EAST, WEST, SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Shawn Behlen, B.S., M.A.
Denton, Texas
December, 1997

A work of creative fiction in novella form, this dissertation follows the first-person travails of Mitch Zeller, a 26-year-old gay man who is faced with an unexpected choice.

The dissertation opens with a preface which examines the form of the novella and the content of this particular work.
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The following novella is set in a Dallas “rotten in the middle,” exactly as its protagonist might be. And in the author’s opinion—which admittedly means little to a reader—it is the story of a decision. The narrator, Mitch Zeller, is a twenty-six-year-old gay man who works in the often mindless field of retail sales and considers himself “a watched pot, never boiling.” As we meet him, he lives with a wealthy, elderly benefactor named Howard Clenellan, a man “tempered unevenly by comfort and folly” who supplies Mitch with a world of goods and travel far beyond what he has previously known. Soon, though, Mitch meets Kurt Johnston, a blue-collar house painter who is closer in age and acts in ways “more selfless” than Mitch is accustomed to. Eventually, Kurt offers Mitch the chance of a relationship based on the exchange of emotion, instead of money and sex, but does so only within the dubious opportunity to move to Kansas.

So, Mitch must choose. And the novella follows his consideration of either option until the moment of his decision. At that point, whether he has made the best decision—or even whether one choice is “better” than the other—is left to the reader. Perhaps it is more important to question whether a “bad” decision can be made for the “right” reason. Again, it is up to the reader to make his or her own decision, and for his or her own reason.

Regardless, it is the author’s hope that the following discussion of form and content will further an understanding of what was attempted and why.
I. Form

The novella is not a particularly glamorous form in which to write. There is no *Best American Novella* anthology nor is there a real market in which a single novella can be published, unless the writer is famous enough to demand it. The novella therefore seems to exist as a form that contemporary writers for the most part ignore or dabble in only once or twice. And perhaps this is why *East, West, Somewhere in the Middle* did not begin as such.

Instead, it began as a short story, one of a cycle about a group of coworkers. But as the main character, Mitch, cropped up in story after story, and as I worked on the one that focused on his decision to alter the life he led, it became obvious that much of the work I had done on the earlier stories was a prelude of sorts. For Mitch is the character that stayed with me as I attempted to move from one story to the next, for some reason demanding a fuller treatment of why he might or might not make the decision he eventually makes. So, I gave in and sat out to expand Mitch’s world, fashioning room for more of a complete life and rooms in which to set it. But as I began this longer piece, I had little idea of where I might end. The vague idea of a novel, supplanting one I had been struggling with for years, was in the back of my mind, but only vaguely.

As I continued, though, thinking at first in terms of chapters, I realized that the question of a single decision in the mind of a single character did not offer the scope of a full novel. I therefore shifted my sights to something shorter, positioning myself midway between the story and the novel, which suggested, of course, that I write a novella. But what, exactly, is that?
To help put my own unformed definition into words, I first looked to those exemplars of the novella that are more well-known, considered classics by many, which I studied in school. I flipped through Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and William Faulkner's "The Bear," both taught to me as novellas in an undergraduate class back in 1981, and remembered that calling them both a novella bothered me simply because one filled a whole book and one did not. I reread J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, both novellas so intense I was caught up once again and failed to concentrate on form much at all. And I compared Carson McCullers' "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," a favorite, to Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, which I do not like, and tried to determine, unsuccessfully, whether form had anything to do with my opinions on either or both.\(^1\)

But I did come away with certain ideas from this study. I knew I appreciated Faulkner's piece for its ability to focus on a single theme, yet touch heavily on others, as well as James' capacity to keep much of the story within the principal character's head as she strives to solve a puzzle or reach a "correct" understanding. On the other hand, I rejected immediately the few-hour time frame of "Franny," since I wanted to examine the gradual move toward a decision.

Nevertheless, still uncertain about the overall format of the novella, I turned next to other writer's opinion of the form. Quickly, I read that Vladimir Nabokov believed the writer of the novella is merely "diminishing large things and enlarging small ones" (Springer 5), while James considered the *nouvelle* a form "beautiful and blest" (Irwin 13). Such opposition was not terribly helpful in my search, though I recognized that, depending on the novella and its writer, either might be right. Still, matters of taste aside, their comments—indicative of the range of opinions available—left me searching for certain
tangibles. Finally, John Gardner offered a definition for my own thoughts to agree with or react against. He writes:

\begin{quote}
The novella can be defined only as a work shorter than a novel (most novellas run somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 words) and both longer and more episodic than a short story. I use the word “episodic” loosely here, meaning only that the novella usually has a series of climaxes, each more intense than the last, though it may be be built—and perhaps in fact ought to be built—of one continuous action. (179)
\end{quote}

As another option, he offers the structure of the “baby novel” in which a writer shifts “from one point of view (or focal character) to another . . . using true episodes, with time breaks between, instead of a continuous stream of action,” though he feels this structure is less “elegant,” “has less urgency,” and, because of its length, prohibits the “powerhouse effect” of a full novel (182). He also offers the possibility of “fictional pointillism,” in which the writer “lets out his story in snippets . . . gradually amassing the elements, literal and symbolic, of a quasi-energetic action” (182).

Obviously, then, though Gardner has his preferences, the precise structure of the novella, beyond its length, is open to interpretation. As A. Robert Lee writes in his introduction to The Modern American Novella, “Not only are hard and fast lines difficult to come by, but more even than usually the exception proves the rule or at the very least casts doubt upon any received consensus” (7). He also adds a summation of what I have come to believe, that when considering the American novella, it is important to remember that “few literatures have been quite so resistant to settled notions of form” (8).
Still, as I began to write my novella, I felt comfortable with certain standards that make up, finally, my own definition of how I could work within the form: I would aim for 50,000 words (I ended up with roughly 45,000), I would concentrate on a series of heightening climaxes, and I would address the subject of one important decision, which parallels nicely Gardner's idea that "the novella normally treats one character and one important action in his life," that it "reaches an end wherein the world is, at least for the central character, radically changed" (183). At the same time, I would resist Gardner's call for "continuous action" as well as critic David Timms belief that "novellas . . . do not give a sense of the experience of the passing of time" (104). I would resist much of this compression, as well as interrupt the action, simply to see what I could accomplish.²

So it was those three goals of form—a certain length, heightening climaxes, and the serious alteration of my main character's life—that provided a framework for the writing and rewriting of my novella. But since it was, at the least, worrisome to tackle a new form, I found myself also turning for inspiration to contemporary novellas I admire: the three novellas in Rick Bass' _Platte River_, Richard Bausch's "Rare & Endangered Species," "Tumble Home" by Amy Hempel, "The Term Paper Artist" by David Leavitt, "The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven" by Rick Moody, and Jane Smiley's "The Age of Grief," "Ordinary Love," and "Good Will." All were helpful, if, simply, in convincing me that the novella is a viable form, capable of great power.³ But, in addition, it was three other novellas that became most important to my understanding of the form's possibilities as it is currently being written: "Believers" by Charles Baxter, "Naked to the Waist" by Alice Elliott Dark, and "Saturn Street" by David Leavitt.

"Believers" is, in my opinion, one of the most extraordinary novellas ever
published, certainly the most powerful I have read. Baxter's novella traces the search by a son, Jack Pielke, for the true nature of his father, Franz, a Catholic priest in Michigan in 1937, who later loses faith after becoming involved with a wealthy couple, the Burton's, and through them, if distantly, Joseph Paul Goebbels. To effect this search, Baxter uses first person narration of the son, now grown, along with the third person telling of the father's life, including scenes from Franz's childhood and adulthood. Thus, in the first part (the novella is broken into twenty-three numbered parts) we are given such wonderful slips in time as, "For a few years before I was born..." (165), followed by a jump to the narrator's present, then a study of the now-dead father's notebooks, and a series of scenes with the father as a young boy with his own father, all interspersed with comments from the narrator on theology, fate, bonds between the Father and fathers, fathers and sons. To my mind, this weaving of time and place is seamless, flowing logically, thematically, presenting a dense texture that breaks, in only the first seventeen pages, many of Gardner's truisms about what constitutes a successful novella.

In that way, I believe, Baxter has broadened the form's possibilities. And though he keeps the central cast small—"This is a story about Goebbels, my father, my mother, and two Americans" (168)—there is a large and necessary supporting cast: the grandfather, the father's former parishioners, and various citizens of Berlin. Also, the scope of history and settings is immense: approximately sixty-five years and two continents. And, again, the narrator's jumping from the present to the past, coupled with a direct call upon the reader to help him do so—creating a sense of time even more elastic than Faulkner's in "The Bear"—makes for another sort of work than one of continuous action.
I would argue, too, that Baxter’s novella is no less elegant and no less powerful for its non-linear nature. Instead, I believe it is through the explosion of the “accepted” form that Baxter is able to tackle the extremely complex issues of faith and religion, fear and love. And yet, “Believers” is a novella. At about 45,000 words, it is the appropriate length, it follows one character’s search for a particular knowledge, a knowledge that changes him, and it does so through a series of discoveries.

Certainly, then, with my three goals of form in mind, Baxter’s risks, and what I consider his triumph, were tantamount to a green light for my own use of the past and present, not only in self-contained flashbacks, but also in parts such as the sixth, in which present tense narration is woven with events from a week ago, a month ago, twenty-two years ago. Reading Baxter’s novella freed me to play with time in much the same way I presume people actually think of it, non-linear and intertwined.

Alice Elliott Dark’s “Naked to the Waist,” though more focused on the individual, as opposed to Baxter’s farther reaching concerns, also breaks with certain standards of the novella form and does so, I think, successfully. Dark’s novella tells the story of Lucy Langworthy, who is thirty years old and torn between her attraction to a gay male friend she has known for years and an older, recently-met Vietnam vet. Set in Key West, the novella covers a long summer during which Lucy is caught up in two triangles, with Nick and the wealthy, older man he lives with, and with Dennis and another woman. Lucy struggles with these people until her mind fills “with images of all the boys she’d known and loved, or thought she loved, kissed, made love with, left, been jilted by, lied to, confided in, all of them marching over the crest of a green hill, going away” (261), and she
no longer counts on them to form her.

Throughout the novella, the five main characters—and there are other important ones, for a high number of characters is how Dark most breaks with novella tradition—are handled adroitly, the manner in which they all interact clear and evenly paced. This was, for me, the most helpful aspect of Dark's plotting. She shows Lucy's progression through her several options, her give and take with the novella's numerous characters, in clear, believable steps, and I have attempted to do the same with Mitch.

Leavitt's novella, "Saturn Street," is less successful than Baxter's and Dark's, in that the ending does not carry with it the power of believable revelation evident in the other two. But I did find a function of its form instructive. "Saturn Street" is the story of Jerry, a failed screenwriter who delivers "lunches to homebound people with AIDS under the auspices of a group of men and women who called themselves the Angels" (135). But it is actually Phil, ill with the virus and as hungry for Jerry's company as he is for meals, who turns out to be the angel in Jerry's life, affecting in him the change which the novella plots.

Curiously, though, to facilitate this change, Leavitt jumps time only eight pages from the end: "And then one day, about fifteen months after I'd left, I found myself back in Los Angeles" (191). After much thought, I decided it was this jump that diluted the ending of Leavitt's novella; there was simply too much life bypassed in that one sentence. But this jump did help with a struggle of my own. I had wanted to move ahead the relationship of Mitch and Kurt in my novella and decided to make a jump of my own, though closer to the half-way point, instead of the end, and with only a month bypassed, instead of fifteen. In that way, and through a quick explanation of what transpired in that month, I hoped to ease the disjunction Leavitt's jump caused for me.
So, these are the novellas and ideas I turned to as I wrote and rewrote *East, West, Somewhere in the Middle*. And perhaps it is the importance of having three primary examples, in addition to three major characters, and those three major goals of form discussed above, that led me to picture my novella, structurally, as a series of threes. Early in the process, as I plotted, I began envisioning the whole broken into nine “parts” (“chapters” no longer seemed applicable since this was not a novel), with each part broken into three “sections.” To my way of thinking then, three sections would form a part, three parts would build to a pivotal moment, and three important moments would trace the whole: Mitch’s movement toward his decision.

This structure is fairly obvious in the finished novella, I believe. The first three parts introduce Kurt into Mitch’s life, cause Mitch to be hopeful about their interaction, and then make clear the difficulties of changing a life: the basic triangle is set up and Mitch realizes the state of his life. The middle three parts throw the stability of Mitch’s current status into question, lead him back to Kurt, and then suggest that Mitch might be able to live without a decision: the two choices are somewhat equalized and Mitch sets a course toward the middle. And the final three parts prove that Howard is unwilling to continue without a decision from Mitch, show why Kurt is unable to wait, and then provide us with Mitch’s choice: the stakes are raised on both sides and Mitch decides. At the end, his life is changed, for good or bad, completely.

Which is, finally, what I have decided is the best use of the novella: to chart the action of one meaningful change in one character’s life, and to do so in a manner more complete than a short story can contain. Regardless of structure, or time covered, or
number of characters, the full arc of a single character's transformation is the one constant, aside from length, that I have found in successful novellas; that is the key to the form.

II. Content

As mentioned, *East, West, Somewhere in the Middle* is the story of a gay man's decision—not on whether to come out or not, as in much of earlier gay fiction, but to choose one life over another, either of them with another gay man. And that, coupled with the fact that I am gay means that should it ever see the light of published day, my novella will be labeled "gay" fiction.

But, just as the form of the novella is worth exploring, so is the conception of a "gay" book. What, exactly, does that mean? In my more cynical moments, I envision a book that has sex with other books, as opposed to videotapes, cassettes, or compact discs. But in my more reasonable, realistic moments, I know it means that a work of fiction and its author would be promoted in a certain way to a certain audience, a product of "niche marketing." As fiction-writer Gary Indiana has pointed out:

Even though homosexuality is not my real subject, and "gay literature," like most parochial manifestations of group thought, makes me feel like a secular Jew trapped at Grossinger's during an especially shtick-heavy lounge act, I have been out of the closet for twenty years, and if your work treats homosexual subjects without moralism, in other words, matter-of-factly, the Sulzberger empire will make you pay for it, one way or another.

(22-23)

Indiana suggests, strongly, that the writer has no choice in this sort of
categorization, and I agree with him. At the 1997 Napa Valley Writers’ Conference, which I recently attended, a panel was composed of an agent, an editor, and a publisher. Each of them bemoaned the difficulty of their jobs, discussing the conglomeration of publishing houses, the popularity of tell-all memoirs, the recent news reports of author contract cancellations, and the difficulty of selling literary fiction. What is required, they said, is a “through-line,” the ability to sum up a book in one exciting sentence, to be able to describe it and its writer to prospective publishers in the same way that movies are pitched to studios and producers. The saleable points, they claimed, must be instantly obvious.

I trust they are right. Their need to have a one-sentence summation, though a lamentable instance of simplification, is understandable. It must in fact be easier to sell the “gay” whatever, when the “whatever” is the name of a book that has already sold, and sold well. Therefore, I cannot imagine an instance I would not be “gay writer Shawn Behlen,” writer of a “gay book,” and this is a fact that troubles me. For in the few decades that books and authors have been specifically “gay” and marketed as such, what good work have we seen? Not a lot, is my answer.

In fact, with the exception of a couple of instant “classics”—Alan Hollinghurst’s The Swimming Pool Library and Andrew Holleran’s Dancer From the Dance—and a few personal favorites—Michael Cunningham’s books, Leavitt’s Family Dancing, Scott Heim’s Mysterious Skin, and Jack by A. M. Homes (who is female and presumably straight)—I think much of contemporary, gay-themed fiction is not terribly well written. But it is lauded or vilified in the gay press for reasons that have little to do with quality and more to do with politics, with what critic Terry Woods considers an author’s willingness to
"speak of difference, of how culture can massively determine the limitations in our understanding of ourselves and others. Of how society inscribes the order in which people are accorded worth. And of gayness as a lived experience of alienated desire" (129).

An example of these political concerns is currently on view in the glossy gay magazines *The Advocate* and *Out*. Amongst advertisements for Gucci and Prada, Larry Kramer, co-founder of Act Up and writer of *The Normal Heart* and *Faggots*, and Edmund White, the author of a prize-winning biography of Jean Genet, as well as *A Boy's Own Story* and *Skinned Alive*, are defending their turf. Kramer's belief—because gay men “have made a culture out of our sexuality, and that culture has killed us” (65)—is that gay men “must create a new culture that is not confined and centered so tragically on our obsession with our penises and what we do with them” (59). And what prompts him to spell this out is White's just-published novel *The Farewell Symphony*, which Kramer calls “an autobiographical diary, couched as a novel.” Kramer writes of White:

> Almost night by night and day by day, he parades before the reader what seems to be every trick he's ever sucked, fucked, rimmed, tied up, pissed on, or been sucked by, fucked by, rimmed by, tied up by—you get the idea. There are so many faceless, indistinguishable pieces of flesh that litter these 500 pages that reading them becomes, for any reasonably sentient human being, at first a heartless experience and finally a boring one. It is bizarre, to say the least, to read the publisher’s description of this as “the great novel about the last 30 years of gay life.” (64)

My guess is that the publisher’s comment might be a bit of hyperbole, designed to sell books, but Kramer seems unable to reach past it, or to recognize, at any level, that
White has written a novel which explains the last thirty years through one character’s point of view, and, given that White himself calls the work semi-autobiographical, through his own consciousness. Kramer fails to discuss the book on its own merits, to determine the success or effectiveness of that one character, the story, or any other aspect that has to do with the actual writing. And, sadly, I have yet to see White point out this fact himself.

Instead, a month after Kramer’s diatribe appeared in one magazine, White delivered a challenge of his own in another.

He believes that a “new prudishness about sex,” which is “never buried for long in any American debate about art, even among radicals,” has reemerged and suggests that:

Just as antipornography feminists in their zeal had been willing to abandon their progressive tradition and join hands with fundamentalist Christians, the new gay prudes suddenly seemed ready to flirt with the forces of censorship or police-enforced closures of baths and backrooms—anything to stop erotic encounters in life or in fiction. If we stick just to the books, the prudes’ argument seems to run that gay erotic literature is somehow unworthy of the gay community, which should now be ready to produce its world-class geniuses of the stature of Tolstoy or Flaubert. (“Joy” 112)

White scoffs at this sort of judgement. He contends that the best gay-identified novelists in English to emerge in the last two decades “have written almost exclusively about the drama and excitement, the adventure and tragedy of sex” and adds:

It might also be pointed out that the word homosexual contains the word sexual and that when pundits ask what exactly is it that unites our
community, what single principle can we erect that might rally all of us, rich
and poor, black and white, young and old, the answer is right there staring
at us with its single slightly rheumy eye. ("Joy" 112)

Admittedly, that last is an amusing line, clever as White most often is. It is true
also that Kramer, in his essay, sees the world as utterly definable in blacks and whites,
with nary a shade of gray, as he most often does. But I feel that together these two
successful gay authors leave little room for a writer such as myself, who feels that subject
matter is not where the argument should be centered, who feels that each writer can only
write the story he is most capable of telling, always with the hope that other writers will
ably fill in the gaps of the community view as a whole. This is what Leavitt means when
he writes, "Literature confronts the perversity of individual experience" (Introduction
xxvi). After all, as White suggests, gay male lives range from David Geffen to a homeless
Asian prostitute in Malaysia, a range perhaps even wider than the much larger straight
community's since race and culture are not the categories by which we are separated from
the whole.

And yet, White and Kramer act as if pro-sex or anti-sex are the only categories in
which a work of gay fiction can fall, or by which it can be judged. This, even though, as
Christopher Bram—the author of several fine gay novels—has pointed out, "There are
many gay novelists who write about more than getting laid, or write through sex to the rest
of life" (20). He acknowledges too that, "everything Kramer said about other men's fiction
[during his attack on White] . . . could be used more accurately to describe his own novel"
(20), Faggots, which makes me think this is all so much petty bickering. It causes me to
agree with Leavitt when he writes in his recent essay, “The Threat of Mediocrity”:

When I look ahead 30 years, my instincts tell me that gay literature as a category will have run itself into the ground. Internal squabbling will have riven it from within, while that brand of self-interest that masquerades as piety will have driven most serious writers to flee its strictures. Worst of all, the very adjective gay will be perceived negatively—not because of homophobia but because so many readers will be fed up with a term that has increasingly come to connote hackneyed sentimentality, propaganda, rage without issue. (112)

In fact, I would argue that much in Leavitt’s words have the ring of truth about them today. At heart, this argument between Kramer and White is, again, not one of quality, but of whether or not certain fiction is “gay” enough, an issue connected to a political argument, centered on certain gay rights issues, which assumes that all activities not based on the promotion of sexual enjoyment—including monogamy, marriage, and conservatism of most any sort—is based on a desire to emulate the heterosexual norm and is therefore anti-homosexual.5 Certainly, this is a simplistic view, and yet, most discussions of gay fiction, even gay life, cannot rise above it. Perhaps that is because it is easier to argue quantitatively than it is qualitatively, but, regardless, I believe we do ourselves a disservice in the process, that we position “mediocrity” as more of a certainty than a “threat.”

But, luckily, there are voices like Bram’s and Leavitt’s, a minority of gay writers who call our attention to what we as a community celebrate or do not, and why. Even fewer, though, view as I do the end of a “gay” classification in fiction as a positive.
Instead, most seem to feel as critic Reed Woodhouse does when he writes that “gay literature—defined as gay men relating to gay men—is on the way out,” a thought he regards “with a great deal of regret” (Mann 40). But, again, I find it unsurprising and the logical next step.

Some editors of gay anthologies have suggested that gay fiction is split into only pre-Stonewall (1969) and post-Stonewall, while others have broken it into waves, usually three, of less and less concern with a community of only men. But to me, the smartest breakdown is put forth by Woodhouse, who argues that gay fiction falls into one of five categories, or what he calls “houses”: 1.) Closet. Pre-Stonewall writing with gay content but no broad connection to a gay community. 2.) Proto-ghetto. Also pre-Stonewall writing, but with a recognition of gay community. 3.) Ghetto. Writing that is immediately post-Stonewall and centered on the gay community. 4.) Assimilative. Writing in which the focus is less on a community of gay men and more on how gay men fit into the larger world. 5.) Queer. Writing with gay content that reveals only tenuous or ambiguous connections to gay culture or community (Mann 42).

What strikes me most about these definitions is the similarities between the first and the last, the date written being the obvious distinction. James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* is an example of work in the first category, and Scott Heim’s *In Awe* is an example from the fifth category. The differences in both style and content are marked in these two novels, even though both tell of gay men lusting after straight men with less-than-satisfactory consequences. And these differences, in content at least, stem obviously from changes in culture. *Giovanni’s Room* was written in the mid-fifties, while Heim
wrote his book in the mid-nineties. Forty years have seen major modifications in how gay men are treated and considered in general society. But if we go along with Woodhouse’s definitions, we see that in the middle of both decades gay writers are speaking little of gay community—one because that community does not yet exist as we have come to know it, and the other because that community has already come to seem, to some, less necessary.

Instead, I believe it is the movement between that was necessary. Considering the way gay men were previously portrayed in both literature and film, as only the lisping twit or the oily villain, it is understandable that gay writers of the seventies, energized by Stonewall and all it prophesied, found the glorification of the male body, male sex, and the gay ghetto as a reasonable form of celebration. But we have now reached a point in which gay characters in films can be too-noble victors (who still must die), as in Philadelphia, or bland excuses for farce, as in In and Out. And in literature too, there is more room for any type of treatment—mystery, satire, etc.—but, again, the evaluation of each should be based on quality. And for this to occur, I believe books must not be “gay,” but simply books, judged against the best writing in history. That is what I want, and why I look forward to the end of stringent categorization, which I think Woodhouse’s model of gradual change accurately predicts.

And yet, in the meantime, I know that my work will be “gay” and therefore targeted specifically to gay men, which is another reason I look forward to the end of labeling. At the moment, I am the sole gay member of a ten-person writing group, the ten-percent rule brought to life. This is a multi-ethnic group that has worked with me throughout the various rewrites of my novella, offering inumerable suggestions that have helped clarify the characters and tighten the plot. Still, it is common for the members to comment on how
they are learning about “another world” as if I am writing science fiction and my characters live on Mars. Also, they rejoice at my “alternative voice” and start many comments with, “If you want straight people to read this . . .,” then suggest changes. They do this because straight people not reading it is the assumption we all have, even though we have never discussed it.

What these statements of theirs also make clear is that they have never read a “gay” novel before, even though each has completed at least one novel of his or her own, and each reads voraciously. The only gay author I have heard any of them mention is Leavitt, and that only in response to the amount of press he receives. Perhaps I should not be surprised. As Keith Kahla, general editor of the Stonewall Inn Editions, the gay imprint at St. Martin’s Press, has said, “I hold no hope for the idea of crossover. Straight people aren’t going to buy gay books. Once we accept that, we’ll be better off” (Mann 33).

I personally know of several exceptions to this assumption, but my overall experience has proven Kahla correct. Because even though minorities read the literature of the majority for the same reason that they learn the rules of majority society—to survive—the reverse is simply not true. My guess is that if a straight person reads a gay book, it is often because a friend, usually gay, has suggested it, or because the reader knows the author, or because the book has received exponentially greater coverage in the press as a “must read.” These are as valid reasons to read as any, but uncommon.

Beyond that, I worry about the actions of some chain bookstores, and even some libraries. In the San Francisco Border’s Books and Music store, as in many others, the section containing fiction and literature stretches across a long wall, all of it there in one,
for me, tremendously exciting and enthralling manifestation of what has been created with
the written word. But not all fiction and literature are on those shelves. Instead, one
shelving unit stands by itself, separate, perpendicular to the rest. "Gay Fiction" is lined up
on one side of this detached unit, with "African-American Fiction" lined up on the other.
And in the San Francisco Main Library, gay fiction even has its own room, off in the
corner of an upper floor. A reader would want gay fiction, and only gay fiction, to walk in
that room, ruling out the possibility of surprise. Also, a reader would want everyone to
know what he or she is after to walk in that room, which may or may not be a problem. 6
To me, this situation simply adds to the notion that gay books should be evaluated
separately and read by mostly gays and lesbians.

So, finally, if I recognize the state of gay fiction in the present and have hopes for
how it will be treated in the future—not as gay fiction—where does that leave East, West,
Somewhere in the Middle, were I lucky and it was published? Honestly, beyond how my
work would be labeled and how it would be marketed, I have little idea, and do not think I
should. I believe, as I do with any written work, that its value will be decided by its
readers. Meanwhile, I can hope only that it would be judged by its merits and not its
politics. For I have attempted to write my version of the truth for one character, one gay
man among many, and that is the only honest goal I can imagine. As White has written,
"Most gay novelists worth their salt (the salt of their tears, of their sweat, of their sperm)
would probably say that their only obligation is to the truth or, failing that, to beauty"
(“Joy” 197).

This is a sentiment Leavitt echoes when he remembers that as a teenager in the
seventies, "I knew only that I longed to read a novel in which the gay characters were neither reduced to a subhuman nor elevated to a superhuman level. Instead I wanted to read a novel that told something like the truth" (Introduction xvi). And twenty years later, I still want to read such a work, and so the character of Mitch is not subhuman or superhuman. He is instead, I hope, merely human, a man who happens to be gay and is as alive as I could make him, smart and stupid at almost exactly the same time. Because regardless of all these concerns I have enumerated, which are real ones, I most want someone, gay or straight, to simply enjoy what I write. I want someone to label it, if anything, a "good read."
Notes

1 Even the difficulty of deciding whether to place certain novellas in italics or within quotation marks points to the form's in-between-ness and the difficulty of naming it exactly. “The Ballad of the Sad Cafe” has been published as a book and as a part of several collections. My copy is in collection form and so I place it within quotation marks. And “The Bear” brings up another interesting discussion about form. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris call it “a story” (67), and call Go Down, Moses, of which it is most often a part, a “composite novel” because of its “extended family as collective protagonist” (66).

2 Such resistance, such attempts at accomplishing difference within a form, are important, I think. Not that I would presume to be on the level of certain writers who regularly expand forms, but I applaud Alice Munro’s ability to reinvent the short story, breaking it into separate sections that connect thematically, often in ways open to much interpretation. Similarly, I celebrate David Foster Wallace’s addition of 97 pages of “Notes and Errata” to what a novel might contain. Therefore, I hope my readers wish to see the “novella” not as a rigid standard of exact requirements, but as a starting point. Otherwise, readers might ignore the sweep of possibilities already evident in the works of many successful writers of the past, as well as the opportunities that current and future writers might discover through useful experimentation.

3 Helpful also were certain “long stories,” which I think could be just as easily classified as novellas, including “The Pretty Girl” by Andre Dubus, the four entries in Ethan Canin’s The Palace Thief, and, especially, “The Womanizer,” “Jealous,” and “Occidentals,” which make up Richard Ford’s Women With Men. I read the Ford book
throughout my rewriting of *East, West, Somewhere in the Middle* because it speaks to me of the incredible ease with which Ford combines introspective, sometimes passive characters and forward action. As I continue to examine his craft (hoping to duplicate one day) I have come to consider it a function of form, though not one I yet understand.

Obviously, too, my contention that these long stories could be considered novellas—and I do not know that I would be alone in that—is another suggestion that "form" is in some ways an attempt to fix a variable. As Lee points out, "Defining literary genres, notoriously, can be a road to perdition" (7).

