

I DON'T EVEN GET OUT OF BED before I light my first cigarette of the day. Light oozes through the louvered windows. Mexican light. It's already hot. A faucet squeaks in the bathroom. The woman I was sent to find is in the shower. Water like silver moonlight pouring off her body. Well, I found her all right. I found her and I'm not taking her back to the United States or the Divided States or any other states. I'm taking her somewhere nobody can find us, ever.

“Benjamin?”

“What, Grandma?”

“Are you awake?”

I can hear her right outside my door now.

“I'm going to yoga,” she says. “Will you be all right?”

“You go five times a week, and when you come back, I'm always right here in one badly assembled piece.”

I listen to her pad away. I've perfected getting out of bed, but it's still not easy. Thanks to cerebral palsy (aka C.P.), I'm pretty much half a kid. The right side is fine, the left not so good. I saw a tree once that'd been struck by lightning. Part of it was all shriveled up. The limbs were naked and gnarled. The other part was green and good to go. I'm that tree. Struck by lightning.

No wonder I want to be Robert Mitchum: big, strong, super-cool, with those Freon eyes of his. That's who I was pretending to be a minute ago—Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past*.

But this is the present, where it takes me forever to get cleaned up, partly because I can't stand to look at my naked self. That's why I keep the TV on pretty much constantly. About a dozen physical therapists have told me to make friends with my body, but I just can't.

Waiting for me in the kitchen is green tea and All-Bran. Grandma thinks there'd be world peace if everybody had regular bowel movements. Colleen and I cracked each other up once talking about the global power brokers meeting in their pajamas and passing the high-fiber cereal around while they chatted amicably. *The West Bank? It's yours. Just make sure there's an ATM. Pass the prunes, okay?*

Colleen. Somebody I can't think about. So once I've choked down the last bite of bran, I cross the street to my friend Marcie's. It's early and the neighborhood is quiet

except for a gardener or two. One of them is sweeping with a big push broom because there's a city ordinance about mowers or leaf blowers before eight a.m. South Pasadena is like that.

I'd be glad to push a broom if I could have two arms and two legs that worked. That's what I tell Marcie right after she answers the door.

"Really?" she says, stepping back so I can get past.

"Absolutely. I'd have a pickup truck and a bunch of clients. I'd mow and rake all day, then go home and watch DVDs."

"You should talk to them. Make another documentary."

"About gardeners?"

"Why not? Your movie about high school killed the other night." She points to the coffeepot. "Want some?"

I shake my head. "Grandma says I'm not old enough yet. And, anyway, it makes me jumpy."

Marcie sits down beside me. The caftan she's wearing this morning is blue, with gold birds on the sleeves. Her face is all angles but not hard-looking. Her life seems pretty sweet—nice house, enough money, time to do whatever she wants. But she's had heart bypass surgery, a couple of divorces, and she goes to AA meetings.

"So you're a bona fide storyteller now," she says. "Part of a community of storytellers. What's your next story? I think you ought to have a plan." She stands up before I can argue.

Marcie takes batter out of her refrigerator and starts pouring perfect little circles on the griddle.

I get down a couple of plates, the ones she made when she was a potter and had a kiln of her own and a husband. On the bottom of each plate is a line from a poem, hers for all I know. The one I'm holding says, *Pleasure is permitted me.*

"What happened to Colleen, anyway?" she asks. "She sure disappeared in a hurry."

I sit down heavily. Like there's any other way for me. "With Nick."

Marcie turns away from the stove and points a spatula at me. "And this Nick is . . . ?"

"Just a guy with a couple of joints and a Pontiac Firebird. Can we not talk about it?"

"I thought she was going to twelve-step meetings."

"She said she wasn't having any fun. I said, 'How much fun was it flat on your back in the hospital with IVs in your arm?' And she said, 'It's just a little weed this time.' How could she do that? Drive down there with us and then go home with somebody else?"

Marcie puts pancakes on my plate, then nudges the maple syrup my way.

"Besides being a card-carrying stoner, do you think she was jealous? People loved *High School Confidential*. So there you are with everybody shaking your hand, and there she is with a pin in her nose."

“Everybody didn’t shake my hand, and she doesn’t actually have a pin in her nose.”

