

# **When Grief Was a Country**

**by Tamar Love, ©2000**

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## **March 19 / Austin, Texas**

Holding your beer cup above your head, you slide into the crowd at Liberty Lunch. It has been one year since you met him. You do not understand how this can be possible, but as you are here again, back in Texas, at South by Southwest, a year must have passed. The pain is gone and if you close your eyes and give in to the low, sexy throb of the music, you cannot remember the odd shape of his chin.

You are proud you came back here, to the place you met. There is no more healing due; Texas was the last thing to prove. Your girlfriend finds you, hands you a cigarette and you take it, light it, nursing your beer. Twenty-eight is not that old. You are in no hurry. There is still time.

## **February 20 / Lost & Found**

Driving toward 38th Avenue at sunset, cruising up and down the gentle hills of San Francisco in your new Honda Civic, you are assaulted by the sudden, pained beauty of the sun on the ocean. You pull over. Marveling, wondrous, you do not know you are weeping until you taste salt. The setting sun warms your face and you begin to laugh, not because you are crazy, but because you are happy. Your hard work has paid off: somewhere in the middle of all that pain, you found yourself again. You take a deep breath and are relieved to find it does not hurt. You exhale, and think you might be ready to start again, to allow yourself to have ideas about things, to dream. And while you are not quite ready to have good memories of the past, you think it might be okay to make plans for the future; you are certain there will be one.

You drive on toward your friend's house, where there will be a barbecue and many new faces. People will laugh, and you will laugh with them. You smile. You are not afraid.

### **February 14 / Silence**

You have not spoken with him for weeks. On television, in the movies, you hear people say things like: it's been two months, three weeks and twelve days since he left me. You try to fill in the gaps, the lost spaces between memories, and give an accurate count of the time that has passed, but you cannot. For so long, you knew the exact minute, the very second. Now all you can do is shrug and say: I guess it's been about five months, but I don't really know offhand.

### **January 30 / Sex**

An old friend visits from out of town. He was divorced last year and has not recovered. His depression, running so deep he can no longer see it, both attracts and repels you. You sit with him in your kitchen and chase tequila with Tecate, taking turns reciting the stories of your respective losses. By now, you know yours by heart. The cadence here, a pause there, a dangling ellipse. His story is not special enough to be interesting.

Hours go by. You find yourself hypnotized by his dehydrating self-pity: his ex-wife, his badly managed affair, the pain and the pain and the pain. You do not take up his shyly offered allusions to failed suicide attempts, but you do take another drink, and another, and you stop listening to what he says and instead watch his large, soft lips form words his dead eyes don't echo, and wonder if he is still as good of a lover as he was in high school.

Later that night you fuck him, and then fall asleep, unfulfilled and angry. The next morning, he has trouble looking at you. You make stilted conversation until it is time to go to the airport and wonder if you will ever talk to him again.

### **January 22 / The Crack in the Landscape**

One day, you receive another envelope and remember, as you take it from the mailbox, that this will be the last check he sends you. After today, his debt will be paid.

You manage to wait until you are upstairs, inside your apartment, coat hung and minor chores taken care of, before you open the envelope. Inside, behind that last check, is a picture clipped from a magazine.

A man without a face and a woman with brown hair stand in an empty gallery, ten feet apart, in front of a slide projected on the blank wall of a barren landscape marred by an enormous crack in the earth. The man, hands in his pockets, regards the woman, who—hands clasped before her—stares at another, emptier wall.

You move closer to the light to read his spiky writing: I hope this picture isn't annoying—it just seems inappropriate to send a mere check for my final payment. I won't forget you, and what we had. Take care.

You don't know it yet, but this will be the last contact you have with him.

### **December 25 / Christmas**

The empty space next to you doesn't hurt nearly as much as you had supposed it would.

### **December 23 / Going Home**

You make the long drive to LA in a trance, listening to music that transports you back to who you used to be: the soundtrack to *Les Miserables* that you listened to in high school until you knew every word, every intonation; the Janis Ian tape you used cry to while you drank Boone's Farm alone in your Camaro; the Suzanne Vega album you and your best friend sang to while you drove through the canyons in the sunlight. You remember what it was like to be you, ten years ago, in this other place. It was not as bad as you thought it was. You were happy, although you don't remember ever feeling that way at the time.

When you arrive, you are surprised to find you haven't thought about him once, in seven hours of driving, and you are pleased.

### **December 20 / His Birthday**

Even though he has left you, it is still his birthday. At least it is a Saturday: you will not have to pretend to be happy today.

You wake up and make a hearty breakfast: eggs and toast and bacon. You sit in front of the television with your eyes glazed over, the uneaten food on a tray by your feet, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from your bottom lip, and watch *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Every time the movie goes to commercial, you quickly flip to *The Golden Girls* on Lifetime. You can't afford any empty spaces.

At one o'clock you give in and call him. Happy birthday, you say, and intend for that to be the end of it. Instead, you tell him how much the cats miss him, and that you're going home for a week at Christmas. That you finally killed that plant that was doing so badly. You tell him you are not doing well, that you dream about him, that you cannot stop crying. You tell him that sometimes, when you aren't paying attention, you wonder what to make him for dinner. There have been a number of times, on the bus, when you've caught yourself planning your weekends together, the museum you'd been planning to go to, the play you'd wanted to attend, the logistics of that weekend in Mendocino.

The words slip out of your mouth like sharp, betraying knives, and you hate yourself for being so weak and stupid. But you do not have the power to stop yourself. Like Pandora, you are unable to recall what you have let loose.

You wait for him to say something that will make it better, something to ease the pain. But all he offers is silence, which has long ceased to be enough. You say goodbye then, and hang up the phone.

You sit for a long time and stare at the television, and then you pick up your breakfast tray and take it into the kitchen and wash the dishes and put them into the dryer rack. You look around the kitchen and notice that it is dirty, and you realize you haven't cleaned your apartment in almost two months. You turn on the radio and put on a pair of rubber gloves. Humming along to some Alanis Morissette song, you sprinkle Comet into the kitchen sink and begin to scrub.

### **December 14 / When Grief Was a Country**

On the ride home from work, you read the following passage in your book:

*Grief was a country, a place you entered hesitantly, or were thrown into without warning. But once you were there, amidst the roiling, formless blackness and stench of despair, you could not leave. Even if you wanted to: you could only walk and walk and walk, traveling on through the black reaches with the sound of screaming in your ears, and hope that someday you might glimpse far off another country, another place where you might someday rest.*

You think to yourself that you just might be done walking through that particular patch of land. Almost, but not quite.

