

EASTER WEEKEND





Daniel got out of bed, wiped the sleep from his eyes, turned on his computer, and sat down at his desk, where he began typing out his suicide note. Although he'd no intention of taking his life on this particular day, typing out his final words made him feel better: a cathartic exercise that helped exorcise the demons of regret, which he often woke with after a night of drinking. He typed:

Dear Adam,

I feel that quite possibly you're the only one who will understand what I am about to do and what I will have done by the time someone stumbles across this letter. I feel it necessary that I take my own life, for I have not been able to make it make any sense whatsoever, and I'm always sad and sick. Nothing makes me happy—I don't know why, but I have an idea. I will not depress and bore you with my selfish (?) rea-

sons for wanting to die, but let's just say, it's because I am a fool, and always will be, and never want to subject anyone to my limitless psychotic problems again. I hurt everyone I encounter, including myself. I love you and miss you ...

Your brother,
Daniel

Reading what he'd typed, he felt mildly disheartened. Yesterday's suicide note to his best friend Mark was much more sad and affecting. It was his second time waking and he hadn't yet showered. Earlier in the morning, he'd woken up on a friend's couch and couldn't remember if he'd tried to sleep with his friend. Before she was up, he was gone. He'd left a note on her kitchen table:

Dear Melissa,
Thanks for letting me crash at your pad;
you saved a young man from dying drunk,
destitute, and alone. Rest assured, you did
a good thing. Take care.

The most hungover man in NATO,
Daniel K.

He showered and thought about shaving. Wearing a towel tied around his waist, he went into his roommate Nick's room, where Nick sat staring at his

computer's screen. "What's up, man?"

"Not much."

"What time is it?"

"Twelve-oh-one."

"Shit, all right," said Daniel while pacing Nick's room. "I'm taking off in about ten minutes."

"Going back to London."

"What are you doing this weekend?"

"I don't know," Nick said.

"Well, shit, man, I'll pack."

"Have a good trip."

"You know, you're welcome to come with us. My mom won't mind. There'll be more than enough food."

"Thanks, bud, but I'm just going to stay in town. Maybe check out the parade."

"All right."

"Okay."

Daniel stood in front of the apartment building, waiting for his lift, when Jesus Christ walked by, dragging a cross. Romans were whipping him and he was bleeding. Many people watched—old, young, babies on shoulders. He'd forgotten about the parade, even though Nick had mentioned it. Daniel found a payphone and called Paul, his ride, and told him to meet a street south of College.

Paul repeatedly filled and smoked from his brass one-hitter, while driving 120km/h, listening to music and talking to Daniel. Paul's T-shirt read, **DO NOT RESUSCITATE.**

When the conversation lulled, Daniel tried to sleep. The night before, he dreamed he'd found a copy of a book about a boat going down a river in a jungle. When he woke, he felt sad, not because the dream was over (he never derived much pleasure from dreams), but because he was hungover again and sleeping on the couch of a girl he may've attempted to sloppily seduce the night before, a girl he wasn't even particularly attracted to. Or a girl he was incredibly attracted to. He couldn't decide.

"So Stephen's marrying Jenny?"

"Uh-huh," Daniel said.

"Fucked up, eh?"

"Kind of."

"I don't want to go."

"To the wedding?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" Daniel asked.

"It'll depress me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe in marriage. Besides, he shouldn't marry her."

"Why?"

"Because she sucks. She's cheated on every boyfriend she's had. She cheated on me, and I'm pretty damn sure she's fucked around on Stephen. She's manipulative. I don't trust her."

“You don’t have to. Stephen’s the one marrying her.”

“I know, and I think it’s a terrible idea.”

“You were saying.”

“Daniel, don’t be an asshole. You know it’s a bad idea. Stephen’s a great guy—I wish him well—but he’s making a mistake. He’ll be happy for a while. Fuck, the marriage might last a whole five years. But then she’ll leave him and he’ll be a disgusting mess. You know this.”

“No I don’t.”

