

THE LOVE STORY OF LIZ AND NICK

Part one: Nick and Liz

Nicholas was a young man coming of age in the world of the late twentieth century, rowing his seemingly leaky skiff through the choppy waters of self-identity and existential uncertainty. Negotiating the labyrinth of college, encountering the mysteries of women and sex, fighting for the approval of his peers, his friends. Neverendingly, of his family. The fight to find his place.

From an early age he would ponder the very nature of his own existence. How did he get here? When did he know? He would often scroll his memories back to the very earliest point of self-awareness. And he could remember distinctly a day, a time, a moment, by the side of the house, in the slanting sun, reflected by the blue-grey siding, the grass green under his feet, in a mind now awake when he said to himself, I am me, I am here, this is now, I exist. How old was he? Maybe three? Maybe two? And later, remembering this earliest memory, he would wonder what came before. Shown pictures of himself as a baby by his parents he would wonder where in there was this me he now knew and why he couldn't remember. This very persistent self-centered awareness would give rise in him, at a very early age, a perpetual quest for self-definition and an ever evolving mental narration of his own history. And an ever present need for validation of this self-created self from others and the world.

He was raised in a family of lawyers-- both of his parents, eventually even his older siblings. Nick always felt a bit out of step with them, the odd one out, dreamier, more introspective. He did well enough in school, mainly because he had to, to live up to the family's standards. In the first year of college, he found that he enjoyed all the intellectual sampling offered in the freshman requirements. What he was yet to find was a singular passion. Until the beginning of his junior year when he took both a contemporary philosophy class and a contemporary art history class. And he realized it was the *combination* of different ideas from different fields that excited him and art, it seemed, was the arena where all of these divergent ideas could be brought together, to fight and play and make. He began cobbling together an interdisciplinary degree of as broad a range as he could, a program built of course work in history, philosophy, twentieth century literature, studio art, and hotel management. (The latter as a bone thrown

to allay his parents' fear that he would graduate with nothing of marketable value.) Because his college was of the small liberal arts caliber, such broad subject sampling was encouraged and Nicholas did well, graduating with honors. Still, his parents worried about what they saw as a certain wayward unseriousness that seemed to be taking hold in their son.

To convince his parents of the seriousness of his efforts to determine his life's goals and purpose, he decided to apply for grad school and based on his excellent GPA and strong recommendations from his undergrad professors, he was admitted to the MFA program in studio art at the local state university.

At first, he found the graduate environment difficult, so different from the comfortable nurturing of his undergraduate years. His professors now were more demanding, their critiques often inscrutable or contradictory. When he made something he at last felt he liked, it would be shredded in class critiques and when he would make something that garnered a professor's praise, he himself would hate it. It was the time in his life of great self-doubt. Of feeling like there was now nothing familiar in this desert world, no markers by which he could locate his place. But at least, eight weeks in, he began to make friends, classmates who shared similar angst, camaraderie that could buffer the uncertainty.

He also became much more interested in dating. His undergraduate episodes with women tended to be fumbling half-initiations into the puzzlements of sex, inexperience meeting inexperience in tangles of misreadings of wants and needs. His virginity lost, Romance never yet led to Relationship. But now, older, having progressed to the tarmac of his adulthood, he was ready to find a more lasting companion in a sexual partner. Nick was quite the romantic about this. In his fantasies, he saw the ideal of coupledness as a partnership of a man and a woman in true sexual equality, each completely understanding and anticipating each other's deepest desires, learning the ways of sex and love together in cosmic harmony. Needless to say, dating real people in the real world rarely came close to his dreamy ideal. He did go on several dates. Sometimes the sex was good, sometimes not. Sometimes the conversation was good, sometimes not. Never seemed like the whole package was there. Most of the relationships were one-offs or repeated, non-committal one-offs. And sometimes, the relationship would settle into an ongoing thing, a reliable go-to for both parties. Still, deep inside the

basement of Nick's psyche was the feeling and belief that *she* was out there. Waiting just for him.

During his second year of grad school, he met a girl in a bar. It was one of those almost weekend nights when his crowd would hang out with pitchers and pizza and darts and billiards, to blow off some mid-semester steam. His then sort of girlfriend had gone to visit her parents so he was on his own for a change. At some point, most of the group had drifted away from the table for one diversion or another and he found himself alone with this dark haired girl he had met once or twice but had never talked to for any length of time. Her name was Liz. Unlike many of the women in their group, she was quiet in speech and reserved in demeanor, with a thoughtful face and eyes that seemed to notice everything and would at times flash with a yellow flame, but you had to be very quick to see this. Their conversation this night began with halting steps, self-conscious reintroductions and inane small talk divided by silent spaces where each tried to think of what to say next. Eventually, Nick began to talk about some of the frustrations he was having with his professors, a topic which came with an 88% chance of eliciting supportive dialogue with a fellow classmate. Liz listened attentively to his complaints, but instead of responding with school complaints of her own, she began asking Nick questions, probing for more of his thoughts about what he was pursuing in his graduate work. And this of course led Nick to ask Liz the same questions, finding out that she was a Psych major but that her real love was creative writing. Their conversation then began to flow with a mutual interest in each other's ideas, histories, dreams. They sat talking for two hours over shots of whisky and beer and when they realized their friends had left long ago, they drifted out to the chilly street, their conversation still going, talking art, philosophy, politics, parents, agreeing on most, disagreeing on some, until they found themselves back at her small apartment and on top of her bed.

It was one of those amazing, one-of-a-kind fucks, where everything went just right, their bodies fitting together perfectly. Nothing awkward or forced, the pacing neither fast nor slow, the acceleration smooth, the shifting effortless. Like dancing partners who had practiced this dance for years. And for each of them, their launch into sexual hyperspace was heavenly in its brief intensity. After landing, they lay in silent wide-eyed wonder at what had just happened. They stayed like that for some time as the spell's dream-haze slowly dissipated. But instead of staying, Nick got up and gathered his clothes. Liz got up too, the

bedspread wrapped around her. I should go he said, she nodded yes, and after politely hugging, he left.

After that night, they went on with their usual separate ways, running into each other from time to time with civil hellos, never referencing that night. Nick was still involved with his sometime girlfriend, and Liz was apparently preoccupied with her studies and began hanging out with a different crowd. Nick never heard if she was involved with anyone and never bothered to ask any of their mutual acquaintances. Was he really so disinterested after that magical night? Perhaps it was because their evening together was so outside of their usual lives, even outside of their own story lines. Dreamspace. It seemed neither of them had any idea of what to make of it, what to do with it, so they simply did nothing. The lovers they embodied on that night would drift away on a blue black sea of memory. When Liz graduated and moved away, Nick lost complete track of her.

When Nick finished his MFA, he decided he would move into the city and try to find a live/work space and survive on whatever temp jobs or odd jobs he could find. His sort of girlfriend wanted to move back to her hometown to be closer to her family, so they amicably broke up. Truth was, they were always more friends than lovers and their being together more a matter of social convenience than passion. And Nick, having finally met the expectations of his professors and fulfilled his academic obligations, was excited about being finally free of the institutional parenting of college life, free to try new things on his own, to make his own mistakes without the constant critical scolds that had always accompanied his life. Until now. Artistically, there were things he wanted to do that he never would get away with in school. Dumb things, stupidly low and crass. In the small two room flat he found in a rougher part of town, he began collecting trash, garbage from dumpsters, torn signs, abandoned receipts, trash found floating in the gutter. He would visit construction sites, picking up rusting nails, abandoned scraps of wood and metal. Anything and everything that would come across his path on his wanderings in the city. He began to assemble these things back in his flat. They would sit on the floor, or hang on the wall, or suspend from the ceiling. He would write songs for them and record his tone deaf voice singing them. He wrote ironic art criticism on his walls in lipstick and crayon. He would photograph everything he made, then tear these up into small pieces to be reassembled into incomprehensible collages. He wasn't trying to make art, he didn't know where a construction or a poem or a song would begin or end. But he

was elated with his making, his marvelous shit. To survive he worked as a line cook, as a taxi driver, as an office temp, as an art mover, as an office cleaner, always for short periods of time until he got tired of the work or he got fired. After eighteen months of this, he began to visit galleries, carrying the evidence of his creations in an old suitcase he found at Goodwill. He found little interest until a small newly opened gallery, and its small newly minted gallery director found something “edgy and new,” the buzzwords of the artworld moment, in Nick’s strange work. The gallerist wanted to display something of his in the next group show, and the two of them began wrestling with the problem of deciding what a finitely presentable piece of Nick’s would be, finally settling on something that was on the wall and on the floor and composed of trash and words and barely listenable song. And for a roving art critic of the city newspaper, the work was revelatory and the launch of Nick’s career and self-confident ego began.

