

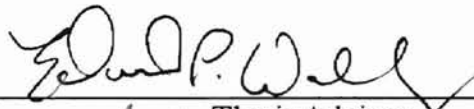
*NO GIRLS ALLOWED: A NOVEL*  
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

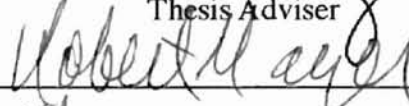
By  
JOHN W. STEINBRINK  
Bachelor of Arts  
Baylor University  
1996

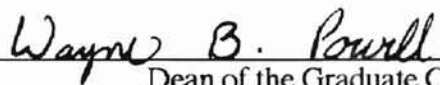
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Thesis Approved:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Adviser

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Robert H. Meyer for Brian Evenson

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of the Graduate College

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### *No Girls Allowed: A Critical Introduction*

Questions of genre can be slippery, even somewhat arbitrary. As soon as a definition is offered, invariably someone sets out to offer an exception to the “rule,” and the game begins again. Terms such as “novel” and “novella” and “postmodern” are used so often, sometimes carelessly, that they can cease to function as guides. Length should not ultimately be the determining factor in distinguishing between a novel and a novella. Although I clearly set out to write a “short novel” when I began writing *No Girls Allowed*, I feel the need first to go about the murky task of distinguishing between my “short novel” project and idea of the novel, and that of the novella. I also plan to discuss how the different parts of my manuscript work together to achieve what I hope is an accessible, comic postmodern novel. In addition to defining some key terms, I will discuss the importance of place and the connection of place to my narrator, Alex’s “code,” the way intertextuality informs Alex’s consciousness, and the way “play” in the Derridean sense is important.

In composing *No Girls Allowed*, I set out to write a “short” novel, a modifier that requires some explanation. Howard Nemerov argues that “A short novel is something in itself, neither a lengthily written short story nor the refurbished attempt at a novel sent out into the world with its hat clapped on at the eightieth page” (120). Nemerov goes on to explain that the difference between a short story or a novella and a short novel is one of “depth,” meaning that the short novel takes on a larger scope than a short story or novella, and in a way attempts to reflect “the whole of life” (123). In the case of my narrator, depth includes a glimpse into Alex’s world— meeting Sarah at the mall, going to baseball games at the Astrodome with his friends, his interaction at home with his

parents— as well as the accumulation of a narrative with more range than a short story or novella. The first chapter, “Barbie Dolls and Liars,” can stand alone as a story, but certainly becomes more interesting with Alex’s quest to retrieve his Adidas T-shirt despite encounters with doubles and ghosts, and distractions like smoking pot for hours at a stretch with his friend Tommy. Nemerov mentions Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes From Underground* as an example of the short novel, and another significant model might include Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, despite the periodic unfortunate labelling of the latter as a novella.

A long short story does not simply become a novella— and that term is too easily thrown around in contemporary fiction. Joseph Gibaldi differentiates the novella from the short story by describing characteristics unique to the novella, including “the encyclopedic eclecticism of the novelist, and the genre’s ideal of brevity with all of its accompanying consequences” (94). Though Gibaldi probably relies too heavily on historical forms and references, these descriptors offer some help in drawing another distinction between the novella and the short novel. A novella, as Gibaldi describes it, does not seek to reflect “the whole of life.” The length and depth of a novella go further than the modern short story, though as Gibaldi points out, characters within the novella are (to use Forster’s term) “flat,” or “constructed around a single idea or quality” (96). While the relative “flatness” of Gustav Aschenbach, for example, could be debated, “Death in Venice” adheres nicely to Gibaldi’s description. In Mann’s novella the death of a famous writer happens in an increasingly strange city, as Aschenbach’s obsession with the youth Tadzio becomes increasingly acute. Mann employs some novelistic devices in the telling of this single event.

Despite the problem of using length as a primary criteria, critics such as the novelist E.M. Forster have allowed themselves to reduce genre differences to a word count. In

*Aspects of the Novel*, Forster relies on the French critic M. Abel Chevalley for a definition of the novel, calling the novel “a fiction in prose of a certain extent,” but adds that the “extent should not be less than 50,000 words” (5-6). This definition, which Forster admits is “amorphous,” like the form of the novel itself, takes into account the scope of the novel as a genre. Forster uses *Moby Dick* and *Ulysses* as examples of this “formidable mass.” In addition to the obvious requirement of length, the novel differentiates itself from the short novel by taking on a larger breadth and scope. The confession of Dostevsky’s *Underground Man* employs novelistic devices, but his story does not take on the scope of Raskolnikov’s, with more characters to interact with, possible changes in point of view away from the primary hero, subplots, and a larger view of the world. The short novel is a singular narrative, the story of one primary protagonist.

I hesitate to call *No Girls Allowed* a *bildungsroman*, or novel of education, simply because of the narrator’s age and status as a college dropout, though a *bildungsroman* does not necessarily have to be about education (i.e. *Huckleberry Finn*). However, I see that my novel does work as a novel of education, in that Alex probably learns something about himself and the world. But there is a more accurate way to describe my novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes *Notes from Underground* as a confessional *Ich-Erzählung* (first-person narration), “not a personal document but a work of art” (227). Bakhtin explains that the confession of the *Underground Man* is addressed to another, “with whom the hero, from the very first step, enters into the most intense internal polemic” (228). This is also the way the narrative voice of my novel works. Like the *Underground Man*, Alex is addressing a reader and trying to make them believe his story, which he admits has some holes and

some things that may be “hard to believe.” In this way my narrator also resembles Humbert Humbert— though Alex assumes (probably mistakenly) readers to be on his side. Alex does not share Humbert’s poetic, baroque voice, given to puns, allusions, and language games; but instead he uses the tropes of a teenager, combined with the wit of a young person who is literate in an increasingly illiterate society. The confessional nature of the narrative and the narrator’s gleeful attitude towards bad behavior produce a kind of black comedy that is present from the first line of the novel. So although I choose to describe *No Girls Allowed* as a postmodern work of fiction, that claim has more to do with Alex’s treatment of the whole of Western culture as an interactive text, there for his amusement. The way the narrative itself functions as an *Ich-Erzählung* actually places it closer to the Modernist modes of fiction, closer to the likes of Dostoevsky.

In the case of my novel, the course of the narrative is meant to represent an important episode of several lives (though admittedly more important to the narrator than other characters), delivered by a single narrator over the course of one summer in Houston, Texas. *No Girls Allowed* is a comic postmodern novel, and the form shrinks from any final epiphany; it offers instead attempts at a kind of deeper, comedic knowledge of dread, or the way things are. The black humor that is present from the first line of the novel informs the narrator’s world and places this work in the tradition of what Ronald Wallace calls the American comic novel: “Faced with a world in which the grotesque, the trivial, and the preposterous seem to rule, novelists like John Barth, John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabokov, Ken Kesey, Robert Coover, and others affirm laughter as a weapon against defeat and despair” (Wallace 2). Like Humbert Humbert, Alex’s position as the teller of this story where his identity and hold on events is in flux creates a comic



tension that resonates through the narrative. In the opening chapter, Alex claims to be a fantastic liar. While this may be accurate, it also sounds like boasting from a narrator who feels the need to color events— to the extent that Alex’s point of view must be constantly measured against the events of the narrative. Humbert’s poetic, slippery voice is meant to disguise him as a pedophile and murderer, and Alex’s profane, suburban brat posturing is a mask for his fear of becoming an adult and having to face his own mortality.

To an extent, the novel is also about failure. The narrator, Alex, is a wounded-rebel-intellectual who has dropped out of the University of Texas in Austin and returned home to Houston; although, the extent to which he is “wounded” or “sick” remains somewhat mysterious and difficult to determine. A brief affair with Sarah, a peripheral friend from childhood, leaves him conflicted. He is lost, and sees himself as being more radical than indeed he is. Though he spends time on a skateboard, he is not really a “hard-core” skater, as such, and though he plays at being a suburban philosopher, his narcissism and laziness get in the way of his doing any real work— and that is the way he prefers it. Alex is perceptive and thoughtful, but he can also be cruel and destructive, and so can his friends. While I realize that some readers will identify me with Alex simply because the novel employs first-person narration, I would like to take the time to distance myself from Alex’s attitudes toward women, and that of his friends. While I know people (as I’m sure most people do) who act badly, even destructively, I neither condone nor identify with these tendencies. Having said that, I still hope Alex can retain the interest, and possibly sympathy for Alex’s sense of loss, of readers long enough for them to make it to the end of the novel.

Alex is obsessed with something irretrievable; a sense of doubt and anxiety permeate

the novel, and de-center the narrative. At the end of the first chapter Alex resolves to retrieve a T-shirt Sarah has “stolen,” and this becomes the primary impetus for the narrative. Although Alex seeks to “actively engage the world,” as the narrator of this story his “identity has become as uncertain as everything else” (Bertens 65). This de-centering of identity is an important part of postmodern fiction, according to Hans Bertens, especially as it emerged in the 1970’s. Bertens views Nietzsche’s and (later) Ihab Hassan’s view of identity of the self as an empty place where many “selves” mingle and depart (65). This view of identity certainly fits Alex. Although he feels more comfortable within the suburban sanctuary of his parents’ house, Alex recognizes how unhealthy it is to withdraw from the world, and so he pushes himself to go to the Astrodome, the mall— or even to a bar or his friend Tommy’s house to get stoned. His inclination is to withdraw from the world, but unlike Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man*, he tries to work against that desire to retreat, and that leads to a series of episodes, during which Alex obsesses about Sarah and even sees “ghosts” or doubles he mistakes for her. As a chapter title suggests, Alex is “Going Nowhere on Fourteen Hours of Sleep.”

This doubt and anxiety— about the future, something lost that can not be retrieved— result in Alex’s privileging the “old school” Adidas brand as a depository of “meaning.” In fact, Alex spends most of the novel in search of his lost Adidas T-shirt, and of course, he is also looking for something in Sarah. The comic implications of this consumerism and brand-name worship as reasons for nostalgic longing call “meaning” and its progressive Enlightenment satellites into doubt. Like a realization of Jean Baudrillard’s claim that partly due to television, “We are no longer in the society of spectacle which the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and

repression which this implied,” Alex reads all of Western culture as a set of texts, where consumerism and apathy, cartoons and literature, high and low culture, exist simultaneously (365). The search for Sarah and what this means become lost in mirrors and television commercials, in *Baywatch* and Martin Heidegger. In an essay on Baudrillard and the impact of postmodernism on Sociology, Bryan S. Turner discusses the “endless spectacle of promises” present in late capitalism (75). Turner points out Baudrillard’s turn away from any “serious” study of culture or Sociology for a celebration of “the trivia relations in late capitalism” (75). This is Alex’s fascination as well: The minutia of popular culture exists on the same plane with everything else. Hanging onto a T-shirt that advertises a particular brand name for “sentimental” reasons, which opens the way to a particular line of nostalgia, provides a crucial key for the comedy of the novel and the way this novel is a postmodern text.

Although *No Girls Allowed* functions on the surface as a first-person confession in the Modernist mode, the narrator’s view of the world is crucial to seeing the novel ultimately as a work of postmodern fiction. As Hassan and Bertens describe the Deconstructionist’s concept of a decentered world, a postmodern text is “governed by a radical epistemological and ontological doubt” (Bertens 45). The absurdity of a brand name as a symbol, as a metaphor for lost childhood and the knowledge of mortality, mocks notions of *episteme* and the move toward totalizing in any sense. Alex’s “development” remains paralyzed, as he refuses to let go of his childhood, and even as his friends struggle with the same issues. His obsession with the Adidas logo as a representation of part of his childhood, of memories playing sports and developing a loyalty for Houston sports teams, coincides with his obsession with Sarah and the ghosts or doubles that recur through the novel. Alex has accepted the void, but can not find a way to deal with that emptiness.

Alex's references to Nietzsche are playful, but the notion of some kind of crisis that can not quite come to the fore is betrayed in Alex's obsessions with beauty, sight, and television, as well as in his preoccupation with youth and childhood. For Nietzsche, "The Apollonian need for beauty had to develop the Olympian hierarchy of joy by slow degrees from the original titanic hierarchy of terror, as roses are seen to break from a thorny thicket" (422). Though Alex can watch things (TV, his neighbors) from the suburban comfort and distance of his parents' livingroom, this also leaves him cut off from the world. Nietzsche's dictum that Western culture was coming to an end a century ago colors the way Alex views the world and himself, as does Nietzsche's conflicted position: To be an affirmer or a denier? Nietzsche was never clearly one or the other, and neither is Alex: "Always already, the Dionysiac rewrites the Apollonian, the two caught in a dialectic at the heartland of culture" (Edwards 19). Alex is also caught in this dialectic with himself. Should he return to the University of Texas and get his degree, maybe even continue on to graduate school, or should he continue to drift, aimlessly and pleasantly, until something forces him to act? The problem is that Nietzsche did joyously affirm *play* and the innocence of becoming, and play in this sense, and as Derrida continued to define it, are important to *No Girls Allowed* (Edwards 17). But Alex still doesn't know what or even *how* he will become (something), only that he is enjoying this period of stasis. It is this innocence, an acceptance of chaos and flux, that Alex wants to keep, no matter the consequences.

As so many critics, from Roland Barthes and Hassan to Jonathan Culler and Allan Megill, have observed, Derrida continued Nietzsche's project, and that is significant for the conceptualization of my novel. The combination of allusions to modern and classical thinkers, as well as cartoon characters and elements of popular culture, work

together as part of Alex's dialectic with the reader and with himself. The Derridean notion of freeplay allows the text to function as a whole where the various elements exist simultaneously: "This field is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble" (Derrida 886). For Alex, questions of quality, truth, and beauty, become mixed up in the telling of this episode in his life, and in trying to decide who he is, or what he will become, though the implication is that he will continually be in the stage of becoming. In a chapter entitled "I Hate Plato," while going through the motions of applying for a job at a bookstore, Alex unleashes a tirade on an unsuspecting older woman about the way Plato "polluted" Western thought; and in another chapter he speculates about his reasons for watching TV shows like *Baywatch*. In *No Girls Allowed*, freeplay occasionally takes the form of a somewhat vulgar rant on the part of the narrator. Derrida's notion of freeplay and the presence/absence of Nietzsche within the narrative inform Alex's consciousness, hovering in the background of the story. However, the language and progression of events are accessible and funny, I hope, and despite Alex's sightings of ghosts and doubles, the world of Houston, Texas is meant to be somewhat realistic and recognizable: the setting is *Alex's* Houston.

*No Girls Allowed* is a hot novel, set in the summertime of Houston. Alex is constantly concerned with the heat, sweating, and the possibility of going for a swim. A connection to the city of Houston is crucial to understanding the narrator, his relationship with his two best friends, and the code of loyalty that Alex alludes to. In *Narratology*, Mieke Bal contends that "The semantic content of spatial aspects may be constructed in the same way as the semantic content of a character" (95). Bal contends that when an event is placed in a real city, the reader's frame of reference is important.

So a reader who is familiar with Houston will get more from the descriptions of place (despite the liberties I take with geography), as a reader of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* who knows Dublin will visualize more “precise images” (Bal 95). Bal also argues that spaces, or places, in a story can function in two ways: They are a frame, which usually leads to detailed descriptions of the space; or the space remains entirely in the background (95). In Alex’s narrative, the city of Houston comes in and out of focus but is constantly present in one way or another. Houston exists as a place of action—or at least, the action of the narrative Alex is telling, with occasional digressions back to events in Austin. But space also holds an emotional connection for Alex. He grew up in Houston, and his feelings for the city are directly linked to his relationships with his friends.

This attachment to Houston also has a lot to do with sports. Alex’s friend Sean is an intensely loyal Houston sports fan— supporting the Astros, the Rockets, and even (before they became the Tennessee Titans) the Oilers. Alex, along with his friend Kevin, see their loyalty to each other in part through this loyalty to various sports teams. This is dramatized in the second chapter, “It’s All About Loyalty, Chief,” in which Alex and his two friends are ultimately ejected from an Astros game at the Astrodome, in the next to last season for that “Eighth Wonder” of the world. Alex spends some time lamenting the possible loss of the Astrodome, another part of his childhood doomed to pass away. Sean is known for his hot temper, especially where it concerns Houston sports teams, and Kevin, though outwardly more reserved, is lost and angry on his own, without the doomed pathos of cheering for teams which, with the exception of the Rockets, seem destined to lose. These three post-adolescents, who have been friends since kindergarten, value their friendship and loyalty to one another, at least in part

because their friendship is one of the only things they can count on as stable and constant.

Holden Caulfield, on the other hand, relies on his relationships with his siblings. Undoubtedly, there are similarities between Alex and Holden that transcend the “loser” stigma, and comparisons between *No Girls Allowed* and *The Catcher in the Rye* are almost unavoidable. I suppose Alex is somewhat quixotic. Like Holden, Alex is “in flight from mendacity rather than in search of truth, and his sensitivity to the failures of the world is compounded with his self-disgust” (Hassan 272). Alex does not hesitate to express his disgust with people and the world, and this disgust is part of the reason for his retreat to his parents’ house, and his nostalgia for childhood. Also, there are self-referential “I mean” constructions, as well as other colloquialisms that are typical of people Alex’s age. Alex also has a propensity for profanity. This was a conscious decision on my part, because I wanted the narrator not only to speak like someone his age, but to evoke through language the persona of a street-smart post-adolescent with a hint of rage behind everything. Alex and his friends can become belligerent quickly. I am sure the language will offend some readers, but I think for a work of fiction to have any kind of real effect on a general readership, it becomes necessary for some to hate it.

The possibility for unreliability coupled with questions of “sanity” are also similarities between Alex and Holden— though Alex takes great offense at being labeled “crazy” and at the same time delights in the prospect of being able to act childishly (the scene at the doctor’s office in chapter one is an example) with few or no repercussions. Holden is constantly saying “I swear to God I’m crazy,” which helps us to believe that the world is crazy, and not him (Hassan 275). Alex, on the other hand, is usually offended when anyone but Sean labels him as “crazy.” He realizes, and even revels in, his

inability to “act normal,” and at times works to accentuate his otherness, something he has done since childhood. Hassan describes Holden’s enclosed narrative and point of view as “radical innocence,” and within *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger is able to present a virtuosic inside view of naivete (Stevick 85-6). This “radical innocence” is the primary similarity between Salinger’s famous narrator, and mine. In *No Girls Allowed*, Alex is attempting to sort out the postmodern condition: “The great gap in human knowledge to which science cannot address itself by the very nature of the scientific method is, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, nothing less than this: What it is like to be an individual, to be born, live, and die in the twentieth century” (Percy 151). Crisis is unavoidable. But while most of the evidence points to Alex’s relative mental health, the inability to quantify that assertion remains at the heart of the narrative and one of the central games at work within the text. Alex never reveals the extent to which there actually is or is not something wrong with him.

While Holden is in flight from the “phoniness” of the world and can not really deal with feelings of sexual love, Alex embraces this “truth” of sexuality from the first line and paradoxically delights in and recoils from this knowledge about the way things are. Alex sees most everything and everyone as “empty;” he admires and hates this trait in Sarah. People at the mall and on television are “empty,” and yet at one point he admits his addiction to *Baywatch*. Alex is lost and going nowhere, but sees this as a natural state. He sees the self, in a Nietzschean turn of subjectivity, as “‘an empty ‘place’ where many selves come to mingle and depart’” (qtd. in Bertens 65). The world is chaotic, constantly at play, and identity and sexuality work this way, as well. When Alex catches some neighbors having sex late at night in their pool, he is disgusted and intrigued. He admits that “only a pervert like me would keep watching,” and yet he



rummages around to find some binoculars to get a better view. He delights in the contradiction.

The structure of my short novel seeks to afford the narrator emotional range and complexity. Though there is a certain amount of rage and displacement behind Alex's voice, there is also room for different emotions. Alex's interactions with his parents reveal some of this emotional complexity, and help to make him more sympathetic. These interactions help to make him a more rounded character and not just a misbehaved college dropout. Alex is also capable of introspection, and he is certainly self-aware. He is not "all self-consciousness," although he does at times feel plagued with his own consciousness, like the Underground Man (Bakhtin 51). Alex's point of view is crucial to the way the novel works. In discussing the way the "hero" functions in Dostoevsky's work, Bakhtin contends that "the hero interests Dostoevsky as a particular point of view on the world and on oneself, as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality" (47). The form of this short novel is meant to give the narrator some depth that could not be achieved with a short story or even a novella, and I think this depth saves Alex from charges of solipsism. Alex is a well-read, spoiled suburban brat. The time of the narrative, and his relationship with Sarah, represent both an ending and a beginning. He does not want childhood to end, nor does he want to become an adult. The contradictions here, and the obsessive way Alex deals with and describes himself and his environment, add an immediacy to his voice that remains constant throughout the novel.

The potential success of the novel rests on the strength of Alex's narrative voice to hold the reader's attention and tell the story of his summer with and without Sarah. Obviously, Alex is not meant to represent a broad spectrum of the American public,

though his position as a suburban dissident affords him a certain amount of accessibility and latitude. I hope readers will find something of themselves in him and in his story, a lie compelling enough to hold their attention. Alex's ability to dissect the media-saturated culture, to be completely obsessed with one person (or idea, or idea of a person), to act old for his age or like a precocious ten-year-old, his mysterious "sickness," along with the way different threads of the story and Alex's telling of it come together, are enough to propel the reader to the final page. But along with these things, I suppose the same charges critics hurl at Nabokov (or Salinger) could apply to this work: an obsession with games, an inability to confront social problems, a preoccupation with beauty, a morbid attachment to childhood. In the end though, in light of possible shortcomings, my goal with this novel was to take back some of the space currently occupied by terrorists and rock stars. As Bill Gray, the reclusive writer in Don DeLillo's novel *Mao II*, claims:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we became famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence.... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (41)

I wanted to write a dangerous novel, a novel that makes people laugh and makes them angry, too. It may be romantic or antiquated, but I still want to alter the culture with language and laughter.

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## *No Girls Allowed*

### Ch. 1: Barbie Dolls and Liars

I can't believe I fucked a Republican. One minute we were sitting in my livingroom, watching TV, and she was talking about Jack Kemp, enterprise zones, family values, and a lot of bullshit she must've picked up in some right-wing political science class, and then all of a sudden her shirt's on the floor, her bra's draped at the foot of the stairs, and her jeans and panties are parked on my bedroom floor. We barely even made it to my bedroom. It was a damn good thing my parents weren't home.