“What?” Paul said. He lit his one-hitter, inhaled, changed lanes, exhaled thick smoke, and coughed hard. Daniel coughed too.

“I’m gonna tell you exactly what’s gonna happen to Stephen and Jenny over the next five years, all right?”

“All right.”

“He’ll knock her up any minute now, if he hasn’t already,” Paul said. “Then, Jenny, being a girl who thrives on attention, will love being pregnant *so* much, she’ll love being pampered *so* much, shortly after popping out the first kid—*BAM!*—she’ll be pregnant again. Now Stephen will be working his bag off in order to support the family that appeared immediately after he tied the knot. He’ll be dazed but he’ll be happy. Or at least he’ll think he’s happy. For a while, he’ll get off on having a family, a small house, a satellite dish, whatever, but he’ll be too damn tired to fuck after work. He won’t be able to get it up and Jenny will get it somewhere else. And

when Stephen finds out that Jenny's sleeping with someone else, he'll be ruined. And you know what?"

"What."

"She'll leave the poor bastard and he'll continue to support her and the kids he never sees while some other fuck's filling her in."

"Jesus."

"Daniel, this is how people live."

Paul put the brass pipe to his lips, he lit his lighter, he inhaled. Staring at the highway, he repeated the process. "Ouch," he said, licking his lips. They kept driving, Paul with a dull red-eyed stare, and Daniel feeling tense.

"I want to get laid this weekend," Paul said.

"Yeah."

"I think I might call Cynthia."

"Are you serious?"

"No one knows, so keep it on the down-low."

"Yeah, I will," Daniel said. "But you realize if James finds out, he'll kill you. Like, you'll be walking down the street and he'll snipe you down from some—"

"He's never gonna find out," Paul said, while lighting a cigarette. "Do you have anyone to call?"

"I don't know. Kind of."

"Okay."

"You remember Colleen Knight?"

"Yeah," Paul said.

"When I was home a few months ago, visiting my mom, I saw her out. We ended up back at her place. We didn't sleep together or anything, but we

messed around for a bit.”

“Then give her call!” cried Paul.

“I will. I...I haven’t talked to her for about a month,” Daniel said, nervously eyeing a black pickup driving close to them. “Her and I’ve been this way for a while—we see each other, have some drinks, mess around, then get on with our respective lives.”

“That’s cool. You need to take a piss or anything?”

“Sure.”

“I need smokes,” said Paul.

He pulled into the furthest right-hand lane. The speed of the car decreased and they glided into the rest stop, which offered a gas bar, three different fast food restaurants, a gift shop, and washrooms. Daniel went to the washroom.

Standing in front of a urinal, he unzipped his zipper; then, a voice started to speak: a commercial came on a screen in front of the urinal while he pissed and “We Will Rock You” played.

Paul bought a pack of cigarettes with a government warning on the box of a cigarette pointing downward like a flaccid penis, its tip flaking ash. Also, he bought a pair of aviator sunglasses. Daniel watched him stand, back straight, measuring himself against the height-chart taped to the side of the threshold, when leaving the store. “Six one,” said Paul.

Daniel said, “Nice shades.”

“Thanks, man,” Paul said, admiring himself in

the reflection of a car window. “Let’s go.” He offered Daniel a cigarette, which was refused, and drove to the highway. Daniel tried to sleep.

Paul pulled his car into Daniel’s mom’s laneway, fifteen minutes northwest of London, Ontario.

“Listen, have your dinner and do your family stuff. Later on, a bunch of us are going over to Josh’s house—we’ll prime there, then hit the town. Cool?”

“Sure. Thanks for the lift.”

Daniel opened the door to his mom’s house, put his luggage down in the hallway, took his shoes off, and walked around, calling out, “Hello! Hello!” No one responded. He went downstairs, where he heard race-car noises. His eleven-year-old brother, Harrison, was sitting in front of the TV, playing a video game.

“Hey, why didn’t you answer when I was yelling?”

“I didn’t hear you.” As the race car turned corners, Harrison leaned to the corresponding side.

“Where’s Mom?”

“Went to get eggs at the store.”

