Three Russian phrases

Tim Dicks
Iowa State University

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Three Russian phrases

by

Tim Dicks

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Haas, Major Professor
David Zimmerman
Paula Curran

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2008
UMI Number: 1453932

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Paul took her by the fingers and pulled her into the bathroom. It was tight inside and lit yellow by the bulbs over the mirror, but Claire had spent plenty of time in here with him over the past few months and so she sat on the edge of the sink and waited for him to grope her or say whatever he needed to say. She'd taken a shower hours ago, before people started showing up, but the smell of water still hung in the air.

"What the hell is going on out there?" he said.

"It's a party." She pulled her feet up and her head spun and she put them back down on the floor. She thought Paul would sit on the edge of the bathtub, but he stood folding his arms across each other and looking at himself in the mirror. It was warm in the apartment but he wore his denim jacket with all the band patches anyway. He wore it every time she had people over. He'd had the thing since before they met and she'd considered making it disappear, stuffing it into the dumpster outside or even into the kitchen trash can he refused to take out.

"I mean with that guy," he said.

"Which one?" she said. Really she knew which one, but it was a ridiculous thing to even think about. She'd been talking to Anders in the kitchen, but he was so far from a threat that she wanted to laugh. She and Paul had been broken up for months now but still he became jealous the moment she stood too close to a man or started having a genuinely interesting conversation. "There are so many," she said. "Did you mean that guy I was feeling up? Because we could invite him in here."

"Claire," he said.
"This is a waste of time." She wished somebody would knock on the door but nobody knocked on the door. She wished she had her drink but she'd left it with Anders.

She leaned back and felt the coolness of the mirror on her scalp, through her hair. Paul put his hands on the sink, then on her hips. He wore a thick metal ring on his left hand and she imagined its cold against the back of her neck, on the insides of her arms. At one point months earlier he'd tried and failed to take the thing off after a shower and she'd put his finger in her mouth and pulled the ring off with her teeth. Now Paul leaned in and tried to kiss her and she decided to let him. They hadn't been together for months, but more often than not they slept nights in each others' beds.

"Claire," he said, but he had nothing to say after that. She slipped past him and let herself out and was relieved to see that nobody was lined up outside the bathroom door. The apartment was bloated with people but apparently none of them had to piss. She held parties every few weeks, and in the past few years she'd gathered an assortment of bartenders and servers from the restaurants downtown and clerks from bookstores and the co-op on Edmund and even other people like her, regular and interesting people stuck in drab jobs for drab employers.

She found Anders and he was busy now, talking to a handful of guys from Paul's record store, so Claire slipped through the people crowded in the living room and into the kitchen. There wasn't much room but she pressed against the counter and went to the freezer and found the vodka bottle empty. There was a mess of beer bottles in the fridge, all shoved in the gaps between take-out boxes and eggs and sacks of produce, and Claire fingered a few before realizing she smelled coffee. She stood and saw her french press balanced on the edge of the sink, half full. Two people stood talking by the stove and she
saw that one of them held her blue coffee mug. She moved to him and he looked at her and she recognized him, vaguely. Often new people showed up with friends or lovers or sisters or cousins, but Claire knew she'd seen this guy before. He was maybe 40, too thick in the waist, going bald. He wore a silky white shirt, and when she touched his arm she was surprised at the feel of it on her fingertips.

"Claire," he said, and raised the cup.

She searched her mind for his name but couldn't find it. She'd seen him before and thought she might have even spoken with him once but it was too hard to remember. She was sure he'd been here before but she threw these parties every other week and more often than not she woke up the next morning with no memory of how things had ended.

"Great beans," he said, and nodded to the little brown sack next to the toaster. She'd bought the blend at the co-op, which meant she'd spent twelve dollars for maybe a week's worth of dark coffee. "Couldn't resist. I work with this stuff."

"You're straight then," she said. "We could use a lift."

"We?"

"Paul and me," she said. "Me at least. This party's gone dry."

"Let's go," he said.

"Wait," she said. She put a hand to the refrigerator, then leaned on the sink. Her head felt full of cotton balls. She wasn't usually afraid of people but there was something distasteful about the idea of climbing into a stranger's car. "I'll send Paul."

"Claire," he said, and leaned in close enough that she could smell the coffee on his breath. "You can trust me. I'm the Devil."
"Okay," she said. She thought about backing into the corner and she thought about smacking his hand away. She could see it: the mug flipping through the air, coffee spattering the floor. Instead she slipped back through the crowd and found Paul in his bedroom, digging around in his milk crates full of records. The room had been an office when they’d shared a bedroom and usually seemed tiny but now the walls seemed to open up around her. She wanted to shut the door and sit on the bed but she took his wrist instead and said, "Come on."

"What?"

"Vodka. Pizza. Whatever." She pulled him out the door, because she knew he would drive no matter how much fuzzy he was. It was a matter of pride with him, a proof of courage. They made their way through the living room and out into the parking lot and into his old Gremlin. The black sky opened up ahead of them and Claire knew that even riding the ten minutes to the grocery store would bore her to sleep.

The floor of the Gremlin was littered with CDs Paul had collected from Quad-X Records, where he worked, and Claire picked up a handful and found one for the stereo and thought about tossing the rest out the window. It was the kind of ridiculous and asinine thing she could get away with. Paul claimed to still love her and would probably allow her to shoot him in the leg if it meant having her close.

The streets were full of late-night weekend traffic, cars loaded of teenagers and college kids and lonely middle-aged people circling around the mall and streaming out of bar parking lots. Paul put a hand on her knee and she let him keep it there. Something brilliant flashed outside the car and she thought they were being pulled over, but it was
only the headlights of the car behind them, bouncing off the dark windows of a string of closed businesses.

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2.

Before he knew her name she was just the Model. Anders met her at one of Claire's parties, on a Saturday night. He felt entirely out of place at Claire's parties because the people were all advertising executives or graphic designers or reporters for the indie papers or bartenders and servers at the few trendy places scattered around Des Moines. They all wore ironic denim jackets and ironic suede jackets and skinny ties and faded t-shirts printed with the logos of old cartoons and breakfast cereals. The people at Claire's parties all looked the same and recognized each other from shows they'd seen at the Vaudeville Room and at the 300 Bar and at the Locust Lounge downtown. Anders himself had never been to a show downtown or anywhere. Anders had never been to most of the coffee shops or the record stores or the bars in the city. He worked the graveyard shift behind the front desk of a hotel on the east edge of town, and the hippest his wardrobe got was a pair of jeans with a green haze and a pink shirt his ex-wife had given him for his birthday four years earlier.

Every time Anders came here for a party there was a drink of the night, a Drink of the Night, maybe, and tonight's was something Pepto-pink. Anders wasn't much for alcohol anymore and especially not a drink that looked as if a crayon had been melted in
it. His glass had gone warm in his hand but Claire's was still full of ice and he looked around for somewhere to set it down but the kitchen counter was a jumble of six-pack boxes and purses and jackets and empty glasses. There wasn't much room to move because two other people stood by the oven, talking about something Anders could barely overhear. The guy was dressed in a silky white shirt and was fiddling around with a french press. Anders was confused about what was going on and there was something creepy about the guy but it was just before midnight and he felt about ready to drift out of his head so put Claire's drink down on the refrigerator and stepped over. "Hey," he said.

"You making coffee?"

"I am," he said. He took a grinder and a sack of beans from a little shelf above the sink. "I like to be as present as possible at these kinds of things."

"Do you come here very often?"

"No," he said. "But you look familiar."

Anders thought that was impossible. The coffee guy was older than him and Anders would have remembered that, at least. Anders was one of the oldest people who came to Claire's parties and he always felt awkward skulking around her kitchen or the corner of her living room. Right now the apartment was bloated with what he guessed to be 18 or 19 people but still he felt that everyone must be looking at him. He was 31 but being here, around these people, made him feel at least a decade older.

The older guy finished making coffee and poured it into mugs and handed one to Anders. The heat from the cup filled up his hands and he almost dumped the whole mess into his mouth at once, just to get it inside him. He felt that he was obliged now to make interesting conversation but his brain was blank, so instead he drifted off toward the
living room. Claire's apartment wasn't small but it wasn't expansive either and there wasn't much room in which to maneuver. He found a spot by one of her bookshelves and stood looking at the spines and burning his mouth with the coffee and at some point the Model appeared and things in his brain started working differently. Something flashed at the corner of his vision and he thought it might be an exploding light bulb or a hole ripping in the fabric of reality but it turned out just to be light bouncing off somebody's bright blonde hair. She stood next to the door, in the pile of discarded shoes, by the stacks of empty six-packs and liquor bottles waiting to be recycled. She was taller than him and thinner and impossibly blonde. She looked entirely confused and entirely out of place. She wore a long red skirt that looked cut out of tissue paper and a tank top that hung from her shoulders like a fashionable bag. She had a wrist full of bracelets, and when Anders looked up from them she was looking back at him. She opened her mouth but he couldn’t hear what she said. He made his way around someone with a shaved head and a guy who he’d spoken to on three different occasions but who never seemed to remember him, and then stepped between two people sitting cross-legged on the floor. He stepped up to the blonde and she was at least four inches taller than him. He said, "Did you say something?"

"I said, do the shoes. The shoes come off? Do I need to leave the shoes?"

"Uh," Anders said. He looked down at his own sneakers, like maybe he wasn’t actually wearing them anymore. He looked at the pile of shoes next to the door, and then out at the crowd of people in the living room, on the couch and in the chairs and leaning against walls. "I think it doesn’t matter."
"Doesn’t matter," she said. "Does not matter." She squeezed the words out of her mouth sideways and Anders instantly understood that she was Czech or Polish or Dutch, something coldly blonde and distant and exotic.

"How about a drink?" he said. "Can I get you something?"

"Where is Claire?" She coughed out the r, like it was a wad of phlegm caught far back in her throat. "She will make the drink."

"Here," he said. "Wait, wait." He slipped into the kitchen and found Claire's little tumbler full of pink booze, still on the top of the fridge where he'd left it. He carried it back to the blonde and said, "This is hers. Claire's, I mean. She hasn't touched it yet."

She looked confused and a little annoyed, and he was terrified that she would ask what was in the cocktail and he would have no idea. "Thank you," she said, and took the drink and put it to her mouth and smiled. "Thank you," she said again, and then slipped off around a balding guy who Anders knew was a pharmacist and a woman who Anders knew sold vibrators at bachelorette parties and then made her way farther into the crowd in the living room. Anders went back to the bookshelf and held his coffee mug in both hands. The smell of it alone worked to keep him centered for a while but when it was gone he felt more adrift than before. He took a book down and paged through it but then felt ridiculous. He went to the kitchen and rummaged around inside for a prop drink and found a bottle with a black label and a picture of a mess of test tubes beneath the logo.

He recognized most of the people in the living room and wandered around trying to join in conversations and ended up hanging around the edges of a debate about music for the better part of an hour. Anders didn't know anything about music but he worked with a guitarist and so every few minutes he tried to toss out impressive-sounding words
whose meanings he wasn’t sure of. The guys he was talking to were friends of Claire’s ex-boyfriend and worked with him at Quad-X Records downtown and had to know that Anders was spouting bullshit, but he couldn’t stop himself. "Humbucker," he said, and then, "I like the new bands from the south. You know, south of here." They nodded appreciatively, like maybe they were too drunk to really understand. Anders was just starting to feel good about the conversation when somebody tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and saw the blonde towering over him, her hair pooling around her shoulders. The lids looked heavy on her eyes.

"Need to go lying down," she said.

"Oh," he said, "yeah, right," as if gorgeous and angular women told him this all the time at parties. He looked around for Claire but she might have been in the bathroom still or maybe in the kitchen now, mixing up another batch of drinks. "Come on," he said, and took the blonde’s hand. Her knuckles were tiny bumps and her fingers were cold from whatever drink she’d last held. There were two bedrooms and Anders lead her toward Claire’s. The blonde wobbled to the side behind him and smiled and closed her eyes. The lights in Claire’s bedroom were off but the blinds were open, and the light from a streetlamp outside turned everything yellow. There was a big glass-and-metal desk against one wall, and a bookshelf against another. There were four more bookshelves out in the living room, but Anders knew that all Claire's favorite books were in here because two parties back she’d dragged him and a few other people in and had pressed books into their arms and had made them promise to read them. She’d given Anders a copy of something called Cinema Fantastique, and it had been sitting beneath the front desk at the Overniter ever since, waiting for him to get bored enough to read it.
Anders looked at Claire’s bookshelf and then there was a soft *flump!* behind him. He turned around and the blonde had dropped into Claire's bed. She rolled onto her side, and just when Anders was about to step toward the door she rolled back over and raised a hand. He went to her and she grabbed his wrist and pulled him close so that he had to sit down to keep from falling onto her. She smelled like vodka and expensive shampoo and Anders suddenly felt like some kind of creep. He could hear the sounds of the party on the other side of the wall and he wondered how many people were wondering what was going on in here.

"I am sorry to be so much drunk," the blonde said.

"It’s okay, it’s okay," he said. He ran his hands over his face and tried to look casual and in his element, as if this was the standard ending for one of his Saturday nights.

"I will make it up to you. I will teach you Russian phrase." She flipped a skinny wrist. "What do you want to learn?"

Anders had taken a semester of Spanish in high school and could barely remember any of it. "What do you know how to say?"

"What? Everything. Duh." She laughed. "I speak Russian," she said, and she laughed again. She rolled back and forth on the bed and grinned up at the ceiling. Her face was flushed and her cheekbones looked sharp and white. "Do you believe that I am Russian girl?"

"Sure."

"Well," she said, "I’m not." The accent slipped from her voice and she closed her eyes and wrapped her spindly arms across her chest. She might have looked amused or
she might have looked apologetic but Anders couldn’t tell because her eyes were closed.


"What play?"

"And these commercials. I mean, I would like to do commercials but it hasn't worked out yet. You can be a model and not do commercials. Do you know that?"

"I didn't."

"What do you do?"

"Oh," he said. He thought about the hotel and felt embarrassed. "Do you know the Overniter?"

"The what?"

"It's a hotel."

"You work at a hotel?" she said.

"I used to be a cop."

"A what?"

"I was a cop from 01 to 04."

"What happened?"

"I turned into a ghost," he said. He held up his hands and said, "Boo." She looked at him and he sighed and leaned back on his hands. "But now they let me watch TV all night. Do you get paid to do that?"

"Come here," she said, and took his hand. Her fingers were cold enough that he worried for a moment that she was having some kind of heart attack, and then he remembered the drink she must have been holding. She pulled him close so that their legs
touched and her eyes were great green lights in front of him. He wasn't sure where to put his hand, and touched it to her side. He moved it to her back, and the knobs of her spine were little bumps beneath his fingertips. He felt awkward. He felt carved out of wood. She turned to the wall and he rolled onto his back. He hadn't been even this close to a woman in at least three years. He'd stopped keeping track because it depressed him.

"I'm going to sleep now," the Model said. "Goodnight." She rubbed her feet together and fidgeted and then pulled a sheet up over her arms. Anders wondered if this was something she did often, if she regularly walked into peoples' apartments and fell into their beds. He wondered how well she must know Claire, if maybe she was some long-lost best friend. He slipped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind him and looked for the guys from the record store but his place in the conversation had been taken now. He wanted to find Claire to tell her about the blonde sleeping in her bed but Claire was still gone and so was Paul.

Anders slipped outside and sat in his car and took a joint from his pocket and lit up. He planned to go back inside but he turned on the radio and let himself drift off with the music and by the time he came back to himself he felt too tired to walk. At home he turned on the oven for a frozen pizza but fell asleep in the living room before he could make it. He woke up two hours later fully refreshed and with a sense that the kitchen would be on fire, but the oven had shut itself off. He stood there staring at it for a while before leaving to drive to Burger King.
Anders spent the rest of the weekend thinking about the Model. This was a welcome change for him, because usually he spent most of his time thinking about Jackie. This had been going on for about three years now, or maybe four. The first time he noticed was the time he got pulled over on Interstate 235. The world had been streaming pleasantly by and then suddenly everything lit up in the rearview mirror and Anders was sure that something dramatic was happening, that something religious or sci-fi or just interesting was happening in his world for once, but then he looked and recognized the cherries blipping around behind him. He pulled over and turned down the radio and turned it back up. He rolled down both the windows in the Grand Am and looked at his eyes in the rearview. He'd brought a joint along for the ride but had tossed it a few miles back.

Anders hoped he would recognize the cop, but he didn't know many of the Des Moines officers, and the guy was a blank anyway, young, no bags under his eyes. He leaned down and flashed the car and Jeremy went blind for a second. He had his badge out but the cop said, "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"Well," Anders said.

"I clocked you at 99," the cop said. "Do you know what the limit is here?"

"Yes," he said. "Jesus." His head felt entirely disconnected from his body and from this situation. He felt like he was in a comfortable chair in a comfortable living room in a comfortable future, remembering this moment. He reached for his wallet and flopped it open so that his badge reflected the beam from the cop's flashlight. "Look at this, man. I know the limit."
"Shit," the cop said. He touched the badge but didn't take it. "Shit, shit. Man."

Anders leaned back in his seat and thought it was over but the cop walked back to his cruiser and stood around for a while talking on the radio. Anders thought about turning up the music but then the cop came back and said, "All right. Just let's wait here, okay?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Are you drunk?"

"Drunk? No."

"It smells like, I don't know, whiskey."

"Come on," he said. He really wasn't drunk, but he'd had a few drinks with his friend Michael and was flying high on a joint stolen from the guy's coffee table while he was out of the room. Michael was somebody Anders had known in high school. He hadn't seen the guy for years but now that things with Jackie were swirling into the ground all his old friends seemed to be popping back into his life.

"Maybe I should have a look in the car."

"Come on," Anders said. He'd tossed the roach miles back but he knew how these things went. He'd had to haul a kid off earlier that year after finding a seed below a floor mat.

"Why were you going so fast, man?"

"It's the feeling," he said. He wasn't sure where to go with this.

"You're with Ankeny."

"Patrol."

"So you know this is stupid shit. This is daring us to take you in."
"Rough day," he said. Really nothing had happened, he'd barely seen Jackie, but when he got home from his shift the apartment smelled of her hair and the black tea she drank and he hadn't been able to take it. They'd barely spoken in weeks and he was desperate just to sleep with her and hated himself for it.

The cop knocked on the Grand Am's roof and said, "Rough day, you get a beer after and go home and get laid."

"My wife won't touch me."

"All right," the cop said.

Anders felt good sharing this with somebody other than Michael, but then more cherries flashed in the darkness behind them. "What's this about?"

"I want a witness."

"For what? You think I'm going to shoot you?"

"I hadn't thought about that," the cop said. "Are you carrying your weapon?"

"No."

"Are you carrying a weapon?"

"Jesus," he said. He looked up at the sky through the windshield. It was a clear night and the moon was a brilliant bulb overhead. It was late July and with the window down things were getting warm in the car. The second cop approached and he also smelled liquor but when Anders offered to blow neither of them seemed interested.

"99," the first one said.

"99?"

"99," Anders said.
In the end they sent him home. He sat in the parking lot of his apartment building with the radio going for the better part of an hour. He didn't consider himself a contemplative person but after he'd listened to three songs it seemed logical that he should listen to another one, and another one. He didn’t recognize any of them. His head felt swollen with cotton and he tried to remember how long pot usually stuck in him.

The house was quiet inside and he crept around in the dark. He made a mug of Jackie's tea and then laid back on the couch in the living room so that he could see the moon outside the window. He felt trapped in the tiny and yet expansive space of his own head. He'd seen an episode of Tales from the Crypt once, where this guy had died but his brain kept going in his motionless body, and he felt like that now.

The cops from Des Moines called his captain and he was asked to take a week off with pay. After that there was another week, and then another, this one without pay.

Jackie told him that if he couldn't even work or keep himself in line maybe he had worse problems in his life than her.

He was put on suspension indefinitely and looked around for security jobs and couldn't make it through the interviews. Jackie told him she was leaving and he decided to leave first. He found a studio apartment on the north side of town across the street from the mall and decided to stop waiting for his old job. He had five grand in savings but was going crazy nights and so when he saw an opening for the night shift at a hotel he'd never heard of in a dangerous part of town, he took it.
At work the week after Claire's party, Anders watched old movies on the TV hanging from the ceiling and the black-and-white faces of the women on the screen reminded him of the Model's cheekbones. He pulled *Cinema Fantastique* out from beneath the counter and thought about its place on the shelf in Claire's bedroom and of the Model lying in her bed.

By Wednesday morning he was so restless and moody he felt like a middle schooler again. He emailed Claire and asked her to meet him for lunch. He'd known her for a few years now, ever since she'd interviewed him as part of her job, but still it felt strange to call her. She sounded giddy when she answered and told him to go to the Russian Tea House, near the Capitol Complex, where she worked. Anders thought this was a strange coincidence and wondered if the clerks would have accents like Marie's fake one but when he got there the only other person in the place was a bearded man in a kung-fu-movie jacket.

Anders looked for a table and then sat by the window and started feeling depressed about the menu. He wanted to order something but there was no soda and no coffee and nothing to eat but scones and biscotti and vegetarian sandwiches stuffed with ingredients he'd never heard of. Usually he considered himself to be fairly health-conscious but now he wanted a sloppy hamburger and a plate of fries.

He ordered black tea and sat wondering when it would be cool enough to drink. He could see the dome of the State Capitol a few blocks away, glittering in the sky. Steam climbed out of the tea cup and over his face and he saw Claire outside, sauntering down Grand Avenue, staring into a book with what looked like a glowing neon fish on the front. The sun cut across her face and turned the lenses of her glasses into bright
flashing mirrors. She didn't look up until she was at the door, and then she tucked the book beneath an arm and hurried to a table.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" she said. "I thought you slept during the day."

"Bed after this." He should have been sleeping all morning but instead he'd made eggs after work and then gone jogging through his usual circuit of roads in the suburbs. He'd found a pretty good route by now and knew how to stay out of the sun and out of the way of cars and off the sidewalks that were dotted with kids' toys. He jogged any morning when he still had the energy and it always destroyed him. "You look tired too."

Her eyes were pink around the edges and the skin beneath was tinted purple. "I was up all night fighting with Paul. Tried to convince him he should go rent a room somewhere. He says I'd regret it if he did."

"Would you?"

"Probably," she said, and then looked away. She knew about him and Jackie and seemed squeamish about bringing up her own destroyed and bizarre relationship. Anders knew that she and Paul weren't really together and supposedly wanted each other to move out but at Claire's parties they almost inevitably ended up in his bedroom together. He could think of married couples, old friends, who were less obviously stuck on each other than Claire and Paul.

"What are you eating?" she said.

"This menu scares the hell out of me," he said.

"I'll pick something for you," she said, and bounced out of her seat. She looked awake and happy and Anders remembered her telling him that her lunch break was the only good part of her workday. When she came back to the table she slipped off her
jacket and her shirt sleeves were rolled up so that he could see the edge of a little dancing skeleton on her right arm. "Is there a reason we're here?" she said. "I mean, I'm happy you called—"

"It's about the Model. The blonde who passed out in your bed. I didn't know where you were—"

"Marie," she said. "I thought maybe she did that after you left."

"I brought her in there. She was going under in the living room."

"Hmm," Claire said.

"I'd like to talk to her again. We had a strange conversation."

"Are you going to ask her out?" Claire said. "I don't know her that well, but she's got this problem with guys falling in love with her. So maybe you shouldn't ask her out."

She dug around in her jacket and found a wadded-up receipt and a pen. She wrote down a string of digits and slid them across the table. "Just ask her to lunch or something."

Anders said, "She told me she was Russian."

"What?"

"Never mind." He looked at the numbers, scrawled in Claire's jagged writing.

"How did you meet her, anyway?"

"Bars. Downtown. She lives down there. I've been inviting her to parties pretty much forever. I couldn't believe it when I saw her asleep in my bed. It's not like we're real close friends. It's almost like there was an obligation for me to ask her over."

"Huh," Anders said.

"Huh," Claire said.
He went home and sat at his desk and stared at the receipt with the Model’s number written on the back. Anders hated the smell of stale air and also the smell of air conditioning because they both reminded him of the Overniter and of the apartment he'd shared with Jackie, and so he kept the windows in his apartment open constantly, even with rain blowing in and puddling on the hardwood floor. Today it was clear and bright outside and also stuffy as hell for September. He fell asleep on the couch in his underwear, and when he woke up his shoulders and neck were clammy with sweat and his face was creased with lines from the edges of the cushions. He went to the kitchen and ate a grapefruit and then, before he could wake up enough to be nervous, he dialed Marie's number.

There was a ring and a ring and a click and she said, "Who is this?"

"Um," he said. "Anders?"

"Anderson?"

"No, no. From the party. From Claire’s party. Remember? You were Russian?"

"Oh." She laughed like a balloon leaking air. "The cop."

Anders paced around his living room and listened to the boards creak beneath his bare feet. The skin of his feet made little sticky noises each time he stepped off the floor, and he went to stand in front of the fan. He wondered if Marie was doing something distracting, standing in front of a bathroom mirror with a hair straightener or organizing a shelf in her living room.

"Let's go to dinner Saturday night," he said.

"Saturday night I’m busy."

"Then tell me when you're not busy."
"Well," she said. "The thing is, it's hard to say."

"What does that mean?"

She sighed and said, "See you, Andy."

"It’s not Andy," he said, but the phone hummed and she'd already hung up. He wondered if she actually thought he was still a cop. He wondered if that might have turned her off. Some women had loved his uniform and Jackie had liked him to wear it to bed sometimes but there were also the kinds of women, particularly the kinds he met now at parties and bars, who hated the idea of touching someone in law enforcement.

That night he worked, and the hotel was a cold and lonely place. The Overniter was stuck in the east side of town, so that he had to drive by strip malls and boarded-up furniture stores and broken-down apartment complexes to get to it, and by the time he parked in the little employee lot he already felt depressed. Inside, the air was clammy chilled and stuck to his face and neck. Todd the Manager kept the lobby at a steady, paralyzing 65 degrees. The air smelled like the inside of a refrigerator.

The hotel didn’t get a lot of business and Anders was the only overnight employee during the week. He usually had the lobby entirely to himself from two in the morning until dawn, when a grossly obese man delivered the day’s papers, and tonight he wandered around in front of the desk, over to the glass door that led to the swimming pool, back to the humming soda machines and then to the rack of faded City of Des Moines tourism brochures nobody ever bothered looking through. Anders pulled the book Claire had loaned him out from beneath the desk and tried to read the first chapter but found himself unable to concentrate. He paced around behind the desk and felt so lonely
that he lay down on the thin carpet and listened to the noise of the television and wondered how he would make it through the night.

When he went home, he was unable to sleep and so spent the entire day shifting around on the couch, drifting away and coming back to himself, with an old detective DVD playing on his little TV. He went into work groggy and feeling sick but was saved at last from boredom by a complaint from Room 114. He dialed Neil the Maintenance Man and tried not to sound too excited when he picked up.

"It’s Anders," he said. "The toilet in 114’s not flushing."

"The toilet’s not flushing?"

"Yes."

"So move the guest to a different room."

"I moved them to 244," Anders said. He’d learned a long time ago that when something went wrong in a room, the guest always wanted to get as far away from it as possible. People would rather haul their bags up three flights of stairs or through the humidity of the pool room than sleep close to a room that had somehow betrayed them.

"Hey, right, man," Neil said, "why don’t I just come in in the morning and fix that toilet up?"

"Well," Anders said, feeling just a little guilty, "I guess you could."

But Neil came in half an hour later anyway. He strolled through the glass doors in the front and he looked stoned and had an open can of PBR stuffed into the pocket of his jeans. He came to the desk and splayed his fingers out and the thick metal ring he wore on his right hand knocked against the countertop. There was a little cat face cut into the top of the ring that Anders had seem him use to pull the tops off beer bottles.
"Sorry," Anders said.

"It’s all fine," Neil said, and Anders thought that it probably was. He had access to all the employee files and knew that Neil earned time-and-a-half for coming in after midnight. A few months back some kids had tossed rocks through the windows on the west side of the hotel, and Neil had come in that very night to install new glass while Anders swept up the mess. He’d been in two other nights that week, and he told Anders that he was going to spend his next paycheck on a set of Beatles vinyl and new pickups for one of his guitars.

Anders paced around behind the desk and watched Neil push the maintenance cart down the hall. Later a group of women who were almost too drunk to figure out whose credit card to use came in and got a suite on the third floor, and a depressed-looking man in a business suit came in and asked for the cheapest room he could get. Anders leaned on the counter feeling sorry for his customers and eventually the elevator doors dinged open and Neil pushed the maintenance cart back into the lobby.

"Hoo boy," he said, "that shit was thick. Thickest shit I’ve ever seen." He rolled the cart into the maintenance closet, which used to be the closet where jackets and hats and umbrellas hung. "Nasty nasty."

Anders said, "I asked a woman to dinner."

"Okay," Neil said. He shoved the cart and one of the wheels caught on the edge of the door to the closet. He shoved it again and there was a tinkling sound, like a drinking glass or a light bulb falling off a shelf and shattering on the floor. Spare broom handles and a mop handle and a plunger handle and a boxed fluorescent light all jutted out of the cart at crazy angles. "And?"
"Blown off. Out of the water."

"Maybe she just doesn’t like dinner, man," Neil said. "You know, some people just hate dinner. The meal. Anyway, where’d you meet her?"

"This house party. She just showed up and melted her brain with liquor."

"So she drinks. Maybe you should invite her for drinks. People are always looking for an excuse to drink too much."

"I’ll make a note," Anders said. There was a little yellow notepad they used to write off things like broken bulbs and rolls of toilet paper, and Anders tore off a sheet and wrote Drinks! in large, overexcited letters.

"If you're really desperate about this girl," Neil said, "I know a guy who could help you."

"I'll try the drinks," Anders said.

He was so excited after Neil left that he stared at the phone on the front desk for ten minutes and considered calling Marie right then, at two in the morning. It was late but she was a model and was probably elbows deep in fruity red drinks or cocaine or something. He picked up the receiver and then realized he didn't have her number in his pocket. He wondered if he'd brought his phone but he remembered leaving it on the nightstand by his bed. He thought he could call her when he got home but it would be 7:30 then and she'd be asleep and he'd be tired and drifting away from himself. He went home after work and thought about calling her anyway and telling her good morning but he went to sleep on the couch instead and woke up in the early afternoon with his work clothes sticking to him behind his knees and between his shoulder blades. It had started raining and the entire apartment smelled fresh and clean and a little like earthworms.
Anders drank an entire pot of coffee and then showered and felt too nervous and anxious and thought about masturbating but was worried he would think about Jackie again. He hadn't seen her in person in months and hadn't touched her in so much longer and the memory of her skin could wreck him for hours on end.

He reached up and found his cell phone and then found the receipt Claire had given him with the Model's number written on it. The phone rang twice and he shoved a clammy hand over his face and then she picked up.

"Andy?" she said.

"You saved my number?" In the background, he could hear the sounds of other people, the sounds of people laughing and talking. "Are you busy?"

"I'm at work," she said. "At the agency. We have an office downtown. On Second Avenue."

"You know how I asked you out for dinner?" he said. "Forget that. Let's get drinks instead."

"Sure. Okay, sure."

"Okay, sure," he said. "Saturday night?"

"Sunday's better."

"Sunday," he said. He worked Sunday nights but not until eleven. He wondered if he could work the front desk after a few drinks and thought he'd be fine. Every few nights he'd slip into the employee bathroom and light up a joint, and fuzzing himself out that way usually helped time pass. "Where should I pick you up?"

"Let's meet at the Continental, downtown," she said.

"Great," he said.
Anders had no idea where the Continental was, but he found the address in the phone book. He couldn't remember the last date he'd gone on and had no idea what to wear. Saturday he walked to the mall across the street from his apartment and spent eight dollars on a new shirt and a pair of khaki pants and then decided they made him look like he was going to work in a bank. He wore jeans and his faded pink shirt instead and drove to the Continental, which turned out to be a little room tacked onto the side of an expensive-looking hotel. The bar was a little room lit by table lamps and the streetlights outside the windows. There were two men in the corner, dressed in suits, and a bartender in a white shirt. Anders ordered a glass of whiskey, which had once been his drink, and then sat in the back corner, waiting. He felt like an idiot and was sure everyone was looking at him but finally the Model stepped in, wearing a long gray skirt and a red hoodie zipped all the way to her neck, and Anders felt his heartbeat jump. Her legs looked impossibly long and thin, and Anders wondered how knobby her knees must feel. She sat down across from him and said, "Hello."

"Marie," he said, and it felt good to say her name. "Can I get you something."

"Number 42," she said.

Anders didn't know what a Number 42 was, but he spoke to the bartender and she handed him a martini glass full of iridescent pink liquid. He placed it in front of Marie and a dense cloud of alcohol swirled inside.

"You like this place?" he said.

"I live down the street."
"It's so dark," he said. This place was nothing like his memory of bars. The bars he'd gone to in his past life were noisy and brilliant and happy places. "I've heard Claire talk about this place."

"Claire," she said, and snorted. She looked at him over the top of her glass and said, "You're wearing the same outfit."

"What?"

"That you wore to her party," she said. "I remember because you don't have the right skin tone for pink. It's like, I can't wear green. Everyone has some color that doesn't look right on them."

"All right." Anders took a long drink of his whiskey and felt it burn the back of his throat. "Did you get the part?"

"The part?"

"The Russian part."

"Oh," she said. "That's not for a while. The audition. But there is a commercial audition coming up."

"How does that work?" he said. He had never known a model before and was fascinated by the idea of her job. He imagined her suddenly, on a jet or a beach somewhere, with old men crab-walking around her with cameras.

"Richard, that's my agent, he recommends me for a project and sends pictures or whatever and then I show up and we talk. It's easier for photo shoots. Something goes wrong with me and commercials. I've auditioned for like a thousand, you know, ten or eleven, but Richard thinks my presence isn't right. Whatever that means. Did you see that Imperial Autos commercial last year?"
"No."

"Well, the woman they picked to drive the Mustang was this fat brunette. Why? I mean, I have to ask why? Obviously I'm doing something wrong. So then this play, right, the idea I guess is that I'll learn something about being in front of people. And also, you know, I'd like to learn to act. Because modeling forever, in this town, can you imagine?"

"So you want to be an actor?"

"Who doesn't want to be an actor?" she said. "Hey, did you believe that accent last week?"

"Yeah," he said, but he wasn't so sure now that he had. "I mean, I'm not really familiar with any Russian people."

"Yeah," she said. "Whatever." She took his hand and pulled him out of the booth and he let himself fall out, to the floor, to his feet. She lead him out the door and still had hold of his hand two blocks later.

"Do you like wine?" she said. "I feel like drinking wine."

She lead him another block and before Anders had time to get excited she was already punching numbers into a keypad next to a door with Courtney Avenue Lofts etched into its glass. She lead him upstairs and Anders thought he would have a panic attack remembering the first time Jackie had brought him home like this. He wondered if she was doing this kind of thing right now, was bringing strange men home from bars. She'd been alone so long now and had always been such a sexual person that he was sure she either had a boyfriend now or was cycling through a string of them.
Marie led him into a studio apartment that was half the size of his. Her bed sat in the corner, narrow but fluffy, and Anders suddenly knew that the night would end there, buried in its white comforter, at least until he had to drive to work.

He sat on a leather couch and tried to put Jackie out of his head. She liked to have sex on couches, with her chest pressed to his, and he decided that if Marie climbed on top of him here on this couch he would stand up and walk out.

She poured wine and carried it across the room. The carpet was cream and looked thick and Anders had a horrible fantasy about her tripping and spilling all over, about the spreading red stain, a burgundy puddle in the shape of a fried egg or a piece of pepperoni. Marie sat down and touched his leg and said, "So do you want to kiss me?"

"Uh," he said. "Yes I do."

"What's with your name?" she said. "Anders is a strange name."

"My grandfather. It was his."

"I don't even know why my mother named me Marie." She looked at him and something seemed new in her eyes. He wished he were drunker for this. "So does this mean you don't want to kiss me or what?"

"I've never kissed a blonde."

"You'll like it," she said.

She took their wine glasses by the stems and placed them on the end table. She slung herself up onto him and he decided not to leave. She kissed him and her lips felt thin and cold. He touched her face and then her shoulders and couldn't figure out what to do with his hands. He touched her back and the bones of her spine were tiny sharp bumps beneath her skin. She kissed his jaw and his neck and he couldn't believe the feel of her
mouth on him. She pulled off her shirt and she was wearing a purple bra and had three moles in a triangle below her left collarbone. She stood and pulled him to the bed and Anders felt overcome with gratitude. He thought for a moment that he might actually have a reason to believe in God again or at least some kind of benevolent agent of faith.

She pulled him close and wrapped her long arms around him. She kissed him and kissed him and then stopped. She sighed and leaned back into the couch and he tried to kiss her but her mouth was suddenly stiff. "What's wrong?" he said.

"I'm tired," she said, and yawned. "Sorry."

He propped his head up on one hand and looked down at her. Her skin was tanned and a little yellow. Anders thought he would lose his mind if he didn't sleep with her.

"How long has it been since you were with someone?" she said.

"Why?"

"Because you're . . . ravenous."

"Listen," he said. He dropped onto his back. "I used to be married."

"Oh," she said. "That makes sense."

"How?"

"You're old."

"I'm 31."

"That's old enough to be married," she said. She rolled over and faced the wall. Anders waited for her to say something but she didn't say anything. He put a hand on her elbow and finally he kissed her shoulder and slid off the bed. He hoped she would turn and grab his hand but she didn't move. His jeans lay in a pile by the couch and he had to hop around to get his feet in. He wondered if he should say something and didn't. It was
too early to go to work but too late to make it back to his apartment so he drove around
town drinking diet soda from a plastic gas station cup until it was time to go to work.

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3.

