

Also by David Foster Wallace

The Broom of the System

Girl with Curious Hair

Infinite Jest

A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

Everything and More

Oblivion

Stories

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THE SUFFERING CHANNEL

1.

'But they're shit.'

'And yet at the same time they're art. Exquisite pieces of art. They're literally incredible.'

'No, they're literally shit is literally what they are.'

Atwater was speaking to his associate editor at *Style*. He was at the little twin set of payphones in the hallway off the Holiday Inn restaurant where he'd taken the Moltkes out to eat and expand their side of the whole pitch. The hallway led to the first floor's elevators and restrooms and to the restaurant's kitchen and rear area.

At *Style*, editor was more of an executive title. Those who did actual editing were usually called associate editors. This was a convention throughout the BSG subindustry.

'If you could just see them.'

'I don't want to see them,' the associate editor responded. 'I don't want to look at shit. Nobody wants to look at shit. Skip, this is the point: people do not want to look at shit.'

'And yet if you —'

'Even shit shaped into various likenesses or miniatures or whatever it is they're alleging they are.'

Skip Atwater's intern, Laurel Manderley, was listening in on the whole two way conversation. It was she whom Atwater'd originally dialed, since there was simply no way he was going to call the associate editor's head intern's extension on a Sunday and ask her to accept a collect call. *Style's* whole editorial staff was in over the weekend because the magazine's Summer Entertainment double issue was booked to close on 2 July. It was a busy and extremely high stress time, as Laurel Manderley would point out to Skip more than once in the subsequent debriefing.

'No, no, but *not* shaped into, is the thing. You aren't — they come out that way. Already fully formed. Hence the term incredible.' Atwater was a plump diminutive boy faced man who sometimes unconsciously made a waist level fist and moved it up and down in time to his stressed syllables. A small and bell shaped *Style* salaryman, energetic and competent, a team player, unfailingly polite. Sometimes a bit overfastidious in presentation — for example, it was extremely warm and close in the little Holiday Inn hallway, and yet Atwater had not removed his blazer or even loosened his tie. The word among some of *Style's* snarkier interns was that Skip Atwater resembled a jockey who had retired young and broken training in a big way. There was doubt in some quarters about whether he even shaved. Sensitive about the whole baby face issue, as well as about the size and floridity of his ears, Atwater was unaware of his reputation for wearing nearly identical navy blazer and catalogue slacks ensembles all the time, which happened to be the number one thing that betrayed his Midwest origins to those interns who knew anything about cultural geography.

The associate editor wore a headset telephone and was engaged in certain other editorial tasks at the same time he was talking to Atwater. He was a large bluff bearish man, extremely cynical and fun to be around, as magazine editors often tend to be, and known particularly for being able to type two totally different things at the same time, a keyboard under each hand, and to have them both come out more or less error free. *Style's* editorial interns found this bimanual talent fascinating, and they often pressed the associate editor's head intern to get him to do it during the short but very intense celebrations that took

place after certain issues had closed and everyone had had some drinks and the normal constraints of rank and deportment were relaxed a bit. The associate editor had a daughter at Rye Country Day School, where a number of *Style's* editorial interns had also gone, as adolescents. The typing talent thing was also interesting because the associate editor had never actually written for *Style* or anyone else — he had come up through Factchecking, which was technically a division of Legal and answered to a whole different section of *Style's* parent company. In any event, the doubletime typing explained the surfeit of clicking sounds in the background as the associate editor responded to a pitch he found irksome and out of character for Atwater, who was normally a consummate pro, and knew quite well the shape of the terrain that *Style's* WHAT IN THE WORLD feature covered, and had no history of instability or substance issues, and rarely even needed much rewriting.

The editorial exchange between the two men was actually very rapid and clipped and terse. The associate editor was saying: 'Which think about it, you're going to represent how? You're going to propose we get photos of the man on the throne, producing? You're going to describe it?'

'Everything you're saying is valid and understandable and yet all I'm saying is if you could see the results. The pieces themselves.' The two payphones had a woodgrain frame with a kind of stiff steel umbilicus for the phone book. Atwater had claimed that he could not use his own phone because once you got far enough south of Indianapolis and Richmond there were not enough cellular relays to produce a reliable signal. Due to the glass doors and no direct AC, it was probably close to 100 degrees in the little passage, and also loud — the kitchen was clearly on the other side of the wall, because there was a great deal of audible clatter and shouting. Atwater had worked in a 24 hour restaurant attached to a Union 76 Truck 'n Travel Plaza while majoring in journalism at Ball State, and he knew the sounds of a short order kitchen. The name of the restaurant in Muncie had been simply: *EAT*. Atwater was facing away from everything and more or less concave, hunched into himself and the space of the phone, as people on payphones in public spaces so often are. His fist moved just below the

little shelf where the slim GTE directory for Whitcomb–Mount Carmel–Scipio and surrounding communities rested. The technical name of the Holiday Inn's restaurant, according to the sign and menus, was Ye Olde Country Buffet. Hard to his left, an older couple was trying to get a great deal of luggage through the hallway's glass doors. It was only a matter of time before they figured out that one should just go through and hold the doors open for the other. It was early in the afternoon of 1 July 2001. You could also hear the associate editor sometimes talking to someone else in his office, which wasn't necessarily his fault or a way to marginalize Atwater, because other people were always coming in and asking him things.

A short time later, after splashing some cold water on his ears and face in the men's room, Atwater reemerged through the hallway's smeared doors and made his way through the crowds around the restaurant's buffet table. He had also used the sink's mirror to pump himself up a little — periods of self exhortation at mirrors were usually the only time he was fully conscious of the thing that he did with his fist. There were red heat lamps over many of the buffet's entrees, and a man in a partly crumpled chef's hat was slicing prime rib to people's individual specs. The large room smelled powerfully of bodies and hot food. Everyone's face shone in the humidity. Atwater had a short man's emphatic, shoulder inflected walk. Many of the Sunday diners were elderly and wore special sunglasses with side flaps, the inventor of whom was possibly ripe for a WTRW profile. Nor does one hardly ever see actual flypaper anymore. Their table was almost all the way in front. Even across the crowded dining room it was not hard to spot them seated there, due to the artist's wife, Mrs. Moltke, whose great blond head's crown was nearly even with the hostess's lectern. Atwater used the head as a salient to navigate the room, his own ears and forehead flushed with high speed thought. Back at *Style's* editorial offices on the sixteenth floor of 1 World Trade Center in New York, meanwhile, the associate editor was speaking with his head intern on the intercom while he typed internal emails. Mr. Brint Moltke, the proposed piece's subject, was smiling fixedly at his spouse, possibly in response to some remark. His entree was virtually untouched. Mrs. Moltke was

removing mayo or dressing from the corner of her mouth with a pinkie and met Atwater's eye as he raised both arms:

'They're very excited.'

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Part of the reason Atwater had had to splash and self exhort in the airless little men's room off the Holiday Inn restaurant was that the toll call had actually continued for several more minutes after the journalist had said '... pieces themselves,' and had become almost heated at the same time that it didn't really go anywhere or modify either side of the argument, except that the associate editor subsequently observed to his head intern that Skip seemed to be taking the whole strange thing more to heart than was normal in such a consummate pro.

'I do good work. I find it and I do it.'

'This is not about you or whether you could bring it in well,' the associate editor had said. 'This is simply me delivering news to you about what can happen and what can't.'

'I seem to recollect somebody once saying no way the parrot could ever happen.' Here Atwater was referring to a prior piece he'd done for *Style*.

'You're construing this as an argument about me and you. What this is really about is shit. Excrement. Human shit. It's very simple: *Style* does not run items about human shit.'

'But it's also art.'

'But it's also shit. And you're already tasked to Chicago for something else we're letting you look at because you pitched me, that's already dubious in terms of the sorts of things we can do. Correct me if I'm mistaken here.'

'I'm on that already. It's Sunday. Laurel's got me in for tomorrow all day. It's a two hour toot up the interstate. The two are a hundred and ten percent compatible.' Atwater sniffed and swallowed hard. 'You know I know this area.'

The other *Style* piece the associate editor had referred to concerned The Suffering Channel, a wide grid cable venture that Atwater had

gotten Laurel Manderley to do an end run and pitch directly to the editor's head intern for WHAT IN THE WORLD. Atwater was one of three full time salarymen tasked to the WITW feature, which received .75 editorial pages per week, and was the closest any of the BSG weeklies got to freakshow or tabloid, and was a bone of contention at the very highest levels of *Style*. The staff size and large font specs meant that Skip Atwater was officially contracted for one 400 word piece every three weeks, except the juniormost of the WITW salarymen had been on half time ever since Eckleschafft-Böd had forced Mrs. Anger to cut the editorial budget for everything except celebrity news, so in reality it was more like three finished pieces every eight weeks.

'I'll overnight photos.'

'You will not.'

As mentioned, Atwater was rarely aware of the up and down fist thing, which as far as he could recall had first started in the pressure cooker environs of the Indianapolis *Star*. When he became aware he was doing it, he sometimes looked down at the moving fist without recognition, as if it were somebody else's. It was one of several lacunae or blind spots in Atwater's self concept, which in turn were part of why he inspired both affection and mild contempt around the offices of *Style*. Those he worked closely with, such as Laurel Manderley, saw him as without much protective edge or shell, and there were clearly some maternal elements in Laurel's regard for him. His interns' tendency to fierce devotion, in further turn, caused some at *Style* to see him as a manipulator, someone who complicitly leaned on people instead of developing his own inner resources. The former associate editor in charge of the magazine's SOCIETY PAGES feature had once referred to Skip Atwater as an emotional tampon, though there were plenty of people who could verify that she had been a person with all kinds of personal baggage of her own. As with institutional politics everywhere, the whole thing got very involved.

Also as mentioned, the editorial exchange on the telephone was in fact very rapid and compressed, with the exception of one sustained pause while the associate editor conferred with someone from Design

about the shape of a pull quote, which Atwater could overhear clearly. The several beats of silence after that, however, could have meant almost anything.

