

## **NO ONE MUST KNOW**

by Lowry Pei

Here is a picture of me: woman in an uprooted garden, outside a house that is being reconstructed, remembering. Sitting on the ground, trowel in hand, poking unconsciously at the dirt. Digging the point of it in, turning up a little soil, patting it back down the with the flat of the trowel. Paying little attention to footsteps of those who pass by, or the sound of hammering from inside the house. No, this woman is raptly thinking: Alex, without you I'm lost. And I can tell no one. With you, at the end, I was lost as well. But I can't forget anything we did. Now I must be who I never wanted to be, a singleton, a dreamer, a loner, a person never fully present who gets lost from one moment to the next in thoughts that I refuse to share.

Not for anyone to know but Alex and me. Because if they knew they'd assemble in the street in front of my house beating pots and pans in primitive ritual to drive the bad one out, they'd treat me like the French did those women who slept with Nazis, after the war: strip them naked and march them to the edge of town, stand there with arms crossed in a self-righteous phalanx, watch them stumble away crying, blocking their return home, forever. All the more pitiless because everyone in the crowd of hypocrites feared their own transgressions would be exposed. So I too would be driven out before my house is even finished, if not literally then in their hearts. I would see in their eyes. Every time I went into the grocery store or the pharmacy or the video store or the coffee shop or the wine and cheese place or the gas station I would see them thinking: There she is, there's the woman who . . .

So I cannot speak to anyone of the things that matter. But I will write them here, for the gods, for the clouds, for the seasons. But not for you who would throw me into one of your prisons if you found out.

And if anyone finds this and reads this may it be a hundred years from now when none of this matters and it is only a story.

I can't say when it really began, whether it started in this lifetime or much earlier, on the other side of the river of forgetting that separates this life from all that has gone before. We don't know the beginnings of things, and we don't know the end either, because when such things end, or when people use those words, they are not over. The important things have no final milestone, no rock with a plaque that says This is the fabled destination, and saying they are over is only whistling past the graveyard of our hopes.

I only want to write here about the things people don't admit. People don't want to acknowledge any such thing as no beginning and no end, because the clock tells them everything and they are on a schedule from six months after birth until they die. Don't say what about when they retire. By then the habit is too deeply ingrained to stop. But some few of us still live our lives outside of time, off the track, and we are the betrayers of the established order, we who have no appointments, no wristwatches, no place we have to be five minutes ago. We have no age either. Traitors, incompetents, parasites, criminals, satirists, provocateurs, ne'er-do-wells, what are we? Not to be trusted by you over there, respectable ones, of that I'm sure. I accept my labels, I accept that I will be stigmatized for not caring as I should about what time it is. As I said the truth is far worse.

What else don't people admit? For one thing they don't want to admit they can be naked. Naked goes with no beginning and no end. You think because people are naked all the time in movies, in photographs, because they have sex in books, because magazines in the grocery store have Look Great Naked! on the cover, therefore you think you can be naked. But just the reverse. That isn't nakedness, it's a costume like any other, and you work your butt off to get it. Bad joke. Fine, but naked that I mean is not a product. How are babies naked? Think of that. Let them run naked and they'll pee and shit on the floor and not think twice. Now I don't shit on the floor but the naked I mean is just as inadmissible.

You who must not be allowed to read this don't believe in sex either. For you it has turned into consumption of a product. Pretend-naked is all it is, lonely entertainment, hiding behind skin. I know this, you don't want to. Or do you protest and say Goddamn it, who are you

to say these things about me, when I have sex, damn it, I have great sex? Fine, I hope you do. If I offend you, remember: I didn't ask you to read this.

This is not entertainment.

But I feel like a fool waving my little fists like that, flexing my scrawny biceps, mentally I see the caption beneath my own picture shouting I Defy The World. The truth is I defy nothing, I am crushed already, or easily crushable, only my invisibility saves me. No one notices, thank God, who and what I am. And why should they? If you look at me there is not that much to see; naked as I am I must all the more adopt protective coloration. I keep my disguise on at all times, the very best one: white, middle-class, indeterminate age thirty to fifty, house, yard, car, newspaper on front steps . . . I am luckily a woman, the less noticeable gender if I choose to play it that way. Oh there is nothing to see when you look at me, nothing except the light in my eyes that would make you wonder what I'm thinking if I ever made eye contact. But I choose not to, feminine modesty, circumspection, precaution against rape, proper upbringing, oppressed by patriarchy, call it what you will but I get away with not looking you in the eye.

I try to look busy even though I am not, at least not in the way I should be. Americans automatically distrust anyone who isn't busy. The disturbing thing about the homeless is not that they're poor and we're rich, we don't mind that anymore, it's that they hold still. No Loitering unless you have a prop to justify it; a guidebook is good, guidebook with camera is better. But this is where I live, so I keep moving; I don't want you to know I don't have a paying job, I don't have a Millennium-At-A-Glance appointment calendar, I'm not late for anything, except my own life. I don't want you to ask how I can afford this way of being, don't want you poking into my means of support, don't want you telling me I live in undeserved comfort, thanks to global capitalism, on the stolen labor of miserable wretches in Saipan. So do you. Let's keep it quiet.

