

## 1. Graves, bad luck, and fat men

I won the lottery. That's what I say when I'm at a party and someone asks me what I do for a living. And while they're still processing that, I quickly excuse myself to head for the booze table. Most people are only too happy to let me move on. Most people, unlucky themselves, don't like lucky people. Besides most people are really only waiting for you to stop moving your mouth so they can start talking about themselves and telling them you won a lottery tends to stop them in their tracks. What are they going to say to that?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not passing judgment. I'm just as self-absorbed as anyone. And who can blame any of us? Everyone's a mystery to themselves and one lifetime just isn't enough to figure it all out. I imagine that everyone dies asking more or less the same question: "What the hell was all that about?"

Maybe that's why we try to keep living as long as possible.

What do I really do for a living? This is what I do: I sit on a park bench and wait for someone to come sit next to me. It could be anyone: a jealous spouse, a suspicious business partner, a blackmail victim, a dirty politician (as opposed to what other kind?), the parent of a missing child, the lover of a missing person—or the loved one who wants to stay missing.

I sit on a park bench and wait for them to come.

And they do. You see, I provide a very valuable service.

What I do is solve problems.

Business is usually brisk. There is never a shortage of problems to go around.

Screwed to the back of the bench I'm sitting on right now is a little gold plaque dedicated to the memory of Edith and Ronald Kriehoffen by their "loving family." All the benches in this part of the park have these little plaques on them dedicated to someone or other. I'm sitting on a tombstone, basically, with no body underneath it. I look around at all these memorial benches. I could be sitting in an empty graveyard. What I'm reminded of is how desperately we all want to matter, how fiercely we all want to be remembered. What I'm reminded of is that we don't really matter at all, how we won't really be remembered by anyone.

It's sad, when you think about all it entails, to be a human being.

In my line of work, I do a lot of waiting. When you do a lot of waiting, you have a lot of time to think. It's an occupational hazard, like getting black lung is for a miner.

While I wait for today's client, I feed the pigeons from a bag of leftover popcorn I bought for breakfast at Port Authority. Desperate and unashamed, the birds swarm around me like an impossible number of ex-wives. As I throw the stale kernels at them, I can only admire their enthusiastic celebration of voracious, opportunistic greed. Usually it's ten, fifteen years of life down the crapper before you get to see this side of the people in your life.

I know what you're thinking: *misogynist, misanthrope, malcontent, mental case*. But I don't have enough interest or passion left for any emotional investment as strong as that.

I don't hate human beings. Honestly, I don't. I just don't think I've ever actually met one.

Once a few years back, when I still thought of myself as quite the badass, I got into kind of a nasty situation that's not all that unusual in my line of work. The circumstances aren't really important. Suffice it to say, it was one of those affairs where you end up on your knees at three a.m. in an alley somewhere downtown, the barrel of a .32 automatic shoved rudely into your mouth, some really excited guy screaming something at you in Spanish. Everything is a mess, someone off to the side is going through your wallet, a pal of yours is sobbing for his mother, puke is everywhere, and you aren't sure whether that's blood or urine soaking the front of your

pants. It's times like those when you're surprised, and later on, thoroughly appalled, to discover just what you'll do to stay alive. That's what this story, all stories, really, are about in the end. The kinds of things we do, day by day, to stay alive—even when there doesn't really seem to be much point to life at all.

He's big the guy who slides in next to me on the park bench this afternoon. He's more than big, he's obese, morbidly so, the kind of guy whose legs are foreshortened by all the fat hanging over his belt. His stubby, meaty thighs are spread out to make room for that prodigious sack of a belly, plopped down there like he's expecting the birth of twin hippos, and he has that anatomically unique-to-fat men pouch of hard fat under his exhausted belt that seems to make any kind of genitalia impossible. I'm about to tell this fat wheezing bastard he has the wrong bench, that I'm waiting for someone and could he please go have his coronary on one of the other benches; he could even find one that doesn't have a plaque on it yet, and claim it for all eternity. I'm thinking, *This just can't be the guy I'm waiting to see* when from out of his wet fat mouth pop the magic words, "You Mr. Molloy?"

He sounded much fitter, much thinner on the phone. He also described himself as "of average build." You'd think this was a blind date the way he misled me. I'm not Molloy, by the way, that's not my real name, it's just the alias I'm using this afternoon, but I'm the guy he thinks I am, alright.

I nod. "Mr. Knott?"

"Who," he huffs, "else?"

He's sweating, and not lightly, from the exertion of walking here from wherever it is he came from, but it can't be any more than seventy-five degrees out. It's only the third day of summer and I'm thinking, this guy isn't going to survive July. He swipes a handkerchief over his hammy red face, its features swallowed up by fat, distorted, smoothed over, so that he has that generic fat man look. I really don't mean to go on about it, I have nothing against the weight-challenged, in fact, I'm none too slim myself, but, the amount of reality he's displacing for his existence, it seems excessive, it seems significant. He's late, too, I should add.

