

• KING KONG •

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Here there is a lurid lushness in the folds and leaves of foliage, unmistakably lurid, damp and primal and writhing with life, inviting and forgiving, yes, all of those things, and that is exactly why Craig likes it here shaded in the flourishing undergrowth, relaxing, thinking nothing, feeling virile and expansive and strong, and this scene would be absolutely perfect, all of it, perfect, except for one lovely thing. She steps on the twigs and they crack. She pulls on the fruit and it falls. She opens her mouth and out pops fact after fact. Craig reaches to smooth a bent *Visalia* frond, holds it in his hand, and as she talks he feels the velvety silk of leaf against skin.

“Well the fact is, even in this country, reproductive success is falsely cut short, you know? Like by these weird cultural rituals, right?” She is excited. Grass pokes up from beneath her. She is holding *Darwin’s Dreamscape* in her hands, with a finger suggestively inserted between the lips of the book so the pages fold around the finger like water around a rock in a stream. By ‘cultural rituals,’ Craig knows what she means. She means sexually exclusive pair bonds: one male to one female. She means the unnatural monogamous relationship, the myth of the passive female, the attempt to halt unbearable evolutionary urges to spread the seed and spread it far and wide. Yes, he knows just exactly what she means. She means marriage. She means science.

“Baby, baby,” Craig makes his voice deep and he swings Elvis hips, “drop the book and kiss me, please.” He’s knows what’s coming. Some outlandish statistic on the puny testicle size of gorillas. Some fun fact on hermaphroditic slugs. To tell the truth Craig doesn’t want science here with him on his plot of dirt. In the garden he squirts her feet with the hose. She smiles and ignores him. With the water on the feet he means leave me alone. He means don’t crack through this green with that voice of yours. And unless it’s science in a bikini today, unless today Leigh wants to toss that book of hers

down in the dirt and start acting like the animalistic Darwinette she claims to be, well unless all that's finally and righteously true, today Craig wants to hear none of it. He already knows all about it, twice, three times, a hundred times over.

“No, but listen, Craig, seriously.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” he laughs, “I got it. I hear you. Reproductive success. So what else's new?” They have the books on the shelf. He knows the drill. The revised theories on sexual selection. The studies on sperm competition, with footnotes and endnotes and asterisks for exceptions. The mountainous piles of papers that surround the slippers on her side of the bed, with their rigid tables and graphs and cross-referenced facts all announce some startling new thing, some outlandishly true exception to the rule every other uninformed sucker in town plays by. Or at least thinks he plays by. Sarah Hrdy, PhD. Patty Gowaty, PhD. Sexual Dialectics. Sexually antagonistic co-evolution. Concealed ovulation. Continuous receptivity. The thing of it is, a guy could go on in his life and he could just not know about all this stuff. He could be like the jokers in the delivery room who believe with all their hearts that women are made yielding, coy, and unfathomable. Unconcerned with the extra-pair copulation. Naturally monogamous. Uninterested in range and variety. Which, Craig knows as well as the published researchers he and Leigh read about every month in *Evolution Today*, is entirely untrue. What Craig can't quite get is how this information works in real life. How it works, for instance, between himself and Leigh. Because as far as he can tell, it doesn't do much for them. This enlightenment. It doesn't seem much like Leigh has anything at all in common with the amorous apes and their constant swollen vulvas, their insatiable appetites, their manhandling of the males. And oh yes, it has to be seen to be believed but Craig's sat in on lectures and watched x-rated classroom slides. These Bonobo chimps? They do sex while manhandling. Oh they do it swinging, upside down, two to one, three to five, male to male, more and more, while eating, while shrieking, while their foremothers look on in encouragement, when they meet, when they're upset, when it's time for bed and when breakfast is brought out. Leigh, if you want to know the truth, does the dishes. Not always, but she does them. She sips tea in bed. She likes quiet movies and books about—well yes, books about these perverse animalistic ménage tens, but also she reads the books about Catherine and Heathcliff, the prim unconsummated

yearnings between married types and their farmhands, the warm-your-heart weepers she snuffles over when Craig takes her to the beach. And what he's been thinking, lately, is that there must be some sort of angle, some way for all this to equal something more, well, something more *wild* than the very nice relations he and Leigh exchange in the bedroom. Twice weekly. With much love and tender care.

She steps unknowingly on a bud. She slaps quickly at a mosquito on her arm. Her feet are bare. The dirt is black. She stretches to hold a branch away from her face. Craig looks at the hopeful outstretched limbs of the sycamore, he looks at the oak. He splashes them both. "Well, so what I was thinking is that—listen, Craig, this is serious, and I mean, if you don't feel—well, I don't know. If you don't feel good about this then we'll just forget it, okay?" Craig listens and he knows that there is a deep untapped potential in his body, a latent marbled vein of desire running through him. "Okay," she says, "if you *wanted* to, what we could do is we could take up a residency in Uganda, and we could apply for the Parish grant, you know, which I think I could get, and we could study the cyclical mating habits of the Red Fern Twit!"

Now did that sound like what Craig wanted to do?

