

the written gallery janet kuyppers chapbook

fireflies

So we went to an empty bar, like we normally do on a weeknight when we know we have to get up for work in the morning but we just don't care anymore, and we drank, and we made fun of the people at the bar, especially the men, like the bartender with the sagging butt that we had to stare at whenever he made a drink, and then we drank some more, and then she talked about the love of her life who just broke up with her. She said she would marry him in a minute if she still had the chance. I still didn't see it, he was a young, prematurely balding farm boy, but I just nodded. Yeah, it was love, and I knew where she came from, and we got depressed, and then we rambled on about how we hated our jobs, how we wanted to be independent, and then we started to laugh at everything, that's what drinking does to you, I guess, and then we drove home.

She parked her car at my house, so when I got us home (I still don't know how I did it) she stood in my driveway, looked up at the sky and said, this looks like a sky to sit on your driveway and drink coffee in tupperware bowls and look at. I told her I didn't want coffee, but I had an old blanket and we could sit in the lawn and watch the sky.

And we looked at the sky and found objects in the clouds (it didn't take long for one of us to find a penis), and then I chased a firefly, and then we sang songs from cartoons. And we couldn't stop laughing.

I told her about how my older brothers and sisters used to take the ends of fireflies and smear them on their shirts so their clothes would glow for a few minutes. Then I promised her I wouldn't smear any insects on her.

And we noticed after a while that the dew was settling on the blanket, and all over us, and besides, it was getting late, she had to take the train downtown early to get to work tomorrow, so I picked up the blanket, threw it to the side of the driveway, and waved good-bye as she drove down the road.

I left the blanket there and walked inside. I'm sure I could fold it up in the morning.

A week later I had a dream that I knew I was going to die. I didn't tell anyone else about it because I didn't want them to worry. In my dream I was making a videocassette message to all my friends. A good-bye message, so to speak. I told Sheri that I hoped her marriage went well, I told Kevin to not worry about business so much, I told Bobby I respected him. And then I got to you. I told you to really look at your life -- was it so bad? Your boyfriend broke up with you. Your job isn't your dream job. But Christ, there are unwed 17-year-old mothers on welfare that kill their sick infant children because they can't read the directions on their prescription bottle. Dream job? You've got a job, and it pays well. Boyfriend? You're talented and attractive, you don't have to be alone. We've got roofs over our heads. We've got food on the table, we've got clothes on our backs, and we have friends. We have reason to celebrate, not to cry.

Well, in my dream I was dying, so I wasn't going to have these things. But I'm not dreaming, I'm not dying, I'm not dead. I have all these things. We have all these things. And we have the fireflies.

Soybeans

Have you ever jumped in a vat of soybeans before? It's very strange, it feels like you're a kid in one of those playground things where you jump in a pit of colored plastic balls. Except soybeans are a lot smaller than those balls in the playgrounds, and I guess they don't have all those colors. Well anyway, I went over to his grandparent's farm, and he decided to take me on a tour of the farmhouse. The cows were smelly, I made sure I kept my distance, and I just kept calling to them, saying, "hello, moo-cow." And there were a bunch of cats running around the field, and we picked up a couple kittens and held them up high in the air. I kept asking the cats, "do you love me?" and he kept asking me why I was asking for approval from cats. Then we gave them some milk from his uncle's farmhouse. And then he took me up a ladder to the top floor of the barn.

That's when he proceeded to take off his shoes and jump over into a ledge. He told me to join him. I couldn't quite see what I was about to jump into, it was almost dusk, but I took off my shoes and socks and jumped in anyway.

And my ankles sunk into the soybeans. And I started laughing. And I fell, and then I started to bury myself in soybeans. And then I jumped around a few more times, then I just started throwing soybeans at him.

And then I just laid down in the pit of soybeans for awhile. They felt cool on my skin. I could feel the dust from them covering my legs, my calves.

There are time like that, times when I just have to let go.

Chain Smoking

He had been acting strangely for oh, the last six months or so, but I never thought much of it. He was the type of friend who was always doing everything -- he held two jobs, was a full time student double majoring in pre-med and Russian, he was in a fraternity house and was also involved with Air Force R.O.T.C. And he still managed to find time to go out on the weekends and flirt with every girl he met. He even hit on me three and a half years ago, while we were still acquaintances and not the closest of friends.

But he had been acting strangely, not calling me as much, not visiting or going out. After about a month or two of this he came over one night at about midnight and started complaining to me about the stress in his life. Then he started to chain smoke, the man who never smoked before, the man who was studying to go to med school, the man who wanted to be in tip-top shape for the Air Force. It made no sense. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he was still complaining to me, he was still wide awake, and he still looked like he needed something to hit.

I had told him before that he did too much with his life and that one day it would all catch up with him. I figured that's what was happening now.

Every time I saw him after that he was the same way -- irritable, chain smoking, telling me about how he's not sleeping a lot and how he's failing his classes. His girlfriend was studying in Russia for the semester. He flirted some without her around, but he didn't cheat on her. But he didn't miss her.

Recently a group of black guys beat him up on the street one night. They picked him out of a crowd and punched him in the face, the doctors figured the assailant had something in his hand, brass knuckles, a roll of quarters, for he made a clean break in his jaw. He had his mouth wired shut for six weeks. I thought maybe this was part of the reason he was on edge, sucking food through a straw for over a month has to be a pain in the ass. But his behavior changed before the accident. And he still chain smoked through the wires in his mouth.

I figured that it must be because of his family that he was the way he was. His father was a high ranking official in the Air Force, they travelled around constantly, his father was always succeeding, always being the stern perfectionist. He wasn't like that. He wasn't stern. He was sweet, and fun.

And now look, He's probably giving himself ulcers, if not lung cancer.

So I finally got back into town and I decided that I had to get this all figured out. The latest I heard was that he was getting back to religion and thinking of talking to his pastor for advice on some of his problems. It sounded like a cop-out to me, I mean, religion wouldn't give him the answers he needed but the answers they wanted him to have, so I was thinking that if he really needed help he should go talk to a counselor. He gets counseling services free through the student clinic. Oh, shit, I don't even really know what's wrong with him, I've got to try to talk to him, I hope he opens up to me, we've been friends for too long.