After Anders left, Marie lay on her side and slowly sank into her bed. Anders had
been an awkward kisser and a little sloppy in a way that reminded her of high school, but
his arms were firm and his chest felt good beneath her fingers and she thought that sex
with him might not actually be that bad. She liked sex very much and liked having it with
men like Anders, who didn’t know her very well, as long as they behaved decently about
it and were somewhat attractive and looked at her the right way when she invited them
home. She liked the look on men's faces when they realized she really was going to sleep
with the, but Anders had been too hungry, too intent, out of control.

Anders had been too desperate and now she imagined that he was at home in his
bathroom, thinking about her and furiously jacking off. The idea was funny to her at first
to the point that she laughed out loud, and then it became uncomfortable and her memory
of the night became uncomfortable. She found her phone on the floor and called Richard
her agent, who she sometimes slept with when they were both bored or lonely or drunk.
She hadn’t been with him outside the office in more than a month, and he sounded
surprised to hear her voice. He was on a date and had slipped away from the table to take
Marie’s call and the date was boring and leading nowhere and he told Marie that he
would be home in an hour. She thought about showering because she felt covered in
Anders’s kisses but then decided that she liked that, the idea of another man kissing her where one already had. She drank another glass of wine and stared into the mirror and ran fresh eyeliner over her eyelids and then decided to at least wash her face and her neck.

Marie remembered the keypad code that opened the lobby doors at Richard’s apartment building, and when he finally came home she was sitting against his door with a bottle of wine sticking out of her tote bag. The cork was out and the bottle was almost empty. He laughed and helped her up and inside he asked if she’d been on a date and if her parents were okay, because she often talked about her mother, who often talked about getting a divorce. Marie walked past him, into the kitchen, and told him that everything was fine. They drank wine out of glasses and then went to his bedroom and had sex on his huge spongy rectangle of his bed. Richard’s apartment was nicer than hers and larger, with taller ceilings and thick paint, and there were actual rooms with actual walls. The sex was sharp and quick and she rolled her hips and dug her nails into his shoulders and came twice, which was good for her. After, he brushed his teeth and she used his brush and they lay on his bed in the dark. It was late now, after midnight, and soon Richard was breathing deeply and soon he was snoring. Marie lay there and needed to pee but her arm was caught beneath his neck. She could already feel the skin of her knuckles going cold and tingly. The blinds were open and so the room was not really very dark and was full of moonlight and the yellow light of the lamps in the parking lot. The light turned the skin of Richard’s neck and shoulders milky and yellow, and turned the thin stretch marks on her stomach and hips into bright distended lightning bolts. Richard had told her before that the stretch marks looked like scars where a tiger or puma had clawed her. She’d had
them since middle school, when she'd lost ten pounds on the volley ball team, and hated them more than anything else about her body.

Richard’s snoring made him sound like some sort of deep sea creature or a benevolent mammoth on a cartoon Marie had seen as a little girl. She stared at the shadows on the ceiling and thought about Anders, who in her mind was still in his bathroom, still jacking off. He wasn’t gorgeous but he was cute enough and had surprising muscles in his shoulders. She felt sorry for him and then guilty and then felt stupid for feeling guilty. She wondered what his wife must have looked like and what must have happened to pull them apart.

She pulled her arm out from beneath Richard’s neck and he snorted and moved his head but didn’t wake up. Out in the living room, she sat on the arm of the couch and found Anders’s number in her phone’s history. It was almost 1:30 in the morning now and she realized as the phone rang that she was calling someone she barely knew. When he answered he sounded confused but not tired and she wondered if he was still up.

"Were you asleep?" Her voice was a whisper. She wasn’t afraid of waking up Richard but she didn’t want Anders to know she was calling from some other man’s living room.

"I’m at work," he said. "The hotel."

"Oh yeah. Yeah. You said that." She cleared her throat and dropped back into the couch. Richard kept a huge television in the corner of the room and she wondered what he needed such a big TV to see. She wondered if he watched football or movies or what. "So I’m sorry about earlier. I was weird. Sorry."

"Oh, it’s fine," he said. "Hey, don't worry about it."
"Okay." She groaned and wondered what she was doing. She realized that she was not really sorry and that there was nothing to be sorry for but she felt sorry anyway. "So maybe we could try going out again sometime—"

"How about tomorrow night?"

"Sure," she said. "Yeah, great."

Then she hung up on him.

She walked back to the bedroom and fell into the sheets next to Richard and was pretty sure that she would blow Anders off, but the next night when he called she reminded him of her apartment number and met him at her building's lobby doors. He had an armful of DVDs and she told him to pick one and they ended up watching *Dr. Strangelove* and eating delivery pizza on her couch. Anders laughed and laughed and she tried to seem interested even though she wasn’t. Anders had worn a t-shirt and a gray hoodie zipped over that and she kept looking at the artery in his neck. He had told her that he jogged four times a week and she wondered what it must be like to exercise regularly. She herself felt flabby and bloated with pizza but she climbed onto him anyway, before the movie was even finished. He seemed uncomfortable on the couch but she liked the idea of him feeling stuck. She let her hair fall over her face in the way that drove other men crazy and he gripped her hips and she didn’t come but when it was over she fell forward on him anyway and bit his neck where she’d been staring at it all night and then lay there, panting, before going to the bathroom. Afterward, they sat awkward and naked on the couch until she told him that she had to go to bed in such a way that he knew to leave.
She was at work when he called the next two nights. On the third night she sat around her apartment watching sitcoms and realized how very bored she was. She dialed Anders’s number and invited herself to his apartment. He gave her an address in a suburb on the north side that she knew only because of its junky mall and its junky shoe store and the rotting houses that sat all around it with their overgrown lawns. Anders’s apartment building was across the street from the mall and was too cheap to have a lobby or even locks on its outside doors, but the apartment itself was larger than hers and quiet and she sat on his couch and felt actually happy to be there. The furniture all around was mismatched and a little worn, like it had been bought at various thrift stores and department stores around the city.

"You didn't keep any furniture from your old house?"

"Everything's at the old apartment," he said. "It meant more to her."

He brought her a glass of juice and she hoped it was full of vodka but it wasn’t. The air clung to her skin like a bad smell and she said, "Why is it so hot in here?"

"Well," he said, and went to the window and shut it and then turned a thermostat next to the bathroom door and overhead, somewhere buried in the ceiling, the AC lurched to life. The apartment felt more comfortable with the hush of the air vents and became cool so quickly that she had to ask him to shut it off or give her a blanket. He did everything she asked and she felt as if he’d protected her from a rabid dog or one of the godless toothless hobos downtown. She kissed him on the couch and they had sex there and she didn’t come this time either. She came back the next night and they did it again while something with Jack Nicholson played silently on the small TV. After, Anders
wrapped an arm around her stomach and pressed himself against her and said, "So are you my girlfriend now?"

"What do you mean by dating?"

"You know," he said, and smiled, like it was a joke. "Are we going steady?"

"How old are you?"

"What does that mean?"

"I can’t have a boyfriend," she said. She wasn’t sure that was true, but she thought she wanted it to be true anyway. She left and didn’t talk to Anders until after the weekend and then, just when she’d decided he’d given up on her, he called and they ate sandwiches at a deli a few blocks from her apartment. After, they walked back and made out on the floor in front of her couch. She thought they’d finally settled into some kind of understanding but then Anders said, "Could I spend the night?"

"I don’t know," she said, and turned to face the bed. "I don’t think so. Not tonight." She closed her eyes and dug her cheekbones into the carpet. It should have stung but the carpet was thick and according to the landlord made of wool and it felt like cotton balls on her skin. She wanted to ask Anders to leave but didn’t want to have to open her mouth. Finally he stood up anyway and she heard the rattle of his belt buckle as he pulled up his jeans. When he was gone she walked to the door and turned the lock. She waited and listened to him walking away and then decided to take a shower.

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Most of the time, Marie was not actually a model. Most of the time she was a waitress at Albert O’Hare’s Authentic Mexican-American Restaurant on the south edge of town. This was something she tried to keep from people at parties and people at the bars she sometimes went to and from anybody she actually cared about. It was an easy secret to keep because nobody Marie cared about or ran into downtown ate at Albert O’Hare’s. She had never seen anyone there who she knew and she doubted she ever would. Nobody she cared about or ran into downtown ever asked what she had to do to be a model, if she had to work a second job. Nobody ever asked how often she worked or what exactly she did for work or what she got paid.

Most of her modeling job involved hanging around the agency’s office on Second Street and waiting for one of the agents to place her with whatever supermarket chain or department store needed someone for its catalog or newspaper ad or mail circular. Really she didn’t even need to spend time at the agency’s office, but it was located between an expensive hotel and a bar called The Continental, with people wandering by outside in business suits and pencil skirts, and being there helped her forget that she had another job where she was expected to wear black pants that were shiny with grease and a red polo shirt with a picture of a chili pepper wearing a sombrero superimposed over a blurry American flag. She hated Albert O’Hare’s and she hated smelling like grease and refried beans but her modeling barely paid for her apartment each month and her membership with Power Fitness, which she never used, cost another $55 and her cell phone bill regularly ran high even though she could never remember using it that much. Sometimes she fantasized about going back to school and finishing some degree but she could never think of what to do with it. She’d enrolled in a community college when she was 22 and
had thought about becoming a radiologist or an interior designer but had realized she
didn't want to do any job she had to train four years for.

She had sex with Anders three more times that week. Each time they finished
she’d lie on his couch with her back pressed to his chest, sweating and listening to the
sounds of traffic outside his open window, and he’d talk about movies he liked or about
the hotel or about the maintenance guy he worked with, who was in one of the shitty
bands that crawled its way around town from one dingy Des Moines bar to another.
Marie had heard of the band—Little Ochre Annie—and had even seen them play with
another band called Love Factory at a music and beer festival the year before. She had
been thin and bouncy with cocaine she'd got from a forty year-old guy who tried to dance
with her all night.

Sex with Anders got better. After the third time he seemed to fall into an
understanding of how normal people behaved in bed. Afterwards, he talked and talked as
if armfuls of thoughts were bundled up in his chest and just waiting to be uncorked by
vigorous fucking. Marie tried to talk too but most times she opened her mouth and no
words came out and there were no words waiting to come out. This kind of thing made
her think she should stop seeing him because obviously they had nothing to talk about,
but he always called her the next night and she would go to him or tell him to come over.
He called while she was at home or at the agency and that was fine because she could slip
outside or sit down on her couch and tell him about her day, but he also called while she
was waitressing with a tray full of fish tacos and oversized margaritas and she’d have to
let the phone buzz away in her hip pocket. When she was waitressing and he called she
felt like he was intruding on the most private part of her life and it made her want to
scream at him or tell him to fuck off. She was sure he imagined her somewhere glamorous, at some photo shoot or at one of the expensive martini bars on the west side or at some party full of well-dressed people, and sometimes she would slip into the bathroom or into the cooler at the back of the kitchen and think about these places where she really should have been, and she would sit on the countertop or lean against the wall until she felt more like herself. She realized that Anders didn’t really know her at all and that she probably didn’t know him at all and she wondered if it even mattered. The water faucets in the bathroom got hot too fast and she’d splash water on her face and watch the skin around her cheekbones turn pink. She’d walk back out into the dining room with water running down her neck and with strips of hair stuck to her jaw but it was okay because here she was just a waitress and wasn’t expected to look nice or even put together at all. Anders never thought of her with water in her hair, she was sure, or with her makeup smeared. Sometimes, on her breaks spent in the back room with a cup of diet soda or even while she was taking peoples' orders, she'd wonder if she should treat Anders better and maybe see how things worked out and maybe they would stay together. At home she would look at herself in the bathroom while she was still wearing her work shirt and her pants and wonder if she should tell Anders about her waitressing job and it always seemed too stupid to tell anyone about.

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4.
Claire often rolled into work late, which meant she had to come in the back way or, if the doors were open, through the auto pool garage, then down through the stairwell and into her office. Wednesday she showed up at 8:35 and almost got busted by one of the administrators driving out of the lot but decided not to worry about it. She made her way to the break room, then to her cubicle in the basement, where she sat staring at her computer screen and holding a paper cup of coffee. When she blew into the cup, hot steam rolled up her face and into her eyes and she could pretend for just a second that she was at home, in the shower, instead of in the basement of the Center for Disabilities and Employment.

There were three research requests at the top of her inbox, all from different field agencies, and one from Anders. Anders only ever talked to her at parties and it was strange to see an email from him but she skipped over it anyway. There was a more important one, sent by her boss at 8:05, asking if she'd like to use vacation time to cover her recent tardiness. Claire hadn't even realized that people in the real world, in official government positions, used words like "tardiness," but there was the word, on her screen. She suspected that her boss always knew when she'd shown up late, even if she sometimes chose to ignore it, and Claire couldn't figure out how. Alise's office was up on the ground floor, with the transcriptionists and the secretaries, and Claire's cubicle was in the gut of the basement.

There were no windows in the basement. There was almost no ventilation, and the air smelled constantly of dust and wet cloth.

Claire worked as a researcher for the CDE. The job was okay as long as there was no actual research to be done, because she was free to sit at her desk with a book or with
her iPod, but a few times each day her email would chime and a detailed and ridiculous question would come in from one of the vocational counselors scattered across the state. Claire had been doing this job for four years now and was still amazed at how simple the questions were to answer. Most of them she could answer with a quick Google search but the vocational counselors were all in their fifties and seemed unsure of even how to send a proper email, let alone comb through webpages full of State legal code. They would ask what schools could license their clients as nurses, and Claire would spend three minutes on the internet and four hours fucking around with the report. They would ask what job openings there were for beginning accountants in Des Moines, and Claire would read the classifieds to find out. For this work she was paid $18 each hour and propped up with insurance and allowed to traipse around the city flashing her ID badge around like it meant something.

The really good research requests, the only ones she really enjoyed, allowed her to get out of the office and actually go learn something about the world, to drive across town to the plastics factory and find out if someone in a wheelchair could actually operate a Number Three Press, or to the closest Pizza Hut to see if their manager would hire a convicted sex offender with partial blindness in both eyes. She'd once had to trudge through snow to the Center for Agricultural Policies to find out if a client could render and sell bologna sausage on a large scale out of his basement. She'd once been asked to find out if a deaf woman could become a police officer, and, when that didn't work out, if she could at least become a private security guard.

Today she had to find a list of schools that offered training in computer programming, determine the licensing requirements for EMTs, and find out if there were
any job openings in the city for movie extras. She skipped all this and stared at her boss’s email for another three minutes and decided not to bother answering it. She hoped that Anders’s email would be entertaining but it was short and all about Marie and this morning Claire had trouble caring. Her head hurt already and when she imagined Anders trying to woo Marie the blood in her temples pounded and she thought something might burst behind her eyes. Claire liked to think of herself as an intensely social person, as the kind of person who not only threw parties every other weekend but who also liked to talk to people after those parties, but today her head hurt and her mouth tasted like last night’s whiskey and she still had no idea what to do about Paul. They hadn't slept together last night but she'd wanted to and she felt sick about it. She wanted to go him and kiss him and she wanted to go home and tell him to find a new place to live. She wanted to slump in her shitty little chair in her shitty little cubicle and listen to the tapping keyboards and wet coughs of the counselors all around her.

She finally wrote back to Anders that afternoon. She liked Anders and thought he was quiet in a dignified way and genuinely nice and he was one of her favorite people at her parties, and so she told him she was sorry but Marie seemed like a very cold person to her and she’d only invited her because they sometimes talked over drinks at the bars downtown when there was no one else around. Anders didn’t respond, and she didn’t think he would tell Marie what she’d written, but a few days later her cell phone rang and it was Marie on the other end. It was ten in the morning and Claire could have slipped outside or into the break room to answer her phone but instead she ignored the call. Marie called against at noon and then at two. Claire had asked Marie about her job before and imagined she was probably now sitting around her apartment downtown eating yogurt-
dipped strawberries and reading Elle or Cosmo, with nothing better to do than call Claire every two hours. Claire’s phone was set to vibrate and every time it rang it almost buzzed itself off the edge of her desk. Marie called again that night, while Claire argued with Paul about rent, and again an hour later while she and Paul were having sex on the couch in the living room. He had both hands wrapped around her back, and she imagined his fingers smeared around the ink of her tattoo. He stopped grinding his hips into hers and said, "Why don’t you just turn off your phone?"

It was exactly the sort of thing he always said at the wrong moment. Claire looked down at him and grabbed his freckled shoulders and thought of all the reasons she’d broken up with him. She couldn’t stand him anymore, really. He was miserable to talk to and he refused to move out of the apartment and he became jealous and whiny every time she seemed even a little interested in someone else. He could cook but he refused to make anything ever since she’d dumped him three months back. He thought she spent too much time at bars and too much time reading and drinking in her bedroom, and told her so at least once a night. Paul’s idea of fixing their relationship was to hang out at the record store where he worked all day and then to stay out all night and then to come home and fight with Claire about something. Really, anymore, she could only stand him when his clothes were off.

"You could at least answer it," he said.

"Shut the fuck up," she said, and pushed him back into the couch. He liked it rough, so it was okay. When he was drunk, he liked to be tied up and blindfolded and to be scratched on the chest and shoulders until he bled. The couch was positioned a few feet from the wall of Claire’s bookshelves, and so while she fucked him she looked over
the spines of all the books, hundreds of them, all printed in their own fonts and colors. She owned too many books and hadn’t even read half of them. She wanted to believe she’d get to them all some day and even sometimes told herself she wouldn't buy any new books until she read the ones in her apartment but in sudden moments like this, when she'd been drinking too much or while she stood in the shower, she knew that she never would.

5.

Michael had been one of Anders's closest friends for a few weeks, when things with Jackie were really falling apart, but now he was mostly just someone to buy pot from. They met a Burger King downtown one evening, before Anders had to go to work. Michael slurped on a soda and Anders told him about Marie.

"Fuck, man," Michael said. "She's a model."

"Something's not right," Anders said, through a mouthful of cheeseburger. He wanted to elaborate but he wasn't sure how to phrase his thoughts. Also, things with Michael had been weird for a long time. Before he'd found his studio apartment, he'd stayed in Michael's spare bedroom for a few days, not long, but long enough to freak out Michael's wife.

"Everything's right," Michael said. "You worry too much."
"It feels like it's going to fall apart."

"The last woman you screwed was your wife. Of course it felt different." He put his hands in his pockets and nodded to himself, as if something helpful had been decided.

Anders bought a little baggy of pot for forty dollars. He didn't intend to smoke that night, but Neil showed up at 1:15 to fix an elevator door he'd started poking at earlier in the day. Usually he wouldn't have bothered but he'd come in from a bar on the other side of town, drunker than usual and also chatty. They rolled the joint on the front desk counter and Anders put up the BACK IN 5 MINUTES sign and they slipped into the employee bathroom.

"You should quit that girl, man," Neil said. "Why fuck with yourself like this? It sounds like she's using you."

"What would she be using me for?" She'd been in his car and had seen his apartment now and he couldn't imagine anything of his she might want.

"What, do you live in a hovel? Where do you even live? It doesn't matter. It's not material. It doesn't have to be material." He sucked in and held his breath and exhaled smoke. The air was hazy and Anders wondered how he'd come to this point in his life. Pot had been something big in high school and then something totally absent during most of the time he was a cop and had now blazed back into his life in a lazy, smoky puff.

"Maybe she's got some other dude," Neil said. His voice was thinner now. He coughed. "Maybe there's some other guy, right, and she's just keeping you around in case things don't work out with him."
"Yeah," Anders said. He had a sweating bottle of orange soda from the Pepsi machine in the lobby, and he took a great gulping mouthful and felt like he might vomit on the desk. "I'm not sure this is entirely helpful."

"You should be happy. You're 31, your wife left you, and now you're banging some twenty year-old model."

"She's not twenty."

"Whatever. She's hot." He slipped off the sink and slapped his hands against his denim jacket. "Maybe there's something weird with this chick."

"No," Anders said. His head was full of cotton and his tongue was a slab of meat in his mouth. "No no no no no no shit."

"You really want to know how to fix things up with this chick? I know this guy. You know Black Hole Donut?"

Anders thought of the swimming pool, through the lobby and a pair of glass doors. He thought about walking in there and falling into the 9-foot end and wiggling around in the water.

"It's this donut place on Grand," Neil said. "West side of town. Bigass donut sign out front, you can't miss it. Painted green. That kind of place."

"I don't know it."

"The guy who owns the place is great. I mean, he can help you out."

"With Marie?"

"Yeah, totally, man. Not sure how to describe him, but he helped me out with the band. How to get started and all that."
Anders turned on the sink and touched the tip of the joint to the stream of water. In the mirror his eyes were red and his face looked unfamiliar. They walked out into the lobby and on TV wine glasses were bouncing off a mattress and shattering on a hardwood floor.

"So what," Anders said, "You want to go get a donut tomorrow?"

"No, man. You go. By yourself." Neil pulled his phone from a pocket in his jacket and looked down at the screen and smirked. He was always getting text messages at work and Anders almost never got any from anyone ever. "Yeah, go check it out. When your shift ends. He’ll be there. Early morning is donut season."

"And this guy's name is?"

Neil dug his phone out again and looked down at the screen and raised an eyebrow. "I gotta go, man. But get the Satin Sheets. It’s great. Fuckin great great."

Anders didn’t know what to say, so he stood behind the desk and watched Neil walk outside and drive away. He hoped that Marie would stop by or call but of course she didn’t stop by or call. At seven o’clock Todd the Manager came in and took over the front desk and Anders drove off with the sun coming down bright from the sky and he was happy for an excuse to stay awake. The sun was so bright in the mornings and the air smelled so fresh. Sometimes he went jogging when he got home from work but more often he fell onto his couch and passed out almost immediately. Today he drove west on Grand Avenue, past blocks and blocks of junky houses and then past the Capitol Complex and then through downtown with all its coffee shops and donut shops and its sidewalks full of people reading newspapers while they tripped along in their high heels and business suits. Anders drove west and wondered if Neil wasn’t fucking with him, but
then the great green donut rose up out of the trees to his left and he swerved into a gravel parking lot. The lot was empty except for three cars, and the building itself, a low little block of a building painted purple and black, looked closed up. The Burger King next door was bloated with customers and the road behind Anders was noisy with traffic and he wondered if he shouldn't just get back into his Grand Am and rattle off away from this place. He walked up to the door and looked in and saw a pair of old men sitting in one corner, and a gleaming donut case behind a black counter, and he wondered if he should knock but that was ridiculous and he felt silly and turned around. He kicked rocks and wondered what he would say to the owner. He walked back toward his car then stopped and behind him the donut shop’s door swung open and somebody said something. Anders turned and saw a paunchy man standing in the doorway, looking annoyed. It took Anders a second to realize that the white dust all over the man’s shirt was flour. The guy’s hair was thinning pretty badly and flying off in wisps and Anders recognized him as the guy who'd made the coffee at Claire's party.

"Coffee man," Anders said. He jogged over and shook the guy's hand. "What the hell is this?"

"It's a donut shop." He grinned and Anders saw the stretch of a tiny pink scar at the corner of his mouth. "You're Anders?"

"Neil Abbey sent me here."

"Neil Abbey, oh boy. Haven't seen him in a while." He pushed open the door and walked inside, and Anders followed. Two old men sat in the corner, staring into their coffee. There was a counter and Anders climbed onto a stool in the corner. The countertop was a smooth clean piece of black marble, and the air smelled like jelly and
chocolate frosting and powdered sugar. Coffee Man walked around behind the counter and spread his hands out. "I assume you're hungry?"

"Neil recommended the, uh, the stained sheets—"

"Why don't you try the Invasion from Mars," he said. He turned and opened a display case and Anders felt his eyes get lost in the mess of sprinkles and frosting. Coffee Man took a donut and placed it on a napkin. He poured a cup of coffee and slid it across the counter. It smelled fresh and dark and was probably too hot and Anders didn't usually drink coffee but he tried it anyway. The tip of his tongue burned and the back of his throat burned but something satisfying rolled through his throat and into his gut.

"So Anders," Coffee Man said, "tell me why you're here."

"There's this woman," he said. He pulled the donut closer to him and looked at the light reflected in the frosting. The donut itself was a deep chocolate color and the frosting was a neon plastic green. "Neil thinks you're some kind of advice guy."

"That's a strange way for him to think of me."

"There's this woman, right? Gorgeous. A model, actually. I met her at Claire's party, actually. That last one. Maybe you saw her."

"Maybe."

"She's wild in bed but it's like that's the only place she likes me. I mean, I wouldn't consider myself an exceptionally needy person but I need something, you know?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Marie is the first person I've had any success with since my wife left."

"I know her," Coffee Man said. "A little."
"Really."

"She's just like any other person in this city. I mean, there's a certain kind of person in this city who feels far too bright and smart and beautiful to live here, but not enough so to actually leave. Would you say that describes her?"

"I have no idea."

"It does. She's a model, man. It takes some balls to call yourself a model in Des Moines."

Anders leaned on the counter and looked at himself in the surface of the coffee. His hair swept down over his forehead and he thought he might need a cut.

"What is your dilemma?"

"I just told you."

"Phrase it for me exactly."

Anders didn't know how to phrase it exactly but he opened his mouth and let everything he'd been thinking about for the past few days fall out. It took less than a minute and he felt embarrassed to have been so bothered by something that could be expressed so succinctly.

"I can help you," the man said, "but there's going to be a price."

"A price?"

"Yes, of course. Everything good comes with a price."

"What is it?"

"Nothing you'll miss two weeks after it's gone. And it's not your soul. Nobody's going to lose a soul here."
Anders looked over the guy's shoulder, at the old men in the corner, but neither of them looked back. He looked at the windows, at his Grand Am out in the lot.

"Hey," the guy said. "Neil didn't tell you who I am. You want to know who I am?" He leaned in and said, "Come on, you’re not curious?"

"Um," Anders said.

"I’m the Devil," he said. He pushed the coffee cup with one finger, and for a second Anders thought it would tip and spill and run off the counter and all over his pants. "Drink this before it gets cold. It really is the best coffee you’ll ever have."

Anders looked at the coffee mug and saw his reflection swimming in the murky surface. He swallowed the rest in one long drink. His mouth felt full and tingly with sensation and he set the cup down too hard on the counter and said, "Jesus."

The Devil said, "So, are you interested?"

Anders felt suddenly very happy and excited and he thought about how warm Marie's neck felt against his mouth and how long her legs felt when they were thrown over his and he thought he should take any chance he could if it meant winning her over.

He thought something strange was going on here and he thought that if he were still a cop now is about the time he would start getting hard on somebody but he wasn't a cop anymore. Anyway, he thought that it must take some sort of sanity to run a donut shop, and anyway he trusted Neil even though he didn't know him that well.

"It’s a deal then," the Devil said. He thrust his hand across the counter and grinned and this time Anders shook it. "You have a pen on you?"

"Is there a contract?"
"No, come on." The Devil found a yellow receipt beneath the counter, and then found a plastic pen with the logo of a bank printed on the side. He bent forward over the counter and began scribbling. The hair in the center of his head was thinning out and light from the overhead fluorescents bounced off his scalp.

When he finished writing, he handed the receipt to Anders with a flourish. It was some sort of list, written in squiggly ink. The top of it looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Broken Glass</th>
<th>--</th>
<th>eskimo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Deutschlander</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Special of the Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Continental</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Number 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th Station</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>The Year 2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"These are drinks," Anders said. He pointed to the Number 42 and said, "I already, we’ve already done this one."

"Then there’s your proof that I know what I’m doing. Take her to these bars, in this order, and buy her these drinks."

Anders held the receipt up and said, "All in one night?"

"Jesus, no," the Devil said. "I didn’t say I was going to help you date rape her."

"Well, wouldn’t that, you know, be in your line of work?"

"I’m not really that kind of guy," the Devil said.

Anders folded the list and the paper was thin between his fingers and he was afraid it would tear or slip away and float beneath the counter or into an open vent. He was suddenly sure that the list would work and that Marie would soon be in love with
him and everything in his life would finally not be just all right but actually good. He slid off the bar stool and headed for the door without looking up from the folded list. "Hey," the Devil said, and when Anders turned to look the Devil tossed him the chocolate donut. The green frosting smeared across his fingertips and Anders ate the donut as he drove toward his apartment and it was so overwhelmingly sweet that he almost crashed his car into a speed limit sign. By the time he got home the strangeness of the situation had faded and he started wondering if something might have been in the donut. He called Claire's phone and left a message asking if she knew anyone who called himself the Devil. He paced around his kitchen and called Marie. She didn't answer, and he sat on his couch and imagined her at home, maybe asleep or watching a movie, or maybe holding her cell phone in both hands, watching his name blink on the screen, letting it buzz all the way to voicemail.

# # #

6.

Marie wasn't at home, and she didn't come home that night except to take a shower after working a shift at Albert O'Hare's. After, she drove to West Des Moines, to Richard's apartment. They watched a television show together and talked about the news and he mixed a shaker of martinis. They wound up in his bedroom where he sat on the bed in his clothes and she sat there in her clothes because no matter how many times she came here they both liked to pretend they weren't going to have sex until the very last
moment before his finger went to her belt buckle and her fingers found the clasp of her bra. They sat talking about nothing and when Marie's phone rang she was happy for an excuse to get away. She went to the kitchen and stood in front of a mess of unwashed coffee mugs and tumblers and water glasses and a little countertop grill. The grill obviously hadn’t been washed in a while and flecks of burnt meat radiated out over the countertop and were magnified if she looked through at them through the water glasses. She thought of the lazy patient smile Richard had given her when she'd stood up, and she wanted to kick him in the mouth.

"Let’s go out tomorrow," Anders said. He sounded excited and fresh and she wondered what kind of night he was having without her. She wanted to lean on the edge of the counter but she imagined the stain on her ass, on her jeans, when she stood up. Richard would grab her ass and his hand would come away sticky with the residue of old meat and spilled drinks and whatever else was stuck to the counter. She thought maybe it would persuade him to clean his fucking kitchen.

"How about the Broken Glass," he said. "There’s this drink I think you’ll like."

"Sure," she said. Tomorrow seemed days away. "Yeah, why not?"

"Are you okay?"

"I’ll be better tomorrow," she said, and hung up the phone.

Richard had a single bookshelf in his apartment, and it was mostly used to hold old pens and his keychain and whatever other debris came out of his pockets. It always reminded her of Claire’s apartment, of Claire’s wall full of books, and that always reminded her of the library at Des Moines Community College, of the shitty little brick library on the edge of the shitty little campus of that shitty little school. Marie had only
stayed in school for a few months but she’d spent too much time in that library trying to find books she didn’t care about for research she didn’t care about for classes that she’d known right from the start didn't matter to her. The memory of the library, of the shelves and the smell of the place, of paper and vanilla air fresheners, still made her stomach ball up and her throat tighten. The memory of the library was almost like a bad meal or a stomachful of cheap liquor, something she’d have to vomit out before she could feel better. She went to the bedroom and Richard looked up from the same issue of Esquire she’d noticed on his night stand the last time she’d been here. Marie dropped onto the bed and felt all her long bones fall apart in the spongy pillow of the mattress. She thought of hotel beds and the bed she’d had as a little girl and for a second she wanted to stand up and jump and see if she could brush both hands against the ceiling.

"Who was on the phone?" Richard said.

"My boyfriend," she said, and Richard was on her in one long lazy roll. She wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck and noticed he hadn’t shaved there lately and then she felt his fingers on the snap on the front of her jeans.

#

Marie showed up at the Broken Glass at nine o'clock and Anders was already sitting at a little table against the wall. It was early still and even though Marie had never been here she’d heard about it and knew it would be bloated with people in less than an hour. Anders held a dark drink in both his hands, like maybe he was afraid it would float
off toward the ceiling or jump up and splash itself all over his front. She was relieved to see that he wasn’t wearing the puke-pink paisley shirt.

"Let me get you a drink," he said.

"Okay," she said.

He lifted his tumbler and swallowed it all, then grinned and looked like he might go into convulsions. His eyes went watery and he looked like he’d just downed a glass of rubbing alcohol. He went to the bar and she watched him stand there with money popping out of his fist. He was surrounded by women who looked like her and by men who looked like they tanned in between their workout sessions. Anders looked lanky and out of place and desperate and she wondered where exactly he would fit in. The song on the speakers switched from moody to dancey and just when she was ready to go show him how to get a bartender’s attention, he turned and came back to the table holding another tumbler and now a martini glass full of something shimmering and blue. He slid the drink across the table to her and a few thin crystals of ice collided and reflected back the overhead lights. "An eskimo," Anders said.

"What’s in this?"

"Well," he said. "I have no idea. But I thought you’d like it."

She wondered what that was supposed to mean. She wondered if he was making some stupid joke about her not sleeping with him lately, about her being cold, but it didn’t seem like his type of joke to make. Marie lifted the eskimo between her thumb and finger and looked at the bar through the side of the glass and the blue liquor inside. Marie loved the feel or martini glasses in her hand. The smell of peppermint liqueur climbed out of the drink and into her nose and bit her somewhere far back in her throat, but when she
tasted it the drink was subtle and cool and thick. She finished it quickly and then went to the bar and ordered another. By now Anders was halfway through his drink and was obviously too loose. They drank together almost every night they met, and it had been obvious since the very beginning that Anders could not hold his liquor. He waved his hands around and grinned a lot and kept rubbing his hands through his hair. He talked about the guy he worked with, Neil, and about his band that Anders had never seen or even listened to. Marie knew about thirty different men in Des Moines who played in bands, and none of them were worth talking about at a bar. She finished her second drink in a long slow gulp and Anders was still talking but she said, "How did you know I’d like this?"

"A guess," he said.

The next night they met at her apartment and walked to the Deutschlander. It was a few blocks away but she’d only been there once because it was a silly themed bar and Marie hated silly themed bars. It was supposed to be German, which, in Des Moines, meant that there weren’t many lights inside and the bar was a huge block of wood shoved against a wall and the speakers pumped out a constant stream of dull trance music and there was some animal’s stuffed head tacked to the wall above the TV that always showed basketball games. Anders held the door for her and the bar was full of tubby middle-aged men and their tubby wives. "Maybe we should try the Continental," she said.

"How about one drink here?" he said, and she agreed. Anders went to the bar and Marie found an empty seat at an old cocktail arcade table in the corner. It was dark enough in the bar that the light from the video game turned her arms and her chest blue and she imagined herself as a zombie or a vampire or just the corpse of a woman who’d
frozen to death. There was a speaker somewhere close overhead and the beat of the music rattled something around inside her chest. Anders was gone too long and when he finally came back with a drink for her she held it away from herself and looked down at the frothy black mess inside.

"Okay," she said. "I don’t drink beer."

"Try this one."

"You can have mine," she said. "This stuff makes me think of my dad."

"Just try it," Anders said. "I think you’ll like it."

Marie looked down at the beer and at the creamy froth on top. It looked like whipped cream floating on hot cocoa. Anders tapped his glass against hers and then she sighed and decided that if she’d just try a sip she could then put it down and go buy herself a cosmo. The beer was heavy in its glass and she imagined what it would feel like in her stomach. Anders stared and she tried to look away at the wall when she tasted the beer. It was salty and bitter but just when she was about to put the glass down she noticed the bite on the tip of her tongue and she tried it again and by the time Anders had finished his she had almost finished hers too.

They finished their drinks and she asked Anders to walk her home. She had a cabinet full of gin and vodka and cherry vodka and citrus vodka and raspberry rum, and she handed him two glasses and told him to make drinks while she slipped into the bathroom. She came out and Anders had put together two cloudy messes that smelled like jars of fruit left in the sun too long and tasted like rubbing alcohol swirled into a glass of jam. She put the glasses down on the coffee table and pulled Anders to the couch and pulled his shirt up over his head and his hair was a mess, sticking up in the back. She
kissed his chest and pushed him back onto the cushions and when they were done she
didn't invite him to spend the night but she didn't tell him to leave either.

"I have an audition tomorrow," she said.

"That play," he said. "I forgot."

"No. It's just a commercial. Have you heard of McCutcheon Home Furnishings?"

"No."

"They need someone for a commercial. It sounds idiotic. It sounds like something
for a middle-aged mom. But Richard sent them my headshots so tomorrow is the shoot."

"Good luck," he said, and kissed her neck.

"It's not going to happen," she said.

It was dark in the apartment and quiet and just when she was ready to melt into
sleep he kissed her ear and then her temple and slipped off onto the floor. She heard the
hush of him pulling on his jeans and then the rattle of his belt buckle. She wanted to
touch his leg or his hand or at least to say goodnight but she was already so tired and by
the time she rolled over he was already at the door, letting himself out into the bright
yellow light of the hallway. She stretched out on the couch and waited for the hum and
clunk of the elevator, but her apartment was so dark and quiet and lonely now and cool
and she crossed her feet on the arm of the couch and thought about her modeling job and
of her stupid awful waitressing job and of Anders and Richard and her car parked in the
garage down the street and of the bars in Des Moines, and she let herself slip off into
sleep.

#
Richard drove her to the audition the next day, just after lunch. He hummed along with jazz music and she pressed herself into the leather seats of his BMW and tried not to look at herself in the car's side mirror. She'd dressed as he'd asked, in khaki slacks and a thin black sweater, with her hair pulled back, and she felt like somebody else, somebody who might actually care about the quality of couches and dining room tables and full-length mirrors.

"Here we go," Richard said.

"This is horrible."

"It's an opportunity," he said.

She knew the audition was taking place at a video production company's office, but even when they parked outside and walked to the door of DYNAMIC PRODUCTIONS she expected to see furniture scattered around inside. There were ten other women crowded around a waiting room, most of them alone, and she couldn't fathom how so many people were interested in this job. She and Richard hadn't discussed the pay but it couldn't have been much. Richard was giddy with the idea that she might find her way onto television screens but she wasn't sure this was the kind of step her career needed.

