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# LOVE OVER THE WIRES

**Wired's first short story is a modern romance via email.**

I knew all was lost when Robbie put his arm around me at the lookout castle-ette on the cliffs above the Columbia River Gorge. He whispered into my ear that I was a woman of incredible light and shadows, and I had that sick feeling of knowing I would be going to bed with him as soon as we could manage it; that once we managed it we would be formally in love, and there was the whiff of disaster about it all. Love was never other than mutual self-deception.

I wasn't really supposed to have been at the Third Annual Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work. Groupware has nothing to do with computational linguistics, and most theorists get pretty sniffy about the lack of formal rigor involved in doing research on topics like What-I-See- Is-What-You-See. But I'd always been pretty good about getting unrestricted grants, and I was dying to get out of Amherst in the middle of January and spend some time on the Pacific Rim. I needed to be somewhere for a bit where if I had to, I could drive in a couple of hours to see the sun set, as opposed to rise, over the ocean.

It was never entirely clear what Robbie was doing at the CSCW conference either, except maybe that he wanted a break from writing his book, or to have an excuse to take a trip without Margaret. The secrets of artificial life were not going to be revealed by a bunch of social scientist wannabes making runs at computer technology nobody would have any interest in using anyway.

My first thoughts on seeing Robbie at the cocktail reception on the opening night were that anyone that good-looking had to be a son of a bitch, that he was the best I'd ever seen at giving people what they wanted to hear, and in spite of

all his manifest trickiness, he was what I had always known I deserved if I had tried very hard, been a good girl, and really done my homework.

I went up and introduced myself, something I don't normally do unless I have to. There was no professional gain compelling me, but I had to, nonetheless. What then began was us circling each other for the next two days, making sure we were always seated at the same tables though not next to each other at meals, and keeping in each other's line of sight when each of us was talking to other conference participants at breaks. I could tell he would be watching me when I was being hit on, for I was doing the same with him. While I appreciated that he was a compulsive flirt, I knew he only meant it with me. I heard him use the dread coupled-off pronoun "we" when he was talking with a woman from Xerox PARC, although he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I always checked.

We finally sat together at lunch on the final full day of the conference. I suggested we forego the afternoon's scheduled pleasures of listening to papers on enabling technologies and synchronous communications and play hooky. Robbie was something of an endorphin-junkie and sought out all the high-risk physical activities he could, so he suggested we get out of Portland and make a pilgrimage to the Columbia River Gorge, a windsurfer world-heritage Holy Place. I was secretly glad it was too cold that time of year for him to suggest that I get suited up to play with him; messing around with equipment was not my idea of an ideal First Date.

I decided to let Robbie do the driving even though I usually prefer to exhibit as much autonomy as possible. I'd found out by then that not only did he fly planes, he built them. And not only did he build them, he designed them. I saw no reason not to leave our transportation in the hands of a professional.

When we got out of the car to head out onto the WPA-built observation deck, I wondered if this had been a good idea. He had spent most of the drive out to the river talking about Margaret, and asking me about my research and about Carter. Although I was new to the notion of adultery, this didn't seem like good form or an auspicious beginning. So we stood, hands in our coat pockets, me covertly coveting the crows' feet surrounding his amber-colored eyes and the grey in his hair and the weary patches under his almost Athabaskan-looking cheekbones. The mustardy brick crenelations of the lookout-tower didn't fit the

landscape; the lack of feng-shui contributed to my ill-ease. And then Robbie made his move, and I leaned into it. The effect was violent, physicochemical, neurophysiological, ineluctable, inarguable.

I said we should be heading back because it was getting dark. At the first vista point, where the river was still highly visible, he pulled the car over, turned off the ignition, and grabbed me and kissed me. Every yellow warning light I owned was clanging and swinging and flashing "DANGER" and sirens were going off and I felt like I was on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride and my adrenaline was pumping and I didn't care. I was going to do it anyway. I stopped kissing him and asked why he'd pulled over to the side of the road. No one, not even in high school, had been impulsive in just that way. Because I had to, he said. He smiled, started the car back up, and headed back on down the road, softly singing to himself "I've got you under my skin" in a way that would have given Robert Goulet a run for his money. This guy was too good to be true.

So it began, the greatest moral compromise of my life. I was in agony, I was in love, I wanted him, I didn't want this, he was worth it, it wasn't. Ms. High Moral Purity was having her comeuppance; the Savonarola act I could pull with my friends and their affairs would have to go. He had made it clear from the get-go that he would never leave Margaret; Carter and I were still operating in the what-shall-we-name-the-grandchildren mode that we'd been in almost since we'd met in the student union cafe when I'd just moved to Amherst a couple of years before.

It operated like this, with Robbie back home in California and me back home in Massachusetts: We wrote each other e-mail

We nearly always detour around Fresno, you know, rather driving through it. At times, I've imagined it's the fear of the center of the city, that by avoiding the downtown of the raisin capital of our universe, we would also avoid the annihilating insight that there are no dried sultanas on Fresno's avenues, no mounds of Medjools behind city hall, that the town is not, at all or in any way, sunkist. So we go around Fresno and tell ourselves we are making our trip shorter, when all we are making is a better, more solid dream of raisinville. I diverted myself from you at first, Claire. Let me explain to you some what that was like. We were both at that cocktail party and I intuited I could have you if I

tried. You sighing, me surging, the long and hard and deep of it. But I had not yet stepped out on my marriage, and I was scared away. Thence to the Gorge, where I had your public nearness and picked up the perfume the sun created from its contact with your skin. Should I have you there, in the rented car on the way back to the hotel, throw you across the bumper, put myself into your mouth while speeding through mountain passes? But I denied myself and you at first, because I was frightened it would be too good, and I was worried I would lose myself in you. To begin with, I did not have the courage of yes, and I almost did not have the courage of no. I must be braver now, because I have become willing to again and again, and forever, inhale your scent and take you into me, to think of the where and the when and the how deep (very). I don't want to drag you down, but I do want to abide with you. Get it? *i really think in a margaret-free + carter-free universe, we would be going steady, for i like you the more i get to know you. no shit sherlock. i really love you.* What you are to me is an emotional laser, matter into which I can pump light of any rate and wavelength and once I have pumped enough in, magic happens. The light then comes back out all at once and at the same wavelength. I pump feelings into you, and thoughts that are rough overlays on feelings, and you take those feelings in and send them back to me, concentrating Robbie nonsense into coherent beams. The rays of your passion and insight hit me in the face with their strength and clarity. These you somehow create from what I have told you about the imperfect man that I am. You are brilliant and beautiful. I can't help but be pulled toward you, and I suspect you can't help be pulled toward me, either. *i love the fur on your ears. in anyone else it would be gross, but on you it's adorable. i wish you didn't feel the need to remove it with your electric shaver. i would drink your bathwater. you've got great eyelashes. didja know you have nice clavicles? not to mention, nice curves round the shoulders? not to mention, having you inside me is just heaven.* What I want is truth and honesty between us. In having that, we will be stronger and happier, as we are both happier because Claire is dusted by a bit of Robbie dust, and Robbie is dusted by a bit of Claire dust. Truth and honesty are not the norm in romantic relationships. You seem to take honesty for granted, but then you are more honest and aware than most. In most relationships, honesty is so unusual that when it is there, it is ignored. When I met you, it wasn't the prospect of spreading your knees, but your synapses that were popping so loudly in my

direction that drew me to you. You were the one beautiful soul worth knowing that week in Portland. You are easy to want, and so hard to have. I love you.

because it seemed safer and faster. I could log on from my office or at home. He was my muse, my Ideal Intelligent Reader; here I was, supposed to be an expert on the deepest structures and intentions of language, its limits and quandaries, and we were double-daring each other. We could talk about pianos

