

WE WERE IN HIGH SCHOOL

by

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These three stories deal with late adolescence. "A Rumor About Jenny" and "Pornography" concern the difficulty of developing sincere relationships in an atmosphere of intense sexual pressure. "Body Shop" follows a teenage part-time worker's experience with economic injustice. The analytical essay, "Commentary and Description," attempts to define the genre in which these stories were written. I define this genre as the "serious," realistic short story, the purpose of which is to describe and comment on objective physical reality in narrative form.

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A RUMOR ABOUT JENNY

OK, check this out: Jenny DeBeers isn't a slut. I know what they say we did at her New Year's Eve party--who cares? I don't give a shit about what they say. So what if I never went out with her? Maybe I know more than some people she went out with. How do I know so much about her? I'll tell you--but this is private stuff, so don't go around repeating it. Cause if you do, you'll have to deal with me, Merriweather Rockwell--and that's Merry to you, dude, so smile when you say that.

Just joking. Don't worry, everybody flicks me shit, a guy being named Merry, you know. But hey, joke 'em if they can't take a fuck, that's what I always say.

OK, here's what happened. This party was one of those freezing-ass cold nights, when everything's covered with frost like silver glitter and there's fog all over the place, and the air's totally still and it smells like wood smoke and Christmas vacation, you know? So I get a ride to the party with Easy Mendoza, cause we're both in the band that's playing at this party. When I get out of Easy's Toyota at Jenny's house, I can see frost all over the car doors in the light from the streetlights. There's all this party noise, laughing and shouting, coming out the windows. The windows are bright and warm compared to this butt-cold fog out here.

Easy keeps hopping up and down, trying to peek in the windows while we're waiting for someone to come to the door. He's our lead guitar player; maybe you've seen him playing for the school jazz band. He's the skinny, tough-looking guy with the long frazzled black hair that always gets in his eyes. I sort of raise one eyebrow at him. "Nervous about the gig, huh?"

He laughs a little, but he doesn't sound too happy. "Gimme a break, dude. I'm just trying to see if Marlana's in there fucking around already. Her car's right there." He points his chin at the street. Easy's been going out with Marlana Dominato (yeah, Marlana Dominatrix, that's her) for about two weeks now, which is some kind of record for her.

Right then the door opens and there's the infamous Jenny DeBeers herself, with her poofy cloud of blond hair, tight sweater, tight jeans, big grin and all, breathing out clouds of steam, smelling like alcohol and perfume, going, "Oh, Merry, Hi! Come on in, guys, God, it's freezing out here--" Then she yells over her shoulder in this sort of airhead, come-up-and-see-me-sometime voice, "Hey guys, the band's here!" She disappears before I can say anything. Now, Jenny has quite a reputation for getting around, but until she asks us to play this party she never gives me a second glance, so I always kind of admire her from afar, if you know what I'm saying. But tonight it looks like I might be able to make a move.

There aren't that many people at the party yet. Jenny's parents, of course, are out of town, celebrating New Year's Eve up at

Lake Tahoe. They're those kind of parents who, like, give their kids the keys to the liquor cabinet and trust them to be responsible. Real geniuses--but hey, I'm not complaining.

Hank and Archie, our rhythm guitarist and drummer, are already inside and starting to get set up. So here we are with all these wires and stuff running all over the floor, looking for outlets and plugging in the big black speaker cabinets. Easy keeps looking over his shoulder at Marlena, who's wearing one of her famous black leather dresses which, like they say, doesn't leave much to the imagination. She's giggling with a three-beer buzz and making stupid faces at Hank, and I can tell Easy's already getting pissed off. Pretty soon Jenny drags her over to offer us some wine coolers.

"Hey you rock stars, want a drink?" Jenny's makeup is laid on a little too thick, but it doesn't mess up her brown eyes, which look like milky coffee or something else I can't think of. Besides, the mascara looks sort of sexy. Then she tilts her head to one side so she's looking up at me, even though we're the same height. This is better than I expected; I'm thinking, Hey, things are looking up for Merry Rockwell!

"Dude, thanks!" I grin and drink some of that fizzy sweet shit. It tastes pretty good. It's cold. It reminds me of how hot my face is feeling.

"So I bought you a drink," she says. "Aren't you even going to say thanks?" She still has her head tilted that way, and the half-smile on her lips is like fighting to stay on top of all that slick

lipstick. That looks pretty sexy too.

So I go, "Depends."

"Depends on what?"

For a second I think about all the crude things I could say, but then I think no, that's too rude, she'd be offended if I was too overt and then I'd never get laid, right? So I laugh and go, "On whether or not you pay us for this gig, dude!"

(I should tell you we already agreed that Tormentor--our band--would do this for free. Cover charges for high school parties are not cool, and besides, Jenny--well, Jenny's parents--were already buying all the booze.)

She sort of tips up her chin at me and shuts one eye. All of a sudden she looks totally wise, like really smart or something. Like, whenever you see her in the hall or whatever, she's always laughing and looking like an airhead, but just for this one second she looked-- I don't know, like she knew some secret about me. Anyway, she goes, "We'll see about that." Then she takes off with Marlana into the kitchen. I can see them over the bar between the kitchen and living room, trying to make drinks from a bartender's manual they got somewhere.

So then me and Easy and the rest of the guys get all involved with putting up the drums, arranging the amplifiers, shoving the speakers into the corners and getting the instruments plugged in. The whole time this is going on, people are running in and out from the kitchen and the dining room and the bedrooms, bringing drinks, going

to the bathroom, talking and laughing. Somebody puts MTV on the DeBeers' big-screen television, and we all sing along with Madonna and Bon Jovi, drinking with one hand, plugging in equipment with the other and dancing around with our feet. I'm kind of irritated, cause Jenny's dancing real close with three or four different guys up by the TV. I'm about to complain to Easy, but then I find out he's just as pissed off because Marlana's sitting on top of Hank's amplifier and giving him a great view up her skirt. Even though Hank looks like he's not buying it, Easy's looking pretty upset about this, especially because he's already pounded a couple beers. That's when I know it's time to get the show on the road. Since I'm, like, the front man (I play bass and sing), I figure I'm sort of responsible for getting these things done.

Without saying a word into the mike (Easy says if you say anything into the mike before you start playing it means you don't have any class), I check out the band. They're looking back at me, and after somebody gets Hank's attention away from Marlana, I can see they're ready. I've got that light-headed butterfly feeling, and it looks like they do too. So I tell Easy to go for it.

Easy sort of leans back and slings his guitar down and starts playing the "Eruption" solo, which is like Eddie Van Halen's trademark--you know, it has all this hammering on the neck instead of picking, it goes super fast, makes you look great, all that good shit--plus everyone recognizes it. The crowd goes wild.

So you gotta understand, this is like the first time we've

played in front of people. I mean, Easy's played in the jazz band, but the rest of us are just amateurs, so all we have to go on is how we practiced all this in Easy's garage. But that's OK, cause not everyone's listening, you know; a lot of people are still cruising around, going into the kitchen, getting booze, running into the bathroom, trying to talk. We're way too loud to talk over; the music's sort of this blaze of sound, not too distinct, and it's all you can do to try to pick out your instrument to see if you're playing right. And if you have to sing, like me, you can't really afford to listen to the music. I'm kind of worried about being too loud and attracting the cops, but I don't have time to think about that too much. I'm sort of catching Jenny's eye whenever I can and then being totally suggestive, even more than I usually am, which is pretty nasty; like Easy says, I got hired for my pelvic thrust, not my perfect pitch.

I can't really tell if we're bombing or not, cause people keep coming in and out, but it seems like more and more people are staying in the living room to dance. Then, after three or four songs, Jenny comes running in. She's been in the other room for a few minutes, but now she looks totally panicked, she's making this throat-cutting gesture, she grabs the mike stand away from me and screams in my ear, "The cops just pulled up!"

I turn around and get the band to shut up, right in the middle of "You Shook Me (All Night Long)," between "You" and "Shook me," and I'm like, "OK, everybody hit the doors--"

Then Archie goes, "No, no, wait a minute, wait a minute! If everybody takes off they'll bust us for sure! Lock the doors and shut up and they'll take off, OK? Just SHUT UP!"

Everyone sort of mills around for a second, then the doorbell rings. My ears are whining and ringing from the music, and there's a loud sixty-cycle hum from the amps. Archie gets up from his drum set and goes to the door. "I'll handle it," he tells Jenny as he brushes past. "I haven't drank anything yet."

Everyone's standing around, shuffling, breathing out alcohol fumes and fear, and Archie opens the front door a crack and goes, "Yes? Can I help you?"

There's some mumbling from the cop, then Hank's going, "Yes, I have a few friends over and we're practicing for our band. Sorry. We'll turn it down."

There's more cop-mumbling which I can't hear, and I'm staring at the back of Archie's head, at his short blond hair and broad shoulders, and I realize that even though I know what MIP stands for (Minor In Possession--of alcohol, dude), I don't know what the penalty is, if they'll take my driver's license or arrest me or what. Plus what will my parents say? I mean, I've had a couple of wine coolers by now, and I'm pretty clearly buzzed. From the looks on their faces, everyone else seems to be thinking the same thing, and a lot of eyes are checking out the windows and back doors.