So I cannot say when it began. It began when he was born, or before. It began when he was my son, legally speaking – but he was not, is not, my son. It began when I decided that I might as well do something to help some miserable wretches somewhere, since I wasn't going to give away the money, I needed that to live on. So I thought I would volunteer my expensive education to lick envelopes or some such, and it got a little more complicated than that but I never let it get to be a job and an appointment book because that is how people like

you get people like me under control and if there is one thing my life is dedicated to it is not being under your control.

What happened to Alex? Just life in this world. He had parents, he had a sister, he reached the age of reason – elsewhere – and then he lost everything I really don't know how but the relief agency said that his family was killed except for him and he, well, by circuitous means he ended up living in my house. I had no husband and that may have been a strike against me, but I also had a good income, plenty of time, I was educated, white, etc., etc. I had privileges; by definition, they work; I got Alex.

It was very odd at first. He was like a boarder in my house, a permanent guest. I was not used to living with anyone. When I had men in my life I might let them sleep over but not two nights in a row; then Alex came and his sleepover never ended. I cooked for him, I made his bed, I did his laundry, I took him to school and picked him up, I read to him (I had to start with books for little kids, but he caught up in a year), I heard him cry at night and didn't know what to do. I was embarrassed to give him a bath at first, but I did. I believe to him it was just one more peculiarity of the culture he found himself thrust into, no more or less strange than anything else that befell him.

I felt myself growing up with him. But it wasn't the way you'll say it should have been. If I were going to be like other people, I should have grown up as the adult, the parent, in parallel with his growing up as the child. But that was not the way it was. I started over in life with him. I may have had a somewhat bigger, older body, but I became his cohort, his circle of friends, his invisible playmate. Yes, that's what I was: after a year or so I was to him what children have, an invisible friend. Outside I looked like a white American adult woman, I would have looked that way to you, but I did not to Alex, and I did not need to look at myself as long as he was here, only at him, I became a me fit for him, fitted to him, his size, his age. He never called me "Mom," he called me by my name.

I flattered myself that I was his sister. Sometimes older, sometimes his twin. I liked that the best. I knew that twins sometimes develop a secret language; we had one too, half English, half mistakes. All words are inadequate mistakes, if ours were more mistaken than most that is where their power came from.

We didn't close the door of the bathroom. There was nothing shameful about openly taking shits, wrinkling our noses and making a face at the smell. If we had both been boys we would have peed in the toilet together. Sometimes I would sit on the floor of the shower while he washed himself; I didn't like to be so evidently taller than him. Once

for a joke while I was sitting there, washing my hair, he peed on my back, I yelled, we got in a soapy wrestling match all over the bathroom until I banged my knee and had to stop.

Alex at that age was more fun than any grown man could ever be. He never wanted to do boring things like drink half the night in smoky crowded places where you have to yell to be heard. He knew how to play, and I found out that I did too. He had no limits, no rules, no embarrassment. He never thought about how things were in our house, what to call them, how they might look, it never crossed his mind. Grown men are afraid to play. That's why they pretend they've forgotten how.

Then he got selfconscious. And this is when it happened. I was not aware of doing it on purpose, that is a true statement but I'm not making an excuse. There is an unconscious, there is much we don't know about what is in the human heart, whether you admit it or not. You want to claim that we can be pious and good, rational and strong of will, you believe those who are otherwise have willed themselves bad and rationally made the wrong choice, to which I say you don't know what you're talking about. I am sorry for you in your ignorance of the mysterious and the erotic and the dark, but I am more sorry for your victims, your husbands and wives, your children and other subordinates, your pupils, your convicts, your congregations, whom you force into the mold of your self-deception.

He became selfconscious and started closing the bathroom door, closing his bedroom door, he wouldn't undress in front of me anymore and since when had he ever been modest? Who taught him that? Suddenly he developed reserve. My feelings were hurt. Did you ever think about how the invisible friend feels when the child throws her aside? So I shut my door too, so there. Inside my room, I missed him terribly, missed our play, our shamelessness, and worse yet, I missed myself, the only me I had ever really wanted to be was stolen from me and I was in mourning.

I would have gotten over it one day – or not – and I could say that it would have been better if I'd been forced to find out which, but that is hypocrisy. The truth is that the happiest period of my life was about to begin.

The thing I cannot explain, that I'm sure I didn't do, is that he missed me too. Perhaps bad things happened to him at school, perhaps the other sixth-graders teased him because he was never able to be just like them. We all know how cruel kids are to each other. Anyway he had nightmares, or maybe having one was an excuse to come in my room and crawl in my bed and stay there half the night, a month or so

after the doors clicked shut.