*what kind of piano are you going to get?* I am not going to get a traditional piano, but one of those keyboards with weighted keys that I can pretend is a piano. I know, I know, it's not the same as having 1500 pounds of spruce and metal underneath my fingers, but it will offer the marked virtues of cheapness, portability, and particularly, being able to make music wearing headphones and not anger the entire neighborhood. I've been checking out these electronic wonders for awhile, and it's like buying computers; if you wait another six months, they just get cheaper/better. The odd thing about this synthetic music universe is that differences in tone quality and keyboard action are not at all connected. Some keyboards are wonderful to the touch, but their microcircuitries do not create swell pianoisms, while in other models the exact opposite holds true. I'm looking for that mix of the right feel and sound. The best sound I've happened on is Kurzweil's Piano #2. It's a shame Kurzweil got out of the business, selling out to Young Chang, a Korean piano maker. There is a rumor that Young Chang plans to reintroduce the Kurzweil, though sadly enough, not with the much-loved Piano #2 (a digitally-sampled Boesendorfer, in case you're interested). *of course i am skeptical that electronic keyboard action could ever equal that of a real piano (the world is analog, you see), but i do know what you mean -precisely- about needing the right action, and fitting that with the right sound.* As usual, you're probably telling me the truth I don't want to hear, in that a digitized piano can't feel like the real thing. I've compromised in accepting an electronic piano, a matter of making the most I can of an already compromised situation. *i love the sound of my upright because it resounds in the right way for my ears, indescribable (actually, i think all art is indescribable, hence my contempt for art-crit talk: there is just no way to convey what makes manet great, or a lisette model photograph distinctive, or what is compelling about eric clapton's playing).* the few times i've played on a grand it just felt too powerful/big a machine for me. I need a

grand. Grands make grand sounds, the sort any but the bold would avoid. I am bold.

or about physics

No question about it, Oppenheimer was greater than Bohr, and Pynchon's better than Didion, but your point is still good. The problem with novels written by women, though, is that they have too much dialogue and not enough plot. *maybe we think oppenheimer is smarter because he is more to our (mine, anyway) taste: renaissance guy, reader of sanskrit, likes to ride horses through the pines. charisma counts, as does looking the part of a genius. political martyrdom helps, too. whereas bohr has to have on his rap sheet the responsibility for having spawned, albeit indirectly, olivia newton-john. but who has a better mind? cant say. didion and pynchon. he is the better writer if by better you mean willing to tackle Big Ideas and being intellectually ambitious and having what you like to call gray matter hanging out all over the place. but line to line, didion writes much better, and writes about real people, and how they think and feel. so i still say it's a toss up. but i resent your crack about female writers and their little novels of the emotion. the problem with male writers and their bias towards action is that they make the mistake of assuming that anyone would be interested in duck-hunting aside from the ducks.* From what I can remember from when I did physics as an undergraduate, I can report that Oppenheimer had a hell of a standing among his fellow scientists. Not only was the man a smooth operator outside academia, but inside it, he was a wizard, too. His PhD was granted by the university in Zurich a few weeks after he got there. After his oral exams, one of his interrogators said "We were lucky to get out of there; he was starting to ask US questions." Bohr was a whiz, too, but not in Oppenheimer's class. I defer to your superior judgement on Didion. I have trouble getting through her.

or about our rotten childhoods

My brother had an automobile crash over Labor Day weekend in 1968 that basically ended his career as an athlete. He received a severe head injury that left him never quite the same, or sure of himself, withdrawn and angry. He is lots of fun, but still there is a sadness about him as though he knows that he suffered a soul-death that day in 1968, that he received no justice from the gust

of wind that blew him into a 12-wheeler on a two-lane Nebraska highway. My brother had to relearn how to read, having lost a big chunk of his frontal lobe. He lost all powers of speech for several months. Sometimes in the early days he was prone to anger. My sister, a cruel kid, would goad him, taunt him, then get him to chase her. It was cruel and she was cruel. *that's another one of those ways we have the classic setup for romantic love. we are exactly alike except for where we are totally different. it runs from the simple in that in different times in our lives we have both become obsessed with the baking of sourdough bread to the profound, what with our two brothers lost to the forces of entropy, the mere anarchy that's always loose upon the world. my brother -drowned- when he was 15. his response to our family madness was to develop epilepsy (my sister first attempted suicide around the same age), which my parents never treated. he had a grand mal seizure when fishing alongside a rushing mountain stream near a town called paradise. he fell in that snow-melt freshened stream, hit his head on some rocks, and got lodged face down between some rapids. the autopsy showed water in his lungs, though perhaps to give us false comfort, the coroner said he was unconscious when he inhaled it. the best natural swimmer i've ever known, he once tried to show me how to swim like the otters do. my sister is inept, not cruel, however.*

or sex

In my days at my British boarding school, the word we used was not cunt or pussy but quim, the Celtic word for "valley". Now that I think about it, I rather fancy quim, don't you? Maybe it can be the kinder, gentler expression we all are seeking. *"cunt" was used by chaucer, and favorably by dhlawrence. its roots are in the same proto-indo-european semantic field as "country" and "kin." an honorable lineage, dont you think?*

or best of all, us

You, you are exotic. I have a vegetable garden filled with cabbages and you are an orchid that somehow landed there. I cannot bring myself to uproot you so I can plant a head of iceberg lettuce or perhaps, more parsnips. Yes, our relationship is a strange one. Must be love. In one corner there's everyone else I have ever known, and in the other corner there is you. *i love it that you read alchemical texts in the medieval arabic. i love it that when -you- get*

headaches, it's because they're the malarial sequelae from your travels in africa; it's not because you had a bad day at work. i love it that when -you- had a run in with the syrian secret police, all they ended up doing is smashing your osborne 1; i know no other 19-year-old foreign correspondent could have fared as well. i love it that when you were giving testimony before congress, i was reading the alexandria quartet over a single long weekend. i love it that when you were hitching rides on the planes of the royal mail, i was watching arlo guthrie flirt with waitresses at the troubadour. i love it that when you spent a summer packing produce into boxcars in laramie, i was observing leeches, loons, and the northern lights at my uncle's cabin on a lake 400 miles north of toronto, knowing calm for the first time in my life. all i ever did was run away from home. but i do not love -you- for your dashing public self. it's the way you look up at me and say "sweetie" each time we are released into each others arms that binds me to you. i can get infatuated with all you've been and done; your derring-do stuns me, for i am one who has spent most of her life hiding behind a book or staring into the middle distance; but it's who is lurking beneath all that rhodes scholar dash that i crave. i've never been into diploma fucking. Airplanes aren't female or male, but they do have individual personalities, much like automobiles, but with far wider variations in character. Airplanes can be stable or twitchy, demanding or forgiving, complicated or straightforward, powerful or wimpy, and expensive or more expensive. When I originally built the plane I have now it was twitchy, demanding, simple, and underpowered. Now it's less twitchy than before, but still not stable, less demanding but still not forgiving, powerful, and expensive. Now that sounds like a description of you. *did you know that in the last two months, between the two of us, we have generated more than 500k of email? ye gods and little fishes!* I know that I love you, and you can know that I love you, because communicating with you, either on-line or in person, is crucially important to my well-being and my soul's progress. This isn't a casual correspondence, our 500k. I have been doing this only for love, just like when I make love with you, it is a further way of knowing you, of having a sense of you. *craft. life. art. love. logos. eros. thanatos. ooooooh, you.* What Claire gets, what she has always qualified for is first dibs on my purest and least fucked-up sides. She will always get my continued (though at times preoccupied or tardy) attention, and concern. Sometimes she gets my goat, and sometimes, when she and I are very



lucky, she gets to be horizontal with me. I love you too. I can't not. We are kindred spirits who lie naked together. At first, I was frightened by the chance of being with you, then as an outcome of that union being perennially discontent with the mate I've already picked. I remain scared today, though not as much as NOT being with you scares me. I do feel loved by you. I have never doubted that for one second. *you just dont understand what a gift you are to me. selfishly, there is just so much to you i find useful to bounce off of, promising my being met head-to-head as i never have before. i have thought i could flourish under your hand; as partial and warpo as things have been with us, i feel you have done me immense good. i havent been kidding when i say you are kinda perfect, for with you there is the possibility of all four cylinders firing as never before. my language is too restrictive to describe your beauty.*

Where Carter, the left-libertarian, at best thought maybe he might have heard of Kafka; for sure, Carter, the field-biologist, didn't know Huxley. Either Thomas or Aldous. More than any linguist I knew, I did believe in Wittgenstein - whereof one cannot speak, one should remain silent - and Carter loving me up as well as he did was just fine; but I also hadn't counted on my ghostly, bounding amour fou for Robbie, epistolary romance that was the best I ever had.

