

SOME GENTLE MEN

short stories

by Michael Rosenthal

SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES

I have some problems with my body.

Mister Fish is my state-licensed, legitimate massage therapist. He is a tall man with black hair, and blunt thumbs that go into me like bullets.

His features are prominent.

Once a week I go to the studio apartment Mister Fish subleases from an importer/exporter. The importer/exporter is never there, only his bed and overstock. I walk sideways past wicker chairs and disassembled brass bedsteads and there is Mister Fish's black leather massage table. It has a removable square at one end so I can look at the fake oriental carpet while he works on my neck and back.

The wicker chairs are scratchy and the brass bedsteads give me goosepimples. It's a funny feeling, to be naked anywhere except your own home or apartment. It's an especially funny feeling to lie down naked in front of a person who's dressed, especially a tall man like Mister Fish with thumbs that go into you. There is a clean sheet over the slab so you won't stick to the leather, but Mister Fish doesn't drape it over my body while he works. At least the apartment is usually warm.

Mister Fish begins every session with a kind of foot massage called reflexology. This is based on the theory that the soles of the feet are where all the nerves in the body end, so if you press very hard on special points, you can send messages back up the nerves. All I know about it personally is that there is one place he presses that makes me very aware of my bladder, and that it hurts like the dickens.

One day Mister Fish is working on my feet and I'm going 'ow, ow, ow' more than usual. "You know, you have a very low tolerance level," he says. He keeps working on my feet and I keep going 'ow, ow, ow'.

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Finally he says, "Let's do this," and he holds his hand horizontally a few inches above my belly and hums very loud. The louder he hums the more convulsively I breathe. I absolutely can't help it. All the air pumps in and out of my body until it is all new. Then he goes back to working on my feet. It hurts just as much, but I am so impressed by what he's done without even touching me that I don't say 'ow, ow, ow' for the rest of that session.

I enjoy most of the rest of the sessions, after the reflexology. When I say his thumbs are like bullets, I mostly don't mean it in a bad way, just that they go very deep into my organs and muscles.

Mister Fish mixes his own combinations of oils and herbs to make his hands go more smoothly through my body. I think of the way the herbs and oils smell as 'lavender', although I don't know if lavender is really part of the mixture.

I smell the 'lavender' evaporating from my body all the way home, even over the stink from the subway.

I feel so relaxed and excited after the sessions that I can't wait to go home and take off all my clothes and masturbate. Mister Fish doesn't approve of this when I confide it to him once. "It's bad for the bladder." Maybe that's why I'm always aware of that point on my foot.

With one exception, the questions Mister Fish asks me during the sessions are professional, impersonal ones about the state of my body. The exception is "How's your love life?" He asks me this in the same tone of voice he inquires about my neck or kidneys. It's embarrassing to tell him nothing's happening. That's probably why I tell him that time about the masturbating.

One day while he's working on my calves Mister Fish tells me about a cameo he has just bought for his wife. He's never mentioned having a wife before. I've wondered.

"Regina likes brooches," he says.

When I'm halfway dressed he asks me to look at the cameo. "Tell me what you think of it."

I feel a little funny because I always dress and undress with my back to him. I know he means now, and why not. He's seen all there is to see. He is sitting in one of the importer/exporter's wicker chairs, holding the cameo out to me.

It's an ivory cameo on a black velvet ribbon. The valleys of the carving and some of the flat parts around the profile are lined with sepia. Some of the ridges are chipped or cracked, in a pleasant antique way. Her hairstyle is elaborately executed. It's a good specimen of your generic cameo, I suppose.

"It's beautiful," I say. "I think she'll like it a lot." I hold it out to him.

He looks at it in my hand for a moment and then up into my face, past the places where I'm still not dressed. "Yes, I believe she will," he says. He takes the brooch back. "You should meet her sometime. You two would get along."

I go back to the rest of my clothes and resume dressing. Yes, I say, OK.

He's very gentle with me the next couple of sessions. I hardly say 'ow, ow, ow' at all. He still asks me how's my love life, and when I'm getting dressed he asks me when am I coming over to meet Regina.

Then one day when I am getting dressed and he asks me when am I coming over, and I say sure, OK, anytime, he says, "How about this Friday?" and I say sure, OK.

When I hand him my check for the session he hands back a piece of paper with his address folded inside.

Mister Fish wears beautifully tailored clothes while he's working with his oils and 'lavender', suit pants and a dress shirt with the sleeves folded crisply back to the elbow. The suit jacket lies folded over one of the brass bedsteads, an exquisite tie draped over it. The fee I pay for my sessions is reasonably high but not extraordinarily so. I never meet another client when I'm going in or leaving. I have never found the courage to ask Mister Fish about his income, or, for that matter, to drape the parts of my body he isn't working on.

On Friday at the appointed time, I press the button marked 'Pesci' in their vestibule, as the piece of paper instructs. Mister Fish buzzes me in.

He meets me at the door. His suit is unfamiliar, but I recognize the tie from the importer/exporter's apartment. I am glad I have dressed for the occasion.

