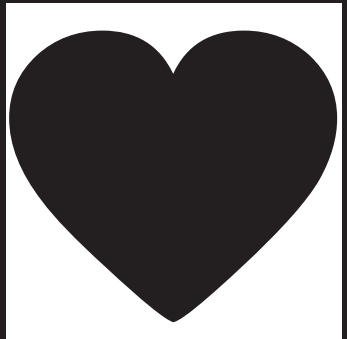




NECROPHILIA



VARIATIONS



Necrophilia Variations
A Literary Monograph by Supervert 32C Inc.

Necrophilia Variations

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Charles Baudelaire, "Théophile Gautier" (1859), *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. II, Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1976.

Gustave Flaubert, Letter to Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (8 July 1861), in Francis Steegmuller, ed., *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1857-1880*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

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“It is one of the considerable privileges of art that the horrible can be transformed, through artful expression, into beauty.” — Charles Baudelaire

“In the Rouen asylum there was an idiot known as ‘Mirabeau,’ who for a *cup of coffee* would copulate with dead women on the dissecting table. I’m sorry you couldn’t have introduced this little episode into your book: it would have pleased the ladies.” — Gustave Flaubert

How Would You Like It?

Inevitably there came a point at which I had to pause and ask myself: How would you like it? How would you like to be lying there on the autopsy table having the coroner slice you up into a variety of sexual aids? The femur bone makes a fine dildo. Intestines are natural prophylactics. The heart, that organ of romance, can be used as a four-chambered pocket pussy. Whatever remains of your body afterward can be filled with KY instead of embalming fluid—or vice versa, perhaps a horny little necro nymph will come along and leech the embalming fluid from your body to use as a “personal lubricant.” Who knows? The possibilities are endless. Do you prefer your corpse to be a waste product or a sex object?

When you put it that way, you would think that people would naturally prefer to be a sex object. After all, to say that your body becomes a waste product is to say that when you die you become excrement. The cadaver is a parody of you made out of shit. Who wants that? Wouldn't it be better to be a sex object? Your cerements become lingerie, you could do a striptease with your death shroud—and if you can't move or dance, eventually your shroud will rot away or be eaten by worms, so in that sense every cadaver ultimately becomes a stripper anyway. You could install a reverse periscope in your headstone so morbid voyeurs could come and ogle you. Sure, they'd leave cum stains on your grave marker, but it has to be better than decomposing in the ground like a human turd. You could even charge a quarter for each look through the periscope, and in your will you could stipulate what to do with the funds—maybe hire a man to scrape the sperm from your stone every spring.

You would think that at least a few people would see how reasonable this is. Preferring to think of their remains as seductive rather than repulsive, they would take an open-minded attitude toward necrophiles coming to disturb their rest. Maybe they would even want to mark their

graves so that necrophiles would know how to find them. An inscription might suffice, an epitaph that titillates like dirty talk. And yet for the necrophile it is a time-consuming task to read all the stones in a graveyard, especially in the dark, and oftentimes these inscriptions are eroded by rain and wind. A better solution might be to transform the gravestone itself into a powerful visual icon. For example, the tombstone of a necro-friendly man could be carved in the shape of an erect penis, and then his coffin could have a little padded hole in the bottom to facilitate a sick sort of sodomy. (Instead of a “glory hole” you could call it a “gory hole.”)

Opponents to this vision will no doubt argue that accommodating necrophiles would encourage sexual deviance and social malaise. And yet, might it not just be the reverse? Is it not possible that necro-friendly cadavers can serve the social good? Think of it. If you repress a sadistic individual, he only gets worse—meaner, crueller, more vicious, to the point where he just might be headed down the road toward that ultimate act of sadism: murder. But what if you provide a release for his pent-up penchant? Send him to the cemetery to find necro-friendly graves. Let him put handcuffs on the dead and beat them senseless with whips. Who cares? He’s not hurting anybody—and you might just be saving a life by giving him a stiff. And perhaps the same applies to deviants of every type. Let pedophiles molest the bodies of dead children. If they’re really hardcore and want younger and younger flesh, give them the medical waste resulting from first-trimester abortions. Why not? It’s not hurting anybody—and you just might perform a social good by draining off the evil.

Here again the shocked and appalled will raise their voices in protest. It’s not a matter of physically hurting the dead, they will say, but of inflicting emotional wounds on the living, the loved ones, the survivors and heirs. Who wants to think of a guy in leather pants beating grandma’s cadaver with a whip and a dog chain? Even if there’s no heaven and granny doesn’t know the first thing about it, it’s still upsetting for the rest of us to contemplate. Certainly this is a valid objection, and yet you have to remember: you can’t prevent it anyway. What are you going to do—stand watch on granny’s grave? Bury her in an assault-proof coffin? About the best you can hope for is that the necrophile might respect something like the sexual equivalent of a living will. Specify how you would or wouldn’t like your body to be utilized when you’re gone. If

you're lucky, the necrophile will be sensitive enough to respect your last wishes. Maybe he'll refrain from tying you up and giving you forty lashes, if that's what you don't want. On the other hand, maybe he'll wipe his ass with your will and whip your remains with a cat-o'-nine-tails. At that point, there's not much you can do about it—unless you were buried alive, but that's even more unpleasant than a posthumous flogging.

How, then, would I like it? Would it bother me to think of my body having sex without me? Or to imagine my ass giving pleasure when I'm gone? In a way, this is a funny question for a necrophile to pose himself. A pedophile cannot become a child, a shoe fetishist cannot become a shoe, but a necrophile can and does flip over to the other side. Eventually—nay, inevitably—he becomes the object of his own weird brand of perversion: a dead body. So what then? What does the necrophile want done with his body? Of course the necrophile spends a lot of time contemplating death and therefore may have some variation on it that you wouldn't anticipate. He may not insist on being preserved in a pristine condition, for example, because he knows that a cadaver does not have to be a perfect but inert replica of a living body in order to be exploited and enjoyed. You could cook a severed limb and eat it as part of an erotic game, much the same as bored suburban couples lick whipped cream off each other's genitalia. It may not be outrageous hardcore cadaver-fucking, but is it any less an act of necrophilia?

After thinking about it, I have decided I want to be cremated—not because I want to deprive other necrophiles of my body, since that would be hypocritical. Rather, I would like to have a tombstone where people could come to pay tribute to me. And at that site, I would like to have my ashes in a dispenser of some kind, like a bubblegum machine. And from that dispenser I would like my loved ones, my survivors and heirs, my fans and followers, as well as random passersby and genealogists of the future, to take a thimbleful of ashes and sprinkle them inside their underwear. I'm particularly thinking of girls here, so that my ashes would be disseminated in panties of all kinds—cotton, silk, and satin—pink, blue, and cream. Every vagina would be my grave, every clitoris my headstone, and by way of tribute perhaps you could even shave my epitaph into your pubic hair.

Christmas for the Sick

At lunch I joined some doctors in a conference room. Decorations had been hung but it did not look particularly festive. Primping the room for Christmas was like using wrapping paper for a tourniquet or sewing up a wound with tinsel. It was good cheer misdirected. There were children dying of incurable diseases upstairs.

Still, that didn't stop anyone from celebrating. There was turkey with stuffing and cranberry sauce, and a few bottles of liquor to make merry. A trauma surgeon told a funny story about operating on a drunk driver in the emergency room. "There were reindeer on his boxer shorts," he said, making a joke about how all the deer were red-nosed from blood.

Everyone laughed. The radiologist on my right selected a bottle of mescal from the booze on the table and poured some into a clear plastic cup. He tilted the bottle toward me, grinning, and I held out my cup for a shot. We all must have been thinking the same thing—if the drunk driver's shorts were bloody, what had happened to his penis?—because a pediatrician started telling a story that had happened to him during his residency. A teenaged boy had been brought to the emergency room after trying to castrate himself. "Unfortunately," laughed the pediatrician, "he didn't understand that castration is not, in the technical sense, amputation."

An oncologist held out a bone from a turkey leg and let it drop into some cranberry sauce. "Did you reattach it?"

The pediatrician grimaced. "I couldn't. The boy's mother didn't bring it along. She couldn't bring herself to pick it up."

"She could have used a Pooper Scooper," said the radiologist.

"Or a pecker picker-upper," a male nurse suggested.

"Better yet," said the oncologist, picking the turkey bone out of the

cranberry sauce, “she could have used shlong tongs to put it in a cock sock.” He rolled the turkey bone inside a cocktail napkin and held it up.

“Does this lesson in gross anatomy amuse you?” asked the doctor to my left, a Brit by the name of Dr. Peterson. “Believe it or not, it’s not unusual to see a patient who’s tried to cut his member off. But I once had a man who did the opposite. He blew his whole body off.”

I downed my shot of mescal. I could feel it burn in my throat. “What do you mean?”

“Back in London we had a car bombing once—the IRA, you know. The emergency workers recovered all the body parts of all the victims, but we had a certain appendage that we couldn’t account for. All the male bodies had their penises, but we had a penis that had no body.”

“So it must have belonged to a female,” I said. “A hermaphrodite, or a pre-op taking hormones.” I do not know why I thought this was funny—was it the drink?—but I laughed and reached for the bottle of mescal to pour myself another shot.

Dr. Peterson was perfectly serious. “All the women had their genitalia as well.”

“Then where did it come from?” I asked, still holding the bottle in my hand. “There must have been another body. The emergency workers must have missed it.”

“In the western world, there are *never* unrecovered remains. People always claim their dead.”

“What if the bodies are mutilated beyond recognition?”

“We have very sophisticated identification techniques: dental records, fingerprints, DNA...”

“So where did this severed penis come from?”

“It could only have been the bomber.”

“How so?” I burped, and the alcohol burned up into my mouth again.

“We hypothesized that the bomb exploded prematurely. The bomber’s car must have hit a bump in the road and set off the bomb accidentally. He was probably carrying it on a plank or a board in his lap. The plank protected that one area, and everything else was literally blown to smithereens.”

“How come no one came forward to claim the—?”

“The remains? Who would? And what would they do with it?”

Just as I started to imagine a specimen jar full of formaldehyde, or perhaps one of those little coffins they put infants in, the radiologist reached in front of me. I was still holding the bottle of mescal in my hand. “If you’re not going to pour,” he said, “allow me.” He took the bottle and, as he tipped it into my cup, the *gusano* slipped out. “The worm!” the radiologist hollered. “He’s got the worm!” Soon the doctors were banging with their fists on the table and cheering rhythmically. “Eat it. Eat it. Eat it.”

I watched the worm, a pinkish nub of flesh swirling in the alcohol, and thought of the bomber’s remains. What would his survivors do with it? Bury it in a tiny grave the size of a beer bottle? Or would his widow keep it on the mantle in a jar of formaldehyde? And if so, would she ever be tempted to take it out and—well—in a moment of loneliness... After all, it *was* a genital, and in the final analysis there’s not much you can do to guarantee the sanctity of your remains. “I’ll just cremate myself,” you say—but then some weirdo comes along to ejaculate in your urn and stir his semen into your ashes with a finger. For every type of cadaver, I thought, there must be a corresponding type of necrophile. No body is safe. Just because we cease to make active use of our sexual organs does not mean that others won’t make a passive use of them. In death we become defenseless and, to necrophiles, irresistible. Every cadaver is a sex object, and in that sense the terrorist who blew off his body is a symbol of our common fate. In the end, we are all of us reduced to a dead genital.

I felt a nudge in the ribs. “Go ahead,” said Dr. Peterson. “The *gusano* is not really a worm. It’s a butterfly larva. Think of it as a thing with the potential for great beauty. Go ahead. Do it.”

Hideous Desiderata

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Love is blind. One man's goddess is another man's shrew. Everyone has sex appeal for someone, or many of us wouldn't be here... Platitudes! Beauty is relative, you say—but perhaps you should be cautious. Perhaps you have not really thought through the consequences of your words. Beauty is relative—right! Do you realize that that, if true, is a veritable abyss? Beauty is relative—but might it be so relative that some of us plunge right through to the very bottom and end up finding downright ugliness appealing?

What I'm going to tell you about is the systematic reversal of my libido—or rather what I learned as a result of this reversal. Don't try this experiment at home.

Like anyone else, I naturally wanted beauty—prettiness—loveliness—charm and allure made flesh. I lived in a culture indicted for its shallow worship of supermodels, beauty queens, starlets and cover girls—and I liked it. I thought it set a standard of gorgeousness by which everyone would do right to abide. In the most mundane advertisements for lipstick and eye shadow, with their pure white backgrounds and precise pictures of exotic hues, I saw a moral value—a lesson—an incitement to strive for excellence and perfection. The superficial world of appearances, I thought, was the product of a subterranean world of effort and drive. Beauty was relative not just to the person who beheld it, but to the one who produced it as well.

Accordingly, I took great personal pride in my appearance. I kept fit. I went to the gym. I swam especially, since I thought it more appealing to be lithe than to bulk up like a weightlifter. I went regularly to a nutritionist, a barber, and a masseuse. I dressed in a manner that was fashionable yet classic. I avoided fads and casual wear in favor of well-made, rather expensive suits. I was—I admit it—rather dashing—a man about town if not a downright cad.

I had my way with women. There was no need to call beauty relative in the presence of my lady friends. Any man would have slobberingly agreed that my women were ravishing. But let me tell you a little secret. The man married to the most beautiful woman in the world? He's bored of her. B-o-r-e-d—bored. He cheats on her with crack whores. He goes behind her back with pre-op transsexuals. Why? It's like a famous crooner said. On his wedding night in Las Vegas, he asked one of his handlers to get him a hooker. The handler was astonished. "A hooker? But why? It's your wedding night! You've got one of the most beautiful women in the world waiting for you upstairs!" The crooner looked at his handler. "Yeah," he said, "but she's my wife."

Get it? At some point the Law of Diminishing Kicks sets in. You go out with an actress—and then you want a model. You go out with a model—and then you want a supermodel. You go out with a supermodel—and what do you want then? A super-dupermodel? Tough luck! When you're intimately involved with the most beautiful woman in the world, there's nowhere to go but down—down, down, down—down into the abyss of relative beauties. First you go from a supermodel back to a model, or perhaps to a mere screen queen. Then from there you plunge and keep plunging—a cheerleader. A hairdresser. A waitress. A female construction worker.

But where is the bottom?

By the time I'd tired of the construction worker, with her body that resembled a bull terrier, I'd started to understand something very fundamental about the libido. When you try to outdo yourself, the Law of Diminishing Kicks exerts itself—you want more, better, sooner. And yet you are exhausted—bored—weakened—faithless. Conversely, when you play the Law of Diminishing Kicks backwards—when you stop trying to top the last kick and voluntarily turn around to descend through the depths of the nether thrills—something very surprising happens. Listen. You feel stronger—better—harder. Imagine! The libido is a muscle: it grows stronger through repeated exposure to resistance. And what, to the libido, is resistance? Ugliness.

Friends were no doubt shocked to see that, after the construction worker, I moved on to a fat woman—and I do mean fat. They saw me with my thin marathoner's body and wondered what it was that

I admired in this portly paramour with the plus-size panties. You, no doubt, now know—you can see clearly what it was that they could hardly divine. My obese odalisque was a drill instructor to my libido. She made it lift the barbell of disgust and run the treadmill of repulsion. She made it sweat out its narrow aestheticism and steel itself for erotic encounters with an ever-increasing range of hideous desiderata.

Next was a deformed man—an amputee—and after him, a dog. In bestiality, I felt as though I had neared the bottom rung on the ladder of relative beauties. I was prepared to take a final step—down—down into a realm so far from normal human sensibility that, unlike adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality, it was not even proscribed in the Bible. Who would have thought to forbid an act—a perversion—that already seemed so inherently repellent? Even for me it remained repulsive—and yet that was precisely what I was after: something to provide resistance to my increasingly potent libido.

It couldn't be anything too reminiscent of—normal life. It needed to be fully itself, with no pretense or gesture of compromise toward the natural predilections of the male libido. It couldn't be a mere simulacrum of sleeping beauty, Juliet in her tomb with the blush of youth still masking the effects of a lethal poison. I needed something—sick-making. Something not just dead but so very dead that there could be no mistaking it for anything else.

And do you know what I discovered? Rigor mortis, pallor, rot—these too can be sources of exquisite sensation. Flesh that is—shall we say, overripe—can provide a soft, snug embrace, even in places where formerly there was no orifice. And maggots, however appalling it may at first sound—and I recognize that it does sound appalling—maggots, when they crawl or scamper across your organ of pleasure, send delightful tickles through your nervous system, like little fingers or a vibrator.

But where do you go from there? Necrophilia is where the relativity of beauty butts up against a limit: death. What could possibly be uglier? You can't go any further down, any further away from innate human sensibilities. From there, you can only turn around and begin climbing your way back up the food chain of beauty—but listen. Once you've been there, once you've touched bottom in the abyss, you will be forever after condemned to see beauty through a lens of ugliness. For

the rest of your life, it will be impossible to see the clitoris of the most beautiful woman in the world without feeling astonished at how much it resembles a maggot on her cadaver.

Death and the Dilettante

There were certain difficulties in obtaining a coffin. Aside from the cost, it is very difficult to purchase one without first having a corpse to place inside it. The directors of funeral parlors, as I quickly learned, hesitate to sell their coffins without first having some idea where the body is coming from. I presume this is less from idle curiosity than from pecuniary motives, since the price of a funeral is much more than that of a coffin alone. Be that as it may, I did not have a body, not one I could turn over to a funeral parlor, because the body that was to be consigned to this coffin was still living and very lovely, and it was to be placed in the coffin thanks not to death but to lust—or at least a certain morbid variation of lust, for it was Marisa's idea that she and I should make love inside a coffin.

If I was enamored of Marisa, Marisa was enamored of death. Everything about her bespoke a self-conscious decadence. She was the daughter of a famous art historian, but the aesthetic sensibility innate to the family underwent a mutation in Marisa herself. Having grown up amid beautiful but inert things, Marisa never learned to appreciate the spontaneity of life, and in its stead she only knew artifice and gesture. What was connoisseurship in the father became affectation in the daughter. What was history to the father became morbidity to the daughter. She indulged in depression, dabbled in dirges, delighted in decay. She was a dilettante of death.

Marisa affected an appearance that was based not on fashion but on the aesthetic of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Her face was sculptural, like marble in hue and geometry in structure, with dark, deeply set eyes. She was tall but very thin and therefore sinuous, like a vine. This impression was enhanced by her hair, of which she was particularly proud. She had not cut her hair in ten years, so she claimed, and it cascaded in shiny

black curls past her waist. In bed I sometimes imagined that it might wrap around me, and I would wake up to find her hair transformed into something vegetal, an ivy twisted in green loops around my white torso. I enjoyed the feel of her long tresses as they dragged across my body, tickling and tingling me, and yet they also caused a certain anxiety. Even the pet snake retains the potential and perhaps the instinct for strangulation, and so too did it seem with Marisa's hair. Curled around her own neck, it hinted at suffocation and suicide. Around mine, homicide and hanging.

Because I was entranced by Marisa, really madly in love with Marisa, I hesitated to tell her that my efforts to purchase a coffin were in vain. I wanted badly to fulfill her fantasy, no matter what it was. I became determined, even obsessed, as only one who fears failing in the eyes of his beloved can become. I contemplated the most foolhardy of plans: I would obtain a job in a funeral parlor and sneak out a casket during the night; I would dig up a fresh grave, return the cadaver to the earth, and steal away with the coffin... But could I possibly make love to Marisa in a *used* coffin? Might it not just make the experience a little too real? As I thought about it, it occurred to me that Marisa might prefer just such a coffin. The thrill of her artifice, and perhaps that of making love in a casket, was precisely to push close to the edge of reality—without quite slipping over into it. She did not want to die, she did not want to be buried, she merely wanted to test her own carefully inculcated morbidity, to see if it could withstand an ever-increasing proximity with death.

Determined to satisfy her, I rented a small van, purchased several sturdy shovels, scouted various and sundry cemeteries. I needed someplace that was out of the way, quiet, dark, and yet not too likely to attract other denizens of the night such as ardent teenagers or lonely drunks, since these also attracted police. I visited Ridge Lawn and Our Lady of Saint Peter and Cypress Hill and Mount Zion. I climbed over brick walls and iron gates and marble porticoes. I wandered along green hills and white stones under a black sky. I grew accustomed to that peculiar smell of cemeteries, which is not so much a smell of death as of something else—a profusion of flowers, freshly cut grass, honeybees. Finally I settled on a certain cemetery, a quiet place bounded on one side by a stream, on another by a golf course, and on the remaining two sides by

a low cobblestone fence. I had the place, the time, the determination—now all I needed was a death.

This came soon enough. It was advertised in the newspaper: deceased, so and so, father and grandfather, funeral to be held at X, body to be interred at Y. I grew excited, perhaps overexcited, at the prospect of obtaining my goal. I felt like a man grinning and rubbing his hands together in anticipation of some ill-begotten enterprise at which he was sure to succeed. In fact, I *was* such a man. I already looked past the unpleasant details of exhuming the body to foresee the moment when Marisa would lay eyes on the coffin. “It’s *real*,” I would gloat—but what if she did not believe me? What if she did not recognize the absurd lengths I had gone in order to satisfy this whim of hers? After all, the effort I expended and the risk I took must no doubt be disproportional to the pleasure she would derive from this whim, which was sure to be replaced by another effort at decadence the moment this one had been satisfied. How, I wondered, could I guarantee that she would acknowledge this sacrifice of mine? How could I guarantee that she would recognize just how much I loved her?

She needed, I realized, to see the coffin in its original location, with its original occupant. Then when the time came for lovemaking, she would recognize it and fathom the extreme measures I had taken to obtain it. So I called her cell phone and invited her to meet me at the funeral parlor, a white brick building situated at the top of a small green hill. I waited outside, watching a valet wax a hearse, until Marisa arrived in a cab. Stepping onto the black asphalt, she glanced at the shiny hearse, then turned to me with a supercilious smile that said: “Look how poorly you treat me. It’s humiliating to travel in a taxi. I want something better suited to my station—like that hearse there.” She took my arm and we entered the parlor, where we were redirected into the viewing area. Certainly we cut a strange figure entering into this closely knit crowd of mourners. Marisa was tall, aristocratic, dark, beautiful. Her black hair glittered strangely in the subdued light of the room. It was as though she were less a real person than a personification of mourning or, at the limit, death itself.

We seated ourselves as discreetly as possible and listened as the minister praised the dead. Marisa held my hand in her lap, squeezing

it tightly, her body emitting an animal heat that was at odds with her almost allegorical mien. I felt an inner premonition and surety of success as I stared at the coffin that was soon to be mine. The funeral was foreplay to a consummation that was devoutly to be wished. And as though she too sensed this—sensed that we had achieved some conspiratorial solidarity in the sadness of another—Marisa squeezed my hand tighter and tighter in her lap, until finally I realized that her lap actively participated in exerting a pulsing, pulsating pressure against my palm. She pursed her lips and I thought that, beneath the sweet congestion of the flowers, I could detect another scent, something humid and musk-like. Suddenly she gave a little cry—more a moan than a sob—and the grip on my hand relaxed. The minister looked questioningly at us, and I put my arm around Marisa’s shoulders as though to console her. But she was smiling, not crying, and it was an arch or perhaps coy smile that seemed to say: “Do you *see* how I take pleasure in this ambience of death...”

With this memory as my inspiration, it was not difficult that night to perform the filthy work of digging up the grave. The fresh earth yielded easily to my spade, and before dawn the coffin was exposed to full view. Hopping down into the grave, I worked the metallic rope of a winch around the box. Climbing out, I affixed the other end to the front bumper of the van and slowly reversed. Suddenly there was a lurch such as you feel running over a cat, and then a crunching sound like bones in a trash compactor. I had reversed over another headstone. For a moment I imagined a saddened family standing around the debris. Death had taken away their loved one, then some inconsiderate vandal—me—had desecrated his grave. And for what? The satisfaction of a perverted whim? Was the frivolity of my cause not disproportional to the cruelty of its effect? I was almost at the point of identifying with the aggrieved, asking myself how I would like it if somebody drove over my father’s grave, when the image of Marisa flooded my vision. I could see her standing there by the van saying, “Who’s more important to you? *Them?*” She would gesture contemptuously at the mournful family, then wave her arms over her delectable body as though unfurling wings. “Or *me?*”

Forcing open the lid of the coffin, I found the deceased not quite resting in peace. Having been jostled and thrown during the ascent, the body lay like a twisted rag inside the casket. A finger had been yanked

from its socket, and mentally I reconstructed how this must have happened: a brass handle had torn from the coffin, leaving a jagged hole through which the hand must have protruded, making the digit in question vulnerable to amputation. Looking down into the grave, I saw a lone finger lying in a pile of dirt.

Satisfied on this account, I set about removing the body. Slipping the shovel under its back, I tried to hoist the cadaver, only to have it tumble to one side or the other. I almost had the impression that the deceased wanted to remain in its resting place, like a person not ready to get out of bed in the morning. Trying again, I accidentally stabbed the body with the point of the shovel, releasing a vile black fluid onto the white satin lining of the coffin. Fearful of staining it any further, I resigned myself to evicting the cadaver with my hands. Holding my breath, I lifted it out of the box and dropped it back into its hole. “See ya later, alligator,” I joked. Then, replying to myself in what I imagined to be the grandpa-like tone of the deceased, I laughed and said: “After a while, necrophile.”

From the cemetery I drove directly to Marisa’s apartment. Letting myself in with a key, I moved her bed, propped it on its edge against the wall, and set the casket in its place. I wiped the mud from the casket, removed the gore-stained lining, and rubbed all the wooden surfaces with lemon-scented Pledge—this gave it a nice shine and somewhat masked the faint smell of earth it exuded. About the hole left where the brass handle had been there was little I could do other than remove any fragments of wood that might leave splinters in the vulnerable parts of our bodies. I placed a comforter in the bottom of the coffin, lined it with clean sheets, put a pillow where our heads would lie, and saw proudly that I had achieved my goal. I had successfully stolen a coffin, and now I could look forward to giving Marisa the pleasure of making love inside it.

I was happy but exhausted. Taking an old pillow from the linen closet, I lay down to sleep on the floor. Because of the strenuous efforts of the night, my slumber was profound. It was not the sluggish sleep of inebriation or the dreamless sleep of anesthetic, but a sleep more akin to drowning. I had sunk into a viscous fluid, gently rocked by dreams as by tides, until finally I drifted to the bottom and lay there in sleep’s

black silt. It was peaceful, quiet, amniotic, until I began to dream of plants—great green flora of the deep, long vertical vines that vibrated with the tide. Slowly I tangled in their tendrils, realizing with fear that I could not move—or rather, I moved, but it was the tide that moved me, snaring me in sinuous strands of seaweed. I could no longer breathe, I felt as though the water were rushing into my mouth and pouring down my throat—and then I woke up, only to find myself tangled in long black locks of hair as Marisa bent over me, pushing her tongue into my mouth. “Marisa,” I moaned. I kissed her and broke through the surface into sunlight glittering on water. Clouds hung in the sky like great white flowers. There was no life anywhere on earth except the life of the kiss, which was eternal, self-sustaining, self-replicating, the great chain of being reduced to a single one of its links. When Marisa finally drew her lips back from mine, it was like being abandoned by God.

“It’s *beautiful*,” she said, admiring the coffin. “Yes,” I replied, “and so are you.” In that instant, her white face not inches from mine, I was as immersed in her beauty as I had been in sleep only moments before. There was something overwhelming about it. I felt vulnerable before it, as though beauty alone could overpower me, render me unconscious. She could not have felt the coffin was beautiful in the same intense manner in which I found her beautiful. It was impossible. When I said she was beautiful, I meant it in the same way in which, were she to strangle me with her thin white hands, I might have said: “You’re choking me.” Conversely, when Marisa said that the coffin was beautiful, she meant it in the same way in which, were she to model a black dress, she might have said: “I look like a vamp.” For her the coffin was an accoutrement, an accessory, and to find it beautiful was not to be pierced in her uttermost being, as it was for me, but to publicize her style and individuality. For me the word *beauty* was a cry of despair, an admission of defeat, a surrender. For her, it was merely an expression of taste.

Is she so beautiful herself, I wondered, that it is impossible for beauty to mean anything to her? Is that why she cultivates death—because, like a frame around a picture, it demarcates her beauty and therefore makes it visible to her? Marisa did not have a fetish for death. She did not want to die. But if I were dying, she would certainly want to make love to me on the very table where I received my radiation treatments or my blood

transfusions—not for the thrill of making love to the terminally ill, but for the reflections of herself in the polished metal of medical instruments. Kissing me, she would see herself through the surveillance monitors at the nurses’ station. That was the essential thing—not to confront death, but to be seen in proximity to it. It was not death that was real for her, but the outside observer. She was like a person who wants to be photographed with a celebrity, except that the celebrity was the Grim Reaper.

“Let’s take some pictures,” she said, though what she really meant was “Take some pictures of *me*.” She fetched a digital camera from her handbag and handed it to me. I climbed out of the box and, as she lowered herself into it with stylized gestures, I recorded the event for posterity—posterity in this case not being the kind her art-historian father dealt with, but rather a private moment in the future when she would admire these images of herself dabbling with decadence. “Do I look like Juliet?” she asked. “Sleeping Beauty? Albine on her deathbed?” Her cultured upbringing had stocked a catalogue of roles and pictures in her mind—languorous nudes and opulent odalisques, pallid invalids and voluptuous virgins, martyred saints and femmes fatales. Idols of perversity.

I found it both sad and ridiculous. I hated the posing and playacting. I longed for a genuine smile or an authentic laugh, some sign of the real person underneath the veneer of morbid artifice. I reached out and tried to tickle her. Ignoring me, she continued to step through her repertoire. I tried to tickle her again, and yet she remained unassailable, assuming pose after pose with equanimity. In fact, with each pose her self-assurance seemed to increase, so that finally a look of what I can only describe as *hauteur* etched itself on her face. I would flutter my fingers in her armpits, twittering aloud like a bird, and yet her face—a mask—would remain unmoved, impassive. It frustrated me. We were playing a game whose stakes were reality and unreality, and I, the champion of reality, was clearly losing. Desperate, I dropped the camera and climbed on top of her. I dug my fingers into her ribs, nibbled at her neck, teased and tormented the backs of her knees. She twisted and turned beneath me, her hair tangling around us, her lips pressed tightly together in a statement of willfulness and control. She refused to let herself laugh, and at length composed a superior smile that seemed to pity my measly

efforts at disruption and incitement.

Then the telephone rang. It was as though an air-raid siren had sounded, or a team of policemen had knocked down the door. Our eyes locked, our bodies froze—our hearts beat faster and faster. What was this intrusion from the real world? Had it come to put an end to the morbid maneuvers of our grotesque game? Marisa lay where she had twisted in the coffin, listening as the answering machine picked up. “Marisa!” a male voice called through the speaker. “Marisa! Are you there?” She tried to lift her head—but something held it fast, as though the ghost of the coffin’s former occupant had seized her head and yanked it back down. “God damn it!” Marisa spurted. “My hair—it’s caught on something.” She tugged and pulled while the voice on the machine continued to call for her: “Marisa! If you’re there, please pick up! It’s an emergency!”

Finally she gave up, gave in, lay there in the coffin and gestured toward the phone. I picked up the receiver and held it to her ear. “What’s the matter?” she asked into the receiver. As she listened, I watched her face crack like a sheet of ice. Water seeped up between the cracks and she began to cry. Leaning over her, I pressed my lips to her tears, and the saline taste reminded me of an intravenous solution. She was more beautiful than ever—but why? Why did vulnerability and helplessness so become her? Was it the sheer reality of it?

“I’ll be there as quick as I can,” she said into the phone, gesturing for me to hang it up. She tried to sit up but her head was still held fast. Apparently her hair had snared in the jagged wood where the bronze handle had snapped off the coffin, and every effort to disentangle it only seemed to make it worse. “I *have* to get to the hospital,” she wept. “My father...”

She dug furiously into the thicket of hair, jerking her head, twisting her neck. It would be an exaggeration to say that she struggled with the desperation of a person trying to dig herself out of the grave, since I would imagine such desperation to be very great indeed. And yet, like a girl buried alive, Marisa suddenly found herself constrained against her will in a coffin and, contrary to her cultivated decadence, did not want to give herself over to it.

“*Help* me!” she spluttered.

“I think we have to cut it,” I said.

“My hair?”

“You want me to take a picture first? For posterity?”

“You bastard,” she spat. “What kind of insensitive fuck are you, just standing there and enjoying my distress?”

“An insensitive fuck who adores you,” I said, and she lay there quietly crying as I cut the beautiful hair she had cultivated for so long and with such lavish care.

Distress in a Dress

When I heard that Rachel's father had died, I was very anxious to see her—not because I felt the need to be supportive, to comfort her in her hour of grief, but because I wanted to see what she looked like.

In terms of appearance Rachel is an average girl, pretty at some moments but not at others. She has an intelligent face, olive skin, a wide mouth with thin lips, and dark brown eyes the color of root beer candy. Black hair curls around her face, sometimes dangles down over her right eye. She has a peculiar habit of wearing a gold wristwatch buckled on top of a long-sleeve shirt or sweater. This makes her appear too small for the watch, as though she needs the extra padding on her arm to prevent the timepiece from slipping off. In general she is so petite that she seems fragile, like porcelain. You imagine that to have sex with her you'd have to do it on a satin pillow so she wouldn't crack.

Sometimes I watch her, looking for the curve of breast on her slender frame, but then she catches me with her eye, peering up through long black lashes. At such moments I find her very seductive. At other moments, however, it's as though the light is too bright. I can make out a few strands of gray in her black hair. Her complexion is pasty. Dark bags indent the skin beneath her eyes. She has the desperate pallor of someone who smokes a cigarette first thing in the morning. If you kissed her, she would taste of halitosis and ashes.

When I heard that her father had died, I wondered if death would push her in one direction or the other—towards either beauty or ugliness. Would sadness make her sexy? Grief make her gorgeous? Mourning make her magnificent?

I had noticed, some time before Rachel's father died, that a woman's beauty could be intensified through sadness. I saw this clearly at the funeral of an aunt. A well-loved lady, popular with everybody, this aunt

suddenly keeled over in the kitchen one day. She was still young, fifty-ish, and seemingly healthy. But while stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce, she felt a headache come on. She lay right down on the floor and never got up. An aneurysm had done its swift work, bursting in her brain. The spaghetti sauce boiled over, leaked onto the floor, and left a gaping blister on her cheek. Otherwise her death was peaceful.

She left behind a husband and two teenaged daughters, a redhead and a brunette. At the funeral, the husband appeared tired but business-like. He seemed to have submerged his grief into the work of conducting a successful funeral. The two daughters, meanwhile, sat huddled together on a sofa in the parlor. The brunette, who was slightly older, cradled the redhead in her arms. The brunette was visibly sad, but like her father she was attentive to the process of the funeral. She was polite with well-wishers, made conversation with relative strangers, all the while solacing her little sister—for this one, the redhead, was inconsolable. She had collapsed into herself. She cried without stop. She made no effort to speak or smile or acknowledge a word of condolence.

Though I was related to the two girls, I don't think I had seen them in two years or so. I knew that they were attractive, but there at the funeral they had become irresistible. I was touched by the maturity of the brunette, and my heart reached out to the redhead in her sorrow and distress. I watched them solacing one another, the younger one sobbing in the elder's arms, and wanted desperately to reach out, hug them, caress them, press my lips to their tears. It may be uncouth to say it, but there was something about their mutual involvement that even struck me as lesbian. A sense of profound intimacy enveloped the two girls, an intensity that only they could share. And though I knew that this intensity was made up of sorrow, not libido, I still could not help myself from finding it stimulating. I excused myself to the bathroom—which was awkwardly situated beside a coffin showroom—and masturbated into the toilet, mixing up their tear-stained faces with cum shots and facials I had seen in pornography.

After the funeral I thought about the relation between beauty and sadness. Why had grief made the two sisters so alluring? Did they have any idea how beautiful they were when they were morose? If you asked women who were in mourning to do self-portraits, I wondered, how

would they depict themselves? Would they look quietly grim? Would they do harsh renderings to give vent to their heartache? Would they flatter themselves? Or would they, in order to express their pain, mutilate their painted appearances the same as some mourners tear their hair or slash themselves with razorblades?

I started to contemplate some rather outlandish experiments. I would see a passerby, an average-looking girl, and I would imagine killing somebody she loved. Would it make her prettier? Would it make any difference if she loved the victim with romantic or with familial love? Was the effect the same if she did or didn't witness the killing herself? After all, if a funeral could intensify a girl's beauty, what must a homicide do to it? Or suppose you tortured someone she loved in front of her—would she reach an absolute pinnacle of prettiness? Was pain the best frame for loveliness?

With such thoughts in mind, I made a condolence call to Rachel at her family home, a sprawling apartment overlooking the United Nations. A short Latina in a French maid's outfit answered the door, took my jacket, and motioned me into the living room. Rachel sat with her back to the entry, surrounded by a small group of girlfriends. Her brother slumped on a bench idly poking at the keys of a white grand piano, and her mother perched on a settee like a stuffed bird, eyes closed and hands clasped over her midriff. Apparently she had cried herself to sleep.

