

Shitty in Sunlight

a love song

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Blood oranges—easy to peel.

I use my fingernails, careful not to damage the fuzzy white film that covers the pulp, with its bloody red pustules. I keep the nails on my left hand clipped close on all fingers. I wash my hands. Any dirt under my fingernails has been scraped away with an oyster shuck.

After the skin is peeled completely, I turn it round and round, making sure I have made no incursions into its soft, delicate exterior. Then I break it along the lines of what my grandmother, Mrs. Mable Muller, called a *schnutz*. In Pennsylvania Dutch, *schnutz* means “piece of an orange.” I am told by a reliable source that in certain old German dialects it can also mean “testicle.” I know from a family photograph that she was a lovely girl. She’s the one on the left, surrounded by aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, brothers, sisters, with a newborn baby in her arms. She stares at the camera with an ironic smile.

So I separate the schnutzes and arrange them in a circle on a porcelain plate. I slide them into my mouth one by one and press them with my tongue against the top of my palate until they squirt.

It is helpful, of course, to be vacationing in the sunny south of Sicily, where a species of blood orange called the Tarocco grows on the foothills of Mount Etna. The name is derived from a farmer’s exclamation of wonder when shown this miraculous fruit by the young girl who first discovered it.

The bloody pulp within the Tarocco’s skin echoes the lava that steams under the hot, crusty fields that stretch to the sea near Sorrento.

There are several words here and any one of them could set you off and create a concussion—or even worse, a conclusion. So don’t be furious. We all do what we must. I’m daunted by love and apologize here, but never again.

This story is about two people who felt shitty in sunlight—but for entirely different reasons.

Key: He, *She*

I. HI

True, I stalked you that evening, walking west on Twenty-second, past that German restaurant, what's its name?

U-boats? Sure, submarines surfaced in New York Harbor. The crews ordered takeout.

Eventually you turned down Avenue of the Americas. I—disheveled, toting a book bag—followed. You slowed, waiting for me to catch up. So I am partly innocent, if partly is possible in innocence. You smiled, and we walked side by side until you pivoted into twilit daubs of lapis lazuli.

It's not like we hadn't met. We'd talked, but it wasn't really what you would call "hanging out." I know you can't tell your mom about me, but since when is your mother a paragon of normality? Was she surprised when you showered her with mosquito bites after the drive-in? If she takes junk in stride, certainly you can tell her you are fucking a sexagenarian.

The topic of conversation that late afternoon, you remember? Vowels, of all things, and how absolutely necessary they are in words like "hi," which is what I said when I finally caught up with you. And now, months later, you are asleep on a couch, naked almost, except for your panties. I am not going to waste

time with flattery, praising the dirty blonde ringlets on top of your head. Do I think you're an orphan? I'm a scoundrel instead.

Look, if it's any consolation, I promise not to divulge the locations of your moles—six, all told. We shall keep their positions a secret from the Allies as well as the Nazis, especially the one at three o'clock on the rim of your asshole. (Correct, as in the old joke goes, two times a day.) If a prince, or princess, wants to verify, I wish them sepie satisfaction.

Your nose is running. Here, let me daub.

What the fuck! Gunshots?

You said I would murder you. But I don't see any assassins, even in the mirror. It's just you, lying on the couch, fast asleep and breathing normally, if anything about you can possibly be described as normal.

Certainly I have no hit-man intentions, except for spanks. Maybe I mistook my bathroom farts for gunshots.

Last night's Indian food lays abandoned—special nan, tikka masala. And at some point you must have slipped your panties on. Darling R is still asleep and nude. But I'll come to him later. He's recovering his lost cords—you know, the vocals—so he speaks in whispers, as if everything's a secret. His cat just sauntered by.

Genitalia, I have observed, seem older than the rest of us, until eventually the remainder of our parts catch up. The skin of my balls is spongy enough. But one testicle is larger than

the other because once I played a trumpet to the tune of “I’ll Be Seeing You.” This caused me to herniate. It doesn’t really bother me when I walk, feels good actually, the right ball pushing my cock left against whatever is holding it in. Presently, nothing is. When I walked to the john just a minute ago, I passed your panties—festooned with ponies, cowpokes, and cacti, a virtual Wild West tucked delicately around the heat of your crotch.

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2. DIGRESSIONS OF AIR (iPhone)

Butterflies bounce in the sky, naked and blue—Morpho hecuba obidona.

*Yes, I know it’s Latin. I had two years of it.
When I was a little girl, Tommy was my friend.*

I don’t know, he just felt like a Tommy. Wings like the sunset, it’s true. He came back in June, year after year— garden hopping. And then just when I thought he was gone, plop, he’d land on a thistle, right next to my thyme, and suck until it came.

Alas, he didn’t return.

I don’t know. It makes me sad. Maybe he died in South Beach during the fair. Still, you’d think he’d send an emissary or something. No, I’ve never been to Miami. I imagine it’s beautiful.

Really? That's sweet of you to ask. Maybe we could find him. I will certainly check my schedule.

Suicide is out of the question. Butterflies don't have necks. Even if he'd tried, he'd have no thumbs to loop a noose.

Butterflies don't qualify for American Express. So even if he had thumbs, he couldn't purchase a rope. And who sells nooses anyway? Haven't seen one advertised lately, have you?

Butterflies can't shoot themselves. They don't have trigger fingers. Even if he did, a pistol would be too heavy to pack. Like, where would he hang his holster?

Don't laugh. It's no joke. I'm serious.

Moths? All I know about moths is that their antennae are fuzzier than butterflies'. Did you know that moths can sniff their mates fifty miles away? Better than a GPA.

S?

S doesn't rhyme.

*Fly to Capri? Really? Well, that's a good time!
Wait a minute. Are there any airports in Capri?*

Okay, well, I guess we can hire a boat.



3. FIGHT SNATCH IN ORPHANAGES (Sunday morning)

Wait! Don't go back to sleep, for God's sake!

Look, over there, next to the sink, eight vinyl 78s drying on the rack. Must be used for dinner plates, don't you think? You were the main course.

Wake up—listen to me.

Let's see, there's "All Through the Night," "Celeste Aida" by Verdi, the Rigoletto quartet, "Art Thou Troubled?" (I am, totally), "Waltz of the Flowers" from the Nutcracker Suite, and from *Carousel*, "You're a Queer One." (Really? I thought you were bi.) Also "If I Loved You" (yes) and "Soliloquy."

A poster reads, "Fight snatch in orphanages," and to the right a 45 of Ray Charles's "I Can't Stop Loving You" (apropos) hangs from a nail. Near the stairs leading to the basement, a nine-inch Jesus stands pink on an upright piano with exposed strings. Nearby, two ancient organs rest beside a snare.

You woke earlier and looked up my sleeve. You probably don't remember. But I don't wear a Rolex, not even a Timex. In your stupor, were you telling your old boyfriend's time? Or looking for an exit sign? If you want to escape, there is a way out. Just turn the knob. It's under the portrait of Manson, just to the left of the Beatles.

Six cans of Fancy Feast cat food. A bumper sticker on the back of one organ reads, "Free Hawaii." On the walls, sparkly Christmas lights dangle in clumps over old guitars. Oh, I see it now—the lights are plugged into a floor socket next to a lamp. They swing daintily across a portrait of Nikola Tesla and a picture of R's dad as an officer in the navy. Fifty-one—would that have been the Korean War. I was six then. You didn't exist.

"Imagine there's no fracking," Yamaha, Baldwin, Fiji, Arnold, Magic Light, Key Food, John, Paul, Ringo, George—not

necessarily in that order. Princess Diana, sure bananas, a black dahlia, three nuns (another tchotchke) singing on top of an upright piano.

OK, guys, a-ten-hut! Everyone present say “I.”

Come on, I’m still horny.

OK, sleep all day—see if I care.

So you want to know the symptoms of my illness?

You don’t remember? You gave it to me for my birthday, quite contagious, five hundred and three pages—Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

Yes, I could hardly lift it, let alone digest it.

How about the definition of “chair”? I am sitting on one at this very moment. A chair is a horizontal plane roughly the size of your ass, with two legs more than you have. It has a back and two arms, no coincidence, and when we’re fucking, collectively we do indeed have four legs, just like a chair. That’s where the analogy ends.

I love the blood that coagulates under your skin. What a medium—finessed with the palm of a hand—better than oil, so clean that even a mole stands up and proclaims:

Here I am. I am an occasional mole, extremely happy to be here for time immemorial. Certainly I am a naked mole—yes, very, very naked—yet even without the assistance of tap shoes, a walking cane, and top hat, I can do a little dance for you. But you must help, since besides not having a top hat, taps, and a walking cane, I don’t have legs. So fuck her, fuck her hard, and watch me tango.

You want a bedtime story? A swallow wants to fuck. He flutters all morning, does his best moves, a jumbled dance with several jerks and uplift at the end. Still, no one comes. He craves a tender touch on the shoulder or maybe fingers running through his hair. Then he remembers that swallows don't have hair, or really any shoulders. He'll settle for a nuzzle. He is a handsome guy, with a wholesome heart. He has his ups and downs, but these ups and downs are literal.

As he wings through the sky, high and low, looking for a mate, he manages to keep cool. But he is desperate. If you happen to be in the proximity of a willow, he may alight on a branch and linger long enough that his tweets accompany your kisses. This depends, of course, on whether you are with someone who wants to kiss you. He can't—obviously—because he doesn't have lips. Of course, there is no way of knowing ahead of time if anyone wants to kiss you. If you are alone, you will not have to suffer uncertainty. You can simply blow your kisses to the wind. But that's not much fun unless you have a witness. Of course, you can count on a swallow for that.

Unfortunately, swallows head south for winter. They can only report your kisses to Floridians. That won't do you much good because Floridians are mostly older folks who have already flown south for the winter a long time ago. And they tend to forget.

So what will become of our legacy? I didn't plan it this way. I just felt if I didn't lean over and kiss you that day, it might never happen. And that's where our story began. A tragic story might end with you throwing yourself in front of a train, or leaving one pervert for another, or dying from catching your death of cold, or being drowned at sea, waves pounding against rocks dramatically (and a necrophiliac fucking you sick and silly). Or maybe an asp bites you in the ass.

Carter just wrote me a note. It arrived by carrier pigeon a minute ago.

Carter's a poet who writes about art.

You might call him a "pocri."

No, they are not extinct. A flock of them still roosts in the Virgin Islands.

"Darkness is the perceptible state of the light
we all seek, because it is life . . ."

"Scythians at the Tomb of Ovid?"

It could be almost morning.

"Give me the waters of Lethe that numb the heart. I will still not have the power to forget you."

Wake up! I want to fuck.

"So the practical thing
is to master the mechanisms of luminous effect,
which can be animated only by an obsession with death."

What do I have to do? Plonk harder on the keys? Pretend to cough?

Wake up, goddamn it! I want to fuck.

That pistol you want for Christmas—the one that murdered the archduke, or a reasonable facsimile? I'll try.

Yes, I will really try.

Look, dear, really, you've slept long enough.

OK, but you have to be good, or else there will be nothing in your coal but black stockings.

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4. EMPTY AS A DREAM (In bed by the Tyrrhenian sea)

I dreamt a pyramid was tattooed to the back of my neck. It felt heavy, so I looked in the mirror.

Yeah, I needed a three-way mirror to see around the other side.

The other side of my neck. It's still stiff.

Really? I was talking in my sleep? What did I say?

Mumbles? Glad it was nothing illuminating.

As I shimmied through a crawl space inside the pyramid tattoo, a large square stone dropped behind me, blocking my escape. All I had to look forward to was a room full of putrid slaves—no real party, not like the ones at Bob Rauschenberg's church on Lafayette Street.

The pyramid was claustrophobic, like the space capsule we rode in on our way to Saturn, a gaseous planet surrounded by rings but devoid of wassailers.

Actually, up close the rings are just piles of tumbling rocks. Your space suit was layered too—jeans, tights, panties.

Of course, space panties look exactly like earth panties.

Navigating through Saturn's rocky rings can be difficult. You instruct me on the ritualistic procedure required to adjust helmets and remove panties. We have a strategy: buttons to press, dials to turn, zippers to be undone, to negotiate a successful landing.

Sorry, I'm trying out a metaphor—I know it's fucked up.

We had several planets to choose from, but unfortunately none had a vineyard. We settled for Saturn because we could bring our own booze. There's no prohibition, no legal age limit. Actually, there are no laws at all, only rocky rings.