'See if you get this,' the associate editor said finally. 'How about if I say to you what Mrs. Anger would say to me were I hypothetically as enthused as you are, and gave you the OK, and went up to the ed meeting and pitched it for let's say 10 September. Are you out of your mind. People are not interested in shit. People are disgusted and repelled by shit. That's why they call it shit. Not even to mention the high percentage of fall ad pages that are food or beauty based. Are you insane. Unquote.' Mrs. Anger was the Executive Editor of *Style* and the magazine's point man with respect to its parent company, which was the US division of Eckleschafft-Böd Medien.

'Although the inverse of that reasoning is that it's also wholly common and universal,' Atwater had said. 'Everyone has personal experience with shit.'

'But personal *private* experience.' Though technically included in the same toll call, this last rejoinder was part of a separate, subsequent conversation with Laurel Manderley, the intern who currently manned Atwater's phone and fax when he was on the road, and winnowed and vetted research items forwarded by the shades in Research for *WHAT IN THE WORLD*, and interfaced for him with the editorial interns. 'It's done in private, in a special private place, and flushed. People flush so it will go away. It's one of the things people don't want to be reminded of. That's why nobody talks about it.'

Laurel Manderley, who like most of the magazine's high level interns wore exquisitely chosen and coordinated professional attire, permitted herself a small diamond stud in one nostril that Atwater found slightly distracting in face to face exchanges, but she was extremely shrewd and pragmatic — she had actually been voted Most Rational by the Class of '96 at Miss Porter's School. She was also all but incapable of writing a simple declarative sentence and thus could not, by any dark stretch of the imagination, ever be any kind of rival for Atwater's salaryman position at *Style*. As he had with perhaps only one or two previous interns, Atwater relied on Laurel Manderley, and sounded

her out, and welcomed her input so long as it was requested, and often spent large blocks of time on the phone with her, and had shared with her certain elements of his personal history, including pictures of the four year old schipperke mixes who were his pride and joy. Laurel Manderley, whose father controlled a large number of Blockbuster Video franchises throughout western Connecticut, and whose mother was in the final push toward certification as a Master Gardener, was herself destined to survive, through either coincidence or premonition, the tragedy by which *Style* would enter history two months hence.

Atwater rubbed his nose vertically with two fingers. 'Well, some people talk about it. You should hear little boys. Or men, in a locker room setting: "Boy, you wouldn't believe the dump I took last night." That sort of thing.'

'I don't want to hear that. I don't want to imagine that's what men talk to each other about.'

'It's not as if it comes up all that often,' Atwater conceded. He did feel a little uneasy talking about this with a female. 'My point is that the whole embarrassment and distaste of the issue is the point, if it's done right. The transfiguration of disgust. This is the UBA.' UBA was their industry's shorthand for upbeat angle, what hard news organs would call a story's hook. 'The let's say unexpected reversal of embarrassment and distaste. The triumph of creative achievement in even the unlikeliest places.'

Laurel Manderley sat with her feet up on an open file drawer of Atwater's desk, holding her phone's headset instead of wearing it. Slender almost to the point of clinical intervention, she had a prominent forehead and surprised eyebrows and a tortoiseshell barrette and was, like Atwater, extremely earnest and serious at all times. She had interned at *Style* for almost a year, and knew that Skip's only real weakness as a BSG journalist was a tendency to grand abstraction that was usually not hard to bring him back to earth on and get him to tone down. She knew further that this tendency was a form of compensation for what Skip himself believed was his chief flaw, an insufficient sense of the tragic which an editor at the *Indiana Star* had accused him of at an age when that sort of thing sank deep out of sight in the psyche and

became part of your core understanding of who you are. One of Laurel Manderley's profs at Wellesley had once criticized her freshman essays for what he'd called their tin ear and cozening tone of unearned confidence, which had immediately become dark parts of her own self concept.

'So go write a Ph.D. thesis on the guy,' she had responded. 'But do not ask me to go to Miss Flick and make a case for making *Style* readers hear about somebody pooping little pieces of sculpture out of their butt. Because it's not going to happen.' Laurel Manderley now nearly always spoke her mind; her cozening days were behind her. 'I'd be spending credibility and asking Ellen to spend hers on something that's a lost cause.

'You have to be careful what you ask people to do,' she had said. Sometimes privately a.k.a. Miss Flick, Ellen Bactrian was the WHAT IN THE WORLD section's head intern, a personage who was not only the associate editor's right hand but who was known to have the ear of someone high on Mrs. Anger's own staff on the 82nd floor, because Ellen Bactrian and this executive intern often biked down to work together from the Flatiron district on the extraordinary bicycle paths that ran all the way along the Hudson to almost Battery Park. It was said that they even had matching helmets.

For complicated personal and political reasons, Skip Atwater was uncomfortable around Ellen Bactrian and tried to avoid her whenever possible.

There were a couple moments of nothing but background clatter on his end of the phone.

'Who is this guy, anyhow?' Laurel Manderley had asked. 'What sort of person goes around displaying his own poo?'

2.

Indiana storms surprise no one. You can see them coming from half a state away, like a train on a very straight track, even as you stand in the sun and try to breathe. Atwater had what his mother'd always called a weather eye.

Seated together in the standard Midwest attitude of besotted amiability, the three of them had passed the midday hours in the Moltkes' sitting room with the curtains drawn and two rotating fans that picked Atwater's hair up and laid it down and made the little racks' magazines rattle. Laurel Manderley, who was something of a whiz at the cold call, had set this initial meeting up by phone the previous evening. The home was half a rented duplex, and you could hear its aluminum siding tick and pop in the assembling heat. A window AC chugged gamely in one of the interior rooms. The off white Roto Rooter van in the driveway had signified the Moltkes' side of the ranch style twin; Laurel's Internet directions to the address had been flawless as usual. The cul de sac was a newer development with abrasive cement and engineering specs still spraypainted on the curbs. Only the very western horizon showed piling clouds when Atwater pulled up in the rented Cavalier. Some of the homes' yards had not yet been fully sodded. There were almost no porches as such. The Moltkes' side's front door had had a US flag in an angled holder and an anodized cameo of perhaps a huge black ladybug or some kind of beetle attached to the storm door's frame, which one had to back slightly off the concrete slab in order to open. The slab's mat bid literal welcome.

The sitting room was narrow and airless and done mostly in green and a tawny type of maple syrup brown. It was thickly carpeted throughout. The davenport, chairs, and end tables had plainly been acquired as a set. A bird emerged at intervals from a catalogue clock; a knit sampler over the mantel expressed conventional wishes for the home and its occupants. The iced tea was kneebucklingly sweet. An odd stain or watermark marred the room's east wall, which Atwater educated was the load bearing wall that the Moltkes shared with the duplex's other side.

'I think I speak for a lot of folks when I want to know how it works. Just how you do it.' Atwater was in a padded rocker next to the television console and thus faced the artist and his wife, who were seated together on the davenport. The reporter had his legs crossed comfortably but was not actually rocking. He had spent a great deal of preliminary time chatting about the area and his memories of regional features

and establishing a rapport and putting the Moltkes at ease. The recorder was out and on, but he was also going with a stenographer's notebook because it made him look a little more like the popular stereotype of someone from the press.

You could tell almost immediately that something was off about the artist and/or the marriage's dynamics. Brint Moltke sat hunched or slumped with his toes in and his hands in his lap, a posture reminiscent of a scolded child, but at the same time smiling at Atwater. As in smiling the entire time. It was not an empty professional corporate smile, but the soul effects were similar. Moltke was a thickset man with sideburns and graying hair combed back in what appeared to be a lopsided ducktail. He wore Sansabelt slacks and a dark blue knit shirt with his employer's name on the breast. You could tell from the dents in his nose that he sometimes wore glasses. A further idiosyncrasy that Atwater noted in Gregg shorthand was the arrangement of the artist's hands: their thumbs and forefingers formed a perfect lap level circle, which Moltke held or rather somehow directed before him like an aperture or target. He appeared to be unaware of this habit. It was a gesture both unsubtle and somewhat obscure in terms of what it signified. Combined with the rigid smile, it was almost the stuff of nightmares. Atwater's own hands were controlled and well behaved — his tic with the fist was entirely a private thing. The journalist's childhood hay fever was back with a vengeance, but even so he could not help detecting the Old Spice scent which Mr. Moltke emitted in great shimmering waves. Old Spice had been Skip's own father's scent and, reportedly, his father's father's before him.

The pattern of the davenport's upholstery, Skip Atwater also knew firsthand, was called Forest Floral.

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The WRW associate editor's typing feats were just one example of the various leveling traditions and shticks and reversals of protocol that made *Style's* parties and corporate celebrations the envy of publishing interns throughout Manhattan. These fetes took place on the six-

teenth floor and were usually open bar; some were even catered. The normally dry and insufferable head of Copyediting did impressions of various US presidents smoking dope that had to be seen to be believed. Given the right kinds of vodka and flame source, a senior receptionist from Haiti could be prevailed upon to breathe fire. A very odd senior paralegal in Permissions, who showed up to the office in foul weather gear nearly every day no matter what the forecast, turned out to have been in the original Broadway cast of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and organized revues that could get kind of risqué. Some of the interns got bizarrely dressed up; nails were occasionally done in White Out. Mrs. Anger's executive intern had once worn a white leather suit with outrageous fringe and a set of cap pistols in a hipbucker belt and holster accessory. A longtime supervisor of shades used Crystal Light, Everclear, skinned fruit, and an ordinary office paper shredder to produce a libation she called Last Mango in Paris. The interns' annual ersatz awards show at the climax of Oscars Week often had people on the floor — one year they'd gotten Gene Shalit to appear. And so on and so forth.

