

ADULT EDUCATION

Tuesday

I've printed my name on the syllabus as Elizabeth Annette Miller, not Lizzie Anne as I'm called on the show. The syllabus is, I realize, a bit long—three pages, stapled. At the top of the first page, I've centered *Journey into Theater*. At the end I've included a brief résumé listing my MFA in Drama and my stage work. I don't mention the show. Instead, I've written *Extensive experience in television*.

I hand out the syllabus and ask the class to read silently. There are nine students. I flip through their index cards trying to find the name of the one non-geriatric. Steven. An engineer.

It's my first night teaching at Pin Oak Community College, and I've tried to look professional if not professorial: a wool skirt, a black twin set. I wear my hair down, of course, not in the pigtails that I wear on television.

A black woman with silver hair looks up from the syllabus. "I thought we were going to learn to act and all," she says.

"This is the history of theater." Smile, I tell myself. "If you want to take a methods class, you can."

A stooped man in bib overalls pushes himself up from his chair. He shakes his head. "You're at Pinocchio Community College." He limps toward the door. "This is adult education," he says over his shoulder. "Noncredit."

The woman rises to her feet, too. "We're just here to have fun, honey." She smiles apologetically. "I'm not working on a doctorate."

"It's personal enrichment," I say.

And my class is down to seven. Fewer than nine and the college will pay only a percentage of my salary. "Anyone else?" I ask. A grizzled man shrugs and rises to his feet. Another white-haired woman follows. "Sorry, dear. Too much reading."

A stooped man in bib overalls pushes himself up from his chair. He shakes his head. "You're at Pinocchio Community College."

The engineer and four grannies remain, either out of inertia or fear. "Right," I say. "Let's get started. It all begins with the Greeks." I take my notes to the blackboard and copy out the word *Tragōidiā*.

From behind me I hear the engineer's voice. "Excuse

me.” *Don’t ask it*, I will him. *Don’t*. But he does. “Will you talk to us about MasterKidz Theatre?”

Wednesday

“Places everyone, please,” Phyllis shouts out. She sits in the canvas chair that she brings with her on the days we tape. *Director* is stenciled on the seatback in white paint.

Robert’s already on the set, sitting on one of the low stools. He has a long cardboard muzzle affixed over his nose in imitation of a wolf, and he wears a shiny tuxedo and a set of pointy ears. This is his costume for the play we’ll film tomorrow, but not even Hollywood makeup could transform Robert into a convincing wolf. He is big beaked, even without the wolf snout, and red-haired. He resembles some rare tropical bird. A small one, preyed upon by everything.

Sammy’s talking to the cameraman. He sets down his coffee mug and jogs toward me.

I’ve got my hair in pigtails, and I’m wearing a red cape. My hemline is too short to be entirely healthy for children’s television. Our studio audience, a handful of preschoolers, sits on the floor. Their mothers hover offstage.

Kansas City 56 is one of those no-budget local channels that you flip past looking for something better, but it turns out that your kids will watch anything. And they’re such a big market that even our show manages to stay on the air.

“I need a huge favor,” Sammy says. He’s thin and pale, and his glasses make him look like an anemic Buddy Holly. Sammy makes the cartoon Vanz Ant that we sometimes air. Each episode, Vanz, a carpenter ant, sets out with a belt full of tools to knock together something new. The other ants tell him he’s got it all wrong—“Carpenter ants *eat* houses; we don’t build them”—but Vanz keeps right on creating. Children love it.

“They need me on set,” I say.

“It’s something evil,” Sammy whispers, in the hope that this will tempt me.

It does. “What?”

“It’s about the sponsorship.”

The station has been looking for someone to sponsor Sammy’s cartoon. It’s a great idea because, with some help to polish the animation, Vanz will be big. Really big. Soon Sammy will no longer be moving his models around in an old warehouse in Kansas City’s northland. He’ll be picked up by the networks or making films.

Phyllis stares. “Chop, chop,” she shouts. Phyllis, sixty-plus, has on tan leather trousers and a sleeveless leopard-print top. She’s kept her



figure remarkably well. She sweeps up her hair in a chignon, and she carefully paints in her cat eyes with eyeliner and dark eye shadow. Sammy and I call her Sunset Boulevard behind her back.

"Later," Sammy says. "But it's important."

I walk onto the stage. Robert and I each choose a toddler from the audience. I pick up a little girl and place her on my knee. "No," she shrieks. "Don't want to." She smells of old pee, and her diaper squishes against my bare leg. Robert picks up a boy and settles him on his lap. This is the unscripted part of the show where we introduce the cartoons.

"Roll tape," Phyllis calls out.

"Hello, Bobby," I say, my voice sickly-cute. I smile at the camera in a way that I hope is not fully demented.

"Hi, Lizzie Anne," he says. Robert can't be bothered to smile. He wants only to write our scripts, but we can't afford to hire another actor.