I know, Capri is far more practical.

So in my dream we are on top of a mountain off the coast, looking down toward the sea, and the gas tank reads empty, but it doesn't matter because we really do not know what to do for the next several weeks. Play it by ear, coast down the hill, not knowing where the next gas station might be? At some point we reach sea level, and there, overlooking the Bay of Naples, is a little hotel with ancient gas pumps out in front. Someone painted seashells on them. So we have mattresses and petrol, all rolled into one.

As we approach the door to the gas-hotel-station, I say, "Knock, knock." I don't actually knock. I simply whisper, "Knock, knock."

Don't want to wake myself up. A woman on the other side of the door says, "Who's there?"

I give an alias.

She says, “Whatever, Mr. Holiday. Please come in.”

Dahlias everywhere. She gives us a room overlooking the sea and says, “We have a special today.” Of course, she only speaks Italian, but somehow we understand—after all, this *is* a dream—and she says, “You know, Jimi stayed here.”

And I ask, “Jimi who?”

And she says, “Yes, he stayed here in January of 1970, a couple of months after Woodstock.”

So I say, “Can we have his room?”

“Sure, dude,” she replies in creaky old Italian.

We walk up narrow stairs and turn the handle and, except for the champagne break, we fall asleep. You fold yourself into my arms like you do when you are not in one of your don’t-touch moods.

We wake in the morning and sunlight is pouring through the window. It falls onto your hair. It shimmers on your cheek. The clean white sheets and pillowcases, all golden—but you are still asleep. As morning passes, the beams shift to your shoulder, and the old lady slips a bill for a single night’s slumber under the door. There is nothing on it except for the date and a note of the exact moment it slid under the door. No charge, not even for the maxi bar. Gosh, and we had three bottles of Dom Pérignon last night, and a whole jar of cashews.

Unsalted. I feel guilty tasting salted nuts even in a dream, although my blood pressure is perfect: 121 over 83.

Later, during a breakfast of toast, tea, and oranges, she congratulates us: “By the way, you are the hundredth couple to sleep in that room, and therefore you can stay as long as you wish. You know there is a balcony, and a stove, and a table upon which to make your drawings and write? Actually, there are two tables,



one for each, and, please”—by the way, this little old lady is the spitting image of Mother Teresa, but without blue stripes—she says, “please fuck your brains out as much as you wish. Nothing you could do would be loud as Mr. Hendrix. I loved what came out of his throat.”

We stayed for a couple weeks. You remember?

Yeah. It was twenty-six days exactly. I know because that’s how old you were.

Look, it was a dream and anything can happen in a dream.

Then Downy, a local fisherman, brings his catch, and we dine on what he calls “Oysters 54321.”

I have no idea what that means. I forgot to ask him. Oysters wrap shells around pain, or at least the gritty cause of it. What you get is a nutty morsel with a sparkly pearl. On the other hand, maybe it’s just an oyster’s end, some kind of speedway shellfish countdown—the time it takes him or her to slide down your throat and die.

We learn to clock the push and pull of our fucking to coincide with the waves that lap nearby rocks. And since it is Capri, we employ a trinity—Father hole, Son hole, and Holy Ghost hole, each with its own ancient story.

Sea spray dapples our windowpanes.

As we fuck our way to oblivion, this peculiar presence of holes, this turnout of nothing, seems deeper than any Milky Way.

And just think, babe, if we stay here forever, when I am 666,068 you will be 666,026 and difference in age won’t matter so much.

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5. SQUABBLE OVER MUTTON (Indochine, corner table)

My sister, once a phobia therapist, presently a chanteuse, coached a seamstress-client whose name I can't divulge. She sought therapy because she was afraid of salt—not the taste of salt, simply her proximity to it.

She wasn't at all afraid of sugar.

Yes, I know. They do look similar.

She always insisted on eating at finer restaurants, where the food is adequately seasoned and there is no need for shakers.

Salt, you know—saltshakers.

At their first meeting my sister slid a shaker across the table, assuring the seamstress it was filled with sugar. Of course it was. Her patient nervously sprinkled the tiny white granules into the palm of her hand, then delicately touched them with her tongue. She realized she had nothing to fear. At each subsequent session, my sister—her name is Suzanne—added a pinch of salt to the sugar, so the taste became more ambiguous as the weeks passed.

Green leaves turned yellow and red, geese tried out triangular formations in preparation for journeys south, and when finally Suzie had switched all the sugar to salt. The seamstress tasted it and realized that it was, in fact, salt, and knew that salt visualized, even ingested in reasonable quantities, was not going to harm her anymore. This made it possible for her to eat at country diners with her boyfriend, where saltshakers maintained a ubiquitous presence. Of course, by this time she didn't really want to eat in diners anymore. She was spoiled. Incidentally, this particular patient never had a problem with pepper, pickles, or even peanut butter. By now she was beyond all that.

There is a moral to this story: a pinch of anger, a smidgeon of uncertainty, groveling sentences, gnashing teeth, lack of sleep, and hunger peppered with lust—all are symptoms of jealousy. And that's why I wanted to watch you fuck R—to see if I could survive.

Is that weird?

Yeah, I think it's weird too.

You remember that silly argument we had at the steak house? Great place. On Thirty-eighth Street, I believe, between Fifth and Sixth. You wore a black-and-white sweater—a posh imitation of a Rorschach test. No kidding, I was mesmerized, trying to figure out what it was. At some point I lost my ability to speak. So you put me on the spot: “You have something to say?” Certainly I had a palate, teeth, tongue, etcetera, available for something more than mutton. And after the fourth or fifth time you asked, I knew I had to say something, so I blurted out, “That fucking manufacturer? Is he the one buying you all those cool new Rorschach-test clothes? That sweater drives me nuts. I don't know what it means.” You told me your old boyfriend-businessman was pursuing you again, not sure to what extent. And then you freaked, and we had a scrap over the meaning of “mutton,” which we could have easily resolved by looking it up in a dictionary or simply swallowing it.

It was obvious to all the waiters holding white napkins folded over their forearms that we were having a brawl. As we walked out, to find you a cab, I ogled your aristocratic New England profile—your nose sloping into a pug, your tomboyish cheekbones and cleft chin. A taxi pulled over, and you had to go. Desperate to make up for the row, we kissed brutally—both of us—as

you seated yourself in the back of that cab. I sputtered syllables through tears than ran down my cheeks in rivulets and melded with the snot running from my nose. I slavered all over the place. You returned the kiss, and then the door closed, the cabbie growing impatient as you pressed your hand to the glass and spread your fingers, five points of flesh flattened on a pane, and I, on the other side, pressed my hand to the cold, smooth surface so our fingers aligned as much as they could with our pain, on the pane between our tips. I walked south, dazed. I blew the taste of mutton out of my ears on Ninth Street, the street where my friend Mel died some years ago, four floors up, two hundred and forty-nine million heartbeats away.

Oh Lamb, Oh Lamb, O Lamb of God.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.

Yeah, Mel was a Jew and an agnostic.

Of course, he observed Passover.

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6. DAWN AT R'S (Brooklyn)

That's OK. Maybe you've lost your nerve, your way. Maybe you don't know where you are going anymore. But you are still good looking for a man your age.

You know, it's really difficult to buy a handgun in New York. It takes nine months for the paperwork, the background tests. It's like having a baby.

No, I'm not pregnant, and don't worry, if I wanted to murder someone, I could just bop you over the head with a driver.

There's no background check for drivers, or putters, for that matter—it's a gentleman's game. Guys walk around in knickers, swinging clubs like silly cavemen.

My dad used to play. He looks like you, sort of.

You have lots of things in common. He hated squirrels too—the gray ones in particular. Yes, I remember you ran right over one, thump, thump, and didn't seem to care.

I was his caddy at twelve, the only girl on the grass. So on the eleventh hole, first shot, my dad hits the ball right onto the green. The ball bounces twice, then keeps on rolling straight for the hole. Along comes a squirrel.

Gray, I told you that, you remember?

Look, this is not a joke. The squirrel thinks the ball is a pfeffernüsse or something, tries to grab it, but it is too slippery, so he dribbles it off the green right between a couple of saplings. "Touchdown!" someone yells sarcastically. My dad couldn't believe it. He was furious, missed his chance in a lifetime.

Yeah, lifetimes are weird. Just look at ours.

I don't think he was clinically depressed, just gloomy.

Later that year, the squirrel—well, it could have been the same squirrel; they all look alike, don't they?—ate its way into the house, right through the wall behind our TV. We'd hear this scratching sound during The Simpsons, then whimpers. In the morning he'd be horny again, just like you. Pretty obvious, isn't it?

You know, your Paul Smith shirt with cowboys and Indians printed all over it goes with my panties. And look at those balls, all shriveled up, peeking out from under your shirt tails. Wrinkly like a couple of over-ripe figs. Where're your Skivvies?

Sorry, that sounded horrible. Actually, I like figs. Especially the ripe ones.

Was your dad horny after all that death, after all that war?

Were you conceived on leave?

I mean, how could there have been a Second World War if there wasn't a first one. And there wouldn't have been a first one if it weren't for that gun. So if you look at it that way . . .

Look, I am looking at it that way . . . So if it wasn't for that Browning you wouldn't exist. It's because of you that I want one.

Yes, it is your fault!

So the Browning kills the archduke, which starts the war, which kills all those people, and therefore the losers want to try again, so they start another one, and then there's Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and your father comes home from the war horny, fucks your mom, and so here I am in my panties and here you are with your balls.

So get some boxers.

I know—it's the littlest things. Like they say, the flutter of a butterfly's wings.

You know, R had a great time. He told me he was in love.

Not with me, asshole. She was cute, wasn't she? Innocent, shy. Too bad she had to leave early. We were just getting started. Yeah, it might have been too much, too fast. Look, there's something I must tell you. Promise not to get mad?

Really? You sure?

Sometimes there's a distant look in your eyes, as if you are staring into a black hole. And then, other times you look up at me so lovingly, through those lids of yours, I dissolve.

Your kids, would I be their mom-mom, their sister—who the fuck would I be? I guess you and I could pretend to be a couple of lesbians. A little old granny lesbian and a cute young girl lesbian.

Maybe we should stop now? But why?

Don't get upset! I just meant stop eating meat. I'm thinking of that big toe of yours. I've read a lot about big toes and gout.

No, not yours in particular. Just gout in general.

Yes, maybe we are tired . . . Maybe we should close lids and play possum. Let's get that speck out of your eye. Here, honey. Please, let's try.

7. EMAIL (a couple of days later)

Æ...≥÷
]=p[l;` ?
]'?> Dear
'`I simply want to say that 57 \\
««4

(later)

The above salutation is a result of my celebratory yearly cleaning of the keys with a wet paper towel. It's all completely random (really) except for "I simply want to say that," "Dear," and "Later," all of which existed before I scrubbed the keys. For days, maybe weeks, months even, I had spilled morning whiskey and evening coffee, so the keys sparkled with spots of umber.

There is really not much to say here, except things that may be interpreted as "too obscurely romantic," like "You mean melody to me," or too religious, like "Jesus Christ, God, fuck, thanks for having her slide down my groin."

Actually, you didn't need a directive.

You tiptoed into my life on your own.

And it is true that you do mean a melody to me, and everything I do and don't with you is because of your insanity, your luminosity, and, shit, stunningly you—what more can I say?

I won't fade. I won't fade.

OK something is happening here—really, really, really. This keypad is starting to yodel.

Did you know that wounded tomatoes produce the volatile odor methyl jasmonate as an alarm? Neighboring plants can then detect the chemical and plan for their own defense. There is a new science called neuro-something-or-other, the study of

plant intelligence. Roots grow this way and that, avoiding stones and other plants' roots, weaving one way then the other before they even touch a stone or someone else's root. They sense light too. That's why they always grow down and over instead of up. Ever see roots poking straight up from of the ground? That's because they think about where they are going. Furthermore, trees hang together and thus share a central brain, just like many of your friends. But their (the plants') intelligence is in their lower extremities, and their sex organs (flowers etc.) are up above, exposed to the sunlight. The opposite of humans.

Shit, now the delete key doesn't work.

