



Watch for More Fiction by D. A. MacQuin

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**POLITE
CONVERSATION
ABOUT THE
WEATHER**

By

D. A. MacQuin

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Polite Conversation About the Weather

After putting on a fresh coat of lip-gloss and brushing her hair, Amy admired herself in the full-length mirror at work. She wore a new white cotton sundress that she sewed herself from one of her mom's old JC Penny's patterns. Her sewing skills improved with each new garment she created. She often received compliments on her dresses, which compelled her to branch out into Capri pants and skirts.

She was irritated when the front door of the diner swung open. *Damn, another customer.* Cut Above up her things, she exited the bathroom to take one more order for the day.

"Don't worry Amy—this one's to go," said Bob Peterson, a small, tired-looking man who stood at the counter. She saw the top of his Monroe County Correctional Facility cap, barely visible above the top of the cash register. "I know you folks are closin' soon."

"Oh, hi Mr. Peterson. How's work?" Right away she had a feeling this wasn't a wise question judging from his sad, tired eyes, and weak smile. Last Christmas he told her that he'd worked in the prison for twenty-five years.

"I guess things are about the same... I need a last meal."

These orders always took her by surprise. It gave her the creeps knowing that she was taking an order for the last meal a man would eat in his entire life. She always wondered what the guy did to deserve the death penalty, and if he was actually guilty.

"What can I get for you?" she asked in a small, somber voice.

He pulled a small piece of paper from his breast pocket and read, "Prime rib, medium rare. Mashed potatoes with extra gravy, corn, green beans, a root beer, and a slice of apple pie."

"We're out of apple pie."

"Do you have blueberry?"

"Yep."

"Okay, make it blueberry."

"Is that all?"

"That's it."

She gave the order to Larry, the grill cook, mentioning it was for a last meal. She told him this, hoping he'd take special care preparing it. Orders from the prison didn't come very often. Oftentimes the prison kitchen was capable of providing them. And sometimes death row inmates desired simple things like ice cream, or a salad that Mr. Peterson would get at the grocery store. A few times he went to McDonalds and Pizza Hut to pick up last meals, which he found depressing.

As the prime rib thawed in a microwave, Larry said to Amy, "At least this one's got good taste. Remember the last one?"

"Yeah, that was pretty gross." The last death row meal Mr. Peterson picked up was about six months ago. It consisted of two childdogs with extra chili on the side, onion rings, fries, a banana split, and a root beer. She thought it seemed like a fantasy meal for a little kid, which reminded her of something she read in a magazine about some death row inmates being slightly retarded.

Amy's boyfriend, Jake, drove up and parked his truck in the parking lot. She recognized the loud skidding of his pick-up truck's tires on the gravel, and his speedy death metal blasting from the windows.

"Larry, I'm taking a break," she said, stepping outside. Jake got out of his truck wearing jeans, hiking boots, and a thick plaid flannel shirt. She loved this look—he reminded her of a big, burly lumberjack. He rushed at her with a wide grin and lifted her up, planting a kiss on her freshly glossed lips. His breath smelled of beer, and his eyes were red and glassy from smoking pot. She didn't like getting high, but it was okay that he did. Pot made her mind feel sluggish, which bothered her because she felt dumb enough

as it was. Her secret fear was that he'd break up with her for not being smart enough. Jake looked like a simple country boy, but he was smart as a whip.

She noticed something strange about his eyes. They seemed larger than usual, and a darker shade of blue. "Your eyes look different."

"That's 'cause I'm tripping," he said with satisfaction.

"Tripping?"

"On acid. LSD. You know—*Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. The Beatles tripped on this shit all the time. Timmy's friend from Chicago brought it down. Check it out." He removed a small eyedropper vial from his inside coat pocket that was filled with clear liquid. "It's pure. Dealers often throw shit like rat poison and speed in it, but not this." He flashed his ill-gotten gains from Timmy. "You wanna try some?"

"I don't know... what'll it do?"

"It's fucking awesome. It makes you super high and energetic. Things start to look and sound weird. And it makes you horny as hell. Nothing's gonna happen to you. I've done it plenty of times and it's never harmed me. Timmy trips all the time and he just got into Harvard. That's why he's havin' a party. Come on—one drop won't kill you."

"How many did you take?"

"Three."

She thought he seemed pretty normal and in control, and he was so excited that she figured one little drop couldn't hurt. If he said it was all right to try it, then it must be okay.

"Come here." He took her hand and led her behind the diner to an isolated place aside massive rows of corn. "Open your mouth," he said.

She did as she was told as he filled the eyedropper and put two drops on her tongue. "How many drops did you give me?"

"Just one. You'll start to feel it in about thirty to forty-five minutes."

They stood quietly for a moment, looking mischievously into each other's eyes. Corn stalks rustled in the wind, and occasionally a car could be heard going by on the never-ending, flat inter-state.

He towered over her, which she loved. He made her feel warm and safe, like her father once did. She couldn't believe how lucky she was to be only sixteen, and already in love with the man she knew she'd marry. Her mother didn't like him. She thought he was too wild and sure of himself.

He gently ran his hand down her cheek as if she were a child. He was proud to be dating the cutest girl in school—so curvy and sweet looking. He prided himself on being able to command her, especially when it came to taking her virginity a year ago. He couldn't wait to exercise his charm around all those delicious preppy girls in Cambridge. He didn't tell Amy yet, but at the end of the school year he planned to go east with Timmy. He felt confident that he'd easily charm people with his rapier wit and dark good looks. He never understood why more people didn't leave town and try to move up in the world. Why would someone like him stay in Linwood? *There's no way I'm gonna stick around this hellhole and work in some fuckin' factory...*

"We just gotta last meal order from the prison. Larry's cookin' it up right now."

"More chili dogs?" he joked with a smile.

"Nope. This one wants prime rib, mashed potatoes and gravy, vegetables, and pie. It's really sad isn't it?"

"What—that they're fryin' some guy?"

"Well, yeah."

"Ha! As far as I'm concerned, it's a garbage disposal. Do you know what that chilidad fuck did? He raped and murdered a nine year-old little girl. How would you feel if you had a daughter and someone did that to her? How would you feel if someone did that to your mom or your sister? Listen—you gotta be real fucked up to get on death row. They're probably fryin' some fuckin' crackhead rapist. And he gets to eat prime rib. Damn..."

She stared at him blankly, not sure how to respond. It always made her nervous whenever he went off on one of his rants. She couldn't tell if he was angry in general, or frustrated with her for not being smart enough.

He noticed the worried look on her face. “Hey—I didn’t mean to scare you just now,” he said. “I just get mad at the world sometimes. Let’s go inside. I gotta take a piss.”

“I should probably get back anyway.”

They went in through the rear door of the diner, walking past the kitchen where Larry was almost finished grilling up the prime rib. Jake noticed some mashed potatoes and gravy, and vegetables inside a Styrofoam container near the entrance to the kitchen.

“I just need to clean up some tables real quick. Do you want anything to drink?”

“No thanks. I’m just gonna use the bathroom.”

He entered a stall and filled the eyedropper almost completely with LSD. Timmy’s gonna be pissed, he thought. But he’ll get over it. He’s rich. He’ll get more.

Before leaving the bathroom, he placed his ear against the door, listening for anyone walking by. When he knew it was safe, he slowly opened the door, and walked three paces to the kitchen entrance. He glanced in and saw that Larry was off in the distance with his back to him. In one swift movement, he emptied the entire contents of the eyedropper into the pool of brown gravy contained by fluffy white potatoes.

He went outside towards his truck, got in, and lit up a joint. His heart pounded with the excitement of having committed a secret act of justice. The thought of that rapist-crackhead-murderer squirming in his cell, going out of his mind during his final hours, seemed beautiful to him. *I hate low down trash. Those fuckers shouldn’t breed.*

He turned on the radio and a Beatles song was playing. He couldn’t remember the title, but it was something from the *White Album*. He began to laugh uncontrollably.

Part 2

Matthew Gold looked at his watch. It was 5 p.m., and fairly quiet for a change. He thought it was pathetic to be happy over such a small detail. Over the past eleven years, he learned to phase out all the noise—the rap music he hated, the fighting, obnoxious banter, and yelling. Thankfully, the Aryan Brotherhood left him alone because of his advanced age, which placed him in the precarious position of being useless. He once joked to himself that Death Row was like high school—he was invisible, except for occasional instances of ridicule. The great irony was that the young, tattooed men with shaved heads didn't realize he was Jewish. His pale white skin was good enough for them. Everyone had to belong to a category. Luckily, he managed to avoid this “mandate” by staying quiet and keeping to himself. He wasn't a threat to anyone, so he survived.

In recent days, he napped more often because he was too angry to be conscious. It was just like the end of his first year when the appeals were unsuccessful, he was broke, and his lawyer was convinced that there was nothing they could do. After coming to terms with the fact that his insanity plea failed, and any legal optimism he once held was gone, he was forced to accept that his wife and daughter would never speak to him or see him again. This wasn't a surprise; Anna told him that this was how it would be. Right after he was convicted and was being led away in handcuffs, she quickly approached and hissed through clenched teeth, “You will never see or hear from me or Leah again.” Her eyes were resolute.

There was a lot of commotion in the courtroom, with many cameras and media coverage. It seemed like she couldn't get too close because of the media, or maybe she didn't want to be photographed with him, or maybe she was too disgusted to be near him. Everything moved quickly like flashes of a nightmare; he was too stunned to respond to his wife. Instead, he panicked and looked away, scanning the crowd for a glimpse of his daughter, Leah. He craned his neck around as he was taken away. Leah was easy to spot in a crowd. She was fourteen, but already tall and very blond like her mother. He must have been moving around too much because one of the guards slapped his meaty hand around the back of his neck to steady him. He didn't see Leah. Maybe she wasn't at the trial, or maybe she'd left the courtroom already. These questions were never answered. He was afraid he'd never see his daughter again, and that's exactly what happened.

During his first year, he didn't exactly expect them to visit. Instead, he remained aware that during visiting hours—weekends from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.—they might appear, or maybe one of them would visit. After the second or third year, (they blurred into each other) he continued to think of them, but not in the context of visiting. At some point, he told himself he wouldn't survive if he continued to harbor hope. Hope felt like punishment.

His relationship with his wife and daughter was reduced to wondering. Leah was twenty-five now and he wondered what sort of young lady she was. Guiltily, he wasn't optimistic considering how much Anna influenced her. At fourteen, Leah already possessed an absolute belief in her own superiority, just like her mother. This was obvious in her carriage and with some of the things she'd say. His daughter's elitism deeply disturbed him, whereas Anna condoned putting down others that she deemed “inferior” or “mongoloid,” which for her meant anyone she thought was ugly.

Matthew wondered what other men contemplated before being put to death. He could barely remember what he had for dinner the night before, but he remembered every detail of his life leading up to that night. He saw his life as a string of bad decisions spurred by human weakness. The mistakes were his fault—being an adult entails accepting responsibility. But he couldn't take full responsibility for the motivations behind his mistakes. His underlying reasoning, he felt, was never completely his fault.

