

# east fifth bliss

by  
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California  
USA

There are two theories.

The first:

After brothing up a world with water and soil and fish and plants and beasts that stand on two feet and talk and would eventually want credit cards and cell phones and satellite TV, God dipped his finger in the wetness between New Jersey and Long Island and summoned forth the rock called Manhattan. By doing so, He set in motion His austere plan: one day, there'd be an island replete with towering steel buildings and shabby brick tenements, dying trees, and co-ops with monthly maintenances more than most Americans' mortgage payments. It'd be a paradise filled with hundreds of concrete parks littered with losing lotto tickets and fried chicken bones. Rats would frolic on doorsteps. Dogs would defecate on the sidewalks. Squirrels would charge at the passing people, having no fear.

His plan called for a place where bulimic make-up salesclerks, who hide their cold sores with dark lipstick, would fit in. Myopic Midwesterners, who swear they've read *Ulysses* when they haven't, would have a home. The Hasidim would feel comfortable hanging their beaver fur hats there. It'd be a place for all, even Italian restaurateurs who claim that stale toast with a little tomato and a spot of olive oil is bruschetta and charge twelve dollars a plate. Even obese Hispanics in tight stretch pants who wave their nation's flag while screaming that they're being stereotyped. All would be welcomed with open arms. All would be embraced. His plan called for an island of everything. An island the world turned to.

The second theory has to do with strange gray and green and purple gases, tiny jumping particles, a spark, and then a Big Bang. *Presto!* Earth's formed. Manhattan's made. Then some slimy being flopped from the waters onto the land, gasped for air, and has since raged for millions of years to become mankind today.

Following either school of thought, this fact stands: Morris Bliss is thirty-five years old. He's lived his entire life in Apartment 8 in a

weathered, red brick tenement on East Fifth Street near the corner of First Avenue. Has lived his entire life with his father.

But Morris has plans, big plans. Life altering plans. He's starting them today, or this week. This month. He's starting them very soon.

Morris Bliss has never left home.

# One

Morris stares at Stefani jumping on his bed, unable to break himself from watching. She's like a movie star or a brutal car wreck or a fireworks display on a clear, dark winter's night, something he can't take his eyes from.

A tepid, damp breeze laps in the apartment's propped window. Early April, and the late afternoon's light is clear and unsettling. It cuts the island and the streets, bright, blemishing, blinding.

New York City. Manhattan. East Village. Fifth Street.

"You know," Stefani says to him, bouncing naked, "I know you." Freshly turned eighteen-years-old—a fact she doesn't tire of stating, repeatedly opening her sentences with "Now that I'm eighteen..."—she attends the St. Benedict's Ukrainian Catholic High School on East Seventh Street. She's only a junior, though, held back her fifth grade year.

Thirty-five years old, Morris could be her father, a thought that isn't lost on him. A thought he works to reconcile, or at least suppress. "Yeah, I feel I know you, too," he tells her, the lightness of his three beers all but over. "Like we're connected," he says, and, feeling he sounds stupid, adds, "Or something." Naked himself and slightly slouched, Morris's body is the body of a swimmer who hasn't swum in years—thin and long limbed, but no longer fit. His looks are the calm, intelligent looks of an elementary school principal on summer break and his fingers are the fingers of someone who takes care of what he touches—fingers of a concert pianist or bomb defuser or a painter who executes detailed portraits on grains of rice. They are fingers that poorly serve Morris. They're too precise for him; he's clumsy, often drops things. Yet they'd held Stefani, run over her skin, touched her.

His best friend N.J. once theorized that there are seven defining moments in a person's life. We're born with them, like a tongue or

toes. "Seven, man," N.J. said, holding up an open hand and two fingers.

Morris asked him to identify the seven, to explain what they signified. "For me to tell you that, man," N.J. replied, "would be like explaining a poem by playing the bagpipes. It doesn't work."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Morris asked.

"It means what it means, man." N.J. was fabricating his theory on the spot, Morris was certain. It was something N.J. did, fabricate.

Morris asked, "So what happens after I experience all seven?"

"You won't make the seven, man," N.J. informed him. "Only people like Jesus Christ or Evel Knievel make it to seven. Only people filled with wonder, man."

Initially, Morris felt he'd burnt through two moments this afternoon with Stefani. Now, he can't claim certainty.

Stefani says, "That's not what I mean by knowing you." The bedsprings twang and groan under her weight. He wishes she'd stop moving, wishes she'd remain still so he can compose the image of her in his mind. Hold her fast. He wants something to remember, wants something of importance. "I know I know you, but I mean not from here," she says. "Not from now and all this." She's large for her age, large for any age, nearly five foot eleven, almost as tall as Morris, and she wears too much foundation, too much makeup to cover the acne high on her cheeks. The birthmark on her inner thigh is shaped like Italy or a wilting zucchini or snubbed out cigar. "Not from our doing what we are doing," she says, and stops bouncing a moment to study herself in the streaked mirror across the small room. Her hair's long. It's nice hair, runs to the small of her back and is conditioned and glossy and shines darkly like ground mussel shells. It's her prize, something she cultivates, prides herself on.

Smiling an open-mouthed smile, she examines her teeth in the mirror. Already, she has six cavities from lack of care.

Her hair is her prize.

"I know you from before," she says, turning her attention to her belly. She pinches a soft fold of skin and holds it tight. She pouts at

her reflection. "Buy me some cigarettes later?" she asks Morris, resuming her bed bouncing. "I don't have any money."

"No. No cigarettes," Morris tells her, rubbing the small, blue-black scar on his left bicep, a scar he's had since age fifteen. He got it playing The Chow Mein Masters Match, a game he and N.J. made up. The game involved baseball mitts, shaving cream, and Chinese throwing stars. There were no rules. The entire East Village was the playing field and the action didn't stop until someone got hurt.

Morris got hurt, came home with a bleeding arm and tight face. His total focus was on not crying. He was determined not to cry.

Had his mother met him at the door, she'd have rushed him to the hospital for a tetanus shot and stitches. Had his mother been alive, she'd have hounded him until he revealed how it'd happened, then grounded him for a week.

But it was his father he came home to. After a quick examination of the two-inch cut, his father got a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and his tool kit. "Ain't much of nothing," he told Morris, pouring the disinfectant on the cut. It foamed and bubbled, the wound washed clean. Morris's eyes glossed with tears. "Had worse cuts from opening mail. Hold tight," he told his son, then taking two small metal butterfly clamps, he pulled the skin tight and pinched the cut together. "In a couple of days," his father said, "you won't even notice it."

Blood welled from the wound. "It's not working, Daddy," Morris told him, studying the make-shift dressing like it was a failed science project. "It's not holding. It needs something more to hold it together."

Seymour dug about his tool kit, pulled out a glue gun.

Morris stared at his father, not believing he was serious. His father plugged the gun's cord in, letting it heat. He was serious.

"You're not glue gunning me together. I'm going to need stitches," Morris said. "Maybe we should go to—"

"Maybe we shouldn't be gabbing so much," Seymour said. "Maybe someone should let me do the fixing here," he said. "What's a doctor know that I don't know?"

"How to stitch a cut," Morris answered.

