

Abandoned Book
(60 pages)

mcMüller

+1

Womb of Forgetting

—Plus-one womb of forgetting.

—*Is there really a place in Manhattan called the Cuddle Puddle, where people gather to just cuddle with one another?*

—I don't know. That's what Ryan said, and I feel like I heard it from someone else after Ryan told me, but I've never looked it up.

—*I wouldn't mind hugging or holding strangers unless they smell bad. I'd hate to hug a stinky stranger. Otherwise, I think it could be fun. You know how a lot of people's breath smells like they've literally been eating shit? What causes that? Why does people's breath smell like that sometimes?*

—I don't know. I once read that halitosis is the releasing of intestinal gases the wrong way. Instead of your intestine releasing gas through the anus, the gas gets pushed up through the stomach and into the esophagus, and out it comes through the mouth.

—*I sometimes think that people whose breath smells like shit have actually been eating shit. They get up in the morning, they go into the bathroom, they take a dump, and then they eat it. Then, they take a shower and they comb their hair and get dressed up and go to work. To me, that seems like a reasonable explanation. People are weird, and they do secret stuff to take out their*

aggression. And one of the things people do—and they don't want to talk about it with anybody, obviously—is they get up in the morning, shit, and eat the shit, and the shit-stink sticks to their breath.

—It's possible.

—I think it's more than possible. I think people are doing it.

[Kissing]

[Kissing]

—I thought you were going to work.

—I'm going in early tomorrow instead.

—I don't mean anything negative when I say people are eating their shit, or other people's shit, or their dog's or cat's shit. I think people should do what they want. People can do what they like. It's pretty brave, in a way, to do that. But I guess that, as with any hobby, eating shit becomes routine after awhile, like anything else.

—But you think they should brush their teeth better, or what?

—Not necessarily.

—You seem to dislike the smell of some people's breath pretty strongly, though. The other morning you said, gently, that I should brush my teeth. I asked if my breath stunk and you said it just smelled like morning breath. You were kind about it. . . .

—People can do what they like. If I'm going to cuddle with someone, the only requirement I can think of is that they need to not smell like they've been eating shit all day.

—Or some of the day.

—Yes, or some of the day. I don't want to take my clothes off and I don't want to hug naked people, but I'll hug anyone, why not? It would be a fun way to spend an evening, or at least not a terrible way to spend an evening.

—Let's look it up and go, then, if it's really a place. I'll go with you. I wonder if it's a bar, or what.

—I wonder why the word puddle is in there.

—That is a little creepy, I agree.

—It makes me think of wet stuffed animals. Of course it makes me think of pee, too, like it's full of people who aren't just hugging, they're peeing everywhere. That can't be it, can it? That seems like two different interests. But it's

a great name. When I think of cuddle puddle, the phrase, I imagine a pile of wet Pound Puppies and teddy bears, and My Little Pony dolls with scuff marks and dirt smears on them—the kind of marks you could lick off, or erase with a pencil eraser. I imagine a place with low ceilings and a wet concrete floor, on the third floor of an eight-story building. The lighting is bad. It's just a room without a bar or a doorman. Just a rectangular room you enter and there are between five and twenty people in there. No music. The lights are purple and blue, and there are four throw rugs—big circle-shaped rugs. Big enough to hold a couple of seated people. The place is a little bigger than a studio apartment. Maybe it's connected to somebody's apartment, but the door between the Cuddle Puddle and the apartment is one-way, so Cuddle Puddlers can't get into the apartment. The way I see it, there's no doorman and there's no sign. It's a word-of-mouth, laissez faire lounge. What do you think? Do you think it's free, or do you think it costs money?

—I can't see how it would exist without a doorman and an entry fee. I think it must be a bar with a little couch or couch complex in the corner

—*A couch complex?*

—You know, like an alcove with a couple couches that are nominally for cuddling, but really what happens is people just sit on them with their drinks, talking, or they sit there with their laptop and blog or whatever. It's gotta be just a bar with a creative name that has wireless internet access. It's probably a combo coffee shop and bar. The Cuddle Puddle.

—*No, I don't think it's like that. Maybe they charge a fee to get in, but*

—Or yes, maybe it is the kind of place you're suggesting. It would be neat if a place like that existed. I can see that being a real place, but I bet they'd have a doorman. He wouldn't necessarily have to stand inside the Cuddle Puddle. He could stand outside, discreetly. It would be too scary to go to that place if it didn't have a staff presence.

—*That's part of the appeal, though: you go there and it's all participants. There's nobody watching, or what I mean is, there's no quote-unquote official people. It's a little creepy and dangerous. It matches the name of the place.*

—But if we're thinking about it realistically, as in, you know, Here's this place, which is ca-razy, but it exists in the real world, and how can it exist? If we're thinking of it that way, it must have some kind of official presence. It's also going to have a bathroom.

—*All you need is a discreet security camera.*

—That’s an interesting point.

—*Just imagine some tiny little cameras in the corners of the room, by the ceiling. Not big enough so you can see them. They’re little night-vision cameras like the one in your laptop computer. What do you think a camera like that would cost these days, about \$200 for an entry-level thing?*

—I bet they’re pretty cheap.

—*Right, and you put a few of them up in the corner and that’s all the official presence you need. It’s like Sliver, but I never saw that movie. Did you?*

—No, but I know what you’re talking about. Sharon Stone and a wall full of video monitors.

—*But it’s not that crazy. There’s not some weirdo hiding in a room watching everyone. I’m assuming that’s what happens in Sliver. In this “realistic” Cuddle Puddle, there are just a few cameras. And fine, I can go along with their being a bathroom. I imagine it’s a decently clean bathroom, and decently big. I’d like it to be a bathroom where you go in and it strikes you as very normal and comfortable. Not ostentatious or overly nice*

—And not smelly

—*Right, it wouldn’t stink. Maybe there’s one candle in there or something, but it’s not a goth place. There’s not a big chain-link chandelier with drippy candles everywhere and wax on the floor. It’s not a bathroom—and it’s not a place—that smells like hot wax. It’s cleaner than that. It’s a plain place. There’s a coat rack, too.*

—Are you still talking about the bathroom or

—*No, now I just mean the place in general. There’s a bathroom that’s lit well enough so you can do what you need to do, but the light isn’t bright and harsh. Opening the bathroom door doesn’t flood the rectangular studio space of the Cuddle Puddle with harsh light.*

—Are there rules posted? Is it advertised? Is there a maintenance crew? Is the first rule of Cuddle Puddle that you don’t talk about Cuddle Puddle?

—*It’s not a 24-hour place, so whatever cleaning needs to happen happens when it’s closed. Maybe there’s a sign with hours posted. More likely, there’s no sign. You just have to know when to show up, which is probably late night. On the other hand, though, wait—maybe there’s a daytime crowd and then a night-time crowd. The Cuddle Puddle might be a good daytime spot for some people. The lighting would probably be different during the day.*

—Is there a window?

—*There are shades. Thin venetian blinds. If it's advertised, who knows. We could stop this discussion and just Google it. If they advertise, they must advertise in the L magazine and Time Out and where else. . . The Onion. Those are the places the Cuddle Puddle would advertise, I bet.*

—If it's a bar that semi-seriously—joco-seriously—encourages people to cuddle up, it would be advertised in *The Onion* for sure.

—*But, see, this is why I don't think it's a bar. It's not the kind of place that's going to be in The Onion. It's not going to get a casual clientele. That's just a feeling I have about the place. And from that, I extrapolate that this place doesn't exist as a money-making thing. This is part of why it's scary.*

—Why is it scary?

—*It's scary because it's a place people gather—not a public place, a private place—and its primary purpose is not to make money. It's not a business and it's not in any way philanthropic.*

—But people are hugging there. That's what we're assuming this place is, right? It's a place where people go to hug each other.

—*That's true, but I think of it more as a place where people go to get hugged and get held. People curl up on these circular throw rugs I was telling you about. They lay there in the dark-blue light—clean light, not a goth place—and they hold each other. And there are little puddles on the wet concrete. It doesn't smell bad and it doesn't smell musty or moldy. Maybe there's a sprinkler system overhead and it mists the floor at night, just before the place opens.*

—Like the misters that mist produce at the grocery store.

—*Exactly. Just like those. That's how they could keep the place's floor wet without making it smell mildewy.*

—There's a hidden closet where they store the circular throw rugs.

—*Right, and they keep the cleaning supplies there, too. Very simple supplies, like a Shop-Vac and a mop and a dustbuster for the venetian blinds. They don't need a complex*

—This could be a room on a cruise ship, like we were talking about at dinner last night.

—*Yes, it could be. They don't need complex cleaning equipment because it's not a bar. It's not a place of business. It's a creepy place that doesn't have any reason to exist except someone wants it there. Someone with a little bit of money who probably enjoys being hugged or laying around in someone's arms*

and legs from time to time. I don't think the person is a voyeur.

—Why don't you think that? I think maybe he is. Or she is. But it's probably a man's place.

—*I don't have a feeling one way or the other if it's a man's place or a woman's place. Why does everyone have to be a voyeur? In some way, we're all voyeurs. Everyone is interested in stuff that other people are doing. In this basic way, sure, let's say the person who—the proprietor of the Cuddle Puddle—is a voyeur. But he doesn't have to be some raving voyeur. It doesn't have to go hand-in-hand with liking to be held.*

—Why would it be a public place?

—*It's partly about anonymity. This is intriguing and seems like fun. Again, as long as a person doesn't stink. I can see it being fun that I'm holding and being held by a stranger. It doesn't have to be strongly, overtly sexual. Just like everyone is a voyeur to some degree, I believe you can't say it's 100 percent asexual, but it's not a place for people to go and get hard ons in silence.*

—Really?

—*I think it's more about just going and being held and, as I say, laying around with someone. Not exchanging fluids or hoping for that or thinking about that. Not really therapy or anything "healing," either.*

—Let's come back to this later.

