

[Send To Printer](#) | [Close Window](#)

## Etudes Tutorials

### Learn to Work in an Online Classroom at WLAC:

If you have never worked inside an online classroom at WLAC, please learn how to (a) equip your computer with the correct browser and (b) work inside our online classroom.

1. Go to [www.wlac.edu](http://www.wlac.edu).
2. Click on the Online/Hybrid Classes link in the upper right corner.
3. In the top menu, click on Course Login Info.
4. Scroll down the screen to the tutorials.
5. View/read the tutorials, as appropriate.

## Instructor & Class Information

**Course:** English 127, Section 8056

**Semester:** Fall 2014, September 2-December 21, 2014

**Instructor Name:** Nuala Lincke-Ivic, Associate Professor

**Instructor E-Mail:** [lincken@wla.edu](mailto:lincken@wla.edu)

**Class Hours & Location:** Online

**Office Location, Hours & Telephone:** My office is in the General Classroom Building, in 210-D. My office hours are from 12:45 - 1:45 PM on Mondays and Wednesdays. My telephone number is (310) 287-4544. The fastest way to reach me is by using Private Messages, and I do ask that you contact me only in Private Messages, not by my college email, as we need to keep all class business inside the online classroom.

**Privacy Issue:**

Please NEVER use a public forum like Questions or a discussion to write about private business that just involves the two of us; please use Private Messages. We use Questions to ask general questions about assignments; we use the discussions for class discussions about paper topics.

## Course Description

ENGLISH 127 – CREATIVE WRITING - 3 UNITS / UC:CSU

PREREQUISITE: English 101 or equivalent.

DESCRIPTION: "This course introduces the student to the basic elements of writing fiction, poetry and drama through reading and writing assignments." (*Schedule of Classes*).

## Course Learning Outcome

"At the end of the course, the successful student will be able to write a scene in a play, screenplay, or work of fiction, that dramatizes character conflict and advances plot."

## Student Learning Objectives

After successfully completing this course, you will be able to...

1. Understand the difference between fiction and non-fiction;
2. Analyze different literary forms, especially from a structural perspective;
3. Utilize appropriate literary terms and vocabulary in discussing/writing about literature;
4. Scrutinize theme, character, motivation, conflict, irony, plot, climax, complications and symbolism in literary works;
5. Compose original literary works.

## Institutional Course Outcomes

English 127 will also help students meet these Institutional Student Learning Outcomes:

A. "Critical Thinking: Analyze problems by differentiating fact from opinions, using evidence, and using sound reasoning to specify multiple solutions and their consequences." *In essays and class discussions, analyze arguments.*

B. "Communication: Effectively communicate thought in a well-organized manner to persuade, inform, and convey ideas in academic, work, family and community settings." *In writings and class discussions, share ideas about what makes an argument effective.*

G. "Cultural Diversity: respectfully engage with other cultures in an effort to understand them." *In writings and class discussion, analyze literature from a multi-cultural perspective.*

H. "Ethics: practice and demonstrate standards of personal and professional integrity, honesty and fairness; apply ethical principles in submission of all college work." *Submit writings in which words other than your own are documented in MLA format.*

I. "Aesthetics: Use multiple modes of inquiry and approaches to experience and to engage with the art and nature; develop and express personal creative visions throughout all aspects of one's life." *In writings and discussions, demonstrate recognition of literature as art-especially works of non-fiction.*

## Assignments & Grading

1. Three flash fiction pieces: short stories with a beginning, middle and end that do not exceed 300 words - 10 Points Each/30 Points Total

2. One longer short story not to exceed five (5) pages - 10 Points

3. The beginning of a novel, not to exceed five (5) pages, inspired by (and including, if you wish) your short story - 15 Points

4. Four discussions of all literary works listed in Class Texts - 5 Points Each, 20 Points Total

5. Five Critiques in Discussion Forum: Feedback from your peers regarding the literary works you produce (1-3, listed above), longer shorter story, and beginning of novel - 5 Points Each - 25 Points Total

**Total Points:** 100

## Grading Scale

A = 100 - 90 points

B = 89 - 80 points

C = 79 - 70 points

D = 69 - 60 points

F = 59 - 0 points

NOTE: There are no plus (+) or minus (-) grades in the LACCD system. For this reason, I will offer three (3) extra credit points at the end of the semester so that students may change grades that would be a B+, C+ and D+ into an A, B, and C. However... fulfillment of extra credit assignments does not guarantee that extra credit will be awarded; all extra credit assignments must be of superior quality.

## Weekly Lesson Plans

Week 1	Activities	Due
<p>Sept. 1: Labor Day</p> <p>Sept. 2-5</p>	<p>Read through these Weekly Lesson Plans; make a reading timeline for yourself--what you need to have read by what date.</p> <p>Prepare for Discussion 1 next week. Start reading <i>immediately!</i></p>	
Week 2	Activities	Due
<p>Sept. 11: Veteran's Day</p> <p>Sept. 8-10 &amp; 12</p>	<p>Participate in Discussion 1:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nathan Englander</li> <li>Salman Rushdie</li> </ol>	
Week 3	Activities	Due
<p>Sept. 15-19</p>	<p>Participate in Discussion 1:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nathan Englander</li> <li>Salman Rushdie</li> </ol>	
Week 4	Activities	Due
<p>Sept. 22-26</p>	<p>Participate in Discussion 1:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nathan Englander</li> <li>Salman Rushdie</li> </ol>	<p>Flash Fiction 1 Due on Sunday at 11:59 PM</p>
Week 5	Activities	Due
<p>Sept. 29- Oct. 3</p>	<p>Participate in Discussion 2:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>James Baldwin</li> <li>Junot Diaz</li> </ol> <p>Critique 1: Flash Fiction 1</p>	
Week 6	Activities	Due

Oct. 6-10	Participate in Discussion 2: 1. James Baldwin 2. Junot Diaz  Critique 1: Flash Fiction 1	Flash Fiction 2 Due on Sunday at 11:59 PM
<b>Week 7</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Oct.13-17	Participate in Discussion 2: 1. James Baldwin 2. Junot Diaz  Critique 2: Flash Fiction 2	
<b>Week 8</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Oct. 20-24	Participate in Discussion 3: 1. Alice Munro 2. Annie Proulx  Critique 2: Flash Fiction 2	Flash Fiction 3 Due on Sunday at 11:59 PM
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Oct. 27-31	Participate in Discussion 3: 1. Alice Munro 2. Annie Proulx  Critique 3: Flash Fiction 3	
<b>Week 10</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Nov. 3-7	Participate in Discussion 3: 1. Alice Munro 2. Annie Proulx  Critique 3: Flash Fiction 3	

		<b>Due</b>
<b>Week 11</b>	<b>Activities</b>	
Nov. 10-14	Participate in Discussion 4: 1. <b>Allen Ginsberg</b> 2. <b>Jack Kerouac</b>	Short Story due on Sunday at 11:59 PM
<b>Week 12</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Nov. 17-21	Participate in Discussion 4: 1. <b>Allen Ginsberg</b> 2. <b>Jack Kerouac</b>  Critique 4: Short Story	
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
<b>Nov. 27-30: Thanksgiving</b>  Nov. 24-26	Participate in Discussion 4: 1. <b>Allen Ginsberg</b> 2. <b>Jack Kerouac</b>  Critique 4: Short Story	
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Dec. 1-5	Participate in Discussion 4: 1. <b>Allen Ginsberg</b> 2. <b>Jack Kerouac</b>  Critique 4: Short Story	
<b>Week 15</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Due</b>
Dec. 8-12	Use the week to work on the beginning of your novel.	Novel beginning due on Sunday at 11:59 PM
<b>Week 16:</b>	<b>Finals Week</b>	<b>Due</b>

Dec. 15-21	Critique 5: Novel beginning	
------------	-----------------------------	--

**Rubric for Literary Works**

<b>RUBRIC FOR LITERARY WORKS</b>			
<b>Criterion</b>	<b>1. Does not demonstrates SLO adequately</b>	<b>2. Demonstrates SLO adequately</b>	<b>3. Exceeds adequate demonstration of SLO</b>
<b>Academic Integrity*</b>	1. Work is plagiarized in whole or in part.	1. Work is not plagiarized in whole or in part.	1. Work is not plagiarized in whole or in part, and presents a fresh approach to a standard situation or issue.
<b>Content</b>	1. Plot seems mundane and/or predictable, and may be flawed: contain unnecessary details and/or unresolved situations that do not logically advance character action leading to change or contribute to the work's overall style. 2. Characters do not seem well developed and may not be interesting to read about. 3. Themes and sub-themes seem prosaic and may not be sufficiently clear. 4. Setting is not detailed sufficiently	1. Plot logically advances character action leading to change, but does not seem particularly imaginative, a fresh approach to a standard situation or issue that contributes to the work's overall style. 2. Characters are sufficiently developed, but may not be particularly interesting to read about. 3. Themes and sub-themes are sufficiently clear, and while not prosaic, may not seem particularly insightful or enlightening.	1. Plot logically advances character action leading to change, and seems particularly imaginative, a fresh approach to a standard situation or issue that contributes to the work's overall style. 2. Characters are extremely well developed and absorb reader's interest. 3. Themes and sub-themes are clear and seem insightful, even enlightening. 4. Setting is detailed not only sufficiently and logically, but in a way that enhances

	and/or logically, so it provides an inadequate frame for characters and plot.	4. Setting is detailed sufficiently and logically, so it provides an adequate frame for characters and plot.	the other elements of story, and contributes to the work's overall style.
<b>Voice (unique writing style of author)</b>	1. Voice seems hard to discern, perhaps obscured by too many distracting errors and/or problematic word choice and usage, which negatively affects overall tone of work as well as different elements of story: character, plot, theme, setting.	1. Voice is clear, but could be improved by different word choice and usage to enhance overall tone of work, which may seem somewhat stiff and/or fragmented in terms of narrative and different elements of story: character, plot, theme, setting.	1. Voice is clear and engaging because word choice and usage is appropriate, innovative and artful, serving to enhance the overall tone of the work, as well as elements of story: character, plot, theme, setting.
<b>Organization</b>	1. The work does not read well overall, seems disjointed, inexpertly crafted in terms of transitions, paragraph length, and/or choices made in beginning, middle, end structure.	1. The work reads well overall, seems adequately crafted in terms of transitions, paragraph length, and choices made in beginning, middle, end structure.	1. The work reads extremely well overall, seems solidly or even wonderfully crafted in terms of transitions, paragraph length, and choices made in beginning, middle, end structure.
<b>Grammar, Mechanics, &amp; Style</b>	1. The work features many different kinds of distracting errors that stop reader from focusing on content: grammar, spelling, punctuation, wrong words, awkward/garbed phrasing.	1. The work may contain several errors, but errors do not distract reader from focusing on content.	1. Contains few, if any, errors.

\*A work that is plagiarized or contains one or more plagiarized passage automatically receives a failing grade.

## Discussion Rubric

Rubric for Discussions
------------------------

Well = Superior performance

Adequate = Meets minimum standards

Inadequate - Does not meet minimum standards

**A:** Fulfills all criteria well.

**B:** Fulfills most criteria well, but 1-2 adequately.

**C:** Fulfills 1-2 criteria well, but most criteria adequately.

**D:** Fulfills one or two criteria well or adequately, but fulfills most criteria inadequately, and too many distracting errors stop reader from focusing on content.

**F:** Fulfills all criteria inadequately, and/or too many distracting errors stop reader from focusing on content.

*Discussion Criteria:*

1. Read and/or view discussion texts, as appropriate, before the discussion begins.
2. Read each discussion contribution before posting your own discussion contribution.
3. Answer each set of questions the instructor asks, but stay focused on the current set of questions the instructor asks. Do NOT attempt to answer questions from a previous week or weeks.
4. Offer your own thoughts/ideas about the instructor's questions and discussion texts; do not simply parrot others' thoughts/ideas or agree with their opinions.
5. Dialogue with one or two peers regarding their thoughts/ideas about instructor questions/discussion texts.
6. Run a spell/grammar check on all discussion postings, and use font Times-New Roman, size 12, in black type.

### Classroom Environment

In this classroom, all students must work together with me to create a safe, pleasant and productive learning environment. Please see <http://www.wlac.edu/studentlife/index.html> for WLAC policies about creating this kind of environment. This URL contains other useful information for students. Please click on it, and read the information.

### Important Dates: Last Day to Add, Drop...

<b>Fall Semester 2014:</b>	
<b>Traditional Semester</b>	
SESSION PERIOD	<b>Classes start Sept 2 Sept 1 - Dec 21</b>
APPLICATIONS ACCEPTED BEGINNING	Tues, Apr 2
<b>REGISTRATION BEGINS</b>	
-Priority (EOPS, DSPS, Veterans, Foster Care Youth & CalWORKs)	Begins May 7
-Continuing Students	Begins May 12
-New & Returning Students	Begins May 19
Special Registration Hours Aug 25 - Sept 12	Mon - Thur: 8:30a - 7:00p Fri 8:30a - 2:00p closed Sat/Sun

<b>M-F CLASSES Begin</b>	TUES, SEPT 2
<b>Sat CLASSES Begin</b>	SAT, SEPT 6
<b>FINALS</b> ( <a href="#">pdf schedule</a> - scroll to pg 2)	Dec 15 - 21
<b>LAST DAY TO</b>	
Apply In-Person	All Year
Determine Residency	Aug 15
File Pre-requisite / Challenge Petition	Aug 15
Add Traditional Classes	Aug 31 online Sept 12 in-person
Drop a Class w/o a Fee	Sept 12
Drop a Class w/o a W	Sept 12
Drop w/ a W	Nov 21
File Pass/No Pass	Sept 12
<b>GRADUATION PETITION ACCEPTED</b>	Apr 28 - Nov 14
<b>CAMPUS CLOSED</b>	Labor Day, Sept 1 Veteran's Day, Nov 11 Thanksgiving Nov 27 - 30
<i>NOTE: Short-term courses and other accelerated program classes have different deadlines. Please check with your instructor.</i>	

## Resources

Please go to <http://www.wlac.edu/studentlife/index.html> to learn about what campus resources are available to you: tuition waivers, book vouchers, academic counseling, tutoring, and additional services. Be aware that WLAC has a Writing Lab on the ground floor of the library--and it offers online help. For library computer-assisted instruction information, please see the Class Schedule.

### **Writing Lab:**

[http://www.wlac.edu/library/info/lab\\_writing.html](http://www.wlac.edu/library/info/lab_writing.html)

## Changes to Syllabus

I may make changes to the Syllabus, if they seem appropriate and/or necessary. If I do, then I'll announce the changes on the home page, on the right side of the screen, under "Announcements," and write the changes on the whiteboard in class. It is your

responsibility to become aware of these changes.

## Learning Disabilities

If you have a learning disability (LD), then you learn things differently than most students do—and you usually learn at a different speed. In other words, you “process” information differently. For this reason, you might need more time to complete an assignment. An LD is not a shameful thing—LOTS of intelligent people have LD’s. You are *not* stupid if you have an LD! Let me know immediately if you have an LD—or think that you might, okay? We’ll need to make sure that DSP&S documents your LD; if it’s not documented, then I will not be able to give you additional time to complete assignments.

Location

Student Services Building (SSB 320)

Telephone

(310) 287-4450

Department Email

[dsp@wlac.edu](mailto:dsp@wlac.edu)

Hours

Monday-Thursday: 8:30 a.m. 4:30p.m.

Friday: 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Saturday: CLOSED

## Plagiarism (Cheating)

In most English classes, cheating occurs in two ways. First, a student presents another person’s words or ideas (or other people’s words and ideas) as his or her own, quoting or paraphrasing that person (or people) without indicating that quoting or paraphrasing is occurring. Second, a student has someone else write his or her work. Every semester I seem to catch students cheating; I don’t enjoy catching cheaters. Please do NOT cheat.

Students who cheat will be subject to all appropriate academic penalties: They will receive a failing grade on their assignment, and the Dean of Student Services will be notified. If an assignment seems too challenging for you, or if you have an emergency that stops you from completing an assignment, Private Message me. I’ll try my best to help you.

## Junot Diaz

# The Cheater’s Guide to Love

By [Junot Díaz](#)

Published in *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2012

### YEAR 0

Your girl catches you cheating. (Well, actually she’s your fiancée, but hey, in a bit it so won’t matter.) She could have caught you with one sucia, she could have caught you with two, but because you’re a totally batshit cuero who never empties his e-mail trash can, she caught you with fifty! Sure, over a six-year period, but still. Fifty fucking girls? *God damn!* Maybe if you’d been engaged to a super-open-minded blanquita you could have survived it—but you’re not engaged to a super-open-minded blanquita. Your girl is a bad-ass salcedense who doesn’t believe in open anything; in fact, the one thing she warned you about, that she swore she would never forgive, was *cheating*. I’ll put a machete in you, she promised. And, of course, you swore you wouldn’t do it. You swore you wouldn’t. You swore you wouldn’t.

And you did.

She’ll stick around for a few months because you been together a long, long time. Because you’ve gone through so much together—her father’s death, your tenure madness, her bar exam (passed on the third attempt). And because love, real love, is not so easily shed. Over a tortured six-month period you fly together to the D.R., to Mexico (for the funeral of a friend), to New Zealand. You walk the beach where they filmed “The Piano,” something she’s always wanted to do, and now, in penitent desperation, you give it to her. She is immensely sad on that beach and she walks up and down the shining sand alone, her bare feet in the freezing water, and when you try to hug her she says, *Don’t*. She stares at the rocks jutting out of the water, the wind carrying her hair straight back. On the ride out to the hotel, up through those wild steeps, you pick up a pair of hitchhikers, a couple so giddy with love that you almost throw them out of the car. She says nothing. Later, in the hotel, she cries.

You try every trick in the book to keep her. You write her letters. You drive her to work. You quote Neruda. You compose a mass e-mail disowning all your sucias. You block their e-mails. You change your phone number. You stop drinking. You stop smoking. You claim you're a sex addict and start attending meetings. You blame your father. You blame your mother. You blame the patriarchy. You blame Santo Domingo. You find a therapist. You cancel your Facebook. You give her the passwords to all your e-mail accounts. You start taking salsa classes, like you always swore you would, so that the two of you can dance together. You claim that you were sick, you claim that you were weak. And every hour, like clockwork, you say that you're *so so* sorry. You try it all, but one day she simply sits up in bed and says, *No more*, and, *Ya*, and asks you to move from the Harlem apartment that you two share when you're not teaching in Boston. You consider not going. You consider a squat protest. In fact, you say you won't go. But, in the end, you do.

For a while you haunt the city, like a two-bit ballplayer dreaming of a call-up. You phone her every day and leave messages that she doesn't answer. You write her long sensitive letters, which she returns unopened. You even show up at her apartment at odd hours, and at her job downtown, until finally her little sister calls you, the one who was always on your side, and she makes it plain: If you try to contact my sister again, she's going to put a restraining order on you.

For some Negroes that wouldn't mean shit.

But you ain't that kind of Negro.

You stop. You move back to Boston. You never see her again.

## **YEAR 1**

At first you pretend it doesn't matter. You harbored a lot of grievances against her anyway. Yes, you did! She didn't give good head, you hated the fuzz on her cheeks, she never waxed her pussy, she never cleaned up around the apartment, etc. For a few weeks, you almost believe it. Of course you go back to smoking, to drinking, you drop the therapist and the sex-addict groups and you run around with the sluts like it's the good old days, like nothing has happened.

I'm back, you say to your boys.

Elvis laughs. It's almost like you never left.

You're fine for, like, a week. Then your moods become erratic. One minute you have to stop yourself from jumping in the car and driving to see her and the next you're calling a sucia and saying, You're the one I always wanted. You start losing your temper with friends, with students, with colleagues. You cry every time you hear Monchy y Alexandra, her favorite.

Boston, where you never wanted to live, where you feel you've been exiled, becomes a serious problem. You have trouble adjusting to it full time—to its trains that stop running at midnight, to the glumness of its inhabitants, to its startling lack of Szechuan food. Almost on cue, a lot of racist shit starts happening. White people pull up alongside you at traffic lights and scream at you with a hideous rage, like you nearly ran over their mother. It's fucking scary. Before you can figure out what the hell is going on, they flip you the bird and peel out. It happens again and again. Security guards follow you in stores, and every time you step onto Harvard property you're asked for I.D. Three times, drunk white dudes in different parts of the city try to pick fights with you.

You take it all very personally. I hope someone drops a fucking bomb on this city, you rant. This is why no people of color want to live here. Why all my black and Latino students leave as soon as they can.

Elvis says nothing. He was born and raised in Jamaica Plain, knows that trying to defend Boston from uncool is like blocking a bullet with a slice of bread. Are you O.K.? he asks, finally.

I'm dandy, you say. Mejor que nunca.

Except you're not. You've lost all the mutual friends you had in N.Y.C. (they went to her), your mother won't speak

to you (she liked the fiancée more than she liked you), and you're feeling terribly guilty and terribly alone. You keep writing letters to her, waiting for the day that you can hand them to her. You also keep fucking everything that moves. Thanksgiving you end up having to spend alone in your apartment because you can't face your mom and the idea of accepting other people's charity makes you furious. The ex, as you're now calling her, always cooked: a turkey, a chicken, a pernil. Set aside all the wings for you. That night, you drink yourself into a stupor, then spend two days recovering.

You figure that's as bad as it gets. You figure wrong. During finals a depression rolls over you, so profound that you doubt there is a name for it. It feels like you're being slowly pincered apart, atom by atom.

You stop hitting the gym or going out for drinks; you stop shaving or washing your clothes; in fact, you stop doing almost everything. Your friends begin to worry about you, and they are not exactly worrying types. I'm O.K., you tell them, but with each passing week the depression deepens. You try to describe it. Like someone flew a plane into your soul. Like someone flew two planes into your soul. Elvis sits shivah with you in the apartment; he pats you on the shoulder, tells you to take it easy. Four years earlier, Elvis had a Humvee blow up on him on a highway outside Baghdad. He was pinned under the burning wreckage for what felt like a week, so he knows a little about pain. His back and buttocks and right arm are so scarred up that even you, Mr. Hard Nose, can't look at them. Breathe, he tells you. You breathe non-stop, like a marathon runner, but it doesn't help. Your little letters become more and more pathetic. *Please*, you write. *Please come back*. You have dreams where she's talking to you like in the old days—in that sweet Spanish of the Cibao, no sign of rage, of disappointment. And then you wake up.

You stop sleeping, and some nights when you're drunk you have a wacky impulse to open the window of your fifth-floor apartment and leap down to the street. But (a) you ain't the killing-yourself type; (b) your boy Elvis is over all the time, stands by the window as if he knows what you're thinking; and (c) you have this ridiculous hope that maybe one day she will forgive you.

She doesn't.

## YEAR 2

You make it through both semesters, barely. It really is a long stretch of shit, and then, finally, the madness begins to recede. It's like waking up from the worst fever of your life. You ain't your old self (har-har!), but you can stand near windows without being overcome by strange urges, and that's a start. Unfortunately, you've put on forty-five pounds. You don't know how it happened, but it happened. Only one pair of your jeans fits, and none of your suits. You put away all the old pictures of her, say goodbye to her Wonder Woman features. You go to the barber, shave your head for the first time in forever and cut off your beard.

You done? Elvis asks.

I'm done.

A white grandma screams at you at a traffic light, and you close your eyes until she goes away. Find yourself another girl, Elvis advises. He's holding his daughter gingerly. Clavo saca clavo. Nothing saca nothing, you reply. No one will ever be like her.

O.K. But find yourself a girl anyway.

His daughter was born that February. He puts her in your arms. Find yourself a good Dominican girl, he says.

You hold the baby uncertainly. Your ex never wanted kids, but toward the end she made you get a sperm test, just in case she decided to change her mind. You put your lips against the baby's stomach and blow.

Do they even exist? you ask.

You had one, didn't you?

That you did.

You clean up your act. You cut it out with all the old sucias, even the Iranian girl you'd boned the entire time you were with the fiancée. You want to turn over a new leaf. Takes you a bit, but you finally break clear, and when you do you feel lighter. I should have done this years ago, you declare, and your friend Arlenny, who never, ever messed with you (Thank God, she mutters), rolls her eyes.

You wait, what, a week for the bad energy to dissipate and then you start dating. Like a normal person, you tell Elvis. Without any lies. Elvis says nothing, only smiles.

"Ever since he retired from yodelling, all he does is sit around the house not yodelling."

At first it's O.K.: you get numbers, though nothing you would take home to the fam. Then, after the early rush, it all dries up. It ain't just a dry spell; it's fucking Arrakeen. You're out all the time, but no one seems to be biting. Not even the chicks who swear they *love Latin guys*. One girl, when you tell her you're Dominican, actually says, Hell no, and runs full tilt toward the door. Seriously? you say. You begin to wonder if there's some secret mark on your forehead.

Be patient, Elvis urges.

He's working for this ghetto-ass landlord and starts taking you with him on collection day. It turns out you're awesome backup. Deadbeats catch one peep of your dismal grill and cough up their debts on the spot.

One month, two months, three months, and then some hope. Her name is Noemi, Dominican from Baní, and you meet at Sofia's in the last months before it closes. She ain't half your ex, but she ain't bad, either. She's a nurse, and when Elvis complains about his back she starts listing all the shit it might be. She's a big girl with skin like you wouldn't believe, and, best of all, she doesn't privar at all; actually seems *nice*. She smiles often, and whenever she's nervous she says, Tell me something. Minuses: she's always working, and she has a four-year-old named Justin. She shows you pictures; kid looks like he'll be dropping an album if she's not careful. She had him with a banilejo who had four other kids with four other women. And you thought this guy was a good idea for what reason? you say. I was stupid, she admits. Where did you meet him? Same place I met you, she says. Out.

Normally that would be a no-go, but Noemi is not only nice, she's also kinda fly. One of those hot moms, and you're excited for the first time in more than a year.

Sunday is her one day off—the Five-Baby Father watches Justin that day, or, rather, he and his new girlfriend watch Justin that day. You and Noemi fall into a little pattern: on Sunday you take her out to dinner—she doesn't eat anything remotely adventurous, so it's always Italian—and then she stays the night.

How sweet was that toto? Elvis asks after the first sleepover.

Not sweet at all, because Noemi didn't give it to you! Three Sundays in a row she sleeps over, and three Sundays in a row nada. A little kissing, a little feeling up, but nothing beyond that. She brings her own pillow, one of those expensive foam ones, and her own toothbrush, and she takes it all with her on Monday morning. Kisses you at the door as she leaves; it all feels too chaste to you, too lacking in promise.

No toto? Elvis looks a little shocked.

No toto, you confirm. What am I, in sixth grade?

You know you should be patient. You know she's just testing your ass. She's probably had a lot of bad experiences with the hit-and-run types. Case in point—Justin's dad. But it galls you that she gave it up to some thug with no job, no education, no nothing, and now she's making you jump through hoops of fire.

Are we going to see each other on Sunday? she asks when she next calls, and you almost say yes, but then your idiocy gets the better of you.

It depends, you say.

On what? She is instantly guarded, and that adds to your irritation. Where was that guard when she let the banilejo fuck her without a condom?

On whether you're planning to give me ass anytime soon.

Oh, classiness. You know as soon as you say it that you just buried yourself.

Noemi is silent. Then she says, Let me get off this phone before I say something you won't like.

This is your last chance, but instead of begging for mercy you bark, Fine.

Within an hour, she has unfriended you on Facebook. You send her one exploratory text, but it's never answered.

Two years later, you will run into her in Dudley Square but she will pretend not to recognize you, and you won't force the issue.

Nicely done, Elvis says. Bravo.

You two are pushing his daughter's stroller around the playground near Columbia Terrace. He tries to be reassuring. She had a kid. That probably wasn't for you.

Probably not.

Even these little breakups suck, because they send you right back to thinking about the ex. Right back into the depression. This time you spend six months wallowing in it before you return to the world. After you pull yourself together, you tell Elvis, I think I need a break from the bitches.

What are you going to do?

Focus on me for a while.

That's a good idea, his wife says. Besides, it only happens when you're not looking for it.

That's what everybody claims. Easier to say that than This shit sucks.

This shit sucks, Elvis says. Does that help?

Not really.

As you're walking home, a Jeep roars past; the driver calls you a  *fucking towelhead* . One of the ex-sucias publishes a poem about you online. It's called "Puto."

### **YEAR 3**

You take your break. You try to get back to your work, to your writing. You start three novels: one about a pelotero, one about a narco, and one about a bachatero—all of them suck pipe. You get serious about classes and, for your health, you take up running. You used to run in the old days and you figure you need something to get you out of your head. You must have needed it bad, because once you get into the swing of it you start running four, five, six times a week. It's your new addiction. You run in the morning and you run late at night, when there's no one on the paths next to the Charles. You run so hard that your heart feels like it's going to seize. When winter rolls in, a part of you fears that you'll fold—Boston winters are on some terrorism shit—but you need the activity more than anything, so you keep at it even as the trees are stripped of their foliage and the paths empty out and the frost reaches into your bones. Soon it's only you and a couple of other lunatics. Your body changes, of course. You lose all that drinking and smoking chub, and your legs look like they belong to someone else. Every time you think about the ex, every time the loneliness rears up in you like a seething, burning continent, you tie on your shoes and hit the

paths and that helps; it really does.