Then Archie's like, "Yes, sir, I understand. No, thanks, I think I've got it under control. Yes, sir, I understand. We'll keep

it down. Thanks a lot. OK, goodnight."

There's this huge sigh of relief as he shuts the door, and then this community giggle when everyone starts talking again. Archie walks back to the band, sort of shaking his head and laughing. "So what'd they say? What'd you say?" I'm not the only guy asking him all this; everyone else is pressing up to him too. He looks like some kind of hero in the crowd.

He shrugs. "He said turn it down, and this is just a warning. He gave me the whole lecture, if he has to come back he'll bust everyone inside, bla bla bla." He grins. "By the way, can I have a beer?"

Everyone starts shuffling around, leaving or heading into the other rooms. The living room sort of empties out, and Archie turns off all the sound equipment. All of a sudden I can feel this weight against my left side, and I smell perfume. Marlana is standing on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. "Merry--Jenny wants to see you in the back bedroom. Come on, I'll take you back there."

I pull back a little, glancing at Easy. Lucky for me he's not watching. "Uh, are you sure?"

Marlena gives my arm a heave and almost pulls me over, laughing. "Come on," she says. We stumble through the emptying living room, down the hall, past the line waiting for the bathroom, and through a closed door. We wind up in a room with no lights on; the streetlight outside shines through the window, but not real bright. I can see a pile of jackets on the bed. I'm alone with

Marlena.

I'm going, "Wait a second, where's Jenny?"

Marlena's standing awfully close. I can feel her breath on my throat. "Don't be in such a hurry."

I step back too fast and sit down on the bed without meaning to. "Marlena, look. You and Easy, uh, are going out, and he's kind of upset. I don't want to make him any madder than he already is. I really think we should go back in the other room."

"Oh, give me a break. I only dragged you in here to tell you Jenny likes you. She said she'll be back here in a minute. Jesus, you're so damn virtuous." Marlena's standing in front of me, with the expanses of her chest and legs shining in the dark. I can't tell if she's making fun of me or not.

Before I can think about it, I go, "No I'm not."

Marlena slumps down next to me on the bed. "Yeah you are. I can tell." She sounds kind of glum. "You're just like Jenny."

"What?"

She twists around to face me, folding one leg underneath her on the bed. My eyes are getting adjusted to the dark now and I can see her looking quizzical. "I thought you were onto her."

"What?" I know I'm repeating myself, but I'm pretty buzzed, and I can't think of anything else to say.

"Did you seriously think you were going to get laid tonight?" I've never been asked point-blank like that before, so I sort of sputter for a few seconds. Then she goes, "Jesus, I can't believe

Jenny can put this over on everyone! She goes out with a bunch of guys, they all get drunk and say they've gotten laid, everyone believes them. Obviously they don't remember jack shit about what they did, and even if they did get laid, they'd probably be too whiskey-dicked to do anything." She's knotting her long-nailed fingers into the coats on the bed the whole time she's talking.

"Well, I'm not so sure." I'm trying to sound reasonable, thinking about all the dates I'd been on when I was sort of hazy about what happened.

"Hey, take it from me." She laughs, but she doesn't smile. "I know a real slut when I see one. Jenny's not a slut. In fact, I don't think she's ever gotten laid."

"No way, I don't believe you."

She shrugs. "Whatever, dude. If you think you know better than me, fine. I guess you must be spending some time with her in the girls' locker room, huh? Or maybe you go shopping with her? Take it from me, big guy. She's a virgin."

I'm totally blown away. I run my fingers through my hair, slowly saying, "Now, that puts a totally different perspective on things, totally different--"

Just then the door bangs open and light floods in from the hall. At first I'm thinking, Finally, Jenny's here. Then Easy's voice blasts in. "All right, get outa there, you God damn... traitor!"

Oh shit, I think, this is just what I need. Squinting, trying

to shade my eyes, I stumble over to the door, going, "No, wait a minute, dude--"

"You piece of shit!" He grabs my shirt in his fists and jerks me out in the hall, pushing me down on the floor. He stinks like beer. Behind us, I can hear Marlana yelling for him to cut it out, it's not what he thinks it is. "Oh sure," he sobs, shaking me by the shirt, "sure it's not! You asshole!" Now, I'm no weakling, but Easy's raging, and I'm totally unprepared. All I can think of is whether or not he's got a knife or a blunt object handy.

Curious faces are starting to poke into in the hall, and I figure I better do something. I grab his arms and throw him down next to me. Out in the living room, I can hear some smartass yelling, "Dude! Check it out! MTV meets World Federation of Wrestling!"

Easy takes advantage of this distraction to get me in a headlock. Then I'm trying to keep him from breaking my nose, because he's already whaling on my face. I get a good one in his kidneys, but one of us is bleeding and it isn't him.

Then someone's yanking us apart, and Archie's going, "Break it up, God dammit, what the fuck's wrong with you two?" I'm wiping blood off my nose, my new shirt's wrecked, Easy's rubbing his fists and ready for more, and Archie's standing between us looking pissed off and disgusted.

I push my way through the crowd--which is shrinking, a lot of people are already gone, cause they don't want to be here when the cops came back--and try to get into the bathroom. I'm feeling pretty

stupid and embarrassed, and wondering if Jenny saw the whole thing.

I decide not to wait in the line for the bathroom, cause people are staring, and I already feel like shit. I decide to retreat back into the coat room and shut the door behind me. This time I turn the light on. I think it's Jenny's parents' room; everything's put away neat, and the dresser has a bunch of men's ties laid over all tidy. Good thing there's a kleenex box with the ties, cause my nose is bleeding all over my hands, even though my head's tipped back.

My ears are ringing again, from the alcohol and the punches, and my face hurts like a son of a bitch. I'm hating life. It's not even my fault, me and Marlana weren't even doing anything. Now Easy's going to hate me. I even start crying, I'm feeling so sorry for myself. The things you do when you're drunk, huh? Yeah, right.

So anyway, I'm sitting on Mr. and Mrs. DeBeers' nice big bed with the pile of jackets, stopping my nosebleed and sniffing, my mouth tasting like old beer, when the door opens. It's Jenny.

Of all the people I don't want to see. "Uh--" my voice breaks and I suck in air, sobbing. Fuck, I'm thinking helplessly, I look like an asshole. "Hi."

She stops all of a sudden, looking at me like she wishes I was dead, or she was, or something. She's like balancing on her feet, trying to decide whether to come in or go out. She's totally wasted.

I get up, stumbling. "Oh, sorry, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to come in here--"

She comes in and shuts the door behind her. "It's not that,

don't worry," she says. She sounds weird, all quiet.

"What's wrong, Jenny?" My voice sounds like my nose is plugged up cause it's all swollen. She kind of laughs.

"Me? You're the one who looks like shit."

"Oh. Sorry." We don't say anything for a second.

"Are you OK?"

I sort of smile. "Nothing hurt but my ego."

She gives me the same sort of smile. I notice her mascara is all kind of smeared, and most of her lipstick is wiped off, and she smells more like sweat than perfume. And something else, too: when she starts crying and falls over against me, I realize she's barfed at some point in the evening. "Oh, Merry," she says, "I feel like shit."

I give her a hug, which is kind of awkward because it's one of those moments where you can tell nobody feels very romantic, but somehow you're supposed to hug, you know? I go, "It's OK." Which is dopey, but what else can I say? She probably won't remember any of this anyway.

"No." She sniffles, sitting up. "It's shitty. I hate this." She swipes at her face with the back of her hand. She sounds pissed off, and not very drunk anymore. "This bullshit about the cops. I didn't want the cops to come. What'll my parents say? I wish everyone would just leave."

"You want me and Archie to get rid of everyone?"

"No." She stares up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry about you and Easy. I'm sorry I didn't get in here faster."

"Ah, never mind." My nose hurts too much to blame anyone.
"It's no big deal."

Just then the door opens and this football player guy, some friend of Jenny's, comes in to get his coat. "Whoa, sorry," he says, when he sees us sitting on the bed.

"Oh, Beau, come on in, we're just talking," says Jenny, switching on her bright grin. She almost looks like she's never been sniffing, or crying, or barfing. Almost. "Leaving so soon?"

The football player shrugs. "Yeah, well. My parents are already pissed about my grades. I'd be fucked if I got an MIP at this party."

"Yeah," says Jenny, handing him a letterman's jacket with "Beau" stitched on the breast. "See you."

"Later." He shuts the door behind him, winking at me as he goes out. For some reason, his wink pisses me off.

"What's the deal, man?" I sort of spout off at Jenny, but I'm not really talking to her. I'm just talking. "I mean, everyone thinks if you go somewhere to talk at a party, you must be fucking."

Jenny looks at me like I'm some kind of slow student. "Isn't that the idea?"

"No! Well...." I start thinking about it. "I guess it does sound pretty cool if you go, 'Yeah, let's just say I was alone in a closed room with Jenny DeBeers for forty-five minutes.'"

