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*Read Before Opening*

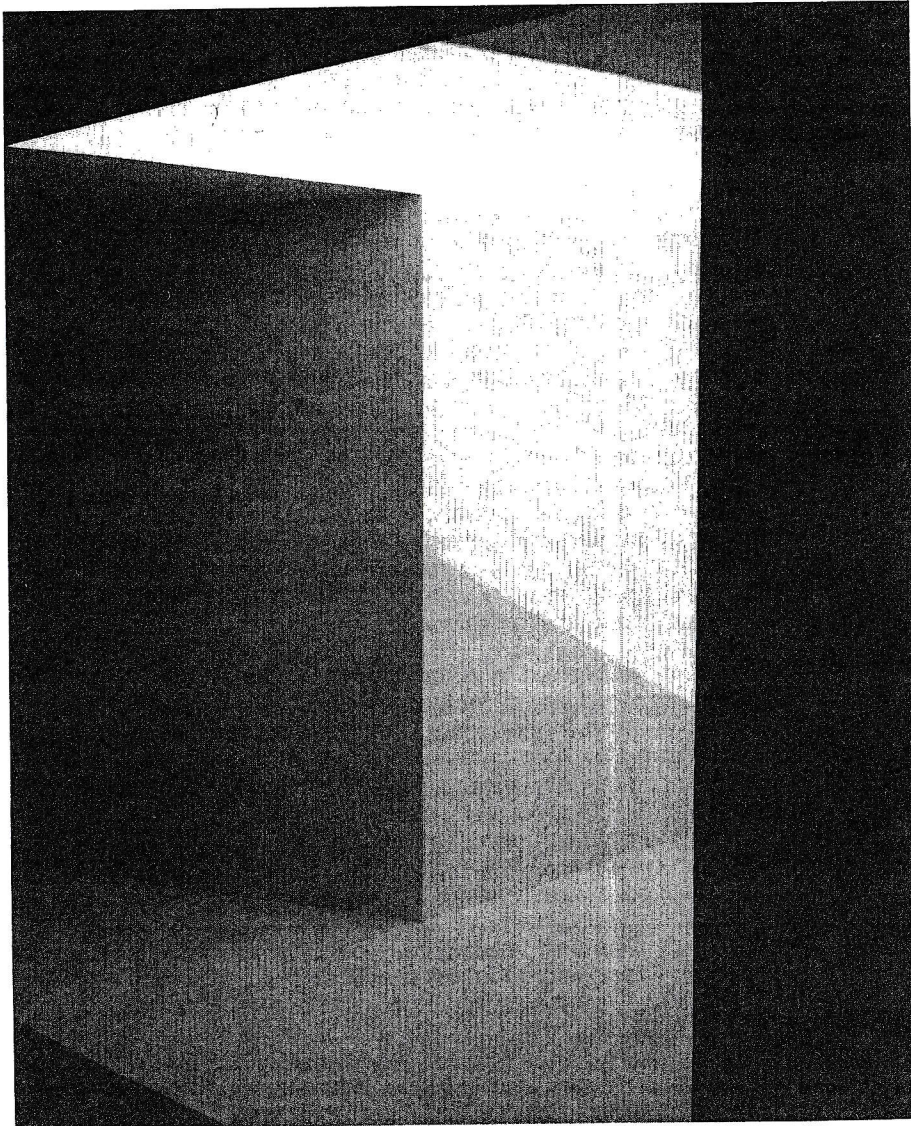
THE BLUE TRAIL

You're trying to connect the dots but they're a long way apart. Born in Buffalo; father dead; mother visits occasionally "which is just as well"; has had many women though so far none of them French; barn by the railroad tracks with no cooking stove. He's an artist. You're in the dark there. You wondered when he called and invited you on this hike – saying right off that he'd gotten your name, along with another woman's, as a birthday present from a mutual friend – if he had strong forearms from keeping a brush hovering for long moments while he considered the canvas. But you're not sure if brushes are still used. Not to mention canvas. This was not covered in Intro to Art History, the class that you found so disconcerting freshman year because it was too dark to take notes.