By winter's end, you've gotten to know all the morning regulars and there's even this one girl who inspires in you some hope. You pass each other a couple of times a week, and she's a pleasure to watch, a gazelle, really—what economy, what gait, and what an amazing fucking cuerpazo. She always smiles at you as you pass. You consider flopping in front of her—My leg! My leg!—but that seems incredibly cursi. You keep hoping you'll bump into her around town.

The running is going splendidly, and then six months in you feel a pain in your right foot. Along the inside arch, a searing that doesn't subside after a few days' rest. Soon you're hobbling even when you're not running. You drop in on Emergency Care and the P.N. pushes with his thumb, watches you writhe, and announces that you have plantar fasciitis.

You have no idea what that is. When can I run again?

He gives you a pamphlet. Sometimes it takes a month. Sometimes six months. Sometimes a year. He pauses. Sometimes longer.

That makes you so sad that you go home and lie in bed in the dark. You're afraid. I don't want to go back down the hole, you tell Elvis. Then don't, he says. Like a hardhead you keep trying to run, but the pain sharpens. Finally, you give up. You put away the shoes. You sleep in. When you see other people hitting the paths, you turn away. You find yourself crying in front of sporting-goods stores. Out of nowhere you call the ex, but of course she doesn't pick up. The fact that she hasn't changed her number gives you strange hope, even though you've heard that she's dating somebody.

Elvis encourages you to try yoga, the half-Bikram kind they teach in Central Square. Mad fucking hos in there, he says. I'm talking hos by the ton. While you're not exactly feeling the hos right now, you don't want to lose all the conditioning you've built up, so you give it a shot. The namaste bullshit you could do without, but you fall into it and soon you're pulling vinyasas with the best of them. Elvis was certainly right. There are mad hos, all with their asses in the air, but none of them catch your eye. One miniature blanquita does try to chat you up. She seems impressed that, of all the guys in the class, you alone never take off your shirt, but you skitter away from her cornpone grin. What the hell are you going to do with a blanquita?

Bone the shit out of her, Elvis offers.

Bust a nut in her mouth, your boy Darnell seconds.

Give her a chance, Arlenny proposes.

But you don't do any of it. At the end of the sessions, you move away quickly to wipe down your mat and she takes the hint. She doesn't mess with you again.

You actually become pretty obsessed with yoga, and soon you're taking your mat with you wherever you go.

You finally start work on your eighties apocalypse novel—finally starting means you write a paragraph—and in a flush of confidence you begin messing with this young morena from Harvard Law School whom you meet at the Enormous Room. She's half your age, one of those super-geniuses who finished undergrad when she was nineteen and is seriously lovely. Elvis and Darnell approve. Aces, they say. Arlenny demurs. She's really young, no?

Yes, she's really young and you fuck a whole lot, and during the act the two of you cling to each other for dear life, but afterward you peel away like you're ashamed of yourselves. Most of the time, you suspect that she feels sorry for you. She says that she likes your mind, but, considering that she's smarter than you, that seems doubtful. What she does appear to like is your body, can't keep her hands off it. I should get back to ballet, she says while undressing you. Then you'd lose your thick, you note, and she laughs. I know, that's the dilemma.

It's all going swell, it's all marvellous, and then, in the middle of a sun salutation, you feel a shift in your lower back

and *pau*—it's like a sudden power failure. You lose all your strength, have to lie down. Yes, the instructor urges, rest if you have to. When the class is over, you need help from the little white girl to rise to your feet. Do you want me to take you somewhere? she asks, but you shake your head. The walk back to your apartment is some Bataan-type shit. At the Plough and Stars, you collapse against a stop sign and call Elvis on your cell.

He arrives in a flash, with a hottie in tow. She's a straight-up Cambridge Cape Verdean. Who's that? you ask, and he shakes his head. Drags you into Emergency Care. By the time the doctor appears, you're crabbed over like an old man.

It appears to be a ruptured disk, she announces.

Yay, you say.

You're in bed for a solid two weeks. Elvis brings you food and sits with you while you eat. He talks about the Cape Verdean girl. She's got, like, the perfect pussy, he says. It's like putting your dick in a hot mango.

You listen for a bit and then you say, Just don't end up like me.

Elvis grins. Shit, no one could ever end up like you, Yunion. You're a D.R. original.

So now it's your feet, your back, *and* your heart. You can't run, you can't do yoga, even riding a bike kills your back. So you stick to walking. You do it for an hour each morning and an hour each night. There is no rush to the head, no tearing up your lungs, no massive shock to your system, but it's better than nothing.

A month later, the law student leaves you for one of her classmates, tells you that it was great but she has to start being realistic. Translation: I got to stop fucking with old dudes. Later, you see her with said classmate in the Yard. He's lighter than you but he still looks unquestionably black. He's also, like, nine feet tall and put together like an anatomy primer. They're walking hand in hand, and she looks so very happy that you try to find the space in your heart not to begrudge her. Two seconds later, security approaches you and asks for I.D. The next day, a white kid on a bike throws a can of Diet Coke at you.

Classes start, and by then the squares on your abdomen have been reabsorbed, like tiny islands in a rising sea of lard. You scan the incoming junior faculty for a possible, but there's nothing. You watch a lot of TV. Sometimes Elvis joins you, since his wife doesn't allow him to smoke weed in the house. He's taken up yoga now, having seen what it did for you. You want not to hate him. What happened to the Cape Verdean girl?

What Cape Verdean girl? he says dryly.

You make little advances. You start doing pushups and pullups and even some of your old yoga moves, but very carefully. You have dinner with two girls. One doesn't like you; the other is married and hot for days, in the late-thirties-Dominican-middle-class-woman sort of way. You can tell that she's contemplating sleeping with you, and the whole time you're eating your short ribs you feel like you're on the dock. In Santo Domingo I'd never be able to meet you like this, she says with great generosity. Almost all her conversations start with In Santo Domingo. She's doing a year at the business school, and for how much she gushes about Boston you can tell that she misses the D.R., would never live anywhere else.

Boston is really racist, you offer by way of orientation.

She looks at you like you're crazy. Boston isn't racist, she says. She also scoffs at the idea of racism in Santo Domingo.

So Dominicans *love* Haitians now?

That's not about race. She pronounces every syllable. That's about *nationality*.

Of course you end up in bed, and it ain't bad except for the fact that she never, never comes and she spends a lot of

time complaining about her husband. Soon you're squiring her around the city and beyond: to Salem on Halloween and one weekend to the Cape. No one ever pulls you over or asks you for I.D. when you're with her. Everywhere you two go she shoots photos, but never any of you. She writes her kids postcards while you're in bed.

At the end of the semester, she returns home. My home, not your home, she says tetchily. She's always trying to prove you're not Dominican. If I'm not Dominican, then no one is, you shoot back, but she laughs at that. Say that in Spanish, she challenges and, of course, you can't. Last day, you drive her to the airport and there is no crushing "Casablanca" kiss, just a smile and a little gay-ass hug and her fake breasts push against you like something irrevocable. Write, you tell her, and she says, Por supuesto, and, of course, neither of you does. You eventually erase her contact info from your phone, but not the pictures you took of her in bed while she was naked and asleep, never those.

#### **YEAR 4**

Wedding invitations from the ex-sucias start to arrive in the mail. You have no idea how to explain this berserkería. What the fuck, you say. Arlenny turns over the cards, quotes Oates: Revenge is living well, without you.

That year your arms and legs begin to give you trouble, occasionally going numb, flickering in and out like a brownout back on the Island. It is a strange pins-and-needles feeling. What the fuck is this? you wonder. I hope I'm not dying. You're probably working out too hard, Elvis says. But I'm not really working out at all, you protest. Probably just stress, the nurse at Emergency Care tells you. You hope so, flexing your hands, worrying. You really do hope so.

March you fly out to the Bay to deliver a lecture, which does not go well; almost no one shows up beyond those who were forced to by their professors. Afterward, you head out alone to a Korean joint and gorge on kalbi until you're ready to burst. You drive around, just to get a feel for the city. You have a couple of friends in town but you don't call them, because you know they'll only want to talk about old times, about the ex. You have a sucia in town, too, and in the end you call her, but when she hears your name she hangs up on your ass.

When you return to Boston, the law student is waiting for you in the lobby of your building. You're surprised and excited and a little wary. What's up?

It's like bad television. You notice that she has lined up three suitcases in the foyer. And, on closer inspection, that her ridiculously Persian-looking eyes are red from crying, her mascara freshly applied.

I'm pregnant, she says.

At first you don't register it. You joke, And?

You *asshole*. She starts crying. It's probably your stupid fucking kid.

There are surprises and there are surprises, and then there is this.

You don't know what to say or how to act, so you take her upstairs. You lug up the suitcases despite your back, despite your foot, despite your flickering arms. She says nothing, just hugs her pillow to her Howard sweater. She is a Southern girl with supremely erect posture, and when she sits down you feel as if she were preparing to interview you. After serving her tea you ask, Are you keeping it?

Of course I'm keeping *it*.

What about Kimathi?

She doesn't get it. Who?

Your Kenyan. You can't bring yourself to say *boyfriend*.

He threw me out. He knows it's not his. She picks at something on her sweater. I'm going to unpack, O.K.? You nod and watch her. She is an exceptionally beautiful girl. You think of that old saying *Show me a beautiful girl and I'll show you someone who is tired of fucking her*. You doubt you would ever have tired of her, though.

But it could be his, right?

It's yours, O.K.? she cries. I know you don't want it to be yours, but it's yours.

You are surprised at how hollowed out you feel. You don't know if you should show enthusiasm or support. You run your hand over the thinning stubble on your head.

I need to stay here, she tells you later, after the two of you fumble through an awkward fuck. I have nowhere to go. I can't go back to my family.

When you tell Elvis the whole story you expect him to flip out, to order you to kick her out. You fear his reaction, because you know that you don't have the heart to kick her out.

But Elvis doesn't flip. He slaps you on the back, beams delightedly. That's great, cuz.

What do you mean, That's great?

You're going to be a father. You're going to have a son.

A son? What are you talking about? There isn't even proof that it's mine.

Elvis isn't listening. He's smiling at some inner thought. He checks to make sure the wife isn't within earshot. Remember the last time we went to the D.R.?

Of course you do. Three years ago. Everybody had a blast except you. You were in the middle of the great downturn, which meant that you spent most of your time alone, floating on your back in the ocean or getting drunk at the bar or walking the beach in the early morning before anybody was up.

What about it?

Well, I got a girl pregnant while we were down there.

Are you fucking kidding me?

He nods.

Pregnant?

He nods again.

Did she have it?

He rummages through his cell phone. Shows you a picture of a perfect little boy with the most Dominican little face you ever saw.

That's my son, Elvis says proudly. Elvis Xavier Junior.

Dude, are you fucking *serious* with this? If your wife finds—

He bridles. She ain't going to find out. Elvis punches you in the arm. Babies are fucking expensive. So just get ready, buster, to be broke as a joke.

Back at the apartment, the law student has taken over two of your closets and almost your entire bathroom, and, most crucially, she has laid claim to the bed. She has put a pillow and a sheet on the couch. For you. What, am I not allowed to share the bed with you?

I don't think it's good for me, she says. It would be too stressful. I don't want to miscarry.

Hard to argue with that. Your back doesn't take to the couch at all, so now you wake up in the morning in more pain than ever.

*Only a bitch of color comes to Harvard to get pregnant. White women don't do that. Asian women don't do that. Only fucking black and Latina women. Why go to all the trouble to get into Harvard just to get knocked up? You could have stayed on the block and done that shit.*

This is what you write in your journal. The next day when you return from classes, the law student throws the notebook in your face. I fucking *hate you*, she wails.

She walks to the kitchen and starts to pour herself a shot, and you find yourself pulling the bottle out of her hand and tipping its contents into the sink. This is ridiculous, you say. More bad TV.

"I've donated all my diplomas to Doctors Without Diplomas.

She doesn't speak to you again for two whole fucking weeks. You spend as much time as you can either at your office or over at Elvis's house. Whenever you enter a room, she snaps her laptop shut. I'm not fucking snooping, you say. But she waits for you to move on before she returns to typing whatever she was typing.

You can't throw out your baby's mom, Elvis reminds you. It would fuck that kid up for life. Plus, it's bad karma. Just wait till the baby comes. She'll straighten out.

A month passes, two months pass. You're afraid to tell anybody else, to share the—what? Good news? Arlenny, you know, would march right in and boot her ass out on the street.

Your back is agony, and the numbness in your arms is starting to become pretty steady. In the shower, the only place in the apartment you can be alone, you whisper to yourself, *Hell, Netley. We're in hell.*

Later, it will all seem like a terrible fever dream, but at the time it moved so very slowly, felt so very concrete. You take her to her appointments. You help her with the vitamins and shit. You pay for almost everything. She is not speaking to her mother, so all she has is two girlfriends, who are in the apartment almost as much as you are. They are members of the Biracial Identity Crisis Support Group and they look at you with little warmth. You wait for the law student to melt, but she keeps her distance. Some days, while she's sleeping and you're trying to work, you allow yourself the indulgence of wondering what kind of child you'll have. Whether it will be a boy or a girl, smart or withdrawn. Like you or like her.

Have you thought up any names? Elvis's wife asks.

Not yet.

Taína for a girl, she suggests. And Elvis for a boy. She throws a taunting glance at her husband and laughs.

I like my name, Elvis says. I would give it to a boy.

Over my dead body, his wife says. And, besides, this oven is closed for business.

At night, while you're trying to sleep, you see the glow of the law student's computer through the open door of the bedroom, hear her fingers on the keyboard.

Do you need anything?

I'm fine, thank you.

You go to the door a few times and watch her, wanting to be called in, but she always glares and asks you, What the fuck do you want?

Just checking.

Fifth month, sixth month, seventh month. You are in class teaching Intro to Fiction when you get a text from one of her girlfriends saying she has gone into labor, six weeks early. All sorts of terrible fears race around inside you. You keep trying her cell phone, but she doesn't answer. You call Elvis, but he doesn't answer, either, so you drive over to the hospital by yourself.

Are you the father? the woman at the desk asks.

I am, you say diffidently.

You are led around the corridors and finally given some scrubs and told to wash your hands. You are given instructions on where you should stand and warned about the procedure, but as soon as you walk into the birthing room the law student shrieks, *I don't want him in here. I don't want him in here. He's not the father.*

You didn't think anything could hurt so bad. Her two girlfriends rush at you, but you have already exited. You saw her thin ashy legs and the doctor's back and little else. You're glad you didn't see anything more. You would have felt like you'd violated her safety or something. You take off the scrubs; you wait around for a bit and then you realize what you're doing and, finally, you drive home.

You hear not from her but from her girlfriend, the same one who texted you about the labor. I'll come pick up her bags, O.K.? When she arrives, she glances around the apartment warily. You're not going to go psycho on me, are you?

No, I'm not. After a pause you demand, Why would you say that? I've never hurt a woman in my life. Then you realize how you sound—like a dude who hurts women all the time. Everything goes back into the three suitcases and then you help her wrestle them down to her S.U.V.

You must be relieved, she says.

You don't answer.

And that's the end of it. Later, you hear that the Kenyan visited the law student in the hospital, and when he saw the baby a teary reconciliation occurred and all was forgiven.

That was your mistake, Elvis said. You should have had a baby with that ex of yours. Then she wouldn't have left you.

She would have left you, Arlenny says. Believe it.

The rest of the semester ends up being a super-duper clusterfuck. Lowest evaluations in your six years as a professor. Your only student of color that semester writes, He tells us that we don't know anything, but doesn't show us any way to address these deficiencies. One night you call your ex and when the voice mail clicks on you say, We should have had a kid. And then you hang up, ashamed. Why did you say that? you ask yourself. Now she'll definitely never speak to you again.

I don't think the phone call is the problem, Arlenny says.

Check it out. Elvis produces a picture of Elvis, Jr., holding a bat. This kid is going to be a monster.

On winter break, you fly to the D.R. with Elvis. What the hell else are you going to do? You ain't got nothing going on, outside of waving your arms around every time they go numb.

Elvis is beyond excited. He has three suitcases of swag for the boy, including his first glove, his first ball, his first Bosox jersey. About eighty kilos of clothes and shit for the baby mama. Hid them all in your apartment, too. You are at his house when he bids his wife and mother-in-law and daughter goodbye. His daughter doesn't seem to understand what's happening, but when the door shuts she lets out a wail that coils about you like constantine wire. Elvis stays cool as fuck. This used to be me, you're thinking.

Of course you look for her on the flight. You can't help yourself.

You assume that the baby mama will live somewhere poor, like Capotillo or Los Alcarrizos, but you didn't imagine she would live in the Nadalands. You've been to the Nadalands a couple of times before; shit, your family came up out of those spaces. Squatter chawls where there are no roads, no lights, no running water, no grid, no anything, where everybody's slapdash house is on top of everybody else's, where it's all mud and shanties and motos and grind and thin, smiling motherfuckers everywhere, like falling off the rim of civilization. You have to leave the rental jípetá on the last bit of paved road and jump on the back of two motoconchos with all the luggage balanced on your backs. Nobody stares, because those ain't real loads you're carrying: You've seen a single moto carry a family of five and their pig.

You finally pull up to a tiny little house, and out comes Baby Mama—cue happy homecoming. You wish you could say you remember Baby Mama from that long-ago trip, but you do not. She is tall and very thick, exactly how Elvis always likes them. She is no older than twenty-one, twenty-two, with an irresistible Georgina Duluc smile, and when she sees you she gives you a huge abrazo. So the padrino finally decides to visit, she declaims in one of those loud ronca campesina voices. You also meet her mother, her grandmother, her brother, her sister, her three uncles. Seems like everybody is missing teeth.

Elvis picks up the boy. Mi hijo, he sings. Mi hijo.

The boy starts crying.

Baby Mama's place is barely two rooms—one bed, one chair, a little table, a single bulb overhead. More mosquitoes than a refugee camp. Raw sewage in the back. The few family photos hanging on the walls are water-stained. When it rains—Baby Mama lifts up her hands—everything goes.

Don't worry, Elvis says, I'm moving them out this month, if I can get the loot together.

The happy couple leave you with the family and Elvis, Jr., while they visit various negocios to settle accounts and to pick up some necessities.

So you sit on a plastic chair in front of the house with the kid in your lap. The neighbors admire you with cheerful avidity. A domino game breaks out, and you team up with Baby Mama's brooding brother. Takes him less than five seconds to talk you into ordering a couple of grandes and a bottle of Brugal from the nearby colmado. Also three boxes of cigarettes, a yard of salami, and some cough syrup for a neighbor lady with a congested daughter. Ta muy mal, she says. Of course they all have a sister or a prima they want you to meet. Que tan más buena que el Diablo, they guarantee. You barely finish the first bottle of romo before some of the sisters and primas actually start coming around. They look rough, but you got to give it to them for trying. You invite them all to sit down, order more beer and some bad pica pollo.

Just let me know which one you like, a neighbor whispers, and I'll make it happen.

Elvis, Jr., watches you with considerable gravitas. He is a piercingly cute carajito. He has all these mosquito bites on his legs and an old scab on his head that no one can explain to you. You are suddenly overcome with the urge to cover him with your arms, with your whole body.

Later, Elvis, Sr., fills you in on the Plan: I'll bring him over to the States in a few years. I'll tell the wife he was an accident, a onetime thing when I was drunk and I didn't find out about it until now.

And that's going to work?

It will work out, he says testily.

Bro, your wife ain't going to buy that.

And what the fuck do you know? Elvis says. It ain't like your shit ever works.

Can't argue with that. You pick up the boy. You look into his eyes. He looks into yours. He seems preternaturally sapient. M.I.T.-bound, you say, as you nuzzle his peppercorn hair. He starts to bawl then, and you put him down, watch him run around awhile.

That's more or less when you know.

The second story of the house is unfinished, rebar poking out of the cinder block like horrible gnarled follicles, and you and Elvis stand up there and drink beers and stare out beyond the edge of the city, beyond the vast radio-dish antennas in the distance, out toward the mountains of the Cibao, the Cordillera Central, where your father was born and where your ex's whole family is from. It's breathtaking.

He's not yours, you tell Elvis.

What are you talking about?

The boy is not yours.

Don't be a jerk. That kid looks just like me.

"Here is your very own doll, so you can see how tiring it is to raise a child."

Elvis. You put your hand on his arm. Cut the crap.

A long silence. But he looks like me.

Bro, he so doesn't look like you.

The next day you two load up the boy and drive back into the city, back into Gazzcue. You literally have to beat the family off to keep them from coming with you. Before you go, one of the uncles pulls you aside: You really should bring these people a refrigerator. Then the brother pulls you aside: And a TV. And then the mother pulls you aside: A hot comb, too.

Traffic back into the center is Gaza Strip-crazy and there seems to be a crash every five hundred metres, and Elvis keeps threatening to turn around. You ignore him. You stare at the slurry of broken concrete, the sellers with all the crap of the earth slung over their shoulders, the dust-covered palms. The boy holds on to you tightly. There is no significance in this, you tell yourself. It's a Moro-type reflex, nothing more.

Don't make me do this, Yuniór, Elvis pleads.

You insist. You have to, E. You know you can't live a lie. It won't be good for the boy, it won't be good for you. Don't you think it's better to know?

But I always wanted a boy, he says. My whole life, that's all I wanted. When I got in that shit in Iraq, I kept thinking, Please, God, let me live just long enough to have a son, please, and then you can kill me dead right after. And look, He gave him to me, didn't He? He gave him to me.

The clinic is in one of those houses they built in the International Style during the time of Trujillo. The two of you stand at the front desk. You are holding the boy's hand. The boy is staring at you with lapidary intensity. The mud is waiting. The mosquito bites are waiting. The Nada is waiting.

Go on, you tell Elvis.

In all honesty, you're thinking that he won't do it, that this is where it will end. He'll take the boy and turn around and go back to the jípetá. But he carries the little guy into a room where a nurse swabs both their mouths, and it's done.

You ask, How long will it take for the results?

Four weeks, the technician tells you.

That long?

She shrugs. Welcome to Santo Domingo.

## **YEAR 5**

Four weeks after the trip, Elvis informs you that the test was negative. Fuck, he says bitterly, fuck fuck fuck. And then he cuts off all contact with the kid and the mother. Changes his cell-phone number and his e-mail account.

Of course you feel terrible. You think about the way the boy looked at you. Let me have her number at least, you say. You figure you can throw her a little cash every month, but he won't have it. Fuck that lying bitch.

You reckon he must have known, somewhere inside, maybe even wanted you to blow it all up, but you let it be, don't explore it. He's going to yoga five times a week now, is in the best shape of his life, while you, on the other hand, have to buy bigger jeans again.

With him, it's like nothing happened. You wish you could be as phlegmatic.

Do you ever think about them?

He shakes his head. Never will, either.

The numbness in your arms and legs increases. You return to your doctors and they send you over to a neurologist, who sends you out for an MRI. Looks like you have stenosis all down your spine, the doctor reports, impressed.

Is it bad?

It isn't great. Did you use to do a lot of heavy manual labor?

Besides delivering pool tables, you mean?

That would do it. The doctor squints at the MRI. Let's try some physical therapy. If that doesn't work, we'll talk about other options.

Like?

He stares at his fingers contemplatively. Surgery.

From there, what little life you have goes south. A student complains to the school that you curse too much. You have to have a sit-down with the dean, who more or less tells you to watch your shit. You get pulled over by the cops three weekends in a row. One time, they sit you out on the curb and you watch as all the other whips sail past, passengers ogling you as they go. On the T, you swear that you see your ex in the rush-hour mix and for a second your knees buckle, but it turns out to be just another Latina mujerón in a tailored suit.

Of course you dream about her. You are in New Zealand or in Santo Domingo or, improbably, back in college, in the dorms. You want her to say your name, to touch you, but she doesn't. She just shakes her head.

Ya.

You want to move on, to exorcise shit, so you find a new apartment on the other side of the Square that has a view of the Harvard skyline. All those amazing steeples, including your favorite, the gray dagger of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. In the first days of your tenancy, an eagle lands in the dead tree right outside your fifth-story window. Looks you in the eye. This seems to you like a good sign.

A month later, the law student sends you an invitation to her wedding in Kenya. There's a photo of the two of them dressed in what you assume are traditional Kenyan jump-offs. She looks very thin, and she's wearing a lot of makeup. You expect a note, some mention of what you did for her, but there is nothing. Even the address was typed on a computer.

Maybe it was a mistake, you say.

It wasn't a mistake, Arlenny assures you.

Elvis tears the invite up, throws it out the window of his truck. Fuck that bitch. Fuck all bitches.

You manage to save a tiny piece of the photo. It's of her hand.

You work harder than you've ever worked at anything—the teaching, your physical therapy, your regular therapy, your reading, your walking. You keep waiting for the heaviness to leave you. You keep waiting for the moment when you'll never think about the ex again. It doesn't come.

You ask everybody you know, How long does it usually take to get over it?

There are many formulas. One year for every year you dated. Two years for every year you dated. It's just a matter of will power: the day you decide it's over, it's over. You never get over it.

One night that winter, you go out with all the boys to a ghetto-ass Latin club in Mattapan Square. Outside, it's close to zero, but inside it's so hot that everybody's stripped down to T-shirts and the funk is thick as a fro. There's a girl who keeps bumping into you. You say to her, Pero mi amor, ya. And she says, Ya yourself. She's Dominican and lithe and super-tall. I could never date anyone as short as you, she informs you very early on in your conversations. But at the end of the night she gives you her number. All evening, Elvis sits at the bar quietly, drinking shot after shot of Rémy. He's just got back from a quick solo trip to the D.R., a ghost recon. Didn't tell you about it until after. He tried looking for the mom and Elvis, Jr., but they had moved and no one knew where they were. None of the numbers he had for her worked. I hope they turn up, he says.

I hope so, too.

You take the longest walks. Every ten minutes you drop and do squats or pushups. It's not running, but it raises your heart rate. Afterward you're in so much nerve pain that you can barely move.

Some nights you have "Neuromancer" dreams where you see the ex and the boy and another figure, familiar, waving at you in the distance. *Somewhere, very close, the laugh that wasn't laughter.*

Finally, when you feel like you can do so without exploding into burning atoms, you open a folder that you've kept hidden under your bed. The Doomsday Book. Copies of all the e-mails and photos from the cheating days, the ones the ex found and compiled and mailed to you a month after she ended it. *Dear Yuniior, for your next book.* Probably the last time she wrote your name.

You read the whole thing cover to cover (yes, she put covers on it). You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. It kills you to admit it, but it's true. You are astounded by the depths of your mendacity. When you finish the book a second time, you say the truth: You did the right thing, negra. You did the right thing.

She's right; this would make a killer book, Elvis says. The two of you have been pulled over by a cop and are waiting for Officer Dickhead to finish running your license. Elvis holds up one of the photos.

She's Colombian, you say.

He whistles. Que viva Colombia. Hands you back the book. You really should write the cheater's guide to love.

You think?

I do.

It takes a while. You see the tall girl. You go to more doctors. You celebrate Arlenny's Ph.D. defense. And then, one June night, you scribble the ex's name and: *The half-life of love is forever.*

You bust out a couple more things. Then you put your head down.

The next day, you look at the new pages. For once, you don't want to burn them or give up writing forever. It's a start, you say to the room.

That's about it. In the months that follow, you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace—and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get. ♦

**Nathan Englander**

# What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank

By [Nathan Englander](#)

Published in *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2011

They're in our house maybe ten minutes and already Mark's lecturing us on the Israeli occupation. Mark and Lauren live in Jerusalem, and people from there think it gives them the right.

Mark is looking all stoic and nodding his head. "If we had what you have down here in South Florida," he says, and trails off. "Yup," he says, and he's nodding again. "We'd have no troubles at all."

"You do have what we have," I tell him. "All of it. Sun and palm trees. Old Jews and oranges and the worst drivers around. At this point, we've probably got more Israelis than you." Debbie, my wife, puts a hand on my arm—her signal that I'm either taking a tone, interrupting someone's story, sharing something private, or making an inappropriate joke. That's my cue, and I'm surprised, considering how often I get it, that she ever lets go of my arm. "Yes, you've got everything now," Mark says. "Even terrorists."

I look at Lauren. She's the one my wife has the relationship with—the one who should take charge. But Lauren isn't going to give her husband any signal. She and Mark ran off to Israel twenty years ago and turned Hasidic, and neither of them will put a hand on the other in public. Not for this. Not to put out a fire.

"Wasn't Mohamed Atta living right here before 9/11?" Mark says, and now he pantomimes pointing out houses.