Six months after the group show, the gallery mounted a solo exhibition of Nick’s work and the show quickly sold out. More reviews came. More interest. Invitations started to arrive. Invitations to exhibit in museum shows, invitations to exhibit at other galleries in other cities. Invitations to give public lectures, invitations to be a visiting artist at prestigious art colleges. It was unexpectedly mind-boggling how blazingly fast an art career of a complete unknown could rise.

It would be incorrect to say that Nick took all this in stride, for Nick was on a galloping horse of artworld stardom. In these heady early years of his career, his work got better, gained greater depth without losing any sense of its youthful brazenness. And for the first time in his life, Nick felt like he knew what he was doing, he felt his art world stature fit him well and was well deserved. His income could now stand on its own alongside the incomes of his parents and siblings, in their eyes the true measure of his worthiness. He was a professional. He had arrived. Finally a grown-up. His sense of personal agency rock-solid, he now truly felt he was the master of his fate.

With his growing reputation and visibility came new opportunities to meet and date young women and although some of these relationships would overlap, they were usually exclusive, if only for a short while, with typically easy breezy breakups. Having these series of non-committal relationships of casual sex and convenient social companionship led Nick to forget most of that romantic idealism from his younger years. He now preferred to see himself as being intellectually

and emotionally unattached, untethered in the world, a self-confident, self-sufficient hero in the drama of his life. The genius artist. Or so he told himself. But it was also during this time that Nick began to have a recurring dream.

The dream always began in the same way. He was on his way to the small apartment of the dark haired girl with whom he had fallen in love. He was bringing with him a suitcase full of money and passports and the deed to a magnificent house on a hill in a forest above the sea and he was almost running by the time he climbed the seventeen floors to her flat only to find that it was empty. The door was open, none of her furniture was there, nothing in the closet but one bent hanger. The emptiness was so final, so unmoving, as if she had never been. He went to the landlord, he went to the neighboring tenants, no forwarding address had been left, no phone numbers, nothing. She had left with nothing to anyone said. The ache he then felt deep in his chest was unlike any pain he had ever endured before. A crushing ache, a desperate ache. He had to find her, knowing nowhere to start. And in the rest of the dream he would wander the night on bitter city streets in woeful lament. Then he'd wake up, shaken, to be haunted the rest of the day.

As interest in Nick's work continued to grow, galleries across the nation and in Europe began to approach him, offering representation. When an Academy of Arts in Brussels wanted to mount a small exhibition of his work and invited him to come and give a public lecture, Nick booked his flight and decided on an itinerary that would take him to some of the cities he had always wanted to visit-- London, Paris, Brussels, Madrid.

And so it was that on a warm October morning in the park across from the Prado, Madrid's greatest Museum of Art with its renowned collections of Velzquez, Bosch, and Goya, he saw her. The dark haired girl from that night long ago in the bar. Liz. Sitting on a bench reading a book. She looked just as he remembered her and he felt a kind of fluttering inevitability that this apparition would appear in this unexpected place. Quietly, a cautious approach. "Liz? Is that you?"

She looked up from her book with a lack of recollection until her eyes turned on in that flashing way and she smiling said "Nick?" then she stood up and they embraced and she asked him to come sit beside her. So nice to see you! What a surprise! How have you been! What have you been up to? What brings you here?

These words back and forth between them with an eagerness igniting them both. Soon their stories were sailing between them, Nick's rising good fortunes, Liz's just blooming career as a writer. She was here to write a travel piece for her newspaper. Similar free-lance gigs she often did to pay the rent and support her own creative work, poems and stories, some of which had already found their way into a few small literary mags and journals. She was happy with how everything was going, though it wasn't nearly as spectacular as Nick's apparently already blazing career. And she said this last with genuine admiration, with not a small bit of pride, which caught Nick off guard and filled him with a sense of validation beyond anything he had known, even from the many successes of his career. It was probably at precisely this moment that Nick's delusions of self-sufficient non-attachment came crashing down. He began to fall hard in love.

Their conversation continued, the easiness they had on that night long ago rekindled. They found a small taverna not far from the museum and continued their catching up over wine and tapas. Looking at the hour, they decided to make it to the Prado to have enough time before closing. Together, in the large halls of this grand museum, looking at art, they felt a new intimacy grow between them, feeling like the paintings were there just for them. Nick loved the room of Velazquez paintings, its central glory the Las Meninas. He was in awe of the painterly mastery, he explained, and most of all loved the reflexivity in the painting, the painter seeing himself seeing the people he is painting seeing him. Liz fell in love with Goya's black paintings, especially The Saturn Devouring His Children. "I just love the savagery of it," she said, "this raging hunger to consume one's own flesh and blood." Their day continued on into the night, another more intimate bar, then walking the streets, now arm in arm, and finally back to his hotel room, Liz completely into his life from which she would never be apart again.

They lingered in Madrid for another three days, then continued their journey together down to Seville, bathed in the exotic warmth of flamenco and wine and, every day, each other. Nick was now completely besotted, passion he had never felt before, his head a little dizzy all the time. And what was amazing to him, (a miracle!) she was in love with him! With an intensity that sometimes left him breathless. He craved knowing everything about her-- her thoughts, her dreams, her history. He loved learning about her life, what she told him about her childhood. How she was raised mainly by her mother after her father died

tragically when she was eight. Her mom was a scientist, a bio-chemist, working for a bio-engineering firm upstate. That she was a naturally curious child and began reading early for her age. How completely she could be absorbed by things that piqued her interest. Bugs, plants, clouds; she would study them intensely, unmoving, for hours. If she sometimes seemed reticent or shy among her classmates or adults it was not because she was self-conscious but rather that she was memorizing them, their mannerisms, their speech. From her teenage years, she kept journals of her observations, began writing poetry. Short stories that won awards in high school. In college, the scientific side of her interest in people and their habits led her to major in Psychology, figuring it would only help in the understanding she would require for a successful career as a novelist, her ultimate goal.

They flew next to cloudy cold London where they hurriedly bought heavier coats and scarves to walk snuggled together, imagining Dickens in his day, then back they flew to the City, to his too small apartment, where his work and hers would engage in good humored battles for space after she moved in. When Nick was offered a one year appointment teaching at the university in town, they would find a bigger loft apartment, with work space for Nick and an office room for Liz. They were a couple.

The magic of that one night stand long ago was no aberration. As lovers, Nick and Liz were constantly awash in their mutual lust and longing. They totally trusted each other, knew each other's wants and needs. Needs that were met seemingly anytime and anywhere. They were reckless, fearless, insatiable. And, instead of distracting them from their creative work, it seemed to energize it. Now with the feeling of Liz ever present by his side, Nick had an even greater confidence in what he made, what he had to say. And Liz seemed similarly emblazed in her work by their union. Her poems and stories began to be published more regularly. Their mutual trust and compatibility were such that they would share their work with each other, she offering insights into the progress of his new pieces, he reading drafts of her writing. He found her writing extraordinary. The poetry was magically perverse, filled with unexpected twists of word and rhythm and space. Liltily beautiful witches' spells. The characters in her prose were so fully imagined, their interiority so profoundly understood and described that to read her stories was like living another life.

Nick had found the dark haired girl of his dream and felt blessed by a beneficent fate and destiny beyond his wildest imagining. He worshipped her.

The wedding was a festive affair, the non-denominational ceremony held in a small chapel close to their loft, the reception held at Nick's gallery, attended by Nick's art world friends and colleagues and Liz's writing world friends and colleagues, all mixing together in a tumbling merriment of raucous laughter and champagne. The honeymoon was a month long tour of Italy, a languorous wandering through small villages and wineries, sampling everything, relishing the soft blue skies and the rolling viridian hills. Awash with each other anew every day, drunk in their love.

They returned to their home feeling spent but victorious and they resumed their productive lives with remarkable ease, Nick teaching and making, Liz writing and writing. The successes of their careers bred more success, and they both wore their public faces with confident grace. Nick was invited to apply for a tenure track position at the university where he had been teaching as a visiting professor and Liz found a publisher for a collection of her short stories. Their lives had arrived at an elevated place that few of their peers would ever attain, a fixture in the city, the perfect couple, a new cultural icon of admiration and envy.

One Saturday afternoon, lying in bed under the slanting afternoon light after languid lovemaking, Nick began to reflect on their amazing good fortune.

"You know, it's all just so amazing. This life of ours. Me finding you, you finding me. Do you ever think about it all, the luck of us finding each other? That chance meeting in Madrid that completely changed our lives? Maybe it wasn't dumb luck. Maybe it was all meant to be, our destiny the design of some benevolent deity..."

Here, Liz began to quietly chuckle. Lying on her back, looking at the ceiling. "Actually....it wasn't a coincidence, our running into each other in Madrid."

His reverie interrupted. "Wait. What are you talking about?"

"I planned it. I was waiting for you that day. I knew you would probably come there, to the museum, and I was right."

