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Collection of Short Stories

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Critical Introduction: The Male-centric Short Story

When it comes to personal relationships, the white middle class heterosexual American male, a historically protected species if there’s ever been one, has a unique social milieu through which to navigate. For instance, he is expected to be the breadwinner and guardian of the home, yet he should not be patriarchal or tyrannical in his position as head of the household. He is expected to be virile, handsome, and sexually attractive (as evidenced by the influx of male impotency drugs and muscle-building scams on TV), yet he is supposed to remain sexually faithful to just one partner. In these and many other ways, the role of the straight middle class white man cannot be pared down to terms of one or the other, this or that; there are no binary poles from which to choose that won’t lead to an adverse social consequence. He must try to find equilibrium when deliberating his position in a relationship. Thus, with the difficulty of meeting the demands of political correctness, morality, and (dare I say) the burden of masculinity, men are forced to negotiate a balance in their lives along the lines of love, marriage, and sex.

What Fiction Has to Say

A tradition of dealing with contemporary male-centric issues has flourished in the short stories of the latter half of the twentieth century, often with men coming to unsatisfying conclusions in regards to their condition and identity amid the vast spectrum of possibilities. The term “male-centric” is not to be confused with sexist, patriarchal, or chauvinistic. In the context of the contemporary short story, the expression simply labels the type of narrative that reflects on men dealing with male
conflicts and trying to find their place along the continuum of potential roles of boyfriend, husband, and co-worker. While plodding through the myriad spaces to form an identity in a relationship with a woman, some men make choices, consciously or subconsciously, that either have a stabilizing or destabilizing effect on their position within the male role spectrums from oppressor to servant, from aggressor to lover, from macho man to sissy boy. Within the narrative of the short story, the moment of epiphany will find them either reaching a deeper understanding of that position or a point of major confusion. Yet the arrival at that revelation takes into account the characters’ own failings and complexities as people. There is no \textit{deus ex machina} that neatly solves their problems.

Much of the male-centric literary fiction after World War II responds to the shift of social dynamics away from a white male-centered world. In the U.S. during this time, rebellions, revolutions, and movements were all being staged against the white male’s dominance: women’s liberation, the civil rights movement, and anti-war protests all targeted white male power. For instance, soldiers returning home from the European and the Pacific fronts of WWII felt the pressure of the changing world. While away at war, women were filling roles as head of the household and breadwinner. Desegregation laws were enacted that gave minorities opportunities that were once only reserved for whites, ostensibly increasing competition for jobs and other resources. In the late 60s and early 70s, the white male military establishment was under aggressive political attack. The American fiction writers of the post-WWII era who reacted to changing times have the voice of this newly endangered group spilling
through their pages. These writers were able to accurately convey the sense of frustration, confusion, and search for stability. The male writers of that period are my basis for analyzing my own work because they have an empathetic stance on the condition of being a white middle class male amid extensive social upheaval. While not forgiving men for past transgressions or trying to cling on to rapidly diminishing social status, these influential short story writers gave men a space in which to struggle with their conflicts and demons. They show men like me and my characters trying to stake out a place in the shifting politics of gender, love, and sexuality. It is these writers with whom I align myself theoretically and critically.

**My Influences**

The touchstones for my short stories are writers such as Donald Barthelme, Richard Yates, and Raymond Carver. Each writer places male characters in positions in which they must decide (or let fate decide) how to deal with the issues of love, sex, marriage, and relationships with women. In “The Indian Uprising” (1968) by Donald Barthelme, the unnamed narrator’s social standing is extremely destabilized in that he is fighting a literal battle against Sylvia, the woman he loves. She is the leader of the Comanches who are attacking the barricades and infiltrating the city. In essence, he is both in love with and at war with the same woman. In addition to Sylvia, he’s at war with a group of Native Americans, and their allies, the people of the ghettos. The cumulative effect is that the man at the center of the short story finds himself displaced and destabilized by a lack of clarity in his bearing toward marginalized people. Furthermore, he’s at odds with his love interest, Sylvia, with whom he is still
“getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love” (Barthelme 102).

Although postmodern in approach, “The Indian Uprising” reflects the world with which latter-20th century white men were coming to terms.

Barthelme subjects his protagonist to a postmodern narrative of seemingly arbitrary lists, non-sequiturs, and symbols. Put in a position to impress Sylvia and win her love, he sands down a hollow wooden door. Even though he got the instructions from someone “who had already solved the problem” (103), he decides that he knows nothing. He seeks Mrs. R to learn more, but conversely, the more she tells him, the less there is to understand. She gives him a list of safe words to use in discourse, “pewter, snake, tea, Fad #6 sherry, serviette, fenestration, crown, blue” (106). Despite his desperate attempts to win Sylvia’s love with the hollow door, he is eventually captured by the Comanche at the end of the story. Taken literally, he is left in an extremely vulnerable position, a prisoner who has been asked to take off his belt and shoes and to stare at the black eyes of his captors. However, if the story is read symbolically, his sincere efforts to win Sylvia’s affections and protect his home city from attack by the people on the fringes of society have gotten him nowhere. He is worse off than at the beginning of the story, and is no closer to understanding the nature of his relationship with Sylvia. He fails as a suitor and protector of the domicile. He effectively destabilizes his position with Sylvia and is displaced from an offensive stance to a defensive one by being captured at the end of the story.

Although he tries to reach a clear understanding, he is hopelessly confused. As a result, the reader is left in a state of chaos that reveals the author’s belief in the white
male’s regression of social status. It is through the narrator’s vain attempts to achieve a relationship with Sylvia that he is left powerless.

Likewise, in Barthelme’s “The Captured Woman” (1976), the men at the center of the story have captured their own women and are keeping them hostage in their homes. Nevertheless, it is the women who have the power over their captors. Even though the narrator keeps his woman on a 40 foot piece of rope, it is she who is verbally abusive toward him: she calls him “a shit, a vain preener, a watcher of television, a blatherer, a creephead, a monstrous coward who preys upon etc. etc. etc. and is not man enough to etc. etc. etc.” (Barthleme 287). The narrator agrees: “This is all absolutely true. I have often thought the same thing myself, especially, for some reason, upon awakening” (287). He figures that the best way to deal with her is by taking on some of the traditionally feminine roles: “I go into the kitchen and begin washing the dishes—the more scutwork you do, the kindlier the light in which you are regarded, I have learned” (288). The narrator is trying hard to stabilize his position in regards to the captured woman. He wants clarity about where they stand in comparison to one another, even if it means lowering his status to keep her happy. Barthelme’s narrator seems to believe in the axiom that a happy woman means a happy household. This stands in opposition to the man being the ruler of the home. Toward the end of the short story, the narrator says that even though the captured woman is still with him, “She is departing by degrees” (289). The captured woman now has the power to free herself, and she has chosen to do it in a slow manner. She reflects an attitude shift toward empowering women and accepting divorce as a viable
alternative to an unhappy marriage. The male narrator will eventually be left with little social status, no woman, and diminished masculinity. Although the allegorical plot is essentially about kidnapping, the reader gets the opportunity to sympathize with the destabilized male who has lost effectual dominance over his life.

Richard Yates’ storytelling style takes more of a traditional route than Barthelme’s often fragmentary structure. Yates conveys the gritty realism of relationships that are already in trouble. In his short story “Liars in Love” (1981), he states that the central husband and wife of the story “hadn’t been getting along well for a long time” (Yates 241). Set in 1953, the couple, Warren and Carol, has a two year old daughter and have moved from the United States to London, England so that Warren can work on a Fulbright scholarship. When people ask him about his occupation, he has a hard time explaining that he doesn’t work a regular job. From the outset, Warren is on unsteady ground as a man without a job and with a wife who wants a separation from him. When Carol finally builds up the nerve to leave him, Warren’s reaction enlightens the reader as to his status within the relationship:

“‘Okay,’ he kept saying gloomily, without quite looking at her” (Yates 242). He takes on the demeanor of a guilty child, or even an ashamed dog, in front of his wife. His neutered reaction is further emphasized when he later asks “What do you suppose he’ll be like, this man of yours…. Oh, I know he’ll be better than me in about thirteen ways, and he’ll certainly be an awful lot richer, but I mean what’ll he be like?” (242).

Any dominance that he may have ever had in the relationship vanishes when he asks that question. He’s further humiliated by the fact that Carol’s aunt, Judith, from
whom Warren and Carol rent a downstairs room, will find out about the separation. They make up a lie and tell Judith that Carol had to go back to New York to care for a sick relative. Judith pities Warren’s situation as a lonely bachelor: “Oh, you poor man…. It’s so sad to find you all alone here…. Isn’t there someone who could sort of look after you?” (244). Judith is implying that Warren is now in need of protection and care, unlike the popular view that it is the woman who wouldn’t be able to fend for herself.

To fill the void of losing his wife, Warren hires a prostitute and begins dating her and staying over at her house regularly. The prostitute, Christine, rooms with Alfred and Grace, and it’s understood that “Alfred’s the man of the house” (249) which displaces Warren even further. Yet, he still thinks that it’s a “triumph of masculinity…to have a young whore offer herself to you free of charge” (250). Due to his suddenly destabilized life, he thinks that Christine is giving him back the power he’s lost. In fact, she is manipulating him into thinking he is dominant over her when she “[falls] into his arms like a girl in the movies” (251) and “talk[s] like a little girl pretending to be an actress” (252). Christine expertly plays upon Warren’s need to feel masculine and dominant, all while she retains the real power in the relationship. She lulls him into complacency with sex, flattering, and coquettish behavior. Even when he catches on to the fact that she wants him to propose marriage—something Warren is sternly set against—he doesn’t break up with Christine immediately. As the plot builds in complexity and there’s a falling out in the household that ends with Alfred punching a hole in a wall to establish his dominance, Christine creates more
lies to try to win Warren back. Confused, helpless, and totally marginalized by his wife and his lover, Warren seeks out Alfred, the only dominant male in the story:

"'Piece of advice for you, Warren,' he said. 'You don't ever want to listen to the women too much.' And he winked like an old comrade" (269). Alfred lets him in on his technique for coping with the shifting social attitudes. He doesn't give much credence to women, doesn't get trapped by lies, and that helps him maintain his status as a strong head of the household.

Alfred's stance toward women is further reinforced when Warren reads a reconciliatory letter from his wife:

When I think back over our time together I know the trouble was more my fault than yours. I used to mistake your gentleness for weakness—that must have been my worst mistake because it's the most painful to remember, but oh there were so many others (271).

This encapsulates a key problem for the heterosexual white middle class male: he takes a risk of being seen weak or effeminate when he tries to go along with society's changing expectations for men. However, the situation tends to result in adversity no matter what the reaction. If he protests against his diminished role in society, he can be seen as barbaric, sexist, and uncompromising. But if he concedes power and "makes nice," he can be seen as pathetic. While Warren has lost his wife because of an apparent weakness, he attempts to compensate with the prostitute.

In the end, Warren is still stuck in the middle. On the night before returning to New York to be with his wife, he fondly remembers Christine whispering "Oh, I love
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you” (272), knowing that he cannot easily forget the power he felt with her despite her lies. Yates allows his characters to struggle with male-centric problems not to solve them, but to try to find equilibrium.

An author who personifies the decentered male figure coping with an unstable social environment is Raymond Carver. His short stories are among the most influential for many writers of the short story who followed him. His protagonists consist of men trying to making their way in a world that doesn’t value their contributions any longer. Carver’s men already have many strikes against them. In addition to being part of the class (white heterosexual men) being repositioned, his protagonists are often alcoholics, unskilled laborers, or emotionally crippled men. Whether this is in reaction to or the cause of their strife is not always apparent, but like Barthelme and Yates, Carver gives his male characters full room to decide how to interact with society.

In “Gazebo,” (1981) a drunken couple in the middle of a break up is recounting their relationship, trying to find reasons to stay together. Holly, though trying to keep it together, attempts to jump out the second floor window. Duane has to intervene. Originally, the problem occurs when Duane has a sexual affair with a Mexican cleaning woman who Holly hires to straighten up the rooms of a hotel they manage. The thing that sparks his interest in her is that she calls him “mister.” Although the title is a small sign of subservience, after that Duane “started paying attention. She was a neat little thing with fine white teeth. I used to watch her mouth” (23). Duane is awestruck, not only by the dominance he commands over her as the
boss, but also by the exotic otherness she entails. After a few days of watching her, she calls him by his first name. “It was right after she said it that we got down on the bed” (23). Perhaps the maid’s circumstances don’t demand equality for women in the same way as for white women, and Duane sees her as an easy target because she is subservient to him from the beginning.

Later in the story, Holly recounts exactly what it is that she hoped for in their marriage. They had once gone into an old couple’s house for a drink of water, and the old woman told them of a gazebo in the backyard that was used for entertaining and listening to music from the bygone days. It was a romanticized notion of what couples could do with their leisure time. Holly says, “I thought we’d be like that too when we got old enough. Dignified. And in a place. And people would come to our door” (28). Since Duane is not financially able to make Holly’s dream come true, and since he has had an affair outside of marriage, Holly sees no future with him. She sees no recourse other than to leave him. And at the end of the story when Duane is looking for Holly to give him a sign about what will happen next, all she says is “Duane.” In contrast to when the maid says his name, when it comes from his wife in this situation, it spells doom for their marriage. She is showing him that she will not be subservient to him. He is left without any real clue in what direction their relationship will move after this.