"You're late," I say.

He checks the time, stretching his short chubby arm as far as it will go, which isn't far. But unless he's got some kind of inconceivably complicated optomological condition going on, he's not going to be able to see his watch no matter how hard he squints. It's on his other wrist. He grunts.

He says, "Subway fire," as if he's just saying that.

He takes out a pack of Camels, holds them towards me, his arm barely reaching across his chest. It's like he's wrapped up in a strait-jacket of meat. It must be horrible, I think, to be such a prisoner of yourself.

"Smoke?"

I hold up a hand. "No thanks. I don't smoke."

I try to say this as non-judgmentally as I can, even though, according to the anti-smoking lobby, anyway, with that cigarette smoking away between his fingers, he's practically as dangerous as any mass-murderer.

He lights up, hacks horribly, all phlegmy and loose, as if his lungs were liquefying, and then he blows some toxic bit of tissue from his mouth onto the pathway that I try not to look at, afraid that it might actually get up and walk away all by itself. After a while, he settles into a nice steady wheeze, like a failing air conditioner.

"Asthma," he explains, as if anyone asked.

I'm thinking, *Look at all the ways we try to kill ourselves, little by little, every day.* Yes, it's true, we'll do almost anything to stay alive; and yet, at the same time, we're killing ourselves all the while. It's so unbelievably fucked-up, like those mothers who love their kids so much they slowly poison them and then rush them to the emergency room, as if there were any other type of mother, right? Ha ha. As I sit there thinking these thoughts, I'm noting the sweat rings under the fat guy's short-sleeved yellow shirt, a salty ring for each day. I'm noting the braided gold chain, circa 1977, around his fat, pink roast-beef of a neck, the pudgy little hands, carefully shaved and immacuately manicured.

"I represent a certain gentleman," he begins his spiel, violently swabbing his face with a handkerchief as if he were trying to wipe it off completely. He takes a gulp of air and continues his spiel by saying, "And this certain gentleman wants a certain matter looked into."

I don't say anything. This is all par for the course. The world is

full of certain gentlemen who want certain matters looked into. If it weren't, I'd be working at Radio Shack hustling double-A batteries or living under a cardboard box down on Sixth Avenue. I wait patiently for the fat man to get around to the point.

He continues.

"The matter in question deals with a certain missing person."

"Did a certain gentleman call the police?" I offer.

"The police won't look for this missing person."

"I see." This is not surprising, of course. "Why not?"

"Only a few people know this person is missing. And the certain gentleman I represent is among them."

"And I'm supposed to find out what happened to this person?"

"Well," the fat man says, "there's more to it than that."

"How much more?"

"We want to know who she is."

"I don't understand. You want me to find a missing person and you don't know who she is?" I make a comical show of looking around in the leafy trees as if I were seeking out a hidden camera. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"I assure you it's no joke. There's nothing funny about this at all. In fact, it's all very, very serious. The certain gentleman I represent met this missing person on the computer. They conducted a rather—erm torrid—online affair. And then one day, poof, she's gone."

"You mean they never met in real life?"

"I think you've hit the proverbial bulls-eye, Mr. Molloy."

"I'd like to meet this client of yours."

The fat man briefly shakes his head. His waddle keeps shuddering an impressively long while afterwards.

"I'm afraid that's not possible. The certain gentleman I represent wishes to remain without a name, unknown, you know..." He looks stumped, like a fish suddenly deprived of its element.

"Anonymous," I say.

"Huh? Say again?"

"Anonymous," I repeat. He wishes to remain anonymous. That's the word you're looking for."

Blank looks from both of us, but I'm guessing for entirely different reasons.

"Forget it," I say.

What I mean is to forget all of it, the whole thing, but the fat man thinks I just mean skip what I'd just said. So he goes on, explaining further, and he doesn't say anything he hasn't already said, which isn't much.

"This certain gentleman wants nothing for himself. If the lady in question does exist and has broken things off of her own free will, he understands. He just want to make sure she's okay. This certain gentleman is just doing his chivalrous duty, you might say. He believes in justice, in love, in those kinds of things."

The fat man gets points, in my book anyway, for saying all this with a reasonably straight face. I guess it's a reasonably straight face, unless any sardonic expression that might otherwise mar his impassive features have been totally obliterated by lard.

"Look Mr. Knott," I say, using what I'm certain is the fake name he gave me two days ago on a payphone near Columbus Circle. "This all sounds a little antic for my diet. I don't like to work through third-parties. I've had some bad experiences with that sort of thing in the past. It tends to bring out the worse in people. At best, what you're describing has all the earmarks of invasion of privacy and harassment. At worst, it sounds like a wild goose chase. Let me give you some free advice. More than likely, your employer has been had by someone pretending to be someone they aren't. There is probably no such person as the woman he seeks."

