MAMAS, DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS

—STORIES—

By

Steve Goerger

RECOMMENDED:

[Signature]

[Signature]

Advisory Committee Chair

Chair, Department of English

APPROVED:

[Signature]

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

[Signature]

Dean of the Graduate School

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Date
MAMAS, DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS

—STORIES—

A

THESIS

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By

Steve Goerger, B.A.

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The stories of *Mamas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys* employ surreal plots and fabulist forms in an attempt to uncover the awe and wonder hidden in even the most trivial, mundane aspects of human life. The narrator of the title story, a time-traveling interstellar policeman, confronts the reality that his astounding occupation cannot gain him what he most desires, love; yet the confrontation itself rewards him with a tiny glimpse of love’s existence. In “L’Ecole du Ciel,” the protagonist finds himself in a purgatory-cum-schoolhouse, where he must unlearn the futile knowledge he gained on Earth and submit unequivocally to his merciless school mistress. The result is a *Candide*-like resolution; it suggests, as do all of these stories, that we “cultivate our garden” and leave well-enough alone.
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Mule Factory

Dan has come out of a terrible relationship, yes, and there is even drinking, and a little drugs. Yes. He has never been all that popular with anyone. Yes. He has just graduated from college, but he doesn’t see any possibility in his life. Yes, all of it; it all happens.

On their first walk around the dry, stale grounds, Rudolpho tells Dan and the others: “The production of mules is very simple—a female horse and a male donkey are mated. You may wonder why we call this production, and not breeding. Well, the word breeding implies that two animals of the same species are mated to further propagate the species. In fact, we do no such thing—mules are completely asexual beings, incapable of reproducing themselves. So we do the dirty work for them! Thank you friends, and welcome.” Spontaneous applause bursts out, with Dan leading the way, cheering the romance he feels finding him here in Mexico.

As the German standing next to Dan asks a further question about terminology, the mood in the room is generous, but strained. At the back of their group a tall, dark-haired girl begins sobbing loudly. The next morning Rudolpho teaches Dan and a Japanese boy how to operate a twelve-thousand dollar insemination probe.

There are six of them, interns, at the Mule Factory that summer. Dan. Florian, the German, who is fair and tall and intelligent. Rico, a Mexican. Inez, the Portuguese crier, whom everyone assumes is Mexican. Shaito, who has come from Japanese business school to learn Spanish. And Don, the other American, who on the very first morning of
work, while Dan and Shaito learn the probe, beds Inez in the bunkhouse and steals a carton of Rudolpho’s prerolled cigarettes.

Rico and Florian work with the donkeys. In the mornings the donkeys are fed and cleaned; in the early afternoon there is exercise, walking in circles, powering the mill; then comes siesta. Both the Mexican and the German have been around equine animals all their lives. Over the first weeks they find they have much in common. Rico speaks fluent German. They discuss philosophy as they recline on haybales in the dusty corral.

“Marx yes, Lenin, no—I think we can agree to this!” Rico says, but Florian just chews some grass awhile.

“I have no interest in politics—my thought is purely existential,” he says. Through the office window he observes the mascara streaking from Inez’s eyes—a Nietzschean Mona Lisa, he thinks—and considers the long chain of cause and effect. “Wer war die erste Ursache?” he asks. It is a difficult problem, but these things take time, is all.

In bed at night, Dan considers cause, too. He wonders who, or what, could have hurt Inez so hard; he wonders exactly how Don helps (hurts); he wonders what he might be able to do to cool the fever that melts her. He mentally sends soft bay breezes and a lapping, licking shoreline her way. Recollections of a surfer girl he once knew wash over him: blonde, beautiful, buoyant in the water. With sudden guilt he shakes his head and tries to refocus on Inez. But only a word comes to mind—his rival’s name—Don!

Just then Inez cries “Don!” into the blackness of the bunkhouse. It is the first word she has learned in English.
Or Spanish, for that matter.

"Don!" Shaito whispers to himself the next morning. He considers what the word could mean. He has been listening to the Mexicans, Rudolpho, Rico, and Inez, speak Spanish, and this is the only word he has heard them all say. Both Americans are named Don, but he assumes this is only a coincidence. Don is a very common American name, after all: Rumsfeld, Rickles, Knotts. But in Spanish it must be a word of very great and secret importance. So secret they leave it out of the dictionaries, so great it gathers full power only at night. Clandestinely he whispers the word to the sun, then smiles at the Don he works with. One of their jennies has just given birth to the first mule of the season.

Rudolpho demonstrates the standard operating procedure, his arm streaked with blood up to the elbow. The little thing lies silent a few minutes and then suddenly looses a strange almost-bray, an odd throaty little whisper.

Back in the office Rudolpho washes up, then splits a spliff with Don. Don smokes with one hand, kneads Inez's back with the other. Inez files and shuffles and straightens.

"The girls are in good hands this year," Rudolpho says. "Soft hands—Dan is a fine, dedicated worker. Not like you, eh, Don, making your girl do all the work!"

Don smokes stoically.

The phone rings under Inez's waiting hand. She picks it up and says: "Estou!" Rudolpho wonders what kind of regional dialect she speaks; her voice is rapid, the sound of water rushing over rock. He hopes the local touch will help sell mules in her area.
Everyone goes into the nearby city of Chuito for a weekend. Rudolpho leads his charges down the cobblestones and into the colonial heart of the city. All the buildings still have seventeenth-century faces; Rudolpho says Chuito was once the great melting pot for the native Indians and the Spanish settlers; now, especially after NAFTA, it is only a little suburb for America. "Everything for the tourists!" he says, playfully punching Rico in the arm. Dan purchases a nice cowboy hat for real cheap. He looks in the mirror, tugs the brim, practices saying "Purdy."

Dinner and drinks. Florian and Rico try very hard to tackle the language barrier between themselves and Shaito. Rico knows traveler's Japanese, but not enough to do any good. Florian tries English, German, Dutch, Afrikaans. They finally end up pointing at things, saying their names in Spanish, letting Shaito repeat and learn. "Cerveza." "Cadera." Shaito speaks the words heartily wrong.

The rest of the table talks business, mostly. Rudolpho praises Dan's handling of the horses, lets him into his best business secrets. Getting very drunk. A lot of money to be made, and great satisfaction in the job. Because, Rudolpho says, covering Dan's hand with his, the thing about mules is, the thing is, the thing is...

"The thing about mules is: I don't think God intended them ever to happen."

"God does not intend a lot of things that happen," Dan says. "Especially the bad things that happen to good people." From under his hat he peeks across the table to see if Inez is listening. And, yes, her face is fixed squarely on Dan.
"Yes, yes, we are all sorry that Inez cries so much," Rudolpho says. "But this is what is wonderful: even the failures of God are his great successes. Do you understand?"

Consensus is reached—all the heads at the table nod yes. Dan is agreeing with Rudolpho; Rudolpho bobs along the buoyant sea of alcohol in his belly. The body of Inez reacts to Don fingering her under the table. Florian and Rico have given up on Shaito; they are only being polite as he repeatedly says, "Don." Don hums a happy tune, nods along.

A fax comes through on the machine—Inez retrieves it and takes it out to Rudolpho, who looks it over. "Prices of mules are plummeting," he says. "Not good, not good—maybe I will have to cut labor, let one of you go." He rubs the small bumps of her spine. "Maybe your Don?"

Inez pours hot tears like coffee.

"No, no, not you guys, Inez," Rudolpho says. "I was only joking. I'll get rid of the uglies first—maybe Rico." With nothing left to say, Inez walks away briskly. Rudolpho watches.

Dan and Shaito help birth thirty mules in June—some tan, some spotted, some speckled pepper and salt. They never see two the same. Shaito whispers his word over each of them, blessing the newborn with its mighty magic. Each time Dan thinks Shaito is talking to him. He turns his head toward the pastel sky and pretends not to hear.
Florian plans a week’s vacation into the mountains, to ponder the ponderous questions that fill his soul. He goes into the office to ask Rudolpho to lend him a pack mule and some marijuana.

“Maybe I should have brought more women in,” Rudolpho is saying to Don. “Even I myself am lonely. From now on I will arrange pairings ahead of time. One-to-one ratios. Harmonies of scale.” Just then he notices Florian.

“And what about you, Florian? Wouldn’t you like to have a nice romantic fling with a Mexican girl, take your mind off some things?”

Florian cautiously considers his play here, jokes, “Off some things, on some others. If you know what I mean.” Rudolpho and Don explode with violent laughter; they clap Florian’s back so hard it hurts. But his wit does win Florian two weeks’ vacation, two mules, peyote, marijuana.

“But hey, take Shaito with you,” Rudolpho says, still weak with laughter.

“Seriously—get that Jap out of my hair!”

Florian invites Shaito into the desert by pointing: first into the distance, then at himself and Shaito, then back into the distance. He makes a walking motion with two fingers, points to himself and Shaito again, and smiles. Shaito smiles back.

That night, with Don drunk and passed out in his bed, Shaito steals over to Inez. He puts his face very close to hers and whispers the word he feels they share. Inez looks at him like he’s gone crazy. Urgently, he pleads the word again: Don! Then the donkeys quit braying, and Rico quits snoring, and everything is soft and silent. Shaito’s face is
creased with tension, as if he will burst unless relieved. Inez swirls a cool digit around his forehead—a hot sweat is forming there—but Shaito takes her hand and presses it hard to his lips. Never has Inez considered Shaito in this regard, but this makes his first impression all the better. She would cry, but Shaito’s ardor has strength for the both of them, too much to allow it. Her eyes search this surprise, until finally they rest upon his—and then they kiss. Their passion carries on wordlessly until the sun rises and they fall asleep. An hour later Florian rouses Shaito and they head off into the cool foothills of morning.

Inez stays home to watch American television on the satellite while the boys, Dan, Rico, Rudolpho, Don, tie one on at the Chuito Gentleman’s Club. By now the sun has given Dan a deep tan and caused a purple sweat ring in his black cowboy hat; all the girls coo at him, a true-blue vaquero. “Any girl in here belongs to you!” Rudolpho shouts gleefully. But just as Dan considers a sweet-faced, flat-chested, tall young thing, Don slips her a fifty and she leads him to the storage room. Dan follows after a few minutes and peers inside: the shadows tumble, heavy breaths fall, envy rises. When finally Don reemerges into the bar, Dan lands a strong left hook and knocks his countryman into the stage. Rudolpho and Rico come running over.

“I’m doing this for Inez!” a terrified Dan shouts, standing over Don.

“Dan, Inez doesn’t need you,” Rudolpho says in soothing tones. “She’s watching reruns of 90210.”
It is in the highlands that Shaito proves his real worth to Florian. Handy with both fire and water, Shaito keeps camp while Florian explores his mind with the drugs Rudolpho has gifted him. Florian lays the pills and pot on the ground. He points to them, then to his eyes, then to the sky. He hooks his thumbs and flaps his hands like bird’s wings. Points to the drugs again—Shaito seems confused. “Don?” Florian asks; Shaito needs no further explanation. He goes about gathering scrub brush for heat, drilling cacti for water.

Dan and Don wordlessly declare a truce, though Dan is hopeful Don has told Inez it was he who punched him, so Inez might wonder: Why? Any press being good press. But Don never says anything to Inez. Never says anything at all. Only hums.

The birthing season hits stride, and Dan midwives, alone, flawlessly. A large inventory of animals accrues. Dan and Rico wonder why Rudolpho does not sell any of them. “The economy is in such shape that probably no one can even afford a mule anymore,” Rico says, keeping to himself suspicions that Rudolpho is simply incompetent. Meanwhile, the corral nearly overflows: all those sexless animals, standing around, just staring at one another.

Inez answers the phone. Sometimes she tries to explain herself fully, in Portuguese. But she can only try.


“Que?”

“Of course, things won’t stay the same forever. Someday you’ll stop crying. I wonder if I’ll still love you then.”
“Papa?”

“However, Rico says what we are we will always be. Somehow, you will cry, and I will love you forever.”

“Don?”

“Dan! Do you understand? Dan. See, I’ve been hurt so much. I don’t know much else. I left my girl in California and I only did it to feel the hurt again.”

“Inez!”

“I called her Joey. But Inez, her real name was just plain Joan.”

“Shaito?”

“Don!” Florian screams, waking Shaito from a comfortable sleep near the fire.

“Ich weiss jetzt! Er ist Don!”

(It takes time, is all is all is all...)

With two more births, the holding pen is literally bursting at the seams. And there are six more births scheduled for the first half of August. Rudolpho sees that he needs to sell. He orders Inez to put ads in all the major newspapers in Mexico. “We’ll undersell even the steepest competition!” he says. “Even those guys in Mexico City! Sell, sell, sell! Two-for-one, free coffee, a juggling clown!”

In the desert, in a hallucinogenic trance, Florian attempts to climb the vertical face of a small mountain, to be closer to God. Halfway up he loses his grip and falls fifty feet. Shaito, who has been trailing Florian without his knowledge, catches his hand and pulls him back to the rocks.
“Don,” Florian says to him, and they begin to climb again. A while later some shadows play tricks on Shaito’s eyes, and he slips and falls into the deep canyon below, to his death. Florian summits, beats his strong breast, wails a deep and true wail.


“How do you know that?” Rico asks. He is offended; he thinks about taking a swing at his already-tipsy boss.

“Listen—we are both Mexicans!” Rudolpho says. “I don’t wish to leave you destitute. Let me ask you a question: can you juggle? Or mime?”

The reason Inez cries: shortly before leaving for Mexico her father has died. They were very close. To make matters worse, her father was a great lover of horses. Every Saturday morning he would take his only daughter riding with him, through gold fields, through wild forests, through light blankets of shiny snow. Being near to horses is terrible, but Inez knows that being away from them would probably be worse still. There is no solution to the problem, and so she cries. But the feeling of the hot tears on her skin is the least of her concerns—first she would like to know how people live life in a brain full of dead memories!

In the late evenings, after the phones have stopped ringing, after making love to Don, she likes to walk along the country road and think about the great loves of her life. Manu, the boy from school, who brought her wildflowers and kissed her cheek raw before he ever kissed her lips. Fun and flighty Pepe during high school. The much older
Geraldo, a man clinging to limitless passion in limited years. Already in her young life she has been loved by so many men! Lately Shaito has been added to the list, but she has not quite figured out why. She can’t even picture him or remember the sound of his voice. But he looked at her the way her father did— they share those green-flecked brown eyes, which bathed her in warm light every time they shined her way. She wonders how long Shaito will look at her that way; wonders if this one familiar thing would be enough to fly her to Japan, to live among all those aliens.

Rudolpho goes into town and buys streamers. He sees a man about a big top tent left behind by a traveling circus. As they negotiate he can see the carnival, the shoppers, the free food on the hot grill, Rico pantomiming, maybe atop a unicycle. The farmers will surely bring their entire families to such a festival. Maybe one of them will have a lovely older daughter in need of a husband—maybe he can trade a few mules for a wife. His pulse quickens and his eyes brighten. He pays five-thousand pesos for the sun-faded tent.

As he lays the body of Shaito into the ground, Florian gives a short invocation:

“Lord, accept into your circle the spirit of your servant, Shaito, perhaps the most righteous man I have ever known. He who was most at home in the wilderness of your creation, he who came across the seas to find his rest here, with you. Though we never actually spoke—communication and communion are hard in this world—I feel that he came all this way only to have his life end nearer to you. Please protect his soul. In your name we pray. Don.”

“Ee-haa,” the mules are saying to one another, back at the factory. “Ee-haa?”
Don walks a few miles out to meet Florian as he comes back to town. Florian rides only one nag; the other he has let run free. When he sees that it is Don who has come out to meet him, he jumps down off his steed and falls to his knees. Don grabs him by the arm and hauls him back up.

“No,” Don says, “it’s not me. This is your problem: you think too much. Do you think God really thinks about any of this?”

“Your logic: it seems false,” Florian says.

“Exactly,” Don says. “But look at it this way: God must surely be alone. I have never been alone. Who would want to be so godly?”

They walk back into town together. Florian begins to cry, tells Don about the fate of Shaito.

Don nods his head, hums his tune. He lights up a spliff and they share it on the way back to the factory.

With Florian to welcome back, with Shaito’s life to celebrate, Rudolpho feels the mule carnival is destiny’s creation. He takes Inez out of the office and puts her to work with Dan, grooming and preparing the animals. He and Florian erect the big top. Don keeps the office afloat, prepares shipping manifests; in his free moments he is to paint a portrait of Shaito, to be wreathed with flowers and hung near the cash register.

Rico has become proficient at the juggling of four, five, six eggs. Or apples, or oranges.
Inez cries day and night for her latest loss. She brushes her tears into the coats of the mules. Dan is revitalized by her sadness. At one point he gathers enough courage as to wrap a tender arm around her. He works hard and puts on a happy face, sweating into the grain he feeds the animals. Years later he will marry a pretty little blonde from South Dakota. They have three children, one of whom they name Inez. When she is twelve Inez takes fifteenth place in a local bowling tournament. She is her father’s favorite by far.

The scheduled first morning of the carnival comes; everything is silent, still, and ready. The six of them stand shoulder to shoulder, waiting. Rudolpho stands next to Don stands next to Inez stands next to Dan stands next to Rico stands next to Florian. Just behind them is Don’s portrait of Shaito—a childish yellow sun shining above a field of red, pink, and purple question marks. They stand that way until late afternoon, when not yet has a soul approached to inspect the restless, fenced animals.

“I guess no one reads newspapers anymore,” Rudolpho says. With that, he lets go of a few loose dreams. That night they throw a party for themselves under the big top. Everyone gets intoxicated. Rudolpho offers Rico a full-time position. Rico tells Florian of his feelings for him, opening a wide, empty chasm between them. Inez cries; Dan grins crookedly under his low-pulled brim. Don walks off into the sunset, thinking maybe Italy…

They fall asleep outside, clustered together underneath the big top. In the early morning the mules’ voices wake Dan. “Ee-haa!” they say to each other. “Ee-haa!” they scream to the sky. Dan gets up and stumbles over to the pen. In the middle many of the
animals are huddled; there seems to be some kind of commotion. Dan climbs up on the highest rung of the fence to look in. He wipes his brow, whistles low, tugs the brim of his hat. In the midst of the animals there is a small calf of some kind, some newborn. A small light, white animal. To Dan’s eyes, it appears winged. Hopefully it is winged.
The Acura broke down somewhere in Yukon—you want every single detail I know, Mr. Davis, but I have to say somewhere, because it all looked pretty much the same the whole way. Two-lane highway stretching out ahead, up into the mountains, with forest edging in from all around. Like that forever, and I got into a zone where I didn’t think about anything—which is amazing, since you always tell me I’m very intelligent, but that I have a hyperactive mind. But right then I was totally mindless...so I don’t even want to guess how long it took me to notice the needle in the red and overheated. And after I pulled over and let it cool down, the engine wouldn’t turn over again. That killed my zone, certainly. In my head I could suddenly hear my stepdad John’s voice, yelling about antifreeze or something.

I guess I got out and hitch-hiked, but I seem to have blocked that part out. I’ll bet I was crying, though. The next part I remember, I was in a big red Ford with a little old Native man who had a cute, raggedy ponytail. He must’ve saw I looked nervous, with the car broke down and all, because he said not to sweat it, these things happen all the time. I was only twenty kilometers out of Whitehorse, he said, and it was a great place to break down, because they have everything. He stared straight ahead as he drove, but kept on talking, in his hushed, careful voice, about Yukon, his dogs, his wife, or whatever. I got the feeling he was a pro at rescuing lost people, and I started getting calm again.

That man was nice as can be, and he dropped me off at a lodge on the edge of town. After I’d paid for a room for the night, I called AAA for a tow. They called
someone else, who called me back in my room. I told the guy what color and make, and where my car was. “Great place to break down,” he said. I remembered how the old man had said the exact same thing, and so I stayed up a while thinking about it. Probably because of science we never take coincidences for the important signs they might be. I gave a lot of brainpower to thinking it out, Mr. Davis—you would have been proud of my focus—but by this time I was so worn-out that I fell asleep halfway, my shoes still on. Great place to break down, yessir.

***

The next day I met the man the police found me with. We walked together. His name was Walter, he said, and I told him my name was Betty. That’s why everything was so confused and such a big deal. Mr. Davis, I don’t have the first reason why I gave him that name...well, okay, maybe I do. Because Betty sounds like the 1950s, which I always think must’ve been a cool decade. And I suppose the other reason was because I was wanting to be someone besides myself. Right? I was disassociating again, or something?

But that wasn’t until later in the day. When I got going the next afternoon I walked down into Whitehorse, to eat and look around. I was definitely in an observational mood. The Yukon River ran next to the foot-path the whole way, and I thought how it looked so much bigger than the Oregon ocean does. There were signs about its history here and there, and I thought, see, this river comes from somewhere, and it goes to somewhere. It can carry things. All the ocean does is sit there. If you go out in
it, in a raft like refugees might, you just get pushed back on the waves. But rivers move you places.

At the Dairy Queen where I ate lunch there were a lot of teenagers, a lot of noisy energy. The countergirl was a little younger than me, fifteen maybe, and really pretty, with long dark hair and a pair of bright-black eyes. Every now and again a real customer, an old RV couple or a local stinky drunk, would come in and bother her, but otherwise she just cracked jokes with all the girls and made faces at all the boys. It looked like she was *The* Dairy Queen, holding court, and I thought everyone in there was probably her best friend. But then I wondered: maybe they just come to talk her into free ice cream? And she gave someone one free, once, and now they all come all the time? That wouldn’t be very much fun for her, but she’d learn to make the best of it, put on a good face, still crack jokes and even flirt. But I do realize that was just my mind, overworking the way it does. I was just *projecting*, like you would have said. You would’ve said: That girl doesn’t have a thing to do with your problems; your problems are your own and you’re the one to deal with them. And John would’ve said: *Eat your ice cream and shut up.* But here I am anyways.

Afterwards I went to the public library, which is something I’d never do in Eugene, and looked at some books. I checked one out—*The Great Gatsby*, which I was supposed to have read the year before, but never did. I didn’t need a library card or anything, the lady just said to bring it back—which makes me feel bad, because I don’t think it ever got there. Then I went out and sat down by the big river and put my legs into it. The water was freezing cold, even though the evening air was warm. People kept
jogging by, one after another...but what I noticed was they all had dogs. I thought Oregon had a lot of dogs! I still can’t believe how many there were, especially with it being so cold in the winter. But up there they don’t have any dalmatians or dachshunds or cutesy poodles; it’s all huskies and retrievers with big shaggy coats, so they never get cold. Sitting by the river, for some reason I started thinking about mermaids, and I laughed aloud, wondering if the Yukon River mermaids had big coats too. It’s funny because mermaids are supposed to be really cute or sexy creatures, but here you’d have these hairy women, and they’d be just beautiful because they couldn’t live any other way.

