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# LUCY JINX

## Book One (excerpt)

Pablo D'Stair

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*for my mother, Catherine VanBrocklin  
who told me the type of my soul*

Oh Hell no, she knows what the truth is,  
'cause she says so, and she knows who her friends are,  
so fuck you, don't get no closer,  
it will only make her run far away

RANCID  
Red Hot Moon

### I

SHE WAS SITTING ON THE edge of the bed, naked, and could hear the mother prompting spelling words out to the child.

*Teaspoon. Tea. Spoon. T. Ea. Sp. Oo. N. Teaspoon.*

Had she slept?

Maybe.

Had she kind-of-slept?

Maybe—more likely.

The room was stale of a night of off air-conditioning and odd dreams, some of which still glopped behind her eyes and had her feeling weighted back toward sleep.

*Archer. Ar. Ch. Er. A. R. Ch. E. R. Archer.*

There was a melodious patience to the mother's voice.

How many syllables could a single letter be given?

The mother enjoyed breaking the words. Enjoyed breaking them more than was wholly necessary. Saying the words, broke, saying

each part as its own word, own words, wanting to instill that magic nothing to do with the lesson or reality.

So obvious the mother knew her child would learn to spell, with or without her.

What would Lucy wear?

She looked on the floor. There was the dress and two pairs of panties—both of which she'd worn and discarded yesterday—and there was one sock and a glove that'd been on the floor for a month.

Yes.

'Glove. Floor. A month. Sure thing' she says, stretches, and still isn't sat up, for whatever reason, this morning, rather liking her nudity, though not regarding it visually.

She liked the feeling of her nudity.

This morning.

The weight of it.

She felt she was a presence.

Though her toenails had gotten to be in that state there weren't apologies enough for.

She thought about vegetables that'd gone off, but this was putting it too harshly.

Anyway.

She thought about a vegetable garden and a war going on someplace through the treelines around it.

The mother, downstairs, was now readying the child to go for the school bus. A hurry hurry sing-song, more pleasant than was needed—tone borrowed from popular cinema, moment borrowed from vague television.

Or not.

Maybe it was the way the mother sounded, felt, real, genuine, hurry hurry, backpack backpack, shoes shoes and all.

The child was repeating some bit of babble—a lot of the neighborhood kids were in the habit of repeating this, now, Lucy heard them out the window all the time.

'What about it?' Lucy asks herself and, caught off guard, shrugs and lays down, tells herself 'Leave me alone, I'm thinking.'

Then, with emphasis, adds 'You fucking worry about it if you're

so worried about it.'

Then, more offhand, probably not even aware so much she'd added it, added 'Ha ha' and crossed both of her arms over her face, splayed her legs, and hiccupped.

Had she drifted off?

No. Nope. She could track her thoughts directly, it was just she'd forgotten to pay strict attention, the mother and child had left the house without her remarking the close of the front door.

Or maybe not.

Unable to relax until it was verified, and nowhere near in the mood to actually dress yet, she decided if she heard no sound for the countdown of fifty it must, conclusively, mean that the downstairs—and therefore the house—was empty.

By thirty-three, she gave up.

Hardly opening her eyes, she looked to the coffee-pot kept on her dresser, the dregs of yesterday's stuff in it, enough for a good half-cup while she brewed something else.

Or else downstairs.

Glutton herself to the already, fresh brewed, hot stuff.

She'd have to dress.

A lie.

Her habit was to roam the house nude until ten o'clock, easy, either showered or unshowered. It was just she'd already—just now—laid back down.

That was the issue.

What was it with this house?

Where was this house?

'Where the fuck am I?' Lucy thinks, burps the words, whispers 'Excuse me' sits up and peeks out the window-blinds.

Just a backyard. The same backyard.

Grumble grumble. Though Lucy tends to wish the word was *grumple* and didn't know which authority to send her complaint to. With a lifetime of effort and enough celebrity achieved, maybe she could work the change into the popular lexicon.

Maybe.

And, on her tombstone, they could say so.

She thought about Socrates.

She thought about subscribing to a newspaper, one that wasn't from around the area, the state even, tired of this rink-a-dink news, these rink-a-dink takes on matters of national scale.

She thought about opening her closet to discover all of her clothes had been replaced with spider-webs and that leaves, bitten through with tiny holes, littered the webs, crisps, sharp enough to cut the strands if she breathed stern enough right against them.

*The room smelled of cinnamon.*

No.

*The room is cinnamon.*

No.

*The room is a cinnamon.*

'The room is a cinnamon ...' she tested aloud, liked it, but narrowed her eyes like she wasn't really being so strict with herself. 'The room is a cinnamon blah blah blah blah'—the five *Blahs* the placeholders for the rhythm of what the rest of the line of poetry would be.

Sure.

*A cinnamon* was good, that was real nice, she liked it as she started pulling on one of the two pairs of discarded panties, as she decided not to, let the fabric out of her hands, the things now just a soft loop around her left ankle.

Nothing to write it down with.

Well, there is—her notebook, stray paper, several pens, and her computer.

*The room is a cinnamon.*

If she forgets it, was it worth remembering?

Or should she be glad?

The compromise was reached with herself to leave the room in a t-shirt and nothing else. The house, as always, sank away sharp from the edge of her door opening. Not that she thought anyone was there, but there were many reasons the mother could suddenly return.

The thing with this was: Both of them were adults. A simple 'Sorry, sorry' would be enough to deal with that. In fact, chances

were more it would be a perfectly fine breaking-of-the-ice. Though Lucy knows the ice was already broken, melted, she got on very well with the mother.

But she should, if caught, be ready to act as though this was the first time in recorded history she'd left her room without pants on.

Oddly, she was more self-conscious about not being in a bra, even with the loose-fitted shirt—a shirt which, in fact, made it moot how she'd no panties on.

Anyway.

Why're we talking about this, Lucy?

Dunno, Lucy—you talk about all kinds of things, who can keep track?

The piano was beautiful and untuned.

So untuned.

So glorious.

Oh God, she could steal this piano, drag it up to her room, stuff it into her purse, ride it down the river, and play it out-of-tune and sopping wet while the authorities scratched their heads about the clues she'd leave, on purpose, to keep them misdirected.

In this scenario: She imagined the main detective was sympathetic to her cause and didn't try too hard, knew the clues were bogus and had her number, easy as pie, but decided to let her get to wherever she was going where, yeah, she'd be cuffed and locked away, find another out-of-tune piano waiting in the prison common-room, courtesy of the entire rag-tag crew who'd chased her.

The End.

She played a few songs, the mistakes, the out-of-practice touch amplifying her asundered perfection.

Another matter was: None of this wonderful food was hers.

'Help yourself—we have to do a big shop every month, help yourself.'

But no one means that.

Lucy, of course, would eat some toast, use some peanut-butter, drink the coffee—that was why a whole pot was brewed, after all, she got that, appreciated the gesture on the part of the mother—because she couldn't cook up one of these steaks, make herself a burger, use pots

for pasta.

Unless, maybe, she made enough the mother and child would use it for dinner—the flaw here being how that was taking things way too far.

One, Lucy wasn't about to cook that much and, two, Lucy herself, the roles reversed, wouldn't want to feel obligated to feed her child some weirdo spaghetti or tortellini some tenant spent the day, pantsless, preparing, unsolicited.

Also timid about using the television—this, she knows, is left-field insanity—she lays out on the sofa and stares at the art-prints on the wall, over in that corner by a bookshelf which seems never used, the shadows over there seeming dust-mote entire, such an unused, forgotten place, another dimension.

Unlooked-at art-prints.

Un-page-spreaded books.

Air that went there when it was too sick to live.

A lonely monster of a room-corner that, if the family moved, would only be packed up with a grudge.

Or maybe it wasn't even there.

This could all be a hallucination, Lucy—like the start of some terrific adventure that'll test the limits of your nerves and birth new imaginations from you, Oh such that you'd no idea!

That corner is all yours.

Go into it.

Join the dead air, the pictures no one painted and no one hung—think what treasures could be in those books written by no one and by no one ever yet read.

AT SOME POINT, SHE'D REMEMBER that this shirt was the shirt which never fit right and had the small stain on the right-hand sleeve, tip of the elbow, beside.

Though hadn't she, dressing, hadn't she checked, this time, this very day?

Moot now—but, yes, she had, in just such a careless way she might as well not've, it seems.

What's so terrific about the shirt, in any event?

What keeps it from being scrap-heaped every time she realizes it doesn't fit, has the elbow-stain, there and then, down to the garbage, out the door of her otherwise well-mannered and all-in-order life?

Is this on purpose, this shirt?

Something about the lime green?

Is there a memory connected to this shirt?

Or maybe—new theory—does the shirt, in some obscure way, remind her base-brain of another memory, something that would defend it?

The lime green, the stripes—that's what she focused on.

What does that mean to Lucy?

Lime green. Stripes.

'Lime green stripes' she says as she takes the left turn at the signal.

The sky is overcast, the color of urinal porcelain—ashtray and faucet-tap stains and urinal porcelain.

To her, the day seemed languid, long, and hogtied.

*Tongue-tied*, she switches this to, whether the day honestly seems it or not. *Tongue-tied* is the better thing to say, the weightier thing to say, the more of a maze.

That's the day, today, but how would she describe herself?

This is where her preoccupation takes her. There and to thinking about arguing with people's predictions about the weather.

Or was that to avoid describing herself?

'Clever of me' she thinks and up goes the radio volume even though it's a commercial and she furiously steels herself to the endurance of such. A heartfelt, bought-and-paid-for endorsement for a steakhouse, one she's seen on her drives around every day she's lived in the area.

It was almost too late she pressed down on her brakes, stark halt, waited out the light feeling obvious, exposed, the volume turned down in a timid I've-learned-my-lesson.

'But what're we supposed to do about Eleanor? Because, in the end, it's her call ...' the woman preparing her coffee was saying to the man with her.

The man had his soft-drink and was taking a bite out of whichever



manner of sandwich that was—dark breaded, whiskers of lettuce, it looked like a children’s film prop.

‘Why’s it Eleanor’s call?’ the man mouthfuled.

‘Because Eleanor ...’ the woman began replying, but something had gone wrong with her adding sugar or something, so an abrupt halt came to the proceedings.

Lucy felt she’d stopped listening in, but when the woman said ‘Because Eleanor’s Eleanor, she’s always in it and she stamps the papers, man ...’ she couldn’t keep herself from straining her ears, wondering what the reply would be.

Hurriedly, she moved to the other end of the gas station shop.

There’s her face, in semi-reflection of frosted freezer-shelf glass, most of her not visible.

There’s her eye, though, evident because of the thick orange of the French-bread pizza boxes.

Wink.

Smile, too.

But that she can’t see.

Then, at the cash-register, very last moment sucker move, she got summoned over to be rung by exactly the cashier she didn’t want. The young girl who shouldn’t be there, who shouldn’t be allowed to speak to her. Even her feint of taking a beat as though uncertain she had her money with her did no good, the clerk she desired had ushered the customer behind her to that counter, a tiny ‘Excuse me,’ and that voice, that perfect other clerk’s voice going ‘How’re you today?’ to not Lucy.

Hell on Earth!

The young girl was crisp and precisely gorgeous in that way young people were until looked at closer.

‘What a sad little sack you are’ Lucy thinks.

The girl?

The girl or you, Lucy?

Didn’t you look like that, ever?

The thought is morbid, bread gone off. Even in her young pretty days she wasn’t so nothing-else-but-pretty as this happy girl who told her, now, that she liked chewing the same gum as Lucy, zapping the barcode with vigor and smiling with no sense of self-consciousness.

‘Write a novel’ she thinks.

How to go about it?

Just make the character your mom.

How’s it go?

She says ‘Your mom’s a drunk, realizes she’s gambled all the money gone. Run with it from there. It shouldn’t take too long.’

How would my mom get into such a situation?

This does clog up her thinking, but she gives the matter a squint while she wipes and flushes, takes up her plastic bag, and goes to the faucet to wash hands.

Maybe not write a novel.