"I can stitch," Seymour said. "I can fix this," he said, ending the discussion.

Morris sat patient, quiet, as his father rifled through Morris's mother's old embroidery kit. The only needle he could find was a three-inch curved tapestry needle used to detail throw pillows. Morris turned his head and bit the inside of his cheek as the needle dipped through his skin and the thread tugged tight. His father sewed five lopsided stitches with black needlepoint thread. And while the experience was painful, Morris was pleased; he was spending time with his father. His father was paying attention to him, a rare occurrence.

Over the week, as the cut mended, dye from the stitching seeped into the wound, causing the scar to take on a dark, burnt hue, a stain that remains today, tattooed in his skin. "It's a badge," his father told him of the colored scar, but a badge of what, he never said.

Stefani yells at Morris, "Come on," and jumps higher on the bed, nearly hitting the ceiling. "Now that I'm eighteen, you should buy me a pack of cigarettes," she tells him. "As a birthday gift. Come on, come on, come on," Stefani calls to Morris, peaking off the mattress. "One pack. Camels. Camel Lights. Kools. Please." She lands on her butt, springs back up onto her feet like a trampoline artist. The mattress shifts on the box springs after each strike. "Just one pack."

"No," Morris tells her again, his fingers fidgeting over his scar. "No cigarettes," he says, then asks, "What do you mean you know me from before?"

They met today at Norman's Sound & Vision on Third Avenue. Morris's father's birthday is in a few days, on Tuesday. He wanted to buy a present, stopped in to look for an album of *Rembetika*, Greek folk songs. It was something his mother used to listen to, something he recalled his father enjoying.

Stefani was in the store, too, staring at him as she absently thumbed through the R section of rock CDs. Her look was one of rapt interest. She seemed to be challenging him from across the aisle of music, her eyes hard on him, waiting to see if he'd speak to her.

Feeling awkward, like he was forced to perform, Morris milled about, occasionally glancing up to meet her gaze. His face flushed each time his eyes caught hers. Normally, he'd be too embarrassed, too uncomfortable, to follow through. But he was held fast. Something in her appearance resonated with him, like hearing the faint notes of a favorite song long forgotten. Something about her made him want to be near her. He couldn't leave.

The three beers he'd had didn't hurt, either. His inhibition was replaced by daring.

Finally, after five minutes of fumbling his fingers along the dusty bins and stealing peeks at her, he gathered courage. Holding up a used album he'd grabbed at random—Meatloaf's *Back Into Hell*—he asked her, "Excuse me, is this—do you know if this is any good?"

"You've got something on your face," she answered, her eyes not breaking from him. "Something weird and kinda nasty, like cheese sauce or bird shit or something." She touched her cheek, indicating where. Morris took a paper napkin from his pocket, wiped his face, and looked at the napkin. He saw nothing. "No, here," she said, pointing to the other side. He wiped. "Got it," she said, then pointing to the album he was holding, added, "Meatloaf sucks. That album sucks. My dad used to listen to him, like, I don't know, twenty-five or forty years ago. But this," she said, holding up a CD by a band named Forty Ounces and a Mule, "this is great."

Coming to his side of the aisle, Stefani explained her likes in music, and then told him about her school, and the girls she calls friends that were the kind of friends that borrow lip-gloss or money or an occasional boyfriend and then not return them. The kind that fade over summer break. Friends that truly aren't.

After talking a half hour straight, she said, "Let me show you something," and motioned him to follow her to the record store's basement, with its stacks and stacks of used CDs for sale for a dollar. Once downstairs, Stefani said, "Get over here." Taking Morris's hands, she wrapped them about her hips, and forced a hard, wet kiss to his lips, her tongue frantically working past his teeth and into his

mouth. She tasted of lemon drops and Pine Sol, a taste that lingered and pleasantly stung. "I want to see your place," she told him.

"I don't even know you," he told her, feeling choked and confused, like he'd just stumbled out of a house on fire. It wasn't right.

It was so right.

"Stefani," she said. "My name's Stefani."

"I know your name; I just don't know who you are."

"You don't like me?" Stefani's eyes brimmed as her fingernails sharply held Morris by the waist. "Why don't you like me?"

"I like you," he said, "but I don't know you."

"But I know *you*. I know you and know you and know you," she told him, her breath spicing his skin. She kissed him again, and as she kissed him, he felt himself being peeled away, like a mountain climber coming off the face of a cliff. He felt himself fall.

The afternoon unfolded in a consuming heat.

Daylight savings time ends on Sunday, the clocks moving forward an hour under the cover of dark. Morris pulls on his brown socks. He feels like a freshly molted crab, his hard casing cast off. He's tender, senses everything, is free and susceptible.

The world continues. Spring's arrived. Easter is soon. Morris slips on his underwear. They sag in the butt.

"You look *just* like a Calvin Klein model," Stefani says, her voice jarring with each bounce. "My granddaddy used to dress like that," she says, "socks before pants. You always put your socks on before your pants?"

"Stefani," he tells her, feeling the desire to take her in his arms.

"Aughh," she says, and drops on her back like she's been shot dead. She lies rigid, taut, her bare arms flat to her side and her eyes tightly closed. She giggles. "You're going to have to speak up," she shouts. "I can't hear you. My eyes are shut."

Morris sits on the edge of the bed, touches her leg, her smooth calf, and experiences a clean comfort.

"You're already starting with the words?" she asks, her eyes still closed. "The horse race has just finished and your mind's already on

glue. But I know, I know," she sings, holding up her hands, "I know it *all* by now." Then, standing up, she resumes her bed bouncing. "And I know you. We've met before."

"Before today?" Morris asks, still sitting on the bed.

She nods. "Five times."

"Impossible," Morris says, though he's not a hundred percent certain. Her jumping forces him to stand. "I'd remember."

"Okay," she admits, "I've *kinda* met you."

"Five times?"

"Just once. But I've seen you bunches, around the neighborhood," she says, then shouts, "Steven Jouseski."

Morris stares at her like she's slipped into a foreign language. "Who?"

"Steven Jouseski," she shouts again, rising and falling. "My father. That's how I know you."

Morris shakes his head.

"Jouseski! You went to high school together."

The name registers, hits Morris sooty and hard, like debris blown from a building's roof. Steven Jouseski.

Stevie Jetski.

Jetski.

That's what he was known as in high school.

"Jetski's your father?" Morris asks.

"Jetski?" Stefani asks, still bouncing. "Jouseski. That his last name. Mine too," she says. "It's also my mom's last name." Then, pointing to Morris's jeans on the floor, asks, "You use those to wash the windows or something? They look all, I don't know, all gross."

Morris glances at his jeans. He needs new clothing. Needs money, needs to find a fulltime job.

Work-wise, it's not been a stellar year for Morris. He was forced to quit his job of nine years at St. Mark's Used Books after his allergies overwhelmed him. He loved the job; his days were spent cloistered and reading. Occasionally, he'd ring up a sale or offer advice on which book was good, which was not. But mostly he read and read and read. And sneezed and coughed. And increasingly had trouble breathing when in the store. For nine years, it went like this, a

gaining, crippling flu from the moment he walked into the store, a rapid healing the moment he left. The books were to blame, and not just the old, dusty ones with their damp smell, either. New ones gave him problems, too. The trace fumes from the bind's glue or the chemicals used to bleach the paper or the inks for book jackets reacted poorly with Morris's system, made his eyes swell shut and his ears turn a bright red. He could handle a book or three, but sitting around stacks and stacks of hundreds of books caused him grief.

