

Dust

Charles Blackstone

When I wake up in the morning, she's already gone. Must have happened at some point during the night or maybe even later than that. There's a note written in oblique, dark lettering on an index card I find wedged between the alarm clock and the remote. In a green marker script unquestionably her own, she wrote:

Es wird gezeigt, daß hach der Quantenmechanik ein harmonischer Oszillator im Mittel ebenso abklingt, wie dies nach klassischen Electrodynamik in der weise...

I have no idea even remotely why she would leave such a missive for me to read upon rising and feel particularly affronted. Since I don't speak any German, I feel like this is even more so an affront. She knows I took French in high school and that I barely even remember any of that. The only verb I can still conjugate is *avoir* but I always end up confusing it with *être* somewhere during the task, usually near *nous*. I read on:

... zu ersetzen, daß die klassischen Gesetze den wahrscheinlichsten Ablauf der Ereignisse beschreiben.

I look for cognates. *Electrodynamik*. We had an argument last night that started before sex -- perhaps a kind of antagonistic foreplay -- broke off during the throes of ecstasy, and resumed shortly after we finished. The argument, oddly enough, was about having an exterminator to come up and bomb the apartment. Renee has been unshakably convinced that we're in the midst of a moth and termite epidemic.

My laughing, which really sounded like a bizarre hybrid of a laugh -- some third or fourth generation concoction, a merger of a cough and a wheezing -- like I was struggling to breathe, couched between deep, anxious breathing in of the dark oxygen -- seemed to vex her and, I figured, would give her more lashing out ammunition, but she just stared at me weakly.

"So tell me again why you want this?" I asked, when it became too quiet and her looking became too pointed.

"Because... we... need it?"

"There are no bugs here."

"It's not 'bugs.' Try not to be so simplistic."

"What is it if it's not?"

"We're having," she said slowly, as if dealing with a tiny pugnacious child, "a problem. Usually when people have something like this happen they call someone and someone comes to the apartment in question and solves the problem."

Maybe the letter means that she's leaving me, packing up her things, driving straight to her parents' in New Jersey, no stopping for sodas or burgers or even for gas

even though that's somewhat unlikely. She always gets anxious if the tank falls beneath halfway, which rules out any interminable trek to anywhere. I've tried to convince her that there is, after all, a whole half left, beyond that middle gauge read. To this she's often responded "but then I don't have a safety net" and so I usually forgo bringing up the fact that the gas light doesn't mean you're completely out, that it's just a reminder to stop at a station when you can. That that's supposed to be safe. I could always tell by the way she would draw in her shoulders that it's beside the point. Perhaps that what *harmonischer* means. That you'll eventually get to this point in any argument where you become distracted and completely lose interest in whatever you'd just been shouting about. Typically this moment is more disheartening and anti-climactic than if you had actually lost the argument because the terms have been pulled out right from under you.

My friend from college, Trey Michaels, finished law school last summer and is getting married next week. I know the girl he's marrying. He comes to the apartment and I put on my U of C shorts and a gray sweatshirt while he examines the index card. He holds it at various distances from his eyes, alternating between squints and nods. He frowns. He tries to sound out some of the words by just moving his lips and tongue, getting a feel for them without actually making any sound. He reads *wahrscheinlichsten* several times this way before trying to read it aloud, fairly awkwardly, breaking down the syllables.

"What do you think it says?" I ask, when he resumes squinting, relaxing his jaw. He puts the card down on the table and runs his hands through his thick dark hair.

"No idea. That's a long word though."

I bend down to tie my shoes and pull up my socks, which are bunched up.

"She might not have meant this for you."

"Who else would she be breaking up with."

Trey smiles in this kind of bent, creepy way. "A German guy. A German physicist?"

I shake my head. "Forget about it."

He points at my shoes. "Are we going to do this?"

We start jogging slowly at first but I start to lose my breath and our rhythm slowly becomes discordant. Trey is always in perfect shape -- he's always been -- and rarely ever loses a stride. I could afford to lose ten pounds. His shorts are those tight lycra ones and I think that's how he convinced Julianne to marry him, showing off exquisite musculature beneath his lycra shorts. Since he's been out of law school, Trey's been working on a screenplay, and he's recounting the specifics of a scene he's been working on -- a mother trying to come to terms with her son's disillusionment. He's framing a shot while he speaks between his hands, something I'm supposed to envision, but all I can see is the asphalt bike path and the dewy grass which surrounds us. Suddenly he interrupts himself. I'm thinking he's going to announce that the scene is completely unimaginable, unthinkable, unfilmable and dismiss it. He's done that before when we've had jogging film debate.

"Julianne wants to move to California," he says. "And--"

"What?" I ask, between gasps. The shock of what he's suggesting actually helps me to quicken the pace.

"Yeah," he says. "I mean, I sort of suggested it first."

"Why did you?"

"Alexi thinks she can sell this script, so, you know."

"How does she think that? You haven't even finished it."

"She's not so concerned with the script itself-- she's thinking more about, well, me."

