ABSTRACT

*Stick Shift* is a novel that has undergone several rounds of significant revision. Scott, the book’s main character, is a sarcastic American who travels to England to move in with an ex-girlfriend. He experiences all of the obstacles involved in moving to a new country, leaving his home, and settling down with a woman in a comic sequence told in seven chapters.

The introduction to this piece outlines my history as a writer, primarily focusing on my development at MIT. The thesis project is discussed and followed from its initial seed all the way through to its current state.

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Introduction

At the end of my undergraduate experience, I feel an ambivalence that extends across all the facets of my life. Unlike many other graduating students who feel uncertain about their futures, it is more my past that causes me worry. Should I feel satisfied? Writing has been the center of my introspective process and self-discovery; it is tangled inseparably with this worry. With the completion of the thesis, I have hopes that it will serve both as terminal and seminal work, that it will help to carry over the parts of me worth keeping. I wish to use this space for a moment of respite, another attempt at capturing human emotion, a breath to look back and explicate the way I came to 21W.

A teacher by the name of McWilliams was the first to excite me about writing. As a sophomore attending a technical boarding school, I gave little thought or effort to English and the Humanities. Writing was a chore that had to be waded through in order to make a grade. Anything I had to say, I spoke aloud; the printed word held no grandeur, no purpose. Coming after a string of uninspiring teachers, Mr. McWilliams found a way to connect me to the page. Not an essay, not a response; he wanted me to write a story. I hadn’t been asked so simple a task since elementary school. Sitting down to complete my assignment, I had only vague ideas about what I wanted to write—I have rarely since found myself sitting down with much more. As the sentences slipped out of me, I encountered the inertia of writing for the first time. The plot moved ahead with its own momentum, as if it were a rolling ball, a spinning top. Things happened that I did not expect, characters began to act against my better judgment, my authorial power; rereading the pages, I was surprised.
This first courting with fiction, however, did not capture me entirely. Its effect could be more similarly compared to a raised eyebrow. I was interested enough that I chose Short Story as my senior English elective. I did my work, enjoyed it, and found myself writing regularly enough that I did a story for a friend in the class in exchange for some chemistry notes. Still, learning to write was a gradual process.

Naturally, when I came to MIT and was forced to take HASS classes despite my registration as engineer, I chose writing. I simply thought, why wouldn’t you chose a class where you get to read good books and make things up for your homework? Everything went along fine. The transition from high school to the Institute was not difficult for me; Pass/Fail was a vacation, not a safety net. The only thing I struggled with was my classmates’ complete focus on technology, nothing else held a candle. The infinite corridor became an apt analogy to the kind of tunnel vision most of the school exerted—the light at the end of the hallway was only their computer screens.

My dissatisfaction with MIT and the limits of my classmates’ ambitions worsened in the fall of my sophomore year. It was not the work, the lack of parties; it was not being on grades, not any of the usual explanations. Good marks and alcohol came freely to me that semester. Something else was wrong. I felt like a part disengaged from the machine, out of place. In February, poetry seemed like revival to me, and if ever there was a sudden love affair with language, it came then. Joining Bill Corbett’s class every week provided a complete separation from the day-to-day grind and churn of 77 Mass Ave. Reading William Carlos Williams, James Schuyler, I finally figured out that my place at MIT was not in the machine at all. It was my job at Tech to stand apart from the Institute’s common concept of growth; accelerometers would be inadequate for measuring my forward progress. I was going to be different than everyone else. I became obsessed with it. I
had to prove that I had a whole brain, not just a left half. I declared myself a writing major.

Now as a writing major at MIT, one is definitely set apart from the norm by several standard deviations. Small classes, no right answers, faculty that knew your name and held you accountable by it. Excellent, but there exists little sense of community beyond that faculty. I had two classmates that I saw regularly. Beyond them, I might as well have been in classes with robots: LED’s for eyes, microphones for ears. There were course 6 robots fulfilling requirements, biology robots writing about their UROP laboratories for four straight weeks, countless people who hadn’t written since high school. Now not only did I want to surround myself with better writers, more dedicated writers, but I wanted to give myself time to put writing first. No science classes. No other major. So I began the application process for study abroad.

The spring semester could not come quickly enough once I was accepted. Oxford, England. As English a place to study English, as anywhere in the world. I moved out of the fraternity and into a flat. My own room. My own kitchen. Nothing to do all day but write and read books. Oh, and drink beer with my professors of course. I learned to like wine. I learned to like James Joyce. I learned and I traveled and I made love to a nice English girl that hardly ever used her computer. It was as if the parts of me that were suppressed by MIT were magnifying by a giant glass made of words.

That first semester in England, I took tutorials from the two Nicks; an experimental British/Irish literature course with Nick Crowe and a one-on-one writing workshop with Nick Thomas. That’s when this project, Stick Shift, started. By the end of Hillary, I had 70 pages of a novella, but back then it was called Formerly a Parade. Each week, it grew a chapter in my basement bedroom. Each week, Nick and I discussed it over coffee and his cigarettes at the Union. It was a surprisingly effective method of teaching, and great
fun, but imagine if MIT discovered one of its professors smoking during his class and
giving lecture in a bar. At Oxford, though, the term ended happily enough. I proofed the
story, but printed 30 saddle-stitched copies with the content mostly unaltered. I thought it
was done.

Trinity term at Oxford held different lessons for me. I was assigned to two new
tutorials, but elected to attend a weekly seminar at poet Craig Raine’s house in addition.
Six of us sat on his couch, on his floor, anywhere, and we stared at the giant portrait of
himself that Craig had hung above the mantle. I quickly discovered that I was the worst
writer in the group and by far the least well read. It was wonderful. I worked diligently to
equal my classmates’ abilities, spent absurd amounts of money on Faber and Faber books
at Blackwell’s, but I never caught up to them. Thank God. I love them for it.

Now couple that with a summer in the Greek Islands and the French Riviera and it
is not surprising that my return to Tech was onerous. No matter how much my living
group thought I was the same person, it simply could not be. My perspective had
broadened while I was away and I found it difficult to fit back in, not that I ever had.
Writing came easily at that point. That had carried over. I could not commiserate with my
classmates over the difficulty of completing one poem a week. For me, it was engineering
that became hard for the first time.

Carrying an absurd amount of units to make up for a lack of equivalent transfer
credit, I hardly remember much of the term. I remember the English girl coming to visit,
crying because she said I was different. I mostly remember getting rejected by Rhodes,
turned down by Marshal, and told no by Gates. Apparently, I would not be allowed to
return to England. It would seem that I was teetering on depression, but for two hours a
day I ran around outdoors and kicked balls, got dirty, balanced my life out. Everyone
needs a relief valve at MIT, everyone, a vent for the steam and chemicals and frustrations.
My final collegiate soccer season was what kept me going. We won 17 of 21 games. We ended the season ranked eighth in the country. We became the New England Champions by beating Williams College at Williams College in overtime in front of 2,000 fans. But most important to me, I had a group of people, a team that I felt a part of. Somehow, we were able to put technology to the side for those two hours a day.

Winter break came and I needed a bit of winding down. I needed to write some bad poetry. I needed to get sick and then get better. My mother wanted me to be more cordial with the family friends, but you don’t heal from MIT overnight. When January came, I found myself perpetually sitting at my father’s desk in the house’s basement office. I read Saul Bellow’s *Sieze the Day* to learn about fragmenting my sentences. I read Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* and put distress into perspective. In January, I wanted to marry Tess Durbeyfield. Sitting at that desk, the changes I needed to make to my thesis unclouded. Surrounded by my father’s high school yearbooks, pictures of my sister and I as young children, piles of papers that weren’t mine, upright bookshelves, security lined envelopes, a space heater that smelled like dryness, I found the time to completely focus on my writing again. My book’s narrator, Scott, has a very personal voice. He is a second-guessing, sarcastic, 31 year old with insecurities that are not well hidden. Yet, some things about him needed to change. He needed some tenacity, some desire. My little 70 page novella needed some punch, some dialogue; and Scott needed consistency.

I went to work, piling up heaps of Pepsi cans and dead bags of pretzels. I gave Scott some edge. I flushed out his mental explanations into fully enacted scenes. With the advice of my advisor, I did this with a considerable effort to inhabit the character completely. I tried to obsess myself with the rewriting so as not to lose his voice. Keeping in as much the same mood as possible, I turned out a completely new 130 page story.
That flourish sprung me into this final term, the term that has capped my dealings with the Institute. Things have progressed with my writing. I continue to produce with greater and greater ease, and with increasing maturity; a trend I earnestly hope will continue. But in a way, I am reminded of Hamlet walking across the Danish plain with the Norwegian army. “We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name.” So says the captain. And later Hamlet, famously, “What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?” And so unto me, I remain uncertain. Should I be satisfied with what has passed? Was it something, or nothing?

Eyes must look ahead at this point, though. I have already made choices. Stanford in October to join a fine and full community of scholars. Yet a doubt, I am still going as an engineer. I wish for this thesis project to serve as a beginning, for the future to justify my purposes, but I am worried. I manage time well, but how will I deal with my newly forged commitments to research in the Robotics Laboratory at Stanford. Electromechanical geckos do not build themselves. And I have a wonderful national defense fellowship (NDSEG), which amounts to a full scholarship and hefty stipend to simply be a student. I’m as good as rich. But I must be an engineering student. There are no double majors in graduate school. The risk of choosing writing over such fortunate circumstances is too great. I am on a six year track. I don’t even know that I would choose it anyways. Rather I try and live with my anxiety, use it to maintain my balance. I’m so close to the end of the corridor, I don’t want to fall down now. I am looking at the paths of other writers with day jobs for my inspiration. Perhaps the duality that was essential for them lives in me too. A whole brain. What a concept. Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams: doubt or no, here I come.
Chapter I
The Transatlantic Traveler

Hey, so listen to this. Crazy story. It all started with me sitting in my seat. I was
tired, but I couldn’t fall asleep. It wasn’t just me, everything else was moving in a tired,
blurry sort of way too. You know how the world looks when you first wake up? It was
like that. The whole of England transformed by insomnia right along with me; small
comfort. The other passengers on the bus looked like zombies, you could hardly tell if the
driver was awake or steering by some kind of somnolent intuition, and even the bus itself
stumbled groggily through the morning fog. I was riding a clutching, jerking, farting,
mechanical giant that had to feel its way out of London.

The man across the aisle from me had a newspaper that sat folded on his lap and a
pair of glasses on top of that. His eyes looked forward, completely without purpose, and
he took short rest breaks each time he blinked as if the action were strenuous—500 lb.
eyelids. Each time he was about to nod off, his head jerked up and his eyes snapped open.
He looked around, embarrassed that he might have called attention to himself, then went
back to swaying in the cradle-like bus seat only to jerk awake again several moments later.
Fighting to stay awake; I wished I had his problem.

I’d waged those epic battles against sleep myself, in college and then in various
seminars and conferences since. I’m sure you’ve had them too. See, I used to work in
management, but not the important kind, just the make sure people show up to work and
don’t fuck up too bad kind. Some wise guy along the way thought that sort of thing
required three weeks of training to transition you into your new massive baby-sitting
responsibilities. A million dollar moron I’m sure. Each day we’d have these terribly
boring guest speakers with really catchy titles for their presentations which made your
think that you might have something more than bullshit to force down, but the only thing
you learned was how to perfect your managerial shit eating grin, which, believe me, is
very different than the entry level shit eating grin. You need whiter teeth to be a manager,
and the ability to speak indefinitely without saying anything that could be construed as a
non-specious statement. Did you know that?

We had this one that was called “How to Sweet-Talk Your Objective”. I only
remember because it was one of the first and I got so excited about it. I thought surely that
this would be something I could use. The presenter might either be an absolute shark
hired to reveal all his pick up lines and smooth talk enabling me unprecedented success in
the bars. Or even better, I thought it might have been a real fox of a woman. You know,
little business suit one size too small telling me what she wanted in a manager, up for a
little role playing after class. Don’t laugh. I’ve seen these sorts of things in pornography;
it was finally going to happen to me. Hah! Bullshit—eat it and smile. It ended up being
this Chinese guy, Dr. Rich Yen or something, and he was spouting off about how the
objective is always “pictures of old dead white men on green paper.” He thought he was
funny. He thought that was a good joke. That’s not funny, right? It’s stupid. For fuck’s
sake, the guy had a lisp, and he was supposed to be training us on how to sweet talk. I
don’t know how I made it through. Most of these guest-speaking doctors must have done
their thesis research on monotone wave creation, I mean 3 hours and they don’t even go
outside a major third.

Hey! That was what I needed. This is one of my business ideas. Ready, listen: they
should sell the tapes of these speeches next to the sleep-aid CDs; you know, ocean sounds,
summer rain showers, business seminars. I think I could be the next million dollar moron.

But riding the red giant, I had nothing to listen to. My eyelids felt like sandbags, but
they were propped up by the swollen bags under my eyes, leaving me a sleepless slit to
stare at the rest of the passengers through. That guy in front of me was just rubbing it in
with his head jerking and neck nodding. For fuck’s sake, I hadn’t slept in two days and this guy’s nodding like a damn narcoleptic. I’d hardly eaten. This wasn’t supposed to happen to people that aren’t on drugs.

There was another passenger on the bus that I was watching from time to time. She was behind me, and at first I thought she was fighting off sleep as well, but it wasn’t that. I could see her concentrating and she had really dry skin that drew in bunches around the corners of her mouth like a crinkled twist in a plastic grocery bag. She was just staring at the seat in front of her, really weird like, this strange intensity and all. Spooked the fuck out of me at first. She looked at it as if it was something important, the whole fucking world in a cushion. Maybe I had it wrong, but she was just freaky, man, so you know, I had to watch her. I wanted something else to look at anyways, something to make this never-ending day pass more quickly. I mean you leave and it is late afternoon in New York, you can tell by the frustration on the people’s faces whereas they generally wear suffering in the mornings. You could tell at the airport by the diminished care in the toss of your luggage onto the conveyor. You could tell it was afternoon because the strip clubs you passed on your way to Penn Station were starting to open. Then you watch three shitty movies with shitty headphones in your ears and they tell you that magically it is somehow 7 am. Bunch of fucking liars. But then the sun outside is in the wrong place, and the fog sure as hell looks like morning too. Was it really seven? It felt like midnight. You ever had this happen? And you get on the bus despite it all, and it is so dull, so gray, and so catatonically boring that you end up watching old women stare at seat cushions. Hah, or listen to me talking about staring at old women.

Well, somehow I thought I should feel lucky because this old bag was like the Tiger Woods of seat staring. I mean it, bring in Bob Costas and set up a live broadcast on CBS. She could’ve been a champion. Old Bobby would make a sob story out of it for heartland
America as if it were the Olympics: “We’re here onboard Jetlink bus today, folks, for the English national chair-staring competition and there’s one special competitor whose story has gone untold until now”—cue cheesy music—“It all started when her father left her as a child. Little Old Bag, as her teammates call her, stared at the wall for a week mouthing daddy with her lips, and she’s been thrilling crowds ever since.”

I mean, I was sold, no? Absolutely, I could’ve rooted her on. You beat that chair bitch. Wow, and in my tedium, in my fucking insomnia, I really was sitting on the edge of my seat, neck crooked behind me, anticipating that crucial moment, that make-or-break play, and just when I thought she might beat that piece of fabric and bring home the gold, she turned, losing, and acknowledged my presence with a scowl. Fuck. I had to look away. Some say I ruined her career.

I got out my copy of ESPN magazine—good magazine—and I tried to read, but way too frantic. I had to put it away. I took out a pen and some paper, then gave up trying to write anything down after about five seconds. So friggin antsy, but so sluggish too. Bloodshot eyes, hazy memories, I thought I would explode before we got to Oxford. All it would take would be one good punch. I was quite sure. (No, I don’t want you to hit me.) There would probably be a big loud crack as my composure ruptured followed by a boom of my head bursting into a thousand pieces of insanity, then all these little doubts would come spilling out like baby-aliens or spiders and run amuck on the bus causing lots of screaming and maybe a titty-shot of the hot girl in front, just like a movie. It’d be a good party trick, but I was going to try and gut it out for my head’s sake. To think that I was going through all for a woman too. Believe that?

It just figures; everything I’d ever accomplished, bought, fucked, and betrayed I’d left behind and for what? The prospect of a single fucking vagina for the rest of my life. I hadn’t proposed, but Christ it was close. I had left my king unprotected, all forward units
had moved into position, I’d unwittingly relinquishing control of my god-damned penis. Crap. And for fuck’s sake, couldn’t we get there already.

Too serious. Calm down now. I was being too serious. If it was some other schmuck in my position I would have been laughing my ass off at him. You’re probably laughing your ass off at me on the inside right now and I’m only telling you about it, you should’ve seen me. I suppose I was just asking for it sitting all glum like that, all dick-tied. I really should’ve been laughing at myself. I must have looked like a big melancholy cartoon character with sagging dog cheeks and real touchy nerves like Shaggy and Scooby. BOO! Right?

Maybe one of these English farts would want to talk. What could I talk about with them? Probably couldn’t hold a conversation like you do. Maybe they liked sports. I turned towards the guy with the paper, but he was asleep now. The fucking bastard. Looking back at the old woman, I got scowled at again. “Ah hell,” I said under my breath. Shit, I could’ve fucking talked to myself in that state.

After several more turns of the mind, we finally got to the station. The sun had cleared much of the fog away and people had started bustling around the city. There was no doubt about it now, no tricks; it was definitely morning.

I got off the bus, and for a few moments, I didn’t see her. Just my luck. I stood looking around the strange place for that one familiar sight, the one person I knew in the whole country, but my eyes were still just slits and the half-night half-morning coldness was making me shiver. That woman, where was she? My fucking first day. Jesus! Now what was I gonna do?

Want to hear a funny story? I’m such a friggin moron when I’m tired. Her phone number was in my bag—front little pocket. I knew that her phone number was in my bag, front little pocket, and yet I started searching in my coat for it, for something, for god
knows what. I’m doing this while thinking, ‘hey moron, it’s in your bag,’ but I’m counting the change I have, I’m looking on the backs of receipts, checking my cell phone which won’t turn on and doesn’t have any service here anyway. Such a lost tourist.

Standing outside of a dumpy bus terminal, alone, searching myself like an idiot, thinking like a bigger idiot. All of England must have been watching me, even the damned Queen laughing like a hyena at the dumb fucking American. Stupid, right? But then I saw a hand rise on the sidewalk and wave—thank god, my beacon, my familiarity, my Beth.

This woman was what I’d been traveling toward. I stepped towards her and without noticing, crossed the threshold that separates leaving and arriving.

Her hair was cut much shorter than it had been before she left, but she does that a lot, changes her appearance. She’s the type of woman that wants to explore every dimension of herself: posh-Beth, goth-Beth, innocent-Beth, oops-I-burned-my-eyebrows-off-with-bleach-Beth; you have to admire her courage. Hell, I used to love it! It made her feel new and fresh to me, like I wasn’t fucking the same woman every night that says “Oh baby Yes” every time you kiss her neck. You ever gotten into one of those ruts with a girl? It sucks. Now I’m not exactly Mr. Change-up or super spontaneity, but I like to think that I have some quirky dimensions of character, they’re just buried under my designer set of emotional baggage. See, she changed her hair, not really that surprising any more, but me, I’ve kept the same hairstyle since high school. Boring you say? Fine, but the reason I keep it the same is because the shaggy black mien that I cultivated through a year and a half of middle school got me hung up in the locker room by my underwear as a freshmen.

You’ve never had that happen to you. It starts to hurt like hell after about 5 minutes. I mean, I looked like Steven Tyler. The fucking senior punks told me I looked like Mrs. Taylor, our butch gym teacher with a mullet. Clearly my hair was styled into a rock star corvette-cut, not some butchered up mullet. There is a big fucking difference! Fucking
amateurs. They left me there for the next class to come in and laugh at. Can you believe that shit. Traumatized my childhood. That’s what I mean: buried character. I didn’t cut it for another year just to spite the pricks, but since then, it’s been boring tuft-on-top, which probably helped me to start getting homecoming dates. Fucking prissy amateurs! Fucking high school! Fuck high school!

Sorry. I’m ok. Well, my hair’s been changing on me lately, but without consent. Pretty soon I’ll have to start working on a god damned comb-over. Save me. Beth was different, though, beautiful, and confident enough to get away any hairstyle no matter what the trends. I wish you could see her.

Her scarf made her neck look pudgy above her fitted pea coat that day, but she was smiling and her eyebrows stood high like they do when she’s happy (although they do it when she’s cold too; I immediately hoped it was the former). Moving towards her, I began to have the springy yo-yo sensations of new starts with old girlfriends. It seemed good at first, like a fun little carnival ride. I just hoped it would stay yo-yoed in the right direction this time and not spin me upside down until I puked. You’d think a man of 31 would have learned. We hugged, and then kissed lightly on the lips, freely, but without passion, like small children kissing their parents goodnight.

She took my backpack and put it in the trunk next to my suitcase. “You ready?” she asked.

‘Why not,’ I thought, ‘Let’s go.’

As we drove to her apartment, the sun was in my eyes which made them hurt more. Bitch, bitch, bitch, I know, but fucking hell, what a long day, you don’t understand. The dashboard clock said 8:55, but I remembered that she always set her clocks 10 minutes fast so that she wouldn’t be late to things. It’s funny what you’ll always know about certain people. Still, when she downshifted, I was like, ‘who, exactly, taught you to drive
stick?’—old dog new trick. I think I smiled one of those I’m-not-sure-if-this-is-a-good-
thing-or-not-yet smirks. We pulled up to a four-story brick building, she pointed and said,
“This is it.”

‘Wow, nice place,’ I thought, but then we pulled around the corner and there were
about ten other cars in the back. I immediately compared it to my apartment. Well, I guess
it was my old apartment at that point, but it had been a lot bigger all the same. I mean
great place. Picture this: it had a yard with a long curved driveway on the left side that
gave a choice of two places to put my big green Chevy. Hah! That piece-of-shit car
would be an import here, a useless whale among minnows. I had a shed and a full kitchen
at that old place too, neither of which I’d made good enough use. Brand new kitchen, but
I’d hardly used it. See that was something I could have done, would have done even, but
now the opportunity was lost. Damn it Beth. That apartment had cable television too; I
could watch baseball games in the summer with the windows open. I wasn’t sure if I
would even be able to see the World Series here, and what if the fucking Mets went?
Then where would I be? I’ll tell you, I’d end up stuck in front of a computer screen hitting
the refresh button over and over again at four in the morning trying to get the score from
mlb.com. Oh God! But think of priorities, right? What’s more important—Beth or an
apartment and a sport I haven’t played since I was 14? The Mets had about as much
chance to make it to the series as an all-asthmatic little league team anyways. What? It’s
not like your Cubs are gonna do any better. Certainly she was more important, especially
until the Mets got a new pitching staff.

Suddenly I had an urge to kiss her, right there, right as she was parking the car I
wanted to kiss her shiny pink lips, swallow them, make us crash. No, of course I waited. I
already said I’m not very impulsive. I just really wanted to kiss her, but if I jumped all
over her it would be like giving in somehow, no? We were still feeling things out. I was moving in to stay, but it damn well felt like vacation.

