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Not Renata

Now and then, he'd come into my head, unbidden, unconjured, the way long-ago boyfriends will do, if you aren't careful. I'd be chewing on my pencil or a fingernail, say, or looking at the blue California sky while pumping gas into my car, and there he'd be, lying on a three-legged, rummage-sale couch in our graduate school apartment of twenty years before. (The fourth leg was a cookbook my mother had given me. "Hope this will inspire you," she said.) In this picture he's as still as a painter's model, cigarette smoke veiling him like stage fog. I peer at him, this secretive, cowardly boy I once loved, and then the picture dissolves and I'm inhaling gasoline fumes or listening to Mrs. Ramirez or Mr. Kuhn or someone else at the senior center tell me a story. I work with the elderly. With the crabby and unpopular Mr. Kuhn, I sometimes play checkers, waiting for the moment he says "King me!" and stirs me from my daydreams.

The last time my former boyfriend appeared before me, I was in the dentist's chair. The dentist, who was rather cheerful for having to work on a Saturday, was removing a nugget of something from my upper gum, what he was 98 percent certain was an accessory salivary gland that had calcified. But he was going to biopsy it just to be on the safe side. He shot me up with anesthetic. As I lay in the chair, waiting for my mouth to go numb, I thought about Chile, that root-shaped country at the bottom of the world. I was planning a trip there in December. ("Chile?" the querulous Mr. Kuhn asked. "What's so great about Chile?") After the dentist finished with me, I thought I might go buy a new pair of hiking boots. Then my ex-boyfriend floated into view, like a ghost on a litter, his big toe poking through a hole in his sock.

An hour or so later, my mouth still puffy with anesthetic, I was in a bookstore on Point Loma, looking for a guidebook on Chile. I found one and took it into the reading nook. A man in a soiled sea captain's cap occupied the couch, his head dipping and rising as he drifted in and out of sleep. I sat down in a wing chair and read about Chile's lake district, the volcanic craters and glacial *lagos* and waterfalls like wizards' beards. The man in the sea captain's cap began to snore; I saw that he had a welt under his chin. I picked up a quarterly that lay on the table next to me. I was attracted by the photograph on the cover: two pairs of dancing legs, one bare and female, the other blue-jeaned and male. On the back, among the list of contributors, was my ex-boyfriend's name, Peter Sackrider.

I read Peter's contribution, a long, quasi-autobiographical story called "The Hazeletts"

Dog.” It’s set in the late seventies, around the time Peter and I were graduate students in Ann Arbor. It takes place in a leafy suburb of Louisville, where the actual Peter grew up, and it recounts the quasi-fictional Peter’s relationship with his contemporaries Hal and Mary Lee Hazelett, who live down the road from Peter’s parents. When this Peter arrives home from Ann Arbor, we learn from a conversation he has with Mary Lee (a well-bred tease who rejected him some years ago for the bolder Hal) that Peter has recently broken up with a certain Renata. The breakup was precipitated by events of the previous Christmas, which Renata, a Jew whose other identifying marks (if any) go unnoted, spent in Kentucky with Peter. Renata, it seems, took offense at an anti-Semitic remark made by Peter’s potted aunt at a family gathering; she took further offense when Peter didn’t respond to his aunt, and eventually—which is to say, in the next line—she dumped him.

The story goes on for a good thirty pages, exploring triangles (Peter, Hal, Mary Lee; Peter, his mother, Hal), Peter’s moral shortcomings, his doggish longings to be liked, petted, caressed. Renata receives no further direct mention, though the reader recalls her when the narrator recounts an instance of anti-Semitism from Peter’s high school days.

Renata is me, of course, though there are ways in which I’m not Renata, starting with my name. Peter was right to change it. Who would believe a Jewish character called Nora Sue? But it’s a fact, as the story reports, that Peter and I lived together in Ann Arbor for several months, in an apartment above an adult bookstore. He read Keats and swarms of commentators, often while stretched out on that broken-down sofa, and I read William Blake, he who, at the age of four, saw God press his face against a windowpane. It’s a fact, too, that Peter took me to meet his parents at Christmas. He didn’t make up the stuff about his aunt’s anti-Semitic comment—a rather mild one, as such things go—but his failure to respond to her wasn’t the only reason we parted.