At Mashomack there are three trails: Yellow, Red, Blue. "Primary colors," you say smartly. He doesn't look impressed, which is the first thing about him that interests you. The Yellow Trail is the family trail, a mile or so and views of the bay, a small swamp, birches – an ecosystem sampler with no commitment because soon you are back at the gift shop where they sell needlepoint kits of cardinals. The Red Trail is all that plus a meadow. On the Red Trail, 4.2 miles, you can sweat and feel for a moment that you're lost, until you hear a buzz saw. And then there's the Blue Trail. You don't know anyone who's taken the Blue Trail. It's almost 10 miles and wanders the periphery of the nature preserve. Supposedly it includes a manor house and wooden walkways across wetlands. It seems dangerous for a first date.

You've already passed the fork where the Yellow Trail starts heading back and soon you'll have to choose between the Red or Blue. You've got those things about yourself that you like to make known all lined up like clay pigeons, which you let fly intermittently, though some of them seem to be falling back into the grass unexploded: the auto repair course you took at the Y; your intimacy with the small towns on the South Fork of Long Island where you grew up and returned to write for the local paper; the way your grandmother, the woman who brought you up, was still gardening until she died at 90, good solid stock.

Every so often he looks full at you and you don't turn towards him. You're trying to imagine what he's seeing. You're wearing jeans tucked into socks cloused with Off, and a once-white sweatshirt that belonged to your father so that the sleeves keep slipping over your hands, and your hair, which is no particular shade of brown and includes some grey that you refuse to pull out, is in a pony tail. You become aware of the bareness of your neck. As you talk about the high incidence of Lyme disease and agree that things are heating up in the Persian Gulf, you're trying to imagine if he'd be caring in bed. His voice is calm and doesn't give much away and when he laughs he says "yeah" at the same time – as if you've reminded him of something he already found funny.





You're noticing that he's just about your height and this doesn't seem to faze him so you figure that he must have had a lot of success in his work. You're adding up his round verging on chubby face and his pale curls to see if it equals cherubic.

You're wondering if this is the guy who'll take the Napeague stretch with you at 120 so you can see if your speedometer's promise is true. You're already making plans to sit on his bed with your legs crossed, to go see the zebra being fed in Hampton Bays, to look at the moon through General Custer's daughter's telescope and feel humble -- all the ways you've discovered to survive the indifference of a beach resort in winter. You're hoping you can break the habit of solitude, which you've had for oh, several years now (the fact that you can't remember exactly alarms you) while at the same time you're chastising yourself for racing ahead. When you come to the fork where the Blue Trail branches off, innocently but irrevocably, through tall grasses yellowed by the chilly October sun, you both pause for a moment. He takes a roll of Lifesavers out of his front pocket. He flips the top one off for you with his thumbnail. This little blast of mint on your tongue will from now on recall the way you are standing next to each other looking up the Blue Trail to where it disappears over a hill. Sometimes memory happens in the present for you.

Then you both decide it would be better not to. Maybe some other time, Pat, he says. You like the way he says your name so easily, as if he's been saying it all his life. And you're thankful he hasn't asked what it is short for.

The next day you call Consolata O'Brien, your college roommate, who's an assistant assistant curator at the Post-Contemporary Museum in SoHo. You tell her you're trying to decide whether to have a crush on this artist and could she tell you if he's any good. She lets out a shriek when she hears his name and for a second you imagine they might have had an affair. No, it's just that she *does* know him, he had a painting from his disease series in the Chaos exhibit. Oh. The Chaos exhibit, where you recall seeking refuge in a tiny room in which snails ate away at a head of cabbage but the walls were plastered with yellowing pencilled notes written by the artist's mother and friends, a tribute to trying to remember in the midst of forgetfulness.

Then you ask Consolata what she thinks this means, that all he said was someday we should take the Blue Trail.... "Well, Pat, it could mean any range of things," she says. "It could mean he wants you to bear his children--"

"That's what I thought!" you tell her happily.

Of course you're really not sure. He sometimes paints Rorschach blots. You were an English major. This means that between the two of you, you could dodge meanings 'til kingdom come. You are exhausted by the semiotics of not yet having slept together.