“I know you like her, Ben. And I’m not going to tell you girls are like buses and there’ll be a new one along in a minute. But you’re a talented filmmaker. You proved that at the Centrist Gallery. Concentrate on that.”

I take a bite of pancake. Colleen eats at McDonald’s. I’ve sat with her. I’ve paid for her coffee and McSkillet Burrito, first when she was groggy and wasted and couldn’t remember the night before, and then in rehab when she couldn’t shut up.

Never again, man. I’m not doing that ever again.

Marcie points her fork at me. “I’ve been thinking—for your next project, you need a camera of your own. You’re welcome to use mine again, but it’s from the Dark Ages. I’ll look around online.”

“Who’s going to pay for it?”

“Your grandma.”

I just look at her. “Grandma wants me to major in business, not film.”

“You can major in business and still make movies. You don’t have to be one thing; you can be a lot of things. Right now you’re in high school, so you’re really majoring in Getting Out with Your Frontal Lobe Intact. Anyway, all you really need is a nice little Flip Mino HD. Couple hundred bucks. Peanuts to somebody like Mrs. B.”

“I don’t know, Marcie.”

“Tell her you’ll never see Colleen again.”

“Colleen’s already history.”

“Maybe. But your grandmother doesn’t know that. And don’t say, ‘Oh, she was at the gallery the other night, so she knows,’ because, yes, she was there, but she wasn’t thinking about Colleen.” Marcie narrows her eyes. “Negotiate, Benjamin. No Colleen, all As, and merit badges in Archery and Lifesaving.”

“Interesting sequence, given my skill with the bow and arrow.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do. I’ll ask her. I will. At the gallery, she said she was proud of me.”

Marcie takes a sip of coffee. “For what it’s worth, I’m not so sure Colleen’s an ex-girlfriend. She likes you. I can see it when you guys are together.”

“Well, she’s sure got a funny way of showing it.”

Marcie picks up the small remote and aims it at the little flat-screen Sony. “Let’s see what’s on the movie channel.”

I take the bus to school. Not a regular school bus, not even the little bus, but a city bus, with real people going to real jobs. Or coming from real jobs, maybe, because about a third of my fellow passengers are crashed against the window or each other. If I had a little digital camera,

I could take pictures of people sleeping. All kinds of people. Work up some kind of montage.

I look out the window. I look with intent. Kids walking to school, hoping they're finally wearing the right outfit; people in their cars, putting on makeup, talking on their cells and eating bagels.

As we make the turn onto Glenarm, somebody's lawn sprinklers are all out of whack. A big old geyser waters the concrete, and rich guys in their BMWs and Mercedes-Benzenes weave around the downpour.

Yesterday, Marcie and I watched part of *Chinatown*, Roman Polanski's great neo-noir thriller. It covers the whole William Mulholland/Owens Valley water scandal better than any history book I ever read. Without the aqueduct, L.A. would still be what the Chumash called it: "The valley of smoke." And the pollution then wasn't smog from cars and trucks, just smoke from their campfires.

I look at the buildings and the cars and the busy streets. It's hard to believe people lived in tents and adobe shacks and walked around in moccasins and hunted and fished. Nobody went to an office or to school.

There was C.P. then, too, I'll bet. There's always bad stuff. What happened to a Chumash kid with C.P.? Did he sit around with the women and bitch about the maize?

In grade school, I did a report once on the Chumash,

and they were hard-core about manhood. A kid gets to be fourteen or so, and it's time for "fasting, hallucinogenic rituals, and trials of endurance." And that last one means—I'm not kidding—lying on anthills. Anthills populated by red ants. Those big mothers.

The funny thing is, I could do that. Maybe, anyway. Probably. I've been through more than most kids, and I didn't wimp out. Ever. Hospitals, tests, physical therapy, all of it.

So I could probably lie there while the ants bit me and some shaman chanted about the seven giants that held up the world, but when I got up, I'd limp. Courageous but crippled. The really cool guys would get the Minnie Ha Ha girls, with their little fringed skirts, and I'd get Moody Boo Hoo, Minnie's bipolar sister.

Unless I could sit with the elders, the Old Ones, and listen. Native Americans have great origin myths. There are Sky Fathers and Earth Mothers and Grandmother Spiders. There are Rainbow Serpents and moon goddesses.

