

Jaime Clarke

A COMPLETE GENTLEMAN

JANE

If you ask me about Jane I'll tell you that she is a fine woman. It is true that, well, in the catalog of women in my life she would come under P for plain, but she is tender and we go together pretty good. Besides, I do not make aesthetic judgments.

The thing I like most about Jane is that she looks best without makeup. Once, on one of our first dates, she had put on this bright red lipstick and the whole night I tried not to stare at it; it looked like she was smiling even when she wasn't and by the end of the night I was self-conscious about it. I think she sensed I didn't like it, or maybe she was uncomfortable with it too. She has never worn lipstick again.

We keep each other at arm's length most of the time and that is really for the best. She knows it too. I guess one could say our relationship is not complicated with love. We are into each other totally, though. I never think about anyone but her and she always tells me I'm the one for her. It wouldn't be fair if it weren't that way, and it is the only real promise we've made.

It wasn't always like that, though. At first we were both friends of each other's love interests. When those relationships deteriorated, Jane and I picked up what worked from each and merged, creating our present utopian relationship which provides for her whatever she wants when and how she wants it, the sort of relationship a woman like Jane deserves and the kind I like to initiate.

If I could change one thing about her, though, I wouldn't make her such a big Christian. I don't have a problem with religion *per se*, but sometimes she can really confuse the issue. Besides, like I've told her over and over again, there is no religion in Utopia.

But she thinks I am the Antichrist. "You're the devil," she is always saying. If she says it too often I start to get a pinched feeling in my head and I have to yell at her to stop. I won't yell at her in front of our friends, though, and I never take it out on her in bed.

Jane is moving to California but I want her to stay. I'm convinced I can get her to stay. I make a point to say "California is not Utopia" at least once a day, just slipping it in a conversation casually. She raises her eyebrows and shrugs in a way that lets me know she is on the fence. I'm convinced I can get her to stay.

"What's in California?" I ask her.

"You could come with me," she answers.

"But I don't want to move to California."

"Caleb, you could easily come."

"But I don't want to," I repeat myself and this signals Jane that I don't want to discuss it.

So I'm in the mood for a good time and Jane and I are getting ready to go out for the usual—dinner and whatever. She sees that I am on the verge of what could almost pass as euphoria and I see that look on her face that lets me know it won't be smooth sailing.

And sure enough on the way to dinner she gets me uptight by demanding to know the name of the restaurant. When I don't tell her, when I say that I want it to be a surprise, she pursues the question about what kind of food this restaurant serves with an irrationality that becomes so frightening I finally do tell her and though I'm disappointed about the deletion of the only mystery the evening holds, I'm glad this has happened, that the glitch is out of the system, and I can now breathe easy through dinner.

Sometimes I think I'd like to marry Jane but I know that our relationship couldn't survive the rules and constraints of a formal institution like marriage. Still, she carries herself in such a way that someone across the room looking at her would think she'd make a good wife. Someday someone should marry Jane and I'm pretty sure someday someone will.

Depending on Jane's mood after dinner we will either go for ice cream or we will go straight back to my apartment. In a way I hope we do go for the ice cream because I like to watch Jane coo like a little girl between licks of her mint chocolate chip. Not only is it an amazing transformation, but it always signals the start of at least an hour of foreplay that lasts all the way from the ice cream parlor to my bed.

Dinner clearly makes Jane pensive and I can sense that she won't want mint chocolate chip and indeed the whole rest of the night may be in jeopardy.



"I'm going to California," she says, as if trying to cheer herself up.
"I'll go with you," I say and wait for her reaction. The skin under her eyes tightens, confirming my suspicion that she doesn't really want me to.

"I thought you wanted to stay here." She tries to act like she hasn't been caught off guard.

"I could stay or I could go," I tell her.

"Well I'm going," she says, realizing I am toying with her. My coyness cheers her up and again I am sure I can convince her to stay.

AZTECKA

My work schedule (Wednesday-Saturday) allows me a lot of free time, which I usually spend with Jane. I think working in a bar is the best job anyone could have. Of course I had to lie about my past to get the job, but I'm a good employee and Geoff, the bar manager, trusts me to watch out for the place.

