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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jackie Knoll entitled "The All-Time Loser And Other Stories." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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The All-Time Loser

and other stories

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Dedication

The stories in this thesis are dedicated to

my freshman composition students at the University of

Tennessee, Knoxville, during the 2002-03 school year.

Your energy, hope, and idealism

made me want to stay in grad school and keep writing.

Thanks, kids,

for making me laugh, making me think,

and helping me hang in there and get it done.

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Abstract

This thesis is composed of stories conceived, written, and revised while the author was a master's candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Among other subjects, these stories consider obsession, apathy, and both the monotony and sickness inherent in everyday life. Preceding these stories is a brief introduction in which the author discusses some of her thoughts on the art of writing, her aesthetic principles, as well as the themes present in her stories.

The All-Time Loser

and other stories

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I. *Introduction*

When I was growing up, we used to frequent a video-rental store that had a faded display of tacky, slightly off-color buttons next to the cash register. Then as now, my eyes were invariably drawn to anything with words on it—I had read myself into (legal) blindness by the age of twelve—and one of the buttons proclaimed, "Sex is only dirty if it's done right!" I was reminded of that video store while revising "Adult Swim" (set in my hometown of Flint, Michigan), and I thought that writing stories isn't a whole lot different—always done on the sly, usually very late at night (I can't remember the last time I wrote fiction before 11 p.m.), and the process, of course, is never, ever discussed.

I think that both sex and writing are both dirty if they're done right ultimately because if they're done right, not only are they both wickedly fun, they're both also honest. I keep coming back to Stephen King's description of writing as "that adolescent hand-job in the bathroom with the door locked." That is not there with other kinds of writing. Most of these stories had difficult births, and when I wrote "The All-Time Loser," the most difficult (and probably the most honest) of them all, I felt like I was not so much creating, or composing, but *dragging* the story out of my head and onto the computer screen. If I didn't have a deadline to keep, "Loser" would probably never have been finished. But when it finally was finished, I was proud of it; I was glad I had written it. I still am.

Oh, I have some good memories attached to the composition of some of these pieces: I remember, while writing "The Year of the Cat," filling up the sink in my kitchen with cold water, climbing up onto the counter, and dropping pages from a

Chadwick's of Boston catalog into the water so I would know whether Seth's porno magazines would sink or float when he dropped them into the quarry. While writing the same story, I also wrapped a bag of ice with a dishtowel and left it in the freezer for a few days so I would be able to write convincingly about how it felt to hold Angel. I spent hours online researching song lyrics to find just the right epigraph for "Loser." (And I'm still not sure I've found it.) All of these activities, however, were not so much the result of a fastidious need to double-check every factual aspect of everything I wrote about—although I *am* fairly anal-retentive about keeping my facts straight—as they were of an urge to put off the actual *writing* of a piece as long as I possibly could. Over and over, I've had students tell me, "I really don't like to write"; "I don't like English" (a kinder, gentler version of "I really don't like to write"); or just flat-out "I hate to write." No one does, I usually tell them, and I believe this to be true.

So then why do I do it? Writing was terrific fun when I was a little kid. In first grade, I was put in a class for gifted students, in which we were told we would work on "writing creatively." Soon I found myself garnering lavish praise for my "creativity." I translated "creative" into "bizarre" and figured that meant the weirder, the better. So my stories gradually became wackier, featuring spies in flying cars, magicians, and aliens, aliens, aliens—I wanted to be an astronaut. The apex of my fledgling career was, in second grade, being invited to the AM radio station in downtown Flint to read a story on the air, which I did with gusto. My mother has preserved the tape for me, but I haven't listened to it—or wanted to—in years.

I wrote for about eight or nine years after my radio debut. There were Young Writer's Conferences, MSU and You Day (a writing workshop for junior high-schoolers,

held at Michigan State every spring), and occasional calls for stories from teachers. But most of what I wrote was on my own time, just for the hell of it. I'd siphon off minutes in my typing and computer classes to pound out fiction instead of assignments. My sister and I used to spend hot summer nights staying up late with the computer my mother had borrowed from someone at work, watching our demented tales zip and screech out of the old dot-matrix printer. I made gifts of stories for my long-suffering friends, who would groan and cringe through them, my junior high school fiction being no more polite and socially correct than it is now.

Then sometime after sixteen, after boys, band, and the PSATs had entered the picture, I stopped writing, telling myself it was a waste of time. I would go on to take the most rigorous math and science classes offered me in high school and, at Central Michigan University, forgo English for the more "practical" major of psychology.

By the time I took my first fiction workshop as an elective senior year, I had not written anything "creative" for at least six years. My first story earned a B+ and this comment from the instructor: "Two things are clear: You can write—and this is not the best story you will ever write." At the time, a B+ in anything was enough to bring me close to tears, but as the class went on, I came to realize that from Mitch Berman, a B+ was high praise. An acerbic, eccentric New Yorker, Mitch was foul-mouthed, caffeine-addicted, and the most fearless critic I have ever met. Mitch refused to gild the lily; in any situation, he could be depended on to speak his mind. And he held his creative writing students to an extremely high standard. I adored him, of course, and I worked very hard in the two classes I took from him. And I watched my own writing become stronger with each story that I wrote. I earned two A's from him and thought, *Hey, I*

might just be good at this. Then my ego, which motivates me more than I care to admit, got in the way and I thought, *Let's see just **how** good.*

So here I am now, an M.A. candidate in English with a concentration in creative writing. People say to me, "Oh, you're in *creative writing*...how interesting," their fascination mixed with the slight condescension that academics that don't consider themselves creative use when speaking to those who they think do. I don't consider myself any more creative than they, but I think I've learned to fake it more successfully. Sometimes I wonder if all I'm really doing is taking elements of people I've met and situations I've been in and books I've read and movies I've watched and songs I've listened to and just stretching everything possible to its utmost limit, to ultimately come up with the most fucked-up situation I can muster.

The ever-present voice of doubt screams: So, you've watched too much TV, read too many books, met too many weirdos, and happen to have a better-than-average grasp of the English language and unusually fast typing skills. Does that make you a fuckin' *writer*? When do you know you are a writer? Maybe Stephen King and Shirley Jackson and Flannery O'Connor and James Joyce—the people that I say are my influences—were just faking it, too. I've never written Stephen King to ask: Steve, can you tell me how to tell when you have truly become a *writer?* What makes you a *writer* and the rest of us no more than posturing, pretentious assholes with word processors (and please, please, *please* don't say a good agent or a publishing advance—I so, so desperately want to believe it is more than that)? I suspect that he would laugh, scratch his beard if he has one, and say something like *Fuck, kid, I don't know, what do you want me to say?*

And, now, neither do I.

So I can tell you that, as far as I can see, the six stories here came as the end result of all my reading, TV viewing, and conversations with people; all my questioning, worrying, and wondering; all my late nights in front of the computer screen; all my meals composed of snack foods and Diet Cokes; all the classes I've taught bleary-eyed and barely conscious of what I was saying. I brought over twenty years of life experiences in Michigan with me to UT, but nearly everything that influenced these stories went on during the first year and a half I lived in Knoxville—in fact, with the exception of "Adult Swim," all of these stories are set in Knoxville. And, not coincidentally, they're mostly about people who have come to Knoxville from someplace else, seeking something in Knoxville and not finding it.

"Strangers with Candy," the first story written and the first story to appear in this collection, is primarily about giving into temptation. I wanted to create a crux situation, a story that had the protagonist teetering on the brink of temptation for nearly the whole story before giving into it. But why is Cecelia tempted? She's come to Knoxville searching for some kind of Valhalla and has not found it. Life in Knoxville does not offer much more for her than life in Lorain, Ohio, and realizing this is going to come at a price.

"The Year of the Cat, or, Pussywhipped" is about obsession and also the peril of good intentions gone astray. Seth thinks he's going to do Cecelia some good by taking her out of the trailer park and moving her down to Knoxville with him. He also thinks he's doing her a favor by allowing her to keep the corpse of her cat in the freezer. Instead, they both wind up obsessed with her cat, both in life and in death, and it grows until the end of the story, when the two of them, I think, finally are certifiably crazy.

"Adult Swim" is also about obsession. Walter's obsession with the child next door has much the same effect that Seth's obsession with the dead cat does in "Year of the Cat"; his obsession makes it impossible for him to live a normal life. But this story also brings more to the forefront an issue I only touched on in the previous two stories—it's about the sickness in people, the unsavory urges and desires that the people around us nourish, and that we do not want to acknowledge, either in our neighbors or ourselves. We have all, at least once, felt the urge to slow down and stare at the scene of a car accident. This urge may not be healthy, but it exists.

"The All-Time Loser" may be the only real love story I have ever written. I call it that because I think that, yes, Patti really does love Pat. It's unhealthy love, it's sick love, but, to her, it's love. When she finds Pat, she's found something to believe in, something worthwhile outside of her body. Patti's body is her trade, so everything she thinks of tends to be connected back to the body. She is unusually attentive to smells and bodily secretions, for example. But she does love Pat. The more he hits her, the more he abuses her emotionally and physically, the more she loves him. And a lot of people live in relationships like this.

"Women Without Any Faults" is one of the more problematic stories in this collection. I'm not entirely satisfied with it, even as this thesis goes to press. I had created the character of Lauren something like a year ago, and although I was fascinated by her, I hadn't really done anything with her. So I gave her a sister and a love interest, integrating her into "The All-Time Loser" as Patti's dark-haired rival for Pat. She comes to Knoxville seeking out Pat, and although I think the two of them have a love relationship that is interesting and perhaps may warrant its own story someday, I became

more drawn into the interplay between Lauren and her sister, Sarah, as the story went on. Writing about two sisters was new for me; although I do have a sister myself, we are quite distant and we rarely speak to one another. So I wasn't sure at first what I wanted to do with Lauren and Sarah. I do agree with Pat that they both think they don't have any faults, but I'm not sure that I've portrayed that as well as I could have. Still, I think this story could be really good some day, and I plan to continue working on it.

"The Wait" is the last of these stories to be conceived and written. Noah brings a twist to the coming to Knoxville theme—instead of coming to Knoxville for the first time, like many of the characters in this collection, he's coming *back*. On a break from school, he returns to his hometown, and spends one aimless day doing nothing, like the people he sees around him, except waiting. I realized, while writing this story, that on some level nearly everything I wrote dealt with aimlessness, or the circular, monotonous feel of everyday life, and I wanted to bring that more to the forefront. Where does Noah go at the end of the story? Back to Michigan Tech, or to his house in Knoxville? Actually, I like not knowing. I like the idea of leaving that for the individual reader to decide.

These stories are all tied together by one character, Pat. Who is Pat? I tried to incorporate Pat as a catalyst for change for the protagonists in all of these stories, some with more success than others. Pat simply offers the lottery-ticket temptation to both Cecelia and Seth in "Candy" and "Cat"; becomes, as a child, the object for a neophyte pedophile's sexual obsession in "Adult Swim"; is the perfect and all-too-likely addition to Patti's aimlessly self-destructive lifestyle in "Loser"; meets his match in "Faults"; and is gone completely by "Wait."

Pat (named for a particularly unpleasant boss I had as an undergraduate) is a composite of every literary badass or devil incarnate I've encountered; he is Oates' Arnold Friend, O'Connor's Misfit, King's Randall Flagg (or Walkin Dude), the speaker in the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil." Pat has charisma to burn. I wanted him to have an irresistible pull over people; like a modern-day Charles Manson or Adolf Hitler; I wanted him to both repel and fascinate (mostly fascinate) the people he met.

Why not write a story—or part of a story—from Pat's point of view? That would destroy the fascination. (That, and I tried it and it didn't work as well as I had hoped. The number of darlings I have murdered while writing this thesis would make James Kelly weep.) He does not function so much as a real character in these stories as he functions as a turning point for the characters he interacts with. I wanted Pat to serve as a mirror for the other characters, as something that shows them how they really are, and although I haven't achieved that as well as I would like in every story here, I'm going to keep working on it.

Why does everyone seem to accept the temptations Pat offers? Well, why not? In the real world, people give in to temptation all the time. The optimism and faith of Joyce and King do an uneasy dance in my psyche with the pessimism and faithlessness of Ernest Hemingway, the Earl of Rochester, and Horace McCoy. Someday, I may create a universe where people are strong and choose the good over the evil when they have a choice, but more often than not I see the people around me—myself included—choosing what they know is wrong or unhealthy over what they know is right or healthy, because it feels better in the short-term or because it's easier or because they've just given up on ever trying to *be* right, even if just for a day. The people who give in interest me far more

than the people who hold out, partly because there are more of them and partly because who wants to read about someone who does *good* all the time? People love dirty laundry, and I'm no exception. I really wanted to explore the more sordid, dirty side of human nature with these stories, the side no one really wants to admit is there but everyone wants to take a peek at. I think I've succeeded with this, so far, and it's an issue I'm definitely going to continue dealing with in my fiction.

II. *Strangers with Candy*

"Hey, little girl, is your daddy home?"
--Bruce Springsteen

Freedom! Cecelia still could taste it like an elixir on her lips, feel its light touch like feathers on her back. *Knoxvilleknoxvilleknoxville,* she had sung to herself as though it were a cartoon jingle, its sweet promise of freedom beckoning her through the miles, the hundreds of miles that now lay between her and the stale smoke from her mother's cigarettes and the drone of her mother's liquor-soaked complaints and the cramped house trailer that always smelled of whiskey and tuna fish and her mother's sour, unwashed flesh. She would never have to invent excuses for the electric company, the phone company, or the Visa company again. She would never have to worry that her mother's boss would smell the lies through the desperation in her voice again as long as she lived. She had been ecstatic when her boyfriend Seth had gotten the job offer in Knoxville and had invited her down to Tennessee to live with him. They were going to have an apartment together and she was going to go to the University of Tennessee as soon as she got her state residency and he was going to take care of her and everything was going to be *wonderful*, it was all going to work out, just like it always did in books and poems and movies. She could go anywhere, do anything, be anything now. Freedom!

And it was so *pretty* here, too! She loved waking up next to Seth in the morning and looking at the Smoky Mountains through the window. Rolling and green and alive, they seemed like everything Ohio was not. She loved the funny green hanging stuff that covered everything outdoors—*kudzu,* Seth had told her it was called. It gave everything

such an antiquey look. Even the air here was good; it was warm and fresh and clean. The clean, clear water—not the rusty, red-tinged water that they had had in the trailer park—that came through the pipes in the new apartment gave her skin and hair a new luster. The sun shone every day, and in the two months since she had moved to Knoxville, she had gained a tan. Oh, she *loved* it here!

But part of her still yearned—still wanted, still needed something more. She longed for an adventure. In the trailer, she used to serve herself 7-UP in wine goblets, pretending she was sipping champagne on a cruise ship bound for somewhere glamorous. Time and again, she would sneak into her mother's closet and try on her old high school prom dress, holding it tight behind her back, so that the moldy pink taffeta clung to the slight curves of her slender body, and dance silently around the room to imaginary sixties music. At work, she would pretend she was serving chicken breasts and fish fillets to kings and queens and knights instead of ordinary, boring Middle American people, middle-aged and fat and fishbelly white. It was good to be out of Lorain. But Knoxville, for all its beauty and warmth, and Seth, for all his kindness and good intentions, still left her feeling slightly dissatisfied, like having an itch she couldn't quite reach, or still wanting one more spoonful after the ice cream bowl was empty. She could ignore the feeling most of the time, but she still secretly yearned for an adventure.

One day late in the afternoon, while she was waiting for Seth to come home from work, Cecelia sat in the shade of a magnolia tree and tried to attach a leash to the collar of her white, enormously fat Persian cat, Angel, which was squirming desperately beneath Cecelia's hands. Poor kitty! She felt a little bad for Angel; it really couldn't be much fun to wear a leash and a collar, but that morning, when Cecelia put her on the scale, Angel

had weighed twenty-two pounds. If Angel had a heart attack or died of diabetes or leukemia, as the vet had warned her might happen, she didn't know what she would do. Angel, who had been Cecelia's main confidante for the last ten years; Angel, who always seemed to know when Cecelia needed a nose stuck under her chin or a pair of paws kneading her lap; Angel, the one relic from Lorain Cecelia wanted to keep. When she thought about losing Angel, fear rose in her chest like an icy hand, almost grasping her around the throat.

She got the leash attached securely and stood up. "Angel, come on," she said. "We need to get you some exercise." Angel lay on the sidewalk and blinked, refusing to budge. She reached out with her claws and stretched, her long belly with its pink teats facing up towards the sun. She shook herself and got back on her feet. Her white back was now covered with dirt and dead blades of grass. Cecelia tugged on the leash. The cat resisted. "Angel, come on, don't make Momma drag you," she muttered.

A shadow fell over Angel. Cecelia turned around to see a tall, thin young man standing on the sidewalk behind the cat. He was grinning, looking down at her. "Nice setup you got there," he commented. He stooped to pet Angel. "Kitty, kitty," he said, scratching under her chin. The cat leaned in and started purring, twisting her neck so that more of her was touching the young man's hand.

"Hi," Cecelia said. "We're just going for a walk."