Of arresting and demotic party traditions, however, none was so prized as Mrs. Anger's annual essay at self parody for the combination New Year's and closing of the Year's Most Stylish People double issue bash. Bedecked in costume jewelry, mincing and fluttering, affecting a falsetto and lorgnette, holding her head in such a way as to produce a double chin, tottering about with a champagne cocktail like one of those anserine dowagers in Marx Brothers films. It would be difficult to convey this routine's effect on morale and esprit. The rest of the publishing year, Mrs. Anger was a figure of near testamental awe and dread, serious as a heart attack. A veteran of Fleet Street and two separate R. Murdoch startups, wooed over from *Us* in 1994 under terms that were industry myth, Mrs. Anger had managed to put *Style* in the black for the first time in its history, and was said to enjoy influence at the very highest levels of Eckleschafft-Böd, and had worn one of the first Versace pantsuits ever seen in New York, and was nobody's fool whatsoever.

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Mrs. Amber Moltke, the artist's young spouse, wore a great billowing pastel housedress and flattened espadrilles and was, for better or worse, the sexiest morbidly obese woman Atwater had ever seen. Eastern Indiana was not short on big pretty girls, but this was less a person than a vista, a quarter ton of sheer Midwest pulchritude, and Atwater had already filled several narrow pages of his notebook with descriptions and analogies and abstract encomia to Mrs. Moltke, none of which could be used in the compressed piece he was even then conceiving how to pitch and submit. Some of the allure was atavistic, he acknowledged. Some was simply contrast, a relief from the sucking cheeks and starved eyes of Manhattan's women. He had personally seen *Style* interns weighing their food on small pharmaceutical scales before they consumed it. In one of the more abstract notebook entries, Atwater had theorized that Mrs. Moltke's was perhaps a sort of negative beauty that consisted mainly in her failure to be repellent. In another, he had compared her face and throat to whatever canids see in the full moon that makes them howl. The associate editor would never see one jot of material like this, obviously. Some BSG salarymen built their pieces gradually from the ground up. Atwater, trained originally as a background man for news dailies, constructed his own WITW pieces by pouring into his notebooks and word processor an enormous waterfall of prose which was then filtered more and more closely down to 400 words of commercial sediment. It was labor intensive, but it was his way. Atwater had colleagues who were unable even to start without a Roman numeral outline. *Style*'s daytime television specialist could compose his pieces only on public transport. So long as salarymen's personal quotas were filled and deadlines met, the BSG weeklies tended to be respectful of people's processes.

When as a child he had misbehaved or sassed her, Mrs. Atwater had made little Virgil go and cut from the fields' edge's copse the very switch with which she'd whip him. For most of the 1970s she had belonged to a splinter denomination that met in an Airstream trailer on the outskirts of Anderson, and she did spareth not the rod. His

father had been a barber, the real kind, w/ smock and pole and rat tail combs in huge jars of Barbicide. Save the odd payroll data processor at Eckleschafft-Böd US, no one east of Muncie had access to Skip's true given name.

Mrs. Moltke sat with her spine straight and ankles crossed, her huge smooth calves cream white and unmarred by veins and the overall size and hue of what Atwater wrote were museum grade vases and funereal urns of the same antiquity in which the dead wore bronze masks and whole households were interred together. Her platter sized face was expressive and her eyes, though rendered small by the encasing folds of fat, were intelligent and alive. An Anne Rice paperback lay face down on the end table beside her fauxfrosted beverage tumbler and a stack of Butterick clothing patterns in their distinctive bilingual sleeves. Atwater, who held his pen rather high on the shaft, had already noted that her husband's eyes were flat and immured despite his constant smile. The lone time that Atwater had believed he was seeing his own father smile, it turned out to have been a grimace which presaged the massive infarction that had sent the man forward to lie prone in the sand of the horseshoe pit as the shoe itself sailed over the stake, the half finished apiary, a section of the simulation combat target range, a tire swing's supporting limb, and the backyard's pineboard fence, never to be recovered or even ever seen again, while Virgil and his twin brother had stood there wide eyed and red eared, looking back and forth from the sprawled form to the kitchen window's screen, their inability to move or cry out feeling, in later recall, much like the paralysis of bad dreams.

The Moltkes had already shown him the storm cellar and its literally incredible display, but Atwater decided to wait until he truly needed to visit the bathroom to see where the actual creative transfigurations took place. He felt that asking to be shown the bathroom as such, and then examining it while they watched him do so, would be awkward and unseemly. In her lap, the artist's wife had some kind of garment or bolt of orange cloth in which she was placing pins in a complicated way. A large red felt apple on the end table held the supply of pins for this purpose. She filled her whole side of the davenport

and then some. One could feel the walls and curtains warming as the viscous heat outside beset the home. After one of the lengthy and uncomfortable attacks of what felt like aphasia that sometimes afflicted him with incidentals, Atwater was able to remember that the correct term for the apple was simply: pin cushion. One reason it was so discomfiting was that the detail was irrelevant. Likewise the twinge of abandonment he noticed that he felt whenever the near fan rotated back away from him. On the whole, though, the journalist's spirits were good. Part of it was actual art. But there was also something that felt solid and kind of invulnerable about returning to one's native area for legitimate professional reasons. He was unaware that the cadences of his speech had already changed.

After one or two awkward recrossings of his leg, Atwater had found a way to sit, with his weight on his left hip and the padded rocker held still against that weight, so that his right thigh formed a stable surface for taking notes. His iced tea, pebbled with condensation, was on a plastic coaster beside the cable converter box atop the television console. Atwater was particularly drawn to two framed prints on the wall above the davenport, matched renderings of retrievers, human eyed and much ennobled by the artist, each with some kind of dead bird in its mouth.

'I think I speak for a lot of folks when I say how curious I am to know how you do it,' Atwater said. 'Just how the whole thing works.'

There was a three beat pause in which no one moved or spoke and the fans' whines harmonized briefly and then diverged once more.

'I realize it's a delicate subject,' Atwater said.

Another stilted pause, only slightly longer, and then Mrs. Moltke signaled the artist to answer the man by swinging her great dimpled arm out and around and striking him someplace about the left breast or shoulder, producing a meaty sound. It was a gesture both practiced and without heat, and Moltke's only visible reaction, after angling hard to starboard and then righting himself, was to search within and answer as honestly as he could.

The artist said, 'I'm not sure.'



The fliptop stenographer's notebook was partly for effect, but it was also what Skip Atwater had gotten in the habit of using out in the field for background at the start of his career, and its personal semiotics and mojo were profound; he was comfortable with it. He was, as a matter of professional persona, old school and low tech. Today's was a very different journalistic era, however, and in the Moltkes' sitting room his tiny professional tape recorder was also out and activated and resting atop a stack of recent magazines on the coffee table before the davenport. Its technology was foreign and featured a very sensitive built in microphone, though the unit also gobbled AAA cells, and the miniature cassettes for it had to be special ordered. BSG magazines as a whole being litigation conscious in the extreme, a *Style* salaryman had to submit all relevant notes and tapes to Legal before his piece could even be typeset, which was one more reason why the day of an issue's closing was so fraught and stressful, and why editorial staff and interns rarely got a whole weekend off.

Moltke's fingers' and thumbs' unconscious ring had naturally come apart when Amber had smacked him and he'd gone over hard against the davenport's right armrest, but now it was back as they all sat in the dim green curtainlight and smiled at one another. What might have sounded at first like isolated gunshots or firecrackers were actually new homes' carapaces expanding in the heat all up and down the Willkie development. No analogy for the digital waist level circle or aperture or lens or target or orifice or void seemed quite right, but it struck Atwater as definitely the sort of tic or gesture that meant something — the way in dreams and certain kinds of art things were never merely things but always seemed to stand for something else that you couldn't quite put a finger on — and the journalist had already shorthanded several reminders to himself to consider whether the gesture was some kind of unconscious visible code or might be a key to the question of how to represent the artist's conflicted response to his extraordinary but also undeniably controversial and perhaps even repulsive talent.

The recorder's battery indicator showed a strong clear red. Amber occasionally leaned forward over her sewing materials to check the amount of audiotape remaining. Once more, Atwater thanked the artist and his wife for opening their home to him on a Sunday, explaining that he had to head on up to Chicago for a day or two but then would be back to start in on deep background if the Moltkes decided to give their consent. He had explained that the type of personality driven article that *Style* was interested in running would be impossible without the artist's cooperation, and that there would be no point in his taking up any more of their time after today if Mr. and Mrs. Moltke weren't totally on board and as excited about the piece as everyone over at *Style* was. He had addressed this statement to the artist, but it had been Amber Moltke's reaction he noted.

On the same coffee table between them, beside the magazines and tape recorder and a small vase of synthetic marigolds, were three artworks allegedly produced through ordinary elimination by Mr. Brint F. Moltke. The pieces varied slightly in size, but all were arresting in their extraordinary realism and the detail of their craftsmanship — although one of Atwater's notes was a reminder to himself to consider whether a word like craftsmanship really applied in such a case. The sample pieces were the very earliest examples that Mrs. Moltke said she'd been able to lay hands on; they had been out on the table when Atwater arrived. There were literally scores more of the artworks arranged in vaguely familiar looking glass cases in the unattached storm cellar out back, an environment that seemed strangely perfect, though Atwater had seen immediately how difficult the storm cellar would be for any of *Style's* photographers to light and shoot properly. By 11:00 AM, he was mouthbreathing due to hay fever.

Mrs. Moltke periodically fanned at herself in a delicate way and said she did believe it might rain.

When Atwater and his brother had been in the eighth grade, the father of a family just up the road in Anderson had run a length of garden hose from his vehicle's exhaust pipe to the interior and killed himself in the home's garage, after which the son in their class and everyone else in the family had gone around with a strange fixed smile

that had seemed both creepy and courageous; and something in the hydraulics of Brint Moltke's smile on the davenport reminded Skip Atwater of the Haas family's smile.

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Omitted through oversight above: Nearly every Indiana community has some street, lane, drive, or easement named for Wendell L. Willkie, b. 1892, GOP, favorite son.