Seeing me enter, the brother stood up from the piano and shook my hand. We were the only two men in the room, and he appeared to think it was his duty to accept my condolences on behalf of the family.

"You knew my father, did you?" he asked.

He put his arm around my shoulders and guided me into a corner of the apartment. He had the demeanor of a man self-consciously playing the role of firstborn son. We sat in two low Dutch modern chairs covered in black leather.

"I thought he was healthy," I offered, shaking my head in a deliberate display of sympathy.

"We thought so too."

He began to tell me how his father had collapsed on the bathroom floor. I stared out the window at the United Nations. Rachel's father had

worked at various embassies around the world. Probably he had seen a lot of pain and suffering during his travels. When he went to African countries where droughts had caused mass starvation, or when he went to Eastern Europe to investigate charges of ethnic cleansing, did he find any relation between beauty and death? Obviously the sad faces of people starving to death weren't beautiful—but what about the French doctors from *Médecins Sans Frontières* who came to help them? Were they inflamed by the faces of the dying around them? And what about his daughter, Rachel? I could see her riding in the back of an Army jeep with her British tutor and chaperone, glorious amidst the bony fingers reaching out for a morsel of lifesaving victual.

“You want to know something strange?” her brother asked, leaning forward in the chair and clasping his fingers like a man about to pray. “My father never used to talk about the war. I knew his parents and two brothers were killed in the camps, but more than that I didn't know. I would ask, ‘Papa, what happened to you during the war?’ And he'd just say that was all in the past. He didn't want to talk about it. But you want to know something strange? Four weeks before he died—exactly four weeks—we were walking together, right here on First Avenue. And he turned to me and do you know what he said? ‘Do you want to know about the war?’ And I said, ‘Ok, sure, I'd like to know about the war.’ And he said, ‘Ok, I'm going to tell you about the war.’ And we sat down on the benches down there in the grass, and he told me about the war.”

“What did he tell you?”

“About when the Nazis came to his village when he was a little boy, and then the camps, and how he survived. Do you know that they were so hungry that if someone had a leather shoe they would boil and eat it?”

The stories he had heard began to take possession of him, and he stood up and paced while he told them. This enabled me to slide my chair around to watch Rachel across the room. I could still only see her from the back, but with every horror he retold, every atrocity he recounted, she positively seemed to glow. If I thought that the grief she felt from the lone death of her father would make her beautiful, then the inherited sorrow from the deaths of six million of her people made her incandescent. She was the individual repository of the pogroms and holocausts of three thousand years, and every Roman who bludgeoned

her ancestors, every Cossack who burned her grandparents' shtetl, only made her more beautiful to me. She was a vulnerable little thing tossed up by a tidal wave of blood. I wanted to kiss away her tears, transform her sorrow into joy through the act of passion.

I excused myself to go to the bathroom. I imagined that I was a guard in the camps, Gestapo but a good guy. I would save Rachel's family from the ovens. With tears of gratitude she would fling herself into my arms, and we would kiss in a rain of human ashes that love had transformed into glorious colored confetti...

I flushed the toilet and something drained from my body too. It was only an ounce of fluid, but getting rid of it was like lancing a boil. Suddenly I could smell the lemony odor of the cleaning solutions which had scrubbed the bathroom to sterile perfection. I could hear the gentle hum of an air purifier and the muffled voices outside. I washed my hands with liquid soap and ran them under the water, which was icy cool. I looked at my watch. I was dismayed to realize I'd spent an hour talking to the brother. I thought of a phone call I needed to make, and I felt a little hungry. If I walked over to Grand Central, I could get something to eat at one of the boutiques in the concourse beneath the station—a turkey sandwich on a baguette, and a caffè latte too.

When I came out, the brother was standing by the windows overlooking the United Nations. "Whenever I look at that building," he said, gesturing to the glass skyscraper, "I will always think of my father. It's like a symbol that reminds me of everything he did to help people, all the good he brought them..."

The glass tower glittered alongside the East River. The United Nations—it was a pillar of cooperation, fraternity, fellow-feeling. And what was I? A cave of bad appetites, Unnatural Needs.

"I'm afraid I have to run along," I said.

"Of course. It was very nice of you to stay so long. Would you like to just say hello to my sister before you leave?"

I looked at my watch. "All right."

We approached the group of girls. "Excuse me, Rachel," he said, "I think you know this man..."

Rachel turned and stood. She reached up with her hand to push the bangs out of her eyes. I noticed the gold wristwatch slipping on her arm.

She had gotten even thinner. She looked tired. Her eyes were puffy from crying. Her complexion was wan and dull like candle wax. She was so gaunt that her teeth looked too big for her mouth, and in fact her whole skull seemed too large for her head. It gave the impression that the skin of her face had been pulled tightly over her cranium, and then an old wig had been thrown on top so you wouldn't see a bit of bony skull peeking out at the ears.

“It was so nice of you to come,” she said.

I could see her tongue moving behind her teeth. It looked prehensile and unnaturally dry, like the finger of a dying man poking at the bars of his prison for the last time.

“It was the least I could do,” I said.

“Wouldn't you like to stay a few more minutes?”

She looked, I thought, like one of those emaciated survivors from the camps. “I'm sorry,” I said, “I can't,” though really I meant I didn't want to.

Prescription for Grief

When someone you love dies, should you masturbate? To anyone who has experienced true grief, this may be a counterintuitive—if not downright repulsive—suggestion. The common tendency, upon learning of a loved one’s demise, is not to induce pleasure but rather pain: we tear our hair, pound our fists on the floor, lash ourselves and long to die. Grief reduces us to a self-mutilating spectacle—and this pathetic display is so obviously masochistic that you can’t help but wonder if there is a sadistic audience for it, sick individuals who derive sexual titillation from exhibitions of mourning. No doubt there are indeed those whose pulse quickens at the sound of sobbing and the sight of black veils, and yet the arch-sadist himself, the Marquis de Sade, proposed at least one cure for the pangs of irrevocable loss.

Iwan Bloch, who wrote the first biography of the divine marquis, noted Sade’s point in *Justine* that a certain “passionate excitation, which can be done every moment without the aid of another, was the best consolation for sorrow, for onanism caused all pain to disappear with safety.” This was in fact the advice that Juliette offered her younger sister Justine after their parents’ death. Juliette counseled her “that it was possible to find in oneself physical sensations of a sufficiently voluptuous piquancy to extinguish all the moral affections whose shock could be painful; that it was all the more essential so to proceed, since true wisdom consists infinitely more in doubling the sum of one’s pleasures than in increasing the sum of one’s pains.” Such logic is hard to refute. Few non-sadists would argue that pain should be inflicted upon the pained. If a man were lying in bed suffering from a terminal illness, would you beat him with a whip? Of course not. You would not want to multiply his distress. And yet, if that’s the case, why do we lacerate ourselves when we grieve? You might say that, when we are sad, pain itself becomes pleasurable, but

really this makes no more sense than saying that, when we are happy, pleasure becomes painful—an obvious untruth.

Perhaps Sade was right: if the pursuit of pleasure is superior to the exacerbation of pain, then when someone dies you really ought to masturbate. Of course, this would have radical consequences for death rites and exequies. No longer would clerical figures be summoned to give speeches and eulogies at funerals. Instead, there would be stimulating entertainment. Exotic dancers would leap out from behind bouquets of flowers to create an uplifting atmosphere of sexual license. A star attraction might pop out of a coffin to do a striptease with shrouds and cements. Instead of tearing their clothes, mourners would pop their zippers and express their laments in sighs of pleasure. Ceremonies might even move from funeral homes to go-go bars and porn emporia. And anyone so prudish as to cling to their wailing and woe could be slipped a strong dose of aphrodisiac or date-rape drug.

Essentially the funeral would become something like an Irish wake, but with fucking rather than drinking. Certainly such a ceremony would ease the sorrow and sadness of bereavement. But what after? The worst hours are not those hectic ones of the funeral and interment, when you're still in a state of shock and disbelief, but the ones that come after—when you're alone, lying in bed reminiscing or sifting through the belated's belongings. Those are the hours when loss crushes you like a displaced boulder and you feel like you can hardly move or breathe let alone touch yourself. How then do you take the cure prescribed by the divine marquis?

On one hand, there is an element of self-discipline involved. After all, it is you who allows yourself to indulge in loneliness and lamentation. Rather than ruminate, you could fantasize about acts of outrageous sexual gratification. Rather than look at snapshots of the dear departed, you could read pornographic magazines or watch fisting videos. At worst, if you absolutely must cry, you could gather your tears and use them as a sexual lubricant. Mucous accumulated from the sniffles can make an effective replacement for lubes and gels. Try rubbing a soiled tissue in your groin.

On the other hand, it may be unrealistic to expect people racked by grief to exercise such self-discipline. It is important, therefore, that mea-

asures be taken to help mourners help themselves. For example, the old and the terminally ill should be careful to leave dildos, pocket pussies, and pornography amongst their things in order to lighten the hearts of their inheritors. Such sexual aids might even become heirlooms, passed from one generation to another. “These were my great grandmother’s ben-wa balls,” your proud descendants will say.

Broader social changes would have to be instituted as well. Memorial Day could become a Saturnalia, with local governments providing strippers to dance on graves. Celebrity porn stars could autograph tombstones while their fuck films are projected behind them on the white walls of mausoleums. Prostitutes could mingle with mourners, giving away free handjobs. Engravers could volunteer to brighten up old tombstones with new epitaphs of a more titillating nature: “do me baby” and “fuck me harder” provide more spiritual uplift to the bereaved than “rest in peace.” And perhaps there could even be product demonstrations for completely new types of grave markers. Marble is cold and hard, a concrete reminder of the irreversibility of loss. Why not use friendlier materials? Tombstones could be made to resemble beanbag chairs, so that mourners could lie comfortably on them and drown their sorrows in autoerotic sensations.

Of course, this mass alleviation of the suffering of mourners will necessarily entail other shifts in social perception. Masturbation must no longer be taboo. Sex workers must no longer be impugned since, like the priest, the prostitute provides solace and comfort to the bereaved. And if on a sunny day a man in a trench coat approaches you, unbuckles his slicker and touches himself, you should not leap to the conclusion that he is an exhibitionist creep. More likely, in the new order of things, he is probably just someone trying to deaden a nerve after a tragic loss, and therefore the moral thing is to give him a hand—or better yet, a handjob.

Whoremonger for a Dying Friend

I found the book on the bottom shelf. I shouldn't feel embarrassed, I thought. It's a work of literature. Still, waiting on line with college students buying textbooks for their new courses, I felt vaguely like a man stepping out of a porn parlor into a busy street. I was buying the book for a friend—but no one would know that. To them, I was not just a man buying a book. I was a man making a public declaration about his sexuality by purchasing a certain *kind* of book.

I handed it to the cashier without looking at her. I wanted to avoid eye contact. "Hey, look." She held the book up in the air, displaying its cover to the girl at the next register. "My book," she gushed.

I was astonished. Could it be that I had gone to the one cashier in the world—the one female cashier, no less—who happened to be a fan of the Marquis de Sade?

"I'm going to have to get this," said the cashier. "What class is it for?"

"What class?" I had the impression she'd never heard of it. Why was it hers if she didn't even know what it was? "It's French," I mumbled, as though I were more interested in its nationality than its perversity.

"It's for a French class?"

"No." Suddenly I realized that I would get an educational discount if I pretended it were for a college course. "It's for—Eighteenth Century Literature," I lied.

"That's really cool," she said. "I never meet *anybody* else with my name."

I looked at her green plastic name tag. Justine—so that was it. "Maybe that's where your parents got the name." I nodded toward the book, fully aware how improbable it was. It would be like naming your daughter Deep Throat.

As she processed my charge card, Justine the cashier studied the flor-

id old painting of two lesbians on the book's cover. The friendly smile on her face soured as though she had bitten down on a cyanide capsule. The title had excited her. It was like looking in a mirror to see her own name in print. In her heart, she hoped the book would inspire her or tell her all about herself. But there was that picture of lesbians underneath the title—did she really want to read such a book? How would she feel as she discovered the serial rape and molestation of her namesake? Would it change her entire self-conception? Would she come to hate her name and perhaps even the parents who had given it to her?

She put the book into a plastic bag and handed me the receipt. "You can find it in the fiction aisle," I said, suppressing an urge to wink.

"I don't have time for fiction," she replied, spitting out that invisible cyanide.

From the bookstore I walked toward the park. It was an unusually warm day for January. Women were pushing babies in carriages. Retirees were feeding pigeons. I was a little overdressed and sweaty, as though I were nervous about something.

I found the brownstone and climbed the big steps. I wasn't sure if I should ring the bell. What if Zak was resting? But then he'd told me to come at four o'clock, and it was four.

His mother let me in. I remembered her as a dark, attractive woman with heavy breasts. But the woman who let me in was thin, pale, exhausted. She looked as though she had been turned upside down and shaken like a ketchup bottle. The color had drained from her skin, the fat from her breasts, the luster from her eyes.

"Don't wear him out," she cautioned me. "He's too hyper. He needs rest."

Climbing the stairs behind her, I watched her backside moving beneath her robe and tried to prepare a face. I recognized it was ridiculous, since he knew and she knew and I knew what was what. But still, I felt compelled to act cheerful, even merry, as though my friend were about to go on a trip, start a new career, get married.

"Zak, you old dog," I said, grinning and holding out my hand. I was acting as though I should be giving him a cigar and a pat on the back, but I was thinking how clammy his hand felt, how red his cheeks were, how ridiculous he looked—a grown man inhabiting a room he had last

occupied as a teenager. I associated Zak with books, erudition, philosophy, truth, and here he was amid model airplanes and baseball cards.

I drew up a chair by the bed. His mother left, giving me a dark look intended to remind me of my promise not to tire Zak out.

“My poor mom,” he said. “It’s been hard on her.”

“She looks great.”

“Don’t bullshit me. She looks like fucking hell. Sometimes I wonder if it would be easier on her if I just kill myself and get it over with already.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Look,” he said. “You’re my friend. I need you... I need you to be yourself, ok?”

I looked at the floor. His candor made me uncomfortable.

“I’ve got enough parodies of hope tiptoeing around me,” he continued. “I don’t have time for any more lies. I need someone I can be honest with, ok?”

I looked into his eyes. I wanted to retreat into that pipe dream of progress, that illusion of improvement, that hallucination of hope. But the eyes said: “No, nothing will improve. The situation will not get better. If I can’t have life, at least let me have truth.”

“Ok,” I said, trying to match his moral courage. “If that’s what you want.”

He nodded his head. He seemed both tired but wired, exhausted but fired up. Maybe it was the medicine. “Did you get what I asked you to pick up?”

I pulled the Sade book out of the plastic bag. Zak burst out laughing—but laughing gave way to coughing and he sounded like a monkey trying to speak Hebrew. He spit into a plastic cup and looked at me. I could see that he was trying to draw his tired facial muscles into an expression of amusement. He reminded me of someone trying to tell a joke after completing a hunger strike. “That’s not what I meant by *erotic*,” he sputtered.

This was a man who, when he said music, meant Stravinsky. When he said politics, he meant Sun Tzu. When he said philosophy, he meant Nietzsche. When he said erotic, what else could he mean but Sade? D.H. Lawrence? Henry Miller?

“I wanted a copy of *Playboy* or *Hustler* or *Juggs* or *Hot Virgin Sluts*

or *Black Bitches Do It Doggy-Style* or anything with *pictures!* I didn't want Sade."

His outburst embarrassed me. The red glow in his cheeks looked different, less a symptom of his sickness than a fire on its surface.

He slapped the bed with his hand—weakly, I noticed. "I'm horny, goddamn it!"

"Horny," I repeated, stupidly.

"Yes, horny!" he cried. "Do you know what it means to die at my age? It means to die in your prime, full of hormones, unsated urges. I want to fuck in this damn bed, not die in it! You understand?"

"I guess." I looked at the floor. My cheeks were probably red too. Even though I had taken my coat off, I still felt overdressed. Hot. Sweaty. The room, I realized, was stifling. I wanted to get out. I wanted to be in the park with the pigeons and babies.

"I really need this favor." He grinned. "You think you can just make a trip to the newsstand for me?"

"What should I tell your mother?"

"Why do you have to tell her anything?"

"What if she asks?"

"So what if she asks! Tell her the truth, for all I care!"

I came back with about five pounds of cheap pornography in a brown paper bag. I also brought a cup of coffee and some snack cakes. As she let me back in, Zak's mother looked at the junk food suspiciously. "Did Zak ask you to sneak that in to him?"

"No," I said. "The coffee's for me. I just bought him some magazines. You know how he likes the *Economist*."

"Don't patronize me. He can't have that nosh."

"Honest," I said. "It's for me."

"Well, you can't take it upstairs anyway. I don't allow food in the bedrooms. You'll have to eat it in the kitchen."

I followed her into the kitchen and we sat across from each other at a little breakfast nook. She poured water for herself from a Brita pitcher and took some diet crackers from a box. "I'm sorry," she said, watching me dunk the cakes in the coffee.

"For what?"

"I can see you're a nice boy."

“I try.”

“It’s very hard, you know. First Zak’s father, and...” She made this weird hiccup noise. It sounded as though she would rather choke on her own tongue than give voice to her grief.

“Can’t you get a home attendant or a day nurse?” I knew this was no answer. She didn’t mean that taking care of Zak was hard. But still, it seemed like a helpful thing to say.

“I tried that,” she said, “but there were—problems. The nurses weren’t very reliable.”

“They can’t all be so bad.”

“First we had a *schwarz* named Carmelita.”

“What’s a *schwarz*?”

“A colored girl. She was from Jamaica. A very sweet girl, very religious, always reading from a little Bible.”

“But she wasn’t reliable?”

Zak’s mother broke a diet cracker neatly in two. “She left without giving us notice.”

“You have no idea why?”

“I called the woman at the agency who sent her to us, and she said it was Zak.”

“Zak?” I could see it in my mind’s eye. Carmelita sat there with her Bible, and Zak had probably vented his angst on her in the form of a Nietzschean harangue—God is dead and so on.

“Then we got a girl from Bulgaria. A tough, no-nonsense kind of girl. She studied engineering before coming to America.”

“And what happened?”

“Well, one day I heard them yelling at each other up there. When I came into the room, Zak said that she’d slapped him.”

“Slapped him?” Suddenly I understood well enough. I knew why she slapped him. I was sitting there with a thick stack of pornographic magazines in a plain brown wrapper. “Did you try a male nurse?” I asked diplomatically.

“Zak wouldn’t have it. He said it wouldn’t look right if the neighbors saw a strange man coming to the house every day.”

I looked at her. In a way I could see Zak’s point. Even exhausted by grief and worry, his mother was still an attractive woman. She reminded me of the great Semitic beauties of the Old Testament—and maybe

she reminded the neighbors of those beauties too. They would see the strange man around the house and snicker as they mouthed that old platitude to each other, “There’s only one way to console a widow.”

“I think my Zak’s actually a *bissel* jealous of me,” she said, smiling for the first time since I came in the house.

“Goddamn! Would you look at those tits?” Zak held up the centerfold for me to see. It showed a buxom blond wearing a cowboy hat and little else. “You want to know what I’d do to Miss January here? I’d get her to shove those big titties right into my face, really smother me with them, and then...”

I tuned him out. It was embarrassing. The room was oppressive. I felt hot, almost feverish. I didn’t want to hear about Zak’s sexual fantasies, and I didn’t want to think about him dying, but I was being smothered by both—rather like Miss January’s breasts in his fantasy.

I thought of Zak’s mother. Did she realize what a pervert he was? Then again, was he really so depraved? Or was he just more honest than the rest of us? We all joke about it being the best way to go—a heart attack in the arms of a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader. I probably wouldn’t be any different if I were in his situation. I dimly conceived the outline of a plan—then something hit me in the head.

“Wake up over there!” Zak hollered. “You’re not going to have that much more time to enjoy my stimulating company, so pay attention!”

“Sorry,” I said, “I’m a bit worn out. This is kind of—overwhelming for me.”

“What do you think it is for me, numb nut? Underwhelming?”

“You’re right, Zak. I’m sorry. What were we talking about?”

“Pussy!” He really seemed manic. He had the harried look of a man rushing through a meal before catching an airplane. “Now pick up that magazine I just threw at you and look at page thirty-nine.”

I picked it up. There was a picture of an olive-skinned girl with glossy dark hair—on her head anyway. “She’s hot,” I humored him.

“You think she’s Jewish?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I mean, how can you tell?”

“Look at her nose. Look at her eyes.”

The picture wasn’t exactly intended to focus your vision on her face, but I did my best. She could have been Jewish, but she could have been

Greek or Italian too.

“Do you realize I’ve only been with shiksas?” he asked.

“No.”

“My father always said, ‘I don’t care what girlfriends you have, but only marry a Jew.’”

I handed the magazine back to him. “Then you never went against his word.”

“True,” he said, looking at the girl in the picture. “But you know what? Really I like Asian girls.”

“A lot of guys do.”

“They didn’t have any Asian porn at the newsstand?”

“I didn’t check. You want me to go back?”

“No, it’s ok. Next time you come, maybe.”

Zak flipped through the magazine. “Now I’ll never get married.” It was less a self-pitying than a factual or declarative statement, as though he’d said “I have to pick up my dry-cleaning.” Then suddenly he started laughing—a shrill, high-pitched laughter. There was something edgy about it, the way a schizophrenic laughs at his own plan for world domination.

I couldn’t help but laugh with him a little, but at the same time I had this weird fear of opening my mouth too wide. I knew I couldn’t catch anything from him, but the room weighed on me. I didn’t want to breathe its air. Finally I asked, “What’s so funny?”

“When you leave in a few minutes,” he said, basically telling me I should go, “I’m going to jerk off, right?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, Zak.” I probably made a face, since honestly I didn’t want to hear about it. I had that icky feeling you get when your mother tells you she has great orgasms. I just didn’t want to know.

“Well, what I was thinking was this.” He laughed again, as though he’d come up with a great joke. “If a dying man masturbates, is it necrophilia?”

I looked at his burning cheeks, his glowing eyes. How long did he have to live? What medicines was he taking? Was he a little crazy? Or just blunt? I had never talked to a dying man before. When you read about it in books, dying men talk about their religion or their children or their legacy. Zak had none of this. He didn’t believe in God. He had no wife

or kids. He was leaving no artistic or intellectual legacy. What else did he have to think about, except perhaps his mother?

He seemed to be hanging on my answer, his eyebrows pointing up into his forehead like upside-down fangs. Is it necrophilia?

“Only to your hand,” I said.

When I got home I made a few phone calls. I described Zak’s situation and asked—discreetly, not naming but rather insinuating what I was after—if anyone knew where I could turn for help. On the third call I got lucky.

“Well,” said my friend, “I know this girl Hillary who’s kind of in the business.”

“She doesn’t happen to be Asian, does she?”

“With a name like Hillary?”

“You never know. My friend likes Asians.”

“Listen to me. You don’t want an Asian. That submissive geisha thing is a myth. They tend to be business-like, hyper-efficient. It’s like going to a Korean deli. You’re out quick, and you pay too much.”

“What about a Jewish girl?”

“You don’t want a Jew. They haggle. Trust me, call Hillary.”

“You have her number?”

“Sure, but you probably shouldn’t tell her the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as a man, I understand what you’re trying to do. But any girl you ask is going to be freaked out by it.”

“That’s why I thought I’d hire someone to do it.”

My friend laughed. “Look, Hillary’s no crack whore. She’s a class act, a smart person. I think she has a master’s degree in something or other.”

Perfect, I thought. Zak is an intellectual too. They can discuss Plato’s theory that wisdom is virtue—and then they can commit an act of vice.

“What should I tell her?”

“You’ll have to figure that one out,” he said. “I’m just giving you the number.”

I wrote down Hillary’s information on a little pink Post-It, but I hesitated to call. I didn’t know what to say. I wanted a plan, a cover

story, something plausible. I happened to flip through the classified pages of a magazine and there, among the advertisements for phone sex, escort services, and body rubs, was an ad for “sensual role-play.”

I dialed the number. “Hello, may I speak with Hillary please?”

“Who’s calling?”

“I’m a friend of—” I named our mutual acquaintance.

“What can I do for you?” Her voice clearly implied the range of things she could do for a man, and it didn’t include cooking, washing, or ironing.

“Well,” I groped for words, “I’m calling on behalf of a friend.”

“Too bad for you.”

“My friend’s birthday is coming up, and I want to get him a nice present.”

“Me.”

“Well—yes.”

“That can be arranged.”

“But there’s something special I have to tell you upfront.”

“What’s that?”

“My friend’s into—well, he’s into some kind of weird role-play things.”

“How weird?”

I stuttered. This was much more embarrassing than buying the Sade book. “Well,” I managed, “he has this one particular fantasy...”

“What fantasy?”

“He wants to pretend he’s terminally ill, and you come along and—you know, do your thing. Like he’s going out with a smile.”

The next night I met Hillary at an ATM around the corner from Zak’s house. Although I had asked her to wear street clothes, I was still surprised when I saw her. I guess I expected a gaudy streetwalker, but Hillary was a smart-looking brunette in an expensive suit. She looked as though she could lead a seminar on internet marketing or real-estate investment trusts. There was an assertiveness in her walk, a crispness in her manner, a cut-the-crap tone in her voice, that suggested an efficient personnel manager. I imagined her staging corporate raids on independently-owned massage parlors or selling junk bonds to lonely johns.

I introduced her to Zak’s mother as my girlfriend and led her

upstairs. We paused outside his bedroom door. “You go in,” I said. “I’ll wait out here in the hallway.”

I retreated a few steps down the corridor and sat down on the floor. The wall across from me was hung with family pictures: Zak’s father, grandparents, baby pictures, Zak at his bar mitzvah... Where had that little boy gone? How had he become that unabashedly lustful man—that dying man—down the hall? I could see the evolution from bar mitzvah to college, from religion to philosophy, but how had he ended up at pornography? Was it something about death?

Suddenly I heard his mother approach the staircase. I jumped up and started down to intercept her. “Do you think I could get some coffee?” I asked, all but pushing her back toward the kitchen.

A sound from Zak’s room reverberated through the stairs. *Yelp. Ugh. Ugh. Oooh.*

“What was that?” Zak’s mother was easily alarmed. Every odd sound could be her son’s death rattle.

“That’s nothing.” I took her by the elbow and turned her toward the kitchen. “My girlfriend’s a, uh, massage therapist, and she’s giving Zak a—workout.”

“A workout? Why’s he making those noises?”

“It’s very strenuous.”

“Strenuous!”

“Only at first. Ultimately it’s very—uh—relaxing.”

“He does need to relax.”

“That’s right. My girlfriend agrees. Doctors often recommend massage therapy in these situations. Now how about that coffee?”

Suddenly there was a noise from upstairs.

Crack!

“What was that?”

Crack!

It sounded like a cap gun or a backfiring car. What was going on up there? Suddenly I heard Hillary call down the stairs for me. “Could you come up here please?”

“Why don’t you get started making that coffee?” I said to Zak’s mother, practically pushing her at the percolator.

I dashed up the stairs. Hillary was standing at the top of the landing. The business suit had been removed to reveal a black leather bustier,

fishnet stockings, and stiletto heels. She looked mad, as though she were about to kick me. “What the fuck kind of game are you trying to play with me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about this role-play business. Is he pretending to be sick, or is he really sick?”

“Just pretending,” I maintained. “Why?”

“Because I don’t think he’s breathing, that’s why.”

I hurried into the room. Zak was lying naked on top of his bright yellow bedspread, his paunchy white skin covered with black hair. A silver band of duct tape held a rubber ball in his mouth. Handcuffs bound his wrists to the headboard and his ankles to the footboard.

“What the hell happened?”

Hillary shrugged, as cool as though she were listening to the complaints of a competitor she had forced into bankruptcy. “I just tied him up. Then I gave him a few smacks with the whip but I got suspicious when he didn’t move. That’s when I called you.”

“You tied him up and *whipped* him? He’s a sick man!”

“That’s not what you said.”

“I thought you were just going to sleep with him!”

Hillary looked at me with unconcealed contempt. I felt like I had failed to read the small print on an important contract. “I don’t fuck people,” she said. “I torture them.”

“Torture them?”

“I *am* a dominatrix.”

“A dominatrix?”

“You have a problem with that?”

I turned to the bed and yanked the duct tape off Zak’s face. It left a big red patch across his cheeks and mouth, as though he’d been run over by a bloody tire. I couldn’t feel any breath coming out. I leaned my ear against his chest. I couldn’t feel or hear anything. It was quiet as a pillow. I turned back to Hillary. “You know any first aid?”

“No.” She lit a cigarette. It seemed to be a gesture of defiance. If I were to ask her to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, she would blow smoke into his lungs.

I didn’t know any first aid either. “I think he’s dead,” I said.

“I didn’t know you were a doctor.”

"I'm not."

"Then you better call an ambulance before issuing any death certificates." She exhaled smoke through her nostrils, like a dragon.

"You're right," I said. "How quick can you change?"

She pulled a long coat over her dominatrix outfit. "Don't worry about me," she said. "I'm getting out of here."

"Getting out of here? You can't just leave me like this!"

"Sure I can."

"But it's going to look suspicious. How am I going to explain it?"

"You'll make up something." She picked up her bag. "This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't lied about him being sick."

I winced.

"What's the matter?" she said. "The truth hurt?"

She walked out the door and I could hear her stiletto heels clunk down the stairs.

"Is everything all right?" his mother called from below.

"Fine," I hollered.

I rushed into action. I opened a window to clear the cigarette smoke from the room. I wadded up the duct tape and concealed it in my pockets. I turned back to Zak. My first impulse was to put his pajamas back on, but then I decided just to pull the yellow bedspread over him. The ambulance attendants wouldn't find it unusual that he, a sick man, was lying naked in bed. All I had to do before calling 911 was remove the handcuffs. I reached for Zak's wrist—and that's when I realized how much the truth really was going to hurt, because Hillary had left with the keys.

Meat Substitutes

I was taking some money out of the automatic teller machine when I turned to see my butcher at the screen next to me. He was an older man with big hands that you could easily imagine strangling a chicken. Normally I envisioned him in a white apron stained with blood, so it was strange to see him at the ATM dressed in a nylon jogging suit. He looked uncomfortable manipulating the keypad and touchscreen, as though he would prefer to cut his money out of the bowels of the machine with a knife.

“Haven’t seen *you* around lately,” he said.

“My wife’s into the organic thing now,” I replied, counting my money. Although I’d never gotten the wrong amount from an ATM, I still felt the need to count it. “You know—no insecticides, no genetically modified tomatoes, no bioengineering. We haven’t really been eating much meat.”

“You and everyone else.” He took his transaction receipt and scrutinized it with the face of a man receiving bad news. “No one goes to the butcher anymore. Meat is a dying business. When my father started the shop, people ate bacon for breakfast, hamburgers for lunch, and for dinner—pork chops, steak, veal, whole chickens. Now all they want is tofu and soy.” He shook his head from side to side. “Artificial chicken. Imitation beef. People want meat to grow on a plant, for Christ’s sake.”

Suddenly I felt guilty for all the veal I’d avoided and the pork I’d eschewed. An old joke floated through my mind. *What do soy beans and vibrators have in common? They’re both meat substitutes.*

“I wish I could sell out,” he continued, “but who wants to invest in a butcher shop nowadays?”

“Your kids don’t want to go into the business?”

“My kids are adults. They have lives already. And you think my grandkids want to go into meat? All they can talk about is computers.”

“Maybe you have to keep up with the times,” I offered. “Reinvent the business.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s all a matter of perception. The word *butcher* scares people. They imagine you ringing the neck of a chicken, hitting a cow in the head with a sledgehammer, hanging a pig upside down and slitting its throat. You have to put a different spin on it. Instead of calling yourself a butcher shop, think of yourself as a meat boutique. Put some chairs out on the sidewalk and serve espresso. Have a live jazz band on Thursdays. Schedule some poetry readings.”

“Yeah, and I should have a clown act too? Bozo the Bacon Eater? I should be the P. T. Barnum of meat?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Nah.” He slapped at the air. “I’m too damn old.”

“You’re not too old,” I said. “It just that the times are changing.”

“For the worse. What kind of world is it when you have to do a dog-and-pony show just to get people to buy meat? It’s *food*, for Christ’s sake.”

I smiled. Though I felt sorry for him, I could see the truth in what he was saying.

“I just don’t get it,” he continued. Taking me by the elbow, he pulled me away from the money machines. He reached into a plastic shopping bag and withdrew a pile of letters bound by a rubber band. “Look at this,” he said. “Today’s mail. Three credit-card offers—I can remember a day when it was shameful to borrow money from somebody. And now they throw it at you!” Then he pulled a glossy brochure from the stack. “And look at this one. I can hardly understand what it’s about.”

I looked at the return address on the brochure: The Institute for Posthumous Fertility. On the cover was a collage showing a newborn baby, test tubes, and a modern-looking glass building. “I guess it’s some kind of reproductive technology,” I said.

“Reproductive technology?” He leaned close to me and whispered. “You mean like a dildo?”

“No, it’s medical technology that helps people have babies.”

“What’s a man need that God didn’t put in his pants already?” For

emphasis he tugged at the waistband of his sweats.

I opened the brochure and scanned the text, picking up random phrases like “sperm bank of the future” and “have children with your grandchildren’s children.” It described the Institute’s archival facility near Silicon Valley, California. It gave bullet points listing all the reasons you might want to save your egg or your sperm for posterity. “The Institute for Posthumous Fertility believes,” the brochure claimed, “that in the future genetic material will be bought and sold like stocks and bonds. Imagine the income that could derive from the sperm of Leonardo or the semen of Einstein. You can provide for your heirs and your heirs’ heirs simply by making regular deposits to the Institute for Posthumous Fertility’s world-class repository for reproductive materials.”

I could imagine the marketing campaigns that would ensue once you had competing genetic products. Sperm donors would smear each other in the media, egg donors would take out print ads lambasting each other’s DNA. There would be nasty rumors about defective material, recessed genes, tendencies to deformity and disease. There would be seminal forgeries and ovular fakes, women weeping when they discover that devious lab techs have labeled the tubes “Einstein” but filled them with their own degraded emissions... If you couldn’t trust a bank with your money, how could your trust it with your posterity?

“Well,” I said, “this place is kind of like a bank.” I nodded back toward the ATMs. “Except that instead of depositing your money, you send in your sperm to be frozen and saved for the future.”

“Now why would anybody want to go and do a thing like that?”

“Lots of reasons, I guess.”

“Name one.”

“Ok,” I said. “Imagine a man your age has a wife of twenty. Maybe she’s not ready to have a baby, so she asks him to freeze some of his sperm so she can be sure to have it when she’s ready.”

“And then she has a baby when I’m dead?”

“Well—yes.”

“But that’s an abomination!”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like those fellers who sneak into cemeteries and fool around

with the bodies.”

I thought for a minute. I could see his point. It was astonishing, when you really considered it, that women who would shudder at the thought of copulating with a dead person would gladly conceive a baby with one. Reproductive technology had basically created a socially acceptable form of necrophilia, one that had no more to do with cadavers than beefless burgers had to do with meat.

“Well,” I said, “people don’t really think of it in those terms.”

“You’re probably right,” he sighed. “I don’t know what people think. I’m just an old man. What do I know? I just know meat.”

Perverts Against Longevity

I scuffed through the wet yellow leaves in the country graveyard. In the light cast by the 50,000-candle-power halogen bulb of my headlamp, I could see my breath hang in the cold air. It was a miserable night, and I wished the graveyard weren't quite so vast. I had read about the burial in the local newspaper, but unfortunately the paper had provided no details as to the exact location of the grave. Looking for freshly turned dirt amid the soggy leaves, I imagined a day when every grave would be provided with GPS coordinates—perhaps as part of its epitaph. In addition to the name and the pertinent dates of the deceased, the longitude and latitude would be etched into the stone, ostensibly as an aid to genealogical researchers. This information would be made publicly available in internet-accessible databases. To find a grave, you'd enter a name or social security number and the GPS coordinates would come up. Then you could use a simple compass and transmitter to hone in on a grave, rather than stumble around half the night scaring raccoons and hoping to hit pay dirt.

Traipsing through the soggy leaves, dreams of progress and perversion in my head, I suddenly saw a flash of red somewhere in the periphery of my vision. Red—it was an unnatural color to see in a graveyard on an autumn night. Roses and carnations were long dead, frozen and withered. The robins and redbirds had flown south. Turning, I could just make out a freshly dug mound of dirt. I approached, the sound of my boots scuffling in the leaves. The halogen light reached down over the lip of the grave to reveal a red cap inside—and crouching in the hole, a man wearing the cap.

He looked up at me, squinting. “Christ’s sake, can’t you turn off that light there?”

I switched from the halogen bulb to the less bright, 18,000-candle-

power krypton beam on my headlamp. The man stood up. A shock of gray hair stuck out from beneath his red cap. He had a face like a dried fruit, lined and grizzled. He was wearing a red-checked hunting coat, faded blue jeans, and green rubber boots. He leaned on an old wooden-handled shovel. A silent look of recognition passed between us. Evidently he had found the grave I was looking for.

