

Getback

A novel in five chapters; mostly set in Valentina, California in the year 1999; written in Sacramento, Shimonoseki, Tokyo and Petaling Jaya; and published by the author.

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Chapter One

The Mission – 1999

There was a cardboard sign above the door of the Mission: Christian Refuge on 23rd Street that read *Abandon All Dope, Ye Who Enter Here*. Will Herrera read it twice, not catching the pun the first time. He stood on the sidewalk with a scowl of concentration tightening his lips in the cold air, checking the address of the Mission against the blue ink scrawl on the palm of his hand. He hesitated to step inside but could not walk away: as chary as he was to get involved with some holy-roller charity program, his wallet was empty, his stomach howling—he couldn't shun a free meal.

Since Will couldn't see through the papered-over windows, he had no way of knowing that, within, a stew had already been served and was being shoveled down gullets at that very moment; its quality, or at least edibility, would determine whether Rodney Toth would be thrown out of the program today. One of the inmates there, a former Hells Angel called Jacob, had woken Rodney just before the five a.m. reveille with a boot to the ribs—Rodney would later find a bruise there—and like friendly disaster incarnate had snickered, “Fool, you're so fucked. You'll never make it.”

Rodney's eyes were open in an instant. “Dang!” he croaked, staring into Jacob's spotty, banana-colored teeth and wondering what on earth the oily skinhead was talking about. The faint light of early morning traced pale grey perimeters around the windows of the Mission's front room, where the other recovering junkies rolled from their beds and patted pockets for morning cigarettes. Rodney lay straight as a rail in his bunk, wakefulness slow to arrive; then it came to him. The rules at the Mission were hard, and Rodney's job for the day—to slap together a morning meal to feed around twenty hungry guys—had been assigned, as usual, as an inviolable condition of his continuing to live there. His first thought was that he'd overslept and blown his deadline, but that turned out not to be the problem.

That week, Joe Cholula had scored an imposing slab of beef, as he acquired most of what the inmates at the Mission subsisted upon, picking it up at the sort of don't-even-ask discount that three decades in the favors-for-favors dope trade could make available. The meat sat in the walk-in freezer in the kitchen, hard as iron; as part of the meal, Rodney was to have defrosted it, an operation that would have taken all night—had he known. The first he heard of it was when Jacob, in a concerned gloat, clued him in as Rodney shimmied into his jeans and brushed his teeth with his finger.

“It's a simple concept, fool,” offered Jacob, to whom any bad news was a ‘simple concept’: “You're in deep shit.” Jacob and Marlon, a vet with only one foot, loafed in the doorway of the kitchen, leaning against the jamb to watch Rodney peel carrots with a steak knife at the long stainless steel kitchen counter—both men drawling comments with an air of having nothing to do but bust Rodney's balls and all the livelong day to do it.

“You don't pull this off, Joe's going to hand your ass to you,” observed Marlon.

“One more Okie motherfucker's going to be living on the river,” added Jacob with an absent crack of the wrist. “In a cardboard *chapeau*.”

Rodney would not rise to their baiting. “*I know, brother, I know.*” He beckoned. “Tell you what, though, dude—if you could fill up that one pot right there with water, that'd be a major help. About halfway up.” Before Rodney had finished speaking, he was alone in the kitchen. Satisfied to work unharassed, he bent again to his carrots, which he peeled and sliced as madly as if he had fingers to spare. He was habitually hyperkinetic: anything worth doing was worth going hells-bells on; also, he didn't

want to look like a loser—he didn't want the guys to see him fail at a job. This probably motivated him more than the threat of ejection from the program. True, Rodney only had to make a bad job of it to be homeless again by nightfall—*Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire*, read one of the many cardboard signs posted around the Mission; and he'd be stupid not to avoid losing out on a rent-free bunk and two hot meals a day—but nevertheless he knew from experience how to live on nothing and had no real fear of hitting bottom, in the way of a fellow who'd been through the wringer already.

Scuttlebutt got around that the coming breakfast would make or break Rodney's chances in the program; the other junkies in the place passed the time cracking jokes at Rodney's red-alert cooking. "If he's not in there tearing down the walls, Rod's doing some goddamn *cooking*," intoned Marlon. From the kitchen they heard Rodney yelp as something heavy and metallic struck the floor, which got a laugh. Then Joe Cholula announced the morning prayer, and everybody gathered in and quieted down.

There remained the problem of the meat, which sat now wrapped in paper on the cutting board. Rodney had taken a mighty swing at it with a meat cleaver, jarring himself to the teeth but not making a dent in it, and retreated. Now he eyed it adversarially as he assembled the makings of a stew and tossed them into the large pot he most often used for mess duty. Faced with an obstacle he had no idea how to surmount, Rodney said to himself, "Shoot, I better just crank it, man." He fired up the gas range and dropped the entire frozen slab into the pot, where it plopped like a boulder. This would have been a daring gambit indeed for someone who knew more about cooking than Rodney, but in his ignorance he knew not how cavalierly he was courting indigestibility.

At just the moment that Rodney was ladling out his stew for the judgement of the others, Will was ambling up 23rd Street toward the Mission. The morning sun, bright but not yet warm, shone horizontally through the gaps between the warehouses on the opposite side of the street to illuminate the Mission; it wasn't much to look at, being only a converted pizza-by-the-slice diner on a decaying block not far from Midtown. The outer walls were a patchwork of gray and off-white where graffiti upon graffiti had been painted over—which distinguished the building from its neighbors, where nobody had bothered to blot out the urban murals. Apart from the hand-stencilled motto above the door, its pun so corny that Will was not comfortable understanding it, the Mission: Christian Refuge was unremarkable; Will could imagine nothing as fancy as a 'rehabilitation clinic' being housed here. At best it might have been mistaken for a tidy squat, or a clubhouse for mad bombers.

Will glanced back up 23rd Street toward the northeast corner of Garfield Park, where a spray of foliage brightened the concrete drab of the block. People were scarce at that hour. A few cars slid past, their drivers cradling paper Starbucks cups or fussing in the rearview mirror with persistent cowlicks. He again considered heading back home; the growl in his stomach was at war with his trepidation at walking into what could be, for all he knew, a Bible-banging Narcotics Anonymous meeting with thin vegetable soup served in paper cups at the end. He'd heard a bit about the program from a former housemate called Tim Thompson, who had told him of "this one place by the train tracks... free meals and shit... for guys only, and you got to be clean... hella military shit, curfews and rules and shit..."