In the rafters of his barn: the magnified medical pictures -- magnetic resonance images of diseased internal organs -- laved with his paint; a friend's sculptures made of large polyurethane sheets crumpled up and strewn around like Kleenex of Zeus; the orange pulsing in the wood stove, in all this you see someone striving for bigness -- and sometimes succeeding. And you desperately want to engulf that and become big with it yourself, like a benevolent paramecium or a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. You can feel that want in the joints of your fingers in your abdomen in your throat. It is not pleasant. Not only is it not pleasant, it is terrifying, and it is luxurious. You will allow yourself spasms of irresponsibility for a while, dreaming of him as the cursor beats below the He-was-an-avid-golfer of an obituary you have to write by 6 p.m. You will wake up one morning and find you've put yourself on inside-

out. Opening your door, you will walk down the driveway to pick up the newspaper and the breeze will hail on your exposed veins, the smell of coffee will be an ecstasy, the phone's ring will lacerate your ear.

He lost his virginity because of a wrong number. He's calling you from a gallery in New York and telling you this. A woman who worked at the Bennington laundrette accidentally called his college dorm room and they got to talking and then he went over to her apartment and did it. He didn't know anything about vaginas. Barely knew where it was. He managed to figure it out. Now he has an unlisted number.

"I can help, I can help!" you want to shout over the phone. But then you suppose in the intervening twenty years he's learned his way around.

That night you are lying on the couch together watching water boil on his VCR. Huge Maui waves, windsurfers sliding up and down the tubes, playing with the lethal crush. Radical. His breath is bitter with garlic. Your thighs are touching and that is all.

Why do you want more?

Why? Because it is the only place to be all by yourself -- when you are on the crest of the wave you are each alone, in silence since all the other voices that usually chatter inside you are stilled by the concentration it takes to lose all concentration. But at the same time together you're engaged in the only indisputable act of creation. Because from then on when you see each other across a room full of people you will remember and it will make you feel chosen, or betrayed, or calmed -- depending on what happens afterwards.

Instead you say, "I better be going." You put on your heavy coat and fix your pocketbook strap stiffly on your shoulder. You were going to phrase it differently, "Should I be going?" but you were afraid the answer would be Yes and it would pierce like a needle and there would be an explosion that would be lost in the roar of the eastbound train and he would look down at the floor and see only a black coat with a liquid that could be *Eau Sauvage* oozing out of one of the sleeves.

The moon is sharp and you're shivering cold in your car and speeding thinking: This is when I'm going to get entangled with a rodent crossing the road. I'll skid off this curve and the trajectory will take me over the edge of the Earth and he'll read about it in the paper. I will be preserved in the noble oversimplification of an obituary; he will be smitten with his loss.

But you get home fine. You crawl into bed with your longing, letting out one groan that comes from between your breasts or maybe from the upper urinary tract, since this is the organ he's currently painting over. You realize that for you he has the same appeal as a surgeon -- someone who rummages around your insides, more knowledgeable about them than you, and perhaps healing. You have a night of patchy sleep. When you awake, still too groggy to ratchet your defenses into place, it feels like Christmas morning.

#### MARTINI IN BLACK AND WHITE

You're beginning to learn the dangers of that striving for bigness -- that is when within the dramatic frame of the old potato barn he says, "I have to go to the bathroom. I go to the bathroom a lot," he becomes tiny, like some sharp-nosed ivory cameo on a powder blue background. He's pulling skeletons out of the closet with both hands: the drugs, AA, the dick thing with women, the can't make plans if the wind's up gotta get out on my board, the I didn't speak until I was eight, the I'm trying to learn how to have some normal intimacy -- but not as apology, rather as a limited warranty card, read before opening.



This time you're watching Zefferelli's "Romeo and Juliet" on the VCR. "I can't get myself 100 percent behind this Romeo and Juliet thing," he says. You've been crying since they touched fingertips at the party, knowing that one gesture contained both the beginning and end of everything between them. As Juliet falls on Romeo's poisoned but still warm lips, he says, "That's why there's so much teenage suicide these days" and he gets up to go to the bathroom, again.

Do you need to contact this raunchy unadorned part of your being? If so, do you need a medium? Does it have to be someone who is so frank about his penis?

