

LOCKPICK PORNOGRAPHY



JOEY COMEAU



Loose Teeth

HALIFAX VANCOUVER

Don't wanna make excuses,
cause this is how it is.
What's the use?
Unless we're shootin
no one notices the youth.

- 2pac

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Halifax ~ New Orleans ~ San Francisco ~ Vancouver

This novel was written in the girl's residence at Dalhousie University, reworked in the French Quarter of New Orleans, tested on San Francisco's Canadian Embassy, and edited on Vancouver's east side near Uncle Fatih's Pizza on Broadway.

For more information refer to the following websites:

<http://www.looseteeth.ca>

<http://www.asofterworld.com>

<http://www.aioku.com>

Lockpick Pornography / Joey Comeau

All the characters in this book are fictitious, except Sheryl and Gilyan in chapter 5. Coke and Pepsi will both make you gay.

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*For Mom and Robert,
Ed, and Maggie.*

Halfway through the televised debate I kick my boot into the screen. Even on mute I can't stand it. It feels good to smash the TV, though. I feel like I'm participating in the political system. The candidate's head vanishes in a shower of glass and noise, and I stand there wondering why I let my knowledge that violence only makes things worse prevent me from being violent.

It's noon.

Before he left, Chris made me promise to be gone before his boyfriend comes home at six. That means I have six hours to calm down, call Richard, and convince him to drive me into a straight neighborhood so we can steal a replacement TV.

I used to steal from heterosexuals for political reasons. Anything owned by a straight white

yuppie is bought with oppression. The heteronormative ownership paradigm is a tyrant belief system that deserves to be undermined on every front, from political protest to petty thievery.

Now I'm a little more honest about it. I can admit that I steal from straight people because I just don't like them. I made myself a t-shirt that says "I break into heterosexual houses so I can masturbate in their heterosexual kitchens."

The TV belongs to Chris' boyfriend, and so I shouldn't have broken it. But I promised myself that if the talking head said "Of course we should be tolerant of the gays," one more time I would kick in the TV, and if you can't trust your own word, what can you trust?

Richard answers on the first ring, and I say "Where are you? I need you to drive me somewhere." I can hear a sound in the background, low repeated clunking of a headboard is my guess. "Who answers the phone in the middle of fucking?" I say, and Richard just laughs. The voice in the background says "Who is it?" and I hear Richard say something. The boy asks "What's he wearing?"

"What are you wearing?" Richard asks me, and that's that. A half an hour is wasted on mediocre phone sex. I think about Chris while I listen to Richard's overacting. Last night, fucking Chris, I thought about Richard. It doesn't matter

what I fantasize about, these days. All that matters is that it's something different from what I'm doing.

I probably won't ever find out who the boy is that Richard's fucking, and I don't care. He's a prop, just some mouth around Richard's dick as I pull myself off on the other end of the phone. A half an hour. Chris' boyfriend will be here in five and a half hours now.

Richard says he's on his way over, and he hangs up.

The boyfriend has a separate dresser from Chris, and I dig through it looking for a clean sock to wipe myself off. I do so, and then fold it nicely back in with the others. There's no TV, so to kill time I get out the phone book and flip it open randomly. The first name is Hubert, J.

"Good afternoon," I say. "I'm sorry to bother you during the lunch hour, ma'am, but I wonder if you'd like to take a survey in exchange for a free dinner for two at a local restaurant."

"What restaurant?" she says, and there's hesitation in her voice, like she thinks maybe it's a trick. Maybe it's dinner for two at McDonalds or something beneath her. "I'm right in the middle of lunch," she says.

"Any restaurant in the city limits," I tell her.

"Okay,"

"Are you married?" I ask. "Sorry, are you happily married?"

“I am,”

“True or false,” I say. “A man should never hit a woman.”

“True,” she says without hesitation. I pause a moment like I’m taking note of her answer. In reality, I’m sitting on the edge of Chris’ dining room table leaving smudge marks. He’s uptight about it. “Always use a coaster. Always use a coaster.”

“Wrong,” I say into the phone. “No. No. No. Hasn’t it ever occurred to you that gender is an illusion? I mean, what if a pussy little faggot punched one of those chunked up body builder girls with a clit like a three foot cock? I mean, that right there is vaginal-dentata-night-terrors three feet from being realized, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” she says, but I’m getting into it. I wonder where Richard is, and whether we’ll fuck later. I picture the woman I’m talking to, sitting at her kitchen table while I push Richard down by the shoulder and pull open my belt. I picture her smooth botox face with a desperate housewife smile while she watches Richard take me in his mouth and she clucks her tongue in time with his. On the phone, she’s saying “Excuse me?” again.

“Gender isn’t a dichotomy,” I say.
 “Sometimes a baby’s born and it’s a boy, and sometimes it’s a girl, sure, but sometimes a doc-

tor is in the background behind one of those pull-around curtains, flipping a coin. Sometimes the mother says 'Is it a boy or a girl?' and the doctor really does say 'Yes.' That isn't the punchline to a joke, Mrs. Hubert, it's the punchline to the whole misguided notion that the concept of boy or the concept of girl are anything more than constructions."

There's silence on the other end of the phone.

"How many loads of laundry would you say you did each week?" I ask, but she's already hung up on me. It doesn't matter.

Outside, Richard is honking his horn. I hang up the phone and check my fly. She won't think about what I said at all. Her husband will come home, and she won't even remember to say "We got a crank call today." I don't know why I waste my time. It's like writing letters. Fuck it.

I get all the way to the door and decide to call her back, give it one last try. Mrs. Hubert. I pick up the phone and press redial.

"Hello?" she answers, and I pause. I hate her for the fact that I know she'll hang up, but I hate her more because there is a chance she won't.

"When I pluck my eyebrows, I'm becoming more of a woman," I say. "When you stop plucking yours, you become less of a woman. When I fuck a man, or his boyfriend," I say, "And

my chest is shaved, and my eyebrows are plucked, and his expensive underwear is pulled aside so that his cock springs free into my mouth, what do you have? Is gender really just tits?”

“Who is this?” the woman says.

“And women who develop breast cancer, who have their tits cut off, who wear the same breast form fakes as I do when I’m all dressed up, are they less than women?” She hangs up and my anger is confused because I don’t know what I believe anymore myself. If that’s what gender is, just an illusion, then why don’t I fuck women?

In the car, Richard wants to know where we’re going.

“We’re going to break into a house and steal a fancy TV,” I say. “I want to get something silver and digital and at least thirty seven inches. We’re size queen burglars, and we’re after something so new and expensive that it’ll make us think about getting real jobs.”

“I’ve got a job,” Richard says as the car starts, but I ignore him.

Richard works at the phone company, doing technical support for a bunch of broadband Internet customers. He brings home big paychecks week after week and he uses them to fund his “deviant” lifestyle. He doesn’t need to

steal things the way I do, but he likes it. That's part of his charm.

We're walking up the driveway to this two story arts and crafts style house and Richard says "So, we're replacing the TV so the boyfriend doesn't know you were there?" and I nod.

"Won't the boyfriend notice that it's a different TV?" I stop and think for a second, and then shrug.

"So it's an apology present," I say. At the front door, I reach out and ring the doorbell. No answer. We turn our backs to the door like we're just casually waiting for someone to answer, and we look around the neighborhood. Nobody watering their lawns, or staring out their windows at us. We walk around the house.

Out back we climb the steps to the deck and Richard lies on his back in the sun while I slide my lockpicks out and get to work. "I thought you were supposed to be at work this morning?" I say as I select a pick. Richard laughs.

"You couldn't hear us slamming the photocopier into the wall?" I can picture it, the photocopier's lid breaking off, cheap and plastic under their hard and violent bodies. Sex is always better when you're breaking something.

I learned to pick locks from *The MIT Guide to Picking Locks*. I found it on the Internet, and you can tell it was written by the sort of queer that

doesn't like the word queer. The whole thing is prefaced by an ethics statement, again and again apologizing for being a guide to picking locks. Explaining and apologizing, like those fuckers I'm always seeing on TV talking about gay marriage, about being in love and being just like straight people, just as monogamous and sexually repressed.

I ordered the pick set off the Internet. I'm having trouble concentrating on which pins are set, though, because I keep picturing Richard fucking the mailroom boy on the photocopier at work.

"I thought it was a headboard," I say. Then the lock is open, and I turn the knob. "We're in." Richard has his shirt pulled up so the sun can get at his chest, and he lays there for a minute in silence before he acknowledges that he hears me.

"Alright," he says, sitting up. "Let's do this shit." I love how he talks like that, like we're TV criminals, about to "do a job." It makes me want to bring pantyhose to pull down over our faces. Maybe next time I will.

There are kid toys all over the wall to wall carpet and there are tasteful clocks and paintings and a decent microwave-fridge-stove kitchen set. The whole kitchen is chrome, and I wish we'd brought a truck. Standing in the doorway, I feel

like going upstairs and getting all the clothes and papers and hidden pornography and dumping it in the back of a truck and moving them out. I feel like stealing their house.

They'll come home and I'll be making some popcorn and watching pornography on their television. Solid gold.

I get to work looking through the silverware, and Richard starts picking up the toys and putting them in a plastic toy box near the wall. The family will come home to a clean house and a missing TV. Richard's fingerprints will be all over everything, and mine will too.

Already I can see my fingerprints on the cutlery, and I press my index finger to the wide blade of a butter knife. The oils from my skin leave a perfect mark, clear and intricate. They've got expensive silverware, but it's heavy and kind of tacky so I leave it.

Richard puts the last toy in the box and looks at the TV. It's a flat screen TV, and more expensive than Richard's rent. I live on people's couches. "That'll fit in the trunk for sure," he says. "Let's look around first."

Upstairs the master bedroom has a big replica of David's Marat, naked, hand hanging down beside the stone bath, holding the pen. There's a nightstand on each side of the bed. His side has a journal and a pencil and a Tom Clancy novel.

There's a hair laid across the journal, maybe an accident, maybe to determine if she's messed with it.

I flip it open randomly, and read. Good wife, good kids, good life. It used to be you could count on breaking into some house and exposing the dark underbelly of the middleclass lifestyle. I mean, it's all they ever make movies about anymore, isn't it? Now they've got a cocktail of pills to get rid of middleclass angst. I flip to the last page and pick up the pencil.

Maybe the police will get a handwriting analyst to examine the note I leave behind. "We were going to watch some hardcore gay pornography and leave quietly, but you didn't have any so we took the TV with us."

I wonder what kind of person it'll say I am. See how the letters are all above the line, here? That's arrogance. Or self-confidence. Or a big cock. It's hard to tell.

I close the journal and carefully replace the hair.

Richard yells "Hey, get in here," from the closet. It's a walk in, and there's a whole wall of shoes. "These aren't very well organized," he says. He picks a pair up off the floor and gets to work. I sit behind him on the floor and watch.

"I heard you slept with a woman," I say.

I watch as his organizing slows briefly, and then speeds up.

“You too, huh?” he says. “Fuck, man. You’re the one who said that gender was just made up, weren’t you? Sometimes you get so drunk that an ass is an ass. I was out at a party full of straight people, and it was either go home with this seventeen year old girl with her face all tattooed and who wouldn’t stop spouting politics at me, or follow one of the guys home in the car and try and find some bushes with a good view. I’ve got nothing against frigging myself in the bushes,” he adds, “but this girl had me convinced, she was just a talker, man. An ass is an ass.”

I’m nodding even though he can’t see me. “Are you going to see her again?” I ask, and Richard thinks a minute before nodding.

“What if I am?” he says. “Are you gonna give me the talk I got from Robbie, about how I’m just too scared to live a gay lifestyle, and I’m subconsciously seeking the security you get from sticking your dick in a woman?”

“Nah,” I stand up and head for the door. “I just think we should start bringing more people when we do stuff like this. We should start finding people we trust, and a seventeen year old with facial tattoos who gets off on convincing fags to fuck her sounds like my kind of girl.” I pause in the doorway and grin. “Not that I’d fuck her,” I say.

He throws a shoe at me, but I'm already gone.

Downstairs I unplug the TV and DVD player and roll up the cords. There's a plastic bag in the kitchen big enough for the player. Richard comes downstairs and we look around one last time before we pick the TV up and carry it outside. There's a kid on a skateboard trying to ollie in the street beside the car.

On the drive back to Chris' apartment, Richard tells me that he's got plans to crash a high school student council party tonight with the girl and some of her friends.

"I know you were dead set on showing up at the lesbian ball," he says, "but if you change your mind, you should come." I'm already nodding. A high school party. How can I turn down the chance to break some young boy's heart for the first time?

Chris' boyfriend is there when we arrive, standing in the doorway with a frown on his face. I smile as wide as I can and offer my hand. Richard is carrying the TV himself, his arms wrapped around it.

"You must be Chris' boyfriend," I say, and he tentatively shakes my hand. "I'm one of the guys Chris has been fucking while he waits for you to come to your senses and realize that monogamy turns love into an ownership thing."

He pulls his hand away and Richard sets the TV down. Chris' boy is just staring at it, so I hand him the plastic bag with the DVD player and cords.

"You've been sleeping with Chris?" he says. "Yes sir," I say. "And it's been great." I turn to follow Richard back to the car, but pause. "Oh, there might be a serial number or something on the bottom there," I say. "If you ever sell it or anything, you should get rid of the number."

And that's that. In the car Richard is already talking about the party tonight, with this girl Alex and her friends whose names I'm already forgetting. We're gonna hit the lesbian ball first, dressed in suits and fake mustaches, freshly shaved and calling ourselves drag kings. There's nothing more satisfying than going out dressed as a woman dressed as a man and having the girl at the door roll her eyes at you because she doesn't think you pass. I live for that moment.

I roll down the window and stick my hand out, giving a family in a minivan the finger, but really just enjoying the feel of wind over my skin.