For weeks his mind ran a series of “If...then” scenarios. If his parents had raised him to be confident, then maybe he wouldn't have settled for a woman who didn't love him enough. If his mother hadn't gotten sick, maybe he would have moved away. If only...

What if I'd married someone slightly less beautiful and slightly more intellectual? He didn't know

any better because he was a naïve twenty-eight year old. For once, his mother was right. But she didn't like any of my girlfriends, so why would I listen? His mother grew to be senile and suspicious of all gentiles.

Matthew Gold never cared that he was Jewish. He was more like his father—a non-practicing Jew, who claimed to be agnostic. Looking back, Matthew appreciated some of the ethical aspects of Judaism, but he never saw himself as religious. He thought religion was an unnecessary emotional crutch, like having a pet. He saw himself as an individual who didn't have to define himself by race, religion, or any other construct. This had always been his instinct, even as a child. Besides, in the small town he grew up in, no one else was Jewish. There wasn't even a synagogue. Since no one perceived him as being different, then why be different?

He was twenty-seven when he first saw Anna. She worked at a cosmetics counter at the mall where he went to buy perfume for his mother's birthday. He snooped around and made it seem like he was browsing while he spied on her. He checked to see if he was taller than her. They were the same height, so he wondered if this would be a problem. Some girls prefer men that are much larger than them.

If he had met her any sooner in his life, he wouldn't have had the courage to approach her. The timing was right. He made good money as a manager for a real estate agency. He showed large homes to the wealthiest families in the area, which required that he hone his social skills. He liked wearing nice clothes to work and driving a Mercedes (albeit used). His newfound confidence allowed him to approach her.

He should have known something was seriously wrong when after two weeks of dating, Anna Doody made a disparaging remark about Jews. They were in his car at the drive-in theater watching *The China Syndrome*, which starred Michael Douglas and Jane Fonda. She said, "Michael Douglas is really handsome for a Jew." He was caught off guard by her remark so he asked, "What do you mean by that?" She responded, "I thought Jews were dark with hook noses. Aren't their genes all messed up from inbreeding? I thought I heard that somewhere."

"Anna... I'm Jewish."

Her eyes widened as if he'd just sprouted horns. "I didn't know Gold was a Jewish name." He nodded. "I'm sorry, Honey—why didn't you tell me?!" She playfully hit his arm and giggled. "I'm so sorry. Are you mad?"

"No, it's fine. I don't come out and say hey, I'm Jewish because I don't feel like I am. I mean, I was sort of raised Jewish, but I don't follow the religion. I never have."

"Oh." He examined her face for any hint of disappointment. It would be cruel to be dismissed for something that wasn't important to him. She looked at him with her sweet smile and said, "By the way, I like your name... Gold."

"You do?"

"Uh huh... It sounds rich." She leaned over and sweetly kissed him on his cheek. "When we get married, I'll be a Golden girl." She giggled at her own joke while fondling him and nibbling on his ear.

His mind raced with a slew of excuses: I'm not religious so it doesn't matter. She wasn't that insulting. She'll change—she's just uneducated. At least she apologized. *It's easy to make excuses when blinded with optimism.*

They married at the Lutheran church, where Anna's family had gone for generations. Both of their families were happy, but puzzled by how quickly it all happened. Her parents were relieved when she told them that they would definitely raise their kids to be Lutheran.

Anna quit her job at the mall and spent her days decorating, shopping, and learning how to cook. Matthew couldn't believe his good luck. His wife turned heads when they were out in public. To him, she embodied what society values in women. She was tall with straight, light blond hair that fell to the middle of her back. She was naturally thin, but still full-figured. Her breasts were plump and her ass was nicely rounded. Her light blue eyes were so piercing that he felt embarrassed to make eye contact on their first date. Sometimes, when they had sex he felt dizzy, as if his head were spinning. Sex with her was unreal, like he was in a dream. Sometimes, he felt guilty that he didn't deserve her.

Matthew looked back on this period of his life as the blind years. For instance, he was glad that his wife didn't have to work, but he should have questioned why she wasn't interested in anything outside the

home (with the exception of shopping). When he offered to pay her college tuition, she laughed and said, “Why would I need to go to college when I’m married?”

Anna wanted to have a baby as soon as possible. Sometimes she seemed more interested in having a baby than being with him. He began to wonder if her rush to conceive was “insurance” in her mind that no matter what, she’d be connected to his money. His suspicions about her were muddled and paranoid; he sometimes sensed coldness from her whenever insecurities about her intelligence surfaced. (She accused him of using big words to sound smarter.) But other times, her sweetness and beauty convinced him to extinguish any negative thoughts that could jeopardize their union. He told himself, she’s just young and anxious to start our family.

His confusion dissipated when Leah was born. They were thrilled with their baby girl. Anna was a good mother. Matthew found it strange, however, that she overly repeated the comment to her friends and family: “She looks just like me!” It was true—Leah had the same golden glow to her skin, bright blue eyes, and light blond hair. He was glad his daughter would look like Anna. But he heard her express this sentiment enough to wonder if she found him attractive at all. He knew he wasn’t the most handsome guy, but he had a certain dark, intellectual look that wasn’t common in their small Midwestern town. He was five-foot-eight, with dark brown wavy hair and big, dark brown eyes. He was small, but sharp looking and trim from regular exercise. One of his clients told him he looked like Al Pacino, which made him happy for weeks. He knew he wasn’t as striking as his wife, but he always figured women didn’t care that much about looks.

Is it six-o-clock already? Two guards opened his cell and told him they were taking him to another cell for his last meal. I know it’s my LAST meal, you idiots. They cuffed him and walked him to a cell that looked identical to his usual one. This was where he’d stay for his remaining hours. Bob Peterson, a guard he knew, was on watch duty. He liked Bob because he did his job without seeming to judge anyone.

Matthew sat at the little table in his cell and ate the meal he requested. Mr. Peterson looked up from his newspaper and asked, “Is it all right?”

“It’s fine... exactly what I asked for. Thanks, Bob.”

“You’re welcome.”

Bob returned to reading his paper while Matthew’s thoughts drifted back to his daughter. She was always so smart... Leah spoke in clear, full sentences by age two, and at three she was reading and constantly asking us to buy her more books. After kindergarten, she skipped the first grade. At the time, Matthew secretly thought to himself, “Thank God she has my brains.” There was a silent recognition between him and his wife that their daughter got the best they had to offer—her looks and his intelligence.

Anna’s life revolved around Leah. She compensated for everything she didn’t have while growing up: a hot breakfast every morning, new and expensive clothes, piano lessons, dance class. Matthew knew Anna was a great mother. But Anna also fostered what he thought of as a “bad seed quality” in their daughter. Leah’s awareness of her own superiority could be chilling. Imagine an eleven-year old little girl telling you at dinner, “My miscreant teacher gave me a B+ on my Theodore Roosevelt project. She’s just jealous because she’ll always be a mediocre school teacher.”

When Leah was in junior high, she had a group of girls over for cheerleading practice. She was always the most popular girl. Her friends fluttered around her and agreed with everything she said. I always thought she’d make a great lawyer.

The girls were in the kitchen making sandwiches when Matthew overheard his daughter say, “Thank God that mongoloid Mexican didn’t make the squad. Can you imagine?” Everyone giggled, except for her best friend, Hally. She was the sweet one of the bunch, and the one who was destined to be Leah’s best friend. The prettiest girls always recognize their equals.

That night, as Anna brushed her hair before going to bed, he asked her if she was aware that their daughter made racist remarks. Anna shrugged it off and said it wasn’t a problem. “What do you mean it’s not a problem?”

“Let’s be honest. All men are not created equal. Leah’s a hard worker. If she feels better than others, then she probably is. I thought you said your parents should have raised you to be more confident.”

“That has nothing to do with being racist.”

“So why don’t you say something to her about it?”

He didn’t want to say out loud that it was her fault that Leah had racist inclinations. “Mongoloid” was her favorite word for insulting people. That night, he lay awake remembering when he was a little boy and his father first told him about Bergen-Belsen. He wondered how his wife and daughter learned to assume a position of privilege. He always prided himself on being a humble Midwesterner.

He knew Anna was right on one point—he could’ve been more proactive in disciplining his daughter. But he was afraid. He feared that if he disciplined Leah too harshly, she would stay angry with him for the rest of her life. He knew how she could stay angry for so long. Sometimes when she looked at him, her face lacked any warmth or affection that daughters usually have for their fathers. He pictured her hooded blue eyes in his mind, coolly regarding him as she ate cereal at the kitchen table one morning. She was mad at him because he refused to have an in-ground swimming pool dug in their backyard. He simply couldn’t afford it. When she stood up from eating her breakfast, it gave him a little shock to realize for the first time that she stood taller than him. She wore shoes with a little heel that made her stand an inch above him. She strode past him with only a cold, dismissive glance to acknowledge his existence. As he watched her walk down the driveway to school, he realized that his little girl didn’t exist anymore. She was now a stranger.

Matthew looked at the clock on the wall. Just a few more hours. He panicked. His heart pounded and he broke out in a cold sweat. It was a half hour after finishing his meal, and now his stomach cramped. He curled up in the fetal position and tried to calm himself with deep breaths. He only wanted time to pass, to lessen the surreal dread of reality, but now he couldn’t deny that it was almost time. He covered his face with his hands and sobbed deep, guttural cries. Bob looked up from his paper. He knew to not interfere or say anything stupid.

This was the point where Matthew usually stopped thinking about what he did. But he couldn’t right now—the automatic distraction mechanism that usually turned on in his brain was disabled. He experienced thoughts and images that were blocked for years, his TV mind in fast-forward. He couldn’t control the speed and flow. He was on his side, staring at the gray concrete wall. Little dark spots and other stains on the wall stood out and glared at him. *Maybe I should talk to Bob. I could make polite conversation about the weather.* For a second he wanted to laugh. Meaningless chatter during the passage to death was absurd. So this is how it goes.

Anna forgot we had theater tickets. This was typical, not that her life was busy. Not that she had a job. It was her idea to see the play. Tom Stoppard. She liked having somewhere to wear her mall dresses. I could tell she was mad. She did that bitchy thing when she holds her head up high, making her neck look longer.

Fucking Danny Sullivan. That fat, disgusting pig. It was after the play, on the drive home. Why did she tell me while I was driving? It’s dangerous to drive while mad. Her mind was already made up. When Leah turned fifteen, we’d divorce. Because then she’d be old enough to handle it. Where did she get this from? Did she read this in one of those fashion magazines? There was no warning. Her head was held high.

They must have been having an affair for a while. His flabby body and fat pig face, with those big nostrils. I could see him huffing and puffing over her like a farm animal. God knows what went through her whore mind. He was rich. That was enough. His big, gaudy McMansion on Brewer Road. People drove past it and said wow, Mr. Sullivan’s rich. Leah used to say that.

Does Leah know? Is she upset? I never found out. She might have been happy to move into that big house with the pool. I don’t know if she knew about her mom cheating. So much I don’t know.