Her apartment was small on the inside too, but there were things that reminded me of her all over. First of course, were all the books piled on shelves and tables, many with little paper marks protruding from the pages. She was a librarian and books were definitely her thing, but she would become so excited about the newest recommendation that she’d begin it before she finished the first novel she’d been reading. Sometimes she had like 10 or 12 books going at once. I mean, it took me three months to finish Wilt Chamberlin’s autobiography and it was only 200 pages long, mostly about sex and basketball. I didn’t know how she read so much and didn’t get bored. In fact, she read so much that she had to have a journal to remember which story went with which book. This compulsively impulsive reading, I think it was the reason that she became a librarian and not a fucking doctor or Pulitzer prize winner. I always picture Beth in college—see I met her afterwards—as a girl who would be top of her class for the first 3 weeks, right. I mean like spot on, knew everything, teacher’s pet. Then somehow she would fail a test. Like she was too stubborn and too engrossed in some crap murder mystery or some 800 page Russian brick to even bother studying the assigned readings. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure she read those too, but maybe not in time for her courses. Who does that? I guess it was ok. I liked her as a librarian; not to smart for me, energetic, grounded, helpful. I have this one fantasy too, with a librarian telling me to be quiet, you know for the sake of the other people in the library. So, I take her behind some remote bookshelf and it ends up with my hand over her mouth to muffle the screams. Good huh? I hadn’t pitched it to her yet, but being with her, I had hope again. I looked around for her current journal, her prized possession, but I didn’t see it lying out.
After putting down my bag, I walked into the kitchen. It was neat, but had a fucking terrific overabundance of appliances. Who actually owned a toaster and a toaster oven? A Rotisserree? This was a one-bedroom place man, not a cooking school. I bet that Beth had taken some class or maybe joined some strange appliance collector’s society. They probably had like the Columbia House of kitchenware in England: get sent a Cuisinart, RonCo Chopmaster, or waffle iron every month unless you sent the postcard back in. She didn’t seem to be using these things; they were all unplugged and had dust on them. Really, they just made her countertop look like a table at a garage sale.

See Beth has plenty of lasting patience for books, I’d say enough passion to read them all, but other things seemed to come and go in her life quickly and often without completion. Take for instance this aerobics class, I remember her buying all these leg warmers and blue body suits and crap, and then four weeks later she switched into a cycling deal to which she refused to wear aerobics clothing. She has a full collection of those videos that promise to turn your body parts into steel hidden away somewhere too, never used. I just shake my head. I never understood those fucking things anyways. Do you? Crunching my abs and getting rock hard glutes make me think of heartburn or holding in diarrhea, that’s some rock hard glutes. See me, I’m totally different. My interests are pretty constant: editorial cartoons, especially that Aaron McGruder, fucking Boondocks is so damn funny, you ever read it? You should man. Ok, I like watching sports, obviously, and my friends would probably call me a pussy for saying this, but back then, Beth. I mean, she gives you the opportunity to vicariously experience pretty much everything. I’m of the attitude that being an armchair quarterback is way better than taking the hits yourself; I’ve always liked my eyebrows too.

I noticed all of her refrigerator magnets, another Beth eccentricity, but I wouldn’t have remembered without seeing them. She had a truly great collection, animals, obscene
phrases, the classic alphabet letters, oh, and this one sexually perverse Santa Clause that I always thought resembled Dick Cheney in a dark way. Seeing them again, made me think of the hundreds of times I’d peered past them in the glow of a digital clock while raiding her kitchen for midnight snacks after a good fuck. Hah! Maybe England would be worth the ticket after all. I pulled the Santa Clause off and put him back on upside down. Cheers Dickey, good to see you again ... ya fucking pervert.

“Well what do you want to do?” asked Beth, appearing at my side.

I had only been in the country a few hours. I wasn’t popular enough yet to have plans. I didn’t say anything, just shrugged my shoulders.

“Well, you can nap for awhile if you want. I can wake you up after a few hours. You know if you sleep too long now, you’ll be up all night.”

“Yes, I know,” I responded flatly. Fucking hell. If I could sleep too long I wouldn’t give a shit about the night. I was so tired I was sure I could sleep through both. I just hoped that I would be able to fall asleep. It felt like there was a pin pricking into my ass and that I wouldn’t be able to anything until I dislodged it somehow. No matter how much I shifted, scratched, slapped, and pawed, it didn’t seem to want to come loose.

Beth smiled and took my coat as I continued to look around. She was always smiling. Smiling at little kids. Smiling at old people. Smiling at the pin in my ass.

“I’ll show you my room,” she said, “And you can lie down for awhile.”

The bedroom was pretty much in line with the rest of the place: a little small, but neat and well laid out. There was a single closet with no door that was already completely full. The carpet was a little thicker, or maybe just a little less worn out. Her bedspread was one I hadn’t seen before, light blue, probably to match the colors of the room. Girls do shit like that.
She tucked me in and said, “I’ll wake you up in a couple of hours,” then placed her hand on my arm and squeezed it for an instant before rising and leaving. I liked being mothered, don’t you?

I hoped so hard for sleep to come, but I lay there, in the foreign bed and just worried. For fuck’s sake, I was the guy that could fall asleep in cars going over speed bumps. I was the one that used to sleep in until it was dark outside. I once fell asleep on a ferris wheel for Christ sake. Maybe I could drink until I passed out. No, Beth would definitely take notice of that. God, this was all about her anyways. It was, after all, her ceiling I was staring at, not mine. It could have been 4 am at home and I would be sawing away on my snore horn, but she was a good girl. I had to remind myself of that. I mean, shit, she was definitely attractive. With the little gut I’d been growing and the not so little recession of my hairline, I shouldn’t be hoping for much better, not without being rich. I mean, she was cool too. She drank. Her own job. She wasn’t too possessive. It should be easy, I thought. Why couldn’t I fucking fall asleep then? I suppose it was pointless to force something that would just eventually happen. I felt like a thirteen year old trying to think myself taller. The bed contained no piece of mind, so I got up and went back into the living room slash kitchen area.

Beth was at the counter cutting vegetables on a wooden board. She wore a white apron that tied behind her waist and it made her figure look thin and desirable to me. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail with the tips of her dark strands curling to their ends only a few inches past the elastic.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I groaned as I entered her line of sight. She jumped a little, as if I scared her, and I smiled in apology.
“Right. Well, I wasn’t expecting you to be awake. I was gonna try and cook something tonight. I was making a lot of stuff for awhile, but I’ve been a little out of practice.”

I nodded knowingly, and she turned back to cutting up vegetables.

“Having someone else to eat it with me makes cooking seem more worthwhile.” She smiled, and turned her slices sideways to quarter the pieces of green even smaller. “I’m sure you haven’t had a home cooked meal since the last time your mother visited you.”

“I made chile out of a can.” I said, forcing her to look up and smile at me again. “It was pretty good. I’m thinking of doing it again sometime.”

“Well that’s great, then you won’t have any problems cutting this other pepper and the two onions.” She pushed the wooden cutting board across the counter to me, and made a half menacing gesture with the knife like she was gonna rob me before placing it on the board.

“I hate onions. Don’t you remember?”

“You’ll hardly taste it. It’s only for flavoring the sauce.”

Yeah right I wouldn’t taste them. You taste onions don’t you? I mean onions do have a taste. A fucking shitty one. She’d forgotten. This was a definite omen. What a mistake I probably made coming all the way here. She didn’t even remember no onions. How were things going to go back to the way they were if she’d already forgotten stuff? I could have bought a round trip ticket for a hundred dollars more than what I paid—flexible return date. I know; it was a good deal. Jesus, I should have bought it just in case. Too many onions and I’d be stuck paying another 400 to get back. Fuck. But gimme a break, I hadn’t even given it a chance. No single onion went for 400 dollars, you needed pounds and pounds of onions to reach 400 dollars. If I wasn’t so damned tired, maybe I would’ve
had some perspective. I really hate onions, though. Like as bad as brussel sprouts, no joke. Worse even.

I begrudgingly chopped them up anyways, and Beth put them into the refrigerator. She offered to give me a walking tour of the city and I agreed, so we set out South, toward the downtown area. It seemed that spires rose up in every direction. I mean, this city had thousands of them, like they’d been breeding. I hadn’t noticed them on the way in with the sun in my squinting eyes. They looked like thousands of skeletal fingers. Everybody probably says that when they see them for the first time. But that’s what they look like, a thousand sets of bones pointing straight up at the sky. The walls turned from normal brick and siding into chipped stone. This was supposedly downtown too. Kind of old-looking. The downtowns I was used to were all made of wafered aluminum and steel. The sidewalks were different here too: cobblestone, and dangerous as hell in some places, so be careful if you ever visit. Seriously, walking along, I felt as if the medieval hands of the bricklayers were grabbing at my ankles, desperately trying to protect their decaying masonry that was all that was left to remember them by. The whole place reminded me of a grandfather. It’s neat dress and cleanliness contrasting with its gnarled skin and worn look. It seemed like my own grandfather in personality as well—1000 stories to tell if you recognized your opportunities. Here is where the martyrs were killed. Here is where they hanged a priest. Here is where C.S. Lewis met with J.R.R. Tolkein to drink. And here is the scar that I got fighting the Japs in the Philippines. Here is where your father fell out of the tree. Here is where I first saw your grandmother.

Beth bounced and pointed and smiled like a friggin twelve year old in an amusement park. She told me all the stories she knew (there were a lot). Some of them sounded so old they seemed like folklore or legends, straight up headless horseman type stuff, but she insisted that they were historically accurate. I began to understand how a place like
Oxford, with so many plot twists, appealed to her. Honestly, she was more excited at seeing all of the churches and colleges for the hundredth time than I was at seeing them for the first. She even had people take pictures of us in front of the various tourist attractions. Can you believe that? I hated it. So embarrassing. I wondered if I’d acted so loopy when I first showed her around my hometown. Do you give tours of your town with pride and excitement and love and shit? I doubt it. I mean for me, giving tours of Watertown, New York takes about five minutes. It really only consists of my parents’ house, a few schools, and a special parking lot. Where’s the pride in that?

Jeez, though, she was off the wall with her excitement. Her energy was a bit wasted considering I hadn’t slept in some ungodly number of hours. So as she walked faster and faster from one thing to another, I started to feel dizzy. I was in some kind of purgatory for the undead that walk the earth tirelessly for all eternity. You ever feel like that? Beth made me keep walking and walking and squinting and smiling for the fucking camera. I started to see things too. Weird things. Don’t tell to many people, but a church tower that would seem gothically magnificent on future walks down High Street seemed to lean over me, threatening, taunting, blurry, and with a window that looked like a mouth bending down to pick me off the sidewalk and crunch my bones. It made me lose my balance looking at it. It was like I was drunk and staring straight up a cliff. And the gardens, which were already blooming in March by the way, just looked like big fields of color to my eyes. I had difficulty discriminating one flower from a bed of them, and so it looked more like colors just haphazardly tripping over themselves instead of the true neatly manicured lawns that they cultivate. No one was even allowed to walk on them; there’s these guys in bus drive uniforms that will come tell you to ‘please step off the grass’. That’s kind of fucked up right? Well the colors just kept blending more and more as we walked further. It was like I was in some weird Tim Burton video about the history
of art. The tour had started out very clearly and accurately, almost like reality or at least El Greco, and then I had progressed into a Boudin stage when things could still be individually identified, but now it was like fucking Waterlilies mixed with Dali and two shots of Absinthe. Everything was just completely formless, intangible, and fucking real fucked up. I was wavering at this point in the movie, sort of zoning out, when Beth pinched me; I’d stopped listening to her.

“You awake?” I jerked at the unexpected twang of pain and suddenly I was seeing like, like, like fucking cubism! Do you know what a city of spires looks like on cubism? It’s FUCKING terrifying! I was a tired man. This was un-real. Some obscure form of punishment. Terrifying.

Needless to say this did not alleviate any of my stress and my unquelled doubts about coming to England. If I could just get some sleep. I mean, my eyelids sagged so low that I thought I’d switched to wide screen viewing. I was not a leaper and this had been a huge leap. I don’t have faith in very many things. Love at first sight? God? The natural goodness of human beings? C’mon, fuck no. Do you believe in that crap? To get up and move my entire life to a new country on the memories and dreams of a woman; what had I done to myself? This was by far the most drastic thing I’d ever even considered doing and yet here I was. And put on top of that, Beth is a leaper. The girl never dipped her toe into a pool her life, never checked to make sure the shower was running hot water, she just got in and screamed bloody murder if it wasn’t. I met her at a New York Nightclub, right—not a very renowned place for starting meaningful relationships—and within three months, she was living with me in Connecticut. Yeah, I know, but so what, we moved fast. But then, two years later, she leaped all the way over here with hardly a second’s more circumspection. Ok. Fucked up, but not done. Nine months later, she said to me “You should come over and live with me.” I thought it was a joke. Honestly. And then she
kept saying it. Kept making jibs about my rights to a dual passport on account of my mother. Now I was here and I felt about as half-British as I felt half-parakeet, but yet, here I was. God knows I had been fucking some other piece back in the states too. I had a pretty good notion that she'd been sampling the island’s offerings too, but once again, fucking here I was.

 Doesn’t make much sense for me. There is, of course, the whole possibility that this had simply been one of her daydreams. She’s always telling me what she just thought of, or what she had a crazy dream about, or which one of her grade school friends she wished she could see now. I could have been getting screwed. It’s like I could have been the man sending out ten letters with twenty dollars in each of them, and expecting Fort Knox to arrive on his doorstep within six to eight weeks. Come to England equals everlasting love—or something like that. Shit, what an idea!

 Then, funny thing right, I had the urge to kiss her again. I wanted to fucking molest her lips in the middle of her tour guide speech. I needed some reassurance to tide me over. Physical contact was like nicorette gum for me in that moment. What I really wanted was for her to take me in her arms and put her fingers through my hair, tell me that this would surely all work out and that I had a giant penis. She could tell me that I was ‘the one’ and I wouldn’t have gotten defensive. You believe that? You don’t. Seriously though, I would have relinquished all of my freedom to get out of that damn trance and get some sleep. She wouldn’t be so bad either. She really is a catch. I talk and think these things, but I certainly couldn’t ask for much better, not the way I look, not with my fucking dirty mouth.

 ‘God Beth, let’s go back to your place.’ But I couldn’t say it to her. She was so proud of this city; it wasn’t even hers really. Still, I couldn’t interrupt. So we went on, running from place to place, seeing the sights of Oxford. Here is the Bodleian and here is
Magdalen, no you don’t say it like that, it’s Magdalen. And here is here and here is and here is. Finally, when the sun started to go down and any shred of definition that remained in my visions of the spires had completely disappeared in the grayness, she led me into a pub. Apparently they’re not called bars this side of the pond.

“Two beers, please.” I said to the guy behind the counter.

“Ale, Bitter . . . Lager, what do you want?”

“Ahhh,” where was MGD, PBR, Sam Adams? The only name I recognized was Guinness and I hated Guinness. It was another omen.

“Guinness?” Beth suggested.

For fuck’s sake! I shook no.

“Make it two double-oatmeal stouts,” Beth said, then to me: “You’ll like these, real beer.” The last two words rang out like a phrase that was supposed to impress me, but I was beyond amusement at hour 30 of my sleepless day.

I took the two large glasses over to the table where Beth had sat in the chair facing the room. I took the chair across from her. My chair faced the wall. We drank the luke-cold beer and I didn’t talk much. She asked why, I don’t remember if I answered. There was no music in this pub.

After a few minutes, a squat looking man with a large beard came over and pulled up a chair next to Beth.

“Hello William!” she squealed, and they began talking very excitedly about something I cared not to listen to. Instead, I looked at the wall and felt neglected. Finally, after I’d squinted at each and every crack in the stone through my slit like eyes, the somewhat portly intrusion excused himself. He would have been dwarfed by a properly obese American. I mean the fat fucks over here actually deserve the politically correct things we say about all the fat people at home. William was big boned, maybe husky.
Now John Candy, he was just fat. Dan Goodman, fat. Rosie O’Donnell, F-A-T. British people only merited terms like fleshy, maybe round if they worked hard at it.

Beth watched him walk away. What was I doing here? Surely I belonged back in New York. I had felt homesick in Connecticut. I don’t know what made me think that I could stand being an ocean away from the city. Besides, I didn’t really fit in here, and Beth did. She had plenty of friends and people always found her interesting. She gave tours with pride. And then she always has the fact that her face lines up somehow so that each of the imperfections kind of cancel the others out. You could describe how and where Beth was not beautiful, but you could never believe it.

It would be better to leave now rather than waiting a few weeks or even a month, then going. That would only make it hard on Beth. If this was the right decision, there was no use postponing it. I belonged in New York. And if Beth was going to live here, she would undoubtedly find one of these men more suitable than me because they actually understood what people were saying. It was pretty tough believing some of the drunks in this pub were speaking English at all. I looked at Beth’s face. She was beautiful. But how can one woman compete against all of the upper west side? How could a librarian’s culture outweigh the Metropolitan? I just shouldn’t have expected Beth’s excitement to surpass Times Square no matter how happy and proud she was of this place. Maybe if I went home right away, I’d be able to beg my job back too. My great apartment with its yard and its two parking spaces had already been rented to a college couple who probably used the fucking kitchen and the shed all the time, but fine, I could get a place in Manhattan again. It’d be all excitement and partying and just fucking great. You lived in Manhattan for a while; you know what I’m talking about.

Apparently these thoughts didn’t make me the best date at the pub so we got up and left after just the one beer. Beth told me I wasn’t having any fun.
When we got home, she cooked dinner while I sat on a bar stool and continued to feel
tired. She was being so nice to me. I hated to have to leave her. If I stayed a week or
two, it could be a nice little vacation. The sex would be good. That wouldn’t be fair,
though. I know. But fuck fair. It wasn’t fair to have a plane take off at 5 pm and land at 7
am either, but where was the judge on that one. I’d make it good for her too. I knew how
to push her buttons. It wasn’t like I was a high school kid in bed. Fuck, she’d definitely
appreciate a good couple of rides before I went back.

Jesus. I’m sorry. Sometimes I end up being an asshole just to try and make things
sound better than they were. I was there. I had suffered through an unending day. There
was no way I was going to give up that easily. Just sit there on the damned bar stool and
make the best of things, that’s what I told myself.

I settled in and tried to make the best of my sore eyelids. My feet were worn out too
from all of the walking, and my body was groggy from the oatmeal business at the bar.
Suck it up, you say. Yeah, but still, what the hell did they put in that beer? It was so
thick. It didn’t seem like such a long shot that they might have stirred in some real Quaker
Oats. It was like drinking a pint of brown yogurt with a dead-squirrel aftertaste. The
alcohol hadn’t eased my condition either. It was like I’d totally skipped the euphoria stage
on the alcohol timeline and moved straight into the head ache and body exhaustion phase
that usually waits until the next morning. But I better cut this shit out and get on with my
story.

Beth kept asking me if everything was all right.

I never answered her straight because it was about the last place I wanted to be that
moment—on the stool in her kitchen—no matter what I told myself. I felt like the walls of
the room were closing in on me, sucking the last minutes of New York Freedom right out
of my life. I was too tired to fend the fuckers off now too. They would have their way
with me. Stick their blood sucking needles into my arms and strip me of my homeland, wash away my Mets, the skyscrapers, the Jazz, the bums, the N & R, all gone. Get ready for that promised explosion. My head was about to fissure. Only one way left to escape.

I asked to use the computer in her bedroom, and she nodded. The power was already on and as I connected to the Internet, I knew that I shouldn’t be doing what I was going to do. Honestly, I don’t think I would have gone through with it even if I hadn’t gotten caught. They say manic depressives attempt suicide sometimes without ever intending to kill themselves. You know what I’m talking about? I’m no fucking wacko, but I’m pretty sure this was something like that.

The connection in her house was slow, like fucking turtle slow, and so it took a long time for the different search engines to sort the lowest fares from London back to JFK. It was sort of fucked up that I was searching for good deals; I would have paid anything to have a decent few hours of sleep. While I was being so pointlessly frugal, Beth came in. Oh god what a shit storm. I mean, I was fucked. Nothing I could do. The screen was facing out and it’s pretty hard to come up with a believable excuse for searching airfares. I didn’t even bother closing the fucking window.

Beth was like instant tears. Just pouring out of her. She didn’t say anything, just fucking cried and whimpered. Okay, now I hate crying. Girls cry to get a grade improved. They cry to get you to call them more often. It is a known fact that women cry to trick you into things that you wouldn’t normally do. See it’s some kind of power they get to help compensate for not being given a cock and testosterone. Well, the tears just rolled down her cheeks. They paved tracks that cris-crossed her face. Maybe I’m a jerk, but the thing I thought as this continued to go on, was how hot she looked crying. Beth was wearing the tears like they were an accessory; a purse, a bracelet. They really did make her look hot. I’m not making it up. She seemed all precious-like. Maybe it was the
vulnerability factor. Ok. So I’m a little turned on, a little annoyed. But was I seriously going to buy a plane ticket? No.

I went and put my arms around her. I tried to comfort her. She gave me a push, trying to get me to go away, but I was stronger than her and wouldn’t let go. That was even hotter, her half trying to be righteous and independent in her tears. How cute is that? She sort of gave a half push against my chest one more time then gave up and buried herself in my shoulder. She seemed to sort of collapse into me and with each sob she pulled her small body against mine. This was fucking great man. Beth was really showing off her womanly gift with this round. It was like a demonstration of power. Having my arms around her seemed to give her a bit more confidence, so she started to get her whole body into the crying. I don’t want to call them convulsions, but something I’d never seen was going on with these tears. I was sort of impressed.

“It’s ok,” I whispered a bit dully. I didn’t feel like I was a suitable counterpart for such a tremendous production. “Shhh, it’s ok.” I kissed her on the cheek to persuade her. Was this real or was she just embellishing now? I didn’t think she really cared so much. C’mon, she would still have all of her friends and British stuff, whatever that was. She would still be able to drive stick.

I kept comforting her because that’s what it seemed like I should be doing, and I didn’t mind holding her at all either. I kissed her again on the cheek because I wanted to, and she looked so good. It made me feel more in control of the situation, too, like I was actually helping her or some such garbage. After a moment, she turned her head and kissed me back. On the cheek. And she was still crying.

“It’ll be ok,” I whispered to her. I can be gentle sometimes too. I was starting to feel really bad now. I mean I was just looking the prices up. I hadn’t bought a ticket or anything.
She gazed up at me and her eyes were glossy with the pre-wet of her next round of sobs. She kissed me again, this time on the lips. “I need you Scott, you can’t leave.”

Was it a trick? Her lips sought mine again. Fuck. Why would she trick me? I hesitated. Her grip tightened round my back. She kissed me again, I mean really kissed me. It was like her tongue was a desperate last chance and she kissed me as if it would be enough.

And it fucking was! I’m a sucker for big romantic kisses, especially with a tongue. Even at the end of bad movies, I love ‘em. God, and she was so hot: all teary and with makeup smearing everywhere. She was like a gorgeous little sex-raccoon.

Thinking about it, this was how our relationship always played out. She provided all of the excitement, all of the spark, the life, the humanity and crap. Its good crap, don’t get me wrong. Me, I just found ways to give her what she needed. She said that she needed me to stay and so I sort of naturally stepped up to fulfill that role. Who knew whether the invitation to come to England had been some spontaneous dream or not? But fuck it, at this point, who cared? All this touching had rid me of my insecurities as well. My little stock of faith was restored, so I started to feel like fulfilling a few more of her needs. Fuck. Like really. Like time to play the role of sexual beast for her. Hah! Poor me.

As we worked our way toward nakedness I began to feel just friggin great. It was as if each article of clothing we tore off reminded me of another slew of good memories. Sex in the kitchen. Groping hands under restaurant tablecloths. Ice cubes and nipples. Mmm. Fuck. Those raccoon eyes were driving me wild too; they were so sexually depraved. Nothing better than an erection to pull me out of my zombiness. As we rocked back and forth, it felt sacred again, it was what fucking was supposed to be like. I’d had sex with other women since Beth had left. Bad sex. This was real. This was fucking love-making
or whatever other nice term you want to use to describe having a dick twice as hard and lips twice as sensitive. I mean my risqué thoughts were racing, but everything was totally focused on her and her body her sexuality. She cried through the whole thing and it was fucking brilliant. I couldn’t ever recreate it by trying to make her cry. See, that’s the difference between just a fuck and the prissy love making terms everyone uses for the other thing that’s so much better. It’s an authenticity issue. Beth whimpering and spilling these fragile tears onto the pillowcase, it wasn’t the best sex of my life, but it sure as hell wasn’t Nadine from accounting on a futon mattress after 12 gin and tonics either. Beth even smiled during it a few times, laughed a little bit at her tears. That was sexy as hell, laughing with tears. Fuck.

