

*Tina Popper*

Alyssa June

I had Bridgette, my friend from work, hang around the house with Leon so I could meet my ex-husband Harold at this restaurant called Sparkle. It was relatively cosmopolitan, being a Tokenville restaurant and all, with black and white tiled floors and sparkly yellow lights in aluminum candelabras. Everybody whispered their conversations and the waitresses acted like they recognized you from some other place. They served this wonderful chicken parm I heard about from Delores in HR that I couldn't wait to devour. I showed up dressed in a blouse from Fashion Central with some lavender make-up, tiny hoop earrings and black stockings.

Harold was going through one of his phases, I knew. He told me he'd like to meet alone for a night. I said that I would see him when he came to drop off our son. That might not be the best idea, he said. It was Leon he wanted to talk about. I'll buy you dinner, he offered, and all you have to do is sit there and listen to some of my observations and what not.

Of course this didn't sound right. Your ex doesn't buy you

dinner to talk about childcare. But I took him at his word. Maybe I wanted to be wined and dined for a night. There's nothing wrong with that. Besides, Leon had become a little strange, I thought, and maybe Harold had some fresh insight.

Leon was friends with another eighth grader, a girl named Stacy. She was mousy and had one of these complicated Italian last names. She followed my son around and didn't talk much. It was easy for me to pretend like she didn't exist. Two or three years ago, when she and Leon were both just little kids really, Stacy's father called me up in a rage. They had recently moved to Tokenville from the big city. Apparently Stacy's father had walked in on Leon giving his daughter an examination. I told him that it's just what kids do, but he said my son had problems, and I told him that he should listen to himself since he was the one who had the anger problem. Harold never found out about that episode, and I didn't tell Leon either.

Then one time I caught her lying on the floor in Leon's bedroom while he was pouring juice into her mouth through a funnel. When I asked what they were doing, because this definitely didn't strike me as normal, Leon explained that Stacy had an alien growing in her stomach and he was aborting it. He actually used the word *abort*, which I thought was impressive.

All that seemed unimportant. Then he started getting into these weird little fights at school, and this didn't seem like such a big deal either. He kept coming home with scratches on his face and arms. I tried approaching him about it, but he was like his father; both of them got a kick out of keeping information from me. I worried, but boys get a thrill from beating each other. For the most part, Leon seemed fine. He never seemed upset or angry about it.

Harold had reserved a table for us. I waited for about ten minutes. I didn't worry because he was never on time. He came sneaking up behind me. He was really dressed up too. He wore a bright purple tie, which was hideous, but he normally wore earthy colors, so this meant something. And he wasn't wearing his glasses, which was a change so drastic that my brain wouldn't comprehend it right away. As soon as it did, I had the impression that I was dining with an imposter.

When he presented me with this gift, however, this book in tissue paper with a shiny black ribbon tied around it, that's when I pulled the wool from my eyes. I set my napkin on the table and shook my head slowly, as if I was making a clear and direct statement, and I walked right past him and out the door.

I hadn't driven to the restaurant because I planned on drinking a few glasses of wine, so I had to call a cab that I waited for down the street in Hairy Tony's Pizzeria. Harold called my cell three or four times and left a few voicemails in which he begged for my forgiveness.

It was good having the cab. I rested my head on the window and let it knock against the glass. I was able to remove myself. I saw how little I was. Then I considered that Harold was probably more hurt than me, and suddenly I felt pretty. I felt like the pretty girl who is always being chased by this one really intense misfit who's obsessed with his own pain, and she just doesn't think his pain is that important. It was funny and stupid that we were behaving like teenagers who were still on the other end of marriage.

I arrived home an hour and a half earlier than Bridgette expected. The moment I walked in, she shut off the television and left her blanket cocoon and met me to stroke my back in the doorway. I wasn't upset. Maybe I was disappointed, but shame on me for not knowing better.

Where's the kid, I said.

The kid didn't feel like watching movies. He went out with some friends, I think. I figured I couldn't keep him. He doesn't really *need* a babysitter, you know.

She asked if he had a girlfriend, by chance, because she had a hunch.

Not that I know of. He has a girl who's a friend. But I don't think they kiss or hold hands.

Don't you ever wonder if he's hiding something, she asked me, to which I didn't respond since the answer was pretty obvious.

At work the next day I got an email from Harold, and he was barely apologetic. The subject was: *About Last Night*. I had to read it in bits, since I was still only a department lead. Currently I

occupied a level 2 cubicle. The supervisor office was five feet away. In less than a month Cheryl, the current sup, was moving Midwest because of her husband's job, and I was going to be in that office and I would be able to read whichever emails I wanted. What I had to do now was read a few lines then minimize the page and work on the instrument. Once the data entry made me sleepy, I enlarged Harold's email and read some more.

There's no reason to rewrite his whole message. What was going on here was that every now and then Harold entered a state of mind where he believed he could achieve this satisfaction that he's denied himself all his life. Once a few years back, for example, he decided that he had to do his job as a dedicated radical and parent, and this meant he had to drive Leon through the poor neighborhoods once a week so he'd develop *class consciousness*. The kid was five years old, and Harold gave him car tours of the northern suburbs, where some people in puffy coats hung out on the sidewalks with shopping carts. Harold told me Leon sat there and looked thoughtfully out the window. This was a good thing, he said. Personally, I don't think it mattered one bit.

I was his new way to achieve the great satisfaction. I came to him in a vision, he wrote. This was Harold's way of saying he had a dream that I was in, but since he'd always been so down on me for analyzing my own dreams for symbolism, he couldn't admit to having similar revelations.

*You had trouble getting down some steps. We were probably in a church because the floors were marble and the room was candlelit, sacred, hushed, a dream room. So I lifted you up and walked you down myself. Although you didn't thank me and you seemed to believe you were moving by yourself, I could feel how warm and safe you were in my arms.*

Harold had the most miraculous and useful feeling he could remember after this dream. He couldn't shake that feeling off.

I wrote back to him that I was sorry, but it wasn't my job to make him feel satisfied.

Harold was quiet for a few weeks then he started up again. He got Leon one weekend a month. It was a Sunday evening when he was

dropping the kid off at my place. I had been out at The Plant having a few Strawberry Swings and some conversation with Bridgette. The doorbell rang before I even had my shoes off, which meant they must have been right behind me. As soon as I opened the door, Leon barged through and shot up the stairs. Harold stood there like he was about to offer me a gift to make up for some wrongdoing, balancing himself on the balls of his feet. He was like an un-dyed Easter egg on a plastic stand, I imagined, which was a pretty goofy thought.

So what happened, I said, and leaned in the doorway. Well what? Don't just stand there.

