

# ::HARD (excerpt)

*by* Matthew Temple

I was born in Dayton Ohio. You think the midwest is easy but it's not. Dayton has the highest murder per capita of any city in the US. At least it did when I lived there.

We also have the highest number of Presidents, Ohio does. More US Presidents were born in Ohio than any other state. Ohio also has the distinction of always voting for the President. In Presidential elections, Ohio is the state that most consistently votes with the winner.

It's a testing bed, a litmus test. Columbus is a model city. That means when they're testing a product, they test it in Columbus, because if it works in Columbus, it'll work in the rest of the country. And if it doesn't work in Columbus, it won't. Columbus is miles and miles of malls.

Dayton has a combination of features from around the country. The language is broadcast English. There are white people. There are black people. There are Indian people. There are some Asians. There's a lot of programming north of Cincinnati; we have some high-tech companies there. You can go to college in Ohio. You've got Ohio State, if you want to party. And you've got OU, in Athens, if you also want to party. And there are smaller schools. Case doesn't count. It doesn't fit with the spirit of the state. Cleveland is just..you go too far north you lose the spirit of the Ohio I'm talking about. If you have an engineering degree from Case, then: every offense intended. And I'm sorry. You got ripped off.

You're not going to be well-rounded if you live your whole life in Ohio, just like you're not going to be well-rounded if you live your whole life in California or Djibouti or wherever else. Ohio isn't exactly whitewashed. In southern Ohio (which borders Kentucky) you have white people and black people who have moved up from the south. They've come up on the bus. They've come to join their cousins..or flee their cousins. So you've got a southern mentality and a southern friendliness (not quite a hospitality). But people

come from Pittsburgh, which is only four hours away, and people leave Dayton to go to Pittsburgh, to go to school. My friend Jenny did that; she went to school in Pittsburgh. Four more hours east and you get to Philadelphia, another hour to New York, so if you were born in Dayton you can go to New York and if you were from New York you might end up in Dayton. If your family's there. That's what happened to Jules. She was born in New York—well, she's *from* New York—and she came to Dayton because of her family. Then they moved back and left her, and she was the only one there.

Jules is black. Black people and white people don't get along in Dayton. That's why Dayton has the highest murder per capita in the country. I know you're rushing for your almanacs. It's gotta be Detroit? Or "South Central"? Right? Nope. It's Dayton Ohio. It's not just murder *in general*. It's murder *per capita*. Look it up.

People who are born there always want to leave. If you came later you like it more. But no one leaves—almost. It's a black hole. People who live there say it's a *vortex*.it's one of the vortexes. There are vortexes near Sedona, in the southwest. And I think maybe there are vortexes in Brazil or something. And then there are the vortexes of Dayton Ohio. They're supposed to be some sort of energy center. It's like a hurricane that you can't see. Or a tornado. It's special energy. Maybe it helps you..you know..maybe you're in tune with it. Or maybe it kills you..you know..*crushes* you because you can't take it. I don't believe in vortexes. But my friends do.

I do believe it's impossible to leave Dayton. I don't really care whether it's due to vortexes or economics or magnetism or what the fuck it's due to, but once you move to Dayton—or if you're born there—it really is impossible to leave. My friend Tuesday left for a while. She lived a year in Sedona. But she came back. And my friend Anna left for a while. I think she lived in Montana. But she came back, too.

I finally left. I drove to New York, left my car in a parking garage on 58th and Lexington, and never went back. That car wasn't there long, I bet. This is New York. I bet it was there for a day, maybe two

days, and then they towed it. I have no idea. That was a great car, but I was done driving.

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I didn't have a car in high school. I didn't have a car in college. It wasn't until after I had graduated from OU and had started my first job. I was working there three months before I got a car. Before that I was driving my dad's van. When I did get my car I bought it new, bought a Honda. Nowadays it'd be a Subaru but this was back a few years. Mine was black. A Honda Civic DX, hatchback, five speed. It was a major step up from the van.

In high school I never worked; we weren't allowed to. My parents wanted us to focus on school. Senior year I had a job in a library; that was about it.

I never drank in high school either, never smoked pot. I did a lot of things late.

In high school I couldn't drive, never drank, didn't have sex. So I had to find other things to do. Mostly I did art projects. And hung out in girls' rooms, not-having sex with them. We listened to music. I was into video; it was later I discovered painting. And it was later I discovered sex, real sex, fucking. And later still that I drank. And even later still that I learned to drive a car. Now I don't do any of them. I'm retired. It was in therapy, maybe five years into it, when I realized I had become a Puritan. Maybe always have been. We have a strict family, but not in the sense that you're *not-allowed* to do things. Strict in the sense that you can do whatever you want..but after you do it, we'll judge you. Freedom, then damnation. That's how all of us turned out.