Because we were making each other's acquaintance through e-mail, there were subjects we could touch on we would never have had the nerve to speak about in person. The only topic that made me uncomfortable, though, that I thought broached our etiquette, was Margaret, although Robbie said nothing was inappropriate in the Vulcan mind-meld we had going.

Robbie would descant on his wife and his marriage, telling me things about Margaret I hadn't asked for and didn't want to know. The key descriptors I could have annotated on a file with Margaret's name on it, as much as the fact of Margaret filled me with fear and loathing, sickness and trembling, and misgivings about Robbie's taste in general in women.

She sounded like that dangerous contemporary mix of marketing yupster conjoined with woowoo, byproduct of the unholy union between human potential movement and Boomer go-for-it-bud plutocracy. She appeared to have caught the particularly virulent strain of New Age hip-kapitalism endemic

to the Bay Area. Margaret being one of the pod-people madding crowd was about the only potentially fatal, as opposed to forgivable, flaw I saw in Robbie.

Paradoxically it would have made me feel better if Margaret were someone I might want to play with in my own sandbox. Then I only would have to question Robbie and my morals, and not also his aesthetics; questioning his judgment about his worrisome choice of spouse meant questioning his judgment about choice of mistress. But then, I'd always been good at catering to someone's internal Perfect Person and ignoring the rest. The rest, in this case, being Robbie's wife.

The intrinsic lack of fit here between me and my Hemingway male disturbed me as well. I felt there were rules of decorum embedded in infidelity that he did not honor; he would write to me about the ongoing disagreements he and Margaret would have about whether and how much they should renovate their house, how much time they should spend together or apart, and who should determine what time they went to bed. Why this seemed like the right thing to do with me I didn't understand.

So part confessor, part marriage counselor, I protested being drawn de facto into his marriage. I never could figure out if he wanted me to approve of his choice of mate, have me wish to befriend her, or in best Ladies' Home Journal style, tell him he had a basically good marriage that only needed fine-tuning and minor tweaking to be made better.

What's more, even worse, Robbie insisted on including Margaret in the caterwaulings he served up about his disappointments and exaltations with women. It was one thing for us both to get into strangers-on-a-train mode, telling all about who we both were and had been to the utter but compassionate and fascinated strangers we were to each other. It made sense that we were offering up our sexual histories to each other online, for we would never have the time to do so in the old-fashioned way of pillow-talk interspersed between lovemaking extended over time. In the limited moments we would ever have together in bed, we would have more pressing exchanges to make. But Margaret was of the present and not the past; it seemed a double desecration of their marriage bed that not only was Robbie breaking his vows of fidelity, he was violating Margaret's privacy by detailing his personal and carnal knowledge of

her as he did. I hadn't wanted to know about the never-fail qualities of Margaret's G-spot, and would not supply similar details about my private life with Carter.

So when as a companion to his remarks on Margaret he made inquiries into my sex-life at home, I was both puzzled and offended. I couldn't see why he would care or, alternately, not be jealous. But e-mail seemed to make him feel he had the right to attempt such liberties. I nonetheless refused him comparable access to my sanctum with Carter. As much as Robbie and I were each other's Boswell, documenting our lives to each other, writing letters like Keats and keeping diaries like Nin, as much as I was apparently willing to do anything for him, this was one act of betrayal I could not commit.

The day Robbie's hard-disk drive crashed after he had been cranking away for hours and so lost a chapter, I sent onto to him a poem I'd heard W. S. Merwin deliver at a reading I'd gone to a few weeks before my trip to Oregon:

**I always knew that I came from another language and now even when I can no longer see I continue to arrive at words but the leaves and the shells were already here and my fingers finding them echo the untold light and depth I was betrayed into my true calling and denied in my advancement I may have seemed somewhat strange caring in my own time for living things with no value that we know languages wash over them one wave at a time when the houses fell in the earthquake I lost my wife and my daughter it all roared and stood still falling where they were in daylight I named for my wife a flower as though I could name a flower my wife dark and luminous and not there I lost the drawings of the flowers in fire I lost the studies of the flowers my first six books in the sea then I saw that the flowers themselves were gone they were indeed gone I saw that my wife was gone then I saw that my daughter was gone afterwards my eyes themselves were gone One day I was looking at infinite small creatures on the bright sand and the next day is this hearing after music so this is the way I see now I take a shell in my hand new to itself and to me I feel the thinness the warmth and the cold I listen to the water which is the story welling up I remember the colors and their lives everything takes me by surprise it is all**

**awake in the darkness Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit  
impediments.**

Occasionally when things were really singing at a high pitch between us Robbie would send me a Mailgram through MCIMail. He could arrange to have an actual letter in a distinctive orange glassine-window envelope arrive in my mailbox at my office, initiated by him electronically the day before in Mill Valley but mailed from the feeder post office closest to me, Boston. MCI guaranteed delivery within twenty-four hours of his requesting the service, so I knew when I saw one of these envelopes in my mailbox that he had been conjugating with me through the aether the night before. Robbie would send me these when I needed cheering up, or when he was suffering from an elation of his own: a chapter finished or good news about the propeller from the testbed, delivered by one of the aerodynamics specialists he had hired for the plane he was prototyping. He had programmed the Mailgrams to be printed out on what looked like his letterhead, but he always wrote the message in formal telegraphese:

You are probably the most passionate woman I have ever known. Stop. You are loving and strong and beautiful. Stop. While there have been previous flirtations in my marriage, this has gone further because it is worth the risk. Stop. I love you. Stop.

The tacky orange of the MCIMailgram envelope took on the semiology of the pink of Valentine's Day and the red of a dozen long-stemmed American Beauty roses. They piled up in the bottom drawer of my desk.

Robbie would call on Thursday evenings; through a happy coincidence, Carter's weekly beer'n'burger get-togethers of the Pioneer Valley rock climbers coincided with the meetings of Margaret's positive visualization healing circle. I would always arrange to be home those nights, though sometimes I was already in the bath by the time he called, taking the phone into the bathroom with me so I wouldn't miss him. The combination of sloshing water and my voice echoing off the tiles added something to the intimacy of the occasion, giving him a sense of my place. A few times I would still be talking to him when Carter came home. But Carter, my large, patient horse, trusted me; he was made

from clear-heart oak and it would not have been possible for him to think of me with anything but the highest regard. Besides, it was not his way to pay much mind to words: our bond was preverbal. Intertwined through our limbic systems, more brainstem than cortex, we were tied below the level of language.

I had already violated Carter's trust in the worst possible way anyway; and I was doing it regardless on a continuous basis in terms of thought-crimes. I had never known before Robbie that I, too, could be slimewad of such exalted degree. And I never knew I could become a sex-offender with transgressions too heinous for me to talk about them to anyone, not even to my gay friend/alter ego/life accomplice, Richard. Sociopathy in my daily life.

So the winter wore off, and Carter added the last little bits to his dissertation detailing the effects of olfactory cues in the dance-language of bees. And really, things in some ways were no different from before. I would still bump my forehead against Carter's upper arm when we would go grocery shopping; I would still laugh when he would hang me upside down and tickle the bottoms of my feet; his dog Pojo, the amoral Chesapeake Bay Retriever cross, still grinned at me when I came home sans Carter, the love of her life.