Will pushed open the glass front door, which was opaque with newspaper, and found himself staring into a confused mess of clattering dishes and loud talk, the air laden with acrid tobacco smoke and the remnant scent of an onion-heavy beef stew. The meal he had come for had vanished, but he had no time to process this fact and make his exit before he was corralled by an officious, diminutive guy wearing blue sweatpants and a gray-shot handlebar mustache whose brief and skittery welcome speech gave way to a fast hustle into the kitchen, where Will found himself, quite against his wishes, roped into

his job of the day—because at the Mission, everyone had a job every day, inmate or visitor, first time or not.

Will was scrubbing plate after plate from a stack of greasy flatware at the stainless steel sink, his arms elbow-deep in steaming, soapy water, considering whether he'd lose any future claim to the food at the place were he to slip out the back door—of course he would—when a tall guy with a throaty drawl materialized from the front room to lounge against the counter, smoke a rollie and chew the fat.

"It's typical," chuckled Rodney. "You put tweakers in charge of anything, the simplest job, it don't matter. Haywire, brother. Everything goes haywire."

"Right." Will, on guard against the overdriven earnestness of Rodney's manner, lobbed him noncommittal replies.

"That hunk of meat's just sitting in there, nobody says nothing to me. Shoot. But I must have beginner's luck. That's the only explanation. By the time them suckers scraped their bowls clean, they was all saying it was the best meal they ever ate at this place. Can you believe that?"

Will had no grounds to disbelieve it; he hadn't tasted a bite. "Man, I only got here ten minutes late, and that shit was straight up gone." He did his best to match Rodney's conversational intensity, speaking with roughly double his normal enthusiasm, which came to less than a tenth of Rodney's; he was doing his level best to look interested.

"Anyway, I'll give you good odds on hanging with the program here, seeing you missed the food but didn't bail on the work." When Rodney chuckled, he made a low, hitching noise; he seemed to Will to be chuckling not at something that was funny, but that *ought* to be funny. "Not everybody can hang with the regimen here."

"Right."

Rodney seemed friendly enough, but something about him was off-center. All of his *right on, brother* and *gee gawl* talk sounded like an affectation that had grown by dogged repetition to a habit of speech. He looked and pronounced like an Okie, not an uncommon sight in Valentina, an urban enough city nevertheless situated in northern California's rural Central Valley; he had a coppery tan on his forearms and enough length of bone in his rangy, active frame to stand half a head taller than Will; beneath his over-animated eyebrows, his eyes were set close on either side of the narrow jut of his nose; he wasn't exactly ugly, but was rather the sort of knocked-at-the-edges guy to whom estimations of ugliness don't apply. His face, like a billboard, seemed oversized and overdone, too easy to read. It was even intrusive, and could have been taken as a parody of expressiveness. Rodney was either uncommonly frank and urgent, or he was an insincere screwball.

Rodney blew smoke from his nostrils and said, "So, yeah, being late. Up here they run a tight ship, dude. You snooze, you lose." When Will made no reply, Rodney asked, "Sleep in?"

"Sort of." In truth, Will had woken in time. Though his one-room studio apartment had little furniture and less decor, with neither TV nor refrigerator by way of household appliances, he had scrounged a digital alarm clock and liked to rise early. But he'd dallied too long near the heater vent in his room, straining to hear the sound it conducted from the next apartment over. So he'd run late. Anyway, it was Will's habit—a bad one, he told himself, but did not mend it—to allow others to persist in misconceptions rather than actively contradict them. "I guess I'm not used to waking up for reveille."

Reveille, in Will's mouth, was ironic. To Rodney it was not.

"Worst part of being a soldier," Rodney agreed. "Army. Seventh Infantry. We fought in Panama, which was, man, what a shit show. You probably won't believe this, but I almost got in the Green Berets—a guy like me, which is like, God help the Green Berets." He chuckled at his own joke; Will tried

to smile. “But they gave me a less-than-honorable discharge because I tested positive for cannabis. And I told them suckers, ‘Shoot, I’m never going to stop smoking, man. Nev-ver.’ Swear the best thing that ever happened to me was getting busted out of the military, brother.”

That word again: *brother*. Will wondered if Rodney was trying to imply some kind of *what-up-my-nigga* interracial camaraderie; or was it a religious thing? Did he expect to be called ‘brother’ in return?

“Really.” Will was a pacifist but was cautious about airing his views among patriotic strangers.

“Sure. I mean, I fought it at the time, since I figured there wasn’t no place else for me to go. But if you come down to it, I could of been blown to bits. That’s pretty much what they were paying us to do. You get wasted, or you waste the other sucker. The way I see it, weed saved my life.” Rodney’s sloppy grin widened—he’d surprised himself, and liked the sound of it enough to say it again: “Weed saved my life!”

“I know plenty of people who say the same thing.” Will’s carelessly splashed a little dishwater onto his canvas-topped sneakers. The furrow between his eyes deepened in annoyance.

“Yeah, but that whole outfit was full of corruption.”

“Your, um, platoon?”

“The whole damn army, pardon my language. I mean, shoot. They said we was in there to whack Noriega, but everybody knew the real score.” As soon as he’d finished a cigarette, Rodney would roll another. Will noticed that he had a one-handed technique for rolling them that looked well practiced. Rodney was a generation older, if looks were any indication, and must have used crank for decades, but he’d held up better than some of the dinosaur tweaks Will had known, the sort of busted-down headcases and jinky white trash with teeth bad enough to make his flesh crawl.

A limping fellow came into the kitchen to fill a mop bucket from the hot water hose behind the sink. After he left, Rodney told Will that he was called Raunch. “He’s all right, though. I’ll introduce you guys later. Just be a little careful.”

“What for?” *Dare I ask*, thought Will.

“Let’s just say Raunch lives way the hell up Gay Street.”

This did not warrant a reply. Will rinsed a spoon.

“Don’t make a difference here, though.” Rodney seemed to feel that the program needed defending. “It’s Christian here, but it ain’t like *church*. We’re on a mission, like the name of the place says. You can be gay, straight, hermo-homo-fag-o whatever. The goal is just, get off dope.”

Will nodded. “That’s what I need to do.” It was surprisingly easy to say this—he realized that Rodney was the type of person it was easy to say it *to*. Will could admit his addiction to a guy like this. For the first time, he began to feel he might not be in the wrong place.

“Right on. Maybe you ain’t Christian, but the Bible got it right. ‘Abandon your dope.’ You seen the sign?”

Will frowned. “The one outside?”

“Above the door.”