Aztecka used to be called The Ivory Bar and every once in a while I'll see an ultrayuppie couple appear in the doorway, turn their nose up at the industrialites that crowd Aztecka every night, and walk away dejected, wondering what happened to their mahogany and green plush carpet.

The best part of working in a bar, of course, is meeting women. The worst part is seeing what people do to each other. I swear, sometimes even I'm surprised at how vicious men and women can be. Take last Friday night for instance: the bar is hopping and Miles, the relief bartender, is thirty minutes late. So I'm making two or three drinks at once while having two or three more orders shouted at me and suddenly I hear this WHACK and then it seems like everyone freezes and I see these two, this guy and his girlfriend (I guess), and the girl is holding the side of her face and she's begging him not to leave her there and that's when I notice another girl waiting off to the side, impatiently, and the first girl is in tears, blubbering, and then I hear the guy say "If you won't do it, she will." I look over at the girl to see if she really will and our gazes lock and I can't make myself look away. The girlfriend's pleading becomes pathetic and she starts convulsing, her voice crescendos and everyone is listening but the guy doesn't realize it and smacks her across the face again. I flinch and reach for the wooden bat we keep under the bar, but it's not there and I remember breaking it the week before playing bottle baseball with Miles after hours. I start in the direction of the guy and

he sees me out of the corner of his eye and faces me, scowling. The showdown. I reach under the bar, go for the invisible bat, and he sees this and grabs the girl-in-waiting and cuts through the crowd to the door. 5/

There's a hum and then the bar is at 140 decibels, the noise swallowing the girlfriend who is left standing in the corner holding her face. People are screaming for their drinks but I ignore them and call out to the girl. I wave a guy off his stool and motion for her to come sit at the bar.

"Are you okay?" I ask. Clearly embarrassed, she just nods. "What was that all about?"

"Can I have a drink?" she asks.

"Sure. What do you want?"

"Just water."

I hand her a glass of water and she takes a sip and sets it back down on the bar. "Want to talk about it?" I ask, feeling like I can really help her, but she just shakes her head and asks me to call her a cab.

When the cab arrives, I search the bar for her, and just as I'm about to shrug my shoulders to the cab driver she emerges from the bathroom. I wave, trying to get her attention, but she isn't looking; instead she turns her back and makes her way to the back room, where the pool tables are. I signal the cabbie to stay where he is and I go after her. 5/

I find her leaning against one of the pool tables and when I walk up to her she gets a strange look on her face like she wonders who I am. Instantly I notice that her boyfriend is back and he comes up to me: "What do you want?"

"Your cab is here," I say to the girl.

"I don't need it," she says.

"The driver's waiting out front," I tell her, trying to persuade her to leave her asshole boyfriend and go home, where she'll be safe.

"Look, I already said I didn't want it. Are you deaf?" she scowls at me, and now her boyfriend moves in closer and I consider throwing him out, but I begin to feel a shift in loyalties on the girl's part and I turn and start to walk away. A hand grabs my arm and I whirl around, ready to deck the asshole, but it's the girl and she asks me: "Do you know where we can score some smack?" 5/

It becomes apparent then and there that she is merely self-destructing and that, cab or no cab, I couldn't do anything to stop it.

ESSAY #1: AFFECTION

The highest emotion one human being can have for another. There is no greater feeling than showing affection and having that affection reciprocated.

Affection is a paradise in and of itself.

It is possible to feel different degrees of affection, depending on the nature of one's relationship to the other person. Without a doubt the most gratifying form of affection exists in a realm of physical and sexual freedom. A realm without judgments.

Most people live in a world of constraint, where affection is merely reciprocated, like a game. I do something nice for you, you do something nice for me. While this existence is placating, there is no real emotion, only *prescribed* emotion.

Free from constraints, however, a person is allowed to indulge in the kind of affection a relationship can create. A person is allowed to give as much affection as he wants; and more importantly, he is allowed to take as much affection as he needs. Each is totally satisfied.