4 Certainly, there are writers now, such as members of "The Violet Quill," as well as in the past, who would desire such a designation. An easy example is Jean Genet, who "makes very clear . . . that he is addressing a middle-class, respectable, heterosexual male reader, whom he alternately cajoles and menaces, seduces and shocks, wins over and repels. This pierce-and-parry is the action of Genet's novels" (White, Introduction xii). Personally, though, I believe the most "subversive" gay book written will be the first in which the main character, male, lives a life of great universal drama and, by the way, goes home to sleep with a man. The positioning of "gay" as *not* automatically equal to "radical" will be most radical.

5 I realize that I am summing up this argument quickly, but it is not the basis of my preface and I do not want to spend much time explaining the different strains of thought that make up this basic either/or dichotomy. It is sufficient, I believe, to point out that in current practice, if any public gay figure suggests that safe sex is still a reasonably good idea or that sex clubs might pose health risks, he stands an almost certain chance of being
labeled in the gay press as a neo-con and anti-gay. My concern instead is what this argument displaces, namely an engaged discussion of the merits of gay fiction.

6 One reason to regret the separation policies I have described in certain bookstores and libraries is that for a closeted man to browse shelves labeled “gay fiction” or to walk into a room labeled likewise—all in order to find novels or stories that might help in the process of becoming open and honest—would be tantamount to the act of coming out itself. For this reason, patronizing gay bookstores is not always the same as a woman walking into a bookstore geared toward women or an African-American browsing the other side of that same shelving unit in Borders. Many gay people feel the need to pass as straight in some portion of their lives, which is an opportunity or curse, depending on your point of view. Passing is not, however, viable for most women, African-Americans, or members of any particular subset of society, except perhaps those separated by religion; nor are other minorities often told that their life is a choice. My point, then, is that different dynamics are at work and should be considered.

It is true, too, that rooms such as the one in the San Francisco Public Library are often funded by wealthy, out gay and lesbians supporters, who work to promote pride in the gay community. Again, though, I think this sort of separation resists the fact that the situation of individual gay people is remarkably varied.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


EAST, WEST, SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE

I remember where I came from.
There were burning buildings
and a fiery red sea.
I remember all my lovers.
I remember how they held me.
East, east—the edge of the world.
West, west—those who came before me.

- Laurie Anderson
"Same Time Tomorrow"
The Ugly One with The Jewels

I.

This night, all I’m searching for is my car, an object nicely tangible and presumably large enough to see. I’m ready to go. But I’m also giddy and buzzed, past the point of easy discernment. Plus, I’m pretending I can sing, wishing I had a voice. I’m stuck on old Cher songs: “Half-breed,” “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves.” My tongue won’t sit in my mouth.

The sky above is even, a just-washed towel with the nap all fluffed. The stars have gone into hiding. Summer muggy, the air is sprinkled with ragged blasts of discordant music from the nearby clubs on Cedar Springs, which is a street of establishments here in Dallas that cater to my ilk. Actually, that’s where I’ve spent the night, with my shirt off and my butt wiggling. I’ve had a grand, good, look-at-me time; I’ve been Mr. Man,
pumped up big and sweaty. But now, as the ferocious stench of dumpster trash settles with the alcohol in my gut, I fear the birth of this new week might be celebrated in an ugly, unnecessary way.

Truth be told, I do lack any sense of direction. I’m not even sure this is the right alley. It’s uneven with potholes, with gravel that shifts continually beneath my shoes. My car’s a well-used Beemer, a 12-year-old two-door that’s black with a tan interior. It’s spiffy enough, cherished, but seems to have disappeared.

To my left, a line of apartments slouches behind the dumpsters. On previous trips, in sober daylight, I’ve noted the families that live within. Always, babies perch on impossibly young mothers’ hips. Always, the men wear knee-length shorts and flip-flops, with bandanas wrapped around their heads. Their guts curved like ripened fruit, their skin a ready canvas for various tattoos. They’ve stared at me as I’ve parked my car and walked to the bookstore, the video store, the bars and clubs, but I’ve never seen them blink, never seen them react. When I’ve braved a hello, a wave, it’s always sailed right past them and remained uncaught.

This morning, on the porches, I see a few dark shapes and assume that these fine folks are swilling their own share of drink, enjoying as well this promise of a Sunday, and I find that I’m happy for them.

But it’s because I’m trying to watch them without being too obvious that I fail to see the three boys come up behind. And the bottle across my head is a total surprise. I’m disoriented, stumbling forward with my hands stretched, my fingers hunting for anything to grasp. After I fall, kicks land in my ribs, my face, and my stomach, right in my balls. I can see it all, but don’t really feel it, as if this is happening to someone else.
In response, without a thought, I roll into a ball, a lowest common denominator style of self preservation. What I feel on my face is blood. It washes across my eyes, into my mouth. And they yell. Three teenaged boys in “Cowboys” caps yell at me while they kick, telling me what I am. They develop a sort of rhythm with their legs and their lips. Their feet are encased in the latest Nikes, amazing, bulbous things. Their voices are raspy and forceful, filled with hatred of me and love of what they’re doing.

Patiently, I wait for their legs and mouths to grow weary, but they are determined and heated. The end arrives only when a stranger does, one who fights in my stead.

It’s over quickly then. As quickly as it had started. And afterwards, like an idiot, I say something about noble knights, and swords, even a word or two about fiery dragons.

But this man, my savior whose name I don’t yet know, looks to be entirely unimpressed. He stands in jeans and a plain white shirt, simple and solid, the t-shirt beneath even whiter. He looks to be the sort of man who should be in a lower-middle-class home happily rocking a crib, or out in the back yard stoking up a grill for some t-bones, but here he is in Queerville with a certain stance I can see. “Jesus,” he says. “Why’d you ever let them do that to you?”

It’s a good question, I think. I consider answering with “laziness,” “cowardice,” “drunkenness,” or all of them together, but even that doesn’t seem a perfect fit. The truth is that I have no idea why I do so much of what I do, or what I don’t. Perhaps the answer is that rolling into a ball simply proved easiest. Still on the ground, I say, “At least they were Cowboys fans. I love Troy. Don’t you love Troy?”

He tells me, in a rather disgusted tone, that I’ve had too much to drink and that he’ll take me to Parkland. But I know what I’m talking about. It’s impossible not to love Troy.
That Dudley Do-Right face. That fuck-me-senseless body. I explain to this guy each of Troy's many attributes, even my own personal theories regarding the meaning of Troy's last name and Troy's number, but this guy doesn't listen. He lifts me, steadies me. He tells me how much taller and bigger I am than him, as if he can't believe it.

"I'm not that drunk," I tell him, spitting. "I'm not blind." Actually, the world seems clearer than it did five minutes ago. Being kicked is apparently an excellent sobering technique, even though I hurt and find it painful to walk.

With difficulty, he helps me along. He says his pickup is just ahead. I think we pass my car on the way, but he doesn't understand what my gesturing means, and I quit moving my arm, needing it to squeeze against my side. I've gotten blood on this guy's white shirt, and as soon as I notice it, feelings of guilt start creeping around.

"There," he says. He's pointing at a red pickup, a Ford with "Johnston Painting" lettered on the side above a phone number and three wavy lines.

Inside, my ruined t-shirt works to wipe off most of the blood. Tenderly, I find that the cut on my skull has weakened to a seep and proves to be not so deep or so very long. I explain this patiently, but the guy says, "You a doctor?" and I answer, "No."

"You want the police?" he asks, and I answer the same.

He nods. "Kurt," he says. He means himself, and I say, "Mitch." I settle as best I can into the seat, both of my hands at work pressing against my head and my ribs.

A streetlamp shines into the cab, a spotlight of sorts, catching me here at my best. The floorboard is a mess of paraphernalia: brushes, paint sticks, can lids, screwdrivers, rags, tubes of something, a jug of clear liquid. It smells like new tires, all rubbery. My feet have barely enough room, and I try to hold them high, but, finally, I push them deep
into the detritus. Waiting, I watch Kurt’s hands on the steering wheel, perfectly placed at
ten and two. They’re tanned hands, thick through the palm and at the wrist, the veins atop
them a ropy proof of life. His nails are ragged, bitten but clean. On the side of one
knuckle, I make out a rough callous, and on the nearest thumb, a cut.

At the hospital we pull into Emergency parking, where Kurt gives me his shirt then
helps me inside. We’re almost alone. In fact, there’s no one around but a plump nurse
with a bun of hair so tight her face looks pulled. She sits under relentless lighting at a
counter that appears to have been submerged into the floor somehow, a mostly sunken
ship. The top is barnacled with charts that glimmer officially. She doesn’t move as Kurt
tells her what’s happened, and I decide she’d be smoking right now if policy allowed it.
Her voice is little-girl squeaky when she says, “Fill these out.”

Obediently, Kurt and I move just past the waiting room proper to a line of empty,
pre-formed plastic chairs against the wall. Before us is a bank of vending machines, none
of the choices looking particularly healthy considering the setting. I ignore the hospital
smells and do what I can with the forms, painfully fishing my insurance card from my
wallet, scribbling numbers and words. When I’m finished, Kurt gives it all back to the
nurse, and then he and I sit. We wait.

I take the opportunity to study this man beside me, this Kurt who took on a fight
for me. He sits in his t-shirt while I stain his button-down. He’s older than me. He has
dark hair and eyes, a subtly dimpled chin. He could use a shave, a plucking of the hairs
between his brows.

There’s something reserved and composed about his posture, yet I can tell he’s
nervously chewing the inside edge of his lower lip, looking straight ahead on purpose. His face is rather pointy. I think to goose him, just for the hell of it, but decide I should be nice. Besides, it would hurt to move, and his stepping into a moment that wasn’t his is a gesture more selfless than I’m accustomed to. It makes me wonder about motive and reason. “You save people often?” I ask.

“Sorry,” he answers, “about what I said back there. I know you didn’t want that to happen. I was just stunned, I think. You’re such a big guy, but you fell awful quick.”

“You save people often?” I ask again.

He grins. “Nope.”

“Rookie,” I tell him. “Amateur.” I use one finger to probe again at the mystery that’s the top of my head. My hair’s matted all down one side and the back, and I’m sure I look like Carrie at the prom. “And no grief about the comments, okay? You stop some little punks from kicking the shit out of me, you go ahead and say anything you want.”

He glances at me, this serious look pinching his face into something longer, thinner. “Just glad I was there,” he says.

“Maybe this is your calling,” I tell him.

He shrugs, looks away. “Actually, I was saved once.”

I wait for him to continue, gesturing impatiently, which hurts again, a stabbing in my side. But he stays quiet. I watch the clock, watch the nurse hand a clipboard of forms to a man who’s come in with a little boy. The man says something I can’t hear, then repeats it, the second time with a delivery forceful enough to make the cords in his neck rise clear. Whatever he says, it works. The nurse grabs the phone, speaks into it while standing, then points to the end of the hall. Instantly, the man scoops the boy into his arms
and takes off running, right past us. Kurt's head pivots with mine as we stare. "If you
loved me," I tease, "you'd get me in there that quickly."

"Okay," he says. He strides to the nurse, leans closer, and speaks. But before he
can finish, an Asian woman in mint-colored scrubs enters through the swinging doors and
calls my name. I wave at Kurt and follow her down another hall, behind a flimsy white
curtain.

There, she examines me, cleans, sutures, and bandages. She's fast and
perfunctory but nice enough. "You know you were lucky," she says.

"Really?" I try not to sound sarcastic.

"Sure," she replies. She gestures at me, a wave of her hand suggesting all the
space I take in this world. "You'll heal," she says. "You'll forget."

After I assure Kurt repeatedly that I'm able to drive, that a few stitches in your head
is an even better technique of sobering up than being kicked, he drops me off at my car,
which now, miraculously, is simple to find. I tell him thanks again, but he remains quiet.
The whole way back he acted like a man with too much to think about. He bobs his head,
gives a little wave, and hurries away. I assume I won't ever see him again.

On Fitzhugh, I stop at the 7-11 for some B.C. Powders, along with a Big Gulp Dr.
Pepper and some Hershey Bars with Almonds. These are the only worthwhile anti-
headache treatments I've ever found, better, I know, than anything I've just been
prescribed. The sky is blueing and the store is incredibly bright, everything chrome or red.
It's also surprisingly crowded, but still convenient as promised. The clerk eyes me
wearily, but doesn't ask. I'm sure he's seen worse.
In the parking lot, I swallow a couple of the powders, then drink and eat as quickly as I can. It works, makes me feel better, able to navigate the city streets. I drive down McKinney and sit at the stop signs until people honk. On Turtle Creek, I speed the car into its assigned spot underground, then wave at security, the guard in the lobby, and ride the elevator to the penthouse with my eyes closed. When the elevator opens, I move through the foyer and inside, locking the door as quietly as I can.

Everything before me casts large shadows, the furniture in the darkened room pointedly overblown. It’s all replaced annually, updated to the point of freaky obsession, but always sumptuous. This place is owned by a man named Howard Clenellan, and there are those who would say he owns me, too. But he’s really just a savior of another sort. He’s quite old, a world-class talent with the giving of promises, and the spender of vast amounts of inherited wealth.

I met Howard my second day on the sales floor at Neiman Marcus, where I still work. I sold him a Zegna shearling coat with horn buttons, a bit overpowering for him, but beautiful nonetheless. The next day, he returned with a heavy gold bracelet looped in a Tiffany’s box and, that night, he took me to dinner at The Mansion, and then home. Since then, our arrangement has never been verbalized; we’ve let it evolve into its own quirky little demon by itself. He swears he’ll fund a store of my own some day, the one thing I’ve always wanted, and in the meantime, I live with him, travel, accepted in a world quite different from anything I’ve known. In return, Howard wants my company, a reinforcing of the notion that I would be with him regardless of his promise or the life. I’m to be beautiful and not the one who leaves.

Prior to Howard, I lived paycheck to paycheck, and as a kid, a teenager, I watched
while my father juggled a checkbook like a hot stone, explaining that if I wanted a third pair of jeans, I’d have to dip into my 4-H money and buy something on my own, even though that was money for college, which I attended, but also for a future beyond that which I’ve never quite realized.

In the kitchen, I guzzle some water, feeling better, though still so stiff, and move into the dining room, where the Diebenkorn hangs. On all the walls of this house are moody canvasses with famous names painted in a bottom corner, a few of which I’ve chosen. This Diebenkorn is my favorite. Beguilingly simple in form, the colors are various greens and blues, the light seemingly trapped behind them, causing them to hover above the canvas somehow, to glow. Often, I put my tongue to it, but there’s no taste.

Down the hallway, I pass Howard’s room, a room that often scares me. I never know where to sit, what’s new, what’s old, how much certain swaths of fabric must have cost. At night, Howard curls in the middle of it like a swaddled babe. His bed is the size of most living rooms, which only reinforces the view of him as an infant: this huge bed, this small, hairless body. It’s a scene suggesting that our past is our future, and not one I often desire to face.

Tonight, as I slip by, he calls, “Mitchie?” and I whisper, “Night, Howard. I’m home. Go back to sleep.” I fear that he’ll call me inside and see me bandaged, imperfect, and be displeased. But then I hear benign snores and lead them to my room.

My space is not so grand, left alone during the annual redecorating because this is how I want it. My room contains a bed, a dresser, a chair, bins filled with shoes, and five rolling racks to hold all my clothes. The racks are separated by type of clothing, one for suit coats, sport coats, one for pants, another for short-sleeve shirts and knits, the next for long-sleeve shirts and knits, and the final for vests, coats, belts, and ties. Everything is on
a wooden hanger, the space between each something I think about, practicing for my store. These are my treasures.

The windows in here are floor to ceiling, and through them, I can see the jagged Dallas skyline, which isn’t particularly grand or expansive, but is lit up nicely at night. It’s companionable when I find I can’t sleep. Tonight, I move to the nearest and watch the blinking ball atop Reunion Tower, then trace the green outline of the Nations Bank building.

In the streets down there, I know there are few vehicles, nothing nice. Downtown after dark is left to the homeless, the troubled, angry, or drugged. Everyone uses the highway instead, eager to whip around the perimeter, leaving the buildings of world-famous architects useless at night. Rotten in the middle, Dallas strikes me as a city that tries too hard, ignores too much. But for the most part, I’m satisfied here.

Quickly, I tap the window, then position my thumb so that it rests atop the blinking ball in the distance. For the briefest of moments I imagine that I could topple such a building; all it would be is a flick of my finger. Just now, I’m imperious and in charge. I’m strong.

But in my bathroom, I wait to turn on the lights until I’ve stripped, my reflection a thing I can’t face. Part of it is the room’s fault.

I’ve begged to have this room redone, but Howard leaves it as is, amused with what he calls my “modesty.” Every surface in here, except for the commode, the tub, the sink, and the marble floor, is covered with mirrors. Even the ceiling projects myself back. Even the tiny roof that juts over the roll of toilet paper is reflective, joining in the fun.

So tonight, the darkness is necessary. I take off Kurt’s shirt and my ruined Miyake
pants. I peel boxers and socks. My hands run the length of my body, gingerly searching out spots I’ll return to incessantly, ready to feel the worst.

Finally, I flip the switch and think I’ve exploded, so many versions of me suddenly facing each other, all moving a hand from the light switch, all standing suddenly straighter, blinking at themselves as if they can’t believe what they see. Here is my body, the effort of so much work. Here’s wavy hair and wide-set eyes, flat feet and long, overtly knuckled hands. But none of it fits. These compass points, long familiar, fail to register because so much between them is wrong. An abrasion shows red on one clavicle. The wrap around my chest is white enough to blind. I glance at the ceiling, taking in the patch atop my head, and wonder how much hair was lost. A series of bruises bloom the length of my left leg, a whole bouquet covers the thigh of my right. My face is in worse shape than my pants.

When I find I can talk, I stay silent for a moment longer, just to feel the quiet as long as I can. But finally I speak. “Chicken,” I say. “You turkey.” I give all hundred of my selves our very best smile.

II.

Howard calls these little get-togethers “cocktails,” although they’re really just good, old-fashioned pissing contests. He and his friends meet once a week, usually on a Friday. They eat out or eat in, they drink and preen, all while lips and tongues are worked into innumerable shapes to gossip, to brag, to punch up the telling of woefully tired tales.

For the most part it’s harmless, old-man fun. And usually, I can join right in, the ingenue who becomes the glimmering, larger-than-life star of the whole damned show. But tonight I’m finding it tedious. I’m sick of everyone saying how “wretched” I look,
their pleasure in this not terribly well hidden.

We’re in the den now, having already eaten, already survived a squabble or two. Currently, this room is a testament to the Arts and Crafts movement, Stickley’d to within a breath of no longer being inhabitable. I sometimes mention the idea of comfort to Howard, suggest that a couch can be a thing you sink into, the arm of it plushly supporting your head as you sleep or read, perhaps even dream. But this is an idea he fails to grasp.

The previous incarnation, which I liked better, was austere, archly modern with Corbusier couches, Breuer and Rietveld chairs. Then, it was just as linearly unwelcoming as it is now, but at least that seemed to be the point.

I stare through the near wall, one solid pane of glass, and think that this might be why the fine citizens of Dallas have abandoned downtown as well. It’s this same desire for right angles, for hard, unyielding surfaces and finishes that reflect. It makes everything in the middle of our city cold and vertical, jutting up; it leaves no place to rest.

On one end of the couch, Brian Jentsen sits with his ample hip firm against the wooden, slatted side. George Everson rests up against the other. Former lovers who can’t part, even though they last touched meaningfully more than a decade ago, they’re the source of most ill will in the group. It’s directed, always, at each other, but spills perilously wide at times. I’ve seen them slap and cuss, seen them yell threats I wouldn’t even repeat.

The only reason they’re still together, I’ve decided, the actual glue of them, is habit, an addiction to anything known. They both own interior design showrooms at the Design Center, so they compete incessantly for clients, for kudos on their exquisite sense of taste and style, for Howard’s latest project. They make me wonder at times about my own
hesitations, my own fears, what I do simply because it’s grown comfortable.

Across from them, on an authenticated Morris chair, sits Wayne Gonzales, the owner of a gallery on Elm, a gift shop on Oak Lawn, and a chain of Tex-Mex restaurants throughout the Southwest. Wayne is 58, the youngest of Howard’s group. And on the other side of him is Caxton Hibbard III, the oldest. He’s my favorite of the men before me tonight.

Caxton’s 73, just older than Howard and almost as wealthy, the money from sources I’ve never quite gotten clear. But he’s harmless and humorous, able to interact with the world in a way that makes it, not him, seem nicely idiotic. He’s never learned to drive, never had to, and therefore hires a limo to cart him around. Often, he lowers a darkened window just enough to wave like some benighted Poobah, convinced he offers a glimmer of interest to the viewer’s day.

On the piano bench, I’m the only one without a drink and at least 20 feet from the action. The distance helps keep me uninvolved, makes my wounds not so noticeable. It’s been almost a week now, but my left eye’s still dark, the scrape along my jaw still red, and my lip still puffy. The stitches on the back of my head are just plain ugly.

By the fireplace, Howard rests on a settee and oversees. He’s in a pajama-like outfit tonight, which makes him appear even more childlike than usual. He looks freshly, vigorously scrubbed. Part of it is how short he is, but also the round, easy planes of his face suggest something not yet fully formed. From within that doughiness, though, his eyes blaze.

Lately, Howard hasn’t been feeling well. I watch his hands for any evidence of shaking, the first sign that he’s tiring. He refuses to see a doctor, calling them all thieves,
and so complains vaguely. "My back has spasms," he says. "My chest is heavy. My arms are someone else's." I react to these as I feel I should, with concern and gravity, but after a while, I find it hard to offer solace when he rejects professional help.

But, considering Howard's age, his body probably has become an enemy of sorts, something to consider separate from himself. Stay young, I tell myself, thinking that 90 minutes at the gym every morning is not so obsessive if it will keep me as healthy as possible, looking as good as I can.

At 26, it's probably insane to be considering my age, though Howard causes me to think about such a thing, as well as the topic of fathers and sons. In some ways, that's what he is to me, though admittedly an old and odd one. My own father is dead, dying when I was a senior in college and leaving me little beyond questions and debts, a sadness I can never quite locate, a few pictures of my mom I'd always coveted, and some gentle memories of a man who'd aimed high in small ways.

Only once did he say he was proud of me. This was the day I left for Texas A&M, the back of his old pickup I'd recently been given crammed with clothes, books, and too many stereo components, all of which I'd tied carefully flat.

That afternoon, when I came outside ready to depart, the weather had cooled and a breeze rifled the ferns my Aunt Peg kept alive along the edge of the drive, wanting us presentable. I clutched a crinkled sack filled with peanut butter sandwiches and green apples in one hand, my monogrammed key ring in the other, and watched Dad continue mowing the lawn. I waited. It was obvious that he saw me, but he continued chasing across even swaths of dry grass as if controlled by a timer.

Finally, when I waved, he made one awkward thrust of his hand to the side. I
assumed then that it was done, that our goodbyes had been said. I climbed in the pickup and pulled to the street, glancing in my rearview mirror. And in that small rectangle, for which I’m still thankful, I saw him again, but in an unknown way, his features rent with emotion. He kept one hand on the vibrating mower, the other wiping his face, and from a short distance I saw that my father cried.

I opened my door as he rushed toward me, hugging me up fast into the cut-grass smell of him, telling me all the things any son wants to hear: that he’s loved regardless. So much of myself I’d always secreted, deeming it necessary, a preemptive style of self-preservation. But in those few minutes, it was as if he knew me wholly, accepted flaws as easily as talents, the unspoken as well as the said.

“You make me proud,” he said.

I’ve told Howard this sweet story before, on nights when it’s only the two of us and the lamps are snuffed, the world outside lighting what it can. I’ve told him that my dad might not say the same thing now, were he alive, and Howard’s held me, explaining how lucky and how very sentimental I am.

His own father, he’s told me, was a coward. Benjamin Clenellan, Howard’s father, wanted to be an artist, thinking himself suited for something more lasting than his own father’s businesses, which included banking, small newspapers and radio stations, and a series of paper mills. Therefore, Benjamin turned his back on his inheritance, and in turn, his father turned his back on Benjamin. Howard became the benefactor of this generational rift. Old man Clenellan took Benjamin’s only son as his own, splitting the family for good, and trained Howard for the life he now leads. Lucky Howard. But it strikes me as a situation in which everyone lost.
Howard's grandfather became obsessed and doting. Benjamin became another failed creator, and Howard accepted the proceeds from the sale of his grandfather's empire too easily. The money has left him a man tempered unevenly by comfort and folly, searching for ever-more-difficult-to-discover amusements. It's left him soft in the wrong ways, rigid where he might sometimes wish to bend.

I've tried to comfort him in response to his story, too, of course. But what can I say? "You poor, little rich boy?" That's too trite, too easy, even for me.

Wayne, still in the Morris chair, is now rambling on about investments, and everyone's listening in. "We're instituting 401K plans instead of pensions at the restaurants," he says. "Nobody ever stays around long enough these days. The impermanence of the work force just slays me. When I was a boy, every man I knew worked his whole life in one place. You went to work and saw the same people and did your job. It was a family. But now, it's a year here, two years there." He shakes his head sadly. "It's contagious, too. I come back after a month and I don't recognize anyone."

Wayne's the member of the group who's come the farthest, financially. I know Howard has loaned him money over the years. I suspect that Caxton has done the same. They both seem to consider him a favored pupil of sorts and have used any influence they have on his behalf.

In the past, I've heard him tell a harrowing story of hitching to Dallas from Harlingen a decade before I was born, making that common gay male trek from country to city. He knew he was queer, he says, and knew his family hated him in a way more visceral than whatever love survived his being caught with the baseball coach. He was
beaten up once along his way up the state, cut up in the process across the chest and one arm. But he says it was his own fault, that he couldn’t keep his mouth shut or his hands still. “I’d already met what I wanted,” he’s explained.

In the past 11 years, he’s lost two of three lovers to AIDS. The cost of that is visible physically, in his eyes and the slumped manner of his walk when he thinks he’s not watched. But back when he arrived in Dallas, agog with the city, vigorous, and unaware of the future, I imagine he stood tall and stared hard. It wasn’t long before he met Howard and Caxton, wasn’t long before the two of them hooked him, netted him, and made him their own.

Often, I’ve wondered exactly what all went on between the three of them. There are nights my imagination’s made me jealous, made me wish I was older or they were younger, so that some semblance of balance might be achieved. But their record also offers hope that Howard will one day come through for me with that store he’s promised. Certainly, Wayne’s made smart use of whatever it is they’ve given.

“There’s just no sense of loyalty,” he continues.

“Well, in our line of business,” George says, motioning at himself and Brian.

But I interrupt before he can finish, not in the mood to hear about chintz wars tonight. “Hey, Caxton,” I say, “what do you think?”

He swivels to look at me, his lips puckered like a chicken’s butt. “Assuming I do think about it?” he asks.


He laughs. “I simply don’t have any words of wisdom I wish to proclaim. That’s
what happens when you get my age. You come to consider wisdom extremely rare and you hoard.” He picks at his bottom lip, which I noticed earlier was chapped. I’ve seen pictures of Caxton as a young man, my age and less. Unlike Howard, he was stunning.

He usually refuses, however, to speak about that time, about what it was like when he was my age. Though I try to find out because what I desire from him is a guide to whimsy, to that amused watchfulness of his. I figure money’s the biggest difference between us, that it’s the basis for his certain ease. But the same corollary doesn’t work for Howard, who has more money, less calm, so maybe I’m wrong. Maybe it’s a different kind of comfort that each of us needs.

Caxton continues to look at me, grinning, his latest set of dentures perfect in his mouth. “I hear you’ve fallen again,” he says. “Ready to leave Howard home all alone, you evil boy.”

I’d told Howard about Kurt the next morning, begrudgingly. He’d asked so many questions that I finally blurted everything out. I raised my shirt to show him my bruises, leaned forward to exhibit the stitches atop my head. I made the three teenagers sound older, certainly bigger, and unreasonably angry. I pouted like a pro.

But Howard, no surprise, fixated on my savior once he’d got past the shock of seeing me ruined. “Kurt’s a solid name,” he said. “Attractive?”

“No really. Nice, though. Sat with me at the hospital and hurried everything.”

“A good samaritan in a time of brutes. That’s so lucky for you.” The tone of his voice and the little “tsk” that followed made me doubt his sincerity, made me fail to reply.

Tonight, it warrants even less reaction that he’s relayed the details so readily to Caxton. They are often akin to gossipy teenagers, ears and mouths glued to the phone.

“Howard’s become bored with me anyway,” I say. “Poor little Mitchie.”
“Not true,” Howard says. He sips the last of his drink. “You, dear Mitch, are never boring, always worthwhile.” His words are delivered in a sing-songy fashion and I know he’s put Caxton up to opening this topic tonight. Howard wants to play.

I shrug, plunk a few notes on the piano. “Could’ve fooled me,” I say.

“It’s the mistreatment?” Howard asks. “This dungeon, the rags you wear?”

He wants to show off for his friends. I understand that. But he knows better than to bring up clothes because those are mine. I’ve never accepted even a pair of underwear from him. Not even one lone sock has transferred from his possession to mine. I stare until he remembers this, until he holds up one hand and almost bows. “The gruel you’re forced to eat,” he says, and we both know the line about rags has been erased, this new one offered in its stead.

“It is truly miserable,” I agree. “The duck tonight?” I clasp my elbows and shiver, making a face. “And this place.” I wave a hand dismissively. I’m offering Howard an opportunity to list what he does for me, all he’s supplied. I have my own version of a pension, after all.