My drag king name is Prag Titmouse, which nobody asks for anyway. The fake facial hair doesn't itch anymore because it's just as sweaty as the rest of me. Richard and I are dancing right in the thick of it, with all these girls packed into the dance floor. I've had two double whiskey sours, and I'm getting over that nervous feeling I get around lesbians.

I love the music, the angry dyke punk rock. I'm jumping up and down with my hands in fists.

A blonde girl with long hair and those thick rimmed glasses that men are always wearing in diamond commercials pushes between us, taking Richard by the tie and pulling him close. She kisses him and he kisses her back, watching me out of the corner of his eye. His face is bright red, and I start laughing and pull her off of him.

We used to play see how many lesbians you can French kiss before one of them figures out you're a boy.

I kiss him myself. I love that feeling in the pit of my stomach, with the dyke punk rock shaking my head and Richard's hand on the front of my pants, squeezing me while the girl watches. These are my people, queer and out of control. That feeling lasts for a minute while Richard and I feel each other up, until I notice the girl still standing there. She's sneering, uninterested in gender play. She can't understand why a drag king would be into another king, and not some femme bimbo. She has no idea.

The feeling's gone, and I remember how closed minded most of the faggots I know are. Richard wants to go to the bathroom and fuck, but I'm ready to leave already. The music is stopped for a bit, and there's a girl up on stage, reading her poetry for the lesbian ball talent show. I want to get up on stage too, and make an ass of myself in front of a pulsing crowd of lesbians who won't be happy to suddenly find a man in their club. I'm not even drunk yet. I want to pull a magic trick, walk on stage as a girl in boy's clothing, nothing up my sleeve, and pull a cock out of my pants. Voila!

The girl who introduces the talent show competitors is named Michelle, and she's stand-

ing against the bar and talking with the bartender. She's got her head shaved, and lines carved into her eyebrows like she thinks it's nineteen ninety three. I walk over, leaving Richard with the blonde who won't give up, and introduce myself. Firm handshake, eye contact. I play up being a man, so she thinks I'm not.

"Prag," I tell her, and she laughs out loud. She's got an explosive, ugly, fucked up laugh. She spits ice cubes that she's been chewing.

"Your name or your designation?" she asks, and I grin.

"It depends on what kind of mood I'm in," I tell her. "You the girl that can get me up on stage to read some poetry?" and she nods.

"What you got?" she asks, and I tap the side of my head. "Come on," she says, "let's hear it."

"I only really feel comfortable up on stage," I say. "I feel like my poems are meant to connect with a wide spectrum of feminine energy, and I tend to get embarrassed when I read them one on one." I try to look embarrassed, but Michelle is nodding. Did she roll her eyes? I hope so.

"No, totally," she says. "I'll get you up after the next girl."

Richard appears beside me, and takes my hand. His fingers are sweaty against my knuckles.

"Can we go soon?" he asks, and I nod.

"We'll be leaving very shortly," I say into his ear. "Trust me."

Soon Michelle is up on stage and pointing at me. I make my way through the crowd and climb up beside her, in front of the microphone. There are a couple of catcalls, and I smile. Michelle gives me a kiss on the cheek, and she steps down into the crowd again.

I'm under the lights and sweating already. This is childish and stupid, I know. How long have I been pulling shit like this? What will this even prove? But I see Richard grinning in the audience, his lips wet and his eyes inviting, and I know that he'll think it's great. I know that when we get out of here he'll tell me how awesome he thought it was, and we'll fuck in the back of his car.

So I pull my shirt open, and tear the facial hair free. My face is still masculine, and it becomes apparent that it wasn't that little bit of hair constructing me. I haven't changed, but I have. I'm not wearing an undershirt and I don't have breasts. Girls are already yelling "boo" at the stage, and I can see a big security guard headed my way through the crowd.

"My name's Prag Titmouse," I say, "and my poem is called 'what the hell is wrong with lesbians, because cock is awesome.' I hope you like it." I pause, and clear my throat. Michelle is there at the edge of the stage with Richard, the only faces that are laughing. I smile at them.

“What the hell is wrong with lesbians?” I say.
“Because cock is awesome. The end.”

I jump off the stage and grab Richard’s hand. Michelle is right there, and says something that I can’t hear. I grab her hand too. Richard’s eyes are wide, but he’s smiling as he runs beside me. We all take a path that lands us some kicks and punches from the girls we pass, but which takes us to the door and avoids the bouncers. In the street outside I’m shaking with laughter. Michelle is still saying something, but I’m near deaf. We run for a couple of blocks, until we’re sure that nobody is following us.

I’ve got that feeling back, like I’m a part of something queer and strong and worthwhile. When I read about “the movement” in the paper, or see queers interviewed on TV, I don’t feel like a part of that, I don’t feel like I’m represented by that toned down image they’ve created to help straight people “tolerate” us. I’m a part of something more honest.

I’m a part of that smile of recognition I get from the store clerk when he realizes I’m gay too. I’m a part of that smile on his face as he looks the other way and I slide a book into my jacket. Richard and Michelle are part of that too. I feel so close to them right now, I want to fuck the air.

“God damn it,” Richard says, leaning against a car. He’s laughing, out of breath. “God damn it,” he says again. Michelle is shaking, and I stick

my hand out. Another firm handshake, this time as myself and not a girl faking it, and Richard gives her his, too. He's still in costume.

"We're going to crash a high school party," I tell her, and Richard gives me a strange look. I know he wants to fuck in the car, but I shrug at him in return and smile. Plenty of time for that later. He shrugs too, but looks a little disappointed. He'll get over it. I want to have some fun tonight. "Are you down?" I ask Michelle. We're walking again.

"Sure," she says. She looks over her shoulder, the way we came. "I can't go back there tonight anyway. They're going to think I was in on it." She smiles. "I wish I was. What are we doing at this party?" We're at Richard's car, and he pulls his keys out.

"Breaking hearts," Richard says, pulling open his car door. "Maybe making friends." We climb in, and Michelle gives us her back story. She only works part time at the dyke bar, just a way to meet girls. She moved here from up north because she was tired of the cold. She was tired of living in a town with fifteen lesbians who all had each other on speed dial.

"And it's hard to look good when you're wearing a parka half the time," she says. Richard nods. He's from up north too, though further north than her I'll bet. "I've just been kicking

around since I got here.” Michelle lights a cigarette. “Sleeping around a bit, and trying to avoid the drama. I work part time to pay the rent and buy my groceries, and spend the rest of my time doing what I want.” She laughs and corrects herself. “Doing who I want,” she says.

Richard’s friend Alex meets us in the parking lot of her high school. A dance is just letting out, and severe looking men and women, her teachers I’m guessing, stand at the door and watch the kids all head out. Alex looks sharp, wearing a suit like ours, and her facial tattoos are impressive in their sheer size. She’s got thick black rectangles crossing her cheekbones.

“So here’s the plan,” Alex says, as soon as she’s in the car. “I pick a boy, and start flirting with him,” She’s talking to Richard now. “I pretend I’m drunk, and easily taken advantage of, and he gets all blood-drained-from-his-head and takes me upstairs.” Richard is driving, watching the road, but Michelle and I are leaning forward. “He lets me blindfold him...”

“And then Richard fucks him,” I say, and I’m grinning like an idiot. “Or sucks him off. He does it instead of you, but the boy doesn’t know.” Alex is looking at me now, for the first time. “He’s blindfolded, and getting the blow job of his life, and until he opens his eyes, nothing is wrong. Everything is perfect because in his head it’s perfect.”

Alex turns back to Richard. "Imagine the look on his face," she says, "when he finds out it was a guy instead of a girl sucking him off. Imagine how angry he'll be." Richard is still watching the road.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he says. "There's not really any consent involved there, is there? When he opens his eyes and sees the two of us there, he's going to feel used and taken advantage of, won't he?" I snort and lean forward again.

"It's like gender play," I say. "You're a girl, sucking him off. You're Alex for that ten minutes on your knees, because all Alex is to him is a mouth. And Richard, if an ass is an ass, then a mouth is a mouth." Richard blushes and glances sideways at Alex. I realize that those were her words and not his, that he was just repeating them. "You're not a boy until he opens his eyes, and then what does he do? He's just had an amazing orgasm in your mouth. He's been moaning about how fucking awesome you are, and now that's all recontextualized. He has to go back and reinterpret everything that just happened, with a faggot sucking him off while he bucks and moans. It's perfect."

Michelle hasn't said anything, and I give her a sidelong look. She's watching me quietly, on her second cigarette. Alex is turned around in her seat now, facing me.

“If Richard won’t do it,” she says, “will you?” and I nod.

“I’m better at it than he is anyway.” I grin, and Richard shakes his head.

“Fuck off. I’ll do it,” he says. “Now tell me what exit we’re taking.”

At the party Richard goes off with Alex to deflower a high school boy, and Michelle and I find a spot near the keg and sit down.

“Spongebob is totally a fag,” a boy next to us says, and a whole group of drunk kids are laughing. “He’s always hanging out with that fucking pink thing. He’s a silly faggot.” He says “silly” with a fake lisp and Michelle rolls her eyes, but I turn around to face them.

“Who else is gay?” I say. “Tinky Winky’s gay, right? That purple Teletubby?”

“Yeah,” the boy nods. “And Batman and Robin have got to be gay. Come on.”

“That Hannah Barbara cat thing,” says a girl. She pauses to think of the name. “Snagglepuss. He’s a total fag.” Michelle turns to look at the girl. It looks like she wants to say something, but before she does someone cuts in.

“Bert and Ernie,” he says. It’s a boy with a t-shirt that says something in binary code on it. He’s got his glasses taped at the corners, even though they’re obviously brand new. “Probably Oscar the Grouch, too. He was like a bitter old

faggot. Kermit the Frog's little nephew." He adjusts his glasses with a practiced move. "They probably all go to the same parties, like a queer superhero team." I almost laugh out loud. Brilliant. But before I can say anything to Michelle, she's standing up.

"Let's go see how Richard's doing," she says. She takes my hand and helps me up from the couch. My mind is flooded with images of cartoon characters and Muppets, gay terrorist comic book heroes. Halfway up the stairs we can hear a boy yelling "What the fuck?" over and over again. "What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck." Michelle starts running up the stairs and I follow.

Two boys have got Richard on the ground, and they're kicking him. They're not doing a very good job of it, because they're so drunk, but they're trying really hard. Another boy is holding Alex back, but she's giving him a hell of a struggle. Michelle is on top of them before I'm even off the top stair, and she is all elbows and knees. Alex breaks free and all of a sudden the tides have turned. I'm not into the violence. I'm too busy thinking.

I help Richard up, and he doesn't have any bruises on his face or anything. He's holding his side and I say "You alright?" and he nods. "Anything broken?" I ask, and he shakes his head. "Good, because I have an idea."

“What?” Richard looks around at the fight that surrounds us. “Is your idea to get the fuck out of here?”

“Nope. You’ve heard that stupid controversy that Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street are gay? What if we got ourselves some masks, and became Bert and Ernie? What if we took the ridiculous idea that characters on a children’s show are gay, that they are a threat to Traditional Family Values, and we made it come true?”

“You mean, like, put on the Bert and Ernie mask and fuck somewhere in public?” he says and I shake my head.

“No, I mean put on our Bert and Ernie masks and videotape ourselves breaking into people’s homes and leaving pro-gay children’s books in their kids’ bookshelves. You and me and Alex and Michelle, assuming the identities of gay cartoon characters and going out every night to threaten Traditional Family Values as best we can. Breaking into a television station and changing the Saturday morning cartoon programming. Pirate TV without all the expensive equipment.”

Michelle has stopped punching the guy nearest me, and she looks up. The guy looks unconscious. I’ve never seen someone beaten unconscious before.

That's lesbians for you.

"What good will that do?" she asks. I can't believe she's been listening. "We're just giving weight to their arguments, aren't we? I mean, there are people on the television all the time accusing us of doing just that, corrupting children."

Alex is in the background somewhere, yelling "And he fucking liked it. Ask him."

"So why don't we do it for real?" I say, "We aren't gonna talk these people into liking us. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. They're bigots through and through."

Richard is grinning now.

"But we can brainwash their kids," he says, finishing my thought. "Why aren't we trying to recruit people? We get accused of it all the time anyway. I'm in. Dibs on Ernie." I look at Michelle, and she still looks wary.

"Well," she says. "I don't know. Who would I be? What lesbian cartoon characters are there?" Alex comes up behind her and slides her arm around Michelle's shoulders. Michelle looks startled. She says "She-Ra? Was She-Ra gay? Is that even a recognizable mask? They'll think it's Bert and Ernie and a couple of random girls in masks."

Alex shakes her head. "There are tons of dyke characters," she says. "I'll be Wonder Woman and you can be Velma from Scooby

Doo. And just so people can tell what the masks are, we'll wear those five dollar plastic kid costumes too. People will figure it out."

We make our way downstairs and through a house full of sullen, staring teenagers. I notice that Richard stops holding his ribs until we're outside. In the doorway Alex stops and turns to face them all.

"Thanks for everything, guys," she says. "See you in class!" She runs down the driveway and climbs into the car. "Where can we get masks at this hour?" she says. "Can we start tonight?"

Richard's cell rings at eight the next morning, and it's Chris asking to talk to me. "I'm not here," I whisper. Richard relays the message, and I think about what a disaster it would be if I tried to get Chris involved in this cartoon fag terrorism thing. He's probably already thinking about getting rid of the TV we stole for him, terrified that he'll get arrested somehow. Richard turns the phone off and falls back asleep.

I lay there and think about Chris. His contacts at the newspaper would be good to have, for publicity, but his guilty conscience would do us in. I took him with me to church, six months ago, on a day when the sermon topic was "The Problem of Homosexual Indoctrination." We stayed in the parking lot, and I slit every tire on every car. Chris gave his own sermon, to me, on the unhealthiness of anger.

I gave him a stack of fliers for a roadside assistance service. It was run by a man who funded anti-gay marriage commercials on TV and in the newspapers. The slogan at the top of his flier was "Let us help." One went in the windshield of every slashed car.