So afterwards, we went to eat the cold dinner that Beth had put on the table. Food is so good after sex. I sat across from her in a pair of briefs and just gorged. I was fucking hungry. I did feel a bit awkward eating so much as I did, especially with half my hairy ass on the cushion in tighty whities, but fuck it. Beth served me a second plate and moved her chair closer to mine. I ate it clean. She put her hand on the back of my neck and sat with her legs crossed underneath a bathrobe. She’d stopped crying and seemed to look now both a small girl and a mother at once. Youth and intensity of feeling on the same complexion. Some shit, I tell you. I ate half of a third plate and she just watched, smiled at me, laughed. She ran her fingernails over my back.

We went back to the bedroom and I held her as close as I could. She had turned me into damn mush. The smoothness of her skin on mine. I mean, talk about crying as a power of women, you can talk just as easily about the weakness of men being touched by soft smooth skin. A daughter, a wife, an old grandmother’s wrinkly soft hand on your arm; it’s like animal instinct. You just want to protect. Man’s great fucking warrior insides turn to jelly. It made me feel like I could say anything to her at that point, tell her I
loved her, tell her she had eyes like stars or diamonds or any of that soppy wet crap.

What a fucking trip? But with her head lying on my chest, her arm like silk on my arm, I
could fucking care less. Soon, my eyes fell shut, my chest relaxed, every muscle began to
loosen. I drifted slowly off, enjoying the drifting. Then I was asleep.

I dreamt the Mets were in the World Series.
Chapter II
Dinner and a Glass of Wine

Ok, so a few weeks later and I’m still in Oxford with Beth. Didn’t you think I would stay for a little while. She gets this idea to ask a few people over to the apartment so that I can meet more natives and start making friends. She kept calling it a dinner party, but the term sounds so old, doesn’t it? So 1940s, I would much rather have just said we were having people over for dinner. Who goes to fucking ‘dinner parties’ anyways? There was supposed to be another librarian, one who worked with Beth, and she had a husband. Sarah and Richard were their names. Then, Beth had asked over a couple of students. Fucking kids! What did I want to meet kids for? I had no fucking idea what to expect from British Universities, but if it were like UMass, where I’d gone to school, I needed to lock the liquor cabinet and tell the neighbors to keep their dog indoors lest they wanted it given drugs or dressed in a toga.

I think there was supposed to be two people from Beth’s relaxation class as well, but I didn’t mind them not coming. I am just a little fucking weirded out by someone who takes a class to relax? Jesus, who leaves the house to relax? Am I wrong, or does it not seem fucking stupid that people would pay money to put on their shoes and shirts, drive over to some classroom, and be forced to behave for an hour calling it relaxation. Not fucking me. Give me a fat leather chair, a beer, a football game on the Television—American football, not this weird prissy shit they call it over here—and you better warn everyone in the damned room that I’m gonna burp, fart, and scratch my balls whenever I damn well feel like it. Now that’s relaxing. Fuck, I should look into teaching these classes; I’m a god damn expert and I didn’t have no job yet.

On the day before this thing, I had a list of vegetables that I was supposed to buy for Beth. For some reason, she couldn’t use regular vegetables if we were having people
over, she had to have these weird things that were gonna make everyone’s ass light on fire.
I had to go and take the fucking bus to the big Sainsbury’s on the outer-ring road for this shit. You couldn’t even get it in town. Honestly, who needs three different kinds of squash and why the fuck did the cabbage have to be purple? Green cabbage not good enough for you? Too good for the fucking cheap stuff? And ok, this one, this one fucking vegetable: green onions. I’m looking all over for these things. I’m asking old ladies. They don’t know. I’m reading the little fucking signs. Finally, this store worker chick points them out to me. They’re fucking white. Why call them green onions if they’re white? Jesus Christ Beth, clearly we didn’t need this shit. I had to buy an eight pack of donuts to reward myself for the fucking episode.

So the crap is sitting in our refrigerator. Who knows if Beth even used it? She’s in there swearing for an hour at one of her juice-o-matic chicken fiers that’s not working and making a fucking racket like you wouldn’t believe.

“What are you doing in there, Beth? You have to keep silverware out of the garbage disposal.”

“Very funny,” she called out over the grating sound of her machine, “This is going to be your dinner wise guy. I just have to figure out why my auto-slicer isn’t getting hot.”

I looked into the kitchen from the living room, she had what looked like a big reciprocating saw in her hand and was playing with dials on its white handle. “I could take a look under your hood you know, make sure everything is in order.”

She turned it off. “Now that wouldn’t get us any closer to having dinner finished, would it? And besides, someone might get hurt.”

She was playing along. I love girls that are willing to play along. Having a good back and forth with Beth before we got to it was a favorite pastime of mine. You know how you develop a repore with a girlfriend and you just get so good at flirting with her
that when you try and flirt with other women you’re stupefied by how bad at it you are. Well, she was real good at taking my crap and spitting it right back at me. “With the state of your chain-saw in there,” I hollered, “I like my chances for survival. Besides, chicks dig scars.”

She had taken out a big knife and was cutting the cooked chicken breasts into slices by hand now. “What chicks are you talking about, honey? Are you not telling me about what you do all day while I’m at work?” The slicing was making a hard chopping sound every so often on the cutting board.

“Well, there’s the daytime TV, which is crap. Then there’s the newspaper, which is also crap.” I smiled, getting up, and started to walk into the kitchen. “There’s no good sports section, see. What else? Oh, there’s Marci. She comes over some days now.” I had reached the counter, so I put my elbow down on it and cupped my chin in my hand.

“Marci, huh? Is she prettier than I am?” Beth grabbed another chicken breast and started slicing it up.

“Oh no. Not at all. Not prettier than you.” I smiled widely at her. “Well,” the knife stopped chopping, “Well, I was just thinking of the nice, you know, she has nice …”

“Nice what?” She snapped quickly, holding the knife up. That was kind of sexy. Beth with a weapon. God. I’d forgotten how much fun she was.

“Nice breasts.” I said, taking an extra long time to say the words.

Beth went back to chopping the chicken, pretending like I hadn’t said anything. She chopped, chopped, sort of batting her eyelashes as she did it. After about 30 seconds, she looked up again, “Are you sure they are nicer than mine?” She squeezed her chest together with her elbows, looking down at them.
I slid both my elbows onto the counter and prepared to stick my head across for a kiss. “I should have to check them to be able to say for sure.” I moved to kiss her, but she pulled back and put the knife in the way.

“I don’t know if you could handle it,” she cooed, “It’s dangerous in the kitchen with all my appliances and silverware in the garbage disposal.”

I was about to move around the counter and force the issue, but the doorbell rang. Beth’s shoulders sank and she went back to cutting the chicken. It wasn’t half as loud anymore.

How disappointing? Have you ever been interrupted on the brink of something really fun? This is why people don’t throw fucking dinner parties. If it had just been having friends over, the timing would have surely been better. Only old people that throw dinner parties have their sexual advances thwarted by doorbells.

Beth beckoned me towards the door by pointing with her knife. “You’re lucky,” she said, “But you’re in trouble later.” I couldn’t fucking wait to be in trouble.

I opened the door and was greeted by three students. Beth said she invited two students. What the hell was going on? There were two boys and a girl. Definitely three students.

The taller boy stood in the middle and looked me over. He said, “Hello, you must be Scott. I’m Graeme, this is Nikki,” he motioned to his left, “and this is Robbie, my best mate from school,” and he motioned to his right. “Robbie just dropped down from Liverpool to visit. There’s food enough for one more, isn’t there?”

Graeme was wearing dark pants and a blue shirt that he’d tucked in. At least he didn’t have any stains on his clothes—maybe they wore clean clothes in British universities. Even the top button of his shirt was done so I thought he was either a complete fucking dork, or he was trying to impress us. Robbie was more or less dressed the same, but was a
bit smaller and looked timid under the present circumstance. He had this large tuft of blond hair which was all spiked up several inches. It seemed so dense and rigid that he might have been able to snip off a clump and pick locks with it. It was like punk rock met church clothes.

Graeme was still looking at me. Oh, fuck I guess I didn’t give a damn if there was another kid at the table, there were going to be two already. I said yes, nodding, and Robbie immediately seemed a bit more at ease. Yeah buddy, I’m not your dad, I don’t really give a fuck. I did remember using that same trick when I was ten, though, asking my parents to have just one more friend stay over while that one extra kid stands right next to you, waiting to cry if they said no. But yes, who cared, come on in.

The girl smiled at me like she had recognized the trick as well. She had a warm face and a thin body with bits of baby fat in her cheeks that made her seem like she wasn’t old enough for college, and made me feel like I was too old to be having her in my house. Yet she was pretty in that girlish sort of way. She was the only one wearing a coat, a brown courderoy thing with buttons, and braced in the crook of her arm, she held a bottle of wine. It was then that I noticed that each of them was carrying a bottle of wine. Jesus, Robbie had two! Fucking A! The British students came equipped with their own supplies! You think an NYU kid would ever do that? Fuck no. That put them on my good side. I wouldn’t feel like I was buying for minors.

“Good man.” Graeme said, and he handed his bottle of red wine and walked into the apartment. I accepted it by the neck in my left hand then took Nikki’s bottle of white in my right.

Now as Robbie walked through the doorway, I sort of expected him to keep the two bottles he was gripping. But he paused, and then I had to just stare at him foolishly. He waited a moment, and then jammed a bottle under each of my armpits. Jesus, I was a
walking vineyard. I thought they were supposed to have manners here. Three of the four bottles were red. I preferred white, but I didn’t expect to be drinking that much anyways. This was just supposed to be dinner.

“They were four for three.” Robbie said as I kicked the door closed. “So we let Nikki get a bottle of the sissy stuff.”

Sissy. I didn’t appreciate that. Why were they buying three bottles of wine in the first place? It seemed like one would have been a sufficient gesture. “Were they out of wine in a box?” I mumbled a bit loudly in irritation. You know what, though, that stuff is actually better than you think.

Regardless, Robbie looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. No buddy, it’s English. Then again, maybe they didn’t sell the gigantic, five-liter boxes of shitty Franzia in Britain. A shame, don’t you agree? What an unrefined culture—no wine in a box.

I carried the four bottles into the kitchen squeezing my armpits along the way. I’m sure I looked ridiculous, but no one bothered to help me.

The Flannerys soon arrived—Sarah and Richard—bringing one bottle of wine, thank god. I put it on the counter with the rest. Counting the bottles Beth had taken out before people arrived, we had the equivalent of a small liquor store. 8 bottles! That’s a ton of wine. Like two boxes even.

Oh well, at this point I didn’t figure we were going to drink it all. We sat down and the punkish kid, Robbie, squeezed into a seat between Richard and myself. I wasn’t sure how the older man was going to take this kid and his spiky hair, but they struck up conversation right away. Apparently they had met before, at Sarah’s fucking house or something. Man, I never got invited to any faculty’s house while I was in college. I don’t
know if I’d have gone if one of the prick’s that lectured at me had bothered to tender the invitation.

Well with Richard and Robbie, I didn’t have a fucking chance of getting in a word edgewise. You know what that feels like? You must. Well, they were talking about ordering special TV packages just to watch Everton games and complaining about God knows what with the team. This was total crap. Why couldn’t they talk about a real sport? I was completely fucking lost. So I’m sitting there just looking stupid as shit and I’m only half listening to the conversation. I’m munching on my salad of the exotic and tasteless vegetables I’d bought when suddenly I hear someone say “But the Rangers of course have the best shot at the Cup”. My head nearly snapped off. Who had said it? Finally someone who could argue with me about New York sports. I personally thought that Messier should have retired two years ago or else they should have trader him for a better second shift set of wingers. As I’m thinking this, Richard says, “I wouldn’t say that, Graeme, the Celtic squad have the talent, especially with Larson healthy.”

“Richard,” I said, eager to get my voice into the conversation, but also disappointed somewhat in Richard’s complete ignorance of what he was talking about. I mean, was he serious? “What are you talking about?” I spouted. “The Celtics, you’re not even talking about the right sport. The Celtics have about as much chance for to win the cup as any other basketball team, I suppose, but if you’re gonna root for Boston, you have to cheer on the fucking Bruins man.”

“Watch your language,” scolded Beth immediately. “You are in the presence of three lovely ladies this evening.”

“Oh to hell with the bloody formalities, Beth.” answered Sarah, “I want to know what the devil you’re talking about. And who’re the Bruins?”
I looked around the table. Everyone was staring at me, even Beth. For Fuck’s sake. I’m talking about the god damned Rangers. And that’s got fuck all to do with the Celtics, isn’t that right? You’re with me, no? Everyone had this blank look, though, like I’m the idiot and not Richard. “I’m talking about the Rangers, the Rangers, Eric Lindros, Mark Messier, Jaromir Jagr, the New York Rangers, the Stanley Cup.” I said, looking around. “Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Graeme started to laugh loudly at this point, nearly spitting out his wine. “How long did you say you’d known Scotty here Beth? Did he make this much sense when you dated him the first time?”

Apparently Beth not only acted as the student’s librarian, but she was a source of gossip for them as well. What had she told these kids about us? Jesus? And why was everyone still looking at me like an idiot? They had been the first to bring up the topic anyways. Which one of them had said that comment about the fucking Rangers?

Beth had one of those light bulb flashing moments and started to laugh. “Ok, ok,” she said giggling, “haha, I understand. You,” she turned her body and pointed at Graeme, Robbie, and Richard, “You, well, see there are a few teams in the states, one called the Rangers that play hockey and a basketball team called the Celtics. Scott thought you were talking about that. Hmm. It’s really quite funny.” She paused to laugh and set down her drink, “You were talking about soccer, though, right? Irish Football, is that right?”

“Scottish football dearie, you seem about as confused as my wife,” said Richard chiming in with his correction. “I’m terribly sorry mate.” He said turning to me, “But I’ve still no bloody idea what sides you were mentioning, and I wouldn’t know a wink about any basketball clubs.”

Fuck! Honest that’s what he said to me. Clubs? What a nightmare. I’d so wanted to trash the Rangers too, bunch of old farts. I’d sounded like a fucking idiot on top of that.
Beth came over and kissed me on my forehead. Woman, don’t patronize me. She refilled everyone’s wine glasses and then kissed me again on the ear before sitting down. Richard and the boys did bring up hockey for a moment later that night, fucking Field Hockey, a girl’s sport! They were calling me a sissy for drinking white wine. Field Hockey! I know that you agree with me, you don’t have to tell me.

The dinner was hopeless for me from the start. I just sat and shut up, just like I had mostly done since I’d arrived. Graeme, kept groping Nikki throughout the night. Nikki kept playfully acquiescing to him, so apparently they were in some sort of relationship. It was like having a bad romantic comedy playing at the table, though. I kept catching myself staring at them fucking touching and I’d have to look away. Jesus, public displays of affection freaked me out a little. At least at this fucking proximity. In a park or a street or even a restaurant, you have some distance. All the same, it made me want Beth.

She was wearing a pair of black pants and a sweater that had an oblique V cut out of the neck. The top showed off her shoulders, but her breasts were pretty well concealed. The thing that really turned me on about it was the color, this bright bright red. I mean like fire truck red, like the same color as the phone booths on the London postcards. Not only was she hot, but Beth was sort of impressive, being able to wear a color like that and not look like a big floozy. I watched her talking to Sarah. Beth’s dark eyes really sort of stood out. I don’t mean to dig into Sarah Flannery, but Beth just looked dynamite in comparison. She had this sharpness, this fucking confidence about her as she talked that all sort of centered in those sexy dark eyes. It made everything she did look like a provocative gesture. The way she held a wine glass. She was comfortable, she looked like she’d grown up being sexy and not learned her manners at back-yard barbeques with older boys and stolen beer like I knew she had. She was really trucking through that wine too. In the time it had taken me to finish my salad, she’d had two full glasses. I got up
and refilled it for her, and everyone else seemed to finish what was left in their glasses on cue. We had killed off all of the white wine, mostly because Nikki seemed to be a lush, so I had to pour myself a glass of red. I stared at it, my fucking enemy, I was going to have to force it down. With as much wine gone as there was, someone must have been getting tipsy. My fucking problem was that I couldn’t tell if they were slurring their speech or if it was just the damned accent. ‘Doya this’ and ‘Doya that’. ‘Fancy-a-bit’. No, that’s when they’re sober. But none of this seemed to matter, no one was going to stop drinking once they got buzzed. The pace continued, and everyone appeared to be headed straight towards being dead drunk.

Dinner finally finished and I was feeling a little woozy, so I started to nurse my glass, but all of the guests just got up and sat down in the living room and kept on pouring out the bottles. We had gone through seven bottles by now. Seven! It was fucking unreal. I hadn’t drank so heavily at a dinner in a long, long time.

The couch Beth had in her apartment is a three seater, and I looked over and saw Robbie stuck in the middle between Nikki and Sarah Flannery. Beth came over and asked Sarah to squeeze over, so Robbie really ended up pretty scrunched between the two women. Ha. The boy was trapped. Stuck between a young, beautiful, and totally untouchable girlfriend of someone else and on the other side, an old, baggy, woman of 40. He just sat there, looking pretty friggin awkward. He pulled in his shoulders and cupped his hands together between his legs in what I thought was a self conscious effort to avoid touching either of them too much. Hah! Poor fuck. Maybe I should say something, start a conversation to take the attention away. But no, why miss out on the fun of watching him squirm? You ever see kids get uncomfortable like that? Fucking hilarious. He looked so intimidated, even with his spiky hair. Of course it was no sense to be intimidated by one woman for her beauty and by the other for her lack of it. See, I knew
that Nikki’s face would be the opposite of beautiful one day. I’d just been let in on a secret amongst thirty year old men: all the pretty girls smile and cry much more than the ugly ones and so they develop wrinkles twice as fast, twice as deep, and thrice as many. Cracks me up and probably serves them right.

Beth was holding up her glass. She wanted me to refill it. I should have been offended at being summoned like a waiter, but I wasn’t, maybe it was her top. I looked deeply at her face for any signs of wrinkles as I poured. I couldn’t really say that Beth’s face was in the same category as Nikki’s, but she didn’t have any lines showing either.

“Thank you,” she said smiling at me. It was sincere too. See Beth’s face was a sincere face, not a tormented one. I don’t know, maybe I’m full of shit. I just didn’t think that Beth would ever be old, wrinkly, and ugly. Maybe that’s love, but let’s not get carried away with that ‘L’ word either. You can save the sap for Hallmark. They’ll believe anything you tell them. Real people don’t use phrases like ‘hubby-bubby’ or ‘super-duper son’. I’m not going to start philosophizing my attraction for you in those terms either. She was hot, ok. I wish you could see her. I figured I would deal with aging when it happened.

I looked back at Robbie to see how he was faring in between the women. The little fucker was about to light a cigarette. Right inside the house. He hadn’t asked either me or Beth if it was alright. With a flick of his thumb and a tug of his breath, he turned the tip of the white stick orange and then exhaled a full cloud of smoke. I couldn’t believe it. How rude. And then he fucking expounds his social hole by offering the pack to everyone. I’m like, c’mon, snub him Sarah! Somebody has to teach these kids some respect.

Jesus, everyone took one as the pack went around the table. Only Richard declined, and he pulled a pipe out of his pocket and went about preparing to smoke something even filthier.
I stood gaping at all of these smokers. Did they not have any courtesy? Was Beth really letting this happen? While I was staring, disbelieving, she had gotten up and retrieved an ashtray. Then, stop the presses, she took one for herself. This was another new trick for Beth, but there was no doubt about it that I fucking hated this one.

“You don’t smoke,” I said.

She lit the cigarette and inhaled the smoke, then gestured with her hands as if to say, ‘What would you call this?’

I looked very disapprovingly at the whole living room. What the fuck? When were things going to start straightening out? I couldn’t catch a break in this country for my fucking life? Beth could tell I was distraught and she came over to put her arm round my waist, jostling me, like some ‘cheer up champ’ jiggle was going to smooth it over.

“It’s just a social thing,” she said. “Are you sure you won’t have one.”

Fucking hell I was sure.

Nikki chimed in rather unpleasantly, “It’s just a fag.”

We sat and they drank, and everyone smoked, except for me. The conversations came and went and I only spoke up when asked a question. After about an hour of this, a miserable hour on my part, Sarah and Richard decided it was time for them to leave. Beth begged them to stay, but they excused themselves on the premise of some early engagement or some other such lie. I was wondering if the students would take this as the opportune moment to say their goodbyes and get the hell out as well, but they stood only long enough to see the Flannerys out the door before resuming their heavy drinking and smoking. The tolerances on these kids, I mean I was in college once, but for fuck’s sake, it was like wine was water to them. The students, maybe, had a case for being such fucking fish, but Beth. I might of said that she was outdrinking them all. And on wine no less. What a hangover that was going to leave her. Thankfully, I hadn’t acquired the taste
for the stuff until I was 25, well past my binge-drinking stage. If I’d have boozed on this stuff, I don’t fucking know if I’d have made it. You know, Beth was such a trooper in those days. What could I make of it? It was so unlike the habits that I had known in New York and Connecticut. Not that I wanted to fucking judge, but damn girl, leave some for the French.

She gotten that glaze in her eyes and she was very pink in the cheeks. I could really tell she was getting wasted when the over-affectionate arm touching and handholding began. That and she kept nudging me with her legs like she we was sharing some secret or something. Jesus woman, get a hold of yourself. I kept on nursing my glass of the fucking awful woody stuff that tasted like bark juice to me. I had absolutely no notion of finishing it. It would have been a fucking race to see which of the students could refill it faster. I hadn’t been under so much peer pressure since the Phish concert I’d gone to as an eighth grader.

Somehow in the drunken blather that Beth had begun spitting out, she brought up her other current class, not relaxation but painting. Now I’d seen the things she’d done, even the most recent she’d brought home wasn’t that good. But the fucking boys wouldn’t leave it alone.

“You’ve got to let us see them.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’re really much better than you give yourself credit for.”

I had no concept of which boy was saying what to her. It was like a fucking barrage. Simultaneous pleading that was unparalleled by the drunkest and horniest fraternity boys I’d ever known. And not even to get laid, to see some damn pictures.

“Beth. Please now. You know that we won’t be critical.”

“If you show us then we will leave it alone”
“We won’t even have to talk about it afterwards.”

“Pretend it never happened.”

Nikki finally broke off their volley, “Leave her alone you wankers. If she wanted to show them to you then she would. Just lay off it, you’re paining me with this whinging.”

“They’re in the car.” Beth said with a bit of disappointment at not getting the attention anymore.

“That’s not a problem, is it?” Graeme chirped. “We’ll go and fetch them.”

“It’s dark,” said Beth, now animated.

“You do own a torch.”

“Yes, don’t you.”

Beth sat for a minute, perhaps thinking, but more likely just dwelling in the fucking spotlight. Honestly, they weren’t that good at all. I’m no art critic but I can tell novice from talented. You know what I’m getting at.

“I’m sure they are really good,” Graeme added, to try and win her over.

“No,” Beth said smiling, “I’m just a beginner.”

“We’ll decide that,” said Robbie.

She rose from her chair and went to the kitchen. After banging about like a fucking blind man in a crowded hardware store, she produced a flashlight. She pulled out the plunger too for some reason and held both high above her head. What the fuck was she going to do with that?

“Come along then,” she said, and walked toward the front door. Christ. Where was she taking our plunger? I thought they just called flashlights torches; maybe I was mistaken. Maybe she was going to attempt to light the plunger on fire. I damn well wouldn’t stop her. That’s comedy at its finest.
Still, what a stupid idea, traipsing around in the dark to look at paintings. Don’t you agree? Everything was provided the batteries were still working, and then there was the fucking plunger to factor in. Did she think she was leading a parade or something? It was a poor substitute for a baton. The canvases were stacked in the trunk of her hatchback and I could just picture them getting out to the car, and having to fidget to find the keyhole and correct key for the trunk. What a fucking laugh. Beth’s car didn’t have one of the electronic things that open stuff for you. She would ask for one of the boys to shine the light at the trunk and the old fucking putzy flashlight would sputter out. Then it would half come on and then go out like the piece of crap it was. Hah!