Will recalled it: *Abandon all dope, ye who enter here*. “Mmm-hmm.” He surmised that Rodney hadn’t caught the Dante reference.

“Shoot, I can’t tell what the heck the Bible says half the time. Got all that olden days language in it. But there’s no two ways about *abandon your dope*.” Rodney cleared the phlegm from his throat.

“‘Failure is impermissible.’ Joe says that a lot. The dudes in charge of the program have all kinds of channels of information, you know. Ways of uncovering if you backslide. And the thing is, whatever

happened in the past, you're a sinner, we all are, so they can look past it. But Joe say, 'Sins of the past are in the past, but rules are rules in the present.' He says that a lot. I'm telling you this so you know, Will: it ain't no joke here. They'll axe you from the program in a heartbeat and you'll be out on your ass again. So don't get wired or high."

Rodney watched Will work with the complacent interest of a guy whose own chore for the day was already done. He'd assumed Will was black until he learned his last name, but whether he was Brazilian, Cuban or whatever, it didn't make the difference it once would have to Rodney. In jail, the white guys made jokes about 'kicking cans'—*Africans*, *Mexicans*, *Puerto Ricans*—and when the opportunity arose they'd go beyond joking; Rodney now felt lingering guilt over the way he'd gone along with all that. In hindsight, it just didn't seem Christian. Most of the people he associated with did not share his scruples.

Will was a handsome, loose-jointed kid in what was probably a T-shirt for a band—*one of these bands you've never heard of*, though Rodney—his curly jet hair cut close and jagged, likely a homemade job. Rodney judged by faces: he didn't mind that Will seemed so out-of-place because his sensitivity, plainly stamped in the pacific set of his features, counteracted what untrustworthy air Will might otherwise have had, holding everything in life in quarantine. Rodney was amused at the way Will washed dishes, a single bowl, a single fork. Rodney's wont was to dump everything into the water, go balls-out with soap, and scrub like hurricanes.

"They're clean-crazy around here. I bet you noticed. Every day they got us swabbing the decks, scrubbing the walls. Joe Cholula says, 'You want to stay clean, you got to keep clean.'"

"Hmm," said Will.

"You get it, right? 'Clean' as in clean from dope, 'clean' as in cleaning crap up, pardon my language. You seen outside, where if somebody tags the building, Joe's got us painting it over lickety split."

Lickety split, thought Will. *Gee willikers*.

"Jesus knows where we get the paint."

"Joe Cholula." Will had heard from Tim Thompson that the founder of the Mission had used to cook dope. Now he was a local notable, occasionally profiled in the area press. Tim made him sound like the world's iron-tightest asshole to anybody who didn't walk the straight and narrow.

"Yeah, you could of met him before," said Rodney, "but I saw him duck out a while ago." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, apparently signifying *he went that-a-way*.

Will hesitated. "Is he—for real?" For all Will knew, Rodney and Joe Cholula could have been bosom pals; he didn't know how to ask with tact whether the Mission was a scam.

"Well," said Rodney, the one word bitten off to mean something like, *Hey, what do you expect?* He gave Will a frank shrug. "Like anybody. He's just a drug politician, is how I'd put it. Lots of people, you know, they believe their own bullshit."

"Right," said Will, slowly. His work at the sink was nearly done. But there remained the large food-crusting pot that Rodney had cooked his stew in. Will cocked an eye at it and said, "You could boil a heretic in a pot like that."

Rodney drew his eyebrows together in consideration. "Have to be a little guy."

Over the week that followed, Rodney made good on his promises, introducing Will to Raunch, Jacob, Marlon and most of the other regular inmates and visitors to the Mission whom Rodney deemed worth befriending, meanwhile dropping broad hints about who to avoid, who to keep an eye on; this advice Will took with a grain of salt, aware that feuds among tweakers ran deep and were often founded

on trivialities. Every morning, after the guys broke up breakfast—a meal for which Will was never again tardy—and began the building’s daily scouring and maintenance, Rodney and Will would find a quiet corner, on opposing bedrolls or behind the kitchen in what had once been a dough-rolling room, with cement-hard flour petrified between the cracks in the floor, and there they swapped stories about, in Rodney’s words, “them scandalous lowlife assholes down on the river, excuse my language, dude.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s not too many model citizens out that way.” Will had inhaled or imbibed every variety of controlled substance he’d ever come across, but nevertheless held cigarette smoking in unvoiced contempt. While he abstained, Rodney’s hand-rolled smokes soon filled the dough room with a haze that hung over the long high unfinished wooden bench there. Rodney leaned forward on his elbows and said, “Those suckers will steal anything. Just take this one example. Let me tell you the one about the chickens. You been to the university?”

He meant Valentina State. Will was nonplussed; at first he wondered whether Rodney meant to ask if he’d ever been a college student. “Actually—”

“It’s over off of M Street. Maybe you thought it was a park or something.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. I’ve been by there before.” Of *course* it wasn’t a *park*.

“So you seen them chickens.” The grounds of the university campus, for reasons unknown to Will, teemed with poultry. He’d first seen them scratching in the dirt when he’d worked a brief stint for a catering company that had sent him there to fill wine glasses for professors during a retirement party. Now *that* had been a new experience: of course he’d been to house parties, and then he’d seen depictions of high-class rich-folks parties in movies, but this ‘party’ had been like neither—not particularly fun, nor particularly opulent. He’d quit that job before long; what soured him on it was the realization that what annoyed him most about it—being invisible—was in fact its true function. What was it he’d told his boss? “If somebody gives me a free glass of wine, I tell them, ‘Thank you.’” That had been rare for Will—to sound off and then quit in a huff, rather than choke it down for the last two weeks.

“Yeah, it’s weird,” he agreed. “Hella roosters.”

“Well,” said Rodney, leaning further forward as he warmed to his story. “There was this old dude that lived with all of us down on the river, name of Greg. You ever met Greg Glavinovich? Tall guy? Well, we was all living in pup tents, you know, as usual not much to eat. And it was getting cold. So Greg—” Rodney laughed in advance of his punch line, a throaty, gulping chuckle—“he gets all these screw-ups and tweaks together and says, ‘We got to get *organized*.’”

Will smiled.

“So maybe forty, fifty of us troopers, with them cheapo tents and all that, and about a million Coke bottles in these shopping carts that nobody could get around to selling. Generally just about as organized as a riot. What Greg does is, he takes me up to the university, and we get these Glad bags with us. Middle of the night. He runs around like some kind of commando in the wild, this fat-ass guy with a bald spot, and he’s grabbing sleeping chickens off the ground, and like *this*”—Rodney demonstrated with his hands—“wrung their necks. Snap, snap, snap, fast as all heck. Chickens making a hell of a noise. And I’m holding the sacks, looking out for campus cops or whatever.”