No. It did not.

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The party that night is far from swank, you'd have to be deaf and blind and half dead to call it swank and even then you'd have to be a mild-mannered academic too. The lobby's as over-lit as an operating room, presumably so that everyone can get a nice long look at the scuffed tweed lounge chairs and cheese platters, and on top of it all there's the location: they titter around directly across from Shariff Lecture Hall for godssake—you know, just in case one of them gets suddenly stuck by an idea so profound she has to race over and give her speech in front of the pulpit—and even this early on in the evening, even at this dismal an affair, Craig is party people and already drunk. He stands surveying the room, its dreary fake plants, its tattered Research Initiative banner, the proud pyramid of cheap plastic cups by the punch bowl, and he's spoken at superhuman length on the Great Tit with Professor Pricilla Richter's camp of devoted bird watchers,

he's altruistically offered his two cents on Cooperative Hunting with Elizabeth Relles, and guess what? He's burned out, he is, he wants to get Leigh and leave here and go some place else where there's music and dancing and no heed paid to proper bibliographic citation. He's burned out and by the time Tim Munro, one on an endless list of Leigh's most treasured professors, ambles excitedly over to share his unique perspective on Bush Meat Consumption Among Indigenous Peoples, Craig feels just about ready to punch him in the throat.

“Welp, Craig, what can I say? Bet you didn't think this old dog had it in him, but as I'm sure you're well aware, *the data is in*, yes sir, Leigh's told you, am I right?” Stale breath, eyes askew, and by god, the stench of the cheese. “Yup, all that's left now is configuration of statistics. And what a fine bunch of statistics they are, young man, really fascinating percentages—don't get me started on the implications here.”

While Professor Tim Munro, with his voice like a distant weedwhacker, buzzes on and on about pros and cons and percentages and industrialization, Craig absently watches Leigh work the room. And she works it like a pro. Craig watches Leigh lean over to whisper authoritatively in the ear of another scientist and then he watches the two of them burst into schoolgirl giggles. Craig sips at his vodka punch. The other scientist is very attractive. Dark flashing eyes, thick hair, all that, and soon enough Craig's mind is wandering; he's thinking about what they need from the grocery store, the nonfat milk, the pork chops, the pink daisy razor packs, teriyaki chicken legs, lean hamburger patties, breakfast links, bacon, ground beef, and as the items parade across his mind he can see the sexy painted fingers of the checkout girl, clutching each item briefly, then scanning and bagging and smiling at Craig and he can see it all as clearly as if he's replaying a movie. All the while, Tim Munro keeps right on talking without even pausing for breath and Craig keeps right on watching the women, Leigh, Elizabeth, and the rest of them, Shiva, Jodi, the wives and girlfriends, the tenured professors and the research assistants, all of them with their degrees and their field work and their video footage.

The thing is, Craig thinks bitterly, in this room, amongst all these people with all this talk of bloody red meat and randy females and sexual aggression, in the end it's still nothing but name-tags and hems below the knee. If someone could come up with a theory—like this bit about the wanderlust in the lusty female heart that all these articles

go on and on about—well then why in the world wouldn't a woman like any of these women test out her own theory in practice? In the men's room? Right now? Leigh is ridiculously faithful but with these types it's all about the theory. It's all about framework, the research. And suddenly, staring out at all of these prim women, a funny idea pops right into Craig's mind as if an apple out of the air hit him on the head. He stands very still, and lets the essence of the idea wash over him. No, he thinks, no, not in a million years. Unless, of course . . . well, but no. Craig looks out at the crowd of data-hungry women, socio-biologists, geneticists, evolutionary psychologists. But the thing is, he thinks, you never know. Maybe. Just maybe. Craig excuses himself, he stands for a while fingering the fake plastic shrubbery, gets another drink, and an hour later he approaches Leigh.

"You wouldn't believe," he says, "what Tim Munro was telling me."

"Hmm?" she says. "Too much shoptalk?"

"Never mind, no, it's nothing." He looks nonchalantly away and waits for Leigh to lean in. "Well, it's just that," he stirs his drink with his finger, "well, oh, I guess as a concept it doesn't have much bearing on real life, you know? It's too bizarre. Forget I mentioned it."

"Tim did you say? Tim Munro?"

"It's nothing. Really. I don't mean to shake things up. How's Elizabeth doing?"

"Well, as far as I know, Craig, he's very thorough. Professor Munro? His reputation is solid fieldwork."

"Yeah," says Craig, "Yeah, you wouldn't believe the things he was saying, though. The nerve of some of these science types, your own colleagues, sweetheart, it's just so *far-fetched*." The delicate scowl as she looks up at Craig is priceless. He shakes his head. "What he thinks women are after? Leigh, honey, if you ask me it just violates basic human nature."

"Oh please, you're really not being fair." Leigh leans in close enough for Craig to smell her shampoo and she glances over at Professor Munro, who is at that exact moment explaining something surely filthy to a group of grad students that involves his hands over his head, as if he's tipping a top hat. "And please don't say human nature here

unless you're joking because you know as well as anyone what a sham that is, I mean Craig, we have our customs but—"

"No, no, no: the question is do you want to be unfaithful? To stray?"