I'll bet I could've been that kind of storyteller then, the way Marcie says I'm the kind of storyteller I am now. The kind with a camera and a computer. I don't have to run fast or shoot straight to tell stories. I can do it sitting down.

At school, I can't help myself. I look for Colleen. I want to see her and I don't want to see her. I want to talk to

her and I don't. I want her to be sorry she took off with that guy, and if she is, it'll just make me mad because she can never be sorry enough.

I sit through history and social studies, then hobble down to eat lunch. Colleen almost never eats at school. She and Ed used to climb in his car, fire up a joint, then inhale four orders of onion rings at Wolfies. And she still had beautiful skin. Once when we were alone at Marcie's, she took off all her —

“Hey, man.”

It's Reshay Pettiford. He's about six three, wearing a Kobe tank top two hundred times too big for him.

I step away from the big double doors that lead into the cafeteria and the usual lemming suicide stampede. “What's up?” I ask.

“I want you to put me in your movie. You talked to Debra. You got her side the story. I want you to get my side. She come on to me. She was all, ‘You don't have to worry. It's taken care of.’ And the next thing I know, it's, ‘You my baby daddy. You got to do the right thing.’ You know what I mean, little man. She's like that Colleen. She'd go with anybody.”

“Colleen's not that way. She won't go with just anybody.”

“She went with you.”

“And I'm what? The bottom of the barrel?”

“I'm just saying.”

I look hard at him. He's either been shooting hoops or he's scared to death, because he's dripping sweat. He's not Native American, but I can guess his origin myth: the earth was without form and void until Phil Jackson came along with the triangle defense and covered part of the earth with highly polished maple.

"The movie you're talking about is kind of done," I tell him. "It opened at eight p.m. and closed at ten."

He grimaces. "Dang. I'll bet it don't make me look good."

"You can see it if you want."

He shakes his head. "That's all right. I know it make me out to be the fool." He wipes his face by pulling up the tank top and using it like a towel. "You gonna do another one?" he asks. "Let everybody else testify?"

I nod. "We'll see, okay?" That's an answer I learned from my grandma. It always means there's no way.

He holds out one fist and I tap it with my good hand. Everybody's afraid of the other one. Everybody except Colleen.

"Let me have my say when you do, awright?"

He's through with me then and charges through the doors and heads right for his homies. Somebody whips a basketball to him at what looks to me like almost the speed of light. Reshay charges, dribbling low and hard a couple of times, making tricky moves, ball between his

legs, head fake—the whole NBA tryouts package, and right in the corner of the school cafeteria.

To be able to do that. To be agile and dexterous.

I look for an empty table. There are my classmates: Preppy, Sporty, Goth, Emo, Skater, Mansonite, Mean Girl (aka Heather, from *Heathers*, a Michael Lehmann movie I've seen about six times).

“So, am I famous yet?”

I turn around and there's Oliver Atkins, looking like he just stepped out of a Banana Republic ad. As usual.

I tell him, “You missed it.”

He points, so I take a cafeteria tray and shuffle forward while he says, “Why don't you dice and slice that little movie of yours and put the best parts on YouTube.”

“And your part would be the best part, right?”

“One of, anyway.”

Right in front of me is something in a big pan that looks like curds and whey. I point and wait for the lady in the hairnet to hand it over.

That's when I see Colleen. She's wearing a flimsy little dress and trashed motorcycle boots with the laces undone. She's not lining up for lunch, either. She's looking around.

I tell Oliver good-bye, put my head down, pay for my lunch, scuttle toward an empty corner, and pretend to eat. I try to act surprised when she sits across from me.

Her skin is see-through pale, and everything just stands still for a second.

She says, “I thought I’d test the limits of the word *tardy*.”

I glance at my watch and pretend to be casual. “So far, so good.”

“What were you talking to Reshay about?”

I shrug. “He wants his say if I ever make another documentary.”

“So you’d what? Follow him around with a camera? I can tell you how that’s going to come out. He’ll go to some community college on a little scholarship, flunk out, then come back here and get in trouble.”

I pick at my lunch. Colleen reaches across, takes a little bit between her fingers, inspects it, puts it back.

“Hey,” I tell her. “Go handle your own lunch.”

“Why don’t we cut to the chase here, Ben. How mad are you? And put that fork down before you answer.”