—Your eyes are red.

—I had a couple glasses of Bordeaux blend with dinner.

—One for each eye?

—Yes.

—One for each eye?

—No.

—One for each eye?

—One for each eye?

—One for each eye?

—One for each eye?

Nutmeg and Cinnamon

—It's not nutmeg, it's cinnamon.

—*It's nutmeg and cinnamon.*

—I have a headache.

—*You remind me of my brother.*

—Try to eat this.

—*I've had a few bites and I like it.*

—I can't stand it. It's disgusting.

—*You're doing a pretty bad job.*

—It's fun to eat pistachios. There's a cartoon pistachio with a craggy mouth, a zig-zag mouth. His eyes are sitting—

—*I've seen that guy.*

—Yeah, he's not as cool as Mr. Peanut, but he sticks in my brain. I haven't bought that brand of pistachios.

—*You're. I don't have time to mess around with this. I'm not doing anything particular, I'm just sitting here, but I don't have time to talk about pistachio characters. The one pistachio character.*

—Do you have a headache?

—*Yes, I have a headache. I'm not drinking coffee this week. It's not a bad headache.*

- You speak with a certain authority.
- I just know that I need to be doing something.*
- I feel like I should be doing something, too.
- We're eating. Let's just eat.*
- I don't like it.

Trouble

- Bye guys.
- Do you want to hear something funny?*
- Yeah.
- That film you were telling me about. . .*
- The zombies?
- Yes, it's not that Mexican thing we talked about. . . .*
- If you need anything—
- Hopefully we won't, but thanks for the offer.*
- Good night.

* * *

- Good night.
- I wasn't sure wah.*
- You weren't sure *waaah?* [No pause before this is spoken.]
- Hee, I wasn't sure what I wasn't*
- You weren't sure what you w [No pause before this is spoken.]
- No! Bleh. I wasn't sure what I waaanted to sayyy. What was I trying to say. I'm having a bain feeze. Peepee. I'm having a hard time saying what I wanted to say.* [No pause before this is spoken. Everyone is interrupting everyone. Two people talking.]

—My brother and I used to say this: “I’m having a tough trouble.” As kids one of us said that once by accident—I’m *having a tough trouble*—so for awhile we’d just say it to each other: *I’m having a tough trouble*. Or *you’re having a tough trouble*. We’d run into an obstacle in a rented role-playing video game—some puzzle we couldn’t solve—and we’d say that it was a *tough trouble*.

For example:

What the fuck is a *censer*? I’m supposed to find the *censer* in the *censer*. I mean I’m supposed to find the *censer* and do something with it. I’ve never heard of a *censer*. There should be a picture of it in the instruction manual but it’s not in the instructions. Some but not all of the other items in the game are pictured and defined there, in the instruction manual. I’ve never seen that word before: *censer*. I’m looking it up in a dictionary right now. . . . It says that a censer is a *vessel for burning incense*. What is incense? I’ve heard of it—I’ve heard the word—but I don’t know what it is, and it’s never been mentioned in the video game. There is absolutely no *incense* in this videogame. I don’t know what it is, and it’s not a part of the storyline. I have a sinking feeling. This is a role-playing game and I can’t make any progress until and unless I solve this “puzzle.” I have to go to a cave where I do something with or in or on or around a *censer*, whatever that is supposed to look like on the TV screen. I don’t know if I’m supposed to *use* the censer or if it’s one of those things where I step on it with my character and stepping on the thing—the *censer*, which I personally won’t know is a *censer* until I step on it—it unlocks a door, or what.

All I know, mostly, is that we just rented this game last night—yesterday afternoon after school—and it hasn’t even been 24 hours. We have another 24 hours with the game and I can’t make any progress. I want to bite the controller. I’m going to bite the videogame controller, and then I’m going to hit the A button with the ball-knob on the top-back of the wooden kitchen-table chair I’m sitting in. I’m going to pick up the

chair, turn it over, and then set the chair down upside-down.

Then I'm going to take the video game controller and lay it flat on the carpet. I'm staring at the A button while I pick up the chair. The chair is upside-down in my hands. I'm aiming at the A button with the ball-knob on the top of the right side of the chairback. Nobody is around. I'm going to smash the ball-knob into the squared-up videogame controller's A button quickly and hard. *I am furious. I'm going to. I can feel adrenaline—I think that's what it is. I do it, I do it, I do it.*

I feel so good having hit the controller hard-hard with nobody around. I'm less frustrated now.

This videogame sucks. It's a *tough trouble*. I'm having a *tough trouble*. I'm going to save my game and come back to it later, though I suspect I won't be able to make any progress. How will I beat this puzzle—this word puzzle? An NPC (non-player character) told me I need to find a *censer*, or hinted that a *censer* is where I'll find the root of the next part of my quest. I have no idea what a *censer* is, or where I'm supposed to find it. I looked it up in the dictionary. What else am I supposed to do? I went everywhere in the videogame—I wandered around for 45 minutes trying to figure out if there was some place or some room I hadn't been to before—and I couldn't find anything new. I haven't mapped the world. That's something I never do—I hate maps—and I'm not going to start mapping now. There are so many places I've been to in this videogame world so many times. I've gone into some of these houses a dozen times, probably, and I've crisscrossed the continent—searching all over—four or five times. I've been stuck for more than 45 minutes. It's been more like three hours, I bet. My brother stopped caring two hours ago. I really just want to find this *censer*, but I don't want to try to draw a map.

I can't call a videogame tip hotline to ask how to get to the next part of the quest. That's not something we can do in this house. Does the Nintendo tipline even offer support for third-party videogames? I don't think they do. Anyway, I can't find any *censer* or any anything. I *hate* this videogame. It was fun

for the night last night when my brother and I were playing together but now it's just a wall I've hit. There are games like this, where you rent them and you're sailing along and then you get to a place where you cannot do a fucking anything. You can't take an alternate route. There's a linear storyline and I am losty-losty-Wendy's-frosty. It's like if there's a boulder in front of me and I've never heard the word *boulder* before and it's nighttime. I can't see the edges of the *boulder*, and I don't even know what this is, a *boulder* in front of me. It's a thing I can't even really see. I can touch it, but how wide is it? I can't even begin to start thinking about it. I can't do anything with this *boulder* (the word for which I've never heard and never missed. What is a *boulder*? I've never seen one and I've never thought I might see one.) and it's stopping me from walking anywhere. I feel like *giving up* or *turning around*. In a role-playing videogame like this one, you can't turn around and make an alternate decision. There isn't a "plan B" path where you can sleep on it or ask a townspeople for help. A call to a videogame tip hotline might work. A real person who might be able to talk me through some kind of solution—that is something. I could break my parents' rules and call a tipline. That's an extratextual plan B—a solution beyond me and the game. I don't know the word *extratextual*. I'll learn that later, years after I've failed to solve this RPG puzzle. *What is a censer? Where is a censer? What does it look like?* I have a complete, or near-complete, lack of confidence in anyone's ability to help me. My brother gave up on this videogame a couple hours before I did. He gave up. My dad doesn't play videogames and gets frustrated pretty easily. I'm not asking him for help because I won't get the kind of help I want and need, need and want. My mom doesn't play videogames. She, too, will not be able to give me the kind of help that is pertinent, pertinent; pert and pertinent. I just want to get to the next part of the game. Mom would and did encourage me to look in the *dictionary* to figure out what a *censer* is. This is why I looked in the dictionary, because my mom suggested

that I do it. But I don't even know what this really means: *a vessel for burning incense*. I ask my mom what *incense* is and she says something, but I've never seen it, incense, so I can't picture it. We don't have it in the house. I haven't learned the word *incensed*, yet, either. At this point in my life—in a room, alone, one who has just struck a videogame controller's A button with a kitchen chair—I haven't been around too many *incensed* people and I haven't been around any *incense* people.

I can't picture a *censer*. My effort has merely led to *incense*, a second thing I can't picture. There's some word for this—I'm sure there is, there must be—for a frustrating thing that inspires you to try to understand, but that actually just merely makes you more confused. A word that fails you, and you try to resolve it, and it leads to another word that fails you. What is the word for that? A hydra?

In a role-playing videogame, there might be a dragon in front of you. You cut the dragon's head off and three more heads appear where there was one head before. The dragon is multi-headed—a hydra. The formidable one-headed dragon problem has blossomed into three problems that are all still, at root, one problem. The problem is this: me. I am inadequate.

For the rest of my life I'm going to be good at trying things once. When hitting a tough spot I'll be a try-try-again guy. I'll assay the Problem with "Let's try." *And then*, when I, trying harder, *leads only to greater frustrations*, I will get fucking fumingly upset and quit everything. Is that not fair? Does this make sense, the way I'm describing it? I can't handle it—I'm bad at handling it. I can't handle *trying*, then being *thwarted*, then trying *harder* and then being thwarted *harder*. Will I ever grow? Will I ever learn to be *patient*? This is my problem: *I'm not patient*. I love playing videogames, and that by itself is definitely not a bad thing. Anyone who says it is—blindly, blankly, with no qualification—is wrong. For the rest of my life I'll hit things—always *things*, never *people*—and that will calm me down, and I'll give up on *trying*, quietly. I'm talking about *me right now* and *me for the rest of my life*. I'm also

talking about *me in the past*. This is how I see myself: I'll give up angrily, hit something, and then the angry giving up gives way to increased anger and an increased sense of ignorance.

—*You're talking about people nobody knows.*

—I'm talking about *having a tough trouble*. Not only can you *have* a tough trouble, you can *be* a tough trouble. And something else—a situation you're in—can *be* a tough trouble.

A tough trouble can also be a third thing: a person. A person, like me or my brother when we were younger, who was in a “hard” situation.