Take Karine for instance. A good example. She'd existed for so long on the crumbs of affection the various men in her life had thrown her that when she happened into La Onda that night, she was starving. Even though I didn't even know her, I put myself at her mercy. I pretended that I had the utmost affection for her (I'm sure I would've developed a sense of affection for her, given time) and gave her all the affection I possibly could, replenishing her. It was just that she was so shocked that she didn't know how to react, she wasn't used to the wonderful feeling of unbridled affection. She just couldn't . . . maybe that's a bad example.

SUNDAY

As the result of a bet I lost concerning how long I could pleasure Jane in bed (although I was just seven minutes shy of the promised thirty minutes, which, Jane assured me, was only average), I have to go to church with her every Sunday this month.

"If you can prove you're omnipotent, you don't have to go," she teased. But, of course, I am not.

I think part of the slander against going to church is that fact that it starts too damn early. As I sit next to Jane I consider this and conclude that this is probably by design as most people are more

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susceptible, or should I say, more easily influenced in a half-catatonic state.

Jane being the Catholic she is, we sit in one of the back pews. The priests march in in an impressive parade, dressed in black and red garb, some holding long staffs with banners that could've been made during the Crusades; and the head priest, the Pontifex Maximus, the one leading the way, bows prayerfully from side to side.

The entourage comes to a halt in front of the congregation and the priests assemble in an indeterminate order behind a long counter on a stage at the front. I look over at Jane but she knows I am going to say something snide and ignores me.

The magic act begins with a white powder erupting in a bowl on the table and I crane my neck to get a better glimpse. One of the elderly priests on the left of the Pontifex Maximus, dangling a charm on the end of a gold chain, begins swinging the chain back and forth, the audience mesmerized. Some sort of liquid (water?) is poured into the bowl and now suddenly all of the priests are busy with their hands and in my mind I superimpose the title COOKING WITH CATHOLICS over the whole scene. I lean over to share this with Jane, but she leans away from me.

After an inordinate amount of standing and sitting, singing and muttering, standing and sitting, I feel the end is near. An anxiety comes over me as I anticipate the benediction, much like the anxiety a smoker in a business meeting feels when he senses he will finally get to step outside for a cigarette, when there is an unquiet silence and the very front pew stands and files out. I groan to myself and fold my hands on the pew in front of me and rest my head in the empty triangle they form. The shuffle of feet and the murmuring of the eucharist become a drone in my ear and I close my eyes, wondering what I would pray about if I prayed.

Images of people I know sift through my head and I imagine each of them praying and wonder what they pray about. I imagine Jane on her knees, at the foot of her bed, and I wonder if she prays for me in some way. What could she pray for me? Does she pray that we'll get married? Or does she only pray for things for herself, like her family's wellness, or for the right decision about California?

Without warning an image of Jane and her next boyfriend praying together, in a circle, heads down, hands together appears in my mind. The suddenness of seeing them quickens my pulse and I feel a bitter irritability creep through me. The image is static, like a giant poster plastered on the wall of my brain, and the thought occurs to me that Jane probably will pray for me, given her good, religious nature.



I'll bet she asks (privately) the Lord to watch over me and protect me from evil. This thought stays with me until we are out in the parking lot and as we climb into Jane's car I say, "Fuck church."

"You're the devil," Jane says and smiles.

MY FIRST TIME

I like hair. All kinds: brown, black, red, blond, long, short, curly, wavy, straight—whatever. And skin. I can't get the feel of it out of my dreams.

Even if I close my eyes, it is hard for me to imagine a life without girls. I think it is all I have ever known. When other guys were showing their prowess at basketball on the playground at recess, me and Steven Howfield were starting clubs and trying to get girls to join: SATURDAY AFTERNOON CLUB (weekly picnics designed to be romantic, like on TV); VERY SECRET SOCIETY (initiation included kissing both Steven and me on the lips for ten seconds—we promised not to tell anyone: hence the name); DAISYCHAIN GANG (the main function of this club was to play out a bizarre game Steven and I concocted, the rules of which I have forgotten); and THE MILLIONAIRE'S CLUB (we tried to convince cute girls that we were going to be lawyers and that we'd make a lot of money). Once Dawn Campbell and I stayed out on the playground after the bell, hiding in the corner where the gymnasium joined the administration building, and we kissed until Ms. Fischer, our third-grade teacher, realized we were missing and came looking for us. We had to stay after school with our heads down on our desks until our parents came for us. I peeked over my hairless arm several times, but she would not look.

