

Lunch with Bethany

Today I'm meeting Bethany for lunch at Vanities, the new Evan Kiley bistro in Tribeca, and though I worked out for nearly two hours this morning and even lifted weights in my office before noon, I'm still extremely nervous. The cause is hard to locate but I've narrowed it down to one of two reasons. It's either that I'm afraid of rejection (though I can't understand why: *she* called *me*, she wants to see *me*, she wants to have lunch with *me*, she wants to fuck *me* again) or, on the other hand, it could have something to do with this new Italian mousse I'm wearing, which, though it makes my hair look fuller and smells good, feels very sticky and uncomfortable, and it's something I could easily blame my nervousness on. So we wouldn't run out of things to talk about over lunch, I tried to read a trendy new short-story collection called *Wok* that I bought at Barnes & Noble last night and whose young author was recently profiled in the Fast Track section of *New York* magazine, but every story started off with the line "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie" and I had to put this slim volume back into my bookshelf and drink a J&B on the rocks, followed by two Xanax, to recover from the effort. To make up for this, before I fell asleep I wrote Bethany a poem and it took a long time, which surprised me, since I used to write her poems, long dark ones, quite often when we were both at Harvard, before we broke up. God, I'm thinking to myself as I walk into Vanities, only fifteen minutes late, I hope she hasn't ended up with Robert Hall, that dumb asshole. I pass by a mirror hung over the bar as I'm led to our table and check out my reflection—the mousse looks good. The topic on *The Patty*

Winters Show this morning was Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not?

I have to stop moving as I near the table, following the maître d' (this is all happening in slow motion). She isn't facing me and I can only catch the back of her neck, her brown hair pinned up into a bun, and when she turns to gaze out the window I see only part of her profile, briefly; she looks *just like a model*. Bethany's wearing a silk gazar blouse and a silk satin skirt with crinoline. A Paloma Picasso hunter green suede and wrought-iron handbag sits in front of her on the table, next to a bottle of San Pellegrino water. She checks her watch. The couple next to our table is smoking and after I lean in behind Bethany, surprising her, kissing her cheek, I coolly ask the maître d' to reseal us in the *non*smoking section. I'm suave but loud enough for the nicotine addicts to hear me and hopefully feel a slight twinge of embarrassment about their filthy habit. "Well?" I ask, standing there, arms crossed, tapping my foot impatiently.

"I'm afraid there is no nonsmoking section, sir," the maître d' informs me.

I stop tapping my foot and slowly scan the restaurant, the *bistro*, wondering how my hair really looks, and suddenly I wish I *had* switched mousses because since I last saw my hair, seconds ago, it feels different, as if its shape was somehow altered on the walk from bar to table. A pang of nausea that I'm unable to stifle washes warmly over me, but since I'm really dreaming all this I'm able to ask, "So you say there's *no* nonsmoking section? Is this correct?"

"Yes sir." The maître d', younger than myself, faggy, innocent, an *actor* no doubt, adds, "I'm sorry."

"Well, this is . . . very interesting. I can accept this." I reach into my back pocket for my gazelleskin-wallet and press a twenty into the maître d's uncertain fist. He looks at the bill, confused, then murmurs "Thank you" and walks away as if in a daze.

"No. Thank *you*," I call out and take my seat across from Bethany, nodding courteously to the couple next to us, and though I try to ignore her for as long as etiquette allows, I can't. Bethany looks absolutely stunning, *just like a model*. Everything's murky. I'm on edge. Feverish, romantic notions—

"Didn't you smoke at Harvard?" is the first thing she says. "Cigars," I say. "Only cigars."

"Oh," she says.

"But I quit that," I lie, breathing in hard, squeezing my hands together.

"That's good." She nods.

"Listen, did you have any trouble getting reservations?" I ask, and *I am fucking shaking*. I put my hands on the table like a fool, hoping that under her watchful gaze they will stop trembling.