### **December 10 / Mobility**

If you have to live one more minute of your life alone in this apartment, you will explode. You lived here alone for four miserable years before he came into your life, and you cannot bear to go back to that time, to the dirty dishes needing to be washed every day, to hauling the laundry down the stairs and five blocks to the Laundromat, to the dust piling up on the windowsills and the bookcases, to the dirt in the bathroom, and the trash cans filled with used tissues and empty cartons of cigarettes. To the food that needs purchasing every week, every day. And the plants that need to be watered, and the cats that need to be fed, and the litter box, and the hairballs, and the annual trips to the dentist. To the Friday nights alone, in front of the television, too tired to do anything else, too tired to make conversation with strangers. To the

suffocating entropy of this life you have created for yourself: empty, then shared, and then empty again.

In the end, you buy a car you cannot afford. It is liberating: you are mobile. You can leave the apartment or you can bring the party to you. But there is no party, only you alone, disconsolate, pathetic. You buy a steering wheel cozy to make yourself feel better.

### **December 7 / Email**

Your workday, spent somewhere between open weeping and veiled hostility toward your blameless co-workers, is regularly interrupted by emails from him. Each time the dialogue box appears—you have new mail—you click "OK" with apprehension and sigh loudly to your co-workers: can't he leave me alone? Your co-workers, who have already heard enough on this subject, nod sympathetically and look away.

*You open the new mail: I was hired permanently—they offered me a non-negotiable \$27,500 and I took it, can you blame me? Or, the school says they haven't received my application—should I be worried? Or, pitifully, do you have the number for the DMV?*

At first you cherish these emails, wait hungrily for each one and, when it arrives, devour it, bending and twisting it in search of meaning that is not there, for further evidence that he can't live without you. But as the emails increase in number, arriving at those awkward moments when you've put him out of your mind long enough to get some work done, you realize this will not do. Your boss, who has been understanding thus far, is starting to become annoyed by your constant outbursts of tears, and you suspect that your co-workers are getting tired of hearing you sigh.

You send him an email telling him to call you that night, and when he does, you pour yourself a big glass of wine and level with him. Look, you say, I can't keep doing this. Doing what? He asks, and you tell him. You left me, you say, staring at the quarter-sized ink stain he made on your green velvet sofa cushion, remembering how you wanted to hit him across the face when he said he assumed it would wash out. You left

me and you're still treating me like your girlfriend. You aren't allowed to ask me for advice anymore. The mistakes you make from here on out are yours alone: I don't want any part of them. You had your chance, and you threw it away. And, finally, after an hour of alternating between strength and self-pity, you find the courage to tell him to stop emailing you. He agrees, and you imagine what life will be like now, with your daily contact with him removed. And then you hang up the phone and you cry yourself to sleep.

### **December 3 / After November**

You wake one day and find it is December 3rd. You cannot recall the month of November. Thanksgiving has come and gone and people are buying trees. You remember Thanksgiving, and you remember Halloween, but you don't remember November. Although you have successfully avoided the emotion thus far, you begin to become bitter. After all he has taken from you, it is not fair: you want November back.

### **November 30 / Angel**

You take a shower. The hot water feels good, but changes nothing. Midway through, while you are rinsing the shampoo from your hair, Sarah McLachlan's "Angel" comes on the radio, the song he used to sing to you after you made love, while he held you in his arms and stroked your breasts. You're in the arms of the angels / may you find some comfort there. You begin to cry so hard that you lose your balance. Your feet slide out from under you and you fall to the floor of the tub, bruising your knees, choking on a mixture of water and tears.

### **November 25 / Thanksgiving**

It is Thanksgiving weekend. It has been one month since he left. You were supposed to have felt better by now, but you do not. But you are a good daughter, so even though you feel like lying in bed and staring at the ceiling for four days, you fly to Southern California to eat turkey with your parents.

On your way to the airport, you sit in the back of the airless shuttle and fail to try not to think about what was supposed to have happened this weekend. You both had tickets to go see his parents in Portland. It would have been the first time you met them, the entrance into the life you were going to share together. You imagine his mother, short, with curling brown hair and librarian glasses, a schoolteacher. His father, enormously tall, balding in the back, wearing a homemade flannel shirt. Your in-laws. Their welcoming smiles, the boxes in the attic of his old school art projects, the stack of poems he wrote in high school, the shelves filled with his favorite books.

After checking in at the gate, you try to lie to yourself, but it doesn't work. You would give a lot to not have been the one who bought the tickets, because now you have this information in your head—his destination and departure time, the knowledge that he is here, in the airport, very near by, waiting to get on that plane to Portland. Because you are a fix-it, a problem-solver, you know that all you have to do is look at the Departures screen for a quick map to where he is sitting. You stare at the screen. Gate 68. It couldn't be easier, just ten feet to the right. It would be best to turn your back, to walk away with your head high, a bullet dodged. But of course you do not do this. There was never any chance that you would. You walk the ten feet and stand outside the glassed-in gate, and see him immediately.

He looks sick. This is the first thing you notice. Then you see he is wearing the jeans you bought him at Old Navy. Somehow it seems wrong that he should still have them, and you think about the day you bought them together, and the sex you had in the dressing room. His rucksack is propped against his knees. He stares forward, at nothing, at the wall, his shock of blond hair tousled, his skin angry and red and white. He looks much younger than you remember, like a student going home for the holidays. And then you realize that is what he is. You place your right hand over your mouth, which has fallen open, and stand, alone, tears sliding into your fingers. People pass you, hundreds of them, but they do not see you. You wonder if he will feel something, if some force will compel him to look up, and, seeing you for the first time

in a month, realize that he made a terrible mistake, one he can correct right here and now. You wait for him to look up at you. You wait for him to see you.

After ten minutes of this, you feel something inside you break. You pick up your bag and head for the smoking room, where you sit until your flight is called, crying, smoking and writing in your journal. You stare at Gate 87, the gate from which he disembarked the first time he came to see you. You remember how thin he was then, in his blue polyester thrift store shirt, how gangly and eager and sweet. You remember the way he tried to kiss you, and how awkward you felt, pushing him back and telling him to wait until you felt more comfortable, until it was right, and you regret being so fucking stupid and nearsighted. If you could travel in back in time, if you could reverse everything. You would take that offered kiss and never let it go, never take your mouth from his again. The broken thing inside you cracks again, and you feel your mind cease to function; all of your thoughts freeze and when you close your eyes, you see only blackness. Your cigarette burns to the filter between your numb fingers as the room becomes oppressively smoky, but you continue to sit and stare at the gate, blind to anything but your own pain.

### **November 18 / The First Check**

On a rainy November day just like any other, you are surprised by the mail: it contains the first in a series of checks from him, payments against the two thousand dollars he owes you.

Standing outside in the rain, you tear open the envelope and begin to weep when you see the contents. The handwriting is the same, but this check is so different from all the others, from the rent checks on which he wrote "for love" in the memo field, the utilities checks decorated with silly little pictures. The memo field on this check is blank. The envelope, addressed with his familiar writing, bears a return address different from your own.