"Hi," he said. He had a small package of red shoestring licorice in one hand and was biting off little bits of it. He bit off a big end and held the rest of the package out to her. "Want some?" he asked with his mouth full.

"Okay," Cecelia said. She broke off a small bit of candy and chewed it.

"So you and your cat are going for a walk?" he asked. Cecelia nodded.

"It don't look like she plans on doing a lot of walking today. Why don't you come with me?"

"Where are you going?" she asked suspiciously.

He held the licorice package out to her. She shook her head. He tipped his head back and coiled the rest of it into his mouth. He let the empty cellophane package drift to the ground. "I'm going to Kentucky to get lottery tickets," he said, chewing. "Want to come with me?"

She looked up at him. He was about her age, or maybe a year or two older. He was thinner than Seth and taller. He had long, straight black hair that was tied in a ponytail. He was wearing a black t-shirt and loose cargo pants. The hems of his pants were frayed and the loose threads brushed against a pair of black engineer boots. When Cecelia looked at his face, he swallowed his licorice, grinned, and pushed his sunglasses up on his forehead. He had very blue eyes and straight teeth. Cecelia thought he was handsome.

"You ain't from around here, are you?" he asked.

"No," she said. "How could you tell?"

"I could tell, little girl. I knew it the minute I seen you." He took an eight-ball out of his pocket and started playing catch with it, tossing it from hand to hand.

"Why? Do I have an accent or something?" she said, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"What's your name, baby doll?" he asked without answering her.

"Cecelia," she said.

"Cecelia," the young man repeated. "*Whoa, Cecelia...you're breaking my heart, you're shaking my confidence, baby...*" he sang. He smiled again, tossing the eight-ball at her. She caught it and looked at it.

"What does the eight-ball say about you coming to Kentucky with me?" he asked?

She looked at it more closely and she realized that it wasn't a regular eight-ball, but a miniature version of the joke eight-balls she had seen at so many Wal-Marts and K-Marts and Kay-Bee toy stores, the kind that told you your fortune through a murky little porthole in the side when you shook them. MY SOURCES SAY UNLIKELY, it said. "It says unlikely," she said timidly.

"Let me see it," he said. She tossed it back to him, but it didn't go quite far enough. It landed on the sidewalk next to his feet. Angel, still lying down on the sidewalk, reached out and batted at it with her front paws. He squatted down and picked it up. "Well, now it says it is most likely so," he said.

"I don't even know your name," she said. "I don't know your name or who you are or anything else about you."

"My name is Pat," he said, holding out his hand. Expecting it to feel cold and clammy, she shook it. But it was warm, and his grip was good—strong, but not crushing. He looked at her and smiled. He seemed so nice! She thought about going to Kentucky. The mountains! The prettiest part of the drive from Lorain to Knoxville, she remembered, had been between Knoxville and the last part of Kentucky. She had gazed with wonder through the windshield of Seth's car, openmouthed, admiring their beauty, their size, wondering what lay beyond them. She pictured herself in the front seat of Pat's car,

admiring the mountains through the windshield, the last rays of the late afternoon sun shining on them. She wondered what they would talk about in the car. Pat seemed so unlike Seth, whose shirts were always tucked in and whose gas tank never dipped below half full and whose SNOOZE button, she knew, would test clean for fingerprints. Seth wouldn't be home until late. There would be enough time.

"Well, are you ready to go?" he asked.

Cecelia thought about an assembly she had been to in the fifth grade, after Laura Zimmerman had stopped coming to school. They had had a policeman come and give a talk in the high school gym. She didn't remember what the policeman had said, but she remembered the solemn looks on the faces of her teachers, and the way her father—he had still been around then—had for weeks afterward driven her to school, even though it was only eight blocks and she kept reminding him she was a big girl, she could walk. She hadn't thought about what happened to nice girls who took candy and rides from strangers then. She looked up at Pat, who was still smiling, playing with his eight-ball. Her eyes lingered on a flat, circular outline in the front pocket of Pat's baggy cargo pants that was too big to be a tin of Kodiak. She had a sudden picture of herself bound and gagged with duct tape, sealed up like a Christmas present in the trunk of Pat's car. The picture flashed out of her head as quickly as it had come in and she was left with a slightly uneasy feeling in her stomach. "Maybe we could go later," she said. "I have to take Angel for a walk first."

"Angel don't want to walk," Pat said. "Do you, kitty?" Casually, as though Angel were his, he reached down and picked her up, not seeming to notice how heavy she was at all. Cecelia noticed that he knew how to hold a cat, with one arm under her butt and

her front half balanced on his opposite arm. She liked that. Angel's leash dangled down towards the ground, like a baby-sized noose, as she burrowed into Pat's shoulder, purring.

"Why are you taking your cat on a walk?" Pat asked.

"I want her to lose weight. She weighs twenty-two pounds and the vet says that if she doesn't lose weight, she's going to get feline diabetes or something."

"Hear that, kitty?" Pat said. "You got a good momma. She's looking out for you."

His praise made her feel warm inside. Seth always complained about the care she took with Angel—"Eleven sixty-seven on a bag of cat food? Angel's not going to know the difference, Cecelia"—"Angel's still going to hate being brushed whether you get the one with natural bristles or the one with synthetic bristles, Cecelia"—"A cat bed? She's just going to end up in the bed with us, Cecelia".

Pat scratched Angel under her chin. "Kitty, kitty, kitty," he murmured. "Such a pretty kitty. Pretty momma, too," he said, just loud enough for Cecelia to hear it. She looked down automatically, a little embarrassed.

"Well, if I go with you, how do I know you won't kidnap me or something?" she asked, trying to be playful.

"You can trust me, Cecelia," he said. "I'm a nice guy. Got a list of references right here in my pocket." She giggled before she could stop it. "And I'll tell you why else you can trust me. I'm from the Midwest, just like you are."

"Where?" she asked.

"Michigan," he said. "Born and raised in Flint, Michigan. Been living down here for a year or two. That's how I could tell you wasn't from around here."

Cecelia didn't remember telling him where she was from. That uneasy feeling slid back into her stomach. Pat smiled at her and felt around in his pocket, sorting through the variety of objects within. Cecelia could see the fingers of his left hand grasp the large circular object in the left pocket. She thought again of duct tape and the humid, dusty darkness of the trunk of Pat's car.

"Isn't Flint the murder capital of the world or something?" she asked.

Pat laughed. He put Angel, who was beginning to get a little restless, back down on the ground. She arched her back up, stretching, and curled up at Cecelia's feet. "A million years ago, honey. A million years ago. But now the murderers are all gone and the crime's all gone and the bad guys are all left Flint now."

"Like you?" she said, smiling at him.

He laughed. "Can't be won over that easily, can you? Well, I do like a girl who plays hard-to-get. No, I'm a nice guy," he said, leaning down a little bit so he could look directly at her, "and I always was a nice guy and whether I'm living in Flint, Michigan or Knoxville, Tennessee or Duluth, Minnesota or Miami, Florida or Alaska or Antigua or Antarctica, I'm always gonna be a nice guy. And I promise I'll always be real nice to you."

"Well, why do you want me to come with you?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be just as easy to go get lottery tickets by yourself?"

The smile left Pat's face. He looked a little hurt. Cecelia felt bad. Oh, she had said the wrong thing again! She had insulted him. She could see it in his eyes. "Oh, I

could, I suppose," he said, "but I just thought it might be a more fun if I had a pretty girl like you along for the ride." His cheeks flushed a little bit, just enough to make Cecelia melt inside. "I just, well, I seen you settin' in that big apartment all day long, all by yourself, and I thought, 'Now, there's a nice girl who might like some company, someone to talk to for a little while.'"

Cecelia thought again, longingly, of the long curving miles of I-75 separating Knoxville from the Kentucky border. So pretty! She thought about riding in a car that wasn't Seth's, sitting next to this boy she hardly knew, and she could feel adrenaline flowing through her veins. It felt like freedom. Her heart beat a little faster. She looked up at Pat, into his eyes. He looked so handsome. She wondered if people felt this way when they got into a certain college, or won a contest, or got cancer. She still wanted to know why she was the chosen one.

"Do you want to come with me, Cecelia?" Pat asked. "Cause I don't want you to come with me if you don't want to."

Cecelia pictured the apartment—it was still *the* apartment to her, or *Seth's* apartment, even though, in all fairness, she supposed, it was *their* apartment. It seemed so empty and dark. She thought about sitting inside the four walls, bored and lonely as a pea in a tin can, until Seth came home. And then what? He would eat, they would watch TV for an hour or two, and then they would go to bed. The next day, they would wake up. She would cook him eggs and make him coffee, and he would leave and it would be the same old thing all over again. Still trying to decide, she bent over and picked up Angel. The cat squirmed a little and then relaxed into Cecelia's shoulder. Cecelia scratched Angel between the ears and tried to decide. She wondered for a second,

irrationally, if Angel wanted her to go. She listened to the cat purr and thought, *My sources say yes.* She looked at Pat again and met his blue eyes. "No, I want to come with you," she said. "I really do. I just don't, you know, I don't know..."

"Don't know what?" Pat asked. "It'll be fun. And hey, what if we win the lottery? We could blow this town forever, you know? We could go anywhere and do anything and be anybody. We'd be free. Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose, Cecelia," he said, and his eyes took on a certain dreamy cast. *"Tell me now baby is he good to you, can he do to you the things that I do, oh no, I can take you higher,"* he sang, and then suddenly, switching keys, *"I got pictures, got candy, I'm a lovable man and I can take you to the nearest star, so get outta my dreams and get into my car."*

Cecelia's eyes fell once again on that mysterious circular object in Pat's pants pocket. Why was it giving her such a sense of foreboding? She remembered a picture she had seen years ago, a picture that she wasn't supposed to have seen, of Laura Zimmerman's mouth and eyes covered with duct tape. That was the way she had been when they had found her. But, Laura had been only ten, and Cecelia was almost twice that old, a big girl now. She could fight back. And surely Pat meant her no harm. It would be fun. Still, the fear in her belly was still there, faint, unwelcome, but *there*, like an annoying relative visiting from out of town. Pat took the eight-ball out of his other pocket again and played with it, waiting for her decision.

The cat suddenly tensed up. Cecelia squealed as Angel's claws dug into her shoulder. Angel flew out of Cecelia's arms and took off on a diagonal, racing across the street. The gray Cavalier careening around the corner was just as fast, just as sudden, and they heard a yowl and they heard a thump and when it was gone they saw the bloody

leash first and then they saw Angel flattened against the pavement, her innards exposed, glistening moist and sticky. Cecelia tried to scream, "Angel, Angel," but the words came out in a whisper. She tried to run over to her cat, but she couldn't move. Her feet felt rooted to the sidewalk. She couldn't take her eyes off of Angel's dead body.

Pat dropped his eight-ball and it rolled until it hit the ground at Cecelia's feet. She picked it up and looked at it. YES, it said.

"Do you want to come with me?" Pat asked.

"Yes," she murmured, still looking at the eight-ball. Pat waited for her to approach him and when she didn't move he walked over to her and gently took the eight-ball away from her and put it back into his pocket. He reached out for her hand. She gave it to him with no resistance. Holding Cecelia's hand, he walked down the sidewalk with her following behind him. Pat took a roll of duct tape out of his pocket while they walked, flinging it up in the air slightly with his wrist and letting it fall back down over his hand. She watched with fascination. They walked until they reached a car parked on the street half a block ahead. Pat held the passenger side door open for Cecelia and she got in and closed the door. He got in the driver's side and started the engine. The car moved smoothly down the block and out of sight towards the interstate. Behind them lay a dead white cat, crumpled and lifeless in the street.

III. *The Year of the Cat, or, Pussywhipped*

Maybe I should have reacted differently that day. A Tuesday, late in September. The day Pat, my neighbor, and Cecelia, my girlfriend, went to Kentucky to buy lottery tickets, the lottery not being legal in Tennessee then. The day Cecelia's cat, Angel, was hit by a car and died. Maybe I should have reacted differently the day I came home from work and found the body of a cat in the freezer.

The cat was dead. Thank God. Angel, a long-haired white Persian, weighed in at twenty-two pounds and was the most obnoxious creature I had ever encountered. She would hiss at me, attempt to scratch me whenever I tried to pet her, and bite me if I rolled too close to Cecelia in my sleep. The cat was also filthy. She never groomed herself and she constantly left bits of dead skin, feces, and cat litter in our bed, where she could be found most of the time. She shed nonstop. Everything in the apartment, it seemed, was lightly coated with white hair. Noxious gases, impervious to changes in diet and feeding schedule, emanated from the cat's ass frequently and at inconvenient times.

But my girlfriend, hopelessly obsessed with Angel, was oblivious to all of this. She was nuts about the damn cat. They had a relationship that superseded ours. She talked to the cat all the time—not normal here-kitty-kitty pet owner type talk, but *real* talk, conversation, as though Angel cared about what Cecelia was thinking, what Cecelia had eaten that day, what Cecelia had watched on TV lately, or what an asshole I was being. She bought Angel toy after toy, always fluffy and stuffed with catnip, never seeming to notice that they inevitably wound up abandoned and dusty in the far reaches

of the apartment. She liked to hold Angel and carry her everywhere, even though Angel's weight was not easy for Cecelia, who was scrawny and sometimes struggled to heft a bowling ball, to bear. Her wallet held more pictures of Angel than of her mother and me combined. So did the front of the refrigerator. Still, though, bathing the cat never seemed to occur to her. And, after it happened, neither did burying the cat.

When I opened the freezer, I didn't know what it was at first. I pulled the bloody towel-wrapped bundle out, looked inside, and screamed. What remained of Angel was a big, hairy, frozen shell. The cat had not died pretty. Her underside was split open and bloody. Her fur was matted around the wound. Bits of shit were still clinging to the fur around her backside. Her head had been left intact; her eyes were shut but her mouth was wide open. Her bloodstained leash was still attached and it stuck out of the bundle slightly, like the pull-handle on a kid's wind-up toy.

At first, I didn't mind that Angel was in the freezer. I had my hands full trying to convince Cecelia that I wasn't secretly glad the cat was dead. Damn her! She wasn't any prodigy of book-smarts, or of emotional maturity, but she could read me like one of those cheap dime-store romances she liked so much. Our conversations all started to take on the same echo, so much so that when we were eating breakfast, or sitting on the couch watching TV, or lying in bed at night, I would lose track of time, never being sure whether or not we had had this conversation before:

Me: I know you're sad. I miss Angel too. *(Sits next to **Cecelia,** puts comforting arm around her)* But you need to move on. You've done nothing but mope since it happened.

Cecelia *(pushes my arm away)*: Seth, you don't miss her. You're the happiest you've been since we started living together.

Me: That's not true.

Cecelia: It is so true. It's easy for YOU to move on. When you've been doing nothing for the last two months but hope she would drop dead.

Me: Cecelia, be fair.

Cecelia *(curls up into a ball, pulls covers over head)*: You're not being fair. Telling me all the time, "Oh, it was just a cat, Cecelia." "It's time you got over it, Cecelia." "You need to stop moping, Cecelia."

Me: Cecelia, please, be reasonable and listen to me. *(Takes a deep breath)* Everything dies someday, honey. It's the nature of things. You knew that Angel wasn't going to live forever. There's no reason for all this carrying on.

(Cecelia breaks down. Muffled sobs can be heard from under the covers.)

I vacuumed. I swept. I mopped. I Windexed, Pledged, and Fantasticked. I drove to the Laundromat to wash the bedspread in the big, industrial-size washing machine. With bleach. Twice. I drove to the Pilot station and vacuumed the backseat of my car in case any stray cat hairs had wound up in the backseat. I washed the rugs. I vacuumed the couch. I vacuumed the armchair. I vacuumed the shower curtain. I duck-walked around the apartment, picking up Angel's toys with rubber gloves. I put the toys, the

litter box, the brush, the carrier, and the full vacuum cleaner bag into a big trash bag, walked outside, and flung the trash bag and the rubber gloves into the dumpster. My hands were shaking with excitement. No more hair. No more used kitty litter sticking to the bottoms of my bare feet when I went to use the bathroom. No more nauseatingly sweet Glade Plug-Ins to cover up the smell of Angel's gas. When I thought of the little bloody bundle still taking up residence in the freezer, I felt like celebrating.

I had thought that Cecelia only intended to keep the cat in the freezer until she could call Animal Control, or make some other kind of practical arrangements as to how to deal with the corpse, but ten days after it happened, Angel was still in the freezer. One day, I opened the door, forgetting, and I was face-to-face with my frozen, bloody nemesis. Disgusted, I closed the door in a hurry. Then, for some reason, I opened the door again and took another, longer look at the bundle. I reached out with my left hand and started to unwrap the towel, but pulled back. I shut the door again quick.

Me: Cecelia, honey, don't you think it might be time to take care of Angel? You can't keep her in the freezer forever.

Cecelia: You—I—she's not hurting anything in there.

Me: I know, but it's kinda gross.

Cecelia *(straightens back, swivels her head to look at me. Gearing up into defense mode)*: She is not gross. She's my cat and she's FINE.