Jenny gets up and starts poking around with the ties on the dresser.

"It sounds cool, all right." She doesn't sound real happy about it.

I go, "Uh," kind of hoping she'll add something, but she doesn't offer any help. "What do you mean?"

"You can get pretty popular with a slutty reputation, you know," she says, looking at me in the mirror.

"You don't have a--"

"Come on, dude," she snaps, turning around. "I thought this was a serious conversation. Don't bullshit me." She turns back to the mirror, and I'm thinking, Well, bite my head off, why don't you. She hands me some more kleenex. "Your nose is bleeding again."

"Thanks." I tip my head back and stare at the ceiling for a while.

"You know, every once in a while, I get really sick of the whole thing. If some dude's not trying to get laid, some girl is trying to find out if you fucked him, and if you didn't, there's something wrong with you. Gets kind of hard to keep up a decent reputation, you know?"

I know exactly what she means. She's not talking about a "nice girl" reputation. So I say, feeling kind of slimy, "Yeah, I know what you mean." I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, with my head still tilted backwards. She slumps down on the bed next to me, pressing her hands together between her knees.

All of a sudden she kind of giggles. "Wanna know a secret?"

For a second I think I might just guess and tell her she's a virgin, but I don't want to get Marlana in trouble with her. Me and

Marlena have already gotten each other in enough trouble for one night. "What?"

"Promise you won't tell anybody?"

"Sure."

"I'm really a virgin."

I take a deep breath and say, "I believe you."

"Sure you do."

I drop the kleenex and rub the side of my nose. It's still tender. She's still slumped next to me with her shoulders all hunched up, so I put my arm around her. But it's not like putting on the moves, it's like friendly.

So we just sit there for a while on her parents' waterbed, with her dad's ties lying on the dresser and bloody kleenexes lying all around us. Pretty soon she leans away from me. "OK, dude," she says, and staggers up to her feet. "We've been sitting here long enough. You need some ice for your nose."

"No, I'll be OK--"

She goes out the door. "Just wait a second," she yells back. I sit there on the bed with my nose throbbing, staring at the ties on the dresser. A couple of people come in to get their coats. I jump every time the door opens; I keep expecting Easy to come back to finish the job.

Finally Jenny comes back with a cup and a dish towel. "There was no ice left in the freezer," she says. "They used it all for making daiquiris. So all I could get was somebody's leftover daiquiri

shavings. Sorry. But it's better than nothing. At least they sucked all the juice out." She empties the cup into the dish towel and holds it up to my nose.

I hold up my hands, trying to take the towel, but missing.

"No, no, I can do it--"

She pushes my hands out of the way and plops the towel onto my nose, ignoring my yelp. "Quit it."

Finally I sort of relax and let her hold the paper full of fruity-smelling ice on my swelling nose. It's melting pretty fast and running down my cheeks, but it feels good on my nose. After a while I sort of lean on her so she can reach my face better. People are going in and out, getting their coats while we sit there together, but I don't care. Even after the ice all melts into pinkish water and soaks into the towel, for some reason I'm still sitting there leaning on her shoulder. We don't say anything. We don't even kiss or hug. It's cool.

But eventually, Jenny drops the dish towel into her lap and sort of sighs. "Well, I guess you better take off. I still gotta kick everyone out of here." As she stands up and folds up the towel, I feel my nose. It's still swollen, but better.

"Hey--thanks." I smile at Jenny, just a smile, as if she's not this beautiful babe, but just, I don't know, some person who helps you out.

"Don't mention it." Jenny sort of pauses before she opens the door. "You gonna give away my secret?"

At first I just sort of look at her, then I realize she's talking about being a virgin. "You want me to?"

She thinks about it. "Nah. Not for a while, anyway. Let 'em all say we fucked tonight." She gives me a jokey wink, but says in kind of a serious voice, "We know better."

"Yeah. Joke 'em if they can't take a fuck." She stands there for a second after I say it, and then she goes back in the other room. I wipe the rest of the ice water off my face with my shirt.

It turns out that Hank took off with Marlana while Easy was beating me to a pulp, and Easy passed out while I was in the bedroom talking to Jenny, so I have to get a ride home jammed into the back seat of Archie's VW Bug with half of his drum set. Easy's pretty pissed about the whole situation, and I imagine there'll be more trouble on Monday, but for now there's nothing to do but go home and try not to get grounded.

So that's how I know about Jenny deBeers, and if you don't believe me, that's your problem. I promised not to give away her secret, but she's moved away now, so I think it's OK. I don't know why I miss her so much. All she ever did for me was put some ice on my nose. But it seems like there's more to her than people give her credit for. I guess I feel like people should at least understand her, as much as you can understand anyone.

BODY SHOP

When I was sixteen and noble as hell, I only wanted to do two things: gain Hank Hudson's respect and rebuild my '58 Chevy pickup. The Chevy was all original parts, painted the original green, now rusted through around the fenders and full of dents; it had a cracked windshield and no stereo. Hank Hudson was four and a half years older than me, the painter and body man at Reno Bodyworks. That was where I got fired from my first job and failed gloriously at both my ambitions.

Reno Bodyworks occupied half of a gigantic tin Quonset hut in the empty-lot part of town out by the railroad yards. Inside, the shop was cavernous; the air was constantly gray with floating sander dust, and the fluorescent lights never seemed to work right. Forgotten fenders and anonymous auto parts loomed in the dim corners. The floor was cold concrete. It was never quiet; the suspended sander dust shook with the noise of pneumatic power tools and the constant backfiring of the air compressor. When that wasn't running, Elvis or Chuck Berry or The Chordettes were playing on the beat-up AM radio. This was where I met Hank Hudson.

Hank told me he inherited the trade from his father, an old drunk who owned a wrecking yard and named his first-born son Henry Ford Hudson. Hank grew up climbing around on rusting hulks out in his

father's yard, listening to the mechanics swear at each other and pull parts off the wrecks. His father had planned to give Hank the business, until Hank got Marlana Dominato pregnant when they were both seniors in high school and he dropped out to get married. Hank didn't tell me the part about getting Marlana pregnant himself; I heard that from the guys at the school auto shop, where Hank was legendary. I made it no secret at school that not only did I work with Hank Hudson, but he was going to help me rebuild my Chevy.

"Yeah," I said to Hank, as if I were confiding something important, "I'm gonna put in a big-block hemi with a four-barrel carb, but then I'll probably need a bigger gas tank." I paused for feedback, but Hank just kept working on the task at hand. "So what do you think?"

"Uh-huh," he said. On this particular evening we were bolting the bumper back onto a Porsche that Hank had just repainted. You had to be a contortionist to reach all the bolts to put that car back together. Hank was lying on a creeper under the car, tightening the bolts while I held the bumper in place. I didn't mind squatting there clutching the bumper while Hank did the interesting work; at least it was better than sweeping the floor, which was all I usually got to do.

There was a loud thunk from under the bumper, and a quiet, "Ow. Shit." Hank's greasy fingers suddenly appeared, grasping the bottom of the doors. One of the knuckles was split and dripping blood. The fingers pulled the rest of him out from under the car. His red bandana had slipped down and his thick black hair spilled around it in

disorder. He had dark end-of-the-day bags under his black eyes, and his five-o-clock shadow was etched with sweat and grime. In spite of all that, his face was as calm as a rock slab.

"Is your hand OK?" Catching myself sounding concerned, I added offhand, "Never know. Might need stitches."

"It's nothing," he said, sitting up. "Let's switch. My hands are too big to fit in there." He took the fender from me and laid it against the car while I lay down on my back and shoved the creeper into the dark under the car. I grabbed the wrench with a flourish.

My hands fit easily into the space under the bumper. My thin wrists, protruding from my coverall sleeves, were half the size of Hank's. Over the ticking of the ratchet wrench, I heard Hank saying, "You know, when I was a kid, we had this one Porsche out in the yard I always used to play in."

"In your dad's wrecking yard?" It was hard to maintain a casual, professional tone with my neck twisted around to see the bolts.

"Yeah. I always used to play like I was this rich dude, driving around in this Porsche with my girlfriend. The steering wheel had a leather cover on it like this one. That's what reminded me of it. Of course, that one was all bleached out and cracked from the sun, but I thought it was pretty cool. I mean, I thought only rich people could have leather steering wheel covers. You know what I mean?" He laughed.

"Yeah." I moved the wrench to another bolt. "So do you ever

take your kid out there, show him your old turf?"

Hank said nothing. Then he said, "I never want Chuck to see that place."

I knew an awkward silence when I heard one. Somehow I had run out of worldly remarks. For a long time there was no sound but the clicking of the wrench and my muffled grunts as I tried to tighten the bolts. Then Hank laughed. "The other day," he said, "Chuck had to take something to preschool for show and tell. He wanted to take this old tricycle he found out in the alley behind the apartment--that one I fixed all up so he could ride it?"

"Uh-huh," I said.

