"I don't know about you guys, but i'm kinda beat," I tell them, stretching out my arms in broad cat-like yawn, feeling the jet-lag. "Why don't we just go somewhere and chill for a while? I just want to get used to you guys again, you know?"

"Erin's in Birmingham," Carola chips in. "He left me the keys; we could all go over there for a spliff and a chat. . ." There are raised eyebrows all around. I like the sound of that option particularly. The option itself, and the way it was presented. It had a pleasant rhythm to it, rolling off her Latin tongue; a spleeff and a schaat.

"I don't know," Susan says. "I have a job in the morning. Why don't you lot go on? Alice?"

But Alice is shaking her head. "I have to get up and find a job," she says. "i'd better not."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right; it is pretty late," Kingsley begins,

and I start laughing. "What's wrong with you fags?" I say, looking over at Susan. "C'mon, let's hang out. . ."

"No, i'd better not," Susan says. She goes over to Sofy and Susan. They kiss on the cheek. "Why don't you go on?" she says to me as she reaches up to plant a kiss on Kingsley's proffered cheek. "You and Carola. I'll leave the key under the mat."

I turn to Carola. "Is that cool? I mean, are you tired or anything?" She shakes her head no as Susan and Alice step into the street to flag down a passing cab. "Alright," I say quietly, giving her shoulder a soft squeeze. Then, to Susan and Alice: "You'll leave the key out, right?" They nod and wave as they pile into the waiting cab. They drive off. I shake hands with Kingsley and Susan, who go back into the club.

"I'm going home before the Tubes close," Sofy says, shrugging. Leaning over for a kiss on the cheek, she tells me to give her a call in the morning. We make plans to meet tomorrow; I have to go into the center to shop for art supplies. I stand a little to the side as Sofy and Carola exchange some stuff in Italian, and then Sofy waves us off, walking down the block. Carola comes over, and we stand together beneath the halo of a streetlight.

"So," she exhales, hands behind her back, smiling up at me.

"So. . ." I exhale, reaching for her, laughing. . .

---

She had assured me that Erin's train won't get in until 7 a.m. While kissing her on the bed with the lights off, I gaze into the phosphorous glow of the digital clock on the nightstand and see that I have the next three hours to run amuck over this girl's entire body, which I've stripped naked to reveal long slender legs, tapering to smooth creamy thighs. I'm fumbling for the English rubber in my leather keycase, and I don't believe it; i'm fucking drooling for godsake, and she's naked and writhing beneath me on the mattress; muttering little ecstasies, sucking my nipples,

and-wondering if she's gonna let me stick my dick in her butt-I mentally lose it for a minute and drop the keycase under the bed, but everything feels so good that I don't give a fuck; she opens her legs and I lurch forward, entering her too quickly, and she gasps out loud. Through the moonlight coming in the window, I can see the outline of her head on the pillow. She's moaning and gripping my shoulders, and though her nails dig painfully into my back, her puss-tight and hot-feels too good to complain, and I ask her, whispering, "Are you on the pill?"

She moans, irritated by this delay of events and says, "No. . . don't you have something?" I tell her no, and we lay there, contemplating this for a silent moment.

And then start fucking anyway. . .

---

Tuesday. Finally went shopping with Sofy for art supplies, earlier this afternoon, after putting it off a day. Walked through the crowded streets of Piccadilly Circus in the drizzling rain, intermittently ducking into the various video arcades to cash pound notes for change to play the games-mostly Narc, or Terminator II-until the rain let up. After leaving the arcade, we stop to stash my bag of purchases-sketch book, rolled canvas, bag full of brushes, metal tubes of acrylics and oils, jars of liquid and turpentine-in a coin-op locker near Piccadilly tube station so we could catch a film, Peter Greenaway's Prospero's Books, at a tiny cult theatre in the square. Sat in the dark red velvety atmosphere, saying nothing for two hours until we got outside and shared a joint, walking along Tottenham Court Road.

So we smoked this huge fatty that Sofy rolled in the darkness of the movie theatre, and strolled aimlessly among the masses, laughing like a couple of idiots at the ridiculous shit. The facial expressions of every passing pedestrian seemed to take on the caricature of one animal or another. The man at the corner with his hawkish nose buried in the pages of a Melody Maker suddenly looking like a fucking pelican; the upturned snout of a massive-assed meter maid resembling a wild boar. We garnered a multitude of curious stares from the passersby as we clutched each other and spun off into mad gales of laughter. Thoroughly stoned, Sofy had to grab me by the back of my shirt to keep me from being mowed down by a brown UPS truck as I staggered across the street. She cursed me in Italian while I stood there, laughing, soaked to skin by the spray of gutter water the driver left in his wake, honking his horn and hollering out the window.

"Fuck," she exclaimed, dragging me across the street. "You are too stoned. . ." I pissed and moaned all the way to the tube station to get my stuff; she finally agreed to chill with me in the nearby park for a few minutes so I could get my head together.

"So what happened last night?" she said to me in the park, eating sloppy sandwiches from Marks & Spencer-roast beef with red cabbage and Russian dressing for me, shrimp salad on croissant for her-wrapped in crackly wax paper. "Did you get laid?" I grinned at her through a mouthful of sandwich; chewing, staring blindly into the rain-breaking sun.

She shrugged. We chewed our sandwiches in companionable silence. Then, "Carola and I were both on ecstasy last night. That gave you a bit of an edge, I suppose."

"I like the way her hair smells," I said, chewing. "And her crooked teeth. She made me hot."

"I have crooked teeth."

"You have something better," I said, pointing to one of my own incisors to illustrate what i'm talking about. "What happened to that one you got in the front? The grey one."

"Car accident," she said. "It's dead." She nibbled at her sandwich, looking at me, rooting through the deli bag for a napkin.

"Can I smell your hair?"

"No."

"Okay."

"You have a nutty accent. You are an Italian speaker who speaks English with an English accent. You've been here, hearing it done that way. It has integrated into your shit. Or, rather, your shit has become it."

"No, Todd," she whined, "do we have to be mad scientists, just now? Can't we be something else, just for a minute? Finish your sandwich. . ." She smiled at me, mincing her sandwich between sharp, pointy little Latin teeth. "Are you going to call her?"

"Carola? I don't know. You think I should?"

She nodded, picking at her teeth with a fingernail. "You should call her," she decided. "You know; make love to her," Cocking a hand to her face as if it were a telephone receiver, she began cooing in Italian and making fishy little kissing noises, laughing.

---

Late in the afternoon. Find myself alone in the flat with a note

on the refrigerator from Susan, saying that I got a message, a phone call from the States, from somebody named. . . Harris. This freaks me out a bit, enough so that I can't concentrate on the work i'm supposed to be doing-work i'm supposed to have started yesterday, or Sunday even. I sit crosslegged on the Asian rug, bent over the sketch book with a mechanical pencil. But nothing. . . is. . . coming, and I roll my neck on my shoulders, loosening up before I put the pencil to the paper, telling myself to just do it, goddamnit, start drawing, but-it's ridiculous, almost hilarious-I get nothing but a lurid image of Faris and Kerri rolling around together in bed, naked, laughing at me and then sweating and panting as they begin fucking, emitting soft curses and helpless little farts, and I throw my head back to face the ceiling, laughing with the sketch pad on my lap, but it comes out funny; more like a howl. I keep telling myself to think techno. . .think techno. . . and though I've got a copy of the BladeRunner soundtrack playing on the CD, I can't think of anything. Cursing, I put my pencil to the squared off pad and finally begin sketching but I keep returning to stark, unoriginal themes of biomechanical design, similar in style to H.R Geiger, and when I step back from the drawing I realize that it looks too much like H.R Geiger, any fool could see that, and I find myself tearing the page out of the sketch book. I stand in the middle of the cold gray room, and warn myself that it's only going to get worse if I start thinking about Kerri and Faris. Pondering my lack of inspiration and the impending deadline-i'm supposed to have camera ready artwork by Friday-I suddenly know that I am going to have problems.

I think i'm in trouble. . .

---

I'm sitting in front of the television when Susan comes home. From my vantage point-barefoot, lounging lazily on the couch smoking cigarettes-I can see her cab pulling away from the curb, outside the window. She keys into the flat, lugging her red toolbox full of brushes and powders, mascaras and lipsticks. Puffing, dragging the toolbox across the living room floor, keys still jingling in her fist, she looks up, grimacing. "Well? Aren't you going to give me a hand?" It's a bad joke, but I can't resist putting my hands together, clapping; applauding her winded effort.

"Cunt," she laughs, dropping the box on the floor, and I go over to help her get it into the foyer closet.

"How was your day?" I ask, reclaiming my seat on the couch while she hangs her jacket on a wire hanger.

"Oh it was alright," she says. "Work. I did meet this boy, one of the models. God, was he gorgeous. . ." She makes a serious face, crinkling her brow as she goes into the kitchen to put on water for tea.

"So did you bust moves? What happened?"