"You? Like selling you?"

"Yeah," he says, looking up at a tall tree wistfully. "She thinks it will be work -- I could be the next Michael Crichton, but you know, with law instead."

"What about environmental law? What about abolishing pollution and all of that?"

"I'll tell you, I don't, and I've sort of been thinking about this a lot, I don't want to let something go just because I'm scared of it."

"But you always let something go -- it's inevitable -- when you take something, decide to do something, there's something you're going to not take or not do."

"You don't think I've considered that?"

"Well, it's something to think about."

@ the slightest provocation you go and fall in love. w/no malice or spite or contempt do you consider the last girlfriend. you insinuated yourself onto her like some kind of obscure fashion and then it's we're soul mates and i love you and all those platitudes you've always done shit like this so it's nothing, neither earth shattering nor life threatening. it's become quite benign actually. consider the girlfriend before that. that blond brown wildhaired tiny young ann arbor girl who always wore blue windbreakers and sometimes a baseball hat and laughed things off nothing really serious and fortunately or unfortunately they got to her it was october during the week before opening night of the winter's tale before you became too invested he pillaged her and made her dull & so it wasn't as hard to pull away as you would have thought. you and he switched places nearly seamlessly, according to the blocking, without even realizing it. now you work and type things and touch vigorously your computer.

The first time Dana came to my apartment was on a Saturday, in the morning. I'd been working on a Flash movie for a client's site and it was already weeks overdue. The movie was supposed to animate phone numbers or prices -- I don't remember which; they tend to start to look alike after awhile -- and they were supposed to dance around the client's preposterous floating logo and random giddy auto parts. My boss Adam sent Dana over, I think to surreptitiously check on my progress after suffering my continuous reports of crashes, core dumps, fuck ups. He had never grown comfortable with me working outside of the office as much as I seem to have had been, but I can't really say how much I was, for that matter. Often I'd spend the days poring over magazines or the *Times* or watching C-Span like an automaton. Dana had on a long

brown coat and jeans and a purple shirt underneath. Her hair was long, really long, well past her shoulders and reaching the middle of her back. She kept it held together in a ponytail.

I led her to the corner of the living room, two sides of windows set apart from the rest of the apartment by two sides of desk and two large potted trees and a hanging plant. She sat down in my swivel chair and pushed her ponytail to the other side of her back, as if one side had grown heavy from having to support it for so long. She pushed her glasses closer to her eyes, balancing the earpieces. She put her hand on the optical mouse with this deft direction and self-assurance that seemed so sexy and charming. No time before we acclimated.

"It's your network setting," she said, without having spent much time deciphering a small message box. "I have to check your DNS server entries."

"Really? That's what it is?" I ask, trying to sound surprised, entirely conscious of the pacing of the letters, as the sound builds together to form words as they travel out of my mouth and into the small verdant bordered space between us. I motion towards a new tiny dialogue box that she squints at. "I bet this is one of the least exciting ways we could be spending a Saturday."

She looks up from the screen and smiles. I feel almost like saying something but I don't. I want to ask her a question about the breeze of letters and numbers she sends across the black box. This strange, beguiling, tiny window which refuses to acknowledge me or let me even see what's going on -- I don't have my contacts in and I would feel like too much of an idiot in front of her with my glasses on -- though I find her in glasses to be rather pleasantly disarming and she starts just like she can read my thoughts.

"You distract me," I call down the stairs.

"What?" she asks, turning around carefully.

"You make me lose my train of thought," I say. "For what it's worth."

And I don't tell her how she really distracts me, I mean the part about how it's hard to remember that I have a job or the part about how she makes me not want to move away and how she makes me want to know where she is and what she does and what she really wants and what she thinks about things and how I could never really tell her about how amazing I think she is -- the extent of it -- because I'm sure she'd say but you don't really know that much about me and I'd say but I want to find out and she will never know about how much I think about her and think about seeing her and want to hear her say things and talk to people and how she gives me that nervous swaying feeling and I forget things because I feel like there's so much I want to tell her and things about me and you know it's funny I imagined bringing her home and introducing her to my parents who never think much of anyone but would instantly adore her and how she and I and they would all play board games together and we'd spend a great deal of time laughing. And I love her eyes. And her voice. And her smile. And I want to believe that it wouldn't work and it's too hard right now and there are so many good reasons not to even try. And I know this. But I look at her and I feel

compelled to see everything and absorb and internalize every part of her face and sometimes my contacts blur up so I want to squint and push aside my eyelids to clear and I'm aware of the fact that there's awkwardness and pauses and the general finite volatility of the thing -- like something volcanic and you know about it because you're so finely tuned but the thing of it is in a second or two or five it's all over.

"Excuse me," she says softly. She lifts a cell phone from her narrow case and dials a phone number without looking at the buttons. I try to guess the numbers she dials from the tones -- I make out a two and a three and either a nine or a four -- I always get those mixed up -- and smiles at me again. She looks at me and then at the screen. Me, lingering, the screen quickly, and then out the window.