A typical afternoon for me, once I had spent the entire day cutting class doing art projects, was to go home with one of my girlfriends and do art projects at her house until my parents called and made me come home, or sometimes until it had gotten to be so late that my parents would call her parents and promise to send me with money next time if they would please front the money, this time, for

a cab. I preferred the cab. You didn't want to have my dad pick you up when he was mad.

I liked girls' basements, and I liked girls whose parents weren't home. Parents who worked late, who would be home an hour before they stuck their head into their daughter's bedroom and discovered there were two of us.

"Who's your friend?"

"This is Matt."

"Have you two eaten?"

"We had macaroni and cheese."

"When's Matt going home?"

"We're working on an *art* project."

"Liz, come see me. I wanna talk to you."

"In a minute, ok Mom?"

"Elizabeth Ronstadt. Right now."

Liz and I did video together. Our finest project was cut to some Pink Floyd she introduced me to, The Division Bell? My parents were into the Beatles. I grew up on Here Comes the Sun. We just cut all these pictures together—black and white pictures from magazines—and we put some Pink Floyd over it and we called it our own.

When Liz came back from talking with her mom she said: "You have to go soon."

Then Elizabeth sat next to me on her bed.

Before, she had been sitting kindof across from me on the bed. Now we only had limited time, so we had to make out.

The first time I touched Liz's breasts it was in school, and we were on camera. For video, we were supposed to go into the hallway, or anywhere around the school, and get shots of things we thought were interesting. Each shot had to be at least ten seconds long, for editing purposes. If the shot was shorter than ten seconds, when you tried to edit it, you might not have enough footage. What if you wanted to fade out? Or fade in? Even if it's a still object, freeze-framing a shot doesn't look the same as having a still shot, of the object, sitting there, not doing anything. We had to make sure

each shot was at least ten seconds. We got shots of the stairs—this neat shadow that was happening. We got a shot of Liz's leg. Then we got a shot of me cupping Liz's breasts in my hands, as I stood behind her. That was the first time I touched Liz's breasts. (Action.)

I touched them a lot after that. We used to sit and play footsie under the work tables in the art room. But in me and Liz's version of footsie, we went straight for the crotch. We weren't playing around with any toe-on-toe stuff. She went for my crotch. I went for hers. We got along fine in art class. When the people sitting next to us found out why we were laughing, they were disgusted. Maybe they were jealous; they acted disgusted. I liked having Liz's foot on my dick. And I wasn't sure exactly what I was doing to her, between her legs, but it felt hot and I liked having my foot there.

Liz was mixed. Maybe that's why some of my white friends didn't like that I liked her. I know that's why some of my black friends didn't like her. It's ok, with some of your black friends, for their black friends to have white friends, but sometimes with those same people it's not ok if their black friends *like* their white friends. You can like white people, you just can't *like* white people. Same with black people; it's okay to like them, you just can't *like* them. Liz was mixed.

I really didn't think of her that way. It's only looking back that I realize she had darker skin (darker than a tan, and more regular than a tan) and that her hair was dark and curly and unlike the hair of any “white” people that I know. In high school I wasn't aware that she was mixed. I just thought she had nice breasts.

When we made out at her house, when her mother left the room, I would put my hand down her pants and feel her vagina, and put my fingers inside of it, and her door would be open, and we'd both be looking at it, imagining her mom walking in.

I'd feel her squishy parts and she'd tell me about her neighbors.

“You know that kid Rafael? He was sitting on the fence when we came in.”

“Yeah. I know Rafael.”

“Why? How do you know him?”

"Because," I say, "he's a gangster."

"Is that all you've heard about him?" Liz sits up.

My hand is still inside her. "Why? What?"

Her jeans tighten over the back of my hand and she leans close.

"You can't tell anyone this. Don't tell him I told you. *Don't tell him.* You know that girl Brandi, the one they found behind the school?"

I nod.

"You know how the police are always around here?"

"Yeah."

"They're looking into Rafael. They think he's the one that did it."

Liz grabs my wrist and my hand is frozen. "Don't tell anyone this, but I know he did it, because he told me."

I look at her.

"He brags about it to everyone, around here. I told him don't you ever tell anyone you told me that. He did it, though. Those police are here every day. I hope they get him."

After that I lost my erection.

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I wasn't with Liz long, just in high school. We weren't even really *together*, we just made out. I preferred making out with her in the school hallway, or in the prop room that had all the theatre costumes. That was a scary room, but Liz's house was scarier. If you know that someone killed someone, and they go to jail for it, and you're the reason they got caught, that's a bad thing. I was pretty sure Rafael had killed that girl; you could see it on his face.

