

Like a Normal Human Being · E. J. Graff

FRIDAY AFTERNOON I'm lying on the open sofa bed flipping through *National Geographic*, looking at the exotic snakes of India — the hooded Indian python, the king cobra, with diagrams of their bizarre insides — one lung way up here, another down there, all their organs squeezed and twisted to fit in.

Ed's pickup just pulled out of the driveway — he's on his way to the evening shift at the video store, so he's gone till at least 10:30. And my mind is made up: this girl is going to *be* here when he gets home. After all, it isn't fair, me dragging in like a tomcat Saturday or Sunday mornings, or afternoons. He only agreed to me going out to the bar sometimes; he didn't agree to me getting a girlfriend and disappearing every weekend. Which is pretty much what's happening.

Then the phone rings.

"Expecting anyone?" she says.

"I was just waiting for some good-looking woman to call," I say. I lean against the kitchen wall, pushing my dishwasher hair back over my shoulder, the red cord twisting around me.

"Well, don't let me keep you," she says.

"Oh, you'll do," I say. While we talk, I run my finger along the cord spiraling across my hip. Cath's got that deep voice, half-flirting, but so serious in the center. You hear a voice like that and it's all over. Everything inside you dissolves.

By the time I get off the phone, I'm meeting her in an hour and a half at Park Street, so we can walk to where they have the Concerts on the Common. She wants to sit outside and listen to Whitney Houston. Cath says everyone knows Whitney's gay, or at least bi, Cath has some friend who supposedly knows Whitney's ex-girlfriend. Yeah, right.

It's past four in the afternoon, so there's not much light in the apartment — it's a small studio, one little window in the kitchen, so most of the time it's like the twilight zone. I don't know how Ed spends so much time here zombied out in front of the VCR. I'm pulling out my denim jacket when I catch a whiff of the gerbil cage. I put their wriggling brown bodies into the rubbermaid bucket we use to wash the floor. Their claws scabble and slide against the sides, desperate to escape.

So I head out to see Cath, what's the worst that could happen? Ed's basically supported me for three years, since I left home. And he took care of me during that disgusting time in the fall. So what's he going to do, kick me out? Or beat up on me? In five years he's never hit me, just threw me around a couple times when he was drunk. Nothing serious.

It's not like I have him on a leash. It's not my fault he never goes out for a beer with his buddies after work. Anyway, I'll come home on the first train in the morning. He won't even have time to miss me.

I fill the tray with clean shavings and lift the gerbils back in. One nips my finger. I drop it into the cage and slam the top with a clang. Those things *hurt*.

Cath and I wind up at the bar after the concert. We couldn't really hear Whitney, they build those fences so high almost no sound escapes. It was a scene, these kids trying to leap up the wood fence while the cops are looking away, guys hawking balloons and t-shirts, Cath and me holding hands, sort of hidden by the way we're leaning back on the damp spring grass, giving each other these little smiles if anyone looks at us funny. To hold hands with her, outside! I keep looking around, feeling light-headed, my hand giddy where it touches hers. Yeah, yeah, two girls, I want to yell to this one guy who keeps looking over at us, over and over, like he can't believe it. Yeah, queer girls. Believe it.

At the bar you don't have to deal with these jerkoffs. You walk up into the steamy half-dark, the smoke stinging your nostrils, the excited lights flashing all over women's bodies, women in tight black jeans and chinos and reeboks, cool in t-shirts and muscle shirts and jackets rolled up to the elbow—the first time I went, I was so terrified to be near all these women squeezing past me to get onto the dance floor, I just stood there frozen to a post, my fingers practically breaking my empty beer bottle, too nervous to shove through the crowd to get another. You better believe I stared. I practically took notes on their clothes.

But it's not just the clothes. It's the way they hold themselves, hands in their pockets or slung over each other's shoulders, eyes roaming over the floor. It's the way they laugh, heads back, the way they lean against the pillars as if they owned the room. You feel like you've died and gone to heaven. You want to grow up to be just like them.

