

2. Behind Door Number Two

Atlanta, 1991

Thursday night Danny comes over with yet another tape from yet another band he's joined. He also has a few joints, to help create truly inspired listening. Best of all, he shows up just in time to stop Linda and me from having another of our endless not-really-but-sort-of-fights.

Trouble had started as soon as she spotted the *White Album* next to the stereo. "We have that on CD?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, hoping to leave it at that. We'd just settled down to our usual post-dinner routine, where she whips out some massive textbook to study from and I put on my Discman and flip through *Creative Loafing*.

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday."

"Bob. . ."

I smiled, hoping some light banter could still salvage the night. "So you wanna listen to it?"

"No. I wanna know how you paid for it."

"I got paid. Bought it at lunch."

Well, that was all she needed to hear to launch into a detailed listing of all our current and future bills. This obsession with money has grown more intense over the last couple of months—pre-Med has her under a lot of stress, but I'm the one who has to deal with it.

So when I open the door not five minutes later and see Danny standing there, grinning, I have to grin back. He bounds over to the couch, saying “Greetings and salutations” so happily I can tell he’s already a little stoned. Linda rolls her eyes and glares at me, but Danny doesn’t seem to notice the tension. He hands her the cassette and smiles as he sits down next to her. “Monkeyhole,” he says proudly, dropping two joints on the coffee table.

I sit down across from them, sinking into the big brown leather recliner we dragged up from the sidewalk, with Danny’s help. It had a FREE sign taped on its back, and we learned why the first time we opened it up: once opened it could only be closed with hard, sustained pressure. So we just leave it open, forcing whoever sits in it to lay almost flat. “I swear to God, Danny,” I say, bending my neck so I can make eye contact, “last time we talked you were still in—”

“‘Leave Greta Alone,’ I know, I know.” He sighs, waving his hands dismissively. “Bunch of posers.”

Linda drops the tape on the coffee table and stares back into her Biology book. “And a band named Monkeyhole isn’t?”

“Don’t you get it? Monkey plus keyhole. . . Monkeyhole! So dumb it’s brilliant.” He picks the tape up and rubs the cover as he talks, as if listening through his fingers. “And definitely not posers. I met these guys Sunday night, and by Tuesday we were at their space recording. Greta could never get it together to record a single fucking song, but we knocked out four in one night.”

“Let’s pop it in,” I say to Linda. Danny’s bands always suck, so once he leaves the two of us will have something to joke about.

Danny leans forward to hand me the tape. “In good time, in good time,” he says, reaching into his front jeans pocket. He pulls out a lighter. “Need to get in the mood first.”

Linda shoots me a disapproving look at that. “Don’t you have an early start tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I say, wishing she hadn’t reminded me. “Gotta be out the door by seven.”

Danny tests his lighter with a few flicks of his thumb as he looks at his watch. “Come on guys, even my parents are still up.” He looks at me; they may be a bit glazed, but his eyes also look more alert, more excited, than they usually do. “I know I’m wrong about a lot of shit, Bobby O, but this band. This band could be really good.”

In spite of myself I find his enthusiasm contagious. Good or bad, few things in life beat that first moment you hear a new piece of good music. If I really think about it, I guess having sex for the first time was better—depending on the music I’m comparing it to. “Yeah, I guess it’s not that late,” I say, talking to Danny but looking at Linda. She’s never gotten anything less than an A at Emory, but each semester she just gets more and more uptight. A hit or two would do her some good. Besides, Danny’s been my best friend since I left my small hometown of Griffin so I could take classes at Georgia State. We met when he jump-started my VW after ten hours of crappy kitchen work at Lingerlong’s, an awful restaurant we both stumbled into, washing dishes and trying to pick up the waitresses. The jobs came and went quick that first year but Danny stuck around, eager to show me the ATL.

Linda doesn’t say anything, just sits there staring at me. Danny looks over, his lighter held under the end of the joint. What else can I do, but shrug and say, “What the hell?”