"You don't need reservations here, Patrick," she says soothingly, reaching out a hand, covering one of mine with hers. "Calm down. You look like a wild man."

"I'm clam, I mean calm," I say, breathing in hard, trying to smile, and then, involuntarily, unable to stop myself, ask, "How's my hair?"

"Your hair is fine," she says. "Shhh. It's okay."

"All right. I am all right." I try to smile again but I'm sure it looks just like a grimace.

After a short pause she comments, "That's a nice suit. Henry Stuart?"

"No," I say, insulted, touching its lapel. "Garrick Anderson."

"It's very nice," she says and then, genuinely concerned, "Are you okay, Patrick? You just . . . twitched."

"Listen. I'm frazzled. I just got back from Washington. I took the Trump shuttle this morning," I tell her, unable to make eye contact, all in a rush. "It was delightful. The service—really fabulous. I need a drink."

She smiles, amused, studying me in a shrewd way. "Was it?" she asks, not totally, I sense, without smugness.

"Yes." I can't really look at her and it takes immense effort to unfold the napkin, lay it across my lap, reposition it correctly, busy myself with the wineglass, praying for a waiter, the ensuing silence causing the loudest possible sound. "So did you watch *The Patty Winters Show* this morning?"

"No, I was out jogging," she says, leaning in. "It was about Michael J. Fox, right?"

"No," I correct her. "It was about Patrick Swayze."

"Oh really?" she asks, then, "It's hard to keep track. You're sure?"

"Yes. Patrick Swayze. I'm positive."

"How was it?"

"Well, it was very interesting," I tell her, breathing in air. "It was almost like a debate, about whether he's gotten cynical or not."

"Do you think he has?" she asks, still smiling.

"Well, no, I'm not sure," I start nervously. "It's an interesting question. It wasn't explored fully enough. I mean after *Dirty Dancing* I wouldn't think so, but with *Tiger Warsaw* I don't know. I might be crazy, but I thought I detected *some* bitterness. I'm not sure."

She stares at me, her expression unchanged.

"Oh, I almost forgot," I say, reaching into my pocket. "I wrote you a poem." I hand her the slip of paper. "Here." I feel sick and broken, tortured, really on the brink.

"Oh Patrick." She smiles. "How sweet."

"Well, you know," I say, looking down shyly.

Bethany takes the slip of paper and unfolds it.

"Read it," I urge enthusiastically.

She looks it over quizzically, puzzled, squinting, then she turns the page over to see if there's anything on the back. Something in her understands it's short and she looks back at the words written, scrawled in red, on the front of the page.

"It's like haiku, you know?" I say. "Read it. Go on."

She clears her throat and hesitantly begins reading, slowly, stopping often. "The poor nigger on the wall. Look at him." She pauses and squints again at the paper, then hesitantly resumes. "Look at the poor nigger. Look at the poor nigger . . . on . . . the . . . wall." She stops again, faltering, looks at me, confused, then back at the paper.

"Go on," I say, looking around for a waiter. "Finish it."

She clears her throat and stares steadily at the paper tries to read the rest of it in a voice below a whisper. "Fuck him . . . Fuck the nigger on the wall . . ." She falters again, then reads the last sentence, sighing. "Black man . . . is . . . de . . . debil?"

The couple at the next table have slowly turned to gaze

over at us. The man looks aghast, the woman has an equally horrified expression on her face. I stare her down, glaring, until she looks back at her fucking salad.

"Well, Patrick," Bethany says, clearing her throat, trying to smile, handing the paper back to me.

"Yes?" I ask. "Well?"

"I can see that"—she stops, thinking—"that your sense of . . . social injustice is"—she clears her throat again and looks down—"still intact."

I take the paper back from her and slip it in my pocket and smile, still trying to keep a straight face, holding my body upright so she won't suspect me of cringing. Our waiter comes over to the table and I ask him what kinds of beer they serve. "Heineken, Budweiser, Amstel Light," he recites.

"Yes?" I ask, staring at Bethany, gesturing for him to continue.