"Goldberg, Goldberg, Goldberg—Atta. How'd you miss him in this place?"

"Other side of town," I say.

"That's what I'm talking about. That's what you have that we don't. Other sides of town. Wrong sides of the tracks. Space upon space." And now he's fingering the granite countertop in our kitchen, looking out into the living room and the dining room, staring through the kitchen windows at the pool. "All this house," he says, "and one son? Can you imagine?"

"No," Lauren says. And then she turns to us, backing him up. "You should see how we live with ten."

"Ten kids," I say. "We could get you a reality show with that here in the States. Help you get a bigger place."

The hand is back pulling at my sleeve. "Pictures," Debbie says. "I want to see the girls." We all follow Lauren into the den for her purse.

“Do you believe it?” Mark says. “Ten girls!” And the way it comes out of his mouth, it’s the first time I like the guy. The first time I think about giving him a chance.

Facebook and Skype brought Deb and Lauren back together. They were glued at the hip growing up. Went all the way through school together. Yeshiva school. All girls. Out in Queens till high school and then riding the subway together to one called Central in Manhattan. They stayed best friends until I married Deb and turned her secular, and soon after that Lauren met Mark and they went off to the Holy Land and shifted from Orthodox to *ultra*-Orthodox, which to me sounds like a repackaged detergent—ORTHODOX ULTRA®, now with more deep-healing power. Because of that, we’re supposed to call them Shoshana and Yerucham now. Deb’s been doing it. I’m just not saying their names.

“You want some water?” I offer. “Coke in the can?”

“ ‘You’—which of us?” Mark says.

“You both,” I say. “Or I’ve got whiskey. Whiskey’s kosher, too, right?”

“If it’s not, I’ll kosher it up real fast,” he says, pretending to be easygoing. And right then he takes off that big black hat and plops down on the couch in the den.

Lauren’s holding the verticals aside and looking out at the yard. “Two girls from Forest Hills,” she says. “Who ever thought we’d be the mothers of grownups?”

“Trevor’s sixteen,” Deb says. “You may think he’s a grownup, and he may think he’s a grownup—but we are not convinced.”

Right then is when Trev comes padding into the den, all six feet of him, plaid pajama bottoms dragging on the floor and T-shirt full of holes. He’s just woken up, and you can tell he’s not sure if he’s still dreaming. We told him we had guests. But there’s Trev, staring at this man in the black suit, a beard resting on his belly. And Lauren, I met her once before, right when Deb and I got married, but ten girls and a thousand Shabbos dinners later—well, she’s a big woman, in a bad dress and a giant blond Marilyn Monroe wig. Seeing them at the door, I can’t say I wasn’t shocked myself.

“Hey,” he says.

And then Deb’s on him, preening and fixing his hair and hugging him. “Trevy, this is my best friend from childhood,” she says. “This is Shoshana, and this is—”

“Mark,” I say.

“Yerucham,” Mark says, and sticks out a hand. Trev shakes it. Then Trev sticks out his hand, polite, to Lauren. She looks at it, just hanging there in the air.

“I don’t shake,” she says. “But I’m so happy to see you. Like meeting my own son. I mean it.” And here she starts to cry, and then she and Deb are hugging. And the boys, we just stand there until Mark looks at his watch and gets himself a good manly grip on Trev’s shoulder.

“Sleeping until three on a Sunday? Man, those were the days,” Mark says. “A regular little Rumplesforeskin.” Trev looks at me, and I want to shrug, but Mark’s also looking, so I don’t move. Trev just gives us both his best teen-age glare and edges out of the room. As he does, he says, “Baseball practice,” and takes my car keys off the hook by the door to the garage.

“There’s gas,” I say.

“They let them drive here at sixteen?” Mark says. “Insane.”

“So what brings you here after all these years?” I say.

“My mother,” Mark says. “She’s failing, and my father’s getting old—and they come to us for Sukkot every year. You know?”

“I know the holidays.”

“They used to fly out to us. For Sukkot and Pesach, both. But they can’t fly now, and I just wanted to get over while things are still good. We haven’t been in America—”

“Oh, gosh,” Lauren says. “I’m afraid to think how long it’s been. More than ten years. Twelve,” she says. “With the kids, it’s just impossible until enough of them are big.”

“How do you do it?” Deb says. “Ten kids? I really do want to hear.”

That’s when I remember. “I forgot your drink,” I say to Mark.

“Yes, his drink. That’s how,” Lauren says. “That’s how we cope.”

And that’s how the four of us end up back at the kitchen table with a bottle of vodka between us. I’m not one to get drunk on a Sunday afternoon, but, I tell you, when the plan is to spend the day with Mark I jump at the chance.

Deb’s drinking, too, but not for the same reason. I think she and Lauren are reliving a little bit of the wild times. The very small window when they were together, barely grown up, two young women living in New York on the edge of two worlds.

Deb says, “This is really racy for us. I mean, *really* racy. We try not to drink much at all these days. We think it sets a bad example for Trevor. It’s not good to drink in front of them right at this age when they’re all transgressive. He’s suddenly so interested in that kind of thing.”

“I’m just happy when he’s interested in something,” I say.

Deb slaps at the air. “I just don’t think it’s good to make drinking look like it’s fun with a teen-ager around.”

Lauren smiles and straightens her wig. “Does anything we do look fun to our kids?”

I laugh at that. Honestly, I’m liking her more and more.

“It’s the age limit that does it,” Mark says. “It’s the whole American puritanical thing, the twenty-one-year-old drinking age and all that. We don’t make a big deal about it in Israel, and so the kids, they don’t even notice alcohol. Except for the foreign workers on Fridays, you hardly see anyone drunk at all.”

“The workers and the Russians,” Lauren says.

“The Russian immigrants,” he says, “that’s a whole separate matter. Most of them, you know, not even Jews.”

“What does that mean?” I say.

“It means matrilineal descent, is what it means,” Mark says. “With the Ethiopians there were conversions.”

But Deb wants to keep us away from politics, and the way we’re arranged, me in between them and Deb opposite (it’s a round table, our kitchen table), she practically has to throw herself across to grab hold of my arm. “Fix me another,” she says.

And here she switches the subject to Mark’s parents. “How’s the visit been going?” she says, her face all sombre.

“How are your folks holding up?”

Deb is very interested in Mark’s parents. They’re Holocaust survivors. And Deb has what can only be called an unhealthy obsession with the idea of that generation being gone. Don’t get me wrong. It’s important to me, too. All I’m saying is there’s healthy and unhealthy, and my wife, she gives the subject a *lot* of time.

“What can I say?” Mark says. “My mother’s a very sick woman. And my father, he tries to keep his spirits up. He’s a tough guy.”

“I’m sure,” I say. Then I look down at my drink, all serious, and give a shake of my head. “They really are amazing.”

“Who?” Mark says. “Fathers?”

I look back up and they’re all staring at me. “Survivors,” I say, realizing I jumped the gun.

“There’s good and bad,” Mark says. “Like anyone else.”

Lauren says, “The whole of Carmel Lake Village, it’s like a D.P. camp with a billiards room.”

“One tells the other, and they follow,” Mark says. “From Europe to New York, and now, for the end of their lives, again the same place.”

“Tell them that crazy story, Yuri,” Lauren says.

“Tell us,” Deb says.

“So you can picture my father,” Mark says. “In the old country, he went to *heder*, had the *peyes* and all that. But in America a classic *galusmonger*. He looks more like you than me. It’s not from him that I get this,” he says, pointing at his beard. “Shoshana and I—”

“We know,” I say.

“So my father. They’ve got a nice nine-hole course, a driving range, some greens for the practice putting. And my dad’s at the clubhouse. I go with him. He wants to work out in the gym, he says. Tells me I should come. Get some exercise. And he tells me”—and here Mark points at his feet, sliding a leg out from under the table so we can see his big black clodhoppers—“You can’t wear those Shabbos shoes on the treadmill. You need the sneakers. You know, sports shoes?” And I tell him, ‘I know what sneakers are. I didn’t forget my English any more than your Yiddish is gone.’ So he says, ‘*Ah shaynem dank dir in pupik.*’ Just to show me who’s who.”

“Tell them the point,” Lauren says.

“He’s sitting in the locker room, trying to pull a sock on, which is, at that age, basically the whole workout in itself. It’s no quick business. And I see, while I’m waiting, and I can’t believe it—I nearly pass out. The guy next to him, the number on his arm, it’s three before my father’s number. You know, in sequence.”

“What do you mean?” Deb says.

“I mean the number tattooed. It’s the same as my father’s camp number, digit for digit, but my father’s ends in an eight. And this guy’s, it ends in a five. That’s the only difference. I mean, they’re separated by two people. So I say, ‘Excuse me, sir.’ And the guy just says, ‘You with the Chabad? I don’t want anything but to be left alone. I already got candles at home.’ I tell him, ‘No. I’m not. I’m here visiting my father.’ And to my father I say, ‘Do you know this gentleman? Have you two met? I’d really like to introduce you, if you haven’t.’ And they look each other over for what, I promise you, is minutes. Actual minutes. It is—with *kavod* I say this, with respect for my father—but it is

like watching a pair of big beige manatees sitting on a bench, each with one sock on. They're just looking each other up and down, everything slow. And then my father says, 'I seen him. Seen him around.' The other guy, he says, 'Yes, I've seen.' 'You're both survivors,' I tell them. 'Look. The numbers.' And they look. 'They're the same,' I say. And they both hold out their arms to look at the little ashen tattoos. To my father I say, 'Do you get it? The same, except his—it's right ahead of yours. Look! Compare.' So they look. They compare." Mark's eyes are popping out of his head. "Think about it," he says. "Around the world, surviving the unsurvivable, these two old guys end up with enough money to retire to Carmel Lake and play golf every day. So I say to my dad, 'He's right ahead of you. Look, a five,' I say. 'And yours is an eight.' And my father says, 'All that means is he cut ahead of me in line. There same as here. This guy's a cutter. I just didn't want to say.' 'Blow it out your ear,' the other guy says. And that's it. Then they get back to putting on socks."

Deb looks crestfallen. She was expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate Trevor, to reaffirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms.

But me, I love that kind of story. I'm starting to take a real shine to these two, and not just because I'm suddenly feeling sloshed.

"Good story, Yuri," I say, copying his wife. "Yerucham, that one's got zing."

Yerucham hoists himself up from the table, looking proud. He checks the label of our white bread on the counter, making sure it's kosher. He takes a slice, pulls off the crust, and rolls the white part against the countertop with the palm of his hand, making a little ball. He comes over and pours himself a shot and throws it back. Then he eats that crazy dough ball. Just tosses it in his mouth, as if it's the bottom of his own personal punctuation mark—you know, to underline his story.

"Is that good?" I say.

"Try it," he says. He goes to the counter and pitches me a slice of white bread, and says, "But first pour yourself a shot."

I reach for the bottle and find that Deb's got her hands around it, and her head's bowed down, like the bottle is anchoring her, keeping her from tipping back.

"Are you O.K., Deb?" Lauren says.

"It's because it was funny," I say.

"Honey!" Deb says.

"She won't tell you, but she's a little obsessed with the Holocaust. That story—no offense, Mark—it's not what she had in mind."

I should leave it be, I know. But it's not like someone from Deb's high school is around every day offering insights. "It's like she's a survivor's kid, my wife. It's crazy, that education they give them. Her grandparents were all born in the Bronx, and here we are twenty minutes from downtown Miami but it's like it's 1937 and we live on the edge of Berlin."

"That's not it!" Deb says, openly defensive, her voice super high up in the register. "I'm not upset about that. It's the alcohol. All this alcohol. It's that and seeing Lauren. Seeing Shoshana, after all this time."

"Oh, she was always like this in high school," Shoshana says. "Sneak one drink, and she started to cry. You want to know what used to get her going, what would make her truly happy?" Shoshana says. "It was getting high. That's what always did it. Smoking up. It would make her laugh for hours and hours."

And, I tell you, I didn't see it coming. I'm as blindsided as Deb was by that numbers story.

"Oh, my God," Deb says, and she's pointing at me. "Look at my big bad secular husband. He really can't handle it. He can't handle his wife's having any history of naughtiness at all—Mr. Liberal Open-Minded." To me she says, "How much more chaste a wife can you dream of than a modern-day yeshiva girl who stayed a virgin until twenty-one? Honestly. What did you think Shoshana was going to say was so much fun?"

"Honestly-honestly?" I say. "I don't want to. It's embarrassing."

"Say it!" Deb says, positively glowing.

"Honestly, I thought you were going to say it was something like competing in the Passover Nut Roll, or making sponge cake. Something like that." I hang my head. And Shoshana and Deb are laughing so hard they can't breathe. They're grabbing at each other so that I can't tell if they're holding each other up or pulling each other down.

"I can't believe you told him about the nut roll," Shoshana says.

"And I can't believe," Deb says, "you just told my husband of twenty-two years how much we used to get high. I haven't touched a joint since before we were married," she says. "Have we, honey? Have we smoked since we got married?"

"No," I say. "It's been a very long time."

"So come on, Shosh. When was it? When was the last time you smoked?"

Now, I know I mentioned the beard on Mark. But I don't know if I mentioned how hairy a guy he is. That thing grows right up to his eyeballs. Like having eyebrows on top and bottom both. So when Deb asks the question, the two of them, Shosh and Yuri, are basically giggling like children, and I can tell, in the little part that shows, in the bit of skin I can see, that Mark's eyelids and earlobes are in full blush.

"When Shoshana said we drink to get through the days," Mark says, "she was kidding about the drinking."

"We don't drink much," Shoshana says.

"It's smoking that she means," he says.

"We still get high," Shoshana says. "I mean, all the time."

"Hasidim!" Deb screams. "You're not allowed!"

"Everyone does in Israel. It's like the sixties there," Mark says. "It's the highest country in the world. Worse than Holland and India and Thailand put together. Worse than anywhere, even Argentina—though they may have us tied."

"Well, maybe that's why the kids aren't interested in alcohol," I say.

"Do you want to get high now?" Deb says. And we all three look at her. Me, with surprise. And those two with straight longing.

"We didn't bring," Shoshana says. "Though it's pretty rare anyone at customs peeks under the wig."

"Maybe you guys can find your way into the glaucoma underground over at Carmel Lake," I say. "I'm sure that place is rife with it."

"That's funny," Mark says.

"I'm funny," I say, now that we're all getting on.

"We've got pot," Deb says.

"We do?" I say. "I don't think we do."

Deb looks at me and bites at the cuticle on her pinkie.

"You're not secretly getting high all these years?" I say. I really don't feel well at all.

"Our son," Deb says. "He has pot."

"Our son?"

"Trevor," she says.

"Yes," I say. "I know which one."

It's a lot for one day, that kind of news. And it feels to me a lot like betrayal. Like my wife's old secret and my son's new secret are bound up together, and I've somehow been wronged. Also, I'm not one to recover quickly from any kind of slight from Deb—not when there are people around. I really need to talk stuff out. Some time alone, even five minutes, would fix it. But it's super apparent that Deb doesn't need any time alone with me. She doesn't seem troubled at all. What she seems is focussed. She's busy at the counter, using a paper tampon wrapper to roll a joint. "It's an emergency-preparedness method we came up with in high school," Shoshana says. "The things teen-age girls will do when they're desperate."

"Do you remember that nice boy that we used to smoke in front of?" Deb says. "He'd just watch us. There'd be six or seven of us in a circle, girls and boys not touching—we were so religious. Isn't that crazy?" Deb is talking to me, as Shoshana and Mark don't think it's crazy at all. "The only place we touched was passing the joint, at the thumbs. And this boy, we had a nickname for him."

"Passover!" Shoshana yells.

"Yes," Deb says, "that's it. All we ever called him was Passover. Because every time the joint got to him he'd just pass it over to the next one of us. Passover Rand."

Shoshana takes the joint and lights it with a match, sucking deep. "It's a miracle when I remember anything these days," she says. "After my first was born, I forgot half of everything I knew. And then half again with each one after. Just last night, I woke up in a panic. I couldn't remember if there were fifty-two cards in a deck or fifty-two weeks in a year. The recall errors—I'm up all night worrying over them, just waiting for the Alzheimer's to kick in."

"It's not that bad," Mark tells her. "It's only everyone on one side of your family that has it."

"That's true," she says, passing her husband the joint. "The other side is blessed only with dementia. Anyway, which is it? Weeks or cards?"

"Same, same," Mark says, taking a hit.

When it's Deb's turn, she holds the joint and looks at me, like I'm supposed to nod or give her permission in some husbandly anxiety-absolving way. But instead of saying, "Go ahead," I pretty much bark at Deb. "When were you going to tell me about our son?"

At that, Deb takes a long hit, holding it deep, like an old pro.

"Really, Deb. How could you not tell me you knew?"

Deb walks over and hands me the joint. She blows the smoke in my face, not aggressive, just blowing.

"I've only known five days," she says. "I was going to tell you. I just wasn't sure how, or if I should talk to Trevy first, maybe give him a chance," she says.

"A chance to what?" I ask.

"To let him keep it as a secret between us. To let him know he could have my trust if he promised to stop."

"But he's the son," I say. "I'm the father. Even if it's a secret with him, it should be a double secret between me and you. I should always get to know—even if I pretend not to know—any secret with him."

"Do that double part again," Mark says. But I ignore him.

"That's how it's always been," I say to Deb. And, because I'm desperate and unsure, I follow it up with "Hasn't it?" I mean, we really trust each other, Deb and I. And I can't remember feeling like so much has hung on one question in a long time. I'm trying to read her face, and something complex is going on, some formulation. And then she sits right there on the floor, at my feet.

"Oh, my God," she says. "I'm so fucking high. Like instantly. Like, like," and then she starts laughing. "Like, Mike," she says. "Like, kike," she says, turning completely serious. "Oh, my God, I'm really messed up."

"We should have warned you," Shoshana says.

As she says this, I'm holding my first hit in, and already trying to fight off the paranoia that comes rushing behind that statement.

"Warned us what?" I say, my voice high, and the smoke still sweet in my nose.

"This isn't your father's marijuana," Mark says. "The THC levels. One hit of this new hydroponic stuff, it's like if maybe you smoked a pound of the stuff we had when we were kids."

"I feel it," I say. And I do. I sit down with Deb on the floor and take her hands. I feel nice. Though I'm not sure if I thought that or said it, so I try it again, making sure it's out loud. "I feel nice," I say.

"I found the pot in the laundry hamper," Deb says. "Leave it to a teen-age boy to think that's the best place to hide something. His clean clothes show up folded in his room, and it never occurs to him that someone empties that hamper. To him, it's the loneliest, most forgotten space in the world. Point is I found an Altoids tin at the bottom, stuffed full." Deb gives my hands a squeeze. "Are we good now?"

"We're good," I say. And it feels like we're a team again, like it's us against them. Because Deb says, "Are you sure you guys are allowed to smoke pot that comes out of a tin that held non-kosher candy? I really don't know if that's O.K." And it's just exactly the kind of thing I'm thinking.

"First of all, we're not eating it. We're smoking it," Shoshana says. "And even so, it's cold contact, so it's probably all right either way."

"'Cold contact'?" I say.

"It's a thing," Shoshana says. "Just forget about it and get up off the floor. Chop-chop." And they each offer us a hand and get us standing. "Come, sit back at the table," Shoshana says.

"I'll tell you," Mark says. "That's got to be the No. 1 most annoying thing about being Hasidic in the outside world. Worse than the rude stuff that gets said is the constant policing by civilians. Everywhere we go, people are checking on us. Ready to make some sort of liturgical citizen's arrest."

"Strangers!" Shoshana says. "Just the other day, on the way in from the airport. Yuri pulled into a McDonald's to pee, and some guy in a trucker hat came up to him as he went in and said, 'You allowed to go in there, brother?' Just like that."

"Not true!" Deb says.

"It's not that I don't see the fun in that," Mark says. "The allure. You know, we've got Mormons in Jerusalem. They've got a base there. A seminary. The rule is—the deal with the government—they can have their place, but they can't do outreach. No proselytizing. Anyway, I do some business with one of their guys."

"From Utah?" Deb says.

"From Idaho. His name is Jebediah, for real—do you believe it?"

"No, Yerucham and Shoshana," I say. "Jebediah is a very strange name." Mark rolls his eyes at that, handing me what's left of the joint. Without even asking, he gets up and gets the tin and reaches into his wife's purse for another tampon. And I'm a little less comfortable with this than with the white bread, with a guest coming into the house and smoking up all our son's pot. Deb must be thinking something similar, as she says, "After this story, I'm going to text Trev and make sure he's not coming back anytime soon."

"So when Jeb's at our house," Mark says, "when he comes by to eat and pours himself a Coke, I do that same religious-police thing. I can't resist. I say, 'Hey, Jeb, you allowed to have that?' People don't mind breaking their own rules, but they're real strict about someone else's."

"So are they allowed to have Coke?" Deb says.

"I don't know," Mark says. "All Jeb ever says back is 'You're thinking of coffee, and mind your own business, either way.'"

And then my Deb. She just can't help herself. "You heard about the scandal? The Mormons going through the Holocaust list."

"Like in 'Dead Souls,'" I say, explaining. "Like in the Gogol book, but real."

"Do you think we read that?" Mark says. "As Hasidim, or before?"

"They took the records of the dead," Deb says, "and they started running through them. They took these people who died as Jews and started converting them into Mormons. Converting the six million against their will."

"And this is what keeps an American Jew up at night?" Mark says.

"What does that mean?" Deb says.

"It means—" Mark says.

But Shoshana interrupts him. "Don't tell them what it means, Yuri. Just leave it unmeant."

"We can handle it," I say. "We are interested, even, in handling it."

"Your son, he seems like a nice boy."

"Do not talk about their son," Shoshana says.

"Do not talk about our son," Deb says. This time I reach across and lay a hand on her elbow.

"Talk," I say.

"He does not," Mark says, "seem Jewish to me."

"How can you say that?" Deb says. "What is wrong with you?" But Deb's upset draws less attention than my response. I'm laughing so hard that everyone turns toward me.

"What?" Mark says.

"Jewish to you?" I say. "The hat, the beard, the blocky shoes. A lot of pressure, I'd venture, to look Jewish to you. Like, say, maybe Ozzy Osbourne, or the guys from Kiss, like them telling Paul Simon, 'You do not look like a musician to me.'"

"It is not about the outfit," Mark says. "It's about building life in a vacuum. Do you know what I saw on the drive over here? Supermarket, supermarket, adult bookstore, supermarket, supermarket, firing range."

"Floridians do like their guns and porn," I say. "And their supermarkets."

"What I'm trying to say, whether you want to take it seriously or not, is that you can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime," Mark says. "It's about this obsession with the Holocaust as a necessary sign of identity. As your only educational tool. Because for the children there is no connection otherwise. Nothing Jewish that binds."

"Wow, that's offensive," Deb says. "And close-minded. There is such a thing as Jewish culture. One can live a culturally rich life."

"Not if it's supposed to be a Jewish life. Judaism is a religion. And with religion comes ritual. Culture is nothing. Culture is some construction of the modern world. It is not fixed; it is ever changing, and a weak way to bind generations. It's like taking two pieces of metal, and instead of making a nice weld you hold them together with glue."

"What does that even mean?" Deb says. "Practically."

Mark raises a finger to make his point, to educate. "In Jerusalem we don't need to busy ourselves with symbolic efforts to keep our memories in place. Because we live exactly as our parents lived before the war. And this serves us in all things, in our relationships, too, in our marriages and parenting."

"Are you saying your marriage is better than ours?" Deb says. "Really? Just because of the rules you live by?"

"I'm saying your husband would not have the long face, worried his wife is keeping secrets. And your son, he would not get into the business of smoking without first coming to you. Because the relationships, they are defined. They are clear."

"Because they are welded together," I say, "and not glued."

"Yes," he says. "And I bet Shoshana agrees." But Shoshana is distracted. She is working carefully with an apple and a knife. She is making a little apple pipe, all the tampons gone.

"Did your daughters?" Deb says. "If they tell you everything, did they come to you first, before they smoked?"

"Our daughters do not have the taint of the world we grew up in. They have no interest in such things."

"So you think," I say.

"So I know," he says. "Our concerns are different, our worries."

"Let's hear 'em," Deb says.

"Let's not," Shoshana says. "Honestly, we're drunk, we're high, we are having a lovely reunion."

"Every time you tell him not to talk," I say, "it makes me want to hear what he's got to say even more."

“Our concern,” Mark says, “is not the past Holocaust. It is the current one. The one that takes more than fifty per cent of the Jews of this generation. Our concern is intermarriage. It’s the Holocaust that’s happening now. You don’t need to be worrying about some Mormons doing hocus-pocus on the murdered six million. You need to worry that your son marries a Jew.”

“Oh, my God,” Deb says. “Are you calling intermarriage a Holocaust?”

“You ask my feeling, that’s my feeling. But this, no, it does not exactly apply to you, except in the example you set for the boy. Because you’re Jewish, your son, he is as Jewish as me. No more, no less.”

“I went to yeshiva, too, Born-Again Harry! You don’t need to explain the rules to me.”

“Did you just call me ‘Born-Again Harry’?” Mark asks.

“I did,” Deb says. And she and he, they start to laugh at that. They think ‘Born-Again Harry’ is the funniest thing they’ve heard in a while. And Shoshana laughs, and then I laugh, because laughter is infectious—and it is doubly so when you’re high.

“You don’t really think our family, my lovely, beautiful son, is headed for a Holocaust, do you?” Deb says.

“Because that would really cast a pall on this beautiful day.”

“No, I don’t,” Mark says. “It’s a lovely house and a lovely family, a beautiful home that you’ve made for that strapping young man. You’re a real *balabusta*,” Mark says.

“That makes me happy,” Deb says. And she tilts her head nearly ninety degrees to show her happy, sweet smile.

“Can I hug you? I’d really like to give you a hug.”

“No,” Mark says, though he says it really politely. “But you can hug my wife. How about that?”

“That’s a great idea,” Deb says. Shoshana gets up and hands the loaded apple to me, and I smoke from the apple as the two women hug a tight, deep, dancing-back-and-forth hug, tilting this way and that, so, once again, I’m afraid they might fall.

“It is a beautiful day,” I say.

“It is,” Mark says. And both of us look out the window, and both of us watch the perfect clouds in a perfect sky, so that we’re both staring out as the sky suddenly darkens. It is a change so abrupt that the ladies undo their hug to watch.

“It’s like that here,” Deb says. And the clouds open up and torrential tropical rain drops straight down, battering. It is loud against the roof, and loud against the windows, and the fronds of the palm trees bend, and the floaties in the pool jump as the water boils.

Shoshana goes to the window. And Mark passes Deb the apple and goes to the window. “Really, it’s always like this here?” Shoshana says.

“Sure,” I say. “Every day. Stops as quick as it starts.”

And both of them have their hands pressed up against the window. And they stay like that for some time, and when Mark turns around, harsh guy, tough guy, we see that he is weeping.

“You do not know,” he says. “I forget what it’s like to live in a place rich with water. This is a blessing above all others.”

“If you had what we had,” I say.

“Yes,” he says, wiping his eyes.

“Can we go out?” Shoshana says. “In the rain?”

“Of course,” Deb says. Then Shoshana tells me to close my eyes. Only me. And I swear I think she’s going to be stark naked when she calls, “Open up.”

She’s taken off her wig is all, and she’s wearing one of Trev’s baseball caps in its place.

“I’ve only got the one wig this trip,” she says. “If Trev won’t mind.”

“He won’t mind,” Deb says. And this is how the four of us find ourselves in the back yard, on a searingly hot day, getting pounded by all this cool, cool rain. It’s just about the best feeling in the world. And, I have to say, Shoshana looks twenty years younger in that hat.

We do not talk in the rain. We are too busy frolicking and laughing and jumping around. And that’s how it happens that I’m holding Mark’s hand and sort of dancing, and Deb is holding Shoshana’s hand, and they’re doing their own kind of jig. And when I take Deb’s hand, though neither Mark nor Shoshana is touching the other, somehow we’ve formed a broken circle. We’ve started dancing our own kind of hora in the rain.

It is the silliest and freest and most glorious I can remember feeling in years. Who would think that’s what I’d be saying with these strict, suffocatingly austere people visiting our house? And then my Deb, my love, once again she is thinking what I’m thinking, and she says, face up into the rain, all of us spinning, “Are you sure this is O.K., Shoshana? That it’s not mixed dancing? I don’t want anyone feeling bad after.”

“We’ll be just fine,” Shoshana says. “We will live with the consequences.” The question slows us, and stops us,

though no one has yet let go.

"It's like the old joke," I say. Without waiting for anyone to ask which one, I say, "Why don't Hasidim have sex standing up?"

"Why?" Shoshana says.

"Because it might lead to mixed dancing."