The drunk of his post-fuck haze was gone now and she had his complete attention. "Wait. You planned that? You were waiting for me? I mean, how? I mean, how could, how long..." Smiling wildly at him, she smack-kissed his half open incredulous mouth, and with a childish bounce, leapt from the bed.

"Stay there, I have something to show you." She went to her shelves of books and folders and pulled a scrapbook. Landing cross-legged back on the bed she flopped the book between them. "Here look! My scrapbook of you!"

And what Nick saw was indeed astounding. Here was his complete itinerary from that European trip, flight numbers, arrival times. Receipts from his hotels, receipts from restaurants he visited. A handout from the lecture he gave at that academy in Brussels. Yet there was even more. Newspaper clippings, magazine articles going back years. Announcement cards from all his exhibitions. A fading photo copy of his graduate thesis, even his class schedules from his last college year. Everything going back to that very first night in the bar. Their first magical night together.

Nick was completely unprepared for such a revelation, such a ripping in his reality. "All this time. And I had no idea. I mean, you've been *following* me? Stalking me? I don't know what to think, I mean, I don't know... it's crazy."

She saw the concern, the sudden fear in his face.

"Nick, love! No! There is nothing crazy here. From that night, I knew it was you, you who I was destined to be with. You knew it too! You know you did! Well, maybe only deep inside you knew...but I knew that the time wasn't right yet. Things had to play out, we had planted a seed that night, the two of us, a seed that needed to germinate in its own silent way and I knew it would! So I followed you, I made sure that you would grow in your life, and in your career as I knew it must. I helped it along when I could. Your gallerist, a friend of an old family friend. The reviewer of your first show, an acquaintance I met in the back room of the newspaper where I worked. I mean, who do you think came up with that phrase 'diaspora of cultural flotsam' or 'post-transactional de-contextualization'? It was me! I did this, I made it work! I made it happen, because I love you, I'm so in love with you!"

Nick's thoughts and feelings churned confused, jumbled. The sheer tenacity of her project of following him, the ingenuity of her sleuthing, this laser focused dedication to this project that was himself. It was beyond incredible. He had always felt her love for him, trusted its truth, but to realize here how manically obsessed with him she was...he realized that instead of making him feel diminished in his sense of agency, to recoil from the crazy, it made him feel a new elation, charged with a new calling. A wild fury then took hold of his mind. He rolled her on her back. She spread her legs. His violence entered her. She took him in. And they were fucking again. Their fucking this day racing in an almost animal way, with thrust grunting claspings and moaning and cries until an orgasmic shriek of shattering intensity arose, a piercing sound reverberating as if in a great cathedral, beyond the human, to the heights of heaven.

The pregnancy was revealed on the urine soaked testing strip four weeks later. The elation they both felt erased any lingering uncertainties Nick might have secretly held after Liz's confession. It was a time of happy scurrying, baby buying! Crib, stroller, baby paraphernalia, cute outfits awaiting their perfect child. They converted Liz's office into a nursery and baby proofed Nick's studio area. But it was also a timeless time, a time of dreamy self-indulgence. Liz seemed to handle all of the discomforts of her changing body with remarkable ease. The first trimester nausea wasn't even as bad as Nick had thought it would be. Nick pampered Liz, and Liz pampered them both. They savored their meals together, often dragging their dinners into hour long strolls into their imagined future.

Nick marveled at how beautiful his wife had become, how she seemed to glow in an almost divine way. The miracle of Liz's growing belly, the mystical otherness of it all.

Late one night during Liz's seventh month, not being able to sleep, Nick quietly got out of bed so as not to disturb his sleeping wife and went out to the kitchen to get a drink of water. Feeling wide awake, he went into the small living area to finish a magazine article he had been reading before bed. When he couldn't find it on the coffee table, he began a rifling search that led him to the nursery and Liz's office desk and shelves now pushed back in a corner, thinking she might have taken it in there. He began looking through the things on her desk, eventually opening the drawers that contained her various writings, versions of articles, manuscripts for her stories, her novel, most of which she had shown to him for his opinion. When

he knocked a small snow globe she used as a paper weight to the floor he got down to retrieve it from under the desk. That is when he noticed on the underside of the desk and towards the back, between the drawers, a compartment, closed by a hinged cabinet door with a lock. The key having been left in the lock, he opened the door to find a box containing another manuscript, very large, one he had never seen. He pulled it out and sitting on the floor, began to read.

Liz's scrapbook confession had not been the whole truth.

Here in this thick manuscript was the story of his life, completely told, accurate in every detail. Here was the backstory of his parents, his mother's difficult labor, his underweight birth. Here were scenes from his childhood, his toys, his early imaginings, his fights with his siblings, stories read to him by his father. He skipped through more pages. Scenes from high school, tests he had done, conversations with friends. He sampled more pages ahead. Intimate scenes with girlfriends, things he had thought, details no one could possibly know. Skipping ahead again. Here were drawings of sculptures he had made, diagrams for their construction, transcripts of the crazy songs he had written, descriptions of his installations, exhaustingly complete in their detail. Everything he had experienced was here, all of the thoughts he'd ever had were here.

Panic gripped him, spinning his head, his mind upside down. He began searching through the pages for the scene he needed to see, their first time together, the night in the bar. And he found it, a third of the way through. That magical night, just as he remembered it, just as he had lived it. The writing so vivid, bringing it to life again. As he sat reading, he realized that he had begun to silently cry. It was clear there was more, the continuing of the story, their life together. The spinning of his life. This was all so mad, so impossible, how far did the story go? To this very moment?

It was then that he realized his wife was standing in the doorway, naked in her swollen pregnancy, her face filled with tenderness and love and solemn concern.

"Oh my darling. I didn't intend for you to see that."

"But how did you?.....how could you know these?.....when?....did you write this?"

“Nicholas. My love. I have been writing this all your life. You are the love of my life. You are my greatest creation.”

He wiped his teary face, feeling shrunken to the size of a beach stone. “how does it end?”

“I don’t know yet. I am making it up as we go along.”

He put his head in his hands and began to slowly rock. He was quiet for a very long time.

The room too was silent, there was no sound to hear. There was no air to breath. The void was complete.

Finally, spent, with a face of weary terror, he looked up at her. “Seeing this, knowing this now, how can I go on. How *can* I go on?”

She came closer to him, got down on her knees, took hold of his hands. Softly urgent she spoke. “Oh my love, nothing has changed! We proceed! We live our lives! We have created this wonderful child, this miracle within me, and we will raise this child, you will be a wonderful father, a caring father, full of tenderness and strength, wisdom and humor, and you will continue to be my wonderful husband and lover. You will go on as you have your whole life. You will live each day.” She came closer to him, her face almost touching his, and said with quiet, chilling authority:

“How do you go on? You go on as if you could.”

And somehow, they went on. Their child was born and raised with warmth and love. Liz’s writing continued to be published, her stories and poems, articles for magazines. Nick’s work continued, as a tenured professor encased in academia and still as an exhibiting artist. His art became more introspective, more circumspect. Still respected, it was seen as more mature. He knew that in fact it lacked the innocent swagger of his pre-Liz life. That is, before that night of revelation on the nursery floor.

They would buy a house in the gentrified country suburbs still within easy train commute to his classes at the college. Their child would go to excellent private schools, summer camps, they would travel to Europe and Asia, road trips in the American west. Sentimental anniversary trips to Madrid. They would fill many albums with family photos. And years later, Nick would look back on his life and realize that he was happy and knew how he had done it, how he'd been able to go on. It was quite simple, really.

He had learned to live within the pretense that his life was his own.

Part two: Liz

So if I'm going to tell you about Nick and our marriage, what happened to him, to us, if I'm going to try to account for myself and my actions, I will have to tell you my story, what I think made the me that did what I did. I will have to tell you the story of my childhood, what formed me as I grew up. I will have to tell you about my passage into womanhood and what led to my obsession with him. I will have to tell you about the creation of our love. And as far as I understand it, I will have to tell you what finally did him, us, in.

The first thing you need to know about me.

My dad died when I was eight.

My earliest memories are of my dad. His smile. His smell. His laugh. The smell of his oil paints and the pictures he made. The mess on his studio floor. The safety I felt when I sat in his lap.

So many of those memories go back to his studio. In fact, I think I have a memory of the very exact time and place when my consciousness switched on and I knew I was me, existing in the world. I was standing just outside his studio door, beside the concrete steps. I remember the sun reflecting off the white siding, feeling its warmth and seeing, as if for the first time, the bright yellow green of our back yard lawn. Of course, there probably are earlier memories, memories that would emerge in dreams or through hypnosis, but that moment by Dad's studio is where my internal voice narrating the story of my life begins.

I remember playing in the studio when he was at his easel working on a picture. It never bothered him, me playing with my toys there, my stuffed animals or my blocks. Sometimes he would let me play with his mahl stick. I would tickle my animals with the padded end, or I would use it to knock down the towers of blocks I had built in in a clattering crash. And I would laugh and laugh and Dad would chuckle in that bright eyed way. Looking back at it now, what sticks is this overall sense of merriment that accompanied Dad whenever I was with him.