"That's, um, all, sir," he says.

"No Corona? No Kirin? No Grolsch? No Morrettif?" I ask, confused, irate.

"I'm sorry, sir, but no," he says cautiously. "Only Heineken, Budweiser, Amstel Light."

"That's crazy," I sigh. "I'll have a J&B on the rocks. No, an Absolut martini. No, a J&B straight up."

"And I'll have another San Pellegrino," Bethany says.

"I'll have the same thing," I quickly add, my leg jerking up then down uncontrollably beneath the table.

"Okay. Would you like to hear the specials?" he asks.

"By all means," I spit out, then, calming down, smile reassuringly at Bethany.

"You're sure?" He laughs.

"Please," I say, unamused, studying the menu.

"For appetizers I have the sun-dried tomatoes and golden caviar with poblano chilies and I also have a fresh endive soup—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I say, holding up a hand, stopping him. "Hold on a minute."

"Yes sir?" the waiter asks, confused.

"You have? You mean the *restaurant* has," I correct him. "You don't have any sun-dried tomatoes. The restaurant does.

You don't have the poblano chilies. The restaurant does. Just, you know, clarify."

The waiter, stunned, looks at Bethany, who handles the situation deftly by asking him, "So how is the endive soup served?"

"Er . . . cold," the waiter says, not fully recovered from my outburst, sensing he's dealing with someone very, very on edge. He stops again, uncertain.

"Go on," I urge. "Please go on."

"It's served cold," he starts again. "And for entrées we have monkfish with mango slices and red snapper sandwich on brioche with maple syrup and"—he checks his pad again—"cotton."

"Mmmm, sounds delicious. Cotton, mmmm," I say, rubbing my hands together eagerly. "Bethany?"

"I'll have the ceviche with leeks and sorrel," Bethany says. "And the endive with . . . walnut dressing."

"Sir?" the waiter asks tentatively.

"I'll have . . ." I stop, scan the menu quickly. "I'll have the squid with pine nuts and can I have a slice of goat cheese, of *chèvre*"—I glance over at Bethany to see if she flinches at my mispronunciation—"with that and some . . . oh, some salsa on the side."

The waiter nods, leaves, we're left alone.

"Well." She smiles, then notices the table slightly shaking. "What's . . . wrong with your leg?"

"My leg? Oh." I look down at it, then back at her. "It's the music. I like the music a lot. The music that's playing."

"What is it?" she asks, tilting her head, trying to catch a refrain of the New Age Muzak coming from the speakers hooked to the ceiling over the bar.

"It's . . . I think it's Belinda Carlisle," I guess. "I'm not sure."

"But . . ." she starts, then stops. "Oh, forget it."

"But what?"

"But I don't hear any singing." She smiles, looks down demurely.

I hold my leg still and pretend to listen. "But it's one of her songs," I say, then lamely add, "I think it's called 'Heaven Is a Place on Earth.' You know it."

"Listen," she says, "have you gone to any concerts lately?"
 "No," I say, wishing she hadn't brought this, of all topics, up.
 I don't like live music."

"Live music?" she asks, intrigued, sipping San Pellegrino water.

"Yeah. You know. Like a band," I explain, sensing from her expression that I'm saying totally the wrong things. "Oh, I forgot. I did see U2."

"How were they?" she asks. "I liked the new CD a lot."

"They were great, just totally great. Just totally . . ." I pause, unsure of what to say. Bethany raises her eyebrows quizzically, wanting to know more. "Just totally . . . Irish."

"I've heard they're quite good live," she says, and her own voice has a light, musical lilt to it. "Who else do you like?"

"Oh you know," I say, completely stuck. "The Kingsmen. Louie, Louie. That sort of stuff."

"Gosh, Patrick," she says, looking at every part of my face.

"What?" I panic, immediately touching my hair. "Too much mousse? You don't like the Kingsmen?"

"No." She laughs. "I just don't remember you being so tan back at school."