"But then Marlana goes, 'Oh, Hank, how can you let him take that old thing? The kids'll just make fun of him!' So we tell him he can't take it because it's too big to fit on the bus. He gets all sulky and tells us he's not going to take anything. But then--listen to this, man--his preschool teacher calls us up and goes, 'In the future, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't allow your son to bring dead animals to show and tell.' We're going, 'What? He wasn't going to take anything to show and tell.' She goes, 'Then maybe you'd better search him before he comes to school, because I don't want to see anymore run-over, dried-up toads in show and tell!'"

He laughed, loud and echoing in the shop.

I was still straining at the last bolt on the bumper when I saw the shop owner's prosperous wing-tips walk up next to Hank's paint-splattered sneakers. "Hey Bob," said Hank.

"Hey Hank," said the shop owner. "Can I have a word with you?" Even though I had only worked in the shop for two and a half months, I had been in trouble enough times to recognize that tone of voice. But I had never heard it directed at Hank.

"Sure," said Hank. "All right if I let go of this, kid?"

"Yeah," I said, giving up on the bolt and swinging out from under the car. Bob and Hank were already heading over to the office by the time I stood up. "Hey," I yelled. When they paused to look back, I floundered. Failing to invent an excuse to follow them into the office, I finally said, "You want me to take my break now?"

"No--" Bob started to say, but then Hank nudged him and whispered something. Bob pursed his lips and stared at Hank; then he nodded and beckoned me over with his fat arm. "C'mere, Stephen," he said. "You may as well hear this too."

When I stepped into the office, glancing out of habit at the posters of bikini-clad women fondling Snap-On tools, Bob was at his desk. Hank was slouched in a folding chair across from Bob. I had to get my own folding chair out of the closet.

"I'm going to be straight with you, Hank." Bob leaned his forearms on the desk and unwrapped a piece of gum. I threw Hank a meaningful and cynical look, as if to say, "Bullshit." Unfortunately, Hank wasn't looking at me. He was listening to Bob.

Bob said, "You both know the company's having some hard times right now. I'm trying to open the new shop across town, but in the meantime business here is struggling." He folded the stick of gum

into his mouth and looked at us through his wire-rimmed glasses. His Reno Bodyworks baseball cap was pushed to the back of his fat bald head. "I'm going to have to shut down this shop until we open the new one."

The blood had dried and caked on the back of Hank's hand; he had forgotten to get a band-aid. His hand almost touched the floor because he was so slouched, his face set in a tired, rock hard look. "How long is that gonna take?"

Bob fiddled with the foil part of his gum wrapper, folding it, balling it up. He didn't look at us. "Well, we still have to get the paint booth set up. Then we have to get the fans put in, and then it has to be inspected--"

"So why can't you send us over there?" Hank's voice had a snap you wouldn't expect from someone slouching motionless in a folding chair. It cut right through Bob's mumbling.

Bob flinched, startled into meeting our eyes. "Because I already have a contractor doing that job." He shrugged. "I'm sorry. That's just how it is."

"So when are we going back to work?" Hank's voice stayed even. I couldn't believe he was so calm about getting laid off. I was feeling kind of pissed off myself, even though I would only be losing gas money and new parts for my pickup. But Hank just sounded like he was asking when a particular car had to be finished, or how much the shop would be charging the owner's insurance company.

Bob took a deep breath and looked right at Hank. "You're not."

He quickly leaned back, as if expecting to be punched. He put up his hands, palms out, and turned his head a little to one side. "I'm sorry, I just can't keep you on. I don't have any choice. You know how it is." Although he sounded like he was pleading for understanding, he wouldn't meet Hank's eyes.

Hank just slumped in the chair, like he was before. Slowly, he lifted his arms from his sides and touched his cut knuckle, without looking away from Bob's face. All he said was, "So that's it, huh."

Bob shrugged, making a regretful face. "You know how it is. What can I do?" Then, noticing Hank's hand, he said, "Jeez, Hank, your hand looks terrible. Why don't you wash that out and get a band-aid on it?"

That pushed me over the edge. I poured out my righteous anger on Bob's bald head. "Oh, right. Worry about his finger." My sarcasm would have sounded more biting if my voice hadn't kept cracking. "Don't worry about his family or anything, that's no big deal."

"Shut up, Stephen." Hank ignored my bravado, as if I wasn't trying to save him at all. "What's the problem, Bob?"

"Stephen," said Bob, staring at me like he wanted to tell me where to go, "I think it's time for you to sweep up the shop."

"But--" I said, expecting Hank to finish the sentence.

He didn't even look at me. "Stephen," Bob reminded me. "You know where the broom is."

I sat there for a minute, trying to regroup as my outrage ebbed under their withering silence. Defeated, I banged out of the office

and started sweeping viciously. When I looked up from my growing pile of gray dust I could see them talking through the dirty window into the shop. Pretty soon, Hank came out of the office and started working on the Porsche again.

I swept the far corner of the garage.

Eventually, there was nothing left to sweep except the area around the Porsche, and it was almost quitting time. Hank was snapping the pneumatic buffer onto the air hose, getting ready to rub down the Porsche. "You care if I sweep?" I mumbled.

"Go ahead." Hank started the buffer. In a second he was lost in his work, his face calm again, running the machine over the car's gleaming skin. After watching him for a minute, I said, "Hey Hank."

He switched off the buffer. "What."

"Why--" my voice cracked and I had to clear my throat. "Why're you gettin' laid off?"

He shrugged. "It's too complicated, kid." He grinned out one side of his mouth. "Basically, because it's cheaper for Bob."

"But that's bullshit, he can't do that!" Hank's half-grin outlasted me. "Can he?"

"Look, kid," said Hank. "You got nothing to worry about. You got a good job at the new shop. You got your rent paid. You even got a place to work on your pickup."

"But you were gonna help me with that--"

"You want my advice?" Hank pointed the buffer at me for emphasis. "Don't rock the boat." He went back to buffing out the

car.

That was the one piece of advice I wouldn't take from anyone, not even Hank. I dropped the broom and stormed into Bob's office. He looked mildly surprised to see me.

"Bob," I thundered, pointing at him with the finger of doom, "I quit."

"Now, Stephen, you don't mean that." He attempted a fatherly grin and put his hand on my shoulder. "I know you're upset, but it won't help Hank if you quit."

"Why not? You can give him my hours, maybe put them together with another part-time position--"

Bob was holding out his hands again and shaking his head. I was getting sick of that gesture. "I'm sorry, Stephen, this is much more complicated than that. Look, just sleep on it. You'll feel different in the morning. Besides, what about your Chevy? How are you ever going to get that done if you quit here?" He grinned, and I felt like he was trying to include me in some kind of conspiracy. I was insulted.

"You're fucked." Once I got started it was kind of hard to get back under control. I stomped out. I slammed the door behind me.

Out in the shop, Hank was almost finished buffing the Porsche. I don't think he knew I was watching him then, because he had lost his look of rocklike calm. His lips were screwed up tight into his cheeks, and he kept having to rub his eyes on one hunched shoulder. His bandana had slipped down, almost covering one eye.

I went over to the tool bench and picked up a jack handle. Then I did something I regretted for quite a while, especially while I was working at that supermarket to pay for the damage. But just then, it was worth it to tell Bob I quit while he stared at the Porsche's spiderwebbed windows over a glittering fan of safety glass lying on the floor like diamonds.

I never did get the Chevy rebuilt; I never even got the windshield replaced. After that I kind of soured on cars. But I did call up Hank a couple of weeks after I got fired; he was on unemployment, looking for another job. He told me in no uncertain terms what a stupid and futile thing I had done by wrecking the Porsche; then he hung up. I never talked to him again.

So I blew both my ambitions. But at least I kept my integrity. I could have done worse at that screwed-up age.

PORNOGRAPHY

Faith and Gabrielle were playing keep-away from Manley. Sitting at opposite ends of the gurgling waterbed, they tossed the crumpled wad of paper back and forth between them as Manley flailed and lurched after it. Manley was Lakeview High's star tackle; he was no wide receiver. Of course, the empty beer bottles rolling around on the floor had something to do with his lack of coordination as well.

"Come on, Don Juan," Faith was saying. It was hard to see because the only light in the room came from a single blue bulb. Faith called it her sex lamp. It cast monstrous shadows from her hairsprayed mohawk onto the James Dean poster behind her. Faith held up the crumpled ball of paper in front of Manley's face. Just before he made a wild grab for it, she flicked it to Gabrielle. "You want to deprive the world of your literary masterpiece? But your depiction of women is so sensitive and realistic--'I see your creamy thighs, naked on the bearskin rug--'"

"What's the matter with creamy thighs?" He lumbered around on the waterbed, waving his thick arms like a basketball player, trying to deflect Gab's next throw and casting blue-black shadows. They were alone in the house; Faith's parents were out. A gust of alcohol fumes accompanied his remarks. "At least I didn't say thunder thighs."