Chris didn't appreciate the beauty of turning our enemies against one another. "They aren't our enemies," he said on the subway ride home. "They're human beings, just like you and me."

"I think they'd disagree about the 'you and me' part," I said.

So Chris isn't going to get involved in this. Richard is asleep beside me, and I climb out of the bed as softly as I can. Slitting a few tires and inciting a few angry phone calls is nothing compared to what these people deserve. I'm tired of the moral high ground. We've already got more than our share of Gandhis in "the movement". We need a General Patton.

No poor bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other bastard die for *his* country.

My underpants are hanging from the bathroom doorknob, still damp from the shower. My hair's probably standing at all angles because I fell asleep with it wet. In the morning light I feel all riled up. I want to run down to the lobby of the building and out into the street. I feel certain

that if I raise onto my tiptoes in the street, I will just keep rising. I will lift off. I will fly. Instead I lean over Richard's sleeping body and kiss his cheek. He looks so peaceful. I could reach under the blankets and wake him up properly, but I don't.

I take his phone and head for the balcony.

I should have written down Mrs. Hubert's telephone number yesterday. If anyone in the straight world is capable of understanding, it's going to be the frustrated housewife, isn't it? I hate that I feel the need to try and explain. Do people even work that way? Can you just understand there is no difference between us and everything's alright again? I find a phone book and look up the number.

A man answers.

"Hello?" he says. His voice is dark and quiet, and I have it all right there in my head. I want to say "Love and sex are separate things, sir. Don't you feel trapped sometimes by the guilt enforced monogamy of your marriage?"

I open my mouth, but I don't say it. I also fail to say "When you lie down with your wife one night, the third Wednesday of the month or whatever your sex schedule is like in fifteen years, and you realize that the drugs have stopped working, are you going to regret not being able to fuck your wife anymore, or are

you going to regret not sticking it where you wanted when you still had the chance? Regret is an ugly thing.”

Instead I stand there listening to him breathe, and he hangs up the phone. I’ll try again around noon. I call the number Michelle wrote on a napkin for me, and it rings and rings and nobody answers. I check the number and dial again.

“What?” she says. Her voice is muffled, but it’s definitely Michelle.

“Hey,” I say. “Did I wake you?”

“No, we were just getting up. We’re going to have some breakfast and then head down to try and find some masks.” In the background I hear Alex saying “Is that them? Hey! Death to the Cartoon Heterosexual Paradigm!” And I laugh because I totally forgot about our war cry. Michelle continues, unfazed. “You and Richard are going to get the books? Do you want to meet around six tonight?” Alex is still yelling in the background. “Death to the Cartoon Heterosexual Paradigm! Smash the straight Cartoon State!”

“Yeah,” I say. I’m glad Michelle is involved. She’s got a good head on her shoulders. The way she laid into those high school boys with her knees and elbows was like a graceful lesbian Thai fighter, and she acted without a second

thought. She has her reservations, but she isn't going to let that keep her from taking part.

"Alright, well. We'll give you a call when we've got our disguises. Alex thinks we should shoplift the masks. She thinks it would be more fun."

"Whatever," I say. "She's shoplifted before?"

"My understanding," Michelle says, "is that she's an old pro." Alex laughs on the other end of the phone. "Mickey Mouse is a closet case! Minnie is his beard! Out of the closet and into the streets of the Magic Kingdom you chicken-shit mouse faggot!"

"I'll talk to you tonight then," I say, and I hang up. Alex is pretty great too. Enthusiastic, anyway. We went for drinks after the party, and she wouldn't let Richard off the hook for backing down. He said "It just wasn't right. It felt too much like rape," and Alex pointed out that he got his ass kicked anyway.

Richard wouldn't go through with it and Alex tried to talk him into it right there. The blindfolded boy heard her whispering and started yelling for his friends. Michelle and I showed up just after they did.

In retrospect the non-consensual nature of the thing does make me uncomfortable. I got so wrapped up in the idea of turning the boy's gender expectations up on their head that I, well, fuck it. I'm glad Richard didn't do it, and I told him so.

Now I'm sitting on the balcony and watching as the city moves with morning energy. Richard wants to pay for this elementary school action we have planned out of his own pocket, and I want to steal the money. I want to break into another heterosexual's house and take something we can sell, but he's got it in his head that the money behind these children's books should be clean money, should be pure somehow. We fought about it last night.

I gave in. We both have different ways of doing things, and if I'm honest with myself I have to admit that his way is more noble in this case. He'll feel good about spending some of his money on these books for children instead of on pornography and me. Also, giving in on this is my way of telling him he was right about the blow job thing with the blindfolded high school kid.

Richard wakes up and I hustle him out the door without breakfast. "We'll eat out," I say, and we climb into the car. The first bookstore we go to is in the city, a big chain outlet. We need at least thirty copies of the book and a chain is the only place we're likely to find that kind of stock, still, it still makes me uncomfortable.

There's a huge line to the in-store coffee shop, and we start looking around for a chil-

dren's book with gay enough pictures. There are two books in the whole store, and Richard doesn't like them.

"This book doesn't even say the kid's uncle is gay. He's just got his hand around the other guy's shoulder, and the little girl is saying 'I love you anyway, uncle Jeff!' It could be a children's book about coming to terms with an uncle who has a shoulder fetish. I don't think we're going to find anything here." I nod, but I've caught the eye of a clerk two aisles over. He's tall and blonde and his glasses are prissy as heck. I wink.

"What we need," I say to Richard, "Is a book called something like *Grandpa's Gay! Maybe I Should Be, Too*. But I don't think those make it past the editors very often, do they?" The clerk is closer now, and he nods his head toward the bathroom. I nod back and Richard looks over his shoulder to see what I'm nodding at. "I'll just be a minute," I say, and he shrugs and picks up another book to flip through.

In the bathroom I pull off the clerk's uniform shirt and put it on over my own t-shirt. He's got a nice chest, and he shaves it. It doesn't matter to me, really, but I certainly don't mind. He has the key to the bathroom, and he locks us in so we don't have to squeeze into a stall. I push him back against the door and my finger presses the bumps around his nipple. He goes straight for my belt like a gentleman.

While he sucks me I'm running my hand through his hair and I'm doing this fake voice the whole time. "Good afternoon, is there anything I can help you find today?" and "Good evening sir, did you know about our storewide sale today? Everything is ten percent off. Also, we do blowjobs. Would you like a blowjob?" I pause, and let out a small moan of encouragement. "We're very good at it," I say. He has to stop a couple of times because he's laughing too hard.

We exchange numbers, and I give him a kiss on the cheek. Richard's waiting outside, and he watches the guy walk past without any emotion at all, sizing him up. "There's nothing here," he says, and we head for the parking lot.

"I don't think we're going to find what we need anywhere," I say in the car.

"What about my brother?" Richard says. "He's a pretty good cartoonist. Couldn't we get him to illustrate fifteen or twenty pages for us? We could print up our own books, about anything we want. *Grandpa's Gay! Maybe I Should Be, Too* and that way we can control the message completely."

It's not a bad idea.

"You'll write it?" I say, and Richard nods. "Yeah, or we can all write it tonight." He smiles and turns back to face the road. "So, the prob-

lem with those big chain bookstores is the service, I find,” he says, and I’m already rolling my eyes.

When we meet up with Michelle and Alex, Alex has her hair chopped off and she’s wearing a sweater vest over top of a button up shirt. Her angular face looks much more boyish, framed by the hair, and my reaction to her facial tattoos is more visceral than I’m comfortable with. She takes Richard’s hand and leads him off into the back room of Michelle’s apartment. Michelle brings out some tea for us to drink, and we sit down.

“I talked her out of binding herself up with ace bandages,” Michelle says, nodding her head the way Richard and Alex have gone. “She’s decided to start self identifying as a gay man, and she wanted to bind her breasts for when Richard got here.” I’m smiling, and Michelle shakes her head. “I told her that I would introduce her to some real drag kings I know, and they’d show her how to do it properly. I don’t want her to hurt herself.”

The way Michelle seems to have taken Alex under her wing verifies my initial feelings about her, I think. She is smart and queer and awesome. If I weren’t gay, or she weren’t a woman, I might consider attempting to ensnare her in the ugly web of a monogamous relationship.

Instead I'll just be glad she's a part of our superhero team.

"We couldn't find any good books," I say, "but Richard's brother is willing to illustrate one for us. Richard will pay the printing costs, and this way we'll have complete control over the end result. We won't have to be sneaking watered down garbage onto the shelves. I think that'd defeat the whole purpose."

"We'll write it ourselves?" Michelle grins. "That sounds awesome." She pulls a bag out from under the coffee table, and shows me the masks, Bert and Ernie and Velma and Wonder-Woman. They're cheesy and plastic and perfect. I feel the way bank robbers must feel before they go out on that last job that ends up getting them all killed. That is to say, optimistic.

When Alex and Richard come back, they're holding hands and Richard is avoiding my eyes. Alex tells me they're boyfriends. "But it's not monogamous or anything like that," she says. "We aren't that naive." It's cute that she makes a little announcement of it. Sorry, not "she", "he". Now I'm going to get my pronouns confused. It's cute that Alex makes a little announcement of it. I like him.

"That's awesome," I say, and Richard looks to see if I'm being sarcastic. I meet his eyes and smile. "We ought to get that book written

tonight,” I say. “We can drop off the text to your brother in the morning. We don’t need this to be a work of art, or subtle. We want something fun, that kids will really enjoy, and something politically effective.”

“The gay grandpa idea’s a good one,” Richard says, and he and Alex sit down. Alex crosses his legs, like a gay man might, and I grin. “*Grandpa’s Gay, Maybe I Should Be Too*” he explains to Michelle and Alex. Michelle nods, but leans forward.

“That’s alright, but it’s so detached. The grandpa’s gay. All those children’s books about fags are detached like that. We want something personal, you know? About a boy who likes to play with dolls, and who wants to be Madonna when he grows up, not Clint Eastwood.” Richard looks pained.

“I wanted to be Clint Eastwood when I grew up,” he said.

“You are,” I assure him, and Alex laughs. He snakes his arm around behind Richard’s back.

“That’s good, though,” I say to Michelle.

“Something smart, too, not condescending. Something like ‘Last year, when I turned eight, my mommy bought me a big bag of army men. She knows that I don’t condone the patriotic ideal of might makes right, but more importantly she knows how much those single tone uniforms bother me. I made it perfectly clear that

all I wanted for my birthday was a day at the spa.' Or something fun like that?"

"Daddy found my doll collection and threw it out with the trash," Michelle says, "and he got so mad when I asked him whether his anger at my eschewal of traditional gender roles was based on his repressed homosexual urges."

Richard is grinning, and he picks up the pen off the table.

"That's good," he says, writing it down.

"Are we writing this about being gay, or being transgendered?" Alex asks, and Michelle shakes her head. Alex leans back in his chair, and Richard takes his hand. He, he, he. I have to get the pronoun down properly, so that I use it without thinking. Alex'll appreciate that, I think.

"Queer," Michelle says. "We can have an older sister who comes out of the closet, maybe! And she wants to be an astronaut, and get married to her lady friend on the moon! And all the neighborhood kids decide they want to be gay astronauts too." Richard writes furiously, and already I can picture the drawings, simple and elegant and fun. I wish I'd had a book like this when I was a kid. This is what publishers should be putting out.

Fuck Dr. Seuss.

Maybe Alex really is a boy. I've never seen him naked. Those could be breast forms under his shirt, that Michelle talked him out of binding. I watch him run his fingers up the back of Richard's neck. We're still trying to get the book written.

"What about a boy with a pet dinosaur," Alex says. "The dinosaur could be gay, and they could ride around town cruising for hot dinosaur loving, and the other dinosaurs would be all like 'Hey Ryan, can I pet your little boy? He's so precious. Does he bite? I had a little boy just like this when I was a kid.' And then the dinosaur gets the other dinosaur's number." Alex grins. "Little kids are a total dino magnet," he says, and even in the near dark of the room I can see that Richard is smiling at him.

Michelle and I are sitting on the couch. Richard and Alex are on the floor in front of us.

I like Michelle's apartment. It's cozy without being too cute. Nothing is too clean, or too careful, but nothing's disgusting, either. It's comfortable.

"I don't know," Michelle says. "'Can I pet your little kid?' That sounds kind of sketchy. We don't have to be politically correct, but we should probably avoid implications of pedophilia. We want a positive message. What was wrong with the girl who wants to be a gay astronaut? We could have a book where she goes to class, and everyone has to say what they want to be. Her classmates are all saying things like 'I want to be a fireman,' or 'I want to be the first female president,' or 'I want to be a soldier,' and then she goes up and says 'I want to be the first lesbian astronaut to get married in space!'"

Richard's cell rings, and he hands it to me. It's Chris.

"Hey," I say, and motion for them to keep talking. I lock myself in the bathroom with the kitty litter and a shelf full of pills. "Did you send the TV back already?" I lift up one of the pill bottles. I have no idea what the drug is. Something to do with girl parts, probably. "It was a nice TV," I say, and then I duck my head to the sink and take a sip of water. "I hope you didn't throw it away."

"I talked him into keeping it," Chris says. "He wanted to call the cops on you. Is that

water running?” I wipe my mouth and shake my head, even though he can’t see me.

“He wanted to call the cops on me?”

“I talked him out of it.”

“Where’s the boyfriend now?” I say. I pick another bottle off the shelf. Oxycocet. Painkillers. I think about pocketing a few, but decide against it. Anyway, if I ask, she’ll probably share.

“At work.” There’s a pause. “Are you busy? Do you want to come over?” I can hear Richard and Alex and Michelle all laughing in the living room, and when I open the door to peek, Richard is making ridiculous, grandiose arm gestures. I don’t even need to think about the decision.

“I’m busy,” I say. “And anyway I’d rather not have to sneak out before the boyfriend comes home.”