“Where’s Ted?”

“Dad’s with her.”

He went upstairs to what was formerly his room, now a room filled with exercise equipment—dumbbells, cross-country skiing simulator, rowing machine, treadmill, etc.—but his bed was still there,

next to the treadmill. His mother's voice called out:
"Hello! Harrison! Daniel! We're home!"

His mother and Ted were in the kitchen, unpacking groceries.

"Hey, Daniel, how you doin'?" Ted said.

"Good, good," he said, nodding. "How are you?"

"Can't complain."

"You look thin, Daniel. Are you eating enough? You need to gain weight."

"I wouldn't worry, Mom. I'm sure I'll gain weight after the feast."

"There's a lot of food," Ted said.

"How was the drive down?" his mother asked.

"Good."

"Traffic wasn't too bad?" said Ted.

"No, it was fine."

"Good."

"Daniel, you look tired, honey."

"I've just been busy."

Daniel went upstairs and shut his eyes but couldn't sleep. Frustrated, he tried to relax by studying the large darkness created by his sealed lids. It didn't work; after a few seconds, he'd lose concentration.

The table was elegantly set. They'd used the nice plates and silverware, candles and linens, with a decanter of red wine in the centre, between two white candles on silver holders. Dinner was nice. The food

was good and plentiful. Everybody looked good. And Daniel couldn't wait for it to be over.

"Harrison might be in the play," their mom said.

"I don't know yet," said Harrison. "I don't find out till Tuesday."

"What's the play?" Daniel asked.

"I forget the name. Something about someone who's looking for...I forget."

"Do you want my dessert, Harrison?"

"Yeah! Thanks," he said, reaching to take the plate.

"I think he's had enough," said their mother. "You have to watch your weight, little man," she said, "or you'll become a big fat man." And she took the pie and ice cream away.

A car horn honked.

Daniel put on his shoes, said goodbye to his mom and Ted, and yelled goodbye to Harrison, who'd gone down to the basement.

"Paul, what's up?"

"Not much. Just strapped on a good-size feed-bag with the family," he said, and lit a cigarette.

"Can I bum a smoke?" said Daniel.

Save for the section lit by the car's headlights, the country road was dark and empty. Paul drove fast. He put the one-hitter to his lips. "You want any of this?" he asked.

"Sure."

Josh's house stood alone, surrounded by acres of open fields. Loud muffled guitar music emanated

from the home. The moon shone weakly.

All the young men celebrated being together by drinking as much as they wanted and by smoking as much as they wanted. Daniel watched fireflies while pissing. The rest of the guys, save for Mark and Daniel, were in the house. The temperature had dropped. They were drunk, their postures lax. Mark took his wallet from his left back pocket and produced a tiny, red, transparent zip-lock baggy containing a gram of cocaine. “Go in the house and get a CD case,” he said.

“She was beautiful when she was young. I mean, really gorgeous. I was in my basement,” Mark said, “looking through old boxes, and I found a picture of her with my old man—she was probably about our age. Believe me, she was stunning.” He said, “Do you remember when Adam and your dad got in the accident?”

“Of course,” said Daniel.

“No, I was just wondering. I mean, you were young.”

“I remember it.”

Paul came out the back patio door. “I’m going into town. Hit a bar. Are you guys coming?”

“Who’s all going?” Mark said.

“Just me. The rest of the guys are content to drink here all night. I say fuck that.”

“Yeah, I’m in,” Daniel said.

Mark offered to drive down because he was the

least drunk.

Daniel's forehead was pressed up against the back right-hand window. The glass was cool. While grinding his teeth, he gnawed on his jaw.

Carol, Ashley, Sue, and Cynthia sat at the bar, smoking and drinking, talking and laughing. Daniel sat down beside Ashley and ordered a whiskey and a beer.

"How've you been, Daniel?" she said.

"Okay, I guess."

"How's Toronto?"

"Good. I like it there," he said. "It's good, I think. I'm sorry, how are you?"

"Good. Really good."

"Really good, eh?"

