

The Party and the Body

by B.D. Fischer

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The party at my mother's ended Saturday night deep into Sunday's morning. I tried to remember the exact circumstances of the end but although they wouldn't come it didn't worry me. I knew I would remember at a certain point. It was really my party since my mother wasn't technically present. It wasn't even much of a party. A dozen, maybe fifteen people.

I stood there pissing in the bathroom, bleary as hell, unsticking my genitals from my torso and pissing. The worst part of a hangover is the stickiness, the stickiness of skin to skin and thoughts to brain and pain to body, and I just stood there pissing and feeling sticky. I flushed the toilet and toppled forward and braced my left hand against the wall and held myself with my right and stared down at the whirlpool. It all whirled right down and then the clean bowl filled up with clean water. Things aren't nearly so simple in my apartment, which is a short or maybe a long way of saying that's why I chose last night to throw the party. My new apartment isn't really the partying type, not with that square footage. I can't even risk having women over any more, I have to somehow manage to have sex before I let them see my apartment. This creates all kinds of tensions and confusions.

At a certain point I gathered my reserves together and pulled myself away from the toilet and staggered back out into the hallway. There, I realized that I wasn't even that hungover but must have smoked a *lot* of weed last night for my thoughts to be so slow in coming. This made sense, and I figure that it's also possible that someone had some nitrous as I stood in the hallway and stared up at kid and baby faces either smiling, crying, or solemn. I barely recognized them, but knew that they were me because my mother doesn't have any other children. I had almost taken them down for the party. Almost.

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I stood there in the hallway, not having what any normal person could call "thoughts," trying to make myself not go back to bed. It was 1:13pm. There was no real reason to be awake, but some deeply buried thought kept trying to force itself to the surface. My mom was coming home tonight. That meant, as I turned to the living room to survey the damage, that there was cleaning to do. Although her plane did not get in until this evening you never know how long that's going to take. You never know what post-party stains you're going to find, and how long they'll take to get out. I had recently resolved to act in ways that would make me happy in the future, not just in the present, and I felt my resolution mist into the Texas sun I could see through the living room windows. It had to be a hundred-and-five out there I was guessing. I was at least ten minutes puzzling this all out. Finally I pulled a pinner of a joint from my pocket and went out to the garage.

In the note my mom left me, with instructions on how to water her plants, she made specific provision for me not to smoke in the house, but I'm pretty sure that she was just talking about cigarettes because there's no way she knows that I smoke weed. Still, I sat down on the rear bumper of her Ford Escort to spark it up and felt immediately better, clearheaded, strong in the shoulders. I pulled as deeply as I could, parodically, and in that dearth of oxygen my thoughts seemed much more real now, although I still couldn't say for sure what any of them were. I felt coherent to the extent that I'd made it now possible for thoughts to emerge, although none did until I remembered yesterday's lunch with Val before the party.

I never expected this meal to turn into such a test of my personal will, an affair which took all the courage I could muster just to reach the end of. I hadn't expected her to be able to come to the party, but her suggestion that we have lunch instead delighted me even more. Delighted me, that is, until she added that Olga and her new boyfriend were coming. I know Olga, vaguely, and this decided that I would have to get incoherently high before heading down to the burger joint in South Austin. Val and I used to work together and are friends. Olga is from the Dominican Republic, where they have

some kind of fascination with Russky names, viz. Vladimir Guerrero. Val is Mexican, I think, a tight little brown ball of Latin fire. She's not pudgy, but neither is she slim. Her forehead kind of slopes down in a way that makes her look like Jay Leno, but way more adorable than that sounds. She has a son and as far as I know has never gone out with a white guy. Olga is pretty, too, she has a round face like a porcelain doll that has never once in my experience displayed an emotion. She's a lot thinner than Val and older than she looks, the kind of girl who you just know looks a lot better with her clothes on than off. Thin but still kind of saggy, not tight. She's no fan of mine, I've always gotten the impression.