Will had no idea what he was meant to make of this story.

“So we run back to the river, which is no joke of a hike all the way from M Street when you’re holding a ten-gallon sack apiece of dead chickens.”

“Jesus.”

“One *apiece*, brother. And Greg had every junkie down there pulling out feathers.” Rodney struggled in vain to hold his laughter together long enough to finish the story.

“Shit.” Will’s ambivalent smile was three-quarters faded.

“Yeah. We roasted them suckers on a campfire. On *sticks*. No salt, no sauce. It tasted like, well, you can imagine. *Shoot*. What a comedy. Comedy of errors. But that’s how we had to do it that winter. Cold as all hell. The city shut down the Army of God kitchens downtown.”

“I remember that.”

They were quiet a moment. Homeless people had died in the cold that winter. Rodney’s guffaws wound down to a slow grinding in his sinuses, like a truck engine that kept turning over even after the ignition had been killed. He bowed his head a little.

Will ran his finger around a crack in the door frame next to where he sat; the back of his aluminum folding chair had been tilted rearward a notch by some past violence done to it. He cleared his throat and said, “Once at this house I lived at, some tweakers stole our front door.”

Rodney pulled himself back, a rigid, lost look on his face, as if reaching to recall something distant, momentous and uncanny. “I done that once.”

Will laughed loud, from his belly. This took Rodney by surprise. He had been wondering for a week what sort of clowning it would take to get Will to relax. The chicken story was supposed to have been surefire; but now he’d gone and done it without trying. *That’s how it goes, though*, he thought. *You want to get to folks, you do it without trying*. Rodney pushed his fingers through his short hair and grinned. “I can’t remember why, though,” he confessed.

Nature and Stuff – 1999

At the far edge of the narrow man-made lake in Garfield Park, a wooden bench sat concealed by a chaotic, drooping canopy of tree branches and cracking vines, nestled into a narrow copse between the weedy ball field and the buzz of traffic on King Street. It was a spot well suited for drug deals, for making out and for sitting to ruminate.

The bench was perpendicular to the lake’s edge, so that, when Keiko Tsuchara wanted a view of the lake, she had to straddle the bench like a rider. When she did, she could peer from between the vines down to the placid brown water that lay flung out before her, stretching the length of the park. Garfield Park was the best feature of a declining neighborhood. On warm days, young mothers brought their toddlers to play by the lake, the open sky and long green gap of land, rare in the tight-packed city, affording room for kids to give vent to their boundless enthusiasm; Keiko would watch them with a mixture of admiration at the simplicity of childishness and relief that she had traded the petrifying and impenetrable confusion of childhood for the more manageable confusion adults navigate. When it rained, the park would clear out, and Keiko, partly sheltered by the thick roof of boughs so that she’d get wet but not soaked, would watch the roiling surface of the lake and listen to the spattering of the water until the subtle monotony of the downpour became the floor of her perception, an open floor upon which thoughts wandered. She didn’t mind the wet, or the bugs. The bench was a favorite hiding spot of hers; she spent time there most days.

Late summer hung in the air, the year’s lazy afternoon. Keiko felt such difference between Valentina summers and those in Osaka that the Japanese word for summer, *natsu*, seemed not to translate into English at all, and vice versa. How could two seasons share a name when the very air was different? The day was hot and dry, with wisps of cloud lacing the wide empty sky. Keiko lay supine on the bench as she often did, slipped off her shoes and rested her bare feet on the earth, pushing her toes into the fine dirt, almost silt, under the trees and gazing into the profusion of branches above. The blue of the sky

penetrated down to her only in patches. With her fingers she pushed strands of sweat-damp hair off of her forehead and cheeks before letting her arm descend to her side. She daydreamed.

She relaxed her breathing and felt her heart slow its rhythm; she strove to forget striving, to slip into time's continuous vanishing always. A trickle of lazy cogitation began a slow drip into her consciousness, prompted by the vigorous tangle of branches she saw. *Trees don't stop growing when they have enough*, she thought. Her eyes rested on a towering black maple stretching above and around her; it dominated the copse; to Keiko it seemed the archetype of organic enthusiasm and natural glory. *They keep growing until the day they die; they grow older but not old*. She pictured the roots of the maple pushing ceaselessly through the soil in slow-motion glee, stretching to wring from the earth the maximum of life. *A tree loves growing. It has an emotion—only one: "I like to grow."*

The moon appeared through an opening in the branches, ghostly in daylight, and Keiko followed it lazily with her eyes. Even in the shade she was sweating freely. From the time she was small, it had always piqued her to see the moon come out in the afternoon, hanging pale and out of place. It was an actor that had bumped onto the stage before its cue. Its motion, too imperceptible when viewed in the frameless sky, seemed minutely discernible to her through the narrow chink in the canopy. *I think I might be able to imagine the life of a tree*, she thought. The wind blew the branches of the maple across the moon's full face. All of the other trees nodded in agreement. *Does it think? Without a brain or central nervous system, I don't suppose it can have organized thoughts like a person, but it's alive; its leaves bow to face the sunlight; so it must be somehow aware of the outer world.*

She imagined how it might form vague, clear, simple thoughts that wended up the inner cells of its trunk at a rate measured in months. It might think in the way her muscles and organs thought, quite apart from intellect. She folded her arms across her belly and let her eyes fall shut by tiny degrees, until all she could see were blurred streaks of ochre, cream and beryl. What were alpha waves again, she wondered, not sure where this thought came from, and not interested in pursuing it. Somewhere in the park, someone was barbecuing, and the earthy scent of coals and mushrooms swept her nostrils. The maple and other trees seemed in her imagination to settle and yawn in vegetable awareness around her. The brush at the end of the canopy crunched, but she took no notice.

I suppose trees never worry or experience fear. Her body relaxed and she settled deeper into the rough surface of the bench. It wouldn't have been bad at all to doze. A thick metal bolt pressed slightly up into the back of her thigh, and a troop of ants discovered the side of her foot and set about negotiating it: small sensations that, at the edge of her mind, she knew would prevent her from falling asleep—to sleep was always such a struggle for her anyway. *Even when an axe bites into its side, it surely doesn't bother the tree. I'm sure of it. Apart from growing it doesn't know anything, not even death.*

A deep, man's voice said, "Hey." Keiko jolted up. It was Sherwin Fender.

