

BRIEF
INTERVIEWS
WITH
HIDEOUS
MEN

STORIES

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE
AUTHOR OF INFINITE JEST

ALSO BY

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

THE BROOM OF THE SYSTEM

GIRL WITH CURIOUS HAIR

INFINITE JEST

A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING

I'LL NEVER DO AGAIN

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For Beth-Ellen Siciliano and Alice R. Dall, hideous ears *sine pari*.

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A RADICALLY CONDENSED HISTORY OF POSTINDUSTRIAL LIFE

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who'd introduced them didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one.

DEATH IS NOT THE END

The fifty-six-year-old American poet, a Nobel Laureate, a poet known in American literary circles as 'the poet's poet' or sometimes simply 'the Poet,' lay outside on the deck, bare-chested, moderately overweight, in a partially reclined deck chair, in the sun, reading, half supine, moderately but not severely overweight, winner of two National Book Awards, a National Book Critics Circle Award, a Lamont Prize, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Prix de Rome, a Lannan Foundation Fellowship, a MacDowell Medal, and a Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a president emeritus of PEN, a poet two separate American generations have hailed as the voice of their generation, now fifty-six, lying in an unwet XL Speedo-brand swimsuit in an incrementally reclinable canvas deck chair on the tile deck beside the home's pool, a poet who was among the first ten Americans to receive a 'Genius Grant' from the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, one of only three American recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature now living, 5'8", 181 lbs., brown/brown, hairline unevenly recessed because of the inconsistent acceptance/rejection of various Hair Augmentation Systems—brand transplants, he sat, or lay—or perhaps most accurately just 'reclined'—in a black Speedo swimsuit by the home's kidney-shaped pool, ¹ on the pool's tile deck, in a portable deck chair whose back was now reclined four clicks to an angle of 35° w/r/t the deck's mosaic tile, at 10:20 A.M. on 15 May 1995, the fourth most anthologized poet in the history of American belles lettres, near an umbrella but not in the actual shade of the umbrella, reading *Newsweek* magazine, ² using the modest swell of his abdomen as an angled support for the magazine, also wearing thongs, one hand behind his head, the other hand out to the side and trailing on the dun-and-ochre filigree of the deck's expensive Spanish ceramic tile, occasionally wetting a finger to turn the page, wearing prescription sunglasses whose lenses were chemically treated to darken in fractional proportion to the luminous intensity of the light to which they were exposed, wearing on the trailing hand a wristwatch of middling quality and expense, simulated-rubber thongs on his feet, legs crossed at the ankle and knees slightly spread, the sky cloudless and brightening as the morning's sun moved up and right, wetting a finger not with saliva or perspiration but with the condensation on the slender frosted glass of iced tea that rested not just on the border of his body's shadow to the chair's upper left and would have to be moved to remain in that cool shadow, tracing a finger idly down the glass's side before bringing the moist finger idly up to the page, occasionally turning the pages of the 19 September 1994 edition of *Newsweek* magazine, reading about American health-care reform and about USAir's tragic Flight 427, reading a summary and favorable review of the popular nonfiction volumes *Hot Zone* and *The Coming Plague*, sometime turning several pages in succession, skimming certain articles and summaries, an eminent American poet now four months short of his fifty-seventh birthday, a poet whom *Newsweek* magazine's chief competitor, *Time*, had once rather absurdly called 'the closest thing to a genuine literary immortal now living,' his shins nearly hairless, the open umbrella's elliptic shadow tightening slightly, the thongs' simulated rubber pebbled on both sides of the sole, the poet's forehead dotted with perspiration, his tan deep and rich, the insides of his upper legs nearly hairless, his penis curled tight on itself inside the tight swimsuit, his Vandyke neatly trimmed, an ashtray on the iron table, not drinking his iced tea, occasionally clearing his throat, at intervals shifting slightly in the pastel deck

chair to scratch idly at the instep of one foot with the big toe of the other foot without removing his thongs or looking at either foot, seemingly intent on the magazine, the blue pool to his right and the home's thick glass sliding rear door to his oblique left, between himself and the pool a round table of white woven iron impaled at the center by a large beach umbrella whose shadow now no longer touches the pool, an indisputably accomplished poet, reading his magazine in his chair on his deck by his pool behind his home. The home's pool and deck area is surrounded on three sides by trees and shrubbery. The trees and shrubbery, installed years before, are densely interwoven and tangled and serve the same essential function as a redwood privacy fence or a wall of fine stone. It is the height of spring, and the trees and shrubbery are in full leaf and are intensely green and still, and are complexly shadowed, and the sky is wholly blue and still, so that the whole enclosed tableau of pool and deck and poet and chair and table and trees and home's rear façade is very still and composed and very nearly wholly silent, the soft gurgle of the pool's pump and drain and the occasional sound of the poet clearing his throat or turning the pages of *Newsweek* magazine the only sounds—not a bird, no distant lawn mowers or hedge trimmers or weed-eating devices, no jets overhead or distant muffled sounds from the pools of the homes on either side of the poet's home—nothing but the pool's respiration and the poet's occasional cleared throat, wholly still and composed and enclosed, not even a hint of a breeze to stir the leaves of the trees and shrubbery, the silent living enclosing flora's motionless green vivid and inescapable and not like anything else in the world in either appearance or suggestion. [3](#)

FOREVER OVERHEAD

Happy Birthday. Your thirteenth is important. Maybe your first really public day. Your thirteenth is the chance for people to recognize that important things are happening to you.

Things have been happening to you for the past half year. You have seven hairs in your left armpit now. Twelve in your right. Hard dangerous spirals of brittle black hair. Crunchy, animal hair. There are now more of the hard curled hairs around your privates than you can count without losing track. Other things. Your voice is rich and scratchy and moves between octaves without any warning. Your face has begun to get shiny when you don't wash it. And two weeks of a deep and frightening ache the past spring left you with something dropped down from inside: your sack is now full and vulnerable, commodity to be protected. Hefted and strapped in tight supporters that stripe your buttocks red. You have grown into a new fragility.