Still, for nine years, he mustered through his day, tearing into boxes of Kleenex and antihistamines. The attacks progressively got worse. It was only after the second hospitalization, his face puffy and pale blue, his hands stiff to the point he couldn't form a fist, and his lungs feeling filled with sand, that he quit his job.

"I'll miss seeing you," the owner of the bookstore told Morris. Morris knew this wasn't true. The moment he left, the bookstore owner wouldn't remember what Morris looked like. It wasn't that he disliked Morris; Morris was certain the owner liked him very much, thought him his best employee. But the owner had prosopagnosia—face blindness. Morris knew that the memory of his face—of anyone's face—was stripped the instant he left the owner's sight.

Morris's next job lasted only a month. Working as a salesman at a leather and fur store on Orchard Street, Morris was fired after spilling coffee on a three thousand dollar fox stole. The following gig, manning the counter at Russ & Daughter's Appetizers on Houston Street, ended when he knocked over a fifty gallon barrel of pickles, the brine and garlic and turned cucumbers flowing over the customers' shoes.

Out of work for eight months, he's been actively looking.

Just this morning he had a job interview. It was for a position he knew he'd hate; telemarketing seven-hundred-dollar self-help business CDs to harried banking executives. It was a commissions-based job, no benefits. "Get the product out," the manager who interviewed him kept saying. "That's what we say around here." It was the office mantra; it was written on the dry erase board in purple marker. The manager claimed the company had been in business

over two decades, but the whole operation seemed a sham. Morris felt certain they could close up and abandon the space they operated out of in less than an hour. "My question to you is," the manager said to Morris, pointing at him with his forefinger and pinky of his left hand, "are you ready to make some money? Are you ready to be the man you want to be, fulfill your potential?"

A bald black woman wearing huge orange earrings interrupted the interview to tell the manager she quit. "I'm a member of the Nation of Islam," she said, "and this bullshit flies against the grain of my beliefs, against everything that makes me strong. I don't give no fuck about no 'team spirit,' because I don't like ripping people off, even if they *are* white. Especially not for the cracker change you pay me. So I asked myself, 'What would Louis Farrahkan do?' And you know what I realized? Farrahkan wouldn't telemarket for no white bitch chump."

The manager had her escorted out of the building by security, but not before she'd sprinkled a handful of powdered sugar and pine ash around the edge of the room and loudly conjured a hex on the entire place.

"So," the manager said to Morris, smiling broadly as he sat back down, "when can you start?"

Morris said he'd check his schedule, let him know.

The interview had so disheartened Morris that he'd decided on a beer at the Old Homeplate, which turned to three beers, which depressed him more; he was spending money he didn't have.

Flopping down on the mattress again, Stefani says, "I met you once when my dad said 'hi' to you. I was with him and my mom." She lies on her stomach, her knees bent and her heels to her butt. "We were on Thirteenth Street and you were going into that comic book store. Forbidden something. Planet or Asteroid, I think. My dad saw you and said, 'Hey, Twisted Bliss.' You looked at him funny, nodded, then headed into the store. I asked my dad who you were and he told me you were friends in high school."

"He said we were friends?" Morris never liked Jetski, never liked the crowd he hung around with. In high school, Jetski was always angling something, working a grift. Once, Morris overheard

him brag that he'd figured a way to pocket twenty bucks a night at the movie theater he worked at. "They can't count each kernel of popcorn they sell," he explained to a girl he was hitting on. "So they count the bags. Same with the soda cups. But check this out," Jetski said. "I get the used bags and cups from the trash after each showing, use them again, and bank the cash."

"Yeah. Said you were good friends," Stefani tells Morris, kicking her legs. "What's with the map?" She motions to the large, sun-bleached world map on his wall. It's flagged with nearly a hundred colored pins.

"I'm going to all those places," Morris says, not looking at it. The map's been on his wall since he was fifteen, since he first read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. He had to see Madrid and Barcelona.

He rarely leaves the city, has never left the country. Every season he says, "I'm going," but never goes. It's always something—money, work, his father—always a reason not to go. "Resistance, man," his friend N.J. said each time Morris's planned trip fell through. "Break through the resistance and go. Lee Strausberg taught me that when I was studying acting with him, man. Pulled me aside and said, 'N.J., son, break through the resistance.'"

Morris knew he was right about resistance. Morris also knew N.J. never studied acting with Strausberg, or anyone else.

Picking up an unframed photo of his mother, Stavroula, off the top of the pressed wood bureau, Morris closely studies the picture. She'd traveled, been around the world before the age of five. Born in Greece, on the small island of Kos, she and her family had lived in South Africa, Spain, and Scotland before settling on Long Island. In the photo, Morris's mother's in her mid-thirties, the age Morris is now. It was taken during the three-month period she'd left Morris and his father. Slightly turned, she looks directly at the camera, like someone called to her. Her hair's pulled back and she smiles a small, mischievous smile, like she's done something she doesn't want to be reminded of, doesn't want to later be held accountable for. The afternoon light casts in from her left, cleanly striking her face, her

body. It's early morning, or late afternoon, deep in the wilds of Oregon. A shadowed mountain looms behind her.

"Anyway, I thought you were cute so I looked you up in my dad's yearbook," Stefani tells Morris, scratching her thigh. "Then I saw you today and I thought, 'He's a friend of dad's.' That's why I talked to you," Stefani says, then, "We studied this guy in school today. A guy from Britain or England or somewhere. Joe or Jack Rustyskin or Ruffian or something like that. Wrote about architecture and art and stuff. I like art."

"John Ruskin?" Morris ventures, putting the photo down. The thought of his mother sends a pang of loneliness through him. She died soon after she returned home. Morris was thirteen.

"Yeah," Stefani says, chewing on her hair, "him."

"You study Ruskin in school?" he asks, surprised. *The Stones of Venice*. He'd found a copy of it on the street years ago. It was in a pile of books and magazines someone had thrown out, the hard green cover faded and worn. After reading it, he stuck a blue-headed pin in Venice.

"Well, yeah," Stefani says of Ruskin. "We study a lot of different stuff. Why not this guy? He's famous, I guess," Stefani says. Pausing a moment, she adds, "He loved little girls. I mean, really little girls. That's what the teacher said. Girls younger than me. But he stopped loving them when they started to grow and get breasts and their hair."

"He died a virgin," Morris informs her.

Stefani rolls onto her back, rubs her belly. "I didn't say he loved them the way you just did me," Stefani says. She runs her fingers through her pubic hair. "Some girls in my class shave. You think I should shave?" she asks.

From the apartment above, Morris hears Mr. Sofar's footfalls as he starts his evening pacing. From the north end of his apartment to the south, a pause, then back again. 5:45 p.m. every evening, for fifteen minutes. The man's frighteningly habitual. Morris can set a clock by him. When he hears Sofar start to pace, he knows it's quarter to six. Soon, Morris's father will be home.

