

AN ORDINARY LOVE STORY

By Daniel Coshnear

Betty leaves Ryan (age 4) with her brother and sister-in-law in Santa Rosa. He hasn't napped but he's fine as soon as they give him hot chocolate in his Sippee Cup and set him down in front of the big flat screen TV. He immediately takes the remote in his small fist, clicks to one of those Third Reich things on the History Channel, clicks again to a woman with a shapely sweater and a broad smile modeling jewelry. Betty exits without saying goodbye to him. No tugging at clothes, no bawling, thank God.

Next, she drops Cassie (going on 13) at a girlfriend's house for an overnight. "Don't forget your backpack," Betty says. "Did you put a toothbrush in?" Cassie, looking as if it takes superhuman strength to endure such a question, shuts the door and leans her tortured, pretty face in the window. "Anything else, Mom?"

"Nothing, honey." She watches as Cassie drags her feet down the gravel drive, hitching her stonewashed jeans over the crest of her fleshy hips, only to have them slide back down. She taps the horn. The girl turns, beleaguered, and shuffles back to the open window.

“How about the hairbrush?”

“I can’t even believe this.”

“And Cassie?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Cassie says. And then, “Yes, Mom, I heard it already like a dozen times.”

She permits Cassie to reach the same low spot in the driveway she’d reached before, and she taps the horn again. She can’t resist. The girl, it seems, is on the brink of becoming whoever it is she might be, and Betty needs to watch. She knows Cassie will not return to the side of the car, but her head will turn, her smooth brow pinched—such a perfect show of suffering. With the late afternoon sun lighting up the windshield, Cassie won’t see the smile on her mother’s lips or the tears brimming in her eyes.

Hwy 101 South to Rte 12 East toward the E Street group home, she hears Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez on the radio. Spanish and English, it’s hard to follow. He was talking about U.S. Imperialism in the southern hemisphere. Why is he now talking about poverty in Africa? It seems every conflict points to another with its own complex history, an endless chain of sticky contingencies, the world is shrinking and expanding at the same time, every toothache a symptom of heart disease; but she breathes and tells herself, it’s not her worry, can’t be right now. She’s on her way to deliver a carton of Camel Lights and a bottle of dandruff shampoo to Karl, to sign the guest book, to be polite and unflappable, and to avoid at all costs that tough-love bitch Penny, the Program Manager.

“No,” she tells Kevin, standing in the office doorway, “there’s no alcohol in the shampoo, I checked.” Behind her, in the kitchen, a bald man in a

sleeveless t-shirt, tufts of black hair sprouting from his upper arms, lifts heaping spoons full of toasted oats to his mouth. She watches him until he looks up at her.

“Yes,” she tells Kevin, “I know about the 10 Day Freeze.” At the last place they called it *Blackout*, (a subtle sign of humor, she’d hoped, but there was never any supporting evidence of such). It means: No visitors, no phone calls, no leaving the premises. Karl survived two days in the last program before he went AWOL, but he wasn’t court ordered that time. Then he didn’t have jail hanging over his head.

“I’ll come see him next week,” she tells Kevin, “when he’s settled in.”

She sees him in the yard on her way out. He’s on his knees weeding the garden. He’s wearing the khaki shorts he wore three days ago when she brought him here. They look clean from fifty feet away. He’s shaved off his sideburns. He looks like Ryan and she feels again as if she might suddenly laugh or cry or both. She walks toward her car quickly. After she turns the corner past the one-room building called Meetings, she hears his voice. “Betty? Bet?”

If she were to stop, what would she say to him? Would she tell him she closed her eyes and sniffed his shampoo? That the aroma triggered a pounding pulse in her sternum and a subtle gag reflex? Would she say she’s decided to look out for herself? That she’s on her way to a class right now? That if she meets someone nice, a man, and if he asks her to coffee, she’ll... she’ll probably freak.

Rte. 12 West to Hwy 101 North to Mendocino Avenue to the Junior College; the radio reports the numbers of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then brief testimonies from the displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina. It wasn’t long ago Betty listened with a strange sense of hope, a belief that when things

got bad enough, people would come to their senses. Isn't that how it's supposed to work—critical mass, one hundred monkeys, or something? She'd taken a passing interest in Cindy Sheehan's campaign at Camp Casey, she'd signed dozens of Internet petitions, she'd even stood on the corner of River Road and Armstrong Woods with a banner and Karl and the kids. It was one of the few things she and Karl did together she felt good about.

But now, though Betty may be hearing the news, she's not listening. She parks off campus. She should hurry, she thinks, but she doesn't. She checks the contents of her backpack – a new five-subject spiral bound notebook, a plastic bag of ballpoint pens and a couple of rubber dinosaur refrigerator magnets Ryan must have tossed in. The class is called Introduction to Fiction Writing. She could have chosen to take Money Management, much more practical, or Local Geology, which promised a coastal outing at the end of semester, but the blurb in the catalog for this class appealed to her more than the others; *supportive and challenging*, it said, *a place to risk real self-expression*.

The word *risk* is what pulled her in. How long has it been since she was not in damage control mode? When was the last time she tried something new?

She enters the classroom fifteen minutes late and sits in the front row, in the last remaining chair. Everyone is writing, even the teacher, seated cross-legged on a table in front of the room, a pad on his lap. Behind him on the board she reads: Prof. McCauley.

She takes out her notebook and a fresh pen, her heart sinking. Except for the teacher, the only man in the class appears to be in his mid-seventies. The teacher has red-orange hair, cut close on the sides, curly on top, wire-rimmed glasses. He looks like he's too young to buy beer.

Of course, Betty doesn't know what the assignment is, but she writes. She'd won an honorable mention in high school for "Second Chances," a story

loosely based on real events about identical twins, girls. In the real account one of the girls had dated an older boy, reportedly a small-time dope dealer. The girl disappeared for two weeks and the story of her disappearance dominated the nightly news and prompted a thorough police search, including divers in wet suits raking the riverbed near where the girl was last seen. Betty's account, like the news, had focused on the missing girl, the mystery of her disappearance and the celebration when she was recovered. All those years ago she'd chosen to call the girls Remington and Madison, and the bad boy was Chad, but this time around she'll make some changes. He'll be called Spike, for example. The missing girl, Kari, may or may not be found, she's not sure yet. In any case, Betty's interest now is in Amber, the not-so-newsworthy twin. She doesn't know where she'll go with all this, doesn't have a clue, only that she wants a scene, a real showdown, Amber confronting Spike. "Stop," says Professor McCauley. "Time's up."



Part of the problem, a small part of the problem perhaps, is that every name, song, book title, film or joke seems familiar. It's all on the tip of the tongue, hovering on the hazy horizon of consciousness. Most hours of the day, Karl's mind is a waterlogged newspaper.

Part of the problem is that alcohol is clarifying. A few drinks tend to engage that thing that fits into that other thing and makes it turn. Cogs. Cognition. A full bottle can turn random noise into melody. Now it's as if he hears claws scratching, a rusty wheel grinding.

The Program Manager, Penny, is preceded by the jangle of keys on her belt. "Meetings," she says. "Everyone. Two minutes."

“Which meeting?” says the man with hairy arms.

“You have a schedule, Marvin,” says Penny. “You can read, can’t you?”

After Penny passes, Karl says, “Seemed like a reasonable question. I don’t know why she had to bite your head off.”

“I don’t know,” says Marvin, expressionless.

Minutes later Marvin confides to the group. “I think someone here wants to interfere with my program.” He looks in Karl’s direction; then down into his lap.

“Oh Christ,” Karl mumbles.

“Do you have something you want to say?” asks Penny.

“No.”

“Because it seemed like -”

“I’ve been here four days and already I can’t stand it,” Karl says. “I don’t know how I’m going to last three fucking months.”

“Language, please,” says Lee, Karl’s sullen roommate.

Penny nods approvingly at Lee.

“One day at a time,” says Cherise, a Level III who hopes to graduate in a week.

“Let’s make it two days at a time,” Karl says.

“That’ll do,” says Penny. “But if you want my opinion, I don’t think you’ll make it.”

“I’ll make it,” Karl says.

“We’ll see,” says Penny.

“What choice do I have?” he says.