—*You—*

—I know I am repeating myself but I can't be any other way—any way other than this. I feel like I have to be so so explicit all the time because otherwise it won't be understood, what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about always already won't be understood. And I know you're good at listening to me, and I love you. This is one of the reasons—one of the many, many reasons—I love you. But with most people, and sometimes even with you, but not right now—I know you've been doing a lot of listening—I have to say what I'm thinking especially clearly, to the point of saying one thing several times—so I can leave a conversation feeling like I've been understood.

I get the feeling, from time to time—it comes and goes—that I haven't been listened to, or understood. I feel like I do a really good job of listening to other people, and you, and I know it's not something you complain about, or are worried about, but I'm constantly conscious of it. I never want to be someone who doesn't listen to you. *[No pause before this is spoken.]*

—*This all reminds me of your favorite scene from Perfect Strangers.*

—Tell me about it again.

—*Your favorite line of dialogue, where Balki says to Cousin Larry, “I know you are lying Cousin Larry.” And Cousin Larry says to Balki, “I can't believe this. I can't believe you're accusing me of lying, Balki.” And then Balki says to Larry, “I know you're lying, Cousin Larry, because every time you tell a lie you say the same thing twice.” And then Cousin Larry, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, and pausing for a couple beats before he starts to talk, says, “Balki.... I'm not lying. . . . I am not lying.”*

—Yes! Balki tells Larry he says everything twice when he’s lying and Larry says “Balki, I’m not lying” twice! Twice! I love it. That’s my favorite bit of dialogue from *Perfect Strangers* for sure. Every time I remember that scene I smile, and a lot of times it makes me laugh. I love you. I love you.

—Ha.

* * *

You’re saying *veritable*. It sounds like you’re saying *ferret-a-bowl*, but you’re saying *veritable*. You’re enunciating it incorrectly, and I think it’s on purpose. Of course you’re doing it on purpose. You’re not a dummy. I love you, and I think it’s funny and fun to call you a dummy, but I don’t think you’re dumb. I know you have mastery of this word: *veritable*. You say it appropriately and you don’t overuse it.

These things are linked: your poor spelling skill and your wrongly enunciated and your overenunciated pronunciations. This is part of why I love you. I think you are so *dumb*. You love me really well, and you never make me feel stupid.

* * *

I’m going to say something, mostly for my own sake, because it is something I think I truly believe:

I don’t have any ill will for the salesperson. It’s not bad that people want to sell me things. It’s a very exhilarating feeling, selling someone something.

Balls Proscenium

—Gluten-free breadsticks with rosemary, please.

—...

—Cut a hole in your jeans—a square hole—so your balls are visible. Make it so you're not wearing any underwear, then put on the pants to test them. The square hole should be a balls proscenium, showcasing just your balls. You should be able to pull your balls out without trying too hard. These are your “balls proscenium” pants, and there's a website where you can post photos of yourself wearing the pants. This is the sole purpose of the site, to host yours and everyone's balls proscenium photos. I don't know who runs the site, or who started the site, but I have a feeling it was started pretty recently.

—*Proscenium, often abbreviated to “pros.”*

—There's a keyboard where I hit the same key again and again. Someone has the keyboard—I don't—and there's one key they hit again and again. I can't see the person's face.

—*The friend.*

—I know how to be a friend. It's about generosity. I'll have to overcome anxiety, wondering whether I'll be liked. What am I going to say to a stranger to communicate that I am trying?

—*Toes, uncovered.*

—I can take my shoes off.

—*Socks.*

—I'm wearing one of my pairs of black socks. We're going to—I've got it. We're going to go on a shopping trip, the two of us, for sock garters, the garter belts men used to wear around their calves, before socks stayed up on their own. Prior to elastic. And you see it now—you see sock garters—in comedies where someone loses his pants. Some guy is sitting on a bench. He gets comfortable. He *cross-aziz* legs (crosses his legs) andy flips *threw-eez* paper (and he flips through his paper).

—*He gets up—*

—Yes, he gets up and his pants stick to the bench. The pants break away, somehow, and there's this guy standing with his newspaper without any pants on. He's got boxer shorts on with polka dots. It's not really embarrassing—you can barely see his *thighs*, let alone his *balls*—but the guy is covering his crotch, now, with his newspaper. He's embarrassed about losing his pants to a sticky park bench.

—*This is the guy—the kind of guy—who wears sock garters.*

—Yes, when the sticky park bench rips his pants away, you see that the guy is wearing sock garters.

—*Spats.*

—We're getting sock garters, and I'm buying them for us. I'm looking it up online, but we're not buying them online. We're going to find a place that sells them here in town and I'm taking us there to try them on.

—*Here comes the breadsticks.*

—...

—*We'll have to find breakaway pants to wear with the sock garters.*

—No, our regular pants will start to betray us. We don't need to plan it out so much. The result of wearing sock garters will be an increased prone-ness to getting our pants ripped off by a number of factors.

It could be a mischievous passerby, for example, who walks by us in such a way that our pants fall down to our ankles. There are people whose brand of mischief is increasing the circumference of the pants. Whenever they walk by somebody wearing sock garters, the gartered person—the Jennifer Gartner, gardener-snake person—they are able to sense the garters and they are able to add six inches to the waist of the gartered guy's pants. We'll be the gartered guys. Our pants will fall down and you see

our polka-dot boxer shorts and we'll become very embarrassed.

We'll start to see a lot of park benches in our daily lives. Our lives' patterns will change in ways that make us pass by park benches with greater frequency. One out of ten times, when we sit on a park bench, we will realize too late that the bench is as goopy and sticky as it is bright green. It's a bright green, goopy, sticky bench, and there's no way—there's just no way—we're going to get off of that bench with our pants on our legs. We're going to leave our pants behind on the bench, we're going to be embarrassed, and we're going to be wearing sock garters.

—*We'll hold out a bouquet of flowers to a pretty woman, for her face to enjoy, and just as she leans in to smell the flowers, our pants will fall down.*

—Dat's exactly right, and our sock garters will be revealed, and we'll be extremely embarrassed by our polka-dot boxer shorts. We'll put our hands down around our crotch region and we'll side-step away from the woman, dropping the flowers, or no! Of course, we'll use the flowers to cover our crotch. How emasculating is that? It's very emasculating. Picture it: we'll be covering our not-immodest polka-dot shorts with a bouquet of flowers, and we'll be side-stepping away from the woman. It's so embarrassing, our pants faing down in front of the woman and her face. We just wanted her face to smell these flowers and now

—*Now she's smelling our dick.*

—No. Now she's... smelling unscented air. She didn't want us to be all embarrassed—she's a kind person—but she recognizes the humor, and she chuckles despite herself. The sock spats—garters—

—*Garters*

—The sock garters are revealed, and she knows and we know, in that snap instant when the garters are revealed, that we are not the kind of guys who are ever going to win the affections of *that* woman, or a woman *like that*. The garters are a sign of hopelessness.

—*Wait. Why are her affections unwinnable? She sees the humor in the situation and you said she's kind.*

—We're too embarrassed to do anything but side-step out of the situation. We'll take steps, left-to-right—keeping the angle of our chests parallel to the angle of her chest—until we are out of the picture. We've blown it. We can never do anything to erase the impression we made.

—*But we were being gallant, giving her flowers, this stranger.*

—She’s too good for us. She’s taller than us, too, I think. She doesn’t want to date some guys who are shorter than she is. She needs a tall man who doesn’t wear sock garters.

—*I’d like to see a woman wearing ear flares.*

—What are ear flares?

—*They’re Mayan jewelry. They look sort of like napkin rings and people sort of stick their ear in them or through them. I guess I’d heard about them awhile ago, but when I went to this Mayan art show at the Met last year, I really noticed them. There were ear flares carved from jade. I can imagine jade ear flares today—wearing them, or seeing them for sale.*

—Would people wear them on one ear or both ears?

—*Both ears. There were drawings, reproductions of drawings and paintings, showing these ear flares on the sides of people’s heads. They look bulky but dainty. They look beautiful, and again I’m not saying they look beautiful just in that context. A lot of that art—I like it, but the style of dress is not something I particularly like. I don’t want to dress up like a Mayan. I’m saying that I’d like to wear an ear flare—two ear flares—with the clothes I’m wearing now.*

—I wonder what they do to your hearing.

—*I hadn’t even thought about that. I guess [scrunching left ear with left hand]. . . .*

—It’s like listening to a seashell, a conch shell. It’s a little like that.

—*I thought I’d hear more of an echo, but the ear is scrunched but not in a little cave like it is with a conch shell. With an ear flare, your ear is still open to the air [scrunching ears with hands]. When I do this, I can still hear really well. I feel like I might even be able to hear better.*

—I wonder if the Mayans wore ear flares to help themselves hear better [scrunching ears with hands].

— . . .

—It’s like my hearing is more focused. I can hear things in front of me with more intensity, I think.

— . . .

—Snap your fingers behind my head. I want to see if I can hear them snapping as well when I’ve got my ears scrunched like this.

—*Your hands are bigger than napkin rings. Let’s just*

—Let’s go buy some napkin rings, I agree, but first just snap your fingers behind my head.

—[snapping]

—I heard them pretty well that time. [Releasing ears from hands] Snap them again, please.

—[snapping]

—I heard it better that time, but it didn't seem like that big a difference. I think you snapped your fingers louder the second time

—*I was just about to say that*

—But I don't think it really matters. that much I heard you fine both times. When you say the ear flaes are like napkin rings, you're thinking of what kind of napkin rings?

—*The kind that are sort of barrel-shaped. Ear flares look like shallow barrels that are open at both ends. They're cylindrical, little squat cylinders, really short tubes, about an inch and a half long. We could probably use toilet-paper tubes or paper-towel tubes.*

—Should we order food?

—Not yet.

—That's okay with me.

—*I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be right back.*

—...

—...

—...

—*I've got two mostly empty rolls of toilet paper in my pockets. Let's ask the waitress for scissors.*

—Just tear the tubes with your hands. Or is there too much paper left on them to tear them?