I try to act casual as I watch the scene on the couch unfold. After sucking in real deep as he holds the flame underneath the tip of the joint, Danny turns to offer Linda a hit. I’m hoping she’ll relax long

enough to take a quick drag, but I don't want to pressure her by watching. To distract myself I pick up the tape; the cassette cover has MONKEYHOLE printed in big black letters and a picture of this red monkey with his ear pressed up against a door. He sort of looks like Curious George, and for a second I remember those books, and how excited I used to be just looking at the cover, knowing what waited inside. There are rings of white around his eyes, looking straight out and opened wide, like he's been stunned. On the other side of the door is a picture of a boombox, and little lines shooting up in the air to show how loud the music is playing. It's a simple as hell drawing, but the more I stare at it the cooler it looks.

“Bob?”

I look up and Danny's leaning over to me, doobie in hand and a big grin spreading across his face. Linda's also looking at me, and it's obvious that she's not feeling any soothing effects. It's also obvious that she expects me to turn Danny down—like we can make him get stoned alone in our house? “Thanks,” I say, letting him slip the joint between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand, still holding the tape in my left. The pot is smooth, barely causing a ripple as it expands the boundaries of my chest. I can't help but smile as I hand the joint back to Danny.

“Good, yes?” He looks pleased. “Nothing but the best for my friends.”

Linda closes her book and stands up. “Well, I'm going to bed,” she says.

I can tell she's even angrier now, but what can I do? I blow her a kiss as I hold the smoke in. Danny's already taking another hit, so he doesn't say goodnight either, just waves. After she leaves the room he raises his eyebrows dramatically, but instead of explaining I burst out laughing, a puff of smoke pouring out of my mouth. It must be good stuff if I'm already feeling this buzzed.

We burn the first joint and then I move over to the couch, to be closer to the speakers. I'm determined to at least keep the volume down as we listen. I close my eyes as Danny fumbles with the machine, trying not to get excited in anticipation: Danny's bands always suck, I remind myself. Just keep smiling, no matter how bad it is.

The first song begins with a driving drum beat, loud and aggressive. I'm trying to think of where I've heard it before when the first line suddenly comes in: "Let me tell you how it begins." Suddenly the whole band is playing, and it sounds harder and heavier than anything Danny's ever played me before. I can feel it inside of my head, and quickly forget I'm listening to a friend's band, not a real band. I close my eyes so I can see the music better. It's not just heavy—it looks so vivid to me as I listen because it's sounds so alive. Strong and alive. All the other bands he was played music that sounded flat, but this is three-dimensional. The song ends with the singer demanding we all "listen again" and I'm sold: this will be the first song Danny's ever played on that I will need to listen to again.

It's the second song, though, that convinces me the band isn't just good, that the band could even be great. The music was just as powerful, but this time I could also feel the words grab hold of me, especially in the chorus:

Where have you gone, my friend
Now where are you?
Behind door number one
Or door number two?
Tell me where I should go
What I should do
To make sure this message
Will get through to you?

After the fourth and last song plays I can't speak. I just nod a few hundred times and motion with my hands for Danny to play it again. He rewinds the tape and fires up another joint. After listening all the way through a second time I finally let the air out of my lungs.

"Jesus, Danny."

"Huh?" He's watching me and grinning, splayed at the far end of the couch. He knows how good it is.

"Jesus Jesus."

He rubs his eyes as he slowly sits up. "Now, I want you to tell me how wonderful we are, but first, can I interest you in some. . ."

I know what he's going to say, and begin nodding. "Yes?"

". . . of those hot. . ."

"Krispy?"

"Kreme," he finishes. His grin grows wider. "I'll even buy, as long as you spend the ride over telling me how much you loved the tape."