When it was her turn to walk into a little studio and let someone press makeup onto her face Marie decided to throw the whole audition. She stood in front of the camera and said her single line, about furniture, five different times, from five different angles. Richard stood in the back corner with his arms folded.

"What was that?" he said afterward, when they climbed back into his car.
"Leather seats are creepy," she said. She fastened her seatbelt. "It's like being in a coffin."

"You looked pissed off in there."

"Maybe that's the attitude that sells coffee tables."

"Do you want my help or not?" he said. He waited for her to say something but she didn't say anything. They drove back to the agency and Marie went home and took off her clothes and stood in the shower.

#    #    #

7.

Claire had grown up as an only child in a little family in a little town in the southern part of the state, and now that she was 27 and lived in a place that she could call a city, at least jokingly, she had too many friends and too many acquaintances and often felt overwhelmed with phone calls and emails and chance encounters on the street with people she barely remembered from bars or thrift stores or coffee shops. She did not belong to any social clubs because social clubs were something for middle-aged parents, but every Monday she drove downtown to 7th Station for 2-for-1 martinis and every Tuesday night she met a group of women who taught lit classes at the community colleges around town and who worked at the public library to talk about books and drink too much rum. Wednesdays she drove back to the Station for Vinyl Night, when you could bring an old record and drink for free as long as it played. Weekends Claire either
threw parties or wandered through downtown, tripping from bar to bar with whatever crowd of familiar people she could find, trying to get drunk enough that she wouldn’t feel bad about driving home.

Thursdays had been Date Night once, which meant that she and Paul would cook for each other or take each other to a movie or to the lake, but now they were nothing. Now Thursday nights were the night that Paul tried as hard to possible to make Claire jealous and she tried as hard as possible not to throw a glass of rum at him.

Usually it was easy to remember why they weren't together and why she wanted to be with someone else, but every few days something would trigger a memory or he would smile at her a certain way in the kitchen or in the living room and she would imagine a future without him that stretched out dark and endless and lonely.

When she got home from work she found him standing in front of the bathroom mirror with shaving cream clinging to the underside of his jaw she felt a familiar tingle of desperate annoyance in the back of her throat. His shirt was unbuttoned so that it hung open around the little gut that he thought was sexy and that Claire thought was a little gross. Paul had a thing for sit-ups and push-ups and the muscles of his torso always reminded Claire of illustrations from text books back in high school. Paul caught her looking in the mirror and grinned. He turned off the faucet and the new silence in the bathroom and in the hallway pressed in on her. The bathroom was muggy and smelled like soap and shampoo and Claire thought she would need a drink as soon as she could make it to the kitchen.

Paul said, "Guess who’s got a date tonight."

"How did you know?" she said. "I do have a date tonight."
He stared at her in the mirror and she turned around. There was vodka and rum in the freezer, and, on the counter next to the toaster, a half-bottle of cheap whiskey somebody had left at the last party. She remembered that the whiskey had tasted like rotten bananas on Paul's breath, but she poured a glass anyway and drank it. From the bathroom, Paul yelled, "You don't have a date."

"Yeah, I don't," she said. She refilled the drink and found a frozen single-serving veggie lasagna in the freezer. It took eight minutes to cook and before it was done Paul was standing in front of the door, pulling on his boots. There were little bits of hardware on the sides that jingled and looked silly but probably helped Paul to fit in with the crowd at the record store. He was getting to be older than most of the kids at Quad-X Records, on both sides of the counter, and Claire thought he was dressing more and more like them all the time.

"Doing anything tonight?"

She shrugged and made something up about meeting people for drinks and waited for Paul to drive away in the Oldsmobile he'd been driving as long as she'd known him. Her stomach felt hollow and full of acid, and she sat in the living room trying to read a hardback about William James while eating the plastic dish full of noodles. Claire hated reading while eating and got bored with the book and put it on the arm of the couch and then reached behind her and dropped it onto a bookshelf. She had a wall full of books but she could never stick with any of them. She thought about Paul and wondered if he was really on a date or if he was just kicking around Quad-X Records. She wondered who the hell he would even go on a date with. He was strange around people he didn’t know, too excited and jumpy, like a dog who might hump your leg or piss on the floor if you get too
close. When they’d started dating she’d been constantly worried that he would jump on
her in the car or stick his tongue down her throat on the sidewalk.

The apartment always seemed empty to her lately, even when Paul was home. She
was used to the noise of parties or at least to the sounds of Paul’s stereo equipment, but
he’d dragged everything but the record player and his worst pair of speakers into his
bedroom, which had once been a little office for both of them, with her computer set up
on a little desk and a chair in the corner and an end table where they charged their cell
phones. Claire went into his bedroom and thought about how different it looked now,
with his posters on the walls and the closet full of his clothes and the bed in the corner
that his friend Bergstrom had lent him. Claire went back to the living room and turned on
the TV and then turned it off. She tried to read but didn’t feel like holding up a book and
staring at its pages. She was terribly bored and decided to call Anders, who she often
thought of at strange, boring times. It felt good to find his number in her phone and to
watch his name blink in black print on the screen of her phone. She didn’t really
understand her relationship with Anders and she wouldn’t have called him a friend but
there was something in him that she felt close to and comfortable with. "Anders," she
said when he answered. Her voice came out in a loud rush and she realized she was
drunk. Warmth rushed down her neck and into her chest. "How are you?"

"I’m fine. I'm watching Vertigo. Have you seen it?"

"What is this business about the Devil?"

"Oh," he said, and laughed. "Yeah, that, never mind."

"Who is it? You said he was here?" She slid down in the couch until her feet were
far out in front of her on the carpet. "I could find him, you know. It's what I do. Sit
around on the computer or on the fucking phone finding things out. If we could find out his name we could look him up in the crim history database or in the sex offender list—"

"Hey," he said. "No, really, don't worry about it."

"You sounded creeped out on the phone."

"I misunderstood him."

"Do you remember who he was with?"

"Uh," Anders said. He remembered the Devil talking to somebody in Claire's kitchen but he couldn't remember what she looked like. "He had coffee."

"Coffee? He was the coffee guy?"

"It doesn't matter," Anders said.

"Motherfucker made coffee," she said.

"Don't worry about it," Anders said. Claire could hear the sound of a TV behind
him, the sound of something blowing up onscreen. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Oh," she said. "Stuff. I'm reading."

"Huh," Anders said. After a few seconds he said, "Well, have a good night."

"Yeah," she said. She hung up the phone and lifted herself back onto the couch and then let herself slide to the floor. She squeezed the phone in her right hand and wondered who else she could call. She drank another glass of rum and started thinking about how it was almost nine o’clock and about how she would have to go to bed in just a handful of hours. She hated falling asleep at night because as soon as she fell asleep she was waking up in the morning with a bomb going off in her head and a sour taste in her mouth. It was like some sort of nightmarish time travel, falling asleep in her warm dark room and waking up covered in thin sunlight, with fifteen minutes to pull on clothes and
boil water for coffee and get out the fucking front door. She started thinking about Paul and the smell of his stupid cologne and she wished he would come home right now and give her a reason to get up off the carpet. He had tight skin around his hips where most people, including her, had too much flab, and she wanted to run her hands around the bottom of the shirt he’d worn on his date. She wanted to shake her black hair around and she wanted him to stare at her. She wanted to make a show of how drunk she was so that she wouldn’t feel bad tomorrow about sleeping with him tonight. She wanted to do anything but go to bed alone, and she wanted to do anything but think about waking up tomorrow and driving to the Capitol Complex. She stood around the kitchen getting drunk on rum and gave up on Paul and was amazed when he came in through the front door. They talked for a while and he went to his room and started playing records with the door open. She stood in the hallway with a glass of rum and he made some joke that wasn’t really funny and she stepped inside and made her own joke and then felt awful, like she was full of something so bright and burning that it was searing her from the inside out. She sat on Paul's bed and leaned back against the wall and held her glass in both her hands. Paul looked at her and she looked at him and wouldn't look away and he came and sat next to her on the bed. She wondered how to go about this and decided that the best way was just to pull off his shirt. When they were finished she didn't want her drink anymore and Paul finished it for her. She ran her short nails over his chest and his neck and sighed and pressed her head against the wall and tried not to stare at the band posters hanging everywhere.
Anders didn't usually waste much time thinking about the state of his apartment, but with Marie inside it was impossible not to notice how trashy the place was. The white of the walls looked dingy and stained compared to the even tan of her skin, and the window above his desk looked filthy and opaque compared to the clear blue of her eyes. The one big room of his apartment was a narrow mess, and the ceilings were low, and the bathroom always smelled like stale water. Marie lived in a place where the carpet was thick and the oven and the microwave and the refrigerator were all the same gleaming black and where the ceilings were tall enough that you couldn’t reach them even if you jumped. Anders felt embarrassed every time she knocked on his front door, as if he were inviting her into his cardboard box or into his parents’ basement. He was 31 and he lived in a shithole.

"I’m sorry," he said. This was a Sunday night, and he and Marie were sitting on the couch in his living room, drinking vodka and watching a VHS tape of cable TV that Anders had recorded back in college, when he’d been able to afford cable in his apartment. They’d spent most of the evening of Blue Moons at the ninth bar on the Devil’s list, and Anders couldn’t get the taste of gin out of his mouth. When they got home he'd brushed his teeth even though she'd been in the kitchen mixing up the new drinks.

"Why?" she said. "What?"

"This place is horrible."
"Your apartment?" she said. She laughed and screwed up her face so that her thin eyebrows twisted up above her eyes. She was drunk and buoyant in such a way that she kept letting herself fall into him. He kept thinking it reminded him of something Jackie used to, but then he remembered it actually reminded him of a girl from high school, someone whose name he couldn't even remember. "I like it. It's got, you know, character or whatever."

"Is that a joke?"

"No, come on." She slapped his knee. Her voice was low but sharp and bright. Most people Anders knew slurred when they were drunk but Marie seemed to get clearer with every martini. "There’s something about this place."

"There's something about it, all right."

"I live in a tiny place. Do you know what my rent is each month? $775, because I live downtown. I'm not even supposed to hang anything on the walls because they're so thin that the nail will poke through to the apartment next door."

"Tell me about your audition," Anders said.

"Stupid." She pushed off his shoulder and let herself fall back into a pillow. It was dark in the apartment except for the TV, and blue light turned her face the color of ice or bright paper. "It was a mess."

"What went wrong?"

"Everything."

"Because if you figure out what went wrong you can figure out how to make the audition for the Russian thing even better."
"That play," she said, and snorted. "It’s not for a while. A couple weeks from now."

"That's no time at all," he said.

"The play is called The Apathetic Sisters of Moravia. It’s by some guy whose name I can’t pronounce. The Des Moines Theater Company's putting it on."

"Were you one of those kids in high school?" he said. "One of those drama kids?"

"What? No. Richard thinks it'll help my career. Like, it'll be exposure, you know? Like people with connections will be in the audience. There's this part for somebody my age with my figure, this Russian woman who comes to America to be a lawyer but ends up being a waitress and then a janitor and then a prostitute by the end of the play. Something like that."

"I can’t really see you as a waitress," Anders said. "Maybe a prostitute."

"What?" She kicked him in the leg and he almost spilled his drink. She grinned and in the dim light of the living room her teeth flashed like fangs. Anders wondered if he should offer to help her practice her lines, but she stood and went to the bathroom and then came back and stood over him and stripped off her shirt. She grinned and looked actually happy for once and Anders was confused but thought he should enjoy the moment. Usually Anders had a horrible time getting to sleep on his nights off but after they had sex Marie crawled into the couch and pulled him close enough that he could feel her breathing against his chest. He wanted to say something, to point out to her that she was actually staying the night, but he was afraid he'd ruin something and before too long his mind was lost, somewhere else, and he was asleep.
In the morning, he woke up to the smell of hot water and the loud rush of the shower. Marie had a photo shoot to get to by eleven, and after she left Anders wasn’t sure what to do with himself. The apartment was full of humidity and the smell of soap, and the rug in the bathroom was wet and shiny with Marie’s footprints. Anders wondered where she was and what she was wearing and if she was in front of a camera and if so if she was smiling or trying to look serious. She’d told him that she modeled things like skirts and tank tops and sweaters for department stores, and sat in cars looking stupid and happy for dealerships, and had once worn goth makeup and black feathery wings for the cover of the indie paper’s Halloween issue. Anders wished he would have asked to come along today. He could have stood at the edge of the shoot, in some old warehouse or in some studio space with bright lights on tripods, and when Marie kissed him afterward the photographers and their assistants would stare and wonder who he was.

A few nights later they went out together to a place called Hearts on the east side of town. It was set into a strip mall and the windows were tinted so dark that they might have been spray painted black. Marie asked him if he’d been there before and he hadn’t but the place was on the Devil’s list and so he said yes, he loved this bar, even though it looked like the kind of place he might have dragged someone out of in cuffs a few years back. Inside, they were both surprised to find leather booths and wood-paneled walls and blue lamps hanging from the ceiling. They sat in the back corner and drank Shoot the Moons, watery blue drinks that tasted fruity like pineapples and sugar but also salty.

"This is amazing," Marie said.
"What?"

"How do you know so many good bars? I’ve never even heard of this place. And you don’t seem like, you know, a real social person. I mean, you don’t seem like someone who goes to bars very much. Is it true that all you cops are drunks when you're not at work?"

"Usually we drink in the cruisers."

"Come on," she said, "Did you used to go out all the time or something?"

He picked up his martini glass and tried to swallow the drink in a single gulp. The booze burned the back of his tongue and the back of his throat and he almost coughed it up all over the table and all over Marie. "I can’t remember," he said. "Maybe, I don’t know, Claire brought me here or something."

"Oh, right. Yeah, right, cause Claire knows all the hip places in town. Claire probably hasn't even ever left the fucking Station. She wouldn't be able to tell you another good bar even if she wanted to."

"You don’t think so?"

"Come on, Anders. Claire’s one of those people who finds one little place they think is cool and they latch onto it like a leach." She made claws of her fingers and gripped the tabletop. "She’s so desperate to be hip, you know. I mean, why do you think she throws those parties practically every weekend?"

Anders said, "Maybe she’s lonely?"

"How do you even know her?"

"You know her job? She had to interview a hotel clerk, and I was the guy."

"You met at her job."
"My job. Sort of. It took place on the phone. My manager gave her my number. And then, I don't know, we just hit it off. I told her how I used to be a cop and she called me when she had to write a report about that, and we met for lunch."

"Lame," Marie. "Anyway, whatever. you seem to know all these great places around town. It’s just surprising."

"Yeah," Anders said. "Well." He slipped a hand into his pocket and felt the list the Devil had given him. He’d unfolded and folded it enough that he was starting to worry that the creases might rip. That night after he dropped Marie off at home and before he drove to the hotel he stopped at his apartment and tucked the list into his sock drawer. On his way to work he imagined leaving the list in his jeans and accidentally running it through the washer and felt like he might be sick all over the steering wheel and his own pants.

Anders spent that night at work smoking pot in the bathroom and thinking about how very lucky he was. Things in his life had started going well for the first time in years. Things in his life had started going so well that he wondered if it was for the best that his marriage had disintegrated.

The next morning, after he shuffled around from behind the Overniter’s front desk and out into the parking lot, he turned up the radio and drove west on Grand Avenue, toward Black Hole donut. He left the windows down and chilled morning air rushed over his face and down into the collar of his polo shirt. Anders loved the smell of the air in the morning and was happy for a reason to stay awake and on the road and to keep smelling it. The parking lot outside Black Hole Donut was empty except for a shiny red Volvo that Anders recognized from his first visit. A neon OPEN sign burned in the window and
Anders went inside and the Devil stood in front of the donut display case and smiled. Anders had forgotten how thin the Devil was, and how paunchy he was in the stomach. He was dressed in a black button shirt and a white apron folded over at the waist and his eyes were intensely bright behind the blue lenses of a pair of sunglasses. Anders sat at the end of the counter, where he’d sat the last time, and the Devil placed a donut in front of him on a paper towel. It was white cake covered in pink frosting, with little blue-black gooey chunks around the edge.

"Black licorice," the Devil said. "**Gratis.** It’s called The Love Raft."

"Looks tasty."

"How’s life?"

"It’s great," Anders said. He picked up the donut and the smell of the licorice almost gagged him. He didn’t like black licorice but took a bite anyway and was surprised at the sharp sensations in his mouth. The Devil left and came back with a mug of coffee that smelled like fresh beans and clear water and the feeling when Anders woke up after being asleep for too long.

"You’ve been using the list," the Devil said.

"Oh yeah. I mean, that's why I'm here. It's kickass."

"Of course it is."

The coffee steamed away in its cup, and when Anders leaned over it he saw his own reflection, shimmery and wavy at the edges. "Actually, it’s working sort of too well. It’s freaking me out a little."

"So you're telling me Marie is too happy with you?"

"Well, yes. In the sense that it's . . . disarming."
"What do you mean?"

"Just," Anders said. He didn’t know what to say and picked up the coffee and burned his mouth with it. "I don’t know. What are you doing with this donut shop? Why are making donuts in Des Moines? This doesn’t make any sense."

"What do you mean by that?" the Devil said. "It’s important to know exactly what you mean when you talk."

'It doesn’t seem very evil."

"Nobody buys a donut because it’s a healthy breakfast option. People with heart disease and weight problems and diabetes and out-of-control blood sugar come in here and sit at the counter and you can see the guilt in their faces when they order a half dozen. So don’t tell me it’s not evil." He went to the coffee machine and poured another cup, for himself. "But I’m not really interested in evil," he said. "Not in the way you’re thinking."

"Um," Anders said.

"I’m intrigued by human freedom. Interesting circumstances. Making things happen that are wonderful and exciting but that wouldn’t happen without some help. It’s a very boring world you live in, really. Without somebody to nudge things along, boredom would carry the day."

"Cheers," Anders said, and picked up his donut. He felt carried away by the moment.

"And the donut shop, it seems weird, yes, granted, but this is just one place I exist. I am just one instance of me. This instance of me, okay, is standing here having this conversation with you, but another instance of me is over in London right now working
as a very effective television producer, and another one is painting portraits in Sydney and another one is at an expensive massage parlor in Hamburg and there’s probably going to be some oral sex soon. Which I can sort of experience from here. It’s hard to explain."

"Okay," Anders said. He looked down at his shoes and thought about dropping off the stool and to the floor.

"I’m existing as much as I can," the Devil said.

Anders put down the donut and leaned on the counter. He could hear the drip of the coffee pot and the hum of some appliance he couldn’t identify. "Isn’t this place kind of dead? Shouldn’t people be buying donuts now?" He looked down at his watch, which was something else Jackie had given him, one of the few things she'd given him after things started going wrong. He'd changed the battery three or four times and was often surprised the watch still worked. "It’s . . . most people are going to work now."

"Sure," the Devil said. He took a long drink of his coffee and then set the cup down on the countertop with a clunk. "But it takes time. Businesses lose money for the first few months. This place is dead now, but by next summer it’ll be the hip destination for kids looking for food after the bars close. We won’t even be open mornings by then. This will be a purely nocturnal establishment."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Oh, yeah," the Devil said. "Sure, yeah. I have a pretty good idea of what's coming. These unusual donut recipes and the excellent coffee and the half-assed retro theme in here will start luring in pretentious people who want to experience something everyone else is missing by shopping at Krispy Kreme."
"Huh."

"Or for example, if I wanted to tell you about what's coming up for you, I'd tell you that your hotel's going to be robbed."

"The Overniter?"

"Don't worry, you won't get shot or anything like that."

"Who's going to rob it?"

"Doesn't matter."

"You know I used to be a cop."

"I don't usually do this," the Devil said. "But you're an interesting case. Most people I work with want suitcases full of money or they want to get an erection again or, you know, I had this guy last May who wanted a suitcase full of coke to appear in his basement. Your friend Neil wanted to sign his band with a record label."

"No shit?"

"You want Marie to love you, and really it has a lot more to do with lust and a lot of other nasty feelings that you haven't considered, but it's at least interesting."

"Nasty feelings?"

"You have an imperfect understand of a lot of important things," the Devil said.

#

Anders called Marie on his way home, and then again while he stood in the kitchen scrambling eggs. The apartment was too cold and the heat rising off the oven
made him want to close his eyes and stand there swaying side to side. He called Marie again, and again, and finally she answered and said, "What’s wrong?"

"I was thinking maybe we could go to dinner."

"I’m busy," she said. There was a clatter in the background, and the noise of too many people having hushed conversations. "Really busy. I mean, I only answered because you called so many times."

"Do you have a shoot?"

"No," she said. "No, nope." She sighed and waited a second and said, "You know Albert O’Hare’s?"

"That Mexican place?" He poked at the eggs and they flopped around in the pan and he thought about how good a burrito would taste. "With the commercials with the talking tequila bottles."

"Uh, yeah."

"Yeah, I've never eaten there, but it's one of those goofy places, right?"

"Goofy?"

"Well, yeah, they’re all wearing green and red all the time. Have you ever seen it? It looks like Christmas is going on—"

"Never mind," Marie said.

"Did you want to eat there or something?"

"I’ll see you later," she said.

"I work tonight."
"I'll visit you," she said. She’d never offered to visit him at work before and he’d never asked her to. He almost dropped the spatula. Anders stood there listening to the phone until he realized that Marie had already hung up.

That night he wore gray pants and a blue shirt to work, because Marie had told him once that the colors brought out his eyes, which he sometimes forgot were even blue. It was Friday night and Anders knew the hotel might be busy and it might be dead and that by three in the morning at least three drunks would have come in and at least one of them would probably have vomited in the bathroom in the lobby. He started thinking about what the Devil had said. He thought about calling the Ankeny police but he was a joke there and anyway they'd just tell him to call the Des Moines cops. They would ask him where his information came from and send somebody out and then nothing would happen and he'd look like an idiot. So he called Neil instead. The phone rang all the way to voicemail, and Anders said, "Neil. It’s Me. Anders. If you get a chance, why don't you stop by the hotel." He hated leaving voicemails because he felt too self conscious. He hated leaving voicemails because if he suddenly burped or mispronounced a word or called someone the wrong name there would be no way to take it back. He said, "I have this feeling the place might get robbed tonight."

He sat on the edge of the front desk and kicked his feet around. The lobby doors were glass and he could see the lamps out in the parking lot and the headlights and brake lights of the cars on the street beyond that. He thought of the weird phone call he’d had with Claire the other night, and he wondered if she drank too much. He realized that their meeting at the Russian Tea Room was probably the only time he’d ever seen her without a glass of something alcoholic. He remembered the book she’d loaned him and it was still
beneath the counter, beneath a plastic case of pens. He opened to the middle and started reading and the writing was thick and heavy like soup and Anders wasn’t much for reading anyway and when the lobby doors squeaked open he actually sighed with relief. Marie walked in, smiling, and Anders couldn’t believe it. She wore a fuzzy gray hoodie zipped up the front because it was October now and she was always cold except for when she was standing in direct sunlight or in the shower in Anders’s apartment.

"This place is dead," she said.

"It's midnight. Most people who need a room are already here," he said. "Most of my job at night is listening to complaints from the people who are already here."

"I fucking hate customers," Marie said.

"Most of the time I just watch TV and make sure nobody jumps in the pool."

"So you have a few minutes," she said.

"I have all night."

"You don’t have to just stand behind this desk."

"Well, no," he said, not getting it.

The supply closet was cramped, even after they rolled the maintenance cart out into the lobby. Anders wedged himself in at the bottom and Marie managed to squeeze in on top of him after she grabbed a broom hook for support. The closet smelled like dust and plastic and cleaner, but if he kept his face close enough to her hair all he could smell was her face wash and strawberry shampoo. It was hot in the closet with the door shut and the movement of her on top of him. When they finished they managed to find her shirt beneath her foot and then they managed to stand and opened the door and fell out into the lobby. The TV sounded too loud, like maybe somebody had turned up the
volume, and then Anders noticed the guy standing behind the front desk. He had on a flimsy blue ski mask and a windbreaker and he was wiggling the cash register around on the countertop. Anders opened his mouth and Marie didn’t say anything and the guy behind the register looked over and jumped back a little.

"Hey," he said, "whoa. Whoa, whoa, what the fuck?"

"Oh my god," Marie said.

"Unless you work here," the guy said. "Do you work here?"

Anders took a few steps and wondered if this guy was the Devil but he was too short and differently shaped. "Did someone send you?"

"What?" the robber said. "Come here." He pulled something out from beneath the counter and it took Anders way too long to realize that it was a pistol. The gun looked too little and too dark and too dull, like a little rock. It was something cheap and probably bought form a pawn shop. It kept waving itself in the guy’s hand, back and forth and sort of up and down too, like a snake, and finally Anders realized that he was supposed to step toward the counter.

"Did the Devil send you here?" Anders said. There was a sort of buzzing feeling in his head, in his nose. He felt calm and distracted in a way that was familiar and yet unrecognizable. He stepped forward and realized he felt like he was pulling someone over again, in the middle of the night. He felt that he should be aware of his weapon and of his cuffs and of his radio.

"How do you open this thing?" The robber lifted the front of the cash register and then dropped it back onto the counter. There was a sharp clunk.

"Who robs a hotel?" Anders said.
"Open the fucking register, man," the robber said. He dragged the cash register across the countertop. The key was on the shelf beneath the counter, somewhere near the copy of *Cinema Fantastique*, and he didn’t see any reason why he shouldn’t pull it out and pop the drawer open. He had to duck down to look for the key because he’d knocked it around when he put the book away, but by then the robber lost interest because he noticed the floor safe beneath Anders’s feet. The safe was open because the hotel was always open and there was always somebody behind the desk and nobody ever bothered to shut the top or spin the dial. The cash bag huddled in the little hole in the carpet like some sort of big robbery spider. The robber bent down and Anders noticed his untied boots and then turned the key in the cash register’s drawer with a *ding!* and there was a pathetic amount of cash inside, maybe eighty dollars and a mess of credit card receipts.

The robber stood up and the cash bag was already half unzipped and the corners of twenties were poking out. Anders didn’t look in the bag very often but he knew that the manager only took it to the bank every few days. The robber tore the zipper the rest of the way open and then looked up over Anders’s shoulder and said, "Where’d she go?"

"What?"

"That girl, that blonde, where the fuck?"

"Oh," he said. He turned around and Marie was gone.

"Go get her," the robber said. When he talked his lips moved around too much inside the mouth hole of the ski mask, like maybe the hole was too small. Anders could see a string of spit between the man’s teeth and a chip in one of the incisors. "Go get her, man."
"What?" Anders said. He tried to focus on the ski mask but couldn’t. Anders tried to concentrate but he felt like his mind was spinning out in all directions, too fast, like he was drunk and too relaxed or high on coffee. The robber hit him in the arm with the pistol but his heart wasn’t in it. Anders said, "I don’t know where she went."

"Oh, fuck it," the robber said, and threw himself up onto the counter. It was probably supposed to be graceful but one of his feet caught on the desk and the other kicked Anders in the chest. Anders had an impulse to grab the boots by their laces. The robber dropped to the floor on the other side and looked at the lobby door on the left and then at the pool room door on the right and then at the stairwell ahead of him, open and empty between the elevator doors and the humming Pepsi machine, and Anders suddenly understood that he was going after Marie with a gun. Anders ran around the counter without thinking about what he was going to do and so when the robber turned around Anders kicked him in the ass instead of in the knee or in the stomach. The guy stared for a second, annoyed, as if Anders had just bumped into him on the sidewalk or stepped on his foot at a party. Anders thought that he should be raging with adrenaline right now and breathing hard and maybe even growling but he couldn’t get over the absurdity of this whole situation. This was the kind of thing that happened in movies that played on network television just before midnight. This was the kind of thing that never happened in real life and that Anders always sort of hoped would happen. The robber turned and jumped as if to jog toward the stairway and Anders jumped and grabbed his knees. There was a shuffle and a mess of movement. There was a dull impact and a thump and then something sharp and wet all over Anders’s forehead and he wondered if he’d been shot and then realized he’d been hit in the head with the gun. The robber kicked him in the
face and then in the shoulder. Anders grabbed at the guy’s pants and was amazed to realize they were sweatpants. The fabric stretched in his hands and Anders couldn’t look away and the guy kicked him in the shoulder again and Anders punched him in the thigh. Anders punched him in the thigh again and then got to his feet and punched him in the crotch. The robber groaned and collapsed and looked at Anders. Anders grabbed the stocking cap and pulled it off and expected someone familiar inside but found someone he’d never seen before.

"My fucking balls," the robber said.

Anders shook his head.

"Seriously, man." He waved the gun around and pointed it and clicked the trigger a few times. "You're fucking lucky this thing isn't loaded."

They both knelt on the carpet, panting. Anders thought this was probably the most interesting moment he would ever have in the lobby of the Overniter. He thought of the last interesting moment he’d had, in the closet with Marie, and of the first interesting moment he’d had, years before, when a drunk in the lot had driven his truck into the west wall.

"Hey, look," the robber said. "How about I just go grab that cash on the counter and walk out?"

Anders didn’t say anything, so the robber stood and his knee popped and he hobbled across the lobby and started messing with the cash register. There was a little metallic chime as the drawer slid open. "I gotta know," Anders said. "Just tell me, did the Devil have something to do with this?"
"Are you some kind of religious guy?" the robber said. The robber finished stuffing loose bills into the pocket of his sweat pants and then picked up the cash bag and a bundle of money flapped out onto the counter. He scooped it up and walked across the lobby, toward the door, with his feet moving in a sloppy, looping way. He looked relaxed and satisfied and ready to be done with this hotel lobby, and Anders imagined him walking down the street with the bag of money cradled in his arms like a baby or a small cat. Anders thought it was funny for a second and he thought he might as well try to tackle the guy. He’d been working here for four years now and he was finally being robbed and he was letting the guy who had kicked him in the face and hit him with a gun walk out the door with probably a few hundred dollars. Anders ran almost every day, jogging slowly down the streets around his apartment, and now he was a motherfucking panther streaking across the lobby. Blood had trickled through his hair and down the left side of his nose and into his mouth, and from the TV there was the sound of a mooing cow. The robber had his hand on the glass of the lobby door and Anders imagined shoving him through with a violent shattering but when he collided with him the door swung open hard and they both fell out onto the sidewalk. The door swung open so hard that it swung back and smacked Anders on the ankle. The pain shot up his leg and he felt so overjoyed to be filled with adrenaline again that he nearly screamed. It was one in the morning and the sidewalk was empty and the parking lot was almost empty and the street on the other side of the lot was peaceful with the slow rush of late-night weekend traffic. The robber kicked at Anders and then kneed him and then scrambled to get away but Anders grabbed at the knee of his sweatpants and he stumbled. Anders grabbed the guy’s windbreaker and it went limp in his hands as the robber stripped it off. The bag of money
fell to the ground and jumped away and started to run. His untied boots slapped against
the pavement of the parking lot and kicked around gravel and Anders could have caught
him easily but he stood on the sidewalk with the bag of money between his foot and then
sat back down again. His neck and shoulders and the spot on his head where he’d been
smacked with the pistol felt like they were glowing red and like if he poked them too
much they would burst and something like rainbow Skittles would fall out. Inside, he
looked for Marie in the pool room and in both elevators and then in the hallways of the
second and third floors. When he got back to the lobby he noticed that the red voicemail
light on the lobby phone was blinking, but the string of robotic voice prompts was so
long and his fingers were shaking now and he fucked up the passkey so many times that
he didn’t even hear the message before the parking lot filled with police cars. The first
one popped up onto the sidewalk and its red and blue lights flashed through the glass
doors and turned the lobby into a carnival ride. Anders thought the people in 12 and 126
and 130 must be suddenly wetting their pants and running to throw the bolts and chains
on their doors. The lobby door swung open and a cop ran in with his hand on his gun and
Anders started waving his arms because he didn’t know what to say. Three more cops ran
in and Anders noticed rumpled, sleepy, drunk-looking people in the hallways. Time
slowed down and then just when Anders got used to it being slow it sped up. Later there
was an ambulance and stinging peroxide and a bandage stuck to the top of his forehead.
The hallways were full of people now and the cops tried to keep everyone back while
Anders told them about the ski mask and the money bag, but Marie broke through
anyway and ran up to him and grabbed his head. Her eyes were brighter and fuller than
he’d ever seen them. She usually looked so bored and distracted. He thought it would be
a good idea if they could go back into the supply closet and have sex again as soon as possible.

"Oh my god," she said, "oh Anders, your face."

He looked at himself in the glass of the main door and the left side of his face had turned puffy and dark. He looked like he’d caught a baseball with his eye.

"I called the police," she said. "I’m sorry but I just ran up and knocked on all the doors and finally somebody let me in—"

"You were here?" one of the cops said. He had a notebook and a can of orange Slice in his hands. "Did you get a look at the suspect?"

"No," Marie said, but the cops wanted to talk to her anyway. Anders walked across the lobby and heard a soft buzzing somewhere near the front desk and realized that his cell phone was vibrating. He picked it up and Neil was on the other end.

"Why the fuck are there cops all over the lobby?"

"Just come in," Anders said.

"I’m sort of all messed up."

"Oh," he said. "We got robbed."

The cops tried to keep Neil out but he slipped past them. He grinned and looked all droopy in the face and he said, "How the hell did you know this place was gonna be robbed?"

"I didn’t."

"I am high as hell, man," Neil whispered. He grabbed Anders’s shoulder and said, "The message, though. You left me that message, right? I'm not having some kind of hallucination here?"
The notebook cop came over and said, "What’s he talking about?"

"Uh," Anders said. Neil looked at him through falling eyelids and Anders said, "Hey, listen, I used to be an officer."

"For us?"

"It’s okay," Neil said. "I work here. I’ve been playing in a band. At the Mews downtown."

"And your name?" the cop said.

"Hey." Neil turned to Anders and said, "What’s the maintenance cart doing out of the closet?"

"Sir?" the cop said.

"Who’s the blonde?" Neil said.

"That’s Marie," Anders said, and he felt a sudden burst of pride in his lungs. Marie was poking the soda machine in its diet cream soda button and she looked frazzled and brave and thin and bright. "That’s the woman I was talking about. You know, the one who doesn't like dinner."

"Oh, no, yeah?" He grinned and punched Anders in the shoulder. "That’s the girl I sent you to the Devil about?"

"Sir," the cop said, "I’ll need your name."

"I’ll be right back," Anders said. He slipped behind the counter and picked up the phone and tried to look suddenly busy while the cop interviewed Neil. Marie came over and stood beside him and shuffled her feet around. Todd the Manager showed up and slapped Anders on the back and Anders could only think about how much he’d been slapped around tonight. Todd the Manager told him he was incredible and gave him the
next week off and Anders could only think about how the man had yelled at him the summer before for leaving the windows open in the break room. The police asked Anders why he’d been so sure the hotel would be robbed and Todd raised an eyebrow and Anders said he hadn’t been sure at all. Neil had escaped by this point and the notebook-and-orange-Slice cop asked if he’d said he’d had a bad feeling about the night and Anders said he had. His old job came up and Anders tried to work past it but the notebook cop remembered the story, the cop getting pulled over doing 50 over and then getting suspended and making a fuss, and everything turned into a joke that Anders wasn't sure was funny. He gave them a description of the robber's face, what he could remember, and then told them he was exhausted and needed to sleep.

When the cops let them go Anders and Marie walked outside it turned out Neil was waiting in his car, and he took them to the White Owl down the streets and bought them drinks for the twenty minutes before the lights came up and the bar shut down. Everyone was giddy and crazy with the stories of the evening and at Marie’s apartment Anders took the stairs two at a time. Inside, they fell into her couch and then crawled to her bed and she scratched at his shoulders and moaned so loudly when she came that Anders thought the neighbors must have heard. They lay in bed with the kitchen lights on and the sheet thrown to the floor and Anders could not believe how electric and excited and satisfied he felt in his shoulders and in his stomach and in the part of his head where he’d been smacked with the gun.

#  #  #
Claire hated reading research requests and hated having to sort through disabilities catalogs and job certification requirements and she had a pages-long roster in her head of good distractions available on the internet. She worked her way down from the New York Times through three blogs and then the Washington Post and listened for the hollow clack of her boss’s heels in the hallway or for the ding! of the elevator and she opened the front page of the Des Moines Register and saw a grainy photo of the Overniter with the headline written in bold black over the top: Hotel Thief Tackled by Night Clerk. She read the story and could not believe that something interesting had actually happened in town. She read the story and could not believe that something interesting had actually happened to someone she knew. She walked fast down the hall, past little cubicles full of transcriptionists with headset cords trailing down to their feet and counselors with framed diplomas and old photographs hanging above their heads. In the bathroom she moved from stall to stall and then sat on the sink trying to catch a signal before remembering that she was in the basement of a massive concrete building. She took the stairs to second and tried the bathroom there and was terrified that the bureau chief or one of the senior counselors or one the catty old secretaries would walk in and ask her what the hell she was doing. Claire bit her nails and looked at herself in the mirror, all pink bags under her eyes and wet-looking black hair, then turned on the faucet for the noise of the water. Anders answered and she said his name and her voice bounced off the gray tile walls and sounded too high and too loud. She remembered their last
conversation, drunk and awkward. She imagined the bureau chief walking in, awful gray curled hair bouncing around her shoulders. She said, "I just read about the Overniter—"

"Claire," he said. "Hey, I was just asleep."

"What happened?"

"I got the shit knocked out of me by some guy with an unloaded gun and really bad eyebrows." He yawned. "But everything's fine."

"This is crazy."

"You know, the funny thing is, the Devil told me this would happen."

"The Devil told you that?"

"Yeah, you remember, yesterday—"

"Anders," she said. "What is this guy's real name?"

"I think it's the Devil," he said. "I'm sort of, do you think he had something to do with it?"

"Anders—"

"Like maybe he sent the guy," Anders said.

"Ask the cops. Don't you still have any cop friends who can shake him up?"

"I didn't really leave the job a popular guy."

"But they could check it out."

"He wasn’t there or anything. It's not like there could be any proof. He just predicted that it was going to happen."