"I had a tan then, didn't I?" I ask. "I mean I wasn't Casper the Ghost or anything, was I?" I put my elbow on the table and flex my biceps, asking her to squeeze the muscle. After she touches it, reluctantly, I resume my questions. "Was I really not that tan at Harvard?" I ask mock-worriedly, but worriedly.

"No, no." She laughs. "You were definitely the George Hamilton of the class of eighty-four."

"Thanks," I say, pleased.

The waiter brings our drinks—two bottles of San Pellegrino water. Scene Two.

"So you're at Mill . . . on the water? Taffeta? What is it?" I ask. Her body, her skin tone, seem firm and rosy.

"Milbank Tweed," she says. "That's where I am."

"Well," I say, squeezing a lime into my glass. "That's just wonderful. Law school really paid off."

"And you're at . . . P & P?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

She nods, pauses, wants to say something, debates whether

she should, then asks, all in a matter of seconds: "But doesn't your family own—"

"I don't want to talk about this," I say, cutting her off. "But yes, Bethany. Yes."

"And you still work at P & P?" she asks. Each syllable is spaced so that it bursts, booming sonically, into my head.

"Yes," I say, looking furtively around the room.

"But—" She's confused. "Didn't your father—"

"Yes, of course," I say, interrupting. "Have you had the focaccia at Pooncakes?"

"Patrick."

"Yes?"

"What's wrong?"

"I just don't want to talk about . . ." I stop. "About work."

"Why not?"

"Because I hate it," I say. "Now listen, have you tried Pooncakes yet? I think Miller underrated it."

"Patrick," she says slowly. "If you're so uptight about work, why don't you just quit? You don't have to work."

"Because," I say, staring directly at her, "I . . . want . . . to . . . fit . . . in."

After a long pause, she smiles. "I see." There's another pause.

This one I break. "Just look at it as, well, a new approach to business," I say.

"How"—she stalls—"sensible." She stalls again. "How, um, practical."

Lunch is alternately a burden, a puzzle that needs to be solved, an obstacle, and then it floats effortlessly into the realm of relief and I'm able to give a skillful performance—my overriding intelligence tunes in and lets me know that it can sense how much she wants me, but I hold back, uncommitted. She's also holding back, but flirting nonetheless. She has made a promise by asking me to lunch and I panic, once the squid is served, certain that I will never recover unless it's fulfilled. Other men notice her as they pass by our table. Sometimes I coolly bring my voice down to a whisper. I'm hearing things—noise, mysterious sounds, inside my head; her mouth opens, closes, swallows liquid, smiles, takes me in like a magnet cov-

ered with lipstick, mentions something involving fax machines, twice. I finally order a J&B on the rocks, then a cognac. She has mint-coconut sorbet. I touch, hold her hand across the table, more than a friend. Sun pours into Vanities, the restaurant empties out, it nears three. She orders a glass of chardonnay, then another, then the check. She has relaxed but something happens. My heartbeat rises and falls, momentarily stabilizes. I listen carefully. Possibilities once imagined plummet. She lowers her eyes and when she looks back at me I lower mine.

"So," she asks. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"My life is essentially uncomplicated," I say thoughtfully, caught off guard.

"What does *that* mean?" she asks.

I take a sip of cognac and smile secretly to myself, teasing her, dashing her hopes, her dreams of being reunited.

"Are you seeing anyone, Patrick?" she asks. "Come on, tell me."

Thinking of Evelyn, I murmur to myself, "Yes."

"Who?" I hear her ask.

"A very large bottle of Desyrel," I say in a faraway voice, suddenly very sad.

"*What?*" she asks, smiling, but then she realizes something and shakes her head. "I shouldn't be drinking."

"No, I'm not really," I say, snapping out of it, then, not of my own accord, "I mean, does anyone really *see* anyone? Does anyone really *see* anyone else? Did *you* ever see *me*? *See?* What does that mean? *Hal See?* Hal I just don't get it. Hal" I laugh.