"Hi," she says. "I'm almost done here." Then, she starts speaking in another language -- I'm guessing it's Hindi but I really have no idea and her voice becomes clearer -- the words whose import I don't immediately understand but contemplate -- the conflation of which doesn't materialize in those moments I stand next to her, won't until later. She laughs at something she listens to closely. She reaches for a pen, holds it between her fingers, which are long and even yet not slight, and sets it down again.

There are tiny instances where my knees, as I lean forward to the keyboard to type, touch the swivel chair and she moves breezily first right and then left -- to me -- and it's like we're touching. I tense up to meet her force -- it's like our energies are touching, connecting. She turns away quickly but so subtly I might not have realized it had I not been within such palpable propinquity.

She pulls a URL up on the browser and it has these form fields and I'm guessing she's on the phone waiting for some kind of code to input and I almost forget why she's even here, why she's sitting in my corner swiveling around my tiny cluttered space -- so many thick dusty manuals with unbroken spines like thin hard icing -- you wouldn't believe how quickly things gather dust in this apartment.

My goofy uncle Roger whom I met when I was eleven years old in Southfield was the first to teach me about dust. He was my mother's step-brother so his official uncle status by genealogical standards in relation to me was always a little ambiguous but I always said Fuck it and threw my arms around him as widely as I could -- this guy was so fucking huge I could never complete the hug -- barely even scratched the girth surface -- but held on as tightly as I could, before my ligaments started to burn, nonetheless. My mother always seemed to be lurking when Roger and I would interact -- like some kind of director or instigator but refused to let the characters exist freely naturally because of her goddamn insecure ego. I only saw Uncle Roger twice after meeting him and on the last time, mid-hug, he called over to my mother, barely able to eke out sound because of this thick horse cough he always seemed to be just getting or just getting over which struck me as a little weird even then and I was only eleven years old and completely oblivious -- all I did were these silly algebra equations, cross-multiplying fractions, and imagine these ridiculous theoretical science experiments -- these tiny pseudo biology things -- extrapolations of the stuff we did with fruit flies in

class and I even had this lab coat with my dad's name, M.D. in red stitching above the pocket and I wore this dumb jacket constantly and I think the sleeves would have been short on a normal sized adult because they didn't hang beyond my arms and over my hands like you would traditionally find though the bottom was torn jaggedly with loose lines of stringy thread dangling in places because of the hasty way my mother lobbed off six inches to make sure I wouldn't fall over and onto my face when walking around in the thing. I looked at cross-sections of insects and pieces of chocolate and smashed Tic-Tacs under the dingiest microscope imaginable.

Uncle Roger, standing there, quite amused by my dancing around the house saying "drosophila" and "chitin" like a maniac and checking off imaginary criteria on my clipboard, taking it all in and I can't-- you know, in retrospect -- imagine a time when I was so unyieldingly outgoing -- I am so much calmer now, in comparison. I think Ann Arbor diluted me. Uncle Roger, emerging from the background, reached up my microscope and attempted to press a thickly padded eye to the tiny view. After trying to reposition it several times, he returned it to the table, coughing good-naturedly, scratching at his balding head. He toddled over to the fireplace, steadying himself against the mantle. He bellowed, "You know what you should look at under there? This." He dragged his stubby index finger across a framed photo of me and my mother and my father and in the picture my eyes looked like they were crossing and my mother, hiding underneath a big, silly hat, looked directly into the lens, uneasily, like she just couldn't wait for the flash and the snap and the dismantle so she could go do something else. Maybe my father was loath in pressing or centering or feigned ambivalence over the staging or the angle or the sky-to-still-life-ratio to taunt her. Later, Uncle Roger continued to argue his case, as if I were some kind of grant board and this was his last chance to plead for funding.

"Dust is ... is like ... a microcosm of everything."

I probably bent my eyebrows or yawned so he tried another tactic.

"Within these tiny particles --" now he rubbed his thumb and middle finger together vigorously before running the hand against the red leg of his sweatpants, sweat droplets collecting above the eyebrows, his breathing arduous but his voice rapt, "--these particles can tell you everything about this house, your mom, your dad, what you ate for dinner last Christmas, everything you ever said or thought or wondered about or wanted."

And I believed him. As I got older and learned more things about biology and plants and reproduction and chemistry elements and stable ions, I wanted to ask Uncle Roger more about the dust theory but he disappeared -- literally. You'd never imagine somebody so fucking fat could float away like that. But he did.

In the cafe, most of the tables are taken, so I just have to stand around, scoping out the place while the barista makes my latte. Chess games. Guys with backwards baseball hats staring into laptop displays. Couples bunching together enduring the cold, whipping air overhead. A mother and her tiny daughter sit at a round table in the corner, on opposite sides, the mother on a straight red chair and the papery thin

daughter on the bench part aloft red foamy padding. A coffee guy shouts, "Caramel Frap!" and I look up and blink my eyes even though I know it's not my drink. When my latte comes, the mother and daughter are readying themselves to go, gathering purses and backpacks. The mother, this thick gray woman with teacherly glasses, rubs a napkin across the table, in long, purposeful strokes. The daughter sighs, "Mom, please," and shakes her head. The mother says, "It's okay," trying to sound soothing and I bite my lip, hold it in place, suppress smiling and the coffee guy shouts, "Caramel Frap" again and then one more time shortly after that and it has to be that more than one person has ordered one because why would it take such a long time for someone to figure out what the fuck was going on. But I'm no longer thinking about other people's drinks because I'm settling into a booth on the other side of the cafe.