Sensation had returned to my mouth; my tongue found the single stitch in my gum, where once there had been that nugget of whatever. I put the quarterly that contained Peter’s story back on the table and got up from my chair. The old sea captain, eyes now at half-mast, said, un-nautically, “Happy trails, missy.” I paid for the guidebook and left the shop. Sunshine flowed down the street, like something poured out of a bottomless bottle. A dry fall breeze rattled the fronds of the palms in the sidewalk planters. Unease nipped at me. I’d lived in California for a decade, but I felt about as permanent as tumbleweed. The stitched-up hole in my gum pulsed.

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I took two Advils, put on my bathing suit, and toted my Keowee half a block down the hill to the bay. The tide was out. A lady and her mannerly dog walked briskly along the beach, as if they were on a mission. Sandpipers skittered away from them.

I set the boat down twenty feet from a young man who sat motionless on a rock, like a gull weighing its options. I fitted the paddle halves together, stowed my fanny pack, removed and stowed my sandals.

"That like a kayak or something?" the young man said, pointing at the Keowee with his head. His hair was cut close to the skull and he had long, narrow sideburns, like stripes on a hot car. He wore camouflage pants and a fatigue-green T-shirt. A tattoo decorated his biceps. He looked about college age. Or maybe he'd gotten loose from one of the military reservations nearby. I smelled reefer, but I didn't see any smoke.

"Yes," I said, feeling the bay lapping at my shins. I zipped my life vest, pulled my baseball cap lower.

"Like for beginners," he said. The Keowee was more stable than a regular kayak—and cheaper, too. My former husband gave it to me some years ago.

"Yes," I said, gripping the paddle, stowing myself in the cockpit.

"Yes, yes, she said yes," the young man said, looking out at the blue bay as if it were his true and only audience. "Have a nice day, Molly Bloom."

All kinds of people live in California. Why not a skinhead with a minor in literature? Or an AWOL soldier who reads the classics in his spare time?

Or maybe he was alluding to a pop song about a Molly Bloom. Pop music was full of yea-saying Mollys, wasn't it?

"Have a nice day, too," I said, sticking my paddle in the water, wondering if he'd be there when I came back. It wasn't my wish to see him again, but I wasn't afraid of him, either. He was just a boy who'd washed up on a public beach, like driftwood, all his complicated feelings worn smooth.

The spot where I'd put in is on an arm of the bay, an inlet staked out by yacht clubs whose members sail in and out on arks made of silk and mahogany. I headed into the bay proper. A following breeze sent me skimming along. The sky was hazy blue, an indolent shade. I drifted, and thought of the autumn skies in the Midwest, where I grew up, and of how sharp the blue became when the temperature dipped; the color was like a shock to the skin.

I got the bottle of Dos Equis out of my pack—something to supplement the Advil. I drank it with my eyes half-closed, hearing the planes taking off from the naval air station on Coronado, the harbor seals barking near the piers of the naval research facility on Point Loma. When I first moved here, a year or so after I divorced, I had trouble sleeping. The constant buzz of aircraft I quickly got used to. It was the seals, with their urpy cries, like cute children in need of attention, that kept me awake. I'd lie in bed, imagining myself an Inuit with a club; I whacked pups and adults alike. I counted slaughtered seals, thousands of them. When I got tired of counting seals, I counted old boyfriends, going back to Billy Leach in fifth grade, shy Billy, who on Talent Day played an almost inaudible version of "When the Saints" on a pocket comb wrapped in a piece of Kleenex.

I drifted, trailing my hand in the bay, seeing my hand on Peter Sackrider's blue-jeaned knee as we sat in his idling Volkswagen, on the narrow, sinuous road that led to his parents' house in Kentucky. Peter had stopped—jammed on the brakes—to avoid hitting a deer and the dog chasing it. They'd shot through the headlight beams like cartoon sketches, almost too fast to be named deer and dog. We'd been driving all day from Ann Arbor. Peter had been tense, untalkative, smoking one cigarette after

another. He *smelled* cranky. I put my hand on his knee and said, "The moment after you nearly get squished by a deer is pleasant, don't you think?" I understood his grumbled "Yes" to be something less than assent.

I was put in the guest bedroom, a floor below Peter's bedroom and that of his sister, who wasn't coming home until after Christmas. "You'll have your own bathroom," Mrs. Sackrider said. The guest room had twin four-poster beds with extra-firm mattresses. On the table between the beds was a glass-bottomed lamp with a frilly shade, a bowl of dried rose petals, and a 1928 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*. When I opened the book, the thin pages released a sweet, genteel smell, like ardor sublimated.