"Oh honey, if I'd wanted to I would have." She looks back at Tim Munro.

"You see. Me neither. I was right all along."

"Yes, but—"

"Nope, case closed. This theory stuff just doesn't hold up."

"Okay," Leigh says to Craig, "are you talking about—"

"No listen," says Craig and as he gets to the gem of it, he feels the excitement burn in his throat, "what I'm talking about is the little deal Mister Munro and his lovely wife have worked out, one which I'm sure you, my dear, would have no interest in." He sips his drink. He tries to hold his face still. The thing to do, Craig knows, is plant the seed. And that's it. Just plant. And wait. "As a matter of fact," he says, "I'm not even going to mention it. Frankly these types of 'advanced scientific principles' are just a little perverse for my taste. I don't know why we're even standing here having this conversation."

"Perverse, did you say?" Leigh looks up in ready defense of any extremist attitude such an expert might hold. Because, of course, the radical text in her head is *The Excess of the Amorous Ape* or *Optimal Mating Habits of the Matriarchies* or whatever. All this, you see, despite her personal habits. All this despite the strict loyalty she advocates and practices, and Craig, at this point, wants to whoop out laughing, he wants to shout *gotcha*, he wants to reach out and slap Shiva across her ample backside, but he knows better than that, he's a smooth operator, and all that betrays him is the sparkle in his eye.

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Craig and Leigh go home later and watch television. On *The Nature Show* a peacock uses his elaborate tail feathers to entice a mate. Craig and Leigh make love. Craig thinks about the supermarket checkout clerk and the tiny furious breasts standing out proud and braless against her shirt. Leigh thinks about walruses defending their turf.

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A small pile of weeds, crabgrass spikelets and kudzu seed twitch in the breeze. On hands and knees Craig yanks at the dirt. Divots of Miracle-Gro deep in the soil. Dig just a little. If it were someone else, okay, a different time in his life, well, the solution would be simple. Because come on, as great as Leigh is, five years with one brand is some kind of commitment. When the hollow is deep enough Craig takes the broken eggshells, carefully preserved from a week of breakfasts, and lets them crunch. He sets them in sparingly, with a generous layer of rich dirt between each new deposit. He burps every layer, patting gently at the soil. And yes, if the situation were different, a different girlfriend maybe, he could do it on the sly, do it without regrets, he knows from experience. You see, something like that doesn't bother a guy like Craig. But Leigh, on the other hand, she's a woman of high moral standards. And he couldn't do a thing like that to her. Cheat. Lie. Sneak. No way. He moves to the tree, tugs up a dandelion shoot and out pops a whole clump of moist earth. Take the well-tred path and she might find out. Leigh's a smart lady. He deepens out the hole. Sticks in seeds, Miracle-Gro, eggshells. Plus they've always been so open and honest with each other, which is not something Craig would knowingly give up. But come on, a person needs a little variety in life, right? It's only natural.

Take Traci: viable, approachable, and ripe with sensuality. Craig feels the wet soil crumble through his fingers and he pictures Traci guarding the food at the end of the conveyer belt with her cheerful nametag and her come-hither-stare. He relives last week's breathy exchange, how she always remembers his name and how she stresses it over the abundance of bananas and cherries and boxed eggs—which by the way, she opens up to check, very thoughtful, thorough woman—and how her little square teeth shine when she laughs at his jokes.

“Do you need anything, honey?” Craig says when he comes in with gloves in his hands and dirt on his knees. “From the store?”

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“Okay,” Leigh smiles and shakes her head in giddy disgust. “Cheat? Sleep around?” Craig sets down his magazine. Their bed is a topographical map, jutting hilltops and knees, the smooth spread of a relaxed thigh, and the lime cotton sheets running over all of Leigh like prairie grass. Leigh displays her novel’s elaborate cover and points with exaggeration, as if it’s a cereal commercial, at a woman whose flowing hair cascades down the bulging hulk of her lover. “Like you said before? Ask the question—and I don’t just mean fantasy—I mean really ask the question and guess what: you’ve got the answer.”

She goes back to the novel, she turns the page and lets out a gasp of mock scandal. Craig snuggles up next to her.

“Oh I know,” he says, “absolutely, I agree. But just think: what if the question weren’t even the issue? Right, sweetheart? Because isn’t that what you’re really saying?”

“Hmm?” Leigh answers without looking up.

“Well, I don’t know. Sounds to me like you’ve been thinking about what Professor Munro and his wife do.”

Over the lip of the book she smiles at him. “Did he really say all that? How’d he put it?”

“I swear to god.”

“Can you believe that?” She stares down at her novel, and as Craig looks back to the magazine, from the corner of his eye he sees her shake her head, and Craig isn’t exactly counting but it’s not two minutes later that she lays her book in her lap, spine up.

“Well, so what exactly did he say?”

“Just like I said. Maximize their reproductive success.”

“They have affairs.”