I dropped off Anna and kept driving. My heart pounded and I sweated. I wanted her back, but I knew it was too late. Some things you just know in your gut. I was a stupid fool. I knew something was wrong, but I let myself get suicidal because I was afraid. A lost, sick man carrying around a gun. I’d been carrying around that stupid gun for weeks because it made me feel better. The sickness was back. I had

been good for so many years. Nobody had a clue about Wichita years before.

I wanted to believe the problem with Anna would go away. I thought maybe I was imagining things and she would never leave me. I can be neurotic. I can't believe I married a dumb woman. I shouldn't have settled for living here. I was a coward. I used Mom as an excuse to stay. I settled too much.

I saw Hally walking alone on Miller Street. She wore a white sundress and sandals. Hally with the sweet baby face and thin, graceful limbs that future beauties always have. Such long chestnut curls and big brown eyes. She was destined to be Leah's best friend. No one else was beautiful enough. But Hally didn't see herself this way. She was raised to be sweet and humble, unlike Leah. No one ever told Leah to be quiet.

I rolled the window down. Do you need a ride home? Look at you. You're too precious to be walking alone at night. She got in. Why are you out so late? I was walking home from a graduation party because my dad forgot to pick me up, she said. How could he forget you? That's right... Leah mentioned that he was a drunk. She got in the car.

"Was Leah at the party?"

"Uh huh." She looks nervous. Did Leah talk about me? Is she hiding something?

"Did Leah go home yet?" It was almost eleven.

"I... don't know." Anna lost her virginity when she was fourteen. Maybe that's what Leah's doing.

"Was she fooling around with boys at this party? Where was the party?"

"It was at David Gregory's house." You didn't answer my first question.

"Well, was she or wasn't she?"

"I don't know." Her voice was weak and scared. David Gregory... Dr. Gregory's son. Anna told me that Leah's date for the dance was Dr. Gregory's son. I read in a news magazine that junior high kids have sex already, especially in little shit Midwestern towns.

"I guess she's takes after her mother. It runs in her blood."

"M-Mr. Gold. You're driving kinda fast. My street is right h—"

"I know where your street is. I've taken you home a million times. I know I missed it. I just want to talk for a while." My voice was calm. I wasn't scary. I saw her eyes look at the clock. She knows something. She knows if my daughter is fucking already. She knows how Leah feels about me, and about Mr. Sullivan. The thing that gets me is not having a choice. There was no discussion about leaving me. If Leah's having sex already, I'll never find out. She'd tell her mother she lost her virginity and they'd hide it from me. Maybe Dr. Gregory will give her the pill so she can fuck his son.

"Hally?"

"Yes, Mr. Gold?"

"Is my daughter a whore like her mother?"

She began to cry. "Where are we going, Mr. Gold?"

"Answer the question!" I slammed my hand hard against the steering wheel.

She was crying and she struggled to speak. "I don't think we should talk about this, sir." Sir. There she goes with that innocent little polite act. "Please stop the car and let me out!" You're yelling at me? You wouldn't if you knew I had a gun in my coat pocket.

The pounding footsteps of four guards approaching his cell jarred him. Mr. Peterson stood up, and as he unlocked the cell, he made eye contact with Matthew Gold. Mr. Peterson noticed that the mashed potatoes remained on the plate—it was the only food left uneaten. The pool of brown liquid congealed in a bowl of stiff white potatoes. "Actually, I asked for white gravy, not brown," Matthew said. "Maybe I'll have them later." He gave Mr. Peterson a slight, sad smile.

The guards cuffed Mr. Gold and took him to a brightly lit white room where he was made to lay down on a gurney. The doctor covered him from his neck down with a white sheet and tightly strapped him down with several black belts. The doctor then attached to him an EKG and an intravenous line. The buzz of the overhead florescent lights seemed to grow louder.

He wondered if Anna and Leah would see him like this. He separated his soul from them years ago. But at this moment, he wanted them there. As soon as he entered this room, all of his anger and pain

disappeared. The story of his life, the analysis of every single detail, all the hurt didn't matter because he was there for one reason—to die for the two crimes he committed. They never found out about the girl in Wichita, but he knew he was dying for her as well.

Any apology—any words uttered about what he did were meaningless. That night with Hally, he let his anger and self-hatred convince him that he was entitled to take something that was taken away from him—a chance to be happy.

A curtain that covered a one-way mirror was drawn back. Through the tears flooding his eyes, he glanced towards the window, but quickly looked away because he was ashamed. He didn't know who was behind the mirror. The superintendent read the death warrant and then asked Mr. Gold, "Do you want to make a final statement?"

He cleared his throat, not sure if his voice would be strong enough to be heard. He took a deep breath and uttered a calm, "No."

The first of three chemicals was injected into him. His mind went directly to a place he hadn't been in years. It was a perfect sunny day at the park. They were having a picnic. He watched Anna fly a kite and hand the string to Leah, who was two years old. Leah gazed up at the sky with a look of pure wonderment. She let go of the string and squealed in delight as she watched it float higher and higher.

Matthew Gold said nothing because he wanted to give his family, Hally's, and the other girl's family, a good death.

Part 3

In the woods outside of Timmy's house, Amy sat on the ground with her knees pulled in to her chest. She leaned against a tree, and stared blankly into the wooded darkness. The din of the party continued in the distance. "Come on, Baby," Jake pleaded. "You didn't think I'd stay around here did you?" He stood above her, impatient to get back to Timmy.

Tears fell steadily down her cheeks as her dreams crumbled. She thought it was cruel that he'd give her LSD and break up with her. Did he plan this? She wanted to tell him this, but she knew her words would come out jumbled. Her mind echoed with all the things he said that made her think they'd be together forever. Tremendous sorrow sat at the pit of her stomach as a wave of nausea rose and fell.

Jake felt bad. Her crying and silence made him feel guilty for getting her so high. He noticed she was sitting on the damp ground getting her new white dress all dirty, which she normally wouldn't do. He felt sorry for her—she cared so much about her clothes, which indicated to him that there wasn't much else going on in her head.

He glanced around and told himself that she was safe. No one would notice if she sat here by herself for a while. "Well, obviously you're in no condition to talk about this right now," he said. In a gentle voice he added, "Look, Timmy and I are going to Hardees for a little while. Do you want anything?" She didn't respond. "We won't be gone long, okay? We'll talk when I get back." As he quickly walked away, she lay down on the damp ground and looked up at the sky.

Timmy's friend, Henry Bright, had been watching them the whole time. He was the only other person who noticed that Amy was crying. They'd been in the same class since the first grade, and he liked that she was one of the prettiest girls, but also managed to be nice. It annoyed Henry when aggressive upper classmen scooped up the cute girls in his class like vultures. He got along with Jake all right, since he and Timmy were on the debate team, and Jake went to their tournaments to watch and support everyone. Henry had to admit that he liked it when Jake called him "a total badass" after a tournament when he made strong arguments against gun control. But Henry didn't like Jake, whom he thought was way too impressed with himself. Even though Henry looked up to Timmy as a cool senior who proved that you could be both nerdy and popular, he thought Timmy was morally weak for conforming to Jake's drug use.

At two in the morning, Hardees was the only place open in town. Jake and Timmy made their way through the parking lot giggling like giddy little boys. They were "peaking"; their acid trips had altered all of their senses and heightened their euphoric emotions. Jake felt lucky that he didn't wreck his truck on the way there considering every traffic signal created traces of light that trailed in his peripheral vision. He felt confident that even under the influence of a hard drug, he could stay in control.

The boys had been best friends since they were eight-years-old, and tonight was a momentous occasion to celebrate. For years they talked about moving away together, and now it was happening. They felt sorry for their classmates who would try to sustain their popular smugness at the local college. Some of them would work in a factory, or the prison, impressed by making ten dollars an hour. Boston was a different planet as far as they were concerned.

The bright lights of the fast food restaurant interior, coupled with elevator music made for a surreal environment under the influence of LSD. Altogether it was a strange and unusual day considering Jake had put the drug in a death row prisoner's last meal, (which Timmy found hilarious), he broke up with Amy, and Timmy bought their plane tickets for Boston. Earlier, Timmy commented that he felt like they were in a movie, and had no idea how it would end.

Adding to this strangeness was the sight of two tall, gorgeous women ordering food at the register. One of them was blond, and the other had long black hair. Timmy thought the blond was the perfect woman—exactly the type he'd want to marry one day. She reminded him of Grace Kelly with her white-blond hair pulled back to reveal a gentle, angelic face with light blue eyes and creamy smooth skin. Both

of them were dressed casually, yet still looked stylish and sexy. Women like this didn't exist in their town. The boys gave each other a surprised look as they approached the register. As they ordered milkshakes and hamburgers, the women sat down together in a booth.

"They must be from out of town," Jake murmured with a stoned, sly smile on his face.

"Should we talk to them?" Timmy asked. He often relied on Jake for advice with women. His high I.Q. did not guarantee erotic success.

"Sure. Just try to be calm." Timmy's small, wiry frame sometimes made him react to drugs with hyperactivity. And his extreme shyness made him awkward.

They paid for their food and walked over to the women carrying their trays. Jake said in his regular cocky voice, "You ladies aren't from around here, are you?"

They looked at him blankly and replied in unison, "No." The blond one added, "We're just visiting."

"Oh." Jake nodded his head. "By the way, I'm Jake, and this is my friend, Timmy."

"I'm Leah, and this is my friend, Estrelle." The dark-haired woman flashed a bored smile.

"Where are you two from?" Jake asked.

"We're visiting from New York," said Leah.

"Are you both models?" Timmy blurted out, barely removing the straw from his mouth. Jake flashed him the "watch yourself" look.

The women smiled and laughed a little. "Actually we are," said Estrelle.

"That's really interesting," said Jake. "It's funny that you should mention New York because Timmy and I are celebrating our big move to the East Coast in a few months."

"Where are you moving?" Leah asked.

"Boston. Timmy got accepted into Harvard."

"That's really great," said Leah. They both conjured a warm smile for Timmy, making him feel like his future was going to be grand.

"Mind if we sit down?" Jake asked.

The women looked at each other and shrugged indifferently. "Sure," said Leah, appreciating the distraction. They were used to young men eagerly wanting to be near them, and they were too tired to care.

"What are you two doing here?" Jake asked. Estrelle glanced at Leah, whose gaze focused downward. Neither of them said anything. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nosy. It's just that we don't often see New York City models here in Linwood." He laughed nervously to ease the tension.

Estrelle ate her salad as Leah folded her hands on the table and looked Jake in the eye with a slight smile. Her flawless face was calm, and her light blue eyes were piercing, making both boys uncomfortable. In a flat tone she said, "I came here to witness the execution of a man who raped and murdered my best friend when I was fourteen."

The prison, Jake thought. He gave Timmy a shocked look, which left them both stunned, especially in their drug-induced state.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jake quietly said.

"It's okay really. It happened ten years ago."

"What was his last meal?" Timmy asked, thinking about the mashed potatoes and gravy. Jake kicked him under the table and glared. Why would she know what his last meal was?

Leah stared at Timmy with barely concealed disgust. She responded to him with measured coldness, "Let's see... I'm pretty sure he had spaghetti with meatballs, corn on the cob, a grilled cheese sandwich, lasagna, twelve apples, twenty-seven pies, a tuna fish sandwich, mashed potatoes and gravy, a liter of ginger ale..."