"Anders," she said, "He's not psychic."

"That’s what I’m saying."

"That maybe he set the thing up."
"No, no." He yawned again. Claire couldn't stand how calm he sounded. "You don’t really understand, Claire."

"I don’t understand?"

"Why would he send somebody in to rob the place of a few hundred dollars?"

Claire walked back to the sink and the mirror. Under the fluorescent bathroom lights her black hair looked dyed and fake like a cheap wig. The left hinge of her plastic glasses looked busted and loose and the skin beneath her eyes was the maroon of some of her bath towels at home.

"Tell you what," she said. "Let's just go out to this café or whatever you said he has—"

"Black Hole Donut."

"I’ll pick you up."

"It's nine in the morning!"

"I know!" she said. "Jesus, Anders. What the hell is wrong with you? Aren’t you interested in the least about finding out what he had to do with this?"

"I've been asleep for a half hour."

"We can talk about Marie," she said. "You’re still trying to hook up with her, right?"

"She spent the night."

"Oh," Claire said

"Yeah, she was there. When everything happened."

"Really," she said. "Well, congratulations."

"Thank you," Anders said.
She left the bathroom and felt strange and loose, like her legs were made out of rubber or clay. The secretary’s desk on second was empty and so were the hallways and the elevator. She went back to her cubicle and when she sat in her chair the springs inside creaked. She had cutouts from magazines and old postcards and little photographs taped and tacked to her wall, and there were three different photos of her with Paul: one taken at Quad-X, with him sitting on the counter in his ripped jeans and a band t-shirt and Claire looking out of place in her work khakis and a black shirt and her green jacket; one taken in their kitchen, during a party, with tumblers of rum and grinning sloppy people all around; and one taken at the City Park during the last Fourth of July, both of them sitting close on a blanket with a Coke bottle full of nine-dollar merlot between them, and you’d never know she’d just broken up with him five weeks ago. It was ridiculous to keep the pictures on the wall but nobody came down to her office anyway. If somebody in the agency or somewhere else in the government wanted to talk to her they folded up their thoughts into a little electronic paper airplane and sailed it off through email and into her inbox. She had three open research requests to finish and a file organization project she’d been putting off for weeks but she kept thinking about Anders and the robbery and Marie. She looked up Black Hole Donut on the internet and found the address but no website. She called Marie but Marie didn’t answer. She thought about calling Paul but knew that he would answer and she wouldn’t know what to say without being able to see his face. She emailed her boss and told her she was driving to West Des Moines to interview somebody with a web design company about the accessibility of the studio, and then she stood and pulled on her jacket and got the hell out of the building before her boss could reply. She left through the stairwell in the corner, which dumped her out into the open
grassy lot to the east of the building. It was hot for October and painfully sunny and the light cut into her eyes and her head swam and she walked to her car with her head down and told herself that she would not drink tonight or would at least pick up a decent pair of sunglasses.

Rush hour was over and she drove away from the Capitol Complex and down Grand Avenue and into the slummy edge of downtown. Quad-X Records was nothing more than a grubby window front and a painted wooden door that was propped open today with an industrial fan. The City had just recently decided to pump money and paint into this neighborhood and rename it The East Village and so shiny new green signs hung from every light pole and stop sign but the buildings still looked derelict and rotting and the gutters were still full of fast food cups and wadded-up hamburger wrappers and empty cigarette packs. There were three cars parked against the sidewalk and Claire could not believe that even that many people needed to buy records at 9:30 in the morning. She slipped inside and the little record store seemed suddenly tight and claustrophobic but the noise of the fan covered everything and Paul didn’t look up from behind the counter. She slipped behind a rack of used CDs and crouched down and pretended to flip through a row of Led Zeppelin and Lynard Skynard. She felt suddenly sick, tight in the throat, and her heart was jumping around but she made herself stand and walk to the front. Paul was talking to one of his friends who she recognized, a guy named Bergstrom, who also worked at the store. Paul looked up and was surprised enough to see her that he smiled.

"You didn’t come home last night," Claire said.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I stayed at a friend’s place."
"Oh," she said.

Bergstrom said, "You writing something for the government about this, Claire?"

Claire thought about telling him to fuck off but then just stared at him until he looked away. She looked down at the floor and it was red and scuffed and had to be twenty years old. It had to be thirty years old. It was probably older than her or Paul. "I’m going to Black Hole Donut," she said. "Do you know it? To see this guy who calls himself the Devil."

"The Devil?"

"Anders says he’s been to our place. At that last party."

"Anders," Paul said.

Claire ran a hand through her hair and waited for Paul to ask if he could come but he told her to be safe and she walked back out to her car. She felt miserably alert and also miserably tired and she couldn’t decide which of the city’s horrible radio stations to listen to. She drove west and west and west and Black Hole Donut was a squat little building on the left side of the road. She walked in and was happily shocked by the thick black countertop and the vintage bar stools and the smells of coffee and sugar in the air. The place was mostly empty, except for a few old men scattered around with newspapers and mugs, and Claire took a seat in the corner. The man behind the counter looked up at her and smiled and Claire recognized him from her last party. He walked to her and splayed his hands on the countertop and she noticed how different they were from Paul’s, how slender and tanned.

"Coffee?" he said.

"Do you know who I am?"
"No coffee?" he said. "And yes, I know who you are. I was at your party last month."

"Who did you come with?"

"You know Rebecca Annear? I came with her. She told me it'd be a great time."

The name sounded familiar, but Claire couldn’t quite think of the woman’s face. She’d been throwing parties for the past couple years and she knew most of the regulars by now but sometimes people brought people, and sometimes those people brought people. "Anders says you knew the hotel was going to be robbed."

He snorted and looked over his shoulder. "Maybe we should go back to my office."

"He said you knew that somebody was going to rob the Overniter. And he also said you’re the Devil."

"Well, I am the Devil," he said, and leaned in low. Claire could see light bouncing off his head beneath the thin spot in his hair. "And I did let Anders know about the robbery, but I didn’t send anyone over there, if that’s what you’re wondering."

Claire imagined him on a phone in some dark back room, ordering some suburban junkie to go rob the Overniter. "So you're telling me I should believe the Devil is a forty year-old balding guy who runs a donut shop in Des Moines."

"Why not?" he said. "I’ve lived plenty of other lives. Right now there are gorgeous aspects of myself all over the world, doing glamorous things. One of us might as well start up a donut shop in the middle of nowhere."
Claire crossed her ankles below the stool and gripped the edge of the counter. She imagined Paul sitting next to her and wished he was here instead of at fucking Quad-X Records.

"What I really do, Claire, is help people out. I help them get what they want. Your friend Anders wanted Marie to be interested in him and I told him how to make it happen."

"This is sick," Claire said.

The Devil turned away and walked to the donut case behind the counter. Sunlight blazed in through the windows and reflected off the brass pipes visible in the ceiling and created phantoms on the lenses of her glasses. The Devil poured coffee into a dark mug and placed it and a chocolate donut in front of Claire.

"No thanks," she said.

"Claire," the Devil said. "You look horrible."

Then she snorted and looked down at the coffee and saw her own reflection, wavy and watery. She wrapped her hand around the mug and it was warm in her hand and when she breathed, steam rolled up into her eyes. The feeling was so soft and warm that she nearly moaned.

"So what," she said, "do I sell you my soul for breakfast?"

"It’s gratis."

"Thank you," she said, and meant it. She lifted the donut and bit it. The frosting was cherry and smooth and she said, "Oh. Oh."

"You can see why this place will be popular soon," the Devil said.
Claire swallowed part of the donut and said, "So what are you going to offer me? What are you going to help me get?"

"Nothing," he said. "I can’t do anything for you."

"Yeah? Why’s that?"

"Because you have no idea what you want."

"Ah," Claire said. She bit off another chunk of the donut and wrapped both hands around the coffee mug and felt the heat sink into her palm. She thought about Paul back at the record shop and then about Paul at the park over the Fourth of July. She thought about moving to Des Moines six years ago. She’d graduated from college with a degree in English that had got her jobs at Starbucks and then Video Warehouse and then, finally, with the State. She’d been so intimidated by the Capitol Building and the State Library and the Judicial Building and the State Patrol cars parked all around. She thought about meeting Paul the first time at the Station and about having sex with him in his apartment a week later and then a year later behind a group of trees at the edge of Gray’s Lake. She thought about the first parties they’d hosted together and about all the times they’d slipped into the bathroom or into their bedroom to kiss each other or grope each other and to fall into bed. She thought about all the times they’d slipped into her bedroom or his, now that they slept alone, and about how many times they’d slept together anyway. The coffee was still very hot in her hands and the warmth was in her eyes. She realized she was going to cry and she almost choked on the donut. Her face became very wet very quickly and when she looked up the Devil was staring out the window behind her. She could see the future now, the six-months future, and she saw herself sitting on the sink in the kitchen of her empty apartment, the cuba libre gone warm in her hand, Paul’s jacket
gone from the hook next to the door and his boots gone from the mat and his band posters and speakers and his piles of clothes and his coffee can of change and his records and CDs gone from his bedroom. She could see the flat carpet of his empty bedroom and the way shadows would creep around the walls and she could imagine the ringing hollow noise the room would make when she shut the door. She thought about Paul’s fat hands and about the highly interesting and highly-sexed life she was supposed to be living. She looked up and the Devil still wasn’t looking at her but she could see herself reflected in the glass donut case, all black hair and red eyes and shining cheekbones. The coffee mug seemed stuck in her hand and so she took it as she made her way to the door. She clicked the remote unlock six times and then climbed into the Jetta and turned off the radio and collapsed against the steering wheel. The thought of swiping her ID badge at the side door or of sitting back in the creaking chair in her cubicle made her feel like driving her car off the 6th Street bridge, but still she got all the way back to the Capitol Complex before she realized she couldn’t possibly go back to work. She parked anyway and found Anders’s number in her phone and when he answered she asked if she could come over. She had never been to his apartment before and he had to be asleep still but he gave her directions, sounding dumbfounded. She parked at the edge of his lot and stared out her windshield at the chain-link fence and the trees on the other side and the dingy lot of the used-car dealership across the street. Claire went inside and Anders answered the door in ripped gray pants and a white t-shirt with a faded picture of a tennis racket on the front. His short hair stood in clumps and his eyes were red with sleep. She slipped past him and looked at the single long room of his apartment, at the little kitchen jutting off at one end,
at the little television playing a video without volume. She dropped onto the couch. He shut the door and offered her a glass of orange juice.

Claire sat on the couch with her glass of orange juice while Anders showered. The bathroom was a little closet on the other side of the kitchen and the noise of the water was heavy and wet and made her feel like maybe she was on the edge of a pool or in the dense foliage of some woods. She’d imagined Anders as the kind of guy who would own a cat, a lithe little black cat, but there was no cat in the apartment and no dog and not even a fish tank. There was a rack of DVDs against the wall opposite her, and a stack of more DVDs and VHS tapes with peeling labels stacked in the TV stand. There was a computer on a desk beneath a window and a lamp in the corner that looked like it had cost $8 at Target. Anders came out of the shower looking damp and uncomfortable in a fresh polo shirt and a pair of jeans. The clothes clung to him and she noticed the shape of his body, usually hidden away. He looked younger now, with his hair flat on his head and his skin pink.

"What do you do here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what is it you do in this apartment? What do you do when you're not at the hotel and not at my place and not with Marie?"

"Nothing," he said. "I live. I don't have a hobby, if that's what you're asking."

"It is," she said.
It was still too early for lunch but not too early for coffee. Claire watched Anders wander around the living room with his hair stuck to his head and his shirt sticking to his shoulders and she wondered what he would say if she asked him to have sex with her. She thought that was probably a bad kind of thought to get stuck on so she got him out of the apartment and they settled into her car. She turned on the air and some music and pulled out of the lot.

"This is nice," he said. "The seats might be leather, though."

"I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry. I'm just, something about pulling over cars for four years, it gives you a feel of what makes a really nice vehicle."

"So this isn't a really nice vehicle?"

"It's lovely," he said. "You should get in my car."

She drove downtown and when she saw the gold dome of the Capitol Building glittering on the horizon she felt anxiety creep into her shoulders. They drove through the East Village and past Quad-X Records and they parked outside her favorite coffee shop and she pumped nickels into the meter.

"Black Cat Coffee?"

"Hell yes, Black Cat Coffee," Claire said, and lead them inside. Anders looked around like a little kid and she wondered how he could have never been here. Everybody she knew had been here and Claire herself had been coming here as long as she'd lived in Des Moines. Black Cat Coffee was the place to go on a Saturday night when it was still too early to start drinking but not too early to be downtown. It was a single long room with blue walls hung with photos and bad paintings and old signs and strings of colored
lights. Claire knew some of the baristas and some of them were regulars at her parties. She only sort-of knew the woman who took their order and was embarrassed when she noticed Anders staring at her tattoos. They sat in the back corner beneath a speaker playing the same moody record that always seemed to be playing at the bars and coffee shops downtown. Most of the tables around them were full of people with computers and headphones and books. "You like her tattoos?" Claire said.

"I never understand how people decide what to get," he said. "It seems so permanent."

"I have two," she said. "It wasn't a hard decision."

"Really?"

"Really," she said.

"What are they?"

"It's hard to explain," she said. "What do you think of this place?"

"I don't know," he said. "I mean, I don't spend much time at coffee shops, but I'm used to more . . . subdued places."

"Like Starbucks."

"No. I mean, diners, I guess. This place is like a demented school. There's a chalkboard on the wall."

"It's fun," she said. She walked over to the chalkboard, which was full of tic-tac-toe games and surprisingly good drawings, and wrote, See?" Draw me," he said.

"I can't draw," she said, and sat back down.
Anders swirled around his Italian soda. "So did you come over because of the robbery, or what? I thought you were going to drag me out to Black Hole or something."

"I already went there."

"How did you find it? Why?"

"I felt compelled," she said. "Let's not talk about it right now."

"Claire," he said. He picked up his cup and held it in front of his mouth like he was smelling it. Claire thought about the chocolate donut and about Paul and about the coffee at the Devil's shop. "You know when you asked me what I do at my apartment?"

"Sure."

"Yeah, well, the answer is, nothing. I don't know. I don't do anything there."

"I'm sure you do something."

"Last month the answer was, I sit around and think about what the hell happened to my life. Where everything went, you know? Most people my age are working on their second kid and a mortgage."

"I'm almost your age," she said.

"You're not working the night shift at a hotel on the east side."

"There's nothing wrong with that," she said, even though she thought it sounded like a miserable job.

"There is, yeah, I mean look at Marie, she's younger than me and she's a model. Claire, she's a fucking model—"

"Marie's not younger than you," she said. "She's what, thirty? I think she's 32—"

"What?"
"Yeah," she said. She tried to remember when she'd heard Marie talking about her age and it was a blur in her mind. "I'm pretty sure that's right."

"Well, whatever." Anders sighed and dropped his head to the table and there was a soft little clunk. "You know what the real problem is? Really? I think it's my name. When I was a kid I was always like, who has this name? You know, a strange thing is, it's my name that got Jackie to take me seriously. I would have just been some other guy hitting on her if my weirdass name didn't stick in her head."

"Where'd you meet her?" Claire said. Anders never talked in details about his ex-wife and now Claire felt that she had to ask something.

"She was a clerk at a grocery store," he said. "Okeydokey Grocery. Silly place in Ankeny. It paid for school."

"When was the last time you talked to her?"

"It's been months."

"Maybe you should tell her you have a girlfriend."

Anders didn't say anything. They finished their drinks and spent the rest of the afternoon downtown. Claire showed Anders all the spines of all the books she wanted to buy at Capitol City Books on 2nd Avenue, and then realized with a sudden realization of possibility and recklessness that she might as well buy them all. She charged $132.14 in books to her credit card and hauled them all outside in two plastic sacks. They drove back to Anders's place and she paged through the new books while they watched a black-and-white movie she'd never heard of. Anders was quiet and looked mesmerized by the movie and something about it made her surprisingly horny. She wondered if Paul was home yet and she held her keys in her pocket but before the movie ended and before she could
make a decision Anders asked her if she wanted to go see one of his friends play a concert. Claire had heard of Little Ochre Annie and had been at a party where their first record was played and she was so surprised that Anders worked with the guitarist that she agreed to go. They drove to a bar called Stewed Lucy's on the west side of town and on the way Anders told her all about Neil the Maintenance Man and the Devil and the walkie-talkies at the hotel. All the tables were full at the bar so Anders and Claire stood in the back, next to the windows and in a mess of kids who looked like they'd driven in from one of the community colleges. Claire ordered Absolut and grape juice and drank it out of a tall glass while Anders told her things she couldn't hear. An opening band played and then it was too loud to hear anything else and finally Anders shut up and leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. Little Ochre Annie came out and the lead singer was a woman with red hair the color of the melted wax and a pot belly and fingers that looked as intricate and strong as carved polished wood when she gripped the mic. Anders pointed Neil out and he was older than Claire had expected, with lines in his face and a receding fluff of gelled blonde hair, and he looked out of place in his ripped jeans and his tight t-shirt and his eyeliner, like maybe he was dressed up early for Halloween. The music was surprisingly good and mellow and by the time Claire finished her third drink she felt like there was no other place she could be right now, that there was nothing else she could be hearing right now but this music. She leaned against the window with Anders and felt like the entire world was opening up on the stage in front of her, just temporarily, each chord ripping a narrow and deep hole into the fabric of her boring life. She closed her eyes and took the music in and a bartender tapped her on the shoulder and
asked her to please not lean against the glass because it might break and she might get herself killed.

When the lights came up she thought that Anders might introduce her to the band but he slipped out the door and headed toward the parking lot. Claire drove back to his apartment and they stood in front of her car with the lights on and he said that it had been a strange day. She agreed. She thought about hugging him or kissing his cheek but she never did that kind of thing. She thought about kissing him on the mouth for the hell of it but then he folded his arms and looked out across the street, at the used car lot. He said that he'd tried to call Marie but she hadn't answered and now he'd hoped she'd be at his apartment but she wasn't. Claire didn't say anything but she had trouble imagining Marie anywhere but at the edges of somebody's party, looking superior and awkward. Anders sulked his way into his building and Claire sat first on the hood of her car and then in the driver's seat, with the two paper sacks full of books she'd been wanting to read for the past few months. She opened one and flipped through and then another but it was too dark in the car and smelled like stale coffee drunk out of paper cups. She drove home and Paul's car was gone and his boots were gone and the light in his bedroom was off and the apartment smelled like a shower. She looked in the refrigerator for grape juice but there was none. She found rum and soda instead and tucked herself into the couch and drank her drink and read an embarrassing number of pages out of one of the new books. Eventually her mouth started tasting sticky and stale and she got disgusted with the idea of drinking and with the idea of reading and brushed her teeth and hummed and walked around the apartment and then fell into her bed in her too-big room with the lights off and the shades pulled open to let in the moon.
When Anders called Marie didn't answer, because she was lying on the leather couch in Richard's living room. She hated leather couches because of the way they stuck to the backs of her thighs and made her sweat behind her knees and in her lower back even though she almost never sweated. She’d spent the evening carrying trays of tortilla chips and salsa bowls and plastic margarita pitchers and had rushed home and stood in the shower for maybe ninety seconds and had then called Richard because she’d known he would be home and would be happy to hear from her and happier to see her. Her hair was still wet around her shoulders and when she leaned against the couch’s armrest she felt like she was resting her head on a thin, soaked towel. Richard sat in a leather armchair that matched the couch and nodded while she talked but also grinned like an excited little kid whenever she laughed or smiled. Marie looked at him through a martini glass balanced on her chest and he looked cloudy and wet and a little pink because of the cranberry juice in her martini.

"Anders got robbed last night," she said. She’d been waiting all night to say it. The martini glass felt suddenly fragile and expensive and she rubbed her fingers up and down the stem and tried to catch her reflection in the rim.
"Anders your boyfriend?" Richard said, as if there was another one. He had this smooth quality to his voice, something dark and liquid. "Is he all right? Should you be with him?"

"He’s fine," she said. She pulled herself up a little and strands of wet hair slipped down her neck. It was like being licked by a tiny wet dog. "He’s a weird person. A really weird person, you know. Like after the robbery when the cops were asking all these questions he's just standing there like he's in a trance or something. And he kept grinning. Like it was some great time. He’s like, incredibly needy but in a way that makes you think it’s not real. Like maybe he just thinks he’s so needy. You should see him when I leave."

"Sounds creepy."

"He used to be a cop."

"So why is that not creepy?" He leaned forward and his voice sounded patient and excited and she wanted to throw her drink into his face. "He used to be a cop and now he fucks around at a hotel all night."

"I didn’t even like him, you know. At first."

"Marie," Richard said.

She pulled herself up and dug her elbows into the couch’s armrest and the leather squealed under her skin. She finished her drink and Richard raised his and drained it and they stood together and walked into his kitchen. The countertop was still layered with the crumbs of old toast and charred hamburger and she wondered how somebody with such a nice apartment and such nice furniture and such nice clothes could live with such a mess. He reached up to an overhead cabinet and took out bottles and poured liquor into an
aluminum shaker that was already sweaty with condensation from the ice inside. When he shook the drinks the loose bags of skin under his jaw and under his eyes slid up and down and Marie wondered how old he really was. "What do you think about that shoot Tuesday?"

"Monday," she said. She took the drink he poured for her. "I’m getting tired of these stupid clothes ads."

He looked off at the wall and said, "That play’s coming up."

"The audition," Marie said.

"Well, yeah, there you go. You make that audition, we add this play to your portfolio, you get a better idea of how to present yourself to an audience, you'll be doing commercials instead of department store ads. You could be doing them now if you just had some confidence. Stage presence. An idea of how to act on camera. I don't know what it is. Actually, I do." He waved his drink around and she was afraid for a second that his vodka would splash out onto her front. She backed into the counter and there was a quick violent shatter and when she turned an empty water glass was already in pieces in the sink.

"Oh," she said. "God, sorry. I’m sorry."

"It’s fine," he said. He put down his glass fast enough that she wondered if the stem would break. He looked down into the sink. "I'll clean this up later. But Marie, what I'm saying, I figured it out. You look good in still shots because you just do. It's you. You have the look for photographs. But it doesn't work on film. There are people who are naturally built for film and you're not one of them."

"So I'll learn."
"It's not that hard," he said. "You just have to try."

They went back into the living room and Claire sat on the couch again but Richard paced around, pretending to look at the keys on the end table and the phone charger plugged in low on the wall. The light was on in his bedroom and usually by now she’d stand and follow him in and she would drop onto the fluffy comforter of his bed. Instead she looked down into her drink and thought about Anders, and Neil, who had been tall and broad at the hotel and obviously high enough not to care about the cops and also older than her, she thought, but she always had trouble guessing the ages of men who needed to shave. She sat holding her drink and Richard sat on the edge of his chair like a little boy in trouble and she tried to think of something to say but couldn’t. She drank her drink and Richard drank his and when the air in the room was bloated with awkwardness she carried her glass into the kitchen and told him goodnight. He stood and looked confused but hugged her and she thought that this, him hugging her in this kitchen, was real desperation. She sat in her Kia and thought about driving to Anders’s but decided that it was too late. Anders’s boss had given him the rest of the week off from work and it was only eleven and Anders would be up for hours but it still felt too late. She drove downtown and parked in the parking garage and then walked to Splash, this seafood restaurant down the street, and she sat at the bar with people in suits and people in nice dresses. The room was lit with dim blue lamps hanging from the ceiling and everybody spoke in quiet whispers but she felt happy to be somewhere with other people anyway.

#
The next morning she woke up late and ate a granola bar while walking to the parking garage where she parked her Kia. The parking garage was dark like always and smelled like puddle water. She sat in the driver’s seat of her car and looked at herself in the mirror, and with the shadows all around and the dark lenses of her sunglasses she was almost blind. It cost her $67.50 each month to park her car, and every time she parked she thought she might as well move out of her apartment and just live in her back seat. She imagined her magazines and her phone on the floor, her skirts and shirts stacked in the back window. Underwear and socks would go in the glove compartment.

She drove to Anders’s apartment on the north side of town. She couldn’t drive to Anders’s apartment without thinking of the North Glen Mall, because when she was little her mother had taken her to that mall before every Christmas and every time she needed new clothes, and Anders lived maybe five blocks from it. She parked next to his car and when she knocked on his door there was only quiet from inside. She knocked again and then again and then again and then she heard the slow shuffle of his feet. The door swung open and Anders stood there with a faded white sheet wrapped around his waist and shoulder like a toga. His dark brown hair poked out to the side.

"Marie," he said. "I thought you were Claire."

"Claire?"

"She was here last night." He wiped a hand over his face, and she noticed dried sleep drool on his jaw. "All day, actually."

"Claire Appel? Why?"

"Upset. Unusually upset. We went to lunch at this place downtown and saw Neil’s band. First time I ever saw Neil’s band."
Marie walked into the apartment. The apartment should have smelled like sleep and drool but the window was open and so it smelled like clean air instead, and trees and wind and water. She went into the kitchen and poured a glass of orange juice and wondered what was wrong with her. She felt full of acid and too cold and angry without knowing why. She went to Anders and stood there until he wrapped his hands around her waist. He looked like a frat boy in the sheet, and she thought of Richard, who lifted weights and trimmed the hair on his chest with a pair of scissors. She thought of the guy she’d been sleeping with before Richard, who was maybe twenty pounds overweight and as hairy as a stuffed dog.

"I wish you would have come by last night," he said.

"I was busy," she said.

They sat on the couch. Marie stared at the wall, which was bare except for a few paintings and a movie poster printed in what she guessed was French. Anders smelled like his bed and when he slid his arm around her neck it felt like a long lump of modeling clay. He touched her leg and then kissed her cheekbone and then her neck. His phone rang and he looked very confused and dug around in the mess of clothes next to the bed while Marie tried to look uninterested.

"Claire," he said, and his voice sounded suddenly full and bright. "Hi. Yeah, good morning."

Marie stared at the floor. It was easily the most banged-up hardwood floor she’d ever seen. She knew he’d lived in this apartment since his wife had booted him out but she couldn't understand why he'd chosen it in the first place. There was something nice about it, a comfortable color, but the paint was chipped and the bathroom sink hissed
constantly and the whole place reminded her of the dorm she'd lived in for three months in community college.

"What’s wrong?" Anders said. He pressed the phone into his face. Marie thought about the agency downtown and wondered if Richard was in his office. He sometimes talked about working at the office on Saturday afternoons. "Well, talk to your boss. Monday, I mean. Marie is here. So, I don’t know, maybe later? Are you having a party tonight? Oh." He looked up at Marie and said, "What are we doing later?"

"Anders," she said.

"What?"

"Hang up the phone."

"What?"

"Anders," she said. She felt furious and stupid. She squeezed her thighs and her nails made a rasping noise against her jeans. She could have been lying in Richard’s bed right now, naked and warm, talking about getting a decent fucking shoot and about how she couldn’t act and the audition was coming up.

"Um," Anders said.

She took the phone from him and snapped it shut.

"Marie," he said. "What's wrong?"

"Claire," she said. "Claire is wrong."

"What?"

She's ground her teeth and didn’t say anything.

"She’s all messed up right now," Anders said. "About her job. She skipped out on work yesterday—"
"She’s a fucked-up person, Anders. It’s like she thinks she’s still in college or high school or something. Don’t you think?" She turned and Anders was staring at her. "She tries so hard to be this hip cool person throwing parties every weekend with all these bartenders and people from the coffee shops downtown and she works for the fucking government."

"So what?"

"So what?"

"Marie," Anders said.

"I’m sorry," she said. She covered her eyes and looked at the lines on her palms. "I don’t know what’s wrong with me right now."

"Um," Anders said.

"Here." She pulled the sheet away from Anders and saw that he was wearing the red boxers with the little yellow stars. She pulled off her own shirt and he didn’t move. "Just fuck me," she said. "Okay? Let’s just have sex. It’s your week off, right? You’re the hero. So come on, let’s just do it."

"Hey," he said.

"Just get inside me."

"Jesus," he said. "Marie."

"I guess if something’s wrong in her life, that’s news to me."

Anders said, "Have you always felt this way about her?"

"Fuck you," she said. She hooked her fingers into his boxers and his skin was surprisingly warm. She was almost always cold and she couldn’t understand how Anders was always so warm. She pulled his boxers down to his knees and then to his ankles and
to the floor. She unbuttoned her own pants and her underwear and straddled him. She let herself fall back into the couch and pulled him with her and thought of Richard and of her own apartment and of the dark parking garage. She thought of the fucked-up audition for the furniture store and of the audition for the play coming up. The sample script was in her nightstand and she hadn’t looked at it in weeks and now couldn’t even remember the name of her character. Anders’s couch was old but thick and soft and worn, and she lay on it looking up at the ceiling until she realized Anders had stopped moving.

"Are you finished?" she said.

He stared down at her and she could see the vein in his neck. "This is a bad idea."

"Why don't you move out of here?" she said.

"Where would I go?"

"This is a coffin. Nobody lives in a little apartment like this. You're a man. It's like you moved into this place to die."

He looked down at her and didn't say anything. She sighed hard and pushed his chest. He didn’t move and she pushed him again. He dropped to the floor and she got to her feet and walked naked into the bathroom. She stood at the sink drinking her orange juice and waiting for Anders to come to her and he didn’t come. She wanted to leave and walk into the nearest dark bar and order something expensive full of gin or vodka. She thought of Richard and how desperate he’d been last night, and how now he would be in this kitchen with her, touching her shoulders or her ass and asking if he could just finish inside her cunt or her mouth. She wanted to punch him in the neck sometimes or in the mouth. When she walked back into the living room Anders was sitting on the couch
waiting for her. He was naked still and looked ridiculous and pale. She sat down next to him and wondered what she should say now.

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11.

Claire woke up in her bed Monday morning and wanted to throw something at the alarm clock. Beep, it said, beep beep beep, and she had never thrown anything at an alarm clock before but now she groped around on the floor and tossed one of her books across the room. She felt sick with alcohol and sudden boredom. She stood in the shower and let the water smash into her back, into the skin between her shoulder blades. She took her time grinding beans in the kitchen and boiling water for coffee, and wondered what Paul would say if she walked into his room with a cup for him. He didn't wake up until nine some mornings, or ten or noon if he had the day off, and she often wondered what he would do if she woke him up. He refused to move out because he claimed to still love her but she thought a few weeks' worth of early wake-ups would change that.

Before she was even halfway downtown she was already late for work. Grand Avenue was thick with traffic and Claire’s head was thick with sleep and leftover rum. She dialed her boss’s number and hoped for voicemail and got it and left a message too fast while trying to pass a station wagon.

After, she drove to Black Cat Coffee and sat in the back corner with one of the books she kept in the back seat of her car. The coffee shop was full of men and women
her age, all scrubbed and trimmed and dressed in dark slacks with tight creases and ties that squeezed their necks. Claire wore green tennis shoes and khaki slacks and a black button shirt and her green cloth jacket because it was October now and cold in the mornings. She had a button on her lapel for a band she’d never heard of, and an orange button on her purse that said "Hipster Magic." She folded her glasses on the table and drank her coffee and looked around for someone she might know, but the people she drank with didn’t show up downtown until after the sun sank and probably weren’t even awake yet. At nine o’clock, when Quad-X Records opened, she walked out of the coffee shop and was so happy to be moving that she didn’t even realize she’d taken her cup along with her.

Paul wasn’t working, but his friend Bergstrom was. Claire carried her stolen mug up to the counter and stood there finishing her coffee and trying to think of something to say. She had no idea what Bergstrom’s first name was but she’d seen him at her parties, drinking beer with Paul and his other friends in the corner of the living room, looking like he was trying to be somewhere else. The store was empty and he looked up at her from a magazine and didn’t sneer at her like he did sometimes when Paul was around. "Claire, hey, what’s new?"

She put her cup down on the countertop and said, "Paul’s not working?"

"Naw, hey, yeah, I don’t think so." He sniffed and then looked up at the ceiling and sniffed again. Claire wondered if he might have coke, but hardly anyone she knew in Des Moines had coke. "Might be in later, though. You want me to check?"

"No," she said. "No no. Actually, yes. Yeah, go check."
Bergstrom crunched up his face and looked down at the counter. It was covered in CD inserts and band posters trapped beneath a sheet of glass. Bergstrom traced his finger in the shape of what might have been a tree. "You know, if you want to be Paul’s girlfriend or whatever, all you have to do is let him know. He wants you back, he really does."

"Oh, I know," she said. "Trust me, I know."

"Oh," he said, and looked confused. "Well, then—"

"It's complicated."

"He’s staying because he really likes you," Bergstrom said.

"This isn’t helpful," Claire said. She walked back into the stacks of CDs and flipped through them until she found an album by Little Ochre Annie. The CD cover was muddy yellow and the title was Monday Nights in the Lounge of Broken Hearts and Kicked Asses. Bergstrom raised an eyebrow and she threw down a ten and waited for him to dump coins into her hand.

Claire carried her stolen coffee cup back into Black Cat Coffee and her table was still open. Her mind drifted around in what felt like a vast expanse inside her head. One of the paintings on the wall behind her was full of glowing red LED’s, all tracing a line through a field of blue, and their reflections burned in her fresh coffee like stars in a muddy river. She called Anders and said, "I’m thinking about having a party sometime in the next couple weekends." He didn’t say anything, so she said, "Things are all fucked up in my life today."

"Uh," he said. "What’s wrong?"
"I'm at Black Cat," she said. "I was driving to work this morning and I just decided not to go. My inbox is probably so full that there are research requests impacted in its fucking walls, and my boss is probably wondering where the hell I am—"

"So talk to your boss."

"Alise? She's a fucking robot," Claire said. "She doesn’t understand anything. I don’t even know what I would say if I got her on the phone." She slumped down in her chair and waited for Anders to say something but he didn’t say anything. "Are you busy? I’m thinking about stopping by."

"Well, you know, I’m kind of still asleep. I have the week off but I’m still on my work schedule."

"Oh," Claire said. "Oh, god, I’m sorry." She opened her mouth and wasn’t sure what to say. Anders didn’t say anything so she just hung up. She picked up the coffee cup again and this time she knew she was stealing it. At home, she put the empty cup next to the sink and then filled it with water and drank it and then filled it again. Paul was gone and she’d expected him to be here, lying around in his boxers watching TV. She went to his room and left the light off and dropped onto his bed. The sheets smelling like detergent and faintly like sweat and sex. She went to her own bedroom and found her vibrator and went back to Paul’s room and shut the door and then the blinds so that the only light in the room came from the green display of his alarm clock. She stretched out on his bed and thought about masturbating and gave it a shot but got too bored to keep going.

The living room was full of a week’s worth of drinking glasses and books and magazines, and Claire slid the Little Ochre Annie CD into Paul’s stereo system and
started to clean up. The music was louder and choppier than she’d remembered from the show, and bounced around the apartment and filled the wide space of the living room. Claire didn’t listen to a lot of music but her friends did, and she knew what was supposed to be cool and what kinds of things to listen for and what kinds of sounds to recognize as interesting and creative. The glasses around the room were dark with the stains of the cuba libres she’d been drinking all week, and the carpet could have used vacuuming, but she didn’t want to drown out the music and so she sat down on the floor and stretched out in a rectangle of light thrown from the window. The fourth and fifth or maybe fifth and sixth songs played and Claire thought it would be nice if Anders would introduce her to Neil, who could then maybe introduce her to the lead singer. Then she remembered that she lived in Des Moines and that the band also lived in Des Moines and was not so far away or successful that she couldn’t just introduce herself. The back of the CD case was marked with the logo of Echolalia Records, which she’d never heard of but which was listed in the phone book. The girl on the other end of the line told her she couldn’t give out Neil’s phone number, and Claire hung up and filled the coffee cup with water again and then went out to her car and drove across town to the Overniter. The east side was a junky and gray part of town and she felt her mood slip even lower as she drove past the strings of fast food places and the busted-up branch library and all the houses with overgrown lawns and broken windows.

Claire had tucked her State of Iowa ID badge into the pocket of her jacket, and now she pulled it back out and clipped it to the front. The photo on Claire’s ID badge had been taken the very day she was hired by the State, a million fucking years in the past, and in it she still wore the wire-framed glasses she’d worn through college and after,
when her jobs didn’t come with vision plans. She had a zit just above her left eyebrow, like a piercing, and her hair was still tinted red from a bad dye job. Claire walked through the Overniter’s lobby and up to the front desk and she held the ID badge so that her thumb covered the picture and the only visible part of it was the line that read STATE OF IOWA in blazing red letters. The clerk looked down from the soap opera playing on the TV in the corner and said something that Claire didn’t hear.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, can I help you?"

"I’m looking for Neil," she said, and realized that she didn’t know his last name. "The maintenance guy, I think."

"Oh, oh." She looked around and found a little legal pad beneath the counter. She was probably forty or older and when she moved her head the curls of her perm bounced against her face. "Let me get your room number, dear."

"No, no." Claire clutched at her ID badge and said, "I’m not a guest here. I’m with the State."

"Oh." The woman leaned forward over the counter. Her own name badge glittered in the light, small and brass with a hotel rooftop etched over her name. Claire wondered if Anders ever wore anything so ridiculous. "Is everything okay? Neil in some kind of trouble?"

"Neil? No. No, no, not at all, no way." The woman stared and Claire felt panic rise in her chest and she said, "It’s about a project he’s helping us with."

"Oh. Well." She lifted a finger and a gaudily painted fingernail and paged through a different legal pad and then read off a number. Claire grabbed for the pen on the
countertop and didn’t notice the chain that connected it until it snapped. She wrote the number down on the back of her arm and then took the pen for the hell of it and then sat in her car listening to the Little Ochre Annie album because every single radio station in Des Moines was goddamn awful. Finally when she felt calm and like herself she dialed Neil and he picked up immediately and sounded tired and excited and she thought she’d be nervous talking to him but she wasn’t nervous at all.