It was getting late, so I decided to head back, even though the sun was still out full-blast. I walked past a campground, where a bunch of college kids were throwing a Frisbee and laughing. They reminded me of my ex-boyfriend, Dennis, who is in college, too—technical college. (Do you remember him? He graduated in 2002.) Dennis always liked to laugh, too. We had just broken up a couple weeks before I left, so really, I was thinking of him more than I am writing here. But mostly I was remembering the bad times, and this was nice because I got to think of him laughing. So, with the mermaids and Dennis laughing in my head, I was thinking very positive thoughts.

And this was how I met Walter. I was walking through a little foresty part of the path when I heard a rustling in the trees. I looked down the bank toward the river, and there was a man, squatting down, with his pants around his ankles. He looked up at me looking at him and his face got red and his eyes got watery. He was really embarrassed.

He was in pretty bad shape, so I reached into my big mailbag purse, pulled out a few Kleenex, and walked down to hand them over to him. He took them without a word,
just gave a kind of snort. I moved down the path a few steps, out of sight, but waited for him. I guess I wanted to make sure he was okay. When he came up on the path and saw me he seemed nervous again, but I could see him working to control it.

“1’m so sorry,” he said. “I walked into town for dinner, and then…I just couldn’t hold it anymore.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

“It’s terrible. I haven’t been feeling right all day.”

“That’s okay,” I said again. I smiled at him and said, “Happens all the time,” which instantaneously I felt stupid for, because that’s a ridiculous thing to say to a man pooping in the woods. But I like to remember what I said, and what happened, because that part makes me laugh. Personally, I think it’s good to remember that nice things come out of stupid beginnings.

***

Walter and I kept walking together, and we discovered we were staying at the same lodge. He told me he and his wife were living a dream, driving north through B.C. and Yukon and Alaska. They wanted to take an RV, but they couldn’t afford it, so they just borrowed a friend’s AstroVan and took off. Some nights they slept in the van, some nights they found a room. He said his wife, Anne, needed to sleep in beds some nights because she has some neck and back problems. He said he was from Oregon, but I didn’t tell him that’s where I came from, too.
He was talking really fast and nervous the whole time. It was funny—it’s always funny, and sweet. In a way it reminded me of Dennis, at the beginning. At the beginning Dennis would take me on long drives and we’d talk all night. We’d drive past an apple orchard and Dennis would tell me, *those are Red Delicious apples.* We’d go past Widmer Street and he’d say, *this is the street where you can buy weed. Just walk down and make eye contact with somebody. You have to act confident.* He was always explaining things to me, talking a lot. Sure, drugs are bad, but I thought it was really sweet, like he thought if he ever stopped explaining the outside world he’d have to talk about things that really mattered. One thing I’ve found is that no one talks about the things that matter. I think it’s because if people talked about the important stuff all the time, then it wouldn’t seem nearly as important. It seems maybe true to me—the important stuff is tucked away, like the present under the pretty wrapping paper. So when Walter talked about his wife and her neck, and then about his job and his van, I was aware that something maybe beautiful was underneath.

“I’m moving to Juneau,” I explained to Walter as we arrived at the lodge, not wanting to let him do all the talking.

“Getting a job there?”

“Yep.”

“You just get done with high school then?”

“Just done,” I lied.
“I graduated high school in 1977,” Walter said. “Me and Anne both. High school sweethearts.” His eyelids got fluttery for a moment, which I thought was adorable, and he said, “Hey, why don’t you come up and meet her?”

So I went upstairs to Walter’s room and met his wife. When we walked in she was flat on her back, staring ahead at the television. She wasn’t wearing any shirt, just a great big cream-colored support bra. But she had silky black hair, I could see, and a pretty-enough face. It took her a minute to look over and realize she had company. But when she did, she jumped up very quickly off her heat packs and threw a shirt on. She was mad, but not at me; she yelled at Walter about never knocking.

Walter stayed pretty even and nice to her, though. “Honey, this is Betty,” he said. “She just...helped me out.”

“I’ll bet,” Anne said, chuckling at herself and lighting a cigarette. “You’re a helpful girl, huh?”

I could tell Anne didn’t like me right off, but I wasn’t going to let her push me around, so I said, “Yes I am.” It was just like that once, Mr. Davis, when Joi DeVillers got mad at me because her boyfriend flirted with me, or something. On the one hand, you want to tell them you didn’t do it. But you don’t want to seem weak, either.

So I said what I said, and Anne and me just kind of stared at each other. And then we both looked around the room. And then we both kind of looked at Walter.

“I’ll walk you down now, Betty,” he said in a low voice.

Anne called out nice to meet you as we walked out the door, and I yelled “You too!” back, but it was total bullshit. Walter didn’t apologize or anything, but he thanked
me for the Kleenex again. This was outside my room door, and, yeah, he lingered slightly, but I didn’t mind. Again, it was like with Joi DeVillers: The other hand is, if you’re going to get punished for crimes you didn’t commit, you feel you might as well go back and commit them, too.

But Walter only shook my hand in his sweaty palm, and turned and left. When I got inside my room I checked the messages, but nobody had called yet about the car. I lay down and thought about Walter and Anne, in their room just like this one. The two of them in bed together, but she with pillows and heating and wires all under her head and back. *Unavailable for comment*, like Dennis would say when I was having my period.

***

The next morning I called my best friend Carrie (Gerard) in Eugene, just to say hello. When she picked up she was all excited and *oh-my-God!* that I’d called her. “We’re all worried sick about you!” Carrie shrieked into the phone. “Are you coming home? Your dad is really pissed off about that car.”

“It’s not even his car,” I said. “My mom bought that, before. It’s her car, and she gave it to me.”

“Well, still, I know he’s real mad. Where are you?”

“Portland.”

“That’s it?” Carrie said. I knew she’d take it like that; if I was close, then my runaway wouldn’t be very interesting to her. If I was really someplace far away, then Carrie would probably demand to join me, and I didn’t want that, either.
So we didn’t really talk about me, thank God; we talked about Carrie’s boyfriend Chad (Jackson). Just the night before she’d caught Chad talking with June Spicer at a party at Greg McDermott’s mother’s house. In the bedroom. With the lights off. But just talking, Chad said.

"Your ought to just dump him and go out with Clarke, ‘cause he’s liked you forever, and he’s way cuter than Chad," I told her. It was my best-friend duty to do so. But to tell the truth, the whole conversation bored the crap out of me. I know I hadn’t graduated, but I felt like the kids who go away to college and come back all mature and different. I wasn’t any older; it was just that my tastes had changed, I felt, almost overnight.

When Chad called on Carrie’s other line, we said goodbye, and I decided to hop down to the lobby and get a bagel or something from the continental breakfast. I’d eat, I’d decided, and maybe watch television for a while, and then call AAA and bitch them out for never calling me. I wanted to see Walter again, too, but I didn’t know just how I would make that happen. I could go to his room and just knock, but if Anne answered, there’d be trouble.

But when I went down to the continental breakfast, the problem took care of itself. There was Walter and Anne, sitting at one of the little tables. Walter was reading a newspaper and drinking coffee, and Anne was spreading jelly on some toast. She had cereal, too, and a couple bagels piled up. I admit it: I thought to myself, *Pig.*

By the time I went through the line and got some orange juice and a cream-cheese bagel, Walter was looking right at me.
“It is you!” he said to me, then gestured to his wife. “Look, honey, it’s Betty again!” She looked up, and made a piggy-like face with her nose all scrunched up, and then went right back to eating. Walter motioned for me to join them, and he grabbed me a chair, which I pulled closer to Walter before sitting down.

“So how’s the car?” Walter asked. “Did they call?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “I’m fucking pissed.”

Anne snorted at that. “The mouth on this one!” she said, but to Walter, like I wasn’t even there.

That was rude. Plus, the smell of the menthol stuff on her back was strong and disgusting, and her neck was crooked a little to the side, like she couldn’t bend it normally. Meanwhile she kept stuffing her face with cereal and bagels. Me and Anne had the worst relationship for a while. We really only had one nice day together, so I guess I don’t blame her if she hates me again, now.

But I ignored her and told Walter I was going to call this afternoon; he said that seemed like a wise plan. Then he asked me what I was going to do after that—he and Anne were going on a riverboat tour; would I like to come along? “I’ll get you a ticket,” Walter said. “It’s the least I can do.”

Anne just kept on pounding her cereal, but I could tell her silence was disapproval. What a bitch—how Walter was married to this beast, I couldn’t then imagine. So, of course, I said yes to taking the trip with them. In fact, I said more than yes. “Sure!” I said. And, exactly as I told the police, I kind of rubbed Walter’s leg a little, under the table.
Perspective is everything is one of your pet-sayings, Mr. Davis. And I believe you about it. So let me explain to you my perspective, about Walter and Anne. Then maybe you’ll better understand.

So imagine this, Mr. Davis: You go to school every day to counsel kids about life and college and stuff, which is really your favorite thing to do. But all the students ever want you to do is help them with is chemistry. And you like chemistry, so, okay, you help them. But after a while, you have this reputation; everyone thinks Mr. Davis is just a chemistry teacher. And you’re thinking, no, no, I’m a counselor! I can do more than chemistry! But no one listens. Until, one day, a new student comes to the school. Now, when you meet with this student, what do you do? Well, maybe you try to counsel them. But, it’s been so long since you counseled, I bet you’ll start out by asking them how they do at chemistry. And if they seem to have a terrible time at chemistry, I bet you’ll help them with that first, even if part of you is sick of it. It’ll take a while before chemistry isn’t your first notion.

But that’s off-track. In the afternoon I called AAA. “The Acura is registered to a Mr. John Hewitt?” the operator-guy asked. “Is that correct?”

“That’s correct,” I said. “But it’s my car. It was my mother’s.”

“Well, either way,” he said. “And you say it’s in Whitehorse, Yukon?”

“Yes!” I said. “You already knew that two days ago! Shouldn’t somebody be on this by now?”
"We're doing our best, ma'am. Let me double-check all the other information, okay? You're Emily Hewitt?"

"Yes."

"Currently living at the Whitehorse Wilderness Lodge?"

"Yes—but I'm only living here until you fix my car!"

"The phone there is 342-452-9884?"

"Yeah."

"Yes. Okay, Emily, that's all the information we need. We'll be on this as soon as possible. Shouldn't take much more than another day."

"I wish you guys could hurry up."

"We're trying our best, Emily. Just stay where you are."

How I did not see how this would turn out, Mr. Davis, I will never guess.

So the riverboat ride wasn't really too much to see. We floated down the river for two hours, then started floating back. There were a few moose and caribou sightings on the banks, but the neatest thing was just the big paddle wheel, kicking up water like a big blender. We sat at the back of the deck, where Walter and me could watch it. Anne had her sunglasses on, so I couldn't tell what she was looking at.

Walter and I talked about my plans for Juneau. I was glad to talk about it, my rosy future. I told him I'd heard I could get a job on a fishing boat, working only
summers but making lots of money. The only thing necessary, they said, was a desire to work hard and succeed. That I had—that I could do.

“Good for you,” Walter said. “Desire, hard work—that’s my line. Betty, I sell power tools for a living—drills, circ saws, miters, the whole bit. It’s a small-time kinda operation. So I gotta stay on top of it.”

“You must get really worn out,” I said, with lots of sympathy in my voice.

“I do,” Walter said, smiling at the water. “So does Anne. Harder, even—I just do the salesmanship. She’s the stockroom manager. Inventory.”

When the boat turned around downstream it was time for dinner, and the captain or whoever invited us inside for a buffet they’d set up. They had lots of smoked salmon, and other seafood, and vegetable trays and red pasta and other good stuff. Anne sat down at a two-person table but Walter found me a stray chair right away.

A waiter came around and asked us what we’d like to drink. Walter ordered Coke, Anne ordered vino, and I got Coke too. The waiter brought them out, and Anne scoffed at her glass.

“That’s not even half a glass,” she said. “Fill me up, buddy.”

She said it like a demand and I started thinking again, disbelieving, how Walter could love a woman like this. To me Walter was just a nice man, full of kindness and eager to be nice to anyone who happened by. But Anne was still only this evil woman who wanted to get in the way of my fun. Just like everybody else in the world. I wondered if maybe they got married because she got knocked up, or her parents caught them in bed and made them, or something.
Walter took her hand in his and rubbed it a while, across the table. It was interesting, how he did that while he was trying to eat. He couldn’t use his knife, so he had to cut the food with the side of his fork. It seemed like a lot of work. Sometimes Anne would take her hand away from his, too, to rub her neck. So a lot of the time Walter’s arm was just lying there, doing nothing, all alone and limp like a dead fish. I was sorry for him—and this is maybe the thing that got us all so in trouble, my feeling sorry just then. Because then I leaned over and started cutting up his salmon and potato.

And this got Anne started, alright. “Christ, Walter,” she said. “I sure hope you’re enjoying this.”

Walter huffed and puffed a little, and his face got red, but he didn’t say anything. So I spoke up tough for us: “Enjoying what?”

“Oh, I’m sure you know,” Anne said. It sounded just like something one of the girls at school would say. I knew what she was getting at—she thought I was some kind of a slut or golddigger. Maybe a hooker, even. I was unbelievably insulted. It was like my reputation was stuck in my hair, like smoke, and could follow me 3000 miles. It hurts a lot. And while I was getting really mad, she just kept on eating and stayed as cool as a cucumber—which was infuriating, and kind of scary, too.

“Hey!” I said. “I’m just trying to be nice here. I’m just trying to help him hold your hand.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want to hold his damn hand,” Anne said, taking a break from eating to point her fork my way. “My hand is busy rubbing my neck. Why don’t you hold his hand, little girl?”
So I did. I laced my hand into his, and kind of held them both up in the air, to show her. Walter was shifting around in his seat, really uncomfortable. So was I, actually. But I held it anyways. And then I brought his hand around my shoulder, and I pressed myself against his chest, and I started crying. Walter smoothed my hair and kept saying, _okay, okay, it's okay_. I can be such a crybaby. But I wasn't crying because I was upset. I think it was just because she had called me little girl, which no one had done in a long time.

While I was crying, Anne finally got the waiter to leave a whole bottle of wine with us. She dumped the ice out of my coke glass and poured me some. So you could give her contributing to the delinquency, but that's all. She gave Walter her glass, and kept the bottle for herself. And she kept on eating, didn't say a word.

When I quit bawling, Walter said I should look into college when I got to Juneau. He was smiling at me, and said how I seemed too smart a girl to be a fisherwoman for the rest of my life.

But suddenly I didn't like Walter talking to me. I didn't want to get Anne mad again. At the same time, now I know, yes, a part of me did. I needed all that tension, like ice breaking.

"Maybe," I said, looking down at the table. "But maybe college is too hard for me. I don't like school very much. The school counselor says I'm bad at turning lemons into lemonade."
Walter laughed again at that—so much that his nose made a squeaking sound. That made me laugh.

Anne just said, “Fuck lemonade—get yourself some champagne, sister.”

I didn’t know what she meant by adding the sister. It was kind of like a joke, but she still wasn’t laughing. It felt a challenge. Walter looked nervous for both of us. But here was an opportunity for me, with her.

So in my tough voice again I said, “That is exactly my intention in life, sister.”

And then I stared at Anne, closely, daring her to take it hard. She looked back at me like I was the hard floor of that van that Walter sometimes made her sleep on—like I was a pain in the neck. But then she laughed, too. “Exactly my intention,” she said. “Fucking smart-ass kid. Go to Harvard or something.”

When we got back to the lodge that night, Anne and Walter came down to my room for a wine party—we’d already had two bottles on the boat, and I told them, hell, I’m almost legal in Canada. They might have questioned me on that point, but they didn’t. We were all laughing and having a good time. Anne got so drunk on the boat that she was trying to bring the waiter back for me—but I told her I already had a boyfriend, even if it wasn’t exactly true.

In the room I gave Anne the best massage I could. She laid face-down on the bed and I straddled her hips. I made her take off her shirt and unsnap her bra. It was that
same big cream-colored support bra, or just one like it, and I said it would get in the way. I worked my fingers deep into her skin. She said it hurt a lot, but she never told me to stop, and she made a lot of good ooohs and aaahs too. All the places that had knots weren’t in her neck, but way lower in her back. I told her all of her energy was blocked around her solar plexus, and that she ought to eat less meat and more greens.

Walter sat on the edge of the bed, drinking from a bottle. He had the television on, but he was sneaking peeks over at us, too. His eyes had about the same look from the night in the woods. Eventually he even brought his hand over, and started to rub Anne’s arm, around the bicep.

“You leave well-enough alone,” Anne said, all muffled in the blankets.

I laughed, but I got off Anne and brought Walter over. I showed him how to use his fingers and his palms, one after the other, and told him to concentrate right down on her tailbone. You see, Mr. Davis, I was just trying to teach them something.

“You have to get really deep,” I said, “almost like you’re trying to reach inside.”

As I coached Walter I thought about Juneau, and how maybe I would open a massage parlor. I would get into the service industry. So many thousands of people visit Alaska every year, and I would meet them all, and I’d never have to be the same person twice. Which if you ask me would be nice.

“Now use your palms,” I told Walter. “Push all the negative energy to the side.”

And I thought perhaps I would go to college, like Walter suggested. I could learn all about psychology—people being the most interesting thing. Or I could become a teacher, which is funny enough to be beautiful. And I’d be a counselor, too.
“And you have to talk to her while you do it. She has to make a connection with the person. It makes it better.”

Or maybe I would buy some dogs, and learn how to make them mush. I could live like the Natives, off the land. I would live in a log cabin and cut down trees for fires and raise my kids without school at all. I had dreams and dreams and dreams for up there. Still do, really.

“And you should kiss her lips when you’re finished,” I said, softly, noticing Walter was getting tired of it.

They laughed at me, but Anne turned herself over, and Walter bent down to her. They kissed—a good, long kiss, with love in it. When they noticed me crying again they hesitated, but “please,” I said, “please go on.” Mr. Davis, don’t think me perverted. And it wasn’t their fault. I just wanted to see what it looked like, for once.

Of course, I’m sure my presence was all the encouragement Walter needed, but that’s okay. Things not being perfect in the world I already knew. And either Anne is just that strong and free, or she was drunk enough to be that free. Either way. But I sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Walter slipped off her bra and started in on her breasts. Anne’s lips puckered up and her eyes closed, very dreamlike. And when Walter was done there he went back to kissing her lips. After a few long moments Anne grabbed the bottom of his shirt, and pulled it over his head—and for a bit Walter’s head got stuck in there; long enough to make them laugh. It was sweet. And when it was finally off they went back to kissing. Walter’s hands were everywhere. I only watched. Anne ran a
finger around his belly, then, slowly, pushed up and through his thick chest hair. For a while they stayed just doing that.
First Day of Class

When my eyes opened again—after what length of time I am still unsure—I was sitting in a small chair in a room lit blindingly bright by those long overhead florescent bulbs that drown commercial lobbies and clinical operating rooms. I thought I must be in for some surgery, and I grew scared and cold. But then the wattage of the light seemed somehow to come down a bit, and I noticed all around me little blonde and bobby-socked children sitting in chairs like mine, all of us in rows. Before me was a milky-white little table, with a neat stack of books upon it. A pencil and eraser set were there, too.

A boy of about ten or eleven leaned over to me and whispered: "Get out your reader—we're doing English! Page twenty-three-sixty-six."

The child seemed kind enough—he had a very sympathetic smile to go with his flaming red hair and freckled face—but I started to cry a little bit anyway, muddled as my mind was about the whole situation. I located the reader in the stack of books, but my hands were shaking so violently that I knocked all of them onto the floor when I went for it. At this point my weeping became uncontrollable, and I must have become a distraction, because a stern voice from the front of the room called, "Stop your bellowing, Mr. Weeks!" The children erupted in vicious laughter. I felt like dying.

But then the voice came toward me—and the body with it. She was probably six feet tall, with coffee hair and a firm, creased smile. She wore a baby-blue sundress, nicely complemented by the indigo pumps which framed her shapely feet. She carriage a
plain wooden ruler and slapped it lightly into her left palm. I feared the worst, but when she reached my desk, she only opened me to the correct page, and then turned to the rest of the class, to instruct:

"That is not what I meant at all/That is not it, at all," she said, reading from my Norton. She spoke the lines in a French dialect, but I was able to understand perfectly, as if I had been taught these things during my slumber.

Second Day of Class

Nix—Joshua Nixon; the redhead and I had made fast friends—sat next to me again. Throughout the whole day he kept passing me clandestine notes, elaborately folded. The notes whispered of conspiracies: *They took you out early...too smart for safety...they don't really like M.I.T. at all. Mme. Slagle spent three months of class on that stuff alone!*

I was in the process of responding—in confusion, mostly—but Mme. Slagle noticed the convolutions of my origami and hotly called me to the front of the room. I played coy, but she demanded I bring the slip of paper with me. All the other boys and girls made catcalls as I strode by, pigtails and cowlicks waving in my wake. I presented Mme. Slagle with the note. She read it over with a dismayed look on her face, shooting an accusatory glare at Nix, who hid his face in shame. Then she pointed to the blackboard and said to me, "Show us."

I took up the chalk and notated:

—*Cauchy problem for infinite system of Keyfitz-Kranzer type:*

\[ \begin{align*}
\Omega' + (\langle \Omega \rangle \Omega)x' &= 1 \\
\end{align*} \]

—*As \( t \to 0 \), assuming pos. quantum string entropy, simplify to:*
\[ \ell = \frac{1}{\Omega^2} \]

—Substitution into classical \((a>0)\) Nambu-Goto reparametrization:
\[ \alpha + g = \frac{1}{2} \left[ \int d^2 \alpha \cdot \frac{1}{\Omega^2} \alpha \cdot \frac{1}{\Omega^2} \right] \]

\[ \alpha + g = g \alpha^2 d \left( \frac{\alpha + d}{\Omega^2} \right) \]

—Bessel’s Equation: \(d=g\) at low entropies:
\[ \frac{1}{\alpha^2} = \frac{g^2}{\Omega^2} \]

\[ \therefore g = \alpha/\Omega \]

Pudgy Marvin Rosenblatt waved an incredulous hand in the front row. “And how does he know that? He just got here…”

A wide grin broke over my face at this—I could tell they were all awestruck and I felt the old joys of competitive intelligence—but Mme. Slagle skillfully subdued me by taking the chalk, and with perfunctory thanks commanded me to take my seat. Then she addressed Marvin’s question. “Mr. Weeks was a very smart mathematician in his life,” she said. “He taught at top universities, and came very close to understanding some rather profound properties of the quantum universe. However, he is also a very bad boy, passing notes, showing off, disrespecting his teacher.” With this she wrote my name in the corner of the board, with a daintily curved checkmark next to it.

