

Yanter

By

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for all the Tammys

who never knew

And the Pammies

who do

Life is not a matter of creating a special name for ourselves, but of uncovering the name we have always had.

—Richard Rohr

*This is my home, you see,
so no longer will I let it be
a place of shame
or a vessel of insecurity.
It will be a chapel of forgiveness
and a palace of respect.*

—Becca Lee

Prologue

The gesture was one she'd never forget. The other girl's eyes concentrating, her tongue-tip peeking the corner of her mouth.

Grace, beauty, and poise ... all in possession of that five-year-old.

Who never knew.

But that one taught her to draw stars.

Chapter 1—*Dramatis Personae*

*I'm breaking my back just to know your name
 But heaven ain't close in a place like this
 Anything goes but don't blink, you might miss
 Cause heaven ain't close in a place like this
 I said heaven ain't close in a place like this
 Bring it back down, bring it back down tonight
 Never thought I'd let a rumor ruin my moonlight
 —The Killers/"Somebody Told Me"*

The K-Qwik was cluttered, per the usual dawn ritual, with the listlessness of the student residents of Old Manger Stream Apartments getting on their java and a breakfast burrito or pork rinds. The Cappuccino Bar in Hanliff Student Center across Merritt Drive offered better coffee and the semblance that you cared about your studies, which most UDers did.

But this was Old Mange, encompassed by the University-of-Denton bubble but not *of* it, even though UD, a decade before, had taken possession of Old Manger and hired a management company to regulate the students' running it into the ground.

It never had far to go.

Chances were, if you lived in Old Mange, you *might* have the means to own a coffee-maker but not the money (or time) to secure the beans for it. Or vice versa, though, why you'd own coffee beans and not a coffee-maker (not to mention a grinder) was a question for your Epistemology class, and this was too early in the morning to contemplate such weighty matters.

She was there to buy cigarettes before slouching back to

campus to sit at a metal-latticed table, sip a cappuccino, smoke (she'd drag her table and chair 25 feet from the Hanliff Mall entry to keep Campus Safety from reluctantly enforcing the outside-the-25-foot-building-radius campus smoking policy that few of the officers themselves heeded), and be greeted by people on the Mall, because she was now one-third of the way into the actual brick-paved Mall, amid its hustle-to-8am-classes foot-traffic.

Non-Old-Mangers, of which she was a lucky member (she lived somewhere on campus nobody ever pinned down), also frequented the K-Qwik to cure a tobacco habit. Casting her gaze around the store, she mused, "Ah, nicotine—the great leveler of the Mange-Ridden and the not-so-Mange Ridden." At the counter, she laid out a ten, and said "Marlboro Lights, flip-top."

Fumar, in his orange-and-brown K-Qwik shirt, was behind the counter, again retrieving change that had fallen to the floor from the "Take-One/Give-One" dish by the POS register. His name was something Bangladeshi, Pakistani, or Indian that few of the students remembered. Given he dispensed them smokes for their school-loan money, they christened him "Fumar," among themselves adding, "Hindu Deity of Smoke and Emphysema." The Brett-Kavanaugh douche-bags, spawn of the nationwide Jesuit-boys'-high-school white-male-asshole academies, who, thankfully, made up but a small portion of the UD student body (a lot of that minority were dumbass baseball players or business majors who struggled with UD's core curriculum, even though the University had watered it down for them so as to capture their families' dollars and hopefully have them one-day contribute to the endowment) would snicker to each other in a *Simpsons'* Apu voice, "Mr. Simpson, do not give my god a peanut." A UD fixture, Fumar had seen them come and go. They, being students, were destined to be anything but—*fixtures*, that is).

Her gaze went unfixed, as Fumar unhinged *herself*, having risen from behind the counter as anything but Fumar. It was a girl. And not just any girl.

“T-Tami?” she asked Fumar’s not-so body-double. “Is that you? What’re you doing ... in *Texas*?”

“Waiting on you!” Tami smiled back. “Pretty scarf! Can I steal it some time? You must not come here evenings, when, I guess, you’re doing something other than buying cigarettes. I talked Fumar into giving me morning shift—y’know, take time off for himself. He’s making enough moola to pay me for it. Almost doubles my hours, and I even get to meet a few professors!”

“What’re you doing at UD? You’re supposed to be in Pennsylvania.”

Tami winked. “‘Supposed to be’ is a page from your book, hon! I’m as surprised as you are. I didn’t know you went to school in *Denton*! All I remembered was that you were Texas-bound, so I imagined some big place like UT or A&M. Things are different on the ground once you’re on the actual ground. I needed a change of pace. Saved up my money, and the furthest ticket it could get me was to the Greyhound depot here in Denton. Had enough bucks left over to land a roomie gig in Old Mange. Needed a job. K-Qwik needed a grunt. Here I am!”

Her listener was open-jawed.

“If it weren’t getting to mid-November here, baby,” whispered Tami, “Your open mouth would be collecting flies. What if I snuck you a pack of free cloves to shut your yapper?”

∞ ∞ ∞

Thomas Yanter was puzzled over sleep. He wasn’t getting it.

“It’s the pressure of your senior year,” Jessica said over the pasta. “Though intensity for an English major shouldn’t come till Spring semester, when we do Comps and Senior Thesis. Is something on your mind you’re not telling me?”

Jessica had been born at UD. She *was* UD.

“No.”

Not a lie. Not truth. The girl he'd watched from afar had been on his mind. Still didn't know her name.

“You have circles under your eyes, Thomas.”

He eyed her. “Call me ‘Yanter.’”

“Pardon?”

“Call me ‘Yanter.’ Kids in high school called me that.”

Jessica posed a gorgeous face as she soured on his words. “We're *not* in high school anymore.”

“You never were.”

“Homeschooling does away with the dross that makes up 90% of high school—pointless socialization in a peer group with which we *won't* naturally associate in the workaday world.” Linguine on her fork. “Maybe *that's* it. The fact that we're soon leaving our undergrad years is making you feel displaced.”

He'd always felt displaced. And Jessica's very exclusive upstairs-Hanliff apartment and cooking hadn't put him in-place.

“I dunno.”

What made him feel so out of place? That Jessica had embraced his lost-little-boy routine?

“How do you explain your nodding off every afternoon in Shakespeare, in front of Dr. Merrill?”

“He's boring.”

“Shakespeare is hardly boring. You *love* Shakespeare! It's what brought us together.”

Pre-vampire-movie Kate Beckinsale had brought them together. Jessica's assessment of vampire vehicles was that they were “A morbid genre. The antithesis of resurrection and the eucharist, fueled by a pubescent fixation with a Bram Stoker pot-

boiler that's taken on an un-life of its own. The genre's aim at young people is sinister, eroding a disaffected youth population's embrace of the truths of the Western theological tradition."

Jessica parroted professors. But her voice.

Opera, musicals, blues, pop. He saw hope when she sang.

First, she saw him.

Kate Beckinsale in Branagh's *Much Ado*. Thomas was smitten.

Jessica had sat next to him in Langer Auditorium. "I saw you rapt with that movie—one of the few films that does Shakespeare justice—and I said to myself, 'Here is a man who can love.'"

Thomas was thereafter loved of one lady.

She'd come late to the weekly movie in Langer. Jessica was never late. But that night her friends-group was.

She now had punctual friends.

Stumbling in the dark with giggling associates, Jessica sat by him. Watched him watch Kate Beckinsale. Her hand flicked to his.

Thomas gulped Chianti. "*Merrill's* boring."

"He *can* be, I suppose. But no amount of boring lecture can allay the heat we feel when the Bard reveals Truth. Dr. Merrill glimpses that truth for us! You should pay attention, Thomas. After all, your Senior Project will be on Shakespeare's comedies."