She unwraps the fresh pack of cigarettes but doesn’t take one out, just gets the pack to her pocket so that it takes on the still stiff slouch, a slight start of crumple. This is an old superstition, to never smoke the first smoke straight fresh from a new pack, always from a pocket after walking, sitting at least once.

Has this music been playing the entire time she’s been to the toilet?

Well it couldn’t have just this moment started, with Lucy stalling, backpedaling, her hand already having begun pressing forward the door to exit.

She tests—yes, the same music as out in the store—then decides to linger at the mirror just awhile.

What does this music even want?

Why’re there even songs for this particular Holiday?

Certainly people, these people, these singers, are only singing these phrasings because they’re being paid. The world can only have so many bent teeth, can only bristle in so many postures. Nowhere can there be human beings who look forward to this music, who sing along, unless in that awful way cat-food jingles are sung along to, remembered at night, treasonous minds mocking sleep and concentration with them.

The bathroom door opens and in walks a woman dressed as though off from work at a buffet restaurant, just that sort of haggard, just that sort of dinge to the uniform shirt.

Though now she feels a little bit bad.

There was no need to be so cutting in her criticisms of the clerk.  
Or there were reasons, but it was still an ill thing to do.

Cliché.

Lucy's sorry she was so cliché in it all. To call out the little girl for being such a little girl when of course she was. It's not the girl's fault she's had no time to be anything but a haircut and a way her shoulders look in a shirt.

Now, in this softer critique, she gets to wondering if there's an outside chance that the girl was still a virgin.

Or if not, how did she feel about that whole event?

When she told someone, honestly confided.

Or did she?

Was she the sort?

Or did she not even confide to herself her feelings about such things, even give herself lines and evasions as people do?

Less cliché is to wonder if that poor little girl's the sort who didn't tell the truth to even herself.

At the turn which leads to the long stretch of road, the final turn which'll end her up eventually, in ten or fifteen minutes, at her destination, she squirms around in her seat a bit, now wanting to be comfortable.

The guest being interviewed is an aerospace engineer and never before has Lucy found this sort of thing interesting. This woman though—Lucy hasn't caught the name—is arresting in even the commonalities of how she speaks. In the obviousness that she has to talk way way way down to be at the layman level of the interviewer, who is, the interviewer, herself very erudite and possesses a wide store and scope of knowledge.

Outside the window: Fields shoulder into houses nudge into buildings, a little town, the roads under her get more even, kempt, soon'll slip away into fields again, all the way until that forlorn, lowly traffic-light, no intersection, dangling, and always set to a red-blink.

'This is the road into forgotten' thinks Lucy, listening to a beautiful woman speak wonders out of aerospace.

She parks, as she tends to, in the lot down the street from the bank

and stares at the bank and stares and stares at the bank.

The bank.

What's it about?

There's nothing, it isn't even in some little way like the sort of bank which could be photographed to look like something.

What an uncanny draw she feels to it, because this parking space is not only random but inconvenient, in that she has to cross the street a few times to get where she's going and has to pass cafes that have tables on the street, the tables always full of people who aren't like her and who look at her as she approaches, as she passes.

Worse.

She wants to howl, instead drags leisurely on her cigarette like a film much cooler than herself, blows the smoke at the inside of her windshield in a way that cinema would make iconic.

Worse worse worse.

These people think they're like her.

She them.

It's the loose tooth of a nightmare.

In the window of a ground-floor apartment there's a collared cat.

No.

It's a shop.

A cat in a shop!

Delighted, Lucy thinks she's been going about everything in life wrong and limply vows to turn it all around, to take in the flaws like graces and all of that.

Who told her that?

No one.

Points to her!

She's made it up—a jolly expression!—and, most symbolically, at the moment she's vowing to start anew in just such a way.

Gears grind, but no need to be sullen.

That line's from a movie, Lucy.

A grandmother tells it to her grown daughter.

*Take the flaws like graces.*

Lucy slumps like an aw-shucks and doesn't even realize it and something in her stomach gives way to a deep sense of distrusting everything about herself.

A grandmother.

An actress.

Why did she have to remember that when she knows she's forgotten so many other things?

And this would've actually meant something to her!

Had the thought been her originality, just then, just there, today!

ARIEL WASN'T IN THE OFFICE when Lucy arrived. No one was in the office. Which is one of those things that's both usual and unusual simultaneously.

The hours—which Lucy, and Ariel for that matter, refer to as 'the hours'—for the office—referred to as 'the office'—were loose and set by no one apart from Lucy and Ariel, with the exception of Thursday and Friday—and the twice-monthly Saturday for setting the final files to printer—but Ariel had the more standard life between the two of them and tended to be in by ten o'clock most days, hard at work—'hard at work'—already by the time Lucy wandered in at eleven, twelve, three, four.

The understanding between them, a tacit one, was that, since they'd obviously know if the other wasn't doing what the other ought be doing, if Lucy wanted to show up at seven at night and work till the cock crowed it was her prerogative.

Ariel though, Lucy thinks—here, now, looking at the empty trailer-office under the buzz of the strengthening fluorescent track-lighting—was most often there, waiting, the coffee she'd have brought for Lucy cold, the breakfast sandwich the same.

Lucy was staring at a movie review in *Entertainment Straight!* sighing, thinking about a cigarette, and about how she was going to invert the content of thing—write her review of the film viciously negative as opposed to the original's obsequies lauding—when the office door opened and Ariel came in coughing, pointing back behind her as though with something of grave import to relate, immediately changing posture when the door closed, and, dropping a thump step while she said it, saying to Lucy 'Thank God you're here!'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. I just don't think I could've bore the thought of not

seeing Lucy Jinx, today.’

Lucy shrugged, squinted, said ‘Are you being nice just because you don’t have coffee and sausage for me?’

‘Aren’t I always nice?’ Ariel points her fingers like a gun. ‘Aren’t I, bitch, always nice and courteously so—courteous to a fault!?’

The telephone rang but neither of them moved to pick it up, none of their duties necessitating them ever to do so.

‘What you’re saying is you don’t have coffee? Or sausage?’

‘You want some sausage in your mouth, is it? Hot sausage?’

Ariel changed her gun to a pantomime of smoking, tilting her head toward the door she’d only the moment before entered through, and Lucy got up smiling ‘I want your hot sausage in my mouth.’

The trailer-office was located at the extreme end of the parking lot which serviced the flagship *Hernando’s Grocery* and, as often she did, Ariel, voice a somber intimation, leaned in to say ‘That’s the flagship store, Lucy.’

‘It’s the starship *Enterprise*.’

‘It is, Lucy. It’s the starship *Enterprise* of Hernando’s fleet. And we work in a trailer in plain view of it. Do you know why?’

Lucy screws up her face good, little kindergartener looking ‘Because we’re lucky ducks?’

Ariel knits brow, villainous suspicion ‘How did you know that? Who told you that?’

They both break the joke with an earnest, well-treaded laugh, Lucy’s smoke out mouth left up, Ariel’s out left down, Ariel punctuating the scene with ‘We laugh, but it’s true. It’s true, Lucy. It’s true.’

And Lucy thinks that tree—look at it, there, the only one—planted in the parking lot, where otherwise there’re only lampposts, is sublime and exists for a special, subtextual reason.

This edition, Ariel has asked to do the *CelebrInterview* feature because the television chef is someone she actually likes.

‘It’ll give me a thrill in my nether parts’ says Ariel, adding that she finds it a shame she isn’t allowed to mock-up the celebrities’ answers as well as reworking the phrasings of the questions put to them while she was at it considering ‘Who in Hell would ever know, when it all

comes down to it?’

A fine observation, yes, but Lucy knows that Ariel knows how Hernando, himself, has set super-strict guidelines on the *CelebrInterview* section based on—as had been outlined at terrific length in a memorandum filed in the top cabinet drawer—some news-magazine on television talking about libel and copyright and such things, way back when this publication of his had first started.

‘Why doesn’t Hernando just get us on one of those lists that lets us access the actual, generic interviews like the websites get—the sanctioned ones?’

‘Don’t ruin my life, Lucy, please. Don’t take this from me ...’ Ariel sighs tall as a church-door, following up with ‘... and we’re not some chicken-dicked *website* baby, we’re a *magazine*’ Lucy bowing her head ‘Holy Ghost mea culpa sorry sorry sorry.’

It never doesn’t astonish Lucy to find that the *Open Submissions to Poetry Corner* mailbox is always full. True, its contents come from all fourteen of the *Hernando’s Grocery* stores—every two weeks a driver adding the pick-up and drop-off to whatever else this driver does—so the submissions don’t generate overnight, but none of this gets away from the fact that these are physical, paper-and-pen or computer-print poems submitted by actual human beings, things put in purses or on passenger seats while stores are driven to, expressions prepared, are words written for the express purpose of submission to this very magazine.

‘It’s Lovecraftian’ Lucy thinks, counting out—it’s a horror of the Elder Gods!—thirty-nine, forty, forty-one submissions for the coming edition. ‘It’s like a lost chapter of *Charles Dexter Ward*!’ she exclaims to Ariel who, typing, says, even-keeled ‘You’ve no one to blame but yourself, Lucy—from now on keep your good ideas in a jar on top the fridge, right?’

Like this poem: *An Ode To Dead Goldfish*.

Like this poem: *Desmela’s Last Kiss*.

‘*Desmela’s Last Kiss*, Ariel ...’ says Lucy ‘... *Desmela*! The first thing a poet ought’ve done is to’ve realized some names can’t be poetic.’

‘*Desmela’s Only Kiss*, more like it’ says Ariel and Lucy, as she will do, likes this more than it needs to be liked and enthusiastically semi-

guffaws about ‘Yes, yes that would work, the one exception!’

Now sure, Lucy jokes—these poems, their peevisishness, their glimpses of more than she’d ever dared fear of the people around her, of their limits, of their photo-thin souls—sure, Lucy shares some of these titles out with morbid smile and sarcastic playful batting to Ariel, but please know—Lucy, we know—that her terror is actual, this feeling she has but cannot describe, the one which ties braids of her veins and could smother her outright in sack-cloth black dread were she alone in the room with the things.

‘You just wear that shirt to show off your mountainous tits to me, don’t you?’ says Ariel, crumpling a paper and tossing it at Lucy, the missile going far right, Lucy just staring down at it with a disappointed-in-you shake of her head.

‘I’m a C-cup, Ariel’ Lucy smiles, shifting her shoulders around just to feel the off-fit of the shirt fit offly, remembering how the second-to-last button up from the bottom is the one she’d replaced, the only thing she’s ever sewn to anything by hand.

‘To me, who hasn’t had to buy new shirts since fifth grade, they are Kilimanjaro. It is imponderable, your bust’ Ariel says, cartoon-face of awing despair—*Your bust* pronounced with foreign accent, one word like *Yabust*.

Lucy—after return joke, some patter, after five minutes of Ariel back to typing, Lucy herself back to typing—covertly examines the thin edges of Ariel’s shoulders pushing through the thinner of her t-shirt, soft, semi-transparent brown, on the front of which was some faded, cracked lettering Lucy’d been too shy to read.

They do their usual game of sharing *Traits Of The Office They Love The Most*.

Lucy: That though only Lucy, Ariel, sometimes Hernando, and one man who certain days drops off supplies, are ever inside the trailer, there’s a cloth basket with a stack of the current issue of *Hernando’s Highlights* in it, on this cloth stuck a handwritten sign, copy paper, lettering from green magic marker, the word *Complimintery*, misspelling and all, proudly showing.

Ariel: That a small bronze plaque has been affixed to the entrance-door—‘Right above the doorknob, no less’ Ariel adds, this being her



main point—with the sort of fine engraving on it one has to lean in close to see, while also holding a hand in front of it to cast a shadow, the words *Publication Offices* curled out in cursive.

Lucy says she wants to switch favorite things because Ariel's is the more hilarious, but Ariel vulgarly tells Lucy something meaning 'Better luck next time' and gives a motion like a man would make, a triumphal humping, then says 'Let's go smoke, again, for my prize.'