"Deal," I say, trying to will my legs into moving so I can stand up. We've managed to stumble to the front door before I remember to walk to the bedroom, to see if Linda is still awake. I'm a little disappointed to see the light shining underneath the shut door, and hate myself for thinking it would be easier, if she was asleep.

But it would be.

I knock quietly and push the door open. She's laying on the bed, that book still open in her lap, headphones on. When she looks my way I make the eating motion and point at her with as un-stoned a

look as I can manage, to see if she wants to come. The way she shakes her head worries me, like she's doing more than just turning down a late-night donut run.

I met Linda at a frat party on the Emory campus. I hate frat parties, and I'd never hung around Emory before, so I've always known just how lucky I was to meet her. Danny had dragged me along to watch his band at the time, MacGuffin Magpie, play a set before the headliner, Holly Faith. While Danny set up in the large basement I wandered the ground floor of the frat house, looking for something to eat or drink—we were there so early the kegs hadn't even arrived yet.

The kitchen was small and dirty, and the closest thing to food it had was an empty bottle of ketchup. I was about to leave the house, and its stale smell of old beer and damp rugs, when I heard music playing in a small room off the kitchen. The lights were so low that I figured either no one was in there, or whoever was in there wanted to be alone, but I had to get closer anyway. The song playing was one I loved but hadn't heard in forever: "The Girl from Impanema," original Jobim version. I stepped close enough to hear better and tried to stay out of sight, but was spotted anyway.

"Uh-oh, we've been caught," someone whispered, creating a loud wave of giggles.

"Don't rat us out for listening to this stuff," a voice near the doorway pleaded. As I stepped into the room I felt a tug on my jean jacket. I looked down to see one of those magical girls I saw float across the campus of Georgia State from time to time: someone who looks prettiest with tousled hair and no make-up, someone who'd you kill to have smile at you with even a fraction of the warmth she radiates for those lucky enough to be in her orbit. I'd never been so close to interacting with one of those creatures before, and my first reaction was to break free of the grip she had on my jacket and skulk out of

the room. The sound of the music, though, the sound of Astrud Gilberto singing like this fallen, if slightly alien, angel, gave me the strength to try and say something clever enough to allow me to stay.

“What do I get if I keep your secret?” I asked, smiling.

Still holding on to my jean jacket—a connection I was beginning to hope would never be broken—the girl turned to her two friends and asked, “What can we give him?”

I watched the two other girls in the room turn and whisper something. One of them slowly stood up and walked towards me, holding out a joint. “Well,” I said casually, trying to sound like the kind of guy who takes joints from pretty girls all day, “that looks like a fine starting point.” I inhaled deeply and slowly, pleased at the way the thick and woodsy weed spiraled into my chest, and the way that warm, soft hand held on to mine the entire time. “I’m Bob,” I said as I exhaled. All three girls giggled, one of them saying “Perfect!” As they introduced themselves—Maggie, Sam, and, holding my hand, Linda—I took another hit.

After I exhaled I asked them to start that amazing song again, and they giggled with delight. I sat down on the wall next to Linda, unable to tell if I was buzzed from the weed or from having three attractive women giggle along with me while Jobim played. As soon as those wondrous opening chords began a silence fell over us, as if we’d all suddenly realized we were in church.

When Astrud started the part of the song that always kills me, singing “Oh, but he watches so sadly,” Linda quietly asked, “How does a song like this even exist?”

I turned to look at her, stunned to hear her say exactly what I had been thinking. “Right? It’s this new sound, like something you don’t hear anywhere else.” I closed my eyes, trying to come up with the

best description I could. “Her voice is so soft, but also so . . . clear? And warm. She sounds so close, like she’s here right now, holding our hands and singing directly to us.”

“Exactly.”