So I asked him to stop by and he came over to my place and he knew very well that I wanted the truth out of him. What was the stress from? Why did he just break up with his girlfriend less than a week after they were looking at engagement rings, why is he chain smoking, is the Air Force doing this to him, does he really need the money from his two jobs?

So he comes in, sits down on the couch next to me, and tells me that he's been coming to terms with the fact that he thinks he's gay. Or at least bi, he's not sure, everything's so confusing. What would the fraternity house say? What would the Air Force say, other than good-bye, and most importantly, what would his parents say? What would the world say?

Okay, so I was shocked, but this wasn't the time to show it. I gave him a hug, let him talk for a while, told him I was there for him. I suggested thinking about counseling. Then we went to a sub shop and had lunch, tried to get our minds off these things.

And we're at the counter of this sub shop and we're making cracks about a six inch versus a twelve inch sub. He told me I was ordering the six inch because I never had him. Fuck, he's doing it again, being his same old self, flirting with women that are friends, and I can take it in good fun and all, but this just seems a little too strange. So then I start thinking, okay, does he make these kinds of cracks to other men? Is he attracted to everything that walks down the god damn street?

So then we're eating our subs and we're sharing the same drink and I start thinking, should I be doing this? Is this safe?, and I still take another drink and try not to think about it. And then he says, "My problem is that I'm horny all the time." Then he tells me about his boyfriend Brandon and from then on nothing seemed real anymore. I had to ask if the gold necklace he was wearing was Brandon's, it's not his style to wear necklaces. It was. He was even borrowing the guy's car.

So I tell him to call me, and I tell him I'll help him look for a counselor if it will help him deal with the issue, and I tell him he can talk to me anytime. And I get out of Brandon's car and walk back to my place.

And then I just start thinking. This is the man who hit on me at a rock concert we went to three years ago by running his tongue up and down my face. This was the man that I visited on the east coast, we had a romantic dinner in a private room in the Air Force dining hall. We toured Salem, Massachusetts and took pictures posing in the witch racks they have on the sidewalks for tourists. We shopped in Maine and bought glassware and Christmas ornaments together. We went to fraternity dances, I was his date, hey, we even went to a military ball together. This is the man who would sit with me in my window sill, feet hanging out the second story, drinking fuzzy navel with me and singing rap songs. This is the man who was my roommate for a few months, we'd go to the local fitness center together and exercise, he'd be on the bicycles, I'd be on the rowing machine.

This was the man who sat with me one night in my apartment, like we were two kids in high school, and we wrote lists of all the people we made out with. His list of women was relatively short, but I didn't think much of it. He told me at the sub shop that his list of men was longer than mine.

This was the man I went to happy hours with every Friday afternoon. He carried me home once because I didn't eat that day and the beer went straight to my head. He called me spaghetti legs from then on because I lost all muscle control in the lower half of my body and couldn't walk. He carried me home and put me to bed.

Another day at another happy hour when we were both depressed because we thought we'd never find someone to marry he told me that if we were both single when we were forty, we'd get married. It was our little joke from then on to say that we were engaged.

I had a dream a couple of weeks before he told me this that he told me he had AIDS from a blood transfusion. The news tore me apart, my close friend, this couldn't be happening to you, I just can't believe it, it must be a mistake, anyone but you. I told him I'd be there for him, I wasn't afraid to hug him, I wasn't afraid to kiss him. And in the dream I wanted to marry him then and there, just so he didn't die alone.

crazy

This dialogue is transcribed from repeated visits with a patient in Aaronsville Correctional Center in West Virginia. Madeline*, a thirty-six year old woman, was sentenced to life imprisonment after the brutal slaying of her boyfriend during sexual intercourse. According to police reports, Madeline sat with the remains of the man for three days after the murder until police arrived on the scene. They found her in the same room as the body, still coated with blood and malnourished. Three doctors studied her behavior for a total period of eight months, and the unanimous conclusion they reached was that Madeline was not of sound mind when she committed the act, which involved an ice pick, an oak board from the back of a chair, and eventually a chef's knife. Furthermore, she continued to show signs of both paranoia and delusions of grandeur long after the murder, swaying back and forth between the two, much like manic depression.

For three and a half years Madeline has stayed at the Aaronsville Correctional Center, and she has shown no signs of behavioral improvement. She stays in a room by herself, usually playing solitaire on her bed. She talks to herself regularly and out loud, usually in a slight Southern accent, although not in a very loud tone, according to surveillance videotape. Her family abandoned her after the murder. Occasionally she requests newspapers to read, but she is usually denied them. She never received visitors, until these sessions with myself.

The following excerpts are from dialogues I have had with her, although I am tempted to say that they are monologues. She wasn't very interested in speaking with me, rather, she was more interested in opening herself up to someone for the first time in years, someone who was willing to listen. At times I began to feel like a surrogate parent. I try not to think of what will happen when our sessions end.

* Madeline is not her real name.

I know they're **watching me**. They've got these stupid cameras everywhere - see, there's one behind the air vent there, **hi there**, and there's one where the window used to be. They've probably got them behind the mirrors, too. It wouldn't be so bad, I guess, I mean, there's not much for me to be doing in here anyway, but they **watch me dress**, too, I mean, they're watching me when I'm naked, now **what's that going to do to a person?** I don't know what they're watching for anyway, it's not like I can do anything in here. I eat everything with a spoon, I've never been **violent**, all I do, almost every day, is sit on this bed and play solitaire.