"No. He was completely stupid. . . a total cro-magnon." Then, "Fuck-all, this kitchen is a bloody mess. . ."

Silence in the midst of her kitchen racket: slamming cupboards, rattling the crockery. Then the phone rings; Susan calls out from the kitchen, asking me to get it.

"I can't," I protest. "I'm not here."

"What?"

"I'm avoiding someone. Can you get it Susan? I'm sorry. . ."

"Chrissake," she mutters, running for the phone in the bedroom. I can hear her end of the conversation from the living room.

"Hello? Er, no. . . i'm afraid he isn't here just now. Shall I tell him you called? Clive? Does he have your number? Alright. No worries. . . 'bye." She hangs up the phone, and comes into the living room, drying her hands on a dishtowel. "What was all that about?"

"He's the guy from Virgin," I tell her. "I don't why he keeps calling; the thing isn't due until Friday for fuck's sake."

Susan stands over me for a moment, saying nothing. I look up at her, and she shrugs and goes back to the kitchen. "Well I guess you know what you're doing," she says.

"I know what i'm doing," I mutter out loud, to no one, turning back to the television.

I know what i'm doing. Sure. But what the hell does that have to do with anything?

---

Mark Moore does call near the end of the week, and I agree to meet him at Sam Therapy, this recording studio in Portobello where he's busy mixing down some track for somebody, i'm not sure who. Renegade Soundwave? Cookie Crew? I don't know.

I take the train the one stop down (lazy bastard) to Ladbroke Grove, and cross the cobblestone street outside the station. Appear in a cluttered neighborhood of kebob shops, betting parlors, pubs, fish and chip shops, and a Royal Mail that reminds me of my first trip to England, when, like a mark, I mistook those places for the post offices. Turn down some residential avenue with a block-long row of parallel-parked carsâ a single millimeter of space between the bumpers. Still slightly stoned from the bit of hash resin I smoked from Susan's wooden bowl when I woke up this morning, I make the bad mistake of scrambling over the adjacent bumpers of two of these vehicles-trying to cross the street without having to walk to the end

of the block-and set off a row of car alarms that move down the street in a domino-effect. The passing pedestrians who saw what I did stop to stare at me from across the street. The claxon sounds roll down the block, and I keep walking, head tilted down to stare at the ground, cursing softly and giggling to myself.

The recording studio is in a building that reminds me of Manhattan fire stations in the 1920's-a red brick box with a clove-shaped set of tall wooden doors, the dull red paint ancient and cracked and peeled back from the rains. There is a security camera mounted at the top right corner of the door. It's cocked down at a crooked angle, staring at me through a single eye; is as out of place as the gooey clock faces in a Dali desert. I press the bell for Sam Therapy, and a clipped English accent comes from the intercom. I give him my name. After a pause, the door gives an angry buzz, and clacks open when I turned the knob.

They're in the middle of doing overdubs when I walk into the studio. Mark turns from the massive 48-track board laid out in front of him and raises a finger to his lips, warning me to keep quiet. I smile, wave hello, and sink down into a chair in the corner; carefully light a cigarette. Some girl in the voice booth-a tall, severe-looking African chick with her hair all done up in

braids and wooden beads-is whining into the microphone, and though she sounds like shit for the most part, she is a beautiful woman who is obviously getting into it. Sways back and forth in front of the microphone, eyes closed, two hands just touching her temple to steady the heavy set of headphones. More wailing, and then she leans forward, hands sliding down the front of her thighs, then moving back up over her hips-sculptured denim ass protruding rude and beautiful. I draw on the filter of the Silk Cut and filled my lungs with smoke. Hold it. Drink in the sight of her, squirming sexily in the glass booth. Exhale. Close my eyes.

When I opened my eyes-two tracks later, haven't said word one to Mark yet-I find myself staring at a massive Thai stick, proffered beneath my nose by a hand studded with obsidian and turquoise rings of gypsy design. I turn my head, following the length of the arm. It ends at Mark's face. His lips are pursed in a way that lets me know he just inhaled a rich lungful of dope and can't say anything. He raises his eyebrows inquiringly and gives the joint an enticing little shake in front of my face.

"Dude," I say, plucking the huge, two-paper spliff from his fingers. I lay back in the chair and sniff at the smoke wafting lazily from the lit end. Mark is the only English cat I know who doesn't mix his shit with cigarette tobacco. He knows what's up. "You are the man, dude," I say, a little too loudly. I grimace apologetically, then lean back in the chair, sucking harshly on this bigass bomber. And it isn't long before the singing suddenly seems to sound somehow better than when I first walked in here, and I find myself drumming my thighs to the beat. Shivers of ecstasy streak up the insides of my thighs with every knee-slap, the mystic charges ending at my crotch, engorging the blood in the head of my cock. Stoned out of my mizzy, I don't realize I've been sporting a perma-grin for the past fifteen minutes-eyes closed, smiling blissfully into the sound pouring from the speakers-until I open my eyes at one point and catch Mark and his studio engineer pointing at me and laughing, the sound of their voices buried beneath the music. Eventually the hallucinogenic high

levels off, and I find myself winding down, submerged in that last mellow stage before sobering, when you're like, "what is life, anyway?"

A little bit later I even fall asleep. When I wake up-hours later? i don't know-they are still going at it. I rise from the chair, bleary-eyed and stumbling, to slowly squeeze past the wall-mounted rack of keyboards, drum machines, samplers. Mark leans over close while I say hello, quietly, in his ear. I ask him for directions out of here, back down to the lobby-the security guard had led me through a veritable maze to get in here. After a bit of indecipherable speech that slips in and out of the music blasting from the speakers, I give up on making anything of what he is trying to tell me, and assure him that i'll find the way out. I tell him i'll call him tomorrow and we both laugh-the sound completely mute beneath the volume of the speakers-at the nutty cinematography of the evening. I wave goodbye and turn for the door.

---

After wandering the carpeted corridors for maybe ten or fifteen minutes, I suddenly realize that I don't know where the fuck I am going. I don't know where the fuck I am going. I had thought the hallway ended at the set of stairs leading two floors down to the lobby. Instead, I come nose to nose with a sliding metal grill that retracted out of a slit in the wall to cut off the corridor. I turn around, find the stairs, walk down, and run headlong into another one of these sliding metal gates that remind me of those crazy extensible contraptions people use to keep their puppies confined in the kitchen. What shit. I curse out loud, wondering if maybe I have to go up a floor, walking through another wing before going down a different set of stairs to get to a corridor uninhibited by these ridiculous metal grates. Or do they completely seal off the goddamn joint, this hour of the night? I'm too stoned for this, and the stupidity of this shit-I mean, I simply can't get out of the goddamn building-strikes me, and I suddenly find myself crazed by the prospect of the compact walls surrounding me at all sides. The carpet also bugs me-that plastic Astroturf crap that reminds me of the greens at a fucking putt-putt. I stagger quickly, blindly, boots clomping heavily down the halls, hoping to find the exit before Mark bumps into me on his way out of the studio for the night. I've been doing this for damn near half an hour; i'll never live the shit down if he comes out and catches me running about the empty hallways like a retarded white mouse in a fucking

Skinner box. There's this one part of the corridor that opens up into a mezzanine over the wide lobby, and I can only stare over the railing at the three-floor drop and think to myself: there it is, the goddamn door is right there. If I can only hold onto the railing and drop, maybe i'd only get a broken ankle or something. . .

An hour and a half later, Mark and the engineer guy stare up in surprise when I open the door to the studio. Still stoned, panting in frustration, I stagger into the room, grasping the backs of passing chairs for support. Mark cuts down the studio volume. They don't get it.

"All right, I give up-show me the way out of this

motherfucker, you freak. . ."

---

Take a day off, from doing absolutely nothing, to spend the afternoon with Dexter and Lori. I called Dexter earlier-woke him up, in fact-at his mother's house in Hayes Middlesex. After a bit of sleepy mumbling, he agreed to call Lori, his girlfriend, and hang out with me for the day. I'd earlier decided to get a tattoo, in Kensington High Street.

I met Dexter's older brother Darren when he came to Detroit three years ago to do some music for Derrick May's record label. It never worked out. Derrick and Darren developed some curious adversarial relationship that blew an ill wind over their plans, but Darren and I became good friends and he stayed at my shitty storefront apartment until I fell behind on the rent and was finally forced to lam it. I moved to my parent's house in the suburbs for a short time, and Darren moved in with Sabrina until I could finally arrange-with not a little help from Joy-for his ticket home two months later. I met Dexter and his girlfriend Lori when I came to London myself the very next year.