—*We don't need scissors.* [Standing up, reaching forefingers and thumbs into pockets, pulling out toilet-paper tubes that aren't half-full but don't look spent. They're crunched up.]

—Are you just putting them on your ears like that, whole? Why d. . .

—[De-crunching tubes and sitting back down]

—... don't you d. . .

—[Reaching up to put first whole toilet-paper tube on ear]

—... do that?

—...

—Exactly.

The Best Ro

—What's the best ro—?

—*I can't think of going outside without thinking of being cold.*

—Do you need to go outside?

—*I am cold, you've helped me feel cold.*

—Do you n—?

—*I don't want to go outside. I like the cold, but I don't want to go outside.*

I want to stay here and press my thumb into the block like this, like you're doing.

—I'm doing it on a bet.

—*How long you can press your thumb down, into the table?*

—I'm making a forceful thumbs-down gesture, and I'm doing it for money, or the promise of it.

—*The promise of it.*

—...

—*That's right. That's what we're doing. I'm doing it too. We're two people pressing our thumbs down into a table as hard as we can.*

—I've been here for, well, you know it's been these two teas we've had plus the tea I brought with me. You're up for tea again, aren't you?

—*I don't want tea.*

—I thought you said you were cold.

—*I don't mind the cold.*

—You wouldn't be cold if you just got us—me—some tea. I would like another cup if you'd please, can I ask you to get me a cup of tea? There's a five-dollar bill in my pocket here, I can't reach it, and you can keep all the change. Go anywhere, go to the close place.

—*Okay. I don't need to keep the change.*

—I'd like you to keep the change. You've been sitting here.

—*We've both been sitting here. I've been listening to music most of the time, too, just like all these other guys.*

—There's a video camera on your shoulder, to make sure—

—*I know all about it. There's a video camera on my shoulder. It makes sure that when I go out for tea I keep my thumb pressed down.*

—It makes sure you keep your thumb pressed downward into the vertical—I mean the portable—masonite slab. You're pressing your thumb down, like I'm doing, vertically, into a portable masonite slab. The slab—the block, the slab—is a part of the tabletop. It's a part of the tabletop that comes off so you can carry it around. Portable.

—*And cameras are mounted to our shoulders that are so lightweight we forget about them. Except when I talk about it, you have to remember.*

—Okay, okay.

—...

—There's a reason most of these guys are wearing headphones.

—*They're all wearing headphones except us two right now. We two aren't wearing them. I'm tired of listening to music.*

—I'm enjoying the silence.

—*It's not—*

—I'm not—I wasn't trying to be rude. I don't mind you talking. I'm talking, too.

—*What's the best route to the tea?*

—That's what I was going to ask you at first, but you interrupted me. It's not a big deal. I've been interrupting you, too.

—*I'll go to that place out the window.*

—Your masonite slab must be in your big coat pocket.

—*My hand is in a pocket you can't see, and my fist is in the pocket. It's all under the table. You can see about to my*

—I can see all of your lower arm, the tibia—or the ulna. The ulna and radius.

—*The masonite slab*
—The masonite slab is pressure-sensitive. It can tell if it—
—*The slab can tell if it's being kept more or less horizontal. It's necessary*
to—
—You've got to keep the masonite slab horizontal or you lose.
—*I'm tired.*
—Meeeee tooooo.
—*As you say. As you say, the promise of the money. If you don't keep your thumb pressed down, forcefully, on the masonite slab, you forfeit.*
—I think you have a chance of winning. I think I too have a chance.
—*You're okay in my book. That's okay in my book. We're all here with our thumbs on slabs the size. . . pressing down, making thumbs-down gestures. I'm not trying to hide mine.*
—Oh, I think you're trying to hide it. You don't like everyone seeing your thumb down.
—*I don't like people looking at me, even though I think we're all mostly doing a good job of ignoring each other.*
—Can you go for the tea? It's cool that you're doing that.
—*Sure. I'll be right back. I'm taking my thumb off my masonite slab. Wait, I'm not doing that. I thought I was going to give up until I said I would. Now I feel rejuvenated.*
—I don't mind saying that you are killing me.
—*I'm not an apologizer.*
—I'm not an apologizer either.
—*You're a real tea drinker aren't you?*
—...
—...
—If you go buy the tea now I won't drink it.
—*Why not?*
—I don't want to be known as a tea drinker. I don't want to be called, by someone, a "real tea drinker." That makes me feel like something other than myself, hearing you say that about me.

Is the Rag Doll Dead?

—I know.

Grandma and Grandpa Were Neutral

I had a dream, more than once, that I was trying to ride my bike to Grandma and Grandpa's house. I tried to ride the bike along the side of the interstate highway. I thought, in the dream, "How long is this going to take?"

I had a feeling like I was lost for a year. As I was riding my bike along the shoulder of the interstate—south, toward Grandma and Grandpa's—I had the feeling that I had disappeared for a long time, like the kid from *Flight of The Navigator*. I loved that movie when I saw it. Isn't Veronica Cartwright in it? I love Veronica Cartwright. She's great at playing characters who have scary things happen to them. In *Flight of The Navigator* she's trying to understand and deal with her son being lost for several years—he boarded a spaceship and lost five years of his life, I think; I forget the exact details; I'll have to rewatch it. Anyway, Veronica Cartwright plays a mom whose son reappears after having been *missing* for five years—*missing*—and when the son reappears, he's the same age he was when he went missing. Veronica Cartwright's face tells you—when you see her when her son reappears—her face just shows you that she has felt terrorized, constantly, for five years. The last five years of her life have been about balancing two things: 1) her love for her husband and her

non-missing son; 2) her bottomless sense of loss. Veronica Cartwright's face shows you that Mom has been emotionally ravaged for five years, but is also living life. When she gets her son back—even though he hasn't aged at all—she's overjoyed, and her face shows you the joy she feels. She feels released from emotional terror, and her face is full of the scars of constant emotional terror. This is why I like to look at Veronica Cartwright: She is capable of looking very happy, and she always looks like she's seen and lived through terrible, terrifying situations.

Riding my bike along the shoulder of the interstate, I felt like I was in the midst of a five-year period of being gone, being away. I felt like when I got to my Grandma and Grandpa's house, if I ever got there—it felt so far away, and I didn't know how to get there; I didn't know how the Interstate works, although I'd ridden on it in a car, regularly, since I was born—I felt like when I got to my Grandma and Grandpa's home, there would be a Veronica Cartwright sense of relief: joy and evidence of great suffering. I would relieve the suffering that I had accidentally, unwittingly caused by riding my bike nearly 200 miles on the Interstate. I had a sense that the trip would take most people days, but it would take me years because I didn't know where I was going. I'd get lost—and I didn't have any money, and I knew better than to talk to strangers, and I didn't know my grandparents' phone number—and so it would take me years of wandering around until I finally just found my Grandma and Grandpa's house. Eventually, after riding around on all the roads, I'd find my Grandma and Grandpa and everyone would be happy to see me again.

* * *

Grandma and Grandpa would be unable to help me find a *censer* in a videogame. Had they been around when I was looking for the *censer*, I wouldn't have bothered asking. They have no idea about videogames, and I'm not going to take the time to try to explain. They'd want to try to help me however they could help, but they wouldn't be able to help me work out this videogame puzzle. I'd never have been able to explain the whole situation in a way that would help them understand my exact need. I'd be unable to communicate the facts:

1) I've been playing this videogame since last night.

2) It's a role-playing videogame. A person typing a novel on a computer is involved in a role-playing videogame, but this is not that kind of role-playing videogame. "Grandma and Grandpa, I'm playing a role-playing videogame." Right there is the first roadblock. I'd have to try to explain what I meant by "role-playing videogame," and I wouldn't be able to do it properly, probably, even though everyone is listening to me and everyone wants to understand me and help me. Even though I am the Grandson, always loved and often enough the center of attention and right now the momentary focal point, my problem is not solvable. To begin to try to explain role-playing videogames is to open the door to an unresolvable problem. There is no expert here, and an expert is required. I need an expert to help me, and it doesn't matter if the expert loves me or cares about me. All I want is to figure out how to get to the next part of the game. If you can help me do that, you are the person I need. I don't care if you listen to me or talk to me ever again. I need you to talk to me so I can get to the next part of the game. We shouldn't have to talk again unless I run into a similar problem in the future. There's no need for us to talk again: I have people who love me. All I need you for is help. I need the people who love me and the people I love for other things.

3) Understanding my predicament requires an understanding of this particular game's storyline. If I could effectively communicate what a role-playing videogame is—and I could not—then I'd have to explain exactly how far I've come in the videogame. I'd have to ask Grandma and Grandpa to sit on either side of me and watch me as I start a new game, from scratch. This way, seeing me play the game from the beginning, they'd have a full understanding of my problem. I need to know what a censor is, but only in the context of the game. It's a thing in the game, and I don't know what it looks

like, and the only way Grandma and Grandpa will be able to help me solve the censer problem is to watch me play. . .to really absorb what I'm trying to achieve. There's no way my Grandma and Grandpa would sit with me for several hours in the way that I might sit with my brother while he plays a role-playing videogame. I don't want them to sit with me for that long for that purpose. If they did, it would be weird. I don't think it would necessarily help, either. They could sit with me and watch me play the game from the beginning all the way to the point where I have the censer problem, and. . . they'd see my problem, and I bet—I know—they wouldn't be able to help. Maybe I don't love my Grandma and Grandpa if this is my attitude. Does my bet that my Grandma and Grandpa would be unable to help me with something—even if they tried very hard—mean that I don't love them? I tend to have too little faith in people.

* * *

Every time I fart I forget something.

Every Time

—Two feathers on an Oldsmobile. This might get noticed.

—*And it might not.*

—And it might not, yes.

—*What kind of Oldsmobile?*

—I'm thinking of a 1984 or '85 Delta 88. "Bad car," as my dad would say, and as a matter of fact *has* said. He owned one. "Bad car," he says. It's the primary car I rode around in from 1985 through 1990, when they traded it in—he and my mom did—for a Toyota Previa.