That night, we went caroling. Peter said, "I hope this won't be too weird for you. You're not required to sing, you know."

I doubted I'd find it "weird," unless there was some Southern twist to caroling I didn't know about. I'd gone before, with my friends in Belle Plaine, the northern Illinois town where I was born and raised. I liked those sweet, *lento* songs about a baby being born in the dead of winter.

I was, and am, a Jew, but hardly an observant one. Now and then, my mother, who grew up among Jews in Chicago, took me to the nearest temple, a forty-five minute ride. But at an early age I sided with my father, an unbelieving Irishman who, if he was home on Christmas Eve, took me to church to hear the music. I sometimes thought that Peter, whose interest in practicing his own faith was well hidden, hoped that I, a pert-nosed reddish-blond with an Irish-bumpkin name, would be more "Jewish" than I gave the impression of being. I was his first Jewish girl, and perhaps he thought he wasn't getting the full experience.

"I could mumble the words, if you liked," I said, pulling Peter toward me. We were in the Sackriders' front hall, getting on our coats. He smelled better; he'd taken a shower and changed.

After the caroling, we went to the house of a neighbor called (in Peter's story) Colonel Willborn. There was food in chafing dishes tended by a cocoa-colored man in a white jacket whom Peter seemed to know. Anyhow, they had a conversation. I drank the Colonel's spiked eggnog and talked to Peter's father. Judge Sackrider was thin, modest, unjudgelike. A clump of unkempt gray hair lay on his forehead; white hairs bloomed in his nostrils. When somebody called out to him from across the room—"It's the hanging judge!"—Peter's father touched me on the elbow and said, "Don't tell him my court is a civil one, where hanging is not permitted." Then he went to refill my cup and get himself some nonalcoholic cider.

I talked to the man who had accompanied the carolers with his wheezy accordion, and to a lady whose sweater was crewelworked with leaping harts, and to a bald-headed man who told me that he was one of the Wise Men in a church Christmas pageant. He was the king who brought the Christ child myrrh. He tried to shake the foam at the bottom of his eggnog cup into his gullet. Could you imagine crossing all those deserts on your camel, he said, with a box of gum resin as a baby gift?

The man who had called Peter's father "the hanging judge" put his hand on my back as he passed me in the hall and said, "Excuse me, precious." I talked to a guy

who wore a rumpled cord jacket and had a big, late-seventies mustache and drank beer from a can. This was Hal Hazelett (or the model for him), Peter's old school buddy, who was now a newspaper reporter. He seemed to regret his presence at the party. He hadn't gone caroling. He said he loathed Christmas. Didn't I hate the season, all that piety mixed with greed?

"As a Jew, you mean?" I said.

"You're Jewish?" He squeezed his beer can and made the metal pop.

I confessed that I was, more or less, but that I didn't mind Christmas. In fact, I liked its pagan excesses, all the drinking and eating and sentimentalism, its anti-Puritanism.

At some point late in the evening, the Colonel took me into his study to show me an 1885 edition of *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, which he thought I, a student of English literature, would appreciate. The Colonel, whose title had come to him courtesy of some local honor society, had beautiful white eyebrows that looked as if they'd been licked into peaks by a cat. The silver buttons on his red vest gleamed. Tennyson, the subject of few dissertations where Peter and I went to school, was the Colonel's favorite poet; he knew a number of the poems by heart. To prove it, he recited "The Charge of the Light Brigade," clippety-clop, and then he read one called "Fatima," a love poem full of throbbing and swooning and shuddering. The Colonel was half in the bag, and he read with fervor, closing his eyes as he came down on the end-rhymes. Peter, long-lost, found me leaning against the Colonel's desk, grinning stupidly. I was half in the bag, too.

On the way home—we walked—I turned to Peter and said, "Kiss me, Pierre. Put your tongue in my mouth." We were near the spot where the deer had come bounding across the road.

"Now?" he said, as if a dark road might be an inappropriate place. There was no moon, only stars blinking in the cold, Christmas lights twinkling on bushes up ahead.

"Now would be a good time," I said. I had my hands inside his coat. I felt the baby rolls of flesh above his hips. I slid my hands up to his ribs, placed my thumbs on his nipples. He kept his hands at his sides, as if I were frisking him. "I barely saw you all night."

"I had to talk to all these people, my parents' friends," he said. "They wanted to know if I'm going to be a professor when I grow up."

"And you said?"

"I hemmed and hawed."