“Well, no, god you’re so harsh sometimes, baby, that’s not how he put it at all—he said that they both knew and agreed. It was like a contract.”

“Yeah, sure, but reproductive success, I mean what? Was he really about to raise some other guy’s kid? If she got pregnant?”

“Well, I think as a couple they were more interested in, how did you put it, lack of restriction. As a concept. So that they could behave like in a way that’s more in tune with, um, I think he said with what our bodies are designed for?”

“Yeah. Well, yeah, I can see that.”

“Yeah, he said you would.”

“Oh, no way. Gross, Craig, you didn’t say you guys were talking about me.” She pauses to consider something, then scrunches her face and smiles in disbelief. “But he did, though? He said me?”

Now, if Professor Munro were attractive at all, even just the tiniest bit, Craig knew, this bait wouldn’t work. But as it was the great scientist, with his crooked nose and slumped lips, his bad breath, loose skin and slipped disk, was elderly, pudgy, and entirely repulsive. So Craig went right ahead. “Said you were an ‘astute observer of the primate’s honestly expressed sexuality.’”

“An honestly expressed sexuality.” Her face takes on a kind of transfixed serenity when she discusses her research into evolutionary theory and that’s just the way her face looks now, as she repeats the words.

“It’s natural he said.”

“Yeah *well*, but a little dangerous, don’t you think?”

Craig shrugs noncommittally, “Beats me.” He picks up his magazine and cracks it open. He flips the pages. “How long have those two been married, anyway?”

Leigh looks over at him and she closes up her book and puts it on the table. “Wow.” She reaches for her tea. “An honestly expressed sexuality, huh?” She sips and stares into the cup. “But just in behavior, though, no consequences. They use contraceptives.”

“Yeah, that was my understanding of it.”

“Those two seem awfully happy. I just wouldn’t suspect something like that.”

“You know? It worked out for them. Maybe it’s the, I don’t know, the dropped pretense or something. According to this, of course”—he holds up the article, *Symmetry and Sexual Attractiveness*—“it’s just the way our libidos have adapted.”

“Well, yes, of course, but wouldn’t it drive you crazy? To know your partner’s out running wild? I mean, come on, who would really want that?”

Craig thinks about crushing the crisp starch of Traci's pressed uniform. He thinks about tugging her hair out of its high ponytail and smelling it. Burying his face in it. Feeling it on his chest.

"I don't know, honey, how much it's an issue of what someone wants. I think it's more—well let's see, how did Professor Munro put it? Acknowledging our natural behavioral potential."

Leigh shakes her head in wonder.

"It's really just that simple. I mean, it really is." Leigh looks at Craig, and he can see the awe, the enthusiasm of science working away, clicking in her brain, variables and facts sliding into all the appropriate slots. "God. That Professor Munro," she says, "he's a genius of risk. Do you realize this? What a risk that is? A pretty big professional risk, Craig." Leigh covers her face and laughs. "God, Maggie! He and Maggie! Can you even imagine?"

Craig laughs too and lies back against the pillow with practiced nonchalance. "Yeah, how on Earth would you set a thing like that up?" he says. "The parameters, I mean? Logistics."

Leigh sticks her finger in the tea to dunk the bag. She licks the finger. It's just the tiniest pause, and then: "He didn't say anything about that?"

Outside, the plants feel the dirt. The flowers have already closed their faces to the thick dark night. Leigh holds the tea cup with both hands and when she looks at Craig he can't look away. He has to time it. He has to be sure it's right.

"Well, actually," he says and he leans up on one elbow and he pauses long enough to flash Leigh his most charming look. His most vulnerable, trustworthy look. Then, as a co-conspirator, Craig smiles wide, and so does she. He shrugs. He takes his time. In the end, the two of them write up the contract in just under three hours. The signatures, snug like that, stacked together on the page, are like a couple of sleeping cocoons, yes. But let me tell you, there is a supercharge in that room. In their excitement they take out the whiskey and sip little sips. They discuss hypotheticals and set parameters and it gets to a point where the voltage in that room could set a forest on fire. Neither can believe the other's audacity, their collective illicit secret. The sex is

fantastic. For breakfast, they each eat more than their usual share. They have bacon with their sausage. They laugh at the funnies. They sing in the shower.

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There are of course all sorts of looks a woman gives a man. At the bank, the teller, a busty Chicana, all but winks. The girls waiting for the bus seem each to offer up the seats beside them, but it's the redhead who smiles and Craig notes it with a special relish. And the idea of it all, the true idea the way that he's read about it in Leigh's books, starts to tickle him pink. He knows about how the most viable is the female who has successfully reproduced once: she's veteran, fertile, and can endure the physical trials of gestation. Young mothers, their toddlers swaying on strollers, are suddenly irresistible. Sexy divorcées seem to linger in every doorway on his block. Everywhere Craig looks the world is blooming with female possibility.