One thing surprised me—the way they all hung in groups, twos, threes, fives, dancing with their buddies all night. Half the time you

couldn't tell which ones were lovers. Seemed like no one was there to meet anyone, seemed like they all had their friends already.

But it just seems that way. After awhile, the music takes over your heartbeat, pounding down the thoughts in your head, you get dizzy breathing the smell of the hair of the woman in front of you—it was the third time I went, she was standing by herself, this tall woman with amused eyebrows that sliced you in half as you passed her, her breasts just crescents poking up from the purple t-shirt tucked into her jeans, her upper arm muscular and tight inside her rolled-up sleeves—I managed to smile before I had to look away, and then her hand was on my shoulder, asking me to dance. By the end of the night her thigh was rubbing against my pants while we danced, she leaned down to brush my throat with her mouth, and off we waltzed to her house.

Oh my god, and I used to think sex with Ed could be good. I was grinning myself silly on the train home the next morning, I just couldn't believe it.

But I was good, I didn't give out my number, I didn't ask for hers, I got home before Ed was even out of bed, I poured frosted flakes and orange juice and brought it to him practically before he turned over to say hello. Big old Ed, ruddy face crumpled from the pillow. Oh sure, he sulked a little bit, but we watched cartoons in bed all morning, and shot down aliens at the arcade all afternoon, teasing each other mercilessly, me tugging his flyaway orange ponytail, him winning extra games at invaders and me at caterpillar, like we used to.

I did, I really used to like sex with him. Or I thought I did. God, I practically had to tie him down the first time. We were at his house, his mother out shopping, both of us virgins—me fourteen, him eighteen. He said he was afraid of hurting me, he was afraid I was too young. But not too afraid. He knew exactly where the condoms were in his father's top drawer.

Back then I used to grab the wheel and steer us toward the far reaches of mall parking lots when we went to the movies, I was always on the lookout for likely fields and empty farmhouses when we were out driving. One rainy night in March we parked his mother's station wagon in a field shaded from the road by a stand of cedars. Afterwards we untangled our clothes, racing to beat my curfew—but we were stuck in the muddy ruts. Ed got me home long past midnight, my guts in knots, tensed against my mother's fists.

She really did a job on me, Ed was pretty upset when he saw me the next day. Pretty soon after that, he got his own apartment, and I stopped even pretending to live at home, just moved right in with him.

I'd been practically living with his family anyhow. His family was great. They had these finches, Eenie and Meenie, that whirred around the living room bookshelves and tugged thread out of your shirt. And at dinner time, his family always set the table and ate all together, sitting down—or mostly they did. Anyway, it was a *house*, not the back of a goddamn motel, where dinner meant somebody shouting an order to whoever was working the grill, usually me, my brothers squeezing past, fighting over the last packet of ketchup. So Ed's father harassed him about his grades, so he wanted Ed to be an engineer, so big deal—Ed's too smart to be a goof-off, somebody had to rag him to shape up. After dinner I kind of liked helping his mother clean up—they had this great kitchen, copper-bottom pots, butcher-block everything, matching tea-towels for drying the plates. She always asked about school and stuff—not just asking, she really listened. I even liked it when his sister practiced the clarinet—Mozart and stuff like that—even if Ed called it “Louisa's bump-and-whine routine.”

Then I'd go home and there'd be my dad, listening to Springsteen sing “Born in the USA” on the jukebox over and over, long after the last customers took off, hunkering over his beer as the Budweiser globe went round and round, blue in the dark.

That first moment you walk into the bar, everyone turns around to check you out. You pretend not to notice, but for a minute you can barely breathe, you feel like the latest model on display, exhilarated, your heart going a mile a minute in your throat, sick to your stomach, certain you're wearing the wrong shoes.

But not Cath. Cath doesn't even give them a cool glance. She just takes off her jacket and you see her muscled upper arms and that bit of strong shoulder under her sleeveless shirt. That stops a few hearts.