Gabrielle shot the paper under his left arm and ignored his

remark. She had been on the cheerleading team until recently. Although she was heavier and less agile than Faith, she and Faith still maintained an advantage in the keep-away game: while Manley had already drunk a six-pack, she and Faith had barely emptied a bottle between between them. "Hey, she's right, dude. You're a regular Shakespeare." In a fake French accent, she quoted, "'I want to feel your tongue, licking whipped cream off my--'"

"You weren't supposed to read that!" His voice was unnecessarily loud, and his words fell over each other in his haste. Trying to recover, he turned around on the shifting bed and told Gabrielle over his shoulder, "Hey, you better watch out, you're gonna cause a tidal wave on this bed."

"You should talk," snapped Gabrielle, and Faith threw her the note while Manley tried to catch his balance.

Faith said, "Not supposed to read it? How can you write me a masterpiece and expect me not to share it with my best friend? Especially a masterpiece with such a juicy proposition in it." Faith raised one hand high and wiggled her fingers behind Manley's head, and Gabrielle promptly threw her the note. "Besides," Faith added, "I'm sure you told her much worse while you were going out with her."

"I don't think so," said Gabrielle. "But then, he never wanted to do that kind of stuff with me, either." When Manley turned his back to her, trying to get the note from Faith, Gabrielle shoved him between the shoulder blades. "Why didn't you, you big shithead?"

Manley barely noticed the push. "Maybe fat chicks don't turn me on." He kept his eyes on Faith and the note.

"See, Faith," said Gabrielle, without smiling, "You're a bad influence on him."

"Hey," said Faith with a shrug. "I didn't ask him to write me that note. And Mrs. Bowdler sure didn't appreciate it. I still can't believe she didn't read it to the class. God, did you see her face? Pow, right in the trash can!" To illustrate, she whipped the note to Gabrielle.

"Yeah, well I can't believe you dug it out of the trash can!" Manley lunged after the note, missing.

"Besides," added Gabrielle, "You didn't write it for nothing. Faith thinks you're ready for a literary career on the basis of that one note.

Right, Faith?"

"Oh, definitely, Gab. In fact, I think he's ready for publication."

"Oh yeah, that'd be cool." The waterbed sloshed as he advanced on Faith in the blue dimness. "I'd be busted for writing it and you'd be busted for putting it in the school paper. Great idea."

"Who said anything about the school paper?" Faith retreated, swinging her legs around until her Doc Martin boots pointed at his chest. James Dean, in two-dimensional glossy blue and white on the wall, backed her up. "We were thinking more along the lines of, oh--" she glanced at Gabrielle, who finished for her.

--Xeroxes." Manley twisted around on the waterbed to look at Gabrielle. Her cloud of curly hair had become a dark cowl in the dim

light, and her face shone out from beneath like a full moon. She continued, grinning wickedly at Manley. "In the girls' locker rooms. And bathrooms. Oh, maybe a few in the halls. You know. No big deal." She and Faith exchanged airy grins.

Manley tried to maintain calm. "Oh, great. Weight Watchers and Punk Freaks Anonymous team up to blackmail football star. That'll go great in the school paper." But his shoulders were bunched up tight and the tendons stood out in his neck.

"Now, Manley," said Gab in soothing tones, and slid over next to him on the bed. Looking up through her eyelashes, she ran her fingers across his chest and rubbed one thigh against his leg. "Didn't we say this would be a friendly get-together?" She glanced at Faith and added, "Didn't we, Faith?"

Faith nodded. "Uh-huh, honey." She winked at them.

Without looking at Gabrielle, Manley said, "I already told you it was over between us. What are you trying to do, blackmail me?"

Faith crawled along the bed and draped her arm across the back of Manley's neck. "It's like this," she said, her mouth an inch from his ear. He squirmed. Faith continued, "You know what you said about me in the note?"

Manley's eyes flickered from side to side in an effort to evade Gabrielle's gaze. "Yeah?" He mumbled.

"It's true," whispered Faith into his ear. She had seen Gab start to grin and was trying not to crack up herself. "I won't deny it. I'm into that stuff. Like when I went out with Beau Rockwell.

I'm sure you've heard that." Then she stopped grinning. Manley shifted his weight. He was trying to hide a grin now, and not succeeding.

"Well it's true. And," she leaned closer, until he flinched away from her breath in his ear, "I really--really liked your note. In fact, that's what Gab's doing here tonight."

Manley frowned. "What?"

Gabrielle ran her hand across Manley's belly. "We have a counter-proposition for you. I had to see you again, just for one night."

Manley's back straightened and he tried to shrug them off, but they held on tight. "What's that?" He was on guard now.

Faith said into his ear, "Here's the deal. You spend the evening with us--and we'll give you the note."

"What?"

Gabrielle stroked his thigh. "Isn't that what you asked for in the note? 'Then another woman comes in while we're--'"

"OK, OK," Manley sputtered. "OK, I get the picture." He thought about it for a minute. The blue sex lamp made huge, shapeless shadows in the corners of the room, while James Dean looked down inscrutably. "Do I get the note first?"

"Only if you do everything you promised in it. Especially with the whipped cream."

Manley's eyes widened. "Deal," he whispered.

"We want to tie you up."

James Dean looked down on a naked Manley. Except for his left sock, all of Manley's clothes were lying on the floor among the discarded beer bottles. Manley was lying on the bed. Faith and Gabrielle had removed only a few earrings and their shoes. Winning a game of strip poker against a drunken opponent had been shamelessly easy, especially with a deck full of marked cards. Gabrielle was tugging off his sock and stroking his thigh; Faith stood in the doorway with a silk bathrobe sash in her hands, waiting for the reply to her proposal.

Manley sat up. "What? Why?"

Faith sat down next to him on the bed, trailing the silk sashes up his torso. "It was in the note, Don Juan." Her voice was soft. "A deal's a deal, right?"

"Well--"

"I brought you the whipped cream." She held up a metal can, which gleamed blue. "Come on." She took his hand and tugged him upright. "Have a chair."

"What's wrong with the bed?"

"Humor us," said Gabrielle, running her hands up his legs.

"You like it better like this, huh?" His huge shadow crawled up the wall as he pulled up a chair from the darkness in the corner.

"Oh, do we," said Faith, tying his hands behind him to the chair back. "Don't we, Gab?" She handed the other sash to Gabrielle and she tied his ankles to the chair legs.

"Uh-huh," she said, and stood up.

Faith and Gabrielle stood on opposite sides of the naked, tied-up Manley and surveyed their work. "Not bad, Faith," said Gabrielle.

"Not bad, Gab," Faith agreed.

James Dean gave silent assent.

Manley grinned complacently. "So how about some whipped cream?"

Gabrielle took the can from Faith. "OK, big guy," she said, and sprayed whipped cream into Manley's lap until he appeared to be wearing a large diaper. He started.

"It's cold," he said. Covering his embarrassment with a sneer, he asked Gabrielle, "Think you'll be able to take that much?" Aside, he told Faith, "She never could before."

Gabrielle made a show of examining the pile of topping. "Gee, I dunno, Manley." She shook her head. "Sure looks like a lot to me. And you know, whipped cream's awful fattening. I wouldn't want to look like a pig or anything."

Manley laughed.

"I mean," Gabrielle continued, "Remember that time you took me out to dinner at the Rapsallion? And we both got real dressed up cause it was Friday night, before the last game of the season?"

Manley sat in the chair, naked, with a pile of melting whipped cream in his crotch and looked confused. "No. Why?"

"It was our last date. Remember?" She leaned over him and stared into his face. His flat pupils, dilated by drunkenness and the dim light, stared into her eyes, which were dark as lunar seas. "I

didn't want to go out," she continued. "I wouldn't tell you why. I was crying on the phone. Remember?"

"I guess so," he said. "Hey, I'm getting kind of cold. Can't we get going here?"

"Be patient, big boy," whispered Faith into his ear.

"But you told me a date would cheer me up, I'd feel better when I was all dressed up, and all like that. So I said OK. And there we were, right in the middle of our steaks, and you go, 'So what's the matter?' And I go, 'Manley, what would you say if I told you I was quitting the cheerleading team?'" Manley tried to shift his weight around in the chair, but the knots were too tight. He was getting goosebumps. All he could do was try not to look at her face, but it loomed so large, with the light behind it, and the only other thing he could see out the corner of his eye was the mocking poster of James Dean.

"So you go, 'Well, I'd ask why.' Then I told you I was quitting the cheerleading team because Marlana was always flicking me shit about always being on the bottom of the pyramid, and always being too big to get lifted by the guys, and then I started crying all over again, remember that?"

Manley stared at her, shivering. "Yeah, and I told you not to listen to her and stay on the team anyway, right? So?"

"You said it would be OK, that you'd love me no matter what." She stared at him for a long minute. "Then when dessert came you just sat there for a second, and then, while I was eating my pie, you

remember what you said?"

He frowned, puzzled. "No," he replied.

"You went, 'Hey, if you didn't eat like such a pig, maybe you'd stay under the weight requirement and Marlana would get off your case.' Remember?" She stood back from him, putting her fists on her hips. "And the next weekend, after I quit the team anyway, you said you were busy Friday night, and you went out with Marlana!"

"Hey, come on," he said, "That was a joke, y'know? Besides, I'm here tonight, aren't I?"

