

Amanda's Knee

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Isaac isn't coming. Most likely he's already on his plane back to New York. Unless the fog in the valley, where the county airport is, has rolled in. I picture him at a window seat, gazing out at the clouds, anxious to be returning home. I imagine his departure making him sad, but I know that this is just my wish. As one part of my brain holds this picture of him, miles high, traveling at some inconceivable speed, I still can not keep myself from turning as each student of mine enters the classroom door. I can not keep my heartbeat from accelerating just that one little bit. At eight twenty, ten minutes before class will end, it starts to sink in. He's really gone. At eight-thirty, the students gather, hand in their final papers, thank me, say good-bye. It's over. The residency is complete, they're all off to their lives, to become writers.

I scoop up the pile of papers from my desk, including the manila envelope Isaac left for me earlier and shove them into the canvas bag Bill got me for Christmas. He knows I can't abide leather. He's sweet like that. I clear everything off the top of the desk, lift my bag and walk to the back of the room. I hadn't meant to, but I seat myself right where Isaac has been sitting these past few weeks. As if being in the chair where he had sat will bring him closer to me. As if that were possible. The sun is just setting and the late day pink washes the walls and chalkboard. Tonight the mist unfolding and settling like a blanket tucking in the valley is tinged scarlet. The silence in the classroom is louder than any of the arguments I've had with students all semester. It is all so impossible. I have been a fool. Such a middle-aged fool.

I guess I knew it from the very start. That very first day he came right up to my desk, his dark, dark curls long on his neck, his eyes even darker than that. Now I see the mistake I made then. I sucked him up, whole like a vacuum cleaner and spit him out. Just like that. Another Jewish boy from Queens,

trying to find his authentic voice down here in the south. A dime a dozen, I thought. Coming down here all full of themselves, their fast-paced-in-your-face-New-York selves. Dreaming of becoming the next late and great. The girls too, but I have patience for them. What they don't know is that a southern voice is something that creeps into you while you're still in the cradle, your mama crooning to you on those god awful nights when no one can sleep for the heat. They think they can come on down here to a writers' workshop, take a class and pick it up like it was on sale at the Winn Dixie. They wring you dry with their insistent questions, with their right-nowness. They don't know time, they don't sense the pace of language, how life will ooze on by if only you'd let it. But this is my job, and it's better than most I could've ended up with. It gives me time enough to be with Ryan, and it takes the pressure off of Bill. This way, he can keep his job at the high school, which he loves, and not worry about us all going without.

I've watched them come and go for years. Maybe too many years, now. Maybe it has gotten to me. Maybe I need a break. I've always been professional. Until now, that is. I treat them kind, I work with them, try to get them to listen; to their surroundings, to their inner voices, to their characters. I tried to do the best I was able. For the most part, though, they don't give a good goddamn about anything I have to say. They want to be famous and fast. They think if they do something as prestigious as the Brickwater Residency, then they're set for life. Once they get accepted they can just breeze on through. They don't realize that the work has just begun. Well, they'll figure it out, sooner or later. If they really want to write, they'll figure it out. I can't help them there.

But Isaac is different. At least, I think he is. God, I hope this isn't a case of raging hormones mucking up my good sense. I could kick myself now for not

seeing it right away. I mean, you get so hard as a teacher. At least I have. Kind of like a protective layer. Like that old toothpaste commercial. The guy in the suit stands there on TV, a baseball comes flying out of nowhere right at the side of his head and just when you think this guy has drawn his last breath, wham, it hits the invisible shield. "Gardol" they called it. Well I've got gardol around my heart. You've got to. Otherwise your poor heart'd break every time that favorite student cuts a class because it's spring and the grass is green and the cherry blossoms are in bloom and he needs to get a tan for his hot date on Saturday night. And come each June, well, forget June.

That first day I was at my desk. I was on the admissions committee, so I already knew it was a talented group. Was hoping that I wouldn't be too disappointed. I came here myself right out of college. How proud I was. Brickwater seemed like someone else's dream. Two whole years to do nothing but write, read, and write some more. I never thought then that I'd stay on.