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The recorder's tiny tape's first side had been almost entirely filled by Skip Atwater answering Mrs. Moltke's initial questions. It had become evident pretty quickly whose show this was, in terms of any sort of piece, on their end. Chewing a piece of gum with tiny motions of her front teeth in the distinctive Indiana style, Mrs. Moltke had requested information on how any potential article would be positioned and when it was likely to run. She had asked about word counts, column inches, boxes, leader quotes, and shared templates. Hers was the type of infantly milky skin on which even the lightest contact would leave some type of blotch. She had used terms like conferral, serial rights, and *sic vos non vobis*, which latter Skip did not even know. She had high quality photographs of some of the more spectacular artworks in a leatherette portfolio with the Moltkes' name and address embossed on the cover, and Atwater was asked to provide a receipt for the portfolio's loan.

The tape's second side, however, contained Mr. Brint Moltke's own first person account of how his strange and ambivalent gift had first come to light, which emerged — the account did — after Atwater had phrased his query several different ways and Amber Moltke had finally asked the journalist to excuse them and removed her husband into one of the home's rear rooms, where they took inaudible counsel together while Atwater circumspectly chewed the remainder of his ice. The result was what Atwater later, in his second floor room at the Holiday Inn, after showering, applying crude first aid to his left knee, and struggling unsuccessfully to move or reverse the room's excruciating

painting, had copied into his steno as certainly usable in some part or form for deep background/UBA, particularly if Mr. Moltke, who had appeared to warm to the task or at least to come somewhat alive, could be induced to repeat its substance on record in a sanitized way:

'It was on a field exercise in basic [training in the US Army, in which Moltke later saw action in Kuwait as part of a maintenance crew in Operation Desert Storm], and the fellows on shitter [latrine, hygienic] detail — [latrine] detail is they soak the [military unit's solid wastes] in gas and burn it with a [flamethrower] — and up the [material] goes and in the fire one of the fellows saw something peculiar there in amongst the [waste material] and calls the sergeant over and they kick up a [fuss] because at first they're thinking somebody tossed something in the [latrine] for a joke, which is against regs, and the sergeant said when he found out who it was he was going to crawl up inside the [responsible party's] skull and look out his eyeholes, and they made the [latrine] detail [douse] the fire and get it [the artwork] out and come to find it weren't a[n illicit or unpatriotic object], and they didn't know whose [solid waste] it was, but I was pretty sure it was mine [because subj. then reports having had prior experiences of roughly same kind, which renders entire anecdote more or less pointless, but could foreseeably be edited out or massaged].'

3.

The Mount Carmel Holiday Inn regretfully had neither scanner nor fax for guests' outgoing use, Atwater had been informed at the desk by a man whose blazer was nearly identical to his own.

Temperatures had fallen and the sodium streetlights come on by themselves as Skip Atwater drove the artist and his spouse home from Ye Olde Country Buffet with a styrofoam box of leavings for a dog he'd seen no sign of; and the great elms and locusts were beginning to yaw and two thirds of the sky to be stacked with enormous muttering masses of clouds that moved in and out of themselves as if stirred by a

great unseen hand. Mrs. Moltke was in the back seat, and there was a terrible noise as the car hit the driveway's grade. Blinds that had been open on the duplex's other side were now closed, though there was still no vehicle in that side's drive. The other side's door had a US flag as well. As was also typical of severe weather conditions in the area, a gray luminescence to the light made everything appear greasy and unreal. The rear of the artist's company van listed a toll free number to dial if one had any concerns about the employee's driving.

It had emerged that the nearest Kinko's was in the nearby community of Scipio, which was only a dozen miles east on SR 252 but could be somewhat confusing to get around in because of indifferent signage. Scipio evidently also had a Wal Mart. It was Amber Moltke who suggested that they leave the artist to watch his Sunday Reds game in peace the way he liked to and proceed together in Atwater's rented Chevrolet to that Kinko's, and decide together which photos to scan in and forward, and to also go on and talk turkey in more depth respecting Skip's article on the Moltkes for *Style*. Atwater, whose fear of the region's weather was amply justified by childhood experience, was unsure about either driving or using the Moltke's land line to call Laurel Manderley during an impending storm that he was pretty sure would show up at least yellow on Doppler radar — though on the other hand he was not all that keen about returning to his room at the Holiday Inn, whose wall had an immovable painting of a clown that he found almost impossible to look at — and the journalist ended up watching half an inning of the first Cincinnati Reds game he had seen in a decade while sitting paralyzed with indecision on the Moltkes' davenport.

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Besides the facts that she walked without moving her arms and in general reminded him unpleasantly of the girl in *Election*, the core reason why Atwater feared and avoided Ellen Bactrian was that Laurel Manderley had once confided to Atwater that Ellen Bactrian — who had been in madrigals with Laurel Manderley for a year of their overlap at Wellesley, and at the outset of Laurel's internship more or less took the younger woman under her wing — had told her that in her opinion

Skip Atwater was not really quite as spontaneous a person as he liked to seem. Nor was Atwater stupid, and he was aware that his being so disturbed over what Ellen Bactrian apparently thought of him was possible evidence that she might actually have him pegged, that he might be not only shallow but at root a kind of poseur. It was not exactly the nicest thing Laurel Manderley had ever done, and part of the fallout was that she was now in a position where she had to act as a sort of human shield between Atwater and Ellen Bactrian, who was responsible for a lot of the day to day administration of WHAT IN THE WORLD; and to be honest, it was a situation that Atwater sometimes exploited, and used Laurel's guilt over her indiscretion to get her to do things or to use her personal connections with Ellen Bactrian in ways that weren't altogether right or appropriate. The whole thing could sometimes get extremely complicated and awkward, but Laurel Manderley for the most part simply bowed to the reality of a situation she had helped create, and accepted it as a painful lesson in respecting certain personal lines and boundaries that turned out to be there for a reason and couldn't be crossed without inevitable consequences. Her father, who was the sort of person who had favorite little apothegms that could sometimes get under one's skin with constant repetition, liked to say, 'Education is expensive,' and Laurel Manderley felt she was now starting to understand how little this saying had really to do with tuition or petty complaint.

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Because of some sort of hassle between *Style* and its imaging tech vendor over the terms of the service agreement, the fax machine that Skip Atwater shared with one other full time salaryman had had both a defunct ringer and a missing tray for over a month. Laurel Manderley was in stocking feet at Atwater's console formatting additional background on The Suffering Channel when the fax machine's red incoming light began blinking behind her. The Kinko's franchise in Scipio IN had no scanner, but it did have a digital faxing option that was vastly better than an ordinary low pixel fax. The images Atwater was forwarding to Laurel Manderley began to emerge from the unit's

feeder, coiled slightly, detached, and floated in a back and forth fashion to the antistatic carpet. It would be almost 6:00 before she broke for a raisin and even saw them.

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The first great grape sized drops were striking the windshield as the severely canted car left Scipio's commercial district, made two left turns in rapid succession, and proceeded out of town on a numbered county road whose gravel was so fresh it fairly gleamed in the gathering stormlight. Mrs. Moltke was navigating. Atwater now wore a mushroom colored Robert Talbott raincoat over his blazer. As was SOP for Indiana storms, there were several minutes of high winds and tentative spatters, followed by a brief eerie stillness that had the quality of an immense inhalation as gravel clattered beneath their chassis. Then fields and trees and cornrows' furrows all vanished in a sheet of sideways rain that sent vague tumbling things across the road ahead and behind. It was like nothing anyone east of Cleveland has ever seen. Atwater, whose father had been a Civil Defense volunteer during the F4 tornado that struck parts of Anderson in 1977, enjoined Amber to try to find something on the AM band that wasn't just concussive static. With the car's front seat unit moved all the way back to accommodate her, Atwater had to strain way out to reach the pedals, which made it difficult to lean forward anxiously and scan upward for assembling funnels. The odd hailstone made a musical sound against the rental's hood. The great myth is that the bad ones don't last long.

Amber Moltke directed Atwater through a murine succession of rural roads and even smaller roads off those roads until they were on little more than the ghost of a two track lane that cut through great whipping tracts of Rorschach shrubbery. Her instructions came primarily in the form of slight motions of her head and left hand, which were all she could move within the confines of her safety belt and harness, against which latter her body strained in several different places with resultant depressions and folds. Atwater's face was the same color as his raincoat by the time they reached their destination, some gap or terminus in the foliage which Amber explained was actually a kind of

crude mesa whose vantage overlooked a large nitrogen fixative factory, whose complex and emberous lights at night were an attraction county-wide. All that was visible at present was the storm working against the Cavalier's windshield like some sort of berserk car wash, but Atwater told Mrs. Moltke that he certainly appreciated her taking time out to let him absorb some of the local flavor. He watched her begin trying to disengage her seat's restraint system. The ambient noise was roughly equivalent to midcabin on a jetliner. There was, he could detect, a slight ammonial tang to the area's air.

Atwater had, by this point, helped Amber Moltke into the vehicle three separate times and out of it twice. Though technically fat, she presented more as simply huge, extrudent in all three dimensions. At least a half foot taller than the journalist, she managed to seem both towering and squat. Her release of the seat belt produced an effect not unlike an impact's airbag. Atwater's notebook already contained a description of Mrs. Moltke's fatness as being the smooth solid kind as opposed to the soft plumpness or billowing aspect or loose flapping fat of some obese people. There was no cellulite, no quivery or pendent or freehanging parts — she was enormous and firm, and fair the same way babies are. A head the size of a motorcycle tire was topped by a massive blond pageboy whose bangs were thick and not wholly even, receding into a complexly textured bale of curls in the rear areas. In the light of the storm she seemed to glow; the umbrella she carried was not for rain. 'I so much as get downwind of the sun and I burn,' had been Amber's explanation to Skip as the artist/husband held the great flowered thing out at arms' length to spread it in the driveway and then angle it up over the car's rear door just so.

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Many of *Style's* upper echelon interns convened for a working lunch at Chambers Street's Tutti Mangia restaurant twice a week, to discuss issues of concern and transact any editorial or other business that was pending, after which each returned to her respective mentor and relayed whatever was germane. It was an efficient practice that saved the

magazine's paid staffers a great deal of time and emotional energy. Many of the interns at Monday's lunches traditionally had the Niçoise salad, which was outrageously good here.