Already I could hear Leon's heavy metal rap music stuff about the jumping and hookywooky blasting upstairs. Harold was smirking and waiting for me to invite him in.

In the last few months, Harold had begun wearing a ponytail to make up for his receding hairline. He had on this button down that was stained and wrinkled and the same kind of boat shoes with the little leather threads on top that he always wore. If you have seen the recent photographs of David Foster Wallace, the writer who hung himself, he reminds me of my ex-husband. That look that's both dopey and intense at the same time. When I read in the Lifestyles section what he did to himself, I swore that I would never read one of his books. And when I found out the kind of books he wrote, I knew that Harold probably had some lofty opinion about them. They were long books full of information and nightmares that should seem important because they were critical of our society, except no one I knew actually took the time to read them.

I give up, I said, just like my mother used to when my father wouldn't hose down the garage or something similar.

Leon is a bit more sensitive than I imagined, he said, and followed me into the house.

He's fifteen years old. How do you think he's not going to be sensitive? Did you reveal to him that our president doesn't like black people or something?

No, I didn't speak about the führer, he said, which he must have thought was pretty clever because he smiled knowingly to himself like he did when he was making a French philosophy reference I

didn't understand. But this was the same liberal schtick about the president I had been hearing for years on the news and even on the classic rock station.

I didn't have much to eat in the kitchen. I didn't feel like cooking. I could have maybe fixed a tuna salad with some of the fresh red leaf I picked up at the farmers market, but I didn't want to stand there preparing food with Harold at the table, so I microwaved this macaroni and cheese from the freezer. The bass and the thumping continued from upstairs. I could hear Leon stomping around up there, or dancing, or whatever it was known as. Slam dancing. Harold had this pen he normally carried in his shirt pocket that he was clicking out and in, out and in. He had this horrible look of longing on his face like he was starving and he wanted some of my mac and cheese. I felt sometimes like I had to be mean to him. I didn't want to be mean, but he could get so clingy, and you had to keep him at a distance.

He addressed me as if I were one of his community college students, using his hands to emphasize his points. When I was younger I thought this kind of condescension was sexy.

On the way here, he said, Leon asked me if you and I were ever going to get back together.

Great.

Hear me out. He asked if there was a chance it might happen because he never felt it seemed out of the question. From what he sees, it seems like we still ... you know.

Oh, this isn't philosophy or anything, Harold. We've talked about it so many times. I mean, we're divorced now.

I said that I didn't know.

I picked up a couple spoons on the side of the sink that I didn't even think were dirty and started giving them a rinse for something to do. If there was one thing I worried about it was that I led him on by not completely exiling him from my life.

I think you were a lousy husband, I said.

I told him the truth. That you asked me to leave.

Did you tell him why?

I told him that you fell out of love with me.

The microwave dinged. I took out the mac and cheese and

stirred it on the counter with one of the spoons I'd just rinsed then put the mac and cheese back in on medium heat.

Why don't you let me talk to Leon, I said. By the time you see him next month he'll be as good as new.

He put the pen in his pocket and clapped his hands. Let's behave like parents. I'm just as cynical as anyone when it comes to the potential of human relationships, but don't you think we should pretend to be responsible? A cheap dinner. We'll drink some coffee.

I cut him off and made it impossible for him to complete a thought. I kept interrupting, saying no, no, no, no. It turned into a game small children play to annoy people, by incessantly talking over them. He couldn't get out a word. This was hell for Harold. He practically kicked out his own seat.

You used to not be this way.

I asked him, because I wanted to know, what way did I used to be?

He left the kitchen. The floor groaned in a way that meant he was turning up the stairs to say goodbye to Leon.

I'm serious, I said, following him through the living room. What way did I used to be?

You gave people the benefit of the doubt once, he said halfway up the stairs. Now everything is like an unfunny joke to you.

Say goodbye and let me eat dinner.

You'll talk to him later.

Get going, I said. It doesn't concern you when I talk to him.

When he came back down, I was already at the table, carving some blackened macaroni from the side of the microwavable bowl. I barely looked up as I waved to him. Sometimes he got a family hug, but not tonight.

Talk to him, he said.

Harold, I said.

When Leon was a baby, Harold and I were broke and too hopeful to be unhappy. At least it seemed that way while I was reminiscing. He taught a few humanities classes at West High while finishing his Master's in Literature. I can't remember what exactly he studied. It

had something to do with the French, of course. What's funny is he could hardly speak the language. He went to the Tokenville campus, and I got the impression his program was considered third-rate because he and his colleagues didn't do much but drink and talk about some of the other programs – the Ivy Leagues and all, the ones you knew were important because they were always featured in magazines – as if those people were all frauds. I had dropped out of school and was training to be a paralegal, which never panned out.

For vacation we drove forty miles east to the shore. We checked the three of us into a Super 8, close enough to the ocean that little Leon could know that it was there at night from the smell. This was my idea, but Harold didn't think it mattered if Leon traveled much or not, unless it was a serious trip, like through the projects. No, these were miserable times in retrospect. We were hopeful though, like I said. I was hopeful anyway. Harold spent one of our first family vacation nights in the hotel bar and found a moron to shoot darts with. He came back after Leon and I were in bed and laid beside me without taking his shoes off and told me about the conversation.

The moron from the bar had some half-baked ideas about needing politicians who speak directly to the people and taxes that show results. Harold would have crucified me for saying those things. Illusions, he would have told me, quick fixes. So I told him to be quiet. Leon was sleeping. I told him to be quiet until his whispers were no more than a drunk's shallow breathing. And in the morning he woke up, headache, dry mouth and all, and took Leon down to the beach in the car while I watched television alone in the room. I didn't like that he had him there at the beach by himself with a hangover, but I was happy when they returned. They shared this glow that I thought was the beginning of a family. I was glad I let Harold do that.

Leon turned his music off after I pounded on the door for long enough a time. He was perched in the beanbag chair on the floor like he had been caught doing something wrong. He was flushed and there was a little sweat in his hair, from his pouncing around or slam dancing or whatever. There was a used computer at his



father's apartment, but not here. I wouldn't pay for it.

Do you mind if I sit on the bed, I asked.

He came up and sat beside me because he thought I expected it, which I didn't, but it was nice nonetheless.

How was the visit?

Leon shrugged to say he didn't know, but then he started talking anyway, which meant that shrugging had become a habit he developed. I didn't think that was healthy, to always pretend like you didn't know.

It's not really a visit, he said. I mean, I go back and forth between your house and dad's place. How do you know I'm not visiting your house and actually living with him?

Because you're here more often. Besides, it doesn't matter.

Not to you.

Why am I here then if it doesn't matter?