"Come in, come in," he says. "We're so glad you've come. Regina is just putting on the finishing touches."

The living room is huge. My entire apartment would fit in it. I exaggerate a little, not much.

The leather couches and chairs, and the chromium and glass coffee table, bar and fixtures, are exactly what I have imagined. The leather furniture is oxblood, unlike his black leather massage table. That is the only part that isn't as I have imagined. What I have imagined is exactly what I always imagine I'll see in any copy of *Architectural Digest*.

He seats me on the couch and asks what I'll have to drink. I tell him a gin and tonic, as I've planned to on the subway.

"Are you sure I can't persuade you to try one of my patented martinis?" he asks. "They're very good."

"No, thank you."

"That's a shame." He prepares my drink and adds a twist of lime from a glass saucer, and pours himself a martini from a large chromium shaker.

He gives me my drink and seats himself in a chair opposite. He raises his glass. I raise mine back at him. His thumb appears distorted and huge through the clear liquid.

"New friends," he says. He sips his martini. "Bliss."

I say, "This is a very nice apartment."

"Regina's family has money." He calls over his shoulder. "Regina! Our guest is here! You're being very rude!"

"I'm just coming," she replies, and enters.

She is also very much as I've imagined her, almost as tall as Mister Fish, with blonde hair almost certainly from a bottle. She is slender, and wears a black cocktail sheath. Her hair is swept up to match the ivory cameo around her neck.

"We're so delighted you could come tonight."

"I'm glad to be here."

"Anthony has talked of nothing else all week." She holds my hand limply in her own for a moment, then sits at the other end of the couch. "You're exactly as he described you."

"It's very nice to be here. I was just telling Mister Fish how much I like your apartment."

“Call me Anthony, for God’s sake.”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“My parents gave us the apartment for our wedding. But I think we’ve made it our own, don’t you, dear?”

“Yes, we’ve put our stamp on it.”

“It was our first project together as man and wife, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.”

“It’s come out very well, I think.” She gazes about vacantly, possessively.

“Yes. Won’t you have one of my patented martinis, Regina.”

“Oh, yes. How nice.”

Grumbling slightly, he gets up from his chair and goes over to the bar.

“Anthony’s martinis are famous, aren’t they wonderful?”

“I’m sorry, I’m having a gin and tonic.” I show it to her.

“Oh, too bad.” Mrs. Fish drinks off her martini while Mister Fish stands over her.

“Bliss, please, darling, may I have another?”

He grumbles again, but refills her glass. This time she merely sips and murmurs.

“Bliss.” He nods and returns to his chair.

We sit there in a horrible silence. Mrs. Fish begins humming.

“Regina.”

“Was I doing it? I’m sorry, dear.”

“Regina had the most appalling habits when I met her, but we’ve managed to break her of most of them, haven’t we?”

“Yes, I was a nightmare. You have no idea.”

I make an apologetic noise.

“But Anthony is so very very good for me.”

“Oh, good. I mean, it’s a good thing you met.”

“Yes, it was. I don’t know where I’d be if I hadn’t met Anthony.”

“How did you two meet?” She draws a breath and begins to reply, but Mister Fish cuts her off.

“I don’t think we need to drag that old story out for our guest, do we?”

“Oh, no, I suppose not.” She sighs on two descending notes, and sips her martini.

“Mister Fish, Anthony, hums sometimes when he’s working on me. Has he ever told you...”

“I don’t think we have time for that story before dinner, do we, Regina?”

She consults a little silver watch. “No, dear. Graciela said the mushrooms would be ready in half an hour. We’ll just have time for our salads.”

“So I thought. You’ll want to wash up. The bathroom is just down the hall.”

I stand. “Thank you.”

The bathroom is all chromium. I wish I were chromium too. I resolve to eat as quickly as politeness allows and then excuse myself with a headache.

I come back to the living room, where Mister Fish is replenishing the shaker, and follow him into the dining room. More glass and chromium. More AD.

The salad greens are vigorous and bitter, the dressing silky and strange. I ask Mrs. Fish what's in it.

"Anthony made the dressing. He's very talented with herbs."

I ask Mister Fish what's in the dressing, and he delivers some brief remarks on the history and science of herbology.

These remarks segue into a full-blown, seamless lecture on aromatherapy, nerve meridians, reflexology, shiatsu, and acupressure, with some sneering asides in reference to the more traditional Swedish methods.

Mister Fish ignores in succession the salad, the crab-stuffed mushrooms, the tournedos a boeuf with wild rice, and the cunning potato baskets filled with baby vegetables, as he proceeds to expound upon Feldenkrais, Rubenfeld technique, and other forms of exotic bodily manipulation. Occasionally, he sips from his martini to lubricate his throat. Mrs. Fish serves, removing our plates at the end of each course. I listen with my chin in my hand until the next delicacy is placed in front of me.

I try to follow through on my wolfing plan but am sabotaged by the extraordinary quality of the food and my reflexive decision to wash it down with martinis from the enormous chromium shaker. Each time its bottom is sounded, Mister Fish prepares another batch in the living room and then resumes his lecture where he has left off.

