

In the past, and maybe still in Asia, women knew they know things. If you fucked around in the old world you could be sure your woman would have the best meal she'd ever cooked waiting for you on the dinner table when you came back from wherever it was you claimed you weren't: mutton, bangers, mash, potato leek soup, butter that looks like cheese, cheese, a warm loaf. She'd serve it to you in silence, make you lick your plate clean, bring the pie directly out of the oven onto your dish, watch you eat the whole thing while she sat with perfect posture, hands folded on her lap, never touching an ounce of any of it. When you were done she'd clean the dishes, wipe off the table, push the chairs back in, head off to bed, close the door behind her, and you'd know you were fucked: not getting fucked, fucked. If you had kids they'd watch from the entrance to the dining room, also in silence. Any time they made a gesture to come in and indulge their hungry stomachs in the fare your wife would raise her open palm and they'd step back again, in silence and dread, the only sounds in the room being the bassy growl from their empty stomachs and the tinny treble of your fork scraping the plate clean.

At some crucial point in history, though, a man tried to love his wife more than others had. He fucked up (around) and came home to the meal just mentioned, yet he too sat at the table stoically, stolidly. The mutton went cold, the bangers turned rubbery, a film grew over the top of the soup. They both sat with perfect posture, her hands folded, his hands flat on the table, all night long, never removing their eyes from each other. Let's say they didn't have kids yet. When the sun rose he broke the stale bread in two, buttered it, cheesed it, and placed the piece in front of his wife who ignored it. He broke another piece off, buttered it, dipped it in his cold soup and ate the entire leftover meal silently and slowly, yanking his way through the bangers, crunching his teeth through the mutton. When it appeared as if he was done he resumed his upright position, palms flat on table, eyes glued on wife, for just a few breaths. Then he dug into the pie and ate the whole mess in record time without tasting a crumb. He burped. He smiled a small smirk, the ultimate jerk, and his wife went a permanent sort of mad. Now there are these modern women who still know things, but due to the inundation of reason they have trouble believing they know these things so they go extra nuts, cuckoo, and they lose it like lose it. They feel the knowledge, try to deny it, can't, must, can't, freak the fuck out maybe that night, maybe years later, but it's ugly and irreconcilable because the worlds of Knowing and Reason no longer know no reason, if you know what I mean. They know Faludi and Facts, Foucault, Faustus and Didion and Deep House music and it sizzles and

simmers and shorts and fizzes and it's painful to watch in a real painful sort of way.

Anyhow, since Georgette and I made love once I was convinced we could find it again, another kind of love some other way. That was how I rationalized this trip. Heavy cream. Georgette answered my heavy cream with a Valium down my throat. Good, I thought, slowing things down should help. She answered that with cocaine on my lips. Great, I thought, then let's go at it and really get down to the film between these curds and whey. She answered that with Methadone, which didn't affect me, so she followed with Vicodin, Percocets, and some sort of Southern Comfort and white wine cocktail she whipped up in her blender. The sun rose with her cold hand on my limp wiener and our eyes fixed silently for twenty minutes. Every other minute she'd jerk it around a bit, but between all the inebriates and my disillusionment it wasn't just limp, it was miniature. Hard and miniature like it was imploding. I took off pissed but mostly depressed and hit the drag where I found Cousin Johnny, part-time Breaks drummer, already searching for me.

"You promised me you wouldn't screw Georgette, *Chrissy*."

"Hence I didn't. Where's the faith, *Thomas*?"

"Then where were you all night, *Peter*?"

"I dunno, running around, throwing fits, trying to slow that girl down, hiding, whathaveyou and the whatnot. Where the fuck were you, little shit?"

"Chrissy, the deal I made with you was that if you fell short on your ideology I was gonna come in her friend's face to illustrate the absurdity you failed to see, like when Nantzen puts his sandals on his head in that famous Zen koan, so when I couldn't find you I told her to jerk me off and then I came in her face and she left for the bathroom, shut the door, and I busted out of there. I've been at that Olympia II diner for like the past five hours. I've already had two egg specials and shat the first one out. Fuck *fuck* fuck. You didn't fuck her?"

"Jesus."

We sat in silence at a coffee shop reading magazines for another three hours until finally my bass player, Don, ran past us, skidded to a stop when his peripheral vision caught us, and ran back.

"Let's get out of this town," Don concurred.

It was months before I officially got out of Don what had happened to him that night, not that it mattered much. He and I were walking down Chestnut Street in Philly when this chubby girl leans out a car window

and yells, “Ohmigod! Chrissy and Don!”

“So who’s that now?” I asked him.

As the car slowed and rounded the corner to find a quick parking spot Don yanked me behind a red brick wall into a cemetery where we hid and he whispered.

“You don’t remember that girl? You talked to her for two hours in Atlanta a few months ago.”

“So?”

“Well after you and Johnny disappear on me fatty lures me back to her place with chocolates and weed only turns out she has no weed, only chocolate and I couldn’t escape. I had her suck my cock and I swear that’s all that happened. I swear. I didn’t even want her chocolate, and of course she’s in Philly somehow today. Oh by the way, Ben Franklin’s buried over there. So is Thomas Paine and a few of William Penn’s sons I think.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, one was a Tory.”

“Of course. Did she swallow?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way... yeah, and Napoleon’s brother’s here too. He was like his brother’s opposite. He moved to South Jersey when it was still called Little Sweden because he wanted to be close to the pacifist Friends, y’know? Let’s go.”