And dreams. For months there have been dreams like nothing before: moist and busy and distant, full of yielding curves, frantic pistons, warmth and a great falling; and you have awakened through fluttering lids to a rush and a gush and a toe-curling scalp-snapping jolt of feeling from an inside deeper than you knew you had, spasms of a deep sweet hurt, the streetlights through your window blinds cracking into sharp stars against the black bedroom ceiling, and on you a dense white jam that slips between legs, trickles and sticks, cools on you, hardens and clears until there is nothing but gnarled knots of pale solid animal hair in the morning shower, and in the wet tangle a clean sweet smell you can't believe comes from anything you made inside you.

* * *

The smell is, more than anything, like this swimming pool: a bleached sweet salt, a flower with chemical petals. The pool has a strong clear blue smell, though you know the smell is never as strong when you are actually in the blue water, as you are now, all swum out, resting back along the shallow end, the hip-high water lapping at where it's all changed.

Around the deck of this old public pool on the western edge of Tucson is a Cyclone fence the color of pewter, decorated with a bright tangle of locked bicycles. Beyond this a hot black parking lot full of white lines and glittering cars. A dull field of dry grass and hard weeds, old dandelions' downy heads exploding and snowing up in a rising wind. And past all this, reddened by a round slow September sun, are mountains, jagged, their tops' sharp angles darkening into definition against a deep red tired light. Against the red their sharp connected tops form a spiked line, an EKG of the dying day.

The clouds are taking on color by the rim of the sky. The water is spangles off soft blue, five-o'clock warm, and the pool's smell, like the other smell, connects with a chemical haze inside you, an interior dimness that bends light to its own ends, softens the difference between what leaves off and what begins.

Your party is tonight. This afternoon, on your birthday, you have asked to come to the pool. You wanted to come alone, but a birthday is a family day, your family wants to be with you. This is nice, and you can't talk about why you wanted to come alone, and really truly maybe you didn't want to

come alone, so they are here. Sunning. Both your parents sun. Their deck chairs have been marking time all afternoon, rotating, tracking the sun's curve across a desert sky heated to an eggy film. Your sister plays Marco Polo near you in the shallows with a group of thin girls from her grade. She is being blind now, her Marco's being Polo'd. She is shut-eyed and twirling to different cries, spinning at the hub of a wheel of shrill girls in bathing caps. Her cap has raised rubber flowers. There are limp old pink petals that shake as she lunges at blind sound.

There at the other end of the pool is the diving tank and the high board's tower. Back on the deck behind is the SN CK BAR, and on either side, bolted above the cement entrances to dark wet showers and lockers, are gray metal bullhorn speakers that send out the pool's radio music, the jangle flat and tinny thin.

Your family likes you. You are bright and quiet, respectful to elders—though you are not without spine. You are largely good. You look out for your little sister. You are her ally. You were six when she was zero and you had the mumps when they brought her home in a very soft yellow blanket; you kissed her hello on her feet out of concern that she not catch your mumps. Your parents say that this augured well. That it set the tone. They now feel they were right. In all things they are proud of you, satisfied, and they have retreated to the warm distance from which pride and satisfaction travel. You all get along well.

Happy Birthday. It is a big day, big as the roof of the whole southwest sky. You have thought it over. There is the high board. They will want to leave soon. Climb out and do the thing.

Shake off the blue clean. You're half-bleached, loose and soft, tenderized, pads of fingers wrinkle. The mist of the pool's too-clean smell is in your eyes; it breaks light into gentle color. Knock your head with the heel of your hand. One side has a flabby echo. Cock your head to the side and hop—sudden heat in your ear, delicious, and brain-warmed water turns cold on the nautilus of your ear's outside. You can hear harder tinnier music, closer shouts, much movement in much water.

The pool is crowded for this late. Here are thin children, hairy animal men. Disproportionate boys all necks and legs and knobby joints, shallow-chested, vaguely birdlike. Like you. Here are old people moving tentatively through shallows on stick legs, feeling at the water with their hands, out of every element at once.

And girl-women, women, curved like instruments or fruit, skin burnished brown-bright, suit tops held by delicate knots of fragile colored string against the pull of mysterious weights, suit bottoms riding low over the gentle juts of hips totally unlike your own, immoderate swells and swivels that melt in light into a surrounding space that cups and accommodates the soft curves as things precious. You almost understand.

The pool is a system of movement. Here now there are: laps, splash fights, dives, corner tag, cannonballs, Sharks and Minnows, high fallings, Marco Polo (your sister still It, halfway to tears, too long to be It, the game teetering on the edge of cruelty, not your business to save or embarrass). Two clean little bright-white boys caped in cotton towels run along the poolside until the guard stops them dead with a shout through his bullhorn. The guard is brown as a tree, blond hair in a vertical line on his stomach, his head in a jungle explorer hat, his nose a white triangle of cream. A girl has an arm around a leg of his little tower. He's bored.

Get out now and go past your parents, who are sunning and reading, not looking up. Forget your towel. Stopping for the towel means talking and talking means thinking. You have decided being scared is caused mostly by thinking. Go right by, toward the tank at the deep end. Over the tank is a

great iron tower of dirty white. A board protrudes from the top of the tower like a tongue. The pool's concrete deck is rough and hot against your bleached feet. Each of your footprints is thinner and fainter. Each shrinks behind you on the hot stone and disappears.

Lines of plastic wieners bob around the tank, which is entirely its own thing, empty of the rest of the pool's convulsive ballet of heads and arms. The tank is blue as energy, small and deep and perfectly square, flanked by lap lanes and SN CK BAR and rough hot deck and the bent late shadow of the tower and board. The tank is quiet and still and healed smooth between fallings.

There is a rhythm to it. Like breathing. Like a machine. The line for the board curves back from the tower's ladder. The line moves in its curve, straightens as it nears the ladder. One by one, people reach the ladder and climb. One by one, spaced by the beat of hearts, they reach the tongue of the board at the top. And once on the board, they pause, each exactly the same tiny heartbeat pause. And their legs take them to the end, where they all give the same sort of stomping hop, arms curving out as if to describe something circular, total; they come down heavy on the edge of the board and make it throw them up and out.