And with Robbie, it was like any other long-distance relationship, but more so. I couldn't be with him because of geography, and I couldn't be with him because I couldn't be with him. But o-bla-di-o-bla-da, life went on. I was guilty, distracted, anguished, and feeding on the best drug there is.

Robbie needed to come east to visit his publisher, so I arranged to schedule the presentation I had been procrastinating about to some folks in the MIT cognitive science group to coincide with Robbie's showing up in my time zone. The way he stood up and grabbed me by the shoulders in the lobby of the Copley, the way we nervously ordered drinks at the Plaza Bar and left them half-drunk before retreating upstairs, made me feel that we might as well have buckled ourselves into sandwich boards that had painted on them "Robbie Henerey and Claire Wyeth are having an affair" and marched up and down Commonwealth Avenue wearing them.

Sex with Robbie was curiously bigamous, not adulterous, characterized by affection rather than passion. Somewhere muffled by having his head cradled in

the curve of my hip, Robbie would murmur that he wished someday to have spent enough time together to become bored with me. For myself, I would smooth back down one of Robbie's eyebrow-hairs that had become ruffled, and tell him that he was the best damned quarter-horse I'd ever found: a sprinter, a working cow-pony, part thoroughbred, a racehorse possessed of mongrel vigor. I could do anything with him.

And because the sex was sweet rather than steamy, I was assured that we belonged to a Higher Moral Order, no petit bourgeois niceties about monogamy and marriage over here. We were participating in a Love That Could Not Be Denied, and our intercourse had nothing to do with hot-sheet joints and hourly rates. After all, we read to each other in bed. And I knew I could only be betraying Carter for Robbie, and Robbie would only be betraying Margaret for me.

He had to catch a plane back to California, and I had to drive back to Amherst. Robbie didn't shower afterwards, saying he wanted to keep our smell on him as long as he could. I thought he was insane to take such chances, but then, I didn't know Margaret personally nor her capacity for self-deception. That night I slept in Carter's arms as I always did, with him holding me as if I were a rabbit to be given to a favored grandchild. Such was Carter's ethology of caring.

Carter got his much-pined-for post-doc back home in Arizona, so as spring turned into summer, I was looking at carrying on two long-distance relationships instead of one.

I managed to see Robbie one time during the summer; though I hated to be away from Carter two weeks before he broke up our happy home, packed up dog and kit, and headed back out West, I needed to attend a joint Berkeley- Stanford conference on neural networks. And my time away from Carter was leavened by the afternoon spent with Robbie in a bed-and-breakfast on top of an antique store in Half Moon Bay. We were pretty good at romance at short order.

When Carter took off for out West, we made no sweeping statements of fealty, or commitment of undying love or eternal fidelity. We had never had to, and it was a couple of years late into our relationship to change things. We shared a morbid fear of sentimentality, and unspoken knew what we were to each other.

We didn't talk about plans for the indefinite future because they had included each other since forty-eight hours after we had first met. Carter's leaving town, any more than Robbie's cropping up in Oregon and in my life, was not supposed to make any difference.

That fall, I didn't know who I missed more, the man I had lived with or the man I was dying to become intimate with: strange to be missing someone I hardly knew. I walked around in a fugue state, always wishing to be elsewhere with someone else. But with whom, I wasn't sure. It was a living application of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle: I could know the location or the spin of either guy, but I couldn't be with one and not miss the other. In the act of observing, something would be lost. In wanting to be in two places at once, I wasn't anywhere at all.

Without Carter around to be kept fed, laid, and have his belly scratched, I developed a haunted existence. I would rise and bathe and teach my classes and have lunch with my colleagues and do my work, and no one knew I was in the throes of demonic possession. For I lived for the artificial high of those nights; what with the three hour time-difference between the East and West Coasts, Robbie and I would really start slinging the words around until his bedtime in Mill Valley, which was way into the early morning in Amherst. I had entered into a double life of secret and delicious shame: symbolic fornication over the wires. Demimondaine, it was as if I were a Berkeley feminist by day, into spanking at night. Claire by gaslight.

O rose, thou art sick, only the Sexually Transmitted Disease I caught from Robbie was not chlamydia or papilloma. It wasn't tertiary neurosyphilitic paresis that caused permanent damage to my nervous system, no permanent herpes simplex infestation in the nerves at the base of my spine. But Robbie had left his mark of sexual scarification on me all right, because the sheath for the nerves that allowed me to type became permanently rubbed raw. With Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, the etiology was not contact of mucous membranes but the vector of too much writing. My arms ached and my limp wrists grew weaker with loss of motor control through the inflammation of Repetitive Stress Injury, venereal disease not caused by unsafe sex but by logorrhea.

And Carter had never been much for writing letters.

As much as I was craving Robbie, Carter was my Designated Boyfriend, so it was with him that I was planning to spend my holidays.

It was just as cold in Tucson as it had been in Amherst when I'd left it, though it wasn't supposed to be that way. Carter picked me up at the airport in his 1964 white Chevy pickup truck given to him by his grand-daddy. I'd come to identify him, the kindest good old boy I'd ever met, with that truck. Since he'd moved back out to Arizona, he'd bought an HR twelve-gauge shotgun to refill the gunrack he'd left empty during his stay in western Massachusetts. In honor of my arrival, he had the radio tuned to the one classical station in town, as heavy on the nineteenth-century goop as it was, figuring I would prefer that to the member-supported station that in its drive towards multiculturalism played bad covers of bar music, or the junior college station that played fifty-year-old white guys' versions of cool jazz. Pojo, quivering with cold and excitement eel-like in the back, trotted hyper back and forth amidst my luggage.

The snow falling on the cartoony saguaro cactus didn't make any sense. It was always confusing when it snowed in the desert; no movie I'd ever seen had prepared me for it, though it happened much more often than the Arizona Chamber of Commerce would like anyone to know. The houses weren't designed with snow in mind, and the names of the malls usually had "sun" in them, or some other notion of the halcyon, when in fact I had to keep my coat on inside Carter's house, even though the coat brought the cold from outside in with it.

I was impatient to get showered, bedded down, and spooned-up with Carter as I hadn't since Thanksgiving - and logged on to see what was waiting for me from Robbie, my spirit demon-lover.

Oh the wonders of technology, where the adulterous commit their crimes in thought and word in an electronic salon, but rarely in deed. We could write each other every day, treat each other like the mental jungle gyms we were for each other, and speak of nooky without our partners having a clue. My computer had become a sex-toy, a marital appliance for the end of the millennium. I took a secret fetishizing delight in touching it, for I knew when I plugged it in that all kinds of thrills, both intellectual and loverly, awaited me. Truly, science is mankind's brother.



*carter's mother mentioned me three times (more than anyone else) in their annual xmas letter. carter has been incredibly affectionate, his wholesome handsome innocence at its best. though typically, he wants to spend his weekly wednesday night at the homemade backyard climbing wall with some climber bums. i didnt protest. i know he loves me, and actually it made me laugh. he's such a Regular Guy. and then there's you. So the mothers are pushing marriage? Or just a decision? How do you feel about that? If Carter pops the question on Christmas eve, how will you answer him? as for how i feel about questions being popped, i headed that off at the pass by bringing this up to carter when we were waiting for my baggage: joking about our mothers' pushinesses. they both think we should get "engaged," get a ring, and make up our minds later. i feel, and carter feels, i believe, that we would rather take the time to find out more who we are and how things go, especially with our time apart, than make lurching leaps neither of us wants to make. but he did comment that even back home here in his mother country of az, he never meets women who compare to me, and its precisely because i am not the ensnaring kind that he can be with me. so in answer to your question, what happens if he pops the question, i would freak, and then say, i dont know, we have to wait to know more, if he were to ask. is xmas eve a traditional time for questions to be popped?*

We were going to spend Christmas with Carter's family in their Northwest Phoenix tract house, and then we were going up to spend New Year's by ourselves at their cabin in the pine country halfway between Flagstaff and the ghost town of Jerome. I loved it there because we could pick up the Navajo radio stations whose broadcasts were interspersed with occasional Anglicisms on a par with the Franglais "le weekend" or "le match de football." Only near the reservations it was references to auto dealerships or fundamentalist prayer meetings or names of country-western songs that were in English.