The thing is, it's not about living with no rules. Their new phase in their primary relationship is by trial arrangement only, and will proceed for three months of experimentation time, effective immediately, he knows as much. Protection must always be worn, regardless of the circumstances. Obviously. Tests would be taken. Every six months. And yes, Leigh has full permission to use any information about this situation in any book on animal behavior that she might someday write, with the understanding of course that all names be changed. And regardless of whatever goes on when they're out by the time they get home there's no telling, no hints, lips sealed—because really, if it's flaunted who wouldn't get jealous? The rules, ask Craig, are okay by him. The plan is just about a perfect one. Because there is something he knows, something he hasn't let on about.

See, Craig and Leigh, they've been together five years now, and Craig knows Leigh pretty well. He's overheard her hushed girls-only-conversations, he's seen what she writes in her diary. She's a sexual person, sure, but the thing about Leigh is that she's a one-man woman. There is such a type, you know. And she's embarrassed. She needs to feel comfortable. She takes a long time. For Leigh, Craig knows, three months is nothing. The two of them dated for a full month at least before they ever so much as

necked with abandon. But here, this way it's perfect because Leigh can have her titillation, she can have her audacity, and it'll be just like the daily thrill she gets at the zoo when she watches those captive Bonobos charge. Vicarious. Dangerous. And thrilling. Yes. But what's the appeal, really? The appeal is the possibility. That we came from that, that we're still, underneath it all, like that. We don't have to do the things they do to prove it. Possibility, permission, the promise of adventure, it's everything.

At three-thirty, when Traci's shift starts, Craig slips on a clean t-shirt, cool, but not too much like he's trying. Sort of wind-blown hair. He dresses as if there's some woman in the room watching him, and he plays his music loud in the car and when he walks up to the automatic doors they open with what seems like a special flourish he's forgotten to note every other day of his life.

He makes his selection carefully: thick steak. Sweet red grapes. Chocolate. Spearmint gum. Plain chapstick. One lotto ticket for luck. And pulpless Tropicana orange juice for all the promise of morning that it holds.

Waiting in line, listening to Traci's scanner beep, he can see her with her barrettes and her earrings, and he feels already proud of himself. It's all foreplay. This consistent intensity. Craig knows it's best like this when there's anticipation. He knows just what he'll say, he's rehearsed it, he's ready. Her uniform, today, looks especially crisp. Fresh-pressed. A little tight. He'll just say it outright. He'll ask for next week, though, so she can have time to get excited about it. And he'll be sure not to come back in until after, so she can build up some hope and he should do something extra, flowers. Daisies. For the first date. He knows how it will go, how she'll laugh, how she'll flush pink, how she'll note the steak and wonder why he finally chose today of all days. When he gets to her he looks her straight in the eye. He stands as tall as he can. He uses his deep voice.

The scanner beeps. She blinks twice. "Oh. Greg. Thank you so much for asking, and I'm flattered, I really am." She laughs. "That's so sweet." She smiles and he pictures the place he'll take her: Diego's, on Oceanside, for oysters and beer, intimate, dark and they have booths there, good music on Fridays. Her pink lips. Her tiny hands. "But I, well—here's the thing. Okay, listen, Greg, the thing is, I'm afraid I have to say

no. Okay? I'm sorry. But please believe me when I say how flattered I am because I really am and you really are a nice guy."

The magazine racks say space invasion. Elvis lives. The lights flicker bright and brighter. The total is clearly displayed. Sixteen twenty-seven. At first he thinks he's misheard and then she has to say paper or plastic and she seems embarrassed for him. And he wants to ask why. He wants to try again. It happens so fast. When he leaves it feels as if he's left his wallet, but he checks and he hasn't. He opens up the chocolate and takes a bite right there in the parking lot. He finds out later why it is, though. He sees Traci downtown one day. She doesn't even have short hair but she's kissing another girl. On the cheek, yeah, but you could tell. No wonder. Fine. But with the teller it isn't as nice.

"Sorry," she says flatly. "Did you still want your withdrawal?"

"That's it?" Craig throws up his hands. "You don't have to even think about it?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mister Etalon."

"You're married, that's why."

"It's not your business."

This he was not expecting. With Traci it was some sort of fluke, but this? This teller's smiled at him before, he knows it. A special sort of smile. Not just any smile. Craig stands there blankly, considering his options. Maybe do they want it worded some other way? He looks back at the woman behind the plexiglass and starts again, he tries to start again, but she sighs and interrupts him before he's even half-way through his description of the restaurant he's selected, just for her, with lighting to complement her tone, and oysters on the half-shell, fresh and salty, the Martinis that she wouldn't believe, the Martinis that would just blow her mind.

"Look, I'm not married, I just don't want a date with you and that's the end of the conversation. Now unless you have some business here with the bank?"

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Leigh's dream is Jordan's face extra close. Jordan's face inches from her face, straight on, filling up everything she can see and then sliding sideways, tilting full-frame until,

inches away, he is sideways. He must be lying down. Where she can get him. Where she can touch him, and have him. He must be.