It's a swooping machine, lines of stuttered movement in a sweet late bleach mist. You can watch from the deck as they hit the cold blue sheet of the tank. Each fall makes a white that plumes and falls into itself and spreads and fizzes. Then blue clean comes up in the middle of the white and spreads like pudding, making it all new. The tank heals itself. Three times as you go by.

You are in line. Look around. Look bored. Few talk in the line. Everyone seems by himself. Most look at the ladder, look bored. You almost all have crossed arms, chilled by a late dry rising wind on the constellations of blue-clean chlorine beads that cover your backs and shoulders. It seems impossible that everybody could really be this bored. Beside you is the edge of the tower's shadow, the tilted black tongue of the board's image. The system of shadow is huge, long, off to the side, joined to the tower's base at a sharp late angle.

Almost everyone in line for the board watches the ladder. Older boys watch older girls' bottoms as they go up. The bottoms are in soft thin cloth, tight nylon stretch. The good bottoms move up the ladder like pendulums in liquid, a gentle uncrackable code. The girls' legs make you think of deer. Look bored.

Look out past it. Look across. You can see so well. Your mother is in her deck chair, reading, squinting, her face tilted up to get light on her cheeks. She hasn't looked to see where you are. She sips something sweet out of a bright can. Your father is on his big stomach, back like the hint of a hump of a whale, shoulders curling with animal spirals, skin oiled and soaked red-brown with too much sun. Your towel is hanging off your chair and a corner of the cloth now moves—your mother has it as she waved away a sweat bee that likes what she has in the can. The bee is back right away, seeming to hang motionless over the can in a sweet blur. Your towel is one big face of Yogi Bear.

At some point there has gotten to be more line behind you than in front of you. Now no one in front except three on the slender ladder. The woman right before you is on the low rungs, looking up, wearing a tight black nylon suit that is all one piece. She climbs. From above there is a rumble, then a great falling, then a plume and the tank reheals. Now two on the ladder. The pool rules say one on the ladder at a time, but the guard never shouts about it. The guard makes the real rules by shouting or not shouting.

This woman above you should not wear a suit as tight as the suit she is wearing. She is as old as your mother, and as big. She is too big and too white. Her suit is full of her. The backs of her thighs

are squeezed by the suit and look like cheese. Her legs have abrupt little squiggles of cold blue shattered vein under the white skin, as if something were broken, hurt, in her legs. Her legs look like they hurt to be squeezed, full of curled Arabic lines of cold broken blue. Her legs make you feel like your own legs hurt.

The rungs are very thin. It's unexpected. Thin round iron rungs laced in slick wet Safe-T felt. You taste metal from the smell of wet iron in shadow. Each rung presses into the bottoms of your feet and dents them. The dents feel deep and they hurt. You feel heavy. How the big woman over you must feel. The handrails along the ladder's sides are also very thin. It's like you might not hold on. You've got to hope the woman holds on, too. And of course it looked like fewer rungs from far away. You are not stupid.

Get halfway up, up in the open, big woman placed above you, a solid bald muscular man on the ladder underneath your feet. The board is still high overhead, invisible from here. But it rumbles and makes a heavy flapping sound, and a boy you can see for a few contained feet through the thin rungs falls in a flash of a line, a knee held to his chest, doing a splasher. There is a huge exclamation point of foam up into your field of sight, then scattered claps into a great fizzing. Then the silent sound of the tank healing to new blue all over again.

More thin rungs. Hold on tight. The radio is loudest here, one speaker at ear-level over a concrete locker room entrance. A cool dank whiff of the locker room inside. Grab the iron bars tight and twist and look down behind you and you can see people buying snacks and refreshments below. You can see down into it: the clean white top of the vendor's cap, tubs of ice cream, steaming brass freezers, scub tanks of soft drink syrup, snakes of soda hose, bulging boxes of salty popcorn kept hot in the sun. Not that you're overhead you can see the whole thing.

There's wind. It's windier the higher you get. The wind is thin; through the shadow it's cold on your wet skin. On the ladder in the shadow your skin looks very white. The wind makes a thin whistle in your ears. Four more rungs to the top of the tower. The rungs hurt your feet. They are thin and let you know just how much you weigh. You have real weight on the ladder. The ground wants you back.

Now you can see just over the top of the ladder. You can see the board. The woman is there. There are two ridges of red, hurt-looking callus on the backs of her ankles. She stands at the start of the board, your eyes on her ankles. Now you're up above the tower's shadow. The solid man under you is looking through the rungs into the contained space the woman's fall will pass through.

She pauses for just that beat of a pause. There's nothing slow about it at all. It makes you cold. In no time she's at the end of the board, up, down on it, it bends low like it doesn't want her. Then it no and flaps and throws her violently up and out, her arms opening out to inscribe that circle, and gone. She disappears in a dark blink. And there's time before you hear the hit below.

Listen. It does not seem good, the way she disappears into a time that passes before she sounds. Like a stone down a well. But you think she did not think so. She was part of a rhythm that excludes thinking. And now you have made yourself part of it, too. The rhythm seems blind. Like ants. Like a machine.

You decide this needs to be thought about. It may, after all, be all right to do something scary without thinking, but not when the scariness is the not thinking itself. Not when not thinking turns out to be wrong. At some point the wrongnesses have piled up blind: pretend-boredom, weight, thin rung hurt feet, space cut into ladder parts that melt together only in a disappearance that takes time. The wind on the ladder not what anyone would have expected. The way the board protrudes from shadow

into light and you can't see past the end. When it all turns out to be different you should get to think. It should be required.

The ladder is full beneath you. Stacked up, everyone a few rungs apart. The ladder is fed by a solid line that stretches back and curves into the dark of the tower's canted shadow. People's arms are crossed in the line. Those on the ladder's feet hurt and they are all looking up. It is a machine that moves only forward.

Climb up onto the tower's tongue. The board turns out to be long. As long as the time you stand there. Time slows. It thickens around you as your heart gets more and more beats out of every second every movement in the system of the pool below.

The board is long. From where you stand it seems to stretch off into nothing. It's going to send you to someplace which its own length keeps you from seeing, which seems wrong to submit to without even thinking.