So I kiss her neck to let them all know I'm with her, I tease her till that amused smile squeezes out of her cool brown eyes. Of course, at the coat check we run into three of her friends. They kiss and hug like they haven't seen each other in years, and then they all start talking about some meeting the night before about Central America and the CIA, and I can't fol-

low a thing, I must have “Dumb” written all over my forehead.

So I check out their clothes to see if I look okay in my black jeans and reeboks and white v-neck t-shirt. The one wearing the leather bomber jacket checks me out pretty thoroughly, so I must be all right, even if I am the only one with long hair—the rest of them have it angled so short their necks go right up to their cowlicks. I start talking to her, maybe playing with her jacket a little bit, just goofing around. Cath looks over at me with her eyebrows, as if to say, well, I’m glad you’re making yourself at home, and takes my arm and introduces me all around.

This guitar duo starts up and we can’t hear any more, so they all go upstairs to dance. It hits me again, that smoky half-dark, red lights bouncing everywhere. I want to touch every one of them, I can hardly believe this is real and I’m allowed to be here, I’m half-dancing toward the dance floor, bomber jacket leans toward me and asks if anyone wants to dance, so she and me and the one in the Hawaiian-print pants head onto the floor, and Cath goes off to the bar with our beer orders, and everything’s perfect.

I mean it, perfect. There’s a bunch of college girls in bermuda shorts and enormous t-shirts dancing wildly in a circle, showing off, and there’s this older couple, must be forty, in their little pumps and pressed trousers and froufy hairdos waltzing to the disco beat—one of them keeps bumping into me, and I don’t even mind. And when Cath comes on the floor, I nudge her to look at these two black women dancing so steamy, one behind the other, hands on hips—and Cath pulls me over to her and we close-dance for a minute, and I bite her ear, and she spins me out so we’re mock-jitterbugging, and I’m so happy I could die.

There’s the little beep-beep-beep of an alarm clock. It takes me a minute. I hate waking up lost in limbo. When the nuns taught us about limbo, I used to think that floating in gray nothingness must be worse than burning in hell. In hell at least something would be happening, you could *do* something.

Then she says, “Oh God, is it Monday already?” And I smell Cath’s warm brown smell, and roll against her, reaching around to her chest to pull myself up into life. I kiss the small knobs of her spine up to the tender spot at the base of her brain.

“Today’s the perfect day to go to the zoo,” I say into her ear. “I want to show you the bongo antelopes, the ones you remind me of, with their

royal antlers.” They stand there staring down at you, too proud to scamper toward you trying to be friends like the zebras, too confident to shy away like the sika deer.

“Bongos,” she says. “I swear you make these animals up.” She stretches herself against me for a minute, and I roll on top of her, pinning her down with kisses. “No, no, I’ve got to get up,” she says. “Move, sweetie. Seriously, I have to go to work.”

“I’m at work,” I say, kissing her wrists.

“Oh, you always have a line, don’t you,” she says, pushing me away. “Listen, get up. No kidding. You made me late last week.”

While her shower rushes, rectangles of light slip across her posters for political rallies and museum openings. Her life is so *alive*, I’m going to learn so much with her — I’ll start reading newspapers, I’ll go to museums, I’ll join one of her groups, I’ll *do* something with my life.

“Does your brother know you’re gay?” Cath says when she comes back into the room, beads of water dripping down her back.

“Hmm?”

“What does he think when you disappear for the weekend?”

I curl on my side, hugging the pillow to my belly. All weekend I kept meaning to call Ed, but mostly I forgot. And besides, I’d think, maybe just then wasn’t the best time, really — maybe it’d be better to wait till I saw him, then explain.

“Hey. Up.” Cath steps into her blue underwear. “I have to leave. That means you have to leave.”

“You could always give me a key,” I say, “so I can sleep in like a normal human being.”

“Oh, I could, could I. A normal human being, let me inform you, doesn’t live your life of leisure. A normal human being goes to work Monday mornings.” Cath snatches the comforter away. When she starts to pull on her maroon sweater, I hop up and wipe off the water still on her back.