Although Carter could hear the difference between the Hopi and the Navajo, he couldn't articulate how he could tell them apart. When I'd visited him over Thanksgiving he had been able to teach me how to pick out the Indian boarding-school accent. We'd been watching a dreadfully educational public-access cable documentary on Native American healing, and I'd asked Carter why the Indians being interviewed sounded so whitebread. I hadn't been able to understand why

some Indians spoke with this strange singsong that made them sound vaguely like recent immigrants from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, most likely of Swedish extraction. Four Corners natives who sounded like snowbirds were one more thing that hadn't made sense about the Southwest.

Once Carter explained, I understood why Indians above a certain age, from all parts of the country and from linguistic groups as diverse as Basque is from Finnish, often all sounded alike and vaguely Teutonic. It was for this down-home naturalist's knowledge of the trail, his tales of being a forest-fire fighter, that I had fallen in love with him. He liked to quote what one of his forest-service buddies had said to him when they had both been stranded on a granite outcropping, waiting for a fire to burn itself out around them: "Wildfires are like women. No two of them are alike." Only from Carter, it wasn't sexist drivel, but a paean to the grand forces of nature and the importance of individuality and idiosyncrasy and respect for the variousness of the world. Or at least that's how I understood the subtext.

On Christmas Eve we hauled into Carter's parents' house, the luminarios lit up and down the cul-de-sac. I hadn't looked forward to the two-hour drive on the interstate between Tucson and Phoenix. But I could use my computer to send and receive the crooniest of messages while Carter would lie gently snoring in the bedroom that had been his in high-school and that we shared whenever we visited his family.

The guilt I felt as I described the dear shape of sleeping Carter's long tawny horse head to Robbie was excruciating. But then, I couldn't have not described him to Robbie, any more than I could not have raced to get my computer plugged in to receive and send our moonings of the last twenty-four hours, any more than I could have resisted changing my seating in a room to track the sunlight as it moved across the floor through the course of an afternoon. Carter was asleep, but would wake up enough when I got into bed to latch onto me; I couldn't know what Robbie was doing, with or without Margaret in Mill Valley, as I cranked into the toll-free CPN node to exchange our endearments, whinings, and musings. CPN was a nationwide commercial service that made it possible for me make a local call anywhere in the country to connect to my electronic mail account. I was shaky with guilt, horrified at my addiction, and nothing

could have made me stop. That I was abusing Carter's trust onsite back at his family homestead made it worse, but it didn't stop me. Pojo lay beside me as I wrote, Pompeian-dog-preserved-forever-in-volcanic-ash style, snout and tail coming together in a good arc. Even the dog couldn't believe I could be doing anything bad, much less violating one of the Ten Commandments.

On Christmas morning, Pojo snapped the frost-burned cherry tomatoes off the vines Carter's mother had planted close to the cinderblock perimeter fence. I gave Pojo a Williamstown-baked dog-biscuit, a kind she'd grown fond of when we were still living together. Carter's parents gave me a sweatshirt screen-printed with a desert scene of the genre Carter called lavender coyote, and a pair of slippers handknit in blue metallic acrylic yarn. I gave them a cutting board I'd picked up at a crafts fair on campus and Carter a wool sweater with caribou knocking heads on it, and tie-dyed socks to match the T-shirts he tie-dyed himself. Part of the proceeds from the purchase of the socks went to benefit AIDS research. Carter gave me a book of poems by Emily Dickinson.

Dinner was a recapitulation of Thanksgiving: fearlessly beige, with peculiar concessions to the Winnebago People's notions of health-consciousness. There were casseroles made by throwing together cans of things, only the cans were "dietetic" or "low-sodium, low-cholesterol." There were cookie kisses, made from a recipe taken from a cookbook for diabetics, where oat bran and Nutrasweet were key ingredients. The house was quiet and tension-free, though; the "Home" show was not on at an intrusive volume, and Carter once again marveled at the way his mother would tell me stories about growing up poor in South Carolina during the Depression - stories he'd never heard in his family of repetitive story-tellers. The latest one was about how her father sold the family dog for a bag of beans. It was a question if Pojo would have been worth it back then when a dollar meant a dollar.

Taking me into the garage, Carter opened a locker wedged between the wall and his parents' RV. He pulled out of it photographs of some fires he'd been airlifted to in Montana and Idaho and showed me his Pulaski. His yellow Nomex fire-shirt and green Nomex fire-pants were still hanging in our closet in Amherst, his way of saying that he still considered where we had lived together his secured base camp.

On the way up to the cabin at Strawberry, Carter starting talking about when he had been on the hotshot crew stationed at Pine. He had been riding his raked and chopped Harley to work one morning when a family of javelina darted across the road in front of him. He swerved to avoid them, but he said he felt a small bump, which probably meant that he had run over their little javelina toes. His deadpan tale of javelina abuse made me laugh, his encounter with wild desert pigs another one of those eerie parallelisms of Robbie's life with Margaret: Margaret had a little car accident. It was just after dusk when she hit a deer while getting off 101 near Tam Junction. The deer is gone and so is about \$3,000 worth of the Peugeot. It turns out to have been a good thing that Margaret had a car-phone. She called me, and AAA. While she was waiting for all of us to show up, a man pulled off the highway in a van and asked her if she needed any help. The deer was still alive, but in really bad shape. Margaret said yes, and so the man pulled out a gun, shot the deer, and took off, hauling the deer away with him but doing nothing to help Margaret! The destruction of nature was a recurrent theme in our lives.

The snow made more sense weighing down pine boughs than it had whipping over the salt cedars and palo verdes. Carter had to stop at a hardware store to pick up a snow shovel, alien gear for Sonora-desert dwellers. When we unlocked the cabin, the first thing I did was turn on the radio and hear that snow was broadcast for the Mogollon Rim, for everywhere Phoenix and north. The second thing was to find out what the local CPN number was for Strawberry.

We settled into the highly pleasant householding we knew how to do so well. I would cook and he would clean and we took day trips to the ruins at Wapatki and Tuzigoot. Downwind from the Colorado Plateau, I figured out the longstanding archeological mystery over what happened to the Sinagua. They died from exposure after some sleazy tenth-century tour-packager convinced them that winters were warm in Arizona. When we stopped at the Sacred Mountain trading post mentioned in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Carter asked about special-ordering a wolf-kachina carving for me; there weren't any on hand. He always remembered that my one dip into the cutesy-itsy-boo was my affinity for wolves. The last wolf kachina the old-coot-straight-from-Central-Casting had kept in stock had been bought a few weeks before by a curator at

the Heard for his private collection. It was fortunate that we had chains for the truck, for the snow kept up intermittently.

And in the evenings, Carter would read letters to the editor printed in every local newspaper we picked up, and I would work on the paper I was preparing for the annual B.U. conference on Language Acquisition. The creosote would leak slowly down the outside of the chimney of the pot-bellied stove; the snow increased the quiet; and working at my computer, I could log on unobtrusively to see what was waiting for me from Robbie. Domestic bliss.

In this melodrama I was living through, I had arrived at one of those cheap epiphanies I had always feared: that I was just too much woman for any one man. Yet this was bedroom farce, not tragedy, and I didn't want to think about what was wrong with me that I had to have two when the rest of the world could make do with one. In any production of *La Ronde*, the characters are at best allowed ironic distance on themselves. Meanwhile, I was having the time of my life.