They often liked to get two large tables squunched up together near the door, so that those who smoked could take turns darting out front to do so in the striped awning's shade. Which management was happy to do — conjoin the tables. It was an interesting station to serve or sit near. The *Style* interns all still possessed the litting inflections and vaguely outraged facial expressions of adolescence, which were in sharp contrast to their extraordinary table manners and to the brisk clipped manner of their gestures and speech, as well as to the fact that their outfits' elements were nearly always members of the same color family, a very adult type of coordination that worked to convey a formal and businesslike tone to each ensemble. For reasons with origins much farther back in history than anyone at the table could have speculated about, a majority of the editorial interns at *Style* traditionally come from Seven Sisters colleges. Also at the table was one very plain but self possessed intern who worked with the design director up in *Style's* executive offices on the 82nd floor. The two least conservatively dressed interns were senior shades from Research and also always wore, unless the day was really overcast, dark glasses to cover the red rings their jobs' goggles left around their eyes, which were slow to fade. It was also true that no fewer than five of the interns at the working lunch on 2 July were named either Laurel or Tara, although it's not as if people can help what their names are.

Laurel Manderley, who tended to favor very soft simple lines in business attire, wore a black Armani skirt and jacket ensemble with sheer hose and an objectively stunning pair of Miu Miu pumps that she'd picked up for next to nothing at a flea market in Milan the previous summer. Her hair was up and had a lacquer chopstick through the chignon. Ellen Bactrian often took a noon dance class on Mondays and was not at today's working lunch, though four of the other associate editors' head interns were there, one sporting a square cut engagement ring so large and garish that she made an ironic display of

having to support her wrist with the other hand in order to show it around the table, which occasioned some snarky little internal emails back at *Style* over the course of the rest of the day.

Skip Atwater's bizarre and quixotic pitch for a WITW piece on some sort of handyman who purportedly excreted pieces of fine art out of his bottom in Indiana, while not the most pressing issue on this closing day for what was known as SE2, was certainly the most arresting and controversial. The interns ended up hashing out what came to be called the miraculous poo story in some detail, and the discussion was lively and far ranging, with passions aroused and a good deal of personal background information laid on the table, some of which would alter various power constellations in subtle ways that would not even emerge until preliminary work on the 10 September issue commenced later in the month.

At one point during the lunch, an editorial intern in a charcoal gray Yamamoto pantsuit related an anecdote of her fiancé's, with whom she had apparently exchanged every detail of their sexual histories as a condition for maximal openness and trust in their upcoming marriage. The anecdote, which the intern amused everyone by trying at first to phrase very delicately, involved her fiancé, as an undergraduate, performing cunnilingus on what was at that time one of Swarthmore's most beautiful and widely desired girls, with zero percent body fat and those great pillowy lips that were just then coming into vogue, when evidently she had, suddenly and without any warning . . . well, farted — the girl being gone down on had — and not at all in the sort of way you could minimize or blow off, according to the fiancé later, but rather 'one of those strange horrible hot ones that are so totally awful and rank.' The anecdote appeared to strike some kind of common chord or nerve: most of the interns at the table were laughing so hard they had to put their forks down, and some held their napkins to their mouths as if to bite them or hold down digestive matter. After the laughter tailed off, there was a brief inebriated communal silence while the interns — most of whom were quite intelligent and had had exceptionally high board scores, particularly on the analytical component — tried to suss out just why they had all laughed and what was so funny about the conjunction of oral sex and flatus. There was also something

just perfect about the editorial intern's jacket's asymmetrical cut, both incongruous and yet somehow inevitable, which was why Yamamoto was generally felt to be worth every penny. At the same time, it was common knowledge that there was something in the process or chemicals used in commercial dry cleaning that was unfriendly to Yamamoto's particular fabrics, and that they never lay or hung or felt quite so perfect after they'd been dry cleaned a couple times; so there was always a kernel of tragedy to the pleasure of wearing Yamamoto, which may have been a deeper part of its value. A more recent tradition was that the more senior of the interns usually enjoyed a glass of pinot grigio. The intern said that her fiancé tended to date his sexual adulthood as commencing with that incident, and liked to say that he had 'lost literally about twenty pounds of illusions in that one second,' and was now exceptionally, almost unnaturally comfortable with his body and bodies in general and their private functions, rarely even closing the bathroom door now when he went in there for what the intern referred to as big potty.

A fellow WITW staff intern, who also roomed with Laurel Manderley and three other Wellesleyites in a basement sublet near the Williamsburg Bridge, related a vignette that her therapist had once shared with her about dating his wife, whom the therapist had originally met when both of them were going through horrible divorces, and of their going out to dinner on one of their early dates and coming back and sitting with glasses of wine on her sofa, and of she all of a sudden saying, 'You have to leave,' and he not understanding, not knowing whether she was kicking him out or whether he'd said something inappropriate or what, and she finally explaining, 'I have to take a dump and I can't do it with you here, it's too stressful,' using the actual word dump, and of so how the therapist had gone down and stood on the corner smoking a cigarette and looking up at her apartment, watching the light in the bathroom's frosted window go on, and simultaneously, one, feeling like a bit of an idiot for standing out there waiting for her to finish so he could go back up, and, two, realizing that he loved and respected this woman for baring to him so nakedly the insecurity she had been feeling. He had told the intern that standing

on that corner was the first time in quite a long time he had not felt deeply and painfully alone, he had realized.

Laurel Manderley's caloric regimen included very precise rules on what parts of her Niçoise salad she was allowed to eat and what she had to do to earn them. At today's lunch she was somewhat preoccupied. She had as yet told no one about any photos, to say nothing of any unannounced overnight package; and Atwater, who had spent the morning commuting to Chicago, made it a principle never to take cellular calls while he drove.

The longtime girl Friday for the associate editor of *SURFACES*, which was the section of *Style* that focused on health and beauty, had also been among the first of the magazine's interns not to bother changing into pumps on arrival but instead to wear, normally with a high end Chanel or DKBL suit, the same crosstrainers she had commuted in, which somehow for some strange reason worked, and had for a time split the editorial interns into two opposed camps regarding office footwear. She had also at some point spent a trimester at Cambridge, and still spoke with a slight British accent, and asked generally now whether anyone else who traveled abroad much had noticed that in German toilets the hole into which the poop is supposed to disappear when you flush is positioned way in front, so that the poop just sort of *lies* there in full view and there's almost no way you can avoid looking at it when you get up and turn around to flush. Which she observed was so almost stereotypically German, almost as if you were supposed to study and analyze your poop and make sure it passed muster before you flushed it down. Here a senior shade who seemed always to make it a point to wear something garishly retro on Mondays inserted a reminiscence about first seeing the word FAHRT in great block letters on signs all over Swiss and German rail stations, on childhood trips, and how she and her stepsisters had spent whole long Eurail rides cracking one another up by making childish jokes about travelers' various FAHRTS. Whereas, the *SURFACES* head intern continued with a slight cold smile at the shade's interruption, whereas in French toilets, though, the hole tended to be way in the back so that the poop vanished ASAP, meaning the whole thing was set up to be as

elegant and tasteful as possible . . . although in France there was also the whole bidet issue, which many of the interns agreed always struck them as weird and kind of unhygienic. There was then a quick anecdote about someone's once having asked a French concierge about the really low drinking fountain in the *salle de bains*, which also struck a nerve of risibility at the table.

At different intervals, two or three of the interns who smoked would excuse themselves briefly and step out to smoke and then return — Tutti Mangia's management had made it clear that they didn't really want like eight people at a time out there under the awning.

'So then what about the US toilets here, with the hole in the middle and all this water so it all floats and goes around and around in a little dance before it goes down — what's up with that?'

The design director's intern wore a very simple severe Prada jacket over a black silk tee. 'They don't always go around and around. Some toilets are really fast and powerful and it's gone right away.'

'Maybe up on eighty-two it is!' Two of the newer staff interns leaned slightly toward each other as they laughed.

Laurel Manderley's roommate, who at Wellesley had played both field hockey and basketball and was a national finalist for a Marshall, asked how many of those at the table had had to read those ghastly pieces of Swift's in *Post Liz Lit* where he went on and on about women taking a crap and how supposedly traumatic it was for the swain when he found out that his beloved went to the bathroom like a normal human being instead of whatever sick mommy figure Swift liked to make women into, quoting the actual lines, "Send up an excremental Smell/ To taint the Parts from whence they fell/the Pettycoats and Gown perfume/And waft a Stink round every Room," which a few people hazarded to say that it was maybe a little bit *disturbing* that Siobhan had seemingly memorized this . . . and thereupon, the latter part of the discussion turned more toward intergender bathroom habits and the various small traumas of cohabitation with a male partner, or even just when you reached the stage where one or the other of you were staying over a lot, and the table conversation broke up into a certain number of overlapping smaller exchanges while some people ordered

different kinds of coffee and Laurel Manderley sucked abstractedly on an olive pit.

'If you ask me, there's something sketchy about a guy whose bathroom is all full of those little deodorizers and scented candles. I always tend to think, here's somebody who kind of denies his own humanity.'

'It's bad news if it's a big deal either way. It's never a good sign.'

'But you don't want him totally uninhibited, don't get me wrong.'

'Because if he's going around farting in front of you or something, it means on some level he's thinking you're just one of the guys, and that's always bad news.'

'Because then how long before he's sitting there on the couch all day farting and telling you to go get him a beer?'

'If I'm out in the kitchen and Pankaj wants a beer or something, he *knows* he better say please.'

The shade who wore Pucci and two other research interns were evidently going with three guys from *Forbes* to some kind of infamous annual *Forbes* house party on Fire Island over the holiday weekend, which, since the Fourth was on Wednesday this year, meant the following weekend.

'I don't know,' THE THUMB's head intern said. 'My parents pass gas in front of each other. There's something sweet about it, like it's just another part of life together. They'll keep right on talking or whatever as if nothing happened.' THE THUMB was the name of the section of *Style* that contained mini reviews of film and television, as well as certain types of commercial music and books, each review accompanied by a special thumb icon whose angle conveyed visually how positive the assessment was.