And so we're sitting there, and Olga's new boyfriend's name is Steve, which just has to be short for Esteban. He's some kind of musician., which makes sense. They were all seated when I got there but hadn't even started looking at the menus, which sat in a pile at the edge of the table. Seeing them induced a rush of panic which I had, fortunately, anticipated, and it passed as soon as I confirmed that none of them had any clue high I truly was.

I sat down and grabbed a menu to steady myself. They were discussing, the three of them, the form and symbolic function of timepieces in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. I was nowhere near ready to decide what I wanted, and the fact that I was the only one looking at a menu made me so nervous that I had to place it back on the pile, subtly, and try to join the conversation. When I did, it turned out I was wrong, and that they weren't talking about *FBDO* at all but instead the new Steely Dan album. This must have been Val's gambit, for Esteban, to make him feel comfortable, although I happen to love the Dan and could not be more pleased. Val is one of those people who makes conversation for other people rather than herself because she doesn't really have anything to say. I find this incredibly desirable.

I make several very subtle, nuanced attempts to get everyone to pick up their menus and begin the ordering process, not so much because I am hungry (although I will be soon) but because I recognize, with my extremely fine-tuned emotional antennae, that

we are wreaking havoc with the rhythm of the waiter. He comes by on three separate occasions while we continue to discuss the Dan and related topics, the menus still piled on the edge where he left them, and all he can do is top off glasses of water we've barely touched. His eyeglasses, I notice, are just like mine. The place is pretty empty post-lunch/pre-dinner, but we're fucking with him because menial jobs are the worst when you can't manage to look busy. That's when your manager really fucks you. Finally I ordered a beer from the poor guy, which everyone noticed and took strangely. I thought for a moment that Steven would come to the rescue and order his own, but it turned out that his smile hadn't meant anything.

But none of this is what tested me so deeply, tested parts of me I didn't even know I had. I was incoherently wasted in such a way that I didn't really have any idea what I had said until after I said it, but people kept laughing and giving me what I felt like was even more than usual conversational attention. That's how compelling I was. This wasn't the hard part. The conversation definitely revolved around me and followed my leads and I made a conscious effort to stay involved in the conversation after the food came just so that no one would be bereft. I tried not to just eat my Texan burger (BBQ sauce and cheddar cheese, to which I decided with real regret not to add ketchup) with the speed I felt it deserved. While it was still hot. Nevertheless, I was halfway done by the time Val had arranged her condiments and cut hers in half and taken the first bite, which made me put my burger back down on my plate and make certain resolutions. By this time my hands were a mess of hickory sauce and embedded bits of lettuce and tomato. I tried to wipe them off without anyone seeing. I ate a few fries from the communal plate we'd ordered, and tried to chew slowly. Olga seemed to be putting away more than her fair share, I noticed. I occupied myself for just a little while debating the chance of her being bulimic. I finally put the figure at 37%. She's divorced, but has no children. The conversation went on around me.

All this was a test, don't get me wrong, but it was a familiar test and I put that effort at a B-, perhaps a B. I have pretty high standards. I finished my lunch first, but Steve wasn't too far behind. It occurred to me that, as a drummer, he might be stoned, too. I was still hungry when I finished, but that was just the weed talking and I was able to keep myself from ordering desert. I wouldn't say that I have a weight problem, but I'm no longer thin. At a certain point, it became clear that everyone had finished. Steve was still kind of absently picking at the fries that were only left because I hadn't let myself eat any, knowing that if I started I couldn't be stopped. He hadn't eaten his garnishing grapes but did not seem prepared to. Val had taken just one bite of the second half of her burger, and I thought briefly that if her son were here that wouldn't really be a very good example, what with the starving Africans and whatnot. Olga had done a credible job on hers and had eaten the lion's share of the fries. The waiter came by a few times but didn't take their plates, clearly spooked. He took mine, but only because it was absolutely empty and in fact looked as though it had been professionally cleaned: I had wiped up the excess sauce with the remnants of my roll and a few fries and eaten all the garnishes.