For New Year's Eve, we decided to keep it simple. We would score some enchiladas in green sauce, which I could never get back East, and then we'd come home, split a bottle of Schramsburg, take a bath together, and go to bed. I could drink a silent toast to Robbie in Carter's peaceable presence.

I'd been too preoccupied reading reprints that day to see if there was anything from Robbie, so I decided to log on just before we left for dinner. Carter had already gone outside to warm up the truck; he knew I liked the interior of the cab to be warm. There wasn't anything from Robbie; there was, however, notice of a message from an alien electronic mail network that nobody I knew subscribed to. I couldn't imagine what it could be, but I had a guilty premonition that it had to do with Robbie. The message had the subject header of "An uncomfortable situation" and was from someone I had never heard of, a Suzanne Rappoport:

**Hello. This is one of those unpleasant letters in which I have to write, I hate to tell you, but we're screwing the same man. The same married man. In case it's not obvious who I mean, it's Robbie Henerey. My name is Suzanne Rappoport. I'm 28 years old, divorced, and I live in El Cerrito. I met Robbie through the**

Electronic Frontier Foundation (I'm a computer journalist) 13 months ago, and we were involved from then on. I want to laugh, now that I know about you. I wondered why he never brought me along on his business trips. It's immediately apparent, now. I wonder how many others of us there are. All of this wouldn't be as upsetting if he had been honest about you and everyone else, but he hasn't been. He had me believing that I was his one and only affair. He's told me all manner of ludicrous stories. I've listened to him say he loves me more times than I can count. Pretty pathetic, hunh? Naturally, it's just as pathetic that I bought into him hook, line, and sinker, but that's another tale, and I don't know you. I discovered your affair this afternoon. I'd like to know how long you've been engaged in it, and so forth. That's my main purpose in writing you. You may already be aware of my existence, and know about everyone else, and this may not perturb you at all. If you have doubts about my entanglement with Robbie, and want it substantiated, I can provide you with credible evidence, but I'd rather not. Robbie, like all slovenly and sneaky animals, no doubt utilized many identical ways and phrases with us both. It hurts me to consider how game I was. I've written a furious letter to Robbie. In it I said to him that I am certain that he's having at least one other fling. I don't use your name or that of anyone else, and I don't explain how I found out (Robbie, creature of many hardons, left snail- trails everywhere around me, as he probably does with you. I ran into some of them. Aside from that, I won't elaborate.) I will tell you, though, that he has many many female correspondents. As for Robbie: he belongs in his lousy marriage. I almost believe it's a good thing for him to be stuck in it than for him to get what he seems to really be chasing after: to be found out. As for you, I have never met you, but I've been told about you, and I imagine you are smart, and articulate, and sexy. Just like me. This is not the way I typically begin making someone's acquaintance, but it's about all I am able to manage right now. Please pardon my awkwardness. I am more distraught than my words can possibly indicate. You can write me at the email address shown above.

It had to be true. I didn't know how this woman found out about me, or how to reach me, but she made too much sense to be dismissed as a writer of crank e-mail. Her writing had the aura of truth-telling about it. She answered the

question I hadn't wanted to pose: if he could do this to his wife, could he do this to me? And all along I had assumed I was other than a random adultery-unit.

Meanwhile, Pojo was on her leash and Carter was waiting so that we could have our holiday feast. The grace under pressure that was being exacted from me wasn't exactly courage, but it did require the best application of method-acting technique I could summon. Stress-testing in the as-if: I had been living for almost a year as if I were faithful to Carter; now I would have to act as if nothing were any different.

Part of Carter's genius for loving was his ability to let me be, so he didn't ask why I was quiet at dinner. He had always entitled me to my moods. I tried my best to utter complete sentences, and evince interest in what should have been festive dinner-table conversation. Carter ordered flan, and didn't ask why I had barely picked at my food. He did ask, though, if maybe I would have preferred him to cook the traditional Southern New Year's good-luck meal of ham hocks and black-eyed peas. I said thank you, I wasn't really hungry for anything, but I appreciated the gesture.

It started snowing again on the way back from the restaurant. I told Carter I had some notes I wanted to write up before I forgot them and sat down to write to Robbie and Suzanne. The snow stopped, meanwhile.

It was hard to parse, exactly, why Suzanne had contacted me: an overture to cooperate instead of compete, an impulse to ruin my idyll as hers had been ruined by finding out about me? I didn't like the way she described herself as in the personals; my conversion-reaction theory of the world lent itself to self-descriptions, for in my experience people who described themselves as smart and articulate weren't, just as people who used the word "class" didn't have any. I was as enraged that Robbie was violating my trust with someone I couldn't consider competition as I was that I had been so righteously snookered.

But whether I liked her or not was not the point. I had been had, I had defiled my connection to Carter the Good for naught, and I had to act. To Robbie I sent: *il pleure dans ma coeur/ comme il pleut sur la ville. it weeps in my heart/ as it rains on the town only here, it's been snowing, and there is no town. sleet in*

*the soul. the question has finally been answered: robbie + claire = deep love? or confusion about the nature of appearance and reality the first reaction is rage and pain, followed by the conclusion that i must drop you immediately. then comes the regret at the loss of the friendship and the lovemaking. finally my need to figure out kicks in. i met my new friend suzanne last night over email. is it because you are badly botching a book you do not want to be working on that you are drowning your sorrows in chasing tail? how sad. what a tawdry form of self-soothing, leading women around by the genitals, under pretense. here i was thinking i was so special, when it turns out i am yet-another cosmo girl made a fool out of by a smooth-talking married man. only my golden-voiced cad, my silver-tongued devil, is kinky enough to want to add an academic woman to his stable. silly me. the most chilling image is thinking of you either sending or receiving mushy email from me on your way to your other "love." it makes me feel like such a jerk. double deception is beyond me: one turn of the worm has been about as much as i could handle. this is what love is: carter dreams of utopia. he dreams his granddaddy is alive; that his truck has been repainted; that he is back in cave creek as it was when he was a kid, a friendly small town far out in the desert where kids still ride their horses to school; that he has a nice cactus garden; that there was a sweet woman next door that he was attracted to and who was attracted to him. he decided when he woke up that the woman must have been me, even though she didn't look like me. you dont know what love is. this is what love is: i'm sleeping in the backseat as carter drives us to his parents for thanksgiving. i've rented a car for us because the truck is acting up. he later tells me that he glanced at me as he was driving that he found me so beautiful that he wanted to reach back and pet me. but then he thought, no, the best thing he could do for me would be to drive as best and as safely as he could. you dont know what love is. you who respond so much to smell: think cadaverine, one of the olfactory fractions of a rotting corpse. loving you was an attraction to complex systems, oh you, so self-organizing and harmonious. it was like the music of bach proving the existence of god. now it seems our carryings-on have been merely another instance of the second law of thermodynamics: disorder is the basic law of the universe, endlessly winding down, and all we are guaranteed is to be left with cosmic dust and intergalactic cold. what was that you were saying about chaos, and strange attractors? i have been living in an epistemology of*



*lying. what an interesting construct. funny, i had thought we had been playing the part of the true secret sharer in each other's lives. i remember that day when we dallied in boston. i had some time to kill until you could get to the copley, so i dropped by the computer museum. in the gift shop, there were buttons for sale with snappy nerd sayings but the one that leaped out at me was the one that said "The street finds its own uses for technology. The net finds its own uses for garbage." reminds me that GIGO is the first thing you're taught in cybernetics. and what Garbage In and Out there has been transmitted between us, darlin', over the net. i would be interested in hearing your remarkable powers of invention put to use here: i can already anticipate "there are no others" "she didn't matter" "why can't i love you both but differently"*

To Suzanne I wrote:

**you did me a kindness by writing to me. as much as i was not happy with what you had to tell me, at some level it came as no surprise. what i am surprised at is how you found out about me. robbie and i do not travel in the same circles; i haven't lived in california for years; and he and i haven't made a habit of appearing together in public. i am sorry that he hurt us both. please tell me more. i applaud your courage in contacting me: sisterhood can be powerful** where actually I thought she was seriously off: in her position, I would have only wanted to confront the erring male, not the other Other Woman. But even in catastrophe pathological curiosity is the strongest post- Freudian personality demonic in my character. I wanted to know more, because knowledge is power.