"We need to get going," Morris says. He doesn't want the tangle of explaining Stefani to his father.

He picks up Stefani's school uniform skirt, a green and blue plaid, and hands it to her. She looks good in her uniform.

"Go?" she asks, tossing her skirt to the floor. "What do you mean? I'm starving," she says, hopping off the bed. She wanders past Morris, out toward the tiny kitchen. Her body has an instant rhythm when she walks, almost a dance. "It's not even four o'clock," she says. "I don't have to go."

"Quarter to six," he says, following her. "If you want, we can go out for a snack."

"I have to eat something now," she says. "I'm weak." She opens the refrigerator, bends to gaze in, her smooth, full butt jutting out. "What is all this stuff?" she asks. Everything's wrapped in crinkled tin foil, from a ham down to a half eaten boiled egg. They're ordered on the shelves by size. Even the condiments have foil twisted over their spouts. The entire interior glints and winks in the weak light, like it's a collection of fallen asteroids or an orthodontist's stockroom.

"I'm afraid of what's going on in there," Stefani says, kicking the door closed. "Got anything to eat, cookies or sausage or something? Something that isn't wrapped in foil?"

"Let's get going."

"No," she tells him, folding her arms and sulking. "Where's your TV?" she asks, then, "Why do I have to go?"

"Because Daddy's—"

"'Daddy?'" Stefani's face beams. She lightly bites into the meat of her thumb. She laughs. "You still live with your 'Daddy?'"

"Da-nny," Morris lies, surprised he publicly called his father "Daddy." "My father's name is Danny." It's Seymour. "And yes, I still live with him," he says, irritated with himself. "He lives with me."

"You said Daddy," Stefani says, laughing harder. Then, speaking in baby talk, she says, "Does he tuck you in at night, shake your pee-pee after you're done tinkling, or does your mommy do it?"

The afternoon's euphoria flakes away. "Stefani," Morris says, his voice firm. "Time to go."

"Ah, come on," she says, her laughter dying. "Don't be like that." She looks pained, her feelings hurt. She wipes her nose with the palm of her hand. "I was just funning with you, you know." She opens a kitchen cabinet, looking for something to eat. "Couples do that, you know. They fun with each other."

"Please," he says, his tone softer, "get dressed."

"Where's your mom?" Stefani asks, pulling down a box of shrimp-flavored crackers from the shelf.

"She's dead," he says. "Died when I was young."

"People do that, I guess," she absently says, shaking the cracker box. "Die and all, I mean. My grandmother did. It ended up making the *Post*, you know, the way she died. Accidentally hung herself opening her front door."

Morris recalls the story. The elderly woman was found hanging from her front doorknob, a key-laden shoestring twisted about her neck and her key in the lock. It was written up as an accident; somehow, she'd fallen. No matter how many times Morris read the article, he couldn't make sense of it.

"You know what I don't like?" Stefani says. "The fact you're so old. It's gonna be kinda weird, you know, having a boyfriend so old. When I finally turn twenty-one and we can go to bars together, you'll be, like, I don't know — you'll still be a lot older."

"Boyfriend?"

She nods and digs into the cracker box, pulls out a handful of small squares. "Yeah, boyfriend," she says, stuffing her mouth. She chews twice, then, her face tightening with disgust, spits the chewed cracker back into the box. "Eeagh, God, that's gross," she says. She leans over the sink filled with dirty dishes, puts her lips to the faucet to rinse her mouth. She gargles, spits, then wipes her tongue on a dishtowel to remove the last of the lingering taste. "Christ, I've never tasted anything so gross. Where did you get these?" she asks, holding up the box and looking at the label. "Chinatown? They always have disgusting stuff like this in Chinatown. Crackers made of fish blood or seaweed or ground up things you wouldn't feed a dog. You know,

they sell frogs down there, like to eat. Frogs and turtles and other things, things that are usually pets and not dinner. Have you ever seen those restaurants," she asks, "that have the pig faces hanging on a hook in the window, snout and all? It looks like a barbecued Halloween mask. Totally foul. I mean, who would eat that, a pig face? *How* do you eat a pig face? I mean, how's that served, like whole on a plate with a serving of beans or something? Think about it looking up at you as you go to stab it with a—"

"Let's get going," he interrupts.

"Jesus," she says, "all right. Relax. Don't get so snippy." She puts the crackers back on the shelf, ambles back to the bedroom, her flesh rippling with each step.

Morris follows. "I'm not being snippy," he tells her. "It's just time to go."

"You're afraid Daddy won't be happy to see me," Stefani says, sitting on the bed. She draws her knees up, holding them.

"Danny. And no," he says. "Or yes. I just don't think right now would be the best time to introduce you. He's old and—"

"Older than you?" she asks. She picks at her toenails, chipping off the powder blue polish. "Is he like one of those two-hundred-year-old guys you have to carry around and feed and bathe and stuff? Does he wear one of those big diapers?"

"He's not old like that," he says, thinking of his father, their relationship. He can think of nothing to say. They don't share a strong bond, a closeness. His father won't have it.

Stefani picks up her bra, fiddles with the small metal clasp. The air in the room is fusty and thick. Morris opens the other window. Watching her closely in profile, Morris is struck by her look of unawareness, innocence.

"Do you mind not staring at me?" Stefani asks, not turning her head. "I feel like you're eating me with your eyes. Can I have a little privacy here without you getting all creepy?"

Morris leaves his bedroom, closing the door. He waits in the hall.

Upstairs, Sofar continues to pace, the noise dropping through the ceiling.

"One of the pictures of you in the yearbook," Stefani calls to Morris as she dresses, speaking through the door, "is really funny. I cut it out and put it in my album. You're at a basketball game or dance or something and your hair is all poofy and real big, and you're wearing a—what band was it?—*Men at Work* muscle T-shirt and you've got no muscles, just these scrawny arms. At first," she says, "I thought you were pretending, you know? Like it was a costume party or something. Like you dressed like that as a joke. But then I realized you hadn't. You dressed like that on purpose."

The door opens. She's dressed, her bag over her shoulder. She studies her face in a compact. "You got a rubber band?" she asks, and applies root beer-flavored lip-gloss to her lips.

Morris goes to the kitchen, opens a drawer filled with jumbled silverware, wads of tinfoil, and old bread bag ties. He sifts through the items and finds a thick, blue rubber band that once held a bunch of California asparagus.

He hands it to her.

She pulls her hair back into a horse's tail, ties it off with the rubber band. "How do I look?" she asks. She's added a fresh layer of foundation, flattened out her features. She looks washed out, like her face has been sanded smooth.

Morris nods. "Great," he says, reaching for her hand.

She takes his and turns it over, drags her fingernails along his palm. "Feels good, huh? I love it when my dad used to do this to me. He won't do it anymore, but he used to. A lot. You like that? You like me doing that to you?"

A chill runs across his chest and down his sides. "I like that," he tells her.

She leans in to kiss him then licks his nose. "Buy me some cigarettes?" she sweetly asks. "I'll give you a kiss if you do."