“I don’t see how you can live off social security,” she says. “Don’t you have to be in school to get that after you’re eighteen?”

“I am in school,” I say, pulling my underwear and jeans out from under the bed.

“I thought you said you weren’t.”

It’s too early for me to remember what I said and what I didn’t. “The

government doesn't know that," I say. Actually, it was a kid I met at Salem State who got social security after his father died. But I haven't seen him since I dropped out of school in October.

Cath throws me my denim jacket and holds open the front door. "I've got to get going. Really. I'll give you a call later, okay?"

"No, no, I'll call you." I kiss her neck. She gives me a funny look before she picks the *Globe* up from beside the forsythia. "Trouble with my brother," I say. "He'll get over it."

Ed opens the store at ten on Mondays, so before I take the train to Salem I hang for a while in a coffeeshop near North Station, making patterns on the formica with the sugar and salt. The bums drift in, the businessmen scan the paper and flirt with the waitresses, not like they're interested but like it's a habit they can't stop. When someone leaves behind a newspaper I flip through Monday's Sci-Tech section until the 9:50 train—Chet Raymo's nature column can be great, once he wrote about actually watching a copperhead squeeze off its skin.

A muffled cheering is roaring up from the TV when I walk in. Ed leaves it on sometimes so he doesn't have to hear the silence behind him when he leaves. He hates being alone in the apartment, even for a minute.

He can be grumpy and sullen after a weekend alone, but he gets really pleasant once he starts talking to customers, so I figure I can call him at work, maybe meet him for lunch at Papa Gino's at the mall. He made assistant manager almost right away, he'll make manager soon—he likes finding out about people and helping them pick something out. He really is a good guy.

Two women dressed up like bees are squealing down the aisle for a chance to win major appliances. I flip off the TV and lie down on the sofa-bed, falling into his stale smell crumpled in the sheets.

Worse than waking up lost is waking up groggy in the afternoon. It's like that awful time in the fall, when I couldn't get out of bed for maybe days at a time, except to pee or grab something from the refrigerator.

At first I just wanted to stay in the blankets and not think about anything. Ed kept trying to get me up, tugging on my toes or my ears when he went by. Once he started tickling me. I about killed him for that, I yelled at him if he ever did that again, bastard, he'd really regret it. After that he let me sleep.

But sleeping wasn't so great for long. Maybe the worst part was the nightmares, using a broken beer bottle to beat off creepy little monsters trying to crawl up my legs till their blood got muddy and I stuck in it like quicksand. Or I had one of those machine guns my dad had in Vietnam and I was shooting heads off people, bam bam bam, but they grew back in these huge animal shapes, their enormous jaws chasing after me, and I was frozen to the asphalt.

Waking up was just as bad: like I said, there's no light in here, limbo. Lying there awake, alone, feeling a little nauseous and greasy from the dirty sheets, the bam bam bam noise starts going in your head, telling you what a shit you are, a useless worthless shit who can't even get up to brush her teeth, and you just roll over and try to go back to sleep so it will all shut off. When Ed was there I was actually glad. It wasn't as bad, curled up against his muscular legs. Sometimes he spoonfed me cartons of Chinese food or ice cream, and I listened to the TV hum above the blanket's fuzzy horizon before drifting down to an easier sleep.

Once I woke in the dark to the click of the door, no idea whether it was morning or evening, what month, what year. I struggled to shake off the numbness. The red numbers on the clock glowed 6:55.

Objects were swimming up in pools of thinning blue. On the bookcase was the big maroon "S" of Ed's varsity football letter that he never got around to sewing onto his jacket; my *Time/Life* science books and college biology book; seashells from York, Maine where I spent summers with Ed's family, and from Orleans down the Cape, where I went with Margie's; and a little stuffed Santa.

A Santa. Christmas songs had been jingling on the radio, and a day ago—or two?—Ed said on the phone, "I don't know if we'll come this year." He must've been talking to his mother about Christmas.

I'd been in bed for two months.