He shrugged. His room was half-lit. This started a few months ago, where he kept the overhead lights off and used a dim bedside lamp. I wanted to call his room the cave. My impulse was always to ask: Are you going up to the cave again? But that would have made me a nag, I think.

You seemed upset. I wanted to make sure you weren't up here putting holes in the walls.

He looked at me hard, but he was sad, I could tell. Nevertheless, I liked it. That look said something about his willpower, I thought. His looks were mostly from my side of the family, except for his legs being short. His face was long and his cheeks and nose were pink and his blond curls poofed around his ears. He was quiet-looking because his lips were naturally puckered. I had the same trait. This was an illusion, I think, because neither of us were really quiet. Harold was the quiet one, especially when he was sober and around men he didn't know and who didn't feel familiar to him. Harold was easily intimidated.

You seem fine to me, I said. Do me a favor and keep in mind that not everything your father says is completely true.

I was going to talk.

Did I cut you off?

You want to tell me the way it is and that's all.

I don't just want to tell you and that's all.

Yes, you do.

You asked me why I was here and I said so.

Dad guides me to an answer. You just tell me what it is.

Now, I knew he didn't think of that himself.

At what point, I said, do I just assume you're making stuff up?

Why do you have to assume that?

I don't know why I assume anything, I said. You're right. And I fell back onto his bed.

Mom is too tired to fight. Let's just feel however we want to feel, I said.

I checked out his skin when I was lying there, to see if I could find any more scratches, but I didn't want to make such a big deal about it.

Monday after work when we were out in the parking lot, I told Bridgette that Harold was trying to get back into a relationship again, and she had the correct response, which was to laugh and go on cursing him for a while. That's what I wanted to hear. She was more or less against marriage. She almost married an aspiring dentist while she was in college. He was the first man she slept with. She didn't take planning the ceremony so seriously. She was only nineteen and he had already finished his undergraduate degree. One night he wanted her to at least start planning the gown patterns, to look through this booklet of bridal wear. She broke into a giggle fit. She couldn't stop, she told me. She rolled around on the floor, holding her belly because the giggles hurt, and he got so angry that he called the whole thing off right there. The next day he dumped her over the phone and called her some brutal names because he was humiliated. But that was what she wanted, I thought.

Harold's trying to make up for lost time, said Bridgette. I was just reading a book about this. I wanted to tell you the name, but now I can't remember. There's a whole chapter about this type of man who, after he leaves, keeps trying to fix that same mistake. They can't deal with not being able to go backwards in time. Do you know what I mean? It's about control.

That's not it, I said. But it sounds interesting.

I'm only trying, she said in the tone she took when I had family problems. She kept a distance since family life wasn't part of her world.

She stood in the sad golden sunlight. We were in front of her car. Sometime this week, she said, we'll have some drinks, some enchiladas.

Fall was setting in, and her brown parka, loose-fitting to cover her roundness, was tied with yellow yarn at her neck. It's probably tough for Leon, she said. If he's telling him you might get back together, and you're not.

He's so tense. He's going to explode some day.

You shouldn't think that.

This irritated me. As detached as she was, she still found ways to moralize to me.

You may be right, I said, but I still think it, even if it's wrong.

The idea is to figure out what kind of men you're dealing with.

I knew she wanted to start talking about this book again, but I'd already disapproved of it once.

I'll read the book, I said.

You don't have to. I mean, it's not so good.

From my car I watched her go speeding out of the lot in her beat-up two-door. She was such a terrible driver. I heard some honking and assumed she cut a person off.

At dinner I mentioned to Leon that Bridgette was asking for him. It had been a while since he saw Bridgette. But something else was on his mind. I did penny for his thoughts because I felt I had to. He spooned up vegetable mix, sipped his Mug and waved his head just enough so I knew he wasn't talking. I saw there was a little rip in his shirt, like from a cat claw or something. It was this T with a picture of a skateboard and an alien in a stocking cap. It wasn't expensive, so I didn't care about the shirt in a money way, but I knew he liked it.

It's nothing, he said about the shirt. I was going to change it, but I didn't. And now I know I should have.

The answer is not to hide things from me.

Why don't you eat your haddock, he said.

He was right. I wasn't eating. I hesitated eating because I didn't want him to get the idea that it was good for him to tell his mother what to do. We ate in silence. Then he spoke up.

Dad sent me this goofy email today.

That's interesting.

His junior high had recently opened the computer lab for personal use during lunch, so Leon was part of the world of social networking.

What kind of email? Movie listings? I know your father's wanted to take you to the theater.

Nothing like that. It was just a bunch of weird stuff.

Weird how?

Why do you want to know?

Because you brought it up. I thought we were having a conversation.

This annoyed him. He finished the fish and brought his plate over to the sink. Food in the garbage, I said.

I guess the conversation's over.

I guess so.

I called Harold to find out what the deal was about the email while I cleaned up the kitchen and listened to the night show on City of Rock. Harold didn't answer the landline or his cell, so I figured he was out. Otherwise he would have picked up. There were two scenarios for why he didn't pick up. There was the more than likely possibility of his being out with a couple of young adjuncts. He was comfortable around the young guys. They would go to some pinewood bar and drink pints, throw darts. Harold liked to name books and theorize about the *simulation*, as he called it. He framed his ego-boosting exercise as a real live conversation. Small enclaves of young professors got drunk with him and listened to his profound French ideas until they realized he was all wet. They would eventually move on with their lives, like they always did, say hello to him in the hallways, and that was about it.

The second scenario was that he was out with one of these girls he courted in the student lounge. It was tasteless, unethical. It didn't matter because he never got lucky. He started when we first separated. I allowed myself to imagine that he treated those young

women like he treated me when we first met, reciting those French poems that weren't supposed to make sense, but were beautiful all the same. I always liked these poems by the man named Valery because I was impressed by the rhymes, which seemed crafted, as opposed to some of the other stuff that seemed dumped onto the page, like from an overturned laundry basket. Thinking about these girls in the student lounge, I was afraid that no part of our life was real, that he had been playing roles throughout the whole of our marriage. I couldn't blame him. I played roles too.

He didn't call back that night. I went to bed frustrated. When I said goodnight to Leon I asked him if he had his homework done. He told me he did. I didn't believe him, but I was tired, and the fish was sitting funny in my stomach, I was gassy, my cramps were going to start.

The next day at work I checked my email first thing and I also got a goofy message from Harold. I prayed to God he didn't send a similar one to Leon. The subject title was *The State I'm In*.

I was a supervisor at Harmon now, which meant I had that supervisor office, so I could read the whole email without minimizing it and didn't even have to look at the instrument or open claims if I didn't want to.

