

Transitional Objects: A Collection of Short Fiction, Poetry, and Two-Act Play

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DEDICATION

For

Malinda  
Fran  
Laoghaire  
Eveline  
Annalivia or Finnegan

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chatting about my writing, and listening to me vent endlessly.

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## ABSTRACT

### TRANSITIONAL OBJECT: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION, POETRY, AND TWO-ACT PLAY

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This thesis consists of five short stories, poetry, and two-act play which revolve around three characters—a young woman (Audrey), her significant other (Neil), and her best friend (Zoe)—as their lives intersect and overlap. The common theme among the pieces is the need for and use of a "transitional object" by each of the characters. The transitional object acts as a comforter for one to grab onto for support in transition from one self to another, or from one relationship to another, and it may be an actual object such as a pig puppet, food, or a tattoo for one character, or a behavior like voyeurism or caretaking for another. These issues are approached with two contrasting yet complementary mediums—the short story and the play. The short stories explore the internal workings of the characters, some with the immediacy and intimacy of the 1st person narrative and others from a 3rd person perspective that can delve even deeper into the minds of these complicated characters. In contrast, the play treats the material externally, reiterating the

themes of the stories but, unlike them, providing an un-intrusive, unmediated depiction of the characters, making the reader/audience the narrator and calling into question the reliability of the previous stories' narrators.

## Hunger

I've got my hand over his and I'm guiding our hands over my calf, my knee, my thigh, and it feels so good. This is what I need. Neil thinks it's sexy when I tell him where to touch me, when I show him. Really, I just need to make sure he doesn't try to make the moves on a part of my body that's fat. Like my stomach. He can't touch there. Sometimes he does by mistake, then apologizes profusely, saying he forgot.

"I understand, just don't touch me there again, OK?"

He says my tummy is cute. No. It's fat. Pure fat. I'll never be able to handle pregnancy, when I won't be able to suck it in.

I should be over this by now. It's been eleven years since it first began, since I was in the hospital, starved down to 70 pounds on my 5'2" frame. I'm fine now. At least with the number on the scale. I don't even know how high it is. Bizarre. I still feel fat, but now I don't do anything about it. Well, I run, but I can't starve, not like before. I enjoy food too much. Everything revolves around it. Besides, Neil would hate me if I went back. I'm such a bitch when I'm hungry.

My hand over Neil's, it feels good. I'm letting it feel good. He sighs when we touch the inside of my thigh, saying, "It's so warm," like he's surprised, pleasantly surprised. He says so much when we're like this. I don't say a word. If I think I might start breathing heavily, I'll hold my breath. I just can't. I can't make the noises, or say, "That

feels so good," like he says, "Oh Audrey, oh God." Even if I did, I'd probably say, "Oh Neil, oh Goddess."

I want to do it. I want to have sex. If we do it now, it'll be the fourth time, more than with any other guy. Neil's different, but I still play the number game. And it won't be real until we reach the number. Maybe then I can erase everyone else. He's number nine and I'm not going to number ten. Gotta make this one last. Gotta make this one stay. It's been six weeks, another two and he'll have been here longer than any other. Can't mess up. Gotta be sane.

Sometimes, I feel like I'm on an elevator with the light behind the floor numbers burnt out. Am I moving? Am I stuck between floors?

I want to have sex with Neil. It's not like the first time. Not at all.

*I have to pretend that Tom wasn't really human. That is the only way I can handle remembering the first time, as science fiction. He was always a bit odd. On our first date he met me after I donated blood. We got ice cream cones, and he told me he could never donate because he already had a pint less blood than normal.*

*If romance were measured by grocery store lines, our happiness lasted as long as the wait in the express lane. One day, sitting on his bed, I said, "If you don't want to see me anymore just tell me. I don't want to play games. Just say so."*

*He said so.*

*I knew he was afraid that I wanted too much. Romance, mostly. I told him I didn't want any of that. Forget the roses and cards. Just the physical. We hadn't had sex yet*

*together. I hadn't had sex at all.*

*I kept thinking he was my last chance. I was about to become an adult—18 years old—and he had been my only boyfriend. It was as if I had an expiration date. Like a carton of milk.*

*I was just about to leave his dorm room when he came over and kissed me, forcefully. I love you, I thought. Even though I knew I'd never say it. Even though I knew I didn't feel it.*

*"You don't want to do this," he said, moving away from me. "I can tell by your kiss. You're not into this at all."*

*"I don't need you to tell me what I want."*

*I moved closer.*

*He started to touch me again. Then I knew, he was right.*

This is right. I know it's right. Neil loves me. He says it, over and over. He writes out the words on my thigh with his finger. I say it, but only, "Me too." Neil told me he fell in love with me when we first met. But love isn't about falling. It isn't an accident. It's a decision. I used to make it so they couldn't decide. The relationship begins, and I think of the future, and how hard it's going to be when it ends. When I was sick, when there was nothing left to hold, I thought, those guys, they'd know there's nothing here to love.

I let him take off my shirt. I let him take off my skirt.

"You're so beautiful," he says. "Astonishingly beautiful." And, I think, compliments are like hot peppers: they taste so good, I think I want a lot, but then my

mouth burns and I'm in pain and I worry that I'll never use my tongue again.

They all say I'm beautiful. I don't believe them. But they say it, even when it's over.

*Seth said it when he broke up with me in a restaurant. On the way to breakfast, he was driving too fast. I said, "Slow down," not so calmly, and dared to question the sturdiness of his car.*

*The waitress took our order—hotcakes for me, waffles for him. When the food came, I avoided eye-contact with Seth, my guest. Instead I watched the maple syrup quickly become absorbed into the stack. How easily it seeped into the hotcakes, as if it belonged there. He told me I was beautiful.*

*I looked over. His waffles were cut into twenty perfect little squares, reminding me of my anorexic days. I told him I was sorry for what I'd said about his car.*

*My hotcakes were completely saturated, I hadn't realized how much syrup I was pouring on. The tough edges now crumbled, breaking apart at the slightest touch. The pieces of cake wouldn't stay on my fork. I practically needed a spoon. I told him I was scared.*

With Neil, it's a different scared. I'm afraid of it ending, instead of fearing that I want it to end.

Neil and I first met at the restaurant where I work part-time to make money for school. I wore the trainee badge, despite being a real waitress. People treat you better

when they think you're new.

I handed him a bus tray filled with remnants of the day's special, tuna salad. "This stuff kills whales," he said, sounding like a Greenpeace member who'd forgotten to read the newsletter. A real comedian.

He's always laughing when we're like this. When he's kissing me and combing my curly, dirty blonde hair with his fingers, untangling the knots. He's my six-foot Pillsbury Doughboy, white as bread. Always with a smile and that little "hee hee" laugh. I don't even poke him.

My eyes are closed the whole time. My excuse, I don't have my contacts in and even if my eyes were open I couldn't see anything but a big blur. It's hard to look. It's hard to let him look at me. It's so hard. I want things to be easy. Neil says I want things to be perfect. He says something's got to give or I'll always be frustrated. He says I can either have it perfect, which isn't easy, or easy, which isn't perfect.

*Things seemed perfect with David, too. I remember when he split town for two weeks, without a warning call. Everything with him was a mystery. When I called, he told me he went home to cut his mother's grass and came back to finish his résumé. That night, I went over to his place for the last time, and he offered me a shiny red apple. I told him I worried about pesticide residues on my fruit. I'd pick an apple with a bruise or a blemish over a polished, wax-covered beauty any day. I said, "It isn't natural for things to look so good."*

"What do you want?" Neil asks.

"You know," I say.

"Say it. Tell me what you want."

I feel a draft, one of the candles blows out.

"You know," I say, hiding my face in his neck. He wants me to use the words, the words he chooses. I never had to say it before. The words didn't matter.

*Fuck. Screw. Making love. Sleeping together. To Martin, it didn't matter what you called it. Sex was sex. A physical act, plain and simple. He wouldn't use the terms, the euphemisms he thought I wanted. To serve my needs he wouldn't manipulate the language for the act we were about to perform. "Whether I have a quick bite with a whore or an eight-course meal with a queen," he said, "I still call it eating."*

I can smell the veggie pizza that Neil and I made together for dinner. I can't believe I finally found another semi-vegetarian. Someone who knows a chicken isn't a vegetable, yet isn't too animal-rights-whacked not to eat good seafood in a restaurant. And, Neil loves to cook. He's my SNAG, my sensitive new-age guy. Neil's never acted like the typical man. I've seen him cry, that time when we had a fight and I wouldn't say a word. He's so into talking. "Communication," he says, "that's what it's all about." I want to leave him notes. He tells me anyone can write down anything. With speech, a person is there, right in front of you. You can read expressions, hear a tone, so it's easier to see if someone means what they're saying. Neil knows I'd rather write my thoughts than speak

them. He says he's learning to accept that about me. Sometimes, I think he's more afraid of losing me than I am of losing him. Not like some of the others. Not like Mark.

*Mark was a meat-eating mogul. A military man. A man's man—straight out of some Western. To him, eating tofu was as damaging as accidentally swallowing a Midol instead of an aspirin. He was convinced that tofu lowered a man's testosterone level—turning "real" men into peace-loving, long-haired hippies. Looking into my eyes, he said, "It's over. You won't let me eat meat."*

*Two weeks earlier, I had put some bean curd on his plate. Reluctantly he had tried it. I guess I was supposed to be impressed by his bravery, swallowing the mysterious white mass. Even now I can't understand his complaints. He couldn't have been offended by it's taste. It takes on the flavor of whatever's close.*

*But Mark couldn't be persuaded. To him, virility wasn't strengthened with beans, but with blood. Fresh cow blood. Raw steaks, juices seeping from the muscular fibers. Staking his claim with a knife and a fork, tearing into the fleshy meat... that's what it took to be a man. The hunt. The kill.*

*I told him I couldn't eat an animal's fear. Its death. It wasn't in my heart.*

*His carnivorous rationale: "I don't eat anything that doesn't bleed."*

Neil hugs me tight, so tight. I like that. Oh, I really like that. Feels so good, like I'm safe. Like he's never going to leave. Sometimes that's all I want. The hug. Sometimes I want it to last forever. And I wonder, when he's not here, if it's all right to call him up

and say, I don't want to sleep alone. I don't need to fuck. I just need to sleep in a hug. Nothing more. Friends can share a bed when times are tough and space is tight. When things get scary like a prowler loose or electrical storms. Or when you need to conserve heat 'cause the bills are too high to keep the thermostat up and I've got one big, feather-filled, flannel-covered blanket to share.

These hugs, they're real.

I do it a lot. Get obsessed, think I'm loving someone when I'm really procrastinating. Avoiding.

*It was like that with Cameron. I should've been doing my homework or putting in overtime at the diner, but I'd call him up instead. It was all a dream inside my head. I never told him, but I wanted to write him:*

*I've got it all down, what I need you to tell me so I'll stop thinking, stop dreaming, hoping . . . feeling. How trite, as creative as I might think I am, I've fallen into the trap—my heart is holding me back. So just recite the enclosed remarks and maybe it'll put me on track. Kill the sparks that burn my soul and scar the most sensuous parts. I'm sure I misconstrue, everything you say, what you do without thinking. You're forgetting. I'm a fool. Accepting your hugs for more than their worth. Taking them like drugs to feel what I know isn't real. I suppose I'm addicted. So please, just say, "They're placebos."*

Quick fixes. Every one of them. I don't care. My own one-step-program—just

fuck it. I'm flying high like a butterfly and then I crash. It's over. Again. But this, this is . . . Neil's my cure. For the first time, for the very first time, I whisper in his ear, really fast, really quiet, "I wanna make love."

He kisses me hard. On my lips, on my cheeks, along my jaw. He laughs, really sweetly. And he says, "Okay, but don't expect this every time."

I shiver, suddenly aware of my nakedness and his clothes against my skin. I feel so fat.

"Don't get me wrong," he says. "I love you. I love making love to you. But I don't want you thinking every time we make out it's going to lead to this."

And just like that he's them.

"I don't want sex to become routine," he explains. "I've seen it happen. These couples, they don't talk anymore. It's just mechanical."

*Just stop, I think. Just shut up.*

I back away.

Can't make the effort to find my clothes. Can't make the effort . . . I lie still on the floor.

"What's wrong?" He's pleading, on his knees, hovering above me, frustrated.

"What did I say?" He's trying to make me look at him. But I can't see, even if I looked. I don't have my glasses.

"Please talk to me," he begs. "Please. I'm sorry for whatever I said that made you upset. I love you. You know that, don't you?"

I nod.

"So what's the matter?"

I say, "Nothing."

After sex, I open the refrigerator to take what I need for the moment. Sometimes I find nothing good. Though I search through the half-empty shelves for what I really want . . . what I know isn't there.

On the middle shelf, silver foil twisted into the shape of a swan, holding the remains of my first dinner with Neil. I wanted to save the precious aluminum, so I put it in the refrigerator to keep fresh. So beautiful, I didn't want to touch it. But the smell of rotten fish permeates. Baking soda won't help.

I toss it in the trash—along with the macaroni salad that went bad, the soured milk, the eggs that expired a week ago.

The refrigerator's empty and the garbage full. But I made a list, and I'll go to the store tomorrow.

## Easter

Dressed in Sunday's best,  
I'm waiting in the patient's lounge  
For my visitors.  
My sweater hangs from my shoulder bones  
As if on a hanger,  
Baggy clothes camouflage  
My Lenten fast.

My parents come in carrying  
My favorite Easter tradition—  
A hyacinth.  
Its purple flowers  
Haven't bloomed.  
This spring has been especially cold.  
They did the best they could,  
But I wasn't to worry.  
The florist told them it should bloom  
Within the week.

I face my family.

We decide to get something to eat.

Walking through the double doors, past the guards,

Down the elevator,

Through the tunnel to the adjacent

Children's hospital with a McDonalds.

We walk into the atrium lined with trees and plants

And pass a fountain

Where children who needed a miracle

Could make a wish.

My father hands me a dime

And I toss it in.

In this place, a little girl, handkerchief covering

Her head, pushes an IV pole across the floor.

She struggles to smile.

A little boy in a wheelchair, stitches over his eye,

Holds a stuffed bunny.

Men and women in white coats and blue scrubs

Discuss the progress of patients

Before the next shift.

We have come to McDonald's to celebrate

The resurrection of our Lord.

My mother hands me my fish sandwich.

I scrape away the fattening sauce and

Position the bun to eat only half.

We get up from the table.

I throw away the crumpled

Paper and Styrofoam boxes.

It's 2 o'clock—

Time to go back.

Under the watchful eye of the guard

In control,

Who unlocks the doors.

Back in my room, my mother gives

Me my Easter present—

Pearl earrings, cultured I think.

So beautiful, but I can't keep them.

I don't like earrings. I'd rather have jewelry

I can see, like a ring or a bracelet.

But earrings...

I need a mirror to see their beauty.

Everyone else can admire them,

But I can't.

After we say our good-byes,

I sit on my bed.

The hyacinth will bloom

In a few days. I'm waiting.

## Tomatoes

When I was little, tomatoes were sweet and red  
and soft to the touch.

Summertime.

Fresh from the farmer's field.

At the local grocery store  
in the middle of winter  
the tomatoes  
look different, feel different,  
smell different.

A biologist told me:

Too much fertilizer,  
the ground's full of salt.

But we've engineered them  
to grow in the salt-ridden soil.

I guess we could make food grow in

nuclear waste too, but I  
wouldn't live there.

Yet strange ones  
on this planet—  
harboring the original seeds,  
carefully packing them away,  
so they won't rot  
want the tomato they had in  
1969, made by Mother Nature.

Completely synthesized life—  
the miracles of technology.  
I just want tomatoes  
to taste the same.

## Fortune Teller Fish

I know I shouldn't believe what a red and gold cellophane fish has to tell me about how I feel. But I wish I could. Who knows, maybe the fish has a better grasp on what's going on in my head than I do. What was Cyn thinking when she sent me this? But it's not only Cyn. It has to do with Dylan, too. Dylan can't get it up.

I really care about Dylan. I really do. In the past two years of meaningless one-night-stands, he's the closest thing I've gotten to commitment. I met Dylan three months ago at my favorite used record store, the Graveyard. I was checking out the latest release from DeVision when he dropped a CD, on my foot. It wouldn't have been that bad if I'd been wearing my mailman shoes instead of my Birkenstocks or if it were a regular CD, but it was "The Doors: Absolutely Live," a double CD, and it really hurt. I was about to give him a chewing out, but when I looked at him, I just couldn't do it.

He was wearing a pair of black Converse sneakers with silver duct tape wrapped around the toes. His tattered jeans were a couple sizes too big and rolled up to show off his tie dyed socks. His shirt was a takeoff on a Coca-Cola advertisement, but instead of "Enjoy Coke" it said, "Enjoy God." His jet black hair fell carelessly over his left eye, and his lips, those lips, so soft and full. I could tell he took good care of them—Vaseline lip therapy three times a day. His eyes were a soothing, mystical blue, like my favorite Crayola crayon, cornflower. I had to forgive him. I mean, it was the Doors. And who can

knock the Doors?

He quickly apologized and invited me to come see his band, Democracy's Children, play at a local bar. I had a great time. When they played "Peace Frog" he dedicated it to the "girl with the sexy feet." Afterwards we went to his small studio apartment. He had no bed frame, just a large mattress taking up most of the floor. On the walls were murals that he'd painted. Lots of junk littered the floor. Junk with potential, but junk nonetheless. He walked over to the kitchen and started eating spoonfuls of cherry Kool-Aid straight from the canister. I asked him if there was anything else to eat. I was famished. I had quite a workout fighting off the drunkards who practically molested me on the dance floor. I opened up the fridge and found two bottles of dill pickles, a half-empty jug of orange juice, and three Chinese doggie bags. I decided to pass.

When we sat on his makeshift bed he started playing with the curls in my hair. He told me he loved the color. "It reminds me of the cheap burgundy wine my grandfather gave me for my 18th birthday."

I could barely lie still as he traced my spine with his fingertip. He knew what to do to get me excited, but it never went any further than slow touches and deep kisses. It was really bizarre. I had been used to guys jumping me within minutes of being alone, but he took his time. He stroked my legs, gently, and I was glad I decided to shave them that morning. His spontaneous caresses made me absolutely crazy. I wanted more, but still enjoyed the tension build up within my body, on the verge of submitting to temptation. But that's all it was that night and countless ones later. No submission, always on the verge.

The first few weeks with Dylan were exciting. Although our sex life was on the low-burner, the rest of our time together we had a blast. We spent evenings just lying on his bed watching movies like "Wings of Desire" and "Annie Hall." Dylan is superficially deep—not ignorant, but not philosophical either. He has his flashes of insight—occasionally questioning his existence and the fate of the world, but these moments will pass quickly and he'll be the fun-loving, sarcastic guy again. Not only is he an amazing bass player, but he's an artist too. He even made me a bracelet out of scraps of leather and beads he found on our expedition to the Jewish community center's five dollar bag sale. I know it doesn't take him long to make the stuff he gives me, but I love it.

I guess the "honeymoon period" ended after a month or so. Lately he always talks about himself, telling me about his dreams with the band. He never asks about me. Whenever I start talking about my classes or my worries or whatever, he'll give me a vacant look and absently add an "uh-huh." I can't talk to him like I can with Cyn. Cyn and I have an emotional intimacy that I know I can never have with Dylan.

Cyn is a nickname, short for Cynthia, pronounced "sin," as in whatever the Catholic Church has decided is inappropriate human behavior, otherwise known as everything we should enjoy, but don't because of guilt. I was never into that whole sin/redemption bullshit. No, that's a lie. Actually I was, until I met Cyn. She set me straight. She told me, "Jade. We aren't born sinners. We're creators. Fuck guilt! Life is short. I don't want to be clean and pure. Nothing clean and pure ever shows you the world. I want a new view, going against it all, like a fish swimming upstream. I don't

want things bleached, I'd rather keep the stain. It makes things interesting and gives me a story to tell. I need rawness to find that piercing truth. I don't want life refined. Plants, flowers, trees, everything that keeps us alive and makes life worth living grows in dirt. So don't be scared about getting a little dirty. Really dirty! Jade, honey, I love dirt!"

Cyn always goes off on religion and politics with me. Our talks last for hours. I can remember more than a few occasions when we'd end up talking outside in subzero temperatures. For me there's a thrill in talking about time spent in a psychiatric clinic or the details of a sexual assault knowing that the guy in the army green jacket who struts by or the woman with the three Gap bags may overhear parts of our conversation. But I also think we're stupid to stand outside for hours talking while the wind gusts violently around us. Cyn, however, thinks this signifies our bold quest to go against the norms. "It's easy to cry when you're warm in an easy chair. It takes guts to shed a tear when it'll freeze to your face."