Timmy began to weep. His body shuddered as he covered his face with his hands. Leah quit speaking and everyone looked down. Jake wasn't angry with his friend; he just felt bad. He reached for a napkin so Timmy could wipe his tears.

Leah felt guilty. He didn't mean to be rude, she thought. These are just young boys who don't know anything. And they're clearly fucked up. Both women recognized that the boys' glassy red eyes, big pupils, and hyper manner at two in the morning meant they were on something. They of all people would

know.

Suddenly Leah realized that she felt worse for Timmy than she ever did for her own dad.

Patchwork

It was nearly three o'clock, and Henry Bright hadn't sold one quilt. He sat at his booth that displayed his handiwork—quilts of various sizes, colors, and designs. He was hot, and he once again slipped into one of his dark moods. He began to wonder if his therapist's recommendation of finding a hobby was just plain bullshit. A year ago, he told Henry that cultivating a hobby was a great way to calm the mind, and maybe meet new friends. Quilting didn't result in any friendships, but his new hobby had been good to him over the past year. He liked feeling that he was good at something, and he looked forward to selling his work at the Linwood Arts and Crafts Fair. He viewed his quilts as veering more towards the arts, as opposed to the crafts.

The other booths at the Fair were set up in the parking lot adjoining the courthouse and the bank. Surrounding him were hand crafted jewelry, bird feeders, God's eyes, knitted afghans, and other regional largess for sale. The annual fair was part of Linwood's five-day Peach Festival. There were rides, a parade, and the highlight of the celebration—a beauty pageant that crowned the new Ms. Peach Festival, launching the winner to compete for the title of Ms. Illinois.

Henry was mortified when he learned that his booth would be situated next to Pete Dugan's. He'd known Pete since they were in the fifth grade. He was one of those guys who always had his classes in the "LD wing"—the section of school where learning disabled classes took place. Pete was mildly retarded, but not in an obvious way, making him all the more disturbing.

The Peach Festival was Pete's passion. He spent the months leading up to it constructing his own float for the parade, consistent with the Festival's theme. And he always sold wooden ducks at the Arts and Crafts Fair, which he carved and painted, sometimes in outlandish, metallic paint that he'd steal from the EZ-Mart.

Henry did his best to avoid Pete's attempts at conversation; it was an annoying throwback to high school when Pete would sit down next to him in the cafeteria at lunch. Henry wondered why the mildly retarded and socially inept tended to feel comfortable around him.

"Hey Henry," said Pete, grinning widely.

"What do you want?"

"You wanna see my best ducky?"

"No."

Aside from Pete and a few grandmothers who visited Henry's quilt booth, he didn't garner much interest in the public. Bitterness brewed, especially when he noticed that Mrs. Ivey's quilt booth was immensely more popular. Of course they're going to go for that boring, traditional quilting style of block patterns and conventional colors, he thought. How could I expect them to understand subtlety? Amateurs.

Just as he was considering packing up and leaving for the day, he noticed a small, strange girl browsing through the stalls. She wore a flowery summer dress with thick, clunky black leather shoes, and a large straw hat that looked too wide for her small frame. She came to Henry's booth and stared at his prized possession that hung on display behind him. It was his largest quilt, made for a king-sized bed. She hovered closer and continued to ogle it, as she intermittently sipped her lemon shake-up and chewed on the straw.

In a small voice she asked, "Are these your quilts?"

"Hand-made."

"You quilted them?"

"Yep, all of them."

"That's really cool. I never heard of a guy quilting before."

"Thanks." Henry could tell she wasn't from Linwood. Most girls from around there didn't engage him in such a friendly, easy-going manner. In Linwood, his social status had been ascertained by the time he was eleven, as if it were branded on his forehead. He wasn't outgoing, athletic, or handsome. In high

school, he was a talented debater, but that wasn't enough to impress anyone. He likened his existence to being a benign backdrop for the town, no different from the Dairy Queen on Main Street, or the omnipresent cornfields.

She said to him with a shy smile, "You're gonna think this is a strange question but...is that quilt about, *Dune*? You know, that science fiction book?"

His heart skipped a beat. The hours spent sitting in the humid, ninety-degree heat while being ignored culminated to this one instant. He didn't care that no one bought his quilts. He was satisfied that at this moment, at least one person—a cute girl no less—recognized his artistic efforts.

"Yes," he replied. "It is based on *Dune*. Wow. I can't believe you recognized it."

"Yeah, well, I read the book, and I recognized the sandworm, the Fremen people, and Paul Atreides with his glowing blue eyes. And right over there," she said, pointing at the top left corner, "that's the Baron Harkonnen floating in the air, with Alia underneath him. That's the part where she's about to kill him, right?"

"You're totally right." he replied. "Wow."

"Do you have any *Dune* stuff for a twin size bed?"

"No, not for a twin. But I have this." He laid out one of his favorites. It was a twin-sized quilt consisting of images from a science fiction novel titled *VALIS*. It was written by his favorite writer, Philip K. Dick, and it depicts a man who comes into contact with what he calls a vast, active, living, intelligence system. This occurs when a young woman from a pharmacy comes to his door to deliver his medicine. She wears a fish necklace that suddenly emits a luminescent pink light, which gives him the ability to see the past and future at the same time, and also speak another language. He depicted the light by sewing various shades of pink material in a sunray-like pattern.

"So you're a PKD fan too. This is totally awesome."

"You've read *VALIS*?"

"It's one of my favorites. I'll take this one. It would make a great souvenir to remind me of this place."

"I figured you weren't from around here. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Dale." She blushed and looked down. In a quiet voice she continued, "I'm... um, h-here for the pageant."

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you?"

"I'm here for the M-mmiss Peach Festival Pageant. I'm c-competing."

"Cool...that's really great." He thought she was adorable, but maybe a little too short and a bit heavy to compete against all those tall, leggy girls. But he didn't like that lanky, standardized form of beauty. He found most conventionally attractive people to be boring.

His genuine enthusiasm seemed to comfort her. She shrugged and added, "I don't expect to win or nothin'. My Dad thought it would be good for my confidence."

How odd, he thought. Beauty pageants struck him as instigators of eating disorders and shame. "I'm sure you'll do fine," he said.

She smiled sweetly, but conveyed in her countenance that she didn't really believe him. "So, how much is the quilt?"

"It's eighty dollars."

"That's a good deal. My grandma used to quilt. I know how much time and effort goes into these things." She reached into her purse and handed him the money.

"Thank you so much! By the way, what's your name?" he asked.

"I'm Maybelline."

"I'm Henry Bright." He stood to shake her hand and realized how petite she was, which he found incredibly attractive. He wanted to walk next to her and protect her from anything she needed protection from. He meticulously folded her quilt and put it in one of the many Piggly Wiggly grocery bags he'd saved. He took his time with the task; he wanted to talk with her more, and maybe ask her out. But he didn't know what to say, or what they'd do. Linwood was a small, boring town. There was always the movie theater, but it was run down, and it was Friday night, which meant that it would be populated by

loud, junior high kids. Or maybe he wouldn't ask her out at all. In the past he'd been accused of being overly anxious with women. He could already imagine the off-putting expression that would form on her face after being asked out.

Interrupting his thoughts, she asked him, "Would you like to come to the pageant tonight?"

"I would love to come to the pageant. Maybe afterwards we could grab a bite to eat or something?"

"That sounds great. I can leave your name at the door so you'll get in for free."

"Okay."

"Well, I should probably go and get ready. I am so nervous. I'll see you later!"

"Yeah, see you at the pageant!"

He watched her walk away with the quilt, feeling like a fool for not offering her a discount.

Like any native of Linwood, Henry possessed fond childhood memories of the Peach Festival. For him these centered around sneaking into the pageant with his friends to gawk at the swimsuit competition. They'd ride their bikes to the high school, where the pageant took place, then listen at the door of the auditorium for the swimsuit competition to begin, which was usually after the fifteen-minute intermission. They would then slip through the doors, knowing that even if they were caught, it would be unlikely for anyone to make a fuss over them in the midst of the pageant.

The open display of supple, womanly flesh boggled Henry's young mind. He viewed the beauty contest as an almost bacchanalian celebration of pure, sexual energy, although he wasn't capable of articulating this idea at the time. The fact that the mayor, and many of the affluent Linwood families attended the event always struck him as odd; gawking at beauties seemed unlikely in the confines of a high school auditorium.

The girls would be lined up wearing swimsuits and high heels—a contradictory fashion combination. Who swam wearing shoes? Their nervous smiles, complimented with big, stiff hair, and heavy make-up, transformed their young faces into maniacal masks of fierce competition. Each girl aimed to outshine everyone else, and bask in the glory of validating her attractiveness. Victory entailed being enshrined in the town's history. The winner would cherish her trophy and tiara for the rest of her life. Her family photo album would insure that one day her grandchildren would be able to proudly boast, "My nanny was the Peach Festival Queen!"

The high school teachers, the school Principal, the families and boyfriends of the girls—they all sat in the audience convinced that the beauty contest was as normal and American as apple pie. Henry saw the presentation as a sexual auction of sorts. He never understood why anyone viewed it as anything other than this. The girls walked down the runway, emoting personal pride as prime specimens of femininity. As they returned to their place in line, you could see the exact shapes of their asses, their firm, taut thighs, and strong calves. Bliss...

When the night was over, Henry would then go home and masturbate, dwelling on two or three of the beauty contestants, and imagine alternative forms of competition that could take place on the brightly lit stage.

Henry felt anxious for several minutes after Maybelline left his booth. She seemed sweet and innocent, not at all like the type to parade her flesh before a crowd of strangers. He wasn't sure if the nervousness at the pit of his stomach was for her, or for himself. Pete seemed nervous as well as he stared, dumbfounded, at Henry with his mouth agape. He held a purple and gold duck to his breast as if he were cradling a baby.

Henry almost never went out on dates. And whenever he did, he was acutely aware of the unspoken mandate to act as normal as possible, although he wasn't sure of what "normal" behavior was. All he knew was that for as long as he could remember, his experience with women resulted in them finding something distasteful about him—something beyond his recognition. He suspected his looks weren't the problem. He was a normal looking guy. Tall and thin, which he considered advantageous, hair the color of dark chocolate, and hazel eyes. On a few occasions, girls from the nearby university asked him out, singling him out for his dark, brooding looks, but polite bearing. Whenever girls would break up with him, he wanted to ask, "What is it exactly that compelled you to dismiss me?" But he never asked. He figured he wouldn't get an honest answer.

Over the years, he grew accustomed to rejection, so he made efforts to see himself as a tortured artist instead of just tortured in general. He took drawing classes at the university, which unveiled a competent, but mediocre talent. It wasn't until he took up quilting that he began to feel satisfied artistically. It distracted him from nagging self-consciousness, and convinced him that rural environments breed artistic eccentricity.