I take a deep breath. “I had to tell my grandma that you had a headache, so your mom picked you up.”

That seems to push her away from the table. “You should switch from documentaries to sci-fi. In what parallel and much more attractive universe would my mother ever pick me up from anywhere?”

“Do you still mean what you said about getting high every now and then?”

She shakes her head. Or maybe moves it ambiguously.

“I wouldn’t pay too much attention to anything I say when I’m buzzed.”

We sit for a minute. She always wears this patchouli stuff, and the scent wafts over my mac and cheese. Queen Victoria used patchouli in her linen chests. And how do I know that? Because I Googled everything about Colleen, including the stuff she dabs behind her ears. And other places. Why is that any more pathetic than watching seven movies a day?

I can’t look directly at her. I focus on her hands—the gnawed cuticles, the black, chipped nail polish. I poke at my ice cream, which is still as hard as a meteorite. “What now?” I ask.

“Well, that’s easy. Now I go to a meeting, say, ‘Hello, I’m Stupid and I’ve been clean for forty-eight hours.’ What about you?”

I shake my head and say, “I don’t know.”

“Want to do something after school? Get something to eat, go to a movie, fool around?” She stands up. “I know what. Let’s go to your house. I love your room. It’s unbelievably tidy. How do you do that? I tried dusting once and I hated it. I mean, what’s the point? It’s just dusty again tomorrow.”

I know she wants something, and I don’t care. I’m just glad to see her again. I’m not addicted to drugs, like she is; I’m addicted to her.

I ask. “You seem a little amped.”

She shakes her head. “Caffeine. Not like you mean. So, what do you think?” She points out the window, toward that other world. “Want to get out of here?”

“I’ve got class, Colleen.”

“After, then? I need to talk to you about something.”

Ah, here it comes. “Give me a hint?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to your house? I might have to take a shower. You might have to bring me a towel.”

“How many pages?”

She grins and her teeth seem pointier. “Just three. On Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘Over-Soul.’”

I stand up first. “Well, I’ll tell you what. Because we had such a good time at the gallery the other night, because going to dinner afterward with you and my grandma and Marcie was so much fun, I’ll absolutely help you write your paper.”

“I’m sorry, okay? I made a mistake.”

I put my tray down. “What a crappy thing to do, Colleen. How could —?” But that’s as far as I get before she goes off on me.

“One ‘I’m sorry’ is all you get from me, pal. I apologize, you accept, we move on. That’s it. No lectures, no whining, no raking over the smoldering coals.”

“Well, then maybe you should do your paper by yourself, because I’m still mad.”

“Fine. And maybe you should jerk yourself off with your one functioning hand.”

I can't stomp off in a huff, so I leave that move to her. I just take my tray to the big aluminum racks. On the way, though, I pass Chana and Molly, girls I interviewed for *High School Confidential*.

Molly shakes her finger at me. “You better off without her, Gimpalong.”

I sit through two more classes, I take notes dutifully, I remember to remember the main points. If the teacher calls on me, I answer. Then at three thirty, when school is officially out, I make my way to the parking lot and lean on Colleen's Volkswagen. The one Ed bought her with money made selling weed.

I don't quite know what I'll do if she shows up with Ed or somebody who wants to buy weed or even a girlfriend from detention, but when I spot her, she's alone. She sees me, too, from kind of a long way off, and she raises one hand. So I wave back.

“Lots of Sturm und Drang, huh?” She puts one hand up and rubs my cheek, and just like that I'm hers. I was, anyway.

I ask, “Did you know that Donder and Blizten mean *thunder* and *lightning*?”

“Santa's reindeer? No fucking way!”

“Yeah. Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen and Thunder and Lightning.”

“When I was little, my mom told me Rudolph’s nose was red from heavy drinking.”

I reach for her dress and pull her toward me. “So there’s jolly old Saint Nick, but his main reindeer was alcoholic?”

She leans into me. “Is that a three-page essay on Emerson in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?”

I let myself put my arms . . . well, my arm, around her. “I’m not even sure Mae West said that line, but if she did, it was in *Sextette*.”

“Can we go to your house?”

I shake my head. “Grandma’s home.”

“Want to just make out in the backseat like people did before rock and roll all but eliminated Judeo-Christian civilization as we know it?”