Me: Come on, Cecelia. It's not healthy.

Cecelia: I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT! *(Pointedly increases volume on TV.)*

Everything became suspect. I couldn't carry a plastic bag, or a cardboard box, or even a laundry basket into the apartment without Cecelia flipping out. "You're not going to put Angel in there, are you? You're not going to take her away from me, are you?" I wound up never even taking the shovel I had bought out of the trunk of my car. But what was I supposed to do? Cecelia never left the apartment. Since it had happened, she barely left the end of the hair-free couch, sipping chamomile tea all day and watching cartoons, huddled in a blanket like a little Russian grandma. When I left for work, there she was. When I came home from work, there she was. Who was it that said woman is the devil's tool? But I had brought it on myself. I didn't have to invite her to live with me after I'd graduated and accepted the job in Knoxville. I had thought that taking her away from the trailer park in Dayton and her bitchy, alcoholic mother would do her good. And naturally, she became so excited when I first brought up the idea, that there was no way I could retract my offer. Dumb, soft-hearted Seth strikes again.

One day, after folding the laundry, I took a pile of folded dishcloths into the kitchen and put them into the cabinet next to the refrigerator. Unable to help myself, I opened up the freezer again to look at the towel-wrapped bundle. A little bit of Angel's tail had popped out from the towel, the white hairs sticking just barely to a can of frozen orange juice concentrate. I touched the tail. It was as cold and stiff as a tombstone. I hated looking at it. I tried to curl it up so I could stick it back under the towel, but it

wouldn't budge. I hated the way it looked there. So white, so hairy. I hated it so much I couldn't stop looking. I stood that way for a good five minutes until I realized my fingers were numb and my nose was filled with cold air and I forced my numb hands to close the freezer door.

"She talks to it," I confided to Pat, the neighbor.

"What does she say?" he asked. We were on the balcony, drinking Michelob Light and watching Knoxville spin by in the lazy warmth of a Sunday afternoon.

"The same kind of stuff as when it was alive. Tells it about her day, what's on TV. Apologizes to it. 'It's pretty cold in there, isn't it? I'm sorry, Angel baby, I'm sorry it has to be so cold.' Tells it what an asshole I'm being." I laughed and drank down the rest of my beer."

"You object to a little thing like a dead cat in your freezer and suddenly you're an asshole. Go figure." Pat was sitting cross-legged, playing with a roll of duct tape. He balanced it on the ground and rolled it back and forth between his knees. "She takes it out and pets it, too. While you're at work."

"She told you she does that?"

"No...she does, that's all. I know she does." His eyes stayed on the roll of duct tape. "I ain't talked to her since the day it happened."

"That's creepy, man."

"Tell me about it. Pettin' a dead cat? Gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinkin' about it."

"No, it's creepy that you *know* about it."

"I know a lot of things." His eyes moved back and forth, too, never leaving that stupid duct tape. "Hey, do you guys have a crowbar I could borrow?"

"What the hell do you need a crowbar for?"

"Just thought I'd do some crowing."

"No."

Pat drained his beer and stood up, pocketing his duct tape. "Well, in that case, I will see you later. Best of luck dealin' with your lady-fair," he said, tipping his head towards the front door of the apartment.

I shook my head. "Jesus," I said and I went back inside.

I started telling myself it was just to see whether or not she was really still dead. Nearly every day, I'd open the freezer door and take a peek. "You fat, flea-bitten piece of shit," I would say to it. "Every time I come in here, there you are, just lying around. Maybe later, Momma will take you for a nice long walk. Preferably off the Henley St. bridge." Or, "Angel, you haven't moved an inch since this morning. You have got to be the laziest cat I have ever seen." Or, "What's the deal, Angel? There you are again! It's almost as though you're frozen in place." I would laugh and close the freezer door, leaving Angel alone in her icy tomb.

Cecelia: What was that?

Me *(returning from kitchen)*: Nothing.

Cecelia: You were insulting my cat.

Me: No, I wasn't. I don't even think anything of her being in the freezer anymore.

Cecelia: I know you're glad she's dead, but you don't have to rub it in my face.

Me: I'm not trying to rub it in your face, Cecelia. But it's not my fault your cat is dead. You don't have to take it out on me.

Cecelia: Shut up, Seth. Just shut up about it. *(Cries.)*

The hair of the cat
Icicles frozen in time
You stay on my mind.

Stiff fur like snowflakes
Locked inside your icy crypt
Dead angels don't shed.

"Seth, you beatin' off in there again?" Danny, the occupant of the next cubicle, was sticking his head over the partition, grinning at me.

"No," I said, hastily swiveling my monitor towards the wall, "just going over these figures."

"Well, we're going down to The Grille for lunch. You want to come?"

"No...not today," I said. I couldn't stop staring at the computer screen. The poems had sort of materialized there this morning. I didn't remember writing them. Consciously writing them, anyway. "I think I'm gonna do a working lunch today."

"Well, have fun with your figures." Danny said and his head disappeared back behind the partition.

All through lunch break and part of the afternoon, my fingers tapped on the keyboard and more little poems appeared on the screen.

Beyond words, you lay
Rigid and lifeless and white
Kitty, are you there?

Here, kitty. Nice kitty. Pretty kitty. Dead kitty. Oh, you like having your ears rubbed, don't you? Oh, wait. You can't feel it now. No, you can't. Oh no, you can't. Oh, you're so pretty. You're so pretty, all stiff and cold. You're a stiff cold kitty, yes you are. You're a big fat kitty Popsicle. Look at your big, fat bloody belly. Such a fat kitty. Cats can die if they get too fat, did you know that? Oh, wait. You don't have to worry about that any more, do you? Nice kitty. Good kitty. Dead kitty.

"You been weirding me out lately, Seth," Pat commented.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're talking to that cat now, too. Pretty soon you're gonna be as flippy as Sybil in there." We were sitting just outside the door of the apartment. He reached out and tapped on it with a skinny finger. "It's your apartment. You go in there and just tell her you had enough. Go in there with your shovel and tell her you're burying that sonovabitch already."

"I can't do that," I said. "It would bother her too much. She'd freak out."

"It's not like she's not already freaked out. It would do her good. She'd have to deal with it, get it all out in the open." Pat spun the top from his beer bottle between his two index fingers. "You want me to take care of it for you?"

"Jesus, no," I spat out. The vehemence of my reaction frightened me. "I don't need you to take care of anything."

"Just tryin' to help," Pat said. He had lost the sunglasses he usually wore and his eyes were scrunched up into little slits, trying to keep the sun out.

"What happened to your sunglasses, Pat?"

"Nothin'. You got a tire iron?"

I opened the door, grabbed the tire iron Cecelia insisted I keep by the door in case of intruders, and shut it. I handed the tire iron to Pat. "Here. You need to iron your tires?"

"Somethin' like that," Pat said. He got to his feet, tire iron in hand, and slowly ambled away. Halfway to his apartment, he turned around and looked at me. His eyes were open wide now, and very blue. "Hey, if you change your mind 'bout lettin' me take care of your cat, just let me know. I'll be glad to dump it off somewhere for ya."

"Thanks, but no thanks." I got up and went inside.

"Hey, you know, I'm just tryin' to help. It's not like I enjoy living next door to the town nutjobs," Pat called as I swung the door shut.

Cecelia: I don't like you talking to him about Angel.

Me: We weren't talking about Angel.

Cecelia: He wants her.

(I say nothing. I stare straight ahead at the television screen.)

Cecelia: He wants my Angel for himself.

(I say nothing.)

Cecelia: Tell me he's not going to take her away from me. Tell me that I can keep her, forever and always.

(I say nothing.)

Cecelia: Please, Seth. Tell me.

(I say nothing.)

I decided Pat was right. I made up my mind to get rid of the cat. I worked out my plan over the next couple of days. On Saturday, I set my alarm and slid out of bed at five a.m. as silent as a ninja, not wanting to even slightly risk waking up Cecelia. I took a shower, shaved, and put on a black t-shirt and jeans. I crept into the kitchen and pulled a black trash bag out of the cupboard. I felt like a serial killer as I held it open and opened the freezer door for the last time.

Okay, kitty, we're gonna go bye-bye. Oof. Damn, Angel, I don't remember you being this heavy. No one told me that after a month and a half in the freezer you'd get even fatter. Well, you're still a good kitty. You're still a pretty kitty. Oh, yes. Yes, you are. Pretty, hairy white kitty. Here, let Daddy scratch you behind your little dead ears. Yes, you like that, don't you? Let's go for a ride in the car with Daddy. I know, poor

kitty, you don't like car rides. I promise this will be the last time you ever have to ride in a car again.

With the dead cat riding shotgun, I drove fifty miles into the sunrise until I hit the city of Newport. A small town, too far away to be fairly called a suburb of Knoxville, there was nothing particularly significant about it, except that there was a rock quarry here. A granite-girded three-hundred-foot drop into clear, watery oblivion, it was where the people of Newport came to picnic, to screw, to suicide. We'd been here one time. Shortly after she had moved in with me, Cecelia had guilted me into disposing of my pornography collection. The rock quarry seemed like a reasonable place, nice and ceremonial. Sitting on the hood of my car, she had watched in mute satisfaction as I opened the trash bag and made it rain *Penthouses* and *Hustlers* down into the clear water.

There wasn't really a parking lot, just a patch of ground, about five or six car spaces wide, made flat and bare by years of cars driving and parking there. I parked the car and got out. Walking around to the passenger side, I took out the trash bag. This one did not have pornography in it. The bottom of the bag was damp. The cat was beginning to thaw and, in the direct sunlight, to stink. I carried the bag in my arms and walked the twenty yards or so, watching my breath puff out in front of me in the chilly November morning air, until I reached the place where I could go no further, where the rocks dropped away into the water.

I'm sorry, but this is something I have to do. You're still a good kitty.

I sat down, putting Angel on the ground beside me, and thought about what I had driven out to the quarry to do. I thought about watching the trash bag spiral down the three hundred feet or so into the water. I thought about the momentum the bag would gain towards the end of the drop. I thought about the silence of the morning broken by the splash of Angel's still partly frozen body hitting the water. I reached out and poked a few holes in the bag with my finger, hoping that it would fill up with water and sink faster. I stood, holding the black garbage bag, and drew my arm back, preparing to throw. I held my arm back for the longest time, unable to propel it forward, as though Angel was intentionally becoming heavier, hoping to hold me back.

What will happen to you in the quarry, Angel? Why are you trying to keep me from throwing you down there? Are you afraid? Will you be able to feel your flesh rotting off your little kitty bones? Will you be able to feel fish nipping at your ribs? Will your kitty soul be stuck down there, too? No chance for kitty redemption?

I let my arm drop to my side and the bag took the brunt of the momentum and swung back and forth from my closed right hand. I thought about Angel's body sinking slowly to the bottom of the quarry, joining the beer bottles and used condoms, dead bodies and porno magazines. I thought about coming home to an empty freezer and felt my heart sink down to my knees.

I sat there for an hour or so, Angel slowly thawing out beside me, before I gave up. I picked the bag back up, put Angel in the passenger seat, rolled down all the windows, and drove back to Knoxville. On the highway, I had to swerve to avoid a car

passing too closely and Angel fell out of the bag and onto the floor. Her towel came unwrapped and she fell out of it, rolling until she was almost touching my foot. I picked up the towel and the bag, held them up to the window, and let them go.

We're going home, kitty. Yes we are. Daddy's so sorry. Daddy's so sorry he ever thought about letting you go, kitty.

Cecelia: ANGEL! Baby, baby, what did Daddy do to you? *(Takes cat in her arms, starts covering it with kisses.)*

Me: Nothing. I realized that you—that WE—were going to miss her, so I didn't do it. I brought her back.

Cecelia: Let's let her stay out of the freezer for a while. She wants to warm up a little bit.

Me: Okay.

(We sit on the couch with the cat between us, taking turns petting her.)

(Enter ***Pat.*** *He is carrying a tire iron, which he tosses back and forth between his hands while he talks.)*

Pat: Goddamn, this is one wacky game show.

(We are quiet, staring at Pat.)

Pat: What's that smell?

Cecelia: I don't smell anything.

Me: I don't smell anything, either.

Pat: Well—

*(**Pat** starts to say something, then stops.)*

Pat: Listen. Do you crazy kids want to go to Kentucky to get lottery tickets?

(Cecelia looks at me. I look at Cecelia. She shrugs. I shrug.)

Cecelia: Okay.

Me: Okay.

Cecelia: Let's put Angel back in the freezer before we go.

(I pick up Angel and carry her into the kitchen. I open the door of the freezer and gently place the cat inside.)

Me *(sotto voce)*: You be a good kitty while we're gone. Momma and Daddy love you. *(I lean into the freezer and kiss the cat on forehead. I back out and close the door.)*

(I return to the living room. **Cecelia** *is standing up, purse in hand.* **Pat** *is still standing by the door, holding his tire iron.)*

Pat: You all ready?

Me: Yeah. I'm ready. *(Picks up keys from table)* Let's go.

(Exit **Pat, Cecelia,** *and* **me.** *)*

IV. *Adult Swim*

Walter had gradually let all the clocks, like everything else in his house, run down after he was laid off from AC Delco in September. The microwave said 4:23. The clock hanging on the wall just above the microwave had stopped at 2:13. The counters in the sticky, grease-smelling kitchen were a mess, littered with used coffee mugs, crumpled, empty corn chip bags, crusty, crispy dishtowels, blank forms for unemployment and food stamps, and yellowing newspapers. A plastic grocery bag lay hanging open on one end of the counter, spilling *Bop* and *Tiger Beat* magazines, apples, bananas, and Dum-Dum suckers onto the top of the stove, which was greasy and worn, the dials on the range barely legible.

A cracked Philco radio sat atop the stove, its antenna duct-taped to the wall above. Over 790 AM's constant hum of static, Rush Limbaugh's confident voice assured Walter, who was in the process of dragging an ugly vinyl chair across the uneven linoleum to the sink, that he was listening to the E.I.B. network. If Rush was just ending, that meant it was almost three o'clock. Walter straightened the chair and began his daily drill. He raised the blinds on the window over the sink until the bottom rested a couple of inches above the sill. He knelt on the chair and, without taking his eyes off of the small strip of window just below the blinds, reached out with his right hand and groped around on the counter, sending an empty Faygo bottle and that day's *Flint Journal* sailing to the floor before his fingers closed around his goal. He lifted the binoculars to his face and watched the snowy yard next door, making sure to keep his eyes on that small two-inch-wide strip of window. Rush Limbaugh's show ended and the news announcer came on.

Walter leaned way back in his chair and punched in the AM/FM knob, switching the station to 96.1, before returning to his sentry at the window. It was now three o'clock. Over the strains of "I Got You Babe," he listened carefully for the screech of the school bus.

He could feel his excitement grow when the music of air brakes being punched too hard reached his ears. He could hear the doors closing with a flappy thud, the school bus pulling away, and then the yells of the two brothers as they kicked and pushed each other into Walter's view. Kevin was first, on the run from Pat, who was chasing him with a handful of snow, the usual childhood malice in his eyes. As Pat threw his bookbag to the ground and pursued his younger brother with greater fervor, Walter's left hand slid down to his fly and eased it open. Reaching in, he brought his erection out and stroked himself while he watched Pat wrestle Kevin to the ground. Amid his brother's cries of protest, Pat gleefully rubbed snow in Kevin's hair and shoved handfuls down the back of his coat. Walter sighed and kept rubbing. On mid-Michigan's number-one choice for oldies, Sonny and Cher sang *"I got you to hold my hand...I got you to understand."* Walter's eyes stayed fixed on Pat as the two boys rolled around in the snow. He twisted his head around a little, trying to get a better look at Pat's slender, nine-year-old face, which was partially concealed by the hood of his blue nylon ski jacket. Suddenly, Pat sat up, holding his brother down to the ground, and looked up, straight into Walter's kitchen window. His blue eyes met Walter's. Walter felt his knees shake, not from arousal this time, but from fear. Then Pat broke into a strange little grin, as though he knew he was being watched, and he kept his eyes on Walter as he shuddered into climax.

Immediately following his orgasm, Walter felt, as usual, guilt, embarrassment, and shame. Ever since Cheryl McLaughlin and her two children had moved into the house trailer next door, he had felt an inexplicable attraction to her older son, Pat. Pat had a strange pull over him, a sexual fascination he could not remember ever having felt for anyone—man, woman, or child—before. His new feelings disturbed him, but fascinated him as well. After Walter lost his job, there had been nothing for him to do but rattle around alone in his small house, eating and sleeping and reading the newspapers and listening to the radio and waiting for something to happen. He had felt useless, like a cipher. He had thoughts about suicide occasionally, but had neither the drive nor the courage to act on them.

Then, about a month ago, the McLaughlins had moved in. The first time he saw Pat, the child had been chasing a stray cat around the old, rotted sheds on his property, and his breath had caught in his throat. He thought he had never seen anyone so innocent, so lovely. He was startled by the power and urgency of his sexual attraction. He had developed an erection so large and immediate it was almost painful, and barely had the blinds pulled down before he had reached inside of his overalls and begun masturbating furiously.