"Hey," she said, repose rattled. *How did you find me here?* she wondered, but didn't say it quite in that way: "You could find me? It's—surprised to me." She moved up onto her elbows and lifted herself to see him more directly. The sweat on her brow had chilled all of a sudden.

Sherwin sat next to her on the bench and surveyed the copse in his quick, impatient way—*like a cop busting a party*, Keiko thought, and then told herself, *That's unfair*. She sat all the way up and he took her hand. His face was boyish, a handsome sort of callow, and she liked his height and his musculature: she liked him larger than her. He seemed hulky to her, like a walking interruption; she found this cute. Keiko could see that Sherwin had wet-combed his copious blond hair moments before. Constant fixing was a nervous habit of his. Both of Keiko's past boyfriends, one on each rim of the Pacific, had been as sloppy in dress as she was; and so, though she sometimes got exasperated, perhaps she was kept

amused by the novelty of Sherwin's endearing, punctilious struggle to control such things: to tuck or untuck his shirt, and if he wore it untucked, to ensure that it hung from his body just so—or else tuck it in after all. Decisions of this sort might take him ten minutes or more, and foul his mood when they stumped him. He grinned at her, and she looked at his hands, not his eyes. “Birdwatching?” he asked with a twist of unbecoming sarcasm. She knew he saw as much sense in birdwatching as in burning money.

Keiko held her breath a fraction longer and glanced around her. “The tree.”

“Which one?”

“All.”

“Yeah. Trees are nice.” Sherwin mashed an ant with his forefinger. He spoke with a note of conciliating agreement: *if you like trees, I can like trees*. He may have been a touch dyspeptic in temper, like plenty of the Americans she saw, but he usually wasn't out to mock her or pick fights. If she said she was watching trees, he would work to agree, or at least see her point, or at the very least show that he *wanted* to see her point—also like plenty of Americans. Fearless to disagree, but anxious to see your point.

“The tree are alive but they don't care.” Keiko's tone, full of approval and maybe wistful, maybe even husky with sincerity, caught Sherwin's attention, and he gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. “Yeah, they're pretty nice,” he said more carefully, watching her surreptitiously, as he would do when he made an effort to connect with her. *Maybe it's a Japanese thing*, he thought. “That's why I hate the scenery in the city, not enough leafy greens,” he continued, gauging her for a reaction. She seemed distant. “It's nice and quiet here.”

“It's quiet. Also it's nice.”

Such distance. Sherwin pressed further. “You probably do a lot of thinking out here? Like some Shinto stuff?”

Keiko didn't answer at once, but then she turned and kissed his cheek. He kept his eyes open when she kissed him, to thrill at the innocent open-lipped way she moved her face to his. It was as though she had no idea how to kiss at all, though they did all the time.

“What's a Shinto?” she asked.

He'd read about it. “Isn't that the Japanese religion? Nature and stuff.”

Keiko didn't answer. She didn't really know anyway.

Sherwin loved her. She was a slight, pale girl with honest and healthy features, the firm and pliant flesh of her face damp with the heat; she was no astonishing beauty by lascivious standards, but Sherwin felt pangs of admiration at how entirely pretty she was. Her features seemed like perfected versions of themselves, just as a drawing shrunk to eight-tenths of its size assumes a fine clarity it never had at its full dimensions. He ran a finger over each of her broad, smooth cheeks, which she suffered him to do. He decided it probably didn't matter much to either of them what she did out in the park, considering how happy they were now to see each other, so he encircled her shoulders with one arm to draw her to his chest. This also she suffered him to do.

“So, what are you doing?” asked Keiko, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Playing a game.”

“What game?”

“It's called, ‘I'm the boss.’”

“How you play?”

“I'm the boss.”

She lifted her head to dart a glance at him. “You're not a boss. I'm the boss.”

“I’m the *boss*.” His tone was stern. Keiko smiled at him, but he kept his face straight. “Say, ‘Sherwin, you’re the boss.’”

She stuck out her tongue at him. “You’re not a boss of me.”

“Don’t make no difference. I’m the *boss*.”

Keiko stopped smiling. “You can’t be boss of me because stupid can’t boss the genius. It’s a universe’s rule.”

Sherwin liked how Keiko mispronounced things. “Be-cyows? I’m sorry, did you say be-cyows?”

“That’s a perfect English. And only a motherfucker likes the stupid boss game. *Hai, kaero*.” She stood up. Just when she began to think he was the stiffest dweeb on the planet, he’d cut loose with a gag like this—not exactly funny, but endearing in its note of self-mockery; he had depths she sometimes failed to give him credit for. “Let’s go home.” Sherwin did not stand—he was too amused with his joke to give it up. “Can we go, Sherwin?”

“Say, ‘Please, boss, may we go, boss.’”

“Eat a shit.” With fists on slender hips and head cocked belligerently sideways, she was a sliver of vitality in his eyes.

“Say, ‘Please eat shit, boss.’”

“Okay, so, you want me to chop off your ball?” She took a menacing step forward. “Japanese karate chop. I put your ball in my miso soup.” Sherwin giggled and scrambled off the bench. “Let’s *go*,” repeated Keiko. They went.

Making Any Money? – 1999

Will fell into a routine, waking up early every morning to the tinny, exasperating strains of country and western music from his clock radio—he kept it tuned to music he hated, as this was the only thing that could rouse him from his mattress—in order to beat it down seven blocks and over four to the Mission in time for a free breakfast; or rather, a breakfast paid for with an hour of half-hearted labor.

His single small room was bare beyond a fold-up card table stacked with library books under the street-facing window, a folding aluminum chair, an inherited mattress heaped with second-hand blankets, and a plastic egg crate that contained his loosely folded clothing inside the doorless closet. All these things he’d culled from dumpsters or junk sales; his landlord had not seen fit to furnish the room with electrical appliances; but there was yet his one luxury: a hi-fidelity phonograph and tuner with a portable CD player jury-rigged to the input stage. That was all; no bric-a-brac or niceties beyond what he’d judged, item-by-item, to be essential.

The radio woke him with a pre-dawn blast of kitsch: Shania Twain—he’d heard this song enough mornings in a row to learn and to loathe the singer’s name—doing a slick, insipid impersonation of a redneck. Will stretched for the off button, the voice of reason whispering to him that he actually *wanted* to get up—he’d be *glad* once he did—there was *food* waiting—and somehow he was up. His first waking impression was to be reminded of his contentment with his room, its shape, the utility of its accoutrements. He was a trapper in the wild, and he’d build this here log cabin with his own two hands.