And but so we're finished but we're talking, and I'm talking and running decision trees, trying to parse out a path that might garner the bits of burger left on the girls' plates without resort to anything antisocial. Steve, I figured, was no problem; what would he care. Olga I could take or leave, we're only friends through Val. But Val ... well, a rebuke from her might have devastated the facade I'd built around my incoherence, and so I needed to tread lightly. I mean, she has a young son. Asking outright was beyond the pale. I couldn't see how the Ethiopians might be put to use without shaming. And so I considered schemes of distraction so wildly implausible that not even I could figure out how to make them work. And so I was just left there staring at the burgers. At least twice my right hand twitched, involuntarily, to grab them from their plates, and I was nearly overwhelmed, almost to the point of passing out. I was able to pass it off by grasping the empty Corona and

tilting it back. There wasn't even a single drop left. Finally, the waiter came and did his job, and I nearly burst into a tears. It was a lot of good meat wasted. Those were good burgers.

I sat on the bumper of my mom's Ford Escort and finished that joint grinning hugely, remembering the whole affair. I may have told Steve about the party, but to my recollection he didn't show. Val of course had Oberon. I'm not sure about Olga, but I didn't want her there anyway. When I finished the joint and stood up I was fully awake, stretched and flexed my arms and felt my biceps (strong) and then moved back into the house to begin the cleaning.

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By the time I finished and had dealt with the presence of the body it was close to six pm, and I was back on the bumper rolling another joint. This joint was more of a necessity, because I was absolutely freaked out. I had finished cleaning, showered, and went into my mom's bathroom to get some Q-tips, where I discovered there was a body in the tub. Mid-twenties, Latin, clean-shaven, flannel shirt and dirty jeans that I couldn't fathom in this heat. I stared for I don't know how long, although probably not even a minute. Then I grabbed the Q-tips and went back into the guest bathroom, heart pounding, and cleaned my ears looking into the mirror. My hair was a mess. I was still pretty high. I tried to figure out what to do. My first thought was to call the police, which nearly sent me sprinting through the streets in my towel. Instead I called Val. I'm not sure exactly why.

Of course she came over right away, Oberon in tow. That's how she is. I had refused to tell her what was wrong but she responded to the sound of my voice. We used to work together. When she arrived I put my arms across her shoulder and leaned in and whispered, "Oberon probably shouldn't see this." I've met the kid a couple of times, he's a real good kid and doesn't need to be friggd up with any of this shit. I had checked on the body several times. It hadn't moved. His mother told him to sit quietly in the living, and

climbed up onto the floral couch and asked if he could watch TV. I flipped on the Cartoon Network and looked to Valerie for confirmation. She nodded. I motioned for her to follow me through my mother's bedroom to the bathroom.

When we got there I held the door open and let her go in first. In retrospect, this does not reflect positively on me, but as a result I only heard but did not see her gasp when she saw the body and then said, "Dean!" Then I was by her side as she leaned over and placed a hand on the body's forehead. She's that kind of girl. I guess you have to be when you have a kid so young.

"You know this guy?"

As soon as she touched it the body twitched upright and grabbed her hand, the eyes wide open. It would be no exaggeration to say that I nearly lost control of my functions. I yelled and reached for the bathroom door and almost fell down. I hoped obscenely that Oberon hadn't heard and would stay put in the living room. I didn't want the kid scarred for life.

"I'm sorry!" the body said, still holding on to her forearm, tight, it looked like. He looked all around, then settled on Valerie, who's real pretty, and then let her go. He kept looking at her. "I'm sorry," he said again, less desperate. He got out of the tub, Val backing away.

"Mommy!" The kid was right outside the bathroom door!