After taking this in, she says, nodding, "That has a certain kind of tangled logic to it, I suppose."

Another long pause and I fearfully ask the next question. "Well, are *you* seeing anyone?"

She smiles, pleased with herself, and still looking down, admits, with incomparable clarity, "Well, yes, I have a boyfriend and—"

"Who?"

"What?" She looks up.

"Who is he? What's his name?"

"Robert Hall. Why?"

"With Salomon Brothers?"

"No, he's a chef."

"With Salomon Brothers?"

"Patrick, he's a *chef*. And co-owner of a restaurant."

"Which one?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, really, which one?" I ask, then under my breath, "I want to cross it out of my Zagat guide."

"It's called Dorsia," she says, then, "Patrick, are you okay?" Yes, my brain does explode and my stomach bursts open inwardly—a spastic, acidic, gastric reaction; stars and planets, whole galaxies made up entirely of little white chef hats, race over the film of my vision. I choke out another question.

"Why Robert Hall?" I ask. "Why him?"

"Well, I don't know," she says, sounding a little tipsy. "I guess it has to do with being twenty-seven and—"

"Yeah? So am I. So is half of Manhattan. So what? That's no excuse to marry Robert Hall."

"*Marry?*" she asks, wide-eyed, defensive. "Did I say that?" "Didn't you say marry?"

"No, I didn't, but who knows." She shrugs. "We might."

"Ter-rific."

"As I was saying, Patrick"—she glares at me, but in a playful way that makes me sick—"I think you know that, well, time is running out. That biological clock just won't stop ticking," she says, and I'm thinking: My god, it took only *two* glasses of chardonnay to get her to admit this? Christ, what a lightweight. "I want to have children."

"With Robert Hall?" I ask, incredulous. "You might as well do it with Captain Lou Albano, for Christ sakes. I just don't get you, Bethany."

She touches her napkin, looking down and then out onto the sidewalk, where waiters are setting up tables for dinner. I watch them too. "Why do I sense hostility on your part, Patrick?" she asks softly, then sips her wine.

"Maybe because I'm hostile," I spit out. "Maybe because you sense this."

"Jesus, Patrick," she says, searching my face, genuinely upset. "I thought you and Robert were friends."

"What?" I ask. "I'm confused."

"Weren't you and Robert friends?"

I pause, doubtful. "Were we?"

"Yes, Patrick, you *were*."

"Robert Hall, Robert Hall, Robert Hall," I mutter to myself, trying to remember. "Scholarship student? President of our senior class?" I think about it a second longer, then add, "Weak chin?"

"No, Patrick," she says. "The *other* Robert Hall."

"I'm confusing him with the *other* Robert Hall?" I ask.

"Yes, Patrick," she says, exasperated.

Inwardly cringing, I close my eyes and sigh. "Robert Hall. Not the one whose parents own half of, like, Washington? Not the one who was"—I gulp—"captain of the crew team? Six feet?"

"Yes," she says. "That Robert Hall."

"But . . ." I stop.

"Yes? But *what*?" She seems prepared to wait for an answer.

"But he was a *fag*," I blurt out.

"No, he was *not*, Patrick," she says, clearly offended.

"I'm positive he was a fag." I start nodding my head.

"Why are you so positive?" she asks, not amused.

"Because he used to let frat guys—not the ones in my house—like, you know, gang bang him at parties and tie him up and stuff. At least, you know, that's what I've heard." I say sincerely, and then, more humiliated than I have ever been in my entire life, I confess, "Listen, Bethany, he offered me a . . . you know, a blow-job once. In the, um, civics section of the library."

"Oh my god," she gasps, disgusted. "Where's the check?" "Didn't Robert Hall get kicked out for doing his thesis on Babar? Or something like Babar?" I ask. "Babar the elephant? The, oh Jesus, *French* elephant?"

"What are you *talking* about?"

"Listen to me," I say. "Didn't he go to business school at Kellogg? At Northwestern, right?"

"He dropped out," she says without looking at me.