“Tell the Women We’re Going” (1981) is an extreme case of masculinity gone wrong. Bill and Jerry are best friends who grow up together and still keep in touch after settling down and finding women to marry. As the years pass in seemingly
marital bliss for each, “Bill looked at Jerry and thought how much older Jerry looked, a lot older than twenty-two. By then Jerry was the happy father of two kids and had moved up to assistant manager at Robby’s, and Carol had one in the oven again” (59). It becomes obvious to Bill that Jerry is unhappy with his life and asks him if everything’s okay. Jerry suggests a drive with just the two of them. They head to a secluded spot along the Naches River where they pass two young girls riding bicycles. “‘Look at that!’ Jerry said, slowing. ‘I could use some of that.’” Jerry’s comments about the girls illustrate his discontentment with his life. He thinks he can find satisfaction with a stranger out on the highway instead of confronting his problems at home.

As he slows down to talk to them, the girls are not interested in socializing with the men. Jerry pulls away, but then circles around to double-check that they aren’t just teasing him. He thinks that because of their revealing clothing and flirtatious looks that he can have them. “‘It’s in the bag,’ Jerry said. ‘You see the look that cunt gave me?’” (64). Jerry’s desperation for an encounter with the girls displays an extremity of male aggression. The two men get out of the car and start following the girls on foot. Carver ends the story from Bill’s point of view: “He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill’s” (66). Jerry’s pent up frustration overpowers his sense of humanity, and he murders the girls. He felt entitled to them; they had shown signs of overt sexuality. While Carver’s story illustrates an extreme case of male dominance over women, it
also conveys the sentiment that, in the era of women’s equality, there are still men who play the part of cavemen and treat women as objects.

Finally, one of Carver’s most important stories on the subject of love between men and women is “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (1981). In it, Carver explores many differing views on love from the two couples drinking around Mel and Terri’s apartment kitchen table. As they try to peg down a definition of love with their guests, Nick and Laura, their conversation ranges from irrational love to transient love to chivalric love. Mel can’t accept that a person could kill for love, but finally he concedes that he wouldn’t mind if his ex-wife would die, even though he must have loved her once. Terri categorizes Nick and Laura’s love as honeymoon love. “You’re still gaga for crying out loud…. How long have you been together now?” When Laura answers a year and a half, Terri says, “Wait awhile” (143).

As they continue to talk into the evening and everyone drinks more gin, Mel finally tells everyone what he thinks true love is. One night he was making rounds in the hospital, and he spoke to an old man in a full body cast who told him that what was making him the most depressed was that he couldn’t turn his head to look at his wife: “I’m telling you, the man’s heart was breaking because he couldn’t turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife” (151). The effect of their stories about love is to mystify love even further. There seems to be no definition that is wide enough to encompass all the types of love that exists. The way Carver writes about love makes one feel that it is bigger than humanity and often a source of contention between men and women especially when they each have differing ideas of what love should be.
Sometimes romanticized notions of love are detrimental to male-female relationships when one of the partners doesn’t uphold his or her end of the fantasy. In the short stories discussed here, the responsibility for happiness in a relationship often falls upon the man’s shoulders. He ultimately controls the stability of the relationship in terms of love, sex, and marriage. His behavior keeps love strong or tears it down.

**My Stories**

In my own fiction, I too allow my characters to try to come to terms with unsteady social norms. Despite the fact that love, sex, and marriage are tied to notions of morality, my characters struggle with what’s right and what’s gratifying. Just like the characters in Barthelme, Yates, and Carver, my stories deal with the destabilizing and displacing effects of relationship politics. Three of the seven stories deal with the problems of fidelity in marriage. In “Between Sound and Silence,” the narrator wants the best of both worlds: a stable home life with a wife who cooks and an exciting mistress on the side who let’s him feel the thrill of life. The dull routine of domesticity bores him. He has already been married once before, and the one aspect of relationships he enjoys is the beginning. He describes the beginnings of relationships as an exhilarating ride on a roller coaster at an amusement park:

> We used to take the convertible, another newlywed splurge, and zip down the hill for late night skinny-dips in the Pacific. Then we’d race back up the hill, each switchback feeling like a roller coaster, laughing all the way (Martin 2).

He also describes his mistress, Theresa, in the same terms. On top of dealing with the
male-centric problems of an adult, this narrator still hasn’t matured past his exuberant
days of his youth, as evidenced by the amusement park analogies. Yet he doesn’t
want to go through another messy divorce. He is caught between the stability of a
wife and the excitement of a mistress.

Each woman in his life forces him to decide on his role as her significant
other. His wife wants him to be the man of the house. When a hurricane threatens to
destroy their home, she asks him to perform the role of protector. She pleads with him
to fix the gate, the shingles and to board up the windows. “This place is driving me
crazy! I can’t live here anymore” (3). Faced with her demands, he acquiesces, even
though what he really wants to do is leave her: “I imagine launching a life raft into
the surf and escaping out past the breakers” (2). His only way of finding stability with
his wife is to comply with her requests. However, with his mistress, his compliance is
more forceful in its approach. When the narrator goes to put plywood on his
mistress’s windows, she wants to have sex, and she takes on the role of a child, trying
to lure him into bed by saying, “Can’t Daddy stay just a teensy weensy minute?” (5).
He, too, appeases his mistress’ request, but is rough is bed with her and doesn’t stop
when she protests that he’s being too violent. Immediately, he’s terrified that she will
call his wife to reveal their affair. He must again appease her by promising to come
back tomorrow.

As he makes his way back home, he discovers that his wife is gone and he
can’t find her anywhere. “Where the hell could she have gone?” (8), he says. The
reader is left to infer that he felt his balancing act between wife and mistress was
foolproof and there could be no way his wife would leave him. Even though the
stability in his marriage is paper thin, he thinks it is more solid notwithstanding the
difficulties they have as a married couple. He can’t comprehend the fact that his wife
could possibly leave him. He believes his indiscretions are hidden from her. In
negotiating his place in two relationships, he thought he had found a sense of balance.
In effect, he loses his position within both.

In the story “The Itch,” the narrator is powerless from the start. He develops a
sty in one of his eyes, and his wife refuses to let him sleep in the same bed with her.
Even more emasculating, he would act as her servant in the evenings because she was
always in a bad mood because of her job. He’s resentful that he has “to wait on her as
if she didn’t have her own two feet” (15) just to keep stability in the household. On
top of that, she badgers him to keep a low-skilled job instead of finishing college.
When he protests that he “can’t be a factory bum for the rest of my life” (16) she
responds “Can’t you think about us for a change?” (16). He finds himself torn
between his own ambitions in life and his responsibility as head of the household. On
one hand, he could alienate his wife by pursuing his degree and bring home less
money, and on the other hand, he could drop out of college to keep his wife happy.

Either way, he’s at a loss for what to do, and sees a fellow classmate, Yvette,
as his way out of his predicament. As he and Yvette practice lines for a one-act play
to be performed in an acting class, the narrator kisses her and she kisses back. He
realizes that in his marriage he’s always going to be subservient to his wife, but with
Yvette he strives for something more like a symbiotic relationship, like “a species of
white bird that would pick out the decaying food from between a crocodile’s teeth” (21). He thinks he can find stability with Yvette, but she is put off by the fact he’s married. Plus, she’s pursuing an acting career and doesn’t want a married man to interfere with her own ambition.

At the end, he makes his position toward women clear when he leaves one last groveling message on Yvette’s phone:

> I feel like such a parasite telling you this, but I want you to know. I’m getting a divorce. It should be final in a few months. I hope everything’s okay with you. After the play, I knew that I wanted to get to know you better. I know I don’t have much to offer you, but I promise I will never devour you (22).

The first person narrators in both “Between Sound and Silence” and “The Itch” avoid working on the issues of their relationships and seek solace outside their marriages similar to Warren in Richard Yates’s “Liars in Love.” In every instance, the man attempts to find comfort to the detriment of the relationship. These middle class white men are all implicit in their destabilization and displacement.

Likewise, Dave in “Between Tension and Release” is also removed from the stereotypical central position of men in society, but he’s even more helpless because of distance. (“Helpless” being a relative term due to the fact that he is the one who causes his problems to begin with.) His wife has just attempted suicide, and he gets the message while in bed 300 miles away with another woman. After getting the message on his cell phone, throwing it into the hotel pool, and diving in after it, he
decides to take the emergency stairs and finds himself trapped inside the stairwell. Immediately, his fears start to accumulate as he thinks back to what lead up to this point. At the moment of being trapped in a stairwell, the most masculine image that pops into his mind is that of the rescue workers who ran into the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. In juxtaposition with his current situation, he is completely emasculated: they had the courage to run up the stairwells to rescue lives; he’s trapped in a stairwell because he was embarrassed to be seen soaking wet. They were brave men who sacrificed themselves for their goals; he is afraid of heights.

In the face of his situation, he further degrades his position toward woman by abandoning his mistress, Cynthia, to fend for herself 300 miles from home, and, in a callous move he throws one hundred dollars on the night stand. Yet he feels he is justified in his actions: he’s returning to his wife’s side and making sure that Cynthia has money to get home. A more critical interpretation of his actions is that he has just paid Cynthia for the fun weekend of sex. This scene paints the portrait of Dave as confidently masculine but not realizing that his actions are leading to more distress.

The narrative point of view then shifts to a letter that Dave has yet to read. His wife, Angelica, leaves him a suicide note. In it she imagines herself “as principal behind a big desk, and you presenting a concise plan” that she rejects flatly (50). She realizes that the ultimate power she can flex over Dave is by killing herself, much like Edna Pontellier, in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening. When Dave reaches Angelica’s hospital room, he is punched in the cheek and knocked out cold by Angelica’s father, a daughter’s ultimate protector. He is put in his place by a more dominant male and is
surprised to wake up in a hospital bed with only Cynthia there watching over him. Like many other characters dealing with male-centric problems, Dave’s obliviousness is what makes him unlikable. A man’s questionable actions may be justifiable only if the goal is selfless. However, the men in my stories don’t realize how selfish they are behaving, thus leading to an inevitable loss of position and status.

“Ginnie A” is a story that tests the boundaries of masculinity in a coming of age story set in a school for criminally insane children. Peter is a 6th grade student who recently had his first erection. He knows it has something to do with girls, but his immature and criminal mind doesn’t allow him to deal with it rationally. He isn’t sure “whether to cut it off or go to the school nurse. No one ever really knows what to do with their first boner, but it somehow compelled [him] to go to that dance” (24). Peter’s only chance of having a date at the dance is Ginnie A, the new girl for whom he already has a burning hatred. On her first day, Peter wanted “to kill the new girl, but instead counted backwards in my mind” (23). He can barely control his rage about the new girl, but he knows that she will be the outcast, thus the easiest to ask out to the dance. He does all her favorite things for her: makes mud pies, kills earthworms, and feeds the crows. When every student receives brand new dance clothes besides Ginnie A, Peter gives back his new suit to make her feel better. His actions enhance the strategy of trying to win Ginnie A’s favor. After fighting with her early on in the story, he has learned that he will attract her more if he is nice.

Peter eventually wins Ginnie A’s trust and she goes with him to the dance. However, another student cuts in on her dance and Peter brutally attacks him. Peter is
immediately restrained and removed to a holding cell for the night. Sometime during the night, Ginnie A breaks in, and they kiss for the first time. Apparently, Peter’s show of violence is exactly what impressed Ginnie A. She calls him “Peter. My goddamn prince” (31). Peter learns the effect of his violence is winning the favor of a woman. This theme harkens back to chivalric heraldry where a man uses a show of brute force to capture the love of a woman. In “Ginnie A,” however, the pressure on Peter is to keep his emotions bottled up and not let them boil over into rage. In fact, one of the classes the children take is called “Not Dealing With Your Feelings: A Postmodern Approach to Rage” (23). Whenever there are violent outbursts at the school, a team of adults come in to restrain the offenders, and there are many codes given to identify different types of possible violence. For example, Code Magenta was “an attack with a sharp metal object” (29). Essentially, the population at the school for the criminally insane were all admitted there because of past deeds, but while there, at least for Peter, violence feels like it can be used as an effective means of communication. The masculinity that he expresses would hardly be lauded in contemporary times, but it helps him come to terms with who he is and his sexuality. Only through violence does he find passion and tenderness, an ironic sentiment in this coming of age story.

In “Between Art and Criticism,” the roles are reversed—the man is totally honest while the woman is evasive and must come to grips with her sexuality. Steve explains to Gina that he reads Playboy magazine, but that he appreciates the artistry in the shots. He represents a male in this story who has obtained a certain balance in
his life in regards to society’s expectations. He is a finance student who deals with numbers and money on a daily basis, yet he has a deep passion and understanding for art. He is an attractive man who admits “after he impressed girls at his college with his looks, they would give him a cute nickname, like Cheekbones, and let him screw them” (10), yet he finds Gina way more interesting because she gives off a mysterious air. Steve finds Gina attractive because she hides behind her intellect, layers of clothing, and blatant lies. Steve is a college-aged man who isn’t just looking for a dumb blonde to throw herself at him; he is ultimately looking for honesty:

He didn’t just want to know the truth; he wanted to know why she kept the truth from everyone. He found it fascinating that someone so dedicated to pointing out the truths in others’ deeply expressed art would keep her deepest expressions hidden (12).

Steve stands in stark contrast to the narrator in “Between Sound and Silence.” While that narrator was consumed with the ecstatic pursuit of female companionship, Steve is enthralled by the intellectual. Steve’s male-centric concern goes against the average red-blooded male stereotype, and Gina doesn’t trust him. His situation heightens the awareness that there are expectations for male-female relationships that are difficult to get past. Eventually, Gina lowers her guard toward Steve after a discussion of the painting of “two fully clothed men lounging at a picnic with a nude woman. The nude woman’s expression says, ‘So sue me. I’m naked’” (14). The painting apparently makes Gina realize the guarded attitude she has had with Steve, and in a moment of overcompensation, she lifts her shirt and exposes her breasts to him while he drives
out of her life.