"Go back into the living room, honey." Her voice had that no-nonsense lilt that kids obey without thinking and that mothers can't reproduce except in moments of true emergency, thank God. The body was now standing right in front of us. He didn't smell great and the bathroom was getting pretty tight, not having been made for three people. I thought briefly of yelling for Oberon to call 911, but I was lot bigger than the body and figured I could probably take him, if it came down to force and he didn't have a weapon.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and started edging for the bathroom door. We parted to make room for him. "Look ... I'm sorry." He fumbled with the doorknob, finally took his eyes off Valerie, and opened the door. "I'm sorry." He sprinted from the room. We looked at each other. I sprinted after him, thinking of Oberon, in

time to see him fly out the front door and into an old yellow Impala parked down the street. I hadn't noticed it before. Then he sped off. I came back into the house, cursing myself for not having gotten the license plate number, although I'm not sure why. Oberon appeared not to have noticed. A cartoon I didn't recognize played on the TV. Valerie stood in the hallway, mouth open.

"There was a body in my bathtub," I explained to no one in particular, getting even that wrong, since it was my mom's bathroom and bathtub.

Minutes later I settled for coffee in the kitchen with Valerie, desperate for a joint. I told her that I thought the body was dead. I was glad I had showered before this unexpected meeting. I was sorry my mom, who is lactose intolerant, had no milk for Val's coffee. She said it must have been quite a party. I apologized for putting Oberon in danger, but she waved that off. Kids are pretty much always in danger, she said, negligent toy manufacturers, playground fights, traffic. I considered this a fairly sophisticated analysis. It's why she'd always wanted to be a lawyer, she said.

"I didn't know that," I said, surprised. "Why didn't you go to law school?"

She indicated the living room with her pretty brown head. "It was hard enough finishing college," she said. "Law school seemed like a little much."

"Have you ever thought about going back?"

She shrugged. "Not really. I've got a pretty great setup now. My roommate looks after Oberon a lot, and his father takes him sometimes, and I make a pretty good living and still have a social life, sometimes."

I've gotten high with her roommate, Jenna, which she doesn't know.

"But that's why you work at the firm."

She shrugged again. "Not really. It's not like I really do anything about that stuff. I guess that's just kind of what I had always thought about, and I was a political science major, and I had to get a job after graduation and that seemed like good work."

I nodded, this made sense, but it also made me sad in a way that was pretty obvious. I was desperate for a joint, and wanted to take her hands in mine. I took a sip of coffee. The TV seemed far away and I could see just a tuft of Oberon's hair poking over the chair. Valerie wraps both her hands around the mug, apparently to warm them, because I keep the house as cold as possible. I'm hoping this doesn't noticeably affect the energy bill, which would piss off my mom. It occurs to me that I am 32 years old and worried about getting trouble with my mom, which makes it seem awfully unlikely that I'll ever get to see Val naked. This makes me even sadder.

Finally, they leave, I thank Val and she collects Oberon and I thank her again and she tells me not to worry about things and they leave. I peek around the kitchen curtains and watch them leave and when they're out of sight I beat it back to the garage and roll another joint and smoke it down to wispy ash. It's almost time to go to the airport.

* * *

When I was a lawyer I had a little stomach definition. Not a lot, but I was in shape, which didn't hurt with the ladies. Since then I've gained a little weight, I'll admit. I think I thought that transitioning into my career as an artist would compensate and that I'd still do just fine. It hasn't exactly worked out, but there's no way I'm going to quit smoking weed. Still, I could have taken the body, if it had come down to it. I may be a little saggy now but that definition is still there underneath. I could have taken him by sheer mass if nothing else. He was just a little Mexican guy.

After Val left and I got stoned I crept back into my mother's bathroom. Peering in to make sure it was still empty, I went over tub for almost five minutes, trying to see if he had soiled anything. There was maybe a smudge or two, but I didn't do any more cleaning. It's not like she would notice that, or blame me if she did. What would I have been doing in her bathtub? Then I left for the airport.

* * *

I spent a few days waiting for the other shoe to drop in terms of stains or spills I had missed, but my mom never said a thing. That I could host a party like that and then clean it all up unawares felt like a turning point. I had reached a new stage. I was proud.