“Oh, sometimes if you tap it on the end,” Beth would say trying to bat it, but knocking the fucker out of the poor boy’s hand, “Oh well, see the connection is loose.”

Each of them would want to have a turn trying to get the thing to stay on instead of flicker, and God knows none of them would be able to do more then get the light to strobe on for a second or two with each bat. Surely their drunken persistence would prevail, however, and they’d have a real intellectual sounding conversation, complete with slurred words, art criticism clichés, and heaps of fucking praise, all the while batting the flashlight continuously to catch glimpses of the paintings. Maybe Beth would point at different sections of the canvases with the stick end of the plunger, how funny would that have been? God, what a fucking useless adventure.

“I’m going to stay in,” I called, “I’ve already seen them.”

Then Nikki also spoke out, “I’ll stay and keep him company.” Her eyes were bright with the wine and I found myself in the position I’d thought that I was above just an hour or two before. I was fucking intimidated by her. The cursed partnership was at work, fucking alcohol and women.
“Suit yourself.” said Beth smiling. She blew us a kiss like she was going on a cruise ship. What a drunk. Then she led the little parade out the door with her plunger pointed straight ahead. The boys were jabbering and marching in time behind her. I just watched. When you’re sober, it’s all you can do with drunk people. There’s no interacting with a drunkard unless you’re a drunkard, only observation and restraint. At least they were finally drunk. I thought they never would get there. Little fucking Britsh fish.

As soon as the front door slammed, Nikki shifted her leg up onto the middle cushion of the couch that separated us. Oh God, I’d forgotten that she was drunk too. Not good. Please don’t get too friendly with me baby. God she was young. I could smell her shampoo too; not fucking good at all. Keep your head Scott. Everything was perfectly innocent. I still felt like I was somewhere I shouldn’t be. Just awkward, you know? Jesus, I’d been drinking with a student, a friggin young hot little eighteen year old who was now three sheets to the wind. I would never be able to afford Johnnie Cochran if some neighbor got the wrong idea. No, fuck, nothing bad would happen. I just felt awkward, like I was playing pediatrician for a day and having to legitimize asking small boys to turn and cough, even though small boys never really have fucking hemorrhoids. No, I was only feeling weird because I was sober and everyone else wasn’t. That’s what I tried convince myself of.

“So you and Beth are a pretty solid couple,” she said with this look like she was trying real hard to be interested.

Good, fucking great. Let’s talk about Beth. Nice. Calming. We could talk about her all the way until she came back and rescued me.

Nikki was still waiting for me to answer. Shit. “Ah. Yes. I mean, yeah, I really like her.” All I could say was I really liked her. What was I, twelve? I’d moved across the
fucking ocean for her and that was all I could say: I liked her. You love her you idiot, why don’t you admit that?

Nikki was not reading any of my facial expressions, thankfully. She just went on like the lush that she was. “That’s good, Graeme and I, we get along well too. And this term we live across the hall at college,” she broke into a fit of giggles at this, God knows why, it wasn’t as if she had said something funny, “haha, sorry, it’s brilliant.”

I smiled. I would be equally happy to listen to her shitty spiel on the relationship game until Beth came back. She was clearly only opening up to me because of the wine, but I wouldn’t hold that against her. Don’t know if I’d open up to me either.

I turned and looked over my shoulder, out the window. I could see a solid beam of light in the parking lot. I was a little disappointed that it was so easy for them. Beth still had the plunger in her hand, but apparently she was just taking it out for a walk. It wasn’t a pet dog. It would be one real skinny fucking thing with a huge red ass if it was. I pointed at them for Nikki to see, but she was still talking about Graeme. She seemed intent on filling me in with all the details of their relationship and her feelings.

“Do you think he’s going to want to split up if his job ends up being in London and I have to stay here for another year?”

What? How should I know? “I don’t know,” I said. Was I supposed to?

“What if he stayed at Oxford to get an MST or something?” She looked up at the ceiling as if she was considering this. “Everything would be great, right? Even if he went to a different college, I think. That would be the best, right?” She was nodding. She at least seemed to think it was best.

I didn’t answer, so she just kept asking questions and leaning further and further across the couch. With each question her voice got a little higher too. It was weird. This is one of those stories that’s funny to everyone but the poor fuck—me—who was in it at
that moment. She started scooting across the couch as she started to get more intent on her questions. I’m not really sure if she fucking noticed me at all. She was in her own little world. I could have been someone that only spoke in clicks and whistles and she wouldn’t have known the damned difference.

“Do you think he loves me?”

“Tick-tick, gnock.”

“Will he ever take me home to meet his mum and pa and brothers?”

“Whoie, tock, whee.”

“Don’t you just adore his eyes? Do you think he’s too tall for me? Should I text him when I’m out with my girlfriends so he knows I’m not cheating? Why do guys get jealous? God you’re so easy to talk to Scott.”

“Clik tssss.”

Translation: you’re drunk bitch!

“Do you think he’ll ask me to marry him someday?”

Holy fuck. Do they really get corrupted that early? This girl was thinking about marriage already. I wasn’t anywhere near ready to discuss that topic with a woman and I was at least ten years older than Nikki. Marriage was everything fucking terrible. It was settling down, the loss of self, being bound together, *for as long as you both shall live*. God, it wasn’t like you could go back at the end of the test and check your work. Game over pal. You were fucking on record, legally fucked, and stripped of your every last freedom. Was there any word more frightening than ‘marriage’?

This is what I said to her, “It’s a little early for you to be thinking about that. You’re still in school, you have so much time to start figuring that out later.” I smiled to try and convince her, but she just leaned back against the arm of the couch. “So much time.” I said again. Wish I still had that luxury.
All of a sudden she burst into speech again. “I’m not in school anymore Silly. I’m at St. Cats. I’m at universiteeee. You Americans.”

Apparently there was a difference between school and universiteee. Apparently I was not the first to make the mistake either. Still, I didn’t like being fucking grouped like that. I was no brand name American. Even if I was proud of it, I was no brand name.

This last bit took me to the limit of my sobriety and thankfully the others came back. Beth brought out two more bottles of wine for us to drink, but she couldn’t work the corkscrew. She sat there fucking slipping and poking around for at least five minutes before Graeme took the bottle and the tool from her to do it himself. Fucking great comedy, but I was flat out done with it at that point. This was completely out of hand. Any more and I’d be holding Beth’s hair as she called to God on the white porcelain telephone: ‘Oh God!’ I wanted to leave, the exciting prospect of being in trouble with Beth from the kitchen had faded from both of our minds.

I excused myself to run to the kebab stand, “I have a craving for fries, I mean chips, be back soon.” Yeah right.

It can be cold at night in Britain, so bring sweatshirts or coats if you’re gonna be out late. I only had a light jacket, so I pulled it tight around me. I certainly didn’t want to go back in and try to find some other heavier fucking thing. I walked south, toward the kebab stand. These things are great. Giant food carts that only sell French Fries and shitty pita sandwiches. Everything is doused in vinegar. What a genius idea to con more money out of drunk fucks leaving the bar. I was just walking tonight, however. No fucking greasy food. I couldn’t stomach it sober. I thought I wanted to be alone, but then I heard this familiar sound. It was a recognizable slang, a drunken slurring of speech that I found perfectly intelligible. Hallelujah!

“Excuse me,” I said, excited, “Are you guys from America?”
The couple turned around, man and woman, both in their forties. The woman was slightly overweight and the man did not look to be in the best of shape either, but both wore big drunk smiles on their faces and I’ve never seen such fat people look so attractive.

“Yeah,” the man answered, “We’re from Massachusetts.”

“Wow.” I nearly shouted, “I’ve been to Boston for a conference every year for the past 5 or 6.”

“We live in Newton.”

“Wow!” I said again; never had I been so fucking amazed or happy about meeting a Masshole. What a coincidence? Yeah, I mean there are a lot of travelers, but I felt like I’d won a jackpot on a slot machine. For fuck’s sake, Massholes!

I chatted with the people for a bit. They told me about the three-week vacation they’d been planning all winter, fucking boring stuff, but terrific too. I told them of my recent move more freely after 20 seconds than I’d spoken of it to any British person yet. After talking until my balls were shriveled and chattering, they invited me to go with them to a pub where they were meeting another couple from the U.S. I sure as hell didn’t want to go back to the apartment yet.

The couple we met at the bar was also in their forties. I hadn’t been in the mood to drink all night, but now that I was with other Americans, real fucking Americans, not like Beth, she’d been adulterated, now I was ready for some booze. See these real Americans thought football was played in shoulder pads, thought free refills were a constitutional right. Americans understood half four as two, and we sure as hell didn’t understand why they’d changed all the plugs so that we couldn’t use our electric shavers and laptop computers. These people, they were my people, they had the same fucking complaints and exasperations that I did.
We ordered bottles of Budweiser at unreasonably high prices. We bitched and complained about everything—a great American pastime. We were loud. We were self-centered. We all agreed that it was unexplainable why everyone else wasn’t following our foreign policy. We kept making these comments about how rude everyone in England was. Then we were unappreciative to the bar staff, but tipped them 18%. We were everything that foreigners stereotyped Americans as. God, it felt so good.

After three bottles of Bud that weren’t the right fucking size at all, my new friends said they had to leave.

“No, stay, just one more. You’re leaving me with them.” I pleaded, gesturing around me at all the English drunks in the pub.

But they wouldn’t stay. I did remain in the bar after they’d left, sitting in the same corner booth with my fourth bottle of Budweiser. I was a little buzzed now, and I started to think about things, but mostly I was thinking about Beth.
Chapter III
Play it Again

Would you believe it if I told you I met her in a New York City bar while a man was singing “Sweet Home Chicago”? It’s really fucking corny, I know, but that’s how it happened.

It was at a place called Prohibition on 75th and Columbus. The place was small and typical of New York—wood paneling, pennants and newspaper articles about the old Yankees teams. There were never any about my Mets, not in Manhattan. Fuck the Yankees. This particular place had a few pillars holding up the ceiling, and the essential three feet of polished mahogany that everyone crowded around when the tables filled up. I knew this place well when I walked in, and I’d never been here before.

The band was better than usual at Prohibition. Both of my friends agreed. The key to them was this big, black guy on the bass guitar. He was right in front of our table. He had these dark glasses and massive shoulders that seemed to fit perfectly with a big, deep bass guitar sound. He was what I imagined when I thought of a fucking bass guitar. He was good too. He controlled the instrument, battled it, told the four strings exactly what to do and beat it out of them if they didn’t cooperate. Who could blame the strings for going along with it? If I were a guitar string, even a big thick mother fucking E string, I’d still have obeyed this man. It would’ve been like a fifth grader picking a fight with Shaquille O’Neal, that’s how powerful this man was with his four-stringer.

He was obviously the leader of the band as well. The other two guys kept looking over at him for cues, making sure he didn’t get mad at them, making sure they were in line. He was just jamming away, though.

There came a little lull in the music, and I stopped sipping my beer instinctively. This bass player, this giant, leans forward to his microphone and says, “Now if you’ve got
shoes on your feet and any soul at all, then I know you’re out on this dance floor with somebody to hold you tight.” Then ‘buh nah ba bu; buh nah ba bu,’ and he leaned forward again, “And if you’re single fellas, I want you to go and find somebody to groove on down with. You hear me cats, now let’s go.”

‘Buh nah ba bu; buh nah ba bu; whawnaw whawnaw; buh nah ba bu; buhdu nah ba bu; buhdu buhdu buhdu nah bati bu.’

What was I supposed to do, be soulless or pretend like I had no fucking shoes on my feet? Both of my friends got up and disappeared to the bar or the bathroom, or maybe to go find a girl, I didn’t know. Then the bass player looked me in the eye and plowed out his line one more time, ‘buh nah ba bu’. This was a direct attempt to call my manhood into question. All right fucker. You keep playing that guitar, you play the hell out of that guitar.

I got up and left my beer at the table, the sleeves were fucking up, I was gonna need two hands for this. I walked across the open space right in front of the stage and the big musician’s eyes followed me the whole way, like he was making sure I didn’t go back or something. I got to a table full of girls, and without even really looking, extended my hand to the one on the end. This was for that big bad ‘ol fucking bass player, not the girl, and the one on the end would have the easiest time getting out. How romantic, I know, but Beth got up and took my hand anyways. I introduced myself with a single word, “Scott”, all caveman and primitive, like some kind of Me Scott, you Beth kind of bullshit. You believe that shit worked?

She was smiling, though, whether from embarrassment or excitement matters not to me now. She wore her hair long in those days, long enough to hang over her shoulders and cover her collarbones. She was in this long black skirt and a burgundy top and had sprinkled glitter on her neck and cleavage and it would rub and stick on the ends of her
hair. She had those same sharp eyes even then, man, dark and with a tight grip. That’s what made me notice her and begin to forget about the bass player. She definitely wasn’t afraid to look me in the eyes either. There was no shyness. But it wasn’t all that flirtatious either, it was just . . . examination. That fucking sincerity she has. Jesus, even when everyone else in a bar has on their new outfits and are wearing their cool shoes and big egos, Beth’ll just stare you in the eye like it’s a fucking interview.

We found a bit of space on the dance floor that we were standing in and she says, “Let’s see what you’ve got then, Scott.”

All right, let’s go. Bring it. I started to do this kind of syncopated step that I thought I’d learned once. I’m a regular guy, I sometimes dance at weddings and occasionally in my pajamas when a good song comes on, but let’s just say I wasn’t putting my best foot forward. But with a few drinks in me and my manhood still somewhat in question, I was fucking Rico Suave. She tried to follow me, but it was all crap and soon, we both knew it. The initial failure sort of left a clump in my throat, like I was fucked, but looking around the small dance floor I realized everybody in this place was a crap dancer. How reassuring. I mean, there was this sweaty couple gyrating in the corner, and the woman clearly had more hair above her lip than the dude did. The way she was attacking his face, he was going to get fucking rugburn. Christ, I really was Rico in this place, or at least his understudy.

I just kept looking at Beth, trying not to get distracted and lose focus like I do. She was getting fucking prettier by the second the way she kept looking down and then shooting those crazy dark eyes back at me. So I twirled her and looped her hands behind my back and stepped on her toe once on accident. Serious. She found it endearing I think. The whole time, that bass-guitar player kept laying the beat down square as bricks. He poured himself into that beat; he was the mortar of the whole fucking moment. The other
players must have felt it and let him go out on his own a bit. And then, when the other players stopped completely and let that big, bad mother fucker do it solo, even the blue smoke that hung near the bar seemed to tap along to the rhythm. He played right through that song, shredded it, and then put it back together again. While he was washing the blood off his hands, the drummer came back, and then the guitar, and finally a sacred voice: “Sweet Home Chicago!”

* * *

One time, after we’d been seeing each other for a while, we took a day and went to a museum, M.O.M.A., I think. You ever been there? Fucked up place really. Well, when me and Beth went it was summer. The weather was warm, and so we decided to walk from her apartment. What a dating sort of thing to do, huh?

We went along the midtown boulevards and avenues in the general direction of the museum. No real rush. It was one of those days when you would have liked to get lost. Well not in fucking New York, but anywhere else probably, lost, not mugged and killed. She knew right where the building was, though, so we just walked slow, stopped to look in store windows at shit I couldn’t afford, that kind of stuff. I paid a vendor three dollars for ice cream then spilled it on my pants. For fuck’s sake. But oh well, I buy my pants at Marshall’s. Time definitely felt like an old farty grandfather that day, it was just crawling along. It was like that day had some weird fucking vibe about it, maybe just in my memory, but it felt like people were moving out of our way on the sidewalks, like traffic was stopping instead of beeping horns and racing past, weird shit. I mean God only performs a few miracles every hundred years, so if this was the way it was really
happening in New York City, get me a priest, two rabbis, and the owner of the Boston Red Sox, because I got secrets to sell.

After forty minutes of walking like this, we got to the museum. It was late morning and they charged us 12 dollars a piece to get in. Everything in New York is so fucking expensive. I say it’s because our shit is better than the shit everywhere else. Still, twenty-five fucking bucks for an hour or two in a museum.

We walked around the different rooms. Maybe I should’ve tried to say something intelligent about the stuff we saw, but I didn’t understand it and I wasn’t going to pretend just to try and impress some girl. Besides, she wasn’t trying to say anything about the pieces either. I spent more time looking at her than I did at any of the paintings or sculptures really. The only thing I thought was really very interesting was this video they had of a piece of fruit. No sound. It sort of rots and then gets eaten by flies all within like 45 seconds, but they don’t tell you how fast they sped the film up to. I figured like 2 weeks, but Beth said it was more.

We just continued to wander light-heartedly through the rooms. She would stop sometimes and pretend to really look at a painting or chair or whatever it was, and so I kept sliding my hand around her waist. I think she caught on and started stopping more on purpose. She would lean into me and sometimes tilt her head as if she were trying to get a better perspective on the canvas, but then she would relax her neck and allow her cheek to rest on my shoulder. That was my tricky fucking girl! Now that’s art for you fuckers, seduction is a fucking art, Beth was like working her Mona Lisa game on me that day.

We heard this one couple while we were paused like that, “I think the coloring is clearly indicative of his inner anger.”

Then the other got sort of upset and pipes back, “No, no Clarice, that’s not it at all, see how the shape of the line comes down and points toward the center as it moves top to
bottom. That’s despair, not anger dear. You see it.” The man began tracing out some line
in the painting with his finger.

“Yes, I don’t deny your point. But it just feels rather melancholy and angry to
me.” She paused for a moment to invent something more gripping to say, “It is a work
suffused with rawness and humility, and that declares itself to the viewer in an angry
tone.”

I still had my hand around Beth’s waist when we started laughing. I couldn’t fucking
contain myself. I didn’t think people fucking talked like that. Beth was laughing too, and
she had to bend over to try and contain her giggles. It kind of made her ass poke into my
crotch. Fuck yes. She had a nice ass too.

“This work is a psuedo-surrealistic representation of dramatic confrontation.” I
whispered in her ear.

She started laughing again and wiggling, which was great.

“The lines about the top left quarter of the painting clearly indicate the artist had a
traumatic experience in the third grade.”

Beth was having a hard time holding it in. She was so hot to me then.

“You really must agree Ms. Schilling that the brush stroke holds the melancholy
twilight of a timeless hero in torment. A perfectly exquisite clarity of thought.” I sounded
like those people who write quotes on the back of books.

Beth let out a little yelp of laughter and the snobby couple looked over and shushed
us. This made me want to laugh. We were like two schoolchildren that had been taken to
an opera on a field trip, and could do nothing but make fun of the fat woman as she sang
her aria. Beth regained control of herself and reached back with her arm to put her hand
on my cheek. That was when I’d known I really liked her, she was so hot, so nice, and she
knew how to touch me without being told or asked. This is why it fucking sucked so
much that I had to tell her I was leaving the city.

We left the room rather sheepishly, but still giggling. Beth turned to me, as we came
into a new room full of aluminum sheets and bent pipes, “So what would you make if you
were gonna do modern art?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.” I said.

“C’mon. You could do anything. I mean look around.” She was still a little giggly.

Fuck. I was thinking. “Alright.” I started, “I would make a giant cake, like a life
sized cake in the shape of Madonna.”

Beth made an amused noise of acknowledgement.

“I would have to use massive amounts of pink frosting for the breasts.” I added.

“Hah. Why pink?”

“Ughhhh. Dunno. It would be for the critics to figure out I guess. What about you?
What would you make?”

“Hmm. I would give them my old bike, from when I was a girl.”

“You can’t do that.” I protested.

“Why not?”

“You didn’t make it.”

“Yeah, but it had these little green ribbons that came out the ends of the handlebars
and a basket on the back that I always put grass and leaves and things in. I could totally
give it to the museum.”

“Whatever. That’s cheating.”

“Why? Because I didn’t want to make a big phallic sculpture out of mashed
potatoes?”
I laughed for a second. “No. And why would you use mashed potatoes? It’d be all flaccid.”

Beth laughed and took hold of my arm. “Ok. Rock candy then, and people could lick it.” She stuck her tongue out at me. “It will be my second great work.”

I laughed. “O.K.”

We had made it to the entrance again. Outside, the last bit of afternoon sun was sliding behind the buildings. We hadn’t eaten, so we tucked into this basement Japanese place. I actually like sushi. If you douse that shit in soy sauce, it’s fucking great. We did that. Then we started walking again, towards Times Square.

In the dimmer light, Beth’s face looked fucking great. All romantically shaded and smooth in the dusky remnants of day. Basically: I wanted her more than ever. After being in the harsh museum lights all morning, it was nice to be outside in the twilight. Can you imagine having sex in a museum under those 2,000 watt ultra bulbs they burn? Your private parts being all lit up like you were in a porn movie? Well, the pores of your skin sure as hell stand out too. Now, it was like I was walking with an airbrushed cover model for a magazine. I just wanted to take her home and ravage her. We hadn’t had sex yet at all. Still, we walked away from her apartment. Down, down, down the island, into the Village and further, all the way down into the twenties.

We were having fine conversation, but I kept thinking about kissing her and unbuttoning her pants. She was telling me about books.

“Well the first ones I ever fell in love with were the Nancy Drew books. Did you ever read Hardy Boys?” She was saying.

“Maybe a little. Not all of them.”

“Well I read every single Nancy Drew I could get my hands on. I think there are more now, but I used to be pretty comprehensive. Then when I was 13, I had this huge
thing for Judy Bloom books. My mother used to have to take them away from me to make me go to bed at night.”

I nodded, thinking how differently I acted when I was thirteen. I still think I only read comic books then. Spider Man. Sometimes X-Men. And those certainly didn’t keep me from sleeping at night.

“Oh, and my senior year of high school I read *The Awakening* and I went into this whole big feminist kick. I spent the whole summer reading Virginia Woolf and Dorris Lessing, maybe a Sontag book, but that might have been in college.”

She was getting so excited relating her high school reading list too me. That was different than what I was used to. My ex-girlfriend had been a hairdresser with huge boobs, so … Secretaries, waitresses, bartenders—those had been my type. A nurse once, but the bitch dumped me. The uniforms are nice, though, aren’t they?

“Oh, oh, and then I did this thing where I read all the Russian greats in one semester. Well, not that you do that, but all the big ones. You know, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Dostoyevski, Kafka, even Chekov and Marx. Have you read any of that stuff?”

I had heard of Marx. That was it. I just shook my head. The only thing I really knew about Russian books was that they were long.

“I’ll let you borrow some of it. You’d love it. Hmmm, well maybe not, but you should read it anyways. Let’s see, I got hot on lots of different authors for awhile. It’s so easy you know. Especially working where I do.” She worked at the Columbia English and History Library as an assistant back in those days. “You read one and before you know it you have to get the next and then you’ve read them all and you are counting down to release dates. Right now I’m reading this Oprah Book Club thing. Well, that one and then this thing on the building of the railroads in California. People don’t give Oprah enough credit. I like most of the stuff she chooses.”
I had actually heard of Oprah. Yeah, believe it or not, I know who Oprah is. But fuck, we had been walking a long time. I liked listening to her and all, but some people will talk about a certain topic indefinitely. Beth’s voice kept rolling up and down enunciating, then fading, then picking up again. Her features kind of perked up and she was talking fucking twice as fast as she usually did. There was only so much I could take.

“We’re really far from your place now, maybe we should catch a cab.” I said.

Maybe when it pulled up to her place I would here those golden words that every upstanding bachelor waits for on the seventh date, ‘Would you like to come up.’

“No, let’s walk back. It’s such a nice night. Perfect for a sweater and an arm around your shoulder.” She said smiling and gripping my hand.

Fuck, I really didn’t want to walk. Like a good guy, though, I fucking agreed. You all think I’m an asshole to her, I know you do. I’m not. I would walk even if I was tired. I had to tell her sometime anyways.