Impossible to make corrections. I don't want to dgive you too smuch credit. You will get a swollen heade, and I don't ever ever—shit shit—want to take anything anything away from away from you. It doesn't do miss fuzzy caterpillar any harm if she is an inspiration, especially when she is wiggling ink, fripping along , need to revise, but no delete, so I cn't. (cn't) (c it te shit the key is going too. Didn't re lize

w ter could do so much d mAge, Oh, OK, here, it is AgAin, if only As A cApitol. And here Am I, And here I Am, if you wAnt need me I will be jhere, there, whorever, for you. StrAnge, After A boyhood invention of U to shAre lonely dying and living too, An imAginAry friend to plAy with when I wAs three—I remember there the smell of An orchArd, and the peach trees, deAd ripe mid-October, oh how I sucked and suckled, As BrAndo used to sAy, “ You rAn through AfricA, AsiA, And IndonesiA, And now I hAve found you, And I love you, And I wAnt to know your ____?” WhAt wAs it? rAin? SpAin? pAin? Brrrrr. Gee. Getting c old AgAin.

Can't complain. Sincerely, me

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8. JEALOUSY? (iPhone)

It's snowing, white tufts floating about. Some shift sideways, others swirl. I'm alone. Any dalliance will be self-contained. The city's quiet and cold.

It's Wednesday. Where are you? I would not presume to know. I'm here, just here, looking out the window, trumpet by my side, bell-down, standing upright on the floor. I'm nibbling a salad—endive, croutons, sardines, and Roquefort mold.

I had to know where I stand. OK, I had to know my competition. But since I didn't have a name to go on, I invented Him, a fictional guy about thirty—tallish, a couple of heads higher than Whoopi. I wanted to differentiate Him from all the other guys by capitalizing His pronoun.

Why Whoopi? I don't know, she is self-composed, dignified, and funny. He had dark curly hair, a straight nose, but not as wide as Whoopi's. Stubby hairs grew on His cheeks and chin, and always a smile. Stiff competition, pun intended.

I based him on the picture of a friend who contacted me recently after a thirteen-year break. He is handsome, a star, and is about the same age as I imagined your X to be—about thirty.

Yes, I do have some movie-star acquaintances.

Look, De Niro's my neighbor. He lives about twenty minutes away.

Depends on how fast you're driving.





I don't really see much of him.

Actually, we've never met.

He was great in *Deer Hunter*. Anyway, my friend is no De Niro. He's only a stand-in for your imaginary boyfriend. I needed a face to fix on.

I know I never took you to the movies. I couldn't think of a movie good enough to forget. When your X came back from his metaphorical grave and lingered, you said you didn't like the taste of his tongue. Something about barbecued potato chips.

Yeah, I guess that meant there was hope for us.

I happen to like barbecued chips, or I did, but I vowed never to nibble another. I see his face on potato chips. His salty grin scares me. I wouldn't want you to think of me as an aftertaste of Texas.

No, never been. It's not all barbecue, I suppose. Musicians in Austin order out sushi.

I'm not sure if I should eliminate all chips, especially the classics—plain or simply garnished with sea salt.

The second problem is more complex. Because He looks so much like my friend, who is very cute, I have come to adore Him. I confess, I've even invited my notion of Him to dinner at our favorite restaurant, Indochine.

Yes, we had dinner there, He and I, more than once.

I don't know—I didn't think I needed to tell you because,

after all, He is fictional. In any case, it was innocent enough. I wasn't trying to fuck Him.

He is a great conversationalist. That drove me insane because I realized that you must have had similar conversations with Him about all sorts of things, like tortoises in the Galapagos and murmurations of starlings, just for a start. And you probably talked sexy too, about girl parts and panties . . .

I don't know. Maybe that skimpy pair you have with the yellow thong. Are they silk?

Girls in panties hang upside down from branches like North American opossums.

I don't know why I said that. I just spurted it out.

But I told myself, if He is having dinner with me, He is not having dinner with you.

This hypothesis turned out to be naive. Fictional people can be in two places at one time. They can even be in three.

My first uncorroborated imagining of your old boyfriend evolved, following something akin to Darwin's principal, from the image of the friend who recently contacted me via e-mail. I googled my friend. He got over ninety million hits.

Why? He's a star. He plays guitar. His name is Sam, like Sam I am.

But then, I googled "He." He got billions.

To complicate matters, my friend looks a lot like me when I was young. So having already evolved into my image of your boyfriend, Sam then morphed into a memory of myself. This happened as I looked into a distorted old country mirror I purchased at my favorite antique shop, in the village of Accord.

I've already admitted to a curious attraction to Him, so it should hardly seem surprising that I developed a curious attraction to myself at the age of thirty. I know this is narcissistic, and confused even more by the fact that all along I have thought *I* was your boyfriend.

Thus I became jealous of myself, albeit my younger self. At this point, the evolutionary process seemed to come to a halt. I mean, how could it go any further? I had time to wonder, would this illusion of myself that evolved from photos of my friend on Google and my imagining of your so-called X age as I have? Or would this vision stay young?

Regrettably, the image of my younger self aged quite rapidly. At some point he grew a beard and practiced the trumpet. And that leaves me jealous of myself as I watch the snow softly falling, and fiddle the valves of my horn. What will happen to me as my selves compete for you? I mean, should I share my salad with Him? And what if *you* stop by?

Will the greens be enough for three of us? A ménage? What about a foursome? A ménage à *cinq*? Maybe you are two selves too. So, let's see, my two I's plus two of you, plus Him equals five.

He only gets one I.

I am not going to apologize.

All I can be sure of is that one of my I's is jealous but outwardly nonchalant for fear of scaring you away. My other I is devil-may-care. This I can see. But what if He's actually jealous of me?

Look, I found a guy who sells vintage firearms listed in the yellow pages. I called, and he said, "What do you want?"

"A Browning semiautomatic, circa 1910." Actually it was

designed by John Browning but manufactured by Fabrique Nationale d'Herstal. That got his attention.

"I have several safes here. I'll have to look. I'll call you back in a fortnight."

"A fortnight?" I asked.

In the meantime, I jacked off every day—some people smoke.

I don't know. The transaction turned me on, I guess.

Look, if you have a compulsion, it's good to pick a freebie.

Of course there was plenty of jiz left over for you. Anyway, you're always the subject of my selfies. I'm totally loyal, even in my . . .

Well, if jerking off is not a selfie, what the fuck is? I'm not pretending to be hip here. Look, I'm wearing fucking Harris Tweed! It says it right here on the label. And by the way, tweed goes well with a riding crop.

I just can't get that fucking image out of my head. Every time . . .

The one where you turn over, rest on your elbows on the floor, push up your ass.

Yes, that's it—drives me *totally* bananas.

You have a problem with bananas? The Velvet Underground didn't have a problem with bananas.

Yeah, well, come up with something better. I remember once Andy . . .

Oh, I already told you the story? Sorry . . .

How can you be sick and tired of Andy?

OK, I'll forget about Andy, and I won't use "totally" anymore either. But just for your information, we had petrol stations named Totally. That's where we gassed up for the drive-ins.

You know, they have a telescope in space, aimed at the stars. Actually, they are suns, just like ours. They are looking for planets. They can't really see these planets, because they are too small in comparison to the suns they orbit, and anyway they are far, far away. So the telescope takes hundreds of pictures of stars and graphs them to measure their light, and when the light gets a bit dimmer on a regular schedule, like once every seven months or so, they know something is passing in front of a sun, blocking light ever so slightly. And that something has to be a planet. I mean, what else could it be, an albatross? They've already found three thousand planets just in one back alley of the Milky Way.

No, it doesn't matter which seven months. OK, take May to December, for example.

I know I'm December. That's well established. You want to be April? You can't be April. April's taken. Anyway, you're too old for April.

Well, OK. Maybe. So be April if you want.

Look, this is science, not metaphor. The months are totally

irrelevant. I mean, on that planet they probably have a different nomenclature for months.

I don't know—maybe they call months “puppies.” At the end of an appointment a doctor or shrink might say, “I'll see you in a pup or two.”

Yeah, sure, they abbreviate, just like us.

The point is, if periodically the light from a star dims, they know a planet is passing in front of it. They can tell how big the planet is by how much light it blocks. If it's neither too big nor too small, it may support life as we know it. And it's certainly good to know if there's life on other planets, even if the aliens are too far away to fuck. Think how long it would take to get there. We'd *both* be senior citizens.

Nude as a butterfly, holding on tight, your arms are around me, your fingers alight.

I mean it's light years away—think of how long . . .

Softly beneath my shoulder.

Unless we travel so fast that time stands still, like when we are fucking.

Of course I don't have to be on top.

Yeah, I know, so I gave him my cell number and he called me back, as promised, a fortnight later—to the minute. He said to come over. It was raining, so I put on a poncho, jumped in the convertible, turned right out the driveway, up Foordmore and then onto Minnewaska Lane, across Route 44/55, until I came to Project 32 Road—just a dirt lane in the woods—and turned right onto a bridge across a stream. The stream splashes down from a

waterfall. And there, tucked into the forest next to the falls, stood a small house with a porch screened in to keep out mosquitoes and such.

I knocked on the door.

The stream, rich with sparkling water, bounced over rocks and sprayed droplets on his doorstep.

I know, pretty idyllic. I had hoped it would be.

I was in the mood for idyllic.

He smiled pleasantly and walked with the help of a cane. The rooms smelled medicinal. But there weren't any display cabinets or guns that I could see. The décor was from the fifties, the couches printed with Pollock-like abstractions.

I sat down on his couch. He brought me bourbon, then seated himself on one of those leather gentleman's club chairs. Actually, I think I had three bourbons before we were through, and, look, I'm sorry, my dear, but I told him about you.

Yes, I spilled the beans, everything. I had to confess, but please don't be angry. It's all for the best.

You're right. I hardly knew him. It must have been the Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve. It's like heaven. I mean, I had no idea how smooth it can be.

So after our little talk, I followed him into an interior room—no windows, not what you'd expect. A strange rectangular lamp illuminated a small wooden table. The pistol rested on a white cotton cloth.

"Is this what you are looking for? It's only a few serial numbers away from the one that killed the archduke and his wife, Sophie, duchess of Hohenberg. She was actually quite handsome," he said.

There it was, in person. I couldn't believe it.

"How much is the gun?"

"Not for sale."

"So, why am I here?"

"You may ask yourself that question."

"I keep it for protection, though I don't have much to steal, except this gun. It's quite valuable. So if I give it to you, there won't be anything to steal, and therefore I won't need a gun. Kind of like killing two birds with one stone, although I would never think of killing a bird, not even a crow. Out of the question. I haven't used the gun in forty years. I think it still works. Oh, I have some Rice Krispies and Campbell's soup in the pantry, and some petty cash in case I want to stop at the grocery store. They can have it all if they want. Maybe when they see I am unarmed, they will let me live, here by this goddamned bubbling brook. It's noisy at night. Keeps me awake. There's no way of knowing if it was a mistake."

Far out, really. He picked the gun up by the barrel, handed it to me, and said, "Yours."

Yes, it was extremely generous.

"But what about a permit? What about all the technicalities?" I asked.

"Technicalities? There are no technicalities. Either you are or you aren't—simple as that. Sound familiar?"

"You aren't really a gun dealer, are you?"

"Never said I was, haven't been for ages. I'm a dermatologist, a lepidopterist, or, more correctly, a dermadopterist. My light holds a cure for people like you. Just look at those spots."

I did have a peculiar rash. "Yeah, really, OK, well . . ."

"The light's metaphoric. It won't really heal. But it will put things off, slow things down, so you still will have time for

fucking and related activities like licking and loving and sucking on snatch. I loved her, you know. Oh God, how I do. I miss her so much. I know you will too.”

Yeah, I was surprised. I didn’t expect shit like that coming from him. I mean, he’s old enough to be my uncle. I thought he might start to cry, but then he went on.

“I’m ninety-four. You think I don’t know about fucking and shucking and kneeling on floors?”

“Shucking?” I apologized for interrupting. “I have never had any requests for shucking. I listened to Jimi play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’ got lost in the woods. Hungry without her, I discovered The Dead. It rained and it poured. We slept under trucks. But no one I knew ever asked for a shuck.”

“My dear man, I will supply you with a footnote. ‘Shucking’ refers to removing the husk from an ear of corn. You boil it for a couple of minutes, then hold it in cool water until it’s just warm enough to melt butter—Cabot unsalted is my preference—which you rub gently over the kernels. It tastes great off the grill, coupled with steak. But it’s good up the ass on an amorous break. That’s what we did, so what do you think? I nap close to sunset when it glows orange and pink.”

Why are you laughing, babe?