Pojo stuck her nose in my lap while I was writing my killer e-mail to Robbie. I pushed her aside. When I finished, Carter poured champagne into white coffee mugs decorated with dappled blue geese. I smiled at him, clinked my mug against his, and glugged it down.

We took the bottle into the bathroom with us. Pojo parked herself outside the door. It was my fault entirely, but we weren't having much fun. We dried off and got into our robes. Carter went to sit by the stove, and not into bed; I came and sat on his lap. He didn't push me off but he didn't embrace me either.

He said that I had been distant and irritable and fault-finding all vacation, and that he couldn't stay with me if I was going to be at him all the time. That he loved me a lot, but loving someone wasn't enough; that you could marry someone for love, and ten years later realize that you had still married the wrong person.

This was Carter making statements, Carter the strong silent Westerner who had shown me the exact spot on the old two-lane Phoenix-Tucson highway where Tom Mix had his fatal car accident. Carter would have scoffed at comparisons to Gary Cooper, but he never spoke when he could joke and was the best-equipped man I'd ever met at stepping around discussions of couple-crap. His giving me a talking-to was a singularity on our event-horizon, history live in the making. I had to pay him mind.

I said he was right; that I loved him too, and I was sorry if I had been distracted. What he hadn't known is that what he had been sensing was Robbie; that when I was with Carter, I was low-grade annoyed with him for not being Robbie, but I was never with Robbie enough to get irked with him for not being Carter. And that night, although for the worst possible reasons, Robbie had been more present than he had ever been. Carter felt the wrench from Suzanne's e-mail, and the presence of the Other, but assumed the dross and the darkness were strictly endogenous, iatrogenically dredged up from within.

I should have known better than to be enacting a privatized bodice-ripper with a man who seemed to come straight out of a Harlequin Romance for the literati. Anything, however custom-fitted to the lineaments of my desires, too good to be true probably was. Robbie had been my personalized temptation summoned Faust-like from Hell, an incubus of my own devising. And only Robbie, supranormal and ultimately self-contradicting, could have made me betray all my self-important homilies about emotional authenticity and who I was and what it meant to love. The Hindus and the Buddhists have it that desire is the root of all unhappiness, that such attachments are maya, or illusion. Closer to home, never ask for what you want because you might get it.

Carter gently pushed me off his lap so he could get into bed. I said I would join him in a little while. Pojo followed him into the bedroom and lay down at the foot of the bed. I turned off the lights in the house and turned on the radio in

time to hear the sign-off National Weather Service forecast, which said there would be more snow, up to Utah, down to Phoenix, and into Colorado and New Mexico.

Without the metalanguage of the affair with Robbie, Carter's wholesomeness was not an adequate overarching metaphor for me to live by; as much as I might wish it to be otherwise, animal husbandry couldn't be the central organizing principle in my life. Once Robbie had entered my life, I didn't have to worry that I had little to say to Carter, exhilarated as I was by unlearning to not speak; but now that Robbie would be leaving it, I realized I could not live without certain kinds of speech acts. While there would be peace in the freedom from Robbie's mostly nocturnal visitations, it would be the peace of hermetic retreat: Carter's horse-sense was telling him what I hadn't wanted to hear. Our menage may have been necessary at one point but it was no longer sufficient. I could no longer couple with either the vampire or the villager.

I got up, turned off and disconnected my computer, and crawled into bed. Carter was already asleep. While he didn't turn to curl up around me as he would have any time in the past, he didn't turn away, either. Instead, he rested one of his large lovely hands on my leg. I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling and could not sleep.

I thought of the death of the heart with Carter; and how the soul had flown out of the love with Robbie. I thought about the impossibility of human connection, the imperfection in all unions, and how no one ever really loves anyone anyway, or at least in the ways that they want to be loved. And I thought about how in Norse mythology, the Ice Giants would always win in the end, and cold and frost and stillness will ultimately triumph, but that mortals had to keep trying anyway.

A couple of hours before dawn, I was still awake. It was then that the promised heavy snowfall began. It was falling on Strawberry, Pine, and Payson; on the Havasupai, the White Mountain Apache, and the people of Second Mesa; on Mormon Lake, Canyon de Chelly, and the Petrified Forest. It was snowing on the kachinas' home in the San Francisco peaks. It added to the weight of the snow already on the ponderosa pines outside the bedroom window, it would bedevil prospectors in the Superstitions, it would gladden the skiers at Sunrise. It

probably wasn't snowing in Mill Valley, where Robbie would have heard from me by now. The blizzard started the new year and marked in passing the death of love. I welcomed the snowblindness I hoped to run into with the morning.

The sun did come out the next day; water was dripping happily off the roof. We hadn't drunk enough to be hungover, but I was suffering from the effects of a *nuit blanche* as well as terminal heartbreak. After Carter cooked us his celebrated multigrain buttermilk pancakes, he said he was going to take Pojo for a walk. I begged off accompanying the boy and his dog. I checked, but there was nothing yet from Robbie.

Carter and I treated each other with extreme solicitousness the rest of the day. We exchanged few words, but those words that were uttered were marked by high civility. It was late afternoon by the time I finally got a reply from Robbie:

You wondered at the intimate interconnection of our two lives; it's been pleasant and useful for us both, I think. I'd like to continue to know you and to read occasionally by your light. Without a doubt, I have made a mess here for everyone, and I apologize. There can be no excuses for chicken-shit actions, only inadequate rationalizations. You asked only that our two minds bang into each other, but I leaned on you for more. I need love. I have screwed things up for you, Carter, Suzanne, me, and Margaret and I am sorry. Beyond being sorry, I can't think of what else to do except try to compensate both you and Suzanne by either exiting your lives or turning into a less destructive and misleading force in them. I need you to let me know how I can make things right for you.

After a quiet dinner, our last before we had to head back down the mountains, I replied to Robbie: *at the cscw conference where we met, there was a paper delivered which we both missed because we were having it off for our second time. it was called "more than just a communications system: diversity in the use of electronic mail." diversity, my ass. i wonder what the author would have made of this, the perversions and evasions of email. only through the distortions of email could i have been made a chump in just this way. i think i should write a paper of my own — "Love over the Wires: deformations in interpersonal attachment as evidenced in case histories of electronic mail" was i ever more than a function, an operation, a lover-pet to you? it feels like someone has half-shoved in the point of a spade into the hollow between the*

*tendons at the base of my throat. i remember not that long ago i wrote you saying that i could only be doing this with you because there was honor among us thieves. i could not love thee dear, so much, loved i not honor more. but the new mistress you now chase is not the first foe in the field but is named suzanne. we seem to each have had in mind different lovelaces, i guess. needing love is such a banality of an excuse that i cannot dignify it with a response. when i think of the beauty of the bone-structure of your skull, of the planes of your face, i want to bawl. my telecommunications costs will sure drop. possession is 9/10ths of the law. i never really had you. farewell, you are too dear for my possessing.*

Carter and I didn't have sex and we didn't talk about it. The next morning we cleaned the house, throwing out the half-drunk bottle of champagne. I washed the sheets and towels and he removed the ashes from the pot-bellied stove. I logged on one last time from our mountain home. Robbie had zoomed back with

What is most important to me is keeping you in my life, whatever that takes, in whatever form. That is what has always been most critical since I first met you. You are the gravel a bird needs in its gizzard or it will starve to death. You offer me reality. I don't want to lose you. We can become friends. You can become friends with Robbie and Margaret the couple. We can maintain a purely writing relationship. Or we can remain lovers.