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After the teller, Craig drives to Kinley's Record Emporium and he decides that the first stranger to smile at him will be the one. Then he decides to try the first woman he can see wearing red. Then it's the shortest skirt. The most obviously dyed hair. The employee of the month. He's out of fucking luck. It's his shoes, his clothes, his teeth—is there something in his teeth? By the time he drives home, with the radio off, five miles over the limit, no dinner in his stomach and the good food gone bad in the trunk, Craig is in no mood to find the house empty.

Which is, of course, exactly what he finds.

There is a little note. With a heart. *Sushi with the girls*, it says. Craig crumples the little note into a little ball and he throws it on the floor. He orders a pizza.

In the garden, something has knocked over the bird-feeder. A raccoon? A cat?

On television they show the Lotto billboards around town. It's a giant jackpot. Millions and millions of dollars. The pizza, with its stingy cheese and sparse toppings—it just isn't very good. It just isn't good enough.

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Vicious systems exist, but it's sort of ingenious too, the checks and the balances that are all set up. Take, for instance, the very earliest moments of the African spotted hyena's existence. They're born, they break free from the sac, and fight each other to the death. That's what they do. First thing ever in life. It really is amazing. And in other ways, too. Because at first, for years, the researchers—and well, yes, it's true they were all male researchers, and it's an implausible, enormous misunderstanding, but the fact is, they just didn't know how to categorize them. They didn't understand. How on earth, these earnest researchers thought, could there exist self-perpetuation in a species that is entirely homosexual? Well, testosterone does funny things to a female when it's present

like that in such high doses, muscle tone, aggression, and suffice it to say the clitoral shaft has to be seen to be believed. Leigh sits in her parked car and carefully, in the rearview mirror, she brushes on mascara. Tentative strokes. Or maybe believed isn't the word for what it is you see. Would a guy like Craig be able to understand it if he saw it with no description, with just his own binocular eyes? Or would Craig check marks on graph paper and set out on a never-ending-hunt for what must be the most elusive female ever to meet the match of safari science? Leigh is pretty sure she knows. She can picture him and it isn't so much a failing as it is just a mindset. With the endowments of Ms Hyena, it may be more accurate to say she has to be imagined to be believed. Maybe it's the seeing that mixes people up.

Leigh checks the time. Twelve-twenty. She doesn't want to get there too early. She brought a book just in case. She checks the time again and then she checks her hair, shaking it out and fluffing it up. When she finds Jordan's old phone number in her keepsake box, it's a tattered sheet of notebook paper. It's an artifact from a foreign land of boyfriends past, a concrete detail to ground her somewhere in the swirl of her memory's fluctuating lust. When she thinks of what Jordan was like, she knows how he will squeeze her neck and bite her lip. She knows just which movies to discuss. She knows that he will always stand up to get sugar for her tea. She sits in the car and she opens up her purse. She takes the well-worn scrap of paper out again and she holds the phone number in her hands. She looks at his blocky handwriting. The big J, the strong N.

She remembers well the damp sweat against her cheek when Omar clutched at her in undergraduate heartbreak on the dance floor, she revisits high school with visions of the track team in mini-shorts hurling themselves over those high wooden barriers, and reminisces, one might even say regularly, about the perfect tempo of Jordan's sophomore hips, his sloppy kisses, his drummer's arms. But you have to understand, that's all perfectly normal, and what's more it's in the past. All things considered, she felt that this experiment she and Craig were embarking upon was a noble one, a notch on her belt, a medal on her lapel. It was thrilling to put the science to the test. It was open-minded. Avant-garde. And the truth of it was, she felt proud of Craig for his unorthodoxy, his generosity of spirit, his relentless pursuit of knowledge, and especially for what she knew full well all of this required: his full deep faith in the security and foundation of their

relationship. After all, what good is a loyalty born of restriction? If anyone had bothered to ask Leigh, that's what she would say. She has it planned out. But she doesn't want him to think anything bad like she's using him or something, so she decides not to tell Jordan outright. She touches the steering wheel. Maybe if she just doesn't bring it up at all.

She puts the paper away, gets out of the car, and when they sit together for lunch Leigh sizes him up, searching for symmetry in the lines of his ear lobes and in the creases of his laugh lines. And it's there. It is. The strong jaw, the cleft chin. It's there, all of it and more.

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Gianne is a sure thing. Okay. Enough is enough. Gianne's been after Craig for years. A sure thing, because he remembers clearly kissing her at a party, and he remembers every time since how boldly she compliments his taste. In music, in books and in anything else that ever comes up whenever they find themselves again at the same sort of dimly lit, late night events. It's been a full three years since that kiss, yes, and they were both quite drunk, yes, but he and Leigh ran into Gianne just two months ago, and at the time he couldn't believe what he was hearing, but Gianne told Leigh that Craig was "quite a catch," and she said it with a low-cut shirt and Craig standing right there listening.

Gianne accepts with no questions asked. Okay. Which is a good sign, definitely. On their first date, after flattery and smiles and a fancy fifty-five dollar dinner, after brushing knuckles in the snack bag which rests only inches from her bosom, Craig boldly grazes his hand against Gianne's heavy left breast during the love scene at the Cineplex and she stands abruptly in the theater, spilling popcorn in her wake. But instead of taking Craig home to ravish, she calls a taxi on her tiny phone and deserts the scene without even waiting to find out how it ends up on the big screen for Brad and Kate.

