

No it doesn't. I lied. Tell me where you are.

When I found out I was having a girl, I was relieved. Did I ever tell you that? I was terrified of having a boy. Not a baby boy: something I figured I could handle. I just didn't know what I could ever say to a teenage boy. Oily, lurching creatures, jerking off and playing bad guitar. I suppose you know that by now.

I almost looked forward to your teenage years. Raising a girl would not be easy, but it wouldn't be alien. I would have some sense of what I was getting into, the good and the bad.

When I began writing this down, I think it was for catharsis. Do you know what catharsis means? Well, if you don't, look it up. But now I know I'll be folding this like a letter and leaving it for you to find.

I know you don't think of your bleaching as something you do to me. You think breaking curfew is a victimless crime. I thought that too, once, when I did it to my mother.

But I will not be my mother. I will not be here when you get home. I'm going out to do some bleaching of my own. It's not payback, or some tough-love technique out of a parenting book. I'm not doing it to you. I'm just doing it. It's becoming impossible for me to stay in this moment any longer. I need to go out, to discover what it is you've done to me.

J.J. STEINFELD

EXPLANATIONS

The man looked at the clock in the kitchen: an hour until his wife, Deborah, would be home. Wednesdays meant a full day of teaching classes, including her evening course, *The History of Women's Criminality, 1800 to the Present*, one of the most popular courses in the History Department, if not the entire university. Her book on nineteenth-century female criminality was nearly completed. Hope you don't mind if I don't dedicate this book to you, she had told her husband this morning. When she had started the research for the book, began the dream of a ground-breaking work in an area she felt was under-appreciated, she had hinted that she would dedicate the book to him. She had warmly thanked him in the acknowledgements to her first book, but not in the dedication. Now it was going to be her thesis advisor and mentor from graduate school.

I hope she lives to see the book published, Deborah said. I hope I live through this day, he told her.

He was not having a good day: the sore throat and running nose, wheezing, coughing, moaning, feeling sorry for himself. He had tried to read but his concentration was ruined. Five pages of a mystery novel, getting half-way through an article in a magazine, and back to the morning newspaper. He caught himself reading sentences two, three times. His eyes hurt. He used another tissue. He couldn't remember the last time he had such a bad cold, or used so many tissues. Deborah had convinced him to call in sick—the hospitality industry isn't going to collapse if you stay home, she had jabbed at him. He rarely missed work, so a day or two off wouldn't undermine the hotel's operations. Why do you stay at that job, anyway? It's hardly intellectually stimulating. Why don't you use your education? You could go back to school, she jabbed some more. And these verbal jabs while he felt so ill—it just didn't seem fair. His wife hadn't criticized him about his career choice lately, but was back on it again. He liked his job, emphasizing that point once more as he blew his nose. Night clerk at one of the finest hotels in the city. That was the shift he favoured, was best suited for, he argued. I'm a night owl. Deborah told him he was starting to look like a little old hoot owl. Thirty-four is ancient for an owl, she joked. You learn a great deal about human beings working in a hotel in the evenings and at night, he said. So write about it, she had scolded on more than one occasion, and he said he didn't have a desire to write. The last time he had written anything of any length was the first two chapters of his master's thesis on the weekly expenditure patterns of rural residents during summer and winter months. That was as far as he had gotten: two chapters. What do you have a desire to do? she had asked during another one of their arguments. Love you, darling, love you with all my heart and soul, and make my modest financial contribution to our household. That sounds

like a song from another era, she said, and he couldn't tell if she was being critical or sympathetic. Usually he could tell. Maybe it was his cold. He couldn't understand why she renewed her criticism of his choices. They were planning to purchase a larger house in a nicer neighbourhood. His wife was pregnant with their first child, after living together for nine years and being married for two. She had confided in a colleague that the pregnancy wasn't planned; it wasn't like her to share such personal information with others, but the pregnancy and her husband's almost studious lack of ambition—a description she had mentioned to several of her colleagues and friends—had been affecting her moods. When they met, they were both graduate students, she a twenty-five-year-old doctoral student in history and he a twenty-three-year-old master's student in economics. He dropped out without finishing his master's—I don't have the disposition to be an academic, he said—and she went on to finish her Ph.D. in a most dazzling fashion, her dissertation turning into her first scholarly book, dedicated to her parents and two brothers. When Deborah referred to her husband, it was in a tone less than enthusiastic.