—*You might notice the car more than you'd notice the feathers.*

—No, I might *think about* the car more than I'd *think about* the feathers. I don't believe you can *notice* something *more* or *less*. I don't believe noticing is relative. You either notice something or you don't notice it.

—*You'd notice the car first. That's all I meant. You'd notice the car, and then you'd notice the feathers. . . . You'd think about the car for sure, if it's the kind you grew up riding around in.*

—You might notice two feathers on a car like that. I don't think you'd notice them. You or me or anyone else. It sounds funny to say feathers on a car, but it's just two feathers on a car. Maybe they're stuck underneath the windshield wiper blades. They're not big eagle feathers, they're probably just little feathers from a pigeon.

—*Well, are they eagle feathers, though? You'd probably notice two feathers on a car if they were from an eagle.*

—I

—*A person can do worse and better for themselves than split-pea soup.*

—Only in some weak, generic sense.

—*If it doesn't work in black-and-white, it likely won't work in color.*

—You've just made me think of a phrase: *contrasting Hughs*. Men named Hugh. I'd name a baby Hugh, maybe. I'd have to think about it more. I don't like the jokey aspect. I think it's a funny name. Maybe that's too much, then.

—*I like the name Kip, and I like how my grandmother used to call me Briny. In early October my cousin invited me to join a new Vampire campaign—Vampire is a role-playing game*

—I know.

—*I went with my wife. The first night of the campaign consisted of creating characters. So first, we filled out character sheets. We determined physical, social, and mental strengths and weaknesses. We selected skills—computers or “security,” say. Security is essentially lockpicking— I have a role-playing game character named Kip Briny. He's a needy charismatic guy with a one out of five on “appearance.” This means he's ugly. He's tall, very social, and his face isn't scarred or anything, it's just ugly.*

—There was a kid in my high school who had to list his hobbies—we all had to list three or four hobbies on a slip of paper that was later posted on a hallway wall—and this guy listed *Vampire* as one of his hobbies, except he left the P out by accident

—*That's funny.*

—So his slip said something like, “Hobbies: playing videogames, working at Circuit City, *Vamire*.”

—*Vay-mire.*

—Exactly.

—*That reminds me of the time in school where we had to name our favorite rollercoaster. I forget why, but the teacher handed us a sheet with a bunch of fill-in-the-blanks, and one of them was “Favorite Rollercoaster.” Well, this one person in the class intended to write “Disaster Transport”—this is the name of a pretty dumb rollercoaster at Cedar Point, the big amusement park in Ohio—but instead of writing “Transport,” the kid wrote “Traport.”*

—So his sheet said “Favorite Rollercoaster: Disaster Traport.”

—Yes.

* * *

—After we all created our Vampire characters—after I made my character, Kip Briny

—I have so much sleep in my eyes today.

—It's because we were up so late last night. Do you hear that dog barking?

—I hear that annoying knocking sound. That's why the dog is barking.

—We made up *Vay-mire* characters, five of us did, and then the game began. We started off as human beings and my cousin, the DM

—Or GM

—Yeah, but we were calling him the DM, he walked each one of us through a story where our characters became vampires.

—How did your ugly-man character become a *vaymire*?

—Kip Briny has amnesia. I couldn't think of a story for him. Nothing seemed to really fit. I knew I liked the name Kip. In my mind it's a dog's name—that's how I learned it—and it's also a word. I thought it was a word for *eating*, but I wasn't sure, so we looked it up. Another guy in the *Vampire* group told us that in martial arts—I forget which martial art—*kiping up* is when you're laying supine on the workout mat and you suddenly spring up. You jump up, using your legs' momentum, from a laying-down position. That's *kiping up*.

We looked it up in the dictionary and found that my working definition—eating—was wrong. *Kiping* is not eating. But it means a lot of things. A bunch of cool things.

For one, *kip* is sleep. To sleep is to *kip*. And also, the sleep I got last night—the 6 or 8 hours or whatever it was—was my *kip*. My period of sleeping—my *kip*. A bed is a *kip*, too. My bed is my *kip*.

Beyond those definitions, which I should have known, are more: a *kip* is a unit of weight equal to 1,000 pounds. It's literally a kilopound. And a *kip* is also the undressed hide of a small animal, or a bundle of such hides.

—Those last two are pretty awesome.

—To me, it was amazing, how unintentionally appropriate this word was as a vampire name when really, I picked it for the sound of it: *Kip*. I

liked the idea of a big guy—an ugly, gregarious, physically needy big guy with amnesia—named Kip. I thought, “This is a character I’ll enjoy role-playing with.” After I made my stat sheet for Kip I wanted to see how my cousin would turn him into a vampire. Another thing about my character is that he likes to hug people. He wears a construction helmet, too. I forget if I said that.

—*And he’s app*

—The name Kip is good for a vampire—and my guy in particular—because all of those definitions of kip are in some ways vampire qualities. Sleep, bed, animal hide, extreme weight, springing up from a supine position. Also, my incorrect original working definition: eating. And the personal association with Kip as a dog’s name. All these things combine into a stew that feels exactly right....

—*And*

—And I almost didn’t go to my cousin’s that night because really, I had doubts about whether it would be fun to do an RPG. I hadn’t played one since middle school, and back then I didn’t play consistently. I’m not counting videogame RPGs here. I’m talking about RPGs where you interact, live, with a group of people. As it turns out, I’m so glad I went there, to my cousin’s, to play. I had a great time, and so did my wife. I don’t remember much about her character. I keep meaning to ask my cousin to email me a scan of my character sheet. For one thing, I’d just like to have it. And for another thing, if I fill out more personal details on my character—if I flesh out Kip Briny on my own time—my cousin will give me additional experience points. I’m not sure they’re called experience points in Vampire, but you know what I mean. I get an experience bonus for developing my character on my own time.

Ipecac Macaque

—What's up, vomiting primate?

—*That's right.*

—You're the Ipecac Macaque. I'll call your vomit "Rhesus' Pieces."

—*That's right.*

—It's not right, it's wrong. If loving you's right, I don't wanna be wrong.

[*Humming an impromptu-tune*] Who's that inside your suit Ipecac, oh Ipecac Macaque?

—*It's just me.*

—Well, and you're not alone today. We're together today.

—*I had a feeling I'd see you again.*

—You're a legend, and that's why I love you. Today you're a legend, Ipecac Macaque, and we celebrate your being very important. We call it your *importance*.

—*Can you scoot over a little?*

—Sure [*scooting*].

—*I'm not feeling well.*

—Are you OK?

—*I'm feeling fine.*

—You're not really vomiting, are you? Are you sick?

—*I'm very very nervous. I cried once last week because I was so nervous. This job is so open-ended and ambiguous, and I knew going in that it would take some mental steel, but its really terifying to me most days, having to take initiative on a job I don't understand. . . . I don't even know what un-annoying, un-stupid thing to say about it. It's exciting to be a part of something big, but I'm so afraid of messing up, blowing my chance to do a good job. You've heard most of this, when I was just about to start the job I told you my anxieties about taking it, and so far the things I've feared would be problems are exactly the things that are problems. Beyond that. . . . I don't want to be negative. I want to be stoic, keep a stiff upper lip. I want to do a great job, but I feel out at sea, lost.*

—Just don't feel alone. Don't kill yourself, don't worry about it. What I mean is, you were picked for this job for a reason, and it was a good reason. They know you and what your work is like. Yo've worked with them for a long time, and they think you're the best person for the job. It's not like they picked you because Doug Fensterbohl was unavailable. Doug Fensterbohl doesn't exist. You are the Doug Fensterbohl. You know what I'm saying. You're going to make it work.

—*I might not make it work, though. I really appreciate everything you're saying.*

—It's okay to be afraid. You don't have to be stoic. You're allowed to have fear, and make room for it. It's going to sound ridiculous, but my dad gave me a book when I was younger, all about *the true warrior*. The true warrior isn't without fear. The true warrior can feel afraid and let that part of himself exist. It's not necessary to suppress or deny that stuff. You can't be ashamed.

—*I'm afraid.*

—I understand. I just want you to know you're not alone.

Elbarrio

Elbarrio is the name of the town. You'll see the town name—*Elbarrio*—on signs at the town's edges. A lot of people don't, or supposedly don't, like the town's name, but I haven't met any of them. Have you?

I'm not sure how you can act on this information, but in Elbarrio last night, a ninja crept in a boy's sketchbook, I bet.

Ovals are the town's unofficial shapes. It used to be a secret, sort of, but more and more people know about it all the time. I'm not sure which ovals are supposed to be the town's shapes and which ovals aren't. Do you know? Somebody said it means *nothing*, ovals being the town's unofficial shapes, but I disagree on principle. I'm hungry.

Sometimes, when I think I'd rather see *nothing*, I tell myself, "Hey, you're not sure what *nothing* means."

People sometimes express opinions. I'm okay with that. Are you?

Carol Deavers' Complaint

“Bad Dentist” was Carol Deavers’ complaint. She emailed me and a couple dozen other people—“Bad Dentist” in the subject line—to tell us all about the bad dentist:

Hey everyone,

I just had a horrible experience at Gentle Dental on 5th and Union. They were rude and disrespectful and humiliating. I’ve never been talked to with so much disrespect and it was especially infuriating coming from a health care provider. I just want to put it out there that if you’re looking for a dentist, I wouldn’t recommend going there. On the other hand, if anyone has a great recommendation for a dentist in Park Slope I would appreciate it if you would let me know.

Thanks,

Carol

I learned more last night when Carol, her husband, and another married couple came to our apartment for dinner and one of the other

dinner guests asked her about it. “Tell me more about the bad dentist,” he said. Carol chuckled and told us some of what happened.

First, a hygienist said, “You shouldn’t leave the house with your hair wet.” Carol didn’t like that.