I read it in about twenty minutes. I closed the blinds on my office window because I needed to walk around in circles and think. Then I walked out across the call floor and pounded on Bridgette's office. I didn't wait for her to answer. I walked right in and sat down. She was at her desk on a business call. She raised the hold-on finger while she answered yes, yes, yes, yes. She was performing verification A, which could take forever. I couldn't keep still. There was a pair of bronze stress balls on her desk that I picked up and rolled around on my fingers. When she was finished with her call she poured a cup of coffee from a mini-machine on a file cabinet and offered me some.

I don't need anymore. So, listen. I just got an email from Harold, and he's finally lost it.

I don't know if Bridgette was having a busy afternoon or if she was tired of hearing my problems, but she opened her activities

binder and started flipping through the laminated pages and said that Harold was always on the verge of losing it. This was her way of blowing me off.

This is something completely different, I argued. He's threatening to kill himself.

Regardless as to if she wanted to listen or not, she gave me her attention. Her hands were palms-down on the activities binder.

Does he make a direct threat? Does he actually say he's going to kill himself?

It was an email. No. He says he's going to hurt himself. You have to read it.

I don't have time. Why don't you talk to him and set your boundaries? Have you ever tried doing that? Tell him what's okay and what's not okay.

I went back to my office and read the email again. I may have been overreacting. I was capable of overreacting, especially at the beginning of the week when I could let my mind wander because I didn't have to rush to follow up on my calls. I sat down and woke up the monitor. No, the message was certainly bad, though he didn't say he would kill himself. The first part was about me. He admitted to being irrational and understood that I would not want him back, but he said he was so miserable. Just because he was miserable, however, didn't mean he couldn't want. A man can't help himself from wanting, he wrote. Wanting is a great disease.

Then he wrote about himself: *I have grown to hate my body. What I'm experiencing, I believe it's not unlike what teenage girls who are cutters experience. My body irritates me. I've turned around all of the mirrors in my apartment because I know that I'm fraudulent. A fraudulent what? I don't know, because I have nothing to compare myself to. All is fraudulent, everything from hope to despair. Never have I felt the presence of the simulation so strongly. When I cut myself it's only so I can be real, that I can take action and witness the result. To see my own blood has become something of a relief. Is death the only way out of the simulation? Has the market-driven culture and overly complex systems of information, entertainment, and even violence swallowed oh so much? If so, I suffer only because I've been damned with a freak*

*consciousness that does not allow me to blindly enjoy myself.*

His message was so drastic that I felt alert and stimulated. The funny idea occurred to me that when he wrote that email he had his glasses off. It didn't make sense. Harold almost always had his glasses on, especially when he was writing. It was the only way I could imagine him being another person. In the reply I wrote: *Call me anytime you want to talk. Perhaps you could think of the good things in your life, like your son.*

That evening I approached Leon as soon as he got home. I had begun letting him hang out with his friends after school, so I had to wait. I had a hell of a time waiting, too. My head was too full to get housework accomplished. A girl from accounts received recommended this book by an Iranian woman, which I thought could open up my mind, but I couldn't concentrate. So I sat on the sofa with an apple and watched the late afternoon talk shows. Eating disorders. Show after show about eating disorders. When the door opened I was so excited I practically jumped on him and helped his backpack off his shoulders. Before I asked him about his day or even took a look at his mood, I asked if he had gotten anymore emails from his father.

He was annoyed with me for suffocating him, but the way I saw it, this was halfway to urgent. I blocked him at the base of the stairs.

Come on, Mom. Let me up.

What did that email say?

It's not important, he said. When he finally lifted his head to look at me and meet his mother in the eyes, I saw his face wasn't its normal pink. He was all red with a scratch beside his nose that had bled a bit.

Leon, I said and could think of nothing else to say, so I wrapped my arms around him. He slipped out from between them and barreled past me and up the steps.

When I knocked on his door he didn't call for me to enter, so I turned the knob, but he had locked the door from the inside. So I waited it out. I saw a show once, I can't remember which, but there was a mother, at any rate, a pretty brunette, who had to get into her teenage son's room because she knew he was keeping marijuana

in there. (I expected my kid to smoke marijuana someday, but not until he went to college.) The television brunette sat in the hallway outside of her son's room and banged a frying pan and chanted all night. It was funny. I thought of this while I waited against the wall with my legs stretched across the floor. Fifteen minutes passed. Leon opened the door, to go to the bathroom, I suppose. He gave me this awful teenage sneer, it was just so deliberate, and asked if I had gone crazy.

No, I have not gone crazy. That's a great way to talk to your mother. Listen, because this is important. Are you listening?

No.

Then why are you standing there?

Because I'm listening.

I didn't want to be oppressive, I tried to sound laid-back. You don't have to tell me what the email said. I respect your privacy. But for me, because I need to know, was there anything in his email that bothered you?

Yes.

And if I were to say that I was worried about dad, would you say, based on that email, that I should be worried?

He thought about this. He had on a shirt that was a plain striped T that he only wore around the house.

You might be worried, he said.

Thank you, Leon. That's all I wanted. Now do you want to tell me about the fight you were in this afternoon?

I don't even know how to fight, he said, snickering because the question was so stupid apparently.

I called Harold's landline and left a message on his answering machine. Then I called his cell and I really let him have it on the voice mail. We're going to talk, I said. It was going to be soon and I was going to get some answers. We're all trying to run our lives, I told him. You have a son. You can't be playing these games.

I called them *morbid games*.

Harold called back while Leon and I were in the middle of dinner. I felt too antsy to prepare good food that you're supposed to feed your kid. Tonight was Hamburger Helper taco special. For some reason I had an endless supply of taco seasoning in my



cabinet. I made Leon fry the beef, which he did without giving me much trouble, though he refused to talk.

I took the phone onto the front porch and first asked him how he was feeling. He and Leon were the same in that one insensitive move on my part could destroy the entire quest for information.

He said: I've been better, if you want to know the truth. I'm sorry about that email. I was drunk.

He sent that email around eight in the morning, I knew. I was shocked. He had never been that kind of drinker. Harold, I said, what the hell is going on? Do you want me to help you find some place, like a clinic?

I can't go to a place. What do you want me to tell them once I get there?

I can't make that decision for you.

Can I tell him that I've lost faith in this world? You think they can do something about that? Should I tell them that their whole concept of madness is a social construct? That even if you go mad you're still playing the game?

No one's playing a game, I said. The last time I saw you, you were fine.

Is that so? He thought this was funny. I guess I was fine then.

Did you lose your job?

Not yet. I'm sure that's next.

He was drunk already. His voice was wet, I imagined he was spitting on himself. Seeing as how he was drunk, I didn't feel the need to walk on eggshells any longer, so I came right out and asked him: What did you send to Leon? The email.