Of course, my love of storytelling I owe to him. He was usually the one to put me to bed, or the one to hold me in his lap in his favorite chair just before bed,

reading me my favorite book, over and over. I can still feel what it was like sitting on his lap, snuggled into his chest, feeling the vibration of his resonant voice, smelling his wonderful smell, some mixture of cloves and chewing gum and aftershave and maybe even something else I could never quite identify as anything other than Dad's smell. Sometimes he would make up his own stories to tell me and I remember liking these the best. There was this one ongoing story involving a talking squirrel who had the magic ability to turn children into different animals and they would go on these fantastic adventures and he would always leave the story on a cliffhanger just before tucking me in so that I would be eager to go to bed the next night when I would beg for the story to continue. Eventually, he would invite me to imagine my own answer to "what happens next" and we would start making up the story together.

Not a day has gone by when writing in my study that my mind hasn't gone back to those bedside stories with Dad.

The bewilderment I felt after he died was overwhelming. The world had been an unfolding kaleidoscope of color and wonder and in one thunderous crash all was turned to grey and black. Life now forbidding and uncertain.

Both my parents worked for the University, Dad in the Art Department, Mother in Chemistry. I was their only child. Sometime after Dad died and it was just Mother and me, I began to desperately wish that I had a brother, someone in our small family with whom to commiserate during those confusing early years. I began imagining what he would be like, what we would talk about. I imagined he would know things, could tell me what's what. With him by my side I could carry on.

The thought of an imaginary sister never occurred to me.

My imaginary brother became a fixture in my mind, always sitting on my left shoulder, listening to my questions and speculations, giving me affirmation and advice. My own Jiminy Cricket.

Later, in middle school, I would write my stories about my imaginary brother in journals that I reserved just for him.

Mother. My mother. Mother had a very different temperament than my Dad. She was analytical and precise where Dad was intuitive and scattershot. Mother planned, Dad made it up as he went along. (I would later wonder how they managed to make their marriage work. When I asked her about this one time when I was twelve, with a coy smile and eye twinkle she said that when I was a little older I would understand. I guess she was talking about sex.) Mother was stoic in her bereavement and dealt with my terror stricken questions with a benign if slightly dutiful warmth and cool logic. Dad died of a massive stroke caused by a ruptured brain aneurysm, an aneurysm that had been completely undiagnosed. As to my questions of why this happened to Dad—afterall, he was healthy, almost never sick--- Mother simply said that for all that medical science knows, it doesn't understand and can't predict everything. Some people simply have inherited a predisposition for such calamities. Of course, she had to explain the anatomy of it all to my eight year old self which she did in her typically clear and thorough way, clear enough for me to get the gist. And her evenness and determination to carry on with our lives in an unemotional way did have a calming effect on me, even though I did feel that it was completely unfair, Dad's too sudden departure from my life. It was at this point, I think, that I decided to become a scientist.

Thus began my life's first obsession, wanting to learn everything I could about the natural world, especially the physiology of animals and humans, thinking that if I really understood how life worked, I would then have a better way of dealing with death's specter. And by following Mother's stoic lead I could maybe still that inner confused turbulence cause by Dad's death. Maybe it was a way to just avoid the whole horrible subject. So this is the way I would be, I decided, a little girl version of Mr. Science. When my classmates were checking out Freddy the Pig books from our school library, I was checking out everything by Herbert Zim. When I was ten, I began dissecting dead birds and mice I would find from time to time in our yard. I remember when Mother gave me the heart of one of our dinner chickens to cut open and examine. I would preserve these specimens in jars of formaldehyde Mother provided for me. These jars I would line up on the shelves in my room along with my collection of small animal skulls and skeletons. I would make detailed drawings of my dissections and make detailed notes. I would share these studies with Mother and she would patiently answer my questions and explain the biological processes involved.

Maybe I thought I could somehow conquer death by closely inspecting so many dead things. I don't know.

I do know that in a very short time I had gone from being the giddy happy-go-lucky apple of my Father's eye to an introverted, ever observant examiner of the world's ways. I still had friends I would play with, and I would still take part in the big hide and seek games the whole neighborhood gang would play on long summer evenings, twilight just turning to dark. But I liked the time spent with myself the best, going on long bike rides to explore different fields, or hikes in the woods collecting specimens, or climbing trees, going as high as I could, wishing I could launch from the limbs like a bird and soar over the rooftops that I would see below.

It wasn't just science books that I would read. I was also reading the works of Jules Verne and HG Wells. There was a copy of Edgar Allen Poe stories illustrated by the great Fritz Eichenberg, ominous and brooding woodcuts that both terrified and fascinated me. I remember reading Moby Dick when I was eleven, totally captivated by the obsessiveness of Ahab. I think it was also around then that I began to extend my studying of the natural world to studying the way people behaved, mainly the colleagues of my Mother's who would come by the house, or that that I would observe on those faculty gatherings to which Mother would sometimes bring me if a babysitter wasn't available. It was easy to bring me along because I would just sit quietly in a corner and watch. And listen. I would repeat what I heard people say back to myself, memorizing the sentences. Later, at home, I would write these phrases down in the journal I kept by my bed. Eventually, in a different journal, I would speculate about who these people were, their back stories, their motivations. I began writing stories. I was good at it.

It was when I was twelve, at the end of sixth grade, that Mother was offered a position as a research scientist for a major bio-engineering firm and we moved. Mother was a brilliant scientist and, this being a time when the cold war and scientific competition was raging, research firms funded by the government were eagerly hiring the best and brightest scientists they could find. And it was finally a time when the powers that be could not afford to overlook a brilliant woman like my mother. They offered her twice the salary she was being paid by the university and the decision to uproot my childhood on the eve of adolescence was made without a second thought.

And so begins the story of my puberty, those awkward teenage years of discovery and confusion. Years when I began to learn about sex and to acquire a growing fascination, frustration, and annoyance with boys. I began to observe them, to study them closely, making copious mental notes of their traits, their speech, their goofy behavior. As my imaginary brother grew up with me during those years, even though he would acquire more of the boy-man traits I had observed, I always made him to be the way I thought boys should be. He would become the yardstick against which all boys would be measured.

Being the young science nerd that I was, by the age of ten I already knew the mechanics of human reproduction from the ever scientifically objective explanations Mother gave me. Grey's Anatomy was one of my favorites of Mother's books, and I studied the illustrations endlessly. Especially the sections on male and female reproductive organs. I would look at my vagina in the mirror, trying to duplicate the position illustrated in the book, identifying the different parts, the inner and outer lips, the clitoris, the mysterious vaginal opening, into which a man's penis would be inserted and out of which a baby would emerge. Or so I was told. How that exactly worked, the interactive sex part, I didn't quite understand. Like how and when did grown-ups do this? What did they say to each other, how did they proceed? What negotiations would be involved? And where was romance, whatever romance was, in any of this? I finally found a cross section of the male and female organs in coitus and although it didn't answer all my questions, I was fascinated by how neatly everything fit together. None of this I found disturbing. It was nature, after all. The way life was was the way nature worked, and I wanted to understand it all.

I remember wishing that I had a penis readily available to examine. Would that I could have been brave enough to coax one of the boys into a secret game of exposing ourselves to each other, but I wasn't good enough friends with any of the boys I knew. Besides, I thought most of them were jerks and would not understand the seriousness of my scientific curiosity. In those stories I was writing about my imaginary brother, I imagined he and I sharing everything, working together, like good detectives, to find the answers to all our questions. He was never cruel or selfish, but helpful, funny, even silly. We could talk about grown-ups, we could talk about our bodies, we could talk about death.

How I wished he was real.

About the same time that we moved, I began to be increasingly aware of the changes happening in my body. My breasts were growing, my nipples tender in a new way. The tactile sensations of my breasts and genitals, sensations I had assumed as a kid to be just regular ticklish spots on my body like the undersides of my feet or my armpits, now began to have a distinctly pleasurable quality of a singular kind, one I didn't quite understand, but one I started to come back to experience on an increasingly regular basis. A month before my thirteenth birthday, I had my first period. Mother had mentioned in general that this would happen, sooner or later, but now that it had, Mother sat me down and explained the menstrual cycle in precise scientific detail. She showed me how to wear the sanitary pads that she had tucked away in her closet in preparation for this occurrence and explained to me how I would eventually want to use tampons. All of which led to me asking many more questions, questions about sex, about men, about pregnancy, finally about love. And I remember very clearly how Mother's demeanor changed, and a softness emerged, one I rarely saw, as she began to talk about my father, how he had been the love of her life. How both of them, having had previous unsatisfactory relationships had found each other at the end of the war. How even though they had very different temperaments, when they were together "in that way," they just fit, like lock and key, and they knew right away that it was meant to be. Of all the topics we covered that day, an almost overwhelming amount of information for my young teen brain, her use of the term "meant to be" unnerved me, a reference to a determinism beyond the natural. The notion of a metaphysical destiny. There was also a wistful sadness in what Mother said, the emptiness she still carried from the loss of her husband. I had never really seen her express this, maybe because I hadn't been paying attention, so wrapped up in my own feelings of my own loss, as if the meaning of my love for my dad was the only meaning there was to be had in the world. But before he belonged to me, he had belonged to my mother, something I had never really considered before.