In the days after the party and the body I was, I thought, doing some of my best work. When you're an artist you're always looking for that terminator, that change of aspect after which everything will be different and great. It may have been the party or it may have been the body but most likely it was both, or possibly neither. I tentatively called the canvas "Detail Of a Face Turned Bad," a big one that would cover most of the wall of your average bedroom. In my theory it was one square inch of a face blown up beyond recognition, which was part of the insight. You can't quite call it a face but I maintain that it is absolutely recognizable as a face. This is part of the theory.

I want to call Val, but one of the challenges of being an artist is the antisocial hours, and the absolute necessity of timing things perfectly. By the time I've been up long enough to have smoked enough weed to even consider calling her it is well past Oberon's bedtime, and I don't want to antagonize her by waking him up. That would be a bad start to the effort. I'm contemplating deciding that the detailed face is hers. I could add just a shimmer of brown.

Most everyone was appalled when I quit my job to paint, but underneath was a thin thread of jealousy, admiration, and thrill. Almost everyone has secret dreams of artistic greatness. It would have been different if I'd had kids. Val said she was sorry to see me go and looked genuinely sad, which left me touched. That we wouldn't see each other every day. I said I was sad too and meant it. We looked into each other's eyes.

Hardly anyone knows what really happened. I was successful, you see. A legal wunderkind. I studied less than three hours a week and still made Law Review. I chaired the team that finished second

in National Moot Court, and it's widely understood that only an ill-timed groin sprain (squash) kept us from winning, for I couldn't really move with sufficient expressive freedom, plus I was whacked out on Ultram, what my orthopedist called Vitamin U. Harper, Dubois and White gave me 95 right out and within two years I was full partner and chairing all the big criminal cases. You should have seen old man Harper's face when I told him I was quitting to paint. I wish I could somehow have videotaped it. It would have been great as some part of an art piece.

What really happened was that I was defending the teenage son of a certain local software mogul on rape charges. It was one of my best trials, all the papers said so, even though he was found guilty, which was no surprise. The evidence was overwhelming, and it was considered an enormous accomplishment that I had cast any doubt at all on the proceedings, even if it wasn't reasonable. The problem was that I had sex with the girl, the girl that he raped, just before closing arguments. It wasn't a rape-type situation, I have to make clear, but still that's considered poor form, and pretty clearly unethical, especially when she's just barely eighteen, which although not a statutory-type situation is still young. But when are you going to get another opportunity on the bad side of 30? I barely knew it was her, it was so dark in that club. Then her father overheard her on the phone and called me at the office making all kinds of threats. I resigned the bar on the spot. A grand gesture. Better by far to resign than be dismissed. I'm not bitter, but what else was I going to do? Now my loft is scattered with paint and dropcloths and half-finished canvasses and the bathroom and overall decor are unimpressive. Not like my old place, so I can't really have people, girls, up there. That's why I jumped at the chance to use my mom's place for the party.

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I'm beginning to have some pretty paranoid thoughts about the body. My fear is that he didn't actually attend the party but arrived

in the middle of the night, as in broke in. My memory is so hazy--we must have been doing nitrous--but I know that I closed my mom's bedroom door because I spent a significant amount of stoned time trying to figure out if there was a way to lock it from the outside. There wasn't, but I made sure it was closed and made a series of magic-markered "BATHROOM" signs with arrows leading to the guest bathroom so that no one would have any reason to go in there. I was kind of paranoid about it, so now the most common theory is that I just kind of passed out as everyone was leaving and maybe too wasted to close the front door and this guy wandered in and passed out in the tub. Probably he came to steal, like small things, jewels or something, but seeing that my mom didn't have much just kind of passed out instead. I've been trying to think of some subtle way to ask my mom if her jewelry box looks messed with or if she's missing anything, but nothing comes to mind. I'm a little worried that shoe's going to drop in a few years when she goes to wear the once-a-decade pearls she keeps buried in her underwear drawer but they're not there. I've been thinking about that a lot lately.