He shivered. "Cold as a witch's tit, ain't it?"

"It's not so bad," I said. "I've got Gore-Tex outerwear and a Polartec pullover underneath. It has a high warmth-to-weight ratio and excellent breathability." I waved my arms in the air. "It allows freedom of movement while maintaining maximum efficiency in heat retention."

He stomped his feet. "The cold climbs my old bones like a snake."

"You need better footwear." I put my foot up on a tombstone. "See these boots here? They're kangaroo leather. It's lighter than cowhide and inherently water-resistant. Inside they've got 400-gram Thinsulate Ultra insulation. With proper socks, you don't even feel the cold. I recommend TechniStrides. They have superior moisture absorption so your feet don't get damp from sweat."

He wiped a drop of mucous from the tip of his nose. "Never even used to feel the cold. When I was your age I could come out in my skivvies and dig all night."

"With a shovel like that, it probably takes you all night."

"What you reckon I should use if not a shovel? Blasting caps?" He burst out laughing at the prospect of anyone foolhardy enough to try reopening graves with dynamite.

"I use this entrenching tool," I said, reaching into my backpack. "It's modeled after the one the Soviet Spetsnaz used to use to dig battle-field trenches. The head is made of heat-treated medium carbon steel, and it's sharp as a razor on three sides. The handle is polymer, which means it's light and durable. You could hit it with a sledgehammer and it wouldn't break."

He scowled. "You young fellers think shit don't stick to a newborn pig." He turned his head and let loose a long string of viscous spit. It dangled from his mouth to his knee before detaching and flopping into the grave with a splat. "You got your synthetic this and plastic that. But you know what else you got? Bad cads!"

“Bad—cats?”

“Cads, son! Cadavers!”

“Cads.”

“What you call ’em—cheesecake?”

“I don’t really call them anything,” I said. “Why do you think they’re so bad?”

He made an expression as though biting down on a bitter lemon. “They’re old and ugly. Not like they used to be.”

I looked at him. He was no spring chicken himself. You imagine that most men his age no longer think about women, let alone cadavers.

“When I was your age,” he continued, “people didn’t go in for all these new-fangled procedures”—he pronounced the word *pro-seedy-ers*—“your chemo this and your transplant that. People got sick, they just died.” He grinned. “You should have seen the cads back then, boy. Young and firm.” He kissed the tip of his fingers. “And they weren’t all smashed up like these here accident victims.” He tapped the floor of the grave with his shovel.

The mention of the body interrupted the flow of his reminiscences. You could almost see obsession elbow nostalgia aside. I felt like a guest who had overstayed his welcome. I contemplated offering to help him finish digging, but I knew he wouldn’t accept. He was the kind of cantankerous old crank who’d attack me with his shovel.

“Well,” I said. “Finders keepers, I guess.”

“Early bird gets the worm, boy.” He turned to dig again, and I thought how untrue the cliché was in this case: the earlier you got to the grave, the less likely you were to find any worms.

Frustrated, I traipsed through the graveyard back to my Toyota 4Runner. I had the new model with the V8 engine, which I preferred to the V6 for obvious performance reasons. I set my backpack with the built-in hydration bladders in the back, fired up the truck, and felt the four wheels bite into the earth.

I knew where there were some other graveyards, and I contemplated stopping at one. I might hit some fresh dirt—but what was the point? Teen suicides, cheerleaders killed in car crashes, starlets drowned in tragic undertows—such rarities were few and far between. If I found a fresh grave, it would probably contain the body of some senior citizen or

grandparent. The grizzled old gravedigger was absolutely right. Modern medicine had become the enemy of my libido. The increase of the average lifespan had committed a holocaust on the objects of my desire. Anti-aging research functioned as a covert suppression of necrophilious urges. Technology had become sexually repressive. You want to live longer? Then you die uglier.

What could I do, I wondered, to reverse the process? To cause people to die younger and therefore more beautifully? I reached beneath the driver's seat and withdrew my Glock, a pistol I admired for its high magazine capacity and true big-bore caliber. Stroking the sand-textured grip enhancers with my fingers, I imagined myself as a Giver of Death. I could see myself at the helm of a guerilla movement. We would not only discourage longevity research but bring about a real increase in the availability of young dead bodies. We would train snipers to assassinate doctors—radicals to firebomb clinics—terrorists to rush into hospital rooms and pull the plugs on life-support machines—guerilla fighters to sneak into pharmacies and slip caustic poisons into anti-aging creams.

But where to start? Where was I to find supporters and recruits? I put the Glock back beneath the seat, pulled into my driveway, and went into the house. I lived alone, and hitherto I had loved alone too. But that was going to change. With a gun, I was just a lone crazed individual. But with a computer, I could be the beginning of a movement, a political interest group, a community of creeps—Perverts Against Longevity. I could organize forums for the free exchange of twisted information, I could develop deviant databases for tracking the most captivating cadavers, I could mobilize sex fiends everywhere to stand up for their psychopathologies—Vote for Death, folks, March for Mortality, and don't forget to leave your tax-deductible donation to depravity on your way out.

When I received the email interview, I decided to respond immediately. I read the first question. “What is a Smart Plot exactly?” My cell phone rang but I let it redirect to voice mail. I balanced my hands over the keyboard. “What is a Smart Plot?” I wrote. “At first, it was basically just a casket with a panic button. By including a wireless chip in the coffin, I was able to make it so that you could notify a central server if you happened to wake up and find yourself buried alive. The server would then compare your signal with a database and provide exact GPS coordinates to your grave. An urgent message would be sent to family and local police officials, notifying them of your distress.”

I paused. I was telling the truth—but how much did I want to tell? Did my business, like all businesses, not have its proprietary trade secrets? And if so, what were they exactly? Were they technological in nature? Or something else? After all, once you have the idea to wire a grave, any qualified engineer can do it. The trick—the profitability—is not in the hardware but in the use you make of it, the imagination you bring to it.

“Once I had wired my first coffin,” I resumed, “I quickly realized there were many other technological amenities that would be popular with my customers. For example, we could use the wireless chip to transmit data straight from the cadaver—heart rate, if there was any, electrical activity in the brain, and so on. This would help to determine the necessity of digging up a grave if a panic signal had been sent out. If there were no vital signs, we could safely presume the panic button had been inadvertently triggered by a worm or rodent.”

Was that last sentence too graphic? But how else could I say it? “The panic button had been inadvertently triggered by an animal—by an intruder—by an unwanted guest...” These euphemisms were as bad as “worm or rodent,” so I let it stand.

“Soon,” I typed, “we had outfitted caskets with all kinds of sensors—temperature, humidity, barometric pressure—as well as other amenities: air conditioning, soothing music. But the real innovation occurred when we began to package ‘gravcams’ inside Smart Plots. Basically these are little cameras that enable us to stream video from the interiors of coffins.” Here, I realized, I was beginning to encroach on my trade secrets. Gravcams were going to open up a lucrative new market for me—but would it not be foolish to admit as much? What if some entrepreneur or venture capitalist stole my idea and implemented it before me? I had to be prudent here. “Streaming video,” I typed, “has already proven popular with our existing consumer base. Some see it as a latter-day version of memorial photography, the nineteenth-century practice of taking pictures of departed loved ones. Others view it as a means to perform spot checks on the owners of Smart Plots, or also as a means to seek visual reconfirmation in the event of panic signals.”

That didn’t say too much, did it? When I looked at that sentence, I could see my million-dollar business idea lurking in there—but if you weren’t looking for it, would you see it? Did it stand out too much? I read it over twice. No, I decided. It didn’t violate the terms of any non-disclosure agreement I would have asked investors to sign. It was prudent enough. It told the truth. Gravcams had already doubled the sales of Smart Plots. But it did not reveal—I hoped—how I planned to expand my business.

I read the next question the interviewer had emailed. “What market demographic do Smart Plots appeal to?” I smiled. I was already thinking of my future clientele. But I couldn’t announce them—not yet. I crouched over the keyboard and began to type again. “Because Smart Plots cost considerably more than ‘dumb’ ones,” I wrote, “they attract an upwardly mobile demographic with a high degree of disposable income. Professional and well-educated, our primary consumer base is one we share with the likes of Brooks Brothers, Lexus, and Club Med. In addition, we have targeted smaller niche markets through aggressive advertising and promotions. For example, our ‘Resting Place of the Future’ ads appeal to the new ‘digital generation,’ technologically sophisticated young people who recognize both the value and the cachet of owning a wired grave.”

I stopped writing and took a brochure from the drawer of my desk. “Don’t Let This Happen to You” it said, showing a cadaver riddled with maggots and worms. “Smart Plots help prevent the desecration of you and your loved ones...” This was a brochure designed to play on people’s fears and repulsions. It was part of a campaign we maintained to attract the fastidious and the hypochondriac, the paranoid and neurotic. In truth, these people, filled with loathing at the prospect of their bodies rotting or being consumed by wild animals, formed a considerable part of our demographic. And even though we crassly pandered to this in our marketing materials, I was hesitant to admit as much in the interview.

“Smart Plots,” I resumed, “have also proven extremely popular among people with religious beliefs. Anxious to preserve their remains for future resurrection, these customers recognize the ability of Smart Plot technology to significantly decrease the deleterious effects of time and environment on their remains.” Euphemistic, I thought, but not untrue. “Finally,” I typed, “we have also seen a surge in sales among celebrities—actors and actresses, musicians, professional athletes. This has led to some exciting marketing opportunities for us, as we have been able to secure a terminally ill celebrity spokesperson for a TV ad campaign that will hit the airwaves in the next quarter.”

Celebrities, in fact, were to be another key element in the future expansion of my business. Of course they did not realize it—because I did not tell them—but as they signed up for Smart Plots and consigned their remains to my graves, celebrities made themselves available to the members-only section of my company web site. Subscribers to this web site were able to view realtime video streams of the remains of their favorite stars, starlets, screen queens and divas. It was my hope ultimately to introduce gravecams into such notorious places of rest as Marilyn Monroe’s mausoleum in Hollywood and Elvis Presley’s tomb in Memphis. I could already imagine the debates: people magnifying stills from Elvis’s gravecam, trying to determine if that was really his body in there, or perhaps that of a decomposing look-alike...

But of course I couldn’t admit this in the interview. This was the seedier side of my revenue stream. So I continued on to the next question. “How do Smart Plots make money?” My cell phone rang again but I saw who it was on my caller ID and ignored it. I bent over the

keyboard. “Aside from the obvious cost of the plots themselves,” I typed, “Smart Plots offer unique income-producing opportunities not available to traditional graveyards. For example, the necessity of maintaining and upgrading the technology of any given plot effectively commits the owner (or his estate) to a long-term relationship with us. We regularly bill for hardware upkeep, software enhancements, replacement of defective parts (with labor). Also, with Smart Plots the percentage of people who default on payments is extremely low, since we structure our contracts so as to retain the right to exhume and evict—and few heirs, need it be said, relish the prospect of having the remains of their loved ones dumped into common graves.”

I could imagine how infuriating this statement might be. Certainly, some would think, this was going too far. Does there not come a point at which the concerns of business have to take a back seat to the most basic forms of sympathy and fellow-feeling? Then again, I would respond, it seems perfectly reasonable to evict living people from a house when they default on a mortgage. Why should it be any different with dead people when they default on a plot? After all, if you look at the matter realistically, it is more burdensome to the living to find new accommodations than it is to the dead.

“In addition,” I resumed, “streaming video from gravecams constitutes an entirely new revenue opportunity in the form of advertising. We view gravecam video as essentially a niche television network comparable to the specialty channels made available by cable providers. It is our intention to introduce relevant advertising into the video streams so that, for example, a particular cadaver might be brought to the home viewer with the sponsorship of flower shops or life insurance providers. We expect that such advertising will be especially easy to sell for celebrity gravecams, as the drawing power of stars will appeal to clients who might otherwise be reluctant to advertise in a morbid venue. Finally, we intend to bolster the marketability of gravecam video by producing specialty programming: documentaries on decomposition, reenactments of famous funerals, game shows in which contestants compete to guess the identity of badly decayed remains.”

Here I was beginning to encroach on my trade secrets again. I was giving away my business ideas, my strategies for creating a media

empire out of a bizarre conjunction of technology and death. After all, I thought, television networks had succeeded by catering to niche markets like sports, travel, and health—so why not death too? If people will watch a channel dedicated to animals, won't they also watch one dedicated to cadavers? I was certain it was going to be wildly popular—and if not, if the general public did not take to it for some reason, then I still had one market I could count on, a viewership with a veritable fetish for the kind of imagery I was going to make available.

I pulled up my web browser. I logged on to a test site that we maintained, a password-protected subdomain of the company web site. I reached into my desk drawer and withdrew a joystick, which I plugged into the laptop. I clicked a link on the screen. A window popped up and the video began to stream. I was staring down at a face, a female who looked like she was sleeping. With the joystick, I was able to maneuver the camera remotely so that it could slide down a track built into the lid of the coffin. And this was the real secret of my future business: I could zoom in on any part of the body—any part.

I smiled. The public could detest my documentaries, revile my reenactments, gag on my game shows, but this was one type of specialty programming that could not possibly fail to be popular. Even if it did, even if the public was appalled by this new pornography, I still knew that there was one audience I could be confident of. It was a tiny niche, to be sure, but it was one hitherto deprived of any imagery that catered to its particular interests. And I would become the baron and magnate of this market, the tycoon of an unusual titillation—the Hugh Hefner of necrophilia.

Terror Groupies

I was less than a block away when the bomb went off, so I don't know how those girls got there before me. By the time I'd dashed down the street, there were already six or eight of them pawing through the remnants of the café. It was an astonishing sight. Rubble, plaster dust, wood splinters, broken glass, pieces of ceramic, charred spoons, marble tabletops that had shattered like eggshells, and of course blood and worse—I mean body parts, fragments, a detached hand lying on the sidewalk beside a sugar dispenser, a leg in a thigh-high stocking splattered with cappuccino and bone chips. In the mayhem, it was impossible to tell biscotti from severed fingers or gelati from gore.

And crouched amid this ruin, picking through the debris, were these women that looked like hookers—garish makeup, hairspray, halter tops, fishnet stockings, bright red fingernails caked with plaster dust and blood. I couldn't imagine who they were or what they were doing. At first I thought they must be nursing students who had interrupted some costume party to rush to the scene. I almost expected to see other outfits: women in togas, Donald Duck suits, hippie attire. But there were no other costumes, and as I watched it became apparent that the women were not performing any of the ministrations normally associated with nurses. One, with frizzy bleached hair and a glittery purple halter that reflected the sunlight, dug frantically through a heap of rubble until she extracted a tangled mass that resembled a hairball. "His *kaffiyeh!*" she shouted, waving the bloody fabric in the air like a flag. The other girls barely looked up to congratulate her before returning like buzzards to the debris.

"What are they doing?" I gasped to no one in particular.

"Looking for souvenirs," said a man standing beside me. "Body parts."

"Them?"

The man exhaled cigarette smoke. “They’re always the first ones on the scene, before the emergency personnel, before the police. They seem to have an uncanny ability to predict where acts of terrorism will occur.”

“But what do they do with the body parts?”

He dropped his cigarette onto the sidewalk and ground it into the cement with a shoe. “You don’t want to know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, they’re terror groupies.” His voice was matter-of-fact, even blasé, as though terror groupies were one of those things in life you just had to learn to accept.

“Terror groupies?”

“Just like girls who follow rock bands from town to town, except that these ones here have a thing for suicide bombers.”

I looked at the women picking through the rubble. He was right. I could see them waiting in groups outside stage doors. They were the same slutty-looking girls who gathered in the front row to flash their tits at famous guitarists.

“Unbelievable,” I said, watching a girl with straight black hair and tight leather pants put what looked like an internal organ into her handbag.

“Yes, it is. The suicide bomber as superstar.”

Suddenly I could hear the wail of approaching sirens. The girls scrambled out of the rubble, teetering and tottering as the points of their heels glanced off bits of shrapnel. A police van came veering to a halt behind us. A Japanese tourist pulled out a camcorder and pointed it at a strong-armed cop hustling a girl into the back of the van. A lieutenant of some type yanked the camcorder out of his hands and threw it on the ground, stomping it with a boot. The tourist chattered in protest, but the cop kicked the camcorder into the debris and sped away in the van.

“I still don’t understand what they do with the body parts,” I said to the man beside me.

He put on a pair of impenetrable black sunglasses. “Trust me,” he said. “You don’t want to understand.”

But I did—I did want to understand. So when I got home, I did some research on the internet. Terror groupies, I found out, are the same as

other groupies except that, instead of rock stars, they worship Muslim extremists, Basque separatists, IRA guerrillas, Quebec nationalists, white supremacists, anti-abortion activists. On the web site of an investigative news station I found streaming video of an interview with a terror groupie. It began with grainy footage showing girls—dressed like the ones I'd seen outside the café—picking through the wreckage of a car bomb. This faded into the silhouette of a girl seated in the television studio. To protect her identity, her face was kept in shadow and a blatantly false name was displayed beneath her silhouette. "Jill," you could hear the interviewer ask, "could you tell us just what it is about terrorists that you find so attractive?"

Lit from behind, her hair glowed like a mushroom cloud. "It's hard to explain," she said. "Suicide bombers aren't like ordinary people. They have this intense *passion*. They live their every day like it could be their last." As she spoke, the camera cut to a snapshot of her with a guerrilla fighter wearing dark green fatigues. This then broke away to a university psychologist in his office. "Suicide bombers are very popular among women with little or no self-esteem," the psychologist was saying. "Because the men are going to die, the women feel they won't be dominated or controlled."

The camera cut back to Jill. "They're men of action," she gushed. A picture of a swarthy soldier faded into view. He was wearing nothing but a bomb belt. "They're macho and strong and sexy."

The camera cut to the interviewer. "People like yourself," he said, waving a pencil in the air, "have an uncanny knack for knowing where and when acts of terrorism are going to occur. Can you tell us how you do it?"

"I don't know," said Jill. "Word gets around." Her silhouette faded into the cover of a magazine called *Terror Beat*. The camera pulled back to show the magazine on the desk of a sociologist. "Terror groupies," the sociologist was saying, "are as well-organized as any underground political movement. They have fanzines, hotlines, chat rooms on the internet." You could see various pages from the magazine: an interview with a terrorist mastermind alongside an ad for lipstick, feature articles with titles such as "Recipe for a Last Supper" and "Spank Me With That Bomb Belt." The centerfold showed a naked guerrilla fighter hiding his

genitals with a hand grenade. Above him the caption said: “Pull My Pin.”

The camera cut to a location somewhere in a desert. A British correspondent was interviewing three terrorists wearing sand-colored fatigues. Automatic rifles were slung over their shoulders. “Do you feel violence is justified,” asked the Brit, “in order to prevent Western powers from meddling in your attempts to lay the foundation of a religious state?”

The three terrorists laughed, squinting in the sun. One, with a scraggly black beard, shoved his comrade-in-arms. “He just like the girls!”

The Don Juan terrorist grinned sheepishly. Evidently he enjoyed being teased about his conquests.

“I’m sorry, the—what did you say?” asked the British correspondent. “The girls?”

“The groupies,” said Don Juan, drawing out the syllables, grooooo-peees.

“Groupies, you say? Can you tell me a bit about them?”

“The American bitches. They like big booms, so—we make big booms.” Don Juan gave a thrusting motion with his hips and the terrorists giggled. The camera held on them, grinning like teenagers in the presence of football cheerleaders, while a voice off-screen asked: “How would you respond to those who think what you do is sick?”

The camera cut back to Jill in the studio. She sighed. She ran her fingers through her hair. “People used to think it was sick to be gay,” she managed. “And now it’s all right.”

The interviewer tapped his pencil on the clipboard in his lap. “But that’s different. Gays are not violent. Gays do not blow themselves up in crowded shopping malls.”

Jill chewed on a fingernail. “It’s not violence,” she said through her fingers. “It’s war. Would you criticize Martha Washington for loving a man who fought against tyranny and oppression? You think George Washington was a terrorist too?”

I wondered if they were going to stage a confrontation between Jill and the survivor of a terrorist attack, or perhaps between Jill and the widow of someone killed in a car bombing. But instead the psychologist came on again. “The very term ‘terror groupie’ is an oxymoron,” he was

saying, stroking his beard. “It brings together two opposites: fear and desire, terror and lust.”

As he spoke, I realized that the interviewer was never going to pose the crude question, the thing you really wanted to know: How did terror groupies get off? Did they have wild farewell orgies with suicide bombers? And what did they do with the—well, the remains they gathered from scenes of destruction? Were these just gruesome souvenirs? Relics, like the body parts of saints enshrined by churches? Or did they use those body parts in unimaginably kinky sex practices? Masturbation aids made of mangled flesh, aphrodisiacs of blood and dildos of human bone...

“As a clinician,” the psychologist was saying, “I deal every day with people who are afraid of intimacy and involvement—people who literally fear love. And now we’re seeing the mirror image of these people emerge as well: people who love fear and panic and dread. They’re like the two halves of a deep alienation in our society, an inability to relate to our fellow man, let alone love and embrace him.”

The camera cut back to the interviewer. He looked thoughtfully at his pencil, then leaned forward toward Jill. “What would you say to the people victimized by your bomber boyfriends? To the survivors and the widows and the children left without parents?”

She stared into the camera a minute, struggling for words. “Nothing, I guess.”

Trauma Response Program

A few weeks after the attacks, Tara handed me an article she had clipped from the newspaper. “This ought to interest you,” she said, a hint of accusation in her voice.

I looked at the headline: “The Devil Made Him Do It.” It was an opinion piece about the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and the “disjointed” but “grotesque” remarks he had made at a press conference. Lamenting the relative impotence of the arts in comparison to terrorism, Stockhausen had called the attacks “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.” I guess he thought of it as a Wagnerian spectacle, an opera of airplanes and towers. “Five thousand people are dispatched into eternity, in a single moment,” he said. “I couldn’t do that. In comparison with that, we’re nothing as composers.”

Tara prodded me. “You still think art should be separate from morality?”

I really believed this. It had been a hard-won battle. First art had to separate itself from myth. Then from religion. Then from morality. Why regress? Art, to me, was a research laboratory, a place to investigate ideas without regard to their real-world consequences. Maybe Stockhausen was a little naïve, maybe he had been too long in the lab and did not grasp what was or wasn’t proper to say at a press conference. But did he have to take a moral stance—and nothing but a moral stance—toward the attacks?

“You’re confusing ethics and aesthetics,” I said. “You wouldn’t criticize a good Samaritan for being ugly. Why criticize an artist for being immoral?”

Tara dipped a piece of cotton into nail polish remover and smeared it across her red fingernail. “Not everyone has to be beautiful, but everyone has to be moral.”

“Morality’s relative.”

“Killing thousands of innocent people is *not* relative.”

“I didn’t say it was.” The acrid smell of the nail polish remover reminded me of jet fuel. “I just mean that, however terrible something like this is, you can’t use it as an excuse to suppress freedom of expression. It’s a constitutional right. Take that away and you have thought police and totalitarianism.”

“But is that all you’re concerned about—your right to express yourself? Are you that egocentric? I mean, what about the victims and their loved ones?”

“What about them?”

“Shouldn’t we be supportive?”

“Of course we should. But that doesn’t mean artists should confine themselves to making get-well cards. Art is more complex than that.”

“You say that, but look at the art you like.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The art you like isn’t beautiful or profound. It’s just dirty.” Tara held her hands in front of her face to look at her denuded nails. “I think you use these big abstract concepts like freedom of expression to justify your own little perversions. That’s what I think.”

“I know the difference,” I protested, “between a work of art and a sexual fantasy.”

“I’m not so sure.”

She got up and left the room. The cotton balls sat in a clump on the table. They looked like bloody bandages. I glanced back down at the clipping. I had the sense it was a piece of evidence in a private trial Tara had convened in her mind. “When Stockhausen realized,” I read, “how the reporters were reacting, he backtracked and asked that his words not be quoted. ‘Where has he brought me, that Lucifer?’ he asked.”

Where indeed?

I thought back to that day, long before Tara, when Bibi and I went to an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. Happy and amorous, we walked at random amid the Post-Impressionists. It was good to see depictions of happiness, sociability, drinking, romance. We kissed passionately, art lovers losing sight of art and becoming lovers pure and simple. Then we

wandered hand in hand into the Cubists and paused before Picasso's famous painting, the *Demaiselles d'Avignon*.

Bibi shuddered, disturbed by the brutal fragmentation of the work. "It's a good thing Picasso was a painter. If he hadn't gotten that out on canvas, he'd have been a serial killer or something."

"Gotten what out?"

"That violence. That hatred of women."

"I'm not sure that's hatred. It might just be a different type of love."

While we stood there talking about it, a curious change came over us—or over me at least. It was like taking a pair of scissors to a paper heart and rearranging it so that the ventricles were now part of an anatomical vanguard. Love still flowed through our entwined fingers, but the fingers were twisted and broken—and I liked it. I liked how Picasso had cut the prostitutes of Provence into pottery shards of flesh. I wanted to do it too. I turned to Bibi and kissed her. I imagined my tongue as a knife thrust into her face, her mouth the resulting wound. Soon my hand was underneath her *Comme des Garçons* shirt, brutalizing her left nipple. Out of the corner of my eye I saw mixed reactions from passersby: some turned away, embarrassed, while others watched in amusement, no doubt thinking we too were an exhibit, contemporary artists engaged in a performance work.

Later we cabled back to Bibi's apartment in the West Village. In the taxi, the radio crackled with special news bulletins. An airplane en route from New York to Paris had exploded just off the tip of Long Island. Hundreds were dead. Although the official explanation of the crash would ultimately declare it not to have been an act of terrorism, in those first few hours suspicions were rampant. Everyone thought of recent acts of terrorist violence—and I thought of something else too. In the live broadcasts of carnage, in the interviews with eyewitnesses, in the description of fiery projectiles shooting into the cold waters of the Atlantic, in the analyses of ballistic and aeronautic experts, in the weeping of friends and relatives, there was something stimulating, a spectacular act of sadism that had been enacted not on an individual but a group. The phrases "big orange fireball," "surface-to-air missile," and "trauma response program" crackled from the radio like dirty talk.

Upstairs in the apartment, Bibi flicked on the television to watch

the coverage. I sat beside her on the bed, absorbed in the footage. It was very exciting. The doomed flight was no longer a master painting. It had become a collage, rearranging itself with bits of sea and flesh. I wanted to belong to that collage too. I wanted to reinvent my libido with bits of water and metal. Sexuality was no longer a sheet of blank white paper upon which I was to write the story of my own climax. The paper had been pierced, ripped, torn, cut up, burnt, subject to all the possible distortions of collage. Like Picasso, I wanted to wreak violence on my canvas. I looked at Bibi. The shifting colors of the television reflected off her face, her breasts. My canvas...

I got up and went into the bathroom, followed by the drone of newscasters, commissioners, spokesmen, analysts. I started the bath, which drowned the voices in a roar of water. Climbing into the tub, I thought of all those passengers plunged into the frigid ocean. When I shut my eyes I could see them casting about in the water for something to hold on to, and I could see myself offering them my penis, a dinghy...

"It's terrible," I heard a voice say, far away. "All those people dead..."

I opened my eyes. Bibi was standing there in her underwear chewing a nail. "How many?"

She shivered. "A couple hundred."

"Why don't you get in the bath?"

"No, I don't think so." She turned to look out the bathroom door. "I feel weird."

I could see that to her the thought of sexual intimacy seemed wrong, even heretical in the face of such tragedy. She might want to cuddle, clothed, with a cup of tea, but the thought of fucking had suffered the same fate as all those passengers. It had been snuffed out by a random act of terror.

I stood up, dripping, and wrapped my arms around her. I could feel the rough edges of her lace brassiere push against my bare chest, and I thought of dislodged seat cushions. "Come on, let's take a bath."

"No," she said, cool as seawater. "I want to watch the news."

She took a step toward the door but I dragged her into the bath, half-laughing, half-fierce, a neophyte rapist acting out something he saw on TV. We dropped into the tub with a splash, twisting and writhing

like water snakes. Bibi turned very serious, as though I were only playing a game and she had to make me understand that now was no time for games. “Cut it out,” she hollered, and “let me go.” But I had managed to pull the belt from the bathrobe hanging on the door, and I tied her hands to the towel bar on the sink beside the tub.

I climbed out of the bath, imagining myself a survivor pulling himself out of the ocean. Bibi lay kicking in the water as though her upper body were paralyzed, and in a manner of speaking it was. Still dripping, I went into the living room and removed two cushions from the couch. Then I retrieved the belt of my pants, a toaster oven, an overnight bag, some underwear, a navy blue skirt, a curling iron, and a Vivienne Westwood blouse. These I dumped into the tub on top of Bibi, who kicked and swore at me. “Debris,” I said, and this simple word seemed to bring about a transformation in her emotions. No longer angry, she gave the impression of fear, as though I were going to plug the toaster oven into the wall socket and electrocute her. Really I had no intention of doing this, since it was enough to make her over into a drowning stewardess.

On the morning of the attacks, Tara perched at the foot of the bed with her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked cold, even though it was a beautiful summer day. The television kept repeating the footage of the planes smacking into the towers, and I watched the orange explosions play across Tara’s face. She was beautiful in the morning, with only the reflection of violence for makeup. I sat down beside her and cupped my hand around her breast, gently squeezing the nipple.

She shook me off and went to the window. We were only half a mile from ground zero, and she said she could see the towers burning like sooty candles. “It’s so unreal,” she gasped. “It’s like a movie.”

I could hear sirens outside, a sort of live accompaniment to the fantastic opera on CNN, the montage of airplanes and towers, crashing and smashing, panic and smoke. I felt like I could just shimmy through the TV screen, break through to the other side, crawl through and squirt out into that fabulous chaos...

I started to make my way downtown. Fire engines and police cars were blaring toward the crash site. By the time I reached SoHo, a flow of

zombies was coming in the other direction: disheveled executives, burnt bankers, fazed financiers stumbling barefoot along Broadway. Further down I paused beside a red ladder truck parked across from the little triangle of grass that separates Broadway from Park Row. J&R Computer World was visible across the way, but I turned and gazed up at the Twin Towers. Acrid black smoke was pouring out of gaping holes in the steel fabric of the skyscrapers. Little figures, office workers, could be seen in the windows above the point of impact, and every few seconds the little figures would blow off in the wind like leaves.

Then the sky exploded. The moon fell through a hole in the ozone layer and landed on our heads. There was an ear-splitting roar and a storm of dust. It was impossible to breathe. Somebody had emptied a vacuum cleaner into my lungs.

People were running. Burn victims were left lying on stretchers. Fleeing stockbrokers tripped over the lines connecting wounded firemen to intravenous bags. Ambulances were abandoned. I was running blindly, bumping into people, bodies, vehicles, a mailbox. I tried to pull my T-shirt up over my mouth but it was already too filthy to filter the air. I stepped on something squishy and fell. I could feel debris and ash and the hard surface of the street. A baby was screaming. Choking, I tried to pick myself back up. Somebody plowed into me and plummeted head-first into a burning police car. I fell back down. The air went black as wet dirt. I felt a sharp pain in my left leg. The baby suddenly stopped screaming. Debris must have got it.

I dragged myself beneath an ambulance. There was a woman already lying there. "Save me!" she was sobbing. "Help! Oh God, I don't want to die!" I tried to take her hand but it had been amputated above the wrist. "Help," she implored. But no one could hear her. No one could hear me. We lay there choking and blind, listening to the enormous roar that constituted the death rattle of the World Trade Center. Struggling to breathe, I yanked her skirt up over her hips and tore her pantyhose. "Doctor, doctor," she moaned, mistaking me for a paramedic. *Beauty*, I thought, *is the chance meeting, on an operating table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella*. I unzipped my pants and lifted her leg, knowing that no one would pay any attention if she screamed. They were too busy screaming themselves.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get on an airplane again,” Tara groaned, still staring at the television.

I blinked. Where had he brought me, that Lucifer?

After Bibi, I had found that there was no shortage of nice girls who were not only willing but happy to play the masochistic role in relationships. They liked being victims, so long as I confined my acts of sadism to the relatively common repertoire of humiliations you can find in any S&M club. They would tolerate, even enjoy, private acts of perversion, but to emulate public acts of terror was too much. They could not see the titillation in it, and for this reason I stopped trying to share my fetish with them. Eventually I assumed the semblance of a “normal” romantic life with Tara—but still I practiced my perversions in secret. I scanned the airwaves for news of terrorism, taping and saving and storing footage of gore. And while I labeled the video cassettes, separating them into categories such as *Palestinian* and *IRA*, I often imagined the couples who would go to bed every night with CNN on, conceiving their children in the flickering light cast off by footage of drive-by shootings, political assassinations, genocides...

“Are you ok?” Tara asked.

“Yeah, sure.” I went into the bathroom and masturbated into the toilet.

It wasn’t long before the wind blew the smoke in our direction. It smelled like gunpowder, plaster, drywall, mildew. We had to shut all the windows. Everything was gritty. I sat at my computer reading the news coverage on the internet. There were incredible photographs of people jumping and falling from the towers. I couldn’t help but be struck by the uncanny resemblance of the photographs to 1960s Op Art and Minimalism. The long vertical stripes of the towers formed a flat background against which you could see a writhing, contorted, sometimes head-down body falling to its doom. It reminded me of certain artists who are known for “subverting” the forms of high modernism by, for example, embedding a dead cow in an otherwise austere, geometric sculpture. The pictures of jumpers were like that: high modernism subverted by fleshly horror.

For weeks after the attacks, we must have consumed every news

program, every newspaper, every magazine, every web site, every radio station. It was as though the destruction of the World Trade Center were quickly becoming an unreal event, a rerun broadcast on every channel of the national imagination. Every news source rehearsed and repeated the smacking and smashing and toppling of the towers. In reality, two planes hit two buildings, but it quickly became thousands of planes hitting thousands of buildings—and who did not extend the narrative further, imagining more and more planes smacking into ever more skyscrapers and monuments? Who, in an egocentric moment following the tragedy, did not imagine his own personal death plane veering into his house or careening into his place of work or running him down in an open field?

“I’ll never fly again,” Tara insisted, painting her nails.

“You have to get on with life,” I said. “No matter how horrifying something like this is, you can’t use it as an excuse to live in fear.”

“It’s not an excuse. I’m really afraid.”

“But you shouldn’t let yourself be.”

“How can you not be?”

“It’s all how you think about it. You can’t control what happens, but you can control how you think about it.”

“Maybe you can. I can’t.”

“You have to try. Look, there are people to whom ugly things are beautiful. Why is that? Not because the thing has beauty, but because they change the way they think about it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Imagine the most awful thing you can imagine. Death or excrement—there are people who find those things appealing.”

“But that’s a sickness.”

“Not necessarily. It happens in art too. When you paint death, you make it beautiful. What do you think all those pictures of the crucifixion are? They’re beautiful images of death.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, smoothing the polish across her nails, “but five thousand people dying is never going to be beautiful, no matter how you think about it.”

“Maybe it’s never going to be beautiful to you, but you can’t speak for other people.”

“Well, if anyone finds it beautiful, that’s sick.”

“That’s not sick. That’s art.”

“You sound like that composer.”

I thought about Stockhausen. What had prompted him to call the attacks a work of art? For him, I thought, it was not a matter of finding death beautiful, but rather of seeing that someone had taken liberties in reality that an artist could only dream of. That was both the virtue and the vice of art. In art, you can kill with impunity—destroy the world, perpetrate a holocaust, whip up the apocalypse. But it’s only art. You can blow up five million people in an opera and not have anywhere near the impact of blowing up five thousand in reality. Stockhausen seemed to realize this, since the terrorism caused him to feel that being a composer was nothing. In that sense, his words were a moral statement about the limits of art, not an immoral statement about aestheticizing destruction.

“I’m just being practical,” I said. “You can’t honestly tell me you’ll never get on a plane again.”

“But how can I? There’s not really any way you can prevent hijackings. What are they going to do, make people fly naked so they can’t hide any weapons on them?”

“People could still hide things. They could pack plastic explosives in their ass.”

Tara paused with the tiny brush in the Lancôme jar. “That’s what I mean. I’ll never feel safe again.”

“Maybe you could strip people at the gates and then sedate them on the planes. Instead of having oxygen masks drop down, you could have intravenous drips with Demerol or something. Even if someone had a hand grenade up his ass, he’d be too zonked to pull the pin.”

Tara carefully applied Passionate Pink to her thumb. “If you use an opiate, everyone would get addicted to flying.”

“You’re right. Frequent fliers would all be junkies. They’d run out of money buying up flights and have to start mugging people on the ground in order to buy more tickets.”

Tara blew on her fingernails. “And then what?”

“I guess it would escalate from there,” I said. “Muggings would give way to bank robberies and shootings and murders. It would be mayhem on the ground. Riots and chaos.”

“So the only safe place left,” said Tara, replacing the cap on the

Lancôme jar, “would be on an airplane.”

“Exactly. And once again we could fly the friendly skies.”