“Gifts,” he reminds me, rolling his empty glass between his palms.

I hold up a hand, flexing a finger with each number I count. “One, two, three, oh, four weeks? Is that it? Months? The trip to London was in May.”

“You are shameless,” Brian says. He claps his diminutive hands, the nails buffed to an alarming gloss, and grins at George.

“And you’re annoying,” I reply. His is a cautionary tale, and I loathe the constant reminder of his physical presence. He’s prissy and fussy, a bearded roly-poly with beady little eyes. He wears enormous rings on two fingers and is always touching his thumb to
his tongue and then rubbing it along his ear. It’s tremendously creepy.

And though I’ll admit readily that I’m a small enough person to dislike him just for this, what delivers me to the land of hatred is that Brian lived with an older man for 16 years. It was only when the old guy died, and Brian inherited everything, that he was able to start his own business. As unlikely as I want this to be, he could be my future.

I smile at him and mime stabbing myself to show I was merely teasing. “You know I love you,” I tell him. “If it weren’t for George and Howard, it’d be you and me, Bri-Bri.” I croon a few off-key notes of “Always and Forever” before I decide I should stop and apologize for real.

Regardless, he huffs, then glances haughtily at the ceiling. George glares at me. After a struggle, Caxton give up and laughs. “Mitch,” he says. “You really are a wonderful ass.”

“I have a wonderful ass?”

“Both,” he says. “Of course, both.” He puckers his lips again and blows me a kiss. “Though you still haven’t given details on this new beau of yours,” he says. “It’s so impolite to make your elders beg.”

But I don’t want to talk about Kurt. Even though he left me at my car when I might have wanted to talk more, I believe he deserves better than a skewering by this group. I turn to face the keys of the piano and jab out a quick rendition of “Chopsticks,” the only song I know. Then a slow version, the repetitive notes hopefully expressing my displeasure. I keep my face turned toward the glass wall and its view of downtown, those glowing, empty buildings that seem such a waste at this time of night. Minding their silence, I know I’ve already taken part in this evening’s festivities when I should have
stayed quiet. The blame is partly mine.

Howard clears his throats, and when I glance at him, he nods expectantly. I feel like a pup, like I should wag my tail and pee cutely on the paper.

"His name is Kurt," I drone. "He stopped some thugs who failed to find me charming."

"And?" Caxton inquires. He's enjoying this entirely too much. Even from a distance I can see that his eyes have crinkled into slits of gleeful amusement. You're supposed to be on my side, I want to say.

"And nothing," I reply. "I'll never see him again. At the end of it, he drove off into the night without a thought or a glance. He's a modern-day Shane," I say, then twist and pounce on the piano keys again, crashing as loudly as I can. Caxton and Howard both say something, but I can't hear them. I am, in many ways, such a child. But I don't stop until Wayne sits beside me on the bench, his thigh right up against mine. He stares closely at my face and frowns.

Wayne has amazing forearms. They're ridged with tendons, topped with curly, dark hair, and the scar from his past only adds to my attraction. "Blow it off," he whispers and takes to the piano. Immediately, I remove my hands as he works through a difficult piece I can't name.

Except for our nearly silent workouts at the gym, Wayne shunts little attention my way. I overheard him refer to me once as "Howard's overbaked trifle." At that moment, I thought it was a wonderful bit of wit to come from him. But over time, I've come to think he owes me for that label, for the way it's stuck so resolutely in my brain. Even though his support tonight will be remembered in the future, it leaves him still in the red with me.
After another song, he says, “You like this Kurt guy.” And when I nod in spite of myself, he adds, “Well, good for you.”

Once everyone’s left, I carry their drink glasses to the kitchen and line them perfectly on the tile counter. In the morning, Luisa will take care of my shoes under the piano and the dirty dishes. She works only half a day on Saturday, but she’ll find time to vacuum the whole place, and straighten, and cluck at us. She’s worked for Howard for almost a dozen years.

Above the sink she’s hung a clear, oblong cube with Christ on the cross embedded within it. It twists in the air when the window is open, and is about as out of place in this house as anything could be. Howard teases her about what he calls “such obvious symbolism.” He claims this Jesus of hers is criminally hunky, begging for a tumble. He says he can’t imagine that marred lucite is exactly the substance in which the son of God would choose to be encased.

But Luisa pays him scant attention when he launches on this subject. She continues on her day, offering, when he finishes, a sarcastically delivered, “I’ll pray for you, Mr. Howard.”

The first month or so that I lived here, I accompanied her to Sunday mornings at Our Lady of Guadalupe. I went because she asked and because I wanted an ally in the house. Quickly, it became too much.

She would pick me up in her old Nova at 8:15, then drive us downtown to the church, a huge bunker of a place with extravagance writ large inside. There, we joined the roll call of her family: sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, cousins, her mother and one lone
grandfather, who scuttled about surprisingly well with his cane. Luisa was the only member of this troupe without a spouse or children, and was also the obvious favorite. To me, they were all incredibly nice; even the children treated me with respect.

But regardless of the new sensation of kneeling, standing, kneeling, sitting, and of listening to foreign languages from Luisa’s family and the priests, it reminded me too much of Aunt Bess and Aunt Sal taking me to the First Lutheran when I was a boy. They’d taken over parts of my life after their sister, my mother, died horribly when I was four, and blamed my dad for not seeing to such a thing as my relationship with the Lord.

Both my aunts were decent women, in the best meaning of that term. They were women who vacillated rarely, giving thought to an action before they took it. They were ample, jovial women who were sincere in what they said and what they believed. These days, I assume they steer through life using much the same methods, but since we haven’t spoken in several years, that’s only a guess. Unfortunately, at a certain point, I learned it was easier to remove myself than it was to remain in their presence after I’d admitted being someone they couldn’t abide and couldn’t believe. I do miss them.

About the whole baptismal idea, finally faced when I turned 13, my dad was noncommittal until the evening before the ceremony, when he sat the two of us down at our chrome-legged kitchen table. For the next hour or so, he tossed questions into the air, clay pigeons I could neither aim for nor shoot.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, not in a way that suggested disagreement, but rather that to articulate my reasons was a good and necessary task to be given. He asked also, “What is God to you?” and, “How will this change your life?” and, “Do you think I’m wrong for not attending church myself?” To each, I mumbled disjointed, surely
nonsensical answers while prickly heat rushed my cheeks and ringed my ears.

Such poor responses caused Dad to frown and study me intently, but the next morning, after I slipped on my new suit and knotted my tie myself, he climbed into the car before me. At the First Lutheran, we met up with Aunt Bess and Aunt Sal, then followed them inside. And when the pastor sprinkled water on my head, I blinked uncontrollably. I did all this because rather than disappoint my aunts, it seemed easier to disappoint myself and presumably God.

Tonight, I feel much the same way as I make my way to Howard’s bedroom. It’s time for my weekly performance, which I premiered on the night he brought me home. When he first set up the scenario, his voice careful and his manner deferent, I was mighty glad I’d imbibed at dinner that evening. Now, though, it’s rote.

First, I remove an old chair from Howard’s closet. The chair is wooden and, except for this weekly outing, it sits half-covered beneath the line of Howard’s suits. The joints of it are rickety and the finish marred. It’s the only thing Howard has left of his father’s. Second, I remove three silk cords from Howard’s sock drawer and tie him with two of these at the wrists and the ankles, the braided softness pliant against his skin. The final cord goes around Howard’s waist, trapping him to the chair. He’s fully dressed at this point, as he is throughout. Third, I remove my own clothes, then masturbate for an exceedingly long time, for what sometimes feels like forever. I’m careful never to touch Howard during this part, or to speak. There’s not a sound in the room but our breathing.

Howard prefers that I rotate a quarter turn about every half-minute or so, giving him a view of all sides. He likes that I alternate hands, keeping the other always busy, rubbing my chest, my ass, my face. In the beginning he gave suggestions, but now I
know exactly what he wants: a sense of constant motion, thrusting and stretching, the hitting of poses that never seem posed.

Through it all, he rarely blinks or nods, rarely reacts in any way. And at the end, his only response is a quiet, dignified, “Thank you.”

But tonight, when I walk in prepared to do my part, Howard is curled beneath the covers on his bed, with half-glasses propped atop his nose. He’s reading. “In your condition?” he asks, then shakes his head. “Not likely.”

And just that easily, I’m dismissed.

III.

I’m at work, at Neiman Marcus, watching a man fall in love with a shirt. I’ve seen this before; it’s part of the job. But it’s more difficult to see today since I’m still walking around with my face to the floor.

Honestly, I’m half-convinced my eye will never heal. It’s no longer puffy, but it has become a lovely combination of several chromatic hues. I tell you it’s embarrassing when every customer asks for an explanation, a story. I’m not sure how many more times I can lie about running into a cabinet door, leaving any other bruises unexplained.

At this point, I’ve already worked at Neiman’s a year longer than I planned. My original estimate was a reasonable two years, that time to be spent on learning the market, meeting the clientele, and then moving on to whichever boutique I’d deemed most worthy. Another two years there, and I planned to be managing, ready to find a financial backer.

So much for plans.

Still, I met Howard. And I continue to appreciate the insulated nuttiness of where I
work because at its heart, Neiman's is a myriad of desires waiting behind easy grins, shellacked composure, and practiced sheen. On the surface, my job requires little, merely the ability to remain engaging for eight hours in a small room, to animate a piece of cloth and offer well-timed assurance. I finger a shirt or pant or jacket, talking about construction and style, about a particular designer's notions for the season. I entertain, I smile, I laugh. I'm an example of the look such clothes can give.

But what I'm really doing is convincing whoever stands before me that this ridiculously expensive item of clothing is necessary to a life. And an insane price can actually help.

If a man holds up a Versace shirt and says, "Price?" I don't say "Two thousand." Instead, I simplify. I say, "Two." Some men become fidgety and say, "Dollars? Hundred? Thousand? Jesus." They duck like they've been hit and limp from the room. Other men, the ones who cause me to have a paycheck, become certain. "No problem," they say, with a quick stare to back up their words. They hand me a credit card, smugly. I've decided that it all comes down to worthiness, what a man thinks, or at least pretends, that he deserves.

So the man before me now is not so unusual. Like other men before him, he's seen a thing completely unlike anything he has, or has ever had in his life before, and he covets it. It's an irrational desire, but true and heartfelt all the same. A shirt or pant or jacket might represent a new position in life, or symbolize a more fit, virile past, or any number of things. For this man, a Mr. Anton Kepler, the Versace shirt of his dreams seems to encapsulate all the things he's never allowed himself to have. It's the answer to a lifetime of denial.

Obligingly, I unhook the shirt from the locks and show him to the fitting rooms.
I'd like to feel that I'm leading a groom to the honeymoon suite, but I can't because this bride, this shirt, is not for him. It's silk, a brilliant gold on a black ground, the pattern a complicated series of medallion rosettes with a Greek key border. It's not a subtle shirt. And for that reason, it requires a wearer just as obvious to fill it, one of those guys I see at the gym every morning at six. Otherwise, it tends to overwhelm and look cheap, which is exactly how it looks on Mr. Kepler.

He is short, 50-ish, with wire-rimmed glasses and little hair. He's not a Versace kind of guy. But as he twists before the mirror, sucking in his gut and squaring himself, I can see that he's in love.

Still, he takes it off and hands it back to me, saying that he'll think about it. "$2,400," he says. "Whew. Shouldn't be legal."

I agree with him and mention Armani, thinking that understated texture might be just the thing for Mr. Kepler. On Armani, he can spend enough money to feel naughty, but not so much that he wakes in the middle of the night, covered with sweat, asking of his demons, "What have I done?" Also, he can continue to look like himself.

But he tells me, "Oh, no. I've found the one. I know it." He takes a breath and winks at me. "But not today," he says. "Have to ease in on this one. Ease it on in." He makes a gesture with both hands, sliding them through the air like a little kid pretending they're planes. He reaches up to touch my shoulder.

After he leaves, I return to my desk and dive back into the pile of thank you notes, churning them out because I'm behind. "Dear ______, It was a pleasure to be of help with the ______. It's perfect for you; a wise choice. Thanks for the patronage. Hope to see you again real soon." There are variations on that, but I've learned that the thought of such a
thing is more important than the actual words. And people do love them.

They call sometimes and thank me for the thank you. It makes me assume that we’re not a very nice people if a minute of my time can spur someone who’s already given me money to pick up the phone. But I’m thankful for their thank you to my thank you. Most of my business comes from a set clientele.

I do okay here, money wise. Better than most. Judy over in Polo makes a bit more, but no one else. Geoff, the other guy in Designer, works for the discount. Today, he’s off, doing whatever it is straight boys who date models do on their day off. Across the hall, I can see Kate dancing around the floor while Judy straightens knits. Kate’s elfin and eerie; she’s worked here only a few weeks. But Judy is an institution. She’s probably 20 years older than any of the rest of us and looks a bit weathered for her years, but is still a striking woman. She’s tall with big, blonde, Dallas hair. She mothers us all; we let her.

I finish a few more notes, spot Judy again, now re-sizing the belt rack, then see that someone has entered the room. I stand and realize it’s Kurt. It’s been a couple of weeks since we met, but certainly I’ve thought about him enough, playing the scenes in the alley and the hospital, trying to figure out everything I said and did that could be considered wrong. So far, I’ve surmised, bright man that I am, that I should’ve fought back and then refrained from being such a wise-ass. But that would’ve required a different kind of Mitch, one I can’t ever seem to be. Besides, I can’t figure out why he’s stuck in my head as he has, why I’m absolutely thrilled now to see him.

Today, he’s wears khakis and another white shirt, both paint-splattered, as are his tennis shoes and the backs of his beautiful hands. He ignores me, even though I remain standing and it’s not a big room we’re in. He fingers a pair of slacks.
For a moment, I consider thanking him again, maybe even handing him a note.

"Dear Kurt," it might say. "It was a pleasure to be saved. Thanks for making the angry teenagers stop. Glad to see you again so soon." Instead, I say, "Looking for anything special?"

He nods and exhales slowly, then tells me there’s a party tonight, where everyone will dress nicely. "I never dress up," he says. "Not unless I have to."

I’m amused by this, and curious as to how long it will be before either of us mentions the blip of a past we have, or if we will, and why we wouldn’t. It still seems as if I should bring it up, being the one who’s beholden and all, but I haven’t a clue what to say. Quiet, I find the only three already-hemmed, decent-looking pants we have in stock in his size, grab a few shirts that will suit his dark coloring, and hurry him to the fitting rooms.

There, he leaves the door open, undressing before me while he explains that he paints houses. "Interiors mostly," he says. He ducks his head, but remains facing me. It’s obvious he’s nervous, embarrassed, forcing himself through something I can’t quite guess. A bright, crimson blotch has surfaced on each of his cheeks, turning him suddenly, preciously boyish.

Since it’s not my goal to cause him discomfort, I step back, but not so far that I can’t still watch. I’m human, after all. His briefs turn out to be baggy, the elastic weak, the type bought in a pack of six. His socks are of the old man variety, solid, dark, and ribbed. I haven’t seen such a distinct farmer’s tan since I was a boy—all skin other than his face, neck, and arms, especially on his thighs and stomach, is pale enough for the smallest of veins to show. It’s not a beautiful body I see, but his posture and the proud jut
of his sternum are compelling testimony to the way he leads his life, his actions on the
night I met him maybe not so far beyond his usual grasp.

He tries on only one set of clothes, then steps in front of the mirror without looking
closely and says, “It’s fine, this is fine.” He returns to his own paint-spattered pants
visibly relieved, his fingers working the button fly about as fast as I’ve ever seen it done.

At the register, he opens his mouth upon hearing the total but doesn’t speak. He
slides his jaw to the left and clears his throat. “Cash?” he asks.

“Rare, but we still take it.” I watch as he pulls a nylon wallet from his hip pocket
and counts out four hundred-dollar bills.

He hands them over and says, “You look okay now. Better.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I think I look like shit.” I lean over and show him the curved
mark, lumpish and firm, that remains on the crown of my head. He touches it gently, his
fingertips warm on my scalp.

When I straighten, he says, “This party,” and tells me I can join him if I want. “I
can bring a guest. It’s just a couple I did some painting for. But they’re nice and all. It
could be fun.” He halts this quick rush of words and breathes, scratching his arm. “You
don’t have to,” he says.

But I want to, instantly, because even though it’s not the most romantic of
invitations, it strikes me as something better, something heartfelt. As the register spits out
his receipts, we both watch it, and I’m suddenly more shy and anxious than he is. What I
can’t get past is that he acts as if I could hurt him, as if I could please him, as if the choice
is mine. I watch him glance anywhere but my face and realize that my skin is tingling, that
my chest has clenched. Men approach me all the time, and this is a strange, humbling
response for me to have, yet welcome somehow, a touch more pleasant than the novelty of it would suggest. How long, I wonder, has it been since an answer of mine about myself has been meaningful or had an audience that waits expectantly?

I tell him yes. And for the rest of the day, I’m addled, showing the wrong clothes to the right clients, pulling incorrect sizes, bad colors, and finally misplacing my fitting room key. Judy asks at one point just what in the hell is wrong with me, but I can’t seem to explain that I feel less myself somehow, that it feels just fine.

I describe Kurt until she remembers seeing him, until she says, “Not really your type. Is he?” She covers her heart with a ring-laden hand.

She’s right of course, and I can only shrug.

I think I’ve been in love once and only once, which is a topic my reaction to this Kurt guy makes me consider as I wait for him to pick me up tonight for this party of his. It was back in college, at Texas A&M, where I began my studies in Poultry Science, the years of 4-H stock shows exerting some control over my life. Actually, had I stuck with it, I’d be an Avian Pathologists, a man who sits in a lab and looks at the blood of birds. I’d be rich and respected.

But after my first year there, I met Marie. She was an English major, and so I became one too, losing my Houston Livestock Show scholarship in the process, having to find another job selling clothes. At the time I knew her, Marie was just over five foot tall and weighed 96 pounds, with the blackest of hair, often tangled, and pale washed-out skin. She walked with her head and shoulders thrust forward, a Lilliputian battering ram who ran and swam obsessively, keeping her body as rock-hard as her stares could be. To my
surprise, she convinced me to work out with her, teaching me the comfort of having at least one part of the day to count on.

Once, I found a blood-stained toothbrush in her bathroom cabinet, and when she told me it was to help with throwing up and patted her concave tummy, I was impressed, as much with her lack of shame as with her knowledge of me so complete that she knew how I’d react.

“What?” she asked. “You want to brush your teeth with it now?” She chased me around her apartment, jabbing the toothbrush in my hair, my mouth, down my pants. She let me watch her use it when I asked if I could, let me hold her afterwards and wipe her face with a damp cloth.

So, looking back, it’s easy for me to see how and why I so readily succumbed, why Marie was the only woman I’ve ever wanted to touch. She drew me in fearlessly, wrapping the good and bad of her in a single present that I had to unwrap.

For most of our time together, a period of almost three years, we were a single creature with two fronts, seeing of the world what the other couldn’t, watching for danger, thrills, anything in between. The university was the reason for much of our bond. An intensely conservative place, where the Corps of Cadets stalked the campus—the senior members in their riding boots, with their sabers—it seemed to us that we were two against 36,000, the only crazy ones there. We fucked on the 50-yard line of Kyle Field, on the university symbol in the floor of the Academic Building. We refused to attend vaunted football games, refused to stand if we did. We showed up to class stoned or drunk and eked our way through. Always, we assured each other that no one understood us, that we were special, and, if only to ourselves, we were.
Unfortunately, the beginning of the end took place during the summer before our senior year. We’d both enrolled in classes, not wanting to go home, me to Luling, her to Mineral Wells. One afternoon, unaware, I walked her to The Onion, our favorite burger joint, which sat across the street from the campus.

It was packed and noisome, the type of place where you topped your own burgers, making them as messy and as thick as you wanted. Pleased with cutting Economics, Marie and I spooned our usual sour cream and chili atop the patties of meat, then took the booth in the back corner. There, we could watch everyone and make fun.

We argued over a mutual project due two days later for a computer class, and then Marie said, “We have to talk.”

I looked up and wiped the grease from my chin. She hadn’t picked at her food yet. She hadn’t torn the bun into half-inch chunks, hadn’t chopped up the meat with her fork, hadn’t even cut a bean in half and chewed that half slowly, or pushed the sour cream off to one side. She looked completely serious. “Am I gonna like this?” I asked.

“Doubtful,” she said.

I returned my burger to its basket and pushed back, the vinyl cushion squeaking as I shifted. I’d had a cold for almost a week and I sniffed, blowing my nose into a napkin. I was scared. Marie angry, Marie too serious, was not a pretty thing. Finally, I braced my hands on the table edge and leaned forward, grimacing, making a show of it. “Okay,” I said. “Hit me. Let me have it.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, God.” I blinked, a small shudder twitching my chest.

Immediately, I was scared, thrilled, those two emotions battling it out until I
decided it was a draw. I was picturing a baby, our baby. "Marie," I said.

Back home, growing up, I'd spent much of my time alone, making friends easily enough, but never ones so close that I could say anything I wanted, do anything I wanted, be anything I wanted. I'd had girlfriends, but never slept with them. I'd found men, or been found by men, but they couldn't be friends, couldn't even be known.

I scooted from the booth and hurried to sit beside her, to take her hand in mine. But she jerked it free and shoved it beneath her thigh. She pushed at me with her shoulder.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Have you been to a doctor?"

"Yes, Mitch. I'm not stupid." She pointed across the table and wouldn't speak again until I moved back, until I was facing her. "It'll be gone on Tuesday," she said. "I just thought you should know. Don't make me regret the decision to tell you, okay?"

"What?" I asked. "What are you talking about?" But I knew.

The burgers between us looked suddenly grotesque, bloody and greasy, mauled little bits. I pushed both baskets to the table's edge, then wiped my hands on my jeans, realizing that against all sorts of impossible odds, I could have a family and do all the things expected of me, of everyone. I, Mitchell Ray Zeller, could surprise the world by doing what we all supposedly wanted to do. But this chance was being offered and taken away simultaneously.

"You've made an appointment?" I asked

She nodded, pulling her food back in front of her and eating.

"But we're perfect," I told her. "You know that. I love you with all my heart."

"Don't be an ass," Marie said. "Me with a kid? You?" She pointed across the room, then reached and turned my head. Along with a group of the more fashionable set, a
guy named Steven from our Fall Communications class had just entered the restaurant, laughing. He was tanned, blond, and hairy, with the thickest wrists I'd ever seen. "You'd do him if he let you," she said. "You know that," she mimicked.

“Yes, but I love you,” I said. I knew how whiny, how ridiculous I sounded. Marie knew everything there was to know about me. Still, I reminded her of things we'd done, things she'd said, how meeting had changed our lives. But, like now, I wasn't the type to try and convince people about anything important and it was a poor attempt I made. I couldn't get the words out, couldn't connect ideas like I wanted. I pushed her hair from her face and held it, watching her fidget. After a while, she pulled free, got up and left. Sadly, I knew better than to follow.

A week later, she called and simply said, “It’s gone.” The next semester, we were friendly, but the change was insurmountable, as if what the doctor had removed was the perfect ease we’d created. By graduation, we were happy to pack up and move, to get away. After that, we phoned once or twice, and then we were nothing.

So this is what I'm thinking about as Kurt pulls up in his pickup for our first date, thinking about Marie, and finite love, and being who you are, the limits of that. I've been waiting out front for twenty minutes to be certain he doesn't come inside.

As he rolls to a stop, I wave and step forward, past the fountain and the stately beds of flowers, past the sculptural archway that leads to the doors. When I climb in the pickup, he says, “You live here? Damn.” He peers upward through the window, his face scrunched though his eyes are wide. The floor of the pickup is empty of paint supplies now, the whole cabin spotless.

“An old friend of the family rents me a room,” I lie, and do so easily.
The party turns out to be a dinner, six of us over pasta in the small dining room of a fashionable bungalow on Monticello Boulevard. This section of Dallas, just northeast of downtown, is an odd mix of small, pricey homes, much petty crime, and residents who spend a great deal of their time hating Central Expressway, the city’s main north/south freeway that’s always being torn up and expanded.

As we take our seats, the hostess, Heather, points in the highway’s direction and groans. “Can you believe that?” she says. “It’s like the city doesn’t even want us anymore.” She asks if we were caught up in the mess, and we tell her we came the long way around, which is quicker.

It’s easy to see that Heather’s much like her home and her husband Bob, both unshowy and sincere. They look to be in their mid-thirties, while the other couple, Walter and Susan, are possibly a few years older. Bob and Walter have a typesetting company.

The house is decorated eclectically, and I like it. Solid-looking antiques are mixed with overstuffed couches and chairs. The dining room table is claw-footed, the artwork in this room all the framed handiwork of Heather’s little girl from a previous marriage, who has gone to the babysitter’s so the adults can have a night. The walls in several rooms are shown to me as examples of Kurt’s handiwork. Behind the bed, the wall is a dusky gray.

In the living room, it’s dark rose, and in this room, the pale paint appears thicker and textured, as if it’s been troweled on, the wall fancier than what I picture as the work of your basic house painter. It gathers the light somehow and reminds me of Howard’s Diebenkorn.

“Kurt’s a genius,” Heather says, as we all take our seats. She glances away from my bruised eye when I catch her staring. “And we’re very glad he brought you along
tonight," she continues. "Finally, we get to meet you."

I thank her, but wonder how much Kurt has said to cause the use of that "finally."

I place my napkin in my lap and think that I shouldn’t analyze, and that, all in all, even though this isn’t my sort of crowd, they are gracious, quick-witted, and I’m comfortable enough to ignore that Kurt’s misjudged the evening’s attire. They all wear some variation of cotton twills and nice shirts, so Kurt’s a tad overdressed and I’m decidedly so. I bite into my salad and listen to them talk. Apparently, a client of Bob’s and Walter’s was displeased with the service he received today.

"In the long run, it’s not so funny," Bob says.

"But damn, the look on Skinner’s face," Walter adds. "He looked like a blister, ready to pop." Walter’s a strong-looking, beefy guy, stretching the front of his short-sleeved knit and showing early signs of hair loss. A pinched smile suggests his mouth’s too small.

From the opposite side of the table, he wags a loaded fork at Kurt. "You ever piss off a client because it’s worth more than the money?" he asks. He looks at me. "You?"

Kurt says he hasn’t, that he wouldn’t, but I have stories. "Sure," I say. "Once I had a woman who bought a shirt and a pair of pants for her husband. She wanted them wrapped, immediately, but when she saw that the packages weren’t labeled—you know, which was the shirt, which was the pants—she threw them at me. Hit me in the head."

"No," Susan says. "But that’s rude." She’s trying to lose weight and the salad in front of her is larger than the rest of ours because it’s her entire meal.

"So what’d you do?" Bob asks.

"Told her I’d have them re-wrapped, labeled, and that I’d bring them to her office
during my lunch. The fact that they were labeled wrongly, well . . .” I shrugged.

“What’s a boy to do?”

“Good man!” Walter says.

“But I found out later they were in the midst of a divorce and she was trying to get back together,” I tell him. “So I felt like an ass. But it’s not always like that. Most people are okay. Last Christmas, this woman kept on telling me how short her brother was. Every sweater I showed her, nope, too long. Finally, I said, ‘Well, how short are we talking about here? Yoda short? Ross Perot short?’ She laughs and says, ‘Ross Perot short. That’s exactly right.’” I stop, take a sip of wine, which is quite good. “Of course it was Ross Perot’s sister,” I say.

Heather claps. Everyone laughs.

“But she was wonderful,” I say. “Didn’t even tell me. Just handed me her credit card after she’d decided on a bunch of stuff, probably thirty minutes or so, and yelled out, ‘Gotcha!’ when I saw her name.”

Kurt looks at me, grinning. I’ve pleased him, it seems.

We all dig back into our food then as Perot’s political ambitions are skewered and Bob explains the nature of their problems with this Skinner guy today. Walter inserts sarcasm whenever he can, Bob shushing him.

Heather rolls her eyes at me, tilting her head toward Walter, then disappears into the kitchen. When she returns, she has more bread and a plastic container of grated Parmesan, which she passes around. “Forgot that,” she says. “Sorry.” She refills her husband’s wine glass before sitting back down.

Bob’s skinny, built a lot like Kurt, but with a ruddy complexion and auburn hair.
He downs half the glass and smacks his lips. Walter watches him and then holds up his empty glass until Sarah taps her knife once on the edge of her plate. Instantly, he raises one hand in surrender. “Yes, boss,” he tells her. “Anything you say, boss.” He looks at Kurt and me. “Be glad you... gays can’t marry,” he says.

“Walter.” It’s all three of them, simultaneously. Their exchanged looks suggest that the saying of his name in this tone is not so uncommon.

“I’ve been on best behavior,” he whines. “Leave me alone.”

Kurt glances at me, hooks an eyebrow. He’s been watching me eat, as I’ve been watching him. It’s worthwhile to see how people ingest their food; it tells what kind of appetite they might have for other endeavors. I position a bite of salad and pasta on my fork at the same time, then works a piece of bread in my mouth along with it. I’m methodical about this, determined.

But Kurt just eats, as if acknowledging that it will all be mixed up inside anyway. He acts as if food’s a too easy type of enjoyment to make into a struggle.