When you're a kid your ideas of things are lampooned. Your idea of a kiss, before you do it; your idea of sex, before you do it; your idea of death, before it happens to someone you know. Even your idea of murder. When you're a kid, it's like: oh my god how could someone do that? Then you grow up, and you're like: yeah, if someone raped my daughter I can see running them over with the car. You understand rage. You understand accident. You understand that some people are just fucked up, and have been

since birth, and will never be ok, no matter what schools they go to or medication they take.

In high school, I just didn't want Rafael to see me at Liz's house, because if he told Liz, and he saw me with Liz, and he ended up going to jail, when he got out he might come looking for me. It was worth making out with Liz in the prop room.

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But yeah, next year it was Tuesday, and the year after that it was Meryl. And Liz's just someone I think about from time to time—like on a scale of years. You wonder where these people are—and you don't really care—but that's a whole person out there, doing things. Usually people become completely different.

I went to OU—this is in Athens Ohio—and I met another girl. This one's name was Kate. And after that it was my roommate's sister, Stacy (that was awkward). Then it was some girl named Meg, who was very forceful, and there were a bunch of other girls in there and there was even a guy (named Chad) and..actually there was even another guy, Mark, and oh, yes, there was this girl named Christina, who was excellent and who I could never give up, even though we had nothing to talk about. I'm pretty sure Christina was the best sex of my life.

But it's hard to judge.

I mean, there are so many angles. There are so many facets. There are so many aspects of a relationship, even just the sexual part, it's hard to say that Christina was *bar none* the best sex of my life. But she was. In a *pure-fucking* sense. She was.

We would go to movies together and she would just suck my dick.

We would go to dinner—she would try the same thing. (We got kicked out of restaurants.)

When we got home we never made it to the bed. We fucked right on the floor. We made out in the *seafood section* of the grocery store—and I hate it when couples make out in grocery stores. Everything was sex to us. At one point we were working through all

the public library branches in Dayton, having sex in every one. Public places was a thing of ours. It was pathological, but it was good, good fucking.

The next day, though, was always a pain. I had to hang out with her until about two in the afternoon, and she'd want to go on errands, *buy* things, random things like she needed to go get a tarot deck or a new crystal. We were always in these gypsy stores. I'd be sitting in the parking lot, in the car, thinking about just leaving, while she had her cards read. And she'd always be talking about other guys. That's what she'd need the tarot reading for. We were just friends with benefits but still, I don't want to hear about the guy you're getting *engaged to*, while I'm buying you a crystal. I didn't care about the money though; the worst part was waiting for her to get done with her errands, so I could take her home. By noon the next day I didn't care if I ever fucked her again. I was done. I was even done with pussy altogether if it had to be like this. How can you be so good at fucking and have absolutely nothing in common with a person? When we fucked it was like god had re-invented sex. In the car with her, the next day, it was like god's counterpart was doing some relationship experiments of his own.

Christina's one of the only people I've ever cheated with. Every time we had sex we were cheating on some engagement *she* was in, but that's not what I'm talking about. When she and I first started, we were cheating on a relationship of *mine*. She was that persuasive. And I was that fucking horny. It's hard to stay faithful when you're twenty.

I was with this girl Ashley, who later became my friend. But while we were together, I cheated on Ashley with Christina. Once. Well, twice. Two nights. And there was one other time I cheated on someone, with someone else. And that time is one of the things I regret the most. But even Ashley—I never should have cheated on her with Christina. She deserved better.

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Ashley I met at work. She was the password girl, the account girl, she kept track of all the user accounts for the software I developed. Ashley was from Florida, and she came up to Dayton for I don't know what reason. She's extremely skinny, kind of a freak; she's got wispy hair like she's fifty, even though she's only twenty-two. If you need passwords for anything you go to Ashley.

"I need a ghost account for news."

"Hold on." (She's on the phone.) She's typing. I didn't see the headset. "Glowacki. You're so nasty." That's what she's saying into the headset. Glowacki is our boss. One of them. "Hold on." This time she's telling Glowacki to hold on. "What do you want." She turns around in her chair, spins the chair around, and spreads her legs. She's wearing jeans. She runs her hands up the inside of her thighs, toward her crotch.

"I need a ghost account for news."

Her eyes never leave mine. "I'll chat it to you. Is that *all* you need?"

"For now." I turn and start to go.

Ashley turns back to her screen then says: "Wait."

"What?"

"Why do you need a *ghost* account?"

Other people in the aisle of cubicles are hearing this.