I met Cyn a year ago. From the moment I saw her across the small classroom that had been transformed for that evening into a haven for vegetarians, I knew she would be my best friend. Scented candles and cedar wood incense burned on the lecture desk in the front of the room. Huge buckets of sticky brown rice, stewed vegetables, and rose lemon tea took up a long table in the back. Indian music quietly hummed while the crowd mingled—second generation wannabe hippies with long flowing hair and jingling ankle bracelets, Hare Krishnas with no hair and dresses sweeping the floor, and radical activists with politically correct buttons plastered over their backpacks. And then there was Cyn,

criticizing the radical right while a pet lizard (or was it an iguana?) clung to the sleeve of her jacket. What the hell! Was it alive? I thought I saw it move and I practically shit. I was looking at it and it was looking at me. Definitely alive. I went over, hesitantly. His name was Omar and I don't think he liked me. I didn't know if those things have teeth, but I wasn't about to find out. When its head turned to face me I jumped away, but not before planning to meet Cyn for coffee later that week.

When I saw Cyn that evening I didn't just notice her. I *recognized* her. I always got annoyed when a guy would give me that line, "Haven't I met you once before?" Like that jerk who came up to me at a frat party and said he swore he knew me. Right. He wasn't wearing a shirt and asked me if I'd go to his room and help him pick out something to wear. He told me he was colorblind and was afraid he wouldn't match. His room was decorated with huge fish carcasses mounted on the wall. Within minutes, the door was closed, locked, and we were having sex. I realized, to him, I was just another trophy—another valued catch. Fifteen minutes later he was on the edge of the bed smoking a Camel. He didn't even offer me one, the prick. Not that I would have smoked it, but that was rude, very rude. When he turned his back, I gathered my clothes and his pack of cigarettes and slipped out of the room. Another meaningless sexual encounter I didn't enjoy.

I had done this type of thing before. Many times. I guess I was looking for something I missed out on in high school. I wasn't popular then, but when I got to college guys wanted me. And I liked that. I knew I was sexy in my black painted-on jeans that hugged my curves and my tight v-neck shirt that showed off my voluptuous figure. Cyn's

jealous of me because I have such a well-proportioned body. I'm like Barbie, but with thighs that touch. With my good looks, I had no problems finding someone to fuck. I did, however, have a problem finding myself begging whomever it might be *not* to stop. Sex was never that good. I never had a fuck that restored my belief in the overall goodness of the world. Never.

I'm sure Cyn has. Cyn's a free-spirit. I never know what to expect from her. One day she'll walk into my room with bleached white hair and a nose-ring, wearing a Breathless Mahoney t-shirt. In the winter she'll wear four coats—two army jackets, a jean jacket held together with large safety pins, and a long black trench coat. Cyn does have a nice winter jacket that would replace her present collection, but she can't muster up the strength to drag the gift from her mother out of the back of her closet. It made her feel like a marshmallow, a ski bunny, a sorority chick, a preppy. No, Cyn has more in common with a wannabe biker bitch than any J. Crew clone.

Cyn's a psych major, so she's taught me about solving problems and self-help. Until I met her, my only therapeutic tools were a box of crayons and a deck of tarot cards. When I needed to cheer up I didn't analyze my cognitive distortions, I read the advice column in *Cosmo*. I felt infinitely better knowing there was some poor soul out there with worse problems than mine.

A few weeks ago things started to go sour with Cyn, too. We were sitting in her apartment indulging in our personal vices. She was smoking Marlboro Lights and I was drinking my Diet Mountain Dew. Caffeine is my high. Yeah, Diet Dew in mass

quantities —it isn't fattening, it makes you hyper, and tastes better than beer.

I took a sip and started sharing my “Dylan problems” with Cyn.

"I shouldn't have gotten involved with someone who's barely eighteen. I don't really love him. I'm just going out with him because it's what I'm supposed to do." I paused. "How about you? How's Justin?"

That's when she told me. She wasn't seeing Justin anymore. She wasn't seeing any guy. She was seeing Zoe. All I heard was, "Her name is Zoe and I met her at . . ." I didn't even listen to the rest. I sat there in silence holding onto my can of Diet Dew for dear life, like it was the only thing in the whole world I could trust and count on. My mind was stuck in some deep abyss. I couldn't understand why Cyn was doing this to me. She told me that both her and Zoe had been curious for awhile and decided to experiment. Nothing serious, she assured me. She was just interested in seeing what it'd be like.

I tried to talk to Dylan about what happened with Cyn. We were eating pizza in our favorite cemetery, a ritual we'd started a month earlier. Dylan was sick of the crowds at the dives downtown and didn't want to deal with it on his nights off too.

"Dylan, what would you do if I said I was having an affair with a woman?" I asked.

"A chick?" he said stupidly. "You looking at chicks?" He reached over and started playing with my hair.

"No," I said and grabbed his hand. "I'm trying to be serious here." But that was a lost cause with him that night. He definitely was not in one of his deep moods.

That night I had a dream. It was about Cyn. And me. We were on the 35th floor of the Cathedral of Learning in a room with a huge red, incredibly soft leather couch. Cyn was reading my tarot cards. I asked her to tell me about my future with Dylan. I knew things didn't look good when I saw the "Hanged Man" card. Then suddenly I started to get an awful cramp in my foot and Cyn started to massage it. She slowly lowered her head and gently pressed her lips on the top of my foot. I had an incredible rush—a warm, electric shock that shot straight up my foot through every cell of my body. The next thing I knew we were in the shallow end of a heated pool. It was pitch black except for luminaries that lit the pathway around the deck. We stood there, warm waves splashing against us, and we kissed. Then I woke up.

I didn't tell Cyn about the dream. I was so freaked out that I didn't even talk to her for the next couple weeks. I was too scared.

Cyn called me the weekend before last and invited me to a party at her friend Otis' house. I was nervous but I went. We both drank. Like fish. I made my own special mixture of Diet Dew and vodka; she had beer. I needed the buzz to help ease me back into things after not talking with her for so long. I tried to forget what she had told me that afternoon two weeks prior, tried to forget that dream. I wanted to have a good time. Desperately.

An hour after we arrived we were leaning against the wall, waiting to use the bathroom. "Cyn, I read in *Cosmo* that holding it is supposed to make orgasms better." I really had to go and was trying hard to think of something positive that could result from

the incredible pain I felt in my bladder.

"Yeah," Cyn said. "There's also special exercises you can do to strengthen your muscles down there."

I don't know what got into me, but at that moment I had to ask. "Have you ever masturbated?"

"All the time!" Cyn answered. "Great stress reliever."

I laughed quietly. "I don't know what the problem with Dylan is, but he's just not doing anything for me."

"Are you telling me you've never masturbated?" Cyn asked.

"Sorry if that shocks you."

"I forgot. You're a recovering Catholic, valuing self-denial, distrusting pleasure. I can't believe you'll let Dylan do whatever he wants with you and you can't even please yourself. God, you're not even in touch with your own body. Some guy knows more about it than you."

"I know plenty about my own body," I screamed.

"Relax tulip!"

After what seemed like eons, a guy finally emerged from the bathroom. I went inside. Cyn followed me and closed the door. She pushed her way beside me. And she kissed me. The tips of our tongues together, the wetness of her lips, I felt it all over, like in my dream. I don't know. It didn't last long, five seconds or so. Then I just stood there and stared at her. I think she said she was sorry. I can't remember. I just mumbled something about having to go and I took off. I pushed my way through the crowd and

made it outside the house. And then I ran and ran. Dried leaves clung to my black tights as I made my way through the huge piles on the street. I could have avoided them, but I love the crunching sounds.

I went to Dylan's place. I had to prove to myself that I wasn't . . . I don't know. I just had to prove something.

"Dylan. Can I come in?" I leaned against the wall outside his apartment door, trying to catch my breath.

"I thought you went to Otis' with Cyn." He was wearing a hand-painted t-shirt of the world.

"All I could think about was you." Then I kissed him. Hard. Passionately. "I want you Dylan. I need you bad." I wrapped my arms around him for support, still shaking from running, still trembling from what made me run. My body pressed firmly against his, I knew he could feel my heart pounding.

He started to pull away, put his hand under my chin, and looked straight into my eyes. "Jade, man, mellow."

"Mellow?" Damn, I thought, doesn't this guy know what to do when a girl comes onto him? I figured he was nervous so I gently stroked his hair and started working my hand down his boxer shorts. I massaged the top of his thigh.

"Mooncake, baby . . . I can't . . . man . . . whoa . . . stop mooncake. Babe, you're wasted. I can't . . . I'd be taking advantage of you. Come on . . . slow down."

Ha! Hysterical. "Don't tell me what I want. I'm sick of everyone trying to tell me what's best for me. You. Cyn. I don't need this." I kissed him again, harder. Then I

pushed him onto the mattress. I started taking off my black rayon blouse to show off my "fuck-me" bra and worked on getting him naked too.

"Ooh Jade."

I could tell he was beginning to get excited, but he still seemed uneasy, like he was looking for an excuse for this to end. Any excuse.

"Baby, I can't deal with this now." He moved back. "I ain't gonna say I love you or anything."

Love. That was funny coming from him. Yes I wanted it. I wanted to make love, to really make love instead of just having sex. I wanted it for the longest time, but I knew I couldn't get it from him. And, at that moment, I didn't really care. I just had to be with someone.

He tried to break away from me, but I wouldn't let go. I kissed him again, on the neck, my tongue finding its way up to his ear, enjoying the saltiness of his skin. Then I breathed into his ear, softly, carefully. Pretending it was a candle, I tried to move the flame without blowing it out.

"Jade . . . hon . . . ya gotta . . . go." But neither of us moved. He took off my bra and caressed my breasts. I pretended to enjoy his touch and smiled.

I don't remember everything that happened after that, but I remember Dylan's words after the failed attempt as clearly as I remember the softness of Cyn's lips. "I'd ask how it was for you, but nothing happened," he said bitterly.

Nothing happened! I was lying there totally naked. Coming off the buzz and into the painful realization that I had just literally thrown myself on Dylan just so I would

know something. Anything. He couldn't get it up and he said nothing happened. Everything happened. Everything. The fucking moon was cracked and falling in pieces from the sky.

Dylan fumbled around trying to put on his boxers. Leaning against the window sill, he gazed outside. The sweat on his body glistened in the moonlight. He'd lost weight since we first met. I could see his ribs clearly now. He stood there silently, with a look of pain on his face. Damn, I never thought what this might mean for him. He was hurting. Bad. And there was nothing I could do.

I don't remember putting on my clothes or walking home. I just remember waking up the next morning, hoping the previous night was a horrible nightmare. For the next two weeks I kept to myself. I got a major cold and for a week I spent most of my time either in an Afrin-induced alter state of consciousness or at the mercy of my bizarre Nyquil dreams (or Nyquil nightmares, depending on the dosage).

I started working on the creative journal Cyn gave me for my birthday. Inside she wrote, "To the Crayola Goddess." Now my childish obsession for crayons had a purpose. I dumped out my 64-pack on the floor, ready to discover myself. But I didn't feel like drawing. It was an unseasonably warm day for November so I ventured outside with my journal and sat on the Cathedral lawn.

I wrote feverishly to capture my flashes of insight before they faded or I changed my mind. I was hiding—under the pretense of thought.

Earlier that day, when I was in my room, with the door closed, the shades pulled

down, and had nothing but that notebook, solitude seemed to be the answer. Seemed to cement my being and form my thinking.

Bullshit! I wanted to be bothered. I wanted someone to join me. I wanted to share with someone my plots to rule the world. I wanted someone to tell me I needed a drink. I wanted someone to say, "Relax. Life's too short. You're much too pretty to worry on such a day. The sun shines and the breeze is just right. The bugs still think it's winter staying wherever they stay when it's cold."

*But I should think . . . should think. It's all about fear. I'm swimming in it. You'll ask me what I do for fun. Easier to name my worries or my faults or the things that keep me from sleeping . . . insomnia for weeks, on a caffeinated high. I'm thinking.*

Yesterday I decided to call Dylan. I knew it was over between us. I'm sure he did too. But I needed to clarify the obvious, for some sort of closure.

I asked him what he'd been up to. He never had a problem talking about himself. Before it annoyed me. Now that's all I wanted, something to end the silence.

"The band's had a lot of gigs lately. The crowd went wild when we played our new stuff. I think we're even starting to get some groupies." Before all this happened I would have been jealous. Now I was almost relieved. He needed attention. Something I just couldn't give him anymore.

"Dylan, I just want to say . . . I'm sorry things didn't work out."

"Listen, Jade, it's not your fault."

"Umm. I'm trying not to blame myself. It's not easy." I took a deep breath.

"Maybe I'll see you around." God, where was this stuff coming from?

"Maybe. Look, I gotta go." Silence. Then the click. I put down the phone slowly. Looking out the window I noticed some kids running across the Cathedral lawn, making bubbles. I watched the bubbles float up in the air and disappear.

Today I got a letter from Cyn. It came in a handmade envelope constructed from a page out of a green merchandiser. On the back she pasted the front panel from a pack of her cherished Marlboro Lights. Next to that was a pencil sketch of lips. A piece of cloth tape used for bandages held it all together. Either she was really creative or really bored, maybe both. Inside was a note. "Jade, I'm sorry. Please call so we can talk. Maybe the enclosed gift will help. Stream of consciousness report to Jade! Love and peace, Cyn." I pulled out a thin paper envelope labeled "Fortune Teller Miracle Fish" and read the instructions. "Place the Fish in the palm of the hand. The movements will indicate your fortune. Moving Head . . . Jealousy; Moving Tail . . . Indifference; Moving Tail and Head . . . In Love; Curls up Entirely . . . Passionate."

I placed the red and gold cellophane fish in my hand and watched it curl up.

**An Afternoon with Someone I Don't Love**

“Without the heart there can be no understanding  
between the hand and the mind.”

*From “Metropolis”*

We're watching Metropolis with the volume  
Turned down (the music has nothing to do  
With the mood of the film). I look at you.  
Lying on your bed—feels more like a tomb.

Outside your window, a basketball pounds  
On the cement. I hear rousing screams  
As someone scores. You put your hand between  
My legs. I close my eyes; ignore the sounds.

I want to get it over with...two years  
Since I became an adult, still not a woman.  
I need someone. Pleasure is not a sin.  
Waiting for love to overcome my fears.

You say, "Nothing happened." I feel relieved.

I don't want to lose everything I believed.

**Girl**

Pulling the loose, white strings

Frayed edges

Of my denim cut-offs

As he pleads

To look at him

To tell him

He needs to know

For him, for her...

(for me.)

twisting the string around my forefinger

watching the tip turn a purplish blue

having the power

to cut part of myself

off from the rest.

“You’ve got to tell me.

It has to be now.”

I release the tightness of the string

Then pull it off  
And roll the soft, white cotton into  
Little balls. Like snow they fall on the floor  
To soak up the beer  
That spilled from his cup.

“Stop acting like a little girl.

You’re a woman. Handle this like

A woman.

Stop playing around.

Let go of those strings

On your shorts.

Don’t touch those buttons

On your blouse.

Look at me. Tell me. It has to be now.”

He’s not my father,

But I’m feeling like

His little girl.

## Cigarette

Leading him back  
To her room, she wants to know  
That someone wants her;  
But doesn't need anything  
More. He expects it.  
Her clothes remain  
on her body, at her insistence.  
She will feel less  
Guilty tomorrow  
When she doesn't have to remember  
Him pulling them off.  
But they aren't as strong  
A barrier as she had hoped...  
Weakened by every minute that  
Passes. Until she says  
No.  
  
He asks for a cigarette

Though he doesn't smoke.

And when he deposits the butt

In the glass ashtray

Resting next to the mattress

The filter's almost white.

## Infatuation

It's dark. I hear thunder. A storm's coming.

I think I'm in love.

Sitting on the floor, near the open window, I stare at the candle.

Entranced by the flickering light, watching the wax drip

on the clean, wooden table. With focused breath,

I try to move the flame without blowing it out.

I think I'm in love.

He's sitting on the couch in front of me.

The bottle of Vodka's almost gone. We've both had our share.

The alcohol brings out his Southern drawl. Uncovering his Virginia roots.

It disguises my fears, but reveals my faults.

I'm talking too much, feeling too much, losing control.

unexpected, a flash of lightning interrupts

our conversation. He stops mid-sentence, amazed

by the movement in my eyes. For a second, my pupils shrink

to the size of the candle's wick, escaping the burst of light.

Then expand in the comfort of darkness.

It's time to sleep. I blow out the candle, watching  
the stream of smoke swirl in the air, before it disappears.

I think I'm in love.

## Scars

When Zoe bends over to pick up the penny on the street corner, near a pile of cinders and dirty ice, it isn't a careless maneuver to delay her, although she dreads entering the clinic. A year ago she found herself in front of the same door, with even stronger hesitation. Then she had to run the gauntlet of protestors, today the street is empty in front of the red brick townhouse without any signage denoting its purpose.

Zoe wonders if she really needs to go inside. Jade will come out when she's finished her shift as a counselor for women seeking abortions. Jade told Zoe if they are lucky and the place isn't too busy this weekend, they'd be able to leave for the tattoo parlor by 12:30. Worst-case scenario, Jade said, they'd be on the road by one. Zoe checks her watch: 12:25 p.m.

Zoe puts the penny in her bag and walks down the stairs to the clinic. She never misses the opportunity to pick up a coin from the street—it's a habit, an obsession. She scans every square of sidewalk on her way to work or the store or home. Sometimes she'll find a quarter that makes up change lost in a vending machine, or she'll find a dime to toss in a homeless person's cup. Most people think it's silly to stop and pick up a penny, especially Zoe's father, who hates the thought of her touching things she finds on the filthy streets and warns her against it. But Zoe can't control her desire to search for a spare penny, nickel, dime, or quarter. Finding change is an advantage to being shy, when

avoiding eye-contact and looking towards the ground can make her feel lucky.

When her best and only close friend, Jade, laughed about Zoe's childlike excitement for finding spare change, Zoe explained, "Have you ever been drunk and sad and feeling sorry for yourself, when suddenly you look to the ground and find a nickel? That is all there is." She slipped Thomas Jefferson into her black leather coin purse. "We live in a world of nickels."

"It's ironic," said Jade. "The only way you'll handle change is picking it up off the ground."

Zoe stands on the final step for a few minutes, leaning against the cold railing. There's no change at her feet; only cigarette butts and ashes. This is where everyone stops for a last smoke, because by the final step, the damage is already done. The wind tugs a few menacing strands of her straight black hair in front of her gray eyes, a metallic gray like her brand new MasterCard. If she could find a quiet place to sit inside, she could make the final touches on the design for her tattoo. Zoe looks at her watch and holds her breath for a minute. She grabs the cold brass door knob and steps inside.

Zoe barely makes eye-contact with the receptionist at the front desk who sits behind protective glass like a clerk in a pawn shop. Almost whispering, Zoe tells her that she's Jade's friend and she should be expecting her.

"Hey, you made it!" Jade shouts from the back. "I shouldn't be much longer. Grab a seat and I'll be out as soon as I can."

Zoe's relief at seeing her friend is fleeting. Alone again, she turns into the waiting area and sits in the chair closest to the door. Three people are already waiting in the cramped space, two women and a man. There is no artwork on the walls, only a clear magazine rack containing a few brochures about Depo Provera®, Norplant®, and pelvic inflammatory disease. Between the two women, a half-empty coffee machine is still cycling through yesterday's grounds. Two table lamps on opposite ends of the room barely add enough light to read in the dark, windowless space.

Keeping her head low, Zoe takes her notebook and a black fountain pen from her shoulder bag. She fans the pages, sketches, fragments of a scattering past like a hand-cranked movie. The pages are gummed with rubber cement, a history she has made for herself in a collage of magazine glossies (palm tree, lipstick, autumn sweater), scrawl of words (aplomb, essentials, journey), and phrases (inane little indulgences, celebrate the joy) with attendant punctuation that cascades into exclamation points or question marks. The notebook captures her better than a photograph. These are past reflections and coming attractions – all the best lines, the best bits, and no one gives away the ending.

Trying to concentrate on her drawings, Zoe sorts through the final variations of her tattoo design. After weeks of reworking, she's chosen an abstract pattern of seemingly random curves. Zoe loves to let her eye follow the edge of the design as the line curls and twists and loops. It soothes and calms her. Jade thinks Zoe purposefully designed her own Rorschach test. And Jade's interpretation, "It's mutant sperm."

Despite her efforts to pretend that she is the only one in the room, Zoe can't help but overhear the others talking, though she doesn't raise her head to look at them.

"I'm a professional clown," one woman says.

"Oh, really," the second female responds.