Gabrielle cast an eye on the drooping pile of whipped cream on his crotch and said, "Oh yeah, I almost forgot." Then she hesitated and added solemnly, "But like I said, whipped cream is awful fattening. And you have to maintain a certain weight requirement if you want to be a cheerleader, remember? Especially if you're going out with the star tackle. Oh yeah," she stopped as if surprised, "I forgot! I don't have to worry about that anymore!" Smiling sweetly at Manley, she shook up the can of whipped cream. "I guess I can have a lot more!" And she gave Manley a faceful of pressurized whipped cream.

Manley tried to jerk his hands up and almost fell over.

"Fuck." He sneezed. "What was that for?"

"That was for calling me a PIG, you asshole!" Gabrielle shouted.

"I told you that was a joke!" He sputtered out gobs of whipped cream. "Jesus! The deal's off! Let me up!"

"Now, now," said Faith, almost nibbling his earlobe. "You didn't say the magic word." She took the whipped cream from Gabrielle and sprayed some in his hair. "That's one squirt for not saying the magic word."

"Hey!" He shouted, shaking his head, splattering James Dean with white flecks. They looked blue in the light. "I'm sorry, OK? I'm sorry! If you wanted to go out with me again you could have just asked!" He trembled. He seemed to have sobered up slightly. "Jesus, is this just a grudge about calling you a pig?"

"Not at all," said Faith sweetly. "This isn't a grudge. This is just dessert." She elbowed Manley in the side, waving the can of whipped cream. "Get it? Just desserts?"

"Heh," he said, staring out the sides of his eyes. "Yeah, that's pretty funny. Could you untie me now?"

"I don't know," said Faith, contemplating the shadows on the back of his whipped-cream crew cut. "We could do so much with this, don't you think, Gab?"

"It needs some mousse," Gabrielle decided.

"What flavor do we have? Chocolate? No, I guess not," sighed Faith. "Just whipped cream tonight."

Manley's eyes stared out of a ruin of artificial topping. "Jesus, man," he said. His voice nearly quavered. "What's your problem, anyway?"

"We're having trouble staying on our diet," said Gabrielle. "We thought this would help."

"Hey look, I'm sorry I called you a pig, OK? I'm sorry!"

"He does look pretty sorry," Faith observed.

Gabriel ignored her. She shook her head and told Manley, "Sorry doesn't cut it. You don't exactly get kicked off the football team for being overweight."

"Yeah, you tell him!" Faith cheered.

"Shut up, Faith." Faith blinked. Gabrielle continued, "This is between him and me. I want to hear him talk."

"What do you want me to say?" Manley tried to scowl. His lower lip was quivering. He was definitely shivering, and his skin looked blue, but that could have been the sex lamp. "So what, you don't think I get grief? You don't think little kids make fun of--" his lips pressed together, and he spat, "--fat boys?" He took a deep breath. "You learn to live with it. Hey, Pop Warner football was the first time I ever thought being fat was OK."

"Congratulations. Too bad the cheerleading team isn't the same way."

"Hey, come on!" Rivulets of white liquid ran down his temples and through the clumps on his cheeks. "I said I was sorry. Fuck, that was just a joke!"

"Profanity, two squirts," said Faith, and gave his hair two fresh squirts of whipped cream.

"Hey, that's cold!" He shook his head again like a wet dog, splattering them with topping. He sat there shivering and glaring at them out of bloodshot eyes. "I said I was sorry, didn't I? Look, I

promise," he sounded pathetically hopeful, "I'll never call you a pig again as long as I live, OK?"

"Manley--" Gabrielle sat down on the bed, her hands falling in her lap.

She stared at him for a minute. He stared back. Up on the wall, artificial dairy product ran down James Dean's face. "Why did you have to write that note to Faith?"

"Yeah," demanded Faith. "What about that, huh?" She prodded the back of his head with the can, making him jerk his head forward and roll his eyes wildly.

"Faith," warned Gabrielle. "Let him talk."

"Gab," he kept trying to glance back at Faith, "Listen. That was a joke too, me and Beau made this bet--"

"That piece of shit." Faith gnawed the words out and spat them at him. "What did he tell you about me? That I'm a dyke? That I like it when somebody tries to fuck me when I'm wasted?" She poked him in the temple with the can, as if it were a pistol. "Tell me!"

"I'm sorry!" He tried to yell, but a sob interrupted the words. "He said you--he s-said you and him and Gab--" he sniffed, got some whipped cream up his nose, and sneezed.

"Me?" Gab yelped. "That bastard!"

--That you all got together at a party and--"

"And had a little menage-a-trois? And inspired your little wet dream of a letter?" Faith was railing and waving her arms around behind Manley, who was desperately trying to crane his head around so

he could see what she was going to do with the can of topping.

"Faith," said Gabrielle, "You never said anything about Beau Rockwell before."

"Lucky for him," said Faith. She ran her hands across the shaved sides of her head and said, "OK, Beau and I were at this party, right? And we were pretty drunk, and somehow we both sort of wandered into the bedroom, and we were sort of fooling around."

Gabrielle's arms were folded under her breasts. "You and Beau Rockwell?"

"Well, it's not like I want this to get around, OK? This asshole," she kicked Manley's chair, "He's heard some bullshit from Beau that's already worse than anything I could say--which might happen to be true. Anyway, we're sort of fooling around, y'know, and Beau starts trying to go down my pants and I'm going, 'Hey, cut it out,' and he's going, 'I know you want it, all you dykes just need a real man--'"

"Dykes?" said Gabrielle. "Where'd he get that?"

"Oh, hey," said Faith, "You know about them mohawk punk girls, right? I said, right, Manley?"

"Whatever you say, man," he said, cringing.

"Besides," said Faith, "What if I was a dyke? Would you care?"

Gabrielle blinked. "I guess not."

"Anyway," resumed Faith, "As I was saying, this dude keeps crawling all over me, saying this shit, and we're both drunk and stumbling around, so I finally have to slap him a couple times and by

then I'm crying, for God's sake, can you believe that? I just about had to kick his teeth in before he stopped trying to grab my ass. And get this--he called me a castrating bitch! Personally, I was kind of surprised he knew a word that long." She jabbed the can of whipped cream against the back of Manley's skull. "Nice friends you got there. That dude's a lying sack of shit. Everything he told you, everything you put in the note? Probably came out of some cheap porno flick he rented last weekend." She poked him again. "So what was the bet? Public circle jerk for the loser?"

Manley said nothing. Faith stepped around in front of him. "You know what your problem is, Manley?"

Manley still said nothing. "You believe everything you hear. You think you know everything. You don't know jack shit about me. You don't know if I'm a dyke. You don't know if I fucked Beau Rockwell. You just believe whatever you hear. Two squirts for believing whatever you hear." She squirted a glob of whipped cream into each of his ears.

"God damn it!" He screamed. "Let me go! Fu--"

"Faith," said Gabrielle quietly. "That's enough."

"Enough?" said Faith. "Whose idea was this, anyway? How long have we been planning this?"

"It was your idea, and don't get snappy with me." Gabrielle contemplated the bedraggled, dripping Manley. "Don't you feel just a little sorry for him?"

Faith also looked at Manley. He responded with a bloodshot

glare.

She grinned. "He is kind of pitiful," she admitted. She glanced meaningfully at his crotch, where the whipped cream had melted into an unconcealing puddle. "Good thing we didn't really want to do something with you here," she told him. "You'd be a lousy porno star."

He inhaled deeply, as if to start yelling again, but Gabrielle intervened by throwing his shirt over him. "I said that's enough, Faith! Just relax, Manley," she told him, "And nobody'll get hurt, OK?"

"Bullshit," he muttered. "Somebody's gonna get hurt."

"Somebody's already gotten hurt." Gabrielle's voice snapped like a soaked towel. "You've come out of this whole thing pretty well, Manley. You should've heard what we were going to do with you."

"Oh yeah," Manley stuttered, outraged, "As if I deserved it! OK, OK," he said, turning his head a little on one side, "Maybe the note was a little out of control. And I shouldn't have called you a pig, I admit that, OK? But torturing me with whipped cream? Gimme a break!"

"Come on, Manley," Faith taunted. "Tortured with whipped cream by two beautiful women? I thought that was what you wanted!"

"This is fucking humiliating, man!"

"Join the club," said Gabrielle.

Manley opened his mouth and inhaled as if to say something, but then he stopped. Faith and Gabrielle stood on opposite sides of the

room, waiting for him to say something. They let him think about it. Finally, he shook his dripping head and muttered, "What a fuck-up."

Without looking at either of them, he said, "I'm sorry." Faith shrugged and looked up at the melting whipped cream running down her James Dean poster. Gabrielle nodded and started untying him from the chair. "I know this was kind of weird," she said, "But I'm not going to apologize."

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTARY: THE "SERIOUS" REALISTIC SHORT STORY

Since this is a creative thesis consisting of work in a specific genre, I will limit my definitions and discussion to the short story. But the entire genre of the short story, "the whole gamut from the astonishing...to that based on the almost mystical notion of the epiphany" (Allen 8), is far too large to tackle here. Instead, I will suggest some definitions and problems specific to the type of short story in this thesis.