So yeah, we met this girl on the highway after that Atlanta debacle, but not just that. Before we met this girl on the highway, we played Charleston where we all arrived like paladins or Teutronics or eunuchs or something. Not quite eunuchs, but bring the Green Knight on, if you know what I mean. Impenetrable fortresses with Girlfriends: strong “G” and let the “irl”-curl-all-around type of beautiful beautiful Girlfriends. It was just a show to get us to and fro, a coffee shop where we’d be fed hoagies and Pabst and play to college kids and make enough gas money to get us to Richmond where we’d do the same, except of course when a woman lets you down a girl always saves you, and vice versa.

Her name was Melanie and she summed everything up with continual blah, blablablahs. She was eighteen. I can’t remember the bulk of it or any specific words, but I know she was always right. When I explained to her how I’m currently *savoring* she pushed me no further. I think she shrugged her shoulders and said a few words. I believed them though they disappeared. A few of them were definitely, “Can I drive you to Richmond tomorrow?”

I went in her VW Golf and Don and Johnny took the van. It was a four-

hour drive, another few hours at a margarita happy hour, the show, the party, the egg special in the morning. I remember she ate her eggs with orange soda not coffee, but Christ, I can't remember a word she said, not a single word, though I know I needed every article of it. She held her utensils like a Brit and cut her eggs into neat pieces as she ate them. She ate her potatoes one piece at a time and free of all condiments, not even salt, but I can not remember a word she said. She dipped a few of the potato pieces into the egg yolk. I'm not sure if you consider that a condiment or not. I know she didn't, but I can't remember her reasoning, something about how an unavoidable condiment isn't a condiment at all. She likened unavoidable condiments to unrelated coincidences. "Some coincidences," she said, "are really just coincidences." I didn't lay a hand on her either. I swear. When I returned to New York my former ex and I broke up soon enough and I got back together with another ex.

Before New York though, there was this girl on the highway who was selling things she'd *golded* to make money for gas so she could reach Bob Dylan and play him a song she wrote. Right. The song was called "Tabel," like table, but spelled biblically because it's where a woman transubstantiates three times a day. Oooh, I hated this girl. "*Golding*," she claimed, "is when you steal things for a greater good and people need to hear this song so I'm golding my way to Dylan." Anything was more interesting than cruising up and down the travel oasis' racks so we listened to her spiel for too long. We'd been to so many of these oases from consecutive months on tour that they'd become our society. It's where we went for life. We'd been to so many we were post reevaluation/reappreciation of the great American candy bars and soda pops and such. What began as browsin' begat browsing which in turn gave birth to perusing which now malfunctionarily just *cruises*. We were over it. We lost the American products, we found them, we left the products once more and we knew we'd never find them again, so we walked with this chick across the parking lot to her U-Haul where she showcased her golded goods out of the back which were really just worthless knick-knacks and pointless bric-a-brac. She had zits all over her face and a tie-dyed midriff. Even though she was a girl I knew she didn't know anything.

"This is all you got?" Don dug into her.

"OK, you might like this. It's an oil called *The Essence of Christ*."

"Why is it called that?"

"Because it smells nice."

"That's not enough reason to call it that. You're trying to be poetic, but there's no point to your poetry. This stuff is all shit. What else you got?"

“OK, I’ve got this ‘how to play guitar’ instructional video tape. C’mon, guys, I’m in a serious bind.”

“No you’re not, you privileged cunt with your privileged little lists of things to do and...*gold*. How much for the video tape?”

“Ten bucks.”

“Fuck you. It’s worth two dollars. If you said two dollars I would have bought it from you, now I won’t buy it from you for a penny. You’re a piece of shit. What else you got?”

We kept her at our mercy for longer than any of us initially intended. I don’t know what came over them, but Don and Cousin Johnny weren’t leaving satisfied until they drew tears. I wanted this chick to cry too. Something came over me though and I pulled them away. “*Absorting*,” Cousin Johnny told her, “is when you feel embarrassed for someone,” and we hit the road.

I love Cousin Johnny. I agree with everything he says, but I can’t move with him so I had to kick him out of The Breaks. He knew. I need to move very very fast, all the time. I don’t think Parkinson’s is an And/Or condition. It’s a matter of degree and there’s a lot more *And* than *Or* in my family genes. Cousin Johnny’s afflicted too. He needs to move fast. When a guy and a girl with equal degrees of Parkinson’s fall in love the disease quotients divide into each other equally creating a whole, finished, complete number one. Unfortunately, the equation doesn’t work with men (it may with gay men), so Cousin Johnny’s frantic energy divided by my frantic energy simplifies into a null set. The Void. Too aware of our lonely, loveless states. If there are girls around though it’s fine. So Cousin Johnny plus any random chick divided by me and any random chick brings us very near to contentment.

After the tour Cousin Johnny invited me and my former ex-girlfriend at the time, Rose, up to his cabin in the Connecticut woods for a mellow weekend of weed and logic with his new girlfriend. It worked. One room was enough. It changed many times. There was a room where we all sat at a table and played cards. There was a room where the girls sat at that table while I hung from a wood beam and tiraded while Cousin Johnny paced back and forth behind the table with a cigarette and tiraded against me even though it wasn’t a this vs. that sort of tit for tat. There was a room where Cousin Johnny and his girlfriend whispered, giggled and did it on a chair in the corner while Rose and I sat to the side of the table under a bright light, both on the edge of our chairs, blowing smoke and interrupting each other’s accusations with agendically directed tongues. There was

a room, devoid of light, where Rose and I forgot about Cousin Johnny and his girlfriend. Rose wore a walkman that played a disc I gave her, I'm not telling which one. I wore a walkman that played a disc Rose gave me and I'm not telling which one. They each spun different tempos though and yes we fucked and one room was enough. I came. I wonder if we had both chosen songs with the same tempos if I would have been able to do that. In my more cynical moments I might even claim that this equation is more complete than the latter, matching girl divided by matching guy: neither Rose nor Cousin Johnny's girlfriend officially matched us. Of course, it disappeared as soon as we left and only an hour onto the road back home the movement began again and no space was enough.