Before Morris can answer, the front door's buzzer rings. His father's home; he's standing out front of the apartment building waiting to be let in. "Time to go," Morris tells her, heading to the apartment's door.

Stefani slides her bag off her shoulder, drops it on the floor. She folds her arms across her chest. She isn't going. She's holding her ground. "Cigarettes," she demands.

"Stefani," he says. "I said no. Come on."

"You promised to buy me cigarettes."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes. You. Did."

She has him, he knows. She won't leave until she gets what she wants. "I don't like you smoking," he says, feeling through his pockets for money.

"Now that I'm eighteen—"

"Hold up," he says, and quickly goes to his bedroom. He returns with a large, brown leather two-fold wallet shiny from years of sliding in and out of his back pocket. The wallet's bordered with a looped, burnt red stitching. The letters MORRIS are deeply tooled in the leather. He's had it for years. It was a present from his mother when she returned home from her three-month absence. "Here," Morris says, handing Stefani a twenty dollar bill, one of his last.

The buzzer rings again, this time longer, louder, his father impatient.

"That's pretty faggy," Stefani says of his wallet, then, "You're not coming with me?"

"Can't," he says. He picks up her bag, guides her to the door.

"How am I going to get cigarettes?" she asks.

Morris is struck with the notion that Stefani's lied, that she's not eighteen, that she's younger. Her physical maturity says one thing while her emotional says another. His stomach knots like he swallowed a tray of ice cubes. "You told me you're eighteen."

"I *am* eighteen," she says, then recites her birthday. She opens her purse, digs around. "I just don't have ID, and these deli guys are assholes about carding."

Morris holds up a hand, silencing her, then presses the talk button on the intercom. "Yeah?" he asks, hitting the listen button.

"Me," a voice, his father's, crackles back. "Let me in."

Morris opens the apartment door, ushers Stefani out into the hall. "Go to the bodega around the corner, right here on First Avenue," he tells her. "Mr. Charlies is the name of the place. It's the name of the guy at the counter."

"He'll sell them to me, this Mr. Charlie?"

"Charlies," Morris says. "Plural, with an 's.'"

"What kind of name is that?"

The buzzer rings again, three short, grinding blurts.

"He'll sell you cigarettes. Just tell him that Mr. Charlies sent you."

A look of bewilderment clouds her face. "Tell Mr. Charlies," she says, "that Mr. Charlies sent me?"

"Yes," Morris says, pressing the door button to let his father in. "Just tell him that and he'll sell you whatever you want."

"Beer?"

Downstairs, his father pushes into the building, the hinges on the front door screeching like a wounded hawk.

"Go," Morris tells Stefani.

"First," she says, stepping back across the apartment's threshold, "tell me you like me."

Morris presses against her, not allowing her any farther. The warmth of her body makes him think of letting her back in, of taking her to his room and staying with her for days and days on end, of never leaving. "I like you," Morris says.

"Tell me you love me," she says, rubbing up against him.

From down the stairwell, he can hear his father mounting the first flight, his worn boots scraping each step. Morris feels sick, like he drank tequila all night and now has heavy lifting to do. "Stefani," he says, his voice low. He looks her in the eyes and knows it's the only way to make her leave. He relents. "Okay, yes," he tells her. "I love you." The words sound awkward, tender but hollow. False.

"And that you're sorry for being so crabby with me," Stefani says, smiling. But before he can answer, she says, "Oh, I left you a present. A surprise." She kisses him.

"What is it?"

He can hear his father reach the second landing, hear him pause a moment.

"This weekend I'm busy," she quietly says, stepping back. "Monday, Ray's pizza. After school. Be there. Don't play with me. And call me, call me often."

"What's the surprise?"

"You'll see." She waves bye with her index finger, moves to the stair, then stops. Holding up the twenty he'd given her, she asks, "I can keep the change from this?"

"Yes. Keep the change," he says, quietly closing the door.

There's never change with Mr. Charlies.

## Two

The door clicks softly shut. Leaning to the peephole, Morris eyes Stefani, her image rounded and distorted, like she's fallen into a fishbowl. Through the fireproof door, he feels her presence, her heat.

She pauses and glances back, knowing Morris is watching. The hallway light casts from her left, cleanly striking her face. Tightening the rubber band on her hair, she smiles a small smile.

Seeing this, Morris is filled with reassurance, a well-being. He knows this moment, has witnessed it before; Stefani standing as she stands, smiling as she smiles, the light brushing her face as it is now. He's experienced it a million times, morning after morning, year after year.

But it's never happened. Not with Stefani, not as now.

It's his mother he's seeing, the photograph of her on his dresser.

She and Stefani look nothing alike, and still, there's something similar about the two. It's Stefani's hair, or her unguarded mannerisms, or how she smiles. Or even just the fact that she's female.

It's none of these. There's no resemblance at all. But somehow, in a skewed, distant way, seeing Stefani standing as she's standing summons the memory of his mother. It's like certain colors reminding one of a moment long past. Or when a whiff of an odor sparks an incongruous memory. Certain smells do that to Morris. Woodchips, for one, remind him of his first wet dream, more a nightmare than an erotic experience; the hot, clinging stench of a packed subway station after a heavy summer rain evokes the afternoon Mr. Sofar tried to make Morris put on a dress; and the dark, moldy odor of freshly turned earth brings to mind his fourth grade teacher, Ms. Wagner, and her hairy arms that she used to constantly scratch.

And something about Stefani makes him think of his mother.

She wiggles her index finger at Morris, and then heads down the stairs.

Morris rests his forehead to the door, closes his eyes. He's held the memories of his mother tight, held them near his heart, yet the weathering of some twenty years has turned them to tumbled sea-glass; all the sharp, poignant recollections have been worn smooth, the details ground away with the passing of time. What he now recalls best is not his actual, physical mother, but the things associated with her: the lemony, stewing smell of the *dolmades* she made every Saturday; the trail of coffee cups she left about the apartment; her quiet voice from a farther room; the *slip-slap* of her sandals as she walked.

The pounding on the door jars Morris.

His father's home.

"Open this bastard door," his father calls from the hall.

Slowly, Morris opens the door. "Hey, Daddy," he says.

"What were you doing in here?" Seymour asks, his breath already malty and stale from drinking.

Sofar's pacing in the apartment above abruptly stops. It's six p.m. Exactly.

Seymour glances around the apartment, sniffs the air like an animal sensing danger. He carries a bag with two lightning blue king-sized bottles of Bud Iced Turbo Load beers, one of which he's already opened, partially drank. Packed with caffeine, ginseng, and alcohol, it's Budweiser's answer to the energy drink craze. "Gets You Up When You Want to Get Down" is the tagline. Seymour had wanted plain Budweiser, but Mr. Charlies was out. Mr. Charlies is always out of the product desired. "I buzzed you," Seymour says, his thick, damp moustache making him look like an agitated beaver.

"I was in the bathroom," Morris answers, moving to the kitchen. Act normal, he tells himself, though he's not sure how he acts when acting normal. That's why it's normal. "I'm heading over to N.J.'s," he tells his father, needing out of the apartment. "Need anything while I'm out?"