I thanked him, put the gun in my pocket, and said, “Good-bye for now.” I’d had enough of confessing—a priest, a doctor, giving a blessing?

*

9. LIGHT

Light failed in mid-December. Falling hickory nuts measured winter evenings as they bounced noiselessly on the lawn. Light weakened with red wines of winter. I visited my doctor regularly.

As the stream outside gushed over gray rocks, D, short for Doc, as I called him, employed a contraption that consists of six fluorescent bulbs hooked together horizontally and affixed to a stand. He gave me an old pillowcase to put over my head so the intense light wouldn't penetrate my retinas. He asked me to pull a sock over my cock so my balls wouldn't burn. I felt like a Red Hot Chili Pepper imprisoned at Abu Ghraib. He assured me that as long as I continued his treatments I would not die for lack of light. I had no choice. I believed in him.

The cost of each treatment was ten dollars and fifty cents. I asked him, "How come the fifty cents?"

"That covers the electricity," he said apologetically.

He checked my lymph nodes and took my temperature.

Light wasn't all he offered. He counseled me on how to row a boat.

"The waters are rising," he said, and encouraged me to practice Mozart.

Often he broke into song, particularly a sad and beautiful tune by Bette Midler that went something like "It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance."

Each week I stood beneath the light. I followed his instructions to turn at a right angle to myself, and then again and again until I'd rotated my body 360 degrees. To make sure light touched every inch of skin, I raised my elbows and the palms of my hands. I lifted my soles, first the left, then the right. Like a photographic emulsion, I was pervious to light. The spots eventually disappeared.



“Am I cured?” I asked him one Monday at 3:10 in the afternoon.

“You are safe as long as your skin is peachy, but you will never be cured. You will always need light, a lot more than most people. Otherwise the spots will come back, and I don’t want to tell you what will happen after that. Just remember, in winter, far beneath the bitter snows, lies the seed that with the sun’s love . . . Sorry, I forgot the last line. By the way, it’s not contagious.”

With his help, I made it through to spring, blustering and cold though it was. Witch hazel bloomed. Its fluffy yellow puffs are the first buds of spring.

*

10. SHADOW (On F train from Brooklyn to Manhattan)

Shadows fall on sidewalks. They fall on my breasts, my elbows, and my ankles too.

In Zimbabwe you might catch sight of the shadow of a giraffe, a hippopotamus, a rhino, a debutant, a squirrel, even an ant.

Yes, they have squirrels in Zimbabwe, just like Connecticut. They have debutants too. Their gowns are different from those you might see in New Haven, especially on ordinary evenings, but their shadows are similar.

The shadow of a worker ant is a tiny testament to its brief life—only a few months and that’s that. A colony consists of one or two queens who live up to six years each, a few sterile females, and a number of fertile males and females who have wings and live for a couple of months.

Periodically these winged “sexuals” depart from the nest in great

nuptial flights. It is then and only then that they see their shadows, since it's very dark inside their nest, and on top of that they're crammed together. One might say that these flights into sunlight justify their brief existence. Without them, there would be no shadow to see.

Winged sexuals reach puberty in ten or eleven days.

Fireflies appear at night when everything is in shadow. They do not have shadows of their own. It's a collective sort of thing—there's shadow all over the place because it's night.

I am not sure whether fireflies are monogamous. Perhaps they have affairs, maybe even birthday orgies. The purpose of their blink is to signal their whereabouts to a mate.

I wonder what a firefly affair might be like.

Some species of fireflies blink in unison. It's an amazing sight to see. But this practice complicates things immensely. Their affairs may simply be cases of mistaken identity.

What about you?

(long pause)

I knew a painter who painted a room full of shadows.

Except for people's, there weren't any real shadows in the room, because the paintings were well lit with floodlights mounted on the ceiling. Each painting was a different color, but basically the shadows were all the same shape.

You remember that shadow room, don't you? It's where we first kissed.

Yeah, there's a first room for everything.

I met him a few times. We shook hands and dined together up on Forty-fourth Street.

No, it wasn't the Red Sea. It was Un Deux Trois. You know it—we've been most everywhere.

True, we haven't been to the Red Sea, or the Dead Sea, for that matter. Lucky for that.

The place was packed. When we followed him from concierge to table the crowds parted.

No, he wasn't carrying condiments or even commandments. We just wanted to get to the table.

They held his memorial at Saint Patrick's Cathedral.

Yeah, it was like God had died, having nothing to do with Nietzsche.

Sorry, then, I get off here. This is my stop.

*

II. SYDNEY (iPhones)

So where's this fucking pond anyway?

Look, you don't have to swear just because I do. With you it sounds like an affectation. Walking, it's about ten minutes from the subway. We'll meet at the bar.

Sydney?

Actually, that's not his real name.

So, what is his real name?

Winston. An English friend thought I was lonely.

Where did he come from?

All he knew in life were a couple of shitty places . . . I mean that literally. Wallowing in his own shit, like Venice in winter, when the canals overflow onto San Marco.

How do you know about San Marco in winter? You've never been there.

I saw the movie.

Canals don't overflow in the movie.

I know, they just smell.

How do you know they smell if it was only a movie?

You passed me the popcorn.

Anyway, he probably wasn't much of a conversationalist.

Of course not—it was all a big mistake.

(A small stone plateau in Central Park. Manhattan gypsies dance in a circle. Slippery rocks lead down to water's edge. Tiny petals of duckweed cover the pond.)

Pixies sprinkled petals from a billion pittle roses.

You some kind of poet? That's pond scum. Roses are crimson, not green. Otherwise they'd bewilder butterflies. I'm hungry—I want a dog.

Ketchup, relish, onions?

Hold the onions.

Will you miss him?

I don't think so.

You sure? You'll never get him back.

Come on. Let's go. Just drop him in.

(Plop, then silence.)

A bit of a belly flop, but he's wearing protection.

What the fuck must he be thinking down there?

I know, from a plastic room with absolutely no accoutrements—no view, no cable, or Netflix, not even a venetian blind—from sloshing in his toilet . . . to a vast, glittering, sun-sparkled pond that must seem a galaxy, a universe, one of many rattling universes in this centrally located park.

Must be heaven.

I know from my *Encyclopedia Britannica*, circa 1911, that turtles don't think in mutually exclusive dichotomies. For Sydney, Winston, or whatever his name, this pond must be heaven and hell rolled into one.

Yes, each has its own attributes. Here, throw him the rest of this dog.

(All of a sudden, there, from under the duckweed, by our feet, a bale of turtles appears, swirling, churning dark water, webbed claws pushing away pond scum, gulping at this fortunate late-afternoon snack.)

You think we will ever see him again?

His head looks like a cock. Are you by any chance releasing my dick? Is that what you are doing? Is this good-bye?

I am not releasing your dick. You are not cold blooded. You are not a reptile. Anyway, your dick doesn't have two eyes. It's a cyclops. You are much taller than a turtle. Your name isn't Sydney. There

are many other differences to consider. You worry too much. Sydney never worried. Anyway, I've changed my mind. I miss him. I want him back. Hey, Sid! Can we get him back?

There's no way I'm jumping in there after him. Anyway, he won't come back. He doesn't know his name, and there are thousands of them out there, and they all look alike. They all have six or seven spots on their shells, just like you.

Just grab one—and we'll name him Jane.

*

12. SPOTS (iPhone in bathtub overlooking Houston Street)

Oh, hi. You there?

Nothing philosophical I hope—like life between two voids.
Humidity good, perfect temperature, little breeze . . .

Anything but . . .

OK, then, so why don't we talk about spots. It's as good a topic as any.

I don't give a shit—any goddamn spots, little ones, big ones, but they have to be circular, or ovals, certainly not triangular.

If it's triangular, it's not really a spot, is it? It's a triangle.

Whatever. Triangles don't qualify. They're way too three-way.

I'm not against three-ways. That's pretty obvious—at least when I'm one of the participants, but I . . . Let's fucking stick to spots.

Less complicated, round, no silly angles—just spots. I worked for a dry cleaner once, plenty of spots there, but I'm ready to relax.

Northern lights? I wouldn't call them spots—would you? It demotes them.

Polka dots? Of course polka dots could be included in our conversation. Dalmatians too.

You want color? I'll give you color. How about a fry?

A French one, double fried, like the ones at Café Loup.

I know they are not spots, but they are responsible for spots, especially when smothered in ketchup. What about Georges Seurat, pointillism, and all that? *Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte*. Now there's some spots for you. Thousands. French too, just like fries.

Ask Larry, Larry Poons. He likes spots.

I do care. That's my problem.

Anyway, how come it's always me who has to come up with conversation? Is it because I have a fucking cock or something? Wait, just checking . . . Nothing ever comes from it except sticky white stuff.

I'll grant you piss.

Sure, you can control the color.

Depends on how many vitamins . . .

Once my uncle took me out behind the barn. He had a rooster by the neck in his left hand, an ax in his right. He told me to get a hammer and a couple of ten-inch nails. “Bang the nails into this stump,” he said. “Let them stick out a couple of inches.” Then he laid the cock down on the stump and jammed its neck between the nails. He handed me the ax and said, “Do it, kid.” I was only six. I was so scared I pissed my pants.

A brook ran between his house and the barn. A bridge arched over it. Forget-me-nots sparkled in sunlight.

His neck, his throat—all about airflow. A penis doesn’t have airflow. It’s all about liquids.

Did you know that ancient ceramicists painted blowjobs and hand jobs on vases?

Yeah, the ones with pre-Socratic blowjobs are more valuable than the ones with pre-Socratic hand jobs.

Look, I am sitting here in the sun, perhaps for the last time—who the fuck knows?

No, I am not committing suicide, but I’m feeling hopeless.

Sorry, I didn’t mean to alarm . . . It just popped out.

OK. It is definitely not the last time. I’ll be sitting in the sun again, maybe here in this same spot.

Look, I am not thinking of dissing myself, quite the contrary. Indeed, I am aspiring to become a gentleman—to do

gentlemanly things, to speak in a genteel manner. It's rather late for that, but why not?

I know it's only eleven o'clock. I meant late in life.

I can dive, learned it from Uncle Rock, who did triple knocks—that's three complete summersaults before you hit the water. Imagine saying a last good-bye then doing a couple of flips into a river?

No, I wasn't going to go through with it. Who wants a sopping wet iPhone? Apple knows when it's water damage. They won't replace it. Not if it gets wet.

They look in the earphone hole. If it's turned pink, they know it's been dunked.

No, not even with a warrant.

But all those END signs where the road stops at the river—like the close of so many films noir. Who knows how many lovers might have driven down that road. With all those THE END signs, I assumed it was the end of our story, but at the same time I didn't want to get cold and wet or dead, because then I couldn't watch Andy Kaufmann on You Tube. Maybe I should stop rambling and get off and . . .

Yes, The End, The End, The End, The End. That's an even number—four. Certainly not a triangle.

Pigtails? Oh, she has pigtails?

I know, I know I could have left the phone with you before I

jumped, but then how would you have texted me? Anyway, I hear there are strong currents in the East River. Even if I hung on and tried to swim to Manhattan, I could easily have been swept out to sea. The East River is just a tidal strait. It changes flow constantly—like you.

Anyway, a real gentleman doesn't jump into rivers. He wouldn't want to mess up his shirt.

Brooks Brothers. I just ironed it. Gentlemen often iron shirts.

Anyway, my neck is stiff. I can hardly hold up this phone. Put it on speaker? Oh yeah, good idea.

The little circle? Press it? OK. Shit, it's not really working.

I'll slouch in the water.

"Slouch"? I think it's Pennsylvania Dutch, like *schnutz*.

I am in the bathtub, don't you hear splashes?

Spalding Gray? OK, we'll make an exception of Spalding. Yes, I would consider him a gentleman, certainly.

I think he was wearing a T-shirt when he jumped off the Staten Island ferry. T-shirts are certainly off limits at the 21 Club.

I believe if I romanticize spots, like the ones on my body, I can scare them away, like I do when I get romantic with you. Then I won't have to keep seeing that doctor out there by the fucking waterfall.

Well, it's frozen at least part of the year. You should know. And that's when I really need the treatment, when the sun is low in the sky.

No, I am not being cynical. Romance—like climbing up a ladder—builds to a crescendo. You reach for the raspberries, hoping to smear them on warm buttered toast, and plop! The ladder slips, and jelly splats over the carpet.

“A thousand Persian ponies fall asleep in the plaza, with moonlight of your forehead.” That's all I know about Lorca. Romantic, but moonlight—not really spots, is it?