At first, he had fought it. He felt sickened by his feelings, and once or twice had actually vomited upon thinking of himself as a child molester. However, his libido seemed to be zeroed in on Pat; other children did nothing for him. He could walk through Wal-Mart, drive past the elementary school playground, and flip through *Parent* or *Child* magazine without feeling a hint of arousal. Gradually, he began to tolerate his attraction to Pat. It was better, Walter thought grimly, to be attracted to just one child

than the whole mess of them. And it was better to be a pedophile than to have no identity at all.

He found himself buying kid bait at the supermarket—the glossy magazines with the movie stars that the kids liked; breakfast cereal with stars and wizards and lots of sugar; wooden paddles with rubber bouncy-balls attached, squirt guns, bubble gum, candy. He'd thought about buying a puppy, too, but discarded the idea. He was deathly allergic and didn't relish the thought of sneezing and snorting during an attempted seduction.

Walter put the binoculars down and opened the cabinet under the sink, grabbing some paper towels. He wiped up the mess on the back of the chair, tossed the paper towels into the garbage, and looked back out the window. The boys had gone inside. He lowered the blinds and stuck a Dum-Dum into his mouth. Grabbing the paper from the floor, he dragged the chair back over to the table and sat down. He found an ink pen in the pocket of his faded work pants and half-heartedly opened *The Flint Journal* to the classifieds. Walter wasn't sure what kind of job he was looking for; at forty, he hadn't finished high school, and was, he knew, qualified for very little except manufacturing spark plugs. He scanned the want ads for about thirty seconds before giving up. What was there in Flint for an unemployed pedophile, anyhow? He added the paper to the growing mess on the floor, sat at the table, and put his head in his hands.

A few days later, Walter was in the small corner grocery store, lost in fantasies about Pat, when he accidentally let his rusty cart slide into Cheryl McLaughlin's hip.

"Oh, excuse me," Walter said, embarrassed. "I'm sorry." He leaned over, helping the blonde, well-shaped woman pick up the faded boxes of Jell-O that the bump had made her drop.

"Thanks. Oh, hi, Walter," she said. "How have you been?"

"Uh...er...I've been okay," Walter said, quickly dumping a dusty box of double-thickness maxi pads into his cart to cover up the candy and cheap toys. "Where are your boys?" he blurted out abruptly.

"Oh, they're—they're around here somewhere," she said, waving her hands in the empty air, as though doing so would make the boys instantly materialize. "Making trouble, no doubt." She laughed. Walter's face stayed blank. "Oh, they're good boys," Cheryl said quickly, "they really are."

"And Pat?" Walter asked. "Is he a good boy?"

"Oh, yes," Cheryl said, a little surprised. "He's fine. He's a funny little kid, though. Sometimes he doesn't seem to know he's only nine years old. Some of the stuff he says—well, anyway. Here I am, blabbing on, and keeping you from your shopping."

"No, it's okay," Walter said. His eyes gleamed with interest. "What does he say?"

"Nothing special, really. Well," she said, deliberately looking at her watch, "it was nice seeing you, Walter, but I need to get going."

"Bye," Walter said. "Hey, call me if you ever need someone to watch the boys for you. I love kids."

"I'll do that," she said. "Thanks."

Walter's knees were shaking so badly he couldn't move. Leaving his cart where it was, he leaned against a shelf of laxatives and hemorrhoid creams, waiting until he could walk again. Without realizing it, he closed his hand around a Fleet enema and began squeezing it as though it were a StressTest ball at the doctor's office. Pat was in the store! Right here in the store with him! He got his knees under control and crept away from the pharmaceuticals aisle and down the next aisle, unwittingly carrying the enema with him. He peeked over a Coca-Cola display two aisles over and saw the top of a little boy's head, just a foot or so off the floor. He edged closer to the display and rose up on his tiptoes to see the child. It was Pat, sitting cross-legged on the floor, a magazine in his hands, the plastic wrapper lying crumpled on the floor next to him. Such a sweet, innocent little face! Walter felt guilty, but at the same time enthralled to have spotted Pat. He could feel himself becoming aroused. He wished he didn't. He wished he were at home so he could masturbate. He squeezed the Fleet bottle gently as he watched.

Pat sat in the middle of the aisle, calmly turning the pages of the *Penthouse* he held, unaware that he was being watched. Kevin was dancing around him, pleading. "Pat, let me see! Just let me see, *pleeeese,* Pat?"

"Shut up, fartbrain!" Pat said, rolling up the magazine and swatting his brother in the rear end with it.

Kevin howled. "I'm gonna tell Mom!"

"Yeah, go ahead, tell her, you big cunt," Pat said, unfolding the centerfold.

"Mo-om!" Kevin yelled, stomping on six-year-old legs towards the flour and spices aisle. "Mom, what's a cunt?" Walter barely heard this last, so closely was his whole attention focused on Pat. His breathing quickened. His erection bulged. As

Walter watched, Pat pulled out the centerfold and examined it carefully. Then he looked up, locked eyes with Walter, and smiled. Pat closed the magazine, stood, and reached up to put the magazine back on the rack. Not high enough up, Walter noticed, and he wondered how Pat had gotten it down in the first place. Pat smiled and started walking towards Walter. Walter panicked and squeezed the bottle even harder.

"*Pat*!" It was Cheryl. She came pushing the cart from around the other side of the aisle, Kevin trailing behind. "Patrick Walker McLaughlin, come here *now!*" Pat did a slow about-face and started walking back towards his mother, looking back over his shoulder at Walter. Walter's hand clenched harder around the bottle. The enema erupted, sending fluid in a jet straight up in the air. Walter looked up, startled, as the fluid came back down and landed with a splatter on the floor, on the soda, on Walter's pants and shoes. Panicked, Walter dropped the empty bottle and was halfway out of the store before he remembered his abandoned shopping cart. He didn't want to leave without the kid bait. Slowly, he walked back into the store, found his cart, and wheeled it up to checkout. His eyes were unfocused and his hands moved haphazardly as he piled Faygo, Dum-Dums, *Bop* magazines, and Fritos onto the conveyer belt, and the cashier, who was still young enough to blush as she passed the maxi pads (which Walter had forgotten about) through the scanner, looked at him with concerned, overly made-up eyes and asked him if he was okay.

Pale and awkward in his frayed green shorts, heart pounding in his scrawny chest, Walter sat uneasily at the edge of the pool, dangling his feet in the water. Thirty years of life in the Great Lakes state had done nothing to lessen his intense fear of water. From

the other side of the bobber, which stretched from one side of the pool to the other, he watched the gaggle of kids congregated in the shallow end, giggling and pushing each other around in the water. His eyes almost immediately fastened on the object of his obsession, which was at present leaning up on the ledge, apart from the other children, picking at a scab on his elbow with great concentration. Despite his still-undeniable sense of wrongness about the whole thing, Walter's lust for Pat had only increased since the encounter at Don's Foodland. His unemployment was now more of a blessing than a curse, as it provided him with ample time to spy, plan, and manufacture coincidences. Two days earlier, the school newsletter had announced that the fourth grade was beginning swimming lessons on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Pat was in the fourth grade. And the pool was open to the public.

Walter sat with his feet in the water and tried to talk himself into edging further into the pool. The thought of the chilly, wet rush over his knees, then his thighs, then his testicles, was enough to make him squirm and shiver. He sat still, trying to gather the courage necessary to get in. Bravely plugging his nose and squeezing his eyes shut, Walter splashed down into the five-feet deep water. His feet landed hard on the concrete bottom, sending a jolt up through his ankles and knees. "Ouch," he muttered, squatting further down in the water. Kicking off of the wall, he stretched out into a clumsy crawl stroke, moving slowly so he could keep an eye on the children.

A young woman with short brown hair and short thick legs, whistle dangling around her neck, was busy urging the kids out of the pool and into four lines at the edge. Pat stood at the end of one line, scrutinizing the wound on his elbow, subtly shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He was shorter and slimmer than most of the other

children, Walter noticed, which made him feel protective, almost paternal, of Pat, yet did not lessen his attraction by one fraction. As he swam closer to the far end of the pool, he imagined the drops of water standing out like goose pimples on Pat's young, freckled skin, water dripping from his bangs and catching in his long, black eyelashes. His whole body tingled with desire. He closed his eyes, tried to breathe gently through his mouth, and kept swimming.

He was almost to the other side when his reflections were interrupted by a shrill whistle blast. The thick-legged swim teacher was standing directly above him at the pool's edge, scowling. With effort, he made the last few feet and stood up in the water. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but you need to leave. Between twelve and two, the pool is reserved for swimming lessons," she said, her voice polite but chilly. "Adult swim begins at five o'clock."

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm so sorry," Walter said, smiling at the swim teacher as he hauled himself out of the pool.

She smiled back like it hurt. "Thank you," she said and walked back over to the children.

Disappointed, shivering, and dripping, Walter was now faced with the problem of how to return to the men's locker room. The only route would take him past the lines of kids, and within touching distance of Pat. There was no other way to get there. He was excited and scared as he walked. He was so busy trying not to look at Pat for too long as he passed that he wasn't aware at first that Pat was looking at him. Pat's eyes traveled down and then up Walter's body before coming to meet with Walter's eyes. Even the

sexually naïve Walter understood the look Pat was giving him.

Cold all over, yet burning with lust, Walter picked up his towel, holding it so that it draped over his groin area, and pushed back the door to the men's locker room. Opening his locker, he barely dodged as it fell the bag of Dum-Dum suckers he had intended as an enticement for Pat after the swimming lessons were over. He peeled off his shorts and, supporting himself against the wall of lockers with one hand, started fondling himself with the other. Afterward, he kicked his towel over the small puddle on the floor and got dressed. He picked the bag of Dum-Dums up, then, disconsolately, he took one out, shucked the wrapper onto the floor, stuck the candy in his mouth and sucked as he dried his hair with the towel. Shoving the wet shorts and the Dum-Dums into a plastic shopping bag, he left the locker room and walked back out into the cold sun of the winter afternoon, trying to formulate a new plan. None came to him. He unlocked his Chevelle and slid into the driver's seat, tossing the bag onto the floor, and turned the key in the ignition. The clock on the dashboard read 6:43. "You're listening to the E.I.B. network," came Rush Limbaugh's voice over the crackly static of 790 AM. Pulling out of the middle school parking lot, Walter pushed in the AM/FM button and sang along with the Chiffons on 96.1. *"He's so fine...oh, yeah...gonna be mine, oh yeah..."*

Walter's guilt had been edged out entirely by his attraction. The mental, emotional, and sexual stranglehold Pat had him in was too great to keep him away from the pool and Walter was told four more times by the short-haired, thick-legged swim instructor to return during adult swim. Four more times he left the pool, disappointed. The floor of the Chevelle grew a sticky carpet of Dum-Dum sticks, Dum-Dum wrappers,

and battered, dampened issues of *Bop* and *Tiger Beat*. Finally, when she threatened to call security, he listened to the swim instructor and stayed away. Mid-Michigan's number-one oldies station and the E.I.B. network lost all of their previous powers to console Walter. Gazing out of the kitchen window when the school bus came at three o'clock was his only pleasure.

Finally, one last time, desperate to see Pat, he ventured out to the pool. The swim instructor duly marched him out before he was even able to stick so much as one foot in the water. In the locker room, putting his clothes back on, he was in the middle of unwrapping yet another Dum-Dum when he heard a child's voice behind him.

"Hey."

Walter turned around to see Pat behind him, small and vulnerable in his dripping blue trunks. Pat walked up to Walter until they were less than a foot away from one another. He spoke softly and quickly.

"Why don't you come to adult swim like Miss Tracey keeps telling you?"

Walter took the sucker out of his mouth and tried to think of how to answer. "Um...I have to work during adult swim. This is the only time of the day I'm free to come to the pool." Remembering that the proffering of candy was traditionally the first step to molestation, he fumbled in his bag for a sucker, but there was none to be found. All he could come up with was fruit. He held a banana out to Pat. "Would you like a banana, little boy?" he asked.

Pat shook his head. "Maybe later, though," he said, catching Walter's glance and holding it. He came around and sat next to Walter on the bench. He scooted close enough so that Walter could feel the heat from Pat's body on his skin. Walter was

exalted. He could hardly breathe. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for, and he had absolutely no clue what to do with it.

"Would you like an apple, little boy?" he asked.

"No, thank you. I had one before," Pat said. He sighed. "Boy, I'd sure like to come to adult swim. I wish I was old enough for that. I want to do everything like grown-ups do." He picked up the apple from where Walter had set it on the bench and started to toss it back and forth between his hands. "You know?"

"Yes, I do," Walter said. "Are you sure you don't want—"

"Yeah, I'm *sure,*" Pat said impatiently.

He made no effort to rise from the bench. Slowly, Walter started to ease closer to Pat. He put an arm around his skinny shoulders. He was amazed at how small Pat felt. He could feel Pat's sharp little shoulder blades move as he continued to toss the apple from hand to hand.

"It's tough being a kid, isn't it," Walter said.

"Yeah," Pat said. He snuggled closer to Walter and slowly, gradually, let one hand drop down to Walter's crotch. It was the first time Walter had ever felt a hand, excepting his own, on his genitals. His penis twitched underneath his green shorts like a divining rod. He held his breath, afraid that Pat would realize what he was touching and jerk his hand away.

When Walter turned his head to look at Pat, however, he realized that Pat was watching his lap with interest. Gently, Pat began to move his hand back and forth over Walter's penis, masturbating him. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing. Walter was frightened. The child wasn't supposed to be this forward. In all his fantasies,

Walter was the aggressor. It was too disturbing to endure. Muttering something about work and needing to be at the office, he sprang from the bench and jumped into his worn gray pants and sweat-stained t-shirt. He thrust his feet into his boots without bothering to tie them and hobbled out of the locker room, carrying his towel and coat. As the door swung shut behind him, he turned around for one last look at Pat, who was still sitting on the bench, playing with the apple. Then he got up, leaving the apple on the bench, and walked back out towards the pool and out of Walter's sight.

"Just call me angel, of the morning...annnngel...Just touch my cheek before you leave me, bayyyybee...Just call me angel, of the morning..." sang Merrilee Rush on 96.1. Inside the house, Walter was exuberant. It was as though all his attraction had flowed out of him like water and gone right down the drain in the middle of the floor. He hadn't anticipated how freed he would feel to be rid of it. When he thought of Pat now, he saw in his mind a normal, healthy, nine-year-old boy instead of a sexual object. It felt wonderful. Relieved to be finally free of the urges, he hummed along with Mid-Michigan's good times and great oldies as he cleaned his kitchen. He balled up all of the sucker wrappers and empty chip bags and crammed them into a garbage bag. He picked the empty soda bottles up off the floor and from the counter and swept them into another garbage bag for return to the store. He tried to set his clocks to the right time, but the Rush Limbaugh show had been over for several hours and he was no longer sure of what the right time was. He was in the process of taking an armful of stained and slightly tacky dishtowels to the washing machine when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Walter, this is Cheryl from next door," said a frantic voice on the other end of the phone. She sounded near tears. "Look, Kevin's real sick. He hasn't stopped vomiting since the boys had their supper. He's starting to bring up blood. I'm sorry...I know this is really short notice, but do you think that you could watch Pat while I take Kev to the ER? I can't get a hold of the boys' sitter."

"Cheryl, I'd be happy to watch Pat for as long as you need me to," Walter said. "Don't worry about it. Just get Kevin to the hospital."

"Oh, thank you so much, Walter. I'll call you as soon as they get us in," Cheryl said. Walter heard the click as she hung up the phone, and then he heard a metallic tapping on his back door. Dishtowels still in hand, he walked to the door and opened it.

In bounced Pat, backpack over his shoulder, red-and-blue boots tracking snow all over the warped linoleum. Not sexy at all, just a regular little kid. Walter felt relieved that he was able to resist the temptation in the flesh as well as in his mind. He dropped the dirty dishtowels on the floor and, with his foot, mopped the floor after Pat as the child made his way into the living room.

Pat threw his backpack onto the couch and himself after it, his hand scurrying to the endtable for a remote control. Finding none, he looked up and then around. The clock on the endtable said 1:23. "Don't you have a remote?"

"Nope," Walter said, taking the dishtowels to the small closet in the back of the house containing his washer and dryer. In the kitchen, Flint's number-one choice for oldies continued to play. *"I'm the friendly stranger in the black sedan, won't you hop inside my car..."* sang the Ides of March.

"How come?"

"My TV didn't come with one," Walter said. "My TV is probably older than you are, Pat."

Pat frowned. "I've never watched a TV without a remote."

"You can learn," Walter said. "It's not hard to change the channels on the set yourself." He walked back into the living room, thinking how glad he was to be able to see Pat only as a normal little boy. A normal, sweet, innocent little boy. He took a seat on the couch next to Pat, barely noticing his hearbeat quickening under his ratty flannel shirt.

"I love TV," Pat said. Finding a stray Dum-Dum on the endtable, he picked it up and started tossing it back and forth between his hands.

Walter stared, hypnotized by the motion. "If you want that, you can have it," he said.