I'm living at home right now, but only because I'm seriously ill. I absolutely could not make it to class in Austin, and I thought I must be allergic to something, so I withdrew from school and came home. My genius doctor first said yes, it was allergies; then no, it might be mono; then wait, it could be a rare sleeping disorder of some kind or another; now we're back to mono again. He actually asked me if I was faking just so I could come home. What an asshole. This guy's been my family's doctor for a long time, but I'm thinking about going to somebody else. There are plenty of doctors in Houston, for chrissake.

This girl — I just don't know what the hell to think. She was all over me in the living room, and we almost fell down the stairs twice on the way up. Her dad has always been this rabid conservative whacko with a reputation for browbeating his neighbors, but I couldn't remember her ever saying anything about politics. Who could tell that a Republican would get naked that fast? So much for family values.

It's funny, because the reason I first liked her, other than her Barbie Doll good looks, was her little girl vulnerability. She has this thing she does with her eyes that makes her

look so young and innocent; it'll just make you want to protect her from the big bad world and fuck her brains out all at the same time. But she's obviously not that innocent, and she's not just a dumb blonde. I mean, I know she gets good grades, but she's not really a thinker. She never wants to know *why* things happened, or questions *why* her parents believe something. She's too accepting. That's one of the ways we're not compatible, because I think too much. I remember in junior high once she bragged about forgetting everything after making a perfect score on some science test. That kind of shit drives me insane.

And she keeps telling me how "unique" I am, which I think just means that some part of her realizes I don't give a shit about much. But she also knows a lot of stuff about me, stuff that most people would probably think is kind of weird. Like when we were in fifth grade and Ronald Reagan was running for president, I camped out in my back yard for almost a week until my parents promised not to vote for him. It's not that I was all that politically informed (then or now), but I had just written this big report about solar energy and I heard some stuff on "Good Morning America" about Reagan thinking solar power was a bad idea. I was one stubborn little kid, and I had decided that solar power was my cause, at least for a couple of weeks. I told my parents I was going to live in a tent in the back yard until they promised not to vote for Ronald Reagan. Of course, after a week of bringing my supper out to me and practically begging me to come in the house and take showers, my parents caved and promised not to vote for him. I think they were also a little worried about what the neighbors would say if I stayed out there much longer. Now that I think about it, they might have told me they didn't vote for him just to get me to come inside; I have no way of knowing.

But I know my parents: there's no way they could lie about that. All my friends at the

time thought it was really funny (and still do), and they talked about it at school all the time. Of course Sarah remembers it, and keeps telling me I'm "unique" and a "rugged individualist," which is just more of the hangover from that political science class, or possibly from a Republican boyfriend. There are a lot of them around, after all. Republicans, I mean.

I'm not sure what Sarah sees in me. I really don't know why she likes me. Maybe I'm some kind of rebellion for her; I don't know. I think most of her boyfriends have been preppy, conservative, future lawyer or accountant types. I'm not sure what "type" I am, or what kind of future will eventually roll out in front of me, or if I'll ever even succeed at anything. But one thing I do know is that I'll never end up with a girl like Sarah: this is just temporary. I just don't have it in me. She's too demanding. But don't take my word for it. Let me tell the story of how we hooked up. We never went out in high school or anything, but I was home for the weekend earlier in the fall because a friend of mine was having a party. Tommy's parents had gone to Europe for a month, and he was determined to live it up while they were gone. Now I should tell you, my friend Tommy is a complete fuck-up: he goes to the University of Houston when he feels like it or when he's not too stoned, or if his parents are bitching at him to get up and do something. He lived in an apartment for a semester and damn near flunked out because he spent more time smoking pot and playing Nintendo than going to school, so his parents made him move home; and for a month while his parents were gone, his house was a cool place to hang out.

The first weekend his parents were gone, that's when Tommy decided to go all out and have this huge party. I guess he thought that he would get it out of his system right away. My roommates when I was at the University of Texas (friends

since the first grade), Sean and Kevin, came home to Houston with me for the weekend, and we all pitched in to buy two kegs. Anyway, I was at Tommy's house, nice and drunk, and Sarah shows up with this friend of hers. I can't remember her friend's name. But somehow we started having that drunk religion conversation people have along the way to eventually passing out on someone's bathroom floor. At least, that's how it happens for me. Well, we started having this conversation, and this little fuck named Kenny, who has bugged me since we were little kids and I had to listen to him try to read out loud in Mrs. Kavener's class, starts quoting Nietzsche— which really pissed me off for some reason, even though I agree with most of what Nietzsche says. But I had to contradict Kenny because he's one of those guys who will start a conversation like this to prove to everyone that he's really not an idiot. So I came back with Kierkegaard: that you have to take a leap of faith toward God for your life to have meaning; that truth is subjectivity; all that shit— and I think at some point I even started quoting U2 lyrics, but the last bit of it's kind of fuzzy.

Anyway, while I was working myself up into this semi-coherent frenzy, everyone there starts gathering around, and they let out something like a cheer after I finished. Kenny ended up looking like a nihilistic dickhead, which was the desired effect. I clearly remember this: When I stopped talking, I looked over at Sarah, and she was just smiling at me. But it was more than a smile. It was, like, an invitation. So I walked over and started talking to her. I have no idea what either one of us said— which has been a problem because she keeps talking about that conversation.

So, it's easy to guess what happened after that. I actually drove home, and then it all happened. But now comes the tough part of this story. I mean, she obviously went for me because of this delusion that I was some kind of Christian philosopher rebel



conservative kid amidst the unruly, liberal, pagan rabble of University of Texas undergrads, or something. I had to explain myself. It's not like I planned to lie or anything. I just went off on Kenny at that party because he's an annoying little fuck and I was drunk enough to ramble on about some stuff I know about and make it somehow sound coherent, or at least make it sound coherent to a bunch of drunk idiots at a party. I had to tell Sarah I was just a lazy, spoiled asshole (also an accurate description of my friends)— and I had to do it fast, because she wanted me to go to church with her. I thought maybe I could scare her off if I could just get her to hang around with my friends for a while, even if it meant dragging her to Austin, because I doubt I could pull any of my friends away from Sixth Street without some kind of lure, even though now might be a good time for them to take a little break from that particular part of Austin.

A couple of weeks ago, my friend Kevin was so drunk in Molly Murphy's or Emoe's on Sixth Street (I forget which one) that he actually beat up a guy in a wheelchair. He was hitting on some girl, grabbing her ass and stuff; she pushed him away, Kevin wouldn't leave her alone, and this guy in a wheelchair tried to come to her rescue. Big mistake. Kevin beat the shit out of the guy. He just started pounding on him right there. Kevin told me he feels bad about it, but what kind of person does that? Kevin is a horrible person, a borderline sociopath and a complete shithead. But he's one of my best friends. I thought if I could get Sarah to hang around with Kevin and Sean and some of my other friends, then I could avoid some kind of emotional scene and she'd just be naturally horrified by my friends. Hell, I'm horrified part of the time myself.

Eventually, though, I decided on Baybrook Mall. Malls annoy me, but I figured she would never make a scene in a place as public as the fucking mall. I figured there would be enough people around so that when I rolled out the truth for Sarah, she couldn't start

crying and screaming or anything without causing a major scene, and I doubted she would do that, anyway. She just didn't seem like the melodramatic type. I told her to meet me near the food court— which I guess was a little underhanded, because it sounded like the setting for a date. I had no intention of spending any money. There was the usual mix of yuppies, skater kids, gang members, and white trash, like they're all milling around, waiting backstage for Jerry Springer. Somebody should castrate that guy. Man, would I love to see that.

Sarah was already there waiting when I showed up, standing away from all the little food booths, looking pretty and conservative in some khaki shorts, a blue blouse and white Keds without socks. She had her arms folded across her chest, and I noticed how tan her legs already were. It suddenly occurred to me how ratty I looked. I had on this stretched out Houston Rockets T-shirt I had worn for years to surf in and to the pool; some faded, ripped denim shorts that hung down to my knees; and some old blue and black Vans. My left shoe had a noticeable hole in it, and I couldn't remember if I had showered that day. I was wondering why I was so anxious to get away from this girl, and then she saw me. She smiled and got this excited look in her eyes as I walked over toward her with my hands in my pockets.

Hey, I said and she said Hey, Alex, and touched my arm. I could smell her perfume and I froze for a second. She had this beautiful, naughty look in her eyes when she talked to me. I had forgotten all about that.

Let's take a walk, I said. We made our way past some Hispanic, fifteen-year-old gangbangers until we got to the fountain, and I thought that would be a good place to talk. The unnaturally blue water made a rushing sound, so our conversation would be drowned. I said, The thing is, I'm not who you think I am. This got her attention. She looked scared.

I mean, the thing is, I'm not a conservative, or even a Christian, I said. I really don't give a shit about politics, and I don't really even know what I believe about God and religion and all that stuff— except that I'm not a Christian. I'm into philosophy, because I think it's interesting. It was my major. But I don't really... believe in anything.

But this is the weird part, because she got this relieved look on her face.

Thank god, she said.

What? I said.

Well, I was just pretending, because after the party, I thought you were really into all that crap, she said.

But why did you pretend? I was stunned.

Because you were cute. Are cute. You're still cute. She did that thing with her eyes again.

Jesus, I said.

Yea, she said.

So we're both a couple of liars, I said. I already knew I was a liar. She just smiled, and we sat there for a while.

So Sarah and I were "dating," or "seeing each other," or whatever cliché people want to attach to trying to figure out places to fuck and not get caught. We actually ended up almost doing it once at her house while both of her parents were home. It just kind of happened. It was this really hot June afternoon and we were up in her room listening to the Cure and looking through the yearbook from our senior year, making fun of everyone. We were sitting on the floor and kept touching each other, just kind of brushing up against one another, and then we started wrestling. We rolled around once,

then I pinned her wrists to the floor and she stopped giggling. She looked right up at me, panting and staring with her yellow hair spilled out behind her head. I was breathing hard, too.

I dare you to fuck me, she said. She gave me this empty, dangerous look.

Jesus, I said. Your parents could walk in. They'll hear us.

We'll be quiet, she said. I started kissing her and she rolled over on top of me and took off her shirt. She unfastened her bra and threw it across the room. I pulled off my shirt. She put her hands on my chest so she could feel my heart racing like a fucking madman— and that's when her mother walked in. So I guess we didn't actually make it very far. But man, her mom was pissed. She started screaming at Sarah to put her clothes back on, and needless to say I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

Sarah's dad happens to be a member of the NRA, and I wasn't going to sit around and wait to be introduced to his personal arsenal. The thing is, I was wearing this red Adidas shirt that I love, and I ended up leaving it. I didn't even grab my shirt on the way out; I just bolted. One thing I decided on my way home: I was going to get that fucking shirt back.

When I got home I told my parents that I had just lost my shirt somehow, and I couldn't remember where I left it. That was a mistake because they wanted me to see the goddamn doctor again. For lawyers they can be incredibly simple, naive even. When I withdrew from school and came home from Austin I just told them that I was tired all the time, that I couldn't get up before eleven. I told them I thought I was sick with something. Of course, they could've just asked me why I was so goddamned lazy that I couldn't get out of bed to go to class, but they really believed I was sick because I had basically been a good student all through school; but that's only because

school always came easily for me. And in a way I really believed I was sick with something because sometimes I actually wanted to wake up early; I just couldn't make myself do it.

I went to the doctor again, but basically just to keep my parents off my back for a while. It was pathetic. The trick, I found, was being as elusive as possible while including credible details. I was actually kind of good at it, and I figured someday maybe I would make an excellent expert witness in a trial. I could be an expert on just about anything, as long as I could supply credible details. Even though they're usually the most important (and most interesting) part, it's the details that can get you in trouble. Whoever said God is in the details must have been a great liar. I decided to kind of play the part of a kook, too, just to add to the "he's losing his mind, or having some kind of breakdown" theory my parents were probably discussing.

My appointment was at two in the afternoon, but I didn't shower or comb my hair or anything before I went (I actually woke up around one), and I wore two different colored socks— one black dress sock like the ones my parents used to make me wear to church that I had pulled up almost to my knee, and an old white sock that kept falling down to my ankle. I also put a tie on over my T-shirt. It was worth it just to see the looks the women at the counter were giving me: hair sticking out all over the place, different colored socks, and a red tie just hanging there over my T-shirt. I think my doctor just assumed I was full of shit, but he usually humored me.

When I finally got in there, the doctor, this old guy with little wisps of gray hair and thick glasses, Dr. Coombs, asked me if I was still tired, and I said yes, I'm still tired *and* lethargic (I just threw that one in there for fun). Then he asked if I had been forgetting anything, and I said yes, come to think of it, now that you mention it, I had

been forgetting to eat, to sleep, to brush my teeth, stuff like that. I told him I stayed up all night reading and just lost track of time, which was true, but really isn't an indication of any sickness that I know of; I'm just absent-minded. But he did this thing with his eyebrows, like he thought that was interesting, something he could work with.

Dr. Coombs said OK, we'll do a few tests, draw some blood, and see what happens. I could tell the old guy was getting tired of this, though, because he sort of glanced at my clothes and gave me the "You're too old for this" look as he left. It was all I could do to keep from telling him to fuck right off, that I'd be as immature as I wanted for as long as I wanted, and he damn well better play along. I thought about buying a pipe on my way to the appointment, just to see how they'd react when I walked in there looking like a homeless, crazy guy smoking a pipe. I even thought about wearing a wig or one of those plastic noses. That would've been hilarious. But I didn't remember until I was almost there. And it's probably a good thing I didn't get that stuff, because the last place I wanted to end up was with a psychiatrist. Those bastards are tricky. They're not as trusting as lawyers.

I waited there for the doctor to come back after he took some blood (I didn't pass out this time) and did some other stuff, and when he did all he said was that I still had slightly low blood pressure, and some other stuff I don't remember because I honestly wasn't really listening, but he backed off the mono diagnosis again. Then he did it: he asked me if I was depressed. I laughed pretty hard, since this guy was mistaking depression for a genuine desire to sit around, watch TV, and read all night. I thanked him, told him to bill my parents, and walked out of there before he could suggest one of his psychiatrist buddies. It was definitely time for a new doctor.

I hadn't talked to Sarah for a while, so I wasn't really sure what was going on with us. I'm sure her parents were still freaked out about that whole shirtless incident up in her bedroom. The image of their daughter as anything but an innocent little angel was probably upsetting. I tried calling her a couple of times, but either no one picked up the phone or one of her parents answered (and I hung up whenever that happened), so I was waiting for her to call me, but it never happened. I got impatient and decided I had to do something.

I came up with the plan of calling her house, disguising my voice, and pretending to be one of those telemarketers, calling to offer Sarah great rates on a new Discover card. I could pretend to be a salesman. But there's no way I could ever actually sell anyone anything. It's not that I'm against the concept of capitalism or anything, but I'd just rather not participate. When I called, I used this really slow Texas twang, which completely fooled her mother, and she told Sarah I was some guy calling about a new Discover card.

Hello, she said.

Well, hi there, little lady, this is Alex, I said, still using that stupid voice. She gasped and almost started laughing when she recognized me, but she recovered.

I'd like to offer you a great rate on a new Discover card, little lady.

How much is the credit line you're offering? she asked knowingly.

Look, I said, dropping the accent, Meet me at the park near your house in fifteen minutes so we can talk, OK?

Well, I'm not really interested...

Say you're *just* not interested if you can meet me, I said.

I'm just not interested.

I drove right to the park near her house, one of those parks that are in every neighborhood in the suburbs. There's a pool, tennis courts, a soccer field, and some benches where people can sit and have a picnic or something, as long as they don't mind the oppressive fucking heat. When I was a little kid, my soccer team used to practice at this park. Smelling the grass made me remember soccer practice, my dad dropping me off with a ball and my water jug. I was a good soccer player. I played for ten years, varsity in high school— until I got kicked off the team when I was a junior for calling the coach a dumbfucking cocksucker, and I haven't played since then, except for the occasional indoor scrimmage in Austin with some friends. Soccer is kind of a rebellious sport to play in this shithole country, even though it's the most popular sport in the world. People think it's weird to play a sport other than football, basketball, or baseball. I guess they think it's European, or unamerican somehow. I don't really understand it.

Sitting there on those shitty wood benches, it seemed hotter now than it was when I was a kid, but I guess kids are just better at handling heat because they have so much energy. I was sitting where there was a little shade under a tree, waiting for Sarah, watching the people at the pool. The lifeguards sat in their seats, twirling their whistles like the people on *Baywatch*. One of the lifeguards, this guy who looked like he spent most of his time away from the pool lifting weights, blew his whistle because some kids were running. I used to do that, too. I remember getting kicked out of the pool in our neighborhood for a week because I called the lifeguard a fucking cocksucker after he told me not to run. I told my parents I was taking a break from all the stupid people at the pool. They believed that, too.

I had only been there for a few minutes when Sarah pulled into the parking lot in her



mom's BMW. As she was getting out of her car I walked over and asked if we could drive somewhere because it was so fucking hot. I got into her car, with the air-conditioning blasting, and we started driving. Of course she was listening to the Cure and I asked her if she ever listened to anything but the Cure, and she said No, the Cure was the only band she listened to, but she said it in this sarcastic, pissed-off way, so I guess I had offended her somehow. That wasn't a good way to start. I asked her what was going on, and she asked what I meant. I asked if her parents were still pissed, if they told her she couldn't see me, if her father had a lot of guns placed strategically around the house, anything like that. She said she was supposed to be grounded, and her father told her she couldn't see me anymore. I asked her if she wanted to see me anymore. She had to think about it for a minute— not a good sign.

I don't know, she said after a little while.

So, not if you're going to get in trouble.

Well...

What about my shirt?

What shirt?

That red Adidas shirt I left in your goddamn bedroom.

You didn't leave a shirt in my bedroom....

Goddamnit, I want that shirt back, I said.

You didn't leave a shirt in my bedroom.

Look, I said, keep the fucking shirt; and if you want to see me, and you think you're old enough to make your own decisions without Daddy's approval, or feel any remorse about stealing the property of other people, give me a call.

She didn't like that, especially the last little bit about stealing. She started yelling stuff

about my being a crazy, directionless, condescending asshole, and some other stuff I ignored; and I told the bitch to just take me back to my car. The whole thing ended in a bad, stupid way, really. And I had lost my favorite shirt. After she zoomed out of the parking lot I stood there for a minute, sweat dripping down my neck, watching all the little kids squealing and splashing around in the pool, the lifeguards observing everything from behind sunglasses or maybe asleep.

I thought about walking around the neighborhood, maybe driving over to Kevin's house since he only lived a few blocks away and was home for the summer, but I decided to go home and drink a Coke in front of the TV. If it was at all possible, I still intended to get that shirt back. But the more immediate problem would be figuring out how to kill off the rest of June, not to mention the rest of the summer, without ending up in a psychiatrist's office; and I doubted I would find a girl that fast who would be so eager to pretend she was a Republican, or anything else, just to get in my pants.

## *No Girls Allowed*

### Ch. 2: It's All About Loyalty, Chief

Going to the game seemed like a good way to kill an afternoon since I couldn't wake up before twelve-thirty, and the Astros never started until well after lunch. So the three of us (Kevin, Sean, and me) made the trek downtown to the Astrodome on a Saturday afternoon to watch the Astros play the Mets. We hated the fucking Mets. I remember being in elementary school when the Mets beat the Astros in 1986 to win the National League pennant. It was the same year the goddamn Celtics beat the Rockets in the NBA finals— the year the whole city of Houston confirmed its inferiority complex about sports.

My friend Sean basically looks like a normal 21-year-old, but under that facade lurks an obsessive sports fan; and obsessive really doesn't go far enough. He has every game from those two series in 1986, in addition to the Rockets' championship runs in the nineties, on video. He has tapes of NFL Films stuff from ESPN about Earl Campbell, tapes about Hakeem Olajuwon— I don't even know how much shit he has. On Nolan Ryan's birthday, he refuses to do anything or go anywhere: he just sits at home and watches videotapes all day. His girlfriend asks us all the time if this is normal, and we always have to lie and tell her yes, it's perfectly normal, we all do that, all Sean's friends, all males are intensely loyal sports freaks who will start a fight and cause serious bodily harm to anyone who makes a disparaging comment about any Houston sports team— even the traitorous Oilers. We're the only ones who can shit on the Oilers because we've been loyal fans since we were little kids. If anyone else says anything about the Oilers, things can become kind of heated, especially when Sean is

around.

There isn't necessarily a consistent philosophy at work here, except that loyalty to Houston sports teams is something that is meaningful and absolute. Women have a tough time with the whole home-town loyalty thing, I think. It's just easier to explain that it's a guy thing, that when we get into a frenzy about sports, there are no girls allowed, like little kids playing in a treehouse. You'd be surprised how easily that kind of explanation is accepted. Nietzsche never really worried about being consistent, so why should Sean? Somewhere in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche actually says that the ability to endure contradictions is a sign of high culture. Most people don't have the patience to endure high culture— or an abnormal, almost pathological sense of loyalty to Houston sports teams and athletes. Sean's girlfriend, Shannon, must actually love him to believe that this guy, who is like the militant Shi'ite of Houston sports fans, could actually be normal. And of course, all of this gets amplified when we start drinking, which is something that must be done at an Astros game.

There wasn't a big crowd the day we went. The smell of wet pavement, air-conditioning, beer, piss, smoke, hot dogs, and nachos fills the interior of the Dome, but it kind of vanishes once you get to your seat. I had forgotten about the smells. We got to the Astrodome just before the game started, with enough time to buy some beer and find some decent seats not far from the Mets dugout. I tried to suggest seats closer to the ones we had paid for, but Sean wouldn't listen; and Kevin kept pumping him up like we were soldiers about to hit the beaches at Normandy or something. We're totally gonna fuck with their heads, Kevin kept saying. Sean intended to piss off the Mets to the point where they would be so focused on wanting to kick his ass that they'd forget about the game. He was wearing a white Rockets T-shirt, some baggy khaki shorts, and Nike running shoes without socks: normal enough— except that he hadn't really

combed his hair, and even though it was short (a grown-out buzz with bangs), it was all matted down on one side, and he hadn't worn a hat. Basically, he looked drunk before we even started drinking. Kevin, on the other hand, had become kind of preppy since he started dating some girl in Austin. It was pathetic. In junior high, Kevin wore the same shirt to school for an entire week on a bet; and now he wears all this Tommy Hilfiger, Gap, Polo shit. It's sad to see someone begin to grow up.

