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Skippy Dies

Written by Paul Murray

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Skippy Dies
by
Paul Murray

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Skippy Dies

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Skippy and Ruprecht are having a doughnut-eating race one evening when Skippy turns purple and falls off his chair. It is a Friday in November, and Ed's is only half full; if Skippy makes a noise as he topples to the floor, no one pays any attention. Nor is Ruprecht, at first, overly concerned; rather he is pleased, because it means that he, Ruprecht, has won the race, his sixteenth in a row, bringing him one step closer to the all-time record held by Guido 'The Gland' LaManche, Seabrook College class of '93.

Apart from being a genius, which he is, Ruprecht does not have all that much going for him. A hamster-cheeked boy with a chronic weight problem, he is bad at sports and most other facets of life not involving complicated mathematical equations; that is why he savours his doughnut-eating victories so, and why, even though Skippy has been on the floor for almost a minute now, Ruprecht is still sitting there in his chair, chuckling to himself and saying, exultantly, under his breath, 'Yes, yes' – until the table jolts and his Coke goes flying, and he realizes that something is wrong.

On the chequered tiles beneath the table Skippy is writhing in silence. 'What's the matter?' Ruprecht says, but gets no answer. Skippy's eyes are bulging and a strange, sepulchral wheezing issues from his mouth; Ruprecht loosens his tie and unbuttons his collar, but that doesn't seem to help, in fact the breathing, the writhing, the pop-eyed stare only get worse, and Ruprecht feels a prickling climb up the back of his neck. 'What's wrong?' he repeats, raising his voice, as if Skippy were on the other side of a busy motorway. Everyone is looking now: the long table of Seabrook fourth-years and their girlfriends, the two St Brigid's girls, one fat, one thin, both still in their uniforms, the trio of shelf-stackers from the shopping mall up the road – they turn and

watch as Skippy gasps and dry-heaves, for all the world as if he's drowning, though how could he be drowning here, Ruprecht thinks, indoors, with the sea way over on the other side of the park? It doesn't make any sense, and it's all happening too quickly, without giving him time to work out what to do –

At that moment a door opens and a young Asian man in an Ed's shirt and a badge on which is written, in mock-cursive, *Hi I'm*, and then, in an almost unreadable scrawl, **Zhang Xielin**, emerges behind the counter, carrying a tray of change. Confronted by the crowd, which has risen to its feet to get a better view, he halts; then he spies the body on the floor, and dropping the tray, vaults over the counter, pushes Ruprecht aside and prises open Skippy's mouth. He peers in, but it's too dark to see anything, so hoisting him to his feet, he fastens his arms around Skippy's midriff and begins to yank at his stomach.

Ruprecht's brain, meanwhile, has finally sparked into life: he's scrabbling through the doughnuts on the floor, thinking that if he can find out *which* doughnut Skippy is choking on, it might provide some sort of a key to the situation. As he casts about, however, he makes a startling discovery. Of the six doughnuts that were in Skippy's box at the start of the race, six still remain, none with so much as a bite gone. His mind churns. He hadn't been observing Skippy during the race – Ruprecht when eating competitively tends to enter a sort of a *zone* in which the rest of the world melts away into nothingness, this in fact is the secret of his record-nearing sixteen victories – but he'd assumed Skippy was eating too; after all, why would you enter a doughnut-eating race and not eat any doughnuts? And, more importantly, if he hasn't eaten anything, how can he be –

'Wait!' he exclaims, jumping up and waving his hands at Zhang. 'Wait!' Zhang Xielin looks at him, panting, Skippy lolling over his forearms like a sack of wheat. 'He hasn't eaten anything,' Ruprecht says. 'He isn't choking.' A rustle of intrigue passes through the body of spectators. Zhang Xielin glowers mistrustfully, but allows Ruprecht to extricate Skippy, who is sur-

prisingly heavy, from his arms and lie him back down on the ground.

This entire sequence of events, from Skippy's initial fall to the present moment, has taken perhaps three minutes, during which time his purple colour has faded to an eerily delicate eggshell blue, and his wheezing breath receded to a whisper; his contortions too have ebbed towards stillness, and his eyes, though open, have taken on an oddly vacant air, so that even looking right at him Ruprecht's not a hundred per cent sure he's even actually conscious, and it seems all of a sudden as if around his own lungs Ruprecht can feel a pair of cold hands clutching as he realizes what's about to happen, though at the same time he can't quite believe it – *could* something like that really happen? Could it really happen *here*, in Ed's Doughnut House? Ed's, with its authentic jukebox and its fake leather and its black-and-white photographs of America; Ed's, with its fluorescent lights and its tiny plastic forks and its weird sterile air that should smell of doughnuts but doesn't; Ed's, where they come every day, where nothing ever happens, where nothing is *supposed* to happen, that's the whole point of it –

One of the girls in crinkly pants lets out a shriek. 'Look!' Jigging up and down on her tiptoes, she stabs at the air with her finger, and Ruprecht snaps out of the stupor he's fallen into and follows the line downwards to see that Skippy has raised his left hand. Relief courses through his body.

'That's it!' he cries.

The hand flexes, as if it has just woken from a deep sleep, and Skippy simultaneously expresses a long, rasping sigh.

'That's it!' Ruprecht says again, without knowing quite what he means. 'You can do it!'

Skippy makes a gurgling noise and blinks deliberately up at Ruprecht.

'The ambulance is going to be here in a second,' Ruprecht tells him. 'Everything's going to be fine.'

Gurgle, gurgle, goes Skippy.

'Just relax,' Ruprecht says.

But Skippy doesn't. Instead he keeps gurgling, like he's trying to tell Ruprecht something. He rolls his eyes feverishly, he stares up at the ceiling; then, as if inspired, his hand shoots out to search the tiled floor. It pads blindly amid the spilled Coke and melting ice cubes until it finds one of the fallen doughnuts; this it seizes on, like a clumsy spider grappling with its prey, crushing it between its fingers tighter and tighter.

'Just take it easy,' Ruprecht repeats, glancing over his shoulder at the window for a sign of the ambulance.

But Skippy keeps squeezing the doughnut till it has oozed raspberry syrup all over his hand; then, lowering a glistening red fingertip to the floor, he makes a line, and then another, perpendicular to the first.

T

'He's *writing*,' someone whispers.

He's writing. Painfully slowly – sweat dripping down his forehead, breath rattling like a trapped marble in his chest – Skippy traces out syrupy lines one by one onto the chequered floor. E, L – the lips of the onlookers move soundlessly as each character is completed; and while the traffic continues to roar by outside, a strange kind of silence, almost a serenity, falls over the Doughnut House, as if in here time had temporarily, so to speak, stopped moving forward; the moment, rather than ceding to the next, becoming elastic, attenuated, expanding to contain them, to give them a chance to prepare for what's coming –

TELL LORI

The overweight St Brigid's girl in the booth turns pale and whispers something in the ear of her companion. Skippy blinks up at Ruprecht imploringly. Clearing his throat, adjusting his glasses, Ruprecht examines the message crystallizing on the tiles.