You look at the piece of paper in your hand and want to burn it, or to frame it; it means so little and is worth so much. You notice he has not changed the address on his checks, and you think of him, crossing out the words and numbers each time he pays for something, writing in his new address. You want to call him, to scream at him: change the address on your checks, you asshole, you don't live here anymore. You wonder if he's remembered to notify his creditors of his new address, if he's called all of his friends and family and redirected his mail. You wonder if one day, something else will come in the mail for him, a bill, a letter, a package, and you wonder what you will do with it, if you will rip it up, or forward it, conscientiously, in an adult manner.

You look inside the envelope. It contains a note: I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused you. I hope that by repaying you quickly, I can somehow make up for it. You read the words, and read them again, and again, searching for further meaning, for something to hold on to. When you do not find it, you stand on the stoop and rip the note into tiny little pieces, your bags tenuously grasped under your arm, sheaves of junk mail falling to the ground before you, while your umbrella, dripping, jabs you in the side.

### **November 13 / Victim**

At night you talk to him on the phone for hours, trying to understand what has happened. He tells you he is a trauma survivor. I have to take care of myself, he says, I've been through too much, experienced loss after loss my entire life. I need time to heal. I've accepted the fact that I am a victim and need to treat myself accordingly. It does not occur to you to be callous. Does this mean you're going to try therapy after all? You ask. No, he says, I think I'm fine on my own.

### **November 12 / Your Horoscope (II)**

Your horoscope in the weekly rag:

*You have just completed this level. Your score is 413,000. This does not exactly qualify you for the Retrograde Saturn Opposition Hall of Fame, but you may be*

*eligible for a few bonus points. You may also want to hit pause for a couple of days to make sure you're well rested before you take on the next level.*

### **November 11 / First Contact**

You are hit on while sipping a large coffee, extra room, at your favorite café. It is improbable—he is a swarthy young busboy at the restaurant where you buy your lunchtime burritos—yet you are incredibly grateful: you are not a sexless hag. You talk for a few minutes about public transportation, about rain and baseball and city life, and come to the swift understanding that you are not ready. When he asks for your number, you blindly shove your business card at him and stumble away. He does not call.

### **November 10 / Hatch Marks**

You tape a sheet of notebook paper to the wall. On it are two columns, one labeled "Moments of Self Control," the other "Late Night Calls to Forgiving Friends." By the end of the month, you have placed one hatch mark in the first column. The second column looks like this: |||| |||| |||| |||| ||.

### **November 8 / Your Horoscope (I)**

Your horoscope in the weekly rag:

*I'm sorry, but you have reached a future that has been temporarily shut down. Owing to a high volume of activity, all of our circuits are busy and your week contains many delays. Please put your life on hold and try again later.*

You feel bad for the other Libras. They should not have to go through this too.

### **November 6 / Damage Control**

You email everyone you know and give them some facts: we have broken up. He moved out a few days ago. And then you lie: I'm fine and we're still friends. If you tell everyone—your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors, the man at the corner store

who kept teasing the two of you about getting married—then there will be nothing left to surprise you, no casual questions weeks later, after you stop crying. Nothing to send you back to this place of grief and pain when you least expect it.

### **November 5 / Self-pity**

At night, alone and wakeful, you lie in your empty bed and trace a pattern on your inner arm. It won't be so bad, you think. They say if you cut vertically, it's over so quickly you don't even feel it. You think of the bottle of muscle relaxants in the medicine cabinet and the bottle of wine in the kitchen. You think of the bathtub, of the warm water, and the numbing, soothing, calming sense of nothingness you long for, the water, lugubrious, thick like saline, lapping at your wrists. The slow seepage of your life, into the bathtub, the water, into your veins. You wonder, Do the fluids run in both directions?

When you were a teenager you were mildly suicidal, but you know now that you were just looking for attention. This is the real thing. You have never known misery this complete, pain this deep. Every moment of awareness is agonizing: you wish you could return to the numbness you've been feeling for the past week, but since you can't, you seriously consider ending everything else. It just hurts too much. Besides, you're already dead inside—why not finish the job?

### **November 4 / Tallies**

You have lost 13 pounds in seven days, consuming nothing but 21 packs of cigarettes, 14 pots of coffee, two bagels and a piece of toast. You have vomited 11 times. You cannot keep water down. If you were sane, you would feel sexy and thin. But you are not sane and you feel nothing. When you can, you think about these numbers and their consequences, but can come to no conclusions. It seemed like a good idea at the time, you want to say, but that is not true. You have had no ideas, good or bad.

### **November 3 / The Bottom**

You lie on the couch with your mouth open and your eyes glazed over. There is something on the television, but you don't know what it is. You have been here for two days. You smell like sweat and smoke. Your hair is greasy and lank and snarled. Your pajamas are stained with coffee and vomit. The ashtray is filled with cigarette butts. The floor in front of you is piled with crumpled Kleenex and half-filled coffee cups. The television fills the room with a comforting light and warm noises. All you want to do is sleep, the one thing denied you, so you lie, hour after hour, watching the colored lights move, sucking the tears off of your cheeks, and getting up every now and then to piss.

### **November 1 / Packing**

He arrives with the rental truck at nine. You have not slept. You spent a few hours in bed, staring at the ceiling, but you gave up when it began to get light. Now, at nine o'clock, you have spent almost three hours in your green chair, immobile, staring out the window at the intersection, unsure if he will be driving a U-Haul or a Ryder truck. Because you don't know if you should be looking for a yellow or an orange truck, you find yourself concentrating harder than you probably need to. You are on your second pot of coffee.

It turns out to be a white Enterprise mini pickup. You were wrong on all counts.

You show him to the living room closet, where you have stacked all of his belongings. You don't think it will take very long; you've pretty much packed for him. You look at the speakers and amps and boxes of books, at the bags of clothes and the rack of hanging shirts. This is all he has. You think of him in his new flat, without a bed, or a table, or even a lamp. You wonder if he has thought about a clock radio or an answering machine. He asks if he can take the hangers, and you say, Yes, of course, and try to think what else you can give him.

It takes him two hours to pack his things and move them to the truck below. Two hours. You sit on your bed with the door closed and listen to him thud up and down the stairs, and you think of the days and weeks it took to ship these same things here from Albuquerque, the time spent arguing with the UPS man, the claims filed and the damages unpaid. It took so much longer to arrive.

He carries the last load down. You watch him from your bedroom window, see him bracing himself with his hands on the truck bed, shoulders hunched, back shaking. It's not too late, you want to shout, You can bring it all back up.