We sat down and took in the cavernous Dome. I had forgotten how massive that place is. Beams crisscross in a kind of matrix of skylights across patches of the white dome, which must make it tricky as hell to try and catch a pop fly. Announcers were always talking about that. The dome itself seems miles away from the ground and gives the place a bigness, an immensity. The green artificial turf, AstroTurf (now generally hated in the sports world), carpets the field, and it looks impossible for anyone to hit a home run. I mean, it is so far from home plate to the left field wall, much less dead center or right. A home run is a Herculean feat in the Dome.

The Astrodome is part of my identity and my childhood. I had this navy blue Astros jacket I wore all the way through elementary school. It was just a windbreaker, that jacket, but that's pretty much all you need for the winter in Houston. It made me sad to hear the rumors about a new stadium. They say a new outdoor place is necessary to compete with the other big markets, but the Astros have played in the Dome my whole life. It sucks that things have to come to an end.

In the first inning, Biggio grounded out and Bagwell, batting third, actually struck out. I can't tell you how badly I wanted him to belt one. It went quickly for about three innings, three up, three down for both teams with a walk for each team that didn't amount to anything, and I was nominated as beer wench since it was time for another round already.

When I left to retrieve the beer, Sean was yelling shit at the Mets dugout like: You cocksuckers are in the *Dome* now, baby! and, Hey, Baerga, I bet you want this beer I'm drinking, don't ya, ya fucking alcoholic! That was after one beer. Baerga actually looked up after the alcohol comment, and the people around us started to act a little scared. I smiled at this old guy two seats away, and he gave me a look like he was begging a mugger not to blow his brains out. I hadn't even yelled anything. It was guilt by association. Carlos Baerga had been rumored to have an alcohol problem when he was traded from the Cleveland Indians to the Mets, although he denied it. And it did seem a little hypocritical for any of us, much less Sean, to be taunting someone about alcohol problems. I've lost count of how many times Sean has passed out in his own front yard, and he was arrested in Austin last year on a DUI. He takes pride in his alcoholism, so I guess he just hates Baerga because he's a Met, and once again, there's no consistent logic at work here. Sean's not really in a position to knock anyone else's ethos.

I came back with beers for everyone and a Dome dog for myself. I figured I should eat since it might be my last meal before we were arrested, flogged, and banned for life from the Astrodome. Sean kept periodically yelling shit at the Mets, all of it laced with curse words, with Kevin giggling and encouraging him; and some of the people around started laughing occasionally, especially after some of them had a chance to get some beer. I just kept drinking. Of course, after beer number five Sean and Kevin started slurring their words a little and yelling stuff like, Hey pretty-boys, go back to your crack whores. The people around us were getting noticeably uncomfortable.

But Sean went on, undaunted by alcohol, adding more curse words to the insults. I can't even remember most of it for some reason. I don't know why; I wasn't drunk

yet. The Astros had taken a 1-0 lead on a single by Derek Bell that brought in Craig Biggio who had reached on a walk, but they had been remarkably unimpressive on the offensive end of things. I was still waiting for Bagwell to belt one. He's my favorite Astro. He'd probably be a bigger star if he played for a team in one of the bigger media markets (i.e. Los Angeles or New York), but I'm glad he's an Astro. Between the fourth and fifth innings, after Kevin came back with another round of beers, this black guy sitting a couple rows in front of us stood up and turned around to look at us. He was huge. He had to be at least six-four, and he could break us all in half. I was surprised it had taken this long for him to say anything. This guy was with his son, who looked to be about ten.

If you little white boys don't shut up, there's gonna be trouble, he said.

The guy's son looked up at his father, then looked back at us with this blank look, like he didn't really understand what was happening, but he was sure his dad would take care of it. The thing is, the kid was wearing an Adidas T-shirt like the one Sarah stole from me, except the kid's shirt was green. It really kind of freaked me out to see the logo, that three-branched plant that looks eerily similar to a marijuana plant. The huge black guy had an instant sobering effect on Sean, but I knew it wouldn't last. The guy sat back down in his seat, but not without sending one more menacing look our way.

Jesus, relax, man, Kevin said under his breath, and got Sean to laugh a little.

Of course, if he had said it a little louder that guy would've been pounding some scrawny smartasses— or throwing us down on the field so the Mets could beat us with baseball bats. It didn't take much longer for Sean to resume with the occasional comment. The big black guy looked back menacingly once or twice; and a guy in a navy blue T-shirt with Security stenciled in yellow came over and sat right in front of

us. Somebody must've tipped him off. He gave us a dirty look before he sat down, so of course as soon as he turned his back I couldn't resist sticking my tongue out, which made Kevin and Sean laugh. The guy turned around once to ask if we were sitting in the seats we paid for, but he couldn't figure out what was so funny. He also never got a clear answer about our seats. We didn't exactly lie to him; we just kept talking around the answer, babbling about how big the Dome is, shit like that. I kept making faces and giving him the finger, my friends kept laughing, the guy kept turning around, and when the Mets had finished batting in the fifth inning, Sean yelled something about taking their glasses with them, another alcohol insult and a reference to an incident from the 1986 play-off series when two Mets were arrested at a Houston bar after they walked out with their glasses— something that must be legal in New York, but isn't legal in Houston.

That's it, the Security guy said. The three of you are out of here.

You can't throw us out for yelling at the other team, Kevin said. He didn't even curse that time.

Where's your team spirit, huh chief? Sean asked.

The Security guy said something into a walkie-talkie, and three other morons in the same T-shirts came down the aisle to our seats.

Let's go, the first one said, a huge, fat guy with a mustache.

This is fucking *bullshit*, Kevin yelled as loud as he could. The people around us looked uncomfortable and embarrassed; some looked at their shoes, others just took in the spectacle.

I knew Sean and Kevin weren't going to go quietly, and for some reason, probably because I was kind of drunk, I decided I wouldn't either. I just sat there in my seat sipping my beer, looking up at the security guys.



I'm not going anywhere with you rednecks, I said.

Get up, the fat guy said.

I don't think so, chubby, I said. Kevin and Sean were laughing at my last stand even as two security guards dragged them away.

They're taking away my right to heckle the away team, Sean yelled as he was being escorted up the stairs. I demand justice! What kind of country robs a man of his right to piss off the visiting team? (A few people applauded and chuckled at that.)

The fat guy and his lanky compatriot, a guy about my age with a major acne problem, grabbed me by the arms, but I went completely limp, dropped my beer, and made them drag me, my feet trailing behind me like a rag doll's. The rubber from my shoes made a squealing sound all the way through the Astrodome as they held me up, one on either side. People were yelling stuff and laughing as we went, and a couple of little kids snickered and pointed while their horrified parents watched and warned their kids not to ever do anything like that. The two security guys took me down to the entrance, where Kevin and Sean were waiting, and I miraculously regained control of my body just before they let me go. The fat guy gave me a little shove, just for good measure.

Don't come back for a while, he said.

No problemo, Chief, I said. Kevin and Sean thought that was great. We were still laughing when we got back to Kevin's Explorer.

Well, that was rude of them. I guess we'll have to watch the rest of the game at home, Kevin said, and by home he meant our neighborhood south of the city on the way to Galveston, away from downtown Houston, away from screaming kids and fat, redneck security guards, big black guys who meant us bodily harm, away from matrixes of interstates and the smog-covered skyline.

Shotgun, Sean said, so I took my usual place in the back seat.

It's really sad to see such a breakdown in loyalty to one's hometown sports team, Sean said in his English aristocrat voice, almost sincere in a homicidal kind of way as we pulled out of the Astrodome parking lot.

Sean probably thinks the Astrodome security should be planning to assassinate managers of opposing teams. I almost asked him about it, but I was afraid to hear what he'd say. It's amazing that I'm the one whose sanity has been questioned of late just because my only ambition is to sit around and read, while Sean is viewed as a perfectly normal, functioning member of society. He goes to school, has a girlfriend who is crazy about him, and can carry on a normal conversation. But if anyone talks to him about sports for a few minutes, he'll recognize that this guy is completely whacked. The thing is, he's been my friend since the third grade. Loyalty is more important than sanity. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote that if you want a friend, you must be willing to wage war for him. Of course, Nietzsche (via Zarathustra) also said that you should possess your best enemy in a friend, but eventually came down on the side of friendship, in a weird kind of way, I guess. I think the original statement is the most powerful. It's the one I choose to internalize, anyway.

One of those huge, puffy, Gulf of Mexico thunderheads that extends up into the sky for miles was just kind of hanging over I-45, building up steam to dump rain on some part of Houston as we got up on the interstate. Kevin put New Order's *Republic* into the CD player, and we cruised down the interstate, still buzzing from Dome beer, passing cars going the speed limit, on our way home.

Well, Sean said with a sigh, at least we pissed off Baerga.

*No Girls Allowed*

Ch. 3: Shouldn't You Be Working?

It's amazing how marijuana can elicit clarity and confusion and leave you thinking that between Bob Marley songs you've reached some kind of epiphany or moment of real spiritual bliss, when all you've really done is made it impossible to differentiate between all the images and thoughts and emotions that bounce around behind your eyes. It's easy to mistake comfortably numb for spiritually awake. I used to think they were the same thing— that I was most tuned in at those mindnumbing moments. But it's just an illusion. They're not the same. I realized this while I was getting stoned over at Tommy's house the night before his parents came back from the Bahamas or Italy or something. I shouldn't have been smoking or drinking or anything. I mean, I have enough trouble going to sleep at a normal hour and an even harder time trying to wake up at a normal hour; getting stoned was about the worst thing for me. I know how bad it is, but I have no self control.

We had been playing Nintendo games and putting away a twelve-pack of Rolling Rock for most of the afternoon at his house when we decided to get stoned. We had managed to kill most of the afternoon playing FIFA Soccer, and we decided we needed something to bring us down when we started arguing (and I mean really yelling) about whether Dennis Bergkamp was a better pure goal scorer than Stoichkov. Of course I argued for Bergkamp, and Tommy was just making the case for Stoichkov because he was the only international soccer player Tommy knows anything about. But it was a pathetic argument, and I persuaded him, as a kind of mediation, to bring his three-foot, hand-painted bong out of retirement, because we needed to get roasted. That particular

bong was retired because the last time we smoked out of it we drove to Austin, got lost, almost got in a wreck, and finally ended up at the party we had set out for some time close to midnight; but neither one of us could remember *how* we got to Austin. So we sat there watching *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*, and *Scooby Doo* and taking bong hits until we were both too stoned to do anything but stare at the TV. My friends, Tommy included, attach almost metaphysical importance to pop culture, and cartoons are no exception.

For example, it's just kind of common knowledge, like part of a larger urban myth, that there's all kinds of drug allusions in *Scooby Doo*. It's so obvious that Shaggy and Scooby are potheads: they're always paranoid as hell in the back of the Mystery Machine, and they're always hungry. And Fred is obviously gay. I mean, Daphne practically throws herself at him in every episode, and he just ignores her. That scarf doesn't exactly hide his proclivities, either. Tommy and I always talk about what's really happening in *Scooby Doo*, and this time was no exception. For Tommy, though, it's almost like the allusions and hidden symbols reveal some kind of mystical truth about the universe. He gets all serious when we talk about it, and he gets belligerent if you even hint at changing the channel. I just think it's kind of funny.

It really pisses me off the way people are always trying to find *meaning* in things. They're looking for some system that seems to answer everything and keeps them from having to really question or think about anything, like being scared to die. I hate belief systems, and people who believe absolutely in anything. It's especially depressing when one of those pseudo-believers is a friend of mine— although Tommy certainly doesn't believe *absolutely* in anything. He's just kind of a fuck-up who isn't much of a thinker. But that's one of the reasons I like him, too.

I'm not sure how long we sat in Tommy's house doing close to nothing, but marijuana will do that: your sense of time kind of vanishes. We started laughing like maniacs when we thought about Sean and Kevin working all day as we zoomed along to Taco Cabana in my Volvo, this old blue tank of a car my mom used to drive and I inherited. I took it to Austin with me during my stint at the University of Texas, and my parents kept telling me they'd buy me a new Toyota Forerunner (a bribe from two lawyers, if you can believe that) if I'd go back and give it another shot, which is actually a pretty good offer, but I think doing nothing in the short term is the only plan I have, and I'm too sick to do anything. Well, I'm too sick to do anything that requires being out of bed before noon. I seem to need even more sleep than I did in Austin, and my memory has been getting steadily worse. I just forget stuff. But I've actually been thinking about getting a job doing something easy, like working in a book store. There's no way I could wait tables or anything. I tried that for a day in Austin. I got a job at a Pizza Hut, worked one day, and never went back after I earned a whopping six dollars in tips. The students and white trash morons that come into Pizza Hut don't tip. So I figured it wasn't worth the effort. I never even got my puny pay check.

It was kind of lucky that we made it to the Taco Cabana on Bay Area Boulevard, because I really was stoned and/or drunk; I had that warm feeling where you feel like you're glowing, your cheeks feel hot, and it almost hurts to smile. But I had made that drive so many times I could almost do it in my sleep, and I guess we beat the afternoon rush hour, which is brutal in Houston. There's always traffic in Houston. There's traffic on I-45 at three in the morning. We stood in line at Taco Cabana, sweating, not saying a word while the people in front of us moved in slow motion and talked too loud. It took forever to move through the line and get some food. The two of us sat

there in the shade of the restaurant eating soft tacos, burritos and tostados, sipping water, and hoping no one around could tell how fucked up we were. I hate the paranoia that sets in on the way down. I told Tommy we should've ordered a pizza and he agreed.

That's when Sarah walked in with some guy. I was just about to finish off a burrito, and I actually dropped the last bite when I saw her. Or them. At least, it looked like her. I just stared for a while until I realized it wasn't her. This girl had blonde hair pulled back the same way; it was kind of eerie. But it wasn't her. I guess there are a lot of girls who look like Sarah. Fucked up as I was, I couldn't help but think about something Rousseau wrote, where he wondered how people (men, actually, because the guy was a major misogynist) are born originals but die mere copies, replicas of everyone else. I guess Rousseau was wondering about the nature of individuality, but I don't remember where I read that. Rousseau was still stuck on Cartesian thought, but Nietzsche really nailed it when he wrote that the vast majority lack an intellectual conscience. That certainly applied to these two idiots. Taco Cabana girl had a longer face than Sarah and she wasn't as pretty— or at least not as pretty as my memory of her. Lately, I guess I've started remembering Sarah as perfectly beautiful, or something. Also, the guy this girl was with looked like a business major, Republican, asshole, frat-boy dickhead.

I asked Tommy if the girl looked like Sarah, but he just glanced at her and said she kind of did, but he didn't act like he gave a shit, so I dropped it. I kept staring at them. I got caught once, too. The girl looked right at me, so I had to look away quickly. She said something to her boyfriend, and he started to get up, but she grabbed his arm and he sat back down. I'm sure she was just testing, trying to see what she could get him to

do, the poor bastard. Beautiful women have so much power, it's fucking unbelievable. From the time they're about thirteen until thirty-five or so, beautiful women hold the world in their hands. They can do anything and they know it. This girl had that poor future suburbanite bastard on a leash. People that pretty don't bother to obsessively examine stuff, and they certainly don't get nostalgic for their childhoods.

Consciousness would just be a nuisance.

I can usually bullshit my way out of confrontations, but this guy was a lot bigger than me. They ate pretty quickly and the guy gave me this long, menacing look as they walked out. He looked like he was contemplating homicide, or at least a severe beating. By the time Tommy and I finished eating we were both almost sober (the glow had dissipated), and we just drove home in the dusky heat, the windows down (the air-conditioning in my Volvo died a year ago), without saying a word to each other all the way back to Tommy's house. Tommy knew it was useless to complain about the heat.

When I got home I sat in my bedroom watching television for at least a couple of hours (I lost track of time), then I went downstairs to get something to drink and decided to stay down there with the big screen TV. It was completely dark, and I guess I must've missed my parents at some point. Usually they come up and check to make sure I'm still alive, but I guess they forgot. The house almost felt empty, even though I knew they were home. So I just sat there watching more TV. It's crazy, the stuff on TV late at night. It's all infomercials, shows in syndication, SportsCenter, and it's the only time MTV plays videos anymore. The problem with watching hours of television is that after a while you start to think that everyone but you is a supermodel or a fucking rock star. That's what I start to think, anyway. I think it's a combination of MTV, advertisements that use sex and celebrities to sell shit, and allowing your brain to hover

in the fantasy world of TV for too long. And when you spend a couple of weeks just reading and watching TV, you kind of lose touch with people and start to fear interaction. I mean, I'm not *afraid* of people or anything, but sometimes TV seems more real to me than what's actually happening— except for when I'm getting stoned with Tommy or kicked out of the Astrodome.

During my stay in Austin I kind of felt insulated, but it was different. I did emerge from my apartment to go to class or Sixth Street or the occasional party— and I sure as hell didn't feel like everyone but me was a rock star or a supermodel. It just felt like Austin was the only place on earth, which is actually comforting as hell. After I'd eaten again and watched most of four episodes of a *Bewitched* marathon on Nickelodeon, it was almost six in the morning and my parents would be getting up soon, so I went back up to my room and just looked out my window for a while. I couldn't remember the last time I had been up this early in the morning, when people are waking up and going to work and there's dew on the grass. I actually watched the sun come up over the houses in my neighborhood, and it was really pleasant. It reminded me of getting up for school when I was a little kid.

I heard both of my parents leave, and I watched a couple of those morning shows for a while. But then I got this crazy idea. I felt restless after watching more TV and miraculously had some energy, so I grabbed my skateboard, the same Powell-Peralta I got when I was a little kid, and plunged into the cool, muggy morning, heading down my street, sticking close to the curb even though the trees that lined the street provided a kind of canopy and the sun hadn't had a chance to get very high. I decided to skate over to my old elementary school, just a couple of blocks away, to see what it looked like because I was determined to remember all that stuff. I drove by it all



the time, but I never really paid much attention. I'll bet that shithead with Sarah's twin in Taco Cabana never pays attention to anything. I'll bet he spends his time thinking about his car and whether he'll make a lot of money with his BA in marketing.

It was nice to be out in the morning, moving quickly down the street with a little breeze, before the inevitable heat had a chance to gain momentum. The humidity kind of creeps up on you in the morning as a reminder that it's going to be really fucking hot in a couple of hours. As I rounded my block and hooked a right, I remembered riding my bike to school every day, usually with Sean or Tommy (Kevin lives in Sarah's neighborhood), and sometimes by myself. I took the same route I did as a kid, zoomed by the same houses— which all looked smaller, but remarkably unchanged. I heard sprinklers, some little kid yelling, and even a lawn mower.

The double-click of my skateboard wheels hitting the seams in the pavement as I crossed the short bridge only a few hundred yards from my old school reminded me vaguely of one of my last days as an elementary school kid when I had dared to ride my skateboard to school. The thing I remembered most about the day was riding across the bridge in the cool morning on my way to school, and holding onto the back of Sean's bike on my way home in the afternoon. I stopped on the bridge for a moment and looked at the ditch that ran all the way through the neighborhood, dividing it into halves. When I was in fifth grade, after I read *Huckleberry Finn*, I used to daydream about building a raft and spending my days drifting up and down the ditch, making the occasional trip to Stop-N-Go, maybe showing up at home in time for dinner on occasion. Sean and I actually built a raft, but it fell apart as we were dragging it to the ditch. He lost interest after that, but I liked the idea of drifting like Huck. I still do.

I was thinking all that as some sweat rolled down my neck, my armpits and the backs

of my legs. It was already starting to get hot. Little beads of sweat formed on my temples. I skated around to the back of the school on bright, new pavement, to the basketball goals and the little soccer field. The front of the school was still the same as it was when my mom used to drop me off for kindergarten. The building was the same piss yellow, but they had rebuilt one whole wing where the library used to be, and they added some classrooms and stuff to the back. I was really sweating by the time I got around to the basketball goals, so I sat down in the shade of a doorway. I sat there for a while, trying to cool off with sweat dripping onto the cement. Looking in at the cool tiled floor of the school I remembered trying to jump from one tile to the next without touching a line.

One time Kevin and I were sent to the principal's office when we got caught jumping around in the hall and bumped into some first-graders when we were supposed to be doing something else. I think we were in third grade. We were scared shitless, but it seems pretty funny now. It's weird that just looking at the floor made me remember that. I tried the door, just to make sure it was locked. Air-conditioning and water would've been much appreciated. I was feeling drained and a little hung over, like this little trip might've been a bad idea, and that floor, clean or dirty, looked inviting.

I was starting to cool down when I saw two people in the distance walking across the soccer field. They had been walking on the bike path that runs through the neighborhood, but they broke off the path and started walking toward me. There's no way they could've seen me because I was concealed in the doorway and they were too far away. I wondered why they were walking around at this time in the morning and why they were headed toward the back of the school. I figured I was the only lunatic out and about, that everyone else was either asleep or on their way to work. Seeing two

people walking from far away reminded me of those Clint Eastwood westerns. The image just seemed kind of desolate in its way. As they started to get closer, I could see they were kids, maybe junior high age, and one of them had a basketball. When they were about a hundred yards away the kid without the ball knocked the ball out of the other kid's hand and ran after it. They started pushing each other and kicking the ball, and by the time they got to the cement court they were too winded to notice me. They looked to be thirteen or fourteen and kind of dorky. One of them sported a buzz cut that made him look like he had stepped out of *Leave it to Beaver* or something. The Beaver wasn't much of an athlete, either, because he heaved one of the ugliest shots at a basket I've ever seen.

Nice shot, Beav, I said.

That kind of scared them because they hadn't seen me sitting in the doorway. I couldn't really see the other kid's eyes because his dirty-blond bangs hung down so far, and he kept twitching his head to move it out of the way. He was wearing these Nike hightops that had to be at least a couple sizes too big and weighed his feet down so that it looked like it would be hard for him to walk, much less jump. I stepped out of the shade and onto my skateboard. The two kids just stared at me, and I kind of glided around on the cement in a circle.

Who are you? Buzz-cut demanded.

Alex, I said.

How old are you? the other kid said.

Twenty-one, I said. How old are you?

We're thirteen, Buzz-cut said, and stuck his chin out to try and assert some authority.

Shouldn't you be working, or something? the long-haired kid asked me.

Why should I be working? I asked.

Well, you're twenty-one, Buzz-cut said.

So?

So twenty-one-year-olds are supposed to have *jobs*, Buzz-cut said.

How do you know I don't have a job? This could be my day off.

But it's Tuesday, Long-hair said.

So? I work at a book store, and this is my day off, I said. This shut them up momentarily because it sounded like it could be the truth.

I guess, Buzz-cut said.

Why aren't you guys asleep, or home playing Nintendo, or something? I asked.

Why aren't *you*? Long-hair flipped his head to the right every damn time he said something. The conversation was getting kind of tedious.

