

match.com

17 DECEMBER 2007

It was one of the milder winters as far as Southern California winters go, but even so, in the nearly empty house that evening it felt unseasonably cold. This may have been due in part to the lighting. The whole house was dark except for a cool blue glow from a laptop screen in the living room. It also may have had something to do with the fact that earlier in the day someone had turned the air conditioning on, full blast. Someone, apparently, had thought it would be an extremely funny joke.

In the living room, a girl in her early-to-middle twenties hovered over the back of a desk chair, where a man in his mid-to-late twenties sat staring at the blue glow of the laptop. The girl had one foot toeing the back of the chair's seat and the other poised, tiptoe style, on its base. Her hands squeezed the man's shoulders for stability. She wiggled back and forth, balancing. The look on her face gave the strong impression that she had a significantly dire need to urinate. The girl leaned toward the laptop and giggled.

“Okay,” she said. “Here’s the About Me section. It’s real important.”

Cradling the laptop on his knees, the young man peered suspiciously at a website. The left side of the page was plastered with an image of a brunette with retro-rimmed glasses glancing over her shoulder with a bad Mona Lisa smile. Positioned just below her cleavage was a quote: “It’s true. I’m addicted to scary movies. Hold me?” The computer cursor blinked impatiently at the top of an empty form.

“The all-important About Me section,” said the young man. He seemed to be sizing up the screen rather than reading. He pushed a quick humpf of breath out his nose. “Remind me again why I’m doing this?”

“Because, weirdo, you wanna meet girls. Bowm-chica-bow-wow.” The girl gyrated her hips up and down wildly. She stumbled off the chair, stabilized, then planted her feet wide on the floor and her elbows close together on the chair back, nesting her chin in her hands behind the young man’s head.

“Tell ‘em who you are,” she said. “Be manly. Be mysterious. Say you’re sexy. Say you’re outgoing.”

“*Outgoing?*” said the young man. “I’m least like outgoing. I’m whatever the opposite of outgoing is. I’m incoming,” he said, looking pitiful.

“C’mon. Put your brilliant MBA mind to work. Market yourself.”

The young man leaned back in the chair and humped again. Quite slowly, his eyes left the laptop and wandered up

the wall of the living room. On it hung what appeared to be a family photograph, two parents and a son and daughter, all dressed in 19th century garb. The photo was done in heavy sepia, and the two-dimensional saloon background suggested it had been taken at the type of photo booths found at county fairs. The father stood holding a Winchester rifle by the barrel and had a grimace reminiscent of “American Gothic.” The mother wore a Quaker outfit, complete with black shawl and bonnet, which didn’t quite fit with her perky eyes. The children were dressed in buckskin. The daughter looked soft and giggly. The son looked confused.

Jostled by a sudden shaking of his chair, the young man’s gaze returned to the laptop. He humped. Then he typed.

The girl leaned in, her wrists bumping the back of the man’s head, and read aloud,

I was born on Planet Zantar, but don’t let that—or the fact that I just turned 322 Earth-years old—put you off. Plus, my third arm is hardly noticeable when I stand sideways. I’m not delusional. I’m just really from Zantar. My intergalactic super powers include the ability to breathe and talk simultaneously, stop at stop signs, and spell most words correctly. In second grade, I won a spelling contest, correctly spelling r-e-f-r-i-g-e-r-a-t-o-r. Since then I’ve been less fortunate with contests. Zantarians are rather unlucky. We are optimistic, though. I continue

to instruct my cat Sweaty in elementary calculus though she makes little progress (Earth pets are rather dense). I have reduced to two packs a day my Twinkie habit. I only require Rabies shots once every other week. Worry not: my goiter has recently been shrinking. Can you can frigerate things? My lawyers say a plea bargain may get me out of jail time. Country music rocks.

“God.” The girl shook her brother’s shoulder again. “You’re such a dork.”

“Wait. You haven’t read the last line.” He typed.

Some of these statements may not be entirely truthful. But at least I am honest.

The young man twisted his head around, looking very pleased with himself. “I like it, kind of. It has that certain touch of...”

“Dorkdom?”

The young man opened his mouth, then closed it. After a moment he said, “But think about supply and demand. Most of the guys on here are probably dorks. They figure the only way they’ll get girls is if they talk about ripped abs and surfing and—”

“So you’re cornering the dork market.”

“Exactamundo, my dear Tess.”

The girl groaned. “Well, press ‘submit’ already.”

He did. They both watched the page reload. The image of the brunette was replaced with a couple in matching rodeo outfits, laughing uproariously. Their quote, placed across their pelvises, read “We match! Yee-ha!”

The girl wiggled her hips. “Okay. Now choose your turn-ons and turn-offs and list your favorite TV shows and music and hobbies and stuff.”

“Sure. Music: John Dowland.”

“Leave out the classical crap. Say you like Journey. Or The Eagles.”

“Eagles.”

“Yeah, The Eagles.”

“I think it’s just Eagles, Tessapoo.”

“What? That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Next you’re gonna to tell me it’s just Beatles and just Who and just—just Cranberries and White Stripes.”

The young man looked up at his sister innocently. “It’s cold in here. Whoever turned on the air was a real jerk, let me tell you. When mom and dad get home, they’ll send us right back to school for that. No more winter break.”

“Where *did* Mom and Dad go tonight? Square dancing?”

“There’s an idea. I’ll put square-dancing as a hobby.”

“You square dance?”

“No. But I am looking for girls in the Midwest.”

The girl let out an exorbitant sigh, stomped over to a couch on the other side of the room and plopped into it, making her own sound effect as she hit the cushions.

“*Thwok!*” She slid down the front of the couch until she was practically lying on the floor. “I still can’t believe you’re going to Nebraska—voluntarily. How could you leave the OC?”

“I think it was all the perfect boobs and tans,” said the young man said, looking down at his feet. “And don’t call it that.”

“It’s *The Eagles*.” The girl pronounced ‘The’ with a hard ‘e.’ “Google it. Trust me.”

“I just might Google it, Tessypants.”

The girl twisted her head around and watched her brother type. She rolled her eyes. Deep into the couch cushions she stuck her left hand and came up with a television remote control.

“It’s dark,” she said, examining the remote control. “Somebody around here should turn the light on.” She looked over her shoulder again. “So Jeremy’s dating this girl in my bio class now,” she said.

“Oh yeah? What’s her name?”

“Madeline. Freaking Madeline Wescott. I mean, when is this? The fifties?”

“It is quite the anachronistic name,” said the young man, still typing.

