

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere 2000

Orientation games began the day I arrived at Yale from Baltimore. In my group we played heady, frustrating games for smart people. One

game appeared to be charades reinterpreted by existentialists; another involved listening to rocks. Then a freshman counselor made everyone play Trust. The idea was that if you had the faith to fall backward and wait for four scrawny former high school geniuses to catch you, just before your head cracked on the slate sidewalk, then you might learn to trust your fellow students. Russian roulette sounded like a better way to go.

“No way,” I said. The white boys were waiting for me to fall, holding their arms out for me, sincerely, gallantly. “No fucking way.”

“It’s all cool, it’s all cool,” the counselor said. Her hair was a shade of blond I’d seen only on *Playboy* covers, and she raised her hands as though backing away from a growling dog. “Sister,” she said, in an I’m-down-with-the-struggle voice, “you don’t have to play this game. As a person of color, you shouldn’t have to fit into any white, patriarchal system.”

I said, “It’s a bit too late for that.”

In the next game, all I had to do was wait in a circle until it was my turn to say what inanimate object I wanted to be. One guy said he’d like to be a gadfly, like Socrates. “Stop me if I wax Platonic,” he said. I didn’t bother mentioning that gadflies weren’t inanimate — it didn’t seem to make a difference. The girl next to him was eating a rice cake. She wanted to be the Earth, she said. Earth with a capital E.

There was one other black person in the circle. He wore an Exeter T-shirt and his overly elastic expressions resembled a series of facial exercises. At the end of each person's turn, he smiled and bobbed his head with unfettered enthusiasm. "Oh, that was good," he said, as if the game were an experiment he'd set up and the results were turning out better than he'd expected. "Good, good, good!"

When it was my turn I said, "My name is Dina, and if I had to be any object, I guess I'd be a revolver." The sunlight dulled as if on cue. Clouds passed rapidly overhead, presaging rain. I don't know why I said it. Until that moment I'd been good in all the ways that were meant to matter. I was an honor roll student — though I'd learned long ago not to mention it in the part of Baltimore where I lived. Suddenly I was hard-bitten and recalcitrant, the kind of kid who took pleasure in sticking pins into cats; the kind who chased down smart kids to spray them with Mace.

"A revolver," a counselor said, stroking his chin, as if it had grown a rabbinical beard. "Could you please elaborate?"

The black guy cocked his head and frowned, as if the beakers and Erlenmeyer flasks of his experiment had grown legs and scurried off.

"You were just kidding," the dean said, "about wiping out all of mankind. That, I suppose, was a joke." She squinted at me. One of

her hands curved atop the other to form a pink, freckled molehill on her desk.

“Well,” I said, “maybe I meant it at the time.” I quickly saw that this was not the answer she wanted. “I don’t know. I think it’s the architecture.”

Through the dimming light of the dean’s office window, I could see the fortress of the old campus. On my ride from the bus station to the campus, I’d barely glimpsed New Haven — a flash of crumpled building here, a trio of straggly kids there. A lot like Baltimore. But everything had changed when we reached those streets hooded by gothic buildings. I imagined how the college must have looked when it was founded, when most of the students owned slaves. I pictured men wearing tights and knickers, smoking pipes.

“The architecture,” the dean repeated. She bit her lip and seemed to be making a calculation of some sort. I noticed that she blinked less often than most people. I sat there, intrigued, waiting to see how long it would be before she blinked again.

My revolver comment won me a year’s worth of psychiatric counseling, weekly meetings with Dean Guest, and — since the parents of the roommate I’d never met weren’t too hip on the idea of their Amy sharing a bunk bed with a budding homicidal loony — my very own room.

Shortly after getting my first C ever, I also received the first knock on my door. The female counselors never knocked. The dean had spoken to them; I was a priority. Every other day, right before dinnertime, they'd look in on me, unannounced. "Just checking up," a counselor would say. It was the voice of a suburban mother in training. By the second week, I had made a point of sitting in a chair in front of the door, just when I expected a counselor to pop her head around. This was intended to startle them. I also made a point of being naked. The unannounced visits ended.

The knocking persisted. Through the peephole I saw a white face, distorted and balloonish.

"Let me in." The person looked like a boy but it sounded like a girl. "Let me in," the voice repeated.

"Not a chance," I said. I had a suicide single, and I wanted to keep it that way. No roommates, no visitors.

Then the person began to sob, and I heard a back slump against the door. If I hadn't known the person was white from the peephole, I'd have known it from a display like this. Black people didn't knock on strangers' doors, crying. Not that I understood the black people at Yale. Most of them were from New York and tried hard to pretend that they hadn't gone to prep schools. And there was something pitiful in how cool they were. Occasionally one would reach out to

me with missionary zeal, but I'd rebuff the person with haughty silence.