Love and destiny. Sex and death. Ideas that challenged my pretense of cool scientific logic.

It took a while to develop new friendships in my new school because most of these kids had already spent the elementary years together and knew each other

well. I was the gangly new kid, quiet, bookish, stand-offish. It wasn't until I was paired up with Shari to do a class project in Geography that I finally found a friend. She was studious like me and was being raised by her mother, her parents having divorced when she was little. Her father now lived in another town and was remarried so she saw very little of him. And, she had an older brother in high school which especially intrigued me. (She complained about him constantly.) Best of all, she lived only half a mile away, an easy and convenient bike ride for both of us.

From that point on, we spent many afternoons, evenings, and sleep-overs with each other. We would commiserate about our teachers, our classes, our mothers. We would share books we were reading, our latest enthusiasms, fads of the day. We had long discussions about boys, the ones who were cute, the ones that were dorks, the ones that were complete jerks. And we would talk about sex, that station in life we knew was waiting for us just over the horizon, a desired and frightening place that we still knew so little about. We would share with each other things we were learning about our own bodies, sometimes intimately. We talked about what it would be like the first time. Who would be our ideal boyfriend.

We also talked about death. Since my mother was an atheist, we never went to church or even talked about it much. After Dad died, in answer to my questions about what happens when you die, and after seeing in my face the incompleteness of her biological explanations, she would usually say some general thing like "he's still here with us, he'll never really leave" or "we keep him alive in our hearts." I always wondered what that would feel like, to live in someone's heart. Shari, who went to Sunday School when she was little,—Luthern, I think—was pretty sure there was an afterlife, certainly a God, maybe a heaven, probably not a hell, although as she grew older she was less certain about any of it. So besides boys and school and clothes and sex, we would speculate on life after death and how that would work. I remember in eighth grade we became captivated by the idea of spirits and ghosts and demons and would even conduct our own seances, complete with Ouija board. I remember how certain we were that we had actually contacted a disturbed spirit that was haunting her house--we even convinced ourselves we had learned his name and his woeful history, none of which I can remember now. I do remember how sad I always was when

my dad would not respond to our summons. A hole I still had that refused to be filled.

In Ninth grade, our social circle widening, Shari and I would often be invited to heavily chaperoned parties that nonetheless provided ample opportunities for our first forays, past bubblegum and pimples, into making out and innocent petting, after which Shari and I would compare detailed notes. Neither of us particularly liked any of the boys, but we felt it important that we proceed with all aspects of our education. Both of us were very good students. And both of us were starting to feel pretty grown up, ninth grade, top of the heap. Then we hit High School. Suddenly, with the passage of a simple summer, we were small again. Here we were walking the halls alongside men, some of them huge, some of them with facial hair. Serious in their swagger. The senior girls were women, their figures full, their makeup rich and alluring. They would smoke in the bathrooms. It was daunting how much there was to learn.

During those high school years, my thoughts about boys, sex, and love were in continuous tumbling confusion. These boys becoming men were simultaneously attractive and repellent. They seemed like alien creatures. Their hands, their fingers, their limbs were so dense and thick. Their bodies had a heaviness, their footsteps pressed into the ground. They moved through their days with a brash force. Their laughter could be infectious, their cruelty sudden. They had hair on their arms, their legs, their chests. They had stubble on their cheeks, rasping to a girl's kiss. Then there was the mystery of their cocks, hidden in their pants, and what that was supposed to mean for me.

I first learned how to pleasure myself to climax during that first year in high school. The experience was revelatory, how these tactile sensations would spread and light up my entire body and when connected to my thoughts, my fantasies, a sublime synesthesia would fuse all of my senses, spinning, rising, throwing me in centrifugal release to a blaze of blaring color roiling, rolling to a serene cerulean and a final mindless calm. What were those orgasmic fantasies? Sometimes I would imagine those boy-men, their hands, their smell. Sometimes hybrid creatures, more animal than human. Sometimes there would be no lover at all, just soaring abstraction. Sometimes the lover would be my own self kissing my lips, pressing my body. And sometimes, quite often, my lover would be my

brother, my invented, imaginary brother. As I look back, those orgasms were probably the most intense and real of all.

It was also during that time that I had a recurring dream. The guys in my class were the size of toys, like action figures, like nutcrackers, and I would direct them in battles and quests, moving them, handling them at will. And I would pick up the most victorious one, the most gallant one and I would begin masturbating with him, putting him deep inside, wanting desperately to come until I would wake in exhausted bewilderment.

Where was my mother in the story of this sexual awakening? My mother advised me about the practical consequences of sexual activity, the need for birth control, the need to be wary of the unpredictable predatory nature of young men. Being a biochemist with many connections in the medical and pharmacological fields, she had easy access to birth control pills which she gave to me to use when I turned sixteen. We didn't talk about my personal life or my awakening feelings beyond that. She preferred to be an attentive though distant witness to my discoveries.

How this very private world of sexual awakening would ever connect to reality was beyond my comprehension. The reality of those attractive repellent goofy boy-men lay ultimately inside their heads. Their minds. Minds I needed to understand. Having developed the ability to listen carefully to what and how people spoke, I began to practice my active listening with the guys in my classes. Amazing what paying attention to someone and asking questions about themselves will do to that person's ego and how readily they will share their private thoughts with you. It will also tend to make them friendlier to you, sometimes to the point of infatuation. But that's another story.

At the suggestion of my sophomore English teacher, who had noticed my facility with words, I enrolled in Creative Writing second term and for the first time, my stories emerged from the private confines of my journals as did my identity as a writer. My characters began to become more complex, more real as I incorporated what I was learning from my practice of active listening. Of course, I was careful to hide identities and to keep to myself the more intimate secrets of my subjects, though I would record everything in my journals. I figured from here on, everything in my life would become material I could someday use.

When it was time to apply for college, my mother of course hoped I would aspire to an elite university or Ivy League school, but I was more inclined to stay closer to home. I had become acquainted with some of the writing professors at the State University through summer workshops I had taken, and I felt most comfortable with the idea of continuing to develop under the mentorship of their program. After my freshman year of general studies, I decided to major in Psychology (a nod in my mother's direction) and minor in Creative Writing, even though I knew that the latter would be my vocation. Studying Psychology would only deepen my understanding of how people thought and why, what neural connections made them act the way they did, how fear and desire worked, how people could be persuaded and manipulated. All of this could only bolster my author's imagination.

My social life of dating in college was slow to start. There was this feeling of anonymity at the University that first year, the classes large, the people all unfamiliar and making new friends was difficult. There were a few dates, one even progressing to my first full fuck. It was with a guy I had known in high school, a basketball player. He had a slow and gentle way about him and was friendly enough in conversation, although a bit aloof. His nose was very pointed and would twitch when he talked, being so firmly tethered to his upper lip. I couldn't help watching it when we conversed. I had not a little trepidation about making love with him, worried about how large he might be, (he was six foot seven after all,) but mercifully he was not as big as I had feared and the sex was not too painful. We dated a few more times but I finally broke it off. He had an annoyingly patriarchal attitude and would authoritatively opine on subjects he understood narrowly at best.

It wasn't until my sophomore year when my classes were smaller and more focused that I began to have a circle of friends, mostly from the writing workshops we had together. Weekends would often find us hanging out at our favorite bar, sometimes our circle would intersect with other groups, from theater or the studio arts. Our gatherings were usually raucous affairs, lots of beer, lots of shit-talking, lots of gossip. Romantic pairings would begin with the best of intentions, last for a while, then end with a nonchalant indifference. Which finally brings me to that evening, that very singular and fateful evening. The night I met Nick.