"Yes," said Ashley. "I'm content."

"Wow!"

"You don't believe me?"

"How's Eric?"

"He's good. He didn't feel like drinking tonight because he has a lot of work to do. Besides, tonight was kind of a girls' night out thing."

"I'm not ruining it, am I, the girls' night out?"

"Well, you're sort of cramping my style."

"I was your style for a while."

"Fashion's ephemeral," she said.

Daniel finished his whiskey, ordered another, and drank beer while waiting.

"Eric and I moved in together," she said.

“So your place’s out of the question, I guess.”

She laughed and Daniel lit a cigarette, forgetting he already had one burning.

“Can you imagine what it’d be like if you and I lived together?”

“Well,” she said.

“Have you?”

“Occasionally,” Ashley said.

“Let me get you a drink,” he said.

Ashley talked about how her parents never paid much attention to her and how most of her family ignores her. She claimed that it’s her sister they dote on—“They’re nuts about her for some godforsaken reason”—and Daniel sat, smoking and drinking, listening intently.

Paul sat down on a stool beside Daniel. He tapped his shoulder. “How you doin’?”

“Not bad, but I’m pretty messed up. I’ve had a lot to drink.” Daniel burped under his breath. “I was doing a bit of the dummy dust with Mark and it’s kind of cracked me out a little. I’m a bit high-strung, you know. It’s stupid.”

“You’ll be fine,” said Paul. “Just don’t do anymore.”

“Good advice.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m meeting Cynthia back at my place around three-thirty. So that’s what’s up. Don’t tell anyone, though.”

“I would never,” said Daniel.

“Yeah, I know, but don’t even tell Mark. He’ll say something to someone, I know it. So keep it

quiet, all right?”

“Sure.”

His friends talked. Instead of talking, Daniel smoked. The big meal he'd eaten earlier, in conjunction with the baby laxative used to cut the cocaine, made him feel uneasy.

“Daniel, c'mon, amigo. We'll go back to my place,” Mark said. “You can crash there.”

“I was sort of thinking about calling this girl I know. Colleen Knight. You know her?”

“It's a little late for that,” he said. “You don't want to call her, man. It's already quarter-after-three.”

“Oh.”

“C'mon, let's go. *Vámonos.*”

“I'm just going to say goodbye to Ashley, okay?”

“Make it fast.”

Swivelling the stool to his right, Daniel interrupted Ashley's friend Sue, apologized, but said he was leaving and wanted to say bye. He kissed Ashley's cheek, said, “Take care, lady,” then stood up to go.

2

A gunshot startled Daniel out of sleep. He was in a bedroom at Mark's place. He knew where he was as soon as he opened his eyes. He rose from bed and did something uncharacteristic, something he only did when he had to dress up: back straight, he tucked his shirt into his trousers so as to create the illusion of composure. His stomach burned, his eyes smarted, and his teeth throbbed. With yellow and brown fingers, he massaged his hurting head. His heart felt cramped; his lungs like burnt toast. The TV was loud and electric with gunfire: a western.

In the kitchen, Mark searched cupboards.

"How was your sleep?" he asked.

"Okay," Daniel said.

"Turn the TV down, Dad."

"What?"

"The goddamn TV. You've got it blasting."

"I'm watching John Wayne."

"I know. You've been watching them all night,"

Mark said. "Are we out of coffee?"

"I don't know."

"Fine. I'm going to get one. Would you like one?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Do you want one or not?" Mark said.

"Don't trouble yourself."

"I'm going there anyway. Shit, Dad, I'm trying to ask you a simple question."

“What?”

“Do you want a coffee or not?”

“No,” he said. “All right, with no cream, just sugar. But I don’t want any of that rip-off coffee—just go to Hortons.”

“Okay,” he said. “Daniel, I’m going to get dressed and we’ll go. I’ll drive you home.”