'Although that in itself shows there's something different about it. If you sneeze or yawn, there's something said. A fart, though, is always ignored, even though everybody knows what's just happened.'

Some interns were laughing; some were not.

'The silence communicates some kind of unease about it.'

'A conspiracy of silence.'

'Shannon was on some friend of a friend thing at the Hat with some awful guy in she said an XMI Platinum sweater, with that awful

Haverford type of jaunty misogyny, that was going on and on about why do girls always go to the bathroom together, like what's up with that, and Shannon looks at the guy like what planet did you just land from, and says well it should be obvious we're doing *cocaine* in there, is why.'

'One of those guys where you're like, hello, my eyes are *up here*.'

'Carlos says in some cultures the etiquette actually calls for passing gas in some situations.'

'The well known Korean thing about you burp to say thank you.'

'My parents had this running joke — they called a fart an intruder. They'd look at each other over the paper and be, like, "I do believe there's an intruder present."'

Laurel Manderley, who had had an idea, was rooting through her Fendi for her personal cell.

'My mom would just about drop over dead if anybody ever cut one in front of her. It's just not even imaginable.'

A circulation intern named Laurel Rodde, who as a rule favored DKNY, and who wasn't exactly unpopular but no one felt like they knew her very well despite all the time they all spent with one another, and who usually barely said a word at the working lunches, suddenly said: 'You know, did anybody when they were little ever have this thing where you think of your shit as sort of like your baby and sometimes want to hold it and talk to it and almost cry or feel guilty about flushing it and dream sometimes of your shit in a little sort of little stroller with a bonnet and bottle and still sometimes in the bathroom look at it and give a little wave like, bye bye, as it goes down, and then feel a void?' There was an uncomfortable silence. Some of the interns looked at one another out of the corner of their eye. They were at a stage where they were now too adult and socially refined to respond with a drawn out semicrueled 'Oooo-kaaaay,' but you could tell that a few of them were thinking it. The circulation intern, who'd gone a bit pink, was bent to her salad once more.

Citing bridgework, Atwater again declined the half piece of gum that Mrs. Moltke offered. All the parked car's windows ran in a way that

would have been pretty had there been more overall light. The rain had steadied to the point where he could just barely discern the outline of a large sign in the distance below, which Amber had told him marked the nitrogen fixative factory's entrance.

'The man's conflicted, is all,' Mrs. Moltke said. 'He's about the most private man you'd ever like to see. In the privy I mean.' She chewed her gum well, without extraneous noises. She had to be at least 6'1". 'It surely weren't like that at my house growing up, I can tell you. It's a matter of how folks grow up, wouldn't you say?'

'This is fascinating,' Atwater said. They had been parked at the little road's terminus for perhaps ten minutes. The tape recorder was placed on his knee, and the subject's wife now reached over across herself and turned it off. Her hand was large enough to cover the recorder and also make liberal contact with his knee on either side. Atwater still had the same pants size he'd had in college, though these slacks were obviously a great deal newer. In the low barometric pressure of the storm, he was now entirely stuffed up, and was mouth breathing, which caused his lower lip to hang outward and made him look even more childlike. He was breathing rather more rapidly than he was aware of.

It was not clear whether Amber's small smile was for him or herself or just what. 'I'm going to tell you some background facts that you can't write about, but it'll help you understand our situation here. Skip — can I call you Skip?'

'Please do.'

Rain beat musically on the Cavalier's roof and hood. 'Skip, between just us two now, what we've got here is a boy whose folks beat him witless all through growing up. That whipped on him with electric cords and burnt on him with cigarettes and made him eat out in the shed when his mother thought his manners weren't up to snuff for her high and mighty table. His daddy was all right, it was more his mother. One of this churchy kind that's so upright and proper in church but back at home she's crazy evil, whipped her own children with cords and I don't know what all.' At the mention of church, Atwater's facial expression had become momentarily inward and difficult to read. Amber

Moltke's voice was low in register but still wholly feminine, with a quality that cut through the rain's sound even at low volume. It reminded Atwater somewhat of Lauren Bacall at the end of her career, when the aged actress had begun to look more and more like a scalded cat but still possessed of a voice that affected one's nervous system in profound ways, as a child.

The artist's wife said: 'I know that one time when he was a boy that she came in and I think caught Brint playing with himself maybe, and made him come down in the sitting room and do it in front of them, the family, that she made them all sit there and watch him. Do you follow what I'm saying, Skip?'

The most significant sign of an approaching tornado would be a greenish cast to the ambient light and a sudden drop in pressure that made one's ears pop.

'His daddy didn't outright abuse him, but he was half crazy,' Amber said, 'a deacon. A man under great pressure from his own demons that he wrestled with. And I know one time Brint saw her take and beat a little baby kittycat to death with a skillet for messing on the kitchen floor. When he was in his high chair, watching. A little kittycat. Well,' she said. 'What do you suppose a little boy's toilet training is going to be like with folks like that?'

Nodding vigorously being one of his tactics for drawing people out in interviews, Atwater was nodding at almost everything the subject's wife was saying. This, together with the fact that his arms were still out straight before him, lent him a somnambulist aspect. Wind gusts caused the car to shimmy slightly in the clearing's mud.

By this time, Amber Moltke had shifted her mass onto her left haunch and brought her great right leg up and was curled kittenishly in such a way as to incline herself toward Atwater, gazing at the side of his face. She smelled of talcum powder and Big Red. Her leg was like something you could slide down into some kind of unimaginable chasm. The chief outward sign that Atwater was affected one way or the other by the immense sexual force field around Mrs. Moltke was that he continued to grip the Cavalier's steering wheel tightly with both hands and to face directly ahead as though still driving. There

was very little air in the car. He had an odd subtle sense of ascent, as if the car were slightly rising. There was no real sign of any type of over-head view, or even of the tiny road's dropoff to SR 252 and the nitrogen works that commenced just ahead — he was going almost entirely on Mrs. Moltke's report of where they were.

'This is a man, now, that will leave the premises to break wind. That closes the privy door and locks it and turns on the exhaust fan and this little radio he's got, and runs water, and sometimes puts a rolled up towel in the crack of the door when he's in there doing his business. Brint I mean.'

'I think I understand what you're saying.'

'Most times he can't do his business if there's somebody even there. In the house. The man thinks I believe him when he says he's going to just go driving around.' She sighed. 'So Skip, this is a very very shy individual in this department. He's wounded inside. He wouldn't hardly say boo when I first met him.'

Following college, Skip Atwater had done a year at IU-Indianapolis's prestigious grad journalism program, then landed a cub spot at the Indianapolis *Star*, and there had made no secret of his dream of someday writing a syndication grade human interest column for a major urban daily, until the assistant city editor who'd hired him told Skip in his first annual performance review, among other things, that as a journalist Atwater struck him as being polished but about two inches deep. After which performance review Atwater had literally run for the privacy of the men's room and there had struck his own chest with his fist several times because he knew that at heart it was true: his fatal flaw was an ineluctably light, airy prose sensibility. He had no innate sense of tragedy or preterition or complex binds or any of the things that made human beings' misfortunes significant to one another. He was all upbeat angle. The editor's blunt but kindly manner had made it worse. Atwater could write a sweet commercial line, he'd acknowledged. He had compassion, of a certain frothy sort, and drive. The editor, who always wore a white dress shirt and tie but never a jacket, had actually put his arm around Atwater's shoulders. He said he liked

Skip enough to tell him the truth, because he was a good kid and just needed to find his niche. There were all different kinds of reporting. The editor said he had acquaintances at *USA Today* and offered to make a call.

Atwater, who also possessed an outstanding verbal memory, retained almost verbatim the questions Laurel Manderley had left him with on the phone at Ye Olde Country Buffet after he'd summarized the morning's confab and characterized the artist as catatonically inhibited, terribly shy, scared of his shadow, and so forth. What Laurel had said didn't yet add up for her in the story was how the stuff got seen in the first place: 'What, he gives it to somebody? This catatonically shy guy calls somebody into the bathroom and says, Hey, look at this extraordinary thing I just pooped out of me? I can't see anybody over age six doing that, much less somebody that shy. Whether it's a hoax or not, the guy's got to be some kind of closet exhibitionist,' she'd opined. Every instinct Atwater possessed had since been crying out that this was the piece's fulcrum and UBA, the universalizing element that made great soft news go: the conflict between Moltke's extreme personal shyness and need for privacy on the one hand versus his involuntary need to express what lay inside him through some type of personal expression or art. Everyone experienced this conflict on some level. Though lurid and potentially disgusting, the mode of production in this case simply heightened the conflict's voltage, underlined the stakes in bold, made it at once deep and accessible for *Style* readers, many of whom scanned the magazine in the bathroom anyway, all the salarymen knew.

Atwater, however, was, since the end of a serious involvement some years prior, also all but celibate, and tended to be extremely keyed up and ambivalent in any type of sexually charged situation, which unless he was off base this increasingly was — which in retrospect was partly why, in the stormy enclosure of the rental car with the pulverizingly attractive Amber Moltke, he had committed one of the fundamental errors in soft news journalism: asking a centrally important question before he was certain just what answer would advance the interests of the piece.

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Only the third shift attendant knew that R. Vaughn Corliss slept so terribly, twining in and out of the sheets with bleatings of the purest woe, foodlessly chewing, sitting up and looking wildly about, feeling at himself and moaning, crying out that no he wouldn't go there, not there not again no please. The high concept mogul was always up with the sun, and his first act after stripping the bed and placing his breakfast order was to erase the disk of the bedroom's monitor. A selected few nights' worth of these disks the attendant had slipped in during deep sleep and copied, however, as a de facto form of unemployment insurance, since Corliss's temper and caprice were well known; and the existence of these pirate disks was also known to certain representatives of Eckleschafft-Böd whose business it was to know such things.