I just wanted to see what my old school looks like, I said, weaving around them in figure-eights on the smooth, ashen cement. Buzz-cut took another retarded-looking shot. He almost fell on his face as he let go of the ball, and I couldn't help chuckling a little.

I have some pills, if you want any, the long-haired kid said as I skated by him.

What?

Are you a narc, or something? Buzz-cut demanded. He had suddenly become defensive and belligerent: Apparently he was the muscle.

No, I'm not a narc. But aren't you guys a little young to be pushing?

You are a narc, Buzz-cut said, and made an awkward lunge at me.

I lost my balance for a minute and almost fell off my skateboard, but I recovered, pushed off a couple of times and I was out of danger, back in front of the school. The

little junior high pushers didn't chase me, but I was in shock. When I was that age I had barely even heard of drugs. There might've been one or two kids my age who smoked pot, but I don't think there were any kids my age selling pills. It was depressing. I actually started to feel better skating home with a little breeze in my face, like I had adapted to the heat. By the time I got to my street though, I was exhausted and my shirt was soaked with sweat. I almost couldn't make it all the way down the block. It must've been around ten or eleven when I got home, because I drank three glasses of water and a Mountain Dew, and I fell asleep on the living room floor and didn't wake up until my mom came in and woke me up when she got home from work, which was usually around six.

She was kind of freaked out, actually, to find me all sprawled out on the beige living room carpet, smelly and nasty from all the dried sweat. She thought I had a fever, she said. I told her I was fine, that I went up to the school to see what it looked like, and I told her about the pusher kids. She agreed that it was depressing. She asked me why I put myself through the ordeal of skating all that way in the heat, even early in the morning, and I told her I really didn't know why I had done it.

I guess I just wanted to see if I could do it, I said.

*No Girls Allowed*

Ch. 4: I Hate Plato

My parents, my mom mostly, had been not-so-subtly hinting that I should get a job of some kind. A few days after my epic journey to my old elementary school, my mom, actually said I needed some direction, a reason to get up in the morning that had nothing to do with television or Western philosophy. I took a shower (it was dinnertime, and I just hadn't gotten around to bathing) and came back downstairs to get something to eat when she said she'd cook something if I'd sit down and listen for a minute. I was starving and tired of microwavable crap, so I relented. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, still wearing a blue business suit, her hands on her hips, and I sat at the kitchen table with my head in my hand, looking at her. But before she started talking about needing direction, a goal, and all the "gifts" I possessed (I tuned out the specifics, but it had something to do with thinking and reading and processing), I started thinking about the time when I was in junior high and I briefly experimented with calling my parents by their first names.

I actually got the idea from this friend of mine, Brad, when I spent the night at his house. Brad and his big sister Kelly (such perfect suburban names: I'll bet there's a Brad and Kelly in every suburb in America) both called their parents by their first names, and I thought that was so enlightened and sophisticated. I guess nothing is original, but I'm OK with that at this point, and mainly I started doing it just to see how my parents would react. They didn't seem like a particularly close family; Brad's father didn't wrestle with him in the livingroom or anything. In fact, the old man seemed kind of distant. But when Brad's father told us dinner was ready, Brad just said, OK, Jim.

Then at dinner Kelly started in on Jim about needing her own telephone line. They didn't make a big deal out of it— which I also thought was cool. They seemed so casual and, I thought then, sophisticated.

Brad Klingman was actually kind of a weird kid. He liked to torture animals— which, besides being the first step to becoming a serial killer, is just a cowardly, chickenshit thing to do. That weekend I watched the little bastard blow up a frog with an M-80. It almost made me puke. He'd put a frog he caught in a shoebox, light the M-80, and watch the frog explode from several feet away. It was disgusting. Blood and frog parts ended up strewn all over his back yard. I almost cried the first time he did it. Looking at the black blinking eyes of something living one minute and reduced to parts the next is traumatic for any normal person, much less a kid. Brad would stand there with this empty smile and blow up frogs. He was a sick little fuck.

But the real reason I spent the night at his house was to look at his sister. She was three years older than us, had the most beautiful, long, brown legs I'd ever seen, and the whole time I was there she walked around the house in an orange bikini. The weekend was like an extended wet dream. She had the most beautiful body I'd ever seen, and I imagined her becoming a porn star, or at least head cheerleader.

Kelly Klingman. The girl was a junior high legend. She had this black, shoulder-length hair that she tossed around like Cleofuckingpatra or something; she was born to strut around the house like a suburban princess, and she was always on the phone. She basically ignored me, but I didn't care. I was there to look. Brad could've been chopping up his parents and I probably wouldn't have noticed. But when he and his parents did speak, it was so informal, like his dad was his pal, that I had to try it out. I got home that afternoon, went into my dad's study and said, What's happening, Mike?

He stopped reading and looked at me over the top of his reading glasses, but he didn't say anything for a minute. Then finally:

What did you say?

I asked you what's happening, I said.

Did you call me Mike?

Yea.

Well, don't do it again.

Why not?

It's disrespectful.

The way he said it so calmly, without sitting up or uncrossing his legs or adjusting his glasses made me lose interest, and I never called him Mike, or Michael for that matter, again. It just didn't work. Mike and I would never be pals, and I decided that was OK. He just sat there in chinos and a Polo shirt reading the *Houston Chronicle*. Brad Klingman was a fucking weirdo anyway, and the fact that Kelly called her mother Lisa made her seem more remote and untouchable. But I call my mom Mary every once in a while because she gets so exasperated and gives me that tilted head *I'm your mother and you can't do that* look. It cracks me up. So as she was standing there grilling chicken and checking the pasta with a quick glance, I decided to go along with her little pep talk, but I really didn't want to get a job, or do anything else *productive*.

What's for dinner, Mary? (This elicited the look.)

I thought we talked about that.

We did.

And?

The jury's still out. (She let out an exasperated sigh.)



Well, what do you think about at least getting a part-time job, establishing some goals for yourself this summer?

I guess I could do that.

Really?

Sure. But I think you're burning the chicken, Mary.

At that point she actually coughed up a curse word, which made me laugh, and she gave me that motherly look again. I like Mary, though. She was racing around in that blue dress suit, kind of sliding around on the beige tiles in white stockinged feet, talking and checking on different pots. Occasional strands of sandy brown hair hung down to her mouth, where a few little lines had formed over the years, probably from worrying about me. Mary has blue eyes, and sometimes she can give me this sad look that renders me powerless, like a sweet, motherly Medusa.

The way the summer sun was still trying to peek through the shades that covered the big windows at the other end of the kitchen reminded me of this time when I came home from school (I think I was in the eighth grade) and found Mary slumped on the couch, wearing a similar outfit to the one she was wearing now, sipping a glass of red wine, listening to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. My parents made sure I knew about classical music as a kid, but at the time I never would've admitted to my friends that I recognized Beethoven or Mozart or Bach. Only the orchestra geeks were supposed to know about that stuff. Mary wasn't crying or anything; she just sat way down in the couch and stared off into space. I remember dropping my bag a few feet from the couch, something she hated, in an attempt to get her attention, but she barely acknowledged me. She just sat there listening to Beethoven.

I think I went and grabbed a Coke, and when I came back into the living room she was

still just sitting there. I went over and sat down next to her on the couch, and I looked at her for a little while, trying to get her to notice me. Later I found out that she'd had some kind of minor breakdown, freaked out at work (my dad's law firm) and started screaming at some client because he said something about the firm being his hired goons, or something. But I sat there looking at Mary until she acknowledged me, and when she did look at me, she grabbed me and hugged me and started really sobbing. She held onto me so tight I almost couldn't breathe, and we just sat there for a while. I let her hold me and run her hands through my hair because I think she needed it.

I guess Mary freaked out at the prospect of being some rich asshole's hired goon, even if the guy was kidding. Mary quit my dad's firm after that. She stayed at home for a year, then she did some consulting, and now she's an attorney in this small firm that does a lot of pro bono work for people who want to sue insurance companies and other societal leaches. Mary isn't exactly a radical, but I guess she'd had enough of working for arrogant shitheads who think they can do and say anything because they have a lot of money.

I wonder now why she was listening to Beethoven. There's a profound sadness, like a lament, in the *Moonlight Sonata*, but it's this fantastic, obsessive loneliness, too, like the emotion of *Every Breath You Take* by the Police— though it's kind of silly to try and compare a pop song to Beethoven. The *Moonlight Sonata* is melancholy and sublime. Nietzsche said that music is the immediate language of emotion. Music does something language can't; music can take you to an emotional place that's otherwise unreachable. I think Beethoven can do that better than just about anything else. I wonder if Mary has the same need that I do: to be in the company of greatness for a certain amount of the day, every day. I find it comforting to know that there are

elements of Western culture that are almost perfect and yet totally accessible. I honestly don't understand how people can spend all their time mired in shit— though I admittedly spend enough time there, too. I love bad TV.

Actually, I feel like I need to confess something: Lately I've started to worry about all the TV I've been watching. I watch *Baywatch* twice a day, for chrissake. I've started watching cancelled sit-coms that run in syndication on second-rate cable channels. The thing is, I know how bad the shit is, and I want to turn it off, but bad television, like the *Real World* marathons on MTV, is mesmerizing and addictive. And once I start watching a little, I start to crave more. I'm addicted to the emptiness of laugh tracks, physical comedy, and pretty people running on a beach with a shitty instrumental accompaniment. I don't get it. Maybe I just want to immerse myself in the TV world of Pamela Anderson and Kelly Packard (real-life Barbie Dolls), but I'm supposed to hate everything in the culture that's mediocre. How could someone who internalizes Nietzsche and reveres the high art of Beethoven and Bach watch *Saved By the Bell* every afternoon at four? I think this is the most disturbing thing I've ever discovered about myself. I'm a closet shlock addict.

The next afternoon (I still couldn't wake up before eleven), the day after my little talk with Mary, I went to one of those megabookstore chain places to apply for a job, hoping of course that they would turn me away and I'd have to go home and say I tried, with a sigh, and resign myself to more reading and eye candy. The store was in the parking lot of the mall where Sarah and I had our little talk by the fountain, but I decided it was better not to think about that. Since I drove there in my Volvo, my shirt clung to me with sweat when I walked in: It's easy to become consumed with thinking about

heat in Houston. I was wearing baggy, blue Stussy shorts, a T-shirt, and some Adidas sandals acquired during my high school soccer days. Not exactly snotty, yuppie bookstore material, I kept thinking.

When I walked into the store, a few people openly stared at me, more with pity than fear. I'm sure I looked more sweaty and pathetic than scary. I'm not even scary up close and personal— that's Sean's department. A conversation with that guy can send people running for cover, especially if they admit to being fans of a fair-weather team: the New York Yankees, the Atlanta Braves, the Chicago Bulls, the Dallas Cowboys or the Green Bay Packers. A connection to one of those cities (i.e. being born there) is a requirement to be a fan of one of their teams, according to Sean. For me though, a bookstore was almost as dangerous as a sports venue (or worse, a sports bar) for Sean. My problem is I care about books; I care about the course of Western thought, the way philosophy started out in ignorance and took centuries to shake the grip of Plato. I don't care about much, but I do care about books.

I wiped sweat from my forehead with the sleeve of my T-shirt, soaked in the cool air-conditioning of the place, and searched for an employee. It wasn't that hard to spot someone wearing one of those goofy blue aprons. It was asking a lot to even consider wearing one of those goddamn things. I made eye contact with this short brunette with a big ass that puffed out behind her apron.

Can I help you? she asked, and looked me up and down in a quick evaluatory glance.

Yea, I was wondering if the store is hiring, I said.

I'm not sure. Let me check.

She turned and walked quickly to the back of the store, where I lost sight of her. I wondered if she actually went to ask a manager if they were in fact hiring, or if she just

went directly for security. My luck with rent-a-cops hadn't been that great lately, and I was feeling more paranoid than usual for some reason. I was standing in the middle of the store, and I looked around at the purple promotional signs, the signs labeling the different sections, a big stack of some dumbass self-help book that promised self-confidence or something equally puerile and was on sale at the front of the store, some middle-aged and older people sipping coffee in the little cafe area near the front close to the big windows that looked out on the mall parking lot. I resisted the urge to walk over to the philosophy section, and as I was thinking about that the girl suddenly materialized.

*We are* accepting applications. Would you like to go back and fill one out?

Sure, I said.

She gave me a little smile and I relaxed a little as I followed her through the store back to some kind of office that was kind of hidden and off to the side. I had cooled off some and I didn't feel as sweaty anymore, but I felt strangely self-conscious. Being in a bookstore made me feel like I needed to at least offer a front of normalcy. The manager guy was sitting behind this pathetic, flimsy little wood desk. He was this fortyish, paunchy, slightly balding guy with glasses who actually looked like he was scared of *me*. He was incredibly pale, and his glasses looked like they weighed a fucking ton. A little green nametag announced him as DAVE in white letters. I couldn't help wondering what a guy his age was doing as the manager of a goddamn bookstore— or more importantly, if he actually knew anything about books.

So, you'd like to fill out an application? DAVE asked me.

Yea, I said. I like books.

We're not hiring now, but we will be in a week or so.

That's fine, I said.

DAVE handed me a clipboard with an application and a pen. He got up and bumped into his desk on the way out.

I'll be back in a few minutes, he said before finally shuffling through the door.

I decided to give my correct name and address and everything, but I thought sprucing up some other parts of the application might be a good idea. The only real problem would be listing references. I thought I could get Kevin to impersonate someone for at least one of them, and possibly Sean, as well. But even if I enlisted Sean, I still needed one more reference. I also started wondering if I should say anything about my illness, but I decided I'd save that for the interview — if I made it that far. My illness and inability to wake up much before noon would surely preclude me from a chance at employment.

As one of my references I decided to list a philosophy professor at the University of Texas who kind of liked me. I had taken two classes from him: an intro philosophy class and a seminar on Existentialism. I didn't have an address or phone number for him, so I just wrote in *philosophy Department, University of Texas, Austin, TX*. I listed him first, then went back to the employment history section to make up some stuff while I thought about aliases for Sean and Kevin. I decided not to make it too outrageous, so I listed a stint at the UT library, thinking that would sound good and DAVE probably wouldn't bother to check it out; and I listed a job as an office assistant in the philosophy Department — something I didn't think even existed. Under the education section, I went ahead and gave myself a degree, a B.A. in philosophy, since I was only fifteen hours away anyway. I doubted DAVE would check on that, either.

I listed Kevin as a wheelchair salesman (I thought he'd get a laugh out of that) and

gave his cell phone number since he was doing an internship with some oil company, Enron or something. After leaving the store I'd have to call him and explain everything, but I was sure he'd be more than willing to play along. Since I couldn't figure out anything for Sean (and because he doesn't have a cell phone), I just listed another philosophy professor at UT, and gave the same generic info. I figured DAVE would only be able to track down Kevin, but that was OK. Kevin could pull off an impersonation, and would probably sound like enough of a wacko to scare DAVE. Kevin owed me in the impersonation department, actually, because in junior high and high school I signed his dad's signature to a ridiculous number of detention slips and he never returned the favor. The dickhead's parents thought he was an angel all that time because he never got in trouble at school; so I guess my parents aren't alone in their naivete.

DAVE came back in the office as I was looking over the application and thinking they would be insane to hire me, that it would be obvious even to a simpleton like DAVE that I was lying about most of the shit on the damn thing. He smiled weakly and I handed the application to him. Well, I guess that's it, I said, and stood up. He looked over the application and kind of nodded approvingly— a bad sign. He was buying it.

We'll give you a call, DAVE said and shook my hand firmly, which surprised me a little. The light from ceiling lamps reflected off his shiny forehead.

Thanks, I said. I walked quickly out of the little office, back into the store. The bigness of the place struck me after being in that cramped little room. There was a little buzz in the air, the sound of people conversing quietly in hushed tones. I decided it wouldn't hurt anything to at least check out the literature/philosophy section, that I wouldn't linger there very long and certainly wouldn't pick up anything. There seemed

to be a few more people loitering: mainly older people standing around looking lost. The first book I noticed was Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, a book I read in that class on Existentialism. The narrator of that book is so alone and empty. I glanced at other familiar names: Aristotle, Descartes, Derrida, Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Heidegger, Kant, Locke, Marx, Mill, Nietzsche (of course), and Plato. For some reason I stopped in front of *The Republic* and the dialogues and stared at the spine of the book, lingered there at the unfortunate beginning of Western thought. I could feel something like anger building in me, just looking at Plato's name on the spine of a book. I mean, I know it's a result of reading all that Nietzsche (although they are in some ways paradoxically alike), but I can't help myself. I hate Plato.

As I was standing there almost unconsciously curling my hands into fists, this older lady with curly gray hair that kind of stuck out waddled by me. She started poking her head around my shoulder to look at a book, and it was all I could do to keep from screaming. I have this thing about personal space. She just hovered there for a minute, until I couldn't stand it any more. Hey, lady, how about some space? I queried, politely, I thought.

I'm sorry, she said. I was looking for a book by Plato for my son.

Oh, I said. Which one?

Well, I think he said he wanted a collection of something...

The dialogues, or the *Republic* ?

Well...

Because you can buy this book and get them both. I pulled a fat, white paperback off the shelf that compiled all of Plato's dialogues and handed it to her.

You seem very knowledgeable, she said.



Yea, well, my undergrad degree is in philosophy.

Really?

Yea. So why does your son want to read Plato? I mean, besides the unfortunate fact that he represents the beginning of Western thought.

That one word, *unfortunate*, really got her attention. Her facial expression changed, and she suddenly looked uncomfortable, almost upset. She stood there for a moment, unsure of what to say, so I jumped in again:

Because if he's just reading it on his own, and not taking a class or something, he may just take those dialogues at face value, read them without realizing, or coming to the conclusion that Plato was a superstitious fascist who privileged speech over writing, denigrated art, kicked the poets out of his pathetic little republic, liked to screw little boys, and basically polluted Western thought for a couple of centuries. *Plato is the Michael Jackson of philosophy.*

The lady was standing there with her mouth open, obviously in horror, and I noticed that two of the sales girls, including the brunette who showed me back to DAVE's office, were standing not too far away and had overheard the whole thing. They were both kind of pale and looked like they had just witnessed a mugging but didn't have the guts or intelligence to say anything, so I decided I had managed to avoid any possibility of having to get a job there, though I had tried (or that would be my story); and I also thought it would be a good idea to get the hell out of there before some fatass rent-a-cop showed up and started pushing me around and telling me not to come back.

So I left the air-conditioned megabookstore, a warehouse of books for yuppies staffed by bimbos and pasty morons, for the unrepentant Houston heat and a scorching ride home in my crappy little Volvo. It really amazed, and sometimes even amused me, the

way both my parents seemed almost oblivious to the competitive materialism that ran rampant in my neighborhood, and I suspect most suburban neighborhoods like mine. Their egos and the relative status of my car remain completely separate— to my occasional consternation and the bewilderment of my friends. They can clearly afford to buy me a new car; they just don't think about it that much. My parents have more important things to concern themselves with— at least, that's what I'd like to think. But as soon as I got into my car and started driving that boxy little piece of shit, a warm breeze drifting through the windows despite the humidity, I felt instantly better, like I had just done something incredibly cathartic and healthy, like I didn't even need a car with air-conditioning and a CD player.

It felt good to be out on city streets with the smells of exhaust and gas and the sounds of cars, an occasional distant voice yelling over the city sounds, moving by buildings in the sun with a little wind in my hair. I realized once again how much I really did need interaction, at least every once in a while; and I decided I hated Plato because he placed himself and what he called philosophy above everything else, and ultimately couldn't appreciate beautiful things— and he couldn't do that because he never really faced his own mortality. I'll be damned if Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a mere copy. Plato couldn't have looked at Kelly Klingman and realized he was going to die. Despite the traffic and the sweat trickling down my neck and stomach, I felt deeply satisfied and at ease.

*No Girls Allowed*

Ch. 5: Interrogating Gunthroat

A few days after my bookstore field trip this repeated pounding on the front door roused me from a deep but tormented sleep. I think I was dreaming about Sarah. I sat up in bed, took a second to gather myself, and slipped on a pair of Umbro shorts that were conveniently lying on the floor before I ambled down the stairs two at a time. I was still wiping sleep from my eyes as I opened the door to this white trash exterminator guy in a gray jumpsuit. He looked kind of pissed, but I wasn't exactly in the best of moods, either. The guy had kind of greasy brown hair down to his shoulders and a mustache like a porno actor from the seventies. He was really tall, too; he kind of towered over me. Yea, I said.

I'm the exterminator, have a ten a.m. appointment. Been knockin' for a while.

Yea, OK.

Sorry if I woke ya up.

No problem.

Actually, it was a problem, but that's one of those socially awkward times when you're required to lie. Apparently my parents had forgotten about the exterminator appointment. They were always forgetting shit like that. Although, I hadn't had a real conversation with either one of them for a few days.

Exterminator guy walked around with this metallic canister spraying crap into crevices— more or less randomly, it seemed to me. He probably had to take a fucking weekend course, or something, to get his license, or whatever it is they have to get. The whole thing was annoying and just a shitty way to start the day.

After I'm done you might wanna get out of the house for a couple hours, he said.

Really?

Some people get nauseous from this stuff. It ain't that strong or nothin', but some people react to it, ya know.

Yea, I know.

You the owner of the house? (He gave me this snide look out of the corner of his eye, and I noticed the redness in his fat cheeks and the sweat stains under his armpits and all up and down the back of his jumpsuit thing.)

No. My parents own the house.

I thought you was too young to own a house like this, he said, untangling himself from some green curtains. You home from college or somethin'?

Or somethin'.

Exterminator guy chuckled and kept walking around, through the rest of the living room, the formal dining room, the study, my dad's office. In the kitchen he said something about what his wife could do in a kitchen like that, but he finally stopped talking once he made it back to the study. I guess he saw some of my dad's law books and decided not to incriminate himself. Then he started to go upstairs, and I stopped him.

Whoa there, buddy, I said. Uh, are you sure you're supposed to go upstairs?

Well, I guess I don't have to, but I think I'm supposed to.

I think you can skip it this time, I said.

I really think I gotta go up there.

Well, I live here, and I don't think you do.