Solitaire is really relaxing, you know, and I think it keeps your brain alive, too. Most people think you can't win at solitaire, that the chances of winning are like two percent or something. But the thing is, you can win at this game like over half the time. I think that's the key, too - **knowing you can win**

half the time. I mean, the last four rounds I played, I won twice. Now I'm not saying that's good or anything, like praise me because I won two rounds of solitaire, but it makes a point that as long as you know what you're doing and you actually think about it, you can win. The odds are better.

people just forget

I think to watch the cards. Half the time the reason why you lose is because you forget something so obvious. You're looking for a card through the deck and the whole time it's sitting on another pile, just waiting to be moved over, and the whole time you forget to move it. People just forget to pay attention. They got to pay attention.

You know, I'd like to see the news. I hate t.v., but I'd like to see what acts other people are doing. Anything like mine? Has anyone else **lost it** like me? You know, I'll bet my story wasn't even on the news for more than thirty seconds. And I'll bet the news person had a tone to their voice that was just like **"oh, the poor**

crazy thing,” like, “that’s what happens when you lose it,”

But I want to see what’s happening in the real world. I just wanna watch to see what, you know, the weather is like, even though I haven’t seen the sun in a year or two. Or, or to hear sports scores. They won’t let me have a t.v. in the room. I think they think that I’m gonna hot-wire it or something, like I’m going to try to

electrocute the whole building with a stupid television set. They let me have a lamp in the room, like I can’t hurt someone with that, but no t.v. They won’t even let me have a newspaper.

What can a person do with a newspaper?

Light in on fire or something? If I had matches or something. But it’s like this: I’ve never been

violent to nobody in all of the time I’ve been in here. I haven’t laid a hand on a

guard, even though they’re tried too many times to

lay a hand on me, and I haven’t cause one single little problem in this whole damn place, and this is what I get - I don’t even get a

t.v. or a newspaper.

You know, I don't really have a Southern accent. **See?** Don't I sound different with my regular voice? I picked it up **when I started sounding crazy.** See, I'm not really crazy, I just know the kind of shit they do to you in prison. I think it's bad enough here, I would've had the shit kicked out of me, I'd've been sodomized before I knew what hit me. I think this voice makes me sound a little more strange. I'm actually from New York, but I mean, changing the voice a little just to save me from going to prison, well, I can do that. Here it's kind of nice, I don't have to deal with people that often, and all the crazy people around here think I'm some sort of tough, bitch because I mutilated someone who was **raping** me. Oh, you didn't hear that part of the story, did you? Those damn lawyers thought that **since I wasn't a virgin I must have been wanting him.** And he wasn't even my boyfriend - he was just some guy I knew, we'd go out every couple of

weeks, and I never even slept with him before.

What a **fucked up** place. You see, I gotta think of it this way: I really had no choice but to do what I did. In a way it was self-defense, because I didn't want that little piece of shit to try to *do that to me*, I mean, what the Hell makes him think he can do that?

Where does he get off trying to take me like that, like I'm some **butcher-shop** piece of **meat** he can buy and abuse or whatever? Well

anyway, I know part of it all was self defense and all, but at the same time I know I flipped, but its because of, well shit that happened in my past. I never came from any rich family like you, I never even came from a family with a dad, and when you got all these boyfriends coming in and *hitting you* or *touching you*

or whatever, you know it's got to mess you up. Yeah, I know, people try to use the my-parents-beat-me line and it's getting to the point where no one really believes it anymore, but if a person goes through all their life **suppressing**

something that they shouldn't have to suppress then one day it's going to just come up to them and punch them in the face, it's going to make them go crazy, even if it's just for a little while.

Society's kind of **weird**, you know. It's like they teach you to do things that aren't normal, that **don't feel right down deep in your bones**, but you have to do them anyway, because **someone somewhere decided** that this would be normal. Everyone around you suppresses stuff, and when you see that it tells you that you're supposed to be hiding it from the rest of the world, too, like if we all **just hide it for a while**, it will all go away. Maybe it does, until someone like me blows up and can't take hiding all that stuff anymore, but then the rest of the world can just say that we're crazy and **therefore it's unexplainable** why we went crazy and then they can just brush it all off and everything is back to normal again. It's like emotion. People are taught to hide their

emotions. **Men are taught not to cry, women are taught to be emotional and men are told to think that it's crazy.** So when something really shitty happens to someone - like a guy loses his job or something - and he just sits in front of a friend and breaks him down and cries, the other guy just thinks this guy is crazy for crying. Then the guy rejects the guy that's crying, making him feel even worse, making the guy bottle it back up inside of him.

I think people are like Pepsi bottles. You remember those glass bottles? Pop always tasted better in those bottles, you could just like swig it down easier, your lips fit around the glass neck better or something. I wonder why people don't use them anymore? Well, I think people are like Pepsi bottles, like they have the potential for all of this energy, and **the whole world keeps shaking them up,** and some people lose their heads and the top goes off and all of this icky stuff comes shooting all around and other Pepsi bottles want to hide from it and

then the poor guy has no Pepsi left. And how can you do anything when you have no Pepsi left? Or maybe you do lose it, but you still have some Pepsi left in you, and people keep thinking that you don't have any left, and then they treat you like you shouldn't be allowed to *tie your own shoelaces* or you should be watched while you're getting dressed.

Can't you turn those cameras off?

I heard this story in here sometime about Tony, this guy that was in here for murder, and after he was in here he went crazy and cut off his own scrotum. I don't know how a man survives something like that, but I guess he did, because he was in here, and from what I hear he was using the pay phones to call 800 numbers to *prank* whoever answered at the other end. Well, I guess he kept calling this one place where *these women* got *fed up* with it, I guess, and traced it or something. They got the number for this hospital, and talked to his doctor. I think he told

them that Tony cut his balls off, now I thought doctor-patient records were private, but I suppose it doesn't matter, because we're just crazy prisoners, killers who don't matter anyway, but he told these **girls** that Tony cut his balls off a whole two months ago. And then he called them back, **talking dirty to them**, not knowing they knew he was a murderer with no balls and they laughed and made fun of him and told him they knew, and he hung up the phone and never called them back. True story, swear to God. Can you just imagine him wondering how they knew? Or were they just making a joke, or...