Thomas had pondered something depressing like T. S. Eliot. Or Conrad. Eliot got all up-with-people in *Little Gidding*.

"Oh!" said Jessica. "And the point Dr. Merrill made today about how the male-to-female disguises and gender-switching corresponds with Shakespeare's trope in feigning the death of a hero or heroine in order to rectify a problematic situation!"

"Ask Romeo and Juliet how that worked."

"I'm talking about the comedies. Merrill said that the

switching of gender identities in Shakespeare is akin to Christ's kenotic self-emptying in Paul's Letter to the Philippians. In fact," Jessica grabbed a notebook from her backpack, "I'm having a brainstorm that I've got to use in my Shakespeare final paper! The need to switch identities, especially something radical and perverse, like a man dressing as a woman foreshadows metanoia in the character, who does it, at least in his view, out of practical necessity. But what it shows is the dying-to-self *all* of us are called to in order to be resurrected in the person of the Christ, who, though the Son of God, embraces something as hideous as death on a cross. Think of it! Someone as masculine as Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* stooping to dress as a woman to escape the premature return of a jealous husband! Instead of facing the husband as a man, Falstaff insists that the solution is to become a woman, thus showing the absurdity of his position *and* the depths of the human condition from which the Christ rescues us!"

"Prodigious." Thomas eyed the linguine golf-ball on his fork.

"I know, right?" whispered Jessica. "Merrill will eat this up!"

"What's the end game?" he grunted through a mouth bulge.

"What do you mean, 'end game'? To graduate *summa cum laude*, then double-MA/PhD in UNT's Voice and English programs. I'll be set for life at UD after that. You know the plan."

"Isn't there something more than that?"

"You'll get your MA and teach in a Catholic academy. Perhaps Hillside here next-door! We'll raise a Catholic family!"

Her voice could make him live.

∞ ∞ ∞

Three years. Didn't know her name.

Always her scarf caught his eye.

∞ ∞ ∞

Dreams. Walking under moonlight. Free. Forever.

∞ ∞ ∞

Daubert's Romantic & Victorian Poetry. Girl front row.

"That girl in Rom & Vic never says anything."

Jessica and her immaculate tiramisu. "What girl?"

"Pink scarf. Trench coat. Did Anne Sexton for Junior Poet."

"You remember nothing from Poet Project because you insisted on doing Anne Sexton as well—possibly the most depressing poet in history. What could you have been thinking?"

The girl.

"Why couldn't you have done Alexander Pope?" Jessica asked.

"English drawing-room satirical epics. Mind-numbing."

"You could have analyzed his work in view of his minority Catholic status in England of the time."

Out the window, on the Mall, is that the girl? "Least interesting thing about him."

"There's *nothing* interesting about Sexton, not even her morbidity. Dead-on-arrival, like your Poet Project. No wonder the best you could summon from it was an A-. It blemishes your GPA." Tiramisu gone.

"Her name is more interesting than Pope."

"Whose?"

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Would ask. Her name.

Rom & Vic ended. Girl to Daubert. Thomas lingered.

He stood before Daubert. No girl.

“Mr. Yanter?” asked Daubert.

“Nothing,” mumbled Thomas and was gone.

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Next class. Jess’ mother.

“Are you taking her class to get an easy A?” asked Jessica.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s my *mother* is ‘why not.’ You know the drivel she teaches! The only reason they allow her to peddle her nonsense is because she’s the Dr.-Pepper heiress and donates lavishly to the University in order to secure an unassailable podium for her particular brand of post-modernist, whatever-wave feminism.”

“You called it ‘new-age sacrilege paraded as Pastoral Care.’”

“So I did, which is another reason why it makes no sense for you to take it. You’re not going into lay ministry. Why not have taken Dr. Stone’s Aesthetics course that was the same time?”

“Dry as a stone.”

“But it would have served as a philosophical foundation for what we’ll cover in Literary Critical Theory, the master class for our Senior Project next spring.”

“Foundation of sand.”

“It’s Analytical Philosophy, an area you need grounding in.”

“Just say no to German Analytics.”

Jessica shook her head. “Then, take Creative Writing. At least that’s an English course.”

“Not creative.”

“But those paintings you did when you took Art Freshman year were actually intriguing. Where did you store them, anyway?”

In Art, her scarf had been splashed with paint.

“Burned them.”

∞ ∞ ∞

“You’ve asked me this a thousand times,” said Ponty. “I don’t know her name, and I ain’t interested in knowing. Why don’t you just ask the mystery girl in question, Roomie o’ Mine?”

“I dunno. Ruin the moment.”

“*What* moment? You’ve mooned over her from afar for the last three years. She’s actually kinda homely, with a front-tooth gap like you have. Is that the attraction?”

“I dunno.”

“I dunno,’ is your gold standard when it comes to Mystery Girl. She’s no mystery to *me*. I wouldn’t fuck her with a rake.”

“Jesus, Pont’, don’t be so crude.”

Quarter-moon, Seminary Hill, K-Qwik-procured long-neck Lone Stars. Ponty.

“Don’t get all Jessica-Schermer-high-and-mighty with me. You may eat her shit, but I won’t be the tail her dog wags. Speaking of which, does Jess know your obsession with Mystery Snatch?”

“I dunno.”

“Christ, Yant’! I don’t get you. You’ve landed a rich heiress’ daughter, who’s as fine a piece of ass as anyone on campus, and you moon over some trench-coat scarf-waif who doesn’t, from her looks, give a thought to herself, let alone anyone else on this campus. Maybe she’s a closet dyke, which closet would be in her

best interest, considering this campus' feelings about queers."

"You're projecting."

Ponty guzzled his third brew, belched, and chucked it down the hill. "Hey priestly-boys!" he hollered. "Get a thrill from what's left of my backwash!" Then to Thomas, "*There's* the biggest closet on campus. And I don't hafta switch to a Psych major to know I'm not projecting when it comes to you, Yanters. I *know* you, buddy. You and I come from the same stock."

Swigged his second longneck. "Louisiana bayou and Appalachian PA are 1,500 miles apart."

"I may be a Chem major, but that doesn't mean my eyes are in a test tube. We both come from working-class families. We plan to leave our upbringing in the rearview mirror. You've got ambition, Yant'. I see it all the time, while the rest of UD thinks you puppy-dog follow in Jessica's wake. You've stayed devoted to her when you've got every girl on campus mooning over you. You're the smartest sonofabitch here, and you know you don't have to make something of yourself to make yourself something. You've hitched a ride with saint-in-waiting Jessica 'cuz she's your ticket out of obscurity. Which leads me to ask again, why in Christ-all-Friday are you obsessed with Mystery Girl? Is it because she's seemingly 'unattainable'? Hell! You already *got* the girl who's unattainable to every other campus hard-on—and you didn't have to lift a finger! *She's* made something of herself with you!"

Shot the beer. "Staying in this rut, and I won't leave it."

"Helluva rut! How 'bout I get down into the wagon-wheel mud with you? To only be so fucking rutted! Mind if I have the last one?" Pont' gestured at the remaining longie.

"Things aren't what they seem," said Thomas.

"Don't mind if I do."

It was cold, so scarves were no longer just fashion accessories. She smoked at her table under the wee-hours moonlight, un-walked-by in the middle of the Mall. Campus Safety had grown used to her A.M. presence over the last few years.

Poets blew smoke rings in her mind ... Shelley, Keats, Sexton. She recited to the cold air, her breath-fog and clove smoke entwining, reaching fingers to the moon.

*I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
It's small thing
to rage inside your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself.*

No one answered her call.