"I don't have anyone to talk to!" the person on the other side of the door cried.

"That is correct."

"When I was a child," the person said, "I played by myself in a corner of the schoolyard all alone. I hated dolls and I hated games, animals were not friendly and birds flew away. If anyone was looking for me I hid behind a tree and cried out 'I am an orphan —'"

I opened the door. It was a she.

"Plagiarist!" I yelled. She had just recited a Frank O'Hara poem as though she'd thought it up herself. I knew the poem because it was one of the few things I'd been forced to read that I wished I'd written myself.

The girl turned to face me, smiling weakly, as though her triumph was not in getting me to open the door but in the fact that she was able to smile at all when she was so accustomed to crying. She was large but not obese, and crying had turned her face the color of raw chicken. She blew her nose into the waist end of her T-shirt, revealing a pale belly.

“How do you know that poem?”

She sniffed. “I’m in your Contemporary Poetry class.”

She said she was Canadian and her name was Heidi, although she said she wanted people to call her Henrik. “That’s a guy’s name,” I said. “What do you want? A sex change?”

She looked at me with so little surprise that I suspected she hadn’t discounted this as an option. Then her story came out in teary, hiccup-like bursts. She had sucked some “cute guy’s dick” and he’d told everybody and now people thought she was “a slut.”

“Why’d you suck his dick? Aren’t you a lesbian?”

She fit the bill. Short hair, hard, roach-stomping shoes. Dressed like an aspiring plumber. And then there was the name Henrik. The lesbians I’d seen on TV were wiry, thin strips of muscle, but Heidi was round and soft and had a moonlike face. Drab henna-colored hair. And lesbians had cats. “Do you have a cat?” I asked.

Her eyes turned glossy with new tears. “No,” she said, her voice quavering, “and I’m not a lesbian. Are you?”

“Do I look like one?” I said.

She didn’t answer.

“O.K.,” I said. “I could suck a guy’s dick, too, if I wanted. But I don’t. The human penis is one of the most germ-ridden objects there is.” Heidi looked at me, unconvinced. “What I meant to say,” I began again, “is that I don’t like anybody. Period. Guys or girls. I’m a misanthrope.”

“I am, too.”

“No,” I said, guiding her back through my door and out into the hallway. “You’re not.”

“Have you had dinner?” she asked. “Let’s go to Commons.”

I pointed to a pyramid of ramen noodle packages on my windowsill. “See that? That means I never have to go to Commons. Aside from class, I have contact with no one.”

“I hate it here, too,” she said. “I should have gone to McGill, eh.”

“The way to feel better,” I said, “is to get some ramen and lock yourself in your room. Everyone will forget about you and that guy’s dick and you won’t have to see anyone ever again. If anyone looks for you —”

“I’ll hide behind a tree.”

“A revolver?” Dr. Raeburn said, flipping through a manila folder. He looked up at me as if to ask another question, but he didn’t.

Dr. Raeburn was the psychiatrist. He had the gray hair and whiskers of a Civil War general. He was also a chain smoker with beige teeth and a navy wool jacket smeared with ash. He asked about the revolver at the beginning of my first visit. When I was unable to explain myself, he smiled, as if this were perfectly reasonable.

“Tell me about your parents.”

I wondered what he already had on file. The folder was thick, though I hadn’t said a thing of significance since Day One.

“My father was a dick and my mother seemed to like him.”

He patted his pockets for his cigarettes. “That’s some heavy stuff,” he said. “How do you feel about Dad?” The man couldn’t say the word “father.” “Is Dad someone you see often?”

“I hate my father almost as much as I hate the word ‘Dad.’ ”

He started tapping his cigarette.

“You can’t smoke in here.”

“That’s right,” he said, and slipped the cigarette back into the packet. He smiled, widening his eyes brightly. “Don’t ever start.”

I thought that that first encounter would be the last of Heidi or Henrik, or whatever, but then her head appeared in a window of Linsly-Chit during my Chaucer class. A few days later, she swooped down a flight of stairs in Harkness, following me. She hailed me from across Elm Street and found me in the Sterling Library stacks. After one of my meetings with Dr. Raeburn, she was waiting for me outside Health Services, legs crossed, cleaning her fingernails.

“You know,” she said, as we walked through Old Campus, “you’ve got to stop eating ramen. Not only does it lack a single nutrient but it’s full of MSG.”

I wondered why she even bothered, and was vaguely flattered she cared, but I said, “I like eating chemicals. It keeps the skin radiant.”

