

❖ Mickey Hess ❖

MEMOIR

Professor Bliss, about that time, had undertaken to write a history of General Clark, and the memoir had probably come into his possession for that purpose. But he was shot on the street in Louisville, September 26, 1842, by a rival editor of a newspaper, and died from the wound, having written but a few pages of his contemplated history.

The memoir seems to have been in the form of a letter, and the word “Sir” at the beginning indicates that it was, at least, not addressed to Jefferson and Madison jointly, or to more than one person.

WILLIAM HAYDEN ENGLISH

❖ ONE ❖

Sir,

When I left Kentucky, October 1st, 1777, I plainly saw that every eye was turned toward me, as if expecting some stroke in their favor. Some doubted my return. A few gentlemen made some attempts to persuade the people to pay no attention to them.

Under great apprehensions that the Indians, under the influence of the British, would shortly make a break upon the country and no time ought to be lost in getting it in a state of defense, and, apprehending no immediate danger in the wilderness road, Mr. Jones and myself attempted to pass, without waiting for other company, but had great cause to

regret it. The second day we discovered alarming signs. We were under great apprehensions. On the third day Mr. Jones’s horse gave out.

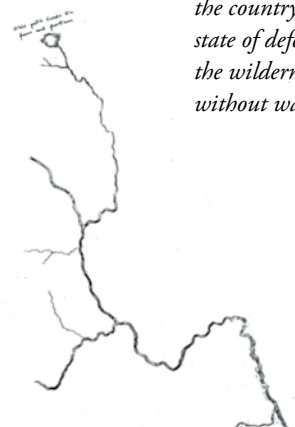
I made a phone call across time zones, from Vancouver to Louisville. I called you sir when you answered the phone.

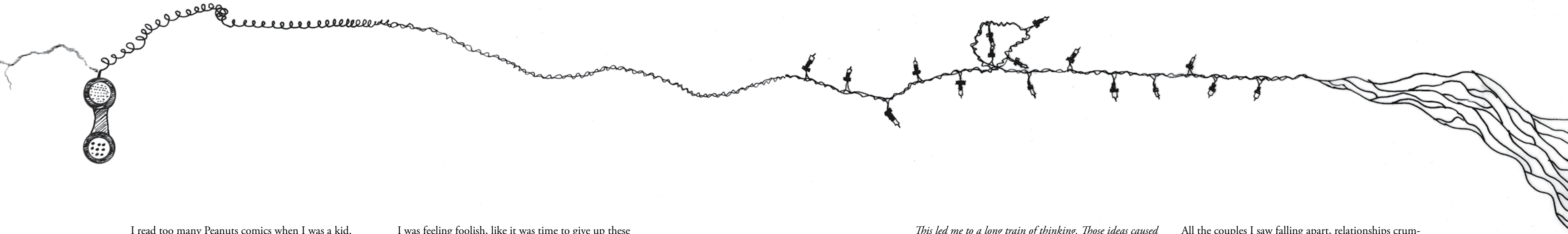
“I’m not a sir,” you said. “I’m a lady.”

I wanted to tell you that if you had been a man instead of a woman when we met, I would have still gone for you. No question. You know what I mean, right?

You told me you’d have to think about it.

Maybe I’m gayer than you are. Maybe I call women sir.





I read too many Peanuts comics when I was a kid. Peppermint Patty and what was her name? Marcie. I started calling my mom sir, my grandmother. Have I grown out of this phase?

Ma'am is insulting to women. I know this. I remember my fourth grade teacher asking us specifically not to call her ma'am because it made her feel old and ugly. I pay attention to these things. I am sensitive to issues of gender.

I left you in Louisville. I spent ten days away from you, exploring to the Northwest. I was not William Clark of Lewis and Clark, but his older, less recognized brother.

These ten days were the longest I'd spent away from you. Not that the days themselves were longer (although they felt that way), but the time period altogether, ten days, was the longest you and I had spent apart. Ten days in as many years.