While waiting in line, they couldn’t help but listen in on a conversation between a woman and a man at a nearby table. The woman had a little boy with her. The little boy was wandering around, making noise. At first, the woman attempted to keep the boy quiet, but after a while she seemed to have given up. The woman said to the man, “He’s just too much. I never have a moment to myself, for God’s sake.” He didn’t say anything. “I miss work. I miss going out. I miss a lot of things. Frankly, Justin’s a twenty-four-hour-a-day job.” The little boy asked his mom if he could have another donut. Sighing, she said no. As the child began to cry, the mother looked at the man with an expression that both appealed for help while iterating her confessed frustration.

When Daniel arrived back at his mother’s, he took a shower and then bleached his fingers. The Javex fogged and turned yellow. For a second, he imagined shooting back the bleach. But first he had brunch with his family.

After brunch, Daniel called Colleen Knight. No answer. He left a message telling her machine his numbers in London and Toronto. She already had both, he thought, but wanted to be sure. He wanted

to sleep with her, to feel warm, to forget himself.

He called Paul. Since the weather was pleasant, the two decided to go for a drink on a bar patio. Daniel watched a television program about books while he waited for Paul to pick him up. The man on the screen was standing in front of a large bookcase, talking about the knowledge he'd attained from reading and how it won't leave like, say, a lover would. His eyes were big and wet as he spoke fast about the benefits of books.

Paul arrived and they set off. Paul's T-shirt read, **MY GOD'S BETTER THAN YOUR GOD.**

"I told Mark we'd get him on the way, okay?" Daniel said.

"Okay."

"How'd things go with Cynthia?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, good, man, good."

"Good."

"It's just odd, you know," he said. "She's still with Jamie, and he's a schmuck but an all-right guy, so it's weird. I don't want to hurt this guy—I mean, God, he's done nothing to me—but then again, the poor bastard's living a lie. I don't want to be the one to disillusion him, but, you know, her and I—well, shit—we fucked last night. So that's where it stands." He lit a cigarette. "I'm sick of this shit," he said.

"Maybe you should forget her."

"I know, I know," said Paul. "All right, we're here. This conversation's over."

Mark hopped in the back of Paul's car.

They sat on a patio, drinking beer. Daniel got up from the table to go to the washroom. Above the urinal, in black magic marker, were the words, NO MATTER HOW HOT SHE IS, SOMEONE'S SICK OF HER SHIT. He made a phone call. Colleen wasn't home, but he didn't leave a message.

"Drinking's killing my short-term memory—I don't remember her at all," Paul said.

"It doesn't matter," said Mark.

"Where's she now?" asked Daniel.

"She's at some stupid resort," Mark began. "She's the head of some recreation thing. It's stupid. Anyway, she called me and she sounded all messed up and sad. She'd just broken her nose skiing."

"That sucks," said Paul. "Yeah, I mean it was bound to happen. All she does is party and sports and... We need another round," Mark said.

"I'll get this one. It's my turn," said Daniel.

"Hey, Danny boy," Paul said. "You and Ashley looked fairly cozy together last night. Are you thinking of trying to get back with her or something?"

"She lives with Eric," he said.

"So, it's you she likes," Paul said, then took a swig of beer. He continued, "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to get back in the sack with her. She looks fantastic."

"She did look good," Mark said.

“She looked foxy, dude,” Paul said. While pretending to asphyxiate himself with his left hand, he made a masturbatory motion in front of his crotch with his right.

“Yeah, well,” said Daniel, “I don’t think she wants anything to do with me.”

“Why?” said Paul.

“I don’t know, because she’s probably mad at me.”

“Why?”

“You know why,” Daniel said.

“No, I don’t. Why?”

“I gave her a hard time. I didn’t treat her that well. I was selfish,” he said, taking a drink. “I thought I cared about her, but I wouldn’t have done what I did had I cared.”

“Bullshit. You’re drunk,” said Paul. “I can’t believe this.”

“What? All I’m saying’s that I feel bad about hurting her and realize that I shouldn’t’ve behaved the way I did—and I should’ve thought a little more about her and a little less about me.”

“I know that’s what you’re saying and it’s total fucking bullshit, Dan.”

“Fuck you.”

“Settle, boys,” Mark said.