Time was tight, as he’d planned it. Give himself time, and he’d just waste it. He began his manic morning routine, tear-assing through his apartment to brush his teeth, douse his head in the sink, check his clothes for smells. He paused as always under the heater vent that formed a conduit for sound between his apartment and Keiko’s, his neighbor on the floor, but did not linger. There was no time. His clothes had

passed the smell test, so he put them on; he'd worn the same stuff for a few days in a row now, but as he never paid attention to what others wore, it seemed reasonable to exempt himself from like scrutiny.

Every day went like this, a mad dash to the Mission for breakfast, then a chore; after cooling their heels for a while, he and Rodney sometimes braved the zombies at the Army of God for a lunch variously under- or overcooked; or else, if they had any money handy, would treat themselves to microwaved burritos at a convenience store. Afternoon was likely to find Will in the same choice spot he'd haunted for months, a table on the fourth floor of the main branch library next door to the Downtown Metro parole office. Will was tolerated by library security because, unlike the other homeless guys, he seldom fell asleep there, didn't truck any junk up in a cart with him, and had never been caught stealing a book. Instead he read, or tried to: he'd taken in a sampling of nearly every kind of literature, history, political and social science, and whatever else struck him as having an elevated reputation; and whatever he failed to understand of it, he was conscientious not to scorn.

Will shot out of his apartment and rattled down the stairs at top speed and into the open street, where the watch-spring of morning was still on the wind. The air was chilly, but it would soon vibrate with palpable dry heat. Good walking weather, he thought. Another habit surviving from his days of drug use was to take epic walks through the city, sometimes for seven or eight hours at a stretch; he'd begun this practice in the days when crank had filled him with nervous energy, had continued it of necessity when he'd had no place to live and nothing else to do with himself than walk, and, now that he was no longer using, and contrary to his expectation that he'd lose the fund of unhealthful invigoration that dope had shot into him, he found that the habit of long rambling, so long held, was ingrained; he was inured to fatigue; if anything, he was more than equal in energy to his prior self. At night, he would return again to the Mission for dinner and more shooting of the bull. The need to avoid temptation meant that Will had to do his best not to come in contact with any of his old friends; this wasn't a burdensome necessity: he was comfortable with loneliness; it was quite in his nature not to strike up much rapport with the guys in the Mission either, other than Rodney.

He came for the food—he hustled for the food. Living on nothing was a challenge he rose to vigorously. It wasn't exactly easy to live on food stamps and Section Eight rent subsidies, but it wasn't exactly hard either. One cure for having it bad was once to have had it worse. Dope had overwhelmed him when he was in high school. He'd tried outrunning it from job to job and scene to scene; had taken two cross-country hitchhikes, had made abortive attempts to relocate himself from the circle of people he depended on and who depended on him to bumble their way to the next white puff; but crank was everywhere in the nation, boiling on tinfoil in the back of every car, on subway trains, in ladies' restrooms, at parties, behind department store loading docks, and even under locomotive bridges crimson with rust. At no minimum wage job he'd ever held—be it slicing pizzas or detailing mini trucks, mopping urine from hospital corridors or running every model of cash register—did he ever miss the tweakers on staff at first sight, the employees with sucked-in cheeks and hard-edged energy, industriously scrubbing already-clean baseboards or rearranging the backroom inventory in order to spend a dope rush on anything squirrel-like and repetitive. Will could not get away from it, or could not choose to, or could not manage to choose whether to choose to—et cetera, et cetera. So he slid through a chaotic life belly-down and blindfolded, at the mercy of a cheap, low-class high that wasn't even thought to be addictive. The last two summers, he'd climbed up onto hot tar supermarket roofs to sleep, where no one could get to him; he'd passed two winters inviting himself onto the lumpy couches or cold garage floors of a set of tolerant but more responsible friends whose numbers grew fewer with each lapse in moral judgement he perpetrated upon them. Now, he made rent regularly and scared up food in ways to which the law had no

objection. This mode of living, which to a more conventional person would qualify as a life of desperation, was to him a long-shot step in the direction of respectability. Perhaps what tinted his daily teeter on the brink of insolvency such an optimistic hue was his sense of splicing together, for the first time in a couple of years, a cohesive story from the blooper reel of existence.

In the other direction along Fuller, opposite his route to 23rd Street, Will caught sight of Keiko stepping off the sidewalk into the gutter to circumnavigate a bunch of pea-green plastic garbage cans left out for the trash collectors. She had the air of coming home, not going out; she must have been out all night. Will felt, in a flash, a stupid urge to duck back into the building before she saw him. It was too late for that. She waved gaily, and he could only grin back and mark time looking at the sidewalk until she approached to within speaking range and lifted her headphones from her ears.

“*Ohayo*, Will.” Keiko winked winsomely. “Making any money?”

“Uh—no?” He wanted a snappy reply, but gave up without trying. “*Ohio*,” he returned lamely. Keiko stood on the sidewalk under a white oleander to talk to him, her bearing light and easy as a person with nothing pressing in all the world to do. She might have been a little drunk—not sloppy, but loosened up. He smiled to return the friendliness she seemed to radiate, but couldn’t release the gush of language from the tip of his tongue.

“Don’t you go to sleep yet?”

“Just got up. Going for breakfast.”

“You got up? You’re too lazybones. I think so, you never get up the early morning.” The accents in her voice jumped and fell at the wrong places like a whimsical fey lyric. She rocked back on her heels and fixed a steady, stern gaze upon him. “You’re still awake from the last night’s party. You’re too much party.”

“Whatever.” If he was going to take it, he resolved to give it; but how? “*You’re* lazy. It’s too bad you can’t even get a job.” Still lame—but at least words were exiting his mouth now. Will knew that Keiko worked two jobs, enduring the graveyard shift at a convenience store and bussing tables in a sports bar. He’d learned this much from what she’d dropped in the long-running conversation they conducted in scraps every time their paths crossed at the building. He also knew, from his eavesdropping, that she barely made enough money to stay afloat.

His habit, which began innocently, of cooling out in his room and by chance overhearing snatches of what went on in the apartments on either side—Keiko on one, an elderly German couple called Schultz on the other—was no longer entirely innocent. He needed to take care not to mix up information she’d vouchsafed him with what he’d eavesdropped, lest he let slip some personal detail of hers he ought not to know: it was fine, for example, to mention the time a drunk came into the convenience store and wiped out a display of candy bars trying to dance the running man; but it wouldn’t do to mention the fact that the same drunk had first aggressively hit on Keiko and made her acutely uncomfortable.