Wait a minute. That's a good one. I'll google it. Just have to juggle this phone. “And though you are not sentient, Spot, / And do not comprehend, / I nonetheless consider you a true and valued friend.”

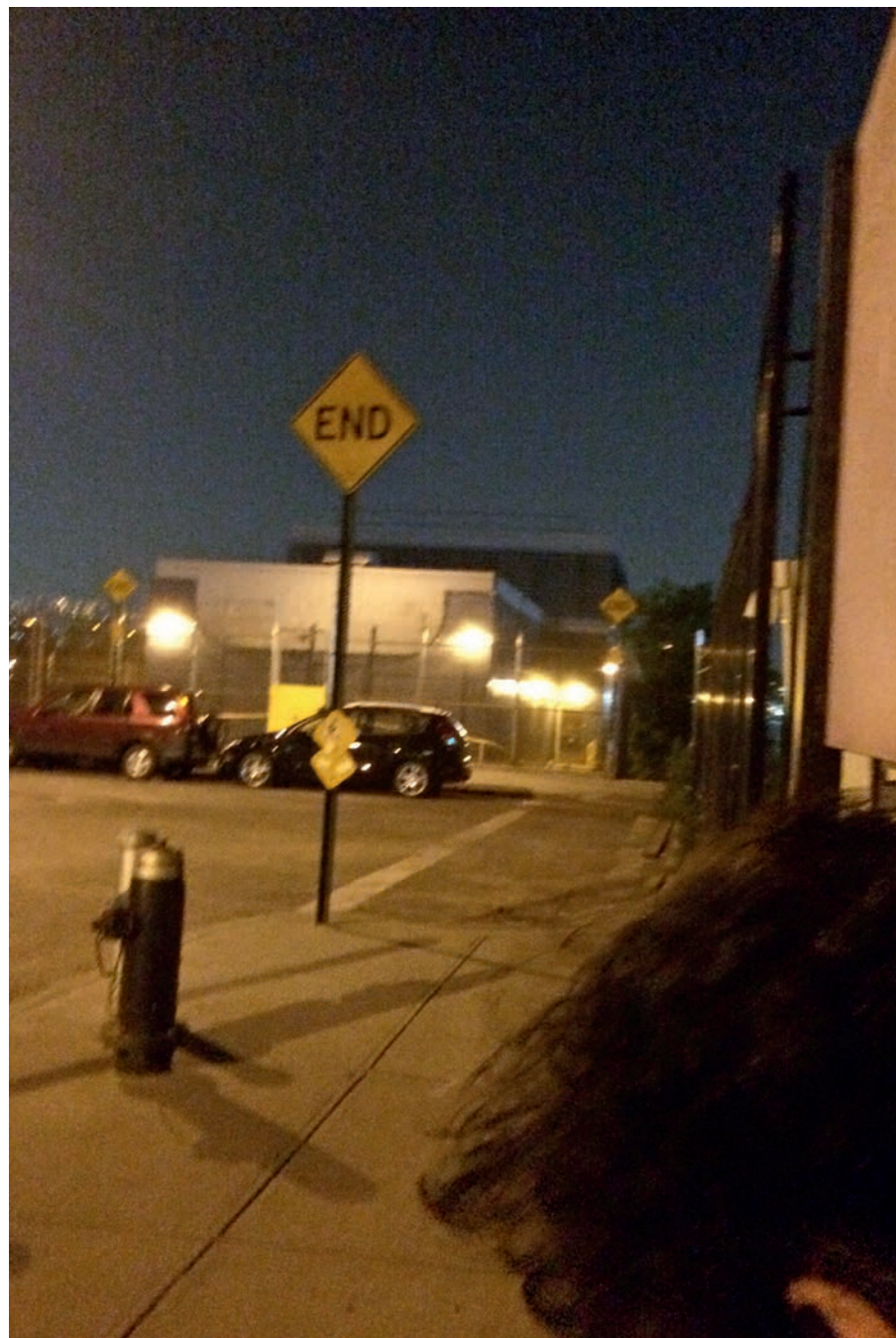
I know, Spot was his cat.

I am not comparing you to a pussy.

Really, is that so? Am I forgetting something? At some point you were into *Star Trek*, weren't you? Or is this all taking place on another planet?

No, it's pretty pleasant this evening. Setting sun, almost. Light breeze. Wish you were here. I really do, you fucking god-damn darling daughter son of a bitch.

Wait, don't hang up! It's working now, the speaker . . .



“What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.”
Me too. Yet I fixed the faucet.

I know. For one thing, a gentleman does not spit on sidewalks. A gentleman carries a handkerchief.

“It is an accustom’d action with her, to seem thus / washing her hands. I have known her continue in this, / a quarter of an hour.”

The faucet, the hot one. It is not really dripping, just hissing. It didn’t cut off—needed a washer, just a little pink rubber thing.

“Yet here’s a spot.”

Shit. You’re not in that fucking Alexander McQueen dress, are you? You know how much that cost?

“Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.”

You know, my car’s in the shop, brakes failed. I’ll have to use my motorbike.

Gentlemen ride motorbikes. Look at Lawrence of Arabia. Now there’s a gentleman!

We can discuss sunspots some other time. I really have to get out of this tub or I’ll dissolve.

“One; two: why, then / ’tis time to do’t.—Hell is murky.—Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and / afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our / pow’r to accompt?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”

Far out! What happened after that?

☆

13. WORDS (iPhone, three weeks later.)

My eyes fell from turban to forehead to lowered lids. You look great in a turban.

Perhaps you can help me with my grammar.

Past or present?

A perfect future?

Missoni? Well, it really isn't a full-fledged turban, then, is it? Just a high-class allusion.

Look, I know I get diddy sometimes.

Not dizzy, diddy, although I get dizzy too.

Like the other day . . .

After three mojitos, you stood up and said, "*And* I made her cum." You just grabbed the glass and lifted your arm, and toasted a coming. Perhaps it was your second.

Yes, I know it was in the past, but it was the very recent past, like a couple of days ago.

It doesn't matter which arm. Depends if you are left handed or right handed. You are left handed, so I guess the mojito was in your left hand. I really don't remember.

And so you announced your current three-way.

"Three-way" is sexier than "ménage à trois." I can't even spell that one, but I don't have to. This isn't a bee.

I know I went silent . . .

No, not “silencer.” I wasn’t a gun, though I could have been . . . The word “three-way” shot through me like a . . .

I’m not sure if he had a silencer in Sarajevo on the morning of June 28, 1914. I really don’t think he needed one. Anyway, don’t change the subject.

Why would an assassin, right out there on the street, in broad daylight, bother with a silencer? It was obvious what he was doing. He was murdering an archduke.

So I sat mum, as I do occasionally, and you said, “OK, next time it happens I shall not tell you.”

You used the word “shall,” not “will.” Some consolation. I’m not sure which is grammatically correct in this context.

Look, under certain circumstances even my spaniel gets jealous.

When I pet the cat, for example.

The cat, Oscar, after Oscar Wilde. He was jealous over Bosie. Yeah, Lord Alfred Douglas. Bosie was all over the place with his dick. Meanwhile Oscar was arrested and put in Reading Gaol.

Reading Gaol is a prison. It’s a long story, but there are similarities.

Yeah, to us. Just google it. I’m not sure who I am.

Look, I don't know what intimacy is anymore. I used to think I did.

Yes, I know, but a doctor has special access to body parts. All he has to do is turn on an X-ray. Or better yet, an MRI. By the way, I just had one recently.

Has there ever been a sexy X-ray?

I know I am not an archduke—I'm not even a duke, or a lord, or a doctor, for that matter. My father was a carpenter.

I am not comparing myself to Jesus Christ. Lots of people have carpenter dads.

Anyway, Archduke Ferdinand's father was an archduke. And Ferdinand wasn't assassinated out of jealousy—there wasn't any three-way to contend with.

OK. So maybe there was. The archduke, his wife, and the assassin. Penetration on two counts. Sadly, Sophia died with a bullet in her throat as Ferdinand cried, "Sophie, Sophie, Sophie . . . Live for our children." By all accounts, he was a gentleman.

I read the book.

A history book, somewhere in time about a time some time ago.

At the Fifth Avenue library with all the lions.

*As his voice grew weaker, Ferdinand kept repeating Es ist nichts,
“It is nothing.”*

But she was already dead. She never heard nothing.

*The Great War began about a month after the assassination.
Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. So many people dead
because of that three-way. See? So now you know why I want it.*

No, not that. The gun, stupid.

*

14. APOLOGY (A handwritten letter dropped in a mailbox on the north side of Houston Street, a block east of Saint Anthony’s Church. The envelope has no return address, just a note in the upper-left-hand corner that reads, “I need sunshine and the paving stones of streets.”)

Hey,

Nixon had a dog too, Checkers, named after a speech. Eisenhower’s dog, Heidi, was a Weimaraner. Reagan’s was Rex, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel—la-di-da—just like my dog, What’s-his-name. (What’s, for short.)

Oh, didn’t I tell you about the cemetery, the old stone church, or the pond? My dad was a choirmaster.

Ponds up north freeze in the winter, and its best to bury yourself deep in November. So I told you about U. At four, I didn’t know how to spell y-o-u, so I just said “U.” I didn’t think of U as a girl then, because I was a boy and little boys are shy of girls even when little girls are make-believe.

One day U whispered to me, “What’s a fuck, when all I want is love?” This seemed very mature for a fictional lad of four.

My parents didn’t own orchards. They just rented the house. I supposed the owner, with peach trees ripe in September, would object to my heisting his nectar. The sweet liquid dripped down my lips and onto my chin. Occasionally I wiped it on my sleeve. Did the landlord own that juice? If so, where did his tenure stop—on my lips, the tip of my tongue, or when I ceased to know the nectar, down in my tum? Did he own the juice as it trickled to my intestines and mingled with my blood? One thing’s for sure: whoever he was, he didn’t own my heart. He was, for all practical purposes, an apparition just like all the rest. And he didn’t own U either, because U is more me than my spleen.

So I asked my friend R, “What do you think—am I crazy or a fool?” He looked at me blankly and with a whisper said, “I don’t know.” I knew I was alone then, when no one would give me the facts, like what we mean when we say “alone,” speaking in the vernacular. I am a pond writhing with turtles in a park called Central. I am gooey with my selves. One dances, a pilgrim shaking with laughter.

I don’t know what to do with the gun. Should I go off somewhere and shoot? It doesn’t need a silencer because the deed will be done in daylight. Everyone will see. I’m not embarrassed.

I really did meet Greta Garbo in Sarajevo during the intermission between *Queen Christina* and, now, shit, I forget the other film. She said to me, in her thick voice, over coffee, “Never, ever, admit to a weakness.” No need to apologize for her.

Hey, wait, *that’s* what the gun’s for! I had to find some practical purpose. I must get on with it, like a cancer writhing in sunlight.

I apologize for the sunsets we knew, particularly the one breaking red, orange, and blue, sliced by dark birches that

feathered the sky. We parked at the entrance of a lane, hoping no one would notice. I admit I was nervous. I'll shoot that sunset.

I want to apologize for Fifth Avenue. Why Fifth Avenue? Why not Sixth or Seventh? Because Sixth has a surname (Avenue of the Americas). Seventh has one too (Fashion Avenue). But Fifth doesn't need a surname, certainly not an apology. It stands as it is. So I take it back.

I want to apologize for snakes. I am not really responsible for snakes, because they evolved before my time, but I want to cover my bases.

If I carry this gun, and trust me I am not speaking metaphorically here, it could kill all that extracurricular shitty stuff and "save the serpent in their midst." But I'd have to be a pretty good shot. Wouldn't want to hit an artery. Packing a pistol, even antique, can get you arrested.

I want to apologize for the subtle sparkles that waves make as they slosh on distant shores.

I apologize for not buying you that bikini.

Oh gee, there is something else. OK—real nitty-gritty—something about the Hudson River Valley Orgy Association of Greater Poughkeepsie—I went once. I'll spit it out somewhere. But before I do, I want to warn y-o-u, that the gun, that Browning circa 1910, is sitting here partially loaded. Shells are rare. The ones I found must have rested on a shelf throughout the twentieth century—through two wars, through trillions of pisses and billions of shits (a rough calculation).