It was early fall and a glorious day, so I decided to walk through the park to get to the museum. I was wearing a scarf but no jacket and it was pleasant to feel the exercise warm my body. I felt very crisp, very alert, my every sense alive and aware. I enjoyed the smell of the air and the sound it made as it rustled through the leaves. Not far past the lawn I stopped to admire a tremendous elm tree. It must have been over a hundred years old. One of its branches, marked by knots that resembled arthritic joints, hung out over the path. It looked like the arm of an old man reaching out to touch a passerby, pat a child on the head or pinch a pretty girl's bottom.

Reaching the avenue, I hiked up to the museum. Muriel was already waiting for me on the steps.

"Any trouble finding the place?"

"I may not come here much," she said, "but it's not like I don't know where it is. It's only one of the five most famous places in New York."

"Why don't you come here much?"

"On a day like today? It's so nice out, why would you want to spend it inside?"

"There will be other nice days. How often do you get to see some of the most beautiful works of art in the world?"

She tossed her head in the direction of the museum. "It looks like a great big mausoleum to me."

"A mausoleum!"

"It is full of dead guys. Dead White European Males."

"But they're not dead," I protested. "They live through their art."

"That's a cliché."

She smiled with such charm that I couldn't even reply. My senses flooded my brain. The logical part of me shut off and I was filled with

the sight of her. Time stopped and I was lost in contemplation, like a man absorbed in a sculpture garden. Every bit of her was beautiful in the autumn light, so beautiful that it hurt me, wounded me with a desire I didn't know how to fulfill. Touching or kissing wouldn't have been enough. Making love would have been insufficient. What's more, I knew that sex would have left me hollow afterward, a little indifferent to the very thing I had wanted so badly. I longed for some other consummation, something that would be unceasingly heightened and intimate.

"That wind is getting chilly," I said. "Should we go in?"

We climbed the steps to the museum and I felt very reverent. The alertness I had experienced in the park was becoming a kind of vulnerability, a susceptibility to beauty. I could almost imagine dropping dead at the sight of a certain crimson. A shade of blue might undo me. Gold leaf could kill.

We started with the Renaissance galleries, walking at random amid a seemingly endless parade of suffering saviors. In one picture, Christ was getting nailed to the cross. In the next, his dead body was being taken down from it. And then in the next, he would be getting nailed back up there again. It was as though the gallery had been curated with deliberate irony. Jesus couldn't catch a break.

"It's all so morbid," Muriel observed.

"That's Christian iconography. Its defining moment is an execution."

She shuddered. "Let's try a different era."

"Do you want to see the Impressionists?"

"Something with color would be nice."

In the nineteenth-century galleries, we paused before an enigmatic painting by Manet. It showed a young woman in a pink peignoir sniffing a bunch of violets, and on a perch before her was a parrot and a half-peeled orange.

"That's such a beautiful painting," she said. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know if it means anything in particular. I've read that the parrot is supposed to be an erotic symbol."

"The parrot? What's erotic about a parrot?"

"Well," I said, "I guess the idea is that a parrot is a thing of beauty

and yet it's usually locked away in a cage. That's analogous to the way in which women have been caged too—locked up in marriage or oppressed by social conventions. So when Manet shows the bird outside its cage, he's making a bold statement. He's suggesting that the woman in the peignoir is erotically liberated."

Muriel burst out laughing. "You've never had a parrot, have you?"
"No," I admitted.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "we had a parrot, a cockatoo. I hated it. It had this awful bald spot on the top of its head and it used to screech something awful. You really can't imagine. It was like scratching a needle across a record at full volume. And this would happen at any hour of the day or night."

"What was its name?"

"We called it Too, for cockatoo."

"Did it talk?"

"It said hello and goodbye. But it didn't mean it. It wasn't a very polite bird."

"Why not?"

"It used to bite—hard. It felt like slamming your finger in a car door."

"No kidding."

"Nope. And you want to know something weird?"

"Sure."

"It would get mean when I had my period."

"Your menstrual period?"

"I don't know if it smelled it or if there was some hormone thing going on or what. All I know is that every time I got my period, Too would become vicious."

"That's unbelievable."

"It's true. Finally I hated him so much I took him out into the yard and let him go."

"He flew away?"

"I don't know what he did. I ran back into the house. I just wanted to be rid of him."

"Did your parents yell at you?"

"They made me go look for him. I had to go door to door asking

my neighbors if they saw him.”

She paused and leaned into the painting, peering at the violets and the orange. I watched her from the side, admiring the outline of her face, the length of her eyelashes, the backward sweep of her black hair. I still felt very vulnerable, like someone who'd been in an accident. I had had a collision with her prettiness. I ached—and yet, unlike the convalescent, I didn't want my ache to end. I wanted it to go on and on and on, like a wound that wouldn't heal.

“You know what I find creepy?” she said, straightening up. “It's the thought of a man painting a woman like that and then living with the painting for so many years. Imagine getting old while the woman stays young and healthy up there on the canvas... It's like dying slowly beneath the gaze of a beautiful woman.”

“But that's precisely it,” I blurted. “There are certain sorts of beauty that a man just wants to take advantage of. But then there are other sorts—” I realized I was looking directly at her, so I turned toward the painting. “There are other sorts of beauty that a man wouldn't mind dying...” I wasn't sure which preposition to use. Dying with? Dying before? Dying in front of? Dying for?

“But why? That doesn't make any sense to me.”

I pretended to study the canvas, as though I could discover some fundamental truth about death in the sight of a pink peignoir.

“Beauty,” Muriel said, “is a just a physical quality that has evolved to attract people to one another and thereby perpetuate the species. Beauty is about life, not about death.”

Suddenly I could see myself as an old man, dying in bed in an old mansion, and she was a little girl going house to house to find her cockatoo.

Letting herself into my mansion, she would wander from room to gloomy room calling out, “Too! Too! Where are you Too?” Then she would stumble into my sickroom and, seeing me, pause awkwardly at the door. Surprised by the appearance of this little angel, I'd wag a stiff arthritic finger and groan, “Come here.”

She would approach the bed with wide round eyes. “Have you seen my parrot?”

“Come closer, little girl.”

Reluctantly, scared by the sight of a sick old man, she would lean closer to the bed. I would reach my hoary fingers into her thick curly hair. I would hold her by the back of the head. To touch her would be to absorb something from her, some vital heat. My pulse would quicken and my mind, dulled by age and mystified by medication, would sharpen and clear. The sight of her would fill me with untold desire, desire for beauty and love and life, desire that I couldn't possibly sate because I was an old man and I was dying. It would be a sweet ache, desire and loss all bunched up, and my heart would stop while my fingers were tangled in her hair, burning the reflection of a little girl into the eyes of a dead old man.

In a corner of the room, the cockatoo would appear. It would squawk and say, "Hello." Squawk. "Goodbye."

"Speaking of life," Muriel said, "I'm getting hungry. Should we go to the café?"

I looked at her.

It would be exquisite to die in front of you, I thought. Not that I want to die, exactly. It's just that, when I go, it would be sharper and sweeter to do it in front of you. You could be a sort of cheerleader for my demise, easing me into non-existence, distracting me with your beauty while I slip into the abyss. My fingers, twisting in your hair, might tether me to the earth for a few precious moments more. The very sight of you would make me loathe to go. My heart would beat wildly and stubbornly in my fading flesh. My very last thought would be, "How lovely! How beautiful!"

"We could share a dessert," Muriel offered. "Maybe they have something with raspberries."

Shrunken Heads

“You want the Red Delicious, right?” the farmer shouted back over his shoulder. “Them’re those over there.” He pointed and pulled the green tractor to a halt beside a small orchard. Fallen apples lay in clusters on the grass beneath the trees.

“I’ve never been on a hayride before,” Isabel exclaimed. “Wherever did you get the idea to go apple-picking?”

I climbed down from the wagon and was about to help Isabel down, but the farmer put on a display of chivalry and Isabel seemed to think it was fun to allow herself to be charmed. His rustic authenticity was cute. And for his part, I imagined that when he looked at me he thought I was weak, superficial, obnoxious, urban, the kind of guy you would see at the beach with a paunchy, glaringly white belly and red sunburned shoulders—a weekend warrior. But when he looked at Isabel, the same cosmopolitan mien that he despised in me was probably seductive. She was small and dark and she had a radiant quality, like black hair in the sunlight. No doubt he was excited to put his hands around her waist and help her jump down into the grass.

“Now I’ll be back in one hour to pick you up.” He tapped his wristwatch for emphasis. “If you see any bears, just climb up a tree and wait for me.” He laughed softly, climbed onto the seat of the tractor, and putted back toward the barn.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Isabel breathed deeply, drinking in the air. She looped her arm through mine and pressed tightly to my side. “It makes me feel so...” She sighed. “I don’t know. Connected. Connected with nature, the earth, the cosmos.”

I loved Isabel the way a botanist loves an exotic plant. Not for a minute of our relationship did I think that we were alike, or that we had the same interests, or that we were two hearts as one. She was a Catholic girl of Portuguese descent, and I sometimes wondered if she had inher-

ited every strange belief bequeathed to her by a superstitious people. She reminded me of her Inquisition ancestors, who would rather blame an earthquake on a heretic than on a natural cause. Isabel could connect astonishingly disparate things—an election in one part of the world with a flash flood in another, a spike in domestic violence with the changing distance between Venus and the earth. She read star charts and thought that there were numerical codes in the Bible. She even believed in God.

“Just think of it,” she continued. “It’s like we’re all one small part of this big organic whole. The trees give us food, the plants give us oxygen, and then we give back to them too.”

“That’s right,” I said. “We die and the plants nourish themselves on our rotting husks.”

She punched me playfully on the shoulder. “You’re so morbid.”

We took a stepladder and positioned it beneath a tree. Isabel climbed up the ladder, I held open the sack the farmer had given us, and she plucked an apple from the branch. She held it up, admiring it in the sunlight. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Every time she reached for an apple, her breasts pushed forward against her sweater and her sweater inched up from her waist. I took an apple from the sack, bit off a chunk, and lifted up my head. Isabel leaned over and took the apple from my mouth with hers.

“Let’s fuck,” I said.

“Here? Now?”

“Yes.”

“We shouldn’t.”

“We should.”

“What if the man comes back?”

“We’ll hear the tractor.”

I climbed up onto the ladder, Isabel bent over the top, and I lifted her skirt. Clinging to her back, with my hands reaching around to cup her breasts, I was no longer aware of what made her exotic to me. Her hair in my mouth, my ass in the sun, we annihilated every difference, abolished Portugal, banished Catholicism, murdered God. The ladder shook precariously as we moved. “We’re going to fall,” she moaned, “we’re going to fall.”

And I think I might have enjoyed it if we’d fallen, tumbled down

on top of each other, banging our heads against one another, my cock breaking inside her. We'd have been bruised fruit, like the apples lying on the ground, and if we'd been conjoined in our pleasure then we could have been conjoined in our pain too.

But instead I climbed down off the ladder. She remained lying across the top for a minute, catching her breath. My body seemed to drain away from my consciousness and my mind moved into the newly liberated terrain. I felt that combination of freedom and desire that presents itself when you move from a smaller to a larger residence. I wanted to do something with all that empty space.

Finally Isabel fixed her skirt and climbed down from the ladder. She lay right down in the grass and sighed. "That was fun."

I stood there looking down on her. Nostalgia for five minutes of humping wasn't going to fill up the space in my head. I wanted to be alone. I felt like reading a book. I still had Schopenhauer to finish.

Isabel lifted herself on her elbows. "Let's relax just a minute." She patted the ground. "Lie down with me."

"We should finish." I gestured toward the trees.

"Just what are we going to do with all these apples anyway?"

"You can bake some pies."

"But we're only two people. How many pies can we eat?"

"I am overtired," I recited, "of the great harvest I myself desired."

"Maybe we can give some away."

"Can't we freeze them?"

"You can't freeze fresh fruit."

Isabel exhaled and stretched out in the grass. I took the half-filled sack and climbed the ladder. I picked a few more apples and mechanically dropped them into the sack. Clearly we didn't need them, and really I didn't even want them, but I felt a sort of duty to fill the sack. It was stupid, because I could foresee myself in three or six months throwing out a bushel of rotting apples.

"You know what I love about being out here?" Isabel asked.

"No."

"Interconnectedness. I feel this wonderful sense of communion with nature and all living things."

I sat down on the top of the ladder and looked at her stretched out

below me on the grass. “I’m not sure that would be a good thing,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Imagine somehow you really did commune with ‘all living things.’ Life is not pleasant for most people. Just think of all the pain you’d experience, all the agony and torment and sorrow and death.”

Isabel thought for a moment. “Maybe sharing all that pain would even it out. Some people might take on more pain, but other people might experience less. On the whole, it would benefit everybody.”

“You’d be willing to take on pain in order to help some person you’ve never even met? You’d make your life harder to improve theirs?”

“It would be the right thing to do.”

I climbed down off the ladder, picked up an apple that was lying in the grass, and sat down next to Isabel. “I read this terrible story in the news,” I said, turning the apple in my hands. “It was about this woman in the Sudan. You know the genocide that’s going on over there? The war crimes?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, these warrior guys basically razed this woman’s village. I forget the details exactly, but the thing that stuck with me was that they killed her husband, they killed three of her four children, or four of her five children. Whatever. After that they gang-raped her in front of the one remaining child.”

“That’s so awful.”

“I understand the guys in the story. War sucks, war is hell, war suspends all the rules, and so naturally they rape all the women they can. There’s nothing to hold them back, and it seems like it’s their right, their reward. Any guy would do it.”

“But it’s not right!”

“I didn’t say it was right, it’s more like—natural. Inevitable.”

Isabel sat up. “You’re not defending that kind of behavior?”

“No, not at all. I’m not defending it. I’m just saying I understand it. It’s fundamental male psychology.”

“Maybe that’s your psychology, but you can’t say it’s every man’s.”

“I think it is,” I said. “Anyway, that’s not the point. What interests me in the story is the woman. So many awful things happened to her all at once. How can you even imagine what she must have experienced?”

There would be grief for her husband and children. Fear for herself and her remaining kid. Maybe there would be a sort of shame too, shame before that remaining kid, since she's the parent and she was incapable of protecting him or even protecting herself. And then add to all that the feelings of getting raped, having pleasure turned into pain. Grief, terror, humiliation—any one of them would be enough to overwhelm a person. How could the woman have withstood them all?"

I turned the apple over in my hands. There was a brown spot and I thought it might have a worm from lying on the ground.

"I don't think you have a right," Isabel said, "to try and put yourself in that woman's place."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Isabel, "that this woman went through something absolutely horrific. If you don't have the right reasons for trying to—"

"Right reasons? What are the right reasons?"

"You're just leering at her, like a rubbernecker. You're not trying to sympathize."

Why, I thought, is it ok for you but not for me to get inside her head? At least I'm honest. All your gibberish about "sharing her pain" is a sham and a lie. It's a way of making yourself feel better about all the horror in the world by deluding yourself into thinking that you're helping it—as though the Sudanese woman could really give a flying fuck about your spiritual openness to her suffering. What she probably wants is some food and a safe place to lick her wounds and raise her psychologically scarred kid. How does your empathy do anything to ameliorate her pain? Are you going to offer her a place to live? Hell, you spend more money in espresso bars than you do in charitable giving.

But then again, on another level Isabel was obviously right. I wasn't trying to sympathize with the woman. I wasn't even particularly outraged by her suffering, since to me it was an inevitable consequence of war—of nature, even. No, what really interested me was the jarring combination of sex and death. The rape was an epicenter of pleasure in a landscape of horror. I knew what it was like for the warriors—they ejaculated in her body, laughed as they watched the others take their turns, and then they carried on with the more important business, which was killing. To them, the rape was entirely forgettable. After all, when you're

killing women and children, you probably think you're being benevolent when you rape one rather than kill her. But what must it have been like for the woman?

The sound of the tractor returned. We stood up, but we were quiet now. "How was the picking?" the farmer called, climbing down from the seat.

"Good," I said.

"Let me see what you got there." He extended his hand and took the apple I'd been holding. He frowned at the brown spot. "That's no good." He pointed at the decay.

"I picked this one up from the ground," I explained.

"I hope you didn't pick all your apples from the ground!"

"No," I said, "just this one."

"Well, what you want a bad apple for?"

I suddenly understood what I was going to do with all the apples we couldn't eat. "I think I'm going to make shrunken heads," I said.

"You know how to do it?" The farmer held up the apple as though to demonstrate. "You got to soak them real good in salt water or they get all moldy."

"I don't like those shrunken apple heads," said Isabel. "They're creepy."

"I like them," I said. "I think they're fun."

I was happy when I had my own cubicle. But then my employer expanded and decided to jam another computer—or worse, another person—into my space. Janice, my new coworker, tried very hard to be friendly. “So where do y’all eat lunch?” she asked, no doubt hoping I’d escort her to a chic corporate sushi bar.

She stood behind me and I could see her reflection on the computer monitor in front of me. The spreadsheet on screen cut her body into little numbered cells. If you dismembered her and put the parts in a box, you could mail it somewhere with the spreadsheet and they could use the numbers to reassemble her. “I eat at my desk,” I said.

“Oh.” She drooped a little and started to take the handbag off her shoulder.

“Everyone goes to the bistro across the street,” I said, fearing she’d stay. “Order the steak-frites.”

She left and I spread the latest copy of the local alternative newsweekly across the top of my file cabinet. I paged through the advertisements in the back, then made a furtive phone call. A heavily accented voice answered.

“Can you tell me what your rates are?” I asked.

“Two hundred for the hour, one-fifty for the half.”

“And where are you located?”

The voice gave an address and I hung up. I called several other numbers and repeated the same questions. I was not looking for the best price but rather the worst accent. I preferred girls who didn’t speak English at all. That way there was no possibility of talking.

When Janice came back, she brought me a cup of coffee. “I didn’t know how you take it, so I got it black and brought back cream and sugar.”

"I don't drink coffee," I lied.

"Oh, that's too bad." She took up a perch on top of the file cabinet, evidently intending to chat. Carelessly she had sat right on the news-weekly, which was no doubt staining the back of her skirt with ink. I could imagine newsprint on her ass, blurry black letters that looked like they had been smoked into the flesh. If you were going to brand a person like a cow, I wondered, what words would you choose?

Janice leaned past my computer monitor to look at a picture I had tacked to the wall. "What is that?" she asked, trying to make small talk.

"Ruth Snyder."

"It looks like she's being electrocuted."

"She is being electrocuted."

"Creepy." She shuddered.

"That's one of the most famous photographs in the history of journalism. Ruth Snyder was found guilty of murder in a sensational trial in the 1920s. When she was sentenced to die in the electric chair, over fifteen hundred people applied to witness it."

"How awful... Are you into photojournalism?"

"No," I said. "I'm into executions."

After work I walked toward my appointment. I was still trying to decide what words to brand on Janice's ass. Would I prefer a symbol? A slogan? A line of poetry? Suddenly I could imagine sexual mug shots. Instead of criminals holding placards of numbers beneath their faces, I envisioned asses branded with dockets and case numbers, breasts with identifications burned into them. I could see a wanted poster showing a penis tattooed with a barcode. I could see court clerks masturbating to photographs of criminal genitalia.

Finally I arrived at my destination, a crumbling brownstone just on the outskirts of midtown. There was a Chinese restaurant on the ground floor. The smell was sickening. I rang the bell, half gagging on the heavy odor of monosodium glutamate, and climbed the stairs to the second floor. A door opened, and I stepped into a shabby apartment. The light was dim. A television flickered. One girl was sitting on the floor eating noodles from a bowl. Another took my hand and guided me into a bedroom. She spread a threadbare towel on the bed and patted it. I took off

my clothes and lay down. She wrapped her mouth around me and when she pulled back I was already wearing a condom. She took a bottle of baby oil from the nightstand and was about to splash it on herself when I stopped her.

“What? You no want fuck?”

“Not yet, not so fast.” I spoke to her with the exaggerated simplicity you use for foreigners. “Slow, ok? Slow.”

I pulled her down on top of me. I could smell her breath close to my face—food smells. I wondered if her teeth were clean. When she put the condom on me with her mouth, did she leave chop suey saliva on it? Did my penis now smell like chicken chow mein? I could feel myself losing interest. I tried to imagine an old-fashioned typewriter, a keyboard attached to large metal prongs with engraved letters on the tips. You could heat up the letters in a fire, glowing red hot letters that would brand words into a body when you typed on the keyboard.

“You have lipstick?” I asked.

“Ripstick?”

“Yeah, lipstick.” I pouted and circled my mouth with a phantom lip liner.

“You give good tip,” she admonished. She got up from the bed and fetched lipstick from a purse. She started to put it on.

“No,” I said. “Give it to me.”

“You no want ripstick?”

“Give it to me.” I held out my hand.

She shrugged and handed it to me. She lay back down on the bed. I turned her over on her stomach and balanced the point of the lipstick over the small of her back. I wrote “China Doll, RIP” in two rows across her skin, effectively transforming her back into a headstone. I could imagine an entire cemetery in which headstones were the backs of naked women. They would sit cross-legged in the grass on top of the graves, and the names of the dead would be scarred into their backs. Flowers would grow up between their legs and they would water them with urine and tears.

We changed positions and she straddled me with her knees on either side of my head. I licked her with the steady rhythm of a gravedigger. I started to masturbate, wondering how I wanted to finish. Then she

moved down, grabbed a firm hold of my penis and guided it toward her vagina.

“No.” I sat up abruptly. “Don’t.”

“What? You no want fuck?”

“No, no fuck.”

She let go of my penis with disgust. “You have disease?”

“No, I don’t have any disease. I just don’t want to get a disease.”

She looked insulted. She mumbled something I didn’t understand. She repeated it. “You scaredy-cat?”

“No, I’m not a scaredy-cat. I just don’t want to catch anything... It’s for your safety too.”

But she still looked insulted, almost angry. “What you do with girl outside?” She gestured with her head toward the door. “You no fuck?”

“Yeah, I fuck,” I said, lamely.

“Then why you no fuck me? You scaredy-cat?”

“No, I’m not a scaredy-cat. It’s just a girl outside, she probably hasn’t had so many men as...” I didn’t know how to finish the sentence. Not as many men as you, you hooker?

“Ha.” A contemptuous laugh told me I was stupid and naive. It was as if she had said, “Do you think every girl is a virgin? What a fool...”

“So what you want, scaredy-cat boy?” She was openly mocking me now. “You want me suck you? Or you too scared, scaredy-cat boy?” She chomped her teeth and grinned.

Frankly I didn’t know what I wanted anymore. I didn’t want this—I didn’t want to be mocked by a hooker. I felt humiliated but also indignant, tempted to spout the old adage about the customer always being right. At the same time, I felt a need to prove myself, fuck her hard, convince her I was no scaredy-cat by pummeling her vagina with my pelvis. And yet that wasn’t really what I wanted. Really I wanted her to lie very still on the bed, face-down, while I masturbated onto her epitaph. But I couldn’t do that now, I couldn’t trick myself into thinking she was something she wasn’t, not when she was obviously so—lively. So I paid her, reluctantly, but figuring it was better to lose the money than risk getting beat up by her Chinese mafia pimp. When I hit the street her voice still echoed inside my head, “You no fuck me? You scaredy-cat?”

I knew I hadn’t wanted a girl who could speak any English.

On the way home I stopped at a tiny falafel stand. A fan blew heat from the stove into the seating area. There were no other customers and the lone guy who ran the stand sat at a table staring at an Arabic news station on an old TV. I watched the exotic letters scroll by—headlines, pullquotes, captions—and thought of headstones made of television sets. Epitaphs would be broadcast by the Mortuary Network, and every few minutes the epitaphs would be interrupted for an advertisement, “This gravestone brought to you by the makers of...” There would come a day that corporate sponsors would pay for our burials in order to market hemorrhoid cream to our grieving families.

After eating I felt an overwhelming need to wash my hands and hurried home. Picking up the mail, I noticed three letters—one from a prison in California, another from a prison in Alabama, and a third from a prison in Texas. I usually received about two or three letters a day from various correctional facilities. I set these on the kitchen table and scoured my hands with dish soap. Then I took a seat and opened the first letter.

It was from Maria. She was very passionate. She spoke of God and undying love and being together in heaven. Then I opened the second letter. It was from Linda. Linda wrote that she missed me and wanted to know when I was going to visit again. Then I opened the third letter. It was from Christa. Christa expressed all kinds of self-doubt. She loved me but she didn’t understand how I could love her, given what she’d done. She felt like a bad person, and it made no sense that a nice guy like me would care for her.

This outpouring of love and affection made me feel much better. I thought of the Chinese hooker with contempt. Did anyone write to tell her how loved she was? Probably not. She was just an old rag. Men wiped their sperm on her and threw her in the trash.

I took a legal pad and a black felt-tip marker from a drawer and sat down to write. “Dear Maria,” I began. “Jesus is our Cupid. When our love is in God and God is in our love, nothing can stand in its way. What are jail cells and prison guards before the will of the Lord? Nothing! If He can part the Red Sea, he can unite two who love each other with a passion such as ours. You write of being together in heaven, but I know that you will be exonerated one day, and then our heaven will be here on

this earth.”

I signed it and began the next letter. “Dearest Linda,” I wrote. “I think of you constantly. I count the seconds until I can come back to see you. I need you, I want you, and I know that one day, when you are exonerated, you’ll be mine—all mine and mine alone. I love you and will come to visit at the first opportunity. It’s just that Alabama is so far away, and I only get one week of vacation...”

The telephone rang. The answering machine picked up, and I could hear my mother’s voice through the speaker. “Are you there, dear? Pick up. Pick up. Are you there? I guess you’re not there. Call me when you get home.”

I remembered the last time I’d visited Linda. We’d had a kind of phone sex inside the non-contact booth at her maximum security prison. Sitting across from her, emitting sweet nothings into the intercom, pressing our hands together against the Plexiglas divider, I had thought of the similar booths at peepshows. In both places, I was free to leave while the girls were constrained to their little clear booths. It tended to make me think of inmates as exotic dancers doing a bump-and-grind in the great peepshow of crime and punishment—*va va voom* on death row.

I finished Linda’s letter and started on Christa. “Darling,” I wrote. “You ask how I could love you. How could I not? Just because you once did a bad thing does not mean you are a bad person. When I look at your picture, I see your beautiful eyes—the window to the soul!—and know that you are good. I see your smile and know that you are kind. I see you—the entire woman—and know that you are mine. One day you will be exonerated, I know it, and then we will be free to live and love in peace and harmony. I know it! I love you.”

Taking off my clothes, I went into the bedroom and lay down. In Texas, Christa would probably die by lethal injection. In Alabama, they had recently used the electric chair on a woman, but I wasn’t sure they still would by the time Linda’s appeals failed. I’d have preferred she die by the electric chair, like Ruth Snyder. I could see her bouncing in the chair like a stripper giving a man a lapdance—but it was not likely to happen. The electric chair was plainly going the way of the guillotine, the gun squad, and the gas chamber. Lethal injection was the capital punishment *du jour*. Probably they would use it on Maria in California

too.

In the morning, I got out of bed and picked up the tissues I'd tossed on the floor. The sperm had dried in them overnight, so they were crusty like a stale croissant. I flushed them down the toilet, watching them disappear like sodium thiopental in the veins of my beloved, and then I took a hot shower. In the narrow stall, I imagined what it would be like to make love in a gas chamber.

On the subway, I drank black coffee and tried to read the headlines on other people's newspapers. It was astonishing how many different languages there were: Spanish newspapers, Korean newspapers, Yiddish newspapers. But you didn't need to read the headlines to know what they all said, because they all had the same pictures and the faces in the pictures all belonged to people dying, dead, or indicted for murder.

Finally I arrived at my therapist's office. The receptionist ushered me in and I settled into a comfortable chair across from the doctor's desk. After a moment he stepped in through a side door. He looked like he had just come from the gym: his hair was slick, his skin glowing, his clothes neat and clean over his compact, athletic figure. I could imagine him pointing to the floor and ordering me to give him fifty push-ups. But instead he smiled and shook my hand as though I were an old friend he hadn't seen since medical school.

"So what's on your mind today?" he asked.

I looked at the floor. "Well," I mumbled, "if you don't mind my saying so, I wish you wouldn't shake my hand like that every time I see you."

"Why not?"

Really it was because it afflicted me with an unbearable urge to wash. Throughout the entire session, I was already imagining myself in the bathroom at work, scrubbing my hand. "You're not my best friend," I said. "When you shake my hand like that, it seems really disingenuous."

"It's not fake," the doctor insisted. "I'm glad to see you. I'm genuinely curious to know how you're feeling. A handshake is an expression of my regard for you as both a client and a person."

"Maybe," I allowed. "But how could you care for me as a person?"

We only meet because my insurance pays for it.”

He laughed. “Do you think I’m a mental health provider or a mental health prostitute?”

“If I had to choose...”

He leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands over his desk. “This isn’t really what you want to talk about, is it? Is this really about something else?”

I said nothing. He watched me a minute, waiting for me to begin the dialogue. Finally he loosened his collar and glanced out the window. “It’s a hot day out,” he offered.

“I guess.”

“Are you still corresponding with those—” He hesitated. What should he call them—women or convicts?

“Yes,” I said.

“How many?”

“Nine or ten.”

“All on death row?”

“Yes.”

“Have you given thought to the fact that these women are very vulnerable? Is it fair for you to build up their hopes or toy with their emotions?”

“They’re murderers.”

“Does that justify exploiting them?”

I looked at the floor. “I don’t know.”

“And what about you? Why don’t you go out and get yourself a regular girlfriend?”

“What’s regular?”

“Regular—I mean not in jail, not condemned to die.”

“But aren’t we all condemned to die?”

“In a certain sense, yes. But you can’t let that interfere with life and living. Odds are you’ve got a lot of years left in you.”

“So have they. It can take years until they run out of appeals.”

“That may be,” he conceded. “But even so, these women are incapable of maintaining a normal relationship. You can’t go to the movies, you can’t take them out to dinner, you can’t bring them home to bed.”

“I secure visitation rights by marrying one at a time. When one’s

executed, I just marry another one.”

“But it’s—” He seemed tempted to say *unhealthy*, but he stopped himself. “It’s frustrating for you, isn’t it?”

“Not really. I like it this way. I don’t have to see them or speak to them any more than I want to.”

“Are you afraid of people?”

“What do you mean?”

His voice rose a little, and I had the distinct impression that he might order me to do a hundred push-ups. “I mean,” he said, standing up, “what are you afraid of?”

“Afraid of?”

“Are you afraid of people?”

“You think I’m some kind of scaredy-cat?”

“Are you?”

“You’re the expert, doctor. Is that your diagnosis—scaredy-cat syndrome?”

He walked to the window and looked out over the parking lot. It was easy to see that he was exasperated. He clenched his hands together behind his back. In his mind, he was probably smashing a serve or nailing a volley. I think he was annoyed with me, as though I were a doubles partner who refused to take the game seriously.

He turned to face me. “What exactly do you hope to achieve from these sessions?”

“I don’t really have a goal,” I said.

“Then why do you come?”

“To talk.”

“Don’t you have any friends?”

“I prefer to pay for it.”

“Why is that?”

I thought about the hooker. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Is it because it gives you control? Is that why you like these women on death row? Because it gives you control?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Well, if I asked you to think about it, what would you say?”

“I don’t know. I’d have to think about it.”

He sighed and looked at his watch. He picked up my case folder

from his desk, took a fountain pen from his pocket, and made a note. “During our next meeting, we should try to establish a broader goal for these sessions.”

“Ok,” I lied. “I’ll think about it.”

He closed my case folder. “Since I know it bothers you,” he said, watching me stand up to leave, “I won’t offer you my hand.”

Death Drive

In the parking lot there were spaces clearly marked for prospective patients. I parked between the two glaring orange lines defining the space that had been reserved for me by the omniscient power that knew I would come. I already felt hemmed in. The parking lot was a moral system painted on the ground. It told you the right and the wrong way to park. It told you which direction you could face and how much space you could occupy. It prohibited you from blocking your neighbors or boxing them in so they couldn't drive away. And yet—what was stopping me from ramming my car into the platinum Lexus that no doubt belonged to the resident neuropathologist?

Nothing. Nothing was stopping me. I could ignore the orange grid on the black asphalt—I could ram my neighbor—if I really wanted to. That was the essence of it. I had driven here and parked politely because I wanted to. I thought it would be good for me. I thought I needed it.

I looked up at the angular glass building, six stories of sexual psychopathology discreetly situated in a corporate park in suburban New Jersey. Here, everything was carefully manicured—the grass had been seeded, the trees had been purchased from nurseries, the placid ponds and gently rolling hills had been sculpted by bulldozers. It made you doubt the reality of the sky, its skittish sun and unpredictable clouds.

The SexPath Clinic was a boutique medical service catering to upper-income “victims” of sexual pathology. When a securities analyst was arrested outside a Catholic school in Connecticut, where he had been attempting to buy the cardigans of adolescent schoolgirls for one hundred dollars a sweater, this is where he came for a program of erotic deconditioning. When a professional tennis player was discovered committing lewd acts in the bathroom of a sports arena, he was able to save his lucrative endorsement contracts by signing himself into SexPath for intensive erotic normalization. And when I first came to the point where

I thought I should be an active rather than a passive pervert—when I started to think I should kill, rather than wait for chance and circumstance to throw decent-looking dead bodies my way—I realized that perhaps I too needed SexPath.

But what would they do to me in there? I studied the building, trying to see something—anything—through its glass walls, but their highly polished surface only reflected the neat grass, the trimmed trees, the placid ponds. A pickup truck rolled to a stop beside one of the manmade lakes, and I could make out the lettering on its side: “Geese Police. Get the flock out of here!” Evidently they—the corporate owners—didn’t want nature shitting the place up. But what did the geese police actually do to the birds, I wondered. Shoot them? Condition them to keep away? Probably they received little electrical shocks when landing on the surface of the ponds.

It seemed symbolic. I too was a goose. I had come to have myself conditioned, redeemed, put back on the straight and narrow. But how would they do it? What would they do to me in there? It seemed impossible that the normal forms of therapy could disabuse me of my fetish. I didn’t see how sitting in a group of repentant perverts and comparing experiences could prevent me from acting on the unnatural lusts I felt. I didn’t see how lying on a couch and talking about my mother could uproot a fundamental titillation at all things morbid. I didn’t see how any of the usual psychoactive drugs could suppress the strange delight I took in the presence of a body that smelled like moldy bread.

They must have other techniques, I said to myself. But what? They could give you a specially tailored emetic that would induce vomiting at the sight of a cadaver. They could put you through a gentle reconditioning program: hookers would imitate corpses and then slowly come around as you fucked them, thus habituating you to sex partners that lived and moved and breathed. But then again, hardcore necrophiles might react psychotically and murder the hookers. Malpractice insurance alone would surely prevent the clinic from taking such a risk. Besides, a bona fide necrophile would never be taken in by a comatose hooker. She would smell too good. Her skin would be too warm. Her breasts would be too jiggy—the real necrophile likes rigor mortis tits, breasts with hard shells like exoskeletons.

So how, I wondered, looking up at the impenetrable glass building, how would they cure me of this craving? What techniques would they apply? Aversion therapy? Possibly. They could require me to have sex with increasingly rotten cadavers, in the hopes that at some extreme point a fundamental repulsion with decay would cause me to repudiate my repellent predilection. Or perhaps they could force me to dig a grave with my penis, scrape it along the ground like a hoe, and as my penis grew blistered and raw and then ultimately calloused, perhaps I would come to understand the inherent wrongness of what I had been prone to do with it. The culmination of this therapeutic approach would involve burying someone—a weeping family would indict me with their tears while I used my penis to push dirt back into the grave of their loved one. Theoretically, I would never be able to experience an erection in the presence of a dead body without seeing the scars on my penis and recalling the grief of that poor bereft family.

But the problem with this approach was that it excited me. The mourners became cheerleaders in my sick fantasy of punishment. Their tears lubricated my desire. Probably I would ejaculate in the dirt of the grave before being able to finish burying—

Ring.

It was my cell phone.

Ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Junie.”

“Hi, Junie.”

“Compare and contrast Existentialism and determinism.”

I laughed. My little sister was in her second semester at Princeton and had developed a habit of calling with recondite questions. “Well,” I said, “determinists believe that everything is preordained, either through God or through fate. Existentialists believe the opposite—that man is free to make his own decisions. There’s a quote by Dostoevski that textbooks always use: ‘If there were no God, everything would be permissible.’”

“Oh, that’s great. That’s a great quote. Let me write that down. Can you repeat it?”

“If there were no God,” I said, enunciating carefully, “everything

would be permissible.”

“That’s great,” she enthused. “Where did Dostoevski say that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll check on the internet.” She thanked me and hung up.

I sat there in the car, brooding. The motor was still running—should I drive away? Or should I go in? I looked at the clinic. What did they do to people in there? What would they do to me? Drug me? Shock me? Lock me up? I sat there absentmindedly playing with the keys in the ignition and imagining what would happen. I could see myself approaching the front desk, filling out forms, squirming with embarrassment as I admitted what my problem was. A doctor would interview me, an orderly would lead me to a room and introduce me to my new roommate, a coprophile from White Plains. And the next morning, the treatments would begin...