He really does have a gift for the martini.

I never utter another word after asking what's in the dressing. Neither does Regina. She begins to hum a couple of times but ceases at a look from Mister Fish.

"...and that is how I arrived at the particular mixture of disciplines I find most effective when treating the ill or depleted body. It's done wonders for you, hasn't it."

"What? Yes. I have a headache."

"There's nothing better for it than a little tune-up. You will excuse us, of course, Regina. You can handle the cleaning up."

"Of course, dear. There's nothing to it but to put everything in the dishwasher."

"Oh no, I couldn't impose, you've been such a good host, I should really just go home and lie down." I stand up, he takes my elbow.

"A tune-up is just what's needed. We'll see you later, dear," he calls over his shoulder as he steers me down the hall.

"Mister Fish, this is very nice but I really don't want to impose. I should just go home and lie down."

"You can lie down here and get a little tune-up besides. No charge. And call me Anthony."

"That's really really nice of you, but..."

"I won't hear any objections. Now just get yourself ready and lie down. See? Nice big bed."

"Mister Fish..."

"Anthony."

"Anthony..."

"You don't think I can work on you through all those clothes, do you. You know better than that."

“Yes, but...”

“I won’t hear of any buts, and that’s that.”

The bedroom escapes the chromium and glass theme of the rest of the house. It’s a generic bedroom with a large bed and a couple of chairs and a walnut dresser with a mirror on it. There isn’t quite enough furniture in it.

It is all pretty standard except for me in the mirror watching Mister Fish watch me put my last stitch of clothing on a chair beside the dresser.

“Lie down now. On your stomach, first.”

“Please be gentle with my feet.”

“All right.” He takes my left foot in his hand and kneads it with a knuckle. “That’s your cranium there. Feel?”

I can feel it.

“We’ll get rid of that headache in no time.”

Some time passes.

“Feel better?”

“Yes...”

“Now we’ll do the rest.” I hear the chafing sounds of him rubbing oil into his hands.

“This is a little different from the mixture I use at the office.”

It is. There is something in it that feels like eucalyptus, that is cool and then quickly warm as he rubs it into my calves and begins pushing his thumbs in. It makes the muscles fall apart from each other and slacken and glow. It is dreamy. It doesn’t smell like eucalyptus. It doesn’t smell like ‘lavender’ either.

His hands move farther and farther up my thighs. “Shhh,” he says, “shhh.” His thumbs go farther around and inside my thighs than ever at the importer/exporter’s office and come dangerously close. His hands seem huge. I am almost relieved when he cups them over my buttocks. More relieved when he moves them to my back and begins separating and lighting up the muscles there and in my shoulders.

“You’re feeling better, now, aren’t you.”

“Yes, Mister Fish. Anthony.”

“That’s right. You feel relaxed.”

“Yes, I do...” I did.

“All right, turn over now.”

I turn over and there is Mrs. Fish, on a chair by the bed. She’s naked, except for the ivory cameo on the black ribbon. She doesn’t look quite as slender as she did in her little black sheath.

“Mrs. Fish.”

“Regina.”

“You shouldn’t be in here.”

Mister Fish says, “She doesn’t mind, do you.”

“No.” She drinks from the chromium shaker. “I like it. Would you like some gin, dear? Just gin. Nobody makes martinis as good as Anthony’s, so I’ve given up trying.”

“No, thank you.”

Mister Fish straddles my legs and begins working his thumbs into the dangerous places in the hollows of my thighs.

“Mister Fish. Anthony. I don’t think we should do this.”

“Ssssh.”

It hurts and it feels wonderful, like sparking spark plugs pushing into me. “Ow. What’s that, what are you doing, ow.”

“That’s an important nexus, there. It frees up a lot of energy.”

“Oh. Ow, ow, ow, oh.”

“That’s the point.”

Ow, and oh.

“Do mine, Anthony,” says Regina. She lies down next to me.

Mister Fish, still straddling my legs, kneads my thighs in alternation with his left hand, and Regina’s with his right. The mattress gives under our weight and she falls closer to me. Her soft flesh undulates against me. It feels good. She says words like there, Anthony, please, and some sounds that aren’t words.

I have nothing to say. I am excited. I am losing my mind.

Regina puts her hand over his, between my legs. “Do me, Anthony, I’ll do our guest.” I feel her fingers, limp yet distinct.

He shifts over to straddle her. I watch his thumbs sink deep into her thighs. Her hand gets stronger.

I lose my mind, my mind is lost. I remember everything.

Hands are involved, and objects. There are parts and sounds and mouths. Every spice is tasted, and every space that can be penetrated, is.

Everything goes in like bullets and comes out like bliss.

I call her Regina and I call him Mister Fish.

When it is over, when we are finished, when they are done, I take a shower in the chromium bathroom. Mister Fish gives me cab fare home. I smell the ‘eucalyptus’ evaporating from me in the cab and for days later, after many showers.