By the time Julianne and Trey saunter in, a chess player beside me named Gaston flirts with a bubbly sort of tiny girl named Caroline with these large, wet eyes, and I feel like I want to go before this even begins to happen. When I look up from a semi-long cathartic holding of my forehead, propping it against my hand attached to the arm which is moored to the table, the Gaston has crossed that imaginary booth dividing line -- you never really know where the table plots start and end because we're all attached by the bench -- the red foamy cushiony seat runs around most of the cafe like a flat petrified snake and in a way it's sort of nice and I wonder who will sit on this side with me and who the other.

Trey sits down first. He pulls a hooded Chicago sweatshirt which is gray over his head leaving him in a t-shirt which is blue. "She went up for coffee," he says.

I say the following in a pseudo-English accent: "You send your beloved betrothed up to the counter to proffer and prepare your coffee beverage?"

Trey winces. "Stop talking like that. Anyway, she volunteered. Don't try to typecast me as some kind of territorial usurper."

"I wasn't," I rejoin faintly. Then, "so what happened?"

"We met with Alexi Solano. She's still optimistic. She was quite taken by Julianne."

"Really," I say. "So I'm to assume that Julianne didn't ... what was it all those times? have a 'tremendous nic-fit' and have to be physically escorted and gently placated?"

"Why do you bring that up? Like that's at all relevant to the conversation we're currently maintaining."

"Sorry. So, what else."

"There's the wedding. I'm not really getting too immersed." He looks at my hand that I have wrapped around my empty latte cup.

"What?" I say, pulling the hand back.

"Has she called?"

"No."

"What's the next step?"

"I guess I forget about her?"

"You know that doesn't work."

"Compartmentalize?"

"You sad, sad martyr."

"Fuck you. You're not really being helpful right now."

Trey stands up, smiling proudly, to receive Julianne and the coffee she holds with an uneasy tension, clenching her jaw. She exhales pointedly when she's freed her hands. "You could have carried some of this shit," she bristles. She leans across the table to greet me cordially, implanting a tiny kiss on my forehead. "What were you talking about?"

"Alexi," I say. "Trey mentioned she really liked you."

Julianne smiles weakly, nonplussed. "It's all an act with those types." Trey looks like he's about to interject but she deftly preempts: "It's true, I'm sorry."

"What, you think I don't know this?" Trey asks, holding his coffee but not drinking any of it. "She is a con-artist."

"Let's talk about something else," she says quickly, all in one gasp.

"I'm going to wash my hands," Trey says, sliding his chair back. It makes a scraping sound against the tile. After he reaches the other side of the cafe and Julianne is aware of this, knows he's suitably out of earshot, she deploys.

"This woman, this so-called 'famous writer' is a fucking joke," she says, her voice low and her tone measured, as if it were severely quiet and she had to compensate but it's actually so noisy that around us, it doesn't even sound like talking at all. "She is deluding him and, of course I can't say anything and he's just so hung up on this fucking dream life that he's completely taken by this ... and of course I'm"-- she draws quotation marks in the air with the index and middle finger of both hands-- "'evil' and an 'instigator' and the bitchy asshole fiancée if I try to--" she buries her head in her hands now, letting out a long, plaintive sigh. "God fucking dammit."

"Well, I got a lot of reading done," I say, flipping the pages of the Dreamweaver manual I brought with.

"Me too," she says, lifting a folded *Times* from beside her Kate Spade purse and dropping it onto the table as if no longer able to support its immense heaviness.

"No, I'm glad we decided to do this," I say. "I was starting to go stir-crazy in the apartment."

She looks at me and touches my coffee cup. "You still haven't said if you're going to move with us--"

"Julianne, it's just so--"

"You're lying," she returns in singsong.

"No, I'm serious, it's right now I don't--"

"I don't want to hear it," she says, shaking her head and clacking her tongue to emphasize a "no."

Trey returns. "I checked the voice-mail," he tells one or both of us. I can't tell for sure which because he's looking out the window while returning to sitting, moving and speaking almost involuntarily. "Nothing from the apartment people. The couch guy--"

"The upholsterer? The importer? The builder?" she chokes out, exasperated. "Be more specific."

Trey lifts his head slowly. He continues. "Your mother too."

My heart starts to beat faster. It's the kind of nervous psychotic hyperbeating which you can feel but palpably not in a remote way, almost like if you touch your neck or forehead but really something larger. I get this feeling like this conversation I've heard before -- these people I've seen before though everyone from before, the mother with the cleaning fetish and the precociously disenchanted daughter and Gaston and Caroline are all gone, have been spun around and their places restocked with others, different but similar. Julianne asks me what I'm thinking about.