Looked at another way, the same board is just a long thin flat thing covered with a rough white plastic stuff. The white surface is very rough and is freckled and lined with a pale watered red that is nevertheless still red and not yet pink—drops of old pool water that are catching the light of the late sun over sharp mountains. The rough white stuff of the board is wet. And cold. Your feet are hurt from the thin rungs and have a great ability to feel. They feel your weight. There are handrails running above the beginning of the board. They are not like the ladder's handrails just were. They are thick and set very low, so you almost have to bend over to hold on to them. They are just for show, no one holds them. Holding on takes time and alters the rhythm of the machine.

It is a long cold rough white plastic or fiberglass board, veined with the sad near-pink color of back candy.

But at the end of the white board, the edge, where you'll come down with your weight to make it send you off, there are two areas of darkness. Two flat shadows in the broad light. Two vague black ovals. The end of the board has two dirty spots.

They are from all the people who've gone before you. Your feet as you stand here are tender and dented, hurt by the rough wet surface, and you see that the two dark spots are from people's skin. They are skin abraded from feet by the violence of the disappearance of people with real weight. More people than you could count without losing track. The weight and abrasion of their disappearance leaves little bits of soft tender feet behind, bits and shards and curls of skin that dirty and darken and tan as they lie tiny and smeared in the sun at the end of the board. They pile up and get smeared and mixed together. They darken in two circles.

No time is passing outside you at all. It is amazing. The late ballet below is slow motion, the overbroad movements of mimes in blue jelly. If you wanted you could really stay here forever, vibrating inside so fast you float motionless in time, like a bee over something sweet.

But they should clean the board. Anybody who thought about it for even a second would see that they should clean the end of the board of people's skin, of two black collections of what's left of before, spots that from back here look like eyes, like blind and cross-eyed eyes.

Where you are now is still and quiet. Wind radio shouting splashing not here. No time and no real sound but your blood squeaking in your head.

Overhead here means sight and smell. The smells are intimate, newly clear. The smell of bleach's special flower, but out of it other things rise to you like a weed's seeded snow. You smell deep yellow popcorn. Sweet tan oil like hot coconut. Either hot dogs or corn dogs. A thin cruel hint of very dark Pepsi in paper cups. And the special smell of tons of water coming off tons of skin, rising like steam off a new bath. Animal heat. From overhead it is more real than anything.

Look at it. You can see the whole complicated thing, blue and white and brown and white, soaked in a watery spangle of deepening red. Everybody. This is what people call a view. And you knew that from below you wouldn't look nearly so high overhead. You see now how high overhead you are. You knew from down there no one could tell.

He says it behind you, his eyes on your ankles, the solid bald man, Hey kid. They want to know. Do your plans up here involve the whole day or what exactly is the story. Hey kid are you okay.

There's been time this whole time. You can't kill time with your heart. Everything takes time. Be have to move very fast to stay still.

Hey kid he says Hey kid are you okay.

Metal flowers bloom on your tongue. No more time for thinking. Now that there is time you don't have time.

Hey.

Slowly now, out across everything, there's a watching that spreads like hit water's rings. Watch it spread out from the ladder. Your sighted sister and her thin white pack, pointing. Your mother looks the shallows where you used to be, then makes a visor of her hand. The whale stirs and jiggles. The guard looks up, the girl around his leg looks up, he reaches for his horn.

Forever below is rough deck, snacks, thin metal music, down where you once used to be; the line is solid and has no reverse gear; and the water, of course, is only soft when you're inside it. Look down. Now it moves in the sun, full of hard coins of light that shimmer red as they stretch away into a mist that is your own sweet salt. The coins crack into new moons, long shards of light from the hearts of sad stars. The square tank is a cold blue sheet. Cold is just a kind of hard. A kind of blind. You have been taken off guard. Happy Birthday. Did you think it over. Yes and no. Hey kid.

Two black spots, violence, and disappear into a well of time. Height is not the problem. It all changes when you get back down. When you hit, with your weight.

So which is the lie? Hard or soft? Silence or time?

The lie is that it's one or the other. A still, floating bee is moving faster than it can think. From overhead the sweetness drives it crazy.

The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind into a cloud-blotched sky, punctured light emptying behind sharp stone that is forever. That is forever. Step into the skin and disappear.

Hello.

BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN

B.I. #14 08-96

ST. DAVIDS PA

‘It’s cost me every sexual relationship I ever had. I don’t know why I do it. I’m not a political person, I don’t consider myself. I’m not one of these America First, read the newspaper, will Buchanan get the nod people. I’ll be doing it with some girl, it doesn’t matter who. It’s when I start to come. That it happens. I’m not a Democrat. I don’t even vote. I freaked out about it one time and called a radio show about it, a doctor on the radio, anonymously, and he diagnosed it as the uncontrolled yelling of involuntary words or phrases, frequently insulting or scatological, which is coprolalia is the official term. Except when I start to come and always start yelling it it’s not insulting it’s not obscene, it’s always the same thing, and it’s always so weird but I don’t think insulting. I think it’s just weird. And uncontrolled. It’s like it comes out the same way the spooge comes out, it feels like that. I don’t know what it’s about and I can’t help it.’

Q.

“‘Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!’ Only way louder. As in really shouting it. Uncontrollably. I’m not even thinking it until it comes out and I hear it. “Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!” Only louder than that: “*VICTORY—*”

Q.

‘Well it totally freaks them out, what do you think? And I just about die of the embarrassment. I don’t ever know what to say. What do you say if you just shouted “Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!” right when you came?’

Q.

‘It wouldn’t be so embarrassing if it wasn’t so totally fucking weird. If I had any clue about what was about. You know?’

Q....

‘God, now I’m embarrassed as hell.’

Q.

‘But all there *is* is the once. That’s what I mean about it costing. I can tell how bad it freaks them out, and I get embarrassed and never call them again. Even if I try to explain. And it’s the ones that’ll act all understanding like they don’t care and it’s OK and they understand and it doesn’t matter that embarrass me the worst, because it’s so fucking weird to yell “Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!” when you’re shooting off that I can always tell they’re totally freaked out and just condescending down to me and pretending they understand, and those are the ones where actually I actually end up almost getting pissed off and don’t even feel embarrassed not calling them or totally avoiding them, the ones that say “I think I could love you anyway.”’