"You're slouching," I said, moving my hands around to his lower back. I untucked his shirt and put my fingers on his skin.

"Whew," he said, straightening. He put his hands on my shoulders, as if to balance himself. We looked almost like a boy and girl at their first boy-girl dance.

"Now's the time to kiss me," I said, sliding fingers under his belt, onto his warm hips. When my father went out the door with his saxophone under his arm and his Thelonious Monk beret on his head, on his way to a gig in Elgin or Champaign or Moline, he always said, "Now's the time to kiss me." It was an inside jazz joke—"Now's the Time" being a Charlie Parker tune—as well as a little dart aimed at my

mother, who was not a kisser and hugger. I compensated for my mother. To me, my dad would say, "Thank you for laying your salty peanuts on me."

"I don't think I'm really professorial timber," Peter said, the steam from his mouth almost warming my face. His hands fell from my shoulders, caught on the belt of my coat. "Flipping burgers might be more my level."

I figured this was one of his feints, self-pity rearing (or lowering, I guess) its shaggy head; he wanted me to say that he was a good student, that he should stick it out, finish his Ph.D., put elbow patches on his sports jacket, which did in fact have holes in it. I'd said something like this to him before, without quite believing it. The truth was he was only a decent student. He was diligent, he wrote well enough, but he lacked presence, he wasn't quick on his feet, and he was frightened by audiences larger than one or two. I thought he would be lucky to get a job at a branch of some state college. Still, I was ready to hitch my wagon to his flickery star, follow him to west Texas or wherever, unless of course he preferred to follow me, crackerjack Blake scholar that I was. He was this weakness I had. It wasn't only the sight of him—the small, delicate hands, for instance, or the toe poking out of the sock. Nor was it the fact that he regularly packed a lunch for me to carry to campus—fruit, hard-boiled egg, sometimes a cucumber-and-cream-cheese number (whole wheat bread, crusts trimmed), which he called an Oscar Wildewich.

"Stay in school," I said. My hands were on his bottom. He was vulnerable there. "I don't want to sleep with a fry cook."

But he was looking away, toward the constellations that spun above big old Southern trees on which mistletoe actually grew. I saw that pictures were popping up in his head, slides of the future, and that I was a shadowy figure he didn't know what to do with. Even with my hands on him, I couldn't keep him near me.

"You still haven't kissed me," I said, "even though we're standing right under the aerial parasite that the Druids were so fond of."

"Huh?" he said, reaching into his coat for his cigarettes.

"Mistletoe." I took away his cigarettes.

He kissed me. A dog barked three times and then it was over.

"Thank you for laying your salty peanuts on me," I said.

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I drank the last of my Dos Equis, and pointed the Keowee toward home. I'd drifted while sipping my beer, pulled by the current toward the ocean, and I was now a good two miles from where I'd put in. ("Your mind wanders," Mr. Kuhn has said. "I could beat you blindfolded. King me again.") I paddled toward the shore, where I thought the breeze and chop might be lighter. My arms felt heavy, but I paddled like a regular Trojan for a while. I tried to remember what I had in my refrigerator that I could eat for dinner, but nothing came to mind. A pelican flew overhead, slowly, like something prehistoric.

Christmas Eve, 1978. Peter and I went to the midnight service at his parents' church. Peter hadn't wanted to go, but I'd asked him to take me, and his mother had said, "It

wouldn't hurt to go once a year, would it?" The church, an Episcopal one, smelled of pine boughs and women's furs and candle wax. Peter mumbled the words of the prayers and rolled his eyes at me during the homily, but he went to the Communion rail with his parents. When he returned to the pew, I checked his face for signs of change. He looked slightly flushed and his lower lip seemed to glisten, though perhaps that was only the effect of the lights. I touched his wrist, to see if consuming the body and blood of Christ had altered his pulse. He pulled away before I could get a clear reading.

I didn't know what exactly it was that he wanted to withhold from me, what sore part of him he didn't want me to touch. Unless he thought he was saving himself, tender spot and all, for some future lover. He was like that deer trying to outrun the dog.

That night, after Mrs. Sackrider had filled all the stockings (including one for me) and unplugged the lights on the Christmas tree and drunk her protein drink and set out the breakfast dishes, I went upstairs to Peter's room. I'd not come up the previous night because Peter had discouraged me; he'd said his mother was a night owl and would hear us. He was afraid of his mother. But I got lonely on my narrow guest bed reading my daily dose of Blake scholarship. When I tiptoed past Judge and Mrs. Sackrider's room and mounted the stairs, it had officially been Christmas for two hours.