Each week, Robert pens another pretentious masterpiece of children's theater for us to perform. Think Puss in Boots meets Bergman. Heavy on the Bergman.

Each week, Robert pens another pretentious masterpiece of children's theater for us to perform. Think Puss in Boots meets Bergman. Heavy on the Bergman.

"You look fantastic," I say. He glares. The camera's on me, so he knows he can. "But you're not really a wolf, right? The children don't need to be afraid?"

Phyllis circles her hand to say *get on with it*. The camera pans to Robert. "No, that's right, Lizzie Anne." His voice is flat. "I'm just pretending to be a wolf."

I'm back on camera. "You can see this week's MasterKidz Theatre production in just a bit." I lean in and stage-whisper to the little girl on my lap, "But right now let's see a cartoon." I give my biggest, fakiest smile.

"Yay," the girl says without enthusiasm.

"Today Vanz Ant is building a piano," I say. "Right after this message. Don't go away."

"Cut," yells Phyllis. "That's crap, but it'll do. Next bit."

I put the girl down. "Where's cartoon?" she asks.

"We don't show the cartoons now," I say, keeping the syrup in my voice. "They put them in later."

Her face clouds. "I want to see Vanz Ant."

"You can watch it on Saturday," Phyllis says. She turns to the crowd. "Where's her mother?"



This Saturday, when the show airs, will be my thirty-third birthday. I've worked with Phyllis and Robert for the last six years. After my MFA, I took parts where I could find them, and I got my equity card. My résumé lists the productions I was in but not the parts I played: friend to

Mrs. Wilson; second woman; a chambermaid. When I got the job with MasterKidz Theatre, I told myself that it was a gig to pay the bills and that I would still go to casting calls, but I haven't auditioned in years. I've always heard stories of actresses heading for Broadway or Hollywood only to end up waiting tables. But why waste the money on a plane ticket? I've found you can fail just as well right here in Kansas City.

"Christ!" Robert says. He sets his child on the floor. "Can we take a break?" Robert stands, and I see that a dark stain has spread across his trouser leg.

"Vanz Ant!" The girl has worked herself up to tears now. "I want to watch Vanz Ant."

I can't really blame her. Vanz is the best thing on TV56.

The girl begins to wail, and there's still no sign of her mother. I should pick her up, I suppose, but I walk off the set. "A quick break?" I say to Phyllis. She takes a cigarette from her purse and stares at the crying girl.

I slip past the sawhorses and *Walk gently! Animator at work!* signs to find Sammy bent over his Styrofoam set. Sammy doesn't need much space in the warehouse; he's a one-person studio. His area is cluttered with carts full of computers and hard drives. An ancient Radio Shack boom box in silver plastic sits on his desk. Above the desk, along the walls, hang his storyboards—clumsy comic strips which show in excruciating detail each shot he has to animate. Sammy sketches these out with a fat pencil on sheets torn from Big Chief tablets.

He walks to a digital camera mounted on a tripod. He looks to a monitor and switches back and forth between the current shot and his last.

Sammy is blasting old music, as he always does—The Violent Femmes playing "Add It Up." He has a cardboard box filled with cassette tapes, none more recent than this. I doubt that Sammy's listened to anything new for years. He doesn't shop for clothes, either. He wears the same plaid shirts and Wrangler jeans and Chuck Taylors that he must have bought when he was in college.

"What's the big favor?" I ask.

He wears the same plaid shirts and Wrangler jeans and Chuck Taylors that he must have bought when he was in college.



He walks back to his set and makes a tiny adjustment to Vanz's forehead. "Just a sec," Sammy says.

Vanz never speaks. He furrows his brow or tilts his head or lets his antennae droop to register how perplexed he is by the world. Ever watched an old Chaplin film and found yourself laughing one moment and crying the next? That's Vanz's genius, too.

But the animation is sometimes rough. Sammy animates every second of it himself. He cheats when he can. His worker ants don't move their mouths when they speak. He uses stock footage of Vanz laughing and clapping. But with some assistants to help him, Sammy could make the cartoon look great.

"Well?" I say.

Sammy steps back from his set and checks the image on his camera. Finally, he looks at me. "Have you heard who my sponsor is?"

I shake my head.

"Timber-Wolf."

I shake my head again.

"They're local," he says. "They make chainsaws."

He motions me over to his desk. I thread my way through the umbrella lights. Sammy's desk is cluttered with spare mouths and eyes. He points to a tiny chainsaw, just Vanz's size.

"That's great, though," I say. "You're on your way up."

"Chainsaws," he repeats. "He's a *carpenter* ant."

He looks up and I follow his eyes to the storyboards. Exterior. Establishing shot of the house where the carpenter ants tunnel. The camera tracks forward and then sideways along the house, revealing patches of snow, before finally pushing in on a downspout clogged with ice. I recognize this as one of Sammy's timesaving tricks—by simply moving the camera, he says, you can create the illusion of movement in the film without having to animate anything.