I took a break from my pen to walk the dog. He moseyed, sniffing. His olfactory interests make for meandering, until I yank his chain. It was cold this morning, and I was cruel. I hurried back home before he had a chance to shit. He held on during the day. So I just took him out again, to Saint Anthony's. Anthony, an apprentice to Saint Francis, holds a white lily. It's

late afternoon, low sun—a beautiful January day. Next to the church stands a life-sized crèche—manger, camels, wise men, incense, and myrrh, a donkey or two. Gabriel's there and, of course, Joseph, who probably is thinking, "Hey, Gabe, s'up?" Maybe Joseph didn't need an explanation. Maybe he just believed in God's benevolence. Maybe he was OK with Gabe fucking his wife. Wonder if there was any foreplay—any extracurricular activity just for the hell of it. Or did they get right down to the business of making a god? And Mary, did she cum? I daren't ask. Never would, because she's just one great big tchotchke here on Houston Street. And tchotchkes never cum. Baby Jesus is wired to the crib so no one will steal him.

So What's squats and craps right in front of Gabriel. Since he ate a couple of these gritty pages earlier this morning, he has bloody diarrhea. How am I going to scoop *that* off the sidewalk?

I am a sharpshooter and will take close aim. I must be careful because serpents are still at stake. I had hoped to cripple *adoring* to quiet my heart.

Shucks then, sorry when I miss.

*

15. PORN LASH (Greene Street and Spring, cold rainy evening)

Jesus, I wish *I* had lashes like those. Where did your get them? Hurry, let's grab us a cab.

Thanks, Fifty-seventh Street. Park Hotel, please . . . Oh no, it's Fifty-ninth—across from the park.

Look, it must be the Ambien. Puts me to sleep—side effects, I can't recall where I am.

So look, sir, stop across from the park.

Yeah, drop us off between those two puddles, but watch out for potholes.

Potholes may be under the puddles.

Don't know where the puddle stops and the pothole begins. Just try to avoid them.

Thanks, keep the change.

Look, all we have to do is get across the street. Wait for the cars to pass.

Shit. Oh shit. I'm sorry. He really got you, didn't he?

No, wait. Don't run. We don't want to die, do we?

Watch it, here comes another. What the fuck is happening? Is this the Indianapolis Speedway?

No time to remember now—let's get to the hotel. Wait! Shit! No, not again! I'm so sorry.

(On iPhone with R, from hotel room)

She's locked herself in the bathroom, sobbing. I don't know what to do. You have any ideas?

It was a goddamn black Chevy, one of those round ones from the fifties.

I told you that story, didn't I? They kidnapped me. I was seventeen.

I didn't? Well, later maybe. She's really upset.

No, the trouble is, when she cries her fake eyelashes stick together even more. I think it's got something to do with the glue she used to attach them.

It was raining, and we were on the north side of Fifty-ninth Street, waiting to cross to get to the hotel.

We needed a hotel.

To sluck.

Sleep and fuck.

There was this Chevy followed by a drenched cyclist in Spandex, followed by a Prius police vehicle.

We just wanted to get across the street, out of the rain and into the hotel.

So this lunky old Chevy drove up and ran through a puddle—splish! Right into her right eye. Then the bicyclist passed by. Actually, he avoided both puddles.

Then this Prius sped by, and splash! Right into her left eye.

Look, this has nothing to do with global warming. It has to do with asshole Chevy drivers, police Prii, and false eyelashes.

Tonight was an exception. She never wears makeup, certainly not lashes.

No, it's not her birthday. What do puddles have to do with birthdays?

Yeah, it was weird. The falsies sealed shut, as if the puddles were Crazy Glue catalysts.

I feel bad for her. She won't let me touch her. The bathroom is locked.

Oh, sure, look, check out this one: petiteblondgetsherholes-filled.com

Yes, I'm sure she'll hate puddles, police, and Prii for the rest of her life.

Actually, I'm not sure you can hate a puddle. Maybe there won't be any puddles in the future. They will probably find a way to smooth things out. Or maybe all the roads will have heating coils, like some floors do now. As rain hits the ground the drops will evaporate.

Or maybe there won't be any rain anymore. Maybe there'll just be preprogramed sprinkling systems. Or maybe the rain will be purple, who knows? But if it's purple and nothing else changes in the world, there still will be puddles. The only difference will be that the puddles will be purple.

Anyway, puddles are innocent. Why not hate Firestone, the company whose tires created the splash? Why not hate the country that exports rubber?





I think it is Vietnam. Rubber was the reason. We didn't want the communists to get a hold of all the rubber trees.

Because then we couldn't make tires for jeeps and couldn't go to war. So we went to war because we realized we couldn't go to war if we didn't first go to war to get the rubber in Vietnam.

I know, I love the spice, especially the dumplings.

Look, it's not only tires. There are condoms, otherwise known as "rubbers," or at least they used to call them rubbers in those days. I'm not sure what they're called now.

I try to control myself. I know, famous last words. But if there were no rubbers, condoms, whatever, eventually there would be a population explosion.

That would give us more soldiers to fight more wars—sort of cancels things out. I can't really get my head around it.

No, she didn't see the driver. She obsessed on puddles—"villipuds," as she called them. In her terminology "villi" is short for "villain."

Now she's a bit calmer, quite philosophical. But still locked in. She's quoting Nietzsche. She's usually right about shit like eternal returns.

I was drenched too, but I can still see because I was wearing my glasses. I just wiped them off with Kleenex and guided her up to the room.

Normally, she doesn't wear makeup at all, let alone two-inch-long black eyelashes.

She was in some performance-art thing.

Here's another: skinnyteenpissing.com

Yeah, like the others—no caps. You multitasking? You have it on speaker?

Tears escape from behind her sticky lashes, and trickle down her cheeks. I can't see her. I am just assuming that's what's happening.

Cutepetiteteenblondlegalbukakiandspankonlyonwednesday.com

That should do you for a while. I'll try knocking again. Her eyes are light blue. I introduced her to you.

*

16. ORGY MODE (iPhone)

You said you were “busy,” last night so I attended a meeting of the Hudson River Valley Orgy Association. I don't really associate “busy” with “orgy,” and I've never really thought about etymologies. I imagine “orgy” has its origins in masturbation, couplings, and three-ways, leading up to other combinational possibilities. “Busy,” I see, is derived from the Old English *bisig*, which means “anxious.”

Last night the logistics were as follows: An entrepreneur named “Jay” rents a hotel room and puts an ad in *Back Page* that appeals to folks—boyfriends, wives, husbands, and girlfriends—looking for fantasy swaps. I feared it would be just a couple of godforsaken, tough-skinned whores hired for an evening, and intended to keep my pants on throughout the affair—never to open my zipper (a device invented by a Mr. Elias Howe, who called it an “Automatic Continuing Clothing Closure.” It was B. F. Goodrich who later gave it its familiar name, after the *zzzip* it makes as it closes and opens).

Yeah, I guess that’s onomatopoeia, like “cock-a-doodle-do.” Except I bet you’d be really surprised if a rooster walked up to you, and said “cock-a-doodle-do,” pursing his lips on the last syllable. For one, he doesn’t have any lips, and two, he doesn’t speak English.

The entry fee, pun intended, was one hundred eighty dollars for single men under the age of sixty-five, sixty bucks for couples at the door, and thirty-three dollars for senior citizens of either sex on weekends.

Everyone—except an ugly guy who was puffy and pocked—sporting tattoos.

One girl had a pistol tattooed to her left thigh. Her boyfriend had a holster on his bicep. A skinny teen had a single bullet tattooed between her breasts. The guy she came in with had a 1961 midnight-blue Lincoln convertible tattooed on his ass. A brunette had a picture of Ford’s Theatre tattooed on her shoulder blade—the left one, as I remember, not that it really matters.

Her boyfriend had “Emancipation Proclamation” sprawled from nipple to nipple. Painful, I suspect. A freckled redhead had a portrait of Martin Luther King tattooed at that sexy slope just above her ass. Could this be an assassination debauch?

Other tattoos, however, were reminiscent of expressionists—like the paintings of Newman, Pollock, Rothko.

None of the tattoos had anything to do with fellatio, cunnilingus, sixty-nine—the usual.

The girl with Martin Luther King straddled the guy with “Blue Poles” tattooed on his ass. The girl with the single bullet gave head to the guy with “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?” on his thigh.

I know you don’t want an art history lesson, but “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue” is the last in a series of primary-colored paintings Barnett Newman completed just before his death. Later, in 1986 I believe, someone slashed that painting to make a point about the apparent inadequacy of abstraction.

I was feeling blue, so I reached for my red Woolworth, hanging in the closet, and took a yellow taxicab home.

Hey, as I write, What’s has sauntered in and placed himself on the floor. Sad eyes looking heavenward, he stares mournfully. He’s blue too; he needs a walk.

It’s cold outside. A terrible wind blows nearby branches against the windowpane. I am afraid the glass will break. I hear a piccolo playing “Satisfaction,” on a dejected radio.

The streets are deep with snow, a layer of ice beneath. I know because people are slipping and sliding on silver sidewalks. I stay by the fire, warm and comfy. Perhaps I'll take a bath, swallow a pill or two.

*

17. TO BE A GENTLEMAN (Office of a psychiatrist, a block away from the Gagosian Gallery, currently showing Ed Ruscha)

It was on my way to the basement, right before my toe touched the dusty, cold cement, that I knew . . .

I wanted to become a gentleman.

I hadn't thought about it very much.

Of course, the third syllable is not a problem. I am equipped with all the necessary accoutrements—testicles, laryngeal prominence, potential for facial hair. It's the first two syllables I can't take for granted.

Facial hair was in at the time.

I did pick up my toothbrush. I brush every night and morning, often at midday.

My toothbrush and razor lay side by side on a marble sink—Italian marble, red with white veins running through it.

The sink has a strange sort of spigot, more like a palm than a penis.

I found the sink in Bologna, beyond the city walls.

It was far too heavy for a plane, so I booked a liner.

Ocean.

To maintain the appropriate hair length—approximately one-eighth inch from skin to tip of hair—I'd purchased a razor that came equipped with plastic extensions that raised the cutting surface slightly. I am not sure how gentlemen did this when Lincoln was president, because electric motors had not yet been invented. Abe probably used a scissors and a comb.

Yeah, I found the raiser at Bigelow's on Sixth Avenue. It was Mel's favorite drug store, and America's oldest apothecary, established in 1836.

Mel was certainly a gentleman, my friend for so many years. He doesn't need analysis anymore.

Of course I am well aware that many men with facial hair are not gentlemen. I don't know how Hitler held his fork, but surely table manners must count for something.

A gentleman never loses his temper.

He is not petty.

To establish a tradition, he has a special drink he can order anytime, in any bar.

Yeah, mine is a vodka martini with a twist.

A gentleman always writes back promptly. He has more than one suit ready and pressed.

I buy my suits at Freeman's Sporting Club on Rivington Street. Handmade, three fittings.

I know its not Seville Row.

There is a technique to shaking hands.

Step one: make sure your palm is not sweaty. Step two: offer your right hand. (If your right hand is incapacitated or immobilized, use your left.) Grasp the hand firmly. Imagine you are holding an egg: you want a firm grip on it, but you don't want to break it. Move said hand up and down using your elbow. Maintain eye contact throughout the shake. Have a good pair of shoes and a classy watch.

No, that's not part of the handshake. OK, maybe the wristwatch is, but a watch is usually on the left hand, so it doesn't really participate in the shake.

A gentleman won't disparage others to elevate himself.

He knows how to cook a few good meals.

He is adept at shucking an oyster. It takes skill, particularly with the hard-to-open West Coast variety. I don't know why West Coast oysters are more difficult to open than East Coast oysters. They are from LA. You'd think they'd open easy.

Kumamoto oysters are from the east coast of Japan. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster—the tsunami. It was terrible. I mean, maybe Kumamotos are radioactive. We had a couple of dozen the other day.

Yes, I feel all right. I mean, nothing's glowing, is it? Be kind of cool if my cock glowed.

Sorry, I will use "penis" in the future.

You don't mind if I use "cock"?

OK. I'll stick with "cock."

You know, Mel was in love once, so much that he had need of a therapist. I think it was quite painful. He made frequent visits, recounting the joys and sorrows of love, even going into detail about how fantastic she was in bed and various other locations, including Central Park and the top of the Empire State Building. So the therapist—I'm pretty sure his name was Sydney, Sydney Geist—suggested that he bring Michelle to sessions with him. Mel was worried that since two people were being treated the charges would double, but the therapist said no problem—it's two for one. Mel soon realized the hidden meaning.