"Mr. Molloy," he starts, and I know immediately that this exchange of "misters" signals in reality a degeneration in the general cordiality of our conversation, "What is a real person anyway? The certain gentleman who I represent has fallen in love with her. Doesn't that make her real enough? What is the difference between invasion of privacy and the art of seduction? If this certain gentleman is concerned for her well-being, is it really harassment?"

I wasn't exactly in the mood for a philosophical discussion on the nature of being, ethics, or erotic love, so I say, "I'm sorry Mr. Knott. I'm not interested."

I get up. The fat man says, "You're making a terrible mistake. I assure you."

I shrug, “I’ve made plenty of those. It’s no big deal. I’ll no doubt survive to make others. But thanks all the same for the opportunity. Have a good day.”

“You’ll be hearing from me, Mr. Molloy.”

He says this last thing to my back, as I’m walking away, purposely heading out of the park in the direction opposite from wherever it is I’m really heading, which is probably the nearest gym, the fat man having temporarily inspired me to finally start that cardioexercise regimen I’ve been putting off for the last twenty years. I’m fairly certain Mr. Knott meant me to understand what he’d just said as both a promise *and* a threat, which, when you stop and think about it, are often the only kinds of promises you can ever really count on.



## 2. Fast balls, fake girls, and mornings-after...

Sitting back, savoring a ten dollar beer-and-hot-dog-lunch, I'm watching the game unfold about a mile-and-a-half below me like a god in the cheap seats. It's a Wednesday afternoon, a two p.m. start, and Clemens is pitching against the Yankees. I like Clemens the way he is now, way past his prime: a big slab of a guy using brute intimidation even more than skill. He'll throw the ball at anyone's head and he lets everyone know it. To him, that's just a given and he acts as if he genuinely doesn't understand what the objection to his attitude could possibly be. He knows that during the short time that ball is in his hand, he's got the advantage. The moment he lets it go, he's a slave to fate just like anyone else. That one moment with the ball in our hand, it's all we ever get.

Today, though, Clemens is like most of us: he doesn't have a goddamn thing.

It's like that sometimes. No matter what you throw you up there, someone hits it back at you even harder.

Today the ball is flying all over the place, as if Yankee Stadium were a big old-fashioned pinball machine someone were making sing just this side of "tilt." The scoreboard is lighting up like a Macy's Christmas display, a row of crooked numbers. Clemens had given up seven runs and a dozen hits by the fourth inning when he's finally replaced by some sorry-ass

reliever Houston has reserved to absorb the beating for the remainder of just such lost causes. But, to everyone's surprise, the Astros come back in the top of the eighth with an improbable bombardment of their own and win 12-10.

Too bad.

I took the Yanks and three so I don't cover and lose three hundred. I take the D-train back to Manhattan trying the whole time to catch the Mets on my walkman through a blizzard of static because I have two hundred on the Cardinals out at Shea. I'll lose that one, too, as it turns out, betting against the home team, it serves me right, I guess, and I steer myself into a basement bar in the East Village and pour a few pints of Guinness on my guilt and so its half-a-grand poorer and almost two am when I finally head out to Brooklyn to keep my date with Meeah Soo.

I should admit right off that Meeah Soo is not like most girls, not like any girl at all, really, and yet she's more girl than most. She'll tell you so herself straight off, if you give her half the chance, because she's learned the hard way that most guys don't like any ambiguity or unnecessary surprises in this area. She's just off her shift at the strip club and we're having dinner at a dingy Chinese eatery under the highway, maybe two days after my already forgotten visit with the fat man. She's having the mu shu shrimp, only eating the shrimp, which aren't very populous in the mu shu here at Emperor Noodles.

Meeah likes when I take her out, even though I only take her out in those charmed hours long after it gets dark and long before it gets light. I only take her out when everyone still up are people just as mismatched as us, or too messed up to notice. I take her to dives like Emperor Noodles where no one speaks any English and you can get a whole meal with a small dish of pistachio ice cream for \$3.95.

Meeah Soo is six-foot-one in her Rite Aid thigh-high fishnets even without the big white sissy platforms and she must weigh no more than one-fifteen soaking wet. She knows how many calories there are in a teaspoon of mustard. She knows the fat content of a raisin. If you're thinking, "eating disorder," then you're close. If you're thinking, "distorted body-image," you're on the right track. No one's image of her body could

be more distorted than Meeah Soo's, and she's got all the scars to prove it. Most guys, they don't take her out at all. Most guys meet her in hotel rooms called "Rooms for Rent" and bring along a couple of 40s and sandwiches if they're romantics.

I'm always telling Meeah I'm sorry I can't take her out to regular places. She says, "I'm sorry I can't be more of a regular woman."

This is as close to true love as I've ever gotten: two people apologizing to each other for not being what the other wanted.

Meeah holds up and inspects a peanut-sized shrimp between her chopsticks to make sure it's not, in fact, a peanut, or an aborted mouse fetus, or something even less desirable. She shows me what she's got trapped between the tips of her chopsticks.

She says, "Does this look like a shrimp to you?"