Deb and Shoshana pretend to be horrified as we let go of hands, as we recognize that the moment is over, the rain disappearing as quickly as it came. Mark stands there staring into the sky, lips pressed tight. "That joke is very, very old," he says. "And mixed dancing makes me think of mixed nuts, and mixed grill, and *insalata mista*. The sound of 'mixed dancing' has made me wildly hungry. And I'm going to panic if the only kosher thing in the house is that loaf of bleached American bread."

"You have the munchies," I say.

"Diagnosis correct," he says.

Deb starts clapping at that, tiny claps, her hands held to her chest in prayer. She says to him, absolutely beaming, "You will not even believe what riches await."

The four of us stand in the pantry, soaking wet, hunting through the shelves and dripping on the floor. "Have you ever seen such a pantry?" Shoshana says, reaching her arms out. "It's gigantic." It is indeed large, and it is indeed stocked, an enormous amount of food, and an enormous selection of sweets, befitting a home that is often host to a swarm of teen-age boys.

"Are you expecting a nuclear winter?" Shoshana says.

"I'll tell you what she's expecting," I say. "You want to know how Holocaust-obsessed she really is? I mean, to what degree?"

"To no degree," Deb says. "We are done with the Holocaust."

"Tell us," Shoshana says.

"She's always plotting our secret hiding place," I say.

"No kidding," Shoshana says.

"Like, look at this. At the pantry, with a bathroom next to it, and the door to the garage. If you sealed it all up—like put drywall at the entrance to the den—you'd never suspect. If you covered that door inside the garage up good with, I don't know—if you hung your tools in front of it and hid hinges behind, maybe leaned the bikes and the mower against it, you'd have this closed area, with running water and a toilet and all this food. I mean, if someone sneaked into the garage to replenish things, you could rent out the house. Put in another family without their having any idea."

"Oh, my God," Shoshana says. "My short-term memory may be gone from having all those children—"

"And from the smoking," I say.

"And from that, too. But I remember from when we were kids," Shoshana says, turning to Deb. "You were always getting me to play games like that. To pick out spaces. And even worse, even darker—"

"Don't," Deb says.

"I know what you're going to say," I tell her, and I'm honestly excited. "The game, yes? She played that crazy game with you?"

"No," Deb says. "Enough. Let it go."

And Mark—who is utterly absorbed in studying kosher certifications, who is tearing through hundred-calorie snack packs and eating handfuls of roasted peanuts, and who has said nothing since we entered the pantry except "What's a Fig Newman?"—he stops and says, "I want to play this game."

"It's not a game," Deb says.

And I'm happy to hear her say that, as it's just what I've been trying to get her to admit for years. That it's not a game. That it's dead serious, and a kind of preparation, and an active pathology that I prefer not to indulge.

"It's the Anne Frank game," Shoshana says. "Right?"

Seeing how upset my wife is, I do my best to defend her. I say, "No, it's not a game. It's just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank."

"How do we play this non-game?" Mark says. "What do we do?"

"It's the Righteous Gentile game," Shoshana says.

"It's Who Will Hide Me?" I say.

"In the event of a second Holocaust," Deb says, giving in. "It's a serious exploration, a thought experiment that we engage in."

"That you play," Shoshana says.

"That, in the event of an American Holocaust, we sometimes talk about which of our Christian friends would hide

us.”

“I don’t get it,” Mark says.

“Of course you do,” Shoshana says. “It’s like this. If there was a Shoah, if it happened again—say we were in Jerusalem, and it’s 1941 and the Grand Mufti got his way, what would Jebediah do?”

“What could he do?” Mark says.

“He could hide us. He could risk his life and his family’s and everyone’s around him. That’s what the game is: would he—for real—would he do that for you?”

“He’d be good for that, a Mormon,” Mark says. “Forget this pantry. They have to keep a year of food stored in case of the Rapture, or something like that. Water, too. A year of supplies. Or maybe it’s that they have sex through a sheet. No, wait. I think that’s supposed to be us.”

“All right,” Deb says. “Let’s not play. Really, let’s go back to the kitchen. I can order in from the glatt kosher place. We can eat outside, have a real dinner and not just junk.”

“No, no,” Mark says. “I’ll play. I’ll take it seriously.”

“So would the guy hide you?” I say.

“The kids, too?” Mark says. “I’m supposed to pretend that in Jerusalem he’s got a hidden motel or something where he can put the twelve of us?”

“Yes,” Shoshana says. “In their seminary or something. Sure.”

Mark thinks about this for a long, long time. He eats Fig Newmans and considers, and you can tell that he’s taking it seriously—serious to the extreme.

“Yes,” Mark says, looking choked up. “Jeb would do that for us. He would risk it all.”

Shoshana nods. “Now you go,” she says to us. “You take a turn.”

“But we don’t know any of the same people anymore,” Deb says. “We usually just talk about the neighbors.”

“Our across-the-street neighbors,” I tell them. “They’re the perfect example. Because the husband, Mitch, he would hide us. I know it. He’d lay down his life for what’s right. But that wife of his.”

“Yes,” Deb says. “Mitch would hide us, but Gloria, she’d buckle. When he was at work one day, she’d turn us in.”

“You could play against yourselves,” Shoshana says. “What if one of you wasn’t Jewish? Would you hide the other?”

“I’ll do it,” I say. “I’ll be the Gentile, because I could pass best. A grown woman with an ankle-length denim skirt in her closet—they’d catch you in a flash.”

“Fine,” Deb says. And I stand up straight, put my shoulders back, like maybe I’m in a lineup. I stand there with my chin raised so my wife can study me. So she can decide if her husband really has what it takes. Would I have the strength, would I care enough—and it is not a light question, not a throwaway question—to risk my life to save her and our son?

Deb stares, and Deb smiles, and gives me a little push to my chest. “Of course he would,” Deb says. She takes the half stride that’s between us and gives me a tight hug that she doesn’t release. “Now you,” Deb says. “You and Yuri go.”

“How does that even make sense?” Mark says. “Even for imagining.”

“Sh-h-h,” Shoshana says. “Just stand over there and be a good Gentile while I look.”

“But if I weren’t Jewish I wouldn’t be me.”

“That’s for sure,” I say.

“He agrees,” Mark says. “We wouldn’t even be married. We wouldn’t have kids.”

“Of course you can imagine it,” Shoshana says. “Look,” she says, and goes over and closes the pantry door. “Here we are, caught in South Florida for the second Holocaust. You’re not Jewish, and you’ve got the three of us hiding in your pantry.”

“But look at me!” he says.

“I’ve got a fix,” I say. “You’re a background singer for ZZ Top. You know that band?”

Deb lets go of me so she can give my arm a slap.

“Really,” Shoshana says. “Look at the three of us like it’s your house and we’re your charges, locked up in this room.”

“And what’re you going to do while I do that?” Mark says.

“I’m going to look at you looking at us. I’m going to imagine.”

“O.K.,” he says. “*Nu*, get to it. I will stand, you imagine.”

And that’s what we do, the four of us. We stand there playing our roles, and we really get into it. I can see Deb seeing him, and him seeing us, and Shoshana just staring at her husband.

We stand there so long I can’t tell how much time has passed, though the light changes ever so slightly—the sun

outside again dimming—in the crack under the pantry door.

“So would I hide you?” he says. And for the first time that day he reaches out, as my Deb would, and puts his hand to his wife’s hand. “Would I, Shoshi?”

And you can tell that Shoshana is thinking of her kids, though that’s not part of the scenario. You can tell that she’s changed part of the imagining. And she says, after a pause, yes, but she’s not laughing. She says yes, but to him it sounds as it does to us, so that he is now asking and asking. But wouldn’t I? Wouldn’t I hide you? Even if it was life and death—if it would spare you, and they’d kill me alone for doing it? Wouldn’t I?

Shoshana pulls back her hand.

She does not say it. And he does not say it. And of the four of us no one will say what cannot be said—that this wife believes her husband would not hide her. What to do? What will come of it? And so we stand like that, the four of us trapped in that pantry. Afraid to open the door and let out what we’ve locked inside. ♦

**Alice Munro**

## **Amundsen**

By [Alice Munro](#)

Published in *The New Yorker*, August 27, 2012

On the bench outside the station, I sat and waited. The station had been open when the train arrived, but now it was locked. Another woman sat at the end of the bench, holding between her knees a string bag full of parcels wrapped in oiled paper. Meat—raw meat. I could smell it.

Across the tracks was the electric train, empty, waiting.

No other passengers showed up, and after a while the stationmaster stuck his head out the station window and called, “San.” At first I thought he was calling a man’s name, Sam. And another man wearing some kind of official outfit did come around the end of the building. He crossed the tracks and boarded the electric car. The woman with the parcels stood up and followed him, so I did the same. There was a burst of shouting from across the street, and the doors of a dark-shingled flat-roofed building opened, letting loose several men, who were jamming caps on their heads and banging lunch buckets against their thighs. By the noise they were making, you’d have thought the car was going to run away from them at any minute. But when they settled on board nothing happened. The car sat while they counted one another and worked out who was missing and told the driver that he couldn’t go yet. Then somebody remembered that the missing man hadn’t been around all day. The car started, though I couldn’t tell if the driver had been listening to any of this, or cared.

The men got off at a sawmill in the bush—it wouldn’t have been more than ten minutes’ walk—and shortly after that the lake came into view, covered with snow. A long, white, wooden building in front of it. The woman readjusted her packages and stood up, and I followed. The driver again called “San,” and the doors opened. A couple of women were waiting to get on. They greeted the woman with the meat, and she said that it was a raw day.

All avoided looking at me as I climbed down behind the meat woman.

The doors banged together, and the train started back.

Then there was silence, the air like ice. Brittle-looking birch trees with black marks on their white bark, and some small, untidy evergreens, rolled up like sleepy bears. The frozen lake not level but mounded along the shore, as if the waves had turned to ice in the act of falling. And the building, with its deliberate rows of windows and its glassed-in porches at either end. Everything austere and northerly, black-and-white under the high dome of clouds. So still, so immense an enchantment.

But the birch bark not white after all, as you got closer. Grayish yellow, grayish blue, gray.

“Where you heading?” the meat woman called to me. “Visiting hours are over at three.”

“I’m not a visitor,” I said. “I’m the new teacher.”

“Well, they won’t let you in the front door, anyway,” the woman said with some satisfaction. “You better come along with me. Don’t you have a suitcase?”

“The stationmaster said he’d bring it later.”

“The way you were just standing there—looked like you were lost.”

I said that I had stopped because it was so beautiful.

“Some might think so. ’Less they were too sick or too busy.”

Nothing more was said until we entered the kitchen, at the far end of the building. I did not get a chance to look around me, because attention was drawn to my boots.

“You better get those off before they track the floor.”

I wrestled off the boots—there was no chair to sit down on—and set them on the mat where the woman had put hers.

“Pick them up and bring them with you. I don’t know where they’ll be putting you. You better keep your coat on, too. There’s no heating in the cloakroom.”

No heat, no light, except what came through a little window I could not reach. It was like being punished at school.

Sent to the cloakroom. Yes. The same smell of winter clothing that never really dried out, of boots soaked through to dirty socks, unwashed feet.

I climbed up on the bench but still could not see out. On the shelf where caps and scarves were thrown, I found a bag with some figs and dates in it. Somebody must have stolen them and stashed them here to take home. All of a sudden, I was hungry. Nothing to eat since morning, except for a dry cheese sandwich on the Ontario Northland. I considered the ethics of stealing from a thief. But the figs would catch in my teeth and betray me.

I got myself down just in time. Somebody was entering the cloakroom.

Not one of the kitchen help but a schoolgirl in a bulky winter coat, with a scarf over her hair. She came in with a rush—books dropped on the bench so that they scattered on the floor, scarf snatched off so that her hair sprang out in a tangle, and at the same time, it seemed, boots kicked loose and sent skittering across the floor. Nobody had got hold of her, apparently, to make her take them off at the kitchen door.

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to hit you,” the girl said. “It’s so dark in here after outside, you don’t know what you’re doing. Aren’t you freezing? Are you waiting for somebody to get off work?”

“I’m waiting to see Dr. Fox.”

“Well, you won’t have to wait long. I just rode from town with him. You’re not sick, are you? If you’re sick you can’t come here. You have to see him in town.”

“I’m the new teacher.”

“Are you? Are you from Toronto?”

“Yes.”

There was a certain pause, perhaps of respect.

But no. An examination of my coat.

“That’s really nice. What’s that fur on the collar?”

“Persian lamb. Actually, it’s imitation.”

“Could have fooled me. I don’t know what they put you in here for—it’ll freeze your butt off. Excuse me. You want to see the doctor, I can show you the way. I know where everything is. I’ve lived here practically since I was born. My mother runs the kitchen. My name is Mary. What’s yours?”

“Vivi. Vivien.”

“If you’re a teacher, shouldn’t it be Miss? Miss what?”

“Miss Hyde.”

“Tan your hide,” she said. “Sorry, I just thought that up. I’d like it if you could be my teacher but I have to go to school in town. It’s the stupid rules. Because I’ve not got TB.”

She was leading me, while she talked, through the door at the far end of the cloakroom, then along a regular hospital corridor. Waxed linoleum, dull green paint, an antiseptic smell.

“Now you’re here, maybe I’ll get Reddy to let me switch.”

“Who is Reddy?”

“Reddy Fox. It’s out of a book. Me and Anabel just started calling Dr. Fox that.”

“Who is Anabel?”

“Nobody now. She’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. It happens around here. I’m in high school this year. Anabel never really got to go to school at all. When I was just in public school, Reddy got the teacher to let me stay home a lot, so I could keep her company.” She stopped at a half-opened door and whistled.

“Hey. I brought the teacher.”

A man’s voice said, “O.K., Mary. Enough out of you for one day.”

She sauntered away and left me facing a spare man of ordinary height, whose reddish-fair hair was cut very short and glistened in the artificial light from the hallway.

“You’ve met Mary,” he said. “She has a lot to say for herself. She won’t be in your class, so you won’t have to undergo that every day. People either take to her or they don’t.”

He struck me as between ten and fifteen years older than me, and at first he talked to me the way an older man would. A preoccupied future employer. He asked about my trip, about the arrangements for my suitcase. He wanted

to know how I thought I would like living up here in the woods, after Toronto, whether I would be bored. Not in the least, I said, and added that it was beautiful.

“It’s like—it’s like being inside a Russian novel.”

He looked at me attentively for the first time.

“Is it really? Which Russian novel?”

His eyes were a bright grayish blue. One eyebrow had risen, like a little peaked cap.

It was not that I hadn’t read Russian novels. I had read some all the way through and some only partway. But because of that eyebrow, and his amused but confrontational expression, I could not remember any title except “War and Peace.” I did not want to say that, because it was the one that anybody would remember.

“ ‘War and Peace.’ ”

“Well, it’s only the peace we’ve got here, I’d say. But if it was the war you were hankering after I suppose you would have joined one of those women’s outfits and got yourself overseas.”

I was angry and humiliated, because I had not really been showing off. Or not only showing off. I had wanted to explain what a wonderful effect this scenery had on me.

He was evidently the sort of person who posed questions that were traps for you to fall into.

“I guess I was really expecting a sort of old-lady teacher come out of the woodwork,” he said, in slight apology.

“You didn’t study to be a teacher, did you? What were you planning to do once you got your B.A.?”

“Work on my M.A.,” I said curtly.

“So what changed your mind?”

“I thought I should earn some money.”

“Sensible idea. Though I’m afraid you won’t earn much here. Sorry to pry. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t going to run off and leave us in the lurch. Not planning to get married, are you?”

“No.”

“All right, all right. You’re off the hook now. Didn’t discourage you, did I?”

I had turned my head away.

“No.”

“Go down the hall to Matron’s office, and she’ll tell you all you need to know. Just try not to get a cold. I don’t suppose you have any experience with tuberculosis?”

“Well, I’ve read—”

“I know. I know. You’ve read ‘The Magic Mountain.’ ” Another trap sprung, and he seemed restored. “Things have moved on a bit from that, I hope. Here, I’ve got some things I’ve written out about the kids here and what I was thinking you might try to do with them. Sometimes I’d rather express myself in writing. Matron will give you the lowdown.”

*Usual notions of pedagogy out of place here. Some of these children will reënter the world or system and some will not. Better not a lot of stress. That is, testing, memorizing, classifying nonsense.*

*Disregard grade business entirely. Those who need to can catch up later on or do without. Actually very simple skill set of facts, etc., necessary for going into the world. What about Superior Children, so called? Disgusting term. If they are smart in academic way, they can easily catch up.*

*Forget rivers of South America, likewise Magna Carta.*

*Drawing, music, stories preferred.*

*Games O.K., but watch for overexcitement or too much competitiveness.*

*Challenge to walk the line between stress and boredom. Boredom curse of hospitalization.*

*If Matron can’t supply what you need, sometimes janitor will have it stashed away somewhere.*

*Bon voyage.*

I had not been there a week before all the events of the first day seemed unique and unlikely. The kitchen, the kitchen cloakroom where the workers kept their clothes and concealed their thefts were rooms I hadn’t seen again and probably wouldn’t. The doctor’s office was similarly out of bounds, Matron’s room being the proper place for all inquiries, complaints, and ordinary arrangements. Matron herself was short and stout, pink-faced, with rimless glasses and heavy breathing. Whatever you asked for seemed to astonish her and cause difficulties, but eventually it was seen to or provided. Sometimes she ate in the nurses’ dining room, where she was served a special junket, and cast a pall. Mostly she kept to her own quarters.

Besides Matron, there were three other registered nurses, not one of them within thirty years of my age. They had come out of retirement to serve, doing their wartime duty. Then, there were the nurses’ aides, who were my age or even younger, most of them married or engaged or working on being engaged, generally to men in the forces. They talked all the time if Matron and the nurses weren’t there. They didn’t have the least interest in me. They didn’t want

to know what Toronto was like, though some of them knew people who had gone there on their honeymoon, and they did not care how my teaching was going or what I had done before. It wasn't that they were rude—they passed me the butter (it was called butter but it was really orange-streaked margarine, colored in the kitchen) and they warned me off the shepherd's pie, which they said had groundhog in it. It was just that whatever happened in places they didn't know had to be discounted; it got in their way and under their skin. Every time the news came on the radio, they switched it to music. *Dance with a dolly with a hole in her stockin'* . . .

Yet they were in awe of Dr. Fox, partly because he had read so many books. They also said that there was nobody like him for tearing a strip off you if he felt like it.

I couldn't figure out if they thought there was a connection between reading a lot of books and tearing a strip off.

The number of students who showed up varied. Fifteen, or down to half a dozen. Mornings only, from nine o'clock till noon. Children were kept away if their temperature had risen or if they were undergoing tests. When they were present, they were quiet and tractable but not particularly involved. They had caught on right away that this was a pretend school, where they were free of all requirement to learn anything, just as they were free of times tables and memory work. This freedom didn't make them uppity, or lazy in any troublesome way, just docile and dreamy.

They sang rounds softly. They played X's and O's. There was a shadow of defeat over the improvised classroom. I decided to take the doctor at his word. Or some of his words, such as those about boredom being the enemy.

In the janitor's cubbyhole, I had seen a globe. I asked to have it brought out. I started on simple geography. The oceans, the continents, the climates. Why not the winds and the currents? The countries and the cities? The Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn? Why not, after all, the rivers of South America?

Some children had learned such things before, but they had nearly forgotten them. The world beyond the lake and the forest had dropped away. The lessons seemed to cheer them up, as if they were making friends again with whatever they used to know. I didn't dump everything on them at once, of course. And I had to go easy with the ones who had never learned such things because they had got sick too soon.

But that was all right. It could be a game. I separated them into teams, got them calling out answers while I darted here and there with the pointer. I was careful not to let the excitement go on too long. But one day the doctor walked in, fresh from morning surgery, and I was caught. I could not stop things cold, but I tried to dampen the competition. He sat down, looking somewhat tired and withdrawn. He made no objection. After a few minutes, he joined in the game, calling out quite ridiculous answers, names that were not just mistaken but imaginary. Then gradually he let his voice die down. Down, down, first to a mumble, then to a whisper, then to complete inaudibility. In this way, with this absurdity, he took control of the room. The whole class took to mouthing, in order to imitate him. Their eyes were fixed on his lips.

Suddenly he let out a low growl that had them all laughing.

"Why the deuce is everybody looking at me? Is that what Miss Hyde teaches you? To stare at people who aren't bothering anybody?"

Most laughed, but some couldn't stop watching him even for that. They were hungry for further antics.

"Go on. Go off and misbehave yourselves somewhere else."

He apologized to me for breaking up the class. I began to explain to him my reasons for making this more like real school.

"Though I do agree with you about stress," I said earnestly. "I agree with what you said in your instructions. I just thought—"

"What instructions? Oh, that was just some bits and pieces that went through my head. I never meant them to be set in stone."

"I mean as long as they're not too sick—"

"I'm sure you're right. I don't suppose it matters."

"Otherwise they seem sort of listless."

"There's no need to make a song and dance about it," he said, and walked away.

Then turned to make a barely halfhearted apology.

"We can have a talk about it some other time."

That time, I thought, would never come. He evidently thought me a bother and a fool.

I discovered at lunch, from the aides, that somebody had not survived an operation that morning. So my anger turned out not to be justified, and for that reason I felt even more of a fool.

Every afternoon was free. My pupils went down for long naps, and I sometimes felt like doing the same. But my room was cold, and the bedcovers were thin—surely people with tuberculosis needed something cozier.

I, of course, did not have tuberculosis. Maybe they skimped on provisions for people like me.

I was drowsy but couldn't sleep. Overhead there was the rumble of bed carts being wheeled to the porches for the

icy afternoon exposure.

The building, the trees, the lake were never again the same to me as they had been on that first day, when I was caught by their mystery and authority. On that day I had believed myself invisible. Now it seemed as if that were never true.

There's the teacher. What's she up to?

She's looking at the lake.

What for?

Nothing better to do.

Some people are lucky.

Once in a while I skipped lunch, even though it was part of my salary, and went in to Amundsen, where I ate in a coffee shop. The coffee was Postum and the best bet for a sandwich was tinned salmon, if they had any. The chicken salad had to be examined carefully for bits of skin and gristle. Nevertheless, I felt more at ease there, as if nobody would know who I was.

About that I was probably mistaken.

The coffee shop didn't have a ladies' room, so you had to go next door to the hotel, then past the entrance to the beer parlor, always dark and noisy and giving out a smell of beer and whiskey, a blast of cigarette and cigar smoke fit to knock you down. But the loggers, the men from the sawmill, would never yelp at you the way the soldiers and the airmen in Toronto did. They were deep in a world of men, bawling out their own stories, not here to look for women. Possibly more eager, in fact, to get away from that company now or forever.

The doctor had an office on the main street. Just a small one-story building, so he lived elsewhere. I had picked up from the aides that there was no Mrs. Fox. On the only side street, I found a house that might have belonged to him—a stucco-covered house, with a dormer window above the front door, books stacked on the sill of that window. There was a bleak but orderly look to the place, a suggestion of the minimal but precise comfort that a lone man—a regulated lone man—might contrive.

The town school was at the end of that residential street. One afternoon I spotted Mary in the yard there, taking part in a snowball fight. It seemed to be girls against boys. When she saw me, she cried out loudly, "Hey, Teach," and gave the balls in both hands a random toss, then ambled across the street. "See you tomorrow," she called over her shoulder, more or less as a warning that nobody was to follow.

"You on your way home?" she said. "Me, too. I used to ride in Reddy's car, but he's got too late leaving. What do you do, take the tram?"

I said yes, and Mary said, "Oh, I can show you the shortcut and you can save your money. The bush road."

She took me up a narrow but passable lane that ran above the town, through the woods, and past the sawmill.

"This is the way Reddy goes," she said.

After the sawmill, beneath us, were some ugly cuts in the woods and a few shacks, apparently inhabited, because they had woodpiles and clotheslines and rising smoke. From one of them, a big wolfish dog ran out with a great display of barking and snarling.

"You shut your face!" Mary yelled. In no time she had packed and flung a snowball, which caught the animal between the eyes. It whirled around, and she had another snowball ready to hit it in the rump. A woman in an apron came out and shouted, "You could've killed him."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I'll get my old man after you."

"That'll be the day. Your old man can't hit a shithouse."

The dog followed at a distance, with some insincere threatening.

"I can take care of any dog, don't worry," Mary said. "I bet I could take care of a bear if we ran into one."

"Don't bears tend to hibernate at this time of year?"

I had been quite scared by the dog but affected carelessness.

"Yeah, but you never know. One came out early once, and it got into the garbage down at the San. My mom turned around and there it was. Reddy got his gun and shot it. Reddy used to take me and Anabel out on the sled, and sometimes other kids, too, and he had a special whistle that scared off bears. It was pitched too high for human ears."

"Really. What did it look like?"

"It wasn't that kind of whistle. I meant one he could do with his mouth."

I thought of his performance in the classroom.

"I don't know, maybe he just said that to keep Anabel from getting scared. She couldn't ride on the sled. He had to pull her on a toboggan. Sometimes I'd jump on the toboggan, too, and he'd say, 'What's the matter with this thing?'"

It weighs a ton.' Then he'd try to turn around quick and catch me, but he never did. And he'd ask Anabel, 'What makes it so heavy? What did you have for breakfast?' But she never told. She was the best friend I ever will have." "What about the girls at school? Aren't they friends?"

"I just hang around with them when there's nobody else. They're nothing. Anabel and me had our birthdays in the same month. June. Our eleventh birthday, Reddy took us out on the lake in a boat. He taught us swimming. Well, me. He always had to hold Anabel—she couldn't really learn. Once he went swimming way out by himself, and we filled his shoes up with sand. And then, our twelfth birthday, we couldn't go anywhere like that, but we went to his house and had a cake. She couldn't eat even a little bit of it, so he took us in his car and we threw pieces out the window for the seagulls. They were fighting and screaming. We were laughing ourselves crazy, and he had to stop and hold Anabel so she wouldn't have a hemorrhage.

"And after that," she said, "after that I wasn't allowed to see her anymore. My mom never wanted me to hang around with kids that had TB anyway. But Reddy talked her into it. He said he'd stop it when he had to. So he did, and I got mad. But she wouldn't have been any fun anymore—she was too sick. I'd show you her grave but there isn't anything to mark it yet. Reddy and me are going to make something when he gets time. If we'd have gone straight along on the road, instead of turning where we did, we would have come to her graveyard."

By this time we were down on level ground, approaching the San.

She said, "Oh, I almost forgot," and pulled out a fistful of tickets.

"For Valentine's Day. We're putting on this play at school and it's called 'Pinafore.' I got all these to sell and you can be my first sale. I'm in it."

I was right about the house in Amundsen being where the doctor lived. He took me there for supper. The invitation seemed to come rather on the spur of the moment when he bumped into me in the hall one day. Perhaps he had an uneasy memory of saying that we would get together to talk about teaching ideas.

The evening he proposed was the one for which I had bought a ticket for "Pinafore." I told him that, and he said, "Well, I did, too. It doesn't mean we have to show up."

"I sort of feel as if I promised her."

"Well, now you can sort of un-promise her. It will be dreadful, believe me."

I did as he said, though I did not see Mary to tell her. I waited where he had instructed me to wait, on the porch outside the front door of the San. I was wearing my best dress, a dark-green crêpe, with little pearl buttons and a real lace collar, and had rammed my feet into suède high-heeled shoes inside my snow boots. I waited past the time he'd mentioned—worried, first, that Matron would come out of her office and spot me, and, second, that he had forgotten all about it.

But then he came along, buttoning up his overcoat, and apologized.

"Always a few bits and bobs to clear up," he said, and led me around the building to his car. "Are you steady?" he asked, and when I said yes—despite the suède shoes—he did not offer his arm.

His car was old and shabby, as most cars were those days. It didn't have a heater. When he said that we were going to his house, I was relieved. I could not see how we would manage with the crowd at the hotel, and I had hoped not to have to make do with the sandwiches at the café.

At his house, he told me not to take off my coat until the place had warmed up a bit. And he got busy at once making a fire in the woodstove.

"I'm your janitor and your cook and your server," he said. "It'll soon be comfortable here, and the meal won't take me long. Don't offer to help. I prefer to work alone. Where would you like to wait? If you want to, you could look over the books in the front room. It shouldn't be too unbearable in there with your coat on. The light switch is just inside the door. You don't mind if I listen to the news? It's a habit I've got into."

I went into the front room, feeling as if I had more or less been ordered to, leaving the kitchen door open. He came and closed it, saying, "Just until we get a bit of warmth in the kitchen," and went back to the sombrely dramatic, almost religious voice of the CBC, giving out the news of the war.