'Tell Lori?' he says.

Skippy rolls his eyes and croaks.

'Tell her what?'

Skippy gasps.

‘I don’t know!’ Ruprecht gabbles, ‘I don’t know, I’m sorry!’ He bends down to squint again at the mysterious pink letters.

‘Tell her he *loves* her!’ the overweight or possibly even pregnant girl in the St Brigid’s uniform exclaims. ‘Tell Lori he loves her! Oh my God!’

‘Tell Lori you love her?’ Ruprecht repeats dubiously. ‘Is that it?’

Skippy exhales – he smiles. Then he lies back on the tiles; and Ruprecht sees quite clearly the rise and fall of his breast gently come to a stop.

‘Hey!’ Ruprecht grabs him and shakes him by the shoulders. ‘Hey, what are you doing?’

Skippy does not reply.

For a moment there is a cold, stark silence; then, almost as if from a united desire to fill it, the diner explodes in a clamour. *Air!* is the consensus. *Give him air!* The door is thrown open and the cold November night rushes greedily in. Ruprecht finds himself standing, looking down at his friend. ‘Breathe!’ he shouts at him, gesticulating meaninglessly like an angry teacher. ‘Why won’t you breathe?’ But Skippy just lies there with a reposeful look on his face, placid as can be.

Around them the air jostles with shouts and suggestions, things people remember from hospital shows on TV. Ruprecht can’t take this. He pushes through the bodies and out the door down to the roadside. Biting his thumb, he watches the traffic fleet by in dark, impersonal blurs, refusing to disclose an ambulance.

When he goes back inside, Zhang Xielin is kneeling, cradling Skippy’s head on his lap. Doughnuts scatter the ground like little candied wreaths. In the silence, people peek at Ruprecht with moist, pitying eyes. Ruprecht glares back at them murderously. He is fizzing, he is quaking, he is incandescent with rage. He feels like stomping back to his room, and leaving Skippy where he is. He feels like screaming out, ‘What? What? What? What?’ He goes back outside to look into the traffic, he is crying, and in that moment he feels all the hundreds and thousands of facts in his head turn to sludge.

Through the laurel trees, in an upper corner of Seabrook Tower, you can just make out the window of their dorm, where not half an hour ago Skippy challenged Ruprecht to the race. Above the lot, the great pink hoop of the Ed's Doughnut House sign broadcasts its frigid synthetic light into the night, a neon zero that outshines the moon and all the constellations of infinite space beyond it. Ruprecht is not looking in that direction. The universe at this moment appears to him as something horrific, thin and threadbare and empty; it seems to know this, and in shame to turn away.

I

Hopeland

These daydreams persisted like an alternate life . . .

Robert Graves

In winter months, from his seat in the middle desk of the middle row, Howard used to look out the window of the History Room and watch the whole school go up in flames. The rugby pitches, the basketball court, the car park and the trees beyond – for one beautiful instant everything would be engulfed; and though the spell was quickly broken – the light deepening and reddening and flattening out, leaving the school and its environs intact – you would know at least that the day was almost over.

Today he stands at the head of the class: the wrong angle and the wrong time of year to view the sunset. He knows, however, that fifteen minutes remain on the clock, and so pinching his nose, sighing imperceptibly, he tries again. ‘Come on, now. The main protagonists. Just the main ones. Anybody?’

The torpid silence remains undisturbed. The radiators are blazing, though it is not particularly cold outside: the heating system is elderly and erratic, like most things at this end of the school, and over the course of the day the heat builds to a swampy, malarial fug. Howard complains, of course, like the other teachers, but he is secretly not ungrateful; combined with the powerful soporific effects of history itself, it means the disorder levels of his later classes rarely extend beyond a low drone of chatter and the occasional paper aeroplane.

‘Anyone?’ he repeats, looking over the class, deliberately ignoring Ruprecht Van Doren’s upstretched hand, beneath which the rest of Ruprecht strains breathlessly. The rest of the boys blink back at Howard as if to reproach him for disturbing their peace. In Howard’s old seat, Daniel ‘Skippy’ Juster stares catatonically into space, for all the world as if he’s been drugged; in the back-row suntrap, Henry Lafayette has made a little nest

of his arms in which to lay his head. Even the clock sounds like it's half asleep.

'We've been talking about this for the last two days. Are you telling me no one can name a single one of the countries involved? Come on, you're not getting out of here till you've shown me that you know this.'

'Uruguay?' Bob Shambles incants vaguely, as if summoning the answer from magical vapours.

'No,' Howard says, glancing down at the book spread open on his lectern just to make sure. '*Known at the time as "the war to end all wars"*,' the caption reads, below a picture of a vast, water-logged moonscape from which all signs of life, natural or man-made, have been comprehensively removed.

'The Jews?' Ultan O'Dowd says.

'The Jews are not a country. Mario?'

'What?' Mario Bianchi's head snaps up from whatever he is attending to, probably his phone, under the desk. 'Oh, it was . . . it was – ow, stop – sir, Dennis is feeling my leg! Stop feeling me, feeler!'

'Stop feeling his leg, Dennis.'

'I wasn't, sir!' Dennis Hoey, all wounded innocence.

On the blackboard, 'MAIN' – Militarism, Alliances, Industrialization, Nationalism – copied out of the textbook at the start of class, is slowly bleached out by the lowering sun. 'Yes, Mario?'

'Uh . . .' Mario prevaricates. 'Well, Italy . . .'

'Italy was in charge of the catering,' Niall Henaghan suggests.

'Hey,' Mario warns.

'Sir, Mario calls his wang *Il Duce*,' says Dennis.

'Sir!'

'Dennis.'

'But he does – you do, I've heard you. "Time to rise, Duce," you say. "Your people await you, Duce."'

'At least I have a wang, and am not a boy with . . . Instead of a wang, he has just a blank piece of . . .'

'I feel we're straying off the point here,' Howard intervenes.

‘Come on, guys. The protagonists of the First World War. I’ll give you a clue. Germany. Germany was involved. Who were Germany’s allies – yes, Henry?’ as Henry Lafayette, whatever he is dreaming of, emits a loud snort. Hearing his name, he raises his head and gazes at Howard with dizzy, bewildered eyes.

‘Elves?’ he ventures.

The classroom explodes into hysterics.

‘Well, what was the question?’ Henry asks, somewhat woundedly.

Howard is on the brink of accepting defeat and beginning the class all over again. A glance at the clock, however, absolves him from any further effort today, so instead he directs them back to the textbook, and has Geoff Sproke read out the poem reproduced there.

“‘In Flanders Fields’,’ Geoff obliges. ‘By Lieutenant John McCrae.’

‘John McGay,’ glosses John Reidy.

‘That’s enough.’