*Oh, love, why do we argue like this?
I am tired of all your pious talk.
Also, I am tired of all the dead.
They refuse to listen,
so leave them alone.
Take your foot out of the graveyard,
they are busy being dead ...*

She saw a lone figure returning from Seminary Hill.

*I refuse to remember the dead.
And the dead are bored with the whole thing.
But you—you go ahead,
go on, go on back down
into the graveyard,
lie down where you think their faces are;
talk back to your old bad dreams.*

“If you remember anything from the beginning of the semester as we now study the cult of Mary,” said Dr. Schermer, mid-lecture, “It should be that the attributes of the Paleolithic and Neolithic partnership civilizations before the fall of Minoan Crete are embodied by Mary as portrayed in Catholic piety . . . yet sidelined, second-classed—co-opted by a dominator-model ecclesial hierarchy because that hierarchy cannot eradicate the sacred feminine any more than it can deny that the earth orbits the sun. And we know how *that* went.”

A hand shot up. “Yes, Mr. O’Reilly?”

“But Dr. Schermer, how can you call Marian devotion a ‘sideline,’ when the rosary is central to the faith of Catholics?”

“Ah, Michael, another ‘quatement’—not a request for information but a statement (wrapped in a question) that challenges my course content: UD’s preferred form of ‘mansplaining.’ Mr. O’Reilly, I ask you, is the rosary a sacrament?”

“Well, no,” stuttered Michael. “But the sacraments, while the essential means of grace, aren’t the only facet of Catholic faith. Marian piety is more than just a so-called priestly sop to the masses. Lots of saints’ intercession is sought, but how many of their prayers extend beyond their feast days, to the point of being recited before or after every Mass like the rosary is?”

“And how would you, Mr. O’Reilly, characterize the majority of people who lead those rosaries—indeed, without whose persistence those rosaries wouldn’t be said?”

Michael looked at a loss. “Uh, my grandmother leads the rosary guild at our home parish. A lot of old people—”

“Old *women*, you mean, are, by far, the majority. And I daresay that, despite the best efforts of every new priest who comes to your home parish, Mr. O’Reilly, that ritual your grandmother leads, sunshine, rain, wind, or snow, has held impervious to priestly or liturgical efforts to dislodge it.”

“Um, well, yes, I suppose. But what’s that got to do with—”

“It’s that way here at UD’s Church of the Resurrection. The rosary’s a line item in a government budget: once added, pay hell to get it deleted.”

“But Dr. Schermer,” insisted Mary Raimer. “*I’m* not a man, nor a ‘feminist.’” She spat the last word. “Mary is a huge part of my faith life. Saying that rosaries are kept alive by old women puts to the lie your implying that Mary is tolerated by a so-called patriarchal priesthood to give lip-service to women’s concerns.”

Dr. Schermer smiled. “Yet, so it persists, Ms. Raimer. *Ad hominem* fallacy works in more than one direction. Your thought on this matter is no more sound because it comes from a self-identified, assigned-female-at-birth woman than it is coming from Mr. O’Reilly or any of the self-identifying males in this room.”

Pont’ said under his breath, “She wasn’t ‘*assigned*’ female at birth any more than the obstetrician attached her pussy as an afterthought.” Thomas elbowed him.

“What was that, Mr. Ponty?” asked Dr. Schermer.

Pont’ cleared his throat. “Book of Genesis 1:27: ‘*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*’ Doesn’t get any more definitive than that.”

“Ah, the dead have spoken!” chuckled Dr. Schermer. “This class was primed to come alive once we ventured into the Catholic turf you’re keen on protecting. Jean-Luc, your first verbal foray into this course’s dialogue is a piquant reminder of the vicissitudes of biblical translation and the male-dominated milieu in which it is conducted. You seem to have a rife command of the English translation, Mr. Ponty, but allow me to acquaint you with the source-text’s Masoretic Hebrew promulgated by an extremely patriarchal rabbinic Judaism between the 7th and 10th centuries CE and since confirmed by the Nag Hammadi texts of origin in New-Testament CE times themselves.”

“It’s ‘A.D.’!” Mary Raimer murmured.

“The word translated as ‘man’ in this and several other places in the early chapters of Genesis is a Hebrew *neuter*, with no gender binary. It means, simply put, ‘humanity.’ And there is no ‘his’ as a possessive pronoun for God in this text, for *YHWH*, as all good Masoretic rabbis and Dead-Sea hermits believed, is ineffable. So, let’s put to rest the notion that the God you currently visualize as a puffy, white-bearded man in sandals (bearing an uncanny resemblance to Pope Julius II, the commissioner of the Sistine-Chapel frescoes), created *man* in *his* image. The Hebrew original wasn’t the product of rabid feminazis, mind you, but of the male-exclusive rabbinical Jewish scholarship of those times. If *they* didn’t assert male privilege in their interpretation of the text, then how did we get here? Survey says ... Jerome’s vulgate Latin translation *and* the colloquial language translations from the Reformation/Counter-Reformation, and beyond—which were war-games of power, with men at the levers of the war machine. You’re saying in your head, ‘*Male and female God created them.*’ By Jove, you insist! It’s man OR woman, thank you very much.’

“But dear hearts,” her eyes scanned the classroom. “The word, ‘and,’ is most emphatically *not* ‘or.’ Furthermore, this is Chapter *One* of Genesis—the ‘them’ doesn’t refer to Adam and Eve, for those personages are players in an alternate creation story inserted into Genesis as Chapter Two. Here in Chapter One, ‘them’ means ‘all humankind.’ It isn’t a hard-and-fast binary in which ‘You’re either a man or a woman and that’s it!’ Humankind is created male *and* female, as the verse you so sagely noted, Mr. Ponty, says—‘in the *image* of God.’ As God is male *and* female, *so are each of us male and female.* That some of you are comfortable in presenting a man’s skin to the world that matches the male sensibilities in your hearts and minds, then bully for you! The same goes for those of us who internally and externally match as women. Bully for us! But I won’t have you bully those persons who are fluid or differential in how their hearts and minds

correspond with what the world has told them they are. And, yes, I'm uttering the verboten word, 'transgender,' in these sacred halls and the even more verboten idea that—as much as any of us—trans, intersex, and non-binary persons are *gifts*, for they embody what this text was getting at: namely, that male and female, men and women, are not opposites, are not the sole either/or options in the divine mind. We are, *all of us*, on a spectrum—or even a sphere—of gender. So, Mr. Ponty, you refer to one half of the human race as 'pussy' to the detriment of your own female identity—for you indeed have one. Ignore it at your own peril! Goodness! What do they teach you in Understanding the Bible?"

Thomas raised his hand. "Dr. Schermer, to your original point—are you saying that Marian devotion has been the product of a grand conspiracy among the male hierarchy of the Church to 'safety-valve' release our innate attraction to the sacred feminine?"

"Mr. Yanter, your quatement implies that such has been premeditated. I think even the most dyed-in-the-wool misogynist hierarch's wish to suppress the sacred feminine is a kneejerk response to humanity's innate need for the sacred feminine. *That* old ladies persist in their rosary guilds and *that* old men in curial garb persist in electing male popes under the approving gaze of their Julius-II man-god in the Sistine and perpetuate a solely male priesthood are but *symptoms* of a more profound wound. I therefore switch the poles of your cause-and-effect relationship. It's not that men and women subscribing to the dominance model (versus the partnership model) have therefore intentionally constructed the gender-binary tyranny we've lived under for the past four millennia. Rather, the societal binary, like the classic definition of a sacrament as an outward, visible sign of an inner, invisible reality, reflects a divide in our hearts that was never meant to be there. God's so-called 'curse' in Genesis 3 was never intended to be a punitive prescription for ordering a society in which men lord it over women—

*I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,*

*yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.*

“Rather, it’s a *description* of the sad state of affairs in the heart of everyone—male, female, trans, genderfluid, intersex, and non-binary. The fruit we eat—a civilization that denigrates partnership in favor of might-makes-right dominance—literally rives our hearts. Mr. Ponty, Ms. Raimer, Mr. Yanter, and many of the rest of you seem at home with that arrangement, if only because you don’t want to get out of your ruts. Perhaps you’ll one day experience the labor pains of birthing something better in your hearts. You won’t feel at home then but cursed to be at war with yourself. But it may be a severe mercy that saves you.”