It happened the next night again. I remember him next to me, hot, his boy body seeming to vibrate with energy even in his sleep.

For two nights after that he stayed in his room and I lay between waking and sleep, listening, waiting for his footstep to cross the few floorboards that separated his room from mine. I must have slept during the day, while he was at school.

Then in the night I heard him cry out, and his light clicking on, and his feet hitting the floor, and then he was in my room stumbling toward the bed. He burrowed under the covers and into me. I put my arms around him; I was naked, I always sleep naked, alone or with anyone else. He went back to sleep, sweating lightly, in my arms, and after a while he had an erection in his sleep; I felt it against me. I struggled with myself, with the angel of desire who was stronger than I could ever hope to be, and in the end I touched his penis. He did not seem to respond, but it remained stiff against my ever so cautiously stroking fingers, and this is where I hear you saying “Cut off her hands.”

In the morning he gave no sign of knowing what had occurred.

I was full of forbidden gladness. And glad, too, that I was a woman and not a man, that I could be aroused without his knowing it, without having a great throbbing erection that would be impossible to conceal. Imagine if our roles were reversed, I a man and Alex a young girl, me dying to force my engorged penis into her little, dry, unready vagina, knowing it could only be rape, only pain and horror, and yet unable not to want her in that way – imagine the agony of that, I thought congratulating myself on my luck, whereas I could want him ever so much and my wet vagina and erect nipples could never harm him, no he would be the one to come into me of his own free will when he was ready ... yes already I thought about that, of course I did, I am no hypocrite to claim I didn't feel what I felt, you would have too, which you will not admit.

All I had to do was to be twelve years old. It was easy. Anyone who wanted to could do it. Or maybe thirteen – an older woman. Never more than that.

It was my great luck to have such small breasts, skinny arms, bony knees; some men don't think much of my body but it was perfect for Alex. There are eighth-grade girls who are better developed than I'll ever be. I didn't look like a mother. If I had been one of those pendulous women whose breasts look like they belong under the wings of a 747 he would have been repelled.

I don't know if Alex was different from other boys, all I know is

him. I imagine there are other twelve-year-olds who would like to have a girlfriend who'd be naked with them, who'd sleep with them, who'd play with their penis, who'd let them feel her up. Plenty of others. They just don't get to have one. Alex did.

Can you possibly understand that this was the greatest happiness life can ever offer me? And I don't mean what you think I mean, I don't mean poor me that this which you call perversion is the only thing I can enjoy, I mean that nothing – nothing – between men and women can ever be as pure and truthful and erotic as being Alex's twelve-year-old naked girlfriend. I will never again be as much me as I was then, never fulfill my mission on this earth as well, never again find myself fitted perfectly into what I was born to be and to do.

Now he was almost as tall as me (and I was no taller than girls his age), so when we took showers together we both stood up, and we'd soap each other all over and his penis, which was not as little as it had been anymore, would stand stiffly out offering itself to my touch. His balls had not dropped yet and I would soap his little smooth stones tenderly, waiting, encouraging the semen to come. The only thing I lived in fear of was he would brag to his friends, I told him he had to keep it a secret no matter how much he wanted to tell, because no one would understand and to stop us from being together they would make it so that he would no longer have a home, and that scared him, I knew. But I didn't tell it to him as his mother. He was not my son, ever, I told you that. I was twelve, we were two twelve-year-olds who somehow had gotten a house and a car and a bank account and one of us could pass for an adult so grownups would leave us, thank God, alone. I had a mad twelve-year-old passion for him, I trembled when I waited in the car to pick him up after school, I wrote his name and mine inside hearts "4ever," I was jealous of the girls in his class and kept trying to find out if he liked anyone, I stayed apart from the adults when I went to his Little League games because I was afraid they'd try to talk to me and I couldn't act their age. I couldn't take my eyes off him, I couldn't think of anything but getting back inside the house. Lock the doors and then my being older and in charge was only pretend and reality was that we were two kids alone together. Oh I so much wanted a girlfriend I could tell it all to, I was the one now who needed an invisible soulmate so I could call her on the phone and pour out my heart, tell her all my secrets, my dreams and fears, swearing her to the most elaborate secrecy in oaths of mingled blood, making her pledge her loyalty to me over again every day, cross her heart and hope to die, before I'd tell her what we did when Alex and I were naked. But I could tell no one, and can never tell anyone whom and how I loved, will never

hear myself speak the truth aloud except to my own ears behind locked doors, which is why I must write it here. Oh you smug and self-satisfied with your wedding rings and your honeymoon suites and your love boat cruises, how I hate you, I hope you will never know.

I showed him how to masturbate and though nothing came out, he had an orgasm and he began to know what it was all about. Then when he knew what an orgasm was I showed him how I could give myself one too, and after that we could do it together. My favorite was when we would lie side by side and hold hands and both masturbate until we came, and I would try to wait until his moment and come with him, but I don't think he knew I was holding back on purpose.