"Listen." I touch her hand.

She flinches and pulls back.

AMERICAN PSYCHO

I try to smile. "Robert Hall's not a fag—"

"I can assure you of that," she says a tad too smugly. How can anyone get indignant over Robert Hall? Instead of saying "Oh yeah, you dumb sorry bitch" I say soothingly, "I'm sure you can," then, "Tell me about him. I want to know how things stand with the two of you," and then, smiling, furious, full of rage, I apologize. "I'm sorry."

It takes some time but she finally relents and smiles back at me and I ask her, once again, "Tell me more," and then, under my breath, smiling a rictus at her, "I'd like to slice open your beaver." The chardonnay has mellowed her, so she softens and talks freely.

I think about other things while she describes her recent past: air, water, sky, time, a moment, a point somewhere when I wanted to show her everything beautiful in the world. I have no patience for revelations, for new beginnings, for events that take place beyond the realm of my immediate vision. A young girl, a freshman, I met in a bar in Cambridge my junior year at Harvard told me early one fall that "Life is full of endless possibilities." I tried valiantly not to choke on the beer nuts I was chewing while she gushed this kidney stone of wisdom, and I calmly washed them down with the rest of a Heineken, smiled and concentrated on the dart game that was going on in the corner. Needless to say, she did not live to see her sophomore year. That winter, her body was found floating in the Charles River, decapitated, her head hung from a tree on the bank, her hair knotted around a low-hanging branch, three miles away. My rages at Harvard were less violent than the ones now and it's useless to hope that my disgust will vanish—there is just *no way*.

"Oh, Patrick," she's saying. "You're still the same. I don't know if that's good or bad."

"Say it's good."

"Why? Is it?" she asks, frowning. "Was it? Then?"

"You only knew one facet of my personality," I say. "Student."

"Lover?" she asks, her voice reminding me of someone human.

My eyes fall on her coldly, untouched. Out on the street,

music that sounds like salsa blares. The waiter finally brings the check.

"I'll pay for it," I sigh.

"No," she says, opening her handbag. "I invited *you*."

"But I have a platinum American Express card," I tell her.

"But so do I," she says, smiling.

I pause, then watch her place the card on the tray the check came on. Violent convulsions seem close at hand if I do not get up. "The women's movement. Wow." I smile, unimpressed.

Outside, she waits on the sidewalk while I'm in the men's room throwing up my lunch, spitting out the squid, undigested and less purple than it was on my plate. When I come out of Vanities onto the street, putting on my Wayfarers, chewing a Cert, I murmur something to myself, and then I kiss her on the cheek and make up something else. "Sorry it took so long. Had to call my lawyer."

"Oh?" She acts concerned—the dumb bitch.

"Just a friend of mine." I shrug. "Bobby Chambers. He's in prison. Some friends of his, well, mainly *me*, are trying to remount his defense." I say with another shrug, then, changing the subject, "Listen."

"Yes?" she asks, smiling.

"It's late. I don't want to go back to the office," I say, checking my Rolex. The sun, setting, glints off it, momentarily blinding her. "Why don't you come up to my place?"

"What?" She laughs.

"Why don't you come up to my place?" I suggest again.

"Patrick." She laughs suggestively. "Are you serious?"

"I have a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé, *chilled*, huh?" I say, arching my eyebrows.

"Listen, that line might've worked at Harvard but"—she laughs, then continues—"um, we're older now and . . ." She stops.

"And . . . what?" I ask.

"I shouldn't have had that wine at lunch," she says again. We start walking. It's a hundred degrees outside, impossible to breathe. It's not day, it's not night. The sky seems yellow. I hand a beggar on the corner of Duane and Greenwich a dollar just to impress her.

"Listen, come over," I say again, almost whining. "Come on over."

"I can't," she says. "The air-conditioning in my office is broken but I can't. I'd like to but I can't."

"Aw come on," I say, grabbing her shoulders, giving them a good-natured squeeze.