‘It is a proclivity, and provided there’s minimal coercion and no real harm it’s essentially benign, think you’ll have to agree. And that there are a surprisingly small number who require any coercion at all, be apprised.’

Q.

‘From a psychological standpoint the origins appear obvious. Various therapists concur, I might add, here and elsewhere. So it’s all quite tidy.’

Q.

‘Well, my own father was, you might say, a man who was by natural proclivity not a good man but who nevertheless tried diligently to be a good man. Temper and so forth.’

Q.

‘I mean, it’s not as if I’m torturing them or burning them.’

Q.

‘My father’s proclivity for rage, especially [unintelligible or distorted] the Emergency Room for the umpteenth time, afraid of his own temper and proclivity for domestic violence, this built over a period of time, and eventually he resorted, after a period of time and periods of unsuccessful counseling, to the practice of handcuffing his own wrists behind his back whenever he lost his temper with any of us. In the house. Domestically. Small domestic incidents that try one’s temper and so forth. This self-restraint eventually progressed over a period of time such that the more enraged he might become at any of us, the more coercively he began to restrain himself. Often the day would end with the poor man hog-tied on the living room floor, screaming furiously at us to put his goddamn motherfucking gag in. Whatever possible interest that bit of history might hold for anyone not privileged to have been there. Trying to get the gag in without getting bitten. But of course so now we can explain my proclivities and trace their origins and have everything tied up all nice and tight and tidy for you, can’t we.’

‘All right, I am, okay, yes, but hang on a second, okay? I need you to try and understand this. Okay? Look. I know I’m moody. I know I’m kind of withdrawn sometimes. I know I’m hard to be in this with, okay? All right? But this every time I get moody or withdrawn you thinking I’m leaving or getting ready to ditch you—I can’t take it. This thing of you being afraid all the time. It wears me out. It makes me feel like I have to, like, hide whatever mood I might be in because right away you’re going to think it’s about you and that I’m getting ready to ditch you and leave. You don’t trust me. You don’t. It’s not like I’m saying given our history I deserved a whole lot of trust right off the bat. But you still don’t at all. There’s like zero security no matter what I do. Okay? I said I’d promise I wouldn’t leave and you said you believed me that I was in this with you for the long haul this time, but you didn’t. Okay? Just admit it, all right? You don’t trust me. I’m on eggshells all the time. Do you see? I can’t keep going around reassuring you all the time.’

Q.

‘No, I’m not saying *this* is reassuring. What *this* is is just trying to get you to see—okay, look, things ebb and flow, okay? Sometimes people are just more into it than other times. This is just how is. But you can’t stand ebb. It feels like no ebb’s allowed. And I know that’s partly my fault, okay? I know the other times didn’t exactly make you feel secure. But I can’t change that, okay? But this is now. And now I feel like anytime I’d just rather not talk or get a little moody or withdrawn you think I’m plotting to ditch you. And that breaks my heart. Okay? It just breaks my heart. Maybe if I loved you a little less or cared about you less I could take it. But I can’t. So yes, that’s what the bags are, I’m leaving.’

Q.

‘And I was—this is just how I was afraid you’d take it. I knew it, that you’d think this means you were right to be afraid all the time and never feel secure or trust me. I knew it’d be “See, you’re leaving after all when you promised you wouldn’t.” I knew it but I’m trying to explain anyway, okay? And I know you probably won’t understand this either, but—wait—just try to listen and maybe absorb this, okay? Ready? Me leaving is *not* the confirmation of all your fears about me. It is *not*. It’s *because* of them. Okay? Can you see that? It’s your fear I can’t take. It’s your distrust and fear I’ve been trying to fight. And I can’t anymore. I’m out of gas on it. If I loved you even a little less maybe I could take it. But this is killing me, this constant feeling that I’m always scaring you and never making you feel secure. Can you see that?’

Q.

‘It is ironic from your point of view, I can see that. Okay. And I can see you totally hate me now. And I’ve spent a long time getting myself to where I’m ready to face your totally hating me for this and this look of like total confirmation of all your fears and suspicions on your face if you could see it, okay? I swear if you could see your face right now anybody’d understand why I’m leaving.’

Q.

‘I’m sorry. I don’t mean to put it all on you. I’m sorry. It’s not you, okay? I mean, it has to be something about me if you can’t trust me after all these weeks or stand even just a little normal ebb and flow without always thinking I’m getting ready to leave. I don’t know what, but there must be. Okay, and I know our history’s not great, but I swear to you I meant everything I said, and I’ve tried hundred-plus percent. I swear to God I did. I’m so sorry. I’d give anything in the world not to hurt you. I love you. I always will love you. I hope you believe that, but I’m giving up trying to get you to. Just please believe I tried. And don’t think this is about something wrong with you. Don’t do that to yourself. It’s us, us is why I’m leaving, okay? Can you see that? That it’s not what you’ve always been so afraid of? Okay? Can you see that? Can you maybe see you just *might* have been wrong, even *possibly*? Could you give me that much, do you think? Because this isn’t exactly fun for me either, okay? Leaving like this, seeing your face like this as my last mental picture of you. Can you see I might be pretty torn up about it too? Can you? That you’re not alone in this?’

B.I. #3 11-94

TRENTON NJ [OVERHEARD]

R——: ‘So I’m last off again as usual and all that business like that there.’

A——:‘Yes just wait and relax in your seat be the last off why everybody right away all the time has to get up the minute it stops and cram into the aisle so you just stand there with your bags all crammed in pouring sweat in the aisle for five minutes just to be the—’

R——:‘Just wait and finally coming out of the jetway thing and out into the you know gate area greeting area as usual thinking I’ll just get a cab out to—’

A——:‘Still but always depressing on these cold calls to come out into the gate greeting area and see everybody getting met and with the squeals and the hugs and limo guys holding up all the names on cardboard that aren’t your name and the l—’

R——:‘Just shut it for one fucking second will you because listen to this because except it’s mostly emptied out by the time I get out there.’

A——:‘The people by this juncture are mostly all dispersed you’re saying.’