When he comes back from the bathroom he finds you examining a martini glass he's silk screened onto the deck of a windsurfer. "I paint to support my windsurfing habit," he says, and you know this is how he would like to see himself. He goes on about his quiver of sails, the trailerful of boards he hauls down to the beach so that he can rig the optimal contraption for any condition. He tells you he started painting boards to make some extra money but then he couldn't bear to sell them. This one with the martini glass is a fantastic tribute to his addictions, a black-and-white hand pouring gin out of the glass, spilling droplets as miraculous in their force as the October wind that can make this board sizzle across Napeague Harbor. At first he painted only the decks, but then he decided the bottoms should be like the lining of a jacket, should have some pattern that relates to the top.... As he's talking you realize he needs these complex explanations because they lend stature to even his smallest actions. No artist can be good without complete self-confidence, at least for that moment in which he smears across the canvas a piece of himself with the belief that it will convey meaning to a stranger.

You were on the couch, naked and thinking about yourself in aesthetic terms. You saw him appraising your breasts and you said, "They match. My mother gave them to me." He rolled you on top because, he said, otherwise the chamberlain didn't fit right. You logged this as a new term for the male organ; something British like "the gov'ner," but more accurate: *chamberlain*, the dictionary said, *an attendant on a sovereign or lord in his bedchamber*. Much later, you asked him about the derivation. John Chamberlain, he said. The sculptor. He designed the couch. This would explain its having only one arm and the shape of a wounded comma. You had assumed it came from a thrift shop. Another example of your staunch phillistinism. Like your distrust of the Kleenex of Zeus. "It's your expectations, they're not being met," he says. "It's not about the sculpture, it's about the air that it's displacing, about your relationship to it. It makes you aware of the space around it."

"It makes YOU aware of the space around it," you say, "it makes me aware that I'm angry. If I want air displaced I'll use a vacuum cleaner."

You couldn't tell when he came because it was indistinguishable. Latent if not actual movement always surrounds him. Cups of coffee never get finished. There is so much floor space in his barn that as you cross it back and forth, a sweater in hand this trip, a greasy cardboard box of pizza that time, you feel like an actor making exits and entrances -- though for what purpose it's not clear. The barn's the kind of place where you would expect to find hanging in a dark corner that blue and yellow poster of instructions for a choking victim.

Round about 5 a.m., after he came -- you knew because you asked -- the westbound train went by, its fluorescent-lit windows one blurred line, leaving the barn coughing. You were only scared when you realized that he'd grown used to this.

He said now that you had made love he felt he could touch you anywhere, that this was the beginning of a new intimacy.

You dreamt you had climbed high, to a narrow ledge, and become paralyzed, the way you had in waking life when you climbed the hundred-odd stairs of the Mayan pyramid of Kukulkan and the wind at the top blew words away and the people on the ground were small and, feeling the blood swirl through your skull, your skin tingle, you knew you would never be able to make yourself climb down. Fear of heights. You know you want to lash out at his confidence, as fragile and hard-won as it is, for the same reasons that you attack your own. And maybe if you could stop yourself -- you could fly.

In sleep, he makes noises you have never heard a human make before. He pants and grunts and then catches his breath with a long ragged snore. His jaw clenches and unclenches. Cherubic, maybe, but in the way of the rebel angels. You realize how hard he must work for his daytime nonchalance. You are woken up not so much by the noise as by the struggle. It's like watching a dog fight that fills you with fear and admiration and disgust. Is thirty-nine too old to die of crib death? At 6 a.m. you get up from the Chamberlain couch, search through the tangle of garments on the floor, and finally find one of his socks and one of yours. Putting these on, you flee to an armchair at the other end of the barn, where you can't hear his snores, where you also can't feel the heat of the wood stove. "Pat, dear, the point of getting into a fix is to prove you can get out of it," you say to yourself in your grandmother's fortune-cookie voice -- the one you never took seriously when she was alive but whose prescriptions you now find comforting. Shivering, the rafters 40 feet over your head, you try to make a cocoon out of his down jacket and pretend that you are proving yourself, the way you did crawling down the pyramid of Kukulkan (though backwards, on hands and knees), or living alone for these last several years. You are waiting for him to realize that he is lying next to emptiness, to come find you where you are, sleepless and cold, and say, stroking your temples, "You poor thing." But of course he can't. He's struggling with life and death on the couch. APNEA. The word comes back from high school blo, though you never before realized the terrible implications. Marc Byrne can't take anything for granted -- not even breathing.