Since the *Capsule Reviews* take the least time and since Lucy's prideful of her glorious insistence that they be labeled *Capsule Reviews*—because isn't *Capsule* such an exquisite word, one of the finest the language has on offer?—Lucy plows along through them, this week in a good mood and so not even troubling herself with taking different slants than the reviews she's cribbing from.

The noia is her own that anyone, even Hernando, would care if she drew her versions of the reviews all from original reviews found in a single magazine—Ariel admits she and another man who'd once worked there tended to do things that way—but is jagged enough she's certain, even while good-mooded and lazy-happy like right now, to take each from a different source.

Where do these movies come from?

And all these people writing about them?

Why?

She knows why she is, she admits, but then again she really isn't writing them and doesn't actually know why she's writing them as much as she is, other than for the paycheck and that it still seems so bizarre a thing to do how could she not.

But these other people?

These thoughts?

What?

And Why?

And Why?

The telephone rings. They ignore it. They look at each other, ignoring it. They look at each other ignoring it.

Ariel smiles and says, once the ringing has stopped 'We did that well' and Lucy says 'We've had practice.'

Ariel complains how one girl—'In college' she adds with a

peculiar derision, self-referential as well as Lucy-referential since both Lucy and Ariel, indeed, are more than college-educated themselves—used to answer the phone, despite being counseled that she didn't need to, and how this girl would always apologize afterward by going 'I know, I know, but I just worry it might be something important'.

'And thus this girl didn't last long, Lucy, and thus is why she was shit-canned with the rest of that land-lubbery lot!' Ariel says, giving Lucy a point, then a thumbs-up, then a hand gesture of *You're A-Okay*.

Lucy smiles, a little bit blushing though surprised to be, and, to hide this, says 'Well, they don't learn about not answering the phone until the last day of college' and Ariel laughs, an ugly burst that's so beautiful it makes Lucy laugh, too.

#### THE LOT SEEMED LOPSIDED.

Better say: The lot still seemed lopsided, the whole of it a lackadazic lilt to the left.

Or the right.

'What do I care?' Lucy thinks and honestly cannot answer when she decides to treat the question as something more than a rhetorical blat.

'I honestly don't know what I care' she says aloud but barely, approaching the furthest out of the parked cars, consciously shifting her monologue entirely inward.

She hadn't asked where Ariel had needed to go off to and was still nervous that her 'But I'll be back, an hour tops, just need to be someplace' was something that could be rescinded with a simple phone call. Or worse, with just a not-showing-up-again, as Lucy, Ariel would know, wouldn't answer the phone, regardless.

A man was singing a song to his child as he secured the kid in a car-seat, this man still singing as he stood up, gave Lucy a smile she pointedly didn't return.

Take that, Mister Smile!

So this is the inside of *Hernando's Grocery*. Flagship. This is it. It's homely. Comely. It's about as charming as permafrost for all of its

banners and the café addition where sometimes—maybe every day, it strikes her—there’s live music.

*About as charming as permafrost.*

She needs a goddamned pen.

Don’t lose that.

Shit.

*The vague charm of permafrost.*

‘Can I use a pen?’

*All the vague charm of permafrost.*

‘Thanks.’

Nabs a flier to write on. Nothing.

Tries it on her hand. Nothing.

‘Excuse me, this pen doesn’t work.’

‘Doesn’t it?’

‘Well, not on my hand or this paper, maybe do you have regular paper?’

The clerk hits a button, some receipt paper extends extends extends is torn.

‘Thanks.’

She tries it.

Squiggle scrag dash dash dash.

‘Perfect, thanks.’

‘Sure thing.’

*About as charming as permafrost.*

*As charming as permafrost.*

Which?

Those are two different statements.

Where can she sit down?

She’s picked a table that wobbles and her shoe has stepped in something sticky because why not?

‘Fuck you, Lucy’ says Lucy and Lucy agrees, she agrees.

Her entire life—it’s been awhile now, she knows how long but for the sake of her feelings back-dates herself a bit—she’s wanted to just take some candy out of the self-fill bins, eat it without paying for it, but never has. Not as a child. Not as an adolescent.

Never.

Perhaps now, when oddly it’d be the most inappropriate, when

it'd be—let us not talk falsely—the least excusable a time in a lifespan to display such behavior, she can.

Perhaps she ought.

Or else?

Play it safe. Wait until she's elderly. When it'll again have become specifically excusable, when it'll have a context of specified appropriateness.

Now is the time because now is the only time it's truly wrong and she knows, right this minute, this is what she's been waiting for.

It's the Wrong she'd desired.

A kid, a teenage brat, a punk young girl, an old doddering woman: Everyone knows they'll take that candy and have charms in the cards for them when they do.

But now?

Lucy. Here you are. There's a gummy-worm. Take it.

No?

Then just stand there and look.

But everyone sees you. They really see you, Lucy. As you are.

'How much is a pound of this?' the man in the Deli line is now asking for the third time, the attendant not at all put off, uncertain, or moving to verify the price from anything but their own memory, despite the man leaning down, straightening, leaning down to look at the sign—that one, Lucy sees it, price clearly marked, exactly the price the attendant is giving.

'How much? Jesus. For beef-steak?'

'Yes, sir' the attendant gives Lucy a smile which she returns but also doubles as her exit move, still hearing the man talking but he dribbles off 'Wasn't it almost a clean two dollars less than that just last ...' by the time she's to the cereal aisle looking at toaster pastries.

A box to keep at the office?

Meh. They should sell single packs.

They should.

Strong self-assent.

An approaching worker says 'Excuse me' from still a good distance off, Lucy not certain had he meant her so she freezes, only ducking to the side when he's almost upon her, he meekly saying 'Sorry' as

he gets the empty palette cart by and then is gone through the swinging doors by the lobster tank.

‘Haven’t seen you around in awhile’ says Suzette as she rings out Lucy’s small purchase.

‘I’ve been around’ Lucy says.

Although Suzette says she hasn’t seen Lucy around for awhile every time Lucy comes through her line, at least—at least—three times a week, Lucy finds no cause to make a thing out of it.

More than that: Lucy likes this.

How long has Suzette worked this cashier job?

Well, look at her: That’s how long. So long that to describe her, even nude, is to describe Grocery Cashier. She’s a grocery cashier the way there’re shadows burnt to walls by the Atom Bomb.

‘Do you have a pen?’ Lucy asks.

‘There you are, dear. And how’s the magazine this week?’

Lucy writes and says ‘It’s coming good, good issue, good interview this time’—she writes *clerk the way there are shadows*—and Suzette says ‘I can’t wait’—writes *Atom Bombs*.

‘You know, a friend of mine submitted a poem’ Suzette says as Lucy’s moving away, small voiced, conspiratorial.

‘They aren’t allowed to write their names on submissions.’

Suzette nods.

Lucy, look at her!

Look at Suzette!

Come on Lucy, are you human!?

Don’t pretend you can’t see!

‘Well ...’ Say it! ‘... do you know what it was about?’

Cigarette. Out under the main awning. Even from here it’s plain: No Ariel’s car. Though it’s been all of half-an-hour.

No less disappointing.

Time has no bearing on disappointment.

‘Hell, something can happen exactly how you wanted it to and you can still feel disappointed it didn’t ...’ she says, enough surrounding noise she doesn’t even feel the need to whisper ‘... yep, sure can.’

Lucy knows she just looks like someone smoking and having a little talk with themselves.

And there's a young kid pushing the rounded-up shopping carts along, prim and vigorous, sure of the love of his first girlfriend.

'Yippie ...' she says '... yippie, young man.'

And Lucy's decent enough to not sarcastically sing a *Beatles* song in his direction.

How long did all that take?

Another five minutes?

She looks at the plastic bag she's set down, only vaguely remembering what she'd bought. Supposing, with her discount, it didn't matter. No different than having bought something she'd actually want and far easier than going through that hardship.

The same clerk at the café kiosk gives her a 'You're back' and she agrees that she is and asks for a coffee.

'Coffee's now over there' points the clerk.

An entirely separate café counter area, this one emblazoned with the logo of the local chain coffee house *Java Turkey*.

'When did that get here?' Lucy asks and is proud of herself, so local-person a thing to say.

'It's been there about a month. They kept it hush-hush all the way until two days before opening.'

'Did they?' Lucy asks, now genuinely intrigued.

'We all thought it was gonna be a *Toboggans*.'

'What's that?'

'Pizza and Ice Cream place. You've never had a slice at *Toboggans*? Or a cone?'

Obviously not. Obviously not, sir. 'No. They're pretty smashing, are they?'

'Not as good as *Quincy's* over in Breadworth, but yeah. We all wanted it to be a *Toboggans*.'

All she can manage to this is a nod.

Enough for one day.

*The sky has curdled, all of its fingers in all of its mouth.*

Lucy hurries, not regretting having two coffees to deal with, exactly, but wishing she'd only gotten the one for Ariel, as this is all slowing her down.

*All of its ears hear only all of its heart.*

No.

*All of its heart beat in all of its ears.*

She discards her coffee, notices a woman giving her a pointless look of ‘Oh no! Your coffee!’ and, because she’s been observed so flagrantly, is obliged to stop a beat, look anguished, and to not hurry off as sharply as she’d wanted—all-in-all her plan negated by random interference.

*All of its tummyache from all of its swallows down.*

Why’s this car moving so slowly beside her?

What could this mean?

Don’t look.

‘Yes?’

A woman rolls down her window. ‘Is there a gas station nearby?’

‘Nearby to what?’ What the devil could this person possibly mean!?’ ‘I’m not the lot attendant, ma’am. I don’t work here.’

At her desk, trailer-office lights not turned on, enough overcast through the window to have allowed her to write without making her feel back-on-the-clock yet, Lucy absently takes a sip of Ariel’s coffee, curses, and carefully wipes at the lid opening, squinting to be sure she’s left no trace of her mouth.

Then, to be certain of no further mishaps, she puts the thing over on Ariel’s desk, a scenario playing out vividly of the following exchange:

‘I got you a coffee.’

‘I got you a coffee, too.’

‘But I also got myself a coffee.’

‘I got myself a coffee too, but threw it into the street in a rush.’

‘I figured you’d done that, I just had a feeling’

‘But you figured I’d not be considerate enough to get you one, too?’

‘Why would I have imagined otherwise?’

Stop.

Yes, that could just keep going on.

Just one more.

‘You know me so well.’

‘I do.’

‘That was two more’ Lucy thinks to herself, but then argues she’d

meant one more two-set, back-and-forth, one more unit.

If she had a camera, she'd take a photograph of the three young men all lounging in the back of their empty moving truck, smoking their cigarettes, drinking whatever that was, tin music playing—this would almost be seen in the photo—from someplace she couldn't determine.

Why're they so happy?

Where're they moving?

Or had they moved here?

One apartment to another?

She levels some smoke out in their vague direction, whichever direction they're in vague.

Why couldn't Lucy be a young a man, she wondered, helping a pal move, smoking a cig, and feeling awesome, listening to flat-tire music?

She'd be good at it, she promises.

One day, she could be one such young man, the next day, another.

This is a sort of way a life could go, why not?

Couldn't that be the way an organism lived?

Of the three in this trio, she'd be the one without the beard, the one who didn't have his long sleeves rolled up, and who seemed to best know how to look while smoking, sat to the lip of the back of a moving truck.

SO HERE'S ARIEL, WALKING INTO the trailer-office and here's Lucy, in just that moment returning a happy greeting, also realizing she's been staring into vacant space for at least the preceding five minutes, tapping her pen on the desk, sometimes giving it an elaborate twirl around her fingers, but staring into space, nonetheless.

'Everything alright?' Ariel asks, for whatever reason turning to give a peek out through the lowered blinds of the trailer.

'Everything's fine. How'd everything go?'

Ariel sighs, to Lucy seeming oddly evasive—evidence: Still no eye-contact to speak of, not having moved to desk, standing in an area of the trailer Lucy really has no memory of her ever standing in



during the course of a given day—when she says ‘It all went fine. As fine as it can go. I don’t know. Fine I suppose.’