“Daniel,” Paul began, “big deal—you hurt her feelings; someone was going to. As far as I’m concerned, better you than some real asshole. She learned a valuable lesson: people aren’t always what they seem, especially the person you’re sleeping

with. Simple.”

“Well, I don’t want to be the one who hurts people in order for them to learn that life can be cruel or something. In a way, I want to apologize.”

“*Apologize?*” Paul shrieked. “I want to hit you! You have nothing to apologize for. Listen, she learned that guys can be assholes, and you learned that *you* can be an asshole, and that in a relationship you shouldn’t think about yourself so much—and you shouldn’t go around sleeping with other girls if you don’t want to hurt the person you’re with, right? So now you both try and make the best of the valuable knowledge you’ve gained from your brief time together and you move the fuck on. Life’s rough, get a helmet. And you don’t go back and apologize; you don’t get drunk and regretful. Do you think that right now she’s thinking about how you ruined her perception of romance? Are you that narcissistic? No way.”

“There’s more to it—”

“Right now she’s with that dork Eric, and I have no idea what she’s thinking, but it’s probably along the lines of, ‘I should find someone to fool around with behind Eric’s back because he’s not very bright and he’s too stupid to fuck me properly....’ However, it *is* possible that you messed her up a bit, because now she’d rather be with some lifeless turd like Eric, as opposed to a guy like you who’s more interesting but capable of cheating. A guy like Eric would never cheat on a girl like Ashley because he shouldn’t even *be* with a girl like Ashley. Fortuna

would never smile down upon that shit twice and Eric knows it, even though he's an idiot. So you might've messed her up in that respect. Nevertheless, even if that's the case, she deserves a loser like Eric. That's her problem if she's co-dependent, desperate, and weak. It's her own doing."

"All right, nice speech. Let's get out of here," Mark said.

"The rippers?" said Paul.

The MC's generic voice echoed throughout the room. It was loud and he spoke fast, like a radio disc jockey during the drive-time slot: "GENTLEMEN, GENTLEMEN, GENTLEMEN, if you like dark meat, we've got a woman for you! Put your hands together for the lovely Dominique, straight out of the Motor City. Oh, c'mon, fellas. You can do better than that! Where's your cocks?"

The applause grew louder.

Daniel, Paul, and Mark sat drinking, silent, watching. No one in the bar seemed to be engaged in conversation. Guys would elbow one another, speaking in terse, covert sentences, making crude jokes and ordering drinks, but no one was talking for extended periods of time. All eyes were transfixed on the young girl's brown body.

The voice came back—loud, powerful, clear: "I want to hear some noise out there! And remember, gentlemen, shower shows every half an hour. And if you men are at all interested in having one of

these fine-looking ladies give you a private dance, then take one to our VIP lounge. Treat yourself like a king. Only fifteen dollars a dance. Guaranteed to put a smile on your face and possibly something hard in your pants, believe me. All right!”

Smoke hung from the rafters like smog. A large-breasted blonde in a sheer nightie sat on Daniel’s lap. “Why so glum, cutie?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Come with me for a dance,” she whispered in his left ear, her breath warm. “I’ll make you feel good—promise. Don’t be nervous, honey. I’m Venus.”

Later, Daniel lay in his bed, attempting to conjure up a naked woman. Penis in hand, he thought about Ashley but was unable to maintain an erection. He thought about some of the strippers—Venus and Dominique, the tiny tattooed one—but that didn’t work either. He resolved to sleep. Or maybe he just passed out.

3

“Hey, wake up, man! Get your shit together and let’s get the fuck out of Dodge.”

Daniel opened his dry eyes. Paul was looming large above him, wearing a T-shirt that read, **EVO-LUTION’S FOR HOMOS.**

“Get me water,” said Daniel. “I’m thirsty.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to go back to T.O. I’ve spent way too much cash this weekend and I feel like a bag of shit. Are those cigarette burns?”

“Where?”

“On your arm.”

“Shit, I don’t know.”