“There’s also hepatitis.” She knew how to get my attention — mention a disease.

“You get hepatitis from unwashed lettuce,” I said. “If there’s anything safe from the perils of the food chain, it’s ramen.”

“But do you refrigerate what you don’t eat? Each time you reheat it, you’re killing good bacteria, which then can’t keep the bad bacteria in check. A guy got sick from reheating Chinese noodles, and his son

died from it. I read it in the *Times*.” With this, she put a jovial arm around my neck. I continued walking, a little stunned. Then, just as quickly, she dropped her arm and stopped walking. I stopped, too.

“Did you notice that I put my arm around you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Next time, I’ll have to chop it off.”

“I don’t want you to get sick,” she said. “Let’s eat at Commons.”

In the cold air, her arm had felt good.

The problem with Commons was that it was too big; its ceiling was as high as a cathedral’s, but below it there were no awestruck worshippers, only eighteen-year-olds at heavy wooden tables, chatting over veal patties and Jell-O.

We got our food, tacos stuffed with meat substitute, and made our way through the maze of tables. The Koreans had a table. Each singing group had a table. The crew team sat at a long table of its own. We passed the black table. Heidi was so plump and moonfaced that the sheer quantity of her flesh accentuated just how white she was. The black students gave me a long, hard stare.

“How you doing, sista?” a guy asked, his voice full of accusation, eyeballing me as though I were clad in a Klansman’s sheet and hood.

“I guess we won’t see you till graduation.”

“If,” I said, “you graduate.”

The remark was not well received. As I walked past, I heard protests, angry and loud as if they’d discovered a cheat at their poker game. Heidi and I found an unoccupied table along the periphery, which was isolated and dark. We sat down. Heidi prayed over her tacos.

“I thought you didn’t believe in God,” I said.

“Not in the God depicted in the Judeo-Christian Bible, but I do believe that nature’s essence is a spirit that —”

“All right,” I said. I had begun to eat, and cubes of diced tomato fell from my mouth when I spoke. “Stop right there. Tacos and spirits don’t mix.”

“You’ve always got to be so flip,” she said. “I’m going to apply for another friend.”

“There’s always Mr. Dick,” I said. “Slurp, slurp.”

“You are so lame. So unbelievably lame. I’m going out with Mr. Dick. Thursday night at Atticus. His name is Keith.”

Heidi hadn’t mentioned Mr. Dick since the day I’d met her. That was more than a month ago and we’d spent a lot of that time together. I checked for signs that she was lying; her habit of smiling too much,

her eyes bright and cheeks full so that she looked like a chipmunk. But she looked normal. Pleased, even, to see me so flustered.

“You’re insane! What are you going to do this time?” I asked. “Sleep with him? Then when he makes fun of you, what? Come pound your head on my door reciting the collected poems of Sylvia Plath?”

“He’s going to apologize for before. And don’t call me insane. You’re the one going to the psychiatrist.”

“Well, I’m not going to suck his dick, that’s for sure.”

She put her arm around me in mock comfort, but I pushed it off, and ignored her. She touched my shoulder again, and I turned, annoyed, but it wasn’t Heidi after all; a sepia-toned boy dressed in khakis and a crisp plaid shirt was standing behind me. He thrust a hot-pink square of paper toward me without a word, then briskly made his way toward the other end of Commons, where the crowds blossomed. Heidi leaned over and read it: “Wear Black Leather — the Less, the Better.”

“It’s a gay party,” I said, crumpling the card. “He thinks we’re fucking gay.”

Heidi and I signed on to work at the Saybrook dining hall as dishwashers. The job consisted of dumping food from plates and trays into a vat of rushing water. It seemed straightforward, but then

I learned better. You wouldn't believe what people could do with food until you worked in a dish room. Lettuce and crackers and soup would be bullied into a pulp in the bowl of some bored anorexic; ziti would be mixed with honey and granola; trays would appear heaped with mashed potato snow women with melted chocolate ice cream for hair. Frat boys arrived at the dish-room window, en masse. They liked to fill glasses with food, then seal them, airtight, onto their trays. If you tried to prize them off, milk, Worcestershire sauce, peas, chunks of bread vomited onto your dish-room uniform.

When this happened one day in the middle of the lunch rush, for what seemed like the hundredth time, I tipped the tray toward one of the frat boys as he turned to walk away, popping the glasses off so that the mess spurting onto his Shetland sweater.

He looked down at his sweater. "Lesbo bitch!"

"No," I said, "that would be your mother."

Heidi, next to me, clenched my arm in support, but I remained motionless, waiting to see what the frat boy would do. He glared at me for a minute, then walked away.