There was silence on his end. I made sure that he was still there, and he said that he was thinking.

What are you thinking about? Was it the same email?

No. Let me think for a moment. It was a different email, but I don't think I actually sent it.

Well you sent something.

No, I don't believe I did.

What the hell's wrong with you? You have a son. You're a father, a college professor. You are a man of *some* authority. How can you just shut off?

Did I shut off?

Oh, you're off.

Meet me tomorrow, he begged. Tomorrow night, after work. Will you do it?

Can you promise that you'll be sober?

He sighed and agreed. He would call me on my cell after five, when I got off work.

I'll have it on, I told him. Now how about that email you sent to Leon?

He insisted that he didn't know what email I was referring to, and when I said that Leon had gotten a goofy email from him, he started sobbing. It was sick, really. I couldn't even feel bad for him. I imagined a wet pile of clothes after the person has taken them off, a wet pile of clothes with a telephone on top.

Are you alright? I mean, do I have to get an ambulance over there?

What's an ambulance going to do?

Have you cut yourself, Harold? That's all.

Will you see me tonight?

I told him I would not. Leon and I were in the middle of supper. Then he wanted to know if he could talk to Leon, and I told him that he couldn't. Not unless he told me what was in the email. He insisted that he never sent an email.

Then he told me there was no more work. He spoke as if it were some horrible pronouncement: There is no more work!

I began to wonder if there was something really going on inside that head of his. The truth is that I was excited in a way that made me feel guilty and alive both at the same time.

I saw Bridgette the next morning at the Harmon Café while we were gathering our pastries and pumping weak coffee into our mugs. The first thing I talked about was how Leon seemed to be getting into these little fights, but how he didn't even seem to care.

Isn't he supposed to have all of these home problems if he's getting into fights at school?

I don't know, she said. He's always had a kind of rebellious streak.

No, I said, this is different.

A skinny woman from faulty claims accidentally elbowed me in the ribs and I pretended not to notice.

He keeps coming home with these little war scars, I said. You would have to see him.

Then I'll have to see him, she said and walked off kind of quickly. This was a whole other problem, that Bridgette was getting annoyed with me at the worst possible time.

Late in the afternoon, I was on a customer satisfaction follow-up call with a windshield customer from 2002. He was pleasant enough with a nice throaty voice. He talked slowly, he was calm, easy-going, and he was obviously an educated man. Basically I was going through a survey with him, and at one point I asked if Harmon's recommendations helped him to save money.

He said: It's hard to tell anymore. Most of that money's been spent and what not. So it would be hard to say how much money your service saved me. Though I appreciated it then, I can't say it makes any difference to me now.

This was exactly what Harold would have said, I thought.

The rest of my day was angst-filled. I did the dumbest thing, which was to keep drinking coffee. I needed something to sip. By the time I got out of work my ears were itching for the phone to ring. I kept thinking I felt it vibrate in my purse, and each time I picked it out, only the time was displayed on the window. I called Harold after fifteen minutes of waiting, which was a good thing because as soon as he picked up he started mumbling and cursing to himself.

I was sleeping, he said.

Why weren't you teaching?

I told you. There's no more work.

Get dressed, I said. Get dressed, Harold. Meet me at Alberta's. Do you know where that is? It's that country style restaurant where Bridgette and I have drinks. It's a nice quiet place on 13.

I can't go anywhere.

No, I don't think so. I've been waiting here in the damned parking lot for fifteen minutes. Besides, you've been sending us distressing emails.

I sent *you* an email.

Do you want me to come over there?

No sooner had I asked that question than I realized that I was being as crazy as he was.

I won't go over there, I said.

We used to live together for God's sake.

No.

You really won't come over.

Do I have to remind you about the scary email?

Then I hung up the phone. I was going to call back, but he beat me to it.

So are you or are you not, I said.

He didn't know what I meant.

Suicidal.

I never said that I was suicidal. I know what I wrote.

Well, whatever it is. Are you sober?

Yes. I'm not sure.

Alright. I'll pick you up. But I'm not coming in.

Give me a few minutes.

I used the time waiting outside of his house to call home and ended up leaving a message for Leon. I lied and told him that Bridgette and I were going to do some quick shopping. Then I just sat there with my eyes closed. I did this now and again when my life was tightening around me, part power nap and part meditation. I made my own darkness and imagined this green bushy utopia where I was lying on my back, so free, so without strain that I got scared I was falling and opened my eyes.

Harold was drunk. And in broad daylight, too. Actually it was more like fall daylight, when it seems like the day is ending too soon. He stumbled out of the apartment complex and cut across the square of lawn. His ponytail was half undone, coming out of its rubber band.

When's the last time you had a drink?

He was a mess, but this didn't stop him from being smart. He slapped his hands on his thighs and told me that I was petty. I asked him why. I didn't think I was being petty at all. As a matter of fact, I thought I was being quite good.

Because it's the little things, he said. You obsess over petty

trivialities and present them to me as something large. Look at this question here, of the single drink. It's not a drink, it's a sign of a problem, a deep-seeded problem. You show it to me, but I see nothing deep-seeded. I see only a seed. Except I don't know what it could grow, this seed, it has so much potential.

Your son's been getting into fights, I said.

Why do you tell me that?

Because you're his father. And now you're a drunk asshole. Do you know that I was actually worried about you?

You should be, he said with saliva in his mouth. You should be worried, because I am a danger to myself. And to others.

He pointed right into my face. I shooed away his hand. To others, he repeated. Now take me to a diner.

It's not a diner. It's Alberta's. You've been there.

I remember that place. It's good. Then he threw himself against the window and pouted a bit and rubbed his nose on the glass.

It wasn't until I pulled into the parking lot of Alberta's that I began to have second thoughts. This was a nice place that I went to often, after all, and here I was with Harold, who was drunk, passed out, making weird grumbling sounds at the top of his throat. I touched him lightly, to see if he would respond. His shoulder jerked, but he was definitely not conscious. So I took a look at his left arm, stretched it out on my lap and rolled up his sleeve. His skin was the color of a fish belly with black pubic-like hairs that poked from agitated pocks. I smoothed his skin and was disgusted at how cold he was. Then he woke and I was beside him with his arm on my lap.

I was looking to see if you cut yourself, I said.

The other arm.

He straightened in his seat, twisting his neck to loosen a cramp. On the belly-side of his other arm there was a nice curved scar. Jesus, I said. Now why would you do that?

He didn't answer.

I'm not taking you in there. You're drunk.

Thank you.

So are you going to do it?

I was getting a bit irritated since I wasn't looking to be his

mother anymore.

If you want to know the truth, I said, and I don't want you doing anything drastic, but I know Leon got an email from you and I just want to know – you have to assure me – that it was not the same horrible stuff that I got.