The pasta has salmon in it, with a cream sauce and a sharp, lemony flavor that’s tasty good. I compliment Heather and explain to her that I’m a lousy cook. But she offers the recipe, says it’s simple and that I can cook it up for Kurt. She’s been studying us closely, and I’ve decided that Kurt’s mistaken statements back at the store didn’t stop with clothing. It’s obvious that Heather and Bob aren’t just appreciative clients for whom he painted some walls. He’s comfortable enough to remain quiet in their presence, even with Walter mucking about, and glances from me to Heather entirely too often.

The rest of the meal proceeds smoothly, quickly, all of us hearty eaters digging in. After dessert we have fresh fruit in a chocolate and caramel sauce, then move into the living
Conversation centers to a large degree on what other improvements Bob and Heather would like to make to their home, another room possibly or a classier style of roof. Their excitement in this, the way they describe each new possibility with their hands, makes me think about having a home like this myself. At some level, it doesn’t seem possible, seems too permanent and unlike anything I might ever have, need, or want. This saddens me for a second, which shocks me. Obviously, all this middle-American hearth-and-home stuff is affecting me adversely tonight. It’s just so different from what I’m used to with Howard and the gang.

Still, I listen impressed as Kurt offers names of workers, detailed suggestions, impressively knowledgeable about an array of topics. He and Bob are discussing grouts, tub models, two Joes talking guy stuff.

It occurs to me that I should add something, but I can’t think of a thing. So I’m pleased when Heather moves beside me on the couch to talk. “How bored are you?” she asks.

“Fascinated,” I say. “Intrigued, mesmerized, struck dumb.” I list every synonym I can think of while she laughs, wagging a finger like I’m a bad boy. She has amazingly green eyes and a sense of the platonic seduction about her. It’s clear she wants us to bond.

“You’re wonderful,” she says. “Just like Kurt described. So stoic even though that eye must hurt. I think what happened is horrible, by the way. There’s just so much evil in the world. But I bet you’re glad Kurt followed you that night.” She smiles at me, at Kurt, then stiffens.

When I look at Kurt, I understand why. His face is not a happy one, his eyes slit,
his mouth wide open. He glances at me, then stares at the floor, a reaction I'm beginning
to realize is sadly habitual.

"Followed me?" I say, realizing at last just how much more everyone here knows
than I do. "Well, I guess I am glad of that. It's romantic, isn't it? Almost like something
from a movie of the week. I think that guy, that Mark-Paul Something from "Saved By
The Bell" should play me. And we've got to get Tori involved." I'm on the same
unflappable auto-pilot that works so well at work. "There's always room for a soap star or
two."

But it's as if the evening's been ruined. One thread's been pulled in a nice-enough
tapestry, and now that's all anyone can see. Heather excuses herself, Walter drinks her
wine, Bob picks up the TV Guide, Susan says she's hungry, and Kurt follows Heather to
the kitchen. In no time, he returns, thanks Bob, promises to get back to Walter and Susan
with an estimate, and then we are gone.

Outside, we pile into the pickup. Kurt won't look at me, won't quit scratching his
neck or rubbing his left arm. The man's become a showcase of tics. He revs the engine
and pulls out quickly, but at Mockingbird, he makes the mistake of turning left.
Immediately we're caught up in the Central Expressway construction zone. Cars line up
around us, and we're trapped.

The night's become sticky again, the usual Dallas sauna that requires Kurt to flip on
the air conditioner and twist the knob to High. Around us, people sit in their movable
boxes. Everyone I can see is singing, or talking on the phone, or staring into space.
We've all become so used to this sort of enforced inaction that we don't act all that annoyed
anymore. Instead, we sit in the glow of dash lights like my show birds used to sit in their
cages, proving that we’ve accepted the lack of any other choice and done so readily. It seems a part of the fine meal I just had, of the nice people in their nice home, as if comfortable and complacent have become exactly the same things.

“That was nice,” I say when I can’t stand the silence anymore. “The dinner. They seem like really nice people.”

Kurt nods, checks his rearview mirror, then the one on the side. I want to point out that we’re not moving, that it’s unlikely anyone’s going to zoom up behind us, but he twists his hands on the steering wheel until they squeak. “Look,” he says. “I’m really sorry about that. I don’t follow you around, I promise. I’m not some idiot nut case. I just saw you leave Village Station and went in a similar direction.”

“That’s what I figured,” I say. “No big deal.” But I can’t resist. This is too easy, too much fun. I’m still trying to get the evening back to some easy semblance of what it was. “Of course, if that was the whole story, you wouldn’t have gotten so upset,” I point out. “But like I said, no big deal. I’m flattered, really. Never had my own stalker before.”

He exhales loudly. “I am not your stalker,” he says, completely serious, so unamused. The traffic moves and he zips into another lane, gaining ground. He makes it through the light, across the highway, all the way to Hillcrest. He turns left, drives, makes a right. He stays silent and focused, stewing like a rabbit in the proverbial pot. I can’t get past how much I seem to affect this guy, how much I like that. Wouldn’t anyone?

Usually, men I date are merely walking opportunities to fuck. My few rules demand that they make me laugh, have no connection to Howard, and care nothing about my opinions of them, myself, or anything else. That’s what Howard seems able to allow, and all I’ve
so far wanted. They never last more than a night.

But this guy gives me such authority. He’s a fresh scab, obviously vulnerable, but impossible to leave alone even though I don’t want to hurt him. I’m not a complete asshole, but such control is heady. Also, even though in many ways Kurt’s the opposite of Marie, like her, he makes me feel that I might discover myself in his presence. I don’t know. Maybe they’re two sides of the same coin.

When he reaches the drive that leads to my building, he pulls in, but just barely. He parks in a visitor’s spot a ways from the door. “All kinds of other inconsistencies too,” I say, twisting to face him. “Why’d you tell me it was dress up tonight, that those people were just . . . I believe it was ‘a couple you did some painting for?’ And you left the fitting room doors open at work. What’s that about? Hmm?” I’m grinning, winking, on a silly kind of a lark. “Were you trying to seduce me?” I ask.

Kurt snorts. “Not a bright way to do it. With this body.”

“So you’re an exhibitionist? Claustrophobic?”

Kurt touches my wrist momentarily. “To make sure you knew how different we are.”

I pause, considering. “As proven by our bodies?” I say. “The outside’s the inside? Not sure I buy that.” But what I want to ask is, When did this get so serious?

Kurt stares at me. “Tell me,” he says. “How often have you dated someone who looks like me, dresses like me, does the kind of thing I do?”

“God, Kurt. It’s not like you’re some caveman,” I say, mentally scrambling, comparing my past to my present. I can’t decide if he’s pegged me or not, whether I’ve become quite this obvious. “Those walls you did were great,” I say.
"I know that." He raises his brows, as if to dare me. "But in that alley, that's why I couldn't react. I couldn't believe it. You, on the ground. I didn't jump right in because I was horrified." He pauses and scratches at his chest. "And happy, too, honestly. That you were human." He squirms to look up at the highrise. "You know, two years is how long I've noticed you around. At bars, at Neiman's. I've watched you order quesadillas at Primo's and seen you drive by in your cool car."

He drums on his steering wheel with his thumbs. "So, I guess what it's about," he finally answers, "is that you make me feel like I'm in goddamned high school again, staring at the goddamned fullback. Once again, I'm some little schlub, thinking to myself, Jesus, to fuck him." He twists to face me, his face oddly dimpled by the outside lights. "Do you know how old I am?"

I shake my head. "I could guess if you want." This is getting weird, and I see that I've wasted a lot of energy, even though this meltdown is probably all for the best. Had this worked, had I wanted to see him again, it could have only caused problems, annoying Howard who's annoyed enough these days.

"I am 37 years old," he says. "That kills me."

"Not so old," I explain, and compared to how old I feel at the moment, it's not. But he leans closer and stares, unblinking. He moves a hand closer to my leg.

"Tell me," he says. "Did you ever notice me before I did something for you? Did you ever even see me?"

"No." I tell him the truth. "I never saw you at all."

And with that, I work the handle on the door, ready for this scene to be finished so I can start a long night of feeling both sad and stupid. But before I step out, he raises both arms, opening them as if he can encompass me, the highrise behind me, and maybe the
whole damn world. He fills the small cabin of that pickup and nods like he’s John Wayne, like he’s finally won the war.

I wait, but nothing more comes. He simply sits there, arms raised. “Amazing,” I say before I shut the door on him and that stare. “You know me so well.”

IV.

It’s 6:19 in the morning, according to the clock above the mirror. I’m already halfway through a final set of leg presses, and the smell of puddled sweat fills the air. This early, the crowd at Frank’s 24-Hour Gym is sparse, more serious than it is anytime after work.

Wayne and I have been working out together for almost a year now, Howard suggesting it because he felt we should be friendlier than we were. So it’s here in this drab gym which we’ve chosen as a testament to our seriousness, here in this small room with carpet on the few non-mirrored walls, that I’ve heard Wayne’s history about traveling upstate from Harlingen and his memories of lovers and how they’ve died. This morning, however, he’s quiet, which is actually more common and something I understand.

Often, I’ve wondered why a great weight against some part of me, the percussive clank of metal, and this dank aroma causes everything to still. The best I can come up with is that it’s a chance to close the world’s door, to ignore for 90 minutes everything and everyone else.

Certainly, I’m selfish enough to think of myself already more than most, but this is different. Here, it’s only my physical self I concentrate on. I focus on a particular muscle, the shape and bunch of it, the feel of it contracting, expanding, and the biology that
accomplishes such a thing. My breath quickens with exertion, my blood races, but I feel like I’m slowing, everything more meaningful, the very least part of me requiring thought.

I’ve tried to explain this to Wayne before, but he’s laughed at me, shaking his head. He so thinks I’m odd, and lately I find that I can’t really blame him.

Finished with legs, I stand, remove my towel from the bench, and nod at the guy who’s been waiting. At the mirror, I study my thighs and my calves. Like too many men, I’ve concentrated on torso and arms in the past. Opportunities to go shirtless are common enough, and the reaction to a mound of chest is easily gratifying.

But just over eight months ago, I caught an odd sight of myself. In my bathroom, I’d turned to toss an old razor blade in the trash, late for work and annoyed. And, as always, my grimace and shape were reflected back a hundred-fold. This time, though, the angle of my arm across my waist looked to cut me in two, and it was obvious that the two halves didn’t match. I flexed and stared, appreciating all the mirrors for a change. It was an awkward vision. And since I don’t really desire to be two different men, I’ve adjusted accordingly.

The reward is that these days I can be compared to dreamt-of athletes by guys like long-gone Kurt, who have no idea how laughable that is. As a kid, I looked nothing like I do now. I was already six foot and an inch in the sixth grade and weighed, at most, 131 pounds. There was nothing between my bones and the world except impossibly thin skin. I had acne clustered on my forehead, along my jaw, across my back. I walked as if I might break.

So, even if they’re mostly surface, I’m glad I’ve made the changes, even if back in college, it took Marie months of dragging me to the gym and yelling before I understood to
go inward, to connect with my body as it worked. It was something I’d never done before. “But if I’m just going to put the weight down,” I told her, “then why pick it up? Think of everything we could be doing instead.”

But she yelled at me, “Jesus! Don’t be such a wussy.”

So I went along to make her happy, and eventually came to realize that for some people, consideration of their own body comes naturally. They don’t step out of it at certain times and then back again.

With one last flex, I signal to Wayne that I’m done, then head for the showers, an open room with nozzles positioned every four feet in the wall. I strip, step under the water, and run my hands the length of myself, thrilled that I’m back to normal, no longer pained or marked with bruises. The last several Friday nights have found me performing for Howard again, everything finally the way it should be.

I smile at this, at a future back on track, and fail to hear Wayne calling for me. But when I turn, he’s there, still dressed and getting wet from the spray. “Come here,” he calls. He looks angry or troubled, too agitated to take his usual quick glance at my crotch.

“What?” I twist both knobs on the wall and grab my towel from the hook. I follow his back to the locker room, where he takes up a whole bench and kicks off wet sneakers.

“Luisa called,” he says. “They gave the call to me.”

It takes me a moment to place Luisa in this context, Howard’s maid about as far from the gym as anyone I can imagine. “What?” I ask. “Is she okay?”

“Just scared.” Wayne pulls his t-shirt over his head and looks up at me, the scar across his arm and chest reddened from this morning’s exertions. “It’s Howard,” he explains. “He’s at the hospital. Luisa says he almost died.”
Howard looks like a bird in a nest, newly born, as if feathers are only some wispy goal of a distant future. Certainly, skin this thin, this pale, shouldn’t be a final covering.

I’ve been here most of the day now, waiting for Howard to be moved from intensive care to this bed. I’ve gorged on junk, eating two bags of Peanut M&Ms, six Reese’s cups, and drinking three Dr. Peppers. I’ve read old issues of several magazines I didn’t even know existed. I’ve sent Luisa home and informed the Friday night gang of what’s going on. Each of them has stopped by except Caxton.

I’ve also wandered everywhere allowable on the six floors of this hospital, searching for something I can’t name, though it’s possible I simply wanted to see something horrible, someone in visible pain. Eventually, I found myself at the back of the emergency area. When I walked up, I failed to realize where I was, didn’t recognize from this angle the line of chairs on which I’d sat those many weeks ago with Kurt.

But then, in an instant, people thronged the space. I watched a family with burns wheeled in, carried in, dragged in, heard them all, and had to turn away.

Now, in this basic square of Howard’s private room, I lift a chair closer to the bed, sit, and stare. Burgundy capillaries trace across Howard’s eyelids, around his lips, and upon the whorls of his ears. White stubble marks his jaw. He looks more dead than asleep, more feeble than I’ve ever seen him. Plastic tubes tumble from bottles and the wall, all piercing him in so many places that I become confused as to which is which, where they all lead. It smells like burnt chemicals in here, like the air’s endlessly recycled.

Half an hour ago, a Dr. Fong explained to me the vagaries of Howard’s heart and also that Howard has been a patient of his for some time now. I can’t say that I understood
everything he said, but I listened and nodded. I caught the important points. What we’ve just experienced is a scare, possibly a sign of ever more scarier things to come. Howard’s heart is tiring.

Contemplating this new fact, I ignore my circling thoughts and say Howard’s name. After the sixth time, he answers. But I can’t make out what he says, even though the issuance of any sound is a comfort. Before he tries again, I stand and lean over.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he whispers. “That’s why I didn’t want you to know.”

I touch my lips to his papery forehead then sit back, keeping one hand as light as possible on his wrist. “Just rest,” I tell him. “I’m fine.”

When he sleeps again, more silent than the machines around him, I lean my head against the bed’s railing and acknowledge that I fail so regularly. For months now, I’ve known he was ailing and done nothing. I’ve failed to think things through or see what’s directly before me. I haven’t been smart.

Of course that’s been the case for such a large part of my life that I should be prepared for the flaw, probably even find some way to mend it. But I don’t. I toddle on, hoping for the best, trying desperately to have as little impact as possible. I wonder if I could disappear, whether anyone would notice, and am then amazed at the degree of my self-involvement at a time like this. Though it’s another trait I should be accustomed to by now.

It all reminds me of my dad’s death, a subject I try not to think about. The sadness then, suddenly mixed with now, is too much.

As I question that, Caxton opens the door, waves jauntily, and steps inside. The
gentle hiss of the door closing behind him makes me think of Ziploc bags and Tupperware, of sealing in things that always turn bad.

“No need to hover,” he says. He seats himself with perfect posture in the only other chair, beneath the television, and motions until I move my own and join him there. “Close-ups are never good for the aged. Especially when infirm,” he explains. “Has he spoken?”

I lie and tell him no, embarrassed of what was said. Then we sit for a while, listening to Howard’s body and its mechanical, oddly musical accompaniment. The room is painted a lifeless beige, the linens and window blinds and floor all colorless as well. I can’t find any place of interest for my eyes to land except Howard, whose face makes me feel guilty because I’m sitting here wondering about my own future more than I am his. If he died, I think, would I be surprised by my name in a will or would I find myself locked out and alone? Neither is easy to think about, and finally I give up. I ask Caxton what he thinks of me.

Slowly, he raises his chin, centering my face in the bottom halves of his bifocals. “It’s not necessary to talk in situations like this,” he says. “Mostly, we are required to wait patiently, lovingly, to be here for a moment that might require our presence.”

He’s wearing gray trousers and a striped shirt, the navy lines dark against his skin. Howard’s always seemed faintly dingy, as if so many years have left residual stains, but Caxton is clear of eye, with brilliant white hair and the skin of a demure, Victorian heroine. “I’m serious,” I tell him. “I want to know.”

“It matters to you? What I think?”

“Yes. Of course.” I have no idea why he’s feigning surprise. This isn’t the first
time I’ve turned to him for assessment, seriously or as a game. Or the first time he’s offered it.

Curiously, Caxton was the last of the Friday night gang Howard introduced me to. It wasn’t so much as if he were saving the best for last, but that I had to prove myself, working higher rung by rung, until Caxton was the only one left. Our meeting consisted of drinks at The Library, then dinner at Actuelle, a tony, glass-walled, half circle of a place at The Quadrangle. The two of them sat on either side of me at a table in the center, gibing with each other about what a telling trio we made.

“What must everyone be thinking?” Caxton asked that night. He wore a bespoke suit, English wing-tips, and carried a cane for effect. “That we each can’t afford young Mitchell on our own? That we must pool our resources? Howard, I think we’re shaming ourselves. We cannot be successfully old and salacious while people think we are poor.”

Howard laughed and patted my shoulder. I was wearing a skin-tight Gautier t-shirt and tapered pants, and wished suddenly for clothes shapeless and drab, a new wish for me. But I smiled. I forced some weak semblance of an amused sound and forked another bite of the squash. The low murmur of exact, certain voices filled the room, and I watched closely, unused to eating in a room like this, with people like these.

“Maybe,” I said when I’d swallowed, “they think nothing of the sort. Maybe they think I’m that rare, warm-hearted youth who takes his two wonderful grandfathers out to a lovely dinner, in memory of all the fishing trips and the berry picking and the ball games,” I continued. “Maybe they’re all misty-eyed.”

Caxton swivelled to take in the crowd, everyone older than me but the waiters, most of the men in suits and ties, the women in tasteful dresses or dark pants. Everyone
the men are figuring your going rate, many of the women are wondering if you switch.
And the waiters, well, I believe they're thinking you might have made the better choice."
He raised his head to stare at me.

In response, I leaned past him, brushing my chest against his arm. I tapped the
shoulder of the gentleman sitting behind him. Too tan, this man looked like the film
version of a banker, a lawyer, a CEO of some venture that required everyone to work late
into the night. His eyebrows were entire creatures by themselves. "A thousand bucks an
hour," I said, when he glanced my way. "Still a bargain."

He frowned and pulled away, but Howard and Caxton whooped like small boys
and called for champagne. "Well, well," Caxton said. "My, my, my."

He’s staring at me similarly amused when I return to the present, to the hopeful
bleeps that accompany Howard’s heart. "Perhaps we need coffee," Caxton says. "Some
of that evil soda you drink." He rises and steps outside.

In the cafeteria, I follow his lead. The room’s too well lit, a perfect, bland square
with most everyone in it bent over a tray as if eating’s a recently-learned act requiring great
concentration. How much weight, I wonder, is gained by depressed family members in a
place like this. There are a few kids running around, but they’re quickly hushed. A table
in the corner is surrounded by garrulous, uniformed staff, acting as if they’re anywhere.

Caxton pays for both of us at the register, then crooks his head and steps through
the room to another at the back. The entrance, which I never would’ve seen, is hidden by a
column and a magazine rack that stretches from floor to ceiling, most of the magazines torn
and out of kilter. Beyond it, the smaller room is done up in colors newly popular, though
presumably this is their second time around.
Night has settled outside. I stop at one of the skinny, vertical windows to see the lights of the city, how they look to stretch forever before they die. This night, the toppling the buildings with a flicked finger, with perspective on my side, isn't something I can imagine.

“'You certainly know your way around this place,’” I say when I've sat.

“A man in his seventies knows hospitals,” Caxton explains. “Or a grave.” He tears the top off two packets of sugar and empties them into his mug, then stirs the coffee with a knife. “You’re not going to let this unfortunate business upset you,” he says. “Are you? It wouldn’t be wise.”

I stare at him blankly. I think I have the perfect reason to be upset and I think he has, too. “Probably, considering what Dr. Fong said. Why not?”

“Ah, youth,” Caxton says. “So ready to waste energy whether it helps or not.” He licks the knife on both sides, his tongue pointed and pink, then rests the knife on his napkin. He sips from the mug and sighs. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to Howard,” he says. “Honestly, I’ve been thrilled to see it unfold, this understanding the two of you have developed. And possibly jealous.” He winks at me and sips again. “But I’ve wondered how far ahead you’ve looked. Whether you’ve prepared for certain eventualities that shan’t be changed.”

“They shan’t?”

“Of course not.”

When I shake my head, he adds, “In some ways, such a child, but in others, Mitch, you are such an old, old man.”

Annoyed, I turn away from that, toward the only other table occupied in this back
room, by a young woman and a small girl with an ancient face. The girl, in brown overalls and a frenziedly colored shirt, sits on the woman’s lap and draws on a napkin. She switches from red to green to blue, then back again, intent for some reason on using each of the crayons evenly. The woman smiles when she notices my gaze, then brushes her fingers across the tips of her spiky ’do. She wears too much mascara and a color of lipstick that is wrong for her skin.

“What else should I do?” I ask. “Not care at all?”

“It’s what Howard’s counted on certainly. He can’t bear to see you upset, unless he’s planned it. What you need to understand is that this might be the first of many such visits. One day soon you will know these floor plans as well as I.”

He waves at the girl three tables away, who responds with, “My arms. Agnes, my arms. Oh, my God, my arms.” Her voice intimates horror and fascination all at once, though her face registers nothing. But the woman looks as if she’s been stomped, hard, by something massive and ancient, returned to life from some unspeakable depth. Her face drains of all color except for the lipstick, and her eyes close. She whispers into the girl’s hair.

But the girl ignores her. “Oh, my arms,” she cries louder, then returns to her coloring as if nothing’s amiss.

“Quite the little thespian,” Caxton says. His eyes suggest mock horror, but unsuccessfully. His top lip sticks to his teeth, and I can see that the girl has gotten to him. “Who do you think she heard say that?” he asks. “Her father, maybe. Maybe he lost his arms in some horrible accident and she saw and heard it all. Can you imagine?”

“No. And I don’t want to,” I say, thinking that maybe he’ll talk to me now, have a
real conversation about all that might happen. Certainly, the hardened gaze is gone, along with the amusement at my expense.

But he shrugs, the gesture curiously dignified on him. “So serious,” he says, a boat instantly righted. “I never would have guessed it.”

With that, I understand that I’ll get nowhere with Caxton, so I stand to leave. I’m disappointed and aggrieved, all out of sorts and without any idea of what to do next. There’s a tug in my gut tipping me just barely forward, off center in my own flesh. “I should get back,” I say. “Howard might wake up, you know.”

“I’m sure he will,” Caxton says. “It’s not the end yet.” He offers a small wave as I walk away, but little else.

Honestly, I can’t quite believe it. This is Howard’s oldest friend, the one member of his circle who I thought I could always count on. It’s obvious he feels he’s teaching me some vital lesson, opening my eyes with pliers to what I don’t wish to see, but regardless, coldness is unwarranted, quips don’t help. Coming from me, that’s quite an assessment.

Back down the hallway, I pass the nurse’s station still mentally gyrating on Caxton’s lack of help, and for the second time today, I don’t realize that someone’s calling to me until the nurse says, “Sir!” again, with yet more emphasis. “Please?” she says. “A moment?”

I turn and walk back. “I’m going to room 411,” I explain. “Howard Clenellan.”

“But visiting hours are over,” she says. A pair of round-lensed glasses hang from a multicolored cord around her neck, clacking once against a nametag that reads, “Miriam Oglesby, R.N.” A constellation of dark moles stretches across her chest and beneath her blouse.
“I’m going to spend the night,” I tell her. “I don’t need a cot or anything. I can push those chairs in there end to end. You don’t have to do a thing.” I give her my best smile, cocking my head. “Unless you have a cot to offer. I wouldn’t turn it down.”

“Are you family?” she asks. “What is your relation to Mr. Clenellan?” She’s much shorter than me and peering up. Her crossed arms are delicate enough that I can’t quite believe she has this job.

And maybe that’s all it is—her tiny stature—that makes me so slow to understand why she’s questioning me. But even with the realization, I forge ahead. “It’s okay,” I say. “I live with him.” I reach to pat her elbow.

When I touch her, she takes my hand and holds it. “You’ll have to go home,” she says. “You’re not family and you can’t stay.” She gives my hand an extra squeeze, then returns to her computer. As far as she’s concerned, I’ve disappeared.

In my car, I’m still angry and hurt, both emotions layered over the sadness I feel about Howard and, honestly, my own plight. It strikes me that I’m always driving around at night this summer, all alone, and I wonder why. Maybe it’s a sign of things to come.

Regardless, all I want is someone to talk to, and that someone doesn’t exist for me these days. I have coworkers, people I can go drink or dance with, men I can fuck with, but no one who talks and listens. I miss Marie; I already miss Howard. I’m trying to think of the last serious conversation I had with anyone in which he or she was honest with me and expected the same, and only Kurt comes to mind, as silly as that might seem. When I pass under Central expressway, I take a left and zoom up the entrance ramp.

Twenty minutes later, after two stops for construction that fail to sway me, I pull to
the curb and stop. The home of Bob and Heather Berg looks little changed, still with the
typical Dallas yard, already browning and obviously wilted.

I stand for several long moments before knocking, then stand about the same
amount of time before Heather answers. When she opens the door, she has in her arms a
child, a little girl with amazingly red hair. “Hey,” they both say, as if I appear on their
doorstep often.

“Come on in,” Heather says. “The place is a mess. You’ve been warned.” She
slings the girl up over her shoulder and pivots, then leads me to the same cozy living room.

“Have a seat.” She points to the couch and says that it’s really good to see me.
She sits across from me, and I realize that the magazines on the floor are catalogues filled
with bright sketches of children’s clothing, the drawings labeled with numbers of patterns
and size charts.

“For little Miss Bethany here,” Heather explains. “She hates everything in her
closet.”

The child is staring at me, three fingers shoved in her mouth. She’s stunning with
that hair and the large green eyes, but something about her face is slack enough to make me
wonder if beauty will be hers only in childhood, when hair and eyes can count for almost
everything.

“How old are you?” I ask, but the girl stays silent and clutches Heather’s leg.

“Usually not such a shy child,” her mom fills in. “At the grocery, she’s been
known to get in other people’s cars. She’ll go sit with other families at the movies.
Sometimes, I wonder if she’s not terribly fond of me.”

“Reminds me of a college friend’s dog,” I say. When Heather gives me a look, I
hurry to explain. “I had this friend. When he was ten or so, he got this purebred Collie that he’d begged to get for years. But the dog always ran away to the neighbors, so many times that his parents eventually sat him down and said, ‘Russell, Toby’s chosen to live with the Washingtons. We have to respect his wishes.’ My friend was devastated, still talked about it all the time when I knew him. For years, he’d heard his dog barking and seen it playing, right next door, but he had to go ask permission to join in.”

“Bethany, you’re not living with the neighbors and that’s final,” Heather says. It’s supposed to be a funny line, but falls flat, and I can see that she’s more spooked by my being here than she’s letting on.

“Children hate me,” I say. “You’ve raised a normal child.”

“Such self-confidence,” Heather says. She laughs, and it’s a good sound, with the dense weight of a cheesecake. Barefoot, she’s wearing shorts tonight, and I wouldn’t have guessed what great legs she has. They’re tanned, shapely, and unshaven. I wonder if this means she’s been too busy or just doesn’t worry about such things. I hope it’s the latter, and then feel myself relax a bit, thankful to be having a conversation about children and dogs, to be thinking about something as harmless as leg hair.

We sit silently then, all three of us, and I think this might be what I was searching for tonight, just this amount of ease and quiet. But finally, it’s not enough; I want to tell her where I’ve been and what’s happened, to ask questions and feel connected in some way. The silence grows uncomfortable, and I say, “So,” to fill it. I nod like it might explain everything.

“He’s on a night gig in University Park,” smart, smart Heather says. “Friends of ours.” She piles the glossy catalogues from the floor into her daughter’s arms and swats
her behind as the girl staggers away beneath her load.

When Bethany’s out of sight, Heather moves beside me on the couch. “I know I screwed up,” she says. “I suck at secrets. I thought about coming into Neiman’s to see you and explain, but Kurt threatened to off me if I did. He’s not a happy man. Spends most of his time moping and giving me nasty looks. His whole life, I don’t believe he’s ever been this mad at me.”

I suppress any visible reaction to “his whole life,” then tell her not to worry. I fiddle with the throw pillow and hope she’ll continue, accidentally tell me something I can use if I work up the nerve to finish this hunt for Kurt. But now she’s clammed up as well, tugging at the border of the couch. She looks at me expectantly, and I see that we’ve reached one of those moments that separates the pros from the amateurs.


She wags her head side to side. “Oh, I think I should exercise more. I think Clinton’s frustrating. I think I’m a so-so seamstress and will probably disappoint my daughter.” Her eyes narrow as she stares at me. “But you meant about Kurt, right?”

I don’t move. I feel like a bug pinned to a piece of styrofoam, the cotton ball soaked in alcohol lowering my way.