Curiously, I ended up having more in common with the younger Dexter than his brother Darren. Darren-a Buddhist, a laid-back individual-was many times driven to near madness by my crazed frenetic hashings. Many times, when I was in the midst of one tirade or another, he would warn me in solemn tones that I was "fucking up his vibe." I haven't seen Darren in a long time, and when I think of him now, I think of jasmine incense, the harsh balsam flavor of a bidi cigarette, the necklace he gave me from his own neck on my twenty-first birthday; a string of dark and shiny obsidian beads lined on a copper-wire chain. I think of the tantric evenings we spent sitting cross-legged and barefoot in the middle of my spare ghetto living room in Detroit with Sabrina and Faris and Diana, the four of us rambling of any number of mystic Buddhist prayer chants in an ancient and alien monosyllabic tongue. I never knew what the fuck we were mumbling, but the effect seemed to nevertheless induce a certain spiritual calm, an inner peace.

I think of the indecipherable script scratched like dead

hieroglyphics in his tiny papyrus prayer books, and the Gohonzen he kept stowed away in his Israeli paratrooper's pack like a guarded prize.

I think of nights spent in Toronto with Sabina and Diane, fucking on acid in anonymous hotel rooms. It seemed that me and Diane would always come first, then spend the next half hour or so lying together, nude beneath the sheets, the soft orange glow from a shared cigarette making for a pencil-thin rift in the tacit darkness as we listened to the proximate sounds of natural pleasure; Darren and Sabrina pounding loudly into each other in the next bed.

Dexter, on the other hand, is a wily, goateed ferret of a character, frittering away his days as an assistant art director at Melody Maker while tearing about town by night, hunched over the wheel of a battered silver Peugeot, tinny Chick Corea or Santana on the stereo. To listen to him talk. . . his speech an incomprehensible speed-rap, sometimes lapsing into his native Portuguese when he gets excited, carried away by a seemingly constant swirl of distracting stimuli-the sights, sounds and smells of the big blue world that penetrate his nutty, palpitating lifebox.

And then Lori. There was always something curiously magnetic about her thin Basque frame and the funny way Spanish rolled out of her mouth behind that slight cockney accent. It had a thick and bubbly kind of lilt snagged onto the end of it that suddenly, inexplicably, made me want to look at her feet. See how those toes with the unpainted nails would look, digging into the luxurious depths of shag-pile carpeting.

Dexter keeps a photo of her in his wallet, a tiny print of a larger photo she had had taken years ago, when she briefly considered taking that figure-whip-thin and Latin tough-on the road as a runway model. In the photo she lies-lounging majestically beneath a spray of hot white

light-on a wide platform draped with black velvet. Head thrown back, loose curls cascading over her shoulder in a rich ebony wave, neck arched to offer some kind of sacrifice or aerobic sex; I meandered between the two at odd times. In the photo she wears a pair of strapless suede leather mules, exposing the delicate curve of her ankles, those pink rounded heels, that muscular Achilles tendon that left a dull ache in the hollow curve of my chest.

"Oh my god," I muttered when Dexter first showed me the photograph, years ago, before I met her. "She's fucking beautiful man," and Dexter just grinned his sheepish grin, refolding the wallet and putting it away in a back pocket.

I remember being awakened by strange sounds in the middle of the night, crashed out on the couch at his mother's house near two years ago. On the balls of my bare feet, I crept like a thief in the night, navigating by touch the dark map of the living room. I crept slowly up the stairs to pause-crouched at the landing near the top-and listened to Dexter and Lori making love behind the blank aspect of a closed door.

One shifting movement or another drew a muffled creak from the wooden planking beneath the thick shag rug under my feet, and the gruntings, the hot hisses between clenched teeth, the rhythmic squeak of the mattress springs all paused in sudden listening, and I had to quickly, quietly, lam it back down the stairs-shoulders hunched in humiliation-to my miserable boycave.

Dexter and Lori have this thing. Whenever they get in the car together to go anywhere-the grocery, the ferry to Calais, anywhere-they christen the imminent drive with a kiss. Nothing too sloppy, or slobbery, or anything lewd like that-just a simple chaste peck on the lips. . . smack.

Of course I didn't know anything about this when, earlier today, I took the front seat on the way to the tattoo parlor in Kensington Market. Dexter got the car started and leaned forward to pop in an old Santana tape. I was rooting through the plastic shopping bag of cassettes on the floor near

my feet, checking out Dexter's collection, when Lori leaned forward from the back seat, eyes closed, lips playfully pursed. Dexter turned around and gave her a quick, unaffected snog before throwing the battered Peugeot into gear and pulling out of the driveway, and I thought it was just so nice. "Yummy. . ." i said. Laughing, they explained their little ritual.

The M4, during this-a lazy London afternoon with the orange rays of the sun just breaching the foggy cloud cover above, the sky the color of dirty dishwater-looks just like the Lodge freeway back home. Except we're driving on the wrong goddamn side of the road, and every time Dexter makes for an exit ramp I wince to myself at the fey prospect of running headlong into the snarling chrome grill of an oncoming Mack truck, ending this impromptu afternoon adventure in gasoline fire and twisted metal tragedy.

But we make it with no incident to Kensington High Street by the canal, and Dexter and Lori fall into an argument over finding a place to park; it's nothing really, just bittersweet domestic tempers flaring with no consequence, and I lean my head like a Labrador retriever out of the window-hair blasting in the bitter wind, stinging the skin of my face like the crack of a million miniature leather whips-to dig everything; the sights, the sounds, the colorful movement in the passing brick-paved streets. I smile blindly into the wind, wishing I had a fiery Latin henchick to scream at me in Spanish and smash the dishes. . .

But when we get there we find that the tattoo parlor is closed, and that is just as well because the display of the man's work-tacked onto the particleboard walls of his basement stall in Kensington Market-looks like a collage of sloppy Rorschach's done in India ink.

So instead we go to this greasy Thai food restaurant in Shepherd's Bush, the three of us eating out of the same massive bowl of chicken pad see-yew. I burn the shit out of my tongue on a red hot banana cake I thought was some kind of dessert.

---

Alice went back to Blue. This was yesterday. I came home from another long day of losing myself in the tubes; going nowhere,

wandering aimlessly, just to get out of the flat. I hadn't talked to Clive in three days, and I could no longer stand to see the look of disappointment on Susan's face as I sat on the couch, barefoot with my legs tucked under me, disaffectedly sipping at the filtered end of a Silk Cut while listening to Clive's voice chattering frantically into the answering machine. I had to admit I was deriving a certain masochistic pleasure in punishing myself; standing idly by while my bridges burned behind me. I'm just waiting now, waiting for the next thing.

It was dusk when I got in. An orange seam of sunlight seeped through flat clouds the color of grayed underwear. According to Susan, Blue had come along in a rented mini van to collect the bit of liveables Alice had toted along with her during the split. He marshaled the goods into the back of the truck while Susan watched from an open window, sipping at a cup of sugary Earl Grey. He hailed her friendly from the curb. Susan knit her eyebrows and returned a threatening feline look. The flat looked inscrutably emptier when I walked in the door. Susan was busy changing the linen in Alice's old room, loudly cracking the clean cotton sheets; she gave me the lowdown while I moved my bags inside and slid them beneath the bed. Alice's old bed.

Alice. Sweet Alice, and her mercurial love moves. She left the Covent Garden flat she shared with Blue after a particularly nasty battle that had culminated in a volley of flying ashtrays, boomeranging high heels, broken windows, and a brushfire on the living room couch. In a black cab loaded with a hastily-gathered cornucopia of crap, Alice had lammed it to Susan's. Along with Clive, Blue's name was strictly shit with regard to the telephone and the post. Susan's Buddhist group met every Saturday. Alice was introduced with back-pats of feminine camaraderie, and their favorite parlor topic seemed to circle around 'that rotten fuck.' I myself fielded a few of his ferreting phone calls, and on a signal from Alice—a curt and silent shake of the head—cockblocked his desperate efforts with my halting American maleness.

"Who the fuck are you?" he once inquired after another extensive bit of unrewarded palaver. I sighed tiredly into the receiver. "Hey. Don't give me any shit. Just quit calling here, okay?"

But love lasts, doesn't it? Love lasts. Like a small endearing animal living caged within the breast. You can drown it with drink, suffocate it with smoke, pound it, stifle it, smother it, scream your lungs out. . . love will have its say in the end. Love doesn't give a fuck.

Just the other evening at the flat, I sat on the couch across from Alice while she bent her freckled face to a bit of knitting. In jeans shorts and white t-shirt, she sat with her long bare legs crossed beneath her. I was a vile American art fuck on the skids. She was a little lost love lamb with nowhere else to turn. I noticed that while her feet were long and thin, the pinky toe on each foot was short and fat, literally bursting with sexual health; I suddenly felt stupid to have let something like 'feet' get between us. Yet I sat there, smiling mutely at her sweetness behind my cigarette and left well enough alone.

I was sad to see the last of her. She left a plastic coffee cup behind, and I now make a select grab for it each day, shuffling bleary-eyed to the kitchen for my morning mug of mocha java-fuel to rise and face another listless afternoon. Goodbye, Alice. . .