"Patrick, I have to be back at the office," she groans, protesting weakly.

"But you'll be *sweltering* in there," I point out.

"I have no choice."

"Come on." Then, trying to entice her, "I have a 1940s Durgin Gorham four-piece sterling silver tea and coffee set I'd like to show you."

"I can't." She laughs, putting on her sunglasses.

"Bethany," I say, warning her.

"Listen," she says, relenting. "I'll buy you a Dove Bar. Have a Dove Bar instead."

"I'm appalled. Do you know how many grams of fat, of *sodium*, are in the chocolate covering alone?" I gasp, mock horrified.

"Come on," she says. "You don't need to worry about that."

"No, *you* come on," I say, walking in front of her for a little while so she won't sense any aggressiveness on my part. "Listen, come by for a drink and then we'll walk over to Dorsia and I'll meet Robert, okay?" I turn around, still walking, but backward now. "Please?"

"Patrick," she says. "You're begging."

"I really want to show you that Durgin Gorham tea set." I pause. "Please?" I pause again. "It cost me three and a half thousand dollars."

She stops walking because I stop, looks down, and when she looks back up her brow, both cheeks, are damp with a layer of perspiration, a fine sheen. She's hot. She sighs, smiling to herself. She looks at her watch.

"Well?" I ask.

"If I did . . ." she starts.

"Ye-e-es?" I ask, stretching the word out.

"If I did, I have to make a phone call."

"No, negative," I say, waving down a cab. "Call from my place."

"Patrick," she protests. "There's a phone right over there."
"Let's go now," I say. "There's a taxi."

In the cab heading toward the Upper West Side, she says, "I shouldn't have had that wine."

"Are you drunk?"

"No," she says, fanning herself with a playbill from *Lés Misérables* someone left in the backseat of the cab, which isn't air-conditioned and even with both windows open she keeps fanning herself. "Just slightly . . . tipsy."

We both laugh for no reason and she leans into me, then realizes something and pulls back. "You have a doorman, right?" she asks suspiciously.

"Yes." I smile, turned on by her unawareness of just how close to peril she really is.

Inside my apartment. She moves into the living room area, nodding her head approvingly, murmuring, "Very nice, Mr. Bateman, very nice." Meanwhile I'm locking the door, making sure it's bolted shut, then I move over to the bar and pour some J&B into a glass while she runs her hand over the Wurlitzer jukebox, inspecting it. I've started growling to myself and my hands are shaking so badly I decide to forgo any ice and then I'm in the living room, standing behind her while she looks up at the David Onica that's hung above the fireplace. She cocks her head, studying it, then she starts giggling and looks at me, puzzled, then back at the Onica, still laughing. I don't ask what's wrong—I could care less. Downing the drink in a single gulp, I move over to the Anaholian white-oak armoire where I keep a brand-new nail gun I bought last week at a hardware store near my office in Wall Street. After I've slipped on a pair of black leather gloves, I make sure the nail gun is loaded.

"Patrick?" Bethany asks, still giggling.

"Yes?" I say, then, "Darling?"

"Who hung the Onica?" she asks.

"You like it?" I ask.

"It's fine, but . . ." She stops, then says, "I'm pretty sure it's hung upside down."

"What?"

"Who hung the Onica?"

"I did," I say, my back still to her.

"You've hung the Onica *upside down*." She laughs.

"Hmmm?" I'm standing at the armoire, squeezing the nail gun, getting used to its weight in my gloved fist.

"I can't believe it's upside down," she says. "How long has it been this way?"

"A millennium," I whisper, turning around, nearing her.

"What?" she asks, still studying the Onica.

"I said, what in the fuck are you doing with Robert Hall?" I whisper.

"What did you say?" As if in slow motion, like in a movie, she turns around.