Before leaving, Daniel jotted down a quick note for his mom, Ted, and Harrison and left it on the kitchen table, saying that he’d left.

The ride from London to Toronto was similar to the ride from Toronto to London: Paul smoked and Daniel felt worried and tired.

Daniel unlocked his apartment door, dropped his bags, and fixed himself a drink. He called out to Nick: “Would you like something to drink?” Nick said yes, so he made him a gin and tonic and brought it to him. He was on his computer.

“Did I miss much?”

“Not really,” said Nick. “Did you have a good time?”

“No, not really.”

“Yeah, nothing too exciting happened around here.”

“I can’t believe how much garbage is in the streets.”

“From the parade.”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll all be out of sight tomorrow,” Nick said. “Oh, you’ve got a few messages, bud. Mr. Ang from work called, Harry called, and some girl, Colleen something.”

“Colleen Knight.”

“Yeah, I think so. I saved it. It’s on the machine.”

And it was; it was Colleen Knight. Her message said she was sorry that they didn’t get together while he was in town, but she said she really wanted to talk to him because they have a lot of catching up to do. She hoped that he’d call her soon and she was disappointed he’d left so early, and the reason she didn’t call him was because her family went to her grandparents’ place in Chatham for Easter.

He poured himself another drink, sat down, and dialed Colleen’s number.

She greeted him enthusiastically. She said she had *big news* to share, if he had the time.

“Let’s hear it,” he said.

“All right, you’re most likely going to think I’ve gone completely nuts—most of my friends do—

but I don't care—you can make fun of me all you like.”

“This sounds intriguing. It comes with a disclaimer, for God's sake.”

“I don't know how to tell you, so I'll just say it, and please don't be too harsh on me, but I go to church now. I found God.”

“Where was He?”

“Ha, ha, very funny. I tell you I've found God and that's the best you can come up with. You're losing it, Danny.”

“Well, this wasn't what I was expecting.”

“And what were you expecting?” she said.

“I don't know. I thought you might be going to teach English in Korea or something like that—you know, the kind of stuff you do. I'm sorry if I seem skeptical, but you're not the first person who comes to my mind when I think of the word *pious*. Are you serious about this?”

“Very.”

“You don't think this is just a passing kick, like drugs or like backpacking across Europe?”

“No, Daniel. I know it's hard to believe, but I'm now a believer,” she said. “Weird, eh?” And she started to laugh.

“How'd this happen?”

“About a month ago, I went to church with my mom and dad—they go every Sunday, but I rarely go with—and I was just sitting there listening to what the preacher had to say, and everything he said made sense to me. *Real sense*. I found it moving and

true, touching; it was like he knew me. That's when it happened—the movement of the Spirit,” she said. “I've never felt anything like it before. And I started crying. Bawling. It was too much to take.”

“Jesus, you're saying you had a major religious experience.”

“Yeah, it was big! This is going to sound unbearably cliché, but I see things differently now, Daniel. They're clearer.”

“Wow!”

“I know,” she said, laughing. “I'm the real me now. It feels wild. I have no chains anymore.”

“So have you completely changed your lifestyle? Like do you still smoke and drink?” he asked.

“I don't smoke anymore. Besides, I'd almost fully quit before this. And drinking, I mean, I had wine with dinner last night, but I don't feel the urge to go out and get destroyed—drugs and alcohol would mess things up. I was sick of waking up feeling like death anyway. I feel alive.”

“But if you and I were to go out sometime, you'd have some drinks with me, right?”

“A couple, sure,” Colleen said. “Daniel, you know when you wake up after a night of partying and you feel guilty and terrible? Well, that's your conscience trying to tell you something. When your conscience's banging on you, that's your ticket out. It means you've been living a sad life.”

“Yeah, well...”

“I felt I wanted out of that rut. Life isn't about what you can't do; it's about what you *can* do. I have

to be careful because I don't want to sound like some Tony Robbins type—but there's just so much. Life's about getting the good. If you want, there's a new life to be had. You can rid yourself of sin. It sounds cheesy, but it works, Daniel. A lot of my friends think I've gone off the deep end, but this is where the Holy Spirit and Jesus come into the picture.”