Seymour tosses his keys on the kitchen table. The kitchen needs cleaning. Coffee grinds speck the warped, gray countertop like ants rolling across a dry creek bed. The windowsills are grimy, the tabletop dusty and stained with tomato sauce. The floor needs sweeping, a detailed mopping. The entire apartment, overcrowded with belongings, needs a clearing out. "You get that job talking on telephones?" Seymour asks of Morris's job interview.

"Looks like it," Morris tells him. He could have it. He needs the money and will probably have to take it. He doesn't want it. "The interview went well. Should know by next week," he says, hoping his father will forget the whole thing by then. Hoping he'll have something else lined up by then. He plans on putting in an application with The Sock Man on St. Marks Place, a small, street-side stall that sells only socks. People often stop him when he passes the place, thinking he works there. He answers their questions as best as possible.

"Should've seen what I just seen," Seymour says.

"Yeah? What's this?" Morris answers, already knowing. Stefani. On her way out. He pats his pockets, feeling for his keys, then looks on top of the refrigerator for them.

"Should've seen it," Seymour says, opening the refrigerator. He grabs three foil-wrapped items, items only he could identify without unwrapping them, then, with his beers in hand, heads to the back room, the room that serves as the dining room, the living room, and Seymour's sleeping quarters. Turning on the TV, voices, cheers, and canned laughter rattle through of the apartment. The small screen's image is a moving Monet painting, vivid and blurry. They have no cable, no satellite dish to pull the program waves from the air, just a bound bundle of wire hangers covered in foil attached to the top of the set. Seymour doesn't believe in spending money that way, wasting it on things that should be free, things that once were. "Some fifteen-year-old girl," he calls to Morris.

Eighteen, Morris wants to tell him. He finds his keys tucked under some travel brochures on Croatia; he ordered them right after he finished reading Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon*. It's on his schedule of places to visit, right after Paris, which is after he visits

Turkey, which is on his agenda following Thailand, which comes after Finland, Australia, Mexico, Beirut, and the North Africa tour. He keeps an ordered file with all his plans, all the information he's gathered on the places he's going. "I'm heading out," he says, thinking he might be able to catch Stefani at Mr. Charlies.

"This girl was on the stairs," Seymour calls to Morris, working on his beer. Fifty-seven years old, Seymour's a shop steward for the carpenters' union. It's his responsibility to watch out for his men, make certain they show up for work, not get too drunk at lunch, and fill out the proper paper work when they're injured. He calls the ambulance when one twists his knee or bruises his ribs. He's seen men crack their heads open, seen them take a two-story fall and hit the hard pavement or rubble littered ground or bounce off an I-beam then, laughingly, stand-up and brush themselves off, and say, "That was dumb" or "Hard head" or "Who's buying drinks?" He's seen worse.

"Sure you don't need anything?" Morris asks, opening the front door.

"Mors," his father calls from the back room. It's a nickname his mother first came up with, wanting more of her Morris, of her boy. More of his hugs, his kisses, more of his cheerful voice calling to her through the narrow rooms of the snug apartment.

"Yeah?" Morris answers, half out the door.

"Bring me some crackers 'fore you go," his father says over the noise of the TV.

Closing the front door, Morris steps into the kitchen, grabs the box of crackers from the cabinet and takes them to Seymour.

Near the back room, hung on the wall, is a small, tarnished brass plaque, one noting Morris as the most valuable swimmer of the 1979 summer season. When young, Morris aspired to be an Olympic swimmer, to train and compete in places with names like Paolo Alto or Zurich or Fort Lauderdale, places far away and foreign to him, places with deep pools with twelve lanes and fifty meters in length. He dreamt of winning races, of touching the wall a moment, a microsecond, before the swimmer in the lane next to him, dreamt of

lifting his head from the wetness to find he'd broken his personal best record, broken the pool record, the world record.

His mother first introduced him to swimming, took him to classes at Asser Levy at the age of nine. The pool was a three lane, twenty-two yard pit on Twenty-Third Street and FDR Drive. It'd been built in 1921 as a way to encourage public hygiene, built in hopes of stopping the spread of cholera and typhoid fever through the promotion of showers and disinfectants. A city pool, it was owned and run by the New York Parks Department, and had a foul and murky locker room with communal showers where the guys would go to soap each other. Morris's mother never allowed him to wander into the locker room, kept a watchful eye over him when he went swimming. He'd put on his suit at home, wear it under his pants, change there on the pool deck. After class, his mother made him wear his jeans over his wet suit, which made him look like he'd pissed his pants. When he complained of this, said he wanted to change in the locker room like the others, his mother countered, "There are worse things than wet pants, and they're all in that locker room."

He had no idea what she meant, but her stern tone, her concerned voice was enough to terrify him. He didn't want to see what the locker room held.

During the summer months, he'd swim at the Hamilton Fish pool, a fifty-meter, Olympic sized outdoor pool on Houston and Pitt Street. It was beautiful, the distance from one end to the other stretching and straight and marked by a black line on the pool's floor. Morris's first laps of the summer were always a struggle, not being used to such continuous swimming. At Asser Levy, a handful of strokes took him to the other end, where he could grab the wall and rest a moment before turning around. At Hamilton Fish, there was no rest. No stopping. But he built his strength, improved his stroke, competed in meets.

At the end of his second summer of swimming, he took first place in the twelve and under 100-meter breaststroke in the All City Swim Meet. His mother was manic with delight. Her boy had won, had taken the blue ribbon. His father wasn't around.

The coach saw promise. Not Olympic promise, but promise still. He named Morris most valuable swimmer that summer, gave him a small plaque with etched lettering. "Keep him swimming, keep him practicing," his coach would tell Morris's mother.

But then his mother left, and all Morris's desire to swim left with her. He felt no reason to continue, felt no joy in winning. He had no one to win for.

He hasn't been in a pool in years. Still, he has his swim ribbons in his bureau's top drawer.

Pausing beside his father's chair, Morris holds the box of crackers out for him.

"How much the phone job going to pay?" Seymour asks.

"It's commissions," Morris says. "You get a percent of what you sell."

Seymour nods. He says, "Should've seen it. A clear shot." A half empty beer bottle is balanced on his knee. He lifts his hand like he's sighting something on the wall above the TV, pointing it out.

"A clear shot?"

"This girl," he says. "Right in front of me, top of the stairs. Standing all sexy," he says. "Sexy and smart-assish. Had a clear shot of her womanhoodliness. No panties. And she called me Daddy," Seymour says, in near reverie. He takes a sip of beer, balances it on his knee again. " 'Hello, *Daddy*.' That's what she said to me."

"Wow," Morris answers, his voice flat.

"Wow's right," Seymour says, taking the crackers from his son. Opening the box, he shakes them, then dips his fingers in for a handful. "I got a good smell of her when she passed. She smelled—"

He breaks off. Looking up at Morris, his face is a knot of disgust.

"What?" Morris asks, but he knows. His father's made the connection. Knows about Stefani, about him, the whole afternoon. He can smell it in the air, throughout the apartment.

"I hope I'm not thinking what I think I'm thinking," his father says, repulsed. His nostrils open wide, air rushing in.