Peter was still in his church clothes. He'd been wrapping presents. There was a small pile of them on the extra bed, all tied up with silver and green and red ribbons. He was smoking a cigarette—Santa's helper on a break. When I entered the room, he said, "How'd you slip by the sentry?"

"I'm a tricky little vixen." I sat down on the bed with the presents. "Which one is for me?"

"You can't open them until morning," he said. "It's a rule." He stubbed out his cigarette.

"He who desires," I said, "but acts not, breeds pestilence." I shook a box wrapped in green paper.

"I have to write my notes. As Willie Blake said to his girlfriend when she came busting into his room."

"Your Merry Christmas notes?"

"Everybody in my family writes these long notes to go with the presents. They're like testimonials and end-of-the-year requests for forgiveness rolled into one. If you've been a bad boy—if you haven't been a dutiful son or husband or whatever—you say you'll try to be more loving next year. You thank the recipient for her kindness and generosity and forbearance. You downplay the gift itself, because even though it was carefully chosen, it can't stack up to the feelings you have for this person."

He lay back, putting his hands behind his head, and gazed upward. Though he was twenty-seven, he could have passed for seventeen, a lonesome boy bouncing lonesome thoughts off the ceiling. It was this that had attracted me to him initially, though I'd mistaken it for detachment, grad student cool. It turned out that I had to do all the seducing, but this was less work than you might imagine. And for a while he seemed ravenous for me, like a desert saint who'd decided that he no longer wanted to live on bugs and thistles. I'd drawn him out, and he seemed happy about it. There'd been that weekend in a motel on Lake Michigan; the weather was rotten, perfect for our

purposes. And then there were those afternoons in our apartment—pluperfect Midwestern fall afternoons, the skies radiantly blue even through our filmy windows—which we’d spent on our frameless mattress, reading, fornicating, reading. We’d hear the belled door of the porn shop open and shut, and I’d say, “May I help you, monsieur,” and he’d say, “*S’il vous plait*, do you carry *Standing Proud*, by I. M. A. Dick?” We read and listened to deep jazz men and napped, like a grad school couple with a future. Then early one evening, I awakened alone in the dark. Three hours later, he came back, stoned, with half a dagwood sandwich for me, unable to say where he’d been. When the weather turned and the snow started to fall, he began to retreat from me, to his library carrel, to the gym where he shot baskets, to a bar called The Idlewild. Though he continued to pack my lunch and kiss me (but only in the dark), he was remote and fretful about his school work, difficult to stir from his sullenness. I minded that I had to wheedle and tease, but I did it.

“So,” I said, touching a box wrapped in shiny red paper, “the gifts and notes are like expiation for the year’s sins, not straightforward expressions of Christmas joy.”

“Yeah.”

I moved over to his bed. “I have a question,” I said. “When you eat the Communion wafer and drink the wine, do you feel like a cannibal? Happy? Sated?” I undid the knot of his tie.

“It’s a secret,” he said, though he was blushing. I pulled off his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, and kissed his belly button, an innu with dark hairs swirling around it. He kept his eyes on the ceiling, his hands under his head. He swallowed a couple times, a sound like water lapping against the side of a boat. He wanted to resist me, but he couldn’t muster the will. I unzipped his pants. I stood up and took my nightgown off. I said, “The nakedness of woman is the work of God.”

“Could you close the door all the way?” he said. “*S’il vous plait*.”

“You’re supposed to say, ‘The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.’” I closed the door. There was an old Cincinnati Reds pennant on the back of it. “Boo, Reds,” I said. I was a Cubs fan.

He didn’t laugh. “And maybe turn off the light, too.”

I did as he asked. The dark was thick. I took everything off him. He was naked as a fish in black water, there but not there.

At some point, I said, “I’ll stifle my cries of pleasure, so your mom won’t hear us.” He didn’t laugh.

Later, when I said “Merry Christmas,” he said, “I need to tell you something.” He had on his most solemn voice.

“You could put it in your note to me,” I said, “if it’s not too terrible. You didn’t go cow-tipping with old Barnes, did you?” Old Barnes was his advisor.

He didn’t laugh. “I slept with this guy, this biologist, a postdoc, he’s studying bioluminescence in fungi or something. He’s British—from England, I mean. Durham. It was a one-night stand. Or briefer than that, really. So ‘slept’ would be inaccurate, I guess.”