§ § §

The kids are finally sleeping after an unusually long and difficult bedtime routine. Cassie threw a fit when Betty cut off the video about the girl skating champion.

“Since when did you get so mean?” she said, and “You don’t have to take out all your problems on me.”

Ryan refused to wear the Batman pajama bottoms with the Spiderman top, fifteen extra minutes waiting for the dryer. Now he holds Betty’s hair in his fist, lightly snoring. She peels herself free from Ryan, one sweaty little finger at a time, tiptoes from his bed to the door; and pulls it almost shut behind her. She places a flat bag of popcorn in the microwave and snaps on the TV. It’s a rerun. She watches for five minutes, but her mind is elsewhere.

Professor McCauley had said he doesn’t want any fluff. No breezy summer vacation stories. He wants high stakes and he wants emotional truth. She’d felt a flush when he said that. She’ll show him she’s up to the challenge. She’s decided that even if he is gay, and she thinks he is, she’s going to make him fall in love with her. She opens her spiral bound on the kitchen table and begins where she’d left off in class:

Amber and Kari had not been close in the months before Kari’s disappearance. Few words passed between them; they simply couldn’t stand the sight of one another. Oh, perhaps once, twice, Kari had made an effort to explain her mind to Amber, but Amber was frightened, and her fear showed as disdain. Kari had become like a stranger in her own house. To her parents the reasons added up to one – Spike. Spike exerted a negative influence on Kari, they said. No, that’s not how they said it, they said, “That boy is nothing but bad news.” It was so obvious, even someone who didn’t know Kari could see it. Everyone saw it. Soon after Kari started dating Spike, she stopped doing her homework. Her scores on tests and quizzes had been mediocre, but soon dropped through the floor. She did an abysmal job on her chores, and

would have ignored them altogether, if not for the threat of being grounded. She cut classes. She slipped out of the house at night and slept in late on weekend mornings. (Kari and Amber's parents didn't know about the sneaking out). Kari, it seemed, didn't care. She'd even started wearing black mascara and silver lipstick.

Almost two weeks after Kari's disappearance, on a Sunday afternoon, Amber said to her mother and father, "Let's go out for ice cream." Judging from the look on her parents' faces, she might have said, "I've been impregnated by aliens." But their faces, like their thoughts, would not hold still for long. She saw her father's gaze return mile by sad mile to his hands on the knees of his trousers. She saw her mother's hard mouth quiver and then soften.

"Okay, let's," said her mother.

"I think that's a fine idea," said her father.

And ten minutes later, from the now enormous backseat of her parents' Volvo Wagon, encouraged by the reception of her ice-cream proposal, she asked, "What's going to happen to Spike?"

"Please don't mention that name," said her father.

A very familiar sickly silence followed. Amber settled back into the worn upholstery, sighed, watched the phone wires rising and falling through her window.

"He was being held for possession of marijuana," said her mother very quietly. "No other charges can be filed until, until they find ..."

"He's been released on bail," her father says with acid in his voice, "free to come and go as he pleases."

It's past midnight. Betty turns the pages to the next subject section of her notebook and scribbles:

milk

catf., wormer

sunscreen

C's book report

K's foot powder

Amber has a plan!

§ § §

Karl is standing in the office beside Penny's desk. He's required to phone Betty and tell her not to visit on Tuesday between four and six.

"Hello," Betty says.

"Hi," Karl says. "You can't come this week. I'm still on restriction."

"Why?"

"Were you here the other day? I'm sure I saw you."

Penny interrupts. "This is not a social call."

"Why are you still on restriction?" Betty says.

"Were you here?" Karl says.

"I'm warning you," Penny says.

"I'm talking to my wife!" He steps back from Penny and nearly pulls the base of the phone off her desk.

"Why shouldn't I visit, Karl?"

"Because they tell me I have a bad attitude," he says.

"Oh, you don't want to go back to jail, do you?"

"I want to come home."

Betty says nothing.

"I miss you," Karl says.

Again silence, except for the sound of Penny tapping her pen against a clipboard. "Just tell her when she can come."

Karl thrusts the receiver at Penny. “You tell her,” he says, and walks out of the office. There’s a traffic jam in the kitchen doorway, house mates Marvin, Kitty and Lee plotting the night’s meal. “Look out,” Karl says, pushing through them down the hall and into his room. He shuts the door hard, drops onto his knees and punches the bed until he is breathless. “I’ll fucking go to jail it’s better than this bullshit this humiliating bullshit I’ll fucking go I’ll fucking go I’ll fucking go to jail,” until he can’t lift his arms anymore. He lays his head on the rumpled sheets. He feels hot and cool, perspiration breaking on his scalp.

“Fuck it, Betty, you’re supposed to be on my side.”



Cassie has soccer practice after school, and afterward she’ll go to the home of a teammate. Betty can’t help replaying the previous night’s angry remarks in her mind. She had wanted to say: *Do you really think I take out my problems on you? Because I have tried so, so hard ...* She had wanted to say, *I’m doing this all on my own. All these years it’s me that worries, it’s me ...* No, she hadn’t wanted to say all that.

Funny, when she dropped Cassie off at school in the morning, she’d said, “I love you, Kari.” Cassie’s head and shoulders were already out of the car, her attention on a congregation of girls and boys beside the tether ball pole. She didn’t seem to hear the slip.

Betty drives east on River Road toward the home of her brother and sister-in-law in Santa Rosa. The sun has fallen low enough to come through her back window, the wisps of Ryan’s blond hair glowing like electric filaments. The man on the radio enumerates U.S. crimes against Haiti over the last two decades. He paints an awful picture of the conditions for political prisoners there. She

listens, but new revelations of horror do not produce the old, familiar responses. She clicks off the radio and says, “Life’s cheap, Ryan. Life’s cheap when you’re poor.”

“Are we poor?” says Ryan.

She considers. Subtracting Karl’s erratic income, adjusting for the costs of his bad habits; she doesn’t know yet. Will she have him back after he’s served his time? She doesn’t know yet. She might be able to pick up more hours working at the dental clinic, but then she’ll have to spend more on daycare...

“Are we poor, Mommy?” says Ryan again.

“I guess we have what we need.”

“Do we need butterflies in our noses?”

She tilts the rear-view mirror until she finds his self-satisfied smile. “I do, sweetie,” she says.

“Do we need tractors in our salad?”

“I do, sweetie.” She reaches between the seats and gives his foot a soft squeeze.

“Do we need—” his head rolls a half turn against the back of his car seat. He’s looking dreamily at the passing sky.

“I can tell you’re thinking up a good one,” she says.

“Do we need daddies in our clouds?”

“I don’t know,” she says.

She takes Mirabel Road to 116 to Occidental Road because the highway can be crowded at this hour, and because she likes driving by the marsh where she often sees egrets standing reed-like against the swamp grass and cattails. Ryan likes the egrets too, “the long ducks,” and even more, he likes the baler in the next field spitting out perfect blocks of hay. By the time they come to the

wetlands, Ryan is sleeping. The egrets are where they should be, but not so special when she can't share them with him.

In class, Professor McCauley asks the students to read back samples of their writing, a page or so. After a brief awkward silence, the woman next to Betty volunteers. She reads a sentimental piece about a family horse with a broken leg. In the story, a girl petitions her father to allow the horse, *aka* Porridge, to live. The father makes a speech about maturity and the woman reading attempts to capture his voice by dropping her own a few octaves. Afterward, the professor solicits comments from the class.

A young woman from the back says, "That was so sad. The father seemed really mean, but I believed he would have said that."

Another woman says, "I wanted to see Porridge. I wanted to care about him more."

And another says, "I think I've heard this story before. It might have been interesting to tell it from the horse's point of view." Betty sees the woman beside her cringe. She wants to say something kind, but she'd been distracted by the reader's theatrical embellishments and worried that the same might be expected of her.

Next, the seventy-year-old man reads a bizarre diatribe about the founding of Israel. There are no characters and it doesn't feel like a story at all. Some of the language sounds biblical, but nothing Betty recognizes. Professor McCauley says, "Thank you. Who's next?"

Betty turns in her chair. No one is volunteering. She looks at the professor who happens to be looking at her. "Please," he says.