There were quantities of books to look at. Not just on bookshelves but on tables and chairs and windowsills and piled on the floor. After I had examined several of them, I concluded that he favored buying books in batches and probably belonged to several book clubs. The Harvard Classics. The histories of Will Durant. Fiction and poetry seemed in short supply, though there were a few surprising children's classics. Books on the American Civil War, the South African War, the Napoleonic Wars, the Peloponnesian War, the campaigns of Julius Caesar. Explorations of the Amazon and the Arctic. Shackleton caught in the ice. John Franklin's doomed expedition, the Donner Party, and the Lost Tribes, Newton, and alchemy, the secrets of the Hindu Kush. Books suggesting someone anxious to *know*, to possess great scattered lumps of knowledge. Perhaps not someone whose tastes were firm and exacting. So it was possible that when he had asked me, "Which Russian novel?," he had not had so solid a platform as I'd

thought.

When he called “Ready,” and I opened the door, I was armed with this new skepticism.

I said, “Who do you agree with, Naphta or Settembrini?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“In ‘The Magic Mountain.’ Do you like Naphta best, or Settembrini?”

“To be honest, I’ve always thought they were a pair of windbags. You?”

“Settembrini is more humane, but Naphta is more interesting.”

“They tell you that in school?”

“I never read it in school,” I said coolly.

He gave me a quick look, that eyebrow raised.

“Pardon me. If there’s anything in there that interests you, feel free. Please feel free to come down here and read in your time off. There’s an electric heater I could set up, since I imagine you are not experienced with woodstoves. Shall we think about that? I can rustle you up an extra key.”

“Thank you.”

Pork chops, instant mashed potatoes, canned peas. Dessert was an apple pie from the bakery, which would have been better if he’d thought to heat it up.

He asked me about my life in Toronto, my university courses, my family. He said that he supposed I had been brought up on the straight and narrow.

“My grandfather is a liberal clergyman, sort of in the Paul Tillich mold.”

“And you? Liberal little Christian granddaughter?”

“No.”

“Touché. Do you think I’m rude?”

“That depends. If you are interviewing me as an employer, no.”

“So I’ll go on. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“In the forces, I suppose.”

I said, “In the Navy.” That struck me as a good choice, to account for my not knowing where he was and not receiving regular letters.

The doctor got up and fetched the tea.

“What sort of boat is he on?”

“Corvette.” Another good choice. After a while, I could have him torpedoed, as was always happening to corvettes.

“Brave fellow. Milk or sugar in your tea?”

“Neither, thanks.”

“That’s good, because I haven’t got any. You know, it shows when you’re lying—you get red in the face.”

If I hadn’t got red before, I did then. My flush rose from my feet up, and sweat trickled down under my arms. I hoped the dress would not be ruined.

“I always go hot when I drink tea.”

“Oh, I see.”

Things could not get any worse, so I resolved to face him down. I changed the subject on him, asking about how he operated on people. Did he remove lungs, as I had heard?

He could have answered that with more teasing, more superiority—possibly this was his notion of flirtation—and I believe that if he had done so I would have put on my coat and walked out into the cold. Perhaps he knew that. He began to talk about thoracoplasty. Of course, removal of the lobe had also become popular recently.

“But don’t you lose some patients?” I said.

He must have thought it was time to joke again.

“But of course. Running off and hiding in the bush—we don’t know where they get to. Jumping in the lake. Or did you mean don’t they die? There are cases where surgery doesn’t work, yes.”

But great things were coming, he said. The surgery he went in for was going to become as obsolete as bloodletting. A new drug was on the way. Streptomycin. Already used in trial. There were some problems—naturally, there would be problems. Toxicity of the nervous system. But a way would be found to deal with that.

“Put the sawbones like me out of business.”

He washed the dishes; I dried. He put a dishtowel around my waist to protect my dress. When the ends were efficiently tied, he laid his hand against my upper back. Such firm pressure, fingers separated—he might almost have been taking stock of my body in a professional way. When I went to bed that night, I could still feel the pressure. I felt it develop its intensity from the little finger to the hard thumb. I enjoyed it. It was more important,

really, than the kiss placed on my forehead later, the moment before I got out of his car. A dry-lipped kiss, brief and formal, set upon me with hasty authority.

The key to his house showed up on the floor of my room, slipped under the door when I wasn't there. But I couldn't use it after all. If anybody else had made this offer, I would have jumped at the chance. Especially if it included a heater. But, in this case, his past and future presence in the house would draw all ordinary comfort out of the situation and replace it with a pleasure that was nerve-racking rather than expansive. I doubted whether I'd be able to read a word.

I expected Mary to come by to scold me for missing "Pinafore." I thought of saying that I had not been well. I'd had a cold. But then I remembered that colds were serious business in this place, involving masks and disinfectant, banishment. And soon I understood that there was no hope of hiding my visit to the doctor's house. It was a secret from nobody, not even from the nurses, who said nothing, either because they were too lofty and discreet or because such carrying on had ceased to interest them. But the aides teased me.

"Enjoy your supper the other night?"

Their tone was friendly; they seemed to approve. My stock had risen. Whatever else I was, at least I might turn out to be a woman with a man.

Mary did not put in an appearance all week.

"Next Saturday" were the words that had been said, just before he administered the kiss. So I waited again on the front porch, and this time he was not late. We drove to the house, and I went into the front room while he got the fire going. There I noticed the dusty electric heater.

"Didn't take me up on my offer," he said. "Did you think I didn't mean it? I always mean what I say."

I said that I hadn't wanted to come into town for fear of meeting Mary.

"Because of missing her concert."

"That's if you're going to arrange your life to suit Mary," he said.

The menu was much the same as before. Pork chops, instant mashed potatoes, corn niblets instead of peas. This time he let me help in the kitchen, even asking me to set the table.

"You may as well learn where things are. It's all fairly logical, I believe."

This meant that I could watch him working at the stove. His easy concentration, economical movements, setting off in me a procession of sparks and chills.

We had just begun the meal when there was a knock at the door. He got up and drew the bolt and in burst Mary.

She was carrying a cardboard box, which she set on the table. Then she threw off her coat and displayed herself in a red-and-yellow costume.

"Happy Valentine's Day," she said. "You never came to see me in the concert, so I brought the concert to you."

She stood on one foot to kick off first one boot, then the other. She pushed them out of her way and began to prance around the table, singing at the same time in a plaintive but vigorous young voice:

I'm called Little Buttercup,

Dear little Buttercup,

Though I could never tell why.

But still I'm called Buttercup,

Poor little Buttercup

Sweet little Buttercup I—

The doctor had got up even before she began to sing. He was standing at the stove, busy scraping at the frying pan that had held the pork chops.

I applauded. I said, "What a gorgeous costume."

It was, indeed. Red skirt, bright-yellow petticoat, fluttering white apron, embroidered bodice.

"My mom made it."

"Even the embroidery?"

"Sure. She stayed up till four o'clock to get it done the night before."

There was further whirling and stomping to show it off. The dishes tinkled on the shelves. I applauded some more. Both of us wanted only one thing. We wanted the doctor to turn around and stop ignoring us. For him to say, even grudgingly, one polite word.

"And lookit what else," Mary said. "For a Valentine." She tore open the cardboard box and there were Valentine cookies, all cut into heart shapes and plastered with thick red icing.

"How splendid," I said, and Mary resumed her prancing:

I am the Captain of the Pinafore.

And a right good captain, too.

You're very very good, and be it understood,  
I command a right good crew.  
The doctor turned at last, and she saluted him.  
"All right," he said. "That's enough."  
She ignored him:  
Then give three cheers and one cheer more  
For the hardy captain of the Pinafore.  
"I said that's enough."  
"For the captain of the Pinafore—"  
"Mary. We are eating supper. And you are not invited. Do you understand that? Not invited."  
She was quiet at last. But only for a moment.  
"Well, pooh on you, then. You're not very nice."  
"And you could just as well do without any of those cookies. You're on your way to getting as plump as a young pig."  
Mary's face was puffed up as if she were about to cry, but instead she said, "Look who's talking. You got one eye crooked to the other."  
"That's enough."  
"Well, you have."  
The doctor picked up her boots and set them down in front of her.  
"Put these on."  
She did so, with her eyes full of tears and her nose running. She snuffled mightily. He picked up her coat and did not help her as she flailed her way into it and found the buttons.  
"That's right. Now, how did you get here?"  
She refused to answer.  
"Walked, did you? Well, I can drive you home. So you don't get a chance to fling yourself into a snowbank and freeze to death out of self-pity."  
I did not say a word. Mary did not look at me once. The moment was too full of shock for goodbyes.  
When I heard the car start, I began clearing the table. We had not got to dessert, which was apple pie again. Perhaps he did not know of any other kind, or perhaps it was all the bakery made.  
I picked up one of the heart-shaped cookies and ate it. The icing was horribly sweet. No berry or cherry flavor, just sugar and red food coloring. I ate another and another.  
I knew that I should have said goodbye at least. I should have said thank you for the cookies. But it wouldn't have mattered. I told myself that it wouldn't have mattered. The performance had not been for me. Or perhaps only a small part of it had been for me.  
He had been brutal. It shocked me that he had been so brutal. To one so much in need. But he had done it for me, in a way. So that his time with me should not be taken away. This thought flattered me, and I was ashamed that it flattered me. I did not know what I would say to him when he got back.  
He did not want me to say anything. He took me to bed. Had this been in the cards all along, or was it as much of a surprise to him as it was to me? My state of virginity, at least, did not appear to be unexpected—he provided a towel, as well as a condom—and he persisted, going as easily as he could. My passion was the surprise, to us both.  
"I do intend to marry you," he said.  
Before he took me home, he tossed all the cookies, all those red hearts, out into the snow to feed the winter birds. So it was settled. Our engagement—though he was a little wary of the word—was a private agreed-upon fact. The wedding would take place whenever he could get a couple of consecutive days off. A bare-bones wedding, he said. I was not to write a word to my grandparents. I was to understand that the idea of a ceremony, carried on in the presence of others whose ideas he did not respect, and who would inflict on us all that snickering and simpering, was more than he was prepared to put up with.  
Nor was he in favor of diamond rings. I told him that I had never wanted one, which was true, because I had never thought about it. He said that was good. He had known that I was not that sort of idiotic, conventional girl.  
It would be better to stop having supper together, he said, not just because of the talk but because it was hard to get enough meat for two people on one ration card. My card was not available, having been handed over to the kitchen authorities—to Mary's mother—as soon as I began to eat at the San.  
Better not to call attention.  
Of course, everybody suspected something. The elderly nurses turned cordial, and even Matron gave me a pained smile. I did preen in a modest way, almost without meaning to. I took to folding myself in, with a velvet stillness,

eyes rather cast down. It did not quite occur to me that these older women were watching to see what direction this intimacy might take and that they were ready to turn righteous if the doctor should decide to drop me.

It was the aides who were whole-heartedly on my side, and teased me that they saw wedding bells in my tea leaves. The month of March was grim and busy behind the hospital doors. It was always the worst month, the aides said. For some reason, people took it into their heads to die then, after making it through the attacks of winter. If a child did not show up for class, I did not know if there had been a major turn for the worse or just a bedding down with the suspicion of a cold.

Time was found, however, for the doctor to make some arrangements. He slipped a note under the door of my room, instructing me to be ready by the first week of April. Unless there was some real crisis, he could manage a couple of days then.

We are going to Huntsville.

*Going to Huntsville*—our code for getting married.

I have my green crêpe, dry-cleaned and rolled up carefully in my overnight bag. I suppose I will have to change my clothes in some ladies' toilet. I am watching to see if there are any early wildflowers along the road that I can pick to make a bouquet. Would he agree to my having a bouquet? But it's too early even for marsh marigolds. Nothing is to be seen but skinny black spruce trees and islands of spreading juniper and bogs. And, in the road cuts, a chaotic jumble of the rocks that have become familiar to me here—bloodstained iron and slanting shelves of granite.

The car radio is on and playing triumphal music, because the Allies are getting closer and closer to Berlin. The doctor says that they are delaying to let the Russians get there first. He says they'll be sorry.

Now that we are away from Amundsen, I find that I can call him Alister. This is the longest drive we have ever taken together, and I am aroused by his male unawareness of me—which I know can quickly shift to its opposite—and by his casual skill as a driver. I find it exciting that he is a surgeon, though I would never admit that. Right now, I believe I would lie down for him in any bog or mucky hole or feel my spine crushed against any roadside rock, should he require an upright encounter. I know, too, that I must keep these feelings to myself.

I turn my mind to the future. Once we get to Huntsville, I expect that we will find a minister and stand side by side in a living room, which will have the modest gentility of the living rooms I have known all my life.

But, when we get there, I discover that there are other ways to get married, and that my bridegroom has another aversion that I hadn't grasped. He won't have anything to do with a minister. At the town hall in Huntsville, we fill out forms that swear to our single state and we make an appointment to be married by a justice of the peace.

Time for lunch. Alister stops outside a restaurant that could be a first cousin to the coffee shop in Amundsen.

"This'll do?"

But, on looking into my face, he does change his mind.

"No?" he says. "O.K."

We end up eating lunch in the chilly front room of one of the genteel houses that advertise chicken dinners. The plates are icy cold, there are no other diners, and there is no radio music but only the clink of our cutlery as we try to separate parts of the stringy chicken. I am sure he is thinking that we might have done better in the restaurant he suggested in the first place.

Nonetheless, I find the nerve to ask about the ladies' room, and there, in cold air even more discouraging than that of the front room, I shake out my green dress and put it on, repaint my mouth, and fix my hair.

When I come out, Alister stands up to greet me and smiles and squeezes my hand and says I look pretty.

We walk stiffly back to the car, holding hands. He opens the door for me, goes around and gets in, settles himself and turns the key in the ignition, then turns it off.

The car is parked in front of a hardware store. Snow shovels are on sale at half price. There is still a sign in the window that says that skates can be sharpened inside.

Across the street there is a wooden house painted an oily yellow. Its front steps have become unsafe, and two boards forming an X have been nailed across them.

The truck parked in front of Alister's car is a prewar model, with a running board and a fringe of rust on its fenders. A man in overalls comes out of the hardware store and gets into it. After some engine complaint, then some rattling and bounding in place, it is driven away. Now a delivery truck with the store's name on it tries to park in the space left vacant. There is not quite enough room. The driver gets out and comes and raps on Alister's window. Alister is surprised—if he had not been talking so earnestly he would have noticed the problem. He rolls down the window, and the man asks if we are parked there because we intend to buy something in the store. If not, could we please move along?

"Just leaving," says Alister, the man sitting beside me who was going to marry me but now is not going to marry me. "We were just leaving."

We. He has said “we.” For a moment, I cling to that word. Then I think, It’s the last time. The last time I’ll be included in his “we.”

It’s not the “we” that matters; that is not what makes the truth clear to me. It’s his male-to-male tone with the driver, his calm and reasonable apology. I almost wish now to go back to what he was saying before, when he did not even notice the van trying to park. What he was saying then was terrible but at least his tight grip on the wheel, his grip and his abstraction and his voice had pain in them. No matter what he was saying, he was speaking out of the same deep place then that he spoke from when he was in bed with me. But it is not so now, after he has spoken to another man. He rolls up the window and gives all his attention to the car, to backing it out of its tight spot and moving it so as not to come in contact with the van, as if there were no more to be said or managed.

“I can’t do it,” he has said.

He can’t go through with it.

He can’t explain this.

Only that he feels it would be a mistake.

It occurs to me that I will never be able to look at curly “S”s like those on the skate-sharpening sign, or at rough boards knocked into an X, like those across the steps of the yellow house, without hearing this voice.

“I’m going to drive you to the station now. I’ll buy your ticket to Toronto. I’m pretty sure there’s a train to Toronto late in the afternoon. I’ll think up some very plausible story and I’ll get somebody to pack up your things. You’ll need to give me your Toronto address. I don’t think I’ve kept it. Oh, and I’ll write you a reference. You’ve done a good job. You wouldn’t have finished out the term anyway—I hadn’t told you yet but the children are going to be moved to another sanatorium. All kinds of big changes going on.”

A new tone in his voice, almost jaunty. A tone of relief. He is trying to hold that in, not let the relief out until I am gone.

I watch the streets. It’s like being driven to my own execution. Not yet. A little while yet. Not yet do I hear his voice for the last time. Not yet.

He doesn’t have to ask the way to the station. I wonder out loud if he has put girls on the train before.

“Don’t be like that,” he says.

Every turn is like a shearing off of what’s left of my life.

There is a train to Toronto at five o’clock. I wait in the car, while he goes in to check. He comes out with the ticket in his hand and what I think is a lighter step. He must realize this, because as he approaches the car he becomes more sedate.

“It’s nice and warm in the station. There’s a special ladies’ waiting room.”

He has opened the car door for me.

“Or would you rather I waited and saw you off? Maybe there’s a place where we can get a decent piece of pie. That was a horrible dinner.”

This makes me stir myself. I get out and walk ahead of him into the station. He points out the ladies’ waiting room. He raises his eyebrow at me and tries to make a final joke.

“Maybe someday you’ll count this one of the luckiest days of your life.”

I choose a bench in the waiting room that has a view of the station’s front doors. So that I’ll be able to see him if he comes back. Perhaps he will tell me that this was all a joke. Or a test, as in some medieval drama. Or perhaps he will have a change of heart. Driving down the highway, seeing the pale spring sunlight on the rocks that we so recently looked at together. Struck by the realization of his folly, he will turn and come speeding back.

It is an hour at least before the Toronto train comes into the station, but it seems hardly any time at all. And even now fantasies are running through my mind. I board the train as if there were chains on my ankles. I press my face to the window to look along the platform as the whistle blows for our departure. It is not too late for me to jump from the train. Jump free and run through the station to the street, where he has just parked the car and is bounding up the steps, thinking. Not too late, pray not too late.

Me running to meet him. Not too late.

Now there is a commotion, shouting, hollering, not one but a gaggle of latecomers pounding between the seats.

High-school girls in athletic outfits, hooting at the trouble they have caused. The conductor displeased and hurrying them along as they scramble for their seats.

One of them, and perhaps the loudest, is Mary.

I turn my head and do not look at them again.

But here she is, crying out my name and wanting to know where I have been.

To visit a friend, I tell her.

She plunks herself down beside me and tells me that they have been playing basketball against Huntsville. It was a

riot. They lost.

“We lost, didn’t we?” she calls out in apparent delight, and others groan and giggle. She mentions the score, which is indeed quite shocking.

“You’re all dressed up,” she says. But she doesn’t much care; she seems to take my explanation without real interest.

She barely notices when I say that I am going on to Toronto to see my grandparents. Not a word about Alister. Not even a bad word. She has not forgotten. Just tidied up the scene and put it away, in a closet with her other former selves. Or maybe she really is a person who can deal recklessly with humiliation.

I am grateful to her now, even if I was not able to feel such a thing at the time. Left to myself, what might I have done when we got to Amundsen? Abandoned the train and run to his house and demanded to know why, why. What shame on me forever.

As it was, the stop there was barely long enough for the team to get themselves collected, while being warned by the conductor that if they didn’t get a move on they would be riding to Toronto.

For years, I thought I might run into him. I lived, and still live, in Toronto. It seemed to me that everybody ended up in Toronto, at least for a little while.

Then, more than a decade later, it finally happened. Crossing a crowded street where we could not even slow down. Going in opposite directions. Staring, at the same time, a bald shock on our time-damaged faces.

He called out, “How are you?,” and I answered, “Fine.” Then added, for good measure, “Happy.”

At the time, this was only generally true. I was having some kind of dragged-out row with my husband, about our paying a debt run up by one of his children. I had gone that afternoon to a show at the Art Gallery, to get myself into a more comfortable frame of mind.

He called back to me once more. “Good for you,” he said.

It still seemed as if we would make our way out of that crowd, as if in just a moment we would be together. But it was just as certain, also, that we would carry on in the directions we were going, and so we did.

No breathless cry, no hand on my shoulder when I reached the sidewalk. Just the flash that I had caught when one of his eyes opened wider than the other. It was the left eye—always the left, as I remembered. And it always looked so strange, alert and wondering, as if some crazy impossibility had occurred to him that almost made him laugh.

That was all. I went on home.

Feeling the same as when I’d left Amundsen. The train dragging me, disbelieving. Nothing changes, apparently, about love. ♦

**Annie Proulx**

## **The Half-Skinned Steer**

By E. Annie Proulx

Published in *The Atlantic*, November 1, 1997

In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thoughts of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns. He’d got himself out of there in 1936, had gone to a war and come back, married and married again (and again), made money in boilers and air-duct cleaning and smart investments, retired, got into local politics and outgain without scandal, never circled back to see the old man and Rollo, bankrupt and ruined, because he knew they were.

They called it a ranch and it had been, but one day the old man said cows couldn’t be run in such tough country, where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sinkholes, gave up large numbers of calves to marauding lions; where hay couldn’t grow but leafy spurge and Canada thistle thrived, and the wind packed enough sand to scour windshields opaque. The old man wangled a job delivering mail, but looked guilty fumbling bills into his neighbors’ mailboxes.

Mero and Rollo saw the mail route as a defection from the work of the ranch, work that consequently fell on them. The breeding herd was down to eighty-two, and a cow wasn’t worth more than fifteen dollars, but they kept mending fence, whittling ears and scorching hides, hauling cows out of mudholes, and hunting lions in the hope that sooner or later the old man would move to Ten Sleep with his woman and his bottle and they could, as had their grandmother Olive when Jacob Corn disappointed her, pull the place taut. That bird didn’t fly, and Mero wound up sixty years later as an octogenarian vegetarian widower pumping an Exercycle in the living room of a colonial house in Woolfoot, Massachusetts.

One of those damp mornings the nail-driving telephone voice of a woman said she was Louise, Tick's wife, and summoned him back to Wyoming. He didn't know who she was, who Tick was, until she said, Tick Corn, your brother Rollo's son, and that Rollo had passed on, killed by a waspy emu, though prostate cancer was waiting its chance. Yes, she said, you bet Rollo still owned the ranch. Half of it anyway. Me and Tick, she said, we been pretty much running it the past ten years.

An emu? Did he hear right?

Yes, she said. Well, of course you didn't know. You heard of Wyoming Down Under?

He had not. And thought, What kind of name is Tick? He recalled the bloated gray insects pulled off the dogs. This tick probably thought he was going to get the whole damn ranch and bloat up on it. He said, What the hell is this about an emu? Were they all crazy out there?

That's what the ranch is called now, she said. Wyoming Down Under. Rollo'd sold the place way back when to the Girl Scouts, but one of the girls was dragged off by a lion, and the GSA sold out to the Banner ranch, next door, which ran cattle on it for a few years and then unloaded it on a rich Australian businessman, who started Wyoming Down Under, but it was too much long-distance work and he'd had bad luck with his manager, a feller from Idaho with a pawnshop rodeo buckle, so he'd looked up Rollo and offered to swap him a half interest if he'd run the place. That was back in 1978. The place had done real well. Course we're not open now, she said. It's winter and there's no tourists. Poor Rollo was helping Tick move the emus to another building when one of them turned on a dime and come right for him with its big razor claws. Emus is bad for claws.

I know, he said. He watched the nature programs on television.

She shouted, as though the telephone lines were down all across the country, Tick got your number off the computer. Rollo always said he was going to get in touch. He wanted you to see how things turned out. He tried to fight it off with his cane, but it laid him open from belly to breakfast.

Maybe, he thought, things hadn't finished turning out. Impatient with this game, he said he would be at the funeral. No point talking about flights and meeting him at the airport, he told her; he didn't fly, a bad experience years ago with hail, the plane had looked like a waffle iron when it landed. He intended to drive. Of course he knew how far it was. Had a damn fine car, Cadillac, always drove Cadillacs, Gislaved tires, interstate highways, excellent driver, never had an accident in his life, knock on wood. Four days; he would be there by Saturday afternoon. He heard the amazement in her voice, knew she was plotting his age, figuring he had to be eighty-three, a year or so older than Rollo, figuring he must be dotting around on a cane, too, drooling the tiny days away -- she was probably touching her own faded hair. He flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu. He would see his brother dropped in a red Wyoming hole. That event could jerk him back; the dazzled rope of lightning against the cloud is not the downward bolt but the compelled upstroke through the heated ether.

He had pulled away at the sudden point when the old man's girlfriend -- now he couldn't remember her name -- seemed to have jumped the track, Rollo goggling at her bloody bitten fingers, nails chewed to the quick, neck veins like wires, the outer forearms shaded with hairs, and the cigarette glowing, smoke curling up, making her wink her bulging mustang eyes, a teller of tales of hard deeds and mayhem. The old man's hair was falling out, Mero was twenty-three and Rollo twenty, and she played them all like a deck of cards. If you admired horses, you'd go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks, so high and haunchy you'd want to clap her on the rear. The wind bellowed around the house, driving crystals of snow through the cracks of the warped log door, and all of them in the kitchen seemed charged with some intensity of purpose. She'd balanced that broad butt on the edge of the dog-food chest, looking at the old man and Rollo, now and then rolling her glossy eyes over at Mero, square teeth nipping a rim of nail, sucking the welling blood, drawing on her cigarette.

The old man drank his Everclear stirred with a peeled willow stick for the bitter taste. The image of him came sharp in Mero's mind as he stood at the hall closet contemplating his hats. Should he take one for the funeral? The old man had had the damndest curl to his hat brim, a tight roll on the right where his doffing or donning hand gripped it, and a wavering downslope on the left like a shed roof. You could recognize him two miles away. He wore it at the table listening to the woman's stories about Tin Head, steadily emptying his glass until he was nine times nine drunk, his gangstery face loosening, the crushed rodeo nose and scar-crossed eyebrows, the stub ear, dissolving as he drank. Now he must be dead fifty years or more, buried in the mailman sweater.

The girlfriend started a story, Yeah, there was this guy named Tin Head down around Dubois when my dad was a kid. Had a little ranch, some horses, cows, kids, a wife. But there was something funny about him. He had a metal plate in his head from falling down some cement steps.

Plenty of guys has them, Rollo said in a challenging way.

She shook her head. Not like his. His was made out of galvy, and it eat at his brain.

The old man held up the bottle of Everclear, raised his eyebrows at her: Well, darlin'?

She nodded, took the glass from him, and knocked it back in one swallow. Oh, that's not gonna slow me down, she said.

Mero expected her to neigh.

So what then, Rollo said, picking at the horse manure under his boot heel. What about Tin Head and his galvanized skull plate?

I heard it this way, she said. She held out the glass for another shot of Everclear, and the old man poured it, and she went on.

Mero had thrashed all that ancient night, dreamed of horse breeding or hoarse breathing, whether the act of sex or bloody, cutthroat gasps he didn't know. The next morning he woke up drenched in stinking sweat, looked at the ceiling, and said aloud, It could go on like this for some time. He meant cows and weather as much as anything, and what might be his chances two or three states over in any direction. In Woolfoot, riding the Exercycle, he thought the truth was somewhat different: he'd wanted a woman of his own, not the old man's leftovers.

What he wanted to know now, tires spanking the tar-filled road cracks and potholes, funeral homburg sliding on the back seat, was if Rollo had got the girlfriend away from the old man, thrown a saddle on her, and ridden off into the sunset.

The interstate, crippled by orange cones, forced traffic into single lanes, broke his expectation of making good time. His Cadillac, boxed between semis with hissing air brakes, showed snuffing huge rear tires in the windshield, framed a looming Peterbilt in the back window. His thoughts clogged as if a comb working through his mind had stuck against a snarl. When the traffic eased and he tried to cover some ground, the highway patrol pulled him over. The cop, a pimped, moustached specimen with mismatched eyes, asked his name, where he was going. For the minute he couldn't think what he was doing there. The cop's tongue dapped at the scraggy moustache while he scribbled.

Funeral, he said suddenly. Going to my brother's funeral.

Well, you take it easy, gramps, or they'll be doing one for you.

You're a little polecat, aren't you? he said, staring at the ticket, at the pathetic handwriting, but the moustache was a mile gone, peeling through the traffic as Mero had peeled out of the ranch road that long time ago, squinting through the abraded windshield. He might have made a more graceful exit, but urgency had struck him as a blow on the humerus sends a ringing jolt up the arm. He believed it was the horse-haunched woman leaning against the chest and Rollo fixed on her, the old man swilling Everclear and not noticing or, if noticing, not caring, that had worked in him like a key in an ignition. She had long, gray-streaked braids; Rollo could use them for reins.

Yeah, she said, in her low and convincing liar's voice. I'll tell you, on Tin Head's ranch things went wrong. Chickens changed color overnight, calves was born with three legs, his kids was piebald and his wife always crying for blue dishes. Tin Head never finished nothing he started, quit halfway through a job every time. Even his pants was half buttoned, so his wienie hung out. He was a mess with the galvy plate eating at his brain, and his ranch and his family was a mess. But, she said, they had to eat, didn't they, just like anybody else?

I hope they eat pies better than the ones you make, said Rollo, who didn't like the mouthful of pits that came with the chokecherries.

His interest in women had begun a few days after the old man had said, Take this guy up and show him them Ind'an drawings, jerking his head at the stranger. Mero had been eleven or twelve at the time, no older. They rode along the creek and put up a pair of mallards who flew downstream and then suddenly reappeared, pursued by a goshawk who struck the drake with a sound like a handclap. The duck tumbled through the trees and into deadfall trash, and the hawk shot away as swiftly as it had come.