“‘In Flanders Fields,’” Geoff reads, “‘*the poppies blow*”:

‘Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place, and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived —’

At this point the bell rings. In a single motion the daydreaming and somnolent snap awake, grab their bags, stow their books and move as one for the door. ‘For tomorrow, read the end of the chapter,’ Howard calls over the melee. ‘And while you’re at it, read the stuff you were supposed to read for today.’ But the class has already fizzed away, and Howard is left as he always is, wondering if anyone has been listening to a single thing he’s said; he can practically see his words crumpled up on the floor. He packs

away his own book, wipes clean the board and sets off to fight his way through the home-time throng to the staffroom.

In Our Lady's Hall, hormonal surges have made giants and midgets of the crowd. The tang of adolescence, impervious to deodorant or opened windows, hangs heavy, and the air tintinnabulates with bleeps, chimes and trebly shards of music as two hundred mobile phones, banned during the school day, are switched back on with the urgency of divers reconnecting to their oxygen supply. From her alcove a safe elevation above it, the plaster Madonna with the starred halo and the peaches-and-cream complexion pouts coquettishly at the rampaging maleness below.

'Hey, Flubber!' Dennis Hoey scampers across Howard's path to waylay William 'Flubber' Cooke. 'Hey, I just wanted to ask you a question?'

'What?' Flubber immediately suspicious.

'Uh, I was just wondering – are you a bummer tied to a tree?'

Brows creasing, Flubber – fourteen stone and on his third trip through second year – turns this over.

'It's not a trick or anything,' promises Dennis. 'I just wanted to know, you know, if you're a bummer tied to a tree.'

'No,' Flubber resolves, at which Dennis takes flight, declaring exuberantly, 'Bummer on the loose! Bummer on the loose!' Flubber lets out a roar and prepares to give chase, then stops abruptly and ducks off in the other direction as the crowd parts and a tall, cadaverous figure comes striding through.

Father Jerome Green: teacher of French, coordinator of Seabrook's charitable works, and by some stretch the school's most terrifying personage. Wherever he goes it is with two or three bodies' worth of empty space around him, as if he's accompanied by an invisible retinue of pitchfork-wielding goblins, ready to jab at anyone who happens to be harbouring an impure thought. As he passes, Howard musters a weak smile; the priest glares back at him the same way he does at everyone, with a kind of ready, impersonal disapproval, so adept at looking into man's soul and seeing sin, desire, ferment that he does it now like ticking a box.

Sometimes Howard feels dispiritedly as if not one thing has changed here in the ten years since he graduated. The priests in particular bring this out in him. The hale ones are still hale, the dodderly ones still dodder; Father Green still collects canned food for Africa and terrorizes the boys, Father Laughton still gets teary-eyed when he presents the works of Bach to his unheeding classes, Father Foley still gives ‘guidance’ to troubled youngsters, invariably in the form of an admonition to play more rugby. On bad days Howard sees their endurance as a kind of personal rebuke – as if that almost-decade of life between matriculation and his ignominious return here had, because of his own ineptitude, been rolled back, struck from the record, deemed merely so much fudge.

Of course this is pure paranoia. The priests are not immortal. The Holy Paraclete Fathers are experiencing the same problem as every other Catholic order: they are dying out. Few of the priests in Seabrook are under sixty, and the newest recruit to the pastoral programme – one of an ever-dwindling number – is a young seminarian from somewhere outside Kinshasa; when the school principal, Father Desmond Furlong, fell ill at the beginning of September, it was a layman – economics teacher Gregory L. Costigan – who took the reins, for the first time in Seabrook’s history.

Leaving behind the wood-panelled halls of the Old Building, Howard passes up the Annexe, climbs the stairs, and opens, with the usual frisson of weirdness, the door marked ‘Staff-room’. Inside, a half-dozen of his colleagues are kvetching, marking homework or changing their nicotine patches. Without addressing anyone or otherwise signalling his presence, Howard goes to his locker and throws a couple of books and a pile of copies into his briefcase; then, moving crab-like to avoid eye contact, he steals out of the room again. He clatters back down the stairs and the now-deserted corridor, eyes fixed determinedly on the exit – when he is arrested by the sound of a young female voice.

It appears that, although the bell for the end of the school day rang a good five minutes ago, class in the Geography Room is still in full swing. Crouching slightly, Howard peers through the narrow window set in the door. The boys inside show no sign of impatience; in fact, by their expressions, they are quite oblivious to the passage of time.

The reason for this stands at the head of the class. Her name is Miss McIntyre; she is a substitute. Howard has caught glimpses of her in the staffroom and on the corridor, but he hasn't yet managed to speak to her. In the cavernous depths of the Geography Room, she draws the eye like a flame. Her blonde hair has that cascading quality you normally see only in TV ads for shampoo, complemented by a sophisticated magnolia two-piece more suited to a boardroom than a transition-year class; her voice, while soft and melodious, has at the same time an ungainsayable quality, an undertone of command. In the crook of her arm she cradles a globe, which while she speaks she caresses absently as if it were a fat, spoiled housecat; it almost seems to purr as it revolves languorously under her fingertips.

'... just beneath the surface of the Earth,' she is saying, 'temperatures so high that the rock itself is molten – can anyone tell me what it's called, this molten rock?'

'Magma,' croak several boys at once.

'And what do you call it, when it bursts up onto the Earth's surface from a volcano?'

'Lava,' they respond tremulously.

'Excellent! And millions of years ago, there was an enormous amount of volcanic activity, with magma boiling up over the entire surface of the Earth non-stop. The landscape around us today' – she runs a lacquered fingernail down a swelling ridge of mountain – 'is mostly the legacy of this era, when the whole planet was experiencing dramatic physical changes. I suppose you could call it Earth's teenage years!'

The class blushes to its collective roots and stares down at its

textbook. She laughs again, and spins the globe, snapping it under her fingertips like a musician plucking the strings of a double bass, then catches sight of her watch. 'Oh my gosh! Oh, you poor things, I should have let you out ten minutes ago! Why didn't someone say something?'

The class mumbles inaudibly, still looking at the book.

'Well, all right . . .' She turns to write their homework on the blackboard, reaching up so that her skirt rises to expose the back of her knees; moments later the door opens, and the boys troop reluctantly out. Howard, affecting to study the photographs on the noticeboard of the Hillwalking Club's recent outing to Djouce Mountain, watches from the corner of his eye until the flow of grey jumpers has ceased. When she fails to appear, he goes back to investi-

'Oh!'

'Oh my God, I'm so sorry.' He hunkers down beside her and helps her re-amass the pages that have fluttered all over the gritty corridor floor. 'I'm so sorry, I didn't see you. I was just rushing back to a . . . a meeting . . .'

'That's all right,' she says, 'thanks,' as he places a sheaf of Ordnance Survey maps on top of the stack she's gathered back in her arms. 'Thank you,' she repeats, looking directly into his eyes, and continuing to look into them as they rise in unison to their feet, so that Howard, finding himself unable to look away, feels a brief moment of panic, as if they have somehow become locked together, like those apocryphal stories you hear about the kids who get their braces stuck together while kissing and have to get the fire brigade to cut them out.