Did you know that I write? I figured that if they won't let me read anything, maybe I could put stuff down on paper and read it to myself, I guess. I try to write poetry, but it just don't come out right, but I've been trying to write a thing about **what I went through**, you know what I'm talking about? Well, I just figure that if other people that are in prison can get best

sellers and make a ton of money, then so can I, I mean, my story is better than half the stuff that's out there, and I know there are a lot of **women** who have a little part of them that wants to do what I did. I think *all women feel it*, but the most of them are taught to **suppress it**, to keep it all bottled in like that. But now that I think of it, what am I going to do with a bunch of money anyway? I'm never going to get out of here to enjoy it or anything. Anyway, how would I get someone to want to read it in the first place, now that everyone thinks that I'm crazy.

Sometimes I get so **depressed**. It's like I'm never going to get out of here. I think *I wanted to have kids one day*. It's easier, I guess, not having to see kids, I guess then I don't miss them too much, but...

For the longest time they tried to get doctors to come in here and talk to me, and you know what they did? They got *men doctors* - one after another - and then they wondered why the Hell I

didn't want to talk to them. Amazing. People really just don't think, do they?

I guess *it's hard*, being in here and all, I mean. I was going to go back to school, I had already taken the GED and graduated high school, and I was going to go to community college. **It was going to be different.**

Sometimes I wonder, you know, ***why this had to happen to me***, why I had to snap. I really don't think I could have controlled it, I don't think this could have happened any other way. It's hard. I have to find stuff to do, because otherwise all I'd want to do is sleep all day and night, and I suppose I could, but then ***what would happen to me?*** At

least if I write a book about my life, about this whole stupid world, then maybe everyone would at least understand. It wasn't really my fault, I mean, I think we **women have enough to deal with**

just in our regular lives and then they keep piling on this **sexism** crap on us, and then expect us not to be **angry** about it because we're taught to deal with it all of our lives. Maybe

this guy was just **the straw that broke the camel's back** or something, maybe he was just **another rapist**, maybe he was just another drunk guy who thought **that he could do whatever he wanted with me** because **he was the man and I was his girl**, or just some chick that didn't matter or whatever, but shit, it does matter, at least to me it does.

I know I've got a lot of healing to do, but I haven't really thought about doing it. I mean, **what have I got to heal for anyway?** To get out of here and go to prison? Then I'll just get **abused** by guards over there, have to watch my back every second of the day. At least here people watch my back for me. They think everything and anything in the world could harm me, even myself, so they're so overprotective that nothing can go wrong, unless it goes wrong in my own mind.

Age

Sometimes, when I get behind the wheel of a car, I feel like I'm at Six Flags Great America Amusement Park In Gurnee, Illinois again and I'm thirteen years old and I'm able to drive one of the bumper cars. And it's such a thrill -- because, I mean, I'm thirteen years old and I can't drive, and I'm now in control of this huge piece of machinery. Granted, there's this wire sticking up from the car that gets electricity from the ceiling, but for once I feel free, that I can just go, go faster than I ever could by running, or even if I used my roller skates or my bicycle.

And when I get that feeling and I'm behind the wheel of my car I want to drive really really fast out on an abandoned road, blare some rock music, roll down my window, and turn up the heat, since it's the middle of winter.

Sometimes, when I go out on a new date, I feel like I'm sixteen again, and I'll rifle through my closet, deciding I have absolutely nothing to wear. And he'll pick me up, and we'll go to a restaurant with deer heads on the walls, and we'll have whiskey sours, and we'll struggle with the lettuce leaves in the salads because they're too big, and when we're done with dinner we'll go to a bar that's so crowded and so loud that we won't be able to talk to each other, but they won't have to stand real close. And then he'll take me home and I'll invite him in, he'll sit on the chair, I'll sit on the couch, and he'll ask for a glass of water. When we can't think of any more small talk, and the clock says 3:12 a.m., I'll see him to the door, he'll kiss me good-bye, and I'll lock the door after he leaves. And when I'm sure he can't see me through the window, I'll turn on the stereo and dance in my living room before I go to bed.

Sometimes, when I'm having sex with someone, I feel like I've done this for years, like I've been married to this man for twenty years, and I still don't know him, but I'm still there, night after night. After the wedding, after the new house, which was a little small, but we'll get something bigger when we have the money, after the two kids and the fifteen pounds, after I lose my job, after we don't get that new house and after the kids complain about their curfews, after the dog dies, hell, it was only trouble for us anyway, after the sinus headaches, the back problems, that all-over sore feeling, you know, it's harder to wake up in the mornings now, after it all he still has the nights, the sex with the woman he knows all too well but not at all, and we do it, as we always do. It becomes memorization. It becomes like a play, that I act out night after night.

Sometimes, when I get home after 10 o'clock from working overtime on the computers, I just want to retire, to quit the work, to stop it all. I see my parents, after a life of working at the construction site and raising five children, now beginning to relax, buying a small home in Southwest Florida, playing tennis in the morning, playing cards in the afternoon, drinking with other retired couples in the evening. Sometimes another couple invites them out for a boat ride off of Marco Island, where they smoke cigarettes, drink a few beers, and drive slow enough to make no wake when they're by the pier.

Sometimes I look at the computer screen I work at and remember how computers used to mean video games. I remember when I was eight and I would sit with my best friend in the upstairs den on the floor in front of the old television set and play table tennis on our Atari. Times change, I suppose, and I get old. This is my life.

done this before

I keep looking back at your picture. I'll flip it over to stop from staring at it while I read a page from my book, but a minute won't pass before I'll have to turn the photo over again to see your face. It's as if I can't get away from it.

My flight was delayed, I'm at O'Hare Airport, the airport that departs three planes every second, or is it one plane every three seconds, oh shit, I don't remember. I have to wait at least three hours for my next flight, hey, if so many planes take off here, then why can't I get on one of them? Oh well, so I decided to waste my time in one of the airport cocktail bars, by gate L 4. I thought I'd start with a white zinfandel and work my way to mixed drinks, but this wine tastes so good that I think I might just have to have another. I'm so exasperated, I hate to wait, and all I have is a good book to keep me company. I used your photo from my wallet as a bookmark. I need these things to keep me sane.