He comes up the stairs one last time. I'm all done, he says, standing in the kitchen in the late morning sun. I guess I'll be going now. He opens his arms for a goodbye hug, and you fall forward, into his embrace, feeling the hard warmth of his back and shoulders for the last time. The strength and solidity of him. The slow curve of his shoulder blades into the firm, flat plane of his lower back. His low, round ass. His strong, wide arms. The soft scent of him, intoxicating. The incredible sweetness of his skin, shampoo and soap. God, you think, I cannot do this. I cannot let this man go.

Somewhere you find the strength to speak to him, knowing that later you will be glad you did. I'm so sorry, you say, muffled, into his stomach, so sorry it didn't work out. I love you so much and I'll always be here for you whenever you need me. You are such a good person, you say, so strong and wonderful—don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise.

Your weeping fills the room. No, he says, I'm not a good person at all, and you understand that he is weeping too, his body shaking, tears streaming down his cheeks, his eyes red and his mouth trembling. I love you, he says. You have never seen him cry.

### **October 31 / Halloween**

Dazed, numb, hysterical, you sit on the floor and remove his CD's from the shelves. You make two piles: the stack he brought with him and the stack you bought together

since he moved in. The first stack is easy; you shove it in a box and don't look at it again. The second stack is harder.

You keep the CDs you truly love: Simon & Garfunkel, Sarah McLachlan, the Sea & Cake. But the others—the Tindersticks, Craig Armstrong, Lucinda Williams, the soundtrack to "Hair"—those you cannot possibly keep. How can you ever bear to listen to any of them again? You try to imagine listening to the Tindersticks without thinking of how he used to carry you to the bed and light the candles while you laid there panting. Or the Craig Armstrong CD—the first song, perfect for kissing, and the second song, which lasted exactly as long as it took him to make you come with his tongue. You can't even look at them without crying and feeling that deep, unreal longing in your chest, the feeling you have come to associate as your heart, breaking.

Below you, in the streets, you hear children screaming, but no one rings your buzzer. You have no candy, regardless.

### **October 30 / Dogs at Sunrise**

Your girl friend picks you up at sunrise. You have been waiting, limply swallowing cup after cup of coffee, staring out at the dawn, thoughtless, a void. You move stiffly into the front seat of her car, next to her two enormous dogs, and ride along a twisting road, staring out at the fog. You don't know where you are or where you are going. Your friend is mostly silent. She parks, and the dogs clamber out, barking, joyous. You follow them up over the sand dune and walk along the edge of the ocean. The air is bitterly cold. The sun, bright and cheerless in the sky, does not give off heat. The chill works through your jacket and sweater, through your shirt and shoes and socks, permeates your bones and is still and quiet.

Perched on an outcrop of rocks, high above the sea, you sit in the empty sunlight, listening to your friend talk about her break-up, what she did to recover. You try to explain that your life is over, that he has destroyed every thought you ever had. That no one could ever love you as much as he did, and if he left you, who could you expect

would stay? You are useless, without worth, a failure. It took you 28 years to find someone, him, the first person to love you. And he left you. He left.

Your girl friend doesn't say much after this, and when you ask her if you can go home now, she nods and climbs down the rock.

The dogs sleep on the ride home and you stare numbly out the window. The ocean was beautiful. You should feel a sense of healing. But you are not healed.

### **October 29 / Good Logic**

On the phone:

No, I don't really miss you. I mean, I do in a way, but I'm really ready to live my life alone.

And then he tells you how he lied to you:

No, none of it was true. I mean, I had some acid, yeah, but I was here the whole time, cleaning out my files and trying to decide what to do. Yeah, I heard the phone ring. All those times. But I didn't answer it. And finally, I went for a walk so I wouldn't hear it anymore.

And then he tries to explain his behavior:

I thought, he says, that if I didn't answer the phone the whole weekend you were gone, didn't return your messages, if I made you mad enough, you'd break up with me. Tell me to leave. But then I talked to my brother and he told me it was a stupid idea. He said that if I did that, I wouldn't have anywhere to stay all week until my apartment was ready. So I told you what I did, hoping you'd forgive me. It wasn't that hard. You wanted to believe me.

And then he talks about what he wants:

I want to be free, he says, I've been in relationships for the past five years of my life, and I want to be free. I want to have casual sex.

Casual sex.

### **10/28 Vomit and Coffee**

After he finally leaves, you stay on the phone until your support system arrives. You don't know how to be alone; you are out of practice. First you call your mother, then your girlfriends in LA and Nebraska. None of them can believe it. But the two of you were so happy, they say, how could it be over? You do not have an answer to that question. You don't know. And is it really over? I never saw it coming, you tell them, that's the hardest part. If only I'd had some warning, some idea something was wrong. At least I could have tried to fix it. As you talk, you drink wine. One bottle, then two. You are not drunk. Alcohol cannot penetrate.

Your friends arrive and extract the wine bottle from your hand. They take the phone away from you and say goodbye to whomever is on the other line. They sit you down at the kitchen table and put a cup of coffee in your hand and set a box of Kleenex next to you. They sit down at the table next to you, in a row, and faced with calm, pitying sympathy, you realize you are about to be sick.

You run to the bathroom and vomit, choking out the wine and coffee, heaving until nothing more comes, beyond that, heaving dry nothingness into the toilet, your body unable to stop rejecting itself. You have never felt this much pain. You have been decapitated, dismembered. You do not exist. You fall over and scream into the bathtub: long, inchoate vowels, no, no, echoing off the shower walls like eerie music. Arms wrap around you and you slide back into someone's warm body. You pitch forward again and hammer your head on the porcelain wall of the bathtub, driving it all away, idiot, idiot and you feel cool hands pulling you away, smoothing back the damp hair from your forehead. *Sssh*, a voice says, It's okay. You finally relax into the crooning and rocking, and curl into a ball, sobbing dry tears, eyes screwed shut. Make it go away.

One friend spends the night to make sure you do not kill yourself.

### **October 28 / Motel 6**

You don't want him to go. You sit in the kitchen, drinking glass after glass of wine, listening to him pack work clothes into his rucksack. When he goes, you will call people and tell him what he has done. They will hate him, which is good. Someone must, and you cannot.

### **October 28 / Boring, Stupid and Shallow**

These are the reasons he gives you for leaving, the reasons why he has stopped loving you. You are boring, stupid and shallow.

To his credit, that is not precisely what he says. He says: you are too conservative and I don't feel intellectually challenged by you and you are too materialistic.

You don't understand, so he explains it for you:

You aren't tolerant of other cultures, he says. And: you didn't open all of the doors of me. And: when we were planning our dream house, I talked about what I wanted to do there, and you talked about what you wanted to put in it.

That's not true, you tell him, I wanted things that would save time, automate everything, so I could spend every waking moment writing and making love to you. Nothing else is important.