And at her birthday party I was the only boy and my parents hesitated before leaving me. I was glad when they left. If you can imagine what it is like to be the only boy at Dawn Campbell's tenth birthday party—they locked me in a closet full of dirty laundry and Dawn opened the door and yelled "Here!" and threw her older sister's bra at me. She slammed the door and all the girls giggled. I had never smelled anything more wonderful than that bra. I pressed the cool fabric against my forehead and inhaled.

I enjoyed this sort of attention from girls and in a bid for some from the first woman I really liked, I baby-sat for my piano teacher, Ms. Thomas (divorced), as a favor. She gave piano lessons out of her house and I was her favorite student. She would sit next to the bench and point along to the music with her slender fingers as I tried to keep

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up. She smoked a lot, but once you were in her house for a while, you didn't hardly notice it.

Anyway, one night I baby-sat her two kids, Harry, 8, and Sidney, 6. I put them to bed at nine, like she told me, and I knew she wouldn't be home before one, so I had plenty of time to myself. I normally don't like to snoop around because I am impatient and don't know what to look for, but something was clearly drawing me to Ms. Thomas' bedroom, and after I put Harry and Sidney to bed, I turned to the left instead of to the right and closed her bedroom door behind me.

The dark was cool, and after my eyes adjusted, I could make out her dresser and her bed. I remember the room was a mess, clothes thrown everywhere. I stood motionless, breathing in the peculiar scents the room held. Then I moved over to the dresser. I opened the top drawer and pulled out one of Ms. Thomas' lace bras. It was cool to my touch, like Dawn's older sister's bra, but somehow this bra was different. The silk and lace sent an electric charge through me and without even thinking about it, I unzipped my pants and put the left cup over my erection, letting it hang like a lace flag in a stifled wind.

I'm not sure what made me commit the act. I'm not sure even where the idea came from except that suddenly I was on my knees at the foot of her bed, the bra with my cock wrapped inside wedged between the mattress and the box springs, and I began moving back and forth, like I'd seen on cable movies. It felt awkward at first, a little rough even, but then it smoothed out and felt all right. I was really moving; a couple of times it slipped out and I had to readjust the setup. Right when it started to feel the best, I began to sweat. I moved a little faster and then something went wrong. I wanted to scream. I stopped moving, but something was happening and it felt like someone was taking a knife to me. Finally it stopped and I pulled everything out and felt the hot goo puddled in the right cup. Frightened, I buried the bra in the dirty clothes and got out of the room as quietly as I could.

DR. HATCH

Dr. Hatch wanted me to call all the people I'd hurt and ask them for forgiveness. It's part of the program, he said, like the essays. The child molesters called their sons and daughters and the husbands called their wives and said they were sorry. Didn't I want to call Karine? I couldn't make him understand: I didn't hurt anyone.

MONDAY

I knew Jane couldn't leave me. She can't replace me and I'm glad because frankly I don't want to replace her. We've got a good thing and not everyone can keep a perfect balance like we do.

"Are you coming with me or not?" she demands.

"Why does it matter where you live?" I ask. "I don't want to live in California."

"Well I do," she says.

"Why can't we just keep on here?"

"I'm tired of being here."

Then I say: "Look, I want you to stay."

She starts to melt and I feel a little guilty for employing such tactics, ~~but~~ the truth is I do want her to stay, ~~but~~ I know it's only because I want to sustain what we have and that someday our relationship will ebb and float away.

"I can't imagine staying here," her voice softens.

"What you imagine somewhere else is exactly what will happen here," I say.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that if you're going to run, make sure you're running to, and not away."

"I'm not running away from anything," she shoots back.

"What are you running to then?" I ask.

"I'm not running... period," her voice grows louder. "I'm simply just *tired* of here." The emphasis on *tired* also insinuates that she is tired of me too, but I pretend like I'm oblivious and I just sit there and smirk.