I squint at whatever she's holding up, but before I can answer, she shrugs her shoulders, dips whatever it is in the sweet and sour sauce, and nibbles it delicately with her capped white teeth. Her dress is royal blue, one of those things that's off-the-shoulder, her big white sissy platforms must be four inches high, and her long press-on fingernails could make a visit to the toilet a life-threatening experience. She's wearing a blue silk scarf around her neck and she has big movie-star wax lips and her make-up is cracking a bit in all the places you'd expect it to crack if you've been pretending to smile at a bunch of groping perverts all night.

Meeah has an apartment she shares near a tin can factory with a friend and that's where we go after dinner. She checks her messages and they are mostly from married guys calling from cell phones. They all sound irritated and crabby, like guys with untended hard-ons tend to sound, irrationally expecting someone to be perpetually waiting on the other end of the line to help them with their situation, like mommy with a warm bottle, I suppose. I make myself at home on a couch that looks like the ghost of a couch because there is a white sheet covering it for some reason I can never discern. I lean forward over a coffee-table covered with fashion and celebrity gossip tabloids. I pick up a copy of some cheesy rag with an article claiming that Jennifer Lopez has been dead for twelve years and a look-alike has been performing for her ever since. That, I consider, would explain a lot. There is a story that Bigfoot is considering a run for Senate with the

Democratic Party. That Oprah Winfrey is pregnant with an alien spawn that will populate Antarctica in preparation for the Antichrist.

Meeah is still listening to her messages, an entire nursery of whining creeps. She looks at me, shrugs apologetically, and mouths, *I'm sorry*, as if she's forgotten the caller's can't hear you on a message machine, anyway.

There are fabrics hanging from the walls that Meeah has hung to give the place atmosphere but mostly to hide the rotten spots where the wall has crumbled away like moldy cheese. There is a poster from years back of Cyndi Lauper in her "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" incarnation. Right now I'm thinking two things:

- 1.) It's so sad to be a human being.
- 2.) How do we endure how sad it is to be a human being?

Meeah has finally gotten sick of listening to all that pent-up testosterone driven petulance. Or, maybe, the machine simply ran out of space for all the neglected hard penises in the world. She's mincing around the apartment, lighting candles and incense, and it's not easy to mince around on four-inch white plastic sissy heels. It takes lots and lots of practice; it takes dedication and devotion. You'd be surprised. She asks me what I'm thinking about.

I say, "I'm thinking we really have to get out of that mess in the Middle East."

She pouts.

So I say, "Okay, okay. I'm thinking that you look very pretty tonight."

My heart, to use a well-worn euphemism for that flabby hunk of meat shuddering in my chest, is breaking when I say this.

Meeah smiles. She is putting the day-old flowers that I bought her earlier that evening from a subway station newstand in a plastic liter bottle of Pepsi One that she pulls out of the recycle pail. She fills the plastic bottle from the kitchen faucet and sits it on the table that stands between the kitchen and the dining area. Carnations, they probably are, or were, or that's what they're supposed to be. They are dyed all kinds of unearthly colors that are supposed to look better than the color carnations really are. I think the whole bouquet may actually be dead.

"They're so pretty," Meeah says, and the sad thing, of course, is that I know she really means this. "They're so lov-er-ly," she coos, and drops a

little pill into the cloudy water so that they'll last a little longer. She says, "I don't have an aspirin, so I'm using a Premamin."

I smile when she says this. I'm thinking, *well, maybe they'll grow a nice set of knockers.*

At least, I hope I'm smiling when she says this, because, if I'm not smiling I don't think I want to know what expression could be on my face.

"I'll be right back," Meeah says, and smiles right back.

At least, I hope that she's smiling, because if she's not smiling, I don't think I want to know what else that expression on her face could mean.

She goes off into the bathroom and flushes the toilet three times and curses and spits and something rattles around in the sink. I hear the shower go on, it sputters and spurts like a man with a bad prostate, squirting out a painful piss. I hear some gargling and hacking. I hear a staccato burst of sharp farts. A groan. I hear the angry buzz of an electric razor. These are the things you try not to hear. These are the things that you know go on behind the scenes all the time. These are the things people have to do to put themselves together, to reassemble the jigsaw, to put a face on to meet the faces that they meet. I pick up another tabloid and read the true-life confession of a desperate lover who sewed his dead beloved's head onto the body of a dolphin. You can't make these stories up. That's what they tell us, anyway.

"Miss me?" Meeah asks when she saunters back.

She's wearing a red silk kimono with some kind of poorly-sewn black embroidery of orchids, or maybe they're lotuses, it's impossible to tell for sure, it's all unraveling. It's slit way up one leg, all the way to the hip, so you can see to the tops of Meeah's stay-up fishnets. It's supposed to be sexy, but it makes me feel like sobbing. Fact is, I did miss her. She must have been gone for about a half an hour. I was starting to wonder what the hell had happened to her.