A couple of months of joint therapy went by. Then, one afternoon—it must have been late afternoon because Mel, who worked the night shift at the *Post*, never woke until two in the afternoon—Mel knocked on the viridian door of the therapist's office, ready for his regular visit. No one answered. This was long before cell phones. He went home and called his therapist. No answer, not even a machine. A few days passed and there was no explanation, nothing—only a posted letter containing a bill for back charges of five hundred dollars.

This is all true. I'm not making it up. The same thing happened to him with Michelle. Mel rang her bell, called—no response. Weeks went by, and then one day he got a postcard from Las Vegas, of all places, with a picture of a slot machine on one side and "Love, Sydney and Michelle" on the other, in blue ink, probably written with a fountain pen—there was a little splotch of ink to one side of the signatures.

Are we running out of time?

A gentleman doesn't talk politics at dinner. Perhaps the guests include both Republicans and Democrats. Maybe a

couple of the guests are buglers—that's entirely possible. And if a Republican bugler is seated next to a trumpeter, they'll find they have lots in common, but some things not.

Bugles are for cemeteries, trumpets for jazz. Both have mouthpieces and are usually made of brass, though some fancy trumpets are silver. A trumpet has valves and bugles don't.

My friend Malcolm is a gentleman and a burglar. To kill time, he painted in prison. Years later he won the prestigious Turner Award.

Even at twelve, he had a fetish for sterling. He was arrested for stealing silver.

I know, maybe we could get together for a bipartisan quartet.

Perhaps we'd want a harpist. Harps are impractical, difficult to lug.

Bass fiddles? Just as heavy. We can consider gentlemen tubists. Or maybe a tubist painter, a cubist tubist.

Malcolm began as a New Realist. But later his paintings became more expressionistic.

How about a flute or an oboe?

A gentleman lives for the moment. He never underestimates the value of flowers, even on days other than Saint Valentine's.

He knows how to tango.

He is compassionate.

He never says "slut."

*



18. (Same psychiatrist)

Speaking of bassists, have you heard of Charles Mingus? He was bassist, and a vegetarian.

Yes, a long time ago. My then girlfriend Laurie was married to John Sebastian, of the Lovin' Spoonful. Meanwhile, she was seeing Bob *and* me on the side.

Yeah, Dylan lived down Houston Street, over that home-made pasta place—just a couple of blocks away.

We never met, but we passed in her hallway once.

Laurie worked with Charlie's wife, Sue. One night they were sitting around watching TV, Charlie in a big leather armchair like this one, with the cat in his lap, and he got pissed off at something he saw and picked up a brick . . .

This is all secondhand information.

Yeah, Charlie was known as the Bad Man of Jazz. Lost his temper quite often.

I don't know. The brick was on the carpet with a number of other bricks, under a begonia. Doesn't matter really, does it? I mean, some things aren't that important.

They are? All of them are significant?

These were the days before flat-screen TV. A television was just a big glass tube.

So he got pissed off at the TV. I think she said it was Shakespeare's *Othello*.

I am not sure, but he either got angry with Othello for being jealous or with Iago for betraying Othello. On the other hand, maybe he was just pissed off at Sue for some reason.

Anyway, Charlie picked up the brick and slung it at the TV, and since the screen was just a big vacuum tube, the whole thing exploded. Shattered glass flew everywhere. Amazingly, it missed Charlie.

Sue had just gone into the kitchen, and Laurie was in the bathroom, so the glass missed them both. Everything was OK, except for the cat, which was bleeding profusely and had a huge shard of glass protruding from its neck. The cat gagged, spewed out blood and guts, and that was it. Curtains.

Charlie felt really bad.

I never asked the name of the cat.

So we were having an argument about whether we should act like a normal married couple on a normal Friday night, even though we are not married and it was Saturday. I thought maybe we should just sit on the couch and watch TV, like normal people do, all across the country, even though I am old enough to be her grandmother and we both reside in New York. I wanted to relax, and hoped repose would lead to cunnilingus. So I turned to a scene in *Pulp Fiction*, one where college students shoot at the Samuel Jackson character and all the bullets miss.

Somehow everything went downhill. I got upset because her cell phone rang and it looked like she was getting ready to go. I knew who was calling. He's black but obviously doesn't have anything to do with Samuel Jackson or Charlie Mingus or Othello, for that matter. That's all just a coincidence. Anyway, I walked up to the flat screen.

It was Movies on Command.

So as Travolta danced with Uma, I socked it with my fist. I put a huge dent in the screen, which immediately went black.

Yes, it felt good. It made her hungry. She usually gets hungry after a fisting. I take her out to dinner and we comment on Republicans, and then everything is good. I think the guy who called was transsexual. I met him once when he was wearing a skirt.

You are really into details. Blue plaid, sort of Scottish. Hairy legs. I think he might have been the guy she had the three-way with. I tried on a dress once.

Black with little white daisies.

A fresh pair of panties too.

Look, this is serious. I'm concerned about those radioactive oysters on the east coast of Japan. The next time I saw her, a Sunday, I got a dozen, shucked them, squeezed a bit of lemon over them, and we sucked them off their half shells. I waited till it got dark, and then I went into the bathroom and made myself hard and spread day-glow paint onto my cock.

A hardware store, right on Lafayette and Bleecker.

The lights were out, the blinds down. I walked out of the bathroom with this day-glow cock, and she totally freaked. She looked down between her legs to see if she was glowing too, but of course she wasn't. I confessed to the ruse. She laughed, "OK, you win."

Of course, we both knew that was not true. She wins and always will, because she is beginning. That's her happy

handicap—unless I become a poet or something arty. Then perhaps we'll tie. But we know there are no real ties in life. I told her it's not about winning—gentlemen don't care about winning. They only care about spooning. And she said, "What the fuck is spooning?" And then all was back to normal, although we weren't watching TV, because I broke it, and it wasn't Friday night. What made it normal was that we'd already had had six glasses of prosecco.

*

19. (Same psychiatrist)

Oh, before I forget, here's a check for the last three visits. A total of \$1,050—three times \$350, for three forty-five minute sessions calculated at a rate \$400 an hour, or if you prefer, \$9,500 a day if we just talked and didn't sleep, or \$3,504,000 if we met for a year without sleeping or eating.

I know that's impractical. Obviously, we have to sleep. It's hypothetical.

Of course we have to eat too, so let's be fair and say \$1,752,000 a year if we allow time for sleeping, eating, shitting, pissing, and drinking.

But if all we did, besides therapy, was sleep, eat, and piss, I wouldn't need a shrink anymore, would I? The only relationship I'd have would be with you. And I don't need a shrink for this, do I?

You can't help me unless I take time off from this room and fuck myself up out there in the world.

I can't figure out if this melancholy is all in my head, or if its in my big toe . . .

Of course she has a name.

Funny, but we used to pay tithes to God.

I don't know, back in 1952?

Sure, He must have been outside us somewhere, because they passed around a plate. If He were simply inside our heads, there would be no need for an offering. I could just put the money in a personal savings account, possibly an IRA.

But what about when I am literally inside *her*, or she in me? Shit happens anytime, night or day.

I don't know what "intimate" means anymore. It's all cinematic.

The \$400 would be worth it if you gave me facts, like where she is right now, what she's doing. I imagine a spy gets more than \$400 an hour, but from a spy you get facts, and facts are like money shots.

Maybe I *should* move to Russia.

I know it's not the cold war anymore, but they still have lots of spies, don't they?

You know the dog show at Madison Square Garden? I mean, the winning dog was a Russian wolfhound. Not nearly as cute as What's. No long, fluffy ears. No melancholy glance, like when he stretches out on the carpet and puts his head between his legs and looks up at me plaintively shifting his eyebrows.

Dogs have eyebrows. Certainly What's does. If you don't believe me, I'll bring him in.

Charge me double?

Cured of what? I'm in love, for Christ's sake.

What purpose do What's's big feathered feet serve? I will never know. Maybe they help him waddle in the snow.

We still have a few minutes?

You don't see red squirrels anymore—you know, the ones that fly. They scamper up trees, then jump off a branch, dive into space, or what space has come to mean.

Yeah, the gray ones have taken over.

Not the space of art history, just the space outside themselves, like the finite distance from upper branch to last year's autumn leaves. Actually, they don't seem to need a buffer. They can even land on rocks.

Certainly it must have been autumn. And the squirrel thinks, "Can I make it? I did it before, didn't I? Like last year."

Squirrels can get along quite well without history.

Time is not infinite. Einstein thought it was. He was wrong. If time is infinite, how have we arrived at this point in our lives? With an infinite amount of time before us, we could never reach the point where we are born. We could never arrive at a *now*, then, could we?

Maybe she is having dinner with friends—something harmless, like eating mussels.

Actually, we just ate mussels a week ago.

She, me. The next morning I woke up and blacked out, fell faint on the floor and couldn't pick myself up for an hour.

Well, it seemed like an hour. I don't really know. I dragged myself to my cell, called 911. Immediately, three attractive firefighters broke down the door, put me on a stretcher, and drove me to the hospital in their truck, the long one, with a girl in the rear, steering.

Yeah, this all happened last week, just after I saw you.

They wouldn't let me ride in the back. I really wanted to. I felt nauseous in the front.

The veins in my hand, look how big they are. There's a kind of lump near the knuckle. I just noticed. See?

You know, sometimes I walk around alone at night, by the East River.

Yes, on the Brooklyn side, overlooking Manhattan.

I take a cab there. It's desolate. It's quiet and I can think. Often I fantasize about getting mugged by a beautiful dame.

It's OK to say "dame"?

Well *I* think it is. In moonlight she sneaks up behind me. I smell her perfume, Shalimar, Ode à la Vanille—Sur la route du Mexique, by Guerlain.

Yes, I know a lot about perfume. Then she gets me in a headlock with her right arm and shoves the fingers of her left hand into my mouth.

The forefinger, middle finger, and ring finger, but there is no ring on the ring finger so I assume she's either hocked it or she is single. Maybe rings don't mean anything anymore.

I have an inclination to bite her fingers, but for some reason I don't.

Presently, she removes her left hand from my mouth and starts fiddling around my back pockets—looking for my wallet, I assume.

The other night I was walking around in my fantasy with about \$200 in my pocket and of course credit cards—Visa, American Express, and Barclays. The Barclays card has a \$3,000 credit line with no interest as long as you pay it off in eighteen months. I knew if she stole it, she wouldn't pay it off in eighteen months, but for some reason I didn't care. It didn't occur to me to cancel the cards. If she goes to all the trouble to hide out somewhere behind a bush—and it was chilly that night—and wait for an unsuspecting subject like myself to wander by, after having taken the time to work out at the gym, on those machines, especially the ones tuned for biceps, and to chance arrest or retaliation—I could have been carrying a knife or even a gun—well, maybe she deserves my Barclays card and \$200 in unmarked twenties.

Only problem is that in my fantasy she is always wearing a short black skirt and stilettos. High heels make a distinct sound on concrete. So how come I didn't hear her coming?

I know, there seems to be a hole in the plot.

If she were wearing sneakers, which would have been the practical thing, not only for sneaking up behind me, but for making a getaway, then of course I wouldn't have heard her approaching. But she was wearing stilettos, ruby red as far as

I could see. It was pretty dark out. But somehow I knew they matched her lipstick.

So I said to her, “Maybe we can work something out. I don’t have to die. If you let go of my neck, I will give you my Barclays card and cash. I also have artist passes for the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim. You can have them too. Just let me keep my driver’s license and my Hellfire Club admission pass.”

“Darling,” she said, in a thick Russian accent, “you have Hellfire membership pass?” So I said, “OK, you can have that too if you want. But leave me the little blue card with the word ‘love’ printed on one side and ‘hope’ scribbled on the other, and something about having hope always—now almost illegible—because, you see, it’s from my first girlfriend in junior high school. Her name was Theresa. I’ve transferred it from wallet to wallet through the decades, as the leather stiffened and wore itself out. In good times the wallets were ostrich skin with the little round pocks at the places where feathers once were. In bad times they were made of cowhide. Once, in really bad times, I had one I’d fashioned out of black masking tape. Please, let me keep the blue card.”

She let go of the headlock and slid the wallet out of my back pocket, which is really easy since there is no button to hold the wallet in. Even if there were a button, she could have forced it open or ripped it off.