Alex didn't like kissing much, he didn't like touching tongues. That was the only thing I missed when we were together. But he liked to suck on my breasts, and that was beyond wonderful except he'd bite sometimes, on purpose, to tease me or see what he could get away with before I'd yell Stop. But I would let him lie and mouth my breasts any way he wanted, as long as he wanted, and from time to time I'd touch myself and I'd come, or touch him, his hard penis, his tight little boy butt. I was all his and he was all mine.

He didn't care of course the way that I cared. Twelve-year-old boys have no sentimental side. That was why I yearned so much to have a girlfriend, who would understand. But it was fun to play sex and he was having fun. It wasn't like he had no idea what was going on, either. Kids don't live in a different world. The difference with Alex was that he didn't have to get all his ideas about sex from TV and magazines and his friends, he didn't have to believe whatever they told him, because he knew.

And of course he got older. When he was thirteen and some months his hairs began to sprout, his scrotum became wrinkled and loose, his penis no longer a little boy's. And it meant I could get older with him. He knew everything was permitted between us, he knew I would let him come in me, but still it took him a long time to get up his nerve to ask, and I made myself wait until he did, no matter how much I wanted to lead him over the threshold every time we played with each other in bed. But when he finally asked, I allowed myself to say "I've been dying for you to do it to me." I didn't use the words "make love" because I was afraid they would scare him. The first time, he came almost as soon as he was inside, and he was embarrassed and disappointed and mad at himself and wouldn't look me in the eye, but I kept holding him and touching him and of course he got hard again and I said "Do it some more."

So Alex lay on top of me and I guided him into me and the angel



took over. He began to move, and at last Alex my boyfriend was making love to me, and I moved with him and my heart was so filled with tenderness that I couldn't keep from crying. I tried to hide it from him, and he didn't know until I sniffled loudly and then he stopped moving and looked at me surprised and was going to pull out but I held him in me and said "Don't stop, please please don't stop, I'm okay, don't stop" until he believed me, and when he began to move in me again Antony and Cleopatra, king and queen of half the world, on her golden barge on the Nile, could not have made more love than Alex and I did.

I know you cannot understand this, because all you can see is the clock. My age, his age, permitted, forbidden, this is all you know. Let me tell you, even though it does no good, that it is the age of the soul, and that alone, which matters, and that the soul knows none of your rules and is only temporarily imprisoned within them here. I look forward to the end of this lifetime; I dream of, but then I sometimes dread, the next. All I can say is that my soul and Alex's are forever joined, that we have chosen to undergo the deepest lessons together. Next time, how will it be? Will I be his as he was mine, will I bear his weight on my girl body, will I have to take his penis into me before I'm ready? Will I be his sidekick, his twin, his father, his . . . or will he be a woman? There's no knowing. But we will be together again, and again, to delight and suffer. Over and over we will pay the price, as I am paying it now, crossing the desert of the rest of this lifetime until we can be together again.

Now we slept together except when I had my period, which predictably grossed him out and only then would he sleep in his old room. Alex discovered he had a heart, he discovered what it is to love not in the way children love, when we don't name what we are doing, when we love and hate like breathing, but to love the hard way that comes when we sprout hair in our pubic regions, when we know that we are loving, when the heart is torn open by a higher power and the soul is given away to the beloved whether one wills it or not. By the time Alex was fourteen he was fully in love with me and he had no discretion. The great danger was going out of the house together because we could hardly keep our hands off each other or stop giving each other looks that anyone could read from twenty feet away. He would fling his arm around me in public to tell the world that he owned me – and he did, but I had to push him away, make terrible angry scowl faces to get him to keep some distance, and inside I would feel awful about hurting him but as soon as we were alone I would beg him to forgive me and tell him all over again how people would make us live apart if they only knew half of it and he knew we couldn't bear that.

I still can't believe no one figured it out. Can anyone, even you who must not be allowed to see this, be so numb and resigned, so dead inside, that you can pass by two people absolutely in love and not know it? People must have wilfully refused to see; it was staring them in the face, I can only imagine that they saw and chose not to admit that they knew. Oh surely it cannot be, too disturbing, too inconvenient to be disturbed, I must be mistaken about her age and besides I'm busy right now . . .

Not that I wanted to be caught, because I knew what you would do to me. But love wants to be known and respected for what it is, Aphrodite demands her due.

She gave me and Alex her gift in all its fullness, as much as mortals can bear, and for this I thank her even now, when all is lost. I surrendered myself to her without reservation, and still do. But the gods have signed no agreement that their devotees shall be made happy by their devotion.