"Where's Treena T?" I ask. I'm looking apprehensively at the door, wondering if we're going to be alone tonight, or if Treena T will catch us in the midst of something sordid. Treena T is a bodybuilder and professional trainer when she's not acting in porn flicks with titles like *Love Muscle Babes*. She is terribly sweet, a real pussycat, but a little eerie, as any six-foot-three, two-hundred-twenty-five-pound muscle-bound guy with glued-on falsies, a black pixie wig, and a penchant for stiletto heels and knock-off Vera Wang

gowns is bound to be. Believe it or not, there are two Treenas that could conceivably be coitus interrupting us here, but Treena T is Meeah's sometime roommate, the other one, Treena F. is in L.A., but how I know that I have no idea.

Meeah frowns. "She's in Jersey. Getting her cheeks done by some doc she met on the internet. But I haven't heard from her in, oh like, days..."

"She's getting her cheeks done *again*?"

"Yep."

Then something occurs to me. "Butt or face?"

"Face. She's getting what they did the last time fixed."

Jesus, I hope so, I'm thinking. I remember the last time I saw her, the resemblance her face had taken to a lopsided catcher's mitt resembling Dolly Parton was alarming and I've heard the resemblance did *not* go away when the swelling went down. These back-alley plastic surgeons were creating a race of cut-rate mutants in the underground sex industry. It was beginning to look like an X-rated version of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* out there. Anyway, all this sounds vaguely familiar to me, what Meeah just said, but then again, most things sound vaguely familiar to me lately. That's what happens when you've heard it all.

"I'm sorry," I say, "did you already tell me that at dinner?"

"I don't know," Meeah says, looking confused herself, and she gets up to retrieve two bottles of beer out of the fridge, and turns off the kitchenette light, although not necessarily in that order. She crosses the room in her big plastic sissy heels, lots of leg flashing along that slit in the kimono, and it's significant that neither of us turns on any of the other lights. She hands me the bottles, pretending she can't open them, and I open them. We sit on the couch for a while, drinking, not saying anything.

"I'll do that" Meeah says, because I'm bending sideways to take off my shoes, and she hands me her beer bottle with the lipstick smeared halfway down the neck as if she's been deep-throating it and slides silkily off the couch onto her knees. I drink out of her bottle because mine is already empty and I taste her fruit-flavored lipstick and it feels as if she's trying to undo my shoelaces, which would be a complete waste of time, because the shoes I'm wearing don't have laces. I take another long sip of the cold beer; Meeah, pretend little geisha girl that she is, always buys

Sapporo, and by now she's slipping off my socks, and I'm vaguely worried about foot odor.

I take another pull of beer to distract myself.

Meeah's worked my pants down and she's licking me, making hmm-hmmming noises, and although I know her enthusiasm isn't entirely authentic, nothing is, I also know that it's not totally fake either, and that's something. I have my hands in her hair, but I'm not pulling too hard or messing around in there too much because I have no idea how much of her hair is real anymore and how much of it is extensions, and I don't want this to be another of those embarrassing moments we have to act like didn't happen.

Too much of all this is like that already.

"Hmmm-hmmmm," Meeah goes, and I'm amazed, as always, at how this all works, even though we might as well be reading from a script. It's all a little like a favorite dirty story in a magazine you've read fifty times before, and yet, somehow, it still works the fifty-first time, even though you know exactly what's coming, and when, maybe *because* you know exactly what's coming and when.

We end up in the bedroom after a while, which is to say, the corner of the one-room flat where the used futon is thrown on the floor beneath the satin comforter. There's some shouting coming up from the street, some garbage can racket, some bottles breaking, threats, curses, pleading, gasps of pain. As you might imagine, this isn't exactly a high-rent district Meeah Soo is living in, but the ugly-sounding commotion just seems to make being inside that much cozier. It makes you thankful to realize it'd probably take a stray bullet to get yourself capped up here, a one in a million shot. That kind of luck, good or bad, is rare.

I'm lying back on the futon mattress now and Meeah is on top of me, running her hands with the long painted nails over my chest, my stomach, and this is the time she'd be taking her clothes off, or I would be taking them off her, if she were any other girl. But aside from the red satin kimono with the wild orchids, or whatever, she still has on all the rest of it: the fur-trimmed bra, the leopard-print micro-mesh panties, the fishnet stockings, the big plastic sissy heels. Meeah is a bit like little Miss Invisible: she is the kind of girl that starts to disappear the more she takes off.

Strange thing is, this is true of most girls more than you might realize. It's just a little truer of Meeah.

Sex seems like such a mystery when you consider what we're often driven to do just to make that connection, any connection. It seems inexplicable and I don't just mean what's going on now between Meeah and I, because what's going on now really isn't that much stranger than anything else, if you take the big perspective, if you look at it from the long range, like an alien, let's say, viewing this all from Alpha Centauri, or someplace far away like that. People will gladly acknowledge that we come into this world alone and leave it alone, but they generally never consider that we pass through it alone, too. That's what sex is really all about: a way to fool ourselves into believing we aren't utterly and eternally alone.