"Are you finding what you were looking for?" you asked on the phone.

I found a Mexican bar where I stared at a taxidermied's head, spraypainted completely white, even the eyeballs, surrounded by Christmas lights.

I rode in the back seat next to a guitar and an amplifier, under a window that wouldn't roll up. The rain persisted and the men became sick. Colonel Henderson had purchased some items from a health food store, hummus and some meats made from soy. These items should have been refrigerated.

In Los Angeles I slept on a fold-out sofa with Mr. Jones. Snores like fucking crazy. I got up at 4 a.m. to sit in the courtyard and make a phone call to you at home. When I turned around I had no idea which door belonged to our room. Sir, there is nothing worse than the feeling that something you live for has become silly or a waste of time. I walked through strange new territories and thought about how I would feel embarrassed back home even calling it an expedition. How friends would italicize the word: how was the *expedition*? As if it really weren't an expedition at all.

I was feeling foolish, like it was time to give up these conquests, like I should be doing something else with my life. That, and the comparison of these new experiences to the happiness I felt at home, was what made me think about having a baby.

I had the idea that you were feeling the same way I was. That somehow, although we hadn't talked about it, we were on the same page with this thing.

I talked about you to other women, about our ten-year success story. Married at twenty, still married at thirty. "Do you have any kids?"

"Not yet," I said. "Not *yet*."

I was thinking that I'm so happy at home with you that a baby would be too, and honestly that this expedition was a foolish idea of youth, and that having given up on it, I was ready to devote my attention to something or someone else, to not worry about being able to explore and take forts anymore. I was feeling old, but not in a negative way. Just like a phase of my life was over and I wasn't at all sorry to see it go. Sorry I was hanging onto it for one last expedition.

When I came home and mentioned it, it was the last thing on your mind.

I told you I'd been thinking about having a baby and you told me you'd been thinking about getting a tattoo.

❖ TWO ❖

In a short time after I had set out, Colonel Todd arrived at the same place, and, after some consultation, concluded that they were able to go to the river and bring on the ammunition and other stores, and accordingly set out with ten men, and between the Blue Lick and the river, on December 25, met the Indians on our trail and got totally routed. Mr. Jones was killed, and three others got killed and taken prisoner.

This led me to a long train of thinking. Those ideas caused me to view Kentucky in the most favorable point of view, as a place of the greatest consequence.

Killed *and* taken prisoner. The worst way to go. But I know you hate jokes about grammar. You think I'm saying, without saying it, that I'm better than, smarter than you are.

I am smart enough to know I'm no match for you. I know useless things, like how to find humor in sentence structures. Useful things, like logic, lie entirely to you. You correct my mistakes on our taxes. You can beat me at Indian leg wrestling. It is you who can unclog toilets. You who can add new cord to the weedeater.

I am pretending to be General George Rogers Clark. Do you remember our picnic on the waterfront, the man who cast a shadow across our blanket? That was him. That was his statue, pointing the way to the West.

We thought he was the same Clark from Lewis and Clark, but I've been doing some research. After we had that fight I went to the university library. I found a spot in the 24-hour study room, but I couldn't sleep. That was when I found it, his memoir of his conquest of the Northwest Territory. Boxes of microfilm that document his founding of our great city.

My own expedition met with hostility in all those we encountered. In San Francisco we stayed with Colonel Davis, whose fiancée woke us up screaming. The three of us pressed together on bunk beds and her ordering Davis to *go out there and tell those people to leave*. In Portland my old friend Martin met us at the door, but his wife never came out of the bedroom. "Clinically depressed," he said.

And what those Indians did to Mr. Jones.

Colonel Henderson's friends in Los Angeles, recently divorced, from the outset of their brief marriage had designated themselves "polyamorous." Bad signs, bad things to come.

All the couples I saw falling apart, relationships crumbling. This may have contributed to it. Maybe you were seeing the same thing at home in Louisville, but who knows? Who knows what you were seeing? Something that made you desire a tattoo.