After class, Thomas heard Pont’ murmur, “I’ll be goddamned if I have a female self. I’m no fucking fag. Fuck that cunt!”

∞ ∞ ∞

“So, you’ve come for advice on your Senior Thesis Project,” said Dr. Giordan Daubert. “Fire when ready.”

Daubert’s office still smelled of pipe, even though UD buildings had been smoke-verboten for years. It had soaked into the volumes of Daubert’s 40-year-old library. She wanted to seep into those volumes with his pipe fumes, to hide and never come out to do a Senior Project. There, she could dwell. Forever.

“I want to branch out.”

“To what? And how far does that branch go?”

Should she tell him what she really had in mind? She didn’t want to have to persuade and cajole, to have to justify her choice. Though, she knew that, if she got her choice, she’d have to parade it publicly, out of its closet, before their closeted minds, defending it in front of a panel of profs and what other English majors and well-wishers would show up to her Thesis

presentation in the Spring.

She'd exhausted herself presenting herself to ... herself. What had Tami said to her? "Fuck 'em. Shoot straight at the bastards."

Tami had zero experience with academics—*no*; correction. Tami hadn't had the experience with academics that *she* had had over the years. As she'd gotten to know Tami better, she saw that Tami-short-for-Tamar had much in common with her three Hebrew-Bible namesakes. Tami's beauty could easily cast her as Tamar (mentioned once, in passing, in 2 Samuel 14:27), the gorgeous daughter of Absalom, David's beloved but cursed-to-rebel son. Beautiful Tamar became the mother of Queen Maacah, who married King Rehoboam, yadda, yadda, yadda.

The tragic bent of the other two Tamars aligned with Tami's rough upbringing. Like the few female figures of note in the Old Testament, both these Tamars were scarred by the neglect and abuse of family. "But that's okay!" the male-edited scriptural canon seems to say. "Their being raped and forlorn paves the way for the Messianic line! All's well that ends well." Sort of a truncated ending (both to Shakespeare's play of the same appellation and to those two Tamars' agency as persons).

All had *not* been well for her Tami. Like the Tamar of 2 Samuel, Tami had been nearly raped by her older half-brother, which crime, when she told it to her father, didn't lead to justice but to his, in turn, raping her as punishment for having been "such easy fuckbait," Tami said. Her story, on both counts, was left unheeded by family, school authorities, and law enforcement, much like the Genesis-38 Tamar had been left to fend for herself, which Tami had. She was here in Denton, wasn't she?

"So why do *I* feel half here?" she mused as Daubert waited.

Tami knew academics from the shunned side of the razor-wire fence. The school system was destined to bar her gifts and person as her family and community had. Yet this strangely had given Tami insight into the denizens of the ivory tower. She was

anything but awed by what she'd found. And her summary of them through a haze of clove smoke was spot-on. "Fuck 'em. Don't let the pricks get their kicks at your expense, Lady."

Nothing was esoteric to Tami about her own heart, and she did not suffer bullshit from others in matters of that vital organ. "What you see is what you get, Missy," Tami had laughed the last time the two of them smoked recently-government-declared-illegal clove cigarillos Tami had surreptitiously freed from the surly bonds of the K-Qwik's surplus tobacco inventory. "But the better point, dearie," Tami saged, while tonguing out smoke rings, "Is what you get when you let yourself be seen."

And that was her dilemma as she sat across Daubert's pipe-sweet desk. Would her musings to him about what she wanted to do for Senior Project let herself be seen too much?

Fuck 'em.

"It's a branch reaching out to another tree's branch, Dr. Daubert. The two quite often touch in the wind. I'm doing the journals of Anne Lister for my Senior Project. It's never been a doubt in my mind. I don't come to you today to be talked out of it but to tell you I'm doing it."

Daubert reclined in his chair, blindly reaching back to the pipe rack on his bookshelf. Campus regulations didn't permit him to smoke in-office, but biting on the stem of that empty hearth would help him think while he parried with her.

"That's an intriguingly ... *unusual* choice," he transmitted through the pipe and waited for her to offer something more.

Something more wasn't coming.

He rocked forward in his chair to plant his elbows. "They're written in her own cipher, which only recently was decoded."

She untied and retied her scarf as she said, "It's been more than 150 years since the code's been broken, which, I realize, is 'recent' in terms of UD time. No matter. I've done my own

decoding of them, which I've compared to the original deciphering. Mine is more accurate."

"But-but-but its translation has only recently been published, which allows hardly enough time for a body of scholarly review to afford you the material you need for your thesis."

From her bag, she thudded on his desk a ream of computer-lab laser-printed pages that scattered pipe notes. "Yeah, I was worried about that myself, since the committee has to approve Thesis topics. So, I came loaded for Dr. Daubert. Ten years since its publication may not seem like enough time, but we live in an era well-past the so-called Rise of the Information Age. Ten years of advances in equipping the Internet for facile research is the qualitative equivalent of 10,000 years of uranium half-life. You and the committee'll find enough secondary material here."

Daubert didn't respond till the notes resettled on his desk.

"But-but-but-but-but what connection could you possibly demonstrate between Lister and her contemporaneous literary scene, let alone the Literary Tradition itself? After all, her journals were encoded. None but her could make sense of them. Thus, they could hardly have influenced anything in the flowing river of the literary canon. She is thus the literary equivalent of a Victorian hermit on a small, off-stream diluvial island. The committee will certainly note that lacking. Look, I embrace freedom of inquiry. After all, this is the 'university for independent thinkers'! Among the Department faculty, I've a reputation for 'maverick' entertainment of students' nonconforming intellectual pursuits. So, I'm not trying to quash you here; I'm, sadly, just a messenger."

That memo having been delivered, he moved to return his pipe to the rack, when her words paused him midair. "Aren't UD English-Department faculty known for saying that the work of art is not the work of a single person, isolated from all cultural influence? That when we engage in writing, painting—any endeavor, really—we step into the River of the Ages, picking up

all sorts of flotsam in its current and depositing our own? It's not our work at all, is it? Anne Lister stepped into the River at the bend of her time, and, as such, was a stone that turned the river's course. If the committee thinks that course-shift too minimal to warrant a Senior Thesis' examination, trust me, Dr. Daubert, I've taken pains in the parcel I just deposited on your desk to demonstrate that, at a minimum, her pantaloons got river-soggy with the flow of cultural consciousness through the ages before her time, in her time, up to right now. It's just wanting someone to put it under a microscope."

Daubert gazed at her as she rose to leave, his lenses thick with smoke detritus. He asked, "Were you inspired to pursue this by the popularity of *Gentleman Jack*?"

"Pardon?"

"*Gentleman Jack*, the BBC-made HBO series that's streaming right now. It's how I discovered Anne Lister."

"Dr. Daubert, I'm a UD student with no time for TV. I decoded Anne Lister's journals when I was 17."