"He lives in a barn, a manger you might say during the holiday season," you tell Consolata. From the other end of the phone line you hear her exhale slowly and in that long exhalation are all the other men whose stories you've told her, whose passions you appropriated so you didn't have to find your own, whose photographs you taped to the tissue dispenser in the bathroom. Consolata is married and has a small daughter. When you call her at home there is always a chatty gurgling in the background and Consolata reporting things like "Can you hear that? She's saying 'Mom, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't this dinner time?' She's *such* a character. You want to talk to her?" and before you can say No there's some shuffling on the other end of the line and you hear breathing and you say "So, what'd you do today? Did you learn object permanence? No? Okeedokee, give me back to Mommy...." Mostly now you call Consolata at work.

"Marc's like this alternate Jesus, the one who never left the manger, who got friendly with the old horses, who spent his inspirational powers in making art that went forth to small museums like yours and group shows called 'Inner Space: Your Place or Mine?' 'Computer Impressionism' 'Blood'--"

"And 'Chaos,' Pat. Don't forget 'Chaos,'" Consolata says. "How do you find them always, these men who are a danger to themselves and others?"

"He spells his name with a 'c,'" you are undaunted, "isn't that neat?"



## OUR RED SHIRT

How we came to be lying here. How I came to be lying on top of you, Marc, feeling against my chin the scratchiness of your wool jacket borrowed from a fireman named Al. How we came to be in these dunes on a January day that is so warm that you eventually take your jacket off. How it is a day that seems like a present for no reason at all, with the waves subdued, the beach roiling with large dogs amazed at this unseasonal opportunity but not afraid to make the most of it, the sky cloudless so that the sound of a single-engine plane comes down clearly, intimately, reminding us of the missiles hissing over Saudi Arabia and Israel, the bombs exploding in Baghdad, making us feel provisional but at the same time blessed to be lying on this beach.

This beach which is for you a gessoed canvas, empty, everything to come, is for me cluttered with twenty-nine years' worth of temperatures: my grandmother's hand on my belly as I lay face-down in the chilly water and flailed my arms and legs in imitation of swimming; the cool of sand under my armpits when it was my turn to be buried by my friends; clumps of sunlazy girls untying their bikini tops and exchanging crucial information: "If you swallow it there's this guppy feeling you can't get rid of." "They should make extra-strength Lifesavers"; the heat of the campfire on my forehead while Nicky Verderosa pressed my fingers into different patterns on the frets of his guitar, "C. D. G. A minor," the hot tingling in my fingertips where they were cut by the steel strings and the hot tingling on the back of my neck from Nicky Verderosa's breath.

How your arms are outstretched but for a minute you lift your hand to stroke my hair then let it fall back down and when I ask, "So Marc, what are you thinking?" you say, "I was, thinking I would wash this red shirt and give it to you since you said you liked it" and I say, "But I like it on you" and you say, "But it would look good on you" and, noticing the colorful shotgun shells in the sand near our heads, I say that what I had been wondering was what we did to deserve this and you say, "This? This warm day?" "And each other," I say, wondering if I've said too much.

How you came to be here I am still figuring out: somehow I have to factor in your parents being convinced you were retarded because you wouldn't talk until you were eight and your I'll show THEM stuffing towels down the toilets, there being more than one toilet, and its being Buffalo where there is lots of snow so you defied it by becoming a skier, and your father dying on the slopes during a father-son outing which was an attempt at reconciliation after years of chill that started during Vietnam when he called you a fruitcake for becoming a c.o., and your seeing the ski patrol bring him down headfirst strapped onto a sled, vomiting but beyond consciousness, then your migrating alone to New York City where one is supposed to be to paint, and the visit from the gallery owner whose father was a friend of your father's telling you without much interest that you should work smaller, and your easing the growing pains with cocaine and heroin and sex, and your spinning out of control until you landed with a muffled thud in the country, in this new state of recovery and therapy and jibing back and forth across Napeague Harbor on the most efficient tack as you mediate in the struggle between sail and wind, and turning all that wild energy into not... and seeing me as a rational partner, "my first sober relationship," who won't go sneaking into the bathroom to do lines, who can teach you some vocabulary words, change your oil filter, and maybe learn to have sex with a modicum of abandon.