That damn tattoo. You've been talking about it for years now. You say I told you once that I wouldn't find you attractive anymore if you got one, but it isn't true. That was the nipple rings.

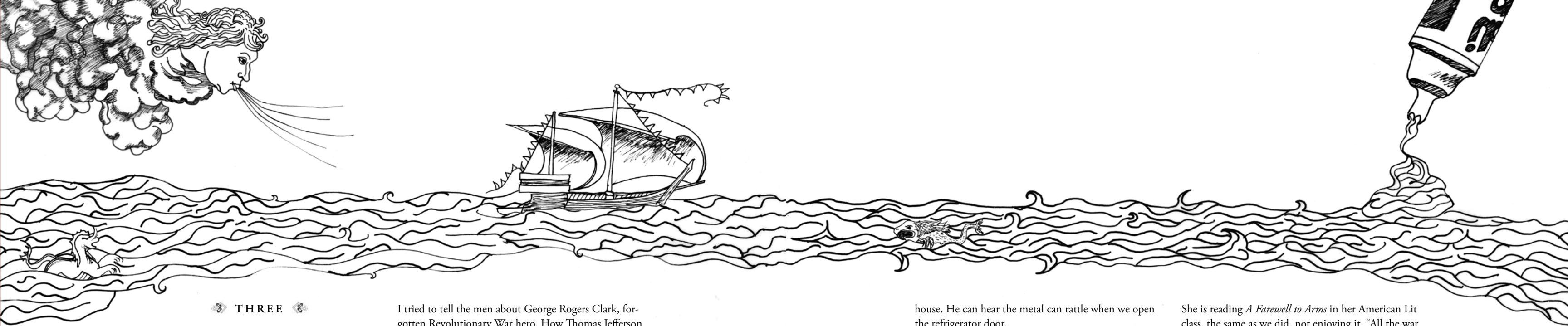
What I wanted to tell you is that you're so beautiful now that I can't see these additions as anything potentially positive. I can't imagine you getting any better.

I tried to tell you I'd trade a baby for a tattoo, but you wouldn't go for it.

You refused to talk about it and even said we should talk to someone, get counseling before this becomes a problem down the road. The most against it you've ever been. We talked about it years ago, about how someday, sure, why wouldn't we want to have children, somewhere down the road.

We pretended to talk to the spirits of our future children on your Ouija board. We have a box of baby clothes that we bought when we were nineteen. We have forced them onto our cats and taken pictures.

I mentioned that this down-the-road talk started ten years ago. I mentioned that Colonel Henderson, thirty-four years old and balding, told me he thinks of himself and his friends as eternally seventeen, and I told you that it was one of the most unattractive qualities I can imagine. You asked me if I was talking about you. And I guess I was, really. I was hoping you felt old like me.



❖ THREE ❖

To the Inhabitants of Post Vincennes:

GENTLEMEN—Being now within two miles of your village with my army, determined to take your fort this night, and not being willing to surprise you, I take this method to request such of you as are true citizens and willing to enjoy the liberty I bring you, to remain still in your houses; and that those, if any there be, that are friends to the king of England, will instantly repair to the fort and join his troops and fight like men. And if any such as do not go to the fort should hereafter be discovered that did not repair to the garrison, they may depend on severe punishment. On the contrary, those who are true friends to liberty may expect to be well treated as such, and I once more request that they may keep out of the streets, for every person found under arms, on my arrival, will be treated as an enemy.

(Signed)

G. R. Clark

There was a girl in that library, using the microfiche, scanning through newspaper headlines from the 1800s. Information about her dead relatives.

She had on one of those backpacks that are designed to hold very little, and I could tell she'd spent a long time on her hair, to come here to the library. She leaned forward in her chair, her face almost pressed to the screen.

She is young. Too young to seem that sad. It took me years to cultivate that kind of sadness.

I stared across the San Francisco Bay with Colonel Henderson and Colonel Todd, none of us talking. I wanted to call you but I had left the phone in the glove compartment, next to the unrefrigerated veggie bologna.