“What, you want to stay and cuddle all night?” his voice is sharp. “You’ve known all along what the situation was. I don’t need you pulling shit like you pulled today. If I want to tell him I’m fucking someone else, I’ll tell him. It’s not your place.” And after I hang up, I feel stupid. It used to be exciting to be the other man. Now I just feel like I’m taking a passive role in the reinforcement of traditional monogamous beliefs. What would monogamy be if there wasn’t something to compare it to?

I call Mrs. Hubert, and this time she answers.

“Monogamy is defined by what it is not, just as much as by what it is,” I say. “We couldn’t have monogamy without infidelity the same as we couldn’t have sad without happy, or down without up. By fucking around in secret, within a relationship defined as monogamous, aren’t I just playing the devil in monogamy’s Sunday school pageant?”

I’m saying all this to the dial tone.

Back at the group, they’re still talking about ideas for the book. Now Richard’s got one.

“We could have a kid who just changes gender at random,” Richard says. “He wakes up and he’s a girl all of a sudden. He doesn’t feel any different on the inside, but on the outside he’s got pig-tails and rosy cheeks. His mom and dad insist that he’s always been a girl. His toys are replaced by dolls and tea sets.” I sit down next to Michelle again.

What if I woke up tomorrow and I was a girl? How would that be any different? I mean, I’d have to throw out all of my clothes, for one, and some day next month there would be a terrifying trip to the bathroom. I wonder if those trips get less terrifying. Would it be worth it, having to have breasts, so that I could be fucked by two men at once? Richard is looking at me, and I smile.

“And maybe he doesn’t understand what it means to be a girl,” I say. “That’s a good idea. He has to pee sitting down. He’s not allowed in the boy’s washroom anymore. People give him funny looks when he buys baseball cards.” Do people still buy baseball cards? I’m trying not to think about Chris’ body.

“And all his clothes are gone,” Alex says, getting into it. “He has to dress up like an idiot.” I can already picture the cartoons that go along with the story, a little girl dressed in girl clothes, looking sour. Getting more and more frustrated as the book progresses.

Richard nods. “But then he starts having fun. He likes how nice his friends smell now. His new girl friends. He realizes that he likes dolls just as much as action figures. He even starts to get a crush on a boy in his class. The boy gives him a valentine, and he blushes. And just when he gets used to being a girl,” he says. “Just when he’s accepted his fate, he wakes up and he’s a boy again.”

“Only now he doesn’t feel like a boy anymore, either!” Alex says. “His friends seem dirty and rude, and he feels weird wearing a pair of pants instead of a skirt. He gives a love note to that boy from school. His mom comes in and finds him trying on her heels.”

Richard is writing this all down, and then smiles. “Johnny’s a girl, sometimes,” he says, and the decision is already made. *Johnny’s a Girl*,

Sometimes. I lean back and look over at Michelle. I feel like we're a band, recording an album so personal that we'll eventually refuse to play any of the songs in concert.

"We should celebrate," I say.

She nods.

"We should get fucking drunk," I say, "And go break into something." And we do. We pile into the car and drive until we find an elementary school.

Michelle is standing four feet away, keeping watch at the corner of the school. Alex and Richard are in the car, making out. I'm trying to hold a bottle of whiskey with the same hand I've got the lockpick in. It's complicated, but everything's complicated these days.

"Picking locks is a lot like being queer," I say. I'm on my knees in front of the door. "Taking the world as you see it, and not how you're told to see it. There's no real difference between turning the knob and picking the lock." I don't intend for "turning the knob" to sound like a euphemism for being gay, but I kind of like the way it sounds. "Both are series of mechanical actions by which you gain access to the room beyond, and both are within your ability. Fuck anyone who tries to tell me what I can and can't do."

Michelle runs her hand through her hair, which is the signal that someone is coming, and I slide the tools out of the lock and into my

pocket. She grabs me hard by the elbow and kisses me. We're making out as the man comes around the corner, and I break off to smile and nod and offer him a drink from the whiskey. "Sorry," he says. He doesn't give us a second look. There's nothing to see. We're just a couple of kids out for an evening of healthy heterosexual living.

I shove the whiskey into her hands and bend down again and select a different pick. After a minute, the lock turns, and I pull the door open and usher Michelle into the school. It takes less than a second before we're standing in the dark. This is our trial run. It'll be quicker when we're sober.

"Listen," I say as we sneak along the row of lockers to the first classroom. "The education of children is too important to leave in the hands of their parents. Kids aren't old enough to decide what to read for themselves, but should the parents really get to choose for them? I mean, children are the future, and the more of them who grow up free of bigotry, the more of them who are exposed to queer concepts and ideas, the better."

"You sound like a radio commercial," Michelle says. The bottle's empty, and she winds up her arm and throws it down the hallway. It shatters like an alarm going off. She grabs me

and pulls me into the nearest room. "This is it," she says.

The classroom is small, and the bookshelf is in the very back. It's pitiful. There are hardly any books at all. "What the hell is wrong with people?" I say. "These kids should have a whole shelf full of books for our subversive addition to get lost in." I step back and look around. Michelle is leaning forward to read something, and I move closer.

On the wall above the bookshelf the teacher has hung up all these drawings that the kids made of their families. There are a couple single mother families, but everything else is mom, dad, little brother, dog, cat, budgie-bird. Michelle grabs a couple crayons from a bucket and starts to draw on one of the pictures.

She draws a stick man in the same style as the mom and the dad, with stick arms and a receding hairline. She gives him a little bottle of something red to hold. Above the stick man she writes "Dad's boyfriend" and by the bottle she writes "Rev" and hands me a crayon. "Get to it," she says.

I find a picture of a single mom and a little girl, and I draw another little girl beside the first one, and I write "My favorite kissing cousin Judy." I give Judy long blonde hair, and a nice little skirt. With a brown crayon from the jar, I

make it so she's holding a football. I step back to admire it, but it feels weird. Some kid drew this picture and was proud of it.

Michelle is drawing a room full of men standing around a nuclear family.

"I don't know about this," I say to her.

"You what?"

"I don't know about this. I mean, this kid's family," I point at one of the pictures. "His family probably is really like this, a dog and a mom and a dad."

"If it wasn't, do you think he'd have the guts to draw two dads?" Michelle says. "Everyone else is drawing mom and pop and little Skippy, and you think some six year old is going to go out on a limb and draw his dad's fuck-buddy?" She tosses the crayon down, and grins. "You're so full of shit, I can't believe it."

"Well, maybe we should draw on every single one of them," I say. "So nobody gets singled out."

"You need to have all these crazy justifications for doing what you want," Michelle says. "You really think there's a moral grounding for you breaking into a school in the middle of the night. It's hilarious. You know damn well that you're doing this for the same reasons I am. You're doing this because it's awesome."

I almost say something, make some argument against her, but she's right. I'm doing this children's book thing because I want to, because

it seems right in my head. Whether that's because of the moral arguments I've been attributing to it, or because I'm angry and juvenile, I couldn't say. And to tell you the truth, I don't really care right now. Right now I'm having a good time. I pick up the crayon she's thrown down.

"Let's draw one for the teacher," I say. "And let's make the teacher straight, so she's the odd man out." But we can't figure out if the teacher is a boy or a girl. There's nothing on the desk, no name or anything, and it's dark and we're drunk. "Let's turn all the desks around so they face the other way," I say, but it's too late. She's already at the door.

"Who do you think is topping?" Michelle asks, as we slip back out the door we came in. I remember that Richard and Alex are waiting in the car, just as drunk as we are, but maybe more naked.

"Alex," I answer. "Richard's a total woman."

When we get back to the car, Richard and Alex are asleep in the back seat, their pants around their ankles. Richard is handcuffed to the door, and Alex has his arms around him. It's sort of sweet, and so Michelle and I take a walk instead of waking them up.

The next morning I wake up to Alex climbing into bed with me, pressing against my leg. There's something hard in her pants, and I scramble out of the bed, half of me awake and

half of me still in some dream about insects covering the earth. I'm not sure that she's real.

"Hey," she whispers, and she sits back on the bed. I try my best to smile. "I just thought maybe you'd want to fuck," she says, but I shake my head.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"You still see me as a girl," she says, and there's as much accusation in her voice as self pity. But what can I say to that. I want to tell her, no, I see her as a boy. I want to say that just because she's a boy, doesn't mean I'll want to sleep with her. I don't fuck every man I meet. If I told her that, it would turn the situation around. She'd be the guilty one, for assuming, for implying. But that's not why I'm still standing.

"You are a girl," I say. "You've got tits and a vagina and whatever that is in your pants isn't going to come on me, or in me. It's fake." Her face falls a little, but then it goes hard. She stares at me in silence. "I know that gender is a construction," I say, and I tap my temple. "Right here I know that you're as much a man as you are a woman, but knowing something is different from knowing something."

"You know what I think?" she says. "I think that if it wasn't born with a cock, you won't fuck it." And I want to argue that I've fucked post-op trannies, but the fact is that they were all male to female and not the other way around.

“You talk big about gender being a construction, but you aren’t willing to apply that to sexuality. You don’t believe a word of the shit you say.”

“Gender is a construction,” I say, and she pulls at the front of her pants. They come open and the dildo pops out.

“Make me believe it,” she says, and what the hell. I climb on the bed with her. I pull my own pants open, and she takes my cock in her hands. His hands. I mean he takes my cock in his hands, and squeezes. It hardens a bit and I press against her naked stomach. I moan and hope that Richard doesn’t hear us. Would he be jealous? I don’t know anymore.

Alex lies on her back, and I lower myself to her dildo, hard and dark. My hand snakes up her chest and I take her breast in my hand, pulling at the nipple. I start to gnaw on the cock with my teeth, harder and harder, my free hand going between my own legs.

And then Richard is behind me, pressing a finger cold with lube into me and saying to Alex “I didn’t know where you were.” Alex moans softly, and Richard enters.

Michelle parks Richard's car in the mall parking structure. Consumerism is a devastating creature, don't get me wrong. It crawls across the world again and again, destroying the older, weaker versions of itself. Malls eat mom and pop shops, and super-malls (like this one here) eat all the little malls, chewing them like gum, and stretching them across six floors and eight blocks of conformity. It's disgusting, but if you're in the mood to cause trouble, there's nowhere better.

"I don't want you to make any jokes about Sheryl's clothes," Michelle says as we walk to the elevator. "She's on this kick about beauty and fashion, and so she's been wearing suit jackets over these awful yellow sundresses. You probably won't offend her, but she'll think you're an idiot."

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. We go inside and they’re waiting for us. We’re ready to cause trouble. We just have to find some.

We find a woman walking with a baby carriage, and we rush over to her, all smiles. “Oh my goodness!” Sheryl squeals as we look down into the carriage at the pink blankets and wispy hair. “Oh my goodness, what a cute little *boy!*” The woman opens her mouth to say something but Gilyan cuts her off, reaching in to gently tickle the baby’s pink bootie.

“What a handsome little boy! What’s your name? What’s your name?” She does the baby talk voice so well that I want to laugh. The mother opens her mouth again, and this time it’s Michelle who cuts her off.

“He looks like an Alfred,” she says. “A little Alfie. Are you going to grow up to be an Alfie?” she says. “You’ll get all the girls, won’t you? Won’t you? I bet you will!” and I lean over to take a look. The baby smiles up at me, and I can’t help smiling myself.

“He’s handsome,” I agree, and I turn to the mother. “But why do you have him dressed up in pink, like a little faggot? That shit can seriously warp a child.”

“It’s a girl,” the mother says. She turns to Michelle. “Her name is Meg.” And I roll my eyes.

“You can’t raise a little boy like he’s a girl,” I say. “He’ll grow up all confused. You have to instill in him right from birth that boys and girls are inherently different. If you don’t teach him that, he may never figure it out, and then what would happen?”

“Madness! Utter madness!” Michelle says. “It would be chaos! Boys and girls would have similar life goals! They’d treat each other as individuals instead of as potential mates or acquisitions! Could you imagine?”

“How would they know what to wear to prom?” Gilyan says. “How would they know who to fall in love with? They might be guided by their interests instead of societal norms!”

“She’s right,” I say, putting my hand on the woman’s shoulder. “You need to take this boy upstairs to Baby Gap and get him into some overalls before he starts fagging up the whole world.”

She stands there silently, looking at each of us in turn, and then she gives a sort of half smile like you give to homeless people who want to tell you about their pet chicken. She walks away.

“Goodbye Alfie!” calls Gilyan, and she turns away before she lets herself laugh.

On the second floor, I buy a Coke from McDonald’s and drink it. Michelle and the oth-

ers are sitting near me, pretending that we don't know each other. They're laughing and talking, and I wonder what they're talking about. Sheryl really does dress like an idiot. She's great. They both are.

I walk up to the front, and slam the Coke down on the counter beside the cash register. "The Manager," I say to the twelve year old girl they've got working. I think she's twelve, anyway. I have no idea how quick girls develop these days. I saw something on TV about it, I think. All these hormones in their milk at breakfast, in their cereal, fucking them up. Maybe little girls are born with tits now?

She's still young enough to be a ballerina, isn't she? I've missed so many opportunities. I'll never be a ballerina. It's too late. I missed the boat. I made the wrong choices. I couldn't even be a high school dropout if I wanted to. Still, I'll get to be a cantankerous old man, one day, with a walking stick to shake at all the little five year old girls with their tits all hanging out. I'll play chess on the side of the road and I'll swear.

The manager is skinny and balding. "Is there something I can help you with?" he says. I give him a long stare, and then look down at the coke. He follows my gaze. "There's something wrong with your beverage, sir?" he asks.

"You tell me," I say, and push the Coke toward him. "I bought this Coke five minutes

ago. I thought I would stop off on my way home and buy a book at the mall, maybe have a Coke. It's my girlfriend's birthday, though, so I didn't want to take too long. I planned on slipping her the dick, if you know what I mean."