It really isn't bad here in the cocktail bar by gate L 4, the chairs aren't that uncomfortable, even though they're a pretty ugly shade of green that doesn't match anything in the room. It really isn't that bad, in a foreign city, in a foreign airport. Not when I've got my Sutter Home White Zinfandel. And my picture of you.

You know, there's a blonde girl dressed well with a bad perm across the bar, and she's smoking a cigarette. I know I don't smoke, but I'm almost tempted to ask her for one just so I can hold the cigarette the way you do. I'd like to taste the tar, the nicotine, the way I taste it in your kiss. You think I don't like it, but I do.

They're playing a song in the cocktail bar, a song that reminds me of an ex. I wanted to marry that man. He had a knack of being able to envelope me, to take my troubles away. I don't know if I can take away my troubles myself anymore. I don't know if the liquor's helping, or the cigarettes. Your photo helps, my little bookmark. At least for now it helps.

Sitting in this L 4 cocktail bar reminds me of my brother. When I was young he'd always pick us up at the airport, but if he wasn't waiting at the gate we knew to look for him at the seafood cocktail bar. a part of me expects him to come walking through the doorway now, flannel shirt, ski jacket, wind-blown greasy hair, coke-bottle glasses. You know,

when I'd look at his eyes through those glasses, his eyes looked twice as big as they actually were. I could imagine him now, I could imagine the smell of his Levi's of dirt from the construction site. I remember that smell from my father; I'd smell it every day when he came home from work. It's my brother's business now, he's got his own family now to worry about instead of a little sister. So I'll just sit here at this airport cocktail bar, remembering the days when I'd sit with him in a place like this and I was too young to drink.

God, I want to see my brother walking in to this bar at L 4, ordering a shrimp cocktail. I want to see you, babbling on about a movie you reviewed or a gig your band had. I want something that isn't so foreign, like this bar. Or maybe I want something that isn't so familiar.

I took your picture out of my wallet, the wallet that has so many pictures of men who have come and gone in my life, men who have hurt me, men who I have gone through like... like dish washing liquid, or like something I use all the time and replace all the time and don't think twice about.

I'll just sit here, in this airport, trying to care just the right amount, not too much, but not too little. So I'll just sit here, in this airport cocktail bar, looking at your photo, and wondering if I've done this before.

Scars

Like when the Grossman's German shepherd bit the inside of my knee. I was baby sitting two girls and a dog named "Rosco." I remember being pushed to the floor by the dog, I was on my back, kicking, as this dog was gnawing on my leg, and I remember thinking, "I can't believe a dog named Rosco is attacking me." And I was thinking that I had to be strong for those two little girls, who were watching it all. I couldn't cry.

Or when I stepped off Scott's motorcycle at 2:00 a.m. and burned my calf on the exhaust pipe. I was drunk when he was driving and I was careless when I swung my leg over the back. It didn't even hurt when I did it, but the next day it blistered and peeled; it looked inhuman. I had to bandage it for weeks. It hurt like hell.

When I was little, roller skating in my driveway, and I fell. My parents yelled at me, "Did you crack the sidewalk?"

When I was kissing someone, and I scraped my right knee against the wall. Or maybe it was the carpet. When someone asks me what that scar is from, I tell them I fell.

Or when I was riding my bicycle and I fell when my front wheel skidded in the gravel. I had to walk home. Blood was dripping from my elbow to my wrist; I remember thinking that the blood looked thick, but that nothing hurt. I sat on the toilet seat cover while my sister cleaned me up. It was a small bathroom. I felt like the walls could have fallen in on me at any time. Years later, and I can still see the dirt under my skin on my elbows.

Or when I was five years old and my dad called me an ass-hole because I made a mess in the living room. I didn't.

Like when I scratched my chin when I had the chicken pox.

A Microcosm of Society

No one appeared in the back half of the courtroom. Thoughts raced through Steven Kohl's mind as his eyes darted across the room. How did this happen? Was he really to blame? Will the jury members decide whether there is enough evidence against him to warrant a trial? Why are there cuts on his hands? Why can't he remember the last three weeks of his life?

Steve thought he might wake up soon, and discover that none of this had ever happened. That he wasn't trying to defend himself. That Erica wasn't dead.

He shifted in his chair. The wet cotton of his shirt collar burned against his neck. Like the branches of the trees in the ravine where Erica was found, the wool of his suit scratched his legs, his hands. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his forehead, but he was afraid that he would seem too nervous to the jury if he moved. He wanted to run out of the courtroom, stand in the February snow and feel his tears freeze as they rolled down his face.

He looked over at the papers in front of his lawyer. The names Stonum, Smith and Manchester embossed the top of the page. Steve couldn't bring himself to look at Stonum's face.

Stonum's face was chiseled and sharp. There was no room for emotion, unless closing remarks in a case called for a strong emotional appeal. The same thought kept going through Stonum's head: this boy couldn't remember who he was, much less where he was, for the last three weeks of his life. When Stonum suggested that Steve go to Dr. Litmann for a psychological examination, Steve broke down. He told Stonum that his cocaine use became daily about six weeks ago, and he started mixing drugs shortly before he lost his memory.

It was the beginning of the fourth day. The prosecutor stood.

"I would like to call to the stand a Miss Kathleen O'Connor."

Stonum jumped. "We have testimony from a Doctor Litmann, with whom she has been seeking therapy, that Miss O'Connor should not be able to testify in this case. I submit his report to you, your Honor, which outlines the fact that Miss O'Connor has been known to compulsively lie and that her perception of the truth is often dis-

torted. We believe that it would be inappropriate and possibly detrimental if Miss O'Connor testified."

The testimony for the case was beginning to rely on character witnesses, and because no specific reason was mentioned for having Kathleen O'Connor testify, the judge said he would review the report and decide whether or not to allow her to testify the next day.