“She texts him all through lecture. It’s total disgustingness.” The girl crossed her arms. “And then she has the gall to go and ask me about what stuff Jeremy and me, you know, *did* while we were together. Can you believe that?” She let her hand slide down the arm of her sweatshirt

slowly and closed her fingers around her wrist. “It’s dark in here.”

“I think I’m all done with my profile.”

“Great. Now you search for hotties.”

“Just so long as they don’t have perfect boobs.”

The girl turned back to the remote control, sighed at it resignedly, and switched on the television. She began clicking through channels, stopping occasionally to add further insight into Madeline Wescott’s disgustingness.

“Let’s see...search ages from twenty-two to thirty?”
Is twenty-two too young? Would an undergrad go out with me?”

“How should I know?” said the girl. She kicked the arm of the couch.

“Oh hey. Here’s someone. And she goes to Nebraska. Wait. No. She goes *through* Nebraska. She’s a trucker. And she spelled it Nerbaksa. Wow. She once did the Detroit-to-L.A. run in thirty-one hours straight. Remarkable, eh Tess?”

The girl suddenly swung her legs around and came to a sitting position on the couch. She arched her back very straight, then tilted her head to the side. She pushed off from the couch and came to a standing position, militarily stiff. The young man stopped typing and looked at her. His forehead crinkled curiously.

The girl threw her shoulders back, made a right-face, and marched down the hallway. Halfway down the hall she made a left-face and marched into a bedroom. Navigating the

darkness with familiarity, the girl sank onto the bed, flopped on her back, and stared at the ceiling.

From the bedroom the young man's typing on the laptop was barely audible. There was a quiet humpf. The girl's head rolled to the side, falling into a glint of light reflected from a glass figurine, an angel, in the corner of the ceiling. A bookshelf against the wall was lined with a mausoleum of stuffed animals—a lionness, three beanie babies, a Raggedy-Ann doll—posed as if they'd just stopped whispering conspiratorially. The girl stretched her arm out toward the window and let her fingers fall and run across the surface of a jewelry box lying on the ledge. After a long time, the girl righted herself.

She looked at the floor. She frowned. On it was a clear plastic storage container. She bent over and peered closer, still frowning. The container appeared to be full of bound school notebooks. She leaned in and bent at the waist, trying to read the label.

JOHN'S STUFF

IMPORTANT BUT NOT WORTH STEALING

“Mom and Dad put your stuff in my room,” she said, padding back to the living room. She scuffed her feet on the ground. The young man had been staring off at the wall again and sort of jerked at the sound of the voice.

“Yeah. I think they converted mine into a game room last semester.”

The girl slumped on the couch and stared at the television. The young man looked over his shoulder.

“Hey now,” he said. “No reason to mope. You’ve still got your room, right?”

The girl didn’t seem to be listening.

“Hey John?” she said.

“Yo.”

“Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m sixty-four?”

The young man breathed in slowly through his nose, then let it out. In the background, a woman in a television infomercial was singing the virtues of a miniature blender. An older man was standing by her, watching and nodding vigorously.

...And how much do you think you would pay for all this—the magic blender, the three spare blades, the recipe book...

On the couch, the girl curled her legs up beneath her. She groaned, turned off the television, rolled over onto her side. She stuck her hands between her thighs.

“Tell me again why I’m doing this,” said the young man.

“I gotta pee,” said the girl. She started toward the bathroom, but on her way made a u-turn toward the kitchen.

In the kitchen, she listened to her brother typing. “Don’t start messaging people a bunch of weirdo stuff,” she yelled, sliding open the silverware drawer. “Be normal for once.”

He mumbled something back.

“What?” she yelled. “Can’t hear ya.”

“I said it’s extremely *cold* in here.”

“Find any hotties?” she yelled. She closed the drawer.

From the living room came a voice mumbling something about practically drowning in gorgeous Midwestern physics majors.

In the bathroom, the girl turned on the light. The fluorescents were harshly bright. The girl squinted at the mirror. She went over to the toilet and unbuttoned her jeans and squatted, elbows on her knees. Only a few drops came out. She waited, then buttoned back up. She walked over to the mirror. The steak knife from the silverware drawer was pinned between her palm and the porcelain sink.

She listened. She went over to the toilet and flushed. As water made its flushing plunk and began slowly to fill, she rested the knife against her wrist. She carefully slid the blade halfway up her arm, watching herself do it in the mirror, the serrated teeth creeping up her skin almost caressingly.

Out of the silence, she heard a hollow whistle coming from the living room. It was slow—some kind of waltz, perhaps—and sounded like a sad song trying hard to turn happy, or maybe a happy song that had just received terrible news.

She pressed the knife harder, still listening. She seemed to recognize the tune, but looked like she couldn't quite place it.

In the mirror, she looked at the small red thread that hung on her arm. She flung the knife and it clattered against the porcelain and she scrunched up her eyes and locked her elbows and gripped the sink.

From the living room, the sound of whistling dropped in mid-melody, like a turntable slowing speed and sinking pitch, and the house again grew silent.

II

16 FEBRUARY 2008

Dinko Margolis sat surfing the web in the Crappy Coffee Cafeteria on a perfectly good, if cold, winter Saturday. It was still in the thirties outside, so everybody on campus was either in their dorms or the student union or the library. Dinko'd been cooped in his dorm all day, and he avoided the library whenever possible, so it was to the cafeteria in the student union, despite the lousy nachos and crappy coffee.

Toobie and Toobie's roommate—they shared a dorm across from Dinko—were already at the cafeteria, and when they saw him with his laptop, they'd invited themselves over to his table to check the score. Nebraska had lost two of their last three games and they were out of the NCAA basketball tournament. It was halfway through the fourth quarter and Nebraska was behind again. Sitting there with

Toobie and his roommate on either side of the table, switching the internet browser between espn.com game updates, his Facebook profile, and a new viral video site, Dinko felt it was like those rainy days in elementary school where you had to sit inside the cafeteria with everyone during lunch instead of playing outside. Well, not the laptop websurfing, but the rainy-day coopiness. The video they were watching finished.

“That’s hella gross,” said Dinko. He looked over at Toobie. Toobie was staring across the cafeteria and had apparently missed the gross part. “I don’t see why anybody’d do that,” said Dinko.

“Or at least video it,” said Toobie’s roommate, sniggering. When the guy laughed, he kind of snorted a little. “Hey chief,” he said, “Check the score.”

Dinko had forgotten Toobie’s roommate’s name, but he didn’t really feel like asking. Chief. The guy’d probably forgotten his name, too. Dinko clicked on the espn.com browser window. Nebraska was behind by nine.