“Where you’re going so early, Will?” She pronounced his name like *wheel*.

“To the Mission. I told you about the Mission, right? Free food, baby.” He grinned.

“So, the boy’s club. Boys only.”

“No chicks allowed.”

“You shouldn’t lie. You’re going to hospital. You broke a boner on the toilet bowl.”

“Well, you—cut your clit on a banana peel.”

“But I remember, you ate the banana from the monkey’s ass.”

This was a running joke of theirs, stupid insults. Keiko seemed to delight in scatological absurdity, and Will felt very warmly toward her as a result. “Yeah, but…” He did his best to think of a

good one: “At least I didn’t suck a fart out of a dog’s penis.” *Good*, that is, by the relative standards of their mutual joke. *Holy shit*, thought Will, even as he said it: his conscience protested that he couldn’t possibly talk to a woman this way without *getting in trouble*. Still, she laughed.

“I never did it. But I like that one.”

“You like that? You should catch me on a good day.” Who was this glib-talking fellow? Will was both within and without himself: frankly pleased with his facile gross-out cleverness, but incredulous at his own easy manner.

“Hey,” she interjected. “Did you see the cat?” She meant a stray she’d taken in; it had disappeared a week before, and she had surprised him by coming to his door to inquire after it. How odd and uncomfortable—and opportune—it had seemed to open his door with a mouthful of soggy fish-sticks and find her there.

“No, not today.”

She frowned. “That’s not good.” He’d noticed these pronouncements of hers before: *good, not good*.

“Yeah, no. Did you ask around at Reimi’s? You should ask the cooks there.” Reimi’s was a Japanese teriyaki takeout shop in the neighborhood.

“Hah?” She sucker-punched his shoulder.

“What? You guys eat cats, right?”

“Who? Japs?” Another sucker-punch. “What do you want? Hah?”

“Well?” He laughed, twisting to dodge her.

“No. That’s Koreans. They eat the dogs.”

“What about Chinese?”

“They eat a bird nests.”

“Japs?”

“Monkey brain. Raw horse.”

Will giggled. *Stop giggling*, he ordered himself. “For real?”

“I never ate.”

“But you ate whale meat.” He meant to goad her.

Keiko looked wistful. “It’s so good. It’s a delicious. Now we can’t eat them, from the environment problems. Because the danger species. So that’s not good.”

Not good, thought Will.

“But I miss it,” she continued. “It was in our school lunch. Long time ago.”

“Huh.” Will recalled, of a sudden, that he had someplace to be. The lull this occasioned in his speech was enough to end the exchange. Keiko breathed deep and shoved her hands into the pockets of her pea coat. A beat passed, then two. “*Hona*,” she said, and let herself into the building. Will, deciding not to watch her go, took off up the street toward the Mission.

Keiko worked her way up the stairs toward her third-floor apartment. The wooden stairs creaked like they’d collapse forthwith. The building had begun life at the turn of the twentieth century as a Victorian manse of graceful countenance and reassuring stateliness; during the twenties, an enterprising landlord, riding high on the bull market, had prosecuted a series of renovations at enormous expense and to hideous effect, resulting in a formless huge loose pack of anachronistic pediments and cornices thrown together and then allowed by a program of bare-minimal upkeep to slowly disintegrate. Even then, it had been decent quarters, each floor a suite of rooms to be let; it was left to the parsimony of subsequent landlords to divide each suite into the tiny individual units into which Keiko, Will and the other tenants

were now cramped. Every year or two, the landlady threatened to turn everyone out and sell the building to a property management corporation, who would doubtless replace it with something modern and unimaginative—and less liable to prosecution for violation of building codes; but the deals always fell through because she believed the building to be worth considerably more than its market value and refused to accept a penny less; as a member of a monied family with extensive real estate holdings, she could afford to wait a few decades for the market to agree with her. Keiko called it a ‘*bukkaké* house’. She was tickled by its illogical construction and baggy mien.

Keiko took each step with care and paused on each landing before ascending the next flight. The stairwell doubled back on each floor. Notwithstanding her night of drinking, which she only got to enjoy once every other week or so, she wasn’t particularly weary. But she dilated on the stairs in order to enjoy the climb. Old, musty buildings made her feel at home in a way that sterile, air-conditioned modern structures failed to match. She found it hard to fathom how anyone could feel at home living inside of an exercise in cold geometry.

At the bottom of the flight leading to the third floor, Keiko saw Sherwin plodding slowly down the stairs up above the next landing, entering the corner of her vision as she looked up. His nimbus of blond hair was ghostly under the dim fluorescent bulb that lit the hall. The sight of him sent through her a faint tremor of blind apprehension—she had no clue what he might have been doing up at the door of her room at this hour, not having a key and knowing she planned to be out, but the sight of him was enough to incite a panicky second of entrapment. She barely had a moment to understand this feeling before it was gone again—because he didn’t look right, the weaving motion of his legs navigating the stairs was different, and, come to notice it, his features weren’t right either. It wasn’t Sherwin after all, just a young man who resembled him.

“Morning,” said David Dunlop when he noticed Keiko gaping at him.

In an instant, Keiko felt awkward. She self-consciously fixed her hair, though it did not need fixing. “Hello.”

“I think I’ve seen you before. We live on the same floor.” He pointed up the stairwell—the wrong way, coincidentally, as if he were indicating that they lived on thin air beyond the landing where the stairs doubled back.

“Oh—yes. That’s right. You... live here?”

“Yeah.” David elongated his answer just a touch, and Keiko realized he’d already said so. “I just moved here this week,” he continued. “Always staying one step ahead of the landlord.” He smirked.

Keiko didn’t understand this last remark. “Sorry for looking funny to you.” Her imperfect English syntax tended to slip further when she was flustered. “I thought you’re the someone else.”

“I, uh, get that all the time.”

She detected from his manner that he did not in fact ‘get that all the time’; this was a joke, spoken in the only-half-serious manner of many of the young people she’d met in Valentina; a joke not because it was funny, but because it was spoken to indicate that something funny might well be said at this juncture of the conversation. To Keiko, such people seemed to believe that a jest ought to be made out of anything mundane, and she didn’t quite approve—she saw no reason to flee the mundane. David Dunlop was a handsome guy, close to Sherwin in type but without Sherwin’s stiffness; David was obviously hip, stylish, and his bearing was typical of the forward-leaning, socially competitive types Keiko had met on the local independent music scene. He made an external display of pulling himself together for a formal introduction, thrust his hand out for a shake, and told her his name. After three years’ conscientious

restraint, Keiko had broken the habit of dipping her head down in a shallow bow as she shook hands, a personal triumph no one not from a bowing culture would fully fathom.