I knew who Nick was. He was a grad student in the art department dating one of the seniors in our writing program so I would often see them together at many of our social gatherings. He had light curly, usually unkempt hair, and seemed lost in thought half the time, almost quixotic somehow. He was usually quiet, letting his girlfriend speak for the two of them, though he could drop an outrageous pun or obscenity when you least expected it. He and his girlfriend seemed comfortable as a couple, but more like siblings than lovers. Like I said, I knew who he was but had never been introduced to him. And so it was that on this one evening when all of us had gathered at the bar and our various friends had drifted away for darts or billiards or whatnot, that Nick and I found ourselves alone at the table. I wasn't seeing anyone at the time and Nick's girlfriend was away at home for the weekend. Our introductory small talk got off to a slow start, typically banal interrogatives interspersed with stretches of silence, eyes down in our beers. But then, he began to talk. Quietly at first, as if in a confessional, both of his hands on his beer mug, his thumb tracing the condensation on the glass. He spoke about his frustrations with his professors, their stilted aesthetics, their expectations he could never quite meet, how he was often dogged by a sense of failure. Then he looked up at me, unexpectedly, and asked if I knew what he meant. There was this yearning in his look, for understanding, for connection. A vulnerability. I said I did, that I often felt the same and I encouraged him to continue. He talked about his family of lawyers, how he had always been the odd one out. He talked about his dreams, how he wanted to move to the city, how he wanted to be free to make crazy shit, things no one had thought of, things his professors would hate, how he wanted to be free to fail. He wanted to experience things he had never experienced before. He had this sincere, boyish enthusiasm. Talking of his dreams he would float away from his sadness in a balloon of energized optimism. It was infectious. Then he turned his eagle gaze back to me, wanting to know about myself, where I was from, and most importantly, what were my dreams. And it was clear he was really interested, like he was hungry for knowledge of me. I had never felt this from any of the other guys I had gone out with. So I began talking about myself, my past, the loss of my father, my aspirations as a writer.

As our conversation continued over shots of whisky and beer, whatever shyness there might have been at the start was now completely gone. We talked about books, movies, music, our parents, our friends, agreeing and disagreeing with outrageous scatology and obscene hilarity. Nick seemed to fly in his boyish

enthusiasm, his slightly lopsided grin that of a merry prankster. I was captivated by his smile, I wanted to own it, to kiss it, to curl up in it. It made me feel safe.

Never had I felt so comfortable with a guy. Finally, long after our friends had disappeared, we drifted out of the bar into the chilly night, drifted arm in arm, our conversation flowing, our shared mirth humming, drifting back to my apartment, drifting into my bed.

I felt like I had entered some kind of dreamspace that first night of our lovemaking and I am still amazed at how knowingly confident we both were, how easy it was, how we seemed to be able to read each other's thoughts, our feelings, our wants. He was beautiful. His body both lean and soft, a swimmer's body, a dolphin's body. His chest hair was soft and downy, his cock long and smooth. And I'll never forget his smell that first night, a gentle aroma of lavender and cloves. He was so gentle and tender, taking his savoring time in his awareness of me. At some point we became totally lost in each other, maybe we fused, maybe we died. But after we had finished, lying in our silent haze, I knew I had found him, the one I had been yearning for since I was a little girl.

Thus began my obsession with Nicholas Hunter.

Funny how awkwardly polite we both were when he got up to leave as if an enchantment had been lifted and we were returned to where we were at the very beginning when we found ourselves alone with each other at the table in the bar. I may have acted that way but inside I was already plotting, creating a plan. I would have him and he would have me.

As the school year went on, I began to wander over to the art building, trying to get a sense of that world. I didn't want to bump into Nick during these forays, although occasionally I would, my intention was to learn about him from a discreet distance. Since the grad studios didn't have doors, from time to time I would be able to peek into his space, glimpse what he was making. I would befriend others in his program and very casually be able to find out what he was up to, never giving myself away. I would follow him from a distance, observe him and his girlfriend, see how they were getting along. I was able to get his class schedule so that I would know where he was throughout the day. I clipped and saved the flyers and announcements of his MFA thesis exhibition.

I began to read the art magazines, Art in America, Artforum. I wanted to learn the language.

After he graduated, I was able to keep track of what he was doing through friends of friends of his. I even found his parents' address and one day called, pretending to be someone from the school's alumni program and learned where Nick was living. I learned that he and his girlfriend had parted ways and that he had moved to the city and was working all kinds of odd jobs to make ends meet as he developed his art. I knew that I too would have to move to the City after I finished my degree. Maybe I could be accepted to a grad writing program there, I wasn't sure how I'd do it. But luck intervened.

During my last two years at school, I had been asked to write articles for the school newspaper. My writing about college life and the cultural scene was witty and colorful and soon became very popular. Some of my articles were picked up by the local newspaper and somehow reached the desk of one of the editors at a small independent paper in the City. Just before graduation day, I got a call asking if I would be interested in moving there to work for them. And just like that, I was able to continue the real purpose of my life, stalking Nick Hunter.

I won't go into all the details of my detective strategies but suffice it to say I did some extreme sleuthing. Wearing disguises to follow him. Going through the dumpster behind his building, scavenging whatever I could from his life. Taking photos. Taking notes. Writing a continuing narrative of his movements. I made a scrapbook to organize all of this. Believe it or not, on a couple of occasions, I actually broke into his apartment when he wasn't there, to see what he was making, how he was living, what he was eating.

I followed him as he went to galleries, carrying a battered suitcase he had filled with examples of his work, pounding the streets to find representation. And here luck intervened again. As it so happened, a small gallery uptown had recently opened with a director who was a friend of a very close friend of my mother. Pretending that I had been asked by my paper to write an article on up and coming galleries, I visited the gallery and met the director, and in the course of our visit, the family friend connection came up, igniting our conversation in a more enthusiastic way. I found out a great deal about the director's history and aspirations for the new venue, the new talent he hoped to find, and I was able to drop names of young artists I knew. Most of them made up, except, of course, for

Nick. I knew he would eventually find his way to the new gallery and indeed it happened sooner than I expected. Because I had presented myself as an art critic for my newspaper and I had talked Nick up, I figured there would be a very good chance that the gallery would give him a shot. And I was right. Then, when I found out that Nick's work would be included in an upcoming group show at the gallery, I was able to plant the idea of how exciting Nick's work was with the real art critic of our newspaper, with whom I had recently become very friendly. I had learned art world lingo and was able to impress him with my insightful jargon. Sure enough, it happened. A rave review of a major new talent. Nick's career was launched.

At this point, my direct intervention in Nick's life wasn't necessary. His Art World roll would take care of itself. But I did continue closely following his life and his growing career. And I wrote everything down.

While stalking Nick had been my main preoccupation during those years, I had not been ignoring my own career. Besides the articles for my newspaper, I continued to write my fiction, mostly short stories or vignettes of dialogue that would form themselves into one-act plays. I had even started a longer fictionalized version of Nick's life, something I thought might grow into a novel. I began submitting some of my fiction to literary magazines and a few began to be published. I was starting to build a little reputation for myself.

Nick's career continued in its meteoric rise. I saw all of his shows, collected all of his reviews. I would sneak into lectures he might give at the University in the City, or travel to other venues around the country where he might be exhibiting and speaking. I discovered ways to find out where he would go next. Through old friends from our circles at school, I would be able to find out details of who he was seeing, who he might be fucking, calculating when I might have to make the move back into his life. Fortunately for me, none of his relationships seemed to last, none to the point of cohabitation. But given his growing art world status, I thought it wouldn't be long before someone might snag him away from me. It was time to act.

I learned that he was going to travel to Europe to give a lecture at an Institute in Brussels and that he planned to visit Madrid, to see the museums there. Disguised, I would follow him, book the same flight, book a room in a hotel close

to his. My plan was to watch and follow and then plant myself in his path, on his way to the Prado, in the park just outside the entrance, with a plausible but invented story of me being on an assignment for my paper. What a coincidence running into you here! Who would have thought? After all this time! He would sit beside me on the bench, and we would begin catching up. And then it would happen, the connection reestablished. Our relationship would pick up where it left off on that wonderful night. I was a genius. And here's the thing: it worked.

I remember that evening in Madrid, back in his room, making love again, the air warm and spicy, the curtains blowing in gentle approval. He was the same beautiful man. The sex was just as melodiously tender but also had more of a joyful hunger, as if we were both relieved that a long search had been finally fulfilled. Afterwards we lay in laughter at our good fortune and, this I'll never forget, he turned to me and said that he now realized that he also had been searching for me all this time and that he hadn't realized it until now. He told me of a recurring dream of his, of a dark haired girl with whom he was in love who suddenly moved away leaving no clue as to where she could be found, and how profoundly sad the dream made him feel. At that point, with him saying that, I knew we were now together and would never be apart again.

And from that point on, as you know, we were a couple, joined at hip and heart. I moved in with him as soon as we returned from Europe. His apartment was too small, but he made room for my writing needs and I always respected his work space. We shared everything, our creative ideas, our aspirations, our hopes for our future. Soon he would accept a visiting teaching position at the University and with the income I increasingly brought in from my writing, we could afford a bigger space. Nick's career continued to flourish as did mine. We were good for each other.

And what a festive affair the wedding was! You remember, the comingling of our two artist worlds, how joyous and rowdy it was. It even got a mention in the society page of the Times! Then that long honeymoon vacation in Italy. Leisurely afternoons in the dusty blue hills of Tuscany, wonderful wine, magnificent fucking. I had never been so happy in all my life.