“Shitbonkers,” said Toobie’s roommate. Dinko kind of didn’t like the guy. The guy had been eating Dinko’s nachos and now they were mostly gone. He could’ve asked. Dinko switched to his Facebook profile.

Still staring over his shoulder, Toobie elbowed Dinko. “Psst,” he whispered. “I think those two are on a first date.”

Dinko looked up, following Toobie’s gaze. A guy and girl sat at the table next to them. The guy had his back to them, but was sort of hunched over the table, fingering a

coffee cup with what seemed to Dinko like undue devotion. Across from him, the girl. She looked familiar. She was in Dinko's bio lab maybe. He wasn't sure. Anyway, she wasn't one of his Facebook friends. She had okay tits for a skinny girl, but she was sort of a butterface.

"First date," said Dinko. "Coolio." He went back to Facebook. He was searching for girls staying in Neihardt, the honors dorms.

"When she joined him," whispered Toobie, "he stood up all funny awkward and she reached out to hug him but he stuck out his hand to shake. They settled on this really awkward shoulder-patting thing."

Toobie's roommate sniggered.

"Isn't it kind of funny how he's got cowboy boots on," Toobie continued, "with his shirt and everything?"

"Yeah. Funny looking," said Dinko. He'd found a girl in Neihardt. He wondered if she was a brainiac. He kind of liked brainiacs. They weren't as into themselves as babes. Well, most of them. Some were worse. He clicked on the girl's pics.

"Cowboy boots. This *is* the Midwest," said Toobie's roommate. He was staring now, too.

"But they don't look right on him," said Toobie.

Dinko looked again. Toobie was right. The guy did look funny in the boots. The guy wasn't local. It was obvious, for some reason.

"Do you think that's his real hair color?"

“Jeez, man, you sound like a frickin’ faggy,” said Toobie’s roommate.

“Go hump your come-stained sheets,” said Toobie.

“Chief, check the score,” said Toobie’s roommate.

Dinko kept looking at the girl’s Facebook profile. Most of her pics were of her and three or four girls in a dorm room kind of dressed up and posing, puckering lips and jutting their hips at the camera. Typical Facebook chick pics.

Why’d you pick the cafeteria to meet? Dinko heard the girl at the table next to them say. The cafeteria’s linoleum tile floors made everything echo.

Here? Oh. I thought it’d be romantic. I mean, what’s more romantic than greasy campus food?

Oh! I thought you picked it because we both probably knew where it was!

Everything the girl said sounded extremely enthusiastic. Maybe Toobie was right. Maybe it was a first date.

“Hey chief. The game.”

Dinko was trying not to stare at the couple. The girl had her hands plunged in her lap, pointy elbows sticking out stiffly. Her body really wasn’t that great, on second thought. Her arms and neck were tight and thin, but her hips and legs were a little dumpy. She was sort of a butterbody, really. The guy had his legs crossed wide and a hand planted on a cowboy boot. The guy might have been trying to flex. It was hard to tell.

Dinko finally refreshed the espn.com browser window. Down by twelve now.

Your profile said you're into Journey?" he heard the girl say.

Yeah. Oh yeah! I wouldn't say "into," per se, but—

They're great! What's your favorite song?

My what?

Your favorite Journey song. What is it?

Oh. Um. Peas from a Pod.

I don't think I've heard that one.

It's one of their lesser known works. From their earlier period.

They call it their Pod Period.

"WTF, man. Pod Period?!" said Toobie's roommate.

Just then, the girl seemed to glance over at their table. Toobie snapped his head around and reached for a nonexistent nacho while his roommate suddenly became extremely engrossed in the espn.com game stats on Dinko's laptop. "Go Huskers," he sniggered.

Dinko clicked back to Facebook. He scrolled down the page. The Neihardt girl's *About Me* said, "Don't worry. The rest of the world has normal covered." Her favorite quote was "Fact. Bears eat beets. Bears. Beets. Battlestar Galactica." She had three posts already today on her wall. Pretty average. But she liked Battlestar Galactica. Potentially a geek. Dinko had never seen Battlestar Galactica, but it sounded geeky. He clicked back to her pics page.

Toobie's roommate sniggered. He and Toobie were looking at the laptop, but really just pretending not to listen

to the conversation at the table next to them. Toobie elbowed Dinko again. It was getting annoying.

But enough about me. Your profile said you like science fiction?

Well, I really meant fantasy instead of science-fiction.

Oh.

Really, like, fantasy with romance. So pretty much I like romance.

“Profile?” said Toobie’s roommate. “Did they meet on eHarmony or somefuck?”

The girl was looking at their table again.

“Quiet, douche,” whispered Toobie, kicking his roommate underneath the cafeteria table.

Dinko clicked on the “Add as Friend” link for the girl and typed a message.

hey there. im bored and in the cafeteria. stupid snow, huh? whats it like in Neihardt? i was going to dorm there but they told me i was just too brainy (j/k). btw, i think we're taking bio together with sonnenfeld? I need major help for the next unit. those darn ligaments. so add me as a friend! no really, do it!

Um, not to be prying or anything, said the guy, but I noticed it and was a little curious. Your hands are blue.

Dinko snuck a glance. The girl was examining her hands, confused. Her palms were, in fact, a pale blue, almost

as if she'd covered them in blue chalk. The girl gave an awkward laugh.

That's really weird. I—I don't know what it is. My hands aren't typically blue.

Sorry. Shouldn't've said anything. So...do you date much?

What?

Toobie's roommate made his mouth into an 'o' and stuck his tongue in his cheek, bringing his hand up to his mouth around an invisible penis.

Geez. Sorry. Brilliant thing to ask on a date, huh?

No, it's okay. I mean, Well, this is the Midwest. Most guys just play Halo in their dorms or get drunk or watch football or, or—

Or all of the above, all at once?

The guy still had his back to them, but Dinko could see he was sort of smiling, and the girl was sort of smiling, too.

Toobie whispered, "This is better than Shot at Love!"

Dinko went back to espn.com. He was starting to get really annoyed with Toobie. Last week, Toobie'd spent the whole afternoon in Dinko's dorm—and yes, the girl was right, they'd played Halo for hours—but Toobie'd cooked a Hot Pocket in the microwave and the Hot Pocket juice had got all over the microwave and Toobie hadn't even offered to clean it. Dinko was no neat freak, but still. And in the first place, he hadn't even invited Toobie to hang out.

"Hey, you guys, we lost," he said.

"Shitbonkers," said Toobie's roommate.

“Wanna go back to the dorms and play Halo?” said Dinko. Maybe he’d explode a Hot Pocket in Toobie’s microwave.