Even though the character arc in this story rests with a woman, the narrative reveals a male-centric issue surrounding perceived hidden agendas of men. It is a factor that many men face when trying to establish relationships with women. Men who are too sympathetic or endearing towards women sometimes have their motives questioned. It is as if their true intentions must be devious if a man pays attention to a woman for her brain before her body. While Steve appreciates Gina’s body, he is more interested in her mind and her personality. In fact, he gets to know her so well that he can hear “the artificial timbre her voice took on, and he wondered if anyone else noticed or if it was his own secret revelation—an insight to her that no one else had” (12). Steve’s problem becomes that he runs the risk of being seen as obsessed with Gina—a predicament that would surely drive a woman away unless he gains her trust.

Another representation of maleness appears in the form of the narrator in “It All Started,” a story that takes on masculinity and death. The narrator’s stance on death is that one should be stoic at funerals and only give very masculine hugs to friends and relatives. In other words, this story plays with the stereotype that men should be emotionally detached from death. The after the third or fourth death he witnesses, the reader becomes aware of the humorous effect of the narrator’s close encounters with death and his arrogant, even egotistical thoughts at funerals. In fact, he begins trying to meet women at the funerals and looks forward to the food spread at the receptions. Even when the deaths are directly caused by him, the narrator’s
emotional shield doesn’t break. He even begins dating the sister of a dead girlfriend who he met at the girlfriend’s funeral. Not so much a story dealing with pressing issues of gender politics, “It All Started” makes death seem insignificant when paired next to the egotistical narrator. Toward the end of the story, the narrator meets the woman who would later become his wife, and they embark on many death-defying experiences that make them seem almost immortal. The comic effect is that even if a man were to put on an iron-clad exterior during times of intense emotional pain, he still won’t be invincible. It is ridiculous that he survived well over 20 near-death experiences and doesn’t have a scratch to show for them. Masculinity will only take you so far; it will not allow you to cheat death.

“Beautiful Hysteria” is the story about a man who cries. It challenges the notion of male representations of strength. In the case of the narrator, he doesn’t cry out of sadness. Rather, his is a reaction when faced with overwhelming beauty—sensory stimuli that come together in a precise way to produce an experience that brings our protagonist to tears. Early in his life, he realizes that there is something different about him. He realizes that not everyone cries this way; yet, it isn’t until high school when he understands the condition and learns to control it. In order to navigate a typical social situation as a man, one mustn’t break down crying at every turn. The effeminate labels for a man who cries are numerous: sissy, wimp, cry-baby, mama’s boy, and pussy are just a few. Understandably, the narrator tries to hide his illness, his hysteria when faced with beauty. His problem, though, is that he is a sculptor and produces tear-inducing art of his own. After he weeps in front of a date
and runs out preemptively, he decides that “hypersensitivity to beauty was ruining [his] life. [He] didn’t have friends, a girlfriend, or a steady income” (58). At that moment, he decides to surround himself with everything that’s bland or inartistic. The threat to conform to society’s expectations of what it means to be a man is stronger to him than the need to experience heartfelt beauty.

After deciding to change his life and become more masculine in his approach to the world, he quits sculpting, gets a job at the IRS and marries a plain girl named Jane. She “was easy to date; she posed no threat of hysterical relapse. [They] would go see all the Hollywood blockbusters, eat at the chain restaurants, and have safe sex” (60). Although his social positioning was stabilized in regards to his wife and crying, his need for beauty began to overwhelm him. He began craving beauty. The need to have artistry in his life became more powerful than a secure social standing. He wanted more. He says, “I started buying art books and sneaking them into my study to gaze at them…. The crying started all over again.” (61). Finally, like an interrogator, Jane confronts him: “You’re either using drugs, cheating on me with another woman, or losing your mind! Tell me what’s going on!” (62). Instead of admitting to his condition of crying spells and the loss of power that would accompany his confession, the narrator responds with a violent “Fuck you!” (62) and gives up the hope of trying to reestablish normalcy with Jane. Instead, he goes out on a fine arts bender. He begins to eat fine arts prints in a poster store. He tears them and rubs them against his body and rolls around with them on the floor of the store. He is a man who has descended to the bottom level of masculinity. His male social
sensibilities are destroyed as he tries to make love to the art prints. Because of his
disease, he lost the sense of male protocols that would have allowed him to save face.
Instead, he’s taken away to jail as his senses are heightened and his universe
transforms into art. Even though he won’t regain his male-ness, he gains artistry ad
infinitum. He loses his freedom and his manhood, but retains soul-inspiring art.

Ultimately, my stories, while differing in theme and technique, allow me to
participate in the reaction to post-WWII America from a middle class white male’s
perspective. These stories illustrate the struggles inherent in being part of a class that
is rapidly losing stature. Mainly through relationships with women, my characters are
trying to find a place to explore what it means to be a man. The male-centric problem
seems to postulate that there isn’t a good answer to the supposition that there is such
thing as an ideal man. No matter what the situation, his gender and identity will
always be problematized by forces outside his control. While not necessarily trying to
find answers, the men in my stories reflect the conflict and consequently the results of
the post-WWII middle class white heterosexual man’s search for a new position in
society.
Works Cited


The Short Stories
Between Sound and Silence

The house shakes in the wind of an approaching storm. The walls creak, the gate bangs against the fence, the garage door rattles. Shingles clap atop the roof, and branches screech across the bay window. As the wind builds, gusts rumble like earthquakes. The small equipment shed tips over during the night, and when I shine a flashlight into the backyard, the glinting rain moves through the beam horizontally. All this commotion keeps my wife and me from sleeping.

The house sits on a coastal bluff above the Pacific Ocean. We moved to Baja California to start over; it's the second marriage for both of us. We bought the house right after we married, two years ago, a monument to our new love. The realtor mentioned something about hurricane insurance when we signed the mortgage, but we were more reckless back then. We used to take the convertible, another newlywed splurge, and zip down the hill for late night skinny-dips in the Pacific. Then we'd race back up the hill, each switchback feeling like a roller coaster, laughing all the way.

We spent the honeymoon in a whirlwind of activity, never letting up lest we slow down. In August of that first summer, hurricane warnings were weekly annoyances. Now, in our third hurricane season together, they are reasons to argue.

In the morning, she says, "Why don't you fix that damn gate? And the shingles! I can't stand this! I--," She pauses to breath, gasping on the intake. "This place is driving me crazy! I can’t live here anymore."

I go to the window, look past the branches, and stare out into the big, wide, open ocean. The wind stirs up the sea to a roiling froth. I imagine launching a life raft
into the surf and escaping out past the breakers. I can hear her breathing heavily on
the bed.

This house is not driving her crazy. I suspect she’s feeling out of sorts again.

Turns out, in the hurry to settle down with the woman I once considered a soul mate,
I ignored her mood disorder. It’s been one crisis after another ever since. My best
coping strategy has been to try to eliminate the source of her discontent. But lately,
that’s been me.

Yesterday, she went out shopping and spent nine hundred dollars on some
clothes and shoes. Then she met with the cosmetic surgeon. Afterwards, she exercised
at the gym for three hours. Later, she spoke to her mom on the phone and cried. She
prepared a 5-course meal for dinner. In the evening, she told me all about her day,
what the surgeon said, what her mom said, and then paraded around in some new
outfits. But this morning, she can’t get out of bed, her eyes are ringed in black, and
everything’s my fault. I wish she was alcoholic—at least then I could understand her
mood swings. There would at least be a reason, something I could fix, a bottle of
whiskey I could throw out, a case of beer I could hide. As it is, there’s no damn
reason for her hormones to be out of whack. One day her hair will be perfectly done
up, and the next it’ll be a bird’s nest. I just wish she was normal.

A potted plant blows over and crashes on the driveway. "Just listen to that!
We’re going to have a hurricane and you don’t do anything about it! God forbid the
windows blow in! What are we going to do if all the windows shatter? This goddamn
house could collapse all around you, and you would still go to work the next
"I'll take care of it," I say to appease her.

The storm clouds cast an eerie darkness on the town below. At the bottom of our hill, the gaudy colors on the homes of the maids and gardeners are muted, dull. I drive the truck to the hardware store. It's crowded with husbands buying plywood and nails and sandbags. I buy some supplies and overhear people saying that the grocery store sold out of bottled water yesterday, that we'd better start stocking up on necessities.

I drive past my office and see the sign has fallen from above the door. I double-back and decide to quickly stack ten sandbags in the doorway and hang a piece of plywood over the window. Then I leave the center of town and drive off into the adjacent neighborhood. Dog leads lie abandoned in their yards. Screens have been removed from doors and windows. Old paint from old houses chips off and flies around the street like so many moths. I look up into the hills and can barely see the palm trees that line my sloped driveway.

I knock on the door of a small house that sits a few blocks behind the office. A few of the S-shaped shingled have already shattered on the ground. The kid answers the door.

"Mom! Mr. Davis is here!" the kid calls out, not opening the door. His mom doesn't answer, and I know she ducks into the bathroom to put perfume and lipstick on every time I stop by.

Finally, she comes to the door as I'm taking off the screen. "We need to take
all these off before they get lost in the storm."

"I'm glad you came," she says. Theresa is a single mom, and I don't mind helping her out now and then. She's been cleaning our house for almost two years now. She's put together nicely, and you can tell that she was very attractive when she was younger. I don't blame her for getting pregnant at 16; her boyfriend at the time probably couldn't keep his hands off of her.

I make quick work at her house. The screens all come off very easily and I stack them in the storage shed behind the house. With a nail gun, I place plywood on every window in about 10 minutes. When I enter the house, I notice she has changed clothes and poured a couple of drinks. The house is very dark, except for the TV. I guess they're happy just sitting there.

"I can't stay this time," I tell her.

"I know. Just have a drink and then you can go." This is how it always happens: we'll drink, she'll put on a video for her kid, and we'll go into the back room for a few minutes. After that, I usually wash up and leave.

"No, I really have to get back." I look to the ceiling. "The storm's coming."

A disappointed look changes her face. She's trying to be cute, but it's really annoying. Her kid does the same thing to get candy.

"Oh, can't Daddy stay just a teensy weensy minute?" she says, pulling on my arm. This affair has worsened in the last few months. At first it was lots of fun. I'd drive her down the hill to the bus stop, revving the engine around corners to hear her yelp with excitement, screeching to a stop at the bus shelter. Then, on a particularly
trying afternoon at home, I took her all the way to her house, and she invited me in for a beer that turned into more than a beer. I thought it’d just be that one time, but I kept going back, sometimes on my lunch break, sometimes just not going to work at all and spending the day with her at the beach. It felt like being at an amusement park.

Then my wife decided not to take her pills anymore. I had told Theresa, “Look, I think we need to stop carrying on like this,” you know, for my wife’s sake, and that’s when she implied that she’ll tell my wife about what’s going on between us. She had said, “Don’t fuck with me!” It was the first time I had ever felt truly threatened, powerless when dealing with a woman. Sometimes Theresa makes me feel like a cornered beast. My wife will yell and scream, but her rants are not her fault. She has that damn mood disorder.

I decide to stay at Theresa’s for a little bit before heading back up the hill. "Let’s make it quick," I appease her. I go into the room to get ready, and she puts a Barney the Dinosaur video in for the kid and turns the volume way up on the TV.

I go straight to work, trying to finish before she does. No foreplay this time. The bed creaks, the headboard claps against the wall, and the springs screech under the force.

"Ow, wait...you're hurting me." I ignore her and keep giving it harder. She tips over the bedside lamp trying to reach out to turn it on. "Wait..." Before she finishes the thought, I spasm and shake, letting my eyes roll in my head.

"I have to go." I put a cigarette in my mouth, and button up my pants, shirt. She lies on the bed, looking at me. I’m terrified that she’s going to pick up the phone.
and dial my wife’s number.

"You're a real asshole, you know?" she says.

"I told you I couldn't stay long." I turn away from her and light my cigarette.

"Fuck you!" Barney's theme song is playing loudly in the other room: *I love you. You love me. We're a happy family.*

"Bye." I leave her in the room, scruff the kid on the head, and shut the door tight behind me.

My cell phone rings a minute later.

"Will Daddy come visit me ta-marrwo?" she lisps into my ear, acting like her kid again.

"Yeah, I'll try." I’m relieved that she’s called me and not my wife. I couldn’t handle it if I had to endure another messy divorce. It took me a while to clean up after the first one—she got the kids, I got the sports car. She got the house, I got the stocks. She got fifteen hundred a month in alimony, I got my freedom. Fair trade, I think. And even though she’s crazy, my second wife can still cook a pretty damn good meal.

When I get back up the hill, there's little daylight left. I quickly remove all the screens from the windows and doors. I nail the shutters in place and board up the uncovered windows. I slide the cover onto the pool and move all the potted plants against the far side of the house where the wind shouldn't get to them. I climb up to the roof and nail down the loose shingles. I look down the hill and can see the hardware store, but the small house I just came from has disappeared in the dim light.

I go inside our house and shut the door tight behind me. With all the work I
did outside, the house is still and covered in gloom. Dusk comes in around the edges of the shutters. They groan against the plywood, softer now, not making such a huge racket as before. The TV is turned off. I’m conscious of my breath slowing down.

"Hun?" There's no answer. The wind picks up heavily and whistling air fills the house. I call down the hall. “Honey?” I look in the bathrooms. I peek into the kitchen. I search all the rooms. I even go back outside and lift the cover to check the bottom of the pool. I open the garage and her car is gone.