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" he says, and it's like he's reading lines out of a fast food manager script. Everyone talks the way they're supposed to these days. It's like we've become the voices for our institutions. He's the fast food manager, and I'm the disgruntled customer. In a few seconds I'll go back to being the frustrated genderqueer faggot and he'll be the frustrated manager. Either way, you could listen to us talk for five seconds and figure out who we are.

"This Coke made me gay," I say. I hold out my hand for him to examine it. "Look at that. I've never had a manicure in my life, but now my nails are neat and tidy. Neat and tidy! I work in a factory, man. I can't have the guys at work thinking I've been filing my nails instead of biting them down."

"The Coke made you gay?" he says, and now he's the sarcastic, embittered fast food worker. The big-titty twelve year old is covering her mouth, pretending not to laugh. He gives her a dirty look.

"What am I going to do now?" I say. "I have a girlfriend at home, waiting for my Johnson

Special, and all I'm thinking about is how to do her hair!" The manager is looking behind me now. "Hey! I said my girlfriend loves cock! You look at me when I'm talking to you."

"I'm sorry, there are customers waiting," he says. "If you have a valid complaint, you can call the head office." I open my mouth to say something, but Michelle interrupts me.

"I don't mean to interrupt," she says. The manager is smiling again, and he shakes his head.

"Not at all, ma'am," he says. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I sure hope so," she tells him. "I think this Coke turned my friends gay." She points over her shoulder, where Gilyan and Sheryl are making out in their chairs. Customers all over the store are staring. "I don't mind or anything," Michelle says. "I mean, six in ten people are queer these days or something. Whatever. It's just that we have to get to a swim meet, and I'm worried that they'll be too busy thinking about vaginas to focus on their warm up exercises. Is there anything you can do? Have you got any Pepsi, maybe?"

"You probably have to call the head office," I tell her, and Michelle nods, thoughtfully.

"Oh, okay," she says. She smiles at the manager. "The food was really good," she says.

After that we're just wandering around the mall, trying to think up things to do to fuck with people. Nobody can think of anything else, and everyone just wants to get in the car and go find some beer.

"Okay, we'll go," Michelle says, but there's disappointment in her voice, like she's looking for one last hurrah before we head off. One last complete mindfuck to leave people with their jaws hanging out, and maybe leave them thinking about things they never thought about before. Unlikely.

I'm having a blast, though, and I just don't want to leave. I have one last idea. I find a girl that's skinny and blonde and Paris Hilton fake. She's got a dainty little bag slung over her shoulder, and her skin sort of glitters. She's standing beside this boy with cheekbones that I want to run my fingers over. He's fucking hot, is what he is, and she's got her arm in his.

"Wait here," I tell Sheryl and the others, and I walk over to them. As I approach, I get that feeling in the pit of my stomach that I get when I see a straight guy with some ditsy looking pin-up girl. I want to push her down stairs. I want her to step out in front of a car and leave a makeup smear for blocks. This is how I react to the beauty myth, I guess.

Normally I push those feelings down, or turn them into sarcasm. Not today. Today I

punch the girl in the gut. She bends a bit, and steps back, and I wonder if I should say something here. Make some comment about reinforcing an unrealistic standard of beauty, or about perpetuating the cycle. I want to kick her when she's down, but instead I turn and smile at the boy. "Do you come here often?" I say.

His fist connects, and then Michelle is there, her knee in his groin, and she's pulling me in the direction of the elevators and laughing. "You are fucked in the head," she says, and I run along beside her, looking back. The girl is climbing to her feet, looking around. She doesn't help the boy up.

I have no idea where Sheryl or Gilyan are. In the elevator Michelle just looks at me, with this half smile on her face. "I wanted to be you, there," she says. "Fuck." There are no security guards waiting for us, and we get in the car and we're gone. We pick up Sheryl and Gilyan on the street outside. They've come out the front doors of the mall.

Then we drive, with no destination. I think about the look of shock on the blonde girl's face when I punched her. She's as much a victim of the beauty myth as anyone else, and I'm not sure whether what I did is justifiable or not. She was born that way, skinny and blonde and tall.

Michelle takes a corner fast, and I press my hand against the door. I still feel weird about

fucking Alex and Richard at the same time this morning. Fucking Alex's cock didn't feel like sex. Or, it did, but it felt like Richard was fucking me with a dildo. It's just that the dildo could talk. I'm feeling guilty about the girl in the mall but I can't stop smiling. I feel alive.

We stop at an adult video store, pile out of the car. Gilyan asks the guy behind the counter "Do you have anything with Asians in it?" The guy nods, and leads us all upstairs. There's a whole wall of boxes. Before the clerk can leave, Gilyan says "Is any of this gay porn?" and he sighs and leads us to the back.

"Here you are," he says. "Gay Asian porn." "Thank you so much," Gilyan says. She pretends to look at a box. "Oh, I can't tell from looking, are any of these Asians born in Canada, but living in Europe?"

"What?" he says, and Gilyan smiles.

"I have a thing for gay porn starring Asians who were born in Canada, but who were living in Europe at the time of filming. It's kind of my fetish, I guess. I don't like blond Asian guys, though. A lot of the Canadian-born Eurofag Asian porn you get has blonds in it. It just looks so fake." She turns to me. "It's really gross, don't you think?" she says.

"Disgusting," I say. "Unconscionable."

Our next stop is the liquor store, and then to Michelle's. The television is showing footage of

a Family Values rally that went on today, and there's a dark haired man standing at a podium with his finger pointing out at the crowd.

"You care about your children," he says. "I know you do. That's why you're here." There's a little boy standing beside him, holding on to the fabric of the man's black pants. He reaches down and picks the boy up. "That's why I'm here too," he says. The boy looks about eight years old.

"Can you imagine what it must be like to be that kid?" Michelle says, taking a sip of her beer. "Every day you wake up and pad downstairs in your dinosaur slippers to a breakfast across the table from that fucker." She points her beer at the TV just as it cuts to a close up of the man's face. The caption says "Dr. Verge." He's still pointing.

"Political correctness and the truth are two different things," he says. "Maybe it isn't politically correct to say that homosexuality is a disease, that it needs to be cured or destroyed. It might not be polite to say so, but I know that it's the truth, and I have a right to defend my child's future." The camera pans to the boy's unsmiling face.

"The poor thing," Sheryl says. Dr. Verge's face fills the screen again.

"My child deserves the chance to grow up in a country that still believes in the word of the

Lord. A country where marriage is a symbol of the love between a man and a woman, not a joke or an excuse for some novelty cake with two plastic tuxedoed deviants on top. My son deserves to grow up in a world where he can go to school without having to worry that one of his teachers is having lustful thoughts about him.”

There’s a lot of applause, and Gilyan groans. “He’s not making a very coherent argument, is he?” she says. “But he’s touching all the right nerves.” She lifts the remote and switches the channel.

The world would be better if people took things into their own hands. A world where people acted on their beliefs. A world where, if they saw someone like Dr. Verge raising a child to be hateful, they would simply take that child from him and raise them right. My eyes are heavy from the alcohol, and my mind is flitting all over the place.

Earlier, Alex was angry that I’d chewed up her cock. His cock. I didn’t know what to tell him. I said “Sometimes I get carried away with sex toys,” and he threw the chewed up cock down on the ground and said “It isn’t a sex toy. It’s my fucking dick.”

Richard hadn’t said anything at all.

"I'm sorry," I had said. "I didn't mean that." But it was too late. What time is it now? I lift my head, but can't see a clock.

There's a cartoon or something on television. Death to the cartoon heterosexual paradigm. Richard and Alex should be back soon from Richard's brother's. I'm worried that Richard's getting too attached to him. I open my eyes again and watch a cartoon man on the television. He doesn't do anything but sit and talk. That's the problem with cartoons these days. It's all just talking heads. None of them do anything anymore.

I miss the violence, I guess, and that feeling that you're watching a whole new world, where the rules change constantly. These cartoons could be filmed with real actors. There's no surrealism, no magic. There was one moment, the moment when Richard's cock entered me and Alex's cock pressed against my throat, where I really believed that it was two men. Just that one moment. And then it was gone, and it was a girl with a fake dick again.

I pull down a Polaroid camera from its shelf, and cut into the packaging with my knife. I tear the camera free from its box, and toss it on the floor. I grab three packages of Polaroid film and one package of regular film from the shelf. Richard's waiting in the car, but I take my time with this, not wanting to look suspicious. I shove the Polaroid film down the front of my pants and keep the regular film out for show. I walk to the front counter.

"Excuse me," I say to the girl who's working. I show her the 35mm film, and lift up the camera for her to examine. "Is this the right film for my camera? I've never had to buy film for it before. There was some other stuff over there that said Polaroid on it, but it was pretty expensive."

She makes a show of looking at the film, but then shakes her head. "That won't work,"

she says, and I nod. "You need the film that says Polaroid on the package." The Polaroid film is mostly stuck in my underwear, but one of the packages has got partway down my jeans already. I'm still smiling, though.

"Ok," I tell her. "Is it okay if I leave that film with you, then? I'm not even sure where I got it." She nods, and I'm gone, stopping just outside the door of the drug store to shake the film out of my pant leg. I pick it up off the ground and jog to Richard's car.

"What do you need a camera for?" he says. "I thought you were buying condoms?" I put the camera on his lap and I don't answer, tearing at the film package with my teeth. Richard pulls the car out onto the main road, and we go. The camera is simple to load, and I turn on the flash and unbutton the front of my pants. I'm rock hard.

Flash.

I take his right hand in mine, and guide it to my cock. Flash. He's squeezing and pulling at me now, and I set the camera on the dash, and reach over to pull at the zipper of his pants as he drives. His fingers leave my cock and he picks up the camera as I lower my mouth to him. Flash.

People are always saying that cell phones cause accidents.

We finish one of the packages on the drive to the school, and the single best picture is this one where I'm in the seat beside him, the Velma

mask on my face and my knees up at my shoulders as I finger my asshole, three fingers on each hand. It's so lewd, and the mask is smiling so cheerfully. It belongs on the cover of a national news magazine.

I'm Velma now, and Richard is Wonder Woman. At some other school across town, Michelle and Alex are Bert and Ernie. Alex was pissed off because she already identified as a man, and so she didn't get to wear a gender inappropriate mask. We park three blocks away.

Richard pops the trunk and lifts out the box. A box of our books, fresh from a print shop. Richard's fucking some guy who snuck him in after hours. Michelle and Alex have a box too. We get into the school, and Richard starts humming the national anthem under his breath.

"God," he whispers. "It's been so long since I was in a school like this. Lockers and tiled floors and coat hangers in the hall." We find a classroom on the first floor. Richard holds the book up so you can see the cover. The little boy in a dress. Johnny's a girl sometimes. Flash. He slides it onto the shelf with the other books.

Flash.

Just outside the door we stop in front of the lockers. They're padlocked, but there's a vent just big enough to shove a book into each one. I push the book into the one nearest me so that it's sticking halfway out, and turn my mask

toward the camera. Flash. I give the book a little tap. It falls with a metallic thud to the bottom of the locker.

In classroom number two we put a couple books into the shelves, and then Richard lifts a thick book off a table and opens it. "Give me one of those fuckers," he says, and he lays it inside, closes the book and puts it back.

In the hallway Richard takes my hand and leads me into a door. Inside, there's a row of sinks lit by light from the street outside, and sound echoes. The girl's washroom. "I'm really glad you decided to join the squad," Richard says, putting the box of books down, and pulling his mask off. "Most of the other girls are way too uptight about their cheers, you know? You seem like you're just in it for the fun."

He's dead serious, lifting himself up to sit on the edge of the sink, his legs dangling girlishly. "Do you have a smoke?" I say. "I've been dying for one ever since third period."

"No," Richard says. "Can you believe that I had my locker searched again today? Twice in one week. It's not legal. My dad says it's an invasion of privacy." I move closer to the sink where he's sitting, and I run my finger up the leg of his jeans.

"Do you use that shit Nair?" I say. "I can never get my legs that smooth." He shakes his head. "That's just from shaving? Wow. The only

part of my body I can ever get that smooth is my pussy.”

“You shave your pussy?” Richard’s voice goes high pitched with a teenager’s disbelief, and I almost laugh. I can see his bulge in the front of his jeans, but he’s looking at me so intently that I know he wants me to keep up the act.

“Jimmy likes it,” I say. “I think it’s kind of gross, you know. Little girls have no pubes. Why does he want me to look like a little girl? He says he just likes the way it feels.”

“I’ll bet,” Richard says, reaching out to take my hair in his fingers. “Can I play with your hair?” I turn my back, and lean against the sink, between his legs.

“I found some porn on his computer though,” I say. “Of like, girls who look our age, kissing each other. I guess it’s not illegal if he’s sixteen too, though. That’s what he said. I didn’t ask him about the ones that had women crying and stuff. Mostly it was just girls kissing each other. Hundreds of pictures.”

“You looked at them all?” Richard’s hands are playing with my hair, but every once in a while they run down to touch my earlobe. I can feel his cock pressing against my back. “Did you...?” His fingers run down the side of my neck and down my shoulders, avoiding my breasts and moving to my cock.

“What if someone from the team comes in?” I say, but already I’m turning and running

my hands up under Richard's shirt, childishly pawing for breasts that aren't there.

"Let them," Richard whispers, and he leans close to kiss me and a voice out in the hallway says "I'm just going to do one more sweep." And there's the sound of a walkie talkie hissing static. Richard's eyes go wide. There's another burst of static, and a voice says something I can't hear.

I undo the front of Richard's pants, and he's frozen with fear. I run my tongue up the length of him, and the man outside the bathroom coughs and says "What was that again?" as I take Richard as deep as I can. I don't know if it's the fear or the role playing, but he comes.

I'm so startled that I almost cough, and I pull off of him while he's still flexing. Come lands on my face, and then the floor between us as I move backwards. He's still sitting on the sink, and his legs are spread out for balance, with his cock glistening in the streetlight. My cheerleader.