I wait until she's seen the nail gun and the gloved hands to scream, "*What the fuck are you doing with Robert Hall?*"

Perhaps on instinct, perhaps from memory, she makes a futile dash for the front door, crying out. Though the chardonnay has dulled her reflexes, the Scotch I've drunk has sharpened mine, and effortlessly I'm leaping in front of her, blocking her escape, knocking her unconscious with four blows to the head from the nail gun. I drag her back into the living room, laying her across the floor over a white Voilacutro cotton sheet, and then I stretch her arms out, placing her hands flat on thick wooden boards, palms up, and nail three fingers on each hand, at random, to the wood by their tips. This causes her to regain consciousness and she starts screaming. After I've sprayed Mace into her eyes, mouth, into her nostrils, I place a camel-hair coat from Ralph Lauren over her head, which drowns out the screams, sort of. I keep shooting nails into her hands until they're both covered—nails bunched together, twisted over each other in places, making it impossible for her to try and sit up. I have to remove her shoes, which slightly disappoints me, but she's kicking at the floor violently, leaving black scuff marks on the stained white oak. During this period I keep shouting "You bitch" at her and then my voice drops to a raspy whisper and into her ear I drool the line "You fucking cunt."

Finally, in agony, after I've taken the coat off her face, she starts pleading, or at least tries to, the adrenaline momentarily overpowering the pain. "Patrick oh god stop it please oh god

stop hurting me . . ." But, typically, the pain returns—it's too intense not to—and she passes out again and vomits, while unconscious, and I have to hold her head up so she doesn't choke on it and then I Mace her again. The fingers I haven't nailed I try to bite off, almost succeeding on her left thumb which I manage to chew all the flesh off of, leaving the bone exposed, and then I Mace her, needlessly, once more. I place the camel-hair coat back over her head in case she wakes up screaming, then set up the Sony palm-sized Handycam so I can film all of what follows. Once it's placed on its stand and running on automatic, with a pair of scissors I start to cut off her dress and when I get up to her chest I occasionally stab at her breasts, accidentally (not really) slicing off one of her nipples through the bra. She starts screaming again once I've ripped her dress off, leaving Bethany in only her bra, its right cup darkened with blood, and her panties, which are soaked with urine, saving them for later.

I lean in above her and shout, over her screams, "Try to scream, scream, keep screaming. . . ." I've opened all the windows and the door to my terracé and when I stand over her, the mouth opens and not even screams come out anymore, just horrible, guttural, animal-like noises, sometimes interrupted by retching sounds. "Scream, honey," I urge, "keep screaming." I lean down, even closer, brushing her hair back. "No one cares. No one will help you. . . ." She tries to cry out again but she's losing consciousness and she's capable of only a weak moan. I take advantage of her helpless state and, removing my gloves, force her mouth open and with the scissors cut out her tongue, which I pull easily from her mouth and hold in the palm of my hand, warm and still bleeding, seeming so much smaller than in her mouth, and I throw it against the wall, where it sticks for a moment, leaving a stain, before falling to the floor with a tiny wet slap. Blood gushes out of her mouth and I have to hold her head up so she won't choke. Then I fuck her in the mouth, and after I've ejaculated and pulled out, I Mace her some more.

Later, when she briefly regains consciousness, I put on a porkpie hat I was given by one of my girlfriends freshman year at Harvard.

"Remember *this*?" I shout, towering over her. "And look at

this!" I scream triumphantly, holding up a cigar. "I *still* smoke cigars. Ha. See? A cigar." I light it with steady, bloodstained fingers, and her face, pale to the point of blueness, keeps contracting, twitching with pain, her eyes, dull with horror, close, then open halfway, her life reduced to nightmare.

"And another thing," I yell, pacing. "It's not Garrick Anderson either. The suit is by *Armani!* *Giorgio Armani!*" I pause spitefully and, leaning into her, sneer, "And you thought it was *Henry Stuart*. Jesus." I slap her hard across the face and hiss the words "Dumb bitch," spraying her face with spit, but it's covered with so much Mace that she probably can't even feel it, so I Mace her again and then I try to fuck her in the mouth once more but I can't come so I stop.