It felt strange entering the high school. He hadn't been there since he graduated twelve years ago. He could've gone to his ten year reunion, but opted not to because he didn't see the point. Having lost touch with the few friends he had, he found high school to be an unpleasant social experience where he strove unsuccessfully to fit in, except when it came to the debate team. Most of his classmates were now married with kids, and would probably think he was a weirdo, or perhaps homosexual since he was still single.

He got his ticket and sat as close to the stage as possible to get a good view. He found it funny that after those years of sneaking into the swimsuit competition, here he was—a guest of one of the contestants. He wondered what they could do after the pageant was over. It would be late, and the only restaurant that would be open would be the twenty-four hour Denny's in Bristol, the next town over. It would be a twenty-five minute drive, but this would give them a chance to get to know each other. Then maybe they'd take a drive through the State Park and walk around the lake. The stars would be out and it might be romantic. Suddenly, he felt that nervous feeling at the pit of his stomach again. He wondered why she even asked him out. Was there something wrong with her?

Henry noticed that sitting two seats over from him was Principal Lee. Henry ignored him. He couldn't stand the guy because he represented that contingent of people from Linwood who considered themselves higher class. Henry remembered that Mr. Lee catered to the popular kids—the football and basketball players, the cheerleaders, and the sons and daughters of the affluent. It was people like Mr. Lee who made high school so unpleasant.

Henry looked at the stage to avoid making eye contact with anyone else he might know from high school. He did this for the same reason why he didn't go to his reunion. On a certain level he was embarrassed by not having a career, like most people his age. When the reunion took place two years ago, he was employed at a video store. And currently he didn't have a job. Instead he lived off the money he inherited from his family. He hated how people equated what you do with who you are.

He was relieved when the lights dimmed and the high school band played *The Star Spangled Banner*. Everyone stood and faced the flag, which waved due to a small fan mounted on the wall that blew air on it from an angle. Mr. Klein, the emcee for the evening, then took the stage to announce the beginning of the 1996 Ms. Peach Festival Pageant. Mr. Klein was the high school librarian, and had emceed the pageant since Henry was a little boy.

The band played Stevie Wonder's *Isn't She Lovely* as the girls entered the stage wearing evening gowns. Each one walked up to the microphone to introduce her name and which town in Illinois she was from. "Hi, my name's Kelly Reed and I'm from Rantoul!" "Hello, I'm Casey Meyer and I'm here to represent Blue Bud!"

When Maybelline took the stage, her smile looked strained, and she didn't stride as gracefully as some of the others, as if she weren't used to walking in high heels. "Hi, my name's Maybelline Carter, and I'm from... I'm f-from D-dale." Her slight stutter was apparent, but barely obvious considering she didn't speak very loud into the microphone anyway.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Klein, "here they are! Take a good look at these ten lovely ladies because one of them is going to be your new Peach Festival Queen!"

The crowd applauded and cameras flashed at the spectacle of women in shiny gowns and big hair, all lined up with huge smiles on their faces. Henry could easily see the disappointment on Maybelline's face, even though she attempted to feign happiness like everyone else. Henry sensed that she knew how out of place she was. Her dress was decorated with sequined flowers, while all the others girls wore solid colors. She was the shortest girl, and her hair and makeup didn't project that she knew how to style herself for the stage. It was clear that she didn't have any pageant experience, like some of these girls who have vied for years to win a local pageant so that they could compete for Ms. Illinois and eventually Ms. America.

After the girls exited the stage, Mr. Klein intoned, “Our first competition for the evening will be the talent contest.”

The first girl to take the stage was a tall Barbie Doll blond dressed in a mint green, regal gown with long sleeves and silver trim that captured the light. She sat demurely behind the grand piano on the stage. Placing her hands on the keys, she shot one more cutesy smile at the judges. Jeez, Henry thought. She’s probably going to play something stupid.

When the crowd was sufficiently anxious for her to begin, she filled the auditorium with a piece from Debussy’s *Suite bergamasque*. Henry instantly recognized the piece because he had it on LP at home. It was one of his favorites that he often listened to while quilting. He was shocked by how perfectly she played the piece. It began with a delicate bass clef introduction. Then the melody comes in, plucky and staccato, with the perfect dose of smoothness in the right parts. Her hands moved in perfect synch, with an excellent sense of expression—especially in the parts where there are two separate time signatures in the bass and treble clef. When she finished, the crowd was generous with applause. Henry was stunned.

The next four girls to take the stage paled in comparison. Henry actually felt embarrassed for one of them who delivered a cheesy speech about the pride she feels when she looks at the American flag. He hoped that he wouldn’t feel the same with Maybelline.

When she finally entered the stage, Henry was surprised to see her in a majorette’s uniform, carrying a baton. He wasn’t yet prepared to see her baring flesh. Her uniform was shaped like a one-piece swimsuit, worn with white sneakers. The uniform was white, and decorated with red and blue sequins. He thought she looked very attractive. Her mid-section was a little heavy, but her legs were shapely and muscular.

A recording of Duran Duran’s “The Reflex” came on, and she began her routine. She twirled with confident fluidity, as if she were truly in her element. Her smile was genuine and natural—clearly she was an experienced majorette. The crowd seemed to enjoy her routine, which wasn’t surprising considering baton twirling was a staple in American beauty pageants. There was scattered applause during an especially high toss of the baton into the air while she spun around several times.

She moved closer to the judges, as if she were trying to project herself more directly towards them. Then, disaster struck. She tossed the baton high into the air again, and it landed off the stage, almost striking a judge on the head. A disappointed “Aw…” swept through the audience. Maybelline stood facing the audience trying to quell a panicked expression as she waited for a woman in the front row to hand it back up to her. As she attempted to continue with her routine, the song ended. The crowd applauded lightly as she took a bow and left the stage with a look of failure on her face.

Henry felt bad for her. All he could think of were things to say to make her feel better such as, “You looked really great!” and “At least you completed most of your routine.”

After the rest of the girls competed, Mr. Klein announced that there would be a fifteen minute intermission and reception in the cafeteria.

Henry made his way to the cafeteria and anxiously scanned the room for Maybelline as the contestants appeared in their evening gowns to mingle with the crowd. He spotted her sipping punch and anxiously looking around the room. “Hey!” he said with a smile.

“Henry,” she said, clearly relieved. “I’m glad you made it.”

“Are you kidding? I’m happy to be here.”

“Henry—” She beckoned for his ear and raised up on her toes. “Let’s get outta here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not finishing the pageant. There’s no way. I want to pack up my things and leave now.”

“Wait—don’t you have any family or friends here in the audience?”

“No.” Her eyes began to look glassy. “There’s no one here.”

“Oh.” He found that odd. He assumed one or both of her parents would be in the crowd. “Are you sure you want to leave?”

“I’m absolutely sure. Will you meet me out front?”

He nodded. “I’ll pull the car up and meet you outside.”

“Thanks, Henry.” As she hurried off to get her things, he noticed that she had her sneakers on under

her gown.

By the time he pulled up in his orange Volvo, she was waiting in front of the high school wearing a t-shirt and jeans. She carried a garment bag and a big duffel bag. When he unlocked the door, she hastily threw everything in the backseat and got in.

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Everything’s fine now that I’m out of that nightmare.”

“I’m sorry you dropped your baton.”

“It wasn’t just that. I also stuttered during my introduction. I couldn’t help it. I was so nervous.” Her brow was wrinkled.

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t noticeable. I probably would’ve done the same.”

“And how could anyone compete with that classical pianist?”

“Well, I guess she was pretty good.”

“Hey—I really appreciate you taking me away from all that.”

He was glad to see her finally smile. “It’s my honor. So, where are we going?”

“Would you mind taking me home first? I’d love to scrub all this make-up off my face. I feel like a clown.”

It was a short drive to Dale, which was a small farm town like Linwood, but even more isolated and nondescript. She directed him through the main drag in town further out into the country, where there were houses and farms situated off of a winding gravel road. “I live out in the boonies,” she said.

“It’s peaceful out here.”

“I should warn you. My dad might be home. He’s kinda weird.”

“Weird like how?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know... I guess he can be kinda crusty. But don’t worry. He’s harmless. It’s right over here.” She pointed to a driveway that led to a small, dirty white-shingled house. Automotive parts and empty beer bottles littered the front porch.

They entered the house to a loud living room blaring an action movie on a big screen TV that was much too large for the room. She set her keys down on the kitchen counter and then peered into the fridge, as if by habit. “Dad? Are you home?” she yelled.

A burly man appeared in the kitchen wearing jeans and a flannel. “Jesus. You scared the shit out of me. What are you doing home so early?”

“I left the pageant early.”

“You mean you just walked out in the middle of it?”

She nodded silently.

“After all the time and effort you put into this thing?” His face was flushed with anger, making Henry uncomfortable, partly because her dad hadn’t acknowledged his presence yet.

“Uh, Dad... th-this is my new boyfriend, Henry Bright.”

“Nice to meet you.” Henry held out his hand. It took him a moment to process that she just referred to him as a “boyfriend.” This was unprecedented, and he wasn’t dissatisfied.

“You can call me Frank,” he replied. He shook Henry’s hand, regarding him suspiciously.

“We’ll be in my room,” Maybelline said as she grabbed Henry’s wrist and led him down the hallway.

“We’re not done discussing this, Maybelline.”

Her bedroom had pink wallpaper and carpeting, with white, girlish furniture. On the walls and shelves were remnants of past happiness: baton-twirling trophies, a blue ribbon from a track and field event, a prom photo of her in mid-blink, standing next to a red-haired Ichabod Crane. He perused her book collection that included Frank Herbert, Philip K. Dick, Heinlein, Gibson, and Asimov. He was flattered to see the quilt he made covering her bed, despite its odd aesthetic juxtaposition.

She flopped down on her bed and covered her face with her hands. “He’s pissed.”

“He didn’t seem that bad.”

“No. He’s totally disappointed in me.”

“Why didn’t he go to the pageant to support you?”

“I don’t know. He said he would.”

“Why didn’t you ask him why he wasn’t there?”

“I don’t know. I guess I don’t like asking him questions.”

He wanted to ask her if he was really her new boyfriend, but clearly she was preoccupied with other matters. Besides, he figured it was too soon to discuss their relationship.

Frank pounded on the door, startling them. She sat up quickly. “Come in.”

He flung the door open. “I just got off the phone with your Aunt Debbie!” There was a pause while Maybelline and Henry wondered what this conversation with Aunt Debbie entailed. “She drove all the way from Cape Girardeau to see you in the pageant and she said you just disappeared at the intermission without talking to her. She asked the pageant coordinator what happened to you, and she found out no one knew what in the hell happened to you!”

“I d-didn’t know Aunt Debbie was coming. Why didn’t she tell me?”

“I don’t know why she didn’t tell you. That’s not the point. The point is, I wanna know what the hell is wrong with you? I thought you said things were going to be different now. I spent almost a hundred dollars on that dress for you!”

“Dad?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you come to the pageant tonight?”

“No,” he said shaking his head, “Nuh uh. This ain’t about me. This is about you. Girl, you gotta learn responsibility. When you start something, you gotta finish it! That’s what you have to do to make your way in the world.” He slammed the door shut. A moment later he re-opened the door and said, “Henry, I’m sorry you have to witness all this. But she’s gotta think about what her problem is!” He shut the door.