Then, the dentist shoved one of those things you’re supposed to bite down on—it takes an impression of your teeth—a little too far into Carol’s mouth. When Carol coughed—a reaction to the thing being shoved too far into her mouth—the dentist said, “You’re going to have to be patient with me today because I have a lot to do.” Carol thought that was rude, and also unprofessional. A dentist should probably assume, I said, that the patient is at least as busy as the dentist. It’s courteous to assume that other people are busy. Carol nodded.

Other little annoying shit happened, too. As Carol was paying, for example, the dentist said, “Carol, do you ever look in the mirror?” Then the dentist threw her hands in the air, turned around, and walked away. I didn’t get the full context here but jeez, what the hell kind of dentist says a thing like that? Carol was wrecked by that one, she said. The receptionist/billing person saw that Carol was upset and apologetic. “It’s not your fault,” Carol said. “You’re doing a good job. But I probably won’t be coming back here.”

At some point during the appointment—I don’t remember if Carol told us when—the dentist said another thing to Carol: “Your lips are really chapped.”

Even though all this stuff happened, and even though it all upset Carol while it was happening, Carol was over it. The conversation segued into other teeth stuff—tumors containing hair and teeth and a guy someone knew who had a tooth removed from his foot. After that, we talked about Carol’s cat’s name—Jonas—and Carol told us his nickname: *JoBeJo*. I asked Carol if they ever call the cat *Nas*. (No.)

After dinner, we talked about which of us had been on cruises. I’ve never been on a cruise, and neither has my wife. Everyone else had been on one or more. Carol said that if she could invent a room on a cruise ship—we were talking about what rooms we’d like to see on cruise ships—it would be a room where she could get up and dance alongside professional dancers, somehow, without being seen.

G, R, U, U, M, M, C, H

- Grummmmmmtch!
- Grummmmmmtch!*
- Where’s our second copy of *Rabbit and Skunk and the Scary Rock*?
- On the shelf where it always is.*
- ...
- ...
- Got it.
- Find the part where it says, “Grummmmmmmmmmtch!”*
- It’s right here. The pages aren’t numbered. Let me see.
- Give me t*
- Let me just count the pages. Hang on. It’s on page one two, three four, five six...
- ...
- It’s on pages 35 and 36 of the book, but the story starts on page five. So it’s on pages 30 and 31.
- Grummmmmmmmmmtch!*
- But look at how it’s actually spelled: G, R, U, U, M, M, C, H.
- Grooooooomtch!*

—I didn't realize it had two U's in it. . . . *Has two U's in it.*

—*Groooooooooooooooooooooomtch!*

—But it might be a hard K sound at the end, instead of a *tchuh* sound.

—*No it isn't.*

—How do you know?

—*Grummmmmmmmm-itch!*

—But didn't you just say it should be *Groooooo-mitch?*

—*Grooooooooooooooooooooo-mitch!*

—Who wrote this book, anyway? [*Looking at book cover*] Carla Stevens.
Pictures by Robert Kraus.

—*When was it published, again?*

—1969.

— . . .

—No, wait. It says "8th printing, August 1969." Before that it says "Text copyright © 1962 by Carla Stevens. Illustrations copyright © 1962 Robert Kraus. This edition is published—published—by Scholastic Book Services, a division of Scholastic Magazines, Inc., by arrangement with William R. Scott, Inc."

—*Hey, William Scott. [These are the first and middle names of the speakers' nephew, who was born about two and a half weeks ago. He's the first child in this generation of the husband's family. This baby—a healthy, good-looking boy—is a big deal, and everyone, everyone, everyone is very happy about it, including the two speakers. They haven't seen William Scott yet, but they'll see him very soon, over Thanksgiving, in a little less than two weeks.]*

—I'm going to call the kid Bill, or Billy, or Billsket. [*The parents are calling the boy "Will."*]

—*Billsket?*

—I just told my mom, on the phone, that I'm going to name our son Won't. She got a kick out of it.

—*We're not naming our son Won't.*

—Why not?

* * *

—Let's hang this "Grummmtch" picture on the wall. It's a thin book, so I suggest that we just pin the book open to pages 30 and 31. We'll pin it open so it lays flat against the wall.

— *We've been talking about doing that for three or four years.*

— Well, now I think we should do it.

— *Where do you want to hang it?*

— Right here, above this painting.

— *Okay, but don't hang it up with tape. Tape will ruin it.*

— I'm not going to use tape. We'll use tacks or something. What do you call riesling up a tree?

— *Trees-ling.*

— Right.

— *What do you call an insect riesling?*

— What?

— *What do you call an insect riesling?*

— Bugsling?

— *Beesling!*

— Haha!

— *And that works on two levels, because riesling is sweet and bees make honey.*

— Can I have your leftover risotto?

— *Sure. I'm going to eat this soup. How are you doing?*

— Just fine, except you had to stink up the parlor by pooping.

— *I have to sew a button on my coat and eat this soup. I thought I'd watch an episode of Carnivale while I'm doing it. Is that okay?*

— Fine with me.

The Humiliate

—I'm worried about two things.

—*What are they?*

—Did you ever see *Son of Sam*?

—*No.*

—In *Son of Sam*, John Leguizamo is married to Mia Sorvino, a

—*Mira Sorvino. Mira.*

—She wants to be cute, so she dresses up a little whorish and John Leguizamo gets freaked out because he thinks there are certain things you shouldn't do with your wife.

—*I'm not John Leguizamo.*

—I'm not saying you are. I'm not worried about you having affairs, eith

—*Good.*

—er. But in the movie, John Leguizamo does all these things with other women, like blowjobs, and when his wife suddenly offers that, he says he doesn't think it's right to do that with your wife. He says he doesn't think that's the kind of thing you're supposed to do with your wife.

—*What's the other thing you're afraid of?*

—That you'll lose interest in me and we'll end up like your parents.

—*We don't know anything about my parents' situation.*

—...

—*I don't think you should talk about it. I'm not my dad and I'm not John Leguizamo.*

—...

—...

—Don't fall asleep.

—*I'm not falling asleep!*

—Well open your eyes and sit up.

—*I'm not falling asleep.*

—Okay, well sit up.

—...

—I want us to do things we want to do. We should be able to do the things we want to do. You never ask for anything, so how am I supposed to know what you want?

—*Last night you obviously weren't interested in doing what I wanted. I didn't ask because I knew. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. I asked for something and you said—you made it clear you didn't want to do it.*

—I want

—*If you don't want to do something, I don't want to do it at all. At all. If I want to do something but it's something you don't want to do, then that's fine. I'm glad you're honest about it. I don't want you to do things you don't want to do. That makes me feel bad, not good, so I'm not interested in doing them. Do you understand? It's very important to me that you see what I'm saying.*

—We need to talk to each other about what we want. Last night, it was a surprise that you wanted me to do that. I had no idea you wanted that. I'm happy to do that, like when we watch a movie with subtitles together. I don't want to do it all the time, but I can have a good time doing it. There are some things I'm not going to want to do all the time, but that doesn't mean I don't want to do them. One of the main things I want to do is make you happy, and let you know it's okay if you want to try something different.

—*Maybe you should do the thing I wanted you to do last night while we watch a foreign film together.*

—[Smile.]

—Then you can have a good time with me in two different ways at once, and you'll be completely enjoying yourself.

—Sometimes a girl just wonders if she's even attractive to her husband. She understands that he's under a lot of stress at work and he's tired and he comes home and he feels exhausted, and he might not want to have sex. She understands that, but she still feels like maybe he doesn't think she's pretty. [Exaggerated pout.]

—I understand.

—[Melodramatic defiant frown.]

—I'm not John Leguizamo, even though I have a picture of me posing with my mouth wide open in front of a FREAK poster.

—I think I've seen that picture. Have I seen it?

—I'm not sure. Probably. It's in that box. It's from the summer of '98, from my first trip to New York. That was nine years ago. John Leguizamo's bright orange face was on the poster for his one-man show FREAK, and he was going like this: [face]. And I had my mom take a picture of me standing in front of the poster, with me going like this: [face.]

—John Leguizamo's face was going like [face]. and you were going like [face.]?

—What?

—He was going like “[face].,” with a period outside a bracket, and you were going like “[face.],” with a period inside a bracket?

—Nice work. This isn't that kind of story. I misplaced the period inside the bracket. [Face.] It should be outside the bracket. As Kalle Lasn annoyingly says, “Congratulations. You've managed to entirely miss the point.”

—Who's Kalle Lasn?

—Kalle Lasn is a guy who co-founded Adbusters, and he wrote this book that I read—I read it in 1999—about how TV commercials should tell people about deforestation. Not enough TV commercials are about forests being destroyed, he says. That's his main thesis.

His other thesis is that you should agree with him. Just kidding. The book is about more than that, but you said that tonight is about doing exactly what we want—

—That's not exactly what I said.

—So tonight, one of the things I want to do is misrepresent the thesis of a book written by a guy associated with Adbusters. That is what I want to

do. It feels good and thrilling to do that tonight, right now. I get a kick out of it. Detournement. . . . But I'm ready to stop talking about that book and all of that stuff. It doesn't make me feel good, so I'm stopping. We said we want to do things that make us feel good. I'm ready to start talking with you about doing those things. I'm ready to talk about doing the things we want to do.

—What do you want to do?

—...

—...

—*Mostly, I want to lay with my legs on you just like this, just like we do all the time. Have you noticed that we do this all the time? It's important to me.*

—...

—*I like to hug you and kiss you, and I like seeing you and being with you. What time are you getting up?*

—I have to be out the door by 7:00.

—*What time is it now?*

—12:15.

—*If you want to, you can service me in that area [exaggerated point].*

—[Chuckle.] Why don't you come up to bed and read with me?

—*Because I have another idea. It's not servicing me in that area. It's another idea.*

—What is your idea?

—...

—What?

—...

—What? What's your idea?

—...

—Hun. Tell me what your idea is.