"Call me Amanda," I insist on every first day. I can't tolerate those artificial barriers. I do have something to offer. Some of these kids think that they can take advantage. Because I'm not a big name author they get down here for the seminars. But I've published my share. Short stories and my novel; a solid, quiet novel that most don't even know about. And I'm not so full of myself that I make the kids read my stuff. But I know how to teach writing. Some of them, not all, mind you but some, are just aching to rub their big city shoulders with the next Faulkner, are just aching to be the next Flannery O'Connor. I don't begrudge them that. I just wish they'd see that what is important is doing the work. That if they want to make it, they need to put in the time. They need to write.

So I guess when every new group comes in, I've got my back up. The best defense is an offense. I run the first class pretty much the same each residency. I need to find out who these kids are, what they're capable of. You can't teach someone to dive unless you already know if they can hold their breath. So I get them writing right away.

I give them the class outline, what all is expected of them, how they'll be graded and the like. For that next hour, then, I have them write. That class, Isaac's first class, I had them write about their childhood kitchens. It always surprises them. They don't expect to actually work on the first day of class and they often do some fine writing. When the class ended they handed me their pieces, and left. All except Isaac. I wasn't sure what it was that he wanted from me. He had that hungry look, I guessed he saw me as some kind of mother figure. I suppose they all do, more or less. He introduced himself right off, and mentally I guessed Queens. I'm pretty good at accents, and he had the thick consonants, and whining "oi's" that I'd come to recognize. I used to think anyone who spoke like that was simply uneducated. But then I met some brilliant poets who sounded like they went to school in the gutter.

"Isaac Schwartz" he'd said sticking out his hand. I shook it and listened while he explained that he would have to miss the last class, that he had already signed up to teach writing to kids in Bedford Stuyvesant. "Inner city kids" he'd called them. I wondered if anybody ever teaches outer city kids.

I said that that'd be fine. As long as he got me his assignments before he left. I told him I'd return his final paper along with his grade if he remembered to leave me his address before he went. Then he did the strangest thing. I was sitting, as I always did, on the front edge of the desk. I was wearing jeans, nice, clean jeans, but jeans they were, sweat socks and my Nikes. I run in between my two sections of this class. That hour is just enough time for me

to do my three miles around the perimeter of the campus and shower. And it sure beats eating wilted salads at the Student Union. What this boy from Queens does, then, is he takes my foot, sneaker and all in that very large palm of his and just about squeals,

“You’re feet are so small!”

For a second I was stunned, never having been greeted in quite that fashion. Had I missed something? All I know is that I yanked my foot away so fast I lost my balance and nearly fell off the desk. I recovered quick as I could, though, and stood squarely upon those two very small feet of mine, looked straight into his chest, standing he’s a good foot taller than I, and I said,

“You’d be surprised what these feet are capable of.”

Don’t even ask me what that was supposed to mean because I haven’t the faintest idea. I just knew I had to snap back something and that’s what came to me. I am proud of my running. My PR is thirty-five minutes even for five miles. That’s damn good for a woman two weeks shy of her forty-fifth birthday. Do you know what he did then? Why, he laughed. He threw back his head laughing. He was all flashes of black and white, his hair, his eyes, his teeth; satiny black and porcelain white shining at me. I knew right then what had to be done.

I wasn’t unkind, I just staked out my boundary. I had to. How was I to teach a class with him thinking he could go ahead and grab hold of my foot any old time he wanted. I pulled way into myself. Starting the next class, I made sure not to pay him any attention. I wasn’t rude. I just stayed out of his way. I read his stuff, but to be honest I can’t remember a single thing he wrote until, well until after that day.