Sammy steps back and motions me to the next section of storyboard. Vanz surveys the ice that bubbles from the waterspout. He claps his hands in excitement and picks up a tiny chainsaw. Iris in on the Timber-Wolf logo. Iris out to a wide shot of Vanz. He fires up the saw and begins to carve the ice. The worker ants approach. "Carpenter ants tunnel," they explain. "We make paths in wood." Vanz smiles and waves, not disagreeing. He puts on his safety goggles and returns to his ice sculpture. Close up of Vanz's feet as he steps on a piece of ice. Cut to Vanz in Buster Keaton fall, his feet skidding, his face registering surprise. Cut to chainsaw, spinning in the air above Vanz. Follow its trajectory downward. The caption reads GRRRR. The saw hurtles toward Vanz, now flat on his back. The saw slices through Vanz's abdomen. Shock cut to blood spurting in arterial



gushes. Reaction shot of other ants, their mouths wide in horror. "I told you so," one of them says.

Even though it's only a pencil sketch, the flying blood and guts makes me queasy. It's a petulant act, I realize. A little boy breaking his favorite toy because he's been told how he can play with it. "You're not really going to film this," I say.

"I checked the contract. He has to use the saw in an episode. They don't specify how."

"You'll never get this on the air."

"That's the favor," he says.

I look at him. "No."

"You do a live show next week, right? Get this cued up instead of the one that's been previewed."

I consider this. I know the technicians; I could get it done. "They'll know I helped you."

"I've got two weeks to show Timber-Wolf what I've come up with." Sammy points to his set, already frosted with snow. "This is a preemptive first strike."

"We'd never work in children's television again," I say.

"That's the beauty part."

"It would be like Pee Wee Herman getting caught with his dick in his hand. It would be the end."

"I've been thinking that I could do something for adults," Sammy says. "Something edgy. Like *The Simpsons* but claymation."

"We'd get some media coverage," I say.

"We'd get a lot of media coverage," he replies.

Thursday

I balance a Big Gulp in my lap and try to work the clutch and the stick. I reach across to the passenger seat and dig around at the bottom of my purse for my phone. These days I drive a lot. After Allison moved away, I gave up my efficiency apartment near the Plaza and rented a whole house in the sticks for less than half the price. I've isolated myself, and it may also have been a false economy because I now buy gas. And since Pin Oak will only pay me five-ninths of a salary, I'm probably not breaking even on the teaching.

I have Allison on speed dial, but still I have to take my eyes off the road to push the buttons. She answers, and I can hear the baby babbling behind her.

"Should I sabotage my career?" I ask.

"First you have to get one."

"I mean in children's television."



“Happy birthday,” she says. “In advance. In case I can’t reach you.”

Allison has always been my closest friend, but she’s moved to Chicago. Her doctor has become her husband; she’s stopped working. Allison used to be a lawyer, but now she’s the original Earth Mother. It’s as if she had a personality transplant. Only no one thought first to screen the donor for impairments.

“I’m the wrong person for the job,” I say. “I’m not maternal.”

“You are,” she says. “You just don’t know it yet.”

A pickup with American flags mounted on the mirrors cuts me off. I brake hard, sloshing Diet Coke onto the seat cushion. “I don’t like children,” I say. I find a paper napkin in my purse and dab at the cushion.

“You’ll feel differently about your own. That changes everything.”

“What a terrifying thought. Thank you.”

“You know this is a defensive posture,” she says. “Those grapes are sour anyway.”

I haven’t seen Allison since the baby. We used to drink together. Now she worries that even a single glass of wine can find its way into her baby’s milk. I say, “I don’t even want to think about my birthday.”

“It’s a good age,” she says. “It’s the age Jesus was.” She pauses. “When he died.”

I merge onto the highway and head towards the city. “I’m not even sure what to do. If I drive into town, I can’t drink. I won’t be able to drive back home.”

“It’s the speed records used to spin at,” she says. “Back when we had records.”

“I don’t want to spend my birthday alone.”

The baby starts to cry. “I’ve got to go,” she says.

The grannies don’t show. Steven the engineer and I wait in uncomfortable silence. Every time we shift in our seats, the noise echoes in the tiled classroom. Finally I go to the board with my notes. “Let’s start anyway.” I write some terms on the board: *chorus*, *catharsis*, *ekkyklêma*, *deus ex machina*. I make a check mark next to the first term and read from my notes, “The chorus in Greek drama served as a reminder that there are forces in the world beyond the desires of men.”

“Let’s have class over a drink,” Steven says.

I turn around. He’s a Dockers kind of guy, but he’s not entirely unattractive. I’ve seen worse. “I’m not sure that would be appropriate,” I say.

Allison used to be a lawyer, but now she’s the original Earth Mother.



“Or we could go see a film sometime.”

I rub out the words I’ve written with my hand. “Let’s call it quits for tonight. We’ll see if anyone shows on Tuesday.” I rub my fingers against my palm. The yellow chalk grits on my hand; it stains my fingers.