I go back in the house, and the sky lightens outside, the wind stops completely, and I hear my heart beating faster. I can’t find her anywhere. Where the hell could she have gone?
Between Art and Criticism

The first thing that attracted Steve to Gina was that she was always the smartest person in the room. He would go to art gallery openings down in Chelsea and invariably get invited up to someone’s loft for an after-party. Gina was always there, a sort of prodigy of art criticism, surrounded by her aficionados. Those of her circle would ask her opinion about this artist’s representation of the human psyche or that *New Yorker* article about 4th wave feminist poetry, and she would give very concise answers: “The grotesqueness would only disturb the *nouveau riche*. Old money loves depravity.” Then she would take a hit of cannabis and recline back into her seat. She never called it marijuana or pot. Steve would try to stand near the circle of people gathered around her and eavesdrop. After several such parties and some asking around, he found out she was a junior at Chelsea College of Art and Design and that she was a critic for the campus newspaper, *See, Cad*. He was a finance student across town, but tended to hang out around the arts community on the west side. In fact, he ate lunch at Chelsea College now and then just so he could read her reviews in the paper. Once, he wrote a letter to the editor saying that she was too harsh in her review of an art installation on campus, but that she made him hate it too.

He was also attracted to her physique, which was always hidden beneath a sweater or a shawl or a cape. Gina caught Steve staring at her body at a party one summer night and pulled at her sweater in spite of herself. She got up from the center of the circle and went to the balcony to smoke a hand-rolled bidi cigarette. Steve followed her out.
“I think I like what you said about German Expressionism,” Steve told her.

“You either like what I said or you don’t. Thinking isn’t a pick-up line.” She took a drag from her cigarette and turned to look at him head on. “I’ve seen you at these parties before. Who do you know?” She was challenging his artistic credentials, and he didn’t have any. But he didn’t think he could pull off a lie with her.

“When I’m not studying, I read a lot of art books,” he said.

“My boyfriend studies postcolonial pygmy death masks,” she said. Steve knew that her non sequitur was a lie. He never saw her with anyone before, and most of the guys who sat in the circle were looking in his direction the whole night. A couple weeks before, one of them hit on Steve during a discussion of Andy Warhol, but he politely declined. He didn’t think Gina was gay, but it wouldn’t have stopped him if she was.

From the balcony, the city was incandescent, only interrupted by the black of the Hudson River. Gina sipped a drink and smoked her cigarette and had a glazed over look in her eyes. She touched his cheekbone with her hand and followed it up to his ear. She said, “Exquisite definition,” and walked back inside.

Normally after he impressed girls at his college with his looks, they would give him a cute nickname, like Cheekbones, and let him screw them. Gina was more measured with her thoughts and her actions. The next time they spoke at a party, she said, “So who do you read?” He was able to name Ruskin, Fry, and Alloway. “How come I don’t see you around school?”

He explained that he was a legacy at another college but really loved art. “I
think it comes from looking at my dad’s old Playboy magazines,” he said. “I would get off on the pictures, but after that I think I really just admired the shapes and the lighting and the textures. The way a certain convergence of perspective lines can arouse something in me.”

She had no opinion for a moment, then said, “Helmut Newton was the pinnacle of art for that magazine.” She tugged at the hem of her skirt. “Is it even in circulation still?”

“It circulates in my apartment every month,” Steve said. “From my mailbox to my bathroom to the trashcan.”

She took a long drag on her cigarette and put a hand to her head to make sure her hair was still up and in place. “You’re not afraid to be honest, are you?”

At that moment, the most honest answer he could think of was, yes, I am, especially when I talk to you. She excused herself to the powder room and didn’t come back to talk to him that night. He saw that she took her spot back in the circle.

Toward the end of the night, Steve said a few goodbyes and noticed with his peripheral vision that Gina had watched him go.

As autumn approached the city, Steve started wearing a tweed jacket to every loft party. Replete with leather elbow patches, he had picked it up in a secondhand store. After the fourth time she saw it on him, Gina pulled him aside, and said, “This coat will be threadbare before Christmas break.”

“Well, you’re not so trendy yourself with all those shawls and scarves.” She raised her eyebrows in an expression of “How dare you!” but subsided when he raised
his eyebrows back. She turned her back on him and walked away. Steve thought he saw her shoulders shaking with stifled laughter.

Another thing that attracted Steve to Gina was the habitual way she lied about herself. Although he had only known her for a few months and had spoken to her a couple dozen times, Steve felt he knew her tone and her persona well enough to hear when her voice caught in her throat slightly. By early winter, when he quietly joined the circle that formed around her, he had a groundling’s seat to her fibs. “I’m not a nicotine-addled addict. I can quit smoking whenever I want.” Or “I wear my hair in a bun because my neck perspires.” Or “Both my parents perished when I was three. I was the only one to survive the fire.” Or “I don’t have a boyfriend because love is an emotion for primordial miscreants.” He enjoyed the artificial timbre her voice took on, and he wondered if anyone else noticed or if it was his own secret revelation—an insight to her that no one else had.

When they stepped outside, he would ask her, “Why don’t you quit smoking?” Or “Why don’t you ever let your hair down?” She would invariably change the conversation or excuse herself or walk away. It made him interested in her even more. He didn’t just want to know the truth; he wanted to know why she kept the truth from everyone. He found it fascinating that someone so dedicated to pointing out the truths in others’ deeply expressed art would keep her deepest expressions hidden. He thought, maybe she had a better perspective on critical analysis; as an art critic she probably knew how cruel she could be—she once wrote that a certain public sculpture should have been installed on the Hindenburg. “Oh the humanity!” She
perhaps chose the field of art criticism so she wouldn’t go under the magnifying glass herself. No one criticizes the critic. But what makes a person so terrified of herself?

The spring semester came and Steve worked hard in his last push towards his finance degree. One Friday night, at the opening of a vinyl-clad dominatrix photo exhibition, Steve told Gina he could only go to one last art show opening of the semester. He was just too busy with school. “My dad would write me out of his will if I don’t graduate with honors. Are you graduating too?” he asked her.

“Yes, that requisite commencement into the global marketplace. A capitalist venture at its finest,” she said. “I’ll graduate and intern around here somewhere. I’m sure your horrendous wardrobe will improve once you obtain a Wall Street cubical. I hope you at least stop wearing that sophistic coat. It ages you horribly.”

“I don’t know where I’ll be,” he said. “My father’s company has field offices all around the country.”

She fixed her hair and looked at him. A piece of his hair was sticking up, and she patted it down. “Good luck,” she said and excused herself.

The next party, even though there was a springtime nip in the air, Gina appeared sans scarf, shawl, cape, or sweater. She wore a form-fitting top that left her open for interpretation. When she turned in full profile, Steve stared at the arabesque line from the crown of her head to her toes. He noticed that she didn’t speak much and constantly checked her hair with a quick, scolding hand. She smoked her cannabis quicker and deeper than before, and stayed within the insulated circle of friends.
He walked up to the circle as someone asked, “What about Edouard Manet’s ‘Luncheon on the Grass’?” It was a scandalous piece for its time: two fully clothed men lounging at a picnic with a nude woman. The nude woman’s expression says, “So sue me. I’m naked.” Steve heard Gina’s voice stall, then resume, “I think the sociological ramifications are more pronounced than the artistic.” She smoothed her shirt across her stomach and looked around for the cannabis. Someone obliged and she sank deep into her chair.

People filtered out of the party very late, and about ten people were waiting on the curb for a taxi. The first two taxis to arrive shuttled everyone but Steve and Gina away from the loft. In the third, Gina and Steve occupied the back seat alone. There wasn’t much to say outside the confines of the loft—her high had worn off and her friends were gone. Since Gina’s apartment was closest, the cabbie dropped her off first. As the car pulled away from the sidewalk, Steve looked out the back window at Gina standing on the sidewalk. At first it looked like she was pulling at her shirt again, but in fact she had pulled it up over her head and was exposing her breasts to him. She stood beneath a streetlight, and he gave her a thumbs-up. Quickly, the darkened cab drove further and further away.
The Itch

One fine morning, as the saying goes, I woke up with this sty in my eye. Don’t know how the hell I got it, but there it was, first thing when I woke up. A sty. You’ve heard what they say about your eyes being a window to your insides? I don’t know if I believe that or not, but that sty drove me crazy.

The foreman at work said, “Don’t be spreading that shit around the worksite,” but I didn’t go to the doctor or anything for a couple days. I really just expected it to go away. I bought the Visine drops. I used an eye bath for a good twenty minutes. I put some over-the-counter goo on it. Nothing. And it started to itch too. Not just that subtle, nagging type of itch. It was a mother of an itch. I couldn’t resist scratching it, and my eye got all puffed out and irritated-looking. I felt like putting a bag over my head, dragging a foot when I walked, yelling out, “I’m not an animal!”

My wife got pretty tired of my eye too. Called it pink eye, but I’ve had pink eye before and I knew this wasn’t it. She thought she knew everything about everything. She worked as a receptionist or a secretary or something like that at an elementary school. I don’t think she even liked her job, but I could never really tell. She got real bitchy when those kids infected her with some new disease. She wouldn’t even let me sleep in the same room with her and my eye condition.

At night, I would have to wait on her as if she didn’t have her own two feet.

“Is that drink ready?” she asked.

“Coming, Dear,” I said in a hell-of-a-sarcastic voice. I handed her the liquor. She took a sip and eased back into the sofa, kicked off her shoes, and exhaled. The
fumes from her mouth sometimes reach me way the hell over on the other sofa. And then there was the constant smell of cigarettes.

“Where’s my lighter?” She walked out into the garage and I didn’t see her again for two hours. That was fine by me.

Work was just okay, too. I mean, I had to have food. I had to make payments on my bills. I got this factory job making cathode ray tubes for computer monitors. I was on the assembly line where we made them. It was an okay job, $14 an hour. Like I said, I had to put food on the table. They put me on the swing shift after a couple months. Problem was, I was also in my sixth semester at the J.C. That was when the crap started to pile up. Job. Marriage. School. So I put off taking my fine arts requirement until the summer session. The last class I had to pass. My wife would rather have had me work all summer.

“Fourteen dollars an hour,” she said. “That’s $560 dollars a week, over $2,000 a month! You can’t cut back now!”

“But I can’t be a factory bum the rest of my life either!”

“Can’t you think about us for a change?”

“...” I didn’t respond. It was hard to win an argument with her. When it came to money, she was always right. I mean, always right. I just walked into the other room.

I couldn’t stand the itch in my eye anymore. I could hardly see. The foreman moved me to the pallet end of the line, all by myself. He said I was going to infect the rest of the crew and then what would he do with a bunch of freaks.
And I still had to take this fine arts class during summer school: Acting 100. It was full of football players and drama geeks. I sure as hell didn’t know any of those people, but I saw this cute girl looking at a script before class. I stared at her for a long time hoping she would look back. When she finally looked up, she caught me rubbing my stupid eye. Now the only decent-looking girl in class probably thought I was contagious. What a long-ass summer that would have been.

Half way through the first hour of class, the goddamn teacher decided to partner everybody up. She didn’t know our names and just randomly chose people. I got the cute girl. She had her hair in curls, the way it’d be if you were modeling for a beer ad. We were supposed to work on a one-act play and have it ready to perform in four weeks. We were only performing it in front of the other students, so there wasn’t any pressure or anything.

“I’m Yvette.” She put out her dainty, dark hand. I lifted it and squeezed. One of those charming-as-hell hand shakes.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Have you read the play yet?” she said.

“Umm...” I balked at this question the way I used to stall when my wife asked if I did my honey-do list.

Yvette gave me this dirty look. I was not even close to being prepared for that class and she looked pissed, in that pretty kind of way. I was one of those partners that you don’t want to get paired up with if you want to get a good grade on the project. I wasn’t holding up my end of the what-do-you-call-it—symbiotic
relationship: she needed me, and I needed her. I learned all about it in Biology 100 a few years back. Problem was, I didn’t have much I could offer her.

“No,” I said, meaning I hadn’t read the damn thing. She gave me a dirtier look and I got this twinge. God, she was pretty when she was mad.

“So, when are you available to rehearse?”

“Um, well, I just started working the swing shift, so it’s going to have to be weird times.”

“Alright,” she said, less than thrilled. “Well, I’m not working right now. I just babysit some kids for this lady.”

“Great. So when are we going to do lines?”

“You could come over and we can run the lines while I’m watching the kids.”

“The lady won’t mind?”

“She can’t mind if she doesn’t know.”

So she set it up that we’d “run” the lines at her babysitting gig. She bribed the kids that if they didn’t tell about me coming over she’d give them candy. She was dead serious. Just to give them the taste for it, she dumped a bag of M&M’s on the table and made them pinkie-swear to secrecy.

“You’re sure this is cool?” I asked when I first got there.

“Yeah. They’re watching TV. Don’t worry. Just park down the street and leave no later than seven.” She handed me a copy of the script with my part already highlighted. She wrote notes in the margins for how we were to “block” out the scenes. She used cute little curvy letters when she wrote. Not unlike her body.
The rotten play we got stuck with was this sentimental crap about a woman who has to leave the man she falls in love with because her grandfather has cancer and she has to care for him. The grandfather lives in Boston and she and the love interest live in Los Angeles, so it’s an entire one-act about their romance, their petty fights, and their separation at the end.

After a few lackadaisical run-throughs at her babysitting job, I discovered that there was this one part of the play that I loved to rehearse. It was when I took Yvette’s hands in mine and we stared into each other’s eyes, a goofy grin on our faces. The first time I ever touched her, I touched her hands. I tried to flub a line, or overact, or pretend to blank out so that we could do that part over again.

“C’mon. How many times are we going to do this scene?” She got frustrated and jerked her hands away from mine. She was such a perfectionist—the stress was getting to her. I rolled up my script and poked her playfully in the gut. Her hands clenched into fists and she looked me straight in the evil eye. I flinched and prepared to block a slap, a punch, even a knee to the groin. But with a curtsy and a grin, she started the first of many script-sword fights. She bashed her script against my shoulder and I countered with a slash to her waist. She went for the side of my head and barely missed my eye.