Why I came to be with you has a lot to do with how you came to be with me though I wish at times that I had known you ten years ago and could've held on for the ride.

But technically this is how: I picked you up at the barn and we drove down Town Line Road. We parked at the cul-de-sac and walked east on the beach towards Georgica Pond. Stepping through a hole in the snow fencing, we lay down in the lee lap of the dune. Two people seeking shelter.

## WHITE PATENT LEATHER CLOGS BELONGING TO SOMEONE ELSE

We dined to the Gulf War. It was our war. We cozied up to the tiny rectangle of disaster and luxuriated in outrage. We did this at my place because the potato barn didn't have cable. At the time I was renting a little house that had been built 80 years ago by the watchcase factory for its immigrant workers. It looked just like the houses on either side, which made me feel great affection for it. I was perched here for the winter. In the summer the owner would come back. She was a sweater designer partial to wicker and blue lilac water bottles and an old black-and-white TV and I had been happily lounging in her sensibilities until a few minutes before Marc came over the first time and I took down the painting of the dog that matched the upholstery of the couch.

The three CNN guys on the fourteenth floor of the hotel Al Rashid were describing the bombs and the anti-aircraft fire:

*"It looks like a number of fireflies."*

*"Some beautiful tracer fire: red and yellow blasts."*

*"Like the firecrackers on the Fourth of July."*

*"When we were children our parents said you could tell how far away the lightning was by counting one one-thousand, two one-thousand -- maybe you can do the same with bombs."* They all laughed nervously.

From the fourteenth floor of the Al Rashid hotel the anti-aircraft fire sounded like someone hacking apart a wooden house with an axe.

"Sure," the F-18 pilot replied when asked if he wanted to fight. "I'm thirty, can't keep a girlfriend, and can't save a dime."

"Is this what the war is about?" I asked Marc.

"Yep," he said. "American wet dreams. Credit cards."

Every night we'd eat dinner in front of the TV, turn the war off at eleven, and have safe sex in the bedroom upstairs. There was an unkempt old tree in the garden that tapped on the bedroom window as if to invite me out or remind me of something as I lay awake listening to Marc Byrne wrestling with the air.

There were yellow ribbons all over the villages. Every healthy tree, every lamp post and front-yard flag pole looked like a present. In the vegetarian restaurant in Sag Harbor, a bearded man stopped at the checkout to tell the waitress a story of an Iraqi woman who had gone to Saddam Hussein to plead for her imprisoned husband. She said she had lived with the guy for thirty years so she knew he was loyal to Hussein. After thirty years you gotta know someone inside and out, said the bearded man. So afterwards the president had the man killed and sent his heart to his wife in a carton. The young waitress, strands of hair escaped from her barrette, listened with her chin propped on her palm.

One evening Marc and I went to a vigil at the First Presbyterian Church. It was lit with electric candles and every pew was filled, mostly with mothers and sisters, girlfriends and aunts who took turns calling out names --

"For Johnny Corwith, son of John and Gretchen Corwith of Bridgehampton, Lord in your mercy..." began one voice. And the response of hundreds of others "Hear our prayers."

Johnny Corwith took me for a ride once on his tractor.

"For Rear Ensign Nicky Verderosa, Lord in your mercy..."

"Hear our prayers."



"For Corporal Joseph Wesnofske...."

After a while we could hear no single voice, as if the church itself were speaking, the furniture polish the joists *Lord in your* the pitch of the roof *mercy hear our* the ranks of hymnals *prayers*. Across the globe, their boys and girls were making surgical strikes.

Here encased in clapboard was pride, love, the dread of losing those. The war made everything simple, bridged the distances between the generations, the stilted communications, shoebox misunderstandings.