"Let's take a smoke break," Heidi said.

I didn't smoke, but Heidi had begun to, because she thought it would help her lose weight. As I hefted a stack of glasses through the

steamer, she lit up.

“Soft packs remind me of you,” she said. “Just when you’ve smoked them all and you think there’s none left, there’s always one more, hiding in that little crushed corner.” Before I could respond she said, “Oh, God. Not another mouse. You know whose job that is.”

By the end of the rush, the floor mats got full and slippery with food. This was when mice tended to appear, scurrying over our shoes; more often than not, a mouse got caught in the grating that covered the drains in the floor. Sometimes the mouse was already dead by the time we noticed it. This one was alive.

“No way,” I said. “This time you’re going to help. Get some gloves and a trash bag.”

“That’s all I’m getting. I’m not getting that mouse out of there.”

“Put on the gloves,” I ordered. She winced, but put them on. “Reach down,” I said. “At an angle, so you get at its middle. Otherwise, if you try to get it by its tail, the tail will break off.”

“This is filthy, eh.”

“That’s why we’re here,” I said. “To clean up filth. Eh.”

She reached down, but would not touch the mouse. I put my hand around her arm and pushed it till her hand made contact. The cries from the mouse were soft, songlike. "Oh, my God," she said. "Oh, my God, ohmigod." She wrestled it out of the grating and turned her head away.

"Don't you let it go," I said.

"Where's the food bag? It'll smother itself if I drop it in the food bag. Quick," she said, her head still turned away, her eyes closed. "Lead me to it."

"No. We are not going to smother this mouse. We've got to break its neck."

"You're one heartless bitch."

I wondered how to explain that if death is unavoidable it should be quick and painless. My mother had died slowly. At the hospital, they'd said it was kidney failure, but I knew, in the end, it was my father. He made her so scared to live in her own home that she was finally driven away from it in an ambulance.

"Breaking its neck will save it the pain of smothering," I said.

"Breaking its neck is more humane. Take the trash bag and cover it so you won't get any blood on you, then crush."

The loud jets of the steamer had shut off automatically and the dish room grew quiet. Heidi breathed in deeply, then crushed the mouse. She shuddered, disgusted. "Now what?"

"What do you mean, 'now what?' Throw the little bastard in the trash."

At our third session, I told Dr. Raeburn I didn't mind if he smoked. He sat on the sill of his open window, smoking behind a jungle screen of office plants.

We spent the first ten minutes discussing the Iliad, and whether or not the text actually states that Achilles had been dipped in the River Styx. He said it did, and I said it didn't. After we'd finished with the Iliad, and with my new job in what he called "the scullery," he asked questions about my parents. I told him nothing. It was none of his business. Instead, I talked about Heidi. I told him about that day in Commons, Heidi's plan to go on a date with Mr. Dick, and the invitation we'd been given to the gay party.

"You seem preoccupied by this soirée." He arched his eyebrows at the word "soirée."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Dina," he said slowly, in a way that made my name seem like a song title, "have you ever had a romantic interest?"

“You want to know if I’ve ever had a boyfriend?” I said. “Just go ahead and ask if I’ve ever fucked anybody.”

This appeared to surprise him. “I think that you are having a crisis of identity,” he said.

“Oh, is that what this is?”

His profession had taught him not to roll his eyes. Instead, his exasperation revealed itself in a tiny pursing of his lips, as though he’d just tasted something awful and was trying very hard not to offend the cook.

“It doesn’t have to be, as you say, someone you’ve fucked, it doesn’t have to be a boyfriend,” he said.

“Well, what are you trying to say? If it’s not a boy, then you’re saying it’s a girl —”

“Calm down. It could be a crush, Dina.” He lit one cigarette off another. “A crush on a male teacher, a crush on a dog, for heaven’s sake. An interest. Not necessarily a relationship.”

It was sacrifice time. If I could spend the next half hour talking about some boy, then I’d have given him what he wanted.

So I told him about the boy with the nice shoes.

I was sixteen and had spent the last few coins in my pocket on bus fare to buy groceries. I didn't like going to the Super Fresh two blocks away from my house, plunking government food stamps into the hands of the cashiers.

"There she go reading," one of them once said, even though I was only carrying a book. "Don't your eyes get tired?"

On Greenmount Avenue you could read schoolbooks — that was understandable. The government and your teachers forced you to read them. But anything else was antisocial. It meant you'd rather submit to the words of some white dude than shoot the breeze with your neighbors.