---

Friday. Lying back on the couch with my legs in the air like an upended cockroach, examining the filthy gray moons of my toenails and contemplating giving them a good picking, when the phone rings. I roll over. Rub my eyes. Pick up the receiver and lean back into the couch, smelling my fingers. Feel like shit.

"Hello?"

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"People are always asking me that shit." I look wildly about the room, suddenly conscious of some potential peeping tom staring at me from one of the windows in the flat block across the yard. Close my robe.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"That one, too. My turn now. Who the hell is this?" American accent.

"Who the fuck do you think?"

"Hello Derrick," I sit straight up on the couch, wincing at the fey prospect of this call. Close my eyes.

"I just got off the phone with Clive. What's going on?" He says all of this really fast, and I can see him nervously pacing barefoot about the sunny loft, the phone locked in the crook of his neck while juggling several activities one after another; wiping down the kitchen counters, mini-camming the fleeing muts, drinking freshly-squeezed lemonade. . .

Derrick rapped right through my efforts at salutations. He wanted to know why I had been eluding telephone contact with Clive, and how I had managed to sneak into the Virgin office to get my weekly expense checks from the secretary while Clive was at lunch. And only when he was at lunch. It wasn't easy.

"Can you imagine how this looks to me right now?" he says. "You're actually spying on the motherfucker's lunch breaks? Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

"Oh man, listen-"

"Susan said you're smoking that shit."

Well. Just how sloppy have I been about this thing, really? Looking back over the past week, I realized that I couldn't have been giving Susan much of anything positive to report back to Derrick, if that's where he'd been inquiring. Fully sacked out, or sitting in front of the BBC with a bottle of Scrumpie Jack between my legs, I've been splitting my time between these two activities during the few hours in the day I actually spend at Susan's flat. The rest of the time being divulged between hanging out Mark's or Sofy's. Susan had given me a wry eye or two after coming home to find the place a mess of pencils and charcoal and balled-up drafts scattered all over the floor, me with my back flat on the deck in frustration and more likely than not a spliff between two fingers, staring at the ceiling with the radio on high volume. What could I say, really? I told him it didn't look good; I was going to need a week's extension, minimum. I told him I didn't want to lie, that it would take another week and no less. He said nothing for moment, and I could practically hear the cogs turning in his skull, referencing his sensibilities, his basic animal money-fears, instincts, to evaluate the situation. He had sensed something desperate in my voice, and like a bit of ticker-tape, the answer popped out of his head with a dull ding.

"Should I," he began slowly, "get Haaq on deck? Just in case?" He had probably taken care of that already. He wasn't stupid. I told him that it wouldn't be a bad idea; that I was certainly having trouble, and that I didn't want to have the the project broken up just because I couldn't meet the deadline. He exhaled slowly. I apologized sincerely, but made myself sound very professional and snotty, as if I really needed that much time. I felt like shit, perpetrating this total farce, and I think he knew I was lying anyway. It was probably all over town by now what had happened with Kerri, and he was probably wondering why I had taken the job when I wasn't even half-sure of being able to concentrate on completing it. I kept on talking, but I had heard his confidence in me die on his breath, and suddenly, no matter what he said, I knew what was going to happen when he hung up the phone.

He finally said he'd call Virgin and see what they had to say about it. He'd get back to me. I said okay, and again told him I was sorry and then we hung up. I rose weakly from the couch and retrieved my tea from the coffeetable before going to the bathroom. Leaned against the porcelain sink with a cup of Earl Grey, and cried hotly in the white-tiled darkness.

---

I'm on the couch when I later awaken to the sound of Susan's keys jingling in the lock. She comes in the room with a busy purposeful air and walks straight to the kitchen with a grocery bag from Marks & Spencer. I rub my eyes.

"So what happened?" she calls from the kitchen, beginning to bang open the kitchen cupboards to put the stuff away.

"What?"

"What happened with Derrick?" Apparently, after getting thoroughly stoned to recover from this afternoon's incident, I had crashed to the couch and fallen asleep for the entirety of the day. Susan had been home, and gone out shopping. Derrick must have called her in the interim. I can figure this much out without further inquiry.

"You tell me," I said, finally, after a pause. I lay on the couch with my feet, sweated in woolly red socks, peering out from under the edge of the blanket.

Susan stood over me, arms akimbo. "You're fucking sacked, that's what. What the hell did you call yourself doing when you came over here?" Although I knew that it was coming, I still somehow managed to find myself surprised at everyone's lack of faith.

"Yeah well," I said, swallowing unsuccessfully. "I kind of figured on that."

"I wonder how not. You're laid out on your hairy bum from the moment I leave for work to the minute I get home. You freak." Susan sat on the edge of the couch, her hip pressed to mine. She brushed the hair out of my eyes. "What's happened to you?" she said. "You want to talk about it?" I silently shook my head. She sighed loudly, and we said nothing for some time. "Well I suppose you'll be going back then," she said. It sounded like a question, the way she said it. "I guess," I said, staring, hypnotized, at my red stocking feet. "I don't know." I felt somewhat protected beneath the blanket. I wanted to pull the covers over my head. I could feel her preparing herself for something, and found myself wanting to hide from it, wishing it was already over. "Todd. Look at this place. Look at yourself. This isn't good. I don't know what's happened to you, but you aren't doing yourself any good like this. Sitting in front of the telly all day and smacking away at tarry old pipe. I can't have it, Todd. I just can't have it."

I knew what was coming in the next moment. I felt bad for her.

"You want me to leave?"

"I want you to leave," she said. "For your own good, and mine. You can go to Dexter's. Or Mark's or Sofy's."

I said okay. I told her that she didn't have to feel bad about it. She didn't seem to feel all that bad about it, but I said it anyway. "Listen Susan, I-

"Todd, please, don't make me feel even more-

"What I was gonna say was, what I was gonna say was, ôthanks for letting me stay.'"

She looked down at the floor, saying nothing. It was all over. The next thing had arrived.

"Okay," I said. I looked up at her, half-risen from the couch; hesitating. . .

---

Spent the latter half of that afternoon walking aimlessly through Covent Garden and Soho. The streets, which had earlier seemed pleasantly wet and fragrant from the day's rain, had become disaffectedly chilling in the face of this newfound plight. I walked along, the focus of my vision bracketing the short space in front of my two feet, the brisk steps going nowhere in particular. I had already stashed my luggage in a coin-op locker in Piccadilly Square until I decided exactly what to do with myself. My direction had no means, no end destination. The routine of putting one foot in front of the other provided nothing more than a distraction from what was going on in my head, which was a roaring storm of desperation that swooped down-like some hellish shrieking creature-to beat me briskly about the head and shoulders with flapping leathery wings.

At intermittent moments, the reality of my situation would slip through the mental block I had erected, and at those moments I would simply wince to myself, shake the thought-actually flinching to myself while walking down the street-and mutter something like "oh god," to myself, under my breath. The bad vibes were rolling off me like a heat haze. I felt the passing pedestrians giving me a wide berth on the sidewalk-they themselves being nothing more than extras, bit players, scenery in the surreal backdrop. Despair has a smell, i'm sure of it-a stinking von of sour sweat. I suddenly remember this one time over Sabrina's, a lifetime ago, bearing what to her must have seemed an inexplicably happy glow. That was the week Kerri moved in, and once seated on the couch with a cup of strong black coffee and a Camel, Sabrina and I commenced a casual conversation with my end contributing nothing more than a mindless, euphoric speed-rap of non sequiturs. Spewing much of nothing: comments on the wonderful weather, the new Lenny Kravitz CD on the stereo, my painting, with its relative unstrung future prospects. Sabrina interrupted me in mid-sentence to ask, "You've met somebody haven't you?" I laughed out loud-high, tittering amphetamine laughter, sounding like a drag-queen-and asked her what made her want to guess.

"It's obvious," she had told me. "You should see yourself; you're walking with your feet three feet above the ground. . ."

These were the nostalgic thoughts that sniped at me while I rolled through the market square of Seven Dials like a shiny steel ball in a pinball machine, vulnerable to the slightest tremor in my train of thought.

I had no business here. . .

Three weeks spent in beds I barely knew, time revealing the slow and lonely death of welcome wherever I went. It made me shudder to think that I would soon have to go back to my apartment, where i'm sure the memories would be waiting to haunt me day and night. The past, always the past. If you let it, the past will follow you like a fuse. A fuse leading to what? I've left a wake behind me like the trail of sour blood from a whipped and wounded animal. The bad feelings churned in my guts like a tub of sputtering unstable acids, lapping over the pan of my belly to sputter and hiss in the cradle of my vitals. I felt a sharp twist in my bowels, and I raised my head-it seemed so heavy, wanting to seek the lowest gravity-only long enough to search for a public bathroom to take a long, slow, satisfying crap. In men's room at the Leicester Square tube station I rattled the locked door of one of the metal stalls, cursing beneath my breath, before my eye caught the coin deposit box with its sign alerting travelers to the 20p fee. I couldn't spare a dime now, not even for this, and I suddenly saw myself inconspicuously crouched, shitting in the alleyways, the empty predawn streets of Soho; squatting by the gutter streams and splashing water on my ass like a monkey.