"Yeah, I've got five clown shows to do today. I hope she gets out of there soon. I need to get her home and be on the road by two."

"My daughter's gonna be five soon. Never got a clown for a party before, maybe this year," the mother says.

Zoe slips her right forefinger in between the spiral rings of her notebook and presses it hard against the wire, leaving a momentary indentation on her fingertip.

"Damn," the man says. "We got here and then they come and tell me they need another \$240."

"Better the extra money now than for the next eighteen years," the clown answers.

The mother says something about how he's lucky his girlfriend finally told him about it. It happens every day, she says—they not telling. And the man says something about maybe his girlfriend didn't really want to do this.

"Too late to change your mind now," the clown says to the man.

Zoe takes the cap from the bottom of her pen and puts it back on the top, then methodically releases it little before snapping it back into place. Click, snap. Click, snap, in almost manic succession.

The clown gets up as her friend comes out from the examining room, leaning onto a woman dressed in white.

"What she needs now is a hot meal and a long sleep," says the nurse to the clown.

The clown takes her friend by the arm and guides her towards the front door.

"I'm dropping her off and I'm rolling out," the man says to the mother.

"For real?" the mother asks.

"Yeah, it's messed up. Hey, I said I'd drive her here and that's it," the man says.

"Well, she's a totally different person," the mother says. "When you're pregnant, you're a totally different person."

"No, it's not that. There's been problems for a while," the man says.

"How old is she?" the mother asks.

"Twenty-one," the man says.

"Oh, shit, she's young! She's got plenty of time. What's she doing wanting a kid now?" the mother asks. Then she mumbles for a while about the wrong reasons.

A patient, the mother's friend, stumbles into the waiting room and sits in the clown's old seat.

"Your girlfriend, she came in there cooler than me," the patient says to the man.

"Even though she was far gone. She must have gotten a sonogram to size the baby."

Zoe quickly turns the pages in her notebook as if she's looking for something in particular, but flips past the sketches to find page after page of blankness.

"Yeah, they came out and told him they needed more money," the mother says to the patient.

"He's lucky, they waited any longer and it would've been too late," the patient says.

"Two more weeks and it'd be in the law's hands," the man says.

"She had a baby, man," the patient says. "Arms, legs, everything. That body was

formed."

"I wanted to show him," the mother says. "I was looking for one of them books, you know, that shows how the baby grows inside."

"They should have some goddamn books in here," the man says.

"You come here expecting a library?" the patient says. "We're lucky there isn't a bomb."

Zoe draws thick, dark lines curving randomly around the blank page until it's almost all black.

"I started crying," the patient says. "I ain't never done that before. I guess I was just dizzy."

"Toni, you know her?" the mother asks the patient. "She passed out. Yeah, that's right, she fell."

"The nurses—they were really great this time," the patient says. "'You're in control now. You're in control now,' they says. 'Get yourself together now,' they says."

"Where is she?" the man says with annoyance. "How long does it take?"

Zoe presses the pen harder into the paper for one final stroke, ripping through the page. She closes her notebook and says, faintly, "Seven minutes."

The man's girlfriend comes out into the waiting room.

The nurse turns to the man and says, "A hot meal and a long sleep."

Finally, Jade emerges from where the patients came out. "Are you set?" she asks, startling Zoe.

She nods. Shoving her notebook into her bag, she quickly follows Jade out the door.

"Thanks for driving me," Zoe says as she closes the car door.

"No problem," Jade answers.

Zoe doesn't have a car. She doesn't even have a driver's license. She fears driving so much that she has never driven a car even though she's twenty-two.

"This is great," Jade says. "I brought my camera. So buckle up. I don't feel like picking pieces of the windshield out of your face."

Zoe locks her seatbelt and smiles to herself, thinking how Jade is really a "hero" friend, always in control with no fears. She admires her unique vernacular: the ability to use discombobulated and defenestration in the same sentence, or describe ordinary details as chronic or random, corrosive or mad-crazy.

"Are you scared it's going to hurt?" asks Jade.

"No. I donated plasma twice a week for almost year. I'm sure this is nothing compared to that."

"No way! You sold your blood?" Jade asks. "Now that's wild. Gives a whole new meaning to the term 'blood money.'"

"Some people really think it's gross that I did that," Zoe says. "Nate really hated it."

"Did he freak out over needles or something?" Jade asks.

"No, he thought it was disgusting that I was doing it for the money."

"Are you kidding me? That's hella stupid," Jade says. "Damn, you've gotta pay the

bills! I might have respected the guy's opinion if he had a real reason, like a fear of blood or needles. Or, if he didn't want to see you going through a lot of pain, but he shouldn't have made you feel like you were blood-slutting."

"I had to lie to Nate about it," Zoe says. "I always wore long sleeves around him so he wouldn't see the bruising or the scars."

"I'm glad I never met this jerk. Why the hell did you go out with him?"

"I don't know," Zoe says, waiting for the traffic light to change from red to green.

It has been almost a year since Zoe has seen or talked with Nate. She often wonders if anything has marked the passage of time. Are cereal bowls stacked twelve high in the sink? Does the dirty laundry spill beyond the confines of the single wicker basket in the corner of his bedroom? When they were together, she'd given him a calendar, so he could keep the appointments he always missed. She circled their anniversary on the 11th of October, turned back three months, and pinned it to the kitchen wall. But summer became fall, and the pages of the calendar never turned. Maybe he looked with unfocused eyes. Maybe he expected the calendar to keep up-to-date by itself. Or maybe, for him, July was so good it lasted through November.

Zoe took the pregnancy test alone in Nate's bathroom with the door closed. When she came out, he gave her money and told her what to do, and all she wanted was to go back, to be separated from him again by the bathroom door. She thinks that was all she would have needed: a door between them while he was talking. *Then maybe I would have had the strength to interrupt him, she thinks, with a knock on the door.* But instead she

stood in silence, as he told her all the reasons why she couldn't have a baby. She waited for a chance to break in, to say, "You don't know. I've rehearsed my response to your raving, you'd never expect." But she never did interrupt him. *If I could have knocked on a door, Zoe thinks, then he would have known someone was there. Then he would have heard me, she thinks. Or, at least, a knock on the door.*

"Shit!" Jade screams as she exits the car.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asks.

"I cut my fucking finger on the car door. I guess it's a sympathy mutilation. "

"Want a Band-Aid?" offers Zoe.

"What? You carry Band-Aids with you?"

"Sure. Don't you carry anything in case of emergencies?" Zoe asks.

"Condoms!" shouts Jade and holds the door open to the tattoo parlor.

As she enters, Zoe notices the signage: "If it didn't hurt, everyone would have one." "We use hospital sterilization equipment." "We do not tattoo anyone under 18, even with a parent." "No children allowed." There are no windows, but the room is flooded with florescent lights that hum and stammer off the linoleum, and Jade jokes she could come here once a week for Seasonal Affective Disorder treatments. Thousands of images, tattoo flash, cover the walls – angels, aliens, lions, butterflies, crosses, dragons, flowers, hearts, skeletons, roses, fruit, snakes, a Jesus fish, Mao Zedong, the Tasmanian Devil, and Virgin Mary—each identified with a numbered red dot.

Zoe observes the customers flipping through the large books of flash mounted to the walls and protected by sheets of clear plastic, imagining how crazy it'd be to think you could find an image that matches your personality or your set of beliefs after only a few minutes of searching. How would you know you'd still like it a year from now if you picked out something on the spot? A young couple carrying large backpacks that identify them as tourists giggle about how they'll always remember this trip. *Tattoo as souvenir*, Zoe thinks.

Unlike the others here, Zoe considers herself well-prepared – her own custom tattoo design has remained on her bedside table for nearly a month so that she could look at it before going to sleep and after waking up. Zoe walks to the front desk and carefully prints her name on the sign-in sheet, then shows the man behind the counter her design—to get it priced. She pays up front. Cash only.

As Zoe and Jade sit in the waiting area, a girl comes in asking about cover-up work. The girl tries to show the tattoo without having to unbutton her jeans, and the tattoo artist says, "Come on, now. Don't be shy. Pull down your drawers." The girl has the word "Spaghetti" tattooed in big black letters across her butt. "A nickname," the girl says. There's nothing she can do, the tattoo artist tells her while giving her the number of a doctor who performs laser surgery. The girl is with some guy, and Zoe thinks he's probably not Spaghetti.

When the couple leaves, Jade starts to laugh.

"A girl came in here a couple months ago," the tattoo artist tells Zoe and Jade. "It was the week before her wedding and she had this beautiful little butterfly tattooed on her

thigh. It couldn't have been bigger than a nickel. Well, she called up her fiancée and told him about it and he said the wedding was off if she didn't get it removed. A week before the wedding, can you believe that?"

"What did she do?" Zoe asks.

"Got it removed," the tattoo artist says.

"Disgraceful," Jade says.

"Yeah," Zoe says. "Scary what people will do for someone they love."

"That's not love, honey. That's sick," Jade says.

Zoe's notebook is on her lap opened to the page with a copy of her tattoo design. She stares at it, entranced and excited. A man comes up and sits down next to her. He tells her about this tattoo he's planning. It's an elaborate tale about an Indian, with meteor showers, skulls, and arrowheads that will cover his entire back. He tells her that tattoos are addictive, as soon as you get your first, you'll want another. "But you can't have them all," the man philosophizes, "You can only tell so many stories."

Finding the ideal place to put the tattoo is almost as difficult as deciding on the design. Zoe's body has never been something she feels comfortable in. Moles freckles, and stretch marks cover her skin. After careful deliberation, she had decided on the area above her knee on her left thigh, a perfect place where the tattoo can easily be seen by her, as well as other people, if she wears a short floral dress, what Nate used to call her "little-girl-fuck-me-skirt." This tattoo is something Zoe has thought long and hard about, and it isn't something she plans on hiding.

Zoe's name is called. Jade stands up with Zoe, but the assistant tells her she'll have to wait out here. Zoe follows the assistant into the private tattooing station. She sits down on the large, cushioned chair that reminds her of a dental office and shows the tattoo artist exactly where she wants the tattoo. The tattoo artist picks up a sheet of paper with the design and transfers it onto Zoe's skin.

"So is this your own design?"

Zoe nods.

"I see. You want this tattoo so you can stare at it for hours when you're drunk and decide what it is."

Zoe squeezes her hands together, bites her lower lip, then manages a quick smile.

"So what is it, really?" the tattoo artist asks.

Zoe hesitates for a few seconds, then says, "Some people think it's two reindeer playing in the snow. Or a moose. People dancing, diving, or swimming. Even chromosomes. When I first started drawing it, I imagined them as fish," Zoe says pointing the fins and the heads of the little fish, "But now, I'm not even sure if that's what it really is. I like the mystery."

The tattoo artist holds the needle in her hand and dips it into the jar of black ink. The buzzing starts. It's too late to turn back. In a second, the first dot of dark pigment is inserted under layers of Zoe's skin. She's in the doctor's office, her feet in stirrups, the doctor enters and in a minute it all starts to end and it's too late to turn back. Nate takes the condom off and he goes inside her and in a second it's too late to turn back.

"Are you okay there?" the tattoo artist asks.

Zoe grimaces and nods her head. She's been thinking about this tattoo for weeks and weeks and in a second it's too late to change her mind, even though she doesn't want to. Nate's on top of her, and she's saying no and thinking no, over and over, but it doesn't change anything.

*Everything changes and you can't go back and it hurts too much to go forward and it hurts too much to leave where you are or to dream of leaving because you know, because you know you can never imagine allowing yourself to go, to leave, to move on, but you want things to change and you want to forget and you want to feel beautiful, like your body is yours, and you want to forget what it is to regret or to carry guilt and you want to feel strong and feel the power of creating and you never again want to know the power of destroying yourself and life and relationships or clinging to pain and you want to know what it's like not to hide or feel shame and anger and you're sick of the concessions and coercion and surrender and you long not to be lost and sad and scared and you crave what it's like to feel lucky and to feel good.*

It's done. Zoe receives a detailed list of instructions for after care.

“Remember,” the tattoo artist tells her, “the treatment your tattoo receives in the first couple weeks is the most important of its life.”

Zoe has a few minutes to look at her new tattoo before it's covered with a sterile bandage. As she walks out to the full length mirror, the artist says, “Take it all in!”

Admiring the tattoo's reflection for the first time, Zoe feels empowered and exhilarated by its permanence. Her decision to finally do this feels so right, she wishes she would have done it sooner.

A man with an unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth and a snake tattooed around his arm stares at her leg. "What is that?" he asks. "A puzzle piece?"

Zoe smiles nervously, shaking her head.

## Saturdays

I happily traded in a day with my dolls  
for a date with my dad.

“Front seat!” I’d say to my sisters  
on Saturdays as we packed ourselves  
into the station wagon.

I told them I’d get carsick if I had to sit in the back.

I just wanted to be next to my father.

The front seat was for an important person,  
like a mother.

Electra’s complex, maybe,

I wanted to play the role.

We went to the dump,  
treasured replacement to dance lessons,  
ice-skating practice, or Brownie meetings—  
their goal to teach me

the fine art  
of being a “good girl”—  
graceful, patient,  
clean and pretty.

My father knew better than that.  
He knew I’d rather watch a bulldozer,  
at least sometimes.

Then we’d go to the bakery.  
I followed him through the back door  
to solve one of the biggest mysteries  
for a seven year old—  
how the filling got into a jelly donut,  
or how the savored white cream  
appeared magically in the center  
of my favorite, chocolate-frosted long john.

Together we watched in awe  
as the slender, metal rod slid  
inside the dough,  
like a syringe

leaving behind the sweet goo.

Holding a pink box in my lap,  
we traveled home with our  
powder sugared clothes and milk moustaches.

The ritual excursion ended,  
like everything ends—  
when the trash got picked up and  
the bakery closed down.  
he started to work weekends  
when I started to grow up.  
when I stopped wanting his answers.

Father says this—

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

**Father**

Introduce me.

Tell me about

The first fuck

Or joint,

Or his bout with T.B.

He almost died.

I almost never lived

But know nothing

Of the time

That jeopardized

My own existence.

All I know is what I've mythologized.

Trips to the bakery or the dump.

Trips to the office when he'd

Give me cups of hot chocolate

From a vending machine.

Introduce me to this man

But only if he wants

To meet me.

## Proof

I just found a laundry basket filled with my roommate's puke and my boyfriend's probably dead. This is not good.

Neil is 136 minutes late. It's still 22 hours before I can call the police and file a missing person's report. It's another seven years before they'll declare Neil legally dead, at least for insurance purposes. My roommate Zoe isn't here to talk me off the ledge. She's gone to another modern rock concert. I've tied all the curtain cords in knots. I've unknotted all the telephone cords. I was supposed to go with Zoe, but Neil didn't approve of the band and wouldn't come with us. So I decided to bail too. Now Neil isn't even here. He's supposed to be. He told me he'd come over tonight after discussing "left-wing economic theory" with one of his classmates. That was 137 minutes ago.

I should have known Zoe would do this again. But living with a bulimic is like living with a cheating lover: you don't see the signs until it's too late. Or you don't want to see the signs anymore. Or you think it won't happen again – after "the promise." I know the routine. She'll say, "I just slipped up," assuring me so convincingly that this really is the last time. And I'll end up feeling like the bad guy for not believing her.

I shouldn't have let Zoe go out alone. She just got dumped by another loser boyfriend. This time the guy waited until right after she ran the half-marathon to tell her he was engaged to someone else. Neil wouldn't do that to me. He loves me.

Zoe told me she started seeing a therapist a few months ago and I thought things were getting better. At least, I hadn't found any evidence. Maybe I just wasn't looking hard enough. In the beginning, I'd find long grocery receipts for food that never made it into the cupboards. Watched as wool sweaters rattled on her shoulders as if on a hanger. At its worst it seemed that every week I'd walk in on another fill-in-the-blank eating contest. I feared going into any room with a sink. I should buy stock in Drano for all the times the shower's been clogged. Even now, after she eats, when I hear the garbage disposal or the toilet flush – a gun shot would startle me less. Instantly I get suspicious. I don't want to falsely accuse her, so instead I just vow to watch her more closely.

I'm living in a world where everything is a potential toilet. I thought it couldn't get any worse than the time I found Ziploc baggies in the closet filled with leftovers from Zoe's stomach. Tonight all I was looking for was a t-shirt. I wasn't expecting to find regurgitated lo mein. This is new – hiding the evidence under a bunch of dirty clothes, in a laundry basket lined with a plastic garbage bag. I guess even she doesn't trust the plumbing anymore. This is all my fault. It was my idea to order Chinese.

\* \* \* \*

I should be spending more time with Zoe. It was my idea for her to follow me to Philadelphia after college. I've got Neil, but she doesn't know anyone else. I try so hard to keep everyone happy, to make things work for the three of us. I beg Neil to come to my place so that Zoe won't be alone. And I make room for Zoe in my plans with Neil as

much as I can.

On Columbus Day, I planned a little, romantic midnight picnic on the grounds of the local art museum—for three. That's the way I wanted it. As long as Zoe was there, I knew at least one person would appreciate my hard work, my need for perfection: expensive Champagne and flawless, red seedless grapes and raspberries. Neil is seldom impressed by my eye for detail.

"Do you know that we're fragments of broken stars?" Zoe announced, breaking the silence that could have lasted another ten minutes. Zoe was lying on her back on the red and white blanket we got years ago in Mexico City during spring break. I sat a few inches away, trying to squeeze onto Neil's lap.

I looked up at the stars. "Really?" I answered, then leaned over and picked out a raspberry from the green plastic basket and dipped it into the Fat Free Cool Whip. I took a bite then tried to feed Neil the rest, but he resisted.

"Do you believe in fate or chance?" Zoe asked.

"Yes." I answered, laughing as I stuck my finger in the Cool Whip and painted Neil's leg.

"Audrey!" shouted Neil and Zoe in unison, simultaneously annoyed.

"What?" I asked.

"Are you listening to me?" Zoe asked, tapping me on the foot. "It's not a yes or no question. Do you believe in fate or do you believe in chance?"

"I don't know. I guess fate." I turned to Neil, who had climbed over me to pick up his black messenger bag. "What about you, Neil? What do you think?"

I never got an answer. After I chased Neil to the car, I forgot that I'd asked.

\* \* \* \*

Neil's three hours late and now I'm really starting to worry about him, too. He's the one who put me in this position – to wonder when he's not here. During the first couple weeks of dating, when I told him about all the bad choices I've made in my life, he'd allude to some big mistake he had made. Then one night on the way to his apartment, which I had never seen up until then, he stopped in the middle of the street and started to cry. I panicked and stared at him. He's gay. Or has AIDS. He's a registered sex offender. Or he killed someone. I never thought he'd say he was still living with his ex-girlfriend. He explained that they'd broken up awhile ago and for the past few months it was purely economics. Neither of them could really afford to live on their own. By the end of the evening I got him to promise to move out and by the end of the week he had his own ground floor efficiency, ten blocks from my apartment and three blocks from his old place, where she still lives. Ex-girlfriends within walking distance are evil.

Two weeks ago, while Neil was out of town I walked over to his place. He didn't ask me to, but I thought I should water the plant I gave him as a housewarming gift. I was shocked to find the fern brown and withered, my card and bow still attached to ceramic pot. When I picked it up to take home and nurse it back to health, I found a key underneath.

I stood in the middle of his small, studio apartment, surveying the mess: CDs sans jewel boxes scattered on the floor instead of in the CD holder in alphabetical order like I had organized them when Neil first moved in, the empty bucket of popcorn from the movie we saw two weeks earlier, books everywhere but stacked on the shelves. I wish he'd just keep things in piles, that's all I ask. I buy him crates and containers, send over boxes and folders. All I need is to see a larger percentage of floor space.

I began by dusting off his stereo with the "Corporate Rock Sucks" and "Corporate Rock Still Sucks" bumper stickers. Picking up the twenty-nine carelessly tossed Hershey's kiss wrappers that left a trail around his futon, I vowed never to give him individually wrapped candy again. Then I gathered together the papers strewn across the floor. I found his financial aid form and copied down his social security number.

I devise sneaky plots to gain those precious pieces of him, the stolen proof of us. The note I made him write when we first met so I'd have his feelings to hold when he wasn't there. I saved his voice – the messages he left on my machine when he couldn't wait to get in touch with me and some of our conversations on the phone. I keep the tape in its clear plastic case without a label to identify the contents.

It's important to have something personal, an object or information. His faded They Might Be Giants concert t-shirt or unofficial school transcript, his GRE scores or a credit card number. That's important: the credit card. On my birthday he went all out, charging up a storm, taking me to a fancy Italian restaurant where the transparent glass bathroom door automatically fogged up when you fastened the lock. He tried so hard to make the evening special, memorable, but I couldn't completely enjoy myself. I was

worried about Zoe. She just broke up with the love of her life and I felt guilty taking pleasure when I knew she was alone and miserable. Just before the appetizer arrived, Neil pulled out a paper bouquet of colorful flowers from his sleeve like a magician and I excused myself to call and check on Zoe.