I was surprised to open my eyes and see her still watching me. Ever since I was a kid music was the one thing I enjoyed talking about, the one topic in the world I felt I could talk about, from debates about Kiss versus Queen in middle school to deep analysis of Brian Eno’s solo records in high school. My enthusiasm usually just made people nod politely and break eye contact, but Linda looked like she was waiting for me to say more. “Even more amazing when you realize it only happened by accident.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was just hanging out in the studio with her husband, who was playing guitar. They wanted to add some English singing, and she was the only one who could speak it.”

Linda playfully smacked me on the shoulder. “No way.”

“Way,” I said daring to playfully smack her shoulder in response. “And it’s magic, right? How much sadder the world would be, if this didn’t exist.”

“Jesus.” The joint came back her way from Maggie, and Linda paused to take a hit. “How does shit like that happen? Makes me wonder if there really is some sort of order to the fucking world.”

“Yeah, music is the one thing that makes me think that.” I took the joint from her, sad that it was almost toast, and that the song was almost over.

“And who knows shit like that?” she added, looking at me with a confused look.

I laughed, handing the joint back to Sam. “It’s the only stuff I can keep in my head. Just don’t ask me about *The Odyssey* or The Civil War. Or any war, really.”

“You’d be a handy guy to have around, Bob.” She drew my name out as she said, like it had two syllables.

I let my pot-stoked ego imagine that she was flirting with me. “Yes, yes I would.” We stayed there for the rest of that Jobim record, outlasting the pot and Maggie and Sam. When Danny came looking for me we’d even started making out, an event I viewed as just slightly less likely than the existence of a song as perfect as “The Girl From Ipanema.”

When we get in Danny’s car he puts the tape in, and as it plays I try to explain why this sounds so different than all the other tapes from all his other bands. How his other bands all sounded like guys pretending to be in a band, but that this one sounded like guys that *had* to be in a band. How the songs sounded like nothing you’d heard before and something you’d already heard, a long time ago. How the bass and drums sounded like a single machine most of the time, and the guitars seemed to come from a million directions at once. Even the vocals were great—finding a good singer’s the second hardest part of being in a band, Danny always said (after finding a drummer who keeps decent time and stays more or less sober), but Monkeyhole had a great one.

I’m still gushing when we pull into the Krispy Kreme parking lot and the gods smile on us: as Danny parks his ’77 Plymouth Valiant the “Hot Donuts Now” sign comes on.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been here when I’ve seen the light come on,” I say as step out of the car.

“Me either,” says Danny. He slams his door and rubs his hands excitedly. “It’s a sign. A very, very good sign.”

Inside half of the tiny white formica tables are filled. Three of them are taken by homeless people, battered coffee cups in front of them and bundles of belongings piled in chairs pulled close. Two cops are sitting at a table by the window, and I watch one of them put an entire Krispy Kreme in his mouth while continuing to tell a loud story. The only person ahead of us in line is one of those classic Krispy-non-sequiturs, a well-dressed woman my mother's age who must belong to the BMW in the parking lot. She orders two, "no make it three," Krispy Kremes and a carton of skim milk.

Danny and I get a half-dozen to split and a coffee each, and take the table the cops abandoned as we ordered. No one but us and the homeless now, unless you count the sleepy girl behind the counter. Through the huge glass window that serves as most of the wall between the tiny dining area and the Krispy Kreme factory we can see the donuts being assembled, a vast scene of machinery and sweetery that always makes me think of that moment in *Willy Wonka* when Gene Wilder throws open the doors to Chocolate Land for the first time. Whenever Linda talks about moving to another city I ask whether or not there's a Krispy Kreme there—and I'm only half-joking.

"I knew you'd like it," Danny says, splitting the bag open so it can serve as a tray. The donuts are so warm they're collapsing in on themselves. "And yet—I have to admit, man. I was nervous."

"Nervous?"

"You've got good ears—if you hated it I'd have to wonder if you were right, you know?"