Kathleen looked at Doctor Litmann seated next to her, then bowed her head. Her letters to him were in a pile on his lap. She stood up, adjusted her dress and solemnly walked away.

Dr. Litmann stared at the chair where she had sat. When he gained the strength, he looked at the letter at the top of the pile.

Dear Doctor Litmann:

I just had a session with you, and you asked me to start writing letters to a friend every day so that I could start to open myself up and understand myself more. Well, I don't have any friends. I don't know if I'll ever let you see these letters, but I'll write them to you.

You were asking me about my childhood in session today. Do all doctors ask about a person's childhood? I guess you must figure that any patient of theirs must have been abused by their father or wanted to kill their mother or something. No, I wasn't beaten, or starved, and I didn't even know what the word "incest" was until I was checking the spelling of "insect" in the dictionary.

I know, I know, I'm avoiding the subject. Open up, you said. Open up, God-damnit.

Fine.

As a child I wasn't liked by other kids. I was too smart, you see, and I had been taught at an early age to respect authority. Actually, I don't think I was ever taught that, because my parents didn't seem to teach me much of anything. I just knew I had to listen to them when they yelled at me.

All of my life I was afraid of my father. He never really was a father to me, for he wasn't home often, but when he was home, all he seemed to do was yell at me. I always figured that I must have done something wrong, because he was never happy with me. Hence the self-esteem problem, I guess. I think that's why I got messed up with all those other men, too, doc. But you said we'd get to that in a later session.

The thing is, they always told me that I had to act a certain way, and that I had to do all of these things, but I never knew why I had to do them. If it was to be a good person, then I wanted to know who the hell decided what was good. From what I understood, good wasn't fun. It wasn't even self-fulfilling.

But I was going to do what they wanted. I got into a good school,

and decided to study in a field that I didn't like. But, you see, that would get me a job with good pay -- even if I didn't like it -- and would make everyone in society think that everything was good in my life. If I just went through the motions, people would think I was happy, and then they might leave me alone.

But that didn't work.

Doc, I'm tired. The medication you make me take at night really knocks me out. I'll write later.

She never signed her letters, and she always typed them so that they could never be traced to her. She made sure she covered all of her bases.

Litmann pressed his right hand over his eyes, almost in an effort to hold his face together.

Dear Doctor--

Hi. I'm back. It's night again. I like writing at night. I write at the desk in my room by two candles. I could turn on the lights, but the candles make shadows on the walls. I like the shadows. They make me think of everything out there that I'm not supposed to do.

In our session today you wanted me to tell you about the turning point of my life. You figured out that there was some sort of event in my life that made me want to rebel against all the empty values my parents tried to shove down my throat. That event was a man.

You see, he was a boyfriend of mine -- a boring one that fit into my plan of having a boring future. I'd get a boring job, and I'd marry that boring man and we'd live in a boring house with boring children and act happy. I thought it would all be simple enough -- I mean, the man seemed harmless and all. But he wasn't.

He went away to school with me, and at the first chance he got, he got me drunk. And he raped me.

It occurred to me then that my boring life wasn't going to happen. Doc, I thought I could just float by life, going through the motions without feeling anything, whether it be pain or happiness. The rape tore me apart inside. This man was supposed to be the security in life, and he killed any security I thought I could ever feel. I knew that what he did wasn't right, but I also knew that there was nothing I could really do about it, because society seemed to ignore things like rape. Nothing seemed right anymore.

I looked into different religions. I read the new testament, and I tried to go through the old one, but the reading was just too dry. God just seemed like a joke to me. I deduced that religion was just a means to keep the masses in their place. But it wouldn't hold me down.

I wonder why I don't tell you all of these things while I'm in session with you. Maybe it's because you're trying to make me "normal" again - normal in the eyes of society. Well, their rules don't make sense.

Dear Doc --

I can't love unconditionally.

I think everyone thinks I'm just very cold. But it's just that I can't love someone that I can't respect or admire. I don't think I love my family, because I can't respect their values, and I can't love other people because I can't trust them. That's where my value system comes in. I decided that the only person I could trust and love is myself. So my goals should be to make myself happy, right? If I do that, what more could I want? Why should I want to please others?

And I liked having those one night stands. I liked the power I felt when I could make a man want me so much and I had the power to do with him whatever I wanted. You could say that I wanted to get back at the man who raped me, you could say that I was looking for someone to care for me the way I wanted my father to when I was a child -- but I wanted the power. I wanted the control of others -- and it was an emotional control, which was even stronger than a physical control. I felt an emotional high from making them weak. I don't know which high was stronger.

Dear Doc--

I'm not afraid to tell you the next part, for even if I do give you these letters, you can't tell anyone about them. I've checked into the laws, and because of the nature of the case and client confidentiality privileges, you couldn't utter a word.

Now, I never got into drugs. I drank a lot, which I guess I get from my father, but I never touched drugs. But I had ways of getting a hold of them, and cheap. So I started selling stuff to some of the college students -- particularly the good looking men. If my plan was going to work, I had to pick the right kinds of people. I'd go to the men in the elite fraternity houses -- the ones that you needed not only good looks, but also a lot of money and a lot of connections to get in to.

Then I found the man. Steve. Gullable bastard, isn't he? Then I found the woman. A typical bitch -- bleach blond, sorority, stupid as all hell. The type that makes me look like something is wrong with me for not wearing designer clothes. I knew I could make Steve do something he normally wouldn't -- and maybe this would be my little way of destroying a microcosm of the society. It's destroying Steve. And it destroyed Erica.

Litmann looked up. He pulled his glasses from his face. He didn't know if the steam on the glass was from his sweat or his tears. He got up, clenching the letters. He left the room.

How You Looked Then

I take snapshots of these things in my mind. I rifle through them.

When I'd see you in the bathroom mirror like that, I'd usually wrap myself around your arm, lean my head on your shoulder, and just stare. I don't think you ever noticed how I'd look at you at those time. Like you were my mentor. My savior.