With most of my students I try to reach in and grab them where they live. I try to help them uncover something real and get them to write about it. With

Isaac, I let him slide by. By the time I really noticed him, it was already too late. Somebody must have been working with him. It makes sense that it was Reg, my office mate. Or maybe he was gifted. I don't know. He was older than the others. He'd already gone to law school and then, after he passed his boards and was all set up in some Manhattan firm, he changed his mind. Decided he wanted to become a writer. He even went back to get another undergraduate degree. I tried hard not to notice. I wanted to believe he was just a sleazy kid, trying to butter up the teach. But later, those last few weeks, some of what he wrote damn near moved me to tears. And I don't cry easily. He had a way of stringing words together like just so many toadstools into an enchanted forest. I tempered my comments even at the end, when I should have been telling him how beautifully he wrote. Before that, I wasn't even playing it safe. I wasn't playing it at all. Isaac was just a student and not one that I was particularly interested in. Until that day in the office I share with Reggie Gold.

I didn't know it, but Isaac had studied with Reggie way back. In New York. Reg's poems are golden like him and he's in demand. He had gone up there to do a poetry workshop at the New School in the Village. Isaac was one of his students. In fact, that's what turned him on to writing in the first place. That was why Isaac wanted to come down here. And well, Reggie's Reggie. His heart just seems to get bigger and bigger with each new crop of kids. But I guess he had this special thing with Isaac. His wife, Leora, is always setting an extra place for dinner, helping kids out with used furniture, letting them borrow her computer for their papers if they need. I know I shouldn't call them kids, Isaac'll be thirty next fall, that's grown up by anyone's standards, but to me they're kids. With Reg and Isaac, it was something special. They'd been friends for years. I should have known it, but I didn't.

Reggie and I have a running date. Every Tuesday afternoon, we run. Instead of doing the perimeter, we drive on out to the aqueduct and run there. It's a soft path, good on the feet, and on the days we run the whole length and back it's ten miles. I had changed into my running shorts and a tank top in the lavatory and I was ready to go. I headed down the hall to the office I share with Reg. It was one of those glorious early spring days, the magnolias huge and sweet and everywhere you look. I was off until my Wednesday night class, which meant I would have some time to work on my new book. I got this idea to write about two elderly women, sharing a room in a retirement community and how they get on each other's nerves. They fight like cats and dogs, and then, well this is where I got stuck. I didn't want them to be caricatures, but it was turning out to be that way. But everything: Ryan, the dishes, reading papers, everything was getting in the way of me sitting down to work on that book. So now, facing a free day, no matter how I turned it, the world was looking good to me.

I just about bounced into the total disarray of our office and there, on Reg's side of the room, half buried in notebooks, pink message slips and student poems, was Isaac.

Sprawled out in the big old stuffed, the only chair we had, he rested his left hand on its arm, just about level with my right knee. And said knee, without my permission or any conscious intent on my part, reached out to Isaac, the rest of my body obliged to follow along. If that wasn't enough, his open hand was right there waiting to cradle my knee. As if this was normal. As if this was the way he and I had been greeting each other, hand to knee, all of our lives. In spite of our wills, his hand and my knee were going to do what it was that they longed to do.

You can imagine how I felt. Well maybe you can't. There would be no way for you to know that it is normal for me to be acutely, even painfully aware of my feelings. I am rarely surprised by my own reactions. And Bill, my husband, and I have been together for a long time. We met in college in Atlanta, moved here after I got accepted to Brickwater. I got hired to teach here, and then Bill sort of fell into his job at the high school. I was going to write. This seemed as good a place as any. So that's what we did. We had gone through our hot and heavy years early. By the time we were in our late twenties, we knew we were in it for the long haul. Our life together has not been without drama. Bill almost left me for that math teacher, the one whose sleek, black hair was styled so that it hid one of her baby blues. That must have bothered the hell out of her, to see the world through only one eye. But Bill and I struggled it out. Staying together was what we both wanted. We knew that there would be times. I have had my share. But this was different. Or was it?

Before, when I took a fancy to a colleague, or one of my grad-students, and it happened more than I care to admit, I was always on top of it. I could relish it, then put it aside, like the very last life-saver in the roll, the grapefruit one, my favorite and pull it out when my life felt as parched as my throat on a hot summer's day. Mostly I lusted after married colleagues, the ones I knew were as committed to their relationships as I was to mine. That kind of safety was a container in which my wildest fantasies could run free. There was that one time, though. That woman from St. Louis. At a week-long writer's conference up at Martha's Vineyard.