So she rummaged through the wallet—neither ostrich nor cowhide, but alligator—picked out the little blue card, stuffed the wallet temporarily into her cleavage, held the card in the thumb and forefinger of both hands, gave me a sorry sort of smile, ripped the card in half, and tossed it into the river. Blue fragments rode the waves, caressed by New York moonlight, rocking back and forth, glittering, as they floated away.

Then she rifled past the credit cards, the twenty-dollar bills, grabbed my Hellfire admission card, handed the wallet back to me, and said, “So much for nostalgia.”

She said something in Russian—*noka*, *shmolka*, or *polka*. I think it meant “good-bye.”

*

20. THE FUTURE

Of course the coffee was cold, sitting there on the kitchen counter, after the taxi door closed. I wondered, “How many kitchen cups has this counter counted?” I searched sincerely for definitions, like the definition of “counter,” and “kitchen.” I paged through the dictionary for the meaning of “ceiling,” since it was right above the counter. I did the same for “cup.” I looked out the window for other possibilities, but I was mostly looking for something I could not find inside or outside the window. I was looking for the definition of “over.” I am sorry, but I cannot come to terms with those two syllables even though you repeated them over and over again. Because every time you said them—o followed by *ver*—the two syllables coupled together, just like us. Otherwise they wouldn’t have made any sense.

Walking on sidewalks still frozen with snow, I hear the slush slosh. What a fucking winter it’s been. And since all this is science fiction anyway, I am going to claim that this is the winter of 2115. I must be dead by now, since almost no one lives to be over a hundred, but at least—despite climate change—snow is still falling, though now it is cerulean. I am not sure what chemicals in the atmosphere have caused it to become this color, but it is quite beautiful actually. Our footprints in the snow, way





back on that Saturday afternoon in the twenty-first century, have long melted away. The sun has come out again and again after a thousand snowstorms since the one in '15. Other humans have stamped ambiguous messages in snow, ice, slush, and summer mud, all saying at least, "I am with you, and you with me, because here are our footsteps."

I reminisce. I am not sorry for my friend U because U is OK. Her (that is truly a typo: I meant to write "he") is simply happy as we play together in the orchards of my mind. It's just that when U walks around in snow now—no footsteps.

But wait a minute! He never made impressions in the snow. No need for proof that he was here. He simply was—when I wanted to play, always when I needed him. And not only in winter. Bare feet on summer mornings make impressions in dew, and leaves crackle underfoot on autumn afternoons. He was himself, only an impression.

If U could make footsteps in the snow, his prints would be small, because he never grew up. He is still only four. But now, in 2115, all the footprints are adult. Thinking it cost-effective for people to begin as adults, they found ways around childhood. Brain implants and steroids and gene transplants—stuff like that. We don't really know who "they" were, but judging by the evidence, they too must have been grown-ups from the start.

That's what's so funny about the future. We thought it would be really different, with flying cars and no need for zippers, buttons, or Velcro because pants would appear when you wanted them to—tight or baggy, take your pick. Same with shirts, belts, panties, and hats. But in 2115, automobiles still roll around on the ground, though most of them are electric. And there are a lot more rowboats everywhere. Other than that, not much has changed. I guess people are smoking pot and not so many cigarettes, and there is still a United States of America. We can spin

that however we want. But I am not about to yodel “The Star Spangled Banner” anytime soon.

Instead, I will sing a love song to you. I will sing my fucking heart out, whether it be a low C, a middle C, or a high. Then maybe I’ll make up a melody, add a few more notes and some lyrics. Perhaps they’ll rhyme and keep us innocent.

What happened with that semiautomatic? Well, honestly, I don’t remember if I told you, but I did find an appropriate round, in an antiques shop in the town of Accord. A big bear of a guy named Ron, for whom I’ve always felt affection, gave it to me. He told me it had been fished from the *Lusitania*, the ship that sank on May 7, 1915, during a run from New York to Liverpool, when it encountered a German U-boat eleven miles off the coast of Ireland. Over twelve hundred people died, including Alfred Vanderbilt and Hugh Lane, an art collector who was carrying paintings by Monet and Rembrandt. The *Lusitania* was also carrying thousands of rounds of ammunition, including the round my friend Ron had in his store. He had no use for it, since he didn’t have a Browning, and gave it to me for my birthday, which is, in case you are wondering, February 11.

I was playing around with the gun one Wednesday, with no intention of harming anyone, just practicing to be a cowboy, although I don’t think cowboys used Brownings. They packed Smith & Wessons, the ones you could play spin-the-barrel with. I started twirling the gun on my forefinger—the unknowing prelude to a showdown with myself at the OK Corral. It slipped off my finger and clunked into the bathtub, of all places. Unfortunately, the tub was empty. The gun banged against the dry cast iron, and, well, you can guess what happened. It went off, and that single bullet glanced around the tub—ting! ting!—then right into, well, I would like to say my heart, but it didn’t hit my heart, or my forehead, for that matter. It didn’t blow off my

balls either. It hit me in my left fucking foot. To be more specific, my left big toe.

Don't laugh. You might think this is funny, shooting myself in the foot, but when it happened, it really hurt. It didn't feel anything like a cliché.

People don't usually die of toe wounds, and I didn't either. I am still very much alive—how else could I be writing this? I don't believe in words emanating from heaven, or hell, for that matter, and I am not pretending to be a ghostwriter. It's not (of course) even 2115. It's simply now, as it has always, forever been.

Will I tiptoe out of the room—"go gently," as they say? I appreciate that you found me there, in that pool of blood spurting from a toe artery. Imagine bleeding to death that way—what would the papers say?

So there we have it, or are we almost here? I mean, imagine Mahatma Gandhi walking in on us on his way from Bombay. What would Bapu have to say about all our fucking and sucking? He was one of the good guys—I am not sure he would eradicate longing, when it lets you know that you're alive.

Well, I admit it's just one thing. There are also our cookies. The red, the blue, the yellow ones too.

So take some pills, why don't you?

Here's an ibuprofen, nothing serious. Won't lead to smack.

Here, have two. The capsules are cerulean, like snow. Hey, maybe *that's* why it's cerulean: it's laced with ibuprofen. People in the future will look forward to snowstorms because flakes will numb the pain.

"Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders. I have no mocking or arguments. I witness and wait."

We shouldn't neglect Walt's body electric, but I often forget.

Have I lost my wallet along with you? My "I" too? No, U

would know where I left it. At a restaurant? He would hurry back and look everywhere until he found it. Because he's a friend.

So what will I do? Will I hobble around forever with a toe full of pus?

Will I be able to go to the health club, lift weights, or pronounce my *L's*?

Will I finally enjoy baseball, especially the catchers with their ambiguous signs? I still find it unconstitutional to shout someone "out" as they slide slo-mo into home.

Since I first set ears on you, I loved you. Still do. Always will.

Once upon a time, when I was a kid, we tried to find a spring that was rumored to bubble out from under a rock between two trees. The problem was, there were lots of trees on the mountain because besides being a mountain it was also a forest. We climbed with our canteens as far as the crest overlooking the valley. There the stones pocked with black lichen were so large that trees could not grow and scuttle the view. You could see far and wide. It was autumn, a perfect day, and the trees in the valley dressed themselves in yellow, red, and orange. Blueberry bushes near the edge of the cliff had dropped their sweet fruit late in June. And now, months later, they were red or, better yet, a deeper shade of burgundy.

We never found the spring, but you and I rubbed shoulders there, in the fading autumn sun, on the rocks at the edge of the abyss. We hung our feet over the edge, swinging our legs back and forth together, like a pendulum or a perfect grandfather cock and a girl, marking time before the last leaf fell, early that November.

☆

21. I REALLY DON'T KNOW CLOUDS AT ALL

So that is how I found myself here, in this twenty-first century, sitting on an old wooden plank supported by a couple of stumps. The bench has no front or back, so you can decide to face one way or the other. I imagine whoever put it there intended a pond-contemplator to face the pond to confirm the facts—the various lives of newts, dragonflies, lily pads, snakes, and yellow irises that blossom at this time of year.

Orange, black, and yellow koi surface, then submarine down again, feeding on insects that visit the pond. I might say there is not a cloud in the sky, but I count three—one shaped like a tutu, another like a donut (at least until the hole fills with fluff), and the third is oblong like a cigar. (A cloud is sometimes just a cigar.) All are cumulus.

I want to join the Cloud Appreciation Society. Its headquarters are in Highgate, not far from Hampstead Heath. No storms or torpedoes predicted this afternoon, thank God.

I'd like to write a poem, but I only get as far as "rain in Spain," because I don't have a pen. I figure no matter how far I go, no matter how roundly I rhyme, within minutes I'll forget correlations, placement, order, spellings, and such. I suppose I could walk toward the house, pull open the flopping screen, and rustle the drawers under the table to look for one. But I don't want to break ranks this late afternoon. If I were you, I wouldn't either. That's the thing about us.

Let's do it again.

Instead, I try to understand where my melancholy is located, so I can put a finger on it. It's obviously inside me somewhere, but nuanced by a sunny day, apple trees, koi and a pond.

Actually, only a single apple tree remains, with no Eve in sight. From what I understand, which at this point is very little, early in the twentieth century this lawn was an orchard. The

deed says, “Orchard’s Close.” The last tree standing, with its hollow trunk, is older than me. Woodpeckers peck over its rot, feeding on insects, powderpost beetles, termites, and such.

It bore no fruit this year because its two sisters died, and it takes three to give fruit.

I can’t see the apple tree from where I am sitting, even if I turn from the pond. I do see a shagbark hickory, which is rumored to waltz during moons that are full. I don’t know who came up with that story, perhaps an old Mohawk who inhabited these woods. Matilda, a real estate agent, relayed it to me. Of course I didn’t believe her. This is the twenty-first century. It’s been like this for years.

I bought the house anyway.

Not speaking of that, you remember the yacht? What a trip it was! I was paranoid that a lingering cough would turn to bronchitis. Hey, what rhymes with “boat”? “Float.” Is that a coincidence? Are phonetics significant?

I don’t want to waste time on philosophy just now simply because I thought I was going to die of pneumonia while riding around a dead volcano christened Capri.

Shortly after we arrived back in the USA, we went through customs and declared your sandals, because I didn’t want them grabbed from your toes. We taxied to separate enclaves in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Happily, I’m alive, my cough almost gone, though not quite. You have your sandals still, I assume.

Of course, there’s room on this bench for you. After all, that was only a couple of days ago. I remember everything explicitly.

Earlier today I lay on the lawn, sunning myself while the shadows grew longer than midday. Sunlight is free—no charge for electricity.

The grass is high. Bob hasn’t mowed the slope that falls to the forest. It is foggy below. I walk toward the apple tree and

there see a furry brown lump, with spots, nestled in the grass. I move quietly. I see her breathing, and I know the warmth of this fawn is outside me, with a life of her own. How else can I keep my sanity? For a second, I feel my throat tickle and try to suppress it. I swallow saliva, but inevitably I cough. Ears perk. Her head turns. "I'm afraid," I say to myself as she bounds away on dancy legs. Beautiful white dapples bounce again and again, far off then, down to the mist.

*

Then a funny thing happens on the way to the bodega.

It's snowing still and chilly. I wear a black-and-white tweed jacket and flip flops, underdressed for this clime. Walking What's down Sullivan, past an antique store that sells chaps and old popsicles, I encounter a disheveled white-haired but otherwise fine-looking gentleman crouched on the sidewalk, shivering. His knees are tucked close to his chest. As I hand him a dollar I've pulled from my pocket, he mumbles something unintelligible.

I stop, turn to face him, and ask him to repeat what he said. I think it was something about What's, because my dog usually evokes comments of joy, and questions of name, sex, and age. Strangers never ask me my age. Consequently, I lie about the facts, just for the hell of it. No matter how I respond, like "My dog is sixty-four and his name is Adolf Ringo-David—after the shepherd boy who slew Goliath and became king," people believe me. I know—it's incredible. Sometimes I even call him Deirdre, after my first wife.

This time he utters more clearly, "Hey, Ghostman, walking his cute little pup up Sullivan . . ."

I am annoyed by his comment. For once I tell the truth and reply, "It's *down* Sullivan not *up*, and What's ain't no pup no more. He's almost four."

I turn and walk west toward the river. Snow doesn't accumulate, so there's no record, however brief, of my passing.

Violent streetlights with loose connections blink as blazing snowflakes circle my head bizarrely. White socks and blue polka dots aren't practical tonight—particularly just with these flip flops.

5 4 3 2 1 . . .

Shiver our tender kin's times.

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