The blue veil thinned completely, leaving the room a watery white. I shucked the blankets and stumbled into the bathroom, splashed my face with water, and went to the dresser for jeans and a sweatshirt. As I zipped up, I heard the door click shut again. Ed was panting from his run, sweat beads on his temples. As he looked at me, his shy, closed-mouth grin spread across his face.

"Want eggs?" he said.

I spent that day flipping through my nature books or standing at the

little window watching the clouds shift. At first he was reluctant to go to work, like he was afraid I might go back to bed again if he left. I shooed him out. But when he came home that night he scooped me into the truck and drove us to Singing Beach. I couldn't believe how fresh the air was on my skin, so wild and alive, the ocean's foamy tumble and roar making me want to plunge in. I kept butting up against Ed, goofy from the salt air and the sharp stars.

At home I took a hot shower, just to feel it alive on my skin. My head filled with the minty smell of Ed's soap, and I started thinking of everything that ever made me happy. Sandpipers running along the lip of the tide on Crane's beach. My ankles chilled numb as I stalked crayfish in the creek with the neighborhood kids. Lying on Grandma Mae's braided rugs in a mess of Sunday comics, listening to Joni Mitchell and Janis Ian. Sneaking out to the night roar of high school football games with Margie. Fingering through Woolworth's plastic squirtguns and Groucho noses and silver fright wigs with Margie in 8th grade. Making out with Margie in the breathy dark under the summer covers. Margie's father catching us necking the week before we started high school, cursing me to hell and back, threatening me with jail if I ever came near her again. Margie's scribbled letters from her aunt's in New Hampshire dribbling away. Weeks of loneliness surrounded by a thousand lockers slamming at Salem High.

Until I met Ed.

Next day I borrowed Ed's truck, drove to Doktor Pet, and bought the gerbils. It was scary to drive again, the onrushing lights and sights and split-second decisions too much after two months of silence. But it was worth it when I picked up their warm bodies, running my palm over the tiny ears and tails. I was so proud, picking out the gerbil food and water bottle and everything they needed to be happy. So there, so there! This is *my* fucking life.

When I pulled up to the parking lot behind the store, the gerbils scabbling in their cage on the mats on the passenger's side, Ed waved at me from behind the plate glass. He ran out to meet me, his face smeared with delight, and offered to drive home. I slid over to the passenger seat and turned back to peer for a strong minute at his face, searching it to see how he'd react to what I had to say. I looked so hard I got that eerie feeling I was looking into a mirror, that his face was mine, that how he felt was how I'd feel. I had to look away.

It took me a week to say it, even though every morning on the walks he made us take around the block it ran in my head like a cassette, this little rap about how it didn't have anything to do with him, I wasn't going to hurt him or leave him or anything, blah blah blah. But I kept watching for the right time. Once a little shiver of disgust ran through me when I watched him lean over to put on his running shoes, a little blubber spilling over the frayed band of his jockeys sticking up above his gray sweats. I pushed my hair back over my shoulder and sat down to talk—but then he stuck a finger through the gerbil cage and started goofing around with them, calling them little names, and I just couldn't. Another time I sat next to him, the sofa cushions sagging beneath me—of course he was folding up the bed as soon as I got up each morning—and I smelled his beery breath, his elbows on his hairy thighs as he hunched over, staring at the VCR—and it was like the whole room was tilting toward him, like I was falling toward him, and I curled away, repulsed.

"What is it?" he said, not looking at me.

"Nothing."

"Some kind of nothing. You've been looking like that all week."

Okay, I thought, this is it. I took a couple of practice breaths.

"Chill out," he said, still looking at the TV, but really kind, not like he was scolding at all. He picked up my hand and kissed it. "You're so intense. Everything's going to be okay. You'll get back on your feet, you'll figure out what you want to do."

Just when you write him off as a dumb lug, he comes out with something like that.

"I want to make an agreement with you," I blurted out.

He got really still. He clicked the pause button on the VCR, and these two oversize faces stopped, one of the mouths half-open, frozen in the middle of saying something.