"Thanks, maybe later," Pat said. "I just finished eating. I fixed me and Kevin dinner."

Walter racked his brain, trying to remember if he had a game, a deck of cards, something to pass the time. He didn't think he had anything. Not anything that would interest a kid like this one, anyway. Cheryl had been right. Pat was a kid, but something about the way he talked was strangely adult. He wished he could stop feeling so nervous. His hands were starting to shake. Pat was the first person besides himself to set foot in his house in over six months.

Pat had wandered over to the TV and begun fiddling with the controls. "Nothing's happening!" he complained in a high, whiny voice, pulling and pushing at the POWER knob.

"Let me try," Walter said. He got up and walked over to the TV. He pushed the knob in and out a few times. The TV remained mute, impotent. "I guess it's shorted out," Walter said. He went back to the couch and sat.

Pat followed him, pouting. "What else is there to do?" he asked. "Do you know any games you can teach me?"

"I can't really think of any, no," Walter said. "Not off the top of my head. You could go outside and chase around after that stray cat that's out there. Run off some of your energy." He ruffled Pat's hair. It felt soft to the touch. Tantalizingly soft.

"It's dead," Pat said. "It got ran over by the bus. I seen it."

"Well, then..." Walter said, dimly aware that he was becoming erect. "Umm..."

"I'm bored!" Pat declared. "Let's do something! Teach me something!"

"Ummm.."

"Plleeeee-ze?" Pat pleaded. He took the sucker and unwrapped it. He stuck it in his mouth. He looked pleadingly at Walter, the white stick sticking straight out from between his lips.

"Well, Pat, I'm sorry the TV doesn't work," Walter said, his voice dropping almost to a whisper, "but there may be some other way we can pass the time."

Pat looked at him with big, innocent blue eyes, his tongue working around the sucker. Walter reached behind Pat and shut off the light, reducing the child to a silhouette. He sat back down and tried to breathe. The moist noises Pat made sucking on the Dum-Dum seemed almost loud enough to drown out the strains of "Daydream Believer" coming from the radio in the kitchen.

"Pat," Walter said, "would you like to feel more grown-up?"

Pat took the sucker out of his mouth. "Yes," he said.

Walter sighed, tired of dealing with the cycle of his obsession, the child's whining, his own swollen penis. He tried to formulate his next words carefully.

In the background, the Monkees sang, *"Cheer up, sleepy Jean...oh, what can it mean, to aaaahhh, Daydream Believer and aaaah, hooomecoming quee-een!"*

Walter finally spoke. "Finish your sucker," he said, resigned. "Quickly."

V. *The All-Time Loser*

"I wonder, wonder, who, who—oo—ooh—who wrote the Book of Love."
--The Monotones

This is what I am: Female. Twenty-two. Five foot five. One hundred seventeen pounds. Thirty-three, twenty-five, thirty-six. Brown hair. Brown eyes.

This is what I think: That my face is like the back end of a mule. That my chest is like a two-by-four. That my legs are like chicken drumsticks.

This is what I hear: That I've got some junk in my trunk. That I've got a butt that won't quit. That I've got the best-looking behind in Tennessee.

This is what I do: I am a buttocks model. Photographers, advertisers, sculptors, and artists all make their way to Knoxville to capture my splendid and profitable ass on newsprint, watercolor paper, canvas, celluloid, videotape. They fly, drive, or bus me to Memphis, Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami. I'm in advertisements. I'm in catalogs. I'm in commercials. I'm in calendars. I'm on Ebay. Everyone's got to have a trade and mine is my behind. I'm a buttocks model. I'm a good buttocks model.

My rules are simple: No face, no breasts, no anus, no pudenda. Their rules are simple, too, but more difficult to follow: I have to run, but not too much, or it ruins the look. I have to tan, but not too much, or it ruins the look. I have to keep from getting bruises, scratches, or scars, because they ruin the look. My bathroom is filled with lotions, scrubs, oils, creams, the mysterious alchemy of commercial products working together to keep the look. If I ruin the look, I don't get paid. If I don't get paid, I don't get to stay in college.

Tonight I'm flying back down the sidewalk on my Tuesday run through the Fort, Aretha Franklin's *"ch-ch-chaaaaiiiiiinn, chain, chain, chain of fools"* flowing into my ears as my cross trainers pound the cracked and glass-strewn sidewalk. I feel good, my glutes working, tightening up, staying firm. I think about what I am going to say about *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in my upcoming paper for modern literature. I think about what I am going to say to Mark on the phone tonight. My eyes stay focused on the grimy pavement, looking out for dog poop or broken glass. I am trying to simultaneously construct a coherent thesis on Stephen Dedalus and images of women for Dr. Roper and a breathy, ridiculous description of my body covered in whipped cream for Mark when a long-haired stranger appears from the shadows and blocks my path. He's holding a tire iron, tossing it back and forth between his hands, smiling at me. My heels skid to a sharp stop and I can feel the blood draining from my face and my knees beginning to shake as with a creeping certainty I realize I'm about to be raped.

Please don't bruise me, I say. I have a shoot on Friday.

This is how I met Pat.

When you are with Pat, walking back to his apartment with him, you will wonder why he was right there to meet you, on that night, at that time. Why you have lived in the same building for a year, but you have never met until now. Why he knows and likes all the same oldies songs that you do, doo-wop, Motown, surf, rockabilly, countless old one-hit wonders. Why he has the same name that you do. Why he calls you Patti. Why he says no one's a mystery. Why everything about him, the grammatical flibs and flubs in his speech, the dirt under his nails and on his clothes, the casual violence in his gestures

and inflictions, is so appealing. You will think back to *The Celestine Prophesy*, to the words about coincidence that rang empty on the page back when you first began to read it, back before you left the book in a tanning booth somewhere, and you will wonder if this means Pat is your destiny.

When you say you are hungry, Pat will take you to the Waffle House and order hash browns and grilled cheese sandwiches for both of you. He will pay the tab but he will not leave a tip. He will allow the door to slide closed in your face on your way out. You will tell yourself he just wasn't watching.

Later, as foreplay, he will show you videos of himself with other women. You will take silent note of the cucumbers (unpeeled), the vibrators, the whips, the steel speculum that looks cold enough to make you shudder. You will tell him that you appreciate his honesty and that you are glad he feels comfortable enough with you to share the videos with you. He burps.

After making indifferent love to you, Pat will sit cross-legged at the end of the bed and play video games for six hours, the blue uranium-glow of the television screen filling the room. You will want to cuddle. You will tell him that you feel cold. He will cue up "Come Softly to Me" on his CD player, cover you with the comforter, the only covering on his bed, and kiss you on the forehead before returning to his game. Underneath the comforter, which is stained with semen and smells of sweat, you will curl up against the wall, listen to the quiet *dahn-dahn, daaahn-doo-dahn-dooby-doo* of the Fleetwoods with the oversized plug of the power strip digging into your ribs, and try to name the children and the diseases you will suffer together, because you didn't use any protection.

This is how I earn money: I forgo school and Mark and Pat for one day and follow the sculptor, who is short and cute and freckled, into a small alcove underneath the eaves of the art studio. I can tell that he drinks wheatgrass and listens to public radio. I can tell that he's not as young as he tells me he is. I can tell he has more than an artistic interest in touching my buttocks. Wearing a pink g-string and peeking occasionally into the mirror he has placed behind me, I smear Vaseline all over the best-looking behind in Tennessee, making sure it is spread on evenly and liberally, as per his instructions.

He's sufficiently circumspect and businesslike as he spreads the plaster on my butt, taking care to avoid getting it too deeply into the crack. He tells me about his project, the postmodern five-part series on woman, woman as a *concept,* he keeps emphasizing, as though he is afraid he will offend me by speaking of woman as a fleshly creature. He wants to use my, um, you know, your...for the Amazon and the Venus, he says. I can't listen because my ass cheeks are itching like death beneath the drying plaster. When I tell him, he turns on the small hair-dryer he has brought and aims it at my derriere. It's a crime, he says, speaking loudly to compensate for the dryer, the way women are marginalized in this society. I feel the plaster hardening under the penetrating dry heat of the hair dryer, my greasy skin still itching beneath it. I couldn't agree more, I say. He moves the dryer up and down and across. Women being passed over for promotions; women giving up their careers and education for children, children that they may or may not want, he says, as though there are other kinds; women being raped, women being abused by their husbands or boyfriends. He stops the hair dryer. Maybe I can help to change that with my art. Bend over, he says. He cracks the plaster off my butt and studies the mold, his eyes boring deeply into the twin impressions made by my

ass cheeks. He pulls out his wallet and hands me money, dismissing me without a good-bye.

Inside my apartment, the answering machine is blinking like a time bomb. Feeling disloyal to Pat, yet guilty for ignoring Mark, I pick up the phone and dial the familiar seven digits, the Vaseline that remains on my ass making greasy stains on the seat of my jeans as I lean against the kitchen cabinet and wait for him to pick up.

Mark lives next door. We have never met, but we talk on the phone almost every night. Was he originally a wrong number? A telemarketer? An obscene phone caller? I cannot remember. We do not know anything about each other, but what I believe is that he works in the computer lab. That he is short and ugly. That the silhouette I see outside my window sometimes, masturbating, is him. That the black rayon pants, crisp cotton shirts, and silk boxers he describes to me in loving detail over the phone as he removes them are a myth. He tries to convince me, but I can hear the flat-front Dockers, golf shirts, and tight white briefs around the edges of his voice, and I know that the static on the phone is there because he has taken it outside.

He answers on the first ring. I've been waiting so long for you to come home, he says, breathlessly, his voice ragged and tumid.

I get right to the point. I'm slipping off my jeans, I say in a low voice, and I'm putting my right hand just inside the hem of my panties.

Mark sighs. I'm slipping out of my boxers, he says, and grasping my hard, throbbing cock with one hand.

Mmm...I like the sound of that, I growl into the phone, which I have wedged between my shoulder and my ear as I walk into the bathroom, peeling off my jeans and g-

string on the way. The sound of running water obscures tonight's description of my assault on Mark's virginity as I wash, scrub, and buff the Vaseline and plaster remnants off of the best-looking behind in Tennessee. Tonight I'm trying to breathe just a little harder. Tonight I'm trying to moan just a little louder. Tonight I'm trying to get Mark off and off the phone as quickly as possible so I can go and see Pat.

In Pat's bedroom it is always warm and the CD player is always on, spinning the old songs he knows you love. Pat will make you tea, teach you to play the video games he enjoys most when you say you are bored, stroke your hair back and get you a heating pad when you say you have cramps. Pat will also make fun of your Southern accent and vernacular, imitating your drawn-out vowels, your *yews, y'alls,* and *fixin' tews* in a high, derisive voice. Pat will make fun of your ass after you tell him about your job. Pat's attitude will not have a detrimental effect on his preferred way of making love. The best-looking behind in Tennessee, he will say sarcastically. Whoever said that never looked at it from this angle. You will tell yourself the nice side of Pat is the real side. That it isn't really you that is making him upset. That he likes you just fine the way you are. That you'll still get work with a swollen eye and a puffy lip. That the abrasions will heal if you leave them alone.

Pat will notice the raised, reddened area on your left ass cheek before you do. He will poke it and prod it lovingly, oblivious to your squeals of pain. He says you ought to get that checked out. He says it's probably the mark of the beast. Go to hell, Pat, you will say, rolling over underneath the comforter that now smells of sweat and menstrual blood and your own sex, trying to sleep. Pat will laugh, tossing the Playstation controller

from hand to hand. I been there, he will say cryptically, before turning on another endless game.

What's that supposed to mean, you ask.

When you come over, he says, I know what hell feels like.

Sometimes when you come to his apartment, Pat will be drunk. Over jelly tumblers of Crown Royal and Coca-Cola, he will tell you stories about his childhood, what it was like to live up north. You have never lived outside of Tennessee, you have never even traveled outside of the South, but you can feel Michigan between the syllables of Pat's voice, a flat urban wasteland, filled with snowy highways, rusty American cars, unemployment; everything in Michigan sharing the color of the sky, drab and gray. Pat will tell you that you aren't that far off. He will tell you about how his father left the family while he was a toddler, about how he was molested by a neighbor when he was nine or ten, about what he really does when he drives people to Kentucky for lottery tickets. He says I dunno know why it's different with you. He says I dunno know why I feel this tender about you. He says I dunno know why you're worth—and he stutters a little bit before he comes to the next part—why you're worth saving to me. Why I don't wanna treat you like I treat the others.

You say I feel exactly the same way. You say I want to help you be the way you really are. You say I want to help you be a good person. You reach out to embrace him, and he turns away from you. He says don't bother. He says fuck off. You think he might be crying. You're not sure what to do, so you get off of his bed and start doing your soft-shoe shuffle strip dance to the *shaaa-na-na-na-na, sha-na-na-na-naaa* of "Get A Job." You hope that watching you dance and take off your clothes will make him laugh. It

makes him throw an empty jelly glass at you and tell you to sit down. It makes you wonder how his aim can be so good even when he's drunk. It makes you wonder why you think you love him.

This is why I haven't earned any money for two weeks: The bruise from the jelly glass is fading, but the red abscess on my ass isn't going anywhere. It has grown bigger and more painful, going from the size of a dime to a nickel. This is what I tell myself: when it gets to the size of a half dollar, I will get it checked out. In the meantime, I touch it. I love it. I stroke it. I talk to it. I name it Carmine. I like *Carmine* better than *boil* or *carbuncle*. I don't know what to do about Carmine. So I let it grow. I let it grow and grow until it exceeds the size of a quarter. When it exceeds the size of a half dollar, I tell myself, I will get it checked out.

The sculptor calls me. He says he's finishing the Amazon. He says my, uh, you know, your... is working out perfectly. He says he needs to schedule another session, to take some photos that he can work with while he's putting on the finishing touches. The smell of patchouli and good health fills the air as I climb to his alcove. He's already got white sheets tacked up over the cinder-block wall, flashes standing ready in the corners. He takes the Polaroid camera off a shelf lined with brushes and dried paint and flips back the lens cover. I drop my pants. My project's going really well, he says. I'm really excited about it, he says. Take off the panties, he says. I hesitate. I don't show breasts, face, anus, or pudenda, I say. I need to see it *all*, he says. He smoothes his way up to me and slips a finger in between the strap of my g-string and my hip. He pulls his finger back and lets the strap snap. Please, he says.

I don't care. I cave in. I slip out of the g-string. I stand back up and he takes pictures. I sit down and he takes pictures. I bend over a stool and he takes pictures. You should get that boil on your, uh, you know checked out, he says. You should get it lanced, he says. You should stay bent over while I put more film in the camera, he says. I stay bent over, my hands grasping the crossed metal bars just under the seat of the stool, while he puts more film in the camera. I think about my paper for Dr. Roper, "Oh, That Smell: Women, Sensuality, and Odor in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (working title). I think about poor celibate Mark, who I haven't called for at least a week. I think about Pat, who has seemed kind of distant these days, as though he is trying to make up his mind about something. I think about how he hasn't said anything derisive about Carmine lately.

The sculptor finishes putting film in the camera and glances through the now-developed pictures he has already taken, subjecting them to his scrutinizing, slightly lecherous eye. You might have to come back, he says, after you get that thing on your, you know...taken care of. None of these are going to work. He tosses me the stack of photos and I can see what he means. In the mirror, Carmine looks bad. In the Polaroids, Carmine almost glows with redness and infection. We're done, he says. Put your clothes back on, he says. Before I get dressed, I peek back over my shoulder at the best-looking behind in Tennessee, trying to get a good look at Carmine, and I feel the light touch of the sculptor's fingers on the boil. It hurts.

As the boil grows larger, you will feel more and more like persona non grata in Pat's apartment. You will notice that now Pat no longer looks at you directly when you

are trying to talk to him. That now he uses the computer for chat instead of for Everquest and free pornography on Kazaa. That now when you call him the line will be busy, which it never is. When you finally invite yourself to his apartment to investigate, he will be on the phone, a tentative smile playing around his lips, excitement in his eyes, and coming faintly from around Pat's ear you will hear a girl's voice speaking in a Northern or Canadian accent, the drawn-out *ah's* and *ey's* hitting you like little kicks in the stomach. Lesley Gore is on the CD player, singing that it's *Judy's turn to cry, Judy's turn to cry, Judy's turn to cryyyy, ayyyi yi.* Pat will smile. Pat will laugh. Pat's voice will lower as he whispers suggestions to the girl from up north. Pat will finally hang up the phone and tell you to bend over. You will.

Pat will tell you he will be busy for a while. Pat does not seem to know precisely how long he will be busy or what it is he will be busy doing. Pat will tell you that the two of you have been spending too much time together lately. Pat will say this with hope in his voice, as though by saying it he thinks he will make it reality. A short break from each other will do you both good. You tell him sure. You tell him you have things you need to do anyway. You do not ask him about the girl from up north.

This is how I finally meet Mark: I fly out of Pat's apartment and back to my own, my shaking fingers punching in the familiar seven digits as I tremble with the desire for vengeance. Mark is pathetic and Mark's not going to do the trick but Mark's all I've got.

