

TWO!

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IT'S SATURDAY AFTERNOON, and I'm having a party, just me, some Heineken, and "The Brady Bunch." I'm celebrating because I start a job in two days as sales rep for Beaver Products, a distributor of kayaks and rubber rafts. During my second interview I told lies that surprised even me. I bragged to the man wearing knee-high boots that I'd gone white water rafting in the Grand Canyon, sky diving in Tennessee, and had once canoed fifty miles of the Mississippi, with a broken arm. My future supervisor grinned with coffee-stained teeth and walked over with a copy of the employee manual. I reached out to shake his hand; he pretended to punch me in the stomach.

I'm not sure about entering the world of *Deliverance*. Until my recent layoff, I sold replacement windows—you've seen our commercials—and never carried a knife or a compass. But working brings a paycheck; not working does not.

I finish the beer and walk to the refrigerator for my third. When I return to "The Brady Bunch" I have a weird memory hiccup of an afternoon with my sister Becky. We're sitting on the floor after school, watching the Brady gang with a plate of saltines. Each cracker is slathered with butter and grape jelly, and Becky guards the plate between her legs. I ask myself if it's uncool for a thirty-one-year-old to watch the Bradys while drinking beer. My answer: Who's gonna see me?

Two of the girls, Marsha and Jan, are having a pajama party with three of their friends. Marsha was recently hit in the nose with a football, and this is her reward for enduring days of humiliation. It occurs to me that I'm caught in some weird synchronism, Marsha's party merging with mine, and I toast my TV friends. The five girls then jump on two double beds, as rock 'n' roll Muzak crackles from a black transistor radio, and I climb off the recliner and do the twist. This throws beer onto my landlord's new carpet, so I blot it up with my socks.

A psychotic commercial for Skittles interrupts the party. I press mute and call Elaine on my cell phone. I

leave her a rambling message about dancing with girls in pajamas and tell her I'm on my way. In the bedroom I pull on perfectly faded jeans and a polo shirt, then change my socks. Next comes a splash of the Armani cologne I can't pronounce, with its blatantly phallic container. \$85 is a bargain, though, when you consider I now smell like Jack Nicholson and Alex Rodriguez.

Slipping on sandals I go to the carport and climb into my Mustang GT. It's summer. I've got a beer buzz. My girlfriend's waiting to see me.

Elaine's neighborhood is on the tired west side, an area of small wood-framed houses painted like hotels in Miami. (Very tacky—I'm told it's a neo-hippie thing.) Her Honda is gone when I pull up to her pink and turquoise house, and I wonder where she's gone on a Saturday. Backing out, I nearly run over a bulging bag of McDonald's waste that someone has thrown to the curb. Elaine will discover this byproduct of consumerism when she gets home and burst into histrionics, upset that one of *her* neighbors could do this to *her* yard. To save her from the unnecessary trauma, I toss the bag into the neighbors' driveway.

I'm slightly relieved she's not home after our "talk" last night. The evening started out well—almost domestic—with Elaine cooking us greasy Thai omelets. Afterwards I repaired the switch on her pole lamp, and then felt her up as she stood at the sink wearing rubber gloves. We soon stumbled to bed, the hurried removal of clothing followed and, before our genitals could do the meet-and-greet, the proceedings stalled.

My girlfriend of five months wanted to discuss problems in our relationship.

"Dennis," she said, cupping a breast in each hand, "you're not calling enough. And you hardly *ever* hold my hand. Either you don't really care about me, or you're afraid of getting attached."

I sat on the edge of the mattress, feeling the vacuum of disappointment and the collapse of a wasted erection. Elaine pulled on a T-shirt and complained about

Valentine's Day—she deserved more than M&M's and a card—then she whined about a necklace I knew nothing about. I followed her into the living room, struggling with a leg of my jeans, and she threw one last knife over her shoulder: "Why don't you admit it—you're only here to put that *thing* between my legs."

"Elaine," I said, "I told you I take time with things. Being with you gives me information I can use in the decision-making process. I need to eliminate objections. I need to be led to a buying decision."

These were three principles from a recent sales seminar. Elaine was not impressed with them and narrowed her coppery eyes. She then tied her hair on top of her head and a muscle twitched in her upper lip.

"Damn it, Dennis," she said, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Say something that makes sense."

I stood before her, distracted by the left breast that angled to the side. (I think of it as the dumber of the two—it's my favorite.) She shouted my name, and I looked up.