“Did I get your eye?” She felt bad, so I played it up and started to massage the evil eye as if I was truly injured.

“Not yet!” I poked her again and we laughed our asses off. She ran at me, and I leaned forward with my shoulder, knocking her to the ground. What a complete
moron I was!

I collapsed to the carpet and that was when Yvette finally asked about my eye.

"Why does it look like that?"

"I don’t know."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not really. It just itches."

"Don’t you think you should take care of it?"

"Maybe." I put down the script and Yvette and I got to talking. She was quite an accomplished actress, what with 5 high school plays, 2 high school musicals, and an audition for a shampoo commercial.

She opened up to me. "I just know I’m going to make it big. I just know that my future is acting. I’ve just got to find a way to leave the deadwood behind. You know?" I only knew too well what she meant. I would have to chop some wood too if my life was to go anywhere.

On the night before we were to act out our scene for class, with the babysitting kids ten feet down the hall, Yvette was freaking out: "We don’t have all the blocking down! You keep screwing up your lines! I have an audition right after class tomorrow! My hair is a mess, and your eye looks like shit!" I kissed Yvette impulsively. She kissed me back. After a moment we came up for air and she brushed the hair from her forehead with the back of her hand and a puff of air from her cheeks. She caught her breath.

"You’re married," she said and looked at my wedding ring.
“Only on paper,” I told her. We made out for about 30 minutes, and she let me feel around under her bra. The whole time, I was thinking about those symbiotic relationships. This must be relieving her stress or something. I don’t know what else she could get out of making out with a married man on a couch at a babysitting job. I told her I had a condom, but she shook her head. She seemed to relax more even though her cheeks were flushed red.

The next day, we got a C-minus on the one-act play. The teacher said that she didn’t believe the intimacy of the relationship between the lovers. She said that we didn’t do enough to “sell” their love for each other with the little things: a sparkle in the eye, a hand on a shoulder, an expectant glance. I remembered an animal documentary in Bio 100 that showed a species of white bird that would pick out the decaying food from between a crocodile’s teeth. The bird would flutter by and the croc would open its big old mouth. Gently, the bird would crawl in and remove the rotten flesh from the croc’s last meal. When finished the bird would stalk away with a full belly, leaving the crocodile satisfied and clean. I think the crocodile loved that bird and longed for its return. In fact, the only reason it even ate a water buffalo or gazelle was so that the bird would have something to feast on, a reason to come around.

I called Yvette that night after her audition and left a message. “Sorry about our grade on the play. I hope your audition went well. Call me back when you get a chance.” I wanted to say I think I’m falling for you. You know, give her a hint that I thought things could have gone further between us if she wanted them to.
Yvette didn’t show up for class the next day or the day after that. I left message after message, and I finally drove out to the hospital. They put this dye in my eye and looked at it under a black light. They said it didn’t look like anything too serious, but scratching it had made things a lot worse. They gave me drops and said it would be gone in 3 or 4 days. Sure enough, the evil eye cleared completely the day I told my wife I wanted a divorce.

Yvette missed another day of class, and I left another message. “I feel like such a parasite telling you this, but I want you to know. I’m getting a divorce. It should be final in a few months. I hope everything’s okay with you. After the play, I knew that I wanted to get to know you better. I know I don’t have much to offer you, but I promise I will never devour you.”

The next time I called back the number was disconnected.
Ginnie A

I first kissed a girl in elementary school. Ginnie A and I were in the 6th grade together at the Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary School for the Criminally Insane. It was downtown, and our principal, Mr. Poe, reprimanded the patients whenever we violated one of the Codes of Behavior. One of the first lessons was that improper touching was strictly against the code. Sometimes kids would be caught and sent to his office to stare into his bloodshot eyes and take whatever punishment was coming, from verbal modifications to full body restraints. Before Ginnie A, I had never even touched a girl I wasn’t related to.

She and I were in the same anger management class, Not Dealing with Your Feelings: A Postmodern Approach to Rage. She had transferred in three months into the school year, and on her first day she sat in my assigned seat.

"Damn it, bitch. Get out of my seat!" I knew I was supposed to find a tranquil solution to her spatial invasion, but I was sick of people sitting in my seat. I leaned into her, filling all her personal space with my body, getting as close to her as possible without actually touching her. Ginnie A gave me a smug grin. "You better get out of my seat," I warned her, getting ready to go for her hair.

"Peter," Mrs. Whitman, our teacher, tried in her most calming of voices, "remember your avoidance techniques." Her tone was so sing-song and pleasant. I imagined what her throat would look like hanging wide open, the fatty tissue of her neck-wattle exposed and red.

"Yes, Mrs. Whitman," I relented. I still wanted to kill the new girl, but instead
I counted backwards in my mind. 10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1. I had learned this in my Why Hate Matters class. "Where should I sit, Mrs. Whitman?"

"Oh, I didn't realize that we have a new patient in class today. Little girl," Mrs. Whitman directed her sing-song toward Ginnie A, "who are you?"

"My name's Ginnie A, ma'am. This seat's mine now."

I took a different seat and glared at Ginnie A murderously. Mr. Poe read the morning announcements over the P.A. with his drunken lisp, and Mrs. Whitman repeated them in her sing-song. Most of the class just stared or ticked.

One of the announcements sounded disgusting and interesting. There was going to be a sixth grade dance on campus, and Mr. Poe wanted us to "learn shome new movthes and come out to the danthe." He called it the Friends All dance. A week earlier I had gotten my first boner, and I didn’t know whether to cut it off or go to the school nurse. No one ever really knows what to do with their first boner, but it somehow compelled me to go to that dance. I had an urge to touch a girl, gently, not ripping out long strands of hair. My only problem was I had to ask one to go with me.

At morning recess, I noticed that Ginnie A didn't play with the other girls, the ones who hung upside down on the jungle gym showing their RWE school underwear. Instead she sat alone beside the crows, feeding them freshly dug-up worms. I came up behind her with a jump rope in my hand, ready to choke her with it.

"I see you, motherfucker!" she shouted, startling me into dropping the rope. I ran off to join a game of torture the frogs.

In class, Mrs. Whitman intoned, "How many of you would like to attend the
Friends All dance?” The class all raised their hands, except Ginnie A. That would leave four boys without a girl: Oswald, Harvey, Lee and me. I was hoping Ginnie A would raise her hand; she seemed the girl with the least to lose by going with a guy like me. I already had a reputation for having full-blown rage episodes, so I knew no girl would want to be my date. Usually, when girls accidentally brushed against me, they would use their invisible disinfectant spray to ward off any cooties that might have jumped onto them. Ginnie A would be the only chance I had at going. I gave her a look, hoping she’d raise her hand. Instead, she flipped me off, and I raised my hand to get Mrs. Whitman’s attention.

"Yes, Peter?"

"Ginnie A just made the gesture for ‘up yours’ to me."

"Ginnie A! Is this true?"

“No, ma’am,” said Ginnie A.

“The hell she didn’t! Goddamn!” I started to get out of my seat to kick her ass.

“Then why would Peter say such a thing?”

“I did make a gesture, ma’am, but it wasn’t the ‘up yours’ gesture,” she said, with a tone of one-upmanship in her voice. “My gesture meant ‘Fuck you and go to hell.’”

“You’re retarded,” I shouted. No sooner had I said the word “retarded” when Ginnie A rose from her seat, grabbed Mrs. Whitman’s adults-only scissors, and sliced apart the front of my trousers. Luckily, the scissors weren’t sharp enough to penetrate the skin, but they put a slice near my crotch. Mrs. Whitman ran to the red phone,
picked it up without dialing, and quickly whispered, "Silver alert. Come quick!"

When we first started this school, we’d all been trained on how to deal with
irate classmates, and rote actions took over. A big kid, Grover Thoreau, jumped on
Ginnie A from behind, knocking the scissors to the ground. In an instant, two adults
burst into our class, Mr. Emerson and Mrs. Plath. They surrounded Ginnie A, who
was kicking and screaming and trying to bite. They bound her arms, legs, mouth, and
eyes and removed her from the classroom.

Leaving school that day, I heard screams from the nurse’s office. A few heavy
metal containers were being flung around, and someone was attempting to break out
the mesh-covered windows from inside.

For three straight days, Ginnie A wasn't in class. But on the next day she
showed up with big eyes and little pupils. That's how she stayed for the rest of that
school year at the Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary School for the Criminally
Insane. It made her easier to talk to.

The day she returned, I saw her on the playground digging in the mud, making
little mounds. She had only spoken two words in class that morning: “present” and
“homicidal,” when Mrs. Whitman took attendance and inquired as to our level of
rage.

I asked Ginnie A, "What are you doing?"

"Burying worms."

"Why?"

"They're dead." I looked in her hand. There were about 7 or 8 worms, all torn
in two. She was putting them in shallow graves and covering them over. Each one had a small stick that marked its location. About 20 sticks stood in jagged rows in the mud.

I was dying to see if she’d go with me to the stupid dance. I thought she’d help me figure out what to do about the boner I kept getting. I was tragically desperate. “Do you want to go to the Friends All dance with me?” I blurted.

She nodded assent and tore apart another worm.

I started going near Ginnie A more and more. She’d be making mud pies, and I’d put little sticks in them and say “Happy birthday,” pretending to blow out the candles. Another time, I brought her a whole mess of worms I’d found. Some were already dead, but she smiled and took them anyway. Once, when she didn’t get to come out to recess, I constructed more mounds for her and fed the crows, who cawed in appreciation.

The night before the dance, I thought of Ginnie A and me at the dance, kissing, holding hands. I had to wake up and change my clothes before the other boys saw the stain.

In class, Mrs. Whitman addressed the students: “Boys and girls, your clothes for the dance have arrived!” Mr. Emerson burst into the room with a rolling rack full of suits and dresses. We all jumped from our seats and rushed to find our sizes. I got a blue blazer and white pants. Jimmy Bryant said I looked like a yacht-boat captain.

When everyone settled, we heard a “ma’am” come from a face buried in arms on a desk. “Ma’am,” Ginnie A cried, “I didn’t get no goddamn dress.”
I felt bad for Ginnie A. I wanted her to feel beautiful. All the other girls were flaunting their frilly gowns. I returned my suit to the rack. Ginnie A saw this and smiled.

Despite Ginnie A’s disappointment, the whole class was buzzing about the dance: who would dance with who, which songs should be played, how to dance a slow song, whether it’s polite to get your date a flower, and how to control your temper if someone tried to “cut in” on a dance like they did in the movies. Mrs. Whitman pretended to be working at her desk as we discussed these urgent matters. I think I saw her smile.

That night, the auditorium was decorated for the big event. Signs on the wall suggested that “Keeping your hands to yourself is fun” and “Avoidance makes the pain go away.”

The first song was awkward: boys lined up against one side of the auditorium with the girls lined up against the other. Ginnie A and I were the only ones wearing our school uniforms. A couple of teachers danced, but they were already married. They danced a few feet apart, modeling for us the way to avoid touching your dance partner. But I wanted to touch, to feel Ginnie A’s hands on my shoulders and mine on her waist. The teachers kept gesturing for others to join, but everyone stood stark still. Everyone except Franklin Benjamin.

Franklin was the boy who landed in RWE for simple manslaughter. Supposedly he killed an intruder who broke into his parent’s house, but when the evidence came to light in court, it seems he had carved his initials in the thief’s skin.
The other kids at school kind of looked up to him because he was so well liked by the teachers as the least violent of all of us. He was the only one allowed to use the adults-only scissors. He was so cocky that he never even asked a girl to the dance. He said he’d just take the “pick of the litter” once he got there. Yes, he was voted class president and least likely to get the death penalty.

Amidst all the gawking 6th graders, he strode across the floor in his new borrowed suit and walked right up to Ginnie A, the easiest conquest of them all. He held out his hand for her, and she looked over his shoulder at me. In my mind, I could only say 10...9...8...7...6 before I ran across the floor and punched the back of Franklin’s head. Immediately the lights went up in the auditorium, sirens blared, and lights flashed. Five adults restrained me. An announcement came over the P.A.: “Code Tangerine in the auditorium. Code Tangerine in the auditorium.” We had so many codes at RWE that they had to use the color tangerine for unprovoked attacks. That was different than Code Magenta, an attack with a sharp metal object.

I yelled for the adults to leave me alone, to stop, that this was my first boy/girl dance. The patients ran around the gym, out of control, using this distraction to punch the kids they hated. In the middle of the chaos, I watched Ginnie A blowing me a kiss.

They took me to the nurse’s office and put me in the padded room. I knocked around in there until I heard them leave, and then I sat quietly, my teeth shaking and snot running down my face. I sat there a long time until I heard someone coming in from outside. I thought for sure it would be Mr. Poe to have his way with me. It was
Mrs. Whitman.

“Peter,” she crooned. “Why did you hit Franklin?”

“Ginnie A was my date. I didn’t want him dancing with her. I was supposed to dance with her.” I got it all out in one breath.

“What about your avoidance techniques, Peter? Couldn’t you control yourself?”

She didn’t understand. Adults never understand why kids fight, why they throw rocks at each other, why they beat another kid with a hammer until he passes out and then keep swinging it. “Dammit! Mrs. Whitman, you don’t understand me! How can you understand me?” I threw myself against the wall again and again. Mrs. Whitman called someone in to restrain me. While I was pinned down, they put drops in my eyes that stung like fire. They left me to rub at my eyes incessantly.

At some point during the night, I heard a scratch at the mesh-covered window, and noticed an object prying out the frame. It looked like a screwdriver was being used as a crowbar to undo the wooden jam around the window. A bruised arm reached through the window and unlocked the door. I don’t know how she did it, but it was Ginnie A. She had brought me some mud pies.