Chapter 2—*The Crash*

*I used to think that the day would never come
I'd see delight in the shade of the morning sun
My morning sun is the drug that brings me near
To the childhood I lost, replaced by fear
I used to think that the day would never come
That my life would depend on the morning sun
—New Order/“True Faith”*

*I've got a static aesthetic, nihilistic prophetic
Everything is a goddamn lie.
I want to go grab a shovel so I can dig up the devil,
So I can ask him why,
And I think I think he'd know why.
—Paris, Texas/“Bombs Away”*

“C’mon, Doubting Tommie! You know you wanna,” Sarah said. Her name, in Hebrew, meant “laughter.”

He wanted to laugh with her, like he used to, but they weren’t kids anymore, and something of him was locked away in a long-lost box from his nightstand. It was the only key she’d never had.

“Geez, ya dumb lump,” she sighed. “It’s my last game cheerleading this season! You’re gonna miss the finale of a star!”

“Sar’, there’s no end to your star.”

“Gee, you really sound like you care.”

“Apparently,” Thomas said over his shoulder, “Dad cares enough to haul you to the game, then to your friends’ after-game party. It’s the first Friday in years that he’s not been at the lab.”

Sarah frowned. “Mom put her foot down on this one. She wants to get out of the house, to ‘socialize, with other parents our age,’ I heard her yelling at Dad. He *has* to take us.”

He snorted. “Like Mom’s insisting on something has ever made a difference to Dad. He’s doing it because *you* threw a fit that got even him to notice. That charm may once-in-a-blue-moon work on him—and it usually works on me—but I’m tired of acting like I care about my senior year. And I despise football, the jocks, marching bands, and brain-dead cheerleaders.”

Sar’ stomped her foot dazzlingly close to his toes as she came around the sofa where he was lumping out yet another iteration of *Grand Theft Auto*. “You know damn well *I’m* not brain-dead!”

His sister was beautiful even when she threatened violence. “True. I taught you everything you know” he said, craning around where she stood in front of the tube. He was launching his Camaro off a rooftop ramp, trying to get enough loft that he would this time fly ... to anywhere but November Friday-night high-school football in Connellsville, PA. “Which is why I don’t get your affinity for shaking your 14-year-old booty in front of a crowd. Do you not get enough attention as it is, Gorgeous One? Why risk near-traumatic-brain-injury stunts with airhead girls I wouldn’t trust my pocket lint to, let alone the safety of my sister?”

“You *didn’t* teach me to be an asocial hermit. Don’t you see how the girls moon over you? But you act too-cool-to-care and hide it under a Wal-Mart bag of discount-rack video games.”

Touché. She’d always touched his core. Then again, she’d never left it since she’d been born. At nearly four years of age, he was enamored of the glow her birth cast into the gloomy Yanter Estate. At that time, he was naïve enough to think that Sarah Wonder-Child would fix his parents.

She didn’t.

It was hardly her job.

Thomas didn't ...

... grow any more naïve, that is.

Sarah made the mansion habitable to him—even desirable—via the light in which her continual smile, verve, and *joie de vivre* basked it and him. Her smile and indefatigable spirit could lift him even after one of Dad's sloshy wee-hours visits to his bedroom that had started before Sarah's entrance into the world. The overhead light would click on, Dad standing there like a scarecrow frightening Thomas out of his sleep.

"You're hardly the son I expected, Thomas," Dad would mutter, clacking the ice in his glass.

Thomas would stare at him with mournful, sleep-dusted eyes. Saying anything might elongate the intrusion to the point that his father would fall asleep in his bed, leaving Thomas to seek out one of the hideaways in the attic.

"You're unexpected because ... you're exactly like me, Thomas," even though Thomas was nothing like him. Dad stared through him, conjuring visions of himself when his life was anything but what he couldn't stand it to be right now. "I used to grab life and feed my mind on things that challenged me. Free to answer every puzzle." He then ruffled Thomas' hair, the boy cringing but submitting to the only touch his father ever afforded him. "Life was on a plate—a harvest feast lit by endless light. I burned through college, graduate school, medical school."

He would pause, noticing Thomas. For a moment, the strange man's vision would focus, as if he'd realized a father shouldn't talk this way. His mouth would open, Thomas waiting for the specter sitting on his bed to offer a confession, then shut off the light and leave the room to be a new man the next morning, one who sat at the breakfast table with his family, who would come home for dinner, away from the lab in which he hid himself. But the jaw would clamp, and the eyes go glassy, his nostrils emitting a steam that said the engine could make no headway.

“Do you think I *planned* this enterprise? That I planned even my own marriage or *you?*” He stared into a mirror only he could see. “I fell into it! My damned intelligence and macabre luck turned it into a billion-dollar pharmaceutical concern. *She found me!* I’d no idea she even thought about me. This house!” he gasped, eyes searching the ceiling and walls. “This house wasn’t even my idea. *She* talked her father into giving it to us, and, wonder of wonders, as if my damn luck had hypnotized him, he gave it to us, sold his stock interests, and set off to see the world in a sailboat, though, luck be damned, that didn’t last long.”

His father would then grab one of Thomas’ puzzle games from the nightstand, his hands solving it while he gaped at Thomas. “I was happy there, for a moment,” he would next say, unable to believe it had been so. “I’d drive into Pittsburgh six days a week, and on the seventh, damn it, I wouldn’t rest but turned this ancient cavern into something habitable, because, you see, I was going to have a son—and a wife again in love with me. It was like,” he’d halt, the puzzle, now solved, dropping to the floor with a clatter, “I built a house of the future . . . for my damnation. A place to house a wife and child I don’t recognize.”

By this point, Mom appeared in the doorway, eyes filled with sleep and disgust. “Tom,” she would mutter. “The child has no idea what you’re babbling. Leave him alone.”

His father would retrieve the bourbon glass he left on the nightstand by Thomas’ treasured musical box and walk past her, dissolving into the hallway’s darkness. His mother would glance at Thomas, wiping a tear from her cheek and turning out the lights. “Go to sleep, honey. Morning sun shines away bad dreams.”

And she was gone.

Thomas lingered at Sarah’s bassinet, humming “Star of the County Down,” a ballad he heard from an antique English musical box in a curio shop Mother perused in Fox Chapel. Its melody haunted him far beyond the silent drive home. At those nap times when Sarah was too fussy to fall asleep, he would trill it

to her till she dozed off. After that, he was given the joy of regularly helping Sarah fall asleep. He pestered Mother to buy him a book of Gaelic lyrics that he pored over, memorizing the words to “Star of the County Down,” which he then sang to Sarah whenever she was scared or anxious.

*Banbridge Town in the County Down
One morning last July,
From a boreen green came a sweet colleen
And she smiled as she passed me by.
She looked so sweet from her two bare feet
To the sheen of her nut brown hair
Such a coaxing elf, sure I shook myself
For to see if she was really there.*

He saved up enough allowance to buy the music box from the Fox-Chapel shop, keeping it on his nightstand for the inevitable entrance of Sarah into his bed when a thunderstorm raged or after a scary movie he’d insisted wasn’t good for her to watch.

When Sarah was old enough to talk and feed herself, Thomas shared with her the morning sun. Mrs. Lanzi, the housekeeper, would fuss over them, her pity translating into extra sweets in his lunch and, for breakfast, a second bowl of cereal instead of the fruit cups he despised. By the time he was eight and Mrs. Lanzi’s health issues led to her retirement, rearing of Sarah fell to him. Thomas took charge of wake-up through breakfast, after which their driver put her in the car seat for the trip to her pre-K, after dropping Thomas off at school. During the ride, Sarah incessantly asked Thomas what he would be learning and doing, liking or hating at school. Her speaking aloud to a better version of himself on the way to and from school reduced that mind-numbing place, and his life, to a puzzle they together solved.