I can't stop myself from smiling at his compliment: "Good ears." I've never thought of it like that before, but I'm stoned enough for my ego to nod and think, he's right. And if I give in and think like that, it makes all the time I spend lost in music seem worthwhile. I have good ears—I shouldn't waste them, right? I split my first Krispy in half and use it to point at him. "Listening to it. . ." I pause to

find the right words. “I mean, it was like, for the first time I understood why you keep joining all these bands. You were looking for a good one this whole time, right?”

“Exactly.” As he speaks a little piece of donut pops out of his mouth and hits the table. He flicks it away with his pinky and says in a softer voice, “I knew it would happen eventually.”

“And it did.” I take my first bite, my lips and fingers and tongue all instantly coated in warm sugar. The first bite of a Krispy always reminds me of my first official date with Linda. Not only had she given me her real phone number, after we met over Jobim, she even returned my call. We went to The Point to see Uncle Green, and to my delight she wanted to stay for the whole show. When I suggested a quick Krispy Kreme run she literally jumped up with excitement.

God, that was so much fucking fun. So why did she roll her eyes tonight?

“Yeah, finally,” he says. “This time I’m convinced. I think this band could actually do something.”

I think back to the tape, the way the songs were layered but not cluttered. “It’s a four-piece?”

“Just three. The guitarist and drummer have been playing together for a while, burning through bass players.”

I nod, licking my fingers after my first kill. Two more to go. I take a swallow of coffee to pace myself just a little bit—the trick is to find that balance between dedicated gorging and moving so slowly you allow the Krispies to cool down too much. “So who writes the songs?”

“These were songs they had written, but we all worked on getting the arrangements right. Spider writes the words—”

“Spider?”

“Yeah, isn’t that a great name for a frontman?”

I nod, taking a bite from my second donut.

“We practiced Monday and recorded Tuesday. The drummer’s unnatural, man—his timing is just perfect. As long as Spider and I didn’t fuck up something too bad we’d get the track down in a single take.”

As I chew I watch Danny’s face. He always gets excited talking about music, but this time he looks different. Almost older. I think of all the times Linda’s made fun of him, or teased me for grabbing a beer or smoking a joint with him after work, and I wish she could have heard the tape. She won’t believe me, in the morning. I shake my head, remembering the way our night went: I don’t have to worry about what she’ll say because she may not even be *talking* to me in the morning, but that’s OK. Things always blow over pretty quickly. I reach for my coffee cup again, and realize I’m in the stage of being stoned where my brain is walking through three or four rooms at once—Danny’s been talking this whole time, but I’ve lost the thread.

“... then record a whole disc in the next month or two. Shop it around, or maybe just find a way to put it out ourselves.”

I nod. For the first time, his talk of releasing something people might actually buy, with real money, doesn’t seem ridiculous. “And man, you have to use that same picture. Of the monkey.” I move to my third donut.

“Oh, you like it? Cool.”

“Of course—it’s perfect! Where the hell did you find it?”

“Find it?”

“I mean. . .” I pause long enough to take my first bite. “It’s put together from clip-art or something, right?”

“I drew it.”

“You drew it?”

He finishes off his last donut. “Yeah, I’m a man of many, many mediocre talents.” He laughs. “You know, always spent my time in class doodling all over my notes and stuff. Now I just fill up little sketchbooks when I should be out at a real job.”

I swallow and sit back, more surprised at that bit of news than how good the band sounds.

“Cool.” Three years of hanging out together, and I had no idea he could draw anything. “It looks great.”

“Thanks. The guys like it, too. If it doesn’t go on the cover I hope it can go on the CD itself, you know?” He shrugs. “But things can change. We might have a better idea by the time we get to Boston.”

“Boston?”

“Yeah. Spider’s talking up Boston, as a place to head. Not as intense as New York, but still up there in the Northeast. I think he’s onto something—we’d be better off trying to get club gigs in Philly and DC than fucking Alabama, right?”