Rose and I stopped to pump gas on the Merritt Parkway and an old couple next to us couldn't get their machine to work. Seconds, thank God, before I offered to help a sign manifested: "Pay before you pump." I looked up at our meter and realized there was twenty bucks worth of credited gas. I abandoned my Samaritan urge just in the nick of time once I figured out the old man put his money down on the wrong pump — pump six, not five — and our gas was flowing free. As he went back in to complain I closed up my tank and drove off with \$17.83 of regular unleaded.

Rose and I have trouble shutting up. This thieving threw a wrench in our ethical cogs for a quiet half hour as we tried to find words to come down on either moral side of my action. We had fun never finding the words. Every attempt gave way to a self-effacing laughter we eventually abandoned for a very practical discussion indeed to bail us out of our locked groove: We agreed to agree that Europeans fail to see the poetry of Pragmatism whereas Americans can't see the Pragmatism of poetry, and we were redeemed. Thank God.

My initial agenda for the day was to cruise down to Manhattan, walk around town with my arm around this girly, check out the flea markets in Chelsea, eat lunch (which I never do), window shop, point at things — today I wanted to point at things we hate, I almost never do that either, I swear. I thought if all we did was point at things we hate the word would dissolve by the end of the day and really mean "let me tear your clothes off now and hate you up your cunt in of course the most loving way." Sounds hippy I suppose, but I was also hoping that by embracing hippy that word might also dissolve. Two birds. One stone. I hate that fucking word, hippy, not in a "let me tear your clothes off now and hate you up your cunt in of course the most loving sort of way" sort of way, a real hate. A hate that can't dissolve. You see, most words will eventually dissolve, like

“all-natural” and “manufactured.” They crash into another word and dissolve. Y’know, like “selfless” and “selfish,” neither “all-natural” or “manufactured” really mean anything. There’s a rarer type of word though that does mean something. Not all forms of hate mean something. “Hate” itself doesn’t really mean anything. “Fury,” however, that means something. No matter how you say it, fury means fury. Not furious, that can dissolve if you want it to. Fury, though, that’s a real word. That word bites. That’s what I feel toward hippies. Anyhow, hippies would take the opposite approach. They could never go around hating things. They allegedly love everything so much they wind up passive-aggressively hating everything, including the genitalia they publicly parade around. Disregard their free love banter and dissolve hippy. I also wanted to split up in department stores and reconvene with new words and queries and most importantly, talk to people that know I’m in love and don’t see it as a threat. Those people are hard to find.

The day never goes that way though.

With all this free gas I felt like we had to keep it rolling with the free thing and head down to Atlantic City. Turn free into more free. Rose agreed. So we stopped again at the very next travel oasis where I bought a pack of Newport lights in preparation for the cruise through Jersey. We each lit up a cigarette every time a sign on the Parkway warned “toll booths one mile ahead.” We worked out a game. We’d head to the “exact change” lanes in the middle of the highway because we figured the ones in the fast lanes cater to drivers with better aim. The middle lanes get old people and moms with mini-vans and full hands. So we’d hit the middle of the middle “exact change” lanes, jump out, run to each adjacent lane, collect all the missed throws, collect the change in our lane, throw in the requisite 35¢ and move on. We tossed our half-finished Newports out in the middle exact-change lanes each time because we thought it was only fair to leave some sort of evidence. The Token Bandits, if you know what I mean.

We hit seven of these down to Atlantic City, raking in (after seven 35¢ tolls were paid) a total of \$5.45 profit. I drove my newly acquired Grand Marquis down there. It had been bequeathed to me by my grandfather, who always hated when I stole it from him during his last bedridden days, or so he said. This thing was hard for me to push past sixty-five miles per hour, not because it couldn’t go faster, it just felt wrong to. Old people don’t drive their Grand Marquis past fifty-five, I noticed as I passed them. I knew these things could go way faster. I was easily driving the fastest Grand Marquis on the road and still every other model of car was flying

by me, unless of course they were driven by Mexicans, Chinese, blacks or perverts. The old people probably thought everyone else was driving too fast, even though cars are built to go that fast, and what the fuck, if it were 1910 they would have thought the kid flying the Model T past twenty-five miles an hour was being disrespectful too. Now they're *creeping* along more than double that speed at fifty-five. So there's an internal reciprocal rhythm between machines and humans. There is a right speed for two things to move together, it changes from moment to moment, but in general it's clearly getting faster. If the spread to drive cars comfortably in 1910 was between ten and twenty miles an hour, anything more or less being unsafe, and the comfortable spread today is between fifty-five and seventy-five, it seems logical that at some point the spread might be between mach three and faster than the speed of light. The danger speeds in that era will be slower than the speed of sound, which will pose a threat because we'll age, like we do now, and therefore eventually die, like we do now. Moving at faster than the speed of light for too long could be dangerous because we could reverse aging too far, possibly to the point of preconception, and unbirth ourselves. At this time in history it's safe to say though that the quest for speed is tantamount to a quest for life, striving toward the era when we can move fast enough to bend time as we see fit. Be old when we want to be old. Be young when we want to be young. Find the right age.