I went to work drunk, he said and slouched in the seat like a teen who was proudly admitting guilt.

And look where it got you. Were you trying to prove a point? Let me ask you this, do you have a plan?

Petty. Petty, petty, petty. You're petty. What I have been dealing with, you don't even know. Let me tell you something, one thing Baudrillard didn't understand. There's one element. Call it soul, call it an id, call it that Lacanian thing beneath the id, I don't know, it doesn't have a name. If that's strong, Tina, the simulation is suffocating. You can feel it. I won't sleep anymore. I called out sick. I couldn't keep calling out, so I went in to teach. This ... this was not a good idea.

Is it a book that did this to you, Harold?

That's funny, he said and clapped his hands.

I announced that I was driving him back home since he couldn't behave himself. I also lied and told him I had made an appointment to speak to a counselor.

She won't tell you anything.

I think she'll tell me plenty. You're a father, Harold, and you've gotten drunk and quit your job. You're smart. Do you think kids don't cost any money?

I can't do it anymore, he said, flapping his hands.

By the time we got back to the apartment complex, I wasn't feeling the least bit sympathetic. He moaned the whole ride and squeezed his head between his hands and said that he was going to kill himself.

I'll do it, he assured me. I can. There's courage in an act that final.

Sure, I said. Courage.

You don't even care.

Then why did I come here? Tell me that. You and your son both. I never care, not even when I show up. You think I do this for my

own entertainment?

And you don't even listen.

That excitement I felt before, it was gone. I wasn't scared or excited anymore. I was able to place this incident in a context. Shortly before we married, Harold was applying to PhD programs right out of college, but his grades were bad because he didn't do the work. His professors weren't on the level, he said. Even I knew his preferences were not realistic, and I warned him not to get his hopes up. And what did he do but apply to only a couple schools, Stanford and Columbia, the same schools he would later accuse of treason in his Tokenville master's program.

The weekend after the second rejection came was some of the worst time we spent together, and I almost left him one night while he was passed out drunk. I took my clothes from the drawer to put them into a duffle. There was a note I composed in my head. I was going to write him all of the things he said to me, about how if he couldn't have it his way and do what he was born to do, which was to write his theory, then me and everyone else were nothing to him. I made him more mediocre, he told me. I thought about that note, I wrote it and rewrote it in my head and I was about to start folding my shirts and blouses on the couch in the living room when he woke up and started calling my name. He sounded so pathetic and whiny that instead of leaving him I went into the room and started pounding on his chest. I pounded hard. And I told him to wait. Just wait, I said, until I start telling you my problems, and you'll never hear the end of it. I'll keep you up night and day.

In contrast to most people, though, I really didn't have problems, or I was able to deal with them better. I thought a lot of serious stuff, like politics and drama and Harold's theories about reality, was funny, which didn't mean that I laughed all of the time, or that I was a jerk. It's just that I could step outside of myself and realize I was small. I might think about how we were all a bunch of miniatures, like this farm set Leon used to have with rubber chickens and cows, and how we were just playing childish games all of the time.

On the day I got a call at work from Leon's school, I had asked

a younger fellow on the call floor, who I knew had an English degree, what he could tell me about this Baudrillard that Harold was obsessed with. That wasn't the first time I had heard him use the name. Baudrillard had to do with the so-called simulation. I pronounced his name wrong, so the young man on the call floor took a moment to recognize it, then he told me it rhymed with *Grow Tree Yard*. Baudrillard. That movie, *The Matrix*, is based on his philosophy, he told me. Then he wrote down the name, misspelled, but close enough that I could find him on the internet. He died last year. The picture I found showed an old Frenchman with white hair and a benevolent smile that made him look like he had just made a profound statement that I was supposed to benefit from.

The way I remember it, I was reading the Baudrillard Wikipedia page when my phone rang and the secretary said there was a woman from the junior high on the line. Apparently, this Baudrillard character said that the first Gulf War didn't actually happen. I kind of knew what he meant because of having watched it on television and seeing fountains of light that seemed like peaceful fireworks in slow-motion, but I imagined telling this to the families of the dead Iraqis and American soldiers, and I thought he sounded ridiculous.

The woman from the junior high was a receptionist in the principal's office, and she didn't sound particularly thrilled to be speaking with me. She asked if I was who I was, and when I told her that she had the right person, she asked me if Leon was my son. Instead of answering in the affirmative, I asked if he was okay because I was worried. I saw this coming, this phone call, I just couldn't know it in any way that I could express.

The principal would like to speak to you this afternoon. Can you make it down to the school?

I told her that I could make it by five, and she said that was too late. I had to come earlier.

Well, I don't know that I could make it any earlier, I said. I am at work.

Your son may be in a lot of trouble, she said.

Bridgette was the only other supervisor on duty. I went into her office and plopped into the chair. She was at her desk with the



activities binder open, holding her head like she was concentrating. There was nothing so urgent in the activities binder (all supervisors used the same one) so I knew that she was trying to blow me off.

I'm not here to waste your time, just to let you know that I have to cut out early. I'm setting my phone to voicemail. Could you handle any emergencies without me?

Bridgette looked up and warmed her meaty cheeks with her hands. This doesn't have anything to do with Harold. Please tell me it doesn't.

Leon, I said. I just got a call from his school. I think he's been fighting.

She took her hand away from her cheek and used it to cover her mouth. Just like you predicted, she said.

I don't remember predicting that.

You said he was going to explode one day. Didn't you?

I did see Harold last night. He was drunk. He's been drunk. I think he has something to do with this.

The guy's a son of a bitch, said Bridgette.

This annoyed me. I understood that I egged her on, but in another sense, she had only met him a few times. She was taking a few too many liberties in talking about my life. I thanked her, but I did it in the driest possible voice, that way she could know I wasn't thrilled with her.

I didn't like Leon's school. The building had been a gun factory at one point, a hundred or so years ago, all worn black bricks. And inside was depressing and dimly lit. But it was the public school, and I wasn't making the kind of money that would let me send Leon to a prep.

I pulled into the lot and went in through the back to the principal's office. This was a little after three o'clock. There was a pale sickly boy about Leon's age sitting in the waiting room. I thought he might have been high on drugs because of how he let his head hang to the side. Plus his eyes were red. The receptionist who called me was a round, elderly woman with a poof of curly white hair and sweet little grandma glasses.

Ms. Halpford is waiting for you, she said. Right down that

hallway, second door on the right.

The door of the office was closed. There was one of these foggy windows that I glanced through before knocking, and I could make out the head of a woman and a nondescript young man sitting beside her. Nondescript, yes, but I knew this was Leon. I knocked, I was asked to come in, so I did.