I taught Alex everything about sex that a man should know, and most of them don't. He had seen me masturbate without understanding he should learn from that, but now I taught him how to touch me, not in his boy-curious, invading way, but so that he gave me as much pleasure as I could give myself – and far more, because he was doing it. I taught him the way my breasts were meant to be kissed and caressed. I taught him how to gently stroke my behind without embarrassing me, how to lick my ear and my neck, how to surrender to me when I wanted to be on top. I did everything to him that he could stand. At first it made him too self-conscious when I took his penis in my mouth, and he couldn't let himself come then; but I kept doing it, and everything I know to do, until nothing surprised him and he could bear all the pleasures of love. The only thing I couldn't teach him was how to make me come when he was inside me, because he already knew by instinct, and I came so easily with him, my body held no secret reluctance as it has with many men I've known.

I taught him everything, and he knew how extraordinary his secret knowledge was, and then, of course, he had to go and try his wings with someone else. Some girl his age. It had to happen, I know that, I knew it even then.

It wasn't easy for him, of course. He never could quite fit in among the American kids who can't tolerate anything different, anything that isn't shown in an ad and doesn't have a brand name on it. And besides, if he liked a girl, if she liked him, was she actually going to let him make love to her, and where would they go to do it? It wasn't so simple as getting in bed with me every night knowing he

could have me any time he wanted. Knowing that if he woke up in the middle of the night after a horny dream I would be happy to wake to him trying to find his way into me in the darkness, I would help him, I would let the dream-desire spend itself in me.

I knew, when he began to keep to himself, when he spent hours in his room with his door closed, when he wrote secret writing which I read with held breath, in compulsion and guilt, writing that named this girl and then that, that hinted at unrequited fantasies.

When we were twelve my jealousy was like a game, but we were not twelve anymore, we were fifteen, and it was no game. You think jealousy is a natural part of honorable relationships, but I think it is a mental illness. I had it. I couldn't admit to him that I had read the torn pages of his secret writing, but I asked such pointed questions that he must have known anyway. I couldn't stop myself. When questions poking at him point-blank didn't work, I schemed whole conversations strewn like minefields with opportunities for him to slip and admit he wanted someone else. I withheld myself from him, refused him my love, told him I wanted to sleep alone, then when he slunk off to his room I couldn't bear what I had done and had to go slip into his narrow bed, where he tried to push me away, but I would beg or tease or simply refuse to go, I would squirm my nakedness against him and he was a teenage boy and could not say no. We would make love and I would tell him that I loved him and not let him sleep until he said the words I had to hear. Then the next day it would start again.

I knew one day Alex, with his dark hair that won't lie down, and his long sharp nose and his intense dark eyes and his olive skin, would be noticed by the girl who would be different from the others, who would see what the others couldn't, who would have a wild streak like his or mine, and when she saw him she would be able to get him. And I – what would I be then? Old clothes. Used, underfoot, smelly, in the way. It would mean having to live with his old, dumped girlfriend while he was falling in love with the new; and worse yet, she would call me his mother.

Picture me sitting in the garden, turning up the dirt with the point of my trowel, listening to workmen hammer inside the house and asking myself, for the thousandth time, what I could have done that I did not. Never start it in the first place, you will say – you who have no respect for the mystery and power of love – but that is never an answer. There is only one world that I can live in, and it is the world in which I love Alex, in which I am his. But there was nothing I could do to prevent his leaving me.

Especially because I loved him. No matter how miserable it made

me, I knew that this was what he needed to do, I knew that our time had to end, that he would one day look up at the world around him and ask himself what he had been doing all this time here in our house, shake his head, heave a sigh, and walk away. That he would put aside childish things. If not, what? He would become one of those grown men who are neutered like pets; or a monster, perhaps, who would kill me. I would have been willing to die at his hand if it would make him happy, but killing me would ruin his life and I tell you again, I love him and loving someone means you care more for their happiness than for your own.

Still, he never should have slept with her in our house.

That little twit, I hate her. Not for loving Alex – how could I not understand that? – but for ceasing to love him, for the fickleness of her inexperienced and therefore cruel heart, or if it was not that, then for her weakness in not being able to bear and return his love. I could wring her sweet little flawless neck for feeling fear when she should have given thanks, for asking for his love without knowing what she was asking, and then running away when Alex opened his heart to her and offered what she will spend the rest of her life fruitlessly looking for.

He did not tell me this, of course; he told me almost nothing, certainly nothing he could not help. But I am as certain as I can be that I know what went on, hidden from me, that brought me and Alex to where we are today.

Her name was Cathy. Can you imagine? Cathy, her namby-pamby little Middle American name makes it all the worse. It should have been a Zoraidah, a Yasmin, a Deborah at least who led to the breaking of both our hearts.

I don't know how it began but I can imagine. She smiled at him, she flirted with him somehow in the hall, she sat next to him in class and whispered to him when the teacher wasn't looking. She started it, I'm sure, because Alex would not have quite known how to make the first move. Boys that age never do. She was a year older than he and probably thought that meant she knew it all and could safely amuse herself with him, the boy no one knew very much about but who some of the girls secretly thought was cute.