I laughed a little. I couldn’t help myself. Perhaps it was the way he described the man, citing his academic credentials and nationality, as if it mattered that he studied

fungi instead of quarks, as if it mattered that he was English instead of Filipino. Or maybe it was the punctilious way he qualified the experience, as if he were saying that the meal he'd just eaten was only a snack, if looked at properly. Anyway, laughter seemed more appropriate than shock or hurt, though I was of course hurt. I meant to sound only curious when I said, "Did you fuck him or did he fuck you?" I pictured something hasty and untender, the biologist screwing Peter and then hurrying back to his lab to check his light-emitting fungi.

He was silent. I kept my head on his shoulder. He was warm, blood was being supplied to his head via his ticking carotid, but nothing issued from his mouth.

"So, what's he like? Is he a mesomorph, ectomorph, what? What are his hobbies?" I touched Peter's earlobe; it was soft, like baby's flesh.

"I don't know, Nora Sue." It always surprised me when he said my name; something in me sprung to attention. "He was just this guy I met at The Idlewild."

"What's his name?"

"Martin."

"Will you be making sandwiches for Martin next semester?"

"No." But he didn't sound positive. Maybe he'd lied about the number of times he'd slept with Martin. I turned on the night-table light so I could see him better. "Queer men come on to me sometimes. And I was drunk. And I guess I'd always wanted to know what it felt like."

"It must be hard to tell what it feels like when you're drunk."

"I wasn't totally drunk, actually." He gazed at me. His eyes, greenish-brown, like the woods in early spring, were clear about his desires: he wanted me to understand and comfort him, and he wanted to be released from whatever obligations he thought he had to me.

"I can move out of the apartment, if you want," he said. "I'll sign the lease over."

"Our beautiful apartment above the porn store?" I felt a rush of adrenaline, anger, and I rolled on top of him, like a wrestler, a lady wrestler with hard little tits and chewed-down fingernails. "I don't know why I don't want you to move out. I must be stupid."

"Sorry," he said, searching for his breath as I pressed on his chest.

"You can go write your notes now," I said, rolling off.

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On Christmas morning, Peter thought he saw a bluebird flying across the yard. His mother said she hadn't seen a bluebird in years; DDT had killed most of them off. Probably what he saw was an indigo bunting. Peter found a bird guide in his parents' library, and, after studying the pictures, said, "I think I'm right, but I don't want to argue with her."

"Save your breath for the important issues," I said.

We ate brunch and opened presents. I gave Peter four pairs of socks and a book. He gave me a black cashmere scarf. In his note he joked about the multiple uses of a scarf—neckwear, gag, blindfold, garrote, magician's prop—but he didn't thank me

for my forbearance or compare me to a rose or say that the scarf was a trifling representation of his feelings for me.

I called my father in Chicago (he'd divorced my mother when I went off to college) and my mother in Belle Plaine. She said I didn't sound good, as if I hadn't been eating. I said I had been eating; for brunch I'd had cheese grits and sweetbreads, a Christmas tradition at the Sackriders'. She asked if I was ever going to come home again—I'd seen her only that summer—and I said I would. She said I could bring my boyfriend.

A half hour later, I threw up the grits and sweetbreads. Peter smoothed my hair. He kissed me on the corner of my mouth. He was trying to be noble. He brought me crackers and ginger ale. He said I could skip his aunt's party if I wanted to.

If I had skipped the party, I wouldn't have heard the anti-Semitic remark that Peter failed to respond to, and Peter and I might have survived a while longer as a couple. Into the next day, at least. But I had an anthropological curiosity about Peter's world, and so I went, woozily, into the bush, to Aunt Helen's house.

Aunt Helen lived in a large brick house on a bluff above the river, where she and Judge Sackrider, her brother, had grown up. There were two stone dogs flanking the steps to the front porch; they had iron rings in their mouths, which you could hitch your horse to, if you happened to ride up on one. Inside, there were four real dogs, including two Irish wolfhounds whose collars were trimmed with bells and Christmas ribbon. The wolfhounds and a dachshund and a small, ungroomed ball of hair barked ferociously when we entered. "I see you have the welcome committee out," Peter's father said to Aunt Helen.

"I let the wolfies out of their cage for Christmas," she said, taking a cigarette from her mouth. "Come in, come in." She was tall and bosomy and had the long Sackrider nose. Her voice was a nasal cackle, tobaccoey. She owned a gift shop—jewelry boxes, angels hand-carved in Italy, high-end baubles—but the shop was mostly a lark. She lived on the money her parents and late husband had left her.