We get back to the car, and we're laughing about it. "We weren't really in any danger," I say, throwing the Polaroids on the back seat with the camera. "He would have walked in, and what? Arrested two hot Junior High lesbians in the middle of fucking? It would have been a dream come true."

"Dear *Penthouse*," Richard says, as we begin to move. "I never believed that something like

this could ever happen to me, but I was working security at the Junior school the other night, and I walked in on this hot lesbian cheerleader eating out her friend's shaved pussy." On the right we're coming up on the school, and I can see the little security car, with two men standing beside it. They don't look up as we cruise past. "I don't know why they were in the school at night," Richard says, "but I've never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Alex and Michelle are waiting at Michelle's house, holding hands. The place stinks of lesbian sex, and I hope that Richard doesn't want to stay here tonight. The smell seems to be bothering him, too, or the fact that they're holding hands.

"How'd it go?" Richard says to Alex, and she shrugs, looking sidelong at Michelle. The two of them laugh, and Richard turns to me. "We were almost caught," he says. "There was a security guard on duty."

"I hope there wasn't a security guard on duty at our school," Alex says, and Michelle rolls her eyes. Richard's trying to smile, but not doing a very good job of it.

"Were you a guy or a girl when you fucked her?" he says, and Alex shrugs again. I wonder if I shrugged that much when I was seventeen. Did everyone want to throttle me constantly?

"Not really any of your business, is it?" Alex says.

“We’ll give you a call in the morning,” I say to Michelle, and she nods and walks us to the door. We leave the box of remaining books by the shoes. In the car Richard is quiet. He doesn’t say anything until we’re standing in his living room. “You can take the bed if you want,” he says. “I feel like sleeping on the couch.”

His bed is comfortable, and I don’t mind sleeping alone. I take his cell phone with me. I sit on the edge of his bed and I punch in Mrs. Hubert’s number. It’s almost three in the morning. She answers on the first ring.

“Good morning Mrs. Hubert,” I say. “I was just wondering if I could ask you a couple more questions for my survey.”

“Okay?” she says, sounding groggy.
“Questions?”

“I punched a girl in the stomach,” I say. “At the mall. I did it because I was angry, and I don’t know if it was right or not. I don’t think it was.” I pause, and I can hear her husband saying “Who is it?” in the background. “I don’t mean because she was a girl,” I say. “I’m not sure exactly what the differences are between a man and a woman. I wish I knew more. I know that I’m much bigger than her, and that her boyfriend was much bigger than me.”

“Did he hit you?” she says, and I nod.

“Yeah, but I knew that he would. I just couldn’t control myself. For that couple of min-

utes she symbolized everything that is wrong with how we perceive beauty as a society. She was the store bought ideal that drives girls to Bulimia and Anorexia. She was the skinny thin-spiration that helps thirteen year olds put off eating for just one more day, and so I walked over and punched her.”

“Why?” Mrs. Hubert says, and she doesn’t sound angry or irritated, she just sounds confused. “Do you think that solved anything?” “I don’t know what to do,” I say. “I can say that society’s beauty standards are killing young girls, but I don’t have a solution to that. Any beauty ideal we create will be exclusive, almost by definition. And the concept of beauty itself wouldn’t withstand an all encompassing model. If everyone is beautiful, then nothing is. It’s so frustrating. I punched her hard, and she went down, but I have no idea who she is. I can’t find out anything about her, can I? She was just some stranger in the mall. What if she’s done nothing to deserve it? What if she’s the nicest girl you’ve ever met?”

“You can’t do anything to fix it,” Mrs. Hubert says. “All you can really do is learn from your mistakes. Anger doesn’t solve anything,” she says.

“I don’t know if I believe that,” I say. “We can’t just push our anger down.”

“Are you the boy who keeps calling here?” she says, and I hang up. It hasn’t helped.

Richard's standing in the doorway when I turn around, and it's clear from his face that he's heard the whole thing. He looks like he wants to say something. I smile as best I can and say "The best way to approach someone with a difficult new concept is to coach that concept in a discourse pattern that they're already familiar with. In this case I chose the motherly paradigm. In order to open her mind to issues of personal responsibility and gender role confusion, I approached her as a troubled son might, looking for answers from his mother."

He's still making the face, and I cut him off before he speaks. "I won't use your phone for it anymore," I say. "That was irresponsible of me. Goodnight." I turn off the light and roll over to face the window. The moon is out, and for a while I can hear him breathing behind me. I don't notice when it stops, but I am suddenly aware that it's much quieter, and when I turn to look again he's gone.

I realize that I'm dreaming when the elephant turns her head to look at me, and she lifts the trunk and words flow out like music. "No flyers please, no flyers please, no flyers please." And suddenly I'm floating in the air above the street, and I can see a long line of elephants, words coming out of their mouths in speech balloons.

"No parking, no flyers please, absolutely no loitering, wash your hands, wash your hands." I

can't hear the words, only read them, but I cover my ears anyway, and then Alex is floating beside me, naked, but her breasts are made of something wrong. I look closer and they're maggots, shaping her breasts and now they crawl down her body and form a flaccid penis. Her chest is flat, and she's stirring down there.

Richard is behind me, but he has Bert's face, like the mask, but it opens when he talks, and the tongue hangs out.

"Let's all go to the lobby," he says. "Let's all go to the lobby, and get ourselves a snack." I shake my head, confused, and when I try to speak, what I say comes out all wrong.

"This is not a threat," I say. "You are violating housing laws, and if you do not vacate the building immediately, we will see your actions as a sign of aggression and we will use tear gas. This will be a response to your violent action and it is not a violent action on our part. We are here for peace. Please surrender your violence. Please surrender your violence." And there's a brief flash and I'm cowering in an abandoned apartment building and holding a sign that says "No war means no peace."

I open my eyes slowly and try and establish where I am. As Richard's bedroom comes into focus, the dream fades. My memories of the last few days are still weak in my head. Did Alex really have a cock made out of maggots? Are her

breasts real or not? Did I sleep with her?

I throw off the covers and out in the kitchen Richard is watching the TV. Dr. Verge is on again, holding his wife's hand, and carrying his son in the other arm. "This is a family," he says. "This is what a family should look like." The boy is smiling because he has to. You can tell because it's so perfect, immutable.

I sit down at the kitchen table beside Richard, and I wonder where the boy goes to school. Richard pours me a cup of coffee. "Sorry about last night," he says. "I don't know why I got upset."

"Don't worry about it," I tell him. There's no sense telling him that he got too close to her, and believed what he wanted to believe. "What are we doing today?" He's wearing a button up shirt and a pair of dark pants.

"I've got work in a half hour," Richard says. "Michelle might be stopping by with the books in a bit, and I think she said Alex went to school." I take a sip of the coffee.

"I'll watch TV for a while, maybe," I say. Richard leaves, and Dr. Verge is still talking on the television. I walk to the front door and pull my boots on. I sit in front of the television and I wait for him to say "family" one more time. I won't have to wait long. When he says it, I'm going to put my boot through his face.

Dr. Verge says “family” and I kick the screen with my boot. It doesn’t break. Fuck the girl in the mall. Every day she feeds off the reinforcement of the beauty myth. It doesn’t matter if she was born Paris Hilton skinny and blonde. Every day she goes out and people treat her better because of how she looks. The world needs balance, and if I have to be unbalanced to supply it then so be it.

If I could punch her in the gut every day, I would. She doesn’t deserve it? Well, cry me a river. She doesn’t deserve the praise either. Who deserves anything? What does that even mean? She gets the praise, she gets the punch to the gut. That’s justice. If I could suck off a blindfolded straight boy and pull back the curtain every day, I would do that too. Every time a straight person laughingly calls someone a faggot, a

straight boy should be tricked into a homosexual act. He should have to live with that fear that someone will find out about him.

Dr. Verge says “family” again, but will it fix anything if I kick the television? I kick it anyway.

I walk down the steps and onto the street, and the sun is bright and hot. I feel like something has been flapping inside my head and it’s finally come free. At the liquor store I buy the biggest bottle they have, something that says xxx on the side of it, like in a cartoon. Or no, maybe it says something realistic on the side of it. I can’t tell. I lift it up to my lips and drink it right there in line.

The girl at the cash register doesn’t ID me. She takes the money and gives me a receipt and a paper bag to drink it out of. She knows. Walking to Michelle’s house, I drink right from the bottle, the cap in some gutter on the way, and the bottle in its paper bag. I drink it down like I’m my mother.

I remember the way. When I get there, I’ll have to speak like I’m drunk. You have to use the right words in the right order. I’m the drunk man, showing up to fuck her. I have to remember to be obnoxious. There’s a script to be followed.

And why not? I mean, what makes a man and a woman different? What is it that makes people like Dr. Verge wrong about family, about

homosexuality, if it isn't the fact that we're all the same person with different masks on? How can one mask be better than another? This xxx shit burns going down, but that just means I get to grit my teeth and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Tough like set theory, but easy like Home Economics.

Michelle's at home when I get there, and I push past her into the apartment. I storm to the back, and find the bottle of pain killers. "I'm stealing your pills," I tell her, and I put two on my tongue and wash them down with liquor. Pills and liquor, liquor and pills. We're getting really dark and gritty now. Everything is shot through a blue filter.

"Alex is a boy now. True or false?" I say. "Richard isn't some bisexual candy-ass faggot failure. True or false? We should take off our clothes and get right down to it. I've never done anything more than gnaw on a girl's fake cock, and you clearly just need a good visit from the cock delivery man. True or false?"

"Are you drunk?" Michelle says, reading from the script. She's the sober woman who's visited by the drunken lecherous male. She's reading the script with her hair all shaved off like a dyke, but we can squint our eyes and picture any one of the dozens of appropriate TV actresses. Anyway, isn't this the part of the movie that everyone's been secretly waiting for, where the

lead character and the awesome dyke character get together? It's awesome that they're fags and all, but "Kiss! Kiss!"

"Of course I'm drunk," I tell her. "My nose is red, isn't it? I'm hiccupping, aren't I? Now, pencils down! Take your pants off and let's see if you passed. I want to see what it's like to enjoy heterosexual privilege. This is what god intended, isn't it?"

Wait, no, that's not my motivation. I put my hand out to steady myself on the wall. Focus.

"What I mean to say is, if gender's nothing, then what the fuck is lust? I've been getting hard over a concept, haven't I? I've fucked post-op trannies, dickless and satisfying, because I knew they were men. Well, you're a man. Spread your fucking labia or whatever the shit it is."

"I'm not a man, and I'm not going to fuck you," Michelle says. "I'm not into men. I like women. You know that."

"So you don't think that gender's just a construction, then?" I say, and she shakes her head.

"I don't care what it is," she says. "It gets me wet to think about my body with another woman. The idea of a penis makes me physically ill. So, I choose orgasms. They're satisfying and plentiful, and if I have to buy into a constructed ideal, so be it."

Out in the street I drink some more. The bottle's bottomless. I start walking again.

There's got to be a bar here somewhere close by. There's got to be a place with a middle aged woman drunk in the afternoon. If Michelle won't fuck me, someone will. Someone will drive me out to their little house in the suburbs and let me try again and again until I'm satisfied that I can do it.

She's sitting at the bar with flowing black hair, and a smile full of teeth. I drop onto the stool next to her and say "You ever fucked a fag-got?" and she nods and says that she had a problem for a while, where all her boyfriends went gay after sleeping with her. The bar is empty, so I don't say "Oh that's right. Having bad sex is probably what makes people gay. Why didn't The Scientists think of that yet?" and instead I say "I hope you live somewhere with expansive green lawns." And she does.

In bed she's wet and moaning, and my cock's inside her and there's no lube and it's fucking awful. I pull out and she grabs my ass to pull me back in, but I can't even stay hard. I've heard that it's better if you don't look. I can't help it. Jesus. I need a man, whether that's giving in to the idea of a valid dichotomy of genders or not, I don't know. But I need a man. This is awful. It's like nails on a chalkboard, except both the chalkboard and the nails are my cock.

"I'm sorry," I say, and she laughs at me, drunk still.

“You too?” she says. “The world is full of impotent men.”

“I’m not impotent,” I tell her. “I’m just disgusted by your sloppy fucking mess.” And I get my pants and I leave. There’s an SUV parked in front of the neighbor’s house, with a baby seat in the back. I take my bottle and I put it right through the back window. “Hey, I christened your boat!” I yell at the house, but nobody comes to the window. Whatever.

I keep walking. I christened their boat. I decided to name it “That Bitch at the Mall Should Have Got a Kick in the Box While She Was Down” and it’s a good name for a boat.

Three blocks later I come across a little girl on her way home from school. “Hey kid,” I say. “Did you know that if you grow up gay, you mommy and daddy won’t have to die?” She looks at me for a minute, and I smile and stagger a little bit. “The instant you let a boy put his cock in you,” I say. “Your mommy’s name gets written down on God’s list of people who have to die. Your daddy gets written down on the devil’s list.” She starts to run away and I shout after her “You’re going to murder your parents you little straight slut!”

For a second I worry what if she wasn’t straight? I just assumed that she was. But then she’s got nothing to worry about, does she? Her parents will be fine.

Michelle opens the door and lets me in. "Don't look at me like that," I say. The room is spinning a little, but I'm fine. I feel better than I have in days. I tell her "I want to make bumper stickers for politicians and gay rights advocates." I sit on the couch, and Michelle sits on the chair. She nods.

"Bumper stickers, huh?" she says.

"Yeah," I say. "They would read 'My other pro-tolerance message is also condescending.'"

As the room spins I wonder whether you need gender to have lust. What about those androgyny loving people. They're still jacking something off, though, aren't they? They're not just sitting around looking at chrome toasters and having instant orgasms. Are they? "I couldn't do it," I tell her. "I don't know how you can deal with that shit. It's like a meat shop, down there. I need stability, you know?" Michelle rolls her eyes.

"I'm not going to get into an argument with you over the pros and cons of our genitals," she says. "You've grown up with yours, and I've grown up with mine. Penises seem unnatural to me, too. Different strokes, that's all. Have you seen the news in the past few hours?"