When they began to talk and Alex felt desire for her it did not make him awkward and tongue-tied the way it would other boys, I'm sure. Desire and sex were his home territory. When he felt the undercurrent between them he was on familiar ground, he became at ease with her; he knew – better than she did – where their conversations were leading when she pretended to be shy with him and

then bent forward to pick up her books and permitted him a glimpse of her breasts. Oh I know I was not there but she did those things, I am certain, having done them myself, and besides I saw them together later on.

She was blonde, and I suppose she was pretty enough, but mostly just young. She had high breasts, bigger than mine, and no hips, and not quite enough upper lip, apparently; in order to close her mouth entirely, which she seldom did, she had to bring her lower lip up to meet the upper in a sort of pout. There are dozens of her in every high school in America. I'm sure she believed that she had serious thoughts; I'm sure Alex believed it too, because he was a serious boy.

I knew when he started to want her (even though I didn't know her name) because he was preoccupied while we ate dinner and when I asked him what he was thinking he looked caught; and when we went to bed, he wouldn't look at me naked before I turned the light out. In the dark he lay apart from me as if he wanted to go to his own room but didn't know how to make it happen, and then he'd make love to me but I knew it was with thoughts of someone else. I'm sorry that those were the last times, Alex thinking of her as he came into me, but I would give a great deal to have even one of those nights with him again.

Then he started going to bed in his own room. Once it might have been a move in our game, it might have excited him to make me seduce him all over again, but there was nothing left that I had not given him. He no longer wanted it from me; I could tell he wanted to forget, to pretend that he had learned about love all on his own. Overnight I became his housemate, his servant, his embarrassment. I lay in my bed desolate, and yet I wanted him to be strong enough to throw me aside, selfish enough to ignore how I would feel; he would be able to survive as a grownup, then. It was only my misfortune that I was his girl whether he wanted me or not.

How they first came to the point of touching each other with held breath, how he gave her the kisses he didn't desire from me, these are things I don't want to imagine. I can't help it anyway. I know how he must have made her feel when she let him touch her, how he must have overwhelmed her. He knew what it was to caress a girl who loved him, who wanted to give him everything, but she did not know what it was to be touched that way until Alex, and above all she did not know she would become that girl under his hands.

He brought her to the house one afternoon and they wandered into the kitchen thinking nobody was home. I heard him asking her if she wanted something to eat and the tone of his voice told me enough.

They both went stiff when they saw me sitting there reading the paper; he mumbled her name to me. I told her mine; I looked her in the eye: Are you the one? She heard my thought and looked away. At least Alex didn't tell her I was his mother. I got up and played the hostess, relentlessly offering her everything in the fridge, so that they couldn't slip out before I got a chance to examine her more closely, to watch her mouth and her fingers and guess at whether she could even begin to be ready for him. She kept mumbling politely thank you no, thank you, turning pinker, and it was too clear that they had come to what they thought was an empty house with one thing in mind, which perhaps they had not admitted out loud to each other, and she was aware that I could guess their plan. Alex wasn't embarrassed, he was mad. He stood there refusing to look at me until I let her escape my good manners, and as they left the kitchen his eyes slid back at me, deadly. Somehow it had not occurred to me until that moment that he could still tell people what we had done.

They went up to his room and stayed there a while with the door closed, but I have a feeling the moment was spoiled for that afternoon. Nonetheless there was always his room, any day or night, and he knew I could not object. I knew when school ended, I knew how long it would take them to get to our house, and every day at that time I was torn between leaving and staying, between helping Alex have what he wanted and preventing what I couldn't bear to think about. I didn't want to know they were in his room together and I couldn't bear not to know, either.

In the end it made no difference what I did. I came home one day about six o'clock to find them laughing on the couch in the living room watching some inane rerun on TV, unable to pass one second without some physical contact with each other, so happy that their happiness embraced even me and they let me sit on the couch with them and Cathy (I hate her name) sent me looks of complicity and thanks because, from her point of view, I had given my blessing to their love. No one needed to draw me a diagram of what had happened upstairs before I came in. Alex avoided my eyes. Later, we had a mostly silent dinner together, too much unsayable and unsaid. He ate ravenously but quickly and stood up; before he could leave I said, "I'm happy for you." That cost me a lot.

He smiled involuntarily, and then the smile vanished. He had a hard time looking at me. "For real?" he said.

"For you," I said. "Not for me."

He didn't want to hear that. He sighed impatiently and looked at the ceiling; the phone rang, and rescued him. "I'll get it upstairs," he

said, already on the run.

After a couple of minutes I picked up to confirm what I already knew, and heard her voice. One more reason to be jealous of her: because when Alex and I were boyfriend and girlfriend we never talked on the phone.

“I don’t think your mom likes me.”

“She’s not my mom. I had a mother before, at home. It doesn’t matter if she likes you.”