As Wayne Booth notes in his Rhetoric of Fiction, "critical programs still divide easily, if roughly, according to their emphasis on work, author, or reader" (39). In suggesting definitions and raising problems about the kind of story I have written, I will discuss the work itself, first through the perspective of the writer, and then through that of the reader.

Writing stories, if done with any kind of deliberation, forces a writer to develop a system of aesthetics--that is, normative values determining the characteristics of a "good" story. These normative aesthetic values vary among different kinds of stories. The particular kind of story I wrote, in terms of formal characteristics, can be described as realistic. The genre of the short story, at the beginning of its modern phase in the nineteenth century, was by definition a realistic genre:

[W]e assume in the short story...that probability and realism, truth to psychology and to history, are pre-conditions of its being....Many strands have gone into its making, a notable one being the impulse that made for journalism. (Allen 8-9)

The "impulse that made for journalism" has since become less important as a defining characteristic of the short story genre (see, for example, the stories of Donald Barthelme). The kind of story I wrote, however, is relatively conservative in its adherence to realism.

In order to continue this discussion, a more precise definition of realism is necessary. "Probability and realism, truth to psychology and history," are vague and even circular definitions of "realism." By realism, I mean a kind of story that describes and comments on an objective reality in narrative form.

The first qualification of this definition belongs to the word "reality." At first glance, I seem to be defining journalism, or at least nonfiction--that is, writing that overtly claims to tell the "objective truth" about specific, historically existing people or events, like Nancy Reagan or the Gulf War. But the reality described in realistic fiction is a reality only in general or typical terms--what could have happened yesterday, as opposed to what actually happened yesterday.

Like journalism and nonfiction narratives, realism assumes the existence of an objective physical world, in which we all live. Realism also assumes that this reality is accessible to the reader through written stories. The story is therefore a communication

between the writer and the reader, referring to an objective reality familiar--at least to some extent--to both. Unlike nonfiction, however, the reality described in a realistic story is a reality of general situation, a reality of setting, rather than a reality of actual people and events. For example, where a journalistic piece might describe what really happened in the ground assault on Kuwait City during the Gulf War, a realistic short story would describe what could have happened to a single soldier during that battle. The short story would retain the general historical event and the geographical area as its setting, but the individual characters and their actions would be imaginary, acting out a typical situation--in this case, let us say the recognition by two soldiers in opposing armies that, had they met in other circumstances, they might not be enemies.

While the characters and events of the story are fictional, the setting and overall event are part of the real world in which we live. One criterion in determining the success of a realistic story, therefore, consists of the verisimilitude of its details of actual geographical and temporal setting. The ultimate application of this criterion would be whether the story could convince a reader who has actually lived through a the historical event described. For example, in order to prove the verisimilitude of the hypothetical Gulf War story, the story would have to convince a reader who actually had fought there that the story could have happened at that specific historical place and time. In terms of the writer's task, creating a convincing realistic story entails the accumulation of a wide

selection of details, either through actual experience or through extensive research. Having recent actual experience in the settings presented in my own stories, I have available the details I need, the raw materials of realistic fiction.

I agree with Georg Lukacs in defining realism as a kind of writing that describes and comments on reality in narrative form. Lukacs proposes a distinction between "naturalism" and "realism." He suggests that merely describing some event or situation realistically, without taking a position on it, constitutes naturalism, not realism. For example, in his novel, Breakfast of Champions, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., advocates what Lukacs would call naturalism. Vonnegut dismisses

old-fashioned storytellers [who] make people believe that life has leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle and an end....I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. (209-210)

Realism, in contrast, demands a commitment to a certain point of view that determines which characters are significant or minor, or which details are significant or insignificant. Lukacs defines "the aesthetic distinction between realism and naturalism. This distinction depends on the presence or absence in a work of art of a 'hierarchy of significance' in the situations and characters presented" (34). The hierarchy of significance is determined by the writer's commitment to a certain point of view or judgment of the events described.

A writer first faces this commitment when he or she chooses the subject matter of a story. In deciding what to write my stories about, I had to find a "hierarchy of significance" among the various events, situations, and characters that occurred to me as story ideas. Some stories, I believe, are more important to write than others, because their subjects are more important than the subjects of other stories. My beliefs concerning what makes a story important are not at issue in this essay; they should be clear from the text of the stories themselves. These beliefs are not determined by theories of literary production; rather, I subscribe to theories that are consistent with my beliefs about what constitutes the important tasks of writing. Lukacs summarizes these tasks admirably in terms of realism's hierarchy of significance:

[E]ach narrative detail will be significant to the extent that it expresses....the tensions and contradictions both within the individual, and underlying the individual's relations with his fellow human beings....The realistic writer must seek the nodal points of these conflicts, determine where they are at their most intense and most typical, and give suitable expression to them. Good realistic detail often in itself implies a judgment on these conflicts. (75)

Without making a judgment on whether an event or situation is good or bad, important or unimportant, a writer has no basis for deciding what to emphasize and what to play down. The hierarchy described by Lukacs, necessary to creating meaningful realistic stories, is missing. For example, in "A Rumor About Jenny," using a handful of shaved daiquiri ice to stop someone's nose from swelling is unimportant, unless seen in the context of the relationship between

Merry and Jenny, which, in turn, is unimportant unless seen in the context of my own position on the following questions: is Merry and Jenny's relationship a good one? Why is it better or worse than other relationships, overt or implied, in the story? My own position, as a realistic writer, should be clear in the story.

Discussing my judgments as a writer on the subject matter described involves the second analytical category: the reader. Although realism assumes that reality--at least the reality of setting and general situation--is objective, access to that reality should be fully available through the story. In other words, even though the writer describes fictional events in a setting or a general situation that the readers could observe for themselves, the story should contain enough detail to be self-explanatory. In "A Rumor About Jenny," for example, a problem occurred with the phrase "MIP." The teenage characters of the story would be familiar with the phrase, "minor in possession of alcohol," as a legal offense. Non-adolescent readers, however, might not know this phrase. My problem as a realistic writer was to work an explanation of the phrase into the narration without being didactic or intrusive.

The reader should also be able to infer the writer's position on the story's subject from the manner in which the writer describes that subject. To borrow (and expand upon) Booth's concept of fiction as rhetoric, the writer must convince the reader that the story's subject is not only real, but it is real in the way the writer envisions it. A successful realistic writer will thus convince the reader to hold

the same opinion of the story's subject as does the writer.

At this point, the distinction between realistic short stories and argumentative essays seems to be disappearing. If short stories are for arguing a point of view, why not just write essays? I suggested above that the kind of story I wrote, which I am calling the realistic short story, describes and comments on objective reality in narrative form. The last phrase distinguishes the realistic story from the argumentative essay. An argumentative essay may be defined as a prose work consisting of sustained, logical argumentation of a thesis. A thesis may be defined as "an idea, stated as an assertion, which represents a reasoned response to a question at issue and which will serve as the central idea of a unified composition" (Gage 48). As Gage suggests, an essay states its thesis as an assertion, and defends its assertion with overt argumentation. In contrast, the realistic short story presents its point of view indirectly, not overtly, through a narration--that is, a description of characters and actions--not argumentation.

A short story writer's success in presenting his or her point of view depends partly on the writer's ability to fulfill the audience's expectations of the specific genre in which the story is written. In structuralist terms, every genre is like a language, in which specific signs correspond with specific meanings according to "grammatical" rules. To violate the audience's expectations of a specific genre--the genre's grammar of literary norms-- risks destroying the work's meaning and failing to make sense within the given genre's language.

A distinction between form and content is helpful in understanding the concept of genre as language. A story can fail to make sense within a genre by violating rules of either form or content, or both. The stories of Wyndham Lewis, for example, are little known in part because they so radically violated formal expectations of the short story just prior to the First World War. In fact, one of the stated goals of the British Futurist movement was be avant-garde, to do away with the old conventions. But in doing away with the old language, writers like Lewis had to make up a new one of their own, which was frequently unintelligible to his contemporaries:

Freud explains everything by sex; I explain everything by laughter. So in these accounts of my adventures there is no sex interest at all: only over and over again what is perhaps the natural enemy of sex: so I must apologize. "Sex" makes me yawn my head off; but my eye sparkles at once if I catch sight of some stylistic anomaly that will provide me with a new pattern for my grotesque realism. The sex-specialist or the sex-snob hates what I like, and calls his occupation the only real one. No compromise, I fear, is possible between him and me, and people will continue to call "real" what interests them most. I boldly pit my major interests against the sex-appeal...(18)

Lewis ignored the form of the short story by violating grammatical rules (such as that governing the use of the colon) and violated the conventions of content by overtly asserting that he would not deal with the conventional romantic content of short stories. His attitude is, perhaps, even farther than Vonnegut's from Lukacs' assertion of the value of realism. Lewis advocates a kind of absolute relativism in describing reality. While I agree with Lewis that people call real what interests them most, unlike Lewis I believe in an absolute physical reality available to common experience.