R——:‘Except for over by there’s this one girl left over by the rope looking in peering gazing in down the jetway thing there as she sees it’s me as I’m looking at her as I come out because it’s emptied out except for her, our eyes meet and all that business like that there, and what does she she up and goes down on her knees drops crying and with the waterworks and all that business hitting slapping the carpet and scratching at gouging little tufts and fibers out of the cheapass product they buy where the low-polymer glue starts the backing separating almost right away and ends up tripling their twenty-quarter M and R costs as I sure don’t have to tell you and all bent over slapping and gouging at the product with the nails, bent over so you can you know just about see her tits. Totally hysterical and with the waterworks and all like that there.’

A——:‘Another cheery welcome to Dayton for your fucking cold calls, we’re pleased to wel—’

R——:‘No but the story it turns out the story when I you know go over to say are you OK is anything the matter and like that and get a better shot of I have to tell you some pretty fucking incredible tits under this like tight little top like leotard top thing under this coat she’s all down and bent over in like bitchslapping herself in the head and still doing manual field stresses on this gate area product where she says this guy that she was in love with and all that business there that said he was in love with her too except he was already engaged from priorly when they meet and fall vehemently in love so there’s all this back and forth and storm and drag business like that and I’m lending the ear to her standing there but finally she says but finally the guy gets off the fence and finally says how he’s surrendering to his love for this girl here with the tits and commits to her and says how he’s going to go and tell this other girl in Tulsa where the guy lives that he’s engaged to about this girl here and break it off in Tulsa and finally surrender and commit to this hysterical girl with the tits that loves him more than life herself and feels a merger of “souls” with him and all that violin business like that and felt like finally for chrissakes after all the onetrack shitheels she’d got the run-around from she finally she felt like here at last she’s met a guy she could trust and love and merge “souls” with the sort of violins and hearts and fl—’

A——:‘And blah blah blah.’

R——:‘Blah and says off the guy goes flying back to Tulsa to finally break the engagement off with the prior girl like he committed he would and then fly right back to the arms of this girl standing with the Kleenex with the tits in Dayton here in the gate area with the waterworks crying out her eyes now to yours truly.’

A——:‘Oh like we can’t see *this* coming.’

R——:‘Fuck you and that he puts his hand over his heart and all like that there and swears he’s

coming back to her and he'll be on that plane there with the flightnumber and time and she swears she'll be there with the tits to meet him, and how she tells all her friends she's finally in love with the real thing and how he's breaking it off and coming right back and she cleans up her place for him to stay there when he comes back and gets her hair done up all big with spray like they do and dribbles perfume on her you know zones and all that business like the usual story and puts on her best pink jeans did I mention she's got on these pink jeans and heels that say fuck me in like myriads of major world languages—'

A——: 'Heh *heh*.'

R——: 'By this juncture now we're in that little coffeeshop thing just in from the USAir gates that shitty one with no chairs that you have to with your shitty two-dollar coffee stand up at the tables with your sample case and bag and all your shit on the low-end tile not even thermoset of the floor they go that's already starting to curl at the grout and keep handing her Kleenexes and lend the ear and all that business there after she vacuums out the car and even replaces the little freshener thing hanging off the rearview and hauls ass to be on time to the airport to meet the flightnumber this so-called trustable guy swore on his fucking mother's life he'd be on.'

A——: 'Guy's a shitheel from the old school.'

R——: 'Shut up and that how she says how he even called her she gets the call right as she's smearing the last drib of perfume on her zone and gets her hair all sprayed out in directions like they do to haul ass to the airport it rings and it's this guy and there's all this hiss and static on the phone and she says he says how he's calling from the sky is how romantically he puts it calling her inflight on the flight on that little inflight phone you're supposed to slide your card through out of the back of the seat in front of you and saying how—'

A——: 'The markup on those things go six bucks a minute it's a racket and all the surcharges rate out of the region you're flying over right then with a double spread if the region they say adjoins at the grid's design—'

R——: 'But that's not the point do you want to hear this how the point's this girl says she gets there early in the gate area greeting area and already with some of the waterworks already from love and violins of commitment finally and trust and stands she says all joy and trusting like a pathetic fool she says while it gets in finally the flight and we they all start herding all in their big rush out the jetway thing and he's not in the first wave out and he's not in the second wave how they come out in these little waves clumps like the thing's taking some kind of almost shit you know how—'

A——: 'Jesus I ought to the amount of fucking times I spend on jetw—'

R——: 'And says like a pathetic a total fool her faith never faldering she kept peering gazing over the octoweave rope maroon octoweave with that nice fauxvelvet finish the rope of the area over at the side during all the hugging and everybody meeting or going off to Baggage and every time expecting this guy in the next wave out, clump, and then the next and the next and like that, waiting.'

A——: 'Poor little muttski.'

R——: 'That then at the end there I come off the last off as usual and nobody else after except the crew pulling their little neat identical little bags those neat little bags that always bug me somehow and that's it I'm the last and she—'

A——: 'So you're explaining it wasn't you that she's screaming and hitting the floor it's just that you're the last of them off and you're not this shitheel guy. The bastard even must of faked that call, the static if you run your Remington it makes static that'll sound like a—'

R——: ‘And I’m telling you you never saw anybody so the word heartbroken you think it’s just words blah blah but then you see this girl with her hand knocking herself in the head for being such a fool crying so hard she can’t mostly breathe and all that business like that, hugging herself and rocking and slapping the shit out of the table so bad you have to lift the coffee off to keep it from knocking over and how men are shits and don’t trust them all her friends said and she finally she met one she thinks she can finally trust to really give in and surrender and commit to do the right thing and they’re right, she’s a fool, men are just shit.’

A——: ‘Men mostly are shit, you’re right, heh heh.’

R——: ‘And I’m basically, I’m standing there holding coffee I don’t even it’s too late I don’t want even decaf I’m lending the ear and my heart I got to say it my heart going out a little bit to this girl for this heart-break. I swear kid but you have never seen anything like this heartbreak on this girl with the tits, and I start telling her how she’s right the guy’s a shit and don’t even deserve and how it’s true most guys are shit and how my heart’s going out and all like that.’