One foot after the other. Left. Right. Left. Right. Then. . . I found myself cruising up and down the linoleum-tiled aisles of a nearby off-license, for a liquor nepenthe. A liquor nepenthe. I was only half aware of my muted whispering to myself, "I'm hungry," and it made me feel even more sorry for myself to say it out loud, however quietly. And as I stared down at the tiny packets of 70p crisps in their assorted flavors-tomato, roast chicken, cocktail prawn, for Chrissake-I couldn't help thinking that, more than often than not, the world was a cold and cruel place. But

why cry? Who to blame? No reason, no body. You take as much as you can take. . . then you take some shit.

Knowing this didn't help anything. Forcing myself to think only about the greater good of getting fucked up-a method of forgetting, at least for a little while-I slid open the glass-paneled door to the refrigerated liquor cabinet and retrieved a bottle of Scrumpy Jack-England's answer to Boogie-Down Wine. I pounded it down on the counter by the cash register and rifled quickly through my pockets for some cash before my better judgment got the best of me. And then I was outside, strolling aimlessly once again, now armed with a conspicuous brown paper bag, one hand wrapped around the bottle. Every other corner, I stopped to raise the neck of the bottle for a vulgar swig-in the broad view of the gray afternoon-and dug for my most formidably halting expressions to combat the obvious stares of the other pedestrians waiting at the street corner for the green light.

The rain came down in a light mist. I had no business here. I weaved like a reluctant victim through the wet streets, streets teeming with anonymous, bobbing black umbrellas. Past the cold pastel splash of neon lights against the stucco walls of Frith Street Sex shops; walls stained with runnels of rusty water that streamed down from the minute cracks and fissures in the concrete. Past the alien, unfamiliar phone booths; phone booths that sapped the coins from my penniless pockets at the rate of twenty pence per ten seconds while I tried in vain to reach Sofy, Dexter, somebody,

anybody who might give a shit. I didn't leave any messages on any of their machines because I didn't trust the desperate, crowing tone of my voice. On Neale Street, I passed a stern redhead who strode by with a shopping bag from the Destroy boutique swinging from one arm. She wore chelsea boots that clacked loudly and confidently over the chipped red cobblestones. I hailed her from my berg of misery. She cut me with a look of pure bile. I moved on, past the bloody-aproned butchers laboring in the back alleys over cardboard boxes of frozen animal flesh. Past the sharp, feral Pakistani waiters, standing by and smoking idly outside the various coffee shops: Bar Italia, Lydia's Patisserie or the Soho. Past cryptic and unfamiliar traffic signs: "GIVE WAY," and "BUS

REQUEST." Past the friendly bobbies who cast me appraising glances from the corners of their eyes. In blue suits and hard helmets they watchfully navigate the city, eschewing the pistol and the scatter gun for a white baton and a walkie-talkie.

Everything seemed to smack of money. I suddenly found myself placing a price tag on everything I passed. Three pounds fifty for a matinee ticket at the Cineplex Odeon in Leicester Square. Every video game in the arcade I passed on Wardour street required the unbelievable deposit of one pound per play. A pound seventy for a cup of cappuccino at Bar Italia; I shook my head in amazement as I inspected the menu over the bar-had I really once paid that much for a hot cup of nothing? I couldn't believe it. I turned and quickly lammed it out the door, and the pretty picture of a couple seated at one of the sidewalk cafe tables outside-holding hands and sipping espresso-made me scrunch up my face in grief. I choked out a single sob that sounded vaguely like a dog's bark and moved on. I suddenly realized the monstrous expense, the spending power required just to keep your head above the water in this city. I began to look with new admiration at the passing bicycle messengers, and wondered idly to myself how the fuck they could make it, living in a city where you pay two pounds twenty-two pounds twenty-for a fucking Big Mac. And, through a hazy cloud of disillusion, I thought to myself how you can quickly compute the cost of living in any city in the world by the price they charge for a Bic Mac. Ridiculous.

In a fog of liquor and languor I descended to the bottom of the Leicester Square Tube, and caught the Piccadilly Line to Victoria station. I thought maybe i'd pop over Lori's in Brixton for a quick visit. Dexter would probably be there, and the prospect of securing an actual destination seemed like a good idea. And though I felt a certain buoyancy in my chest at the prospect of seeing my good friend (I snorted at myself that every available acquaintance had suddenly become my good friend), this was quickly remedied when I glanced down at my travel card and saw that its one-week validation was only good for two more days.

This city doesn't suffer. It does, but it doesn't. Not really. Not like Detroit, not like Capetown, or Calcutta. Not like Adis Ababa. But suffering is relative. It is mercurial, it is just nutty like that. The variety of human suffering is equal to the

number of human worlds. The number of human worlds is equal to the number of human minds. The number of human minds will be the root of our destruction. Or expansion. Only the illusion of time will tell.

But in the meantime, it's too many goddamn humans, as usual. Look at his place, this city. Look at the damage done, the abuse. London's cobbled streets are worn, trod upon, spat upon, choked with the scurrying rat-like residents. London is wounded; a felled animal, a rotting carcass overrun with ants. Hear its dying howl. The tube tunnels are its veins, buried deep within the flesh. We are the disease, the slow death still running rampant through the corpse, propelled by trains and cabs and double-decker buses. I did my bit, pacing the length of the station platform, a gruff grizzly awakened from a winter-long nap, apt to bite and claw. I finished my bagged bottle as the train came rolling into the cavernous bay, and let the empty pint fall from my fingers to splash loudly to the concrete floor. A tall balding oldster in pinstripes and wingtips, a tan Burberry's raincoat slung over his folded arms, turned away and muttered something under his breath. Thoroughly drunk (Scrumpie Jack-it doesn't creep up on you so much as it makes a blind rush to sap you in the back of the skull when you're not looking), I glared unflinchingly in his direction-burning my stare into the back of his neck-and muttered something myself; louder, and in a slurred, but markedly American accent. He walked the length of the platform to take another car, and I grunted in satisfaction as I staggered forward onto the train.

The frenetic pace of this horrible, harried afternoon seemed to slow down somewhat as I exited the train at Victoria, and made my way in slow haste through the tiled arteries of tube like hallways toward the Victoria line transfer.

I finally came out into the wide space of the station, and quickly lit a cigarette to calm my nerves. I cupped the flame with a shaking hand, and threw the match away. Victoria Station, with

its peeled paint, its bombed-out ceilings, was far and away from the cash and commerce that affects Covent Garden, and somehow comforting. The government had long ago given up its efforts to rehabilitate this place, in the face of the explosions set off by the IRA at least once a month. The paint from the walls had been chipped and peeled away by the constant shock and rumble of bomb blasts that rocked the very foundations of the building. The entire ceiling had been utterly destroyed; the girders exposed, complex tangles of electrical wires and pipes and plumbing hanging down to graze the top of the trains as they glided into the station. The only light came from the orange, haloed glow given off from a line of naked bulbs that hung down from the rafters on their individual cords. I stood at the edge of the platform, and waited.

Looking down over the four foot drop to the tracks, I thought how stupid it was to bother complaining when I could easily end this shit here, right here in the station. A northbound train arrived on the other side of the platform, and my mind strayed to thoughts of snuffing it. It would be easy to wait until the southbound train came rumbling through the station, and leap blindly forward to whatever lies beyond this life. I stared down at the rust-colored rails, littered in between the wooden trestles with a mud-splattered cornucopia of spent cigarette butts, empty matchbooks, soiled paper napkins,

balled up bits of toilet tissue, a water-logged red and yellow cardboard French fry carton from yet another fucking McDonald's. All of it gathered at the edge of a round grated drain; a manhole cover rimmed with sludge and dark soiled earth. It looked like the sinister discharge of some dripping industrial cunt. I look up and around the station. The tube traffic this time of the day was sparse. There was an old gray Brixton Rasta with beautiful parchment paper skin and a twisted mix of salt and pepper dreadlocks tucked beneath a green, yellow and red knit cap. A couple of pretty little Pakistani girls in school uniform-the knots of their navy ties pulled loosely from around their throats. They giggled to themselves, a couple of Silk Cuts pinched between thumb and forefinger. Skipping class no doubt. Another couple of girls, Eurailers, young women about my age with healthy Seattle farm girl bone structure-accoutered in heavy woolen sweaters and hoary-looking hiking boots with thick red shoelaces-squatted by their massive backpacks and conversed thickly in German.

I stared around the station, marveling at the idea that these could be the last witnesses to my living, breathing body. My space suit. These could be the anonymous people with whom I would share the exit of my destiny. These would be the ones who-still shuddering from the effect of the nutty spectacle-would make their nervous and fleeting comments to the press, who would no doubt surround them with microphones and flash-bulbs to record the sequential elements of the grisly event. And then I wondered, who would give a shit? I thought about how it would all blow over in a matter of days, how this kind of thing happened all the time and rarely even made the New York Post back home, and i suddenly felt even worse.