On his way out the door, Steven says, “I can take a rain check.” He gives me his business card.

Friday

“Action,” Phyllis yells.

I pull the red hood from my head. Instead of a basket of goodies for Grandma, I hold a battered suitcase with a *West Indies* sticker on the side.

The scene begins with me in a sunny field filled with paper flowers. The overhead lights are so bright that I can feel my makeup running. Water beads on my forehead. I step from the field into the forest, where the lights are mercifully dimmed and covered with blue foil. Cardboard trees surround me. “It’s dark,” I say timidly. I look around. “As if a curtain has fallen, hiding everything I have ever known.”

“Whoa,” Phyllis says. “Ouch. What happened there?” And then she remembers to say, “Cut!”

I step forward out of the lights so I can see. “What was wrong with that?” I ask.

Phyllis takes a long drag on a Virginia Slim.

Robert, in wolf ears and snout, sits in a folding chair next to her. He shakes his head at me and then turns to Phyllis. He jerks about with short, nervous movements. “Has she even read the book?”

“Of course I have,” I lie. Last week Robert gave me Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* to read. Robert always bases the skit we do on a fairy-tale, and over the years we’ve run through most of them. But, of course, Robert doesn’t want to simply do Little Red Riding Hood with a girl, a wolf, and a woodsman; he wants to look for the sub-text. In our version, Red, having moved from the light of the field into the dark of the forest, falls into a depression. Her grandmother has abandoned her. Walter Wolf appears at first to be kind and sympathetic.

We were supposed to tape this yesterday. We’re behind schedule, and I just want to get it finished.

But, of course, Robert doesn’t want to simply do Little Red Riding Hood with a girl, a wolf, and a woodsman; he wants to look for the sub-text.



Now I'm listening to two has-beens who-never-were debate whether or not I'm a real apple.

"Don't roll tape," Phyllis says to the cameraman. She waves the smoke away from her face and says to me, "This time, I don't want you to read your lines. I want you to just say what your character is feeling."

This is one of her favorite exercises. I walk back to my spot in the lights of the field. I look down, trying to gather myself into character, and then I again walk from the field into the cardboard forest. I pause and look around. "I feel that this is a bunch of crap," I say. "Our audience is three to six year olds. They haven't read Jean Rhys. And they don't care about the method."

"Listen, sweetie," Phyllis says. Her voice is sharp. "You may not care about your art. That's your problem. But I'd like to remind you of what Lee once said to me at the Studio."

I walk from the set and stand in front of Phyllis's chair. She tells me this story at least once a month. "We were sitting in this little café with Marlon and Marilyn," she begins. The dramatis personae of this tale vary. The woman is always Marilyn, but the man has occasionally been James Dean, Paul Newman, or Steve McQueen. "There was a bowl of fruit on the table, and Lee picked up an apple. He said, 'If you give me a fake apple, it had better be perfect. But give me a real apple. . . .'"

She looks at me, waiting for me to show my appreciation.

"Right," I say. "Got it."

Robert nods his head enthusiastically, as if he's pecking for insects. "Just because we're filming for children, it doesn't mean we have to dumb down our material."