Meeah makes things easy, but, of course, it still isn't easy, it never is. There are all kinds of places to touch and not to touch, things to say and not to say, parts to see and not to see, to keep the illusion real. And so that's where we're at, as I'm touching her breasts, or where her breasts are beginning to be, or going to be, after a few more treatments. She's still got her panties on, the bra, the sissy heels, everything, and she's on her back now and moaning and squirming around because it's my turn to make her feel good, and I can't tell if it's really anything I'm doing or if she's just enjoying some movie version of herself that she runs in her head. Meeah's got this part of being a woman down pat. The fact that I'll be here with her while she watches this movie, that alone seems to make her feel good, that alone seems to be enough. I'm there to bear witness to her fiercely imagined femininity. Sex, like any other social interaction, is a performance.

"One day," she's always saying, "I'll have a pair of real breasts," but that's not true. "One day," she's always saying, "I'll have a real vagina," but that's not true either.

These are the kinds of little lies we tell ourselves all the time to make ourselves feel better. These are the kinds of lies we pretend to believe to make each other feel better. I have my hand on her silicone-filled bra, though, as if all this were true; I've slipped my hand inside her micro-mesh panties as if what she believes will one day happen already has.

Fact is, she seems even smaller and softer than she usually does and I'm reminded, yet again, of the cost of what she's doing to herself chemically, of the impotence, the inability to experience real sexual

pleasure, not to mention the risk of permanent damage to her internal organs because none of what she's doing is being properly monitored by an endocrinologist, and I'm amazed as she comes, or pretends to come, bucking like the girl she wants to be against my hand with all these pretty little gasps and soft moans, of just how convincing she can be, if you don't think about any of it all too much, and it's not the first time or the last time that I'm making a real effort not to think about too much of anything at all.

You're not spending the night with a girl like Meeah Soo, that much you know going in. You're not spending the night if you have to brave a thermonuclear holocaust to get out of there before morning comes. It's kind of like being with a werewolf in reverse, except instead of the moon, it's all going to hell when the sun comes up, and I'm not only talking about the need for a morning shave. You have to face up to a lot of harsh realities the morning after with a girl like Meeah Soo and those harsh realities are to be avoided at all costs.

So after we're done, I stumble around, pulling on my clothes, and Meeah Soo gathers the sheets around herself, knowing that I prefer she not walk me out, or kiss me at the door, or, for that matter, say much of anything at all. On the way to the door, I leave three twenties on the table near the dead carnations standing in the plastic Pepsi One bottle but neither one of us say anything about it because that's not what this is supposed to be about anyway. At least, we're both pretending that's not what this is about. Before you know it, I'm out of the housing complex and walking up a block of steaming manhole covers on a street that's looking less and less dangerous by the second in the graying morning light and instead just more and more sad and generically miserable than ever before.

### 3. Porn, aliases, and guilty consciences...

“Oh Christ,” I mutter, cringing like a dog expecting the rolled newspaper, just like I always do whenever the phone rings, “what the hell can it be now?”

It’s four in the afternoon and I’m trying to get some sleep because I’m driving the taxi tonight. I’ve had to pick up some part-time lately since business has taken a bit of a downturn.

Okay, “a bit of a downturn” is a euphemism. Let me be perfectly frank: Business has ground to something just south of a screeching halt. I have no business. Basically, I’m doing nothing. I’m minding my own business, that’s what I’m doing, and no one, including me, wants to be doing that.

What’s happening to me lately is what tends to happen to people in my line of work when the last guy you worked for ends up disappearing off the face of the earth. Well, that’s not entirely accurate either. It’s even worse than that. Lately, the guy’s been turning up all over the place, but only one piece at a time. The last I heard they’d found a hand in Albany, a partial torso in a landfill out on Staten Island. They tell me a kneecap made it all the way to San Francisco. At this rate, his family should have most of him back to celebrate Hanukkah.

Under the circumstances, you’d think I’d have jumped at the fat man’s offer. You’d think that, but you’d be thinking wrong. You lose a lot of confidence in yourself when a client winds up scattered across the country like Osiris. Everyone else loses a lot of confidence in you, too. You

try to learn from your mistakes and that case, as I recall, also began with a certain gentleman who could not be named. I swore to myself *never again* and here it was, again already.

It seemed like fate, alright. And just like everyone else, I was putting off fate as long as possible.

So here I am sitting on the couch, trying to remember who I am, where I am, why I am, head pounding, hung-over, afraid to stand up too fast, reluctant to stand up at all. And meanwhile the phone is still ringing. It's saying, *pick me up pick me up pick me up*.

I usually leave the damn thing unplugged and let the answering machine take the aggravation. Yes, the bad news comes all the same, it sits there waiting for you to plug the phone back in. Bad news will walk through the sun from the other side of the universe to make its way to you. But I figure you might as well keep it waiting as long as possible. You never know, the world really may end tomorrow. I know I'd be kicking myself all the way to the apocalypse if it did and I ended up doing anything that I could have put off for eternity.