They climbed through the stony landscape, limestone beds eroded by wind into fantastic furniture, stale gnawed bread crusts, tumbled bones, stacks of dirty folded blankets, bleached crab claws and dog teeth. He tethered the horses in the shade of a stand of limber pine and led the anthropologist up through the stiff-branched mountain mahogany to the overhang. Above them reared corroded cliffs brilliant with orange lichen, pitted with holes, ridged with ledges darkened by millennia of raptor feces.

The anthropologist moved back and forth scrutinizing the stone gallery of red and black drawings: bison skulls, a line of mountain sheep, warriors carrying lances, a turkey stepping into a snare, a stick man upside-down dead and falling, red-ocher hands, violent figures with rakes on their heads that he said were feather headdresses, a great red bear dancing forward on its hind legs, concentric circles and crosses and latticework. He copied the drawings in his notebook, saying Rubba-dubba a few times.

That's the sun, said the anthropologist, who resembled an unfinished drawing himself, pointing at an archery target, ramming his pencil into the air as though tapping gnats. That's an atlatl, and that's a dragonfly. There we go. You know what this is, and he touched a cloven oval, rubbing the cleft with his dusty fingers. He got down on his hands

and knees and pointed out more, a few dozen.

A horseshoe?

A horseshoe! The anthropologist laughed. No, boy, it's a vulva. That's what all of these are. You don't know what this is, do you? You go to school on Monday and look it up in the dictionary.

It's a symbol, he said. You know what a symbol is?

Yes, said Mero, who had seen them clapped together in the high school marching band. The anthropologist laughed and told him he had a great future, gave him a dollar for showing him the place. Listen, kid, the Indians did it just like anybody else, he said.

He had looked the word up in the school dictionary, slammed the book closed in embarrassment, but the image was fixed for him (with the brassy background sound of a military march), blunt ocher tracing on stone, and no fleshly examples ever conquered his belief in the subterranean stony structure of female genitalia, the pubic bone a proof, except for the old man's girlfriend, whom he imagined down on all fours, entered from behind and whinnying like a mare, a thing not of geology but of flesh.

Thursday night, balked by detours and construction, he was on the outskirts of Des Moines. In the cinder-block motel room he set the alarm, but his own stertorous breathing woke him before it rang. He was up at five-fifteen, eyes aflame, peering through the vinyl drapes at his snow-hazed car flashing blue under the motel sign, SLEEP SLEEP. In the bathroom he mixed the packet of instant motel coffee and drank it black, without ersatz sugar or chemical cream. He wanted the caffeine. The roots of his mind felt withered and punky.

A cold morning, light snow slanting down: he unlocked the Cadillac, started it, and curved into the vein of traffic, all semis, double and triple trailers. In the headlights' glare he missed the westbound ramp and got into torn-up muddy streets, swung right and right again, using the motel's SLEEP sign as a landmark, but he was on the wrong side of the interstate, and the sign belonged to a different motel.

Another mudholed lane took him into a traffic circle of commuters sucking coffee from insulated cups, pastries sliding on dashboards. Half around the hoop he spied the interstate entrance ramp, veered for it, collided with a panel truck emblazoned STOP SMOKING! HYPNOSIS THAT WORKS!, was rammed from behind by a stretch limo, the limo in its turn rear-ended by a yawning hydroblast operator in a company pickup.

He saw little of this, pressed into his seat by the air bag, his mouth full of a rubbery, dusty taste, eyeglasses cutting into his nose. His first thought was to blame Iowa and those who lived in it. There were a few round spots of blood on his shirt cuff.

A star-spangled Band-Aid over his nose, he watched his crumpled car, pouring dark fluids onto the highway, towed away behind a wrecker. When the police were through with him, a taxi took him, his suitcase, the homburg funeral hat, in the other direction, to Posse Motors, where lax salesmen drifted like disorbited satellites and where he bought a secondhand Cadillac, black like the wreck but three years older and the upholstery not cream leather but sun-faded velour. He had the good tires from the wreck brought over and mounted. He could do that if he liked, buy cars like packs of cigarettes and smoke them up. He didn't care for the way the Caddy handled out on the highway, throwing itself abruptly aside when he twitched the wheel, and he guessed it might have a bent frame. Damn. He'd buy another for the return trip. He could do what he wanted.

He was half an hour past Kearney, Nebraska, when the full moon rose, an absurd visage balanced in his rearview mirror, above it a curled wig of a cloud, filamented edges like platinum hairs. He felt his swollen nose, palpated his chin, tender from the stun of the air bag. Before he slept that night, he swallowed a glass of hot tap water enlivened with whiskey, crawled into the damp bed. He had eaten nothing all day, but his stomach coiled at the thought of road food.

He dreamed that he was in the ranch house but all the furniture had been removed from the rooms and in the yard troops in dirty white uniforms fought. The concussive reports of huge guns were breaking the window glass and forcing the floorboards apart, so that he had to walk on the joists. Below the disintegrating floors he saw galvanized tubs filled with dark, coagulated fluid.

On Saturday morning, with four hundred miles in front of him, he swallowed a few bites of scorched eggs, potatoes painted with canned salsa verde, a cup of yellow coffee, left no tip, got on the road. The food was not what he wanted. His breakfast habit was two glasses of mineral water, six cloves of garlic, a pear. The sky to the west hulked sullen; behind him were smears of tinselly orange shot through with blinding streaks. The thick rim of sun bulged against the horizon.

He crossed the state line, hit Cheyenne for the second time in sixty years. He saw neon, traffic, and concrete, but he knew the place, a railroad town that had been up and down. That other time he had been painfully hungry, had gone into the restaurant in the Union Pacific station although he was not used to restaurants, and had ordered a steak.

When the woman brought it and he cut into the meat, the blood spread across the white plate and he couldn't help it,

he saw the beast, mouth agape in mute bawling, saw the comic aspects of his revulsion as well, a cattleman gone wrong.

Now he parked in front of a phone booth, locked the car although he stood only seven feet away, and telephoned the number Tick's wife had given him. The ruined car had had a phone. Her voice roared out of the earpiece.

We didn't hear so we wondered if you changed your mind.

No, he said, I'll be there late this afternoon. I'm in Cheyenne now.

The wind's blowing pretty hard. They're saying it could maybe snow. In the mountains. Her voice sounded doubtful. I'll keep an eye on it, he said.

He was out of town and running north in a few minutes.

The country poured open on each side, reduced the Cadillac to a finger snap. Nothing had changed, not a Goddamn thing, the empty pale place and its roaring wind, the distant antelope as tiny as mice, landforms shaped true to the past. He felt himself slip back; the calm of eighty-three years sheeted off him like water, replaced by a young man's scalding anger at a fool world and the fools in it. What a damn hard time it had been to hit the road. You don't know what it was like, he had told his wives, until they said they did know, he'd pounded it into their ears two hundred times, the poor youth on the street holding up a sign asking for work, the job with the furnace man, yatata yatata ya. Thirty miles out of Cheyenne he saw the first billboard: WYOMING DOWN UNDER, Western Fun the Other Way, over a blown-up photograph of kangaroos hopping through the sagebrush and a blond child grinning in a manic imitation of pleasure. A diagonal banner warned, Open May 31.

So what, Rollo had said to the old man's girlfriend, what about that Mr. Tin Head? Looking at her, not just her face but up and down, eyes moving over her like an iron over a shirt and the old man in his mailman's sweater and lopsided hat tasting his Everclear and not noticing or not caring, getting up every now and then to lurch onto the porch and water the weeds. When he left the room, the tension ebbed and they were only ordinary people to whom nothing happened. Rollo looked away from the woman, leaned down to scratch the dog's ears, saying Snarleyow Snapper, and the woman took a dish to the sink and ran water on it, yawning. When the old man came back to his chair, the Everclear like sweet oil in his glass, glances resharpener and inflections of voice again carried complex messages.

Well, well, she said, tossing her braids back, every year Tin Head butchers one of his steers, and that's what they'd eat all winter long, boiled, fried, smoked, fricasseed, burned, and raw. So one time he's out there by the barn, and he hits the steer a good one with the ax, and it drops stun down. He ties up the back legs, hoists it up and sticks it, shoves the tub under to catch the blood. When it's bled out pretty good, he lets it down and starts skinning it, starts with the head, cuts back of the poll down past the eye to the nose, peels the hide back. He don't cut the head off but keeps on skinning, dewclaws to hock, up the inside of the thigh and then to the cod and down the middle of the belly to brisket. Now he's ready to start siding, working that tough old skin off. But siding is hard work (the old man nodded) and he gets the hide off about halfway and starts thinking about dinner. So he leaves the steer half-skinned there on the ground and he goes into the kitchen, but first he cuts out the tongue, which is his favorite dish all cooked up and eat cold with Mrs. Tin Head's mustard in a forget-me-not teacup. Sets it on the ground and goes in to dinner. Dinner is chicken and dumplings, one of them changed-color chickens started out white and ended up blue, yessir, blue as your old daddy's eyes.

She was a total liar. The old man's eyes were murk brown.

Onto the high plains sifted the fine snow, delicately clouding the air, a rare dust, beautiful, he thought, silk gauze, but there was muscle in the wind rocking the heavy car, a great pulsing artery of the jet stream swooping down from the sky to touch the earth. Plumes of smoke rose hundreds of feet into the air, elegant fountains and twisting snow devils, shapes of veiled Arab women and ghost riders dissolving in white fume. The snow snakes writhing across the asphalt straightened into rods. He was driving in a rushing river of cold whiteout foam. He could see nothing; he trod on the brake, the wind buffeting the car, a bitter, hard-flung dust hissing over metal and glass. The car shuddered. And as suddenly as it had risen, the wind dropped and the road was clear; he could see a long, empty mile.

How do you know when there's enough of anything? What trips the lever that snaps up the STOP sign? What electrical currents fizz and crackle in the brain to shape the decision to quit a place? He had listened to her damn story and the dice had rolled. For years he believed he had left without hard reason and suffered for it. But he'd learned from television nature programs that it had been time for him to find his own territory and his own woman. How many women were out there! He had married three of them and sampled plenty.

With the lapping subtlety of an incoming tide the shape of the ranch began to gather in his mind; he could recall sharply the fences he'd made, taut wire and perfect corners, the draws and rock outcrops, the watercourse valley steepening, cliffs like bones with shreds of meat on them rising and rising, and the stream plunging suddenly

underground, disappearing into a subterranean darkness of blind fish, shooting out of the mountain ten miles west on a neighbor's place but leaving their ranch some badland red country as dry as a cracker, steep canyons with high caves suited to lions. He and Rollo had shot two early in that winter, close to the overhang with the painted vulvas. There were good caves up there from a lion's point of view.

He traveled against curdled sky. In the last sixty miles the snow began again. He climbed out of Buffalo. Pallid flakes as distant from one another as galaxies flew past, then more, and in ten minutes he was crawling at twenty miles an hour, the windshield wipers thumping like a stick dragged down the stairs.

The light was falling out of the day when he reached the pass, the blunt mountains lost in snow, the greasy hairpin turns ahead. He drove slowly and steadily in a low gear; he had not forgotten how to drive a winter mountain. But the wind was up again, rocking and slapping the car, blotting out all but whipping snow, and he was sweating with the anxiety of keeping to the road, dizzy with the altitude. Twelve more miles, sliding and buffeted, before he reached Ten Sleep, where streetlights glowed in revolving circles like Van Gogh's sun. There had not been electricity when he left the place. In those days there were seventeen black, lightless miles between the town and the ranch, and now the long arch of years compressed into that distance. His headlights picked up a sign: 20 MILES TO WYOMING DOWN UNDER. Emus and bison leered above the letters.

He turned onto the snowy road, marked with a single set of tracks, faint but still discernible, the heater fan whirring, the radio silent, all beyond the headlights blurred. Yet everything was as it had been, the shape of the road achingly familiar, sentinel rocks looming as they had in his youth. There was an eerie dream quality in seeing the deserted Farrier place leaning east as it had leaned sixty years ago, and the Banner ranch gate, where the companionable tracks he had been following turned off, the gate ghostly in the snow but still flying its wrought-iron flag, unmarked by the injuries of weather, and the taut five-strand fences and dim shifting forms of cattle. Next would come the road to their ranch, a left-hand turn just over the crest of a rise. He was running now on the unmarked road through great darkness.

Winking at Rollo, the girlfriend had said, Yes, she had said, Yes, sir, Tin Head eats half his dinner and then he has to take a little nap. After a while he wakes up again and goes outside, stretching his arms and yawning, says, Guess I'll finish skinning out that steer. But the steer ain't there. It's gone. Only the tongue, laying on the ground all covered with dirt and straw, and the tub of blood and the dog licking at it.

It was her voice that drew you in, that low, twangy voice, wouldn't matter if she was saying the alphabet, what you heard was the rustle of hay. She could make you smell the smoke from an imagined fire.

How could he not recognize the turnoff to the ranch? It was so clear and sharp in his mind: the dusty crimp of the corner, the low section where the snow drifted, the run where willows slapped the side of the truck. He went a mile, watching for it, but the turn didn't come up; then he watched for the Bob Kitchen place, two miles beyond, but the distance unrolled and there was nothing. He made a three-point turn and backtracked. Rollo must have given up the old entrance road, for it wasn't there. The Kitchen place was gone to fire or wind. If he didn't find the turn, it was no great loss; back to Ten Sleep and scout a motel. But he hated to quit when he was close enough to spit, hated to retrace black miles on a bad night when he was maybe twenty minutes away from the ranch.

He drove very slowly, following his tracks, and the ranch entrance appeared on the right, although the gate was gone and the sign down. That was why he'd missed it, that and a clump of sagebrush that obscured the gap.

He turned in, feeling a little triumph. But the road under the snow was rough and got rougher, until he was bucking along over boulders and slanted rock and knew wherever he was, it was not right.

He couldn't turn around on the narrow track and began backing gingerly, the window down, craning his stiff neck, staring into the redness cast by the taillights. The car's right rear tire rolled up over a boulder, slid, and sank into a quaggy hole. The tires spun in the snow, but he got no purchase.

I'll sit here, he said aloud. I'll sit here until it's light and then walk down to the Banner place and ask for a cup of coffee. I'll be cold but I won't freeze to death. It played like a joke the way he imagined it, with Bob Banner opening the door and saying, Why, it's Mero, come on in and have some java and a hot biscuit, before he remembered that Bob Banner would have to be 120 years old to fill that role. He was maybe three miles from Banner's gate, and the Banner ranch house was another seven miles beyond the gate. Say a ten-mile hike at altitude in a snowstorm. On the other hand, he had half a tank of gas. He could run the car for a while, turn it off, start it again, all through the night. It was bad luck, but that's all. The trick was patience.

He dozed half an hour in the wind-rocked car, woke shivering and cramped. He wanted to lie down. He thought perhaps he could put a flat rock under the Goddamn tire. Never say die, he said, feeling around the passenger-side floor for the flashlight in his emergency bag, and then remembering the wrecked car towed away, the flares and car phone and AAA card and flashlight and matches and candle and power bars and bottle of water still in it, and probably now in the damn tow driver's damn wife's car. He might get a good enough look anyway in the snow-

reflected light. He put on his gloves and buttoned his coat, got out and locked the car, sidled around to the rear, bent down. The taillights lit the snow beneath the rear of the car like a fresh bloodstain. There was a cradle-sized depression eaten out by the spinning tire. Two or three flat ones might get him out, or small round ones -- he was not going to insist on the perfect stone. The wind tore at him; the snow was certainly drifting up. He began to shuffle on the road, feeling with his feet for rocks he could move, the car's even throbbing promising motion and escape. The wind was sharp and his ears ached. His wool cap was in the damn emergency bag.

My Lord, she continued, Tin Head is just startled to pieces when he don't see that steer. He thinks somebody, some neighbor, don't like him, plenty of them, come and stole it. He looks around for tire marks or footprints but he don't see nothing except old cow tracks. He puts his hand up to his eyes and stares away. Nothing in the north, the south, the east, but way over there in the west, on the side of the mountain, he sees something moving stiff and slow, stumbling along. It looks raw and it's got something bunchy and wet hanging down over its hindquarters. Yeah, it was the steer, never making no sound. And just then it stops and it looks back. And all that distance Tin Head can see the raw meat of the head and the shoulder muscles and the empty mouth without no tongue open wide and its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hate like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for and all of his kids and their kids is done for, and that his wife is done for and that every one of her blue dishes has got to break, and the dog that licked the blood is done for, and the house where they lived has to blow away or burn up and every fly or mouse in it.

There was a silence and she added, That's it. And it all went against him too.

That's it? Rollo said in a greedy, hot way.

Yet he knew he was on the ranch, he felt it, and he knew this road, too. It was not the main ranch road but some lower entrance he could not quite recollect that cut in below the river. Now he remembered that the main entrance gate was on a side road that branched off well before the Banner place. He found another good stone, another, wondering which track this could be; the map of the ranch in his memory was not as bright now, but scuffed and obliterated as though trodden. The remembered gates collapsed, fences wavered, while the badland features swelled into massive prominence. The cliffs bulged into the sky, lions snarled, the river corkscrewed through a stone hole at a tremendous rate, and boulders cascaded from the heights. Beyond the barbwire something moved.

He grasped the car-door handle. It was locked. Inside, by the dashboard glow, he could see the gleam of the keys in the ignition where he'd left them to keep the car running. The situation was almost comic. He picked up a big two-hand rock, smashed it on the driver's-side window, and slipped his arm in through the hole, into the delicious warmth of the car, a contortionist's reach, twisting behind the steering wheel and down, and had he not kept limber with exercise and nut cutlets and green leafy vegetables he could never have reached the keys. His fingers grazed and then grasped, and he had them. This is how they sort out the men from the boys, he said aloud. As his fingers closed on the keys, he glanced at the passenger door. The lock button stood high. And even had it been locked as well, why had he strained to reach the keys when he had only to lift the lock button on the driver's side? Cursing, he pulled out the rubber floor mats and arranged them over the stones, stumbled around the car once more. He was dizzy, tremendously thirsty and hungry, opened his mouth to snowflakes. He had eaten nothing for two days but the burned eggs that morning. He could eat a dozen burned eggs now.

The snow roared through the broken window. He put the car in reverse and slowly trod the gas. The car lurched and steadied in the track, and once more he was twisting his neck, backing in the red glare, twenty feet, thirty, but slipping and spinning; the snow was too deep. He was backing up an incline that had seemed level on the way in but now showed itself as a remorselessly long hill, studded with rocks and deep in snow. His incoming tracks twisted like rope. He forced out another twenty feet, spinning the tires until they smoked, and then the rear wheels slued sideways off the track and into a two-foot ditch, the engine died, and that was it. He was almost relieved to have reached this point where the celestial fingernails were poised to nip his thread. He dismissed the ten-mile distance to the Banner place: it might not be that far, or maybe they had pulled the ranch closer to the main road. A truck might come by. Shoes slipping, coat buttoned awry, he might find the mythical Grand Hotel in the sagebrush.

On the main road his tire tracks showed as a faint pattern in the pearly apricot light from the risen moon, winking behind roiling clouds of snow. His blurred shadow strengthened whenever the wind eased. Then the violent country showed itself, the cliffs rearing at the moon, the snow rising off the prairie like steam, the white flank of the ranch slashed with fence cuts, the sagebrush glittering, and along the creek black tangles of willow, bunched like dead hair. Cattle were in the field beside the road, their plumed breath catching the moony glow like comic-strip dialogue balloons.

His shoes filled with snow, he walked against the wind, feeling as easy to tear as a man cut from paper. As he walked, he noticed that one from the herd inside the fence was keeping pace with him. He walked more slowly, and the animal lagged. He stopped and turned. It stopped as well, huffing vapor, regarding him, a strip of snow on its back like a linen runner. It tossed its head, and in the howling, wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the

half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching for him all this time.

## James Baldwin

### Equal in Paris

#### *An Autobiographical Story*

(1955)

James Baldwin

On the 19th of December, in 1949, when I had been living in Paris for a little over a year, I was arrested as a receiver of stolen goods and spent eight days in prison. My arrest came about through an American tourist whom I had met twice in New York, who had been given my name and address and told to look me up. I was then living on the top floor of a ludicrously grim hotel on the rue du Bac, one of those enormous dark, cold, and hideous establishments in which Paris abounds that seem to breathe forth, in their airless, humid, stone-cold halls, the weak light, scurrying chambermaids, and creaking stairs, an odor of gentility long long dead. The place was run by an ancient Frenchman dressed in an elegant black suit which was green with age, who cannot properly be described as bewildered or even as being in a state of shock, since he had really stopped breathing around 1910. There he sat at his desk in the weirdly lit, fantastically furnished lobby, day in and day out, greeting each one of his extremely impoverished and *louche* lodgers with a stately inclination of the head that he had no doubt been taught in some impossibly remote time was the proper way for a *propriétaire* to greet his guests. If it had not been for his daughter, an extremely hardheaded *tricoteuse*—the inclination of *her* head was chilling and abrupt, like the downbeat of an axe—the hotel would certainly have gone bankrupt long before. It was said that this old man had not gone farther than the door of his hotel for thirty years, which was not at all difficult to believe. He looked as though the daylight would have killed him.

I did not, of course, spend much of my time in this palace. The moment I began living in French hotels I understood the necessity of French cafés. This made it rather difficult to look me up, for as soon as I was out of bed I hopefully took notebook and fountain pen off to the upstairs room of the Flore, where I consumed rather a lot of coffee and, as evening approached, rather a lot of alcohol, but did not get much writing done. But one night, in one of the cafés of St. Germain des Prés, I was discovered by this New Yorker and only because we found ourselves in Paris we immediately established the illusion that we had been fast friends back in the good old U.S.A. This illusion proved itself too thin to support an evening's drinking, but by that time it was too late. I had committed myself to getting him a room in my hotel the next day, for he was living in one of the nest of hotels near the Gare St. Lazare, where, he said, the *propriétaire* was a thief, his wife a repressed nymphomaniac, the chambermaids "pigs," and the rent a crime. Americans are always talking this way about the French and so it did not occur to me that he meant what he said or that he would take into his own hands the means of avenging himself on the French Republic. It did not occur to me, either, that the means which he *did* take could possibly have brought about such dire results, results which were not less dire for being also comic-opera.

It came as the last of a series of disasters which had perhaps been made inevitable by the fact that I had come to Paris originally with a little over forty dollars in my pockets, nothing in the bank, and no grasp whatever of the French language. It developed, shortly, that I had no grasp of the French character either. I considered the French an ancient, intelligent, and cultured race, which indeed they are. I did not know, however, that ancient glories imply, at least in the middle of the present century, present fatigue and, quite probably, paranoia; that there is a limit to the role of the intelligence in human affairs; and that no people come into possession of a culture without having paid a heavy price for it. This price they cannot, of course, assess, but it is revealed in their personalities and in their institutions. The very word "institutions," from my side of the ocean, where, it seemed to me, we suffered so cruelly from the lack of them, had a pleasant ring, as of safety and order and common sense; one had to come into contact with these institutions in order to understand that they were also outmoded, exasperating, completely impersonal, and very often cruel. Similarly, the personality which had seemed from a distance to be so large and free had to be dealt with before one could see that, if it was large, it was also inflexible and, for the foreigner, full of strange, high, dusty rooms which could not be inhabited. One had, in short, to come into contact with an alien culture in order to understand that a culture was not a community basket-weaving project, nor yet an act of God; was something neither desirable nor undesirable in itself, being inevitable, being nothing more or less than the recorded and visible effects on a body of people of the vicissitudes with which they had been forced to deal. And their great men are revealed as simply another of these vicissitudes, even if, quite against their will, the brief battle of their great men with them has left them richer.

When my American friend left his hotel to move to mine, he took with him, out of pique, a bedsheet belonging to the hotel and put it in his suitcase. When he arrived at my hotel I borrowed the sheet, since my own were filthy and the chambermaid showed no sign of bringing me any clean ones, and put it on my bed. The sheets belonging to *my* hotel I put out in the hall, congratulating myself on having thus forced on the attention of the Grand Hôtel du Bac the unpleasant state of its linen. Thereafter, since, as it turned out, we kept very different hours—I got up at noon, when, as I gathered by meeting him on the stairs one day, he was only just getting in—my new-found friend and I saw very little of each other.

On the evening of the 19th I was sitting thinking melancholy thoughts about Christmas and staring at the walls of my room. I imagine that I had sold something or that someone had sent me a Christmas present, for I remember that I had a little money. In those days in Paris, though I floated, so to speak, on a sea of acquaintances, I knew almost no one. Many people were eliminated from my orbit by virtue of the fact that they had more money than I did, which placed me, in my own eyes, in the humiliating role of a free-loader; and other people were eliminated by virtue of the fact that they enjoyed their poverty, shrilly insisting that this wretched round of hotel rooms, bad food, humiliating concierges, and unpaid bills was the Great Adventure. It couldn't, however, for me, end soon enough, this Great Adventure; there was a real question in my mind as to which would end soonest, the Great Adventure or me. This meant, however, that there were many evenings when I sat in my room, knowing that I couldn't work there, and not knowing what to do, or whom to see. On this particular evening I went down and knocked on the American's door.

There were two Frenchmen standing in the room, who immediately introduced themselves to me as policemen; which did not worry me. I had got used to policemen in Paris bobbing up at the most improbable times and places, asking to see one's *carte d'identité*. These policemen, however, showed very little interest in my papers. They were looking for something else. I could not imagine what this would be and, since I knew I certainly didn't have it, I scarcely followed the conversation they were having with my friend. I gathered that they were looking for some kind of gangster and since I wasn't a gangster and knew that gangsterism was

not, insofar as he had one, my friend's style, I was sure that the two policemen would presently bow and say *Merci, messieurs*, and leave. For by this time, I remember very clearly, I was dying to have a drink and go to dinner.

I did not have a drink or go to dinner for many days after this, and when I did my outraged stomach promptly heaved everything up again. For now one of the policemen began to exhibit the most vivid interest in me and asked, very politely, if he might see my room. To which we mounted, making, I remember, the most civilized small talk on the way and even continuing it for some moments after we were in the room in which there was certainly nothing to be seen but the familiar poverty and disorder of that precarious group of people of whatever age, race, country, calling, or intention which Paris recognizes as *les étudiants* and sometimes, more ironically and precisely, as *les nonconformistes*. Then he moved to my bed, and in a terrible flash, not quite an instant before he lifted the bedspread, I understood what he was looking for. We looked at the sheet, on which I read, for the first time, lettered in the most brilliant scarlet I have ever seen, the name of the hotel from which it had been stolen. It was the first time the word *stolen* entered my mind. I had certainly seen the hotel monogram the day I put the sheet on the bed. It had simply meant nothing to me. In New York I had seen hotel monograms on everything from silver to soap and towels. Taking things from New York hotels was practically a custom, though, I suddenly realized, I had never known anyone to take a *sheet*. Sadly, and without a word to me, the inspector took the sheet from the bed, folded it under his arm, and we started back downstairs. I understood that I was under arrest.

And so we passed through the lobby, four of us, two of us very clearly criminal, under the eyes of the old man and his daughter, neither of whom said a word, into the streets where a light rain was falling. And I asked, in French, "But is this very serious?" For I was thinking, it is, after all, only a sheet, not even new.

"No," said one of them. "It's not serious."

"It's nothing at all," said the other.

I took this to mean that we would receive a reprimand at the police station and be allowed to go to dinner. Later on I concluded that they were not being hypocritical or even trying to comfort us. They meant exactly what they said. It was only that they spoke another language.

In Paris everything is very slow. Also, when dealing with the bureaucracy, the man you are talking to is never the man you have to see. The man you have to see has just gone off to Belgium, or is busy with his family, or has just discovered that he is a cuckold; he will be in next Tuesday at three o'clock, or sometime in the course of the afternoon, or possibly tomorrow, or, possibly, in the next five minutes. But if he is coming in the next five minutes he will be far too busy to be able to see you today. So that I suppose I was not really astonished to learn at the commissariat that nothing could possibly be done about us before The Man arrived in the morning. But no, we could not go off and have dinner and come back in the morning. Of course he knew that we *would* come back—that was not the question. Indeed, there was no question: we would simply have to stay there for the night. We were placed in a cell which rather resembled a chicken coop. It was now about seven in the evening and I relinquished the thought of dinner and began to think of lunch.