Leon sat in a wooden chair beside the desk, slouching like he did at home when he didn't want me asking questions. His shirt, a blank white T, was wrinkled and bunched up at the chest. He had those scratches on his face, like he did a lot of the time, but his normally pink face was red. My impulse was to trap him in my arms and keep him there. But he obviously didn't want it, and this Halpford woman was a hundred and twenty pounds of seriousness that I could feel with the whole left side of my body.

She was a black woman, but I don't think she was completely black. One of her parents might have been something else, maybe Asian. She was relatively small with an intimidating whoosh of black hair and a deep voice. She said her name and asked me if I was who I was, then she asked me how I was doing today.

*I was fine*, I said. What happened, Leon?

He shrugged and exhaled.

Halpford said: Leon, why don't you go into the waiting room while I talk to your mother.

She spoke with the firm disciplinary tone I would never use. He followed orders. He left the office without looking at me. Once he closed the door behind him, the principal pushed Leon's chair away from her side so that I could sit. She opened a window and retook her seat.

You must be shocked.

That's exactly what I am. I'm shocked.

Let me ask you. Have you noticed anything like this before?

Anything like this? No. Never.

No scratches?

Oh, I said. Scratches. Sure. And some small rips in his clothes. But he's a boy. He's fifteen years old. Boys fight.

Halpford looked down at her desk. She had her own kind of activities binder open, but it was full of graph paper. For a moment

I wondered if she was laughing at me.

They do fight, she said. But those scratches on your son's face, they didn't come from a boy.

From an animal? I sounded stupid to myself.

They're from a girl, said Ms. Halpford. She looked up now so I could realize the gravity of the situation.

Mr. Timm, Leon's social studies instructor, discovered Leon in one of the seldom used supply rooms with a female classmate. Would you mind taking a moment to read over Mr. Timm's report? It's brief, and I think it's important that you see what we're dealing with before we go any further.

Halpford took a yellow sheet from her binder and handed it across the desk to me. According to the report, which was scribbled half legibly, this Mr. Timm was going to the supply room for a detailed map of East Africa (he was specific) when he was about to open the door and heard some knocking around and grunting inside. His first thought was to get the principal or one of the guidance counselors, imagining there were a couple of students *making out*. But then he heard a serious bang and worried that there was a fight. He swung open the door and saw my son and another student, a female, who was this Stacy girl with the Italian last name. What he walked in on, he didn't know what. But Stacy was on the floor, on her back, kicking and flailing her arms. And my son was on top of her. He appeared to be strangling her. When Mr. Timm asked my son and this girl what it was they were doing, they both agreed they were playing a game. And Mr. Timm ended his report by saying that it didn't look like any game he had ever seen before.

When I was finished reading I set the paper down and went through the motions of considering it, but I was only thinking in black and white, but without images. This may have been the closest I'd ever come to having a real anxiety attack.

So they were playing a game, I said.

They were not playing a game.

They both agreed they were playing a game. Is the girl ... is Stacy injured?

She covered her mouth. I noticed her fingernails were painted yellow, which was strange for a principal. Not on her face, she

said. But yes. I have been communicating with Stacy's parents for some time now. They've suspected that she's been having some problems here at school. And I shouldn't be saying this to you, but Leon's name has come up several times. I didn't feel comfortable approaching you until we had some better idea, but now I have no choice.

The office was as still as a dark, almost black painting. There was one that came to mind, from the cover of one of Harold's academic books. I believe it was a collection of literary theory. The title of the book may have been *Literary Theory*. It was a dark painting, most of it was in shadow and showed two women in sixteenth century gear, or from whatever era, and they sat face-to-face over a wooden table. This was Halpford's office. And for a moment I began having racist thoughts, where I wondered why this black woman would care enough to get involved in my life. Then Harold's voice got in my head and I heard him accusing me of being a racist like he had the time we walked into a diner where there happened to be no white people, and I told him I felt something bad would happen.

I was convinced that she knew what I was thinking. So I smiled to show that I was willing to cooperate. Where do we go from here, I said. I'll have a talk with Leon tonight and find out what this is all about.

Ms. Halpford said: Do you understand the seriousness of this situation?

I believe I do.

We'll have to perform an investigation.

He's fifteen years old.

We think he may have been raping one of his classmates, Ms. Popper.

Popper was my last name, which I took back after the divorce.

After we pulled up outside the house and I unlocked the door to let us in, I attempted the silliest action, which was to wrap my arms around him, but Leon escaped and bolted up the stairs. I sat down on the sofa and considered that my poor boy had raped a girl, and I just knew it was impossible. He and this Stacy were playing a game. She said so herself. And even if he were a little guilty, it could not

have been his own idea. And this is when I remembered the email, which I had never gotten to the bottom of. I didn't even think about the time I caught Leon giving Stacy the kiddy abortion with the juice or whatever. It was possible that Harold's email influenced him. That's what I thought.

He did have that side to him, Harold did. Towards the end of our marriage we still tried to have sex now and then, but usually it ended in frustration. I complained that Harold wasn't acting manly enough, and he asked me sarcastically if I wanted to be ravaged. I told him that wasn't so funny because yes, I would like that, if he could at least try. He said that I was his hostage, so he tied a hand towel around my mouth and pushed me up against the wall. It got me really excited at first. But he ruined the experience soon enough by talking. I need some information, he said, the information between your legs. I want to fuck the truth out of you. Then I was suddenly aware of his doughy stomach pushing up against my back and his sour breath and felt I wanted to hide. Since we had gotten this far I could do nothing but cry. But he thought my crying was part of the role-playing, and kept on going, telling me that the sexual interrogation would continue. I wanted to be tortured, didn't I? Dirty terrorist bitch that I was.

Then I was struck by the fact that I had cried in front of him. No, I didn't want to remember myself that way.

I called him and he picked up on the landline.

I knew it was going to be you, he said. I had a feeling. I'm not much for feelings, but I could tell.

I told him to stop joking. He would have to come and meet me at the house.

Are you sure, he said.

Are you drunk?

I've quit drinking for a while. I've been thinking about some of the things you said the other night.

I didn't tell you anything.

I need to find a job.

So you were fired?

Oh yeah, he said. My 110 class formed a coup against me. All of them. They reported me to the dean.

While I was waiting for my ex-husband to come over I went upstairs so I could talk to Leon for a bit. I didn't want to talk about what had happened. It was funny, but more than anything I just wanted to ask him how he was feeling, how his day was, as if showing him how much I cared could make him less guilty. He was in the bathroom where he was running water. I figured he was washing off his face. When he came out I couldn't look at him. The scratches were no worse than they ever were before.

I didn't do anything wrong, he said.