Old people move slow because they've seen too much to rationalize atheism, and without atheism there's hope, so they're comfortable taking their time. As far as the Mexicans, Chinese, and perverts go, I don't think they know about death, so they move most closely to the natural reciprocal rhythm, unhindered by a rational drive to move faster and fend off mortality. Black people gotta be removed from this equation because they can't afford to go one mile over the speed limit or they'll get a ticket, plus, they come from the South where everything is slower, even the reciprocal rhythm. And speaking of being unhindered by reason and getting closer to the natural rhythm, every retard knows every word to every song in *Grease*...if you've room to ponder nothing else, reader, ponder that. I thought I was a million miles from that mindset until the little explosions in the engine that this Grand Marquis floats upon hummed a lower, smoother hum than I previously knew and it felt great to drive that slow. Hopeful. With it. Naive.

At the final toll booth I locked eyes with a toll booth collector on the other side of the highway while I was collecting missed change. He was on

Parkway North, cars leaving the casinos. He was far away so I couldn't imagine he could tell what I was up to, but I felt snagged nonetheless. I flicked my Newport in his direction. He was black, overweight, but like a normal big American guy is, regularly fat. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. I didn't feel him judging. He just stared. If I was a girl I would have thought he was a pervert, but his stare wasn't quite that. It was something else.

When we reached Atlantic City we parked the car and ran right into whatever casino didn't claim the loosest slots. We didn't want to push it, convinced there was dignity somewhere up in this milieu. There's nothing worse than asking too much from something that's already so giving and we were ready to be given to. We walked tight to each other through the golden gates and mirrored hallways and aisles of slots, past a sea of zombified tiny ancient white heads unaware that the unified bleeps and bloopers they were composing with every spin of the slots mirrored the most modern music being burnt to disc today by kids even I feel out of touch with. And speaking of rhythm again, this slot noise soundtrack comprised of every machine in the house moves at a calculatable rhythm regardless of how fast or often any individual pulls the machine's arm. The casino is one big rhythm. Calculate it and label it as "wrong rhythm." As the tables came into sight Rose got some sort of gloss over her eyes and I let her drift with her \$2.75 share. I went to the roulette tables alone where for some reason the biggest, straightest, most human croupier had an empty table. He saw me from across the room; I guess he marked me. As I made my way over he spread the betting chips out with some flare, or flame, spread them back up into a stacked pile, nodded his head and I threw my \$2.70 down on black with one eye wondering where Rose went.

"It's a five dollar minimum."

The deal was it was supposed to be only free money played. I broke the deal and dug into my pocket for another \$2.30. All on black. It landed on red. What a sucker to naturally assume the inherent evil in red. And what a fool to bet loser's money. \$2.70 of my \$5.00 was tainted with the bad aim that missed the exact change baskets. But most importantly, black versus red? I sold red out and I deserved to lose. I looked for Rose. She was sitting at a blackjack table with an odd crew of people and a "Ten Dollar Minimum" sign. At least I knew I broke the rule. I'm getting the vibe she doesn't even remember the rule existing. As I stand behind her she's winning and she's losing and it's all really binary and uninteresting to me so I go to have a smoke on the boardwalk when I pass that toll booth collector from the Garden State Parkway, the guy who saw me collecting the

change. Excess change, remember. I knew I couldn't get into any real trouble, but I felt like a vulture. Vultures are the only creatures on earth free of karmic hindrance. They don't kill their carrion. It dies of its own accord. Even vegans kill kale. Vultures kill nothing, yet we still label them *vultures*, filthy scavengers, though they're the only ones who've done nothing wrong. The change Rose and I took was already dead, but I knew we could be scolded anyhow and I worried that a good scolding could kill my Free Mojo which was already waning. I ducked into the handicapped bathroom and locked the door and as I bit my nails pacing back and forth I realized the mirror in front of the can was a full length. Full lengthed for the crippled, who have the least luxury of vanity. Whose cruel idea was this to make sure they have no way of avoiding the ugliness that comes with catastrophe? Right in front of the can, man, and you've got to figure the rate of constipation amongst the crippled is higher too. I realized later it had to be full length because the crippled come in so many more different shapes and sizes than the healthy, but still, what a miserable reflection. I checked myself out and it turned out I looked good. I looked great and I make a pact with myself always to use the handicapped bathroom from this point on to get a good head to toe assessment in front of the full-length mirror of how efficiently I was using my youth. Today I happened to be using it well.

I popped out and headed toward the revolving doors hoping to make it past the Garden State Parkway guy, who scared me slightly less than he did a few minutes ago. I saw him staring out onto the floor. He wasn't betting. He was just staring again and licking a machine-vented strawberry shortcake ice cream cone. I didn't think he saw me, but as I exited the building onto the boardwalk he turned around quickly and looked. Fuck, I tripped inside the revolving door. I realized my trip probably freaked him out too. I didn't want to scare him away. Now I was getting intrigued. So I walked across the boardwalk extra slow and cavalier-like, ready to be caught. I lit my Newport, turned back around to face the casino and this dude was already standing right in front of me.