For three years it went on like this, our perfectly perfect lives. Until that one Saturday afternoon. That stupid Saturday afternoon. That stupid fucking Saturday afternoon when I fucking blew it.

We were lying in bed after making love when he said something about how lucky we were, in our life, in our careers, in our having found each other and for some reason, and I still don't understand my thinking, I said something like luck had nothing to do with it, and I guess it was some sort of twisted ego thing that compelled me to show him my scrapbook, the one I had assembled during those years of my stalking him before Madrid. Originally, I had vowed to myself to never show him those records and writings of my stalking, secrets better kept so that happiness could prevail. But on this day, this stupid Saturday afternoon, I decided otherwise. Maybe I felt confident enough in our love and trust that nothing bad could come of it. Maybe I thought that to see just how determined I was to have him, the absurd effort I put into my quest for him to be mine would only make him love me more. To finally know how completely, obsessively loved he was by me. So I revealed all of it to him, my dogged determination, my brilliant plotting to reel him in.

Of course now, looking back, I think maybe, just maybe, a part of me wanted him to finally realize how I had called the shots. I had made our destiny happen. I wrote the script.

When I saw the draining change in his face, I knew how badly I had misjudged. I remember how desperate I became, I tried to make light of it, I tried to reassure him in every way I could, I kissed his mouth, his neck, I sucked his cock, made it hard again in a lackluster way and I got on top, riding him hard, trying to make the strangeness go away. And then it was over. Never the same again.

We did carry on, for several months. Nick was hired to a tenure track position at the university where he had been teaching, my first collection of short stories was published. We talked about trying to have a child, both of us thinking it would create a renewed bonding of our relationship. We kept track of my periods, my time of optimal fertility, month after month. But it didn't take. And Nick seemed to have a lingering wariness of me. Suspicious. Sometimes I found him snooping through my things.

Then the final blow, like that last hammer strike at the end of Mahler's Sixth Symphony. Nick had for some time been rummaging around behind my back in my files, in my drawers, at the back of the closet, anywhere he thought I might be hiding more secrets when he stumbled upon my old journals with my stories of my imaginary brother and the now abandoned manuscript of his fictionalized life. And something snapped.

Did I tell you that I had named the imaginary brother from my childhood Nick?

I never knew that he had experienced some "episodes" as a teenager. He never shared this with me. His family certainly never did, nor would they have, feeling that he had been stable for many years and felt secure for him in what they saw as a married relationship that would only continue to reinforce his grounding and bolster his self-assurance and sense of agency. Turns out they were more protective of him than I knew. Once the breakdown happened, they swooped in and swept him away on a cruise ship of legalese and sooner than I could have imagined possible, I was out of the picture.

Well, you know all the rest. Nick was broken.

I can't seem to get over the sadness I feel. Or the guilt. Nick was broken. I broke Nick. I wish I could understand what happened inside that beautiful head, what exactly triggered his psychosis.

I wished it wouldn't have happened like that, that maybe if I had trusted destiny more, our union would have come about on its own, without my scheming. And it isn't that I think our love wasn't real, I know it was. But still.

Sometimes I don't understand why we couldn't have gone on, why he couldn't have accepted his delusion as a gift, a gift from me, his loving Fairy Godmother, his Goddess of Love, who would grant him his wish to be a real boy if only he would believe.

Someday, I'll be able to write about this, about Nick. I feel I owe him that, to try to honor what I think he felt. I owe myself that. Maybe not the novel I had planned, maybe a short story instead. But a story that will end not in the way it did, but in the way I wish it could have.

Part three: Nick

I go down the ramp to the building on the left, to the door with the sparrow on it. There are always sparrows there, that's how I remember it. The audience is large, eager students, waiting for my talk, how I did it, how I made my work. Michael is there. And Elizabeth and Ryan. I ask for a glass of water. The lights go down.

Thank you for inviting me here to give you this humble presentation of my humble work. So I have to tell you this first, you must know that the sound the cars make on the wet city streets are unlike anything else. Except maybe the surf in Oregon. A splattering roar that never ends. Yes, thank you for that, I know I know, you're very kind.

The art world, you see, can be a very forbidding place, unkind to newcomers. You have to have grit. Grit and steely determination. The determination to follow a lead, a clue, to its furthest point. You are all detectives, remember? Private Dicks of the first rank. You hunt your prey. You are hunters.

I remember Madrid, how salty it was, how cavernous were the galleries in the Prado, how magnificent the Velazquez, that sweet little princess, floating into the room and the King sees me and the Queen sees me and I am fucking her again, she's grabbing me like a doll, biting my head off, blood streaming down to the floor, staining the concrete which the janitors will come and clean up again like they do every evening before nine. I see them do it. I was there.

Your mechanical voice asks for my order and I say it into the speaker a large Coke and Fries with a Fish Sandwich on the side and I drive up and you are a young thing very pretty in your uniform I like your Spanish accent it will work very well on the stage you know, and you hand me my order and a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. Yes you are right. I think much better with a clinking scotch in hand, my thoughts cohere, lickety split as it were, and then I remember, you know, I remember where I put it, her number, her phone number you know, after she left, after she ran away. She ran away. She left me behind. Why? Why? Why?

It's ringing, I can hear it ringing. Mother answers hello dear how are you my love I am fine fine can I speak to Dad yes of course he's dead but I'll put him on Son Son how are you I was worried about you that Spanish affair I read about it I was

worried oh Dad the wine was fine and you should have seen the sunsets! The sunsets over the bay, like they would never end I'll have to make a painting of it, or a construction expressing it, or a performance piece that will direct the gallery walls to dance to in an orange vermillion in a million different ways 'til Saturday, always a Saturday on the bed in the park on the bench.

Oh Elizabeth, Elizabeth my queen,
 if I pull your bloody tampon string
 will our baby come out to play, to play,
 will our baby come out to play?

I remember so clearly my sister and I, how we went out to play by the steps in the sun with Daddy inside with his painted lawbooks and how he covered the walls with pictures he made, pictures that sang in iambic pentameter. I cried and cried and I thank you all for that, for your appreciation of my efforts on the opening of my show, isn't it grand? This opening on this wonderful Saturday and tomorrow is Saturday too and so is the day after that. My sister Elizabeth knew I could, she always knew, my lizard sister Liz. And I remember us playing in the yard, the yard, it had been raining and it was muddy and we ran in the rain and we took off our clothes and we played touch me touch you and you don't have one like I do isn't that funny isn't that strange and then you covered me in mud I was covered head to toe and we laughed and laughed and you made me lie down and you covered me in mud and my penis was hard standing up the last man standing I was buried only my penis standing up and you played with your toys around it your cowboys and Indians and soldiers it was standing there then you cut it off and took it inside and put it on your shelf and now I didn't have a pee-pee I was like you I was Liz the Lizard girl and I went inside to find Nicholas Nick and there I was in the hallway, I had my backpack with all of my drawings my plans my schematics to bring to my crit, my clit with you Professor to show you my plans and how brilliant you thought them, you did, you did I will mount a show of this work my lad an exhibition we'll print cards to hand out we'll make a catalogue this will be a sensation you will be rich you will be famous all you have ever wanted, wanted, what I wanted, wanted to find to find her again where is she? Her apartment is empty and we were here we made love so sweet right there, her mattress was there next to her plants and she told me her life between kisses she showed me her poems between kisses, those kisses my kisses her lips her toes her nipples her rose her rose her rose but now, now, now it is empty, the closet is empty and I

don't know where to find her I have no clue where to begin I feel so lost the pain of my loss this dark hole in my chest where is she where is she where is she where is she?

My brother is here. Richard or William, I can't remember which. Richard William. William Richard. Shit. Never mind. Anyway, Brother, here you are and I like living with you, you help me remember my pills, morning and night, one at lunch, the one I always forget, and they do make things much more clear, I see where things are, to feel, to hold, I can go in my corner and make stuff, make my stuff, those friendly little things, half drawing half sculptures half writing oh that's three haves oh you can't have too many haves 'cause you want those haves that keep you going, keep you making your art shit, that's what I always tell them, my students, my eager students, you have to want it to have it and the want has to be big enough, big enough to fill the gallery, big enough to fill this auditorium, big enough to fill and explode your head in delirium! I love that word, delirium, delirious, serious delirious delirium, I remember that, you know, I remember and I remember how she caused it, she made me feel it, my love, my sweet love, my my why now, now, I am here again, in this room, her room her mattress was there but it's gone, she's gone, I have to find her, please help me find her, brother, please.