The living room was vast, with fifteen-foot ceilings. The furniture was old and European, the Orientals thin and frayed. The Steinway, which a little girl dressed in red velvet was playing, was out of tune. The room was cold, except near the fireplace, which was large enough to roast an elk in. I stood next to the fireplace with Peter and the wolfhound named Seamus, who seemed to have been assigned to me. When Peter went to get some food, Seamus stayed at my side, his gray head pressed against my hip.

Seamus and I wandered over to the piano. Judge Sackrider was there, along with his sister and the man who had played the accordion at the caroling party. (He was a cousin of some sort.) Colonel Willborn, who had taken over at the piano, was attempting to play what sounded like "Good King Wenceslas," but a dead key and several flat ones crossed him up.

"You need to get this thing fixed," Colonel Willborn said to Aunt Helen.

Peter appeared at my side, with a plate of ham and biscuits. "My aunt makes these herself," he said, placing a biscuit in my palm; it was a hard little wafer with two rows of fork-tine perforations in the top. "They're called beaten biscuits. You have to beat the hell out of the dough before you bake it. You put it through these medieval-

looking steel rollers a hundred times, until the dough pops and screams for mercy.”

“I need to get the whole damn house fixed,” Aunt Helen said to Colonel Willborn. She brushed something off the front of her ski sweater, adjusted her bifocals. “I had the furnace man out here the other day, and he told me I was making all the sheiks in Arabia happy with the way my furnace sucks up oil.” She took a swallow of whatever was in her tall glass. “And I got that old Jew plumber practically on retainer. I don’t know how many shekels I’ve given him over the years. And somebody wants a couple thousand to shoot insulation into the damn walls.”

Peter’s mouth was full of ham and biscuit when his aunt made the comment. He stopped chewing and glanced at me. His glance contained embarrassment, but I knew that he wasn’t going to say anything to his aunt. It wasn’t his style to make a stink, or even to file an objection of the mildest sort. (In a restaurant, he’d eat what he hadn’t ordered rather than send it back.) And at least she hadn’t said “old kike plumber” or something. He resumed chewing; he had to finish what was in his mouth. Life was going on. Peter’s father and the accordionist were talking about Jimmy Carter’s brother, Billy, and his beer label. Over by the buffet, a woman was laughing. Colonel Willborn was telling Aunt Helen that Mrs. Willborn used a blind fellow to tune their piano; the blind fellow was inexpensive and good. The Colonel winked at me, his white eyebrow descending.

I gave Seamus my biscuit.

✱

“The fucking defroster isn’t working,” Peter said, wiping the windshield with his forearm. We were on a road that ran alongside the river, though the river wasn’t visible. Fog had erased from view nearly everything beyond the front bumper. “I feel like a pilot flying on instruments. Except there are no instruments on this car.” He was hunched forward, his nose near the glass, both hands squeezing the wheel. I saw him fifty years hence, an old man, peeping through small, round spectacles, his hair still hiding the rims of his ears, his mouth a slot into which you put a dollar and get a grunt in exchange. The woman in the passenger seat—he’d marry once or twice, keep his homosexual side secret, believing it to be shameful—would try to humor him and fail.

“Here.” I turned the dial one notch, and air flowed out of the windshield vent. “You didn’t have it on the right thing.”

He grunted and pulled his face back from the glass. Hanging from the edge of his nostril was a bead of moisture, the beginning of a cold perhaps. We traveled through clouds of vapor, the silence disturbed only by the sound of the VW’s toy engine. We might have been aloft. Finally Peter said, “What time did you say your bus left?”

“There’s one at one, and one at two-thirty. The one o’clock is an express.” I was going to Chicago to see my father, and then I was going to Ann Arbor to clean my stuff out of the apartment.

“I don’t think we’ll make the express at this rate,” he said. It was twelve-fifty. The bead of moisture clung to his nose, defying gravity.

I wondered whether I should leave in the apartment the cookbook my mother had given me, the one that served as a sofa leg. Peter would have more use for it than I would, surely. I thought I'd take the toaster, one of our few mutual purchases. We'd gotten it at a yard sale. Toast flew out of it as if launched by a catapult—perfect toast.

Peter said, "I can't see diddly." He downshifted and pulled off the road. Did he want to talk?