I discouraged the chatter of my New York friend and this left me alone with my thoughts. I was beginning to be frightened and I bent all my energies, therefore, to keeping my panic under control. I began to realize that I was in a country I knew nothing about, in the hands of a people I did not understand at all. In a similar situation in New York I would have had some idea of what to do because I would have had some idea of what to expect. I am not speaking now of legality which, like most of the poor, I had never for an instant trusted, but of the temperament of the people with whom I had to deal. I had become very accomplished in New York at guessing and, therefore, to a limited extent manipulating to my advantage the reactions of the white world. But this was not New York. None of my old weapons could serve me here. I did not know what they saw when they looked at me. I knew very well what Americans saw when they looked at me and this allowed me to play endless and sinister variations on the role which they had assigned me; since I knew that it was, for them, of the utmost importance that they never be confronted with what, in their own personalities, made this role so necessary and gratifying to them, I knew that they could never call my hand or, indeed, afford to know what I was doing; so that I moved into every crucial situation with the deadly and rather desperate advantages of bitterly accumulated perception, of pride and contempt. This is an awful sword and shield to carry through the world, and the discovery that, in the game I was playing, I did myself a violence of which the world, at its most ferocious, would scarcely have been capable, was what had driven me out of New York. It was a strange feeling, in this situation, after a year in Paris, to discover that my weapons would never again serve me as they had.

It was quite clear to me that the Frenchmen in whose hands I found myself were no better or worse than their American counterparts. Certainly their uniforms frightened me quite as much, and their impersonality, and the threat, always very keenly felt by the poor, of violence, was as present in that commissariat as it had ever been for me in any police station. And I had seen, for example, what Paris policemen could do to Arab peanut vendors. The only difference here was that I did not understand these people, did not know what techniques their cruelty took, did not know enough about their personalities to see danger coming, to ward it off, did not know on what ground to meet it. That evening in the commissariat I was not a despised black man. They would simply have laughed at me if I had behaved like one. For them, I was an American. And here it was they who had the advantage, for that word, *Américain*, gave them some idea, far from inaccurate, of what to expect from me. In order to corroborate none of their ironical expectations I said nothing and did nothing—which was not the way any Frenchman, white or black, would have reacted. The question thrusting up from the bottom of my mind was not *what* I was, but *who*. And this question, since a *what* can get by with skill but a *who* demands resources, was my first real intimation of what humility must mean.

In the morning it was still raining. Between nine and ten o'clock a black Citroën took us off to the Ile de la Cité, to the great, gray Préfecture. I realize now that the questions I put to the various policemen who escorted us were always answered in such a way as to corroborate what I wished to hear. This was not out of politeness, but simply out of indifference—or, possibly, an ironical pity—since each of the policemen knew very well that nothing would speed or halt the machine in which I had become entangled. They knew I did not know this and there was certainly no point in their telling me. In one way or another I would certainly come out at the other side—for they also knew that being found with a stolen bed-sheet in one's possession was not a crime punishable by the guillotine. (They had the advantage over me there, too, for there were certainly moments later on when I was not so sure.) If I did *not* come out at the other side—well, that was just too bad. So, to my question, put while we were in the Citroën—"Will it be over today?"—I received a "Oui, *bien sûr*." He was not lying. As it turned out, the *procès-verbal* was over that day. Trying to be realistic, I dismissed, in the Citroën, all thoughts of lunch and pushed my mind ahead to dinner.

At the Préfecture we were first placed in a tiny cell, in which it was almost impossible either to sit or to lie down. After a couple of hours of this we were taken down to an office, where, for the first time, I encountered the owner of the bedsheet and where the *procès-verbal* took place. This was simply an interrogation, quite chillingly clipped and efficient (so that there was, shortly, no doubt in one's own mind that one *should* be treated as a criminal), which was recorded by a secretary. When it was over, this report was

given to us to sign. One had, of course, no choice but to sign it, even though my mastery of written French was very far from certain. We were being held, according to the law in France, incommunicado, and all my angry demands to be allowed to speak to my embassy or to see a lawyer met with a stony "Oui, oui. Plus tard." The *procès-verbal* over we were taken back to the cell, before which, shortly, passed the owner of the bedsheet. He said he hoped we had slept well, gave a vindictive wink, and disappeared.

By this time there was only one thing clear: that we had no way of controlling the sequence of events and could not possibly guess what this sequence would be. It seemed to me, since what I regarded as the high point—the *procès-verbal*—had been passed and since the hotelkeeper was once again in possession of his sheet, that we might reasonably expect to be released from police custody in a matter of hours. We had been detained now for what would soon be twenty-four hours, during which time I had learned only that the official charge against me was *receleur*. My mental shifting, between lunch and dinner, to say nothing of the physical lack of either of these delights, was beginning to make me dizzy. The steady chatter of my friend from New York, who was determined to keep my spirits up, made me feel murderous; I was praying that some power would release us from this freezing pile of stone before the impulse became the act. And I was beginning to wonder what was happening in that beautiful city, Paris, which lived outside these walls. I wondered how long it would take before anyone casually asked, "But where's Jimmy? He hasn't been around"—and realized, knowing the people I knew, that it would take several days.

Quite late in the afternoon we were taken from our cells; handcuffed, each to a separate officer; led through a maze of steps and corridors to the top of the building; finger-printed; photographed. As in movies I had seen, I was placed against a wall, facing an old-fashioned camera, behind which stood one of the most completely cruel and indifferent faces I had ever seen, while someone next to me and, therefore, just outside my line of vision, read off in a voice from which all human feeling, even feeling of the most base description, had long since fled, what must be called my public characteristics—which, at that time and in that place, seemed anything but that. He might have been roaring to the hostile world secrets which I could barely, in the privacy of midnight, utter to myself. But he was only reading off my height, my features, my approximate weight, my color—that color which, in the United States, had often, odd as it may sound, been my salvation—the color of my hair, my age, my nationality. A light then flashed, the photographer and I staring at each other as though there was murder in our hearts, and then it was over. Handcuffed again, I was led downstairs to the bottom of the building, into a great enclosed shed in which had been gathered the very scrapings off the Paris streets. Old, old men, so ruined and old that life in them seemed really to prove the miracle of the quickening power of the Holy Ghost—for clearly their life was no longer their affair, it was no longer even their burden, they were simply the clay which had once been touched. And men not so old, with faces the color of lead and the consistency of oatmeal, eyes that made me think of stale *café-au-lait* spiked with arsenic, bodies which could take in food and water—any food and water—and pass it out, but which could not do anything more, except possibly, at midnight, along the riverbank where rats scurried, rape. And young men, harder and crueller than the Paris stones, older by far than I, their chronological senior by some five to seven years. And North Africans, old and young, who seemed the only living people in this place because they yet retained the grace to be bewildered. But they were not bewildered by being in this shed: they were simply bewildered because they were no longer in North Africa. There was a great hole in the center of this shed, which was the common toilet. Near it, though it was impossible to get very far from it, stood an old man with white hair, eating a piece of camembert. It was at this point, probably, that thought, for me, stopped, that physiology, if one may say so, took over. I found myself incapable of saying a word, not because I was afraid I would cry but because I was afraid I would vomit. And I did not think any longer of the city of Paris but my mind flew back to that home from which I had fled. I was sure that I would never see it anymore. And it must have seemed to me that my flight from home was the cruelest trick I had ever played on myself, since it had led me here, down to a lower point than any I could ever in my life have imagined—lower, far, than anything I had seen in that Harlem which I had so hated and so loved, the escape from which had soon become the greatest direction of my life. After we had been here an hour or so a functionary came and opened the door and called out our names. And I was sure that *this* was my release. But I was handcuffed again and led out of the Préfecture into the streets—it was dark now, it was still raining—and before the steps of the Préfecture stood the great police wagon, doors facing me, wide open. The handcuffs were taken off, I entered the wagon, which was peculiarly constructed. It was divided by a narrow aisle, and on each side of the aisle was a series of narrow doors. These doors opened on a narrow cubicle, beyond which was a door which opened onto another narrow cubicle: three or four cubicles, each private, with a locking door. I was placed in one of them; I remember there was a small vent just above my head which let in a little light. The door of my cubicle was locked from the outside. I had no idea where this wagon was taking me and, as it began to move, I began to cry. I suppose I cried all the way to prison, the prison called Fresnes, which is twelve kilometers outside of Paris.

For reasons I have no way at all of understanding, prisoners whose last initial is A, B, or C are always sent to Fresnes; everybody else is sent to a prison called, rather cynically it seemed to me, La Santé. I will, obviously, never be allowed to enter La Santé, but I was told by people who certainly seemed to know that it was infinitely more unbearable than Fresnes. This arouses in me, until today, a positive storm of curiosity concerning what I promptly began to think of as The Other Prison. My colleague in crime, occurring lower in the alphabet, had been sent there and I confess that the minute he was gone I missed him. I missed him because he was not French and because he was the only person in the world who knew that *the* story I told was true.

For, once locked in, divested of shoelaces, belt, watch, money, papers, nailfile, in a freezing cell in which both the window and the toilet were broken, with six other adventurers, the story I told of *l'affaire du drap de lit* elicited only the wildest amusement or the most suspicious disbelief. Among the people who shared my cell the first three days no one, it is true, had been arrested for anything much more serious—or, at least, not serious in my eyes. I remember that there was a boy who had stolen a knitted sweater from a *monoprix*, who would probably, it was agreed, receive a six-month sentence. There was an older man there who had been arrested for some kind of petty larceny. There were two North Africans, vivid, brutish, and beautiful, who alternated between gaiety and fury, not at the fact of their arrest but at the state of the cell. None poured as much emotional energy into the fact of their arrest as I did; they took it, as I would have liked to take it, as simply another unlucky happening in a very dirty world. For, though I had grown accustomed to thinking of myself as looking upon the world with a hard, penetrating eye, the truth was that they were far more realistic about the world than I, and more nearly right about it. The gap between us, which only a gesture I made could have bridged, grew steadily, during thirty-six hours, wider. I could not make any gesture simply because they frightened me. I was unable to accept my imprisonment as a fact, even as a temporary fact. I could not, even for a moment, accept my present companions as *my* companions. And they, of course, felt this and put it down, with perfect justice, to the fact that I was an American.

There was nothing to do all day long. It appeared that we would one day come to trial but no one knew when. We were awakened at seven-thirty by a rapping on what I believe is called the Judas, that small opening in the door of the cell which allows the guards to survey the prisoners. At this rapping we rose from the floor—we slept on straw pallets and each of us was covered with one thin

blanket—and moved to the door of the cell. We peered through the opening into the center of the prison, which was, as I remember, three tiers high, all gray stone and gunmetal steel, precisely that prison I had seen in movies, except that, in the movies, I had not known that it was cold in prison. I had not known that when one's shoelaces and belt have been removed one is, in the strangest way, demoralized. The necessity of shuffling and the necessity of holding up one's trousers with one hand turn one into a rag doll. And the movies fail, of course, to give one any idea of what prison food is like. Along the corridor, at seven-thirty, came three men, each pushing before him a great garbage can, mounted on wheels. In the garbage can of the first was the bread—this was passed to one through the small opening in the door. In the can of the second was the coffee. In the can of the third was what was always called *la soupe*, a pallid paste of potatoes which had certainly been bubbling on the back of the prison stove long before that first, so momentous revolution. Naturally, it was cold by this time and, starving as I was, I could not eat it. I drank the coffee—which was not coffee—because it was hot, and spent the rest of the day, huddled in my blanket, munching on the bread. It was not the French bread one bought in bakeries. In the evening the same procession returned. At ten-thirty the lights went out. I had a recurring dream, each night, a nightmare which always involved my mother's fried chicken. At the moment I was about to eat it came the rapping at the door. Silence is really all I remember of those first three days, silence and the color gray.

---

I am not sure now whether it was on the third or the fourth day that I was taken to trial for the first time. The days had nothing, obviously, to distinguish them from one another. I remember that I was very much aware that Christmas Day was approaching and I wondered if I was really going to spend Christmas Day in prison. And I remember that the first trial came the day before Christmas Eve.

On the morning of the first trial I was awakened by hearing my name called. I was told, hanging in a kind of void between my mother's fried chicken and the cold prison floor, "*Vous préparez. Vous êtes extrait*"—which simply terrified me, since I did not know what interpretation to put on the word "*extrait*," and since my cellmates had been amusing themselves with me by telling terrible stories about the inefficiency of French prisons, an inefficiency so extreme that it had often happened that someone who was supposed to be taken out and tried found himself on the wrong line and was guillotined instead. The best way of putting my reaction to this is to say that, though I knew they were teasing me, it was simply not possible for me to totally disbelieve them. As far as I was concerned, once in the hands of the law in France, anything could happen. I shuffled along with the others who were *extrait* to the center of the prison, trying, rather, to linger in the office, which seemed the only warm spot in the whole world, and found myself again in that dreadful wagon, and was carried again to the Ile de la Cité, this time to the Palais de Justice. The entire day, except for ten minutes, was spent in one of the cells, first waiting to be tried, then waiting to be taken back to prison. For I was *not* tried that day. By and by I was handcuffed and led through the halls, upstairs to the courtroom where I found my New York friend. We were placed together, both stage-whispering certain that this was the end of our ordeal. Nevertheless, while I waited for our case to be called, my eyes searched the courtroom, looking for a face I knew, hoping, anyway, that there was someone there who knew *me*, who would carry to someone outside the news that I was in trouble. But there was no one I knew there and I had had time to realize that there was probably only one man in Paris who could help me, an American patent attorney for whom I had worked as an office boy. He could have helped me because he had a quite solid position and some prestige and would have testified that, while working for him, I had handled large sums of money regularly, which made it rather unlikely that I would stoop to trafficking in bedsheets. However, he was somewhere in Paris, probably at this very moment enjoying a snack and a glass of wine and as far as the possibility of reaching him was concerned, he might as well have been on Mars. I tried to watch the proceedings and to make my mind a blank. But the proceedings were not reassuring. The boy, for example, who had stolen the sweater *did* receive a six-month sentence. It seemed to me that all the sentences meted out that day were excessive; though, again, it seemed that all the people who were sentenced that day had made, or clearly were going to make, crime their career. This seemed to be the opinion of the judge, who scarcely looked at the prisoners or listened to them; it seemed to be the opinion of the prisoners, who scarcely bothered to speak in their own behalf; it seemed to be the opinion of the lawyers, state lawyers for the most part, who were defending them. The great impulse of the courtroom seemed to be to put these people where they could not be seen—and not because they were offended at their crimes, unless, indeed, they were offended that the crimes were so petty, but because they did not wish to know that their society could be counted on to produce, probably in greater and greater numbers, a whole body of people for whom crime was the only possible career. Any society inevitably produces its criminals, but a society at once rigid and unstable can do nothing whatever to alleviate the poverty of its lowest members, cannot present to the hypothetical young man at the crucial moment that so-well-advertised right path. And the fact, perhaps, that the French are the earth's least sentimental people and must also be numbered among the most proud aggravates the plight of their lowest, youngest, and unluckiest members, for it means that the idea of rehabilitation is scarcely real to them. I confess that this attitude on their part raises in me sentiments of exasperation, admiration, and despair, revealing as it does, in both the best and the worst sense, their renowned and spectacular hard-headedness.

---

Finally our case was called and we rose. We gave our names. At the point that it developed that we were American the proceedings ceased, a hurried consultation took place between the judge and what I took to be several lawyers. Someone called out for an interpreter. The arresting officer had forgotten to mention our nationalities and there was, therefore, no interpreter in the court. Even if our French had been better than it was we would not have been allowed to stand trial without an interpreter. Before I clearly understood what was happening, I was handcuffed again and led out of the courtroom. The trial had been set back for the 27th of December.

I have sometimes wondered if I would *ever* have got out of prison if it had not been for the older man who had been arrested for the mysterious petty larceny. He was acquitted that day and when he returned to the cell—for he could not be released until morning—he found me sitting numbly on the floor, having just been prevented, by the sight of a man, all blood, being carried back to *his* cell on a stretcher, from seizing the bars and screaming until they let me out. The sight of the man on the stretcher proved, however, that screaming would not do much for me. The petty-larceny man went around asking if he could do anything in the world outside for those he was leaving behind. When he came to me I, at first, responded, "No, nothing"—for I suppose I had by now retreated into the attitude, the earliest I remember, that of my father, which was simply (since I had lost his God) that nothing could help me. And I suppose I will remember with gratitude until I die the fact that the man now insisted: "*Mais, êtes-vous sûr?*" Then it swept over me that he was going *outside* and he instantly became my first contact since the Lord alone knew how long with the outside world. At the same time, I remember, I did not really believe that he would help me. There was no reason why he should. But I gave him the phone number of my attorney friend and my own name.

---

So, in the middle of the next day, Christmas Eve, I shuffled downstairs again, to meet my visitor. He looked extremely well fed and

sane and clean. He told me I had nothing to worry about any more. Only not even he could do anything to make the mill of justice grind any faster. He would, however, send me a lawyer of his acquaintance who would defend me on the 27th, and he would himself, along with several other people, appear as a character witness. He gave me a package of Lucky Strikes (which the turnkey took from me on the way upstairs) and said that, though it was doubtful that there would be any celebration in the prison, he would see to it that I got a fine Christmas dinner when I got out. And this, somehow, seemed very funny. I remember being astonished at the discovery that I was actually laughing. I was, too, I imagine, also rather disappointed that my hair had not turned white, that my face was clearly not going to bear any marks of tragedy, disappointed at bottom, no doubt, to realize, facing him in that room, that far worse things had happened to most people and that, indeed, to paraphrase my mother, if this was the worst thing that ever happened to me I could consider myself among the luckiest people ever to be born. He injected—my visitor—into my solitary nightmare common sense, the world, and the hint of blacker things to come.

The next day, Christmas, unable to endure my cell, and feeling that, after all, the day demanded a gesture, I asked to be allowed to go to Mass, hoping to hear some music. But I found myself, for a freezing hour and a half, locked in exactly the same kind of cubicle as in the wagon which had first brought me to prison, peering through a slot placed at the level of the eye at an old Frenchman, hatted, overcoated, muffled, and gloved, preaching in this language which I did not understand, to this row of wooden boxes, the story of Jesus Christ's love for men.

The next day, the 26th, I spent learning a peculiar kind of game, played with match-sticks, with my cellmates. For, since I no longer felt that I would stay in this cell forever, I was beginning to be able to make peace with it for a time. On the 27th I went again to trial and, as had been predicted, the case against us was dismissed. The story of the *drap de lit*, finally told, caused great merriment in the courtroom, whereupon my friend decided that the French were "great." I was chilled by their merriment, even though it was meant to warm me. It could only remind me of the laughter I had often heard at home, laughter which I had sometimes deliberately elicited. This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of the living is not real. I had heard it so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it any more. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal and never can be stilled.

---

**Salman Rushdie**

## **In the South**

### **Two elderly Indian men**

By [Salman Rushdie](#)

Published in *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2009

The day that Junior fell down began like any other day: the explosion of heat rippling the air, the trumpeting sunlight, the traffic's tidal surges, the prayer chants in the distance, the cheap film music rising from the floor below, the loud pelvic thrusts of an "item number" dancing across a neighbor's TV, a child's cry, a mother's rebuke, unexplained laughter, scarlet expectorations, bicycles, the newly plaited hair of schoolgirls, the smell of strong sweet coffee, a green wing flashing in a tree. Senior and Junior, two very old men, opened their eyes in their bedrooms on the fourth floor of a sea-green building on a leafy lane, just out of sight of Elliot's Beach, where, that evening, the young would congregate, as they always did, to perform the rites of youth, not far from the village of the fisherfolk, who had no time for such frivolity. The poor were puritans by night and day. As for the old, they had rites of their own and did not need to wait for evening. With the sun stabbing at them through their window blinds, the two old men struggled to their feet and lurched out onto their adjacent verandas, emerging at almost the same moment, like characters in an ancient tale, trapped in fateful coincidences, unable to escape the consequences of chance.

Almost at once they began to speak. Their words were not new. These were ritual speeches, obeisances to the new day, offered in call-and-response format, like the rhythmic dialogues or "duels" of the virtuosos of Carnatic music during the annual December festival.

"Be thankful we are men of the south," Junior said, stretching and yawning. "Southerners are we, in the south of our city in the south of our country in the south of our continent. God be praised. We are warm, slow, and sensual guys, not like the cold fishes of the north." Senior, scratching first his belly and then the back of his neck, contradicted him at once. "In the first place," Senior said, "the south is a fiction, existing only because men have agreed to call it that. Suppose men had imagined the earth the other way up! We would be the northerners then. The universe does not understand up and down; neither does a dog. To a dog, there is no north or south. In this regard, the points of the compass are like money, which has value only because men say that it does. And in the second place you're not that warm a character, and a woman would laugh to hear you call yourself sensual. But you are slow—that is beyond a doubt."

This was how they were: they fought, going at each other like ancient wrestlers whose left feet were tied together at the ankles. The rope that bound them so tightly was their name. By a curious chance—which they had come to think of as "destiny" or, as they more often called it, "a curse"—they shared a name, a long name like so many names of

the south, a name that neither of them cared to speak. By banishing the name, by reducing it to its initial letter, “V,” they made the rope invisible, which did not mean that it did not exist. They echoed each other in other ways—their voices were high, they were of a similarly wiry build and medium height, they were both nearsighted, and, after a lifetime of priding themselves on the quality of their teeth, they had both surrendered to the humiliating inevitability of dentures—but it was the unused name, that symmetrical V., the Name That Could Not Be Spoken, that had joined them together, like Siamese twins, for decades. The two old men did not share a birthday, however. One was seventeen days older than the other. That must have been how “Senior” and “Junior” got started, though the nicknames had been in use so long now that nobody could remember who had originally thought them up. V. Senior and V. Junior they had become, Junior V. and Senior V. forevermore, quarrelling to the death. They were eighty-one years old.

“You look terrible,” Junior told Senior, as he did every morning. “You look like a man who is only waiting to die.” Senior—nodding gravely, and also speaking in accordance with their private tradition—responded, “That is better than looking, as you do, like a man who is still waiting to live.”

Neither man slept well anymore. At night they lay on hard beds without pillows and, behind their closed eyelids, their unsettled thoughts ran in opposite directions. Of the two men, V. Senior had lived by far the fuller life. He had been the youngest of ten brothers, all of whom had excelled in their chosen fields—as athletes, scientists, teachers, soldiers, priests. He himself had begun his career as a college-champion long-distance runner, had then risen to a senior position with the railway company, and for years had travelled the railroads, covering tens of thousands of miles to assure himself and the authorities that the proper safety levels were being maintained. He had married a kind woman and fathered six daughters and three sons, each of whom had proved fertile in his or her turn, providing him with a haul of thirty-three grandchildren. His nine brothers had sired a total of thirty-three more children, his nephews and nieces, who had inflicted upon him no fewer than a hundred and eleven further relatives. To many this would have been proof of his good fortune, for a man blessed with two hundred and four family members was a rich man indeed, but abundance gave the ascetically inclined Senior a permanent low-level headache. “If I had been sterile,” he told Junior frequently, “how peaceful life would be.”

After his retirement, Senior had been one of a group of ten friends who met every day to discuss politics, chess, poetry, and music at a local Besant Nagar coffeehouse, and several of his commentaries on these topics had been published in the excellent daily newspaper based in the city. Among his friends was the editor of that newspaper, and also one of the editor’s employees—a celebrated local figure, a bit of a firebrand and too much of a boozier, but the creator of wonderfully grotesque political cartoons. Then there was the city’s finest astrologer, who had been trained as an astronomer but had come to believe that the true messages of the stars could not be received through a telescope; and a fellow who for many years had fired the starting pistol at the racetrack’s well-attended meets; and so on. Senior had revelled in the company of these men, telling his wife that it was a grand thing for a man to have friends from whom he could learn something new every day. But now they were all dead. His friends had gone up in flames one by one, and the coffeehouse that might have preserved their memory had been torn down, too. Of the ten brothers only he remained, and the brothers’ wives, too, were long departed. Even his own kindly wife was dead, and he had remarried, finding himself a woman with a wooden leg, toward whom he behaved with an irritability that surprised his children and grandchildren. “Not having much choice at my age,” he would say to her, hurtfully, “I chose you.” She retaliated by ignoring his simplest demands, even requests for water, which no civilized person should ever refuse. Her name was Aarthi, but he never used it. Nor did he call her by a diminutive or an endearment. To him she was always “Woman” or “Wife.”

Senior endured the multiple health problems of the very old, the daily penances of bowel and urethra, of back and knee, the milkiness climbing in his eyes, the breathing troubles, the nightmares, the slow failing of the soft machine. His days emptied out into tedious inaction. Once, he had given lessons in mathematics, singing, and the Vedas to pass the time. But his pupils had all gone away. There remained the wife with the wooden leg, the blurry television set, and Junior. It was not, by a long chalk, enough. Each morning he regretted that he had not died in the night. Of his two hundred and four family members, quite a few had already gone to their fiery rest. He forgot exactly how many, and their names, inevitably, eluded him. Many of the survivors came to see him and treated him with gentleness and care. When he said that he was ready to die, which was often, their faces took on hurt expressions and their bodies sagged or stiffened, depending on their nature, and they spoke to him reassuringly, encouragingly, and, of course, in injured tones, of the value of a life so full of love. But love had begun to annoy him, like everything else. His was a family of mosquitoes, he thought, a buzzing swarm, and love was their itchy bite. “If only there were a coil one could light to keep one’s relations away,” he told Junior. “If only there were a net around one’s cot that kept them out.”

Junior’s life had been a disappointment to him. He had not expected to be ordinary. He had been reared by doting parents who had instilled in him a sense of destiny and entitlement, but he had turned out to be an average sort of

fellow, doomed by average academic achievement to a life of clerical work in the offices of the municipal water board. His above-average dreams—of road travel, rail travel, air travel, perhaps even space travel—had long since been abandoned. Yet he was not an unhappy man. The discovery of his affliction with the incurable disease of mediocrity might have cowed a less ebullient spirit, but he remained bright-eyed, with a ready smile for the world. Still, in spite of his apparent enthusiasm for life, there was a certain deficiency in the energy department. He did not run but walked, and walked slowly—had done so even in the distant years of his youth. He abhorred exercise and had a way of poking gentle fun at those who took it. Nor did he interest himself in politics, or the all-pervasive popular culture of the cinema and the music that it spawned. In all significant particulars, he had failed to be a participant in the parade of life. He had not married. The great events of eight decades had managed to occur without any effort on his part to help them along. He had stood by and watched as an empire fell and a nation rose, and avoided expressing an opinion on the matter. He had been a man at a desk. Maintaining the flow of the municipality's water had been a sufficient challenge for him. Yet he gave every appearance of being a man for whom living was still a joy. He had been an only child, so there were few relatives to look out for him in his advanced years. Senior's immense family had adopted him long ago and brought him tiffin and attended to his needs.

The question of the dividing wall between Senior's and Junior's adjoining apartments was sometimes raised by the visiting hordes of Senior's blood kin: whether it should be taken down so that the two old men could share their lives more easily. On this matter, however, Junior and Senior spoke with one voice.

"No!" Junior said.

"Over my dead body," Senior clarified.

"Which would make the whole exercise pointless, anyhow," Junior said, as if that settled things.

The wall remained in place.

Junior had one friend, D'Mello, a man twenty years younger than him, an old colleague from his water-board days. D'Mello had grown up in another city, Mumbai, the legendary bitch-city, *urbs prima in Indis*, and had to be spoken to in English. Whenever D'Mello visited Junior, Senior sulked and refused to speak, even though, secretly, he was proud of his prowess in what he called "the world's No. 1 tongue." Junior tried to hide from Senior how much he looked forward to D'Mello's comings; the younger man bubbled with a kind of cosmopolitan brio that Junior found inspirational. D'Mello always arrived with stories—sometimes angry accounts of injustices against the poor in a Mumbai slum, sometimes funny anecdotes about the characters who took their ease at the Wayside Inn, the famous Mumbai café in the Kala Ghoda area, named for a no longer present equestrian statue, "the Black Horse district from which the black horse has been exiled." D'Mello fell in love with movie stars (from a distance, of course), and provided gory details of the killing spree of a not-yet-arrested madman in the district of Trombay. "The miscreant is still at large!" he cried gaily. His conversation was littered with wonderful names: Worli Sea Face, Bandra, Hornby Vellard, Breach Candy, Pali Hill. These places sounded altogether more exotic than the prosaic localities to which Junior was accustomed: Besant Nagar, Adyar, Mylapore.

D'Mello's most heartbreaking Mumbai story was his tale of the great poet of the city, who had surrendered to Alzheimer's disease. The poet still walked to his small magazine-infested office every day, without knowing why he went there. His feet knew the way, and so he went and sat looking into space until it was time to go home again and his feet walked him back to his shabby residence, through the evening crowds massing outside Churchgate station—the jasmine sellers, the hustling urchins, the roar of the B.E.S.T. buses, the girls on their Vespas, the sniffing, hungry dogs.