He stood in the cream-tiled entranceway thinking it over, but finally he shrugged his shoulders and gave me an almost homicidal look before he trudged toward the front door. Have a good day, he said over his shoulder. I just closed the door, glad to be rid of him. I thought I showed a remarkable amount of self-control because I really wanted to tell that fucking redneck what he could do with himself, despite his size. The fumes from the bug-killing juice were already making me light-headed so I went out to the back yard— where it was not only rain forest hot, but so humid that steam was practically rising off the fucking grass: a typically sub-tropical Houston day. I really wished we had a pool. A dive into some cool water would've hit the spot. When I was a little kid I begged my parents for a pool, but they acted like it was an extravagant thing to ask for, and just gave me a grin that meant no way in hell. They'd always say I could go to the neighborhood pool whenever I wanted, which was true, but I wanted my *own* pool. Hitting them with the only child plea and the physical fitness argument didn't help, so I basically gave up. Standing there I thought about turning on the sprinklers and just sitting in one of several crappy white plastic chairs littering the wood deck, wearing nothing but Umbro shorts, letting the little bastards spray me. Christ it was hot, and not even lunch time.

The back yard looked pretty much the same as it had when I was a little kid. There were flat stone steps that led from the porch to the gate near the garage, and a little bed of flowers with this flimsy red plastic perimeter that sat between the fence and the garage. Kathy liked to work out there occasionally, but at the time it was just a mound of dirt. She'd been busy, I guess. I've never really understood the whole gardening thing. I guess some people think it's relaxing, or something. The grass was getting kind of long, and I noticed a broken piece of fence, a place where the fenceboard was

broken almost in half.

Sean did that when we were in junior high. We snuck out in the middle of the night to egg some cars from this spot where we could hide under a bridge and nail them as they drove by, and the cops chased us because they drove by and we threw eggs at them before realizing they were cops, but we both managed to make it back to my back yard by hopping two blocks of fences in the dark. Sean looked back over his shoulder as we got to my house and broke off the top part of one of the fence boards because he leaned against it too hard. It was pretty funny, actually, although we would've been screwed if he fell off the fence and broke his arm or something.

I could feel sweat starting to form on my neck and forehead so I decided to go ahead and turn on the sprinklers. What I really wanted was to go back inside and go back to sleep, but I had to let the house air out for a while. I was tired from the dream, and I just felt heavy. When I sat down, I looked at some ants crawling around near my toes, between the porch and the grass, and I started to think about my dream. Usually I have a hard time remembering dreams, but I had a feeling this one was going to stay with me for a while. In the dream I was looking through a window, and I could see Sarah having sex with all these faceless guys, one after another, and every once in a while she'd look out the window and laugh at me. It was all incredibly pedestrian; I'm sure the psychiatrists would go to town with the spurned lover shit, maybe throw in something about issues with my mother just for kicks.

In the dream I could see my Adidas shirt in the background sitting on the dresser, just a splash of red cloth and a glimpse of the white leaf logo, and the more I thought about it, the more pissed off I got. The thing is, I never really stopped thinking about Sarah, or the shirt. I wanted them both back and I couldn't remember

why I had been so eager to ditch her. I was even thinking about Sarah when I was being forcibly removed from the Astrodome, mainly because I wondered if she would think it was funny. I hadn't wanted to admit it before, but I couldn't stop thinking about her. The sprinklers hitting me felt like some kind of water torture, like I was being attacked by hidden water guns, so I turned the damn things off and went inside to get dry. After towelling off, I slipped into a shirt and some shoes and decided to drive by Sarah's house, just to see if she was home.

The whole way there I kept telling myself this would be a one-time thing, that I was just a little freaked out because of the dream. Hot air rushed past me, and the glare was excruciating as I drove by the little park with all the pine trees lining the road, little kids running around the swimming pool, and the tiny soccer goals standing there like markers from some ancient and forgotten culture. Sarah's neighborhood was a flash of white. I took the turn to her street on two wheels (I guess I was driving a little fast) and slowed down so I could cruise by her house. I couldn't tell if anyone was home or not, but there was a new, navy blue Ford Explorer in the circle driveway. It only took me a second to wonder if that was a new boyfriend's car, and I felt empty, worse than if someone had punched me in the stomach. She could be in there fucking some other guy. I had this sick, anxious feeling, but I didn't know what to do. I wanted to pound on her door and get some answers, even if it meant finding her with some other guy, but I took a deep breath and regained some sanity. At the end of the street I pulled into a driveway, turned around, and drove by again. No change. I don't know what I expected. I drove away wondering what the hell to do. Now I not only needed to get my shirt back, I wanted to find out whose fucking car that was.

The next day I called Sarah's friend Amanda. They had been pretty close in high school, and I assumed they were still friends. Amanda wasn't with Sarah at that party where we hooked up, so I didn't really know if calling her would be useful, but I thought I had to try. I called her house and her mom said she was at work (but only after some nauseatingly polite banter), the Baybrook Mall Macy's, where Sarah and I had our little fountain talk. Of course, I had to go down there to see if I could find out anything.

It actually took me a while to track down Amanda. That Macy's store is not a small place. She was working on the third floor, in the Ralph Lauren department. The whole thing was kind of disgusting. They had everything there: beds, sheets, socks, belts—everything you could ever want with the little guy on a horse. You'd have to be absolutely sick with materialism to want shit like that, and the thing that really pisses me off is that those people are considered normal. I want to sit at home and read, which makes me a weirdo, but the shitheads with Ralph Lauren bed sheets are considered healthy members of society. Amanda was talking to some guy she works with, this tall, thin, nerdy-looking guy who looked like a future IBM stiff, when I showed up. They were flirting a little (it was pathetic, like little kids) and not paying attention to anything else, so I had to clear my throat to even get them to look at me. I had on a similar outfit to the one I wore to the bookstore, and they both gave me that *you obviously don't shop here* look, which pisses me off because it's judgmental and condescending. But Amanda recognized me.

Hey, Alex, she said. Her co-worker stood there looking pissed-off, like he was thinking about beating the crap out of me. Amanda isn't fat, but she's definitely bigger than Sarah. She has shoulder-length, brunette hair and blue eyes that tend to reveal



what she's thinking in this snotty, almost aristocratic way. Amanda was born to be a doctor's wife. She's also a gunthroat: I mean, she starts talking, and the more she talks the louder she gets. It can be kind of scary. Every time I see Amanda I think about this time in elementary school, fifth grade I think, when Kevin told her to shut the fuck up right in the middle of class. The thing is, it took a while for him to get kicked out because the teacher was laughing right along with the rest of us. I'm pretty sure Amanda still hates him, but she's probably not the only one.

Hey, Amanda, I said. How's it going?

OK. What are you up to?

Why would I be up to anything?

You're not up here to steal or something, are you?

Jesus.

Well?

OK, OK. Are you still friends with Sarah?

Yea, kind of. I heard the two of you have become pretty good friends lately.

Yea, well, I was wondering if you know anything about her, um, seeing anyone new lately?

Shouldn't you ask *her* that? (Noticeable rise in volume.)

Probably...

Well? (Even louder.)

So you're not going to tell me?

What do you think? (Obnoxiously loud.)

Goddammit, Amanda—

That's when geeky salesguy came to the rescue. He asked if there was a problem, I

said no and left the store. I just walked out. It occurred to me that it might be a good idea to cut back on the profanity. It seems like every time I utter a curse word it's like I'm setting off an alarm of some kind. People tend to hear a curse word, and it's like I'm breaking into their goddamn car, or something. Cursing might be a bad habit, but I can't help myself. Curse words are just so expressive; I can't live without them. I don't trust people who refuse to curse, at least every once in a while. Christ, even Kathy lets loose with the occasional shit or goddammit. People who don't curse are fooling themselves into thinking they're better people, more pure or innocent than the rest of us. Fuck them.

I went back into the mall to get one of those big chocolate chip cookies before heading back to the homestead; I hadn't bothered to eat anything that day. I was no closer to finding out who belonged to that car, and for the moment I was out of options. Sarah has plenty of friends, but I figured most of them would be about as receptive as bitchy gunthroat Amanda. I wandered back out to the fountain with my cookie and a Coke, and I sat there looking at people for a while: some black and hispanic gang-banger types in pro sports jerseys eyeing each other and occasional shoppers walking by trying to ignore them; small groups of teenagers, junior high kids thrilled to be at the mall unaccompanied by their parents; and of course a few geriatric specimens, shuffling through the mall for no particular reason, pretending to shop. I glanced in at some stuff hanging in a sports store, I think it was a Footlocker, and saw what looked like a blue silk banner with the old Adidas logo: the three-pronged leaf, not the new logo, the generic three stripe triangle-looking thing. I thought about buying it, but decided I'd had enough of the mall. The cookie was kind of hard, so I threw half of it away and walked slowly out to the parking lot. Killing the summer was proving to be

excruciatingly difficult, like it had been when I was a little kid. Not much has changed.

I found the whole experience with gunthroat depressing, so I drove to this new bar, I forget what it's called, on Nasa Road One, just down the street from the Johnson Space Center. That place is like a theme park now. They have rides and stuff, I guess; I haven't been there since I was a little kid. I remember walking through with my parents and sitting through a couple of those films about the Apollo missions when I was in elementary school. I think that's the way I'd like to remember it.

Even though there was plenty of afternoon light, the bar was dark and a little smoky, which I found appealing. That's what I expect of a bar. I handed over my Visa and downed a rum and Coke and a Budweiser before deciding to call Tommy. If anyone would sit in a bar and drink with me in the late afternoon, it would be Tommy; and I hadn't talked to him in a while, not since our Taco Cabana experience. I sat swiveling on one of those high-backed chairs, making small talk with the bartender, this short guy with dark hair and a mustache: he looked like this idiot teacher I had in sixth grade who mispronounced stuff when he tried to read out loud to the class, but it wasn't the same guy. Idiots with mustaches seemed to be the theme of the day. Just thinking about the way my day had gone made me tired.

The bartender wanted to talk about this suspected serial killer who had killed three women in the area, abducting them from bars. Supposedly, the killer had nabbed one of the women from a bar up the street, one of the bars right across the street from the space center where the NASA guys (and girls) go after work, but the police weren't sure. That's what the bartender guy said, anyway. He could be full of shit for all I know (or care, for that matter). I told the bartender the killer must not approve of women at Mission Control, but he didn't laugh.

By the time Tommy showed up I was drinking my second Bud and already feeling the incredibly pleasant, light, warm feeling of an afternoon buzz. My cheeks felt warm and red. That rum and Coke must've hit me pretty hard; I hadn't had any hard alcohol in a while and I was incredibly hungry. Half of a big cookie won't quite sustain me. The dumbass bartender kept giving me homicidal looks and wasn't talking to me anymore either, except to take my order. He's one of those soft-talkers; I could barely hear the fucking guy, so I guess it's better that he wouldn't talk to me. I guess he didn't like the Mission Control comment. Tommy came in looking like he just woke up. He sat down next to me at the bar wearing baggy, green mesh shorts, a blue Yaga T-shirt and Nike running shoes without socks. His hair was all messed up (I don't think he always bothers to shower— but then, neither do I), and his eyes were bloodshot, so it didn't take much of an interrogation to get him to admit he'd been smoking out for about an hour and a half, and he was already kind of fried. He just sat there staring at me for a few minutes, blinking, which of course made bartender guy even more morose. But it wasn't that long before Tommy regained enough of his brain to order a drink.

We went over and sat at a booth to look at the traffic congesting Nasa Road One. I always thought Nasa Road One was kind of a pretentious name for a road. It sounds too official. But I figured Tommy wouldn't really care about that kind of observation. I asked him if he'd heard anything about a serial killer in the area, and of course he said no. If it doesn't happen in a Nintendo game, Tommy doesn't give a shit about it. He blinked his eyes a couple of times and squinted at me.

So what happened to Sarah? he asked.

Whatta you mean what happened?

Weren't you fucking her for a while?

Yea.

Well?

So we're not anymore.

Why not?

I don't know.

And you thought you saw her in Taco Cabana that night.

Yea. (I laughed a little, and so did he.)

So, are you stalking her now, or what?

Fuck you.

Well?

Fuck off.

OK, Jesus.

I'm not stalking her.

OK.

I'm not.

Fine.

I just sat and looked out at the traffic for a couple minutes. Tommy gave me this stupid grin.

Why the fuck would I stalk her?

I believe you, Jesus.

I mean, I drove by her house one time—

You drove by her house?

One time.

You drove by her house?

Are you fucking deaf? What did I just say? I drove by her house. Once.

When?

Today.

Today?

Goddammit.

OK. So, why did you drive by her house?

I don't know. I just felt like it. She still has my favorite T-shirt.

Which one?

The red Adidas shirt.

The old school shirt.

Exactly.

What happened when you drove by?

Nothing. But there was a car there I didn't recognize.

What kind of car?

New, blue Explorer.

I know lots of people with Explorers.

Quick thinking, Sherlock.

Fuck you.

If you smoke a little more hoochie, maybe you'll become omniscient.

Hey, I'm just trying to help *you*, asshole.

I took a big gulp of beer and looked out at the traffic again. I was still in kind of a bad mood after all that, but Tommy looked like he was perking up a little, so I told him about the whole thing with gunthroat and he actually laughed a little.

She actually kicked you out? he asked.

I just left when the tall, dorky guy walked over, I said. Tommy grinned and shook his head. It didn't take long to get bored watching cars, so we decided to throw some darts. I pounded most of my remaining Bud (a mistake, apparently), and we started to walk over to the corner of the bar, but I felt a little dizzy and had to lean against a table. It was almost the same feeling I had after I got back from the skating odyssey to my elementary school, but this just hit me all of a sudden. From out of nowhere I was wasted, and the room was spinning. I looked at Tommy, and he gave me this weird look and asked if I was OK. I told him I felt dizzy and tried to sit down in a chair, but I fell backwards and I remember looking up at these brown, whirling ceiling fans, but the rest of that day is kind of hazy. I only remember parts of it.

## *No Girls Allowed*

### Ch. 6: Better than Porno

Apparently I passed out in that bar, at which point Tommy, instead of freaking out or just running away (which is kind of what I would expect him to do), actually got his shit together enough that he not only dragged me out of there with the help of the soft-talking bartender but managed to take me to a friend's apartment where I eventually sat up, drank some water, puked a little, and ate part of a sandwich. I vaguely remember this guy without a shirt and his annoying, nasal, incredibly talkative, red-headed girlfriend sitting around with Tommy taking bong hits as I went in and out of consciousness on their dirty, yellow couch. The whole thing is kind of foggy: I must've faded in and out of consciousness. I think that guy is Tommy's marijuana source, and he seemed to be a pretty cool, understanding guy.

By the time I got home I was more or less OK, if still a little drunk, dehydrated and sick. I've been meaning to tell Tommy how impressed I was with his quick thinking, and the fact that he saved my ass. People can really surprise you sometimes. I mean, if Tommy put that kind of care and thought into the rest of his life, he'd be the most successful person my age that I know. But somehow I think the situation brought it out of him. My parents would've freaked out if he had dragged me into the livingroom in what they probably would've assumed to be a coma.

But really the only thing I had to explain was that I left my car somewhere and had to retrieve it, and I did that the next day, after eleven or twelve hours of sleep, a microwaved pizza and some fig newtons, and loads of water, Gatorade and Coke— not



to mention six or eight Advil. Of course, Mary freaked out a little when it took me a minute to remember where my car was, but she got over it. I couldn't remember *why* it was in a strip mall parking lot in front of a bar on Nasa Road One, and Mike and Mary couldn't really find a way to disrupt my logic of amnesia. I just kept telling them I didn't remember, and they kept looking at each other, unable to get any further. The way the whole thing just kept going in a circle was beautiful, in its way; and I never mentioned Tommy's name, either, which was probably a good idea. I didn't want him to get caught up in anything that was essentially my fault.

I was kind of lethargic for a couple of days after that, though. I sat in my house in Umbro shorts and a T-shirt, and didn't bother venturing out or changing clothes or anything. Tommy took me to my car, and he laughed when I told him about the perplexed looks on my parents' faces when I explained why I couldn't remember I had left my little blue love machine in front of a half-empty mall which happened to house a bar. I also had to retrieve my Visa card. But I had a feeling another trip to the doctor, or possibly a psychiatrist, was in my future. I'd have to be more careful: no more late-afternoon drinking binges for a while.

I told Tommy I was kind of tired and should probably keep a low profile for a few days, especially after the whole thing with Amanda, and he agreed. I thanked him for helping me out of a tough situation. He was pretty cool about it. Tommy is a good friend, I guess. I haven't know him as long as Kevin and Sean, but still. I could do worse. I'd been meaning to get back to TV and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, so my strategy of hiding in my house seemed like a good one. Man, I thought Kant was tough to read, but Heidegger is brutal. Apparently German philosophers don't strive for simplicity. The thing about that is it's just too easy to put down a book and get lost in the pretty, mindless world of *Baywatch*.

I seem to have a real talent for burning time. I mean, I can do almost nothing for days at a stretch without trying very hard. So, after two or three days and part of a night of doing very little (this includes watching up to six or seven hours of TV at a time), I decided to turn off the television in my room and take a look out my bedroom window, do a twelve-sixteen A.M. survey of the neighbors. That's when I spotted Mr. and Mrs. McDaniel making a naked, loud rush for their pool. It was a typical, disgustingly hot and humid Houston night, so skinny dipping was actually an excellent idea, but I wasn't sure I wanted to see two middle-aged people naked. I should've looked away right then, but I didn't. There they were, Jim and Sally, swimming naked in their lighted pool at midnight when they thought no one would be watching. Jim had a major farmer tan and a lot of hair on his back. He had an incredibly white ass and a huge dick. I'm not kidding— it looked huge, even from a couple houses away. It looked like he had a goddamn airpump swinging around down there. I rumbled through some stuff in my closet until I found an old pair of binoculars, and that confirmed it. I actually felt kind of jealous of the guy, but he was completely bald on top and he had a gut that protruded a bit farther than seemed healthy.

Sally, on the other hand, was a pretty hot little number for a middle-aged mom. She had the farmer tan problem, too (like I should talk), and she had a little paunch, a place where the rounded pit of her stomach bulged a little, but she had beautiful, round, white breasts and a delicious ass that was maybe starting to get a little on the big side. Still, she looked good. Sally McDaniel was what my friends and I would call a hot mom, which meant that even though she was actually someone's mother (she'd had two kids), she was miraculously attractive, and someone in the neighborhood that every heterosexual man would like to sleep with. She was like Mrs. fucking Robinson.

Actually, I think I remember Kevin flirting with her once in a grocery store when we ran into her while making a run for eggs and toilet paper to do someone's house. I flipped off my bedroom lights and went back to the window just in time to see Sally turn on her back so that I got a nice view of her breasts and her stomach and the splash of hair between her legs as she dove under the water, away from her husband. This was better than porno.

I really should've looked away when Mr. and Mrs. McDaniel started kissing, but this was live sex, and better than anything on Cinemax. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche says that art is the great stimulus to life, but on that night, I'd have to diverge from old Friedrich and say that watching two people have sex is, if not the stimulus to life, incredibly entertaining, especially compared to Letterman or Leno or the syndicated shit that comes on after them. I mean, the whole experience of watching these two people in what they thought was a private moment was incredibly exhilarating, and I should have looked away, but right as I was thinking that, Sally wrapped her legs around Jim, and I guess they started to fuck. Now I admit that at this point only a sick little bastard like me would keep watching, but I couldn't turn away. I really kept watching to see the expressions on Sally's face as she welped and moaned occasionally just loud enough for me to hear, through the window, from two houses away. She scrunched up her nose, shut her eyes, and opened her mouth as wide as it would open. It looked like she was doing everything she could to keep from screaming her pretty little lungs out.

And then they stopped gyrating up and down, so it was over, I guess, and I did look away. For some reason I didn't want to intrude on that post-coital moment, which I think is more private than the act itself. But if you're doing it in a pool where neighbors can just look in, what kind of privacy should you expect? I looked back quickly after

just a couple of seconds to try and get a glimpse of Sally's ass as she walked away from the pool toward the house with water dripping from her hair and her skin onto the pavement. Her nipples stood erect on those round, white breasts and with the binoculars I could see water dripping from her whole body; I watched her grab a towel and pull it around herself. The binoculars were surprisingly powerful. I couldn't sleep for hours after that; I was hyper, actually. So I read some more Heidegger and watched some TV, and when that didn't help I masturbated. That Sally McDaniel was one hot little number.

The next day, I was sitting on the couch flipping channels, having just finished a sandwich and a couple of Cokes, when Mary showed up. She hardly ever came home for lunch, so I knew something was up. She popped something in the microwave, probably one of those Lean Cuisine pasta things she likes, and came back into the livingroom to talk to me, sporting this serious expression. For a little while we just sat there, and I flipped channels, shooting her the occasional anxious glance. Alex, she finally said, I want you to do something for me.

Oh boy.

Come on now.

What?

I want you to go to a doctor, a different doctor, and I want you to behave yourself when you go. Do you think you can do that?

Of course I *can* do it, the question is—

Goddammit, Alex.

OK, OK. I'll go to the damn doctor and I'll act normal.

Thank you. (She sighed, probably relieved I gave in so easily.)

She went back to the kitchen to eat whatever she nuked, and I just sat there on the couch channel surfing, feeling like I had just completely surrendered my autonomy. I almost felt like a little kid again, and I wasn't sure how to process that. The feeling had been creeping up on me for a while now, and I still wasn't sure what kind of emotion I was feeling, or if it was an emotion at all. My childhood had been great by any standard, but I wanted and needed to feel like I was beyond it, in one way or another. That didn't mean I would ever stop thinking like a kid. I just couldn't see myself being as serious as Mike, sitting in the study reading the *Houston Chronicle*, going to a big office every morning in a suit and tie. Part of me would always be a little kid— or at least a teenager. Mary inhaled her pasta lunch on the run and smiled at me on her way out the door.

I want to talk more about this, she said.

Great, I said, but she was already out the door. Fantastic. She liked work again, which was probably a good thing. But it left me there feeling sorry for myself. The thing with Sarah and my shirt and that mysterious Explorer was driving me nuts. I felt helpless, paralyzed. It was eating at me; and now I had promised another trip to a doctor. I hadn't been sitting there that long when I decided to head upstairs to my room, to try and lose myself in Heidegger (an easy thing to do: I was half-way through *Being and Time* and still finding *Dasein* elusive, to say the least), and the doorbell rang. Now, keep in mind, I had been wearing the same Umbro shorts and T-shirt outfit for two days, and had showered once in that time. I looked and felt like a suburban hermit. When I saw Sarah standing there with her hands on her hips, staring at me with this haughty, pissed off look (which was incredibly sexy), my mouth dropped.

Well, she said. Can I come in, or do I have to stand out here in the heat?

Yea. Come in, I said. She gave me a smile that was actually more like a smirk and stalked past me into the entryway, but she didn't waste any time and headed straight for the living room. She was wearing some tight, white shorts, a blue tank-top without a bra and sandals; and I guess she had her hair cut recently, because those pretty, yellow locks hovered a few inches above golden shoulders that I wanted to touch in the worst way.