Why not do it? What the fuck. There was the outside chance that maybe Kerri would blame herself somewhat; that alone almost made the thing a worthy effort, save for the fact that I wouldn't be there to see it. And then the idea of the weakness, the weakness of feeling sorry for myself flashed hotly through me and for one second I thought I couldn't even wait for the train; I pondered leaping down into the concrete pulpit to crack my stupid skull open on the steel tracks.

But then I could hear the train rumbling up the dark hollow tube to my distant right. If I opened my eyes and leaned over, looked over, I would see the harsh animated glare of headlights, snarling down and daring me to do the shit. I kept my eyes cinched shut, and swayed drunkenly back and forth over the precipice on the balls of my feet. I felt the warm bag of bad air pushed forward by the motion of the train. It made me wince and wriggle my nose like a rabbit. Everything seemed extraordinarily vivid; my senses were revving. I felt suddenly aware of everything; the hair rustling over my head by the slight wind coursing through the station; the calm, regular routine of breathing-inhaling red oxygen, exhaling invisible blue carbon dioxide. I suddenly knew what it would feel like to make the leap. Or maybe not even that; I could simply lean forward over the edge of the platform and let the steel edge of the oncoming train knock my fucking block off. Would there be pain before that final mental departure? I thought so. It had to hurt-damaging your physical body to the point where it couldn't function anymore. But I didn't think it would last longer than a few seconds. The decapitated form would spin wildly-arms

pin wheeling-and crash to the concrete floor. The head-perhaps with the last vestiges of my conscious still in it-would awkwardly roll like a fleshy misshapen bowling ball, the eyes still seeing-for a few blurred, disconcerted seconds-ceiling, floor, ceiling, floor. . . before rolling to a stop. Maybe I would even hear the first screams, the panicked scuffle of footsteps on the concrete before the slow fade to black, the final stillness-or the jump cut to Disneyland. Objects would be rifled from my pockets by the police. Half a deck of smokes. A seven-day fare card that would never be used. The last eighty English pence I had left in the world. The blue passport book that would be stamped without me-probably by the same sonofabitch who stopped me in Customs on my way in-when my dismembered figure, packed away in a wooden crate, would be shipped back to the waiting arms of my mother, stepfather and two brothers back home.

The train roared into the station. The mother had my name on it. It was loud, louder than I thought it would be, and I increased my expectations of the pain a notch higher than I had earlier calculated. The train rumbled down the tracks, growing closer. I heard the two German chicks behind me stand up and tiredly scrape their packs off the ground to hoist them onto their shoulders. I swayed forward, mouth gaped stupidly open, neck arched. . .

---

On the train, I leaned against the sliding doors and idly wondered if I should've called Lori before coming over. But then, what difference would it have made? If nobody answered the door, then the alleys in Middlesex made for a more interesting sleeping place than the ones in the center. I was almost looking forward to it-curled up against the world in my long coat for a quick nap amid the dripping drainpipes and small white mounds of petrified pigeons' shit that dropped from the high ledges-waiting out the morning in the darkened doorway of some kebab shop. Most likely i'd be stripped down to my skivvies by the roving ranks of shit-disturbers, the smash-and-grabbers, before the night was half over.

I leaned against the sliding doors and rested my forehead against the glass, stubbled chin lowered, eyes closed to the harsh UV glare from the ceiling lights. I felt filthy. My hair was sure to leave a grease spot on the windowpane when I exited the train, and when I tried to part my buttocks to squeeze out an inconspicuous fart, I almost shit my pants. Still, a foul odor-something like burnt steak-drifted from between my legs when I shifted my stance. So nasty. The old guy standing next to me sniffed disdainfully at the air a few times before turning his head to glare at me. He shook his head to himself and rifled the pages of his newspaper before moving to a seat at the other end of the car. I just stood and stared, concentrating on a carmel-colored cigarette burn on the wooden floor.

It wasn't long before I noticed the suitcase. I wasn't sure how long it had been there. I couldn't remember it not being there. I had assumed it belonged to the old dude with the newspaper, but he hadn't taken it with him when he beat his hasty retreat from my vulgar vicinity. It was a tan nylon suitcase, reinforced around the edges with stiff brown imitation leather. It had a gold plastic design logo in the center, and an airport luggage tag wrapped around the handle. It was seemingly stuffed to capacity with soft clothing, and

after a moments' observation it began to give me the creeps.

The thing is, there'd been several bomb explosions since the day I got here. From the moment I got off the plane, I was surprised at the posters mounted in and around the center, everywhere you went-at malls, museums, galleries, shopping districts, and the tube stations; especially the tube stations-that warned of potential IRA bomb threats, and the relative evacuation procedures. If you were to put down your backpack, briefcase or shopping bag for one second-to light a cigarette, maybe, or possibly to make a phone call-you were more likely than not to look up and find yourself surrounded by the feds-readied with pistols, face masks, water bags, and folding plexiglass blast shields. More than a few times, I found myself trapped in the bowels of one tube station or another, the line stopped for two hours because some blue-haired granny from Ladbroke Grove had made the bad mistake of forgetting her hat box on a bench in

Victoria Station. I had trouble taking the whole thing seriously at first. My short time living in New York had numbed my perception of public tragedies. Car accidents, suicides, a derailed train; these were all aggravating delays, obstacles that always seemed to happen when you were in a hurry to get somewhere. Fast food for the New York Post.

But it wasn't long before it began to get to me. One late night, coming home from some club-Method Air, I think-with Sofy, we came up the steps to key our way into her Maida Vale apartment building and found somebody's Addidas sports bag waiting for us on the front porch.

"What's this shit?" she said, eyes squinted against the smoke curling up from the Silk Cut dangling from the corner of her mouth. She nudged at the bag with a booted toe. I flinched visibly.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" I hissed between clenched teeth, hands raised to ward off the fey prospect of the impending blast.

"What?" she said, now crouched down to inspect the bag. I grasped her by the crook of her elbow and pulled her to her feet. "Jesus," I said. "Don't you know where you are? This is London, for Chrissake. You can't. . . you just can't do that shit."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"How do you know that thing's not going to blow up in your face? We're in Maid Vale, for Chris sake. This could be George Michael's apartment, for all they know. . ."

She slowly backed away from the bag, keeping a wary eye on it while she rifled through her back pockets for her keys. "Shit. You're right. You think I should call the cops?"

"No.Let's just get-Jesus, will you get the fucking keys already? Let's just get the funk out of here. . ."

And the more I thought about it, swaying to and fro with the rocky movement of the rumbling train, the more I didn't like it. It was ridiculous. I'd been conditioned to be afraid of luggage, for Chris sake. Still, I nonchalantly moved a little bit away from the thing. I pardoned my way through the other passengers, and went to the other side of the car. I was standing next to the guy with the newspaper. He looked at me over the spread pages, glaring, and I glared right back-a silent funk-you. I couldn't have been too smooth about concealing my intentions though, because the German chicks caught wind of what I was doing and hustled their way up the aisle with their backpacks, and dropped them near the doors across from me. They threw me this inquisitive sort of conspiratorial look, motioning with their chins toward the suitcase, and I just shrugged and smiled: unsure.

But that fucking bag-it was ridiculous-just wouldn't leave me alone, and I knew that when the train pulled into the next station, I was going to have to switch cars to be able to let myself relax and forget about the thing.

I wondered if Dexter knew Susan had tossed me out of the flat. He might even be expecting me. I started feeling sorry for myself again when I thought about how Dexter hated his job at the Melody Maker. His effortless airbrush technique had always impressed me. He would've given his left nut to get that job from Derrick, and I wondered what it must have felt like for him to have to watch me dumbly kick back with my legs in the air while the whole project rolled over me like a fucking locomotive. How is it that the people who deserve nothing in this world are put in a position to pluck opportunities from the goddamned trees?

The train pulled into Pimlico station. Pimlico. Such an ugly name. Sounds like a dish washing detergent. I stared into my haggard reflection in the glass sliding doors while the tiled

station platform raced by, outside the window. The slack shoulders. The stooped, defeated hunch. The large head lurching numbly forward. Frizzy, greasy-looking hair pulled back and tied into an afro-puff at the back of my head. I sighed to myself as the train slowed to a stop. The yellow light panel came on, and the doors rumbled open. I stepped to the tiled floor and saw the explosion before I actually heard it. One second there was only the suitcase; the next, there was a large, bursting whiteness in my left eye, like goosedown belching from a torn pillowcase, and then the glass windows of the train car blew outward with a flat, quaking cough. Shrapnel or glass, little bits of something, peppered the left side of my face like a blast of #12 bird shot, and my vision went black on that side as I was thrown forward on the tips of my toes, arms wind milling in the air. Something hot burned through the calf of my left leg with the sick meaty sound of a drumstick being wrested from a Thanksgiving turkey, and left a numb feeling there. I crashed into a candy machine that closely resembled a parking meter, and as I sandwiched it awkwardly between my body and the wall, it pushed into my guts and I felt the ribs on my left side crack inward, the sound muted by the surrounding flesh-like breaking pencils through a heavy cotton towel. My head slammed against the wall with a percussive crack; I felt something give in the rounded cliff of bone structure above my right eye, and the shape of my skull felt somehow different-changed, crushed there-as I bounced off the wall and flew backward.