Sitting back down, I realized I could smell her perfume on my hand, mingling benignly with chalk dust. For the rest of the day I stayed silent with my palm pressed to my nose, listening to her instruction in Glaciology and African History with dough-boy eyes.
“She’s got it in for you,” Nix said after, as we pulled on our coats in a corner of the big walk-in closet. “You be careful. Two checks means detention. Three checks— you don’t even wanna go there.”

Dorm Life

All of us boys lived in a big dormitory on campus, giving the proceedings a prep academy feel. All the girls lived in pretty much the same building, my roommate, Hank Greeney, told me, except that they were situated way on the other side of town. “They keep those girls positively cloistered,” he said in the shower, while lathering his surprisingly muscled three-foot-eight frame. “We don’t really get to hang out until after graduation.”

Greeney was a strange fellow. In the classroom he was largely a nuisance: harassing the class’s pet hamster, putting gum in the hair of rivals, intentionally singing off-key to his own derisive lyrics during Music. It surprised me that the usually hawk-eyed Mme. Slagle did not detect his sarcasms and punish him severely—but I suppose this only illustrates the lofty level of Greeney’s tomfoolery. In the dormitory he was much the same—running the halls late into the night, bullying whoever came along. But when he returned to our room he would dutifully brush his teeth and say his prayers, and then—with a brief goodnight to me—he would quickly sink into the deep sleep of a babe, with all the requisite gooing and gaahing, sucking his thumb to his happy noises.

Many nights I would go upstairs to Nix’s room, to relax and watch reruns of The A-Team and Cheers and other hit programs. Nix bunked with a Jack Miedema, who was
the only boy besides myself over five feet—but whereas I was comfortable with my height advantage, Miedema seemed very unsure of it, eleven and unhappy to be singled out in this or any regard. He was a sheep, but sheep have their softness, and the three of us made an easy trio. We laughed at the antics of Mr. T in his absurd good vs. evil crime-fighting world; we shared in the weekly-deepening romance of the mismatched but strangely harmonious Scarecrow & Mrs. King. We stared silently at the box, dreaming ourselves into better worlds.

Sometimes Greeney would show up with canned beer that he got from who-knows-where. We took his intrusions good-humorously—I was certainly grateful for the taste of beer, at least. Usually Greeney would get over-drunk and try to get us to go streaking past the girls, but Nix and I didn’t see the point in it. Hank would grow frustrated and call Miedema names—pussy, sissy, etc. Nix and I said nothing, let Miedema bear the abuse alone.

**Physical Education**

Each morning at ten we walked to the gymnasium for our daily exercise. Required to buddy with our roommate every time we ventured into the hallways, Greeney pressed his sweaty palm into mine. In murmurs he cursed my ridiculous height, which forced his arm to sway above his head like some Baptist convert while we walked. With each moment we liked one another less and less.

On the court Greeney seemed to take it as his particular vocation to ensure that our education would truly be “physical.” Even the girls were not off Hank’s radar—
during a water polo match I watched him hold cute Sally Hemmings underwater a full thirty seconds, her black pigtails flapping madly with the waves. From my helpless position in goal I shouted and sent him evil telepathic messages: *Pick on someone your own size!* But Greeney made no response, and I was just about to alert indolent Mme. Slagle to the severity of the situation, when finally Sally’s head popped above water. Once her pale cheeks had recovered enough color she glared terribly at Greeney and slapped him across the face. It was like the strike of a panther only toying with a mouse, however, and Greeney’s sole reaction was squeaky laughter. Soon enough they were swimming up to meet the ball, together.

Once during American football Greeney—playing middle linebacker—came across the line early and threw Jack Miedema, our quarterback, hard to the ground. I looked at Slagle to throw a flag but she did nothing, so I rose from my crouched lineman’s stance to take care of business myself. I knelt down and grabbed Greeney by his diminutive face-mask, pressing our helmets together. I stared him deep in the eyeballs, my ragged breath blowing furious in his face. I could feel the rage rising in me—especially as Greeney eyed back without the slightest sign of shock or submission. I demanded to know the nature of his malfunction. Greeney still gave no response, however, and eventually my senses came to me. I realized I was ready to pummel nothing more than a ten-year-old brat. I had to let him go.

All of it took place in a handful of seconds, as things do in sport. Afterward I went to check on Miedema in the huddle, and Greeney went back to his defense: they all
patted him on the back. I could hear them singsongedly mocking me across the line:

“Smarty-boy *de-maaands* the nature of the *maaal-function!*”

**History**

Mme. Slagle’s true talents were undoubtedly artistic—her mastery ranged from impressionist paint to papier-mâché—but her peculiar phenomenological interest seemed to be the histories of all the poorer nations of the earth. Each day we delved into new sorrows: Irish famine, Mesopotamian flooding, Somalian civil war, North Korean isolation. Her attention to detail was meticulous; she had committed to memory all relevant statistics of GDP, inflation, infant mortality and criminal tendency. But these facts were always distributed with the brightest gleam in her eyes, like the plundered African diamonds she spoke of. Her dark hair framed her face in such a way that those diamonds also appeared to be stars set against the black canopy of night, and I always noticed the way she would gently caress her left hand with her right, as if simulating a lover’s touch. It was during these lectures on genocide and starvation that my heart desired her most. In the moments of our quizzes, when our heads were to be firmly pointed to our papers and desks, I always made a quick sketch of her from memory, in order for her beauty to guide me at all times.

Invariably I did quite poorly on these quizzes, distracted as I was. Always, when handing out our scores, Mme. Slagle would audibly scoff at my disappointing mark. By contrast, Nix received a galaxy of gold stars on nearly every paper; Mme. Slagle would even tousle his hair for good measure. Even Greeney would receive warm
encouragements: "Chouette, Hank— pas mal!" It was a trial to check all my jealousies. To the entire class she would reiterate: "One must not underestimate the importance of these histories! To know one side of the story is never to have known the story at all."

But I knew she spoke only to me. And we would bow heads and clasp hands as she offered up a classroom prayer—clearly impolitic. But perhaps I could use the help, I reasoned.

**Midterm Exams**

Everyone was edgy about midterms, as Mme. Slagle refused to let on exactly what would be covered. Before the test Nix, Miedema and I pulled an all-night cram session, wired up on blue Kool-aid and Oreos. My grades were worse than they’d ever been in my academic career, and I needed a good showing. Nix kept telling me not to be nervous, that I had been a genius, and a genius I was still. For himself he had no worries—Nix was Mme. Slagle’s prize pupil—but he was a nice boy and glad to help.

The first section of the test was Mathematics, and I was relieved to start with something familiar. I easily wrote out the proof that zero was a false concept—beginning with Newton’s second law of energy conservation, I then wrote out Bernoulli’s explanation of the universe as a closed system equal to 1—from there, I was home free. The other math problems only asked for the volumes of water cylinders which are leaking 12 cm³/sec. at 24° C, and the like.

After this the test took a strange turn. The first question in the section on Psychology seemed easy enough: *Describe yourself*. I took this as a warm-up, a bizarre
throw-away, and so I wrote something of my ability to think on multiple channels simultaneously (which I playfully termed “an accommodating schizophrenia”), my resultant love of knowledge and exploration, and my affinity for puppies. In fact I thought I answered the question rather well, but the next query—Why would one man kill another?—really threw me. This seemed like an impossible problem with an infinite number of solutions. Not only that, but we had never even studied Psychology in the first place.

I raised my hand and Mme. Slagle came over to me. A soft, fruity perfume floated before her, springing from the pink cashmere sweater she wore, which was cut just low enough to glimpse the crests of the lovely flesh hidden beneath—and as she bent to my desk, all was revealed, down to lacy troughs. But I repelled my bodily reactions and asked, with great care, when had we discussed this subject in class. Mme. Slagle’s patient smile turned flat and her eyebrows wrinkled (cutely); she replied curtly that I was wasting her time asking about the easiest question on the test. When I pleaded for a bit of direction, her suggestion was that I “try to think a little more abstractly,” which my ego took with the force of a blow. We stared at each other for a long second; her lovely lips curved back upward just as I struggled to regain my breath. She took her victory and then turned sharply on a heel, back to her desk.

As her step was sounding on the tile floor, Nix poked me in the ribs. “Psst,” he said. “It’s ‘Why not?’” He looked up and around for a minute before continuing. “Trick questions, Dave—all tricks.” So I wrote down the two words, and, sure enough, when we got the tests back, he was right. Nevertheless, I got most everything else wrong, and
ended with a 62%. I even answered the water volume question incorrectly, forgetting to do a temperature conversion somewhere along the way.

Detention
Everyone who failed the exam had to stay thirty minutes late every day the next week, for extra instruction. This was the general way Mme. Slagle put it to the class, of course, but when Monday afternoon came, I saw it applied only to me.

That day, after the rest of the class had been dismissed, Mme. Slagle sat me down for a little motivational speech. “You have been underperforming greatly,” she said in a serious tone—though I must admit my mind was more occupied by the pensive way she unhooked the hair knotted at her nape. “And it is true that I expect a little more of you in this classroom, with the kind of educational pedigree you have. So perhaps I, too, am to blame…but I cannot teach you the desire to learn! Tell me, Mr. Weeks, what is to be done? Are you so satisfied by the achievements of your life that you will now rest on your laurels?”

“Oh no,” I replied. “I think there is just a period of adjustment. And my roommate situation…”

But apparently these were rhetorical questions; Mme. Slagle’s face grew red and furious when I spoke. “Excuses!” she yelled, banging her ruler down on the desk for effect. “We cannot tolerate such shabby justifications here. Either you learn, or you do not—the choice is yours.” With this she went silent, though she continued to stare at me with her intense brown eyes. This gaze was so hot and charged that I felt a hole melting
in my head, and I grew afraid that she could see all the secret thoughts, fears, and lusts there. I saw no recourse other than to hang my head in shame. This was the state of affairs for a full twenty-five minutes, until she bade me leave. Nix and I walked home together then—he waited for me each day, throwing a rubber ball against a brick wall.

On Tuesday I was given a book—*The High Life and Fast Times of Greta Garbo*, by Hospur Jenkins. My assignment was to read it over in the next few extra periods, submitting a book report on Friday. When Mme. Slagle gave it to me, she explained that it was one of her favorite books, and an excellent teaching aid. “Ms. Garbo did not have as elegant a life as we might believe,” she said with the equanimity that had been missing the day before, again rubbing her one hand tenderly in the other. “She suffered parental abuses, scandalous management, and relentless scrutiny—not to mention an unrequited love! Yet the words ‘Greta Garbo’ are filled with a kind of light, are they not? Consider this for your report.”

I began the four-hundred-odd pages immediately, but had trouble sustaining my attention for even that first half-hour. Interesting as the life of Greta Garbo might have been, it was the appalling English of Mr. Jenkins which made the tome unreadable. I lost count of the mistakes within the first paragraph: The life of a hollywood damsel is often thought to be pure sugarcake and sunshine. When you, the reader, picture Marilyn Monroe or Rita Hayworth, or any other of the million bombsheels that have graced your Silver Screen, certainly you see the view thru rose-colored glasses: wine, parties, Camelot, affairs with Eisenhower and LBJ and all those other rich dickeys. Nonetheless, nothing could be farther from the truth: look no farther than Greta Garbo for the
exception which proves the rule. When young Garbo was fourteen—and yet named Greta Lovisa Gustafsson (not yet Greta Garbo)—the horrid stench of misery first descended upon her when her beloved father, Karl Gustafsoon, died, forcing young Garbo to take a job in a barbershop. There countless immoral men attempted to insinuate their lusts upon her, beginning a long string of failed romances in Garbo’s life, which would include both men and women, and even a ‘runaway bride’ moment. “I vont to be alone,” became Garbo’s catchphrase, and while the accent is indeed fetching, it also betrays the isolation that your sex kitten of the silent screen lived with...

Jenkins seemed to have learned his craft from a band of eighth-grade dropouts, and I could not make heads or tails of his ramblings. Still I stuck with my studies of Garbo—for no other reason than Mme. Slagle’s eyes on me, ensuring that I keep turning the pages.

From time to time I would look up, however—ostensibly to stretch my arms or mull over the reading, but always only to run my tired eyes up and down the oasis of Mme. Slagle’s slender frame. Curiously, Mme. Slagle seemed almost a different creature when all the students were no longer underfoot. Each day her first move was to untie her hair, and after this she would sit at her desk, staring out the window at the playground and the endless horizon of cloud beyond. From Tuesday on she also removed the tall boots she wore beneath her dresses, and set her feet up on the corner of her desk, so that in my reflective moments I was treated to a view of stockinged toes, connected to leg bones, and knee bones, and thigh bones, and ever upward and onward… And I would follow that trail for a few moments, watching Mme. Slagle gaze outside, with her arms
wrapped around her midsection like she was hugging herself, until the internal clock in her mind told her it was time to check on her pupil again. And then she would turn her eyes to me, and I would look quickly away, and she would surely frown.

At the end of the week I handed in a paper in which I paid some homage to Garbo’s tenacity of spirit, but where I spent most of my time ripping apart and correcting again the syntax of Hospur. Mme. Slagle made me wait silently while she went over my writing. When she had finished she looked up at me with sadness and a long sigh. “I told you what the book was about,” she said. “No, it is not perfect…but Mr. Jenkins knew perfection to be a waste of time—especially when I tell everyone what the book is about before they read it!” She took a marking pen from her desk drawer and wrote a bright red “F” at the top of the first page. With frustration in her voice she goaded me: “Tell me, Mr. Weeks: How often must we reinvent the wheel?”

Recess

Miedema and I were playing hop-scotch with some of the girls when Greeney called out to me. Since my week in detention, I had apparently risen in his esteem. “Weeks!” he bellowed. “Get Nixon—bring Jack—meet me behind the boiler.”

When we were assembled in the dark concrete corner, concealed from the rest of the playground, Greeney pulled out a small tin foil satchel and opened it, revealing a small white, powdery rock. “Good stuff,” Greeney said. “Hard to get.” Nix surprised me by immediately running a fingernail along the stuff, then plunging the digit into his
nostril. Then Greeney offered the rock to Miedema, and he did the same. When it was my turn I hesitated, looking at Greeney for any signal of setup or sabotage.

Greeney rolled his eyes and shook his head from frustration. “Listen Weeks,” he said. “You better start getting something. I ain’t out to get you.”

“Oh really?” I asked, incredulous. “Then why did you just threaten me?”

Greeney sighed and shook his head again, sadly. I was expecting some further confrontation, but he dropped the subject and instead turned his attentions to the rock in his lap. Pulling a box-cutter from his jeans, he hacked off a corner of it and began chopping the section into a fine powder. Nix and Jack and I all sat silent and watched. Greeney was extremely meticulous in his work, making sure the powder was ground fine and even, and then arranged in a perfect linear progression. I was sure he would cut himself, requiring Mme. Slagle to know all and think even worse of me for my involvement—but Greeney kept the steady hand of a surgeon, his tongue lolling out of his mouth with concentration. When he finished he brought an old milk straw out from his other pants pocket and used it to suck half the line into his nose. A glassy look came into his eyes quickly. And then he handed the foil and straw to me.

“I wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t safe,” Greeney said. Still I hesitated, looking from Greeney to the rock, and back, and again. I looked to Nix for help, but he was already lying back, oblivious but for the sky. Miedema was stupidly staring at his left palm. There was no help for me, and I felt ensnared, like some lamb circled by wolves.

But sensing this, perhaps, Greeney took my hand in his, and squeezed it. “See, Weeks—this is what I do,” he said, in a soothing baritone I did not know he could
possess at his age. "This is me. This is what I am. It's not the greatest thing, but all I can do is share it with you."

"Like Hospur," I said to him, laughing, a few minutes later.

When we went back inside for class to resume, I had trouble finding my correct desk, but the boys sat me down. Mme. Slagle began to talk about the rampant poverty in Samoa. She passed around photos, of many chubby-cute men and women dressed in colorful rags, sitting around on weather-beaten wooden benches, smoking American cigarettes, talking. Later photos in the series pictured these same folks, lying prone in funeral boxes, smiling with the frozen grin of the dead.

When I had looked through all the pictures I raised a wobbly right arm. Mme. Slagle tried to disregard me while she taught her lesson, but, having a point to make, I persisted. When at last she called on me, I dreamily said, "They look nice."

"Oh yes; yes they do, Davey," Mme. Slagle said. "Très beaux. Bonhommes."

Track & Field Day

"Now that spring has fully sprung, we must get you all outdoors," Mme. Slagle announced one day, in a happy lilting fashion. With two weeks left to go in the school year, we would observe the annual festival of competition and award, sports-, games-, and brinksmanship. The idea sounded fine to me, though I hadn't noticed a change in the weather: It had been spring the entire time.

On the morning of the appointed day, Greeney and I rose early to run calesthetic drills in preparation. We woke Nix and Miedema, took them for a three-mile run, then
returned for push-ups, jumping jacks, and yoga. We stretched and strained outside, my mind at a greater ease than it had been since my arrival, the early morning sky marbled a pastel blue on egg-white. Nixon’s unkempt red hair flared against it like lightning—and suddenly, for the first time, I was able to recall that golf course, and the rainy afternoon, and even the flag on the eighth green, when the bolt knocked me down. I could see the concern on the faces of my foursome; I could even see myself dead-still, without the slightest tremor of shock or pain. All in all, I decided, it was not such a bad way to go.

When we arrived at the playground Mme. Slagle was there waiting, wearing her exquisite crushed velvet track suit, in ruby, with her hair pulled back into a simple ponytail. Nix went straight for her to say hello, and the rest of us followed behind. “Hello,” Nix said. “Good morning,” Mme. Slagle replied. “Bonjour, Madame Slagle,” I said sheepishly. “Good morning, Davey,” said she, reaching up to ruffle my hair for good measure.

The first event of the day was the egg relay, and this went to the very athletic lineup of Sally Hemmings, Pashram Osikrit, Mdubi Ndebi, and Greeney. Next up was the blindfolded run, in which I finished fifth (my stride was long, but I could not grip the baton quickly enough). I was disqualified in the skipping run—because I cannot skip very well—and Nix and I finished badly in the three-legged race, because of the mismatched length of our limbs. The morning was fun, but a little depressing; it reminded me of the time, as a small boy, I successfully derived the quadratic equation from a complex polynomial. At first I had been immensely happy, and I showed my work to my praiseful parents…but when I came down from my joy I had to ask, “What’s
next?"—and I discovered that it would never be enough. So it was on the morning of the
races. I was not sad at losing; it was more than that; I was sad to rediscover the
bottomless depths of desire.

At the end of these thoughts, as if on cue, Mme. Slagle came and sat next to me
on the dusty playground.

"Why aren’t you playing with the other children?" she asked me.

"I don’t feel like it," I said.

Mme. Slagle nodded silently at this, and worked her tennis shoe in a circle on the
ground. She seemed to be contemplating the lesson appropriate to the situation, as
teachers will, and I waited earnestly for it, staring at the dirt in front of me.

"Come," she said, suddenly standing. "If you won’t play, you will clean the
chalkboard for me."

I wanted to mope, or to learn, not be put to work—but what could I do?
Depression mounted in me. I followed Mme. Slagle into the schoolhouse, where she
handed me the can of cleaning solution and a dirty rag. "Spray the rag, not the board."
she instructed, sitting down in her desk, throwing off her sneakers and putting her feet up
on the desk.

I set to work. I sprayed the rag, nearly coughing on the noxious fumes, then
began working the cloth over the slate. "No, not like that—move your wrist in little
circles," Mme. Slagle said from behind me. I corrected my technique, reaching into the
topmost corners of the board to remove all the old markings. Mme. Slagle approved.

"Ouais, David...comme ça," she whispered.
Her voice was heavy with breath.

Joyfully I kept at my work for about twenty minutes, despite a creeping soreness in both my arms. Finally she said to me, simply, “That will do, Davey.” and she set her feet back into her boots. Then she stood up and tousled my hair again. As we walked back out to the playground, the blood rushed back into my aching arms. The sensation of nerves reawakening forced me to rub and slap one arm with the other. I’m sure I looked like a mad hatter, a happy idiot.

**Final Exams**

The final was much like the midterms. It began with mathematics, and I made sure to do my proofs carefully and accurately, showing all of my work so that I might receive partial credit, if not full.

The next section was Sociology. The first question was: *How many televisions does a person need?* I thought long and hard, and then wrote down, “Four seems a good number.”

Question two read: *Will you tell me?* “Yes I will, if you tell me first,” I wrote, in my finest script.

Question three was: *Tell me about Greta Garbo.* My response: “Greta Garbo was a woman, not really Swedish, not totally American. She didn’t know anything about math, but she knew a lot about unrequited love, and fair is fair. See Jenkins, Hospur, for the definitive account of this dichotomy.”
Graduation

On graduation morning we all got dressed up in our caps and gowns, and looked at one another excitedly. Greeney kept on about how happy he was to be finally going after the girls, and I had no doubt he would. He looked a good bit taller and very handsome in his mortarboard.

The excitement of the audience was palpable as we congregated backstage. I peeked out into the crowd and was amazed at what I saw: my Mom and Pop, all smiles; Mr. Steele, my old math teacher; my best buddy Lambert, who had died in a car accident during high school; Veronica, my wife’s sister—and I had not been able to recall my wife until that very moment! It was a rush like I had never felt before, even when receiving my Ph.D. To be with new friends, with old friends...I felt the tears come on. Nix came to me, put an arm around my shoulder, and promised me that there was nothing criminal in letting it out.

And then Mme. Slagle appeared, and beckoned to me to follow her to the classroom.

“Unfortunately, you will not be able to graduate with your class,” she said to me, sitting in her plush teacher’s chair, massaging her hands. “You did well on the final, but overall you are still failing, and I must make sure you master the basic requirements before sending you on.”

I was barely able to speak. “But...” I croaked. “But...my family is here. I don’t want to disappoint...I want to...”
Mme. Slagle slammed a fist into her desk. “Exactly—this is the exact problem!” she said. “You want this, you want that, Davey. But what about the rest of us? Mr. Weeks, what about what I want?”

“I don’t care what you want,” I said. My longing for her mixed, for the first time, with a deep bitterness. “You’re in charge. You always get what you want.”

“Correct,” she said, placing her naked feet on the desk for emphasis. “What I want must always be done. And let it be a lesson to you.”