You look like shit, she said. You're all pale.

I've been kind of sick.

Because you've been getting wasted in the middle of the afternoon.

How'd you know about that?

I just do. (She shrugged her shoulders and flopped down on the couch.)

Are you checking up on me or something?

I just... hear stuff.

From whom do you hear stuff?

What does it matter?

So what are you doing here? (I sat down in the chair next to the couch: she could be mesmerizing. If I was a soldier being tortured for information, all they'd have to do is show me a picture of Sarah in that outfit and I'd cave in an instant.)

I didn't come to bring you chicken soup.

Funny. Why the fuck are you here?

I want you to stop telling people about us.

OK.

Really?

Sure. As long as you give back my fucking T-shirt and tell me whose Explorer that is parked in front of your house.

What?

You heard me.

What shirt?

My red Adidas shirt.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Alright, get out.

The Explorer belongs to my mom— and quit stalking me. Leave my friends alone, too, for chrissake.

It's your mom's car? (I couldn't help breaking into a smile.)

Yes. So will you promise to stop hunting down my friends?

It's your mom's car?

Jesus.

And I'm not stalking you.

Right.

What about my shirt?

Jesus, what shirt?

Goddammit, Sarah—

I guess I was yelling at that point because she got up and headed for the door, doing that beautifully-perfected butt-wagging thing that makes me want to scream with joy and kill myself at the same time, though all I could really do was stare. She made sure to lob a parting shot before strutting out.

You're fucking nuts, Alex, she said, before slamming the front door.

Fuck you! I yelled out the door as she was walking out to her car, but she just laughed, the same way she did in my dream: this high-pitched cackle that actually sounded kind of evil, like the Wicked Witch of the West. I felt like an idiot. *Fuck you* wasn't much of a comeback, but that bitch paralyzed me. I mean, it was nauseating the way my brain functioned in the presence of that girl. The thing is, I had been around plenty of pretty girls, and even dated a couple. Sean and Kevin were always laughing about the way I seemed to stay above the fray, so to speak. Sarah just did something to me. I couldn't decide on an emotion. I wondered if she was lying about the Explorer. I doubted it, but Sarah was an excellent liar. She wasn't quite on the same level with me— actually, in some ways she was better. At the same time, I was totally getting the brush-off. There was no way I was going to stop telling people about us though, and I realized I was really going to have to resort to some sneaky shit to get that shirt back. But that was OK. I needed a project. It was time to bring the hermit act to a close.



## *No Girls Allowed*

### Ch. 7: Kevin Practices His Swing

I feel like I should take the time to explain some stuff about the shirt. I mean, it's not just my favorite shirt, and I'm not obsessed with it solely because it offers some kind of connection (however tenuous) to Sarah. Tommy called it the Old School shirt— which means two things. First, he's alluding to the old Adidas logo, the three-pronged leaf. Like I've pointed out before (OK, obsessed about), the old logo can be tough to find and has all but been replaced by a new, generic, three-stripe triangle thing. It's not that I hate the new logo or anything; it's just that the old logo represents something important.

In addition to having the shirt a long time (I think I got it in the eighth grade, and it was huge on me), the shirt and the logo represent an earlier era in sports, even from before when I was born, back to the seventies and the early eighties (for me, but Old School for older people conjures up icons like Bart Starr and Mickey Mantle), when Pele was still playing soccer, when basketball players like Dr. J and Magic sported afros, when Tony Hawk was just a punk kid on a skateboard— when Phi Slamma Jamma with Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler took the college basketball scene by storm at the University of Houston, and Mike Scott won the Cy Young Award with the Astros in 1986 on the way to the pennant run against the Mets. All that shit is important to me because it's pure, in a way, and it offers a sideways glimpse of my childhood, when I first started watching sports, when I first met Sean and realized I had to be a Houston sports fan or suffer the consequences. For me, Old School isn't just a slogan

on a T-shirt or a marketing ploy for mindless, empty kids strutting through the Gap— it really means something. There aren't many things in my life that mean anything. Actually, I resent the way that phrase, *Old School*, has entered the mainstream, and become a kind of cliché, because now it's just another way to sell stuff. But that's what happens in this country.

The shirt has faded and shrunk over the years; Mary even said it was too small for me once, but I kept wearing it. I sat through hours of detention in that shirt. I drank my first legal beer in that shirt. It's even possible that I smoked my first joint in that shirt. I'm not questioning after it because I'm bored or because it gives me an excuse to stalk Sarah and possibly break into her house— because that's probably what I'll have to do. Even though I really don't really care about most of my possessions, I want that shirt back because it's probably the most sentimental thing I own. It may be the only sentimental thing I own, and Sarah is pushing me to the limit by pretending not to have it.

I decided I would try writing Sarah a letter, and just ask her for the shirt one last time. I thought being polite and civil might be worth one last shot. It was hard writing the letter. I couldn't remember the last time I sat down and wrote someone a letter, much less something like this, requesting the return of my property. It took me a while to think about the tone. I decided to be polite and try to write it as if I were writing to a company or business that had somehow mistakenly sent me the wrong product— but it didn't quite go the way I wanted. Anyway, this is what I wrote:

*Dear Sarah,*

*I haven't been very good up close and personal with people lately, so I thought I'd write a letter and ask that you give my shirt back. It's the red T-shirt*

*with the Adidas logo on the front. This way, there won't be any misunderstandings, I hope. It probably seems trivial, or even stupid to you, but I love that shirt. Everyone knows how much I love it, and I want it back. I shouldn't have left it at your house, but if you remember, the situation dictated that I get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. And I think you had at least something to do with that.*

*If you'll return the shirt, I'll promise to stay away from you and your friends, and I'll even stop telling people about us. It won't be easy to stop all communication or to stop thinking about you completely, but I'll do it if you return my shirt. I promise. Maybe after this, we'll be able to get together and laugh about the whole thing.*

*Thanks in advance.*

*Alex*

It didn't sound like a goddamn business letter at all; it sounded like brief, direct, personalized groveling, and I made sure not to close with *Love*, or anything. But at the same time, after reading it again, the letter struck me as stilted and formal— which was close to sounding official or businesslike without actually achieving it. Boy, had I fucked up. I mailed it quickly, and as soon as I had it, immediately started to worry about saying *It won't be easy to stop all communication or to stop thinking about you*. What would she think of that? Would she think I was desperate just to get in touch with her? I shouldn't have written that, even though it was true. I should've gone with my instinct to lie. If she paid any attention, she would realize she completely had the upper hand— although, I knew that had probably already occurred to her. I thought maybe I could intercept the letter. I could check her mail for the next couple of days and just steal the letter back, but that would require that I get to her mailbox before anyone else

in her family for at least a couple of days, and of course I'd have to be careful not to get caught. I think messing with the mail is a federal offense, and I couldn't go to jail for something as stupid as that. But it was an option.

After going over all that shit and pacing back and forth in my room for a while, I decided I needed to clear my head and burn some nervous energy, so I grabbed my skateboard and headed out into the afternoon heat. My street was silent, like the sun and the humidity had combined to choke out any life or desire to make noise. The cement on the driveway was white-hot and looked like it could burn skin, so I decided against trying out any risky tricks. Mostly I stuck to the occasional ollie and just glided around the driveway. I decided to try one foot-flip before calling it quits, ended up bailing out of it, and ran out into the street, almost right into Sally McDaniel, who was walking her dog. I thought it was weird that she had decided to walk her dog, a golden retriever with its tongue lolling, in the hottest part of the day— but I was twenty-one, jobless, and riding around on a skateboard in my parents' driveway at three in the afternoon, so who am I to judge?

That dog looked like it was sucking wind, though. It was huffing and puffing, its head down until I ran out in front of it. Sally was wearing khaki shorts, a red tank-top, and running shoes with those little ankle socks. When she walked, she swung her heels out behind her like she was trying to cover her tracks or something, a mannerism that straddles the line between cute in an endearing way, and nauseating in a high school cheerleader way. I guessed Sally had probably been a cheerleader in high school. She looked like the type. Her hair was pulled back with one of those black scrunch things and she looked happy, satisfied, and cheerful. She was probably thinking about her husband's enormous cock.

She said hi, I said hi, and of course I started thinking about seeing her naked, and I was trying for the life of me not to get aroused. It was tough, though, because there she was. That image will stay with me for a while. How are you? she asked. I wanted to thank her for the masturbation material and compliment her performance, but thought better of it.

I'm... fine, I said. How are you?

I'm fine.

Kind of hot to walk your dog, huh?

Well, I wasn't able to do it this morning, so...

Yea. (She maneuvered herself and the dog up onto the yard.)

Have you heard about that suspected serial killer who's been abducting women around Nasa Road One?

Yea, I was talking to someone about that a few days ago.

This city, she said, I just wonder if it's worth it to live here. She shook her head, and wiped a line of sweat from her forehead. Then she tilted her head, gave me this weird, almost condescending, cheerleader smile, and said: Well, I guess we need to get home, so, see you later.

Yea, bye, I said. I wasn't sure if I liked Sally McDaniel any more, even from afar. She practically asked if I was the killer people are freaked out about. The thing is, people die every day in downtown Houston, in the Fourth Ward and the other ghettos, but the *Chronicle* won't start writing about murders until it's rich white people who are doing the dying. That's not a Houston phenomenon: I'm sure it's true in every big city in America. I decided I would become a fan of the supposed serial killer, if only because he scared all these content, empty fuckers, and because that ignorant, horny

bitch Sally McDaniel implied that I was deranged enough to kill people. I wonder if everyone in America is that suspicious of people who want to spend their time reading and watching TV in suburbia. People think I'm wasting time, but what are they doing?

Mary actually made an appointment for me with a doctor not too long after that brief discussion when I stupidly agreed to go. She even offered to take a day off from work and drive, which was her way of saying she meant business. The appointment wasn't until the afternoon, so I could sleep till noon, get something to eat, and shower (even though I knew I'd be sweating by the time I got there, I had promised to look presentable) before heading out in my blue Swedish heat machine. As soon as I encountered traffic, I realized how isolated I had been for the last week or so. I was actually conscious of being out in the world again. Everything seemed to move fast, or at least more quickly than I had remembered; and having that many people nearby made me nervous. Looks from other drivers made me want to throw something at them. I wondered where the hell all these people were going in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. For some reason I thought I was the only one entitled to drive around in the middle of the afternoon, that all the other drivers should be doing something somewhere.

I got lucky hitting the lights, so a thin layer of sweat on my forehead was the only evidence of my transportation limitation. It actually wasn't as hot as it had been, and a very slight breeze created by speeding whenever possible helped. I signed in at the front desk of the doctor's office, this white cube of a building, and slumped into a chair in an airy, well-lit waiting room. The colors were all bright: reds and purples and yellows. I guess the place was designed to feel hopeful. I felt good sitting there in the air-conditioning— maybe a little lethargic, but good.

At the same time, I also started to get anxious. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know exactly what was wrong with me. I mean, there's something wrong with everybody, and I kind of wanted to find out for myself why I needed to sleep till noon every day. All of a sudden, I was shaking, like I had the chills or something, and having trouble breathing. I had to get out of that office. I felt like I was suffocating. People started staring at me.

I stood up and walked out the door, gasping and coughing, taking deep breaths. A white-haired receptionist with a big nose looked up from whatever she was doing, peering at me over the top of huge, black, wire-rimmed glasses that rested on the far end of that slightly crooked beak, but I was through the glass door before she could say anything. I felt better back in my car, surrounded by heat and humidity and air pollution and traffic again, comfortable now with the movement of the city around me. Isolating myself the way I had wasn't healthy, I decided, and it was time to take some fucking action. I needed to do something, so I drove to Sean's office, this big, three-story white building that used to be out in the middle of nowhere surrounded by trees and that I had only been to once before; but there were houses encroaching, sneaking up on the building from all sides.

It had been a little while since I talked to Sean, and the last time I did he told me his girlfriend had called from Austin to break up with him. She told him she had been seeing someone else for a while— which wasn't the worst part. The bad part, and this is really bad, is that the guy is a Dallas Cowboys fan; and he's from Irving. I guess Sean went kind of ballistic after the phone call, started ranting and raving and breaking shit, and his mother had to call Sean's dad (they were divorced when we were in junior high) to calm him down. It had only happened a week or so ago, but I felt kind of bad

for not being around for my friend.

When I walked into Sean's building I had to find a water fountain and a bathroom to cool off, and then it took me a while to find him. I had to go to the front of the building, browse through a directory, ask the receptionist for directions, get on the elevator, go up two floors, and twist and turn to get to a big room of cubicles and desks arranged in a haphazard, almost schizophrenic way. It was ridiculous. I would never understand how Sean could work in a place like that. When I found him, Sean and the guy at the desk across from him, this lanky long-haired goon who was so pale you could practically see through him, were playing catch with a tennis ball. That made me chuckle, and Sean looked up at me as I approached the game of catch.

Oh shit, here he is, Sean said.

Working hard, I see.

Well, somebody has to. We can't all sleep till noon.

Fuck you.

Jesus, not so loud, man. What are you, a gunthroat?

Hey, don't compare me to that bitch. (Of course, Sean knew the story.)

This is Pete. (Sean introduced me to his catch partner.)

Hey, I'm Alex.

Nice to meet you, Pete said.

What's up, A? You look like you have something cooking.

Actually...

Oh, shit.

Yea. Can you take a break from playing catch?

I guess.



We walked out of the big room and down a floor to this lounge/breakroom place with a table in the middle and some vending machines. There was one guy in the back giving us the eye and milling around a bit, but he left after Sean stared him down. The funny thing about that is that the guy has to be more important, higher up than Sean, but he was totally intimidated. That guy was scared shitless, just because of a look. Sean and I got Cokes and sat down to talk.

Remember Sarah? I asked him.

Yea.

Well, I need to break into her house.

Jesus.

Yea.

Why?

To get my shirt back.

Which one?

The red Adidas shirt.

The Old School shirt.

Exactly.

Alright. Well, that won't be easy.

Actually, we just need to get into her bedroom.

I think that's doable.

There's something else, though.

Oh boy.

Well, I kind of came here instead of going to a doctor's appointment, and I need you to call Mary at work and impersonate someone from the doctor's office.

Christ.

I've done shit like this for you.

Yea...

It's easy.

It's *not* easy. What if she recognizes me?

She won't. You can do that foreign accent thing. She'll never know.

I guess.

There ya go.

Do you know the name of the doctor?

Let's say I do.

Jesus.

Relax, I know it. You can make the call from here. Tomorrow. You just have to tell Mary I have symptoms of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, that I need to take it easy like I have been, all the same shit.

OK...

It'll be fine.

For you, I'm sure it will.

After I gave Sean the doctor's name (I wrote it down and pronounced it for him) and Mary's work number, went over my symptoms, and made him promise to make the call to Mary at work some time in the morning, I decided to go and see Kevin. There would be another time for Sean and me to have it out over Whitney, the girl in Austin. I had never really liked her; she was too bossy. Sean was probably thinking about moving back to Austin and kicking the new boyfriend's ass, if only to get some closure.

I hadn't talked to Kevin in a while either, and I figured we needed him to help us get

into Sarah's house, assuming that was possible, and I just kind of wanted to go and bother him. It took me a while to remember where Kevin worked. I knew it was one of three buildings that are grouped together in this little complex with a parking garage, but I couldn't remember which one, so I had to walk from building to building, looking at the directories on the first floor while receptionists eyed me apprehensively with those fake smiles that say *I'm putting on a friendly face, but I have my finger on the security button and I'll kick your ass out of here in a second.*

Of course the third building I went to was Kevin's. All the running around was beginning to feel like work. I was already starting to feel hot and tired, and I thought if I sat down for long in the pleasant, corporate air-conditioning of Kevin's building I might fall asleep. Unlike Sean, Kevin actually looked like he was working. It was strange to see him there in slacks, a white dress-shirt, and a tie. Jesus, a tie. Sean told me Kevin had become really serious about the whole work thing, but his temper got out of control on occasion after a couple weeks of suppressing it and kissing corporate ass. Every once in a while he just lost it.

I guess not too long ago he came home from work and this little dog, a loud, irritating little mutt, was running around his street. It started barking and biting at Kevin's heels when he got out of his car, so he calmly went into the house, got a baseball bat (an old Louisville Slugger), let the unsuspecting dog come up on his yard, waited till it was close enough, and beat the shit out of it, killed the damn thing right there on the lawn. I guess there was blood all over the grass and the sidewalk in front of Kevin's house.

Sean told me that after Kevin whacked it once, the dog whimpered and tried to turn tail and run, but Kevin hit it a few more times on the head, which knocked it down. After that the damn dog was like a pinata. The neighbors, the people who owned the dog,

called the cops and threatened to sue, but some other people on the street had called the cops earlier about the dog running around the street barking and snapping at little kids; and since it happened on Kevin's yard, the cops just warned him and told him not to do it again. He got off pretty easily, actually. It's generally not a good idea to piss him off, especially since he's not entirely at ease about becoming an adult. When I walked into the office, Kevin looked up from his desk in the corner of the room and got this big smile on his face.

You look like shit, he said.

Yea, well, it's been a long day.

I'll bet.

I was wondering if I could ask you to help me with something.

Yea. Hold on a second.

He clicked the mouse next to his computer a few times, closed a manila file folder, and we walked down the hall from his office to this little place with a window that looked out over some other buildings, our old high school, and the neighborhood that ran up next to it, seperated by a thin line of pine trees. The place we stopped to talk wasn't a lounge or even a room, just a little place with a water fountain and a couple of vending machines near a window.

Nice view, I said.

Yea. So, what's going on?

Well, remember how I told you that Sarah stole my shirt?

The Old School shirt.

Exactly—

I thought you left it at her house.

I did, but she won't give it back.

Oh.

Well, I need you to help me break into her house and get it back. Sean's already on board.

Jesus. All right.

Really?

I guess.

Now, there probably won't be any dogs to kill or anything, but I'll still need your help.

Very funny, ya crazy fuck, he said, and smiled that Kevin smile that looks like a blend of happiness and repressed psychotic behavior trying to bubble to the surface.

And actually, I might not even need your help. I just came to bother you.

I figured.

Yea. I'll give you a call soon.

Right.

It didn't make me mad that Kevin called me crazy: He could get away with it, not that he was an expert on sanity. I was afraid I'd have to persuade him to come along, but he agreed right away. I was surprised, actually. He acted like he needed something to do. That place had to be killing him. It would kill me, at least. After that I drove home with a sense of accomplishment I hadn't felt in a long time. I had a plan for getting my shirt back, and I had actually started doing something about it. It wasn't a feeling of *power*, necessarily, and no way did I feel *happy*, but it was a start. I wasn't even completely sure I wanted to break into Sarah's house, but it felt good to be doing something.

When I got home, I made sure to call the doctor's office. I told them I had forgotten

about another appointment and didn't know when I would reschedule, which wasn't a very good lie since it lacked details— and believability; it sounded like a lie. Luckily, I hadn't checked in while I was there, and of course they didn't know I had been there. The woman just told me she hoped everything was OK, and to call them as soon as I wanted to reschedule the appointment. After that last bit of business, feeling like George Peppard's character on *The A-Team*, I collapsed on the couch with some fruity drink Mary must have made (some red, watered-down punch stuff with a bad aftertaste, like over-ripe pineapple), and fell asleep in front of the TV watching cartoons.

I dreamed I was running around a hot, gray, haunted house with Scooby and Shaggy looking for my shirt, and Daphne was trying to get me to follow her into a closet but I kept losing her. The whole thing was exhausting. Jose Cruz, Earl Campbell, and Hakeem Olajuwon joined the search, all wearing their uniforms (Astros, Oilers, Rockets), and we just kept running around this old, Gothic house that wasn't really even in color (I guess it looked more green than gray), though the rest of the dream happened in those seventies cartoon colors. I also kept hearing the theme for *The Jetsons* and Beethoven's Fifth. It had been that kind of day.

*No Girls Allowed*

Ch. 8: Going Nowhere On Fourteen Hours of Sleep

Mary woke me with a weird look on her face. I couldn't tell if she was mad, or scared, or what. She was still dressed in workclothes (a navy-blue dress, white hose, and black flats), and she sat down on the couch like I was delicate and she had to be careful not to break me. I assumed Sean had called her at work, that the impersonation had been a success— but I remembered he wasn't supposed to call her until the next day. She must've been curious about the doctor's appointment, or something. I felt sleepy and kind of sick, almost nauseous. The livingroom was dark and cool except for the muted glow of the television and some dusky sunlight peeking in through the French doors.

Falling asleep late in the afternoon is the worst. I was groggy, even more exhausted now than I had been before I dozed off. Mary put a hand on my forehead like she was checking for a fever and brushed her hand through my hair, which was actually long enough for me to have some bangs. For the first time, all of a sudden, for some reason I couldn't begin to locate, I really felt bad about the clandestine, backhanded stuff with doctors. I mean, I am sick somehow and prone to bouts of extreme lethargy, but I guess this was the first time I felt bad about lying to my mother— but it's not like I was planning a confession, or anything. I didn't feel that bad.

You feel OK? she asked me, still sitting there on the edge of the couch. I sat up and took a sip of the watered-down red stuff— and instantly regretted it.

I'm kind of tired, I said. And thirsty.

I have something... strange to tell you. Do you remember Brad Klingman?

Yea.

Well, they've arrested him in connection with those murders we've been hearing about. They think he's a serial killer.

Jesus. That figures.

What?

Nothing.

I grabbed the remote from the coffee table with a lunge and turned on the television to the end of the local news. I'd have to wait until ten to see and hear the story.

What happened? How'd they get him? I asked, glancing at the TV.

I guess he tried to abduct some woman from a bar on Nasa Road One last night, but she got away and called the police, and he came after her again. The police chased him down and arrested him. Something like that.

Christ.

Do you remember how upset you were after spending the night at his house?

Yea. The little bastard used to torture animals.

Mary gave me a worried grimace, then looked back at the television. I desperately wanted to hear something about Brad's being arrested, exactly how it had happened. It was only a matter of time before this neighborhood and my high school in particular produced a serial killer. I'm surprised it took this long. Seeing how Brad's parents dealt with the whole thing would be interesting. I think they have a lot of money, so they can probably afford to hire some badass lawyer.

How was the doctor? Mary asked.

OK. Same as usual, I guess, I said. She put her hand on my arm and



squeezed. I half-expected some kind of comment like, What are we going to do with you? or When was the last time you talked to Sean? But apparently I was in the clear, from sappy motherly stuff and being caught asking a friend to impersonate someone— even though he couldn't have called her yet. I was confident in Sean's ability; he was actually really good at voices. He can do imitations of Ross Perot and Mike Tyson that are just fucking hilarious. The guy should quit whatever it is he's doing (engineering or something, I forget) and try getting on *Saturday Night Live*.