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They met later that night, at a bar that Claire had never heard of deep in the east side of town. The parking lot was full of cars that looked close to falling apart and the window in the bar’s front door was covered with cardboard, but inside it was dark and warm and comfortable in a way that reminded her of her bedroom. It was Monday night and the bar was full of people who looked like they’d been here since getting off work. Neil sat at a round table in the middle of the floor with a glass of beer in both hands, and he winked at Claire when she walked past to buy a dollar cuba libre from the bar. When she sat down she noticed his denim jacket and his blue t-shirt, and his hair that wasn’t spiky now, and the lines in his face that stood out like they’d been drawn in with a pen.

"Thanks," she said.

"No, it’s my pleasure," he said, and he reached out and shook her hand. His fingers were calloused and thick and she realized that the only things she ever used her hands for was typing up research reports and opening bottles of liquor. "I go crazy when I’m not playing. I mean, we take the early nights in the week off, Mondays and Tuesdays,
so all I really have to do is sit around my apartment waiting for pipes to explode at the hotel." He drummed his wrists on the table and dragged his beer glass around on the table, in a circle. "I’m gonna order some food. You interested? Did you eat yet?"

Claire tried not to sound whiny and said, "This probably isn’t my kind of place."

"What?"

The ice in her tumbler had all cracked and sunk and filled the bottom and chilled her palm through the glass. She said, "I’m a vegetarian."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, oh, right, sure. Well." He picked up a little plastic menu that she hadn’t even noticed before. "They have fried mushrooms."

"I’ll grab something when I leave."

"No, come on." He knocked his glass against hers and then tilted it up and drank half his beer and when she didn't follow he said, "Drink up." She did, and when they finished their drinks he led her outside. Claire had only been in the bar for ten minutes but already the sun seemed to have moved through the sky. "There’s a pizza place a couple blocks down. You can eat pizza, right? I mean, the cheese—"

"You're thinking of vegans."

"So you just stay away from animals. That’s cool, that’s cool." He smiled and there was a little mole on his cheekbone and his teeth looked very bright and clean and she wondered if he used whitening strips. "So what if it was a very evil animal? Would you eat a very evil animal?"

"An evil animal?" She imagined a lion with a mustache, and then a bear with a monocle.

"Like a bear or a cow or something. Like a cow who had killed your parents."
She said, "I guess I'd have to be in the situation."

Neil led her around the corner and to a little brick building with a glowing neon pizza sign in the window. Inside, they ordered a tomato-and-mushroom pizza and sat in a booth against the wall drinking PBR out of a plastic pitcher. Neil said, "So you came to the show last night with Anders. I can’t even believe Anders showed up. You know how long I’ve been trying to get him to come out?"

"How long have you known each other?"

"Three years. Probably three years, something like that. He started at the hotel right after me." He shoved a pizza crust into his mouth. "Does he talk to you about his wife?"

"Ex, right?"

"Ex, yeah, I guess, I don't know. He, uh, he doesn’t really bring her up unless he's stoned."

"Stoned?"

"Yeah," he said. "You didn't know he smokes pot?"

"I guess not," she said.

"He’s pretty much the only person there who isn’t a dick. You should hear the boss when he calls me in to fix something."

"And he smokes pot."

"Yeah. I’ve been on him so long about coming to a show, but I think he’d rather sit around his apartment watching TV or something."

"My roommate works at Quad-X, downtown."
"Quad-X, sure, hell yeah. They carry our record. Good guys there." Neil finished his drink and poured another one. "So yeah, you’ve probably heard your boyfriend bitch about the music scene in this town, then."

Claire snorted. "Yeah, well—"

"Cause there is no music scene in this town, right? Nobody in this town cares about real music. The bars want you to come in and play covers and the venues that really want bands to come in just want metal groups, you know, kids screaming into mics, eyeliner, all that. Last week, right, LOA has a gig booked at Hairy Larry’s, and they call us up to tell us they’re booking some band called Burning Barzebo instead."

"Maybe you should get a harder name," Claire said. There was a stringy chunk of green pepper caught in her teeth, and she felt it rubbing against the inside of her cheek. "Undead Ochre Annie."

"The Mace of Damnation."

"Little Ochre Antichrist."

"Fistful of Semen."

"Eww," Claire said. "Seriously, though, have you thought about playing metal?"

He snorted so loudly that Claire expected beer to squirt out his nose. She looked around but the cook behind the counter was distracted by a wrinkled copy of what might have been a porn magazine.

"As a joke," she said. "Just to see how it would go over."

"Ha," he said. He looked like she’d just tossed her drink in his face. "There is no way."

"You’re not even curious?"
"It doesn’t matter if we’re curious. I mean, everyone’s curious. In the band, I mean. We fuck around with new styles all the time, but, I don’t know, I don’t want to sound like a pompous ass or anything, but there’s something to the idea of musical integrity. Artistic integrity, right? We’ve spent years putting together our sound, and to change that now as an experiment would be . . . perverted."

"You know," Claire said, "you do sound a little like a pompous ass."

"Yeah," Neil said, and drummed his fingers on the table. "I know."

#

Claire went back to work the next morning and Alise didn’t track her down but still Claire spent her breaks hiding out in the bathroom and the rest of her time looking over her shoulder, out the door of her cubicle. When she got home from work she fell into bed with a stack of books and spent her night getting bored with each of them. She didn’t see anyone but Paul outside of work until Wednesday, when she finally sighed and drove downtown to 7th Station and saw a group of librarians and public school teachers she sometimes drank with sitting in the corner. She bought a whiskey sour and talked with the bartender and then she went to their table and they pushed out a chair for her. Claire usually tried to drop into conversations at bars without interrupting anything, but everybody looked at her and she hid behind her tumbler and said, "Hello."

"Where have you been?" Julie Dowell said.

"What do you mean?"
"Last night," she said. She was one of the librarians who Claire usually met on Tuesday nights. "It wasn’t the same without you."

"It’s been a strange week."

"Yeah," the librarian said. "Sure."

Claire gripped her drink and dug her heels into the floor. The people around her talked about the new mall on the west edge of town to a story somebody had read in the Register about bird abuse at Levinger’s Pets and then to a salon moving in down the street from the Station, and Claire gulped at her whiskey and thought about how suddenly bored she was. It was ten o’clock and the Station was as busy as it ever got and the room was full of moody electronic music. Claire noticed a young guy at the bar with his shirt unbuttoned far enough to let his chest hair poke out, and she noticed somebody smoking away in the corner even though the Station was supposed to be a smoke-free bar. She looked at the post cards tacked to the doorframe, little bright rectangles against the painted black of the wood, and at the canvasses and photographs nailed to the walls.

"Hey," Amie Chaude said. Amie Chaude was also a librarian and she was also a huge person, a 6’3" woman who was not pudgy or round but just well-proportioned and overly fond of maroon lipstick. Claire sometimes wondered if Amie Chaude drove taller men wild with lust, and sometimes, when she’d been drinking and they were sitting close together at a table with cocktails in their fingers, she wondered what it would be like to kiss her. She thought it must be strange to kiss someone with such a large head and such a large mouth. "Claire, are you okay?"

"What? Why?"

"You look kind of out of it."
"No," she said. "No, I’m fine. Fine, I’m fine."

They looked at her like she was crazy.

"I’m having a party next week," she said. "Next Friday. So why don’t you come?"

She coughed and looked down at her hands splayed on the table. She pushed her chair back and said, "I’ll see you there, okay? I’m going for now, but I’ll see you there."

"Okay," Amie Chaude said. "See you, Claire."

"Okay," Claire said. "See you." She thought about carrying the rest of her whiskey out the door with her because that was the kind of thing she did lately. She imagined a new string of petty thefts, of silverware and plates and maybe even a chair stolen from downtown businesses. She drank the whiskey and left the tumbler on the corner of a table and ducked outside and Fourth Street was alive with the clatter of drunks and the noise of a kid with a guitar outside Black Cat and the muffled thumping of car stereos and the speakers of bars for blocks around. Claire drove home and the apartment was brilliant with light and Paul was in his bedroom organizing his vinyl collection by color. Claire was so stunned and grateful to see him and so sure that she shouldn’t show it that she stood staring for a few seconds too long. He waved and didn’t look up and she went and stood leaning on the kitchen sink, staring at black beans in the drain from dinner the night before. She wondered if she was going insane—not crazy insane, not painting-the-walls-with-shit insane or driving-the-Jetta-through-the-front-door-of-the-Capitol-Building insane, but just the sort of insane where she would lose control of her emotions and start weeping in public or scream and throw drinking glasses around the living room. She found a bottle of expensive rum in the back of the freezer she thought about how silly it was to horde away expensive liquor when all liquor, really, was
expensive. She sat on the couch in the living room drinking rum from a plastic Halloween
glass from the year before and tried to decide if she should go talk to Paul but then he
shut his door and she could hear the slow beat of one of the CDs he played all the time
when he was in his bedroom, at night, one of the CDs that meant he was in a good mood
about something and likely to make a joke or try to kiss her if he came out into the living
room. Later he went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth and she thought he might say
something but he went back to his room and shut the door and she heard the creek of his
bed as he dropped in. Claire herself didn’t feel like going to his bed or even her own and
so she pulled her feet up onto the couch and folded her book over her chest and stared up
at the ceiling and wondered how she would make it into work in the morning.

#   #   #

12.

Thursday morning Marie crawled out of bed too early and showered and Anders
tried to persuade her to please lie back down but she had to be downtown by ten to model
dresses for the alternative paper. Anders asked if he could come and stand at the edges of
the shoot but she told him it would be boring and anyway the photographer would get
pissy and ask him to go for a walk. She left and he tried to sleep but it didn’t work. He
wondered what he was supposed to do with all this time off this week, with his big
reward of a week’s vacation. He thought about watching a movie but the thought of
watching movies by himself made his throat go dry and his stomach feel thick and heavy even though he did it all the time.

He thought about Jackie and wondered what she was doing right now. She'd been working as a secretary for a high school the last time they'd talked, but it seemed entirely likely now that she was for some reason at home, lying on her back in bed, one arm thrown over her eyes and her skin brilliant brown against the sheets. He wondered what she would say if he showed up outside the door of their old apartment.

"Anders," she'd say.

"Did you see the paper?" he'd say.

And she'd invite him in and make him that black tea and they'd sit in the living room and not be weird and not be strange but they'd talk about the robbery like two people who used to be good friends.

But maybe he'd show up outside the apartment and the doormat would be different and he'd knock and somebody else would come to the door and he'd realize she didn't even live there at all.

Anders couldn't think of anything to do, and tried calling Marie at noon and then again at three. He ate a dinner of macaroni and cheese and watched Blade Runner on DVD. When that was over he leaned on his desk and looked out the window, and far down the street the big signs for McDonald’s and Pizza Hut glowed like gaudy stars fallen to the dirt of Des Moines. Someone knocked on his door and he almost jumped. The knock was too loud to be Marie and when he looked through the peep hole he saw a man with short spiky hair and a leather jacket the color of a baseball glove. There was
something around the man’s neck, and when Anders opened the door he saw that it was a
boxy old camera.

"Anders Levine?" The man crossed his arms over the camera, and Anders started
at the thing’s lens, wide and shiny, looking like something out of the seventies. It looked
like something his parents might have used when he was a kid. "I read about you in the
paper," the man said. "Tackling the guy down at the Overniter, all that."

"Uh," Anders said.

"The name’s Don Piano."

"Piano?"

"Like the instrument. Your boss hired me to check out this business at the hotel
last Thursday night. Oh," he said. "I’m a PI. Private investigator." He reached into his
jacket and pulled out a wallet and flipped it open. There was an ID inside, some kind of
badge, but the plastic covering it was so thick and cloudy that Anders couldn’t see
through. "What kind of name is Anders, anyway?"

"It was my grandpa’s name."

"Huh. Huh." He pulled up the sleeve of his jacket and looked at his watch, then
rocked back on one foot. "What do you think of letting me come in?"

"Aren’t the police taking care of this? I mean, they were there, and then an officer
came by Tuesday—"

"You used to be police, right? Maybe we should talk about that."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It’s just strange, don’t you think?"

"You think this was somebody I know?"
"I'm just saying."

"What is it you're just saying?"

"You got me," he said, and shrugged. "Anyway, the police probably are taking care of this, but I'm not the police. I'm the guy your boss hired to look into it."

"What is there to look into?"

"He wants to know what happened." He made a face like he'd just told a bad joke. "He's curious."

Anders ran a hand through his hair and then over his face. The man in the hallway looked back at him and Anders thought about Marie and wondered if she'd show up soon. He imagined her coming up the stairs and finding some forty-year-old guy standing in the hall or sitting on the couch. "I'm kind of busy tonight," Anders said. "Maybe you should come back some other time."

"Sure!" Don Piano said. "Sure, yeah, why not? Tell you what, though—" He lifted his eyebrows and Anders waited for him to say something and then Don Piano picked the camera up off his chest and before Anders could look away there was a click and a flash. Anders backed away and batted at the door. He should have slammed it shut but he didn’t hit it right and it swung slowly around on its hinges, so that he could see the guy grinning and winking out in the hallway.

Marie didn't show up that night, but Saturday, just as Anders was getting ready to become really desperately lonely, somebody knocked on his door again and this time when he looked through the peep hole he saw her standing out in the hallway, wearing a blue denim dress that should have hung formless on her shoulders but somehow looked perfectly fitted and incredible. Anders yanked open the door and wrapped his arms
around her waist and was embarrassed about how happy he was to see her but then didn't care. He hadn't seen her in what seemed like too many days and Marie’s body felt cold and unfamiliar beneath his fingers, and she coughed after he kissed her and he realized he already had an erection. She came in and sat on his couch and he wasn't sure what to say to her. He felt like he’d been asleep for a long time. He felt like his lonely weekend had stretched out for weeks and weeks. He wasn’t sure how to talk to her or how to touch her but they made it into his bed somehow anyway. The air was cold outside and he’d shut the windows but now his apartment was too hot, with someone else in the bed, and he kept waking up to the soft rhythm of her snoring and the electric green light of the alarm clock.

The next night Anders went to work for the first time since the robbery. He expected streamers above the desk or maybe a cake in the break room, but the lobby was empty and Sheryl, the woman whose curls looked like they were made out of fishing wire, looked down at her wristwatch and then handed him the keys to the register and to the pool room and to the lobby doors and said, "Here you go, hero. We keep the safe closed now."

The night was boring and too long but the next night, just after one in the morning, Don Piano came in through the lobby doors. He wore a powder blue suit and a black stocking cap and he looked about ten years older. The same camera hung from his neck. He walked through the lobby and leaned on the front desk. "Is this a better time?" he said.

"Do you always work nights?"
"Yes," he said, "oh yeah. It’s a major selling point. Most PIs do overnight work for a higher fee but I prefer it. Less traffic, less people. Surveillance is rough with less people to blend into, but you make up for it with shadows." He pulled a notebook from his jacket and flipped it open. "Here’s what we’ve got right now. You were working the overnight shift. Male in a ski mask comes in with a gun. You’re in the, uh, pool room but the robber doesn't come looking for you because you happened to have left the safe not only unlocked but also open."

"I wasn't actually in the pool room."

"You weren't?"

"I was in the closet. With my girlfriend," Anders said. "She's hotter than hell."

"Oh," Don Piano said."

"And everyone leaves the safe open. Left it open. It's closed now but we used to just leave the door up. I mean, this desk is never unwatched."

"You never use the bathroom?"

"Well," Anders said. He didn't use the bathroom often but most times he went in there it was to smoke pot. He usually cleaned up pretty well after but sometimes with Neil it was hard to stay focused and he thought there might be ashes in some corner of the floor from a few nights back or at lingering odor, something the other employees wouldn't notice but a trained detective might. "The bathroom's unpleasant," Anders said. "But yeah, we go in there. Not for long."

Don Piano chomped his teeth together and tapped the notebook on the countertop and Anders saw squiggly writing covering the page. "Another thing your boss is curious about: how do you think this criminal knew where the safe was?"
"He probably saw it when he was messing with the register." Anders said.

"So he just saw it down there. Ho. Kay." He made a note and his handwriting looked electric and blue and out of control on the page. It looked like he could probably only fit four or five words on a page. "You and the gun. This guy had a gun, right?" He looked up into Anders's eyes and said, "You ever hold a gun?"

"I was a cop."

"So maybe you noticed what kind of gun he had."


"And you must have noticed the safety was on."

"Why's that?"

"Because you tackled him."

'Most holdups like this, the perp lacks the balls to bring a clip."

"But you don't know that for sure. And this guy's waving the thing around, a pistol, you said, and maybe he could slip and bump the trigger and fwoosh, there's a new hole in your shoulder."

"Well—"

"And not only are you ballsy enough to tackle the guy anyway, but he's calm enough not to try."

"He pulled the trigger."

"Oh, yeah. Yes. So you knew. But still, too late."

"He did hit me with the thing."

"Well, yeah. I mean, I wasn’t going to say anything, but those are some pretty shiny bruises."
Anders looked at his reflection in the window. The skin around his eye was faded blue and he knew that his shoulders and a spot on his chest were still yellow and hurt if he pressed on them wrong.

"Don't get caught up over it. Now, this description you gave the police. That's accurate."

"I made it up," Anders said. When Don Piano started making a note, he said, "I'm kidding. No, it's accurate. Fuzzy face. Dark eyebrows. Narrow head. That's it."

"What about your girlfriend? She see anything?"

"Marie ran upstairs and got on the phone as soon as it happened."

"Maybe she'd be fun to visit anyway," Don Piano said.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Don Piano said. "Nothing."

"Don't bother her."

"Look, relax." He looked over his shoulder, then into the pool room. "Between you and me, this whole investigation is a joke. The cops are done with this thing because they decided your robber was just high on something and looking for a few hundred bucks. Your boss wants me to poke around and scare the hell out of a few people on the off chance somebody with this hotel was involved. The description you gave the cops fits about fifty percent of the criminals in this city. You ask me, the chance of one of you making this thing happen is pretty fucking slim." He pushed off the counter and said, "So is there any way to get a soda out of that machine without actually paying for it?"

"No," Anders said.
"Your boss hired me for ten hours on this thing. That’s not enough time to solve a case like this, especially when there’s nothing to be solved. So relax. I’m just filling out my hours."

"Marie's not going to tell you anything. She'll waste your time."

"I might have to talk to her," Don Piano said, "but probably not. Who knows. Right now, though, I’ve got a stakeout at the Grand Lodge. You know it? Infidelity case. Guy fucking around on his wife. So I get to sit in the parking lot with gas station coffee and a thousand-dollar camera trying to catch pictures through a motel window that are going to blast somebody’s marriage. Sounds like a killer night, I know. You want to come?"

"Oh, no, no," Anders said. Don Piano looked back at him and actually looked a little disappointed. Anders thought about going, imagined himself sitting in Don Piano’s car in the dark outside some hotel. He wondered what they would talk about. He wondered what would happen to the Overniter if he just walked out the front door, if the place would be robbed again or if there would be a fire or if a customer would come down to complain that the people above them were too loud or that the heater wasn’t working or that the bed wasn’t soft enough.

"All right," Don Piano said. "Suit yourself." He turned and headed for the door and Anders waited for him to turn and take another photograph but he didn’t and then he was gone.

#
That morning when he got off work Anders decided to drive downtown to visit Marie at the modeling agency's office. He called her on the way and she told him that it was seven in the morning and she wasn't at the office and was still in bed and he shouldn't visit her at the office anyway.

"Why?"

"It's the office, Anders."

"You visited me at my office."

"Your office is a shitty hotel in the middle of the night," she said. "I mean, I’m sorry, but it's true."

"Yes," he said.

That night he woke to the sound of Marie knocking on the apartment door. She waited on the couch while he showered, and then they drove to a pasta restaurant on the west side of town. The restaurant was the kind of place that served bread with a little dish of olive oil, and while they ate Anders couldn’t help leaving a greasy trail all over the table cloth.

"How was work?" Anders said.

"Nothing to do today," she said. "I haven't had a good assignment since who the fuck knows when."

"Huh," Anders said. He didn't know what else to say. When they were both too full of pasta, Anders asked her if she’d ever been to the Drunken Parrot. She said she had and Anders was relieved because he had no idea where the bar was. She directed him across town and they stood in line for drinks and before he could order something for her she asked the bartender for a cosmopolitan.
"Maybe I should drink that," he said. It was eight o’clock and the place was full of people and he had to talk too loudly to hear himself. "You should try the tropical grog."

"The what?"

"It’s rum," he said. Really he had no idea what it was, except that it was something on the list the Devil had given him. "And fruit, it’s probably got that uh, that fruit—"

"What are you—"

"Pineapple," he said, "it’s probably got pineapple juice."

The bartender handed Marie the cosmo, and she handed the bartender a ten-dollar bill. "That’s for whatever he gets," she said. She turned to Anders and held up the drink and grinned through and said, "I’ll find a table."

Anders nodded and watched her go. He wished the Devil was here so he could ask him what to do. The bartender leaned on the bar and looked pissy and impatient and Anders said, "Do you have coffee?"

"Coffee liqueur?"

"Just give me the tropical grog," he said. She tilted her head and her blonde hair fell over her shoulder, so that one side of her head suddenly looked heavier than the other. Anders wondered if she even knew what he was talking about, if the Tropical Grog really existed, if maybe the Devil had screwed this one up, had screwed him over, but then the bartender nodded and slid away and scooped up a tall bottle of booze and then a carton of juice. It took her a while to make the drink and Anders started to feel dry-mouthed and claustrophobic in the mess of people crowded around the bar. He looked around the room for Marie and couldn’t see her anywhere. The bartender finally came
back and placed a tiki cup in front of him and offered him a dollar in change but he grabbed the drink and walked away. He found Marie slouched at a table against the wall, and when he sat down she said:

"I’m so full of noodles!"

He handed her the drink and she handed it back to him. "What’s with you?"

"I just think you’d like it," he said.

"I thought you’d never been here," she said.

"Well." He thought of the Devil and the donuts and the coffee and said, "I get around."

She took a drink of her cosmo and Anders decided that what the hell, he’d try the grog. It tasted grainy like sugar and tart like grapefruit juice and he imagined himself, three hours from now, vomiting into the toilet at the Overniter. Marie said, "Do you know what happens Tuesday?"

"You want go on a date?"

"What? No. It’s my audition, Anders."

"Oh," he said. "Yeah. Right, yeah."

"I haff bun vorking on may excent," she said, and laughed, and Anders laughed even though he wasn’t sure if he should.

There were three hours left until he had to be at the hotel, and they drove back to Marie’s place and she told him to mix drinks. She disappeared into her bedroom and he found the bottles of liquor and put cherry vodka with Sprite from the fridge. Marie came out in a red corset and a red garter belt and red stockings and Anders was so shocked that he almost dropped the glasses. She smiled at him and there was something too sweet
about it and obviously fake and he felt his heart slow and his breathing stop for a second
and there was something sad in the room and then she smiled her regular smile and
everything was okay again. She came to him and kissed him and lead him into the
bedroom and they fell onto the mattress and kissed and he couldn’t get enough of the
chilled feel of her back and her hips. He nuzzled against her neck and waited for her to
bite his ear or whisper something sexy but she closed her eyes and pressed her head into
the pillow and strands of her yellow hair stuck up like thin pieces of uncooked pasta.

"If I get this part," she said, "I’ll be busy. I’ll be a lot busier."

"Okay, sure." He ran his hands up her back and back down over her hip bones.

"That’s fine with me."

"Are you sure?"

"You need this, right? I mean, I assume commercial work would keep you busy
anyway."

"It would." She sighed. "I need something to happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm getting older, Anders. And I mean, do you know how long I've
been posing for advertisements for video rental stores and bars and restaurants around
here?"

"Something will happen."

"Anders," she said. "I'm not getting younger."

"Talk in your accent," he said.

"Why?"
"It’s sexy," he said, but then he wondered if that was true. "It reminds me of the night I met you."

She snorted. Anders ran a hand up her hips and over her stomach and onto her arm. She looked up at the ceiling and he kissed her shoulder and then her thin arm and then her elbow and she said, "Jesus, will you relax? Just calm down for a second."

"What?" he said.

"Just be patient."

"I’m sorry," he said, but he wasn’t sorry. He pulled himself up next to her and dropped onto his back and felt like some sort of animal, a dog or maybe a small bear, some stupid and ravenous creature. He looked down at the bulge of his erection and at the hair on the bottom of his stomach. He looked at Marie’s body, all smooth skin and curves, and thought of how much more attractive she was than him. He thought of how ridiculous he looked naked, dark and hairy and all bones and bumps and knobby toes.

"Okay," Marie said.

"What?"

"I’m ready now," she said.

"Okay," Anders said, but he couldn’t move without thinking of his own awkwardness, of the strangeness of his body. He thought about the hair he tried to remember to shave on the back of his neck, and about his bumpy knees. He thought of his toenails, overgrown, and he thought of himself crouching in the bathroom, trying to angle a rusting pair of clippers at the tips of his feet. Marie put a hand on his stomach and grabbed at his belt but got caught up on the buckle and he realized that even his clothes were ungainly and poorly designed. When she finally stripped him she lay back and
wrapped her legs around his hips. He wanted to slide out of bed or just sit next to her but he knew there would be a fight so he kissed her neck and tried to focus on the warmth of her body next to his. She clasped her fingers behind his neck and pulled him onto her and after that was quiet and still beneath him, looking up into his eyes were her mouth slightly open. After, Anders rolled off and she scurried into the bathroom and came back wearing shiny athletic shorts and a t-shirt that said Saucey’s Pizza! over a picture of what looked at first to be some kind of snake and then turned out to be a cooking spoon. The t-shirt hung limp and too big on her shoulders, and Anders wondered what the fuck kind of pizza restaurant took a cooking spoon for its logo. Marie fell into the bed next to him and found a remote on the nightstand and turned on the little TV in the corner. Anders looked up at the clock and had less than an hour to get to work.

"We should get your car," he said. "It’s at my place."

"I can walk to work in the morning," she said.

She changed channels and changed channels and changed channels. Anders kissed her and she kissed him back but then it was time for him to pull his clothes back on and drive to work. At the Overniter, he leaned on the counter and waited for someone to come in and rent a room but nobody came in and rented a room. He waited for someone to call and complain that their toilet was overflowing all over their sandals and towels and their expensive canvas luggage, but it didn’t happen. The Pepsi machine glowed blue in the corner of the lobby and Anders considered drop kicking it or getting on top and tipping it over, riding it all the way to the thin carpet. He wondered what his boss would think of that. He wondered what Don Piano would think of that. He wondered if Don Piano would come in to ask him anymore questions, but nobody came in at all.
The night wore on and Anders watched TV and then gave up and pulled *Cinema Fantastique* from beneath the counter. He sat in the uncomfortable office chair and flipped through the photos in the middle but he couldn’t get very interested. He took a break to manage the Overniter’s books for the day, and then he climbed onto the front desk and lay down with his head on a legal pad and picked up *Cinema Fantastique* again. When the sun rose and filled the lobby with yellow and white light Anders had read 77 pages and he realized it was the first night he’d ever worked without a single person coming in or calling down a complaint. At seven Todd the Hotel Manager came in to take over the front desk and Anders watched him walk through the doors and then through the lobby, looking sure of himself and impossibly awake and freshly shaved and dressed in a stupid blue blazer that made him look like a badly dressed weatherman on TV. Anders wondered if he should ask about Don Piano and the investigation but decided that it wouldn’t matter anyway, that Todd would either lie or tell the truth but either way it wouldn’t matter. Todd told him good morning and Anders said good morning back and handed him the keys to the register and the doors and walked outside and left.

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13.

Friday after work, Claire put in the Little Ochre Annie album and cleaned the apartment and then stood in the shower with water rushing over her shoulders and down her chest and around her hips for the better part of a half hour. The shower was loud but she could hear the music through the open door and she wondered if Paul would be in the
living room when she stepped out. She would step out with a towel wrapped around her
neck and hair plastered to her face and maybe Paul would be in the living room and she
would maybe act surprised to see him and maybe she wouldn’t. They almost always had
sex before she threw a party, even now that they were broken up. It was something that
seemed too normal and usual to be strange. Claire thought it must be one of the last
vestiges of their actual relationship. It was so easy, on Friday afternoons with people due
over soon and too much liquor loaded into the freezer, to forget that something as simple
and natural as sex in Paul’s armchair in the living room could have any consequences at
all.

But Paul wasn’t in the living room anyway and anyway she didn’t really feel like
having sex with him tonight. She walked over to the window and then looked back at the
damp trail of her footprints over the carpet. Her hair was just long enough to hang in a
wet thick rope against the back of her neck. The few strands that had fallen out in the
shower clung to her arms, dark and thick so that they looked like threads from some old
sweater. She put on her glasses and they slid around in her wet hair. She got dressed and
Neil showed up at 7:30, an hour before she’d expected anyone to knock on her door. She
answered the door and was amazed to see him, standing in the hall in his denim jacket
and his four-day stubble. His hair was spiky with gel and his skin was dark and she
wondered if he spent a lot of time outside or in a tanning bed.

"I know it’s early," he said, "but hey, I brought this." He swung a box of PBR into
the apartment. Claire took it in both hands and moved it into the fridge and knocked over
a bottle of salad dressing. "Nice place. Kind of little, but that can be a good thing, right?"
"It works pretty well, really." Claire stood back up and wrapped her arms around herself. Neil smiled at her and she wasn’t sure how to act around him. She’d invited him with a voicemail but hadn’t thought he’d show up and now here he was, standing in her kitchen. She wondered if it was weird to have someone here whose album she’d been listening to all week, and then she realized that she was listening to the album right now, that the Little Ochre Annie album was playing on Paul’s stereo in the living room. "Oh my god," she said, and laughed, and sighed, and felt warm in her neck and in her arms with embarrassment. She stopped the CD and looked back at Neil and he frowned and she thought *Fuck fuck fuck*. She pushed play and he grinned and shook his head and she pushed the button to switch CDs without even knowing what else Paul had in the machine. For a horrible moment she thought that maybe he would have a different copy of the same album in there, but then there was a crackle and the noise of electric guitars and it was something she didn’t recognize. Neil cracked open a beer with a loud snap and said a band’s name she didn’t recognize. Claire nodded and went for the gin and the lid didn’t snap open when she broke the seal and she couldn’t find a proper knife to cut the lime. She leaned on the counter and hoped she didn’t look too silly or jiggly sawing away at the lime with a butter knife.

"So you have a lot of parties?" Neil said.

"Usually, yeah. It's always awkward beforehand," she said. "I can't help but feel this anxiety, like what if nobody shows up—"

"Huh."

"Yeah," Claire said. She stopped with the butter knife and ripped the lime in half. Neil stood drinking his beer too fast and she dropped a too-big chunk of lime into her
own glass and joined him. Her friends from the drunken book club showed up later, carrying sixers of spiked lemonade and a cardboard box of merlot, and then it was a leftover friend from college who brought along her boyfriend, and then it was a couple people she knew from Black Cat Coffee. Neil seemed impressed and overwhelmed and they moved to the living room and outside now the sky was dark and the street looked yellow and wet when she looked through the window. One of the bartenders from 4th Street Tap showed up and then Krystal, one of the bartenders from the Station, showed up with a friend whose shirt was unbuttoned enough to show off a gaudy picture of Marilyn Monroe on her chest. Claire loved it when bartenders showed up to her parties because they always brought ten-dollar six-packs and forced bottles into her hands and they always became gloriously, embarrassingly drunk without punching anyone in the ribs or vomiting into her bathtub. A guy from Capitol City Books showed up after that, and then somebody she didn’t recognize, and she went to her bedroom and threw old bras and underwear and her vibrator into the closet and pulled a chair to the center of the room and opened the door. She felt too aware and awkward and sober and overwhelmed without Paul here, and drank her gin too fast and then lost herself in the party, slipping from room to room and coming back to herself for a few seconds at a time whenever somebody knocked at the door. Eventually she looked up from the corner of the living room and saw Anders walking into the apartment and was so suddenly excited to see him that she almost didn’t notice Marie coming in behind him, holding his hand. He was dressed in khaki pants that looked too large and a blue shirt that hung loose and weird on his thin shoulders.

"Hello," Claire said.
"Oh man," Anders said. He hopped up and craned his neck and said, "Neil’s here." He looked at Claire, who wasn’t sure what to say, and then pushed off into the crowd in the living room. Claire held her drink up in greeting and Marie shrugged and showed some teeth. She looked too tall and thin and pale standing in the doorway, backlit by the bulb in the hallway.

"Want a drink?"

"Eh," Marie said, and looked off into the living room. Claire decided not to deal with it and went to her bedroom, where people sat in her chair and somebody leaned on her desk and the bartender from the Station sat on the edge of her bed. It was maybe ten o’clock but they all smiled and looked so loose and happy but Claire felt something creep up her back and into her shoulders. She tried to look hip and relaxed but couldn’t figure out where to sit, or where to stand, or where to lean against the wall. She went back to the living room and saw Marie still in the kitchen, tall and thin and glittery blonde, all tanned skin and bony shoulders. She looked excited for once and happy and she was talking to the Devil. He was dressed in gray pants and a black blazer and when Claire looked at him she remembered the taste of the chocolate donut and the dark rush of the coffee in her mouth. She started off across the room and Amie Chaude appeared out of nowhere with a lazy drunken smile and a glass of booze and Claire slipped past her so quickly that something splashed onto her wrist. The Devil and Marie were engrossed with each other, and when Claire got to them Marie gave her a look that let her know it.

"Claire," the Devil said.

"Hi." Her tongue felt thick with gin and she wondered what her breath must smell like. "You two know each other?"
"We just met." He grinned at Marie and she smiled back, all teeth. Claire turned and looked for Anders in the crowd but all she could see was the flannel shirt of one of the bartenders and the backs of two librarians and the clustered heads of people she didn’t recognize. The Devil said, "But it turns out we both know Anders."

"So that makes all of us," Claire said. "Who’d you come here with?"

"I came by myself. I hope you don’t mind. I brought this tasty bottle of port."

"I thought you drank coffee."

"Tonight I’m celebrating."

"How did you know about this? Did someone invite you?"

"Claire," he said. "I’m the Devil." Marie laughed like this was some private joke between them, something that Claire wouldn’t appreciate. The Devil said, "I've been here before, you know. You invited me last December, after we met at that t-shirt shop in the East Village. Smash, you know. It was early evening and you’d been drinking vodka tonics."

"Oh," she said. "Oh." An image started to rise out of her memory, but it was too dark and clouded, something to do with Paul and one of his friends and a bar in the East Village, and she let it slip away. Paul had always been asking her to come out with him and his asshole friends, guys who stared at her chest like maybe she wouldn’t notice after two drinks, or who made stupid jokes about sex at awkward moments. She'd had to drink herself silly to put up with them.

"I hope you don’t mind," the Devil said again.

"Hey, Claire," Marie said. She stepped closer and tilted her head and wrinkled up her nose. "I don’t want to be bitchy but we’re sort of talking here."
"Yeah," Claire said. "Yeah, okay." She gripped her drink and it was empty but the gin was in the freezer and she didn’t want to stand in the kitchen unscrewing the bottle and then pouring the tonic and trying to dissect another lime. She walked through the crowd in the living room and was afraid that somebody would grab her elbow or say her name. Anders and Neil stood in the hallway, leaning on the wall next to the bathroom, holding drinks. The bathroom door was open and the light was off inside and the room looked like a little cave, something shadowy and safe and warm. Anders raised a bottle of beer to her and looked entirely too sober, but Neil looked ready to wobble off the wall and across the room and through her bedroom and out the window, into the bushes two stories below. Claire leaned against the wall opposite them and imagined going downstairs to find him lying in the lawn with a bruised shoulder and a can of PBR spilling itself out onto the grass.

"Hey, Claire," Neil said. "We were just talking about the fine line between great awful music and, you know, just awful music. Anders says that everything from the 80s should be burned, burned."

"Well," he said, "it should."

Claire looked at them, standing close together, looking ridiculous together, Anders wearing too-big clothes that looked like something he could work in, and Neil dressed in clothes that belonged in a bad 90s rock video. They both looked at her and the noise of people in the living room carried into the hallway and she wanted to kiss them both. She wanted to wrap a hand around both their wrists and pull them into Paul’s bedroom and fall tangled with both of them into the bed. She wanted to finish her drink and collapse between them onto the wall and close her eyes and feel the warmth of
people close to her, of a hand on her shoulder, of fingers on the back of her neck. She tried to focus her thoughts and said, "Anders, I thought you didn’t even listen to music?"

"Everyone listens to something sometime."

"I don't either," she said.

"Then what’s with the music?" Neil said. "I mean, come on, how many parties do you go to where somebody’s playing the new Glass Bottom Glass record?"

She opened her mouth to say something about Paul, and then didn’t.

"Hey," Neil said. "You remember we talked about LOA doing a metal show?"

"Sure," she said. She couldn’t take her eyes off Neil’s neck. He hadn’t shaved for a few days. The collar of his pattern shirt moved when he talked.

"You inspired me. The band’s gonna do it." He raised a fist and said, "You gotta come head bang with us."

"No way," she said. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, totally. All power chords and screaming. Jumping around in heavyass mascara. It’s gonna be great."

"Wow," Claire said.

"I cannot imagine your band doing that," Anders said.

"Fuck are you talkin about?" Neil said. "You’ve seen us play once."