I never go back there again, all right, twice. Once to find out and the last time to be sure. The last time is definitely a mistake.

I could go there again, and again, but I don’t. That much I can say.

My answering machine picks up my calls for months. I leave it on twenty-four hours a day. Mister Fish doesn’t call. He does send a bill for the first two sessions that I miss.

It’s called ‘sleeping with’, but of course I never slept with the Fishes. I took my shower and then the cab ride home. You sleep with it afterwards.

ENTERING AND BREAKING

Separately they departed. Her heart was aching, and his mind was perplexed...

He broke a light sweat as the top of the hour approached. At five to, he saved the templates to the public folder and went to the closet.

“Where are you going?” his supervisor asked.

“I told you I had to leave early.”

“Oh yeah.... Jacksonville has to have those by 5 tomorrow or we’re up the creek.”

He shrugged into his jacket, patted the breast pocket, then took it off again. “Yeah, yeah.” He sinatra-ed the jacket over his shoulder and headed for the door.

His supervisor called after him. “Hey.”

“What.”

“Good luck.”

“With what?”

“With the audit?”

“Yeah.” He tapped his forehead. “Thanks.”

She was perky. “Yes, Doctor?”

“You tore Mrs. Kouame’s impression.”

“I did?”

“Mm-hmm.” He flexed the mold. It was torn across the stump the crown would have to fit.

“Ohmygod. I’m so sorry. I’m just so worried about my grandfather.”

“It’s only a hearing aid.”

“It’s... just... you don’t know my grandfather.”

“Hmm. Well, mix up another batch. I’ll tell Mrs. Kouame there was a bubble in the first one.”

He fiddled with the jacket all the way down to her apartment, zipping it up then down halfway in the breezy streets, unzipping then back over his shoulder in the funky subway station, zipped up in the clammy 6 train. Patting the pocket occasionally.

All the responsible people were still at work and she shunned punks, bums and artists. Nonetheless, when he got to her block his eyes were peeled for anyone he thought might know her.

He was looking in three directions and so primed to keep on strolling if her building’s front door was closed that he stumbled when he saw the usual stack of bricks propping it open. Casual, he trotted up the steps.

He gave the contractor’s guys his usual solidarity smile as he passed the apartment they had been renovating for months. They gave him their usual semi-mechanical grins. In theory, they could rat him out. But they hardly spoke even to each other, and what he’d

overheard didn't sound like any language he recognized or she might know. At the top floor, he passed her door and kept going.

The alarm on the roof door was dented, dinged, and defunct. A couple of weeks before, after it blared for three merciless hours, the cops had shown off for her and some other female tenants by bashing it to death with their batons and radios. Her building super might be quicker to respond the next time he was beeped. The door release bar still worked.

The breeze blew unimpeded across the roof. He played with the zip, patted his pocket. Tarpaper stuck slightly to his shoes. The five-story-tall tree in the courtyard rustled its fans of diamond leaves.

The ladder over the side was surprisingly sturdy. Rusty flakes ground into ash under his palms. The exposure, the possibility that someone across the way might see him added a goosepimple or two.

She couldn't figure him out at all. She hadn't loved anybody as much as she loved him, since Ben. Ben was big and warm and fuzzy, nothing at all like his angles and puzzles. Thinking of Ben made her smile. Mrs. Kouame, misinterpreting, perhaps, blinked and grimaced around the mold. She smiled back and went to check inventory and daydream. But Ben was puppylove, really, and he was something else all together.

He didn't even have to slide by her neighbor's windowsill, just step step squat and look around. The slats of the landing objected to the unaccustomed weight. Across the courtyard, a floor down and diagonal, a fat orange cat watched in the window, poker-faced.

He peeked in her window. She made her bed as perfectly when she wasn't expecting him as when she was.

He took a techie's flathead screwdriver from the jacket's breast pocket. He angled the tip through the top pane towards the brass lock. The chatty cop when his apartment had been broken into said that the small breach in the glass was typical, that one burglar would apprentice another in the technique and so on. God bless New York's finest; where would he be without them? Not hanging on the fire escape outside her apartment, preparing to break in, that's for sure. Probably.

He thumped his palm against the butt of the screwdriver. It clicked through the old glass and lodged under the clasp. He pressed and levered and the screws slid out of the fragile wood. He stashed the screwdriver back in his pocket.

He raised the window. This last step depended on her. Had she locked the folding security gate as he constantly, conscientiously reminded her to, or, stubborn as he suspected she really was, left the padlock sitting on the radiator again?

The gate slid stiffly back. He knelt on the sill and entered. He slid the screws and lock back into place, tamped them down. The fat cat's head swiveled to track a pigeon.

She jumped when he asked, "Have you forgotten something?"

"Ohmygod, Mrs. Kouame! I'll —"

"Already taken care of. Go home."

"Doctor, I'm so sorry."

“I’m not angry. Just go home, go help your grandfather, you’re no use to me today.”

“I’m so sorry, Doctor.”

“Yes, yes. It’s not your day. See you tomorrow.”