“Listen, Beth.” I began. “I was talking to Ron, my boss, yesterday at work.” How to put this? Fuck, there wasn’t any angle that made it look good at all. “Well, see the thing is, I’m getting transferred to Connecticut.”

She didn’t stop walking. She let go of my hand, but kept stride perfectly. “Were you surprised?” She asked.

“I knew they were going to move some people, I didn’t know it would be me. The good thing is that I’ll make more money, but, I won’t be living in the city anymore.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t say anything. Just walked.

“I know things with you were just starting to take off. I mean, I’m sort of disappointed. Or I mean, it’s just really bad timing is all.”

She looked up at me. “Well, you’re not going tomorrow, are you?”

“No. Umm. End of August.” It was mid July.
“Well, then I don’t have to stop seeing you just yet.”

We walked for a long while without talking. After thirty minutes, we got to the entrance of her building.

“I had a really great time at the museum and all.” I said looking at her.

“Me too.” She smiled.

I moved in and kissed her just like I had done the last few times. “Good night then.”

I said, starting to move away, but she grabbed my arm.

“You’d better come up.” She said. “You did get a promotion and all. We should celebrate. Besides, you won’t be here much longer, I better take advantage while I can.”

She pulled me by the arm to the front door where she used her key to undo both a door lock and a deadbolt. Like a golden ray from heaven had come down to shine on me. I thought for sure I was moving into the we-used-to-date phase of the relationship, not the I-want-to-fuck-you-every-second-I’m-alive period. Believe me, I wasn’t complaining.

I saw her about three nights a week after that. The sex was great. Beth is a real bombshell in bed. Sincere. Uninhibited. Looks only take you so far, you know what I’m talking about. Beth had loads of everything else. And she was hot on top of it anyways. Honestly, I was disappointed to leave her, especially after finding out what a fucking fox she was. There wasn’t really anything I could do. I’d get fired before I’d be allowed to turn down the promotion as a single 28 year old. I was on some company track and I was supposed to be fucking thrilled about it, but financial accounts isn’t exactly the most thrilling industry to be ladder climbing in. Beth’s fucking bedroom was a hell of a lot more exciting.

It was like a week before I was moving and her and I had just finished making it for the second time that evening when she says to me, “Guess what, I quit my job at the library today. Just went in and said ‘Two weeks notice.’ Well almost. I found this
bookstore in Mystic that’s hiring. I did that first. I’m gonna move up there to be with
you.”

“Where are you going to stay?” I asked. I was shocked. It just came out. I know.
You really do think I’m an asshole. But was she really moving two and a half hours to be
with me? Quitting a good job? For fuck’s sake. To this day, I don’t fucking know if her
she had planned on getting her own place or not, but that’s what she did.

The bookstore she worked at was a shittier version of Barnes and Noble; smaller,
pricier. She tried to call it quaint, but the right word was definitely shitty. They did have
an unlimited supply of crappy coffee that they served to customers for free in these small
white cups. She had to have been unsatisfied there, but she never said anything. Her
apartment was about 5 minutes drive from mine and I saw her almost every day. We
should have had a place. It would have made some fucking sense, but I was not about to
get tied down like that. I started to take the sex for granted, and as that became less
exciting, Beth seemed to fall increasingly victim to the tedium of her job. It sucked,
because, shit, my job was great. I got to boss four or five kids around that were still wet
behind the ears from college.

Beth withdrew into herself, stayed in bed all day long on the days she didn’t work.
She watched garbage TV and started refusing anything that was served to her in a white
coffee mug because it reminded her of work. Christ, I had to buy two new black mugs
with Met’s logos on ‘em to have something to put her coffee in when she stayed the night
at my place.

I really noticed it one day when I went into the store to take her out on her lunch
break. The other girl was somewhere in the back, but Beth was just sitting at the register
in these ratty jeans and a fucking sweatshirt, drinking water out of pink thermos. She
looked pathetic. I came in the front door, but she didn’t notice me at all until I said her
name. Her sight was just fucking disappearing three feet in front of her face. No one was in the store, but she wasn’t reading. She wasn’t doing anything. I looked under the register where she usually tucked a book to have it at the ready, but there was nothing there.

Working in the library, I think she’d felt like a hot shot academic. I mean she even did some kind of history project of her own. The people in there were a lot smarter than the average mom in Mystic looking for a book to read her kids at night and the latest Tom Clancy thriller. There were these huge cases dedicated to Danielle Steel, John Grisham, all the pop-novelists. Beth had to rearrange them every time a new book of theirs came out, which was about once a month it seemed.

Beth had told me one time of her hatred of that genre. “It’s like they take one of their old stories and just retell it, generally worse than the first time. They put this gaudy flashy cover on the thing, title it something catchy, and hype it to the public like it’s the cure to cancer. I’d almost rather watch a soap opera.” It had been one of the only times I’d seen her so worked up with anger rather than excitement. Her job sucked.

A couple of weeks, maybe a month after that, we were sitting in the kitchen of her place after a rather routine turn on the couch. “I got offered a job to be a full librarian rather than assistant. I’m gonna take it.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Oxford.” She said. Then waited for me to respond. “In England.”

“I know where fucking Oxford is.” She hadn’t even asked me. Jesus. I knew she had to take it. She needed something more stimulating than ringing up murder mysteries and pop-up books, but I wanted to keep her. I wanted to be selfish. I wanted to continue getting laid every night.

That was that. She just dropped me. Left for England within two weeks.
Nine months later. I didn’t see it coming at all. Not a fucking chance. “Why don’t you come live with me?” She says all casual, as if it were no big deal. Fucking A right it was no big deal. We were both seeing other people. Yes, I had a passport, but shit, that didn’t mean I should go. Such typical Beth. So impulsive. All excitement and surprise. I should have assumed she’d drop me again, just like she quit all of her classes after a few sessions. What made her think it would work in England? What the fuck made me think it would work in England? I still wanted her. My dick made me think it. At least he was happy so far.

I had felt better about things when I’d been with her. This was one way of telling her that—fucking moving in with her. Jesus. I didn’t want to settle down. Not yet. Go and fucking ruin all the sex by getting hitched and having babies. No thank you. Everything was flipped around. With ‘long live the queen’ and VAT refunds, even death and taxes seemed fucked up. Christ, I was sitting in a bar alone with a 13 oz. bottle of Budwieser.

The lights came up and I stopped thinking about the past. I got my skimpy jacket ready for the cold walk back to the ‘dinner party’. What was the bar doing closing at 11 pm? Fucking pussies. God, no doubt the students were still drinking and smoking and having more fun without me. It felt like I was crashing a party, but where the fuck else could I go. Beth’s place was now my place. Scared the shit out of me. I really missed America where things were comfortable. Where was my fucking hiding place here? My mind was pounding. Sorting this out was like trying to swim in a tuxedo and cowboy boots. I wasn’t gonna cave yet, I couldn’t. Fuck that. I just needed a good way to organize my thoughts.
Chapter IV
Organizing Jack

Jack Kerouac revival meditation class? She had to be fucking kidding me. Do I look like the kind of guy that meditates, let alone in the effort to raise the spirit of a dead Poet? Wasn’t he a poet? I thought I’d read something of his once, in college. It was pretty popular. *Howl*, that’s what it was fucking called. I went into this poem thinking it was going to be about a wolf, or loneliness, or screaming at the friggin moon or something. What a crock. It wasn’t about anything like that. I don’t remember ever figuring out if it was about anything at all. So why then, would I meditate to try and raise his damned ghost? Maybe if it worked, I could ask Jack what the hell he was doing writing a poem like that with a fucking bogus title. I would just tell Beth, no. Simple. ‘Beth, I don’t want to join a group to learn how to meditate.’ That would work fucking fine.

They had rolls of those tea biscuit crackers at the first meeting, but I was drinking coffee. Figured. I dipped one in my Styrofoam cup anyways, but it didn’t really soak anything up. Jesus, what was I doing here? Beth wouldn’t drink anything because all they had were the white cups and she’d become a real freak about that issue. It was kind of cute, but it meant no coffee for her.

She was definitely one of the less freakish people here, though. All kinds of fucking weirdoes were walking around the room. It was like a hippie congregation that had been forced to shop at Marks and Spencers, Britain’s equivalent to JC Penny’s.

There was a woman of about 55, with a pink sweater and a jean vest who looked pretty normal, but she had about twelve different strands of pearls on. One would have been ugly lady. Twelve was just ridiculous. Did she think it was Mardi-Gras or something. She didn’t even have the excuse of being drunk. Honestly, she must have
bought the 15-inch strand, the 16-inch one, the 17-inch, fucking all of them. The longest of the things came all the way down to her belly button. I’m watching her, and it keeps getting hooked around one of her breasts every time she bends down or jerks at all. It was like giant ugly boob was being lassoed. This didn’t seem to bother her at all. Oh no. She just gave a shake or a shimmey or a fucking chatter like a dog drying herself and these friggin beads would all jangle together and fall back in between her massive sagging mounds of chest. Was she even wearing a bra? Certainly not one that did much work.

Then there was this guy, Roger. He had long hair and glasses with lenses that were that weird brownish color. These, you couldn’t tell if they were tinted, or if he’d held them over a campfire. He looked a little like Ozzie Osbourne and I’m not talking young rocker Ozzie, Roger was definitely an old decrepit Ozzie. He must have also done a fucking lot of drugs to look so similar. This seemed fucking spot on, because he had this real grizzly raw sounding voice. It had the exact same qualities as low-grade meat. Seriously, this guy sounded like he was chewing and gnawing on the language rather than speaking it. This hacking cough. Didn’t hold him back for a second. That’s the thing that worried me the most. It wasn’t as if Roger was sick—he always had a hacking cough. Jesus. Yet, he was all smiles and when he came over to us. He kept asking Beth questions about whether we’d done any kind of meditation before. Had we read all of Jack’s stuff? I told him, yeah, I’d read *Howl*. I told him it wasn’t that good too. He laughed. What the fuck was he laughing about? I was gonna say something but he starts hacking out this wheezing sound in between his laughter. It was fucking disgusting. I didn’t want anything to do with this burnout. He finally settled down, and says, “I will have to tell Jack about that one.” I’ll tell you, I think he really believed he was talking to the guy. The fucking dead guy! Hello!
It turned out Roger was the leader of our group. He takes us into this adjoining room and there were all these straw mats set up in a circle on the floor with one in the center. Each of the mats had some kind of pillow on it, but none of them matched. Blue, green, Small, Lacey. Like he’d raided his relatives houses and stolen them off the couches. Roger told us that we could take whichever pillow was on our mat home and decorate it. Was this fucking arts and crafts class? He said we could bring in our own pillow if we wanted to do that instead. The mats had to stay because he owned them and it was critical to contacting Jack that everyone of them stayed in his possession. Whatever. I would leave both the mat and the pillow, because fuck it if I was going to come back next week.

My mat had a thin, purple cushion on it. No design, just four buttons sewn into the front and some battered yellow tassels coming off the corners. There’d been this nice big blue one. I’d walked straight towards it, and Beth just slides up beside me and sits on it. Typical. The woman drags me to a fucking witch séance, and then she’s gonna make me sit on a shitty pillow for 90 minutes until I can’t feel my ass anymore. The floor was concrete. I was going to argue about the pillow with her, you can’t let them get away with everything, but Roger was flapping his hands like a damned duck trying to get everyone’s attention.

“Ok group, I tried to introduce myself to all of you, but if I missed anyone, I’m Roger.” Then he starts coughing real loud for about eight seconds. Christ. Then he continues as if nothing had happened. “Now, since this is a meditation group about Jack Kerouac and about communicating with Jack’s spirit, we are going to start by concentrating on the words of a Boston Poet, William Corbett. The two lines I want everyone to focus on, to med-i-tate on are: ‘Like Jack Kerouac aiming an arrow / at that moment of alert rest.’ All right everyone, let’s recite that together.”
About half of the circle started in with him, “Like Jack Kerouac aiming an arrow at that moment of alert rest.”

Roger looked around disapprovingly, “That wasn’t everyone; lets try again.”

This time I joined in, looking over at Beth, who was smiling at me. Was I fucking doing this? Holy shit. “Like Jack Kerouac aiming an arrow at that moment of alert rest.”

Roger smiled this time like some great problem had just been solved. “That was excellent. And that is what we are going to begin with, a simple meditation of alert rest. We are going to start with fifteen minutes of meditation on these lines. Sit comfortably, that is why you each have a pillow,” My pillow was a piece of shit! How was I supposed to sit comfortably on a one foot square pillow with no fucking padding and four buttons poking into my ass! “But please remain silent,” Roger continued, “this is a personal meditation, and later, silence will be very important. Spirits are afraid of too much noise, and when we communicate with Jack, the connection can be lost if someone is too loud.”

Too loud. What about his fucking coughing? That shit scared off the living. Jesus. His speech was so hokey. It reminded me of an airline stewardess explaining the emergency procedures. He must have asked for silence 100 times before. I’m sure that he’d had people just like those fuckers on the planes that recline chairs and lower tray tables before the stupid seat-belt sign is off, who had blatantly disobeyed his call for silence. I mean how could you take someone like Roger seriously? The guy was an ex-druggie that was trying to be a hippie with a Brittish accent. I thought we’d started this little 15 minute deal, but Roger breaks into coughing like he’s trying to say something more. At least the airlines don’t hire lifetime smokers that sound like they have TB and are choking on extra chunky peanut butter. The awful sound had finally ended and I was going to give the thing a try, but he starts in again with his, “Please recite the lines once more, and then we will begin.”
For fuck’s sake. “Like Jack Kerouac aiming an arrow at that moment of alert rest.”

Can I *med-i-tate* now, Roger? Or are you going to spit up some blood? About twenty seconds into this silence, there is a loud thud in the room next door. Then you could hear these muffled cheers through the wall like everybody was real happy about the piano they’d just dropped on the floor or whatever it was. Beth turned to me and whispered, “They’re trying to contact Picasso through gymnastics.”

I smiled at her. Who really knew? There were two more thuds during the first 15 minutes, and then always the muffled cheer. Maybe they were rolling people out of bunk beds.

Ok. So Roger had finally stopped hacking. It was semi-quiet. I took a deep breath and tried to follow procedure by thinking of the lines. What did alert rest mean? Fucked if I knew. Soon, my mind was wandering. I was thinking about my feelings for Beth. Maybe she was thinking about me too. I stole a glance out of the corner of my eye, but she looked like some kung fu martial arts master sitting cross legged with her hands on her knees. Oh well.

I would just keep to my own thoughts. I began by trying to arrange my feelings for her into some kind of a time-line or chronology. At first, there had been this excitement, and infatuation. She was hot, I was single. And she could drink too, and go out and keep up. Then what? There’d been the sex. Fucking ecstasy, that was at first. Should be a real big fucking spike on my line. Then I’d moved. So downwards, but then she’d moved too. It still had to go down. It definitely wasn’t as good as those first 6 weeks of banging in New York. Still, even in Connecticut it was well above average. It was like a peaceful and contented period for me. I sounded so fucking psychological. Was I actually doing this? Whatever. After that, though, Beth had moved to England. There would have to be a break in my chart for that. Well, maybe a dotted line would be better, because I still had
feelings for her. I still thought about her when I masturbated. Ok, 9 months of dotted line, then what? Then I was in England. What to make of that? Christ. I couldn’t tell yet. It’d only been 2 months. At least I had a job now. That made things better. The ante had definitely been fucking raised by coming here. It was kind of like starting over at excitement and infatuation in a way. I just couldn’t fucking back out as easily now. The sex had gone back to being pretty good. She’d passed out on me that night of the dinner party after threatening me so coyly with that knife. Aside from that, though, it was hot pretty much every night. A lot of mornings too. She looked great in the shower. So it was back to the good times, but she was definitely different now. Like at that awful dinner party. She had been drunk, and that made me angry because she had changed from the old Beth. She’d become more British and less the careful, New York girl I’d met. Maybe I should turn my line into a ring. Good sex, boring sex, and around now again. No, three years of fucking her, we were some place different now. A helix. That was it. Who knew biology class would ever come in useful? We were on some kind of weird upward sex spiral.

Right when I came to this idea, Roger broke in. “You all did a great job focusing that round and most of you kept very quiet.”

That couldn’t have been fifteen minutes. It had felt like only four or five. Jesus. Wonders never cease.

We did another for twenty minutes. Then Roger talked about the Beatniks and some other shit I wasn’t listening to very carefully. Then there was the last ritual of the night. Twenty minutes.

Roger started talking, “So, Jack was a man who liked to climb mountains. One summer he worked on a mountain in Washington. A fire lookout. Complete isolation for a whole summer. In the mountains. In touch with his inner peace. We’re going to fo-cus
on that mountain as a metaphor for our own struggles and climbs in life. And just like Jack, we are going to do this in isolation. So let’s think about Jack’s mountain, Desolation Peak, and let our minds, ugh-huh ughhh-huhh.”

Roger started coughing like a madman, so I didn’t feel so bad interrupting the poor fucker. “I been there.” I screamed over him. “Went there as a boyscout.”

“Really!” Roger cries out, through his coughing. He said the word almost like it was an aside that was part of a sentence starting with a phlegm hack and ending in a wheezy sucking of air through his teeth. Must have thought it was important. I just sat there. It wasn’t a big deal. I’d been 10 or 11 or something. Didn’t remember it too well, just the name because it was so, I dunno, fucking memorable.

Roger got control of himself and says, “This is going to be very good for the meditation, very good. You, Scott, is it? Tell us what it is like.”

Well fuck. I mean it was a mountain. Like I said, I’d been there for Boy Scouts on some week long backpacking thing. I remembered the camping goods store that sold only hard candy and no chocolate. Richie Headington had brought a nudie magazine that he stole from his dad and we all stared at it one night with our flashlights. Roger was waiting expectantly. I looked around the group for someone to bail me out of this one, but they were all waiting expectantly. Well fuck. To try and appease them, I said, “It’s a mountain,” then paused, “A real pointy mountain.”

Roger took this in, and scratched his chin in what looked like contemplation. He took the long, straight hair that draped over his shoulders and pushed it behind his ears. He was interested. Why? I hadn’t said anything. “Tell us more,” he said.

Jesus, the guy was really putting me on the spot by playing like he was so fucking intrigued. I tried to think. I said the only other thing that came into my mind about the trip. “There’s not a lot of small twigs to start a fire with. You know, the ones that you put
inside the log cabin to get the flames going.” I remembered it took a bunch of us looking for like half an hour to find enough dry ones.

“Ahhhhh,” said one of the group members across the circle, like he understood what the fuck I was talking about. What a moron. He had on this rainbow colored tie-dye shirt. I bet he figured he understood everything people said. What a fucking nut job. I bet he used words like ‘dig’ and ‘far out’ that weren’t even cool anymore when I was born.

“Yes, Yes,” said Roger. “This is very important, this idea of a cabin.” Was he serious? “Jack Kerouac did in fact talk about his friend’s cabin, a Mr. Lorenzo Monsanto I believe.” Roger began pulling on his hair again, brushing it back as he leaned forward. “More about this cabin, Scott, this is great stuff.”

Ah. Ok buddy. Whatever you say. I would appease the poor fuck. He was probably fiending for some drugs anyways, why not tide him over with some bullshit. The problem was everyone seemed really interested now that our big guru had made a big deal of it. For fuck’s sake. All of these middle-aged faces staring at me so eagerly. As if I was the reason they’d come to this group and not because they didn’t have friends and had nothing better to do on Thursday nights.

Whatever. I went on. “Well, there were four different jobs in my troop when it came to the fire. Ah, one person gathered the twigs and small kindling, that was usually me.” These people were eating this stuff up. It was crazy! Even Beth was listening intently. I was gonna give her flak for that later. For sure. These people were envisioning me as some crazy American, which of course meant that I must have known crazy ole Jack Kerouac and all his buddies too. I mean, shit, I’d been to the state of Washington. I kept going though. “Then there was one person that gathered dead grass, or tore up the newspaper,” some of the people gasped at this so I raised my voice, “TO LIGHT the fire with. And um, a third person found big pieces of logs, or chopped them off of a fallen
tree.” Some of this was hard to remember. There’d been one more job. “Oh yeah. Then there was the builder.”

Roger put his hand up to stop me. This was far enough for a beginners’ group, he seemed to say. I was going to frighten them with the job of the builder and it was way over their heads anyway. He really was crazy.

“‘Yes,’” he said to all of us in this majesterial tone, “This makes a lot of sense to me now. Scott, you have been in communication with Jack.” I wanted to laugh. He was serious too. “Scott,” he paused, and looked around at the other group members nodding his head, “One of Jack’s favorite things to do was chop wood.” Someone gasped. You had to be kidding me. Roger started coughing, so we waited. Then he says, “Will you come sit in the middle with me for this last meditation? I think it would be very good for the auras present tonight. The group can focus on your con-nec-tive power and on my guidance.”

“Why not.” I said. This was all hoopla, part of a show I figured. I would play along. I got special treatment out of it. So what if it was unmerited. Beth sort of looked at me and smiled like she was proud. Maybe this turned her on. I thought she was pretty hot sitting cross-legged like she was. I moved my mat to the center of the circle and placed my pillow in the middle of it. When I sat down, Roger made me turn so that I was facing him. Sure. Whatever you want Roger. What a quack.

He looked past my right shoulder at Beth on her big, blue pillow. “Beth,” he said, “It is Beth isn’t it? I’m going to ask you to move for the good of the group as well.”

I turned back to look at her. She was smiling. Broad, expectant, like a girl who was about to be asked to the prom.

“Can you shift over to your right a bit to fill in the space that Scott’s left? The rest of you fill in as well. We don’t want any holes or else Scott’s presence could leak out.”
I had to contain myself as I watched Beth turn frumpily away to scoot herself closer to a Middle Eastern fellow in a suit.

We finished the session and then all poured back into the lobby. The fat lady with the pearls came up to me.

“Hi. My name is Catrin. With a C,” she made a symbol with her hand and the pearls all jostled about, “not a K.” She reached out and took my hand. God, why was she touching me? “I just want to tell you, you were really fantastic in the center. I could feel your telepathy, and,” she leaned in to whisper the last bit in my ear and the pearls hung forward, “I think that you are a stronger force than Roger.” She shook my hand, but did not let it go. She stood up straight and the longest strand of pearls looped her right breast. Christ. She shimmied it off without releasing her eyes from my forehead. “But don’t you tell him that,” she said, “I want him to ask me out. I just thought you should know.” Finally, she let go of my friggin hand. She walked away, straight towards the left over biscuits.

Beth appeared to my right. She was carrying her blue pillow and my purple one. “It looks like you have a fan,” she said.

“That guy with the mustache and the green, high-water pants complimented me too,” I said. “What a bunch of weirdoes. It’s like they think I’m some kind of fucking celebrity.” I started to chuckle. Hell, I didn’t mind being put on a pedestal.

“Yeah,” Beth said, obviously forcing a smile, “and you don’t even know a single thing he wrote.”

*   *   *
So after the second meeting I asked Beth to sew my initials onto my purple pillow. She ignored me. Then it was Thursday of the fifth week. I come home and she’s already changed into her pajamas.

“Beth. What are you doing? We have class tonight. Get dressed. Quick. We’re gonna be late.” Jesus. How could she have forgotten?

“I’m not going.” She said.

“What do you mean you’re not going? You can’t just quit.”

“Why not? I already paid. I can quit whenever I want.” She was upset.

“Whatever is wrong, we can talk about it after class. Meditating will probably help you sort it out anyways.”

“I’m not going!” She screamed at me.

“Well what about me? I want to go. You can’t just leave me.”

“Take the car. I don’t care. You don’t need me to hold your hand, do you?”

“I will go. I will take the car. You’re making a mistake. I’ll tell Roger you’re sick so that you can still come next week. I don’t know what’s wrong with you.”

“Scott. Don’t you get it. I’m not going back. I don’t like it anymore. It’s boring.”