Maybelline curled up into the fetal position on her bed, hugging an old, beloved brown teddy bear. She began to cry. Through her tears she said, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.” He sat next to her on the bed. “Maybelline. That pageant was totally shitty and you know it. Think about it. If you had stayed, you would’ve had to do the swimsuit competition. You don’t seem like the kind of girl who wants to have her body judged by a bunch of strangers. You have other things going for you.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

He didn’t understand why she allowed herself to be victimized over something as trivial as a beauty pageant. He didn’t want to say anything, but her dad seemed like a total redneck, like those guys in high school who’d terrorize him in gym class.

“You shouldn’t let your dad make you feel so bad. Do you really think he has everything figured out?”

“I suppose not. It’s just shitty when your dad’s disappointed in you. Everyone wants their parents to like them.”

“How old are you, Maybelline?”

“Nineteen. And you?”

“Thirty. You don’t think I’m too old for you, do you?”

She wiped away her tears and looked him in the eye. “I think you’re perfect.”

“No girl’s ever said that to me before.”

“I’m not like most girls.”

“I can see that.”

“No, I mean seriously.” He waited for her to elaborate, wondering how serious her revelations could be. “I feel like I should probably tell you that I had a nervous breakdown last summer. I’d just graduated, and I thought it would be fun to look around the attic for old yearbooks with my parents in them. When I was up there, I found my mom’s diary in a box. I started reading it, and she wrote all about how she seriously considered having an abortion when she was pregnant with me. She was only my age when she found out she was pregnant. She said she felt doomed to stay in Dale with my dad, whom she didn’t even like very much. She called him a moron in many of the entries. She was angry as hell that she couldn’t

follow through with her plan of moving out to L.A. with her best friend, Olivia. When I read this, I felt like my life had no meaning, like I wasn't meant to be here. I wouldn't leave my bedroom for days. But it was worse than just depression. It was like something clicked in my brain and I could swear that I was hearing my father's voice in my head. It was kinda like in *VALIS* when Horselover Fat feels like he's perceiving two realities at once. I thought of that book a lot during this time, which is why I was so shocked when I saw your quilt. *VALIS* was such an important book to me, and it was amazing to see your quilt."

"What sort of stuff did you hear in your head?"

"My dad's thoughts. At random moments I heard him say that he'd wish I'd never been born, that his life would've been easier without me, and how I was a miserable little troll next to my mother. She was very beautiful, you know. For the first time in my life, I blew up at him and told him that he made everyone's life miserable and that he's a moron. I told him that they should've aborted me or put me up for adoption because my life is shit. Next thing I know, I'm being forced by orderlies to the Southern Shawnee Center. Do you know what that place is?"

He nodded. "Yes, I've heard of it."

The Southern Shawnee Center was notorious when a news story revealed the year before that they still practice shock therapy. On occasion while growing up, there would be alerts on the news whenever a patient would escape. It didn't happen often, but whenever it did, imaginations would ignite about mad men in straightjackets showing up in your back yard, staring in through your windows during dinner.

"My dad told them I threatened to kill myself, but I didn't exactly say that. He was full of shit."

"I'm sorry he did that." He felt himself begin to hate Frank.

"It wasn't a big deal, really. I just had to go to a bunch of meetings. I wasn't there very long, and as soon as I got back I went back to normal. I think I just had a weird nervous breakdown that made my brain work differently. At least that's my theory. You're the only person I've ever told about the voices in my head."

There were many times when he questioned his own sanity, especially when it came to feeling optimistic about fitting into society. It didn't seem normal to have nothing to look forward to. And he'd had his fair share of depressive episodes, especially after the deaths of his mother and grandmother. But he'd never heard voices in his head or anything close to that. He couldn't deny that her description of hearing voices, albeit temporarily, was disturbing. He'd read in the DSM IV that that could be a sign of schizophrenia. Or maybe it was a type of echolalia, he thought.

Was he lying to himself? Is it a liability to love someone who's mentally ill? He thought of all the dates he'd been on with women over the years who easily dismissed him. It made him feel damaged, as if he didn't fit into the human race. It was the worst feeling in the world—unrequited affection for reasons beyond his control. He was tired of it.

Seeing her so tiny and hurt, clutching a teddy bear, he now realized that he would not dismiss her. He would not throw away the possibility of love with an imperfect, but honest being—a woman brave enough to reveal her vulnerability. He felt no inclination to hide that he was seeing a psychiatrist, which felt refreshing for a change. He now viewed her with admiration because most people try to hide anything remotely unattractive about themselves. Her iconoclastic nature seemed to match his own.

"What do you want to do with your life?" he asked. "I mean, what are your life goals and dreams?"

"I don't know. In the immediate future I should probably go to college, but I can't afford it and I don't know what I'd major in. All I know is that I gotta get out of here." She gestured towards the living room where her dad bellowed loudly at some TV show. "He's driving me nuts."

"You could move in with me."

She sat upright with wide eyes. "Move in with you?" She looked optimistic yet skeptical. "I don't know..." As her voice trailed off, he detected ambivalence in her eyes and it excited him. "It is a little odd that we don't know each other. At all."

The importance of the moment had reached fruition. He thought of the scene in *Dune* when Paul Atreides addresses the Fremen desert people as their leader, laying out the plan for their uprising and survival.

He took a deep breath and continued, "I live alone in an old Victorian house in the center of Linwood. My father died when I was three, and I was raised by my ma and grandma. My ma died when I was in high school, and my granma just died last year. I inherited the house, and a good load of money. I guess I don't know exactly what I'm doing with my life either, but meanwhile I spend my time quilting and reading. I've always been a big reader. In high school I was captain of the debate team. Sometimes I take college classes in Art or English Literature. I'm in therapy. Twice a month I talk to a doctor, mainly just to talk to someone. So how about you?"

"I was born and raised in Dale. My parents split up when I was thirteen, and my mom left us for California to break into movies. She used to call every now and then, but then she just quit. Dad gets drunk and talks about how much of a whore she was, and sometimes he looks at me with this disgusted expression, like he's really looking at her. I've never been popular and I only had one boyfriend—that one over there in the prom picture. He broke my heart. Left me for a cheerleader."

"There's nothing worse than unrequited love." He took her hands. "Come with me, Maybelline. It'll be like you're moving in with your boyfriend. There's nothing wrong with that." At this exact moment, he was reminded of Amy, his old friend from high school. When they first started hanging out, she was shy and intellectually insecure; he had the feeling that he was the first person who was interested in her opinions. He discovered that she was smart, and told her as much. So she started studying more, and eventually garnered the courage to move to New York by herself to study design. He often wondered what would've happened to Amy if they hadn't become friends, because she seemed unable to look beyond the confines of dating and caring what others thought of her. Now he was presented with a similar opportunity of being able to jar open doors of perception for Maybelline—to see beyond the efforts of a beauty pageant or living in Dale with an emotionally abusive father. He didn't have everything figured out, but at least he felt free. If he could share his freedom with someone else, then he knew he was doing something right. Any considerations about her mental health were irrelevant in relation to this.

Most people would scoff at the idea of starting a relationship with a stranger, but when they looked into each other's eyes, they felt an ineffable bond that came from feeling like strangers among everyone else.

"Henry?"

"Yes?"

"Let's get outta here. I want you to walk out the front door and wait for me in your car. I'll be out in ten minutes with my things."

"What about your dad?"

"I can handle him."

"What are you going to say to him?"

"The truth. I don't want to live with him anymore. I'm a legal adult so I can do what I want."

"Will he be mad?"

"He's always been mad at me and he always will be."

"Well...if you're sure, then let's do this."

He leaned over and kissed her softly and slowly, feeling his heart swell with a feeling he hadn't felt in years. His therapist told him that people create their own destiny. He now believed this was true. Here he was, changing the course of his life while sitting on top of a quilt that he pieced together with his own hands.

Revelations

“Jesus Christ, I wish they’d leave already,” Martha Valente said as she stood before her full-length mirror. She wore a white, one-piece swimsuit and combed her silky black hair that graced her thin waist. She was by far the best-looking girl in school, despite her frumpy name. People often remarked that she was way too hot to have such an old lady’s name.

Her best friend, Samantha Bright, sat on the bed cleaning large, hairy buds of pot by removing the stems and seeds—a recently acquired skill from Martha.

Both girls were anxious for Martha’s parents to leave for a medical conference in L.A. Dr. Valente was a neurosurgeon, and it was common knowledge that he and his wife often flew to different cities—sometimes out of the country—for conferences, leaving Martha alone at home. It seemed like a crazy thing to do, not that anyone complained. Martha Valente was a party girl. Lots of people at school vied for her friendship so they might get invited to her parties.

“Will you put some water in this, Sam?” Martha handed her a small bong made of dark purple plastic.

“Sure,” said Samantha, stepping into the bathroom.

Having learned the basics of pot smoking, Samantha filled the bong with cold water. Martha taught her that it cools the temperature of the smoke, making it less harsh on your throat when you inhale.

There was tapping at the door. “We’re leaving now,” her mother said from the other side.

Martha opened the door to give her a quick hug. “Bye, Mom. Have a nice trip.”

“Have a good trip,” said Samantha, stepping out of the bathroom, leaving the bong behind, of course.

“Be careful girls,” said Mrs. Valente in the proper parental tone. “And don’t forget— our hotel number’s on the refrigerator door if you need anything.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fine,” said Martha.

Samantha found it odd that Mrs. Valente initially said goodbye through the door, as if she didn’t care if she saw her daughter before leaving. And why didn’t her father bother to say goodbye? There was something unsettling about Martha’s parents. They were successful and worldly, yet they left their beautiful, seventeen-year-old daughter alone in their expensive house for days at a time. Martha previously brushed off Samantha’s questions by saying, “I make the High Honor Roll every quarter, which proves to them that I’m responsible.” It never ceased to amaze Samantha the way rich parents let their kids run wild as long as nothing serious presented itself. It seemed obvious that Martha was the type of kid who could engage in illicit activities (such as the ones they had planned for that evening) and not get caught.

“You’re not gonna believe the new swimsuit I just bought,” said Martha. “I’ve been dying to put this on.” She disappeared into her bathroom.

“Cool. I’m gonna go downstairs and put on some music. See ‘ya down there.”

Samantha played King Crimson—a band Martha recently got her into, and sauntered around the living room, admiring the beautiful objects the Valentés acquired during their extensive travels. She recently moved with her mother, Maybelline, to Westchester because they wanted a fresh start away from Manhattan. They left after her father, the artist Henry Bright, died in a car accident. He was taking a cab home from his retrospective at the Folk Art Museum in Manhattan when a drunk driver slammed into the side of the cab where he was sitting. Both drivers died as well. Some said it was ironic that he died on the night that his life’s work was honored.

So far things worked out well for Samantha. It was the first quarter of her Junior year, and already she had befriended the most popular girl in school. On top of this, her new boyfriend, Paul, was the best buddy of Martha’s boyfriend. The guys planned to come over later and no doubt spend the night. Eli, Martha’s boyfriend, was bringing over ecstasy.