Alors!—it was a hard lesson, abstract, difficult for the exacting mathematician in my innermost heart. But during the next session I was awarded blackboard duties on an indefinite basis. The work and my studies overwhelmed me, but I persevered. Contentment came from the labor itself, I suppose, though I admit I soon gave up thinking about it.
Mamas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys

As we set our cruiser down, Frank describes the atmosphere of Staralfur as a composite of iron-oxides, arsenic-oxides, bromides, and ozone-like compounds—which is gravely important for us to know, so that we can adjust our oxygen regulators accordingly. Important to know, but unfortunately it seems all that Frank judges fit to know of the planet: and I fear, silently, that he misses the lovely amber tint those happy chemicals give the sky. Everything is bathed in the burnt-orange glow, and it makes the planet seem warm and festive, as if every cloud were a separate sun and each inch of soil the grainy sand of some tropical beach—perfect for relaxing two tired old troopers. Or, conversely, I could imagine the planet is engulfed in a great blaze, and Frank and I will spend our day side-by-side, beating back the flames. This warm thought shoots a cold shiver up my spine and into my skull, where it curls into a smile—because the fire is not real, but my reaction is. Frank notices my grin and shakes his head sadly. I know he is upset that I should be at all jovial on such a grim mission…and maybe he is right. But in the cruiser Frank is often very silent, and there is little work to do anyways—and so my foolish mind always has its games at the ready.

But, as we descend from the cruiser, I remind myself we are not here to play games. We have come to Staralfur to arrest Petro Kirby, 36, mineworker, who is (will be?) wanted for the crime of murder. To be more precise, tomorrow June 23, 2243, at 20:40 local time, Kirby will return home to find his wife in bed with another man, and will shoot both of them full of primitive shotgun pellet. Our job then, Frank’s and mine,
is simply to bring Petro in before any of this can take place. And certainly, without us, it will take place: Yesterday Frank and I were here, today, watching the gruesome act unfold. We watched Vera and her lover, slithering together wildly; we watched as Petro entered the bedroom, and backed out almost as quickly; we watched as the shocked couple returned to their coupling for a few moments, uncertain what else to do. And then Petro entered the room with weapon in hand...and declarations of truest love were made, in all possible connections and permutations—Vera with her lover still inside of her, pleading with her husband—until the emotional load became too much for poor Petro, and he committed his crime. Then he made his way to the basement, where he splattered his own brains against the unfinished wallboard.

That was, as it always is, the hardest part of the job—watching with detachment the future-evidence, proving the case clinically, pretending to feel no emotion at the human drama. Though we never discuss these things openly, I have no doubt that even iron-clad Frank has a hard time with the task. He would like to execute his police duties as an Officer MacGruff, a slab of mustachioed muscle and nothing more—but Frank has been with the Criminal Authority so long, has seen so much purified horror, that it proves the existence of his heart: he must have a vault deep inside, somewhere, the burial place of his emotion. And his detachment did not deceive me at the Kirbys’—at each new terror I check his eyes, and each time I see his smoldering sympathy for the sad characters we watch. Frank is tough, and Frank is brave, but he is also human, and I know he clings to the shards of his human love. There is nothing else for the tough ones to do.
But I’m not tough—only a dreamer—and to myself I must always whisper the same words: *Tomorrow will not be another today.* It gets me reasonably through. Thank God I have a job that makes it a reality.

The business with Petro Kirby goes fairly well, as it usually does in pre-crime: when we arrive at the Kirby household we find Vera sitting in her daychair, knitting something or other, the picture of domesticated bliss. Kirby is in the backyard, on his day off, reading a newspaper and drinking canned beer. We ask Vera to ask Petro inside, and when we reveal the nature of our visit, they break down into the sad antics of the previous tomorrow—minus the bloodshed. It is Vera who has the look of a criminal on her face, as Petro goes to his knees and hugs her body against his tears, asking *why, why, why?* But they both know why—Kirby is simply, biologically, unable to satisfy his wife, since one of those all-too-common freak accidents of the workplace. Vera’s cries and sighs spill down her cheeks and into the remaining patches of her husband’s gray hair as she admits that the affair has been going on “oh, Petro, oh Peetey, oh God...for years now.” Kirby’s sorrow takes him in rushes—he gets up and goes to the mantel, slamming his fist into their wedding picture, then goes back to her and traces a single finger over her face, memorializing her loving contours. During all of this Frank keeps his sight on their empty fish tank, a silly little pirate ship sunk in the lonely depths. But then Petro’s eyes go red, and he begins slapping his wife across both sides of her face, his hand flying back and forth, his mouth calling her bitch, and slut, and *honey,* and darling, and slut, and honey. Frank and I rush in to break them up, and I feel a twisted twingle of gratitude for
Kirby’s abuse, actually: It reminds me of our reasons for breaking up what had been a tranquil and contented afternoon.

Petro says his goodbyes like the ghost of himself, his face ashen, his shame transparent. Vera still cries and reaches her arms toward Petro as we march him away. But there is something missing in her manner, I think, and I have to wonder if she is excited at her suddenly changed prospects. She and her lover, previously deceased, might now live the life of loving openly, together. He might move into this very house, share that old bed on a more permanent basis, take over the mortgage, the electric and the water. Or they might fall apart without the spark that was, for them, Petro himself. It is always a strange thing to separate two living people based only on your own hearsay and perhaps your official-looking uniform. But it is a rare day when people doubt us, too. Usually they’re already waiting; usually they can feel it; usually they just know: Something, *something*, is up.

And during the long walk back to the cruiser Kirby is completely undemonstrative, probably shocked and still wrapping his mind around these improbable events. When we reach the cruiser I strap him into the backseat like so much rag doll. A smile bobs up to his face, too, as if he were suddenly again swaying in his backyard hammock. It is the usual kind of reaction…but perhaps doubled or divided…his eyes seem bright and clear, and they stare at me with what feels like kindness (the soft eyes over lolling child-smile). We look at one another for a moment, and I return the smile, unwilling as I am to further maim the already injured.
“I’d like to go as far ahead as possible,” he says to me. With those eyes, like a kid in a candy store.

Frank overhears and responds...gruffly. “You’re going back two billion years—to Earth. That’s when the penitentiary is. Suit you okay?”

“Two billion years,” Petro Kirby mumbles, to himself. “Two billion years.” I climb into the front seat next to Frank, shooting him a little glare for unnecessary roughness.

“How far have you guys gone?” Petro peeps, head looking out the window as his planet recedes.

“3792,” I say quickly, before Frank can cut me off. I remember it well—Gurthar 3792, perhaps the most beautiful place in the entire multiverse. To think of the freedoms men give each other with time! But I don’t do any reminiscing for our detainee, the way I feel Frank staring hard at me for even answering the question. Oh Frank, I think, if only you could lighten up! You’re like this Vera is, lonelier than you’ll admit to yourself, until it’s too late. If only you would come with me to Gurthar 3792! If only...

Meanwhile we are entering space, and Petro is coming fully out of his doldrums—the farther we escape Staralfur, the happier he gets. He is full of all kinds of questions about our work: How does time travel work? Does the multiverse have limits? What year are we from?—are we even from a year, or do we just exist in all-time?

I keep my mouth closed—but Frank clears his throat, begins with a chuckle (a chuckle!): “I couldn’t even begin to tell you anything about boundaries, or the real workings of space-time. We leave that to the desk jockeys”—he looks at me for signs of
laughter, but I don’t give him the pleasure—“But tonight you’ll be in a holding cell, on Vega, in 2534…” His eyes measure me again, to make sure what he’s saying is okay, and I nod diffidently. “…That’s the year we’re from.” I try so hard to keep a straight face; my look gives nothing away, but I giggle slightly at this—Lighten up, I think, and seconds later Frank does! Can you hear my thoughts, Frank? Can you hear me in here?

Kirby giggles too. “Wow. And then Earth,” he says, full of awe. “With the dinosaurs.”

“No dinosaurs yet,” I turn and say. “Just bacteria in those days.”

“And 3792,” Kirby says, rambling on. “To think that it all exists already, before it’s even happened. That’s such a relief…it’s like some guarantee.” He slumps back in his seat and looks out the window as we enter the strange blacklight of the wormhole—it is dark, but everything glows with the dense energy of supernova. These are the superhighways that Frank and I travel everyday, an intricate interconnected series of tunnels in time, like the burrows of a gopher. Frank calls them the “tears in time,” but I don’t like to call them that. “Tears” has the ring of a mistake, while I believe the wormholes were created for a reason. They make the multiverse better. They don’t eliminate sadness, but they make it smaller.

As we come out of the wormhole, on the light side of the black hole, Vega appears in the distance—glowing green, rich with oxygen and water, a rainforest oasis in the middle of a dark and sometimes distant cosmos. Frank nonchalantly radios in to HQ that we have arrived back with murderer in tow—but even officially labeling him thus does not shake glee from Kirby’s face. “Your planet is very beautiful,” he whispers,
through the divider but close to my ear, and for the first time I wonder if he is going a little mad. “The future is beautiful, it is beautiful, it is beautiful,” he chants softly, like a secret only we two can share.

It is always good to be back home, among the people and places you know. Before heading home I stop by the store to pick up a movie and dinner. I get a sappy romance—needing, I suppose, some small affirmation after the Kirbys—and buy ingredients for lasagna, grandmother’s recipe. In the produce section I find myself holding the tomatoes close to my face, breathing in their faint familiar scent—and then I look around to see if anyone has caught me at it. I’m still in my starched officer’s uniform, for Saturn’s sake—the scandal if someone saw a policeman squeezing his intimacy from a piece of produce!

The flight back home takes eternities; traffic is backed up from Modesto to Monsanto, with some breakdown somewhere keeping everyone in a holding pattern. I use the time to ring Carl. “I’m going to be a bit behind tonight,” I say; “Can’t you just have Frank run you back an hour or so?” he quips. I ignore it and try to make small talk about the workday—I mention the dementia of Petro Kirby, the way this happy dead man is eagerly anticipating his fifty-to-life with the dinosaurs—but Carl is sighing into my ear, clearly disinterested in keeping me company on the road. We hang up not a minute later. Red lights knife in ahead of me and I lay on the horn, which makes its impotent hoot-toot-tooh: the call of some sickly horned owl.
While putting the lasagna together I carelessly slop sauce on my uniform—Grandma would never have been so slovenly around the house. But I use the excuse to strip myself down and shower. The pasta is in the oven for forty-five minutes, and I spend every last one letting the spray knock the work-a-day knots out of my muscles. Revitalizing mineral conditioner for damaged hair. Tea-tree facewash from Bloomingdale’s. Exfoliating body scrub by Nicotine. By the time I get out the air is thick and the mirror is sweating bullets. I wipe a streak down the middle and stare at myself idly. Spinach and ricotta waft in and mingle with the steam like some dayspa dream.

I take the lasagna out, I dress in khaki and cotton, I cue the movie, I call Carl over—all in that order. Carl and I met at my sister’s wedding last summer: red roses at every table, I watched Carl dance the tango with one clamped between his rough ruby lips. When he sat down I brought him a Heineken and applauded his aplomb. Summer weddings—are there any more loaded, deceitful things in the world? Carl told me right off he was an art broker, dealing to a sophisticated clientele. He spoke of his abiding appreciation for the Maid of Honor, though he could admit (after a few more) that the Best Man was often better. But how could I hear what he was telling me, with the breeze blowing those brown curls over his tan and only lightly-lined face, and the quartet reaching beyond the pale for *The Girl from Ipanema*? It was like talking with a burning bush—the first instinct may be to run, but you stick around to touch and see if the thing can really singe you.
Carl arrives; we eat and watch the movie; we make love. The whole thing is a bit of a fiasco. We haven’t seen each other in weeks, and we talk like maybe we don’t want to. In bed we fight over the positions. Usually I’m on bottom first (because Carl does men mostly to watch), but tonight I’m impatient, and we wrestle with each other during the foreplay, rolling our bodies one over top of the other, neither willing to concede the high ground. We don’t say a word. The tussle reminds me more of my employment than my personal life, and this sudden combinational thought—man of work with man of play—is such sad one that I finally give in and let Carl have his way with me. But I cling to my bittersweet idea, and once the trick turns I pretend it is Frank below me. Above us the skies are burning again, everything about to crumble down on us. Petro is in the frontseat now; we’ve slipped into the back. And if I have to have a last moment in time, oh God, let it be this one...but, predictably, the skies go green again, Carl goes home, and time goes on.

In the morning I am make-believing again—necessary to look at Frank with a straight face. We get coffee and do small talk. I tell him about the movie I watched, how the girl was a university professor and how the boy was one of her older students, so that it was silly and obvious (yet sweet) when the boy straightened himself up and got a good grade on the final, because he realized he couldn’t abuse her trust any longer, because he wanted her to love him. And moreover he helped her see that she couldn’t stay an icy schoolmarm forever; she should let her pretty black hair down sometimes, maybe attend some student parties, really live her life. Sweet and obvious and silly, I tell Frank.
Frank gives the tale a slight nod, feigning tolerance but clearly unimpressed. "Can't stand movies like that," he says. "Prefer my movies to be authentic to life."

"But all you watch is cop shows," I say, with more sarcasm than I intend. "Don't you ever want to escape that?"

Frank's eyes are lost in his cup. "I guess I don't see how that is truly possible," he says. "Only lying to yourself, and I think lies do more harm than good, in the long run." And suddenly he looks up, and his eyes are asking if I understand him, and so I nod my head, even if I do think he's being a little over-dramatic. All morning he has flashed that look: searching, though not quite willing to ask. It is as if he suspects me of something and is digging for clues. And though I've done nothing, something in me responds. Is it guilt?

Then his lips twist as he curses the coffee he has just spilled on his hand. "See what I mean?" he says. *Oh Frank,* I think: clearly more than spilt coffee has upset him this morning. Or it was last night, perhaps.... He mutters and mumbles oaths over his shoes, the radio, our filthy cruiser, everything in sight, all the way to the lockup. He makes me angry too, but inside I have to laugh at him, accusing *me* of some self-deceit when he can be here on tropical Vega and not see a single ray of sunshine in it. Overnight he has contoured the fuzzy little beginnings of a mustache on his lip, too, and I want to ask him: *Is that* the truth? Or is the "real" you baby-bottom smooth? How stupid of him to think that some absolute exists out there, especially in our occupation. Frank can't escape only because he *thinks* he can't escape.
Petro Kirby has also apparently gotten up on the wrong side of the bed—when we arrive for transfer the guards say he has been mostly noncommunicative and is refusing to eat. Frank stays behind and fills out Petro’s paperwork while I go back with one of the zookeepers to retrieve him. Zookeepers: we call ‘em that since they handle lockdown; they call us cowboys because we handle the wranglin’. As we walk down the block some twenty-third century pusher throws himself against his bars and at us; he gives me a fierce snarl, like to make me afraid. But what I notice is the two lone teeth left in his skull and the long scars across both his wrists. I feel more sorry than scared, but I’m not stupid enough to show any empathy his way—you let them see that and they’ll remember the weakness in your face forever. Not a possibility in this line of work: a cowboy has to hide all that away.

We find Kirby sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring at a stack of protein pancakes. His eyes are glowing like a kid at a campfire. “Sat like that with last night’s dinner, until we replaced it with breakfast,” Zookeeper says. I grunt a reply and Kirby’s eyes flash upward at the sound of my voice. He gingerly picks up one of the pancakes with thumb and forefinger, wondrously holding it out to me.

“Question, Sarge,” he says. “If this comes from the future, and my guts are from the past, I don’t need to eat it. Right?” He looks at me conspiratorially: “I already put it down. I already put down an infinite stack, didn’t I?” He giggles in his telltale fashion and suddenly smashes the pancake inside a fist, bits of it oozing out between his fingers. “It’s the eternal short stack—ain’t I right?”
I don’t respond, but Kirby doesn’t care—by his rationale, the question was answered before he ever asked it. I get him on his feet and cuff his wrists in case his crazy continues in unexpected directions. But on the march back to daylight he is the picture of compliance. He smiles at all the inmates. He smiles at the zookeepers. He smiles at the desk jockey while I do the final sign-off. We get outside into the fresh air and he takes a big gulp, holds it a moment before releasing it back into the world. He grins big and loony at Frank, says “Hiya.”

“Not today, Kirby,” Frank replies. He stubs out the cigerton he’s been working on and grabs prisoner Petro by the cuffs, throwing him face-first into the back of the cruiser. He shuts the door on him and fixes me with an accusatory glare: “And don’t you start make-believin’ with him, neither.”

“What a revelation this has been,” Petro Kirby, convicted murderer, is saying as we make our way into the tunnels. “What an absolute thrill. I’m feeling so”—his tongue wags to the corner of his mouth, searching for the right word—“connected. Connected. Like I can feel time. And I can feel you, Sarge, and you…”

“Shut it up,” Frank says testily. “Cool the jets, Kirby, or you’ll have trouble.”

It is the most he has spoken since we got in the cruiser, though I wish I could coax him out of his moodiness—if only for my own selfish reasons. *Amuse me, Frank, you are my only hope!* Each case we work on is a three-part cycle, always revolving back around on itself: first day, evidence; next, detainment; third, lockdown. It’s a life on the road, really, and the only entertainment we ever have is each other. We spend almost all
that third day in the wormholes—four billions years is a long haul. It’s set up that way so the inmates have no hope of coming up with the technology to get back, but what it really does is confine Frank and me to the cruiser—plus whatever backseat low-life—along the same tedious cosmic route, two billion years down and two billion back, sometimes two or three times a week. It can get to be a long trip if Frank isn’t talking, or if I’m too far-gone into myself to really listen. It seems sometimes that we only have the worst parts of a relationship, without any of the good—today being a prime example. I suppose if I were Petro Kirby I would figure that, since we’ve made this trip ten thousand times already, it exists eternally, on and on and on, and we should just quit and let the cosmos do the work for us. And maybe that’s even true—but I could never give up these trips with Frank. Worst part or best part, it’s all I’ve been given.

From the backseat Kirby starts asking if we’ve ever seen the very beginning, the big bang and beyond. For some reason he’s asking Frank, slithered up just behind his ear and speaking with a giddiness that’s sure to short-circuit my partner. Sure enough: “What did life look like then?” Petro sings, like he expects some refrain to echo back from the congregation. Instead, Frank calmly, deliberately presses a button on the dash, and Petro’s restraints pull him back into his seat, where a 50,000 volt shock gets him. All I can do is slowly shake my head at Frank. In the backseat Petro looks limp, tired and sedated. But his eyes are only slightly dimmed, and his tongue is lolling in that same spot, as if he’s still thinking his questions over.

I turn around to face him fully. “But Kirby, how could you time-travel into a dimension without time?” I say. Frank shakes his head back at me, shoots me a
menacing “Don’t Encourage Him” look, but I ignore his pessimism. I know exactly what I’m doing. “It’s impossible, Kirby. That’s like walking on a star—you turn into a gas and evaporate. Even if the physics do make sense, some things are physically impossible anyways.”

Frank stays ticked off at me for another couple minutes, until he realizes that Kirby has been silent this whole while. I know how it works: the questions are now up in Kirby’s head, hemming in on him like a labyrinth, until he doesn’t even know which way to yell for help. He’s staring up at the cruiser’s ceiling like the answer might be up there, mumbling to himself. A glob of saliva forms and slowly drips from his lower lip. Frank sees this in the rearview and nods his assent, but I just want to rip him to pieces, the heartless fool. Seems to me Kirby knows more about it than he ever will.

I try to relax, settle back and stare out the window. The dreary gray matter of time-space is swirling before me, and I think how sharply it contrasts with the fire-bright colors going off inside my head last night. It seems strange to think that all the small things in a life, the dark chocolate birthday batters of youth, the shared steel-blue of a group’s graduation gowns, the azure instant of a lover’s touch, accumulate simply to this dull, monochrome expanse. The tinted glass clarifies the distinctions between time outside and time inside—inside my brain time folds over on top of itself, so that this second now shakes hands with that minute long ago, their separation becomes meaningless. They realize they are identical in every regard; they see they must have been separated at birth....
Suddenly Frank asks, “What ya thinking about, Tim?” His brow is creased with concern, and his mouth is asking for understanding again, even if those aren’t the exact words. Funny—I might tell him how he has just proved two theories with this one gesture. It seems he can read my mind, even in asking what I’m thinking (just when I want him to); it seems that this moment and the moment from yesterday are mirror reflections. I can’t find the words to tell him about it, though I smile meaningfully.

But here, gratefully, Petro’s theories combine perfectly with mine. I’ve already said it. Frank already knows.

Frank and I get to talking about the Caledonian situation on Vega. Caledonian immigration has been rising steadily over the last couple decades, and now Vega is all up in arms about what they call “Caledonian culture-conquest,” because Vegan kids love Caledonian music and dance and interactives, and everyone is worried that in a hundred years, Vega will just be another Caledonia. Frank’s worried about it, too, but I have to mock him. A hundred years from now, Vega won’t be the Vega we know, and Caledonia won’t really be Caledonia, either. Everything will be different, a hybrid of everything known today. And what’s the option? Massacre the Caledonians? Nothing for a peace officer to be thinking. “So now you’re gonna hold that against me, too,” Frank says. We look at one another and crack up.

Earth is hot—humid, sweltering, sticky. The atmosphere isn’t fully formed yet; the oceans bubble up steam and bacterium, the building blocks of everything that comes after. Petro Kirby, who’s been quiet since our talk, is straining against his cuffs to peek
out the window. Don’t go jumping out just yet, I tell him; you won’t be able to breathe this air for another one-point-five billion. We sync up with the penitentiary airlock and take ol’ Kirby down to booking. Our end of things is again over. Alone in the cruiser, we can spend the afternoon rehashing Caledonians, or talking football clubs, or whatever nonsense pops into our heads.

I wait around a minute, though, to escort Kirby down to his cell myself. His eyes are wide and frightened, and I can’t help but empathize. What he must be feeling: Quite scary, I’m sure, to be trapped in the past, without hope of crossing the years ever again.

“You know, Sarge, I’m real glad you guys stopped me from hurting Vera,” he suddenly says along the way. “Not that I feel so bad about it. Just that it’ll be a lot nicer to have that memory of her being sorry for what she done, instead of having to remember my guilt forever.”

“I’m sure it will be,” I say. I can feel his pulse racing through the material of his jumpsuit.

“But you know, Sarge, I am guilty, ain’t I? That’s why I’m here.” At this point the zookeeper takes him from me, thrusts him into his cell, and slams the gate. Kirby falls to the floor and turns around to face me. He looks scared stiff...and completely sane. Saner than he’s been since we picked him up.

“Sarge,” he says. “Tell me how I did it?”

“You come in with a shotgun,” I begin. I tell him in specific, graphic detail; the frank language of a police report.
“Thanks Sarge,” he says, staring up at the ceiling. “Now I’ll remember that one, too.”