Morris's on the spot; he has to explain, like someone caught cheating on the driver's license exam. "Daddy, it's what you're

thinking," Morris admits, trying for the best spin. "But it's not the *way* you're thinking. If you let me explain—"

"I ain't a fancy man," his father says, his voice hard. "But I ain't an animal, either." He pulls his hand from the cracker box, holds it out. In it is a mass of damp, pale, partially chewed crackers. The ones Stefani spat back into the box. "What's wrong with you?" Seymour asks. He scrapes the glob back into the box, wipes his hand on his pant leg. "This ain't a zoo. When we eat, we eat."

Morris stands silent, waiting for more, waiting for his father to say, "And that girl I saw on the stairs..." But he doesn't. He doesn't say anything, focuses his attention to the TV and acts like Morris isn't even in the room.

"I'll buy you some more crackers. I'll get them right now," Morris says.

Seymour doesn't answer, doesn't acknowledge him. He stares at the TV, takes a sip of beer. The speaker blares with guffaws and chuckles. The show isn't funny.

Studying his father in profile, Morris is hit with the fear that once he exits the room, exits the apartment, his father will cease to exist. That it'll just be Morris, alone. "Daddy," he says. He wants to tell his father something important. He has an urgent need to hug him. "Daddy," he says, but his father doesn't answer him.

Morris picks up the cracker box. "Okay, then," he says, and leaves the room, leaves the apartment. Leaves his father in a crowd of false laughter.

## Three

"I'll tell Morris," Stefani shouts, stomping out of Mr. Charlies with a pack of Basic filterless cigarettes and no change from the twenty Morris gave her. Evening's settled in swift and softly. "I'll tell Morris and he'll..." She can think of nothing he could do. "I'll tell all my friends," she yells, "and they'll tell their friends, until no one in New York shops here."

Striding north on First Avenue, she furiously tears the package's wrapper, pulls out a cigarette. "That asshole will pay," she says, then calls to the couple ahead of her, "Hey. Hey listen." She sidles up to them, touches the man on the arm. "Listen to me. That Mr. Charlies place, don't shop there. Don't shop at that place back there."

"No, none thanks," the man says. In his hand is a *Slumming through Manhattan* guidebook. The couple pick up their pace, trying to move ahead of Stefani.

"Serious, you know," Stefani says, "don't buy anything from that guy." She struggles to keep up with them, her large purse banging her side. "I'm telling you," Stefani says, "listen, this Charlies guy, he steals, and the place reeks, like he's got some health code violation going on, you know? And," she says, unable to think of anything else, "he steals."

"None, none, none," the man says, tightly holding the hand of his girlfriend, "none, thanks." They escape by crossing against the light, hopping through the traffic.

Pausing for breath, Stefani wedges a cigarette in her lips. "What's wrong with you?" Stefani yells at them, then turns to an approaching woman and says, "Hey, you know that Indian or Mexican store down there, Mr. Charlies?"

The woman has a ferret on her shoulder. Dressed in a tiny pink and blue knit sweater, the ferret tentatively sniffs the air, its head bobbing like a Styrofoam cup in the East River. "Jesus," Stefani says,

seeing the animal, "like, what is that, an opossum? And why's it wearing that stupid little cape? Can I touch it?"

"Ariel's a ferret," the woman answers. She has the worn, life-weary look of an ex-drug addict or born-again Christian, and smells of nervous sweat masked by Right Guard. Around her neck hangs a large crystal on a chain, a cracked geode the size of a racket ball. "That's a sweater she's wearing, to keep warm. She's very susceptible to chills. And no," she says, "you can't touch Ariel. I've just had her chakras aligned." The woman walks off, the ferret clawed to her shoulder.

"Just remember, don't shop at Mr. Charlie's," Stefani calls after the woman, then gives up the venture. Pulling the rubber band from her hair, she redoes her horse's tail, pushes a few stray strands of hair behind her ear. "Well," she says, "I won't shop there, and Morris won't shop there. I'll make certain of that."

Setting her purse to the pavement, she opens it and digs around for matches or a lighter. "I won't shop there because I know better," she says, rifling through the contents of her bag. The size of a small suitcase, the purse is packed: hair barrettes; a bottle of Sweet-on-Him perfume; a Tower record receipt with some boy's phone number written on the back; Kleenex in floral prints; a half eaten donut from this morning; a letter from her school counselor, asking to meet with Stefani's parents; root beer and choco-berry and cherry favored lip glosses; a small Pearson Mason English boar bristle hair brush that she stole from Anderson's Drugstore; a large plastic brush with missing bristles; aspirin; a broken purple Swatch; a grape Blow Pop; a lucky rabbit's foot her father gave her for her tenth birthday; two make-up compacts, the mirror cracked in both; a small, leather bound photo album; and, at the bottom, a scattering of Skittles and pennies and pennies and pennies.

Pulling out the photo album, she looks at a four-year-old picture of her and her parents at South Street Seaport, their faces shining with forced smiles like they're out to prove they're having fun. She's an only child, lives on East Thirteenth Street above a Laundromat that belches out a warm, chemical fragrance of flowers and baby powder

fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. It's a ten-minute walk from Morris's place and a world away.

She touches the picture, her fingers resting on the image of her father. Ever since her puberty set in at age fifteen—she was a late bloomer—her father, Jetski, has acted strange around her. He can't adjust to this new creature, this different being. Stefani's asked her mother what's wrong with him, why he acts so weird. "Stress of his career," her mother replied, referring to his job as a construction foreman.

But it's more than that. Stefani knows it's more, can sense it. Something has change between her and her father. The household balance has shifted. She's no longer her daddy's little girl, no longer the daughter he actively seeks out. Now she's a woman he actively avoids.

The life she once had has been breached by something corrupt and awful. Their home has been infiltrated, tainted. Stefani's a stranger to her father. She can tell he's disquieted by her; he won't tuck her in at night anymore, won't even enter her bedroom. The two of them no longer watch TV together like they use to, no longer playfully wrestle around like they once had. Jetski now locks the bathroom door and when Stefani enters a room, he finds a reason to leave.

More than once, she's caught her father staring at her the way boys at school sometimes stare at her. I'm your daughter, she wants to remind him, feeling sick about what he's probably thinking. I'm your little girl.

Stefani flips the album to the picture of Morris that she cut from her father's yearbook and laughs. Morris stands tall and thin, all bone and gristle in his Men at Work muscle T-shirt. "Morris, Morris," she says to the photo, then quietly sings, "If my father only *knew* about me and you. Oh, Morris, oh Morris, how he'd be *stewing* knowing what his best-friend was doing."

She turns back a few pages to Tom Ginkins, her first boyfriend. He's standing by the black square sculpture at Astor Place, his eyes near closed as he squints in the bright sun. Tom had been the first boy

she'd been intimate with—or near intimate. He was tall with a thick neck and overlapping teeth and had the habit of making everything he said sound like a question. Two years ago, Stefani's freshman year, he'd asked her to a school dance and afterward, in a third floor classroom that was to have been locked but wasn't locked, she had let him touch her in places she'd only touched herself. He'd been terrified but determined and wouldn't stop repeating the Lord's Prayer the entire time.

After, he asked if she'd be his girlfriend. She said sure, why not?