I gave myself the liberty of going ballistic, for there was nothing left to lose. Carter was willing to throw sticks for Pojo for as long as I needed to write, for Pojo was a machine genetically engineered for retrieving quail-like objects by the hundreds and Carter was always one to seek solace through the outdoor activities of boyhood. But I no longer needed long stretches of uninterrupted time to make sure that my words seduced. My prose could become prolix and awkward and it didn't matter any more that the music in prosody Robbie had always so praised had fled:

*this is how it goes. you + i have often remarked how we are totally alike except for when we each seem to be from another planet. typically, in our college days we both worked in radio but i volunteered at the college station and you got yourself one of the few real media jobs in your county at the only MOR station in town. when i took my fcc 3rd class license exam (i was the only one*

who passed that year from my station, though; i wonder, oh master of technique, did you ever bother to get your 3rd class license?), i marvelled that one of the test questions addressed the examinee's knowledge of this rule, among the fcc's most fundamental: that you were not supposed to -knowingly-broadcast false or misleading information. secret sap that you know that i am, this brought tears to my eyes; that one of the moral laws of the universe, higher-powered striving toward the light, could be codified in the government amazed me. one of the tenets of my existence — mean what you say and say what you mean — mattered to the powers that be [i also told this story once to a semi-famous has-been, a crusading left-liberal former fcc commissioner, with whom i also kept an affair going through remote control by email, who is the only other man i have ever met who is your match in accomplishment in the things i value, and in the absolutely stellar, stunning quality of his hypocrisy. he, like you, probably found my streak of earnestness, that is a tad too wide, charming and useful in its naivete. and once said he would rather get poison-pen letters from me than love-letters from anyone else. but that is another story, which we no longer have world enough and time for]. suffice it to say: for communication-junkies, lying breaks the rules. it's axiomatic. how much of what you have said to me has been true ever? you have lied by both commission and omission. i have never lied to you about anything. why have you done this with me unless genuine self-revelation was the aim? what i thought we were doing was based on reciprocal and accelerating trust. you have always said you valued my passion and honesty — why, because you cant combine the two ? it's a shame. i gave you more credit. next time you have an affair, try not to bring love into it. it will only confuse the poor woman and make her that much angrier when she finds out she has been deceived. hell, next time you even flirt with someone, think of what it means, what you're doing, where it might lead. how can i be friends with someone who cares so little about me? i am not certain what that locution, "friend," means to you. i doubt you use it as in common parlance. as for being friends with you and margaret, puh-leez. most of what i have heard about margaret i despise, and your travesty of a marriage has always appeared to be a system of lies and starvation. what, i'm supposed to come over to your house for dinner and act like i dont want to jump your bones, or that margaret deserves those sinews and bones more than i? i was willing to defy taste, sense, judgment, and

*generally-held standards of decency for you. i didn't sign on to betray carter, the nicest man in the world, to be friends with margaret. or suzanne, for that matter. i wanted you; i wasn't interested in your wife. nor your bit of local action, had i known about her. but then, the notion of the sacredness of personhood, of women not being interchangeable vile receptacles, is evidently beyond your ken. positions for three has never been to my liking. as for being lovers, surely you jest. it's been bad enough to put up with margaret, whom i suspect i wouldn't like if i ever met her; but she was a pre-existing condition. but with suzanne on the scene, all bets are off. i am not in the habit of playing second fiddle to anyone; backstreet girl is not my scene to begin with. if mucking around with miss second-rate prose is what you want, you cannot have me. sorry. sport-fucking has never been my event. i hate to give up our letter-writing communion, though. our dialogue was exquisite and valuable to us both. but without the erotic tension, the email drovers of love that our desire for each other gave, the showing off and reaching far and digging deep that one only does when one woos and courts, what would we be offering to each other without those yearnings undergirding everything? we wrote because we couldn't be together. i will miss our discourse terribly. so as for continuing to write each other, what would we talk about, home repair? even for the language-obsessed, writing has to be about something. once the opacity of lying has been introduced into the clarity of our talk, the universe falls apart and nothing makes any sense any more. it's gresham's law, robbie: bad coinage always drives out good. i see no future for us unless these issues are dealt with. i would love for you to tell me that things are different than i see them. i loved you not wisely but too well.*

Disgorging had taken far less time than our psychic mutual grooming ever had. I told Carter I was through and ready to go. He turned off the water and the power, locked up, and we drove away.

The snow dropped away quickly as we drove towards Tucson. The travel day was my last with Carter before I had to fly back home. We made love that night, but it already had the static quality of recreational sex with an ex-lover. We didn't have any SALT talks; no state-of-the-relationship summings-up. It was much more Carter's way, as gentle as he was with livestock, to let me drift away than drive me off.

Carter took Pojo with him to the airport to see me go. Neither one allowed for the elegiac: Pojo whomped her tail a few times against the floorboards of the truck and smiled a dragon smile as I scratched her under the chin one last time, and Carter, with the gentlemanly manners to the end of a cowboy come to town to court the schoolmarm, carried my luggage to the skycap, kissed me briefly on the mouth, said goodbye, and drove off. I guessed to Carter stoicism meant not drawing attention to stoicism.

On the flight back, I considered what life would be like without either Carter or Robbie. It was a neat trick, to surgically excise two guys from my life at the same time. And I had the unwitting change-agent of Suzanne to thank for it.

I hadn't been able to bring myself to log on to see what new bad news was awaiting me the last few days in Arizona. The "You have new mail" prompt was now associated with terror and dread, not pleasure. But I fretted over what Robbie would say when he broke his radio silence; he had never been able to resist my prose before.

When I got home, I saw there was nothing from Suzanne, which was just as well. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to be swapping confidences with someone I suspected would ick me out. There was something from Robbie, however. I nervously scrolled it down: I have no desire to communicate with you further. I see nothing good that can be accomplished in doing so, so I won't participate. Our relationship isn't working for me anymore and I need to end it. I hope your work and your emotional life progress as you wish them to. Best of luck, Robbie The son of a bitch. At least, I would give myself the pleasure of the last word: *neither of us, it seems, knows how to handle further contact. with all your talk of the eternal qualities of our love, and all that bay-area psychobabble about spiritual values, you cannot be bothered to talk this through. pulling apart while continuing to talk promotes healing. pretty shabby, robbie. your silence, i take it, means assent to all i have painfully mapped out. this was one time i had really hoped i was wrong and that my understanding was fragmentary. i would gladly have been informed of how i was wrong, or how a different, fuller narrative should be made of our story. it's hard to square my distinct stubborn sensation of having been loved by you with the icy, robbie-first love-denying utilitarianism of your cutting me off as*



*you have. as for your final words to me, really cold, robbie. you might as well have said "have a nice day/have a nice life." i have kept all the copies of our email. that's something you should know. not that there is any threat to blackmail: nothing i want from you could be obtained that way. there is no efficacy in blackmail and it's not kharmically correct. instead, as one creator of texts to another, it is a way of telling you that a paper trail exists documenting how we appeared to be more than that which existed opportunistically for your benefit. i have proof, oh lord, i have proof, that i had been led to believe that i would have been honorably dealt with, even in the ending of this. that's all. speech may be vaporware. the written word is not. you have banished me to the land of ice and snows. robbie henerey's personal ovid exiled to silence and obscurity (i never have had enough cunning) to live out life in the remoteness of the black sea, far from your accidental empire. ok then, as you wish. a toi de meme. fuck you drop dead go to hell, yourself. i loved you better than that, and expected better than that from you. les jeux sont faits.*

I didn't hear from Robbie again. Carter and I continued to talk as often as we ever did, but we made no plans to see each other over spring break. We were breaking up the old-fashioned way, slowly and gracefully. A new silence took over my life, a ceasing from mind-chatter.

With no Robbie to chronicle my life to, I no longer treated my days as cinema. My perspective on the general aviation section of airports had been permanently altered. I continued to wonder if anyone else had been working on a better study on the syntax and pragmatics of romantic attraction and e-mail.