The next day, when Neil and I were trying to buy train tickets to visit my parents, his credit card was denied. He slammed the automated ticket machine. I pleaded for him to let me pay for the trip. I don't ever want him to be embarrassed like that again. In his apartment I found an old credit card statement and copied down the information. Now I can call and check to make sure he's okay and if his balance teeters towards the limit, I'll offer to pay for everything.

I saved organizing the closet for last. When I first opened the door, I noticed a yellow box labeled "Jennifer" in Neil's handwriting. When I accidentally pushed the vacuum a little too hard into the suitcase underneath the yellow box I didn't mean for it to topple over and spill its contents. I didn't want to see anything I wasn't supposed to, but when I started returning the items into the box I couldn't help but notice it was filled with old love letters. I read every one. It made me sick as salmonella. Her heart-felt words thanking him for the oil filter he put in her car. I didn't even know he knew how to change an oil filter. And for cleaning her bathtub. He doesn't even clean his own bathtub! He has me to do that.

When Neil got back from his trip I tried my best to act normally. I thought maybe I could survive without bringing it up, without asking why he would keep those letters from her when he supposedly loved me. I send him plenty of even more beautiful cards.

A stationery shop was going out of business, everything 60%, so I bought \$35 worth of funny cards, romantic cards, and a disproportionate amount of "I'm Sorry" cards because I know how I can be. But it was no use, Neil could tell I'd been stewing so I confessed. Then waited for his explanation and an apology for holding onto the past now that he had me.

His response: "What were you doing looking in my closet?"

\* \* \* \*

Neil's four hours late. Could he be testing me? Or punishing me? Maybe I seemed a little too controlling this afternoon when I said on the phone, "You better be at my place at eight or I'll get drunk and sit on the edge of the roof."

Well, if he's trying to get back at me for supposedly putting a curfew on him, forget it. I don't need this. What I need to do is listen to Zoe's advice: I need to realize that I have my own life and if he fits in anywhere, that is coincidental, but everything does not revolve around him. Basically, I have to forget about him. To condition myself not to worry about what goes on when he's not with me. I need to prioritize, without putting him first. That's what he's doing. Not putting me first.

Sometimes I think he's taking me for granted and there's no reason he shouldn't. I make things too easy for him. I call him all the time (I bet he doesn't even know my number). I buy him cold medicine and hair gel, things he doesn't need to ask for because I just know what he wants, what he needs.

I love Neil so much, but every time I talk about him to Zoe she ends up hating him. I don't mean to do it—to make him seem like a pretentious jerk—but it happens. Take, for instance, Christmas. Our plans were up in the air. We knew we had two stops to make, his parents and my parents, but the timetable was negotiable. Or so I thought. I get a call from my mom. She tells me my dad just bought an extra place setting of china—for Neil, for Christmas dinner. I tell this to Neil. Isn't that sweet? You're a part of the family now, I say with a grin.

His response: "It's not sweet, it's a shackle."

\* \* \* \*

Four and a half hours have passed and nobody's home. I've got the yellow pages open to "Hospitals." I'm almost ready to call. It's probably okay that Zoe's not back, I shouldn't expect her until past one. But Neil should be here. Something's got to be wrong. I contemplate phoning his parents, though it might be a bit awkward since we've never been introduced. But the police would notify them about the accident before they'd call me.

He must be dead. He'd never do this to me on purpose, not show up and not call to warn me. Neil loves me. He knows that people who haven't called me when they were supposed to have turned up dead. A year ago, Tara was supposed to call so we could finalize our plans to get together over the weekend. The phone never rang and I worried that something was wrong, that she forgot about me. On Monday morning, when the

phone finally rang, someone told me that Tara had been murdered. It could happen again. It could easily happen again.

That's why if Neil's not with me, I make him call. If he goes out alone, I want him to call me before he leaves and then call again when he gets back. He thinks it's absurd how much I worry about catastrophe.

"Hello?" I'll say.

"Not dead," he'll say in a childish voice.

"Good," I'll say, always with relief.

Neil would never do this to me. He's always been thoughtful and romantic, never this inconsiderate. He's the one who came up with "Kiss Buggy." Of course, it's possible that he got sick of me punching him every time I saw a Volkswagen Bug first, but I'd like to think he wants an excuse to kiss me. After all, Neil's the one who said, "Sure I'll marry you," if I wrote the winning essay for the "\$35,000 Wedding Contest" that Zoe told me about.

\* \* \* \*

When he's five hours late, I start to take inventory and I don't have enough of Neil. The closest thing I have to a picture of him is the pumpkin he carved for Halloween. A couple of days ago he got mad at me when I tried to photograph his blue teeth. (I'm sorry; he was not "mad," he got "angry." Animals get mad, people get angry, or so Neil says.) He was chewing on the pen that he constantly carries and it leaked in his mouth. I

thought it was funny, but he wouldn't smile or let me take the picture.

If Neil's not dead, I think we're through. But if he is dead, there'll be nothing of him left but a few voicemail messages and a jack-o-lantern. Even though I gave him a sheet of stamps for Valentine's Day and told him how much I love his notes, he hasn't sent me one in months. It's crazy but now I really want to get pregnant. I want Neil's baby! I'm so worried that he'll die and I'll have nothing from him. I think back a couple months ago when we had "the scare."

"If I asked, would you go and buy a pregnancy test for me?"

"No," Neil said. "Inevitably I would get the same check-out lady I had when I bought the condoms." He laughed then and reached over to take my hand. "I'm just kidding. I could do it. I'd just have to pace around a lot. But I won't have to because nothing's going to happen."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because I'm careful."

"But something can happen," I said, "even if you're careful. Nothing works 100%."

"They have to put those disclaimers on the box to account for the stupid people who don't know how to put the thing on right. It's just propaganda. A scare tactic to keep unmarried people from having sex. You've got nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, well, you were wrong about Tara. You told me she was okay, but she was dead."

"What the hell does that have to do with this?"

"If something can happen, it will happen."

"Audrey, don't mistake my self-confidence for not caring."

"Yeah," I said unconvinced.

"All right, to prove that I care, I'll indulge your paranoia. You're carrying my child right now. What are we going to do?"

Ten seconds passed that seemed like forever. "I don't want to talk about it," I said really fast, not looking him in the eye.

His response: "I offered."

I was so relieved when Neil turned out to be right. I didn't want to be a mom then, but now I've got my priorities set straight. It's hard to believe that before Neil and I got serious, I even thought of selling my eggs. I was strapped for cash and I wasn't planning on using them any time in the near future anyway. The only glitch, I didn't think I could pass the psychological evaluation.

Now I just want Neil's sperm. For security. That's it; if he's alive I'll go through motions and only have sex for procreative reasons. Then maybe I'll have something valuable, a real part of him.

When Neil's six hours late, Zoe strolls through the door, just as I'm getting ready to walk over to his apartment to look for clues. I want to tell her that I'm worried I'm going to find her slumped over in the closet like Karen Carpenter, that I want to be there for her and if she wants to get help, I'll go with her. Instead, I just point to the basket and

wait for her to explain.

Zoe's response: "What were you doing looking through my stuff?"

I go back to Neil's apartment at daybreak, eleven hours after he was supposed to meet me, and the screen door is flung open like I left it last night. I see the rusted outline of a key where the flower pot used to be. Why didn't I make a copy of his key two weeks ago when I had the chance? I've looked under the doormat, took apart the window thermometer (which turns out not to be a key hider after all) and I'm still locked out. I get on my knees and look through the two inches of the glass door that isn't covered from the inside by the Venetian blinds. All I can see are some muddied Doc Martens, a couple of empty two-liter soda bottles next to the garbage can, and a knocked-over box of Lucky Charms. There's a mound on the futon, but I can't tell if it's a bunch of pillows or his body slumped over and dead. I've got this scenario in my head: I'll want to die when the ambulance attendant tells me that Neil could have been saved if only someone could have gotten inside and called 911.

I call Zoe at work. I tell her I don't know what I'll do. I can't live without him.

"Get a grip," Zoe says. "He's just being inconsiderate like any other guy would be."

I tell her that Neil's different. He wouldn't put me through this on purpose.

"The two of you have been storming in and out of the apartment like you're in some Victorian melodrama. You guys should really take a break."

I tell her that I need to know he's okay before I start thinking like that.

"I've got to go," she says. "Let me know when you hear from him."

"If," I think.

Neil's 12 hours late and I have to go to work. My shift at the restaurant starts in half an hour. Maybe it'll keep my mind off picturing his funeral.

Being a waitress is a lot like being in a relationship. Sometimes, no matter how hard you work, you get nothing in return. It's like a game, looking for the tip; that's the part about my job I love. There's no science to figuring out what a customer will leave, so I make little bets with myself. I'd never want Neil as a customer. A server makes one mistake, like putting the check directly in front of him instead of exactly between us and Neil takes off five percent.

Today, I've been spending lots of time on this one customer, a chimney sweep, with soot-covered clothes and dirt under his finger nails. He mumbles, really quietly. His belly barely fits under the table. You'd think such a large man would have a stronger voice. I keep giving him refills on coffee, five times. He's alone and smiles a lot when I walk by. He's got huge, black boots and a whitening beard that's about an inch or so past his chin now. He could be Santa Claus in a few years. I mean he could play one in a mall. I think this man's going to leave me something good, and when he's gone I look on the table for folded bills or pieces of silver but find nothing. I have most of his mess cleared up and still nothing. I can't believe I got stiffed and start cursing him under my breath. Then, as I reach for the creamer to see if it needs to be refilled, that's when I find it. A twenty-dollar bill.

"Let me talk to you," Neil says when I open my door; he's only 22 and a half hours late. While I was at work he left a message on my machine explaining that he'd lost track of time, had a few too many beers, and ended up crashing at his friend's place. I returned his call as soon as I could, but he wasn't there so I left him a message, too.

"Talk is cheap," I say. "Take me out to dinner." I'm leaning against the edge of the door for a minute before I finally let him in.

Neil's wearing his usual drab clothing, black pants and an olive green button-down shirt buttoned all the way up, the one that he refers to as his Russian peasant shirt.

"I'm sorry," he says, and hands me the bag of candy orange slices he'd been hiding behind his back.

"You don't have to apologize," I say. "Just tell me the truth."

"What truth?" he asks.

"Forget it," I say. "Listen, I want you to give me a copy of your key."

"But I don't want yours."

"Well I want yours, in case of an emergency."

"How is having my key going to do you any good if I'm dead?"

"All right, then I want your key because we've been going out for nine months."

Neil shakes his head.

"Well if you can't give me your key then maybe we shouldn't be going out."

"I don't think our relationship should continue based on whether or not I give you a token object."

"How am I supposed to know you love me?"

"If it's love, you don't need to prove it. Besides, who knows what you'll find that will make you flip out. Maybe next time I do something stupid you'll trash my apartment."

Okay, so perhaps during an angry fit I might have threatened to scratch one song on every record in his valuable collection, but it was just talk. I would never really do that.

"What about everything I've done for you," I say, ready to recite the litany of favors and gifts.

"Jesus," he says. "It's like you expect a receipt! Like love is currency. I refuse to commodify this relationship any further. Do you want to eat or not?"

All through dinner I can't stop thinking about the damn key. If he won't give me the key, it must mean he wants to break up with me sometime in the near future and he's just stringing me along. Or maybe he didn't really throw out those old love letters like he said he would. Doesn't he know it'd mean so much if he gave me that key: My door is open to you any time and all the time. I want you here always and I have nothing to hide from you ever.

"Hey, did I tell you my idea for a new comic book?" Neil says as we walk back to his place after dinner.

I shake my head.

"It's called Deconstruction Man. He fights evil by denying that it exists."

"Ha," I say, debating whether or not I should display my ignorance and ask him to define deconstruction.

We pass by a Blockbuster and Neil says, "I want to run a video store where movies are inversely priced according to how good they are. That way I'd be able to give some culture to lower classes who can't afford videos. I'd rent all of Bergman's films and most of Woody Allen's for free, but any film with a budget of more than \$100 million would cost \$4.95."

"Hmmm," I say.

"I could do the same for a record store, too. I'd give out copies of Joy Division CDs and sell 'Best of the Doors' in three easy installments of \$29.95. Money speaks in this culture so maybe it's time we start pricing things according to an aesthetic."

When we arrive at his apartment, Neil unlocks the door and I follow him inside. This place is a mess again. No surprise there. I start moving the scattered papers and books into piles when I notice the answering machine blinking.

"You have a message," I say. He knows, but says he doesn't need to play it now.

"What are you hiding?" I ask.

"Nothing."

"Then why won't you play the message?"

"Because if I play it now you're going to listen and it's my message."

"Play it!" I try to push the button, but he pins down my arms. I start to kick and he lets go.

"Forget it," I say. "Forget everything. I'm leaving."

He doesn't try to stop me.

Neil's taking me for granted. I'm sick of it. He doesn't appreciate me. He's hiding things from me. How can I trust him if he can't even play his answering machine in front of me, if he won't give me his key? Zoe's right. I should take a break from him. Zoe – she's slipping away from me and I'm letting it happen. I keep putting the two of them together and neither of them first. From now on I'm putting her first. She has so much shit to deal with in her life and she never complains. God, I'm so busy thinking and talking about him I don't even let her talk to me anymore. I don't listen.

I'm halfway home when I realize that the message on his machine is mine.

**Mary Elizabeth**

No pictures of her hung on the wall.

My mother was barely ten  
When her mother lost her mind  
And went to heaven to find it.

When I was eleven,  
I opened my mother's jewelry box.  
A gold heart, a locket,  
delicate flowers etched in the center,  
raised design around the edge.  
I opened it carefully  
and found nothing.

I blew on the locket and rubbed it  
With the bottom of my shirt.  
I wanted to wear it to school.  
My mother cried when I asked her.

One day when she left the house  
I searched for answers  
at the desk where she kept important papers.  
I opened the drawer,  
Sorting through yellow-tinged pictures of children  
Smiling in a river near Baton Rouge.

Then I found her,  
Standing next to my grandfather.  
My mother's real mother  
finally had a face.

Mirror in left hand,  
her picture in my right,  
same nose, same chin,  
same smile.

But what made her laugh?

I want to inherit more  
than a name and a face,  
her beautiful locket.

**Having an Anxiety Attack  
on a Sunday Afternoon  
with a Long List of Things to Do  
and a Bad Cold**

Useful as a remote control  
with the batteries dead.

## **Distance**

**July 6**

### **The Window**

Audrey sat at the bottom of her neatly made, twin bed and stared out her bedroom window, waiting for Neil to reach the top of the stairs outside her apartment building. She remembered mornings when she didn't have to go through this, when she'd wake by his side, when they would make love in the hours between sleep and wakefulness.

Fifteen minutes passed and Neil came into view. Audrey jumped from her bed, to the windowsill, then backed away slightly so her silhouette would not be seen if he turned around. She took in every detail: the black hat concealing a badly needed haircut; the black trench coat with a few splattered, bleach stain dots on the left elbow; the baggy, olive green pants; the tightly-laced combat boots. Her eyes followed him down the sidewalk out of the cul-de-sac with the twenty-five steps it took him to walk from their apartment complex into the world.

When he moved past her line of vision, Audrey left her bedroom and navigated in bare feet on the hardwood floor around the piles of carefully labeled boxes, some already sealed and addressed to her parents' home. She walked through the living room and onto the balcony overlooking the parking lot. That was how she knew her neighbors – as they entered and exited their cars. Audrey sat on the sun-bleached director's chair and watched

the blonde woman put her daughter in the car seat, wondering whose crime was worse – Neil's infidelity or how she found out about it.

Audrey remained on the balcony until the activity of people leaving their apartments to go to work ceased. She rose from the chair, hesitating a minute in the doorway before she walked back inside. It was time to finish packing.

For Audrey, moving cross-country meant getting rid of nearly all her possessions. Her goal was to fit everything she needed into two suitcases. It made Audrey feel good to give away barely worn brand-name clothes to friends and furniture in perfect condition to former co-workers. She donated the contents of her kitchen cupboards, the boxes of unopened cereal and pasta, dozens of cans of beans and tomatoes, to the local food bank. She didn't leave more than a few things for herself since she hadn't had much of an appetite.

Audrey knelt in the middle of her apartment and began to sort her unpacked belongings into piles: necessities, gifts for friends, donations to Goodwill, indisputable trash, and archives. Most of the mementos from her relationship with Neil went into the archives pile—things she couldn't throw away, but to which she didn't want constant access. She'd hide those boxes in her parent's basement. Audrey found the strength to discard some of the gifts from Neil, including the dried roses she had carefully preserved from their first Valentine's Day together two years ago. She gave her unread copy of *Jane Eyre* that accompanied the roses to her friend Kerry, but only after she tore out the page with Neil's inscription. Audrey would never destroy anything Neil had written to her.

The e-mails, letters, and cards were put in a special box that Audrey would later seal. She picked up the letter on the top of the opened box and started to read it again.

*Dear Audrey:*

*Hi love! I'm going to miss you so much this weekend. Especially when my parents start grilling me. I really want to tell them how I feel about you. I don't know if I can, but if I did (if I do) I think it would sound something like this.*

*"Audrey and I met in class. Serendipitously, we lived nearby, so we'd meet at the bus stop after class and talk. We'd cover a lot in those brief rides; things just seemed to flow. We started e-mailing each other, too. A lot. I don't think I've ever told her how much those early communications meant to me. It's hard to find someone who you can really talk to so soon after moving to a new place and I appreciated her friendship. I thought she had really sexy legs, too, but it was that friendship, those talks, that I loved.*

*Both of us had found someone who we knew wasn't right, but we stuck with them because sometimes that's easier than facing loneliness. When we started talking and hanging out more, it happened. Those feelings started to swell. She's so beautiful. She really trusted me blindly and opened up to me before she really knew what to make of me. She wanted someone who would just hold her, listen to her, and God help me I wanted to be that person. As independent as I consider myself, as much of an "I like to be alone" pose I put on, I want the same things. She made me happy and I hadn't even kissed her yet. So many times I wanted to. When it finally happened, it had such an air of pleasant inevitability.*

*I've promised her over and over that I'd never hurt her. I hope she knows how*

*much I value a promise. I've never offered so much of myself to another person. She considers me part of her family now, and I want her to be part of mine. I will love her forever. I know this as well as I know myself. I love Audrey."*

*What do you think of that?*

*Love, Neil*

Neil was Audrey's first and only boyfriend; the first man to say, "I love you"; the first man to whom she replied, "I love you, too." Neil always said he wanted to see Audrey happy. That's all he wanted. And Audrey would say, "Just being with you makes me happy," knowing that being happy wasn't even a priority. She just wanted to not worry, to not panic, to not stress. To be...even. Happiness seemed out of her reach.

Audrey returned the letter to the box and slid it under the couch. If she'd still been working or if she hadn't just finished her master's degree, maybe everything would have been easier. Then she might have had something else to occupy her mind besides Neil. With nothing else, she scheduled her days around seeing him, if only for the fifteen seconds she could watch him leaving the apartment complex. Since Audrey had sold her TV, she was even more out of touch with the outside world and had more time to concentrate on the reality beyond the connecting wall.

### **January-April**

#### **The Neighbor**

Neil's best friend, Rachel, lived next door to Audrey. When Audrey moved into Neil's apartment complex six months ago, she didn't know until after she signed the lease

that she would be Rachel's next door neighbor. The thought did not please her, though considering Neil lived directly underneath the landlord, she had imagined it couldn't be any worse than that.

When Audrey first found out about Rachel's existence a year ago, Neil calmed her jealous fears by telling her that Rachel was a lesbian. A statement that Audrey never doubted, especially after seeing Rachel's car plastered with the "Homophobia Is A Social Disease" and rainbow triangle bumper stickers. However, a few months later Neil admitted that he hadn't been completely honest. Rachel, in fact, considered herself bisexual and hadn't had a relationship with a woman in years.

It made no sense to Audrey that after she had moved closer to Neil, she would see him less. She figured that if they lived one minute apart instead of fifteen they'd spend more time together. She could go over to borrow CD's or he could come over to borrow milk. But the whole thing backfired. He went to see her next door neighbor instead.

## **May 1**

### **The Conversation**

Neil left a message on Audrey's machine. "Listen, Rachel invited me over for dinner and I'm going. So I'll talk to you tonight or tomorrow or whatnot. I love you. Bye."