There was silence for three seconds until Rose came storming out of the casino: "There you are. Check this out, right — I was up thirty-five bucks..." and she recognized the awkward situation. Rose tried to straddle the line. Was she with me or wasn't she with me? Did she recognize my moves as risky or stupid? She didn't know and she never would. She was only born with half the capacity. I know there's only one outcome to *our* situation, but in the meantime it's fun and I have yet to figure out that kind of chick anyhow, the *in-between chick*, so it's a constant vacillation

between surprise and disappointment. I told her *this* only works with two feet in. She agreed, but she'd never make the leap. We'd break up in a few weeks just like we'd done before and she'd be fucked for life because the former world will never satisfy her again, still she'd never be able to make the leap to my world and here I was paralyzed in front of this toll collector. This situation was weird and getting weirder — neither he nor I broke the silence until Rose came along. Maybe it's because she was so out of her element, I dunno, or maybe awkwardness *is* her element so she remedied it. Or maybe she's just stupid and I was filling in the blanks so she remedied it. Bouncing pressure back and forth off each leg, big grin, I got two-thirds of her looks, the toll collector got the other third. She introduced herself as "Rose." I pitied Rose.

"Howard."

That was all this dude offered up though, so I gave "Chris."

"Howard. What were you doing on the Parkway?"

"Why, did you have your eye on that change or something?"

Things couldn't be moving any slower with this guy but Rose and I are feeling so fast it feels faster to slow down — like putting little kids on Ritalin or Tai-Chi or something — and faster feels good.

I'm fucking Rose which is odd. I can usually only fuck girls I don't give a shit about which is becoming rarer and rarer and I can only make love to girls I love, which is like non-existent. Rose falls somewhere in-between which is usually the no-bone-zone and yet she's still getting some. I even come half the time, though I haven't figured out a way to really ram it all home yet and I know time is running out. The last time we fucked was a month ago (a month ago!) after penne alla vodka and a pitcher of white sangria on a sidewalk restaurant patio in the Ironbound section of Newark that brought to our table over the course of a couple of hours first my brother walking the stray pit bull Delilah, he had just found, then a fortune teller from Queens who told me I was in danger, and then an African from Africa selling miniature wooden wildebeests and gazelles of the Serengeti. Word to the wise: never let the fortune teller freak-out more on you than on your girlfriend. They take the freak-out to mean more alive and intriguing, but if the fortune teller does freak out on them they're petrified and they'll blame you for allowing them into the world of voodoo, so word to the wiser: never go to a fortune teller with a girl. It's a lose-lose situation. That night was beautiful, though, and the yellows filling my room in the morning reflecting off her yellow back while I outlined the tattoo on her spine with different fingers and wondered if she could tell

which finger was which was even more beautiful. I didn't know then that she was carrying my baby in her stomach. I didn't find out until it had already been miscarried by booze while I was on tour in the U.K. a few weeks later. After years and years of fucking anything and everything that came my way, never using protection, it finally caught up to me, seconds before I was about to vow to stop teasing fate this way once and for all. Our relationship has been strained ever since, but it also holds a dark grip on us. Anyhow, a month ago! Yet I can come.

Third parties, like this toll collector guy, are a welcome break from *us*. One-on-one conversations are almost always bound to be dishonest anyhow. How can I be myself when I'm so aware this person across from me is getting off on nothing else at that moment other than me being myself? That makes me *really really* want to be myself. So I become my uberself, zuperself, caricature of myself, less myself. I'm never just talking to one person anyhow. No matter how intense a conversation could be. No matter how locked two sets of eyes could get, there's always at least one Other party these words are directed toward. Whether it be the bio/book/movie scene that will later try to recreate the moment, the scene that will fail because it's impossible to recreate the moment, the scene that will fail because inevitably it will neglect to mention that this moment is also about a future movie scene. The Other might also be a child, real, imagined, or aborted with booze. It might be a mother reassessing every child-rearing decision she made that caused her son to wind up in Atlantic City with \$2.70 at twenty-six years of age. The Other can be anyone. It can be a stadium full of people, but either way it's always at least one other Other. In the best case I think it's a singular composite of what two lovers were meant to be if the life that came out of the primordial soup didn't keep splitting apart, multiplying away from itself. Ourselves.

In the future, with Vera, we would often take pseudo-breaks from each other. We would tell the maitre d' at macro-biotic restaurants that we were waiting for a third person to arrive and have the table set accordingly. In Italian restaurants we'd tell them two more, a couple, were on their way. Once, even, at a diner somewhere in Long Island, we asked the waitress to set up a banquet table in the back for nine people and we waited and waited. Eventually we ordered our eggs and waffles, ate alone squished close to each other by the head of the table, and expressed our bewilderment as to our missing party to the Greek owner on our way out. It took the pressure off. It allowed us to see us as others might. And with all the extra potential stimuli it made it harder to get wrapped up playing ourselves.

When we'd leave only one extra seat open, we'd always order the Other something too, like a glass of wine or a hearty soup, though in our cockiest moments we ordered quiche. Once, we even ordered the Other a fruit bowl we knew was dumped out of a can. Bad karma, but not bad in a bad bad way. Bad karma in a way that I know will tease me when I can least manage the tease at some future date because canned fruit bowls are bad but still taste good, y'know? In our most glorious moment we ordered the Other lasagna stuffed with black beans and eggplant and let it go cold. The waitress asked if we wanted a doggie bag and we said "no." Oooh, the karma from that move still hits me in warm waves. Warm warm waves. I wonder if it still hits Vera too.

Rose would have found the discussion of that idea exhilarating — feeding the Other — but when it came right down to the implementation she'd panic and call it stupid, a waste of money. So frustrating. So so frustrating. She couldn't put two feet in. She served my purposes though, at least for the moment. At least as the third person between me and this toll collector guy.