“Peter,” Ginnie A grabbed my wrist. The mud on her hand was cold against my skin. With her free hand, she wiped a smear of mud across her lips. Then she kissed me, my first kiss. I tasted grit and grime and the acidic pleasures of the inside of her mouth. She held that position, darting her tongue everywhere, until my mouth was full of mud. Her eyes were closed, and when she pulled away, she slowly opened
them. Both our mouths were smudged with brown sludge and saliva. A little stream of the mixture trickled down her chin. “Peter. My goddamn prince.”

I pulled her back to me and held her as tight as a straitjacket. I put my hands around her waist and hers were on my shoulders. I realized that I was so close to her that I could open her jugular vein with my teeth. We kissed again clumsily and our bodies writhed together. I don’t think she even noticed, but that’s the moment I discovered what boners are for.
It All Started

Rich had gone up to the ski resort on Big Bear Mountain during Christmas break and returned in a body bag. Apparently, a tree got in the way of his one last run. The whole dorm was pretty shaken up; most of us were fresh out of high school for four months, and we'd never known anyone who died before. It was a pretty new experience. All the guys from his floor wore black sunglasses and black armbands to the cemetery.

I tried to be stoic at his funeral; I only gave very masculine hugs to all his friends and relatives. You know, where you lean in and only put one arm with a closed fist around the other person. I wanted to project an image of calm urgency, if that makes sense. I looked like I was ready to rescue a baby from a burning building, but I was going to take my time getting there.

Rich's roommate, Steve, took the spring semester off. He went to Barcelona and partied for three months. When he came back, he did nothing but snort coke. When his dad stopped paying his credit card bills, he jumped off the Coronado Bay Bridge, smacked into the San Diego Bay and killed himself instantly. Steve's funeral was attended by over two hundred people--some who I swore were drug dealers. A few of them even spoke Spanish to each other with a lisp, so I knew they were from Spain. Afterward, Steve's dad put on a reception dinner for everyone who had made the long trip. I said, "Hola," to a girl across the shrimp buffet, and she pulled her lips and nose up in disgust. To this day, I don't know if she was disgusted that I was trying to pick her up at a funeral, or if she just didn't like shrimp.
Heather, Steve's girlfriend, was pretty distraught over Steve's death. She often skipped class and went down to Seaport Village to look across the bay to the bridge. I heard that she tried to swim to the center of the bridge to write Steve's name on a pylon in memoriam, but she was yanked out of the water by the Coast Guard. I had Physics with her, but she stopped going.

A month later, Heather suddenly took off, leaving a load of laundry in the washer. After an extensive search, they found her ashes in her burned out car at the bottom of a remote canyon cliff in Orange County. Her family buried an empty casket in her name in the same cemetery as Steve. Instead of a body, they put possessions of Heather's in her casket before it was lowered. Her funeral was more subdued than Steve's—not as many people, and the food wasn't anything spectacular. Her older sister, Karen, started asking me all these weird questions about whether I noticed anything strange about Heather, and if she ever showed any signs of suicide. The family desperately wanted to believe she was murdered. The police had already interviewed me, since we were in the same class and all, and I was starting to get bored, so I told Karen some stuff I made up about Heather always talking about Disneyland, and for the rest of the funeral, Karen kept talking to me. Apparently, Heather really did like Disneyland, and I guess I was one of the few links between Karen and her dead sister.

I waited a few days, and then I called Karen and told her I found a note that Heather might have left in her textbook that says she wanted to ride "It's a Small World" just one last time before she died. The next morning, all of Heather's family
drove up to Disneyland to ride Heather's favorite ride together in memory of her. While on Interstate 5, they got into a car accident and were all pronounced dead by the paramedics: mother, father, grandmother, and Karen. At their funeral, I decided that I wasn't going to talk to anyone, so that I couldn't be held responsible.

I failed physics that semester.

During my sophomore year, I met Randy, a seemingly innocent skater-type who loved eating Rubio's fish tacos and skating to class without any shoes on. Once, a professor stopped his whole lecture on Mendel's genetics research to make Randy, for God's sake, put on some shoes. We hung out at the East Commons a lot, especially in Monty's Pub, where we'd sit outside on the patio and watch people walk by. A friend of his worked behind the bar, so we drank for free all the time. We both got caught drinking underage and were put on academic probation, but I brought my grades up easily. Randy didn't really have the "get-to-it-tiveness" to improve his grades. Once, I told him that if I was ever kicked out of college I would be so embarrassed that I don't think I could ever go back home. I would run away to Mexico or something. Randy was from a small town in Utah, and his parents were ultra-religious. When he got kicked out at the end of the semester, he went down to Mexico and was murdered by a drug cartel. Salt Lake City was so cold that December of his funeral, but I got in some skiing at the resorts. For some reason, Utah snow is way better than California snow. At the top of one of the longer runs, a double-diamond, the prep area was deserted. I pulled out a beer from my snow jacket, chugged it on the spot, and skied down the mountain shouting Randy's name as I
went down. I didn't realize there was an avalanche hazard there, and on the adjacent hill, my yelling caused the snow to start sliding. Fourteen people were buried alive. Two others were found clinging to life, but they later died of hypothermia.

The spring of my sophomore year, I met Wendy. We shared similar interests—slacking off, eating, smoking dope—and we would hang out a lot in the food court. We'd do everything there—copy homework, watch TV, read the Bible, you know, mindless stuff. Apparently, an employee at the Taco Bell on campus had dropped some of the date rape drug into her drink, and Wendy started having these massive convulsions, like she was allergic to it or something. I started saying, "Wendy, Wendy, Wendy," but she couldn't hear me. She choked on her tongue and died of asphyxiation. We hadn't even had sex yet.

I didn't know anyone at her funeral because she had different friends than I did, but I had three little Subway sandwiches at the reception. They were awesome—these little mini sandwiches with mustard and mayonnaise. One of her sisters came up to me, sobbing, and threw her arms around me just as I was about to take a bite of the third sandwich.

"Ooo, hoo, huuu," she cried. I could sense her mascara rubbing off on my collar.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," she said.

I started dating Wendy's sister. Her name was either Jean or Jan. I tried not to say it out loud. She was fun to hang out with, but her husband didn't like it. He
chased me out of his bedroom with a kitchen knife and tripped over one of their kid's toys and impaled himself. We tried to stop the bleeding, but the knife must have severed something or other. His funeral was a sprinkling of ashes; I'd never been to a sprinkling of ashes ceremony before. We were all out on the motorcycle track in Santee, and one of his friends rode around the track and sprinkled ash all along the way. It was funny because the guy had to stop sprinkling halfway around because he was getting ash blown back into his face.

By my third semester as a sophomore, I was able to move out of the dorm and get a house with three roommates. The faulty heater killed them with carbon monoxide poisoning while I was at the beach. I rode the best wave of my life the day Skylar, Thom, and Tyler feel asleep and never woke again.

I really started working on my major in Spanish during my first semester as a junior. A group of us went down to Mexico. Only me and one girl returned alive. It seems as though you can't forget to check the brakes on a charter bus before going down a steep grade. I survived because the guy next to me was fat. As the bus rolled 32 times, I was cushioned by his body. It was the hardest thing I ever did to close his eyelids for the last time. Standing next to the burning wreckage of the bus, I saluted the proud men and women who went up in flames inside it. Adios amigos.

Once I became fluent in Español, I started traveling the world. I took a year off between junior and senior year and surfed up and down Central America, drinking cervezas and meeting plenty of Mexican girls. In a small town in Costa Rica, I met a stray dog that started following me everywhere. He would even paddle out to the
waves with me, and I trained him to stand on my board. I named him Randy because he had a dopey little look on his face. That dog used to always beg me for food. Finally, I gave him some of the meat out of my burrito. He choked to death on a tough piece of gristle.

My senior year started off pretty well. I took a class in Spanish literature where I had to read *Don Quixote* in the original updated Spanish and some poetry by Pablo Neruda. The girl who had survived the bus crash in Mexico was in that class, and we became partners on some projects. Her name was Eunice, and her Spanish was way better than mine. We started hanging out second semester and throughout the summer. Even though I know it was probably dumb, we started seeking thrills. We bungee jumped, sky dived, went white water rafting, spelunked, walked on hot coals, took a class in sword swallowing, swam with the sharks, rode fifty roller coasters in eight states, ate raw blowfish, tried rodeo clowning, hang glided off Sunset Cliffs, delivered a baby calf, chased a tornado through the plains of Kansas, climbed Yosemite’s Half Dome, and ran with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain.

A couple years later we got married. She’s a risk management specialist for a company downtown, and I sell death and dismemberment insurance.
DAVE

"My Cyn," Dave says as he climbs the ladder out of the hotel pool. Nobody is there to see or hear him. "My greatest Cyn." Instead of taking the risk of bumping into anybody on the elevator, Dave takes the emergency stairs back up to the room on the third floor. His shirt, sweatpants, and hair are too soaked to pretend he just came from the fitness room. As he pulls on the door handle to the third floor, the clank of metal against metal tells him that the door is locked from the other side. He tries the door to each floor below and discovers himself trapped. Not only is he locked in the stairwell at the Vagabond Inn of San Luis Obispo, but he had just fished his cell phone from the swimming pool moments earlier. He begins knocking on the 1st floor and saying "Hello? There's someone in here!" After a minute of that he sits on top of the railing and thinks about the firemen on September 11, 2001. Those guys were trapped in a dark, smoke-filled stairwell, people cascading past them, and a 747 lodged in the building above them. He imagines running up the stairs carrying oxygen tanks, axes, and 50 pounds of equipment. He wonders if any of them tripped, and he counts the steps of the stairwell to calculate the distance someone would fall until hitting the next landing. He has always been afraid of falling from heights. It has been a running joke with his friends. They say that he's even afraid of falling in love.

He desperately wants to get back to his room. The same room where he made a phone call earlier this evening:

DAD: Hello?
DAVE: Hi Dad, let me talk to Mom.

DAD: Davey, is that you?

DAVE: Yeah, Dad, put Mom on.

DAD: [muffled] It's Davey. He wants to talk to you. [slight pause] I don't know.

MOM: Hi Davey. What's wrong?

DAVE: Mom, Angelica tried to kill herself.

MOM: Is she okay?

DAVE: I don't know.

MOM: What do you mean 'you don't know'?

DAVE: I'm not with her. She's already at the hospital.

MOM: Where are you, Davey? Why aren't you with your wife?

DAVE: Don't worry about that now.

MOM: You need to go to her.

DAVE: I can't get there right now. I'm asking YOU to go to her for me!

MOM: Davey, where are you?

DAVE: I'm in San Luis Obispo, Mom! It'd be at least a 4-hour drive, and that's only after I rent a car!

MOM: Stop yelling at me, Davey! I'm your mother. What are you doing there?

DAVE: Look! I'm in San Luis Obispo, and the neighbor's left 20 messages on my cell phone, and when I finally checked them, that's when I called you! I need you to go to Angelica!

MOM: Oh, Davey, I don't know what's going on, but I'll go to her if you won't. [The
"This was such a huge mistake," Dave had said to the woman in his bed, Cynthia. "I shouldn't have lied...I shouldn't have come here...."

"Dave, it won't be your problem any more," she said.

He stared at her and left the room. Cynthia pulled the sheets over her head and cried.

He had walked down to the hotel pool and sat on a deck chair. He listened to a message from Angelica from this afternoon, while he and Cynthia had been in bed. She had quoted a Madonna song: "Life is a mystery. Everyone must stand alone. I hear you call my name, and it feels like home." Guilt-ridden, Dave tossed his Blackberry into the swimming pool and dived in after it. As he sank to the bottom, streaming bubbles escaped his lips. He thought about all the pot he and Cynthia smoked after breakfast that morning, how they went for a hike. He thought about making love to Cynthia just off the trail in the underbrush. Footsteps crunched all around them, and they had to stifle their moans. He thought about the things Cynthia did with him that Angelica wouldn't. He thought about how yesterday they signed the guest register as Mr. and Mrs. Peterson and paid for three nights in cash. He thought about how, back at home, his next-door neighbor, Maureen, must have discovered Angelica stumbling down the sidewalk, clutching her stomach and foaming at the mouth.

He grabbed the phone off the bottom of the pool and pushed off. As he broke the surface of the water, he thought about how he had started dating Angelica because
he was bored with his menial job at an insurance office and his general ed. for his English degree. He thought about how she looked in her wedding dress last June. He thought about their honeymoon in Jamaica. He thought about fighting over where they should spend Christmas. Then he thought about Cynthia, his good friend, and how she had called him on the night before his wedding and left 12 messages. And he thought about how he called her back after the honeymoon. "My Cyn," he said as he pulled himself back atop the pool deck. "My greatest Cyn."

The night before his wedding there were 13 messages on Dave's voicemail. One was from his mother; twelve were from Cynthia.

MESSAGE 1: [4:45 PM] Hey Dave, it's me, Cyn. Just seeing if you were home yet....
Okay, so I guess I'll talk to you later.

MESSAGE 2: [4:52 PM] Hey Dave, it's me, Cyn. Call me back when you get this message. Bye.

MESSAGE 3: [5:36 PM] Hey there Dave, Cyn. I've been thinking about us—about the things we've shared, and the amazing conversations we've had, and, well, I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm just so afraid of losing you—of losing us—of what we have together. I know your roommates might be listening to this message, so I really need to talk to you—tonight. Please call me back................

MESSAGE 4: [6:54 PM] Hi David, it's Cynthia again. I'm starting to worry about you a little. I know you were picking up your tux this afternoon, but I really thought you'd be home by now. I hope everything's okay. Just thinking about you because our favorite show is on in 5 minutes. Okay, talk to you later.
MESSAGE 5: [7:15 PM] Hey Dave, it's Cynthia again. I just had to tell you that you're missing one of your favorite episodes of "Friends." It's the one where Joey and Chandler get a pet duck. Oh my God! Remember how we laughed so hard watching this episode? And Rachel thinks she's being stalked by the guy from the coffee shop? HA! I remember that we could hardly breath—we had to call each other back after it was over. So effin' hilarious! Okay, bye.