I just need it. "For testing," I say. I mean this is her job. She could get fired for giving me the wrong password. But she'll give me any account I want. You're supposed to keep things separated—partitioned—for people's safety. Social security numbers and everything. But in actuality everybody has everything, inside the company. We're always in the news for leaks.

In my chat I find a picture of a girl squatting over a boy. They're on a mattress with no sheets. Paint on the walls is crumbling. This is from Ashley. She always sends me porn at work. Technically, the pipe that chat runs on is unencrypted, so anyone in the office who had two brain cells to rub together could run a program and sniff out what everyone else was saying on chat. But no one in this office takes that initiative. They're all busy surfing YouTube.

I delete the picture. I type: *ghaccount?*

Ashley types back: *a second!* Then she types: *xoxoxxx++*

Grisly. Ashley is technically married, but they're separated. She got the house. That's where we fuck, typically, though sometimes in my apartment. I fucked her one time in her desk chair on a Sunday morning, which was a really terrible idea but there's no cameras in this area. I think she has a thing for Glowacki. It's something about the way she presents to him in meetings. Like a slave thing; like she's getting off on subserviently presenting him with bullet items and completed task reports. I can see when she does it. Glowacki doesn't notice but to me it's obvious. Something about the way she puts her elbows on the conference table and then where her chest rides after that, its altitude. Glowacki is a fucking idiot for not noticing. He's an MBA.

Glowacki I found at the pop machine one day. This is in the hallway outside the office. He's standing there in his pleated khakis. When he bends down you can see how tight those pants are. I hated tapered khakis, I just do. It says something about you if you'd buy them. This fucker is going for a nickel in the coin-return. It's not clear if he's putting it in or taking it out. He struggles with a dollar. It's folded. It won't go in the bill acceptor. He sees me standing there and he says: "I'm an MBA, you'd think I could figure this out."

MBAs. I wasn't going to critique him. I wasn't going to say a thing. I was going to stand there quietly and wait my turn. I might have even said something pleasant to him, even though he's my boss. Something like: "Hey." And maybe a smile.

But no.

This fucking guy.

Even a pop machine is about him being an MBA.

Does he remember using pop machines before becoming an MBA? Does he remember that non-MBAs can fuck, drive cars, pick their noses, make telephone calls, drink water—even play golf! Motherfuckers and their "golf shirts". Give me a fucking break.

If Ashley ever fucked Glowacki I would lose all respect for her. But she wouldn't. He's too fat.

I type: ..? That's an ellipsis and a question mark. Two is the new three. As in: where is my fucking ghost account?

Ash responds with another link: this time to some Sesame Street gag I've seen before. Sesame Street crunk. ("What's the number for today?"—"I'o'n'know nigga!")

I call her. I don't say anything. I just breathe.

I can hear her lips. Gum.

"What are you doin after work today?"

She says: "Making cards." She makes greeting cards out of construction paper, popsicle sticks, stuff like that.

"That's not what I mean," I say. "What's your *pussy* doing after work?"

"Oh that," she says. Long pause. "I can't talk about that right now. Uh-huh. One second." *ppl at my desk!* she types.

*ghaccoutn* I type. I type fast and the letters get transposed.

.....*forthcumming* she types.

Then it says Ashley has left the conversation.

I'm imagining her bent over on the carpet in her upstairs bedroom, the extra room, the craft room. She's got a popsicle stick in one hand and an Elmer's glue in the other hand. Maybe she's licking the glue, I don't know, but I'm fucking her.

Ashley wears the weirdest panties. Her bras, on those tiny breasts..I always feel like I'm with a little boy. Some cross-dressing kid who stole his older sister's undies. Yeah. She would definitely have a popsicle stick in her hand.

Her husband lives in some apartment north of Cincinnati. It's kind of fucked up since he paid the down-payment on this house and Ashley never would have been able to get it without him. She can just barely make the payments. I know cause I've helped her. Now that's an expensive hobby.

Ashley is the only person in this entire office who makes any sense. Well maybe Gao. No—scratch that; Gao doesn't make any sense. Ashley is the only person here who makes any sense. I hope

she finds another job, she's too good for this place. A bunch of monkeys. I'm not sure if I really like Ashley or if I like Ashley because of the contrast between her and everyone else.

She types back across my screen: *GKHDDWN*

That's my ghost account.

I type back: *txh*

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I follow her home after work. She drives real fast. We play cat and mouse on I-75. When it's just me I don't drive like this but I use her as an excuse. It's flirting; it's justified. We don't talk on the phone, though. That's a little too dangerous.

Ashley gets home she eats a banana. That's why she's so skinny.