He pressed her greeny flowered bedspread with his padded fingers and tautly the mattress pressed back. The blue plush pony doll, well-worn, rocked against the pillow. When she expected him, it was usually standing on the bookcase by the bed. He had learned to just smile when she sometimes rolled away from him and pulled it down to her. He pressed hard enough to make the springs complain, then smoothed the single wrinkle away.

The dustless books were shelved straight as soldiers. Three shelves of trashy novels, one of textbooks, one of self-help, these last showing smudged and broken spines.

The plastic covers on her computer monitor and hard drive were as carefully squared as her bedspread. He pulled them off — where did she put them when she used the computer? — he closed his eyes and tried to remember, visualize — couldn’t come up with anything — where would she put them? He opened the larger drawer of the desk and there was a space they folded into perfectly, next to the disks and manuals.

He booted up her computer.

She had never really liked his neighborhood. She should have liked it better than her own, it was cleaner and safer. It just didn’t really seem to be meant for people to live in. The apartment buildings were sort of shoeboxes stacked up because employees had to live somewhere. Even with the weirdos and beggars and all, at least her neighborhood felt like a neighborhood.

The light had something to do with it. Up here the avenues were wider and there was more light and it lit up the side streets and that should have been nice, but there was nothing friendly about the light, it was cold. In her neighborhood there were trees, brick, brownstones, warm tones. The light here shrank the trees. And the people.

She took a paper clip strung with keys from her tiny backpack. As she’d suspected, the one for the outside door wasn’t current. She scanned the names by the buzzers, then waited a few yards away until a middle-aged man put his key to the door. She skipped up to him and touched his arm.

“Excuse me, would you mind helping me with something?”

The middle-aged guy looked startled then pleased as he took in her smile, the fanciful backpack, her figure in the loose but clingy shift. Then suspicious.

“That depends on what.”

“It’s my boyfriend’s anniversary and I want to surprise him. It’s our anniversary, I mean. Would you let me in so I don’t have to use the intercom?” She smiled wider and touched his arm again.

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

Only one buzzer’s label had supplied a man’s full name. “Alan Ng. 7-H.”

“Ng?” He was a little more surprised than she thought was polite, but recovered quickly. “Sure, sure.”

He held the door open for her.

“Thank you.”

“I guess that Ng’s some kind of guy,” he said, when he got off on 3. She smiled and thanked him again. After the doors closed she hit the button for 5.

When the empty elevator opened on 7, Ng had to hustle his walker down the hall, but he made it.

He washed the rust off his hands and dried the sink with a tissue. He dropped it in the toilet, raised the seat and peed attentively, swiped the rim with another tissue, flushed, and lowered the seat. He rinsed his hands then, abruptly, checked the soles of his shoes for tar. He traced his path back to the window. No tar on the carpet. The computer bonged its readiness.

Her Mac’s desktop was deceptively neat. When he opened her hard drive he found a motley roster of alphabetized but otherwise unorganized apps, folders, and documents. Same mess as when she’d asked him how to get more usable space out of it, a graduation gift, a premature antique. At least she had compressed some files with the software he’d copied for her. He opened the folder labeled ‘PERSONAL!’ and double-clicked on ‘My Journal’.

Damn. She’d discovered the encryption function in the compression software. The application asked him for a password.

She pressed her ear to his apartment door. He was still at work but his creepy roommate worked strange hours. She tapped on the door a couple of times, then gave it a few real knocks, then opened it with the borrowed keys. She closed the door and locked it, leaned against it, feeling cinematic.

She tiptoed down the hallway and peeked in the first door. Caved-in snack bags and crusty clothes littered the floor of the roommate’s incredibly messy but uninhabited, by people anyway, she had her suspicions, bedroom. Hawaiian girls hula-hula’ed across his computer monitor — she didn’t get why it was left on all the time. A bulky tech manual pinned a porno magazine to the carpet. On the chest by the door, small change, a clever little screwdriver kit with one missing, and the cereal bowl full of keys she’d borrowed her paper-clipped set from.

She tried to walk regular through the living-room/kitchenette but couldn’t quite muster it. If her feet fell right her shoulders seemed wrong. So she dashed into his bedroom and dodged beside the doorway.

He tried her name and his name, uppers and lowers, all caps, all lower case. He tried PERSONAL! and PASSWORD, he tried what he thought was her birthday and several variations. He tried the names of her mother and father, her sisters and brother. He tried a few other standard things, then gave up.

She’d never realized he straightened up for her visits. Thank God it was cleaner than his roomy’s. The blanket and topsheet were twisted on themselves and flung to opposite corners

of the bed. Underwear was heaped over the top of an open bureau drawer. It was going to take a lot of self-control to disregard the dirty gym socks crumpled at the foot of the bed.

Now that she was here what was there to be seen. She pivoted slowly in the center of the room, bureau, underwear, mirror, her in the mirror, closet, door ajar, electric guitar on its stand, desk, computer, gym socks, bed, pillow, night table: condoms in the top drawer. She checked: only the kind she least disliked, no weird styles, none unaccounted for. So that meant something good.