It was only if, after sheep, controlled breathing, visualizing IV penothal drips, and mentally reviewing in close detail a special collector's series of photographs of people on fire entitled *People on Fire*, Corliss still could not fall or fall back asleep that he'd resort to the failsafe: imagining the faces of everyone he had loved, hated, feared, known, or even ever seen all assembling and accreting as pixels into a pointillist image of a single great all devouring eye whose pupil was Corliss's own.

In the morning, the reinvented high concept cable entrepreneur's routine was invariant and always featured a half hour of pretend rowing on a machine that could simulate both resistance and crosscurrent, a scrupulously Fletcherized breakfast, and a session of the 28 lead facial biofeedback in which microelectric sensors were affixed to individual muscle groups and exhaustive daily practice yielded the ability to form, at will, any of the 216 facial expressions common to all known cultures. Corliss was in constant contact via headset cellular throughout this regimen.

Unlike most driven business visionaries he was not, when all was said and done, an unhappy man. He felt sometimes an odd complex emotion that, when broken down and examined in quiet reflection, revealed itself to be self envy, which appears near the top of certain Maslovian fulfillment pyramids as a rare and culturally specific form of

joy. The sense Skip Atwater had gotten, after a brief and highly structured interface with Corliss for a WTTW piece on the All Ads cable channel in 1999, was that the producer's reclusive, eccentric persona was a conscious performance or imitation, and that Corliss (whom Atwater had personally liked and not found all that intimidating) was in reality a gregarious, backslapping, people type person who affected an hermetic torment for reasons which Atwater's notebooks contained several multipage theories on, none of which appeared in the article published in *Style*.

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Atwater and Mrs. Moltke were now unquestionably breathing each other's air; the Cavalier's glass surfaces were almost entirely steamed over. At the same time, an imperfection in its gasket's seal was allowing rain droplets to enter and move in a complex system of paths down his window. These branching paths and tributaries were in the left periphery of the journalist's vision; Amber Moltke's face loomed vividly in the right. Unlike Mrs. Atwater, the artist's wife had a good firm chin with no wattles, though her throat's girth was extraordinary — Atwater could not have gotten around it with both hands.

'The shyness and woundedness must be complex, though,' the journalist said. 'Given that the pieces are public. Publicly displayed.' He had already amassed a certain amount of technical detail about the preparation of the displays, back at the Moltkes' duplex. The pieces were not varnished or in any way chemically treated. They were, however, sprayed lightly with a fixative when fresh or new, to help preserve their shape and intricate detail — evidently some of the man's early work had become cracked or distorted when allowed to dry completely. Atwater knew that freshly produced pieces of art were placed on a special silver finish tray, an heirloom of some sort from Mrs. Moltke's own family, then covered in common kitchen plastic wrap and allowed to cool to room temperature before the fixative was applied. Skip could imagine the steam from a fresh new piece fogging the Saran's interior and making it difficult to see the thing itself until the wrap was removed and discarded. Only later, in the midst of all the

editorial wrangling over his piece's typeset version, would Atwater learn that the fixative in question was a common brand of aerosol styling spray whose manufacturer advertised in *Style*.

Amber gave a brief laugh. 'We're not exactly talking the big time. Two bean festivals and the DAR craft show.'

'Well, and of course the fair.' Atwater was referring to the Franklin County Fair, which like most county fairs in eastern Indiana was held in June, quite a bit earlier than the national average. The reasons for this were complicated, agricultural, and historically bound up with Indiana's refusal to participate in Daylight Savings Time, which caused no end of hassles for certain commodities markets at the Chicago Board of Trade. Atwater's own childhood experiences had been of the Madison County Fair, held during the third week of each June on the outskirts of Mounds State Park, but he assumed that all county fairs were roughly similar. He had unconsciously begun to do the thing with his fist again.

'Well, although the fair ain't exactly your big time either.'

Also from childhood experience, Skip Atwater knew that the slight squeaks and pops one could hear when Amber laughed were from different parts of her complex foundation garment as they strained and moved against one another. Her kneesized left elbow now rested on the seat back between them, leaving her left hand free to play and make tiny languid motions in the space between her head and his. A head nearly twice the size of Atwater's own. Her hair was wiglike in overall configuration, but it had a high protein luster no real wig could ever duplicate.

His right arm still rigidly out against the Cavalier's wheel, Atwater turned his head a few more degrees toward her. 'This, though, will be very public. *Style* is about as public as you can get.'

'Well, except for TV.'

Atwater inclined his head slightly to signify concession. 'Except for TV.'

Mrs. Moltke's hand, with its multiple different rings, was now within just inches of the journalist's large red right ear. She said: 'Well, I look at *Style*. I've been looking at *Style* for years. I don't bet there's a

body in town that hasn't looked at *Style* or *People* or one of you all.' The hand moved as if it were under water. 'Sometimes it's hard keeping you all straight. After your girl there called, I said to Brint it was a man coming over from *People* when I was telling him to go on and get cleaned up for company.'

Atwater cleared his throat. 'So you see my point, then, which in no way forms any sort of argument against the piece or Mr. Moltke's —' 'Brint.'

'Against Brint's consenting to the piece.' Atwater would also every so often give a small but vigorous all body shiver, involuntary, rather like a wet dog shaking itself, which neither party commented on. Bits of windblown foliage hit the front and rear windshields and remained for a moment or two before they were washed away. The sky could really have been any color at all and there would be no way to know. Atwater now tried to rotate his entire upper body toward Mrs. Moltke: 'But he will need to know what he's in for. If my editors give the go ahead, which I should again stress I have every confidence they ultimately will, one condition is likely to be the presence of some sort of medical authority to authenticate the . . . circumstances of creation.'

'You're saying in there with him?' The gusts of her breath seemed to strike every little cilium on Atwater's cheek and temple. Her right hand still covered the recorder and several inches of Atwater's knee on either side. Her largo pulse was visible in the trembling of her bust, which was understandably prodigious and also now pointed Atwater's way. Probably no more than four inches separated the bust from his right arm, which was still held out stiffly and attached to the steering wheel. Atwater's other fist was pumping like mad down beside the driver's door.

'No, no, not necessarily, but probably right outside, and ready to perform various tests and procedures on the . . . on it the minute Mr. Moltke, Brint, is finished. Comes out with it.' Another intense little shiver.

Amber gave another small mirthless laugh.

'I'm sure you know what I mean,' Atwater said. 'Temperature and constitution and the lack of any sort of sign of any human hand or tool or anything employed in the . . . process of the . . .'

'And then it'll come out.'

'The piece, you mean,' Atwater said. She nodded. In a way that made no physical sense given their respective sizes, Atwater's eyes seemed now to be exactly level with hers, and without being aware of it he blinked whenever she did, though her hand's small circles often supervened.

Atwater said: 'As I've said, I have every confidence that yes, it will.'

At the same time, the journalist was also trying not to indulge himself by imagining Laurel Manderley's reaction to the faxed reproductions of the artist's pieces as they slowly emerged from the machine. He felt that he knew almost all the different permutations her face would go through.

Nor was it clear whether Mrs. Moltke was looking at his ear or at the underwater movements of her own hand up next to the ear. 'And what you're saying is then, why, to get ready, because once it comes out nothing will be the same. Because there'll be attention.'

'I would think so, yes.' He tried to turn a little further. 'Of various different kinds.'

'You're saying other magazines. Or TV, the Internet.'

'It's often difficult to predict the forms of public attention or to know in advance what —'

'But after this kind of amount of attention you're saying there might be art galleries wanting to handle it. For sale. Do art galleries do auctions, or they just put it out with a price sticker on it and folks come and shop, or what all?'

Atwater was aware that this was a very different type and level of exchange than the morning's confab in the Moltkes' home. It was hard for him not to feel that Amber might be patronizing him a bit, playing up to a certain stereotype of provincial naiveté — he did this himself in certain situations at *Style*. At the same time, he felt that to some extent she was sincere in deferring to him because he lived and worked in New York City, the cultural heart of the nation — Atwater was absurdly gratified by this kind of thing. The whole geographical deference issue could get very complicated and abstract. At the right periphery, he could see that a certain delicate pattern Amber was tracing in

the air near his ear was actually the cartography of that ear, its spirals and intending whorls. Sensitive from childhood about his ears' size and hue, Atwater had worn either baseball caps or knit caps all the way through college.

Ultimately, the journalist's failure to think the whole thing through and decide just how to respond was itself a form of decision. 'I think they do both,' he told her. 'Sometimes there are auctions. Sometimes a special exhibit, and potential buyers will come for a large party on the first day, to meet the artist. Often called an art opening.' He was facing the windshield again. The rain came no less hard but the sky looked perhaps to be lightening — although, on the other hand, the steam of their exhalations against the window was itself whitish and might act as some type of optical filter. At any rate, Atwater knew that it was often at the trailing end of a storm front that funnels developed. 'The initial key,' he said, 'will be arranging for the right photographer.'

'Some professional type shots, you mean.'

'The magazine has both staff photographers and freelancers the photo people like to use for various situations. The politics of influencing them as to which particular photographer they might send all gets pretty involved, I'm afraid.' Atwater could taste his own carbon dioxide in the car's air. 'The key will be producing some images that are carefully lit and indirect and tasteful and yet at the same time emphatic in being able to show what he's able to . . . just what he's achieved.'

'Already. You mean the doodads he's come out with already.'

'There will be no way to even pitch it at the executive level without real photos, I don't think,' Atwater said.

For a moment there was only the wind and rain and a whisking sound of microfiber, due to Atwater's fist.

'You know what's peculiar? Is sometimes I can hear it and then other times not,' Amber said quietly. 'That you said up to home you were from back here, and sometimes I can hear it and then other times you sound more . . . all business, and I can't hear it in you at all.'

'I'm originally from Anderson.'

'Up by Muncie you mean. Where all the big mounds are.'

'Anderson's got the mounds, technically. Though I went to school in Muncie, at Ball State.'

'There's some more right here, up to Mixerville off the lake. They still say they don't know who all made those mounds. They just know they're old.'

'The sense I get is there are still competing theories.'