Toobie was surveying the cafeteria. It had become almost empty. They and the first date couple were about the only ones there. “Yeah, I guess so. Nothing else to do.”

The girl was so right, Dinko thought. Toobie and his roommate got up.

“Hey,” said Toobie, looking down at Dinko. “You coming?”

“I think I’m gonna stay here.”

“Jesus. You suggested it,” said Toobie. He muttered something and started walking toward the exit. Toobie’s roommate looked over his shoulder at the couple. He stuck his tongue in his cheek again and swaggered out the door.

Dinko sat there, trying not to listen to the first date couple talk about their pets. The guy had a cat, but he was trying to give it away, not because he didn’t want it, but because he thought he’d become allergic, or at least that was one explanation for why he’d been taking so many showers lately. The girl really liked cows, but she didn’t have any live ones, just stuffed. She also had a teapot shaped like a cow. The guy said he was extremely interested in seeing a cow-shaped teapot.

Dinko opened a new browser window and went to Google. He’d heard you could set up “alerts” that would email you whenever a given phrase showed up on the web. He found the Google Alert page, but then he couldn’t think

of anything he could possibly want to be alerted about. After a while, he typed in his own name and submitted the alert.

The two were talking religion now. He'd been born into a new-wave, free-thinking church with a pastor who wore polo shirts during sermons, surfed at Huntington Beach before Sunday services and forwarded religious joke emails to the congregation. She had grown up Eastern Orthodox—her grandfather, a refugee priest, had fled the steppes of Ukraine under Stalinist rule. The guy was now sort of an atheist. So was the girl. He said it was mainly because of the jokes. She said it was mainly because of the whole God thing.

Dinko looked up atheism on Wikipedia. He scanned the page, ran across Richard Dawkins, who was apparently some atheist big wig. He went to richarddawkins.net, where he found a bunch of atheist merchandise and apparel. Atheist clothing. That seemed funny to Dinko. There was a t-shirt with a big red “A” on it. Dinko got the reference—that one book he'd read in high school—*The Scarlet A*, or something. He Googled it.

Now the first-daters were onto family vacations. His family took trips up the California coast to visit lumber mills—the father owned a furniture store. The guy had witnessed a worker's arm severed by a circular saw, a baby deer flattened by a falling oak, and had his own little finger broken when his sister slammed the car door on it. The accidental nature of this was still debated at family gatherings. The girl's family trips amounted to going to the

Nebraska State Fair each year, where she once got to ride a cow right before it was led into a pen and slaughtered in front of the crowd.

The *Scarlet Letter*. That was it. The search results showed a Korean movie by the same name had just come out, in 2004. Dinko looked it up on imdb.com. He looked at the photos. The lead actress was kind of hot. He read the synopsis. Weird. The last quarter of the movie apparently featured her and the lead guy trapped in the trunk of a car, during which time she had a miscarriage, he went crazy, she asked him to shoot her with his handy gun, he did, and the police discovered him two days later, naked and bloody and crazy. Twisted Korean films. He kind of wanted to see it.

The actress, he read, had killed herself the following year. He looked her up on Wikipedia. She'd slit her wrists *and* hung herself. Must have been serious about it. She'd been suffering insomnia from the nude scenes she'd done in that film, the article said. She'd left a suicide note, in her own blood. It said, "Mom, I am sorry and I love you." Dinko closed the Wikipedia page. He kind of didn't want to see the film anymore.

Suddenly the girl gasped. *My pants. It's my pants!*

Um. Excuse me?

My jeans—they're brand new—I bought them for the date. The blue dye must've rubbed off.

The girl held her hands out. She said, quietly, *My hands sweat a lot.*

Dinko looked at the couple out of the corner of his eye. The guy had reached across the table and now he held both the girl's blue hands, palm up, in his.

Blue hands, the guy said. You know, it could be a new fashion statement. Or you could claim you're a superhero and it's part of your super power—blue hands. Or if there was this guy bugging you and you wanted to get rid of him, you could say were an alien or something.

I think I'll go with the superhero thingy, just now, she said.

They were both quiet.

Your hands are so soft, he said.

I use lotion, she said. She looked away. Your hands so are warm, she said.

I don't use anything, he said.

Dinko stared at his laptop. He thought about looking at the Neihardt girl's photos again, or looking up another girl, but he was bored or tired or something. He closed the internet browser. *Mom, I'm sorry and I love you.* That seemed like a lot to write in blood. Maybe it was easier in Korean. He turned off the laptop.

It's funny, the guy was saying, when I first created my profile—you know, Planet Zantar and all—well, I kind of wanted to fail. I wanted it to be a gorgeous disaster. I wanted to...to wallow in self-pity. Isn't that sad?

Dinko shoved his laptop in his bag and walked toward the cafeteria doors.

The girl and guy weren't touching anymore, but they were still looking at each other.

As he crossed the cafeteria, he noticed the work-study student manning the cash register was eyeing the couple, too. Her mouth was slightly open, and Dinko stared at her white teeth, such a contrast to her quiet Southeast Asian skin. She was so thin, held herself like a toy ballerina, all line and ligament. As he passed her, she seemed to feel his gaze and turned. She frowned, retreating those white teeth from him.

“What?” he said, still heading for the exit. “I’m not looking at you.”

III

12 MAY 2008

Like a curse, the weather had turned hot the last two days, angry hot, just as they were nearing the Rockies. That meant they’d have to turn the heater on, and even with the windows down, the station wagon would be an oven. Cal Feuchtwanger peeled his already damp back from the seat and pushed his left knee against the steering wheel. He craned his body into the passenger seat and reached between John’s corduroy-panted legs for the Monster energy drinks.

“Watch the road for me, willya?” he said to John.

“You could just ask me to get a can for you.”

“That’d be too normal. You gotta live roadtrips on the edge.” When it came to roadtrips, Cal was the expert. Anchorage to Lincoln and back every summer break, every spring break, every winter break in the same Toyota station wagon since he’d started as an undergrad at Nebraska. Six

years of road trips. Three-thousand four hundred miles each way of road trips. However many gallons of gas a year of road trips.

His passenger scribbled something in a notebook against his lap. Cal couldn't believe John had never roadtripped. They'd just graduated with MBAs and he was just now going on his first roadtrip. And Cal didn't know *what* was up with all the notebook jotting. Atypical roadtrip behavior, certainly. But notebook or no, roadtrips were always better the more people you had in the car. Even when you got around to hating them during the middle stage.

"So, tell me about it," he said. He pinned the Monster can against the steering wheel and reached his finger around to pop the top.

"About what?"