Toll Booth Collector said to Rose: "You're a cute looking girl. You've got nice hips." Totally awkward and funny, but not gross so Rose said "thank you" while she laughed. I wasn't laughing though because I was thinking the same exact thing right when he said that. Oh, another reason I might be able to get off with Rose is because she's incredibly hot. She's thin, but devoid of muscle tissue so any meat she does have is fat, skinny fat. I love tossing it around. I'm not sure though. I figured it was her shifting of weight from leg to leg that kept her hips moving that triggered like thoughts in the toll booth collector and me, but when he followed that with "You should try the Baltimore Tavern, they've got good spaghetti" I was about to say "that's exactly what I could go for," when Rose said "that's exactly what I could go for," so instead I said "Will you join us? It's on us?"

On the walk over I explained to him the "missed change game" we played on the way down here and how we compartmentalize our money. So, though we overspent our gambling allotment and though I'm not sure I'll make this month's rent, there's another fifty bucks in Rose's wallet that needs to be spent tonight. You see, two nights ago at the bar Rose bartends, an Italian from Italy, probably Milan, called me a "Fagora" which he told me was "a boy with a beautiful girlfriend" but I wasn't having it. I told him I knew what it really means, assuming naturally it could only mean I wouldn't know what to do with such a beautiful girl. I could've been wrong, but forget about that. One thing lead to another, we got into a brawl, and amidst the mayhem Rose stole his money clip — fifty bucks.

That's not money you can put toward anything like a gas bill or car insurance — that's three pastas, three house salads, and a carafe of some Ruffino that hopefully won't be very roughino at all at this place called the Baltimore Tavern.

There was an Italian restaurant somewhere in Atlantic City where at that moment big big smiles were savoring bigger mouthfuls of risotto al funghi, penne melanzane, and mozzarella i corroza, where candles were lit by waiters with little black ties who asked where his diners were from and where they were staying tonight. Where big tips were left by patrons eager to take one last stroll down a shiny boardwalk at night and cast patronizing "I beat God all the time" looks upon the hoi polloi, if there were any hoi polloi in Atlantic City. the Baltimore Tavern was for the other people sitting at the roulette wheel with them earlier in the day. Us. And way less than us. Everyday Us-ers.

Howard ordered our meals and specified "no meat."

"—All right, what's your page, Howard? How'd you know we don't eat meat?"

He folded his hands, took a deep breath, and laid his eyes into each of us (which is saying a bit since I'd already been feeling the heavy weight of his stare as if he were a Chinaman since we met on the boardwalk).

"I've been working on the Garden State Parkway for eight years now. Forty hours a week, eight hours a day. I collect 35¢ from people. Depending on how much change I owe them, the entire transaction can take anywhere from ten to twenty seconds. That's ten to twenty seconds of a different song in every car. Ten to twenty seconds of blaring hip-hop, light FM at half the decibels, rock, R 'n' B, sometimes nothing, sometimes five cars in a row of the same song...at different volume levels, different treble and bass mixes, ten to twenty seconds of Megadeth over and over and over and over again.

"I remember when I first started I'd take my lunch break in the employee lounge. This older toll collector would ritualistically walk past me on his way to the coffee machine whistling 'Watching The Wheels' by John Lennon. '*...People think I'm crazy/doing what I'm do-oo-ooing...*' every fucking day. For the first few months I hated this guy 'cause I hate anyone that calls themselves crazy — I'm too lonely for that — and since he'd taken this as his theme song I assumed he thought of himself as one of those 'wild and crazy guys' that's going against the muther-fuckin' grain. Four months into my job though, I'm trying to eat my egg salad sandwich with like fifty gazillion songs flying through my skull, getting in the way of my ability to taste, this guy walks past me whistling that fucking song

again, as he did everyday, and all of a sudden it's clear to me that at this point he really must be crazy — you can only call yourself crazy for so long until you actually are crazy, that's what happened to Jesus — so I stop and ask him *how how how* he can keep singing that song everyday amid the constant barrage of all the others hurled at him in his booth in the middle of the road. He said it was the only way he could do the job without losing his mind — focusing *focusing* on one song to drown out all the others and unfortunately that was the song that was playing when this epiphany hit him and unfortunately the person driving the car playing that song looked like a constipated comic book store clerk and now he can't hear any other song except this one which he hears all day long and when he does he sees this guy's face and remembers the warm sweaty coins this guy handed him and this is why he has to drink his coffee as black and bitter as he can, to flood out the other bitter tastes in his mouth. Drown 'em out. I suggested he start only eating sweets and aphrodisiacs and try to convince himself he's gay — you can only call yourself gay for so long until you actually become gay, that's what happened to Little Richard — eventually it'd work and he might be able to change this affliction into a perpetual wet dream about fucking the comic book clerk, and since all orgasms are fleeting, he'd eventually be freed. You can't have a wet dream all day long, forever. He didn't go for it. Next day though, same thing, same poisoned look on his face so I start to panic, right, because I can see myself heading down that road, and as soon as I see him I have trouble tasting my food again. I feel the onslaught comin' on.