—...

Uncle Ned

—If they made a movie version of *Dennis the Menace* today, Alfred Molina would be the perfect Quigley the Grocer.

—*Who would play Uncle Ned?*

—Good question. Not Billy Crystal. In a way, fuck Billy Crystal. In another way, don't, but—

—*I understand what you mean—in a way, fuck Billy Crystal—but think of an Uncle Ned.*

—Who is Uncle Ned again?

—*Uncle Ned is Mister Wilson's uncle, I think. I forget. But anyway, he's a guest star—a really strong personality—who made guest appearances on the show, or maybe just one guest appearance. He was like Dennis's fun, mischievous great uncle: the opposite of Mister Wilson.*

—Is this a real character from the show? He's the guy who liked to do morning calisthenics in the backyard, right?

—*Yes, Uncle Ned is real. Maybe it's not the same guy. Calisthenics sounds like something Uncle Ned would do, though. So probably.*

—I think I know who you're talking about. He's not the same actor who played *My Favorite Martian*, but he—

—Yes, he looked a lot like that actor, Ray somebody. The actor from *My Favorite Martian* and that Fred MacMurray movie, *The Apartment*.

—The Jack Lemmon movie with Shirley MacLaine?

—Yes. I think of it as a Fred MacMurray movie. Anyway, Uncle Ned was a little bit in the vein of that *My Favorite Martian* actor: a lithe, sparkpluggy old guy. Lither and more sparkpluggy than the *Martian*, though. Anyway, I really do think he was Mister Wilson's uncle, even though I feel like the actor who played the part wasn't that much older than the Wilsons. The Wilsons always seemed pretty old to me. Old people whose kids had grown up, or had no kids. Enough about Mister Wilson, though. Based on your understanding of Uncle Ned, who do you think would be a good actor to play him? A fun great-uncle type who could trick Quigley the Grocer—Alfred Molina—into giving him double his money back on a dozen cans of a new product called Grandma's fruit preserves.

—I tell you what. This is a little bit dumb.

—Why do you say that?

—Why don't you suggest an actor for Uncle Ned?

—Ned Beatty would be a good choice.

—He's a versatile actor. Remember how he played John Goodman's father on *Roseanne*?

—I didn't remember that. That's cool. What I like about Ned Beatty is he's really funny as Otis in the *Superman* movies, and he's really depressing—a sort of depressing schlubby guy—in the movie *Rudy*. He plays Sean Astin's father, who's really proud of *Rudy*. That part isn't depressing. It's great, of course. What's depressing, I guess, is that he conveys—Ned Beatty does—this air of a guy who hasn't had a lot of good luck in his life. He looks like a guy who hasn't had an education, and probably wishes in some way, though he'd never admit it, that he did get an education. A really good eddication. He's one of those dads who wants the best for his son.

—That's depressing? Isn't that what every dad wants? Or let me rephrase that: isn't that what the best dads want?

—No, I mean Ned Beatty is this runty guy who works really hard and wants the best for his runty son. That's not depressing. What's depressing is, neither one of them is getting it. The best. They're guys—especially Ned Beatty, just by looking at him—who don't have as full of a sense of what “the Best” is as they feel like they should have, let alone the ability to reach out and grab it.

They can neither identify nor obtain “the Best.”

—Unlike you, who can?

—No, I don't think I or you or anyone is really able to put his finger on what, exactly, he is shooting for. I think we all wish—or let me just keep it personal, to be safer—I definitely sometimes wish, for myself, that I was more creative in identifying my options at any given moment. My opportunities. I think we're—I think I am; I think I am—I think I am a guy in a Robert Frost poem who sees two paths and wonders which one he should go down, but really, underneath the sagebrush or whatever, underneath the brambleberry and briarbrickles along the sides of those two paths, there are countless additional, unseen paths. I take the one less traveled by—of the two obvious ones that I see right there—and then I write a poem later gloating about how great my decision was. I have framed the situation incorrectly, thinking there are only two paths.

—You have thought inside the box?

—Thank you. You suck. Yes.

—The point is, someone is going to clear away the bramblebrickle you didn't even think about clearing away and they're going to see some other path—some path you didn't see—and that path is going to lead them onto their own life, which is different from yours in a lot of ways but also probably not too different. We're all people, after all. We all have hopes and fears, and that's something I'm always having to remind myself of, that it's not just me who. Anyway, we all choose a single path, so to speak, and we stick with that—we can't not stick with a single path—and we do what we can do.

—Someone could come to the Frostian fork in the woods with a pair of really tall stilts and walk down both paths.

—The trees and all the brambly, briarpatch underbrushy stuff would get in the way. Wouldn't it?

—Imagine the tallest pair of stilts in the world. They already exist somewhere in the world, by default, so imagining them shouldn't be very difficult. Imagine extremely tall stilts made of very strong, hard material. If the stilts were tall enough and strong enough—maybe there's some kind of a pneumatic stamping or stomping action, to help you take each step; a kind of mechanical action that would ensure sure-footedness, even if it meant stepping through a tree. . . .

—What?

—What I'm saying is, with a tall and strong pair of stilts—stilts it

isn't really hard to imagine—you could walk down two paths at once. One foot in each path at all times. And you make the stilts tall enough so your crotch clears the tallest trees. You end up with an overview of the situation. You're taking both of the fucking paths, and that's your path. You're taller than everyone else.

—*That doesn't sound very sustainable. It sounds pretty awesome, and it could be lo-fi, but it doesn't sound very sustainable, let alone accessible.*

I'm not saying I'm better than Ned Beatty. On the contrary. He's a great actor, and in this one character he plays in Rudy is someone I'm afraid that I, in some ways, am. Ned Beatty is one of those dads who is like, "Okay, son. You have to play the hand you were dealt, just like you're old man. He's a guy with a you're/your problem. He tells Rudy that this, life, is a five-card Poker game, and we have a High Jack. We were dealt a High Jack and we traded in two cards hoping for something better and we still have just the High Jack. So get up at 6:00 in the morning every day and do your best with your High Jack. I'll buy you a beer and tell you it's necessary to cope, which it is, but the way I'll tell you will sound like, what's that stuff, Orajel. It tastes like you're eating a minty Ziploc bag, and when you're done you can't feel anything. A son with a dad like Ned Beatty's character in Rudy—just by looking at him you can see it—is not going to come home right after school and do his homework right away. Ned Beatty isn't the kind of dad who took practical steps to make sure his son has the best possible education, whatever his resources. He's arc welding in the garage, probably. It's a rented garage that belongs to some cousin, and he's allowed to do small welding jobs in there after whatever his full-time job is. Pressing tires. Applying smudges to his cheeks with tire dust.

—In real life, Rudy Rueteger wasn't that small. He was a pretty normal-sized guy.

—*Ned Beatty is a great, powerful actor. He can make you think all that stuff without saying a word. Just by looking in his face, you can see how shitty shitty shitty. He plays the character in a way—I've only seen that movie once, so maybe this isn't accurate—he plays the character in a way where it makes you not want to be him. I take a look at that character and no way in the world do I want to be him, even though, yes, if I have a son I want to be supportive of my son, obviously.*

—Ned Beatty also has those other great roles.

—*Of course, his first-ever movie was Deliverance. What a great way to*

start a career. *The first thing I ever saw him in was Superman, where he played Lex Luthor's assistant, Otis.*

—Otisburg?

—Right. Otisburg. . . .

—Haw haw haw.

— . . .

—So you would rather be Otis from *Superman* than the dad character from *Rudy*?

—No.

—So what actor would you get to play Uncle Ned in a new Dennis the Menace movie? Ned Beatty might be a good one, but I'd like to hear some others.

—*Christopher Lloyd.*

—Okay. He sort of has a cheap feeling, unfortunately. He's great as Doctor Emmett Brown, who is one of the best movie characters of all time, I think, but nothing else he's done, that I've seen, feels very good like that one feels good. Plus he was the martian in the '90s movie remake of *My Favorite Martian*.

—*I know. I didn't see it. Did you?*

—No. I didn't watch the original show either, did you?

—No. *My mom did, though.*

—It's kind of funny to imagine your mom sitting in front of the TV—the whole family sitting around in the early '60s watching a sitcom about a Martian who looks like Ray what's his name, the old-looking guy who played the Martian.

—*I know. It is pretty funny. It's a little like ALF, I guess.*

—I guess.

—*I watched ALF with my mom when it was on. I probably saw every episode. The kid's name was Brian. The nosy neighbors—the Ackmanics—the woman is the woman who played Jerry Seinfeld's mom on Seinfeld. The first time I saw an episode of Seinfeld with that woman, I thought of Mrs. Ackmanic from ALF. Instead of being foiled by ALF, she was being foiled by Jerry Seinfeld. Pretty much the same character with the same hair and clothing. It's not really acting, it's just that awesome woman doing her thing. I'm sure she's a fine actor. I think she was really good in both those roles.*

—What about Uncle Ned?

—A good *Uncle Ned* would be. . . hmmm. . .

—Someone thin and old-looking, but not too old.

—*Billy Bob Thornton* is

—He's too Southern, I think.

—*I was about to say, I think he seems too po-dunk for Uncle Ned. Uncle Ned seems like he's from Wisconsin, or maybe from Massachusetts, but probably from North Dakota or something. He doesn't have a North Dakoooota accent, so maybe he was born in Massachusetts—I can imagine that being Mister Wilson's home state, "Mass," though they never ever betray any specific regional locations or affiliations in Dennis The Menace as far as I remember.*

—They're all from L.A.

—*I can imagine Uncle Ned being born in "Mass," and then moving at the age of 12 to Wisconsin or Michigan or North Dakota. Minnesota. Somewhere cold, where he was on the track team and he learned to do calisthenics.*

—What kind of actor can do that? I don't think it's Christopher Lloyd.

—*Probably not Russell Crowe.*

—No.

—*Or Guy Ritchie.*

—What are you talking about?