The computer was easier to deal with than print. He didn't have to concentrate as much as he surfed the internet, looking at pictures. He used the computer in the den, the old model—works like a charm and there's something beautifully old-fashioned about it, she had said, and he agreed. She had written much of her dissertation on it. He gave in to the temptation to type in suggestive words in the search engine. Were there no limits? He was critical of pornography and its easy accessibility on the Internet, yet here he was surfing and sneezing. He had written a long letter to the editor of the local paper about the dangers of pornography for adults, not just for younger, more impressionable minds. He was pleased: it had been the featured letter-to-the-editor of the day, beating out for page-primacy letters about the environment and food additives and the bane of reckless, inconsiderate drivers.

Stockings ... pantyhose ... secretaries ... he typed them into the search engine after a few of the cruder sexual practices came to his mind. He knew why he associated stockings and pantyhose with secretaries, but he was astounded by all the references he found, the pictures and streaming videos and naughty, poorly written text. One of the women at the hotel had told him she had "modeled" a few years ago, but that was when she was desperate and misguided. He told her she had nice legs, and she said she wouldn't wear a skirt if the hotel didn't insist on it. She told him that in one of the photo shoots she had posed as a secretary, and stripped down photograph by photograph, until all she had on were her stockings. Then her boss came in, some idiotic crude lecher who wouldn't know one end of an office from another, and she removed the stockings for him and drove him wild with lust. On the desk, the floor, against the door. That was the motivation the photographer had given her. He had been a snarly old man who kept complaining how much his indigestion was bothering him. Not painting too glamorous an image of the porn industry, she said. Wouldn't that make a delightful little film, he had said, and she told him it had been one of the worst experiences of her life. He travelled through different websites like a man who had been given the key to a candy shop

and couldn't decide which confections he desired most. What would happen, he thought, if he had a sudden heart attack, and Deborah found him slumped over the computer, a webpage full of stockinged secretaries on the screen?

He got up from the monitor and went to the kitchen to make himself an Echinacea tea. He put two lozenges in his mouth and swallowed some medication. He went back to the computer: more photographs, more videos. As bad as he was feeling, he was excited.

The idea of masturbating while sitting in front of the old computer distressed him. He recalled times when he was younger, living with his parents, when he used to masturbate. He used tissues then. Now he was using even more, but for his nose. He went to their bedroom and opened his wife's hosiery drawer. He wanted to touch them. She had several pairs. He looked for her special dress-up, thigh-high stockings.

The solid sensation of metal crushed his excitement. He looked beneath the fabric. There, at the bottom of the drawer, was a gun. A loaded gun. What is this? he heard himself say. He said it again. A gun. It looked old, almost antique, much, much older than the computer, he thought, but it was loaded. He went through her other drawers, not knowing what he would find, what kind of arsenal of weapons, but there was only the one loaded gun. He held it in his hand. He had never held a loaded gun in his hand before. Would it work? He put his finger on the trigger but quickly removed it, fearful that he might shoot a hole through the wall. But he did not want to put the gun back in the drawer, as if it would be more dangerous hidden away.

There had to be an explanation, he thought. Maybe it had something to do with her research, but he stretched and pondered and couldn't come up with a plausible justification. She had never expressed an interest in having a gun, and they discussed everything: it was important to both of them that their marriage be based on fairness and openness. There were no secrets, at least nothing of this magnitude. A gun. A loaded gun.