"Well . . ." she demanded.

"I'm afraid to say anything. It might be wrong."

"You know," she said, handing me my shoes, "I sometimes wonder if you're an alien. Get back to me when you've figured out my language."

I drove home, my ego a deflated balloon, and spent the night looking at naked women on the Internet.

Still humming from the afterglow of three Heinekens and the pajama party, I stop at a liquor store and buy a bottle of micro brew that costs \$3.19. The cashier, with one-inch pink fingernails, uses her cleavage to get me to buy five instant lottery tickets, all losers. Tossing the tickets out my car's window, I sip the beer. It tastes like A-1 Sauce and potting soil, but I remind myself it's cool to drink micro brew, cool to drink things that taste bad. I've brought along the employee manual and retrieve it from the passenger's seat. On page three I find this passage: *Employees of Beaver Products will maintain a system of cooperative utilization management that ensures consistency and accountability, while also implementing a marketing strategy . . .*

I'm dumbfounded that a man in boots handed me this corporate crap. I toss it back onto the seat, hoping there won't be a quiz.

In the shaded parking lot I force myself to drink more beer, while sneaking glances at a young woman talking on a cell phone in the car next to me. She looks like Meg Ryan in the filtered light, but then begins stabbing the air with her free hand, as though she's begging for something. I saw Elaine do this one week ago. After four glasses of wine she pulled on my wrist from across the kitchen table, and could've been coaxing me into a cold lake.

"But how *long* do you plan to be with me? Why *can't*

you decide?"

I didn't have an answer. She then said she was in love with me, and I said thanks. When she began crying, I offered to make her an egg salad sandwich. I then explained that my emotions were best explored in the dark, after sex, just before falling asleep.

She sent me home before any of this could happen.

I have two friends, also in their thirties, who are married with a house, and another friend who's been in a monogamous relationship for six years. Their ability to make a commitment is baffling, even illogical. Men aren't meant to commit; their lives are too complex. We've got world events to contemplate and some very potent distractions. Like Major League Baseball, shopping for electronics, and watching satellite TV.

I finish the beer and remind myself that Elaine is great; I do like her a lot. I see us together for years, that's if she learns not expect so much. She and Becky have become good friends, and I've never seen her go to bed without brushing her teeth. Other than the wandering boob, her body's a 10 and her face is a solid 7.85. Her libido is a good match for mine, and she's the first woman I've known who actually cares about something. She loves to talk about garbage, and recently told me that Fish Kill landfill outside New York City is visible from outer space. She said Americans throw out 300 million tons of garbage each year and that my contribution is 4.75 pounds a day.

It's not the latest movie plot, but it's *something*.

The need to urinate comes from nowhere, and I start my car. Before pulling out of the parking lot, I call Elaine again on my cell.

"Sorry, Dennis," she says, "I can't talk. I've got some ladies from a senior center."

"You're at work?"

"Of course. It's Saturday. Where should I be?"

"No, work's good. Keep the economy going." Luckily, she doesn't realize how thick I am, forgetting she has a JOB!

Elaine owns her own business. Well, it's more accurate to say she earns a living from a hobby. She leases a booth at the mall and sells candles that have been carved to reveal stripes of color. Most resemble chunks of oversized Christmas candy, but I've never said this to her face. She's planning a new line in beeswax, and I can't wait: the queue of customers should snake out the mall and into the Cracker Barrel across the street.

"Elaine," I say, "here's your chance. Geezers are easy to manipulate. I've sold those white-hairs two hundred windows. At least."

"That's not very nice, Dennis. We're actually discussing cookie recipes. Have you thought about our talk last

night?"

"Yes, absolutely. It's been on my mind all day. I've been making detailed notes on a legal pad and calling my friends for input. I went online and read articles about relationships, too." (Alcohol encourages this verbal spew; I warn myself to reel it in.)

"I'm glad. Oh, I wanted to ask you something. There's going to be a guitarist at my church tomorrow night at eight o'clock. I'd like you to come. Remember Orlando?"

Stopping at a red light I stroke my mustache. Yes, Orlando, the singer of sappy white-guy songs, groundbreaking interpretations of Burt Bacharach and Barry Manilow. Orlando with his trendy ponytail, wooden cross, and black turtleneck. I'm ready to pass on the abuse, but then recompute the scenario. After enduring Orlando we may go back to Elaine's. I'll help her sort through her recycling, our weekly "bonding activity," and then she'll light ten of her candy candles. We'll sit side-by-side on her living room floor, drinking wine and groping like high schoolers in the back of a car.