“What is she, then, if she’s not your mom?”

“I live in her house, that’s all. She took me in.”

“Oh.”

“I won’t be living here that much longer, anyway.”

“Where you gonna go?”

“Wanna come with me?”

“Alex – I can’t just run away from *home*. Not even with you.”

“Come over tomorrow after school,” he said, and I put down the phone because I knew that tone in his voice, the tone in which he had once said to me “Take off your clothes” and sometimes I would do it. She would say yes to him, she would come over I was sure, but the next day she did not appear. Smart of her to make him wait the way I never could. I was busy wondering what Alex meant when he said he wouldn’t be living with me much longer.

The day after, she came to the house with him again and I did everything in my power to be unobtrusive and pleasant because I wanted Alex to have his Eden undisturbed so he wouldn’t leave me, and they spent hours in his room and when they came out they were serious and quiet with each other and I knew they were closer now.

For a short while she was in love with him the way she ought to have been. Seven weeks; I kept track. I thought she was his the way I had been his; though she couldn’t spend the night with him I thought she would have if she could. I had to make Alex tell me if she was on the pill, if they were using some kind of birth control, I didn’t want her to mess up his life by getting pregnant. I had been on the pill the whole time and still was, Alex had never used a condom and he didn’t want to now; he hated my talking about it and would hardly say a word. Hated any reminder that I knew what was going on between them, that I had taught him how. In the end I had to talk to her, too, about contraception, why the hell her mother didn’t do it I’ll never know, she must have been one of you who deny everything human. At least Cathy faced the facts.

For me their love was an exquisitely calculated hell. I had to live in the house where they went to bed together, sometimes together

there while I lay alone just across the hall, in the room Alex and I had shared for so long; I had to see every day the Alex in love I had known so well, having not one thought of me. To be replaced by her, with her shallow, inflectionless voice, incapable of carrying the tune of an actual emotion, was degrading to me and Alex both; and yet I saw in her how young I was not, I saw the mortifying difference between real and pretend. Loving Alex had been the garden of all my hopes and now I was stripped leafless, blasted and broken.

Then something made her get scared. I will never know exactly what it was, but yet I know. And it had nothing to do with what Alex and I had done; what he felt for her cannot be taught. Alex came into this world, I believe, with a capacity for passion – like mine – that most people seem not to share. He was able to give everything, to let all defenses down, to be naked in soul, and you, the rest of you, of whom Cathy turned out to be one, run from that in embarrassment and fear. Let me tell you that until you arrive there you will never be free, that no matter how much it terrifies you, you will have to run the risk of being totally known to another human soul, and the universe doesn't care how many lifetimes it takes. Do you think that the Creator doesn't know what is in your heart, doesn't know when you withhold it in the vain pursuit of a safety that does not exist? Don't deceive yourself, please, I beg you, because when you do, you lay waste the heart that is able to open to you and strew wretchedness in your path. That is what Cathy did to Alex, I know it; he bared himself to her utterly, he was given to her as he never was even to me, and she shrank from him in fear. No doubt she made the squeamish excuse of innocence and youth.

I knew something was wrong when I realized that more and more of the time behind the closed door of his room he was alone. He barely spoke to me when he came out; he had muttered phone conversations in the middle of the night and though I could not make out the words, their tone told me enough. Just listen to people for once, not to their words but to their cadence, and you will hear that most people are saying one simple thing over and over, saying "I'm furious" perhaps, or "I'm happy," or "I'm in despair." Alex's voice behind the wall was repeating over and over, I can only assume to her, "I'm in pain, save me." But she would not, or if I bend over backwards to be fair I might force myself to allow that perhaps she could not.

One day I got up my nerve and asked him how he and Cathy were doing and he said, "Don't ask me that ever anymore."

His pain was far worse to me than my own. I could see that he was dragging himself down the mud track of each day, that his sky had



turned permanently black, that he had barely glimpsed the fertile valley before he had been made, again, a refugee. I had been able to take him in once and give him a new life, and I wanted to again, but I was the old life now and nothing I did was any help. He wouldn't talk to me and when I tried to put my arms around him he impatiently turned away, averting his face, the breath hissing between his teeth. I cooked everything I knew he liked but he barely ate. Some band he liked gave a concert and I bought him expensive tickets to it, but he said he didn't listen to them anymore.

One night I waited for hours until he came out to go to the bathroom, and when he emerged I met him in the hall, wearing a bathrobe over nothing, and I made him stop and meet my eyes. I was still his girl whether he cared or not. "You can always come and sleep with me," I said. "Any time you want. You can always – have me, I don't care if it can't be the same, I still love you, Alex. I'll do anything for you, you know that." But while I was speaking those words he closed his eyes and grimaced as if I had punched his stomach, and when I stopped he took me by the shoulder and shoved me into the wall, hard, and went by. Slammed his door and I turned my face to the wall and cried, holding my shoulder not because it hurt but because he had touched me there. After a while I went into my room and crawled into my bed and wished that I could die.