But you sound like you are whining, even to yourself. Even you don't believe yourself. He has redefined you, found the most secret fears in you, the things you are terrified of becoming. For years, you have fought against your conservative upbringing, yet you are practical and traditional, afraid of strange new things, and now you have become boring. You have always found it easier to hide your fierce, difficult intelligence so you could communicate better with others, all the while fearing you were killing the best part of your brain, which you were. You have worked hard to have nice things that will make your life easier, more comfortable, and were deathly afraid you were becoming a yuppie. But you weren't; you were just becoming shallow.

Your rational mind knows you are none of these things; your friends, your family, people who know and love you, swear that these things are not true. But your rational mind goes on vacation for the next few months, and while you can listen to other people, you cannot hear what they are saying. You begin to hate yourself, and understand why you are worthless.

### **October 28 / Take Off Your Boots**

You greet him with a kiss, throwing your arms around him, standing on tiptoe, hoping to be lifted into his arms. Come in, he says, gently leading you into the kitchen, take off your boots. He gently pushes you into a kitchen chair. I bought us a bottle of wine, he says. Candles are lit and you can smell incense. You wonder if he finally got hired permanently. Or maybe he found out about his raise. We have to talk, he says. About what? You say, setting your bag on the floor. You wonder if he has made you dinner. I'm moving out this weekend, he says. You stare at him, confused. Why would you do that? You say, and he says, because we are getting ready to spend the rest of our lives together and I don't want to. I don't want this. I don't love you. You are not what I want. My life is different. I am different. I don't want this. If I stay with you I will lose myself. I have to leave.

You do not understand what he has just said. It is a dream. You are still on the bus, riding home to see him after a long day, planning dinner, fantasizing about that night's lovemaking. This is not happening. You are still on the bus.

But where will you go?

I found a place and I'm moving in this weekend.

You found a place?

Yes.

When in God's name did you start looking?

Two weeks ago.

Two weeks?

Yes.

For two weeks you made love to me, pretended nothing was wrong, acted completely normal, and looked for an apartment?

Yes.

How can you justify this?

It was something I had to do.

Where did you get the money?

I borrowed it.

But you owe me almost two thousand dollars!

I know. I'll pay you back.

Why did you do it like this?

I didn't think you'd let me stay here if I told you I wanted to move out.

But I didn't even know there was anything wrong. You never discussed anything with me. You never told me you were unhappy. I thought you were happy!

I'm sorry, he says, but I wasn't.

You sit at the kitchen table and stare at the wall. You neglected to take off your boots.

### **October 27 / And You Didn't Even Know**

You attack him the second you walk in the apartment, and keep him in bed for over an hour. You come up for air to do the laundry. He's out of socks, he explains, it can't wait another night.

### **10/26 Black Lace**

You play hooky from work and spend all day cleaning the house. Your conversation last night was unsettling, but everything seems to be fine. It was good to talk about that stuff, get it all out. You've been encouraging him to communicate more, to open up. It's working. It feels wonderful to be getting the cobwebs out. You scrub the bathroom walls with vigor.

At four, you finish cleaning the house and start cleaning yourself. You take an hour-long bath, scrape and scrub and shave your body. You slather yourself with lotion and perfume. Slide into your black lace slip. Meet him at the door with a wet kiss. Lead him into the bedroom and fuck him hard, fancy, for hours.

### **October 25 / He Explains Everything**

You are so frantic; you take a taxi home from the airport. He is there when you arrive. Where were you, you ask. I called you over and over again. He is pink and scrubbed clean, wears a calm expression you cannot quite define. He leads you to the kitchen table and sits down next to you, taking your hands in his. He looks directly into your eyes and he lies to you.

He had gone on a binge after work. Someone had some acid and he took too much. He freaked out. Yes, he heard you call, but he couldn't deal with the phone. Wasn't even home that much. Didn't call you at your parent's house because he was afraid they'd answer the phone. He was so sorry. He didn't mean to scare you.

You do not know you are being lied to, so you let yourself be placated. He tells you he loves you, over and over, stroking your hand. Holding your face. Tender kisses. Gentle

cuddling in the night. You relax into his body, grateful. There is nothing to worry about. You are safe.

### **October 23 / Phone Calls**

When you arrive at your parent's house, you call him to tell him you've arrived safely. He does not answer. You aren't surprised; he'd said he was going out with his work friends that evening. You call him again before you go to bed. He's not home. You wake from a nightmare and call him in the middle of the night. He does not answer. Fine. He drank too much and crashed on someone's couch. You wake from another nightmare at six AM. You call him. He does not answer. At ten, noon, two o'clock, he does not answer. Four. Four-thirty. Six. Eight. Ten. You lose track of the number of calls you make. Midnight. Six AM. Ten. Ten-thirty. Eleven. Eleven forty-two. One. Two. Four o'clock.

### **October 15 / Separate Vacations**

You know, you say, you don't have to go with me this time if you don't want to. He has gone with you twice to visit your parents, both wonderful trips. But as you fly home every six weeks or so, you cannot expect him to go every time. He might like a bachelor weekend, time spent drinking and watching basketball, lazing around unbathed. You can stand to be separated from him for two days. It has been five months. You must be realistic.

That might be good, he says. I could use a weekend alone.

### **September 30 / Your Birthday**

It leaves you a little unsettled.

At six-thirty, he wakes you by playing "Happy Birthday" on his guitar. He leaves a note for you on the kitchen table, wishing you a happy birthday, wishing he could spend the whole day with you. He sends you flowers at work, a dozen red and purple roses, and two sunflowers. He emails you birthday wishes all day long. When you get home,

you find he has lit all of the candles, burned incense in every room. The house smells delicious. He has picked up another dozen roses, pink buds, and has a bottle of Mumm on ice, which you take up to the roof. He gives you a sack full of presents: a green glass necklace, a blue Baccarat vase, two books, two CD's, a lavender candle in a beaten metal box, lip balm, a box of expensive chocolates. He takes you to dinner at Woodward Gardens, where you stare into each other's eyes over Chilean sea bass and South Australian Chardonnay.

You don't understand why he thought all of this was necessary. He must have spent five hundred bucks, money he doesn't have. Did he really think you needed this? That you wanted this? The necklace, champagne and chocolates would have been plenty. Dinner at an inexpensive café. Hell, he could have made you dinner. The roof was nice, and the candles. The homemade card. But the Baccarat scared you. You know how much crystal costs.

But it's your birthday, and you aren't about to berate him for showering you with gifts. That would be rather tacky. You'll have a quiet word with him in a few days. For now, you don't think you have ever been happier. He must really love you.

### **September 13 / The Magic**

You realize that—for no real reason—you didn't have sex yesterday, for the first time since he moved in, almost three months ago. Although your instinctive response is intense fear, you make a joke of it. The magic is gone, you say, you don't love me anymore.