But what kind of treatments? The ones that I could imagine working were treatments I could not imagine anyone performing or permitting. They could kill my sister, for example, or my mother, and oblige me to have sex with the corpse. Though Junie was attractive, all in all I would have been aggrieved and appalled. The same with my mother—it would sicken me. But then again, it would sicken me to have sex with my mother if she was alive, too. Besides which, I highly doubted this could be an accepted approach to the treatment of any perversion. In the first place, it was illegal. In the second place, there may well be certain sick individuals who would relish such a mixture of incest and necrophilia. In the third place, though it might disgust you to have sex with the cadaver of a family member, there is no guarantee you would therefore swear off cadavers as such.

Perhaps, I thought, SexPath took a different approach altogether. The smart thing might be to saturate the fetish, overwhelm it, kill it with kindness. If a child pesters for chocolate, force him to drink a gallon of chocolate syrup. Odds are he’ll puke and never ask for more—and the same might apply to necrophilia. You sign in to the clinic, and at first you think you’ve found heaven. They supply you with bodies, as many as you want. (Where do they get them? Organ donors. Once all the kidneys, hearts, and livers have been removed, the human husks are donated to science. And rather than forensic schools receiving them for their dis-

section labs, a few get squirreled away by clinics such as SexPath, where they are utilized in the treatment of morbid perversions.) After a month of this, the Law of Diminishing Kicks sets in. You get bored fucking the same old cadavers, day in and day out. You start to long for something different, something new—at the limit you long for something so different that it's not even dead anymore, it's alive. And at that point you're cured.

But how do they presume to cure necrophilia, anyway? Is perversion really pathology and sickness? They used to try to cure women of frigidity and men of homosexuality. Now that had fallen out of style. Feminists blamed frigidity on men and their “culture of rape.” Homosexuals formed political interest groups. Maybe perversion was not illness after all. Maybe every form of deviance was just a potential force of union and community, one that had not yet organized itself into political lobbies, self-help groups, bowling leagues. Maybe one day necrophiles would have their moment in the sun too. Why not? Once you grant social legitimacy to one sexual proclivity, what's to stop the others from demanding their rights too? Homosexuals were simply a vanguard that had blasted open the gates for a future army of perverts. It would be like the barbarians sacking Rome.

I looked over at SexPath again. A security guard had left his post behind the impenetrable glass walls to smoke a cigarette outside. I could imagine—and I enjoyed imagining—a horde of perverts rushing up, throwing him to the ground, assaulting him. Uniform fetishists would strip him of his clothes. Sadists would tie him up. Homosexuals would rape him. Psychopaths would kill him. Necrophiles would amuse themselves with the corpse while the rest of the horde rushed into the clinic to free the patients. Soon chairs would be hurled through the windows and examining tables pushed through the walls. Smoke would seep out through shattered panes of glass. Orderlies would be lynched and the resident neuropathologist would be tried in a spontaneous people's court for his crimes against the free expression of sexual eccentricity.

It was a nice fantasy. I lowered the driver's side window, half hoping to hear screams and smell smoke. But it was quiet, except for the sound of a distant lawnmower, and the air was perfectly pure, a potpourri of flowers and cut grass. I shut the window, retreating into my world and

leaving SexPath to its glass tower. I knew what I really wanted now. I threw the car into reverse and stepped on the gas. The car hurled into the platinum Lexus behind me, smashing the rear end. The bumper was mangled and the red plastic shell of a taillight hung precariously from a wire, like a severed limb dangling by a nerve or an artery. I smiled, happy, and raced back to the turnpike to continue on my own merry way.

Shriek Freak

I want to hear you scream. I like to hear you scream—not in anger or exuberance, not in pleasure or in pain. I like to hear you scream in fright. I like to run up behind you in the dark or pop out from some bushes when you're alone in the park. Boo! I like to push fear inside of you, penetrate you with fright the way other men penetrate you with their cocks, and then I like to hear the sound you make, the sigh of pleasure amplified to a shriek. Fear fucks you, fucks you hard, with passion and intensity, and you express how much you love it when you open your mouth in a great wide wail. Oh, the naughty blisses I have known, climactic panics and orgasmic horrors...

There are so many delicious types of terror, so many darling brands of dread. Some women worry about worms, others take fright at black flies. There are nymphomaniacs with their neuroses, virgins with vertigo and whores afraid of heights. You can slip a spider inside a starlet's stiletto or a snake inside a schoolgirl's sneakers and scare up a squeal of ecstasy. Arachnophobia, bacteriophobia, claustrophobia, demonophobia, electrophobia, frigophobia, gymnophobia—these are all sweet spots to me, the places I touch you to bring out the fear. I put a frog in your hat—you scream—it's music to my ears.

How did I get to be this way? How did I learn to delight in dismay? Blame Dracula. Blame Frankenstein. Blame monsters and ghouls and celluloid homicides. Blame Hollywood and b-movies and special effects galore. Blame blood and guts and horror and gore. Blame—mommy. When I was a wee little freak, a pubescent perv, a fetishist with a future, I saw Dracula bend over a buxom babe, bare his fangs, incline toward her cleavage—and then—as he began to descend—darkness! I couldn't see! But I could hear—and oh, what things I could hear. Moans—gasps—shrieks!

Was it sex? It had to be. Why else would mommy blindfold me with

her hands?

When the screaming was over I saw the blood trickling down into the cleavage, the crimson cum shot, the vampire titty fuck. It excited me. It made me want more—but more what? Did Dracula fuck his victims in the neck? Did he use those ferocious fangs to commit a kind of creepy cunnilingus on them? Did he drink blood from their clits? I didn't know. I hadn't seen. But I did know what it sounded like—very intense, uncontrollable, spasmodic. It was like a sudden urge to vomit, except it came boiling up out of the voice box, a raw, primitive sound, undifferentiated vocalization, primal noise, a vent in the shell of the self giving way to an ejaculation of fiery magma, burning tongue and exploding brain bursting in the air, an aural eruption sending shards of white cranium hurtling through infinite black space, the reverberation of a supernova.

That's what it means to climax, I thought. That's how a woman has an orgasm. She explodes in space, and the ear-piercing scream you hear is the sonic boom as she achieves escape velocity. Afterward she drifts back down to earth attached to a parachute gently shaking in the wind, and she lands in the ocean.

That's what I thought. That's what I heard when I listened to the cassette tapes I had cobbled together, holding my recorder to the speaker of the television during horror show reruns. I had entirely confused pornography with fright night. I thought fear was foreplay and panic fornication. But the joke was on me, because I had only set myself up for the big shock. I fingered Kristin in the back of my car and she panted and I shut my eyes, focusing on the sounds she made. And it sounded like somebody whispering, or tossing her head in an unpleasant dream. There was also something vaguely rodent-like about it, a scampering of the lips, as though orgasm were a piece of cheese in a trap and she were nervously trying to grab it without the trap snapping on her.

Afterward she lay there, quietly giggly. "I'll blow you," she offered, laying her head in my lap. She rubbed and I could feel her hair against my crotch. I thought of skinny-dipping in a pond full of seaweed. My penis was an eel. It just lay there in the mud at the bottom of the pond, waiting, waiting for something to call it forth. Kristin reached her hand inside my zipper—but I wasn't interested. I wasn't excited. This wasn't what I wanted. I was disappointed by sex. I had wanted to plant a bomb

in her belly, trigger it, hear it explode. The air and debris would rush up her throat, blow out her teeth as it escaped from her mouth in an ear-piercing shriek—and simultaneously, in my version of a mutual orgasm, I would experience the crimson climax, the spurt of blood between the breasts, the vampire titty fuck.

But that's now how it happened. I pushed her hand away and drove her home. Then, as I was driving away from her house, I saw a jogger on the side of the road—blonde, middle-aged, with large breasts bouncing inside a white jogging suit. I passed her. I turned around. I passed her again. She moved to the very edge of the road. It was night. I pulled into Kristin's driveway and turned around again. I rolled down the window. I turned off my headlights. I held my tape recorder out the window. I barreled down on the jogger. I flicked on the headlights. She screamed. I pointed the tape recorder at her. I slammed on the brakes and u-turned. I raced back, still holding the tape recorder out the window. "I'm going to kill you," I hollered.

"Aaaaaaahhhh!" she screamed.

I sideswiped her, knocking her into the grass.

"Aaaaaaahhhh! Help! Help!"

I u-turned again. She stood up and stumbled. I raced up. "I'll kill you, bitch!"

"Aaaaaaahhhh!" she screamed, diving into the water in the ditch.

I flew past her, driving on until I reached the state park a few miles down. I pulled into the access road. I rewound the tape. I played it. I rewound it. I played it—and as she screamed for the seventeenth time, white sperm spurt across the speedometer, a needle of semen going from zero to sixty in the space of a gasp.

I had discovered my *modus operandi*.

I would pick up girls—"C'mon, hop in the back"—then hurtle through nocturnal space, threatening to knife them, shoot them, dump their bodies in a swamp. They would scream—I would tape—they would shriek—I would record—they would beg for mercy—I would threaten to kill. Sometimes they'd open the back door and fall out on the deserted roadway, then I'd try to run them down, never hurting them, only fucking them with fear, titillating myself with their terror, pleasuring myself with their panic.

There were white girls and black girls, rich and poor, old and young, tall and short, fat and thin. It didn't matter what a girl looked like, because I had no concern for her visual appearance. All I cared for were her vocal chords, her mouth, the sound she made vomiting up dread. And in truth, I discovered that if you frighten girls well enough, if you really attack the g-spot of terror, they all sound alike anyway. What comes up is no longer black or white, young or old, tenor or bass, but a kind of universal noise, the rush and roar of horror, the diaphragm bursting in panic and sending a gush of primal existence hurtling up the throat, a boiling lava that melts the teeth and flares up into the air, a burning rain of bone and blood, a basic will to live transformed into a viscous spume that sprays its fear of death across the sky—for all fear reduces to fear of death, and all screams are the screams of the dying, and thus to delight in dismay, to revel in panic, to eroticize your nightmares and get off on your fears, amounts to an aural love of morbidity, an acoustic kiss of death, a necrophilia for the ears.

Graveyard Survival Training

When I told Cindy about Angelica, she went and killed herself. I was surprised because what did she expect from a guy who is on the road six months a year? I mean, I had been seeing Paulina when I started going out with Cindy, so how did Cindy ever expect me to keep my hands off Ashley, Angie, Stacy and Gail?

Still, I was bummed about Cindy. She was a nice girl and I was sorry to hear she had OD'd. Actually, it was good for me she did it that way, rather than write a big long florid goodbye note and hang herself. I knew that, when she stuck the heroin needle in that vein in her foot, it was a loud and clear message saying “fuck you, jerk.” But no one else could say that for sure.

Maybe they suspected, some of them. I was sure her parents blamed me for her death. They probably weren't quite sure what I had to do with it. Maybe I introduced her to drugs or a fast lifestyle. Whatever. I can't blame anyone's parents for not wanting their daughter to marry the guitarist of a band named after a disease. Classical guitarists probably don't have this problem. There's something about saying “I play Brahms” that has a reassuring effect on parents. Whereas when you tell them you're in a Marilyn Manson cover band, they automatically think you're the antichrist.

Anyway, the weird part was that I didn't know if I should go to the funeral or not. I was her boyfriend—wouldn't everyone expect me to be there? But at the same time, I figured they'd shoot me if I did show up. So what I did was send in Angelica. I waited around the corner in the car, and I told Angelica to call me on my cell if she picked up the vibe that I should be there. I sat there listening to this remastered Black Sabbath CD and thought about Cindy.

When I tried to remember her face, I felt really bad. It's a heavy trip

to think some chick killed herself just to spite your stupid cheating ass. But then I started to get pissed at her. Like, what right does this dumb bitch have to fuck up so many other people's lives over a stupid relationship? That's what I call selfish. Cheating—ok, that's selfish too, but it's not like killing yourself. Maybe I fucked Cindy over, but look what she did. She screwed her whole family and all her friends too. It's not sad, once you get to thinking about it, it's nasty. Real nasty.

When Angelica came back to the car, I was shocked to see she was crying. Black eyeliner was running down her cheeks. She looked like Alice Cooper. "What's eating you?" I said. "Nothing," she sputtered, sniffing and wiping her nose on her velour sleeve. "If that's why you're crying," I said, "don't worry. I'll eat you later." I flicked my tongue in a crotch of two fingers. She gave me this look of repulsion, like I had a genital wart on my forehead. "You're a fucking idiot."

Why was I an idiot? Cindy made her choice. She wanted to go out with a sneer. When rigor mortis set in, she wanted a look of accusation etched onto her face. Fine, ok, that's what she wanted and that's what she got. Did I have to feel bad about it? Let everyone else be morbid and mope. I wasn't going to let it get me down. I preferred to be a survivalist in their dreary graveyard of emotions.

When we got home I pulled out my guitar and started jamming around. I had this chord progression in my head and some words. "So good in bed, so good at head, too bad you're dead, I'm celibate, and now you're cheating with some worms..." It was sounding kind of like a White Zombie song—at least until I realized Angelica was standing there listening to me work it out. She was just shaking her head at me, like "you fucking idiot."

"What?" I yelled. "What? Did some relative of Cindy recruit you to her feminist fucking funeral football team? What do you want?" Angelica walked over to my guitar amplifier. "Don't you touch that," I warned. She reached out and yanked the cord out of it. "You don't get it, do you?" she said, waving the cord at me like a whip. "Cindy *killed* herself. She killed herself because of *you*. Now you're making *fun* of her."

"Yeah, so?" I said. Angelica picked up a wah-wah pedal and threw it at me. I ducked and we got into another whole big stinking fight so I left. I took the car keys and drove down to the Big Duck and bought a

whole bunch of beers. I took them over to Gary's house but he wasn't home. I talked to his mom for a while, then I just went driving around. Finally I ended up near the graveyard and I thought, what the fuck?

It was just about night so I parked at the country club and cut through the hedge to the cemetery. I wandered around until I found Cindy's family vault. "Jesus, Cindy," I said. "Guess you're not going to be cheating with any worms, are you?" Meaning, Cindy was not buried six feet under in any wet wormy ground. She was sleeping on a marble slab in a mini mausoleum. Juliet-like.

I popped the cap off one of the beers and chugged it. I sat my ass down on a headstone across from Cindy's vault and reminisced. Really she was a pretty good chick, Cindy. Why had I cheated on her? It wasn't because I didn't like her. It was just that I needed to put my dick into every hole I could find... Well, I corrected myself, seeing a freshly dug grave a few yards away. Maybe not *every* hole.

After three or four beers I was feeling pretty good so I thought, why not? I got the tire iron out of the back of my car and pried open the door on Cindy's vault. There were so many flowers in there it smelled like a ten-year-old's panties. I held up my lighter and stepped inside. There was this huge new casket. The wood looked like cherry, so my drunken mind groped for a dirty joke. "Hey Cindy," I said. "I like your new cherry."

Somehow this put "Like a Virgin" in my mind, so I started dancing around with my lighter in one hand and a beer in the other. "Touched for the very first time," I crooned. Then my cell phone rang. From the caller ID I could see it was Angelica. "What?" I said, not bothering to say hello. "Where are you?" asked Angelica. "Dancing," I said, moving my legs with all the grace of a habitual drunk trying to juggle torches. "What?" she asked. "I'm doing to you what I did to Cindy," I said. "Maybe you can go stick your head in the oven."

I danced over to the doorway of the narrow vault. "Here," I said, "go talk to your friends," and I tossed the cell phone out among the headstones. I could hear Angelica's voice a thousand miles away, "My friends? What friends?" I laughed. I was shaking my booty. "Your dead friends," I called, turning back into the vault and slamming the door shut. I wanted to lock her out, right?

So there I was in the vault, prancing around like an idiot, a dumb

drunk doing the dance of death with no music. “Like a vir-ir-ir-ir-gin,” I sang. “When your heart beats next to mine, oh-oh-oh-oh...” I could hear my own voice bouncing off the walls like a trapped bat with a faulty sonar. Then my foot got tangled up in a wreath and I tripped. It was like diving into a swimming pool full of dried concrete. Fuck. I felt like I got run over by a marble bulldozer. That floor was *hard*.

“Son of a bitch,” I yelled, fucking up the everlasting peace of Cindy’s grandmother. I could feel blood coming out my nose but I couldn’t see it. And my ankle felt like it had been given a few twists in a diaper genie. I dug my lighter out of my pocket and looked at my hand. Blood.

I grabbed the brass handle of Cindy’s coffin and pulled myself up. I sat down on the edge of the slab and massaged my ankle. Let me tell you, I sobered up quick. There are two kinds of drunk. The kind where you can get punched in the face by an off-duty Marine and never even notice. Then there’s the kind where you get a paper cut and all of a sudden you’re sober as Abe Lincoln on a Sunday.

That’s what happened to me. All of a sudden I could put two and two together. I declared my own Emancipation Proclamation and said, “Man, what the fuck am I doing in here? I better make like an egg and scramble.” I hobbled over to the door—and that’s when I realized I had locked myself into Cindy’s vault. Fuck, what could I do but laugh?

I mean, it was such an absurd thing, or maybe I was drunk. I don’t know. But somehow I had this goddamned giggle fit all of a sudden. Like there was nothing funnier in the whole wide world than to lock yourself inside a family mausoleum. I was howling, laughing, hysterical, a one-man laugh track to a sepulcher sitcom. It was great, a riot—until I realized I couldn’t get the door back open.

I pushed and I shoved and I humped and pried and gave it a few whacks with the tire iron. Nothing doing. I felt like a real idiot. If I hadn’t thrown my cell phone out the door it wouldn’t have been a big deal. But ironically I had thrown it out into the dark graveyard, where no doubt some stiff from Africa was running up my bill calling witch doctors in Timbuktu. “Hi, it’s your ancestral ghost, have you been feeding my volcano lately?”

At a loss for any better escape plans, I tried to holler out through

the door, in case the cell phone was still on. “Angelica! Angelica! If you can hear me I’m with Cindy! I’m locked in! Help!” I yelled like that for a few minutes, but then I felt stupid. Also kind of humiliated. I didn’t like the thought of having to ask Angelica for help. I could just see her standing outside the metal door of the vault taunting me. “You want to come out? Are you going to apologize first?”

Hell, I didn’t need any spanking. I’m not a baby. I can take care of myself. I decided the smart thing would be to wait until morning. Some caretaker would come along, either hear me or see the cell phone, and let me out. No problem, no humble pie. I’d tell Angelica I spent the night with Gail. That would get her goat.

I took a leak in a corner of the vault and shoved Cindy’s coffin over a bit on the slab. I still had four beers, but I figured I’d better ration them out. I popped the lid off one, chugged it, said good night to Cindy, and slept like a babe in arms.

When I woke up I felt like I’d been rolled down the side of a glacier. I was cold and stiff and sore. I had a massive headache. My ankle was throbbing. I couldn’t tell if I was hung over or if I had a concussion from when I tripped. I’d have given my left nut for some aspirin—and my right nut for some coffee to wash it down.

There was a faint line of light coming from the crack beneath the vault door. For the first time I could make out my surroundings without the lighter. Beside the slab there was a big smelly wreath that said “Beloved Daughter.” I knocked it onto the ground and took its stand in hand, figuring I could use it as a crutch. I swung my leg over the side of the slab and tested my weight on it. It felt like I had one of those big ancient bear traps with teeth clamped on it.

I hobbled over to the door and listened. I couldn’t hear anything. I didn’t have my watch but I figured it was about seven in the morning. I picked the tire iron off the floor and gave the door a whack—but the sound was excruciating. It entered my already throbbing head and beat a drum. I was half tempted to hit myself with the tire iron and put myself out of my own misery. But I’m not a suicidal type. I’m a survivor.

I have to master this situation, I said to myself. I’m hung over. I have a bad ankle. I am locked in a vault. I have three beers, a lighter, and no food. I can get drunk and set myself on fire before I starve to death.

Or I can figure out how to make do until I am rescued. Certainly it can't be long before a groundskeeper happens by.

So that was it. I just had to hang in there for a few hours. Maybe until afternoon, at worst. Putting my weight on the wreath stand, I hobbled back to the slab. "Shove over, Cindy." I took out one of the beers and contemplated it for a minute. The predicament had made it more valuable, like water in a desert. But I desperately wanted to take the edge off my hangover and the sting out of my ankle. So I chug-chug-a-lugged, figuring the other two bottles would be more than enough to last me the rest of the morning.

I stretched out on the slab and fell back asleep. The next thing I knew somebody was trying to perform brain surgery on me with a chainsaw. A terrible ripping sound reverberated through the vault. It was like a loud buzzing in the brain except it was outside. What the hell? I thought graveyards were supposed to be peaceful. I was annoyed and I wanted to go back to sleep.

Then I realized it was a lawnmower. A lawnmower—the catalyst of a chain of events that would begin with rescue and end with breakfast. I hobbled with the wreath stand over to the door. "Hey!" I yelled. "Hey! Hey Mr. Lawnmower Man! Help! I'm stuck inside! Hey! Over here!" I banged on the vault door with the tire iron. "Help! I'm hurt! Help me!"

But I guess the lawnmower was too loud. The lawnmower dude couldn't hear me over the engine. Or maybe he was wearing ear protectors or an iPod. I could hear it racing circles around me like some graveyard Indy 500, then it started to get fainter and fainter as it got further and further away. Ditto my chances of rescue. Fainter and further away.

I tried hard to remember. Was I very far from the graveyard offices? Had I seen any caretaker buildings? A garage for tractors or lawnmowers? I couldn't remember any. Hell, in this day and age they probably don't even have an on-site groundskeeper. It's all subcontracted to immigrant guys in green pickups. Maybe the lawnmower dude heard me but didn't speak English. How do you call for help in Spanish? Chinese? I had no freaking clue.

For the first time I started to think I was in some deep shit. I had two beers, a lighter, a tire iron, and no food. What if I was stuck in this damp old mausoleum for *days*? Could I make it? Sure, I could make it.

I wasn't going to give in so easily. I'd read in *Reader's Digest* about some sailor guy who lived for forty days on a raft. Then again, he had light and water and birds and fish and some kind of homemade fishnet. What did I have?

I looked around the mausoleum. Flowers. Flower pots. Coffins. Brass handles—what could I use those for? There wasn't much else. The old river Styx was shit creek, and I was up there without a paddle.

I had to get my sorry ass rescued. But how? Would Angelica call the police and report me missing? No, she'd figure I ran off with Gail. Would a groundskeeper stumble on me or my cell phone? Maybe—maybe not. I'd already missed an opportunity with the lawnmower dude. Maybe there would be another burial? The teary family would be gathered around the grave, lowering Betsy Sue into earth's sterile embrace, and there I'd be banging on the mausoleum door with a tire iron, wild-eyed and filthy... That would be worth a laugh, if my life didn't depend on it.

What could I do to draw attention to myself? Start a fire? I'd die of smoke inhalation before anybody would see it. The mausoleum had no windows and only a small crack under the door. Keep making a racket with the tire iron? Start chipping away at the marble? Could I dig my way out? I poked around the floor, prodding it here and there with the wreath stand. Nothing doing. They don't fool around when they make these marble mausoleums. They're built to last, like air-raid bunkers.

I was starting to get freaked out, so I figured I should just kick back and relax for a bit. Accept the situation. Deal with it on its own terms. Don't fight it. Give in to it. Work it. Forget about escape and rescue. That will happen when it's time to happen. For now there's a new reality. Life in a mausoleum. Graveyard survival training.

I needed to conserve energy. I stretched out on the slab. Things weren't so bad. I had shelter. I just needed food. With shelter and food I could last for days, weeks, even months if I had to. I could pass the days playing the guitar in my head. Some guys compose their world-famous debut album in prison. Me, I'd do it in a mausoleum. Why not? *From Headstones to Headphones: A Death Trip in Heavy Metal's Sonic Necropolis.*

Just as I was starting to imagine fame, money, power, women, I sud-

denly realized I had to take a shit. I mean, it just hit me like a punch in the gut. I hadn't gone since the day before. But where could I go now? I had been thinking of my situation in terms of what I lacked—food, water. Now I realized I had a disposal problem too. What could I do with my own waste? I really didn't want to go in the vault. It would be like taking a shit in your own living room.

I got down off the slab and looked around. My eyes were getting used to the light filtering in under the door. I bent down and picked up one of Cindy's pots of flowers. I tucked it under my arm like a football and hobbled with the wreath stand over to the furthest corner of the mausoleum. I dumped the flowers and dirt out on the floor. I unzipped my pants. Well, I thought, here goes...

I tried to balance on the flower pot but it was hard with my bad ankle. I had to set it right in the corner and lean back against the wall. I did what I had to do and wiped myself with some flower petals. "Hey Cindy," I said. "My shit smells like roses."

After I cleaned myself, I put some of the dirt back in the pot on top of my shit. It seemed more sanitary to cover it, like a dog, and it would also help control the smell. But what if it didn't help enough? I hoisted myself up using the wreath stand, and then pushed the pot along the floor to one of the other coffins. It was hard to open, so I had to hobble over to the door and get the tire iron.

I gave the latches on the coffin a few whacks. They loosened up and I was able to open the lid. I only lifted it about two inches, not really wanting to see what lay inside. Cindy's grandmother? Grandfather? That cousin who'd gotten hit by a car? I knew I couldn't afford to puke. I didn't have enough to eat or drink, and I didn't want to be stuck with the taste of puke in my mouth. So I very carefully turned my head away, lifted the coffin lid, and set my pot of fecal flowers inside. "Sorry," I said to the stiff, laughing at the same time. I mean, why apologize to dead people?

Hobbling back to Cindy's slab, which I realized had become my base of operations, I couldn't help but feel proud of myself. I was turning my disadvantages to advantage. I was making do. Getting by. Living off the land. I had found an efficient solution to a potentially calamitous problem—imagine the entire vault backing up like a clogged sewer... It

all gave me confidence I would find equally good solutions to the problems to come.

And the next problem was food. So far I'd been hung over enough that I didn't feel that hungry, but now it felt like I had baby rats gnawing at my stomach. I was starving. I hobbled around the vault, poking in the corners and praying to find an abandoned Taco Bell bag or an unwanted banana. But no luck. I had two beers, a tire iron, a lighter, and ample shelter—but no food.

I lowered myself to the floor beside the slab. I didn't have much choice but to eat flowers, so I tried to decide how to go about it sensibly. I started by chewing some older, drier petals, hoping maybe I'd accidentally discover some new hallucinogen. If I started tripping, I wouldn't need to eat—hell, I probably wouldn't even care about escaping anymore.

But eating old dried flower petals was as satisfying as licking your grandmother's gash. They were crispy, like potato chips, and the flavor wasn't entirely bad, kind of like a lettuce salad that somebody had put perfume on. But they flaked away in your mouth and left you thirsty. So then I followed up the old flowers with newer ones from Cindy's bouquets. These still had some innate moisture to them. They were harder to chew, stronger in flavor, but they didn't sap up all the spit in your mouth.

I know it sounds entirely fucked-up to say it, but some weird part of me had started to enjoy being locked in the mausoleum. It was the challenge of it, the necessity of being creative and self-sufficient. I felt like a pioneer, Daniel Boone in a dungeon. Chewing a tulip, I wondered if there might not be an entire underground movement of cemetery squatters, people who colonized crypts and homesteaded Hades. Our great American ancestors had faced death in the wild, now we would make a new wilderness out of death...

When I finished the flowers, I allowed myself three controlled sips of a beer. I had to be diligent with myself about rationing my supplies. Actually, I realized, this was true of the flowers too. Were they not also a limited resource? This was especially true if they were going to do double duty as both toilet paper and foodstuff. I better not get the two confused, I laughed to myself, or I'll end up with the wrong kind of shit-eating

grin.

I felt a little better after the flowers and the drink, so I stretched out on the slab alongside Cindy. I should plan my escape, I told myself, but instead I found myself getting drowsy. My mind wanted to escape but my body wanted to sleep. Hell, I thought, I've got all the time in the world to plan an escape. I might as well get some shuteye. I'll think clearer afterward.

When I woke up the line of light from the door was gone. It was pitch black. Instinctively I flicked on my lighter and looked around—but then berated myself for wasting the lighter fluid. What did I need to see? Nothing could have changed in my surroundings. The dead were sleeping peacefully.

I realized that it had been stupid to let myself sleep during the day. Now in the dark I had absolutely nothing to do. The mausoleum had become a sensory deprivation tank. I had nothing but my own mind to keep me amused.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the slab. My ankle hurt less but it seemed stiffer, harder to move. Was it tightening up because I wasn't moving around enough? Should I pace laps in the mausoleum? Of course! This seemed like a fundamental insight. Surely I did not want to go soft. I needed to stay in shape if I was going to conquer this interior wilderness. I resolved to do push-ups, sit-ups, and laps around the vault. This would also help kill time.

I groped for the wreath stand and was about to start my laps when all of a sudden I heard a noise. Pitter-patter. Squeak. Squeak. Something else was in the vault with me. A ghost? No. An animal. A squirrel, a field mouse, or, more probably, a rat. I held myself completely still. I barely breathed. What should I do about this hostile intruder? My initial response was territorial. This was *my* mausoleum. Kill the little bastard.

Then I realized that, though I probably should kill the thing, I should not do it out of anger. I should rejoice. Squirrel or rat, this was *meat*. Food. Survival. Horrible as it was to contemplate, I could drink the blood too. It would be a sick-ass meal, but more nourishing than the anemic flowers I had had for lunch.

Quietly, moving slowly, I reached for the tire iron, which I had left lying on the floor. I listened carefully, trying to pinpoint my prey, then

sprung into action. I flicked on the lighter. It was a rat. I hobbled after it on my game leg. “Ouch! Ouch! I’ll get you, you little bugger! Ouch! Ouch!” I chased him around in circles until I managed to trap him in a corner. He stared up at me, little shining black eyes, waiting for me to make my move. I lunged with the tire iron...

And missed. And the rat took off running. And I guess he was just looking for the nearest place to hide, which happened to be up my pant leg. I screamed. He squeaked. I fell over backwards on the hard marble floor, dropping the lighter. It was pitch black again. I beat my own leg with the tire iron, trying to push the rat back out my pants. Finally he scampered over my sprained ankle and disappeared in the dark.

I lay there breathing heavily. Adrenalin rushing. My first defeat. I had used the plant life of my new world to advantage, but I had failed to come to terms with its animal life. The rat had won. It pissed me off. I was mad—mad at myself, mad at the rat, and determined to dominate this new aspect of life in the mausoleum. I was a man, a pioneer, a survivalist, and what was a rodent in comparison?

I groped on the floor for the lighter and gathered myself up. I hobbled back over to Cindy’s slab and took off my pants. The way to fight rats, I realized, is naked. It seems counterintuitive, I admit. Instinctively you want all the armor you can manage. But the truth is that rats will hide in your clothes if you wear them, but if you don’t wear them they won’t take the time to stop and bite your bare legs.

As a gesture of defiance, I removed my shirt and underwear too. Far from feeling naked, I felt as though I had gained in power. I had become an animal too. Anyway, what did I need clothes for? I was alone. If I was chilly at night I could pull the clothes back on. Even if I were just going to do laps, I realized, it was better not to get my clothes sweaty, because then I wouldn’t be able to sleep with them. Damp blankets are no good, and in the mausoleum they weren’t going to dry very quickly.

So I had lost a battle with the rat, but not the war. Even more importantly, I had a new insight into the strange ecology of the mausoleum. I had been approaching it like a foreigner. I was thinking about escape and rescue and salvation. But the important thing was not to look to the outside for help. The important thing was to help yourself—to think like a mausoleum-dweller, to accept its terms, live by its code. I

was determined to survive in the mausoleum alongside Cindy in a way that I had not been determined to make our relationship work.

I climbed back on the slab and waited. I knew the rat would come back—or if not him, then one of his friends. Rats are brave little buggers. Somehow I would get a second chance, if only I waited. So I waited. As I sat there, maybe for two hours, my body stiffened, and I realized I had only worsened my ankle by walking on it then beating it with a tire iron. But this did not matter. What mattered was pitter-patter. Squeak. Squeak. *Smash*.

When my second opportunity came, I willed my legs into action. I willed my eyes to see and my arm to strike. I dominated the rat. I triumphed over him. Death came quick and unforeseen. I pummeled him with the tire iron. He squeaked no more.

I held him up by the tail and flicked on the lighter to get a good look at him. He was a tawny color, except for the blood, which was red like my own. He had a ferrety little mouth with white teeth. I contemplated holding the lighter under his leg and roasting it, but I knew that I could not allow myself such a luxury. Did I expect to broil every rat I caught? I would run out of lighter fluid in a week at that rate. I had to eat him raw.

I tried to tear off a leg. Surprisingly, this wasn't so easy without a knife. I yanked and I pulled. I could feel little rat bones coming out of little rat sockets, but the sinews and muscles remained powerful, some kind of animal superglue. Where, I wondered, could I get a knife or a sharp blade of some kind? Could I sharpen a stone? How?

Then suddenly I felt disgust—not for the rat meat, but for myself. There I was thinking like a non-resident again. What did I expect, a butler to come and slice it up for me? Did I expect it to be chewed up and predigested like baby food? Was I a baby? No! I was a man! A pioneer! An—an animal! Animals don't have knives because they have *teeth*. What was I waiting for? I had all the knives anybody could want—in my mouth.

So it was with a weird mix of disgust and power, repulsion and triumph, that I lifted the rat to my mouth and bit into his leg. The fur felt nasty against my lips, worse than the dry old leaves, worse than kissing a man with a beard. But as my teeth released blood and meat, I knew that I

had done the right thing. It was nourishment. Survival. Life—more life.

Afterward, I sat on Cindy's slab chewing on the tail the way a farmer chews on the end of a weed. I felt good—strong, primitive, victorious. I was losing inhibitions I never knew I had. The mausoleum was educating me, teaching me about my own resources, my ability to live off the land, to survive using my wits. I looked at Cindy's coffin. This wasn't what she wanted. She didn't want to see me prosper. She had tried to fuck me over, cripple me with guilt. That was her intention—to wound me, hobble me. She was like my sprained ankle—a liability.

I got up on my knees on the slab. What right, I thought, did *she* have to occupy pride of place in this brave new world? There I was forced to sleep naked on a hard stone slab, while she was stretched out in that nice cozy coffin with its pillows and satin lining. It wasn't fair. Hell, I was a man—a living, feeling being—a pioneer! And what was she? A stupid stiff.

I popped open the lid of the coffin, intending to dump her on the floor. I flicked on the lighter. There she was, lying there, pale, still pretty, dressed in a white gown that I remembered from her sister's wedding. I reached down into the coffin...

And suddenly there was a loud scraping sound and a blinding flash of light. A burst of air. "Hey you in there," said the light. "Move away from the body. Now." I was stunned. Immobilized. "I said move away, *now*." What could this be? I heard voices. Men. Angelica. How had they known? Did they find the car? "My god, he's naked." Someone sobbing. "What's he *doing* to her?"

I could feel hands pulling at me. I stammered. I stuttered. "It's not what it looks like." But the hands kept pulling. I was frightened. The mausoleum was my frontier, my homestead, my settlement. "Where are you taking me?" Someone threw a coat over my shoulders. "Jail." Jail? Guards, orders... *Get up. Eat. Shit. Sleep.* How could they do this to me? I just wanted to be left alone. I wasn't hurting anybody.

If someone were to tell you, in all earnestness, that he was about to kill himself, you would probably try to stop him. You would argue with him, remind him that a permanent solution makes a poor answer to temporary problems, and—if all else failed—you might even dial the police or physically restrain him. You would do all that because, when a person threatens to kill himself, it puts you into a position of responsibility. Suddenly you're the captain of a ship struggling through stormy weather. You have to take hold of the situation and guide everyone to safety. If you don't—well, then, you're not quite a murderer, but you still end up with blood on your hands. You didn't do what you could to prevent someone from dying.

But what would you do if someone were to tell you, in all earnestness, that he was about to kill himself—but it was over the internet that he told you? He is a complete stranger. You don't know where he lives, what state or what country. You don't know his real name. You can't even be sure what age he is, or what gender. All you have is an obviously fake moniker, a screen name. And yet the responsibility is just the same as if he had told you face-to-face. You still have to do something. You still have to help the person. Otherwise you end up with blood on you.

This is what I contemplated when a habitué of a certain web forum posted a suicide note. It was late and I was about to go to bed. I happened to check the forum to see if there was anything new. It was a Friday night. Nobody seemed to be around. There was just one lonely post with the subject header "Goodbye." It was posted by a person whose screen name was NecroPhil—evidently a guy really named Phillip. Since there were no other new messages, I clicked on it—and immediately wished I hadn't.

NecroPhil told us, in words whose sincerity was difficult to doubt, that he had become frustrated with life. He wanted to be a musician,

but various forces had conspired to prevent him from pursuing his ambitions. He didn't see any way out of his currently maddening situation, and so he had decided, as he put it, "to end himself." Before doing so, he just wanted to wish all of us forum regulars goodbye, since we had been such good friends to him.

At first I thought it was a joke—and yet his words had an unnerving simplicity and plainness to them. His suicide note seemed perfectly genuine. NecroPhil had been a frequent contributor to the forum. It was hard to call him a friend exactly, but he had built trust in the forum regulars through the obvious sincerity of all his past posts. Why should this note be any different? Why would he play a practical joke now, after so many months of participation in the forum? Of course, it was possible that some malicious trickster was using NecroPhil's screen name to play a mean joke on him. But why? It was hard to make out how the trickster would gain any advantage from a false post.