"We should leave early," I say. "Get good seats."

After a long pause she whispers, "I need to go. Someone's handing me a recipe for sugar cookies."

I celebrate our plan by tossing my phone onto the passenger's seat and drumming the dashboard. I then burn rubber in two gears pulling away from a traffic light, and this burst of speed is equal to the sudden braking that follows when I almost hit the car in front of me. My head snaps forward, sending my upper lip into the steering wheel.

I taste blood.

Examining my wound in the rear view mirror, it occurs to me that Elaine didn't tell me where or when to pick her up. I plunge into a dive of crippling insecurity, a state enhanced by alcohol, and cower in distress. Maybe, just maybe, another relationship is falling apart.

My last girlfriend, Sheila, was older than me. She wore short skirts and moccasins and smoked little brown cigarettes. She also wrote erotic poetry, poems filled with female body parts that were pink, throbbing and coated with honey. This should've been a gift from my own private carnality god—an attractive woman who writes about fucking.

Wrong.

Sheila was a vacillating bisexual in a "penis-not-pretty phase," meaning a hard-on had the appeal of a decomposing rat. I was allowed to kiss her—no tongue—and once managed to brush her breast with the back of my hand. We shared a bed on only one occasion, after hours of rum and Coke, and my biological need to spread my seed got me into trouble. My hand wandered beneath the blanket, and then she dug at my palm with a fingernail

that felt like a Phillips screwdriver. Hissing, "No vagina!" in the dark, she turned me away at the gate.

The torture ended when she ended the relationship to attend a poet's retreat in Vermont. A good thing too—I would've waited years for that vagina.

The relationship with Sheila was the seventh in five years. Before meeting Elaine at friend's birthday party, I was beginning to wonder if I had some rare syndrome, a recessive anti-coupling gene. Then I became convinced that dating two consecutive psycho-bitches had damaged my unconscious, and that I was too innocent to comprehend it. So I began saving for therapy. An aloof psychologist named Dr. Minkhoffer would retool my personality, helping me be more functional, a man who could maintain a relationship without being obsessed with his monthly copulation rate. I might even stop lying.

But fortunately, I met Elaine. And used the money to buy my Mustang.

My pulsating lip threatens to explode against the windshield, and I hold the beer up to my mouth. I then meander home through miles of side streets, concocting a story for my first day at Beaver Products, which is only two days away. A fight with crackheads is my first choice, and but I can't decide if they should attack me with hammers or socks filled with rocks.

At home I feel thirsty and irritable. After drinking three glasses of water I shut the blinds and slump on the sofa; a bag of frozen corn sits on my lip. On CNN our president is giving a speech. He's no doubt lying about a previous lie and shakes his fist to show he means it. He's short, stocky and built like a monkey, and I wonder if I can take him in a fight. I'm an even six feet, without shoes, and assume it would be like beating up a kid brother. I picture us stripping off our shirts and circling like drunken dockworkers, throwing punches on the carpet-like lawn of the White House. We swing wildly, like girls fighting over Justin, sending fists into each other's head. The fist-cuffs turns ugly when the president jabs me in the eye with his thumb.

I've never been in a real fight. No bloody knuckles, no bruised ribs, no black eyes. At the moment I do have a fat lip, but getting struck by one's car isn't the same as participating in a bar brawl. My lack of fighting history concerns me. I feel like half a man, and with my curly blond hair, a girly-man. Turning off the TV, I jump to my feet, throwing out a karate kick that sends the corn into a wall.

Dragging my feet in a pitiful display of self-pity, I make my way to the bathroom to collect my toothbrush and deodorant, supplies I'll need for my night at Elaine's. I gamble on the candle fantasy coming true and throw in a handful of strawberry-flavored condoms. I plan to meet

her at work, not wanting to risk a call that could expose my lack of attentiveness. This gives me one hour.

In the kitchen I can't find anything to eat, so I open a beer and thumb through the employee handbook. I read I can be terminated for sleeping on the job, for carrying a firearm, and for looking at porn on the Internet during business hours. I picture a group of salesmen crowding a computer at 5:01 and laugh out loud. My lip then orders me to stop.