"Well, mine is not finished," she says.

"That's fine," he says.

“I’ll just read a scene,” she says.

“Could you speak louder,” says the classmate who’d wanted the horse’s point of view.

... Amber completed her trigonometry problems at the kitchen table and told her mother she’d be going to bed. Nothing was out of the ordinary, except for the storm brewing in her belly. Nothing was unusual, except her peculiar resolve, which somehow made everything else, the tuft in the carpet, the smoothness of the banister, the long, narrow triangle of light beneath her bedroom door seem brand new. She felt that if she permitted herself to stop and think, she wouldn’t go through with her plan—but was it HER plan? When exactly had SHE decided to sneak out of the house in her sister’s clothing?

She pulls on Kari’s skin-tight, stonewashed hip-buggers and one of her tie-dyed tank tops. She wears the denim jacket because Kari had a mole on her left shoulder. She can’t wear the sandals because Kari had painted her toenails red and black. She grabs a pair of Doc Martens from under Kari’s bed. The finishing touches are the most confusing; the black mascara and silver lip gloss, because these she must do in the mirror. Try as she might, she can’t hide the fear in her eyes.

She rubs a bar of soap once up and down the tracks so that the window will slide without squeaking – a trick she’d seen Kari do a few times. She cautiously steps through the hole backwards, rests her hands and her waist on the sill and finds the bough of an elm tree with her right boot, then the left. Now she must blindly push back and catch the branch above her head – something she’s never had the courage to try before, as much as Kari had coaxed and teased her.

What if her mother or father stumbled upon her broken body on the lawn, dressed as her sister, and only two weeks after her sister’s disappearance? It’s so horrible to imagine, it’s almost funny. Kari would have found it hysterical. And that she, Amber, the cautious one, the

good one, can see any humor in it at all is a little bit frightening, but exhilarating, too. She holds her breath and shoves off into the dark ...

§ § §

Penny has several announcements at morning meeting, the last of which is Karl will receive an extra three days of restriction for rudeness and non-compliance.

He's not surprised, except by the fact that he's not angry. Maybe he'd punched out all his anger, or sweated it out like some poison, some foul fluid sopped up by his foul-smelling mattress. Is that possible? Something seems to have changed, but maybe it happened in the moments before his private tantrum, when he'd said, "come home" and Betty had said nothing.

Karl needs some kind of script to fill that silence. What about her seeing him and walking off as if she had not? He can't sit with that. You *do* see red if you're angry enough, and this feeling of emptiness; it's real, too. He feels loose in the gut, a dull, weakening ache as if his ribcage were expanding or dissolving.

He is sitting on one of the sofa sectionals surrounded by his alcoholic, drug-addicted house-mates. In his civilian life, Karl is a freelance photographer, and he has a half dozen other jobs— landscaper, house painter, jewelry maker, math tutor, garbage hauler, wood splitter—because snapping pictures never paid the bills; but he'd always hoped it would, that his talent would be recognized and that he would be able to give his full attention to it.

Each morning Penny has the residents state how they feel, one after another, happy, worried, peaceful, tired, etc. Karl has consistently muttered "blissful," with a sour expression on his face. Today, when his turn comes, he says, "Okay."

"Just okay?" Penny says. "That's a change."

“I feel like I’ve been hollowed out,” he says, “like someone took a fucking plumber’s snake and—”

“Language, please,” says Lee.

“Sorry,” Karl says.

“Sorry now?” Penny says. “Another first.”

“Hollowed out?” asks Cherise, thoughtfully. “Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know where to start.” He holds his forehead in the palms of his hands.

“Ask your higher power,” says Cherise. “That’s what I do.”

He shakes his head. He closes his eyes. At the suggestion of higher power, he’s only ever drawn a blank, but this morning, surprisingly, he conjures a picture of his father. He can see the old man in his flannel shirt and suspenders, can almost smell him, the creosote-soaked dungarees, the pipe. His father had also made a career of odd jobs, also had high expectations of himself, but unlike Karl he didn’t give a damn if anyone recognized his abilities. His father the handyman, poet, dope farmer, backwoods radical iconoclast; he could do any work he set his mind to do, he just couldn’t keep a boss. Christ, he’d have a good laugh if he could see his son right now. He’d shake his head or run his sleeve under his nose and mutter, “Poor bastard.” Karl’s stepmother was a little less predictable. She might laugh, scream, spit, throw a bottle at the wall. In one of her gentler moods she would say, “Keep yourself free, honey. Don’t be any body’s fool.”

§ § §

Betty pauses, short of breath and suddenly aware again that she is in a classroom full of people.

“Is there more?” asks Professor McCauley.

“Well, now enters Spike. Spike never finished high school. He’s nineteen,” Betty explains.

“Go on,” says McCauley, smiling.

... Spike hangs out above the tattoo shop, a one-room apartment on the second floor with no curtain and a bare bulb dangling from the ceiling; but Amber guesses that he’ll be steering clear of his old haunts, that while on probation and with the investigation still going, he’ll keep his head down, probably stay at the home of his parents. She knows the street, and she thinks she’ll find the house by finding Spike’s car parked in front, a jacked-up, Lemon-yellow Le Mans. But she guesses again, the car must have been impounded for evidence, it was, after all, where Kari was last seen. The police had identified her scarf soaked in vomit on the backseat. And, as the report had it, they’d found Spike a couple of hundred yards away shivering, waist deep in the river.

She pulls Kari’s jacket tight across her chest and walks three long blocks past hedges, drawn curtains and flickering blue windows, looking for any sign of him. She stops and forces her hands deep into the tight pockets of Kari’s jeans. A light gust swirls dried oak leaves and bats them against the curb beneath her feet. She hears a young woman’s laughter, the scrape of leather boots against concrete, a man’s voice, low and intimate. She decides to walk on, slowly, three more blocks and then another until the houses give way to the empty lot of a drive-through bank and she knows she’s gone too far. Turning back, she feels an odd mix of disappointment and relief – her plan unraveling. But was it HERS? What had she expected to accomplish? Did she really think Spike would be fooled? Did she really think that upon seeing her, he’d assume she was Kari, or the ghost of Kari, that he’d get down on his knees and plead for mercy, or that in some other way he’d reveal himself and what happened the night Kari vanished?

Now Amber can admit to herself the plan was pretty far-fetched, pretty god dammed stupid, but what is harder to admit is this driving feeling that she, Amber, must, absolutely must, come face to face with the negative influence, Spike, the murder suspect, Spike, the lover. She quits her searching left and right, tucks her chin and pushes forward, now rehearsing in her mind the quiet re-entrance from bough through bedroom window to sleep. She breathes in and out fully for what feels like the first time in hours, days. Oh, to return to her senses. But there, twenty timorous paces ahead under a dark canopy of trees ...

“That’s as far as I’ve gotten,” Betty says. “I haven’t finished the scene. I don’t know what will happen.”

“It’s very creepy,” says a classmate. “kind of like a ghost story.”

“I think it’s a love story,” says another. “Not the ordinary kind of love story, though.”

“That business of one twin pretending to be the other, it’s so like Patty Duke, you know.”

“I just hope Amber gets home safe.”

“Thank you,” says Professor McCauley. “I’m eager to see where it goes.”

Betty blushes like a schoolgirl, and the blushing makes her even more embarrassed.



“I don’t know anything about god or religion,” Karl says, “if that’s what you mean by higher power. My folks didn’t bring me up to be a joiner. They weren’t exactly social.”

“I guess it’s hard for you to be here,” says Cherise.

“Just another sign of failure,” he cautions a glance at her and the other faces around the circle. Lee is nodding slowly, as if to the sound of some familiar song. “Everything’s going kind of wide angle on me,” Karl says.

“Why don’t you say what you mean?” says Penny.

“I get it,” says Cherise. “Like losing perspective.”

“Is that right?” asks Penny.

After a long pause, Karl says, “Like if I was to put a camera on you,” and he captures Penny in a small frame made of his index fingers and thumbs, sitting with her legs crossed, clipboard balanced on her knee, “then I’d want to separate you from what surrounds you, Marvin there, and Kitty, and that chair. See what I’m saying? I’d want you to stand out.”