'Sorry,' he says again, reflexively.

'Stop apologizing,' she laughs.

He introduces himself. 'I'm Howard Fallon. I teach History. You're standing in for Finian Ó Dálaigh?'

'That's right,' she says. 'Apparently he's going to be out till Christmas, whatever happened to him.'

'Gallstones,' Howard says.

‘Oh,’ she says.

Howard wishes he could unsay *gallstones*. ‘So,’ he rebegins effortfully, ‘I’m actually on my way home. Can I give you a lift?’

She cocks her head. ‘Didn’t you have a meeting?’

‘Yes,’ he remembers. ‘But it isn’t really that important.’

‘I have my own car, thanks all the same,’ she says. ‘But I suppose you could carry my books, if you like.’

‘Okay,’ Howard says. Possibly the offer is ironic, but before she can retract it he removes the stack of binders and textbooks from her hands and, ignoring the homicidal looks from a small clump of her pupils still mooning about the corridor, walks alongside her towards the exit.

‘So, how are you finding it?’ he asks, attempting to haul the conversation to a more equilibrious state. ‘Have you taught much before, or is this your first time?’

‘Oh’ – she blows upwards at a wayward strand of golden hair – ‘I’m not a teacher by profession. I’m just doing this as a favour for Greg, really. Mr Costigan, I mean. God, I’d forgotten about this Mister, Miss stuff. It’s so funny. *Miss McIntyre*.’

‘Staff are allowed to use first names, you know.’

‘Mmm . . . Actually I’m quite enjoying being *Miss McIntyre*. Anyhow, Greg and I were talking one day and he was saying they were having problems finding a good substitute, and it so happens that once upon a time I had fantasies of being a teacher, and I was between contracts, so I thought why not?’

‘What’s your field normally?’ He holds open the main door for her and they step out into the autumn air, which has grown cold and crisp.

‘Investment banking?’

Howard receives this information with a studied neutrality, then says casually, ‘I used to work in that area myself, actually. Spent about two years in the City. Futures, primarily.’

‘What happened?’

He cracks a grin. ‘Don’t you read the papers? Not enough future to go around.’

She doesn't react, waiting for the correct answer.

'Well, I'll probably get back into it someday,' he blusters. 'This is just a temporary thing, really. I sort of fell into it. Although at the same time, it's nice, I think, to give something back? To feel like you're making a difference?' They make their way around the sixth-years' car park, a series of Lexuses and TTs – and Howard's heart sinks as his own car comes into view.

'What's with the feathers?'

'Oh, it's nothing.' He sweeps his hand along the car's roof, ploughing a mighty drift of white feathers over the side. They pluff to the ground, from where some float back up to adhere to his trousers. Miss McIntyre takes a step backwards. 'It's just a . . . ah, sort of a gag the boys play.'

'They call you Howard the Coward,' she remarks, like a tourist inquiring the meaning of a puzzling local idiom.

'Yes.' Howard laughs mirthlessly, shovelling more feathers from his windscreen and bonnet and not offering an explanation. 'You know, they're good kids, generally, in this place, but there's a few that can be a bit, ah, high-spirited.'

'I'll be on my guard,' she says.

'Well, like I say, it's just a small percentage. Most of them . . . I mean, generally speaking it's a wonderful place to work.'

'You're covered in feathers,' she says judiciously.

'Yes,' he harrumphs, swiping his trousers summarily, straightening his tie. Her eyes, which are a brilliant and dazzling shade of blue custom-made for sparkling mockingly, sparkle mockingly at him. Howard has had enough humiliation for one day; he is just about to bow out with the last shreds of his dignity, when she says, 'So what's it like, teaching History?'

'What's it like?' he repeats.

'I'm really liking doing Geography again.' She gazes dreamily around at the ice-blue sky, the yellowing trees. 'You know, these titanic battles between different forces that actually created the shape of the world we're walking around in today . . . it's so *dramatic* . . .' She squeezes her hands sensually, a goddess forging

worlds out of raw matter, then fixes The Eyes on Howard again. 'And History – that must be so much fun!'

This isn't the first word that springs to mind, but Howard limits himself to a bland smile.

'What are you teaching at the moment?'

'Well, in my last class we were doing the First World War.'

'Oh!' She claps her hands. 'I love the First World War. The boys must be enjoying that.'

'You'd be surprised,' he says.

'You should read them Robert Graves,' she says.

'Who?'

'He was in the trenches,' she replies; then adds, after a pause, 'He was also one of the great love poets.'

'I'll take a look,' he scowls. 'Any other tips for me? Any other lessons you've gleaned from your five days in the profession?'

She laughs. 'If I have any more I'll be sure and pass them on. It sounds like you need them.' She lifts the books out of Howard's arms and aims her car key at the enormous white-gold SUV parked next door to Howard's dilapidated Bluebird. 'See you tomorrow,' she says.

'Right,' Howard says.

But she doesn't move, and neither does he: she holds him there a moment purely by the light of her spectacular eyes, looking him over with the tip of her tongue tucked in the corner of her mouth, as if she is deciding what to have for dinner. Then, smiling at him coyly with a row of pointed white teeth, she says, 'You know, I'm not going to sleep with you.'

At first Howard is sure he must have misheard her; and when he realizes that he has not, he is still too stunned to reply. So he just stands there, or perhaps totters, and the next thing he knows she's climbed into her jeep and pulled away, sending white feathers swirling about his ankles.

The door swings open with a creak and you step inside, into the Great Hall. Spiderwebs cover everything, drifting from floor to ceiling like veils from a thousand left-behind brides. You look at the map and go through a door on the far side of the hall. This room used to be the library; books cover the floor in dusty piles. On the table is a scroll, but before you can read it the grandfather clock bursts open and there are one, two, three zombies coming at you! You swipe at them with the torch and duck round the other side of the table, but more appear in the doorway, drawn by the smell of someone alive –

‘Skippy, this is totally boring.’

‘Yeah, Skip, do you think someone else could have a go, maybe?’

‘I’ll just be a second,’ Skippy mumbles, as the zombies pursue him up a rickety staircase.

‘What do you think these zombies do all day?’ Geoff wonders. ‘When there’s no one around they want to eat?’

‘They order pizza,’ Dennis says. ‘Which Mario’s dad delivers.’

‘I told you a thousand times, my father is not a pizza delivery-man, he is an important diplomat in the Italian embassy,’ Mario snaps.

‘Seriously, though, how often is anyone going to call into their creepy house? Like, what do they do, just wander around it all day long, moaning to each other?’

‘They sound sort of like my parents,’ Geoff realizes. He gets up and stretches out his arms and staggers around the room, saying in a sepulchral zombie voice, ‘*Geoff . . . put out the garbage . . . Geoff . . . I can’t find my glasses . . . We’ve made great sacrifices to send you to that school, Geoff . . .*’

Skippy wishes they would stop talking. Heat coils round his

brain like a fat snake, tighter and tighter, making his eyelids heavy . . . and now just for a second the screen blurs, enough time for a raggy arm to fling itself around his neck – he shakes awake, he tries to wriggle free, but it's too late, they're all over him, pulling him to the ground, crowding around till he can't even see himself, their long nails slashing down, their rotten teeth gnashing, and the little spinning light that is his soul whirls up to the ceiling . . .