It was the first time in about ten years I had been away from Bill. The first time ever, from Ryan. He'd just turned eight and he and Bill planned to do a little male bonding while I was away. Eat a bunch of junk food, not change

their underwear, yell at the TV all the while spilling popcorn on the couch as they watched the Braves trounce the Mets; boy things.

I'd met Jennie right at the start of the conference. I knew she was a lesbian, but hell, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. There was something so fluid about her. One minute she was tough, strong, swaggering, the next she was dazzling me with her vulnerability, her softness. It was so safe there, away from home, not being mommy for a few days. I knew it would never threaten our marriage. She would go back to St. Louis, and I would come home to Bill and our lives would go on as they had before. I've got to admit, I was curious.

I had it all planned out. The last night of the conference they were treating us to some big old clam bake; lobsters, corn and baked potatoes cooked right there on the coals, the food was fabulous, and I figured afterward I would just invite her to my room. For a drink or something. I guess I hadn't worked the whole thing out. But when she came out on the deck after dinner, she had her bags with her. She had made plans to fly to Boston that night to visit friends before heading back to St. Louis. It never occurred to me that she would leave the conference before the closing plenary. I certainly felt the fool. Then I wondered if she knew how I felt? I must have been so obvious. I cried into my pillow that night like I hadn't done since I was twelve and Bobby K. moved away to Montana, of all places, and I knew I'd never see him again.

I never did tell Bill about Jennie. Not that he wouldn't have understood. But really, what was the point? Nothing had happened, nothing had changed. No need to hurt him.

But that itinerant knee of mine. I'll never be sure if it was Isaac's touch that knocked the breath out of me, or, if it was the very fact that a part of my body could go off on its own as if it had that right. I sank to the floor, all the

time trying to look like nothing at all. I often end up on the floor, when I don't want to be sitting at my desk, but this time it took all my effort just to steady my breathing. He mustn't know, I told myself, that I hadn't planned on greeting him with my knee.

For a few days after what I fondly call "the knee incident," I just stayed put. I couldn't bear to talk to anyone, especially not Bill. Ryan gives me plenty of leeway as long as he gets fed and has enough chocolate chip cookies to chew on. But Bill knew something was up. I felt like such a traitor. As if I was being disloyal. But worse than that was how I had scared myself. I thought I was in control. I knew what my priorities were: my work, Ryan, my marriage. Somewhere in there was running. Who could ask for more? My life was carefully assembled; perfect. But something had broken through my put-together life; a fragile egg shattering from the inside out. Now I can see is what a farce the shell was, and sticky yolk is everywhere.

Wasn't I always the one to mouth off when friends left their marriages of ten, fifteen, twenty years for younger women, for younger men? I had no patience for it. When Alice and Larry, our closest friends split, I was convinced that we would never recover. Bill and I were on twenty four hour a day crisis duty. We had either one or the other of them on the phone, or else we were keeping their kids so they could do whatever it was that they were doing. Bill was great with them, always his kind, compassionate self. But me, I was hard on Larry, when, after his affair with his secretary, he wanted to come back to Alice.

"You made a choice," I said. Alice said, no way. But I had no sympathy for her, either. She whined and sounded like a daily soap opera, going on and on. How could he leave her and what about the kids, and why couldn't he stay and "do the work" on their marriage?

“Alice,” I had said then, so damn sure of myself. “People don’t just leave relationships unless there’s something that’s already not working in them. You’ve got to look at the bigger picture. It’s not about Harriet.” That was Larry’s nineteen year old secretary, if you can imagine such a thing. She was sweet, really, and not completely ditzy, but I wouldn’t cite her for profound thoughts. I suspect it was more a case of her skin; smooth, tan, taut, stretched across a shape that any Playboy Bunny would die for.

“Harriet’s just the vehicle. Larry was deeply unhappy. And so were you. You’ve just got to move on.” I cringe now when I think how complacent I was. It was no use. Alice was bitter and wounded, and even now, six years later, they still can’t hold a civil conversation. I feel for the girls, though. So torn up, always trying to balance their affection, trying to protect Alice and Larry from each other. Kids shouldn’t have to bear those kinds of burdens.