Or when we were at that restaurant and you were sitting across from me, wearing the denim button-down shirt I bought you, and you were eating, and you were slouched over your plate, elbows on the table, and you were just eating, not paying attention to much else around you. And you hadn't shaved in a few days, and the copper-colored stubble was every once in a while catching the light. And in between bites you kept combing your hair back with your fingers, because it kept falling while you ate.

While you were eating, I just had to stop, lean back, and stare at you for a while. I don't know why, but I'll never forget how you looked then.

A Letter

I was looking through some old photographs of mine the other night, and I came across a photo of you. A snapshot, by the pool in Florida. Years ago. Those were the days when you thought you were cool, when another gang broke your ribs, when the cops chased you down the street for trying to steal a car. They caught you because you slipped in your two hundred dollar boots. You had to sell your stereo to pay your lawyer.

And things do change. You wanted to go back to school, you worked full time, you kept away from the drugs. And your back hurt all the time, you felt too old, you wanted to start over again. I still remember that photograph. I was dating you then, but you never told me you had another girlfriend. She wrote me a month later, telling me you were engaged.

It's funny to see that I lasted longer than her, that I still have a hold over you.

Did you ever give her an engagement ring? Was it an emerald, too?

I remember once, in the hall, after you took a drag from your cigarette, leaned over the pool table and made your shot, you told me that you would do anything for me. I asked if you'd give me the diamond earring in your ear. You remember the one, the one a married thirty-five year old woman gave you when you were sleeping with her. Yeah, that one. And you told me that if I needed it, you'd sell it and give me the money.

Christ, the pool table, and the pool cue that was your grandfather's that you got after he died. You loved him, and he wasn't even related to you, your step mother's dad. But you never liked your family. You never liked anyone, unless it was convenient. You never liked anyone, unless you weren't alone.

Someone told me last spring that they heard you say, "Have you ever decided that you wanted something so much, but you knew you could never have it?"

They thought you were talking about me. I think you were, too.

Yes, it was nice to see a change, it was nice to see you sitting in the mornings with your coffee and your cigarette drawing in your book, creating. You have potential, you've got a genius inside you that's been beaten up by too many gangs, screamed at too many times by your family, hardened by too many pains, hurt by too many insane nights.

You once knew a pharmacist, one who liked to steal stuff and mix it with anything else he could find. You befriended him quickly. You think I don't know these things, but I do. You think I don't know you, but I do.

You used to always tell me I was the only person that knew you. You wanted someone to talk to, and you wanted it to be me. And then we'd argue, and you'd get defensive, and the first thing out of your mouth would be, "You don't know me. You don't know anything about me."

Don't try to separate yourself from me. You can't do it.

It's not love. You should know that by now. It's two people, from two different countries, from two different worlds, who can read each other's minds.

Less than a week after you stormed out of the bar, someone came up to me and asked, "Why are you still wearing his emerald ring?"

I shouldn't have to explain. They might not understand, but you do.

When you stormed out of the bar a few months ago, I didn't think you were leaving town. But you were gone. Damn, you're such a hot head. But I know you. A few months will pass, maybe a year, and you will call again. You will say you want to be friends. But it's more than that.

It's like we're connected. It just feels different when we're in the same room together.

And when you can't stand it anymore, when you need that feeling again, you'll call.

Driving By His House

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, I don't know what I'm trying to prove. I don't even want to see him again. I don't want to have to think about him, I don't want to think about his big eyebrows or the fact that he hunched over a little when he walked or that he hurt me so much.

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, but sometimes when I'm driving I'll take a little detour and drive by his house. I'll just drive by, I won't slow down, I won't stop by, I won't say hello, I won't beat his head in, I won't even cry. I'll just drive by, see a few cars in the driveway, see no signs of life through the windows, and then I'll just keep driving.

I don't know why I do it. He never sees me, and I never see him, although I thought I didn't want to see him anyway. When I first met him I wasn't afraid of him. Now I'm so afraid that I have to drive by his house every once in a while, just to remind myself of the fear. We all like the taste of fear, you know, the thought that there's something out there stronger than us. The thought that there's something out there we can beat, even if we have to fight to the death.

But that can't be it, no, it just can't be, I don't like this fear, I don't like it. I don't want to drive by, I want to be able to just go on with my life, to not think about it. I want to be strong again. I want to be strong.

So today I did it again, I haven't done it for a while, drive by his house, but I did it again today. When I turned on to his street I put on my sunglasses so that in case he saw me he couldn't tell that I was looking. And then I picked up my car phone and acted like I was talking to someone.

And I drove by, holding my car phone, talking to my imaginary friend, trying to unobviously glance at the house on my left. There's a lamppost at the end of his driveway. I always noticed it, the lampshade was a huge glass ball, I always thought it was ugly. This time three cars were there. One of those could have been his. Through the front window, no people, no lights. I drive around a corner, take a turn and get back on the road I was supposed to be on.

One day, when I'm driving by and I get that feeling again, that feeling like death, well then, I just might do it again.

How A Woman Falls in Love

I

Okay, here's scene number one: it's about three in the morning, you're in a wheat field with him. He pulled his junker off the country road, got out a blanket, and just started walking. You followed. The hip-high blades of grass were wet with dew, you can still feel the cool of the water when you think about it now. And you can smell the wheat, you can smell that it's green, that the acres in the dark are screaming with life.

He finds a spot and pushes the wheat down. Then the blanket goes. Then you go.

You remember that all you could see was a few stars in the sky, silhouettes of trees waving on the horizon, wheat hovering over you like skyscrapers. And him, kissing your arm, your shoulder, your cheek, your eyelid.

When the two of you leave, he tells you it's a little after four. And you don't believe him.

II

Okay, here's another scene: you're sitting at your desk, and out of the corner of your eye you see a jar of potpourri. There are about twenty white roses in the glass, they're still whole. You dried them yourself.

So when you see the roses you stop your work and let your eyes wander until they can't see anymore. And you daydream.