“You know, I don't want to sound contemptuous of your decision to...to walk with God,” Daniel began, “but you're Colleen Knight. We've had a lot of fun, right? And now Jesus and the Holy Spirit have claimed you. I want to be honest with you—it does come off as a bit nuts.”

“Maybe, but I feel much better now than I did before. Salvation—I understand what the word means. And to me it's not nuts at all because I know that this is good and real. I feel it in my bones. When you're first new with the Lord, He gives you special attention. Don't you ever hear that voice inside your body, not your head? I was a weak person, desperate, and now I feel empowered. I used to question the existence of God all the time, but He's always provided for you, He's always been there—why wouldn't you believe?”

“I can think of a few reasons,” he said. “You use the word *He* when you mention God. Do you think God's a man?”

“I don't know. But Jesus Christ was a man.”

“Do you read the Bible now?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you believe it all to be true?”

“I don’t take every passage literally, but it helps you begin to live a better life, to understand life, and it helps you relate to your love for the Lord.”

“I can’t believe this. This is cracked out.”

“I know,” she said.

“Colleen, in *The Catcher in the Rye*...” Daniel said, searching a bookshelf. “Wait half a second... sorry... I know I have it marked... bear with me... yes, okay, here it is.... Holden says, ‘What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.’ I’ve sort of thought that that’s the sort of effect the Bible has on its readers.”

“Well, there’s no question the Bible has a profound effect on its readers, and, yes, it does make you want to *know* God, but why does that have to be a bad thing? It doesn’t have to be a sinister thing,” she said. “Most people believe in God. They’re just scared of religion, which makes sense, you know, but God wants you to make a conscious act of faith. If you do, He’ll be there for you.”

“I don’t know about this.”

“You overthink things. You have to be careful with logic. It’s a curse, after all.”

“All right,” he said, “I have to ask. Sex—will you still partake in sexual intercourse outside the sacred bonds of marriage, or are you a born-again virgin or something?”

Colleen laughed. “No, I’m not a born-again virgin

per se, but I don't think I'd just have casual sex ever again. It doesn't interest me. I have no need for it."

"No need for it? I'm sure the Lord wants you to enjoy the body he gave you. Sex is a way for two people to be close and feel good and—"

"I agree with you. Sex is a wonderful way for two people to be close and feel good, but by that rationale, shouldn't you really respect the person you're making love to?"

"Just because it's casual sex, it doesn't mean you don't respect them and want to debase them or something."

"I know," she said.

"Would you have sex with someone who didn't share your belief system, then, but totally respected your decision to, you know, lead a Christian life?"

"I guess I'd have sex with someone I wasn't married to, realistically, and I'd probably have sex with someone who didn't share my belief system. But the truth is, I don't think I'd be attracted to someone who didn't believe in God. I want to share my love for God with my partner. He's important to me. God loves you, Daniel. And He wants you to love Him back. The atmosphere's so embracing—it's an unseen world and I think you'd cherish it. He wants to give you everything you've ever wanted—love, understanding, peace of mind. It's overwhelming. I've never felt such intense love before. I know God's glad I came back to Him. My whole life I've had a sneaking suspicion that there was a God—is a God—and now I'm positive. You'll

never be lonely again. Think about the love, Daniel. It's intoxicating warmth that doesn't leave. Talk to Him. Let Him know you love Him, and He'll respond. He wants to love you; He wants to help. He wants to take you in. I love you, Daniel, and I want you to feel what I'm feeling—I want everyone to feel what I'm feeling. I want for you and me to feel this way together. Think about all the undying warmth and love. Think about getting better."

As he listened, he thought about how nice it'd be to not feel lonely, unsettled, and he fantasized about being in bed with Colleen: he pictured himself lying up against her warm naked body, with his face planted between her breasts, his eyelids sealed, studying the large darkness, while she talked about how much undying love there is in the universe, about getting better. He took a swig of his drink. Daniel, then, became aware of his hard-on.