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I think about Petro for a few seconds as I climb back out of that hell, but he’s out of my mind by the time I’m back in the cruiser with Frank. I feel sorry for him, but my selfish heart doesn’t want him ruining the best part of the job. Frank lifts off and heads for the hole, and my pulse is pounding with anticipation. And there in front of us is the breathtaking sight: Ourselves, row upon row of multiple Uses, waiting to enter the tunnel. A splendid side effect: we bring all the prisoners to the same point in space-time, and leave that point a few minutes later, so that our past presents itself again and again, without the embellishments of memory, but in dullest living color.

I can look at my own face, which I usually imagine so exquisite that no man can deny me—and here it is revealed to be fairly plain, and already in decay. And I look into the dry stare of Frank, the Frank next to me, and I can hear the weak beat of his timid heart. OldFranks everywhere sneak glances at little OldMes; I catch one OldFrank looking me, NowMe, square in the eye, and all the space-time energy, the electrostatic thing amid the molecules, zips between us. I can’t see it, but in this special situation I am able to trust it is there. It’s always there, I think, just as the colors of the rainbow are hidden in black and white. So I boldly return the stare of this OldFrank; I slowly, seductively, mouth to him the words that I always wish to yesterday, and hide in today—I, Miss, You. And now NowFrank pilots us into the wormhole, and my moment with
OldFrank is already gone. But: at least I have time to dream about it. Time, time, time—b Billions upon billions of years.
Greg Gierson  
ANTH 320  
Dr. Carson  
5/10/

Introduction:

In this analysis we will explore ideas of romantic love in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in execution of completion requirements set forth in Anthropology 320: Ideas of Romance in the 21st Century. “Romantic love,” according to Webster’s Dictionary, is the conjunction of words meaning, among other things, “of or relating to a tale of adventure or intrigue, often of a dreamy or emotional quality” (56), and, simply, “a strong feeling of affection toward a person,” or “sexual desire and its fulfillment” (39). While the latter term is shown to have several meanings, overlapping and ambiguous, but definable within the ranges of a spectrum, we can clearly see that it is the former term—romance—which is uncertain, relating at it does directly to the more unknown and mysterious aspects of phenomenology (adventure, dreams). Therefore, this study hopes to focus on the concept of romance itself, how it aids, abets, and obstructs the greater ideals of love.

The term itself takes its roots from the Latin word romanice, which translates as “in the vernacular.” This usage was vulgarized and expanded into the Old French romanz, which connotes any “work composed in French.”  

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1 Ibid, 56.
romance lie along literary lines. Originally that literary literal meaning implied only composition in any of the romance languages (a further expansion of the Latin/French etymology), but in the Middle Ages “romance” specified itself as the label for a literary genre dealing, in verse or prose, with legendary, supernatural, or amorous subjects and characters. Romances began to appear in western Europe in the twelfth century and reached their greatest popularity in the thirteenth; they remained in vogue until the Renaissance. At first, they were related orally, but soon they were to be written by court musicians, clerics, scribes, and aristocrats for the entertainment and moral edification of the nobility. Popular subjects for romances included King Arthur in Britain and Charlemagne in France. Even in North Africa, texts have been unearthed which record the romantic adventures of humanized gigantic chimpanzees.\(^2\)

Shakespeare solidified the conception of literary romance as concerning improbable and wonderful epics of sexual love’s fulfillment, but by the time of the nineteenth century, the pressures of industrialization and the modern world had reduced the worth of such literatures. Realism and Naturalism took a contrary viewpoint, suggesting that serious art should deal with the objective reality of the world, not the highly subjective fancies of wandering troubadours. Literature and the literate classes took a turn away from romance. Here the concept itself is proven to vary in value over the course of time.

In consequence, this study will focus on romance as conceptualized today in the form of music. According to many, music is the means by which today’s popular and

\(^2\)
personal ideals of romance are communicated to the public. Where literary storytelling (both oral and written) was once the medium of mass-communication of emotional concepts, it is clear that the modern era has assigned this role to music. Popular music’s ubiquity is unquestionable, making it a wonderful diagnostic tool toward analyses of conception trends between the mid-to-late twentieth-century and the modern day. Being a great music lover myself, I have chosen two songs that, I believe, fairly represent past and current ideals of adoration. These two songs are “Crazy Love” by Poco, and “Swimmers” by Broken Social Scene.

The main objective of the analysis has been to determine: What is the conception of romance, as rendered in music, and has it changed over the last thirty years? And if romance is indeed proven to be a fluctuating ideal, the analysis must go further, to ask: How can an objective romance ever be achieved? Since it is well-known that “all things must pass” and “the more things change, the more they stay the same,” it is our initial hypothesis that romance is a concept entirely artificial and outdated, and therefore the concept of romance should be dispensed with.

Methods:

This study was primarily conducted at Evergreen University, utilizing the university’s network system in acquirement of both Broken Social Scene’s “Swimmers” and Poco’s “Crazy Love.” Broken Social Scene was suggested as a research topic as long ago as last

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3 The study had access to over 500 compact discs, everything from Aretha to Avril, Bach to Barry White, Cat Stevens to Cat Power—though, in full disclosure, the Cat Stevens belongs to our peaceable, true-hearted idealist, Research Assistant McLeod.
autumn, gleaned from roommate and Research Assistant Keith McLeod; “Swimmers” was chosen in contexts that shall come clear as this paper progresses. Poco’s “Crazy Love,” despite being the older (1978) song in this analysis, was not unearthed until the weekend of 4/28-4/30. That weekend it was encountered at a local social gathering hall, on jukebox; on return to the research network that night it was promptly downloaded and analyzed many times over the following days.

Anthropology 320: Ideas of Romantic Love in the 21st Century, as taught by Dr. Carson, has always emphasized the use of a very interdisciplinary research schema, in order to overcome biases inherent in each of the various social sciences. In complete agreement with that feeling—and wanting to treat my study samples as “real world phenomenon” and not simply analyzable abstracts (not wanting to write some simplistic literary analysis)—each of the study songs has also been released to a female participant, as a case-study of the effects/affects of the latent romantic theories each song presents. In point of fact both songs were included as part of a larger compact disc—again, in keeping with their larger social contexts, I felt the songs should not be singled out. Still, each song was burned as track number four of its respective disc, and both participants were keenly aware track four serves as the most important position of any compact disc I make. It is therefore certain they were conscious of the larger thematic symbolism of “Crazy Love” and “Swimmers,” respectively.
Compact disc #1, containing “Crazy Love,” was entitled simply Crazy Love and was given (via post) to Study Participant Laura Hartley on 4/31. Compact disc #2, containing “Swimmers,” was entitled Cinco de Summer and given in-person to Study Participant Summer Cooley on 5/5. Personal interviews were conducted in the days after each disc was listened to.

Results:

Reactions were mixed, and perhaps without significant (P<.05) value. Overall, romance as conceptualized in 1978’s “Crazy Love” was considered overly unrealistic and of a dubious nature, while that of “Swimmers” and 2005 appeared ironic, distant, and generally negative. In both cases the ideal of romance seemed to cause irritation. However, irritation was not achieved without a complicit measure of excitement and there were no attempts at avoidance of any terminology of romance and romantic love.

Both subjects showed a willingness, almost an enthusiasm, to engage in said terminology.

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6 The research questionnaire consisted of four questions, used to directly ascertain each subject's feelings to her respective song: 1) What did you think of track four? 2) What images, feelings, or associations did track four inspire in you? 3) Why did track four conjure images of [repeat participant response to #2]? 4) How did [echo responses to #2 and #3] make you feel?

7 Study Participant Summer’s responses to all four questions: “I know what it meant.” “Because I know what it meant.” “Fuck you. You know who gave me that song first.” (Perhaps should be transcribed as “You-Know-Who gave me that song first.”) “Fuck you, Greg. Oh—look how you make me say things like ‘fuck you!’ Are you having fun making me talk like this?”
It was as if both enjoyed the irritation caused to them by the songs, as if they could never, consciously, turn off the appeal to romance, despite both of them responding to the concept in accordance with the terms of our initial hypothesis. In other words, it seems that both subjects agree with the first part of our hypothesis, that “romance is a concept entirely artificial and outdated,” but not necessarily the conclusion that “therefore, the concept of romance should be dispensed with.”

Discussion:

Although romance is generally thought of as an almost superstitious belief, one for which the pragmatic world has no use, the findings of our study related to romance and romantic selection suggest that people are still, at heart, bleeding. Both cases reveal a level of cognitive dissonance, or what Gormond calls “latent value contradiction”; i.e. both participants attempt to live their lives according to values (romance and love) which are in conflict. These value contradictions seem completely insignificant to the study participants, however.

One is reminded of the seminal experiments of American psychologist Leon Festinger in this area. In 1959, Festinger and his colleague J. Merrill Carlsmith asked college students to engage in an extremely boring, repetitive task for one hour. Afterward, the experimenters offered the students either $1 or $20 to deceive a prospective subject in the experiment (actually another researcher) into thinking that the

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task ahead would be interesting. Later, the students were asked to rate their enjoyment of the task. Students who did not mislead a confederate admitted the task was boring. So did those given $20—ample justification for their white lie to the confederate. However, those paid only $1 rated the task as somewhat enjoyable. Having lied without a sufficient justification, these subjects felt an internal pressure to view the task in more positive terms as a way to reconcile their behavior with their attitude and reduce their cognitive dissonance. Also consistent with the theory, hundreds of more recent studies have shown that people change their attitudes to justify their own investment of effort, money, or time.

Festinger's findings suggest that people change attitudes toward a particular subject whenever experience and external stimuli force a conflict in the area—thus, our expectation would be that both study participants, holding incongruous feelings in regards to romance and love, would seek to rectify the incongruity. Yet, amazingly, it would appear that both Study Participant Laura and Study Participant Summer are not inclined toward any such mental restructurings. Their preference is a continuation of the inner conflict, with hopes that one day it will magically resolve itself. If, as Festinger suggests, "we come to love what we strive for,"\textsuperscript{10} then our Study Participants have come to love romance itself, perhaps, remaining oblivious to the fact that the actual goal of love—true love; caritas and carnalitas combined—is being neglected.

These phenomena of hopeful ignorance were revealed acutely by the musical reactions of each participant. Certainly the lyrics of "Crazy Love" invite such responses:

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
Tonight I'm going to break away
Just you wait and see
I'll never be imprisoned by
A faded memory...

These were lyrics that spoke directly to the value contradiction held by Study Participant Laura. She singled them out for remark as “pretty,” but when pressed to elaborate she instead capitulated, repeatedly calling them pretty but adding “they don’t mean very much.” To her the lyrics signified an aesthetic of both higher truth and lower importance. This observer, in reflection, would like to point-up the abject lunacy of this contradiction. How can truth not “mean very much?” Have people so lost their

11 Study Participant Laura is the same Laura cited in my first paper for this class: “Do the Senses Make Sense?”, which analyzed my own intellectual and emotional responses to a number of scents, including the perfume Laura preferred during high school days. Further background information may prove efficacious: the study participant and I grew up in the same neighborhood; at age 10, playing baseball, I accidentally swung my bat into her head, quickly causing a gushing gash, leading me to carry her home, leading to her undying gratitude. At 14 I once spied her changing for bed (a lamp on, a t-shirt off); by 16 spying was no longer necessary. One spring night after a basketball game I innocently, naively, whispered “I Love You”—and the response was so wonderful that I whispered it for the next two years again and again. I whispered it when she caught me flirting with Abbey Gillette; I said it loudly when I caught her kissing Ricky Lange. We never tired of it; we didn’t even think what it meant. Eighteen brought scholarships, one to St. Scholastica, and one to Evergreen; nineteen brought a certain Maggie (also cited in “Senses”). This brought on a rising tension and a tearful denouement, wherein I whispered those words again, this time with a necessarily modified tone...and I think this was the moment where Laura realized the meaning had been situational all the while. I would argue that situationality proves truth. A whole lifetime of scholarly achievement could be found here...two lifetimes, if I were ever so smart.

12 An interesting word for Study Participant Laura, and the modern era in general: it connotes beauty, yet (to many female ears) it also subtly implies the absence of beauty (“If you want to say beautiful, say beautiful!” they say). It is an important disassociation in itself—many were the times I called Laura’s blonde hair, blue eyes, and buxomity “pretty,” and many were the times she accepted it with a gracious, if half-hearted, smile.

13 But perhaps the lyrics which do mean something are the ones which follow: “It happens all the time/ this crazy love of mine/ wraps around my heart/ refusin’ to unwind...ooh-hoo, crazy...aah-haa.” Upon first hearing those words, at Rascal Jack’s, value contradictions were the first thing that leaped to mind. More specifically I thought of Study Participant Laura: at times she certainly “wraps around my heart/ refusin’ to unwind.” This occurrence, coupled with the fact that Study Participant Summer was only a few feet away during my revelry, certainly speaks to the truth that value contradictions are held by everyone, including this author. The matter is further complicated by the song’s howling, almost gone-mad, ooh-aah coda, with which I could not help but bay along upon very first hearing. Summer frowned at me—especially when I insisted on hearing it again, feeding the jukebox quarters meant for a pool match with glibly grinning Research Assistant Keith. Still, perhaps this suggests deprivation of language as the correct treatment for disassociative behaviors.
way that they will give up on the universal truths\textsuperscript{14,15} in order to keep themselves contented in the moment? If Laura had been able to recognize the conflict in her own thoughts, she might have moved to reconcile them; any rational being, the author imagines, would choose the higher-ordered value over the lesser matter, or would at least

\textsuperscript{14} "There is no other commandment greater than these." (Christ, Jesus. \textit{The Bible}. ) "To whom thou sayest/ 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all/ Ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know." (Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn." \textit{Norton Anthology of English Literature}. ) "The single thing we seemingly realizing/ being dying." (Babcock, Peter. "Cats and Dogs." Unpublished manuscript.) "Let be be finale of seem/ The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." (Stevens, Wallace. "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." \textit{Everyman's Wallace Stevens}. ) "All you need is love." (The Beatles. "All You Need Is Love." \textit{Yellow Submarine}.) Laura digs the Beatles.

\textsuperscript{15} "If truth be told": \textit{Webster's} notes this phrase is utilized “when expressing a surprising or unwelcome fact or observation" (70). Surprise, then, may be a requirement in the revelation of Truth. And surprised I was, one day last spring break in California. Laura was there visiting her sister and her sister’s baby; she was not seeing anyone at the time (see Note 19); nor was I. This prompted us to fly me out to see her for a few days. Well, sister took the opportunity to spend a few days at the office, and Brother-in-Law was always there anyways; so Baby, Laura, and I were left alone for much of the time—as planned. Our thought had been that we would have a purely sexual experience with one another, devoid of the emotional complications of the past; for the most part this was entirely successful. According to one of Research Assistant Keith's crude formulations we “sexcelled,” just as we always had. In this particular instance I had just changed the babe’s diaper, and Laura had put her to crib; within moments we were on the floor of the nursery, pulling clothes from one another, caressing and kissing with strangely added impatience. Our clutching was fierce and primitive; not after long I had Laura on all fours before me. Now, like all men mine is a visual stimulation, and so I spent those moments with eyes cast downward, witnessing our coupling as if it were the work of others. In fact our intentions for the week demanded as much; and so I was already in a new frame of mind, seeing these sights as through the crystal-clear windows of some touring Greyhound, moving through time without space, or space without time, or something, relieved of the normal strands of connection that can cause friction in even the slickest of spaces. But that mental motorcoach was not fueled by the visual sense as much as the olfactory: the room was rank, spiced with the odor of dear baby’s bowel movement. Now, I was not bothered by this in the least; in fact I was inspired to a heightened pace and awareness. I looked downward again and my consciousness made the connection: there, in such a tiny space, is all for which we exist: fornication and defecation. The rest is icing, sometimes tasty, sometimes sticky. Moreover, I also saw I would have never made this realization if we had scheduled the weekend for walks along the beach, and long talks, and contemplation of our shared future; the simple reality of the situation would have remained hidden behind all of it. But, \textit{here, now}, the truth was mine, and this brought me to the brink of my ecstasy; I knew my Laura stood right there with me at the peak, so impassioned were her cries. It was obvious we were loving one another as much as we ever might, and I loved \textit{that}. Apparently, though, we let her moans get too fevered—before we were able to summit the baby launched into a ferocious wailing, firmly forcing us to alter our attentions. Naked Laura held the baby to her bosom, cooing over it, appeasing its every self-unknown need. I looked on, burning yet with desire, but now thinking about that desire, analyzing it, not just simply living it. And here my desire disclosed the final surprise, which is now very clichéd and banal to me, but which went something along the lines of “loveismuchtoosimpletosurviveinourcomplexhumanworld.”
revisit the valuations of both. If pretty had won out for Poco, things might have been different.

However, it must be remembered that the song itself is titled “Crazy Love,” and the implication, therefore, is that love is, in some circumstances at least, crazy. Perhaps this was the truth that Laura instinctively picked up on—a truth that is in complete agreement with our hypotheses. Perhaps “pretty” does not imply any type of universal truth (which is, in turn, found inconsequential), but rather some equipoise between that truth and the contingencies of life on Earth; in other words, perhaps the cognitive processes of Study Participant Laura are in order, and the mistake lies only in the author’s interpretation of those processes. Still, if it is the study participant’s contention that pretty is as good as it gets, we can see that her belief in this value is nevertheless undercut by other cognitive theories. Placing highest value on pretty, Study Participant Laura nonetheless advocates for unattainable goals in the areas of self-worth, physical beauty (see Note 12), and romance itself. The assumption seems to be that romance and crazy are synonyms. Study Participant Laura seems perfectly contented to wait for the day they are not, without working toward the change herself.

Study participant Summer also holds this sort of preference. Her history is enough to make any student of cognitive dissonance drool;¹⁶ she too prefers that conflict

¹⁶ My studies go back as far as 2001, when Summer graduated from West Valley High School. In that environment she had been head football cheerleader and basketball superstar, as well as the leading purveyor of Christian rhetoric and all things Puritanical, her father being a local minister. Shortly into her freshman year at Evergreen, however, incongruity asserted itself, manifesting in a quick series of romances with Brad, Bill, and Bert, the last of whom brought her fully into womanhood. Sophomore year featured a poor showing in the classroom and the advent of an oral fixation...but tobacco was given up by summer, and devout church-going was resumed (though evangelizing had been dropped). Later in the season, working as a tour director for a local hotel, she met a new beau, whose apparent but absolutely superficial
of conflation, "romantic love," to anything nearly resembling one or the other. The song
given to her, "Swimmers"—in the author’s estimation one of the most pragmatic
realizations of "romantic love" ever recorded\(^\text{17}\)—was treated with scorn and derision
upon first listen, as if this fulfillment of her dreams, however small, could not possibly be
enough.\(^\text{18}\)

Summer’s interview responses reveal a defensive posture, suggesting she
understood the song as an attack on her own cognitive and decision-making processes.
An admission? “It makes me feel trashy,” she said in response to question four,\(^\text{19}\) and the
answer certainly sheds light on her feelings of self. For a modern woman of a certain age
(and these age boundaries are constantly widening, in both directions), “trashy” implies
the very discord that my hypothesis suggests. “Trashy,” in its most modern sense,
combines the connotation of sexual promiscuity with a mood of lower social or economic
charm and confidence allowed her to drop all pretense to piety and again lead a sinner’s lifestyle. The
obvious value contradictions were soon pointed-up and realized, however; the relationship ended with a
great bang, though, regrettably, the two remain truest friends to this day. A few months later Summer took
up with a new man who she seemingly felt would allow both the cake, and the eating of it: the two are
monogamous but unamorous. Any contradiction in this area is meticulously repressed.
\(^\text{17}\) On a staccato hippity-hoppity background, prefaced by the female singer metaleptically speaking “Give
me more of that beat”: “I was/ waitin’ for you/ I was/ standin’ around/ I was/ gettin’ older/ I was/ going
down. If you always get up late/ you’ll never be on time/ if you’re always making/ after work...after work. Oh
the day never comes/ and you stand up/ waitin, on. I saw you down there/ I knew you were tired/ I saw
you/ you looked like a swimmer. I wanna be with you/ all of the time. Why can ‘ tyon/ satisfy? You look
good/ but you sound bad. You were the best I... If you always get up late/ you’re never gonna be on time/ if
you always get up late/ you’re never gonna be on time. And that’s a shame/ ‘cause I like you/ I never see
you.” Italics mine, though they also appear in the singer’s pleading voice. Buy it, Dr. Carson—it is the
greatest admonition toward a dissonance-free lifestyle this side of Hiroshima.
\(^\text{18}\) “Could”: The subjunctive is used in this instance, in admission that the motivations and desires of my
study participants remain ever-hidden; proper indices have not yet been begotten or made.
\(^\text{19}\) For comparison’s sake: Laura responded, “I feel like Matt wouldn’t like you sending me secretly-coded
CDs, Greg.” A paucity of data prevents me from drawing any relevant conclusions about this Matter.
Other answers: “You and your classic rock; ☺ (I swear a smiley-face could be heard in her tone).” “I
thought about you, I suppose.” “Um...Greggy, you’re recording me again, aren’t you.”
status ("trailer trash"). To feel trashy is to feel as if you have done something wrong and—worse yet—to have inadequate remedy.

Thus, any student of psychological or sociological study can see that Summer’s responses do in fact stem from her own improper cognitive theories. To align the research with the romance/love dichotomy-paradox, we might say that, like study participant Laura, study participant Summer holds to an unrealistic ideal of romance—rendered in the form of an unknowable and therefore adventuresome God—while simultaneously searching out a tangible, corporeal love here on Earth. It is worth noting that, unlike Laura, Summer does not follow both these values simultaneously. Instead she swings from one to the other; we might have grounds to call her personality bipolar. Regardless, in the long run the results are the same.

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20 Even Research Assistant Keith, who last summer breezily described her as “a fucking headcase.”

21 It is debatable, of course, if God and romance lie along similar cognitive pathways. The author would argue they do, but study participant Summer would, and has, argued to the contrary many times. Although not directly. But it does follow, since God and corporeal love are dissociated, as are romance and corporeal love. In one particular interview we explored these dichotomies. It was a September day; the sun was still warm; we were in her dorm room, in which she lives alone, watching some old VHS. We lay in bed. Throughout, whenever I nuzzled her she would reply in-kind, which would lead to earnest kisses. Each time I nuzzled I would attempt to increase that earnestness. A dancing tongue. A nibbled ear. Responses in earnest, though in silence. By the time the lead had won over the object of his endearing affection the study participant had undressed to that enticing level of some Sears catalogue pages. Her affair was hued in dark blue, with a little lace bow between her bosom and polka-dots on her panties. The vision is clear to me as I write this—remember, the sun was out behind us; autumn had not taken its turn yet. Summer is a very thin girl, and I have never really had a preference for thin girls—but I cannot believe I have ever seen any woman as filled with spirit and light and life as that one whom I still see in my mind’s eye, clichés be damned! But then I only looked for a moment, conscious as I was to keep her mouth busy with kisses, lest she speak some reproof. And perhaps this was my failing—being too cautious, waiting too long—because just as my hand was moving down into that blue-and-white speckled field (Old Faithful!), she pushed me away, with both hands and a firm, “No, Greg.” She spoke it like a command to a dog, or like she had seen it on film. After that she launched into a long monologue on what God did not want her to do, and I listened agreeably, my tongue lolling perhaps, but with all the empathy I could still summon. Dear Dr. Carson, she delivered the sermon in her skivvies.