Marc and I never ventured further in than the vestibule. We weren't sure we had the right to be there. "Kibitzing," I whispered to him and, when he shook his head, explained, "It means sneaking drags off other people's faith."

He was silent on the drive back to my house and silent until we turned off the war and the last static of it had vanished from the screen of the old TV, and then he said "I think there's something going wrong between us and maybe that's it. Kibitzing. You don't have your own melodrama. You want mine."

I went to the closet and took out a shoebox and placed it in his lap. He opened it and held up one of the Gucci clogs, high-heeled, white patent leather with a gold insignia buckle. "Whose are these?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "They arrived here Fedex from L.A. a day after my birthday." I showed him the note: *I asked the saleslady what the girls were wearing these days*, my father had written, *Hope you adore them*. At the moment my father was out in L.A. doing voiceovers, heard but not seen, and hoping for more, and my mother was on the road doing PR for a country band. When my parents call me they ask about each other by first name.

I could also have shown him the recent letter from my mother, postmarked Dime Box, Texas, and inside the balding cardboard star, its glitter rubbed off and collected in the cracks of the envelope -- an invitation to a Lone Starlettes club gig on the back of which my mother had written in pink magic marker, "Come to the concert baby." I kept a collection of these, for the postmarks, mainly: Palestine, Sweetwater, Saint Jo, Nada, Pandora. I could never picture the clubs in any but the most predictable way, their beery darkness shot through with strobe lights, and my mother, surrounded by slow-talking men, beating time on the bar with the big silver and turquoise ring she wears on her index finger.

I could have told him finally the full name my parents left me, from an incense box -- Patchouli Anne Gifford.

Marc put the unworn clog back in its tissue paper nest. "They're fetching," he said.

I let it go. There was no telling what he would do with this information. Pity would be unbearable, and then I would have to try to explain, But I chose this rebellion -- staying put, smack in the middle of this town which my parents left, where I make a job of controlling local memory.

But while I was explaining that I would be thinking, Maybe he's right, I am kibitzing, I do long sometimes to find the urges that compel my orderliness, to tap them, not to convey them, not to connect the dots. I wanted to know how he did it, how Marc got freed up by the sterile gloom of the medical images he used as canvas, how he could stare at disease straight on for about as long as you can look at the sun, then turn away and paint like a child, unselfconscious and sensuous.

We carried our samples in Tupperware to mail at the Sag Harbor Post Office, which was closed until 1, so we took our blood to lunch. When the nurse slid the needle into his vein, Marc looked at me without flinching and said "This must be love." The whole thing had been my idea. But I hadn't known we lived in a zone that was technically rural and so would have to mail the blood ourselves to an official destination, a lab Upisland where strangers would titrate and peek. We had pastrami at the Paradise, with our blood sitting on the counter, and 180

degrees through a spin on the counter stool I thought What if it's positive? And me with no religion.

I sat on the stool displacing almost no air. Containment. I picked up the two surprisingly light envelopes, preaddressed to the lab. What do these things contain? Hemoglobin, corpuscles and platelets probably, used to rushing around in a mindless diaspora of systole and diastole, now in suspension. Little liquid reckonings of his past and mine, all of our complicated loves and momentary after-party infatuations. All of the wrong numbers. "Go on ahead," I said to him. He was restlessly pulling napkins out of a dispenser. "You have work to do," I said. "I'll pay. And I'll mail these." He looked grateful and kissed me on the forehead, then left.

At first his kisses were shapeless: lips and thick tongue in saliva, engulfing my mouth, my chin, my nose. He branded me with his kisses. "You are mine," they said, leaving a sticky patch.

Now they are more measured. We are. We are routinizing. We are experiencing technical difficulties. Please stay tuned.

The night after the blood test, of all times, he said this: "Sometimes I feel like I'd like to sleep with somebody else but I need to resolve this situation before I do that."

*This situation* means him & me.

"It was nothing you did, Pat," he added.

I started counting to myself, one one-thousand, two one-thousand.

"Well that's a comfort," I said aloud.

"It's that I need more space. You're subletting my space."

etc.