I’ve looked at their mess, and lots of other messes and I say, uh-uh, no way. I’m never going to do that. I was above human frailty. I was beyond adolescent behavior. I was sitting pretty in mid-life, fulfilled and safe.

Then due to an accident of my knee’s making, nothing was the same anymore. You might think I’m overreacting, now, comparing the demise of my friends marriages to a tiny indiscretion of the knee. But I swear, everything has changed.

Right before Isaac’s class, the one that he’s in, that is, I’d go get all nervous and butterflies and such. I’d primp. I’m not proud of it, but I would. Before, I used to take my run, race over to the locker room, shower, and towel my hair dry. It’s short, straight as sticks, always has been. But A.K., (after knee) I’d try like anything to style it, give it a little poof here, a little lift there. I even started to use a little make-up; not much, a touch of mascara, some lipstick. I never have to worry about blush because my freckled cheeks flushed on their

own these days, mid-life and all. Suddenly I was super conscious of how I looked, how I felt, how I smelled. I've always been strongly motivated by comfort. I'm a married lady, a mother, not a teenager trying to get a date for the prom. And I was relieved to be. I can wear any old damn thing, so long as it's clean and fits and isn't too raggedy. At least I did. The point being that I am a middle-aged teacher, and I haven't been worried about what any young boy is going to think of me. Then all at once, I was.

Not since I was fifteen have I been so acutely aware of all my imperfections. I wanted suddenly to be beautiful for him. The few streaks of gray, barely visible in my sandy and indistinct hair now seem to shriek. My bulgy belly, never recovered from my c-section, used to be my trophy. Now, along with a varicose vein behind my left knee, it looms large, an indictment. You are not young, they cry. The softness around my jaw explodes into jowls when I dare linger too long before a mirror. I am Mrs. Robinson, I have become Cloris Leachman in "The Last Picture Show." And I am paralyzed. If Isaac were a plumber come to fix our perennially broken washing machine, if he were the guy who pumps gas at the corner Texaco, if he were a stranger on line at the Wal-Mart, I wouldn't hesitate. All be damned. But my position and my fear at being seen as the pathetic older woman have rendered me immobile.

I began to spend hours reading and re-reading his papers, caressing the cold lifeless stock on which he penned his thoughts, hoping to cull something of his essence from his words. I even once, but just once, mind you, brought his stories to my nose hoping to sniff him out like a poor old hound on the hunt. Walking to class, I'd look around outside Adam's Hall, to see if his bike was parked there yet. I'd seen it before, one of those day-glo orange all terrain bikes. I'd seen it, but like everything else I hadn't paid it any attention at all. Now, I scoured the campus for that bit of bright orange, locked in front of the

library, parked at the student union. It gave me peace just to know where Isaac's bike was.

The first class Isaac showed up at after that day in Reggie's office, he came late. I had already begun my lecture when he came in quietly and sat down, as always in the back of the room. We'd been reading Ellen Gilchrist's The Annunciation, her protagonist holed up in the Arkansas hills, and we were talking about the impact of landscape, of place in literature. How that could change a story. What a different story that would have been if it had taken place in London. I slid down from my desk and paced between the rows. I asked the class to write a description of a place that would set a particular tone for a story they would write. As they wrote, I walked to the back of the room and stood. The sound of pens scratching paper was louder than usual, the florescent lights flickering more. I was hyper-sensitive, as if someone had just cranked up the volume. From the back of the room I let my eyes travel the shoulders of my students, hunched over their work. It had been a good semester. Better than most. They had worked hard. Some of them had had real breakthroughs. Some had just gotten by. There were only three more weeks of class and I was already entering that grieving state that I try so hard to steel myself against every June. My eyes drifted here and there, until they rested on Isaac's cobalt blue tee-shirt. "Andelman's Bakery" was stitched in white across his back, and I supposed that was a sponsor for an amateur baseball or bowling team. I needed right then to see exactly how the stitching was done. It was an old shirt, maybe even a fifties shirt, the white stitched on the edges of the sleeves, too. I walked closer and closer to Isaac, all the time knowing the danger, all the time conscious of my breath catching somewhere around my heart, my palms moist. How was it possible, to have had this young man in my class for a whole semester and never have felt a thing beyond slight