23 As if among vines.
Summer's response to "Swimmers," is not only bi-polar; it is tragic. The song offers its listener an account of romantic love which is deeply rooted in the complexities of the real-world; the song makes no attempts to shy away from imperfection or disassociation; it does not attempt to resolve these problems. Here the song knows itself to be too small for such quandaries; instead it hopes only to ignore them, and to find a small space of comfort and protection within those knotted tendrils.  

Whereas 1978's "Crazy Love" is perhaps an overstated case for the possibilities of romantic love, 2005 shows "Swimmers" suggesting that, for all its problems, romance might exist if it exists within the limits of self (that is, within us). It seems, however, that Study Participant Summer is discontented with this level of romantic interaction; she prefers an omniscient and all-encompassing interaction to an intimate, individual one. It is as if, in love, she needs to be swaddled rather than caressed. Sadly, this is the exact system of romantic belief which "Crazy Love" shows us cannot be sustained. Both representations of romance result in ardent, cardiac arrhythmia...

So, if Gormond is correct in her assertion that we should be concerned whenever "a value contradiction is consciously utilized as a mechanism for coping with the world," then both study participants demand the attention of professional psychology. While this prospect seems acceptable and harmless enough, the author must again point

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24 "Tired": 1) needing rest; in need of sleep, or weakened and made less active by exertion; 2) no longer interested; having waned in patience, interest, or desire. (Webster's)

25 Perhaps the study should have given each participant the other's CD. "Crazy Love," with its weighty wails and exaggerated pretense, would have suited Study Participant Summer well. Study Participant Laura surely would have found "Swimmers" perfectly pretty. But the study made its choices for valid reasons: if thusly undertaken from the start, there would be no need for a study at all.

26 Ibid, 47.
out, in the interests of science, that the values of these responses may be insignificant. That is, the responses of our two brave, clumsy Study Participants may not be enough to validate the hypotheses. Moreover, we might wish to make a special exception for value contradictions concerning "romance" and "love." If we borrow the terminology of discourse from Hayden White, we might see that "romance" remains always in the realm of the unknown, despite its frequent linkages with "love." Therefore, any model of consciousness that discourse-theory provides must keep romance outside consciousness, always as an object, never a subject. Love itself appears as subject, due to the analogies of mother, father, family, love of music—any euphoria of feeling—which give at least a

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27 Hayden: A favorite band of both study participants; singers of that great song "Dynamite Walls." I thought about putting the song on one of these CDs—but I could not decide who to give it to. At first I thought Study Participant Summer, because it would've offered her a message of my melancholy; perhaps she would have picked up on my feelings of neglect; perhaps she would have been prompted to do something about it. Maybe it might have gotten me somewhere...but I suppose in the end I wouldn't have wanted her to mix herself up even more than she already is, with this value contradiction stuff and whatnot. And as for Study Participant Laura: certainly the subdued, muffled melody of the song fits her aesthetic criteria, and experience says she is a wonderful one for taking in (and fixing up, and making a part of herself) those slight sadnesses such as the song contains...but again, do I send her that feeling, make her think about it (at the expense of "Matt"), make her think of me more than she already does, risk a cognitive concupiscence that would only further disassociate our two key terms? Now, I take this work seriously, Dr. Carson; I realize that I shouldn't go about tempting hearts for mere scientific investigation. Furthermore I do believe in my hypotheses; romance is so much smoke up your steamhole; it's impossible in the world, simply because our lives are based on order and systems (psychic, physic, economic), not on the chaos of the human heart. Chaos theory probably does explain the universe best, but it's not (yet, at least) being applied in the humanities. But Joseph Smith, twenty-seven wives himself, had it right—I want Summer, but also Spring, Autumn, Winter; some sweet flower-child named Solstice! Summer to pray with in the mornings (I would not shirk that duty if we were properly married and I was allowed the other husbandly one), and to club and rave with at night (no dissonance there; a man spending time with his wife!). And Laura to make me dinner in the evening (I'll do it every-other, darling!) and to cuddle and to sing to and maybe to draw with, I suppose in afternoons and rainy days. And it would be she I would probably show most of my emotion to, but that's only because we are who we are; Summer wouldn't mind; I'd give her what she needs, which isn't really emotional but spiritual; by God I've got both in me! In bed both of them; a dream-come-true, certainly, but at this point no more than a moral obligation. I can do it; I've read books and seen movies and I'll take in more; I've had plenty of practice already, picked up a move or two in all those dorms; I'll improve my stamina, I'll start running. I can do this. If we're really honest about our motivations then mine are only to plant a plethora of babies, I suppose, and theirs are to grow them and sustain life in general, and I don't know why we can't all do it together, if we can look one another in the eye and be honest about it, which is more than the current state of affairs, it will work. I don't know why.
dialectical positioning inside the realm of the known. Of course, romance may also give this “euphoria of feeling,” so we might say that one may love romance. But the two exist in separate realms of life—the unknown and the known; the Other and the Self—so that their conjoined existence in the brain seems impossible, audacious, and exciting all at once. It is this last which makes the association forgivable even as it remains dubious.

We might also note that in the case of romance, the Other is in fact a Self, with its own unique set of Others. Thus in romance the onus may not always be on the Self to realign any cognitive dissonance with the Other; in fact, it might be just as helpful, I suppose, if that Other investigate his own cognitive procedures, not for internal dissonances, but for dissonances with the external. If romance is doomed forever to be unknown by the Self, then perhaps it is that unknown that must actively make itself (its Self: cognitions and otherwise) known, into part of Self. Perhaps Other has had problems with this in the past...perhaps in the future he should apply himself more rigorously toward this goal. A choice must be made. This author can only encourage further research time, laboratories, grants, etc., be applied in this important arena.

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the whole world doesn’t do it this way! We’ll have to do something about AIDS, certainly, but maybe if we group ourselves into bigger groups, and do it early on in our lives, from birth or something, it won’t be such a big deal: Laura on a specially consecrated shelf at my mouth and Summer on the bed below, our moans a prayer of truth to heaven. I can do this. If now and then they want to go with someone else—separately with someone else, I mean—I’ll probably get jealous but then I’ll be able to do it with another part of my group; I’ll bring Maggie back into the fold; isn’t that what jealousy is, an analogous desire without hope of fruition? We’ll build new equipment, we’ll make new dreams! Matt and Keith can help raise the barn! Damn it, if everyone knows that the world is completely subjective and fragmented, by Schroedinger’s sake, let’s have one for each one of the ones that is me! Let them do the same! Oh Summer, God won’t mind; he made it this way. Oh Laura, I love you now, I always have; I don’t know how any of this would change that. Probably we’ll all be happier. We’re monkeys, baboons, bonobos, don’t you see?; the only difference is we have these big brains and so many impossible ideas about monkeydom. All we’ve really ever achieved on this planet is the restriction of the one thing that matters (love, which all life knows); romance—some attainable, unknown perfection—is the method.
White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. White defines a *discourse* as "a kind of model for the processes of consciousness by which a given area of experience, originally apprehended as simply a field of phenomena demanding understanding, is assimilated by analogy to those areas of experience felt to be *already* understood as to *their* essential natures" (5). Romance trends toward a "field of phenomena demanding understanding" exegetically un-understandable. Its likely analogy to love—"already understood as to [its] essential nature"—is obvious, but obviously troublesome.
Osama bin Laden is Lecturing in New Haven

Sure, he’s around. You can definitely catch him T-TH, 2-3:30, HGS 203, for ARBC 334: Muslim Literature in Translation. There is a theory among some that this is some other Osama bin Laden, that Osama bin Laden might be a fairly common name in some parts of the world, that they wouldn’t just let Osama bin Laden teach at the nation’s top university. I don’t know. But our Osama’s got the beard, and the white turban, and the long robes, although now they’re cleaner than you usually see on television. And he walks with the cane, too. The class is crosslisted as ENGL 337.

You’ll see him down on Old Campus a lot, out on the quad, just kind of observing everything, that flighty freshman world as it goes past. Usually alone, but often enough he’ll be there with this kid, Pat Humaskin, who has kind of become the Professor’s...protégé, I guess is the word. Pat’s talks and hands out the literature now—though I don’t think Prof ever handed out literature anyway. Pat’s a sociology major, like me; we met in the dorm our first year. Kind of a crazy kid: He used to walk from his room to the shower buck-naked, in a dorm full of guys, no good reason; I think he just enjoyed the attention for attention’s sake. But Pat’s friendly enough, and he’s damn smart; I can’t say too much bad about him. In fact, I’ve often used him as a pacer: We’ve had a lot of classes together now, and how he’s doing in them, grade-wise, is where I like to be, too. It’s a little bit of competition, healthy as long as I don’t get overly obsessed with it.
Pat's also the one who turned me on to this Mus-Lit class, though he's never had any classes with Prof. What happened was, Pat's jockeying for WYBC a couple semesters ago, late nights, and as it turns out, Prof has the show slot just before him. Prof plays Beatles ("Norwegian Wood"), with lots of world music mixed in, the occasional Shins track, and lots of this tinkling, double-timed Arabic folk music, too. Often Pat sees him leaving, and eventually he strikes up a conversation, asking about the folk songs. Prof tells him how they're shamanic (Pat's word, though it seems wrong to me), and Pat gets really interested—the songs sounding cool and unique, something he could use on the ladies, and also from a sociological perspective. And that's just how Pat is—he's a real charmer; he'll schmooze with most anybody, so long as they're not Greek-affiliated. Especially girls. He kind of paces me in that regard, too, but that's a digression I'll save for my therapist.

In class Prof is fairly Socratic, which I frankly find a little boring—pretty much every professor I've ever had does that. Inquisition is a valuable learning tool, but I bet you could pack a lot more knowledge into a really good lecture. I guess it does encourage the individual to think for him- or herself, but in a way that just leads to everyone thinking whatever they want, and no right answers at all. Subjectivity drives me nuts! I mean, we've got one of the great ranter/ravers of all time up there; we're all at attention; just tell us what you believe to be true and trust us to tune out the non-useful stuff. Instead he's all, "But what do you think of Mohammed?"

Still, some of the books we've read are pretty interesting—the Qur'an and The Thousand and One Nights, obviously, and then all this medieval saj, novels-in-verse that
concern lots of sex and wine, very interesting. But my favorite is *Season of Migration to the North*, by Tayeb Salih. It’s the story of this Sudanese who goes to London for an education, then ends up seducing and killing all kinds of British girls. Seems like a tell-tale pick from Prof, but it really is a wonderful book. Mostly it’s about the little village where the killer and the narrator live. It’s on the Nile, full of fertile farmland and peaceful, but the story of those murders really make you question that peace. How can one place be called peaceful, when another part of the world is not? Maybe there’s a bigger connection. Maybe there’s a third side to the story.

And that’s just why I got into sociology in the first place, because I’ve always been interested in that cultural complexity. I remember being twelve years old, and I was in my dad’s office, kind of bothering him, and to get rid of me he gave me this big atlas to look at. This country’s pink; and this one’s brown; and this one’s green; I’m a little kid and I’m asking myself “Why?” Maps have fascinated me ever since. You look at them, and they give you such a high-up, omniscient sort of view, that you can feel your brain just sort of expanding, all raw power and knowledge. But not only that; it’s also that you can’t help but wonder what’s going on down on the ground. From that kind of aerial height people are just pixels, or ants, or sheep—that’s what the intellect says—but then you can feel your own heart beating, and you want to say, *no*, we’re not just sheep, we’re something more: ghosts and souls and essence, and all that other New Age crap. At least that’s how it was for me, when I was twelve; I know it sounds ridiculous but it’s the truth. And right then I decided I would learn all the different ways we could be more—different, but the same in our Moreness. So Sociology. For Pat I think it’s about
something else...for him it’s just another bourgeois I’m-Better-Because-I’m-Unique mindfuck. Not something more really, but something other. Which I admit is an attractive and precious commodity these days, but still, you’d like to think there’s some fundamental thing that links us, too. At least, I would. Like I said, subjectivity drives me insane.

Sometimes I do feel a little guilty, whenever I see footage of 9/11 or it just crosses my mind. Then my blood will surge and I can just want to stab Prof in the back, while he’s writing on the chalkboard, or put him in stocks in Times Square, or something like that. Other times I’m calmer and I just want to talk to him about it rationally—I want to ask him why. But I know what kind of response he’d give: “Well, Mr. Hayden, what do you think about it?” And so I’d have to tell him that he killed three-thousand-plus people and scared a whole world more, and for what? And then he’d ask: “You tell me, for what?” And I’d say I suppose it was revenge, or vengeance, or jihad, or whatever, but I don’t understand it, and besides, violence is only a cycle, never the final answer. But he’d say, “The answer to what?” And I’d have to admit he had a good point: I’m no idiot, we pull a lot of bullshit over there, and who knows what came first, chicken or egg. And we’d just stand there looking at one another, at a stand off, he with his hands on his hips as if he’s said something definitive when all he’s done is raise a bunch of questions, and me without any good answers, just blushing and uncertain and intimidated. So it’s a conversation I can’t have. I mean, I’d like to, but that’s very, very difficult. Though it’d also be heroic.
And there’ve been sporadic little protests here and there, but nothing more than some wannabe hippies beating on their drums in between bong hits behind the library. I do know that somebody or other alerted the government, too, because there’s been this creepy old guy dressed up in grey t-shirts and Gap khakis in the corner of the class all year. He never says a word, he always sits in the same desk by the windows, and he always wears the same outfit. I mean, come on, the guy’s obviously a fed; even the preppies pierce their lips these days. I just don’t think the government much cares, really; everybody watches enough CNN to know they’re better off with him alive. Fuck, Yale’s better for it, too, I guess.

Pluralism. Multiculturalism. Diversity—the vaunted values of today’s higher ed. Like Pat told me the day after he’d seen Prof coming out of the radio station, one of his little audio tapes clutched tightly in his non-cane hand, way before Pat had started attending Mosque and praying every thirty seconds and all that bull. The next day Pat, my pacer, said: “Diversity has been the buzzword in higher education so long that it’s pretty much cliché. But still, there’s surely some value to it. This university is great exactly because it includes people from every single culture in the world. You get to learning—I know it sounds trite, but it’s become a reality for me—you get to learning that everybody out there is just about the same.”

Everybody with money that is, I sneered at Pat. That was the obvious reaction—though I have to admit I didn’t exactly say it aloud. But it was in my thinking, at least.
Excerpts from a Review

From a review of “Birds Flying Away,” an exhibit featuring the work of artist John McGregor (the artist being myself), published originally in the April 9, 1992 edition of the *Times*, pg. C-19:

“Mr. McGregor’s talent lies not only in his ability to paint beautiful canvasses which convey all the ideas and messages they intend, but also in how his works convey and expose those ideas *unintentional*...behind his hazy, velvetein brushstrokes are dark, primal things, remainders from the earliest stages of the piece. The effect of this layering cannot be discounted; the hint of history and loss is unmistakable. In *Eve and Her Apples*, for example, the mother of man is rendered asleep under the tree of knowledge...”

Apropos, though personally I espouse more of an “art for art’s sake” philosophy—I don’t see any need to differentiate between intent and latent. One can squeeze infinite meaning from any piece of art, just as one can never fully wring a sponge. Besides, meaning-making is the critic’s job, not the artist’s, and I don’t begrudge anyone their *raison de être*. The artist must create only for himself—later interpretations will always be as vague as the wind. Art can be anything to anyone, and that is what makes it beautiful and ridiculous, all the same.
For example, discussing my art with Gwen at the “Birds” opening, April 9, 1992:

Gwen: Fantastic!

Me: Thank you.

G: Utterly!

M: Again, thanks.

G (pointedly): They say everyone hides themselves in their art, somewhere. I wonder where you hide yourself in these canvasses?

M (pointing, not at the canvas, but at her sequin-clad heart): Here. I stay in my art by keeping outside it.

G (coyly): Stop that! John, have you seen any of my art?

M: No, but I’m looking forward.

After this exchange Gwen and I shared an impromptu dance (a modified Peabody) around the gallery—she began it by seizing my waist and twirling us madly; I ended it by taking her phone number down on my forearm. And I am glad I did it because, truthfully, her sculptures are magnificent. Gwen is a Walter Pater figure, critic and artist, comfortable in both roles. It was under her influence that I first tried my hand at sculpture. I welded and shaped scraps of wrought iron into the form of a giant black raven, then cut a small hole in his belly and mangled his beak. I titled it Hunger, simply, and my idea was to fill the belly with live worms and watch them wriggle out, one by one, onto a glass platform below—an invertebrate performance piece. But when I explained it to Gwen she said it would be worthless as art, because worm as metaphor
had been rendered cliché, and spinelessness was redundant in the late twentieth century. After some short consideration, though, she decided the raven would be an excellent place for us to make love. I eagerly turned the small hole into a large doorway and we climbed inside. I repeatedly banged my forehead against the iron-work, and Gwen’s knees ended up quite bruised— still we managed, relying on our experiences in elevators, working kitchens, and closets. Then, I shall never forget: upon conclusion, when I wanted only to smell and contemplate the citrus shampoo in her dark hair, Gwen slipped away and ordered Chinese take-out, wryly commenting that the “hunger” was now hers. Maybe the allusion to my working title was accidental, but I like to think that Gwen intended it as a critique, a statement about the futility of artifice (the artifice of futility?). Maybe it was that she didn’t mean anything other than the obvious, excellent as she was at expressing the primal urges. But this is what I mean about Gwen (it is what they said of Goethe): Her life is her greatest art.

Now look at this— Gwen discussing my art with Cynthia, my wife:

Gwen: Fantastic!

Cynthia: Thank you!

G: Such a talent, your husband. You must be so proud! And so lucky!

C: Thank you! And he tells me you are also an artist?

Cynthia and I met in high school, children of wealth, upstate (Yonkers). But whereas I was disaffected and displaced by money, a complete loner, Cynthia was our 1967
homecoming queen—I still see her upon that stage, waving porcelain to her handmaidens, a thin layer of makeup streaking under teenage tears. I must admit crying a little, too, so in love with her was I, so conscious of my unworthiness! That night we left the ball early in favor of a foreign film festival in the City...and there it is, my secret stroke of luck: Cynthia loves the movies. But love is too easy a word for Cynthia, for everyone loves movies. Whereas for Cee it is passion, ardor, fervor...she cries when *Manhattan* or *Annie Hall* makes me giggle; she considers *2001* a tearjerker. We sat through six hours of Fellini that night, holding hands and passing popcorn while the characters on screen danced, broke apart, and recoupled; when we left the theatre a shiny ring of oil had found its way onto both her taffeta gown and my tuxedo slacks. But Cynthia was contented and smiling: she simply loves, loves, loves (how insufficient the word becomes!) to watch the world go by. It was probably the money, the languid ways of debutante balls and summer pool parties, which made her so. She possesses the artist's detachment without the artist's self-sorrow about it.

I suspect these days she sits home much, near the window, watching the raindrops fall, gladdened by the fact that life has turned a corner, shown her something new. And why not?—we should all be so contented. I imagine her red hair cut short, in some mourning, but it is only my vanity which paints that picture.

“...by her shimmering smile we receive the suggestion that her dreams are beautiful, full of greens and golds even more vivid than those McGregor gives us. The self-portrait *Johnstown Blues* is yet more mischievous: the busy geometrics of the background steal
thunder from the artist’s face, itself wide-eyed at some beauty (or fright) sitting off the canvas. These three foci battle to a standoff, begging questions of reality and life that I haven’t room for here. Suffice it to say that McGregor’s work is a metaphysical bag of worms. Like Eve, he boldly ushers in knowledge, claiming a place among the gods; like Adam, he trembles before it and them, aware that knowledge is, at base, an accumulation of questions.” –K. K.

I must admit to enjoying this review—which, of course, is why I include it here. However, I swear on God in Heaven that *Johnstown Blues* was not a self-portrait—honestly, the title refers to Johnstown, Ohio, where Cynthia has some distant family, and, in 1987, we attended a wedding. We sat in a middle pew in a little church, on the bride’s side; everything there felt dignified and sedate. But the minister’s ruddy face—how it struck me!—there was an unnatural joy in his eyes during the entire ceremony, and his hands waved about frantically, like the wings of a falling sparrow. I was filled with curiosity for his thoughts: Were they with God, or with these mortals? How did he reconcile the two; which end did the joy come from? I began to see the thing as an equation, full of thousands of variables, determinable but much too complex for determination, solvable only by super-computers that have yet to be invented. Hence the geometry—it is all I know of mathematics. Nevertheless, the picture and the implications are that minister’s, not mine. My brain is full of dust, is not a "metaphysical bag of worms." What a beautiful cliché, Mr. K.K.; I thank you for the compliment!
Painting is my first love, but not my one-and-only: I do enjoy dabbling. I can claim at least journeyman status in charcoal, ceramic, sculpture, and prose. I play bassoon and related woods. Poetry I cannot do—I think not in image, but in scene. I made a film in 1986, called Room 8, Chelsea. I produced from my own funds and directed from my own script, which followed the revolving denizens of Room 8 at the Chelsea Hotel. Cast and crew were entirely NYU film students; I fed, clothed, and sheltered them in lieu of a paycheck; we all had a time with it. Gwen thought it was exciting, but that was probably because she was sleeping with one of the leads—in fact, we were first introduced upon that set. Cynthia loved to be there, too; she liked to whisper me camera positions and correct my cinematography (I even gave her an editing credit). The film was unfortunately panned by everyone else. No studios wanted to touch it for rights or distribution, and I had a very difficult time finding a theatre to give it a proper opening. They labeled it all kinds of things: “pornographic,” “solipsistic,” “licentious,” “immoral,” even “tedious.” (How could pornography become tedious, I wonder?) It was, at the time, my most complete failure.

Philip Roth wrote, once, that art is the opiate of the educated classes. I admit solidarity on the point—Roth is always worth betting on, and Cynthia and I know him a little from parties, so I must admit bias also. Still, I would love to hear myself say, over cocktails: “But Philip, every class has its opiates; aren’t we entitled to ours as well?” Better yet, I should like to paint the picture of myself saying it. I would place myself on the left border of the canvas, represented only by a purple triangle, with Cynthia, a column of
whitest white, shining from one of my vertices. If I only spoke my rejoinder to Mr. Roth, he would quickly forget it with the passing wind. But if I paint the moment, it will focus him: Roth, a stoic figure, conversing with two abstract images, the party scene behind us in blue and green, swirling wildly.