I shake my head and she says "They found the books at one of the schools, and they shut it down while people from the church searched the lockers and classrooms. It was the school you and Richard went to."

"I told you we should have broken into people's houses," I say, and she shakes her head.

"No, this is great," she says. "I talked to Richard on the phone. He wants to call the newspapers, claiming responsibility for the books. He's gonna go out of his way after work. Give them some details that nobody else could have, and say it was done by gay children's icons everywhere."

"We should go tonight," I say, "and break into people's houses. Put them on their shelves."

"We got what we wanted," Michelle says.

"We didn't want publicity. This wasn't just about getting on the news," I say. "We wanted those kids to find the books and read them. We wanted to actually try and influence the youth of today, not just give their parents more ammunition." Michelle stands up.

"Well, I'm not breaking into anyone's house," she says.

In her kitchen I call Richard at work.

"Tonight," I say. "We go and deliver more books. The same way we got that TV, you know?"

"I'm not," Richard says. "I'm going out dancing tonight to celebrate. You should come."

"Celebrate what?" I say. "How many kids do you think actually saw those books?" But he has to go, and I hang up the phone in Michelle's empty kitchen. She's sitting in the living room, watching TV. "Do you have a knapsack I can borrow?" I ask her, and she nods.

I pick up the phone book while she's getting it, and I flip it open to Hubert, J. The address is right there, and I tear the page out. That whole neighborhood is probably perfect. Anyway, Mr. Hubert won't be home from work for a while, and it's across town. Michelle brings me the knapsack, and I fill it with books.

"You're drunk," she reminds me, and I nod.

"Wish me luck," I say. On the street I flag down a guy on a bike. He stops beside me, and grins in his shiny glasses. "Are you heterosexual?" I ask him, and his grin gets wider.

"Fuckin' ay," he says, and I kick him in the dick. He topples over, and I snatch his bike up and I ride. I wonder for a moment whether he would still be heterosexual if his junk got all infected and they had to cut it off. Masculine, feminine, neuter. The toaster fuckers would love him.

"Thanks a lot!" I shout as I turn the corner. "I hope you don't have to fuck toasters!"

I ditch the bike a block from Mrs. Hubert's, and I walk the rest of the way thinking of what I have to say to her, about gender and construction and the futility of trying to unravel the nature of our ideas. Every new hidden layer can be deconstructed. I wonder if she'll be the way I pictured her, smooth and botoxed and my last hope of the straight world understanding.

But when I get there, there are two cars in the driveway, and I can see a man standing in the

living room. It makes me sort of ill to think that I want the understanding of the straight world, and I sit down on the curb. Well, understanding is better than hatred, isn't it? It's better than tolerance. Fuck. My knife is in my hands and open and I'm standing now, walking toward their car. I slit the tires and walk back to the bushes where I left the bike. I drive back toward the Hubert household, pumping the pedals as fast as I can, up onto their expansive green lawn, and into the side of their car. There's glass and blood and I'm falling.

"Are you alright?" the man says, and I sit up. I'm in the living room, and a small, squat woman is reaching for my forehead with a wet facecloth. It's warm. "Can you hear me?" he says. He turns to the woman. "He's drunk."

"Have you got kids?" I say. "Have you ever thought that maybe things don't have to work the way they do? I mean, I can wear makeup and breast forms, and I can be something else. I'm more than just this," I gesture at my pants. "Aren't I? If it was all gone, wouldn't I still be me?"

"He's delirious," the man says, but Mrs. Hubert is looking at me and she knows.

"Go and get him some water," she says, and when he's gone she asks "Are you the boy who keeps calling?" but I'm already standing and looking around for Michelle's backpack. There's no reason for me to be here.

“Have you got a son?” I say. I push a book into her hands. “Take this.”

The bike is fucked, and I start walking back the way I came. A bus comes and I climb on and sit at the back. Richard isn't home when I get there, and so I lean against the door instead of picking the lock, even though I know he wouldn't mind. I fall asleep.

I'm made of insects, changing and growing, forming breasts and a cock that stretches for blocks, sliding into the mouths of strangers, men on their way home from work, their lips forced open to accommodate my cock as it explores their whole body from the inside. They choke on it, these straight men in their hats. I push the insects that form my breasts, and they move, and then regroup to form the tits again. There are children climbing up my body, trying to suckle at the breasts. I push the breasts again, and the insects move.

I dig at them, pushing my hands deeper and deeper beneath the insects to find myself, but all I get are handfuls of beetles and flies. There's nothing underneath.

Richard wakes me up, and I climb to my feet.

“Why didn't you let yourself in?” he says, and I shrug. “Just felt like falling asleep here,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Well I hope you're ready for a night of dancing,” he says. “Because I'm in a fucking

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good mood. You should have heard the reporter on the other end of the phone. I told her it was Bert and Ernie and Velma and Wonder Woman. Let's turn the news on," he says. He walks to the TV, which is laying on its back, and he lifts it up.

It still works.

They found the books we made. So what? In the end, nobody would have read them to the children anyway. In the end, there would be nobody there to walk the children through page by page, to explain and reinforce those ideas about what's normal. Kids can't just pick up a book about a tranny and understand. They need their parents to help them, and their parents never would.

What we need to do is replace their parents. My anger is so intense now that it isn't even anger. I'm floating. The sun outside the window is shining through me. Children are too important to be left to their parents.

I open Richard's closet and pick out a dark blue suit, nice but not flashy. It says Politics more than anything and it fits me snugly. Richard has a credit card in the top drawer of his

night stand, and I slide it into my pocket. I find my lockpick set, and I take that, too. I feel like a mobster. I want to comb my hair with a switch-blade comb, to slick it back all wet and black.

I call Michelle.

“Can I come over?” I say. “I have a plan.”

She’s still eating breakfast when I get there, sugared puffs of wheat. She has a bruise on her shoulder in the shape of a mouth, so fresh you can still see individual teeth. I can hear Alex singing to punk rock in another room. I take my suit jacket off and fold it over a chair.

“We should take the remaining books down to a bookstore to donate them,” I say. “We’ll leave them in a box out front, with an anonymous note. The stores can sell them and give the profits to charity,” I say. “Or they can just give them away. At least the books will get into homes and someone will read them. And we won’t get arrested. It’s perfect.” Michelle nods.

Alex comes in. She runs her hands through Michelle’s hair and says “I want to do more. Every day we should do something bigger. I want to be on the news every night.”

“We will,” I say. “The Cartoon Heterosexual Paradigm hates to be fucked with. By the end of the day, we’ll be on the run from their cartoon lawmen with their big black billy clubs.” Alex grins. “Pack a bag,” I tell her. “You too,” I say to Michelle. “I have a plan. I have so many plans

that my head feels heavy. We'll be gone for a few days."

Richard comes to pick us up in his car and everyone piles inside. The books go in the trunk.

"This is a good idea," he says, smiling in the driver's seat. "I'm glad that people will actually get to read the books, instead of just burning them on TV." He puts his hand on my shoulder, and I wonder if he's fucked that boy in the photocopier room again. I want to kiss him, to taste the other man's come on his lips, but I don't. What if there's no taste at all?

Our first stop is Venus Envy, a sex shop downtown. Richard parks the car and we climb out. "Can I do the talking?" Alex says. "I think the girl who runs it, Maggie, has a crush on me." She grabs a stack of the books from the box. She and Richard haven't spoken yet, but it's none of my business. Michelle laughs while Alex fixes her hair in the reflection of the car window.

"Are you sure that Maggie's the one with the crush?" she says, and Alex doesn't answer. Our masks are in the trunk beside the box of books. I can't stop staring at them.

Inside the store, Alex smiles the whole time. She puts the books down in front of the manager and she says "We thought you might be able to sell these, or give them away."

"What are they?" The manager, Maggie, lifts up one of the books and grins. "These are the books from the news?" she says.

“You didn’t get them from us,” Alex says, and she leans across the counter. “We could get in a lot of trouble,” she confides. “Our organization has made a lot of people very angry. We’re above the law!” There’s a whole wall of dildos in here. The lighting is calm.

Michelle rolls her eyes at Alex and she says “You should donate any money you get from them to a charity of your choice. The important thing is that mothers who care will read them to their children.”

Maggie leafs through the book.

“I know people who work at a queer summer camp,” she says. “I can arrange to get copies to each of the kids there. And I’m gonna steal a copy for my girlfriend Jesse. She would love this. She’s working on a book, too.”

“Are you and Jesse, uh, exclusive?” Alex asks. She’s playing with her hair again. “Have you ever gone out with a revolutionary?” she says. “Maybe you need to be overthrown.”

In the car Richard kisses me, and he tastes like mint. We drive to the next store, and Richard and I wait outside. We make out in the car for the next three bookstores, too. It’s nice to just make out, to kiss and touch his chest and not move right to sex. It drives me insane and it calms me down.

While we drive around, Alex goes on and on about the girl from Venus Envy. “She’s going to

see me on the news one night,” she says “and then what will her girlfriend have on me? I’m doing something. I’m going to save the world. We all are,” she adds, grinning around at us. “We’re going to save the world, aren’t we?”

“One child at a time,” I tell her.

After the last bookstore, I climb into the driver’s seat and Michelle says “Where to now? Food?”

“We’ve got one more stop,” I say.

“That was the last of the books,” Michelle says. Alex and Richard are sitting in the back seat, quietly. They still haven’t spoken.

“We aren’t dropping off,” I say. “We’re picking up.” I remember the address, and it takes us twenty minutes to drive across town. I fix my tie and turn the car into the driveway of the school.

“I’ll just be one second,” I say. “Keep the engine running.”

It’s a huge, gothic looking building. The most expensive and exclusive private school in the city. It houses grades primary right through high school. The money that these parents pay for tuition isn’t even a real number. I don’t feel jealous about money at all these days. It seems like part of a make believe world that people create for themselves. A TV that costs eighteen hundred dollars just sits in some straight person’s home, waiting for me to steal it.

It takes me five minutes to find the head office. I smile as wide as I can, and I say “I’m

here from Dr. Verge's office. Sorry to trouble you again."

After that I walk casually out of the school, holding David's hand. We get to the car and Michelle is staring at me, confused. Alex and Richard don't look up until I pull open the back door on Richard's side, and tell David to climb into the middle.

"Everyone," I say. "This is David. Say hello, David."

He's silent.

"I told them I was one of Dr. Verge's assistants," I say, sitting behind the wheel. Nobody else says anything. "I said that we needed David here for another televised save-the-family rally."

In the back seat, David sits looking straight ahead. I wonder if his father has given him instructions not to speak to the help. I wonder how he's going to like being a little girl.

"Children are too important to leave to their parents," I say. Alex is grinning.

"His dad is that anti-gay marriage guy?" Alex says.

I nod, and then focus on driving. Michelle turns to face the boy in the backseat.

"Have you ever worn a dress?" she says.

In a thrift store, I buy two dresses, one in my size and one in David's, because I think if he sees me in the dress he won't feel as weird about wearing one himself. Mine is nice, a simple black

dress that I drape a chrome spiked belt over. My boots are covered in mud, and with the stubble I have a confusing look that I find appealing. I have a small clutch that I keep the lockpick set in.

Out in the car, I pass the dress to David.

“Put this on,” I say. He unfolds it and holds it up.

“This is for a girl,” he says.

“I’m not a girl,” I say. “I’m wearing a dress.”

“You’re probably a gay,” David says. There’s an edge to his voice, a tone that he’s gotten from his father. “You wear dresses in parades,” David says. “You think you’re a girl anyway. I’m not gay.”

“How old are you?” Richard says.

“Eight years old,” David says. He folds the dress carefully and hands it back to me.

“Put it on,” Alex says. “Or we’ll make you put it on.” Michelle turns to look at her, but Richard speaks first.

“Right,” he says. “We’ll just hold him down and pull his clothes off. Then we’ll force him to dress up like a girl. I’m sure that on top of kidnapping it won’t make that much difference if we forcibly remove his clothes.”

“I have a knife,” David says. He pulls out a little Swiss army knife. And carefully forces the blade out with his fingernails.

It’s Alex’s idea to refuse to feed him until he puts the dress on. At the truck stop I keep the

doors locked while Michelle runs inside and buys us some food. The hamburgers are greasy and I leave mine half eaten in the bag. "This is good," Alex says, and she forces herself to smile. "Mmmmm." Michelle and Richard eat quietly. David stares out the window.

When we're back on the highway, David says "Where are we going? Where's my dad?" and Alex sticks out her hand to shake.

"I'm Bert," she says. She points to Michelle. "That's Ernie."

"Bert and Ernie are puppets," David says.

Richard offers his hand too. "I'm Wonder Woman," he says. "Don't laugh."

I meet David's eyes in the mirror. "I'm Velma," I say.

We drive for hours, and I push the car too fast, wind coming in the window and slipping up my dress. I can feel every hair. The material waves and flaps. I hate driving. On the radio they're playing country music. I have no idea if they're talking about us on the news or not. I don't care. I meet David's eyes in the rear view mirror.

"You don't like dresses?" I say. "Why, because boys don't wear dresses?" I say. "You only do what your father says you can do. What do you like? Race cars?" I press my foot down, and the car goes even faster. "Did you know that I'm a race car driver?"

“You are not,” he says. He looks sullen. There’s a car ahead of me, in the right lane, and I speed toward it. At the last minute, I swerve out to pass and my stomach lurches to the right. We pass the car and I swerve back in front.

“I used to race at Daytona,” I say. “I had a car with those rims that keep spinning after the car stops. I think they would have kept spinning, anyway. I never found out. Do you know why?” I say, and I lurch the car to the left again, passing an SUV. “Because I never stopped.”

We drive all day, and into the night. It’s Michelle who sees it first. “Hey, stop the car,” she says. “What the fuck is that?”

“What?” Richard says, leaning into the front and trying to see what she’s pointing at. “It’s gone.”