"I want to go to the bar sometimes," I said.

He knew exactly what I meant. He knew about Margie. He knew about every girl I'd ever had a crush on since I was fourteen.

"Nothing serious, Bear. I don't want to get away from you or anything. I just—I just have to, sometimes." I felt retarded, trying to explain my thoughts after not having any for so long.

He sat there facing the TV, a beer and the remote control between his knees. "Nothing serious?" he said, his voice sagging.

“I swear, I swear to God.” I tried not to, but I was pleading, I wanted to run my hands over the orange hair that ran over his ears into the flimsy ponytail, to soothe him and make him smile.

“Nothing serious,” he said, like a contract, popped the top of the beer, and took a long drink. It wasn’t until he turned to me sharply that I realized I’d taken an ecstatic breath.

“Don’t worry, old Bear,” I said, hugging him to me, rocking him, rocking him with happiness. “Don’t worry, Bear, everything will be fine.”

Squeak, squeak, squeak goes the gerbil wheel, and I sit up in the dimness, wondering whether he remembered to put water in their bottle over the weekend. The clothes I’ve been wearing for three days stick to me, so I peel them off and pull on some clean ones. Sure enough, the water bottle is empty. I take it into the bathroom, and while I’m running the tap I glance up at the mirror

It’s a shock, seeing my stupid brown eyes and sideways nose in front of all that foggy thought, the dirty blond hair spilling every which way over my shoulders.

And then I hear the door. Shit.

What’s worse, the phone rings. I know right away who it is.

“Hello,” he says. I sit down on the toilet.

“No, she’s not here right now.” He gives a short laugh. “No, I’m not her brother. Yes, I’ll tell her.”

In front of me is the creeping black line of mold in the shower’s cracks, and the yellowed tile he tried again and again to scour white. Not like Cath’s bathroom with its clean white freestanding tub, surrounded by shower curtains decorated with a crayon-bright map of the world.

He has a beer when I come out.

“Your girlfriend called,” he says, looking out the window at his parked truck.

“I heard,” I say. Then I realize what I just admitted.

He snorts and tosses back some beer. “You going to call her or what?”

“I thought maybe you and I could watch a movie. I could go out and get some Chinese for dinner. My treat, ha ha.”

“Ha ha,” he says, dead flat. Shame flushes through me. I head over to the gerbil cage and slide the water bottle in. I want to bite free of him so bad my teeth ache.

“Well, I’m starved,” I say. “Don’t you want to eat?”

He takes another long swig from his beer and tosses it in the sink. It clatters to a stop. The hollowness in my stomach swirls with it.

“Why don’t we just order a pizza,” he says, resigned, and pulls another can from the refrigerator. “I brought home a couple of movies.”

Relief breathes out of me, leaving behind a narrow thread of excitement. Everything will be fine.

The phone rings again. I sprint into the kitchen to pick it up. “Hello?”

“Oh. You *are* there,” Cath says.

“I just walked in.” Hearing her voice, I go damp.

“I forgot to tell— whoever— why I called,” she says.

“One of my brother’s friends.”

Ed snorts again and walks into the other room.

“Right. Listen, you left your backpack here. I just found it when I walked in. I didn’t know if you keep anything important in it.”

“Nothing much. I have my wallet in my jacket.” Watching Ed out of the side of my eyes, I try to keep my voice from flirting. I reach over to the refrigerator and grab an apple.

“Well. Sounds like this isn’t a good time. Talk to you later,” she says.

“Yeah, thanks,” I say, and hang up. I bite into the apple, hard. I want to cry.

Ed’s pulling videos out of his backpack. I lean over his shoulder. “Looks like action/adventure flicks for a change,” I say. “Cops conquer evil. Boys conquer jungle. Me Tarzan, you Jane, unnggh.”

Ed drops the pack on the bed and stands up. “You pick one out, I’ll call for the pizza.”

“Hey, this one’s a romance comedy!” I call to him. He nods, turning his back to me as he speaks into the phone.