I could just do this forever. Stand by her car, feel her against me, say anything.

I whisper, “You know, ‘Give somebody a fish and she eats once. Teach her to fish and she eats forever.’”

“So that’s a fish in your pocket?”

“I’m saying we should work on your paper. But instead of writing it for you, I’ll show you what to do so you can write any paper anytime.”

She leans in a little more and puts her face against

mine. “You sound like some guy on television who’s about to throw in a second ShamWow! if I order in the next ten minutes.”

I don’t care if she really likes me or not. All I care about is that she’s doing what she’s doing. Doing it to me. Ben the loser recluse. Ben the spaz.

“That’s the deal,” I say. “Take it or leave it.”

She kisses me quick and hard, finds the keys in her purse, hops in her little convertible without bothering with the door, and looks up at me. “So what are you waiting for? Are you going to teach me to fish or not?”

Colleen likes Buster’s, this cool little coffee shop in South Pasadena, which is, for the record, not just southern Pasadena but a whole other city. Pretty and green. Pricey. We’ll end up sitting outside just a block or so from a store that sells seven-hundred-dollar baby strollers. I know because Grandma and her yoga friends chipped in and bought one for someone in their morning class.

Colleen drives us south. We stand in a little line and order from Ayanna with the butterfly tattoo on her shoulder and the pierced lip. I’ve got the money and I order what Colleen likes (caramel macchiato), but the barista looks at Colleen. It’s not flirty or anything like that; they’re birds of a feather and I’m not.

Have I ever connected with anybody like that, ever?

Amy, maybe. A little, anyway. She was in the Centrist Gallery show, too. She wants to go to film school, and she gave me her e-mail address.

Colleen and I settle into a table under the green awning. Well, she settles; I brace myself and sink. The bracing isn't pretty, but I've tried just sitting down, got all tangled up in myself, and ended up flat on my back like a turtle, wishing somebody would just turn me over and let me crawl into the desert and die.

She takes my good hand between both of hers and rubs it briskly. "You okay, Ben? You're cold."

"Just thinking about Emerson."

Colleen pretends to shudder. "Makes me cold all over." She sips her drink, nods at a skate punk who checks her out as he hurtles by, then scrutinizes a couple of nannies who cruise up, speaking nonstop Spanish.

They park their strollers, and the angel-haired toddlers hold up their perfect arms.

Colleen points at the kids. "*Lindo. Lindos niños.*"

The nannies nod and smile, then go inside.

I tell her, "I didn't know you spoke Spanish."

She shakes her head. "I don't. I know, like, ten words. Ed's pretty good, actually. The smugglers like it when you use their native tongue."

"Do you ever want kids?" I ask.

"Get serious. Do you?"

“Are you kidding?”

She takes a drink from her tall glass, wipes the foam off her lip with an index finger, then licks that. “Why ‘Are you kidding?’ You don’t have C.P. where it counts; we know that. And you’ve got money to burn. You could marry somebody nice and have all the kids you want.”

“Let’s talk about Ralph.”

“Who?”

“Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

“Oh, yeah. Him. You never think about anybody talking to these, like, icons and calling them by their first names. ‘Ralph, either put on those Over-Souls or you can’t go out and play with Thoreau!’”

Colleen has a terrific laugh. High but not screechy. Big but not booming. Robust, I guess. For a girl, anyway. Especially one who weighs about ninety-two pounds.

I ask, “What’s the assignment, exactly?”

“Compare Emerson’s belief system with three or four others.”

“So it’s just research.”

She sits back in a semi-huff. “Fine. I’ll do it myself.” She runs her hand up my arm. “I just thought if you loved me, you’d do it for me.”

“Nice try.”

“Love is bullshit, anyway,” she says. “But you like me, right? Like hanging out with me?”

“I can take it or leave it.”

She’s out of her chair, leaning over the table, kissing me, asking, “Really?”

I wait till I can breathe again before I say, “So I’d rather take it.”

People stare at us, or at her, maybe. Are they thinking, *How can she do that to a gimp like him?* Or do they just think, *Get a room?* The guys can’t take their eyes off Colleen: that incredible skin, the in-your-face tats, the lazy way she smokes, the bitter curve of her lips. One of them—his wife keeps barking orders: “Get some napkins,” “Get some more milk,” “Pick up one of the twins, no not that one, the other one”—probably sees her just like I do, she’s the gatekeeper to another world. Like in the ads for movies: *A world of danger, intrigue, desire. A world where almost everything is a mistake.*

When he won’t stop staring, I glare at him and ask, “What?”