I can't figure out what to do next and finish the beer in the shower, drinking out of the side of my mouth like a baby goat. I then comb out my hair, and impulsively decide to trim the mustache I've had for seven years. Five beers have impaired my coordination, and I clip too much off the left side. Over the next half hour I retool and reshape, until I reveal a freakishly swollen upper lip. I stare at my mouth in alarm, but then tell myself to relax—I still look good without a shirt. My naturally sculpted chest, a gift from my father, is my greatest asset, next to my hair. Elaine teases me that I resemble a "surfer dude," a label I enjoy, even though she's confused the sloppy look of a beach dweller with the vanguard of style. I do nothing to maintain this model's physique, and flex in the mirror until my arms grow heavy.

Clipping my nose hair, I then dial several numbers, trying to reach someone to talk to. The phone suddenly rings in my hand, and I assume it's Elaine. I say, "Your voice gives me a boner," and Becky says, "Dennis, that's sick." She goes on to ask if I've called our mother, and if I've fixed her radiator. Mom lives in a mobile home with six cats and we do what we can to help out. She's kinda crazy, too, and we pretend not to notice.

"Yep," I say. "Went over this morning, missing cartoons, I might add. It was just a leaky hose, but I want you to know that I spilled coolant on my shoes. And I almost tore open a knuckle on a metal bracket covered with oil. There was a family of bees living under the hood, and about twenty bees—"

"Dennis! Don't do that. I never know when you're telling the truth. How many times do we have to talk about it? Listen, I saw Nana today and heard some things about Wendell."

I miss my grandfather. He died when I was nine and once told me he almost played for the Detroit Tigers. I could always count on him for five-dollar bills and sips of Black Label beer.

"Nana told me he had cancer in one of his testicles."

"Get out!" I cup my crotch. "You made that up."

"It's true. His right testicle was removed, but the cancer spread anyway. He refused to have treatment because he was afraid his skin would fall off. After the surgery he complained that half his manhood was gone. He told

Nana a real man had two balls, not one. He died from the cancer, not a heart attack like everyone thought."

My heart swells for Wendell, and I pace from the window to the toilet. Becky begins a long gossipy story about our cousin's boyfriend, who's in jail for selling stolen cigarettes, and then tells me about a band she's discovered online. She stops to swallow something and follows this with a belch. I want to ask questions about Wendell, but she says, "Gotta go," and hangs up.

It's now 7:53. I've pissed away precious time by talking with my sister about our grandfather's missing gonad. News I'd like to extract from my brain, along with an image of him not wearing pants. It's too late to meet with Elaine, and now she's got more reasons to be disappointed with me. My lack of reliability is one of her frequent complaints, next to my confabulations. But telling stories is not my fault. It really isn't.

My father left two weeks after my ninth birthday. He moved to Florida with a neighbor down the block, a mousy woman who seemed crazier than Mom. She knocked on our door often, claiming to be looking for a dog, a cat, a pair of hamsters. It didn't seem odd to me; but then I was only nine. As a clever child I began seeking attention to replace my father's. (With my mother disconnected and my grandfather sick, my father had been the only one to give me affection.) I told anyone who'd listen that I'd seen knife fights, found mice with two heads, visited the old man down the street and watched him drink poison. The reactions were varied, but I got them and loved it. This fabrication is now second nature and has developed into a compulsion to outdo myself.

I picture Elaine sitting in a folding chair as Orlando wails Barry Manilow's dirge, "Mandy." If I drive like a maniac I can join her for an encore, but then I'll have to grovel for the rest of the night, with just a small chance of sleeping in her bed. I say to hell with it all and open another beer.

At eleven o'clock I brush potato chips crumbs off my lap and peer into an empty bottle. I've watched three hours of figure skating, all the while debating whether I should call Elaine and tell her I'm sorry. I decide to call and announce my apology.

"You're sorry? What'd you do this time?"

"Orlando—I didn't make it. I was reading the employee manual and lost track of time. I found out I can fire for bringing a gun to work and for keeping poisonous snakes at my desk. Spiders are okay but not snakes."

"You never listen, do you? Orlando is playing *tomorrow*. I told you that—tomorrow." She snorts disgust through her nose. "Is there anything else you have to say? We can't leave our problem hanging like this. I'm getting very frustrated with you."