When he comes back, he puts his arm around me and draws me close. The acrid smell of sweat under his arm is familiar, almost tender. I close my eyes. The pressure in my chest is terrible.

To my surprise, he strokes me all the way down my body, his hand slow across my thighs. Something inside me quickens, and my breath spins. I try not to let him see me cringe— I’m so relieved that he still wants me, that I still have him. I bite into his shoulder, a little harder than I mean to. He flinches just a little and grabs my hips and pulls me on top of him.

Trying not to let him see how stiff I am, I shove myself up against him,

grabbing for his zipper. I think of Cath—running my face over the ripple of her appendix scar, the incredible curve of her ass, the sudden rise of plum-brown hair between her jutting hips. When Ed’s tongue strikes my mouth I jerk back. He puts his hand on my hip and holds me still. We lie close together, his slow wet breath on my face. I turn my face down into the pillow.

I *want* to want him. Why can’t that be enough?

The doorbell rings. I start to giggle. I don’t know why, I get a little hysterical, the kind of laughing that leaves you bruised, almost like you’re crying. The bell rings again. “Coming!” I yell, dragging on my jeans and t-shirt and scrambling for the door. I plop the steaming pizza box down on the bed and eat with a vengeance, strings of cheese trailing from my teeth.

After we’re stuffed, leaning back on the pillows, Ed tosses the box on the floor and reaches over to touch my cheek.

“Leenie?” he says, his eyes closed, curled on his side like a child. Leenie, that lost name.

“Leenie, let’s get married.” I put my face back in the pillow.

“Let’s get married. *Married*. We could have babies. My parents would be happy. Everything would be great.”

I know what he wants. He wants me to hide out with him forever, trapped and unhappy on the leash of his paycheck. He wants to pretend we’re still kids together. Like I’m not turning into a woman all by myself.

“Think about it, at least. Will you think about it?” His voice lingers. I bite the pillow and fight the hot tears starting to rise.

I lie there, stark awake. A headlight scrapes the gray walls and escapes. I keep seeing Cath floating past me, Cath’s skinny arms moving in a smooth jerk as she dances, her eyes gleaming as she looks someone over with a quick flick, her smile and eyebrows razor-sharp.

The little red numbers glow 2:07. I get up and prowl the room, finally taking one of my *Time/Life* books into the bathroom where the light won’t bother Ed. But I keep staring blindly at this page of twisted cocoons and migrating monarchs. Panic hits me when I think I might not hear her voice till tomorrow.

In half a breath, I’m on the highway in Ed’s pickup.

It’s weird on the highway. The few headlights stream by like extrater-

restrials. The DJ's hey-guy voice echoes in the car and out into the gigantic night, I'm bebopping in my seat to the Shirelles and the Supremes, tapping the horn until it lets out an excited yelp.

I zoom into Boston doing 75, 80, barely slowing down to toss a fistful of coins in the tolls, speeding around midnight delivery trucks, accelerating through the red lights that glow eerie and alone at deserted crossroads, barreling around the Jamaica Way so fast I'm tossed from one lane to another as the road throws up surprising curves.

When Ed's truck shudders to a stop, you hear it echoing all down the sidestreet. I tap on her window. The yellow smell of the forsythia floods my head. "Cath?" I whisper, loud. "It's me, Arlene."

The shade moves slightly and drops again. I'm hopping back and forth a little, hoping I'm not crushing the hyacinth, the chill of the spring mud making my toes and soles ache in my reeboks.

"Hurry up, come on in." She chains the door behind me, putting her hand on my elbow. "Are you okay? Is anyone after you? Should I call the police?"

I look down at her feet. Her second toe is longer than her big toe. I never noticed before.

"I'll make you some tea."

Her kitchen clock, a funky black plastic cat with rhinestone numbers, makes enormous clicking sounds, wide-awake eyes sweeping from side to side. She quizzes me. Am I hurt? Is anyone else hurt? Is there anyone she should call? Her voice slows to a suspicious halt.