“I don’t, I guess,” she finally says. “I have no idea. Nobody knows, right? I mean you seem like a great guy, but you hurt Kurt’s feelings something awful. And I chased my ex-husband like he was the last man on Earth, but it didn’t work out. Then, Bob. I wouldn’t even talk to him at first, and now I can’t imagine life without him because he’s here for me.” She stops and takes a deep breath. “Sorry. I’ve had way too much coffee tonight.”
“No problem,” I tell her, thinking that the polite thing to do would be to ask where Bob might be or how he is. But I’m stuck on the “here for me” part of her speech, thinking about Howard. Guilt flashes through me, as if he might know where I am and what I’m doing. He’s been very good to me and, in so many ways, is the only family I have.

“Okay,” I say. “Well, thanks.” I stand and hurry to the door.

But Heather follows along, grabbing a pen and pad from the stand in the hallway. She scribbles on the pad, then tears off the top page and hands it to me. “Go talk to him,” she says. “And you be nice to my baby brother, okay?”

I step back from that one, too stunned to hide my reaction. It seems impossible that Kurt had as many secrets entering our first date as I did, but maybe we were more evenly matched than I’d thought. I open the door and walk out, taking only two steps before I stop. “That night,” I say, “at the hospital. Kurt told me he was saved once. That was you, right?”

Heather scoops a firefly from the doorframe and cups it in her hand. “Not me.” She lets the bug go, and we watch it glow a trail across the yard. “He drowned in the tub,” she says. “About Bethany’s age. There was an ambulance, and sirens, and lights. I was hysterical. Everyone was crying and running around. Kurt was purple and he looked... swollen. Or baked somehow. Mom’s the one who saved him. She beat everyone away and hammered on his chest. He swears he remembers that.”

“Then he wasn’t really dead,” I say.

“But he was,” she assures me. “According to the doctors, anyway. I don’t think there were any bright lights or anything like that, no angels. But he was dead. He says
everything was dark and thick. Says he had to decide.” She stops, then steps forward and hunches her shoulders. Gently, she kisses me on the cheek. “Go,” she says. “Make everyone happy.”

V.

I don’t immediately follow through on Heather’s suggestion, don’t instantly find Kurt and make everyone happy, because I’m a.) hopeless, b.) a loser, c.) spineless, or d.) all of the above. Of course “d” is the appropriate answer, but there might also be an “e” and “f” in there as well: e.) too much time to think—it’s not like anyone will ever accuse me of being Mr. Action; and f.) Howard as a depository for just about any sort of emotion I can muster these days.

Actually, there might even be a “g,” at which point this whole exercise becomes ridiculous. Still, it’s not like one thing alone is going to make “everyone” happy, no matter what I do, and I need to remember that.

So, instead, here’s the pattern. For the past three days, I’ve worked the late shift in order to spend mornings with Howard, and then after work, I’ve driven here, across the street from the address Heather gave me. At the moment, I’m hunched low on the seat of my car, like some guilty goon, and am watching closely for any part of Kurt to punch a dark shape against the lighted squares of the windows. Yes, now I’m the one who’s stalking and presumably in a more real way than Kurt ever did me.

And while I do this, I think about how, growing up, I took 4-H so seriously, meeting monthly to attest to the importance of my Head, Heart, Hands, and Health, living it like a true believer. I wore the green windbreaker with the white clover leaf on the back, my name printed on the front. I slaved over my annual record book, totalling costs and
profits, and wrote detailed explanations of feeding schedules and foodstuffs, all in big block print. On the whole, I was quite the little businessman.

But now, when I tell people that, they don’t believe me, just as they wouldn’t believe I’m sitting here. Instead, they look at the body, the duds, at my manicure and earring. They say, “Unh uh,” as if the Mitch Zeller they see at 26 was necessarily the same person at eight, eleven, fifteen. Honestly, they act as if I would make up such a thing, as if anyone would. But I swear that for nine years, at stock shows all across the state, I was the proud exhibitor of chickens and turkeys, the big and little of this nation’s most popularly edible birds.

Each Spring, my dad would load me in the pickup, the birds caged in the back with my suitcase. The only family in the 4-H club who thought it worthwhile, we’d head out of Luling, a tiny Texas town notable only for oily water and the annual Watermelon Thump. We’d take off for San Antonio, Houston, or Dallas, sometimes even Oklahoma or Arkansas. Once we made it all the way to Kansas City.

And wherever we might land, Daddy would make certain I was settled in the correctly numbered bed in the exhibitor’s dorm and my birds were comfy in their correctly numbered cages. Then he’d climb into his pickup and leave me behind. I was ten when this procedure began, and it lasted until I grew old enough to drive the routes myself.

My dad did this, he said, because he considered farming a noble profession, even though he was an auto mechanic himself, working at the Dunlap at the end of our street. “Can’t afford them fancy animals,” he’d tell me, “or for me to stay along, but the birds are a fine start.”

Among the rest of my family, the theory used to quiet my teachers who thought I
shouldn’t miss school or be alone was that I was learning resilience, self-reliance, how to function in the real world alone. Which, though I never came to like it, to some degree I guess I did. I discovered that if you spent all your money in the first three days on Spin Art and Space Invaders, then the end of the week would find you hungry. I marvelled repeatedly at the nervousness of chickens and caught on to what great, stupid birds turkeys were, always thwarting me by bruising themselves while I hugged them to the judge. And I learned to give a blow job that could make a grown man moan.

An only child with a room across the house from my dad, I had no idea how noisily others slept. In the dorms, as man as 300 men and boys filled those metal-framed beds that were lined up like soldiers. They snored and grumbled, they fidgeted those beds into a chorus of old springs and dry, weak joints.

Most nights, I gave up after an hour and set out, knowing I could nap the next afternoon. I explored too because at night the grounds crackled with something less homogenized than fresh-scrubbed youngsters and their livestock. At night, animals slept, air cooled, and attention turned from the stock barns to the midway and the rides.

To me, back then, nothing was more thrilling than a night of racing lights, the sirens and whistles, the men calling, “Hey, kid! Give it a try!” Those long walkways of hawked goods and games of chance struck me as otherworldly enough that I wasn’t so much scared as amazed, too drunk on newness to worry or hang back.

My favorite midway was at the Houston show, run by the Connors company with a slickness that allowed for nicer prizes and chancier games that insured even fewer of those prizes were ever won. It was there that I met Teddy. He ran The Hoops.

Teddy seemed ancient, but was probably no older than fifty. He stooped, heavy
through the shoulders and across the chest, with arms and legs that seemed impossibly thick considering their length. His teeth were discolored from tobacco, yellowed like the whites of his eyes. His laugh boomed from the small alcove of his game, and later, from the mattress of his smaller trailer, a silver oval that held the bed, a chair, and little else.

He motioned me over the second night I walked by. “You come put these balls in the hoop,” he said. “You come on over here, Slick.”

I walked over and took the ball, completely giggly.

“Never been very good at this,” I admitted. At school, I was always picked last for any kind of team.

“Not about good,” he said. “You give it a go.” He leaned close, making us eye to eye.

I was a disaster at the game, the basketball bouncing from the rims of the shrunken and tilted hoops exactly as I later learned it was meant to do. But Teddy gave me some free shots, exhorting my efforts. He laughed that booming laugh that seemed to work itself from some recess in the middle of him, gaining force and tenor as it rose. And when I hung around until after two in the morning and helped him close, scribble a few numbers on a form and throw a few latches, it seemed only natural that I would accompany him wherever he went.

In his trailer, off behind the roar of the generators, he gave me a warm Coke in a chipped bottle and took off his shirt. A scar ran the length of his torso, straight down the center, as if he’d been cut in half, then put back whole. When he unzipped his jeans and fished out his penis, I touched the head of it, which gave a toss, then grew. And when he told me to come closer, I did.
There are those, I'm sure, who would say that Téodore Latziani made me what I am today, a man who loves a good cock in his mouth. But they'd be wrong. As for my sexual being, all Teddy did was give me a glimpse of the future, a place I would have found on my own because we all search for whatever excites the mind. Instead, I believe that if Teddy changed me at all, it was to make me a man who cherishes objects, things, and wants to give them order.

On a small ledge above his mattress sat a line of prized possessions, all found at one fair or another, dropped or lost, forgotten by someone who didn’t see in these things what Teddy could and did. I remember three rings propped carefully, one with a small red stone that Teddy told me was a garnet. There was also a long knife, a slingshot, a ring filled with keys. A blue ribbon had been tied to a thin, gold chain and then to a comb. The bottom of a set of dentures rested teeth up in the center, everything arranged on either side. “My treasures,” Teddy called them. He spun tales about every object, giving it a life, a past, a place to belong. Before we parted, he took my picture with a clunky Instamatic and said I would own a spot on that ledge. “You're a good kid,” he said.

I didn’t see Teddy again after leaving Houston. He called a few times and talked quickly if I was lucky enough to answer the phone. But there were others like him I could find. The midways were always a haven for various men ready to teach a young boy about prizes, technique, of how leaning against a body can calm and deepen a sleep.

At this point I should just leave. I know that. The time for talking about Howard, my original reason to find Kurt again, is past. But Kurt's stuck in my head now, and I can't shake him. I'm curious about his nights, curious about what comforts him, and all
that he might use to get through.

Around me, cicada sirens fill the sky. The oaks that line the street are deathly still, their leaves like limp rags. I can smell seared meat from somewhere, though it’s late for a barbeque, late to think about food or a project that large. It’s been a while since I’ve eaten.

This house I’m watching is two stories high, with yellow, intricate trim. In the front yard is a lone Magnolia tree, the blossoms dusky circles of collected moonlight. Occasionally, I’ll sneak out and stand beneath it for a moment, feeling brave. But when I did that last night, it rained, the water dribbling from leaf to leaf to land atop me, soaking through to my skin. Still, I stood there, staring and thinking all sorts of things, little of which made any sense. More than anything, I felt as I do right now: needy, sad, and way too pitiful. I seem to have lost any nerve I ever had.

Yet, I showed fortitude at work today. It was Mr. Kepler’s fourth trip in to see his beloved shirt, but this time, I refused to let him try it on. I told him no. His shocked face opened with surprise then shut down, glaring at me. “I don’t think you can do that,” he said.

He was probably right, and I probably will be written up tomorrow, but as I tried to explain to him, my stand was for his own good. “My life is out of control,” I said, with absolutely no idea why he should be the one to hear this sudden, certain realization, “and since I can’t seem to do anything about it, I’m going to enforce some order on yours.” I smiled hugely, handsomely, and went on to explain that he was letting the shirt control him, that he was investing too much in some fabric and thread, some buttons, regardless of the name on the label, the price, or the looks of the thing.

But Mr. Anton Kepler refused to be swayed. He shook my hand, told me that he
appreciated my concern, and walked across the aisle into the Polo room. There, he asked oddball Kate to show him a shirt in Designer, and when I shrugged, she did as she was asked. Though he didn’t buy the shirt. Again.

So I can assume only that he got whatever he wanted from it just by trying it on. And tonight, as I dip even lower to stay clear of a pair of passing headlights, I admire him for that immensely, enough so that I think maybe he’s taught me something about determination, hoping that he’s imposed something on my life instead. Maybe it’s the moment that counts, the doing of something regardless of what anyone thinks.

I climb out, walk forward, and knock. Kurt answers immediately. He’s in jeans, barefoot and shirtless. He looks hard-working and honest, solid and sane. That’s exactly what I expected, and I find it stunning. He grins like he’s the clever one and says, “Finally. I didn’t know how much longer I could make this job last.”

“You mean . . .” I start, then shake my head. I shouldn’t be surprised. He can recognize my car and was surely briefed by Heather.

“But you made me wonder,” he continues. “I was about to give up on you ever actually knocking. And last night when it rained? You looked a little ridiculous. But cute.”

I shrug, nod, swing my arms. I don’t all fit together physically for a moment.

“That’s why I’m here,” I say. “Actually. Because you’ve been so slow. The people who own this place called and said you needed some help.” I stick out my hand. “Mitch Zeller, your new assistant.”

Kurt laughs, thank God. “You’re hired,” he says and motions me inside.

I follow him down a cramped hallway into the living room. A marble mantle is
impressive above the emptied fireplace, the rest of the room bare. All the molding and trim has been covered with blue tape, the edges of the mantle as well. The floor is layered with an amazing number of tarps, the tarps covered with several dozen paint cans, many of them open with lids propped against their sides. The smell’s powerful enough to make me breathe open-mouthed.

When I turn, blinking, Kurt holds a tree branch in his hand. It’s about two feet wide and a mesquite branch, if I’m right. It looks as if the leaves have been ripped or snipped, leaving an odd mesh of sticks on a handle, whittled in a certain skeletal way that looks frankly troubling, enough to make me step away.

“Be careful with your clothes,” Kurt says, frowning at my jacket. “I’m not exactly neat.”

I look down and realize that I’m still wearing the Matsuda outfit I bought during last season’s Last Call sale at work. It is a bit much, medium olive in color, made of triacetate and rayon. It’s fuzzy and incomplete, all the stitching showing, with threads undone and hanging, much of the lining and padding specifically visible. “It’s postmodern,” I say.

Kurt nods. “Nice shoes,” he adds.

The studded sandals were an over-the-top touch I was rather proud of when I chose them this morning, but now I realize how I must look to Kurt: alien or idiot, one or the other, neither very attractive. “Look, you’re busy,” I say.

“That’s okay.” Kurt scratches at a drop of paint that’s dried atop his left nipple. “Let me show you what I’ve been doing.” He motions at the main wall and says that the owners are letting him experiment.

Carefully, I wend my way through the variously-sized paint cans, a rainbow of
colors, but contained and separated like that. At first, I think the wall’s been layered with mud or some sort of brown paste, I can’t tell which. I put my eye right up to it, then my nose. It’s not very thick, whatever it is.

“Something new,” Kurt explains. “I dreamed this up about a month ago. Tests have gone great.” He steps beside me and scratches the surface with one pointed tip of the branch. He tells me it’s a type of clay that he’s mixed with something that starts with “mon” and finishes with at least a dozen more syllables that he pronounces with ease.

I nod like I understand.

“I painted behind it, and the color in it’s a matching wash,” he says. “See? I trowel it on, smooth it out paper thin, then this.” He raises the tree branch like a prized scepter. He bends and dips each pointed end of it carefully into a different can of paint, then returns to the wall. “Watch,” he says. Quickly, without any sort of pattern that I can see, he drags and rolls the branch across the wall. It marks and gouges, digging little lines and divots.

For a moment, I’m lost as to the purpose, realizing instead that Kurt has much nicer triceps than I’d noticed back in the fitting rooms at work. But then, when I step back to move out of his way, I see it. As the clay is removed, quite a lot of it, the paint behind it shows through, the same rusty color that’s on Kurt’s skin. Where the clay remains, it twists and buckles, tectonic plates in miniature, adding the merest relief. Only right up against it, do the many colors from the branch’s various end points show, outlining with pencil-thin marks where the clay stops and starts.

I rock back and forth, stunned. From only a foot away, the reds and purples and oranges and yellows and blues and greens disappear, the wall suddenly a fascinating play
of texture instead. And from the middle of the room, even that’s lost, a deep, rich rust all that’s seen.

After several more trips between the paint cans and the wall, Kurt drops the tree branch on a wadded section of tarp and steps back. He crosses his arms and tilts his head. “The hard part’s knowing when to stop,” he says. He looks back at me. “You really want to help?” he asks. “I could show you how.”

“I’d mess it up,” I tell him.

He shrugs. “Then we’d just do it over. Those fancy clothes are what I’m worried about.”

I stare at him, my mind really sort of idling, so many gears available and waiting, only a few of them reminding me of my purpose for being here. I wait a moment more, then hold up a finger and step into the next room, the dining room as it turns out, where I keep the lights off. I hang my jacket over the back of a chair, kick off my sandals, add my pants to one arm of the same chair, my shirt and tie to the other. In boxer shorts, I step back in front of Kurt, trying not to flex or pose. For an instant, I’m terrified. “No longer a problem,” I say.

He grins, just like he did when he answered the door. It’s a response I could grow accustomed to. “That’s what you should always wear,” he says. “Okay, then. C’mere.”

I tromp up beside him, brushing his arm with my own by accident. Painting a wall is not what seems most likely, much less having the conversation I came here to have, but I’m proven wrong, because paint the wall I do.

He has me bring in two tubs of the clay stuff from the bathroom, amused when I drag them in on a bath towel instead of hefting them high. Then we work our way through the process. We add clay to a two-foot square section of wall that Kurt’s already painted.
The whole time, he stands behind me, guiding my hand, his fingers curled firmly over mine. I can feel his chest rise to my back as he inhales. I can smell his peppermint breath. His mouth is just at my shoulder, his directions simple and calm.

Finished with that, Kurt clears a few of the paint cans and sits across the room.

"You know the rest," he says.

I pick up the tree branch, convinced that this is all so utterly ridiculous. Still I scuttle around several of the paint cans, most of them nearly empty. I dip "just barely," as Kurt says, into each of the brights. I wipe with my fingers where any of it drips past the whittled ends, then pat my hand on my chest, wanting to look the part. After a quick glance at Kurt, I begin.

It’s a hell of a lot of fun. In no time, I’m actually thinking about something other than the mole I noted at the small of Kurt’s back, or Howard and the last three days. I’m trying to be as artistic as possible for someone like me.

The area he’s given me to practice with is not so large. I drag the branch down and back, covering the space in three careful swipes. Then I get crazy and roll the grip of the branch between my palms, the paint-covered ends of it twirling against the wall, grating audibly. I stab with it, kind of a strong, forceful look what I’m after, then brush across everything evenly once again.

I stop and step back, ready to be pleased. But whereas Kurt’s work looked subtle and ever-changing, mine looks like the work of a small, demented child. I’ve pretty much abolished the clay and scratched through much of the paint underneath.

"God," I say. "Call Irwin Allen. It’s a whole big disaster movie by itself." I want to apologize, but I can’t think of the right words, anything that doesn’t sound smart-alecky,
doesn’t sound like me. Finally, I move to turn around and accept whatever waits, but I stop at the touch of hands on the backs of my legs. Just that instant, it’s hard to breathe very deeply. The hands squeeze and press at the hem of my boxers, then circle around to the front of my thighs, tracing heavily through the hairs of my legs along the way. I see that one hand’s red, the other green. I think it must be Christmas.

The red hand dips into a can of purple paint at my foot then returns to move upward, outlining slowly everything it finds beneath my tightening shorts, the color on the white fabric an image I know I’ll never forget. The green hand disappears behind me, caressing and sticky, and then my boxers slide floorward. Happily, without a thought, I follow right along.

In no time, we’ve knocked over the yellow paint can and two of the blues. Kurt’s entire face is silver and orange, mine soon the same. Two or three of the lids are stuck to my back, one to my right foot.

Much of the action is a blur, too much of me too far gone to know exactly where my mouth is, my cock is, where my hands have found any sort of purchase to hold onto tightly. It’s not just that the paint is slippery, both of us sliding across the tarps to crash against the walls, but also that sex has never quite been so frantic for me. This is all just limbs and lips, skin slapping, the two of us tied in an effort to occupy the same space and meld. At one point, Kurt is seated with his feet under him and my ass in his lap, my legs up over his shoulders. He’s inside me, talking to me, saying my name, explaining what I do to him. I’m trying to fix that in my mind, the feeling of fullness, the jagged life in his voice, trying to know this moment as well as I can, when he hoists me higher, his hips rising with mine, and then bends himself in two and takes my cock in his mouth, fucking
and sucking in three jabbed, alternate, impossible strokes: in and up, out and down, a fleshly circle that the middle of me completes.

I gasp, my lungs clenched tight. I scream and yell and flop. All the multi-hued colors in the room coalesce, reflected, and I go blank, everything in my mind the purest white, bright enough to blind.

In the elevator up to Howard’s, I still can’t believe it, that first time with all the paint, really too sticky, or the second time in the tub either, so lovely and gentle, as we washed each other and didn’t know quite what to say. All of it so different from anything I’ve known.

I scratch at one fingernail, still green, and think that maybe what happened was exactly what I needed, that talking and analyzing are both vastly overrated, especially by me. But I could tell that Kurt was hesitant there at the end as well. We stood in front of the main wall in the den, now ruined, a butt-print evident in the lower right corner. “Good thing the Ritchies are still out of town,” Kurt said. “This is a wreck. It’ll take days to clean up.”

I apologized, but he shook his head, quick, and held up a hand.

“No, really,” I said. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t make it bad.”

I stayed silent then, and he hugged me, holding me tight. I can still feel it now, the pressure of his arms, his lips barely on my neck. He kissed me before I left and asked me out on a “proper date.” I told him I’d think about it.

When the elevator opens, I move inside and leave the lights off, moving through
the darkness and the heavy furniture to the kitchen. At the sink, I drink two glasses of water and stare at Luisa’s cubed Jesus. He doesn’t have much to tell me, not that I know what to ask.

Back in the den, I sit on the couch ready to figure out a few things. I’m considering making pro and con lists when someone clears his throat from the piano bench, scaring me enough that I jump. “Goddamn it,” I say, reaching for the lamp switch, then staring at Caxton. “What are you doing here? You should warn a fellow.”

“Howard’s home.”

I freeze, my breath held too long before words tumble out. “But I talked to him this morning. At the hospital. I was there for two hours. And I called at 5:30 before I went back to work after dinner.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise, dear Mitch.”

I can tell from his face that he’s telling the truth; he’s too pleased. “Oh,” is all I can get out.

“Yes, oh.” Caxton squints at me, one hand busy tugging at the skin beneath his chin. He’s got the cane with him tonight, his khaki shorts revealing desiccated legs with stiff-looking gray hairs. “And apparently it’s an even bigger surprise than we had planned.” He stands and walks the distance between us, perching on the edge of the Morris chair so that he can give me the once-over. My skin prickles, and I know I’m blushing.

“You’re going to make me wait, aren’t you?” he asks. “Even though it will be so tedious, and you could just tell me everything now.”

“Where is he?” I ask. “In his room?”
“He’s fine,” Caxton says. “The doctors are thrilled, he’s thrilled. We thought you’d be thrilled, too.”

I ignore him and walk toward the hall. Behind me, Caxton sighs. “Always the bridesmaid,” he says. “Always the last to know.”

At the door to Howard’s bedroom, I wait for my eyes to adjust to the dark. He’s in white pajamas, and against the patterned sheets, which I’m sure he was thrilled to see, he looks pale and helpless. Any light from the windows seems to draw itself around him, but it fails to bolster what I see. Instead, it highlights frailties: the curve of skull so visible now, the ragged line of his open mouth, the bright bandages taped across the tops of both bruised forearms.

When I move to the foot of the massive bed, I do so quietly. I’m working hard to remember what I felt with Kurt tonight, but can’t. Even though it was only 20 minutes ago that I left him.

I straighten the blanket across Howard’s feet, and because of that or because he’s been waiting to see me, even in his sleep, he wakes. His eyes slide open and he smiles.


Howard fusses with a button on his pajama top, then closes his eyes again, so long that I think he’s fallen back asleep. But then he says, “Better. Glad to be home.” He motions me closer, looking up at me with such obvious affection that I try my best to return.

“Oh, Mitch,” he whispers. “I’ve missed you. I’m no good in hospitals. No good at all.” He traces a finger across the back of my hand and yawns.

“Go to sleep,” I tell him. “We’ll talk in the morning.” I press my lips to his
forehead then move toward the door, where he stops me, calling my name.

“Mitch,” he says. “I’m so tired. I thought your hair was orange.”

VI.

The next month turns out to be fizz on a soda pop, foam on a beer. For the most part, I’ve managed to stay oblivious to anything below the surface. But it’s been hard work, this treading, and now I’m beginning to bob, beginning to dip.

Tonight, it’s dark and flat as old car oil outside, even darker in here; it’s probably about 11:00 or so. At the moment, I’m a wet heap on the floor of my room, with the rolling rods to my right and my bed to my left. I’m concentrating on my sweat as it cools on my skin, how such a thing actually feels.

For the past couple of weeks, I’ve made a habit of running, perversely drawn to a nightly, sweaty, hour-long stretch of time which forces me to consider what I’ve done, am doing, and still might do. Simply continue, running demands, as if that’s all that finally matters. But nothing certain comes from this time of reflection. With every stride, my thoughts twitch back and forth metronomically, Kurt to Howard, Howard to Kurt. It’s endless. Those two are the east and west of me now, both with as little knowledge of the other as I can manage.

Of course, Howard refers to Kurt by name and calls him my “beau.” But I tell him nothing new. And Kurt still chooses to believe that I live with an old family friend too ill for him to call or come over, for which I’m thankful.

Because yes, Kurt and I are a regular item these days. I took him up on his suggestion of a proper date for the simple reason that I wanted to see him again. That
night, he gave me a beer and then a tour of his duplex.

The kitchen barely held us both, the card table in there too big, but the refrigerator was well-stocked. In the bathroom, a three-foot stack of magazines sat between the commode and the tub. The closet, in the hallway, was only a quarter full. In the bedroom, there was a full-sized bed, a kid-sized dresser, and a chair with a sunflower painted realistically on the seat. In the whole place, not one of the walls was anything but plain.

Back in the living room, a huge rectangle of plywood rested on the floor, the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle lined carefully around a half-completed border. There was also a recliner, a rocker, and a beat-up television that Kurt switched on for “background noise.”

“I thought maybe dinner,” Kurt said. “Maybe a movie, if you like anything showing.”

“Easy to please,” I told him, and so we ended up at some kung-fu flick at the $1.50 movies, not exactly what I would’ve chosen. Halfway through, he apologized in an embarrassed whisper for not using a condom when we had fucked. I glanced around to see if anyone had heard, then motioned at the screen. I wasn’t sure I could have a serious conversation while Asian men kicked the shit out of each other, yelling as they were. “Negative,” I assured him, whispering. “I promise. Huge scare about a year ago. Multiple testing, many tears.”

“I’m negative too,” he said, and I nodded, sending a silent thank you to the heavens.

Actually, I hadn’t realized our neglect until the day after, and then, honestly, I’d been thrilled, loving how we’d crashed right past a topic that I, and I have to think everyone, has grown tired of, regardless of whether or not we can afford to be so weary.
This one time, I hadn’t wanted to think about such a thing and I hadn’t.

After the movie, we sat for a while in his pickup, parked in his drive. Atop the fence that separated us from his neighbors, a mass of honeysuckle grew, so huge that it rendered the passenger side door of the pickup inoperable. With the windows down, I smelled how sweet the plant was and envied walking outside to such an aroma every morning.

I pulled Kurt close and inhaled at his neck. He smelled like strong soap, but with something underneath, too, something only his. What it brought to mind were summers at the pond on Mr. Deakin’s land, when I was a boy. We kept my birds on his property, fenced-in behind our house, there on the southern edges of town. Mr. Deakin kept any of his cows that were sick back there as well, along with an old Chevy truck on blocks and a barn filled with hay bales, assorted tools, and his tractors. I slept in there sometimes, in the loft, if Dad worked nights.

The rest of Mr. Deakin’s land stretched off to the west of us, quite a large spread with several hundred head of cattle and a few hogs. The pond sat at the far edge, alive, as it felt to me now here in this pickup tonight: the sun becoming reflection as the sweat cooled at the small of my back, the dank smell of the mud at water’s edge, and the rich silence, filled as it was with the sound of water, bugs, and my own held breath. I hadn’t thought of those evenings in years.

“What kind of kid were you?” I asked.

Kurt shifted to look at me, drumming on the steering wheel. “Quiet, I guess. Nothing special. My dad ran a junkyard, so I spent a lot of time there. I hid a lot and daydreamed. Worked when the old man made me.”

“Popular?”
“Average. Never seemed to get that. What to say and all, how to be.” He ran a quick hand across the top of my head, petting. “Important, though, in a town that small. Kansas,” he continued. “Kinsley. I followed Heather a week after she moved down here, I was so ready to go.” He was quiet for a moment. “I miss my mom, but not really my dad. They’re getting old.”

I tried to picture him shorter, younger, wondering if he’d changed physically as much as I had. I considered asking to see pictures, but didn’t want to leave the pickup just yet. “This is nice,” I told him. “I like this.”

He grinned, then pulled my face closer and kissed me, his mouth traveling to my eyelids. He licked across my face, and when I opened my eyes, did so again, his tongue on my eyeballs, slow and wet. I couldn’t see, could only feel. He could have scooped them out it seemed, with his tongue, could have held my eyeballs in his mouth, not biting or swallowing, and never letting them dry. If he’d offered, I think I might have let him.

Since that night, we’ve done much the same sort of thing. We don’t belong to clubs, or attend anything weekly, or talk on the phone to people from our past. Or often from our present. We don’t play team sports, or demonstrate for social causes, or march in parades. Though I assume that’s for different reasons, Kurt seeming to have little idea that the political can extend beyond his own person. A trait, I’ll admit, that I like.

In the past, when I’ve discussed this topic with Howard and the gang, all of them except for Wayne as uninvolved in any sort of social action as I am, he’s said that he was born too early and I was born too late, that the thrill of upheaval affected most generously those born between us. I don’t really believe that; I think I’m just lazy and unconcerned. But, too, it’s not like my own life is so together that I have much room to preach to anyone
else.

So, except for dancing now and then, or watching wretched movies that I’ve actually come to enjoy, we both prefer evenings at home alone to evenings out. I go over there, we do whatever, something inane, and then we sit and talk, either in the pickup or in his tiny bed after sex so alternately rough and tender that I can’t ever place it afterwards in my mind. In memory, every movement is connected to the next and nothing’s distinct, just perfect.