Penny uncrosses and re-crosses her legs. Her eyes show only suspicion. “I don’t like metaphors,” she says. “I like it when people say what they mean.”

Karl peels his fingers apart, keeping his eyes focused on Penny. “Maybe you don’t like the feeling that you blend in with the background,” he says. “The way I’m feeling now.”

“You don’t like it,” says Cherise.

“I’m tired of fighting it,” he says. “I don’t know if I can anymore.”

“Well,” Penny says, “sounds a little like humility, an important first step. But,” she adds, “I have my doubts.”

“I only know I miss my wife, my girl, my little boy.”

Penny says, “Maybe you should have thought of that before getting behind the wheel drunk and putting your girl in danger.”

Karl hasn’t the strength or the desire to defend himself. There were extenuating circumstances, but no one has ever wanted to hear them. He lets his head fall into his hands again. “Fuck. Sorry.”



Betty expects Mr. Roberts at ten o'clock for a full cleaning, but he cancels ten minutes before his appointment. She doesn't have another on the schedule for an hour and a half. She takes out her notebook and a pen, sits in the big reclining chair and looks up at one of the posted pictures of a perfect set of teeth.

... Spike had gotten his hair cut short and he'd shaved the fuzzi off his chin. He seems younger. He seems older? He is handsome. He is drunk? He is with a young woman. He is walking with his mother, elbow in elbow. He needs to floss ...

Betty announces to no one, "I've got to get the hell out of here." Passing the front desk, she tells the receptionist she'll be back in time for her eleven thirty. She heads west on 116 through Guerneville to Duncan's Mills, where the coffee is very strong, and the sky seems huge, unobstructed by redwood trees. A voice on the radio urges, "We need your support to continue bringing you the kind of programming ..." She clicks it off. There was nothing new on the CIA leak story, except that Cheney appointed two checkered characters to fill Libby's post. And Bush nominated another Supreme Court Justice. And Rosa Parks died. It surprises Betty that Rosa Parks hadn't died way back when. She seems part of another era, another life-time.

The last time Betty saw Mr. Roberts for his "spring cleaning," he'd made a remark about her choice of radio station, and later, her boss, the gray-haired, pony-tailed, surfer, vegan Chris Chesney DDS, had told her to find something closer to the center of the dial. Seems funny now, but at the time she was livid.

She'd rehearsed a speech, then swallowed hard and given in without a fight, without even a word. Soon after, it seemed, she stopped liking her job. And she'd chosen not to tell Karl about it. He'd have been angry, she knew, and he might have chided her for being a coward; but on this front, he'd have been her ally.

She sits at a picnic table with her notebook open and a double iced espresso. For forty minutes she watches the big sky turn nervous. *Do we need daddies in our clouds?* Will she have Karl back in her life, and if so, under what circumstances?

She simply hasn't wanted to think about it, and she's told herself many, many times, she doesn't have to, not yet. She writes: *What does Amber really want from Spike?* In the real story all those years ago, the prodigal daughter returned. For all the nightly news drama, the celebration was short-lived. One rumor had it that the girl had gotten pregnant and left the state to get an abortion. Another said she'd dropped acid and had a psychotic break. In any case the story ended abruptly, disappeared from the screen, and soon after the family moved away. Of the well-behaved twin, little was ever said. *Why does Amber need to confront Spike?* Betty bites down hard on her lower lip. She glances at her watch, gasps, then as she's packing up and heading back to work, she says, "Because if she doesn't, McCauley will know what a chicken shit I am."

§ § §

At 6pm the day's meetings are finished, dinner is over, most of the chores are done. Those who aren't on 10 Day Freeze or some other form of restriction typically walk a few blocks to an AA meeting and out for coffee afterward. Karl must stay home. He's forbidden to watch TV and he's bored with the

paperback novels he'd brought with him when he moved in. Cherise decided to skip AA tonight because, she said, she had some packing to do. They convene at a bench beside the vegetable garden; he has cigarettes, and she has a match.

"You must be feeling pretty good," he says. "What, two more days here?"

"Pretty scared, I'd say."

"Yeah," he says. "Not so sure what you're getting back into."

"Or who I'll be," she smiles.

It strikes Karl that she's not quite who he thought she was. He'd assumed all his fellow residents had been hypnotized by Penny, but Cherise has her own mind, and a warmth one associates with the living. He says quietly, as if to himself, "Change the lens; change the picture."

"Hmmm." She blows out smoke, throws her hair over one shoulder. "I've been thinking about mirrors," she says. "How you can see your own reflection in everything, in everyone." She smiles.

Karl nods. "Got a family?"

"Just a boyfriend."

"He drinks too?"

"Oh yeah," she laughs. "He loves his tequila and beer."

"How's that going to be?"

She stares at the side of the house, as if maybe she hasn't heard, or as if she's straining to hear something else. The only sound is coming from her bedroom window, a tinny clock radio. After a long pause she gives her head a little shake, "I don't want to go back to the way things were," she says. "What about you?"

Karl laughs. "Ask me in three months."

"Yeah."

“Right now, I’d kill for a glass of whiskey.”

“You’re just starting out. That’s normal.”

“I’m glad to hear something’s normal,” he says. “Shit.”

Cherise stubs out her smoke, stands and stretches her arms over her head. He feels a sudden desire to put his hands on her waist and pull her to him. He looks away. “Something is in the air,” he says. “I feel ... I don’t know.”

She smiles. “I guess I’d better get back to my packing,” she says.

“I’d better get back to my whatever,” he says.

She laughs. “You know,” she says from half way across the lawn, “Penny shouldn’t have said what she said. You’ll make it through the program. You will, if you want to.”

He sits on the picnic table, examining his toes through the tops of his sandals. *Higher power?* He’d been told that it doesn’t have to be God. It can be anything you want it to be. Karl’s father had once described himself as an anarcho-syndicalist. He called his philosophy “principled skepticism.” And yes, Karl admired his old man’s independence and self-assurance. Surely, he’d inherited his dad’s posture, and at least a little bit of the surliness, at least some of the time. He’d learned at a young age to associate real power with free-thinking, and free-thinking with political activism. He’d spent more than a dozen nights in jail, in most cases with friends and for a cause he believed in. Higher power, as he’s understood it, is invariably something to be resisted, rebelled against.

In the years after his stepmother left with a real estate salesman, Karl had seen his father turn bitter. The old man wasn’t taking life on his own terms, though he liked to say he was; he was merely reacting, a creature of habit like anyone else. To think of him alone in his cabin in Cazadero, smoking fatties,

reading the same obscure tracts about the Kronstadt Rebellion or Haymarket Square he'd read twenty years ago; he'd become a caricature of himself.

The highest power Karl had ever known was the feeling he'd had when he fell in love with Betty—the feeling that she loved him. The power was *in* him then. God, was it fourteen years ago? It was mid-October, as now, the same sweet scent of rotting leaves.

Karl had first seen her at the one and only coffee shop in Duncan's Mills, where a dozen of his photos were mounted on the wall. He was a regular, did some jobs now and then for the owner. Betty was passing through and foolish enough to order the rum Danish, a three-day-old almond croissant recycled with a healthy dousing of booze to cover the taste of mold. He watched her pick it apart slowly, taste it slowly, thoughtfully, as if it were some sort of delicacy. He didn't think, *stupid-ass tourist*, as he'd often thought when he saw a new face in town. He felt the strange desire to put his hand on hers, if only to make her stop eating that thing.

He watched as Betty circled something in the newspaper, then paused to turn her ballpoint over in her fingers. When she lifted her eyes, she couldn't help but see him studying her. She blushed. She looked back at her paper, toyed with the handle of her coffee cup, picked at her pastry. She was like a bad actor trying to look busy. To think of her trying twice, three times, to swallow that little bite of Danish; he hadn't meant to make her feel uncomfortable, but he couldn't have taken his eyes off her if he'd wanted to. She stood to examine the photos on the wall, anything, he was sure, to turn her back on him.

"It's called "River Life," Karl said, standing two feet behind her.

"You did these?" Her voice seemed trapped and small. She cleared her throat and tried again, "These are your pictures?"

“Those are some of my friends,” he said. “They camp out year-round. I guess you’d call them homeless, but they don’t think of it that way.”