I lay on my side like a poisoned animal, unable to move. The shit was hilarious. The shit was hilarious. I wanted to laugh, but just it hurt too much. There was black smoke, and the friendly crackling of flames. I heard some of the remaining bits of glass in the windowpanes of the train tinkle to the tiled floor. A large, metal something—a girder, maybe—fell from the ceiling onto the tracks; the meeting of the metals made for a dull gong in the quiet aftermath. I heard someone, some male voice, groan out loud before somebody else, this one a woman, slowly regained consciousness and began screaming—hysterical high-key shrieks that came at perfect, rhythmic intervals. The seat of my drawers felt hot and heavy; I knew that I had shit my pants. My bowels felt hot and loose and watery, and I was only vaguely aware as I let the urine trickle out in a pitifully thin stream to flow outward from my broken twisted figure like a foul yellow pond. I

could see nothing out of my left eye, but from my right I could see the the fallen candy machine. From my perspective, it lay directly in front of my face at a warped angle, my vision knocked out of kilter by the blast like one of those campy Boatman television episodes from the fifties. That seemed serious. It seemed like something to worry about. The woman kept on screaming, and my first intentional thought was: shut up you bitch the pain my fucking head oh my god you're going to kill us all. . .

Then I realized the screams had somehow swigged into the distant wail of sirens, and I stared through the amniotic swirl that swam before my right eye—like looking through an eyeful of red-veined rotten egg—at the cracked plastic facade of the candy machine. I read distinctly:  
CADBURY. . .

---

The ocean doesn't want me today. . .

Step out of my building into the raw dog sunlight, staring up, wincing, brow furrowed behind the opaque plates of the mirror-lens sunglasses I bought when I got off the plane at Dulls last month. Raise the portable CUD player to tickle the volume, and the sunlight gleams off the spinning edge of the silvery disc, slashing upward like a knife.

The ocean doesn't want me today. . .

I stand on the sidewalk outside my old building, listening to a song about some poor slob who keeps trying to hurl himself into the graces of the ocean. But the harsh tide just rolls him-limbs splayed, helplessly bludgeoning himself, spinning beneath the waves-back to shore, over and over again. Still; that's only the ocean. Does this man really want the end, or do the particular means make all the difference? I'd have to ask Tom Waits; he wrote the song, he wrote the guy. Tom Waits. Tom Waits makes me think of New York subways; late nights in empty subway stations of filthy gray concrete floors specked with blackened wads of discarded stepped-on bubble gum and flattened cigarette butts. And boring black and white films; movies where ill-shaven goatee characters with bad haircuts and black leather jackets spend most of their time lighting each other's cigarettes, sleeping in box cars, and slapping the shit out of their sharp-tongued, blonde-haired, bedroomed-eyed bitches . . .

It feels good to be walking again.

I feel like a ghost, like I'm leading a haunted existence. I haven't seen anybody yet, though I'm sure word has got around town about my return. I've been inconspicuously creeping around the old hangouts. Seen the odd familiar face here and there. Exchanged a few words. But what usually happens when I spot somebody-at Union Street, at the Shelter, any number of

places downtown-is an exchange of quick, disaffected double takes before going back to our own respective tasks of rifling the newspaper pages, patting down pockets for a cigarettes, whatever, saying nothing in the end. I guess too much crap has happened in the

interim. It must be easier this way, to one party or the other. It might seem inconceivable now, but it won't take long for me to settle in here again. And i have to settle in here again. This place makes for a cheap beginning. . .

I now look through life with one eye wide and staring to guide the way, having left its twin reduced to a red stain streaming down the glossy face of a cinema poster on a London Tube car. One eye. From now on. All i can say, basically, is that my first twenty-two years with double-sided vision were a gift. That i can still see out of one eye-i think it would be smart to look at this as a gift. I really can't see it any other way. So I'm not unhappy. But my depth of field. . . it's going to be a difficult thing to get used to. Sometimes I'll be reading a menu in some restaurant, eye squinted to make out the print-a pain in the ass, really-and I'll think to myself, 'Christ, I can't wait until this fucking patch comes off.' And then it hits me. One of these days I'll stand before the mirror and lift the fuzzy felt flap for a quick peek. But not today. Not today.

The cane is a little easier. Compared to my empty eye socket-sutured shut like a badly-stitched baseball-the cane. . . shit, the cane is candy. A fucking nightmare though, having your severed Achilles tendon roll up on you like a window shade. One of the nurses told me I looked like Pup the sailor, the torn muscles raveled and bunched in a fleshy softball beneath the skin of my calf. It gave me the creeps to touch it; it was hard, a hard ball of baby snakes entwined beneath the skin. They remedied the shit with a bit of complicated surgery. They did what they could. I wound up with my left leg near two inches shorter than the other, and count myself one lucky mother. I can do that.

I didn't know anything until I woke up in the hospital. I woke up, and was immediately conscious of one of those ultra bright, multi-bulbed halogen lights, burning down from above,

baking me. For a one fleeting moment of sheer horror, I was sure that I had suddenly awakened in the middle of surgery. The anesthetic had worn off while they were busily rearranging my mixed-up giblets with their bloody red rubber gloves. The left side of my head was swathed in cotton bandages, covering my eye. I remembered the shrapnel attacking me there, like a host of buzzing bumblebees, but there was little pain and I tried to keep myself from worrying about it. I kept my eyes closed. I could hear them talking in clipped English accents, muffled behind cotton surgical masks.

"American passport, this one. Just a moment. . . shit-hand me the two, will you?"

"American? Bloody Christ. What was he doing on the train to Brixton?"

Grim silence. They were cutting away the tattered cloth from my right pants leg. My leg was hiked over somebody's shoulder, while some other hack busily scissored away the remaining bits of blasted-looking Frankenstein britches. They let go of my leg, and it fell-weighed down at the end by a grimy leather boot-to the top of the metal examining table with a dull clang.

"Drugs?" somebody said.

An indecisive grunt. "Who knows. Good-looking kid like this?" I could feel a couple pairs of hands rolling up my shirtsleeves, searching for needle marks. Stupid pricks. Did they let just anybody be a fucking doctor?

Well. At least my face wasn't blown off. That was something. I could feel them scissoring the laces from my boots. Up until then I had absolutely no sensation in my right leg; no sensation or feeling at all, and I'd been worrying about that for some time, lying there.

Until they pulled the boot off.

I felt my Achilles tendon snap like a taut wet thread before all the muscles bunched within my calf rolled up the length of my lower leg. I remember cracking open one of my uncle's golf balls as a kid; the time I spent severing the little rubber bands with a Swiss Army knife, hypnotized by the queer way they snaked around the ball, unraveling with a life of their own. . .

I raised up on the table, bucking mutely like a fish on a hook. My cracked ribs screamed in protest, and the pain was fantastic; it came at me from a million different directions at once. It took my breath away. I couldn't draw enough air to scream. I flopped and floundered on the table like a crocodile. Rubber gloves grabbed at me.

"Jesus-"

"Get 'it down-NURSE!-get 'it down for Chrissake,"

"Hold him! Can't you get-"

"His arm, fucksake, get his arm down on the-"

"NURSE!"

It didn't last long. I passed out. Some time later, I felt a peculiar priapic sensation; a not altogether unpleasant friction. I swam upwards to consciousness, and when I opened my right eye, a nurse was standing over me-a luscious blonde with massive twits that stretched the canvas of her starched white blouse. She had my prick gripped in a fist with painted red fingernails, and was busily lubricating the stiffening Islam dome-via a palmful of Vaseline-with the other. Her open

palm spread in a slow, circular motion over the head of my prick. It was delightful. My neck arched back into the soft pillow, and I croaked softly-a shameless groan. This was more like it. I began to move my hips in time to the circular swipes. I looked into her face. She stared back down at me, unblinking. The rubbing continued. It was like fucking.

"Hold still," she whispered. With the fingertips of one hand she parted the fish lips at the end of my prick, and before I could blink

or beg for mercy, she inserted a slim hollow tube straight through the hole with a proficiency I wouldn't have believed possible. I bucked upwards on the bed, but she held me down with a strong flat hand pressed to my bare chest. The tube continued to snake upward into my guts, and now I couldn't move at all for fear of poking something in there, or rolling off the bed where the tube was sure to rip its way out like an unraveling rope and turn my prick inside out. She had me.

"What have you done to me, you bitch?"

"Just hold still; it'll all be over in a moment."