Anyway, I like to deal with bad news only when I'm good and ready, and on my own terms. That's too say, when I'm out of Zoloft and I've properly armed myself with a couple of six-packs or when I'm otherwise depressed enough to be reminded once again why it's not altogether a bad thing that senility awaits us, that we all have that appointment coming up with the Grim Reaper, that life doesn't go on forever.

True, too, that even though I forgot to unplug it, I don't have to answer the phone just because it's ringing. I could still let the machine pick it up. But knowing for sure that message is there, waiting for me, beep-beep-beeping, that's like Chinese water torture, that'll drive me nuts. So I pick up the phone just to get it over with, just to shut it up, getting ready to pretend my name is Malone if it's a bill collector, and Riley if it's practically anyone else.

"Yeah," I say, like someone peering around a dark corner, all set to pretend I'm not surprised no matter what, "Yeah?"

I've gotten to my feet to do this, of course, crossed the small cluttered room to my desk, a.k.a a badly-scarred card table where the phone sits, along with a laptop, an old goose-neck desk lamp with a broken goose-neck, various unpaid bills, dried up pens, paper cups from Starbucks,

Dunkin Donuts, Borders, etc., and I've plopped down in a rolling office chair with a bum wheel rescued from a curb somewhere. It's sunny out: I can see every stain on the shades, every mummified fly-corpse on the window-sill. I'm still in my boxers, you get the grim picture.

No preamble, no intro, Johnny Nomad starts right in: "What the hell did you turn Mr. Flynn down for? He told me you turned him down. What the hell did you do that for? What the hell were you thinking?"

I've already figured out he's talking about Knott since that's the only person I've turned down in the last thirty-six hours and, thinking ahead to a long night in the taxi, I'm already beginning to wonder if maybe I shouldn't have turned him down, after all. I idly wonder if Mr. Flynn is the fat man's real name, although I doubt it is, anymore than Mr. Knott was.

"Calm down," I tell Johnny, "for crissakes calm down."

"I will not calm down," he says, "I cannot calm down," he then repeats what he just said in a rapidly escalating tone up the scale to sheer hysteria, as if determined to prove it to himself. "I will not calm down," he shrieks in an embarrassingly unmanly way, "I can't I can't I can't!"

"Okay, you've convinced me. You can't and won't calm down. I concede the point. So don't. Just tell me what the problem is. Tell me who Flynn is, or Knott, or whatever the hell his name is and why I shouldn't have turned him down."

"Meet me," Johnny sniffs, "meet me at the One World Café. Everything is *so* fucked up."

I say, "Okay, give me a half-hour. I've got to put my pants on." I take a look around on the couch, the floor, the top of the fridge. "Christ, better give me the whole hour. I've got to *find* my pants."

And when I hang up the phone I'm getting that wriggling- snakes-in-a-sack feeling that you get in the pit of your stomach when the last bus out of a town invaded by zombies pulls away from the depot and you really wish you were on it.

Waiting for a light to change on the corner of 23<sup>rd</sup> and Broadway, I suddenly have a feeling of *déjà vu*: three years ago, maybe, I was standing on this very same street corner. It was during one of those sudden summer rain storms, Biblical in intensity, that catch everyone by surprise, except for

those Jamaican guys who appear out of nowhere to sell you a defective umbrella for five dollars each. I had retreated into the doorway of a Gap to wait out the storm and watched the lightning reach out through the sky with bony lethal fingers, feeling between the tops of the skyscrapers.

Although the lightning was miles away, with each clap of thunder, I saw everyone flinch, and, I admit it, me right along with them. Some atavistic instinct was at play no doubt, genetic memory from the caveman days, but I couldn't help feeling it was more than that, as if at the core of our very being each of us felt with the terror of superstitious certainty that of all the places the lightning could fall, of all the everywhere's it could possibly strike, that lightning was God reaching down out of heaven to finger us in particular.

And that's when it hit me:

*What the hell is it that we all feel so guilty about, anyway?*

Three naked Japanese women are shooting each other with plastic water pistols on Johnny Nomad's computer when I arrive at the internet café. Oblivious to everyone around him, Johnny doesn't hear me coming, totally absorbed as he is in the internet porn sites he's cruising. He jumps about six inches when I tap his shoulder. These days we all jump about six inches when we feel a tap on the shoulder.

"Hey," I say.

"Shit," he says. "You scared me half to death."

Johnny Nomad isn't Johnny Nomad's real name, of course. That's only one of his screen names, but I met him online and that name seems more real than whatever his real name would be if he were ever to trust me enough to give me his real name. I suspect that when we first met online, still unsure if I were a psycho or a cop, he gave me an alias, and never bothered to correct himself. I know that's what I did with regard to him. What you're talking about here is extreme paranoia. You're also talking about taking sensible precautions. You're talking about two people who've shared everything but bodily fluids and birth certificates, and we've probably come close to sharing the former on a lonely virtual night or two, and still we don't feel comfortable giving each other our real names.