“Is that a Japanese name?” David asked when she’d introduced herself—and then regretted the question; he tried to remain sensitive about ethnicity. But the girl was cute, which lent him moxie to be forward.

Keiko answered with a slight tilt of her head, her short hair swinging playfully round her face. “I use to be Japanese. *Use* to be.”

“Now?” He cocked an eye at her, expecting a punch line.

“Now I’m all-American bitch.”

“Go U.S.A.”

“Go G.I. Joe.”

They both laughed a little. David saw that Keiko was nervous; he felt nervous as well; he wondered if this might be a bit of sexual tension. *Fish or cut bait*, he thought, smiling inly at the corniness of the expression, made a movement from one leg to the other, and said, “Well.” With that, it was time to go. They said pleased-to-meet-you and passed each other without further eye contact, David descending to the street and thence to work, Keiko continuing up to her room. As she turned the key in the lock and flipped open the letterbox flap, she thought again of the little shudder of relief she’d felt when the young man on the stair had not been her boyfriend.

Lady and the Tramp – 1999

David Dunlop pulled into the parking lot of Angela Keene’s place just after eight o’clock with his evening clothes folded into the knapsack on the passenger seat, along with his contact lens solution and a bottle of hair gel. Her building was much newer than his and had an *elevator*—he was sure that he’d never care for such a bourgeois commodity, but as he rode up to her floor he indulged in a little resentment toward his landlady anyway. Whenever they were to go out for an evening, David was in the habit of bringing his clothes and toiletries with him to her place. If he arrived at Angela’s ready to roll, he’d nevertheless have to sit on the sofa and wait for her, with only C-SPAN to amuse him, so he dressed with her. He reasons for doing this were one part economy of effort, four parts silent reproof to Angela for taking so long to primp. His message, if she even got it, made no discernible dint in her equipoise.

Angela Keene was—David searched for the best word—the most *potent* woman he’d ever dated. Each day of her life, no matter how productive, ended unfinished; she went to bed nightly with her head full of things yet to get done; what she’d accomplished, she was too proud of to dwell on; what lay before her was territory to conquer, spoils to win. She slept heavily—a *clean conscience*, David quipped to himself—for precisely six and a half hours a night, a habit fixed upon according to a calculation of her own circadian rhythms. David, in his folly, had once broken a jest upon the topic of circadian rhythm, which he knew nothing of but took to be hippy-dippy nonsense; her very great lack of amusement at this offense had cast a chill on their sex life for the entire following week.

David liked to sleep late. This ticked Angela off. He blamed his sleep habits on low blood pressure, interpreting this as portending longevity. “Shouldn’t we both be thrilled?” he both suggested and mock-suggested. She also made plain her scorn, not for his job per se, but for his contentment with it. Not for nothing had her own father worked his way up from car mechanic to garage owner to proprietor of a chain of repair stations; ambition, in her rubric, was manliness. Post-coitus, halfway to sleep and in a happy fog of prolactin and oxytocin, he’d loose his tongue and prattle about moving up from the café to

something more lucrative, expecting this would make her happy. He meant these as proposals; she interpreted them as declarations. Both of them saw marriage, or something equally committed though not necessarily mired in religion, in their futures: and yet their union in its present state was doomed because David thought love meant she'd accept his flaws, while Angela thought love meant a responsibility to help him shed them.

David let himself into Angela's apartment—he had a key—and found her just getting into the shower. “David?” she called, her voice a tinny echo on the bathroom tiles.

“Uh, he's coming later. I'm a random stranger. Are you naked?”

She did not answer. Before her full-length mirror, David changed from the grungies he'd worn at work into more voguish clothing. His mind was on their dinner reservation at nine. This business of waiting for the woman to dress... if anything, a role-reversal would have appealed much more to his sensibilities: between the two of them, he ought to have been the one to dally with his wardrobe, she the one to dress promptly. To subvert societal roles—to exemplify how foolish it was to generalize about the sexes—would have been cooler. Their present dynamic was too typical. He also prided himself, a bit deliberately, on loving her as she was; all she ought to have done was to throw on any old clothes, apply a dab of makeup as perfunctorily as you please, and she'd be naturally beautiful to him. Another part of the problem was that she was knock-out beautiful, to the extent that he could easily imagine strangers assuming she was a trophy, and that he pressed her to spruce up in order to satisfy his male ego. *It makes me feel so self-conscious*, he thought, with an inner ha-ha.

David's efforts at procrastination availed him nothing. He was dressed and ready while Angela was still in the shower. He watched the television for a bit. Angela claimed that C-SPAN had the only non-crap content on television and would watch nothing else.

“You know,” David loud-talked to Angela, trying to be heard over the hiss of water, “C-SPAN could actually be alright if it just wasn't TV.” A good relationship tactic, the tacticians all concurred, was to make concessions to the opinion of the other party. “As good as they try to make it”—blatant concession: tactical maneuver executed—“the C-SPAN people can't overcome the fact that they're stuck broadcasting on a shitty medium.” *I should have said, 'flawed medium'*, he thought.

“Okay,” answered Angela from the shower.

“It's like, TV is just stuck being what it is. A flawed medium. Putting across the truth on TV is like trying to paint the Mona Lisa with mud instead of paint.” A trio of thoughts skittered across David's consciousness: Had he heard this line in a movie? Would Angela come back with the argument that the Mona Lisa wasn't objectively better than any other painting? Or that painting with mud could be a valid form of expression? As soon as these doubts surfaced, they vanished again. At any rate, those were the sorts of arguments he himself was more likely to make, depending on the time, occasion and point to be proven.

“You watch TV at home all the time,” reminded Angela from the shower. “Shitty shows. You even call them shitty.”

“Touché.” David bethought himself of a rejoinder: “But I'm not expecting the *truth*. You know what I mean?”

“Okay,” said Angela.

He observed her as she toweled off and began to dress. For a feminist guy in 1999, it felt wrong (*but oh-so-right*, he quipped to himself) to ogle his beautiful girlfriend. Angela had luscious, lustrous brown skin and facial features that were the picture of loveliness: wide nose, full lips with an unusual turn to them, hints of haughtiness, arched cheekbones, coolly tilted eyes. *A de-va-sta-ting beauty*, he thought,

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