"Let's get a pizza."

"You get one."

"You're not having any?"

"I'll have a *slice*."

I dial a number.

"I want pepperoni."

"I'm not getting pizza."

She looks at me weird.

"I'm not getting pizza if you're only gonna have a *slice*!"

"What are you getting?"

"Burgers."

"I want extra mayo. And no cheese. And extra of that sauce they have."

I throw her the phone. "Order it yourself."

"Look who's cranky," she says. Then we fuck.

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We don't get pizza. We don't get burgers. She eats bananas and I eat Special K with her fucking skim milk and beef jerky. She's making craft cards with glitter and ink stamps. She's got ink all

over her hands. Sometimes I don't get into the tomboy thing. I'm looking out the window with a glass of wine.

"We should throw another party," she says.

This whole neighborhood is still being created. There are lots in her cul-de-sac that don't have houses on them. Most of the houses on this street are empty. They're waiting to be sold.

I turn to Ashley and say: "What kind of party?"

She pats the carpet next to her for me to sit.

The last party Ashley and I threw was called the Ice Party. We always do theme parties. And we always require something of our guests. It's a trick to create ownership. If you require something of someone, they become a participant. When you participate, you feel ownership, you have more fun. Like someone who never does chores at the house they live in: you're not getting away with anything, you're harming yourself by dealing yourself out of participation in the house. You won't ever feel you really live there until you participate..in whatever's going on..chores or whatever. At our parties the required participation is written on the invitation. At the Ice Party, the participation was "Bring something to share". Simple as that. Your participation can be anything, as long as it requires something from the guest. It doesn't matter what they bring to share, it doesn't even matter if they share it. The only thing that matters is that the person *feel* they're a part of things. "Bring something to share" accomplishes that.

Ashley and I were working on perfecting our parties.

"What should we call it?"

The "Naughty". I said that without even thinking.

Ashley's patting the carpet next to her, trying to get me to sit.

"What's the participation?"

I gesture with my wine glass. "Wear something naughty," I say. I don't sit down. Now I'm pacing. Pacing. Because now we have the kernel of an idea.

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Next thing you know I'm at Frederick's of Hollywood—and this is before I'd ever been to Hollywood, so this was Frederick's of Hollywood in the Dayton mall, in Buttfuck Ohio.

I'm picking out water bras with these women who are loving picking out water bras with a twenty-three-year-old man. Most of these women are older than me. But there's *one* who's about my age. They have their hands on me: they have to in order to size the bra. Turns out what looks good on me is a 32A. Pink. Water bra. And I'm buying panties too. I was going to stuff the bra until these women introduced me to the water bra. Before I walked into Frederick's of Hollywood I didn't know such a thing existed.

If you're the *host* of a party called the Naughty, and on the invitations you've charged each of your guests to “Wear something naughty!” then you better damn show up in something naughtier than all. Pink panties and the rest of my Frederick's of Hollywood get-up should do it. You never know, though; some of these Ohio kids are freaks.

I'm squeezing this water bra to feel its plushness and this check out girl is squeezing it with me and we're both standing over it like experts at Christie's examining lot 666, the matching bra and panty set for a man. Perfect! Better than stuffing! If someone feels me it'll be oh so soft! I'd like to take this girl in the back and feel her chest, do some side-by-side comparisons to the water bra, see which one is softer, swap out this pair of panties for the ones she's wearing. Etc. Instead I settle for giving her an invitation to the Naughty.

“What's your name again?”

“Janel.”

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Ashley's naughty outfit is this French maid thing. It's like a corset. It's not supposed to be a French maid thing, but that's what it looks like to me. She just looks like a whore. Or a vampire or

something. It's really not that hot. I think I'm getting tired of Ashley. Just sexually. The maid thing is played out.

"What are you wearing?"

I show her the Frederick's of Hollywood shit.

She touches the bra and looks at me. "You're gonna wear this?"

I put the bag on her craft couch, next to a bunch of *Stampin' Up!* accessories. "Want to see me in it?"

"Sure," she says, but she's not sure. She's not sure at all. "Your boobs are gonna look bigger than mine," she says.

"Are you jealous? Do you want to sit on me and think about it?" I touch her tit. She does have small tits.

"Do you wish I was.." she's not looking at me "..more like that?"

I fingernail the shit out of her tit and she jumps back.

"Ow!"

I grab the top of her jeans.

"Do you wish I was more like this?"

"Do you wish I was more bodybuilder?" I say. "Or more washboard? Or more teen angst emo mothefuckin earlobe-plugged-out fuckin..skater..earthy.."

"No, no," she says, "You're pretty washboard."