### **September 4 / Dream House**

Your Sunday night ritual: sitting on the roof, smoking a joint, splitting a bottle of champagne, watching the sunset. You talk about your dream house. On the edge of a high cliff, he says. Somewhere on the Central Coast, you say. The sea below.

I'd want it to be huge, you say, more rooms than we could ever possibly use. I'd have a studio, he says, and I'd lock myself in and make music all day long. We'd have servants,

you say, a sweet married couple who would live on the premises and do everything so we don't have to. I'd sit and look at the ocean, he says, at night when it's wildest. I'd read in a hammock under a huge oak tree, you say, I'd have walls and walls of books. I would sleep until noon every day, he says. We'd have every appliance known to man, you say, cooking would be so easy. I'd play guitar all the time, he says. I'd write all day, you say. And then at night, you say, he says, at night we would make love. In a bed filled with pillows, you say, and silk sheets. He looks beyond you then, out at the fading sunset, and doesn't say anything more.

### **August 30 / How We Met**

When people ask you how you met, you let him tell the story:

I was in a bar in Austin, working at South by Southwest. She walked in, and I saw her right away. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I fell in love with her at first sight. I watched her for awhile, then went over and started talking to her. We had an immediate connection. One thing led to another, and I moved out here from Albuquerque. We live together now, and it's the best thing that ever happened to me.

Fade to blackout. Curtain drops.

### **August 22 / Cambria**

Only one moment is really important. On the second night of your stay, after dining on steak and lobster, sipping champagne and holding hands in front of the hotel fireplace, he takes you back to the hotel suite, gently removes your clothes, carries you out to the private balcony, where the warm summer breeze brushes softly over your body, and tells you, looking deep into your eyes, that he doesn't think it's possible for him to love you any more than he does this minute.

### **August 10 / Drawbacks**

Although he is very intelligent, he has no common sense. You are a problem-solver. You have all kinds of common sense, and the lack thereof drives you insane. You had

to teach him how to use the ATM, for the love of Christ. And you were appalled to learn he'd paid for a two-year motorcycle insurance policy before leaving Albuquerque and hadn't even seen about getting a refund because he didn't know New Mexico insurance wasn't any good in San Francisco. But it isn't really a problem. If nothing else, he has taught you how to be patient, a trait you have long wanted to acquire.

But he never has any money, and while you don't want to be mercenary, you are already tired of paying for everything.

### **August 1 / Belly Fat**

He loves your belly, plays with the soft roll of fat, kneading it, kissing it, smoothing it with his fingers. Every time he touches it, you melt, remembering your previous lovers, who touched it gingerly, as if by acknowledging it, they would be telling you they thought you were fat.

### **July 16 / Your First Fight**

You are in the supermarket, explaining to him that it's fine, you have money, he can get whatever he wants. Yet he still refuses to put anything in the basket. Finally tired of asking him what he wants, you shout at him, tell him he'd better make a fucking decision about something or go hungry.

He doesn't speak to you until you are outside, walking back to your apartment. You don't understand, he says, I've always been poor. My father used to take us to dumpsters, all ten of us, to scavenge damaged supermarket food...unlabeled cans. Whenever I've gone to the store, I've had about \$17.38, and I've had to figure everything out to the last penny, even the tax. I don't know how to live like this.

This is so far out of the realm of your own experience, you do not know what to say. You have certainly never been rich, but you've also never gone hungry. You are ashamed at your behavior, and apologize, wondering how and when this issue will resurface.

### **July 4 / Meet & Greet**

Fourth of July has always been a big deal in your family, a chance for hedonism and barbecue. Fireworks, outlawed years ago, are missed, but your Dad always seems to scrape up a few for illicit consumption.

Their meeting is flawless. He shakes hands with your father, serious, careful. You look at the two of them in profile: your Dad, huge and familiar, soft and strong; and your boyfriend, tall and gentle, yet so beautiful and strong and filled with laughter.

Your parents love him. But then, they would love anyone who loved you—as he so obviously does. You expect them to be embarrassed by his devotion, but they make jokes: are you two ever going to stop kissing? And how was your "nap?" and I think you two must be attached at the face. Cute jokes. Parental jokes. You are happy.

Late in the day, you go for a bike ride, your Dad on the Harley, he on the Honda. You ride behind him, the wind lifting your hair, the summer sun beating on your shoulders. You ride out to the canyon, the ride you and your Dad have been taking since you were a little girl. Your Dad rides next to you, beaming, grinning so hard you think his face will split. This is his dream too, to see you so happy. To ride alongside his daughter and the man who loves her.

### **June 30 / The Short List**

You are so happy, you can hardly breathe. Things seem to be working out. You compile a list in your journal, a few of your favorite things:

Sex on the puzzle. You both love to do puzzles, and often spend an entire weekend listening to Tom Waits, piecing together puzzle after puzzle. When the mood strikes him, he lifts you up onto the table and takes you right there, on top of the puzzle. It takes awhile to sort out the pieces when you're done, but it's worth it.

Chair time. You can spend hours at the kitchen table, him sitting in one of the straight-backed chairs, you straddling him, facing him, devouring each other. You call it "chair

time," and when you want it, you pout and stamp your foot like a child, until he laughs, pushes back the chair, pulls you over, onto his lap and kisses you.

The lift. You've never been with a man who so enjoys picking you up and carrying you around. You feel small, dainty, feminine. Protected.

Oral sex. He loves giving it, you love receiving it and he never wants you to reciprocate. Your girlfriends are jealous and you are smug.

His attentiveness. He is the most devoted, affectionate person you've ever been with. He holds your hand, gives you massages, opens the door for you, gives you anything and everything you've ever wanted from a relationship. You've always wanted this kind of intimacy. Now that you have it, you will never let it go.

The best part is that you are also completely safe. After all this man has done for you, after everything he has undergone to be with you, there is no way in hell he will ever leave you. There is a small chance that you won't marry him, that you won't, after all, spend the rest of your life with him, but the only way that would happen is if you were to end it first. And you have no plans for doing so.

### **6/10 A Big Problem**

You hate his music; he hates your writing.

You try to listen to his CD, the one he burned before leaving Albuquerque, but you hate it. The first time you listen to it, you sit on the bed, in his arms, and try to let it fill you; try to understand it through osmosis. It sounds weak, derivative, utterly devoid of talent. You cannot imagine a more painful series of noises. You ask him pertinent questions—what was he trying to accomplish? Who were his influences? But you honestly do not care about the answers. You only want this noise removed from your CD player. You crave the sweet solace of Ella Fitzgerald.

He reads your published story and is noncommittal. You know it is good; if it weren't, it wouldn't have been published. You would not have received all that money would not

have attracted the attention of agents and publishers in New York. Yet he does not care for it, says it does not touch him. He feels the same about your poetry.