He looks down, embarrassed, and I feel the rush of testosterone.

Colleen does a pretty good imitation of De Niro in *Taxi Driver*. “Are you lookin’ at me?” Which makes me blush.

There’s that laugh of hers again, big but weirdly like wind chimes, too. “You are so cute,” she says.

Then we sit for a little while. Young parents cruise by, a homeless guy with a Santa pack of recyclables over one

shoulder, another nanny or two chatting on cell phones to some humid country I only know about from coloring it green in the second grade.

I could sit all afternoon and just be with her, but Colleen gets restless. I know we're just about to get up when a couple of women walk by. They're just in shorts and T-shirts and flip-flops. But their shorts are shorter, their T-shirts are tighter, and they're put together in a way even the yoga moms aren't. One of them—short, rice-white hair and a snake tattoo winding up one calf—stops.

“Colleen? What are you doing here?”

“Hey!” Colleen stands up and they hug. Then she points to me. “I'm just hanging out with my pal Constantinopolous, the Greek shipping tycoon. He's got so much gold in those cargo pants, he can't stand up, so he's not just being rude.”

“Ben,” I say, holding out my good hand. “Don't pay any attention to her.”

“Who are you guys these days?” Colleen asks.

The tattooed one says, “Uh, I think I'm Tawny, and she's Crystal.”

Crystal elbows her friend. “It's Amber, dumb ass.” Then they both laugh.

“Want to sit?” Colleen asks.

They shake their heads. “We gotta go.”

We watch them—everybody watches them—get

into a blue Miata convertible and zoom away. I wait and see. Colleen will either tell me or she won't.

"There's something you ought to know," she says after a very long minute or two. "I mean, it's no big deal, but better you hear it from me than some vindictive bitch at school who wants you all to herself."

She doesn't mean it, that last part, but I like to hear it. "Okay. Whenever you're ready."

She takes a deep breath. "Those girls are strippers. They change their names every time they work at a new club. There's this kind of, you know, crop rotation, so customers don't have to look at the same boob jobs all the time."

"Do you know their real names?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure they do anymore. The one with all the collagen used to be a Mormon. 'Let's hear it for the beautiful Hulga from Salt Lake City,' right? No way. So it's Raven or Peaches or Toffee or Dawn."

I just nod. This is her narrative.

"Um, well, let's just cut to the chase here: my mom's a stripper, too, okay? She works downtown at this club called Girls Before Swine."

"I thought you said your mom was a waitress."

Colleen squirms. "Well, she waits for guys to stuff twenties in her thong. I probably should have told you before."

"So I know now. No big deal."

She looks at me, one eye half closed suspiciously.
“‘No big deal.’ Is that it?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. Your mom’s an exotic dancer. Mine’s a missing person. I’d rather have yours.”

“It doesn’t matter to you?”

“I don’t think so. Does it matter to you?”

She takes a deep breath. “Ed hated it.”

“No way. Ed’s an entry-level felon. What’s he doing judging —?”

“Ed’s a chauvinist dickhead. He thinks women ought to stay home.”

“You were his girlfriend.”

“I was a toy, okay? He played with me.”

“You told me you carried dope in your underpants so he wouldn’t get caught with it.”

“So I was a toy mule. This isn’t about Ed and me; it’s about my mom.”

“Colleen, I don’t care what your mom does for a living. I’m glad she doesn’t torture small animals for minimum wage, but except for that—”

She blurts, “Kids made fun of me.”

I push her coffee toward her and she takes one last sip, then makes a face. I ask, “What kids?”

“Kids at school. When they found out, it was fucking awful.”

I take her hand. “C’mon, you know how kids are.

They're hyenas. They harass the weak and the wounded until they collapse, and then they eat them. When I was in grade school, some jerk found out my mom ran away from home. He told everybody. First, I was one of the untouchables, anyway, because of the C.P. Then I'm so toxic my mom can't stand me, and then after school my grandma pulls up in that Cadillac. Pity and envy are a nasty combination. If you ever have to mix them in chemistry, wear protective goggles."