I tell Mark I need you. Bad. In the flesh. I'm coming over.

Before he can say yes or no, I drop the phone, grab my keys, and race out of my apartment and into the apartment next door.

Mark is sitting on the couch, surprised, but, I notice, nursing a decently sized bulge in his pants. He's short and ugly, slightly overweight, big aviator glasses, brown hair that needs cutting. He's wearing flat-front Dockers and a golf shirt. No one's a mystery. What do you want to do, he asks, all nerves, looking over my shoulder warily as though I have a burly boyfriend coming through the door any minute to beat the piss out of him.

What do you think, I snarl, dragging the words out from the bottom of my throat as I grab his collar and haul him down onto the couch. I pull his belt out of its loops, unzip his pants, and yank them down. Impeded by his lace-up Hush Puppies, I wedge those off his feet first, throw them to the floor, and finish pulling off his pants. Mark is trying to do things the way he thinks is right, leaning up to kiss me, his cold tongue sliding in between my lips. I push him back down and kneel on top of him, subduing him as I pull off the tight white briefs. I thrust my thumbs into my waistband, pulling down my jeans and panties before he gets a chance to move into the bedroom or chicken out and take off and then I get on top of him and fuck him right there on his ugly frieze green couch, fuck him while panic and pleasure meet and mix in his eyes.

It goes like I expected. Mark is finished in about five minutes, lying back, panting, slightly sweaty. He doesn't need to tell me this was his first time. I don't need to tell him this was the last time. Somewhere out there Pat is thinking about fucking the girl from up north. Somewhere out there she is touching herself, thinking about fucking him back, taking with great, gulpy screams the orgasm I'm never able to have myself. Somewhere out there waits a prudish, pious girl with aviator glasses and a heavy penchant for couch-sitting and chocolate-eating, ready to take Mark off my hands.

Someday they will find each other. It makes me feel relieved. It makes me feel pissed. It makes me feel sad. I push myself off of Mark, reach down for my panties, and slide them on, feeling the last of Mark ooze down my leg. I have to get going, I say abruptly. He looks at me a little funny, startled and disappointed, but not angry. Well...ahhh...it was nice meeting you, finally, he says. Maybe we can get together again sometime.

Maybe, I say, pulling my jeans up over my ass. Mark hauls his briefs and Dockers back on, looking at the floor. I go into the bathroom while he's buckling his belt, shut the door, and peer into the mirror for another look at Carmine. Large as life and growing bigger every day, Carmine is taking on an elongated shape now. It is even more painful to the touch than when the sculptor caressed it. I touch it anyway. I love it. I stroke it.

I hear Mark opening the door of the bathroom, checking on me. Leave me alone, I say, pulling up my pants, almost knocking him down on my way out. You really ought to get that thing on your ass checked out, he calls out.

I'd just as soon not. Carmine and I have grown attached to one another. In my apartment, I lay back on my bed and, against my will, imagine Pat once again with the girl from up north. I imagine the two of them wrapped around each other in bed, legs, arms, and genitals entwined. I imagine Pat stroking her hair back, making her tea, asking her if she is cold. I imagine cold death creeping over her like sleep as I slide under the covers and drift off.

The girl from up north will take three days to hitchhike down to Knoxville from Michigan. She will laugh through her nose and say things like "yah" and "'ey" and

"youse guys." She will pop back Dexedrine and Diet Cokes like they're CrackerJacks at the county fair. She will bring her guitar strapped across her back like some sixties vagabond, and the three songs she knows how to play will fill the neighborhood late at night, wearing away at the thin threads of your nerves like a millstone.

This is what you want to say to Pat: You want to tell him how thinking about the girl from up north makes your guts twist up and the bile rise into your throat like battery acid. You want him to tell you everything about her in small, measured amounts; every slimy, stinking element of her personality and his lust and their relationship coming to life, making that bile taste like vengeance. You want to ask him how it feels to have her tongue slipping around in his mouth and over the head of his cock. You want to ask him how it feels to grab onto her long, curly hair or her short, curly hair. You want to ask him to describe to you, in luscious and unforgiving detail, the way it smells and tastes between her legs. You want to ask him what it was about you that wasn't worth saving. What you did that made him change his mind about you. Why you keep feeling the urge to call him after midnight, although now he never picks up his phone. Why you keep feeling the urge to apologize to him. Why you keep feeling like it was your fault. You want to tell him what it is like to feel words like *love* and *hate* rising up and twisting together in your mind, re-forming themselves into words like *acrimony* and *vengeance.* What it is like to feel that everything you ever knew or believed to be true about him and about you and about the *us* you always thought was there was a lie, a lie you kept wrapped around yourself, next to your naked skin like a comforter rank with sweat. What it is like to finally understand *bitterness* not as a concept but as something real, like

a nasty-sweet liqueur dripping down the back of your throat, like the cold grasp of an icy fist around your heart.

This is what you actually say to Pat: When the girl from up north finally disappears and he calls you up late one night, apologizing like mad and begging you to come over for a more intimate reconciliation, the word *intimate* slipping off his tongue with a perfect, uncharacteristic lack of guile, you tell him you have missed him. You tell him you hope he has been okay. You tell him you understand that he's been busy.

You will go over to his apartment, where Pat will dispassionately fuck you to the *whoo-oo-ooh* of "Book of Love," pull out in time, and ejaculate all over your back. He will pull the comforter, which now smells like another girl's pussy, over your body without cleaning you up and finally talk to you about the girl from up north, telling you nothing that you don't already know, telling you nothing you haven't already read in the strutty cock of her thin legs or the toss of her black gypsy curls or her drugged-out, seedy nasal laugh. You will start to understand that this girl is just as bad, perhaps worse, than Pat is himself. That goodness is not why he has chosen her. That goodness is not ultimately what he wants. That goodness is not what you can give to him. That you're not worth saving anymore, because Pat's not interested in saving himself. He fingers your swollen boil gently, but not gently enough for the touch to be painless, and tells you that you ought to get that thing on your butt checked out. You tell him you don't believe you will, allowing your voice to slide back into the instinctive and hated southern *wheeeellll* on the last word. You ease back into your clothes and slide back to your apartment in the dark, the laughter of the girl from up north following you in your imagination all the way back, ringing in your ears like the death of your soul.

This is what I finally do. I resign myself to Carmine and the girl from up north, trying not to resent them so much as accept them as beacons to a new way of living. Pat no longer calls me. The sculptor no longer calls me. Mark no longer calls me. Carmine is still there, growing ever larger, ever redder, and ever more tender. I finish my paper on women and Joyce. I run as often as I like now and I listen to different music while I run, classic rock, hard rock, hair rock. I get my paper back and Dr. Roper has given me an A, my first in three years of college English. I stop tanning. I stop moisturizing. I stop buffing. My ass now looks real and horrible, the muscles prominent and mannish, the skin flaky and pale and marked with acne.

When I run I let the rock music flow into my ears and think about how my life has changed. I have lost my career. I have lost the only man I have ever loved. I have lost the only thing I ever had going for me, the best-looking behind in Tennessee becoming more of a distant memory every day. Maybe losing it all isn't so bad. Maybe I can make a go of it as the all-time loser. Maybe *The Celestine Prophesy* would say that the all-time loser is who I was always meant to be. I can run. I can write. I can have a body that is my own. I take a deep breath and cold air fills my lungs like new life. I think about a new job. I think about a new guy. I think about a shower as the sweat gathers in my armpits and around the small of my back.

In the privacy of my apartment I stretch, peel off the layers of jogging clothes, and jump into the shower, feeling some of the bitterness flow out of me and down the drain as I rub myself down with a soapy loofah sponge, and then while I'm there in the shower, alternately tightening my buttocks, the left and then the right, enjoying flexing

the new muscles I have there, I slide the sponge down the left side of my ass and suddenly feel my skin give way as the boil bursts.

Carmine does not go out with a whimper, but with a bang. Under the loofah, Carmine's contents discharge with a painfully audible plopping sound. I look behind me at what I feel sure will be a gush of blood and pus coursing down the back of my leg, but there really isn't much. What remains of Carmine is a hardened white lump about the size of a chickpea. The smell of decay is strong as I pick and squeeze the lump out of what is left of the boil and let it slide from my hand, washing down the drain. I sink down to the floor of the tub, water pounding on my head and flowing down my face, and reconsider it all. Maybe the best-looking behind in Tennessee is still there, underneath all the pus and blood and muscle and untanned skin. Maybe I could be working again in less than two weeks. Maybe the girl from up north will remain up north indefinitely. Maybe Pat will be home, and by himself, when I get out of the shower.

VI. *Women Without Any Faults*

Noah's not the man for me, but he's the man for right now. He's a college kid, on his way home for the summer. Lucky for me, his hometown happens to be the same place I'm going so he's giving me a ride. I have to wait because he wants to keep smoking and drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon and playing fifteen-two with the regulars until close. I smoke and drink and play fifteen-two, as well, until I'm out of cigarettes and my peg won't fit into the holes on the board because I'm too drunk to find the hole. When they switch on the lights at two a.m., we're both drunk. He holds on to me for support, giggling, as we stumble across the icy parking lot to his rusty Cavalier. Once we're inside the car, he ties on his hunting hat with the earflaps and pulls on his gloves, because while it may be springtime in the rest of the country, it's still colder than a witch's tit in Houghton, Michigan. He starts the engine and swings the car back onto the short access road leading back out to the highway, out of Michigan and back down through Wisconsin, Illinois, maybe Missouri, giving me one last long look at the Midwest before I end up back in Tennessee.

He's not a bad drunk driver. He drives steadily, but too fast. "How long you gonna keep goin' tonight?" I ask him.

"Dunno," he says. "Till I get tired, I s'pose."

"'kay," I say. The Beatles are playing on the radio. "*What would you think if I sang out of tune, would you stand up and walk out on me...*" In my head I work out the chords on the guitar, my gloved fingers silently going through the motions as we drive on through the cold dark night.

Noah's a talker. The PBR doesn't help. I learned his whole life history in the bar. How he was born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee. How he got the scholarship to Michigan Tech last year. How he's carrying a 3.7. How he passed freshman composition by making it with his professor. I graduated valedictorian without cracking a book, or fucking any of my teachers, but I decide to leave that for another time.

I went through his stuff while he thought I was in the bathroom. Nothing good. All he's got with him is his computer, his clothes, and three milk crates full of Raymond Chandler and H.L Mencken novels, CD's and DVD's without cases, and loose, crumpled papers. There is a personal essay, a first-person account of a colonic irrigation, tucked inside a tattered copy of *The Elements of Style.* I stop reading when I come to the painfully poignant "partying for hours at the elimination disco." Nothing that's both easy to take and valuable enough to be worth my trouble. I could get maybe twenty, thirty for the DVD's, but the CD's, scratched and burnt at home, are worthless.

I imagine that Noah's hand is running up my long leg. I look down and see that Noah's hand is running up my long leg. "Yeah," I say. "Sexy."

"Uh, Lauren, you wanna--?" He's looking at me funny. That's the only way to describe it, funny. The kid from Tennessee: drunk, horny, inexperienced. The Midwestern girl on her own: pretty, drunk, easy. Same old song, same old song. He twists his hand around some, ending up with his palm right underneath my ass. Drunk, he's really not able to both feel me up and drive well, and now he is leaning too far forward, his scrawny, nonexistent butt almost up off the seat. If I were sober, I'd be laughing my balls off. I glance at him sideways, sneak my hand forward and into his lap, and when he sighs I decide to go ahead and ask him if he wants to get a room.

The sun has already risen over Memphis when I wake up. Noah is draped across the cheap hotel bed, nude and snoring. I don't know how many days it's been. Driving, eating bad food, driving, drinking, driving, fucking. Noah's getting on my nerves, nothing but premature ejaculations and braggadocio. I pull on my jeans, drape his duster over my shoulders, and ease out the door.

I notice, as I always seem to do in the morning, how much more war-beaten the Cavalier looks in the bright daylight. More Bondo than paint and lots of rust. Classy guy. Keys, keys, keys. They're in the inside pocket of his duster. I open the door and sort through his stuff one more time. I wind up taking a couple of the DVD's and a fifth of Captain Morgan's that's poking out from underneath the driver's seat. He's been holding out on me. I shut the door and slip back inside the room.

Noah is still dead to the world. I unzip my backpack. My hands are cold, making the childproof cap difficult to get off. *"I get high with a little help from my friends, oh, I'm gonna try with a little help with my friends..."* I wash down three uppers with a mouthful of Captain's. Finding his wallet, I pocket the cash and quietly feel through his pants pockets for anything else of value before dropping the pants and getting my own clothes back on.

"Bye, Noah," I whisper, easing outside and closing the door.

I have my backpack on and my guitar case in one hand. I discover that I'm still holding his car keys. When I get in, I have to move the seat back. The third key I try starts the car. I look down. There's one shifter and three pedals. I fuck with the shifter until I feel the car moving. I stomp on each of the pedals in turn. The last one I stomp on makes it go faster. "Stop, stop, stop, STOP!" I yell at the car. The Cavalier makes a

grinding noise. It stops. The dashboard's lit up like a damn Christmas tree. Well, shit. I turn the car off and leave the keys in the ignition. After I take my stuff out of the passenger seat and get out, the car rolls backwards until it bumps into another car. Whoops. How the fuck do you park a car so it doesn't move after you're done? Sarah. She can teach me to drive as soon as I get down to Knoxville. I light a cigarette and start moving.

"Lauren, what the hell are you doing?" Sarah said. She opened the door to let in her skinny, bedraggled sister.

"I'm comin' to see ya, sis," she giggled, lifting her dirty face towards the porch light. The pupils in her big brown eyes were widely dilated. She stumbled inside, tracking mud all over the white carpet. She could barely walk straight, holding onto couches and lamps for balance. She fell down on the floor at the base of the couch.

Sarah ran to the kitchen for some towels. Mopping up the mud, she asked, "How in the world did you get down here?"

"Hitchhiked," Lauren said, grabbing the towel away from her older sister. "Le—le—lemme clean that for ya, Sis." She scrubbed the towel around the carpet a little bit, making the mess worse than it already was. Lauren was on drugs again, speed and probably alcohol—Sarah could smell it. Walking around like a bad, real-life version of a Jefferson Airplane song, *one pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small.*

"Mom called me four days ago. She said she gave you money for a bus ticket. What in the world did you do a stupid thing like hitchhike for? Oh, Jesus, Lauren, let me

do it, please," she said, taking back the towel. Lauren flopped back down on the floor and watched Sarah clean up. She lay down and started kicking her feet against the couch.

"Knock it off!" Sarah yelled. "Your feet are filthy."

Lauren ignored her and kept kicking. She started laughing. "The money's gone, gone, gone...I spent it on STUFF."

"Fine," Sarah said.

"Sarah, Sarah, I gotta tell you about this guy I got a ride from..."

Sarah scooted over to Lauren, pulled one foot off the couch, and firmly held it down.

"...this guy, Noah, he was a Tech student, and he was cute, you know, he was Native, like us..."

"*You're* Native American, Lauren, not me," Sarah said, unlacing Lauren's thick combat boot. "My dad wasn't Native American, remember?" She pulled the boot off of Lauren's foot and started unlacing the other one.

"...but, I swear, Sarah, every time, he was like, gone in sixty seconds." She launched into another fit of giggles.

"God, Lauren." Sarah had both boots off now. She carefully wiped the snow and grime off of the soles and set them down by the door. "Well, did you use protection?"

Lauren grinned and said nothing.

"Oh, Christ."

Lauren grinned. "He was so loud," she said. She jumped to her feet and took her guitar off the couch. "He was a screamer."

"When was the last time you ate anything?" Sarah asked.

"I don' remember."

Sarah walked into the kitchen and picked up the cordless. She dialed their mother in Michigan. Hi, it's me. Yes, she just got here. Yes, she's fine. Is she high? She looked back at Lauren, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing her guitar, the only thing that calmed her down. She stopped in mid-song to smile at Sarah and give her the finger. Sarah turned back to the phone. I don't think so, she said, taking a loaf of bread out of a cupboard. No, she can crash on the couch, it'll be okay.

What'd she come down here for? What guy? You mean the older one? My neighbor? Sarah reached into the refrigerator for butter and cheese. Oh, Pat. Well, I don't know. Yeah, she spent a lot of time with him when she was here last spring. I don't know...

Mom! Sarah put the four buttered slices of bread face-down on the griddle. She put a slice of cheese on top of each. You know Lauren...it's not like I can control what she does...Okay, Mom. I swear. I'll try to keep a closer eye on her this time. Okay. I'll ask her.

"Lauren?" she called, covering up the mouthpiece of the phone. "You want to talk to Mom?"

The music stopped. "Hell no!" Lauren called back. She resumed playing.

She's in the bathroom right now, Mom. I love you too. Ok. Bye.

Sarah put the grilled cheese sandwiches on a plate, cut them diagonally, and poured her sister a glass of orange juice. She took the food out to the living room. *"I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' 'bout half-past dead, I just need some place, where I*

can lay my he-ead..." Lauren was singing. Sarah cringed. Lauren's favorite song. The one she knew that Sarah hated, the one she knew haunted Sarah's dreams at night.