In a dreadful tension Lucy tries to sound nonchalantly jokey with ‘That sounded like a little song.’

By pure luck, Ariel just then notices the coffee waiting for her, turns and mock-lovelorn coos ‘Lucy ...’ the middle pronounced *oooooooooooo* ‘... you got me coffee. I didn’t get you anything. I’m a selfish monster or some kind of emotionless crab-person!’

The two shared the curious mix of sensation that comes from realizing they’d been under the impression they needed to prepare the issue for print this week when really they had until next.

How had this happened?

Was it worse or better?

Worse.

Mutually concluded.

‘We were stoked to do it, here and now—it’ll seem twice as dreadful by next week.’

‘I wasn’t stoked’ admitted Lucy and Ariel admitted the same, both of them confessing how, even if it did have to go print this week, neither had at all intended to do anything about it that day. This easily stitching to the further revelation that, in reflection, they likely never had been under the impression it was to go to print this week except for in the instant immediately before realizing it went to print next week.

‘I think everything’s dreadful, like the world’s stomach has a headache’ Ariel sagely imparts and, glowing, not to miss an opportunity like this, Lucy deftly whisks in ‘Or the world’s headache has a stomach’ which gets the prize of the modern world for Lucy in Ariel going ‘This is why you run *The Poetry Corner!*’

*The Poetry Corner.*

So let’s get to that.

What had Suzette said her lamentable little friend’s poem had been about?

Oh God—Oh God Jesus, oh God, no—oh for Christ’s this cannot be the thing!

Lucy feels a tremendous urge to belittle herself.

Here's your humanity, precious girl!

Here is your compassion!

This is what it looks like, what it reads like!

She got you, Suzette did, with her woe-mask of a face all tattooed up with mundane Hell—she got you!

She isn't you, Lucy—Lucy, you aren't where Suzette is and took steps to never be.

And this friend, too!

You've let Suzette get the better of you with her maudlin show of being common, human, frail—you've taken such steps to avoid those things but they got you, all the same, rusty nail of them stepped on, poisoned sheets slept between.

This is the poem!?

*To My Beautiful Girl.*

No.

No!

And it's about a cat.

Who can make a cat seem hideous?

This woman—this nameless friend of Suzette.

This is how she dares malign both poetry and feline?

Rhyming *Purr* with *her* is one thing—rhyming *meow* with the exclamation *And how!* is a darker complexion on a deader horse altogether!

What about it, Lucy?

Now you have a decision to make with direct repercussions.

Of course Ariel's noticed the war-torn brow of Lucy and has come to stand over her shoulder, positioned like three moons cooling the death of the Earth by an overstuffed sun.

'You look like your skin wants to strangle you, are you okay?'

Lucy cannot even joke. 'I promised to publish this.'

'You promised?' Ariel says, not even having read it yet—that note of incredulity you heard in the question, the emphasis on *You* and the singsong to the second bit of *Promised*, required not even an opinion of the verse, itself, but just a knowledge of Lucy, which, even in her current state, Lucy's glad to note Ariel has.

'I promised with my body. My face promised. Maybe she didn't notice, but people like her notice things like that—they think things

like that are real.'

*'How comfortable your fur / no wonder you wear it all hours'* is recited by Ariel, who tries to pretend like that might be an okay thing to exist as Lucy scans her face desperately for Let It Be True!, but—alack alack!—Ariel hands the paper back with a meager 'Lucy, I hate to tell you this ... but there's no balm in Gilead, there's no physician there.'

Lucy decides to just skip to the next part of her life. She accomplishes this, as best she can, by the following daydream while Ariel has to make some of the boring telephone calls, having lost three-in-a-row best two-out-of-three coin flip sets.

Here's Lucy in a cabin apartment on a small boat.

The desk with the typewriter is bolted to the stage boards of the room floor and a mirror, stained off-bronze with time, reflects her back like a drawing on soaked paper.

She lives on this boat and people know only to come to her door with food, news of terrible coming weather—she doesn't like to be caught off-guard, romantic penchant for sea-sickness if she doesn't brace—or to inform her there'll be a showing in the ship's cinema that night.

Not a month goes by that a guest on board doesn't know her by name, too shy to approach.

Not a week.

This is better.

A laugh with Ariel, now, about the nasal-voiced woman who titters like a bagful of field mice at the prospect of having an advertisement in the magazine even though she always has an advertisement, full page, in the magazine. This time—no rarity, every third issue she gets this—the woman gets the reverse cover.

'Her daughter designed this one' Ariel says, tone of voice in mock of the solemn way this'd been expressed to her.

'Not her famous daughter?' hand-clasp-to-hearts Lucy.

'The famous daughter, known to us all' Ariel finishes the scene as they both, unrehearsed, take meaningful postures to hold as the stage lights remain full a moment, dim, turn them silhouette, extinguish, applause.

‘This is for the bistro?’ Lucy wonders aloud, knowing full well it’s not, just wanting Ariel to say ‘For the *Kidnasyium*’—because who wouldn’t want Ariel to have to say that?

‘The *Kidnasyium*?’ repeats Lucy.

‘The ...’ begins Ariel, deftly catching on to Lucy’s great trick, pivoting to a graceful ‘... fucking writhe in Hell with your rotten onion of a mother, Loose.’

Taking a more casual gait of it, Lucy inquires as to what Ariel had been up to during lunch—referred to as ‘lunch’—hoping that it’s not entirely none-of-her-business ‘In which case, nevermind.’

‘No, no ...’ says Ariel, obviously not about to let out anything exact—mysterious, but something—and says ‘... I just had an appointment. Something. I don’t know what you’d call it.’

Lucy has nodded to this now fourteen times, Ariel not seeming put off by the silence, so this all indicates they both know there’s a thing and Lucy isn’t out-of-bounds, not unwelcome.

‘You don’t have an awful tumor or anything do you?’

‘You could call it that ...’ Ariel demurs—or Lucy inserts the word *Demurs* because it sounds beautiful, harmless, and she wants it to be the correct word, whatever it actually means—but she, Ariel, immediately overcorrects with ‘... I mean no no no it isn’t a tumor or anything, it isn’t any kind of anything like that at all, sorry’ which is, just from being said like this, in correction to so recently having so charmingly demurred, maybe the worst sound of a string of words Lucy has ever encountered.

The following is concocted by Lucy, on the spot, to weather what now seems an odd series of setbacks in mood and atmosphere. A story she claims, with forced animation she does indeed believe she pulls off without seeming forced, to be true and which she alleges she’d meant to relate ages ago.

It happened, according to Lucy, that driving home of an evening, recently—short-handed as ‘two weeks ago’—she’d felt distracted and had really wanted to listen to a particular *CD*. Although the road was empty, in a sudden fit of adult responsibility she’d slowed the car to a halt—‘There’s no shoulder to this road ...’ she ad-libs for authenticity ‘... so just there in the middle of the road, putting on

my hazard-lights’—and looked through the glovebox. Then, inserting the found CD, she’d glanced ahead at the road, preparing to drive on, only to see in her headlights the—she says ‘it seemed to me, then’—enormous form of a bulb-shelled tortoise, right there, directly in front of her, slugging along. Had she not stopped just when she did, for such a random reason, she would’ve destroyed this turtle, utterly.

Good story, Lucy.

And look: Effect achieved.

Remember Ariel as now, as that face, you did that.

The announcement is made by Ariel that the coffee Lucy gave her was all the necessary inspiration for this month’s penname for the lengthier, freelance—called ‘freelance’—editorial on Digital Cinema, this cribbed mainly from an article in a major New York newspaper, a recapping of a documentary in the current issue of *Frazzle*, and an actual editorial out of *Out Of Focus: The Cinematographer’s Magazine*.

‘This’ll be written by a man, of course ...’ Ariel zippily zips ‘... because women don’t care to make such masculine distinctions as Digital and Not Digital, because women actually understand Cinema and Art, unlike men who understand, at best, whether or not they like the shoes they bought that one time ...’ Lucy rolls her hands as though impatient, which causes Ariel to extend her blah blah blah shtick, sticking out her tongue, before finally saying ‘... it’ll be written by *Julio R.F. Zinn*.’

‘What does that have to do with coffee?’

‘It has everything to do with coffee, Lucy. I thought you, of all people, would get that.’

Faux look of exasperation, a hissy pout, Ariel’s lips a pretend-mean kiss.

Bottle rockets and candy kissing the grass under the moon!

There’s nothing to do in the room.

Is Ariel staying longer than needed because Lucy accidentally seemed more worried than she’d meant to seem, earlier?

Does Ariel want to maybe hang around with Lucy, if Lucy were to ask?

Because Ariel isn't doing anything and it's well past time she could've gone.

Lucy's about to go, in just a minute.

What if Lucy didn't go?

Would Ariel not go?

This job can be confusing like this because it's the sort of job that's surrounded by the tumult of every question that has nothing to do with the act of producing *Hernando's Highlights*.

'When's the last time you watched a movie, Lucy?'

Was that actually Ariel asking that?

Blink blink.

'Uh ... I ... have no idea. Am I fired now that you've discovered what a fraud I am?'

'Yes. You're fired. I've turned State's Evidence. I did so without any consideration for you. I didn't even know what it meant and still don't. Your goose, Loose, is right and truly cooked.'

'When's the last time you watched an actual movie?'

Ariel seems to not want to be able to answer when she, instead, has to say 'Last night. But I'd seen it before. I'd seen it a few times before. You know?'

Lucy nods. She pictures a romantic comedy. Seen many times. 'I hear ya' Lucy says.

She also pictures Ariel, in the blue glow of the flickering romantic comedy, and whoever else that is with Ariel.

But whoever-that-is-with-Ariel is a different flicker of blue, the kind that a corpse turns before it disintegrates.

Ariel's the flickering-middle-of-the-night of tired-eyed-cinema.

The same as Ariel always is.

THIS TRAFFIC IS LUCY'S OWN fault.

Though what Lucy really means by this is that the particular quality of its tortuousness is the fault of Lucy. In a general sense, traffic doesn't even bother her. She'll just sit in her thoughts—like that one there, this one here, that one there—and will have the radio playing—*Chopin*, *NPR*, *Rancid*, random station—and will be content as an unknown thing so far near the sea-bottom we'll never know it exists.

But: She, on nearly her first day of work, had said to herself—or had thought, or something like that—how this particular traffic had the feel of a toilet queue and so now her stomach begins loosening as she sharp-tingles with the need to urinate every time she gets trapped in the clog of it.

Doesn't she take precautions, know this'll be the case, and act responsibly?

'Of course I do' Lucy seethes.

Of course she does. Always voids herself before leaving work.

But it doesn't matter.

No Lucy, it never matters: You brought this on yourself.

How she imagines it: The majority of these cars take the same winding turn off to the left at a certain bend in the road and plunge into the sour of a swamp, submerge limpidly, and then, over the course of the nighttime hours, air pockets raise them back out, they pull onto the road, car-washes are kept in the black, and the life-cycle repeats as it has since whenever the muck of this nowhereescape first became what she grudgingly admits to be civilized—a word she pronounces, in this case, to sound like whatever jumble of letters would onomatopoeia the cringe of a slobbery tooth over a dry one.

Listen: What's on the radio?

Just that.

And how many times has this same album cycled through in just the last week?

Well there's nothing on the radio in the afternoon, anyway.

Hearing well-spoken voices talk incisively about meaningful events elsewhere 'round the globe with full soul and erudite understanding of their pertinence—well!—that's just too much for Lucy to bear, right now.

Every day, right now.

Every day, around this time.

Lucy doesn't want to feel envious of war orphans and then later feel guilty for being so self-absorbedly awful.

There's a list of small responsibilities in her head. Simple list. Things that can be taken care of in three-quarters of an hour.

Now she's talking to herself, but note: The traffic is moving.

Now she's saying to herself 'I say three-quarters of an hour to make it seem longer. There's ways to say everything to make it sound awful, ways to make it sound normal, ways to make it sound pleasant. Three-quarters of an hour is dreadful. Forty-five minutes is regular. Not-even-an-hour is nice. Tada—Shakespeare, crown me something, stitch me by hand into a quilt.'