I hated those cashiers, and I hated them seeing me with food stamps, so I took the bus and shopped elsewhere. That day, I got off the bus at Govans, and though the neighborhood was black like my own — hair salon after hair salon of airbrushed signs promising arabesque hair styles and inch-long fingernails — the houses were neat and orderly, nothing at all like Greenmount, where every other house had at least one shattered window. The store was well swept, and people quietly checked long grocery lists — no screaming kids, no loud cashier-customer altercations. I got the groceries and left the store.

I decided to walk back. It was a fall day, and I walked for blocks. Then I sensed someone following me. I walked more quickly, my

arms around the sack, the leafy lettuce tickling my nose. I didn't want to hold the sack so close that it would break the eggs or squash the hamburger buns, but it was slipping, and as I looked behind me a boy my age, maybe older, rushed toward me.

"Let me help you," he said.

"That's all right." I set the bag on the sidewalk. Maybe I saw his face, maybe it was handsome enough, but what I noticed first, splayed on either side of the bag, were his shoes. They were nice shoes, real leather, a stitched design like a widow's peak on each one, or like birds' wings, and for the first time in my life I understood what people meant when they said "wing-tip shoes."

"I watched you carry them groceries out that store, then you look around, like you're lost, but like you liked being lost, then you walk down the sidewalk for blocks and blocks. Rearranging that bag, it almost gone to slip, then hefting it back up again."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"And then I passed my own house and was still following you. And then your bag really look like it was gone crash and everything. So I just thought I'd help." He sucked in his bottom lip, as if to keep it from making a smile. "What's your name?" When I told him, he said, "Dina, my name is Cecil." Then he said, "D comes right after C."

“Yes,” I said, “it does, doesn’t it.”

Then, half question, half statement, he said, “I could carry your groceries for you? And walk you home?”

I stopped the story there. Dr. Raeburn kept looking at me. “Then what happened?”

I couldn’t tell him the rest: that I had not wanted the boy to walk me home, that I didn’t want someone with such nice shoes to see where I lived.

Dr. Raeburn would only have pitied me if I’d told him that I ran down the sidewalk after I told the boy no, that I fell, the bag slipped, and the eggs cracked, their yolks running all over the lettuce. Clear amniotic fluid coated the can of cinnamon rolls. I left the bag there on the sidewalk, the groceries spilled out randomly like cards loosed from a deck. When I returned home, I told my mother that I’d lost the food stamps.

“Lost?” she said. I’d expected her to get angry, I’d wanted her to get angry, but she hadn’t. “Lost?” she repeated. Why had I been so clumsy and nervous around a harmless boy? I could have brought the groceries home and washed off the egg yolk, but instead I’d just left them there. “Come on,” Mama said, snuffing her tears, pulling my arm, trying to get me to join her and start yanking cushions off

the couch. “We’ll find enough change here. We got to get something for dinner before your father gets back.”

We’d already searched the couch for money the previous week, and I knew there’d be nothing now, but I began to push my fingers into the couch’s boniest corners, pretending that it was only a matter of time before I’d find some change or a lost watch or an earring. Something pawnable, perhaps.

“What happened next?” Dr. Raeburn asked again. “Did you let the boy walk you home?”

“My house was far, so we went to his house instead.” Though I was sure Dr. Raeburn knew that I was making this part up, I continued. “We made out on his sofa. He kissed me.”

Dr. Raeburn lit his next cigarette like a detective. Cool, suspicious. “How did it feel?”

“You know,” I said. “Like a kiss feels. It felt nice. The kiss felt very, very nice.”

Raeburn smiled gently, though he seemed unconvinced. When he called time on our session, his cigarette had become one long pole of ash. I left his office, walking quickly down the corridor, afraid to look back. It would be like him to trot after me, his navy blazer

flapping, just to get the truth out of me. *You never kissed anyone.* The words slid from my brain, and knotted in my stomach.

When I reached my dorm, I found an old record player blocking my door and a Charles Mingus LP propped beside it. I carried them inside and then, lying on the floor, I played the Mingus over and over again until I fell asleep. I slept feeling as though Dr. Raeburn had attached electrodes to my head, willing into my mind a dream about my mother. I saw the lemon meringue of her skin, the long bone of her arm as she reached down to clip her toenails. I'd come home from a school trip to an aquarium, and I was explaining the differences between baleen and sperm whales according to the size of their heads, the range of their habitats, their feeding patterns.

I awoke remembering the expression on her face after I'd finished my dizzying whale lecture. She looked like a tourist who'd asked for directions to a place she thought was simple enough to get to only to hear a series of hypothetical turns, alleys, one-way streets. Her response was to nod politely at the perilous elaborateness of it all; to nod and save herself from the knowledge that she would never be able to get where she wanted to go.