“What was it?”

“Just stop the car,” she says, and I pull over to the side of the road. We all climb out, even David, who hasn’t spoken in hours. Michelle stands looking up at the dark night sky, with its slowly drifting clouds. “There!” she says, and she points.

There’s a cut in the darkness of the sky, an incision, with light shining out of it. It’s a green that’s too bright to be natural. It looks like the trail of an airplane, but lit up, and too perfect.

“Is it a comet?” Richard says. The line is broken in two, now. It’s still as straight as an inci-

sion, but there's a gap. Then it fills in. "What the fuck," Richard says. "It's so green."

"It's a laser," David says. "It's a laser beam."

"Lasers are red," Richard says, and David shakes his head.

"There are green lasers too," he says. "Look how straight it is." A cloud drifts into the beam above us. "It's behind these trees," he says.

"Weird," Alex says. "Can we get out of here? It's creeping me out. It looks like something out of a science fiction movie."

"Let's go and find it!" David says.

"I'm sure it's past your bedtime," Alex says. "Let's get back in the car and go find a hotel. Come on." She grabs Richard by the arm, and it's the first time they've touched today. He looks startled and then turns to me.

"Yeah, let's get going," he says.

I can't stop staring at the laser beam. I can't see the whole beam, just streaks where it hits cloud or mist in the air. It's obvious that it's a laser now, but for a brief moment I really did think there was a tear in the sky. When the end comes, I hope it's as strange as that. I hope that the sky tears open and the world is washed with colors that we've never seen before. David is looking at me.

"Can we go and see it?" he says. I look back at the car. Alex and Richard are already inside, and Michelle has her door open. She's standing and watching us.

“You guys try and find a hotel,” I say. “Grab Richard’s cell phone for me,” I say. Michelle leans into the car and says something. I see Richard pass her the phone. “Just give us a call when you find a place to stay tonight,” I say. “We’re gonna go find this laser.”

Michelle hands me the phone and looks me up and down. “In that dress?” she says. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. You’re going to get the shit kicked out of you in front of a little kid.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say. I turn and look up again. The laser is gone, and for a moment I feel sick with disappointment. Then it slices into view again. “Hey David,” I say. “You’ve got your knife, right?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“See?” I say to Michelle. “David will protect me.” I put the cell phone into the small clutch I’m carrying.

David is trying to tell me about lasers as we make our way through the woods. He says “No, that’s not what I said. I said ‘coherent light’. I have a book. It means that the light waves are in phase with each other.”

“They’re what?”

“They’re lined up!” he says. It’s hard to hear him, because he’s walking a few feet ahead of me and he won’t turn around when he talks. My dress gets caught on a bramble again, and this time it tears. The trees are blocking out the sky, but every once in a while I can catch a glimpse of the laser’s light through the branches. It looks like it’s getting closer. I can see the beam all the time now, not just when it’s touching a cloud. It looks like a strand of mint dental floss, pulled tight across the sky.

“You know an awful lot for an eight year old,” I say. “Are you some sort of scientist?”

"I'm going to be a physicist," he says. He climbs up on a rock. "Like Richard Feynman. I'm going to learn how to do everything. I have books on mathematics and chemistry and maybe if we make another atomic bomb I can work on that, too. I'm going to learn to pick locks and pick up women like he talks about in his books." He jumps down from the rock, and turns to grin at me.

"I can teach you how to pick locks," I say, and he laughs.

"Richard Feynman won the Nobel prize," he says. "He was smart like Einstein, but he was funnier. You probably work at a hair salon, or with computers. You probably work at Kentucky Fried Chicken," David says. "How would you know how to pick locks?"

"I taught myself," I say. We come to the edge of the woods. "Picking locks is a way of making sense of the world on your own, without people explaining what things are for," I say. "Picking locks is like wearing a dress if you're a boy." This is someone's backyard, and above their satellite dish and chimney the laser is brighter than ever. As a cloud drifts over it, a point of brilliant green appears, wavering up and down with the shape of the cloud. "It looks closer now," I say.

"What will we do when we get there?" David says.

“It’s probably up on someone’s roof. Maybe they’ll let us inside to see it.”

We walk in silence for a while, David running ahead, across people’s lawns, but never too far ahead. He must know by now that something weird is going on. I don’t think he understands that we’re kidnapping him. My anger is worn off. I’m not thinking about saving him, about opening his mind to the knowledge that it’s okay to be different, for boys to dress like girls. I’m not thinking about reversing the damage his father has done to him. All I’m thinking about is finding the laser. I don’t know what I’ll do afterward, but right now he and I are going to find that laser together.

On our right there’s a few men sitting out on their porch. They’re leaning back in their lawn chairs, and as we approach I can hear them talking. The first words I can make out are “What the fuck?”

“Don’t pay any attention to them,” I say to David, before the first of them even begins cat-calling. “Just keep walking until we get to the corner.”

“Hey faggot, isn’t he a little young for you?” A voice yells. “That’s a nice dress.”

“Yeah,” says another. “Is that your wedding dress? Are you going to try and marry him? I don’t think they’ve made pedophile marriages legal yet, have they?” There’s three of them, and

I have to force myself to keep walking. I want to turn around and rush them. I want to bloody my elbows and my knees with them. I don't want to hurt anyone in front of David, though.

"Hey kid, is that guy bothering you?"

"Leave us alone," David yells, and he starts walking faster. We get around the corner, and I can see that his face is flushed. "Why are you wearing that?" he says. "They wouldn't have yelled if you weren't dressed up like a gaylord."

"They yelled because they were assholes," I say.

"They yelled because you're dressed up like a girl. You're a faggot," David says, and I want to slap his face. Instead I grab his wrist, hard, and pull him up a lawn and into the backyard of the house on the corner. We cut through backyards until we're behind the house with the drunken assholes. I can hear them out front, laughing to one another.

"They don't let pedophiles get married too, do they?" one said, and they all laughed, reliving their moment of glory. I open my clutch and pull out the lockpick set.

"What's that?" David whispers. I lead him to their back door, and I get down on one knee. "Is that a lockpick?" He watches, fascinated, as I slide one of the picks into the lock, using my other hand to work the tension wrench. "You really can pick locks," he says.

“We can’t talk when we get inside,” I say. “We have to be very quiet. We’re just going to sneak in and then sneak out, okay?”

“What are we doing?”

“We’re going to steal a toaster,” I say. “They made fun of us and said we were getting married. Well, people always give toasters at weddings. We’re going to collect our wedding present.”

“I’ve never stolen anything,” David whispers.

“Well, I won’t tell if you don’t,”

The lock moves, and I let out a sigh of relief. I push the door open a fraction of an inch, sliding the picks back into their case, and the case back into my purse. There’s no flashlight, and so we move very slowly, waiting for our eyes to get adjusted. David runs across the kitchen to grab a toaster, and he pulls the cord from the wall.

“Got it!” he says. The lights come on, and a man steps into the kitchen heavily. It’s one of the men from the front lawn.

“What the fuck is this?” he says. He pushes David to the side and grabs the front of my dress. “How the fuck did you get in my house?” David’s watching, his eyes wide, and there has to be a way out of this without violence. He’s eight years old. I shouldn’t have brought him into this house. Fucking Christ.

“Listen,” I said. “He’s only eight. We’ll just leave, alright? We’ll forget this ever happened.”

He has my chest hair through the dress, and I want to bring my knee up and into his crotch. He isn't that much bigger than me. I wonder what he'd tell his friends if he got stomped by a faggot.

He shoves me against the wall and grabs the toaster out of David's hands. He starts wrapping the cord around his fist. My own hands are fists now, and all I can think to say is "David, close your eyes." This fucker has a punch in the throat coming. But before he can step forward, and before my fist can come up, he drops the toaster and staggers to the side, his hand on his back. His hand comes back with blood on it.

"What the fuck?" he says. David is staring at him in shock, his little knife still in his hand. There is something smeared on the blade. I grab David's wrist and we're out the door and into the neighbor's backyard before I can even start thinking. I can't believe he stabbed the guy. Eight years old. I'm the most irresponsible kidnapper ever. From the front yard we can hear yelling. I slow down to see if I can hear what they're doing, but David shoves me from behind.

"Run!" David says, pushing past me.

We run. Above us, the laser slices through the clouds. I can't stop looking up. David is looking up while he runs, too.

"It's close," I say. "It's way closer than before. It can't be more than a few blocks from

here.” And then we aren’t running from anything, anymore. We’re running toward the laser. We’re pushing through bushes from one backyard into the next, our eyes on the clouds and that beacon in the sky.

We stop on a street that's all dark, some new suburb with skeleton houses and dirt everywhere. The laser looks thick in the sky now. I can see it all. David sits down on the curb and cries. He's still holding the little knife in his hand. He ran all this way with an open knife. I didn't even notice.

"We're almost to the laser!" I say, but David just cries harder. "Don't you want to see?" He shakes his head, and all my excitement is gone. I can't pretend anymore. I'm glad he's not wearing a dress right now. What if that fucker back at the house had turned on David first? What if he'd done something before I could react?

"I want to go back to the car," David says, and I sit down on the curb beside him and pull him into a hug. I squeeze him hard, and he shakes against me, silently.

“Richard will call soon,” I say. “He’ll come and get us, and we’ll go get some ice cream or something.” There has to be an all night ice cream place somewhere.

“I don’t want any ice cream,” David says. He looks down at the knife in his hand. Then he folds it up and puts it back in his pocket.

When Richard calls, he says “We can’t just take him home. Are you crazy? We’d be arrested three blocks away.” Someone in the background on his end says something. “Alex says we should leave him somewhere and then call the cops to tell them where he is.”

“And how long would it take the cops to get there?” I say. “We just leave him in some McDonald’s by himself to wait for the cops?”

“I don’t want any McDonald’s,” David says.

“He doesn’t even like McDonald’s,” I say.

“Nobody said anything about McDonald’s, man,” Richard pauses. “Listen,” he says. “There’s got to be a safe place we can leave him.”

“Okay,” I say. “I know where.”

“Where?”

“Come get us,” I say. “Just you, Richard. We don’t need a car full of people.”

“Where are you?” he says. I look around.

“Hey,” I say to David. “Run over and take a look at that street sign.”

In the car I sit in the back with David. I tell Richard how to get to Mrs. Hubert’s neighbor-

hood. I straighten my dress and pull my seatbelt on. David isn't crying anymore, but he's staring out the window.

"Hey, have you got the Internet?" I say, and David nods without looking at me. "There's a book you can download off the Internet called *The MIT Guide to Picking Locks*," I say. I have my lockpick set in hand, and I reach out to place it in his hand. "You just read it again and again until it starts to make sense to you," David is looking down at the lockpicks in his hand. "There are other guides and things on the Internet, but the MIT one is the best, I think,"

"Okay," David says.

Richard parks his car two blocks away, and David and I walk under the trees toward Mrs. Hubert's house. I want to say something to make him feel better about stabbing the guy, but I don't know what I'd say. I don't know what it would mean if I convinced an eight year old that it was alright to put a knife in someone. Would it be worse to have him grow up afraid of his own ability to be violent? What if he got so afraid that he wouldn't defend himself?

"Hey David," I stop walking and sit down on the curb. David stops, too. He's holding the lockpick set in his fist, and in the streetlight he looks more tired than scared. "Do you think it's okay to hit a girl?"

He looks at me for a long time.

LOCKPICK PORNOGRAPHY

Mrs. Hubert's husband answers the door and takes one look at us and closes the door again. I ring the doorbell again, and this time Mrs. Hubert answers. She looks tired too, and I realize that I have no idea what time it is.

"Can you call his dad in the morning?" I say, putting my hand on David's back.

"Is he the boy that's gone missing?" Mrs. Hubert asks, and I nod. "He's okay?" She kneels down in front of him, and I kneel beside him.

"Mrs. Hubert will take care of you until your dad comes to get you, alright?" I lift up his hand and tap on the lockpick set. "You keep this hidden, or your dad will take it away. You keep it a secret," I say.

Mrs. Hubert is looking at me, now. "What about you?" she says. "You look tired."

Later on, Richard will refer to this whole thing as "making the drop" and he'll talk about the time we "burlap sacked the son of a political figure." Richard will tell the story of this meeting like we had planned it this way all along. We get the kid, take him out, have a homophobe shout and threaten him, and have the kid stick up for himself, stab the asshole and we drop him off before bedtime. If he mentions Mrs. Hubert at all, he probably won't have her say "You look tired." He'll probably have her say something else, something trite and expected and designed to make us look like heroes.

He definitely won't tell anyone that I stand back up and smile at her. He won't tell anyone that I say "I am tired."

David gives me a hug goodbye, and as I walk back to the car I try to think of something to tell Richard. I try to think of something we can do tonight, the four of us, some organization that needs their windows smashed, some slogan we can spray paint on every storefront.

Back in the car, Richard says "What happened?"

I sit, looking out the window at the suburbs we pass, still trying to think of something we can do.

"She said she'd give the police a call in a half an hour, so that we could get far enough away."

"Really?"

"She gave me a hug, too," I say. I should have washed the blood off of David's knife, I think. I roll down the window and stick my hand out, enjoying the feeling of the wind on my skin.



Joey Comeau was born in Edmonton, Alberta in the year 1980. When he was younger, his father had custody and so his mother kidnapped him. That was pretty exciting.

His mom was a punk rocker and a hairdresser and she liked to keep her children on the cutting edge of fashion. One of Joey's earliest memories is of a Christmas party for poor kids, where everyone got a present from Santa Claus. Joey got a Barbie from Santa because the guy had never seen a little boy with long hair. "There you go, Princess," Santa told him.

In elementary school, Joey used to pull the wire out of coil bound notebooks and slip it around the latch to unlock doors. He taught himself to pick locks using *The MIT Guide To Picking Locks*, which honestly isn't very good. You just need to go out and buy a cheap lock at a hardware store and practice and practice and practice.

Joey studied Linguistics in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