While Lewis has fallen into relative obscurity, partly because of the convention-breaking nature of his writing, other modernist writers' works that were equally incomprehensible by contemporary standards have now come to be considered landmarks, such as James Joyce's Ulysses. This later understanding of misunderstood works undermines the deterministic assertion that meaning is only created through strict adherence to audience expectations of genre. Just as new words are gradually added to languages, so new characteristics of form and content are added to genres in what Hans Robert Jauss calls the

process of continuing horizon setting and horizon changing [that] also determines the relation of the individual text to the succession of texts which form the genre. The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced.
(13)

Writing a specific kind of story teaches a writer not only about the kind of stories that he or she is writing, but also about what he or she is not writing. I did not write stories that would change the horizon of expectations for their genre, at least in terms of formal characteristics. When I began my thesis, I was interested in discovering whether stories that did violate expectations would be mere nonsense in the context of their given genres. While I do not believe they would be nonsense, I am skeptical of Jauss's claims for this kind of story:

The experience of reading can free him [the reader] from adaptations, prejudice, and predicaments in his life by forcing him to a new perception of things. The horizon of

expectations of literature...not only preserves real experiences but also anticipates unrealized possibilities, widens the limited range of social behavior by new wishes, demands, and goals, and thereby opens avenues for future experience. (33)

While I admire Jauss' ambitions for literature, I doubt that reading "forces" readers to do anything. While Wyndham Lewis and his social circle engaged in a "widened range of social behavior," there is little evidence that reading his stories forced anyone to do likewise. The most that can be hoped for, I think, is to persuade the reader to consider a situation from a new point of view. This is where Jauss' horizons of literary and real expectations intersect: in the realm of content, not of form. Jauss' example of a "horizon shift," Madame Bovary, was offensive to contemporaries not for its formal experimentation but for its content. By introducing a new word to the language of literary conventions--that is, the naturalistic novel dealing with characters who violate bourgeois morality--Flaubert expanded the range of literary conventions. He convinced readers to consider a situation from a new point of view.

If my stories contain any "horizon-shifting" potential at all, it is in the sense of the sexual content of "Pornography" and "A Rumor About Jenny." While the situations depicted in both of these stories are commonly depicted (in their essentials) in movies and television, they are rarely depicted with equal attention to both male and female characters, especially among adolescents. But because I am more interested in communicating my positions on existing situations persuasively than in changing the horizons of literary expectations in

terms of form or aesthetics, my stories remain formally conservative.

In order to communicate well within the language of a particular genre, it is often helpful to refer to the works that originally created the genre's horizons as models or grammar books on the genre's normative rules. For example, in "Body Shop," I wanted to create a narrator with an ambivalent attitude toward his past actions, so I referred to Sherwood Anderson's "I'm A Fool." He begins his story with a brief introduction, setting the tone without elaborating the situation of the telling:

It was a hard jolt for me, one of the most bitterest I ever had to face. And it all came about through my own foolishness, too....Perhaps, even now, after all this time, there will be a kind of satisfaction in making myself look cheap by telling of it.

It began at three o'clock one October afternoon.... (3)

Following Anderson's norm, I began my own story with the line, "When I was sixteen and noble as hell...." In an earlier draft I had wanted to include an elaborate "frame" for the story, describing the circumstances of its telling, but I found Anderson's treatment more efficient.

In terms of the effects of my audience's expectations on my particular type of story, it is important to note that my stories were written for an audience of English professors, as a project for academic evaluation. The expectations of this audience may be summarized as a demand for "serious fiction." By this phrase I do not intend a value judgment, but instead an empirical distinction between "serious" and "popular" fiction.

This distinction is maintained on the levels of both formal

literary characteristics and quantitative textual consumption (Ashley 3). In terms of literary characteristics, "serious" fiction--the kind of stories I wrote for this thesis--easily contains all the characteristics of realistic fiction discussed above, while also allowing for avant-garde works intended (in Jauss's terms) to expand the horizon of literary expectations. In contrast, "popular" fiction deals with genre-specific subject matter, such as horror, science fiction, fantasy, or mystery.

The serious-popular distinction in terms of quantitative textual consumption is less clear. This distinction is most apparent in circulation and book sale statistics. Not only do "Little" and "Literary" magazines appear together in Writer's Market, but the terms seem intuitively synonymous, with the notable exceptions of Harper's, Atlantic Monthly and New Yorker. Indeed, common sense suggests that stories written for intellectual elites ("serious" or "Literary" audiences) must be read by fewer people than stories written for mass ("popular") audiences. In terms of actual circulation statistics, however, this assertion proves inaccurate. The popular-genre magazine with the largest circulation figure in the 1991 Writer's Market, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, has a circulation of 375,000 copies (416), whereas the largest "general interest" magazine with "Literary" characteristics in Writer's Market, New Yorker magazine, has a circulation of 600,000 (315). Although the idea I am about to suggest would take another thesis entirely to prove, I believe that even

though they publish "serious" fiction, magazines like New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly have large circulations precisely because they contain material, including stories, about typical, real situations that are more widely accessible than the genre-specific material of popular literature. Although the style of the "serious" stories may be less accessible than that of the "popular" stories, the "serious" stories' subject matter seems more widely accessible.

By implying a causal relationship between my primary readership and the kind of story I wrote, I do not mean to suggest that an educated audience reads only "serious" literature, especially for entertainment. Rather, to convince such an audience of a point of view in narrative form requires the conventions of "serious" fiction. I found the genre of the "serious" short story useful in getting my audience to take me seriously.

As "serious" fiction, then, my stories are intended for a small audience, with specific expectations of the story's formal literary characteristics. The "serious" audience expects, for example, that I will not indulge in gratuitous, graphic descriptions of fornication in a story entitled "Pornography;" such descriptions would characterize the story as "popular" fiction (either a Danielle Steele romance or commercial pornography, such as a Penthouse "Forum" letter). Or, if I do indulge in such descriptions, I do it to portray and comment on some real social event, situation, point of view, or person. The "serious" audience expects the writer's commentary to be expressed subtly, in choice of detail, instead of in overt assertions (as in an

essay). To continue with the example of "Pornography," if I want to comment to my audience that the sexual expectations of adolescents, shaped by institutions such as high school football and cheerleading, are usually unrealistic and overtly harmful, I describe a situation, an event, instead of writing a long expository passage like the one above. Furthermore, in my description, I refrain from commenting overtly on whether I approve or disapprove of the action taken, although my position--if I have succeeded--should be clear. Achieving this clarity, I believe, is half the work of writing, and most of the work of rewriting.

An important aspect of this clarity is the writer's management of the reader's reception of details intended to carry a certain commentary. Sometimes merely describing a material detail--a look, a shrug, a piece of dialogue--is insufficient; the import of the detail on the development of the character or situation must be clear as well. Ideally, this is done through the context in which the detail occurs, but occasionally more information must be introduced to make the detail clear. For example, in "A Rumor About Jenny," when Jenny tells Merry, "Gets kind of hard to keep up a decent reputation," I found it necessary to include the following commentary from the narrator to keep from confusing the reader about the definition of "decent reputation:" "I know exactly what she means. She's not talking about a 'nice girl' reputation".

The art of managing the nuances of details is the actual work of writing the realistic, "serious" short story. Generally speaking,

this kind of story, in describing and commenting on objective reality in narrative form, fulfills a purpose somewhere between that of a nonfictional or journalistic "human interest" piece and that of an argumentative essay. I wrote this kind of story because I am convinced of the value of describing reality in narrative form, convincing an audience of my point of view on that reality, and, hopefully, providing them with some entertainment.

I asserted above the existence of an objective physical reality. The value of describing this reality, as opposed to some subjective psychological reality, is its accessibility: physical, concrete objects are a starting point for discussions, a literal "common ground" on which to build arguments and discussions. I find narration particularly effective in describing this reality because of its accessibility. In spite of the proliferation of genres, including "popular" and "serious," narration remains generally accessible to the literate public. The conventions of serious and popular fiction are much more widely-known, for example, than the conventions of an essay on literary theory (like this one) or the conventions of a scientific paper on particle physics.

I believe it is more important to convince an audience of something than it is merely to describe something to them. While this is an optimistic view that has been generally abandoned in the modern period (from around the end of the 1800's), I am convinced that certain common denominators, like physical reality, still exist, and that social and ethical issues can be discussed on the basis of these

common denominators.

Finally, I believe in the inherent value of entertainment. I find stories entertaining that contain an element of surprise. Surprise is central not only to suspense, which makes one want to finish reading a story, but also to humor. Humor is a specific type of irony--a disparity between expectation and result. This disparity is similar to that mentioned earlier in reference to the language of genre conventions and reader expectations. Works that successfully stretch genre boundaries do not meet genre expectations, but are pleasantly different; jokes that succeed are narratives that do not meet some kind of common expectation, whether narrative, professional, or commonsense. Jokes that fail, like literary works that are incomprehensibly avant-garde, go too far outside expectations; nobody gets it. The art of writing entertaining stories, whether "serious" and realistic or otherwise, is inextricably connected with the art of humor. Success depends on a balance between foiling and fulfilling expectations.

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