repugnance, now to be feeling worse than a cat in heat. Isaac's back, which rippled through the worn cotton of that old shirt as he wrote, was broad and strong like a swimmer's. I stroked it in my mind as it narrowed down to an almost tiny waist. If I hadn't known him, I would have thought him gay. A silver bangle circled his wrist, a diamond studded his ear. At least I think it was a diamond. It twinkled like one, as the sun, which set during every Monday night class came in through the wall of windows that faced west. It was more than I could take. I gulped at the rapidly diminishing air around me, and walked to my desk, feeling more and more like the cliché I was. That boy took my breath away. I was wanting to touch him, to feel the strength of his back, to brush away that ebony curl that spiraled down on his forehead. I couldn't remember the last time I wanted to touch someone. Besides Ryan and Bill. But with them I just do. They are mine and I can touch them as I want. At least until Ryan hits adolescence. I know I'll be in for it then, but for now I take it for granted that these are mine, to touch or not as it moves me.

But Isaac was a stranger. In every way I could imagine. He was fifteen years my junior. He was in diapers when Martin Luther King was assassinated. He hadn't even been born when Kennedy was president, let alone, killed. He missed the whole Viet Nam war. What kind of a person could he be? He was dark when everyone I knew and loved was fair and blue-eyed. He was from a big northern city, where I'd grown up in a small town in the south. And he was Jewish: just one more brick of difference in the wall that separates us, making him even more other.

Yet when we spoke, the wall was gone, my words rushing to meet his, like best friends back at school after summer break. Or did I just imagine it? Had I misinterpreted as special, as interest, what for him came as naturally as breath? Since the day of the knee, we chatted casually after every class. We

talked about the weather, the latest movie, what was all the fuss about Forest Gump anyway, about other student's work, (I knew I shouldn't have, but he was so engaging, his critiques so fresh, his insights so raw, you can see my good sense totally overrun by my infatuation.) We spoke with an intensity that eclipsed all else. His words took on density; at times it was as if I could see them drifting towards me in the air between us. We'd leave the classroom together, alone sometimes, often with the others, walking out into the dangerous warm spring dusk, where my shallow breath'd come in fits and starts. I'd watch as he'd unlock his bike and disappear with the last bit of vanishing daylight.

And I, nervous, like a child really, answered always too quickly and in a voice that said no more, ask me no more questions, I have got to go now. Worst of all was last night, his very last night and somehow everyone else had gone on and we walked out alone, the moon just rising, the merest sliver of a thing, bright as ice. He turned to me and in his most casual Brooklynese, (I was wrong he wasn't from Queens), asked me what was I doing then. And too fast, way too fast, without taking the time to realize that he might be asking me to do something with him, I answered in my most casual drawl that I had to go on and fetch Ryan from his friend Ned's house, and that then we would have dinner.

By then it was too late. Too late to say, why, did you have something in mind? Too late to say, well let me just call Bill and see if he can round Ryan up, too late to say, let me call Ryan and see if he can stay at Ned's, yes lets go have dinner, lets grab a cup a', go for a beer, anything but what I'd said, anything that would have stopped him from hopping on his bike and saying,

"Welp, thanks for everything. Really. It was a great class. I learned a lot. Take care." This last he yelled over his shoulder as he pedaled down the

tarmac towards the center of town, away from Brickwater, away from the south, and away from me.

Sitting now in his seat, in the classroom dark but for the campus lights slicing across the chalkboard, I try to imagine being held by him. Held still, his broad arms encircling me, my head resting gratefully on his chest, the thrumming of his heart sweet in my ear. He is gone, but at the same time I expect I'll see his bike outside, at the campus center.