When it became obvious that I really would have to wait for word on how Brad was caught, I went up to my room, took a shower, and fell into bed. When I woke up it was dark, and I could hear crickets chirping. It hadn't been dark that long, but I figured I had missed the ten o'clock news and would have to wait for the paper the next day to get the real story about Brad; and I realized I had fallen asleep three times that day.

I didn't do much over the next forty-eight hours: For two whole days I didn't talk to a single person. Mary and Mike were working and eating out, I guess. Usually I saw Mary at night, but not for those two days. It was sort of like being stranded on an island— if the island had a two-story house on a suburban street. I slept a lot, but decided I wouldn't let myself stay isolated as long as I did the last time. The day after Mary woke me up I got the full story on Brad Klingman, from the papers and the local news. Of course, the stories conflicted about some of the details, which was interesting, but basically the cops claimed Brad (they were calling him the Suburban Stalker) killed seven women, all thin brunettes, all abducted from bars around Nasa Road One. They caught him the way Mary described it, but he wasn't talking about what he did with the bodies of those women, or if those seven were the only women he killed.

Watching footage of Brad Klingman being rushed into police headquarters, to and from cars in a bullet-proof vest surrounded by FBI guys and Houston cops, made me think about this girl, Sheila something, who was kicked out of my junior high for making threatening phone calls to some girl. I guess they taped Sheila making death threats to this girl, which is a federal offense. Her dad was a doctor, but he couldn't buy her way out of it— which is usually what happens to the people I know. If they get in trouble, they just get their parents to write someone a check. The pathetic thing is that approach almost always works.

I remember hearing about Sheila french-kissing this guy named Shane Jenkins in third grade. Sean told me he saw them touching tongues one time in the back of the class, and the teacher thought it was cute. Now that's fucked up. It's hard to believe we were thinking about sex even then because I don't remember anything definite, just these vague, watery feelings about girls. In the third grade I think I spent most of my time thinking about the cafeteria's choices for lunch, soccer, and getting home in time for *Speed Racer*. I guess I should've been hitting on Sheila.

After a few days of watching the TV guys make a big deal out of the whole thing with Brad Klingman long after they had anything new to report, and with nothing new to read (I had finished Heidegger's *Being and Time* finally: all that primitivist nostalgia did nothing for me), I made a trek to a mall to play some video games and peoplewatch. I hadn't been to Baybrook Mall since I tried to get some information out of gunthroat, and I hoped I wouldn't run into her, but I didn't plan on walking over to the Ralph Lauren store, so the chances were remote. I almost felt invisible walking into the arcade, I guess because it's so close to the entrance. But there's no mistaking the mall smell: some kind of cleaner, new stuff from different stores, and foodstuff from far-off

concessions. I always notice the background noise: little kids laughing and running, and bubbling water from those fountains.

I got five dollars of quarters at the change machine in front of the arcade and measured my options. For a while I tried that *Dragon's Lair* game (I think that's what it's called), because the animated graphics looked amazing, but I could never make it to any of the cool stuff they show in the preview. I kept dying the same way: falling off the same ledge, even though I knew it was going to give way. For some reason I still couldn't step in a different place. So I kept spending fifty cents to watch the reincarnated cartoon me fall off the same cliff in the same fucking way, over and over. The thing is I kept believing I could figure it out, that in my next life I could find a way to step around the piece of cliff I knew would give way. That game was too hard, and apparently my animated fate had been determined, so after wasting three dollars, I moved to one of the driving games, where I figured I could at least get past the first level and avoid dying in the same stupid way.

In the middle of the second level of that car game, as I was trying to make tight turns in a yellow Lambourghini, I started thinking about the way time seems to stop when you're playing a game, the sense of closure at the end, and the feeling that the world is contained within whatever it is you're playing, whether it's a video game, or a sport like soccer, or even chess. When I'm really into a game on TV, the same thing happens: My sense of time vanishes.

After I died trying to pass a car at the beginning of the fourth level, I looked up at a clock and realized I had been in there for more than two hours, though it only felt like ten minutes, and I was out of quarters. I decided to walk into the mall, maybe get a Coke, look at a girl or two, and then head home. But as I rounded a corner and found

myself on the edge of the common area where all the fountains are, I saw something that scared me. This blonde who looked exactly like Sarah, even down to the clothes, was talking (in an animated way) to someone who looked like me, or at least appeared the way I thought I looked, in the same spot where Sarah and I had our little liar conversation. I just stood there gaping. For a little perspective I walked away and came back— and they were gone. At least, the guy who looked like me was gone. But the Sarah lookalike was still there. She walked over to one of the fountains and sat down on the circular red-brick bench.

At this point I was totally freaked out, but I spotted the guy that looked like me heading for the exit and started breathing normally again. He was taller, weighed more, had a wider face than me. But still. He was wearing a Stussy T-shirt, some baggy blue shorts and Nike running shoes without socks. There was another me— and another Sarah— and they were both in the mall at the same time with me. I couldn't tell yet if the girl was really Sarah, but since I had done this before, I assumed I was seeing what I wanted to see again. Seeing Sarah lookalikes didn't really phase me anymore, but seeing her talking to a guy that looked so much like me— that smacked of something totally beyond my control. It was as if I stepped back in time, and I was watching our mall conversation happen again. Seeing someone who could almost be my twin made me feel so ordinary I almost couldn't breathe.

I had to get out of there. It was the same feeling I had at that doctor's office, minus the coughing. In a daze, hot Gulf of Mexico air and the smells of exhaust and gasoline hitting me in the face, I drove home, almost oblivious to the stifling red heat. For a while I was so unsure of what I had seen that I couldn't really even think, which is an almost impossible state for me. I overthink everything: speaking, multiple-choice tests,

where to eat. But I felt my way back home like a fucking bat or something; I don't even remember the drive. I felt stoned. Even though I was unbelievably thirsty when I got home, I just sat on the couch, staring, and I didn't even turn on the television. Of course I did ultimately turn it on, and drink a Coke. After a few minutes of bathing in the mindless glow of TV, I felt OK enough to call Sean. Say what you want about television, but it does have the power to soothe. I had to call Sean at work, even though he'd only be there another hour or so, but I doubted he'd mind. I wasn't sure what I'd say, but somehow I knew that if I called him, I'd figure out what I had to do next. When Sean answered the phone, he was laughing, and it took him a minute to recover.

Shit, man, what's up? he finally got out.

I think I might've seen myself.

What?

I think I saw another me, and I might have seen an event from my life happen for a second time.

OK, man, you and Tommy have to stop getting stoned in the middle of the afternoon all the—

Fuck you, I saw it, and I'm not stoned.

Well, that only leaves one other possibility.

I know.

So?

I don't know.

Listen, A, there's a party tonight at Liz's place. You know where that is, right?

Of course.

Alright, well, her parents are gone, there should be lots of girls and lots of beer.

Yea, OK.

You sure you're OK there, Skywalker?

Fuck off.

Later.

Actually, a party was probably the last thing I needed, but I knew I would go; and I felt a little better after talking to Sean. Once I know about some happening like a party, I'll go even if I'm sick enough to be carried in with a group of attending physicians. Since I'm sick most of the time (or *feel* sick most of the time), I'm still afraid of death, but it's easy to become obsessed with symptoms and forget the inevitable. When I was in Austin I had the flu one time, but there was this huge party some guy in my English class invited me to. It was his party, and he lived at this apartment complex that looked like someone had tried to reconstruct the set of Melrose Place or something. The whole complex put on this huge party. Anyway, I took a couple of six-hour antihistamines before I went and, needless to say, after a few beers I was flying. I passed out in Kevin's car, apparently. I don't really remember all of it.

I kind of wonder why Kevin didn't take me to the emergency room that night. I probably needed my stomach pumped. But he just took me home and let me sleep for two days. The point is, going to parties is a necessary distraction because I can forget about how shitty I feel and the fact that I'm going nowhere on fourteen hours of sleep. Liz always knew how to throw a party; and I thought Sarah might be there.

Mary and Mike actually put in an appearance that night. We sat down and ate dinner like we did when I was a little kid, Mike and Mary still dressed in their work clothes: Oxford shirt, suit pants (no coat or tie at the dinner table, though), and some Italian

leather shoes for Mike; a burgundy pant suit with black hose and heels for Mary. It was nice. I felt a little underdressed in baggy khakis, a blue T-shirt from a high school soccer tournament, and Vans without socks— my usual uniform. We had spaghetti and salad and cheesecake, and we did the small talk thing. Mike asked me if I had thought about the fall, I said not really, and Mary sat there with this pensive look on her face, though she tried like hell to smile.

The thing is, I was lying about not thinking about the fall, because I had thought about it. I wanted to go back to Austin and try again, but I was scared. I didn't know if I could do it, and Sean and Kevin wouldn't be there much longer. Actually, I wasn't afraid of being alone necessarily, and the coursework had never been a big deal; I actually enjoyed the work when it was engaging. I was afraid of sleeping all day, and not being able to go to class, even if I wanted to. In Houston I couldn't fail at anything, and it didn't really matter if I slept all day.

After dinner I showered and changed, and I sat around waiting for Mike and Mary to go to bed. It was a Friday, and they said they might be going out too, but I doubted that. I couldn't remember the last time they had gone out anywhere together. I told them I was going to a party, but they didn't seem to mind. Instead of having to haggle over how I spent my time, I got the impression they were just happy I was getting out of the house for a little while. Around nine, I was sitting on my bed watching *Magnum P.I.* in syndication on some cable channel when Mike came up and said they were meeting some people for drinks. On his way out of my room he gave me this half-smile and grabbed my shoulder, like he did before my soccer games when I was a kid. I wasn't sure what to make of it at the time. I think he wanted to say something, but just couldn't do it. Sometimes I wonder how he succeeds as a lawyer.

Elizabeth Sutton, or Liz, as we had called her since the second grade (because she thought Liz sounded more sophisticated and there was another Elizabeth in our class), lived in a huge new house her parents bought while we were in high school, more to show off how much money they have than because they need a bigger house. Liz threw some raging parties in high school. This house is one of those new, modern places with conventional and circle driveways, lots of glass, lots of black and white tile, and an amazing pool that looks like it's been cut out of some kind of dark, marble-like rock in the middle of a perfectly manicured lawn, complete with rows of all kinds of flowers and shit. In the event of a hurricane, these people will be fucked.

I thought if I got drunk enough, though, I might ask Liz if her parents would mind adopting me. The pool was amazing. But before I could start fantasizing about spending my afternoons poolside, I remembered I'd have to put up with Liz: She's an only child— and Christ is she spoiled. When she turned sixteen her parents bought her a red BMW convertible, and I don't even want to relive all the bratty shit she did as a little kid. When I was in elementary school, she was in my class every year except fourth grade, and I remember fourth grade with a kind of nostalgic bliss. She was so fucking bossy. When we were in fifth grade, she told me I had to ask this girl named Jennifer Adams to be my girlfriend. Of course I wouldn't, mostly because Liz told me I had to but partly because Jennifer Adams had the biggest, scariest eyes of anyone I'd ever seen; and that refusal turned into this war of the sexes thing between most of the fifth grade boys and most of the girls that lasted for at least a month. My friends and I started following girls home from school, harrassing them, egging houses and shit— though we probably would've done some of that stuff anyway.

I showed up at Liz's place around ten-thirty, and I was worried about getting there too



early, but I actually had trouble finding a place to park. It didn't take a genius to realize the neighbors would be pissed soon, and the cops would probably be there within the next hour or so. But I was determined to enjoy myself until that happened. I finally had some energy, and although it was still incredibly humid, I wasn't sweating or anything in jeans and a T-shirt. As I walked up the long driveway, these two girls, a brunette with big tits and a tiny strawberry blonde (they both had amazing bodies, actually) came stumbling out the back door near the garage, giggling and holding onto each other. They both went to my high school, and I couldn't remember their names—but one of them, the brunette, might've been Lacey or Casey or something. They were wearing almost identical outfits: short, black skirts, spaghetti-strap blouses (turquoise and silver) without bras, and those clog things that look uncomfortable. I guess the blonde was wearing some white K-Swiss sneakers without socks; those clog things look like clown shoes. I was probably staring at them. They both looked trashed, and it looked like they were holding each other up in a pushing, pulling tug-of-war. The one whose name I could almost remember grabbed my arm and yelled Hey, do you have any pot? as her friend tried to drag her away, toward their cars I guess, and they both started laughing again. When she lunged at me, I got a nice look at the brunette's rack: she was spilling out all over the place. I couldn't tell if they were really looking for some drugs, or if Lacey or Casey or whatever the fuck her name is was just making some kind of drunken lunge at me. I always seem to encounter people in pairs. For just one quick moment I allowed myself to think about *menage a trois* positions with them—but decided not to torture myself with that; I resolved to try and focus on socially acceptable behavior.

I watched the drunk girls stumble across the lawn and out of sight (the brunette

actually looked back at me), then I walked up the driveway and peeked over the little gate to see if anyone was in the back yard. A few stragglers were standing around with red plastic cups, but most of the people appeared to be inside. I went in through the side door the two girls used. The first thing I noticed was the keg sitting beside the kitchen table in a trash can filled with ice. People were helping themselves to the beer, and to the incredible stash of hard liquor sitting on the bar between the kitchen and the ridiculous livingroom that looked like it was built for entertaining wealthy business clients, not spoiled post-adolescents. I saw four different kinds of vodka, three kinds of scotch, I forget how many different brands of whiskey— there was a lot of shit there. Bottles of Coke and Sprite and a little tub of ice had been strategically placed near the liquor, and I decided to start with a Jack and Coke on the rocks. I was pouring myself a drink when Liz yelled out my name, stumbled up to me and gave me a hug. I couldn't believe how wasted she was already. She usually didn't get that sloppy at her own parties so she could keep an eye on stuff.

I'm *so* glad you came, Alex, she managed to shout before grabbing my arm and hugging me as she tried to back away and almost fell. That was all she said. After giving me this big hug and making a spectacle of walking across the room to greet me, she just walked away. It looked like she had maybe gained a little weight; but that may have been because she had her hair pulled back. Christ, she was wasted. I didn't even get a chance to ask her what she thought about Brad Klingman being arrested. He was in a couple classes with us, and I think Liz had a crush on him in junior high. The ghost of that emotion could be why she was getting wasted. I walked through the living room, nodding hello to a couple of people I knew, trying to smile at every girl I walked by, looking for Sean. I was starting to get uncomfortable, and I even started to think

about leaving. There's nothing worse than feeling like an outsider at a party. The time seems to creep by when you're alone in a group.

I walked outside to the deck and the pool, saw a few more people I vaguely knew and didn't want to talk to, finished my drink and went back inside for another. Standing at the bar pouring myself another Jack and Coke, I couldn't help looking at the lighted pool through the kitchen window. I could see part of my reflection, just my head actually, in the top half of the window, and the azure water from the pool shimmered and reflected florescent yellow light. I got anxious when I saw a turned blonde head of hair at the back door, but it turned out to be this cheerleader from my high school, Amy Farrel, who walked in with two huge meathead types and two other former cheerleaders, one of whom was talking into a cell phone. I hate those goddamn things. I can't understand why people want to be accessible all the time.

Amy Farrel was a major bitch in high school— well, all the way through school, actually. I think she was born a bitch. She barely acknowledged my existence in high school, even though I had known her since we were little kids and I sort of hovered around the edges of the self-proclaimed cool, party crowd. I figured this would be no different.

The important thing was, she wasn't Sarah. Liz and Amy were doing that annoying squealing hello thing while the bodyguards headed for the keg. That's when Sean finally showed up. Of course Liz had to hug him for about five minutes. I thought she might start kissing him right there, and Sean made sure to grab her ass at least one time that I noticed. Liz still had a drink in her hand, so I figured it would be about an hour until she was passed out face-down in one of the house's many spacious bathrooms. Sean had managed to ditch his work clothes and looked like himself again; his hair was

all matted down on one side, and it looked like he just woke up, threw on some jeans and a T-shirt, and came to the party.

It's about fucking time, I said. I was about to leave.

Keep your skirt on, Dorothy, he said, and headed for the keg. I drank down about half of my drink and was already feeling that familiar, pleasant, warm, red alcoholic glow, so I figured I should switch to beer soon. As soon as Sean made it back from the keg, I maneuvered us out to the pool. It was getting stuffy in that kitchen, and I figured the chances of getting into a fight were considerably less if we stayed out of the kitchen or the livingroom and away from the former cheerleaders and their anonymous entourage. Sean ran a hand through his hair, but that just made it worse. Women actually went for the unkempt wild-man look on occasion, so I suspected he affected that look somehow. But his hair was so fucked up it was hard to believe he could've done that on purpose.

I was about to say something to Sean about his hair when Amy and the troops brought their act outside to the pool. Amy looked in our direction with something that resembled a smile, so we smiled back and Sean nodded. Chelsea Dolenz, one of the other former cheerleaders and Amy's shadow since the fifth grade, was still talking on a cell phone, no doubt looking for something better to do. She had shoulder-length brunette hair and these blue eyes that could hypnotize— and she looked like she either worked out all day or starved herself. I figured it was a combination of the two. She could probably be a model. Chelsea could still send a cold look that could make you feel like a fucking serf, but she waved at us and smiled in mid-sentence, the cell phone still pressed to her ear.

I was really surprised. The frat-boy drones gave us a menacing *stay away from us if you know what's good for you* look, which Sean ignored, of course. He walked right

over to Amy. If I remember correctly (and like I said before, my memory comes and goes), Amy had called him a psycho on more than one occasion, but she only half-meant it, and she was usually drunk when she made pronouncements like that. She was kind of a psycho herself.

The bodyguards just stood there looking menacing, so I followed Sean over to talk (well, listen) to Amy, though I knew it was probably a mistake. I actually ended up listening to Chelsea. From her hand on hip stance, if you just evaluated the body language, it looked like Chelsea was talking to the head of a major Hollywood studio about closing a movie deal, or putting together the last-minute financing for a hostile corporate takeover; but the conversation was actually about how dead the Shepherd (a street within shooting distance of downtown) scene is, and what colors were in last year. If you just took in the serious, animated way she was talking, it looked like she had something important to say. You have to listen to find out how empty she is.

On top of that, she has this incredibly annoying, nasal voice that makes me want to scream, but I was determined not to say anything antisocial, so I walked away, back towards the pool. I sloshed the remnants of my drink around, looking at the gold flashes in the bottom of the glass, and drank it down. It was time for a beer. I left Sean on his own with Amy and went inside to the surprisingly unoccupied keg, thinking I would drink one beer, make sure Sarah was nowhere near the party, and then I would leave before Liz passed out or the cops showed up or Sean decided someone wasn't a loyal Houston sports fan.

As I was pouring myself a beer, I looked out at Sean talking to Amy. Those idiots standing next to her with their arms folded looked like bouncers. If I cut the two

bouncers out of the image, and when Amy turned away from me, it was like I was watching Sarah talking to Sean, like a half-assed, more dreamlike replay of the thing at the mall. A feeling like I was drowning and a panic attack hit me in a wave, so I gulped down some beer quickly, tried to take a breath, and looked around. The alcohol helped, and I heard Liz laughing from the entryway. I peeked around the corner just in time to see her walking-crawling upstairs with two guys I had never seen before— but she was a big girl, and it was none of my business. When I walked back out to the pool (breathing easier now), I noticed a green leaf that looked like the old Adidas logo floating in the shallow end of the pool, and as I stared at the leaf and the charcoal pool bottom, I heard Sean talking loudly.

I was surprised. Really. I mean, he'd only had one or two beers, I think, and it usually takes more alcohol or some serious provocation (i.e. a serious sports conversation) for him to get irate. By the time I walked over there, I realized he was in mid-story and not about to start a fight, telling Amy and Chelsea (who had finally stopped talking on the goddamn cell phone) and the two meatheads about Kevin killing that dog. You should've seen the looks on their faces by the time he got to the end of the story. Sean started laughing as he made this whacking motion with his arms to demonstrate how Kevin killed the dog with the baseball bat, as if they needed a visual aid. The bodyguards, their arms still folded, had these amused smirks, like someone just told an obscene joke and they actually understood the punch-line; and the two girls had these horrified, mouth-dropping expressions that were just fucking priceless. Sean was laughing so hard he was almost snorting just trying to catch a breath, and I thought he might fall back into the pool. I guess he figured he had no chance with those girls, so he might as well horrify them.

That's when I looked through the kitchen window and saw two cops standing at the door talking to someone who had answered the door, someone I had never seen before. I slammed the rest of my beer, grabbed Sean's arm, and started dragging him toward the little gate. Between protestations that really just amounted to a series of *what the fuck* sputterings, we made it through the gate, followed by Amy and her little group.

The cops are here, I said.

Oh, was all Sean could muster, once we made it far enough down the driveway for him to see the squad car. So, you guys want to meet at a bar, or something? Sean inquired in Amy's direction. Amy and Chelsea and Lori (the third former cheerleader who had suddenly materialized) shot back these stunned looks. They acted like we had tried to violate the sanctity of their little club. The look on Amy's face reminded me of the fifth grade, when sides were clearly drawn, and we actually roamed our neighborhoods on bikes in a group, acting like some pathetic suburban gang: And no girls allowed.

Maybe another time, Amy said with a fake smile, as she clicked off the car alarm of her green BMW and dipped into the driver's side. Even the way she swung her hips into her car was sexy.

Right, Sean said, sounding a little hurt. I'm not sure what he expected.

You know what? I said.

Here we go. (He stared after Amy as she zoomed away with her crew.)

I'm going to Sarah's.

Shut up.

I am.

Tonight?

Yea.

Now?

Ycp. And I *don't* want you to come with me.

You sure?

Yea. You OK? I asked him.

Yea. Why wouldn't I be OK?

Uh, no reason, but we better leave before the dumbass cops come out here and want to ask us anything.

Right.

So I'll talk to you later, I said, and half-jogged over to my little Volvo. Sean's Acura was parked behind me.

Yea. Fuck her, anyway. Fuck'em all.

What?

Nothing. I want to hear what happens, he said.

You may get to read about it in the *Chronicle*.

Jesus, Alex.

Yea.