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In the bathroom mirror Leigh stares at her morning self. Women cloud their true faces every morning under concealer and powder and lipstick, with moisturizer and toner and oxy 10. At the same time, a sink away, men clear their faces from shadow as the razor blade scrapes away their only hope of disguise, increasing exposure.

When it's early Leigh looks smaller, less well-defined. She brushes her teeth and lets the foam dribble down her chin. Leigh knows things. She looks at herself. She knows things she doesn't quiet let on about.

For instance, Leigh knows that in evolutionary terms there is such a thing as antagonism. You see, what's good for the goose is not necessarily what's good for the gander. Obvious, maybe, but a thing to think about. A thing to take advantage of. Because what's really the point of this open evolutionary behavior if there isn't something at stake? Some sort of sperm competition or something, at least. She brushes her tongue. She brushes the roof of her mouth. Women don't need the urge for babies, that's not the way it works. All you have to want is the sex, and the rest—well, it just happens for you one way or the other. And Leigh's no different, she doesn't think she's any different, but what she wouldn't mind is just finding out. You know. Which one it is. Who's the better match for her particular genes. It's just a thing she's wondering. It would be crazy, she knows, to do sex without protection.

Then again, she understands something that maybe Craig isn't clear on: an increment in the swiftness of the gazelle is a blow to the lion. It's simple. It's true. She spits. She rinses the sink. She feels faster. She feels invincible. And for no reason at all in the mirror she flexes both arms like a superhero.

In the kitchen, clean-shaven Craig cooks breakfast. Cracks the eggs, saves the shells. When Leigh walks down the stairs he's got the newspaper spread out across the table and he's checking the numbers against it.

Craig plays the lotto. Up to five tickets at a time. Maximizes his chance. Leigh jokes that the lotto is a self-imposed tax on people who are too stupid to grasp odds, a whole community who choose to punish themselves for failing the world's math test. People like Craig. Who lose every week just to lose again the next.

She sits down. She takes the plate he hands her. She eats the eggs he's scrambled.

“I was thinking,” she says. “Have you ever thought about, you know, babies, ever? Like us having some?”

“What? Now?” Craig looks up from the newspaper. “Are you crazy, what are you talking about this for?”

“Well, I don’t know, maybe we should just—” she waves her hands vaguely around the kitchen, “forget all this. You know, we could go to Uganda. Like I said. The Red Fern Twit, Craig. I wanted to do that, you know. I’m serious about that.” And yes, it’s a test, but she doesn’t so much mean it as one until the hopeful words are already hanging in the kitchen air.

“Uganda? Are you out of your mind? You’re asking me now to go to Uganda? Jesus Christ, Leigh, what’s the deal, here? Huh?”

“Fine,” she says. “Fine. Real nice of you, Craig, you know. Sorry I asked.” She stands up and puts on the kettle. She thinks of Jordan’s scent, she thinks of the place on her waist where Jordan held her down. With that arm. She reaches around and tries to recreate it. She smiles. She hums. She checks her watch, straightens her skirt, and Craig is watching her. Suddenly he sets down the paper. She looks at him, with his pathetic stack of lucky picks, the tension in his shoulders, those soggy scrambled eggs.

“You’re pregnant, that’s it, right? Am I right?”

Leigh rolls her eyes. “No, tell me, Craig: how exactly could I be?”

“What, I don’t know, you stopping by the sperm bank on your way home from work or something?”

“That’s disgusting, Craig, and you know it.” Leigh rinses her cup in the sink and sighs. Typical. “I just was bringing up some suggestions, okay? You don’t have to be so nasty.” But when she looks back at Craig he looks so utterly defeated that in a sudden panic of condolence she reaches for polite, for interested-in-his-interests, for the vacuum that will suck the dead air out of the conversation and re-inflate it with banter. Friendly banter. Lover’s banter. “Look, I meant more like hypothetically,” she says. “Mainly you know, I was just thinking out loud. It’s a dumb idea. Forget it.” She tries to think of something else to say. “How’s the plants? Begonias, right? The begonias? Sweetheart? How’s it going with that?”

She looks at Craig. It's not that Jordan's better, it's just that he's newer. And not so uptight. And he does the thing with the sugar for the tea. He pulls out the chair for her before she sits down. He makes her feel sexy. And plus, she thinks, I mean, what would I do if Craig died? Or if something bad should happen to him? It would be crazy, yes she knows, to do sex without protection. Crazy. Destructive. There's Craig sitting there like that. It would be crazy, she thinks. And already she regrets it.

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The fact of the matter is, evolution and sexual selection and primal urges happen. It's not like not knowing makes it not happen. And so for Leigh there is no fifty-five dollar dinner. There is no darkened Cineplex, no spilled popcorn. What there is for Jordan and Leigh is energetic heterosexual copulation. Extra-pair copulation. Primal screaming copulation. Legs in the air, discarded clothing thrown with abandon, and fierce untamed mating, wild outrageous lunch-break coitus, lock-the-bathroom-door and park-in-secluded-spots sex. But also there is more.