"Nothing," I say tremulously, almost gasping, like I've been jogging and can't catch my breath.

"He's upset about Renee," Trey says, a little louder than what I'd consider ideal. Behind the trays of muffins and rows of neatly packaged salads and sandwiches at the counter, a bell rings. Then I hear a hissing which is supplanted with more hostile arguing.

"I'm not, I mean, I don't--"

Julianne looks like she wants to say something but stops herself.

Trey gets up again and walks towards the back corner where the phones are, without excusing himself.

"What else is going on," she asks me, her voice lilting gently.

And in that moment I want to tell her all about Dana and how I can't seem to make myself stop thinking about her and how she makes me feel even when she's not around and how it's almost a frightening thing to come so close to something which seems like the reification of something mercilessly inscrutable which you're typically not even allowed to see like a secret vapor and how it makes me wonder why it is that something would want to make us come together -- so I could know something so powerful actually did exist -- but then make it implausible for us to be together -- so I would have to know that we can't actually have anything.

Julianne wants me to say something -- her eyes are blazing arcs of flame through my body -- almost impaling me to the wall so I can't squirm around the grip is so tight.

"I'm okay," I say.

She doesn't look convinced.

Trey sits back down. "Where did you go?" Julianne asks.

"Voice mail. Alexi called."

"Well?"

"She said it might be a few more months."

"A few more months?"

"Maybe a year."

"A year?" Julianne flings down her spoon, which clangs loudly and stays several conversations. Some people look over at us and Trey nods regally in spite of our embarrassment.

"Can you control yourself?" he says through tightly clenched teeth. "Alexi Solano is a miserable old whore."

"A whore who can't get laid," Julianne tells me. She touches her face, scratches her forehead right at the point where hair begins. Her hair is long and straight and brown -- all one color -- and neatly braided.

"I hate her," Trey says, measuring out the words: "I want her dead."

"You don't really want to kill her, do you?" I ask, somewhat tentatively.

"No," he laughs, hanging a wrist limply in front of him. "I guess I don't *really*." He continues on from Julianne's assertion: "Nobody would want to fuck this depraved hole, she's right."

"That's probably why she's fucking with you," I say.

"Exactly," Julianne thrusts in.

"Why does she make you so angry?" Trey asks her sweetly. "If it happens--" he corrects himself "--*when* it happens it will be great but honestly why should we be impatient?"

"Because I don't want to fucking stay here forever waiting for her to call you back. That's why."

As soon as she says this I know what the inevitable follow-up question is going to be. Trey delivers it later on, outside, in front of the café. We're playing in the snow. Julianne screeches as Trey hurls a snowball at me that hits her squarely in the arm. "Go away," she shouts. "Go away." She starts running down the street.

When she reaches the end of the block and looks back to see if we're coming, only to notice we're still standing, she screams again.

Trey turns to me and asks, "So are you moving with us or what's the story?"

The next letter comes in the mail. The return address is nonexistent and the postmark is conveniently obliterated. After staring at and even purposely touching the ink on the squiggles of the cancellation stamp, I start to see something that vaguely looks like San Luis Obispo. I don't know how I come to this conclusion -- I've never even been to California -- or why. There's no real, tangible basis here; the methodology enigmatic, her motivation, which I can detect before even opening it, intentionally dubious, misleading. The envelope feels warm and if I listen closely it almost sounds like that wispy hollow shell noise like a beach. Inside the envelope is an index card. One side, the unlined side, has the word VALIDITY written in black ink. It's my handwriting. On the reverse side, the side with the faint blue lines on it, it says:

A feature of arguments in which the relation between premises and conclusion is such that if the premises are true, the conclusion could not be false. And written above and below and in between and filling any white space on the card is:

Man erkennt leicht, daß diese Lösung den Anfangsbedingungen genügt. Die Oszillatoren verteilen sich mit der Zeit über alle Niveaus $i < n$ derart, daß immer...

Her handwriting. Trey tears the card out from my hand and begins to examine it.

"I think she's fucking crazy," he says, flinging the card back at me.

"She must have taken that from here," I say. I point at the VALIDITY side. "I wrote that."

"Whatever she thinks she wants," Trey says, reaching out, gesturing at me to return the card to him. "Whatever she's thinking, you don't need to deal with."

"I know," I say. "You're right. But how do I make it stop?"

He taps his finger against the card several times quickly: tap tap tap tap tap. "I think the way to stop is..." he trails off.

"Is what?" I urge.

He lifts up his hands and lowers them. The card slips out of his clutches and billows to the floor. I bend down to pick it up. It's suddenly weird holding it. It feels like it's supposed to be all the answers but it really isn't at all.

The next day, Dana calls from her cell phone. She's coming over again. After she tells me this I return with a kind of reluctant "Oh, yeah?" which prompts her to ask if they told me.