"Well don't get worried about it."

She's touching the Frederick's panties. "I just..if you want..I mean my underwear aren't like this."

"That's because your underwear have class."

"If you want me to wear underwear like this—"

"I love your underwear."

This is the kind of thing you say to end an argument. You say this thing in private, when it's just you and one other person. "I love your underwear." I mean, you don't *love* her underwear. You might *like* them, you might have kinky great feelings about them, but no one *loves* underwear. Love is reserved for animate, complex beings; responsive beings. You might even love a cow. You could definitely love a dog. But *underwear*?

"You do, baby?"

"Of course I do."

“You love my underwear?”

“Yes.” I love to take them off you. Does that count? I love that they contain *you*—does *that* count? I love them because you love them, I love them because they're *yours*. That's the extent of my love for them. I'm not a loving-underwear kind of guy. “Come'ere, Ash. What's wrong?”

“Do you like my costume?”

“I like it.”

“Does it make you want to fuck me?”

“I always want to fuck you.”

“But does *this* make you want to fuck me?”

“Jesus, Ash.” I pull away. “It's naughty. It's very naughty.”

“So that's a no.”

“I can't *determine* if it makes me want to fuck you, because I *always* want to fuck you; and *hence*, I can't *distinguish* which of the multiple factors *at play* are making, me, *want*, to, *fuck*, you.”

“Do you really want to?”

“Yes.” (I really did.)

“Do you want to do it on the counter?” (The kitchen counter, this was a new thing.)

“Yes.” Of course I want to do it on the counter. Counter is fine. Kitchen. Bathroom. Those are all fine places to fuck.

“Do you wanna do it with the vibrator?”

“Yes.” Of course. I want to do it with the vibrator. No man can always be enough for a woman. You need the vibrator on your clit. I want you to have it there.

“You're gonna play with my nipples?”

Of course. Of course I'm gonna play with your nipples. And you're gonna cum. And then I'm gonna lay you back and fuck the shit out of you. You'll be face-down. I'll come on your back. Then I'll lay on top of you and you'll go back to craft..motherfucking..*iPod* holders or whatever you're working on.

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There's a hollowness about sex—there can get to be. You can avoid it. You can maintain it sweet, you can maintain it pure..it's just a lot a lot of work. Because you *do* get used to their underwear. And their shaving cream and their favorite lunch meat. Those were all tiny little pieces of information that were new to you at one point. Of course you knew that corned beef *was a lunchmeat*, before meeting that certain someone..you just never thought about it like that. As a good choice..as the *right* choice. Somehow this person, in moving around in the world and making sandwiches and learning how to eat lunch, has found such an *optimal* choice of lunchmeat..something you were unable to find..or *not ready* to find! But now you are! Corned beef is truly the best choice for lunchmeat, as is that certain kind of sandwich bread—the kind you had been getting before is too hard! It's too hard to chew. This bread is much better. It says “sandwich bread” on the package for god damn! The bread I've been buying doesn't even say “sandwich bread”. That bread was good for my sandwiches—you know, honey and butter—but for corned beef and mayo *this* bread is ideal. This is the bread. This one right here. Why does anyone do it any other way?

And then you eat that kind of sandwich for a while.

And it just becomes bread.

It's just: the kind of shaving cream we always get. The kind that's in my shower.

It's just: the way we do it, with the vibrator on your clit and you sitting on top of me and then me fucking you from behind while you smile blissfully with your face pressed against the sheets. Then I come on your back and then you get up and then I fall asleep and then you put the sheets over me so I'm not sleeping naked and then I have dreams about dogs biting me *who won't let go* and their teeth! and then I wake up sometime in the middle of the afternoon with afternoon sun shining in my eyes and I push off the sheets and I go in the next room past the bathroom with all the usual shaving cream and I find you in the craft room and I wonder why I don't sneak a few of my clothes home with me this time when I go and you

look at me thinking these things, which I'm sure you think as well, and then you reach for the craft knife and you're cutting identical strips of iconic bears into the side of..side of..something..a cup holder for your mother..I don't know..

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You can put your junk in female panties even if you're a guy. It's not 100% comfortable, but it's ok. My junk isn't that big.

I'm wearing cargo pants, six pockets per side. But underneath are my Frederick's of Hollywoods. On top I'm wearing a rainbow shirt, skin tight. And under that is my water bra. I did have to stuff it a little. I'm not wearing makeup or anything. And I'm wearing socks. They're these furry ones with little gripper things on the bottom. I have to adjust my junk.