Now she's boring herself, embarrassed that most of that was so malformed, not witty worth spit.

What a brute, Lucy, such low class you might as well let your bra-strap show and always be pulling your hair up when people are around.

Never put off till tomorrow what you can put off till the day after tomorrow.

'Who said that?' she whispers.

Not you. Maybe Garfield the cat.

Anyway, it's not even that clever, little miss.

Rain is the most romantic thing that happens around this place. It makes even the *Countrytowne Buffet* seem as though there might be something going on inside.

As Lucy passes now—not a whiff of rain, not even a thickening of ozone building up around, the overcast broken, sky through tender cloud cover, sunlight—the ghastly *Countrytowne Buffet* is entirely void of beauty, even for the Joycean altogetherness of its name, something Lucy knows is likely better attributed to a mistake or simple illiteracy than kinship to the pen of an Irish thunderclap holy soothsaying firecracker.

The place looks like it could be peopled with slugs.

Edit: The place looks like it could be filled with slugs covered under inches-and-a-half of dust.

Edit ... naw, leave it.

'You get the idea' Lucy sighs.

No point changing the *CD* at this point. Listens to the whir of it resetting for track-one, the *dant dant dant* of the first strikes of drum mixed with synth, something delightfully early-computer-game sounding.

What in Hell was she thinking of?



When?

Just now, before.

Grind grind grind.

Ah! Responsibilities. Get the bills into envelopes, good riddance.

She'll put off the telephone calls.

No. Yes. No.

Meh.

She doesn't quite want to be home yet, so this parking lot will do.

Outside, car, leaned to, Lucy, light flame, cigarette, mouth, thick smoke, circle lips, kaboom.

Smoke two of them, Lucy.

'Three.'

Deal, but then you've got to get home.

No one argues it'd be too early, now.

So awkward to wend in while the mother does homework or piano practice with the child. Though you're welcome. Don't even need to quick-step through like over just-polished floor, just-shampooed carpet, like dog tongue stealing half-of-bacon-slice dropped accidentally.

Exhale. Long. Look at that smoke. A whore of a breath, that, a million dollars for one night, no doubt about it!

Smoke three, Lucy.

You do pay rent. And they both even like you. The child even drew that picture of you and on that homework said you were his favorite part of his house.

'Could I get a cig?'

Who's this?

Shit. He thinks he's handsome, yeah?

Sure does, with that shirt he thinks he's got something one-size-fits-all in his wit.

This will go poorly.

'This was my last. Sorry, man.'

'No worries, no worries. You always smoke here?'

You're within your rights, Lucy, this isn't okay of him—poor bugger might not know it, but like a gravedigger shouldn't eat cotton candy on the job is the same as how this guy ought know to be more prudently behaved.

'I do. Always. Where do you always smoke?'

What're you doing?

God.

Just to see what he says?

Okay.

'I used to smoke right here. Always. But I moved away and I guess you Bogarted in.'

'Where did you move?'

'To Egypt.'

'Like Cleopatra.'

What're you doing, Lucy?

'I took her old smoking spot, come to think of it.'

'Birds of a feather, I guess.'

You do know you want to smoke a whole 'nother cigarette, right Lucy?

'Birds of a feather, yeah.'

'Why'd you leave? Did she show up again and bug the shit out of you, like you're doing?'

Why put a sign up indicating a quarry is thirty-six miles off in that direction?

There isn't a sign, a mile that way, saying the quarry is thirty-seven miles away, nor one two miles that way or three indicating it's thirty-eight, thirty-nine.

Could this be, some investigation unearthed, the spot where people, on average, first start to wonder how many miles away that quarry is?

And what's the matter with Lucy's foot, now?

Why're her toes sweating, all of a sudden?

These are questions no one was asking until a moment ago.

We're DNAs tip-tip-tapping along through some cycle until turning to nothing, surrounded by limitless questions that don't need to be asked.

And here's the blinking sign for the *Shoe-Repair and Watch-Repair* which signals she's suddenly, abruptly, just about home.

This sign, when it's midnight dark outside—it isn't now, but just to mention it—is so bold and deity-bright one can almost hear, even with windows closed and radio cranked up garbage-truck loud, the

contractions of the electricity prodding the light out from nothing in the itty-bitty bulbs of the letters.

To understand the swell of luckiest-girl-in-the-world Lucy feels when the mother's car isn't present—even tempered by the ought-to've-remembered-it-wouldn't-be sigh, because the car's never there until late evening, this day in the week—isn't something Lucy even attempts.

Cold like a shivering fish rush of joy over her, she just stares at the outside of the empty house and hasn't even undone her seatbelt.

Incredible.

And she'll still have an hour.

The bricks of the house almost seem yellow they're grinning so welcomingly.

And her bones are hand-warmed putty done being played with, dropped to the floor, restful as the sleep which comes after screaming into a telephone for two hours.

Somewhere a neighbor starts a leaf-blower and even this doesn't bother her—though it's wholly uncalled for, leaf-blower, the evening, no decorum to whoever that is!

There must be something wrong with Lucy.

What happened today?

Why does any of this mean anything to her and where has this mood cockroached out from?

What even is this mood, can she tell?

A message is being left on the machine and Lucy listens to it.

So quaint, this old fashioned answering-machine. Peculiar to have in a home which rents a room to strangers. But then again, the fax-machine in the mother's bedroom caterwauls, desperate feline yarls all hours, as well, so these people are obviously accustomed to their own sounds and think nothing of others knowing them.

Those candy-bars have been on the kitchen counter all week.

Is it possible they were meant for Lucy?

Not wanting to risk it, she writes a quick note promising she'll replace the candy tomorrow but was jelly-willed and couldn't argue with her sweet-tooth anymore, she'd just given up even though she knew it no longer loved her.

Smiley face.

Weird. You're so weird, Lucy.

Winky smiley face.

Might as well give it a bow-tie.

'Stop yer flirtin'' she says with an off-brand country accent, getting the chocolate's first corner unwrapped.

So: Here's your room, again.

Here's Lucy's room.

Anything changed?

Not a thing, not a jot.

She wishes she were more paranoid so that she could work herself into a tizzy, sometimes. There must be something about the room which could at least seem to be different were she unbalanced enough to really force the issue. Something malodorous in this home.

*Malodorous*. Good word.

She jots it down and while she does wonders if her just having thought the word *Jot* the moment before had made her think to jot it and so also jots the word *Jot* and sings a song that goes 'Jot jot-jot-jot jot-jot-jot jot' to the tune of the final notes before the final chords in the first movement of the *Pathetique Sonata*.

'Malodorous jot' she says.

Seems a good thing to call someone. That suave little prick who tried to pick up on her while she smoked.

'Fuck off, you malodorous jot' she tries out and her room stays empty and quiet afterward in a clear sign of approval.

Also she tries, this done like as a line in a play not as like a scene in real life: 'Petey? Petey, you mean? That malodorous jot!? Why would you think he'd been here?'

If she were to lay down now she'd sink like something found weeks later in a motel pool by a wading kid's tippy-toe.

LUCY STILL ISN'T DRESSED BY the time she hears the front door opening downstairs.

She'd fallen asleep.

Had she meant to?

Had I meant to?

Evidence to the contrary: Her odd positioning on the bed, one leg half-dangled over the side, the thin sheet, orange, just vaguely draped to her body. Not even draped. A wrinkled triangle of it sort of covers one of her breasts, the other breast long exposed, goose-fleshed and tightened from the constant air-conditioning.

Final evidence?

The room door isn't closed.

Jesus!

That disaster quickly remedied—closed, locked, tested—Lucy gets her bearings, nude in front of the not-drawn blinds of the room window, looking at some neighbors smoking and airing their dogs.

They can't see you, Lucy, running fingers in scoops under your arms and painstakingly scratching the side of your hip, deep pressing skin, stretching up up so that your calves might cramp and feeling your toes go crick-crick in the muffle of un-vacuumed carpet.

There comes a soft tapping at the door as Lucy finishes with getting her socks on, the same socks she'd been wearing all day.

'Yes? Come in.'

The handle is tried but doesn't, of course, turn, the mother's voice starting but remaining unheard because Lucy's already shaking her head at her silly self and saying 'Sorry' then unlocking the thing and opening it casually wide.

'I'm sorry, I don't mean to bother you.'

What's her scent?

Lucy always wants to ask but that just isn't a question Lucy's ever asked anyone and so somewhere inside of herself feels she isn't the sort of person who asks things like that.

'It's no bother ...' Lucy's smile almost knocks off her ears for going big-wide so hurriedly followed by an I'm-such-a-dork bleh face and a depreciating chuckle into '... I was just spacing out, I appreciate the jostle.'

'It's fine if you don't want to ...' the mother is whispering, leaning in, breath the same as that scent—could it be just a natural scent? '... but Flynn wanted me to ask if you wanted to have some of the cake he got, he wanted me to invite you.'

Stop smiling, Lucy, and say something.

Nod nod.

That works.

‘Why does he have a cake?’ Lucy whispers, stealthy step into hallway, closing her door like a diary lock while she does.

The child, Flynn—Lucy’s known its name since moving in but doesn’t like Flynn as a name despite she likes the child rather more than she tends to like children—asks Lucy what she does for a living, an obvious affectation lifted from somewhere to his posture and the pronouncement of the question.

From the kitchen where she’s putting slices of cake to plates and getting napkins and such things, the mother serves as footnote ‘They’re doing Careers in school, this week’ the child, Flynn, repeating right on top of his nodded approval of his mother’s explaining him ‘So what do you do for a living?’

‘I plagiarize’ says Lucy, at the same time turning to take her plate and flash a smiling ‘Thank you’ to the mother who’s chuckling in response, asking the child ‘Flynn, do you know what that means?’ as she sets down his plate and then turns to retrieve her own from the kitchen.

Flynn looks at his cake and then up at Lucy ‘What does it mean?’ and then back at the cake, obviously uncertain if he’s supposed to wait for a fork or tuck in bare-fisted.

The reason the child has a cake is that he received a ribbon for a Science project in school and the earning of said ribbon was so unexpected the mother felt the need to grandiosely make a thing of it.

Flynn using the toilet, the mother whispering—Lucy realizes pointedly that when the mother whispers to her she gets a feeling almost like being drunken, giddy in her chest, from listening to the hiss-hush—how ‘I didn’t even know he was working on a goddamn Science project, knew nothing about it, and totally didn’t know there was a contest! Since when does this punk like science!?’

The mother fake growls and Lucy—aww—is smiling with her teeth pinching her lower lip.

‘Are you sure he actually got a ribbon for a Science project?’ Lucy decides to act bold enough to ask, familiar tone and everything.

The mother lets out one regular volume sound of a laughter, stifles, and says 'Very first thing I thought! That's the fucking first thing I thought! What Science project!? But I wanted a cake anyway, so figured I shouldn't be responsible, attentive, ask too many questions, risk ruining it all.'

Describe the child?

Eh. A kid. Flynn. Has a surname, but not the mother's. Some story there. Hair about that length a kid in second, third grade or whatever has. The color, as well.

Since when has Lucy ever had to describe a kid?

It's like asking someone to describe their dog beyond its breed.

A kid is a breed. It looks like what that looks like.

But for sake of humoring: The kid has brownish hair and a tapered face and tends to either smell like bubble-gum—the scent of his shampoo or hand-soap?—or else that sweat that kids sweat that doesn't quite smell like sweat but more like soggy mulch.

Right now: Lucy's looking at the kid—who is over there in the living-room, laid on the carpet, drawing in a notebook, talking to itself—while she desperately fights the urge to clear the dishes while the mother is out of the room for just a moment, having asked Lucy 'Can you hang out a bit or did you have to get going?' before having quick-quickened up the stairs, silence a moment, then some beeps of numbers on a fax-machine being pressed.

The mother's looking at the clock politely from time-to-time while they chat and Lucy knows full well this is the time of evening the child usually is about to take its bath and whatnot, the final stretch of its night spent pajamaed and wet-haired with a comb's teeth through it pristinely apparent.