Times in my life that I have spent with only men have been dismal. The things cowboys write songs about. Boy Scouts. Little League. Something is missing. You have no idea how we talk about you when we are among ourselves.

I tried to tell the men about George Rogers Clark, forgotten Revolutionary War hero. How Thomas Jefferson offered him the Lewis and Clark mission, exploring to the Pacific. But he turned it down. "I have long since laid aside all idea of public affairs, by bad fortune and ill health I have become incapable of pursuing those enterprising and active pursuits which I have been fond of from my youth. But I will with greatest pleasure give my bro. William every information in my power."

The men were uninterested. "Alcatraz," Colonel Todd stated. Colonel Henderson nodded, and began to relate the story of a young woman who lives in his apartment building. "She's hot, but not very interesting." By not interesting, of course, he meant not interested, in him.

Clark gave that mission to his little brother and he stayed in Louisville. But he wasn't happy there. Conquest was in his blood.

You remember where Will and Kirsten got married. That was the estate where Clark died. I want you to rent it for me. We'll have a party. We'll invite friends and celebrate ten years, or however many since Clark's conquest of the Illinois. A George Rogers Clark anniversary party. We'll dress up. We'll be fucking frontiersmen.

You've told me the story of how your parents' relationship ended, how your dad, in the middle of a fight, just said "I want a divorce," and your mom said "Fine, you got one." You laugh when you tell it, amused by their mutual stubbornness. But it always scares me.

You prefer to walk away from arguments instead of talking them through. You believe that talking solves nothing.

We visited your brother in prison. I'm trying to be better about it. Maybe he is inclined to build meth labs. Maybe it's biological. I think you're afraid of that. We have an addict cat, and I say it comes from your side of the family. We cannot have Reddi Whip topping in our

house. He can hear the metal can rattle when we open the refrigerator door.

It was bad. You eased him off the junk onto some kind of milk designed for cats. See? I said. Look how good you are with him.

But a baby? You're afraid it would hate you, or you would hate it. You're afraid it would die.

Your cousin had a stillborn baby. Her husband brought it out of the delivery room to show the rest of your family. You weren't there, but you heard reports. Your mother has never been skilled at knowing what information to give people. She bit a baby once, to teach it some kind of lesson.

You're also afraid it would be fucked up, predisposed to drugs or crime and the other problems that run in your family. I try to convince you that we could nurture it, we could steer it away from those things, but you aren't convinced. You believe that some people are born to fuck up their lives, and there's no saving them, no matter how hard you try.

We could read parenting books, I say.

We used to read all the same books. Now I've skipped your Anne Rice phase, and you've been less interested in the memoirs of Kentucky statesmen.

We're two different people now, you say.

I read other things in the library. I made a discovery. There aren't any good books about stable relationships, characters who have been married for ten years. "No successful two-person short stories," says her Intro to American Lit professor.

"Maybe she likes you," you say.

If she is interested in me, she is charmingly awkward about it. When I was her age, you and I were getting married.

She is reading *A Farewell to Arms* in her American Lit class, the same as we did, not enjoying it. "All the war stuff is boring. But I do like when she dies."

We don't have any role models. Hemingway kills off Jake's nurse before things can get complicated.

"My friend's band is playing tonight," she said. But these pursuits are too enterprising and active.

❖ FOUR ❖

The Chicasaws being at war, I wished to have some correspondence with them, to feel their pulse.

It is summer. You are sucking on a tube of raspberry-flavored honey, walking with me to the Atomic Saucer, where you'll carefully read the chalkboard menu before ordering what you always get.

You're declaring things.