Where he felt an aching hole at the neglect silver-spooned by Mom and Dad, Sarah not only *didn’t* miss their attentions but treated them like *they* were blessed she was in their lives. That they nonetheless failed to notice her charms made no difference to

her. Whereas, Thomas felt like an old medical book gathering dust in Dad's library or like one of the news networks his mother left droning whether she was in the room, in the house, or even alive ... none of which were distinguishable to him.

That was it—Sarah *distinguished* herself, yet never in an arrogant or narcissistic way. He never had to work at being her sibling and best friend as he'd had to labor at piecing together the shattered mirror slivers that were his mis-relation to Mom and Dad. He could love Sarah and therein love himself ... without a thought, by just ... being. The pieces fit together with her.

Well, they used to. The two once solved every puzzle, every mystery. Broke every code and cipher. Invented ones of their own—mazes with no Minotaur, that needed no ball of thread because their lives together were that thread ... one overlooked by parents who were deaf, dumb, and blind to the lifeline-in-their-midst. By puberty, a sullen resignation characterized Thomas' dismissal of his parents as a lost cause beyond the money and living arrangements they provided. Yet, despite himself, his heart would flare, making him want to yell, "If you'd just look deeper, you'd see something worth pausing over, even *loving!*"

Their bond had persisted through Sarah's schooling until her eighth-grade and his junior year. Then, losing track of his once-beloved musical box and of Sarah, he deciphered codes alone, a shadow separating them. Her spirit was there, but Thomas knew Sarah was no longer of this house. Try as he might, he couldn't find the music box. Sarah had left to make the world her home, a force not of her own choosing having ushered her out.

"Sar'," he pled. "C'mon. I'll make it up to you. After the game, I'll show you the hardest cipher I've ever found. I *need* you. You see possibilities I can't think of."

She smiled. "I thought you taught me everything I know."

He rolled his eyes. "Sar', it's not like that. It's ... *fun* with you. Without you, it's ... more like a job I can't lose myself in."

Her smile faded but not at his words. She stared at the flights that led to the attic, a shadow dousing her morning-sun eyes. “I ... can’t, Tommie. I’ve got not just a party but a sleepover after the game. I won’t be back till Sunday night, ’cuz we have a cheer competition in Waynesburg into Sunday afternoon, remember?”

The Camaro crashed to earth in flame, his avatar fleeing the wreckage. That she saw his disappointment curdled his mood all the more. What would he do when he had to go to college and no longer had her to remind him of a world beyond these walls?

“I’ll help you, Tommie, over breakfast Monday. Besides, by then, you’ll have solved it, and I’ll just coo in admiration.”

“Not this time, Sar’,” he mused. “This one’s beyond me.”

Even then, she had been beyond him. And the slaughter and conflagration on Route 119 made the separation final.

∞ ∞ ∞

“Wake up, dammit!” came Grandpa Jade’s rasping rattle as he rapped Thomas’ door. “I made breakfast. Got news for you.”

Grandpa Jade made breakfast? The coot rarely left the attic. Besides, Thomas never ate breakfast—not since Sarah started skipping it for before-school cheerleading practice. He rolled over and ignored the pounding. Grandpa must be off his meds again.

The pounding stopped, and he heard the old man tromp down the stairs to the kitchen directly below the bedroom. Thomas was just dozing off again when a manic clanging of the pipes leading to his bathroom shot him out of bed, bleary-eyed. “The old bastard must be batshit crazy! He’s gonna hammer the plumbing out of its moorings,” he thought. Where the hell was Mom? She’d be freaked that Grandpa was out of the attic, let alone operating gas and electric appliances. With his brain injury, he wasn’t safe to whip out his own wang over the attic toilet. Mom had to take on that job when the old pervert had assaulted

three separate home health care aides. No home-health agency would respond to the Yanters' requests after that. Word traveled fast about bad-news cases like Old Man Jade.

Thomas stomped on the bathroom floor in protest, and the clanging ceased. He was heading back to the bed, still in his rumpled tee and jeans from last night when the old man bellowed, "There's a new sheriff in town, you little bitch! You come down here, or, swear to the Lord of Hosts, I'll axe down your door and rape you with the handle, you misbegotten little pussy. It'll be a breakfast you'll never forget!"

Thank God Sarah was on a sleepover. She hated Grandpa, who, for his part, kept his distance from her after his tumble down the attic staircase caused a fracture of his femur. It was strange because Sarah and the old man had been inseparable the first two months he came to live with them. Always in the attic, Grandpa showing her ancient family treasures up there or Sarah getting the old man to sit for a portrait. The day he fell down the steps, Sarah had said nothing. Thomas had found her in the attic bathroom Dad had installed for Old Man Jade to occupy the top floor. Thomas had pounded on the door, but Sarah would only sob, "It's my fault, all my fault." When the dust had cleared and Grandpa was home recovering, Thomas couldn't get a word from his sister, and their parents shrugged the whole thing off as anticipatable from an elderly man who'd previously suffered a TBI from his accident on the sailboat. Grandpa, for his part, had since been as silent as the grave about the incident, Thomas figuring that the old coot hadn't wanted to admit another instance of his decrepitude, lest they institutionalize him.

"New sheriff in town?" Thomas wondered. He smelled a burning odor through the floorboards and hightailed it downstairs, expecting the kitchen in flames. When he got there, Jade was shoveling something burnt onto two plates.

"Sonofabitch!" muttered the old man. "Your making me go up and down the steps saw to it I burnt this ham!"

Everything was singed to charcoal. “I’ll pass on breakfast, Grandpa,” said Thomas, fishing the OJ container from the fridge.

“Suit yourself,” Jade grunted, chewing whatever his fork snagged from the ashes. “But don’t expect me or any housekeeper to cook meals for you. You’re on your own as far as that goes.”

“What happened to Miranda? She sick?”

“I fired her is what. We don’t need maid service.”

Again, Thomas wondered who the hell let this coot out of his cage to subject others to his dementia.

“Also,” munched Grandpa, “I’m not occupying an attic prison anymore. The first floor is all mine. You get the second. Keep that music at low volume, whatever that shit is you listen to.

“It’s old Genesis,” said Thomas, sipping his juice and rubbing his eyes. When was Mom gonna wake up to notice that the inmate was running the asylum?

“I don’t give a fuck if it’s the new Exodus,” said Jade. “You know how sound carries in this house. You’ll keep it the volume I say it’s to be kept, or you won’t listen to it at all. Got it?”

Thomas didn’t grace that with more than a yawn. Looked like he’d be the orderly who had to do the locking up. Before he could act, Jade had smacked away the juice, and a searing pain tore his left hand, the old man having a carbon-encrusted fork into the flesh between Thomas’ thumb and forefinger, nailing his hand to the table. A yelp escaped his lips but no more, the shock making him puke up OJ and stomach acid. Grandpa towered over him, a butcher cleaver in hand.

“Like I said, Little Lady Fauntleroy, a new lawman’s in town.”

Thomas whimpered, “You’re fucking crazy.”

“No, little girl. This is just the beginning of crazy, unless you learn to play by the rules. We’ll get along fine once I give you the news. You stay out of my way, and I’ll keep out of yours.”

Jade yanked out the fork and Thomas clutched his hand, spurts of blood staining his t-shirt.

“Wash your wound with dish soap, then dress it with the cream in the first-aid kit under the sink,” said Grandpa. “And thank your gods I hit you in a spot that didn’t give you any nerve damage. You’ll be able to play your video games again in a week.”

Thomas glanced around the kitchen, but Jade loomed tall with the cleaver and a look of ferocity. “You wash the wound. I’ll talk.”

The story he told bled like the crimson falling into the sink.