'I wanted to let you know that you should feel free to use the shower in the master bedroom ...' the mother says, shake to her face, cartoon-rabbit twitch of nose like she had whiskers to accent the expression of I-should've-told-you-this-long-ago '... I know it can't be fun to share a bathroom with Flynn, exactly.'

'It's fine ...' Lucy says and says '... but maybe I will, thanks. I just wouldn't want to intrude with my showering at all hours.'

The mother shrugs like this renting a single room in the house—a

room without its own shower, no less—is just the most oh-so-absurd little world imaginable, segueing the resigned look of Ah-what-a-life into her saying ‘Anytime. It’s a human right. Lord knows it must be awkward for you in the evening to always worry if you’re bothering the kiddo. I don’t think I thought this landlord thing through—and thank you for being so wonderful about it.’

A crisscross of voice, water splash, room tile echo, overhead fan, the mother and child are singing a bathtime song—more-or-less *Happy Birthday* but with some gimmick of not saying *Birth* and instead inserting any other word in its place, funny scraggle of voice to whichever replacement.

Happy *Blat* day.

Happy *Comb* day.

Happy *Zap* day.

Happy—this done triple-quick to approximately, though comically, keep the tune—*Caterpillar* day.

Happy *Pillow* Day.

Happy *I Need a Hamburger* Day.

Lucy’s at the piano bench, resisting the urge to start plinking the tune, the official tune, because—oh God!—how psychopathic a thing would that be to do!?

And after free cake?

The mother with the kid in the tub, singing goes quiet, vulnerable feeling, exposed to anything, forced to realize the room is rented to a serial murderer?

Don’t do that to them, Lucy.

Jesus.

In the meantime—as though it’s any better she’ll realize in a pinch of horror an hour later, panic-sick setting in—she’s been absently playing the songs in the child’s *First Funny Fingers* melody book, adding a few embellishments here-and-there in what limited way she’s able.

The matter-at-hand is as follows: So the mother is reading with the child, upstairs—not bedtime yet, maybe homework, maybe just a thing mothers do with their children, who knows?—and Lucy’s still in the living-room but unsure if it’d be uncouth of her to head out



without first saying ‘Goodbye’ to them both.

Very tricky.

Sure, Lucy’d like to think she feels this sense of vagrant obligation simply because they’d all spent the last bit of time kind-of-together but she knows that isn’t true at all.

So is it this: Lucy rather wants an excuse to pop her head in, say ‘Goodbye’ to the mother?

Why?

She doesn’t even want to think about this, obviously, because it doesn’t matter, any reason doesn’t make it less weird.

So: Say she does leave—which statistically is how any other evening would go—would her not saying ‘Goodbye’ be particularly noted?

If so, how?

In what tenor?

Damn it, Lucy.

Would it be better just to say ‘Goodnight’ to the kid?

No, Lucy.

What’s even the matter with you?

But you better find something to do other than sitting at this table, that much is certain.

It’s surprising how the child’s homework still involves circling things since these vocabulary words are pretty tough.

That’s Lucy’s assessment. If a kid knows what *Trepidations* are or what it means when someone says *Discombobulated* then they should be past the educational point where circling plays any role.

The kid has circled the wrong thing here, though. Maybe as a protest, Lucy smiles, thinking, but of course it’s not so.

No, the kid did circle the right thing.

Okay: Idiot points to Lucy, read the instructions ‘Jesus, someone ought to revoke my passport’ she mutters.

What terrific words.

*Top Shelf Words* the paper proclaims. *Level Red.*

*Nonchalant.*

*Obliterated.*

*Omnipresent.*

*Sublimation.*

*Cantankerous.*

*Sollicitous.*

*Rankle.*

‘These should be my vocabulary words’ Lucy says, scratching lower back then, just for a quick minute, the left cheek of her ass.

Upstairs can be heard ‘Why do you think a lion would even want a typewriter?’

‘It’s just a story, mom!’

‘You don’t think a real lion would want one?’

On the paper: *Cumulonimbus.*

*Trenchant.*

*Circumspect.*

*Aplomb.*

‘Aplomb’ whispers Lucy and there are her teeth in her lower lip, again—what’s that, five times tonight?

‘Are you still here?’ the mother asks, coming around the corner from just then descending the stairs, moving right to the cupboard for one of the plastic cups the child drinks from, the tone of the question happy but genuinely surprised.

For no reason at all other than, of course, feeling caught and ridiculous and shameful and scardy-cat, Lucy answers that she was just about to leave, actually, a friend had sent her a message.

That last part, the detail, was added to make things sound unassailably legit.

Watch this quick pivot, though: Lucy asks about what’d been so funny upstairs ‘cause the mother and the child had been laughing like loons the past five minutes.

And just like that, lickity-splitly, she’s gotten out of a briar-patch.

The mother explains, Lucy nodding and not listening, or listening but not getting the context. It was one of those odd things that happen—which Lucy knows all about, having had some with other people now-and-then—that cannot be explained to others so others simply listen-but-don’t when somebody’s fool enough to try.

‘I don’t think I’ll be out long and I’ll try not to knock over garbage-cans and accidentally play the tuba when I come in, you know?’

The mother smiles either because-of or in-spite-of the preceding,

possibly-most-idiotic sentence Lucy had in her life-to-date ever uttered, then tips the purple cup like a toast and tells her ‘You have fun, I’ll just hold down the fort.’

The mother probably feels weird about saying that too, of course, but Lucy, when she tells herself so, argues that she doesn’t see why she ought to.

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT’S HAPPENED, JUST here—it really is extraordinary, Lucy isn’t feigning that, anyone would agree, and it’s spooked her, moreover—we have to skip back just a few minutes.

Now: Lucy’s merely sitting in the front of her car, radio on—the song is irrelevant but happens to be *Come Right Back* by *The Honeycombs*, entirely by chance, random station selected—and the thing has just happened.

But just before: She’d left the house a little while ago on the pretext given the mother, for no reason, that a friend had messaged her. Drove away, Lucy did, nowhere to go and certainly no friend had gotten in touch and she’d no mind for much of anything, in general. She got out of the car to use the toilet inside a rather largish gas station shop.

Okay?

There’s Lucy, now. A minute ago, now, after that set up. She looked at her phone and said ‘Okay friend, now message me to meet you’ and whap—bing whack, this is no gag—the moment she finished saying it, staring at her phone like a joke, the screen glowed to indicate a message had come through from one of her few friends in the area, Katrin.

And Katrin was asking to meet at a small restaurant, having some need to speak to someone. Lucy in particular. Yikes.

This is Lucy’s life. She sits there. Understandably terrified of Katrin and of everything.

But Lucy’s decided that whole show of coincidence didn’t phase her. Aloof, she waited fifteen minutes then responded to Katrin, explaining how she’d be there, straight away.

This sort of thing is always going on, especially if one pays attention. In this case, it’d be a mistake to pay it too much mind,

because why wouldn't Katrin have sent her a message this evening, just then?

That's about as ordinary a thing to do of an evening as Lucy can think.

Coming down to it, in fact, it really ought to've been expected. It probably was.

Lucy—she can't recall—had probably been wondering if Katrin was going get in touch all day, an undercurrent of thought set at simmer, and had likely checked and checked her phone, making the odds all but certain she'd eventually be looking at the contraption right when a message finally came through.

'And the fact that I'd lied to my landlord?' Lucy asks.

'I just answered that' she replied, turning left onto a road that it'll be more pleasant to drive along.

Finding herself subject to a delay based on a traffic accident or something, Lucy's fatigue catches up with her.

'I've been going all day' she thinks.

Watches a policeman waving one car that way, one car this way, one car a third way—Jesus, this'll take forever!

'I've been going all day' she repeats, killing the radio, putting it back on.

No. Killing it.

It must be an accident, here.

Construction on this sort of road isn't likely and why would that take place at this time of the day?

The evidence is bothersome because all Lucy has to go on at once suggests a minor accident and a major one, possibly with fatalities involved. Considering there're only two lanes, one in either direction—these with no shoulder, the one ending almost right on top of a treeline, the other square against the lip of a corn field—even just a slight bump and a car stalling could muck up this intersection where the jam is centralized.

She wants to be angry, is the thing. Because the minor situation would be something to righteously be furious over—the whole thing a disappointment and stab of rage at this entire area perfectly justified. But if someone is dead she can't well be mad. That'd just come off petty.

Why isn't her radio on?

Katrin is tall, slender, and can most accurately be described in the following way: She looks awkward the way many women who later blossomed into exquisite beauties—actresses, models—looked in their adolescence but also clearly looks her thirty-nine years and so gives the impression of merely being an odd-duck of a woman, not even of a close-call, you-had-potential kind of dame.

Has Lucy said this to her?

In fact Katrin said it, or something near it, to Lucy and Lucy'd elaborated Katrin's remark into its current iteration and this had made Katrin feel simply swell. Back when they'd first met.

In fact, Katrin had intimated, at another time, about how she has an exact photograph of a certain actress she admires—a photo of the actress at age fourteen—in mind when she thinks of herself, now.

As Lucy arrives, Katrin is loitering kind of in the condiment area but near enough the queue for the cash-registers to make it seem she was holding a spot, another customer—a tad uncertain, but whatever—making room for the two of them on the quivery assumption that maybe they'd been there ahead of him.

Considering she was the one who sent the request for this meeting, Katrin is coming off rather casual, an air to her of this all being something she and Lucy do all the time.

Katrin takes some of Lucy's fries.

Katrin tells Lucy to take a sip of her drink and asks Lucy what Lucy's drinking.

'Iced Tea' Lucy says, not having enjoyed the taste of whatever fruit drink Katrin had passed across. And now the tang of this colors the delicate thin of the taste of her tea, enough to make her, hiding the edge of it, sigh and ask 'Is everything alright, Katrin?'

'I quit my job. And I don't know why. Except I felt like it was making me crippled emotionally. Spiritually. I just quit. I made a scene. I've no idea what comes next.'

Lucy kind of thinks this sort of thing is cool despite she and Katrin both being full-grown adults. But should she say 'Awesome'?

Why not?

'Awesome.'

Katrin laughs, beautiful, unrepentant, so fast it comes from her, the laugh—speed of the curve of a cat-food lid slicing through finger flesh.

Now smoking cigarettes and watching cars place orders at the drive-thru speaker—both of them complaining about the noise of it but neither of them moving away—Katrin and Lucy come up with a handful of plans. The central tenet of all of them is that Katrin not get another job, no, not any time soon.

‘You need to bamboozle some man, Rin-tin—don’t look guilty!—you need to string some yutz along by his yutzy pecker until that gets boring. Treat it like a vacation—with the bonus being that afterward you’ll be able to ridicule the guy for letting it go on so long.’

Katrin didn’t look guilty, in fact, and the timbre of all the plans stay close to this—this is the kind of matrix for what Katrin wants her life to be for the next two, three years.

‘Or longer, if I get used to it. But I’m not working. That’s for suckers. I refuse to use this goddamned doctorate for anything else but a garnish to my honey-trap.’

‘Hear-hear ...’ Lucy muffles, chaining a new cigarette from the stub of her old, continuing with ‘... I’d do it too, if I could, Kinny, believe me.’

‘Men still have your picture posted, is it?’

‘Oh I’ve just got the scent on me. The price on my head doesn’t even enter into it.’

‘Do you want to come over and we can watch a movie?’

Lucy wasn’t expecting this question, certainly not the instant she exited the Ladies’ Room at the grocery-store they’d wandered over to.

‘It’s cool if not...’ Katrin is always so quick on the uptick of facial expression, booby-trapped the question like this on purpose ‘... but this really has been a help and I’m a great big brat.’

‘I’ll watch a movie, sure.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Let’s do it!’

Lucy, you’ve no intention of watching a movie with Katrin!

How do you think this is going to play out?

‘You’re the best, Lucy-loo. Hey! You said *Yutz*, back there.’

‘I did. But the trick is: I say *yutz* all the time. It’s just a ploy. I’m not very genuine, at all.’