'*Game over, Skippy,*' Geoff says in the zombie voice, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder.

'Finally,' Mario says. 'Now can we play something else?'

Skippy's dorm, like all the other dorms, is in the Tower, which sits at the end of Our Lady's Hall and is the very oldest part of Seabrook. In days of Yore, when the school was first built, the entire student population ate, slept and sat through classes here; nowadays, day boys form the majority of the pupils, and out of each year of two hundred there are only twenty or thirty unlucky souls who have to come back here after the bell has gone. Any Harry Potter-type fantasies tend to get squashed pretty quickly: life in the Tower, an ancient building composed mostly of draughts, is a deeply unmagical experience, spent at the mercy of lunatic teachers, bullies, athlete's foot epidemics, etc. There are some small consolations. At a point in life in which the lovely nurturing homes built for them by their parents have become unendurable Guantánomos, and any time spent away from their peers is experienced at best as a mind-numbing commercial break for things no one wants to buy on some old person's TV channel and at worst as a torture not incomparable to being actually genuinely nailed to a cross, the boarders do enjoy a certain prestige among the boys. They have a sort of sheen of independence; they can cultivate mysterious personae without having to worry about mums or dads showing up and blowing the whole thing by telling people about amusing 'accidents' they had when they were little or by publically admonishing them to please stop walking around with their hands wedged in their pockets like a pervert.

Unarguably the best thing about being a boarder, though, is that the Tower overlooks, in spite of the feverish tree-planting efforts of the priests, the yard of St Brigid's, the girls' school next door. Every morning, lunchtime and evening the air rings with high feminine voices like lovely secular bells, and at night-time, before they close the curtains, you can see without even needing to look through the telescope – which is a good thing, because Ruprecht is extremely particular about what his telescope is used for, and always keeps it pointed into the girl-less reaches of the sky above – your female counterparts walking around in the upper windows, talking, brushing their hair or even, if you believe Mario, doing naked aerobics. That's as close as you'll get, though, because, while it's the constant subject of plans and boasts and tall tales, no one has ever verifiably breached the wall between the two schools; nor has anyone conceived of a way past the St Brigid's janitor and his infamous dog, Nipper, not to mention the terrifying Ghost Nun who legend has it roams the grounds after dark wielding either a crucifix or pinking shears, depending on who you talk to.

Ruprecht Van Doren, owner of the telescope and Skippy's room-mate, is not like the other boys. He arrived at Seabrook in January, like a belated and non-returnable Christmas gift, after both his parents were lost on a kayaking expedition up the Amazon. Prior to their deaths, he had been schooled at home by tutors flown in from Oxford at the behest of his father, Baron Maximilian Van Doren, and consequently he has quite a different attitude to education from his peers. For Ruprecht, the world is a compendium of fascinating facts just waiting to be discovered, and a difficult maths problem is like sinking into a nice warm bath. A cursory glance around the room will give an idea of his current projects and interests. Maps of many kinds cover the walls – maps of the moon, of near and far-off constellations, a map of the world stuck with little pins marking recent UFO sightings – as well as a picture of Einstein and scoresheets commemorating notable Yahtzee victories. The telescope, bearing a sign that reads

in big black letters DO NOT TOUCH, points out the window; a French horn gleams pompously from the foot of the bed; on the desk, hidden beneath a sheaf of inscrutable printouts, his computer performs mysterious operations whose full nature is known only to its owner. Impressive as this may be, it represents only a fraction of Ruprecht's activity, most of which takes place in his 'lab', one of the dingy antechambers off the basement. Down here, surrounded by yet more computers and parts of computers, more towers of unfathomable papers and electrical arcana, Ruprecht constructs equations, conducts experiments and continues his pursuit of what he considers the Holy Grail of science: the secret of the origins of the universe.

'Newsflash, Ruprecht, they know about the origins of the universe. It's called the Big Bang.'

'Aha, but what happened *before* the Bang? What happened during it? What was it that banged?'

'How would I know?'

'Well, you see, that's the whole point. From the moments *after* the Bang until this moment right now, the universe makes sense – that is to say, it obeys observable laws, laws that can be written down in the language of mathematics. But when you go before that, to the very, very beginning, these laws no longer apply. The equations won't work out. If we could solve them, though, if we could understand what happened in those first few milliseconds, it would be like a master key, which would unlock all sorts of other doors. Professor Hideo Tamashi believes that the future of humanity could depend on our opening these doors.'

Spend twenty-four hours a day cooped up with Ruprecht and you will hear a lot about this Professor Hideo Tamashi and his groundbreaking attempts to solve the Big Bang using ten-dimensional string theory. You will also hear a lot about Stanford, the university where Professor Tamashi teaches, which from Ruprecht's descriptions of it sounds like a cross between an amusement arcade and Cloud City in *Star Wars*, a place where everyone wears jumpsuits and nothing bad ever happens.

Ruprecht has had his heart set on studying under Professor Tamashi more or less since he could walk, and whenever he mentions the Prof, or Stanford and its *really first-rate* lab facilities, his voice takes on a starry, yearning quality, like someone describing a beautiful land glimpsed once in a dream.

‘Why don’t you just go then,’ Dennis says, ‘if everything’s so whoop-de-doo over there?’

‘My dear Dennis,’ Ruprecht chortles, ‘one does not just “go” to somewhere like Stanford.’

Instead, it seems, you need something called an *academic résumé*, something that shows the *Dean of Admissions* that you are just that fraction smarter than all the other smart people applying there. Hence Ruprecht’s various investigations, experiments and inventions – even the ones, his detractors, principally Dennis, argue, purportedly undertaken for the Future of Humanity.

‘That tub of guts doesn’t give two hoots about humanity,’ Dennis says. ‘All he wants is to ponce off to America and meet other dweebs who’ll play Yahtzee with him and not make fun of his weight.’

‘I suppose it must be hard for him,’ Skippy says. ‘You know, being a genius and everything, and being stuck here with us.’

‘But he’s not a genius!’ Dennis rails. ‘He’s a total fraud!’

‘Come on, Dennis, what about his equations?’ Skippy says.

‘Yeah, and his inventions?’ adds Geoff.

‘His *inventions*? The time machine, a tinfoil-lined wardrobe attached to an alarm clock? The X-ray glasses, that are just regular glasses glued onto the inside of a toaster? How could anyone take these for the work of a serious scientist?’