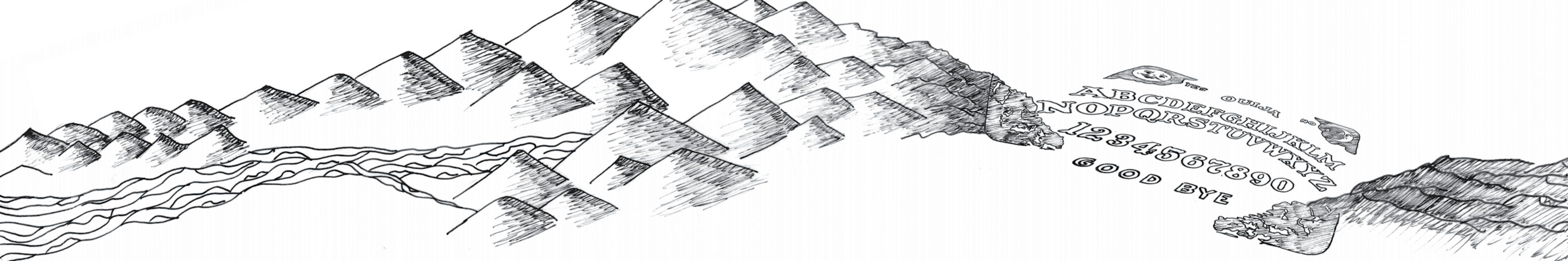
I had planned to walk down to the grocery store to buy envelopes, but you tell me "That's the old people grocery store."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're only gonna have the old-fashioned kind because most old people aren't going to buy self-adhesive envelopes."

I am buying self-adhesive envelopes because it has become my job to lick them. You refuse. You say no one should have to. The technology is out there. I, on the other hand, have insisted on finishing out the box of one hundred before I pay for another box. I am rethinking this.

These envelopes taste like shit and chemicals. Now we're walking through our Germantown neighborhood in search of the peel-off kind.



At the grocery store, you will buy two fashion magazines, fall edition, and at home you will turn them face-down. You pace while you listen to music, bite your fingernails. You have a specific walk for listening to records. Very determined. I have pictures of you doing it, caught in action. It's hard to get a legitimate picture of you because you always freeze, then adjust, when you see a camera.

I have rolls of film I took trying to surprise you, but the shutter wasn't fast enough to click before you could realize I was there. In most of them you just look angry.

❖ FIVE ❖

Liberty and freedom, and huzzaing for the Americans, rang through the whole town.

While we were resting ourselves four men came to us who had been exploring land in that quarter, and informed us of the situation of affairs in Kentucky.

"So what do you do about other women?"

Late night, driving from San Francisco to Eugene, Oregon, Colonel Henderson asked me, having been married for so many years, about my stance on women who are not my wife.

"What do I *do* about them?"

"Yeah, I mean, do you still get crushes on them and stuff?"

There is someone, in fact, with whom I have a weird, but good, sexual tension. I don't do anything about her. I will think about her in passing and then there she is, like I conjured her. I can feel when I'm going to see her. In front of the library we talked for a few minutes because we're vague friends now, acquaintances. We have listened to some of the same bands. We say hi but avoid eye contact. Hey what's up? What have you been doing? What about those bands that we both enjoy? Well, see

you later, and then she walked into something. Maybe a person. I didn't look back.

I had a dream that she lived on our street, two houses past the old man that we have learned to avoid. I saw her sitting on her porch, and when I went inside it was the inside of the YMCA from the town where I grew up. In the dream she wanted to hire me to transport a large dog from her attic to somewhere in Kansas City.

You and I bought a house together and planted a holly tree. We dug up ugly things from the front yard and replaced them with prettier things.

You often tell me about people from television who you think are attractive. The day we moved into our first apartment, you asked me to tell you the actress I found most attractive, out of anyone. I tried to think of what you wanted me to say. I tried to think of the one who looked most like you.

What do I do about them? When I was a younger man I passed notes. Do you like me? Check a box: yes/no. And the girls would all write in maybe.

Do you still like me? You told me once that you'd be perfectly happy alone— "completely satisfied" were your words.

Fine, I said. Whatever. I went to sleep on the couch but I woke up in bed with you.

When we woke up we were clinging to each other, and we had sex immediately. I thought about impregnating you.