She pulled out the bottom drawer of the night table. Magazines. Nothing sleazy, just some old *Peoples* and a current *Entertainment Weekly*. Maybe he was embarrassed to read them in front of weird roomy. Sweet. Not like they were *Playboy* or anything or even *Penthouse*. She shouldered the mattress up to see if he kept dirty magazines where her big brother used to keep his. No. She nudged the blanket and top sheet back to their corners.

She positioned her head in the pillow valley his head had made and read part of an article in the *Entertainment Weekly*. This was not enlightening. She slid it back under the *Peoples*. Funny. Why the newer magazine under the old ones?

She probed the heap of underwear. No foreign objects, microfilm, or guns. The scent of bleach and detergent, a clean smell was one of her favorite things. She touched her cheek with a T-shirt, then released the heap.

The other drawers she opened carefully and felt around in, turned up nothing specific. She returned to the center of the room, and made some gnarly faces at herself in the mirror.

She could snoop around in his computer but he probably had some clever password. Hers was 'PETEY PONY'.

He didn't like her to touch his guitar. He'd mutter that she might put it out of tune. He hunched protectively over it when he played, stiffened when she kicked her legs too close, dressing. She plucked a string. Ting.

He aligned the computer covers so that each fold fell true. He figured on a quick reconnoiter of her lingerie drawer and then vamoose, when a retinal image, pastels against pebbled black, came into register. What was that? He opened the large desk drawer again and there it was, there they were. Behind the stacks of disks and manuals, at the very back of the large drawer, were two diaries with flimsy locks begging to be picked, and a pebbled black notebook.

She shook her hair and mimed screaming while madly strumming the guitar. Without an amp it wasn't loud, but the jangling, like shaking a drawer full of knives and forks, still satisfied. She bopped up and down in one of his white dress shirts, her breasts strove to shimmy out of their bra. Her shift was neatly folded on the bed. She hopped from foot to foot, chimpanzee'ing for the mirror.

She was starting to get a little dewy. Best to finish up and get out of there. She hunched, picked a couple of notes, bending the last one as hard as she could, let him have a real out-of-tune mystery, she brought her hand high over her head and struck a conclusive ka-brang. The pick flew out of her hand and into the bottom of his closet.

She flapped his shirt gently to disperse her scent. Skillfully she insinuated it under the plastic and paper, back onto the dry cleaner's hanger. She hung it second out of his next shirts to be worn. The pick she found on top of the box of magazines.

The first diary was covered with daffodils:

I went to Sunrise Mall with Renee and we saw BEN. He was wearing Jeans that fit him just like That and Renee said he was all THAT. Renee said that when I wasn't looking he was Pretending that he wasn't looking at me but he WAS.

He flipped ahead a couple of pages:

I Love Ben / He is so sweet / I love him walking down the street

I love Ben / He is so nice / I love him with Sugar and spice.

He flipped ahead a lot of pages:

I HATE HIM!!! I HOPE I NEVER SPEAK TO HIM AGAIN IN MY LIFE! I HOPE THEY ARE VERY HAPPY TOGETHER WITH THEIR UGLY CHILDREN!!!!

A few pages much the same then the rest blank. He exchanged the daffodils for tulips: I'm scared said little BOOBOO BEAR. I'll protect you growled big BENNY BEAR.

Huh? He skimmed back and forth. No clues. He continued reading:

But how can you protect me if we are lost in the Forest?

Each picture was more than the next. This one showed a woman touching herself with a perfectly manicured nail, and that one showed two women touching a third with their perfectly manicured nails. One showed a naked woman with her arms and legs around a man, and one showed a naked woman with her legs around one man and her mouth around another. This one showed a woman whose skirt was lifted to reveal her, pantiless, and that one showed three women flipping their skirts up, pantiless and shaved. And this one showed a woman kneeling on the floor in bra and panties, facing, inviting, just as she kneeled in front of his strewn magazines, staring, sweating.

He clicked the second diary closed and began the black notebook:

I thought it might be appropriate before I started this journal that I should go back and read my old diaries from when I was a child. Looking back from eighteen years of age I can hardly believe that I was that girl anymore. She was so trusting and innocent and happy. And today I am so not trusting and not innocent anymore (well, not as innocent) and not always happy.

I am looking at my pony, Pete. Thinking about my first love Bennett, will always make me feel warm and safe and loved, which is really important in this world. I have to remember that even as I go forth into the world that I will always have that happy little girl with pigtailed traveling with me too. And not to lose that trusting and innocents.

He found himself unexpectedly warm while reading this. He opened another button on his shirt, swallowed, and read further.

She smoothed her shift over her body, picked up her backpack, and made two decisions. The second involved keeping the set of borrowed keys.

He hurtled down the steps, neglecting to acknowledge the contractors' guys. Absently he patted his breast pocket. He was trying to remember exactly where that store was. He knew it was on one of the streets on the way to the restaurant.