Hours later, long past dinnertime, Audrey heard noises coming from next door. She ran to the peephole. First Rachel came out, then another woman, then Neil. Rachel and the woman stood in front of Audrey's door, smiling as Neil ran down the stairs.

Audrey flung open the door, hitting her left shoulder with its edge, then braced herself with her right hand against the wall. Still gripping the doorknob, she said, "Keep

running, Neil," and slammed it shut.

Laughter echoed in the stairwell.

Audrey ran to the balcony and watched as Neil opened the passenger door of Rachel's car.

"Remember no smoking in the car," Rachel said to her friend.

"Neil," Audrey yelled. "Could you please come up here and talk to me for a minute?"

"I can't," he said.

"Please," she said.

"No, we're leaving now."

"Please."

"I'll be back soon," he said.

For the next five hours, Audrey sat in the dark, in silence, looking out the window, waiting to hear Rachel come home. At the top of every hour she walked down the hill to Neil's apartment, checking to see if his light was on.

When Neil returned home, Audrey ran to his door and knocked hard four times, rattling the glass. Audrey watched as Neil put his fingers in between a couple of the Venetian blinds, pushing down to see who it was, then let go. She heard the latch click. He opened the door then walked to the opposite side of the room, leaving Audrey to shut the front door before sitting down on the floor next to his futon.

"I'm sick of this," Neil said, staring at the wall.

"Of what?" Audrey asked.

"Of this," he said, pounding the air with his fist, "of us."

Audrey started to cry.

"I can't take it anymore," he said, pacing back and forth along the length of his small, studio apartment. "I want out."

## **May 2-31**

### **Random Contact**

After their conversation, Audrey decided to give him a break, some time apart. No contact meant hope. It meant not hearing, "We're through."

She wouldn't call. She wouldn't stop by his place except to leave things at his door. First, she left a penny to remind him of the question she'd always ask to break the silence, "Penny for your thoughts?" Then she left the sports page of the Sunday paper and a half price chocolate bunny she got at an after-Easter sale. Next, she left a paper bag filled with her empty CD jewel cases so that he could replace his cracked or broken ones. She left Tootsie Pops and Lucky Charms and all the things he secretly loved, hoping he'd realize, appreciate, just how well she really knew him.

She sent cards apologizing, promising to change, promising not to expect so much from him, not to mind when he spent time with other people. Standing in front of the mailbox, seeking solace from the dependable structure of the blue, metal safe, she pulled down the little door, placed her letter, then let go. The envelope vanished. On the phone, he could hang up; face-to-face, walk away; in a letter, no escape. She walked home, her thoughts delayed for two days until it reached its destination. Waiting for his reply, she hoped he used the phone.

Audrey would not see Neil unless it was random, but figured she could increase the chances of running into him accidentally by fingering him on the Internet. If Neil were logged onto his e-mail account at school she would race down there so she could bump into him at the computer lab. If he were logged on at home she would stare out the window waiting for the chance to watch him leave.

The first three times she ran into him after the conversation he still kissed her, even though she had to ask. "Kiss?" she said in a childlike voice. But on the fourth time she found herself walking towards him on the bike path, as she stood in front of him, he puckered his lips ever so slightly to initiate the kiss. She didn't have to ask. Afterwards, she finally posed the question, "Have your friends asked if you broke up with me?"

"Yes," he answered.

"What did you say?"

"No."

Audrey remained silent. Minutes passed.

"Yeah," Neil continued, "and then they said, 'Try harder.'"

*Nice*, Audrey thought. *Nice friends*.

## **June 1**

### **The Trip**

The constant barrage of hand-written apologies and forgiveness gifts won Audrey a temporary reprieve. For closure—and that's all it was, Neil warned her, not a second chance, but closure—he granted her request for one last trip together. She spent three days researching their get-a-way by skimming dozens of guidebooks in the local

bookstore. She planned every detail from developing an itinerary of activities that Neil would enjoy to packing a special suitcase of romantic food, candles, and a compilation tape she had made of special songs they had shared together. She rented a car and reserved four nights in a ritzy hotel with a special weekend rate at her expense. Even though her finances were tight since unemployment covered only half of her normal salary, she spared no expense, choosing instead to carry a balance on her credit card for the first time.

Audrey gripped the rental car's steering wheel and rambled about the scenery and the flow of traffic. Neil said nothing, then turned on the radio, ending the silence. His rule that the driver picked the station seemed only to apply to himself since when she asked him to stop at a particular song he continued pressing "seek."

When Neil finally spoke, he told Audrey that he appreciated her efforts to change for him. "But that leaves me feeling a little antsy, like I'm shaping you to fit my whim."

Audrey continued to stare at the speedometer, watching the needle flutter between 65 and 75.

"I hate to think that I'm the only positive thing in your life," he continued. "That's part of our problem, I guess, that I can find contentment in so many things and you can't."

The hotel room came with two double beds even though Audrey had specifically requested one king size. Audrey placed her suitcase on one bed and Neil put his coat and book bag on the other.

"Good," he said, throwing himself on the mattress. "We get to sleep in separate beds."

Audrey spent the whole day wondering if they'd really be sleeping in separate beds or if he were just kidding.

"You're getting too skinny," he told her as she undressed in front of him during their first night together in over a month. "Be careful, I don't want you getting anorexic on me."

He cares about me, she thought. This is a good sign. He worries about me. After sex when Neil fell asleep, Audrey went to the bathroom and took a long, hot shower. She sat in the bathtub, her arms wrapped around her legs, as the water pounded her back and neck, mixing with her tears.

In the darkness, she stood between the two beds for more than five minutes before slowly walking towards the empty one.

"Where are you going?" Neil asked, lifting his head off the pillow.

Audrey, having assumed he was still asleep, was startled and said nothing.

He held out his hand to her. "Come here," he said.

They made love three times a day and she tried hard to enjoy herself, to make the gasps and moans she thought he wanted to hear, remembering how many times during their relationship he criticized her lack of enthusiasm during sex.

"I feel like a child molester," he had said as they lay in bed one night during the

first few months of their relationship.

"What?" Audrey laughed.

"That blank look on your face," he said, "I feel like I'm molesting you."

"I'm sorry!" she said, twisting the edge of the sheet around her finger, ". . . but give me a break. No one taught me how to act. I don't know what to do."

"You're not supposed to act," he said. "There's nothing to learn. Just react."

"Okay. I'll try," Audrey said hesitantly at first, then with more vigor, "I'll try!"

"You shouldn't have to try," he said. "It shouldn't be work."

Audrey and Neil got along so well during the trip that she expected their fate to change when they returned home. But as soon as she turned off the car's engine it was as if the trip never happened. He went to his apartment; she went to hers. An hour later he was back in Rachel's place. Half an hour after that Neil and Rachel went out together.

## **June 15**

### **The Trash**

When Neil refused to return her calls, Audrey left a card outside his door. Later that day she walked over to his apartment to see if it were still there. It wasn't. She walked back to her apartment and as she climbed the stairs she heard voices. It's them, she thought. There was nowhere for her to go, nowhere to hide. Rachel came down the steps first carrying empty boxes. Neil followed her, carrying more boxes.

He's moving out, Audrey thought with horror. Oh my god, he's moving out. Her mind raced in an instant panic. What am I going to do? she thought. I'll never be able to

see him. He's never let me know where he's going. It's over. It's really over.

"What are you doing?" Audrey asked.

"Taking out the trash," Neil said.

"Oh," Audrey said.

Audrey followed Neil and Rachel to watch them throw out the boxes. A few hours later, she went back to make sure the pieces of cardboard were still in the dumpster.

### **June 16-30**

#### **The Peephole and Glass**

The sounds of squeaking doors, jingling keys, footsteps climbing or descending stairs, locks turning, or shifts in her neighbor's hardwood floors sent Audrey dashing to her front door. Looking through the pea-sized piece of glass was the closest she could get to her dream of being invisible. Audrey wished the peephole were lower on the door. That way she could sit comfortably while she spied. Her back began to hurt from hunching over while she smashed her nose and forehead against the door for a good, steady look. She thought she better start using an anti-oil soap when she saw two big shiny smears on the door after she stepped back.

The peephole was useful in determining Neil's and Rachel's comings and goings, but she wanted to know more. She wanted to hear things, to be privy to conversations that she wasn't a part of. Rachel spoke so loudly that often Audrey could hear her talking, as clearly as if she were in the room. But she couldn't hear everything. A friend jokingly suggested putting a glass to the wall. She decided to try it.

Audrey tested every different kind of glass and mug in her cabinet before finding

the perfect one that was easy to hold as well as provided the clearest sound. The glass stood four inches tall with a flared rim and a red plastic handle. A housewarming gift from her grandparents, it was part of a four-piece glass set which also contained matching red plastic stirrers and cork coasters with red plastic trim.

Audrey arranged all four glasses in strategic places along the wall—on top of the stereo, the table, and each of the bookcases—so one would always be within reach. They were placed bottom-up because it was more natural to put them down that way after spying. Also, that way she didn't have to flip the glass around when she picked it up to position it against the wall.

Audrey spent long hours on the weekends and in the evenings with her ear pressed against the bottom of the glass she held tightly against the adjoining wall, deciphering the mumbled words, filling in the silences. One day, she saw Neil walk up to Rachel's apartment carrying a videotape. She listened in on the whole movie, to the commentary they both made during the film. Another evening she attended a party next-door. She kept listening through the wall, even after hearing Neil call her a crazy loon to all of his friends.

## **July 1**

### **The Password**

One month after their trip together, Audrey followed Neil to the computer lab. He hadn't noticed she was standing behind him as he typed in his e-mail password. Out of the corner of her eye, in an instant, she gained access to another part of his life, to all the e-mail he had saved throughout their entire relationship. When Audrey said hi and Neil told

her to go away, she ran to the 24-hour Mac computer lab that he never used to test the password. It worked. In less than five minutes, Audrey was able to download all the mail folders from his account. Since she had no disks on her at the time, she saved all the files to the hard drive. Even though she could print the files, it was imperative to have the mail on her own disks. She ran to Kinko's to pay three times what she normally would for one disk and then stayed in the computer lab until three in the morning, deleting unnecessary lines to make the messages easier to read. She even created separate files for each person with whom he corresponded. Before the night was over she had printed all his mail, leaving with a stack of paper four inches thick.

Lying down on her bed, Audrey took the stack of messages and began reading in reverse chronological order. She held a pink highlighter in her left hand to color the lines that contained pertinent and valuable information. She read about him going out with other people, affairs, infatuations, admiring the eyes of another woman. It was like reading a script, a screenplay, a dirty novel. It wasn't real.

After she finished reading his mail, she unpacked the three volumes of photo albums containing all the neatly saved messages he had sent her. She compared her messages with his and created a timeline of events. How could he still sign messages to me with "I love you" when he was fucking someone else? Audrey wondered. She couldn't feel anger or hurt, she was numb. And, she still wanted him back.

## **July 4**

### **Break-In**

Audrey's snooping was like stealing, stealing his privacy instead of his things, and

there was a rush of adrenaline at being able to get away with it. Audrey didn't know what she wanted or expected to read in the messages or to hear in the conversations, she just didn't want to be in the dark anymore. The lies and uncertainty made it impossible for her to move forward. She was stuck. She wanted to know the truth so she could forgive him. But she couldn't forgive him of his sins without a confession. If he wasn't going to tell her, she was going to find out on her own.

With the sun beating down on her neck, Audrey pushed open Neil's bathroom window, feeling lucky that there was no screen and that he lived on the first floor. With her feet first, she easily squeezed through the opening and jumped into the bathtub. She was not afraid. This is where I belong, she thought, walking into the main room of the studio apartment.

Audrey knew every corner of this place. She'd cleaned this sink, this toilet. Washed those dishes, those clothes. She'd given him the crates that lined the walls, the CD's that filled the cases, the neckties that hung over the closet doorknob. They made love on that futon, in that shower. She cooked him dinners on that stove. She stood in the center of the room for half an hour, taking in every detail, and noticed the pictures of them that she had given him were no longer on his refrigerator door or computer desk.

Audrey walked over to his answering machine and carefully lifted the lid to remove the incoming messages cassette tape. She removed the tape and walked over to his stereo. Dozens of tapes, some in cases, others not, were scattered on the floor in front of it. She looked through them until she found the compilation tape that she had made for him of her favorite female vocalists, labeled "Women Kick Ass." She placed the two

tapes in his stereo and began dubbing.

After the duplication process was complete, she rewound his tape back to the point it had been before and returned it to the machine. She took her copy, slid it in her pocket and turned the stereo off. Audrey opened his front door, making sure it was locked before she closed it behind her. She left with only the tape and without feeling like she had done anything wrong.

## **July 7**

### **The Other Woman**

Audrey slowly walked down the hill from her apartment towards Neil's building carrying her comforter and two plastic grocery bags, one filled with food, the other with cleaning supplies. She wanted to leave them at his door before he went to work so that he could bring them inside right away. Then she wouldn't worry about her things sitting there all afternoon ready for someone to steal.

Just before she turned to make the final five steps to his front door, she heard the door open and saw a woman emerge from his apartment. She was stunned, but quickly moved three steps back and hid behind the building's side door. Since there was a glass window on the top of the door, she could still look at them. She stared as they walked up the hill, waiting to see if they would hold hands.

Seeing this woman emerge from the place that she had just days earlier felt so at home, the place where she belonged, and to imagine what this woman and Neil were doing all night together into the morning . . . it snapped Audrey back into reality.

Feeling empty and hollow, Audrey thought of how Neil told her on their closure

trip that she was a shell of a person ("a very nice shell, but a shell nonetheless"). She was all adjective, no noun. Finally Audrey was stripped of her delusions, there was no other way to explain this—he had a new lover. She had been replaced (knowing though, that Neil would use the word "upgraded").

Audrey saw this—this woman and this man she loved, the worst thing in her mind that she could have seen and she wasn't dead. It didn't kill her and it didn't leave her wanting to die. Now she felt almost calm in her decision to move, to leave him behind.

After returning to her apartment, Audrey began to write a poem in her journal:

*I'm trying to decide if it's a step back  
for me not to hide,  
to deal with the fact that I'll never find  
what I thought you might give,  
so I could live in some kind of resolution  
after all this.  
I know it's a delusion to believe  
that I could expect honesty from a coward,  
openness after things have soured.  
But I kept holding on.  
Maybe I made demands.  
Things got out of hand; I admit and accept  
every action of mine that was incorrect.*

*After all this maybe I shouldn't be upset  
with the way things were left in the end.  
Maybe I can say good-bye, for real,  
without needing,  
without something proving  
that you were honestly a friend.*

It was a letter to Neil, but she wouldn't give it to him. Not now, maybe never.

Late that evening, Audrey walked to the playground down at the end of the block, wondering how the neighbors slept in a night lit by an anemic moon, noticing the TV on in one insomniac's bedroom. Swaying on the park swing, Audrey began to contemplate her world in decay, then slipped down the cool metal slide thinking simpler things, and smiled, with no passersby to wonder at a twenty-five-year old playing hop scotch solo.

## Youth

In a dream I was Cronos...  
Eating children.  
It started, the dream,  
As visions of babies,  
Beautiful children,  
Fully formed, yet fetal in size  
Less than fetal,  
Miniaturized  
I yawned...bored I suppose.  
Yet I felt the hunger.  
Consume. Devour.  
And the babies, those children of mine,  
I felt them  
Slipping from the palm of my hand  
Into my mouth  
Down my throat.  
They tasted like gummy bears.

Someone tells me to pick a –cide.

(matri-, sui-, homi-)

I'm afraid of all that I have wasted.

Rhea wrapped a rock in baby's cloth

To save Zeus from his father.

But now I know,

I would have swallowed him too.

## Natural

"Is that your natural hair color?"

I've been put on the spot by a man of the cloth.

And in a moment's thought I go from . . .

Should I be witty, could I be sly?

Does he think it's pretty or can he tell it's dye?

My pale skin and blue eyes wouldn't reveal  
the auburn hair my stylist gave me isn't real.

But when a priest asks a question like that  
on my first visit back since youth.

there was no doubt I must tell the truth.

So I answered, "No." But, deep down I knew

That when I walked inside and sat in the pew  
the most unnatural thing about me wasn't my hair,  
but simply the fact that I was even there.

What a fraud, what a fake.

To return to that which I'd once claimed to hate.

Without parental demands to listen to God  
I'd grown up and away from my faith.  
The brunette child in confirmation class, didn't last.  
I changed my hair and denied my past.  
And as I became more at odds with the church's stance  
on issues of deep importance to me,  
the chance of returning to mass seemed unlikely.

But finding love, gave me a reason to return.  
To start within, to grow and learn.

To church, then I came, after so long  
Wondering if I'd remember the words to recite  
or the melody of a song.  
Wondering if it would feel right  
or if I could ever really belong.

But a priest, who asked me about my hair  
Would take the time to listen, to care.  
And life is much more full.

So now I can say, without dispute,

I've claimed my roots.

I'm a red-head and a Catholic and it feels so natural.

TRANSITIONAL OBJECT

---

A Play in Two Acts

by

Leah Ann Connor

"The transitional object is a soft toy or a blanket the small child carries with him and uses as a comforter especially before going to sleep. The transitional object starts acquiring importance when the child emerges from the symbiotic relationship, begins to distinguish between me and not me, between himself and his mother. The transitional object represents both. It has mother's smell, but it stays with him. It remains under his control, while mother is absent. Thus, the transitional object allows the child to increase his independence. By extension any personal possession can function as a transitional object. It can be anything material, but it can be also an ideology, a grouping of people who hold the same beliefs."

-Molnos, A. (1998): A Psychotherapist's Harvest  
(concept created by D. W. Winnicott)

"Love is more afraid of change than destruction.  
If we possess our 'why' of life we can put up with almost any 'how'."

-Nietzsche

"... [P]hotography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event."

-Henri Cartier-Bresson

"A photograph can be an instant of life captured for eternity that will never cease looking back at you."

-Brigitte Bardot. In "The Book of Quotes," by Barbara Rowes, 1979.

"All photographs are there to remind us of what we forget."  
John Berger, Keeping a Rendezvous, "How Fast Does It Go?" 1992.

Cast of Characters

Male Piggy Owner/Daddy:

A man in his late 20s/early 30s.

First boyfriend, then husband, then father.

Believes himself to be extremely literate with aggressive introversion that is often mistaken for arrogance, seeks loyal independence in a significant other, fears inescapable technology, at times is unable to express regret due to stubbornness and pride; lives in the moment, a here-and-now kind of guy.

Current occupation: graduate student/part-time book manager

Observation by a kindergarten teacher:

"He's interested in everything and contributes nothing."

Female Piggy Owner/Mommy:

A woman in her late 20s/early 30s.

First girlfriend, then wife, then mother.

Smart, sneaky and creative with a sense of humor that's often overshadowed by an irrational fear of being erased or ignored; tries to be someone who's always fun

to be with, but often falls short due to an overly critical and perfectionist personality; quick to anger; usually willing to put up with MALE PIGGY OWNER's sometimes esoteric tastes; unable to express needs due to fear of weakness; tends to view things in one of two ways: things that benefit her, things that hurt her; lives in the future and the past  
 Current occupation: graphic designer for advertising agency, amateur photographer

Observation by a kindergarten teacher:

"So quiet and such a pleasure to have in class. Goes back and corrects any mistakes she makes."

The Piggy:

Puppet.

Maintains a grayish-pink complexion due to heavy play; mouthpiece for MALE OWNER, lovey for FEMALE OWNER; finds himself in precarious situations due to FEMALE PIGGY OWNER's desire to stage entertaining photographs and saying things that he wouldn't normally say because of MALE OWNER.

Baby:

18-month old baby. Child of MALE and FEMALE PIGGY OWNERS.

Scene

Apartment of MALE and FEMALE PIGGY OWNERS.

Time

The present.

Pre-Prelude

## SETTING:

A large movie screen should be centered on the back wall of the stage where slides of THE PIGGY photos will be projected throughout the play. The stage may contain other exaggerated, larger-than-life-sized props, but at the same time they are simple, child-like versions of key items in characters lives. There should be a surreal and youthful feeling to the stage.

CENTER: solid, drab-colored sofa

LEFT: FEMALE PIGGY OWNER's side of the room-Items may include: computer, photography equipment, easels with enlarged photos, also slightly hidden (yet still visible) in the back is a very large box (black or brown) perhaps the word "Fragile" written on the outside.

RIGHT: MALE PIGGY OWNER's side of the room - bookcases and stacks of books and papers

Before the play begins, while the audience finds their seats, there will be a slide show of piggy puppet photos which show THE PIGGY having a good time. Photos should be humorous and slightly absurd (most should be of THE PIGGY

solo, but perhaps one could be of THE PIGGY and MALE PIGGY OWNER). These photos may or may not include captions at the bottom. (See Figure 1, p. 181.)