“Reminds me of?” Betty bit her finger.

“Walker Evans,” Karl said. “One of my heroes.”

“His pictures told stories,” she said. She laughed. “What do I know? I took one elective in college.” She stepped closer to a black and white nine by twelve of a woman hanging laundry on a rope between two bay trees. The woman wore tattered sweatpants, a soiled vest, and a bandanna on her head. Behind her was a tarp and beneath it, a bedroll and a small fire pit made of bricks and stones. She was handsome, smiling, as if she’d just heard something amusing. She clearly enjoyed the attention of the man with the camera.

“She calls herself Ma Kettle.” Karl laughed. “She’s only twenty-eight.”

“Can’t be an easy life.”

“Summer isn’t bad,” he said, “except for the tourists and the cops. But most of the year it’s damp and cold. You’ve got to have a strong constitution.”

“You admire her.” When Betty turned and looked at his face, he was stunned. She was vibrating, ever so slightly, like human fluorescence.

“I do,” Karl said, “I admire people who make their own way.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” she said. “A tourist,” she said, “but not for long, I hope.” She put her hand out to shake and introduced herself. Her hand was soft and small, but her grip was firm. He could tell she didn’t ordinarily talk to strangers, and what he was experiencing, the pulse that traveled through his fingers, was the first hint of her resolve. He held onto her hand and pulled her to the next picture.

“This old guy,” he said, pointing, “is an original Wobbly. He can tell some stories, but he’s the crankiest bastard you’d ever want to meet.”

Betty swallowed and said, “I’d like to meet him.”

And so, it began. She'd rushed off to get a sweater from the seat of her VW bus and watching her return, he was stunned again, her peculiar gait, hurry and hesitation, effort and grace. Uncertainty, even fear, made perfect sense under the circumstances; she was probably far from home and about to take a ride with a complete stranger. He'd known plenty of indecisive, muddle-headed people, but she wasn't like them at all. She was radiant, as if animated by her ambivalence.

Betty straddled the back of Karl's motorcycle and pressed her pink fists into his coat pockets as they rode to the camp of the grouchiest man alive. They made a quick stop for a tin of chew and a pint of blackberry brandy: "The cost of admission," Karl explained. And when they arrived, their unsuspecting host was not at home. "Probably off to score dope in Monte Rio," Karl said.

"Well now, what are we going to do with all this brandy?" she sighed. She smiled. She brushed off a wide stump and invited him to sit beside her. And so, it began: fascination, infatuation, love? So, they started, Karl then Betty telling their dreams, sharing the highlight reels of their lives so far, each culminating in this moment, just a stone's throw from the muddy river.

Karl remembers it in warm summer light, but it couldn't have been that way. His memory always betrays him these days. His thoughts are interrupted by Cherise calling from her window. "Hey," she says, "Did you hear? Rosa Parks died."

§ § §

No, Betty says to herself as she drives east on River Road, big sky falling away behind her. She hadn't come to Duncan's Mills to think about Karl, or the early

days of their relationship; but perhaps she'd come to think about herself then, the young woman with the camper bus, fresh out of grad school cruising down the coast all the way from the Olympic Peninsula with her future just beyond her front bumper. What a good and sensible girl she'd been—patriotic, law-abiding, unassuming and unquestioning, a budding dental hygienist—a daughter to make her Wyoming-bred, Republican parents proud. Except for her road trip, she'd always done what was expected of her, even the trip, it had occurred to her, was expected. It was the time in a life when a young woman sees the big world, broadens a little, gets frightened, gets lonely, gets *it* out of her system and returns home. Everything had been going as planned, though it wasn't as Betty planned.

No, that's not what she'd come to think about either, not intentionally. She'd come out from under the shadows of the tall trees for a fresh perspective, to discover what Amber will do! She shouldn't have left Amber in such a predicament. Amber is too young, too good. Amber should be mourning the disappearance of her sister, not trying to become like her.

Passing back through Guerneville, she sees two girls and a boy walking along the side of the road toward the center of town. They should be in school, she thinks. They shouldn't be smoking; those tender pink lungs, those gums. That's Cassie's striped running jacket. That's Cassie!

The girlfriend Betty knows is not from the soccer team and Betty can't remember having seen her at school. She'd seen her only once, a face that had seemed to materialize out of the darkness the night Karl was arrested. The girl wears a heavy coat of mascara and looks owlish, and a little old for high school. The boy is not at all familiar, though that night she'd felt vaguely aware of

another presence, someone, something beckoning from some shadowy somewhere. What a confusing, awful night it was.

Betty stops her car in front of Lark's Drug's, across the street from the Rainbow Cattle Company, the scene of all that awfulness. She's not angry, not yet, not even when she sees Cassie at the corner of the plaza putting her friend's long filtered cigarette to her lips. It's not funny either, though it could be—the utter concentration in the gesture, as if Cassie would miss her mouth if she weren't trying so hard.

As she sits in her car the awful night comes back to her, and with it a painful constriction in her chest. Karl had said he needed to meet someone about a possible job. "A magazine editor," he'd said with enthusiasm. The job was landscaping, but Karl was excited to make a new connection, and surely, he was hoping for a chance to publish his new series of photos—Campesinos in the Vineyards. He'd been unusually buoyant. He'd been drinking, though he denied it. Karl's license had been suspended for DUI ten months before.

So, it was, that cold, rainy late afternoon drizzling into evening, Karl had promising he'd be back soon enough to help with putting the kids to bed. Betty was left to do the full routine alone again for the fourth night in a row, Ryan winding way up before winding down, Cassie in extreme sulk mode over who knows what. There was no milk for the bedtime hot chocolate. Ryan was in his pajama top, naked below the waist and hiding behind the sofa. She shoved the sofa out of her way and heaved him up on her shoulder, his little fists swinging. She ordered Cassie to get in the car and they headed for the grocery store, her head pulsing with rage. There—here now—in front of The Rainbow Cattle Company was Karl's pickup, her suspicions confirmed.

She'd stopped, double-parked. "Wait right here," she hollered.

"Wait here with this screaming nut job?" Cassie said.

“You’d better,” she said, pointing her finger at the wrinkle between Cassie’s eyes, “you’d better,” but all the threats that came to mind she’d intended for Karl. She slammed her door and charged, slipping and almost falling on the wet pavement and into the saloon. Just inside, she was greeted by the sharp smell of stale beer, the shrill guitar of B.B. King on the juke box and darkness, except for a string of pin-sized red Christmas lights over the bar. “Betty? Bet?” she heard. “Is everything okay?” She saw Karl ten feet away, seated beside no editor; but a spiky-haired, leather-clad lesbian, one of the local realtors on her favorite piece of real estate. She watched Karl push himself back from the bar and his half-filled glass of whiskey.

“I just needed to see for myself,” she said, and having said so, it felt true. Her rage, that wonderful horrible energy rippling through her sinews, seemed to have spent itself. “Don’t bother coming home, Karl,” she said, as if an afterthought.

“Betty, wait,” he said. He stepped toward her. The bartender, a burly man in a black vest, offered her a shrug and a sheepish grin. The dozen or so patrons had turned their attention back to their cocktails and conversations. She’d half turned to go, the car badly parked, her children in their own uproar, Karl drawing nearer, his earnest face and conciliatory tone, his hand looming larger. She did not want him to touch her, did not want to hear apologies or explanations of any kind, and yet, she paused. What a farce! What dawned on her then was as disheartening as anything she’d ever experienced—she was merely the counterpart, the leading lady in this alcoholic drama, in spite of all his high ideals and her high hopes, this banal scene had been scripted for them years ago. For fuck sake, the other men and women at their stools knew exactly what was happening and it bored them. She smacked his hand away and exited the bar as forcefully as she’d entered. He followed.

Betty and Karl were then briefly frozen in place just outside the doorway, illuminated by the pulsing blue light of a cruiser parked across the street. Karl put his head down. He moved quickly, but it all appeared slow with the strobe effect. He lifted bare-assed, wailing Ryan out of the backseat of Betty's car and he hugged the boy tight to his chest. Betty stood with her hands in the air, helpless and confused. She turned and saw Cassie halfway down the block by the entrance to the video store talking to the owlish girl. Cassie seemed oblivious to the unfolding scene. Her hands were in her coat pockets and her full attention was on her friend, who'd apparently said something hilarious. Cassie bent over laughing. Betty bore down on them, her rage returning, doubling with each step. She'd never hit anyone, ever, but she slapped Cassie hard across the face.