## *No Girls Allowed*

### Ch. 9: Astronomy is Easily Forgotten

I was kind of drunk, which I realized as I was rolling through the stop sign on the way out of Liz's neighborhood. Thankfully, all the cops in the area were camped in front of her house (though she was probably in no shape to talk to anyone), so I went on my merry way to Sarah's, just a few miles away. There's something incredibly pleasant about driving (speeding, actually) on an almost deserted four-lane road at night, the warm wind in your hair, the streetlights like solitary beacons, the smell of grass and exhaust and humidity hitting you in the face. It would've been better had my fucking stereo worked, but the piece of shit continually fades in and out, and on that night it chose to stay silent. The euphoria of alcohol was enough.

I really knew I was drunk when I noticed the sparkling lights from the Johnson Space Center as I raced along the road behind NASA on my way to Sarah's house. The lights peeking out at me reminded me of the ice-skaters at the Galleria, downtown. One year around Christmas, when I was a little kid, Mary decided to take me along while she shopped. She left me two stories above the skaters. I sat and watched them for I don't know how long; time didn't seem to move. I was hypnotized. A girl in a red sweater moved gracefully on her own over the ice, and some guy in a blue jacket eventually joined her. They skated on their own, weaving around everyone else. That's how I pictured Romance: a graceful couple, oblivious to the world around them. I just watched, and imagined myself as I might be, taking the boy's place.

I wondered if Sean went home or to some bar by himself, and if he really was upset

by that encounter with Amy and her little gang. I'm not sure what he thought that dog-killing story would accomplish. Sean's not exactly the master of seduction, and he was probably still upset about the dear John phone call from Austin: That bitch really knew how to get to him. But I decided I should probably stick to my own situation, and try to come up with some stuff to say to Sarah, some kind of set speech to start things off with so I wouldn't take one look at her and lose all my resolve. The easiest thing to decide on was the letter: There was no way I would mention that, unless she brought it up, and in that case I'd try and play it off as a civil attempt to get the shirt back and hope to move on quickly. It's hard to plan out a coherent argument when you're slightly drunk and have a mind that races like mine does; I could barely concentrate on driving, and I'm pretty sure I ran a couple of red lights and a stop sign or two.

Before I knew it I was cruising down her block, going fast enough to take a wide turn and almost smash into a Toyota truck parked in the street. I killed the lights and parked several houses away, just in case anyone was keeping a lookout. Her father is a fucking wacko. The house looked dark, but Sarah's room was all that mattered. I walked around to the back and hopped the little gray wood fence between the back door of the house and the garage, feeling a little tipsy on my way over the top. Her light was on, and I had to find a way to get up to her second-story window. In Sarah's back yard the only light came from her upstairs bedroom window and a pale quarter moon. I started looking for a way to climb up to the second-story ledge, and knew it wouldn't be easy, especially with my balance slightly impaired. I had done shit like this dozens of times, but it had been a while. I used to do all kinds of things with Kevin and Sean; we would sneak back into our houses all the time late at night after venturing out to look for girls or something to vandalize. But it had been even longer since I tried to sneak

into someone else's house. I was more of a hit and run kind of guy.

Climbing from the fence (it looked old, rotten, and unstable) and up the drain pipe to the ledge looked like my best option, but if the drain pipe broke (and it looked plastic and flimsy), I would be totally fucked, not to mention in danger of breaking something as I landed. I hopped up on the fence (that was easy, though it swayed a little and I almost fell) and used it as support for some quick scrambling up the drain pipe— which I thought was incredibly loud (because I kicked and scraped against the side of the house), but I managed to get up on the small and precarious ledge right outside Sarah's bedroom. I was breathing hard and I could feel the alcohol pumping through my body and sweat on my forehead, neck, and back, so for a second I stood there with one foot in front of the other, balancing myself on the ledge, hoping Sarah didn't have an impulse to fling open her bedroom window on my side. Once I caught my breath, I took a step back and knocked lightly on her window.

What the hell? Sarah asked, and opened the side of the window farthest from me, luckily, and poked her head out. I thought I heard something, she said, and grabbed my hand to pull me in. She was standing there just wearing panties and a little sleeveless T-shirt that didn't quite cover her belly-button: Night-time Barbie in all her glory. Her hair was a bit shorter than the last time I saw her, and it made her look even younger and more innocent than usual. It also looked like she'd been spending some time by the pool. Her skin was evenly, perfectly tanned to a golden brown. She was like something out of some crappy pop song, or possibly *Baywatch*.

Thanks, I said, a little out of breath as she pulled me through the window and I almost landed on my face.

What are you doing?

Sarah? her dad yelled up (and I almost went back through the window.)

It's OK, dad, it was just a bird out on the ledge.

OK, he said.

I, uh (I was having trouble breathing after the Spiderman shit on the side of the house, and the enquiry from her psycho dad who was mad for guns wasn't making it any easier), need to talk to you.

Now?

Yea.

Are you drunk?

Yea.

Jesus.

Yea.

You're not gonna be sick or anything, are you?

I don't think so.

Breathe, Alex.

OK, the thing is. I mean, the thing is that, I —

What? *Breathe*, for chrissake.

Are you still grounded, or whatever?

No. I just didn't feel like going out tonight.

Right.

So? What are you doing here?

I want my shirt. (I had been scanning her room and didn't see it.)

Not this again (she twirled around— like a ballet dancer, a golden swan, doing a

pirouet— and then she was facing me again with her toned, perfect legs crossed and one hand on her visible and inviting stomach, standing almost on tip-toe, her head cocked to the side, like she was pissed and thinking about something.)

I want it, I said, trying to remember to close my mouth.

I don't have it! (She uncrossed her legs, and really was standing on tip-toe.)

Jesus, don't yell. Look (I hated myself for suggesting this, but I knew it was the only way I'd be able to think even one rational thought), meet me at the park in a few minutes so we can talk.

Again?

Yea. I don't want your dad bursting in here with a gun and spilling my guts all over your nice white bedspread.

Funny.

I want that goddamn shirt.

Look around. Do you *see* the damn shirt?

No, but that doesn't mean it's not here.

You used a double negative.

Jesus—

I don't want to go to the fucking park.

So, fine. Let's talk here.

About what?

About my shirt.

That's really what you came here to talk about?

Why else would I come? (This obviously pissed her off: she strutted over to a bookshelf and started throwing things on the floor for no apparent reason, still totally at

ease with the fact that she was almost naked and I was drunk and out of my head.)

You'll wake up everyone—

What do you care? You're just here to get your stupid shirt back. I should call the cops and have you arrested for breaking and entering.

OK, take a deep breath—

Fuck you! Don't tell me to calm down in my own bedroom.

Sarah, honey (her mom this time, from a few rooms away), what's going on in there?

I'm just rearranging some things, mom.

OK, her mom said. Are you talking to someone?

I'm on the phone.

OK, honey, we're going to bed.

Look, this is freaking me out, so I'm going to the park, and I'd like it if you'd meet me there, I said.

She was standing there with her arms folded across her chest, her right leg stuck out to one side like a sprinter before a race, or something; but I thought my offer was incredibly diplomatic, and I made my way toward the window again so I wouldn't be inclined to stand there and just stare at her leg like a starving wolf.

Fine, she relented. Don't kill yourself on the way out (and she giggled and held her hands up to her mouth as I climbed out the window and lurched forward again).

I wish I *could* kill myself, I said under my breath. One side of the window still hung open and I could see her reflection for one quick moment: What I really noticed was her eyes. This may sound stupid, but they were so blue it looked like someone had drained one of those perfectly blue lakes in Colorado or Washington that get that way from the mountain snow melting, and filled her eyes with the water. I crawled back out on the

ledge, slid down the drain pipe a few feet (I think I got a splinter in my hand because it still hurts) and dropped to the ground. I was assuming she would wear some clothes to the park, because if I saw her again in those panties and that little shirt I thought I might just break down and start crying uncontrollably or promise to be her slave or some damn thing. It was just too much.

The tops of my shoes were wet from the dew on the grass by the time I made it back to my car, managed to whirl it around and drive around the block to the park. I just sat there in the parking lot for a while, looking at the little soccer goals, thinking about what a different place it was at night, without the scorching sun and all the humidity. The pool looked inviting. A touch of moonlight glistened off the water in the deep end, near the diving boards. It wouldn't be that hard to hop the fence and go for a swim, but there were houses right across the street, and cops drive by every once in a while. I was aching for a swim, but it wasn't worth getting busted. I wondered if Sarah would come; I really wasn't sure. She acted annoyed and distant— and I just hoped I wasn't broadcasting every emotion I felt.

That's when Sarah's BMW slid into the spot next to mine. I wondered why everyone but me seemed to drive a fucking beemer. She looked kind of sullen getting out of the car, and she shot me this pissed-off look, but I had a feeling she was faking it, despite all the stuff she said; I could see it in her eyes. The only wardrobe change she made was to put on a pair of jeans and some Nike running shoes. That helped a little, but the same little T-shirt revealed a tiny waist and her belly-button: I had to fight an urge (not as bad as in her bedroom, though) to grab her and just start kissing and licking. After spending so much time obsessing about her, I almost couldn't stand being this close to

her, looking at her; and I was starting to lose my buzz. I got out of my car and walked over to the little bench where I waited for her the last time I was there. She still looked belligerent, but her expression softened as she walked over.

Is this really about a shirt? she asked, and stood there with her hands on her hips, refusing to sit down. I wasn't sure what she wanted to hear.

Yea, I said. I mean, for the most part. That shirt means something to me.

What do *I* mean to you?

Well—

You know what? I'll tell you what I mean to you: I'm like this idealized sexual object, this great memory you have. I'm not a person, even though we've known each other since we were little kids, because we've just been lying and fucking and playing games. I'm not even a real person to you.

Do you have to be real? (Even though I was obviously kidding, I knew that was a mistake the moment I said it, especially because she actually looked hurt. But I wasn't sure if she really felt victimized, or if the look she shot me was just one more attempt to fuck with me.)

I hate you.

I thought you already hated me.

Now I hate you more. (She turned around and started to walk back to her car.)

Wait, I said.

Why?

You said *we've* been lying and playing games.

So?

So that implicates you, too. (That got her attention.)



Maybe. (I guess she thought I was still too drunk to pay attention to what she said.)

You pretended to be a Republican.

Who says I pretended?

But you said—

Aren't most people around here Republicans?

I guess. Sarah—

What?

I need to know—

What?

Why you like me, I mean, *liked* me. (Her face changed, and she looked at me almost the way she did at that party when we hooked up.)

I guess... I admired you, in a way. I mean, I didn't love you. I don't love you.

OK.

I don't.

Fine. But what do you mean when you say you *admired* me?

Jesus.

Well?

OK. You're... I guess—

Different?

Yes.

How?

I don't know!

Try.

Why do you want to know all this stuff?

I just do.

She walked over and sat down on the bench. It was getting late at this point; it had to be two or three in the morning. We just sat there. Sarah exhaled loudly a couple of times, and we stared at the houses sitting back in the shadows and the streetlights attracting swarms of mosquitoes, the phallic poles reminding me of lighthouses, or at least pictures of lighthouses. I've never actually seen one. All of a sudden I was exhausted. It almost didn't matter that Sarah was sitting next to me. I just wanted to be home in bed. But she leaned over and put her head on my shoulder, and the warmth of her body touching mine was like a shot of caffeine.

Why does everything have to be so complicated, Alex? she asked.

I could smell her hair and some of it got in my mouth. The weight of her head on my shoulder actually brought the chattering in my mind to a brief halt.

I don't know, I said. I wish it wasn't.

For a moment the whole thing felt like a dream, and I looked up to see someone walking on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street in the direction of the park. Sarah still had her head on my shoulder, but the person in the shadows walking toward us looked to be our age. He had his head down and he was walking fast, his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. I couldn't see his face, but there was something vaguely familiar about him, and I wondered if it was the guy from the mall, or just another guy who looked like me. He looked over at us and stopped walking. All of a sudden the guy just turned around and started walking the other direction, away from the park. Sarah sleepily lifted her head from my shoulder.

Who was that? she asked with a yawn.

I don't know, I said. Some guy who's more afraid of people than me, I guess.

The next couple of days went by quickly, even though I spent most of the time either asleep or sitting on the couch in front of the TV. It was like being sick as a little kid. I kept my bedroom freezing cold with a couple of fans going, and hunkered down underneath a pile of blankets and pillows. Occasionally I'd wake up, look at the ceiling or glimpse the sun and clouds moving slowly across an azure sky through my window, and usually fall back to sleep almost immediately. It was incredibly pleasant. On the second day Mary even came home from work on her lunch break to check on me. She sat down at the foot of my bed (of course I was still asleep) and just looked at me. She woke me up when she came in, but I pretended to stay asleep and she just sat there looking at me.

During this interval I never woke up in time to watch any of the morning talk shows, or the game shows like *The Price is Right* because I remembered the way game shows made me so nauseous that I never wanted to watch TV again, so I figured it was OK if I missed them. I tried setting an alarm for eleven, but I just turned the damn thing off as soon as it started yelping. This may sound hard to believe, but when that screaming bit of technology rouses me from a deep and dreamless slumber that resembles hibernation, I feel like my body will revolt if I don't get another hour of sleep. There has to be something seriously wrong with me to feel tired all day on anything less than ten hours of sleep.

When I woke up I couldn't remember any of my dreams. I actually felt refreshed. That first day I sat down in front of the TV and started to wonder about everything that had happened, how I hugged Sarah and told her good night, how she looked at me and even teared up a little. The whole thing was almost romantic, in its way. Then I started thinking: I never got my damn shirt back. I never got the balls to tell her I love her

(loved her, I mean— past tense is important), especially after all the shit she said about *not* loving me. And then I wasn't even sure I had been in love. There was also no way I would tell Sean or Kevin or Tommy about any of this.

Maybe she was right and I was just obsessed with the memory of her. Maybe I had objectified her in some way. Doesn't Western culture condition men to objectify women? Is that my fault? In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche says that artists continually glorify, and I think he implies that they glorify the beautiful, the romantic, and that they *should* glorify the Dionysian. But I'm no artist. I'm a well-read suburban brat trying to figure shit out. Was Sarah just playing with me to keep from giving me the shirt, or was she really sad and regretful about the way things happened? I didn't know her well enough to supply an answer.

Ultimately I decided the bitch had tricked me again; but instead of being mad and looking for revenge, I was just depressed. I decided there wasn't really anything I could do, and it was probably just better to let it (and her) go and try to move on, though I'm not good at that kind of thing. Stasis is a natural state for me. I have a tough time letting go of things, to say the least. I'm like Jay fucking Gatsby.

So I called Tommy, went over to his house to hang out (his parents were gone somewhere again; they never seemed to be home), and we smoked enough pot to take at least a decade off both our lives. We passed a bong back and forth for hours and slumped all the way down in leather chairs, barely conscious, to watch afternoon cartoons, the news, and the beginning of primetime. When we got hungry we ordered a pizza — I learned my lesson after the Taco Cabana fiasco— even though we were both in the mood for Mexican. For a while there I couldn't even walk to a car, much less drive one.

After we ate, the spontaneous giggling started, but that was interrupted because I saw footage of Brad Klingman on the news as we were flipping channels, and we both sat and listened. The news guy said the suspected serial killer (the *Suburban Stalker* they called him — that just made me laugh) had been released yesterday on a technicality, something to do with miranda rights or an illegal search, and that his location hadn't been disclosed for his own safety. The cops were looking for a reason to arrest him again, though, the news guy said.

We couldn't believe it. I thought Brad would get off, but I assumed it would cost tons of money and would happen as a result of some trickery in the courtroom, like his lawyer convincing the morons they always get for jurors that Brad was a victim somehow, or some bullshit equally as specious. But he never even got a damn trial. I couldn't help wondering who he planned on killing next, because he obviously would. I didn't think he could just stop; I'd bet he was compelled to kill. The news guy said that if arrested again, if the cops found new evidence, he could supposedly be tried for all the murders. But that wasn't looking likely.

Tommy and I decided that was strange enough to warrant smoking some more, and after a few more bong hits and at least two hours of lethargic TV watching (I actually passed out or fell asleep for a little while), I finally got up and went home. I'm not sure how late it was, but all the lights were out in my house, and Mary and Mike were nowhere to be found. In my paranoid, on-the-way-down state, the house seemed kind of spooky. I stayed up for a while looking, or trying to look, at the stars and the neighboring houses from the foot of my bed, and thought I heard some noises downstairs, but it was just the usual marijuana paranoia. There was just the right absence of light from the street and houses so that I could actually see some stars,

though I couldn't name any.

I took an astronomy class at UT my freshman year, made a B, and didn't learn a goddamn thing. I almost always forget stuff I memorize to regurgitate on a test.

Ultimately, the houses are more interesting to me than the stars. It's always amazing to me the way just looking at the houses in my neighborhood, the similar two-stories with lawns of thick St. Augustine grass and basketball goals in the driveway, reassures me and makes me feel safe, like everything is going to be OK. I couldn't imagine being blind. Looking makes things real, makes things OK, and I need to look.

\*

The summer was almost over and Kevin had been harping for days about wanting to go downtown to the Galleria and a record store or two, so Sean and I agreed to make a day of it. For some reason, Kevin had this idea that he needed some new shirts and a U2 bootleg, one of those Italian specials where you take your chances with the quality of the recording. I guess the copyright laws in Italy are a bit more relaxed than ours.

We piled into Kevin's Explorer (I never suspected his was the one in Sarah's driveway because they're different colors) and headed downtown. We went to a record store on Westheimer where we just looked at some stuff for about thirty minutes (Kevin couldn't find anything he wanted, and neither could I) before calling it quits in favor of the Galleria. The Galleria is a great place to people watch. It took us a while to find a place to park; we ended up on the third story of multi-level parking, and after some more driving around we found a place. The air pollution is always the worst in places like that. It was like all the exhaust, gas, and oil smells in Houston collected in that one

place, and the heat just magnifies everything. I'm not kidding: It was hard to breathe.

But once we were inside, with the air-conditioned mall smell (except the feeling and the smell are bigger and more open than a regular mall), things were OK. Kevin started looking around for the Gap and the Ralph Lauren store, and Sean wanted to go to one of the sporting goods stores— both of them oh so predictable. I just wanted to stand next to the rail and look at all the empty people, parents and yuppies, walking around to different stores with sacks in their hands, the little kids dancing around their parents, a few teens and pre-teens in baggy clothing standing together in clumps talking and giving each other the evil eye. The big, open feeling of the Galleria was a nice change, but I knew it would probably just be a matter of time before I started to get freaked out. I can only handle malls in small doses.

In that little moment of pleasant distraction and introspection Kevin and Sean had taken off and left me alone to fend for myself. I knew approximately where they would be, but still. There I was. I'm continually amazed by the fact that all my friends are assholes. I stood there, hands in my pockets (I had decided to wear Jeans and a T-shirt since presumably we'd be spending most of our time in air-conditioned areas), trying to decide if I wanted to chase after one of them, or if I should just stay where I was. For the moment I didn't feel like moving, so I walked back over to the railing and looked around: That's when I spotted Sarah with some guy. It was really her. No doubles or lookalikes or hallucinations. It was really her. And she was with some guy I had never seen before. I tried to think of a way to hide, or duck away without being seen, but they were walking right toward me and there was nowhere to go, really.

Hey, Alex, Sarah said.

Hey, I said as sheepishly as if a teacher had caught me masturbating.

This is Brian, Sarah said, and Brian shook my hand.

Hey, he said.

Yea, I said. (Brian was taller than me and had this vacant look in his eyes; he dressed like the most boring guy on the planet.)

Brian is an engineering major at Texas A&M, Sarah said. She was holding his hand.

Congratulations, I said.

Are you here alone, Alex? she asked, trying to get at me because possibly she didn't like my *tone*, or just because she could.

No, Sean and Kevin are— around somewhere. (Sarah actually turned around to look for them, like she was scared they were hiding in a store, waiting to ambush her and the Aggie engineering geek.)

Well, we should go.

Nice to meet you, the geek said.

Yea, I said, surprised at how well I was behaving under the circumstances; but I was in shock, really, and I just didn't feel like I had the energy to do anything about it. In a way I thought it was time to give up, and I sure as hell had to get out of that oversized mall. I also knew, absolutely, that I had to get out of Houston. I had been there too long at this point, and it was time to leave.

You want me to throw something at them? Sean asked me, walking up behind me.

No, I was thinking maybe I'd spit on them if they walk below us, though.

I go first.

Fuck you, I had to talk to them. I go first.

We walked over to the railing, because they took one of the escalators down to another floor, but we couldn't see them. Sean just stood there while I looked, but I gave up quickly.



You alright, man?

Yea. Why wouldn't I be alright?

No reason.

Let's find Kevin. Maybe we can harass the salespeople at the Gap for a while.

I followed Sean, without thinking, through a couple of twists and turns to the Gap, where Kevin was still busy looking through shit and acting like a normal consumer and member of society, but instead of harrassing any salespeople (Sean actually started asking this uptight, slight, blonde guy about child labor and giving him a hard time, which was kind of funny), I sat down in one of the chairs and held onto one knee. I just wanted to get out of there. I just wanted to go home.

\* \* \*

The thing is, nothing turns out the way you want it to, or think it should. You just have to keep moving like a goddamn shark or something, even if it means going in circles just so you can stay away from doctors and those tricky bastard psychiatrists. That's why I'm going back to Austin to take some classes. Well, one class. I only have nine more hours left to finish my degree, but I'm going to take it slow, just three hours for me in the last fall semester of the millenium. It'll be nice to look at all the pretty little freaks on Guadalupe Street from the comfort of my new Toyota Forerunner. That's right: No more Swedish torture machine for me. My parents were so overjoyed at the news that I'm going back to school that they broke down and bought me the truck I wanted. It's an amazing precedent, actually. It turns out I'm great at taking bribes.

Now that I've managed to kill most of the summer, I'll have to work on forgetting

Sarah and seeing her at the Galleria with that Aggie geek, probably a Republican. It just kills me that lame motherfuckers like him end up with girls like Sarah. I'm just glad she didn't show up in my Adidas shirt. I've resigned myself to losing it at this point. I haven't done a very good job of keeping track of things this summer. I may even have to leave Texas to forget about Sarah, head out west to Colorado or Oregon or something. I've only seen snow once, and I've never been skiing or snowboarding or anything. Colorado would be a refreshing change, with the mountains and the snow and cold and everything. I wonder if there are many Republicans in Colorado.

VITA 

John Steinbrink

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: NO GIRLS ALLOWED: A NOVEL WITH A CRITICAL  
INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from Stillwater High School, Stillwater, Oklahoma, in May 1992; received Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism from Baylor University, Waco, Texas in May 1996. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in English at Oklahoma State University in May, 2000.

Experience: Worked as a Copy Editor at the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, December 1996- May 1997.

Professional and Academic Memberships: Golden Key National Honor Society.