Dennis and Ruprecht don’t get on. It’s not hard to see why: two more different boys would be hard to imagine. Ruprecht is eternally fascinated by the world around him, loves to take part in class and throws himself into extra-curricular activities; Dennis, an arch-cynic whose very dreams are sarcastic, hates the world and everything in it, especially Ruprecht, and has never thrown himself into anything, with the exception of a largely successful

campaign last summer to efface the first letter from every manifestation of the word ‘canal’ in the Greater Dublin Area, viz. the myriad street signs proclaiming ROYAL ANAL, WARNING! ANAL, GRAND ANAL HOTEL. As far as Dennis is concerned, the entire persona of Ruprecht Van Doren is nothing more than a grandiloquent concoction of foolish Internet theories and fancy talk lifted from the Discovery Channel.

‘But Dennis, why would he want to make up stuff like that?’

‘Why does anyone do anything in this shithole? To make himself look like he’s better than us. I’m telling you, he’s no more a genius than I am. And if you ask me, this stuff about him being an orphan, that’s a crock too.’

Well, that’s where Dennis and his audience part company. Yes, it’s true that details of Ruprecht’s ex-parents remain vague, apart from an occasional passing reference to his father’s skills as a horseman, ‘famed the length of the Rhine’, or a fleeting mention of his mother, ‘a delicate woman with aesthetic hands’. And it’s true that although Ruprecht’s present line is that they were botanists, drowned while kayaking up the Amazon in search of a rare medicinal plant, Martin Fennessy claims that Ruprecht, shortly after his arrival, told him that they were professional kayakers, drowned while competing in a round-the-world kayaking race. But nobody believes he or anyone else, with the possible exception of Dennis himself, would do something as karmically perilous as lie about the death of his parents.

That’s not to say Ruprecht isn’t annoying, or that he’s not poison to a body’s street-cred. There are definite drawbacks to a public association with Ruprecht. But the bottom line is that for some inexplicable reason Skippy actually *likes* him, and so the way it’s panned out is that if you’re friends with Skippy you now get Ruprecht into the bargain, like a two-hundred-pound booby prize.

And by now some of the others have become quite fond of him. Maybe Dennis is right, and he is talking non-stop bollocks – it still makes a change from everything else they’re hearing these

days. You know, you spend your childhood watching TV, assuming that at some point in the future everything you see there will one day happen to you: that you too will win a Formula One race, hop a train, foil a group of terrorists, tell someone ‘Give me the gun’, etc. Then you start secondary school, and suddenly everyone’s asking you about your *career plans* and your *long-term goals*, and by goals they don’t mean the kind you are planning to score in the FA Cup. Gradually the awful truth dawns on you: that Santa Claus was just the tip of the iceberg – that your future will not be the rollercoaster ride you’d imagined, that the world occupied by your parents, the world of washing the dishes, going to the dentist, weekend trips to the DIY superstore to buy floor-tiles, is actually largely what people mean when they speak of ‘life’. Now, with every day that passes, another door seems to close, the one marked PROFESSIONAL STUNTMAN, OR FIGHT EVIL ROBOT, until as the weeks go by and the doors – GET BITTEN BY SNAKE, SAVE WORLD FROM ASTEROID, DISMANTLE BOMB WITH SECONDS TO SPARE – keep closing, you begin to hear the sound as a good thing, and start closing some yourself, even ones that didn’t necessarily need to be closed . . .

At the onset of this process – looking down the barrel of this grim de-dreamification, which, even more than hyperactive glands and the discovery of girls, seems to be the actual stuff of growing up – to have Ruprecht telling you his crackpot theories comes to be oddly comforting.

‘Imagine it,’ he says, gazing out the window while the rest of you huddle around the Nintendo, ‘everything that *is*, everything that has *ever been* – every grain of sand, every drop of water, every star, every planet, space and time themselves – all crammed into one dimensionless point where no rules or laws apply, waiting to fly out and become the future. When you think about it, the Big Bang’s a bit like school, isn’t it?’

‘What?’

‘Ruprecht, what the hell are you talking about?’

‘Well, I mean to say, one day we’ll all leave here and become scientists and bank clerks and diving instructors and hotel managers –

the fabric of society, so to speak. But in the meantime, that fabric, that is to say, us, the *future*, is crowded into one tiny little point where none of the laws of society applies, viz., this school.'

Uncomprehending silence; and then, 'I tell you one difference between this school and the Big Bang, and that is in the Big Bang there is no particle quite like Mario. But you can be sure that if there is, he is the great stud particle, and he is boning the lucky lady particles all night long.'

'Yes,' Ruprecht responds, a little sadly; and he will fall silent, there at his window, eating a doughnut, contemplating the stars.

Howard the Coward: yes, that's what they call him. *Howard the Coward*. Feathers; eggs left on his seat; a yellow streak, executed in chalk, on his teacher's cape; once a whole frozen chicken there on the desk, trussed, dimpled, humiliated.

'It's because it rhymes with Howard, that's all,' Halley tells him. 'Like if your name was Ray, they'd call you Gay Ray. Or if it was Mary, they'd call you Scary Mary. It's just the way their brains work. It doesn't mean anything.'

'It means they *know*.'

'Oh God, Howard, one little bump, and it was years and years ago. How could they possibly know about that?'

'They just do.'

'Well, even if they do. *I* know you're not a coward. They're just kids, they can't see into your soul.'

But she is wrong. That is exactly what they can do. Old enough to have a decent mechanical understanding of how the world works, but young enough for their judgements to remain unfogged by anything like mercy or compassion or the realization that all this will one day happen to them, the boys – his students – are machines for seeing through the apparatus of worldliness that adulthood, as figured by their teachers, surrounds itself with, to the grinding emptiness at its heart. They find it hilarious. And the names they give the other teachers seem so unerringly *right*. Malco the Alco? Big Fat Johnson? Lurch?

Howard the Coward. Fuck! Who told her?

The car starts on the third try and putters past slow droves of boys babbling and throwing conkers at each other till it reaches the gate, where it joins a tailback waiting for a space to open up

on the road. Years ago, on their very last day of school, Howard and his friends had paused beneath this same gate – SEABROOK COLLEGE arching above them in reversed gold letters – and turned to give what was now their alma mater the finger, before passing through and out into the exhilarating panorama of passion and adventure that would be the setting for their adult lives. Sometimes – often – he wonders if by that small gesture, in a life otherwise bare of gestures or dissent, he had doomed himself to return here, to spend the rest of his days scrubbing away at that solitary mark of rebellion. God loves these broad ironies.

He reaches the top of the line, indicating right. There's the ragged beginnings of a sunset visible over the city, a lush melange of magentas and crimsons; he sits there as witty responses crash belatedly into his mind, one after another.

Never say never.

That's what you think.

Better join the queue.

The car behind honks as a gap opens up. At the last second, Howard switches the indicator and turns left instead.

Halley is on the phone when he gets home; she swivels her chair around to him, rolling her eyes and making a *blah blah* shape with her hand. The air is dense with a day's smoke, and the ash-tray piled high with crushed butts and frazzled matchsticks. He mouths *Hi* to her and goes into the bathroom. His own phone starts to ring as he's washing his hands. 'Farley?' he whispers.

'Howard?'

'I called you three times, where have you been?'