“It’s not boring.” I protested. Sure it seemed stupid. But I gave it a fucking chance. Why couldn’t she?

“If you’re going, then you can take this with you.” She threw the blue pillow at me. I caught it as it hit off my stomach. God damn it Beth. Christ. I wasn’t going to be late. I went in the bedroom and got my pillow, then left.

About half the group was already sipping coffee and eating biscuits when I got to the center. Roger was talking to the really old guy that had a green floral pillow. I waited and waited for them to finish their damn talk, but with Roger coughing every other minute and the old guy just blabbering on. For fuck’s sake you bag. You don’t have that much time...
left. You’re gonna gab away your last 5 years. He looked about 100. No joke. I called him Century Club in my head.

I’d come up with a lot of names for the people in the group. There was Century Club a.k.a. Mr. Wrinkles. Neglected Goth Girl wasn’t here yet. There was Mr. and Mrs. Rainbow Tiedye Clash (Rainbow for short, and because sometimes it was hard to tell them apart), Pearl Monster, Bryant ‘Floodpants’ Gumble, Hippie Poet Dude, and Lebanese Bruce Wayne to name a few more. They were all so pitiful for actually believing the crap that Roger told them. Whatever though. They all respected me like I was some sort of genius. Ever since that mountain thing the first week. Surprisingly, I talked to Roger the most. Confiding in a crackpot, I know. It’s not like I had anyone else to talk to in this country. Not besides Beth. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. I poked Roger on the shoulder.

“Hi Scott,” he said.

“Hi.” Century Club was still standing around so I gave him the cold stare and he went to go get himself a peppermint. The biscuits were probably too hard on his fucking dentures. “Beth’s not coming this week.” I said to Roger. “I think she’s quitting.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” he said. “You know that I won’t be able to give you a refund.”

“No, or yeah, that’s fine.”

“Are you staying Scott?”

“Of course I’m staying!” Hello. What kind of a question was that? “Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something, though. She seemed really bitter about something today when I came home, so I just took the car and drove myself here. She’s been a little fucking bitter about a lot of stuff lately. She just pricks up her bristles at small stuff.”

“What do you mean Scott? What kind of bristles does your wife have?”
“First, she’s not my wife. They’re not real bristles Roger. It was a metaphor, you know. She’s been a bit spiky, edgy.”

“Oh, I see, like a porcupine then?”

Christ! “Yeah Roger,” I said, “sure, like a porcupine. Real irritable. You know what I mean. Why do women have to act like that? I don’t act like that. I’ve been nice to her. Nothing but nice. I act happy, agreeable, even when I’d rather be doing something else. For her sake. But her, no, she can’t be civil. She has to be fucking mean and touchy.”


Finally he continued, “She has obviously become jealous of your superior meditation power. Have you considered that? You have been reaching Jack and she has been doing worse and worse each week.” He paused, looking me over. “And, Scott, you do have the purple pillow, she chose blue. I think that says a lot about her.”

“Jealous,” I said, “No, I don’t think that’s it. It’s something else.” What a moron. Why was I asking for his opinion anyway. The only love relationship he’d probably ever been in was with fucking smack. I was turning away.

“You’d be surprised what the less-talented people in the class say about you. I think there are a lot of jealous people around you, Scott.”


“Anytime Scott.” He called out.

I walked into our mediation room where the mats were already laid out. I pulled one mat out of the circle and rolled it up next to the wall. I had to reposition a few others to take up the empty space. Wouldn’t want any holes for the damned spirit power to escape.
During the middle ritual, I was supposed to be thinking about what kind of train car
Jack might ride in heaven. As usual, though, I was thinking about Beth. She had grown
bitter over a lot of things recently. There was no fucking denying that. The class was only
a small part of the problem. She got mad at me for bringing home one of the other agents
from the realtor’s where I’d found work. Piers. He’s a nice guy. I had even asked her in
advance. Still, when he showed up at our house. Beth was fucking rude all night. Fuck. I
was just trying to make some friends of my own. She complained and complained. ‘Why
should I have to cook a big meal for someone I don’t even know?’ ‘I’ve had to work all
day too.’ ‘This guy is such a tosser anyways.’

I knew he’d heard her say some of it. She was being such a bitch. Ok. Fine. So
definitely more than just the stupid meditation class. It was like each time I made one
fucking step towards being acclimated, she would lose her temper. Or any time I did
something without being asked. I put out the garbage and she was like, “What did you do
that for?”

“It’s garbage day, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s only 8 o’clock. I was going to make you do it before we went to bed.”

Christ. It was like I couldn’t even fill up her gas tank without permission. Maybe
that was it. Maybe she liked being in charge of everything. Being the one who knew
everything. It was like, if I knew when garbage day was, Wednesday, then she wasn’t
needed so much as a source of information. Jesus Beth. My fucking little baby. She
probably didn’t feel like she was as important to me anymore. Not now that I was
beginning to know my way around and meet some people on my own. Oh. What a sexy
little crabby bitch she was. I bet she thought of each step I made on my own as one I took
away from her. I was gonna fuck her so nice tonight. Just put my arms around her and
squeeze her until she knew how important she was. I’d be real slow. Give her a buzz down below. Mmm.

Christ. Why did my mediations always turn to sex? These things were a load of crap, but sometimes they seemed to work a little bit too.

I was serious about Beth. I was going to find a way to make her feel appreciated. Even beyond the sex. I had to make her appreciate how I would always need her. Oh fuck! Did I just think always. Christ! That was a slip. Wasn’t it? I didn’t mean that? For fuck’s sake Scott. As long as you both shall live. Ahhhhh. Christ. Get out of my fucking head. Demons!

 Fucking Roger. Damn it. This was his fault. Him and his stupid self focus and alert rest bullshit. I had been a master at avoiding any kind of introspection my whole fucking life. Why would he come in and fuck with that? That fucking bastard. Didn’t he know how dangerous it was to start being aware of your position on life’s blueprint. It was too late now. I was fucked. See my blueprint looked like a house and I was right on the stairs between the first floor and the second. And, well fuck, the first floor has all the fun shit on it. The social living room. The den with the pool table. They don’t get satellite TV on the second floor, I’ll tell you that. The second floor is like all boring bedrooms. Clean bathrooms. Linen closets. Jesus. You could fit, at most, two people in any single room on the second floor. The pictures on the wall were in frames. You only got Chinese takeout once a year. Christ. It was like a stairway to hell. Even the attic would have been better than the second floor. In the attic there were all those cool boxes of shit that you’d thrown up and forgotten about. In the attic you could keep forgetting about that shit and re-find it every day if you wanted to. And I mean, you got to start eating applesauce as a meal again in the attic too. Really, the fucking point is that the second floor is a big piece of crap and Roger and his damn med-i-tate was making me dwell on the fact that I was on
the stairs going up to it. Fuck Roger and these damn rituals and focus meditations. I
opened my eyes; wasn’t this one over yet?
Chapter V
A week of lunches

So I had this week some time after Beth stopped coming to meditation classes that sort of sums up what life had boiled down to. I tell this part of the story to everyone who asks what England is like. You said you wanted to know, so I’m gonna tell you too. Anyways, it was Monday morning and I sat with my limbs hanging off my chair. Lethargic. Heavy. An empty desk stared at me blankly. Fucking Monday mornings. I just had to sit here and wait for lunch. See, people don’t want to buy houses on Monday mornings. People want to sit on their couches and watch old movies. They want to stay in bed and reread the Sunday paper. People want to call in sick on Monday mornings. What most people end up doing, however, is sitting at their fucking desks waiting until the afternoon to start really doing anything. Nobody ever goes house-hunting. It was ten o’clock. Lunch was only 2 hours away.

There was one other assistant agent that usually sat in the front of the office with me, but he was on vacation. I had to wait for lunch alone. What a fucking drag. I could see the light in Pier’s office, but I wasn’t supposed to leave the front room unoccupied. Christ. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t have heard someone come in. I got up and looked through the door. Piers seemed occupied with his own boredom so I left him alone. Alright. An hour and fifty-five minutes until lunch. Man, people didn’t even bother to stop and look at the ads in the window on Monday mornings.

Piers and I left the office together at 11:53. We went to this small café around the corner. It was pretty reasonable and it served beer. Piers wouldn’t go anywhere for lunch that didn’t serve fucking beer.

I got to the counter and asked for a baguette with egg salad, I meant egg mayonnaise. Fuck. Whatever.
The girl behind the counter took out a length of bread and asks, “Do you want mayonnaise with that?”

_Egg mayonnaise_. Didn’t that implicitly contain mayonnaise. Fuck, I didn’t need extra mayonnaise on my egg mayonnaise sandwich. A fucking cholesterol toasty. Christ. These English. It’s like they never heard of ketchup or hot sauce. Mayonnaise with everything. Seriously, more than just the french fries. Chicken wings. Celery sticks. Egg Salad! It was only a matter of time before I would walk into a bar and order a pint, then be asked, “Do you want mayonnaise with that?”

Piers ordered a salad. Well, salad and a beer. He tried to convince me to get one too.

“We have to go back to work,” I said.

“Right Scott. You haven’t been doing much work today. I can see you mate, if I lean back in my chair.” He started laughing.

“Still, I don’t want to drink this early in the day.”

“It’s a beer with lunch. You make it sound like a bloody damnable offense. I have one every day. It’s just something to have with your meal. Tastes better than water.” He smiled at me and raised his glass. “Now how about it?”

“Piers, I don’t want a beer. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, pointing his aloof chin at me. He did this all the time. It wasn’t that he was older than me, or that he was my boss. Piers just had this really pointy chin and instead of being self-conscious about it, he fucking wielded it against everyone. He’d cock his head back and point at you with it. Sometimes with his head like that all the time, and that fucking pointy ass chin, you’d have to duck when he turned! I give him a hard time, but he was a good guy. A great fucking boss. That made one. We both had to deal with Big Boss, the head realtor at our office. What a cock that guy was. Maybe
that’s why Piers was so nice to me, didn’t want to make it doubly shitty. The Big Boss liked to pick on me extra, too. It was always something. I wasn’t courteous enough on the phone. I looked like a slob at work. My fucking stapler was on the wrong side of the desk and causing me to be inefficient. How fucking outrageous is that? Piers said it was because I was new, but I knew better. He hated me because I was American. He would come up to my desk, and ask me fucking trivia questions about British History. About politics.

“Do you remember who was the opposition leader when Margaret Thatcher took over Scott? I was trying to remember.”

What a fucker. Sorry prick, even if I did know I wouldn’t tell you.

“I was just thinking, Scott. Do you know which sub-Saharan British colony was the first independent state?”

I mean, of course I never knew the answers. What was I, fucking Alec Trebeck. So Big Boss would fucking look the stuff up before he asked me, I swear, just so he could rub it in.

“How do you get over here anyway? I didn’t sponsor your visa.”

“My mother’s British.” I said. Bastard.

“And she moved to America and married your father?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” What did he care. It wasn’t as if he was paying me enough to be an important employee.

“I suppose that’s what she gets for marrying a Yank: uncultured children like you.”

What a fucker. “Ho-ho. Now I’m just pulling your leg a bit. You Yanks are good for some things. Keep an eye on that window, hey?”
What a huge ass-hole. I’d ask Piers some of these absurd fucking questions. He never knew. But Big Boss never asked Piers such things, did he. It had been hard enough to get a job, I wasn’t going to quit for this douche bag. I might shove my Swingline American made Stapler up his ass one of these days, but I wasn’t going to quit.

So Piers and I are sitting at one of the window tables and Piers is nursing his second drink. I’d just finished telling him a story about New London. “How’s the lady treating you these days?” He asked me.

“She’s fine,” I muttered through the first bite of my pastry dessert.

“Thank her for having me over to dinner,” he said, “Will you?”

“Oh, that night she was being a real bitch. I’m sorry. She isn’t usually rude like that.”

“It was all right.”

“No, Piers, I should be thanking you for being so nice about it. Jeez, it was the first time you met her and she had to be like that.” I nodded my head to indicate my sincerity.

“Yes. Hmm. Well, you won’t find a woman that you fancy all the time, I’ll tell you that. 90 percent seems pretty good to me. I had a girlfriend once, I was about your age; she was about 80 percent, maybe 85, but things just didn’t work out.”

“Yeah, but you’re happy being single Piers. The freedom. The women. I know it from the stories you tell me.”

“Yes. But who tells the unhappy stories?”

“Oh. C’mon. If I have as much fun as you do when I’m old, I’d deal with a few unhappy stories. It’s not like I don’t have unhappy stories now. Christ. I do.”

“Who are you calling old you little wanker?”
I smiled and laughed at him. Hah. This was my other boss. I made a gesture of peace, putting my hands up in the air as if I’d done nothing wrong.

“All I’m saying,” Piers continued, “is that 90 percent is good. If she is 90 percent, that’s pretty bloody good, that’s all.”

I swallowed my last bite of pastry and Piers started talking about something else. It was good. That was about as deep as our friendship went. We had pretty decent pastry length talks, but the sandwich length discussions seemed to lose their luster if we didn’t switch subjects once or twice. I liked him plenty, that wasn’t it, but we would have struggled to keep talking through a three-course by ourselves. If he weren’t my boss, I probably would have considered him a bit of a pathetic old man.

* * *

Tuesday mornings are a lot busier in the estate agency business. People begin to get off their asses. They forget about the money they spent over the weekend. They start thinking ahead, about the next weekend. They start thinking, ‘Gee, my apartment is a shit-hole and I pay rent like it was bomb-ass.’ I have to work hard on Tuesday mornings.

It was so busy this Tuesday that I had to eat my lunch in the car on the way to showing a house. I dropped Beth off at the library in the morning and took her car. She had to take the bus home. Nice of her, huh?

So I’m in Beth’s car and I have this chicken tikka panini. I’ve also got a can of coke that there is no holder for and I’m trying to juggle the fucking stick shift. I did well. I spilled on the seat rather than on my pants and white shirt. I needed my own car. A fucking automatic. They were just so damned expensive over here. If I could sell the house I was showing, the commission would help a lot.
I was showing it to a couple. It was an ok house for them too. A small 3 bedroom with an attached garage and a medium sized garden in the back. Problem was, it was off the Marston Road and pretty close to Cowley. Cowley was a pretty shitty rundown neighborhood. Lots of little newsstands and storefronts that changed every few years. I'd only been here 4 months and I'd seen one place open and shut down already. An internet café. No one uses the internet in a shit-hole neighborhood, man. Don't you think so? And the students all get it for free at their colleges anyways. This house I was selling was a little expensive considering all of this, but fuck, that's how I made my money.

Everything was going fine through the kitchen, the living room, the basement, and "Yes, the washer and dryer are included." I was really playing the place up. I felt like Tom Sawyer selling fence-painting to his friends. Three bedrooms seemed like a Mansion to this couple with me hyping it. They were eating it out of my hands. I kept making little suggestions to convince them that I was being candid and showing both the positives and negatives. "If it were me. I would want to paint this room a beige, maybe a light yellow. It would just open it up and with some nice lamps, the room would feel even bigger than it does now. That's of course if it were me. You'd have to spend a few pounds on two or three cans of paint, but I think that would pay itself off in the satisfaction you'd get."

The woman looked me in the eye the whole time, nodding along. "You're so right Scott. You have such a sophisticated sense of light and color. Don't you think so darling?" She nudged her husband, who wasn't paying attention.

I smiled wide. What a load of bullshit. "It's my job to study these things." You could put me under a fucking cow. I was milking it.

Convince the wives. That's always my philosophy. They can convince the husbands for you. Just sweet-talk the women. Listen to their shitty comments. Drop in a few bits about plumbing or the roof to make them feel secure. Be polite. Tell them they were
wearing nice shoes. Fuck. It was so easy. They could bait their husbands with sex or whatever later to get their way. Women always do.

So maybe I was a little dishonest. A little covert. But fuck, they shouldn’t have called me an estate agent. Call me The Man. I could ease myself into their little family. I could urge them in the right direction. They thought it was their idea when they said, ‘yes, this is the perfect fit for us.’ And you know what? Anywhere that I was selling to them was a fucking palace compared to the shit that was for rent in this town.

“Well, the thing I like about this room is all of the natural light.” I pulled open the blinds in one dramatic sweep. “Windows like these are hard to find. And everyone looks just so much more vibrant when they have a little bit of authentic brightness in their homes.” I said smiling at the Mrs. like I had an orange peel jammed in my mouth. “Mr. Thomas, you are a very lucky man.”

Shit. I was outdoing even the best used car salesmen. Those CIA types that sell junkers to auto mechanics didn’t have shit on me. I had my groove on. --Go Scott. It’s your birthday. You gonna get yourself a new car. Like it’s your birthday--Shit, get through the upstairs without a hitch and it was in the bag.

“The upstairs is really lovely too,” I said. “I think that I would put a ceiling fan in the first bedroom on the right to give it that nice quaint feel, but it would work great as a lounge or a den, or a guestroom—maybe with a daybed. I just love those.”

I sounded like I was gay. But women trust gay men’s advice. Just keep it up Scott.

I was walking up the stairs slowly, letting them look around, building up the next floor.

“This is a nice winding staircase too.” Said the woman. “What do you think honey?”

The man just nodded.
“I completely agree.” I chimed in happily. At least you would have thought it was happily. “Such a nice transition from the first…” Oh shit. The damn English. Cough. Quick. “Eghhha, excuse me, a nice transition from ground floor.”

“Oh, bless you Scott.” Said the woman.

Great. Fucking great. You’re still okay. Let’s go Scott. Don’t fuck up now. “You could also use the second bedroom for a nursery if that’s in your plans some day.” I said smiling. Women fucking love to talk about little kids. They don’t have to have kids. They don’t have to want kids. But if you tell them kids will like it. The women get all fucking soppy and sentimental about a place.

Just as I thought this woman was going to blush and grab the hand of her husband, one of the stairs opened its jaws and bit my ankle. Oh fuck. Falling. Fuck!

I fell flat on my front. It was like I was going down in slow motion. Sink and fucking burn, baby. I hit the stairs, catching one right in my stomach. I exhaled something awful. This was The Belch. It was loud. It was long. It smelled like chicken tika. I would have won contests with it in my college days. Fucking hell. The woman’s face changed to something of utter disgust. No gay man would ever let out something so horrendous and primitive as what had just passed my lips. I had fallen off the ladder. I was condemned as a fake. I was no fashion expert. I had no sense of color. I was a fucking weasel in a suit to her now. The man laughed, but that wouldn’t get me anywhere. God damn it. I showed the rest of the ratty, overpriced dump, but what was the point? Really? I apologized, but it was hopeless. She left without even taking my fucking card.

Apparently I was struggling on stairs in my recent experiences.

* * *
On Wednesday I met Beth for lunch at a cheap curry joint. It was small and did most of its business through take out and delivery, but there were two tables inside. Both were fucking taken. Beth and I took our boxes of food and sat at this bar type thing instead, facing the window. It wasn’t really an eating area, just a stool and a ledge really. But who the fuck cared.

“So we were supposed to get this shipment today of 2003’s critical essays on renaissance history. Not all of them of course. Just the ones that were important. Was going to be a real big box. Didn’t show up. Supposed to be there at 9:00 this morning. You know, I think this company has screwed up before. I am going to call some of the other libraries and see if they got delivered there by mistake. This is some really important stuff. I mean, the students have to turn in their extended essays in three weeks. Some of them were waiting on one or two of these journals for their final sources. You know what Nikki’s topic is. It’s really interesting.”

On and on she went. This was an important book. This wasn’t an important book. This shipment was late and no one had returned the fucking Berenstein Bears trilogy or some such shit. She was stressed out, that was fine. But there was only so much I could fucking take.

Beth and I had all three levels of conversation. WE could have great pastry length jabs. Light-hearted, joking, excited. We had good sandwich length repartees as well. Academic disputes. Gossip. Stuff like that. We could sometimes go for like 8-course French feasts, though, too. It was like a philosophic decathlon. Or a completely comprehensive nostalgia over some period of our life. Fucking Beth talking about books. That was like an all-you-can-eat buffet. You just have to know to stop once you’re full. I was stuffed to my fucking gills right now.

“How’s your deep-tissue massage class going?” I asked, interrupting her.
“Fine,” she said, then tried to keep going on about the importance of these renaissance texts to Nikki’s report or essay or whatever it was.

“Maybe you could practice on me sometime,” I suggested.

She stopped for a moment, slowly switching off the book faucet that was within her. “Maybe. We practice a lot in group, you should start coming with me. We could be partners and we’d get to practice on each other.”

I stole a piece of her lamb, “This is really good lamb.” I paused, smiling. She was still waiting for me to answer her. “I go to meditation on Thursdays.”

“Why are you trying to avoid the subject? We’re having a conversation and you’re talking about the food. You could just quit meditation anyways. I know you think it’s a load of crap.” Her tone was getting confrontational and it pissed me off.

“It’s not all crap!” I snapped back. Why was I defending it? Who the fuck knew? I didn’t want to stop going. That was certain. And why the fuck did she yell at me for saying the lamb was good? It fucking was.

“Oh right, I’m sure you think that group of crazies in there with you are really stirring Jack Kerouac’s grave.”

“Don’t call them crazies!” They were my fucking weirdoes now. She didn’t go any more. They didn’t belong to her. If anyone was going to make fun of them it better damn well be me. She didn’t even know their fucking, weird little quirks. I did.

“Oh Scott, if you don’t think those people are wack-jobs, then you’ve obviously become one of them too.” With that, she stabbed a piece of lamb. We were beginning to draw attention from the two tables of people.

I didn’t fucking answer her. What could I have said? They were wack-jobs. But fucking my wack-jobs. She’d quit.
She took a rather vicious bite of the meat and then pointed her fork in my face. “I bet they have a nick-name for you or something dumb,” she was talking through her lamb, fucking smacking her lips with its fleshy juice, laughing at me. “They probably call you The American Buddha or something.”

That wasn’t even a creative name. “Don’t point your fucking fork at me.” I answered. Who was she to try and come up with the names for my group? “I’m not quitting. That’s final. No way. I don’t want to take a damn massage class anyway. I have a class.” I was very defensive. Fuck her for that. What she said was probably right. But she had no fucking right. Not after quitting. So what if I liked my wack-job classmates. Maybe I had become one of them. So fucking what.

She was eating fiercely, but hadn’t said anything else. I had to go and open my big fat mouth. “I just wanted a free rub-down. Just trying to get you to shut up about the fucking books.”

Beth stood up. She looked pretty fucking mad. “You know what?” She was stabbing me in the chest with the plastic fork now. “You know what? This isn’t even about classes, is it?” For fuck’s sake. Why do women always extrapolate these petty arguments into ‘issues’. It was about class. My fucking class that I liked. And I wasn’t going to leave. But oh no. Not to a fucking woman. Beth just started right in with her rant. She’d probably been practicing it at home. Rehearsing. Waiting to try and squeeze it into any fucking argument she could. There’s no stopping a woman on a rant once she starts either. I sat back on my stool.

“You can’t commit. You’re still afraid to spend too much time with me. Ever since you started that class, ever since you’ve been wanting to bring that guy from your work around, you’ve been avoiding commitment. It’s like you don’t even see me.”

“I live with you, Beth. How could I not see you? I see you every single day.”
Logic is completely insignificant to a woman on a rant, though. I could have said it was aliens and she would only have slightly altered her words.

“You see me like you see the junk mail we get, like you see the cup of coffee I make you every morning. It’s like I’m just part of the scenery for you to pass over. And now you want me to give you a massage. You want me to shut up about my life. You have your group, you don’t have time to listen to me.”

Get me out. I hate fighting. I lost every fucking time. Even when I won, or should have, I fucking felt like I’d lost. It was too easy to resort to personal dirt and knowledge with a person you knew so well. The argument always seemed to be extended way beyond what was at hand. Fucking women’s fault that. Fucking always making ‘issues’ out of things. God damn it.

“Beth,” I said. “I have to get back to work.”