What did I just hear then? You're telling me you didn't do anything, but I got your principal telling me you might get kicked out of school.

She's a liar. She's a total bitch.

Leon, what word did I just hear come out of your mouth?

She's a nigger and a bitch, he said.

You get back in that room, I told him. You get back in that room. Your life's about to change, buddy.

He shrugged and poked forward his head like he were going to spit on the carpet. Then he did as I said, even though I hadn't sounded very convincing, not like Halpford anyway.

Now this is not my son, I thought. This is not the same Leon I've been eating dinner with every night. I didn't know who taught him to talk this way. It certainly wasn't Harold. This was one thing I could be sure of. Harold had a strong sense of ethics when it came to the political issues.

I was hungry, but I didn't have the concentration required to heat up a frozen meal. So I sat in the living room and waited. I didn't even turn on the television. When Harold rang the doorbell half an hour later, I took my time going to the door to ease my nerves. Harold was standing there with his hands folded before him. His hair was pulled back into a nice tight ponytail and his clothes were clean and he had shaved. His face had a youthful glisten and smoothness. It's good to see you, he said. The other night, I couldn't really see you.

Come in and sit down.

I was hanging on by a thread less than a week ago, and now I've changed and you don't even care?

I just met with Leon's principal, and I found some things out, and a lot of things are about to change. I'd like to hear what your French philosophers have to say about this.

Okay, he said. Enough about the French philosophers.

Your Baudrillard, I said, pronouncing his name correctly. I'd like to see how this is part of the simulation.

You don't understand it, so let's just leave it alone.

I've seen *The Matrix*.

Harold laughed at me and I told him to shut up.

We went into the kitchen where we sat at our old table. This is what I told Harold: One of his teachers found them in a supply closet. Do you remember that Stacy girl who's always hanging around with him? Well, they were together. And he was strangling her. Haven't you noticed those scratches? They think it's a case of rape maybe.

Harold's hands were set on his lap. I couldn't see them, but I could tell by the way he was sitting, like a well-disciplined student.

I asked him about those scratches, said Harold. He told me that he and some friends were playing football and what not.

They're from a girl, I said. From that Stacy character.

He's been raping her? No.

I don't know if he's actually raping her. But that's what's at stake. I guess. What gets me, when the teacher asked them what was going on, they both said they were playing a game.

Both of them?

They both said it. So I don't know if it's right or wrong, but they both agreed to it.

That's Hegelian, said Harold.

No. No more French philosophy. This is real.

Hegel was German. This is just like the master-slave dialectic. I suppose a high school teacher wouldn't know about this.

I don't think they care, Harold. Now tell me something, because now it's important. What the hell was that email you sent him? Do you think you may have put ideas in his head? He was really bothered by that email. And I was pretty bothered by the one you sent me.

I didn't send him an email. I told you. I was about to. Then I

changed my mind.

Okay. How about this? What was on the email you were about to send him?

Poems.

What?

Poetry. I've been writing poetry, and I thought it might be cool if Leon got to read some.

Oh, Harold, you dumb-dumb. You sent Leon poems. That's all. Were they all about rape or something?

No. As a matter of fact they were not. They were poems and they have nothing to do with rape.

Well, they're going to investigate.

What does that mean, investigate?

I don't know. This is just what the principal tells me.

It's not rape, he said. It's not even attempted rape. If she agreed to it. If they were playing a game.

What kind of game has our son strangling a girl? That's what I want to know.

They're kids. Kids are kind of fucked up now. With violence everywhere. Video games. Movies. The music of depressed and angry African-Americans.

The simulation, I said.

Sure, it's the simulation. Whatever you want to call it. Is he upstairs?

He's upstairs.

Do you think I should talk to him?

He's angry.

Maybe I should try.

Harold left the kitchen. The floor groaned, which meant he was turning up the steps. A few eternities passed while I sat at the kitchen table and waited. God, the things that went through my mind, none of them had to do with the issue at hand. Until I remembered the kiddy abortion. This is when it occurred to me that maybe I should have paid more attention. No, I thought, it's not fair. I was a woman, after all, and a caring one, and I never suggested to my son that he should play rape games.

Harold was shaking his head when he returned to the kitchen.



In reality, maybe a half an hour had passed since he went up there.

You were right, he said. I mean about the email. I fucked up.

Harold became unreal to me. I saw him there without any depth, like he was cut from cardboard. I couldn't understand what relation he had to Leon and me. At the same time, I looked at his clean-shaven face, his smooth shirt, his tightly-pulled-back hair and saw that it was all an act. I was so removed, I was ready for anything. I felt myself on the verge of laughter. Even that funnel and the juice. Really, it was funny if you thought about it for what it was, which was a funnel and some juice, and some kids playing games.

I sent those poems to Leon. He remembered a few of them. Apparently he really studied a few. He, uh ... I have to sit down.

He came to the table and sat on the chair and held his face.

This thing with Stacy, I said, it's been going on for some time, Harold. I don't think those poems really affected him.

Except for one, he said.

One what?

One poem. Damn it. Except for one. He basically recited it to me. I think it may really have affected him.

One of your poems?

*Slave Loves Slave*, he said. I forgot I had included it.

Then he covered his face and began to recite it to me. It was probably the worst thing I ever heard. It went something like this:

The slave tells the slave what to do.  
They're black slaves, they're white slaves,  
They're imaginary slaves, they're Jews.  
The masters are imaginary, too.  
Eyes in the sky, attached to no face,  
In what you once thought was blue.

I couldn't help myself. I broke out into laughter, and Harold pulled his face from his arms. His eyes were red and lazily floating from left to right. He asked me if I thought this was funny.

No, I said. I really don't.

But I heard my own laughter, and it felt so good and strong and it made my shoulders feel tickled, then my knees, they felt tickled

too. I didn't want the feeling to end, so I made myself laugh harder. Harold was standing now. He looked down at me. I was supposed to sense his disapproval probably, but that actually made me laugh harder. I realized that Leon upstairs could probably hear me. Call me a bad parent, but for the instant I was drunk without so much as a sip. I wanted my son to hear my laughter too.

You really are cynical, said Harold. That you can actually be entertained by this. What? You think my poetry is funny?

No, no. You don't understand. It's not you, it's not him. But, god, something is funny.

The truth was that Harold understood perfectly. He entertained me. I was the pretty girl and he was the nerd who was always courting me, and I was always throwing his gifts back in his face. There's nothing wrong with that. Only I couldn't help myself enough to be tasteful. And even now I wonder how much that mattered, if my laughter hurt us more or not. And if a fellow like David Foster Wallace had heard his wife laughing at him like I laughed, maybe he wouldn't have hung himself. You should listen to me, Harold, I thought. I'm the woman who's been saving your life.