The dishwashers always closed down the dining hall. One night, after everyone else had punched out, Heidi and I took a break, and though I wasn't a smoker, we set two milk crates upside down on the floor and smoked cigarettes.

The dishwashing machines were off, but steam still rose from them like a jungle mist. Outside in the winter air, students were singing carols in their groomed and tailored singing-group voices. The Whiffenpoofs¹ were back in New Haven after a tour around the world, and I guess their return was a huge deal. Heidi and I craned our necks to watch the year's first snow through an open window.

“What are you going to do when you're finished?” Heidi asked. Sexy question marks of smoke drifted up to the windows before vanishing.

“Take a bath.”

She swatted me with her free hand. “No, silly. Three years from now. When you leave Yale.”

“I don't know. Open up a library. Somewhere where no one comes in for books. A library in a desert.”

She looked at me as though she'd expected this sort of answer and didn't know why she'd asked in the first place.

“What are you going to do?” I asked her.

“Open up a psych clinic. In a desert. And my only patient will be some wacko who runs a library.”

“Ha,” I said. “Whatever you do, don’t work in a dish room ever again. You’re no good.” I got up from the crate. “C’mon. Let’s hose the place down.”

We put out our cigarettes on the floor, since it was our job to clean it anyway. We held squirt guns in one hand and used the other to douse the floors with the standard-issue, eye-burning cleaning solution. We hosed the dish room, the kitchen, the serving line, sending the water and crud and suds into the drains. Then we hosed them again so the solution wouldn’t eat holes in our shoes as we left. Then I had an idea. I unbuckled my belt.

“What the hell are you doing?” Heidi said.

“Listen, it’s too cold to go outside with our uniforms all wet. We could just take a shower right here. There’s nobody but us.”

“What the fuck, eh?”

I let my pants drop, then took off my shirt and panties. I didn’t wear a bra, since I didn’t have much to fill one. I took off my shoes and hung my clothes on the stepladder.

“You’ve flipped,” Heidi said. “I mean, really, psych-ward flipped.”

I soaped up with the liquid hand soap until I felt as glazed as a ham. “Stand back and spray me.”

“Oh, my God,” she said. I didn’t know whether she was confused or delighted, but she picked up the squirt gun and sprayed me. She was laughing. Then she got too close and the water started to sting.

“God damn it!” I said. “That hurt!”

“I was wondering what it would take to make you say that.”

When all the soap had been rinsed off, I put on my regular clothes and said, “O.K. You’re up next.”

“No way,” she said.

“Yes way.”

She started to take off her uniform shirt, then stopped.

“What?”

“I’m too fat.”

“You goddam right.” She always said she was fat. One time I’d told her that she should shut up about it, that large black women wore their fat like mink coats. “You’re big as a house,” I said now. “Frozen yogurt may be low in calories, but not if you eat five tubs of it. Take your clothes off. I want to get out of here.”

She began taking off her uniform, then stood there, hands cupped over her breasts, crouching at the pubic bone.

“Open up,” I said, “or we’ll never get done.”

Her hands remained where they were. I threw the bottle of liquid soap at her, and she had to catch it, revealing herself as she did.

I turned on the squirt gun, and she stood there, stiff, arms at her side, eyes closed, as though awaiting mummification. I began with the water on low, and she turned around in a full circle, hesitantly, letting the droplets from the spray fall on her as if she were submitting to a death by stoning.

When I increased the water pressure, she slipped and fell on the sudsy floor. She stood up and then slipped again. This time she laughed and remained on the floor, rolling around on it as I sprayed.

I think I began to love Heidi that night in the dish room, but who is to say that I hadn’t begun to love her the first time I met her? I sprayed her and sprayed her, and she turned over and over like a large beautiful dolphin, lolling about in the sun.

Heidi started sleeping at my place. Sometimes she slept on the floor; sometimes we slept sardinelike, my feet at her head, until she complained that my feet were “taunting” her. When we finally slept head to head, she said, “Much better.” She was so close I could smell

her toothpaste. “I like your hair,” she told me, touching it through the darkness. “You should wear it out more often.”

“White people always say that about black people’s hair. The worse it looks, the more they say they like it.”

I’d expected her to disagree, but she kept touching my hair, her hands passing through it till my scalp tingled. When she began to touch the hair around the edge of my face, I felt myself quake. Her fingertips stopped for a moment, as if checking my pulse, then resumed.

“I like how it feels right here. See, mine just starts with the same old texture as the rest of my hair.” She found my hand under the blanket and brought it to her hairline. “See,” she said.

It was dark. As I touched her hair, it seemed as though I could smell it, too. Not a shampoo smell. Something richer, murkier. A bit dead, but sweet, like the decaying wood of a ship. She guided my hand.