I look in the mirror. I don't look like a girl at all. I look like..a guy wearing a water bra. I push down the front of my pants. Pink top of the Frederick's. Now that's sexy. It doesn't make me want to fuck a guy. It makes me want to be a girl getting fucked by myself. Or maybe it makes me want to fuck a girl. My dick is pointed straight up. But it's not hard.

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Here's who's gonna be at this party. It's gonna be me. It's gonna be Ash. It's gonna be waaay too many of our work friends—the ones who like to do drugs. The ones who wanted to make sure we'd have alcohol and ecstasy and that the party was going to be *insane* before they agreed to come.

“Is it gonna be insane?”

“Yes.”

“Is it gonna be ridiculous?”

“Yes. Are you coming?”

“Let me check with Angela.”

Angela is Gao's wife. Gao is definitely coming to this party.

Who else is coming? Let's see. It's gonna be Ashley's improv friends and it's gonna be people from my neighborhood. I live in town, in Dayton, in the Oregon District. There's gonna be people from there, people I met at the coffeehouse and people who live downtown. These are people who come to art shows and who I know from bars, and from high school. Ashley and I went to different high schools. Some of her friends are coming too. Aside from her improv friends, she's bringing Kenzie Merriman, her best bud from high school. And Nathan, someone else from high school. He's gay and his mom robbed a bank on television. I mean she *robbed a bank*. And it was *on* television. On the news. We're pretty sure he's gay. Well, I'm totally sure; Ash is on the fence.

Who else? Ashley's notable improv friends: MJ and this girl Brooklyn. And Zombie. Brooklyn is this tightly-hot, kind of smouldering one of the three. MJ is short for Mental Jiant—we call her that cause she's smart. And Elizabeth Ronstadt..that's Liz, from before—who I went to high school with? People call her Zombie now, or Zombie Lizard. We never hang out; Ashley met her independently through class. Now I only see her at the club. Elizabeth is sort of the babydoll-murderer of the three. The three of them plus Ash are in an improv troupe. Improv comedy. And they do some sketch.

From work it's going to be—no managers, just people we work with—it's going to be Hong Yang Gao, my work partner, me, Ash, this guy Brickman, a web developer, his wife (or girlfriend), this girl Karen, she's a tester, she's not very good but she looks like she needs to get out of the house. She's married but not bringing her husband. There's a story there, I'm sure, but *I'm* not going to be the one to tell it. Who else? Some girlfriends of mine from high school—that should be interesting. That would be Sarah Garner, Arianne Bannister, Constance Page, and some others. I guess you could count Brit. And also Missy Horne. They might be there too. I just kissed Brit once, but it was an intense kiss. She was grabbing my dick.

Ash is bringing some exes too. Annoyingly, this fuckhead Christopher Whatever-the-Fuck-His-Last-Name-Is. Muggs? Miggs? Something stupid; something that sounds like the military. What was it? Sergeant Fuggz reporting! Fitz-something? I don't know. The guy is an asshole.

And my friend Chad. Chad is beautiful. Chad is one of the guys I would fuck if I was gay. Or maybe even if I wasn't gay. Chad has beautiful, long, dark, shiny hair. Did I mention it was black? It's not curly; it's wavy. Down to the middle of his back. He wears it in this ponytail; he looks like a martial arts master. And he has the funniest sense of humor. He'll go off on a tangent about "The top ten reasons you never want to fuck a crack ho"—stuff like that. It's hard to explain but he's just..silly.

Also I invited Janel—the girl from Frederick's of Hollywood, remember?

That's about it. We invited the neighbors just so they have less reason to call the cops.

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When I have a party I don't fuck around. We had to modify Ashley's house a bit.

I mean it was *our* party. But certain touches were just mine. Like the disco ball. And the strobe lights. And the blacklight room. And the bong, with a funnel at the top and a bunch of plastic tubing we bought at Home Depot. That bong was a motherfucker. You'd pour—whatever—in the top and it would slide down this one-inch plastic tubing, swirling around this pole in Ashley's kitchen, and at the bottom—you'd have to lie on the floor to get it—you'd open your mouth and in would slide your shot, or your beer, or whatever you were drinking.

The blacklight room was for sex-only. It was designed to be an orgy room. Everything in there was meant to inspire sex. We'll see how it goes.

What else? The bathrooms were all done out, decorations on the mirrors and shit. There was a makeout closet—Ashley's walk-in closet. It was labeled “Makeout room” or something equally obvious. You don't want to be putting complex instructions on your party. “Makeout room” is simple enough. You can read that and understand it when you're drunk. Also: on the invitations: “Wear something naughty”. A five-year-old could understand. That was all our flyer said on the front: “the Naughty [date and time] [location]” and “Wear something naughty”.