Katrin nudges Lucy’s shoulder—again, again—then says ‘I really should trap a *yutz*. I admit I’ve been loosely planning to nab some handsome, together person, but that’d defeat the purpose.’

‘Yes, it would. You don’t need to fall in love or be satisfied amorously—in fact, that’s the worst thing you could do! You just quit your job, after all. Live a little!’

Oh you vicious bitch, Lucy!

You’re a cat-scratch kept on ice—so that was your angle!

And watch it work: Katrin laughing, one more nudge to you, but weaker, and her voice trails off on the now repeated ‘Yep ... I just quit my job.’

Deflation.

You’re a terrible terrible terrible woman, now arching one eyebrow and asking ‘Everything okay?’

Lucy promised to call. The illusion was all made complete with a few bolstering and a few concerned text-messages sent off while she just sat around in her car, still in the fast-food joint lot, both front windows rolled down, smoking, though no longer remotely enjoying it.

‘On paper I’m an excellent person, magnanimous, giving, benevolent to a fault’ Lucy alouds in the direction of the young guy taking haggard trash-bags to the dumpster.

There should be something poetic about the sight of that young man, dumpster, all of it, but there just isn’t.

‘Hey!’

The kid squints.

‘Come here’ Lucy encourages, padding softly at the air outside the car. ‘Do you want a cigarette?’

‘Uh ... yes. Can I have one, really?’

Lucy hands over the remainder of her pack.

‘Are you sure?’ goes the kid.

‘Give me one more’ she decides and the kid, very dutifully—treating the whole action like turning in an essay he’s worked very hard on and but knows is already a day late—gives her one. ‘Do you

want to smoke with me a minute?’

‘I mean ... yeah, I really do ...’ the kid says—lord knows where his mind is rat-in-a-mazing ‘... but I have to get right back in.’

‘Okay ...’ Lucy says and tells him ‘... thank you’ just to watch him fluster one last time, tap dance some kind of ‘You’re welcome, uh, and thank you’ followed by some kind of ‘Uh, yeah ... uh ... yeah.’

Suddenly it seems as late as it ought to. It’s one of those moments that come up. Lucy tries to take it in stride.

Everything is dark, now. Civilized people are at least in bed if not already asleep.

Her bones weigh their age.

She sings along to the radio to bat away the questions that are starting to clamber inside the small tombs of her eyes.

A dismal brew, questions.

Louder goes the music, but it’s too late.

Lower goes her voice, acquiescing.

This is the nighttime.

Tower of Babble goes her identity, her sense, her surety, her joy, her understanding of being awake.

There’s nothing sublime about these awful questions. Questions are her night but they never are for anyone else. This is a fungus her mind grows on all corners, thickest right against the front bone of her forehead. This is the paper-tear of her insides, her being buried by everyone else evacuating.

Yes.

‘Fuck you all ...’ she hisses, Paleolithic red clay of a hiss ‘... fuck you all.’

That’s just what’s happening—a thought she’s had before but indulges, liking the cleverness of this spite—everyone else is shruggingly dumping the burdens of their questions and the lot of ‘em are burying down upon Lucy, never even letting her have a last breath.

*Licentious.* She likes that word. Never learned what it means and now is terrified she’s about to.

Lucy’s parked in her space outside of the house, again. Her room



light is on and there's some indication of other light in the downstairs but also maybe not.

*Licentious.*

There'll be no way of stopping the knowledge of the word's definition if it sneaks up on her.

How could it sneak up?

So many ways. Don't ask. Oh so many ways—all it takes is a moment, the definition lurking somewhere, and her ignorance of this beautiful word is pickpocketed.

Still in seatbelt, she writhes against this unfairness and feels her nose welling with mucus for the crying she could—for all she knows—be just about to begin.

Why did she ever hear that word?

Just for this misery?

I'll bet, Lucy, I'll bet.

It was a seed, it was a promise put in you long ago, to grow, to be broken now.

Why fight it?

'Licentious. Licentious. Licentious. Licentious.'

Are you just gonna keep saying it?

Licentious. Licentious. Licentious.

Thinking it's the same as saying it.

Pathetic.

The knowledge is coming with the weight of a capsized boat, Lucy. Ready or not. Hell, you probably already know what it means if you think about it—and now you won't be able to help yourself thinking.

The end of you's already in you, girl—and what good are your yesterdays when eventually you won't have any left?

THE MOTHER WAS SITTING ON the sofa, made a half-twisted corkscrew of herself to give Lucy a wave while Lucy was gingerly removing her shoes in the front hall.

'Can you not sleep?' Lucy asked, not speaking loudly but obviously not worried about being particularly quiet.

The volume of the television was being tap tap tap lowered and lowered while the mother answered how she just needed to seep out

slowly, explaining cryptically how things were ‘not exactly going my way, across the board’ and that her brain wouldn’t shut up about it, her brain ‘being quite the obstinate whiner.’

‘I’m sorry. I hope you feel better.’

‘Are you off to bed? You must be tired. Jesus. What time is it, even?’

Lucy glanced at the commercial on the television screen but had her face done up like thinking of the time.

‘Would you mind company?’ Lucy asked ‘I’m kind of restless, too. I can just hang out upstairs, though.’

The mother straightened a bit, like bip-bopped where she sat, one-two-three, and grinned that she’d be delighted if Lucy would hang out, Lucy replying, an up-down on her toes motion ‘Let me just get changed then, okay?’

Now this was a ridiculous situation—Lucy hadn’t even considered this rascally dilemma!

What was she supposed to wear?

No pajamas to speak of, her habit being to sleep nude, and she couldn’t seem to find anything but panties.

Don’t you have some sort of sweatpants?

Lounge pants?

Shorts?

She has shorts, but not lounging shorts.

‘I don’t own sleepwear’ she whispers, loathe at herself for reaching this state of being, this fluxion of existence where such words were true with regard to her.

All stop.

You’ve no idea the hideous stop interior our Lucy.

She stands topless, pants-front undone, looking into the small drawer of the bureau that homes her socks and undies—there’s a pair of suspenders too!

‘Maybe I should just wear those’ she tried out her voice, wanting to chuckle. ‘Fuck fuck!’

There’s also the belt she thought she’d lost—why did she think she’d lost it?

It’s right there.

Is that the same belt?

Focus, Lucy. Focus!

Lucy discovers the mother in the kitchen.

‘I’m making hot chocolate because I’m at that point. Would you like some?’

Lucy Yes-pleases and is relieved when she takes in what the mother is wearing: Thin tank-top—semi-transparent, actually, a semi-transparent shade of green—shorts, yes, but of such variety they’re no more concealing than the boyfriend-cut panties Lucy’d settled on—and honestly, if it came down to such things, Lucy suspects that the material of her panties is thicker than that of the shorts.

Both of them are wearing socks, Lucy’s thicker, more meant-for-sleep looking, the mother’s just the same athletic socks Lucy often sees her padding around in.

Yep. You’re right, Lucy. Letter-of-the-law, since you have the lumpy t-shirt look going, you’re more dressed than her.

All above board!

Yep—it’s her house, you’re right, again, she has every right to go around like that. Good on her—you endorse it, Lucy, let that be known.

Hell, even if the mother is in panties, too, since the shorts show no indication line of them it looks like your panties are still thicker than her both garments would be, put together.

But it’s a good idea you’re finding something else to look at.

The mother apologizes for just watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, mocks her bad habit and her nerdiness, which allows Lucy the perfect opportunity—still settling to the sofa—to lean over while she whispers ‘I love *Next Gen*, are you kidding?’

Lucy glances and gleans that it’s an early episode, grins.

‘Thank God ...’ the mother says—touches Lucy, her upper arm, did you notice that, Lucy?—while settling to place, herself ‘... I can now stop thinking I have to hide it from you or you’ll move out. You’ve no idea the stress I’ve been under. Honestly, it’s why I couldn’t sleep, tonight.’

Lucy laughs—at this point the laugh is part earnest, part tarted-up—and, speaking into her mug as though doing so also helps cool

the chocolate, says ‘Tonight you just figured you’d put it to the test—chips fall where they will?’

The mother laughs—genuine? seems it, though who cares?—and does a kind of impersonation of herself in an agitated mindset ‘Not one more night—no! I must know! I can keep concealing this no longer, it must be tonight!’

Lucy’s sipping chocolate.

She has to do something other than just sit there with her face.

Blonde hair, greying, brown hair, greying, they are colored bright flickers like an anxious hand sketching and resketching them while on the screen something is wrong with William Riker and Deana Troi looks stricken.

It’s been silent except for the program these serene passing-ten-minutes and now the mother goes ‘We’re both actually just sitting here watching the episode.’

The mother changes positions, moving her legs up and under her.

Lucy makes a shushing sound and the mother—thank goodness she picked up the levity—goes all cowering and holds her mug up to her face with both hands, caricature of a chastised step-child.

Lucy, for comedy’s sake, lets the silence hold a moment then—yeah, why not? proud of herself, in fact—touches the mother’s curled leg right on the thigh with her toes tap tap tap and says ‘The pathetic thing is that this, literally, is the worst episode of this show ever’ and her reward is the immediate—I mean instantaneous—leaned forward, gushingly smiley ‘I know, I agree!’ and—that’s exactly what that is, Lucy—a hand gripped to Lucy’s foot for an actual squeeze before an absent-minded finger flick.

Mid-breath, this being just as Lucy’s about to deliver another quip over closing credits—indications on the screen that another episode will be starting, the both of them already having hung their heads shamefully, admitted they’ll be watching it even if it means dozing off where they sit—the mother holds up a finger, turns her head, keeps her neck craned as though awaiting something, then says, softly, a balm to her tone ‘Hey Flynnamon—everything alright, guy?’

The child gives Lucy a three-quarters asleep wave as he rounds the

sofa and lean-embraces the mother who's scooted a bit to allow the hug while saying 'Miss Lucy and I are just watching our show—you have a buggy dream, bean?'

'Yeah' groggies the child, now looking at Lucy—she doubts he'd actually registered her when giving the moment-ago wave—and smiling, affect of about ready to pass right back out.

Lucy mouthed 'Should I go?' but the mother didn't seem to notice, caressing the child's face and touching him in feather light tickles over the ribs.

Lucy has an interval to compose herself.

But does she need to?

Not *compose herself*—that isn't what she means.

She wants to have something appropriate to say when the mother returns.

What's the thing to say, here?

She can't not acknowledge that the thing with the kid just happened, but she doesn't want to seem more concerned than she is.

What does that mean?

Are you concerned, Lucy?

'He had a nightmare?' she whispers toward the commercial for denture glue.

But why say that?

'Is he feeling alright?'

No no—the mother said she was stressed. The mother just wants the child back in bed, not to have his intrusive little guest appearance color the night, give she and Lucy their cues.

Right?

Say something funny about denture glue.

Except—Lucy glances toward the room ceiling—maybe kids coming down in the night isn't as annoying to a parent as it is to a Lucy sitting on a two-in-the-morning sofa with one. With this one.

Anyway—obviously the mother will say something first.

Just riff on that, let that be in the driving seat.

The mother is carrying a stuffed turtle and tosses it at Lucy as she comes back around the sofa.

'Turtle' she says.

‘Yes’ Lucy says.

‘Apparently the turtle was looking at him. While he was asleep.’

‘Jesus’ Lucy holds the turtle to her face, giving it the hard glare.

‘I’ve always hated that fucking turtle and now it’s creeping on my kid, ruining our *Star Trek*.’

‘Well ...’ oh go ahead, Lucy, push your luck, she can’t just jump directly to hating you for it ‘... I have to say I’m glad it was the turtle’s fault. I was sitting here hating your kid for ruining our Riker date.’

Slick—slick, Lucy, that last bit, you couldn’t resist going out on the limb but used Riker as a buffer, nice and innocuous, a masterstroke, that—but let’s see how you fared: The mother is laughing and reiterating your statement with a furthering of her own.

‘I’d have disowned him—he’s hanging by a thread as is, Lucy, skin of his teeth. Barging in here in his underoos! He should be thanking the turtle, if anything, for giving him some excuse!’