❖ SIX ❖

We were now at a loss for some time to determine what to do. When the wind appeared to die away, we proposed setting fire to the houses, as we intended.

Your parents divorced before your first birthday. My dad cheated, so many affairs for so many years, but Mom stayed with him till he died.

You think she's weak for this, I know, but there's more to it than you realize.

I watched my parents stay in what you called a loveless marriage. First time I'd thought of it that way, and it made me think. Made me resent you for making me think. But no, you're wrong. There was love there. In some form we cannot understand.

When I was eleven I pulled a shoebox of letters from the top of the closet. Correspondence between my parents, mailed from the living room to the bedroom. The shoebox was hidden under my dad's Air Force uniform, the one he tried on at fifty, to prove to himself that it no longer fit.

In the letters he apologized. Mom said that she could forgive him. If I had stopped reading there, I would have seen a beautiful picture of their relationship. Regret and forgiveness. But I flipped through more of these same letters, with different dates, and they became terser and shorter until they finally stopped existing.

Your parents let one argument end their marriage. Mine argued for years over the same things, like the wooden pipe rack my dad bought when he was in the Air Force. What happened was that Mom had cleaned out some of the clutter from our very small house, and she was storing things in abandoned cars my dad kept for parts.

I don't know why this seemed like a good idea.

Everything she stored in those cars got mildewed and ruined. Photo albums. My sister's baby clothes. Mom would rather let something get ruined than throw it away.

A decade later, Dad would bring up his pipe rack. He'd say she did it on purpose, to tell him something.

Mom would say that he knew where it was the whole time, that he could have brought it inside, that he let it get ruined so he could have his grudge.

Maybe they were in love but just not very good at it. Or maybe you're right.

If you let something be destroyed like that, if you just sit there and let it happen, you never wanted to keep it in the first place.

❖ SEVEN ❖

The summer was spent to advantage, as we were careful to spread such reports as suited our interest. I remained at Louisville until the spring following, continually discharging the multiplicity of business that was constantly brought from every quarter.

We now began to feel the effect of the depreciated state of the paper currency. Everything was at two or three prices, and scarcely to be had at any price. We set out on a plan of laying up, this fall, great quantities of jerked meat.

They've seen me out there wrestling with nature, trying to dig up the grass from the front yard and replace it with more attractive grass. You kill all the ugly little flowers.

The Kentucky Derby is happening, and you and I have been invited to a party. Our small crisis, which we make big, is revealing to our new neighbors our vegetarianism. This would have been best taken care of upon the initial invitation. When they said "We're gonna grill up some burgers—you all should come over," I should have said "I'll bring the Not Dogs. The False-age Links."

But I didn't.

Maybe I didn't take their invitation seriously, or maybe I didn't intend to go, but they began to mention their

cook-out each time I saw them, and I became less comfortable with bringing up veggie burgers.

Honestly, I was afraid they would think I'm a pussy. Our new neighborhood is already suspicious of me, since I painted our front steps bright blue. They've seen you in the front yard repairing the lawnmower, me planting chrysanthemums.

Once I saw our neighbor chase his daughter out the front door and into the street, screaming "You ain't no better than me!"

In a fight once, you accused me of thinking I'm better than the people on our street, better than your family, better than lots of people.

The next day you wrote me a letter to apologize. I accept. But I'm not clear whether you were apologizing for saying it or believing it.

Last night, before I fell asleep, you put your hands under my pillow. I could feel you staring into my eyelids. "You'd never want to sleep with anyone else, would you?"

The first night we slept in the same bed, I said something ridiculous in my sleep. We had a roommate then, and you felt uncomfortable having sex with him there in the next room. "It's cool," I said. "I understand."

Then, sometime during the night, you tell me I turned to you and said "We totally could have fucked and he wouldn't have known."

We totally could have fucked. I have no memory of saying this, only the image you gave me the next morning. I was lucky enough that you thought it was funny. But I wonder. What else have I been telling you?