Val and I became friends because I was just so blown away that someone so young and tight could have a kid. I want to call her, so I use it as motivation: I'll paint for three hours and then I'll call her. But by that time of course I'm way too stoned and it's too late by far. Still, I'm painting every day, working really hard, although who can say how it's really going. Everyone was surprised when I became a painter, but it wasn't really unprecedented. I've always had an interest in art. In college I drew a comic under the pseudonym Shecky Honkycracker. It was called "Wartime Whores" and its subject was three Vietnamese sisters, all prostitutes, who came to Texas in the late '70s. It was a big hit, and a huge controversy, even though I tried to keep the swearing to a minimum because of obscenity laws. Everyone was bursting to know who the author really was, but it never got out, so I've always had a hand in the artworld and when the girl's father called me it just popped into my head to go into Old Man Harper's office and tell him that I was

quitting to become a painter. You should have seen the look on his face, but I would like to sell a fucking canvas at some point. When I do I will definitely call Val, to celebrate. I want to call her now and confess it all, the enormous personal courage it took me to get through that lunch with Olga, the party that night, how high I was, my fears about the body, how much I want to see her naked. Instead I think I'll invite her on a picnic. Yes, I'll invite her and Oberon on a picnic, which is altogether wholesome and reasonable. I'll tell her I know the guy who opened up the new sandwich shoppe on South Congress and that I can get us some bitching sandwiches at reduced price and that I'll treat and that I'm dying to have a picnic and naturally thought of her and Oberon, being sure to include the son so that she knows I am inclusive and full of feelings. I don't think this will seem desperate at all. And so I call her.

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The phone call doesn't go quite as well as I'd planned. I set my alarm clock for 3pm to make sure I am up in time, but the lack of sleep throws off my rhythm. I smoke just enough weed to get me through a shower and then held off until a little after 6--you never want to call right on the hour, which makes you seem desperate--so that I could talk to her with just the right level of highness to make things go smoothly. They do, until this exchange:

"A picnic?" (her)

"Sure!" (me)

"Outside?"

"Of course!"

"Isn't it a little hot?"

And then I nearly said, "Aren't you Mexican?", but I caught myself in time. I don't know for sure that she is in fact Mexican. She seems a little too round and tight and not quite brown enough to be truly Mexican. She may be half-sies, but I have the suspicion that she's really full-blood Spanish, which makes me want to see her naked all the more.

I'm not completely sure how I responded to the heat objection, but eventually she acknowledged as how a picnic could be fun and Oberon could swing on the swings. Maybe we could even go swimming, she suggested, which seemed to me so gracious as to constitute a rescue and nearly induces tears of gratitude on my part. This also confirms my suspicion that she agreed to all of this basically out of her own free will, and not as a result of any badgering on my part. Or possibly just because, hey, free lunch, and when you're a single mother paralegal you have to do what you have to do. I can't be sure about anything. I confirmed her and the kid's likes and dislikes, and made arrangements to pick up a tuna on wheat--all the kid will eat, she says--and an Italian sub for her. Of course, I don't know anyone who owns any sandwich shoppe, on South Congress or otherwise, but I have no problem making the full-price purchase.

So now I'm driving toward Barton Springs with the window way down and my left arm tapping out a hip-hop beat on the roof. It's hot, but Val's heat objection feels far behind me. I had tossed a football and, after some consideration, a tennis ball into the wicker basket I had purchased at the Pottery Barn for \$95. Maybe Oberon and I can toss around a ball, if he wants.

But I'm late, which was a miscalculation. It's not just the time-altering effects of the weed; I wanted to be fashionable. You never want to get anywhere first, but when I pull into the parking lot Val is already there, standing by her car in the heat, and I feel guilty, terrible, for I'm the one with the food and the blanket. I didn't see any way she could not be furious. Oberon appears to be trying to catch a Monarch butterfly with his mouth. Before I even get out of the car a light sheen of sweat has broken out on my forehead. I step into the sun.