He brought her to meet his parents the following week. They dated, or what he termed dating—a movie followed by a few minutes of quiet groping then a goodnight kiss—for over three months.

But it ended when Tom's mother walked in on him masturbating in the kitchen, Stefani's class photo propped against a pig-shaped ceramic cookie jar.

His mother, stunned and revolted, made a sharp sound like a parrot being shot. "This is where we eat," she said, thinking of how her son had helped her with dinner the night prior, had tossed the salad and handled the food. "Food's served here."

The entire house was thrown into chaos by the event. His mother wept for two days straight, yelled at her husband that it was his fault that their son was mentally tainted. "Come on, mom," Tom repeatedly pled, embarrassed and angry. "It's not like I killed someone."

"No," his mother tearfully answered, "it's not. It's worse." She demanded he get professional help, see a doctor, which ended up being a dermatologist who was related to the family in some distant, difficult-to-trace manner—Tom's mother feared the stigma of having her son go to a shrink. She forbade Tom from seeing Stefani anymore.

Tom explained to Stefani that he could no longer see her. He loved her, he said, but "outside forces, forces larger than you and me" made it impossible for him to keep seeing her. Having grown bored with Tom, Stefani was hardly hurt by the break-up, but still she acted the role of the jilted lover. In the school, when they passed, she turned her head down and ignored him. For nearly two weeks,

the girls Stefani sometimes hung out with harassed Tom, calling him "Asshole!" or "Dicklick!" in the halls between classes, slipping nasty notes into his locker. They started rumors he had Ebola or E. coli or some frightening disease you get from doing something you shouldn't do. Loyalty and friendship to Stefani were not the wellspring of their actions. The girls taunted and berated Tom out of sheer adolescent cruelty, because there was the opportunity.

Then there was Gary and Greg Black. The Black brothers. She'd met Gary, the younger brother, at a Methodist youth group gathering her sophomore year. Being a Catholic, she'd gone not for the religious aspect, the community of Christ, but for the free snacks and screening of the movie *Halloween*. "You like Mountain Dew?" Gary asked her, seeing she'd poured a cupful. She wore tight, elastic, purple flare-bottom pants and a zippered Rocawear hoodie. "Yeah," she answered, "and Cherry Coke. I like Cherry Coke a lot," she told him. "And regular Coke. But not Pepsi. Tastes like sugared tree bark, you know?"

"Word," he said, nodding in agreement. He asked if she wanted to sit next to him during the movie. She did, and grabbed his hand twice during the scary scenes.

His confidence was what Stefani liked. He said what he felt, wasn't shy or goofy like most the boys she knew.

She handed up her virginity that night in the choir robe closet and on Monday, told Susan, a girl in her gym class, all about it. "You had sex with a black Methodist?" Susan said, crossing herself. "That's definitely a sin."

"His name's Black," Stefani corrected. "Gary Black. I met him at a Methodist youth ministry thingy," Stefani said, but it was too late. She'd lost the rights to her own story; the tale quickly spread, getting distorted and embellished with each telling. By end of the day, word was that Stefani was fucking a black minister addicted to Methadone.

She dated Gary for seven and a half weeks, then started going out with his older brother Greg, because he had a battered, old Nissan Z28. He was cool, had all the confidence of his younger brother and half the acne. He drove her into Brooklyn to go drinking

at a Polish bar that never carded, or up into Washington Heights to a Dominican bar that never carded, or out to Queens to an Albanian bar that never carded. Or he'd buy a twelve pack of beer with his fake ID and drive out to Staten Island where, parked on a quiet cul-de-sac with aluminum-sided houses, they explored each other's bodies.

When she'd come home at midnight or one or three a.m. on a school night, her mother would explode, demand to know where she'd been. "Bowling" or "Youth group" or "Getting my nails done" she'd answer, her clothing wrinkled. She'd list about the apartment, like the floor was uneven or warped. "What have you been drinking?" her mother would demand. "Milk and milk and more milk," Stefani would reply. "Does the body good." She'd smell salty and fetid like she'd sprinted five miles then napped on a mound of fish sticks and mangos. Her mother would yell, all empty threats. "Okay, okay, okay," Stefani'd say, staggering to her room to collapse on her bed.

The next night she'd be out again.

Her father did nothing, stayed clear of the fray and let the women work it out.

Stefani and Greg's relationship stalled when Greg graduated and joined the Coast Guard. "I'll write," he promised her, "and visit when I'm back." She knew he probably wouldn't.

He didn't.

Since then, Stefani spends most nights at home flipping through *Seventeen* and *Elle* and other magazines she finds on the street for recycling, drawing flowering doodles with Magic Marker on the faces of the models.

Taking one last look at Morris's picture, she tosses the photo album back in her bag, then shifts about the purse's contents, looking for matches or a lighter. Junior prom's approaching, and thinking of Morris in a rented tuxedo and a cummerbund, she laughs to herself. "Yeah," she says, thinking of the surprise everyone will have when she shows up at prom with Morris. Her father will flip when he sees Morris at the door, a corsage in hand. Maybe she can get Morris to spring for a limo and dinner out at a nice place with a tablecloth and two forks at the setting.

And liquor, she thinks, lots of liquor.

She finds a battered pack of matches, strikes one. It hisses to life. The cigarette catches. Stefani, coughing violently from the smoke, grabs her bag and heads west on Ninth Street, planning which pages in her photo album she'll put the prom pictures. Planning which pages will be dedicated to Morris.

## Four

Heading out his building's front door, Morris runs directly into a flabby, homeless black woman.

"Excuse me," Morris says, startled.

The woman eyes him suspiciously as she gnaws on a crab leg she found in the garbage. Dressed in an oversized pink skirt and a tight, faded red *Make-Out Bandit* T-shirt, her rolls of fat give her the appearance of three sets of breasts, one stacked on top of the other. The sidewalk's littered with the trash she's pulled from the can, littered with damp coupon fliers from Rite Aid, ripped, cancelled checks from someone named R. P. P. LeRoy Lee III, and orange take-out menus from Ali Bayou, the new Turkish-Louisianan fusion restaurant that specializes in deep-fried Snickers and Doner kebabs.

"Naw, naw, sweetmeat," she tells Morris, then shakes her hips. "It's me that needs excusing." Hiking up her skirt, she urinates on the sidewalk.

"Ah Christ, come on," Morris says, scooting to the side. The urine puddles then runs toward the street. "You have to do that here, in front of me? In front of my building?"

She laughs a laugh of ripping velvet. "When the muse is ringing, sweetmeats, *the muse is ringing*," she says, the crab leg protruding from her mouth.

Sickened by the scene, Morris stalks off to Mr. Charlies.

Mr. Charlies is the owner of Mr. Charlies Deli and Beer, a twenty-four hour bodega around the corner from Morris's place. A small man, Mr. Charlies has thick, black hair and an overbite that makes him look like he's constantly smiling. "Hey, buddy, hi buddy" is how he greets everyone who enters the store. He's originally from India, or Argentina, or from a country with a royal family and a large heroin production. It's hard to say. His story varies, depending on who asks, and his accent's strange and shifting, like he's trying to