I nod, trying to hide that it feels like a vacuum cleaner just sucked all that warmth and sugar off the insides of my chest. It never occurred to me that Danny would find a band so good he’d actually leave Atlanta. At least, not before I found a reason to leave.

“One more for the road?” he asks.

“Great,” I say, handing him my empty coffee cup.

He nods and goes to wake up the girl behind the counter. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as I sweep away the crumbs of our donut orgy. Is it possible he's really as different as he seems? He's walking with a bit more of a swagger, and even gets the bored cashier to laugh as he talks to her. It's like he's turned into one of those people you notice, instead one of those people that invisibly pass by you all day long. Watching him slide the cashier a dollar tip, and seeing her face suddenly wake up as she says goodbye, I realize I never expected Danny to change. He's a few years older than me, still bouncing between disposal jobs—"McWorking," he calls it—and I have been counting on always being ahead of him, even if I can't keep up with Linda.

Boston.

He starts heading to the door, holding a bag with Krispy for both of us and our re filled cups. I follow him to the car and we sit there for a second, finishing off our donuts as the Valiant unevenly rumbles to life. This fourth donut is just as warm and melty as the previous three, but I find myself more annoyed at the way the sugar sticks to my fingers than anything else. I'm frantically wiping my hands on my jeans when Danny reaches out to touch my shoulder.

"You alright?"

I nod, and take a sip of the coffee so my hands will have something to do. "Fine."

Danny gives my shoulder a pat before he moves the hand to the steering wheel. "You got real quiet, all of a sudden." He shifts into drive and grins. "But come on, now you'll just have a good reason to visit Boston."

“I know. I mean, it’s great, it’s fucking great.” I stare out the front window at Ponce de Leon, as quiet as it ever gets this time of night. “What do your parents think?” Like me, Danny had never been out of the state of Georgia. I tried to imagine how my parents would react. “They freaked?”

“Oh, I haven’t told them yet. Haven’t told anyone else yet, besides you.” He waits for an empty MARTA bus to pass and then slowly turns onto Ponce. “But they won’t give a shit. Dad’s got his new family to fuck up, and Mom’s just waiting for me to move out of the basement. I think they’ll even give me some money to get started, you know?” He turns down the music and gives me a quick look. “You sure you’re OK? Something else bothering you?”

“Just tired,” I say, yawning. “I was out at seven to cut fucking yards.” When I first started working on a friend’s yard crew it had seemed like an easy way to make some quick money—ten bucks an hour, because who wants to cut yards in Georgia in the summer? I settled into the routine easily, though, and Linda went from making fun of the job to admiring the way the way my muscles started to get some tone. I was supposed to be building a nest egg, so I could get back to taking classes at GSU, but now an entire year had gone by. Linda was starting to look at medical schools for next year, and I was still a stalled sophomore.

“So.” Danny’s voice sounds slower, like it’s matching the Valiant’s cautious weaving through narrow side streets. “Everything alright with Linda?”

I shrug. How would she answer that question? A roll of the eyes? A sad glance? I shut my eyes. “I think so. I mean, she’s been a little tense, with school and stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s seemed a little tense.” He turns down my street, moving slowly through the gauntlet of cars parked on either side. “She doesn’t like me much, but that’s fair enough, right?”

In a different mood I would have told him he was wrong, I would have told him not to be silly, but I've never felt so stoned and sober all at once. "It's OK. I'm not sure how much she likes me sometimes, you know?"

"Oh, come on, man. You guys are tight, like a good rhythm section. Some stranger walks into a room and sees you two and they'd know, right away. That's a couple."

"I wanna believe you," I say. "That'd be nice."

We reach the old house turned into four apartments that Linda and I have been living in for the last year. Danny leaves the car running, shifting to park and looking like he thinks I have something else to say. I have this sense that it's time for me to come out with some revelation, to unveil a secret as big as Danny's hidden talent for art or his decision to move to Boston, but instead I just sit there and clutch my styrofoam coffee cup, listening to the Valiant's troubled engine. All I can think is, I don't have anything I've been holding back from anyone, no hidden talent I'm waiting for just the right moment to reveal. No big secret I'm planning to spring on the world.