The mother then sighs and says she also wishes she could smoke inside, this in the same moment where Lucy kisses the soft fabric snout of the stuffed creature and coos ‘Thanks, turtle.’

How tired are you, Lucy?

Tired.

Then why not drift off, too?

You have every allowance to do so.

Look at her, there asleep.

Lucy knows she already is looking but tells herself ‘Look at her’ regardless.

The mother has drifted off. She’s laid is a semi-seated, semi-supine twist, head crooked to the edge of the sofa arm, knees bent and toes about a cat-hair away from Lucy’s own.

How long have you been looking at the tattoo on the mother’s ankle?

For as long as you were looking at the mole on the side of her knee?

Lucy touches all of the toes of one of her feet over all of the toes of one of the mother’s feet, tip-tap-tip-taps them.

‘I think you’re asleep’ she says, but the first words don’t even

come out and the rest come out as a gravelly gruff.

Clears throat.

Touches toes to the tattooed ankle and gives a nudge that doubles as the slightest caress ‘I think you’re asleep.’

The mother stirs into a smile, eyes opening and lips rising all one and the same, doesn’t even glance to the television or seem to need to get her bearings.

‘I fell asleep. I’m sorry. What a terrible nerd I turned out to be.’

Lucy decidedly—pointedly, on-purposely as a thing can be on-purposed—didn’t watch the mother as she walked toward the stairs and made sure to return her eyes, hard locked, to Geordi LaForge explaining something urgent concerning the Warp Core—his concerned visage behind the vip-vip-vip of the Warp Core’s blue lights reflected on the window glass—the split second she’d said ‘Get some sleep’ in response to the mother pausing at the stair base to say ‘I’m sorry, I had fun, I’m just zonked.’

This all certainly, by the way, didn’t just happen.

‘No?’

Think about it.

‘You’re right.’

Yes, I am.

‘It didn’t happen. Any of it.’

Moreover: Why would it?

Moreover: Why would you even think it possibly could’ve?

When did you get in, Lucy?

‘Dunno ...’ a numb whisper, all of those questions, statements, answers ‘... I don’t know. Sometime.’

She notices the odd evidence of two mugs on the carpet, but deduces swiftly, with help of a simple algorithm of logic, that both of these mugs are hers and she needs to stop being such a wasteful slob.

‘I’m no way to be’ Lucy says, knowing she’d meant to say something else while saying exactly what she meant.

*HER ROOM IS THE PLACE where a tooth used to be / but now where there’s only / sometimes / a tongue pressing in, prowling around.*

Lucy’s hesitating about the word *Her*, there. It could be that she

wants it to be *The*. Or even *My*. Or—no, she’s dismissed the thought even as she thinks it—just *A*.

For herself, she’s in her room, lit only by computer glow.

Years, decades ago, she would’ve gnashingly bellowed or disciplinarian-trying-be-be-courteous intoned that a computer was no place to write poetry.

She’s writing this directly into the computer screen.

She does that a lot.

‘Piss off. I have plenty of notebooks and write by hand, all the time’ she’s defended herself, earnestly, often enough to not want to keep bothering herself about it.

She daren’t change out of the clothes she’d put on.

*Daren’t*. Good word.

She also wants to say *a tongue is sometimes there prowling around or a tongue sometimes goes there just prowling around*.

No: *Loiter*. She wants to say *Loiter*. That’s what she wants.

*Sometimes a tongue skulking in, loitering around*.

*Loitering around* is nice.

She could kiss herself though knows it was pure luck those words hitting how and when they did.

She’s self-conscious about the volume of her keystrokes.

Diagnosis: She assumes the mother is awake and wants the mother to think she’s asleep.

Primal behavior, there since her own childhood.

In this room she reverts oddly to daughterhood even more than she adopts tenanthood.

Fatigue has thrown her blank, now, wrung her ‘round into a coil she hopes will be used one-last-time as a whipcrack before she’s discarded outright.

Something about how today—this day, this literal today, her today, not some idiot general Today which belongs to everyone—had felt both like the first day and the very last ever.

She doesn’t want to just reword that, she wants to say it.

There has to be some trick of words that means that but sounds better, but her eyes sting in chalk spirals and her shoulders are growing broken fists like pimples.

Why does she have to get tired?



Now of all times!?

*This is the worst time to get tired* she laments by typing it, erases it very very very quickly in horror that someone might've known she'd typed it and thought she'd meant it as part of a poem.

She takes far longer a pause than is necessary in the inside-out hallway—sounds of shifting in pipes, guttural whir of the vent fans though there seems to be no air-conditioning or heat happening—and her eyes hurt being open, trying to focus through the gloom on the mother's shut room door, stinging a bit more, then the sting easing to comfort as she squints.

To her immediate right is a poster for some violin concert, one which happen once, long ago, in France—or maybe Spain, she just assumed France, now knows she's really never verified—and to her left is a poster of frogs watching horses play hopscotch.

This is just as it should be.

On the floor is a washcloth, escapee from she and the child's shared bathroom, Lucy now bending to take it up, clammy and moist, then deciding to leave it there, instead.

Maybe if she breathes just a little louder.

She does.

And just a little louder.

Does so.

Why?

She doesn't even understand this latest little sleepwalker game.

Lucy eats a slice of bread and when she opens the refrigerator the light is enough she can read one of the child's Spelling tests that's been oh so proudly posted.

Seven-out-of-ten.

She's puzzled. Something in this strikes her funny, like the quirk that'll make the dreamer realize the dream's about to be done.

One-out-of-five of the Bonus Words is what lifted it to seven-out-of-ten, overall.

Six-out-of-ten.

She reads the words.

The ones misspelled are *Tomorrow*—*tomoro*—*Lightbulb*—*lietbelbe*—*Shade*—*schad*—and *Toaster*—*toestare*.

The Bonus Word the child had gotten correct was *Limpid*.

So what?

Something.

She closes the refrigerator—verifies the blinds of the kitchen are drawn—then turns on the light, wishing it had a dimmer.

One other Spelling test on the fridge, more-or-less the same state-of-affairs. Math. Pictures. Blah blah blah.

Why's this bothering her?

Why're *tomoro lietbelbe schad* and *toestare* anything to do with her?

What're they drawing her toward?

Automatic—or semi-automatic, she'd caught onto herself mid-process—Lucy finds the Vocabulary list she'd seen, earlier.

The child gets the Advanced vocab word list but can't spell for shit?

Okay. No. Those other tests are from long ago. Nothing so wild about that.

Walk away.

Because do you see the oozing disquiet coming over you like insects you never feel till they've bit you and bred in the puncture?

Lucy. You know better than this.

You're in the panties you picked earlier because they were your most modest, you're middle-of-the-damn-nighting in a kitchen reading misspelled words on a child's test and now you are looking at *Omnipresent Sublimation Cantankerous Solicitous Rankle* and you're continuing to glance down so—baby, baby—you brought it on yourself when now you see *Licentious*.

Just like that.

And it's already too late, because you just read those words, the ones written in less bolded print, defining it, those irrevocable words after it after the dash mark.

No scrubbing can do anything now, no fingers down throat, no amputation.

Your world just did what your world always does, Lucy—and you've no one to blame but yourself.

It was the longest it'd ever taken Lucy to walk up some stairs.

Not remotely true. This doesn't even make the list of the longest-walks-up-short-flights-of-stairs.

But it still takes a long time, because she has to drag up each atom of her soul, one-at-a-time, and each one weighs about as much as a potato, give-or-take.

It's not even new how she stops and has to sit down, though her mind is still alive with trepidation over being found out that way—a light suddenly being turned up to reveal her there, a very soft, calmer-than-it-was-the-moment-before-but-still-alarmed 'Is everything alright?'

This is the worst sort of awake, where it's not even romantic to worry if you are, you just know, it isn't even romantic to know that you are, you just are.

Lucy's a dreadful, absconded sack of plain reality—she feels little more than her bones, organs, the denseness of whatever she's eaten and is waiting to shit. Little more. And what that little more is she'd rather not name—because the last thing she needs is to start crying on the rented stairs, too.

Naked to bed, the bed, and her face into mattress, and pillow pincer in the tense of her kneebend.

If you sleep you'll wind up awake but it'll be different.

A disappointment that's even a day old is at least one that's already happened and so the cinematic tightening of the distilled image of it loses the always-been-now, forever-will-be-now bludgeon.

Why in Hell does it have to mean anything?

'Be logical, Lucy' Lucy says—this very question thought-uttered not boding well for whatever syllogism might follow.

You thought of a word, didn't know what it meant, knew you'd find out soon, and then did.

Is this the Horror of the Modern Age?

Is this so sinister?

What does it infect, exactly?

Tell me what it infects!

Tell you, Lucy?

Go ahead and tell you.

But you know you're all desperate with hide-and-seek questions because it means the same thing it always means and always has. From this moment onward, all that was contained in today—try not to think about it but, yes, even that—is worm-ridden, rot-gutted,

cankerous.

Ask your questions, do what you will, but it was pure instinct the first thing you did when you came into this room, just now, was to get out of those clothes and it was the appropriate admission of what they are how they're already shoved, the lot, in that closet corner under the suitcase.

Lucy will not recall this, but the dream she tried to coax herself into before she actually fell asleep ran along these lines. She wanted to dream about: Lucy at a bus station, noticing a man who seemed to be pouring milk from a brochure but the milk vanished into thin air.

And then someone pointed out how, if one looked closer, the milk wasn't pouring out from the brochure but was rising from the cavity of air into the brochure—either way, the milk had a Nowhere attached to it.

Lucy ran her hands in the air over the brochure and under the milk, she ran her hands—motion like tracing an increasingly smaller ball or rubbing a shrinking pregnancy belly—in the space around the milk but refused to run her hands through it.

'What about your tongue?' she wanted a little girl to ask her so she could scowl at a little girl, only agreeing to lick the milk when the little girl's father had noticed her expression and looked disappointed she'd behave that way when the suggestion had been so innocent.

'I know you were never intending to touch it ...' the man said, leaned in, face set apologetic for how he'd a moment ago seemed so cross '... but she didn't know. Look at her. She's only that old. Can you guess how old that-old is?'

Lucy will, only for a few moments and only in drunkard-legged snippets recall this, it being the dream that she actually had: Ponderous building fronts in lemon-yellow, except for the windows which should be mint-blue but are lime-green, are being dragged along as though they don't belong anyplace by an old woman driving a cart pulled by five dogs and a half-dozen raccoons.

Aboveboard, this seems, and, in fact, the whole thing has a vaguely sexual demeanor, the way music does when it's a style one has never encountered and something has to be assumed of it: Love, lust, anything to draw flesh toward flesh.

The ocean is only the size of a gallbladder and Lucy watches everyone in the township take turns seeing how far they can punt it.

In the distance, each time the ocean is kicked, there are more and more birds choking on something and eventually it can be discerned that the choking is in individuated beats and each one sounds exactly like the elevator chime at a department store she's had other dreams about.

Lucy wakes in the irrevocable spread of the morning's light over her nudity. She feels as though she's recently orgasmed. Maybe she has.

It's both early and late. She hears the shower running—this would be the mother—and though she doesn't hear cartoons downstairs, she just goes ahead and acts as though she does.

Lumps herself, laundry like, in the chair in front of her computer and blinks at the screen.

*The day was the stone under the moss / not forgotten but not not forgotten.*

She blinks. Noncommittal. But sees a variant, obviously built of the same notion.

*Eventually we forget the graves / under the gravestones, and / anyway we are the / soil under those, never / thought about, once.*

Meh.

That's her assessment of the poetry she left for herself.

As what?

A clue?

A prize?

A consolation?

'Meh' she says again but is less convinced.

Reads both lines another few times. Manipulates the things so they're now shaped into a verse containing them both, a few little alterations for visual aesthetic.

Taps some keys to undo all of that, segregates the things.

Since she's going to abandon them both she's no need to choose and no need to couple. Words are the same as anything: They wind up exactly the same as each other, in the end.