"Why do you have to be so confrontational all the time?" I ask, knowing what this will do to her.

"Me? You're the one that's confrontational."

"And defensive too. You're always defensive about something." I am pouring gas over the fire.

"You are probably the most impossibly," she angrily spits the words out at me, "most fucking impossibly . . . retarded fuck—"

I burst out in laughter. "Retarded? Is that the best you can do?" I get up and start gimping around the room, slapping my limp wrist against my chest chanting "Tardy, tardy, tardy, tardy."

Jane lunges for me, at first in anger, but soon we are both on the floor of my living room, laughing so hard we have to hold ourselves. "You really are retarded," she says, still laughing.

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"Yeah, I know. So are you," I kiss her on the forehead. We lie there silent for a minute and then I tell her, "I hope you stay." It comes out sounding like an apology, and in a lot of ways, it is.

GO WEST

Once when I was young (which feels like an eon ago), shortly after my mother left him, my father and I took a trip by car to a cabin he owned up on the northern rim of the Grand Canyon. As we ascended out of the valley, I remember thinking how beautiful the desert was. The red rock formations and the cacti and the vast sky that opened up in front of me. But I also remember feeling afraid. I stared at a cactus aways in the distance and thought/I could get hurt out there; or at an endless brown field, every acre a carbon copy of the rest: ~~everything here is dead~~

Halfway to the cabin, in Sedona, I went into the gift store of the restaurant where we'd stopped and looked around while my father finished eating.

"Don't dawdle," he warned and even though I was careful not to linger looking at any one thing for too long, I wasn't surprised when I returned to our table and my father was gone. Without panicking, I walked out to the parking lot and, confirming that my father had left me, I headed back towards Phoenix on foot, looking over my shoulder now and then to see if the approaching car was my father.

Not less than a mile out of town a white pickup truck pulled over. "Where you goin'?" the guy, a rancher, asked.

"Phoenix."

"This is your lucky day," he told me.

"Great." I hopped in the truck, which smelled of dust and sweat, and we raced down the highway. He asked me the typical hitchhiker questions and I made up a story about how I just graduated from college and was seeing America via my thumb. He liked this story and launched into one of his own about how the youth of America isn't as patriotic as in his day and how more people should get a feel for the land, to cultivate an appreciation for what nourishes and sustains them, and I nodded my head all the way back to Phoenix.

ESSAY #2: AN IDEAL DAY SOMETIME IN THE NEAR FUTURE

This is an ideal day sometime in the near future:

I meet a girl who can appreciate me for what I can offer and we spend a lot of time together. But we don't get trapped into love. We just like being together and we realize that it isn't forever, that eventually we'll move on, but that we'll always remember what we had with one another.

And after that girl and I are over, I meet another girl who can appreciate me for what I can offer, etc.

TUESDAY

Tuesdays Jane volunteers at a nursery for abandoned children and Tuesdays put Jane in a good mood. We both always look forward to Tuesday nights and this Tuesday night seems especially good because afterwards, our backs against the crumpled sheets, we solidify the Utopian Love Code:

"If a man makes promises to a woman and does not keep his promises, another man shall fulfill the obligation," I start. "If a man has stolen another man's woman, and if that woman is unhappy, that woman shall remain with the man; however, if the woman is said to be happy, she shall be returned to the man from whom she was stolen."

This makes Jane giggle and she adds: "If a man has put a spell upon a woman, and has not justified himself, the man shall plunge into the holy river, and if the holy river overcomes him, his intentions are bad; but if the holy river bears him out and shows him innocent, his intentions are good and may proceed with his sorcery."

"If a fire breaks out in a woman's heart and a man extinguishes the fire, he shall be set fire himself."

"If a man has married a wife and has not made her feelings and her property part of a whole, she is no wife."

"If a woman's reputation is besmirched by another male without just cause, he shall throw himself into the holy river for the sake of the purity Utopia."

Jane props herself up on her elbow and adds: "A woman's feelings cannot be hurt, taken for granted, abused, or ridiculed."