Claire wanted to kiss Anders on the neck and then Neil on the neck. Her legs felt fuzzy beneath her and her head felt light and disconnected and she stepped forward and into the dark bathroom. She flipped the light switch and the bulbs on either side of the mirror blazed to life and she saw herself, her skin pale and her hair all shadows. Somebody had left a cell phone on the toilet tank. Claire placed her tumbler on the edge
of the sink and leaned close into the mirror and then heard the sound of her glass sliding
down toward the drain. There was a little cracking noise, and when she picked up the
glass she almost didn’t notice the chip in the rim. She filled it up and took a drink and
then dropped the glass into the trash and sat on the bathtub and listened to the hum of
conversation on the other side of the door. She thought that she could reach out into the
hall and grab Anders or Neil by the sleeve and pull them into here to kiss them both or
just one of them. She’d had sex with Paul in this bathroom two times that she could think
of, and had gone down on him in the shower more than that, and had stood in the mirror
so many weekends while they’d been still dating, doing her hair while he stood close
behind her with his arms wrapped around her waist. The people in the living room kept
talking and laughing, and it was like somebody had to be saying something hilarious
every few seconds. The bathroom smelled like shaving cream and water, smells that
Claire hated because they reminder her of the mornings before work, when she’d stand in
front of the mirror half awake thinking about calling in sick and wondering if she could
cut away with it and wondering why the hell she drank so much, every night, when every
morning her mouth tasted sour and her head felt stuffed with burnt cotton balls. Someone
knocked on the bathroom door and Claire cleared her throat and stood up and put a hand
on the sink. The room felt warm and she realized the heat was on too high for early
October but anyway it was always warm in the bathroom. Someone knocked on the door
again and Anders said, "Hey, Claire, are you, uh, is everything okay?"

    "I’m fine," she said, and pulled open the door. Anders and Neil stood there
looking awkward and mismatched together.

    "Paul’s here," Anders said.
"Oh," she said. She leaned out the door but Anders was in her way. She turned and looked at herself in the mirror and her hair stuck up in dark soft curls like she was a laid-back or drugged Medusa. The matte black of her hair clashed horribly with the glossy black plastic of her glasses, but she decided not to care and rubbed her face and wondered why her eyes were so red.

"Claire," Anders said. "Listen, I don't know if you're going to care, but he brought someone."

"What?" she said.

Neil swung into the doorway and said, "Don’t worry, she’s not too cute." He wrinkled up his mouth and the spikes of hair on his chin stood up and he looked a little like a blonde porcupine. "Kinda ugly actually."

Claire slid past Anders and past Neil and out into the living room. A few women looked up from their conversations and Claire saw Bergstrom first, gangly and pale in his stained Autolux shirt, standing in front of her bookshelves. Paul stood just inside the door, still slipping off his boots, the little chains on the sides rattling like change in his pocket. A short little blonde stood next to him, staring off at some space in the distance, some non-space, because of course she wouldn’t know anyone here. Claire wondered where she did know people, where she would normally be on a Friday night. She tried to look away but felt compelled to burn the girl’s face into her mind and then she felt herself drawn across the room. She wanted to grip her drink but them remembered that she’d left the broken glass in the bathroom trash can. She walked up to Paul and smiled tightly and Paul looked up and Claire grinned and showed her teeth.
"Hey," he said. "Claire. I brought Bergstrom, from the store. And oh, this is Rebecca."

"Rebecca?"

The blonde looked up for just a moment and then looked away again. Claire held out her hand and the blonde looked confused by it but then shook anyway. Claire grinned and then for some reason winked. She tried to set her face into an expression of equal parts friendliness and menace. Paul looked worried and she broke away and wandered back to the bathroom before she could say anything stupid that she would regret. Neil stared and she walked past him and sat on the bathtub again with the light bulbs on and wished she had a drink. "Hey, Neil," she said, and he stepped into the doorway. "There's a bottle of gin in the freezer. I'm going to sit here on the edge of the bathtub and I would appreciate it endlessly if you'd bring me a glass."

"Hey," he said, "Claire. Let's get the hell out of here."

"What?"

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink. I know a great place down the street, you'll love it."

"Why?" she said. "What are you talking about?"

"Claire," he said, and held out his hand. She looked up at the ceiling and at the dim light bulbs on either side of the mirror and decided what the fuck, why not. She took Neil’s hand and felt the roundness of the ring on his middle finger, then let go and walked to the kitchen without looking at Paul or at his blonde. Anders and Marie stood in front of the refrigerator now and the Devil was gone, gone. Claire decided to skip the gin and mixed a cuba libre instead in a plastic cup with a Halloween witch on the side and carried
it out the front door. She stood on the stairs and waited for Neil and he came out with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his leather jacket.

"People are going to think I date raped you," he said.

"Whatever," she said. "Let’s get the fuck out of here." She dropped down the stairs and out into the parking lot. She went to her Jetta and then realized she was too drunk to drive but leaned on the roof anyway and looked at her bleary reflection in window. Neil called her name and he was unlocking the doors of a rusting green Gremlin in the corner of the lot. Claire got in and the seats were leather and crunchy beneath her and she wondered why Neil loved having things made out of dead cows so much. She drank her cuba libre and stared out the window, and the roads were dark but alive with the dim and busted headlights of junky cars and pizza delivery drivers and people standing on the sidewalks in front of bars too dingy to have signs out front. Neil had a CD player set into the dashboard, which seemed silly in his junky car, and they listened to music she’d never heard before, all fast guitars and bouncing drums that sounded put together for no other reason than to make her happy right now, sometime after eleven o’clock on a Friday night. Claire tapped her head on the window and when they got to the bar, a dark place built into a strip mall next to a grocery store, she finished her drink and then threw her cup as far into the air as she could. It bounced somewhere in the parking lot and Neil lead her inside and they sat in a corner drinking beer for an hour. The walls were dark wood and full of tiny framed black-and-white photographs of what looked like London.

"What is this place?" she said.
"Primary Suzuki. I think." He flipped over a paper drinks menu on the table.

"That’s what it used to be anyway."

"Maybe I shouldn’t go home."

"Maybe you shouldn’t."

"What do you think we’re supposed to be doing?" she said. She felt tingly everywhere, but especially around her neck and fingertips, like maybe she was covered there in scratchy cotton or packing peanuts. "Are we supposed to be here, right now, or am I supposed to be I don’t know at home at that party or am I supposed to be in New York right now at a book release party or on a boat somewhere—"

"We’re not supposed to be anywhere."

"I know," she said. "I know. But are you supposed to be playing some show in Dallas, you know? Does that make sense?"

"No," he said.

"I talked to the Devil," Claire said.

"Oh," Neil said.

"So?"

"So what?"

"So how did your record get produced?"

Neil swirled his beer around. "He gave me the name of this record label in town. This old guy, actually. Used to be an accountant and wanted to get into music. Green grass records. You heard of it?"

"Maybe Paul's mentioned it."

"What's up with Paul and you, anyway?"
"Oh, let's go." She sighed and leaned forward on the table and then they left the bar. They drove and she pressed her forehead and her temple against the glass of the window and watched the streetlamps and the neon signs blur by outside. The streets and the sky and the alleys and parking lot looked dark and soft and lonely like her bedroom. She realized that the city might as well have been two cities for her, the soft black city of the night with drinks and music and people who seemed too hip and smart to be here, and the bright and thin and awful city of the early mornings and her cubicle in the basement at the Capitol Complex. Neil parked in a narrow driveway in front of a single-story house with aluminum siding and an overgrown lawn in a neighborhood full of houses with aluminum siding and overgrown lawns. They walked inside and Claire was surprised at how clean and bright the place was, all white walls and black-and-white photos in cheap frames. He pulled two bottles of beer from the refrigerator and then sat in a thrift store couch in the living room. She dropped into a cold and overstuffed leather armchair that looked and felt and smelled like it had been stolen from a library. Neil lit up a cigarette and offered it to Claire and she never smoked but she took one anyway. He found an old movie on TV, and Claire put the cigarette in her mouth and wondered how to smoke it. She stared at a blue lava lamp on a stand in the corner and sucked on the cigarette and felt smoke fill her mouth and thought she might cough if she wasn’t so loose. She wondered what she looked like with a burning orange dot in front of her mouth. Neil puffed smoke out of his mouth and slouched in his chair and looked entirely happy and comfortable, like maybe he would fall asleep.

"Where do you practice?" she said.
"Our drummer’s got a basement. Got his own place, better than this, right, bigger, nice space in his basement. He’s even got acoustic shit up on the walls. He’s an accountant."

"But where do you practice?"

"Me?" It was dark in the living room except for the light from the TV, and when he looked at her the glowing tip of his cigarette bounced in front of his eyes and turned his face dull orange. He stood and walked down a hallway and came back with an acoustic guitar with a Heineken label taped to the front. He held the guitar out like he might play it but handed it to Claire instead and she took it by the neck. She had never played a guitar and realized now that she’d never even touched one, and she pulled some of the strings and held some others down with her fingers and finally found a chord that seemed to rattle through her fingers and hands. She gave the guitar back to Neil and he sank into the couch until his ass was hanging off the cushion and then spent the next half hour strumming out a soundtrack for the movie on TV. Finally he stopped and was quiet and it took Claire too long to realize that he’d fallen asleep. She thought about shaking him or saying his name but it was late and she found the light switch, and a blanket folded up on a shelf in the corner, and she pulled her feet up beneath herself and tucked the blanket behind her shoulders so that it wouldn’t fall away. She looked at Neil, all pale and blue in the light from the TV, with the guitar still balanced on his chest, and then she closed her eyes and thought about Anders and Marie and then Paul and then about her apartment and what was going on there right now and who was asleep in her bed and who was asleep in Paul’s bed and about where she was, right now, and the thought that this, the dark living room of a guitarist who she barely knew and who drank too much like her
and smoked too and fixed toilets and elevators at Anders's hotel, was the best and only place she could be right now.

#

Monday morning Claire snuck into work through the back stairs, a half hour later, and then sat in her cubicle reading personal emails from the weekend. There were a handful of messages from Saturday morning, sent by people who were confused about where she’d gone Friday night. Aimee Chaude thought she had driven to the grocery store to buy more liquor and had then been arrested. Krystal the bartender thought maybe she had gone outside to smoke even though Claire didn’t smoke and had then stumbled into the wrong apartment and passed out someone’s couch. One of the girls from the book group wondered if somebody had drugged her drink and then carried her home, and Claire imagined herself passed out and tossed over the Devil’s shoulder, her jaw banging against his back as he carried her to his car, her drool dampening the ass of his pants. She closed all their emails and skipped to the one from Paul, the first one she had. She hadn’t seen him since leaving the party, and he hadn’t called, but he’d emailed at one in the morning, presumably from her computer, because he didn't own one.

Hey Claire com on, it’s like two in the morning or something and nobdy here knows where you are There’s some girl named Monica asleep in your bed and I thought it was you for a second and almost jumped in with er and she probably would have pissed herself. Don’you think? I know you left because I brought
Rebecca but really you have no right to be pissed. I don’t mean that in an angry way or in a mean way, it’s just that Claire I want to be with you and not Becca but it’s all up to you and your’re the reason I have to bring her home and not you. I’ve tried to wait around and be patient but it’s been a long time now and I know sometimes we have sex and your’re so into it and then I think everything’s gonna be okay but it never is. But it’s like Radiohead says, true love waits, except not forever. It’s like there’s this Nada Surf song where nevermind, you wouldn’t know anyway. It’s like we’re happy when we’re fucking or eating veggie pizza and then I go out and my friends ask what’s going on and I have don’t know what to say so don’t be pissed off at me for showing up with a girl, it’s my apartment too and if you want me to not bring people home you need to start dating me yourself. I’m going to let that girl sleep in your bed and if you come home we can throw her out or something.

Claire decided to print the email to fold up and keep in her pocket and read over again at lunch when her head was clear and she could think about the words. She hit the print button and then thought about carrying Paul’s words around all day in her pocket and thought that they already haunted her enough and she smacked at the mouse to cancel it. She closed all her emails without responding, and then saw one from Anders that had showed up in the last few minutes. She wondered what Anders was doing awake at 8:30 and then remembered that he’d probably been home from work for less than an hour. She imagined him in bed now, lying in his boxers and wrapped in a comforter in the cool bright corner of his little studio, maybe with music on or a movie playing on mute, and she was so suddenly jealous that it made her stomach hurt.
Claire, wonderful party. Remember when you offered to look into the guy from the donut shop? Would you mind looking into a private detective instead? The owners hired this guy Don Piano to look into the robbery, and the idea seems to be that maybe I set up the whole thing. Like I enjoy getting hit in the head with pistols. Piano seems to think it's all some kind of joke, but maybe you could check him out anyway.

So Claire ran a search for "Don Piano Private Detective" and found nothing. She ran a search for "Don Piano Private Eye" and found nothing. She typed it in again just to see what it looked like and wondered if real private detectives really used the little eye logos they always used in old movies and comic books. She typed Don Piano’s name into the State of Iowa’s criminal history database and found nothing there either. She typed it into the State’s sex offender registry and really hoped to find something but nothing came out. She imagined some mustachioed pervert detective in a Miami Vice suit and an unbuttoned shirt grabbing Anders’s ass behind the front desk at the Overniter and she laughed. She rattled her fingers over the keyboard and opened a phone directory site and found a number and dialed it into the huge beige plastic handset on her desk. The phone rang too many times and then there was a click and then a recorded voice and something about the voice reminded her of the sound of frying sausage. "Don Piano, Don Piano," the voice said. "This is the office. I’m out on business, so leave your message."

Claire almost hung up the phone and then thought about this guy fucking around with Anders in the middle of the night at the hotel. Anders seemed not really weak but just apathetic and strange in a way that she thought should exempt him from annoying encounters with private eyes. When she thought of people being in trouble with police
she thought of people like Marie and like Paul but of course those people never got
themselves into trouble. Claire didn’t get pissed off about things nearly often enough and
now she forced herself to wait for the beep and said, "Mr. Piano, this is Claire Appel with
the State of Iowa. I’m investigating a matter and would appreciate it if you would call me
back at your earliest convenience." She left her office number and dropped the phone into
its cradle and felt righteously pissed off but also a little silly and hoped he would never
call back or maybe even never get the message, at least not for a few weeks. She grinned
and then laughed and spun around in her chair. She was tired and hungover but also
excited now, and she opened her work email. One of the counselors in Mason City
wanted to know what the job market was like for fast food managers, and one of the
counselors in Bloomington had a client with diabetes and partial deafness who wanted to
work in a bowling alley. One of the counselors in Centerville wanted to know if there
was a labor union for house painters, and if not, how she could set one up. Claire skipped
through all these and went to a message from her boss, sent at 8:04 that morning, asking
her to please stop by the second floor when she made it into work. Claire looked at her
watch and it was after nine now and she sucked air into her lungs and stared at her
computer screen and then pushed herself away from the desk and into the aluminum
filing cabinet behind her.

She skipped the stairs and rode the clunking elevator all the way to the second
floor. The second floor was all windows and shining stainless steel doors and water
coolers that hummed and bubbled so you’d know that unlike the water in the basement’s
drinking fountains the water inside the coolers was amazingly goddamned cold. Claire
squinted in the bright light and nodded at the secretary and made her way up through the
halls, past the empty conference room and somebody’s dark empty office and somebody else’s dark empty office. Most of the offices on second were dark and empty because the bureau chiefs and the division heads and everyone else up here were always traveling around the country or at fundraisers at the Capitol Building or just on long lunches or, really, Claire imagined, at home eating lavish late-morning breakfasts with their families and reading the most boring sections of newspapers. She rounded the last corner and thought that maybe her boss’s office would be dark and empty with the door closed but it was open and bright with fluorescent light and spooky cheerfulness. Claire thought of waking up folded up in Neil’s leather arm chair and of her rows and rows of books at home and of the sound of Paul’s breathing when he slept next to her, and she sucked air into her lungs again and then lunged into the office. Her boss was not at her desk, which meant that she was in the bathroom or maybe at the coffee machine down the hall. The office smelled like live plants and berry-scented air fresheners and Claire decided to get the fuck out of there. She dropped down the back staircase two stairs at a time and decided to come back later. She stopped at the fax machine and the printer and there were uncompleted grant apps and a brochure for incontinence products and a Wikipedia article on prosthetic feet and her email from Paul, printed out in dark ink and lying on top of the stack. She held it in front of her and looked around and wondered who might have read it, and then crumpled it and dropped it into the recycling bin. There were maybe twelve other people in the basement and she wondered if any of them had read it and if so if they were going to say anything to her. She felt a twinge of terror in her chest and then between her shoulder blades. She felt a rush of heat in her neck. She knew it was ridiculous but she thought she might vomit. She went to her desk and held onto the edge
of her desk and wished she would vomit, all over her monitor and keyboard and the Des Moines Public Library coffee mug full of pens and staples. She could puke everywhere and her boss would hear about it from everyone else and would tell her to please not worry about showing up late. She could puke everywhere and then go tell her boss about it and her boss would pat her on the shoulder and tell her to please go lie in bed for the next 48 hours reading books and drinking lemon-flavored green tea from a tiny clay cup. Claire held onto the edge of her desk and closed her eyes and tried to vomit but couldn’t. It was almost 9:30 now and almost time for her morning break, and she grabbed her green jacket and one of the paperbacks she kept on the little shelf in the corner, beneath a shadowy photo of her leaning on the bar at the Station. She took the stairs outside and the sky was gray and the air was just a little cloudy. It was the middle of October and Claire couldn’t think of a better time of year. She walked down Grand Avenue and looked up at the glinting gold dome of the Capitol Building and opened her book and decided to walk down the street to the Russian Tea Room and figure out what to do next when she got there.

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14.

Richard didn't schedule Marie for any work during the entire week before her audition, and she couldn't decide if she should yell at him for treating her like an amateur or if she should yell at him because maybe he'd tried to find her a shoot and couldn't. She
walked around her apartment, looking at herself in the bathroom mirror and the little mirrors in the kitchen, sucking in her cheeks and pulling back her hair with one hand and wondering what exactly she needed to do to look Russian. On Tuesday she ate a lunch of macaroni and cheese even though she knew it would make her feel bloated and then watched daytime news in her pajamas. Her phone rang just after noon and the screen said DON’T ANSWER!!! which was what she’d programmed it to say when somebody called from Albert O’Hare’s. Nobody ever called her from the restaurant unless it was to ask her to cover someone’s shift. She could have picked up the phone and told the assistant manager that she was busy tonight, but she was so comfortable and warm in the couch, with the warm bowl of noodles in her lap and the TV droning away in the corner, that she picked up the phone and tossed it onto her bed. The thought of pulling back her hair with a rubber band and sliding into her greasy-slick black pants and her red-on-green polo shirt made her stomach kick around inside her chest and her throat go dry.

Marie was bored as hell in her apartment and she didn’t know what to do about it. Usually she would shower and dress and walk to a coffee shop or the agency or a bar, but today she didn’t want to get off the couch. She would only have to shower again later that night, before the audition, and then her skin would go dry and her hair would stand up in the back. She went to her closet and looked around inside and there was nothing there but clothes and coats and boxes of old pictures and books. There were letters from guys she’d dated in there, and letters from her mother, and a few from her father. Marie took out some of the boxes and dropped onto her bed and laid back and felt something uncomfortable between her shoulder blades. It was her phone, and now she tossed it back onto the couch, where it bounced off the cushion and hit the floor. She held the shoe
boxes and stared at them and wondered what was wrong with her lately. She thought
opening the shoe boxes might help but she thought there might also be nothing but
boringness inside them, so she went to the bathroom and showered anyway and the water
stung like tiny needle pricks on her neck and arms.

She walked to her car and drove toward Anders’s apartment without calling him.
He would still be asleep and would pull open the door and grin and stare with his mouth
open and hug her and whisper into her neck about how happy he was to see her, and the
bruise on his eye would be blue and wide like a bruise on a pear, and the thought of it
disgusted her suddenly and made the small hairs stand up on the back of her neck. She
turned around and drove to the agency instead and parked against the curb out front.
There was nobody behind the desk in the lobby and nobody in the lounge but Richard’s
door was open and she heard the sound of him clicking around on his computer. She
peeked inside and he looked up from his desk in the corner and smiled at her with too
many teeth. He came around the desk but she took a bottle of Evian from the mini fridge
in the corner and sat down in one of the cloth chairs. She uncapped the bottle and took a
long drink but her mouth was full of the taste of white noodles and cheese powder.

"Big day, huh?" Richard said.

"Uh huh."

"Are you ready?" he said. He looked at her and screwed up his face and said,
"Have you seen the begonias? The begonias I planted all through the night have been
ravaged by Inspector Truffault’s dog."

"What?"
He raised an eyebrow and said, "But it would be acceptable, yes, if the dog’s behavior did not so faithfully mimic its owner’s."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The script," he said. "Come on, Marie, it’s from the script. Have you even read through it?"

"You gave me like three pages of it."

"I know!" he said. "Here." He went to his desk and pulled open the long drawer on top. "We can go through it together."

She looked around the office for a clock and saw one on his desk, a little plastic-gold bell tower standing next to his phone and his printer. "Richard."

"You don’t seem to understand why this is important. You need to understand why this is important, Marie. You’ve been bitching about your assignments lately but something like a leading role in this play can really get your name out in this town. The right people are going to be at this show or they're going to see the ads and they're going to hear that one of this agency's models is doing the lead role."

"So now maybe you could even get me shoots with K-Mart."

"Look," he said, "do you want to keep waiting tables? You’re getting to the point where it’s going to be hard to find a chance like this."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you don't want to toss this one off."

"Well, whatever," she said. She thought of Anders in his shitty apartment, working nights at a shitty hotel in a shitty part of town, getting robbed and beaten up.
"Look," he said, and sighed, and sat on the edge of his desk. He was dressed in a striped polo shirt with a brown blazer and he looked silly and boring like somebody who should be laughing and playing golf or leaning on a conference table. He stood up and closed his door and said, "I don’t want to be an asshole about this. It’s just that it’s a good chance, and you can do it if you focus."

"I’m focused."

"So look," he said, and stepped toward her. It had been weeks since she’d slept with him, more than a month maybe, but that wasn’t anything unusual, they’d only slept together a handful of times and then randomly and unexpectedly. She remembered his skin and knew he was pale and freckled with big orange-brown blotches on his shoulders. He had a mole on his spine and another on his ass, just below the red line his leather belt left in his skin. He worked out enough to avoid being flabby but not enough to give his body much real form unless he was holding himself above her, and then his arms and shoulders looked tight and powerful and the veins stood out in his neck. Marie looked around the office and tried to think of something to say and couldn’t think of anything she wanted to say. She thought it was too weird and unfair somehow to have to see somebody with his clothes on when you already knew what he looked like without them. She stood and expected the door to be locked but of course it wasn’t locked. Richard sighed behind her. She went outside and had been in the agency for maybe ten minutes but already there was a little yellow parking ticket tucked beneath the Kia’s windshield wiper. The ticket was for $35 and she could have paid it with the tips from a night or afternoon of waiting tables but instead she pulled it off her windshield and looked around for Richard’s BMW and then just dropped the ticket onto the street. The streets
downtown were always full of dropped parking tickets, like little yellow leaves blown off some giant yellow tree.

She drove around downtown and didn’t want to go back to the parking garage because it was dark inside and always somehow wet and smelled like the street right after rain. She drove around downtown instead and listened to the radio loud enough that she got distracted and rolled through a red light on 6th Street and almost got hit by a school bus. She thought about places she could go and decided again not to visit Anders and then remembered the Devil, tall and a little goofy-looking at Claire’s party but still interesting and maybe even sexy in a strange way.

She had his number in her phone now, and she found it and dialed it. It rang three times and she wondered if she'd entered it in wrong, if she'd been too drunk when he gave it to her in Claire's kitchen, but then there was a click and he said, "Hello?"

"It's Marie," she said.

"Marie."

"From Claire's party."

"Of course," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," she said. "I don't know. I just left the modeling agency and I don't know what to do next."

"Then why don't you come here?" he said.

She had trouble believing that the man she met at Claire’s party would actually own a donut shop but she drove to the west side of town anyway. The road was surrounded by Burger Kings and carwashes and movie rental stores and she might have given up if she’d had anywhere else to go but finally the great green donut rose up into
the sky on her left and she almost rolled past in surprise. The parking lot was empty except for a little white Volvo, and she pulled up next to it and turned off her engine. A neon red OPEN sign burned in the window and she sat in her car, staring, until the letters burned in her eyelids when she blinked. It was almost two in the afternoon now and she had four hours to go until her audition. She unfastened her belt and opened the door and closed it again and decided she didn’t feel like talking to anyone and then opened it again and stepped out. The parking lot was paved but full of tiny rocks that crunched and scratched under the toes of her flats.

Inside, the tables were empty and the counter was empty and the little space behind the counter was empty. Marie climbed onto a stool and breathed in the air, which smelled like sugar and fresh coffee. The display case behind the counter was mostly empty and she stared at her reflection in the glass, thin and transparent enough that it disappeared when she moved her head to try to look at the side of her face. She closed her eyes and heard footsteps and when she looked again the Devil was stepping out of a door in the wall. He wore a deep red shirt tucked into a pair of khaki pants, with an apron folded on top of that. Marie thought that anyone who thought he was the Devil should have enough fashion sense to put together a better outfit.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"I can’t stand coffee."

"How about tea?" he said. "Tea it is." He found an empty mug and a tea bag and then disappeared through the door in the wall and appeared again. "Water will be just a minute. So why are you here?"

"I don’t know. Why are you here?"
"That’s a good question. There are about thirty aspects of me all over the world right now at really blowout parties and I’m wearing an apron in a donut shop."

"Life sucks even for you."

"Your audition is tonight," he said. "You mentioned it at the party Friday night."

"Yeah, I know." She flattened her hands on the counter and pressed them against the marble and noticed how small her knuckles were, little knobs in her fingers. The tips of her nails were cut into perfect angles, and she’d worked at the agency for almost five months before learning to stop biting her nails. "My publicity guy or manager or whatever he is is all worked up over it like it’s going to be one chance to make it. Like it’s this audition or nothing."

"One moment," the Devil said, and smiled and disappeared through the door again. He came back with a kettle that wasn’t whistling and filled Marie’s mug with water. The tea bag rose and floated on the top and then sank.

"And I really, I don’t know, I’ve never been in a play. Richard keeps telling me that I’m perfect because of the way I look but I haven’t even looked at the script."

"There are two important things to remember," the Devil said. "First, getting this part isn’t necessarily going to launch your career. I mean, how is this even going to help?"

"I’m interested in acting."

"So why aren't you an actor? I mean, come on, how hard is it to find a part in a commercial? We're in Iowa, we're in Des Moines. It shouldn't be that hard for you to make the jump. You're gorgeous."

"Something doesn't work for me on film."
"So you don't need to act in a play to fix it. Just set up a camcorder in your kitchen and practice there."

"What was the second thing?" Marie said.

"The second thing is, not getting this part isn’t going to kill you."

"Richard’s got me shooting stupid fucking department store ads all the time lately."

"That won’t last forever," the Devil said.

Marie closed her eyes and leaned her head on her palm. She’d thought about the audition so many times. She imagined herself walking around onstage, fifteen feet off the ground, covered in light. There would be furniture all over the stage, old armchairs and rugs and a coffee table, the kind of stuff that made her think of her grandmother. She’d be nervous and speak in her Russian accent and choke on a line and smile out into the crowd and that smile would win the director over. She would use the smile she used that made photographers at shoots look lost and forget to push their shutter buttons. In her imagination, the director didn't ask her to wait around the theater but did underline her name and then maybe even circled it. She thought about it some more and knew that it would actually be a disaster, that it would be a failure and that afterward she would walk too fast out of the theater and collapse into her car and want to cry and be unable to cry and would just stare at herself in the mirror. She opened her eyes now and the Devil was looking at her very somberly and she felt like laughing so she laughed. She put her hands into the pockets of her hoodie and felt a little bunch of metal in there and she pulled it out. It was a little keychain with three plain keys and plastic box printed with the Volkswagen logo. It had been hanging on a nail in Claire's kitchen at the party Friday
night and she'd slipped it into her pocket and had forgotten about it until now. She'd been pissed off and wanted to take something important and throw it into the yard or the street but had forgotten to actually do it. Now she pushed a little button on the plastic box and a key flipped out.

"Fancy," said the Devil.

"What were you doing at Claire's party?" Marie said. "You two friends?"

"I don't really know her. The party was just a place I wanted to be."

"The Devil crashing parties," Marie said. "I hate her so much. She drives me crazy. And I don't even know why. I mean, I do know why, but it doesn't, I don't, I also don't know why Anders loves her so much."

"Are you jealous?"

"Of Anders and Claire? Of miss fucking black hair and black fucking plastic glasses? She's so desperate, you know? She wants to be hip and popular so bad. I mean, come on, that's why she throws all those fucking parties—"

"Why don't we talk about it?"

"Why don't we fuck off," Marie said. She rubbed her hands over her eyes and leaned back and stared up at the paneled ceiling. She breathed in and felt so much air rush into her lungs that she thought they might burst. She felt like she'd been ridiculous lately and caught up over stupid things and now she suddenly felt alive again and sharp and fully aware of her body, of her shoulders and elbows and wrists and knees and ankles and the spaces between her toes. She wondered why she was having so much trouble feeling like this lately. She wondered why she had so much trouble feeling alive and happy. She thought the stool might swivel so she pushed off the countertop and spun around in a
slow circle. She thought of Anders in his small bed in his small apartment and she was so glad that she wasn’t there right now with her arm trapped beneath his neck and the soft noise of his snoring keeping her from relaxing. She thought of Richard in his small office and she was so glad she wasn't with him right now, naked and sweating on the floor behind his desk. She thought of her own place and she didn't want to be there either and she tried to think of anywhere in Des Moines she wanted to be right now and couldn't think of anywhere.

#

That night Marie decided to walk the five blocks from her apartment to the Des Moines Theater Company Playhouse. It was cold but she wore a black dress as thin as tissue paper because the color made her hair glow and burn yellow and it made her skin look deep and tanned and smooth. Her hair was loose and crimped into waves and the wind kept slapping it against her neck, like a limp scarf. Her ankles felt brittle with cold and she wished it wasn't October.

The streets were well lit with yellow light from street lamps and she carried the few pages of her script in front of her face like a shield. They were bent and there was a cocoa stain near the bottom of the first page. She pressed them to her head and tried to make the words and everything in them sink through her skin and into her skull and into her brain. She was pretty sure now that she was going to fuck up the audition and she was okay with it but she thought she should at least try to do well. She spent the next two blocks imagining her entire life as a Russian girl in 1912, the daughter of a rich farmer
and the love interest of a police inspector with a bad temper. Inside the theater, she sat in
the lobby on a couch that was too soft and fuzzy and purple and she worried about parts
of it coming off and sticking to her dress. People her age and people older and a few
people younger leaned on the walls in the lobby or stooped in front of the water fountain
or walked around outside smoking. Most of them wore comfortable things like yoga
pants and black t-shirts and t-shirts printed with what looked like the names and dates of
plays. Nobody was looking at their scripts but Marie looked at hers. Most everyone in the
room was talking to somebody and she wondered if they all knew each other from other
plays. She wondered if any of them ever sang. She wondered where Anders was and
decided he was probably in his apartment watching some stupid fucking DVD and
thinking about Claire.

By the time somebody called her name she was too bored to be nervous. She had
to pee and her mouth was dry, and she wondered if somebody would hand her a bottle of
water but nobody did. She followed a woman through a door and there was no stage, just
a black floor covered in scuff marks and little x's made out of tape, and all the lights
overhead were bare and burning like lights in a gym, and a woman in glasses and a
sweatshirt asked her to stand on the yellow x near the front of the floor.

"Marie," the first woman said, and then the woman in the glasses said, "Why don't
you start at the top of 43. You read Agnessa, starting with the third line."

"Um," Marie said. "Is that the third line, or the third line—"

"Start with 'Sir."

"Sir," Marie said, and found the line. Her tongue felt like a heavy lump in her
mouth. She thought she should have had a cosmo before coming here. She wanted to ask
if she should speak in the accent but the first woman and then the woman in glasses and a handful of other people around the room were staring at her. There were catwalks above and some kind of control booth and it was too bright to see much up there and she wondered if there were people somewhere up there staring down at her. "Sir, if you would only listen," she said, and didn't bother with the accent because she knew that it was terrible and that these people wouldn't want to hear it. She wondered if they would teach her one later and then decided she probably wouldn't get to find out. She finished the line and the woman in glasses read the next one, the one Richard had read in his office, and then Marie read her next line. She read lines for the next thirty seconds or five minutes, she couldn't tell which. Her body felt too long and she felt covered in light and she wondered if her legs and shoulders were shining. Marie almost never felt strange in her body but now she wanted to slip on a coat or hide in a corner. The woman in the glasses thanked her and said that somebody would make a decision by Friday. Marie nodded and wondered if she should leave her script and then rolled it up into a little tube. The lobby was still full of people in loose pants and dark shirts and none of them looked up to ask if she'd done well or if she'd blown it. Nobody looked up at her at all. She wanted to go to the bathroom or at least to the water fountain but she wanted to leave more so she pushed her way out through the front doors and looked north toward her apartment and walked home.

#   #   #

15.
Anders expected Marie to call by eight and when she didn't call by nine he started to panic. He'd rearranged his entire apartment, had pushed the couch against the wall and tucked his desk lamp and computer and cup of pens and coffee can of change neatly into the closet and had dragged his desk into the middle of the room and thrown a sheet on top of it. He didn't often miss his old furniture but now he wished he had a damn dining table. He wondered now how he had lived for nearly four years without one. In all that time he'd eaten his meals sitting on the floor or on the couch with a plate balanced on his lap or standing at the counter next to the sink and had never once thought about a different way things might be.

Anders had bought a thirty-dollar bottle of merlot and new glasses to pour it into. He'd bought two strip steaks and a bundle of red-leaf lettuce and two potatoes and a tomato. He wasn't sure what to do with the tomato. He had music running through his DVD player that he thought Marie might like. The music had played to the end and he'd had to restart the disc three times.

This wasn't the first time Anders had planned a romantic evening in, but it was the first time in a long time. He poked around at the wine bottle and wondered how cold to chill it in the refrigerator and thought about how strange it was that he was now doing exactly the same thing that he might have done for Jackie, half a decade ago, on her birthday or their anniversary. He thought it was fundamentally strange that two women who were otherwise entirely unalike would have the same reaction to the same prepared meal.

At ten o'clock he blew out the candles and at ten-thirty he pulled on a windbreaker and went out the door. It was windy outside and dark, and he drove downtown to Fifth
Avenue and tried to figure out which of the windows in Marie's building looked into her apartment. He parked against the curb and searched around in the old tissues and soda cans beneath his seats before remembering that he didn't need to pay the meters so late at night. He almost got hit by a taxi as he crossed the street and Marie's building was locked and he pressed the buzzer for her apartment but there was no click. The lobby doors were glass and metal and cool when he rested his head against them. There was a keypad next to the door and he thought he might try her birthday if she knew it or the PIN for her ATM card if he knew that but he couldn't think of a single string of numbers that might have been meaningful to Marie.

He called Claire and she told him that as long as he was downtown, he might as well walk to 7th Station for a beer. It was a Tuesday night and he found her sitting at a wide table with a group of women who looked familiar, maybe from one of her parties. Claire held a tumbler of something fizzy and dark, and she looked up and stood and came around the table and seemed too excited to see him. They went to the bar and took stools at a corner and he ordered a beer. He had the remains of a joint in his hip pocket and he wished he could produce it now and light up and watch himself floating away in the long mirror behind the bar.

"You seem different," Claire said.

"Marie's gone," he said. "Or dodging me."

"Ah, shit."

"Shit."

"I'm not surprised," Claire said. "I mean, what are you doing with her?"
"She's better than you think," Anders said. They leaned into the bar and he said, "Her audition was tonight. For this play, The Three Sisters of something."

"She's auditioning for a play?"

"It has something to do with her career," he said. "Or it doesn't. I don't really understand. Something is wrong with her and she thinks learning to act will fix it."

"Maybe she's still at the theater," Claire said. "I used to have a friend who did community theater. Auditions can take hours."

"Maybe," Anders said. He finished his drink and got directions to the theater from the bartender. He went out the door and back to his car and drove a few blocks down, but the theater's parking lot was empty and he tried the doors but they were locked. The doors were glass and inside the lobby was all fuzzy couches and dim yellow lamps but no people. He looked at his phone and Marie hadn't called yet and he didn’t want to call again in case she was asleep or busy or onstage or something. He drove around the parking lot and looked down at his phone to see if he'd missed a call and waited to hear it chime or to feel it buzzing on his lap.

Anders had to work that night, but he took his phone into the Overniter and cranked the volume up and laid it next to the cash register. Tuesday nights were usually busy, for reasons he and Neil had never quite figured out, and in the hour before midnight he rented out three rooms. He tried to watch a movie in the lobby and changed the channel and found Brazil playing on HBO. Anders stood around leaning from foot to foot and trying to pay attention and then pulled himself up and sat on the front desk. The movie played and the Pepsi machine hummed away and the front door swung open and Don Piano walked in wearing his leather jacket again. He took huge strides across the
lobby and something else looked different about him and Anders couldn't figure out what it was.

“What do you think of the ‘stache?” Don Piano said. He tilted his head and grinned and he had the beginnings of a bushy brown mustache above his upper lip. His lips looked impossibly pink and his teeth looked impossibly white and Anders wondered if he used whitening strips. "I can't decide if I should cut it or what."

"I don't know," Anders said.

“The real problem with this, as you can probably guess, is that I think I look good in the damned thing, but then I remember being a kid, like you, even a younger man, and wondering why the hell anyone would have a mustache.” He pulled the camera off his chest and held it at arm’s length and aimed it at his own face. Anders considered grabbing it, but didn’t. “Do you think that once you get past a certain age, your taste in faces changes? Maybe it’s like having the palette for cheese or wine or, I don’t know, asparagus.”

"I've never been able to grow one."

He pushed the shutter button and there was a tiny popping flash. "You know what helps? What I hear helps is if you rub the juice of a habanero pepper into it."