"Whaddya mean *what*? The breakup." What else did he think there was to talk about? On roadtrips, there was never much to say once you were to the middle stage. The beginning stage was fun enough—caffeinated excitement and eyecandy scenery. And the final stage, the banzai stage, was fun, too, because you could feel the end, smell it like a woman's body. But the middle stage. You'd get annoyed at anything the other person said. Anything. Hence the music, the books on tape. Last winter break, he'd driven by himself and got all the way through Stephen King's Dark Tower series. But John had saved this gem, a tragifically tragic breakup with an undergrad he'd met online. All Cal knew so

far was that it had happened just before he'd graduated and just after he'd given her his cat. It was going to be good.

John closed his notebook and watched the rising hills of the Rockies in front of them.

"Well, we ended it over the phone," said Cal's passenger.

"Yeah? Did she call or did you? I bet she called. She called, didn't she?"

"She called. I was in the library—on the fourth floor, you know, where I usually sit. I was looking out the window—I'll always remember that—looking out the window when she called—

"You're *always* looking out the window. I've seen you." Cal gulped the energy then stuck the can in his crotch.

"Regardless. Right then, I knew. I started walking down the library stairs—I'll never forget that, either—you know how big moments in your life you remember random images? That breakup will always be about the stairs."

"Ah. The symbolic descent into relationship oblivion."

"No, just walking down stairs."

Cal checked the rearview mirror. The minivan they'd been trailing for the past couple minutes wasn't moving any faster, but the highway was only one lane in either direction, so he was waiting for a chance to pass. In the mirror, he examined his stubble beard. Before they'd hit the road that morning, he'd trimmed some of the hairs near the edges of his lips. It still looked rugged, but more sharp now. It oozed

hard-working businessman who didn't have time to shave, but just as equally, ladies man who didn't need to.

“So she broke up with you.”

“It was a mutual thing, actually. It couldn't have been more mutual.”

“It's never mutual. Someone always loves more.” Cal thought about Lindy—they'd been together since senior year of undergrad—about how she always got him gifts for their monthiversaries, how she looked at him in bed before they fell asleep, watched the action movies he wanted to see, obliged him whenever he wanted to fuck. He got her gifts. And he said goodnight nice, even when he was exhausted. He told her he loved her, too, almost every day. He did love her.

A car zoomed past in the opposite direction. “It's never equal,” he said. “Someone always still wants to stick it out.”

“Well, this time it was. Becca asked me how I felt and I said I thought we should maybe just be friends and she said she maybe felt the same way. Tell me how that's not mutual.”

“Easy. One of you was lying. She probably wanted to stay in the relationship but she thought you didn't, and you thought she wanted out, but you really didn't, and so you told her you wanted out because it's what you thought she thought—because, after all, she called—and then she said she wanted out too because it's what she thought you thought.

“That’s extraordinarily confusing. You’re saying neither of us wanted out?”

Cal leaned over and looked down the road as far as he could. It was flat and empty. He stepped on the gas, pulled the car into the lane for opposing traffic, and nosed alongside the slow minivan.

“So what happened afterward? The usual boozing and whoring?”

“I ate a lot of cheese pizza. A lot.”

Cal checked out the driver of the minivan. Goofy looking guy. A woman, probably his wife, sat next to him. Two kids were waving at them in the back seat.

“Did you hate her for weeks and wish pianos to fall on her from the sky?”

“No. I didn’t. It wasn’t so bad. There were low points, of course. In the evenings I was sort of catatonic. And I woke most nights, sweating and moaning. Drooling, too. I couldn’t figure that out. I mean there was drool *everywhere*. Anyway, the mornings...god, they were the worst. But there was this little part in the middle of the day that wasn’t so bad.”

“Because I’m not saying it’s *good*,” said Cal pulling in front of the minivan, “but you’ve gotta replace love with some other emotion, and hate’s always handy.”

“You’re right, in a twisted kind of way. Ever heard of the Kubler-Ross Stages of Grief? I ran across it in a book on Menninger.”

John opened his notebook and flipped to a blank page. He clicked his pen.

“It kind of looks like a sine wave. It starts out at ‘immobilization’ and goes to ‘denial,’ then ‘anger’—there’s your hate thing—then ‘bargaining,’ ‘depression’ right here, at the low slope, and then finally ‘testing’ and ‘acceptance.’ Kubler-Ross first noticed the pattern in patients with terminal illnesses.”

“So that’s what you read in the library. Fascinating.” Cal examined his stubble beard in the mirror. “And that’s how you felt?”

“Oh no. No no no. *Here’s* what I felt.”

On the facing page, John began scribbling another graph. After a while he stopped and turned the page toward Cal.

“Looks like yesterday’s stock market. Hey. Didja hear the latest sign they know the economy’s bad? Brothels in Nevada are slow. Truckers aren’t willing to spend the gas money.”

“There’re lots more ups and downs on my graph, but here, you see—” John stuck a finger at the end of the graph. “It ends at *peace*. That’s the point.”

“You’re getting a little too philosophical again,” said Cal. He’d once said the same words to Lindy. There’d been absolutely no reason to analyze to death the stupid movie they’d been watching. He couldn’t even remember the movie, but it wasn’t a great movie or anything. But because

she was getting her M.S. in sociology, everything just had to be mean something.

“I’m sure Becca had just as tough a time, you know,” said John. “Maybe without all the drooling, but—”

John stopped in midphrase and looked at the CD player. The Gypsy Kings album had finished. Once again, they were surrounded by road noise.

“Well, I’m sorry,” said Cal, “but it would never’ve worked anyway, you a grad student and her an undergrad. It’s all sophisticated-sounding for her at first and all sexy and scandalous for you. But then you realize.”

Cal ejected the Gypsy Kings and reached over John for the other CDs. He sometimes wondered if he would have gone on for an MBA if it wasn’t for Lindy and her grad school plans.

“We talked about that, actually,” said John. “About grads and undergrads. We figured it’s basically the same except in grad school you have to, well, study for classes. And there’s a lot less sex to go around. There’s approximately the same amount of drinking...but you kind of do it for the opposite reason.”

Cal put in a Maroon 5 CD. He could feel the sweat dribbling down his ribs under his shirt. He smelled body odor, too, and it didn’t smell like his. Body odor mixed with old corduroy.

“Whaddya mean? About the drinking?”

“When you’re an undergrad, you drink because you’re with friends and you’re happy. As a grad student you do it...”

“Because you’re alone and sad?”

Cal’s passenger was silent. He slid his pen down the page of the notebook, tracing some invisible shape. Cal recalled how John had told him about his decision to go to grad school. It hadn’t sounded like he had been exactly thrilled. After all, the guy had been a singer before or something. An undergraduate degree in classical voice or something.