What we’ve learned in our talks is that we like few of the same things, but can’t seem to get enough of testing that fact. Last Sunday, we’d planned a road trip, a nice enough drive to Forney, which is about an hour from here. It’s a small, highway-side town that consists almost entirely of antique stores, set up in giant warehouses, everyone there ready to slap a price tag on the past. If not their own, then surely someone else’s. I was excited about the trip because it seemed important proof of a common interest between the two of us, though Kurt wanted to look at pottery and I at clothes or pictures, anything that attested to its previous owner in an overt, sentimental way. Still, we’d be in tandem, looking, digging, searching.

But Howard pushed for me to spend the day with him. Since coming home from the hospital, he’s been incredibly nice, incredibly polite, and incredibly manipulative. He’s not a stupid man, and knows that I’m not always at work when I say I am. It’s just that I never thought jealousy would manifest itself in Howard in this way. He’s known that I’ve hunted down sex that included touching in the past, and has said little.

This is different, though, and he knows that, too. But truth be told, I thought that if ever provoked enough, Howard would simply kick me out. And though I don’t want
that, in any shape or form, I’m uncomfortable with a whiny Howard as well. What he

demands now is that I fetch him things, or rub his back, or fluff his pillows. It’s a
constant need. Also, he walks with his hand in the crook of my arm whenever we go out,
and I run interference. I read to him every night. And once a week, I accompany him to
the doctor since he no longer has any qualms about keeping me fully, obsessively informed
of his condition.

For the most part, I do all these things because I want to, because I want to help.
I’m thrilled that Howard feels better, and I’m thrilled that we’re back on track, his heart still
something to be monitored carefully instead of watched with dread. But every time I return
from seeing Kurt, Howard grows more petulant, and I wonder how long I can last.

In retrospect now, I can guess only that Howard understood this, too, that I was
growing weary. Because on the morning of the road trip to Forney, even though I’d lied
and said I was going with Judy from work, Howard woke me with breakfast in bed and
said he had a surprise for me, one that would be worthy of a change in my plans.

He was coy all through my eating and getting dressed, and then he drove me to
three sites, on Oak Lawn near Cedar Springs, in Travis Walk, and on the second level of
The Crescent. At each, he spun verbal gold, listing square feet, terms, possibilities.

“These are the best three options in the city,” he said. “For your store.”

His voice animated, he went on to articulate the possibilities, explaining how each
location would require a different style, a different “weight of visual elements,” how I
could hire anyone I wanted to design my store. “It’s all about tone,” he informed me at one
point. “But of course you’re the one who will have to decide such a thing, whether the
atmosphere is to be formal or relaxed, whether this is to be a place where a man will waste
time or come in only to purchase, whether that man will be old or young or somewhere in between."

He spoke as if I'd never thought about any of this before, never spent nights in my bed imagining every detail to the point that I already knew the tailor I would steal from Neiman's, the exact lines I would carry, the style of the hangers, the design of the wrap desk, and what I would wear on my very first day.

Through much of these lectures, in the car from place to place and then as we peered through the windows of each, I remained silent. There was a catch in my chest I couldn't work past. I'd waited a long time for this moment and now I couldn't believe it enough to readily respond. And I couldn't believe his timing.

But finally, at The Crescent, I spoke up and said that this was my favorite. It was smaller, but possessed of a moneyed seriousness that impressed me completely. As did the building itself. The Shops at The Crescent are attached to The Crescent Hotel, sister hotel to The Mansion at Turtle Creek. Annually, they're listed as two of the ten best hotels in the country.

The area that houses The Shops is a three-storied, open air oval, one end anchored by Stanley Korshak, a posh specialty clothier, the other opening to the hotel, while the center is marked by a grandly tiered fountain. Everything is rose granite, slate, and preciously detailed railings. The stores are pricey, understated. It's not a place in which I could ever imagine anything going wrong, as naive as that may sound.

Howard approved of my choice. "I'll make the necessary appointments for this one then," he said. "We'll get inside, let you check it out more closely. Caxton's worked with the realtor before, so it shouldn't be difficult." He shrugged, a problem solved. "Happy?"
he asked.

I was and told him so. I told him thank you and that I appreciated this and then thank you again, all in the same breath. I was still a bit dizzy, coming clear only when Howard asked me why having a store was so important to me. He’d never asked before, no one had. It had always just been assumed that it was a thing I wanted, some lark, as opposed to wanting it in the same way I wanted a bed, some food, potable water and decent air.

“The turkeys,” I said. “When I was a kid? Stock shows? You know.”

Howard remained intent on jiggling the change in his pocket, a suggestion of slight confusion marking his face. One of those looks that reminded me of his age. “Yes,” he said. “Of course I remember.”

“This is the opposite,” I said, then stopped, knowing that if I tried to explain my reasons any more than that, I’d only confuse him. Howard wasn’t the type to appreciate that clothes didn’t bruise and customers didn’t bid. This could be something wiser, better, even if it was just me, still showing, still enticing, doing all I know to do.


I loved hearing that. Loved it. It was a promise I could live with, and am doing so still tonight, repeating it, those three words whispered slowly, as a lover repeats a beloved’s name. Of course it also makes everything more complicated, what with this ultimate goal finally in sight and Kurt on my mind. I need to concentrate more.

Right now, tonight, Kurt’s in the living room of his duplex. Or at least he was when I jogged by earlier, the light through his blinds enough of his presence that I could continue on, turn, and make my way home. What he’s doing is working on a ridiculously
large puzzle, a present from Bethany, who proudly chose it herself.

The image is of marbles, just shiny globes of glass with color in the middle, all much the same. I would lose my mind over such a thing. But I know Kurt’s intent, focused, stripped to baggy briefs that I’ve come to find rather sexy. Silent, he sways over the eight thousand pieces, on his hands and knees with his head hung low. When he does this, it looks like an odd form of prayer to me.

At the Dairy Queen in Forney, the postponed trip now almost over, Kurt threatens me with a Dilly Bar. It’s melting, but still he thwacks it against my cheek and says he’ll lick me clean later. “Don’t you worry,” he says.

We’re in the last red booth on the left. This is one of those modernized DQs with wood paneling on the walls and security mirrors mounted up in the corners, where one or two males work behind the counter with all the women and the staff wears jeans and t-shirts instead of tacky red smocks. The rest of the clientele appears to be equally mixed between city folk on a day trip and a motley band of locals. It’s easy to assign everyone to a respective group. Clothes help, the addition of a cowboy hat not to be ignored. But also, some of the older men up near the front, the ones with coffees and a hint of ownership about the way they slouch, have been glancing back at us the louder Kurt gets.

He’s been like this all day, high-spirited and flirty. He took my hand in Little Red’s, at the end of a line of Victorian desks, and kissed me, laughing when I pushed him away. I lectured him then, slow to understand on this first trip of ours that he failed to compartmentalize new space as I do, into gay or straight. My actions don’t necessarily change from one to the other, but their tenor can be heightened or lowered accordingly,
smartly.

But Kurt seemed oblivious to my point, and still does. Here in this small-town DQ, he leans across the table as if he might go ahead and lick my face, proving that I've yet to discover any of his fears except age.

"Chicken," he says. He makes clucking noises and taunts me again with the ice cream bar.

"Just don't be so obvious," I say. "Fighting for me once proved your bravery, okay? There's no need to make a habit of it."

He sucks a mouthful of ice from his Coke and chews it, staring at me. A tendon in his jaw works. For a change, I don't smile or tease back. I look down and stuff another wad of salty fries in my mouth.

"Back in that alley, you think those boys kicked you because you're gay," he says.

"Of course."

The start of a laugh breaks free before he swallows it and shakes his head.

"Listen," he says. "You look like a movie star, you're white, you wear clothes that scream, 'Guess how much I cost.'" He reaches for his Coke again, making me worry that this chewing of ice might be a habit. "They had so many reasons to hate you," he says.

"Maybe they were just bored."

"Thanks," I say. "A lot. Did you even hear them? Did you hear what they called me?"

He nods, his face suddenly so pinched and sorrowful that I want to slug him.

"Mitch," he says. "Fuck. It's like you want the whole world's attention, but you don't know what to do with it. You can talk forever, but don't say anything. Sometimes,
make it really hard to understand you. I mean, you’re like a puzzle.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. I want to know exactly.

He closes his mouth and remains silent, watching the Dilly Bar melt on the napkin. After a while, he runs one finger tip along the back of my hand, his nail marking a white trail, tiny proof of his touch. “Nothing. Look, I like puzzles, but since I’ve fallen in love with you—.” He looks up quickly, and when he sees my face, he says, “Oh, come on. You knew that.”

“Exactly when did I know that?” I ask.

He mimes like he’s going to hit me. “All I’m saying,” he continues, “is that you make me feel... freer, like I don’t have to worry about everything so much—you know, what people think—and I wish I had the same effect on you.”

I nod. I can’t answer.

Kurt waits, tilting his head, then releases a sigh that sounds so like Howard I actually flinch. “Fine,” he says. “You ready to go?”

“Sure.” I push away my basket of fries and stand, leading him outside. This whole meal has me spooked. But when I get to the pickup and look back, I see that he’s joined the locals and is shaking everyone’s hands.

With what he’s said clanging in my head, I climb into the cab and watch him. He fits, I realize. Like a chameleon, he could blend in anywhere. I, however, cannot and have therefore always thought it unfair to be judged on the same “outness” scale as guys like Kurt. It’s easy for them to claim complete openness because I can’t imagine any straight person ever assuming they’re gay. But me? As a child I was too effeminate. As an adult I’m too overtly masculine. Sure, the latter is in large part compensation for the
former, but it's not my fault that much of gay culture changed right along with me. It's not me that lets him worry less, I decide. It's him.

When Kurt returns to the pickup, his spirits are back up to his usual level, as if the fact that I'm "hard to understand" is just a blip on his screen. "They saw the sign on the door," he says, pointing to the side of his truck. "One of them's got a house to be painted. It might be too far, but who knows?"

Oh, I think. So I'm the idiot. Defensive, I blame my silence on the heat, not on the fact that I can't think of anything to say, at least not anything nice, which Kurt deserves. I think about what it would feel like to blurt out that I love him too, but the thought does anything but take flight.

Because it's the why of my emotions that's troubling me. I could list a dozen things about Kurt that stun me: his great kindness, that farmer's tan that seems so innocent of the things he does to me physically, the way he'll talk about anything as long as I want and then we can simply sit quietly, together. But I can't say, "this, this one thing, this is why I think of him while I interact with other people, why I jeopardize all that Howard offers to keep him near." Though maybe we're not supposed to be able to do that; it's not like I would know.

And as for Kurt's reasons, I haven't a clue. I'd run from me if I were him.

Quietly, we roll onto the highway, one of a thousand vehicles heading into the sun, and too easily, the thought of lemmings comes to mind. We're in Kurt's pickup because he thought he might look at furniture, something large, but he didn't. I bought three old postcards with tractors on the front, happy messages on the back, and Kurt bought lunch. Now, I wish we were in my car; it has stronger air conditioning and a few other comforts. Plus, I'd have the driving to do, activities to occupy my hands. As it is, they're wandering
around me like dogs on a long leash, my control of them final if need be, but minimal in the meantime. I dig through the glove compartment, under the seat. I roll up the hems of my shorts to the point of risque and back again. Twice, I frog Kurt hard on the arm just to hear him grunt. But he doesn’t look at me.

Eventually, I give up and lean my head against the window, watching the other vehicles’ occupants, wondering what they’re thinking and where they’re going. If they’re happy or particularly sad. I did this as a child, too, and the act of it now conspires with the drone of the pickup’s tires to make me imagine it’s my dad to my left. When we traveled to stock shows, he spoke about Mom at times. Otherwise, he never brought her up, never answered if I did.

Mom’s name was Margaret, Maggie to friends, Mags to my dad. She was 23 when she died. According to the police, the car wreck that killed her was her own fault. This struck me as a cruel pronouncement for Dad to pass on, but he pointed out that he did so only to teach me. What the lesson was, though, was slow to be said.

Because before he discussed her death, Dad always told how the two of them met, doing so with a degree of animation quite unlike him.

At first, as a young boy, my dad developed his first real crush on Bess, Mom’s sister, the youngest of the three Graham girls. They lived on the edge of town, the wrong edge, and had for two generations in an unpainted house that Aunt Sal, the oldest, renovated after she married. Their father worked for the railway, the line running through the center of town. Their mother was a housewife, a woman no one of my generation knew enough to discuss.

“Elizabeth Taylor,” Dad said. “National Velvet Elizabeth Taylor, next to me in
geography class. Black hair. Perfect mouth. She made it hard to breathe, made it painful.

I tell you, son. You would’ve fallen in love just like the rest of us. Not a boy alive could
resist your Aunt Bess.”

He drummed his thumbs on the steering wheel. “Gave it a go,” he continued, shifting lanes. The pickup was still new then and responded quickly. Beyond us, burgeoning fields flashed by until they all looked the same. “I made little cards and carried her books, said nice things about her hair,” he said. “Called her a lot. She’d talk sometimes, but other times, half-way through a speech I’d thought about all day long, she’d give the phone to your mom. Just hand it over and walk off. I wouldn’t even know it until Mags would say, ‘It’s me, Frank. It’s Margaret.’” He looked at me, and I nodded, though I had no idea what I was acknowledging.

“Your mom was already in high school. We’d never met. She was pretty too, but not like Bess. Your mom’s looks were tougher. She had those eyes. Good honest looks, but I couldn’t see that yet.”

That’s when I wanted to jump in, but never did. I wanted more description. To me, at 10, 14, at any age, my mom was only a broad, smiling face in pictures, someone to conjure whole cloth while I waited impatiently at night for sleep to overcome me. Those eyes, I would think. What does that mean?

Dad forged ahead. “I couldn’t understand why she asked me things either. When Bess was on the phone, she talked about herself, her friends. But Mags. She asked me what kind of food I liked, what my favorite color was. What I wanted to be once grown.” He grins at me, tapping his temple. “After a while, all I wanted was her on the phone. Guess I’d been searching for someone to listen. Bess about died the first time I rang up
and asked for her sister. Then she was glad. Already a lot better boys than me were calling for Bess.”

He watched a Mustang hurry around us, then glanced at his speedometer. “Lucky for us all,” he said.

I’d heard this entire story before, many times on many drives, but was still caught unaware by that last line, stuck as I was on the thought of my two parents talking on the phone. Like kids. Like the kids they were. I had a horrible time imagining them as young as or even younger than me. Little about the dad I knew suggested boyishness, and Mom was already dead. That last line then, that “lucky,” seemed to me wrong-headed and perverse.

And I hated that it bridged to the scene of her death, though not immediately. Dad had to stew for a while before resuming, had to mumble to himself and press the accelerator pedal until we sped above the limit. Usually, waiting, I turned to the window beside me and searched for kids in the other cars, other boys in other pickups. I thought I might learn something.

When he began talking again, Dad always twisted a bit toward me, affording a three-quarter view of his face that seemed to have so little in common with my own. Often, before and after my acne years, I was mistaken for Aunt Bess’s boy, which she loved, being unmarried and childless. Dad liked it too, telling me I’d gotten all the good genes from all the right places. But his own face, he called “doughy,” a description hard to argue with. Almost featureless at first glance, the parts of his face, his eyes and mouth and all the muscles in his cheeks, remained fairly slack, regardless of whether he laughed or yelled. There was one look only, which verged on blankness. I’d seen adults stop in at the station
for gas and assume he was slow, start enunciating carefully and raising their voices. He’d
stare back at them with the same expression he would’ve had if they’d assumed he was
Einstein. All in all, it was a face I studied, that I loved, that scared me at times. I had no
idea that years later, when I left for college, it would find a way to cry.

“I was with old man Lott back then,” Dad began. “Before the Dunlap. Worked
so many hours, I didn’t get to see you much. But you loved when I took you along out
there. You’d thump them melons, bigger than your head.” He flipped on the left-hand
blinker for no reason, then flipped it off. “So your Mom would’ve waited supper when
she got done teaching, would’ve sat by the stove and kept it warm. She came home that
day with a mum from her students. Little kids pitching in.”

From there, he described how she picked up the two-year-old me at Aunt Sal’s, the
family home, and how I fixated on the mum attached to her lapel, a bronze flower as big as
my hand that trailed green and white streamers down her chest, with her name glittered on
the ribbons along with “Go Eagles,” her two initials in pipe cleaners on the mum itself.
How I loved it so much that she gave it to me, let me tear it apart and rub it all over myself.

I’m told I was positively giddy with the excitement of it all. In the past, though not
to my face, Aunt Sal has described me in that moment as “overcome.”

“Your mom had never seen you so happy,” Dad continued. “She asked your Aunt
Sal for ten more minutes, time enough to run to Ben Franklin’s and buy more ribbons,
more glitter, some glue, then make it back. For you,” Dad said.

He meant come back for me, meant buy those things for me. He meant give up the
next so-many minutes for me, and therefore her life. After so many renditions, I wished
he’d go ahead and spell it out like that, make it as clear as I knew it could be.
But he didn’t. Instead, he drove on, his voice coming as fast as the traffic. He detailed those minutes in a way that left me feeling he’d been there, right by her side.

She made it to Franklin’s, made it inside and down aisle four. There, she found a display of glitter, all in round plastic vials, separated by color. I knew that’s where the glitter was kept because I worked at that never-changing Five and Dime the summers I was 12 and 13, sweeping up when the shop closed, those two summers straddling the school year I served my classmates in the cafeteria in order to get a free lunch. I swept those aisles to buy turkey feed while Mrs. Egerton, the proprietress, counted all the cash drawers and complained about her feet.

I’d slow down on aisle four, most of the lights in the high ceiling already off, the darkness failing to make the glitter wink. I’d lean against the broom handle and think about my mom. Think that I should feel something, that I ought to cry. But the loss of her was too distant, too much a part of the past. I’d already spent years learning how to remain affectless, and even that glitter couldn’t break its way through.

“She bought gold and silver,” Dad pointed out. “Same colors as on the mum.”

Then she hurried to our car, an old Galaxie 500. And less than a block away, she rammed it into the back of one of Dawson Oil’s flatbed trucks. A lengthy metal rod it carried broke loose and stabbed the car’s windshield, ending deep in the middle of my mom’s head. She died instantly, the coroner said, but it took half an hour to cut her loose, long enough for Dad to show up and see her like that.

Quickly, he jumped in to assist with her extraction, even though the firemen already working on her thought he should step back and wait, that he shouldn’t see his wife impaled on a stick of iron, two inches wide, buried in her skull where her nose should be.
“She was coated with glitter,” Dad said.

By that time, he was coated with sweat himself and twisting his hands, no longer looking at me as he drove. Fairly unaware I was there. But I could hear the squeak of his palms, could hear the pressure there on the steering wheel, could feel it in the way the pickup bore forward, so straight and true. “Blood near everywhere,” he continued, “but glitter atop it all. When we got her out, the sun shone down on your mother, son. She gleamed. Your mother gleamed.”

Though that’s not what he said when he came to get me that day. Instead, he held my hand so hard it hurt. That’s about all I remember, even if Aunt Sal never believed I didn’t remember the rest as well, didn’t remember the pain of Dad scrubbing glitter from my chest and hands, my hair, my tongue. Scrubbing so hard that my face swole and my eyes puffed shut. Aunt Sal had to beat him before he’d stop, had to hit him with a frying pan and kick him and claw. “He’s all you got left,” she yelled at him.

He never talked about that, never relayed anything after the pulling of Mom from our car, the weight of her in his arms. As we drove on to Houston or San Antonio, whatever place we’d be heading, where he’d leave me behind with my birds, he jumped straight and finally to the lesson of it all. “When there were so many other possibilities,” he said. “Foil, she could have given you foil. Foil shines.” He suggested silverware and a beaded cape of Aunt Sal’s. “The fender of the car,” he said. “Same thing.”

He glanced at me then, wanting agreement, confirmation. “But that’s in the past,” he finish, one touch quick on my arm. “All in the past.”

And that was it. “The past” examined from a single angle, then dropped for a one-sided discussion of my future, my “upcoming success with the birds.” But the present, in
the real sense of the two of us sitting there side by side, father and son? In so many ways, it didn’t exist.

I glance at Kurt and think about telling him all this. In the past, Marie’s the only one who’s heard the tale. I wouldn’t even consider sharing it with Howard because he’d label it, or make a pronouncement. But Kurt? I think he’d understand, I think he’d know better than to ask how it all made me feel, as if I could explain such a thing even to myself. He’s smarter than that.

But when I say his name, and he looks at me, humming, without a single concern visible on his face, all I can say is, “What a day, huh?”

Nodding, he reaches over to brush a thumb against my arm, this gesture of connection made with such ease that I can’t help but wonder what I’m doing to his life, and whether, in the long run, as usual, I’ll be anything but bad.

Back in my room, on my bed, I leave the light off and roll to my stomach. I’ve stripped and cranked the central unit to high. On the sill of the window before me are my four new treasures, the three postcards I bought today and a surprise from Kurt. They glow nicely in the moonlight, the buildings of downtown looking to be about the same height.

I have no idea where Howard’s at. Often, he leaves a note, but not this evening. Probably out of spite.

Of course that’s an emotion I know myself. By the time we made it to Kurt’s place, I was pouty again, tired and hot, a general pain in the ass. But Kurt took it all in stride. He invited me inside and promised to scrounge up something decent from the
On the recliner, I flung my legs over the side, expecting for Kurt to hurry to the kitchen, but instead, he stared at the puzzle on his floor. From the looks of the empty peanut butter jar and several cracker wrappers on the floor, I could tell he’d worked on it most of the previous night, had stayed up being logical and toiling toward completion. Now, the flat mass of marbles was almost complete, orb after orb of shiny glass, each with some brilliant flash of color wrapped nicely inside.

“You’re just about done,” I said.

Kurt looked back at me and shrugged. He pulled a paper bag from behind his back, then handed it over, the top of it wadded like a little kid’s sack lunch. “Scared you were gonna find it when you went tearing through the pickup. Before you went to la-la land,” he said, still thinking I’d slept during the ride.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Open it.”

I was too surprised to say anything smart. “A porno tape,” I guessed. “Something from the ’70s, with truckers and mustaches. Outdoor scenes. Lots of unprotected fucking and men with real paunches.”

“Lord, no.” Kurt grimaced. “Just open it.”

I did and found within a wooden man. He stood maybe five inches tall, about half an inch thick. Very folk art, very primitive. His face was three dots of paint, everything else suggested in the grain, the curve of it. He wore a tuxedo and top hat, quite the dapper little gent.

“When?” I asked. I couldn’t remember Kurt more than three feet away from me the whole time we’d searched during the day. I flipped on the lamp above me to see their faces
better, Kurt’s and the little man’s.

“When I went to the john,” Kurt said. “Supposedly. I sprinted over to the next warehouse and bought it, then ran all the way to the pickup and hid it. Then back.” He grinned crookedly. “You didn’t even notice I was breathing hard. How’s that for sneaky Kurt?”

“He’s perfect,” I said. “Thank you.”

Kurt bowed, doffing an imaginary hat of his own. When he straightened, it was obvious how pleased he was with himself. He made a gleeful face, pushing his palms against his stomach, an attempt, maybe, to keep something inside.

In response, I stood and kissed him. Then I left as quickly as I could. I was too stunned by how perfect a gift he’d chosen to stay or talk, to be the way I was being.

Now, on my window sill, the little man stares forward. He has a look of seriousness about him, of direct forthrightness; he looks to know what he needs.

I like too that he’s dressed up and ready to go. I throw on briefs and shorts, socks and shoes, and take him with me. We turn right where I usually turn left. The Crescent’s only a few blocks away.

In front of the empty shop Howard showed me, I stand the little man before the window and give my own version of Howard’s speech from the previous week. I explain why as many Japanese designers will be carried as Italian, why a couple of Germans deserve a shot. I talk about how small the Dallas market is for such clothes and how visitors from the nearby hotel might be a source of real clientele. I talk about carpet and lighting and the type of music I could play. I explain it all, and the little man listens. He listens so well.

I need to learn how to juggle, we decide. Think of all we could have.
VII.

Work, today, is more a test of strategy than actual work. Last Call is coming up soon, and there’s no way customers will spend now when we’ve taught them so assiduously that waiting will procure the same item at a bargain. Who can blame them?

But for them, I’m spending the day making notes, preparing for pre-sale next week, a two-day period I hate. What happens is this: we lug all the fixtures out of one room, usually and unfairly the Designer room, re-fill it with cloth-covered tables, and then load those tables high with every item that’s receiving a final markdown. It’s a sort of bargain basement approach to fine retail, with the stated purpose of having all the better clients come in the two days before the sale and pick out what they want, without fighting the crowds.

They can’t buy what they want during those two days, though. They can only choose it, have it stashed away, and then ring up before the store opens the day of the actual sale. Plus, so many customers now know about pre-sale that the crowds aren’t that much smaller. Retail foreplay is what it is, delayed gratification and the building of the purchase into something grand and satiating. When they finally get to take something home, I half expect them to moan, “Oh baby,” then light up a Marlboro.

So far, my strategy’s about half mapped out. Super Salesman Geoff is in the fitting room now, with two account executives from Rolland Advertising. They’re younger than me, these two guys, fresh out of college and making too much money. In their hearts, I think they’re hoping they’ll walk out of here as Geoff clones. Not that he’s overly attractive, but his is a look that makes me dislike him at times, makes me doubt my
mornings at the gym because his brand of slouched, understated masculinity is just so effortless.

At a time when so many gay men shave their bodies, which I don’t, and work to make every line of their body a curve, which I do, Geoff makes me wonder if he’s more male simply because he fucks women, as unevolved as that may seem. What I mean is that I’m taller than he is, stronger than he is, and neither of us are testaments to rich inner lives. Yet, if 100 people were to choose between the two of us to illustrate “man” in the dictionary, with no knowledge of our sexual natures to sway them, I bet the majority would still select him simply because he doesn’t think about such things, doesn’t have to. And that sort of unencumbered, unworried-ness shows, honest to God, in everything he does. I can’t explain how much I hate that.

In retaliation, I always make more money than he does at sale time. While he’s back there, I’ve spread clientele pages across the desk and am hunkered down. It’s not like there are any customers to interrupt me. Occasionally there’s a tourist or two to poke fun at the prices, to exclaim, “Hey, Mabel!” and hold up a shirt they’d never wear even if it were free. I like these people at times, or try to. I like their ability to be shocked, their willingness to appear uncertain and naive. It’s almost charming, but not quite.

At the moment, I’m mentally comparing Betty Ahlschlager to Rick Riojas. Betty is 62, nearly six feet tall, and the physical embodiment of ancient money, with hair the color of sterling. She wears only men’s clothes, mostly tailored suits with open-collared Turnbull & Asser shirts beneath, pearls at the neck, but occasionally she’ll attempt something funkier, something “young,” as she says. Rick, on the other hand, is a 33-year-old architect who rides his bicycle to the point of obsession and has possibly the most
beautifully muscular legs of any man alive. I’ve fantasized about him more than once in the privacy of my mirrored bathroom, imagining what those legs could do.

Both of them, then, are people I like, and all season, the two of them have coveted the same pair of Matsuda pants, plain-front and patchworked. I’ve worked insanely hard to convince either that $1,400 is a reasonable price to pay when neither is hurting for cash, all the while knowing that what has happened would happen because they refused, determined to wait for those infamous Neiman Marcus markdowns. “All your generosity in one fell swoop,” Betty likes to say. They’ve ignoring my warnings, and now there’s only one pair left in their size.

Therefore, someone’s bound to be displeased, and it’s up to me to decide whether it’s more important that Betty spent almost $3,900 more with me over the past six months or that Rick will strip without closing the door. Does aged money count? Looks and the opportunity to look? It’s a dilemma that I might just solve by buying the damn pants myself, only $364 after markdowns and discount.

I’m contemplating this, pleased with what a fine solution selfishness might be, when Judy walks across from Polo with a note.

Over time, I’ve learned that she has no one with money waiting at home, no real family at all that I can tell. One good friend, Faye, a wonderfully crazed woman with breasts like a shelf, meets her for lunch sometimes. But usually, it’s just Judy, making her way through a day with an amount of resolve that strikes me as formidable. I wish I knew her better than I do.

“I took this ages ago,” she says, handing me a folded sheet of paper. “Sorry.” She bobbed her hair last week and colored it red. It swings along her cheek now as she makes
apologetic gestures. "I didn’t realize you’d come back from lunch."

"Goob, I’ve been back almost 90 minutes," I tease. I unfold the paper and see that Chuck, one of the security guards from Howard’s highrise, has called. There’s his name, the phone number. Nothing more.

"Damn it!" I can’t believe this. Certainly, something has happened to Howard, just when things have been going so well. But I can’t understand why no one has tried to call again.

"Judy," I say. "When, exactly, did you get this? What, exactly, did he say?" I’m trying to decide if I should just go straight to the hospital, if I should even bother calling home.

Judy fidgets and looks back toward Polo. She’s nervous now. She’s probably the most reliable person around this place, and this moment isn’t one she’s accustomed to because on another day, one approaching normalcy, our roles would be reversed.

"Two hours," she says. "No more than that. I promise. All he said was to call."

Frantic, I pick up the phone. "Chuck?" I say when my call is answered. But it’s Willy, the newest of the security squad and my least favorite. I swear he’s Barney Fife reincarnated, but even less at home in the world.