I admit I'm a fuckup, and that I often have no idea what I should do or say. I tell her I belong in an institution where I can't hurt anyone, and that I should be forced to make shoes for Nike, sniffing adhesive, standing side by side with barefoot children. Elaine says nothing, and I feel more desperate. I ask if I can visit her then, whine, "*Pleeease.*" She says yes with ice in her voice, as long as I return her sauté pan. I'm tired, hungry, and a little drunk, and want to say, It's a *frying* pan, Elaine, I borrowed a *frying* pan. But I don't—she's given me permission to sleep with her.

I drive with the windows down, planning my speech. A cold Heineken sits between my legs, and I take frequent sips to quell my nervousness. The toiletry bag is on the passenger seat, next to the employee manual. I plan to read all two hundred pages in the morning, after Elaine makes coffee and eggs. It's time to tell her that a relationship frightens me; it scares me like free money. I could walk into her house, start wearing slippers and a cardigan, and never walk out. That shit's terrifying!

She'll smile, hearing my honesty, my *feelings*, and then lead me to the bedroom. I'll visit my favorite boob and make love to it, then I'll fuck her, too. We'll sleep side-by-side like worn out dogs, and our lives will return to bliss.

Elaine comes to the door wearing a nightgown. Her face is freshly scrubbed, fragrant with the kiwi soap that makes me want to lick her. She reaches through the door, and I pull down the front of her nightgown. She slaps my hand and grabs the pan.

"Thanks," she says. "Now what's on your mind?"

"Can't I come in?" I'm slurring my words.

"No. The shipment of beeswax came in today. I'm going into work early to set up my display." She reaches behind her and turns on the porch light. "Oh my god, Dennis, what happened to your lip?"

"Some crack heads. I'm working with the police on something. No big deal."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing—just ignore me."

She doesn't move from her guard post at the door, and we stare at each other. I've forgotten my speech and wait for help, but it doesn't come. Shuffling my feet I stagger.

"You be careful driving," she says, touching my shoulder. "I should let you stay but I can't. There's something in the way here, and you've got to grow up and help me work it out. Get some ice on that lip, okay?"

I nod my head, and she gives me a hard kiss on the cheek.

A few blocks away I nearly hit a cat. Everything seems inside out, and I wish I could be run over and left for dead. I want a tattoo that says "SHITHEAD" and a bumper sticker, too. I worry that I'm failing as a male, and that

I'll fail at Beaver Products and everything else I attempt in the years ahead. Wendell must've felt this confused, I tell myself, after he lost the testicle; his torment had to be intolerable. Then it hits me, like bleach in the eye, that his sex life probably ended after the surgery. I pull over to the curb and have a sobering thought that *my* days of sex are over. Elaine refusing to sleep with me will trigger a chain of events that will leave me dating my hand for the rest of my life.

Sheila and her milky thighs leap from the back of my mind to save me. I'm convinced I can get her to share her vagina and fumble for my cell. My hands are shaking I'm so excited; I can't believe I'm going to call her. She hasn't seen my new car yet, and the penis-not-pretty phase has *got* to be over. Shouting her name through the window, I dial her number. I see myself knocking on her door in minutes. We're playing catch up. She's offering me wine. I'm having her vagina on the kitchen floor.

After two rings she picks up.

"Sheila! It's Dennis!"

"Dennis who?"

"We went out last year, remember?"

"Why are you calling me?"

"I just wanted to say hi, maybe hear one of your poems. I'm writing poetry all the time, now. I'm thinking about getting a degree in poetry and going to some poetry school. You really changed my life, Sheila, and I wanted to see you and see how you're doing."

"How I'm doing? Sleeping, that's how I'm doing. Seconds away from hanging up, that's how I'm doing."

The threat is real. The call ends.

I consider calling another old girlfriend—what was her name . . . Candy? Sandy?—but decide to give Elaine a second chance. I know I can persuade her to let me in; I know I can remember my speech and close the deal. Making a U-turn, I head back to her house, taking gulps of beer. Some slurps onto my lap, and I frantically sweep it to the floor, not wanting to give Elaine an excuse for turning me away. Brushing with drunken fingers, I club my genitals and think of Wendell. He told Nana a real man had two balls, not one. I think, *two* balls? The idea seems simple enough—two balls and you're a man, you've got your foundation, your place in the world.

Driving with my left hand, I reach down, loosen my belt and unzip my jeans. It takes time to dig through my underwear, but I find them. They're sticky but there—it's such a relief. I'm comforted knowing they're safe, and take a moment to appreciate them, honor their existence. We drive together for a mile or so, then I remove my hand and decide that yes, this is a good place to start. It's okay to go home.