"You find this guy yet?" Anders said. He touched his face where the bruise was and it was mostly gone now and had never even been that bad, he'd decided, but now it felt tender beneath his fingers. He hadn't cared about the bruises or the robbery at first but the more time went on and the longer he went without talking to Marie the more he kept thinking back to that night. He wondered if he'd let her down somehow by not tackling the guy sooner. She'd been so shaken up after. "The guy with the bad eyebrows?"
"Actually, we've got you," he said. He rubbed his mustache and said, "No, I'm kidding. Anders, I told you, I'm just looking into this for your boss. We're not going to find the guy because he's probably just a normal person who thought it'd be a kick to rob somebody. He probably lives two blocks from here, statistically. So no, I'm not trying to pin it on you. In the end I'll type up a ten-page report and clip on a stack of oversized photos and take my paycheck and go buy drinks for everyone at the bar."

"Oh," Anders said.

"And I've decided I probably don't need to talk to your girlfriend."

"Yeah," Anders said. He laughed and leaned forward and thought about collapsing back against the wall. "Well, you probably wouldn't be able to find her anyway."

"Oh?"

"She's hiding from me. Had this big thing tonight we were supposed to celebrate about after and I don't know what happened."

"Maybe her big thing didn't go well."

"Well, maybe." The memory of her Russian accent clashed around in his ears and he said, "Maybe."

"She's probably upset."

"I don't know. She's been weird lately. She has strange emotions."

"Strange how?"

"She seems . . . disconnected. All the time."

"Mm," he said. "I hate to tell you this, but it doesn't sound good."

"She's been nervous about this audition."
"The big thing," said Don Piano. "Uh huh, uh huh."

"She never tells me what she's thinking about."

"The only people who really like to say what they're thinking are drunks and perverts." Don Piano leaned back on the front desk and the cuffs of his jacket crept up his arms. "My whole job is either watching people or talking to people. People will blabber on about anything, as long as it's something nobody cares about it. Ask about one true thing, and they shut the hell up."

Anders turned around and lowered his face to the desk and pressed his cheek against the false wooden top and it was slick and greasy. He thought of all the people who rubbed their hands on the desk and who leaned there writing checks, who spilled crumbs off muffins from the breakfast vending machine or soda from the Pepsi machine.

"Welp," Don Piano said, "good luck with the lady."

"Wait, wait," Anders said. "You don't have any questions?"

"I'm pretty much done with this case. The police gave up on it and your boss just wants me to snoop and I've frankly got better things to find out. I've got a woman on the south side who wants me to get into her husband's computer and find out if he's into kiddie porn, and you don't even want to know what's going on with the new mall."

"So why are you here?"

"Billable hours, Anders."

"Billable hours?"

"Billable hours," Don Piano said. He stepped back from the desk and his mustache was the darkest thing in the room. Anders imagined him standing in some squalid yellow bathroom, rubbing pepper juice into his skin. He left and Anders leaned
on the front desk and knew he shouldn't try to call Marie again but he tried calling her again anyway.

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16.

Friday morning Claire dreamed that she was lost in the woods or the forest or the jungle or somewhere else leafy and thick and wet. In the dream she wore nothing but her green cloth jacket and her black plastic glasses and she wandered around getting slapped by rubbery branches and stepping on thorns and she loved it. She woke with a gasp and it was 8:30 and she had somehow slept through the alarm screaming on her desk. She skipped the shower and wanted to skip the bathroom entirely but her mouth tasted like stale rum and stale soda and she was sure that when she breathed a cloud of flame would billow out of her nose. She brushed her teeth and took a mouthful of Scope and forgot to spit it out until she was almost downtown. She spit mouthwash out the Jetta's window at thirty miles an hour and watched in the mirror as it splattered on the side of the car. Her mouth felt like it was full of tiny, minty needles.

Claire had always thought that if she ever showed up to work late and her boss had left a note on her computer she would sit down and read the news and maybe make a phone call and start working on a report and maybe she wouldn't even notice. Today there was a note waiting, taped to the monitor of her computer, and she saw it before she
even stepped into her cubicle. She tore it off and the tape left a thin line of dust on her screen.

Claire, we had a phone call from a private detective named Don Pianot. He said he was trying to return a telephone message you left him. I called your desk at 8:20 and 8:30. Why don't you stop by my office and we can talk about it when you get a chance.

Claire sat dry-mouthed and staring at a blank gray spot on her cubicle wall. The cubicle wall was all gray carpet fraying out in poofs where she'd pulled out thumbtacks or ripped off tape, and right now it was the only thing she wanted to focus on. She leaned back and kept staring at the wall and reached down and pulled the lever beneath her chair and she sank nine inches closer to the floor with a hiss. She held the note in her hand and wanted to fold it up or slide it into her desk drawer but was afraid to look at it.

She rode the elevator up to the second floor and stared at the bank of buttons to the right of the door. The second-floor button had been broken for months and didn’t light up and so she was always unsure when exactly the elevator would stop moving. She hoped it would stop moving too early or would just not stop moving at all, that it would get lodged in the shaft or slide up and down for hours so that she could slump to the floor and sleep. She hoped the door to her boss's office would be closed but it was open and she could hear the slow clatter of a keyboard on Alise's desk. Claire pushed her fingers into her hair because she could feel it standing up in strange angles. She knocked on the doorframe and stepped into view and Alise looked up and smiled and leaned forward
over her desk. "Hi, Claire," she said, and Claire knew it was all over. She stepped in and sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair the color of the inside of a watermelon. "So I tried to call you a few times this morning."

"Yeah, I made it in late—"

"This Piano person thought you might have something to talk to him about. He said you sounded pretty, uh, urgent on the phone."

"Oh, no," Claire said, and smiled, and shook her head, like this was all some stupid mistake, which, really, it was. "It's, he probably misunderstood." She crossed her legs and wondered if she was wearing the same outfit she'd worn the day before. Sometimes after she'd done laundry she'd leave her clean clothes in the hamper and pull them out as the week wore on and it was hard to keep things straight in the morning. When she'd first started working for the State she'd pressed her pants and skirts and hung her shirts but it seemed so pointless now, to get dressed up and made-up only to sit in a cubicle in the basement of a building that smelled like must and dust no matter where you went, in the basement of a building occupied by an agency that most of the rest of the Capitol Complex didn't even really know existed. "I called him for an interview, this interview about private detectives. I left him my desk number."

"He tried your desk and then called the front desk when you didn't answer. Which is why I asked you to come up here." Alise shifted forward in her seat and then crossed her legs. She wore rimless glasses that looked always like they might slide down her nose, and today they looked like they might fall off hit the desk. "You've been having a lot of attendance issues, Claire. Showing up late. I wanted to avoid a conversation like
this because you're a very valuable asset to this agency and you've been with us for six years now."

"Okay—"

"And it's getting to be a very noticeable problem."

"It's, I've been having these insomnia problems. I know it's not an excuse—"

"All right, insomnia, sure. But whatever it is, you need to figure out a way to work with it. Because you look terrible lately, Claire. Right now you look like you just rolled out of bed."

Claire thought about Anders. It was sometime between nine and ten in the morning and he would be asleep right now with sunlight falling all over his bed. It was sometime between nine and ten and Paul would be leaning on the counter at Quad-X Records, waiting for the lunch rush he always complained about, the people in pinstripe and black business suits coming in on their breaks from jobs with law firms and banks and insurance offices to buy records of bands he couldn't stand.

"I want you to stay on here," Alise said. "You're a resource the agency genuinely appreciates. I honestly don't know what we'd do without you. Most of the counselors here don't even know how to use the internet and they don't want to learn. But we can't keep you on like this." She pushed the glasses back up her nose and said, "I want you to take some time and figure out how to get yourself in order. Go home. Relax. Get yourself together."

She felt her stomach kick in panic and she said, "Why don't I stay till lunch? There's a new research request in my box—"
"I want you to go home now. Take next week off. You can use whatever vacation time you have to cover what you can, and the rest will be unpaid." She leaned back and folded her arms over her chest. It was a favorite gesture of hers, something Claire had seen her do while talking about problems in the secretary pool or problems with the auxiliary offices. "Do whatever you need to do, and if you still want to work here in, what, ten days, come back."

"Ten days?"

"That's including weekends," Alise said. "This will be good for you. And us. I genuinely want this to be a good thing for everybody involved."

"Sure," Claire said. She nodded somberly and tried to look serious and devoted and repentant. "Yes," she said, "thanks." She walked out and rode the elevator to the basement and sat in her cubicle staring at the computer screen and the walls and listening to the noises all around her. She pulled on her jacket and put her things in her desk and then went outside and sat in her car and sank into the fake leather of the driver's seat. She held her car key and looked out at the sky and then finally put the key in her jacket pocket and stepped back out. She walked through the parking lot and down Grand Avenue, past her building and the Capitol Building and the Judicial Building and the Department of Transportation offices. The sky was bright today and full of sun but the streets of the East Village were all grit and shadows and peeling paint and empty Wendy's cups rolling around the gutters. She walked past an art store and a Greek restaurant. She walked past a t-shirt shop and there was a yellow t-shirt in the window that had a drawing of the 6th Street bridge silk screened onto the chest, and below that it said
She stared at the shirt and at her own reflection in the glass. She thought the shirt would be a great hit at the Station because sometimes, outside the door, on 4th Street, you could smell the fish and the salt and the rot of the river running just a few blocks away. She went into the store and the shirt was $24 and was sized for a man but she bought it anyway and the clerk, a paunchy older guy who looked desperate for business, wrapped it in brown tissue paper and folded it into a tiny paper sack. Claire walked a block west and saw Paul's shitty brown Oldsmobile parked outside the record shop and she thought about going in but walked past. She turned around and walked past again, back the other way, and then turned and walked past again. The front of Quad-X was mostly white-painted wood but there was a window too full of record cases and band posters. She thought Paul had to have seen her by now and she couldn't decide if that meant she should keep going or if she should just go in and ask him how his morning was. She wanted to lean on the counter and be casual with him and ask about the little blonde or maybe something easier like what he wanted for dinner tonight, if she should order a pizza or if he was going to cook or, really more likely, if he was just going to pick up a hamburger for himself on the way home or stay out all evening. She folded her arms and looked down at her shoes and at the sidewalk and thought about telling Paul why she wasn't at work again, how she'd been sent home, and she decided to forget about Quad-X Records. She went to Capitol City Books and it was full of people on their morning breaks, people dressed in slacks
and sweaters and blazers who didn't look like they cared about books at all. Claire bought two paperbacks she'd been thinking about lately and then sat on a bench at a bus stop and paged through them until a woman in nice jeans and a denim blazer asked her if she could loan her five dollars for gas. She left and missed the bus stop, with its clear plastic walls pasted up with little maps. She found a table at Black Cat Coffee and drank mochas and ate vegetarian chili for lunch and read books while the music and the light and the staff changed around her. She thought she should leave but she didn't want to go home. She thought of her apartment, empty and dark, the blinds pulled to block out the light and the inside quiet and cold like a tomb. The inside of the coffee shop was blue and heated with vents set into the wall between paintings and signs, and the music overhead was relaxing and new and just loud enough that she could read without being distracted. The chalkboard was full of new doodles, and she was sad to see that what she'd written there before had been replaced by a suggestion for a show to catch Friday night. She ordered a grilled veggie sandwich for dinner and finished reading the first book and moved onto the second and ordered more coffee and her stomach felt like it was dissolving with all the acid and she decided she had to get the hell out of there.

Claire went to the Station and Krystal was running the bar. They were the only people in the place, so Claire leaned on the bar and ordered a black russian and Krystal leaned on the other side and they talked about things their friends had done recently and things they'd heard in the papers and about which bands were going to play downtown in the next few weeks. Krystal had dyed red dreadlocks and black diamonds climbing up her arms like ivy. "What's your tattoo about?" Claire said.

"People without tattoos always ask that question."
"I have tattoos," Claire said. She pulled up a sleeve to reveal the little dancing skeleton on her arm. "Come on. Two of them."

"Huh. You don't seem the type."

"What does that mean? Too nerdy for you?" She looked at Krystal over the tops of her glasses.

"Well, why don't you tell me, then. What do yours mean?"

"Nothing," she said. "They're from a long time ago."

Krystal shrugged and sipped her drink, a rocks glass full of cranberry juice and tonic water. Krystal had told her before that she had to drink something behind the bar to keep drunks from trying to buy her shots. Krystal was cute in the way that drove drunks crazy, in the way that made you think she might be able to kick your ass. A couple guys in business suits came into the bar around six and then a couple kids showed up and more people filtered in and Krystal slid around behind the bar, from person to person, and Claire rested her head on her hand and drank her black russian and when she ordered her fourth Krystal hesitated and then put the glass down on the bar and looked at the clock hanging over the taps. "I hate to be a bitch," she said, "or nosy, but you're going through these kinda quick."

"So what?"

"So it's not even seven o'clock."

"There are other people here." She wanted to hold her glass and turn it around on the table but she didn't have a glass. "I got sent home. From work," she said. She looked up at herself in the mirror and she couldn't stop thinking about how bright the Station was tonight. She usually came in after nine, in the dark, but now it was early and the one wall
with windows was burning orange with the sunset. "I'm supposed to sit around my apartment all next week like a kid on time-out. Without a paycheck."

"Ah, shit," Krystal said. "Hey, I'm sorry, Claire."

"Yeah, well. Week off, right? I'm sleeping the fuck in all next week."

"Yeah," Krystal said. She poured Kahlua and vodka and crushed up ice and slid the new drink across the bar. Claire held it up and the booze wasn't quite mixed up and she could see Krystal through the vodka, distorted and cloudy, and the blue string of lights climbing up the wall on the other side of the room, and the little green lights on the credit card reader's display. More people came in, looking desperate and lonely or desperate and giddy, and Krystal slid around behind the bar more quickly than before, and Claire sat alone on the edge with a warming glass of booze in one hand and her phone in the other. She scrolled past Paul's name and thought about calling him and then closed her phone and opened it again. She wished she could remember the private detective's number because she wanted to call him and asked him what the fuck he was doing calling her boss. She had her boss's office number in her phone, and she wanted to call and leave a message asking what the fuck Alise was doing sending her home. Claire flipped her phone closed and open again and went back to Paul's number and closed it and opened it again and stared at the screen and when it vibrated in her hand she was so surprised that she almost dropped it.

She managed to get her phone open and Anders said, "Claire? Are you at that bar downtown?"

"The Station? 7th Station? Yes."
"Hold on, then," he said. "I'm outside Marie's building." He went silent and Claire looked down at her phone and saw that he'd hung up. She wrapped her hand around the damp glass of her tumbler and waited and a few minutes later she saw Anders in the mirror behind the bar. He wandered through the blue-light and lamplight murk and stood next to her for a while before realizing he could climb onto a stool.

"So you haven't found Marie?"

"I don't know where she is."

"And you were outside her building," she said. "Anders, what's going on? Did she break up with you? Are you a crazy stalker now?"

"She can't be there," he said. "She wouldn't just ignore her buzzer for four days."

"She might."

"And her phone." He leaned on his fist. Claire wanted to buy him a drink but the bartender, Krystal, was at the other end of the room, mixing something complicated involving green liqueur. "I'm thinking of calling the police."

"Oh boy," Claire said. "Anders, no, don't call the police."

'What if she's in trouble."

"Yeah, I’m sure she's in trouble. The Nazis have got her. Or the mob."

"Claire."

"The Des Moines mafia."

"This is a strange way to break up with someone," he said. "She's 28 and she's acting like a teenager."

"I think she's 30," Claire said. "Or 32. Isn't that right?" Anders looked up at her like she was telling a joke.
"Where are your friends?" Anders said. "Last time you were with a group of people."

"That's the book group. Bunch of librarians. Tuesday nights."

"I have to work tonight," he said. "How am I supposed to stand around behind the front desk and not lose my mind? It's like some new and important piece of my life has just disappeared."

"Relax," Claire said. "Anders, she's probably just fucking with you. She probably doesn't even realize she's fucking with you. She's a cold person."

"She's not cold."

"Anders," Claire said.

They sat there for a while and then he shook her hand, which seemed strange, and left. She watched in the mirror as he left and she kicked her feet around beneath her stool and decided to finish his drink for him after she finished hers. She left a handful of ones for Krystal and stepped outside and it was fourteen blocks back to her car at the Capitol Complex and she hummed to herself as she made her way down 4th Street and then onto Court Avenue. It was jacket weather outside, perfect weather, and there were people scattered around the bars looking happy and comfortable and asking for money. Claire gave two dollars to the first man who asked and five to the next person, a middle-aged woman, and after that her wallet was empty and she crossed the street to avoid running into anyone else. She stopped on the 6th Street bridge and planted her hands on the railing and leaned far enough over that she felt the blood rush into her temples. The water below was green and yellow in the light from the streetlamps and the moon, and the air smelled like salt and a fish aquarium she'd kept in high school. She still had the little paper bag
from the t-shirt shop, and now she shrugged off her jacket and let it fall to her ankles and she took out the X NO SWIMMING X shirt and pulled it over her head. She imagined how perfect it would be, right now, to swing her legs over the balcony and to splash into the river and to kick around and float around until she was cold and bored enough to go home. The river smelled like fish food and mud, though, and she looked down at the little chops in the water and thought she would probably drown in some silly and humiliating way, that she would bust her leg on a support beam or forget to hold her breath underwater and then would be talked about in the local paper. Claire usually wouldn’t litter but tonight she felt annoyed with the stink of the river and with the bums on 4th Street and she didn't much care about littering and she tossed the brown paper bag and let it drift away from her and the bridge and into the water below. She pulled her jacket back on and watched the bag float and then sink, and then she stumbled down the street and flipped off her agency's building and laughed and felt juvenile and great and drove home too fast. The lights blurred outside her windshield and it was great fun to rev the Jetta's engine on the interstate. She thought about the police and wondered what she would have to do to get pulled over, if she would have to sideswipe another car or just dodge in and out of lanes.

Paul's car was parked against the curb and next to a tree, and she was so surprised that she drove around the block again before parking. She'd planned for the apartment to be empty and dark so that she could come in and collapse on the couch and stare up at the ceiling and fall asleep, but inside now the lights were all up and he had a record playing in his bedroom, something she'd never heard before or couldn't remember. She went and stood in the hall in front of his bedroom but he looked up and smiled and then looked
back down at his box of records. Claire went to the kitchen and leaned on the sink and looked at the blender that she never used and at the little electric grill that Paul used to use all the time and the toaster that she would use if it still worked. She thought about making a drink and realized that it was Friday and that anyway she didn't have a job for the next week, for the next nine days. She poured rum into a small glass and went to her room and sat at her desk and opened her computer and the screen glowed like a small rectangular miracle in the gloom of her bedroom. She could hear Paul's music through the wall and she thought about calling Anders but her phone was in the living room, too far away. She opened her email and thought about writing to Anders but she thought of him at home, alone, feeling miserable for himself. She wished he would figure out that Marie wasn't going to work for him. She decided to email Marie, and asked where she was and why she was ignoring Anders and if she was cheating on him and if she was even really dating him. It wasn't her business and she felt like a snoop but Anders had looked pathetic at the Station and she was full of rum and vodka. She sent the email. She thought about Paul in the next room, and she thought about walking in and kissing him on the mouth and then falling into his bed and letting him slide her jacket to the floor and her shirt up over her shoulders. She thought that maybe she and Paul weren't that different from Marie and Anders and the thought froze her in her chair for the better part of a few minutes. Usually she thought of her life in this apartment and her arguments with Paul and their awkward and familiar exchanges at Quad-X as unique and particularly interesting, and now she wondered if they were boring examples of one common kind of human dilemma. Living with him and thinking about finding other men seemed perfectly
hip and appropriate as long as it wasn't the kind of thing other people all over the world were doing.

She stood and swished her drink around and closed her computer and her bedroom went dark. She yawned and sat on the bed and wondered what to do and eventually she laid back in the mess of sheets and pillows and let her thoughts fray and disintegrate entirely.

#  #  #

17.

The next morning Anders came home from the Overniter and tried to fall asleep on the couch. He laid there and listened to traffic and he could see sunlight and blood vessels through his closed eyelids and he knew he had to get out of the apartment. The air outside smelled fresh and crisp like leaves and he was glad to be awake. He dropped into the Grand Am and drove across town.

He didn't expect Black Hole Donut to be busy but it was. There were a few open spots at the edge of the parking lot, and when he walked inside he had to look around for an empty stool at the edge of the counter. A girl with dyed pink hair and tattoos crawling up her neck asked Anders what she could get him. Her bangs flashed in front of her eyes and he thought that she might look cute if he wasn't already in love with a girl who was a model. He asked if her boss was in and she poured coffee for three people and then boxed a half-dozen long johns for a woman in a football sweatshirt and slipped through the door
into the back room. Anders looked down at his knuckles and the tips of his nails. He should have been tired but it was still early enough in the day that the sunlight streaming through the windows made him feel alive and awake, and he was surrounded by the smells of food and freshly showered people. The girl walked out of the back room and leaned over the counter, close to Anders, and told him to go on back. The counter was full of people and it took him a moment to find the part that swung up to let him through. He imagined the back room would be industrial tile and aluminum shelves and two folding wooden chairs in a corner next to some pipes, but there was a brown rug in the center of the floor and a framed mess of paint hanging on the wall and a shelf full of canvas sacks of coffee beans. The Devil sat in a leather chair and was backlit by a window set into the wall. He said, "Anders. Good to see you."

"This place is busy."

"Oh, yes. Yes. We've been here months, you know," the Devil said. "But this will change. This place will be open later in the day, later at night. Kids with ironic t-shirts and tattoos and guitars strapped to their backs will come here when the bars close, and people with the local papers will write us up and send in the people who are tired of this town and tired of spending time at coffee shops and bars."

Anders pulled a little metal chair out from the wall and sat down. The Devil raised his eyebrows and waited for him to talk and Anders said, "Let's talk about Marie."

"The Model."

"The Model."

"Our Lady of the Bad Russian Accent."

"I haven't seen her since that audition."
"Maybe she's left you."

"She has been weird lately."

"Weird how?"

"I don't know," he said. "In bed? Is that weird. She has strange habits in bed anyway—"

"Very attractive women are often horrible in bed," the Devil said. "When was the last time you were with a very attractive woman?"

"Before Marie?"

"The problem with really beautiful women is that they're so bored with being objects of desire that they forget to have any desire themselves. They're so used to being hit on and stared at by men who want sex that they forget they can want it too."

"Yeah," Anders said. "Well." He fidgeted in his chair and felt weird and realized he felt like a seventeen year-old. "This isn't really the point."

"The point is that you think she's left you."

"I haven't seen her since Tuesday."

"Are you lonely?"

"I just wish she would tell me what's wrong."

"Maybe she doesn't know what's wrong. She probably doesn't want to see you until she knows," the Devil said. "Sad truth, man, it happens all the time. To everyone, everywhere. You feel that you exist at the center of some conspiracy of fortune and then something like this happens, the person you feel most drawn to in all the world is tired of you and your boring humanity and doesn't even have the decency to tell you."

Anders opened his mouth but didn't know what to say.
The Devil said, "My advice to you is to go home and sit on your couch and try to remember how not to worry about Marie."

"It doesn't work," he said. "I've spent years trying to remember how not to worry about my ex-wife. About Jackie."

"Sometimes it takes a while."

"You're yourself one moment, and then suddenly there's somebody in your life who could wreck everything if she left."

"You were with her a long time," the Devil said. "You were in here asking me how to hook Marie barely a month ago."

"I don’t know that it matters," Anders said. He thought about Jackie again. He wondered if the Devil served the kind of tea she enjoyed. He thought that now might be the time to ask about her, to ask for some advice. He thought he might just drive to her apartment but he couldn't get over the possibility that someone else would answer the door. He'd been afraid of it half a year after leaving and now it seemed undeniably likely. He couldn't figure out why but the idea that she'd moved so entirely beyond him as to find her own apartment or one with someone else was enough to make him feel shot in the chest.

He left Black Hole Donut and drove by the theater again and Marie's agency and didn't see her little blue Kia parked outside either one. He parked outside her apartment building and looked at the glass doors and the iron letters above them spelling out COURT AVENUE LOFTS. The inside of his car smelled like dust and fast food wrappers and he wished he'd bought a cup of the Devil's coffee. The sky was a dull metallic blue outside and the air was cold but Anders rolled down his window anyway and smelled the rolling
stink of exhaust and fuel and the doughy smell of a pizza place nearby. Anders thought
about the night he met Marie, in Claire's kitchen and later in her bedroom. He thought of
her collapsed in a drunken tired mess in Claire's bed and lifting a hand to tell him
goodnight and goodbye. Anders wondered how they'd got to this point and how he'd got
to this point in his life.

He thought about his first night with Marie and of her crazy lopsided accent and
he shifted into gear and drove off toward the downtown library. He'd never been to the
library and he didn't have a card but he thought it must be easy to get one. He thought it
must be simple. He thought that maybe some blue-haired woman in a cardigan would ask
him for two forms of ID and a deposit check and maybe a credit card number or a handful
of dollars and he would freak out and back slowly toward the door.

So he decided to skip the library and drove to Capitol City Books instead. The
front door was propped open with an enormous plant in an enormous orange pot, and the
leaves scraped against his arms as he walked in. He had only been here once, with Claire,
but he found the used books against one wall and he found a shelf of language books and
a little softcover book called *The Beginner's Guide to the Russian Tongue*. The back was
creased and a lot of the pages were folded over and on the cover a man swallowed up in a
winter coat stood grinning on the steps of some huge stone building. Anders paid seven
dollars for the book and walked down the street to Black Cat Coffee and sat in the back
corner and drank coffee and muttered beneath his breath in Russian. He realized he must
look crazy and then he realized that he didn't care. His mind felt watery and thin, like
maybe his brain was melting. His shoulders felt sore and his eyes felt tired but when he
thought about driving home and climbing into bed the idea seemed too quiet and boring and horrible, almost like dying.

The first two pages of the book explained the pronunciation of letters in the Russian alphabet and was full of strange symbols and weird phonetic spellings and Anders didn’t even try to understand. He hadn't taken Spanish in high school and he hadn't had to learn a language in community college and now he didn't know where to start. He flipped forward in the book and found a little phrasebook at the end of the chapter, and then another at the end of another chapter. He found an index in the back, and then there were phrases in Russian written out in noises he knew how to make. Anders flipped around in the book and drank coffee and talked to himself until he had a handful of words to say in a language he didn't even understand.

#

Anders drove around Des Moines all afternoon and the hours rolled by and he stopped counting how many times he'd driven by Marie's apartment. He got tired of the radio and shut it off and kept muttering foreign phrases that sounded more and more familiar and then more and more absurd. He balanced the phrase book on his lap and then put it on the dashboard but he took a corner too sharply and it almost slid out the open window and onto the street.

Anders decided that he was so caught up over Marie because there was no chance he would ever kiss someone as beautiful as her again. There was no chance he would ever sleep with another woman who modeled for a living or who lived in an expensive
loft downtown. He was 28 and the older he got the less single women there were around him. "Marie," he said. "Oh, Marie," he said. "\textit{Ya tebya lyublyu}," he said, which meant that he loved her. "\textit{Vwee krasivaya dyevachka}," he said, which meant that she was a beautiful girl. "\textit{U teb'a prelesnye hlaza}," he choked out, which meant that her eyes were gorgeous. Her eyes were hazel and he imagined her melting into him and he kept driving.

Anders had stopped believing in God sometime in high school but he had an idea that there must be some kind of guiding force keeping track of all the random and pointless things that happened in life, and the idea that Marie, who had appeared almost magically to him in Claire's living room at a party that might have been just another party, had now slipped back out of his life seemed monstrously unfair or at least senseless. He thought that if Marie were gone from him it must mean something about Jackie. He had long since stopped wishing to have her back and remembering the way her mouth tasted or the way her voice sounded in the passenger seat of his car, but he thought now that if he could just have a glass of water or a cup of tea with her and ask her how life was he could at least get some kind of perspective back. It seemed that since he'd left her his life had drained of all its meaning and he was some kind of hollow paper bag blowing around Des Moines.

He took a joint from his pocket and lit it up and sucked in smoke but then wondered why he wanted to be high to see his ex-wife. He flipped the joint out the window and looked at himself in the mirror and tried to decide if his eyes had already gone red. He rolled down the windows and sucked in fresh air and wondered if he smelled like pot now. He stared at himself in the mirror and then at the road ahead and as he swung out onto the Interstate and headed east and then north he became giddy with the
idea that he was actually driving home. The city fell away around him and was replaced by grass and factories and hills and scattered farmhouses, and then the shopping centers at the edge of Ankeny came into view and Anders pulled into the suburb. He realized he was laughing and he kept it up. It was just too early for rush hour traffic and the roads were mostly empty and he crept into town at fifteen miles per.

He'd been here before, had driven aimlessly past the taco stand he and Jackie had eaten at and past the bars they'd drunk at and past the row of box stores where they'd bought furniture to fill out their apartment. He'd even driven by their place, in the months after he left, usually late at night and stoned, looking to see if her car was in the driveway, if any other cars were there, if the lights were on inside and if the blinds were drawn. He'd given it up as creepy and had stayed away but now, driving down the long stretch of First Street, past the school and the grocery store and the Bike Universe and the Christian gym and the pizza place and Under the Sea Pets, he felt like he might have been traveling back in time, to a regular day in his past life. The turns took like the right turns to take and the houses in the residential district all looked familiar. His old place loomed up on the right, a little building, an eight-apartment building, with the same little parking lot on the side and the tiny stretch of lawn out front. Jackie's car wasn't in the lot but Anders had by now decided that she would have upgraded by now, would have got a better job and traded in her old New Yorker for a convertible or maybe something blockier, sportier, an SUV, maybe. He imagined her as a hiker now or a biker or as some kind of outdoors person. She'd never been one and he had no idea where this new idea of her had come from.
He parked in the lot and walked up the same wooden stairs he'd walked up countless times, in his past life. He touched the door and rang the doorbell and nobody came. He waited and noticed that the doormat wasn't different but was gone. He waited and turned and looked out on the neighborhood, on the apartment building across the street and at the rows of houses stretching off toward First Street. He turned and popped up on his toes and looked into the little diamond window in the top of the door, and then looked again. Inside everything was dark and obviously nobody was home. He popped up on his toes again and looked at the furniture inside, at the expensive wooden table in the dining room and at the paintings hung low on the walls. He walked down to the row of post boxes clustered against the curb and looked at them and didn't see her name anywhere. On the mailbox he'd once carried a key for, a little sticker said B. SUPPES in tiny printed letters.

"That's it," he said. His voice sounded flat to him and he realized that was perfectly fine. He walked back to the stairs and leaned on the railing and realized he was not surprised at all. It had been years since he'd left and of course she'd moved out. Of course she'd moved on. He sat down in the grass and realized that he didn’t even care.

He thought of a time when they'd sat out here together, cross-legged, drinking water out of coffee mugs. The power had gone out and they played Go Fish with an old deck of cards until the utility trucks rolled onto the block.

He thought of a when they'd scrubbed at her car in the parking lot. She'd pulled trash out from beneath the seats while he'd rubbed the car's doors with an old bath towel dipped into a bucket of warm water.
He thought of the way she'd kissed him, and of the way that Marie kissed him now, and he realized that he wouldn't go back to his past life even if Jackie pulled into the parking lot now and offered him the choice.

Anders climbed back into the Grand Am and left Ankeny. He got back on the Interstate and drove back to Des Moines. He intended to park somewhere and purchase a glass of lemonade or a beer or a diet soda, but he wasn't sure exactly where this would happen. People were getting out of work now and the roads were crowded with cars. Anders drove by people in worn dress pants and hoodies and people in striped suits and patterned dresses and happy swaggering people in jeans and t-shirts and aviator sunglasses. He drove by old ladies walking dogs and by a harried-looking woman leading a gaggle of preschoolers down the sidewalk. He drove by a man in khaki pants and a puffy jacket who looked a little familiar. He looked at the man's face in the side mirror as he passed and thought about it for a few seconds and was so surprised and excited to recognize him as the guy from the robbery at the Overniter that he stamped on the gas and almost crashed into the back bumper of a delivery truck in front of him.

Anders looked in the mirror again and crossed lanes. A minivan honked and swooped around him and Anders didn't care. He looked at the guy in the mirror again and he was far away now and hunched over and Anders could only see his jaw now and the side of his narrow head but the memory was so clear that he knew he couldn't be wrong.

He couldn't look away from the mirror and there was a jolt from the front of the car and he had popped up onto the curb. He screamed and gripped the wheel and smashed down on the brake and stopped just before running into a parking meter. He looked in the mirror and there were no cars behind him. He looked down the sidewalk and the robber
was the only person around. Anders thought about leaving the car where it was but he was on Locust and there would be cars by at any second so he reversed and dropped off the curb and back onto the street. He drove to the parking lot of a drive-through bank and turned around and drove back past the robber and the guy didn't even look up. He drove two blocks past and couldn't decide what to do. He picked up his phone and dialed 911 and then closed his phone and decided to follow the guy himself. He told himself that he had been a cop once, but then he remembered that he'd never chased anybody, had not even stayed with the department long enough to tackle a drunk or even get swung at. His heart kicked and he turned around in the parking lot of a video rental place and happened to look in the mirror just as the robber ducked into a doorway. Anders panicked and gunned his car up the street and saw that the doorway lead into a bar with a sign overhead that said The Golden Duck. He stopped in the middle of the street and dialed the Overniter and then hung up. He dialed Neil and Neil didn't answer. He stared at the bar's dingy wooden door and had an intense fantasy about waiting for the robber to walk outside and then running him down or at least scaring the hell out of him with the horn. He tried Neil again but Neil didn't answer and Anders slapped around at the fast food receipts and the pennies and soda bottle caps in the ash tray and finally found Don Piano's business card. It was bent and already faded but Anders could still make out the phone number printed beneath a picture of an old camera.

"This is DP," Don Piano said.

"Listen," Anders said. "I found the motherfucker. I found the cocksucker."

"The guy who ripped you off? Really?"

"He's at the Golden Duck."
"The what?"

"It's some kind of bar on Locust. I just almost ran over a parking meter."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," Anders said. He gripped the steering wheel and looked into the mirror. He was sure the robber would step outside at any second. "Come . . . private investigate or something."

"Why don't you call the police?"

"I can get him," Anders said.

"Maybe he's got bullets for that gun now," Don Piano said. "Hum. Hum hum." He exhaled right into the phone and it sounded like wind rushing over Anders's head. "Tell you what, Anders. I'm sitting around here in my underwear trying to think of something worth doing with my Saturday and nothing's coming up. So why don't we meet. You're not at the hotel."

"I'm on Locust. Downtown."

"So let's meet downtown."

"Here?"

"Well, not just on the street."

"This guy could disappear."

"Nobody walks into a bar for ten minutes. It's four in the afternoon. He's got nothing better to do than get drunk."

"Okay," Anders said. "Black Cat. This coffee shop. You know it?"

"I will see you there," he said, and hung up.
Anders drove to Black Cat Coffee and felt like a creep going back up to the counter and ordering another cup of coffee from the same girl who'd already poured him three. He sat at the front of the room and thought about going out to this car to get the phrase book. Twenty minutes passed and Don Piano showed up in a pair of brown pants and a matching vest. If he'd had a fedora and better cheekbones he might have been straight out of a black-and-white movie. He grinned and pointed at Anders and said, "The Golden Duck!"

"Should we go?"

"No," Don Piano said. "But let's get out of here. I can't stand this place." He crossed his arms and shifted around on his feet and said, "Look around you, man. What do you see?"

Anders saw bad art and blue paint on the walls and a huge coffee grinder set up in the corner. "A coffee shop?"

"This place is full of crazies. Look around. The kids in the corner, the barista, all dyed hair and tattoos like a suntan. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it's nothing wrong, but it's not our scene. We don't belong here."

"There's nothing wrong with this place."

"Look around. Look at yourself," he said. "Anyway, bring your coffee. This place won't give two cats' tails if you walk out with a coffee cup. It would spoil their reputation if they chased you down." He headed for the doors and a string of bells rattled when he pushed through and Anders couldn’t decide what to do with his coffee. He carried it out and spilled on his hands and it was getting cold but he'd had too much already anyway. "You want a drink?"
"I'm good with this coffee," he said. "I'm not much of a drinker."

"Good," Don Piano said. He walked to a brown Oldsmobile parked against the curb. It was a bulky refrigerator of a car, but the door felt solid when Anders pulled it open and the leather seat took him in like an armchair. Don Piano buckled in and pulled away from the curb and said, "This is my working car. I charge thirty bucks an hour plus expenses and I drive around in a car that's straight out of the fucking 80s. Perfect for stalking cheating husbands around, though."

"Huh."

Don Piano drove up 2nd Avenue, past Marie's building, and Anders scanned the sidewalk for her. They turned onto Grand and then turned again on 3rd. "I know I asked you about your name already, but is it short for something?"

"It's just a name," Anders said. He slouched in his seat and they drove south and within just a few blocks the tall buildings and crowded parking lots faded away. They rolled past a thrift store and then a grocery store and then a row of factory buildings with boring gray and brown fronts. "I think my parents just wanted me to have a weird name. Something special. Who knows."

"Who knows," Don Piano said. He leaned back in his seat and held the steering wheel with one hand and looked entirely at home in the car. Anders wondered if he did this a lot, if he drove around talking to people he barely knew. "Anders," he said. "Let me ask you this. What do you guys think of us? I mean, cops and PIs. The general wisdom is that cops are dicks who don't want me getting in the way."

"I worked in Ankeny," he said. "Nothing really happened there. Nothing happened there that we couldn’t handle."
"Ah, but see, that's the thing. That's what you guys always say."

"Nothing happened there that would have interested you."

"Too bad," he said. "Too bad for business. And us. We could have met a long time ago." He drummed his fingers over the steering wheel. "Your girl come back yet?"

"She's gone. I don't know where she is." He tugged on his seatbelt and pushed his head against the window. "I haven't slept in like 36, 37 hours. I've been downtown looking for her all day."