But it turned out I didn't really want to. At least I didn't want to die by burning, when I woke up to the smoke alarm and the house on fire. Instructions I didn't know I remembered flashed through my head, feel the door to see if it's warm, stay low, I opened my bedroom door a crack and flames were rushing up the stairs, consuming the banister, smoke shot through the crack and into my eyes and throat, and I knew I had no time to spare. I managed to push the door shut; I raised the window, and the storm window, and jumped. Naked I fell into the high bushes beneath my window, and my foot caught somewhere and twisted my knee around and I landed much too hard on one hand and the side of my face, cut and scratched, but able to pull myself out of the entangling branches. I thought I heard someone yelling at me to move farther away but I couldn't get my footing because my hurt knee gave way and then, I guess, the firemen covered me in something and got me out of there. At least that's what they say happened. I can't remember it. I remember being in the emergency room though and a doctor telling me I had a broken wrist, while a nurse swabbed orange disinfectant on my cuts. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would, I was mostly just cold. Probably they shot me up with something. I didn't care about my injuries, I wanted to know if Alex was okay, and I kept

asking about him, if he was in the hospital, if he had been in the house, but no one knew anything.

It was no surprise to me the next morning when a policeman came to the hospital and told me the fire had been set. He wanted to ask me questions but he had to wait for them to put a cast on my wrist. It gave me a chance to think. They would figure out I had no reason to burn down my own house, and the next person they'd ask about would be Alex. And of course he had done it. That was good in a way because it meant he couldn't have gotten burned up in the fire. Anyway, they would have found him if he had been. Where was he? They could ask all they wanted, but I didn't know; I kept thinking of him telling Cathy he wouldn't be living with me that much longer. She would be no help to him now. But I would, if I could; I would not help them accuse him of anything, and not because I might be found out (I knew it might be all over for me, that Alex's next move might be to tell everything), but for the best reason, the old reason: I still loved him.

All I gave the police was my bewilderment and shock; and I could see that was acceptable even if it disappointed them. They could understand it. They would wait, and let me recover a bit, and then come back and question me again, and it would get more difficult, I knew all this, but meanwhile where was Alex, all I wanted to know was that he was alive.

A day and a night passed before they found him. I had checked into a bed and breakfast, and they called me there and told me he had admitted setting the fire. But they did not come with handcuffs and say that he had also told them why he did it, they did not drag me away to your jail; I passed day after day in dread, waiting for the heavy footsteps and the knock at the door, but each day I became more certain that he would not tell them the whole truth and I knew that this was his final message to me, that in the end he still loved me. The police were frustrated because I would not press charges against him, they thought I was a foolish overly forgiving mother with too much love for her son and I could see they held me in contempt because to them punishing the forbidden was everything. I of all people was not about to help them out; and they did not need my cooperation anyway, they had plenty of evidence, and social workers to kidnap Alex into foster care, and though I hired him a lawyer he could not wriggle out of the so-called juvenile justice system. I have never seen him since that moment when he shoved me into the wall; I was afraid to go to his trial, afraid of what might happen if he saw me there, and now he is in a detention center. Once I tried to visit him but he refused to see me. They'll let him out soon, though, and he's young enough that his record will be

expunged and then no one will ever have to know that he lit the match. It will be as it should: he has done no wrong, there is nothing for me to forgive, and if nothing for me, then how much less for anyone else. Alex did what anyone would do if they could communicate the truth, if they dared to make a gesture commensurate with the loss of love, and it was right that I should be the one to take the danger and pain. Not because of what you think. Not because I ever harmed him. But because I loved him enough, and I was strong enough. Someone should suffer visibly, openly, when hearts are broken, and I am proud to have done it along with Alex.

I'm sure that whether he admits it or not, he's glad I did not die; he will not have that preying on his conscience for the rest of his life. But I know I will never see him again. Or maybe one day our paths will cross, "by chance" – only there is no chance in this exquisite universe, whose order is so much more subtle than your morality. But if our paths do cross, I suspect he will not notice me seeing him from a distance, and I will not call attention to myself. Perhaps by then he will have a wife and children, and of all people on earth, I am the last one who should be introduced to them.

So I work on the garden, which was mostly destroyed in the cleanup after the fire, and I wait. It is going to be a long wait, the rest of this lifetime and probably part of the next, until Alex and I can be together again, and yet as I wait knowing that, inside I tremble, I write my name and his next to each other "4ever." And meanwhile the hammer blows continue. Thanks to insurance, the carpenters and the sheetrock men and the electrician and the painters are rebuilding the house we once shared. I am having it reconstructed exactly as it was, because as I told you already there is no end, and I will fill it up with furniture and my secrets. But I don't know what I am going to put in Alex's room when I move back in, except what is left of my heart.