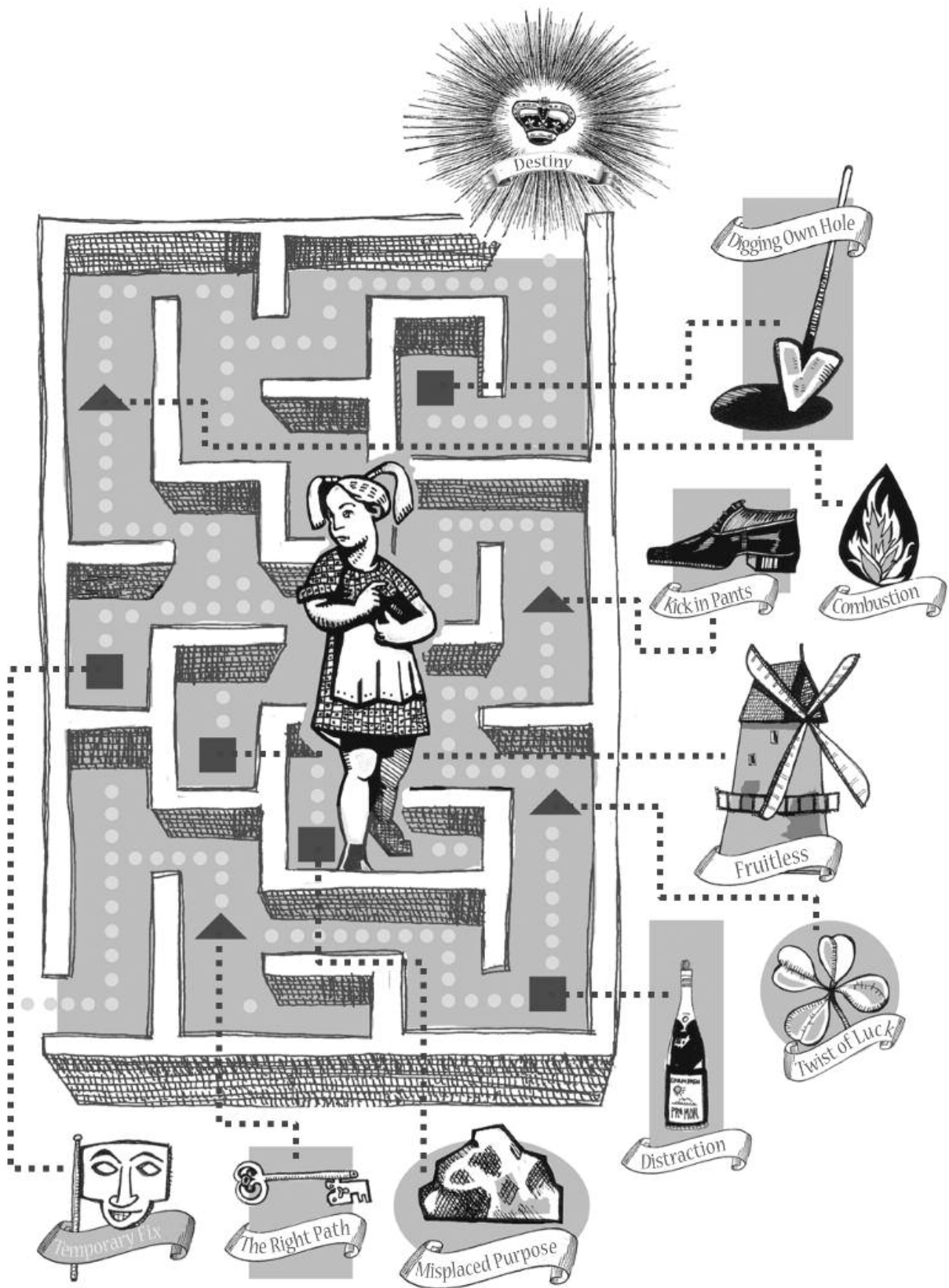
At university, I had a professor who assured me I was the real thing. "Don't ever forget it," he would say. "Don't let the world beat it out of you." Now I'm listening to two has-beens who-never-were debate whether or not I'm a real apple.

I can't wait for Sammy to get that tape in my hands.

In the evening, I sit with my cats on my lap. Netflix has sent me *Fanny and Alexander*. I think, I've become the kind of woman who shares her house with cats.

I pause the film, and I consider how to introduce Vanz Ant next week. We'll be broadcasting live from a shopping mall. Phyllis and Robert will be expecting me to talk about an old rerun—Vanz repairing floorboards the other ants have tunneled through—but instead I'll smile sweetly and say, *Watch closely, kids, because Vanz Ant has an important lesson*





Emily Pyle



on *chainsaw safety*. Robert will cock his head at Phyllis, but the show will be live, and the tape will play.

I wonder how badly our departures will hurt the show. Robert and Phyllis might find someone else to replace me, someone hungry enough she won't care that the job hardly pays, but Vanz Ant will be a bigger loss. We have some other cartoons that we show—a Russian knock-off of Tom and Jerry; some old Japanese anime, badly dubbed—but nothing like Vanz.

Of course, the station might pull MasterKidz Theatre from the air. Phyllis and Robert will plead ignorance, but they might not be believed. Perhaps it would be good for them. Shock therapy. An incentive to move ahead.

The phone rings, and I check the caller ID on the handset. Phyllis. I let it ring a few times before I decide to pick up.

“Thank God you're there,” she says. “There's a problem with the tape. We have to redo Red Riding Hood.”

“But it airs tomorrow morning.”

“How soon can you get here?”

Saturday

The signboard has been taken down, but the menus still bear the old Denny's logo. It's the nearest restaurant to the warehouse, a weathered blue and orange box in a failing strip mall. We've been here before, and we know to take the corner booth nearest the television. I'm in sweatpants. Robert, sans wolf ears and snout, still wears the wrinkled tux. All of us have slept only a couple of hours on the floor after the filming and editing.

Sammy has joined us this morning, too. He's been spending nights at the warehouse. A push to finish the carpenter ant chainsaw massacre.

The waitress recognizes us and turns on the television. She brings us the remote so that we can adjust the volume. Phyllis and Robert order pancakes. I'm hungry and tired, and I decide to allow myself a short stack. Sammy orders a hamburger.

“Everything on that?” the waitress asks. She's missing an eyetooth.

“Just ketchup,” he says.

Robert flutters his hands. “A bit early in the day, isn't it?”

It's funny to see Robert in the wrinkled tux. He usually takes such pride in his appearance. I look at him and notice how carefully he combs his thin red hair over the bald spot at the back of his head. I'm sure Robert's gay, but in all the time I've known him, I've never heard him mention a lover. Or even a friend.