—*I'm just saying names as they come to mind, thinking that maybe they'll lead to something else. Someone else.*

—Russell Stouver.

—*The candy guy?*

—What does he even look like? Is he a real guy or is he like Julia Child?

—*You mean Betty Crocker? Julia Child is real.*

—Julia Stiles.

—*She'd be a pretty hot Uncle Ned. I'd watch that Dennis the Menace remake for sure. Buy me an advance ticket.*

—Chris Cooper.

—*Who is that again?*

—He's the guy from *American Beauty* and *Seabiscuit* and *Adaptation*. The guy who

—*Oh yeah.*

—The guy who comes on to Lex Luthor in the garage.

—*What?*

—Kevin Spacey.

—*Chris Cooper would be cool. He'd be a really good Uncle Ned, I think. It would give him a chance to play a rascally uncle-type. I think he'd be good at that kind of comedy. The mischievous calisthenics-doing uncle.*

—He's not too Southern?

—*Not in the way that Billy Bob Thornton comes across. In some ways I think his name locks him to that. You can't be Billy Bob who was born in Massachusetts. I can't suspend my disbelief like that, or it's not fun to. Billy Bob Thornton's decision to put himself out there as Billy Bob makes it annoying when he asks me to suspend my belief that he is Southern. I liked him a lot in The Man Who Wasn't There, though. Maybe he'd be an okay Uncle Ned. He'd probably be really good, actually. Still, I think Chris Cooper is the best option so far.*

—And Julia Stiles.

—Right.

—What about. . .

—*Eddie Murphy.*

—No way. That would suck bigtime. I wish it wouldn't, but sorry.

—*Paul Hogan.*

—Crocodile Dundee?

—*If he could lose the Australian accent and still keep it together, he'd be a pretty sweet Uncle Ned.*

—Or Paul Newman.

—*That's a nice idea, too. If Paul Hogan can't keep it together, you get Paul Newman. He'd be a great Uncle Ned.*

—Campbell Scott.

—*He's not old enough.*

—I was thinking George C. Scott, but he's dead, so then I thought, well, Campbell Scott. If he was just a little older, I think he could do it. He could use a good comic role. It would give him a chance to show that he is versatile. I'm not so sure he has the range. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt and give him an audition. I'd fly him out to wherever and we'd see if he could do it.

—*"Look, Campbell, this isn't Roger Dodger."*

—Exactly. *"This isn't The Secret Lives of Dentists, Campbell."*

—*No. This is a big-budget Hollywood film. We need you to show us Uncle*

Ned. A fun-loving guy who buys a bunch of jars of jam from Quigley because it's double-your-money-back-if-you-hate-the-jam day. Your dad could have done Uncle Ned, and we think you can do it, too. But you need to show us that you can do it, Campbell. Otherwise, we're hiring Chris Cooper.

—It's relish, I think, now that I think of it. It's Grandma's Sweet Relish that he's buying dozens of jars of, and then tasting each one, and returning it to Quigley—Alfred Molina in this case—for double his money back. Uncle Ned is a bad influence.

—*We should be thinking of someone, too, who would play well off of Quigley the grocer.*

—Richard Gere was good with Alfred Molina in *The Hoax*.

—*What an asshole he was in that movie. Richard Gere blinks too much. He's not a good Uncle Ned. Can you imagine Richard Gere enjoying being around Dennis? He's got to come across as fun and mischievous around Dennis. He's got to be straight-faced about how much fun life can be.*

—Gene Hackman?

—*I think he's a little too old, but maybe he'd be just right. Maybe it's a little too close to The Royal Tenenbaums.*

—Maybe you could get both Gene Hackman and Ned Beatty in there. I can imagine Ned Beatty as a good Mister Wilson. I'd cast Gene Hackman as Uncle Ned only if we could get Ned Beatty to agree to do Mister Wilson.

—*You could get Anjelica Huston to be Mrs Wilson, but then it would be too close to Wes Anderson.*

—Yeah, we can't cast too many, or any, Wes Anderson people. This can't be Wes Anderson's *Dennis the Menace*, unless we hire him to be the director. He'd do a great one. But he'd have to agree to cast Alfred Molina as Quigley the Grocer or he couldn't have the job.

—*You could just make Owen Wilson play Dennis.*

—That would be good. Just cast him as an 11 year-old and have everyone around him play it straight, as if his character really is an 11 year-old Dennis Mitchell.

—*I don't think he'd take it in that direction, Wes Anderson.*

—But he could, and it would be good. It would be something that would be fun to watch, and I'm sure you could make it work.

—*You could also have Wes Anderson do a Dennis the Menace as a grown-*

up kind of thing.

—That’s too close to the *Royal Tenenbaums* for sure, now. And it would get too far away from what Dennis the Menace really is, which is a kid who bothers the old man next door, and the old man loves him even though he is simultaneously constantly annoyed by him. If you do Dennis the Menace as a grownup, Mister Wilson is dead or immobile, and you lose the heart of the show. Maybe it would be fun to watch—you could do a grown-up *Dennis* and cast Cheech Marin as some made-up character who wasn’t in the original show, but who figures prominently into the grown-up-Dennis storyline. . . . You have to do Dennis the Menace as a kid.

—*It doesn’t have to be set in the ’50s and ’60s, though.*

—Definitely not. I hadn’t thought about that, but definitely not. It could be set in the ’60s, and maybe it would have to have some kind of nostalgic feeling if you got Wes Anderson to do it, and that could work, but I think it might be best if you set the new Dennis the Menace in the present day. Or really, let the story come forward and just don’t dwell at all on the tie period. The TV show wasn’t obsessed with the fact that it took place in the ’60s or ’50s or whenever. It was a story that just happened to take place then, because that’s when the series was on TV.

—*So to make a Dennis the Menace, today, that takes place in the ’60s would be like if, back in the ’60s, they had set Dennis the Menace in the ’20s.*

—Yes.

—*It might have worked, but why bother foregrounding the time period? It’s not a show about a time period. It’s a show about a classic, timeless love-hate relationship between a rascalion kid and a high-strung middleaged stamp collector.*

—Right. And when you put it in a time period you’re confusing the issue. You can’t hire Mason Gamble and slick his hair all up and say, hey, this is Dennis the Menace. A kid doesn’t look like that. It’s a distraction. If you’re going to make a movie like that, then get Christopher Lloyd to play Uncle Ned.

—*What about Christopher Walken?*

—He could do it. And you know exactly what it would be like, too. Almost too much so. He’d definitely be a box-office draw in that role, I think. He has that air, like Uncle Ned does, of unknowability. You never know

what quite makes him tick. . . .

—*"This watch. . . ."*

—Yes.

—*Ugh. I have to go to work.*

—Me too.

—*Michael Caine and Anthony Hopkins are too British.*

—I agree. Otherwise, Michael Caine would be great.

—*Steve Martin?*

The Wise Cat

On the way to the grocery:

“There’s an ugly cat. Maybe it’s walking to my house. Someone might think, ‘Maybe that cat is full of answers.’ What question would a wise cat least likely answer well?”

At the grocery:

“A neighbor might wonder if the floor of a produce aisle could become a treadmill. To me, it doesn’t matter whether a grocery will build a treadmill floor. If it happens it’s not my fault.”

I pick up some green seedless grapes and a bag of romaine lettuce and drop them into my shopping cart.

Home from the grocery, I’m pretty angry. “God damn it,” I think to myself. “God damn it, I can’t believe it,” I think. “What’s so unbelievable? Nothing. It’s pretty believable.”

Today

- When you click on “view,” what do you see?
- Oh man.*
- What?

A

- A golf stick.
- A golf club, you mean. It's a club.*
- A rent check.
- A swimming pool.*
- A rent pod.
- A bent hoe.*
- A tenterhook. What is a rent pod?
- A rental.*
- A tired.
- A sad.*
- A dental.
- A lentil.*
- After you go,
- I'm not going to let you talk, or take*
- After you
- Didn't you hear me? I'm no*
- I'm n
- I said I'm*

—I'm
—Is
—Th
—Sh
—What do you call an alien comedian?
—*Uh. Quigley up over?*
—No. You call him Blob Hope. The movie *Quigley Down Under* isn't about aliens.
—*What do you call a millionaire Pac-Man?*
—I don't know.
—*John D. Pack-a-feller.*
—John D. Pack-a-feller? What do you call a Pac-Man pyramid scheme?
—*I don't know.*
—A Pac-scam.
—*What do you call a Pac-Man version of a cat scan?*
—A Pac-scan.
—*Right.*
—What do you call a smoked Pac-Man thigh?
—*A Pac-ham.*
—*Right.*
—*What do you call a Pac-Man version of a Hindu sanctuary?*
—I don't know.
—*A Pac-ashram.*
—*Okay.*
—*What do you call a strategically placed Pac-Man?*
—A Pac in time saves nine?
—*No.*
—A Pac in time saves ten?
—*No.*
—*Hmmm. . . .*
—*A strategically placed Pac-Man. He holds water in.*
—*Bloated Pac-Man.*
—*No. A Pac-dam.*
—That doesn't work.
—*Sure it does.*

—What do you call a Pac-Man who is unsure of himself?
—*A Pac...*
—Nevermind that one. I don't have an answer for it.
—*We can probably think of one anyway. Try to think of a punchline.*
—...
—...
—...
—A Pactical joker.
—*No...*
—A Jell-O swallower. Somebody who swallows Jell-O.
—*No...*
—A Pactical jokester.
—*No...*
—A tactical
—*No...*
—...
—...
—Something else.
—*Okay. What do you call a Pac-Man who hates war?*
—A Pac-a-fist.
—*Right.*
—What is the Rolling Stones' most famous Pac-Man song?
—*I don't know.*
—*"Paint It Pac."*
—*What is Justin Timberlake's Pac-Man song?*
—The one that goes "I'm bringin' sexy Pac."
—*Right.*