"Hey," I say to Val. "Sorry I'm late. Hi Oberon," I say to Oberon. Oberon hides behind his mother, buries his face in the backs of her thighs and then peeks out at me. I smile.

"Oberon," Val says, "you remember Mr. Wilcox."

Oberon says nothing.

"Say hello to Mr. Wilcox," Val says. I smile dumbly.

"Hello, Mr. Wilcox," the kid says reluctantly, in kid-accent.

"Hi Oberon," I say again, feeling incredibly, toothsomey stupid. I make an awkward gesture with the left side of my body to indicate that maybe we should proceed into the park for her picnic. Val nods, gracious, and leads the way. Unfortunately, though, she leads us to a picnic table, near other people, and not to the gently sloping hill, which might afford some privacy. That's why I brought the blanket. I'm so high that other people, screaming kids in bathing suits, would make conversation difficult. But Oberon doesn't like bugs, she says. Kid, you're in the wrong state, I think, but don't even come close to saying.

"Did you know that in college my friends used to call me Tromeo?" I say wildly as we're setting up at one of the tables. I've saved pretty much everything by turning the pretty blanket into a tablecloth. I have no idea why I'm telling her this. It's not even true.

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, you know. It's, like, a combination. Of, uh, 'trauma' and 'Romeo.' You know. Tromeo."

"Really? Why would they call you that?"

I shrug.

"I have no idea."

We eat. The table and the pretty blanket/tablecloth look pretty, and I'm happy. There aren't as many screaming kids as I'd imagined, including Oberon, who is near-silent, and eating his sandwich with what looks like pleasure. His legs that don't reach the ground swing freely beneath the table, which I take to be the kid-equivalent of a labrador's wagging tail.

Val and I are speaking calmly, about what I don't know, and I wonder in a general way whether she has ever seen porno. I have to believe that she has; after all, she grew up in San Antonio. Then I begin to consider in an even more general way whether she's ever *been* in a porno. She's just so round and tight, and she clearly puts out: The evidence sits across from me, eating a tuna fish sandwich.

He was once *inside* her. I shudder, even in the heat, and take a bite of my \$11 meatball, which I'm nearly done with.

She probably hasn't, but who knows what a young single mother would do to feed her child.

Val makes a joke that seems to be about our body, but I don't get it. I'm looking at her mouth as she talks, tremendously animated. Even though I don't understand a word she's saying I seem to laugh at the right times because she continues. I nod, and move my hand toward the pickle spear on the wax paper beneath her barely touched sandwich, although Oberon has torn into his with such gusto that most of it's on his face, which pleases me deeply. I almost laugh out loud, and am suddenly afraid that the picnic will come to a swift conclusion.

"It's so pretty here," I say, gesturing widely with my left arm, indicating the park, the swimming hole, the summer greenery.

"Yeah," she says.

"Oberon, do you want to go swimming?" I ask. He looks at me and smiles and nods, still chewing and tuna all over his fucking face. A moment of panic as I realize that I should have asked Val first. I'm sorry. I don't even know if he has trunks, although it looks like he could go swimming in the shorts he's wearing, though.

"Oh, Oberon!" his mother exclaims, and reaches for a napkin.

"Mom!" he says, squirming.

"Oberon, you have to show Mr. Wilcox that you have manners." This is hilarious, but it also makes me feel proud and chest-swelly.

"I want to go swimming!" he says.

"Not for half-an-hour after eating," she says, almost wagging a finger at him. He looks nearly chastened, and then picks up the other half of his sandwich and begins eating noisily. She doesn't seem to notice. She begins talking again, half with her mouth and half with her hands. We have at least another half-hour of picnic left, then, and then we'll go swimming. I interlace my fingers, elbows on the table, and rest my chin and smile, trying to look happy. It isn't hard. At least another half-hour. At least another thirty minutes.