"They called her a whore. I'm nine years old. What am I supposed to do with that except punch their lights out?"

"I wish I'd punched everybody's lights out instead of hiding in the Rialto."

"At least you know a lot about movies. What do I know except names for weed? Angola, baby bhang, Canadian black, Don Juan—"

"Yeah, but look how nicely you alphabetize them."

She can't help but laugh as she picks up my good hand, pulls it to her, and kisses it. "I missed you."

"Really? Then I'll tell you what. Go with Grandma and me and probably Marcie to this concert Saturday night, and I'll write that Emerson essay for you."

THIS OUGHT TO BE INTERESTING. Colleen at the Norton Simon Museum. And not just wandering around looking at paintings, but sitting down in one of the galleries and listening to chamber music. Well, at least there won't be some tall guy outside with a muscle car and some hemp rolling papers.

I'm ready to go: brick-colored J. Crew khakis, one of their cotton/cashmere sweaters, and some cool shoes called Planet Walkers that slip right on. Colleen picked out the sweater and likes the shoes. She said to the salesman, "My boyfriend here would really like the Planet Lurchers so he can emphasize his disability and everybody will feel sorry for him, but he'll settle for the Walkers."

I liked being called her boyfriend.

I'm leaning in the door of my grandma's bedroom while she puts on a few diamonds. She knows some high-end jewelers downtown, the kind with a guard at the door and a space-station air-lock entrance. She owns one of those loupes, those eyepieces, and she and Mr. Biddle take turns looking through it while they diss the new, callow rich. The upstarts and Powerball winners who come in and buy the biggest thing in the display case. Grandma's old-school. She and Mr. Biddle agree that they are from an era when the word *elegant* meant something.

She's got one photo on her dresser, and that's of her and my grandfather. In a bad movie, right now there'd

be this montage where that photo melted into one of my parents and me, and that one turned into just my parents, et cetera.

My grandma would never be in a bad movie. My father's dead, and that's that; photographs would just remind her. And Mom? I guess she was kind of a basket case. I kind of remember her and I kind of don't.

She turns around. "How do I look?"

My grandma likes linen and silk. She shops where everybody knows her name. They call her when new stuff comes in. The next day, she sits and sips bottled water while they show her things.

I tell her, "You always look good."

"Someday, Benjamin," she says, "you're going to have to take care of our assets."

"What happened to Flatterum, Leechum, and Bill-umtillthey squeal?"

"There are family matters to be taken into consideration."

"Right. They're family lawyers."

She puts her hand up to my face. Her skin is warm and dry. "We need to talk soon, dear."

"What about?"

We both look up at the sound of the doorbell, and I say that I'll get it.

When I open the door, Marcie points at Colleen and

says, “Look who I bumped into on your lawn. What a coincidence!”

They both kiss me, and Marcie says how nice I look. She’s ready for a short hike, in cargo pants and crewneck, and Colleen has her B-girl look down (sideways baseball cap, tight black pants but not so tight she couldn’t bust a few moves if she wanted to, tank top with *Floor Angelz* on it, sneaks).

Grandma makes her usual entrance. “Hello, everyone.”

Colleen mutters, “Your Highness. I bring news from Paris that I hope will not distress you. It’s about the dauphin’s hernia.” But immediately she goes right up to Grandma and says, “I’m sorry about last week at that gallery. I should have come in and said good-bye, headache or no headache. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Thank you, dear. Apology accepted.” She checks her watch. “Probably we should go. The concert is at seven, and there are no reserved seats.”

We follow her toward the garage. Marcie and Grandma talk about roses. Marcie actually gardens. Grandma goes out with a sixty-dollar basket from Pottery Barn and her Felco forged-steel pruning shears and has the gardener hold the bush steady for her while she clips.

Colleen whispers, “Where are we going again?”

“The Norton Simon Museum. Chamber music in the north gallery.”

“Probably not going to be a mosh pit, huh?”

“If there is, let’s try and keep Grandma out of it. You know how she gets when she hears ‘I Wanna Be Sedated.’”

The three of us stand on the sidewalk while the car oozes out of the garage. Marcie gets in front, Colleen and me in the back.

Grandma gets to the end of the driveway, then waits until the street is completely empty in both directions, maybe as far as the Atlantic and the Pacific.