Prelude

## SETTING:

Silence. We find FEMALE PIGGY OWNER in her ritualistic, self-soothing act of setting up a photo shoot with THE PIGGY, a picture for a Christmas card, a copy of which could be included in or used as the program.

(See Figure 2, p. 182.) This shoot should last about 2 minutes beginning with her entering the stage with pig puppet in one hand (but not on her hand) and props in the other (i.e., wrapping paper, poinsettia leaves, holly, etc.), setting up the shot, then taking a series of photos, and ending when she finally is happy with the results.

During this "ceremony" of sorts, we see FEMALE PIGGY OWNER's strong attachment to the pig puppet as well as her need to make everything appear perfect—to create or stage images of happiness rather than to experience them first-hand. Although she is very detail-oriented in her quest to get the perfect picture, she lovingly handles THE PIGGY during the whole process, treating it more like a life-long pet or a young child rather than as an inanimate object.

Using a digital camera, she's able to take a shot, look at it through the LCD screen and

then make slight adjustments to the position of the pig puppet or the background props and re-take the photograph (5-7 times). As she takes each shot, it appears on the slide screen on the back of the stage. Although she acts professionally during the photo shoot, taking the whole thing very seriously, there is an amateurish aspect to the whole act. Rather than having a professional studio with the proper lights and tripod, etc. she's on her hands and knees trying to set up the shot, using a desk lamp to get the right light on the subject.

When she's happy with her collection of shots, she picks up THE PIGGY, gives it a tight squeeze with both hands, touches her nose to his snout, and mouths a kiss to the puppet.

Lights go down.

When lights come back up on the slide show screen there's a large "MISSING" photo reminiscent of those you see for missing children on milk cartons or in mass mailings with a picture of THE PIGGY. Date last seen, other details normally shown on those notices could also be on the projected poster. As the scene progresses, shadows of the pig puppet (something

like hand puppet shadows)  
dance around on either side  
of the MISSING poster. (See  
Figure 3, p. 183.)

THE PIGGY is center stage.

ACT IScene 1

## THE PIGGY

This play is called "Transitional Object," but I petitioned for the more clever epithet: "If This Be Not A Good Play, The Piggy Is In It." I took that from a Thomas Dekker play—not that you'd know that. But if I hadn't told you, you'd think I was a sham. I'm not. Leah Connor will take credit for writing this, but she's a hack. I'm the brains, she's the mouthpiece. I might as well have my hand up her ass. Don't ask for the name of the town we're in because this play takes place in an apartment. And for the two people inside, no world seems to exist outside of it. A little self-absorbed, but it keeps the cast small and production costs low. Of course there are neighbors, but the people who live here only notice them when they cram their pizza boxes in the garbage chute. All I know is that they snore, they fight, and the bed has a headboard. When the lease is up, I'm out of here.

(A sigh)

I'd better show you around this apartment 'cause the way you all are staring at me, it looks like you're expecting a tour.

(THE PIGGY does not move at all during this tour of the apartment, however when he discusses a particular item in the room, the main lights dim and a spotlight focuses on that particular item.)

Up here, on the back of the front door, is a sign . . .

(Spotlight on sign.)

"FREE WOMEN. Get one today." I think they handed that out with her women's studies degree.

(Spotlight on degree.)

As you can see, the couple's family and co-workers think it's funny to buy them pig-related crap. Yah,

that's...clever. The teapot has a snout, there's the Swine of the Month calendar, and everyone's pink slippers have little curly-cue tails. Maybe you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but they do make a refrigerator alarm that goes "oink."

More disturbing, however, is the recent invasion of poseur pigs who look a lot like I did a few years ago—true pink, fat, and bunchy.

(Spotlight on various pig puppets around the apartment.)

Because of my large role in this production and their similarity to me in terms of appearance, one might be tempted to describe this plethora of pigs as a supporting cast, but that's all wrong. Since their role in the couple's life is so minimal—they do not speak nor have discernible personalities—I insist on referring to them solely as piggy extras; despite the fact that, for some bizarre reason, she has insisted on naming all of them in relation to me.

Over there...

(Spotlight on bookcases.)

is his library, his most prized possession. He's a bibliophile, an anglophile bibliophile to boot. The shelves are labeled like the bookstore where he works except it goes chronological instead of alphabetical—Elizabethan, Jacobean, Carolean, Restoration, Romantic. Sometimes she just sits and stares at the shelves, but I think she's more intimidated than impressed. We both wish she'd read more. I bet the girl hasn't even glanced at Shakespeare, but she won't admit it. When he dies, she's been told that the collection must be donated in its entirety to one institution. Ten to one it's the Goodwill.

Way back there...

(Spotlight on box slightly hidden by a bookcase.)

behind the bookcase is a box of all sorts of papers and

stuff he's collected over the years. Pay stubs and test scores. His GREs were actually higher than his take home pay last month. There are baseball cards and student loans, Christmas notes from ex-girlfriends and a stack of greeting cards from her.

This cramped apartment has three, large laundry baskets,

(Spotlight on laundry baskets in 3 separate locations.)

but she's the only one who ever uses them. Don't look at me, I'm perfectly content in my altogether. Piles of his dirty socks, yellowed drawers, and grimy old t-shirts with band names like Joy Division. *It's 2004 and he still listens to Joy Division?! Didn't the lead singer off himself in 1980?* Her clothes are in the back. She wears black.

(Spotlight on a closet, the door springs open, showcasing a row of black clothing.)

Exclusively. She's not a Goth; she doesn't have the time to coordinate outfits evidently. Anyway, she hated his stinky old t-shirts for years, and one day, they fight, he storms out, and she tosses them all. She had a *Stella Gets Her Groove* back moment, but then he comes back and the next day she replaced them all. Sucker.

Over here...

(Spotlight on box.)

underneath a stack of photography magazines is her box of love letters and savings account statements. The only love letters from him are dated more than 5 years ago when they first met. Their first Valentine's Day together she gave him postage and a plea to write her even though they saw each other nearly every day. He used the first 5 stamps to fulfill her request and the rest to mail his overdue bills.

Along here is a makeshift gallery of photographs she's taken of me. She doesn't buy frames; she just tapes the photos to the wall, one on top of the other. I must admit I am quite photogenic.

And this is her computer.

(Spotlight on computer desk.)

These days she spends more time staring at that screen than at me or him.

Here's the bathroom closet.

(Spotlight on closet door.)

Up front you've got abnormal quantities of normal toiletries like tissues, toothpaste, and soap, but on the bottom shelf, hidden behind hair color and tampons—she's got the stash of baby paraphernalia—everything but the crib: a baby safety kit, pregnancy journal, bath toys. She's got baby fever, but it's like Ebola: it's not airborne yet. It can only be spread through the transmission of bodily fluids.

(Spotlight on kitchen.)

Over there is the kitchen. It's all sporks and paper plates; it's a freaking picnic everyday. A disposable lifestyle. That was all her idea. She hates washing dishes, so she doesn't dirty anything she can't throw away. On the countertop there's a bit of his influence: a bread machine and Foreman grill. He likes to cook. As long as it's beef, I don't complain.

(Spotlight on THE PIGGY.)

Nice apartment, y'know what I mean?

Oh, who am I kidding? It's a sty. They're using compact discs for coasters. I have no say on the décor, but it's my home, for now. Nothing very remarkable has happened in here, s'far as I know.

So, another day's begun. But this day is different from most in this apartment: Today I've gone missing and the couple is determined to find me.

[FEMALE PIGGY OWNER and MALE PIGGY OWNER

silently enter the stage, FEMALE PIGGY OWNER from the left hand side—MALE PIGGY OWNER from the right hand side and meet in the middle.]

That's them.

[Throughout Act I MALE PIGGY OWNER and FEMALE PIGGY OWNER should be searching everywhere on stage for THE PIGGY, except of course in the front center stage where he is actually sitting, waiting for his future commentary and monologues.]

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Did you look in the bathroom?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

He's not in the bathroom.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

(With a slight tone, but playful.)

It wouldn't hurt to take a look.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(He goes offstage for less than a minute and returns)

He's not there. Are you sure you didn't leave him at work?

(Slide show of office photos. Figures 4-5, pp. 184-185.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I'd never forget to bring him home. I guess he was serious when he said he'd go on strike if we didn't pay him photo royalties.

(Throws arms up and spins herself around.)

This apartment is not that big. How can we lose a pig?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'd hate to see us with a kid. If we can't keep track of something that doesn't even move, how the hell would we

ever manage a child?

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER starts walking around the couch in circles eyes focused on the floor.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

(Interrupting)

Did you look in the bedroom?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Yes, I looked, no he wasn't there.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

He must be in there somewhere. I know we brought him to bed last night. Are you sure you searched through everything on the futon? Under the comforters, between the sheets?

(Walks to the bedroom to look for herself.)

Did you shake the blankets?

(In the bedroom and speaking louder so to be heard by MALE PIGGY OWNER in the living room.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Please leave it alone.

(She continues to pull off each layer and shake it out looking on the ground for THE PIGGY that never falls out.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Dammit, he's not here.

(She returns to the living room.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Yeah, I just told you that. Have you looked under the couch?

(Have her come out with some other piggy trinket, piggy pillows, piggy something, make everything that is NOT the pig an accessory,

the other pigs should be pot holders and not sentimental or related.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(Almost mimicking her tirade about the bed.)  
How about between the cushions? Did you check between the cushions?

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER flings the cushions, and then stares him down after sweeping off the crumbs.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

My name on those crumbs?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Fritos. I don't eat Fritos.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'd eat at a table if we had one.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

And that's my fault?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'm just saying, I wouldn't eat on the couch if we had a table.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Then buy a table! It's just one more thing to move when the time comes. I think PIGGY would agree.

(Voice changes, as if talking to a baby or a small child)

PIGGY? Where are you hiding PIGGY?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Wait, is that him over there next to your computer?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

No, that's Piggy's Cousin.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I see something pink over there by my bookcase.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

That's Piggy's Uncle.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

For Christ's sake, how many pigs do we have now?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Ummm, I don't know . . . uh, 13.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

13? How the hell did we end up with 13? When, where and how did we accumulate 13 pigs?

(He picks up two pigs, one in each hand, grasping them, he shakes his fists.)

What are you doing? Breeding them?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

No!

(Almost whispering to herself)

Bulk discount.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

All of these other pigs are expendable. They can't replace him and they weren't there when the really important stuff happened. Like when you got hit by the car a couple months ago. Who was in the ER with you?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Oh God, it would have been horrifying to be in the ER without THE PIGGY!

(Slide show of THE PIGGY'S ER photos. Figures 6-7, pp, 186-187.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(Prompting her.)

And without me.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

In the waiting room . . .

(Under her breath, but still audible.)

probably reading a book.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What else did you expect me to do for 2 and ½ hours?

## FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I'm sure that's why it took you so long to get there. Oh no, you couldn't leave the apartment without grabbing a few of your precious books. I call you in tears, "I just got hit by a car and I need to go to the hospital" and the first thing you say is, "Give me a minute."

## MALE PIGGY OWNER

I was tired.

## FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

But I had just left the apartment 10 minutes earlier. You were awake enough to say goodbye and give me a kiss.

## MALE PIGGY OWNER

Please, it was my only day off that month and you took it away from me by getting hit by a car. And it's not like I haven't heard you exaggerate your ailments before. "What are these bumps on my back? I've got skin cancer!" "I'm thirsty. I have diabetes." "My head hurts! It's an brain aneurysm." "I just lost my balance, stumbling over an expendable pig, I've got Multiple Sclerosis!"

## FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

(Not listening)

I'm just thankful THE PIGGY was there for me in the examining room.

## MALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't remember THE PIGGY helping me take care of you during your month-long recovery.

## FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Aw, you're my sweetie!

(She gives him a kiss, then walks to the other side of the room to pick up another pig.)

"Expendable pigs." I know we haven't had all these others as long as THE PIGGY, but I've taken some funny pictures of them. You have to admit that.

(Slide show of photos with multiple pigs.)

Figures 8-13, pp. 188-193.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

All right, but ...

(He starts picking up pigs and tossing them towards FEMALE PIGGY OWNER, first slowly tossing one or two and speeding up.)

I think maybe you should hold off on adding to the collection. This proliferation of pigs needs to stop. Mind you, I care deeply for THE PIGGY and I can't imagine our lives without him, but these 10 or 12 distant relatives, employees and whatnot who've taken root around the apartment, well this place is too small for all these pigs and us to live comfortably. I can't walk to the bathroom anymore without tripping over one. When you surround the futon at night with pigs and I've got a row of beady, black eyes staring me down, I feel nervous touching you.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

You're using THE PIGGY as an excuse to avoid having sex with me.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'd never dare!

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

So, you do have the desire. Why, then, do you always turn me down when I give you all these opportunities? It's like you'd rather read a book than have sex with me.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You're creating a false dichotomy.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Huh?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Let me tell you flat out, as not to cause any future confusion: whenever you ask for sex in that annoying way you tend to ask for it, you're not going to get any. Your little game, for lack of a better word, of coyly or not so coyly saying, "Sex? Sex?" It's just not sexy. And when you paw me and grab at me when we're in bed after I tell you

I'm too tired or want to finish a chapter, you end up making it a chore.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Maybe I don't really want it when I ask for it.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

If that is truly the case, I can only think of 3 reasons why you'd do this: #1, to be funny, #2, to annoy me or #3, because you're stupid. If you're doing it to be funny, it's not working. If you're doing it to annoy me, then that's kind of scary. It's never a healthy sign in any relationship when one partner is purposefully trying to annoy the other. And I just kind of threw in #3 to round the list out a bit. I don't really think you're stupid, honey.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

That's comforting.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Of course, if you get any more pigs, I reserve the right to change my mind.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Are you telling me I can't get any more pigs?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I liked it better when it was just the three of us.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

So now what? You're going to set up some kind of Pig embargo?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Yes, if necessary.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

You can't stop me.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'm merely suggesting that maybe you've gone a little overboard and perhaps this is the time for some self-restraint. So, yes, if pressed, I suppose I would advise you against purchasing, funding, or accumulating any more

pig paraphernalia as it might make you appear psycho.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Right. I'm psycho.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)



equal than others." There can be no disputing—I am more equal.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I can't believe we're missing THE PIGGY on our anniversary.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Our what?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Our non-consecutive five-year anniversary.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What the hell are you talking about?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Our five non-consecutive-years anniversary.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(Silence)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

It's been five years and 7 months since we first kissed, minus the seven months when I was in LA, you were fucking that tramp Eve and THE PIGGY was in the box. That makes 5 years. Happy anniversary!

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(Silence)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Remember the first time we celebrated our anniversary? Three months. That meant a lot to me. It was 3 times longer than any other relationship I'd ever had.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(Sarcastically)

That's surprising.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

It's kind of silly to think how we used to celebrate months of togetherness, and now it only seems significant if it's been years.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Actually, I'm not interested in any temporal milestones, it ends up placing too much importance on the past.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I guess that means you didn't get me anything.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

See, I knew you weren't stupid.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Do you remember what I gave you on our 3-month anniversary?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Should I?

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER glares at MALE PIGGY OWNER.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

THE PIGGY?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

No! I bought THE PIGGY for my niece a few weeks later, but somehow he never made it there, did he? When you picked him up and put him on your hand I knew he had to stay with us. *(suddenly melancholy)* I can't believe he's gone.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

We're going to find him, don't worry.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Right. I'm sure you're right.

*(Suddenly happy)*

But before we start looking again, I want you to open your gifts!

*(She reaches underneath a table next to the couch and pulls out two nicely wrapped gifts, then hands them to MALE PIGGY OWNER and sits next to him. He unwraps the gifts, a photo album of THE PIGGY photos and an empty frame.)*

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

(Slightly manic)

I've left some empty pages in the photo album so there's plenty of room for more Piggy adventures. And the frame is for a new picture of us. I can't believe it, but the only one I have of us is almost five years old. I've got a remote control on my new camera. We could take one right now.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Thanks, but I don't think so.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Why not?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't like photographs because they give people the illusion that they exist. Too many people just look at their physical appearance and think, "Hey, I exist." And these people are the ones who get those funny looks on their faces in "Intro to Philosophy" class when the teacher begins a discussion on whether or not we exist. Photographs are proof for stupid people who can't realize that essence defines us, not existence - those people who want the sum without the cognito. These people tend to come from state universities, by the way.

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER makes a gesture as if turning a light switch to the "Off" position.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Hey, I went to a state university.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(With a smile)

Precisely. Anyway, as I was saying, I don't like to be photographed because I don't want to fall into that trap. Without pictures, I can get over my physical trappings and then contemplate and improve upon my real existence.

(A beat)

Besides, my hair never looks right.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Well THE PIGGY doesn't mind getting photographed.

(Baby-talk voice)

Piggy, where are you? I want to take your picture!

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'm sure he'll run out of his hiding place now.

(MALE PIGGY OWNER picks up the camera and starts fiddling with it.)

You know maybe I should start learning how to use this thing. How do you turn it on?

(MALE PIGGY OWNER tries pressing the various knobs and buttons.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

(Looking for THE PIGGY, talking to herself more than to MALE PIGGY OWNER.)

Five years. My parents were married and had three kids five years after they met.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You know my art teacher in high school used to say I had an eye for finding the moment and capturing it.

(He puts the camera up to his eye as if trying to take a photo, he fumbles with the zoom.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Times are different now, I suppose.

(MALE PIGGY OWNER starts stacking the existing pigs into a Piggy Pyramid in preparation for a shot.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(Laughing)

This is going to be great!

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I shouldn't complain.

(Focusing on MALE PIGGY OWNER; semi-ironic)

I'm really lucky to have found someone who would care about THE PIGGY as much as I do.

(MALE PIGGY OWNER, with camera in place, focuses on the shot, takes it, then looks at on the LCD screen as photo shows up on screen.)

(Simultaneously)

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
Got it!

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER  
I love you!

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER  
(Repeats)  
I love you!

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
(Still interested in his photo rather than her.)  
That's nice.

(Almost a minute of SILENCE. Tears begin to well up in FEMALE PIGGY OWNER's eyes.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER  
I feel like I'm living a lie.

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
Of course you do.

(Almost a minute of SILENCE. FEMALE PIGGY OWNER in full-blown tears.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
(Less than sympathetic)  
What's wrong?

(MALE PIGGY OWNER sits down on the opposite end of the couch, the left-hand side.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER  
(In tears)  
Nothing.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(With a tad more sympathy)  
Why are you crying?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER  
(Sniffles)  
I'm not crying.

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
Fine, I tried.

(A bit of silence. Then MALE PIGGY OWNER leans near FEMALE PIGGY OWNER.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
Give me a kiss.

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER isn't really enthused at the idea, still visibly upset, now more angry than sad.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
Oh, is this going to be a mad kiss?

(Her lips remain un-puckered, they kiss.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
Give me a real kiss!

(He tries again, she makes a slight effort to appease him.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER  
What's wrong?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER  
God, I don't understand what we are to each other anymore. Sure, we're living together, but sometimes I think we're more roommates than romance. I don't know who was the last person you said "I love you" to, but I know it wasn't me.

(MALE PIGGY OWNER drags a hand over his face in exasperation.)

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

It was Eve, wasn't it?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What does she have to do with any of this?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

She was the last person you said "I love you" to, wasn't she? You loved her.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Just let it go. She is not the problem here.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I know I'm not as smart as her, but -

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Listen, I don't know why you find it necessary to constantly compare yourself to Eve-

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Don't use her name!

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

You just did!

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't care. I don't want to hear you say her name!

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't want to have this conversation again.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I bet you still have a picture of her. Or she still has one of you.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Stop. Just stop.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

You used to say it to me all the time before. On the phone, in bed, in letters. It seemed so natural for both of us to say it.

(Slowly and with precision)

"I love you."