MESSAGE 6: [8:00 PM] Okay, so, the second episode of "Friends" just ended and I haven't heard back from you. It's no big deal. I just wanted to talk. Maybe I'll just talk to you some other time. See ya.

MESSAGE 7: [8:01 PM] ..............................................

MESSAGE 8: [8:02 PM] Davey, it's your mother. The caterer called Angelica and she wanted me to call you to ask if you wanted the steak or the chicken. I told her 'Just order the steak. No big whoop,' but she wanted me to ask you. She says you two aren't supposed to talk the night before the big day. Oh well. I'm so proud of you, Davey! Remember: Give me lots of grandkids!!! Love ya, bye-bye.

MESSAGE 9: [8:03 PM] Hey Dave. I had just tried calling and the phone was busy so maybe I thought you were trying to call me, so now I'm calling you. Anyways, I hope everything's okay. Call me.

MESSAGE 10: [9:45 PM] I don't think you're going to call me back, and I just want you to know what an asshole you are. You made me feel special, you made me feel one-of-a-kind. You didn't have to be friends with me. You didn't have to say those things you said.... You gave me hope, YOU BASTARD!!! You made me think you'd
leave her for me! "In my life/ I loved you more?!?!?" That wasn't just some silly song lyric to me! I just want you to know that I totally feel cheated. Cheated!! Do you know how you led me on? Every time you smiled at me, every time we hung out, every time we drank coffee and sang duets and the time on the bridge. You're nothing but a dog! Do you hear me? Do you hear me cry your name? Do you hear my cries? I used to see you, YOU, every time I looked in the mirror. Now I see sickness. I'm always sick on the inside, and now my outsides are beginning to show it. DAVE! DAVE! DAVE! DAVE!

MESSAGE 11: [11:39 PM] Hi Dave. I'm better now. I finished another bottle of wine. I hope we can still be friends. It won't be like before tomorrow, but...meander--meander--meanderfully. You know what I mean.

MESSAGE 12: [12:01 AM] The big day! Congratulations! I'm so happy for you. You do make a cute couple. Good luck, and don't forget me.

MESSAGE 13: [2:56 AM] My fondest memory, besides the time we almost kissed on the bridge, was that warm spring day when we sat on the slope between East Commons and the Drama Building, and the little white buds from the trees carpeted the grass, and the air was so warm it was like being wrapped in a blanket. We sat on the grass, lounging, not saying many words, looking up into the blue blue sky and watching the wispy clouds. The way you looked at me was better than a kiss. The way we laid on our backs with our legs touching, sword fighting with little twigs. Oh! Dave, I still love you, the love of my life!
A year before they married, Angelica started dating this guy named Dave. For their fifth date, she asked Dave to take her to see "The Notebook." She had read the book the previous summer sitting alone by the pool, had fallen in love with the romance in it, and wanted to see how true to the novel the movie was. The idea of two lovers who couldn't possibly stay together was as romantic as Romeo and Juliet, suicides aside. Now that she finally had someone, she wanted to share the story with him, inspire him the way she'd been inspired. Eternal love, beautiful eternal love despite the odds. I'm starting to like this guy, she thought, but then she quickly put it out of her mind as she remembered the last guy she was with, Rick. Rick was a guy she had worked with and went out with casually. It could have been something, but he got drunk at a New Year's Eve party and spouted, "I love you" before kissing her and passing out. That was the end of that unpleasant episode.

But with Dave, she felt more comfortably herself. She didn't have any classes with him, and he didn't know her from any of the other girls who went to their school. In fact, she could be whoever she wanted--reinvent herself, become a whole new Angelica--and he wouldn't be the wiser. Freedom! Say things, do things, feel things that never occurred to her before. Dave liked things that were foreign to her. She thought, could I get to like Nirvana and Pearl Jam? Would I sit down and watch football on a Sunday afternoon? Do I really have the guts to stick this one out?

After the movie, Dave said he liked it but thought it was a little far fetched. "C'mon," he said. "Reading a woman's life story to her from a notebook while she's
an Alzheimer's patient in a hospital? Typical Hollywood melodrama." When he saw
the hurt look on her face, he said, "But isn't it great how two people can love each
other for so long? How he never gave up on her? That's what a true relationship
should be about, right? Not giving up on the other person? Always fighting for
them?" He hugged Angelica as they passed through the lobby of the theater, her
shoulders snuggly in the arc of his arm. She wondered how the night would end.

That night Angelica dreamed about "The Notebook," except in her dream the
story went backwards. The woman slowly regains her memory and little by little
remembers the man as her husband. Their marriage regresses, children come home
backwards from college, and wrinkles disappear from their faces. Her father parts
them on the day of their wedding. The first time they make love, the gentle glow on
their faces turns to a red heat and then to a nervous anticipation. At the end of her
dream, the man and woman no longer know each other. They are strangers, two
people floating amongst the mass of humanity, being driven further and further apart
until they meet at a carnival.

CYNTHIA

Dave and Cynthia knew each other for a month before he told her he was
engaged. They were in the same German class, and they went to a film festival
together. They weren't dating; they just happened to meet there and share a tub of
popcorn during Das Leben der Anderen, The Lives of Others. Despite his attachment
to another woman, Cynthia held out hope. The way Dave flirted with her in class
made her feel unique, extraordinary. She was addicted to that feeling. It made her feel healthy. Since he was an English major, she once told him that Jack Kerouac was her favorite author but couldn’t name anything he’d written. When Dave suggested, “On the Road?” she said, “Oh, you mean that Beatles’ song?”

A few months before, she had innocently ordered a Grande cafe decaf mocha soy latte with extra foam and met Dave when the barrista called out the drink and they both reached for it at the same time.

"Lactose intolerant?” had been his first words to her.

"Yes,” she said, not a little embarrassed.

"Me too.” He handed the coffee to her and smiled and waited for his own drink to be made. Walking out of the Starbucks, Cynthia looked back at him, and he returned her glance. He wasn't classically handsome. No Adonis or Statue of David, but he had a very calm, easy-going look about him. He appeared to have a sense of tranquility in the way he shifted his backpack and sweater to the opposite hand so that he could pick up his drink. The way that a strand of his hair hung into his face.

Arriving in class that morning, she dismissed the whole encounter as she straightened the papers on her desk and put her hair up in a bun held together with a pencil.

A week passed in the mindless tedium of class, library, study, and upon seeing him again at the Starbucks one morning, she said fuck it all and walked right up to him.

"Lactose intolerant?” she asked.

"Yes,” he said. "You're the one who orders the soy too, right?”
"Yeah, I'm Cynthia." She stuck out her hand, and he shifted his backpack and sweater to the other hand, smoothly, and shook hers.

"I'm Dave." He's a David, she thought. My Statue of David in flesh, blood, and dimples. The motion of his handshake was slow, relaxed, and in perfect rhythm with her heart. She thought that if the Statue of David were ever to come to life, it would shake hands just like this Dave. "Nice to meet you."

Cynthia slowed her breathing and said, "Busy Starbucks, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it's so close to my class, where else am I going to get my fix?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm heading over to Hepner Hall myself."

"Me too. I've got a class in that huge lecture hall."

"German 100? Professor Weider?"

"Yeah." The barrista called out a Grande cafe decaf mocha soy latte with extra foam and Dave handed it to Cynthia.

"Thank you. See you around."

Next day, she found Dave sitting in the high-backed armchairs that Starbucks scattered around, and he had two drinks on the coffee table in front of him. He motioned her over.

"I hoped you'd be here again, or I was going to have to drink your Grande cafe decaf mocha soy latte with extra foam all myself."

After Dave told her he was engaged, she went home and ripped the only picture she had of him and then taped it back together. It looked like a little jagged
lightening bolt, which she thought was a perfect symbol for their pseudo-relationship. She stared at it as she considered whether or not to call him.

She got a hold of him that afternoon, and after crying through the phone, she got him to agree to see her later that evening. They sat in his car when she kissed him, and he let her.

DAVE

When an old woman opens the stairwell door, Dave leaps up to grab the handle. “Thank you thank you thank you. I’ve been trapped in here for almost fifteen minutes.” He goes to the room he’s sharing with Cynthia and knocks.

“You’re back,” she says.

“I’m leaving,” he says. He quickly changes clothes and throws his toothbrush and razor into his suitcase. “I’m going back.” He picks up the case and heads for the door. Cynthia lies on the bed with a stunned, expectant look on her face.

As he reaches the door, he realizes that Cynthia doesn’t have money for gas or food for the next two nights, so he goes back and puts 5 twenties on the night stand. Then he leaves.

Dave takes a cab to the rent-a-car company and gets a small sedan. Halfway back to El Cajon, the engine dies, and he spends the night in the car, not going anywhere.

ANGELICA
Dear Dave,

I miss you already.

I can't sleep tonight. I hear the TV ticking as it cools off. I hear Ruff rustling the blanket in his bed. I heard you murmur in your sleep a few nights ago. My name's not Cynthia.

You came home from work with sand between your toes and a far-off look. I had a terrible day, and you held me on the couch as we watched American Idol. I don't wear Juicy Couture perfume.

This has been the best year of my life. When you proposed to me beneath the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas. When we went white-water rafting at Knott's Soak City. When I blushed during your speech at our engagement party at Claim Jumpers. When I became your bride at the Blessed Sacrament Church. Our honeymoon to Jamaica was the most exciting trip--white sands, crystal water, lush trees, drunken sex. Eating until you threw away your belt. "Goodbye Belt! Enjoy your new home at the bottom of the Caribbean!" We were like two kids laughing in church when that guy's butt crack kept showing. My hair isn't curly.

I was so refreshed going back to work. People looked at me differently, not just gawking at my ring, but treating me differently. I was no longer a Miss. I was a Misses. My boss gave me more responsibilities. I was drinking less coffee, running more miles, losing less hair, and feeling in the best shape of my life. I never wear red lipstick.

We bought the house and the dust slowly settled. Days slipped into weeks into
months. Two days ago I got a hang call up at the house. The area code was Pacific Beach. A busy tone when I called back.

When I was in 6th grade, I was elected to be my class president. I took my responsibility very seriously. I set the agenda, I ran the meetings, and I conducted votes. After I spent three months campaigning to have assemblies changed to a full hour, collecting signatures on a petition, talking to the teachers, and presenting a concise plan to the principal, he said, "I'm sorry you wasted all your time. We're not having full hour assemblies." I don't write my phone number on the inside of matchbooks.

I picture you reading this, a coffee mug in your hand, and Ruff in your lap. I picture you calling my cell phone. I picture you driving to my mother's house, my sister's house, my job. I picture you making another phone call and talking for a long time. I picture myself as principal behind a big desk, and you presenting a concise plan.

I'm sorry you wasted all your time.

Love, Angie

DAVE

When the tow truck refuels his rental car near Santa Barbara, Dave is hungry but doesn't dare stop for food. He doesn't want to see his mother's expression if she smells a strong odor on his breath. It would just be too selfish for him to eat just now. He drives the last 150 miles with empty pangs in his stomach and a headache from no
protein.

In the hospital parking lot, he decides that he has to run into Angelica’s room with sweat on his brow. It needs to look like he jogged the 300 miles from San Luis Obispo. He also devises an alibi for his parents: he was at a business training in Santa Barbara and a few of the guys drove up the coast to San Luis Obispo for some wine tasting and site seeing.

At the information desk, a nurse tells him which room is Angelica’s. As he bursts in, he is surprised to see both his parents and Angelica’s parents there. He never considered that his in-laws would drive in from Phoenix. Her father is holding a handwritten letter that appears to be in Angelica’s writing. There is a figure in the bed with a faint pulse beeping on a monitor and a breathing apparatus covering most of its face. With grieving eyes, Angie’s father walks over to Dave and punches him in the cheek. The force knocks him down, and Dave’s head hits the floor.

When he regains consciousness, he can’t understand why he’s in a hospital bed. The room is empty and dark except for the faint glow of a heart rate monitor. It illuminates Cynthia’s smile from a bedside chair.
Beautiful Hysteria

When I was a child, they thought I had a mental illness. I remember being ten and having doctors ask me questions. “What, exactly, happens when your crying spells come on? Are you sad? Do you feel any pain when I touch your head?” My mother sent me to a psychiatrist who held up flash cards of different faces: some surprised, some sad, some angry. I had to identify the emotions and imitate the facial expressions. He told my mom to take me to the playground and let me play with other kids. At first, the doctors thought I was autistic because I didn’t talk much, and I didn’t particularly enjoy interacting in social situations. One time in the sand pit a kid bit me on the arm. He clenched down like a dog, and from the bite mark I noticed that he was missing two teeth. My mother told me to go punch him in the nose, but I didn’t want to.

The uncontrollable crying was the worst part. I would suddenly sob at random moments, and my mom would have to spank me to get me to stop. The doctor’s thought I could have Asperger’s syndrome and told her to buy drawing paper and crayons to give me an emotional outlet during those episodes. Within weeks, I had filled a shoe box with my Crayola creations. After completing each picture, I’d run to my room to cry. The adults in my family said, “Oh, he’s just a sensitive kid. He’ll grow out of it. It’s a phase. Make him play football.” One pediatric neurologist suggested, “Perhaps it’s Seasonal Affective Disorder? Try sleeping with all the lights on.”