I point at the computer, all those wet Japanese cuties. “What’s with the water pistols?”

He shrugs. “Foreigners. They think we do crap like that over here, I guess. Lord knows where they get the idea. Ratking hacked me the password to the three-hundred-seventy-five sites linked to this host. Something for everyone. A whole site devoted to women in high-heels crushing bugs and rodents. Wanna see?”

I grab his wrist as his fingers start to fly over the keyboard. “No thanks. Maybe another time. Anyway, shouldn’t you be looking at this crap at home? You know, on your personal computer?”

Johnny Nomad shrugs. “Can’t. Computer is on the fritz. A virus, I guess.”

Johnny doesn’t look too good. He never looks good, but today he’s looking much worse than usual. He looks like a guy who’s been awake in the same clothes too many days for no good reason. He looks like he’s been living under a volcano, or in the waiting room of an oncologist waiting for his test results. He looks like he’s lost a lot of something important, blood or air, something that you need to stay alive: money, perhaps.

I suggest we take a walk; and that’s what we do, heading up Lexington Avenue, north, I think. Up the street we walk, going nowhere, because I find people more likely to tell you the truth if they feel they are walking away from it at the same time. Johnny, I notice, has picked up a limp from somewhere, but I can’t tell if he’s faking it or not, and I don’t really have the time, patience, or interest to find out.

“What’s this all about?” I ask.

The story goes something like this: the Yankees were having an unbelievable winning streak and Johnny kept betting against them. They’d be down by five runs in the ninth, two out, nobody up, and some weak grounder to second would go through someone’s legs, a broken bat single would follow, a mix-up at first, a bad call, a raccoon loose in left field, a homerun, and before you knew it, the Yankees would win by three. Anyway, Johnny’s regular online bookie couldn’t carry his losses any longer so Johnny went surfing for another bookie. Enter Flynn, a.k.a. to me as Mr. Knott, real identity, unknown, and this guy was like sugar on a turd, making the shit go down all the easier, and while the Yankees kept winning,

Johnny's losing streak continued, got worse, became a way of life. He was living in a house of cards and now he was way behind in the rent, and the big wind himself, Flynn, a.k.a Knott, had finally, inevitably, come around to blow it down.

"I figured I'd be able to scam this guy out of the payment. You know, like I usually do. I mean, it's the web, right? For all I knew, Flynn could be some wiseass thirteen-year-old computer geek. I figured, what's the worst that can happen, a few hundred spam emails for penile enlargement?"

"Jesus," I say, "why did you keep betting against the Yankees?"

Johnny looks stricken. "They have to lose sometime, don't they? Everyone does."

"That's the theory. What's this business he wants taken care of, anyway? Someone missing. Do you know anything about it?"

"No," Johnny says. "He just said he needed someone good and discrete. He also said something about unscrupulous."

"And I'm the first person that came to mind?"

Johnny shrugs. "Sorry dude. Listen, I admit I fucked up big time. He promises he'll discharge the debt if you take this on. I heard you could use the work. All you have to do is look into it: no strings attached. I'm into him for major money, man. Major money. I'm worried, I'll admit it. Frankly, this guy doesn't mess around. He sent me video files of the kind of work he does. And they don't look altered." Johnny shuddered. "People end up, you know, *disassembled*."

I stare out into what is supposed to be the distance. But I'm really looking at an ad for a new musical about homicidal nurses in a children's hospital that is pasted to the side of a cross-town bus parked at the curb two feet away. Last week, it was a comedy about Josef Stalin. It just goes to show you. If you only wait long enough, everything becomes a joke.

I say, "What the hell are you so scared of? I've seen Flynn, or Knott, or whatever the hell his name is. Just walk quickly up an incline. The guy needs a moving ramp to step up to a urinal."

Johnny shakes his head. He looks very sad, very worried, very old, and suddenly very wise. "No," he says, "you got him all wrong. He's fast. Unbelievably fast. I'm telling you, man, he's cobra-fast. He's, shit, I'm pretty sure he's not even human."

"Yeah well," I say, "there's a lot of that going around nowadays."

“So you’ll take the job. Tell me you’ll take the job.”

I tell him, “I’ll see what I can do.”

But I already know what I’m going to do. I mean, all considered, what choice do I really have?

Btw: That comment Johnny Nomad made at the end, about Flynn, Knott, et. al., not being quite human, that’s just one of those throwaway comments you usually chalk up to the kind of thing people just say, the kind of half-ass stuff you hear all the time. I didn’t even give it a second thought. Truth is, I didn’t give it any thought. Even now, even much later, I’m still not really sure how much thought to give it, how relevant that comment was, if it’s even relevant at all, at least to the way things ended up working out.

Maybe it’s all a matter of defining what you mean by a “human being.”

Let’s just say that even under the best of circumstances, no one is really who you think they are, and some people are much less, probably most people.