MALE PIGGY OWNER

It's not all about words. Wouldn't you rather I show you I love you rather than to say it and not mean it?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

But, you never want to hold my hand while we're walking down the street, or-

MALE PIGGY OWNER

God, if you're not complaining, you're not happy. What about all the times I make dinner for you or meet you for lunch or take care of you when you're sick or-

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

We're nothing like that couple you used to work with. When we were out with them last week, they just seemed so in love, he opened the door for her, called her "love", they touched each other so longingly and-

MALE PIGGY OWNER

They're so happy because they're both sleeping with other people.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

What?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Each of them is fucking someone else on the side so they have somewhere else to go when they get sick of each other. How's that for a healthy relationship? Looks may be deceiving, so maybe you should be happy with our own little world.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

But I want to get married. I want to have babies.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Let's get a cat.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

(Silence)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You want a baby, I say let's get a cat.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

But I don't like cats.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Well neither do I.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

But at least we both don't get what we want. You want a baby. I don't want a baby or a cat. If we get a cat, it's not quite what you want and it's not quite what I want: the perfect compromise.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

You're being ridiculous.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

No, I'm trying to have some fun.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Well I don't appreciate you making a joke out of my desire to be a mother.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You're wrong. This situation is precisely something we should be able to laugh about.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Go to hell.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What is your problem?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I've got a lot going on right now and I'm not in the mood for your little games.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Stop worrying. You'll finish your project for tomorrow.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

That's one thing. Why do I do this to myself? I kept putting it off and putting it off and then the day I need

to finish it, THE PIGGY gets lost. I give up.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You know what I always say about procrastination.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

No.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

It's a sign of self-confidence. You wouldn't give yourself so little time to complete a task if you didn't believe that you could actually get it done well. That's self-confidence.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

No, it isn't. Procrastination is my defense-mechanism. If I wait 'til the last minute to do something and I fail, then I can just blame it on the fact that I waited 'til the last minute instead of the fact that I'm just not good enough.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Give me a break. You've never failed at anything in your life.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Except for my choice in a boyfriend. Thanks for the unconditional commitment, ass.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Hey, at least you've been going to therapy to work things out. That's a start.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't know about that anymore. I hate handing her the check when it's over. It makes me feel like I've just been to a prostitute.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Don't back out now, you promised! Besides the therapist said you've got to work on some issues individually before we can start meeting together again.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Yeah, well I've changed my mind. I'm a woman, I'm allowed. Blame it on the hormones.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

That's always your excuse.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Well this time it's valid because my period's 11 days late. But don't worry, I don't feel pregnant. And according to the 3 tests I've taken, I'm not. So go ahead and breathe a huge sigh of relief. At least then one of us will be happy.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 4

## THE PIGGY

Happy. I was happy before I got put in The Box. Solitary. The hole. The lock-up. It was so dark and cold. I didn't get any food or attention. It was a horrible, horrible place. I didn't deserve it. What could I have done to deserve such incarceration? I was framed.

All right, so I'm being a little melodramatic. No, I didn't hate the box, actually I rather enjoyed the solitude. I like to think of myself as something of a stoic. I did my time in the box with the good grace, humor and fatalism of, say, Steve McQueen in "The Great Escape." Unlike this dysfunctional couple, I'd rather not be consumed by my fears.

What's up with the baby talk? If they have babies, I'm outta here. I refuse to become a toy. A toy! No, I do not want to be a warm, fuzzy, plush toy for a baby to drool or god-knows-what else on.

My life as I know it will be over. She won't take pictures of me anymore. She'll take pictures of the baby. Gone will be any hope of engaging, intellectual conversations with them, replaced with slobber, baby slobber, and crying. Oh, the endless crying! No! It can't happen! My body can't handle the pulls and tugs of a toddler's hands. I won't go on exciting trips to Europe, no, instead I'll be confined to a crib or ugh - the crowded Toy Chest! No babies! No babies! I don't want to be a toy!

I won't let it happen.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 5

"The future influences the present just as much as the past."

Apartment is disheveled, as if nothing was left unturned in hopes of finding THE PIGGY. As the lights go back up on the couple they are sitting silently on opposite ends of the couch. They are no longer actively looking for THE PIGGY. Both are tired of arguing, but they are still arguing. FEMALE PIGGY OWNER takes a bad situation and makes it worse.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

We're never going to find him. We've looked everywhere. What are we going to do without THE PIGGY?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't know.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

There's no protocol for handling a loss like this. No ceremony, no service. Who the hell is going to take us seriously?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

It would be hard to explain.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

We'll never be able to take another trip without him. How could we?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

It would be hard for me to board a plane without him in my backpack.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I'll never forget when you pulled him out in front of the psychiatrist.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Well, he had a lot of grievances.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I always dreamed of THE PIGGY at our wedding, a little ring bearer.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What wedding?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

God! What are we doing?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Looking for THE PIGGY.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I mean, really, what are we doing? Us - what is going on with us?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Can't we talk about something other than us for a change?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

We aren't talking about us, I'm talking about us, and you're not saying anything at all. Don't you care? I can't believe that I just told you 15 minutes ago I was 11 days late and you haven't even acknowledged it.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

But you said you weren't pregnant, you took three tests and they were negative. That's good news. I mean this is not the time for an accident.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

You mean *another* accident. Besides, it wouldn't be an accident if one person wanted it.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

No, if both people want it, it's planned. If both people don't want it, it's an accident. If one person wants it and the other doesn't, then it's a set-up.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I've already delayed motherhood for you once.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Why do you have to bring that up? We've got enough going on

right now without you dredging up the past again.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

That's right. I'm not supposed to talk about it.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Please.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

"Nothing will change," you promised me. "You do this and nothing will change between us. If you don't . . ."

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'd be in Mexico. Look, we're not going to have this discussion now. I want to find THE PIGGY.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

It's ironic - that's what I wanted to hear, that nothing would change, that I could do this terrible thing and that everything would remain the same between us, as if it never happened. Now two years have gone by and you've made every effort to make sure nothing in your life gets any better.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Number 1: that's not irony (*tosses her a dictionary*), look it up for future reference, so next time you get it right.  
Number 2: What the hell are you talking about?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Maybe I should just cut my losses. If we find him, I'll take THE PIGGY and we'll be out of your life forever.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What makes you think you will get him?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

He's mine. I bought him. Besides, you couldn't afford a happy meal on your wages.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I knew you'd somehow find a way to make this all about my pecuniary deficiencies.

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER looks at him with bewilderment.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

It always ends up being about money.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I'm just stating a fact. He was mine first.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Whatever.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't understand what your problem is. Yes, I make more money than you, but that doesn't matter to me. It could be our money if you'd just grow up and realize that marriage is the next step.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

The next step for what? So, you finally get that baby you're always talking about?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Yes, I want a baby. What's wrong with that?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

What's wrong is that when you talk about having a baby, it's a solo project - it's your baby - not ours. You talk about having a baby rather than starting our family. I'm completely extraneous. I don't know if you love me for me or because I'm the only guy who stuck around long enough to give you a chance to have a child.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Well, I must love you *for you* because you're obviously never going to let me have one, and I'm still here, aren't I? When I had a chance, when it was between you and a baby, I chose you. So there's the flaw in your thinking.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Do you hear what you're saying? Deconstruct that first sentence. Examine the subtext in what you just said.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

There is no subtext.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

There's a subtext behind everything. Your choice of words—it's always so accusatory. Stop blaming me. I'm not the only reason you don't have a baby right now.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

What do you mean?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I've read your journals. You've been miserable your whole life. And now you think a baby is the magic pill that's going to solve all of that. It won't. And you're not helping your case by talking at me, lecturing me. By making demands, you're making a baby another unpleasant task.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I've already tried to be romantic about it, but every time I do you say, "What wedding?" or "What baby?"

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You really need to develop an appreciation for sarcasm, honey.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I've told you over and over not to joke about this stuff anymore, but you still do it. It's not funny.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Using your logic—I've told you to stop talking about it all the time, but you still do it.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Why don't you want to see me happy?

MALE PIGGY OWNER

You just don't get it. Lately, I feel, I dunno, past my prime? All I ever wanted to be is smart, and now I have that and now what? I'm in a dead-end, low-paying job that I love one minute and hate the next and I'm wasting my life.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Suck it up! I'm wasting my fertile years.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Oh you have at least 10 more years to have children.

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Then you also have those 10 more years to prove yourself.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

Prove myself how?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

I don't know. That's for you to figure out. If you're worried that you're wasting your intelligence.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

So you get a baby, you're happy. Where does that leave me?

FEMALE PIGGY OWNER

Being a dad.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

I'm hungry. What do you want for dinner?

(He walks offstage towards the kitchen and the sound of pots and pans clanking.)

Silence for approximately 30 sec - 1 minute. The lights remain up. FEMALE PIGGY OWNER remains on the couch, far right, MALE PIGGY OWNER comes from the kitchen, moving further left and towards the front of the stage where the piggy is. As MALE PIGGY OWNER gets closer to THE PIGGY, the lights around him dim and the spotlight on him brightens covering him and THE PIGGY.

MALE PIGGY OWNER picks up THE PIGGY with an air of pleasant inevitability. He puts THE PIGGY on his hand and starts to smile. He begins walking towards FEMALE PIGGY OWNER.

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(In a Elmo-like voice)

Hello? Hello?

(He waves THE PIGGY's front right arm with his finger.)

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER sits on the couch unimpressed at MALE PIGGY OWNER's efforts.)

MALE PIGGY OWNER

(In a Elmo-like voice, MALE PIGGY OWNER tries to cheer FEMALE PIGGY OWNER up with THE PIGGY.)  
"All of life is a dispute over taste and tasting." Let's get pizza.

(FEMALE PIGGY OWNER smiles. MALE PIGGY OWNER laughs. They all laugh. Lights dim.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT I)

Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing; a confusion of the real with the ideal never goes unpunished.

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

"The value of marriage is not that adults produce children but that children produce adults."

-Peter De Vries

Parenthood remains the greatest single preserve of the amateur.

-Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, 1970.

A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.

-Diane Arbus, In Diane Arbus: A Biography, Preface by Patricia Bosworth, 1985.

Most things in life are moments of pleasure and a lifetime of embarrassment; photography is a moment of embarrassment and a lifetime of pleasure.

-Tony Benn, In "Independent," (London), 21 Oct 1989.

Act IIScene

Apartment of MALE and FEMALE PIGGY OWNERS, who are now MOMMY and DADDY.

Time

Two years later.

Prelude

SETTING:

Silence.

We find FEMALE PIGGY OWNER (now MOMMY) in her ritualistic/self-soothing act of setting up a photo shoot except this time it's with THE BABY rather than THE PIGGY.

THE PIGGY is safely placed on the top shelf of a bookcase, displayed like a trophy, surrounded by framed photographs and DADDY's Master's degree diploma with honors.

This shoot should last about 2 minutes, beginning with her entering the stage with the baby in one hand and Valentine's Day props in the other, setting up the shot, then taking a series of photos, and ending when she finally is happy with the results.

During this "ceremony" of sorts, we see MOMMY's treating the child more as a prop than a baby. The strong attachment that was obvious with THE PIGGY at the beginning of the play, isn't apparent in this photo shoot with THE BABY.

Using a digital camera, she's able to take a shot, look at it through the LCD screen and then make slight adjustments to the background props and re-take the photograph (5-7 times). As she takes each shot, it appears on the slide screen on the back of the stage. However, because THE BABY is not an inanimate object like THE PIGGY, she can't reposition THE BABY, like she did THE PIGGY. Instead she desperately tries to coax the baby to look up a certain way, smile, etc. It's clear that the photos she's taking aren't meeting her high expectations. She gets more and more frustrated and looks up towards the shelf for some sense of security, first by looking at THE PIGGY, walking over to touch him, pick him up and kiss him for a second, maybe she makes a comment to herself about how much easier it was to photograph THE PIGGY. Then she looks at the perfectly composed, framed photographs of a happy baby and sighs.

It should be apparent that

unlike photographing THE PIGGY, taking photographs of THE BABY is less a fun thing to do than it is a clear obsession—another task. Indeed, in every sense of the word, it is work.

For MOMMY, the photographs are "proof" that she's a good parent, she's driven to do it not for her own personal enjoyment but to show/prove to others that she's a good parent. She is so insecure about her abilities as a mother that she needs the constant flow of compliments from people impressed with her constant photography of THE BABY. Also, it's easier for her to connect with photographs of her child than to actually interact with the child. Because photos, like the pig, are an inanimate object, it is something she feels safer with than a real human relationship.

The pre-prelude of the 2nd act should show a contrast between the photo taking of THE PIGGY and THE BABY, show how the ritual of photography has transformed—things she took pictures of piggy doing were somewhat more spontaneous, absurd, and funny, documenting travels, journeys, and explorations. But with THE BABY it's more contrived, there are more typical settings and events—daily photos of the child

doing the simple, everyday things of life and the monthly "holiday" card she sends to almost 100 people. Baby photo taking is constant and prescribed—much like a chore.

Lights go down.

Scene 1

THE PIGGY

So, I guess you're wondering how we got to this point. Well they got married. I can't be certain, but I think my temporary loss put things into perspective and he finally decided it was time to make it legal.

At first I wasn't thrilled with the idea.

(Slide show of PIGGY in front of door. Figure 15-16, pp. 195-196.)

But, it wasn't so bad. I was still the center of attention and there were gifts. More annoying pig items, but they did score some decent stuff.

(Slide show of PIGGY with gifts. Figure 17-19, pp. 197-199.)

I didn't have a speaking role at the ceremony, but I did have the pivotal role of ring bearer.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with rings. Figure 20, p. 200.)

If I knew marriage was going to include a fancy excursion,

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with champagne, etc. Figure 21-27, pp. 201-207.)

I would have insisted upon it much earlier. Little did I know at the time, but it would be our last trip.

Some other pigs came too, but it was solely for decoration. They weren't allowed to leave the hotel room.

(Slide show of PIGGIES in hotel room. Figure 28-29, pp. 208-209.)

Each day, all day long, it was just the 3 of us. We had a blast. Mostly because I was in charge of planning the itinerary.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with map. Figure 30, pp. 210.)

I tried to spice things up a bit with a little extreme climbing and braving the rapids.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with rocks, in hole, on building and above river. Figures 31-34, pp.

211-214.)

Despite the danger, I remained confident that someone was always watching my back.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY almost falling, with blurred hand reaching for him. Figure 35, p. 215.)

For the most part there was plenty of food,

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with sandwich. Figure 36, p. 216.)

but sometimes it required a bit of negotiation and fancy footwork.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with pigeon. Figure 37, p. 217.)

And on occasion, I was allowed to follow my own path for a bit of solitude.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY on the road less traveled. Figures 38-40, pp. 218-220.)

The highlight of the whole trip was performing my one-man show at the Globe.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY on stage. Figures 41, p. 221.)

Listening to mr-know-it-all correct the tour guide under his breath was more difficult to handle. So I hid out in the nosebleed section.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY in bleachers. Figures 42, p. 222.)

But the hardest part was saying goodbye.

(Slide show of THE PIGGY in airplane, waving goodbye. Figure 43, p. 223.)

Before the honeymoon was even over, she was on a mission to get pregnant. Actually she was on the desperate pursuit before the honeymoon. She had been trying for a long time to get pregnant. I just don't think that he knew about it.

About 3 months into the marriage, when even she got sick of the prescribed sex, she decided a sperm bank was the way to go. Of course I was hoping for a mistake in the lab. Unfortunately it does appear that the baby is in fact his. She told him she needed his sample for testing purposes. Yah, testing to see if he were actually that gullible. Apparently so, because 2 weeks later she was pregnant. The joy!

(Slide show of THE PIGGY with pregnancy test. Figure 44, p. 224.)

I suppose a ring on the finger gave her the green light to carry out such a deception. Or perhaps she always longed for some kind of "virgin birth." She took me with her to the baby factory. It gave me the creeps. I thought she had a photo obsession—you should have seen the walls in this place. Ugly baby snapshots were posted everywhere—not an inch left uncovered.

Luckily I'll never have to go to such extremes. If I want to sire a son, I know where to go:

(Slide show of THE PIGGY in front of computer.  
Figure 45, p. 225.)

eBay®.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not going to settle down any time soon. As one of my heroes, Francis Bacon, once wrote, "Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried, or childless men."

She eventually came clean on the whole fertility clinic deal. He wasn't too upset actually. He wasn't too anything about any of it as a matter of fact. He was trying to finish his thesis at the time, so I suppose he had bigger things to worry about.

We went with her to all the appointments.

(Slide show of PIGGY with Doppler and copy of ultrasound pictures. Figure 46-47, pp. 226-227.)

And then the piggy baby gifts started arriving.

(Slide show of PIGGY with pig-related baby gifts. Figure 48-49, pp. 228-229.)

They did get one practical gift, a child safety kit.

(Slide show of PIGGY with child safety kit.  
Figure 50, p. 230.)

However, if it were truly equipped, it would have also included two more suitable and qualified parents.

Although I'm positive they would have failed any parent readiness test, they did make some futile efforts to

prepare. She became addicted to baby-related television, what he and I referred to as "maternity porn", witnessing hundreds of births and birth defects. He put together the crib and practiced diapering.

(Slide show of PIGGY in crib and diapers.  
Figure 51-53, pp. 231-233.)

I joined them for the "Big Day." They wouldn't let me cut the umbilical cord, but I was given a cool set of scrubs to wear.

(Slide show of PIGGY in scrubs. Figure 54-55,  
p. 234-235.)

Since then, in her flurry of . . .

(With intense sarcasm)

mothering, wifery,

(Without sarcasm)

and cardmaking, not to mention the all-consuming passion for work, she hasn't had much time for me. She hasn't ignored me like he does, but we don't hang out as often as we used to.

And if Thanksgiving rolls around, and I get another card featuring that porcine butterball dressed as a pilgrim or a turkey, I shall personally toss the little tot into the nearest river like baby Moses. God forbid when President's Day rolls around and she can't find a toddler-sized powdered wig. No one will escape her wrath.

In fact, it's time I put a ban on this lunacy. I insist: DO NOT LOSE YOURSELF IN THIS INSANE DIGITAL PICTURE TAKING BABY OBSESSION! Take ME on a trip, dammit. I deserve better than this.

That's it. No more calendars, puzzles, tote bags, CDs, greeting cards, t-shirts, mugs, coasters, playing cards, mousepads, or anything else that she hasn't come up with yet, but, given another night of insomnia, undoubtedly will. Time burglars, that's what they are, and she is short on time. These projects eat up huge swaths that could be better used on ME.

Look, I'm obviously bonkers. I get worse with each passing day surrounded by this frenzied madness, but the poor recipients of dozens of cards and whatnot every month MUST

be equally sick to death of that fat little turnip in his various outfits. Am I wrong here?

I might give her a pass on Christmas, since it is, indeed, a major holiday, but that's it. She's through.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 2

(The Valentine's Day photo shoot in the Prelude continues. MOMMY is unsuccessfully taking photographs of THE BABY. It's clear that she's obsessed, and DADDY's sitting in a chair reading the newspaper and is not helpful.)

MOMMY

(To THE BABY)

Smile! Smile Baby! Smile for Mommy! Please Baby! Smile for Momma!

(MOMMY struggles for a minute or two trying to get the baby to smile. She has a hard time connecting with him and also finds it difficult to simultaneously focus the camera while making faces or dangling toys in order to get her child to grin.)

MOMMY

(Desperate)

Daddy, would you please make him smile?

(DADDY gets up and leaves stage.)

(MOMMY gets more frustrated by the second.)

MOMMY

(To DADDY, who's off stage)

Come on! Please!

DADDY

(Half-heartedly; enters stage.)

Smile.

(Leaves stage.)

(Mommy grunts in further desperation and annoyance.)

DADDY

(Off-stage)

Smile so your Mommy will end this painful exercise.

MOMMY

When I ask you to make him smile, I expect you to do more than just say, "Smile."

DADDY

(Off-stage)

If you can't make him smile on your own by now, then you've got a problem.

MOMMY

It's not that I don't know how to make him smile, I just can't do that and take the photo at the same time.

DADDY

If that's your excuse...

(A beat)

Look, I don't think he's in the mood. He's tired. He just woke up from a nap and here you are putting him on display already. Give it a rest.

MOMMY

But I've got a deadline! All the envelopes are labeled and stamped. We've got 100 people expecting a photo of our baby celebrating Valentine's Day. God knows you and I won't be.

DADDY

Don't you see you're zapping all the joy out of something that should be fun?

MOMMY

(To herself)

This was so much easier when he couldn't smile. Now that he's got the skill, everyone wants a picture with a huge grin. I'm not even certain I like the ones with him smiling. He's got weird thing going on with his eyes, all squinty. He looks Asian or something.

DADDY

(In disbelief)

You liked it better when he couldn't smile?

MOMMY

This is important, I have to get this done today.

DADDY

Well he's obviously not in the mood.

(A beat)

Use PIGGY.

MOMMY

I'd be thrilled to photograph THE PIGGY, but I have a strong suspicion that your mother would rather have a picture of her grandchild.

DADDY

Ok, let's make a deal. I'll get him to smile if you give me a couple hours of library time this afternoon. I still have a few more applications to get out and I need to work on modifying my statement of purpose.

MOMMY

How much money are you spending on all this?

DADDY

Think of it as an investment.

MOMMY

You've already applied to three other schools. Isn't that enough?

DADDY

Do you understand how competitive it is to get into an English PhD program? You can't just pay to go to one of these schools. They only accept as many people as they can afford to fund. We're talking ratios in the range of 350 applications for 18 slots.