You both pretend everything is fine, sweep the dirt under the rug, place the Band-Aid over the wound and act as if all is healed. But you are resentful and angry. Why doesn't he see your talent? And while he doesn't mention your reaction to hearing his CD, you know he is hurt. Perhaps it's better, after all, to just leave it alone.

### **June 6 / Road Trip**

You determine that the only way he's actually going to get here is to drive his motorcycle cross country. It's a long trip—two days—but it will save him the cost of a rental truck and get him to you all that much faster. You tell him to stuff his rucksack full and send the rest of his stuff via UPS. He doesn't have much, anyway.

On June 6th, he rides up to your door. He has been on the road for two days and is covered with dead bugs. You jump up when you hear his motorcycle, race downstairs, throw yourself at him as he is dismounting, and kiss him through the faceplate of his helmet. He picks you up in his arms and carries you through the door, up two flights of stairs, into your apartment. You can smell him through his coveralls, dirty, greasy, and dank. But you don't care. You have waited so long for this moment, to feel him in your arms, to start your life together, that you can't wait even a moment more. It's time to begin.

### **May 23 / The Second Weekend**

Is much the same as the first. You make love around the clock, stopping only to order delivery and to shower. You break routine on Sunday and go out into the world. You take him to your favorite place, the stone wall at the Sutro Baths, and sit in the sun for hours, making out. The Japanese tourists are shocked, but you do not care. It is a beautiful day, and you are in love.

The next morning, you take him to the airport and cry as you place him on the plane. True, he will be back in less than a month, back forever, but you already miss him. Natalie Merchant plays on the radio as you drive to work.

### **May 22 / In the Closet**

Naked, you stand in the closet looking for something to wear. He is behind you on the bed, sorting through your CD's. What will your friends say, you ask, when you tell them you live here now? They'll think it's strange, he says, rising from the bed to put his arms around you, but they've always been supportive of the decisions I've made. He kisses you. But, you say, won't they think it's a bad idea for you to have another girlfriend so quickly? He stares at you, blankly, then: I guess you are my girlfriend, aren't you? Yes, you say, we're going to be living together. What did you think you'd call me?

### **May 19 / His Response**

He takes a quick trip up the coast to Portland to visit his best friend. He calls you from a bar at 2:00 AM. Can I move in with you? He asks, over the din. Oh, baby, you say, I'm so happy. You've made me so happy.

### **May 17 / Your Offer**

Before he leaves for Portland, you ask him to move in with you. He is startled, but he takes it in stride. You tell him not to answer now, whatever the answer might be, but to think about it while he is in Portland, to tell you when he gets back.

### **May 15 / Everything and More**

You sit at the kitchen table, sipping wine in the candlelight, and talk about books, poetry, music. Despite the initial awkwardness, your embarrassment and insecurity, you are drawing toward him. The two months of phone calls have paid off. You know this man, after all, you feel comfortable with him, safe. You want him.

But frightened by your initial, cold reception, he makes no move toward you, despite your hints. Finally, you ask him if he is ever planning on kissing you. He smiles, pulls

you to him, places you on his lap and begins to slowly, thoroughly kiss you. Eventually, he carries you to the bedroom.

When you are done, you lie next to him, limp, satiated, and ask him if it is too soon to tell him you love him. Not at all, he says, I've been telling you that for months, remember? He pulls you on top of him and you laugh, deep, from the belly.

### **May 15 / Cat Facts**

His flight is due at 7:30 p.m., so you arrive at the airport at 7:00. You practice standing, something you normally do without effort. You check your hair, your lipstick, your scent. You position your bag over your shoulder so it won't fall to the ground when he embraces you, gives you the kiss you've been promised these long weeks. You shift weight, noting the beauty of the setting sun over the tarmac.

The plane lands and people stream out. You wait, rehearsing the moment one last time. The stream thins, stops, and he is not there. You panic: did he miss his flight? You call your voice mail; there is no message. You pace, think, what could have happened? You consider having him paged; perhaps you missed each other, perhaps that other blond man was him and you didn't, after all, recognize him. The thought that he just didn't come occurs to you, but you quash it. He loves you. Of course he came. You look at one of the "Arrivals/Departures" monitors and realize you have transposed the numbers; you are at the wrong gate.

Panting, you run down the hallway to the next terminal. You have never done anything this stupid. That, and the fact you are woefully out of shape, gives you a piercing pain in your side. You try not to sweat, and wonder if you will have time to check your lipstick before his flight arrives.

You do not. Approaching Gate 87, you see his flight deplaning. You slow to a casual stroll and try to catch your breath, smoothing back your hair and running your tongue over your front teeth.

You see him immediately. You wait for your heart to drop. You wait for disgust to fill you. You stare at him, at the tall awkward blondness of him, wearing the new shirt he bought just to impress you, and you note the fresh haircut, his pressed vintage slacks. You think, my god, what have I done? And know you are not attracted to him, know that while he is what you remembered, he is not what you expected; there is no rush of chemistry, you do not love him.

He turns, sees you, and smiles, takes three steps—all his long legs require to bring him to you—and stops, bends down gingerly to kiss you. You receive the kiss, but when he moves closer, places his arms around you, nudges his head deeper into you, you pull back, say whoa, there, take it easy. He pulls away from you, unshaken, and tells you about his flight. I had the best seat, he says, in the front row of the plane. I know, you say, I wanted to make sure you had enough room to stretch your legs.

It is then, as he shifts the books he is carrying to his right hand so he can take your hand in his left, that you notice he is carrying a copy of *Cat Facts*, a \$.99 throwaway book you saw last week at the grocery store check-stand. You remember wondering who in the hell would buy such a thing and are embarrassed for him. Nice book, you say, as you start walking toward the baggage claim. Is it any good? Yes, he says, exuberant, I read the whole thing on the flight over. I learned so much about cats! Did you know that tri-colored cats are always female? Only 99% of the time, you say, and when they are male they are sterile.

### **April 28 / Hasty Thinking**

You plan a trip for the middle of May, which will be two months after you met him. He'll be done with school then, and can fly out and stay awhile. And if things work out, you'll ask him to move in with you. He's said he wouldn't mind living in San Francisco—why not with you?

You have been cautioned by those you love, those who would not see you hurt, that this is a bad idea. It's too soon, they say, you've never lived with anyone before. But

their protests are relatively quiet; it's as if they, too, know that this was meant to happen. That this, the strangest, best thing to ever happen to you, must be experienced.

### **April 19 / Three AM**

You talk every night until three AM. He calls late, close to midnight, and you lie in bed together, you in San Francisco, him in Albuquerque, twelve hundred miles away. He courts you, woos you, asks about all your secrets, explores your mind, remotely. Every day you fall deeper and deeper in love with this disembodied voice, this inappropriate man. He reaches a deep part of you that no one else has seen before, all of those other men who only wanted sex and comfort and ease. This man wants you, the deepest and most secret part of you. You don't know if it's real—but it seems that way. Can you trust it? You don't know, but you want to. God, do you want to.