A——: ‘Heh heh. So then what happened?’

R——: ‘Heh heh.’

A——: ‘Heh heh *heh*.’

R——: ‘You really got to ask?’

A——: ‘You bastard. You shitheel.’

R——: ‘Well you know how it is I mean what are you going to do.’ A——: ‘You shitheel.’

R——: ‘Well you know.’

B.I. #30 03-97

DRURY UT

‘I have to admit it was a big reason for marrying her, thinking I wasn’t likely going to do better than this because of the way she had a good body even after she’d had a kid. Trim and good and good legs—she’d had a kid but wasn’t all blown out and veiny and sagged. It probably sounds shallow, but it’s the truth. I’d always had this major dread of marrying some good-looking woman and then we have a kid and it blows her body out but I still have to have sex with her because this is who I’ve signed on to have sex with the whole rest of my life. This probably sounds awful, but in her case it was like she was pre-tested—the kid didn’t blow her body out, so I knew she’d be a good bet to sign on and have kids with and still try to have sex. Does that sound shallow? Tell me what you think. Or does the real truth about this kind of thing always sound shallow, you know, everybody’s real reasons? What do you think? How does it sound?’

B.I. #31 03-97

ROSWELL GA

‘But you want to know how to really be great? How your Great Lover really pleases a lady? Now, all your basic smoothie-type fellows will always say they know, they’re an authority and such. It’s no

a fag, darlin', you have to hold it in. Most of these fellows, they haven't got the first damn idea how to really please a lady. Not really. A lot of them don't even care, to tell you the truth. That's your first type, your Joe Sixpack crackertype fellow there, your basic pig. This fellow's barely even semiconscious about life anyhow, and when it comes to lovemaking why he's just pure selfishness. He wants whatever he can get, and as long as he gets it that's all there is to it far as he's concerned. The type that rolls on and has at her and the minute he comes he rolls back off and commences to snoring. Go easy there. Why I suppose this is your old-fashioned stereotype male fellow, older, the fellow that's been married twenty years and don't even know if the wife even ever comes. Never thinks to even ask her. *He* comes, and that's all that counts far as he's concerned.'

Q.

'These aren't the fellows that I'm talking about. These are more like just animals, roll on and roll off and that's all she wrote. Hold it closer to the end there and don't inhale as much in as a regular fag. You want to hold it in and let it absorb. This is mine, I grow it, I got a room all lined with Mylar and lights, darlin' you would not believe what it goes for down here. Those fellows are just animals, they're not even in the type of game we're talking about here. No, because the ones we're talking about here are your basic secondary type of fellow, the fellow that thinks he's a Great Lover. And it's real important to these fellows that they think of themselves as Great. This preoccupies a major block of their time, thinking they're Great and they know how to please her. These right here are your sensitive male smoothie type. Now, they're going to look like the complete opposite of your white-trash fellow that don't even give a shit. That's it but go easy. But now don't go thinking these fellows are really any better than your basic pigs are. Seeing themselves as a Great Lover doesn't mean they give any more of a shit about her than the pigs do, and deep down they aren't one little bit less selfish in bed. It's just with this type of fellow what they get off on in bed is their own idea of themselves as a Great Lover that can make the little lady just about lose her mind in bed. What they're into is a woman's pleasure and giving her pleasure. That's this type's whole trip.'

Q.

'Oh like oh say going down on her yinyang for hours on hours, holding off their own coming so they can keep at it for hours, knowing the Gspot and Ecstasy Posture and such. Running down to Barnes & Noble's for all your latest female sexuality-type books so they can keep up on their knowledge about what's going on. I'm guessing from looking you over out here now you've run up against a smoothie a time or two, with his pheromone aftershave and strawberry oil and hand massages and the holding and touching, that know about the earlobe and what kind of flush means what and the aureole and the backside of the knee and that new little ultrasensitive spot they say they found now just back of the G, this type of fellow knows them all, and you can be damn sure he's going to let *you* know he knows how to—here, give it here. I'll show you. Well and now darlin' you can just bet *this* type of fellow wants to know if she came, and how many times, and was it the best she ever—and like that. See there? When you blow out you don't want to even be able to see anything. That means you got 'er all. I thought you said you did this before. This is not your average cracker ditchweed. It's like a notch on this fellow's gun for each time he can make her come. That's how he thinks about it. It's too damn good to go blowing half back out, it's like you got a Porsche and you're only driving it to church. No, he's a Notcher, this fellow. That's a good way to compare them maybe. The two types. Your pig might put a notch for every one they nail, that's their notches, they don't care. But your so-called Great Lover-type fellow puts a notch for every time each one comes. But they're both of them just Notchers. They're both really the same-type fellow underneath. Their trip is

different, but it's still only just their own trip they're on, in bed, and the little lady deep down's going to feel like she's just getting used just the same. That's if the lady's got any sense at all, which is another story. And now darlin' when it goes down a little more you take and don't grind it out with your boot there like you do a regular fag. You want to wet up your finger and gently pat the end of it and put it out and then save it, I got something to save them in. Me, I got something a little special but your more run-of-the-mill is one of them little film canisters from the developer, that's how come nobody ever throws those out. See if you ever see you a little film canister thing in the trash someplace.'

Q.