Samantha wasn’t crazy about Paul, but she appreciated the social cache of going on double dates with Martha. She recently lost her virginity to Paul, more as a perfunctory task than an act of affection. It

seemed like something to get out of the way as she basked in the sexual power she held over him. His desperate infatuation with her was more intoxicating than her feelings towards him.

At her old prep school on the Upper East Side, Samantha was familiar with the fast crowd—the pretty girls who had fake I.D.s and went out to clubs on weekends. Half the time they didn't get carded because the clubs like having hot girls around. Samantha never hung out with the partiers and druggies, in part because she was only a freshman at the time. Plus, her parents were strict. She felt distinctly different from her friends in this regard; she was the only one whose parents were small town people from the Midwest, and had middle class values because they were newly rich.

Back in the late nineties, Samantha's father, Henry Bright, made a name for himself in the art world by creating off beat, elaborate quilts—some that were massively large. His quilting technique was hailed as unique, and he combined elements of sequential narrative, and multi-textured fabrics. After his first big Manhattan opening, the *Times* called his work “oddly post-modern” due to his reverence of ancient iconic imagery that's aesthetically analogous to pixel art in a folk art medium. Henry Bright created buzz as an artist who bridged high and low art.

After the accident, Maybelline spent more time with friends from the art world that lived in Westchester. Samantha was glad to leave because she was concerned that her mother was becoming unhinged in the city. She began making more of her signature specious statements, which she and her dad were subjected to on various occasions. Maybelline was famous for stating things in a non sequitur-like fashion, as if she were privy to the Fates.

“Well, what do you think?” said Martha as she descended the staircase with a huge grin. She wore a light pink string bikini that barely supported her ample breasts.

“You look totally hot.”

“Wait—this is the best part!”

She turned around to reveal a g-string bikini, her round, taut buttocks proudly on display. Both girls squealed with laughter.

“Oh my god! Martha—you little slut!”

Turning her head back over her shoulder she replied, “There's no way in hell I'd let my parents see me in this! Eli's gonna freak out.”

Clad in their bikinis, Martha and Samantha relaxed in the pool on rafts, carefully passing the bong back and forth. The Valente's pool was kidney shaped, and surrounded by groomed plants and flowers.

“I can't wait for the guys to get here,” Martha said. “Eli always gets good shit. He knows this girl at NYU who deals right out of her dorm room.”

“That's pretty stupid.”

“I know. You'd think she'd at least meet people at a coffee shop or something.” Martha yawned and stretched with a satisfied smirk on her face. She added in a dreamy voice, “Eli is so hot.”

“Yeah, he's a great looking guy.”

“But I don't know what he'll do after high school. Seems like he can only do three things: get drugs, fuck, and make cheeseburgers.”

Samantha giggled. “Everyone loves a good cheeseburger.”

“So are you gonna dose with us tonight or what?”

“I don't know... probably.”

Samantha was secretly elated about her adventures with Martha. She never did drugs when she lived in the city, but if Martha Valente could party, then it couldn't be truly wrong due to her obvious intelligence. At school, Samantha noticed that the teachers treated Martha with respect. It was typical for rich kids to get better treatment, but there was something special about Martha. Samantha had never met anyone so gorgeous, well spoken, and well read.

She also noticed that Martha was nonchalant about intimidating a lot of people. One day when they were getting high in Martha's SUV on their lunch hour, Martha made her laugh so hard that soda almost came out her nose. They were talking about all the jealous rumors that float around about her. She said, “Only the best people are ridiculed. Look what happened to Jesus.” She always said things like this with a

straight face; she said it was gauche to laugh at your own jokes.

It was ironic that since Samantha started smoking pot, drinking, and having sex, her grades had never been higher. This is what made her realize how important competition was for achievement; she had to keep up with Martha. But the dark side to feeling great about popularity and good grades was feeling deep remorse. How could she be happy when her dad hadn't been gone a year yet?

"I'm really glad you moved here."

"So am I."

"The last time I had a close female friend was in the fifth grade."

"Really, why?"

Martha shrugged. "I had a best friend but she moved away."

"That's too bad."

"I have some friends, but I feel like they're always comparing themselves to me and trying to tear me down."

"Yeah, I noticed that. They're just jealous. My dad taught me that it's insecure people who put others down."

"Sounds like he was pretty cool."

"He was."

"Well, I'm just glad you're not like that. Of course it helps that you're totally hot."

"You're totally hot."

"No, you're totally hot."

"Did you hear the doorbell?" asked Samantha.

Martha glanced at her waterproof watch. "It's too early for the boys. I wonder who it is."

They got out of the pool, wrapped themselves with towels, and went inside. Martha made sure to place the bong behind a plant.

"Oh shit," said Martha, giggling like crazy after looking through the front window. "It's a couple of those Jehovah Witness boys." The familiar look of mischief crept across her lovely face. "Should we let 'em in?" she asked softly.

They could barely contain their laughter. "Why not?" said Samantha. "It might be funny."

Martha whipped both of their towels off and opened the door. Samantha felt embarrassed for a moment, but if Martha could stand there in a g-string, then she could wear her bikini without covering up.

"Hello," said Martha.

"Good afternoon! We're with the Jehovah's Witnesses. My name is Theodore, and this is Luke. We'd like to discuss some Bible literature with you. May we come in and speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure!" she said cheerfully, stepping aside. "Come in."

The boys entered the house, straining to appear oblivious to the fact that the girls wore bikinis. Theodore looked agitated as he scratched his scraggly attempt at a beard while Luke was wide-eyed and jittery, like a child being sent to the principal's office.

"Would you mind coming out to the pool?" asked Martha.

"That would be fine," said Theodore.

As Martha led the group through the house, Samantha quickly glanced back to see the look on the boys' faces. She sensed the powerful effect they had on the boys. Paul and Eli are gonna crack up at this, she thought.

Luke was one of Martha's many admirers; she was often the focus of his masturbatory fantasies—in some she was dressed like Valeria from *Conan the Barbarian*. He had no idea she lived in this house. Even though he'd had classes with her since junior high, he suspected that she didn't recognize him at all. He felt paranoid, as if she knew his dirty secret. His heart raced, and he couldn't believe what he was now seeing—her nearly naked body in all its glory, just as he imagined. Such big breasts, and that bottom—what heavenly curves, he thought. And Samantha's really pretty too. She was the talk of the school—the pretty new blond girl who was Martha's new best friend. *Jesus, please help me to be strong.*

"Have a seat," said Martha, gesturing towards patio furniture situated under a large umbrella. She then dove into the pool and reclined on her raft, with Samantha following suit.

“Thank you for letting us in,” said Luke.

“No problem. By the way, I’m Martha, and this is Samantha.”

“Nice to meet both of you,” said Luke. He caught himself staring, so he looked away, glancing instead at his surroundings—potted plants, a plastic bucket filled with pool supplies, a barbeque grill. He wished his family had a pool—the water looked fantastic in the heat.

Theodore also tried to not stare too much at the girls. Their skimpy swimsuits irritated him, as did his itchy face. Sparse, dark stubble peppered his cheeks and chin as he attempted to grow a beard. His girlfriend, Elizabeth, told him she was attracted to men who resembled Jesus.

He opened his bag and pulled out some pamphlets, dropping a few on the ground. After replacing them in his bag, he held one up that had the words “Behold the Good News!” on the front. In an awkward and falsely enthusiastic voice he said, “We’re here to talk about the good news about faith in Jesus. Do you know what we mean by ‘good news’?”

“No,” Martha flatly replied, while Samantha shook her head.

In his bland voice, Theodore continued, “The good news is that by having faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will have everlasting life.”

There was a moment of silence as Martha regarded him blankly. She wore big Jackie O. sunglasses that hid her true expression, but her mouth formed a slight smirk. Samantha felt uneasy, sensing the tension almost like a physical presence. Then she wanted to giggle suddenly when she imagined herself and Martha as sirens in the water, luring wayward men to crash.

Breaking the awkward silence, Luke asked, “Were you ladies raised Christian?” The girls nodded.

Theodore intoned, “Then I’m sure you’re familiar with this message. But our mission to remind people to have faith in Jesus is because we believe we’re living in a crucial time period. Our faith emphasizes that we’re now living in end times. We have some literature here that explains this.” He held up another pamphlet that said, “The End Time is Among Us.”

“Why do you believe we’re living in end times?” asked Martha.

“We believe the signs are clear,” Theodore replied with authority, “due to the prevalence of violence in the world—the increase of rape, kidnapping, murder, and other brutal crimes. According to Matthew, Chapter Twenty-four, verse twelve, ‘And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.’”

“I’m sorry,” said Martha, “but I don’t see how taking a quote from the Bible proves that we’re living in end times. Sure, there’s a lot of violence in the world, but when hasn’t there been? How can you quantitatively measure violence in the world throughout the history of mankind?”

Theodore looked flustered, which didn’t surprise Luke. Every once in a while, they were let inside so somebody could argue with them, sometimes for entertainment. This didn’t bother Luke nearly as much as Theodore. Luke felt that some people believe what they want to believe and there’s not much they could do about it. One time, an old man listened patiently to Theodore’s sermon, then all of a sudden blew up at them and started raving about how they were foolish and uninformed for not realizing that aliens once lived on Earth who facilitated evolution and agriculture—two things they weren’t discussing.

Theodore wiped sweat off his brow with a handkerchief and continued, “Our point is that through faith, Jehovah grants everlasting life. And those that are wicked and non-believing will be condemned.”

Luke sensed that this was a disaster. Samantha looked bored, while Martha was on the attack. I have to admit, thought Luke, Martha makes a good point about “End Times.” Theodore and I disagree about certain core beliefs of our faith. He takes the Bible much more literally than I do. I prefer to preach on the goodness of the gospel and how it affects our daily lives.

“What do you mean by ‘wicked’?” asked Martha in an irritated tone.

Theodore took a deep breath and continued, “The wicked are those that don’t follow Jehovah’s word, which is why our message is important. We believe that the Bible teaches us to impart good judgment and soundness of mind to make wise decisions. For example, by not associating with certain people, we’re less likely to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He looked at Martha when he said this.

The emphasis on the phrase “certain people” rubbed Martha the wrong way. Even Luke thought he sounded off-putting. After all, there were rumors around school that Martha was fast and liked to do

drugs. Theodore was wary of wealthy people.

Martha flipped over onto her stomach, revealing her glorious, round buttocks. The seams of the raft had created slight, vertical lines in her flesh. Her face was defiant as she dared them to be tempted. This was when Luke felt that familiar throb in his shorts. Oh no...not now, he thought.

Martha said to Theodore, "I believe that wickedness is a subjective term. I thought Jesus was the only judge."

This caught Luke's attention. She really is smart, he thought, not that he was surprised. He knew how fast she could turn in an Algebra exam and get an "A." At this point, his excitement was uncontrollable. He had no choice but to sit with his legs together and lean forward a bit.

"What I mean by 'wicked' or 'bad'," said Theodore, "is when people aren't aware of Christian ethics."