### **March 28 / Buffalo Daughter**

You have spent all day cleaning the house, removing the debris, getting a fresh start. Texas has left you confused, hungry, and you have no outlet. You change into your going-out clothes and mix yourself a Cosmopolitan. Your girl friend will be there in an hour, with the boyfriend she decided to keep after all, and the three of you will go to the Justice League to see Buffalo Daughter, the excellent electronic band from Japan you saw last week in Austin.

You turn on the television and start watching "The Summer Place," with Sandra Dee and Troy Donohue, a silly movie about sexual taboos and the moral corruptness of infidelity. Sipping your Cosmo, you feel elegant. The house glistens around you, smells sweet and clean. The movie is entertaining, and you are about to do something fun. You feel a certain freedom you don't think you've ever felt before.

The phone rings. It is him. Finally. He's left several messages, but no phone number, and you haven't talked to him since you left him in Austin, next to his motorcycle, a week ago.

You talk for two hours; your friend having called to say she will be late. You talk about his life, why it is changing. How it's good his band is breaking up, because he's been wanting to do solo work for a long time. He's planning on moving to the West Coast soon, probably to live with his best friend in Portland. He wants to get a job, go to school, get his degree.

You talk about your life, why it is due for a change. How you've lived in the same apartment for four years, and while it's beautiful and very inexpensive, you are so bored you can't stand it much longer. You talk about the job you hate, the daily tedium of life, the chores, the bad relationships you've endured, your immense capacity for love.

By the time you hear your friend's horn below, a weird thing has happened. You have fallen in love with him. You promise to call him back when you get home, and you go out, into the night.

### **March 22 / Chateaubriand**

On the flight home, you are served Chateaubriand and champagne in First Class. You feel surreal, are not certain the events of the past two days have really taken place. As your girlfriend thumbs through the issue of Bikini she's bought for the flight home, you stare out the window at the bands of silver and gold filling the sky. You are limp, dispossessed. She looks up at you and says, he's really young, isn't he? Yes, you say, he is. And geographically undesirable. Keep an open mind, she says, it could work out. You never know. I have a feeling. She smiles and turns back to her magazine.

### **March 22 / The First Kiss**

It's time to leave: you for your flight and he for the long, cross-country drive back to Albuquerque. You walk him to his motorcycle, a beat-up, well-tended Yamaha. His pride and joy, he's said.

You stand there, in the long shadows of late afternoon, staring at each other, unsure of what comes next. I'll call you, he says. As soon as I get home. Ok, you say. And you

stare at each other. Can I have a hug? He finally asks, and you smile at the sweetness, at the innocence of it. Of course, you say, and move forward, into him. His arms, enormous, cover you, swallow you. You can hear his heart thumping beneath your ear. You move back slightly, tilt your head up at him, and give his lips the barest, smallest kiss. You pull back slightly, but he looks down at you, and moves to take another. And another. He moves further into you, pressing the length of himself against you, and you move back, place your hand on his chest. It is too much.

Goodbye, you say, and you smile, turning. You walk to the corner and turn back, see him standing where you left him, next to the bike, helmet in hand, dazzling in the sunlight. You lift your hand once, turn, and walk away, around the corner, certain you will never see him again.

### **March 21 / The Good & the Bad**

I'm in love with you, he says, in the small hours of dawn, just four hours after you meet. I knew it the moment you walked in the door of the club. I couldn't take my eyes off you. It was love at first sight. He sounds ridiculous, his words empty and hackneyed, a cliché, a bad movie, a cheesy pick-up line, a tacky romance novel. But you don't say any of those things, because you believe him, because you feel the same way yourself. It makes no sense, and it is wrong, and it is not very practical, but it is true.

You've spent the evening talking with him, drinking a few drinks, wandering through one another's minds. You've shared favorite movies, books, songs; you've talked about ideas and ideologies, pain and heartbreak and love. He's 22, unemployed and lives in Albuquerque. He has no marketable skills. He wants to be a musician.

You are 27, drug-free, and gainfully employed. You live in San Francisco. You think about Fate and Destiny and True Love and your laugh sounds brittle, but you can handle it—you've overcome worse.

## **March 20 / Austin, Texas**

You swagger into Fat Tuesday, drunk on tequila and steak. This is your first time in Austin and you feel powerful. The night air, the stink of festivity, the free shots sported you by the cute bartender at the walk-up bar. All the girls are wearing tight white jeans they've stuffed their size-12 asses into, and you, in your hip-hugging black boot-cut pants, are chic by default. You feel uncommonly feisty, far removed from the plain, conservative bore you've watched yourself become. You and your girlfriend grab a couple of beers and scan the place, looking for something interesting.

You see him immediately. Tall—well over six feet—he towers over everyone else in the room, his shock of blond hair blinding in the dark bar. He is difficult to miss. He's wearing black-rimmed glasses and he's got a funky jacket on, and you can tell from across the room that he's cute, more than cute. Kind of amazing. Even with the surge of power the tequila gave you, you don't think you're quite up to this; he's a little more man than you're used to attracting. You scan the bar for a short, dark, overweight fellow, much more your speed, but you find yourself drawn back to him. He doesn't see you.

You tell yourself you are watching the show, some Chicago Americana band here for the festival, but you're tracking him with your eyes as he moves around the perimeters of the stage. You point him out to your girlfriend, who checks him out. You're pretty sure he hasn't seen you looking at him, although a couple of times you think you may have caught him eyeing you. Fat chance of that; it's your girlfriend who's the cute one, not you. She asks you if you're going to go over there and introduce yourself, but you blush and say no. You are not into one-night stands. And here in Austin, what more could it be?

The set ends and you think about getting another drink, when you feel someone tap you on the shoulder. Hey, it's the tall guy. Can I buy you a beer?

You look up into his face and feel your heart drop into the bottom of your stomach. He looks down at you with a certain bruised intelligence in his eyes, as if someone had

beat him for being smart, but it is covered with the warmest, gentlest sea of blue you have ever seen. He smiles, the edges of his mouth turning up in semi-circles that make you ache with longing to touch them. The room grows faint around you, the sound muted and the light dimmed, and all you can see is the light of his face against a perfectly black backdrop. This your life, unfurling behind you like a unrolled tapestry, stretching out beyond you, into the future, a blank roll of paper on which frames are printed, and in every frame, for the rest of your life, this man. You feel color rise in your cheeks and your mouth is suddenly dry, but you say yes, and smile back at him. So this is what it feels like to fall in love at first sight, you think. How strange.

Okay, he says, don't move. And as he turns and leaves, as your girlfriend shrieks and grabs you in a triumphant hug, you know one thing with certainty: nothing this wonderful has ever happened to you before.