'I had to do some work with my third-years for the Science Fair. What's wrong? Is everything okay? I can't hear you very well.'

'Hold on' – Howard reaches in and turns on the shower. In his natural voice he says, 'Listen, something very –'

'Are you in the shower?'

'No, I'm standing outside it.'

'Maybe I should call you back.'

'No – listen, I wanted to – something very strange has just

happened. I was talking to the new girl, the substitute, you know, who teaches Geography –’

‘Aurelie?’

‘What?’

‘Aurelie. It’s her name.’

‘How do you know?’

‘What do you mean, how do I know?’

‘I mean’ – he feels his cheeks go crimson – ‘I meant, what kind of name is Aurelie?’

‘It’s French. She’s part-French.’ Farley chuckles lasciviously. ‘I wonder which part. Are you all right, Howard? You sound a bit off.’

‘Well, okay, the point is, I was talking to her in the car park just now – just having a nice, normal conversation about work and how she’s getting on, and then out of the blue she says to me –’ he goes to the door and opens it a sliver. In the next room Halley is still nodding and making mm-hmm noises, the phone cradled between her jawbone and shoulder – she tells me she isn’t going to sleep with me!’ He waits, and when no response is forthcoming, adds, ‘What do you think of that?’

‘That is strange,’ Farley admits.

‘It’s *very* strange,’ Howard affirms.

‘And what did you say?’

‘I didn’t say anything. I was too surprised.’

‘You hadn’t been rubbing her thigh or anything like that?’

‘That’s just it, it was completely unprompted. We were standing there talking about schoolwork, and then out of nowhere she goes, “You know, I’m not going to sleep with you.” What do you think it could mean?’

‘Well, offhand I’d say it means she isn’t going to sleep with you.’

‘You don’t just *say* to someone that you’re not going to sleep with them, Farley. You don’t introduce sex into the conversation, out of a clear blue sky, and then just banish it. Unless sex is what you really want to talk about.’

‘Wait – you’re suggesting that when she told you, “I’m not

going to sleep with you,” what she actually meant was, “I *am* going to sleep with you”?’

‘Doesn’t it sound like she’s laying down a challenge? Like she’s saying, “I’m not going to sleep with you *now*, but I *might* sleep with you if certain circumstances change.”’

Farley hums, then says reluctantly, ‘I don’t know, Howard.’

‘Okay, I see, she’s just trying to save me a little time and embarrassment, is that it? She’s just trying to help me out? There couldn’t possibly be any sexual element.’

‘I don’t know what she meant. But isn’t this entirely academic? Don’t you already have a girlfriend? And a mortgage? Howard?’

‘Well obviously,’ Howard says, simmering. ‘I just thought it was a strange thing to say, that’s all.’

‘If I were you I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it. She sounds like one of those flirty types. She’s probably that way with everybody.’

‘Right.’ Howard agrees curtly. ‘Here, I’d better go. See you tomorrow.’ He hangs up the phone.

‘Were you talking to someone in there?’ Halley asks him when he comes out.

‘Singing,’ Howard mutters.

‘Singing?’ Her eyes narrow. ‘Did you actually *have* a shower?’

‘Hmm?’ Howard realizes he’s neglected a key element of his cover story. ‘Oh yeah, I just didn’t wash my hair. The water’s cold.’

‘It’s cold? How come? It shouldn’t be cold.’

‘I was cold, I mean. In the shower. So I got out. It’s not important.’

‘Are you coming down with something?’

‘I’m fine.’ He sits down at the breakfast bar. Halley stands over him, examines him carefully. ‘You do look a bit flushed.’

‘I’m fine,’ he repeats, more vehemently.

‘All right, all right . . .’ She walks away, puts on the kettle. He turns to the window, silently trying out the name *Aurelie*.

Their house lies several four-lane miles from Seabrook, on the front line of the suburbs’ slow assault on the Dublin mountains. When Howard was growing up, he used to ride his bike around

here in the summer with Farley, through fairy-tale woods ticking with grasshoppers and sunshine. Now it looks like a battlefield, mounds of sodden earth surrounding trenches waterlogged with rain. They're building a Science Park on the other side of the valley: every week the landscape has morphed a little more, the swell of a hill shorn off, a flat gashed open.

That's what they all say.

'What have you got there?' Halley comes back with two cups.

'Book.'

'No shit.' She takes it out of his hands. 'Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*.'

'Just something I picked up on the way home. First World War. I thought the boys might like it.'

'Robert Graves, didn't he write *I, Claudius*? That they made into a TV series?'

'I don't know.'

'He did.' She scans the back of the book. 'Looks interesting.'

Howard shrugs non-committally. Halley leans back against her chair, watching his eyes buzz restlessly over the counter surface. 'Why are you acting weird?'

He freezes. 'Me? I'm not acting weird.'

'You are.'

Interior pandemonium as he desperately tries to remember how he normally acts with her. 'It's just been a long day – oh God – ' groaning involuntarily as she pulls a cigarette from her shirt pocket. 'Are you going to smoke another of those things?'

'Don't start . . .'

'They're *bad* for you. You said you were going to quit.'

'What can I tell you, Howard. I'm an addict. A hopeless, pathetic addict in the thrall of the tobacco companies.' Her shoulders slump as the tip glows in ignition. 'Anyway, it's not like I'm pregnant.'

Ah, right – this is how he normally acts with her. He remembers now. They seem to be going through a protracted phase in which they're able to speak to each other only in criticisms, needles, rebukes. Big things, little things, anything can spark an argument,

even when neither of them wants to argue, even when he or she is trying to say something nice, or simply to state an innocuous fact. Their relationship is like a piece of malfunctioning equipment that when switched on will only buzz fractiously, and shocks you when you're trying to find out what's wrong. The simplest solution seems to be not to switch it on, to look instead for a new one; he is not quite ready to contemplate that eventuality, however.

'How was work?' he says conciliatorily.

'Oh . . . ' She makes a gesture of insignificance, flicking the dust of the day from her fingers. 'This morning I wrote a review of a new laser printer. Then most of the afternoon I spent trying to get hold of someone in Epson to confirm the specs. Usual roller-coaster ride.'

'Any new gadgets?'

'Yeah, actually . . . ' She fetches a small silver rectangle and presents it to him. Howard frowns and fumbles with it – card-thin and smaller than the palm of his hand.

'What is it?'

'It's a movie camera.'

'*This* is a camera?'

She takes it from him, slides back a panel and returns it. The camera issues an almost but not quite inaudible purr. He holds it up and aims it at her; a pristine image of her appears in the tiny screen, with a red light flashing in one corner. 'That's incredible,' he laughs. 'What else does it do?'

'*Make every day like summer!*' she reads from the press release. 'The Sony JLS9xr offers several significant improvements on the JLS700 model, as well as entirely new features, most notably Sony's new Intelligent Eye system, which gives not only unparalleled picture resolution but real-time image augmentation – meaning that your movies can be even more vivid than they are in real life.'

'More vivid than real life?'