“It's starting,” Phyllis says. She turns up the volume on the television.



"I don't like to eat," Sammy says.

Robert studies him. "Here or generally?"

Robert once gave me his novel to read, hundreds of unbound pages. I read a chapter and then dog-eared random pages. I returned it a few weeks later, without a note, by leaving it atop his stool on the set.

The waitress brings our food. I slide hunks of margarine between my pancakes and let them melt. Phyllis and I both reach at the same time for the Mrs. Butterworth's.

"I have a theory," Robert says, "that pancakes were invented by syrup manufacturers."

"Shhh," Phyllis says. She gestures toward the television. Robert appears on screen in wolf costume. Sammy laughs. Phyllis lifts the remote and momentarily blasts the volume. The on-screen me says, "You look fantastic."

"Bitch," the off-screen Robert says without irony.

Sammy takes the bun off his hamburger and inspects it. "If I could take a pill once a day instead of eating, I'd do it."

Phyllis puts down her fork. She takes her cigarettes from her purse. "Does anybody mind?" she asks, holding up the pack.

Is there any chance she really did study at the Actors Studio? Sometimes I hope she'll surprise me by pulling from her handbag a tattered photo of herself squeezed between Lee and Marilyn.

On the television, Vanz Ant tugs a strand of hair from a comb and stretches it tight to serve as a piano wire. A couple at a nearby table laughs along.

The waitress returns with a dented pitcher of coffee. Phyllis points to me. "It's her birthday," she says. "Can we get a bottle of wine?"

The waitress looks around. "We don't have a liquor license." She kneels by the table and whispers. "I can bring you some cups," she says. "And there's a quick mart over there. But don't let nobody see."

"I'll go," Sammy says. I think he's relieved not to watch his own cartoon.

Vanz Ant finishes, and Robert and I are back on screen again with different toddlers in our laps. The couple at the table next to us has resumed their conversation, no longer interested.

The waitress returns with four red plastic cups. She places them on the table and winks.

Sammy comes back into the restaurant with a brown paper bag tucked half-under his shirt. He unwraps his purchase beneath the level of the table and then flashes it at us. A bottle of pee-yellow Thunderbird.

Robert shakes his head. "At least we won't have to worry about how to get the cork out."



“That stuff turns your mouth black,” Phyllis says. “You didn’t know?”

“It was cheap,” Sammy says. “I don’t drink wine.”

Robert sloshes the yellow Thunderbird into each of our red plastic cups. On screen, I watch myself carry a shabby suitcase into the forest.

“Cheers,” says Phyllis. We clunk our cups together. “To a real apple.”

“God, yes,” Robert says. “But please don’t tell us that story again. I can’t bear it.”

“Happy Birthday,” Sammy says.

A sad thought: this is my birthday, and these are my friends.

They say the cut worm forgives the plough, but I don’t believe it. Robert and Phyllis will hate me for my betrayal. But I know too that Sammy has slaved away at his video, spent nights without sleep. I can hardly refuse to play it now.

The wine doesn’t have a bouquet;
rather it throws fumes. I take a
drink. It tastes of petrochemicals.

I raise my cup to my nose. The wine doesn’t have a bouquet; rather it throws fumes. I take a drink. It tastes of petrochemicals. Sammy sets his cup down on the table without trying it. Robert makes a face and shudders.

Phyllis turns off the television. We divide the bill.

In the parking lot, Phyllis says, “I forgot something.” She goes back inside. The others walk toward their cars, but I wait a moment and then follow Phyllis inside. I stand in the doorway watching her. She returns to our table, picks up Sammy’s cup of Thunderbird, and pours it down her throat. Then she picks up mine and does the same. I slip outside before she can catch me watching.

I stand in front of the mirror and brush my tongue, trying to get the black off it. Toothpaste splatters on my dress. It’s the same little black dress I’ve had for years, the kind everyone is supposed to have in the closet but which I rarely wear. I take a washcloth and try to dab away the toothpaste. Then I hold a string of faux pearls to my neck. I decide against them.

I’ve decided that I am going out for my birthday. I will walk to my local bar, a dive called Carl’s, which I’ve never been to. But I have a feeling that I’m looking for trouble by going to Carl’s alone.

I order a Latin Manhattan.



The bartender holds her hand to her ear. "What?"

"Latin Manhattan," I shout. Patsy Cline sings "Walking after Midnight" on the jukebox.

She shakes her head. "What goes in it?"

"White Rum," I say. I try to think of what else. "Vermouth. Cherry juice."

"This isn't really the place for umbrella drinks," the bartender says. "I'll make you a rum and coke."

She sets the drink in front of me. The bar is smoky and dark. Men in jeans and caps with unfamiliar logos cluster together in groups. I must look as if I'm from Mars, standing here alone in my black dress. No one joins me at the bar.

My cell phone rings. It's Allison.

"Where are you?" she asks. "My God, I can barely hear you."