“I see,” I said. The record she’d given me was playing in my mind, and I kept trying to shut it off. I could also hear my mother saying that this is what happens when you’ve been around white people: things get weird. So weird I could hear the stylus etching its way into the flat vinyl of the record. “Listen,” I said finally, when the bass and saxes started up. I heard Heidi breathe deeply, but she said nothing.

We spent the winter and some of the spring in my room — never hers — missing tests, listening to music, looking out my window to comment on people who wouldn't have given us a second thought. We read books related to none of our classes. I got riled up by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *The Chomsky Reader*; Heidi read aloud passages from *The Anxiety of Influence*. We guiltily read mysteries and *Clan of the Cave Bear*, then immediately threw them away. Once we looked up from our books at exactly the same moment, as though trapped at a dinner table with nothing to say. A pleasant trap of silence.

Then one weekend I went back to Baltimore and stayed with my father. He asked me how school was going, but besides that, we didn't talk much. He knew what I thought of him. I stopped by the Enoch Pratt Library, where my favorite librarian, Mrs. Ardelia, cornered me into giving a little talk to the after-school kids, telling them to stay in school. They just looked at me like I was crazy; they were only nine or ten, and it hadn't even occurred to them to bail.

When I returned to Yale — to a sleepy, tree-scented spring — a group of students were holding what was called "Coming Out Day." I watched it from my room.

The emcee was the sepia boy who'd given us the invitation months back. His speech was strident but still smooth and peppered with jokes. There was a speech about AIDS, with lots of statistics: nothing

that seemed to make “coming out” worth it. Then the women spoke. One girl pronounced herself “out” as casually as if she’d announced the time. Another said nothing at all: she came to the microphone with a woman who began cutting off her waist-length, bleached-blond hair. The woman doing the cutting tossed the shorn hair in every direction as she cut. People were clapping and cheering and catching the locks of hair.

And then there was Heidi. She was proud that she liked girls, she said when she reached the microphone. She loved them, wanted to sleep with them. She was a dyke, she said repeatedly, stabbing her finger to her chest in case anyone was unsure to whom she was referring. She could not have seen me. I was across the street, three stories up. And yet, when everyone clapped for her, she seemed to be looking straight at me.

Heidi knocked. “Let me in.”

It was like the first time I met her. The tears, the raw pink of her face.

We hadn’t spoken in weeks. Outside, pink-and-white blossoms hung from the Old Campus trees. Students played Hacky Sack in T-shirts and shorts. Though I was the one who’d broken away after she went up to that podium, I still half expected her to poke her head out a window in Linsly-Chit, or tap on my back in Harkness, or even join

me in the Commons dining hall, where I'd asked for my dish-room shift to be transferred. She did none of these.

"Well," I said, "what is it?"

She looked at me. "My mother," she said.

She continued to cry, but seemed to have grown so silent in my room I wondered if I could hear the numbers change on my digital clock.

"When my parents were getting divorced," she said, "my mother bought a car. A used one. An El Dorado. It was filthy. It looked like a huge crushed can coming up the street. She kept trying to clean it out. I mean —"

I nodded and tried to think what to say in the pause she left behind. Finally I said, "We had one of those," though I was sure ours was an Impala.

She looked at me, eyes steely from trying not to cry. "Anyway, she'd drive me around in it and although she didn't like me to eat in it, I always did. One day I was eating cantaloupe slices, spitting the seeds on the floor. Maybe a month later, I saw this little sprout, growing right up from the car floor. I just started laughing and she kept saying what, what? I was laughing and then I saw she was so —"

She didn't finish. So what? So sad? So awful? Heidi looked at me with what seemed to be a renewed vigor. "We could have gotten a better car, eh?"

"It's all right. It's not a big deal," I said.

Of course, that was the wrong thing to say. And I really didn't mean it to sound the way it had come out.

I told Dr. Raeburn about Heidi's mother having cancer and how I'd said it wasn't a big deal, though I'd wanted to say the opposite. I told Dr. Raeburn how I meant to tell Heidi that my mother had died, that I knew how one eventually accustoms oneself to the physical world's lack of sympathy: the buses that are still running late, the kids who still play in the street, the clocks that won't stop ticking for the person who's gone.

"You're pretending," Dr. Raeburn said, not sage or professional, but a little shocked by the discovery, as if I'd been trying to hide a pack of his cigarettes behind my back.

"I'm pretending?" I shook my head. "All those years of psych grad," I said. "And to tell me *that*?"

"What I mean is that you construct stories about yourself and dish them out — one for you, one for you — " Here he reenacted this process, showing me handing out lies as if they were apples.