'It corrects the image while you record. Compensates for weak light, boosts the colours, gives things a sheen, you know.'

'Wow.' He watches her head dip slightly as she extinguishes her cigarette, then lift again. Miniaturized on the screen she does indeed seem more lustrous, coherent, *resolved* – a bloom to her cheeks, a glint to her hair. When he glances experimentally away from it, the real-life Halley and the rest of their home suddenly appear underdefined, washed out. He turns his eye to it again, and zooms in on her own eyes, deep blue and finely striated with white; like thin ice, he always thinks. They look sad.

'And how about you?'

'Me?'

'You seem a bit down.' Somehow it's easier to talk to her like this, mediated by the camera viewer; he finds the buffer making him audacious, even though she's sitting close enough to touch.

She shrugs fatalistically. 'I don't know . . . it's just these PR people, God, they sound like they're turning into machines themselves, you know, ask them anything at all and they feed you the same pre-recorded answer . . .' She trails off. The backs of her fingers move across her forehead, barely touching it; the viewer picks up fine lines there that he has never noticed before. He pictures her here on her own, frowning at the computer screen in the alcove of the living room she has made her office, surrounded by magazines and prototypes, only smoke for company. 'I tried to write something,' she says thoughtfully.

'Something?'

'A story. I don't know. Something.' She seems happier too, with this arrangement, liberated by not having to look into his eyes; she gazes out the window, down at the ashtray, kneads her bracelet against the bones of her wrist. Howard suddenly finds himself desiring her. Maybe this is the answer to all of their problems! He could wear the camera all the time, mount it onto his head somehow. 'I sat down and told myself I wasn't getting up until I'd written something. So I stayed there for a full hour and God help me, all I could think of was printers. I've spent so long cooped up with this stuff that I've forgotten how actual human beings think and behave.' She slurps her tea disconsolately. 'Do you think there's a

market for that, Howard? Epic novels starring office equipment? *Modem Bovary. Less Than Xerox.*

‘Who knows? Technology’s getting smarter every day. Maybe it’s only a matter of time before computers start reading books. You could be on to something big.’ He places his free hand on hers, sees it jump in Lilliputian form into the corner of the screen. ‘I don’t understand why you don’t just quit,’ he says. They have had this conversation so many times now, it is an effort to keep it from sounding mechanical. But maybe it will turn out differently this time? ‘You’ve got a bit of money saved, why don’t you take some time off and just write? Give yourself six months, say, see what you come up with. We could afford it, if we tightened our belts.’

‘It’s not that simple, Howard. You know how hard it is to find someone who’ll give me a work permit. Futurlab’s been good to me, it’d be stupid to quit there with things as they are.’

He ignores the implied accusation here, pretends that this really is about her writing. ‘You’d find something. You’re good at what you do. Anyway, why not worry about that when the time comes?’

She pulls a face and mutters something.

‘Seriously, though, why don’t you?’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake – I don’t know, Howard. Maybe this is all I’m good for. Maybe office equipment is all there is to write about.’

He withdraws his hand, exasperated. ‘Well, if you won’t do anything about it, then you’ve got to stop complaining.’

‘I’m not complaining, if you ever actually listened to what I –’

‘I do listen, that’s the problem, I’m listening all the time to you telling me you’re unhappy, but then when I try to encourage you to do something about it –’

‘Just forget it, I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Fine, but then don’t tell me I’m not listening when the problem is you don’t want to *talk* –’

‘Can we just forget – Jesus, would you put that fucking thing

down?’ She stares at him, alight with wounded fury, until he slides the camera’s panel shut. Right, right, this is how they act. She grabs another cigarette, lights and tugs at it in a single blur of antipathetic motion.

‘Fine,’ says Howard, picking up his book and getting to his feet. ‘Fine, fine, fine, fine.’

He closets himself in the spare room and turns the pages of the Robert Graves book till he hears her get in the shower.

Halley and he have been together for three years, which, at twenty-eight, constitutes the longest relationship of his life so far. For a long time it coasted along, joshing and amicable. But now Halley wants to get married. She doesn’t say it, but he knows. Marriage makes sense for her. As an American citizen, her right to work here currently depends on the benevolence of her employer, who must renew her permit every year. By marrying Howard, she would become, in the state’s eyes, naturalized, and so free to go where she pleased. That isn’t the only reason she desires it, of course. But it does bring the matter into focus rather sharply: suddenly the question becomes, why do they *not* get married right away? And it hangs above them like some hulking alien spacecraft, blocking out the sun.

So why don’t they? It’s not that Howard doesn’t love her. He does, he would do anything for her, lay down his life if it came to it – if for example she were a princess menaced by a fire-breathing dragon, and he a knight on horseback, he would charge in with his lance without a second thought, stare the serpent right in its smouldering igneous eye, even if it meant getting barbecued there on the spot. But the fact is – the fact is that they live in a world of facts, one of which is that there are no dragons; there are only the pale torpid days, stringing by one like another, a clouded necklace of imitation pearls, and a love binding him to a life he never actually chose. Is this all it’s ever going to be? A grey tapestry of okayness? Frozen in a moment he drifted into?

And so in short everything remains on hold, and everything remains unspoken, and Halley gets more confused about where

they are going and what is wrong, even though technically nothing is wrong, and she gets angry with Howard, and Howard as a result feels even less like getting married. Actually, when the plates start flying, it feels like they've already been married for years.

After dinner (microwaved) a détente of sorts is reached, whereby he sits reading in the living room while she watches TV. When she rises to turn in at ten-thirty, he presents his cheek for her to kiss. The protocol that has emerged of late is that the first person to the bedroom is given a half-hour's grace, so he or she can be asleep by the time the second comes in. It is forty-five days, if you're asking, since they last had sex. Nothing has been explicitly said; it is something they have agreed on tacitly, indeed is one of the few things they do not, at present, disagree on. Eavesdropping on the pornographic conversations of the boys at school, Howard considers how inconceivable the idea of *not wanting* to have sex would have seemed to his younger self – remembers how his every atom hurled itself (mostly fruitlessly) after physical contact with the unthinking, unstoppable urgency of a wild salmon flapping up a waterfall. *There's a woman in your bed and you're not having sex with her?* He can practically hear the disappointment and confusion in that younger self's voice. He's not saying that he likes the present situation. But it is easier, at least in the short to middle term.

Often, as they lie side by side in the darkness, neither letting on to the other that they are still awake, he has long, candid conversations with her in his imagination, where he fearlessly lays everything out on the table. Sometimes these imaginary conversations end with the two of them breaking up, others with their realizing that they can't live apart; either way, it feels good to make a decision.

Tonight, though, he is not thinking about this. Instead he is sitting in the front row of a classroom, staring with the other boys at a globe that spins with luxurious, excruciating slowness under slender fingers. And as he stares into it, the globe changes under the fingers from a map of the world into a crystal ball . . . a crystal

ball-cum-lucky dip, where any future you want is there for the taking; and under his breath he is murmuring, '*We'll see about that. We'll see.*'