'No but here's your classic symptom to tell if it's one of these Great Lover fellows is they'll spend whole major blocks of time in bed going down on a lady's yinyang over and over and making her come seventeen straight times and such, but afterward just watch and see if there's any way on God's good green earth he's going to let *her* turn around and go down on *his* precious little pizzle for him. How he'll go Oh no baby no let me do you I want to see you come again baby oh baby you just lie there and let me work my love-magic and such like that right there. Or he'll know all his special Korean massage shit and give her deep-tissue backrubs or haul out the special black-cherry oil and massage her feet and hands—which darlin' I got to admit if you never had a quality hand massage you have not heretofore even really lived, trust me—but will he let the little lady reciprocate and give him just even one backrub? Nosir he will not. Because this-type fellow's whole trip is *he's* got to be the one giving the pleasure here thank you ma'am. See, it's different, it's got a screw-lid with an airtight seal so it don't smell up your pocket, they're stinky little boogers, and then it goes right in this little flap thing here where why it could be anything at all. Because this is where your smoothie type is being stupid. This is what gives me my contempt for these fellows that go around thinking they're the Lord's own gift to the female species. Because at least your cracker type's halfway honest about it, they want to nail her and then roll off and that's all she wrote. Whereas but your basic smoothie thinks he's all sensitive and knows how to please a lady just because they know clitoral suction and shy-atsum and watching them in bed's like watching one of these stupid-ass mechanics in white coats work on a Porsche all swelled up on their expertise and such. They think they're a Great Lover. They think they're generous in bed. No, but the catch is they're *selfish* about being generous. They're no better than the pig is, they're just sneakier about it. Now you're going to be thirsty, now you're going to want some Evian. This shit'll dry out your mouth something fierce. I carry these little portable Evians with me in here in this inside part, see? Custom-made. Go on and take one, you're going to want it. Go on.

Q.

'Darlin' no problem, hang on to it, you're going to want some more in about half a minute. I could have sworn you said you did this before. I hope I'm not corrupting a Utah Mormon here am I? Mylar's better than foil, it reflects more of the light so it all goes right into the plant. They got special seeds now where the plant don't get any higher than this here, but it's lethal, it's death on a cracker. Atlanta in particular seems full of these fellows. What they don't understand is their type's an even worse drag for a lady with any sense than your on-and-off pig ever was. Because how'd you like to just lie there and get worked on like a Porsche and never get to feel like *you're* generous and sexy and good in bed and a Great Lover too? Hmm? Hmm? That's where your smoothie-type fellows always lose the game. They want to be the only Great Lover in the bed. They forget a lady's got feelings too. Who wants to lie there feeling all ungenerous and greedy while some Yuppier with a Porsche shows off his Tantric Clouds and Rain Half-Lotus on you and mentally notching off how many times you come? If

you swish it around a little your mouth'll stay wet longer, Evian's real good for that, who cares if it's a dumb-ass Yuppie water if it's good, know what I mean? The thing to watch for is if the fellow when he's going down on you if he keeps one hand on the low part of your stomach there to really make sure you're coming, why then you'll know. Wants to make sure. This son of a bitch isn't a Lover, he's just putting on a show. He doesn't give a shit about you. You want my opinion? You want to know how to really be Great if you want to please her, that there's not one fellow in a thousand that's figured out?

Q....

'Do you?'

Q.

'The secret is you got to both give the little lady pleasure and be able to also take it, with equal technique to both and equal pleasure. Or at least you got to make *her* think so. Don't forget it's about *her*. Go on and eat her yinyang till she begs, sure, go on, but also let her at your pizzle, and even if she's no prize at it why you carry on and make her think she is. And like if her notion of a backrub's just some of those little pissant karate chops on your backbone, why you go on and let her, and you carry on like you never knew a karate chop could be like this. That's if a fellow wants to be a genuine Great Lover and go and think about *her* for one damn second.'

Q.

'Not on me darlin', no. I mean I usually do but I nibbled them up already I'm afraid. The real falldown of these wannabe-Great-type fellows is they think a lady is, when you come right down to it dumb. Like all a lady wants to do is just lie there and come. The real secret is: assume she feels the same way. That she wants to see herself as a Great Lover that can blow the top of a man's head clean off in bed. Let her. Put your picture of yourself on the goddamn back burner for once in your life. The smoothies think if they blow the little lady's head off down there they got her. *Bullshit.*'

Q.

'But you're not going to just want one, though, darlin', trust me. There's a little Mart thing a couple blocks if we—whoa, watch your—'

Q.

'No, you go on and make her think she's blowing *your* damn head off. That's what they really want. Then you really and truly got her, if she thinks you'll never forget her. Never ever. You follow?'

B.I. #36 05-97

METROPOLITAN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COMMUNITY OUTREACH, COUNSELING, AND SERVICES CENTER ANNE
AURORA IL

'So I decided to get help. I got in touch with the fact that the real problem had nothing to do with her. I saw that she would forever go on playing victim to my villain. I was powerless to change her. She was not the part of the problem I could, you know, address. So I made a decision. To get help for *me*. I now know it was the best thing I've ever done, and the hardest. It hasn't been easy, but my self-esteem is much higher now. I've halted the shame spiral. I've learned forgiveness. I *like* myself.'

Q.

'Who?'

YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE POROUSNESS OF CERTAIN BORDERS (XI)

As in all those other dreams, I'm with somebody I know but don't know how I know them, and no this person suddenly points out to me that I'm blind. As in literally blind, unsighted, etc. Or else it's the presence of this person that I suddenly realize I'm blind. What happens when I realize this is I get sad. It makes me incredibly sad that I'm blind. The person somehow knows how sad I am and warns me that crying will hurt my eyes somehow and make the blindness even worse, but I can't help it. I sit down and start crying really hard. I wake crying in bed, and I'm crying so hard I can't really see anything or make anything out or anything. This makes me cry even harder. My girlfriend is concerned and wakes up and asks what's the matter, and it's a minute or more before I can even get together enough to realize that I was dreaming and I'm awake and not really blind and that I'm crying for no reason, then to tell my girlfriend about the dream and get her input on it. Then all day at work then I'm incredibly conscious of my eyesight and my eyes and how good it is to be able to see colors and people's faces and to know exactly where I am, and of how fragile it all is, the human eye mechanism and the ability to see, how easily it could be lost, how I'm always seeing blind people around with their canes and strange-looking faces and am always just thinking of them as interesting to spend a couple seconds looking at and never thinking they had anything to do with me or my eyes, and how it's really just a lucky coincidence that I can see instead of being one of those blind people I see on the subway. And all day at work whenever this stuff strikes me I start tearing up again, getting ready to start crying, and only keeping myself from crying because of the cubicles' low partitions and how everybody can see me and would be concerned, and the whole day after the dream is like this, and it's tiring as hell, my girlfriend would say emotionally draining, and I sign out early and go home and I'm so tired and sleepy I can barely keep my eyes open, and when I get home I go right in and crawl in bed at like 4:00 in the afternoon and more or less pass out.

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