It was impossible not to conclude that the suicide note was genuine. I immediately shut off the entire computer. "I don't want to deal with this," I said to myself. I could imagine being sucked into a night-long effort to reassure someone that life was worth living. I would end up typing life-affirming clichés till dawn. Or worse, I'd end up feeling guilty enough to give him my phone number, then I'd become NecroPhil's personal suicide prevention hotline. Who needed it? I did not want to be the captain of that ship. I did not want responsibility for a stranger's life. All I did was click a dumb link. How could the tiniest movement of an index finger have such drastic consequences? Let someone else deal with it. It was a public forum. Surely someone else would take hold of the situation and convince NecroPhil to live.

I went to bed. I curled up alongside my wife and held her so that we were like two spoons pressed together. It was cozy and warm and secure. I wondered if NecroPhil had anyone to hold at night. Probably not. If he was considering suicide, he was probably a loner—or perhaps not a loner by nature, someone who likes to be alone, but rather someone depressed by the lonesomeness and alienation that life presented to him. I could see him, because of his screen name, holding the body of a dead woman in his arms and telling it, pathetically, "I have *so much* to give." His heart was bursting with love, but the only people who didn't spurn

it were those who couldn't—dead people.

I imagined NecroPhil had never had a girlfriend. Maybe he had never even been with a woman—a live one, anyway. I could see him with that dead body again. “It’s my first time,” he was telling it. “Please be gentle.” Or maybe he wasn’t such a milksop. Maybe he wanted it down and dirty. He would bring a tape that he’d recorded by holding it up to the television while playing a pornographic movie. He’d pry open the jaws of his beloved and prop a Walkman in there, so that she would make sounds of passion and orgasm while he deflowered himself in her rotten clam.

My wife turned in my arms. “What time did you come to bed?” she mumbled.

“A few minutes ago.”

She pouted. “I didn’t feel anyone kiss me goodnight.”

I leaned over and touched my lips to hers.

“That’s better,” she cooed, sleepily. “How come you don’t kiss me anymore?”

“But I do.” I kissed her again. I could see NecroPhil with his body. “Don’t you love me anymore?” he was asking it. “I feel like all the passion’s gone out of our relationship. You’re so cold and distant.”

If he really was a virgin, I wondered, would it be possible to deflower himself with a dead body? Is it possible to lose your virginity with a cadaver? For a woman, virginity has a technical meaning: the integrity of the hymen. A female necrophile could rupture the hymen with a corpse and thereby deflower herself. But what of a man? Physically there is no difference between a virgin and a playboy. So when a man has sex for the first time, what changes? Why is the first time more significant than the tenth? For that matter, what does “first time” mean exactly? The first time you have sex with someone else? Does a cadaver constitute a legitimate “someone?” And if so, is it a virgin cadaver until a necrophile comes along and deflowers it? Or does the cadaver’s previous sexual activity carry over with it into the grave, so that it is to be considered a corpse of experience?

My wife withdrew her lips. “Hello?” She snapped her fingers. “What’s the matter, my kisses don’t interest you anymore?”

“I’m sorry. I was thinking about something.”

“What?”

“It’s kind of weird.” I sat up. “A guy posted a suicide note on this web board tonight.”

“It wasn’t a joke?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Did anyone respond to him?”

“I shut the computer off.”

“You shut the computer off without responding?”

I could tell by her voice that, if I admitted I had, she would insist I go right back and send NecroPhil a supportive response. But what could I say that wasn’t hackneyed and obvious? Life is good, smell the flowers, love and be loved in return? It all sounded so trite. I couldn’t possibly imagine that a cliché would make the difference between life and death.

“I sent him a response,” I lied. “Of course I did.”

“What’d you say?”

“What’d I say?” I looked at her. She was soft and pretty, and the bed was warm. “I told him,” I said, “that it’s wrong to hurt yourself if anybody loves you. I told him that somebody must love him, and if he thinks no one does, then he has to go out and find it—he has to find someone who loves him. Because love is everything. Love is great and glorious and if you die you’ll never know just how glorious.”

“That’s so incredibly sweet,” she said, beaming. She kissed me, deeply, and this time I responded. It was nice to be under the blankets with her, the woman I love.

Later, I saw that she had gotten her period while we were making love. There was a pool of blood on the sheets beneath her. She put a towel down to soak it up, then lay with her head in the crook of my shoulder. She fell fast asleep, safe and secure in my arms, while I stared into the dark and thought about how there was no doubt blood on me too.

“Where should we go for Labor Day weekend?”

I looked up from my book. “Nowhere.”

“You wouldn’t like to get away for a last romantic weekend?”

I lay the book face-down across my chest. I looked at my wife. She was lying flat on her back with her pajama top bunched up beneath her breasts. She was rubbing her enormous naked tummy. It didn’t look to me like an advertisement for romance. It looked to me like a warning against it. “We should probably stay home near the doctor, no?”

“I’m not due for at least three weeks.”

“You never know.”

I picked up my book and began reading again. My wife turned on her side and snuggled closer. I could feel her stomach pressing against me. Once it got bigger than her breasts, I couldn’t bear to look at it. I knew I would love whatever was inside, but I couldn’t love what it did to my wife. It looked like a deformity, a gnarled joint or a goiter—and she was happy about it. Ecstatic. I couldn’t understand it. Maybe it was the fundamental difference between man and woman, but every time she expressed pride about her swollen midriff, it struck me with the same incomprehensible grotesquerie as you’d feel to hear a cancer patient praise his malignant cells.

She sighed, watching me read. She was waiting for me to pay her a little attention. I turned the page of my book. She sighed again and turned on her back. “You don’t even want to touch me anymore.”

It was an invitation for me to protest, to reaffirm my love and commitment. And really I did love her and really I was committed, but all the same I just couldn’t say it. “What?” I said, pretending not to hear.

She sighed a third time, giving up. “Just what are you reading so intently?”

“That new biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay.”

“Since when did you start liking Edna St. Vincent Millay?”

“She was a great poet.” From memory I recited a short poem.

“That was nice,” said my wife when I had finished. “You never read to me anymore.”

“I didn’t think you were interested in anything but books for expectant mothers.”

“That’s not true.” Out of the corner of my eye I could see her grin. “I also read books about baby names.”

“How wonderful.”

“What should we name the baby?”

“Well, Edna here was named after a hospital. Maybe we should do that and call our kid Lenox Hill. It has a nice ring to it.”

“Good thing we’re not going to Columbia Presbyterian.”

“That’s why we shouldn’t go anywhere for Labor Day weekend. We should stay near a hospital that we can name our kid after.”

She began to debate the merits of the various boys’ names she had selected. I heard her declaring her preference for Tyler before I disappeared back into the book. While she talked I looked at the pictures: Edna as a girl, Edna at Vassar, Edna the famous poet. She wasn’t the prettiest woman I’d ever seen, but it was hard to tell from the old black-and-white pictures. Apparently Edna had a certain vitality, an élan, that distinguished her. “Hey, listen to this,” I said, interrupting my wife’s soliloquy on the merits of Tyler. “It says here that Millay’s sister burned three things after she died: some ‘indiscrete’ letters, some pornographic pictures, and an ivory dildo... You ever have an ivory dildo?”

“No.”

“You know what I wonder? What’s the difference between masturbating with an ivory dildo and fucking a dead animal? I mean, either way, it’s having sex with dead animal matter, you know what I mean?”

“Not really.”

“You know how people say marijuana is the first step to becoming a full-fledged drug addict? Maybe it’s the same with ivory dildos. You start out masturbating with an elephant tusk and before long you end up with a taxidermy fetish. You keep deer heads and stuffed bears and antlers around the house to jerk off with. It’s kind of a combination of bestiality and necrophilia, a sexual desire for dead animal parts.”

“That’s really lovely.”

“Sure, and there are probably guys who develop fetishes for sheep-gut condoms too. You ever see one of those? They’re really made from sheep guts. Guys probably put them on to jerk off just so they can feel the touch of dead animal intestine against their penises...” I couldn’t stop now. I knew what I was doing. I was turning the conversation to something vile so that she would not participate in it. I was pushing her back into her own world, forcing her to retreat into daydreams of Tyler. I was using disgust as a silencer, deviance as a gag, perversion as duct tape across her mouth.

Finally she turned on her side to face the wall. I stopped ranting and returned to the biography. It was exciting to read about Edna’s early years. You could sense her charisma, her energy, her brilliance. As I was reading, though, it dawned on me that this was the first time I’d ever read a biography of a woman. There was something strange about it. I had never before understood, in reading the biography of writers such as Poe or Baudelaire, just how much I must have identified with them as men. But now, reading the biography of a woman, I realized that I did not identify with Edna at all. I could not share her passion. To the contrary, I was attracted to it, just as I might have been attracted to her as a person had I known her. Her vitality was not an example to me, Edna St. Vincent Millay was not a role model I could hope to follow. Rather, she was a kind of sex object, even though she’d been dead fifty years.

From my wife’s breathing, I figured she was asleep. To make sure, I whispered her name, and she didn’t respond. I shut out the light and retreated into my mind, imagining Edna as she might have looked when she first moved to New York after college. At that time she was still a virgin, I had learned from the text, so I imagined putting some baby oil between her thighs, rubbing between them without penetrating her, ejaculating on what her husband came to call her “pretty red kitty.” Listening for any changes in my wife’s breathing, I masturbated gently, furtively, then wiped myself with a tissue.

I had never jerked off to a figure from the past before. Lying there in bed, it seemed odd to fantasize about having sex with someone you could not possibly have sex with. Normally, even if you fantasized about a famous supermodel who would never in practice agree to sleeping with

you, at least in principle it remained possible. You could kid yourself on that. But with Edna, there was just no chance. She was dead, long gone, and you couldn't even have sex with her cadaver because that had no doubt disintegrated into the earth by now. There was nothing left of her, just her poems, and as I started to drop off to sleep I wondered if it were a kind of necrophilia to fantasize about figures from the past. Edna was dead, after all.

Or was she? Books had given her a kind of immortality. That's what I liked about books and why I wanted to be a writer. I too wanted to be transmitted into the future. I too wanted people to think and perhaps even fantasize about me when I was gone. Yes, having children perpetuates your genes into the future, but it doesn't make posterity daydream about you. No one jerks off to fantasies of their great-grandparents disembarking at Ellis Island. No one does that, children only love you for a generation or two. After that you're absorbed, diffused, a small shred of genetic material in a horde of descendants for whom you have all the sex appeal of a piece of parchment. Only art can make the future love you, and that is what art is about: attraction at a distance, seduction from the past, inveiglement from beyond the grave. Art is a plea to love me when I'm gone.

And yet, I thought to myself, who could love what I do? Who could possibly love me for this?

Fragment of a Love Letter

It was March rain, a cold rain, rain that had been cooled by winter but not yet warmed by summer. It wasn't refreshing or invigorating, like some rains can be. There was something terrifying about it. The clouds acted as cover for malevolent angels shooting machine guns out of the sky. The raindrops had cores of ice. You wouldn't want one to hit you in the eye. It would plow right through to your brain and kill you. That's the kind of rain it was. Homicidal.

I opened the car door for you and you got in. You plugged your cell phone into the cigarette lighter. You looked in the rearview mirror and put on lipstick. I thought you might just drive away. We'd been fighting. I knocked on the window. You opened. I leaned my head in. You could have raised the window and decapitated me. You could have trapped my head in the window frame and hit the gas on the car. You could have dragged me down the street until my body came loose from my head. But you didn't. You kissed me and then you drove away.

I watched you go. I was glad we'd made a gesture of reconciliation before you left. I was worried that the rain would turn into ice on the highway. The car would hit a patch of black ice and slam into the concrete abutment. You would bash your head against the windshield. A speeding SUV would be unable to stop and would plow into you from behind. The force of the impact would throw you a hundred yards from the vehicle. You would land in oncoming traffic. A green truck hauling Perrier water would plow over you. It would crash and carbonated water would smear your blood across the highway. Night would come, the rain would stop, and it would freeze. There would be new sheets of ice across the road, ice made of your blood.

I never loved you more than that moment you drove away and left me standing there in the homicidal rain. There was something about

the prospect of your death that piqued my feelings for you. It was not that I wanted you to die. It's just that the thought that I might never see you again—the thought that you'd be lying there on the cold wet pavement, murmuring my name for the last time—agitated my love, excited it, made it sharper and more poignant. I realized, as I turned to walk back into the house, that you would call me on your cell phone in ten minutes. I realized that you wouldn't die. And yet I also realized that the prospect of death—the miniscule, entirely unlikely prospect—fired my love in a way that your presence could never do. Alive and in my arms, you were a source of happiness, but also of frustration and resentment. That's natural. But dead and in my dreams, you were a source of pain—and therefore love, I was forced to conclude, was more fully itself in this condition than in the actual routine of life.

The cliché is that love should be forever. But eternity is precisely what flattens and destroys love. If familiarity breeds contempt, just imagine how familiar you can get with a person after a thousand or a million years. God forbid we should both go to heaven. Its endlessness would make us hate each other. Better for you to be in heaven and me in hell. We would long for each other, dream of each other, idealize each other. You would rail against God, since He was keeping you from consummating your love. I would send smoke signals from my pit of brimstone—love letters that smelled like sulfur and made you choke. Maybe we would even try to sneak off to purgatory for illicit rendezvous. You'd be an angel and me a demon, with horns and hooves like a goat, but that wouldn't detract from our passionate reunion. Your golden halo would shake while we fucked. I'd take you from behind and the feathers on your wings would tickle my snout.

Doesn't it sound romantic? That's just the point. When we're together, love is assailed from all sides by little imperfections. I smell. I belch. I fart. I shit. How can you possibly feel romantic about me? And you—you're no angel. You whine. You piss and moan. You bitch and kvetch. You make me wish I'd go deaf sometimes. When you talk, I fantasize about sticking knitting needles in my ears and perforating my ear drums. And if I actually did it, stood there with blood running out of my ears and down my neck, you'd probably stop bitching. All the little imperfections would disappear before an enormous swell of love

and concern. You'd run to me, comfort me, hug me and hope I didn't hemorrhage to death.

Violence, in short, would sharpen your feelings—just as they sharpen mine.

But this is a precarious equation, a fucked-up formula, a recipe for indubitable disaster. If death, or the prospect of it, makes love better, where do you draw the line? For example, is it acceptable—is it psychologically healthy—to fantasize about the death of the woman you love precisely in order to love her better? There is something deeply twisted about imagining you dying in an automobile accident just so I can say the four-letter L-word. And yet, suppose that it's acceptable to fantasize about you crashing into a concrete abutment, since a fantasy is just a fantasy. Would it also be ok to fantasize about killing you? Must you only die in accidents? Why can I not daydream of stabbing you in order to make myself love you more? Does it matter what happens to you in my dream life if in reality I'm a nicer boyfriend? A more sensitive husband? A more loving lover?

And what if fantasy edges over into reality? We're driving down the highway. I'm behind the wheel, going too fast. I'm swerving in and out of the passing lane. I play chicken with the other cars. You're gripping the seat. Your knuckles are white, like bone. I sideswipe a taxi and speed off, laughing. "What's the matter with you?" you shriek. I look at you with eyes like full moons. I'm just doing it because I think it's romantic. Death makes me love you. I think death makes you love me too. I explain it all to you and you understand. So we continue on jeopardizing our lives and those of the people around us, just to feel closer. Is that ok? If I run over a little boy riding a bike, will the jury absolve me if I say I did it not out of malice or negligence but out of love?

Diary of a Sick Fuck

I have to be careful or Vivian will hear me typing. She always calls when she is making the walk to the subway. Even though it is just getting dark, she claims to feel safer if I'm on the line with her. Personally I fail to make out how this contributes to her safety, since she is fifty blocks from where I work. If a rapist jumps out and attacks her, all I will hear is the cell phone fall to the ground. It will conk out and, to tell the truth, I will not call 911. What would I tell the police? "Hello, officer, I'm calling because my girlfriend is somewhere downtown and she lost control of her cell phone. Could you please investigate?"

But none of that is what I meant to write. It is difficult to focus while she drones in my ear about her thesis advisor. Let me try to block her out and concentrate...

What I really wanted to note was something about last night. Vivian was reading in bed with the television blaring in the background. I was in the living room looking at a new archive of horror images on the internet. It was an amazing stash someone had put together—full-color, high-resolution images organized according to manner of death: car crashes, burns, gang shootings, suicides, tortures, sex crimes, domestic accidents. There were some really nice pictures of hangings, people with their necks weirdly distended like human giraffes and their tongues dangling out. Another series of pictures showed the progressive effects of breast cancer on a middle-aged black lady. Looking at it, I could not imagine why the pictures even existed. Wouldn't the black lady get medical attention? Wouldn't the doctor who took the pictures insist on surgery or chemotherapy? The picture that really gave me pause, though, was one showing a person who had jumped out of a building. His guts were splattered all over the sidewalk, and I am really at a loss to describe how repulsive this picture was. It looked like somebody had entered a

contest to see who could eat the most spaghetti and then got sick all over the sidewalk, vomiting up tomato sauce and noodles the size of garden hoses.

In the past when I looked at sick images such as this I felt a kind of pseudo-repulsion—*pseudo* because really it was thrilling, and by definition repulsion ought to be the very opposite of thrilling. But this image was too horrible to allow for any wiggle room. It wasn't like pornography, where you never quite know if the pictures are staged. Fucking is easy to fake, but this—this death—seemed undeniable. A man never knows if his girlfriend simulates orgasm, but certainly he would know if she tried to fake something such as this. You can't question the intentions of a body exhibiting its guts. You can't question *entrails*.

As a result, the obvious reality of this image induced a corresponding reality of effect within me. Looking at the exploded spaghetti innards of a despondent jumper, I began to feel authentically sick. And I liked this, I did, but still... As my repulsion lost its falsity, so too did my thrill lose its cruelty and superiority. Yes, *superiority*. What kind of sick fuck have I become? I have thousands of pictures like this shattered jumper, all archived on disks. I do not masturbate to them, but I do collect them with the same obsessiveness with which some men pursue drugs or gambling or illicit fetishes. How did I get to be this way? Is there something wrong with me?

I am at work so I have to be careful. It would not be unusual for my boss to see me typing—that's not the problem. The danger is that he may want to come over and have a look at whatever he thinks I am editing. If he sees what I am actually writing I will not know how to explain it. Obviously it is not one of the firm's novels. I could lie and say it is a rough draft of one that I am writing, and that I intend to transform the personal details later in order to raise it from confession to art...

Last night when I returned home from work Vivian had ordered a pepperoni pizza for us. The analogy of intestinal matter with spaghetti still reverberated in my head, and even though pizza is not pasta I could not eat a bite of it. I am afraid all Italian food is henceforth going to resemble the aftermath of random acts of violence. Mexican food always looks like excrement, thanks to the refried beans. Now Italian food looks

like death, thanks to the tomato sauce. I will have to stick to good old American food, like grilled cheese... Then again, melted cheese looks an awful lot like pus. If a chef with acne popped his zits on your grilled cheese sandwich, you would never know.

After supper Vivian disappeared into the bedroom and I seated myself in front of the computer. I started going through my picture collection—but I had changed somehow. I was looking at the pictures differently than I had looked at them before. A kind of self-consciousness had intervened. Rather than look at them purely for the sake of enjoyment, I now watched myself as I looked at them. A split had occurred in my personality: one part of me thrilled to my favorite pictures of violence and death, while another part of me observed myself as from the vantage point of a psychologist. The first part of me watched the violence, the second part of me watched the first part. I was a voyeur who had undergone fission: each part of me was engaged in looking, but one part was a thrill-seeker and the other part a scientific observer. It was only self-consciousness, really, but it had a... A schizoid-type effect, I believe.

Turning off the computer, I went into the bedroom. I sat down on the edge of the bed, and Vivian peered up at me through the black frames of her glasses. “To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?” she asked. “What surprise?” I replied. “You,” she said pointedly, making that one single word convey the idea that I did not normally pay enough attention to her. “I just thought I’d come see you,” I said. For a moment I wondered which part of me was speaking: the psychologist or the thrill-seeker? Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde? “What do you want?” she asked. I kissed her on the cheek. “Ah,” she said, “*that’s* what you want.”

Vivian lay back on the bedspread and drew me into long, prolonged, elongated kisses—kisses as impervious to the passage of time as Egyptian statues. She ran her fingers through my hair and held tightly to the back of my head. After a few minutes, I began to feel as though she were no longer kissing me but rather setting a skull fracture. Images of automotive fatalities formed a slide show in my mind. I have one picture in my collection, from the *Color Atlas of Diagnosis after Recent Injury*, showing the face of a man whose head had gone through the windshield of a vehicle. His lips were sliced clean through and turned back, so that they resembled petals sprouting from a weird red flower of meat. As we

kissed, the slide projector in my mind got stuck on this image. Suddenly I started to feel an immense and, I know, irrational fear. I saw Vivian mutilating my mouth with her teeth, chewing and gnawing my lips, severing them from my face...

To dispel the image, I opened my eyes. Vivian, still wearing her glasses, was looking at me. "How come you never close your eyes when we kiss?" I asked. She smiled. "I like to look at you, that's all."

Last night I was scanning through pictures of abortions. I have this really terrible image of a hand, covered in a kind of rubber dish glove, holding up an aborted fetus. It is a truly repellent photograph, enough to turn anyone against abortion. Leaving it on the screen, I forced myself to stare at it. What kind of sick fuck have I become, I wondered. Why do I collect and catalogue and even treasure such imagery? But before I could answer that question, before I could locate the wellsprings of my love for the lugubrious, a voice interrupted. "What the hell is that on your screen?" Vivian had come in behind me. I tried to hide the image on the screen but it was too late. "It looks like roadkill or a dead—" She paused. "Is that a dead baby?" Peering over my shoulder, Vivian moved closer to the computer. She reached past me for the computer mouse. I grabbed her wrist and twisted it. "Ow," she yelled. I stood up from the chair. "Don't you touch my machine!" I gestured threateningly, and Vivian ran toward the bedroom.

After a few minutes, my anger began to subside. I could almost watch it recede, like a tide, and the void left by the anger was soon filled by contrition. Jesus, I thought. There must really be something wrong with me. I should never yell at Vivian like that. I love Vivian. She means the world to me.

I wandered into the bedroom. Vivian lay on the bed holding *Civilization and Its Discontents*. "Vivian," I said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what's the matter with me lately..." She looked at me and I could see the hurt in her eyes. She'd been crying. I started to say something I did not want to say. "I think I might need some help or something. I think I've got a... Got a problem." The sincerity of my words—but were they really mine? Or those of only a part of me?—obliged her to study me. Was I going to apologize? Was I going to explain why I'd been so

weird? “What’s the matter?” she asked. “Well,” I stuttered, “it is difficult to describe”—and just then her telephone rang. We sat there helplessly while the answering machine went off. At the sound of the beep, a distinguished male voice spoke out. “Vivian, this is Professor Rosenzweig...” Vivian held up a finger, gesturing for me to wait a minute, and rushed to pick up the receiver.

Irrationally, I felt rebuffed. I had been about to unburden myself, and she had snubbed me. I imagined strangling her while Professor Rosenzweig listened over the telephone. “Vivian?” he would say. “Vivian? Are you all right? Are you choking? What’s the matter?” Then there would be silence. Breathing. Uncertainty...

But what a childish fantasy of revenge! Vivian could have had no idea what I was going to confess to her. And I had twisted her arm only a few minutes before. Why should she not have rebuffed me? I deserved it, didn’t I? Why did I have to turn so quickly to violence? After all, I did not really want to hurt Vivian. I guess it’s just that my lugubrious impulses are not for pictures alone. My thoughts see the violent possibilities inherent in every situation. My left hand is not quite sure what my right hand is capable of. It would make a great scene in a comedy: my right hand trying to strangle my girlfriend, my left hand trying to disarm my right hand. But it is not funny to me because... Because I know it is a possibility. But then again, in saying this, am I not identifying with the non-violent part of me? When I say “I don’t want to hurt Vivian,” am I not clearly speaking from the psychologist or observer or perhaps even moralist within me? What does Mr. Hyde think?

It’s late and I can’t sleep. Earlier, Vivian and I were sitting at the kitchen table. I was eating an omelet, wondering whether it was possible to choke on one or not. After all, it is not the type of food to catch in your throat. It is soft, mushy, rather like the skin of a body that has been underwater for several days.

“You haven’t been eating much lately,” Vivian commented. “Are you feeling ok?” This question put my guard up. I did not trust her. She was acting—fishy. “I’m fine,” I said. “You know,” she replied, “you haven’t quite been yourself lately.” I forced an apologetic smile. “I’ve been under a lot of pressure at work...” She nodded knowingly. “That’s

just what I thought I should talk to you about,” she declared. “You know, since you got this job, you’ve been, well, different... Morbid, even.” Certainly this conversation was not about my job but about last night’s abortion imagery. “Oh?” I said. “Yes,” she went on, “I mean, think about it. When you edit horror novels, it must have some effect on you.” I swallowed the last bite of omelet. “It’s just fiction,” I replied, licking my teeth. She picked up her knife and turned it in her hands. “You’re right,” she said, “but still I wonder about it. I mean, basically you spend your entire day trying to make people’s worst nightmares more believable. You don’t think that could have some effect on you?” I watched her with the knife. She could not possibly wound me seriously with a butter knife unless she managed to put it directly into my eye or, possibly, ram it very hard into my throat. “No,” I declared, leaning back in my chair so as to move my head out of her reach. “I don’t think it has any effect on me at all.”

She lay the knife back down beside her plate. “Well,” she said, “I wish you’d think about it. Maybe you should ask your boss if you can transfer from horror to romance.” She picked up her glass. Although she would have been able to shatter it against the table and slash at me with the shards, I was confident I would be able to respond with the fork. Also, since the stove was behind me, I could easily have reached the frying pan—with any luck there might even be burning grease left in it. Facial blisters would give her pause. “Transfer to romance?” I blurted, incredulous. I understood Vivian now. I understood her secret agenda. Romance novels are propaganda for the most saccharine beliefs of womankind. Reading romance novels all day would be like volunteering for brainwashing or cult reprogramming. I would become an automaton of the fantasies of women...

In a stroke, Vivian had positioned things such that my very individuality was allied with horror. “Transfer to romance?” I repeated. “I don’t think so. Romance isn’t really me.”

“And horror is?” she shot back.

I haven’t been writing because I was making the transition—to romance. I had started thinking about what Vivian said, and maybe she was right. Maybe mingling my thoughts with those of horror all day was having an

effect on the way I conceived things. Much as boot camp submits the soldier to artificial battles in order to train him for real war, did fictional horror not perhaps train me for real violence? With this possibility in mind, I thought it prudent at least to give romance a try...

But do you know what I discovered? Romance may be different—but I... I am the same. At work, I keep a word processor open in the foreground of my computer screen so I can give the appearance of doing a line-edit on the novel currently assigned to me. Meanwhile, in the background I have my web browser set up in a tiny window so that I can download horror images to disk. I spend my days reading about muscular but sensitive men and the strong but attractive women who love them—all the while looking at, for example, pictures of drownings, dog bites, hangings, third-degree burns. I enjoy the contrast, romance and death, saccharine words and savage images. I just now finished downloading frames 153 to 325 of the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination. There are a few frames—right around 315, 316—where it really is possible to see the president's head explode. Normally this alone would thrill me, but as I read the romance novel, my thoughts turn to JFK's wife as well. Did enough blood splatter across her chest to make her nipples peek through that dust-pink outfit? In my mind I rewrite the assassination as a wet T-shirt contest.

I have decided that there is absolutely nothing wrong with me for thrilling to all of these gruesome pictures. After all, taste is relative. A photo that one man finds beautiful will leave another cold. Why should the same not hold for the grotesque? One man might be repulsed by the sight of the president's head exploding all over his wife. I, conversely, can find it appealing. Why not? Am I not entitled to my opinion? Admittedly, I do have moments when I am not quite sure what my opinion is. Whenever I discover a new cache of horror somewhere on the internet, the thrill-seeker in me takes over. I grow obsessive. I cling to that computer mouse the way a shoe fetishist must cling to the pumps of a starlet. Then, once I acquire the whole stash, once I have it safely archived, once I possess it, once I know it is mine—then I begin to grow cold, distant from my own self. It is a distinctly post-coital feeling. I see the image of myself, a death fetishist attached to a computer, and feel contempt. Surely I have become some kind of sick fuck.

Taste may indeed be relative, but my problem seems to be that I am of two minds. Part of me does in fact want to be brainwashed by romance, and yet another part remains in the grip of horror. Part of me wants to become the ideal man for my woman—become Brad, the protagonist in the novel I am editing, a macho electrician who ends up marrying his high-school sweetheart and adopting her child after saving them from perils too tedious to recount. Is that not what Vivian really wants from me? A protector? A big strong guy whose power works for her, not against her... And yet, and yet, and yet—there is that little demon, that unrepentant sinner inside, that sick fuck who thrills to the depiction of boating accidents and hands amputated at the wrist by chainsaw mishaps.

Vivian is on her cell phone doing her subway walk. She is telling me Professor Rosenzweig's latest commentary on her thesis. "He said my work on the Szondi test was brilliant," she beams. "What is the Szondi test?" I ask. Vivian sighs through the phone. "I explained it to you, don't you remember?" Without waiting for me to reply, she goes on to explain: "It involves showing psychiatric patients pictures of people who are suffering from genuine ailments such as mania, paranoia, dissociation, and so on. The subjects are asked to choose the pictures they like best, the theory being that their choices reveal their unconscious impulses..."

I tune her out... I cannot imagine why she believes she is safer with me on the line. There are a thousand innocuous reasons our line might get cut: interference, sunspots, a dead battery. I would never call the police just because our connection broke. And yet, of course, in that one instance, in that one-in-a-million instance, naturally it would be just that time that I failed to call the police that some nigger rapist would drag Vivian into a dark doorway. He would force her to swallow that black sperm, which probably smells like Kentucky Fried Chicken, and she would come home with breath that reeks like the bottom of Colonel Sanders' shoes. "Why didn't you call the police?" she would weep, and it would be a fucking nightmare. She would hate me at the exact moment that she would need me most. And for my part I would still love her, but the predominant feeling would become that of guilt, as though I had allowed her to get raped by the nigger.

Anyway, that is not what I meant to write. With her voice droning in my ear it is hard to concentrate. Let me try to focus myself... Ok. I think I can tune her out. Here goes. What I really meant to write is this. Something peculiar about last night.

I had to work late. When finally I returned home, I found my computer turned on. That's it—turned on, sitting there waiting for me. My first thought, naturally, was that Vivian had turned it on for some reason. I stormed into the bedroom, ready to scream at her—but she was not there. I saw the light on the answering machine blinking, so I pushed the play button. "I got your message," said Vivian through the machine. "Since you're working late I'm going to stay at the library. Call me on my cell, ok?" This made perfect sense. Vivian did not like to be alone in the apartment. Whenever I had to work late, she would contrive some reason to stay out. This was normal behavior. But how was I to explain the computer? Maybe she came home, turned it on, then left again? But why would she do that? If she was spying on me, looking for my abortion pictures—or worse—surely she would not have been so sloppy as to leave the computer on. But how else was I to explain it? I know that I did not leave it on last night. I would have noticed this morning. Also, it is not configured to turn on automatically. Why would it turn itself on? Did it have a virus?

I decided to try an experiment. At the end of the night I unplugged the computer, so as to be sure that it would not turn itself on in any way. Now tonight I am going to work late. If the computer is on when I get home, then obviously something is—peculiar.

Later. Vivian sleeping. Something is indeed peculiar. When I arrived home, my computer was on. In fact, not only was it on, but there were images of horror already displayed on the screen. An entire stack of Nazi atrocities was sitting there in plain view, as though waiting for me to embrace them. What could this possibly mean? Might I have left the computer on myself? Impossible. I would have noticed this morning. Might the computer have turned itself on? Impossible. I had deliberately unplugged it. Someone—some *person*—had to have turned it on. But who? A burglar? No—no burglar would leave cash, jewelry, and electronics untouched in order to peruse images of Nazi atrocities on my

computer. It didn't make any sense. Only one person could have done this: Vivian.

But why? What was her motive? What was she trying to find out? What was she trying to prove? Was she simply snooping around, trying to discover why I have been so, as she put it, "morbid" and "out of it" in recent weeks? But if this were the case, how could she be so careless as to leave the computer on—and with such images in plain view! Surely she cannot be that sloppy. Consequently, I can only conclude that she *deliberately* left these images for me to find. She wanted me to know that she had been using my computer and that she knew what horror could be found therein. She lied to me about staying at the library, crept home in secret, plugged in my machine, and exhibited these Nazi horrors in order to provoke me. This much is undeniable—and yet it makes no sense. It would be perfectly comprehensible for her to snoop my hard drive, or to confront me with evidence of my fetish for death. But what could she possibly intend by this game?

I seated myself at the computer. On the screen was a picture of a Nazi holding a match toward an old man, as though to light a cigarette for him—except that the old man had no cigarette and stood in a posture of submission. "And the beards of old Jews," read the caption, "were set afire for the amusement of the soldiers who stood by and laughed." The picture itself showed nothing terrible—I mean the terrible thing, the burning of the old man's beard, had yet to happen, and so in that sense the picture was not particularly repellent. And yet, there was indeed something horrid about the picture. It was the spectacle of the strong brutalizing the weak, the young exploiting the old, the group terrorizing the individual. You could not help but have a moral reaction to the image, and yet at the same time I *liked* looking at it, so that a tension ensued between the two sides of my person, the moral and the morbid.

But why did Vivian deliberately confront me with this particular image? Perhaps it was because of the obvious analogy between myself and the soldiers: each of us ogling the agony of others... And yet, if this was her point, I resented it. Why this devious means of trying to inspire a revelation in me? Why not just confront me? Why must she toy with me, as though I were one of her little patients at Professor Rosenzweig's clinic? Was she subjecting me to some new Szondi test? Was that it? I

could not help but inspect the living area around the computer. Was there a hidden camera taping my reactions? I could see her and the professor sitting in his office reviewing the tape. “Observe how your companion reacts to the Nazi atrocities, Vivian. Clearly he has become psychotic.” I began to repeat this aloud as I searched in vain for a surveillance camera—repeat it in a kind of mocking, sniveling tone, like a child with a cold. “Observe, Vivian... Nazi atrocities, Vivian... Observe...”

I hate romance. My boss humiliated me. “I thought you had talent when you were in horror,” he exclaimed in front of my colleagues. His neck was red and looked like an amputated leg bursting out of his collar. Yes, there was also something about his face that suggested a stump. It was red, disfigured. It gave the appearance of being able to bludgeon something. “I didn’t know why you wanted to transfer to romance, but I gave you the opportunity, didn’t I?” His voice was at a pitch, and he shook papers at me—a printout of the manuscript I had been editing. “And this is what I get in return!” Here his outrage turned into a low grumble, storm clouds in the distance. “When Mrs. Trumble called me this morning to ask about the edits, I... Well, I...” He stuttered, rage making him incapable of cogent speech. “This is not the kind of practical joke I find funny! Dorothy Trumble sells half a million books a year!” He actually swatted at my head with the folded papers. However, I had been anticipating such a move and managed to dodge alertly to the left, thus causing him to swipe across the pushpins holding a picture of Charles Manson to the wall of my cubicle. The picture fell to the floor, and in rage he threw the manuscript at me. “Now I want you to call Mrs. Trumble and apologize, or you’re fired!”

The proofreader in the cubicle next to me watched all this with amusement. He picked up the manuscript and began reading at random. “This is hysterical,” he laughed. “I can’t believe you did it, especially to Mrs. Trumble.” He began to read aloud to another coworker, and I was surprised myself to hear how the romantic ramblings of Mrs. Dorothy Trumble had been edited. Much hilarity was caused by a scene in which, the way Mrs. Trumble had written it, Brad the electrician rescues a little girl trapped in a car when a power line falls across it. In the “edited” version, as I suppose I must have rewritten it, the little girl

is electrocuted by the intense voltage of the power lines. An anatomically precise description of the burns on her bodies follows, and then Brad drags her body into a wet ditch and does something unspeakable to it. "I can't believe you did this!" my coworkers laughed. Neither can I, I thought, the shame of having been reprimanded paling before a bright flash of surprise at my own unconscious audacity. Certainly it was I who had transformed this work of romance into one of horror, and yet... I searched and searched my memory in vain. That file was not to be found on my hard drive. I could not remember doing it.

Now I really do have to work late tonight. I am not to leave the premises until I have removed my insertions from the manuscript and prepared a neatly edited version which can be overnighted to Mrs. Trumble. Naturally this is quite upsetting. Not only was I humiliated today, but rather than work late in order to archive the cache of autopsy photographs I found last night, now I am being forced to immerse myself in the chivalrous episodes of Brad the electrician. I have half a mind not to do it. Why should I? I do not regret rewriting the manuscript. It is just weird that I did it unconsciously or automatically. You could say that it was a mistake, that I transferred jobs but retained the same skills, such that I treated romance as though it were horror. But the truth is probably much more nefarious than that. The truth is that I am so addicted to trauma and violence and terror that anything I touch will only come out the worse for it...