You remember him coming over with two dozen long stem white roses, taking you on a picnic. You ended up in the balcony of a music theatre eating croissants and strawberries with sugar, drinking champagne, listening to a pianist play Mozart on the stage below.

And you remember that he took you to dinner afterward, but what really sticks in your mind is that after dinner you brought him back you your place and you turned on the stereo and slow danced in the dark.

You moved away the next day. But you put all the roses and all the leaves and all the baby's breath in a small garbage can, filled it with some water and took it with you.

And that's why you keep the roses dried on your desk.

III

Okay, I've got another one: you're fulfilling your end of a bet, so you take him out to an empty road one night, fully prepared to serenade him. But every thing starts to go wrong: the wind picks up and you're

shivering with a chill, you're coming down with a cold and sound nasal, you get nervous, he's going to hate it, you're going to make a fool out of yourself, and you can't even think of a good song to sing. So you're racking your brains for a good tune, you should have thought of this before, he's still there staring at you, and finally you remember this song from your childhood. Your older sister taped it for you, you don't even know who sings it, but all you ever thought was that it was a song about romance, about love lasting forever. So you just started to sing.

In the back of your mind you always thought that song would be the song you shared with your husband. But you didn't tell him that part.

IV

So now jump ahead a couple weeks. You're at a bar with him, it's crowded, you're pretty drunk. After the bar closes he takes you to his car, his already pathetic car, you know, the one that stalls at intersections, and by now the driver's side door is stuck and won't open so he has to crawl in from your side. Well, he drives you to his house and he lets you in and he goes upstairs and he gives you a bouquet of flowers, and then he gives you this compact disc with the song you sang to him on it. He found out the name of the original singer, and by the fourth record store he found the song.

And he got it for you, girl. For you.

V

Alright, one more. No picnics, no serenading, no gifts. Here's the scene: you make dinner with him at your apartment. You set the table, lower the lights, turn on some big band music real soft. He opens the wine. As you eat, the two of you start talking.

About politics. About the upcoming election. About abortion. The death penalty. The judicial system. About the ethical dilemma in returning clothing to a retail store simply because you've worn it and don't like it anymore. About business. About the welfare system. About philosophy.

So when you can't eat anymore you just kind of lean back in your chair and watch him. You smile. He's your intellectual equal. He talks to you.

You know, earlier that day you were looking through the want ads because you wanted a new apartment. And you mentioned, without thinking, that the two of you could save money by living together.

You still can't believe you said it. Or even thought it. But the thought is still there, haunting you, teasing you, in the back of your mind.

Seven Miles

Okay, so you were going to be in Chicago for a few hours, and then you'd be driving out of town again, and I really wanted to see you, so I said I'd be more than happy to drive to the city to see you for an hour or two. Okay, let's meet at the Planetarium, I said, because it would be the quickest place for me to get to from the interstate, besides, you were in the city anyway, you'd easily get to the Planetarium before I would. So okay, we'd meet at 3:15, you said, and I got off the phone and rushed out the door.

And I got there, traffic was a bitch, but I got there, parked my car and then proceeded to walk back and forth looking for you. Where the hell was he, he didn't have much time before he had to leave, where could he be, it's been over twenty minutes, what trouble has he gotten himself into now? Knowing him, he probably thought I said the Aquarium and was waiting at the building a block away from me, the big jerk. And all these men were staring at me, like they've never seen a woman in a suede skirt before, one of them even said hello to me, and I had to sit there and try to ignore everyone and brood because you were late. You probably crashed the car and were bickering over insurance with someone while I sat there. Made me drive for a couple of hours for nothing.

So then I finally see you sprinting up the block. Your oxford is unbuttoned, and the closer you get, the more red you look. Okay, now I'm intrigued. "Where have you been?" I asked, and as you're panting in a vain attempt to catch your breath you explain that you couldn't get the car out of the parking lot because the person who has the ticket stub for the car is in the doctor's office, so you ran seven miles to get here so that I wouldn't wait.

Okay, I feel like a heel. And you never cease to amaze me. I know you said you'd go to the ends of the earth for me. Seven miles is more than enough.

Having Children One Day

Every time we're together we talk about how much we both love to play with children. I wanted you to meet my niece and nephew, Claire is five, Marshall is two and a half, oh, he's so adorable at this age, all he does is hug and kiss you. And it's so cute how he kisses you, you're holding him in your arms and he grabs the sides of your head with his tiny little hands and he kisses your nose. Well anyway, I just thought you'd think they were adorable, well, they are, but I just wanted to see you with them.

And you came over, and they saw you, and they were probably thinking, "a stranger, oh no, it's a stranger, run and hide, run and hide," and I really hope you didn't take offense that the kids were a little scared of you. What do you expect, they're little, they're afraid of anyone other than their mother holding them, I mean, you understand, right?

But I wanted you to see them, I wanted you to see the love I had for them, for the future, for their future, for my future, for our future. I just wanted you to see why my eyes glowed when I talked about them.

So the day went on and little Marshall sat down next to his daddy to watch t.v., and even though he didn't know you he sat down next to you, too. And earlier you kept doing cannonballs into the swimming pool so that you would splash Claire and I. She laughed when you did that, you know.

I told you earlier that day that I felt like I was never wanted by my family before, I was unplanned, unwanted, neglected, blah, blah, blah, and you were saying you would never have an unwanted child. If one day your wife told you she was pregnant, you could never not love the child. That child would only enrich your life more, those were your words, I remember them exactly.

And I wanted you to know what it meant to me when at the end of the day the kids were leaving and I told little Marshall to give you a hug and he did. And he gave you a kiss, too, right on the nose, and without my asking. And you laughed. And you looked at me, laughing while this two year old boy clung to your neck and you gave me this look, this look that was almost serious. It was a look that said that one day this may be yours. And it may.

the written word
janet kuypers
jkuypers@scars.tv
<http://www.janetkuypers.com>

scarsuoppeayqnd

Editor@scars.tv

<http://scars.tv>

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