"No, I don't think they did," I say, relaxing a bit to the suggestion. "But it's no problem."

"If you're doing something else," she starts.

"No, no," I say, trying to sound reassuring. "I wasn't."

"If you want to do this some other time..."

"No," I repeat, this time more firmly, wondering if my resolve sounds questionable over the phone or if she's perhaps reconsidering. I haven't looked at the changes she made he last time she was here or printed out the coding I promised her I'd review.

"Okay, well, I'm parking right now," she says. I hear rustling like she's passing the phone from hand to hand or craning her neck to see behind the car. "I'll see you soon."

"Okay," I say, but chances are she doesn't hear this because of a wave of static rushing in, disconnecting the call.

The bug argument actually started the night before the fight, but in a slightly different form. Renee found out about the wedding and how I was planning on going alone. She woke me up, during the night, shouting.

"So you weren't going to say anything. You were just going to go and that would be it. Just like that."

I rub my eyes, yawning, remembering a sandwich I made for dinner and didn't finish. "Look," I say sharply, sitting up. "It's not like I was trying to hide things from you." Feeling completely naked in a thin, old t-shirt. It's freezing in the bedroom, a breeze coming from somewhere, a window barely open, one of the heating vents.

"You're totally missing the point."

I think it definitely has to be the way she looks at me. I think the way that she looks so interested in what I have to say has something to do with it but there's definitely more to it -- it's this concern for me -- not concern in a dotting or obsequious way -- it's much more subtly crafted -- this delicate interweaving of ingenuous deference with idyllic longing that makes her gaze -- her gaze -- so captivating. And powerful. I feel helpless like my body is suddenly evanescent within some kind of ephemeral container -- and normally I probably don't sound this arguably remote but I swear to fucking god I felt like I stood outside myself and watched that self -- whose self? Mine? Hers? Just some free-floating form turn essential and it's just a way nobody's ever made me feel -- and the way she speaks the cadences of her voice and the dramatic spin she gives -- the places she emphasizes coupled with the expressions and rapt facial contortions -- everything infused with this fun and carefree jocularity -- carelessness -- mine? hers? someone else's we're just temporarily inhabiting? And the volley of ideas -- both of us -- kind of cant which you literally can't quite denounce as merely cant because there's undoubtedly so much more to it. You talk with this undercurrent of exigency -- like this is the first conversation inextricably linked with the last and it's those opposite simultaneous extremes, the inherent polarity problem, which charges it and you and the attraction repulsion -- what kind of power is in that field which could freak you out given the chance which could wind your arms about you tightly and then snap -- let you fly around and hit corners and edges with glancing blows and it doesn't matter where you'd fly off too for the simple fact that no matter where the rubber band ends up -- even if you lose sight of it for a really fucking long time eventually you find it -- someone finds it -- and completes the circle, solves the mystery, puts a peremptory and sudden end to the conversation.

Of course there's the other notion that at this moment when she's walked into your life, amidst so much disparity and things which, by the mere fact that they exist encourage discussion and argument and fistfight and make your hands sweat. Maybe she's there to be that wedge, that cork, the thing that assuages and mollifies and stays and makes the bad parts go away? Or if not away just not be so vexing.

"But you were hiding things," she says. "You did. You do. It's hiding."

"No, it's not. You just fucking don't understand. You refuse to see anything through anybody else's eyes."

"Whose eyes can I look through? Who opens up to me and lets me in their big thick fucking head. Certainly not you."

"There's nothing to know about me. I'm fucking nothing. Don't you understand?"

"You want to know what I see? I see someone -- goddamnit, I fucking see *you* so fucking wrapped up in your two stupid friends. You love Julianne and Trey more than anybody else. How could I ever compete with that?"

"I can't stand this conversation--"

"Strikes a nerve?"

"No. No, goddamnit. You're so fucking simplistic. There is no nuance in the way you approach anything." I stop speaking and she won't look at me. "Or maybe it's just how you treat me."

"Maybe we'd just better turn around then."

"Turn our backs to the disturbing picture and pretend like it's not there?"

"Maybe," she says softly, running her thumb along the outline of her ear, tracing it, and then touching her scalp. "But I think when something is so destructive and intrinsically subversive -- like these fucking insidious termites you REFUSE to acknowledge -- god you can be such a motherfucker sometimes -- are you even fucking listening to me? Give me that water. Thank you." She sips from the green plastic cup I offer her and swallows appreciatively -- and then takes another sip and spits at me -- missing my face -- a splash on my t-shirt and I lurch back instinctively -- banging my elbow into the headboard. "You wouldn't even notice if I were gone," she says, and then hisses, "You'd probably sleep through it."