I frown at this and tell her that the rule about besmirched reputations covers this and she just stares at me and then rolls away, and I guess we've pretty much covered the basic tenets but I review them silently for oversights.

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KARINE

Here's what happened: I met Karine at La Onda, the bar where I worked in Boca Raton. She hung around the bar most of the night, talking to me while I worked. At first I thought she was merely friendly, or lonely; either way as the night got on I could tell that she was hanging around for me.

And I felt sorry for her. There's so much misery on the day-to-day level, she certainly didn't deserve to be frustrated in a place like La Onda, a place vibrating with sexual excitement. I felt like she deserved to be happy.

"My shift's about over," I said to her. "You want to get out of here?"

"What do you have in mind?" she asked.

I took her empty glass and wiped the bar in front of her. "Nothing in particular," I answered, and I didn't. I told her she could come upstairs and wait while I changed and she said sure she could do that.

After showering I came out into my front room and there she was, sitting on my couch, looking around. "I hate to wait," was all she said, but it was the way she said it that let me know she didn't actually want to go anywhere, that what she really wanted was for me to give her one good time in the vacuum of dreariness of her life.

The surge of power came over me and I sat next to her on the couch. She seemed even more pathetic when I got up close to her, but instead of feeling sorry for her I reached out and stroked her arm. She flinched but didn't make a move to resist, so I leaned over and kissed her hard on the lips. I could taste the alcohol on her breath but it didn't gag me and she put her hand on the back of my neck and forced her tongue all the way into my mouth.

We sat like that for a while until I moved to untuck her shirt. She helped me by wriggling a little and I lifted it off over her head. Soon we were both naked and on the floor. I crawled on top and started kissing her madly, really getting into it, until she pushed me away. "Do you want to stop?" I asked and she just looked at me. "We'll stop if you want to," I told her but she didn't say a word and I put my hand back down between her legs and she started moaning again.

Just when we started to get back to where we were, I could feel her hesitate once more and as much as I wanted to give her what she needed, I couldn't spend a lifetime doing it so I moved inside her. Her whole body tensed up and I was gentle. She tried to fight it, but by then it was apparent to me what she needed and I felt she wanted me to take control, to convince her of what she wanted. When we were

through she was in a hurry to leave and I didn't get a chance to hold and cuddle her. I thought maybe she didn't like that part of it.

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I DIE ALONE

The end of Utopia comes in a poorly lit room, a wooden chair at the foot of the hospital-style bed. Outside the window the city carries on, ceaselessly, one day the same as the next. Jane is long gone, along with all the other women that have come, gone, gotten married, had semi-happy lives and lived in relative harmony ~~are all gone~~ too. There is no one left.

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I am sitting up in the chair, smoking a cigarette for the first time in my life, desperate for pleasure. I look down at my worn body, my skin a chemise that has been left out in the sun. I want to get up and look out the window and see the life on the street below but I don't have the strength. I look over at the telephone on the nightstand next to the bed and my mind is blank.

I wonder what I had for dinner the night before.

I start to reminisce about the old days, a light tickle comes across the bridge of my nose but my eyes are too old and dry to tear. I draw on the cigarette and gag and it occurs to me that if I die, it could be days before anyone notices. Who would find me? Probably the landlady, after the third of the month.

But even with this portrait in my head, even though I see it at least once a day, I am helplessly propelling toward it at a speed unstoppable by me alone.

WEDNESDAY

Wednesday I come home and Jane is on my couch, naked, watching TV. I notice her immediately but she does not look up at me. I sense she is being coy but then I notice she has been crying. I sit down next to her and she pulls her feet up so that her heels are in her crotch.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Nothing," she looks over my shoulder at the TV.

"Tell me what's wrong." I rub her knees tenderly. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she sniffs quietly, dramatically.

"Something must be wrong."

"I can't decide what to do," she blurts out.

"About what?" I'm massaging her full leg now.



"About anything," she starts to cry again.

"Like what?" Now I'm beginning to be agitated.

"I just can't decide about . . . California or here . . . or you or . . ." her voice trails off.