This is what people wore:

(Some people dressed heavenly.) Janel was one of those. She rolled in early; she was one of the first to get here. Janel's idea of naughty was something like a lingere angel. I didn't think it was all that naughty but it was naught-*tay*. Ash was in the kitchen, I open the door, Janel comes in, the house is mostly still empty. Ash and Janel see each other, I know this is going to be a rough night.

“Janel! Glad you're here!” (Slight kiss on the cheek.)

“I brought these,” she says. She's got two bottles, a Jamison and some potato vodka I've never heard of. “It's Russian.”

“Really? Janel this is Ash, Ashley, this is my friend Janel.”

Ash stays seated on her kitchen counter. “And how did you two meet?”

“Really? That's Russian? I didn't know Russians made potato vodka.”

“Or it might be Slovenian,” she says. She twists the bottle in her hand. She looks very, very good.

(Some people dressed normally.) I mean normally for “naughty”. These would be people like Brickman, from work, and like Karen, from work. Karen comes in she's got her mouth hanging open like she's at the dentist. She's always like that.

“Is there cotton in your mouth?”

“What?”

“Close your mouth. Is there cotton in the back of your throat?”

“What?”

I put my arm around her and bring her into the house. "Come here, come here, there's the kitchen, have a drink. Ashley's in there."

Karen shows me some Bud Lights. "We brought these."

"Put em in the kitchen. Where's Gao? There he is. Gao. What the fuck is up with you?"

"Nothin."

"*Hong.*"

"Matthew."

"*Hong Yang!*"

"*Matthew!*" Gao leans in close. "Do you have any ecstasy?"

"What?" I pretend not to hear him.

He whispers in my ear. "I heard there was gonna be ecstasy at this party."

I put my hand on his head. "*Hong Yang.*" I kiss his forehead. "Come do a shot with me. Brickman, get your ass in here. What the fuck. I thought you were gonna bring your wife."

(Some people dressed freakishly.) That would be Elizabeth Ronstadt—Zombie Lizard? These girls show up. This is Zombie, Mental Jiant and that girl Brooklyn. Yeah. Babydoll Zombie murderer shows up in desert camo pants, combat boots, and a white bra, drenched in blood. Mental Jiant is smearing the blood on Zombie's stomach when I open the door to let them in. MJ is dressed as a flasher. When I open the door, she straightens from Zombie's belly and opens a beige trenchcoat. She's completely naked. Sweaty little clam. She closes the coat and pulls down a dark pair of shades, overly-dark. And Brooklyn. Brooklyn. It's not like we had this party in January, but still. Brooklyn is wearing electrical tape on her nipples—two little Xs—and a white pair of panties..and that's it.

There were those types of people. There were those that dressed heavenly, there were those that dressed normally, there were those that dressed freakishly. And then there were other kinds of people.

(There were those who dressed devilishly.) Well, there was one who dressed devilishly. Actually she dressed *as* the devil. But a naughty sort of devil. And it was this one that I liked the best.

I've told you all I've told you, up to this point, not so you'll think I'm a womanizer—by today's standards I'm not—but so that you know what this story is about. This isn't about my job. It isn't about my using drugs. It's about my love. And I had imagined love, held concepts of love, even thought I'd been in love..but before that night I had never had the *chance* to love. Of course I'd loved my *family*, I'd loved my friends, I'd even loved my job and in a way I'd loved drugs and books and exercise. I'd loved apartments I'd lived in. I have this chair I love. And I'd loved women—loved their bodies, even loved their minds. Even—and this is true—even loved their emotions, even loved their *person-ality*, their chaos and their little quirks like wanting to see a nine o'clock movie and leaving the house at eight forty-five. (That was Ashley.) But before that night I'd never been *in love*, and that's the kind of love I'm talking about here. Did she sweep me off my heels? Not really; I'm a guy, we don't really get swept off our heels. Did she blow my mind? It's more like she blew my spirit. I just never knew anyone like that existed. I spend my whole life acting—pretending to like people. I don't even know I do it—at least I didn't before I met her. It's like you're having these conversations, and you're dialing yourself down to deal with whatever the person is telling you, whatever thing they're going through, but without even thinking, you've filtered out the great and wild and real *you*, and you're just dealing with them in the way that they need to be dealt with. Because all they want to talk about is work—or all they *can* talk about is work. Or dance. Or improv. Or painting. Or sports, television, and all that shit. I don't care about the weather. I don't care about traffic. I don't care that the show was *so goddamn funny* last night. It wasn't. It wasn't funny. It wasn't scary. It wasn't great. And it never is with people.

Except..eventually..when you meet the right person..it is.