What exactly did the officer witness? Betty still doesn't know for certain, only that he'd chosen to wait in his cruiser and let the scene unfold. She swept Ryan out of Karl's arms and put him back in his car seat. Karl had been whispering or pleading or something; she didn't want to hear. Cassie refused to get back into Betty's car. Betty drove away. She forgot to buy milk. An hour later the sheriff brought Cassie home, and the following news: Your husband is in jail. He's been arrested for driving on a suspended license and reckless endangerment.

The light changes, and the driver behind Betty taps her horn. Betty rolls forward slowly. Cassie's girlfriend ashes out her cigarette on a cement wall. The boy points in the direction of the bridge. The girl points the opposite way, possibly back to school. Betty steals a glance at her watch. Even if she had another minute to spare, she doesn't know what she'd say or do. She thinks she

can see the look on Cassie's face if she were to approach. She pictures Cassie walking away from her, again, and it gives her a shudder.

§ § §

At 11:30pm Tim, the night counselor, has poked his flashlight inside each of the bedrooms and retired into the office. Lee snores like a mud-soaked whistle. Karl rises from bed fully dressed, takes his sandals in his hand and slips down a short corridor to the door. Once he crosses the lot and steps beyond the picket fence, he is officially AWOL. If he is caught, he'll be taken back to jail. So be it. The day had been cold and dark and wet—the only brightness, Cherise, has now moved on.

Karl had been accused and convicted of bringing the mail from the box on the front porch to the office door, a job belonging exclusively to staff. He had been told to write an essay about the importance of adhering to house rules. The length of his required essay was promptly doubled from three to six pages because he'd said, "You can't be fucking serious." A grown man shouldn't have to live like this—one stupid humiliation after another. His father wouldn't put up with it. His stepmother wouldn't. Nor would Emma Goldman.

At the time of admission into the program, he was permitted to keep the change in his pocket, three dollars and ninety-six cents. Or, more likely, it was an oversight. All his other possessions had been inventoried. His cash had been locked in a box in the office. Under the circumstances, in what he perceived as a climate of distrust, he felt no need or desire to be forthcoming with his last nickels.

He walks down E Street toward a convenience store. The damp fog of the late afternoon has cleared and the bristling air puts tears in his eyes. A simple crime, he realizes, is really a complex series of choices, many crimes and many opportunities to turn back. If he *is* an addict, as they tell him he is, then he is choosing to be so now and now and now. Or is this choice thing only an illusion? It seems as if the experts want to have it both ways, but where does that leave him? If his behavior is only the manifestation of his illness, why should he feel responsible? Why should he feel guilty? But where is the dignity in that line of thinking? The thoughts are persistent and wearying. All he wants is a little clarity, and a chance to feel good for a change. He wants to leap over this moment to the next.

“Hey,” says a man sitting on the curb.

“Hey,” says Karl.

“Better watch yourself.” The man rises unsteadily to his feet. He pats the pockets of his worn coat. “Lots of punks around here,” he says.

“Really?” Karl doesn’t see anyone.

“Got a cigarette?”

Karl holds out a Camel Light and the man nearly falls into him when he reaches for it. Beneath the man’s whiskers are a dozen scabs from his chin to his right ear. “Got a match?”

When Karl steps closer he is overcome by the smell of shit. He tries to hide his revulsion, but the man isn’t looking at Karl’s face anyway. He says, “Got a couple of bucks you can spare?”

“Not this time,” says Karl.

“My ass is about froze off.”

“Sorry.” Karl backs away, his hands in the air as if to say there’s nothing he can do. When he turns, he can see the blue and white electric Pepsi sign

above his oasis. He wills his hands into his pockets, wills his way backward through the glass door, wills ... *enough already*. He steps up to the register and asks for the cheapest vodka on the shelf. He sets his change on the counter. He has fifty cents to spare, and when he exits the store, is it will, or the felt absence of it, that guides him to the pay phone?

She won't be up, but she might get up. He is relieved to hear his name still included on the family message. His hand is shaking, the cold receiver shaking against his ear. He waits.

"Hello," she says. "Hello?"

"Betty."

"Oh no," she says. "Karl, where are you?"

"Betty."

"You need to go right back to the group home."

"Yes," he says. "Yes honey, I know."

"Right away, before anyone knows you're gone."

"Yes," he says, but the sound is trapped inside his throat.

"I'm going to call there, Karl. I'm going to ask for you. Fifteen minutes."

Weeping comes over him like a convulsion.

"Karl?"

"I just needed."

"What, Karl? What?"

"I just needed."

"Karl?"

"Your voice."

"I know, Honey. I know."

He puts the receiver back in its cradle. Several paces ahead he hands off his brown paper package to the man on the curb. “Merry Christmas,” he says.

§ § §

Betty can't go back to sleep. She doesn't want to laugh—that funny impulse lately—and she really, really doesn't want to cry. No popcorn, thank you. No TV. She might like to write, if she could see her way through Amber's predicament, if she had a clearer sense of what she'd like to have happen. When she'd started it was fun, something new to think about, and it was as if the scenes were appearing before her eyes and she couldn't scribble fast enough, but now it's all become opaque and oppressive.

She doesn't want to be alone, but who would she call? She can't help thinking of Karl, one of his familiar tirades. “We're all scared shit-less of one another,” he'd often said. “That's capitalism and the corporate media at work. Your neighbors are arsonists, pedophiles, serial killers. Stay in and play with your toys. Buy bigger and better. If you need company, watch Seinfeld, or Cheers. Watch Friends!”

All her friends were really his friends, and where are they now? She doesn't want to be alone and now, bless them, comes a pair of feet that look like small flippers with the socks sliding down so. Here come hands pushing through a curtain, a mop of blond hair, eyes squinting against the kitchen light.

“Did the phone wake you up, Sweetie?”

She doesn't expect an answer. She sweeps Ryan in her arms and carries him to the sofa. They snuggle under an afghan and she enjoys the warmth of him. Now she hears the creak of the wooden ladder; it is Cassie descending from her loft bed.

“What’s going on?” Cassie says, knuckles pressed deep into her eyes.

“Your father called.”

“Oh my god. How is he?”

Betty lifts the afghan and makes space for Cassie beside her. Cassie sits.

“I don’t know,” she says. She puts an arm around Cassie’s shoulders and with her fingers gently examines her long hair. “He misses us.”

“I miss him, too.” Cassie says.

“I thought you did. You haven’t said a word about it.”

“I didn’t want to say it to you,” Cassie says.

They sit quietly for two minutes, staring at the black screen of the television. Cassie’s words have made Betty sadder, but also relieved. *At least she feels she can tell me now.* Cassie leans forward and says, “Looks like nut head went back to sleep.”

“I know. I could feel it.”

“Your weight changes when you die,” Cassie says. “It’s like your soul is leaving your body, or something.”

“I’ve heard that, but it’s never been proven,” Betty says.

“Mrs. Robinson said it in class.”

“Since when do you listen to your teachers?”

“I just think it’s true.”

Betty says in a mildly inquisitive tone, “Do you think smoking cigarettes is bad for you?”

“I don’t know,” Cassie says. Betty feels her pull away, just an inch, but tensely. She pulls Cassie back and squeezes. She thinks, I’ve never been as old as I am right now. My daughter has never been this old. Every moment between us is a frontier, a cliff.

“You know,” Betty says. “You know plenty.”

They sit quietly for another minute.

“Mom?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“I’m going to put nut head in his bed,” Betty says.

“Are you going to visit Dad tomorrow?”

“If he’s not in some kind of trouble.”

“Can I come with you?”

“I was hoping you would.”

The class is debating the merits of good taste vs. the need for verisimilitude. Would the rapist really have said, “I’m going to do you?” Would he have said, “Yeah baby, I’m doing you now?” Would the victim have said, “Stop doing me?”