“Why do you think it didn’t work out?” Cal squinted ahead at an RV in front of them.

“I think it was the whole online-dating thing.”

“Whaddya mean?” Actually, Cal had been thinking the same thing as soon as he’d heard how they met, but he wasn’t going to say it. He could be understanding.

John looked ahead at the road for a long time, silent.

It was actually two RVs in front of them. A caravan of people, plugging sluggishly over the Rockies. Cal hated everything slow. He stepped on the gas and neared the tail of the RV.

“There’s a certain...stigma to online dating, you know?” said John.

“I dunno. It’s pretty acceptable now.”

Acceptable, right. Cal wouldn’t be caught dead dating online. Lindy and he had met at a friend’s party. That’s how you were supposed to meet people. They drank a bit, fooled

around a bit, he asked for her number and they texted each other for a week before they first went out. They were still together.

John closed his notebook. “People go online assuming there’s something wrong with them, and something wrong with the other people online. They’re desperate. They’re ready to settle.”

“You’re depressing me,” said Cal. God it was hot. He pulled into the oncoming lane to pass the RVs. He reached down and adjusted his boxers, feeling the sweat between his legs, on his junk.

“But it’s a catch-22,” said John, staring idly at the RV. “Once you’re in the relationship, you start thinking maybe there’s nothing wrong with you—because hey, you’re in a relationship—and you start feeling you could do better. Which is why there’s something wrong with you in the first place. Anyway, you start thinking you can do better, and then you decide to break up, and right about then you realize there really is something wrong with you and you better hold on. But of course it’s too late.”

“Is that really what you think?”

“No. But it’s easier than the truth.”

Cal rolled his eyes.

Only then did he see the car approaching from the other direction. It was coming fast.

“Christ,” Cal said, under his breath, and he felt his heart skip. He gunned the engine. They were still alongside the second RV.

The other car wasn't slowing. Hadn't seen them or something. The sun was probably in the driver's eyes.

Cal pushed the gas harder, leaning to the front of the seat. The other car was coming fast. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see John reaching out for the sides of the car.

"Christ."

Cal could see the shape of the driver now, and the driver had now seen them, had slammed his brakes and was now skidding forward.

Cal gunned the engine.

It happened faster than Cal could figure and he would always remember the look on the face of the driver in the RV watching them helplessly, and John's arms grasping for something to hold onto, and that smell of old corduroy.

He barely passed the second RV and veered hard back into the right lane, spilling Monster on his junk, and felt the whoosh of other car zoom past.

He didn't take his foot off the accelerator for a long time. All he could hear was the roar of the engine and the blood pumping in his ears and Maroon 5 wailing in the background.

After a long time, he glanced over at John. The guy was still holding onto the sides of the car. Cal had almost killed this person, this person who'd just graduated business school. The better student. The one the professors loved. John was planning to fly back to L.A. after the vacation in Alaska. He already had an internship at some marketing agency. And what did Cal have? A verbal *Maybe I'll have a job*

for you from a friend of his mother's who ran an internet advertising company? In Anchorage? Who was he kidding? This guy he barely knew, this guy he'd almost killed. Christ. He didn't even know why the guy had given the girl his cat.

John had finally relaxed his grip on the car and was looking at Cal. Here it came. Well, Cal deserved it.

"You know the last thing she said? She said *I just want to live in a perfect world. Is that too much to ask?* Like she was half apologizing and half feeling like she'd just been ripped off at a swap meet. Isn't that weird?"

Cal darkened. "Jesus. We almost got killed. You say the dumbest things just when I think you're being serious. We almost got killed. I almost killed us."

"I am serious. Becca *hates* being ripped off at swap meets."

Cal was gripping the wheel so tight his knuckles were white. He shivered. Cal checked the rearview mirror for the car, or for the police. Oh christ he would never, never do that again. He promised it on his mother's grave.

He looked over at John, and that was when he got really scared.

John was sitting there, staring at the road in front of them, pale as a sheet. Terrified out of his mind, clearly. But the scary thing was he seemed, in a way—yes, it was undeniably there—he seemed almost disappointed.

IV

1 JUNE 2008

Catrina Feuchtwanger stood at her bedroom closet unbuttoning her blouse. Behind her, already changed, her husband Bill sat in bed, flipping television channels. He had just returned from an oil project just outside Fairbanks, and as always when he first returned, Catrina could smell the petroleum.

Bill had recently bought them TiVo, which gave his remote the added power of not just cycling through the two hundred-plus satellite channels, but pausing the television, fast-forwarding, and viewing in slow motion. He liked watching American Gladiator maneuvers frame-by-frame. Catrina slipped off her blouse and stood in her jeans and bra. She turned sideways just enough to see her husband.

When he'd started working for the oil companies the smell had annoyed her. She'd once promised herself she wouldn't kiss him until the smell was sufficiently gone. Now, she noticed, its dark scent had become familiar, friendly, almost comforting.

"The *Songbird* came today," she said.

"Oh yeah?"

Bill changed the channel and a local reporter appeared, giving the eleven o'clock news. Catrina looked out the window. Even this late, the sky was still pitched in bleak blues, the lopsided Alaska sun drooping down the side of the

earth. It would stay vaguely light like this until after midnight tonight, she thought.

The news man had finished his blurb. Bill put down the remote.

“So let’s see your article.”

“It’s with the other stuff,” she said, nodding toward his nightstand. Bill was a good husband. He remembered the things important to her, and the nature articles she published in the monthly community newsletter were important.

Bill rubbed his belly with the tip of the remote control and leaned over and reached for a stack of mail on the nightstand next to him. He picked up the pile and began sifting through the papers.

Out the window, Catrina watched the sunlight glimmer off the drying mudflats at Jewel Lake. Catrina loved June in Alaska. Everything turned from brown to green in the span of two weeks. But June was also risky. With the sun finally emerging out of its winter depths, Alaskans would start to shuck off their Seasonal Affective Disorder slumps and deal with all the things they’d been too depressed to face during the dark months. It had been right about this time last year the native community organized that disastrous parade-protest against—what had it been? Hiring practices? No one had been completely sure, not even the protesters. And a few Junes before, one of Catrina’s friends had finally—after a whole winter of complaining about her husband the couch-potato—thrown their television out the front door.

“Junk, junk, junk,” said Bill, dropping a clump of envelopes off the side of the bed.

Catrina finished changing and got into bed, sidling up against the headboard. She idly stared at the television. Bill hadn’t looked at her the whole time.

“How were things on the project?” she asked, reaching for a book on her nightstand.