∞ ∞ ∞

Once upon a time there was a gasoline tank truck on Route 119. And a desperate man behind the wheel of a BMW sedan that, with no tire marks or signs of avoiding a crash, took a direct path into the opposite lanes to meet head-on at a combined 114 miles per hour with that cauldron of death on wheels.

The truck driver had been only minorly injured.

Gilbert Hostetler from New Stanton wept to Thomas at the funeral home. “I was mindin’ my own business, headin’ to my first delivery of the night, to Bell’s Exxon. Never seen anything like it. He drove right at me like I was his destination. And I saw her when I tried to pry open the wreckage, before it completely lit up.” His right hand was covered in dressings, as was his left ear, which the troopers said had melted off his skull.

“Your Mom and Dad were already dead,” said the hyperventilating man. “She looked just like you. Spittin’ image. Smiled, she did, like she was sayin’, ‘Time for me t’ go now.’” The man’s tears trickled into a laceration that scored his cheek. “I tried to veer away, but he jes kept comin’, like he had a death wish.”

He squeezed Thomas’s hand, Thomas wincing at the pressure on his purpled thumb and forefinger. “I been in one other wreck,

when I wuz just a kid like you. Had a Camaro in those days. Hot shit, I wuz. Till I had it knocked out of me by a boozer in a pick-up hooking a left in front of me. It went all slo-mo. I saw his face jes calm and lookin' ahead to the road he wuz turning onto. He had a Stillers cap on, like he was headin' home to take in the second half ... which he an' I both did, gettin' stitches in the Frick Hospital ER. He didn't say a word to me, 'cuz the Troopers were there, wantin' to know how it went down.

“Your Pa was like that, I swear. Like he was headin' home. The cops said he hadn't a drop of alky in his veins. An' your sister wuz peaceful, like she wuz tellin' me it would be okay ... an' now I'm here, tryin' to tell you that I'm so, so sorry. They took mah license. My hauler fired me. But I don't wanna drive no more. Don't know what I'll do, but I'll always see her face.”

Thomas heard himself say, “Mr. Hostetler, it's not your fault.”

Hostetler paused, overwhelmed by the gift of those words, which Thomas didn't know were a gift because he was numb and not with himself, nor ever would be again. He just said them because he wanted this done. The man fell into sobs, from which Thomas gathered only a few remaining syllables. “I ... tried to get her out ... flames ... no scream. She was an angel, that one ...” Hands grabbed Gilbert's shoulders and steered him away. Thomas had seen Mrs. Hostetler coming. And just like Gilbert remembered Sarah's eyes, Thomas recorded that woman's look of despair, apology, and shame. And the final bow of her head, like she had been lost. This time, for good.

Chapter 3—*The Kiss*

*There is so much a man can tell you, so much he can say
 You remain my power, my pleasure, my pain
 Baby, to me, you're like a growing addiction that I can't deny
 Won't you tell me, is that healthy, baby?*
 —Henry Olusegun Adeola Samuel/“Kiss from A Rose”

“Thanks for brunch,” Tami said.

“Considering it’s the UD cafeteria, you should be blaming me, if anything,” Thomas smiled. “I’m just amazed that, of all places, I see you in Old Mange. How long have you been in Texas?”

Tami paused over her pancakes. “I told you that last week.”

“I don’t remember ... though, of late, Jess and Ponty have had to remind me of things I’ve forgotten. I haven’t had good sleep lately—it’s fucking with my short-term memory.”

“Who are they? Family? Friends?”

“Pont’ is my best dude friend. And Jessica ...” he looked down to his plate. “... is my fiancé.”

Tami’s eyes got big. “Don’t be embarrassed about telling me you’re engaged, you goofball! You should be proud!”

“I suppose I am ... it’s just that my life feels so planned out.”

Tami smiled through a bite of bacon she’d slathered in syrup. “I know what you mean. I had to get out of Southwestern PA. Had things gone like others planned for me, I might be dead.”

Thomas jerked up his head. “Huh?”

“I’m not ashamed. I’m proud of myself. My stepdad stalked me. First, he tried to rape me, but a fireplace poker to his head taught him otherwise. Then, when he saw me kissing my college girlfriend, he went apeshit—‘You fuckin’ dick-cutting lesbo cunt.’ So, you see, dear Tommie, I don’t swing from your side of the plate. Jessica’s in no danger from me.”

“Jesus Christ! I can’t believe you had to go through that shit. But, honestly, I didn’t think you were coming on to me so that I needed to cool your jets with a ‘Hey, bitch, I’m taken,’ passive-aggressive maneuver. I’m not vain.”

Tami sipped her sweet tea and winked. “Who says I didn’t once come on to you? You had every right to be vain in high school, though you weren’t. I thought you were just ... aloof. And you and I had been fairly tight till high school.”

Thomas looked away. “Things got away from me in high school ... especially senior year. I was wrapped up in myself and wouldn’t talk to anyone. Still am. Jess brings me out of my shell, though I do it kicking and screaming—all that in total silence and surrender, like you’d expect from a vain, aloof, loser loner.”

Tami drew his gaze to hers. “I don’t remember a loser. I remember a valedictorian who was humble enough to admit that the test to get a scholarship from this place was intimidating.”

Thomas looked at her. “You were there when I took it?”

“Your long-term memory is as bad as your short-term when it comes to me,” giggled Tami. “Hell, yes! I was in the soundproof room in the high-school library, trying to make up an Algebra test and Mackey, the world’s most bedraggled guidance counselor, whisks you in and says ‘Tami, I can trust you to keep an eye on this rampant cheater, can’t I?’ Mackey had written me off as part of the skid crowd (which I might’ve been), so she didn’t worry that I was alert enough to help you cheat. Sometimes, it’s smarter than smart to fly under the radar. Worked for me.”

“I have no memory of this.”

“Of course you don’t! Like I said, everyone wrote me off as a skid, including you, Mr. Vaedictorian. But I do get the aloof part, except you seem to think it was self-imposed. After the crash, no one would dare a conversation with you. We were petrified you’d lose it if we said something stupid. The person I saw in that testing room was fighting a lonely battle. You were so by yourself that I wanted to reach out my hand, ’cept I knew if I touched you, you’d jump out of your skin. I didn’t pass that Algebra test ’cuz I couldn’t keep my eyes off you, wrestling with that test. I remember wondering what it was like to be as smart as you—”

“Aw, bullshit!” rasped Thomas.

“No, really, Tommie! Everyone was afraid of you, even the hardasses, not to mention every teacher and administrator.”

He stared at her. “Afraid? Of what?”

She again toyed with the pancakes. “All I know is that on that day, I saw someone who was truly afraid ... of yourself. Sighing and rustling and shifting in your seat at every question.”

“I know, I know. It wasn’t a test I could game. No multiple choice. Everything was a sentence or paragraph answer, with two essay questions to finish it off. I went home, looked in the mirror, and said ‘Yanter, you are *not* getting out of this shithole and going to Texas. You failed that thing, whatever the hell it was.’”

“Still a little vain, aren’t we?” Tami winked. “My Nana used to say that most people have a superiority complex when it comes to hating themselves. Y’know, m’ dear, you don’t need a scholarship to get out of Fayette County. You just tell yourself you’re not gonna take it anymore, then act like you believe what you just said. That day, I believed in you. I said, ‘Tough test, huh?’ You looked up like it was the first you noticed me there—that was how wound-up you were. All you could see was what scared you in the moment. I couldn’t let that go without comment. I stared you in the eye and said, ‘Tommie Yanter, you’re the smartest person I’ve ever met. Scary smart. If this test is giving you fits,

then I say it's rigged, and you should write "FUCK YOU" on every page, 'cuz no scholarship is worth that bullshit."