Cee found out about Gwen last year after I came to Mexico, to work on my novel. I imagine what happened, simply, was that Gwen wanted something to do. I’m not conceited enough to believe Gwen was missing me, as she had plenty of other lovers; my brain conceives that a Monday (or Tuesday, or whatever day it was) presented itself, and Gwen could think of nothing else to fill it. So she made herself beautiful (flowing in her favorite blue Persian blouse and lavender dancing skirt) and went to our home. I’d wager it was Louisa, our maid, who opened the door and saw her there. Louisa probably knew right then (for she knows everything of my life, I am convinced), and called for the missus. Or perhaps Gwen coolly stepped right around Louisa and into the foyer, where she could be seen by Cynthia, watching from the stairs. Yes, Gwen probably would have done just that, and Cynthia would have been just there, waiting. And a moment must have passed, long enough for the flicker of recognition to pass between them [the opening; the artiste]...

G: I’ve been having an affair with your husband.

C: And you’re telling me this now, why?

G: I thought you should know.
C: You poor hurt thing.

G: Please. We made love in the raven. He burned for me—I gave him fever.

C: And what was I?

G: Chronic illness—a disease.

—or:

G: I’ve been having an affair with your husband.

C: I think I know. You were at that art show, a decade ago. You’re an artist as well?

G: Yes.

C: Then you know the artistic temperament. I knew what I was getting into with John. Believe me, I know: I am his wife. (Descending the stairs.) I am his wife. Who are you? I have watched my husband grow from a small, trite boy, into a fully rounded, larger-than-life character. I helped him to it! Of course an affair would be the outcome: Such greatness must be tempered by some blemish! And how sad for you, that I am his wife, but you are still just a girl!

G: ...  

When I paint I take no preferred mode—oil, acrylic, water-based, crayon, they all produce color—but one may safely say that I always operate under a desire for texture. I like to litter my canvases with bits of woods and metals and plastics, then paint over top of that. I find the effect more closely mirrors reality—fragmented, pockmarked, unstable.
Usually I reside in New York, and love it, but Europeans are my buyers. They understand my work best: I showed at a friend’s gallery in Lausanne in ‘88 and sold thirty canvasses in one month. I think it has something to do with the European conception of time, as time itself is a textured thing. They have seen so much there, while our nation is barely removed from its infancy. Time layers. Moments compress, pressurize, until they no longer exist independently, and are instead replaced by this terrible diamond called eternity. If we could live only in the moment, with its specific gravity, we would always be happy; unfortunately, things do not work this way. Cynthia, with her love of montage, never really perceived this problem to my satisfaction; Gwen understood it all too well. Gwen is very European; she was like one of my buyers.

My novel...I am calling it *A Song of Portugal*. Of course, it has nothing to with Portugal, per se, other than that Portugal is a far-off country no one ever visits, and so is exotic and damned all the same. And I suppose, from here in Mexico, Portugal does have a bit more feeling to it than Spain or Cuba. The storyline (a bit of a fantasy) concerns a commercial portrait-painter, Samuel. Samuel is successful in his line, therefore bored; he has grown tired of painting human faces, all of them so similar and superficial. His desire is to paint landscapes—a grove of olive trees growing in craggy rocks, a willow overlooking a graveyard. But then he is commissioned to paint the portrait of a young girl, the heiress to the czarista: Katja. Upon their first meeting Katja hides herself beneath her matron’s skirts, impishly shy of everything around her; only when she escapes into Samuel’s garden, to run with the retriever through the trees, does Samuel finally see how beautiful
she is (espying her from his window far above). The view moves him: beautiful girl in beautiful landscape, he realizes that the two are one, impossible to separate. His cynicism with paint falls away as he falls in love.

Suddenly the portrait becomes the only thing important in his life. He spends weeks painting and repainting her, ripping the work up and starting over until the weeks roll into months, roll into years. When Katja comes to sit for him, Samuel sees in her his garden, exactly as it was that first day; he sees her in all gardens; every landscape he might ever paint is enclosed in the exact hue of her cheek, and the slimmest furrow of her brow. She grows into the full bloom of maturity and eventually they become lovers, as she seduces him (*she seduces him*, mind). On the day they marry Samuel finishes her portrait and presents it to her; after this he quits painting all together, contented that he has reached the apex of his life’s avocation. Katja protests, however: her pride in beauty and position has become hubris, overfed by Samuel’s obsessive and doting hand. She becomes bitter, resentful that he no longer paints her; Samuel sees he can blame only himself. When Katja assumes the throne she strikes at her husband’s heart by planting the courtyard all haphazard and hideous: nightshades and gourds are bred to grow into misshapen fruits; peach trees are cultivated only to be starved and rotted; the rose garden is deflowered each year upon first blossom. The ironic juxtaposition I seek is that of the beautiful, singular portrait, with the twisted, undying landscape. I must admit I haven’t written the finale yet, and exact outcomes are uncertain. I suppose, though, in the end they both must die.
Gwen called on the phone, maybe two weeks ago:

M: Bueno.

G: John. It’s me, Gwen.

M: How are you, Gwen.

G: Fine. How are you getting along? How is Mexico? How is the writing?

M: So-so. I’ve got about six-hundred pages so far.

G: A monster of a novel!

M: Yes.

G: John, you know I’d read for you—I’m quite an editor. You might fax me copy.

M: I might.

G: But you might not.

M: I may revise myself.

G: ...

M: ...

G: Is it warm there?

M: No, not really. I’m too far north—the good weather is east and south. Here it rains.

G: It’s raining here too. Oh, I ran into Daniel Clootes at the Tea Room the other day!

He said to say hello, if I ever spoke with you.

M: Hello to Daniel.

G: God, John, have you got to be so cold? I wish you would say something. What do you think about these days?

M: I think about my novel.
G: John, I’m sorry. I really am, I—

M: There’s nothing to be sorry about, Gwen.

G: But I am.

M: It’s okay.

G: ...

M: ...

M: Well, I’d better get back to work, Gwen.

G: Yes...okay. When will you be returning to New York?

M: I don’t know yet. When the book is done.

G: Yes, well. When you come.

M: Yes. I’ll see you then.


M: Buenas noches.

In writing, as in painting, there are brief moments when you’ve captured life so perfectly, like a swallow in the fist, that the rapture of existence becomes overwhelming. Page 67 of *Portugal* provided me one of those moments: “She sat upon the stool before him like a queen upon her throne. Nothing in the room moved, not even his heart: all was prostrate before this girl, who two or three years earlier had been only a child, playing with dolls and dreaming of marrying her father. And now she was a queen—she would be his queen. She seemed even to have further unfolded her blossom since the last time she had come—and of course she had, with the spring sun outside, shining on the avenue through
the poplars. From his window, Samuel had often watched the local people walking that road, and had often walked it himself. The row of tall, slender poplars acted like a kind of prism, refracting the light, bending it until it was no longer light, but something else entirely. With one step you would be completely in shade, protected, contented; upon the next footfall, however, the light would jump into your eyes, blinding you to everything else but the ecstatic energy of the sun. It was this continual interplay that grew living things like Katja—all of them depend on both the rejoicing of respiration and the reliefs of rest.” When I finished those words I shut my computer for the day and rang Cynthia. She picked up a little alarmed, but she soon read my harmless, light melancholy; she knows it well, all those times I curled into the warmth of her lap after finishing a canvas. We discussed Mexican cinema, and she told me of the chronic back pain she’s been experiencing (it was funny; I’d been feeling the same symptoms). I related a fun evening a few weeks ago, drinking mescal with my gardener here until 2 a.m. Agreeably jealous, Cee said, “Oh John, there are no good parties here anymore.”

I wanted to do something for her. “Maybe Samuel could…” I began, but I stopped myself before actually offering to send him up on a jet plane, to take her dancing and say hello.

“I am glad to be the first reviewer to admit, without hesitation, that the art of John McGregor’s new exhibition (Hudson’s Gallery, 1934 4th St., Greenwich Village, 749-471-1348) is stunning, delectable, ground-breaking. All of it. What I do hesitate upon, however, is the title of the exhibition: ‘Birds Flying Away.’ What the artist means by this
I cannot fathom—given as McGregor is to deep abstraction, the title feels like a riddle I must answer before moving to the work itself. I can find only one bird in the whole exhibition: a wispy little V-shaped thing in the corner of *Two-for-One*. The rest of the canvas is a simple landscape, two neighborly cedars growing on the side of a green hill. An absurdly golden sun hangs above them. I ask myself, where is that bird flying to? What is that bird flying away *from*? McGregor is not answering (at least, not directly), and so I must interpret only as best I can, surmising from the other canvases of the show. Here is my conclusion: The bird flies neither ‘to’ nor ‘away.’ Indeed, the bird is indifferent about where he goes. It is because he knows, regardless of direction, he can only keep flapping his wings.”
Kilchowski experienced a Christian impulse—he had, it seems, been talking with his old mother the night before, his wife was upstairs convalescing from a surgery, and he was sitting at his desk, staring out the window at the stars, when it happened. He thought of all that was wrong with the world: hunger, fear, disease, cruelty. It pushed tears up into his eyes and made his soul grasp for something, anything, righteous...and then he thought again of his mother. She was a woman of such strong faith, an upright Christian, such a pillar for him! There was still good in the world. All of this passed through Kilchowski in the span of a heartbeat, inspiring in him a need to do something true and beautiful and pure.

Then Kilchowski wiped his eyes and brought a piece of paper out from his desk. With the moon outside, and the moonlight, and the stars, he was thinking to write a poem describing his feelings. But after a few minutes he shook his head and laughed, realizing he was no poet. He thought: How to say it? And then, thinking of the example of St. Paul, he decided what he wanted was a letter, like those to the Ephesians, Romans, Corinthians. Kilchowski wanted only to share his love. Upstairs just then his wife moaned softly, and it struck him to write to the doctor who had taken care of her in the hospital, to thank her for showing her own kind of love to Wanda.

Dear Dr. Bilde, he wrote quickly, with inspiration, My name is Kilchowski Kilchowski. My wife is Wanda Kilchowski, who was just recently in the hospital, on your ward and under your attention. I am writing to thank you for showing such wonderful
care and thoughtfulness to Wanda throughout her ordeal. We are both so grateful. Without you it is doubtful that she would have ever been up and around again. Now she is—we are both—looking forward to a brighter future. It is people like you that make this world such a beautiful place to live. The letter went on, telling the doctor a bit about himself, his wife, and their life together. He invited her to call or visit and gave her the information. Kilchowski wanted to sign it With God’s Blessings, but he feared it pretentious. So instead he wrote Best, Kilchowski and Wanda Kilchowski, and marked out the hospital address. And then, feeling something missing, he sealed the whole thing up with a kiss.

* 

Kilchowski dropped the letter in the mail the next day, and Dr. Bilde— Dr. Kimberly Bilde— got the letter at work on a Tuesday morning. It was a busy day, though, so she put the mail into her purse to take home. Kimberly was a busy doctor—as their hospital was the only one around, the physicians had to be ready for any kind of duty. On this day she set an old man’s broken leg, administered a series of booster shots to a toddler, and performed a minor surgery concerning a bullet wound. It was all very exciting—Kimberly loved her work—but at the same time she was always eager for quitting time to roll around. When it did she put on her coat, grabbed her purse, and made the rounds to say one last goodbye to her patients for the night. All of them replied from their sickbeds cheerfully: “Goodbye, Dr. Bilde!”

During her walk home Kimberly came across some children playing in a leaf pile on the boulevard in front of a pretty, white-shuttered house. She smiled at them, thinking
how lovely children at play always seemed; in turn they stopped their game and grinned politely as she went by—though some of the older boys snickered to themselves. But boys will be boys, Kimberly thought. A few blocks later two red squirrels ran around a tall elm tree and she stopped to watch them, too. Somehow they reminded her of her patients, and all she could do was smile—as a doctor, she knew it was the best medicine for anything. At the next corner an old man crossed the street toward her—and after they had passed Kimberly turned around to watch him amble by. She stood in the middle of the road, keeping watch for cars, for them both.

When she reached her downtown apartment she sank into the couch and took out her mail. The envelope with the name Kilchowski Kilchowski puzzled her at first, but became clear as she began his letter. The kindness of it felt immense. *Wanda and I have been married for almost 20 years*, the letter said. *Through the good times and the bad, we have always believed that whatever is needed in life God will provide us, in His own mysterious ways. My mother taught me that. Because of Wanda’s very serious problem, you were introduced into our lives, and we into yours. I am not a terribly religious man, but I do thank God that He has brought us all together. I wish that this letter could somehow show you how blessed we are to have one another! I cannot find the right words to express my gratitude. If there is anything you need that I can help give to you, please do not hesitate to call.*

Kimberly put the letter down and reflected for a moment on her career and her patients, including Wanda Kilchowski. She remembered her as an especially warm woman, full of jolliness and laughter, and was glad to think she had made such a good
person’s life even better. It was what she lived for—the world was a lovely place, but wasn’t it our duty to make it more so? She thought, too, how lucky Wanda was to have a husband who wrote letters like this, always there to care, and to be taken care of. Kimberly wished for someone like that in her own life. She took joy from looking after her patients, but patients came and went—that joy was transitory. True happiness, she thought, would be to have someone, day in and day out, to nurture, to shower her love upon.

Kimberly put some music on, mixed herself a slight drink, and untied her hair. After a moment’s contemplation she sat back down and dialed Kilchowski’s number, to thank him for the letter. Kilchowski answered and they discussed Wanda’s case at length.

“I’m so grateful you’ve called,” Kilchowski said, when conversation started to lag. “You’re such a kind woman. It’s nice to say it directly to you.”

“And you’re quite kind to say it,” Kimberly said. Then she added: “I’ve had a wonderful time this evening, too.”

“We’ll have to continue this conversation another time,” Kilchowski said.

Kimberly agreed. She really had few friends outside the hospital, and she thought it might be good to spend some time with such a nice man. Perhaps they would become friends. “Maybe you’d let me cook you dinner sometime?” she asked. “As a thank you—for your thank you?”

Kilchowski said yes, and when they hung up, Kimberly felt an indescribable shock of sudden energy. The desire to do something good had overcome her, too.
A few nights later Kilchowski arranged for Wanda’s sister to come care for his wife and went to Kimberly’s for dinner. He dressed in a good dark suit, stopped by a florist, and drove downtown to Dr. Bilde’s apartment. She answered the door wearing a nice white sweater and blue jeans; Kilchowski remarked her pretty face and worried he had overdressed. He offered her the basket of lilies he had decided on, and she thanked him and welcomed him inside. “You’ve a lovely home,” Kilchowski said, looking absently about. “This old place?” Kimberly replied, rather quickly. But then she thought how dismissive she sounded, and how rude it was not to accept a compliment. She felt her color rise…and then turned away and led him into the living room.

Her walls were covered with fantastically colored art works. Kilchowski paced about the room, looking them over. From the sofa Kimberly watched his large body move, thinking how healthy and strong he seemed. Kilchowski stopped at a bookshelf and took down a book of poetry. He read some of it aloud, and Kimberly was reminded of the rich emotion of his letter—Kilchowski seemed suddenly like one of the great romantics, reincarnated. “Rilke is my absolute favorite,” she said, beaming at Kilchowski. Kilchowski looked up from the book and their eyes met, finally, for the first time. “Oh...well...I think I’ve got Auden here,” he said. Again they both blushed a little. Kimberly asked: “Wine?”

They filled their glasses and went into the kitchen, then sat down to a lasagna Kimberly had made for the occasion. Before they ate Kimberly clasped her hands together and asked Kilchowski if he would say grace, thinking of his letter. Kilchowski
was elated. They took each other’s hands. *Bless us oh Lord,* Kilchowski intoned, *for these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy holy bounty.* *Give us today our bread, forgive us our daily trespasses, as we forgive thous who trespass against us.* *And lead us not into evil, but deliver us from temptation.* *Amen.*

After dinner they sat down to a game of Scrabble and more wine. Kimberly drew a D and went into deep alphabetic concentration first. Kilchowski watched intently as she twirled a strand of her long dark hair between her fingers, asking off-handedly if she played with her hair while performing surgeries. Smirking at him, Kimberly placed the word CLERIC. Kilchowski cast his eyes down at the board, his mind fluttering hopelessly. His mother crossed his thoughts, and he had to think: *Isn’t this a sign?* He twisted and flipped his letters toward some larger meaning, but after a few minutes could get no further than ACE.

“Nice move,” Kimberly teased. At first Kilchowski interpreted this as an attack on his intelligence—but then he looked up to see the wide, harmless grin on Kimberly’s face.

Kilchowski responded with a joke of his own. “Hey, when your full name is twenty-six letters, you take all the short words you can get,” he said.

This brought up the very interesting question of Kilchowski’s unusual name, and before making her next move Kimberly cautiously probed the topic. Kilchowski ran a hand through his graying hair—usually he avoided this line of questioning, monotonous as it had become after so many years. But Kimberly was so kind, and they were having such a nice night, how could refuse to discuss it? “It makes phone books less confusing,”
he began with a wink. He spoke in the easy manner politicians use to repeat old speeches.

It was his father's doing, he said seriously; he was actually Kilchowski Eugene Kilchowski V. It was a long-standing tradition, a mark of pride and distinction in his family ever since they had come to America from Poland. It was the double name of his great-grandfather, who had helped settle Abilene, Kansas and built a general store there; it was both fore- and surname of his grandfather, Kilchowski III, who had served during the First World War as a mess officer in Italy. All the family considered them great heroes and thought Kilchowski very blessed to share their name. For him, though, the name had only been something for other children to make fun of and pretty young girls to crushingly mispronounce. When he was young he tried sometimes to go by just Kill, or Killer, but neither fit him, and of course his mother would not hear of such horrible nicknames. She called him Kil'ski.

This was where Kilchowski usually finished the address on his naming, although sometimes he might save the phone book line for the end, or tell about the time he had met a Mr. Kilgore Levy Kilgore, of Pinebrook, NY. But this time, when he looked up, his eyes met with perhaps the most sympathetic face he had ever seen. Kimberly's eyes peered right back into his, searching them. Her forehead was furrowed, underlined by curious eyebrows, and her mouth was at once a wistful smile and a pained, compassionate grimace. It seemed to Kilchowski the face of an angel. Never before had he seen anything so wonderful, and so he continued on. His father, Kilchowski IV, had ridden the rails out of Kansas during the Depression, looking for steady work. He had
found it in California, settled there, and married Kilchowski’s mother. When Kilchowski
was seven his father had gotten back on a train and left his wife and four children behind.

“It was a good name, once,” Kilchowski said, “but times have changed. You
can’t name a child something like that anymore. Kids are so ruthless with one another.
And my father...he was an alcoholic bum, a terrible man, leaving my poor mother all
alone like that. If I had my way, I would not have his name.” A tear came into his eye
and he quickly blinked it away. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Of course, no
one bothered to ask me about it. My mother always let him do as he pleased. She never
once said a bad thing about him, ever, and forbade us to, too. That man never deserved
my mother—or her love.”

Kimberly kept her beatific smile focused on Kilchowski. It was a doctor’s
practiced look, yes, but sincere nevertheless. She moved around the table to sit next to
him, and as she stood, she was for a moment bathed in white light by the chandelier.
Kilchowski thought how troubled his heart had been the night he wrote her that letter, and
in that light it occurred to him that Kimberly might actually be an angel, the answer to his
prayer, sent to care for him.

“It’s okay,” Kimberly said to his tears. “It’s only a name. I don’t think it means
anything.” She took his hands in hers. “From what I can see I think you’re a very good
man, Kilchowski Kilchowski.”

Kilchowski had not known it before, but he now saw he had been longing to hear
these exact words—he had meant his letter to bring goodness into his life, and now it had.
He wanted to say something in reply—but what could he say that would equal the gift she
had just given him? She had called him a good man. He was struck dumb by these thoughts, unable to move, when Kimberly’s face crumpled and frowned downward to their entwined fingers.

“Your hands are so warm!” she said. “Are you feeling okay?”

Kilchowski was not feeling okay—he felt numb, like his soul was slipping from his body. He could not help it: Kimberly’s caring hands felt like a release from all the small pains of living; they felt, Kilchowski thought, like grace itself. It was a difficult thing to deal with. His breathing seemed to have gone shallow, and his pulse was erratic. He felt lucky to have a doctor there.

“I think...I have a fever,” Kilchowski said softly. At this Kimberly took her hand and placed it on his forehead. Kilchowski looked into her eyes for her verdict, and Kimberly returned his stare. For a moment they sat like that, just looking at one another. And then Kimberly shook herself and said, “Let me go get my thermometer...”—but Kilchowski did not feel he could risk letting her move away from his ailing body. With no other recourse, he pressed his lips to hers. Kimberly pressed back, both intently and carefully, as she might press a needle. They shared a long, quivering kiss like that, invisible tongues of flame licking at Kilchowski’s forehead.

3.

With the blessing of Kimberly in his life, Kilchowski felt like himself for the first time in quite a long time. He went to visit her at her apartment whenever he could get away. They thought about going out to dinner, but neither of them liked the risks it involved.
So they stayed in, played games or watched a movie, then adjourned to the bedroom. Afterward Kilchowski would read more verse to her and say things like “I’m old enough to be your father”; Kimberly would reply, “But I’m old enough to be a mother, too,” and they would both laugh at their favorite joke: the absurd beauty of life. Kilchowski would eventually tear himself away and sneak home into bed with his wife. In the mornings he resumed the old role of loving husband, cooking miniature meals while Wanda came around from gastrointestinal bypass surgery, which shrunk her stomach in an effort to shrink the rest of her; a surgery performed by Dr. Bilde.

It was quickly obvious that the operation had been a success. Within a few weeks Wanda’s shirts began to loosen and billow around her, and even her pants started to slip easily down over her hips. Her energy returned and she, too, got to feeling like her old self. She was happy, and Kilchowski was glad—after all, it had really been his idea. They had seen an hour-long news program on the surgery one night on television. Kilchowski had not said a word either for or against the procedure, but he knew, as did Wanda, the power of a properly timed grunt of assent and a stilled remote control. When a week later Wanda came home with a brochure from the doctor, her husband said only, “Okay, dear—if it’s really what you want.” Kilchowski’s passive encouragement put him in position to take much of the credit and none of the blame. Knowing this, Wanda wasn’t at all surprised when, wondering how to properly thank the doctor, Kilchowski responded, “Dear, I’ve already sent a letter.”

Wanda, being a smart woman herself, saw right through her husband’s sly maneuvers in the case of this surgery, but did as he wanted anyway. She was, after all,
his wife—she knew him well, and was used to such things from him. She had long ago forgiven him of these tendencies. Despite his sometimes shady methods and suspicious motivations, she did not doubt for a second that he truly, deeply loved her. How could he not, when they had been through so much together? When she had been so good to him for so many years, and both of them knew it?