"A bar. In Empyrean. So far nobody has tried to pick me up."

"Don't be stupid," she says. "Go home. Rent a movie. Buy a pint of Ben and Jerry's. Take comfort where you find it."

I sip my drink. "You're a real help."

She's quiet for a moment. "Okay," she says. "Don't then. Call Sammy."

"He's the most sexless human being I know. Phyllis calls him the world's oldest virgin. Robert calls him the idiot savant."

"Call that guy from your class."

"You think I should?"

She sighs. "Happy birthday," she says.

I call Steven. I've never been the one to call first, but I dial the numbers. "This is," I begin, but I can't decide what name to use. "Elizabeth Miller," I say, wincing at how formal I sound. "Your teacher." I hate the rising inflection in my voice, as if I'm asking him who I am. "From Journey into Theater?"

"Hi," he says. Monosyllabic, but it's a start.

"What about that movie?" I say. "Is the offer still good?"

"Now?" There's a long pause. "I can't go out tonight, but we could watch something here."

I hesitate. I hardly know him. But then I've already braved Carl's tonight. I take down the directions.

Steven greets me at the door with a glass of wine. He's made some effort at dressing for my arrival—a button-down shirt and a pair of slacks—but still I feel overdressed. "I'm glad you called," he says. He reaches the glass out to me, holding it by the base.

"I'm driving," I say.



"It's good," he says. He wafts the glass near my nose. "Ribera del Duero." I shake my head. Steven shrugs and takes a sip. I have the feeling he's had a glass or two already. "What then?"

"Diet Coke?"

He leads me into a foyer. An archway leads to the living room where the television quietly flickers. Steven touches my arm. "This way." Suddenly a small child runs full speed at me from the living room. He grabs my legs. "I'm a little bear," he says. "And you're a big bear." He must be two or three years old. He wears a pair of oversize glasses that make him look serious-minded.

"I'm not very good at being a bear." I'm not sure how to react. I don't want to seem too cold, but neither do I want him pressed up against my legs.

"Teddy," Steven says, "can you shake hands?" The boy steps back and limply holds out his left hand to me. I give it a quick shake. "He's not afraid of strangers," Steven says. "I worry about that."

"Come on, Daddy," the boy says. He pulls on Steven's hand.

"He's mine for the weekend," Steven says. He kneels down. "Let's go finish your cartoon."

We walk with Teddy into the living room. Steven places him on the couch and turns up the volume. It's a cartoon I don't recognize, but it looks as if it's aimed at older children. "I'm going to get your drink," Steven says to me. "Can you stay with him for just a moment? Until he's settled here?"

I don't know how to refuse. I sit in the armchair opposite Teddy. His mouth opens as he watches the cartoon. I pick up a copy of *Newsweek* from the coffee table and flip through it. I find the arts section in the back.

Teddy makes a noise like a hiccup. I look up from the magazine. He's in tears. "What's wrong?" I ask.

He points to the TV. "Bunny crying."

I look at the television. A cartoon rabbit sits on the riverbank with his head in his hands. He sheds great streams of tears. Teddy is crying because the rabbit is crying. It almost gives me faith in humanity. Perhaps we do have some innate capacity for empathy.

"Don't worry," I say. "I've seen this one," I say, although I haven't. "Everything turns out okay." I pick up the remote and flip through the channels until I find another cartoon. Teddy still cries. I move to the couch and sit next to him. I take off his glasses and dry them on my dress. I wipe the tears from his cheeks with my thumbs.

Steven pokes his head into the doorway and motions for me to follow him. I slip Teddy's glasses back over his ears and leave him in front of the TV.



In the hallway, Steven says, "I know. It's terrible to park him in front of the television." He leads me to the kitchen. "But sometimes I just need the peace."

I sit on a tall chair at a butcher-block counter. The kitchen is blue tiled and cozy. Steven hands me a glass of cola. A wedge of lime sits atop the ice.

"It's my birthday," I say.

Steven sits down next to me. "Many happy returns." He clinks the base of his wineglass against the side of my tumbler. "Have you made a birthday wish?"

I roll my glass between my fingers. "My wish comes true next Saturday," I say.

He looks at me expectantly.

"I want a change."

He takes a drink of his wine. "When his cartoon finishes, I'll put Teddy to bed and then we can watch a movie."

I rattle the ice in my glass. "My career wasn't supposed to turn out like this."

He looks me in the eyes. "I've watched your show," he says. "With Teddy, I mean." He leans in to kiss me.

I pull back and offer him my cheek. "Let's talk."

"Sorry." He gets up from the table and pours himself another glass of wine.

I sip my drink and try desperately to think of something to say. "Why are you taking the class?" I ask.

He brings his glass and the bottle back to the counter. "I thought adult education sounded a little kinky." He laughs. I don't react, and he hurries on. "I'm joking. I like the class."

"I wanted to finish with tragedy last time so we could move on to comedy." I click my fingernails against his wineglass. "Comedies were performed for Dionysus."