Renee acts like she knows me. She acts like her conception of us is some kind of tangible, non-negotiable, unshakable entity but it's not. It's a vagary. And I'll admit at certain moments over the course of things certain thirty-five millimeter chunks of the reel -- I might have felt the same way, who knows -- and that reel is, if you really want to get into it, just a bunch of tiny frames -- you run them together and it starts to look cohesive and seamless but you slow things down or stop the movement all together and it's unequivocal -- just a series of building static images. But I know we all delude ourselves and see things as we want to see them. Imbibe things with all this meaning and then pull away quickly, just to see if anything sticks, is there like when you were four years old and you'd imagine what it would be like to fly and when you'd take your stance, up on that chair and then jump down. In that tiny moment before you'd land on the carpet, that split second of being planted on nothing -- that was the essence of the whole thing and you could catch it -- the diminution regardless. And that's an image which you've held onto for so much of your life and there has to be some reason to explain that kind of emotional attachment to an idea -- commitment to the memory. To the idea.

"So you think you're ready for this," I ask Julianne, after she pulls the thermometer out of my mouth. She twists it around, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. She squints at the tiny fragments of line gradation and liquidy solid mercury.

"Yeah," she says proudly, and then, "I guess."

"You realize this is a big step."

"You sound like my mother."

"Big."

"Yes," she groans.

"Ashes to ashes," I start.

"Dust to dust, I know," she concludes. "I was a catholic once, you know. Until I knew better."

She pauses for a minute before continuing. "Besides, how can I back out now -- not saying that I'd want to -- I've had a year of this as actual thing progressing and god knows how many years before that with marriage-as-sublimated-desire."

"Well, yeah, right. I'm saying that."

She laughs. "You'd think it was funny. You'd find it hysterical if I, you know, backed out, freaked out, like some kind of fucking Sandra Bullock and look what happened with that."

"What? I don't think I'm getting the analogy."

"That guy... you know. The 'Suddenly Susan' guy who fucked some prostitutes and then killed himself."

I start laughing, realizing what she's talking about. "Julianne," I say. "I don't think that had anything to do with *that*."

"You don't know that for sure," she says, a bit defensively. "Actors take parts way seriously. I knew this guy who worked at the Mambo Room and he was telling me that he played Hamlet once -- nothing big -- this, like, community dinner theater or something. I think they passed out juice cups and oatmeal cookies periodically just to be sure everyone was alive -- anyway, this guy went into therapy after the six or eight weekends this thing ran... just to try to deal with the subtext."

@ the very least you would think i'd have learned something by now. you would think that i wouldn't have these sort of things happen, that i wouldn't make mistakes, that i would be able to protect myself from those things relationships falling all those things that can sneak into your life furtively and fuck shit up throw your heart your shoes your papers fragment your hard drive irreparably at the first chance they'd get. you would think that i would have some kind of built-in mechanism or at least one i could attach externally after having this happen so many times that would protect me and look out for me and say something before something bad would happen. But there isn't any such mechanism in my life. Nothing like that.

Dana comes over in the afternoon. The second doorbell rings while I'm hovering over a near-boiling kettle on the stove. She's wrapped up tightly in her gray coat, a woolen sweater sticking out at the neck and the sleeves -- her tiny gray gloves with the purple tips. I was only moments before wearing a bathrobe but I still feel awkward as if I were still wearing it, at that point where it would suddenly lose its context, now that she's standing here.

She asks me about codes for the Flash movie, things needing to be embedded. Information contained in a series of e-mails.

I admit I haven't checked any of my e-mail.

She shakes her head at me in a scolding sort of way but sweetly.

"I have a cold," I say. "Do you want some tea?"

"Yes." She pulls off her gloves and begins to unbutton the coat. "That would be great."

I bring the mug of tea over to the computer corner where she's set up. She types quickly. Her ear against a cell phone, balancing it against her shoulder.

"Thank you," she says. She closes the phone and reaches for the mug, grasping it firmly, lifting it to her lips, the mug planted within a firm, protective two-handed grasp.

She takes a tiny sip. The rising steam momentarily mists her glasses. She says, "Come look at this."

I move around the desk and stand beside her. The screen contains large sections of thickly set text, embedded code. Brackets and arrows and lots of fours and sevens. Tags separated by lines that wrap around and around. It's hard to read because I keep thinking of other things but I try to nod and even say "um hmm" a couple of times but I bet she can tell. She just sips tea and watches me.

At one point she asks me what I'm doing this weekend.

"Oh, I don't know," I say, rocking back on my heels. "Probably nothing. Maybe try to finish this thing." I thumb through the pages of one of her codebooks. "What about you?"

"This weekend I have to--" she looks down, as if trying to remember something, "open a bank account, pick up my dry cleaning, and--" she pauses again, "and buy a piano."

"Wow," I say. "That sounds like a lot and of course nothing you can do at once -- I mean, it's not like you can ask for 'no starch' while you're considering APR."

She laughs, tilting her head back and forward again. "No, I guess you can't."

"There," she says. The screen blackens and sparkplugs and radiator belts and transmission fluid bottles begin dancing across the screen in a chorus line. They're grinning beneath large top hats.

"That's great," I say. "I can't believe you got it to work. You fixed it."

"That's just the index," she says modestly beaming. "The rest is up to you."

"I haven't seen you."