MOMMY

So, if you were such a strong candidate, like you say you are you shouldn't be worried about getting into anywhere.

DADDY

It's just like undergrad. There are the dream schools, the places you're likely to get into, and then the safety schools.

MOMMY

I only applied to one school both as an undergrad and a grad student.

DADDY

Well you were studying something a little less challenging.

MOMMY

Well who's got the good job now? Anyway, why even apply to the safety schools? If those places aren't ranked well, you'll never get a good job when you're finished, anyway. Right?

DADDY

Not necessarily true. I went to a shit grad school and I applied myself and now I'm a potential PhD candidate. It's all about focus.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

## THE PIGGY

I guess I should be impressed that he is finally getting his shit together, putting his energy into something potentially big. This focus on getting into a PhD program is a new thing, that's for sure. Let's take a look at his past record to demonstrate this:

Of course he's currently employed, and has been for the past year and a half as a stay at home DAD, that's a euphemism for LAZY.

Before that he was a Bookstore Manager. Yep, he really shined as he guided people who lose IQ points when there's someone standing there asking if they need help or who suddenly lose the ability to follow the alphabet or a directory upon entering a store.

In college he was an Environmental Group Fundraiser, swindling money from the public using high-pressure sales techniques that he proved quite efficient at.

He was also an Art Gallery Attendant—responsible for maintaining valuable works of art by keeping the public's grimy hands off objets d'art in a high traffic gallery. Assisted in designing and setting up exhibits for display, 'cause he can spackle a wall like a fucking master.

And we can't forget the tenure as a Café Cook, when he was responsible for taking a dive restaurant, and, in one summer, cleaning out the whole place so it could pass the health department inspection. Oh, and he had one lackey under him—the power!

Not surprisingly he also has been a Disk Jockey. Disturbing the local populace with annoying music and banter, which  
(with sarcasm)  
now I've gotten the pleasure of being the sole audience member for.

Quite a résumé. No doubt, he'll get into that dream school.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 4

(DADDY and THE BABY are off-stage. DADDY is giving THE BABY a bath. We hear THE BABY laughing, splashing, etc. DADDY is laughing too. MOMMY is on-stage at her computer working.)

DADDY

(Off-stage)

Where's the baby?

(Laughter from THE BABY.)

DADDY

(Off-stage, to MOMMY)

Oh no MOMMY, I lost the baby!

(More laughter from THE BABY.)

DADDY

(Off-stage)

Oh, there he is!

(Intense laughter from THE BABY.)

DADDY

(Off-stage, laughing, to MOMMY)

MOMMY, you've got to come watch this. It's hysterical.

MOMMY

I'll be there in a minute.

DADDY

(Off-stage)

Where's the baby?

(Laughter from THE BABY.)

DADDY

(Off-stage)

Oh, there he is!

(DADDY continues to play with the baby.)

DADDY

(Off-stage; singing)

A B C D, E F G, H I J K, LMNOP, Q R S, T U V, W X, Y, and Z. Now I know my ABC's . . .

(THE BABY babbles)

DADDY

MOMMY, can you hear that? Come here. You've got to see this.

MOMMY

I'll be there in a minute.

(DADDY continues to play with THE BABY. A minute passes. MOMMY is still busy at work on the computer.)

DADDY

(Off-stage)

Time to take this tub out of the tub. Which jammies do you want to wear, big guy? The one with the doggies or the one with the stripes? Point to the one you want. Ok, it's stripes for tonight. You're free! Go get MOMMY!

(THE BABY comes running onstage towards MOMMY. She's still intently working on the computer and barely notices that THE BABY is right next to her.)

DADDY

(Off-stage, to MOMMY)

Hey MOMMY, we're low on diaper cream. I can run out . . .

MOMMY

(Interrupting him)

No, I'll go. I wanted to go to the store anyway to save some money.

DADDY

(Off-stage)

You mean spend money.

MOMMY

Last week I got 10 tubes of toothpaste for 25 cents each.

That's hardly a spending spree.

DADDY

(Off-stage)

It's not a good deal if you don't need it. It'll take us five years to go through your stockpile of hair conditioner.

MOMMY

I don't buy things I don't need. Besides, I like matching up coupons with items on sale in the store's circular. It's like playing the game Memory.

DADDY

(Off-stage)

If you're so good at buying in bulk, how come we never have aspirin when I need it?

MOMMY

We have aspirin. We always have aspirin. The problem is if I'm not here to tell you where it is, you think it's all gone.

DADDY

(Off-stage)

If you kept things in the same logical place, then I wouldn't need you to tell me where it is.

MOMMY

Interestingly enough, you have no problem finding and eating MY chocolate when I hide it from you.

DADDY

(Off-stage)

If all the money you save on toothpaste is thrown away on chocolate, you're not really saving money, are you?

MOMMY

(With irritation)

And how much are those application fees again? \$50-70 a pop? And you're applying to how many schools?

DADDY

(Enters stage and picks up THE BABY who's been trying to get MOMMY's attention.)

And how much did you spend last month on chocolate?

MOMMY

(Walking off-stage)

A lot less if you didn't eat it all.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 5

(DADDY is sitting with THE BABY. There are numerous letters scattered on the floor in front of them. He picks them up one by one and reads from them to THE BABY.)

DADDY

(With glee, with the intensity of reading a child a bedtime story or fairy tale like *Goldilocks and the Three Little Bears*.)

Once upon a time, there was a DADDY who applied to lots of doctoral programs so he could some day become Dr. Daddy. He went for a walk in the forest. Pretty soon, he came upon a huge mailbox with his name on it. He opened it and found three letters.

He opened the first letter. It was from one of DADDY's safety schools.

"Congratulations on your superb academic record. On behalf of the English Department, I am very pleased to offer you admission to our PhD program with a renewable, four-year English Department Teaching Assistantship. The Assistantship package will pay you approximately \$11,000."

"This offer is too low!" he exclaimed.

So he opened the second letter. It was from one of DADDY's high likelihood schools.

"We were extremely impressed with your application and are delighted to offer you a fully-funded place in the program. As a teaching assistant, you will need to teach four courses per year."

"This offer requires too much teaching!" he whined.

So he opened the last and thinnest envelope. It was from one of DADDY's Dream Schools!

"Thank you very much for applying to the PhD program in the English Department. Your academic achievements and recommendations promise an outstanding graduate career. You

have been selected to be part of a very elite fellowship program that includes an extremely generous stipend, medical insurance, and a fully-funded trip to a research library for your dissertation research."

"This offer is just right!" he said happily and did a victory dance.

(MOMMY enters stage, returning home from work, disgruntled.)

MOMMY

(Hasn't dropped her bag yet, doesn't say hello to DADDY or THE BABY, instead begins to complain about something trivial.)

God it stinks in here. Did you take the trash out like I asked you to?

DADDY

(Waving letter to MOMMY, with excitement)  
350 applicants. 18 slots. Yes, there are 332 people out there right now wondering, "Why didn't they take ME?!" And I'm NOT one of them!

MOMMY

(Doesn't hear him. Looks over, sees trash can still full.)  
Lovely, you lied to me again.

DADDY

(Suddenly unhappy and deflated.)  
Jesus! It was something I wanted to get done but didn't, I did not willfully deceive you. It just didn't get done. I'm sorry. I was a little busy reading over this incredible fellowship offer from a top-ranked university.

MOMMY

(With little enthusiasm)  
That's great. I'm really happy for you.  
(A beat)  
But I'm not going to move.

DADDY

That's a brilliant way to start the discussion, honey. Thanks for your support.

MOMMY

It's going to be hard enough finding and paying for child care when I can't count on you anymore. I don't want to quit my job, pack up all of our shit, and move on top of that.

DADDY

Sorry to disappoint you by actually getting into a good school. I know you secretly prayed that I got rejected by everyone, put in my proper place, and required to be a househusband for the rest of my life.

MOMMY

I never wished ill upon you.

DADDY

Please, you've known for how many months now that it was a possibility that I'd get into a program that would require a move? You never said anything about not being willing to relocate before.

(With intensity, determination, but just a hint of desperation)

I've finally been given a real opportunity to make something better of myself and I'm not giving it up.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 6

PIGGY

Since I've been stuck up here on this bookshelf, I've had some time to read. Yeah, I picked up an interesting little tale the other day: *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

Oh, the "bunny story." What a load of crap. For sure that bunny burned in the fire, maybe it was his martyred soul that imagined the fairy, like the real brain giving you its last trick before it goes idle.

Reality has its ups and downs, but I don't believe that one becomes real through somebody else.

I'm no bunny. I'm real to myself. What others think of me, I don't really care. I like who I am and what I am.

The bunny burns and the boy walks away and grows up.

From what I can see, there are two disastrous outcomes to becoming real: like the pigs in *Animal Farm* or on Hillshire Farm. I can either take over or be eaten and I don't want to be human or a sausage.

I'm not going out like that. It's time I disappear.

(THE PIGGY jumps from the shelf. Lights go out before he hits the ground.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 7

BLACKOUT

(Laughter of child is heard.)

Slowly a spotlight appears on the child, who is alone on stage. At first all you see is his back, that he's playing, but you don't see what he's playing with. Then the spotlight broadens, the child turns and you see him tugging and pulling at THE PIGGY.

As the light comes up on the entire stage you see DADDY in a rocking chair in the corner reading a book.

MOMMY, dressed in work attire, enters the stage carrying papers in her hand, a day care application, and sees THE BABY playing with THE PIGGY and freaks out.)

MOMMY

(To THE BABY)

Oh my God! What are you doing? Give me THE PIGGY right now!

(She yanks THE PIGGY from THE BABY's hands. THE BABY immediately begins to cry.)

No! No! No! I can't believe you! You are not allowed to play with THE PIGGY. He's mine!

(To THE PIGGY)

Oh PIGGY are you OK? I'm sorry! Did THE BABY hurt you?

DADDY

(Entering stage, perplexed)

What in the world is going on here?

MOMMY

Where were you? You're supposed to be watching THE BABY. That's your job! God you are so lazy, you can't even do the simplest thing in the world. How did THE BABY get THE PIGGY? I can't trust you at all. How could you let this happen?

DADDY

Will you calm down?! You are scaring THE BABY.

(With intense sarcasm)

Our child was having fun playing with a toy, the horror!

MOMMY

THE PIGGY is NOT a toy!

DADDY

(Picking up THE BABY.)

Look what you've done. THE BABY is all upset. Give him back the pig. He wants to play with it.

MOMMY

Well he can't. I don't have time for this. If you're going to take that Latin class this semester, we've got to fill out these daycare applications now.

DADDY

(Putting THE BABY in the stroller)

Do it yourself. I'm taking THE BABY to that playground down the block.

MOMMY

You can't go there, it's private property, you'll get arrested.

DADDY

(Leaving)

Gee, I wonder what the penalty is these days for "stealing fun"?

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 8

(MOMMY is sitting on the floor with THE PIGGY and a bunch of papers scattered in front of her. She reads aloud the questions from the daycare application, feeling lost and perplexed, unable to answer them, desperately looking at THE PIGGY to help her out.)

MOMMY

"Does your child take a nap?"  
He must. Yeah, I'm sure he does. Yes.

"In the morning and/or afternoon?"  
Geez, could this require any more detail?

"How many hours your child sleeps at night?"  
Do they expect me to keep a sleep chart—documenting the exact time his eyes close and open every day for a week? Ok, let me think. I usually go to bed at 10pm. Sometimes THE BABY's still running around, sometimes DADDY's rocking him to sleep. I leave for work at 7. He's always still asleep then.

(Counting hours on her fingers)  
10 to 11 to 12 to 1 to 2 to 3 to 4 to 5 to 6 to 7 . . .  
Ok, I guess 9 or 10 hours.

"Describe your child's appetite: always hungry, eats at mealtime, snacks, snacks all day, never hungry, has to be coaxed to eat."  
Sheesh, the kid doesn't have an eating disorder yet, are the expecting him to?

"Are there any foods your child dislikes?"  
How the heck am I supposed to know that? It's not like he's got the language skills to say, "Mmmmm, I like this. I want more peaches. Yuck, I don't like that. No more green beans." He can barely say Momma and Dada.

"Special interests: Singing? Painting? Stories? Trucks? Music? Outside play? Crayoning?"  
What difference does it make? Would they really tailor a play schedule to fit his particular needs anyway? I doubt it.

"Is your child generally cooperative?"

"Shy?"

"Competitive?"

"Aggressive?"

"Sensitive?"

"Submissive?"

"Angry?"

"Happy?"

For the love of God! I couldn't even answer these questions about MYSELF. This is completely ridiculous. I just need someone to make sure he doesn't kill himself during the day while we're gone. What is the purpose of all these nosy questions? Do they want a copy of my labor and delivery records too? At least I've got that.

"Usually does what is asked of him/her?"

Well if he takes after his father, then the answer would be NO.

"Seldom does what is asked of him/her?"

Well if the answer to the question above is NO, then the answer to this would have to be YES, now wouldn't it? Could this be more redundant and a waste of my time!

"List other behaviors characteristic of your child."

Complains endlessly about his incompetent, out-of-touch mother who is never around and has no understanding of him at all.

(Flips through the other pages of the application, looking for the contact/employment information)

Where do I write down my contact information and place of employment?

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 9

## THE PIGGY

So that didn't work out like I planned. The escape, that is, my feigned, I mean *failed*, effort to disappear. I don't really want to re-live or rehash what happened, or to analyze what went wrong. That's for others to decipher, if they so feel the need. No matter. Juxtaposed to the sad display that I just had to witness, my failures pale in comparison. I could have done a better job filling out that application. What she forgot to write down was, "Child and father complain endlessly about the incompetent, out-of-touch mother who is never around and has no understanding of child at all."

And maybe she figured that out on her own because she seems to have changed her attitude a bit since then. Some may call it an "epiphany" of sorts, I'll credit the hormones. Yah, because in addition to the botched attempt to document her knowledge of her child's personality, idiosyncrasies, and sleep patterns, she just failed *another* test.

Scene 10

(MOMMY returns home to an empty apartment. She has a bagful of Hershey's kisses and creates a trail from the front door to the main living room then places THE PIGGY in the middle of a pile of chocolate and empty wrappers shaped in a heart.)

(MOMMY leaves.)

(DADDY and THE BABY return to the apartment and both laugh at THE PIGGY in the chocolate. DADDY "accepts" her apology—the pig puppet sign language of sorts. And decides to create his own amusing set-up with THE PIGGY. DADDY and THE BABY leave.)

(Grinning, DADDY returns holding a shopping bag and THE BABY. DADDY has bought a "Furreal" cat toy that acts like a real cat. He sets up a scene with THE PIGGY—an empty package of batteries lies near THE PIGGY's paws, as if he's just put the batteries into the cat. THE DADDY and BABY pet the cat and it begins to meow and move it's tall. THE BABY and DADDY laugh, then leave.)

(MOMMY enters the empty apartment and hears a meow and screams. Then there's a loud hissing as the cat arches its tail.)

MOMMY

(With slight sarcasm)

Cute, really cute.

(She goes over and picks up the cat, which continues to hiss, she turns it off.)

(MOMMY goes into the bathroom and emerges carrying a pregnancy test box. She removes the positive test from the box and puts it in the THE PIGGY's paws, then positions the cat upside down, with it's battery compartment open and empty.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 11

DADDY

You told me nothing would happen.

MOMMY

Well I didn't think it would. In case you don't remember, we used a fertility clinic to have our first child. Besides, I thought you subconsciously wanted another baby anyway since you didn't insist we use any protection.

DADDY

What?! Every time we had sex, I mean, the TWO TIMES we had sex, I prefaced it by warning you, "If you get pregnant, this one is yours."

MOMMY

You were the one who told me you wouldn't sleep with me again unless I stopped breastfeeding. Well I did, and that's probably what screwed things up.

DADDY

Yah, we were finally getting back into the groove and now this.

(With bitterness).

Thanks.

(Walking away.)

That's it, we're done.

(Slight pause)

I'm never having sex again.

MOMMY

It was an accident!

DADDY

No it wasn't. You lied to me.

MOMMY

I can't believe that you are accusing me of that.

DADDY

You need to take "I can't believe" out of your vernacular.

MOMMY

I'm sorry, if you didn't want another baby, you should

have . . .

DADDY

And while we're at it, remove "should" from any discourse as well.

MOMMY

Hey, you started it!

DADDY

You escalated it! I'm supposed to start school in 6 months. Another baby is going to complicate everything. This couldn't happen at a worse time.

MOMMY

We don't have to keep it.

DADDY

(With sarcasm)

Right, that's an option.

MOMMY

I'm talking about adoption.

DADDY

(With sarcasm)

Yeah, I'm sure you'd be able to give a baby away.

(Defeated)

We're keeping it.

MOMMY

Don't sound so excited.

DADDY

As long as you understand that this doesn't change anything. I'm still going to school. I know you don't want to move, but maybe with a new baby it'll be a good time to relocate. You can take an extended maternity. You're so talented you'll have no problem finding another job if you want. With my fellowship and the lower cost of living, you might not even have to work. Actually, this could end up working out for all of us.

MOMMY

I can't have a baby, quit my job, and move all at the same

time. That's too much change. It's not like you're being sent to war, you have a choice.

DADDY

So you want any school that requires a move off the table? That only leaves one university - the one that's not even in the top 10 for my field.

MOMMY

I'm not stopping you from going anywhere. Leave if you want. Personally, I don't care if you're not here. I'm thinking of your children. Do you really want to abandon them?

DADDY

You don't want me around anymore, do you?

MOMMY

Tell me: What's salvageable here? You don't want this new baby, you never plan to have sex with me again. What's the point? I want a divorce.

DADDY

(Suddenly very serious, in deep thought, occasional pausing, as if intensely thinking through the problem while he responds)

Ok. Well I'm going to need to move home for awhile I guess. I'll need some time to figure this all out, what I'll need to do, but I can start packing my stuff tonight. I guess you expect me to take THE BABY . . .

MOMMY

You really want to leave . . .

(Very softly)

me?

DADDY

Oh, so asking for a divorce was just a test?

(Waits for a reply. There is none.)

You expected me to protest, to say, "No, I don't want a divorce, let's work things out." We're adults. We really need to stop playing these games.

MOMMY

You're no saint. You never cared enough to ask me why I was against moving or to find out what would make me consider a move so you could attend one of these precious universities.

DADDY

That's because I'm afraid to ask you anything. You fly off the handle for no apparent reason. Honestly, I've reached my limit. You're always angry or complaining. I've got MOMMY outrage fatigue.

MOMMY

I've got a lot of stress. You should try juggling three jobs and . . .

DADDY

(Interrupting her)

And that's another thing. If I'm worried about something you always trump me with a bigger crisis. Or if I need a break from THE BABY, I'm afraid to ask for some time because you always have some big deadline or catastrophe that keeps you at the computer all night long.

MOMMY

If I'm such a hag, then why are we even together?

DADDY

Because I love you.

MOMMY

But if you're afraid of me, if you can't even talk to me, how can you love me?

DADDY

(With sincerity and emotion)

I want to work with you. I don't want to run away from my family. If you stick with me, it'll pay off. You need to think long term. So are you on the bus or off?

MOMMY

(Hesitates, then smiles)

I guess I'm on.

DADDY

Let's assume that when we talk then.

MOMMY

(Cheering up)

We could wait a year for me and the kids to move. Just enough time for me to get accustomed to the idea, tie up loose ends here, find a new place to live. In the meantime, you could come home for long weekends. And when you're away, we could write love letters to each other.

DADDY

Now you're thinking.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 12

(MOMMY sets up the tripod, then places a camera with a timer on top for another photo shoot. This time, for the first time, it's for a family portrait.)

MOMMY

(Looks through the camera's viewfinder)  
Ok, DADDY's going away for a little bit, but he'll be back every weekend. And then soon we'll all be together again.

DADDY

Thank you. . . . for trying.

MOMMY

Thanks for letting me finally get a picture with all of us.

(DADDY gives MOMMY a kiss. MOMMY smiles, then hands THE PIGGY to the BABY who giggles.)

MOMMY

(Clutching the camera remote control)  
Everyone smile!

A loud "click"-like sound of a camera shooting occurs simultaneously as a bright light engulfs the entire stage like a giant flash...

(BLACKOUT)

THE PIGGY

Yah, I know. That was all kinda sappy. Don't worry. She wasn't happy with any of the pictures.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF PLAY)

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Leah Ann Connor was born on May 18, 1971, in Findlay, Ohio. She graduated from Mt. Penn High School, Mt. Penn, Pennsylvania, in 1989. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Pennsylvania State University in 1993 and her Master of Arts from The George Washington University in 1996. She was employed as a graphic and web designer in Washington, D.C. for seven years and received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2004.