"You're a stalker."

"Private investigator," he said. "But you know how it is. I mean, you get like this, you realize you're crazy and perfectly normal at the same time."

"Hmm."

"Do you have a girlfriend? Are you married?"

"Hell no." Don Piano looked over at Anders and then back out at the road. "As my dad would say, I'm queer as the night is lonely."

"You're gay?"

"Gay as hell." He gripped the wheel and they were in a neighborhood full of houses now. They drove past two-story houses with wide lawns and badminton nets strung up in front of sidewalks. Kids chased each other around the edges of the streets, and in some of the windows Anders could see the silhouettes of people moving around inside their homes. He'd never been in this part of the city, and he couldn't help staring at the wide lawns and the lack of sidewalks. His idea of the city stretched from the long empty nights at the Overniter to the fluorescent lights of the movie rental store down the
street to Claire's parties and to the stoop in front of his apartment building where he stood waiting for pizza delivery drivers to show up.

"So what do you want to do?" Don Piano said.

"About Marie?"

"About your guy at the Golden Duck."

Anders knocked his head against the window and imagined the glass breaking all over his hair and the seat and the road outside. "I want to take him down but, you know, it's stupid. A bar fight. I get arrested and then the cops ask if we have some history. That's what I'd suspect. Some kind of history together and so I found him and beat the shit out of him."

"Like maybe you two planned the robbery and he kept your cut."

"At the very least I come out looking crazy."

"This one's your call, buddy. Your boss hired me to tell him not to worry and I told him not to worry. So what you want to do with this now is all your decision."

"Shit," Anders said.

"What do you think is gonna happen if you call the police? They're gonna scream up to that door and handcuff this guy and put him in a cell for the night and then a bail bondsman will come pick him up and two months later he'll show up in court and you and your girlfriend are going to have to testify, so at least you'll get to see her again. And then your guy is going to go to jail for five years or more, really, because he got a firearm involved. Loaded, unloaded, nobody gives a shit. The paper loves taking people apart for weapons violations."
Anders pulled down the visor and opened it and looked in the little cracked mirror. The bruises were gone from his face and he knew it but he wanted to make sure anyway.

"It was probably just some old piece this guy got from his dad and kept in his sock drawer. It's not that uncommon. I mean, you could open the glove box and see my revolver in there with the Chapstick and Kleenex. I don't even need the damn thing. I don't even know why I keep it."

Anders thought about opening the glove box, but didn't. Don Piano took a few turns and then Anders saw the tiny skyline of the city rising up a few miles outside the windshield.

"So the beans boil down to this," Don Piano said. "Do you want to send this guy to jail, or do you want to go home and get some sleep?"

Anders wanted to be lost in thought but he couldn't get his brain going. Don Piano drove around and hummed little pieces of songs to himself and finally Anders said, "Take me to my car, please."

"All right," Don Piano said. He looked at Anders but by the time Anders looked back he was staring out the windshield again, holding the wheel with one hand and rubbing his mustache with the other. "I think I'm gonna shave this thing. It's ridiculous, I know. I can't help it. I get so experimental with facial hair."

"Maybe Marie will show up," Anders said. "Maybe she'll just show up at my place."

"Yeah," Don Piano said. "I don't know about that, bud."

"Maybe she's there right now," Anders said.
Marie was at the Devil's apartment on the far west side of town, and had been sleeping there for the past three nights. The Devil kept telling her to forget about the audition, not to worry about it because it wasn't important, but she'd kept her phone's ringer on and had carried it everywhere she went for the past three days. She'd stuck it in the tiny pockets of her jeans and laid it on the sink when she showered and now it was actually in the bed with her, up by the pillow, and nobody from the theater had ever called. Anders had called her, too many times, and each time she'd have to listen to the phone ring five times before going to voicemail. Finally, yesterday, she'd driven to the theater. There was no one around but she'd walked into the lobby and the cast list for the play was tacked to three different bulletin boards. She'd guessed that if she went into the bathroom she'd see it tacked up in there too. Marie's name hadn't been on the list and the part she'd auditioned for had gone to somebody whose name she didn't want to look at long enough to remember. She'd left the theater and ground her teeth and decided that the director and the stage manager and Richard could all go to hell. She called him an hour later and told him to get her a fucking commercial. Now there was something lined up with a chain of waffle houses but Marie knew it would fall through.

And she'd been brooding about Claire. She'd decided that she could not stand Claire. She'd printed the email Claire sent her and had kept it folded up in the back
pocket of her jeans every day. It was marked from one in the morning and was full of
typos and Claire had obviously been drunk when she'd written it. It was condescending
and insulting and Marie liked to pull it out and read it and get pissed off all over again. It
said things like, "Why would you treat Anders like this?" It said things like, "Whatever
idea you have about relationships is so obviously fucked up."

It was dark outside when Marie left, and when she got in her car the headlights
seemed jarringly bright in the parking lot. She wondered where to go and then drove to
Claire's shitty apartment on the East Side and looked for her stupid Jetta and didn't see it.
She didn't know what Paul drove but she figured he was gone too because he didn't seem
like the kind of person who would be stuck at home on a Saturday night. The building
wasn't expensive enough to have locking lobby doors, and Marie bounded on inside and
up the stairs to the second floor and decided that if Paul did come to the door she would
have sex him and find some way to make sure that Claire found out about it. Paul didn't
come to the door and Marie knocked again and then took the keys she'd stolen out of her
pocket. They made an awful jingling noise in the hall and she had to try two of the three
keys before the door opened. The foyer was dark and the kitchen was dark inside and the
living room was dark inside, barely lit with light coming through the blinds, and she felt
like she was looking into a tomb or a cave or something. She jumped inside and shut the
door and locked it and then checked the lock and then wondered what good it would do if
Claire or Paul came home.

The apartment was shadowy and quiet like a museum or a graveyard. She had no
idea what she wanted to do now that she was inside, and she thought about just turning
the lock again and going outside and tossing the keys into the street like she'd wanted to
do in the first place. She thought about just leaving the keys on the counter and leaving
but then she'd have to leave the door unlocked. She touched the light switch next to the
door and then ran her hand up the base of a lamp but was too nervous to turn on any
lights. She walked through the living room and listened to her footsteps crushing the
carpet and pushed open the door to Claire's bedroom. The bed in the corner was small
and neatly made and she remembered the night she'd fallen into it, the night she met
Anders. She touched the sheets and they were cool and she realized how cool the air in
the apartment was. She let herself fall forward into the bed and then laid there smelling
the pillow and feeling the sheets beneath her fingers. It was quiet and dark and she
wondered what it must be like to fall asleep every night in this small space, in this small
apartment, with someone she knew sleeping on the other side of the wall.

Marie had known Claire for almost two years now, and she realized that for all
that time Claire had been pretentious and ridiculous and also condescending and
annoying. The first time they'd ever gone out together Claire had sat on the other side of
the table at the Station, trying to look interested and engrossed but really just looking
bored. Marie had talked about her job and how she got it and what she did every day and
Claire talked about working for the government and she'd sounded so proud of herself
that Marie had wanted to vomit. Claire always seemed superior and aloof and also
oblivious, like she always had better places to be or better things to think about. Marie
rubbed her hands on the bed sheets and thought about Claire having sex with Paul and
thought that she must be the most bored-looking and awful person to sleep with. She
pressed her face into the pillow and wondered if Claire dreamed about books or her job or
the Station or what.
Marie rolled over on the bed and the room was dark but she could see well enough to make out the photos taped to the wall. There were pictures of Claire and Paul, of Claire and other women that Marie recognized from the bars downtown, of Claire and the red-headed bartender from the Station. Marie stood and didn't bother fixing the sheets and saw Claire's green cloth jacket hanging from a hook on the door. Claire wore the jacket all the time, and Marie realized it was as much a part of her as her plastic glasses or her dyed black hair. She pulled it on and it was too baggy in the shoulders and the sleeves were too short but it didn't matter. She found a wad of receipts in the pocket and a twenty-dollar bill and left it all on the desk, next to the computer. She buttoned the jacket over herself and felt warmer and better she noticed how the cloth scraped against her elbows and rode up her arms and how the collar rubbed against the back of her neck.

Marie went back to the living room and looked out through the window blinds. Paul had to be out somewhere interesting and Claire had to be at some downtown bar drinking too much, but Marie was still afraid that one of them would open the door. She played with the buttons on the jacket and thought about dropping it onto the floor or hanging it back up but then she saw the wall full of bookshelves, the wall full of books. She went to the books and pulled one down and flipped it open and wondered how anyone could read so many books. She imagined Claire sitting on the little couch beneath the window, drinking whiskey or gin or whatever she drank, reading and thinking about how smart and hip she as. Marie took down another book and looked through it and thought maybe a photo or a bookmark would fall out but nothing did. She took down another one and another one and when she had an armful she carried them into the kitchen and then changed her mind and carried them into the bathroom. The shower
curtain was pulled back and she dumped the books into the bathtub. It looked mostly dry and the rattle of them falling was louder than she'd expected. There were no windows so she turned on the light and the books all looked so thick and colorful against the white floor of the bathtub. She thought that if she looked around in the kitchen she could find some matches and she could light the books on fire. She thought she could get a great fire going and then go for more books. There would be a smoke alarm somewhere, though, and then probably police. She might accidentally burn down the whole fucking apartment. She thought that maybe she could soak the books instead, but when she grabbed the hot water knob it was cold and surprisingly dry in her hand and she got a little scared. She scooped the books back up and stacked them on one of the shelves in the living room and then looked out through the window and then the peephole in the door and when she was sure it was safe and empty outside she left and locked the door behind her. She realized she was still wearing Claire's jacket, and she put the stolen keys into the pocket and then pulled them back out. She gripped the key ring in her fist and squeezed and imagined the little red lines it was digging into her palm. She turned around and threw them up onto the roof and waited to hear them clatter but they landed far off, three stories up, without a sound.

The sleeves of the jacket were loose but so short and climbed up her arms when she held the steering wheel and she felt ridiculous driving. She thought about calling Anders but knew he would be home because he was always home. She couldn't figure out how Anders knew all the best bars in town and the best drinks when he never went out and didn't even really like drinking. She thought that if he ever stopped trying to impress her he would probably sulk around his apartment and drink soda and watch DVDs for the
rest of his life. She parked next to his car and went into his building, which was cheap like Claire's and shitty enough not to need a lock on the outside doors. She stood in front of Anders's door and looked at the brass numbers hanging above the peephole. She could hear the sounds of a movie playing inside, and she imagined him slouched in his couch, his mouth hanging open. She thought about walking back outside and to her car and driving downtown but she imagined Anders inside, looking pathetic, and she knocked on the door and waited. She heard his footsteps and the creek of the floor and she wondered how many times his neighbors had heard them having sex. The door swung open and Anders stood gaping. "Marie," he said.

She thought he would jump onto her and squeeze the breath out of her but he didn't. He stood in the doorway with his mouth open and his hair sticking up on the side. He was dressed in the green-tinted jeans that he always wore and a faded high school track t-shirt and he looked a little cute. The apartment was dark behind him except for the glowing television screen. A blanket slithered half off the couch and she asked, "Were you asleep?"

"No, no," he said. "No, not at all."

"I thought I should stop by."

"Yeah, yes. Yeah. I'm glad you did, you know?" He leaned forward through the door. "Why are you wearing Claire's jacket?"

"I stole it."

He didn't say anything.
She shifted from one foot to the other and then crossed her arms over her chest but then the cuffs of the jacket slid up past her wrists and she felt ridiculous. "So obviously I'm breaking up with you."

"Oh, Anders said. "Oh, Yeah. Yeah, I guess."

"Uh huh."

"But," he said. He cleared his throat and looked up at the ceiling and then down at the floor of the hallway. She hated it when people looked away from her and so she looked down too, at the crisscrossing orange-and-brown lines on the carpet. He said something she couldn't understand, and then looked up at her and smiled.

"What?"

"Ya tebya lyublyu. And, uh, also, Vwee krasivaya dyevachka."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's Russian," he said. "And, uh, oh, damn." He closed his eyes and knocked his fist against his forehead. He squinted and when he opened his mouth he looked like he might be getting ready to pray. "U teb'a, U teb'a prelesnye hlaza."

"Anders," she said, "I didn't get the part."

"I know," he said. "I know, I mean, I figured, but—"

"So why the fuck would you stand here talking to me in that fucking language?"

"It means you're beautiful," he said. "Or that might be the second one. The first thing was, I love you."

"Oh, fuck off," she said. Anders opened his mouth again and his eyes got a little wider and she thought it should make her feel bad but really it made her excited. "You
have anything else? Did you memorize anything else? What, did you find some Russian class on the internet—"

"That's all," he said. "That's it, that's all."

"So you what, memorized three Russian phrases and thought they would just magically seduce me? Like the button on my jeans would just pop off or my shirt would just fall apart or something?"

"Marie," he said.

"I'm gonna go," she said. "See you, Anders." She waited for him to say something and realized she didn't need to wait. Anders just stared and she decided she should go before he said anything else stupid. She thought that she should kiss him or hug him or feel something warm for him. She thought she must be a bad person because she just wanted to turn and leave and then she decided that was fine. Anders kept opening his mouth and closing it again, and she turned and jogged down the stairs and out into the parking lot. She got into her car and looked in the mirror but he didn't follow her outside.

#   #   #

19.

Claire spent her week off getting bored with all the things she loved. By noon Tuesday she was tired of reading in the back corner of Black Cat Coffee and of drinking bitter coffee and of explaining to the people she ran into downtown why she wasn't at
work. By Wednesday she was tired of sleeping and by that night she was even almost
tired of drinking rum and fucking around on the internet. By Friday she was too sober
and restless out of her mind and Paul didn't have to work so they went shopping together
for the first time in at least two months. Claire thought it might have been longer than that
but her memory was fuzzy so she decided not to argue. After, they made vegetarian
burritos in the kitchen of their apartment and then ate sitting on the living room floor
while listening to one of the obscure and not-too-great records Paul was always bringing
home from Quad-X. Claire thought they might have sex on the couch, and watched him
chew and swallow and nod his head around with the music. His jaw moved in an
awkward swing, left to right, and when he swallowed he looked like a horse or a giraffe.
She thought that if he would just move out she'd be able to forget about him. She thought
that there really wasn't much she liked about him anymore except the idea that she'd liked
him for so long. She decided not to sleep with him, but while she washed dishes he came
up behind her and brushed his hip against hers. He smiled and touched the bone of her
shoulder. She panicked and told him she had to take a shower and when she finally
stepped out, soggy and shining in a bath towel, he was gone.

Claire sprawled on the couch with a book and a glass of rum and ice and found
that she wasn't bored yet with reading or drinking after all. The apartment was quiet and
empty around her and she felt like she'd somehow fallen out of time. The next morning
she slept until eleven and was still in her underwear and a t-shirt, eating cold cereal and
drinking green vegetable juice, when her cell phone rang and she saw Neil's name
blinking on the display.
"Neil?" she said. She hadn't spoken all morning and her voice came out as a rough whisper.

"Claire," he said. "Hey, what's new?"

"I'm on suspension."

"What?" he said. "Hey, you never got back to me. About the show, I mean. What do you think?"

"The show?"

"Yeah. Anders was supposed to email you."

She put the cereal bowl down on the carpet and stood up. She had trouble holding phone conversations while sitting down. "I haven't been to work in a week. So if he emailed me there…"

"Oh, hell. Well, what's up? What's wrong?"

"My boss is a bitch," she said.

"Oh, yeah, well, no surprise, right? Anyway, LOA is playing at House of Stones tonight. We're doing that metal show. Remember?"

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, yeah." She paced over to the window and looked down on the parking lot. It was still early in the day and the sun was bright and she remembered that she was barely dressed and decided it didn't matter. "You're really doing it, huh?"

"Hell yes," he said. "Hell yes, hell yes. You oughta come out. I mean, you pretty much have to. It was your idea, right?"

"I don't know about that. We were just, it was a joke, I think—"

"It is a joke. Sort of. It's a lark, you know. It'll be for kicks. But like you said, this city is four years behind everywhere else."
"Won't it be kind of depressing if you're more successful as a fake metal band?"

He sighed and said, "Yeah. Yeah, it will."

Claire finished her cereal and her juice and laid on the floor and spread her arms out on the carpet. Paul was still at work and would be until five, and she dialed the record store and then hung up and put her phone on top of the refrigerator, where she wouldn't see it. Later she went to the shower and stood in the water so long that the skin of her shoulders and chest turned pink and soft and her hair clung to the back of her neck like the collar of a wet raincoat. When she finished, the air in the bathroom was thick and wet and she had to wipe the mirror every few seconds while penciling old eyeliner onto herself. She went to the kitchen with a towel hung over her neck, dripping water onto the tile floor, and dialed Paul's number again and hung up again. She found an old pair of jeans in the closet and pulled on a busted pair of Chuck Taylors that she hadn't worn since two summers before. The Des Moines River shirt needed to be washed but she pulled it on anyway and the yellow looked pale and horrible against her skin. She sat at the kitchen table biting her thumbnail and thinking about Paul until she felt tight with stress and pulled the rum bottle out of the freezer. She tried to read and couldn't read without glancing up at the clock or at the sky outside the window, and so finally she grabbed her keys and looked for her jacket and couldn't find her jacket and decided it wouldn't go with her outfit anyway. She drove toward Quad-X Records and slid the Little Orphan Annie CD into her dashboard. She wondered where Paul had spent the night and she thought about the way he chewed and how long they'd been living together and fighting over stupid things like television shows and blondes and how they couldn't figure out what exactly was going on in their apartment and how she wanted so badly to be rid
of him and done trying to make decisions about him. She kept driving but rolled past the Capitol Complex and then the East Village and kept looking at her own eyes in the rearview mirror until she almost ran into the back of a delivery truck. She'd slept so much this week, ten and eleven hours a night, and the little purple bags under her eyes that she thought would never go away were finally fading out.

She thought about calling Neil but he was probably with the band, warming up or drinking cheap beer or whatever he did before a show. She hadn't talked to Anders in a week and wondered what else he'd emailed her, and so she aimed the Jetta for his apartment building. The sun was low in the sky by the time she got there and the main hallway smelled like heat and boiled pork and overcooked vegetables. She felt silly and exposed, in her jeans and t-shirt, without her jacket. She knocked and waited and thought about knocking again and thought about leaving but then the door opened and Anders stood there looking sleepy and surprised.

"Claire," he said. He looked at her legs and then at her arms and her face, and she remembered that he almost always saw her dressed for work. "I thought you were dead."

"Dead?"

"I just mean, you're usually very easy to reach."

"It's been a strange week," she said.

They sat on his couch and looked at a movie playing on his DVD player and talked about Marie. The window over his desk was cracked open and the apartment was cold and the air felt thin and smelled like fall leaves and rain even though Claire couldn't remember the last time it had rained. Anders said that he was all right and fine but he kept sighing and folding his arms and slumped deeper into the couch. Claire wanted to
tell him to take a nap but she had no idea what she'd do if he took a nap. She wanted to
tell him to have a drink. She went to the window and drank a glass of water while Anders
muttered to himself in a way that Claire couldn't understand. She asked him what he was
saying.

"It's Russian," he said. "Godawful language."

"I didn't know you spoke Russian."

"I don't," he said.

Claire's mouth tasted like old sugar and fire from the rum she'd had hours earlier,
so when it was time to leave she took a can of soda along for the ride. She wanted a Dr.
Pepper or an RC but Anders only had Coke. She drove with both hands on the wheel and
the radio volume turned almost all the way down, and Anders sat in the passenger seat
nodding along with the quiet music and staring out the window. It was dark outside and
she could see his reflection and her own in the glass. "Remember that private eye?" he
said.

"Don Piano," she said. "Fucking Don Piano."

Anders reached for the radio knob and turned up the volume. "This is Neil's
band."

"That's true."

"Yeah, right. He gave me this album. Listened to it once. I mean, it's great, I'm
just not into music. I never really picked up the right attitude for it."

"It's not too late," she said.

The House of Stones was full of kids in black t-shirts and torn and baggy hoodies
and jeans held up with studded belts. Claire could not believe how old she felt stepping
inside and how ridiculous. She'd been here before for other shows but hadn't felt so out of place then or so awkward, and she realized she'd never been here sober. She and Anders waded through the crowd and to the bar and then found a place in the back, by the window. Anders cradled a beer in both hands and Claire sipped at a gin and tonic that smelled like floor cleaner. They tried to talk but the bar was crowded and buzzing and bright with lights and Claire couldn't think of anything that seemed worth talking about. Eventually a tall guy in gray jeans and a black t-shirt slipped up to them through the crowd and Claire was surprised to see that it was Neil. He'd dyed the tips of his hair black and his t-shirt hugged him so that his belly looked a little too big but his biceps looked thick and tight.

"Nice costume," Claire said.

"I feel ridiculous," he said, and laughed. He punched Anders in the shoulder and said, "You forget about that girl yet?"

"Yeah," he said. "Oh yeah. Well. No."

"Good enough," Neil said. "Enjoy the show. Don't forget to scream or throw your underwear." He ducked back into the crowd and Claire turned to Anders.

"There are better women than Marie," she said.

"I used to know one," he said.

"Better than Jackie too."

The bar filled up and Claire watched the door and finally she saw a few people her own age, people who looked like they'd been out of high school and college for more than a couple years. She recognized a woman from the Station, and then someone who worked at the sandwich shop she went to on her lunch breaks. She saw someone from the
Russian Tea Room and thought about leaving Anders alone next to the window but he looked so pathetic and alone that she sipped her drink and leaned back against the glass and stayed where she was. The opening band came out on a little stage in the corner that was so low to the ground that Claire could only see the top of the singer's head over the crowd. They were all kids in black clothes and she wondered how they felt about opening for a band they probably had never listened to. When they were done the lights came up and then went back down and Little Ochre Annie came onstage and the singer took the mic. She introduced the band as Big Metal Mary in a voice lower than Claire remembered, and they launched into a hard clashing metal song that Claire barely recognized from the CD in her car. The crowd moved along with the music and the singer screamed into the mic and the band jumped around and Neil looked silly onstage but she couldn't look away. The crowd screamed in between songs and Claire couldn't believe the experiment was going so well. The singer rumbled into the mic and strode around the stage and Claire hopped up and down for a better view and saw Neil leaning forward and smacking at his guitar strings with such frenzied intensity that she remembered a time, months before, when she'd walked into the bathroom and seen Paul masturbating on the other side of the translucent shower curtain. The show ended sooner than she expected and the lights came up and she thought the band must be exhausted. Anders looked cramped against the window and so obviously out of place that she thought he might start laughing. Most times he looked like a hotel clerk but every now and then she'd catch a ghost of someone he used to be, or her idea of who that person might have been. "You all right?" she said.
"I'm great," he said. He made a show of finishing his beer and then knocked the bottle against Claire's glass and wandered off toward the bar.

She looked around for Paul. She didn't know how Paul could have missed this show, but then she decided that it was probably too silly for him. Paul and his friends and the other guys who worked at Quad-X would have been repulsed and offended by the idea of Little Orphan Annie dressing up in black and gray and twisting their music around for a different crowd. Paul and his friends and the other guys who worked at Quad-X would have been repulsed and offended by the idea of any band doing anything with music just for fun. Claire looked around for Paul anyway and then looked around for Marie but there was no way Marie would be here. Anders came back and looked around at the ceiling and at the floor, and Claire was about to give in and lead him out the door when Neil appeared out of the crowd, looking giddy with sweat, holding a can of PBR.

"What'd you think?" he said, and his voice was raspy, as if it had been him singing instead of the woman. "We're going to this place down the streets for drinks. You should come. You and Anders, I mean."

"Uh," Claire said. She looked at Anders and he shrugged. She thought about Paul last night in front of the sink, bumping into her while she washed dishes, and wondered if he was home now, waiting for her, mixing cocktails and playing records she liked and wondering if she'd come home. She thanked Neil and told him that she wasn't feeling well and Anders didn't complain. They went outside and he buckled himself into the Jetta's passenger seat and Claire drove off and decided not to wonder about what she was missing at the bar.
At his apartment he looked at her and asked her where she was going and she told him to see Paul. He nodded and stepped out of the car and she knew she should stay and talk to him or invite him home or at least out to a bar or coffee shop, but instead she watched him go and shut her door. The parking lot was dark and there was no one around to watch her in the car and she pulled out her phone and called Paul. He answered and she heard a television in the background.

"Where are you?" she said.

"I'm at the apartment."

"The apartment?"

"I live here," he said. "Remember?"

She tapped on the steering wheel and looked at her reflection in the window. "I forgot. Seriously, though, you're never home Saturday nights."

"Either are you. Anyway, it's dead tonight. Nothing to do."

She thought about saying, What about your blonde? She couldn't remember the blonde girl's name but it didn't matter, it was better that way. She wondered what she could say that would sting but not piss him off too much, and then decided it didn't matter, that she didn't need to care about the blonde girl or about Paul or what he did with her. The thought surprised her and seemed strange and new. She said goodbye and tilted her seat back and stared at the ceiling of the car for a few minutes and then went inside the apartment building. Anders came to the door and looked surprised and said, "Claire."

"Could I hang out here tonight?" she said. She wasn't sure what to say beyond that, but it didn't matter. Anders lead her in and she sat on the couch. Anders turned on the television and flipped around the channels until they found Dr. Strangelove playing
somewhere in the 60s. They shut off the lights and Claire curled her feet beneath her. The sound of traffic carried in through the open window and she wanted a blanket and wished she'd found her green jacket. Anders went to the kitchen and came back with a coffee mug of some whiskey that he said he'd had since last Christmas. She wondered how anyone could hold onto a bottle of liquor that long but drank it anyway and sat on the couch with her toes tucked into the crack between the cushions. The movie played and she said, "Hey, are you okay?"

"Why do you keep asking that?"

She thought about chasing him and making him talk about Marie but decided she didn't want to hear it. She thought maybe he would spill all his feelings and go through some kind of breakthrough and they would become closer friends, but she didn't have the energy tonight to go through with it. She slouched lower into the couch and held her cup between her knees and looked at the posters on the wall. The movie finished and Anders yawned and Claire asked if she could spend the night. He told her that of course she could spend the night. She thought about Paul at home and closed her eyes but couldn't keep them closed.

"Hey," she said. "You know that girl, that blonde Paul brought home, his girlfriend or whatever. Do you remember her name?"

"What?" Anders said.

"Never mind." She sighed and wondered what Paul was doing at home now, if he was drinking her rum yet and wondering where she was. She moved around on the couch to pull the phone out of her pocket and Anders didn't move and she realized he was asleep. His mouth hung open at the corner and he looked so silly that she almost laughed.
She pulled her phone out of her pocket and Paul hadn't called. She pulled her keys out of her pocket but dropped them and they slid off the couch and onto the floor. She thought about picking up the keys and maybe going home and she thought about picking up the phone and dialing Paul but she finished the whiskey instead and slouched lower into the couch and decided it was a good enough place for her to stay tonight. The apartment was cold with the window cracked open and the air smelled like camping and Halloween and Homecoming back in college and a lot of other memories.

When she woke up the next morning Anders was lying on the bed in the corner of the apartment, with the comforter pushed off and one arm flung onto the floor. Claire went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face and neck and into her hair and thought about how hung over she felt before realizing she wasn't really hung over at all. It was just before nine and she thought she might sit on the couch and look at Anders and look out the window, but the wooden floor squeaked when she walked and Anders groaned and ran a hand over his eyes and sat up. He went to the kitchen and started chopping up peppers for omelets. He asked if she could eat eggs and she said of course she could eat eggs. Anders chopped away and Claire leaned on the wall next to the window and drank water out of the coffee mug and tried not to get too excited about the smell of breakfast.

"You keep asking how I am, and the answer is, I'm all fucked up."

"Only temporarily," she said.

"Let's go see the Devil. Let's go see him."

"Yeah," she said. "Of course, no problem." She thought about asking if she could shower first, but she went to the bathroom while Anders finished the omelets and looked
at herself in the mirror and decided she was fine being dirty. Her black hair stuck up in
wild angles and last night's eyeliner had smudged around the corners of her eyes and she
looked like some kind of sexy demon or ghost. She and Anders ate slowly on the floor
while looking at each other and then drove in his car to Black Hole Donut. The parking
lot was full of minivans and sedans, and the shop looked busier than either of them had
ever seen it. Inside, a girl with dyed pink hair poured coffee and made change and looked
too busy to notice them. The Devil stood pouring coffee into mugs and when he saw
Anders and Claire he grinned and nodded toward the door to the back room. There was
too much conversation going on for them to ask questions and no space at the counter for
them to wait, so when he nodded again Claire lifted the divider in the counter and they
walked past the pink-haired girl and into the back room.

"This is strange," Claire said.

There were shelves full of flour sacks and coffee bean sacks and frosting cans and
stacked dishes. A sink and a stainless steel cabinet ran along one wall, with a fryer and a
lot of utensils hung up to dry. Anders sat on the chair in front of the desk and Claire
wandered around the room, looking at the sticky notes stuck to the walls and at the tubs
of sprinkles and the industrial-sized peanut butter jars. The Devil appeared with three
cups full of coffee and sat behind his desk. Claire thought of roofies and of poison but
then felt silly and picked up a mug. Steam crawled over her face and into her eyes and
she felt the muscles in her shoulders relax.

"Over her yet?" the Devil said.
"Let's talk about why," Anders said. "That's the part I can't figure out. I mean, yes, these things happen all the time, but why? What is the reason? The purpose? What is the logic?"

"Oh," the Devil said. "That's easy enough. You weren't quite the type of guy she could really care about."

"What's that mean?"

"You'd have to figure that out for yourself," the Devil said. "But it might help you to know she's sleeping with me now."

Anders choked. "That's not true."

"Sorry." The Devil sipped his coffee and Claire decided to drink hers. It was too hot and burnt the tip of her tongue. She thought that Anders might throw himself over the desk and punch the Devil in the throat. She remembered the description of the hotel robbery and how Anders had kicked and fought and wound up with a black eye and a swollen mouth. She braced herself for the sudden movement and the violence but Anders crossed his legs and sat up in his chair.

"She doesn't even know you," Anders said. "She's talked to you one time—"

"She's been staying at my place most nights."

"Oh." He looked down at his shoes. "You're telling me you stole Marie?"

"You can't steal a woman, Anders," the Devil said. "Well, sure, I suppose you could kidnap her, but that's not what I did."

"Is Jackie your fault too? Was that part of this? Were you part of that?"

"Sometimes nice things are just too nice to work."
Anders leaned back and said, "I tried to see her." He looked at Claire. "I drove to her apartment. I just wanted to say hello, see her, I don't know, remind myself."

"And to answer your real question, I agreed with her that she should leave you and sleep with me because she's gorgeous and really a very interesting person. Did you ever notice?"

"So this is the price."

"The price?"

"The price for that list. That fucking list and I bought it with a woman?"

"I don't know," the Devil said. "I don't know if you did. There are other things. It's hard to know what you lose until it's been gone a while."

They stared at each other over the desk. Claire held her coffee cup in both hands and it was now half empty and she thought she could throw it at somebody's head if she had to.

"Ah, man," Anders said. He stood up and Claire wondered if now he would dive across the desk and she would be left to keep the pink-haired girl out of the fight. She imagined tossing some scrawny donut girl into the shelves and coffee bean sacks spilling out onto the floor. "Ah, man, fuck it. Fuck it. Tell her goodbye."

"I will."

"Tell her to fuck herself. Tell her I'm glad she's gone."

"I don't know about that one," the Devil said.

Anders looked at Claire and then at the floor and then he walked out with his coffee cup. Claire looked at the Devil and then Anders yelled something from outside the door and there was the sound of shattering glass out in the café. Claire imagined the
donut case or the mirror behind the bar in shards on the tile floor and the Devil just put his feet up on the desk. "He'll be okay."

"Yeah, I know." Claire sipped her coffee and it was still too hot and burnt her tongue. "This is really amazing coffee."

"We grind the beans fresh every few hours," the Devil said.

Claire left. Back in the café, pieces of the mirror crunched under the soles of her Chuck Taylors and Anders's coffee had splattered over the wall and the cabinets behind the counter. The pink-haired girl grinned and stepped over the mess and Claire found Anders outside, leaning against the Jetta. She pushed a button on her keychain and unlocked the doors from thirty feet away.

"I might have overreacted," Anders said, in the car.

"Nah," Claire said.

They stopped for lunch at a little café in the suburbs near Anders's place. She expected him to swear and pound his fist on the table and maybe even cry but he ate and they talked about inane and pleasant things like which cafes in Des Moines had the best food and which good movies Anders had seen lately and which good books Claire had read. They split the tab and went back to Anders's big one-room apartment and Claire sat on the edge of his desk, kicking her feet and feeling the breeze through the open window. Anders sat on the couch with his hands behind his head and Claire felt like she could lie back against the glass or slip off the desk to the floor and be entirely happy. She felt bored and happy and stuck, the way she felt when things stopped being one way but hadn't yet started being another.

"Why do you have that tattoo?" Anders said.
"Why not?" she said. "It's just something I liked when I got it. Back in college."

He looked up at her, then at the ceiling. "I can never think of anything I'd want forever."

"Things are going to be okay, Anders."

"Nothing's going to be okay," he said. He looked like he was going to laugh. "And the best part is, nothing's ever been okay."

"Things are okay for moments. I'm sure Jackie was good when you had her."

"That's so far in the past it seems like it never happened."

She went over and thought about punching him in the arm but touched his shoulder instead. "Things change, Anders," she said. She sat next to him on the couch.

"I feel very old," he said.

"Things will happen in the future," she said. "And this will be nothing." She knew she was spouting off fortune cookie philosophy, and she pushed herself back into the couch and closed her eyes. "I don't know, I'm just saying, unexpected things happen."

Anders didn't say anything, so she sat up again and turned to him. He looked over at her and the sun was all over his skin so that his neck and face and the beginnings of his collar bones looked bright and hot. She felt possessed by perverse irrationality, and said, "We could have sex."

"What?"

"I mean, you never know." He looked at her like she was crazy and she said, "We're both stuck. Maybe we both need to remember there are other people in the world."

"Are you serious?"
"It shouldn't be something to be ashamed of," she said. She had no idea what to say but felt a need to make herself sound sane. "I mean, maybe it's this fear of things happening that's got us stuck where we are."

"Oh boy," he said.

"Listen," she said. She sat up and touched his face. "It doesn’t need to mean anything." He sighed and didn't say anything, so she said, "Do you want to see my tattoo?"

"The skeleton?"

"The skeleton came after."

"Okay," he said.

She stood and turned around and looked out the window. She felt nervous electricity in her shoulders and this was strange but also interesting. Nobody but Paul had seen her without a shirt on in more than a year. She reached down and pulled the Des Moines River t-shirt up and off herself. Her hair tangled in the neck of it and she'd been wearing the shirt too long and taking it off felt as clean as stepping into a shower.

"Oh wow," Anders said. "I didn't know."

She reached back and unclasped her bra.

"What kind of tree is that?"

"I don't know," she said. It was the truth. When she'd first moved to Des Moines after college she'd brought a picture of a beech tree that an ex-boyfriend had drawn in ink on a piece of yellow paper. She hadn't known any of the bars or coffee shops or any of the businesses downtown yet and so she'd gone into the first tattoo shop with a woman behind the counter. When she'd unfolded the piece of paper the woman had grinned and
shrugged and said that she could design a tree that would be so much better, and she did. She'd inked a thick black trunk on Claire's spine and black branches that stretched almost to her shoulders and black leaves that filled her skin and fell to the ground and collected around and in the small of her back like hundreds of dark freckles.

She sat back down and kept her shirt wrapped up in both hands. Anders looked at her. They sat there just long enough for her shoulders to go cold and then Anders said, "Maybe we could try that."

"Yeah?" she said. "Maybe we could try it?"

So they tried it. Anders leaned toward her and laughed and looked away and stood up and sat back down. She decided it would be easiest if she just took off his shirt. His body was surprisingly narrow and his muscles were surprisingly long beneath. A constellation of freckles ran up his shoulders. At first things were awkward on the couch and Claire thought about going to the kitchen for a cup of the old whiskey but then things started moving along and the strangeness of the moment evaporated into the room's thin air. When it was over they lay together on the couch just long enough for their heartbeats to slow and the awkwardness of the moment to return to them, and Anders sat up. A tiny spot of red had appeared on one of his shoulders, where her nails had scratched him.

A minute or so passed and Claire tried to think of something smart or at least reassuring to say but nothing came to her. Another minute passed and she realized she didn't have to say anything. She could hear her own breathing and Anders's breathing over on the couch. It had to be almost noon now and the record shop was closed Sundays and Claire thought that Paul had to be home, at the apartment, listening to CDs and reorganizing his room or messing around in the kitchen or watching TV. Their lease
would end in five months, which seemed so far away, but she thought that maybe this week she would pick up a copy of the paper and see what other places she could find. She'd wanted to move downtown for a long time and hadn't thought she could afford it but now that she'd spent the week at home without a paycheck the idea of going back to her job filled her with a glut of excitement she hadn't felt since being hired. She thought about the furniture she could buy at thrift stores and the fresh coffee beans she could carry home from Black Cat. She thought about a new bedroom and of the quiet of her own small CD player and of all the people she would have over and the couches they would sit on and sleep on. She thought about the smell of the river beneath the 6th Street bridge, salty and disgusting like fish but also kind of fresh, and about the breeze coming off the river and through the streets as she walked to the Capitol Complex. Anders started breathing more heavily on the couch and she wondered if he was asleep. She wondered if he was done brooding over Marie, and she wondered if she would actually move out and into her own place or if she would be weak and moody about the past and would sign another year's lease. She decided that the problem with the future was that it always showed up in the present eventually and you had no idea what to do so you panicked and did the wrong thing. She thought that Anders might be stuck and that she might be stuck, but she thought too that they both had a decent chance for now that was good enough and all she could ask for.