The fog seemed even denser here, billowy. The river had to be close. I made out a tree, its branches drooping. A weeping willow? Peter turned off the car and lit a cigarette. He said, "Once I parked here with this girl who ate my draft card. I was a sophomore in college. We were sitting right here, in the grass, talking, and she asked to see my wallet. I gave it to her, and she took my draft card out and wadded it up and stuck it in her mouth like it was a piece of gum." He wiped the drip from his nose, tipped ash into the overflowing ashtray.

"And then what happened? Is that the end of the story?" It exasperated me, the way he told things in bits.

"She gave it back to me. Soaked with her saliva."

"She was making a statement about boys who carried draft cards?"

"Me in particular, I think." He smiled wanly.

I got out of the car. I wanted to see the river. I thought seeing it would clarify my mind somehow. I walked across what seemed to be a picnic ground. The fog licked at me. I smelled the river, its cold basement odors. I descended a bank littered with cans and tree branches. I stood at the water's edge in my Michigan Avenue shitkickers, my traveling shoes, and watched the debris on the river's muddy back go by. I waited for Peter to come stand beside me.

I went back up. He was sitting on the car bumper, hunched forward, watching me. I tightened my scarf, his scarf. His face, as far as I could make it out, said, *Don't hate me for being weak.*

But all I could say was, "Some fog!"

✱

When I landed the Keowee, my skinhead friend had abandoned his rock and was lying in the sand, up near the entrance to the beach. He'd stripped down to his shorts, and was deep into a reefer. I had to walk past him to get to the path that led to the road up to my apartment house. A rose tattoo bloomed on his flat, hairless belly; the rose was crimson, its innermost petals puckered like a tight little mouth and the crimped outer petals flowing away in waves. The stem seemed to begin below the waistband of his shorts. I got a close look because I'd tripped on my sea legs and lost my handle on the Keowee. The boat weighed less than fifty pounds, but after a beer it felt like double that.

"You want a hit?" he said, holding out the reefer, which was on an expensive-looking (ivory?) roach clip. His head was resting against a sea-scoured log. "It'll smooth you out."

“No, thanks. It’s not my cup of tea.”

He lifted himself up on his elbows. The rose rippled, folded in on itself. I thought of Blake’s rose, the worm landing in it, fouling it. “That was a joke, right? Dopehead humor?”

I managed a shrug. Then I noticed the tattoos on his upper arm. By comparison with the rose, these were dull, the work of a bathroom stall artist. One, enclosed in a heart, said, “Mom,” in Gothic letters. The other, up near his shoulder, was a mug shot of Hitler.

He said, “I got the munchies. Maybe I’ll order out.” He tipped his head toward the cell phone sticking out of his basketball shoe. Perhaps he ran a business out of the shoe. “There’s this yuppie pizza place down on Cabrillo. You know the name?”

“No,” I said, lying, hoisting the Keowee. “Have you shown your mom your Hitler tattoo?” Hitler’s oddly cropped bangs and square doodad of a mustache were, I had to admit, nicely rendered.

“Everything you see is my mom’s work. And what you can’t see is hers, too. She has her own shop. I’m her accountant.” He grinned. “You like it, Miss Molly Bloom?”

I started away. What had I been trying to prove to myself by talking to this person, this gaudy anti-Semite lying here at the edge of the continent in his shorts, a boy who had possibly read Joyce, at least the dirty parts?

“Don’t be a stranger,” he said. “Don’t forget to write. Or call. I got an 800 number—1-800-SAY-YESS. Two S’s, like in SS.”

I hauled the Keowee up the hill to my building, put it in my storage space in the underground garage, and took the elevator to my third-floor apartment. I listened to my phone messages (Mr. Kuhn: “If you take me some place good to eat, I’ll play checkers with you again. P.S. The food here stinks”), changed out of my swimsuit, got another beer and a jar of olives out of the refrigerator, and sat on the balcony. The tattooed boy was gone from the beach. A dog was running loose, scattering gulls. I nibbled a salty olive, waiting for the incision in my gum to react, but it didn’t. A military plane took off, its wings flashing in the late sunlight. To the east, beyond El Cajon and Lemon Grove, the air was a smoky Southern California brew. Down below me, a woman pattered in her garden—bougainvillea, pomegranate, oleander, a lemon tree, other things I’d never dreamed about as a girl in the Midwest and still don’t know the names of. Sometimes at night, in between seal barks and planes ascending, I hear fruit fall to the earth. *Thump. Thump.* The tree gives up its burden, and then, a few months later, starts over.