I told you no, I don't want to have sex with anyone else. Don't worry. Go to sleep. But there is a girl with whom I have a weird but good sexual tension. She smells like a baby.

I was sitting in the Filson Historical Society. I've been doing some research—the nation's storehouse for Lewis & Clark information. Why was she there? She played Sacajawea once in a school play, only black girl in the school. I was in a play about conservation. I was a guitar-playing shark.

She had on this terrycloth hoodie. Baby blue. She pulled the hood tight and chewed on the plastic thing at the end of one of the cords.

In the Lewis and Clark room she showed me a boar's jawbone, the only animal artifact from the expedition. She pointed this out to me. "Did you know they didn't take enough food? They had to eat their colts."

"What? They ate horses?"

"They ate *baby* horses."

Does she spend her days studying Lewis and Clark at the Filson, smelling like infants? Was it the smell of youth still clinging to her?

I found out she works in a nursery.

You and I, I mostly, have talked about having a baby. You're afraid it would turn out like your brother, that something stupid and criminal runs in your family. You presented adoption as some sort of compromise, and when that didn't sit well with me, you suggested something else was behind it. Something biological.

Is this true? If I'm biologically inclined to impregnate women, then I'm inclined toward other traits: competition, aggression. Could I eat a pony?

Your brother once told me "Well the cavemen ate meat and that's good enough for me!"

Well, yeah, I said. But the cavemen did lots of things I don't do. They all lived together in *caves*, for instance. I think there's also evolution, I said, which didn't sit well with him, which I think he took the wrong way.

I hid out in the house with you on Derby Day, neither one of us wanting to go to the party across the street, because knowing the neighbors too well can only lead to more social obligations, to more trouble down the road.

We sneaked out to rent those movies and buy whiskey when we had turned down free alcohol at the party. And they saw us coming back.

We are terrible people.

People like to challenge our vegetarianism, make arguments about how we're *supposed* to eat meat, take our place at the top of the food chain.

I haven't understood the resentment till now. But I see what they're thinking. I want to be better than human.

❖ EIGHT ❖

The defense of our forts, the procuring of provisions, and, when possible, suppressing the Indians (which was frequently done), burying the dead and dressing the wounded, seemed to be all our business.

A small boat made her escape, which was all that was saved.

In the cemetery where Colonel Sanders is buried, we took a walk to the top of the hill. To the grave of George Rogers Clark, the founder of our great city. It was like he was calling me there. You were smiling, impressed, coming around.

Did you know that Clark joined the French army? That George Washington sent out orders for his arrest? He funded the 1777 expedition himself, bought ammunition and supplies for his men to secure Kentucky. The government wouldn't reimburse him.

Here he is, under a tiny headstone, a miniature American flag. And Colonel Sanders with his million-dollar monument.

Our wedding was held in our apartment. You wore a twenty-dollar skirt. We didn't invite our families. We didn't have a cake.

We didn't do what we were supposed to, and we were sure that's what made it work. But more than that, we didn't want anyone *watching* us. Some couples get off on having sex in front of other people. We didn't even want someone watching us get married. We then spent months in that apartment, not returning friends' calls, coming out late at night for long walks around our dangerous neighborhood. We laid aside all idea of public affairs.

Getting married was selfish and somehow rebellious, and there is new excitement, after ten years, in having *stayed* married. People are interested. People are impressed.

But the stories we've read tell us that people married for this long are bored and resentful. Too content, or not content at all.

Sir, it is uncertain to whom Clark was addressing his memoir. The historians say Thomas Jefferson, or James Madison, but I prefer to believe it was me. I was meant to discover his memoir in that library study room. Two-hundred-year-old stories of conquest and glory were exactly what I needed to hear that night.

You and I talk about things happening at the right moments in our lives. When is the time to do what? We got married at twenty, against everyone's advice. But we listened to their advice on children: wait.

Now I want to convince you that we've waited as long as we should. That we're getting older, which is a terrible realization to come to, even worse to have forced upon you.