'Dave Letterman on the TV talks about Ball State all the time, that he was at. He's from here someplace.'

'He graduated long before I got there, though.'

She did touch his ear now, though her finger was too large to fit inside or trace the auricle's whorls and succeeded only in occluding Atwater's hearing on that side, so that he could hear his own heartbeat and his voice seemed newly loud to him over the rain:

'But with the operative question being whether he'll do it.'

'Brint,' she said.

'Respecting the subject of the piece.'

'If he'll sit still for it you mean.'

The finger kept Atwater from turning his head, so that he could not see whether Mrs. Moltke was smiling or had made a deliberate sally or just what. 'Since he's so agonizingly shy, as you've explained. You must — he's got to be able to see already that it will be, to some extent, a bit invasive.' Atwater was in no way acknowledging the finger in his ear, which did not move or turn but simply stayed there. The feeling of queer levitation persisted, however. 'Invasive of his privacy, of your privacy. And I don't exactly get the sense, which I respect, that Mr. Moltke burns to share his art with the world, or necessarily to get a lot of personal exposure.'

'He'll do it,' Amber said. The finger withdrew slightly but was still in contact with his ear. The very oldest she could possibly be was 28.

The journalist said: 'Because I'll be honest with you, I think it's an extraordinary thing and an extraordinary story, but Laurel and I are going to have to go right to the mat with the Executive Editor to secure a commitment to this piece, and it would make things really awkward if Mr. Moltke suddenly demurred or deferred or got cold feet or decided it was all just too private and invasive a process.'

She did not ask who Laurel was. She was wholly on her left flank now, her luminous knee up next to her hand on the Daewoo unit, and only the bunched hem of his raincoat separating her knee and his, her great bosom crushed and jutting and its heartbeat's quiver bringing one breast within inches of the Talbott's shawl collar. He kept envisioning her having to strike or swat the artist before he'd respond to the simplest query. And the strange fixed grin, which probably would not photograph well at all.

Again the artist's wife said: 'He'll do it.'

Unbeknownst to Atwater, the Cavalier's right hand tires were now sunk in mud almost to the valves. What he felt as an occult force rotating him up and over toward Mrs. Moltke in clear contravention of the most basic journalistic ethics was in fact simple gravity: the compartment was now at a 20 degree angle. Wind gusts shook the car like a maraca, and the journalist could hear the sounds of thrashing foliage and windblown debris doing God knew what to the rental's paint.

'I have no doubt,' the journalist said. 'I think I'm just trying to determine for myself why you're so sure, although obviously I'm going to defer to your judgment because he is your husband and if anyone knows another's heart it's obviously —'

What he felt in the first instant to be Mrs. Moltke's hand over his mouth turned out to be her forefinger held to his lips, chin, and lower jaw in an intimate shush. Atwater could not help wondering whether it was the same finger that had just been in his ear. Its tip was almost the width of both of his nostrils together.

'He will because he'll do it for me, Skip. Because I say.'

'Mn artny gld t—'

'But go on and ask it.' Mrs. Moltke backed the finger off a bit. 'We should get it out here up front between us. Why I'd want my husband known for his shit.'

'Though of course the pieces are so much more than that,' Atwater said, his eyes appearing to cross slightly as he gazed at the finger. Another compact shiver, a whisking sound of fabric and his forehead running with sweat. The cinnamon heat and force of her exhalations like one of the heating grates along Columbus Circle where coteries of

homeless sat in the winter in fingerless gloves and balaklava hoods, their eyes flat and pitiless as Atwater hurried past. He had to engage the car's battery in order to crack his window, and a burst of noise from the radio made him jump.

Amber Moltke appeared very still and intent. 'Still and all, though,' she said. 'To have your TV reporters or Dave Letterman or that skinny one real late at night making their jokes about it, and folks reading in *Style* and thinking about Brint's bowel, about him sitting there in the privy moving his bowel in some kind of special way to make something like that come out. Because that's his whole hook, Skip, isn't it. Why you're here in the first place. That it's his shit.'

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It turned out that a certain Richmond IN firm did a type of specialty shipping where they poured liquid styrene around fragile items, producing a very light form fitting insulation. The Federal Express outlet named on the box's receipt, however, was in Scipio IN, which was also featured in the address on the Kinko's cover sheet that had accompanied Sunday's faxed photos, which faxes the next morning's Fed Ex rendered more or less moot or superfluous, so that Laurel Manderley couldn't quite see why Atwater'd gone to the trouble.

At Monday's working lunch, Laurel Manderley's deceptively simple idea with respect to the package's contents had been to hurry back and place them out on Ellen Bactrian's desk before she returned from her dance class, so that they would be sitting there waiting for her, and not to say a word or try to prevail on Ellen in any way, but simply to let the pieces speak for themselves. This was, after all, what her own salaryman appeared to have done, giving Laurel no warning whatsoever that art was on the way.

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The following was actually part of a lengthy telephone conversation on the afternoon of 3 July between Laurel Manderley and Skip Atwater, the latter having literally limped back to the Mount Carmel Holiday

Inn after negotiating an exhaustive and nerve wracking series of in situ authenticity tests at the artist's home.

'And what's with that address, by the way?'

'Willkie's an Indiana politician. The name is ubiquitous here. I think he may have run against Truman. Remember the photo of Truman holding up the headline?'

'No, I mean the half. What, fourteen and a half Willkie?'

'It's a duplex,' Atwater said.

'Oh.'

There had been a brief silence, one whose strangeness might have been only in retrospect.

'Who lives on the other side?'

There had been another pause. It was true that both salaryman and intern were extremely tired and discombobulated by this point.

The journalist said: 'I don't know yet. Why?'

To which Laurel Manderley had no good answer.

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In the listing Cavalier, at or about the height of the thunderstorm, Atwater shook his head. 'It's more than that,' he said. He was, to all appearances, sincere. He appeared genuinely concerned that the artist's wife not think his motives exploitative or sleazy. Amber's finger was still right near his mouth. He told her it was not yet entirely clear to him how she viewed her husband's pieces or understood the extraordinary power they exerted. Rain and debris notwithstanding, the windshield was too steamed over for Atwater to see that the view of SR 252 and the fixative works was now tilted 30 or more degrees, like a faulty altimeter. Still facing forward with his eyes rotated way over to the right, Atwater told the artist's wife that his journalistic motives had been mixed at first, maybe, but that verily he did now believe. When they'd taken him through Mrs. Moltke's sewing room and out back and pulled open the angled green door and led him down the raw pine steps into the storm cellar and he'd seen the pieces all lined up in graduated tiers that way, something had happened. The truth was he'd

been moved, and he said he'd understood then for the first time, despite some prior exposure to the world of art through a course or two in college, how people of discernment could say they felt moved and redeemed by serious art. And he believed this was serious, real, bona fide art, he told her. At the same time, it was also true that Skip Atwater had not been in a sexually charged situation since the previous New Year's annual YMSP2 party's bout of drunken fanny photocopying, when he'd gotten a glimpse of one of the circulation interns' pudenta as she settled on the Canon's plexiglass sheet, which afterward was unnaturally warm.

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Registered motto of Chicago IL's O Verily Productions, which for complicated business reasons appeared on its colophon in Portuguese:

CONSCIOUSNESS IS NATURE'S NIGHTMARE

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Amber Moltke, however, pointed out that if conventionally produced, the pieces would really be just small reproductions that showed a great deal of expression and technical detail, that what made them special in the first place was what they were and how they came out fully formed from her husband's behind, and she again asked rhetorically why on earth she would want these essential facts highlighted and talked about, that they were his shit — pronouncing the word shit in a very flat and matter of fact way — and Atwater admitted that he did wonder about this, and that the whole question of the pieces' production and how this rendered them somehow simultaneously both more and less natural than conventional artworks seemed dizzyingly abstract and complex, and that but in any event there would almost inevitably be some elements that some *Style* readers would find distasteful or invasive in an ad hominem way, and confessed that he did wonder, both personally and professionally, whether it wasn't possible that Mr. or at least Mrs. Moltke wasn't perhaps more ambivalent about the terms of public exposure than she was allowing herself to realize.

And Amber inclined even closer to Skip Atwater and said to him that she was not. That she'd thought on the whole business long and hard at the first soybean festival, long before *Style* even knew that Mr. and Mrs. B. F. Moltke of Mount Carmel even existed. She turned slightly to push at her mass of occipital curls, which had tightened shinily in the storm's moist air. Her voice was a dulcet alto with something almost hypnotic in the timbre. There were tiny random fragments of spindrift rain through the window's opened crack, and a planar flow of air that felt blessed, and the front seat's starboard list became more severe, which as he rose so very slowly gave Atwater the sensation that either he was physically enlarging or Mrs. Moltke was diminishing somewhat in relative size, or at any rate that the physical disparity between them was becoming less marked. It occurred to Atwater that he could not recall when he had eaten last. He could not feel his right leg anymore, and his ear's outer flange felt nearly aflame.

Mrs. Moltke said how she'd thought about it and realized that most people didn't even get such a chance, and that this here was hers, and Brint's. To somehow stand out. To distinguish themselves from the great huge faceless mass of folks that watched the folks that did stand out. On the TV and in venues like *Style*. In retrospect, none of this turned out to be true. To be known, to matter, she said. To have church or Ye Olde Buffet or the new Bennigan's at the Whitcomb Outlet Mall get quiet when her and Brint came in, and to feel people's eyes, the weight of their gaze. That it made a difference someplace when they came in. To pick up a copy of *People* or *Style* at the beautician's and see herself and Brint looking back out at her. To be on TV. That this was it. That surely Skip could understand. That yes, despite the overall dimness of Brint Moltke's bulb and a lack of personal verve that almost approached death in life, when she'd met the drain technician at a church dance in 1997 she'd somehow known that he was her chance. His hair had been slicked down with aftershave and he'd worn white socks with his good suit, and had missed a belt loop, and yet she'd known. Call it a gift, this power — she was different and marked to someday stand out and she'd known it. Atwater himself had worn white socks with dress slacks until college, when his fraternity brothers had