Thomas straightened in his seat, like he had when he'd faced a test he thought he had no prayer of solving.

"I remember," he said, light coming into his eyes like one of the arias Jess sang, sonorous and moving. But this was bouncy and jaunty. "I remember ... *you!* In Kindergarten. We were coloring, and I was frustrated that I couldn't draw a star. You took my pink Crayola, and said, 'I can show you how to draw stars.' I remember your tongue, poking out of the corner of your mouth. You didn't show me like I'd show someone else a talent I could do, going fast and flashy to impress. You did it methodically, like you were okay with my being slow to follow your steps. I didn't comprehend what you were doing. Then, like now, I didn't think anyone could give me anything I could deserve. Not because I was above everyone else but because I'm so ... *different*. You made me *see*. I'll remember you every time I effortlessly draw a star. 'Cuz only *you* would know that *nothing* is effortless for me. You and ..." He slumped in the chair.

Later, as they walked the UD Mall, she led him to the trees by the chapel, where she clasped him by the collar for a kiss. "Whoa! I thought you didn't swing from my side of the plate," he gasped.

She smiled. "Nothing says I can't try out as a pinch-hitter for another team," and drew him to her. He felt the sugar maple of her lips and the scent of her curls on his cheek. "Besides," she breathed when they finally parted. "A girl likes to taste life. And you, vain and clueless Tommie dear, are life."

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When Thomas knocked on Jess' door with no answer, he used his key. On the landing was a rose, a note around its stem held in place by thorns on which he pierced his finger.

Thomas (Should I call you “Yanter”? It doesn’t matter. What does is how you address me.) We haven’t had an extracurricular lesson in some time, and your behavior is showing your need. Proceed to my bed. Now.

Unlike the other times they played this game, he hesitated. Was he mad? This was *Jessica*. Why pause? He lived for this. Glancing into the kitchen, his eye lingered on the cleaver by the cutting board. He should confess that he didn’t have the energy. For weeks, he’d woken mornings feeling like he got no sleep. Jess might see it as the end of the game. Or would she refuse to relinquish the role that, after all, he’d feverishly begged her to play? She’d become entrenched as mistress. When he dared look up at her last time, he’d noted her savoring it. At that memory, he locked the apartment door and paced to her bedroom, where candles burned, and a patchouli scent ran down his spine. He averted his gaze while she apprised her auction purchase. His cheeks burned as her eyes tasted the pounding of his heart. She wore only the shimmering blue corset he bought for her at the Renaissance Festival. Flicking a finger to her foot dangling over the bed, she smiled as he fell to the floor and kissed her toes.

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When he came to himself, he was washing off at her bathroom vanity. Looking in the mirror, his heat gone, he wondered why he wanted this so badly only for it to end this way? Released, yes. But not sated. For he’d want it again and again, and would be a slave to *it*, if not to her. And it wasn’t merely her—it was Woman to whom he prostrated himself. Even now, his stomach flipped at the myriad ways he humiliated himself for her pleasure. One occasion, she had him in tears, groveling for release. Not only did she *not* abhor him afterward, but that was the night she’d accepted his marriage proposal as a foregone conclusion, planning their future together with no thought to what always seemed to him, in its aftermath, to be his shame that put to the lie their picture-perfect life as presented to UD.

“Thomas, dear,” she cooed when he later brought it up, “It’s just *you*. I entrance you. You entrance me, though you don’t seem to notice that. When I sing, I sing for you. It’s only natural that it overwhelms you. Seeing as how we’re faithful to the Church’s teaching on premarital sex, why wouldn’t I take satisfaction in your being able to find release in submission and devotion? Don’t be such a puzzle to yourself! Besides, I enjoy it.”

Was it devotion that kept him kneeling before her?

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Later, he awoke to Jessica sleeping. He dressed and left the apartment to walk the Mall under the half moon.

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Mary Raimer was into her third beer, which was already two too many for her, but Hacking’s Old-Mange party only now was morphing into something meaningful, and her interlocutor was showing a very desirable interest in her thought and her presence.

“You think Schermer’s the victim of penis envy?” he asked. His attentions were flattering her. He’d always been so aloof and unreachable. The beer, and she dared think her own wiles, seemed to be loosening up this mysterious one. “I didn’t say that,” she answered. “But I do think she envies the authority of the priesthood and apostolic succession. It surrounds her on this campus. It has to gall her, given she thinks the last 4,000 years have been a huge put-over job by men lording it over women.”

His eyes flashed. He had, an hour before, walked out of the night into the party, at the point when it would either peter out or become one of those rarities in which a couple found themselves together, and crafted a lifetime. UD was all about that—legends of chance meetings leading to miracles of new generations. It seemed to Mary that that was the way he was looking at her right

now. And it was exactly what she'd wanted since Freshman year.

“How do you take that—lording a man?” he whispered.

She felt herself get wet and knew she'd had too much to drink. But she was warm in his gaze, and his hand had taken hers.

“I think,” she whispered, “that a man should feel comfortable with a woman who knows how to respond to him.”

He stroked her hair, his fingers untying the scarf at her throat. “Why shouldn't a woman direct her man?” he asked. “Do you trust yourself with that power?”

A deep inhale lifted her breasts as she felt herself grow in his presence. Time was floating, and she didn't care that she had been off-and-on dating Michael O'Reilly throughout her UD career. Here, at last, she found what was meant to be. She kissed him long. Releasing, she heard herself say, “I can show you,” and intended to lead him to her apartment, her roommates out for the weekend at a volleyball tournament. But this one led her to a fine and private place where he devoted himself to her.

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The girl and Tami laughed over a joint under the half-moon, on a blanket in the Seminary Hill trees.

“No, really!” said Tami. “I respect the hell out of UDers. I see the rings under their eyes as they stagger into the K-Qwik after an all-nighter and grab an energy drink to get through their morning classes. I just know that that shit is *not* my cuppa joe.”

She eyed Tami and took a hit, passing it back. “We must look silly to you. We're so earnest about ‘the pursuit of Truth’ that our party conversations are dominated by things we debated in-class.”

“Ponty invited me to a party tonight,” laughed Tami. “I declined, 'cuz, to quote *The Big Lebowski*, I would be out of my element. UD is like a parade of valedictorians let loose in a

sandbox full of books instead of beach toys.”

“Not all valedictorians wanted the honor.”

Tami finished the stub. “You literally can’t help yourselves.”

She smelled the night breeze in Tami’s eyes. “I helped myself to your stash, didn’t I?”

Tami untied the scarf around her interlocutor’s neck. “Only because I saw you under the moon and enticed you here. Otherwise, you’d still be at that creaky table, smoking cloves.”

“Let’s just say I wanted to help myself to something else.”

Tami’s eyes shone, a smile curving her lips. “That’s what I wanted to hear. Time to finish the kiss we started earlier today.” Tami tugged the scarf to pull her lover to the blanket.

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At moonset, a somnambulant shadow stalked the back trails of campus, a large bag draped over its shoulder. The figure either knew the path or nothing save to walk and carry, walk and carry. At the foundation of the new Admin building, it paused by the protruding tubes—holes for pillars bored into the turbulent ground on which the University was built. Dig deep enough, and you can unite even with a restless earth. Into one of the tubes, it tossed the burden to make it one with the concrete that the construction team would funnel into the hole tomorrow morning.

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A dirt-flecked Thomas stumbled into his apartment at 8:50am, Ponty heading to the door for his Saturday-morning shift at the library. “Out late, eh, roomie?” Ponty asked. Thomas didn’t acknowledge his presence. When he got to his room, he pulled a scarf from his jacket pocket and gazed at it in a stupefaction that he consummated by collapsing into his bed.