He reaches out and brushes the backs of his fingers against my hair. "You should wear it in pigtails," he says.

It's not the first time I've heard this. It seems I can't escape from Lizzie Anne. So many guys want me to be her, some strange combination of their mother and a little girl. It churns my stomach. I stand. "I've got to go."

Vanz lies on his back. A chainsaw protrudes from his gut. His eyes have been replaced by tiny Xs. A puddle of Play-Doh blood surrounds him.



Steven stands too. "What's happened?"

I walk down the hallway towards the front door. "I don't think the course will run," I say. "The bursar will refund your money."

"What's wrong?" he asks. He follows me down the hall.

I open the door. "Here's a last fact for you, though." I turn back to him. "In the comedies, the actors wore huge red phalluses that dangled between their legs. Isn't that interesting?"

Sunday

Vanz lies on his back. A chainsaw protrudes from his gut. His eyes have been replaced by tiny Xs. A puddle of Play-Doh blood surrounds him. It's like an *ekkyklêma* from a Greek tragedy, the cart rolled out on stage to show the bloody aftermath of a tragedy. Agamemnon's butchered remains paraded for all to see.

Sammy hasn't heard me come in. He roots among his cassette tapes and then slaps one into the player. The Replacements sing "I Will Dare."

He turns and sees me. "Have you slept?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I'm almost finished with this. Then I just need the reaction shot of the worker ants." He punches his remote and shows me several seconds of stop-motion blood gushing.

"I can't do it," I say.

He looks away from me. "It's a little late to tell me now."

"Kids love Vanz."

He turns off the monitor. "Kids love to be shocked."

I gesture toward the ant carcass. "Maybe this is catharsis enough." Sammy looks at me without comprehension. "Take the sponsorship. Compromise a little."

He looks as if he might cry.

"Vanz is the best thing going. It's time for you to move on."

Sammy takes off his glasses and rubs at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I'm supposed to have something to show Timber-Wolf next week." His voice is choked. "I've spent all my time on this."

I walk to his storyboards. "What if Vanz were just to carve something miraculous from the ice? A self-portrait with chainsaw?" I point to the scene where Vanz first picks up the saw. "How long would it take to shoot a new ending?"

He shakes his head. "Forever." He thinks for a moment. "Three minutes is a hundred and eighty seconds. Over two thousand frames."

"You've got a week. I could help you animate."

"You couldn't."

"You could teach me."



“It takes a long time to learn.”

“I could try,” I say. “What would it hurt?”

He thinks about this. “You could try,” he says at last.

He sits down and sketches out a shot that I can animate. No camera movement, no facial expressions. A worker ant running across the pavement towards Vanz.

“That’s it?” I say. It doesn’t look like much.

“Learn how to do this first.”

He goes to his desk and finds one of his worker ants. He shows me how to move the character, to twist the mechanical frame underneath its plasticine exterior. “Don’t bump the table,” he says. He shows me how to compare shots on the video monitor. “Stand behind the lights when you take the picture. You don’t want shadows.”

“Go home and sleep,” I tell him. “I’ll work on this for a while.”

He hesitates and then he nods. “Don’t touch anything except the character you’re moving.”

“You’ve told me,” I say.

He turns back at the door. “Keep checking the playback to make sure your animation is lifelike.”

Left alone, I rummage through Sammy’s cassettes. I know what I want to hear, and I know he has it. At last I find it. The Pogues. I cue up “Fairytale of New York,” and I listen for the lines that have been on my mind. Shane MacGowan complains, “I could have been someone,” and Kirsty MacColl answers him, “Well, so could anyone.”

I didn’t tell Sammy of my own cathartic reaction to Vanz’s death. Last night I went online and searched through casting calls. I found a listing in Chicago: open auditions for *The Misanthrope*. A comedy, one that speaks to me. It will be expensive to fly, but I’ll go. I’ll stay with Allison. I’ll see her little girl.

I let the tape keep playing, and I begin to animate my character. Soon I understand why Sammy takes his shortcuts, creates the illusion of movement when he can. Animation takes forever. Gently move the character. Check this shot against the last. Adjust. Step away from the table. Take the picture. Do these things twelve times to get one second of film.

The tape clicks off and I turn it over. A while later, I check the clock and realize that I’ve been working for nearly an hour. I remember Sammy’s admonition, and I stop to watch the playback of my work.

I stand in front of the monitor and push play. On screen, a worker ant staggers forward to take a drunken, slow-motion step. The animation is amateurish, but I hit play to watch it again. And then again. The second side of The Pogues finishes; still I sit in silence watching the ant lurch forward. The movement is clumsy and graceless, but I’m struck by the



image. True, Sammy cautioned me to keep the animation lifelike, yet perhaps that's just what I've achieved. My character has hardly moved, has taken only a single jerky step toward its goal, but what, I wonder, could be more lifelike than this? Just like life, it seems to me, it takes one so long to get anywhere. 🎸