"Wait a second," said Martha. "You think Christianity is the only form of ethics? Does this mean that people from other countries where Christianity isn't prevalent are all sinners? What about Buddhism, which is largely consistent with Christ's teachings? Are Buddhists wrong even though their ethics are practically the same as Christians?"

Luke politely interjected, "We don't want to judge other religions. We just think the wisdom and truth of Christian faith becomes apparent through practice." He heard himself speak, but didn't recognize his rote, robotic tone.

Samantha noticed Martha seething under her sunglasses. Martha mentioned having beef with some Christian girls at school who gossiped and snickered about her behind her back.

"You know what?" said Martha to Theodore, sensing that he was the more hard core Christian of the two, "I've read the Bible and I know what it says. But don't you get that you're just structuring your faith in an ideology? I think Christianity is great—I'm totally down with J.C., which I believe is a personal matter. I think it's annoying when certain Christians have to advertise how good they are. For instance, look at that Elizabeth Charles girl at school. That frumpy girl who dresses like she's down with J.C. Penney's—"

"Wait a second," said Theodore. "Elizabeth is my girlfriend and I won't have you talking—"

"Here me out!" said Martha. "She calls herself a Christian, but she's judgmental and racist. Are you aware that your girlfriend makes racist comments about me being Cuban? I can hear her when I walk down the hall."

Theodore didn't know how to respond. Luke remained silent as well. He knew Martha was telling the truth.

"I'm sorry, but mere faith in Jesus doesn't cut it with me," Martha continued. "Besides, how do you explain all the horrible and random things that happen to people every day? Look at what happened to Samantha's dad last year—he was on his way home from a museum and was killed by a drunk driver. He was a Christian. Where was Jesus when that happened?"

Samantha was surprised that she'd bring up her dad. But she didn't say anything. She was high and the heat was getting to her brain.

In a calm voice, Luke asked Samantha, "Were you angry with Jesus when this happened?"

"I don't know... I was mad at everything when it happened. Why?"

Theodore said to her, "The Bible teaches that Jehovah will provide divine protection for those that have faith by either removing a harmful situation, or giving us the strength to endure it."

"Well, that sounds pretty convenient," said Samantha. "So in other words, regardless if you have faith or not, it doesn't change anything."

"That's not exactly what I'm saying. You see—"

"You Bible thumpers make me sick! You think you have everything figured out. It's all bullshit. The world is chaos! People like you walk around preaching faith so you can feel better about yourselves."

Samantha surprised herself. She was lashing out at every inappropriate gesture of condolence ever uttered to her. All the talk of Heaven, faith, and Jesus was nothing more than an opiate to her, just like Marx said in that book Martha let her borrow.

"I think we better leave," said Theodore as he gathered up his things. "We don't have time for these

Jezebels.”

“Theodore! That’s not right. Apologize.”

“I’ll apologize when she apologizes for insulting Elizabeth.”

Martha smiled large and said, “Fuck you, Bible thumper.”

Theodore shook his head. “Let’s get out of here.”

Luke noticed Samantha looking right at him. It made him feel shame; a beautiful girl like her could only view him as a religious freak. He saw Martha staring at Theodore and holding in laughter. This made him think about Elizabeth, whom he’s heard make disparaging comments about Martha, other minorities, and Catholics too. Elizabeth considered herself the paragon of chastity, but he knew for a fact that she gave Theodore hand jobs on a regular basis.

“You can stay, Luke,” said Samantha. She thought it was charming the way he attempted to hide his erection earlier. It was then that she realized he was cute. His friend, however, was an obnoxious asshole and she wanted to punish him. She’d learned from Martha that it drives people nuts when you ignore them.

“You can totally stay,” said Martha. “Jump in—the water feels great.”

Luke could no longer convince himself that Theodore was still his best friend. His judgmental attitude was getting lame, and his girlfriend was a bitch. He’d always love Jesus, but he’d grown out of Theodore’s world of proselytizing. He was tired of worrying about people making fun of them when they made their rounds, and feeling doubtful about the mandate of chastity before marriage.

“I’m staying,” he said.

“Fine. Do what you want. Just try not to catch anything.”

The girls laughed at him as Luke peeled off his clothes to his boxer shorts and dove in. It felt like he was being baptized for a second time. “Sorry about him,” he said, after Theodore was gone.

“What’s his problem?” Martha asked.

Luke shrugged. “He needs to lose his virginity bad.”

“What about you? What do you need?” Martha swam towards him while Samantha followed her lead. They cornered him in the shallow end.

He laughed nervously. He couldn’t believe he was hanging out with Martha Valente and Samantha, the hot new blond girl at school everyone was talking about. “Umm...I don’t know.” He sensed the importance of the moment, but was too tongue-tied to play along.

“You’re cute,” said Samantha.

“Totally.” Martha ran her hands through his hair. “Feel how soft his hair is.”

Samantha stroked his head and looked at Martha’s mischievous face, indicating that they were thinking the same thing. “Hey, I’ve got an idea,” said Samantha. “Let’s play a game. Close your eyes, and try to guess which one of us is kissing you.”

“Um... okay.”

He shut his eyes and Samantha kissed him long and slow. When she finished, she pointed to his crotch and silently laughed. He was almost poking out of his boxer shorts. “Okay, who was that?”

“I don’t know... was it Martha?”

“Wrong!” They yelled.

“Oops,” he said. They thought his flushed cheeks and nervousness was adorable.

“Let’s do it again,” said Martha.

He shut his eyes, and this time Martha kissed him slowly with lots of tongue. She reached down and pulled him out of his boxers. “Oh! Um, hehehe...”

“Keep your eyes closed,” Martha whispered.

When he couldn’t stand it any longer, he opened his eyes and stuffed himself back into his boxers. “I really don’t know who that was.” His voice cracked and his cheeks burned even redder. The girls looked at each other and smiled. The decision was made.

It was cool and gusty out when Samantha returned home the next day. She went straight to her room and lay down in bed, still exhausted from being up late partying. Paul told her that if she smoked some

pot later, some of the effects of ecstasy would re-enter her system, triggering a nice rush.

She wasn't sure if her mom was home; she was still getting used to the little creaks the house naturally made when no one was around. She turned on her side and watched the wind blow leaves against her window, making her nostalgic for fall. Martha's pool would be closed in a few days and soon the weather would demand a shopping trip for new clothes. She heard it was much colder there than in the city.

It was a blast partying with Martha, Eli, and Paul. But the little fling with Luke in the afternoon might have been a bit much. It was the first time she'd fooled around with two guys in one day. She didn't go all the way with Luke, but she suspected he felt a little less like a virgin after spending some time alone with him in the guest bedroom. It thrilled her to see the ecstatic look on his face as he indulged in physical pleasure for what seemed like the first time. She imagined layers of religious brainwashing being stripped away in his mind. It made her feel proud.

The garage door opened and shut, filling her with a rush of paranoia. She was no longer convinced that her mom wasn't aware of her new lifestyle habits. Maybelline hadn't said anything, but now the silence between them was disturbing. Her new freedom to stay out late and spend nights at Martha's house whenever she wanted was never debated. She assumed her mom would snap out of her indifference eventually, but now she wondered.

There was a light rapping at the door. Maybelline entered with a solemn expression that put Samantha at ease.

"Did you have a good time at Martha's?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Listen, I want to chat a little about something."

"Sure, have a seat."

Maybelline sat on the edge of the bed, looked out the window with a distant expression and said, "I just want to say... change for the better will happen when you learn to forgive." She took a deep breath, gave Samantha a little half smile, then made her way towards the door.

"Wait. That's it?"

Maybelline's brows were raised quizzically. "Yes, that's all I had to say, Sweetie."

Samantha's irritation rose quickly as it did with the Jehovah's Witness boy. For as long as she could remember, she and her dad had to listen to her otherworldly comments, which smacked of rural quirkiness from back home in Southern Illinois. They'd laugh a little and make some comment about how eccentric she was. Right now it didn't feel quirky or eccentric. It was annoying. Maybelline drifted from day to day in a haze since they left the city, and now this all of a sudden.

"What does that mean? How do you expect me to respond to that?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I don't know what you want me to say."

"I want you to say something!"

Maybelline sighed. "Let's talk about this later."

"Fine, whatever."

After the door was shut, she lay back down and stared at the glass flowered light fixture on the ceiling. She was always skeptical of her mom's supposed "psychic ability." But her dad was a believer. She remembered something he told her to calm her nervousness on her first day of school in New York. He said, "Remember to look backwards and forward at the same time... and remember who you are. I know it sounds hokey, but this is what your mom told me when I was preparing for my first gallery show in Chicago. She knew that by not forgetting my roots I would succeed. It was the biggest inspiration in my life. She knew my quilts were going to lead to New York, and look where we are now—just two blocks from Central Park!"

Samantha pondered this and admitted that sometimes her mom did just know things. This made her remember the night of her dad's death—something she hadn't thought of in a while, as if the part of her mind that controls sanity prevented it. That night Maybelline cried and pleaded with her dad to leave his show at the American Folk Art Museum early, creating a mild scene. Even Samantha thought her mom was being weird and paranoid. It chilled her to remember being slightly pissed at her mom for being

embarrassing on such an important night. And now, her mom was probably devastated knowing that she could have saved his life that night. The fact that this was the first time the thought occurred to Samantha made her roll over on her side and cry hard into her hands. She felt like a terrible, selfish person.

She wiped her tears and let her mind settle on the debauchery from yesterday. It was Martha's idea to fool around with Luke; she said it would be good practice. She now asked herself, when did I become someone who uses others for practice? Then she wondered how discreet Paul and Eli would be about them all doing drugs and having sex in front of each other. It wasn't technically "group sex," but it was intimate and intense enough to make her feel like they weren't typical high school juniors. Last night she didn't care about anything but how the surreal quality of it all made her special in some way, on Martha's level.

Thinking of all this made her feel stuck in a mental rut. She dreaded going to school on Monday to face her friends, as well as Luke. What if rumors floated around school about how slutty she was? Why did this not occur to her last night? This was the last thought she had before drifting into a deep, troubled asleep—one that compensated for the lost hours of rest that drinking and ecstasy took from her. Her dreams were lucid, with vivid scenes of anger directed mainly at herself. Martha was a villain and a saint, and her mom was a powerful figure demanding respect while projecting vulnerability. She felt her mother's pain in the dream; she found herself seeing things from her point of view, but as an elderly woman at the end of her life, sitting alone at home. In her mother's voice she thought: I've missed Henry every second of every day since he left, and when I die, his presence will be with me till my very last breath.

When she awoke, she pondered the intensity of her parent's love for each other, and realized that the drastic change in her behavior that Martha catalyzed was pure distraction. She was distracting herself from grasping the reality of her mom's situation, from being angry at her for being distant, and mostly she distracted herself from being angry at the chaotic universe.

She needed to forgive her mom for coping with the loss of her life partner the best way she knew how, and forgive herself for coping the best she could. It was a plan that was easy to conceive because clearly her mom had forgiven her for her transgressions.

Maybelline was correct: when Samantha looked into the past and the future, she realized that with forgiveness, things would get better.