It came up in again Mexico, celebrating our ten-year anniversary. We had a fight at the bar while I ate spicy peanuts from those never-ending bowls. The tension and spiciness gave me hiccups. We went back to our room and went to bed without saying goodnight or anything else.

Without kids I worry that my life will never change, that

it will stay as it is. I want to look into the future and see my life as different.

You like our lives as they are.

When I woke up I put my hands under your pillow. If I had been in another city I would have called you, or written you a letter. But lying in bed next to you these ideas seemed ridiculous. So instead I said what I say sometimes: "Tell me all your secrets."

"I don't have any secrets," you said. But it isn't true.

I have no idea what you think about. About your brother in prison, facing all those years. His third drug offense. I had almost convinced myself that he likes it in there. He's always smiling when we come to visit. After he got out two years ago he talked about it like it was summer camp.

But it can't be easy for you. I get depressed because my sister doesn't like her new job.

When you stare into whatever future you see, what does it look like? Have we given up the enterprising and active pursuits of our youth, and if so, what replaced them? Did you get your tattoo?

The distance of the expedition did something to us, I think. We used to brag about having never spent a night apart.

I parted ways with the men from the expedition fully expecting I'd never see them again. By the time we reached Vancouver only Colonel Henderson and I were left, staring out opposite car windows. There was never enough depth to our conversations. We bonded only when we discovered we were each secretly making desperate phone calls, trying to arrange flights to get away from each other.

It is not easy for me to get along with people, for people to get along with me. I have always held this as a testament to the power of my relationship with you.

When I came home you told me that you had been perfectly happy alone. But it wasn't true. What you said you were asking me, later, after that fight, was not to go away again.

I made it home just in time for your thirtieth birthday. I left you alone for the ten days of dread leading up to it.

I had tried to make plans, but you weren't interested in staging a mock Sweet Sixteen party, or a Southern Belle's coming out party. Instead, you wanted to walk through the cemetery.

If I were my dad standing here at thirty, my life would be more than half over. He died young, unexpectedly, quietly. I don't think he ever wanted to get old.





George Rogers Clark died a miserable death. He had a stroke and fell into a fireplace. They had to amputate his leg, and the legend goes that he refused anesthetic. He hired a drummer and fifer to play outside his bedroom throughout the operation.

How would things have been different if he had accepted that mission exploring west? He would have still died, but would he have died out there somewhere instead of broken, taken in by his sister?

Clark was a lifelong bachelor. They wrote plays about him during the Civil War era—a love story between him and a Spanish princess. His moment of glory had passed. He was a forgotten hero, fucked over by George Washington and living in the shadow of his little brother. He believed that he wasn't good enough for her.

Am I good enough for you? A man walking with his wife stares you up and down and asks me, "Is she your sister?"

"No."

"Well you're lucky then."

I am lucky you're not my sister.

Last year, when we found ourselves spending far too much time with friends ten years younger than us, we talked one night about which of them would be suitable offspring. My first choice, you said, is exactly the reason you're afraid to have children. Too self-destructive, gets his heart broken too easily. The kind of kid who would move in with his girlfriend and never call his parents.

There should be some kind of program to adopt eighteen-year-olds. Low commitment, like a test-parenting kind of thing. You liked the one who is painfully shy, the one I tried to talk out of smoking. The one whose girlfriend was stolen by my initial choice. I agree. He makes the list. Can I add this girl from the library, the one who shares some of my interests in music? She's good at research, sort of obsessed with mortality.

I started mentioning babies when I got home from the expedition, but I'd mentioned them before. After my dad died—that same night—somehow it was linked in my mind.

Couples are pushing strollers through this cemetery. A man carries two screaming infants and a disappointed look in his eyes, a warning to you and me, holding hands. You look back at Clark's grave. "So how old can I get and still have a baby?"

* Certain phrases are quoted from George Rogers Clark's *Memoir*, from *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783* and *Life of Gen. George Rogers Clark* by William Hayden English, and from *The George Rogers Clark Teaching Units*.