To make matters worse, the author insists that that’s how it really happened. And McCauley forms a T with his hands for Timeout. “It doesn’t matter what really happened,” he says. “The story makes its own demands.”

Betty copies his remark in her notebook

“Do you have something new for us?” McCauley says.

Betty clears her throat:

Amber steps off the sidewalk through a gap in a hedge onto someone’s front lawn. She can see a man’s silhouette in the light of a street lamp filtered through the bare branches of an overhanging elm. It’s Spike all right; broad shoulders, trim waist, baggy pants. He hasn’t shaved the fuzz off his chin. He stops walking to light a cigarette. He takes two steps and stops again.

“Is someone there?”

Amber shuffles backward and brushes the head of a shovel with her foot. She catches the handle before it falls, and she pulls it tight against her chest.

“Is someone there?”

“Someone’s here, Spike,” she says.

Who are you?”

She steps out onto the sidewalk into the dim light. She can’t read the expression on his face, but she can hear anguish in his voice. “This isn’t funny,” he says. “Who are you?”

“You can’t hurt me Spike,” she says. “Not again.”

He steps forward abruptly.

She brandishes the shovel like a spear.

“Amber,” he says. “You’re freaking me out.”

“How do you know I’m Amber?” she says.

“Because.”

“How do you know?”

He looks down at his feet.

Amber feels her knees go weak. Now what? “How do you know? How do you know I’m not her?” she says.

He sighs, shakes his head, and tugs at the hair on his chin. “Okay, okay, I get it. If I had an identical twin, I’d probably try to pull some Patty Duke bullshit, too.”

She raises the shovel and aims the point at his throat...

§ § §

Can he remember having a functioning memory? It seems to function somewhat differently lately. A part of the condition, he’s been told, is denial of the condition.

So, what if he stops denying it? What if he embraces it? He still doesn't know what's fucking real and what's not. Once late at night, not so long ago, he'd been standing on his front lawn barefoot, relieving himself on the acacia bush and Betty had locked the door. He had to come in through a window, scraped the top of his head, fell asleep on the couch. Once, he'd called her a cunt, or she'd said he had. Did she ever remember the names she'd called him? Did she ever apologize? Once, twice, many times, he'd wanted to have a family picnic at the coast or a hike through the redwoods up to Bullfrog Pond, but she wouldn't. His wants were always frivolous or selfish, even when they were not. Once, he remembers, his head was in her lap, she was examining the scrape on his scalp, he was crying.

Did he betray her? Did she betray him? Or is there a third alternative? Were they both betrayed by some middle-class fantasy of happiness? Is all their suffering and discord the result of diminished desire? Failed imagination? False consciousness? One thing is certain: she believed in him, and now she doesn't.

"I want to congratulate Karl," Penny says at morning meeting. "He is finally off restriction."

"Way to go, Karl."

"Good going, man."

And another thing's for sure: he's stopped believing in himself. Is it necessary to go back, strip off the covers as they say, identify the misunderstandings, the lies. Is it even possible?

"I feel so happy for you, Karl."

"Thanks," he says, flatly. And because there seems to be an expectation for more, he adds, "I'm tired."

§ § §

They're driving east on River Road, Betty and Cassie in front, Ryan in back in his car seat. It is mid-afternoon, the last traces of fog have finally evaporated, and the sky is clear blue above the golden vineyards. The kids are clean, well-combed, and it's funny, Betty thinks, because she's reminded of her childhood in Wyoming; she, her mother and her father in their church clothes driving across the county to visit Grandma. Oh, such energy, such attention was given to making a respectable appearance. It's funny after so many years and so many changes; a certain few defining images of *family* persist. Try now to picture Cassie in a home-made, knee-length gingham dress. Try to picture Karl at the helm in a tweed coat and tie—now that's funny.

Betty didn't sleep well last night or the night before and her mind is rummaging. She gives her head a shake. "We can't stay long with Daddy, you know."

"I know," Cassie says.

"I know," Ryan says. "Why?"

"Because I have to go to class and you have to go to your aunt and uncle's."

"Can Daddy come?" says Ryan.

"No, but we can come see him again on Sunday." Under her breath, Betty adds, "If he behaves himself."

"I don't think you should say things like that," says Cassie.

"Maybe I should keep it to myself."

"Does Daddy have behavior?" says Ryan.

"You bet he does."

Cassie leans forward and turns up the volume on the radio. "Sounds like the man is talking about Rosa Parks," she says.

“That’s Jesse Jackson,” Betty says. “Your father and I saw him speak in Washington D.C. years ago. We sat on a huge lawn with thousands of other people. It was our honeymoon.” She laughs. “Or that’s what we called it.”

“And Daddy was arrested, right?”

“Not that time, but he spent plenty of nights in jail. I got locked up a few times myself,” she says, “before you were born.”

“Really?” Cassie says.

“We had high hopes,” Betty says. “Long ago.”

“We’ve been hearing about Rosa Parks in school,” Cassie says. “I don’t get it. I mean, she wouldn’t give up her seat on a bus. Why is that such a big deal?”

“It took courage,” Betty says.

“I guess,” Cassie says, “but lots of people have courage, don’t they?”

As Betty turns onto E Street, two blocks from the group home, she feels suddenly utterly unprepared. She swallows hard. Why hadn’t she thought this all through? Why hadn’t she come up with a plan? With an unhelpful rush of adrenaline, she leans forward as if to listen closely to the radio, but all she can hear is blood beating in her ears. “You should ask your father,” she says.

Betty pulls the car to curbside. She examines her face in the rear-view mirror. Cassie unbuckles her seat belt, waits for her mother to open her door before she releases the latch on her own. Ryan announces, “I have to pee.”

Cassie frees Ryan from his car seat as Betty retrieves a carton of cigarettes and a small tin of foot powder from the trunk.

Penny with the jangling keys happens to be crossing the lot and greets Betty at the picket fence. “I see you’ve brought your children.”

“Yes.”

“That’s a bit of a surprise. We don’t often have children visit.”

Betty nods, barely.

Penny stands squarely between Betty and the entrance to the group home. She smiles long and hard at Cassie, then Ryan.

Betty says, “Ryan has to use the bathroom.”

“Follow me,” Penny says. “All visitors have to sign in. And it looks like you’ve brought some things for Karl. I’ll have to check those out.”

Betty can feel the curious glance of Cassie at her side like a jet of hot air against her cheek. Her face is set, neck and shoulders rigid, as if her body has decided to prepare for a roller coaster ride. She is not certain what she is afraid of, but she doesn’t like the scrutiny, and doesn’t like the assumptions she knows have been made about her. Maybe there’s meth in the foot powder! Is that what they think?

Cassie whispers, “What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Nothing. What do you mean?”

“You could chill out a little, that’s all.”

Ryan runs through the open door to a large metal cabinet with file folders and boxes of medicine in bubble packs. “Is this Daddy’s new house?” he says.

“This is the office,” says Penny. “Not a place for children.”

Marvin appears behind Betty and looks over her shoulder into the office.

“You can see I’m busy, can’t you?” says Penny. “If you want to do something useful, let Karl know his family is here.”

Marvin backs away, expressionless, or almost so. Betty spies a hint of embarrassment. She thinks, there is a man who’s swallowed his pride so often he barely knows the taste of it.

Karl appears. His hair is wet. "I was in the shower," he says. "You're here. I was just in the shower." He pulls a chair away from the kitchen table; then slides it back again. "I wasn't sure you were coming."

"Hi Daddy," says Ryan. He runs through the office doorway and hugs Karl's knee. "Is this your new house? Can we live here, too?"

Karl bends low and wraps his arms around Ryan, but only briefly because Ryan squirms loose and runs down a corridor, searching.

"Hi Dad." Cassie gives her father a long hug. "You shaved your sideburns."

"I did."

"You look so much younger."

"Do I?" Karl is looking over the top of Cassie's head at Betty in the office doorway. Betty averts her eyes, appears to be studying her cuticles.

"Come with me?" says Karl.

"Living room or picnic table," calls Penny from the office.

"I know," Karl says.

"House rules," Penny says. "Not in the bedroom."

Karl says, "I know."

Betty says, "What do you think we're going to do, fuck in front of the children?"

Karl looks at Betty, stunned.