She held the food out to her sister. "Here. Eat."

Lauren obediently picked up a sandwich half and nibbled on it. She had barely finished it when her head started nodding down and her hands went limp. She slumped down to the floor, her breathing deep and relaxed.

Sarah took the plate and half-finished glass of juice back out to the kitchen and set them on the counter. She leaned her head on the cupboard, supporting herself against the sink. She looked down and watched drops of water drip off of the leaky faucet and down the drain. Keep an eye on Lauren, indeed. Lauren was like a little tomcat; she lived strictly on her own terms. She thought back to herself at Lauren's age. At seventeen, Sarah's virginity was still intact. Her short, stocky, and pale body bore little resemblance to Lauren's tall and thin one. She was considered curvy then, but she had sensed that the extra pounds that now rested on her middle, buttocks, thighs were already there, waiting, just taking their time to bloom. She had spent nearly every night sitting at her desk, studying; the A's she earned were as a result of hard work, not brilliance and luck and cramming and pills like the ones Lauren had earned. They had both been valedictorians, although Lauren had been so strung out on Ritalin and Dexedrine that no one had understood a word of her speech. The videotape their mother had made had mostly picked up a lot of giggling.

Sarah peeled herself away from the kitchen counter and went back into the living room for another peek at Lauren. Dirty and strung-out, Lauren was still beautiful. She was stretched out on the floor, snoring, drooling into her hair, the long, thick, black curly

hair Sarah had always envied. Sarah decided to leave her alone for the time being. She walked back into the kitchen and was about to throw the uneaten sandwiches into the garbage disposal when her mother's voice broke back into her head. *There are starving children in China, you know.* She looked at the plate and then picked up the top sandwich and took a bite, trying to forget for the moment the twenty pounds or so separating her body from a "normal" size and the fifty pounds or so separating her weight from Lauren's. After all, as their mother would say, no sense letting good food go to waste.

I wake up with my head throbbing. Am I still drunk? Where's Sarah? I pull myself off the floor and read the note she has left beside me. At work. I go down the hall and push open the door to her room. Ugh. Immaculate, flowers on everything, candles everywhere, giving off a thick, disgusting smell of summer lilacs or tropical mist or springtime vanilla or whatever. It's so her.

The bathroom is connected to her bedroom. I take a long shower, emptying half a bottle of conditioner onto my hair. Her bathrobe is on a hook behind the door. It is enormous, pink, and very comfortable. There are some Diet Cokes in the fridge. I drink down some Diet Coke and some pep pills and step out onto the balcony, welcoming the warmth and sunshine of the South. Where is Pat? There is Pat's car. Yes. That dark red Buick sitting in the parking lot, resting on one flat tire, yes, that is his. I light a cigarette, pull over one of the old plastic lawn chairs that Sarah has on the balcony, take a seat, and wait.

I don't want to go over to see Pat at first, uhh-uhh. Don't know why, I just can't do it. It would be giving in too easy, I guess. So I sit on Sarah's balcony for two days, wired as hell, playing my guitar and spying. He lives one level below her. No one goes into his apartment. Or comes out. Including him.

Sarah drags me inside to take a phone call one day. "I'm not covering your ass this time, Lauren, *you* deal with Mom." Go away, you fat bitch, I wish I could tell her. Go back to your soaps and your Ben & Jerry's and your gay friends and leave me alone. I can see outside through Sarah's spotless Venetian blinds. I can see the Buick's front end slowly rising towards the sky. I drop the phone and fly out onto the balcony, the loose ends of the belt of Sarah's robe flying out behind me. Yes, there down below, there is Pat as I remember him, jacking up his car, singing a song like he always does. It sounds like "Midnight Rambler." I hold onto the railing. Breathless now. Waiting.

Pat finishes jacking the car up and starts rifling through a tool kit at his side, finally extracting a large screwdriver. Not looking up from his work, he calls out, "Lauren, what are you doing back in town? Where the hell's your guitar?" He does not miss a beat as he pries off the hubcap.

"How the fuck 'ja know I was here?" I yell, running down the stairs to join him, pulling Sarah's robe tightly around me as I do so.

"I just knew." He stands up, tossing the screwdriver from hand to hand. He gazes coolly up and down at me. Nothing but eyes. Blue eyes penetrating right through the robe. Examining my long, skinny body. Same old Pat, same old Pat. I want to hug him.

"Yeah, but *how* did you know? I didn't tell my sister I was coming down here."

"I know that too," he says. He gets down on his hands and knees to pry off a lug nut with a dented tire iron. "Like I knew you've been hiding out in your sister's apartment for about two days. Like I know you still can only play three songs on your guitar. Like I know you still pop reds like Crackerjacks.

"How was he, Lauren?"

"Who?"

"That kid you rode down here with. The one you fucked all the way back to Knoxville. I can smell him on you."

"You lie."

"I ain't mad. People fuck around. I just wanna know."

"How was *she*, Pat?"

"How was who?"

I don't know if there even was a *she*. I can't bluff for shit.

"You can't bluff for shit," he says. He wrenches off the last of the lug nuts and looks around for the hubcap. I nudge it with my foot. Plingpling. He finds it and places the lug nut in the hubcap with the other four. Plingpling.

"You're an asshole." I roll a lug nut between my fingers.

"Put that down. I'm going to need that in a second." He pries the flat tire off the Buick and sets it down. "Well, you must not mind that too much." He bounces the donut on the pavement. "Or else you wouldn't be down here, would you?"

He looks at me, and there is warmth and goodwill reflected in his blue eyes.

"Fuck you," I say.

He puts the donut on, spins it around and around the hub. *"You spin me right round, baby, right round, like a record, baby, round and round and..."* he sings. "You know when that song came out?"

"When?"

"1985. The same year you were born." He picks the tire iron back up, lowers the jack, and removes it. He opens the trunk and stashes the tire iron and the jack back neatly inside. He still keeps rope and duct tape in his trunk, but he has also added a small cache of Buck knives. He lugs the flat back into the trunk, too. "Got to take that to the quarry for disposal," he mutters.

"What're you keeping those Buck knives around for?" I ask him.

"For bucking, dipshit...now come inside," he says, doing a roundabout past me and opening the door of his apartment with a flourish. I hesitate at the threshold, then walk inside after him. Inside his apartment it is dark and warm. He sweeps me into his arms and carries me into his bedroom. Inside, he kisses me. He unties the robe. Slowly. "Missed ya," he says.

Sarah pulled a Diet Coke out of the refrigerator, went into the living room, and kicked off her low-heeled pumps. She picked up the ringing phone on the coffee table. Hi, Mom. I'm fine, how are you? No, I just got home from work. It was okay, you know, same old thing, same old thing.

Sarah waited for her mother to mention why she was really calling. She felt her throat tighten as her mother asked the familiar question. I don't *know*. I haven't seen her for two days. Drugs? Sarah reaches for the pill bottle Lauren has left on the coffee table,

looks at it, and sets it back down. No, I don't think so. Mom, I'm not—Mom, Mom, listen. I'm—no, I don't *care.* If you're so worried about her, why on earth did you give her money for a bus ticket to Knoxville?

Oh, I see. Oh, thank you. Sarah clenched her teeth without realizing it. Thank you *so much*, Mom. No, no, thank *you* for designating me the responsible one. No, I love being the one you ship her off to when she becomes too hard for you to handle. Thank you so much.

Oh, Mom...No, I'm sorry. Please don't cry. I'm sorry. I—I didn't mean to snap at you. It's that time of the month, that's all. I'm sorry. No, it's okay. No, I'll try to keep a closer eye on her. Okay, I *promise* I'll keep a closer eye on her. Love you too. Bye. Sarah hung up the phone and sat on the couch with her head down, massaging her throbbing temples.

She got up and walked to her bedroom to change out of her work clothes. She took off her suit and pantyhose and stared at herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door. Fat ass, pig, blimp, she thought. Great white whale. She hated the way her flesh came spilling down over the waistband of her panties, the way it bulged up from the cups of her bra, the way it protruded below the leg openings of her panties in the back. She tried to picture the way Lauren would look, naked. She imagined ribs, hipbones, a flat stomach, streamlined buttocks and thighs. Her breasts would stick straight out instead of hanging down like pendulums. Sarah felt like she was nothing but a huge, grotesque mountain of flesh. She pounded her stomach in frustration, put on her sweatpants and t-shirt, and went back into the living room. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV. Then she went into the kitchen and grabbed a pint of ice cream out of

the freezer, stood over the sink and furiously spooned it into her mouth until it was gone. Her head hurt even more badly now from the coldness. She went back into the living room and lay down on the couch. Her glance fell on the bottle of pills on the coffee table. The bottle had no label. She took one out and stared at it for the longest time. It was a green-and-red capsule. She put it back in the bottle. She turned the volume up even higher on the TV and lay face-down on the couch and cried.

In Pat's bedroom, we snuggle under the covers. It's so warm and serene here, in his arms. When I'm with him, I feel like the charm-bracelet jangle of my nerves is finally stilled. I'd give anything to feel this tranquil every day. His hand reaches out. He caresses my tit. I giggle. He pulls me closer.

"It tickles," I explain to Pat.

"Does it tickle if I do this?" he says. He squeezes my tit. Hard.

"No...that feels good. Do it again."

"Lauren, you're a real glutton for abuse," he says. He squeezes my tit again. Hard.

"I just like the way it makes me feel," I say. "Calm."

He squeezes my tits in succession. "The lottery starts next week," he says.

"The lottery?"

"Yeah. Tennessee finally voted in a lottery. So you and me, little girl," he says, turning to me, "are going to be able to buy us some tickets right here in little ol' Knoxville, beginning on the fifteenth of May."

He sounds so corny. I laugh. "So what are you going to do instead of taking people to Kentucky for lottery tickets?"

Pat takes his hands from my tits and sits up. "You probably oughta think about going back to your sister's place soon."

"Fuck her." I snuggle down deeper under Pat's bedspread.

"I got some stuff I got to do."

"That fat bitch."

"You're not that unlike her, you know." He starts tossing a closed Buck knife from hand to hand.

I get out from under the covers and take my cigarettes off the night table. "What, do you fuck her, too?"

He swats the cigarettes out of my hand. "I don't want you smoking in here."

"Go screw yourself. I'll smoke in here if I want." I reach over him for my cigarettes. He blocks my hand.

"I said, I don't want you smoking in here," he says, pressing the Buck knife against my ribcage.

"Fuck you." I pick up my cigarettes and light one up.

Pat puts the Buck knife away. He doesn't try to stop me this time. "No, I ain't fucking her. Your sister acts like she's got the crown jewels between her legs. What I mean," he says, "is that you both think you ain't got no faults."

"I don't see where you get that. Sarah hates herself." I exhale a puff of smoke.

"No, Lauren," he says, speaking slowly, "think about it some more." He picks up the knife and starts tossing it back and forth again, and he looks at me in the tired way he has when he's had enough, and I know better than to contest him on this point.

The sun shone in through the stained-glass windows of the Chinese restaurant, making patterns on the floor. Sarah sat in a booth with her best friend Boris, stirring Sweet 'n Low packets into her tea until Boris put his hand over hers. "Okay, that's enough," he said, smiling. "Is your sister still in town?"

"I thought you liked boys," Sarah said.

Boris laughed. "I do…I'm not looking for a pickup, Sarah. I'm just asking."

"Yes." Sarah sighed and pushed the remainder of her moo-shu pork around on her plate. "I'm sorry. She's just been driving me crazy."

"I thought you said she was always at that guy's apartment," Boris said.

"She is. Well, I think she is. I don't know where she goes. She only comes back every couple days." Sarah reached into the appetizer bowl in the middle of the table for a crab wonton.

"Sounds like a real hot love affair she's got going on," Boris said.

"It's just screwing," Sarah said, crunching. "But I never got to do any screwing around when I was seventeen. I came home from school, I went to work, I came home, I studied, I went to bed, I got up, and did it all again. That was it. That was my life."

"No boyfriends?" Boris asked.

"None," Sarah replied. She thought back to Jack, her first and only lover. A classmate at the university, he had delivered pizzas and always smelled like onions and

double cheese. He never kissed her on her mouth or took more than five minutes to finish in bed. She had let him occupy four months of her junior year before turning back to her books. "I just get so tired of having to be the responsible one all the time."

"Well, then why don't you stop?" Boris said. "The world's not going to stop turning if you screw around a little. Get yourself a big love interest or something."

Sarah looked at her friend, appalled. "I couldn't do that."

"You're a big girl," Boris said softly. "You can do whatever you want."

Sarah stared down at her plate and turned red. She had stopped listening when Boris said "big girl."

Sarah's apartment. I'm lying on the couch with the TV on, thinking about what Pat had said.

You both think you ain't got no faults.

You've got plenty of faults yourself, I had said.

I know, and I'm not looking for a woman without any faults, either.

Do I have faults?

Hell yes.

Then why are you with me?

Don't you listen, Lauren? I said, I am NOT looking for a woman without any faults. Now go. I have shit to do at present that doesn't involve you. Go spend time with your sister.

When Sarah came home from her lunch with Boris, she found Lauren lying on the couch, watching cartoons and laughing, wrapped up in Sarah's favorite robe. There were stains on the robe Sarah couldn't identify. She sat down in an armchair and picked up the remote, which lay on the coffee table among an array of empty Diet Coke cans.

"Hi, Sarah," Lauren said, tilting her head up to say hello. Her eyes were big and glassy from lack of sleep. "Where did you go?" she asked, pulling a cigarette from between her lips.

"Out," Sarah said. She picked up a magazine and started flipping through it, slightly conscious of turning the pages more loudly than necessary.

"I mean, you don't mind that I was gone for so long, do you? Did you miss me?" Lauren said, punctuating every two words or so with a giggle. She sucked on her cigarette.

"Nope," Sarah said, flipping a page. "It's just peachy with me."

The phone rang.

"If it's Mom," Lauren shouted, "I'm not talking to her."

Sarah took the phone into the kitchen and opened the fridge. Lauren stayed in the living room, washing down some pills with the last of her Diet Coke.

"You're out of Diet Coke," Lauren said.

Hi, Mom, Sarah said into the receiver. No, she's taking a nap right now. No, actually, she's been sleeping here every night. Well, she doesn't *act* like she's been taking drugs.

In the living room, Lauren laughed at something on the TV, too loudly, and for a minute Sarah thought the laughter was directed at her, and she looked into the sink, at the

cold drops of water dripping down off the faucet, each one like the last, and as she listened to her mother's voice over the telephone she felt cold fear build up and sink to the bottom of her soul as she realized what the two of them, she and Lauren, were in for.

VII. *The Wait*

Because she had taken all of Noah's cash, he had to stay in Memphis an extra ten days, waiting for the wire to arrive so he could get the damage she had done to the Cavalier repaired. When he got back on the road, the muffler still rattled slightly. It had become a near-constant screech and clatter by the time he reached the city of Lebanon and he finally stopped to replace it, choking down a greasy cheeseburger at the cheap mom-and-pop diner next to the repair shop as he waited. The repair cost him the rest of his money. He picked up a girl at a rest stop just outside of Cookeville, politely declined her offer to keep him "real good company" for the rest of the ride, and turned her loose fifty miles later with a Tennessee map and the five dollars in change that he had managed to find on the floorboards and in the coffee-cup holders. But her baby-doll features, partly hidden under a tangled heap of red hair, and the large, pert nipples poking up from underneath her dirty tank top were distracting, and he was still thinking of her when he passed the Dandridge city limits sign and realized that his destination was forty miles behind him.

It was almost eleven-thirty p.m. when he reached Knoxville. He passed through the brightly lit Henley Street tunnel, turned right on Clinch Avenue into Fort Sanders, and slid his car into the first roadside parking space he could find. Exhausted, he decided that the search for Lauren, the girl responsible for the damage to his Cavalier, could wait. Arms crossed over his thin chest, he slipped down behind the wheel and into the leaden, restless sleep of the weary traveler, dazed from the road and still feeling the curves and dips of the interstate in his dreams.

The next morning when Noah awoke he felt better. Cramped and slightly shaky, he slowly emerged from the Cavalier and stretched. He dug a stale and broken Camel from the depths of the driver's seat, lit it, and inhaled the first smoke of the day. The sky was gray with first light, that pale dawn light that washes everything of color, and Noah guessed it was around seven a.m. Cars were moving up and down the street and he felt very conspicuous. He got back into his car and put the key back into the ignition, trying to figure out a plan, and while he was doing that he fell asleep again. When he awoke again the cigarette had burned down to nothing but an inch-long ash and he cursed himself for wasting his last one. The sun was high in the sky now, shining on him through the windshield, and he could feel his underarms and the insides of his thighs becoming sticky with sweat. He felt a little dazed and woozy still. He started the engine and pulled away from the curb and into the city.