They met in 1971. Wanda was at a university bar, drinking with university friends, celebrating the engagement of her friend Charlene. The mood was certainly festive—the young man whom Charlene was marrying, John, had just graduated from medical school with high marks, and the couple’s future seemed undeniably bright. All the girls cheered and toasted this—all except Wanda, who only smiled when she felt Charlene’s bright eyes on her, and otherwise sipped her champagne silently. Not that she did not wish her friend the best, or had anything against the institution of marriage. It was only that she was sad for herself. For nearly a year she had been carrying on a secret affair with John, had secretly been in love with John, and was only now coming to terms with the terrible thing she had done to her friend, and the terrible thing John had done to them both.

Kilchowski was at the same bar, drinking with his own friends. He too was sad, but he made no attempt to hide it from his friends, as Wanda did. While they laughed and drank he sat at the bar and openly sank into his beer, trying to clear his mind of a beautiful, impetuous girl named Eve, his first love. She had just jilted him in favor of a move to the city, saying he couldn’t give her all she needed out of life—saying he was simply “too conventional” for her tastes. This statement shocked young Kilchowski. He
thought the dedicated student and quiet, thoughtful boy he had been before her was much more “conventional” than the social player and hard drinker he had become for her. He had therefore responded to her goodbye with much confusion: “I don’t think I will ever be able to love again,” he had said, his heart fragmenting inside his chest. And there at the bar he remembered Eve’s strange reaction: “Predictable—this is what I’m talking about. Come on, Kilchowski! Life’s a lot more complex than that!”

And as it often is with two parties at a bar, one of the boys happened to know one of the girls, introductions were made, and eventually heartbroken Kilchowski was obliged to turn from the bar and shake hands with his future wife, the quietly sulking Wanda.

“Don’t ever fall in love,” Kilchowski said to her, slurring the words a little.

“Tell me about it,” Wanda said. “You’re preachin’ to the choir.”

That night they sat at the bar together, and under the emotional security of drink, they discussed their problems in love. Thinking he would forget most of it the next day anyway, Wanda shared her secret with him, and unloaded on Kilchowski the terrible guilt that it caused her. Kilchowski told her how Eve’s sudden departure had devastated him and left his large heart empty. “I feel incomplete,” he said. “And I don’t know if anything will ever make me feel whole, the way she did, again.”

“I feel like that too,” Wanda said, “but even worse. I loved him, but I feel so guilty about doing that to Charlene. I feel like the lousiest person that ever lived. What a friend I am! What was I thinking?”
Kilchowski stared deep into his glass of beer. “You weren’t thinking,” he said. “Who thinks in love? When you’re in love you’re not yourself. You’re like two people—one who thinks, and one who loves. The thinker says you’re doing something wrong, but the lover says, ‘What can be wrong about love?’ And probably both are right, somehow.”

So began the ballad of Kilchowski and Wanda. The next day Kilchowski awoke, groggy and hung over, without much memory of the night before. But he found a slip of paper in his pocket with Wanda’s phone number on it. After a friend clarified for him the events of the evening, Kilchowski called her up and they began seeing one another regularly. Their relationship evolved slowly, mostly because Kilchowski’s heart was shattered and he was wary for it to happen again. But he liked Wanda—she was kind, and funny, and pretty enough. Over time she helped him put the pieces back together. Wanda, for her part, was smitten from the very first night, and that very first conversation at the bar. The words Kilchowski had said to her (words Kilchowski did not remember in the morning) allowed her to forgive herself for her dalliance with John. Kilchowski put her at ease. Plus, somehow, she found his double name adorable.

After a little more than a year together they were engaged to be married. Kilchowski came to adore Wanda’s bright outlook and her buoyant personality, desiring to see life in the same way. She was his saving grace, and he wanted nothing to do with other women ever again. After graduation he took a good starting job at the insurance firm downtown and felt ready to begin a quiet, steady lifestyle with his wife at his side. He quit drinking, and he and Wanda began attending Sacred Heart every Sunday.
Kilchowski looked forward to their marriage as a time when he would be a respected, solid citizen. He went to visit his mother often.

Then, walking home from work one fine spring day, he saw her again: Eve, his city girl, on the sidewalk ahead of him. He needed only to see the long auburn hair draping her shoulders to know it was her. All the old feelings—feelings he had thought vanished—returned, and his heart beat wildly as it tried to suppress them. In the time she had been gone he had tried not to think of her at all, and when he could not help himself he thought of her with loathing. Now it all muddled inside him. She turned in to a bar and he followed her. He got it in mind to tell her that he was to be married, that he was happy without her. But when he finally approached her at the bar, she smiled warmly at him, and all the dark feelings were gone, replaced only by the memories of the bliss that came with her devilish smile. She hugged him, she bought him a drink; she said she was in town visiting for a few days, staying at a hotel nearby, that city life was grand but that she missed her old college town sometimes. After a few more drinks she admitted she sometimes missed him, too. Soon enough they were in her room, in each other’s arms, in an embrace the likes of which Kilchowski realized he had never shared with Wanda. With Wanda it was love, yes, but it was still something other. Kilchowski and Eve made love and waxed wistful for this lost passion of theirs. They kissed and hugged and cried over the mercilessness of time. And when Kilchowski finally left Eve’s side and went back down on the street, he realized that the hole she had left in his heart long ago only now felt filled again.
That was the last time he ever saw her. In June of that year he and Wanda were married. The wedding was beautiful; everyone had a splendid time. Kilchowski looked handsome, and his bride glowed with happiness and love. It was true that a week before the wedding Eve had phoned Wanda in the middle of the night, drunk, telling her about her last visit with Kilchowski and how she, Eve, was the only woman he would ever truly love. But it did not matter to Wanda. She recalled Kilchowski’s words from the first night they had met, and she forgave him instantly. She saw clearly that within one person were many different people. She knew that Kilchowski loved her in his way, which was nothing at all small; she knew that it was she that he was marrying, and that he would do his best to honor his vows to her, and they would strive to make one another happy. What more could she ask for? So years later, when Wanda had put on weight and they watched that television program on the bypass surgery, she assented to her husband’s silent request. If it was an attack on her, it was an attack by the same part of him that had slept with Eve during their engagement, and it was a part him she could easily forgive. It was, after all, the same part of herself she had forgiven for her romance with the fiancé of her old, dear friend Charlene.

Kilchowski continued to see Kimberly at her downtown apartment, and after a few weeks he even relented to dinner out with her—somewhere discreet. They met at a candlelit restaurant in a town fifty miles to the south. How easy to smile when they saw each other that night! The gravity of the event was not lost on either of them; inside, they were both
nervous teenagers on a first date. Kilchowski paired his best black blazer with a turtleneck sweater for the occasion, thinking it made him appear younger and more sophisticated. Kimberly wore a long, flowing red dress, and so they drank red wine. Kimberly said it was the most delicious wine she had ever drunk, though she had drunk the same wine many times before, with many other men. Of course, she did not think of them. Kilchowski bowed his head and said a blessing over the meal.

After eating they took a stroll around the streets of the unfamiliar town. They went along arm in arm, stopping to embrace in front of store windows, kissing under the cover of trees in a silent park. They went to a local hotel and made love in an ordinary double bed that their bodies transformed into something entirely new, wonderful, and other. When they were done Kimberly gathered a sheet around herself and went to the window, to the exotic view of the unknown terrain outside. The moon shown on Kimberly’s body through the window, framing her curves, and Kilchowski stared at the vision, humming a few happy bars to himself. Moved by the scene, he was then moved to clasp his hands and close his eyes. Our Father, he prayed, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thank you, Lord, for your blessings, for Kimberly, this beautiful angel, who loves me for what I am and might be. Thank you, too, for Wanda, who loves me for what I am and was. You have blessed me with an abundance of love that lightens my heavy burden, and I only hope it is your will for it to continue. Keep us all in your sight and bless us, for you are the most high. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory...
The world was wonderful that night, to Kimberly and Kilchowski both; therefore over the coming weeks they repeated its events many times. They met at the same restaurant, drank the same red wine (though eventually Kimberly began limiting herself to one glass, and often didn’t finish it), and held conversations momentous and meaningful to them both. On one occasion Kilchowski spoke further of his name, his father, and the foolish pains it caused him. “It makes it seem, sometimes—it’s ridiculous, I know—it makes it seem like the weight of the world rests entirely on my shoulders,” he said. “Like my father, by giving me his name, is always tormenting me.” Kimberly pressed his hand and declared she would henceforth call him by his middle name, Eugene. She did it to mark her devotion to his deepest, most precious feelings. Feeling some shame at their affair, she had decided the best way to deal with this was by loving him.

After their dinners they went to that same hotel, often making love in the very same bed. Kilchowski fell into a fine balance. He enjoyed his new name; he enjoyed both Kimberly’s tender care and her exquisite beauty. He watched over his Wanda as she slimmed into a brand-new self, feeling proud of both her and himself for it. Love surrounded him on all sides, love both given and received. Kilchowski recognized it all as a manifestation of divine grace, descended upon him. He did not understand why he deserved it—but then, who can understand the ways of God?

These thoughts occurred to Kilchowski one morning at home as he sat at the desk where he had written Dr. Bilde that first letter. Thinking along such heavenly lines inevitably brought his mind around to his mother, and Kilchowski remembered that it had
been his last conversation with that faithful woman which had prompted him to write his epistle to Kimberly. It was she, and her urgings about pious, Christ-like living, that were to thank, ultimately, for his newfound happiness. Yes, they are my angels, he thought. But then I have always had an angel walking with me—my own dear mother!

Kilchowski’s mother had turned to God in the time after his father had left. For the first week, despairing, she had not left her bed, and Kilchowski had had to care for his brother and sisters. But when she did finally get up, she reappeared clothed in her best cotton dress and a great gaudy Easter bonnet Kilchowski had never seen before. That very moment she gathered her children and took them off to their first mass. Kilchowski was unsure what was happening—at the front of the church a priest bellowed words he did not understand; the air smelled of something cooking, but Kilchowski saw only bread. His stomach grumbled, but his mother refused to let him go and have some, anyhow. It was mysterious and confusing. When she sat back down, though, Kilchowski spied the slight suggestion of a smile, thinly affixed to her tight face. The smile was almost not there at all, and yet it clearly was—and a smile had not been accomplished for some time. And so Kilchowski continued thinking: How mysterious, how confusing!

In coming years Alta Kilchowski sent her children to catechism classes. Kilchowski was taught how the bread became the body of Christ, and he trusted and believed, looking forward to the time he could eat it, to see if it would affect him as it had affected his mother. But when First Communion came he was disappointed: he chewed, he prayed, he believed…but felt nothing. Sitting back down with his family, his mother
leaned over at him and smiled. Not knowing what else to do, Kilchowski grinned back at her.

But now, thinking of his mother and Kimberly and Wanda, Kilchowski felt less confused than he ever had. God’s love seemed so clear! He wanted to share the revelation with his mother. That very minute, Kilchowski got into his car and drove out to the nursing home on the edge of town, where Alta Kilchowski lived. His mind worked into a state of frenzied devotion, and unexpected tears began to roll down his cheeks. *Oh, she’s always been my angel!* he thought. He remembered how good she had been, so strong after father had left. She was the picture of perfect maternal love, and it was from that original wellspring that Wanda and Kimberly both came to him.

By the time Kilchowski reached the home he had calmed himself outwardly, though inside his chest his adoration for his mother still winged about like a butterfly. He checked in at the desk, asking again whether Mrs. Kilchowski lived on the second or third floor? He chastised himself for not remembering; it had been too long since he had last visited. But he knew she understood and forgave him. She loved him. He had come to honor that love, honor her, just as commanded, and this act alone would give her great joy. His heart bursting, he opened the door to her apartment—

—and then it burst completely, and spilled out, when he saw her sprawled on the floor, face-first, in front of her chair.
Kilchowski walked through the streets that night, past the churches and restaurants and taverns, devastated. He could not believe she had died; he knew he could not replace her. Who could love him like her? He realized he had not thought to pray until the ambulance had already taken her lifeless body away. What kind of son was he? He made his way back to his home and woke Wanda. He cried in her arms, with Wanda lovingly smoothing his hair, until sleep mercifully took him.

The funeral was set for Saturday, to allow enough time for the family to gather. Kilchowski spent all day Wednesday at home with Wanda, crying, watching television, and thinking. He pondered life, and death, and what possibly came after, wondering where his mother might be now. The happiness that he had known so strongly only the day before was shattered, replaced by a dark, unsure feeling in the pit of his stomach. The joy that he had come to see as his mother’s doing left with her, and suddenly he was lost without it, without her. He shuddered at the emptiness of it.

Kilchowski had been caring for his wife since her surgery, but now it was Wanda’s turn to care for him. That day she cooked their meals and managed the remote control; she prayed for him and his mother as they sat silently together, watching the world go by on the television. When he broke into tears she held him and cooed into his ear. Kilchowski hugged her tightly, and was thankful for his wife’s love, but his mind was far away and elsewhere, lost and inconsolable, working between his mother, Wanda, and Kimberly. Mother was gone. Had it been a punishment for his affair with Kimberly, which had been so beautiful only the day before, but was now black and murky, like
everything else? Was God angry with him for all (the surgery, the affair, Eve) he had inflicted upon his wife? Was he an evil man, doomed to hell for all of it? That night he and Wanda went early to bed. He was restless, and again after a while began to cry. Wanda curled up next to him and held him, emphatically kissing his cheeks. Though his mind was still somewhere else, her compassion reached Kilchowski; her kisses moved to his lips, and eventually their bodies came together as well. After they had made love Kilchowski ran his hands over her constantly thinning flesh. It seemed to him somehow symbolic: lost, gone, substance turned to nothing.

Kilchowski and Kimberly had plans the next night, for their usual meeting in their restaurant in their southern town, and distraught as Kilchowski was, he could not summon any power to break off the flow of events. That afternoon he put on another of his suits, told Wanda he was going out to speak with the funeral director—and to do some “soul-searching”; he was not sure when he would be back—and drove down to meet Kimberly. When he entered the restaurant he saw her, sitting at their table, beaming up at him. Without thinking, Kilchowski smiled back—he knew it was a good cover for confusion.

He went to her, kissed her lightly, and sat down. Kilchowski said nothing of his mother. The waiter, who had come to know them very well, brought and poured their wine, and took their order. Kimberly requested the veal parmesan and a side order of onion rings; Kilchowski ordered a salad. When he did this Kimberly shot him a puzzled look. Kilchowski replied with a gallant smile, saying, “Well, my dear, we can’t all eat as much as you, can we?”
Kimberly was shocked, and hurt, but she gathered herself and let the remark slide. She laughed to herself and began telling Kilchowski about a patient who had decided that day to turn a bedpan into a fountain. Kilchowski laughed at the story, but did not speak—he kept his mouth busy with the wine, swallowing one glass quickly after the other. The waiter brought out their plates and Kilchowski launched quickly into his salad. Kimberly was a little taken aback. “Won’t you say grace, Eugene?” she asked.

“Gwace,” Kilchowski said. His mouth was full, and he snorted with laughter. “Gwace to Gwod.”

By the time they were finished with dinner, Kilchowski had put down nearly two bottles of wine by himself, though Kimberly had hardly touched her first glass. She would have liked to have gone on a walk through the town, but Kilchowski was in no condition to walk, so she had the waiter call them a taxi, and they took it to their hotel. While Kimberly was in the bathroom, slipping into something more comfortable, Kilchowski snuck out to get another bottle of wine from the bar. He started in on it in the elevator and entered the room with a long pull. Kimberly, in red stockings and garters, stood with her back to him. For a second, with such a beautiful vision in front of him, Kilchowski wanted to run to her, tell her everything, and hide himself in her arms. But then Kimberly turned toward him and flung a pillow at his head. The wine bottle thudded on the floor and spilled its contents on the carpet. Kimberly was crying.

“Eugene! Why are you drinking so much tonight?” she asked. “Is something wrong? Did I do something?”
Kilchowski stared at her, but said nothing. His hazy eyes were unable to focus and he saw two of her before him. He blinked for a moment and suddenly the left-hand vision seemed to be his old temptress Eve, back to haunt him further. Kilchowski quickly cast his eyes down to the blotch of wine on the floor, but soon his eyes again tricked him, and he saw his mother sitting in the dark of her room, alone and dying. Then he saw Wanda, at home by herself, bathed in the light of the television, eating a dinner smaller than a baby’s.

“Say something Eugene!” Kimberly screamed hysterically.

He looked back up at her, suddenly sober. “My name is Kilchowski,” he said sadly before walking out the door.

Wanda was scheduled for a check-up that Friday. She asked Kilchowski to come along, thinking it might be a good distraction for him, and so he was brought face to face with the woman he had stormed out on the night before. He was expecting—almost welcomed—a blowout, but Kimberly showed no reaction at all when she saw him. Wanda undressed some and was measured and weighed. Thirty-one pounds and nine inches! The results made everyone genuinely happy. Kimberly smiled at Wanda, thinking Wanda’s shape looked lovely. Wanda smiled at Dr. Bilde, thinking the exact same thought. Kilchowski forced himself to share in this good moment and smiled at them both. He thought that there would never be a better time to let the truth out. And what might happen? Maybe, with honesty, they could just all love one another. The idea
of such foolish, real love made him think again of his mother, and he sent a smile to her, too, out the window and toward the sky.

At the funeral Kilchowski sat next to his wife and family and listened to the priest talk about his mother. Alta was a devoted woman, he said. She was devoted to her Lord—she came to mass every single morning up until the day she died—and she was devoted to her children, raising the four of them into fine adults all by herself. She loved Jesus, family, and life. She was a woman who allowed Christ’s love into her heart so fully that it came through her entire being, in everything she did. She loved without judgment, and with compassion. She followed Jesus’ most important teaching: To love one another as he has loved us.

Kilchowski kept a tissue to his face, soaking up tears the entire time. It was so sad that someone so good had to leave this world! He wondered at how terrible his sins must be, to blot out the bright light of his mother’s goodness. He felt lost and wretched and longed for forgiveness, or transcendence, or something. He threw himself on his wife’s shoulder and bawled. “What a terrible son I was!” he said to her. I should have been to see her more! I loved her so much. What was I thinking?”

And Wanda, remembering that night long ago, said to Kilchowski, “Who thinks in love? You were like two people—one who loves, and one who thinks.” She kissed her husband’s cheek and hugged him close to her.

Kilchowski stared vacantly at a portrait of his mother as a young woman that hung near her casket. The image reminded him of a fine spring day when he was a child. His mother was pinning sheets on the clothesline in the back of their home. Kilchowski
and his siblings ran under them as they flowed in the wind, trying to time their runs so that they wouldn’t touch the sheets as the wind moved them. The children got in the way of their mother’s work, but she smiled sweetly at their game anyway. Kilchowski thought of his wife’s words. He was like two people—but his mother had been different. She was a person who did not think at all, really; she only loved, blind to everything else. He knew then that she surely forgave him for what he had done, and still loved him. Just as God must. Just as Alta had forgiven her own Kilchowski Eugene Kilchowski, when he had run off so many years ago.

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After his family had left and Wanda had returned to work, Kilchowski went over to Kimberly’s apartment, bringing with him another basket of lilies. He wore a good suit and rehearsed his lines in the car. Kimberly answered the door and led him wordlessly into the kitchen, where she said she had just sat down to lunch. The table was spread with food: grapes, peaches, potatoes, a roast turkey, mixed vegetables, and a quart of rocky road ice cream. Her plate was piled high and she had already started. She motioned for Kilchowski to sit down. He did so.

“Kimberly...” he began.

She held up a fork full of mashed potatoes to halt him. “I’m leaving you, Eugene,” she said. She kept her eyes on her plate. “I’ve taken another position. It’s one I’ve been waiting for my whole life. I’m leaving.”

“Leaving?” Kilchowski repeated. The word stung a bit. He felt he had heard this once before.
“I’m sorry for your mother, Eugene,” she said. “I read it in the paper the other day. Everyone says she was a lovely woman.”

“Thank you,” Kilchowski said, then, “I’m sorry about last time. You deserve better than that.” He stood and turned to leave. “I’ll miss you, Kimberly,” he said.

Again the mashed potatoes waved him off. Kimberly smiled politely. “Won’t you eat something, Kilchowski? There’s plenty. You look pale. You need to take better care of yourself.”

“I’ll miss you, Dr. Bilde,” Kilchowski said.

*

Kilchowski left Kimberly’s and went to his mother’s room at the nursing home to gather her things. He boxed up her clothes and effects, then went to her desk to go through her papers. In a lower drawer he found some pictures from his youth, of him and his siblings playing in yards, closets, bathtubs. Underneath these was a collection of their birth certificates. The thought of his family made Kilchowski serenely melancholy. He struggled to keep on top of his emotions.

(Some months later, in a hospital somewhere in Poland, Kilchowski Eugene Bilde was born. The baby came into the light of day very calmly, seeming almost to smile. The sweet smell of cabbage wafted up to Kimberly Bilde from the cafeteria one floor below, and the nurses cleaned the baby and plied him heavy with blankets, as his mother ordered. They handed the newborn to her. She held him close and thought how easily the Polish tongue would click out his name. She whispered to him welcome home, welcome home...
Kilchowski spread the pictures and things out in front of him on the desk, and closed his eyes. *Dear God,* he prayed, *you who rule the sea and the sky and everything,* I am confused. *I don't know who you want me to be.* *I don't know who I am.* I am lost and wandering and feel alone. *Please help me.* He opened his eyes again and they fell on his birth certificate, Kilchowski Eugene Kilchowski...but no, the year was wrong. It was not his birth certificate, but his father's. At first he thought to toss it away, but, feeling tired of losing things, he pressed his hand against the little one imprinted on the paper. It occurred to him then that he had abandoned his mother, just as his father had. He shut his eyes again and tried to picture God—but all that appeared to him was her.

Mother was again pinning the laundry, smiling at her children, smiling to herself. Little Kilchowski was playing in the sheets and thinking he had never seen a vision so beautiful, when—lo!—there came father, home in the late afternoon with three big trout hanging from a line. The elder Kilchowski gathered his namesake up onto his shoulders and they went inside together, where son watched father's strong hands clean the fish, listening intently to the tale of the catch. Mother came in to cook, but father wouldn't let her—he took her in his arms and danced her, grinning a wide, manly grin, whispering into her ear unknown words. Mother blushed and asked her son to go set the table and call in his siblings. He did so, and they sat and waited; finally in came their parents, each flushed and holding a platter. Kilchowski said grace. Alta smiled broadly, truly. And they ate: fish and bread, plenty for all.