Sticking out the top of my bag is the large manila envelop he left on my desk earlier today, the one with his final piece in it. Without turning on the light, I sniff at it and conjure up Isaac. I want to read his story right away and I want to save it for weeks, so when the missing grows worse, I will have it to look forward to.

The urgency wins out. I tear open the envelope as I approach the light switch. The harsh yellow fluorescent is jarring, but necessary. Attached to the typewritten piece with a plastic paper clip is a handwritten note. I have never seen his handwriting, and it seems somehow terribly intimate, just naked there on the small scrap of paper.

“Amanda, Here is the assignment. I hope you enjoy the story. Let me know what you think. I look forward to hearing from you. Isaac.”

A love note could not have moved me more. Standing there in the doorway to my classroom, I read his story. Isaac's words wrap around me as his arms never will. Suddenly, nothing seems as important as seeing him one last time. I grab my bag, and his manuscript and bolt down the hall to my office. Did Isaac say what time his plane was leaving? I can't remember. The warm light from Reg's new halogen lamp wedges out into the darkened hall. I reach for the phone book, scattering a stack of Reggie's students' poems. Airlines,

airlines, how will I ever know which airline to call to see if it was on time? Or is the fog, mercifully for once, on my side? It doesn't matter, I realize. All the flights leave from the only terminal there is at County Airport. I have to go and see.

I know that it's crazy, but the thought of seeing him again is like a shot of adrenaline. I have to do it. The trip to the airport will normally take twenty minutes on a moderately misty night. I make it in just under twelve. And all the way there, I keep thinking, I will forget that I am his teacher, for a moment I will forget Bill, and even Ryan, and for once in my life I will just go for it. I imagine coming face to face with him in the terminal, his surprise and delight at my unexpected appearance. I imagine seeing him, sprawled out in one of those uncomfortable chairs nailed to the floor of the terminal, reading the latest Rolling Stone, a bag of SunChips swallowing up his arm. I plan how I'll approach him, how the very first thing I'll do is brush back that springy curl from his forehead, and look at him full in the face. I'll dive heart first into the soft richness of his dark brown eyes. I'll drown.

By the time I pull directly in front of the "No-Standing, Do Not Discharge Passengers, You Will Be Towed" sign, I am so hot and bothered that even the unseasonably cool breeze whipping across the air field can't touch me. The terminal is relatively busy for nine on a Wednesday night, so at first I don't see Isaac. I slow my scan and begin again. The second time through the waiting travelers, I see him. He is not absorbed in the music world, or munching his chips. He is gazing attentively into the eyes of the tall, lithe young woman, who belongs to the arm which has wrapped itself around his back, inserting a set of long manicured fingers possessively through the belt loop of his brushed jeans.

With as little fuss as possible, I back out of the terminal and flee. The familiar fog was just late tonight, and now I am grateful for its cover. I prolong the drive home, not thinking or feeling, car windows open to the sounds of the night.

The house is dark as I pull into the driveway. So I don't see the skateboard that Ryan is forever leaving in the walk, and I am not prepared for how I fly into the darkness, crashing down, the concrete edge of our front stoop driving into my knee. I hug it to my chest, the sting of the open wound against my jeans a welcome manifestation of the pain I've been avoiding all the way home.

"Shit." I whisper to the stoop.

Inside, the bathroom light assaults my eyes as I try to focus on the task at hand. Gingerly peeling off my pants, I behold my knee; the raw insides of my skinned knee.

"Serves you right." I chastise. It has been a long time since I have been on the receiving end of the mercurochrome bottle, but I grit my teeth and bear it. Without washing or brushing my teeth, I peek in on Ryan, strip down and crawl into bed.

Bill is sound asleep. Nothing ever wakes him. I lie there beside him in the dark, hugging my pillow, settling into the familiar rhythm of his breath. My poor, foolish knee, throbs in the dark, larger than anything I can focus on. At last somewhere beyond my knee, I locate the fact that the semester is over, that I have eight weeks of full-time writing ahead of me. Like a lullaby I sing my self to sleep. Eight weeks, eight weeks.