“Pretty slow. Push the rigs in the ground, pull the oil out. Not much to it.”

Bill rarely talked about work. Early on, Katrina had wondered about this, even feared he was hiding something. Over time, she decided that for him, work was work and there wasn’t much to say.

“How was it around here? Survive without me?” he asked.

“Oh, same old. Cal got back from school.”

“He out tonight?” asked Bill. “Oh, this is yours.” He tossed a magazine-style newsletter onto her lap.

“Yeah, he’s out,” she said. It was her college alumni magazine. Every year they sent them. Every June, in fact. Maybe they’d figured out that people were more likely to donate post S.A.D.

Catrina flipped the pages of the newsletter. “He said something about trying to live it up before getting down to business.”

Their son was a real night owl. And a partier. But he had a good head on his shoulders, and he was safe, and they trusted him.

“Sandhill Cranes Arrive Early This Year,” read Bill aloud. He’d found her article. It was on page two of the *Anchorage Songbird*. He kept reading, making overexaggerated hmms along the way. Catrina knew he was humoring her, but she accepted it, appreciated it.

“We raised a good one, didn’t we? Cal turned out okay, didn’t he?” said Bill.

“Yes, he did.” Catrina was thumbing through the alumni magazine. She’d gotten to the obituaries page and had stopped, intrigued.

“Did you see the article next to yours here?” Bill was still looking at page two. “Says the deputies found a camper’s body all burnt up on an ice floe. Dead under mysterious circumstances. Deputy said it could have been the sleeping bag caught fire. But there was no campfire, no equipment. Couldn’t identify the burn victim. I once saw a guy burnt up at a petroleum drill, you know. Poor bastard. Seventy-percent of his skin burnt off and it still took him nine days to die. Bummer way to go.”

Among the obituaries Catrina had found a professor of hers. It had been a long time since she’d thought of him. It had been a long time since she’d thought about college. After Cal had come along, college had seemed not to matter so much.

“Ralph and Judy Kohl are getting remarried,” said Bill. He’d gotten to the “Announcements” section of the *Songbird*.

Well, Catrina thought. It had been a June a few years ago when Ralph had announced he wanted a divorce. Catrina shared carpool duties with Judy at the time, and it had been awkward for everyone involved. Now, this June, Ralph and Judy were getting back together. Maybe this June would be good.

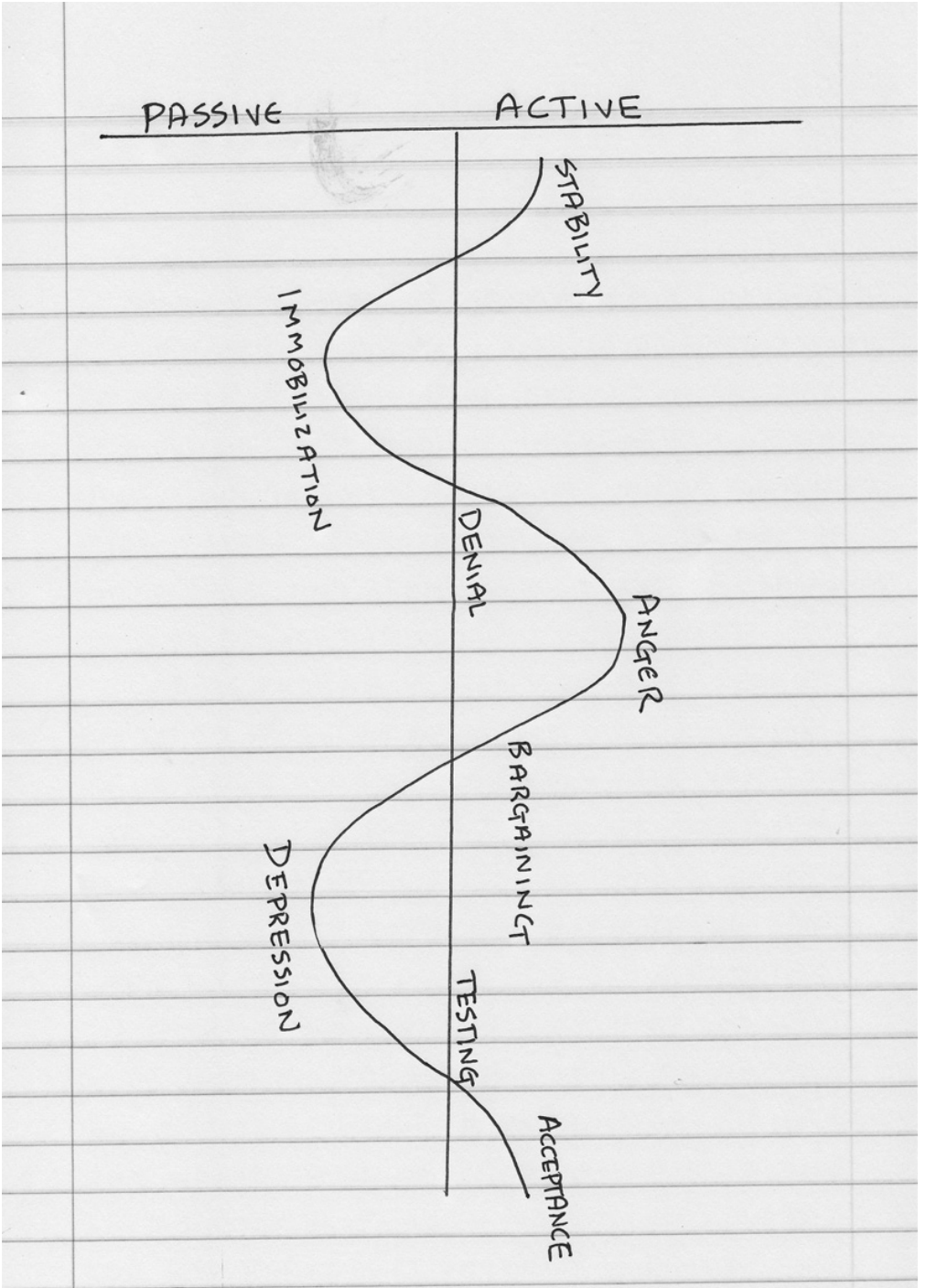
“What’s this?” asked Bill. He was sorting through the rest of the mail and held a photocopied page of two graphs. He turned the graphs this way and that, scratching his head.