"What do you think you should do?" I ask, genuinely trying to help but feeling a bit vulnerable by my own question.

"It's just that I know (sniff) that I'll (sniff) meet someone like you in California and—"

"What does that mean?" I pull away from her.

"That my life (sniff) will be the same . . . wherever I go."

"That's probably true," I say coldly, hurt by her supposition that she can replace me.

"I'm fucked up," she really starts to sob and I think it's just a ploy because she knows she has upset me and I go for it, putting my arms around her.

"It's okay," I try to calm her. "You're not fucked up. You're going to be fine."

"You really think so?" she asks, pressing her wet cheek against my neck.

"Sure," I pat the back of her head and right then I hate her more than I've hated anyone in a long time. The way she smells makes me crazed and I jump up off the couch.

"What's wrong?" she looks up.

"Nothing."

"No really," she stands up, fully naked in front of me.

"I just wish you'd make up your mind about us," I try not to look at her.

"I know. I'm sorry," she says. "I just don't know what I want."

"Well you better decide," I make myself cry and this moves her to put her arms around me. I struggle out of her grip and stand there with my head down. When I look up at her, a tear sliding down my face, she is looking away, at the TV, crying too.

I TAKE JANE ON HOT-AIR BALLOON RIDE

Here's the key to any relationship: surprise. Surprise breaks the repetition that is the deathknell of all contemporary unions. That's why for Jane's birthday I surprised her with a sunrise hot air balloon ride/champagne brunch.

There is nothing more magnificent than watching the sun rise over the desert (except maybe the sun setting over the desert). Jane

loved it. We stood hand in hand and looked out at the eastern horizon, spellbound. Looking down we watched the shadow over the desert floor slowly pull back, revealing the harsh landscape, wakening the wildlife.

Our pilot poured the champagne and we ate fresh fruit with our fingers, ignoring the handsome pastry display. "Happy birthday," I kissed Jane on her cheek.

"Thank you," she smiled.

We didn't hardly speak the rest of the ride. I could tell she was totally enraptured and this made me feel good. It's a good feeling to treat people the way they deserve to be treated.

ESSAY #3: PRISON

SUNDAYS:	Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.
MONDAYS:	Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.
TUESDAYS:	Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.
WEDNESDAYS:	Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.
THURSDAYS:	Baked chicken, vegetable greens, hey peaches.
FRIDAYS:	Fucked chicken, green ^x hey peaches.
SATURDAYS:	Fucked chicken, green ^x hey hey peaches.

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-s/

THURSDAY

Jane and I have a game that we sometimes play where I leave and come back. I go to the corner store while Jane tucks herself into bed and when I come back I pull a ski mask over my face and crawl through the front apartment window. The place is pitch dark and I feel my way around the living room to the bedroom. The door badly needs oil but Jane pretends like she doesn't hear it squeak.

I leave the door open and pounce on the bed, startling her awake. I press my hand over her mouth and her eyes get wide, a terrified expression comes across her face, and I say: "I've seen you. . . . I've been watching you." Sometimes Jane works up tears and the wetness on my fingers really makes me violent.

"I'll bet you've got a pretty pussy," I say and pull the sheets back. Instinctively she clamps her knees together and folds them up to her chest but I slip one hand between them, breaking them apart and then wedge myself in while unzipping my pants. "Show me your pretty pussy," I say. "Here pretty, pretty, pretty."

I pin her arms on her chest and put all my weight on top of her so she can't flail her arms (sometimes she gets loose and starts hitting me) while I kick out of my pants and boxers. "Shush now," I say to quiet her sobbing and I pretend that if she's quiet I'll pull my hand back. At this point she begins to whimper and this is usually when I stick it in her. "Oh yeeeeees," I moan. "You have a pre-tty pu-ssy, pretty pu-ssy," I sing as I hump on her to the rhythm.

After I come I pull out and roll off her. She gasps for air when the vacuum of my hand is gone and we both grab for each others hand. We lie still for a moment, not saying anything, and then Jane mounts me until she comes too.