"Chuck’s gone home," he tells me, slowly drawling, and I can see him sitting there, so pleased that I’ve given him something to do. The security desk, broad and burled, runs down one whole wall beneath etched windows, the length of it fitted with banks of television screens and more high-tech phones than could ever be necessary. Willy’s dwarfed by this desk and its overreaching purposefulness.

"It’s Mitch Zeller," I tell him. "Chuck called me at work. About Howard, about
Mr. Clenellan. When was he taken to the hospital?"

"Well, that was a while ago," Willy says. "About two weeks now, I guess. But you’d know better than me."

"No, today!" I yell. It’s difficult not to beat the phone on the desk. The air feels slack. I shouldn’t have wasted time calling. "When did he go to the hospital today?"

"Mr. Zeller, you got to calm down," Willy says. "I don’t know what you’re talking about. Chuck called because some guy came in here about 3:00 o’clock this morning looking for you. Got all mad when we wouldn’t wake you up, but we told him, ‘There are certain hours that Mr. Clenellan cannot be bothered, and this is one of them, buddy.’ We both told him that. I know Chuck was gonna give you the message on your way out this morning, but you didn’t come back from the gym like you usually do."

"What guy?" I don’t want to hear this.

"Kirk, I think. Skinny dude. Anyway, when you never called back, Chuck called up to Mr. Clenellan’s and gave the message to him." He pauses. "It’s his place, right?"

Since it’s Friday, the whole gang’s here, which makes it worse. In fact, as if to bedevil the situation, they were here by the time I arrived. For his part, Howard’s been acting unaware of anything untoward, and doing so expertly all through dinner. Give the man an Oscar.

As for me, I’m a mess, a bundle of live wires, all of them twitching about and sparking on anything hit. There’s no way I can build up the nerve to ask Howard for whatever it is Chuck told him today. I just can’t. All afternoon, I called Kurt’s number, and then stopped by his duplex and Heather’s and Bob’s house on the way home. Both
places were locked up tight, but I have no idea whether that’s for the moment, a week, or
forever. People don’t just disappear, right? This is what I’m telling myself now; it’s
become a sort of mantra.

Smiling beatifically, Howard sits at the far end of the inlaid table, one of the few
pieces of furniture that never disappears. The Diebenkorn hangs behind him, while I’m at
the opposite end, with the kitchen behind me. Given this arrangement, Howard believes
that he can signal to Luisa without anyone noticing. Caxton, oddly sheepish, and Wayne
both sit to my left, while Brian and George bicker on my right. I’m convinced that the
spotlights in the ceiling have been resituated to shine directly in my face, though I’m trying
to believe otherwise.

So far, we’ve made our way through the ribolita, which Luisa served more quickly
than is her habit, dumping ladlefuls into our bowls, then scurrying away. Full of carrots,
white beans, and a couple of other things I couldn’t even identify, the soup went quickly, a
blessed cause for the slacking of chatter. But as she brought out the roasted chicken,
surrounded on the silver platter by artful hillocks of garlicky broccoli, everyone seemed to
rev back up into high verbal gear. For the past five minutes, we’ve been discussing the
recent theft of Brian’s car, a Lexus he loves in a way that approaches the sexual.

“It was a first-year model,” Brian repeats, George patting his arm in a rare show of
support. “One of the first bought in this city, too.”

Brian prides himself on being a style-setter, some sort of barometer of what the
masses will want. Yet I know of few people who constantly lick their thumbs to wipe their
earlobes. He catches me frowning at him and lowers his hand. “It’s upsetting,” he says.
“I feel violated.”
Wayne is quicker than I am on that one. "Isn’t that a bit much," he says. "Honestly, Brian. It’s a car."

So far tonight, Wayne hasn’t talked to me directly. We still meet up at the gym most mornings, but even that has grown awkward, our gazes kept noncommittal and separate. Since Howard’s hospital stay, he seems to consider me somehow responsible. I’ve tried to discuss it all—what he thinks, what he feels—but he shuts down at the mention of myself and Howard, which I think is unfair. I want to remind him of sitting beside me on the piano bench not so long ago and championing my interest in Kurt, in something other than what we sit here doing.

"It could be an opportunity," he continues, a napkin at his mustache. "The insurance will cover the cost of a new one." He reaches for more broccoli, more of the potatoes. "Don’t take it personally," he says.

Howard, who’s remained quiet through much of this, motions at me. "How’s your car been running, Mitch? Any problems?"

"It’s fine." Howard bought the used car for me soon after I moved in here, a huge fight threatening the whole arrangement as Howard was set on the latest, largest model of BMW, which I found intimidating and too obvious. "Might as well brand your name on my forehead." I told him, because at that point I still worried about such things, about keeping some piece of me for myself. Tonight, it amuses me that I thought a used car was so much less a payoff than a new one would be.

These days, such ideas are distant, vague considerations, and the fault for this is only my own. Staring the length of the table, I think that what Howard and I have engaged in these past three years is a war of sorts, complete with battles and skirmishes, myself as
both competitor and the prize.

But he hasn’t won yet, even if, insane as it sounds, this whole topic isn’t something I’ve tried to analyze very deeply. Probably out of a desire not to face anything I don’t have to face. Instead, I’ve simply accepted the promise of a store and assumed that I am for Howard an accessory nicer than any Caxton has, younger and more attractive than most. Malleable, too. Which I think Howard appreciates: my odd blend of outward blankness, curious stasis, and the ability to remain unsurprised. Certainly, it makes his life easier that I go along, simply, like an oxen toward food. So it’s no surprise that this whole Kurt thing, this attraction of mine to a man for more than a night, has thrown him. Up to now, we’ve both played our roles quite well.

As a boy, back when I knew life wasn’t simple but still thought it was at least somewhat less complicated than mine is right now, one of my favorite haunts was that tiny pond on Mr. Deakin’s land, a scummy divot of brackish water several hundred yards beyond the turkey pen. The pond rested at the base of a small hill, the edge of the two a perfect recliner to make use of before the setting sun. There, I spent most of my time digging through mud, chasing frogs, and testing water beetles.

These insects, with glassy black bodies shaped like missiles and elongated legs the width of filament, stood poised atop the water, balancing effortlessly. Up close, I watched for hours as their thread-like legs, footless it seemed, touched upon the wet surface without breaking through and falling under. A magical feat, I found it, and remained amazed. In one summer, I filled three pocket-sized notepads with statistics, marking the minutes spent frozen before the beetles moved, the effect of waves made by me in varying strengths on their posture and stability, and how close I could wade before they fled.

I remember dragging my dad out there to see this phenomena, his calloused palm
clasped in both of mine as I tugged, and showing him all my data while he nodded, confused and possibly amused. “How can they do that?” I demanded, wanting from him the knowledge of how these creatures kept from tiring, why they stayed so still for so long. It seemed impossible to me, and Daddy had no answers. Tonight, on the question of why Howard and I refuse to tire in the midst of our own balancing act, I have none either. But maybe, like those insects, we’re simply doing what we’re designed to do.

“My car’s fine,” I tell Howard again.

“Well, it’s important to watch that sort of thing,” he says. “I want to keep you as safe as possible, you know. That’s my goal.”

I nod, foregoing any sort of expression such a remark calls for, then motion to George for more wine, the bottle at his elbow in a bucket. Liquor might help. But when he lifts the bottle, ice shifting noisily, we both see that it’s empty. I stand and step into the kitchen for another before Howard does, quickly, because I’ve been wanting a moment with Luisa anyway. She takes messages as much as anyone does around here. Also, Howard hasn’t allowed the two of us to be together without him yet, which strikes me as an obvious sign.

“Hey,” I say, when she pulls back from the open refrigerator. She ignores me and moves to the work station in the center of the floor. The kitchen’s oversized and high-tech, everything metallic and gleaming, and there are times when I think Luisa would appreciate something a little simpler, designed more for working in than looking at. “Hello-o-o,” I continue when she doesn’t even glance at me. “You’re not talking to me either?”

She’s uniformed tonight, her hair pinned back. She stops fussing with the individual cakes arranged on the woodblock surface and stares forward through the open
doorway, probably at Howard. There are half a dozen of the perfect little cakes before her, spicily aromatic, and a seventh unfrosted one that she'll eat herself. The white bowl of strawberry sauce from the refrigerator waits in the middle, the red so red, like too-fake blood.

“You've outdone yourself tonight,” I say, sticking a finger in the sauce, bringing it to my mouth. “Scrumptious eats.”

I can see the flutter of one cheek. She looks up for a second, muttering, then moves to unlatch the kitchen door and guide it shut. Through the inset window in the top half of it, I can see Caxton glancing our way. He's said nothing tonight, I realize; he hasn't even asked for particular foods. That's easily frightening to me, him silent, and I try to concentrate on Luisa standing now before me instead of letting my thoughts spiral out of control, all questing for what a muzzled Caxton might portend.

“Luisa.” I take her warm hand in mine and lean closer. “Did you get a message today? From security? It was supposed to go to me, but I think Howard might have stepped in.” I flash an enormous, perfected smile. “It's fine if that happened, but I really need to know what it said.”

She gives a quick dip of her chin and glances at the closed door, which doesn't stay that way. “The natives are getting restless,” Howard says as he enters. Like everyone else, he's overdressed tonight, in black pants and a starched shirt with emerald cuff links, actually quite tasteful, given to him by his grandfather when he turned 21. They're his favorites and seldom worn. “Trouble finding that wine?” he asks.

“No, Mr. Howard.” Luisa slips her hand from mine.

“Just discussing whether to stay with the same vintage,” I say. “Change can be
good, right?” I step forward and sling my arm around Howard’s shoulders, turning him, pressing with my body until we walk together back into the dining room. Luisa deserves no part of our endless squabbling.

When I sit, staring at Caxton with an arched brow, signaling as best I can that a life preserver of any sort would be appreciated here, he tilts his head toward the den, where I see that Howard is headed. Wayne’s eating silently, intent on his food. Brian and George are whispering to each other, only the sibilant syllables audible to the rest of us. It’s so tempting to reach over and slap them both, as hard as I can. I consider even pretending to do so, for my own peace of mind, but I’m a good boy. I growl at them instead, stopping only when Howard returns to the table.

He’s carrying a gift-wrapped box that’s flat, about a foot long and almost as wide. The paper is a deep brown, the ribbon burgundy. He slides my plate toward the center of the table and carefully sets this package before me. “A bomb?” I ask.

Howard laughs, and when he does, I join right in. “Dear Mitch,” he says. “This is a great day. I don’t know why you’re so jumpy.” He rubs a hand across the top of my head, down to the base of my neck. His hand rests there. I can feel it shake. I can feel the coolness of his skin.

It’s difficult not to pull away, but everyone stares at me, waiting, and so I do what’s expected. I tear at the ribbon and the paper, ripping into both like an overeager five year old on Christmas morning. The box itself has no store name affixed, which surprises me, and when I lift the lid, I see that the tissue doesn’t either. Lord, I think, Howard might have actually wrapped this himself. But also, it’s beautifully done, which means Luisa must have been asked to do it, to keep this a secret as well.
Finally, with a deep breath, I lift back the tissue and see before me an imposing looking document, complete with dates, addresses, and sums. A quick perusal of it makes my skin tingle, the food I’ve eaten weigh heavier. What I’m holding is a three-year lease for the space at The Crescent, the home for my store. What I’m holding is my future.


She backs into the room with her arms loaded, as Howard tells of how excellently she’s kept all this secret today. I try to catch her eye, to involve her in a moment she knows I’ve looked forward to, but she ignores me still, her gaze drilling the floor. It’s enough to make me wonder, a tiny drop of panic seeping wide across my tongue. Quickly, I think back over everything again then turn back to the forms and flip page by page.

There are two sets of documents, I discover. And clipped to the bottom of the second is a note on highrise stationery. The address of this building is printed across the top, with a small pictorial of its south facade. Below that, in a now familiar, backward-slanting script, is written this: “Got to leave town for five days. Funeral. I’ll explain when I get back. We should have a real talk. Miss you already. Kurt.”

It hits me then, and I compare the two documents, searching for the one difference that will prove me smart enough to guess correctly. Which I am. Everything—me, the room, the men around me—all seem to buckle and sink as I see that the copy on top sets up the business in my name, but the second, the one with Kurt’s note attached, lists Howard Clenellan as the sole proprietor. On that one, my name is nowhere to be seen.

I note that neither copy of the lease has been signed and glance up at Howard.

His eyes are flat, his mouth a slash, though his whole face is suffused with
something more stimulated than either of those features would suggest. His skin looks filled to me, as if a good taxidermist's been at work. He's enthralled with what he's accomplished here tonight. Slowly, he leans close and whispers, "It's something to think about." He kisses me quickly at the temple, once, twice. "The choice is yours," he adds. "I'll support whatever you want."

The rest of the evening is a prime example of forced merriment. At a certain point, I decide we should all be shipped to Hollywood, hired to supply the laugh tracks for every bad sitcom ever made. With Howard setting the standard, we would laugh at anything, guffawing until we're red-faced and coughing, spraying amusement like it's spit. Honestly, the whole thing is almost as bizarre as it is sad.

Luckily, though, no one asks for a speech from me, even as I wait for such a call from Howard, thinking he might twist the nuts while he can. But, perhaps, he feels his hand has been played and anything more would be superfluous. He's not cruel after all, simply determined. And actually, there's a part of me, the part that wishes I was someone else, someone strong and forward-moving, someone Marie-like or Kurt-like, that admires what he's done tonight. Whichever choice I make, he'll have lived up to his half of our original, unspoken bargain. And he's certainly made his point about my extracurricular activities, even while telling everyone else that he's helping with my future now because of his own precarious health.

What with all the toasts and congratulations, it takes about an hour before we can graciously show the gang the door, and then about 20 minutes beyond that for Luisa to finish tidying the den and make her quick, silent exit. She doesn't look at me, even as she
leaves, and I think that maybe I should have continued attending church with her. I might have learned something useful.

But I know I won't be with her morning after next. Instead, I'll probably be right here, still trying to make up my mind. I glance at Howard, who says, "20 minutes?" and when I nod, continues on to his bedroom. It's Friday night after all, and though there are those, I'm sure, who would have me walk out right now, I want to have this decision to make. I want to stay in the game as long as I can. After all, it's all I've come to know.

Sighing, I flip off the lights and plop my ass on the ridiculous couch, so uncomfortable. I hate decisions. Obviously. To put off the inevitable, I think back to third grade and my teacher that year, Miss Evelyn Brozowski. She was a tall woman with eyes that weren't quite horizontally even and a perfectly aquiline nose.

One afternoon, right there at the edge of the Bennett Litwin Elementary playground, she caught Bobby Geiger mashing my face into a chain link fence. He was doing this because I'd been brave enough, after weeks of working up my nerve, to walk up and tell him hello. He was doing this because according to the spot I held in the pecking order, this was what I deserved.

But as if she didn't understand that fact, Miss Brozowski pulled him off me and yelled for another teacher to hurry me to the nurse. Then, as I was being carried away by Mr. Mula, I heard her say too calmly, "Robert Joseph Geiger, you don't understand that life's about choices. And that you need to be certain about every one you make. Young man," she said, "you need to think."

Twisting my head that day I saw that Bobby cared little for her words, but they stuck with me, entering into me in a way I still don't understand. At that time, though, I
didn’t know they’d last. Instead, I huddled back, grabbing Mr. Mula’s shoulders and, without realizing it, swiping his neck with blood.

When we stepped into Nurse Pettit’s shiny office, she sucked in her breath, one hand rising to her twisted mouth. It was enough to make me wriggle forward from Mr. Mula, seek out a mirror, and scream. On the rough-edged diamonds of that fence, Bobby had scraped off half an eyebrow and a chunk of my nose. Until I saw it, I didn’t feel a thing.

I fainted, straight to the floor. And when I woke, I was wrapped in a blanket on Nurse Pettit’s lap with a gauzy bandage taped across my face, blocking edges of my vision. I looked up into her face, into her tender concern, and heard Mr. Mula in the hallway. “Makes me think of his mother,” he said. “Give me those damn nightmares all over again.”

It wasn’t until two days later, when I asked my dad and he told me Mr. Mula used to be a volunteer fireman, that I understood he’d been there when my mother died, that he’d seen what I could only imagine.

And so that’s the image I take with me to Howard’s bedroom, my mom’s face mirrored in my own, and what I’m questioning is Miss Brozowski’s wisdom. For if every decision presupposes regret, and even no decision is a decision of sorts, then how does any human discover the bravery required to raise even a finger? After all, you might end up bloodied regardless, the blood yours or someone else’s.

Howard ignores me when I walk in, ignores me as I drag his father’s chair into the room and suss out the cords from his dresser. When he takes his seat, he’s a bit more prim and certain than usual. I tie the cords, careful not to touch him, then take off my shirt and
stop. I can hear him breathing, can smell the taint of his cologne. "What do you get from
this?" I ask.

"No talking," he sings, as if he's reminding a very small child.

got to know my dick as well as I do."

He stares, and I shrug, not so much pleased that I finally asked, but thinking that it
was the right thing to do. Out of my boxers, I peel off my socks and grab my penis. I
twist it and pull, stretch it out long then snap it against my thigh. I arch my back and rise to
my toes. But nothing. Usually I can turn off at this point, I can send my mind to God
knows where while physical sensations take over and do the job. Tonight, though, my
body seems to be making the decisions my brain refuses to make.

But, like those beetles on Mr. Deakin's pond, I continue, alternating hands until the
glimmer of my mother finally fades from mind. Instead, I think of Kurt, of the true taste of
him just beneath his balls, and everything lifts hesitantly into gear. Though there's no
show to it tonight. I don't turn, or flex, or lift a leg. I stand flat-footed, unposed, and jerk
as roughly at myself as possible. And when I come, it's such a sad little bit of me that

VIII.

I've pilfered the spare key from beneath the cobwebbed eave and let myself in,
gulping Kurt's beer, clutching his pillow tight for the smell of him there, which I've come
to need. The window unit in his bedroom is accomplishing little and because of that I'm
naked and splayed on my stomach, fitfully drowsy, in that wonderful condition somewhere
between wakefulness and sleep. I'm imagining that it's winter out, that shadows are no longer the place to run and the dark something to wait for, when I see that Kurt's at the doorway, rooted as if he's been there for hours. With the kitchen light on behind him, he's more a form than anything distinct, this blank space against what's beyond, but I know it's him: the tilt of his head, crook of an arm, the way his left foot is positioned slightly ahead of the right.

"Hey." I reach out a hand, stretching.

He dumps a military-style duffle bag to the floor, stands for a moment, tugging his t-shirt over his head, then climbs silently atop me. The bed sags. I can feel his weight, solid, and the tickle of his breath on the back of my neck. His heart beats above me.

"I'm so glad you're here," he whispers.

His voice exits broken, rasping the side of my face like a chunk of rough wood.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Better. Can we just stay like this?"

I twist an arm behind me and tug one of his hands to my face, pressing it flat. I kiss his palm, tongue between the fingers, then fold it tight. "As long as you want," I assure him.

But as soon as I've spoken, Kurt lifts from me and stands, leaving me even more naked than I was before. He balances the duffle bag, olive and huge, on its end and digs jeans and t-shirts from the mouth of it. The clothes have been balled and shoved in there haphazardly, in a hurry, and when he pulls them free, everything accordions, the wrinkles in them deep. He tosses the items into like piles—briefs and socks on the chair with the painted sunflower, t-shirts and shirts on the floor, jeans and shorts at my feet on the bed, the outfit he bought from me at Neimans into the bathroom—then lifts from the bottom of
the bag a navy suit and striped tie, both as wadded and lumpy as the rest.

“You’re not serious,” I say.

Kurt looks up. “What?” From the blink of his eyes, their sudden focus, I can tell how far away he was, how far I’ve wrenched him back to ask that question.

“That tie’s ruined,” I tell him. Cowardly, I’m glad the only light comes from the kitchen, that I can’t see his face any better than I can; his mouth stays shadowed. “You haven’t done that jacket much good either.” This isn’t what I want to be talking about, but it’s what comes out. Oh, how unlovely to be incapable.

Kurt scrunches his face, holding it contorted and misshapen, then rubs it with his free hand. I can hear calloused palm against chapped cheeks and think that I should rise and touch him myself. But the balance of the moment feels too precarious, certainly too unsure for anyone like me to step in and act. He moved away from me, after all, when I took his hand, so I’m thinking he wants to handle this by himself, to tough it out. All I do is grunt when the suit and tie land on my head.

“Didn’t want it anyway,” Kurt says. “Mom made me buy it. For the funeral.” He gives an odd shake, as if something invisible’s latched itself to his shoulders, then walks to the bathroom to pee. I push the suit to the floor and watch. He always unbuttons his jeans completely and tugs his briefs below his balls when he urinates. I’ve stared, fascinated, as he’s done this before, even in restrooms at the movie. It seems an incredibly boyish thing to do, as if he’s missed out on the grown man rules of peeing as if it’s a struggle between private and public. I can guess only that he’s been picked up a couple of times doing this.

He finishes, shakes, and flushes, and I realize that I’ve become a bit aroused by my instant fantasy: Kurt at some highway rest stop in the middle of the night, innocently
pissing with everything displayed, and some bloodshot, hairy dad, with a wife and three
kids asleep in the station wagon, and the two of them sharing five glorious, achingly
hungry, instantly sweaty minutes that pop up full-blown from time to time, into their
thoughts, for the rest of their lives, during dinner conversations and sex with others, after a
church sermon or a little league game, at the last, final moment of their death. Annoyed, I
roll back over as Kurt returns to the duffle bag and digs up a belt and one last sock.

Kurt rolls the belt tightly and shoves it in a drawer. “Both of your parents died
quick,” he says. “Right?”

I nod, knotting his wrinkled tie around my neck. In the past, all I’ve said is that
both my parents died in car wrecks, giving no further details about Mom’s glittery fate or
about Daddy being crushed by a two-ton truck at the Dunlap when it fell from mislaid
jacks. Even though I was in college, I’d refused to drive or ride in any sort of vehicle for
almost half a year after that.

“I think it’s better that way,” Kurt continues. “Honestly. A shock, but better.
Cause to watch an old man die, to take forever at it? You have no idea,” he says. “It’s
fucking awful.” He walks over to slap the air conditioner and mutter “piece of shit.” The
machine is whining now, sounding rather pitiful.

I roll to my back and consider what he’s said. Of course I have at least a clue about
the subject of the ailing elderly, but I’m not about to say anything. Nor will I tell him that
I’m not technically supposed to be here, or that by the end of the week I have to decide
whether my store will be actually mine or not. I hug Kurt’s pillow tighter as he squats on
the floor to smell each of the t-shirts and make littler piles.

“You okay?” I ask again.
"It was my dad," he says, and I tell him how sorry I am. I'd hoped that something like this hadn't been his reason for leaving town.

But Kurt glances at me as I've expressed the wrong sentiment. "He was a real bastard," he says. "But still, it gets you. A body in a casket and everyone there." He has one of the t-shirts twisted around both hands now, yet he keeps on working it tighter. It's one of my favorites on him actually. The sleeves ride high on his shoulders and show off how ropy his arms are, the muscles and tendons all proof of much real power in an arm so thin.

Kurt extracts his hands from the t-shirt and continues sorting. "Liver failure, not like that was a big surprise. An alcoholic most of his life, definitely all of mine. I'm kind of glad in some sense." He shrugs. His words sound oddly bland, almost emotionless. "Easier for Mom now, at least. She doesn't see it because she's too used to taking care of him to know what to do next, but she will. I hope. God knows she deserves some peace. She used to drink herself."

Finished with one pile of clothes, he scoots over to the next. This is an odd amount of effort for someone who packed as he did, effort made, I assume, only for the sake of his hands, to give them a task. They shake as he reaches for a pair of shorts.

"Was the first time Bethany met her grandfather," he continues. "Heather wouldn't let him see her before, didn't want Bethany subjected to that. Still. To see him laid out? That to be the only memory? I didn't like it. And he looked sort of plastic, too good, really. Not like himself at all. I could tell it spooked her. She didn't cry or anything, just stared. Sometimes I think she's more like me than Heather. Heather was a wreck. And Bob. He was Mr. Man-In-Charge, stomping around and making all kinds of decisions that
didn’t have a goddamned thing to do with him. I didn’t like that either. Guess I didn’t like much of anything, really.”

He leans forward for a moment, his face parallel to the floor. “Not supposed to like a funeral,” he whispers. “Idiot.” Then his head dips lowers, one giant sob arching his back, the curve of distinct ribs highlighted by the glow from the next room I’d snuff if I could.

He’s a sculpture of grief. And thinking that, of him in those terms, I know that I’m lost, completely, that I have nothing to offer here. This is too real, too honest and open and human and messy and valid. There’s nothing clever kneeling before me, nothing affected or planned. This man is in pain, and I’m helpless. I can’t even move.

“Oh, Kurt,” I say.

He turns to me quickly, his whole face shiny wet. “God, I love how you listen to me,” he says. “You know? I do, I . . .” And then, finally, he comes to me, and I hold him tight.

It’s after 1:00 now, and the night has an odd sort of ragged, slouched quality about it, as if it just can’t face itself. The air, what I catch of it through the rolled-down window, is warm even as it rushes, the pungency of the neighbor’s honeysuckle fading as we roll away in the pickup. Kurt’s jumpy now, he says, and needs to drive.

We end up at White Rock, a mid-sized lake encircled by the city. It’s a haven for bike riders and joggers, picnickers, and the more-than-occasional tryst. It’s a constant source of material for the Morning News, which prints story after story about the state of the water, and whether it’s cost-efficient to dredge layers of muck from the bottom before
the whole thing fills in. Tonight, it looks real enough, unlikely to disappear, though I recognize that any problems are hidden beneath the surface. Great, I think, perfect. What with Kurt unloading tonight and me not uttering much of anything, the lake and I have way too much in common.

Kurt parks on the far side, where we can pretend to be alone for a while, ignoring the good-sized homes twinkling amongst the trees across the water. The moon is visible in the dark sky, the reflection of it rippling. Most of the stars have disappeared behind blotchy, gorged clouds, the rest looking ineffectual.

"Ever sailed?" Kurt asks. He points at several boats, perfectly still, just past the water’s edge. They’re skeletal without their sails strung, the mast alone and sad somehow.

When I tell him no, he continues. “Something I was going to do when I moved down here,” he says. “Never have. Back home, dirt’s all there is.” He coughs, hacking hard enough that I reach over to thump on his back. Then he rambles on about his hometown, informing me that Kinsley, Kansas, sits atop Highway 50 and is famous for being Midway, USA, 1561 miles from New York and 1561 miles from San Francisco. He says that it’s home to assorted generations of farmers and their interwoven families, then continues faster, referring to the place as both “tiny” and “backwards,” and to the inhabitants as “beyond fucked up.”

“Glad to be back?”

“Glad to see you,” he says. Then he changes the subject, begins talking about a new gig he’s gotten and how nice the people were to wait for him when they heard he had to attend a funeral. “Three rooms,” he says. “Huge rooms. Lots of molding and intricate window work. I like that sort of thing. Keeps my mind as busy as my hands.”
He twists in the seat to face me. “It can be boring, you know. Painting. Rare that I get to try something like that wall you saw”—he pinches me—“and ruined. So sometimes I wonder why I do it.”

“You’re really good at it.”

“Not like it takes a genius.”

What does? I want to ask. Isn’t it true that we all pick things for reasons we only pretend to understand? Lately, in the midst of Howard’s little game of the Choose the Document, I’ve been searching for every reason possible to want a store as desperately as I seem to want one. And for so long. I’ve come up with good reasons, but nothing earth-shattering, nothing that explains every facet of my desire. At work, I’ve even started quizzing customers, asking them if they like their line of work and how they got in it. Most of them look at me as if I’ve asked them something crazy, as if I’m crazy myself. They’ve been no help.

But still, as I sit here tonight, sweating and staring at the lake while Kurt stares at me, I know I want a store. Maybe because I just do, maybe because I don’t have even a clue of what I might want instead.

“When you were little,” I say. “What did you want to be?”

Kurt laughs. “Rich. Clean. Polished. With parents who got along and didn’t have to be bailed out of jail. By me when I turned 14 and Heather got tired of doing it.”

I touch his leg because of what he’s said, saddened by the last part, but even more amazed that the first three words could’ve come from my own mouth. “But then . . .” I start.

“Just had to face it,” Kurt says. He slaps the dash, making a point. “I wasn’t born
into a grand, perfect life, wasn’t wired for it either. I used to watch rich people on TV and think I could be them. But when I moved down here, I met a few, and fuck. I changed my tune. Quickly. I mean, at Neimans, don’t those people drive you crazy? I’ve never brought it up, but I can’t believe you like that job, even with the clothes and all. Everyone like they’re God’s gift. Lots of sucking up, I’d think.”

“Some of the people are nice,” I say.

“I guess. But don’t you ever get tired?”

At that, I lean over and rest my head on Kurt’s lap, ignoring the steering wheel at my face. He strokes my temple with gentle circular motions.

“When I was a kid,” he says, “I thought I’d grow up and make my dad’s junkyard a success, show him how it should be done. But then I just couldn’t live there anymore. I was lonely even though everybody knows everybody. I hated the gossip and the looks. Everyone’s got their nose up your ass, sniffing for shit so they can use it against you. One time, I had a teacher call me poor white trash, in class. Can you believe that shit?”