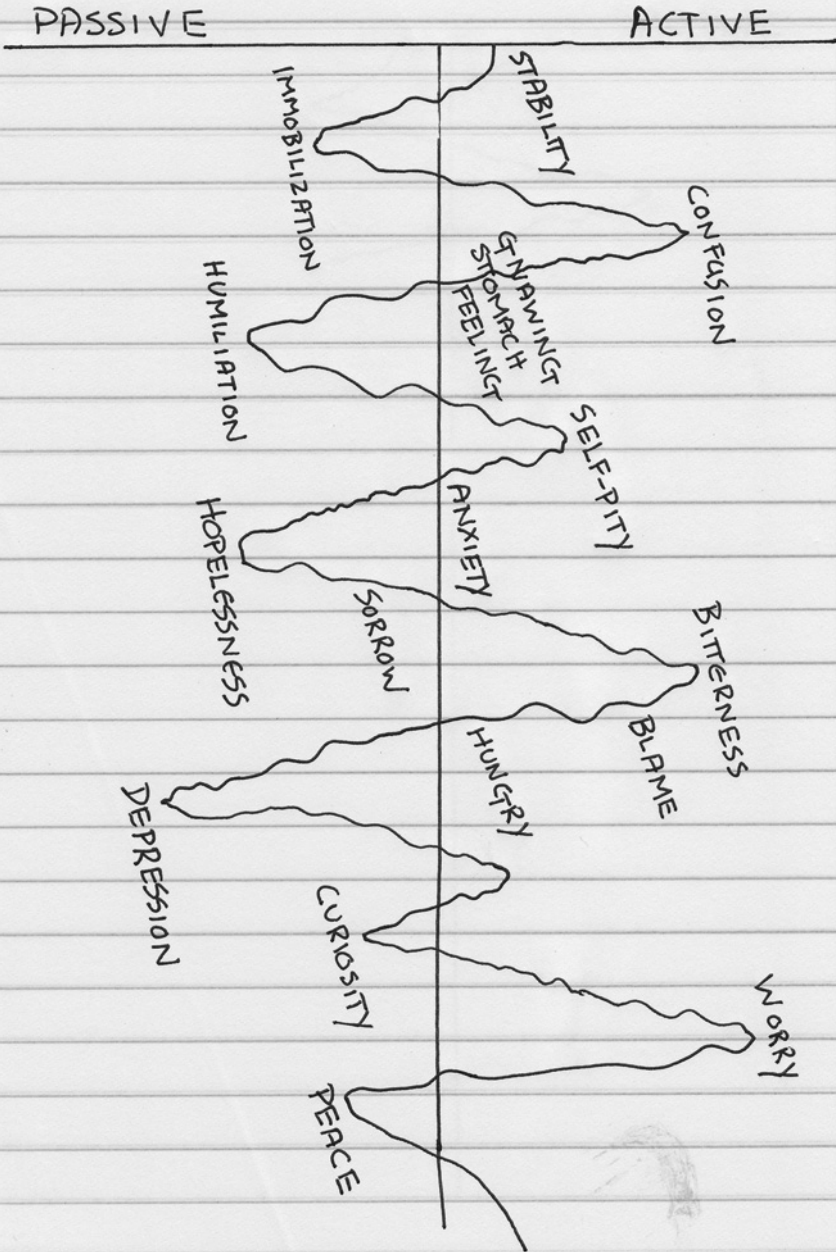
Catrina felt herself flush. Why had she left it in the pile of mail? Had she? It must have been on the kitchen counter, she thought, got mixed in. She was getting hot.

“Cal roadtripped up with a friend from school. They graduated together, and Cal invited him to stay here for a few weeks. He just left on Sunday. It’s from his notebook. He had this notebook.”

“He give this to you?”

“No. I thought it was—interesting. So I xeroxed it.” Catrina made a show of turning the page of her newsletter. Bill was still looking at the graphs. She wished to god he’d stop.





“What do they mean?”

“How should I know?” They had just seemed so strange to her, so fascinating that someone would put that in a notebook. She was ashamed that she’d read the notebook and unsure why she’d made the xerox. But it had been so curious to her. There was something so different about him, but something vaguely familiar, too.

“What was the guy like?”

“Easy going, I guess. Kind of quiet. Quirky sense of humor. Look, I’m tired. I’m going to bed.” Catrina closed the alumni magazine and rolled over on her side. Bill shrugged, dumped the rest of the mail on the floor, and turned out the light.

That night Catrina had waked, shivering. She had suddenly become terribly concerned for Cal’s friend, and as she lay there in the twilight, she tried to recreate what her mind had pieced together. It was something about the story Bill had read her about the burned camper, something about the graphs in the notebook, the obituaries in the alumni magazine, the impending doom of Alaska June. They’d all come together in her mind and made sense in one desperate, horrible tragedy. *Couldn’t identify the victim.*

She had decided that Cal’s friend—but that was completely silly. But still, it seemed so like the logical thing. That night, she lay in bed a long time, trying to force herself back to sleep.

In the morning, Cal had come into the kitchen, yawning about the worst hangover since undergrad. Catrina loved that—that her son could be so straightforward with her.

When he sat down, she asked her son if he'd heard from his friend. Cal blinked, scratched his crotch, said he thought so. The guy had sent him a text, Cal recalled vaguely—about a safe landing in Los Angeles.

A text message? That meant they hadn't spoken. Cal hadn't heard the voice.

Catrina had begged her son, ordered him, to call the friend right that instant. After a lot of complaining—*he's probably in the middle of some important marketing meeting, Ma*—her son got his cell phone. It rang for a long time. Finally, she had heard her son offer reluctant greetings to a voice on the line. She listened to her son and to the murmur of the other voice from the cell phone.

Cal had seen his mother's face and begrudgingly pressed the speaker on his cell phone.

"...lucky that MBA prepared me for all the nonfat mochas I'm delivering to the CEO. But actually, it's fairly interesting stuff. Absorbing."

After had he hung up, Cal looked at his mother with an "I told you so" look, and Catrina had smiled apologetically.

Sometimes the mind plays funny games, she thought. You jump to conclusions, look for the easy story, want to make everything all add up. You seek out drama and trouble

where none exists. Maybe it was just her being a mother. She'd watched the Sandhill crane mothers, so protective in their own way. Catrina smiled again. Something was happening inside her.

That afternoon, Catrina went to the edge of the mudflats and gazed out at the lake. She'd studied the mudflats for months, watching each morning the cranes nest and peck and preen, and it had been beautiful. She'd loved writing about it, imagined herself as some lone naturalist first discovering a flock of unknown creatures. But now there was something new, a different kind of beauty, a different kind of imagining.

At night, Catrina sat typing at the computer in the bedroom as her husband lay TiVoing away. "More cranes?" he'd asked, and she'd mumbled an absentminded yes, even though cranes were furthest from her mind. It would be a good June. She knew it.