He heard his wife come into the house, and his hands were full of stockings. The den was just off the entranceway. He had forgotten to exit the fetish website he had been looking at. He heard her yelling. I can explain, he said, but his throat was so sore it was painful for him to say the words. Yes, he could explain: he was looking for the woman from work; she told him about the site, her past salacious life. He was curious about a long-time co-worker—such a quiet, modest woman. He hadn't believed her and they made a small bet. A bottle of wine—fine wine. He was checking on the bet ... And yes, he was going to write a story about his co-worker's past and the fetish website and his life as a night clerk. Didn't she want him to write about his experiences, to use his education? Yes, the economics of stockings ... the amount of money spent on hosiery in history. It would be in the millions of dollars, billions ... How much had she spent in her life on hosiery? That could be in a footnote.

"Why are you looking at these disgusting pictures?" Deborah called upstairs.

He coughed and sneezed, rubbed his eyes in confusion.

"You have pornography on the computer. Pornography!" she shouted.

He wrapped the gun in a bundle of stockings, hiding it, prepared to make it dissolve.

He wanted an explanation, too: what was the gun doing in her drawer? I can explain that ridiculous fetish website, but a loaded gun ...

I can explain, he said again, and ran down the stairs to his wife, the stockings still in his hands. His head felt stuffed and everything seemed unclear. On the third last step he tripped and tumbled the rest of the way, the star of a slapstick film, his nose running right on cue. "What happened?" she called from the den, and started to leave the room. He brought one of the stockings close to his face to wipe his nose, and inhaled. The gun, at least, hadn't gone off. He waited for his wife to come to the foot of the stairs and be sympathetic, soothe him, not ask why he was clutching the stockings to his face.

WES SMIDERLE

DANCING THROUGH THE SKY-BLUE DOORWAY

Alexis has no clear memory of the impact with the tree, or the snow-swept lawn, or the reasons why. All she remembers is the fear and happiness of her naked skin. Bare toes dancing above a wild rush of December air. A sensation of freedom followed by dislocation on the dark ground.

The man with the notepad wants more. He asks what, precisely, prompted the death leap. She smiles. His face remains flat, a row of white teeth set against the nub of his pen. The man with the notepad does not grant her the privilege of a sense of humour. She keeps smiling because the memories are embarrassing.

It started with her first Christmas exam, *Power and Everyday Life*, one item among a laundry list of courses that made less sense the longer she considered them: *Journalism's View of Life Language*, *The Psychology of Public Life*, *Life Writing: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary*. For Alexis, real life was confined to the ninth floor of a campus dormitory. Snug cement rooms, each as narrow as an upright coffin. She shared a two-bedroom with a brainy grade-A type who offered unsolicited studying tips and occasional fashion advice.

When deadlines drew close, Alexis fortified herself with a kitchen sink slop of cheap coffee, cold soft drinks, three-cheese pizza and a vague assortment of pills. A diet for dizzy, perpetual confidence highs. Her thoughts buzzed with psychology. Alfred Adler and his patterns of life. Jung and his shadowy gang of archetypes. Both men discussing the unseen powers beneath her mind.

The man with the notepad interrupts to wonder, why Jung? Why Adler? Because their words turn me on, she replies. He writes this down in careful block script. Underlined.

Alexis had little choice. Jung and Adler were the dead white men being crammed into her head. Daily lectures, study-notes, and cheat-sheets. Random, dislocated information. She could summon facts and theories without effort. She once heard a professor claim that human beings only use five per cent of their brain's capacity. Sitting on the floor of the bedroom, surrounded by wrinkled paper and a mound of textbooks, Alexis saw how easy it was to access the rest. She could do anything.

With the words of dead men still ringing in her skull, Alexis abandoned her notes and left for a quick beer. She savoured the idea while riding the elevator and racing through the lobby. Quick beer, quick beer.

At a campus bar, she ran into that guy in economics class. The straight-A jock with the perfect hair and sculpted ass. The studly brainiac. The philosopher king. The guy she'd never had the courage to talk to until that moment when she strolled over no problem whatsoever. She started discussing roommates and the