When D'Mello was present and talking, Junior had the sense that he was living another, very different life, a life of action and color; that he was becoming, vicariously, the type of man he had never been—dynamic, passionate, engaged with the world. Senior, observing the light in Junior's eyes, inevitably became cross. One day, when D'Mello was speaking of Mumbai and its people with his habitual, gesticulating fervor, Senior, breaking his rule of silence, snapped at him in English, "Why your body doesn't return there only since your head has already gone?" But D'Mello shook his head sadly. He no longer had a foothold in his city of origin. Only in his dreams and conversations was it still his home. "I will die here," he answered Senior. "In the south, among sour fruits like you." Senior's wife, the lady with the wooden leg, increasingly took her revenge upon her unloving husband by filling their apartment with family members. She, too, came from a large family, of hundreds of persons, and she began most particularly to invite her younger relations, the great-nephews and great-nieces, with their wives and husbands and, especially, their babies in tow. The presence in the small apartment of large numbers of babies, toddlers, high-speed pigtailed girls, and slow plump boys fulfilled her own matriarchal ambitions, and also, very satisfyingly, drove Senior wild. It was the babies-in-law that really got his goat. The babies-in-law rattled their rattles and giggled their giggles and screamed their baby screams. They slept, and then Senior had to be quiet, or they woke up, and then Senior could not hear himself think. They ate and defecated and puked, and the smell of excrement and vomit

remained in the apartment, even when the babies-in-law had gone, mingling with a smell that Senior disliked even more: that of talcum powder. "At the end of life," he complained to Junior, in whose apartment he often took refuge from the squalling hordes of his and his wife's blood kin, "nothing stinks worse than the smells of life's sweet beginning—bibs and ribbons and warm bottled milk and formula, and farting, talcumed behinds." Junior could not help replying, "Soon you also will be helpless and need someone to tend to your natural functions. Babydom is not only our past but our future, too." The thunderous expression on Senior's face revealed that the words had hit their mark.

For, it's true, they were both fortunate men. They were neither wholly blind nor wholly deaf, and their minds had not betrayed them like the Mumbai poet's. The food they ate was soft and easily digestible, but it was not old buggers' mush. Above all they were still ambulatory, still able, once a week, to climb slowly down their building's stairs to street level, and then to shuffle along, helped by walking sticks and frequent little rest stops, to the local post office, where they cashed their pension slips. They did not need to do this. Many of the young who thronged Senior's apartment, driving him next door to quarrel with Junior, would readily have dashed down the street to cash the checks for the frail old gentlemen. But the gentlemen did not care to allow the young to dash for them. It was a point of pride to cash one's own pension slip—on this, if on nothing else, they agreed—to travel under one's own steam to the counter where, behind a metal grille, a postal-services operative waited to dispense the weekly sum that was their return for a lifetime's service. "You can see the respect in the fellow's expression," Senior said loudly to Junior, who kept mum, because what he saw behind the grille was something more like boredom, or contempt. To Senior the pension trip was an act of validation; the weekly sum, small as it was, honored his deeds, transmuting into banknotes society's gratitude for his life. Junior thought of the journey more as an act of defiance. "You care nothing for me," he once said flatly to the face behind the grille. "It means nothing to you to count out the cash. But, when your turn comes to stand where I stand, then you will comprehend." One of the few privileges of very old age was that you were allowed to say exactly what you thought, even to strangers. Nobody told you to keep your mouth shut, and few people had the guts to answer back. They think we will soon be dead, Junior thought, so there's no point getting into a fight with us. He understood the nature of the contempt in the eyes of the post-office employee. It was the scorn of life for death.

On the day that Junior fell down, he and Senior set forth on their errand at their customary midmorning hour. It was late in the year. The local Christians, D'Mello included, had just finished celebrating their Savior's birth, and the consequent proximity of New Year's Eve—with its promise of a future, of, indeed, an interminable future in which a sequence of such Eves stretched out at their predetermined intervals toward infinity—was bothering Senior. "Either I will die in the next five days, meaning that there will be no new year for me," he told Junior, "or else a year will begin in which my end will surely come, which is hardly a thing to look forward to." Junior sighed. "Your gloom and doom," he moaned, "will be the death of me." This sentence struck them both as so funny that they laughed heartily, and then for a while they had to huff and puff for breath. They were descending their building's staircase at this point, so the laughter was not without danger. They clung to the bannisters and panted. Junior was lower down than Senior, past the second-floor landing. This was how they customarily descended, some distance apart, so that if one of them should fall he would not drag the other down with him. They were too unsteady to trust each other. Trust, too, was a casualty of age.

In the front yard they paused briefly by the golden-shower tree that stood there. They had watched it grow from a tiny shoot to its present sixty-foot grandeur. It had grown quickly, and, though they did not say so, this rapid growth had disturbed them, suggesting, as it did, the speed of the passing of the years. The Indian laburnum: that was another name for it, a name among many names. It was *konrai* in their own, southern language, *amaltas* in the tongue of the north, *Cassia fistula* in the language of flowers and trees. "It has stopped growing now," Junior said, approvingly, "having understood that eternity is better than progress. In the eye of God, time is eternal. This even animals and trees can comprehend. Only men have the illusion that time moves." Senior snorted. "The tree has stopped," he said, "because that is in its nature, just as it is in ours. We, too, will stop soon enough." He placed his gray trilby on his head and moved through the gate into the lane. Junior was bareheaded and traditionally dressed in a white *veshti* and a long blue checked shirt and sandals, but Senior liked to go to the post office in the guise of a European gentleman, wearing a suit and hat and twirling a silver-handled walking stick, like that Beau-somebody of Piccadilly of whom he had read, or the man in the old song he liked, *who walked along the Bois de Boulogne with an independent air*, the Man That Broke the Bank at Monte Caaar-lo.

The shady lane gave way to the brilliant sun-soaked street, where the noise of traffic drowned out the softer music of the sea. The beach was just four blocks away, but the city didn't care. Junior and Senior shuffled slowly past the homeopathy shop, the pharmacy where prescription drugs could easily be bought without troubling any doctor, the general store, with its jars of nuts and chilies, its tins of clarified butter and its imported cheese, and the sidewalk bookstall, with its many pirated editions of popular books brazenly on display, and set their sights on the traffic

lights a hundred yards ahead. There they would have to cross the lawless main road, where a dozen forms of transport battled for space. After that a left turn, and another hundred yards of walking, and then they would be at the post office. A five-minute journey for the young, half an hour each way, minimum, for the two old men. The sun was behind them, and both men, inching slowly forward, were looking down at their shadows, which lay side by side upon the dusty pavement. Like lovers, they both thought, but neither of them spoke, their habit of opposition being too ingrained to permit them to express so fond an idea.

Afterward, Senior regretted that he had not spoken. "He was my shadow," he said to the woman with the wooden leg, "and I was his. Two shadows, each shadowing the other, to that we were reduced, that is so. The old move through the world of the young like shades, unseen, of no concern. But the shadows see each other and know who they are. So it was with us. We knew, let me say this, who we were. And now I am a shadow without a shadow to shadow. He who knew me knows nothing now, and therefore I am not known. What else, woman, is death?" "The day you stop talking," she replied. "The day these tomfool notions stop dropping from your mouth. When your mouth itself has been eaten by the fire. That will be the day." It was the most she had said to him in more than a year, and he understood from it that she hated him, and was sorry that Junior was the one who had fallen.

It happened because of the girls on the Vespa, the girls on their new Vespa making their way to college, pigtailed horizontal behind them as, giggling, they rode toward murder. Their faces were vivid in Senior's mind, the long thin one driving the scooter and her chubbier friend behind her, holding on *for dear life*. But life was not dear to such persons. Life was cheap, like a garment idly flung away after a single use, like their music, like their thoughts. This was how he judged them, and when he discovered afterward that they were not at all like his unjust characterization it was too late to change his mind. They were serious students, the thin one of electrical engineering and the other of architecture, and, far from being unaffected by the accident, they both went into dreadful, guilt-ridden shock, and for weeks afterward they could be seen almost every day standing silently with lowered heads across the lane from Junior's home, just standing there, heads bowed in expiation, waiting for forgiveness. But there was nobody to forgive them; the one who would have done so had died, and the one who could have done so would not. Haughty Senior looked down upon them with disdain. What did they think a human life was? Could it be so cheaply bought off? No, it could not. Let them stand there for a thousand years, it would not be long enough.

The Vespa had wobbled, no doubt about that; its young driver was inexperienced and it had wobbled too close to where Junior stood, waiting to cross the road. Of late he had been complaining of a weakness in his ankles. He had said, "Sometimes when I get out of bed I do not think that they will bear my weight." He had also said, "Sometimes when I go down the stairs I worry that an ankle will turn. I never used to worry about my ankles, but now I do." Senior had responded adversarially, as was customary. "Worry about your interior," he had said. "Your kidneys or your liver will fail long before your ankle does." However, he had been wrong. The Vespa had come too close and Junior had leaped back. When he landed on his left foot, his ankle had indeed turned, and that had induced a second half-leap, as Junior tried to save himself. So it had been a strange fall, more like a hop and a skip, but at the end there was the tumble, and Junior, toppling backward to the sidewalk, had bumped his head, not hard enough to be knocked out, but, still, hard enough. He was winded, too. Air left him in a great *whoosh* as he clattered down. Senior was too busy shouting at the terrified girls on the Vespa, calling them assassins and worse things, to notice the moment when the thing happened that must happen to us all in the end, when the last little puff of vapor pops out of our mouths and dissolves into fetid air. "The spirit, whatever it is," Junior used to say. "I do not believe in an immortal soul, but I also do not believe that we are only flesh and bone. I believe in a mortal soul, the non-corporeal essence of ourselves, lurking within our flesh like a parasite, flourishing when we flourish, and dying when we die." Senior was more formal in his religious beliefs. He read the ancient texts often, and the sound of Sanskrit was for him akin to the music of the spheres—the subtlety and profundity of those texts, which were capable of questioning whether even the creative entity itself understood its creation. Once, he had discussed these texts with his students, but there had not been any students for a long time, and he had been obliged to keep his own counsel on the grand matters of being. The ancient ambiguities gave him joy; Junior's lay-philosophical invention of a soul that died was banal by comparison.

So Senior thought, and, ranting as he was, he missed the telltale little puff of air that might have persuaded him to think again. An instant later there was no Junior anymore, just a body on the sidewalk, a thing to be disposed of before the heat of the tropics did its malodorous worst. There was only one thing to be done. Senior reached into his friend's pocket and took out the pension slip. Then, sending the Vespa girls to his apartment to speak to his wife and relations, he set off on his mission alone. There would be time for death to be respected. In the traditions of the Palakkad Aiyars or Iyers, from whom both he and Junior were descended, the rites in honor of the dead lasted for thirteen days.

The next morning, in the south of the planet, far away from Senior's home town, but not far enough, there was a great earthquake under the ocean's surface, and the mighty water, answering the agony of the land beneath it with an

agony of its own, gathered itself up into a series of waves and hurled its pain across the globe. Two such waves travelled across the Indian Ocean and, at a quarter to seven in the morning, Senior felt his bed begin to shake. It was a violent and puzzling vibration, because there had never been an earthquake in this city. Senior got up and went out onto his veranda. The veranda next door was empty, of course. Junior was gone. Junior was ashes now. The neighbors were all out in the lane, improperly dressed, hugging blankets around their shoulders. Everyone had a radio on. The earthquake's epicenter had been near the distant island of Sumatra. The tremors stopped and people went on with their day. Two and a quarter hours later, the first giant wave arrived.

The coastal areas were smashed. Elliot's Beach, Marina Beach, the beachfront houses, the cars, the Vespas, the people. At ten o'clock in the morning, the sea made a second such assault. The numbers of the dead grew: the lost dead, taken by the sea, the marooned dead, washed up on the remnants of the sands, the broken dead, everywhere the dead. The waves did not get as far as Senior's house. Senior's lane was undamaged. Everybody lived.

Except Junior.

It was fortunate that the waves arrived at Elliot's Beach in the morning. The romantic young who laughed and flirted there in the evenings would all have been slain if the waves had come at night. So young friends and lovers survived. The fishermen were not so lucky. The nearby fishing village—its name was Nochikuppam—ceased to exist. A seaside temple remained standing, but the fishermen's huts and catamarans and many of the fisherfolk themselves were lost. After that day the fishermen who survived said that they hated the sea and refused to return to it. For a long time it was hard to buy fish in the markets.

Senior did not like the Japanese word everyone used to name the waters of death. To him the waves were Death itself and needed no other name. Death had come to his city, had come a-harvesting and had taken Junior and many strangers away. In the aftermath of the waves, there grew up all around him, like a forest, the noises and actions that inevitably follow on calamity—the good behavior of the kind, the bad behavior of the desperate and the powerful, the surging aimless crowds. He was lost in the forest of the aftermath and saw nothing except the empty veranda next to his own and, in the lane below, the girls with the lowered heads. News came that D'Mello was among the lost. D'Mello, too, was gone. Perhaps he was not dead. Perhaps he had simply gone home, at last, to his storied city of Mumbai, on the country's other coast, that city which was neither of the north nor of the south but a frontiertown, the greatest, most wondrous, and most dreadful of all such places, the megalopolis of the borderlands, the place of in-between. Or, on the other hand, perhaps D'Mello had drowned and Death, swallowing him, had denied his body the Christian dignity of a grave.

He, Senior, was the one who had asked for death. Yet Death had left him alive, had taken so many others, had taken even Junior and D'Mello, but left him untouched. The world was meaningless. There was no meaning to be found in it, he thought. The texts were empty and his eyes were blind. Perhaps he said some of this aloud. He may even have shouted it out. The girls in the lane below were looking up at him, and the green birds in the golden-shower tree were disturbed. Then, all of a sudden, he imagined that across the way, on the empty adjacent veranda, he saw a shadow move. He had cried out, "Why not me?," and in response a shadow had flickered where Junior used to stand. Death and life were just adjacent verandas. Senior stood on one of them as he always had, and on the other, continuing their tradition of many years, was Junior, his shadow, his namesake, arguing. ♦

**Allen Ginsberg**

## Howl

By [Allen Ginsberg](#)

*For Carl Solomon*

Written in 1955, published in 1956 as number four in the Pocket Poets Series from City Lights Books.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179381>

aw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,  
ugging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,  
gelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,  
o poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats  
floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,  
o bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,  
o passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the

scholars of war,  
o were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull,  
o cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,  
o got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York,  
o ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night  
th dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,  
comparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson,  
illuminating all the motionless world of Time between,  
yote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront  
boroughs of teahed joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks  
of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind,  
o chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine until the noise of  
wheels and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked and battered bleak of brain all drained of  
brilliance in the drear light of Zoo,  
o sank all night in submarine light of Bickford's floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate  
Fugazzi's, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,  
o talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,  
ost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State  
out of the moon,  
ketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of  
hospitals and jails and wars,  
ole intellects disgorged in total recall for seven days and nights with brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on  
the pavement,  
o vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall,  
ffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark's  
bleak furnished room,  
o wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken  
hearts,  
o lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night,  
o studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at  
their feet in Kansas,  
o loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels,  
o thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy,  
o jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown  
rain,  
o lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to  
converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa,  
o disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind nothing but the shadow of dungarees and the lava and  
ash of poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago,  
o reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark  
skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets,  
o burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism,  
o distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos  
wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed,  
o broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,  
o bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild  
cooking pederasty and intoxication,  
o howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts,  
o let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,  
o blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,  
o balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their  
semen freely to whomever come who may,  
o hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond  
& naked angel came to pierce them with a sword,  
o lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew

that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom,  
o copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness,  
o sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns and naked in the lake,  
o went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver—joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too,  
o faded out in vast sordid movies, were shifted in dreams, woke on a sudden Manhattan, and picked themselves up out of basements hung-over with heartless Tokay and horrors of Third Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices,  
o walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steam-heat and opium,  
o created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson under the wartime blur floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion,  
o ate the lamb stew of the imagination or digested the crab at the muddy bottom of the rivers of Bowery,  
o wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and bad music,  
o sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and rose up to build harpsichords in their lofts,  
o coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,  
o scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,  
o cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsht & tortillas dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom,  
o plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg,  
o threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,  
o cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried,  
o were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,  
o jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even one free beer,  
o sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles,  
o barreled down the highways of the past journeying to each other's hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz incarnation,  
o drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,  
o journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver & waited in vain, who watched over Denver & brooded & loned in Denver and finally went away to find out the Time, & now Denver is lonesome for her heroes,  
o fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other's salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,  
o crashed through their minds in jail waiting for impossible criminals with golden heads and the charm of reality in their hearts who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz,  
o retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit, or Rocky Mount to tender Buddha or Tangiers to boys or Southern Pacific to the black locomotive or Harvard to Narcissus to Woodlawn to the daisychain or grave,  
o demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with their insanity & their hands & a hung jury,  
o threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of

the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,  
I who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational  
therapy pingpong & amnesia,  
I in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia,  
turning years later truly bald except for a wig of blood, and tears and fingers, to the visible madman doom of the  
wards of the madtowns of the East,  
grim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in  
the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the  
moon,  
I whose mother finally \*\*\*\*\* and the last fantastic book flung out of the tenement window, and the last door closed at 4  
A.M. and the last telephone slammed at the wall in reply and the last furnished room emptied down to the last piece  
of mental furniture, a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet, and even that imaginary, nothing but  
a hopeful little bit of hallucination—  
I Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time—  
I who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipsis  
catalogue a variable measure and the vibrating plane,  
I who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the  
soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together  
jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus  
recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking  
with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head,  
I madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after  
death,  
I whose rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of  
America's naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down  
to the last radio  
I whose in the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.

that sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?  
Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys  
sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!  
Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!  
Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch  
whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!  
Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!  
Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!  
Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless  
Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the  
cities!  
Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the  
specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!  
Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove  
and manless in Moloch!  
Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me  
out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!  
Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral  
nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!  
They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists  
and is everywhere about us!  
visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!  
dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!  
breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years'  
animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!

al holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!

rl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland  
where you're madder than I am  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you must feel very strange  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you imitate the shade of my mother  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you've murdered your twelve secretaries  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you laugh at this invisible humor  
1 with you in Rockland  
where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter  
1 with you in Rockland  
where your condition has become serious and is reported on the radio  
1 with you in Rockland  
where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the harpies of the Bronx  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you scream in a straightjacket that you're losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed  
madhouse  
1 with you in Rockland  
where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national  
Golgotha  
1 with you in Rockland  
where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb  
1 with you in Rockland  
where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale  
1 with you in Rockland  
where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won't let us  
sleep  
1 with you in Rockland  
where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof they've come to drop  
angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry-  
spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we're free  
1 with you in Rockland  
n my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage  
in the Western night

*San Francisco, 1955—1956*

**Jack Kerouac**

*On the Road* (1957)

Jack Kerouac

<http://lit.genius.com/Jack-kerouac-part-1-chapter-1-on-the-road-annotated>

### **Part 1: Chapter 1**

I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles. First reports of him came to me through Chad King, who'd shown me a few letters from him written in a New Mexico reform school. I was tremendously interested in the letters because they so naively and sweetly asked Chad to teach him all about Nietzsche and all the wonderful intellectual things that Chad knew. At one point Carlo and I talked about the letters and wondered if we would ever meet the strange Dean Moriarty. This is all far back, when Dean was not the way he is today, when he was a young jaikid shrouded in mystery. Then news came that Dean was out of reform school and was coming to New York for the first time; also there was talk that he had just married a girl called Marylou.

One day I was hanging around the campus and Chad and Tim Gray told me Dean was staying in a cold-water pad in East Harlem, the Spanish Harlem. Dean had arrived the night before, the first time in New York, with his beautiful little sharp chick Marylou; they got off the Greyhound bus at 50th Street and cut around the corner looking for a place to eat and went right in Hector's, and since then Hector's cafeteria has always been a big symbol of New York for Dean. They spent money on beautiful big glazed cakes and creampuffs.

All this time Dean was telling Marylou things like this: «Now, darling, here we are in New York and although I haven't quite told you everything that I was thinking about when we crossed Missouri and especially at the point when we passed the Booneville reformatory which reminded me of my jail problem, it is absolutely necessary now to postpone all those leftover things concerning our personal lovethings and at once begin thinking of specific worklife plans . . .» and so on in the way that he had in those early days.

I went to the cold-water flat with the boys, and Dean came to the door in his shorts. Marylou was jumping off the couch; Dean had dispatched the occupant of the apartment to the kitchen, probably to make coffee, while he proceeded with his loveproblems, for to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life, although he had to sweat and curse to make a living and so on. You saw that in the way he stood bobbing his head, always looking down, nodding, like a young boxer to instructions, to make you think he was listening to every word, throwing in a thousand «Yeses» and «That's rights.» My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry - trim, thin-hipped, blueeyed, with a real Oklahoma accent - a sideburned hero of the snowy West. In fact he'd just been working on a ranch, Ed Wall's in Colorado, before marrying Marylou and coming East. Marylou was a pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair like a sea of golden tresses; she sat there on the edge of the couch with her hands hanging in her lap and her smoky blue country eyes fixed in a wide stare because she was in an evil gray New York pad that she'd heard about back West, and waiting like a longbodied emaciated Modigliani surrealist woman in a serious room. But, outside of being a sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things. That night we all drank beer and pulled wrists and talked till dawn, and in the morning, while we sat around dumbly smoking butts from ashtrays in the gray light of a gloomy day, Dean got up nervously, paced around, thinking, and decided the thing to do was to have Marylou make breakfast and sweep the floor. «In other words we've got to get on the ball, darling, what I'm saying, otherwise it'll be fluctuating and lack of true knowledge or crystallization of our plans.» Then I went away.

During the following week he confided in Chad King that he absolutely had to learn how to write from him; Chad said I was a writer and he should come to me for advice. Meanwhile Dean had gotten a job in a parking lot, had a fight with Marylou in their Hoboken apartment - God knows why they went there - and she was so mad and so down deep vindictive that she reported to the police some false trumped-up hysterical crazy charge, and Dean had to lam from Hoboken. So he had no place to live. He came right out to Paterson, New Jersey, where I was living with my aunt, and one night while I was studying there was a knock on the door, and there was Dean, bowing, shuffling obsequiously in the dark of the hall, and saying, «Hello, you remember me - Dean Moriarty? I've come to ask you to show me how to write.»

«And where's Marylou?» I asked, and Dean said she'd apparently whored a few dollars together and gone back to Denver - »the whore!» So we went out to have a few beers because we couldn't talk like we wanted to talk in front of my aunt, who sat in the living room reading her paper. [She took one look at Dean and decided that he was a madman.](#)

In the bar I told Dean, «Hell, man, I know very well you didn't come to me only to want to become a writer, and after all what do I really know about it except you've got to stick to it with the energy of a [benny addict.](#)» And he said, «Yes, of course, I know exactly what you mean and in fact all those problems have occurred to me, but the thing that I want is the realization of those factors that should one depend on [Schopenhauer's](#) dichotomy for any inwardly realized . . .» and so on in that way, things I understood not a bit and he himself didn't. In those days he really didn't know what he was talking about; that is to say, he was a young jailkid all hung-up on the wonderful possibilities of becoming a real intellectual, and he liked to talk in the tone and using the words, but in a jumbled way, that he had heard from «real intellectuals» - although, mind you, he wasn't so naive as that in all other things, and it took him just a few months with Carlo Marx to become completely in there with all the terms and jargon. Nonetheless we understood each other on other levels of madness, and I agreed that he could stay at my house till he found a job and furthermore we agreed to go out West sometime. That was the winter of 1947.

[One night when Dean ate supper at my house - he already had the parking-lot job in New York - he leaned over my shoulder as I typed rapidly away and said, «Come on man, those girls won't wait, make it fast.»](#)

[I said, «Hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you soon as I finish this chapter,» and it was one of the best chapters in the book.](#) Then I dressed and off we flew to New York to meet some girls. As we rode in the bus in the weird phosphorescent void of the Lincoln Tunnel we leaned on each other with fingers waving and yelled and talked excitedly, and I was beginning to get the bug like Dean. He was simply a youth tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con-man, he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and to get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him. [He was conning me and I knew it \(for room and board and «howto-write,» etc.\), and he knew I knew \(this has been the basis of our relationship\), but I didn't care and we got along fine](#) - no pestering, no catering; we tiptoed around each other like heartbreaking new friends. I began to learn from him as much as he probably learned from me. As far as my work was concerned he said, «Go ahead, everything you do is great.» He watched over my shoulder as I wrote stories, yelling, «Yes! That's right! Wow! Man!» and «Phew!» and wiped his face with his handkerchief. «Man, wow, there's so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears . . .»

«That's right, man, now you're talking.» And a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his excitement and his visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the «overexcited nut.» In the West he'd spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library. They'd seen him rushing eagerly down the winter streets, bareheaded, carrying books to the poolhall, or climbing trees to get into the attics of buddies where he spent days reading or hiding from the law.

We went to New York - I forget what the situation was, two colored girls - there were no girls there; they were supposed to meet him in a diner and didn't show up. We went to his parking lot where he had a few things to do - change his clothes in the shack in back and spruce up a bit in front of a cracked mirror and so on, and then we took off. And that was the night Dean met Carlo Marx. A tremendous thing happened when Dean met Carlo Marx. Two keen minds that they are, they took to each other at the drop of a hat. Two piercing eyes glanced into two piercing eyes - the holy conman with the shining mind, and the sorrowful poetic con-man with the dark mind that is Carlo Marx. From that moment on I saw very little of Dean, and I was a little sorry too. Their energies met headon, I was a lout compared, I couldn't keep up with them.

The whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then; it would mix up all my friends and all I had left of my family in a big dust cloud over the American Night. Carlo told him of Old Bull Lee, Elmer Hassel, Jane: Lee in Texas growing weed, Hassel on Riker's Island, Jane wandering on Times Square in a benzedrine hallucination, with her baby girl in her arms and ending up in Bellevue. And Dean told Carlo of unknown people in the West like Tommy Snark, the clubfooted poolhall rotation shark and cardplayer and queer saint. He told him of Roy Johnson, Big Ed Dunkel, his boyhood buddies, his street buddies, his innumerable girls and sex-parties and pornographic

pictures, his heroes, heroines, adventures. They rushed down the street together, digging everything in the early way they had, which later became so much sadder and perceptive and blank. But then they danced down the streets like [dingle-dodies](#), and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, [because the only people for me are the mad ones](#), the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes «Awww!» What did they call such young people in Goethe's Germany? Wanting dearly to learn how to write like Carlo, the first thing you know, Dean was attacking him with a great amorous soul such as only a con-man can have. «Now, Carlo, let me speak - here's what I'm saying ...» I didn't see them for about two weeks, during which time they cemented their relationship to fiendish all-day-all-night-talk proportions.

Then came spring, the great time of traveling, and everybody in the scattered gang was getting ready to take one trip or another. I was busily at work on my novel and when I came to the halfway mark, after a trip down South with my aunt to visit my brother Rocco, I got ready to travel West for the very first time.

Dean had already left. Carlo and I saw him off at the 34th Street Greyhound station. Upstairs they had a place where you could make pictures for a quarter. Carlo took off his glasses and looked sinister. Dean made a profile shot and looked coyly around. I took a straight picture that made me look like a thirty-year-old Italian who'd kill anybody who said anything against his mother. This picture Carlo and Dean neatly cut down the middle with a razor and saved a half each in their wallets. Dean was wearing a real Western business suit for his big trip back to Denver; he'd finished his first fling in New York. I say fling, but he only worked like a dog in parking lots. [The most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world, he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race among fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into tight spot, hump, snap the car with the emergency so that you see it bounce as he flies out; then clear to the ticket shack, sprinting like a track star, hand a ticket, leap into a newly arrived car before the owner's half out, leap literally under him as he steps out, start the car with the door flapping, and roar off to the next available spot, arc, pop in, brake, out, run; working like that without pause eight hours a night, evening rush hours and after-theater rush hours, in greasy wino pants with a frayed fur-lined jacket and beat shoes that flap.](#) Now he'd bought a new suit to go back in; blue with pencil stripes, vest and all - eleven dollars on Third Avenue, with a watch and watch chain, and a portable typewriter with which he was going to start writing in a Denver rooming house as soon as he got a job there. We had a farewell meal of franks and beans in a Seventh Avenue Riker's, and then Dean got on the bus that said Chicago and roared off into the night. There went our wrangler. I promised myself to go the same way when spring really bloomed and opened up the land.

[And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell.](#)

[Yes, and it wasn't only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I wanted to know Dean more](#), and because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified, but because, somehow, in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother; the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swimholes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic. His dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a custom tailor but only earn it from the Natural Tailor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses. And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drowsy doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills. All my other current friends were «intellectuals» - Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk, Old Bull Lee and his critical anti-every-thing drawl - or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same, sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the New Yorker. But Dean's intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his «criminality» was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yeasaying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the other, «so long's I can get that lil ole gal with that lil

sumpin down there tween her legs, boy,» and «so long's we can eat, son, y'ear me? I'm hungry, I'm starving, let's eat right now!» - and off we'd rush to eat, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, «It is your portion under the sun.»

A western kinsman of the sun, Dean. Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds - what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off.

Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.