I gulp down the last of the coffee and toss the cup down with the rest of the trash on the floor of his car. I push hard on that heavy door and swing my feet out to the road. After I stand up and turn around I say, "It's a really great tape, Danny. You guys are gonna own Boston."

He smiles. "Thanks a lot, man. And I meant it, you know—your opinion matters a lot to me. Great fucking ears."

It's only been a half hour or so since he last said that, but my mood is so different that I'm not as convinced that's a compliment. My ears may be good, but what good is that, really? Finding gold doesn't do you much good if it's always someone else's.

As I watch the Valiant slowly finds its legs and crawl away I fantasize about standing in the middle of the street until the guys come to pick me up in truck in the morning. Jorge will hand me a huge cup of that cheap Quik-Mart coffee, Big Joey will make a crack about my red eyes, and my brain and hands will have a series of simple tasks to think about all day. Within a matter of seconds, though, a pair of headlights come down the street, forcing me to move.

When I get back inside the stereo is making a kind of low hum; we left the tape deck turned on. An empty Coke can we'd turned into an ashtray sits in the middle of the coffee table, a stub of a roach hanging off its edge and a sea of half-filled glasses around it. A stale smell lingers in the air, some combination of pot and the frozen dinners Linda and I had in front of the TV. I have a sudden urge to clean the whole room, imagining how happy she would be tomorrow morning when she saw it, but I don't want to wake her up.

I sit down on the couch to take off my shoes and pants. The empty tape cover is under the coffee table, and I bend down to pick it up. I try to imagine Danny coming up with the image out of thin air. Was it some doodle he had lying around, or did he hear the band name and start working ideas out? The more I look at that monkey the more personality he seems to have. He looks totally surprised, like he never expected to be hit with such a powerful sound when he stuck his ear to that door.

Down to my boxers and T-shirt I shuffle quietly through the kitchen and down the hall to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and stand over the toilet getting rid of all that coffee as softly as I can. There's a slight ring in my ears, some unpleasant afterglow of pot and coffee and donuts, and I hope it's not going to be there in the morning, a new noise to compete with the daily roar of lawnmowers and leaf blowers.

I shut off the bathroom light and step out into the hall. Linda's left the bedroom door slightly ajar for me, and I don't shut it all the way once I step in to avoid the squeaky hinges. I stand at the far edge of the room, and as my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness I watch the room come into focus. The blankets are pulled up to just under Linda's neck, and beneath the rumpled covers I can see the sharp lines of her body, her legs and arms reaching out to her left, away from my side of the bed. Her breathing at night is always heavier than I expect it to be—how can someone who glides across the world so lightly during the day crash so hard at night? It took me a while to get used to it when we first moved in together, but now I have so much trouble falling asleep without it I have to let her fall asleep first every night. I swear there's a rhythm to it, even a melody.

Standing there, staring so intently I can watch the blanket inch up and down in sync to her breathing, I am flooded with memories of our firsts—that first kiss as Jobim played in the background; the first time we lay side-by-side silently, the better to feel how well we fit together; the first time I saw her naked, startled to realize she was nervous, as if anything closer to perfect than her body could possibly exist; the first time we woke up next to each other, in her tiny dorm room. You're aware of those first times as they're happening, I realize in a flash, but you don't know about the lasts until they've happened.

I approach the bed as quietly as I can. Linda's drifted onto my side, but with some careful maneuvering I stake out enough space on the edge to get in without disturbing her. I clutch a handful of blanket in my right hand and pull it up to scratch my chin, ignoring the ringing in my ears and focusing on the sound of Linda's peaceful breathing. I need to listen closely, need to memorize its tone and rhythm so I can keep hearing it even after she is gone.