“When my lunch break was over I tried extra hard to concentrate on every song that came by because a) I didn't want one of them to remain in my head forever and because b) ‘Watching The Wheels’ was making a strong push for that position and I couldn't let myself turn into *that guy*, a replica of *that guy* — though I did toy with the idea of adopting that song as my own also, in the hope that our timing would be slightly off and when we'd meet both singing it we'd be on different verses or maybe in-between notes or something and they'd clash so hard the whole thing would come crashing down and we'd both be freed. I was scared to try it because the risks of it not working out that way were too scary, but man, maybe I should have because instead I began concentrating extra hard on the source of my initial insanity — the ten to twenty seconds of every song blared at me. I started to sing along. Five seconds in I'd always recognize the song and then I'd get at least another solid five seconds worth of sing-a-long groove time, then the next car, next song...and then...then...this...it got to the point where the wall of sound got to be so bad I couldn't hear

anything else. I needed pickled ginger to clean my palette between every car, but I didn't have any so a residue remained and built into a massive wall of sound. A dirty wall of sound. Every song became one big, loud, *All* song occupying every available drop of my dirty blood.

"Then something even bigger happened:

"I'm sitting there eating my egg salad sandwich, the songs in my head are getting louder and louder, so loud I'm having trouble tasting again and fucker walks in whistling his song, *Watching The Wheels*. I can't taste this fucking sandwich anymore so I start breaking it apart in my mind, I'm not letting this loser beat me every day. I used to love this sandwich. I dissected everything it was I liked about egg salad sandwiches in the first place. I liked mayonnaise. Mayonnaise, who made that shit up? I do love it, but it's practically the same as the eggs it's holding together, like eating a pasta sandwich, carb on carb, wheat on wheat, but it doesn't seem to matter. I liked celery and dill, stronger on the celery than the dill. That way you taste the dill more. I liked toasted rye. I liked mustard. I hadn't decided whether the slice of tomato added or subtracted from the whole thing. So some days I put it in, other days I don't ask for it, some days the people in the deli put it in without me asking for it because they think they've got me down and I just forgot to ask for it and then that makes me question if maybe I did forget to ask for it, but doesn't remove my doubts about whether it's one flavor too many or not. So I concentrated on mayo, egg, mustard, toasted rye, celery and dill, over and over and over in my head until I could taste them again. One by one. Celery, dill, tomato, over and over trying desperately to drown out these noises, particularly the one song.

"Something snaps.

"The songs disappear and leave a void for the flavors to explode throughout my entire body. I taste everything. Caraway seeds! I'd forgotten all about caraway seeds and now I realize they're a crucial chemical. Caraway, like dill. And the tomato verdict: yes, but only if I'm not eating or drinking anything else with my sandwich. The tomato should always be pondered before purchase. Otherwise you just wind up eating for sustenance alone.

"It was the best egg salad sandwich I ever had."

From unnerving slowness to the slowest build to mania, Howard's face lost all emotion. He stopped and looked at us again. I wanna say deadpan, but that's giving him too much credit. I wanna say stupid, but then you have a right to smack me for being so dumb. I wanna say he looked at us blank, not point blank, not with a blank expression on his face. Blank. Not

empty, man, something I'd never seen before. The spaghetti marinara we all ordered was really just lo mein with tomato sauce, though it was the best noodles pomodoro I'd ever had. Against the wall at the side of the table was the condiment rack. They sold fries at this "Italian" restaurant so the ketchup bottle between the oil and vinegar struck me as repulsive, but not surprising...until Howard picked it up and hit it twice on the fifty-sevens so two globs fell on the rest of his dish and he handed the open bottle to me. I hit it twice, mixed it in my pasta, and handed the bottle to Rose who refused, but tasted and kept tasting mine. New Cuisine. New Amazing Cuisine though I shall never ask for it again. I promise.

Howard had confided something to us, though I wasn't sure yet what it was. It was enough to make him pause and assess if he'd gone too far though, and I wanted him to know we were still with him so I tried to offer him something too:

"Every American book and film uses metaphor to discuss sex — skylines, wars, races, space exploration, etc., all serve as sexual allegory. All French books and films use sex as metaphors for larger ideas about towns, bike races, wars, space exploration, etc. They can't just use one thing to talk about itself because then the thing would disappear and they'd really just be talking about a building. Talking about a building can never be just talking about a building though, can it? Talking about an ass can never just be talking about an ass, yet we spend so much time thinking about ass. This friend of mine, Leo, recently wrote a great haiku:

*with an ass so fine
how can you expect me
to work*

"You know what I mean? Leo's been taking pictures of women's asses and breasts for a few months now. He has hundreds on store in his digital camera. He goes up to women at bars and says 'Hey, can I take a picture of your ass?' They always say yes because they know he needs to. He puts these asses and breasts onto his computer screen and works up a boner at his desk. Then he gradually enlarges and diminishes the pictures right up until the points far and near where his boner loses interest. Along the way he plots the boner's interest on a curved graph. For example, as he slowly zooms in on a woman's crack he gets harder and harder as he gets more and more of something and then the next thing you know the crack is just a void. It's no longer part of an ass. It's no longer apparent what it is at all and his boner starts to shrink. He does the same thing with breasts, most-

ly focusing on the space where the nipple meets the regular skin, though I've raised issue with him that that isn't the point he should focus on. He also stretches the asses out wide and long to the points where his boner grows and shrinks. What is too wide? Where is too long? At the point where his cock shrinks he freezes the shot and saves it. Though the project is as much about enlarging as it is about zooming out, he's calling the collection *Everything Is A Crack If You Shrink It Far Enough*. He's positive something happens at that point of limpness and subsequently the stiffest stiffness that comes right before falling flaccid. He's positive we must be talking about something. We must be talking about *something*, right? We can't spend our entire existence talking around everything, about Something Else. He's made some small discoveries too, like the hottest asses rest right on the line where the boner shrinks. He pushes them right to the threshold of width, right before the boner falls it's so hard it hurts.