“Sure. Your answer is just to leave. Run away Scott. You’re such a man. Why won’t you just sit here and talk to me? I’ll tell you. You can’t commit Scott. You’re afraid of anything tying you down. I hate you, Scott.” She was still standing, half blocking my way out. She was still threatening me with a plastic utensil.

“Look, I’m sorry Beth. I didn’t mean that about your shipment. I love you; I was just upset because I want to stay in my group. That’s all. I like my group. I really have to go back to work. I will see you at home tonight. You can pick a movie out or something.”

My attempt at conciliation went for naught. Beth moved out of my way, but as I passed in between the stools, she unleashed a taunt, just to make sure I knew that I’d lost the fight. “Right, run away Scott. Go back to your great job that took you a month to find. You’re like a secretary in that place. More like a secretary’s secretary. So go ahead. Run on back.”
Oh fucking hell. Didn’t she know that I had left a great fucking job to come over here? Didn’t she fucking care that I thought she was more important than the name of the fucking firm I worked for. Christ. Women will stoop so low. Fucking estrogen and all that shit I guess. Fuck her. I took Big Boss’s shit every fucking day. What for? So that I could live with her. Try things out. This is what I got for that degradation. Jesus fucking Christ. I couldn’t speak. I just slowed down a little bit and kept walking out. Sometimes things get worse before they get better.

*   *   *

On Thursday, I opened the wrapping of my baguette alone. I moved the telephone to the side of my desk to create more room to eat. Nothing to read. Nothing to do. Just eat. I started as methodically as possible. I had to kill a half an hour. No sense chowing through my only thing to do in 5 minutes. Eating alone in the office. I know. Shitty. Piers was out with some woman, though. I tried to make each bite a deliberate cleavage. Each sip of soda was a purposeful maneuver. Chomp. Chew, chew, chew, chew . . . swallow. Chomp. Chew, chew, chew—sip—chew . . . swallow. Chomp. This was hopeless. Just think of how good it was and it would be good. C’mon. Mmmm Scott. Good Sandwich, well chosen. Good fucking sandwich. Yum. Hits the spot. This is your lunch.

Fucking hell. Work sucks.

*   *   *

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Friday: the end of the week. At last. I sat at my desk. Nothing to do. I had abandoned all my impulses to do work at about 10 am that morning. It was time to wait for lunch. Thirty-five minutes to go. I could hear it raining outside. It was always fucking raining outside. Not enough to dampen my good mood. Not today. Friday. What a great word. Clearly the best day of the week. Even Big Boss couldn’t ruin the sound of it. Friday. Thirty minutes until lunch. Friday, the promise of something to do. And when you put the word with lunch, it made the perfect excuse to leave the office. Friday lunch. Hmmmm.

Beth and I had sort of made up last night too. There was a peace at least. I was sorry. She was sorry. We were just going to forget about it. Just in time for Friday, too. She was meeting me for lunch again today. Piers was coming as well. Maybe they could get along a bit. It could be a merging. Why not? It was Friday and that breeds optimism. Not just in me. In everybody. Look around next time. No one drinks as much coffee. No one smokes as many cigarettes during the day. Don’t need too. Friday is like the natural ephedrine. What was heavy on Tuesdays and Wednesdays was meaningless on Friday. Friday is the end of the week. It lifts you up. The week is a lot like sex. The best part is always the end. And Saturday was that nice fifteen minutes after. Ten minutes until lunch. Why not leave early? Friday.

I knocked on Piers door and he got up. He wasn’t doing anything either. “Let’s go.” I said.

We met Beth at a pub halfway between her library and our office. Fish and Chips all around. Piers and Beth both ordered a beer, so what the fuck? Ingrained culture or no. “I’ll have one too.”

Piers nodded approvingly.

“Cheers,” I said, smiling.
We had two conversations, each lasting the length of a piece of fish. Good length for a Friday. We talked about the University first. Some bit about a change in administration. A new president of some college. I don’t know. We didn’t go into too much detail. Didn’t need to. Friday.

Then Beth asked Piers about The Brit Awards.

“Well, I’m sorry lovely, but any competition in which the Beatles are not winning best band is just, well, it’s just not right. Undermines all the other awards whole credibility.”

Beth was laughing. Fucking terrific. Fridays man, what a great day. What a great word.

“Best Hip Hop Group?” Said Piers, popping each of the ‘p’s off his tongue. “I would have to say the Bee Gees, I suppose. That’s a bit more of a race, though, isn’t it?”

They bantered. I drank my beer. Ate my French fries. Beth excused herself to go use the bathroom after a bit.

Piers took the opportunity to give me a more serious glance: sly. “90 percent, old boy,” he said.

I laughed at that. Fuck. Maybe he was right. Friday. The word sort of stopped up my natural repulsion at the kind of fidelity he was suggesting.

That lunch was great. I could’ve stayed the whole next week right there. It was comfort. It was company. It felt like that laid back sensation that comes over you when the fucking tide washes sand over your feet and you sink into the beach. C’mon life. Wash over me then. I’m ready. Friday’s here. Let’s have it out.

Beth came back and sat down. Her sharp little eyes engaged mine for a second and I remembered how much I wanted to fuck her. It’d been a few days. She had been mad.
Tonight, I’d give her the works. No holding back. Before and after we went out to the bar. Definitely.

Piers struck up the banter again. I sipped my beer. Leaned back against my chair. I rested my foot on the opposite knee. Beth was laughing at some joke and Piers was pointing his big sharp chin at me. It was the first time I felt like I really belonged anywhere in four months.
Chapter VI

English Costumes

Once, when I was a kid, I was a Rubik’s cube. My dad and I cut some holes in the square TV box that had been sitting in our garage for years. We painted each side with 9 blocks of the proper colors (white, blue, yellow, red, green, and orange). We even stenciled the logo onto the middle white block. It was just like I was a real Rubik’s cube.

It was a great costume, so of course I wanted to show my neighbor and babysitter before we went to the annual Pumpkin Parade. She said I was adorable then invited my sister and me inside for a treat. I couldn’t fit through her narrow screen door, though. I was real scrawny, all legs and arms, but the box was so wide that my arms only poked out at the elbow. I bet it was funny watching me try to walk into the door and running into the jam.

I was stopped dead in my tracks. Stuck. I tried turning sideways and shuffling in, but I didn’t fit that way either. So then I tried to go in diagonally and lost my balance. I fell off the front steps and into the bushes. I’d tried to catch hold of my sister, the vampire, but she didn’t try to catch hold of me back. I had to take the box off and leave it outside while I went in to get my hot chocolate and one of the extra large candy bars that were reserved for my neighbor’s favorite children. That was me. While I was enjoying the special treatment, my neighbor’s dog was outside chewing a corner of the green side off and leaving teeth marks in blue and reddddd. I walked around the rest of the afternoon and the whole night in a costume that could be interpreted either as a broken Rubik’s cube or as a chew toy. If I’d gone for the chew toy from the start, I might have done better in the K-4 division of the costume competition.

This was years later and I was undaunted. I saw the flyer in the community center advertising a Halloween party and the excitement rose in my chest like a fucking rocket.

Roger came over saying how it was a good turnout. I should come. Most of the people
from class had already confirmed. Hell yeah I would come. But it was only 10 days away! I needed a costume fucking quick.

“There’s a party next Friday night at the community center.” I said to Beth. “Me and all of my wack-job group members would like for you to come.”

“That’s Halloween.” She said, looking me in the eye. “Is it a costume party?”

“I was thinking I might try and find something.”

“You know last year I bought a ton of sweets and only 3 kids came by my door. They don’t do it as well over here.”

“We can show them how.”

“They really just use it as another excuse to get drunk.”

“They don’t need any excuses for that.” I said. I moved closer to her and wrapped my hand around her waist from behind. “Come on. It will be fun.”

“We get to play dress up?” She said, swaying with me.

“Whenever you want.” I reached up and squeezed her boob.

“Behave yourself.” She said slapping my hand. “Do we have to RSVP?”

“I already put our names on the list, sweetie.” I moved my hand up to her breast again. “Piers is coming too.”

“Scott!” She yelped, slapping my hand.

“I’m just happy you said yes.” I grabbed with my other hand.

“I wouldn’t miss a chance to dress up.” She returned, not bothering with my hand anymore.

“Can I be prince charming?”
“You’re so cheesy you.” She had moved a little ways away from me now. “You have to be the donkey and I get to be the cowgirl coming home after a long day on the range.” She laughed. “Go to the stable while I take a bath.”

“Can I be prince charming’s donkey that gets to pleasure the lady farm hands in the outhouse?”

“No, you’re not in good enough shape to be the royal ass.” She was backing towards the bedroom.

“Touche.” I said, lunging for her and tackling her onto the bed. I thought I had her pinned down, but she got an arm lose and turned me over by the armpit.

“No. I’m serious.” She said, loosening her other arm. “You can wait here, on the soft hay while I go clean up. I’ll come back for you in a few minutes.”

She got up and went into the bathroom. After I heard the water on, I got up and stole a peek through the door. What a fucking body Beth had. I didn’t used to think so that much. Now. For fuck’s sake. It wasn’t fair to make a woman so sexually appealing to a guy. It was like her personality was counting for something too. What was the world fucking coming to?

Well. I sex or no, I still needed a costume. I wanted it to be really fucking great too. Something elaborate. Show these fuckers what American commercialized holidays were all about. See I have this theory that it’s the stock market that comes up with all these holidays. America was a fucking great land of opportunity for that. I was sure some Jewish banker invented Santa Clause to make money off of the Christians. Well there were hardly any prepackaged overpriced costumes in the stores here. Obviously they didn’t think Halloween was a big deal. I would have to prove them wrong. I would be like the Nestle sponsored Ambassador of Halloween. I needed a good fucking costume.
Ideas ran through my head all week. Nothing was fucking right. In college, it had been easy. Squeeze into a costume made for an eight year old and everyone will love it. As an insect or skeleton, you were virtually guaranteed to bag one of the drunken freshmen that was going as a slut or better as a stripper. Too bad those days were over. I could be a political leader. George Bush mask and bullet proof vest? Yasser Arafat and a yamacha? Maybe cross-dressing would do it. Cher. I could be Cher. Liza Minelli. No. People had to like my costume. Could go traditional. Giant pumpkin. Toilet paper mummy. Too boring. What about weird. It had worked before. Go as a tooth brush. Too fat. Go as a cell phone. No these were all fucking terrible. It had to be ironic. Clever. I was the fucking Ambassador of Halloween. It had to be great. Oh that was it. Prince charming. It made sense. That would be perfect!

I didn’t tell Beth about any of this. She had gone to the dark side. I would have to remind her what proper commercialization was all about too.

Finally the fucking day came. I made Beth wait in the kitchen while I took my costume out from under the bed. I dressed. Looked in the mirror. Nice. I came out and Beth burst into laughter. Hell yeah. Success. I was going to be the hit of the party. “How did you do all that?” she asked.

“Well, I took that picture of Prince William from last week’s Sunday Times and had it screen printed onto a pillow case. Then of course the eyeholes and a few inconspicuous rubber bands to keep it in place.” See, I was fucking Prince Charming. Prince William Charming. The clothing had been the easiest, it seemed that everyone who attends a boarding school in England has to wear the exact same fucking thing. “They had the jacket and the tie at Austin Reed. I just wore my own pants, er, trousers. Both actually.” It hadn’t been that hard.

“You are hilarious,” she said, still laughing.
“Wait, there’s more.” I went back into the bedroom and pulled out my other date to the party. I had a Courtney Love blow up doll. You can get everything on the internet these days. Usexcelebrities.com. God I hope my credit card company doesn’t let those fucking records slip out. I outfitted her in a tattered thrift-store wedding dress. She looked like such a real white-trash American. It was fantastic. The red, white, and blue flag I stuck in her ass was almost overkill. Oh yeah. And a crown on her head. Ha. The Ambassador of Halloween!

“This is classic, Scott, absolutely brilliant. I love you so much baby, come here.” She took my head in her hands and kissed me through the small hole I’d cut in Prince Williams’s lips. “I never thought I’d ever get to kiss a prince,” she said.

I laughed and kissed her again. “You don’t mind a threesome then, do you?” I asked humping her leg with the doll.

“Oh God!” She clung to my shoulder. “Well, I guess if it’s just this once.”

Beth liked it. She was still giggling. I was going to be fucking huge tonight. Comic genius.

“I’m going to nick that crown and wear it myself.” Beth said looking me and Courtney over.

“No,” I said, drawing my doll back protectively, “Not until everyone’s seen it.”

She pouted her lips. Shrugged her shoulders. “You’re brilliant, but kind of twisted Scotty. Is there something you haven’t been telling me?”

I laughed and tossed her the car keys. Honestly, this really was my first blow up doll. Serious.

Every young girl in America seemed to be in love with Prince William. Even my friend, Nadine, in New London, told me to keep a look out for him and put in a good word. She’s 36. “Slip him my number if you get the opportunity.” She said. What the
fuck was I going to tell him? ‘Hey Willy. If you fancy a shag with a bird old enough to
be your mum. I know this girl, she lives 3000 miles away. Not that attractive. Bur real
easy. I’m telling you man.’ For fuck’s sake. I think the fucking girls just want the jewels.
I don’t see what the big deal about him is. I mean. Take the younger one. Not as much
responsibility. These fucking teens, though. Honestly. Given the choice between fucking
William and some movie star, Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, anyone, fucking 9 out of 10
American girls would choose William. Prince William vs. Justin Timberlake and N’Sync
wouldn’t stand a chance. Even if the fucking girls could be President themselves, I think
they’d rather date the king. What kind of fucking sense does that make? You could buy
some Italian models for yourself if you were President. Fuck William. He’s British. Pale
as a ghost. Old Charles is your father-in-law too. Course Buckingham Palace and
Windsor Castle are pretty nice, but shite. So are the Hamptons. You couldn’t get drunk at
family gatherings if you were a princess. The china’s probably older than our country.
Why isn’t there an American figurehead that’s popular? We just don’t do it in style. The
fucking Whitehouse is more like an office than a house. The guards don’t wear poofy
fucking hats. I mean, when was the last time an American politician was on the cover of
something other than a news magazine or tabloid? For all our music and fashion and
fucking shallowness, we didn’t pick very beautiful people to lead our country. And here I
thought we were more materialistic than everywhere else. The closest politician to being a
heartthrob is probably Jesse Jackson or good ole ex-wrestler Jesse Ventura a.k.a. former
governor of Minnesota. Christ. If some young American girls wanted to get in bed with
them. That’s just fucking scary.

Well, for my queen I’d had blow up choices Courtney Love, Pamela Anderson, and
Whitney Spurs, a doll that looked suspiciously like another celebrity. Do they really get
away with that? Well, it was really pretty inevitable that the prince would end up with the
big fucking white trash girl that had drug problems. It just plain made sense. I mean, she flashed her crowds. What else could a prince want? His highness wouldn’t have wanted the tan silicone blonds anyways. Pale fit in so much better in England.

Getting all my shit together had taken some time and now we were late. Whatever, though. We could made a fucking entrance. I was the American Ambassador of Halloween and all. I would stop conversation. I would turn heads. I would cause crowds that had previously only liked dry (boring) British wit to laugh hysterically at perverse American humor. Fucking hell. Bring it on. I was going to be great.

When we walked in, crowds did stop talking. Heads turned. But in my moment of glory, no one made a fucking sound. I scanned the room. Not one fucking person was wearing a costume. There was Roger, hippie hair pulled behind his fucking hippie ears. There was Lebanese Bruce Wayne in his standard smart clothes, even a tie a fucking tie. Century club had on a sweater-vest. Pearl Monster had two loops caught on her right breast. She had her hand on Roger’s shoulder. Everyone was fucking normal. Christ. All of them were just staring at me.

“Is that you Scott?” Mr. Rainbow called out.

“Haha. Er. Hey everybody.” What the fuck was this. A Halloween party and no one in costume. Christ I must look like an ass. Beth was just sort of standing there. Gaping with everyone else. She had worn a short red dress. No devil horns. No tail. She was fucking safe. No one said anything else. No one laughed. Everyone just fucking stared away. The god damned entire Community Center. All the No Dairy Dieters. All the Jack Kerouac Meditationists. All the fat women in the Lamaze class. Even the gymnasts and modern painters just stared. Fuck! I thought I would at least get some support from the Heavy Metal Self-Help group. Not a fucking word.
Christ. This country had the worst sense of humor ever. How could a bunch of uptight fuckers like these be from the same country as Mr. Bean? I guess it was my fault for thinking they would convert to American holiday spirit, but fuck, what kind of a Halloween party didn't have costumes?

My gelatinous knees began to fail in the spotlight, but Beth grabbed my arm and walked me over to the bar. People turned back to their conversations. Yet it was like the room volume had been turned down a notch or two. As if everyone had switched from party voices to gossip voices to fucking make fun of me. I wasn't the fucking weirdo. They were all the fucking wack-jobs. God damn it.

Beth was impervious. "I'll take a Carling and get a Fosters for William over here," she said firmly. The bartender didn't smile. He didn't look us in the eye. He just went and pulled the two pints.

"Nothing for the bride?" He sneered, setting the beer in front of us.

Fuck. I couldn't speak. I had a giant fucking foot crammed in my mouth. Beth. She was something. A fucking firecracker.

"No." She said. "Courtney doesn't swallow." She took my hand and led us to some chairs. We sat down, but I had to kind of prop the doll up on my right. I had duck taped her to my belt at the hip. Piers came from somewhere in the crowd and sat next to Beth.

"Did the poster say it was a fancy-dress party?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes, but no one could see the gesture through the pillow case. No it didn't say fucking fancy-dress. What the hell was fancy-dress? All Halloween parties were supposed to be costume parties. Why the hell else would you throw a Halloween party? This wasn't my fault. They definitely did some fucked up shit over here.
“Well,” he said, taking my silence as an answer, “Why did you want to make fun of the Prince? What are you trying to say by that Scott? You know, people love him over here.”

“People love him in America.” I said. “That’s why it’s funny. Why can’t you people laugh at a joke?”

“What do you mean by you people? I just don’t understand why you’d put the royal family together with an American flag and Courtney Love. You wouldn’t have found it funny if I came here dressed as George W. Bush and carrying a kilo of flour.”

“Whatever Piers, it would’ve been fine with me.” Fucking hell. Why hadn’t I thought of that one? “So am I the only one in here wearing a costume?” I asked.

He scanned the room for a moment. “Well, I did see a woman with those flashing pumpkins that stick out on springs from your head, but I think the band was cutting into her scalp. She may have taken them off.”

“Great, it’s me and a 2 dollar gimmick from CVS.”

“From where?” Piers asked.

Roger had come over now. He was arm in arm with the Pearl Monster.

“Hiya Scott,” he began. “That is you, isn’t it? Can’t really tell under all that mess.”

I nodded so that he would continue.

“I’m not sure that I understand your costume entirely.” Then he looked over to the Pearl Monster and gave a pathetic little chuckle, like they were in on some fucking little comment.

“It’s just supposed to be a joke,” I replied. “See, lots of American girls like Prince William, so . . .”

“Oh, right.” he said, cutting me off.
“It’s not a very funny joke, is it?” the Pearl Monster said. She started laughing at this her own feeble fucking attempt to make fun of something.

Christ. I felt like telling her what I really thought was funny. She was fucking funny. Her and her damn pearls. All her fucking friends in group too. They were a fucking freak show every day. I wanted to call her Pearl Monster, my chosen name for her. I wanted to tell her that going to group with her and everyone else was like being in a pathetic imitation of new age California that didn’t have the cool clothes and the vegan restaurants. Somehow, I couldn’t. Somehow, I had developed an affinity for these freaks and couldn’t just turn on them so quickly as I would have liked. It didn’t matter, though. My stock as the exalted, meditary-connection member of the crappy group had just fucking creashed. I would now be the punch line of their crappy pathetic jokes. I had somehow become more fucking confused and hopeless and pathetic than they had ever been.

Lebanese Bruce Wayne came up to the growing circle of people, and stated the obvious as if he were insightful, “I think you’re the only one in a costume, Scott.” He began laughing, “Maybe you would be more comfortable if you took it off.” It was like the last card of a fucking castle blown over. I just bet he would have liked to see me keep it on, though. Be the source of laughter for everyone the rest of the night. His too proper suit and those fucking Bat-shoes were just dying to see me walk around the rest of the night as the outcast.

I shook my head. Fuck you Batman. There’s no way. “Yes, I suppose that I’ve shown it off enough,” I said. “It’s sort of awkward to sit in as well. I’m gonna go put it in the car Beth.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” she asked. “Do you need any help?”
“No. I’m fine.” I didn’t need any fucking help. I made a move to undo the tape holding the crown on. I would give it to Beth to wear. She would look wear it much better than I had worn my costume. But she quickly shook her head no.

“It’s okay honey. Hurry back,” she said.

No crown. Fine. The last two words were the ones that stuck in my head. She didn’t want to be left alone with these fucking wierdos either. Neglected Goth-Girl came over to the circle as I walked away. She couldn’t look me in the eyes. Fuck. She looked just as costumed as me. People were just used to her fucking ensemble. Black lipstick. Black hair. Black clothes. Black fucking eyes. Put a hat on her and she was a god damned witch. Christ. Both the Rainbows immediately gave her kisses on the cheek, though. Shit was fucked up here.

Outside, the air was cool. I pulled the pillowcase off my head and the tiny beads of sweat that had accumulated along my hairline began to evaporate. The wind felt good. Like it was washing some of the embarrassment off of me. A nice cool night wind. I took off my belt and ripped the duck tape apart. I was gonna deflate the blowup doll, but Beth had said to hurry, so I just stuffed everything in the trunk and went back inside.

I came back through the door and saw that the group was a little smaller now that I wasn’t there to fucking ogle and make fun of. Beth, Piers, Roger, Lebanese Bruce Wayne, and that god-ugly Pearl Monster remained talking. No one seemed to see me come in this time. I went to the bar and got another drink, then started to sneak behind Beth. I was gonna scare her. It was still Halloween. The British could fuck off. I could still have some fun. Even now.

I crept up behind them. Piers had his arm around her. A little strange. But Europeans are all so damn touchy feely. Kissing everyone all the time. Hello. Kiss. Goodbye. Kiss. Fucking fill up the gas tank. Kiss. No one saw me coming up.
“Well, he’s only just gotten here.” Roger was saying. “But you’d think he would know what was appropriate. At least he could have asked someone. I’d have told him.” He started into a coughing frenzy as soon as he finished.

“Everyone makes mistakes.” Beth said, speaking over him. “He never told me a thing about that crazy costume either. He just showed it to me tonight. He was so excited, I didn’t get a chance to tell him not to wear it.”

What crap! The hell I hadn’t told her. She had fucking asked me if it was a god damn costume party. Trying to play British. She had even wanted to wear the fucking crown. Who was this backstabber girlfriend of mine? Did she think she needed to look good in front of these people? She didn’t like a single one of them.

“Well,” Piers said, “You are the sensible and intelligent one of the two of you.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.” Beth responded. What a fucking false pitch she had in her voice. Liar. Then right before my fucking eyes she did kiss Piers! Unbelievable. It was a decisive kiss. Right on his fucking cheek. Why did she do that? Was she flirting with this older guy who not three weeks before, she had defamed openly? That bitch. Had she not told me to hurry back as if she needed me? Fine. She didn’t want the crown. But now this. Fucking leaning into another man’s arms for my return!

I lost control. “Oh fuck off!” I said in a humph. I took Beth’s drink and threw it down on the floor. Some of it spilled on my shoes, so I kicked the glass into the chairs, then took off for the front door again.

Mr. Rainbow looked on as if he understood. He thought he understood everything. The fucking cosmos now made sense to him. I said it again, right in his face. “Fuck off!”

The red in Beth’s dress flared in my eyes as I approached the door. I turned my head half way around only to see her reaching down to pick up the plastic glass. She was saying, “I don’t know, he’s been acting really crazy today.”
Crazy, was it? "Fuck off!" I screamed as I pushed my way through the front door.