Oh, yes, you are right. My name is Nicholas Bradley Hunter. My father's name is Arthur, my mother's name is Alma. I have three siblings, sibs I call them, sips, thank you, sibs, Richard, William, and Anne. And Elizabeth. Liz. All of them are lawyers, very successful, very smart. I am an artist and I too am very successful, my work has been exhibited extensively nationally and internationally and is currently the subject of a major retrospective exhibition at the Museum of, and at the Museum of, and at the Museum of, and his work is in the collections of major museums including the Museum of, and the Museum of, and the Museum of. So it is with great pleasure that I introduce to you my good friend and lover, the kisser of my lips, the licker of my cunt, the father of my story, Nicholas Hunter! Thank you, thank you, you are too kind, thank you! So to truly understand my work, how it arrived at the place it is today, you must understand where I, Nicholas Hunter, came from, my beginnings, my story, my history. I was a dreamy kid, growing up with two brothers and a sister who were all rambunctious and loud, but I was more quiet, I liked to play alone in the sandbox, I would build mountains in which I would dig out tunnels to drive my matchbook cars through

and you had to have the sand just right, a little moist, to make it stand up, so it stands up, oh that's funny, yes, thank you, but I digress, I learned way back then the importance of getting your materials right if you want them to do what you want them to do and when I started seriously to make my serious work, assembling those constructions, with all of those different materials, I always would think back to that sandbox of mine, and the mountains with their tunnels through which I would enter with my car, my car, my

Let's stick to what we know, what I know, let's stick to what I know for shore. Right you are Doc my dock right you are. Let's talk about school, grad school, yes, graduate school for the M, F of A. How I became a motherfucking asshole of an MFA. OK, sorry, I'll be serious now. Think. Graduate School. Am I alone? Well, yes, it's just me, away from home, really away from home, I'm going to become an artist and these good professors at this good school are going to help me realize that dream. I'm living in a rooming house, I've got a small bedroom and there's a shared kitchen, I live on the top floor, under the roof, I have to bend over at the sides of the room and there is this cool round window overlooking the street below. I'm dating this girl and we sometimes come up here for sex I guess I'm trying to remember her I think we mainly talk or she talks but I can't remember what she said. Anyway, school, yes, school. My professors are all real artists they have shows and shit and they are demanding that we make work that isn't shit but that is relevant and smart and that meets the standards of real art for our time. Time. Time. We graduate students all have individual work spaces in a big warehouse type place, our spaces partitioned by thin portable walls of plasterboard with no locking doors, privacy but community, that's what they want us to have, and we graduate students work together and crit together and eat together and sleep together and shit together but we each make our art by ourselves. My art, such as it is. My professors never like it much. I should look at this artist or that artist here is a profile on them you don't know them? look them up you really don't know much do you? And I try to look like this guy or that guy, why all guys? And I try I try I do. Somehow I make it through, it's good enough. And I earned my motherfucking asshole. Look around, you say? Look behind me, you say? No, no one there, I'm by myself. So I move to the City, Mom and Dad gave me some money to find a place, crappy part of town and it's a crappy flat, but it has room to work, and it's mine, mine alone. No teachers no parents no brothers no sisters no others. I don't know why but I feel free, do I remember that feeling? Me, by myself, free. I'm going to do what I want and if I don't know what I

want I'll make up what I want until I find what I want. I walk the streets wandering, I walk the streets wondering, I walk the streets looking and smelling and tasting and hearing, hearing, hearing the sounds of cars, the sounds of the subway, the sounds of hammering and pounding and screaming saws, hearing the water splashing on the pavement, the black asphalt street. And I pick up things, discarded bills, posters, broken toys, broken hairclips, broken phones, broken bones, pieces of wood from palettes from crates from construction sites. The detritus of the City. And I haul it back to my flat and I lay all these prizes on my floor these jewels shining with possibilities that I can see, that now I can see! I start hearing their voices, I can imagine their conversations. I start to construct, I start to build, no one is in the room with me, you're right, no parents no teachers no sibs. And now I begin to hear my voice. You are right, Doc, it feels good. It's just me, I did that, I made those things, those wonderful goofy things that hung on my wall or sat on my floor. Each one of them with a different story to tell taking me to different places of thought and feeling to Oregon and Spain and Timbuktu. And I remember so clearly now, that day I stumbled onto the gallery that would help launch my fabulous career, Michael the director and his sweet funny way who liked what I showed him, who saw promise in my work and who offered me a show. And I remember how happy, how on top of the world I felt! I can still feel it, I can still hear the excitement in my heart, I can still hear the little girl clapping from behind the front desk, clapping and giggling, my best friend! Liz, there you are! Let's play some more! Do you still have my penis on your shelf? Give it to me and I'll cover you in mud, it was so much fun, no? No. Know. Now. That's not what happened. I made my way, my way I made. Making and showing and climbing that art world ladder of success. Yes there were women, yes there was fucking. My cock and I were good at it. I was a young art stud on the rise in the City. But, Doc, here's the thing, her's the thing. There was this girl I met long before, came out of nowhere. She was so beautiful. Pretty. Dark hair, diamond eyes. We talked so well and we fucked so well and I was so young I didn't know anything but there was a magic night and then it was gone, my brain all pumpkin again but part of me wouldn't forget. And here's the thing: underneath all of my art, the searching in all of my wonderful art, was the yearning I couldn't fulfill or fill or satisfy or sanctify or firefly or, you get the point, yes? You get the point. She haunted my nightmares and I had to find her. I was Nicholas the Hunter of this Haunting Whoever she was. This was my quest, my purpose.

And Damn Doc! Damn if I didn't find her! In Madrid! Madrid of all places! Outside the Prado, my favorite museum in all the world! And she was so beautiful, Doc, so beautiful. I undressed her there, right there in the park, and she was glowing, so proud in her beauty that she was showing me. Her face glowed with a shameless openness, welcoming eyes, a welcoming gentle grin, her body so smooth and perfect, her breasts perfect, her tummy perfect, her belly button perfect, her pussy perfect, her feet perfect, her toes perfect. If I had been Pygmalion himself I could not have sculpted a more perfect form. I had found her, I did. And I led her into the museum and lay her on the floor in front of Las Meninas and I entered her there, with the king and queen watching, I fucked her there, with the little Princess watching, I fucked her there and then we rode a carriage to my Hotel where we dined and laughed away the evening making plans for our future. I asked her to live with me, I was a famous artist I had lots of money. I could take care of her, provide for her, she could pursue her dreams of stardom, she was an artist too, our lives and ideas and inspirations we could share. We could be happy and she said yes, yes my darling, I know it too, it's true, it's true.

What happened? I don't know. What happened? I don't know. Next, what happened? She gave me something. No that's not it. She told me something. No that's not it. She ate your cock, she ate your head? No that's not it either. Don't you remember? You fucked her on the floor with everybody watching, the king and the queen and the little princess and your mom and your dad and your brothers and sister and Michael and all your friends and she ate your cock and she ate your head and you pulled out her bloody tampon and your baby came out red swirling on the floor, remember remember? No, that's not it either. Never happened.

No, what happened was this. I found a door at the end of the hall inside her room inside her head past her tongue past my penis inside her throat down to a cavern a cave a dark dark cave of drippy walls and stalagmites and found a boat made of paper and board that floated me across a lake to a glade where two children played in the sun by a house with pictures in the windows of two children playing, best friends they were, a boy and a girl riding their bikes together looking at the sky together playing tickle me tickle you together like brother and sister, sister and brother and they grew up and their families moved. And I found a book they left behind, its pages old and musty but its stories so real, their stories, their adventures, I lived them I remembered them they were my memories of my best

friend. The pages kept turning for me, revealing to me prophecies, stories of the future to be, of the boy who left home to seek his fortune. How he gained the favor of the King and never forgot his best friend and finally found her again, grown to great beauty and they married so happily ever after.

But at the back of this old book was an appendix filled with directions and formulas and diagrams. How to build a nickbot. You grab a foot from here, grab a nose from there, give it some hair, smiley teeth and glinting eyes, stuff pudding inside its head, give it an asshole to poop and a stiff cock to fuck and set it in motion, to build with this paper you provide, to build with this board you provide, to build with this wire you provide, to sing with these songs you provide, to hear applause you provide, to live this life you provide.

And I took up the book, closed its old cover, tied it with string, carried it back with me, back up her throat, back out of her mouth, back into the hall, back into her room, and I saw myself in a mirror, a mirror in her bedroom, and I saw myself in a mirror that I was her, the dark haired girl, the girl I lost, I was her all along, and I saw I was her writing my stories, living my life. And I remember how this happened, how I felt tears on my face, warm tears of bliss, tears of such exquisite joy and relief. For I had finally found out who I was.

And I remember that sometime later I left. I left to look for somebody named Nicholas Hunter. I drove through cities and plains and deserts and mountains until I came to Oregon, blessed Oregon. And on a cliff above the endless rolling roaring surf I looked to the west to the ocean to the sky and I saw at last the true meaning of lessoning light, the dying ember, the whispered kiss, no heaven above or earth below, just a scattered void upon the sand.