"God, Mom," says Cassie, "I can't believe you just said that."

Betty asks Karl for a cigarette.

"You don't smoke, Mom," says Cassie.

"Go look after your brother," she says.

Karl and Betty step outside onto a porch. With trembling hands, he produces one of his Camel Lights.

“I can’t stand it, Karl. I don’t want to be here.”

“I know. Neither do I,” he says.

“I don’t know what I want,” she says. “I try to know, but I can’t.”

He reaches for her hand, but she pulls back.

“Can you accept that?” she says.

Cautiously he embraces her, pulls her to him. “Do I have a choice?”

§ § §

Cassie walks down a corridor in search of Ryan. She finds him in the living room, alone, with a television remote in his hand. He clicks rapidly through the channels, and though she sees a program she’d like to watch, she knows it’d be too much work to persuade him.

§ § §

Out on the porch, Karl feels self-conscious holding Betty because she is straight and firm as a plank, and she does not hug back. He holds her anyway. He whispers, “I only wish I could have seen Penny’s face when you—”

Betty lets out a sudden, explosive laugh. “You should’ve seen your face,” she says.

They laugh.

§ § §

When Cassie attempts to grab the remote from Ryan, he tosses it against a wall and it falls behind one of the sofa sectionals. A small piece of plastic has come

loose from the back and the batteries cannot be found. They are stuck with C-Span, a White House press conference, the head and shoulders of Scott McClellan above a podium.

Cassie throws up her hands, then walks outside, where she sees her mother and father now sitting opposite one another. Karl is bent forward, hands in the center of a picnic table, face tilted down. Betty's hands are fastened to the edge of the table, as if she might fall were she to let go.

"Dad," Cassie says, "Mom said I should ask you about Rosa Parks."

"What about her? She was very brave."

"Mom said that, but a lot of people are brave."

"She was a fulcrum."

"I don't think that's a word Cassie knows," Betty says.

"It's like a lever on a machine that makes it go. It's like there was this great big machine, a social justice machine, all fueled up and ready; it just needed to be turned on."

"Huh?" says Cassie.

"There's no question she was brave," Betty says. "Who knew what those cops might have done to her."

"It wasn't just courage though," Karl says.

"Or what some angry bigot might have done to her family," Betty says. One of her hands rises from the edge of the table and gathers the fabric of her collar. "I remember the pictures, that frail little woman, those big men."

"The pictures were important," Karl says. "People doubt what they read and hear, but pictures don't lie."

Cassie nods, but there is still a wrinkle in her brow.

"She was like a picture of dignity," Karl says.

"What's dignity?" says Cassie.

Karl looks at Cassie, then at Betty. One of his hands turns, palm up. He swallows. “I guess I thought I knew,” he says. “I’m learning.”

§ § §

North on Mendocino, west on Third, she’s left Karl alone with his thoughts, his torment, and now she leaves the kids at her brother and sister-in-law’s. Their aunt greets them with kisses in the driveway. Their uncle stands in the door, smiling. The kids seem relieved to be out of the car. Cassie starts toward the house, then returns to lean in Betty’s window, an anxious smile: “It’s going to be okay, Mom.”

Betty’s eyes are thick and shimmering. She wipes them with her sleeve. She nods.

Back to Mendocino, north past College, they’re rattling the sabers again, Iran this time. It’s time for that hundredth monkey to show up. And past time for Betty to make some big decisions. She finds parking on a side street. In class she finds the only remaining seat, in the front row. McCauley smiles when he sees her. He asks her to share what she has.

Spike doesn’t flinch. His eyes rise slowly from the head of the shovel to Amber’s face. He’s neither frightened nor angry. He looks weary. He says in a voice drained of conviction, “I guess if I’d lost my sister, I’d want to kill the person I thought was responsible.”

Now Amber hasn’t a clue what to say or what direction she’d like this—this what—to go in.

He says, “I’m going to sit on the curb and if you want you can knock me over the head with that thing.” He sits. “Or, you can sit next to me and we can talk.”

She doesn’t swing the shovel. She doesn’t sit. She can’t move.

"You might not believe this," he says. "Kari wanted to be like you, but she couldn't. She could never be that good."

"You don't know me, Spike," she says.

"I guess I don't," he says. "I only know what Kari said. She talked about you all the time."

"Yeah right. What'd she say about me?"

"She said you're naturally responsible. She said you always do the right thing because it makes you feel good."

"Bullshit," Amber says. "I'm so tired of—"

"She couldn't be like you, so she had to be different, as different as she could be."

"She was just fine Spike, until you came along."

"No," he says, "of all people, you should know she wasn't fine. She felt like a failure. She told me she could never measure up and she was sick of trying."

"That's why she took drugs! That's why she ran into the river! Is that what you're saying? Are you saying it was my fault?"

"It was her fault. I only blame you for not telling her."

"Telling her what?"

"That you missed her. That you loved her." He sighs again, very heavily this time. "I blame myself, too. Every day. Every night."

She stands in place until the shovel in her hands begins to feel like the weight of the world, until it drops with a clang onto the pavement. A fraction of a second later, Amber drops. Is this what fainting feels like? It can't be. She thinks she hears Spike scrambling to his feet. She thinks she hears him holler, "No, Amber! Not you! Not you!" She thinks she sees his face contorted in pain and only inches from her own. If she is conscious, it is a different kind of consciousness than any she has ever experienced. She feels as if she's passed through a window into some other realm and she's left her body behind. One of his hands falls upon her shoulder and the other brushes her cheek. She cannot move to resist him, if resisting him is

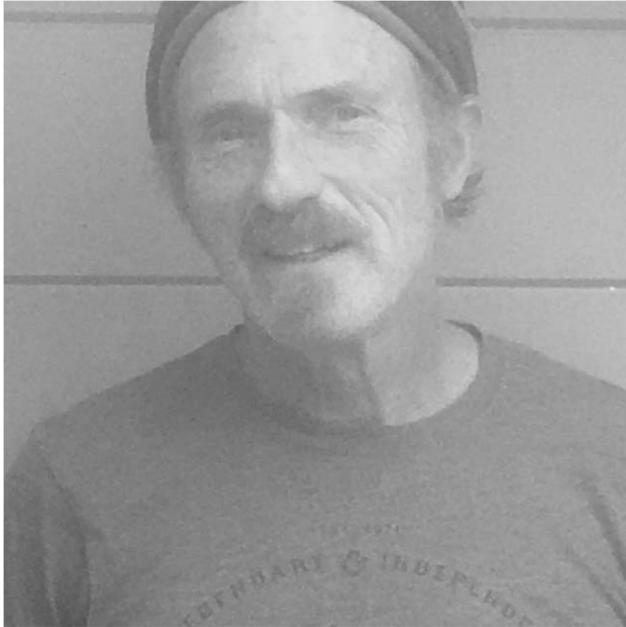
what she wants to do. Her thoughts are coming very rapidly, and she tries to speak, but cannot hear her own words.

Here is what she might have said aloud: "Did you love her, Spike? Did you kill her? Why?" or, as she imagined herself floating back through the window, his warm hand bracing the side of her face, "Tell me, Spike, please, how can we go on?"

In the end, all she can be sure of was that he lifted her off the ground and carried her home, and this, Spike's unsatisfactory response: "My lawyer told me not to answer any questions."

Betty closes her notebook. She sighs. It's been a long, draining day and nothing seems clearer. She'll try again with Karl because she knows too well how to live without faith, because, she thinks, it is better to believe him and be wrong than not to believe him. *How can we go on?* Stubbornly. With dignity. With hope. We'll go on like Rosa Parks did. Exhausted. Uncertain. One ordinary act of courage after another.

She waits for the groans and protests of her classmates to subside before she says, "I know. I'm sorry. I have trouble with endings."



Daniel Coshnear works at a group home and teaches through UC Berkeley Extension. He is author of two story collections: *Jobs & Other Preoccupations* (Helicon Nine 2001), Willa Cather Award winner, and *Occupy & Other Love Stories* (Kelly's Cove Press 2012). In 2015 he won the Novella Award from Fiction Fix (now Flock) for *Homesick Redux*. His newest story collection, *Separation Anxiety*, will be published in 2021 by Unsolicited Press.