Driving around, he felt very aimless. He didn't know where to start. He had grown up here in Knoxville, but it no longer felt like his city. It was too warm, too crowded, too narrow. He didn't know where to find the girl, but he didn't want to go home yet, either. He wanted some time to readjust to his hometown and shake off the cold of Michigan Tech before returning home to deal with the hellos and hugs and questions from his mother and his stepfather and the friends he had from high school. The radio of his deteriorating car was starting to fail and the Lesley Gore and Buddy Holly songs streaming out of 95.7 were punctuated with static and blots of silence, which added to his annoyance and frustration. He circled the same block about five times before he realized it and pulled up to the curb and stopped. He was within sight of the 17^{h} Street Deli, and as he got out of the Cavalier and walked closer he could see that

there was a line of people outside the store that had wound around the side of the building and snaked back for almost half a block. The deli had never been that busy while he lived here. He walked faster, wondering what was going on.

"Saaaar-ah! Saaaar-ah!" Lauren called to her sister, lying on the couch with her head hanging off the edge, watching cartoons upside-down with her long, curly brown hair trailing along the carpet. "Will you go to the store and get me some cigarettes?"

Sarah walked into the room, a stick of deodorant in her hand. She was wearing only a bra on top and the loose flesh on her arms wobbled as she put it on. Her belly was stuffed into a pair of too-tight jeans. "Now, Lauren? You should have told me when I was going to the store earlier. You know the wait is going to be even longer now than it was when I was there before."

"Come on, Sarah! Please? Please? Please?"

Sarah walked back into the bedroom and came back out with a t-shirt on and her big leather purse slung over one shoulder. "Go get the grill started. There's lighter fluid under the sink, okay?"

"Okay! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Lauren squealed.

Sarah picked up her sister's pills from the coffee table and automatically handed the bottle to her sister. Lauren opened it without taking her eyes off of the TV and handed it back. Sarah washed down two of the uppers with the last of her Diet Coke, put the pill bottle and the empty can back on the coffee table, next to the stack of lottery tickets, and walked out the door.

At the 17th Street Deli the line of people waiting to get in was indeed much longer than it had been three hours earlier, when Sarah had bought the lottery tickets that morning. She took her place in the back of the line and pulled a book out of her purse. The speed was making it harder for her to concentrate than usual and her attention continually wandered from the words on the page to the people waiting in line with her, the Fort denizens she had become used to after years of life in Knoxville: men with torn jeans and graying mullets; women with bleached hair and flowered blouses; pants, made tight with fat, either sneaking into the ass-crack (women) or dipping below the belly to reveal it (men); mouths jammed with Skoal; kids in strollers; dogs on leashes; the university students, identifiable by their youth and their backpacks and the expensive brands of the cigarettes they smoked. She listened to the things they said as the line moved steadily forward:

"How big's the jackpot?"

"Thirty million."

"Kentucky's one million at least."

"Yeah, but we ain't got no income tax like they do—you get to keep all of it."

"But they take some of it away, don't they?"

"Fuck no..."

"You have to match all the numbers, doncha?"

"No, it builds up, four numbers you get like a hundred, five you get like a thousand..."

"How many you gettin?"

"Just one."

"Five."

"Ten."

"Twenty, me and the gals at work all pitched in..."

"Do they run out?"

"No, they can't run out, the numbers are all generated by some computer program. There's millions of possible numbers."

A different voice behind her said, quietly, "Oh...the lottery's here."

Sarah turned around to see a young man standing behind her whose trench coat, green hunting cap with earflaps, and frayed shorts looked ridiculously out of place, especially since the day was so warm. Sarah judged him to be nineteen or twenty.

"You didn't know?" Sarah laughed. "Isn't that what you're here for?"

"No, I was just wondering what was going on."

"It's May 15, remember?"

The kid looked back at her blankly.

"The first day of the Tennessee State Lottery! You can buy lottery tickets in Tennessee now."

"You mean people," the kid said, "are waiting in a line this long for *lottery tickets*?"

"Yeah...it's a big deal, I waited in line for forty-five minutes this morning to buy 'em."

"That's ridiculous," the kid said. He leaned back against the cinderblock wall of the building. "I'm starting to remember why I left this town in the first place."

"Well," Sarah said, a little offended, "I mean, it's fun. Hoping you might win. And, you know, it's something to do, anyway."

"I hope I'm never that short of stuff to do." He looked at her defiantly, as though willing her to challenge him. The line moved forward. Sarah turned away from the kid, feeling hurt, and stepped inside the building. She looked back at him. He glanced at her, and then peeled himself away from the side of the building and walked away.

The ozone smell, the fiery odor the model associated with mosquitoes and paper plates sagging with meat and potato salad and the sour taste of beer, became stronger as she approached Sarah's apartment. The charcoal grill was smoking outside and the back door was slightly ajar. She said hi self-consciously to a couple of neighbors standing outside drinking beer before she went inside. "Sarah...Sarah, where are you?" she called out in her distinctive Southern drawl.

"Oh, hi, Patti," Sarah emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

"You want any help?"

"I have things under control. You get tickets?"

"Oh, yeah." The model pulled a crumpled wad of paper out of her pocket. "I went to 17th Street first thing this morning."

"So did I. I'm surprised we didn't bump into each other there." Sarah walked to the refrigerator and pulled out the plate of hamburger patties. She pointed to the keg sitting by the door. "Have some beer, Patti."

The model obeyed. She followed Sarah out to the bare patch of dirt just outside the apartment's back door that served as a back yard.

Outside, neighbors of Sarah and the model stood in the afternoon sun sipping beer out of plastic cups and comparing ticket stories.

"...forty minutes at the Texaco on Papermill."

"...almost an hour down at the Shell on the Strip."

"My roommate, he went and camped out overnight..."

The model sat down on Sarah's small porch stoop and drew circles in the dirt with a stick. "Where's Pat?"

Sarah recognized the tension in her friend's voice. "I don't know...Tell me you're still not hung up on him."

"No...but his car's not in the lot."

"He's probably out trying to buy up every ticket still left in Knox County." Sarah laughed as she ladled the burgers onto the grill. "You know how obsessed he is with the lottery."

"Yeah...I know." The model sat and sipped at her beer. "But do you think he'll show up?"

"Hey, how's it going?" A tall, blond young man joined the model on the stoop. "You got tickets?"

"Yeah," she said. She pulled the crumpled paper out of her pocket to show him.

"Me too," he said. "What would you do if you won?"

"If I won? Oh, I don't know..."

"Would you quit your job?" His eager, friendly blue eyes looked into her face. "I'd quit mine in a fucking heartbeat, tell you what."

"Patti wouldn't quit," Sarah said, pressing the patties onto the grill. "Patti," she said with a touch of envy, "is one of the top models in the country."

"Yeah?" he said eagerly.

"Yeah...she models her butt. People come to Knoxville from all over just to take pictures of this girl's butt," Sarah said. "Can you feature that?"

"Is that true?" the kid asked, turning back to the model.

"Yeah...for advertisements and stuff. It's just to pay my way through school," she said quickly, "and it passes the time."

"Wow...so you've got a famous butt," he said. "Can I check it out?"

The model stood up and, for the hundredth or the thousandth time, lifted up her t-shirt in the back so the kid could check it out. For the hundredth or thousandth time, she felt a pair of eyes scrutinizing her butt, mentally peeling back the tight jeans and panties to see through to the naked flesh. For the hundredth or thousandth time, she heard a male voice say "nice." She let go of her shirt and sat back down.

"So you wouldn't quit," he said again, "even if you won enough money to pay for school and everything?"

"No," she said, running her finger along the lip of the plastic cup that held her beer. "I have to do something...and what I do is model."

After the encounter with the girl at the deli, Noah had started around the Fort again, on foot because he had hardly any gas left in the tank. He walked with his hands jammed in his pockets, imagining what he was going to say to Lauren when he finally

found her. The day had become warm and he had taken off his coat and hat, tucking them underneath his arm.

Suddenly, he heard her. The throaty voice with the Midwestern accent, playing and singing her favorite song, the same song she had played and sang in all the rooms where they had spent nights. *"I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' 'bout half-past dead...I just need some place, where I can lay my he-ead..."* He looked around until he had located her. Just to his right was a large apartment building. She was sitting on the ground in front of one of the apartments, cross-legged, her bare knees sticking out from the rips in the knees of her jeans. Her head was down and her hair was covering her face.

She was not alone, which was how he always pictured her while they were having it out. She sat in the midst of a group of people, who were drinking beer out of flimsy plastic cups and smoking, trading slips of paper back and forth. The door to the apartment was open and he could see people inside watching television. A couple of people were standing at the kitchen counter, doctoring cans of Diet Coke with rum. The people took his nerve away and, instead of feeling angry, he felt quiet and shy.

The girl he had talked to in front of the deli came out of the apartment, a beer in her hand. He waved self-consciously to her and she beckoned him with her free hand. "Hey," she said, drunk, "I remember you. Go on inside and grab a beer." She jerked a thumb towards the door.

He went inside and filled a plastic cup with beer from the keg. A couple of people looked at him strangely, but he ignored them. He found an empty lawn chair off to the side and sat down. He listened to the people talking around him. They all seemed to be concerned about another of their number, a party guest who had not yet arrived.

"Hey, have you seen Pat?"

"No, I thought for sure he'd be here..."

"Dude's creepy, man, always disappearing and reappearing like he does..."

"Maybe he's just still in line to get lottery tickets."

"There's nobody at the stores right now, everyone who wants 'em has got 'em..."

"Is he at work?"

"No, dude doesn't even have a job..."

Noah finished his beer and went inside for another. When he returned, a girl had materialized in a chair near his. She smiled at him. "Got your tickets?" she said shyly.

"No," he said. The beer had made him feel mellow. "I've been out of town. I didn't know the lottery began today."

"Well, I only got a couple." She dug a tattered piece of paper out of her hip pocket, looked at it, and put it back. "Sit and wait till tomorrow, I guess."

"What's tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's when they put the winning number in the paper."

"Oh...I thought you meant tomorrow was when that Pat guy was coming back."

The girl's smile disappeared. "Do you know Pat?"

Noah looked down. "I don't...I just heard some people talking about him. I thought he was the man of the hour or something."

"Pat's always man of the hour," the girl said. She sounded disgusted.

The girl from the deli came over and stood over the other girl's chair. "Have you seen him, Patti?"

"No…I couldn't care less where he is," Patti said in a way that let Noah know that she could.

"I thought he'd be here by now."

"Let's be glad he's not. Sarah, let's go inside…it's getting cold."

The two girls went inside the apartment. Noah sipped at his beer and wondered how to best approach Lauren. She was still bent over her guitar, picking out another song. Her fingers flew over the frets as she sang, almost whispering, *"hey little girl, is your daddy home, did he go away and leave you all alone..."* The girl from the deli, Sarah, came out of the apartment, a can of Diet Coke in her hand. She bent down, silently offering it to Lauren, who shook her head, curls wobbling. The big girl shrugged and began drinking it herself. Lauren continued to play. Noah, getting buzzed, thought she was very pretty like that, almost like a picture. He could see her in black-and-white, a photograph in one of those *Life* magazine compilations, never aging, always looking young and beautiful.

It was dark and cold. Almost everyone had gone inside, leaving behind empty plastic cups and dead cigarette butts crushed out in the red dirt. Someone had taken a liner out of one of the garbage cans and tied it to a lawn chair, but not many people had troubled to use it. Sarah came out of the house and half-heartedly began picking up the trash. "What are you doing out here still?"

Noah slowly rose up out of the chair, where he had been semi-dozing, lost in his daydreams. "I don't know. Just killing time, I guess. Waiting for something to happen."

He had lost count of the beers he had drank, and he had trouble walking at first. He held the liner open while she dropped the cups and empty cigarette packs into it.

She said, "You're waiting to talk to my sister, aren't you?"

"What? Who's your sister?"

"The dark-haired girl with the guitar. Lauren. She saw you here, but she didn't want to say anything. She was afraid you wouldn't remember her."

"Oh. I remember her."

"Well, she's out front if you want to talk to her. Go ahead. If that's what you came here for."

"Thank you."

Noah still didn't feel like he could go back home until he had talked to her. He walked unsteadily around to the other side of the building. The ground sloped down as he did so, revealing a basement level of apartments just below the level on which Sarah's apartment rested. The streetlights winked off of the chrome of the cars dotting the parking lot. Squinting, he could see her, sitting on the hood of a dark-colored Saturn, staring up at the sky with her knees pulled up to her chin. She smoked a cigarette. Her guitar was sitting next to her, but she wasn't playing. He wanted to make a picture out of this image, too, another black-and-white picture, with Lauren's silhouette rendered dramatic and beautiful by the street lamps. He could caption it "Waiting," he thought, or maybe simply "The Wait."

"Lauren!" he called.

She turned around. "I saw you earlier," she said. "What are you doing here?"

The harshness in her voice startled him. "I don't know," he said. "Get the money you owe me. For fucking up my car." He walked over to her and joined her on the hood of the Saturn. "You stole some stuff from me, too. Some money and some DVD's."

"I still got the DVD's, but I spent the money."

"Well, you can write me a check or something."

"Okay."

There was a silence.

"You waiting for Pat?" Noah asked.

"Yeah," she said, "though I don't know when he's gonna come back."

"What are you waiting for him for?"

"I don't know. It passes the time."

Noah watched her exhale a puff of smoke. "Give me a cigarette," he said.

They sat in silence for fifteen or twenty more minutes, chain-smoking. Cars cruised up and down the street, windows down and rap music blaring from subwoofers. Across the street, in another yard made of dirt, people drank beer out of plastic cups, the same kind Noah had been drinking beer out of earlier. The people were drunk and laughing, letting their cigarettes burn to ash as they traded their lottery tickets back and forth.

"It doesn't matter," she burst out suddenly. "Life doesn't change, even if you win. None of these people seem to realize that."

"They do, I bet. Sort of," Noah said. "But it's fun for them to hope they might win, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," Lauren said. "I'm not eighteen yet. I can't win."

"But you can imagine, can't you?"

"NO," Lauren said loudly.

"Okay, okay," Noah said. "I'm sorry."

A few minutes passed.

"When are you going to give me the money?" Noah asked.

"I don't know!" she exclaimed. "I want to wait for Pat to come home first."

A car swung into the parking lot, its headlights shining momentarily right in their faces. Lauren leaned forward, then sat back down.

"Not him?" Noah asked.

"Not him."

"When does he usually come home?"

"He's not usually gone."

"I see."

Lauren picked idly at the Saturn's hood ornament, making it wobble back and forth.

"Do you think he's coming back?" Noah asked.

"Yes," she said, irritated. "Of course he is."

They sat and waited. The big neon OPEN sign that hung in the window of the 17th Street Deli went dark. About ten minutes later, the little Indian man who owned the deli came out. He got into his car and drove away.

"I wonder if he gets tired of it," said Lauren. "Being in the deli every day, all day, except for Sunday. He's the only person that works there. "

"Maybe he just waits for Sunday."

"Yeah, but if all you do is wait for Sunday, then you spend all day Sunday just knowing that on Monday you'll have to go back and do it all again."

"Maybe you do."

They sat and waited. Lauren twisted a ring around and around her middle finger. Noah felt increasingly uneasy. Close up, Lauren's dark curls were unwashed and greasy. She had a habit of jiggling her leg, and it rocked the whole car. Noah gradually felt a certainty that she wasn't going to give him any money. He watched the night bugs circle the streetlights. He looked up, but he couldn't see any stars. The city was too brightly lit for them. Across the road, the people drained their beer cups and refilled them, finished their cigarettes and lit new ones. Their stereo blasted the same songs that were playing in the cars driving up and down the road. Partygoers walked up the street in twos or threes, arms slung drunkenly about one another. To Noah, they all looked the same. He felt stupid. There was nothing he wanted here.

"I'm going home," he said, abruptly sliding off the hood of the Saturn and shaking his coat.

"What about your money?"

"Don't worry about it." He laughed. "I'll buy a lottery ticket tomorrow. Maybe I'll win."

"Good," she said after a minute. "I'd just have written you a bad check."

"Well," he said, extending a hand, "so long. "I hope he comes back."

Lauren took his hand in hers limply. "Yeah," was all she said.

Noah shook his arms back into the sleeves of his coat and started walking up 17th Street, towards his car. He was parked a couple of blocks away from the apartment

building. He got to the top of the hill and looked back at Lauren. She was still sitting on the hood of the Saturn, staring up into space. Her fingers wandered over to the guitar and silently knocked out a couple of chords. Behind her sat Pat's apartment, the door closed and the shades drawn, still unlit and empty. Noah turned back around and kept walking. The Cavalier was still where he'd left it, parked on the street. He got in, turned the key in the ignition, and drove away.

Vita

Jackie Knoll was born in Flint, Michigan, on July 5, 1978. She was raised in Montrose, Michigan, graduating from Hill-McCloy High School in 1996. She then attended Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, graduating summa cum laude with a B.S. in psychology in December 2000. She moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in 2001 upon earning a graduate teaching assistantship from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She obtained her M.A. in English, with a concentration in creative writing, in 2003. She won the John C. Hodges Graduate Writing Award in April 2002. She gave a reading of "The All-Time Loser" as part of the University of Tennessee "Writers in the Library" series in January 2003. Her future plans include looking for work teaching college English and possibly going on for a Ph.D in rhetoric/composition.