ESSAY #4: FREE TOPIC

IMPROPRIETY

R - this seems too small

It has only recently occurred to me that I open more doors than are opened for me. I am keeping count. Previously I would hold doors instinctively, a natural reflex. And I believed that this was a form of common courtesy, that it was all about fellowship and kindness. But of course it has to be about much more; and I'm sensing a tension between men and women.

I learned this as I listened to a woman, a peer, someone I don't really know, but someone I have probably held the door for, vehemently arguing that holding doors is an "undue exertion of influence by men over women". And there were others who chimed in, talking in cool, clinical terms about things like equality and empowerment, agreeing. I could not fathom the implications of this conversation. Was common courtesy really an exertion of influence, a favor to be repaid, a debt? Does this then mean that a smile or a look can suggest possibilities, make promises, imply?

There is a clear inequality between the sexes. I am not a caveman. I have been privy to the secret conversations of men, the in-between comments, the raised eyebrows that telepathically communicate low whistles. There is nothing in these conversations and behaviors which makes me think these things will ever change.

But I understand why things need to change. I am on the side of progress. To prove this to myself I laughed out loud at a pair of city workers who slowed down as they passed a young woman on the street, yelling "hey baby" to her and bravely speeding up before she could respond. I laughed out loud at this, laughed at their pathetic

existence. And as they passed me, the one in the passenger seat nodded to me as if we had an understanding. He thought I was smiling, approving of his behavior.

But I'm not sure I wasn't. I mean, I saw her first, before the truck came rolling down the street, before the catcall. I looked up and there she was in front of me. I did not say "hey baby," either out loud or to myself, but I did make note of her appearance. That's all: I simply registered whether or not I liked how she was dressed.

But I know not to tell a woman that she looks nice, even though I am thinking that she does. I've learned my lesson on this one. *I shouldn't even be thinking it*, I know. Because I know that by evaluating her appearance I am objectifying her, making her an art piece in a museum of other women; and everyone knows that the objectification of women is the cornerstone of pornography and all this leads to the fact that I am considering her, rating her, telling her that I am willing to have sex with her. And I know that if a woman tells me that I look nice, that she likes my new haircut, that she likes the color of my eyes, she is really, subtly, telling me that she would like to sleep with me.

And I'm learning not to look directly at women I don't know, either. I understand that this is an invasion of their right to walk down the street unmolested. By looking at them, by trying to catch their attention with a smile or a look, I am frightening them, making them feel uncomfortable, demanding something in return. Like a smile. Or a hello. I understand this completely.

I mean I really understand this. I understand that living among an enormously anonymous population can bring out the worst in people. It is very easy to hurt someone. People, women, have cause to be afraid. But most people are kind and treat people with the kindness and respect they deserve. There are aberrations, of course, but it seems these anomalies loom large over our lives, casting a shadow of fear and doubt over and among us. But I'm sure that these people are sorry for what they've done and that they never really intended to hurt anyone.

FRIDAY

Cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt. Bitch cunt. It's fuckin' hilarious how women always say (I want you to tell me what you're thinking about) and then they fuckin' up and pull out of your life without so much as a HAD A GOOD TIME! or THANKS FOR THE COCK! Jesus, why?

5/2/

ESSAY #5: A NIGHTMARISH DAY

Here is the worst possible scenario in my life:

I fall in love, get married, live in bliss until I have children, get a job with regular hours, watch my children grow up, lose interest in my wife, cheat on her with prostitutes who don't satisfy me, lose interest in life all together, kill myself.

FRIDAY NIGHT

I call in sick at Aztecka and then call back ten minutes later and quit. Later I'm dressed up, leaning against the bar, and Geoff is so pissed off at me he pretends not to hear my drink order. I wave down Miles and he brings me a vodka but doesn't take my money and this gesture of kindness almost reduces me to tears.

It isn't long before I spot another one, lonely and alone, the table in the corner but there is a revulsion within me, remnants of my loyalties to Jane, a revulsion I've felt many times before, the final pull of the last one's personality and the arrival of the next. The vodka clears the slate and I saunter through the crowd to her table and I can tell that she wants me to give her one good time in the vacuum of her life and when I smile she invites me to sit down and I do, opening the gates of Utopia one more time.



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