“Pretending. I believe the professional name for it might be denial,” I said. “Are you calling me gay?”

He pursed his lips noncommittally, then finally said, “No, Dina. I don’t think you’re gay.”

I checked his eyes. I couldn’t read them.

“No. Not at all,” he said, sounding as if he were telling a subtle joke. “But maybe you’ll finally understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Oh, just that constantly saying what one doesn’t mean accustoms the mouth to meaningless phrases.” His eyes narrowed. “Maybe you’ll understand that when you finally need to express something truly significant your mouth will revert to the insignificant nonsense it knows so well.” He looked at me, his hands sputtering in the air in a gesture of defeat. “Who knows?” he asked with a glib, psychiatric smile I’d never seen before. “Maybe it’s your survival mechanism. Black living in a white world.”

I heard him, but only vaguely. I’d hooked on to that one word, pretending. Dr. Raeburn would never realize that “pretending” was what had got me this far. I remembered the morning of my mother’s funeral. I’d been given milk to settle my stomach; I’d pretended it was coffee. I imagined I was drinking coffee elsewhere. Some

Arabic-speaking country where the thick coffee served in little cups was so strong it could keep you awake for days.

Heidi wanted me to go with her to the funeral. She'd sent this message through the dean. "We'll pay for your ticket to Vancouver," the dean said.

These people wanted you to owe them for everything. "What about my return ticket?" I asked the dean. "Maybe the shrink will chip in for that."

The dean looked at me as though I were an insect she'd like to squash. "We'll pay for the whole thing. We might even pay for some lessons in manners."

So I packed my suitcase and walked from my suicide single dorm to Heidi's room. A thin wispy girl in ragged cutoffs and a shirt that read "LSBN!" answered the door. A group of short-haired girls in thick black leather jackets, bundled up despite the summer heat, encircled Heidi in a protective fairy ring. They looked at me critically, clearly wondering if Heidi was too fragile for my company.

"You've got our numbers," one said, holding on to Heidi's shoulder. "And Vancouver's got a great gay community."

"Oh, God," I said, "She's going to a funeral, not a Save the Dykes rally."

One of the girls stepped in front of me.

“It’s O.K., Cynthia,” Heidi said. Then she ushered me into her bedroom and closed the door. A suitcase was on her bed, half packed.

“I could just uninvite you,” Heidi said. “How about that? You want that?” She folded a polka-dotted T-shirt that was wrong for any occasion and put it in her suitcase. “Why haven’t you talked to me?” she said, looking at the shirt instead of me. “Why haven’t you talked to me in two months?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“*You don’t know,*” she said, each syllable steeped in sarcasm. “You don’t know. Well, I know. You thought I was going to try to sleep with you.”

“Try to? We slept together all winter!”

“If you call smelling your feet sleeping together, you’ve got a lot to learn.” She seemed thinner and meaner; every line of her body held me at bay.

“So tell me,” I said. “What can you show me that I need to learn?” But as soon as I said it I somehow knew she still hadn’t slept with anyone. “Am I supposed to come over there and sweep your enraged

self into my arms?” I said. “Like in the movies? Is this the part where we’re both so mad we kiss each other?”

She shook her head and smiled weakly. “You don’t get it,” she said. “My mother is dead.” She closed her suitcase, clicking shut the old-fashioned locks. “My mother is dead,” she said again, this time reminding herself. She set her suitcase upright on the floor and sat on it. She looked like someone waiting for a train.

“Fine,” I said. “And she’s going to be dead for a long time.” Though it sounded stupid, I felt good saying it. As though I had my own locks to click shut.

Heidi went to Vancouver for her mother’s funeral. I didn’t go with her. Instead, I went back to Baltimore and moved in with an aunt I barely knew. Every day was the same: I read and smoked outside my aunt’s apartment, studying the row of hair salons across the street, where girls in denim cutoffs and tank tops would troop in and come out hours later, a flash of neon nails, coifs the color and sheen of patent leather. And every day I imagined Heidi’s house in Vancouver. Her place would not be large, but it would be clean. Flowery shrubs would line the walks. The Canadian wind would whip us about like pennants. I’d be visiting her in some vague time in the future, deliberately vague, for people like me, who realign past events to suit themselves. In that future time, you always have a chance to catch the groceries before they fall; your words can always be rewound and erased, rewritten and revised.

Then I'd imagine Heidi visiting me. There are no psychiatrists or deans, no boys with nice shoes or flip cashiers. Just me in my single room. She knocks on the door and says, "Open up."

¹ *Whiffenpoofs*: Yale's a capella group