"Well, I haven't really wanted to hang out, I guess."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I might as well stop pretending that you want me to be part of your life... that you could want-- when you obviously don't."

"Wait a minute, that's not true, it's not just that easy to say that. You can't just think that, you know."

"Why not? What else do I have to think?"

Later, after Dana leaves, Trey calls and invites me to dinner.

"I'm still sick," I moan in protest.

"Oh, come on, you know you're not," he says loudly. I hear him rustle the phone away from his face and he whispers something to Julianne that I can't hear.

"I have work to do," I say, my eyes scanning down a piece of paper Dana left for me, a sheet of instructions entitled, "step-by-step," in her handwriting.

"You so do not."

"What if--" I stop. "Fine."

And at six o'clock I drive to their apartment. Julianne takes my coat at the door. She's wearing a dark bra under a light shirt and has her hair pulled back into a disinterested ponytail. She smiles softly. Trey is wearing jean shorts that are starting to fray quite drastically and a University of Chicago sweatshirt. There aren't a lot of lights on and those that are burn dimly. It smells like applesauce in the kitchen and on the couch, salty, sparky corn chips and burnt coffee everywhere else. Trey and Julianne sit on one section of the couch, together, across from me. I stare at the boxes scattered around us: some teeming, the attenuated lengths of packing tape straining to hold everything in, others seemingly in process, stacks of boxes yet to be set up. I'm suddenly fully aware of the fact that they're staring at me before even having to look up.

"What?" I ask flatly.

"You haven't said anything," Julianne says. "We need to know now," she adds, her voice tenser, more urgent. She reaches for a handful of tissue from a crushed box beside her and blows her nose loudly. Her skin looks osseous where normally it's dusky as the muscles of her face expand and contract. Her eyes damp, bloodshot, look at me like it's hard to, almost like it would be easier to look at the top of my head or beyond my shoulders. Her threadbare sweater hangs limply. I wonder if she's wearing it because all her appealing garments have already been packed up and this one was all that was left. If I stare at it for a long enough time, she'll explain why she has it on but I look away.

We end up drinking a lot of wine. This is, ostensibly, them trying to convince me of something which I'm sure I've had figured out this entire time. Julianne stumbles off for photo albums from college which she's already packed and taken out of boxes and repacked three times this week. Trey follows me to the bathroom.

"Oh, shit," I say, splashing water from the faucet onto my face, eyes, forehead. "I think I'm really drunk."

"What the fuck am I doing," he asks. I look at his reflection in the mirror.

I turn my head and he quickly laughs. "I have heard, sir, of such a man, who hath a daughter of most rare note."

He grins proudly, his voice emboldened, stretching out his arms towards me. "Prithee be my present partner in this business, and lay aside thoughts of Sicilia."

"I willingly obey your command."

"My best Camillo! We must disguise ourselves."

Julianne doesn't return with the photo albums. Trey wonders aloud if she's fallen asleep amid the search, and that's exactly what we discover when we look for her. Julianne, lying on top of an unmade bed, her arms splayed out, her eyes shut tightly, her hands curled up almost like fists, but tentative. We finish one of the bottles of wine, the third one, in the kitchen and Trey smokes one of Julianne's cigarettes.

"These words aren't mine, not ours. Don't you see? It's like they're somebody else's? She leaves me an index card? That's it? How does that make any sense. That's supposed to be enough?"

"I get the feeling like nothing's ever going to be enough. You know? We just sort to have to get around things with what's there. That's basically all we can do."

There was a night when we were all together, Renee too, at Trey and Julianne's apartment and we'd been drinking wine and Trey kept telling jokes which were louder than they were funny and somebody broke an ashtray but before that point, maybe it was after, Julianne and Renee were in the other room, trying to find out theater listings - - somebody suggested we drive to Hot Tix -- somebody else kept trying to persuade the rest of us to want to go see *Rent* and I kept laughing. Trey told me, offhand, while I was trying diligently to calm and to think clearly, that he was going to purpose. When.. Not yet but soon. Soon? Soon. Later I thought about how it was sort of peculiar -- though I didn't pick up on this at all that night -- more infectious giggling -- that it was like he was asking me first, like if he should do it or not, but it was as if he'd already made up his mind -- he seemed confident even though he spoke carefully, confidentially, measuring his words. It wasn't as if he was even looking for affirmation either. The equanimity had already taken hold. And I looked up at Renee that night, sometime after Trey had told me what he was going to do, and there was something about the gentleness of her gaze, the admiration and the sense of contentment which she exuded that made me think, that night, for the first time, wow, at some point she is going to want to marry me. She is going to want me to marry her. And I panicked. And I couldn't stop imagining how it would happen, what the signs would be, which ones would be more obvious and which would elude me entirely. And I smoked too much pot after that, when Julianne passed over the bowl I inhaled too deeply, thinking for some reason that it would be only the cashed resin ash, and made myself choke and when I threw up in the bathroom at the end of it, alone, head in the bowl, Trey and Julianne outside, watching television, making out, ignoring me, it felt like I wasn't really even there.