It was. The snaking sensation soon halted on its own. I looked down and saw that the transparent hollow tube was connected to a clear plastic bag that began to quickly fill up with dark yellow urine. The bag filled itself, and grew warm against my leg. The nurse backed away from the bed, pulling her rubber gloves off with a powdery, prophylactic snap. I glared at her from the bed like a fettered beast. She smiled and said nothing before turning her back on me and leaving the room. The operation left me winded and wanting to vomit. I let my head tiredly sink back into the pillow. I lay there for some time, pondering the fate of my violated penis and staring at the dust motes that danced through the beam of sunlight streaming through the curtained window. The room was spinning, as if the bed beneath me was mounted on a gyroscope. My stomach gave a sickening lurch, and I really would have let fly except I was too sore to lean my head over the edge of the bed, and I didn't want to risk drowning myself in my own sauce.

I spent a long time in that ward. Did my fair share of freaking out between the scheduled administrations of anesthetics by friendly, rubber-gloved interns in white suits and shoes with crepe-paper soles. The staff caught on quickly, and had me strapped to the bed the first week. After a few days of placating them with soft tones and coolly reassuring assertions, they probationed my restraint. . . whereupon I freaked out again, leveling frenzied fists and curses at the air above me—a square frame filled with strange faces swathed in blue cotton face masks. I got to know the smells of pentathol and morphine; particularly that last one that—somehow, at the end of the ride—left a pleasant taste on the plate of my tongue. I pissed myself often, and had my dirty asshole cleaned by anonymous nurses bearing plastic tubs and warm washcloths. I lay in that bed for what seemed an eternity—tossing and turning beneath the sheets, wearing those goddamn infernal one-piece baby's pajamas. They clung to me in the night like some strange amorphous animal that was trying to fuck me. My leg itched madly beneath the cast, which was as heavy as a block of fucking granite and bare as a baby's ass of graffiti, since evidently no one knew what had happened to me, or had even stopped to ponder my certain whereabouts. I later learned that the hospital was holding the press and others at bay until they were relatively sure I wasn't going to snuff it. Dexter was the first they let in. He sat on a stool beside my bed and we said stuff to each other while I stared up his nostrils from my place on the pillow. Darren called me from Paris, where he was shacking up with some girl who designed for Chanel.

I called my mother in Michigan before my situation hit the press so she wouldn't freak out and have a heart attack in front of

the television or something. I didn't know what to tell her. To live with the love of a parent is a funny kind of caged existence. If you live the life of a mad scientist, you can't help but be interested. Your parents and your children, in my own scientific opinion, are the nuttiest things on earth. To at once observe where you came from, and what came from you-what could be nuttier than that? Nothing. Nothing. I hear of people getting bored by their children. I can't imagine it. I can't see it. But it must be true. After all, parents, at some point, become boring-we do spend time away from them, doing other things, engaging other people,

other events, objects, locales. This is done, to some degree, by everyone. Why should children be any different? Still, the ideas are interesting. The most interesting ideas there are.

It is in this respect that cuckoo birds make me roll. They tweak me for this reason. Cuckoo birds mate for life. They choose a partner, and they move forward with no further questions. A widowed cuckoo remains widowed for life. But in the meantime, cuckoos lay mad eggs. Cuckoo couples do what any other couple might do for fun. They eat. They drink. They shit. They sleep. They fly about, peeping shit. They fuck. And they lay eggs. When the female is due to deliver, the couple seek out the nest of another bird-preferably that of a pair of thrush, who evidently make for reliable marks. While hubby acts as a lookout, the female cuckoo squats and lays her massive spotted boulder alongside the tiny white thrush eggs. Then she rises and flies off with the male, into whatever future awaits a couple of cuckoos. The cuckoo egg has a shorter incubation period than the thrush. Two weeks before their own babies are due, mother and father thrush have to deal with the demands of this squawking, oversized infant. Busting their asses to wing food back and forth from the forest to the nest. In return for their (philanthropic, or myopic?) attentions, the cuckoo chick-still blind and naked as a rubber chicken-shoulders the other eggs out of the nest. They roll end over end, spatting open on the lower branches. . . and now the cuckoo is the sole heir to the thrushes, who continue to feed the fat murderer until he fills the nest with his fuzzy girth. Two tiny birds tending after a fat baby twice their size. Then the cuckoo flies off in search of its own mate. It always chooses a cuckoo, never a thrush, and it knows what to do with any eggs that result from the relationship. My question is: who tells them how to do the shit?

Anyway. My mother took the news rather well-though this was mostly through my telling of the story. Basically, I decriticalized the latest professional appraisal of just how fucked up I really was, and declined her offer to fly over. It made the present so much easier to deal with. Less clutter. My recovery seemed dependent on keeping my head clear of complications, particularly emotional ones. My hospital bills were being taken care of-I was under insurance

with Virgin as a private contractor, and Derrick never mentioned having me fired from the project beforehand. He did that.

I had the pleasure of denying a visit from a very stooped and penitent Susan Childs, and two phone calls-collect, I might add-from both Faris and Kerri. The thing of it is, they had the monstrous nerve

to call me at the same time, waiting on the other end of the line together like a fucking couple or something for godsake. I bellowed like a stricken yak, staring bug-eyed at the receiver before slamming down the phone. It was something. I really didn't think I could go through that again, and told the head RN on the floor not to put through any more calls from Detroit. They tried a few more times, Susan too. The three of them kept calling and I kept refusing their calls, and pretty soon they stopped calling and I suddenly found myself wondering why I had to act like a such predictable asshole, wishing I had talked to them.

I learned to hate that room, and the way my neck stiffened on me from staring up at the television mounted in the corner, blaring tinny, rerun episodes of "Eastenders," or "Black Adder." The bed was covered with complicated mechanical contrivances, and was far too high off the floor for me to easily de-bunk for my morning shuffle across the tiled floor to the bathroom, closing the rear seam of my hospital muu-muu to hide my hairy naked ass. And my dick was sore from masturbating-like a fucking monkey-every day since the day I got there. The fucking room smelled like. . . Clorox for Chrissakes. I had to keep smoking cigarettes to conceal the odor. They kept asking me to put them out, and I kept lighting them up behind their backs, lest they catch a whiff of fresh fragrant nut and embarrass me deeply by deciding to inspect my filthy sheets. That was over a month ago. I'm home now.

My phone doesn't ring a lot. When it does ring, the calls come from somebody saying something I have little interest in listening to. Mostly vultures from the press, or prospective agents from New York or LA who wanted to latch onto the media blitz surrounding the bombing. Oh yeah, i forgot to mention: all of a sudden I'm a hot item in the art fag world again. Of course i am.

It makes about as much sense as anything else. Leg shredded. Blind in one eye. Hobbling around on a four-prong crutch like an old lady, and standing evilly on the streetcorner, waiting for the bus with a cigarette pinched between thumb and forefinger, and a scowl engraved on my grill. Shit. I would have cooked up a scheme like this a year ago if I had thought it would have a made a difference.

Kerri, I hear, has moved to Arizona.

That fact tweaked me until I heard the word was that she had simply taken a time-out; had wanted to go to a city where nobody knows her, to get her head together. I can understand that. The universe has many times demanded i engage this same ritual. But I can't help feeling the impending sequel episode to his madness is just over the horizon. I can't wait to see what happens next, but i'll enjoy the tension in the meantime. Faris calls, and that's enough to curb my masochistic appetite for emotional drama. I'm usually home when the phone rings. I'll be sitting up in bed in an insomniac haze at three in the morning, with only the angry red glow of a cigarette making for a pencil-thin rift in the cold dark room. Stare distractedly in the direction of the inquiring voice-irritatingly cool and calm and seemingly scot-free from emotional injury-coming from the answering machine. I'll answer it, one of these days. Jealousy is just another kind of acting. A ridiculous role. I know that.

At the streetcorner, the pedestrian traffic light blinks white. I swim upwards from the deep blue funk I had spun around myself.

Make my way across, having to hustle it a little bit at the end to keep from missing the light and getting my crippled ass run over like a fat, hobbling woodchuck. Make the curb, and turn over my shoulder to leer at the cars-growling chrome grills honking their horns at me as they pull away. Make for the bus stop at the corner-a wooden bench with the glossy green paint stripped in places. Strike the butane lighter Dexter gave me as a gift when I was laid up in the hospital, and cup the flickering flame to a Camel Wide.

I can see the Renaissance from here-a massive monument to the power of commerce-and find myself contemplating the shed skins of the formerly bustling communities down below; the wrecked and windowless skeletons of architecture lining Woodward avenue for blocks and blocks, every street in this city in dire need of a citizen fix. Idly wonder to myself. . . what next?

Hear the industrial roar of the bus as it approaches from down the street. I step closer to the curb, and raise an arm to make sure the driver can see me. Brakes give a harsh metal squeal as the rubber-lined doors open with a pneumatic hiss. The driver pulls away from the curb as I stand there, impatiently rooting through my cluttered, lint-filled pockets. I need a token, or a transfer.

A transfer. . .

---