I ask Colleen, “Everything okay?”

She warns me, “Don’t check on me every two seconds. I’m fine.”

I settle back into the leather. I shouldn’t have said anything. When I was little, Grandma used to constantly ask me how I felt, and it was a real drag. So I spend a little time wondering what Grandma wants to talk to me about “soon.” What is it that a lawyer can’t handle and I can?

We’re somewhere on Orange Grove Boulevard, maybe halfway to the museum, when Colleen whispers, “Good thing Ed’s not back here. He’d cut Grandma’s ears off to get at those diamonds.”

“Where is Ed, anyway? I haven’t seen him at school.”

She shakes her head. “Boot camp. He got busted, and the cop said, ‘The army or we go up in front of a judge.’ But I really don’t care where he is. When I go to meetings, some chick is always saying how she ran into this

dude from before, and the next thing she knows, she's high again. I know what she means. I can't be around Ed or anybody else like that. That's why I like you. All you're going to turn me on to is mango sorbet."

"Can I ask you about something else? Do you think your mom would talk to me about her work?"

"Her work.' She slithers up and down a pole and takes her clothes off."

"I'm thinking about making another documentary. I've got a new camera. Marcie talked Grandma into buying it for me. It's really cool. Super-sharp, sound, the whole nine yards. Check this out." I open the satchel Colleen and I bought one day at Old Navy and show her.

She looks through the little viewfinder. "Sounds like you just want to take pictures of naked girls."

I shake my head. "I want to talk to the girls who get naked. Working in clubs is a whole other world, okay? It's got to have rules and rites and all that stuff, just like high school. Like, how old can you be before you're kicked out of the tribe? What's the shoptalk like? Are the girls saving to go to college, or do they spend money as fast as they get it? There's got to be, like, a thousand stories just in their dressing room."

She leans closer, so she's almost whispering. Her breath is warm and I can smell the patchouli. "If it's stories you want, try this one: My mom knows this chick who lived with a schoolteacher, okay? Sweet guy. Taught

third grade. Liked to cook. So, she comes home at two thirty a.m. with her little stripper purse full of ten-dollar bills, and he's there with, like, lentil loaf and a glass of carrot juice. He's been doing lesson plans, and there's all these little maps and shit from his kids who adore him. I mean, she's seen these kids, okay, gone to some play where they're all dressed like dairy products or something."

"How'd they even meet?"

"Supermarket. Some guy recognized her and wouldn't leave her alone, so Mr. Super Teacher steps in. Chicks love that Sir Galahad shit."

"This story isn't going to have a happy ending, is it?"

She shakes her head. "Six months or so later, she takes up with some hard-core scumbag from the club."

"Wow."

"No kidding."

Grandma turns off Colorado and into the parking lot. She says something to the nearest guard, who walks over and moves a big safety cone that had been guarding a primo parking spot.

Without being asked, Grandma says, "I called ahead. I'm on the board."

Colleen whispers, "Unfuckingbelievable."

We stroll up the steps and past the first of about two thousand guards. Grandma points to this big, black sculpture of six bronze guys and says in her docent's voice,

“The Burghers of Calais. It’s actually quite a lovely story. The English had cut off the town of Calais, and people were dying. Months with almost no food and very little water. So the richest men in town got together and gave themselves up as hostages. That way the others would survive. They’re dressed in those loose clothes because what they had on was basically their underwear or their pajamas. They didn’t want to go over to the English in their finery because they knew they’d be killed for sure.”

“So were they?” Colleen asks.

Grandma shakes her head. “King Edward’s wife, Philippa, was pregnant and, luckily for the mayor of Calais and his friends, superstitious. She thought it would be bad luck for her unborn child.”

Inside, Grandma and Marcie show their membership cards. Colleen takes in the scene: sculptures and paintings, busts and bronzes. And not all crammed together, either. The place is huge.

I’ve been here a lot. When I was little, Grandma would drive up all the time and “expose me to art.” Like art was some kind of dandy virus I’d be lucky to catch.

Colleen shudders. “I’d hate to polish these floors, I’ll tell you that.”

“Now, there’s an idea for a documentary,” I tell her. “If just being around great art is good for a person, are the janitors here happier than the average maintenance men?”