They hurried towards their rendezvous. He carried a Beanie Baby, and her panties were tucked in her backpack....

HARRIS'S HEAD

When Harris is standing up, he thinks of his head as an oval, with almond apertures for eyes through which his mind looks out. His mind rides in the oval.

Now he is lying down. When his head is sideways on the pillow, why doesn't his mind stay standing, looking out one vertical aperture with the other at its feet? Does the mind lie down with gravity?

Harris is tall and thin, a bony matchstick man looking out his oval. If he hears, how's the weather up there?, one more time, he swears he'll do as the joke suggests — he'll spit and say it's raining.... Not really.

Please don't call him Harry. Don't call him Slats or Shorty, either.

Harris is once-divorced. When she liked him, his wife called him Boney Maroney. When she didn't like him, she complained about his sharp hips digging in. Let me on top, she'd say, I'm tired of looking into your chest.... Now she lives in another city.

Harris is good-looking and doesn't know it. Women like his beard, especially the streaks of gray that have grown in the last couple years. And — even his ex-wife, once — they like that he's tall. Harris tends to think they're just being friendly.

Harris is at a loss for conversation at parties. After saying, nice party, and asking, are you a friend of so-and-so or so-and-so, the only next thing he can ever think of to ask is, what do you do?

Most people are either very interested in what they do, or not at all. Harris is a not-at-all person. If he asks another not-at-all person what they do, and they shrug and ask him back what he does, then two silences meet and the conversation is probably over. If they are a very-interested-in-what-they-do person (woman), then a conversation possibly can be sustained. Sustainable does not always mean desirable.

A desirable conversation could lead, he supposes, to bed.

Harris's mind observes that most very-interested-in-what-they-do people like other very-interested-in-what-they-do people. Not-at-all people can get along okay, if something sustains them past two silences meeting.

So at this particular party, Harris asks a very-self-interested-seeming European-looking woman what she does. And she says, that's such an American question, nobody where she comes from would ever think of asking that question of somebody they just met.

That's the end of that conversation.

Harris met his first wife in college, at a mixer. They had a common context. They talked about their majors and the music they were hearing.

What-you-do is no longer a gambit. Being divorced is not much of a gambit, nor is being tall. What's left, being? Hi, do you stand in your head, watching the world? Does your mind stand up when your body lies down? Why not? What's in your head?

Harris's horizontal mind thinks, head, and he says to himself, oval, which he knows means egg. He says it to deny it. Scary to be that fragile. The other thing that he thinks of when he thinks head is coconut, and this is appalling — a hard thick sphere, covered with nasty hair. It makes his beard itch. And the three spots on top, like a stopped-up bowling ball or some awful reduction of the face to inexpressive nothings. He makes a grimace, sideways on the pillow. He'd shave his beard, if his chin wasn't so weak.

Harris on the subway, on the way to work. Work is work is work is work. It's done with computers.

Harris imagines a European party conversation. XXX, one says, and XXX the other says, and XXX and XXX, and then they're in bed. Over coffee the next morning, perhaps what-they-do may be exchanged.

In the years since the divorce, Harris has had two lovers, with an interval between them. Both co-workers. A workplace is a context, and a context makes a conversation easy. So-and-so is a jerk, so-and-so is funny, did you hear how so-and-so screwed up that thing?

Harris isn't seeing anybody right now. He still works with both co-worker-ex-lovers. One still talks to him and the other one doesn't. They both broke up with him pretty much the same.

Bed, subway, work, subway, bed. Like the joke about the idiot's guide to sex — 1: in, 2: out, 3: repeat as necessary.

Once Harris overheard two other co-workers talking about him and one of his then-lover-co-workers. He had become somebody else's so-and-so; they had become part of a context. Who knows what that led to.

When the subway car is especially crowded, Harris gives up his purchase on a pole or handle to a shorter person (woman) and holds on to the rim of an overhead ventilator, or, stretching slightly, stresses his body in place with a hand flexed against the ceiling. Other men sit with legs sprawled, taking up two or three seats.

Harris is courteous, with large hands. Some women... but Harris tends to think....

Harris on the subway, on the way to work.... Work is work. His stop. The 14th Street station is an old one, not built for modern, longer, subway cars. A gap exists between the car and the platform when the train pulls in. A kind of mechanical scaffold is supposed to extend to the car before the doors open. This time it doesn't. The doors open and Harris steps into the breach.

There he is, a shim between the subway car and the retracted scaffold, hands desperately forward grasping the cement to keep from slipping to the filthy, rat-infested, electrified tracks. His effective height at that moment is about 15 inches, from his excruciated armpits to the top of his astonished head. How tall is his mind then?

If ancient gum ground into concrete looks disgusting from six-and-a-half-feet up, imagine it from a foot away, near mouth level. It is an inexpressive blot, filthy.

If the scaffold functions now, it will divide him.

Help, he says in a conversational tone, help me. The commuters exit, stepping over him. He's out of context, theirs, his own; everybody's except the thief who picks up Harris's attaché case without breaking stride. Help.