She had laughed at the costume. That fucking backstabber. She thought it was funny. I know she did. Well, fuck her. Fuck everything. The Halloween Ambassador had been rejected by the Brits. Even the Brit that used to be an American rejected me. Well they didn’t know a good fucking holiday when it fell in their lap. No fucking Halloween. No Lions game on Thanksgiving Day. No Fourth of July. Hell. I’d already missed Veterans Day Weekend. Was Martin Luther King and Lincoln’s Birthday going to be next? And what the fuck did they have instead. Bank Holiday Mondays! Christ, that was lame.

I sat down on the hood of Beth’s car outside. It sat still. The night was still. I just wanted to forget everything. Stop being so damned angry. I waited on the hood for my thoughts to calm down. So what. I had overreacted. Didn’t need to storm out of the party a second time. Things weren’t right, though. They didn’t feel right. I wasn’t fucking ready for this. For England. Moving in with Beth. Too late for that now. That was fucking blatantly clear. Everything just seemed to be swimming in front of my eyes. I leaned back against the windshield for balance. What, was I gonna fucking cry? Feel sorry for myself some more? Christ. I would have liked to just take a really long nap on that hood. Wake up to something else.

At least Beth’s car had a comfortable hood. The windshield wipers were low and didn’t stick into your back at all.

When I was growing up, there was this one time. The family used to go to the city for the 4th of July. We’d bring a small charcoal grill and some hotdogs and chicken to cook up. You had to arrive in the afternoon to get a place to put your blanket and also to beat the traffic. One year, I must have been 8 or 9, something went wrong and we were late. I remember being stuck in the city gridlock, trying to get to the park. The night just kept getting darker and darker. We were still stuck when the fireworks started to go off and I
cried and cried. My father tells me to quick, get out of the car or I'll miss them. He takes me under the armpits and lifts me up onto the hood, leans my head back against the windshield. Next he puts my sister down beside me. We couldn't really see the fireworks because the buildings were still in the way, but you could hear the booms. See the different flashes of color between the skyscrapers. That sort of made things just manageable. That and wiggling to keep his old windshield wipers from poking into my back. I felt like that now. All I was seeing of the fireworks were the flashes of color, certainly not the real thing. This wasn’t my life. Just bells and whistles. Maybe music in the distance.

We used to sit on the hoods of our cars in high school too. We’d hang out in parking lots because there was nothing else to do. Sitting in a parking lot you’re your friends seemed better than sitting at home. We’d pose on our cars. Try to create drama with everyone else that showed up. People must have acted up sometimes, just so that we’d have something to gossip about. Man, we couldn’t wait until we were old enough to get out into the real world Make our own money. That was the good life. Your own place. Your own job. As many dogs as you wanted. I don’t think I could have ever imagined, sitting on those hoods 15 years ago, that this was where life would take me. My life was a lame Halloween party in Oxford, England. I was still sitting on the hoods of cars trying to create something meaningful to talk about. Hah. Funny in a way.

I sat for a while. Don’t know how long. Eventually Beth came out. I didn’t know if she was upset or bored or anything. But when I saw her, things seemed to go from hopeless back to just manageable.

“Got room on that hood for one more?” she asked me.

I bobbed my head. “Hop on.” I patted the space next to me and moved over a little bit. I was still sort of angry. Maybe it wasn’t all at her, though. She was faithful. I was a
moron if I thought anything would have happened between her and Piers. I couldn’t
question that. But fuck. It just showed what a boring life I had. A semi-dramatic party
exit was about as exciting as it ever got. Sex was good, but it only took us so far. Christ.
Even when I’d try to make something exciting. Tried to import some fucking holiday
spirit. Was I that clueless? I’d only made things worse. It’s like before, everybody else’s
life had been funny to me. Fucking walk through each day making jokes to myself.
Everyone else had a crappy routine. Crappy job. Bad hair. Terrible jewelry. Now it
fucking turned out that I was the same. Crappy sense of humor. Crappy job. Boring life.
When was Beth gonna realize that? She’d leave me. Fuck. At least I was sitting on the
hood of a car. No better place to be boring than that.

After a little while, she asked, “You all right?”

I answered her lethargically, “Yeah, I suppose.” I wasn’t trying to pull any sympathy
from her. I just couldn’t fake like there was anything in me more than normality now.

We just sat there for a while. It wasn’t that cold. Not for almost being November.
Maybe I pulled my arms to my sides once or twice. Rubbed my legs. It was more an
action to try and feel cozy. Whole. I didn’t need to warm myself up. Beth didn’t push me
to expain anything. Maybe she already understood. I apologized. But it didn’t seem to
mean much to her. At least it started us talking.

“How did you become so British while I still feel so American all the time?”

She laughed for a second, rolling her head from side to side. “I think I act British
some times to fit in. I’m not sure, but I think I could still act American too.” She laughed
again with her hands folded over her stomach. “Could put my Jersey drawl back into
everything.” She smiled to herself and waited awhile. “You know what I miss?”

This was putting me more at ease. At least it wasn’t just me. “Trailer parks?” I
guessed.
“Nope.”

“Busch Lite?”

She chuckled, “Uh-uh.”

“Reaching over your right shoulder to flush?”

She was laughing now. “Shut up.” She punched me lightly in the leg. “No, what I miss is Super Wal-Marts.”

“Ooh, that’s a good one.”

“Yeah,” she said. There was this huge grin on her face as she was saying it. She was looking up at the sky. “Everything is based on consumer convenience at home. Don’t you love that. They built this one by my friend’s house in Virginia—she was telling me about it—it has a Sam’s Club attached and the Super Wal-Mart in one building.”

“I’ve seen those before,” I said. Had she called it home for my sake, or had it just slipped out.

“No, no. Not like this. It’s not the regular Wal-Mart Sam’s Club combo, it’s got the super market too, like Super Wal-Mart, with the regular groceries. Then next to that is Sam’s Club, with the 5 lb. bags of Cheerios and 112-packs of batteries and all that stuff. Plus,” She was still smiling real big. She seemed like the old Beth for a moment. I was attracted to her more than ever. Not even because her skirt had gotten hiked up by the wind and the hood. “They have the regular Wal-Mart junk too, with the big outdoor garden center and the auto shop and, I mean, it has everything.”

“Wow.” I sighed admiring, “It must be half a mile long.”

“Yeah,” she let out the word like a little moan. She was dreaming about Wal-Mart. How hot is that? She definitely still had some American left in her.

We didn’t say anything for a while again. People must have been coming or going from their cars. Whatever. I didn’t really want to go back into the party. I didn’t want to
go back to the apartment either. It was one of those moments you didn’t want to slip
away. I would have paused time if I could have. So what if the Rainbows came out and
looked at us. Who really cared if Century Club approved or not? They could look. I
would put my boring life on parade.

We still sat there. I wanted to ask her a question. “Hey Beth.” I started.

“Yes.”

“What do you see in me? Like not what are you attracted to. I mean my life is so
boring. At least it feels that way.”

“Everybody’s life feels that way sometimes.”

I thought about this for a second. No. That wasn’t right. What about Beth? Her life
always felt interesting to me.

“Not yours,” I said, “Not with all of your classes and you have friends. Your life is
definitely interesting.”

“Ha! All of my classes.” She made a gesture to indicate how frivolous she thought
they were. “What do I do, Scott? I’m not good at anything. I’m a novice. An amateur at
everything I’ve ever done.”

“You’re good at books,” I told her. I believed this to be very true.

“Yes. Right. But I’ve certainly found out that books aren’t quite enough by
themselves.”

The perfect librarian’s attitude. “But at least you’re always doing things. My life is
boring. I’m not even an amateur at anything.” It sounded like I was bragging. Like I
should win a prize for being the most boring.

“I’m telling you, taking a class on something does not make you interesting. I don’t
finish half of them because they aren’t interesting. Do you think that log, Catrin, is
interesting because she does your meditation class?”
It took me a minute to recognize that when she said Catrin she was talking about Pearl Monster. When I figured it out, I laughed. “No. She is definitely not interesting.”

“You want to know why I invited you to come live with me?”

“For the sex,” I answered.

She laughed, “No, that’s a bonus, like getting dental with my benefits.”

“You just compared the mind-blowing, earth-altering, god-summoning sex I give you to going to the dentist.”

She patted me on the chest and the skirt of her dress crept up her thigh. “I invited you out here because I wanted to be good at something. Master it.”

“You want to be my master?” I said, turning my head towards her.

She just smiled and went on. “I’m a shitty painter, I couldn’t hold my breath long enough in synchronized swimming. I hated that self-defense through kickboxing class. The list is long. I just want to be an expert at something. I want to have something that meets more than once a week for three months. One day I just realized I wanted that thing to be you,” she took her arm off of her belly and nudged it up against mine.

She was so romantic and soppy.

She smiled at me and said, “And then of course there is the sex.”

And sexy too.

I looked back at her. “Yes thank you for that.” I said. “But now I think I’ve been listed as the fourth choice behind at least two things that you have to wear head gear for.”

“Shut up,” she said. She took my hand in hers and brought it to her lips. Kissed it.

See. She was still so soppy and romantic even when she was sexy.

We continued to sit there talking. We stared at the sky. I stared at her thigh sometimes. We just sat there and talked. About all kinds of things. Some serious, some not.
You could call it a potpie length conversation. Is it a full meal? Or is it like a sandwich? Sort of both. There’s a flaky crust like pastry too. It didn’t matter, though.

We weren’t really keeping track of how long we were talking. That was nice for once.

We must have stopped sometime. Gotten off the hood. Driven home. I don’t remember doing that. What I remember is sitting on the car talking. Looking around. Feeling the wind in my hair. A Courtney Love blowup doll locked in the trunk.
Chapter VII
Not Guilty

I had saved and saved and saved. Drank cheap beer instead of good beer. Ordered
tuna instead of roast beef. Fucking sold my extra kidney on the black market. No just
kidding. But I did finally have enough to buy my own car. The pounds were starting to
burn a hole in my bank account just sitting there.

Maybe I didn’t need one. Yes, the busses were convenient. So gas was expensive.
But it just wasn’t the same not having one. I always had my own ride. Even growing up.
It was like it was written in the U.S. Constitution: everyone is entitled to life, liberty, and
the pursuit of happiness—in their own car. A car was freedom. It was an expression of
personality. It was something I had washed more often than my clothes during my late-
teen summers. In Britain, it was only available in sizes small, extra small, and Smartcar.
Who cared? It was time to test drive.

“What should I get? What should I get?” I asked Beth.

“I don’t know. Why don’t we go out on Sunday. I will drive you to the dealerships
and you can try out everything.”

The first place she took me too actually had Smartcars. Ok. I would try one. Don’t
knock it till you’ve tried it, right? Beth suggested it too.

I climbed into the driver’s seat and the salesman got in on the passenger side. Wasn’t
Beth going to come too? Why was she just standing there? I looked in the back seat. Oh
right—no back seat.

“We won’t be long.” I said to her.

The car was so small I think my Tall Latte from Starbucks had to duck its head to fit
in the cup-holder. No way. Not for me. I was an American. C’mon now. I had to test
drive a Land Rover next, just to restore my faith in the sanity of automobile manufacturers. I wish I’d had enough money to buy that baby. That’s a real car. None of this fold into a suitcase sized shit. I should have been so lucky.

I bought a Ford Fiesta. I came all the way to England to buy a Ford. I know. But the car had four doors and four seats. So there was hardly room for four of anything. So what. You could fit four twelve year old kids in it if two of them had no legs. No room for a wheel chair in the trunk, though. Fuck it. It was my car. Mine. It drove me wherever I chose to go. At rates up to 140 kilometers per hour too. That was like 88 miles an hour. Michael J. Fox fucking time traveling speed, that was my car. It was dark blue and shaped sort of like a jellybean. It was a little bigger than the candy, but it still looked sort of like it. Like one of those weird jellybeans that has an air bubble or a tumor or something on it. That was my car. My car. The jellybean no one will eat. Deformed, outcast jellybean. If cars say something about your personality, what did that fucking say about me? I named her Betsy after a girl I’d known at my old bank job who would pick out the black JellyBellys and only eat them.

I should give her a fair chance. She did save me a lot of money. She got good gas mileage. Christ. I was getting old thinking about shit like that.

The first night home, I did what any kid born in Missouri would do. I asked my girlfriend to go parking with me. We needed to christen my new set of wheels. Beth the fucking Brit objected at first. We could get caught. They don’t do that over here. What are you, sixteen? But Beth the adventurer. Beth the American. Beth my true girlfriend, won out in the end. We set off for a little joy ride listening to Otis Redding to get in the mood. Betsy still had that new car smell. That’s actually the same in the U.K. and in the U.S. One of the only things. Maybe traffic and hating the French too.
We drove through the whole CD, but there was no open road to really cut Betsy loose on, so we put in some Marvin Gaye and started looking for a spot. We found this parking lot between Gypsy Lane and the Ring Road. Could there be a better place? I turned off the engine and pretended to yawn, tossing my arm around Beth’s shoulder. I started kissing her. She started reaching for my shirt buttons. The angles of the car were making things pretty fucking difficult, though. First of all, the damned driver’s seat hardly reclined at all. Certainly not far enough to get out of the way of the oversized steering wheel. Then the fucking stick shift. It kept poking my thigh or trying to engage the gears. Beth kept kneeling it into reverse. Perhaps fucking worst of all. The parking brake punched me in the most unfortunate place when I tried to fight across the fucking seat gap to get to Beth.

After that failed attempt, I had to take a breather. Beth tried to make a reverse move and come over to my side, but she slipped on the coin holder. Her head ended up in my lap rather than on my neck. You know what. That worked nicely for a little bit. But we had to do things properly still. We would have to go to the back seat.

Beth had her top off so she didn’t want to get out of the car. For fuck’s sake. It wasn’t going to work up front. “Just crawl to the back then,” I told her. She got stuck between the front two captains’ chairs. I was sitting in the back seat alone. Beth’s head was poking through and the tops of her breasts, but she was stuck somewhere above the nipple. She finally wriggles those through somewhat painfully by the sounds she made. But then her hips got stuck. She’s fucking wriggling. She’s pushing her shoes against the windshield. Shimmying. All trying to get free of the two chairs. She was like one of those salmon that have to fight their way upstream to mate. Nothing was going to stop her. I thought I was helping her. I pushed the seat lever down on the passenger chair to recline it. Give her a little more room. My lever pushing must have fucking coincided
exactly with one of her lunges, because she did not shimmy free. Oh no! She fucking shot free. She massively head butted me in the shoulder. Christ! At the end of it. My shoulder is fucking killing me and she is upside down in the back. Her head was literally on the fucking floor mat and the soles of her shoes were scraping dirt on my new car’s ceiling.

It had never been this hard in the States. I mean, Charlene, my ’79 Impala from college. That was designed for love. It was probably about twice as wide as this Fiesta piece of shit. Bench seats too. Not just in back. In front as well! I could have mounted the fucking Jolly Green Giant in that car easier than Betsy was letting me fuck Beth. Maybe we just had to break her in. She was prude because it was her first time. I’d gotten Charlene second-hand. Somebody else had probably already gotten her used to it. Like oiling up a baseball glove and working it in.

But for fuck’s sake. We couldn’t get turned around right. Why had American culture glorified this so much anyways? Trying to do it now felt suspect as hell. It just didn’t seem achievable.

Wait a second. Oh. Almost. There we go. Finally. That’s the spot right there. Now we were getting the hang of it. So Beth’s feet did belong on the ceiling after all. This was like we were fucking two S’s bent together. Little difficult. But that was nice. Yeah. There we go baby. Beth started to moan. Then.

“What the fuck was that!”

All of a sudden, there was this foreign sound. It wasn’t panting. It wasn’t giggling. It wasn’t fucking Otis or Marvin. It wasn’t even the crazy creaking of my brand new car. Oh my God! Someone was knocking on the window.

In a scurry to cover my bare ass, I caught my head on the handle that rolls down the window. I fucking broke the thing completely off with my fucking skull. Who the fuck
was out there. What did he fucking want. Why was he wearing such an ugly hat? Did he really think it looked fashionable in this day and age. Oh Christ. It was a police officer.

* * *

I was tired again. Fucking tired. It felt like I hadn’t slept in days. Once again, I couldn’t fucking sleep. Beth hadn’t been released yet. I sat outside the police station for at least half an hour. Maybe I could go get some coffee. She would be so pissed if I wasn’t there when she came out. Christ. She was gonna be so pissed anyways. What the fuck was taking so long? It had been over three hours since that incessant tapping. Maybe Beth was ratting out someone higher up. Getting us off the hook by selling our boss upstream. Yeah fucking right. She was gonna be so pissed.

How was it that you could get arrested for something that was so encouraged? John Travolta got to make out at the drive-in for Grease. What was really so fucking wrong with a little fun and games in a parking lot. Wasn’t doing anything that hadn’t been done before. Christ I was tired. Beth wasn’t going to speak to me for weeks too. She had said no at first. I pushed her into it. Fucking shit. Why did sensible British Beth always have to be smarter than fun American Beth? This fucking sucked. If Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus, the fucking British are from … Fucking I don’t know. Wherever it is it’s fucking boring and too proper. Fucking decorous sons of bitches. Demure bastards. It was like every single one of them was the kid on your block that went to private school. Christ. It was my damned fault. If I’d gotten caught in America it’d have been the same. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Why was everything always my damned fault? Beth certainly knew that, no matter who I fucking blamed it on.
Finally, she came out. I had gone through a thousand scenarios of what they were doing. Frisking her. Fucking grilling her in the interrogation room. Here she was. Didn’t look too bad. She was walking pretty briskly. I was gonna fucking get it. The thuds of her shoes were resonating in my chest. It was like a fucking crazy methodical approaching doom. I stood up and called out to her, “Beth,” she was going to find me sooner or later. She turned and noticed me. Changed her direction. Her hips began to swing back and forth as she walked too. That fucking sexy bitch. She was just flaunting her power over me. I wasn’t gonna get laid for a month. She was smirking. She knew it. Well maybe it was a smile. Who could tell? It was the unanalyzable physiognomy of women. I’ll tell you this. It probably wasn’t too fucking good, considering. She stopped close in front of me. Real close.

“I feel like I’m twelve and I’ve been caught watching an R rated movie. I haven’t heard so many lectures in year. I thought I was going to be grounded for at least two weeks.”

I laughed, trying to hide my hesitation. If only that was the true punishment. It was going to take a fucking significant chunk out of that bank account of mine. The British government was gonna charge us for our little sexcapade. “Glad to see you’re taking it so well.” I offered.

“What’s to take,” she said, “I think its pretty funny. Don’t you?” and she paused to laugh, “Piers is going to die when you explain it to him tomorrow at work, surely.”

Was she serious? I should just agree with her. Stay out of trouble. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. I guess I just don’t think it’s so funny just yet. I’m really tired. It’s going to cost a lot of money. Maybe one day I’ll be able to tell the story and laugh.”

“One day. I couldn’t tell it with a straight face now.”
I smiled faintly. Maybe I wasn’t in that much trouble. “Yeah, I’m just really tired I guess.”

“Oh no you’re not,” she said in her imperious voice. Fuck. I was in trouble. It was a trap.

She turned her head to the left and then to the right. What the hell was she doing? Making sure we weren’t being spied on or giving the fucking special forces unit a signal to come in and kick my ass for getting her into all this mess. Nothing. She just looked both ways then leaned towards me until our cheeks were nearly touching.

She let out a sigh and spoke in a raspy tone, “I believe that we still have some unfinished business to take care of.”

Holy shit! I loved this woman. I did. I loved her. We went back to the apartment and opened all the windows and did it in the living room. They couldn’t get us for that. And she was right: I laughed my ass off telling the story to Piers.

I guess my life is just designed as a comedy rather than a drama. It fucking sure as hell wasn’t a thriller. Of course, it turns out that in my comedy, I’m the fucking butt of most of the jokes. But with Beth, it sort of felt like I still had a shot at that last laugh. I just couldn’t let myself get too tired.

A few weeks later, I had to sell Betsy to pay off the fines and court fees. Oh well. I just rekindled my relationship with Bertha the 7A bus. I’d gotten home and Beth is sitting there in a towel with wet hair.

“My old boss at Columbia offered me a chance to go back at a bit of a pay increase. What do you think?”

“Wow,” I said, “I think you look great in a towel.”

She blushed. “About going back?”

“You didn’t tell me that you were looking. Are you serious?”
“I wasn’t. He just dropped it in an email today. We’ve been keeping in touch a little bit, you know, mostly about novels and things. Well, he just fired this guy and wants someone competent to come back.” She made quotation marks with her fingers as she said the word competent.

“Well?” I muttered.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’m doing ok; I think I want to stick it out here. I shouldn’t always be quitting everything so quickly, especially jobs.”

Christ. “Don’t get my hopes up like that.” I said.

“What,” she asked turning to frown on me, “I thought you liked it here.”

“I’ve always claimed that I came here for the sex.” I said smiling and gave her butt a quick slap through the towel. She was still looking at me like I was supposed to say something more. “I mean, it’s kind of true Beth. Yeah, it’s ok here. It’s been getting a little better. But everything I like about this place is related to you.”

“And more things are legal in the States?” She suggested.

I laughed, “And they have bigger cars.”

“I just don’t want to quit. It’d make this move just another failed start.”

I considered this for a moment. This was a big chance. I could get back to ketchup on chips. No. Fries. Fucking fries! Jesus. Pizza menus without sweet corn listed as a topping. I was getting hot. Midnight shows at the movie theater. Steering wheels on the left. Oh god … Sportscenter!!

My heart was racing. How could I convince her? I had to talk her into it. “Beth, it wouldn’t be a failed start. Why would it be a failure?”

“I’ve worked here for almost two years now; what would I have to show for it? That’s not a failure to you?”
“No.” Why not? Think. C’mon man, this is your big chance. Don’t blow it!

“That’s a, it’s ahh complete ahh experience,” yeah, there you go, “not a failure.”

“An experience? Ok. I really feel like I need to stick it out, though, try and make something of it.”

“No.” C’mon you fucking pud, you can do it, stop puttering around. “It really is an experience.” I said. “Already is an experience, I mean. Umm. When you stop a class or dump a boyfriend, do you forget what you learned?” Oh yeah, good stuff, keep it going now. “Is every, ahh, ex-boyfriend a failure because you didn’t marry him?” Hmm, maybe, she is a woman. Stay away from the ‘m’ word too you moron. C’mon. Do better now.

Here we go: “Was your time at college a failure when you left, or did you keep some of it with you?” God, I was drowning. Where was the Oxford Debating Society when you needed them? Probably discussing something fucking worthless: the House of Lords, the Euro compared to the Pound.

Well, even without them, I won Beth over. I don’t know how. Maybe I was fucking right for once. Doesn’t matter that much. I’m happier now anyways. That’s for sure. I go to Wendy’s and Target with a whole new appreciation. I bought Alysha last week. A fucking Chevy. A real Chevy. Nice full figure. The last I heard from Piers, he was still suffering under Big Boss. I told him to fuck around with him a little. Plant some special farm websites on his opening page of Internet Explorer. Something like that. The group got on without me. At least as far as I know. I wound up reading On the Road and Dharma Bums last summer. Fucking way more interesting than that Howl crap he wrote.

Shit. We were trying to raise a fucking drunkard. We should have been meditating about good whiskey. Cognac. Those books didn’t explain the group anymore to me, though. Don’t know why those people would pick meditation. Bunch of fucking crazies. I heard about this anonymous phone call that led police to a tied up gangster looking fellow and
an unconscious middle aged man who turned out to be the biggest drug dealer in London.

I just knew it had something to do with Lebanese Bruce Wayne. I mean, shit. All in all England was a complete experience. A nice 6-month experience, well sometimes I think of it that way. But there’s no place like New York anywhere else in the fucking world.

What’s happened to me and Beth since we came back to the States? That’s actually a bit of a funny story. And comedies don’t usually have depressing endings. You know what, though? I’ve gotta run. I’ll see you around I’m sure. Bye.