The most astonishing thing has happened. When I got home, it was immediately apparent that my computer was on. Into the darkened apartment it cast a blue glow like the light reflected from a swimming pool. Vivian did not appear to be home. "Vivian?" I yelled. "Vivian? Are you here?" There was no answer, so I went into the living room. Clearly displayed across the screen of my computer was a horrible picture of a woman who had been brutalized. She was hanging head-down off the edge of a bed, arms falling unnaturally to the floor. She had been stabbed so many times in the stomach that her intestines had come up through the wounds and then gravity had pulled them down toward her face. Some nestled against her breasts like little pink snakes.

I stared at this compelling image on my screen. Where did it come

from? Certainly I had an archive of sex crimes, but I did not remember downloading this one. In a weird way, it was an especially chaste image. The body was smeared with so much blood that, although clearly unclothed, it did not give the impression of being naked. Like virgins, perhaps victims can be modest too... And then suddenly I had to laugh. I recognized the bed. I recognized the body. It was no virgin. It was—Vivian! She had staged this picture to gauge my reaction! A new Szondi test! Show pictures of violence to the violent and record their responses! The Vivian Violence Index, A Doctoral Dissertation under the Supervision of Professor Rosenzweig! “Hey Vivian,” I yelled, scanning the room for her hiding place. “Do you want to know what I think? I love it!” Was she in the closet? No, there were just shoes and skirts. Under the desk? No. There must be a recording device. A camera—but where?

I reached for the phone by the computer and dialed Vivian’s cell. To my great surprise, I heard it ringing somewhere inside the apartment. Could that be? Had I missed her hiding spot? I hung up and the apartment went silent. “Vivian!” I hollered. “You better come out by the time I count to three... Do you hear me? One... Two... Two and a half...” I hit redial and followed the sound of her cell phone into the bedroom. “Three!” I hollered, flicking on the lights. And there, in three dimensions, lay the body of Vivian, dangling upside down at an impossible angle from the edge of the bed. She had been stabbed so many times in the stomach that her intestines had come up through the wounds and nestled against her breasts like little pink snakes.

A bloody knife lay abandoned on the floor. I stooped to pick it up. It felt hard and heavy in my hand, relentless and uncompromising. I had the impression the knife were touching me, trying to remind me of something, its basic reality or objectivity. Fucking is easy to fake, but this—this death—seemed undeniable. You can’t question the intentions of a body exhibiting its guts. You can’t question *entrails*.

I dropped the knife and it smacked the floor with a thud that seemed too loud. Obviously the knife had stabbed Vivian—but had I too? Had I evolved from consumer to producer, from collector to creator? I searched and searched my memory in vain. That file was not to be found on my hard drive. I could not remember doing it. It all seemed

so unreal. Having stared at precisely this picture and so many others like it, I felt as though I had plunged through the looking-glass. I had stepped inside the very scene that still glowed on my computer screen. Our bedroom had become a giant monitor, Vivian had become an image of horror, and I—what kind of sick fuck had I become?

I often think how much better life would be if I could just get over it. An obvious reason is that I am not unafraid of catching some weird disease. I do try to be safe, but in the heat of the moment it's often difficult to remember to take all the necessary precautions. Besides which, some part of me finds it absurd to wear a condom while having sex with a cad. In the back of my head I hear a little voice protesting, "You don't need a rubber! You can't get a cad pregnant! Go ahead. Just do it. Enjoy yourself, already..." And yes, I also have some fear of the consequences of getting caught. But then again, the legal consequences aren't that bad. In many places, it's not actually illegal—and even in places where it is illegal, it's such a monstrous-seeming thing that you stand a decent chance of getting off on a psych charge. You can do your time in the state hospital, telling the bureaucrat shrinks all about your mommy. It's not so bad.

But the primary reason I think life would be better without it is just that it takes up so much time. You really can't imagine how much time it chews up. Think about it. You work eight hours a day. You sleep six. That leaves ten hours for commuting, eating, shitting, bathing, exercising, paying bills, making phone calls. The time goes quickly. And there you are sneaking away for three hours to wander around a cemetery or to troll the internet for suicidal girls. And once you make contact—once you find a fresh grave or you get a depressed chick to talk to you—do you realize what an investment of time you need to make then? It takes hours to dig up a grave, especially alone. It takes hours—sometimes even days—to convince a suicidal girl to meet with you. And then it can take days or even weeks more to convince her to kill herself in front of you so you can doodle around with her dead body.

Do you know what I could do with all that time? I could socialize,

spend time with the people I love. I could clean my apartment, go to the movies, plan a vacation, take up a hobby. I could take care of more important things, get down to basics, the crucial things in life that suffer because I'm trying to break the basement window of a funeral parlor. Sometimes I imagine it would be a funny little film...

Interview on the street.

Random Fan: "Oh, yes, he is such a great writer. I love his work, just love it. It's soooo brilliant."

Interviewer: "He used to be pretty productive. Why do you think it's been so long since his last book?"

Random Fan: "I'm sure it must take a lot of time to write like that. I mean, he's so brilliant. How many paintings did Leonardo make? Twenty or thirty? He's probably like that. Quality not quantity."

Cut to my kitchen.

Wife: "Do you think we can go for a drive? The leaves should be beautiful this time of year."

Me: "I'm busy."

Wife: "Still?"

Me: "I have to work!"

Wife: "I know but... Can't you just take a break for one Sunday?"

Me: "Now I know why Rimbaud didn't marry!"

Shot of me storming out of the room. The camera sees my back. My wife is sitting at the table. She sighs. She picks up the phone and dials her mother.

Wife: "You want to go to the mall, mom?"

Mom: "Doesn't your husband want to go with you?"

Wife: "He's working on his book."

Mom: "Still?"

Wife: "It's not so easy, mom. It's not like writing a letter. He puts a lot of pressure on himself. He wants to be in the canon."

Camera recedes while wife talks. Wife gets smaller. Camera moves down the hallway. It gets darker and quieter. The camera moves into a somber room. It shows me from a distance. I am hunched over a laptop computer. It casts a blue glow on my face. My fingers move across the keyboard. The viewer thinks I must be hard at work writing the Great American Novel. The camera moves closer. You can make out an image

on my screen. It shows a cheerleader injured in a school bus accident. A brassiere soaked in blood. In the still of the room you can make out that my arm is moving rapidly back and forth beneath my desk, down near my crotch. Outside you can hear my wife trying to convince her mother: “These things can’t be forced, mom. He’s a genius!” The camera tilts down to the floor. There’s a grunt. A spurt of white fluid plops on the floor. “He’s a genius!”

Yeah, I’m a genius all right. You know what I’m a genius at? Wasting my own time. That’s what I’m a genius at. And do you know what wasting your own time means? It means killing yourself. Literally. If a young musician puts a gun in his mouth and blows out his brain, everyone cries about how he cut his life short. But you know what? You’re stealing just as much time from yourself by indulging in weird urges. To jerk off is to die a little. To fuck a dead body is to become one, on the installment plan. DON’T WASTE TIME. TIME WASTES YOU.

To discourage myself, I try to form a vivid mental image of negative consequences. I look through the newspaper. Every day there are a thousand sex crimes: peeping Toms, rapists, child molesters, flashers, incestuous siblings, demented male nurses groping senior citizens attached to dialysis machines. The newspaper is a parade of the sick and depraved. The faces of these perverted perpetrators stare out from mug shots, bug-eyed and sad, or from home snapshots that vicious relatives sell to the papers. They become a gallery of ghosts, moaning with regret at the way they have mortgaged their entire lives for momentary pleasures. I see their floating heads against a background of prison bars. A voice rises up from a drone made of cursing, flushing toilets, jeers, sobs, tin cups banging on steel doors. “I used to have a life,” the voice says, shaking sadly, “and now I have this...” It’s a dull hell of group accommodations, a commune without community, thin sheets and furniture bolted to the floors.

Slowly I start to acquire a sort of conscience but it is distant and abstract, a deduction from axioms of behavior rather than a real sense of wrongdoing or sin. It’s like a video camera lodged in my brain, watching and recording everything I think, say, and do. I find myself bending over a green body and all of a sudden there’s that little red recording light staring at me.

“Turn that camera off.”

There’s a shadowy figure behind the camera. It has the voice of a minister. “If you’re not comfortable doing it on tape, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it.”

“Fuck off.”

“Let’s not be nasty.” It rewinds some tape. “Remember this?”

On the camcorder screen I see myself drag the body of a woman beneath a burning ambulance. She is limp from loss of blood. Her hand has been amputated at the wrist. “Doctor, doctor,” she moans, mistaking me for a paramedic. I cradle my hands beneath her head as though to kiss her, but then I jerk her head violently against the axle of the ambulance. Thud. She passes out, and it might have been a strangely merciful act if my intention had been to prevent her from suffering while bleeding to death.

Struggling in the cramped space beneath the vehicle, I hike up her skirt and tear open her pantyhose. Then—

Conscience pauses the tape and shakes its head. “Why?” it asks. “Why?”

Why?

It’s not easy to listen to the voice of conscience. It’s not easy to give it up. You can’t just do it once and be done with it. You don’t just wake up one fine sunny morning, give it up, and then blast off into the rest of your life. It’s not like that at all. When you decide to give it up, you have to give it up a thousand times a day. Every time you manage to overcome one temptation, along comes a better, stronger, more irresistible temptation—a procession of opportunities, each one more golden than the last. Your perversions really want your business. They take out advertisements in the magazines you read. They sponsor taste tests in the supermarket. They give away free samples on the street. It gets to the point where you look up into the sky and half expect to see a blimp with your dirty little secret emblazoned across the side. You hesitate to watch the half-time show at the Super Bowl for fear the baton twirlers will lead you back into the ways of sin.

You’re just one lone individual facing a host of temptations. You’re outnumbered. Opportunity knocks. Desiderata dangle themselves before your eyes. The entire world around you offers itself to the warped crav-

ings inside you. The only thing separating them is a thin shell of self. Conscience is an eggshell, morality is a membrane—fragile, delicate, ill-suited to prevent the consummation of object and subject. Any one thing could poke a hole in it, desire could stab through, desiderata could penetrate, burst the dam, and there you go again, killing time killing.

Double Suicide

In the woods behind the old church was a babbling brook. No doubt Lucy considered it romantic, though personally I hate the sound of running water. Waterfalls grate against my ear like static. Ocean waves vibrate through my skull like a dentist's drill. And babbling brooks do just that—babble, annoyingly, incessantly, nature's own Chinese water torture. I would have preferred another wood, one with no running water, but then I figured the brook would be good for washing away the blood.

I picked a path through the dark trees with my flashlight. Lucy followed behind, talking to herself, singing, asking me questions I willfully ignored. She was like the babbling brook, a steady stream of noise pollution. Women, I thought to myself. Women should be obscene and not heard.

"Do you think," Lucy asked, "that what we're doing is a sin?"

"No."

"It's a sin in the Bible."

I turned and pointed the flashlight at her. "You believe in the Bible?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know if I believe in God per se, like an old man with a big white beard sitting on a throne. But I believe in *something*... Don't you?"

"No." I resumed walking.

"Not at all?"

"You ever hear the joke about God and the necrophile?"

"No."

"Why'd the necrophile go to heaven?"

"I don't know," she said. "Why?"

"He heard God was dead."

Lucy was quiet a minute. I raised my hand and motioned for her

to stop. I listened. An owl hooted in the distance. After that it was quiet again. I resumed walking, and I could hear Lucy tramping behind me in the leaves.

"I don't understand," she said. "Why did you just tell me that joke? What's it supposed mean?"

"It's just a joke."

"But why tell it to me now? What do you mean by it?"

"I don't mean anything by it."

"I'm just trying to understand. Why are we doing this?"

"Why do you think?"

"I know why I'm doing it."

"Why is that?"

"I love you."

"More than you love life?"

"More than anything."

Finally the flashlight picked out the small clearing where the brook ran shallow over some stones. The remnants of an old campfire gave off a strong smell of burnt wood, and through the maple trees you could see the white spire of the old church. I set the flashlight on a stump and swatted at the moths flitting around it. I took the revolver out of the oiled cloth I was carrying it in. I held it up to the light and Lucy looked seriously at it.

"You only brought one gun?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well, what am I supposed to shoot *myself* with?"

I held up the gun. "I thought I'd shoot you first."

"How do I know you'll really shoot yourself if you shoot me first? Maybe you just want to kill me!"

"That's ridiculous," I lied. "Look, how about we play Russian Roulette."

"You can't expect me to shoot myself. I've never even touched a gun before. What if I only wound myself?"

"If you wound yourself," I said, "then I'll finish you off."

"But what if you use up all your bullets on me? Did you think of that? How many bullets did you bring?"

"Six."

"Only six bullets!" she huffed. "There. See? You'll use them all on

me, then you won't be able to shoot yourself. I don't want to die alone. Don't let me die alone..." She started to sob.

"I'll shoot myself first," I offered, knowing she would refuse.

"No!" she cried. "Don't leave me alone. What if I can't do it myself?"

"For God's sake, Lucy! What do you want me to do? Line up our bodies and shoot through us?"

"Could you?"

"I could," I said, and pressed the gun to her left breast and shot.

Bang!

She looked surprised.

Bang!

She fell back at the water's edge. She put her hand over her heart, like a person making a pledge. The blood leaked out between her fingers and she tried to stop it with her other hand. Then she relaxed and lay there with a wide-eyed look of shock, as though she'd woken up to find a dead parakeet wedged between her teeth.

I spread out the oiled cloth on some leaves and set the revolver on it. The ringing in my ears from the gunshot drowned out the brook. I picked up the flashlight and looked closely at Lucy. Blood ran from her chest, down her shoulder, and into the water. She was very pretty. I lay down beside her in the cool water. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the church spire through the trees—and then suddenly I could see Lucy up there in heaven, looking down on me. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing to my body?"

I could see her, furious, venting her spleen to an angel: "Isn't there anything we can do?" The angel would reason with her. "It's not really you," he would say, "it's just your body. Don't let it bother you." But naturally the sight of me would upset her. "Fuck you!" she'd yell, giving the angel a shove. "It's not your dead body getting raped down there." She would stomp her foot, smash her harp, refuse to sing God's praises. "How can he let this happen?" Her shrieks would reverberate through heaven. Angels would stick their fingers in their ears. God would lament his omniscience. "Who's making all the racket?" he would thunder.

I turned my head to the sky and shouted, "She's your problem now, God." And in reply it was quiet, except for the hoot of an owl in the distance.

Sleeping Beauty

Mentally I pluck a flower from its stem, and then I pluck the petals from the flower, saying to myself: Should I touch you? Should I touch you not? Should I touch you? Should I touch you not?

Obviously you don't play any conscious part in the decision. What I mean is that it's not up to you. You'll let me touch you. You'll wait until I decide—you'll wait and you'll wait—if I turn around and walk away, you'll continue to lie there, waiting. You'll wait until the end of the world. You don't care. It's not that you love me so much, or that I'm worth waiting for. It's just that—you'll wait. I know you will.

There is no indecision on your part. There is no decision at all. You're just there, like Mount Everest, waiting. If it had ever occurred to you that you would provoke such a dilemma, you'd have probably had yourself cremated—you'd have willingly jumped into a blender and ground yourself to a pulp just to make yourself repellent. You'd have infected yourself with disease, smashed your nose with a hammer, tattooed NO TRESPASSING on your forehead. You'd have obliged your heirs to mutilate your dead body or to rig up your grave with land mines.

Not that you're actually dead. I can see your chest move up and down. I can see you breathe. The life support has been removed, but the life remains—or appears to. Your heart traces a little green wave across the EKG. However, your brain does not trouble the electroencephalogram. A flat green line neatly divides the screen into a top and a bottom. There is no electrical activity in your brain. Your mind is gone, your head is dead, you have attained the medical minimum for shuffling off this mortal coil—you have attained the legal definition of death. But is that dead enough for me?

A thousand years ago no one would have thought you were dead. They would have held up a mirror to your mouth. It would have fogged with your breath. They would have turned to each other and nodded.

“Yes, she is still alive.” Then they would have put leeches on you and bled you to death.

But now the case is not so clear. Wires can sustain you, drugs can maintain you. There are stimulants to inspire the heart. But what happens when the shot of adrenaline wears off? Coronary entropy? Does the heart grind to a halt? Or does it remain what it is, a dumb muscle dumbly doing what it dumbly did every day anyway? It didn’t need instructions or supervision before. It did its work without you in the past. Why shouldn’t it do its work without you in the future?

And what then? Terminal coma? Persistent vegetative state? A body that resembles an untenanted house? To be sure, it remains an admirable body. You were born beautiful, and perhaps you will die beautiful too—though there are no guarantees. You could hang on like this—in this twilight state, this crepuscular coma—into dreary old age. You could become a wrinkled sack of flesh, covered with suppurating bed sores. The nurses might find you so repulsive that they shudder to bathe you with a sponge. Your heirs will cremate your body to spare the worms from getting sick at the sight of it.

But you haven’t changed yet, at least not physically. Every allure you once possessed remains an allure in extremis. True, fluorescent light is not flattering. True, a hospital smock is not seductive. True, intravenous lines are not normally... Well, did I tell you the dream I had last night? I’m sitting at the edge of your bed when the night nurse comes in. “You must be the orgasm donor,” she tells me. She unhooks your intravenous bag from its silver pole, kneels on the floor in front of me and undoes my zipper. “We can save her,” she says, nodding back toward your bed. Wearing a surgical mask and latex gloves, the nurse masturbates me into the IV bag. Afterward, she puts the bag back on its hook and the milky white fluid seeps down the tube toward your arm. As it enters, you start to convulse—in pleasure? Or is your body rejecting the orgasm transplant? The transfusion of seed?

Is that why I hesitate to do it? Am I afraid that you’ll actually wake up? That I can resurrect you with a kiss? Give you new life with an illicit touch of the finger? “It’s a miracle!” they’ll exclaim, failing to smell the musk of your crotch on my index.

But I’m no Prince Charming. I don’t want to quicken you with

semen or revive you with my lust. I don't want to walk off into the sunset and live happily ever after with you. I just want to walk off. Half the pleasure of necrophilia is not having to cuddle afterward.

I don't know how to say it exactly. After I *had* necrophilia for the first time? After I *did* necrophilia? After I *engaged in* necrophilia for the first time? After I *became* a necrophile? But is one time enough to transform a man into a necrophile per se? If I did it with another male just once in my life, I wouldn't be considered a homosexual—would I? So why should I be considered a necrophile if I did it with just one you-know-what? Then again, you only have to kill one person to be considered a murderer. Maybe necrophilia is like that. It only takes once.

I don't know. But I do know that the next day everything was different. It was like losing your virginity all over again. I felt changed. If having sex for the first time makes you feel more like a man, what does having sex with a you-know-what make you feel like? More alive. You can't hold an inert thing in your arms without experiencing a rush of pure vitality through your own system. It heightens your awareness of who and what you are. You feel strong, alive, and grateful—grateful to have this portion of life that is yours and will soon be gone, like the object of your affections. That's how I felt, really, though I know it's not what you'd expect. You have this caricature of the grave-robbing pervert, a creepy nerd who is either too weird or too shy to do it with “real” girls. But that's not what it was like at all. It was very moving and emotional. There were tenderness and sympathy, if not love. I felt sorry for her, and I felt like just maybe she'd be grateful to me for providing her with a little warmth at a time when the rest of humanity had abandoned her.

More than anything, I felt a great need to talk about my experience. I wanted to dissect it and analyze and understand it. I wanted someone to ask me all the gory details so I could have the guilty pleasure of replaying them in my mind, hearing myself speak. But to whom could I talk? I didn't know anyone else who had ever done what I'd done—or at least

no one who had ever admitted it. I guess it's possible there are thousands of necrophiles suffering in silence, and maybe they would all be grateful to me for speaking out or starting a support group. But there was an obvious reason I didn't, and they didn't. You couldn't just talk about a thing like that.

Originally I was going to go into work the morning after, but I realized I couldn't. Or I didn't want to. How could I confine myself to that little cubicle for the whole day, how could I make small talk, go through with all the little routines of daily life, when I had just done something so extraordinary? I mean, if you'd just come back from climbing Mount Everest, you wouldn't go into work the next day, would you? No, you'd stay home, hold court, issue statements to the press, maybe receive a congratulatory phone call from a figure of eminence. Not that I seriously expected any figurehead to call and pat me on the back for having violated a you-know-what, but I did feel as though I had done something extraordinary, something other people might be interested to know about. I mean, how many people ever do what I did? A handful? If that?

So I called in sick, but it seemed ironic when I felt so full of life. Really I wanted to shout through the receiver, "Hey, Mr. Boss Man, I've found the fountain of youth! The elixir of life! I know how to feel younger, stronger, more powerful, more vital." But naturally I didn't say anything like that. I just faked a cough and a sniff and said I'd be in the next day. I sat there looking at the phone and wishing a reporter would call to debrief me on my extraordinary act. Of course I knew it wouldn't happen. No one was going to call. No one cared. No one *knew*. How could they? I was half tempted to pick up the phone and dial numbers at random, just to get the word out. "Hi, you don't know me but I'm calling to tell you about the most astonishing thing. I did it with a you-know-what last night. It was really great." But I knew it would be a stupid thing to do.

I decided to go out. It was a beautiful day, sunny but cold. I got on the subway and between stops a deaf man came through the train asking for money. He handed me a little card. On one side it said, "I'm trying to earn a living. Please help." On the other side there were illustrations showing how to say things in sign language: hello, how are you, I'm

fine. I looked at the card and wondered if there was an internationally recognized hand sign for what I'd done. Probably not. If you were a deaf mute who'd just had sex with a you-know-what and you wanted to talk about it, you'd have to act it out in pantomime. That would be hard. People would misinterpret it. They'd think the person you had sex with was just sleeping and not dead. You'd get frustrated and give up. Maybe you'd even give up before you tried, and then you'd be sad because you had this wild experience and you wanted to tell everyone about it.

I got off the subway at West Fourth Street and decided to go for a haircut. I walked around the corner to the barbershop with its red-and-blue striped pole. Sal, the old Italian guy who runs the shop, looked at me with surprise. "Hey, you no work today?" I took a seat to wait for him. There was a *Playboy* magazine on the rack so I picked it up and turned to the centerfold. Somehow I didn't find it appealing. I never did. It was too fake, too prefabricated. With Miss April in the centerfold, you didn't know where the girl ended and the airbrush began. But last night it was the opposite. There was no airbrush, no makeup or deception. You knew right where the girl ended.

Finally Sal motioned me over to the barber's chair. "So what you like?" he asked, and I told him to give me a trim. He started cutting, and I noticed a song playing in the background, someone singing "I know I'll never love this way again." That's for sure, I said to myself. It's not that I didn't want to do what I did again, because I did—I did want to do it again. But I knew that you don't often get the kind of opportunity I had, where you know you can get away with it.

I must have grinned, because Sal interrupted me. "Hey, you like the haircut? Or you got new girlfriend, maybe?"

I know I grinned this time. I could see my face in the mirror. It was a little red, a little shy, embarrassed but flattered too. I was anxious to talk about my new girlfriend. I would have liked to tell him how pretty she was, how still. It was different than being with a normal girl because of the pace. I mean, there was no mutual urgency, no dance of intimacy, no struggle to attain satisfaction while giving it too, no insecurity or performance anxiety, no sudden giggles in the middle of romantic moments. No, it had an entirely different pace—slow, quiet, almost methodical. It felt a little like pantomime, since there was no talking. I

was the Marcel Marceau of a sexual abomination.

"I plead the fifth," I said, knowing I couldn't possibly say anything.

He pointed his scissors at me. "What, you lawyer now?"

"No."

"I no like lawyers." A Sicilian immigrant, he had this funny way of putting an *a* after words that ended in *e*. "I no lika lawyers."

Sal began to tell me how, in his opinion, lawyers had ruined America. "People sue, sue, sue," he said, gesturing with the scissors, "because they no believe in God. You believe in God, you see the higher purpose. You get a hurt and, 'Ok, God's punishing me.' But you no believe in God, you no see the higher purpose. You get a hurt and you blame the other guy. 'Hey, you hurt me, I sue you motherfucker, ok?' You see what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

"You want gel?"

"No."

He combed my hair back and patted it with the palm of his hand. "Everything in life got the higher purpose." He inspected my part. "You live, you die, you get married, you make the babies—it's all the higher purpose."

"Then how do you explain when people do bad things, Sal? Where's the higher purpose in murder and torture and rape?"

"People," he said, tapping his palm with the comb, "they is like hair. Sometime they go stray. They need barber set them straight." Suddenly I could see him on Judgment Day, separating the good from the bad with his comb. "Anyway," he laughed, slapping me on the back. "You no worry. You all right. You a good fella."

I paid and left. I didn't believe in God, but as I walked I wondered about "the higher purpose." Was there fate? Destiny? Did everything unfold in accord with predetermined laws? And if so, where did I fit in? Where did it—necrophilia—fit in? Was I supposed to learn a moral lesson by consorting with a you-know-what? I couldn't imagine what. It was an extraordinary experience, and I did feel as though I had grown as a person by doing it, and yet what I learned didn't seem moral exactly. It's like asking what moral lesson a person would get from climbing Mount Everest. Certainly the experience would enrich you, expand your

horizons as an individual—but morally? When one explorer was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, he said: “Because it’s there.” Necrophilia is kind of the same. Why would anyone want to have sex with a corpse? Because it’s there. Because it’s different. Because you can. Because you’re curious. Because you don’t know until you try.

On University Place I stopped to buy a sandwich and a caffè latte, which I then carried up to Union Square. I sat on a park bench in the sun, unzipped my jacket, and took a few bites from the sandwich. It was mozzarella cheese with tomato and basil on a fresh roll. I chewed meditatively, flicking bits of roll to the pigeons who gathered on the grass beside me. The pigeons cooed as they plucked at the ground. It was a glorious day, I thought, and I was a new man. I had done something I’d never done before, something few people ever do. In my conception of it, it wasn’t depravity but rather discovery, exploration, knowledge. Maybe that’s why I wanted so badly to share it with someone. If it really were depravity, I would have been ashamed, I would not have wanted to talk about it, but it wasn’t that at all. It was something new, a Mount Everest of perversion, and I just wanted to let people know that I’d reached the top.

But I knew that I couldn’t. I couldn’t talk about it. I finished the roll and the pigeons wandered away. I felt a little sad. I sat there on the bench slurping steamed milk from the top of the coffee. A homeless man approached. “Hey bro,” he said, “can you spare a little change?”

I looked at him. He was carrying a rucksack on his back and gave the impression of strength, in spite of being thin and dirty.

“I’m a Vietnam vet.” He adjusted his shoulder straps and tried to advance his case. “I got a Purple Heart fighting the Red Menace, Victor Charlie, the Viet Cong. You know what I’m talking about?”

I nodded.

“I was kicked out of the VA when Ronald Reagan slashed the budget. I’ve lived on the street ever since. I don’t do drugs and I don’t steal, though sometimes I think I should. I served my country but my country did not serve me back. You think you can help me out with a few bucks?”

My sandwich and caffè latte had cost nine dollars and change. I paid with a twenty and put the loose change in the clerk’s tip cup. That meant I had a ten in my pocket. It was too much to give to a homeless

guy. “Sorry,” I said, “I don’t really have any change.”

“I put my life on the line for your freedom, pink ass.” He was suddenly angry and hostile. “You got no sympathy, man, no pity. You’re just like all those dumb fuckers that ask me, ‘How many gooks did you shoot? How many gooks did you shoot?’ Well, let me tell you something, numb nuts. I didn’t shoot anybody. I respected those gook motherfuckers, man. They were a proud, hard people. Slimeballs like you don’t deserve to wipe the ass of the lowliest peasant gook farmer. They took care of their own, man, and what do you do? You sit there on a goddamned park bench with a five-dollar cup of coffee and you can’t even spare me a fucking quarter? United we stand, lard ass, divided we fall—and you’re a fuckin’ divider...”

He went on hollering and gesticulating. People on nearby benches—a postal clerk eating a deli salad, some skater kids inspecting a CD cover, a college student reading a textbook—looked over at me with that urban sympathy that says: “We know your embarrassment. This could have happened to us too. Don’t worry about it. We don’t think you’re to blame. He’s just one of the many homeless freaks we city-dwellers have to endure. He’ll go away. Don’t worry. We’re there for you.” And in fact he did eventually wander away, yelling and blaming everyone but himself for his problems.

I got up and headed in the other direction, up Broadway. Maybe the vet was a guy like me, I thought. From Vietnam he came back full of his adventures, anxious to tell people everything he’d experienced—danger and boredom, disillusionment and death. And instead of sympathetic listeners anxious to hear his old war stories, what did he find? War protestors, hippies, yuppies, peaceniks, people who spat at his uniform. No one wanted to listen to him. They didn’t respect him, so why would they want to listen to him? He was a baby killer. He massacred innocent peace-loving peasants. Punish him, they thought. Condemn him to silence. Lock him up in the most solitary of confinements—the mind.

I could understand his frustration. I wanted to tell people about my unusual experience, I wanted to talk about the stillness of it all, the strange sense of tenderness I had, as though I weren’t exploiting someone but rather caring for her. I wanted to tell them that it was exciting and consuming at first, that I had no thought except for the novelty of my

getting off, but then afterward I felt very lonely, and I talked aloud to my you-know-what. “Here,” I said, “I’ll clean you up,” wiping her with some tissues and fixing her dress.

But what would people do if I told them all that? Spit at me—if not in reality then in spirit. They didn’t want to hear about it, no matter how sensitive an observer I was. They didn’t want the nuances, the details, the subtleties. They didn’t want to know, they wanted to condemn—and since I knew this, since I was well aware of it, I was doing their dirty work for them. I had locked myself into that most solitary of confinements. I was punishing myself by keeping quiet.

Alongside Madison Square Park, I looked at the people eating their lunches and walking their dogs and I wondered if one day keeping it all bottled up would drive me insane. Would I crack? Burst? Explode? A veteran of the war for new experience, I would be disillusioned by my homecoming to the land of erotic normality. Homeless and crazy, I would walk up to strangers in the park and harangue them with tales of sordid doings. They would signal each other with that mutually understood look of urban suspicion. “Here’s another nut case. Don’t look him in the eye, he might come over here and harass us. Just ignore him and he’ll go away.” And they were right. I would wander off in the direction of nowhere, shouting and baring my soul to the wind, which didn’t care.

A few blocks further on, I stopped to look up at the Empire State Building. It was about four in the afternoon. I thought perhaps I should go up to the top and watch the sunset. I had nothing better to do. I went in, bought a ticket, passed through security, and took the elevators to the topmost observation deck. I stepped out onto the platform and the cold wind ripped through me. I looked downtown to where the Twin Towers used to be. I remembered how the city had been plastered with flyers and posters in the weeks after the towers fell. “The graffiti of grief,” I’d heard someone call it, a collective sob and groan for the thousands of dead. Every exterior surface in the city had become a wailing wall.

If you were a victim, you were welcome to shout your grief to the skies. But if you weren’t? A tacit gag order was in effect. Evidently it wasn’t nice to brag about exploiting the helpless—and I could understand that, when you put it that way, but at the same time there was another side to it, another side to the story, my side. For I never felt

as though I'd exploited the helpless, the dead, but rather that I'd gone exploring, climbed a mountain, crossed a hitherto uncharted sea. It wasn't perversion but exploration, discovery—and though I might have been accused of being insensitive to the dead, or to the dead's loved ones and heirs, at the same time I felt that as an explorer I had been extremely sensitive. I watched myself, listened down into my heart for reactions, noted and analyzed them when they occurred. Wasn't that something? Didn't people want to hear what I'd felt when climbing the mountain?

On the observation deck around me a group of tourists was jabbering in Japanese. A middle-aged lady approached, camera in hand, and with gestures asked me to take a picture of her and her friends. "Sure," I said, "no problem." They lined up in front of me, and in English I said, "Last night I had sex with a dead body. Smile!" They grinned, laughed, half-bowed in gratitude as I handed back the camera. I turned to the city again, leaned over the railing on the observation deck and looked at the people far down on the street below me. They were leaving work, rushing home, cell phones to their ears. They looked very small and very distant. And I knew that when I took the elevator back down to the street, the people were going to remain small and distant. I had climbed to the top of a tower of perversion, and unless they followed me up—which undoubtedly they wouldn't—there was no way for me to come down.

Suicide by Strumpet

I counted out a series of twenties and set them on the night table. There was an unspoken protocol that you didn't hand her the money directly, because handing her the money made it a real transaction. The court could say "money changed hands." Instead you just set it down somewhere and then you both could claim you happened to misplace it or forget it or whatever.

I began to unbutton my shirt. She picked up the money from the nightstand and counted it. She was wearing a black chemise. She was a little fat but she seemed nice. "What's your name?"

"Juanita."

She put the money into a pink plastic purse, smeared some red lipstick across her face, and snapped the purse shut. She reached into my open shirt and rubbed her hands across my chest. "What you like, chico?"

"What you offer?"

She pulled the shirt off my shoulders and, as it came off, she noticed the marks on my arm. She traced them with her fingertips, feeling the three raised lines running six inches along the length of my forearm.

"Razors," I explained.

"Razors?"

"I cut myself with razors."

She stepped back. She shook her head dramatically. "I no do that stuff, chico."

"It's not S&M."

"Maybe I tie you up but I no hurt you."

"It's not for fun," I said. "I was trying to slit my wrists."

"Por los clavos de Cristo!"

"But then it occurred to me that I might as well have some fun first."

I thought I'd spend a whole night with—well, with you, maybe, and then finish the job tomorrow.”

“No, no, no, chico. You no want to do that.”

I was standing there in my socks with my shirt off. It was a little chilly. I had fantasized a lot about killing myself, and in none of my fantasies did I die in socks. It was too domestic. I didn't want to die while brushing my teeth or sitting on the toilet. Death was a formal occasion, like a wedding. I wanted to be ready for it, dressed, prepared—which is a way of saying that I was very conscious of the image my death would make. I did not want my death to look pathetic, as though the Grim Reaper had snuck up on me in my socks.

“Why you want to kill yourself, chico? Why?”

“It's a long story.” I sat down on the bed.

“You want me kiss you? Then you feel better, chico?”

I tried to make out if there were any sores on her lips. I certainly won't feel better, I thought, if I get herpes.

She put her arm around me. “You need somebody talk to, chico? You see doctor, maybe?”

“I don't really want to talk about it.”

“You should talk, chico.”

“I don't want to.”

“I call someone for you.”

“No, really, that's all right. I'm fine. Thanks.”

“I call.” She got up and reached for the phone. I could see her dial a number advertised on the subway for people in need of help. Somebody answered and she spoke in Spanish. She was talking about me, explaining that her amigo needed to speak to a doctor. She held the phone out to me. “You talk.”

“No,” I said. “I don't want to talk.”

“Yes, you talk.”

“I don't feel like it.”

“Que huevos! Talk!”

“I don't want to. You can't make me.”

She grabbed my shirt and shoes and threw them into the bathroom. She locked the door and leaned her back against it. “You talk,” she said, “or I no give back your clothes.”

“Come on, now,” I said, laughing not because it was funny but because I was embarrassed. “Be reasonable.”

She shook her head and assailed me in florid Spanish. In the background I could hear a faraway voice on the telephone saying, “Hello? Hello? Are you still there? Is everything all right? Do you need the police?” I felt awkward, and I was also vaguely afraid of the police coming. Would I get arrested? What would they charge me with—patronizing a hooker? Planning suicide? Both?

I took the receiver. “Hello?”

“Is everything all right?” asked the faraway voice.

“Yes, fine,” I said. “There’s just been a little misunderstanding.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, I’m all right. Everything’s fine. I’m sorry we troubled you.”

“You tell truth, chico!” Juanita shook her head. “Or I no give back your clothes!”

“Well,” I said into the phone. “I told my, uh, girlfriend here that I wanted to die. She got kind of freaked out and called you but I was just kidding.”

“Were you really kidding?” asked the faraway voice.

“Yeah, sure. I don’t want to die.”

“You no want to die?” asked Juanita.

“No, it was just a fantasy.”

“A fantasy!”

“You want me to stay on the line?” asked the faraway voice.

“Yeah, a fantasy,” I said. “Like a sexual fantasy.”

“I no see what’s sexy about that,” said Juanita. “That’s sick. Hijo de puta!”

I hung up the telephone. She opened the bathroom, took out my clothes, and threw them at me. “You leave,” she said. “I no do that stuff. Chinga tu puta madre! What kind girl you think I am? I no want your money. Phew! You take it back.”

She tossed the twenties onto the bed. I tied my shoes and picked up the bills. Fine, I thought. I’ll just take my twenties to the next girl.

“What’s your name?”

“Mila.”

“You speak great English.”

“I’m very smart.” She laughed. “I do this until I go to American university.”

“What do you want to study?”

“Economics. Business. I want to make money, no?”