It's a short guy finally helps him up. To lift Harris to his feet, the short guy has to hoist him by his armpits practically over his own head. Harris thanks the short guy who says, no problem, and walks away. The short guy has short hair, with one long strand in back, like a tail.

At work, the response is exclamatory: Oh, my god! No! Really? Nobody stopped? Just walked away with it? Shit! Harris has brought something new to the context. People cluck at him when they walk by his desk. The co-worker-ex-lover who still talks to him pats him on the arm.

Could this be a new conversational gambit? XXX, Harris could say, platform and scaffold, falling and thief, ha-ha, and isn't life X. How to tell it charming and self-deprecating, rather than pathetic and frightening. Help me.

Harris's head says, take a cab home.... Harris's body walks to the usual station.

The train pulls in. Yellow letters painted on the platform warn STAND CLEAR. Harris watches the scaffold extend to the closed doors of the car. It's undramatic. The doors open and everybody walks around him to get on.

Harris's head says watch out, don't trust it, don't walk on it. Harris's body leaps into the car just before the doors close. A guy gives him a dirty look.

When Harris goes to work the next day...

Who stepped over him? Who watched him fall? Who would have found it even more exciting if he had died? Who would have talked about it at work? Who would have been annoyed that the train was taken out of service while Harris's body was recovered? Who stole his attaché case? Is the thief on the train? Is the guy with the tail?

Standing Harris looks at heads.

The heads in the car are motley patchwork. Blonde hair teased up into pastry rolls, coarse black hair dyed red, stubbled tonsure, helmet of silver, inky shimmering froth. They are an ill-plowed field. The heads shake when the mouths speak.

The bodies of the heads press against him, the bodies and Harris's sway, the bodies generate heat. Disembodied smells rise up. A smell is a residue of a body, it is a disembodiment. If a mind is disembodied, does that make the mind a smell? Perfume.

Harris sneezes. A nice small lady, wide head tilted up under braided basket of hair, says God bless you. Thinks Harris, I get it. God bless your mind when you sneeze it.

Thank you. You wouldn't push me under a train.

No, of course not.

Harris breathes shallowly, deliberately. Harris's head expands and, paradoxically, empties.

The nice small lady gets out at the next stop. Everybody else is suspect.

Whose head stepped over him? Whose head watched him fall? Whose head would have found it even more exciting if he had died? Whose head didn't give a damn?

Which one of you took my attaché case?

I said, which one of you heads took my attaché case?

Now the heads are eyes. Eyes are brown with spots like fetal chickens, they are blue with radiating lines, they are shades, they are mirrors hiding mirrors. Cool air sweeps around him as the bodies draw away. Eyes are almonds, heads are eggs.

A near tall head speaks over shorter others.

Whyncha shut up.

Young head, smooth and fresh, a glitter cushion delineated square, shaven above small ears. Onyx egg, burnt-almond almonds afloat in clear whites.

You makin the ladies nervous.

I'm sorry, my eggs and almonds are getting confused.

Whatever; just shut up and quit makin a scene.

Have you seen the man with the tail?

No monkeys on this train. Ha.

You're not the one who took my attaché case, are you?

You callin me a thief?

An older amber egg pokes in, bobbing in front of the tall egg's chest.

Easy brother, can't you see the man's disturbed?

He got no right to be callin me a thief. I'm an honest man.

'sokay, son, the man's not in his right mind.

A bolt, Harris is electrified.

Yes that's it exactly! The right mind. The platform failed me and I fell out of my right mind.

Harris's large hands grasp the shoulders beneath the amber egg.

I lost my context at 14th Street.

There you go, that's the next stop.

You'll help me find it, please? Harris draws the amber egg closer.

Sure I'll help. Next stop. You ought to let go of me now.

Right. It's probably waiting for me.

Yep, probably. Don't you want to let go of me now?

Harris draws the amber egg older head's shoulders even closer. The whites of his eyes are ivory, the irises brown as earth. A grounded man.

God bless you.

We all need God's blessing some time, yes. Don't you think...?

Harris bows until his egg touches warm skin over skull. Slight adhesion.

Does your mind stand up when your body lies down?

Let go of me, sir.

See, he's some kind of weird punk faggot.

I must insist that you let go of me, but Harris's arms clutch him, Harris's egg nests with his. The train swerves the long curve north of 14th Street and their bodies totter together... disembodies mingle.

Shit, he's gonna kill him!

Heads knock and crack, heads are real. Sympathetic head is torn away. Bodies are real, bodies wrestle, many bodies pull at one. Harris is dragged away, limbs to the four corners. Stagger all as the train pulls in to the station. Mechanical screech, dangling head.

Get him out, get him out.

Don't hurt him.

The other door, no, the other door!

Through the wrong door they bear him away.

When Harris was standing up, he thought of his head as an oval, with almond apertures for eyes through which his mind looked out. His mind rode in the oval.

Now he is lying down. He twists his horizontal head to spy his standing mind. His mind waves from the other door. Why does it just stand there? Doesn't the mind lie down with gravity? Even perfume falls.

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