"So I've got this image that as France ships its metaphor west across the Atlantic and we send ours east across the Atlantic both ideas pass each other for a split second and at that moment there is no metaphor and that must be what we're both really talking about. There is something between a dick and a pussy. Since this metaphor reveals itself in transit though, it's transient, like an orgasm. This is probably why all that crazy shit goes down in the Bermuda Triangle, where the metaphors meet. But is that it? Are all we're all really talking about is orgasms or is there a more permanent idea out there? A non-fleeting one? One that needs no metaphor? One we can ride?"

Man, I thought that was pretty good shit I tossed out, but he didn't bite. Rose didn't either. I think she didn't because she knew it was dishonest. I had ulterior motives to both impress and ease our guest, not simply to kick logic. He didn't bite, apparently, because there were much greater things on his mind.

"It was the best egg salad sandwich I ever had, I told you. That's when that fucker walks by and I hear him singing his song again: '*oh they give me all sorts of advice / to save me from roo-oo-oo-in.*' Pissed that he and it were what interrupted my moment I shot a dirty look at him only to realize he wasn't singing his song at all! His lips were not moving, but Christ I could hear it loud and clear and the more I listened the more I heard John Lennon's real voice and there were more instruments than just a hum and it was all so much more colorful and compressed. I was really hearing '*Watching The Wheels*' as it was originally recorded and as it lodged in his brain.

"— I was reading his mind —

“So I threw the rest of my sandwich away and ran back out to my booth. In the first car, Van Halen was the soundtrack to a feathered longhair think — screaming ‘boo-yah!’ on his way to getting laid by a girl his cousin introduced him to in Wildwood. In the second car, Jay-Z sang along inside the mind of a slouching homie contemplating whether to eat at the Sbarro’s pizzeria or Burger King at the next travel oasis. In the third car, some Chinese chick listening to Depeche Mode was pissed that her father took away her gold card and disgusted that her boyfriend wasn’t affluent enough yet to give her one of her own. All day long I just kept listening, reading minds. I didn’t go home that night. I went to the diner and milked a strawberry milkshake and disco fries for hours listening in on affairs, cock-size insecurities, dudes that really do give a shit about Derek Jeter’s homerun record last season, man, everything — everything.

“There were times though that nothing would register — silence. At first it didn’t make much sense. Someone would be obsessing about nail polish, there’d be nothing for awhile, then all of a sudden they’d be wondering why that coffee hasn’t pushed out a shit yet. What was the nothing all about? I couldn’t accept that those were moments when people just weren’t thinking. The silence was abrupt anyhow, like I was being cut off. Like someone was pressing a record button over more dialogue, deleting something. A week into this I realized my brain was filled with more shit now than it ever had been. All I was getting was shit. Is shit all people think about? If so, what isn’t shit? Everything was just a whole lot of nothing. Before I let the depression sink in that everything rests on a mushy foundation of bullshit interactions I decided to exploit my talent. That’s when I started coming down here to the casinos and sitting at the poker tables calling people’s bluffs. After my exploits I’d buy myself some sort of treat, usually some sort of chocolaty chocolate ice-cream on a sugar cone and take it slow up and down the boardwalk. I noticed loud louds coming from a lot of people, but there were more silent types on this boardwalk than I’d ever encountered before too. In normal life I would read people’s minds and then be interrupted with these breaks, then back to whatever bullshit it was they were thinking about, and I assure you it was always bullshit. Down here, on the boardwalk, it was like either I could read their minds or I couldn’t. They were either all blank or endlessly rambling. It took me three seconds to focus and build the two composites: The readable minds were the winners dreaming about yachts, Armani suits, and bottles of Cristal. The unreadable minds were the losers. They were the depressed ones with nothing in their hands. The ones that just lost everything. The ones on

their way to the Baltimore Tavern. The ones thinking about shit. Serious shit: what sort of shit got them there, what sort of shit's gonna get them out, why they do this sort of shit over and over again. What I'm saying is: they were thinking about important shit, gettin' down to it stuff and all of a sudden I recognized my gift as an affliction — I can read people's minds, but only the insignificant thoughts, the bullshit, as soon as they're about to go profound: silence. I can only read people's bullshit, all day long, everyday. I'm forced to eat the slop here at the Baltimore Tavern because it's the only place I can eat in silence. We're surrounded by losers.”

So, silence across the table too. There was something maniacally comical about the whole situation. Part of it probably stemmed from our inability to digest it, to fit it in, our slow *mentabolisms* if you will. I asked for the check as the waitress walked by, thinking it was an artistic ending. Thinking this is just the life I lead: I get laid every night, in a different city every day. People confess everything to me, I meet mind readers and fortune tellers on every corner. But it wasn't. It was young and amateur. A bad exit. Rose paid with the fifty bucks and there was still change left over. We bid our new friend adieu outside the Baltimore Tavern and said we knew we'd meet again. “We” meant “I,” though, and Howard knew it. Rose was our empty seat, though she was an exciting empty seat.

I can't believe I let that dude go.

We walk back to the car stupefied, aghast, “oh-mi-gods” and giggles all around. Right before we got in to begin our three-hour drive home I counted the change from dinner: “So how're we gonna spend the remaining twelve bucks, Rose?” as I slip my finger into her labes.

Stupid, cocky, muther-fucking boy.