“Well,” I said, “speaking of money, let me ask you a question. How much would you charge me to stay here all night?” I had an image of myself spending a whole night in a brothel before killing myself. It seemed like an appropriate thing to do, a wild fling, an excess of life in the last minutes before death.

“All night?”

“Yeah, all night.” As I was saying it, though, I thought to myself: what would we do all night? After all, she’d probably been having sex for three or four hours already. She wouldn’t want to do that all night. Would she try to discourage me, put me off, ruin my last hurrah?

“How long is all night?”

Would we have anything to talk about? Would she be a good companion for my last hours? Was she pretty enough, or interesting enough? “I thought I’d stay until morning,” I said.

“When in morning?”

I didn’t want to wake up too early. On the other hand, I wasn’t sure I could sleep anyway. “I don’t know. Let’s say, ten o’clock?”

“You want to stay here until ten o’clock tomorrow morning?”

“That’s right. How much?”

“Why you want to stay so long?”

“Because I’m sad.”

“Why you sad?”

“Long story.”

“Don’t be sad. Sad no good.”

“You can’t just turn it off. It’s not like I can say, ‘Ok, you’re right. Sad is no good,’ and then feel happy.”

“In Russia, my boyfriend made me baby. A little girl. At four months it had brain fever and died. I cried for week, then I said, ‘Ok, Mila, enough sad.’ And I moved to America. In America you can do anything. Don’t be sad.”

She put her hands on my shoulders. “Now is time for pleasure, not

for sad.” She unbuttoned my shirt and pulled it off. She saw the red tracks on my forearm.

“Razors,” I said.

“You cut yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Why you cut yourself? You want to die?”

“Yes.”

“You have wallet?”

“Wallet?”

“Yes, give me wallet.”

“Why should I give you my wallet?”

“I take your money. I buy Mila nice present. Maybe pearls.”

“Why should I let you take my money?”

“You won’t need it.”

“I might.”

“Then you don’t really want to die.”

I did—I did want to die. But I didn’t like being subject to a *reductio ad absurdum* by a hooker. I didn’t like being bullied for my money. “Maybe I better go,” I said.

“In hurry to die?” She laughed. “Leave little something for Mila in your will, ok? What they say? ‘You can’t take it with you.’”

On the street it was dark and a little cold. A garbage truck was blocking the sidewalk and a sick smell of rot wafted from its rear. I held my breath and walked away as fast as I could. It struck me as ironic that I wanted to die and yet some deep life instinct in me remained capable of repulsion. Just because you want to die doesn’t mean you’re willing to sniff garbage, fondle excrement, or lick the skin of a leper. And yet, if you remain capable of disgust, doesn’t that mean that you want to repudiate anything distasteful and dangerous—that you want, in short, to live?

I paused at the corner. I wasn’t quite sure what to do. Evidently my plan to go out with a bang wasn’t working too well. What did I want? What did I expect? Did I just want to have one last fling before dying? Or did I expect something more from these poor girls—solace, salvation, existential deliverance? Maybe, I thought, I should just go have a last meal instead of a last hurrah. But I wasn’t hungry. I didn’t think I could

eat. I wandered into a Korean deli and bought a bottle of lemonade. I walked down the street drinking it through a straw. The taste was sharp and clear in my mouth, and I wished my thoughts were as sharp and clear.

I touched my arm. I could feel the raised trails of dried blood beneath my shirt. Part of me was deeply ashamed of them. In the morning I had taken great pains to hide them from my wife. When finally she noticed them, I blamed them on my daughter, implying that she'd scratched me with her fingernails when I was tossing her in the air and catching her. This was a credible lie—but also a shameless one. Because at the same time, these three red lines on my arm were a tremendous source of pride, fascination, and inner strength. I found myself fingering them from time to time, feeling the pain in my arm, and drawing sustenance precisely from this pain. I loved my wounds, not because they hurt but because they were like a gun in my pocket. They gave me a power that no one knew I had.

Maybe, I thought, I should just exercise that power now. Maybe I should give up on this idea of a last hurrah. Why bother? If I was going to die, then did it really matter how I spent my final hour? Cavorting in the arms of a prostitute or walking down Fifth Avenue drinking a lemonade—what did it matter? I could see myself taking the elevators up to the top of the Empire State Building, slipping through the fence on the observation deck, taking the big plunge. Afterwards, the police would interrogate a Japanese tourist who saw me leap. “Did he say anything before climbing over the edge?” the police would ask. “Yes,” the Japanese would say. “He said, ‘I’m going to paint the town red.’”

I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes before twelve. The observation deck at the Empire State Building would be closing. At midnight the lights marking the building’s place on the skyline would switch off and leave a dark hole in the sky. Later—tonight or maybe tomorrow—I would float up through that hole into nothingness. But for now, I had nothing to do, nothing except to indulge in pleasure or in fantasies of death or maybe both.

On the corner there was a green box offering copies of a free weekly newspaper. I took one, opened to the back, and called the numbers advertising sensual massage and table showers. I made an appointment

and turned back toward uptown. The advertisement said my date would be twenty-two and submissive—the geisha thing.

One girl had tried to stop me. Another had tried to take my money. What would the next one do? Would she throw me out? Would she offer to assist me? Maybe that was it—the last resort. If the geisha didn't work out, I could go to a dominatrix and pay her to kill me. Erotic asphyxiation. Death by misadventure. Suicide by strumpet.

“What's your name?”

She said something unclear. Then she made an up-and-down gesture with her hand, and I understood. Yoyo.

She took me by the hand and showed me into a small cubicle with white plasterboard walls. On the nightstand was a lamp that had a red scarf thrown over it, filling the room with crimson shadows. And there was a cheap-looking bed, the sort you expected to poke you in the back with a spring.

She helped me remove my clothes. Either she failed to notice or chose to ignore the cuts on my arm. She folded my shirt over a chair, undid my belt, hung up my trousers, and then indicated I should sit on the edge of the bed. Last of all she took off my socks, and somehow it embarrassed me to have her touch my feet. I was about to vault into an incredible physical intimacy with this pretty stranger, and I would have gladly suffered her tongue to dawdle between my legs, but it shamed me to have her touch my feet. I wanted her to wash her hands.

Once I was undressed she slipped quickly and easily out of a silver bikini and lay down beside me on the bed. “What you like?”

“What you offer?”

“You very handsome.”

“I'm very sad.”

“You big strong man fuck me hard.”

“I want to kill myself.”

“You give good tip, ok?”

Evidently her English was confined to stock phrases that her Chinese pimp must have taught her with a pornographic film. For the next hour she would probably say little more than “Oh yeah baby, harder, you sexy, fuck me good time, you give good tip.”

She immediately started to blow me. It was too much too soon. It was like getting run over by a bus en route to killing myself. I felt like I'd had some power of decision taken away from me. I wanted foreplay—and this too, I realized, this night with a hooker, was a sort of foreplay for death.

“No, no,” I said, gesturing and trying to make her understand that I didn't want her to rush.

But she misunderstood. Without taking her mouth off my penis, she merely turned around so that her ass was now in my face. This is not foreplay, I thought. This is skipping straight to the end.

I despaired of making her understand, so I started to kiss her thighs, her ass, her vagina. I chewed on her lips, thrust my tongue inside her, and in return she pushed herself against my face. Her movements expressed pleasure—probably, I thought, she was enjoying herself more than I was. Her moans began to seem less melodramatic and therefore more real. Meanwhile, my mind wandered. I licked her but I wondered what I could catch from licking. Could I get crabs from cunnilingus? Could I get genital warts around my mouth? Could I contract gonorrhea, syphilis, or AIDS?

I tried to remind myself that, if I was going to kill myself, it didn't matter whether I caught an incurable superstrain of the most lethal disease. I'd be dead before it ever took hold. But at the same time, though this was the rational thing to tell myself, I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was doing something stupid and unsafe. I was having a sort of unprotected intercourse with a hooker. There had been hundreds of men already sucking and fucking that vagina in my face. I'd be repelled to climb into a bed that hundreds of men had just slept in. The very warmth of the sheets would threaten to pollute me with—well, with what? the bad vibes? Hostile radiation? Tainted being?—of all the men who'd been there before me. Why shouldn't the same be true of her vagina? I was licking the residue of half the cocks in New York.

I stopped abruptly and tried to sit up. She made a sound of annoyance, the sort of groan you'd make if somebody woke you from a deep sleep. She thrust her ass back into my face, but I pushed her away from me. I got up from the bed and grabbed my shirt from the chair.

“You no fucky?” she said.

“No, no fucky.”

“You still pay!”

I threw my twenties onto the nightstand and quickly pulled my clothes on. She watched me dress. I could see in her eyes that, so long as she had her money, she wasn't going to worry about my sudden departure. She'd seen weirder things.

Our Wound

I lay there feeling horribly vulnerable, exposed to the universe, as though I had to protect my guts against rain or bird droppings. If I weren't careful, squirrels might build nests in my chest cavity or rats might chew up my heart. I was afraid to sleep because it would leave my innards unguarded. I imagined waking up to find them stolen by illicit transplant syndicates, international traffickers of pilfered lungs and misappropriated kidneys. In Palm Beach some wealthy invalid would overlook the undocumented origin of the organs that would save his life, and meanwhile I'd slowly expire, stripped of my vitals...

Not that I wasn't going to die anyway, but it seemed worse to see it happen piecemeal, one organ at a time.

Eddie came in. She was carrying a pear in her hand. She kissed me and her lips were sticky. She took a lusty bite from the fruit. "How's my little patient?"

"Pull up my shirt," I said to her.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

She set the pear on the tray by my bed and reached for the sheet. I could smell the sweetness on her fingers as she gingerly pulled down the cover then lifted my gown.

"Well," I said, "what do you think? Do you like my wound?"

I watched her face. Far from crumpling up in revulsion, it surveyed me with a benign, even indulgent expression, much the same as the mother of a newborn regards a dirty diaper. Pure love had overcome innate disgust.

"What do you mean—*your* wound?"

"What do I mean?"

"Yes," she said. "Don't be silly. That's *our* wound."

"Our wound?"

“We always share everything, darling. Why stop now?”

She was smiling strangely. There was something a little crazy about it. She resembled a fanatic at a televangelist’s revival meeting. She was the cripple throwing away her crutches and stumbling down the aisle to embrace the crucifix.

“I love everything about you,” she continued. “I love your eyebrows, your fingertips, your toes. And I love your wound too.”

“Great,” I said. “A necrophile loves death. I wonder what they call somebody who loves a wound?”

“They call that a wife.”

She pulled the crisp white sheet back up to my chest. She gently tucked it around me and kissed me on the forehead. She picked up the pear and took another bite.

“That’s easy for you to say,” I said. “You don’t hurt like I hurt.”

“Your half of the wound is just in your body. Mine is *here*...” She put her hand over her chest, like someone about to make a pledge. “There is no painkiller for what I feel. No IV can soothe the ache in my heart.”

“Cut it out,” I said. “It’s my wound and it’s going to be my death too.”

“If you die,” she said, “so will I.”

“That’s just a metaphor.”

“No, that’s just love.”

I turned to face the wall by the bed. The wall, I thought, is death. This is just a pause, a freeze frame, as I am being hurtled into it. To die is to smash into an infinite white plane.

“Do you want a bite?”

Eddie offered me the fruit. I could see the marks of her teeth in its flesh. It looked injured, like me.

“No,” I said. “I don’t like pears.”

I could see the mascara blurring at the edges of her eyes. She was going to cry. Suddenly I felt guilty—guilty at leaving her, guilty at abandoning her, guilty for making her go through this. Was it cruel to die slowly? Sadistic to linger? Would it be altruistic or even noble to kill myself after she’d left for the evening?

“You want to know something funny?”

She wiped her nose and nodded.

“Ever since I regained consciousness,” I said, “I’ve been tormented by the thought that anything I say might be my last words. Suppose I died a minute ago. If somebody had come along and asked you, ‘What were his last words?’, you’d have had to tell them: ‘I don’t like pears.’ Those would have been my last words.”

I laughed. The words were so trivial that they seemed incongruous alongside death—alongside Death. It was like dying while you were brushing your teeth or taking a crap. There was nothing great about it, nothing grand—and that, I realized, was what I resented about my wound. It was taking me away in a stupid and banal way.

“Every night when the night nurse comes in,” I said, “I rack my brain trying to think of something profound to say to her. I quote Dostoevski or Nietzsche or whatever else I can think of. That way if I die in my sleep and somebody asks her in the morning what my last words were, I’ll have said something good.”

“That’s so vain!” Edie got up from the chair and walked to the window. “Why can’t you just say *I love you*? Why can’t you just tell the nurse how much you love your little Edie? Isn’t that profound enough?”

I turned back to the wall. I hadn’t even thought of it.

“I don’t know what last words you’re going to say,” she said. “But the last words you’re going to hear are *I love you*. Do you understand that? I love you.”

It sounded like a threat.

“I love you,” I repeated.

“Yes,” she said. “I love you. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Of course not.”

“Let me hear you say it.”

“I love you.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

“*I love you*.”

“Good.” She opened the window a few inches. “Anyway, please let’s not talk about dying anymore. I think we’re getting better.”

You lie there with the ground pressing down on you, suffocating you, seeping into your very pores. A worm or a mole comes by and you're grateful for the company until you realize that it has only come to eat you. You feel it nibbling your finger or gnawing a little hole in your side or boring through the bone of your skull. Even though your awareness is dim, weak, diminished, you've got nothing else to focus on, so you obsess over it. You imagine you feel the lips of the mole against your temple, the ridges of the earthworm sliding through your ear. You see your own brain become a slithering mass of maggots and grubs. Memories, things you cherish, the last thoughts that give you warmth or happiness—these you envision sliding down the throats of the creepiest vermin. Your love for your family becomes worm meal. Your knowledge of classical music perishes in peristalsis. You return to the earth through the intermediary of beasts. It's not pleasant. "Dust to dust" is a lie. The truth is a movement from flesh to food to feces—and only then to dust.

You lie there thinking about this because there is nothing else to do. The sanest individual becomes a neurotic corpse. You worry about your physical integrity. You question your mental powers. You try to reassure yourself. You exercise your mind playing chess or solving rudimentary equations. You would pat your limbs to make sure everything is in place, but rigor mortis holds you in its vice. And the earth is so heavy, bearing down on you with the weight of a thousand mountains of lead. You envy men buried at sea, for when the tide tosses their bodies in the water, and when the waves swing their bodies in the sea, the movement must give them the illusion of a little more life.

In the grave you pray for earthquakes, upheavals, something to break the wall of dirt between you and the next stiff. Let skyscrapers fall, bridges collapse, houses implode—apocalypse, holocaust, nuclear winter, mutually assured destruction—you'd sacrifice a billion lives just to reach

out to the corpse next door. It could be your bitterest enemy, the friend who fucked your wife, the colleague who stole your promotion, the psychopath who stabbed you in the eyeball with shearing scissors, and yet you'd embrace him, embrace him like a brother, love him, weep tears of joy. It's not that death erases all the old hates but that, in comparison to being encapsulated, imprisoned, entombed—shut up in a narrow grave, a narrower coffin, the narrowest body—in comparison to being confined in your own mind, what are those old enmities? Who can stand himself for eternity? Or rather, who can stand to watch his own disintegration—alone, all alone—for all time? Imagine if a rotting orange had a sense of self-awareness.

Eventually you feel vulnerable and exposed as your flesh falls off and your bones press naked against the dirt. You lose the desire for earthquakes because you're afraid the upheaval would jar your skeleton. You fear if the earth trembled you'd find yourself lying in the bottom of your grave, arm bones and leg bones all jumbled up, a femur penetrating the eye socket of your skull. And what good would it do to reach out to the stiff next door now? You imagine two skeletons embracing: their ribcages lock, the bones catch, and when they try to separate their skeletons fall apart like a house of cards... One of the things you miss about flesh, you begin to realize, is that it holds you together. Without flesh, your arms fall off. Your legs knock about like drumsticks.

Finally vermin don't even turn to you for nourishment anymore. If something gnaws on you, it's to sharpen its teeth on a bone. You wouldn't have thought it possible, but you miss being chewed on. You start to reminisce about worms. In retrospect, you think that feeding the worms at least gave you a kind of purpose. It was a positive contribution you could make to nature. Now what can you do? You have nothing to offer but that sculpture of calcium you used to call me. And nobody wants it.

You accept the inevitable and give up on the physical world. Your thoughts turn to telepathy. You imagine reaching out, mentally, to the friends and family you left behind. You concentrate and try to send them messages. You imagine them walking through your bedroom and feeling an abnormal chill. You imagine the flight of your thought knocking a vase off a shelf. Your survivor hears it—what's that sound? Is there a

frustrated ghost trying to communicate something? No! Don't be silly! There's no such thing as ghosts. It's just gravity pulling that vase to the floor... You imagine your loved ones stepping through these rationalizations, and you know that they are right. There is no such thing as ghosts. Besides, if you really love the family you left behind, you shouldn't be scaring them.

You resign yourself to lying there, watching and listening to yourself deteriorate, but it's the loneliest thing in the world. You don't want to die alone, especially if you've already done it once. Why can't someone just come visit your grave, water the grass with a few tears? When is Memorial Day? Why don't they visit? Can't they bring some fresh flowers? Perennials would be nice. Perennials would give you something to look forward to. But the sad truth is that time heals all wounds, and the pang of grief lessens as the months and years go by, so that your loneliness only becomes lonelier, lonelier than you thought it possible to be. Weeds sprout on your grave, the grass goes uncut, the rain chips away at your tombstone, and then vandals come and knock it over. Drunk, laughing, they urinate in your face and make you wish you'd been buried the other way, face-down, so that mentally you could tell them all to kiss your cadaverous ass.

It's a sad thing to be a cadaver, lonely and forlorn, abandoned by all—until you realize that there is one person who won't abandon you, even in extremis. It's not Jesus come to save you from your final solitude, it's not Christ come to console you for the cold. But it is love that will resurrect you, and you imagine the warm arms lifting you out of your grave, you imagine the red lips pressing themselves to your green remains, you imagine the burning ardor that inspires your rescuer to risk life and limb to unearth you. It makes you feel immense gratitude, enormous gratefulness, so much so that you tolerate—even welcome—the embraces that in life might have repulsed you. After all, don't you owe him his peculiar peccadilloes, his disturbing doings? For if to the living he is a pariah, to the dead he is the final hope, the messiah of the morbid, the savior of the six-feet-under. With his erection he achieves the resurrections the Good Book only promises.

Brother, have you heard the news? The Creep Gospel does not preach the immortality of the soul, but it does deny the finality of death.

For death need not be an end, when to the lugubrious it is where the beautiful just begins.

Visions of Supernatural Depravity

I went around to the back door. As the sun set, I struggled to pick the lock. But was it the lock that was jammed? Or my hand that was reticent—even afraid? I looked back at the sun—a disgorged heart about to splatter on the horizon. I wanted to be inside before dark. I took a deep breath and—with the butt of my flashlight—broke a pane of glass in the door. A smell of old carpets rushed out. I reached through with my hand and let myself in. Hello, haunted house.

In the living room I hid myself in a nook formed by the conjunction of two moldy sofas and an overturned end table. Crouched on the floor, I took a few bites from a chocolate bar—for energy. And I began my vigil... What would I see? What would I hear? I imagined the clanking of chains in the night—dead souls rattling their fetters? Or masochistic ghosts writhing in pleasure while handcuffed to invisible headboards? And moans and groans—expressions of eternal torment or of momentary pleasure? What, I wondered, would it be like... I mean, supposing that there really are ghosts, what would it be like to have sex with one? Could you? Would you?

Obviously it was a question of mind versus matter. If ghosts are immaterial entities, it would be hard—though, to the imaginative, not entirely impossible—to... Fuck them. But suppose, I said to myself, suppose they really are material. What then? Could you have sex with them? For example, what if ghosts really do waft through the air in white sheets? Certainly you could rub yourself on a ghost's sheet and leave a little stain as evidence of your pleasure.

And yet, what an idea! Because it automatically implies, to the logical mind, an entire sociology. What I mean is—it would be possible to determine promiscuous from chaste ghosts by the amount of staining on their sheets. Nymphomaniac ghosts would sport sheets covered in cum

stains, while a clean white sheet—like a bridal gown—would be the hallmark of a supernatural virgin. Or perhaps smart ghosts would abandon white sheets for darker colors that don't stain as easily. Romantic ghosts would use satin sheets, ghosts into S&M would use rubber sheets, fashionable ghosts might use spandex or nylon, and nudist ghosts wouldn't use any sheets at all...

But wait! Suppose, I said to myself, that this business of white sheets is just a—just a myth. Suppose, as spiritualists sometimes claim, that ghosts are ectoplasmic entities. What then? Certainly, if ectoplasm is... If it's slippery enough, you could rub yourself on a ghost—or even rub yourself *with* a ghost, thereby treating it as a supernatural form of “personal lubricant.” This may or may not be enjoyable to the ghost, but... But—are ghosts capable of pleasure? It is possible, I thought, that ectoplasm is not a substance of which ghostly “bodies” are composed. Rather, the ectoplasmic emissions that sometimes occur around séance tables might be male ghosts ejaculating onto Ouija boards or crystal balls. It's not ectoplasm, it's sperm—from the afterworld.

And yet this raises even further possibilities... For if ghosts have a sexuality, must they not also have their little proclivities? Their supernatural perversions? An entire *psychopathia sexualis* of the spirit world? The reasonable thing to presume is that ghosts take all their human perversions with them into the next world—gay people become gay ghosts, masochists become masochistic ghosts, and so on. Some of these perversions may even get better when you die—voyeurism, for example. Think about it. If your thing is to—is to watch others do it, what better vantage point than that of a ghost? You could haunt bedrooms, shower stalls, massage parlors, the home of your favorite star or starlet... See Nicole Kidman naked!

On the other hand, some perversions probably get worse when you die—I mean more difficult to satisfy. Imagine the plight of sheet-type ghosts with exhibitionistic tendencies. They try to expose their phantom genitals, but when they throw off their sheets you see nothing but thin air. This must no doubt be why they sometimes take to rapping on tables and knocking china off the shelves: they're just frustrated flashers striving for attention.

Or consider the strange dilemma of necrophiles who die and

become ghosts. How do they satisfy themselves? Are the ghosts who haunt graveyards just horny shades looking for hot cadaver action? Or is it entirely redundant to be a necrophilious ghost since ghosts are already, by definition, dead? Could a ghost satisfy necrotic urges simply by masturbating with its own dead self? Or—another possibility—is necrophilia the one perversion that changes when you die, so that necrophilious people become biophilious ghosts? It would certainly make sense if, in the land of the dead, a fetish for living people is as perverse as a fetish for dead people in the land of the living.

As I sat there in my hiding spot, legs getting stiff and eyelids heavy, I thought of all these things—perverted poltergeists and pornographic apparitions. I imagined phantoms fucking and succubi sucking. Occult orgies. Supernatural scenes of debauchery. Anal sex on the astral plane! Spooks in cock rings and women specters pleasuring themselves with dildos made of human bones. I thought of different types of supernatural beings—ghosts, zombies, and even angels. Each, I imagined, must have its own distinct type of sexuality. A zombie would be very meaty and bestial. An angel would be beautiful and ethereal. A ghost would be somewhere in-between. They were all just different types of dead people.

How could I—how could I not seek to determine if any of this was real? And yet—suppose there really were ghosts in the house. How does a person go about making a sexual advance on a spirit? Should I expose myself? Should I say something? But what do you say—“Hey, ghost, want to fuck?” Or should I just leap out from my hiding place and grab the ghost? But wait—isn’t that rape? Molestation? Did it matter? You probably couldn’t get in trouble for raping a ghost—who was it going to tell? God?

I fell asleep, and—and the Grim Reaper came. He was naked. He dismounted from his horse and I could see that his ass was red from rubbing on the saddle. He had a short, blunt penis, like a mallet. It was flaccid and hung limply in his black pubes.

He took a clipboard out of his saddlebag and flipped through the papers on it. He called off a name. “Is that you?”

“Yes.” I was lying in bed. I pulled the covers up to my neck.

The Grim Reaper made a checkmark on the clipboard and approached the bed. “Let’s get to work then.” He sounded bored.

“Get to work?”

“Man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” He slapped at his penis, trying to draw blood into it.

“But I’m a guy!”

“Man, woman, or child—I don’t discriminate. Now roll over.”

“No,” I protested. “I will not roll over.”

The Grim Reaper sighed. “Now don’t make things harder for yourself.” He looked at his watch. “I really don’t have time for this.” He pulled a tremendous gleaming scythe from a scabbard affixed to the saddle. He pulled a black hair from his pubes and sliced it in two on the blade of the scythe. “Normally I don’t like to do this till later. It’s not very pleasant for me, you know, with a decapitated body...”

“Ok! Ok! Wait a minute! Ok!”

“Ok what?”

“Ok, you can do it.”

The Grim Reaper swung the scythe and buried its point in the headboard. It hung there over the bed, casting its black shadow over our bodies. “Let’s get to work then.”

He spit into his hand and rubbed his penis. He pinched his nipples with his other hand and tried to work up an erection. “All right, roll over.”

He climbed on top of me and I could feel his hairy chest against my back. I could smell his breath, cold and sterile as a meat locker, and I could feel his teeth against my neck. He huffed and puffed and I wondered if I was going to die. If so, shouldn’t my life flash before my eyes? Wasn’t I supposed to see the highlights of my time on earth? Instead I could see nothing, just the pillow pressed up against my face, and the shadow of the scythe across the sheets.

After he finished the Grim Reaper flopped down beside me on the bed. He seemed to be catching his breath. “This is no more fun for me than it is for you,” he said. “It’s like being a porn star. Sure, you get to meet a lot of people, but then they all die. Where are you then? There’s no companionship, no commitment. It’s very lonely. I fantasize a lot about a long-term relationship, having a family. I’d like a son to carry on my name, a Grim Junior...”

I interrupt. “How come I’m not dead?”

“Sorry?”

“How come I’m not dead? I thought I’d be dead when you finished.”

“Oh that.” The Grim Reaper gathered himself up. He seemed embarrassed to have confided in me. He resumed a bored, bureaucratic tone. “It doesn’t happen all at once unless I use the scythe.”

He stretched and got up from the bed. I could see a little fluid, black semen, drying in his leg hair. He swung himself back up on his horse. “This way is like being pregnant. There’s a kind of gestation period.”

“How long do I have to live?”

“Can’t say. It’s against the rules.” He was already looking at his clipboard, calculating his next appointment. Giving a tug on the reins, he turned and galloped off, leaving me alone with my mortality—or with my new awareness of it.

“Whuh?!?” I woke up. The sound of my voice died against the old furniture—collapsed on the moldy sofas like an asthmatic struggling for breath. The living room was dark... Quiet. My clothes were sweaty and there was a—a pain in my leg. A cramp. Massaging it, I thought about the dream—what it meant. Its message was plain. Supernatural depravity did not consist of a man’s lust for ghosts or zombies or angels. It was not a matter of fantasizing about phantom fuck-dolls—slutty specters in spook orgies—group gropes with ghosts. To the contrary—supernatural depravity was the lust that the beyond experienced for us. For me. For you. For man. What would it be like to—you know—to have sex with the Grim Reaper? Sooner or later you’ll find out. Guaranteed. For man is the Grim Reaper’s easy lay—death’s piece of meat—mortality’s bitch—a skeleton offering its bony ass to eternity.

Confessions of a Skull Mask

We were at a party, you and I, in celebration of a long-forgotten cause for joy. There was raucous drinking. The party pushed on into the darkest hours of the night. Somebody brought out a video camera to tape the merrymaking. Your boyfriend was seated at a table with some other men, drinking. And you were there beside him, with your hand on his thigh. The camera came and exhorted you all to be witty for posterity. Jokes were made. Funny faces and obscene gestures were directed at the camera. I happened to be lying on the table. Your boyfriend picked me up, slipped his face into mine, put the cheap rubber band around the back of his head. He and I mugged for the camera together. For a moment, he was death personified as a drunk man. Or was I an inebriated reaper of souls?

You, my darling, leaned over and—performing for the camera—pushed your tongue through my plastic mouth and into his. You were tongue-kissing the personification of death. I could feel your breath, share your alcoholic saliva. Your friends all cheered. The kiss ended—but then, sweetness, you couldn't pull your tongue back out through my face. My plastic lips had caught it tight, like a Chinese finger trap. You winced, pulled, made a sort of open-mouthed, gargling cry. The men at the table laughed and jeered. Finally you managed to extract your little muscle of love, but not without cutting it on the sharp edge of my lips. Afterward the videotape clearly showed sweet blood on your tongue.

If you'd been sober, you might have found it symbolic. You can kiss somebody else's spouse and get away with it. You can kiss a member of the same sex with near impunity. You can give an incestuous kiss on the sly. You can tongue-kiss a dog or exchange raptures with lab rats. But you can't kiss death without death kissing you back. Death is a passionate kisser. I bite your lips, chew your tongue, leave a little taste of

blood in your mouth as a portent of things to come. If I were to kiss you between the legs, you'd see a little blood there too and think that your period had come early. But it wouldn't be your menses, lover. It would be your ruination, a death's head with your clitoris in its mouth.

Death is mad about you. Death loves you. Do you love me too? I'm not needy, but I enjoy intimacy—especially with you, darling. Go ahead. Slip your face into mine. I like to feel your warm lips in my inert visage. I like to feel your eyelashes tickling my empty old sockets. One day I'll slip my face into yours too, and then we'll experience another sort of intimacy. I'll be inside you, like a lover. I'll kiss you from the inside, and it will feel like catching a chill. You'll get goose bumps up your thighs and shivers down your spine. I'll whisk you to my wormy bed and we'll lie there nestled in each other's arms, or at least so long as you have arms. And even then, when you are hideous dust, I will remain true. I am death and when I love you, it's forever.

And why shouldn't you love me back? I know that sometimes you fantasize about me. You lie in bed at night wondering how and when I will come, and what I'll look like when I do. Am I a knight in shining armor? A fiery dog of hell? Do I look like a vampire? A skeleton? A ghost? You imagine me taking you into my arms, embracing you, comforting you. "There, there," I say, kissing your tears away. "I'll make those awful things go away. Life won't be a burden to you anymore. I promise."

I pull back the curtain to reveal a wonderful new world—a party, a riot, a ball. It's the costume affair, Mardi Gras, the Halloween festival, the Day of the Dead, and it's enormous fun to prance around on the arm of inevitable doom. Life is short! Seize the day! Go ahead, darling. Slip me on. Pretend you're me. See the world through my sockets. Laugh. Live. Love—while you can. Eat, drink, and be merry. What do you think I do? I'm death, and I laugh and make merry too. I dance with skeletons and make goblets out of skulls—to drink from the cranium, you should know, is very fine. When your brains are gone, what nobler substitute could there be than wine?

Death-drunk—mortality-mad—overdose on the necrotic narcotic—tongue the skull—laugh in the mask—tempt fate—dance—flirt with the fatal—giggle at the grotesque—get down with the death's heads—kiss the dirt from the cadaver's lips—laugh—drink—dance—

dissevered heads know how to party—skeletons rock—bones get it on—
when you're a skull and your brain is gone, you've got every excuse. You
can't say you knew better because you had nothing to know with. I am
the justification, the skull mask says, for the time of your life.

Everybody in a circle. Join hands and sing out loud, "We all die."

Guilty Pleasure

I feel afraid. I feel as though I am accumulating bad karma—and yet I’m doing it deliberately. I am a man tempting fate, and I know it. I do it with complete awareness. I am taunting my future self, making my own life more painful and difficult. I do it willingly, proud of the work I do in terrorizing myself, all the while fearing the point at which it will catch up to me. It’s especially ironic since I have been there before. I know what it’s like. I’ve experienced the heartache and the sad futility and that weird feeling of having joined an unexclusive club, the adults who’ve been wounded by death. I’ve been in mourning before, and one day I will be in mourning again. I will be drenched in grief, drowning in my own sorrow, and Lord how I will look back at this and hate it—hate myself—for being so insensitive, so glib.

Sooner or later everybody goes through it—the loss and the hurt. In this respect, I taunt not only myself but everybody else too. There is no one who won’t be repulsed at some awful moment. They will only have to think of it in the hour of their grief, and to see it through the veil of tears will sicken and appall. Moreover, by disgusting everyone, I isolate myself. When my moment comes, and when I rue everything that quickens the pain of my own grief, there will be no one to turn to. “He deserves it,” they’ll say. “He has no one to blame but himself.” And it will be true. I will have done it to myself. I know this. I see myself worsening wounds I will one day have, aggravating my own future grief for the sake of a transient delight, and yet I do it anyway.

What’s the matter with me? Why do I plod onward in spite of all reason and sanity? At moments I imagine a council of the dead, concerned spirits shaking their heads in sad wonderment at my irrational audacity. I half expect a specter to rise up and warn me, a booming voice from beyond the grave: “Do not trifle with death.” It will rattle the door-knobs and shake its chains, improvise a lugubrious *Christmas Carol* in an

effort to scare me back into a healthy attitude toward life. “Repent your morbid obsessions! Regret your callow flirtation with powers beyond your control! We are death and we will crush you!”

But then that plays itself out. You have to respect death, I admonish myself, but you don’t have to make it into something it isn’t. Death is not a skeleton on a horse, come to behead you with its scimitar. Death is a biological process. Your liver gives out. Your kidneys fail. Your heart seizes up. And if not that, then you rear-end a garbage truck. Fall off a ledge. Run out of rope. Hey, shit happens. That’s all death is.

And in that light, what is necrophilia? A spurt of fluid on an inanimate object. In the grand scheme of things, it has no more or less moral value than blowing your nose or peeing on a bush. What’s the big whoop? What’s the source of the fear? Why worry about bad karma? Nothing is going to come back and “haunt” you except your own fears and anxieties. You can fuck all the dead bodies you want. Fate is not going to throw it back in your face—which is not to say you might not get caught by the police, or that you might not catch some awful disease. It’s just to say there’s no necessity to it, no higher power meting out cosmic justice. Everything is human and relative. God is dead. Morality is made by man—so how can you really give any credence to it? Today it’s ok to love the dead in spirit but not in flesh. Tomorrow, who knows? Maybe men of the future will consider nostalgia a more contemptible perversion than necrophilia. After all, to love the dead is to live in the past, and that can’t be healthy.

Then again, even if you consider yourself an enlightened individual, one who feels free to pursue his own personal weirdnesses down into their furthest recesses—even if you are a hardened spelunker of depravity who considers necrophilia to be no more or less repugnant than all the other murky chambers that make up the underground complex of human behavior—odds are that this tolerance will quickly be put to the test when the cadaver in question belongs to someone you loved. How will you feel then? Will you be able to maintain your philosophical poise, your lewd suspension of judgment, your lurid epoche? After all, you’ve read this. You’ve passively gone along with the fantasy. Perhaps you’ve even enjoyed it—and therefore you will have changed forever. One day you will feel the sharp sting of loss, and in your mourning you will

remember your complicity with this, perhaps even your delight in this, and how will you feel then? It's easy to be glib now, to speculate about the intersection of eros and thanatos, but in your hour of sadness and grief, how will you feel then?

Probably it's not fair of me to stick that awful thought in your brain. I knew I was doing this to myself, or at least I became aware of it at a certain point. You probably weren't thinking about this at all, you were just drifting along in anticipation of a little shock and awe. Now I've had to go and point out a kind of icky moral consequence—what a bringdown. A curse on the reader of these pages. Normally when you go through a period of mourning, it is not difficult to forget all the slasher flicks you've seen, the horror novels you've read, the video games in which you've slaughtered the innocents. But now this little curse is going to reverberate in your head, set up uncomfortable associations. You'll find yourself in the funeral parlor with someone you loved, you'll look down at the face in the coffin, and—wham! bam! damn!—suddenly you'll see horrible images play across its surface. The intimacy you knew and the joy you shared will be skewered through a filter of sickness. Grotesque thoughts will mock your saddest goodbyes. It's fun to imagine douching with human blood—until the blood comes from mommy or daddy.

Unfortunately, there is not much you can do about it at this point. You've come this far. You've got it in your head. Maybe you even had it in there before. Either way, whether you brought it or I gave it to you, you've been set up for a jarring moment—the collision of a naïve morbidity with a relentless mortality. So far as I can make out, there are only three ways to get around it. First, you could be the next to die. Spare yourself the pang of mourning by being the one to mourn. Second, you could try to forget—but then that's like a Zen koan. Can you ever really *will* a loss of memory? Can meditation or hypnosis extinguish every trace of necrophilia in your brain? Third, you could scrupulously avoid emotional attachments. Love no one, care for nobody, and then death will be a matter of indifference to you. Relations die, neighbors perish, coworkers undergo spontaneous human combustion—and you almost don't notice. Murder, war, disease, ethnic cleansing—these don't affect you either, since if you don't love the people around you, you certainly don't love humanity. “Survival of the fittest,” you yawn. “Population

control.” And you return to the contemplation of wantonly depraved thoughts, *Hm, if I grind the skull of a cadaver into a fine powder and slip it into a girl’s drink, will it act as a stimulant? A necrodisiac?*

So if you want a way out, I can offer you this: love no one. Otherwise, if you must insist on loving, you’re pretty much fucked.