This conversation was only a formality. I had already figured out that half the time he went to the bathroom it was just to take a trip. And now he had a show coming up in Paris and there was that omission of French women to be addressed.

I was balancing on the one arm of the Chamberlain couch, with my knees drawn up, and smiling -- irrelevantly, since he wasn't looking at me. Inside the pressure was building to the point where I might have inflated and then, like a punctured helium balloon, shot up to the roof and ricocheted from beam to corner to wall. I tore the band-aid off my inner arm and noted the sting, but there was no mark at all to show where the blood had been drawn, my belated attempt to lay the groundwork for spontaneity.

I was unsure which was making me feel worse: that the man who came to my door one rainy night to deliver a rose on his way to an AA meeting was now talking about our relationship with the affection of General Schwarzkopf describing maneuvers, or that I was letting him, that I was smiling, sitting there with my knees drawn up, rather than standing, walking out without closing the door behind me, glorying in the honest pistons -- the engine power unleashed merely by turning a slender key -- then burrowing into my comfortable bed and not minding if I woke up the next morning with no one to talk to about dreams. Instead I stayed. On the couch. I could feel him retreating but I thought he wouldn't get far as long as he was inside of me. We had a night of mechanical passion. I worried that he wouldn't come and that I was shivering only from the cold.

#### SHADES OF MAROON (OBITUARY)

What, after all, did I expect from a guy who paints on top of a total stranger's upper urinary tract? I spend hours at the keyboard, where I should be writing



about the Zoning Board of Appeals, wrapping this ending into neat word packages that make a gift out of truth. Soon I'll be able to call Consolata, my voice light as droplets on a hot skillet, and say, "Right you were. We crashed and burned."

What's left behind of the two of us is a vague scent, like that a woman leaves walking by while you're sitting in some quiet place, the library or a doctor's waiting room. I rummage through pieces of dialogue, images, gestures: He's talking to his mother on the portable when I arrive at the barn, sit down on the couch and pretend to read while trying to work backwards from his laconic side of the conversation to hers. Still talking to his mother, he squats in front of me and, like the solicitous salesman of Mary Janes at Indian Walk, props my heel on his knee and unlaces my sneaker. But that was at the very beginning, when we adored what we imagined in each other.

And now you find:

- (1) All fortune cookies are suddenly true.
- (2) Recipes are dispiriting.
- (3) and (4) You imagine all the configurations of him with a French woman or with the other birthday present, over and over, telling this rosary in the hope that it will become simply monotonous.
- (5) Nobody ever died from this?
- (6) You wish you wore eyeglasses or a cast or some other inorganic barrier -- the best you can do is put up the shield of the second person singular.
- (7) Your breathing becomes audible to you.
- (8) You shop for Delft figurines.
- (9) You nervously cross and uncross your selfconfidence.
- (10) You stare with loathing at other people's pets.
- (11) You stand in the dark bathroom in front of the medicine chest mirror chewing a roll of wint-o-green Lifesavers until, tongue numbed by freshness, fluorescence froths between your teeth.
- (12) You write lists. Tuesday! File fingernails!
- (13) You write lists.

After he left the Paradise you paid the twelve dollars and thirty two cents and walked down Main Street, toward the harbor and the post office. Your black coat was open and you felt in the air the warm underbelly of spring. The breeze rang the halyards against masts of boats just out of dry dock. It is a sound that you notice only when things are about to change. Outside the post office -- "Hi, how're you doing"s and "Survived the winter, have you?"s as acquaintances hold the door open for each other -- there is a green oil drum garbage can. You tore open the two envelopes, took out the plastic containers, still a little warm in the palm. Both the same color -- surprising. Held up to the light, still the same color. You were sure there was a better name for this color than "maroon." You were sure there was a difference between these two that you just couldn't see. One is perhaps vermillion and the other Titian red, or Alizarin and Scarlet Lake. From the paint charts in the barn you'd learned that every color gradation has its own identity. You took the tops off the two containers and poured your blood into his, swished this around a little, and dumped the mixture into the oil drum. It stained a styrofoam cup and several announcements of Publisher's Clearinghouse winners. Someone would see it and be curious, the way we always are about other people's insides.

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