"Did you have a fight with your — ah — brother?"

I want to crawl under the table.

"Arlene, say something. Christ!" she says.

"I just had to get away."

"From?"

"He makes me sick. I can't live with him any more." I'm surprised how violently it comes out.

"Him," she says, waiting for me to go on.

I stare down at the honeypot.

"Your boyfriend."

I nod. She gives a little snort of disgust. Just like Ed's when he found out about her.

"And you want me to take you in?"

“Just till I find a job,” I say hesitantly.

“Thanks for letting me in on the plan.” The kettle’s sputtering before it really starts to whistle. Cath gets up and stands by the stove, her arms folded.

“You scared me half to death, you know, when you tapped on my window,” she says. “You’re lucky I didn’t call the cops on you.” Just as the whistle starts to pierce the room, she turns off the gas and the sound dies into a sigh. She pours the steaming water into two mugs, and puts one in front of me. The mouthwashy smell of peppermint slaps my face.

“When I figured it out, about your boyfriend, I decided I had to stop seeing you.”

I sit there gripping the honeypot. I want to slam her against the wall. “You don’t mean that,” I say, not sure whether it makes it out of my mouth.

“Why did you lie to me?” she says.

And then she’s off and running, quizzing me like I was a juvenile delinquent. Does he know I’m seeing her. How long have I been with him. When I tell her his family kind of took me in because mine wasn’t so hot, she wants to know was my family violent. How can you answer that? And then she puts her hand over mine, right, like she knows anything about it.

More third degree. Does he support me. Am I in school. I actually tell her about the day I thought I saw Margie between classes and practically knocked over half the campus running to catch her. But when she turned around, it was some strange girl in a perm and makeup. Next thing I knew it was Christmas.

I’m hunching over my mug like it was a private campfire. When I look up, her head’s tiny and terribly distant.

“You can stay tonight, Arlene,” she says, her words dragging toward me over the miles, sad and slow, “but you have to leave in the morning.”

Sitting in traffic in Ed’s pickup, I look over at the sullen morning huddle waiting for the bus. Secretaries in heels and lipstick twitter about their weekends with their boyfriends. A black guy in a leather jacket and a backpack is probably off to engineering classes at UMass; he wants to get the hell out of Mission Hill. And there’s a woman dragging on a cigarette, someone I’ve seen at the bar, maybe a short order cook heading for the midday shift.

What the hell, I could do that. There's worse things than working a grill—like cleaning motel bathrooms, you wouldn't believe what people leave behind when someone else is going to clean up the mess.

I drive way north, past Salem, past Marblehead, up to Plum Island. Ed'll kill me, but he'll get to work somehow. I take off my reeboks, tie the laces together, and throw them over my shoulder as I walk up the beach. The sand's damp and cold, so cold it shoots up my back and hits the base of my head. But the cold feels good, the gritty sand grinding into my bare soles. It's too late in the morning to see many birds, but I sit down anyway—not on the beachy part of the beach, the part the tourists like, but up in the dunes, near the brush, where you can hear the waves slap the sand and the tall grass rustling around your ears, like somebody sighing.

This kid comes by. He must live in that row of houses that's right before you get on the island, because he's pedaling like crazy, butt in the air, on his mountain bike, the kind that does okay in sand because of the fat tires. I guess he doesn't see me because he hops off, letting the bike drop on its side in front of this mess of brush, and scrunches down to peer between the branches.

And I get it: he's found a nest. When I was nine, down by the creek I found a deep-basketed nest holding three speckled eggs no bigger than my thumb. I got a lot of crap for coming home with my clothes all muddy and scratched up. Not that I cared, I used to run down there nearly every day anyway, before or after school, or both.

Still, the day I went down there and found these skinny rags of birds, damp bits of egg sticking to them, screeching like hell, I was so surprised I froze. Their beaks were sharp and nasty, stretching so wide you'd think they'd snap their twiggy bones into bits. Those huge mouths were scary—like all that hunger scraping open their gullets was just too big to fit inside.