To the world, it looked like I broke down crying for no apparent reason. I was
an odd child among my peers, and their whispers confirmed that. Even teachers avoided me when they could. No one felt comfortable around me; I could break down at any moment and become inconsolable. In high school, these incidents happened regularly enough that I didn’t have a date for prom and no one wanted to be my lab partner. I cried a lot during chemistry because that was the class Becky Nielsen was in—she was stunning. She sat in front of me and would wear lilac perfume and wool skirts. Her voice had an even tempo and a slight breathy sigh. It was like I was allergic to her. On the days that I avoided seeing or hearing Becky Nielsen, I’d be fine. However, on the days when she did her make-up just so, and her hair hung into her face to cast a perfect shadow beside her nose, I always had to excuse myself to cry. Of all the girls in class, she had the prettiest face and the most artistic composition. She was put together like a supple painting.

One time she noticed me staring at her and gave me a strange look. After class, she ran up to me at my locker. “You keep looking at me in class,” she said, “but you never say anything. You shy?”

I stammered and shook my head.

“Don’t be shy,” she said and laid a hand on my bicep. She was close enough that I could smell her bubble gum lip gloss and see faint freckles dotting her nose. I looked away, but it was too late. I ran to the restroom and locked myself in a stall. I cried into my shirt front and dabbed at my eyes with my sleeve. I missed the rest of the day. The next day, all the students said that I had jizzed my pants when Becky spoke to me. I didn’t say anything to anyone.
No one else I knew had this kind of spontaneous hysteria, and I didn’t want to be the first one in the world to be diagnosed with it. I had learned from a young age that certain images, scents, textures, tastes, and sounds were meant to portray beauty in the world. Most people experience beauty with a passing appreciation, but my response was always deeply visceral and uncontrollable, especially when my senses intermingled in a synaesthetic way and created something ten times more beautiful than any single perception. I could stare at the back of Becky’s head or at her yearbook photo and remain in control, but my reaction to her was particularly intense when she spoke and the element of sound was added to the shape of her body. I could only imagine how she must have tasted and felt!

In my twenties, I went to college for a fine arts degree. Years of drawing pictures had paid off, and I found that I could sculpt the hell out of anything: clay, bronze, marble, metal, wood. My figures never resembled anything in the real world, at least they were never meant to. Whenever I finished a work, signed it, and stood back to admire, I would cry, absolutely weep until I had to go lie down.

I entered my work in contests and won. The judging panels would say that they couldn’t necessarily interpret the meaning of the works, but that it provoked a profound reaction in them. Other artists would ask me to mentor them, to show them some techniques, to give them criticism of their work. I was approached by sculptors three times my age who had been working at it for 50 years. They all wanted advice, but I couldn’t give it. I didn’t know how. I always said no, even though I wanted desperately to work with someone.
One of my blue ribbon pieces was a rusted steel amalgamation of colors and empty space. It was suspended six feet from the ground by a crane so it could be viewed from underneath. There was also an overhead mirror that allowed for an aerial perspective. Viewing the sculpture in that manner showed off all the angles I was trying to create between air and steel. If you looked at it straight up from the bottom, you would see your own reflection peeking through the raw rusted metal. That piece made me break down in tears every time I saw it. I wore dark glasses on the day of the awards ceremony to hide my puffy eyes.

After college, I made a modest living selling sculptures privately and publicly. The owners of drearily squared-off office buildings would commission me to design something for their foyers or courtyards. City governments needed me to spruce up blighted city streets. Sure, some months I had to eat dehydrated noodles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner until my commission checks came in, but I was able to pay my rent and buy a car. I had the crying under control, too. If it happened in public, I was able to make it seem like severe allergies, and I bought a second-hand asthma inhaler, empty of course, and pretended to take a few hits from it.

On one occasion, at a public unveiling of my work in an industrial plaza, a girl stood next to me and my sculpture as someone took a picture. Her features reminded me of Alice in Wonderland: big, bright, blue eyes; long, straight, blond hair; small mouth; upturned nose; and small feet. It was a warm day, and her dress hung from her shoulders independent from the movements of her body. She smelled like wild flowers. I immediately reached for my handkerchief and started dabbing my eyes. I
hoped she wouldn’t speak.

“I love your work,” she said. Her voice was femininely husky and her eyes were averted like a Mother Mary painting. I started to blubber. I could barely say thank you. I took a fake shot from the inhaler. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Bad allergies,” I said with an inhalation of breath. I sounded like a toad. I tried to think of something bland: a cardboard box, a rock, a pop song on the radio. That seemed to stave off the weeping. I gave her my card and told her to keep in touch; I’d let her know when the next piece was coming out.

The next day I received an email from her and we began exchanging messages for a few days. She said it was a pleasure meeting me and that she looked forward to the next sculpture. I told her that there was going to be an exhibit in about three weeks. She said she’d be there, except she had to check with her boyfriend. He normally didn’t go to arts events and she didn’t want to commit if he had plans for her. I said that I understood, but in my mind it drove me nuts to learn she had a boyfriend. She said that if it was on a Sunday, she would have to go to a football game with the boyfriend, even though she didn’t like football at all. I said that I was only going to be there Sunday, but that she could see my work all week. She said that she’d have to see. I said that I hoped to see her there.

I tried to immerse myself back into sculpting in a rented studio space, but I kept thinking about my “Alice.” I worked very late nights, not locking up the studio until 5 or 6 o’clock in the morning sometimes. Then, I’d drive back to my apartment in a daze, drained. I would dream about “Alice” and wake up whimpering.
On the day of the exhibit, I put on a sports coat and extra cologne. At the gallery, I had the requisite idle chatter about my pieces, not looking at them of course, and the judging panels walked around. The local college press was there taking pictures. Other artists showed their work. Wine, crackers, and cheese was passed around on silver plates. Finally "Alice" walked in the door with a perfectly complementary red dress that showed off the blue in her eyes. It was as if two blue orbs floated directly to me, and her smoky voice said hi. I couldn’t look at her and kept my glasses on.

I showed her my work, which she said she absolutely loved. Then she said, "I’m lucky to have made it here at all."

"Why’s that?"

"Oh, boy trouble. I told him I didn’t want to go to the game, and he was getting loud, and things were said."

"I’m sorry," I told her.

"It’s okay," she said. "I’d rather be here anyway. I love what you do." I looked to see what kind of expression she had on her face, and her eyes told me that she was genuine.

"I love what you do," I told her, attempting to flirt. She laughed and I had to excuse myself to go cry.

When I came back, I asked if she wanted to have dinner with me. I realized that I wasn’t classically handsome, and that my half-assed attempt to dress up and comb my hair wasn’t going to turn me into an Adonis, but I thought that maybe she
didn’t mind.

“Sure,” she said. After the awards—another blue ribbon—we walked down the street to an outdoor café. There was a cool autumn nip in the air and a guy on the corner was playing a wistful saxophone solo. The café had an art nouveau theme with statues and poster prints hung everywhere. They were all sensual representations of the female form. We chatted about art, and I was constantly on the verge of weeping. The aromas wafting from the kitchen were creamy and earthy and fresh. I found myself with a beautiful girl seated in front of me and all my senses being stimulated. I didn’t know how long I could last. When our soups were served, I took a taste of my lobster bisque and could taste the cream, the wine, the onion, and the lobster working in perfect harmony. I thought I would faint; I think I said goodbye and ran out of the café. I cried for three hours that night and found myself asleep in my clothes in bed.

I thought about her a lot for the next week and attempted to send her an apologetic email, but I never saw the girl again. My email was left unanswered.

Hypersensitivity to beauty was ruining my life. I didn’t have friends, a girlfriend, or a steady income. My mom was living in another city, my patrons only called when they needed a commission, and I didn’t really go out to meet people. I had to move on with my life. I let the lease expire on the art studio, sold all my supplies, and I found a job as an administrative clerk for an IRS collections office just outside of Philadelphia. I worked in a cubicle with a computer and two filing cabinets. I only posted memos and calendars on the three walls closing me in, and on the outer office walls were stock images of marathon runners, redwood trees, and
birds in flight. They were all pretty tame works of art--nothing to cry about. A few of my officemates tried to “pretty the place up” with some houseplants, but they were so under watered that the only beauty they could have possibly produced was from a Gothic rendering of the garden of Eden. I almost misted up when I thought of that comparison, but got over it quickly when I looked at the linoleum tiled floor with its randomly spotted squares repeated about two hundred thousand times across the workspace. Even the architecture of the building I worked in was bland and mostly functional, except for the modern glass doors.

My coworkers were a sorry looking bunch. They all reminded me of the people whose pictures got printed in the newspaper holding up oversized million dollar lottery checks. Nondescript, overweight, blue-collars with slightly puffy red noses. I made friends with the woman in the next cubicle, Doris. She was 57, married, and had four kids and seven grandkids. She wore reindeer sweaters during Christmastime. It was very easy to be her friend because we talked about her family or current events or office gossip—who’s dating who. Even though I didn’t own a TV, we would talk about her favorite TV shows. She would run down who the characters were, and each week I’d get an update about what they did or said. I would ask polite questions to keep her stories going.

Luckily enough, I had to take public transportation to and from work, and my stop was right next to a gas station. An exhaust pipe symphony was playing in the streets, and it didn’t affect me one bit. It was finally easy being me. I ate meals at my apartment. I shopped for groceries at the Quikie Save. I listened to Top 40 radio and
read the newspaper. At work, I dealt with forms and numbers and didn’t have to wear a tie. Everyday I made ten telephone calls, filed thirty reports, and typed three memos. My computer mouse pad had a puppy dog on it. No one knew about my condition, and I stopped wearing dark glasses. My crying was in complete remission. I felt so good that I went to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and ran to the top of the “Rocky Balboa” steps. I jumped up and down with my arms raised and hummed “Gonna Fly Now.”

Doris introduced me to one of her granddaughters named Jane. She had hairy arms. Jane was easy to date; she posed no threat of hysterical relapse. We would go see all the Hollywood blockbusters, eat at the chain restaurants, and have safe sex. We dated for a good while and she proposed marriage to me over a few boxes of take-out Chinese.

“Sure,” I said, and shoved some chow mein in my mouth.

We moved to the suburbs into a planned community. All the houses looked the same, all the lawns were green, and you weren’t allowed to change the oil of your car in the driveway. Everyone drove SUVs and all the women dyed their hair blond. It was the American dream: perfectly average, perfectly anonymous, perfectly bland. I loved it for keeping me safe and secluded. I never told Jane about my disorder and she never asked.

I even started going out more. Jane and I would shop for groceries together, buy smoothies together, and vacation in Las Vegas. I felt so confident that we strolled through the Forum Shops at Caesar Palace.
The first work of mock art we approached was Michelangelo’s La Pieta, the body of Jesus being held in his mother’s arms. The original sculpture was gorgeous, but the faux one was slightly askew. We circled it several times to get the full perspective. On the third trip around the two figures, there was a girl kneeling in front of the statue, praying in a language that sounded Italian, a red scarf around her head. Her Capri pants hung just below her knees and her deck shoes were blue and white. A mist of musky perfume hung about her, and a natural plumpness hung at her hips and chest. When she made eye contact with me, I noticed her eyes were violet and her skin olive. When she winked at me, I felt an eruption from deep down inside, a stirring of emotions I hadn’t felt in a long time. I ran to the restroom and ducked into a stall. I couldn’t come out for a half an hour. This was the beginning of a major relapse.

A few days later, we flew back into Philadelphia and drove out to the suburbs. The air in our neighborhood was too clean, too fresh compared to the smoky city we had visited. The walls of our house looked plain to me, devoid of the colors of the casinos we saw. Jane seemed too plain, and for the first time since I met her I wished for something more.

I started buying art books and sneaking them into my study to gaze at them. I started stealing swatches of fabric from the sewing store. I added extra seasoning to every meal I ate. I bought Jane a make-over at a beauty salon for Valentine’s Day. I painted our house a different color from the rest on our block and was fined by the home owner’s association. I drove a different route to work and sometimes just
skipped work all together to walk through art galleries.

The crying started all over again. Women in the grocery store, shadows from trees against walls, and classical songs would make me cry. Sometimes the shimmering image of a painting through my tears would make me cry harder. I would heave, sob, whelp, whine, whimper, and sigh. I made an art out of crying.

I hid it from Jane for as long as I could. I wept quietly during movies and pretended to be sick all the time. When I stopped going to work and got fired, she finally confronted me.

“What’s going on with you? Grams says you aren’t going to work anymore.” She hesitated and then asked, “Are you seeing someone else?”

I couldn’t respond. I wished she would just leave me alone. I wished I could tell her the truth. I wished I had never agreed to marry her. I walked into another room. I heard her pick up the phone and dial. From the snatches of conversation I heard, I could tell she was crying. It made me feel a little better to hear her cry. I sat down and tried to relax. I thought of Renoir’s painting, “Boating Party.”

She burst into the room and tried to coerce me into confession. “You’re either using drugs, cheating on me with another woman, or losing your mind! Tell me what’s going on!”

Never corner an addict. I told her off with a nicely intoned, “Fuck you!” I feigned disgust. I kicked a few cushions on the couch and stormed out of the house.

I drove to the mall and hurried into a fine art print store. Every type of popular fine art was represented, and I browsed around trying to get my fix. Nothing seemed
to bring the hysteria on. I tore a small corner of a Picasso poster and chewed on it. I rubbed a bit of it against my chest.

From across the store, I heard, “Are you planning to buy that, sir?” I ignored the voice. I ripped the print from its frame and rolled around with it on the floor. I began to stuff the print down my pants as I was cramming it into my mouth. I toppled a whole stack of prints on top of me. I heaved and swooned. As I was reaching a climactic wail, mall security pounced on me. The stiff steel of the handcuff around my wrists sent me over the edge towards hysteria. As I was led to the mall’s security office, my back arched. In that moment, I smelled infinity and tasted nothingness.

The universe became art.