“Sounds charming,” I tell him. I reach and flick his key ring, a tiny socket wrench, so that it swings from the ignition. He used to have only three keys, but now there’s 11. I count them again, wondering, and then my mood sinks so far so fast I’d be pressed into stepping from the pickup and searching underneath to find it. Earlier tonight, if Kurt hadn’t come to me, I wouldn’t have known what to do. I’m ignorant of that sort of thing. But at other things, I’m a whiz, a genius. And I know right now that Kurt’s been working too hard as we sit here, belaboring a point that he’s scared someone else might make before him. He’s cutting off routes to something, I can tell.

“But it wasn’t so bad this time,” Kurt says. “Wasn’t like I remembered it. Just
people. Some folks I’d always been scared of were really nice, brought food to the house and talked to me, asked about Mom’s plans and all."

“That’s what they do,” I say, picturing vague memories of when Mom died. "Small towns and funerals.”

“True.” With one hand, Kurt frees my shirt buttons, all different shapes for that designer touch, then brushes my chest, his fingertips on my skin more unsure than I remembered them. He pushes a thumb against my left nipple and fingers the hair around it. "Mom wants me to move back," he says. “I think I might.”

I hold my breath as long as I can. As I finally exhale, Kurt bends sideways, his shirt digging into my ear, and kisses my chest. He squirms for room, his lips traveling the length of my belly, whispering, “Don’t say anything, don’t.” He turns me and unzips my shorts, tugs at my boxers, and teases my penis with his tongue. He licks and bites, rubbing his unshaven chin against the head of me there. But it’s all wasted effort.

When the first little cry exits my mouth, we’re both surprised, though Kurt couldn’t be any more shocked than I am. He sits up hurriedly, and I cover my face, pushing hard against my eyes. “Fuck,” I say. “Fuck!”

“No,” Kurt says. “Don’t. Oh, God.” He pulls me upright, hugging me close and kissing the backs of my hands, trying to get to my mouth.

But I jerk away and move to the other end of the seat, right up next to the door. Stop being such an idiot, I tell myself. Stop it! I make one last horrible sound, then finish wiping my face. The tears are gone, history, never even there. “I’m sorry,” I say to Kurt. “Really. I’m being ridiculous. You lost your dad and I’m the one crying. Please.”

It’s for the best, I tell myself. All for the best. Now I’ll never have to do anything
like this to him. I glance over, and Kurt’s slumped behind the wheel, his eyes closed. He looks worse than I feel, and I don’t feel great.

“Mom’s getting old,” he says. “I... I have a plan.”

He tells it to me then, all of it, how his father’s junkyard is his now, his big inheritance, and all the ideas he has to make it as profitable as he’s always thought it could be. “That teacher was right,” he says. “I was poor white trash, but because of the drinking, because Dad was embarrassed about being the junk man. It was all combined somehow. But it didn’t have to be that way. It could have been a good business. I always used to tell him if he would just sell off parts instead of the whole damn car, and pull in scrap metal business from Haviland and Greensburg and Coldwater, which wouldn’t be hard, and haul certain kinds of shit to Dodge City, then we’d have money to get into recycling.”

Kurt looks at me, sheepish. He wants a reaction that allows him to continue.

And who am I to stop him? I nod and listen to him speak.

“That makes sense,” he says. “Right? A real plan is all it’s ever needed. Someone to treat it like an actual business and not a final option. Someone who’s not soused all the goddamned time.” He squints through the window and it’s as if he can see what he’s described there, rising from the lake, a visionary sort of junk nirvana pushing skyward, streaming from the waves.

But I’m unaccustomed to feeling suffocated around Kurt, and I hate it. He’s too focused, too certain. And though I want to join in, to exclaim and wave my hands, to ask solid questions and prove I understood, I’m too selfish. There’s no place for me in such a vision, and it’s wretchedly dispiriting to hear this talk of him elsewhere. I keep my face toward the water, the moon’s reflection suddenly gone.
All I can picture is junk and trash, with rats probably, their ghastly long tails, and
mangy dogs roaming in packs, and pinched-looking old people dumping everything
they've sucked the life out of, everything worthless. They've used it up and now they're
handing it off. To Kurt.

Back at his place, Kurt and I are quiet. He attempts a joke about me wearing those
"butt-ugly" sandals again, then turns to his puzzle. Currently, he's working on a 5000
piece-r of St. Peter's Cathedral. It's 62 by 41 inches, and the colors are mostly gray, all
drab, with just a touch of red. He bends over it on his hands and knees, gently swaying.
"There's more," he says.

I wait, knowing that if he tells me I can visit him in backwoods, bum-fuck Kansas,
I'll have to kill him. But he doesn't explain. Instead, he begins plucking all the dark,
putty-colored pieces from the rest and piling them at his knee. With so many choices, this
takes several minutes, and then he spreads them out in a careful grid, each piece at right
angles. He's entirely anal, I tell myself. Look at him: this man is so square, so skinny, so
not my type. I can't even remember why I'm here.

But that's a lie. I can. I remember being saved and watched over, kissed and held,
treated like every single thing I did mattered greatly. I remember silences that lasted half an
hour and never grew uncomfortable. I remember smelling him on my hands when I got
home after hours of sex, tucking those hands between my legs and curling up to sleep. I
remember.

Though what are they really worth, memories? They're exactly like the past three
months with Kurt compared to three years with Howard. They're not anything to count
on, not like . . . oh, a signed contract for a business in my name. Over time, I’ve learned that you have to let memories ferment. You have to give them time to age so they can come back to haunt you at the appropriate moment, as a particularly hateful one is right now.

Yes, even sitting in this dimly-lit duplex with my emotions bubbling and Kurt being needlessly vague, I can place myself at 15 years old on a certain Saturday afternoon so clearly, within one of those moments that teach you entirely too much about yourself.

At the local stock show that year, the sun pressed through the baked roof of the tent where the chickens were kept, the smells of hay and shit and cheap, drugstore perfume, and the din of excited chattering as people pressed around to second-guess this final step in the process. In a county like Luling, such a thing was deemed important and treated accordingly.

As usual, the judge lined his favorite groups of birds on a long table, comparing each set of five to the next and switching their order according to which he liked best. His method was to work from one end of the table to the other, making changes, then naming the winner, often me. But that year my chickens and I started at the wrong end, and since I was the one who exhibited birds everywhere, people had come to count on me placing well year after year, and were surprised, many of them probably heartened, to see me stuck where I was.

In this setting, each contestant has a helper, and I had Dad, who’d taken the day off from work just to stand there beside me. Both in new jeans and Panhandle Slim shirts, the two of us clutched all five of my birds by their scaly legs, each carefully stretched on their washed and blow-dried chests atop the wooden table. We glanced to our left, toward those entries before us. Twenty people and 50 birds waited all in a line like this. Shoulder to
shoulder and wing to wing, we watched the judge for any possible clues, the birds’ white heads twisting and weaving like the heads of curious, suddenly-feathered snakes.

The judge started with me and the older boy next to me, Tommy Lindermann, who I’d had a crush on forever, as everyone did, but had never spoken to. He’d ripped, rumor had it, the sleeves from every single shirt he owned to show off those arms, but no one minded. He was the all-American boy incarnate, the best our little town had to offer. The judge passed one hand the length of each of my birds, then Tommy’s.

He was a dry-looking man, the judge, desiccated, as if everything wet and alive had been sucked out right through his nose. He made a low, fluttery sound as he felt chests and legs, the look on his face suggesting that these birds were suspended before him without any humans attached, all there for his pleasure. He concentrated on the wing of Tommy’s fifth bird, then switched us; I was on my way up.

This happened eight more times, my own excitement mounting as Daddy’s did, each of us grinning, heady, nudging each other with our elbows as we switched places with the less fortunate, again and again. And all the while a mother of one of the other contestants complained. “Holy hell,” she said, frowning at me, loud enough that everyone heard. “That damn skinny kid got to win it every year? What wrong with my Belinda’s birds? Huh?” She had a tight red mouth and a scarf wrapped around the waist of her jeans. She squared her shoulders.

But Dad and I ignored her. When the judge had the two of us standing at the front of the line, he worked his way down the line one last time, switching number six for number five, Gerald Tieken for Suzy Barosh, then nodded to the announcer that he was ready. Everyone pushed forward, watching me. I gave several, excited little hops,
knocking my head against Daddy’s sweaty shoulder, but the judge had other plans. He
pointed at the wrong end of the table, at Tommy Lindermann’s birds, and said, “I’ve
chosen this group as the champion this morning because of meatiness and uniformity.”

The woman with the scarf, Belinda Muller’s mom, whooped with one jabbing fist
the air. She pointed right at me and gave several sarcastic little claps, her fingertips just
touching. “Fag,” she mouthed, then raced to hug her daughter, who was second now,
instead of ninth. While I was tenth, the last one at the table.

I ducked my head, glancing sideways and praying that Dad hadn’t felt Mrs.
Muller’s lucky jab, hadn’t caught that one word I always dreaded hearing. But he had.
His shoulders slumped, his skin draining of color, to an ashy gray, and I knew he’d heard.

Sighing, I come back to the here and now with Kurt, still so hurt and angry more
than a decade later. But at least this easily, with one split-second memory, I’m re-
convinced of how much I loathe the small towns, of how all that saved me was getting away to
big-city stock shows and being alone in the meantime, with my birds or at that pond of Mr.
Deakin’s. Kurt must be insane to even consider moving back.

He plinks another piece into his puzzle. “We’d be good there,” he says.

“The Cathedral?”

“No.” He shuffles over to me on his knees and wraps both warm hands around my
ankles. “We’d be good in Kinsley. Together.”

And that’s when I realize just how far out of bounds this has gone, how incredibly
wrong-headed and just plain wrong I’ve been. This sweet, sweet man. He’s ready to
wreck this future he’s planned simply because I’ve shed a few tears. I need to end this
once and for all, I see, at last. I need to make it final.
I push him away, the look on my face hopefully relaying equal parts disbelief and exasperation. "Yeah, I'd fit right in," I say. "Just transfer me to the Neiman Marcus there, and I'll give that farmhand customer some lessons in real style. A gigantic hit, that'd be me. The belle of the fucking ball. I—"

When Kurt glares at me, his jaws clenched and the tendon there hopping, I stop. He shuffles back to complete the bodies of some people at the base of a column, ignoring me and my sarcasm, which, honestly, I work on so hard.

"You'd be with me," he finally says. "You'd work for us." He twiddles another piece between his fingers. "Of course, you couldn't wear some of those clothes. White jeans and silk shirts aren't real big in Kansas. Or those shoes." He motions at my feet as if these shoes and all my clothes mean nothing to me.

"We're gay," I remind him. "We suck dick. Get real."

"I know what we are," Kurt says, and the tone of his voice is a taut cable, slicing cleanly through the air. "You think I don't know that? You think I don't remember what kind of shit those people put me through?"

"Well. Then."

"It's my mom," he says. "She's all alone."

I push thoughts on my own mother from my mind. "But she could move here," I say. "Then she'd be around her granddaughter. She'd have you and Heather both nearby. Wouldn't that be better?"

He shakes his head. "I asked. Cities scare her and . . . . I just have to do this. Okay? I just do." He gives me a look that suggests I'm being petulant, unreasonable, then turns back to his precious puzzle. What does he think about? I wonder, watching. Does
the whole scope of the world coalesce for him into a perfect rectangle, everything bordered with straight lines that always connect? I can’t imagine such a thing. “I should just go,” I say. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

Kurt stares down, shaking his head. He snaps a piece into place, then glances back up at me, his face sincere enough to kill me. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you,” he says. “You know that.”

I leave anyway. I push him flat when he goes to stand and tell him I’ll call.

Like an idiot, though, like some lobotomized zombie who can’t help it, instead of driving straight to Howard’s, I return to White Rock and park the Beemer right where Kurt and I had sat not an hour ago. I step out and arrange myself on the hood, staring at the water, there like it’s always been, unaware and unknowing. I pinch my thigh just to feel something, then my stomach and finally my lip, twisting until I grunt. Until I admit that as ridiculous as it seems, some miniscule sliver of my moronic brain thought that if I came back to this place I might be able to see it, to have some fine vision of a junkyard for two. But, nada. Nothing, nope, nought, never, no.

What is wrong with me? I think. I should be honored that he’s asked me to tag along. But I’m not. I’m furious that he knows me so poorly that he thinks moving to Kansas is an option, that he thinks I can change and become someone noble and concerned, someone just like him.

Livid, I rip one of the studded sandals from my feet, these shoes that Kurt hates so virulently. I hold it, breathing hard, and think to test myself one last time. I lean back and hurl that sucker in the water.

But in seconds I’m off the car and wet, splashing around in the putrid water, my
one bare foot sinking in the muck. I paid $495 for those fucking shoes, and I’m not about to give the damned things up. That instantly, I’ve reverted to form. I dive once, twice, sputtering and flapping about, gurgling sounds coming from someone; I guess from me. The water’s cold and black, seemingly bottomless, and I’m ruined. I scream in exasperation, but my mouth fills with muddy, brackish water. I spit, wanting the taste gone, this night gone, every fucking thing I’ve ever seen or thought gone. I dive again, blind in the dark, up and down and left and right all twisted, conflicted, turned inside out and incredibly wrong.

Then my fingers grasp it, a strap. I break for the surface, gasping, and find that I can stand. This entire little scene of desperation has taken place in about five feet of water.

Embarrassed, I turn to the shore, wiping at my eyes, my tongue, slinging water from my arms and the precious sandal. And then I see him, about twenty feet behind my car. “Kurt!” I yell. “Kurt!” I swear to God my heart swells.

But he doesn’t answer, and I see, blinking in the dark, that this guy is actually a quite old woman who must weight 200 pounds. She waves and moves on, shaking her head. About me, I think, which is what anyone sane would do. “You’re a genius!” I yell to her, spitting. “You could go on Jeopardy! and win 100,000 bucks!”

And then, with little other choice that I can see, I slog my way to the muddy bank and strip, wringing my clothes with not a thought in my head. Or maybe a million. I can’t decide. All I know is that I’m ready to go home, my home, wake up Howard, and sign.

IX.

On this, the morning after my Esther Williams routine in White Rock, I gulp a piece
of bread almost as it leaps from the toaster. Luisa’s at the sink, Jesus hanging before her, and I’m turned away, not wanting her to see how swollen my eyes are. It’s from lack of sleep and, yes, a bit of emotionalism that overtook me about the time the roosters of my childhood would have been crowing their throaty morning songs. I down my apple juice and begin to tidy up, but Luisa tells me to leave it.

“You look like hell,” she says. “What are you doing?”

Luisa’s not one to often use a word like “hell,” though she’s smarter than any of us, perhaps all of us combined, and so my surprise at this can’t possibly be earned. “Just tired,” I say. “Long night.”

“Hmm.” Luisa washes my juice glass, then peers over her shoulder. “Wet clothes in the washer. Are you being a stupid boy?” she asks.

“Yes,” I assure her. “That’s exactly what I’m being.” But who’s to judge, really? These days who’s to know what’s smart, what’s not? I hug her from behind, smacking a big kiss atop her head. “Run away with me,” I whisper. “Make me an honest man.”

But Luisa knows better than to become tangled up with the likes of me. Her old attempt at making me a church-goer was a failure; she’s never attempted another transformation on my behalf. Exhaling, she flicks water in my face and tells me to go. “Go to work,” she says. “Go and be useful.”

“Yes ma’am,” I say. I kiss her again, then grab my sport coat and head down the hallway, thinking that a truly useful man would do the evil deed today and get it over with, would explain it all to Kurt, then offer him assistance in packing, wave goodbye, and be done. I shudder at the thought.

But past Howard’s room, I stop and take two steps back. For there, stacked on an Oriental rug in the corner, is my answer.
Not that many days after his return from the hospital, Howard claimed boredom, even in the midst of maneuvering me around, and decided to set in motion the next redecoration, to begin with the painting of his room. He’s already had the paint mixed and tested against Caxton’s cat’s nose—“the perfect combination of peach, rose, and tan”—but has put off the actual work because the men he usually hires are in the midst of another job. So this morning, these cans of paint sit waiting, waiting for a painter.

At work, I immediately phone Kurt, talking before he can speak. I tell him I understand that I was an asshole to leave last night, that I know he already has a job waiting, but that this is something I need, desperately. Finally, because he won’t listen, because he won’t quit asking if I’ve thought about his offer, I tell him the completion of this job is the only way I might be able to leave behind my old family friend with a clear conscience. “Today,” I say. “You have to do this. You have to.”

And so, as if something fated, the what-I’d-thought-was-impossible will soon take place: Kurt is going to meet Howard.

In the meantime, it’s pre-sale here at work today. As soon as the doors are opened, the designer room is teeming with well-dressed bargain hunters, many of them accompanied by zealous sales associates, shoving for their share. Quickly, I find the crush and craziness consoling. I fill the fitting rooms with men and clothes, stretch the counter with wives and girlfriends, and boyfriends, plying them all with options wise and silly, all of them grabby and needy and just what I deserve. An hour passes, then another, and in no time, I have a rolling rod full of put-back goods, and two shelves as well.

It dawns on me at some point that I might even top my one-day take during the most recent Last Call, a record-breaking $1,831. Not bad for 10 hours work, and proof
enough that I’m not wholly dependent on Howard. But I don’t want to think about him, not now. So I slap my hands together and call to a tall, dark-skinned man across the room. I grab for him two pants, some Matsuda socks, a Dolce belt and a private label sweater. I rush him to the fitting room and by the time he’s allowing me to call him “my brother,” I know I’ve made another sale.

It calms me, makes the gray drizzle of the rest of my life a little more distant. I thank this man, winking, then turn back to the designer room, ready for another conquest. And there’s Mr. Anton Kepler, arms crossed, the only one still, standing in the center of the room. “You didn’t call me,” he says. I can see a vein pulse, jagged across his forehead.

“That Kate girl says you took it,” he continues. “Says you didn’t give her a chance to call. But you didn’t call me either.” He’s biting these words, mauling them before they can reach me. I begin to explain how rushed I am, that customers are waiting for me, but I realize here’s an opportunity, one to do the right thing and prove that though I’m being cowardly with Kurt, I can, by myself, save Mr. Kepler from a fate he doesn’t deserve. This is work I can do.

“It’s gone,” I say, though it’s not. It’s actually three feet from his right hand, right there, under a stack of other silk shirts. That’s where I hid it this morning, with no real thought other than to get it out of sight. Mr. Kepler didn’t need it, shouldn’t want it, and that’s why I’d neglected to call him or put it aside.

But his silence is deep enough to intimate that Mr. Anton Kepler is capable of surprising me. “Why do you want it so bad, anyway?” I ask. “Don’t you know it’s not for you?”
“Who do you think you are?” he asks. In three quick steps he’s at me, one fat hand on my bicep, his full height stretched on tippy-toes to level his eyes with my chin. His breath is bitter, the sweat visible on his forehead, the vein there freakier, completely mesmerizing this close. “You have no right,” he says, “to decide anything for me. You’re just some swish punk, with your attitude, your holier-than-thou bullshit.” He breathes deeply. “You don’t know fuck!”

Well. La-dee-da-dee. What the hell can I say to that? Around me, even the air hesitates, everyone frozen in mid-movement, their hands reaching for the next unnecessary thing, the next too-expensive thing, the next, the next, the next. All of them wait certain pulses to breathe, this check in their desire as momentary as my own disillusionment with it. And all I can do is laugh, at my idiocy, my helplessness. I point Mr. Kepler in the right direction, then walk out. If I can’t teach someone like him a simple truth about wanting a thing more fitting than that stupid Versace shirt, I can at least go home and watch a pro like Howard impart the same lesson to Kurt about me.

I’m crouched in the hallway. I’ve told Luisa to stay in the kitchen, and all I can see of Howard’s room is the nearest third, the section with the closet and a bank of windows. Earlier, pleased with my call that I’d found him another “workman,” he called up two security guards and had them move the furniture several feet from the walls and drape it. Now, the room looks ghostly, the dappled sun spattering the windows and wavering all the sights beyond. Neither of the walls I can see have new color yet. I’m unable to see either of the men inside.

“Yeah?” Kurt asks, and Howard answers, “Yes, exactly.”
I hear the thump of something metal and Howard say, “Careful.” My eyes travel the skyline, unable to rest.

“Mitch was beautiful in Paris,” Howard says, and I realize how much I’ve already missed of this little meeting of the minds. “I took him there one summer,” he continues, “so pleased with the reaction. He speaks the language, you see, and led me around for two whole weeks. It’s wonderful to see the world again through a young man’s eyes. It makes an old man feel young. At night, we walked in any direction, wherever our feet and wits took us. Through parks, along the river. It was glorious, Mr. Johnston. Mitch is a fine boy.”

I wait for a reaction, but there’s only silence, and I find myself thinking that Howard’s a fine boy, too, one who never grew up because he’s never had to. Many’s the time I’ve envied him for that. He coughs, and I imagine the folds of flesh at his neck, his jaw stretching with the thrust of his face. This is a sound I’d recognize anywhere, one I’ll know for the rest of my life. There’s a comfort in that.

In this moment, my feelings for Howard feel less fragile, more permanent. We have a history. In the past, I’ve always considered the trip to Paris a disaster, my poor French able only to get us into trouble, to make us party to misunderstandings on a Brobdingnagian scale. To learn now that he’d been proud of me felt good, felt like a hand on my shoulder, just the firm, warm pressure of it. I lean my head against the doorframe and relax a bit, assuring myself as best I can that what’s happening—scary and heartless and numbing as it feels—is good and proper.

“Let me explain what I’m trying to tell you,” Howard says. “I am a certain sort of man. But I had to discover, as we all do, what sort of man for myself. I won’t bore you
with my history, not all of it, but I will say that I once had a job."

Dear hell. This is a revelation I never would’ve expected.

"I did," Howard continues, and I can tell he’s pleased with himself, being so open.

His voice deepens with seriousness.

"I was a manager at one of my grandfather’s paper mills," he says. "I showed up each day at my office and rearranged papers, reading them, marking them, and then I passed them on to my subordinate for action that I never completely understood. At lunch, I stepped to the diner next door and ordered a steak with two beers. Then I would spend the afternoon as I had the morning and return to my home, a rented place I didn’t care for much. The point is that during those days when I attempted to be someone else, and there were almost four months of them, I made countless decisions, and not a one of them mattered. To anyone. Because I was, in a word, unnecessary. Everyone knew that my life was set, that I had nothing to fight for. In such a world, nothing I did or thought mattered at all. It was a difficult lesson."

"There are other worlds," Kurt says.

"Yes! Yes, exactly." I can tell Howard’s loving this, even as I try to puzzle what this “explanation” of his actually means. That if you’re not management material you should never work at all? That his life since has been carved with a set of disciplined virtues like an arrow from stone? That he’s happy, whatever that means?

"And I had to go discover that other world," Howard says, louder now, convinced. "To make it from nothing. This place, my travels, the items and people I’ve collected. To them, Mr. Johnston, I matter quite a bit."

He pauses. "I want only to see Mitch satisfied, of course. To help him discover
his own world. He tests me at times, but I know that I help, testing him as well. So when you mention this Kinsley, a junkyard, I am dumbfounded by how wrong you are. I cannot see it. Our Mitch in a junkyard, in some little town? He's already found where he belongs. Frankly, your suggestion strikes me as cruel and horrible."

Kurt's voice is soft when he answers, but not unsure. "I think I can make him happy."

"Ah," Howard says. "But you are a different sort of man altogether, aren't you? From young Mitchell and myself. Have you been listening to me? I'm sure you would have been quite happy in that paper mill; you work with your hands. Whereas Mitch is a creature of his senses. Can't you see that? Every day, he tells people what is beautiful and what is not. And people listen to him, they believe him."

Yeah? So? I glance down the hallway toward the portion of the Diebenkorn I can see and struggle in vain to recall the last time I've voiced an opinion about something other than clothes or meals or rooms or furniture or paintings, about anything that wasn't made by other people, bought by other people. I want to point this out, to speak up so that Kurt doesn't completely hate me, but it's too late to go back now.

Besides, this is necessary. No matter what I learn about Howard today—his ideas not so terribly odd compared to other testaments of his—this is irrefutable: Kurt needs to know, finally, who I am. What he learns matters today; not me.

Still, unable to resist, I lean through the doorway. In the corner, Howard sits in his father's old chair. In his pajamas, he slouches comfortably, his legs crossed at the knee with one foot barely swinging. I watch his face as he watches mine, and it became obvious what he learns.
Just then, I consider turning to Kurt, to explain that much to my surprise I know precisely what I want, even if I don’t deserve it. But when I steel myself to glance his way, he’s faced away and bent over, in roughly the same curled-in position I’d held on that first night we met. Which, quite simply, changes everything.

It’s Miss Evelyn Brozowski who’s on my mind as I walk into Howard’s room. My head fills simultaneously with her take on decisions, and my mother’s death because she’d wanted to please me, and the lack of any contact with Marie for years, and Howard’s loneliness even when I’m around, and the fact that my own aimlessness has brought me here to this moment as if I’d planned it all along. What I’m deciding is unknown to me even as I do it.

When I say his name, Kurt swivels and stares. He attempts a grin, a nervous twitch of his mouth that leaves me hurting. “You’re here,” he says.

I look around and realize that he hasn’t painted anything, that he’s been stirring one bucket all this time. “Hey,” I tell him. “You okay?”

But before he can answer, Howard slaps both hands together, demanding my attention. “He’s fine,” Howard claims. His voice is upbeat, tuned for a party. “This nice young man and I have only been talking. Nothing wrong with that.” He swallows audibly, and his tone shifts. “Although I think I’ve said more.”

“It’s okay, Mitch.” Kurt waves as if he’s on a lifeboat, escaping the wreck. “I sorta knew all along.”

“Oh, but not everything,” Howard tells him. Then he shifts his gaze to me. “Why don’t you get the cords from the dresser?” he asks. “We can show him all your tricks.”
I'm not surprised by this, and the lack of it feels worse. But there's no way to stop. Beyond what Miss Brozowski warned, the problem with decisions is that each begets another. I'm a part of this now, actively. "He saved me once," I say. "So don't. I told you all about it."

"Yes, dear Mitch. You did." Howard pushes both feet to the floor and leans forward, intent enough to ignore the beloved chair squeaking beneath him. "But there are so many things you didn't tell me. Or him. We could both be very angry if we wanted."

He's right, of course. So I move to the dresser and remove the drape, a sort of heavy muslin that I can't imagine doing much to protect the furniture. I sling the fabric over my shoulder and take the cords from the third drawer. I hold them up, jiggling them with my hand. "I tie him with these," I tell Kurt. "Then I strip and masturbate."

"Show him the stain on the rug," Howard says. "I won't allow Luisa to clean it."

I walk to the edge of the bed and point downward. "It's mine," I say. I spread my legs, wondering if this might be how people do whatever it takes, simply by doing. I mime useless liquid falling from my crotch.

When I stop, Kurt's face hardens, giving a hint of what he'll look like in 20 or 30 years. There's a crease between his brows I've never noticed. "Explains a lot," he says.

And then we wait. Howard stares at Kurt, wanting the fuse he's lit to do its job. But nothing happens. We all crouch, sit, or stand—breathing, unsure—and when he realizes this, that he's earned no theatrics and Kurt's not the type to explode, Howard sighs and his body slumps. In the yellowed whites of his eyes, tears form so fast it's as if a switch has been flipped. "You've never had to fight like we did," he says. "You young people just expect it all, wanting, taking whatever you touch."
"Howard," I say. "Don't. You've been given everything your whole life."

He whips his head, suddenly smaller and feeble, like a man whose heart is wearing out. "Never love," he says.

This is a new Howard, one I've never seen and one who might have found in me what he seems now to have always wanted. I walk over and kiss him, wiping his cheek with my thumb.

"I saved you too," he says. "I did."

I agree with him, try to get him to stand, but he pushes at me, slapping as if his hands are flippers, unable to grasp or hold on. He shoves me away, a little mewing sound rising from his chest. "You're not going to sign," he says.

"It's too late," I agree, and my words sting with a level of regret, of loss, that I know will haunt me, layering itself atop all that I ignore about Marie, my father, my mother, almost anyone who's ever been a part of my life.

But Kurt's still here. I turn to him, hurry the few steps, and sit. Up close, I realize he's more stunned than I'd realized. His eyes are widened, wary. He's looking at me like he's never seen me before. Probably, he hasn't.

Without planning it, I take the fabric from my shoulder and drape it across us, over our heads. I want this moment covered, unwatched. Underneath, the air is stiller, calmer, the light diffused. Moments pass before I can touch him, more before I can speak. The only sound is Howard's keening, our own breaths silent. I can smell Kurt's sweat.

"I'm here," I say. And though I've never experienced it, I know this is what it's like to be four, or seven, or 26, hiding under the covers, best friends our whole lives.

"But what about there?" he whispers. "In Kansas?"

"Still?" I can't quite believe it, the quality of this man huddled before me.
“I...” The doubt on his face is obvious, the conflicting emotions and second thoughts. He would be an idiot to say “yes,” but he does, the word just barely escaping his lips. “Will you?” he asks. “Decide now. Will you stop all this and go?”

This is it, I think. This whole day, these months, my life, for this. That night in his duplex Kurt claimed I could be myself in Kinsley. But over the past two decades, I’ve learned a way of life that sits like a watched pot, never boiling. I ignore the highs and lows; I concentrate on the middle. But in Kinsley, I know life would force water, even blood, to bubble up.

Right or wrong, I tell him I will.