"Aw come on," he slips into the booth, "we've been doing nothing but these lunchy diners—Leigh, you gotta let me take you out someplace nice for a change. Friday night, huh, someplace like where we could grab a bottle of wine, what do you say?" Jordan talks and Leigh watches his thick hair, his straight teeth.

"It's just that I'm busy. With work. Ow, no, I'm serious—please, Jordie," says Leigh, and she leans in to sniff his clean man scent, "tell me you respect the hours I put in, Jesus I used to hate that about you." When he reaches over and sets his effective hand on top of hers, Leigh can't help but note the well-shaped joints, the unvarying proportion of those muscular, sturdy hands. I'm a one-man woman, she thinks, I am, it's just that I want to try this out and see.

"You can't, huh? Well. Maybe," Jordan arcs a brow, "maybe next week if you're not too busy, maybe you could pencil me in, huh? Make me more than an afterthought?"

She ought to start carrying the heavy data-books around with her, make it more feasible. Craig is so different. Not so indignant. But then when Jordan orders his club sandwich with panache, Leigh thinks Yes, just like that. In a diner in the future my

handsome kids could order food in just that way, with just that tone, that lilt, that cozy hospitality. And then Jordan, with that hand, squeezes her knee under the table and it's all over. She slides closer to him. She smells him. She wants her hands in his hair.

"Another thing," she says, "that used to drive me nuts."

"What's that?"

"The flirting with the waitress, yeah."

"Really? Huh, not so much the nicest compliment I've ever gotten, you know."

Jordan shifts in his seat and Leigh knows there's no point in resisting, and it's all she can do to avoid burying her face in the scent underneath his arm. "And you still smoke," she says. "People hate that."

"Vicious today, huh? Think I don't notice your nasty habits?"

"Okay, and what time is it because you're always late."

"Okay," Jordan grabs her wrist, "completely irresponsible."

"What? Please."

"How behind are you," he bites his lip, "that you work weekends. Right?"

Leigh feels her cheeks go hot. She looks at Jordan. She looks at his hand on her wrist. "Also," she says, "your terrible posture."

He smiles. The other hand is on her knee, just as it would be in any romance novel of hers. His shirt stretches tight across sturdy eager shoulders that are so different from Craig's, shoulders that are underneath that shirt just like the brawny shoulders embossed on any front cover.

"Christ," Jordan says, "I'm tempted to just take the afternoon off again, huh?" He smiles. "Yeah? Shall we? Hey, I mean, I'm tempted, I really am, this crazy schedule it seems like it'll be June before you've got anything other than lunch dates available for a smoker like me, huh?" He squeezes tighter before he lets go of her wrist and Leigh feels the blood pump under her skin.

The waitress brings out their drinks and Leigh watches her give gorgeous Jordan the once-over. Jordan smiles and Leigh knows this experiment she and Craig have embarked upon is not a rationalization. It is not an excuse to get away with it. That's not how evolutionary theory works. Like it or not, sexual selection is just the explanation for how it already is. Why we already are this way that we so irrevocably are.

“Hey come on, you don’t want to slip outside, Jordie? Have a quick smoke?”

“Leigh,” Jordan pats her thigh, “you’re going to have to ask nicer than that.”

Like it or not, the body does tricky things on your behalf. To engage in autoerotic sex play, to jill-off, masturbate, pet the kitty, diddle the skittle—it’s all a secret weapon, and Leigh knows it. Maybe if you take a new lover, for instance, one like Jordan for instance, with his broad flat chest and his narrow muscular waist, well then maybe you might be more prone, in his immediate absence, to go on a solo run. On the off days. The days when he’s not available. Just because you want to. You’re compelled to. It seems innocuous enough, but what that does is it arms the womb with the deadly forces of vaginal secretions, more deadly than an ordinary man might imagine. The vulva, inviting as it may be, is not a hospitable place for the male’s procreative offerings. Leigh knows as much. That’s why they come in alkaline ejaculate, and by the millions.

Acidic, lethal, and abundant, when the masturbated cervix trembles and dips in orgasmic spasms it is these natural secretions that are sucked deeply up and which then wait to disarm and pulverize whatever unsuspecting ejaculate later enters the scene. Leigh watches Jordan fiddle with his watch. She wants him to be done eating. She wants to leave with him. She feels his thigh against her thigh. Like if for instance on one of those self-gratification days maybe your usual partner should enter the scene and have his hopeful, earnest ejaculation effectively immobilized? By those daily stored secretions? Well, then the natural, spontaneous cycle of desire is acting for you as birth control. But situation-specific birth control. Stacking odds in favor of the new lover. With whom—on non-masturbatory days—you maybe experience similarly timed, incredibly intense climax. During which the dipping spasms of the cervix dunk into and carry up his seed. That is if you were, on one of those days, to happen to engage in natural, unprotected copulation, of course. People are built for this sort of thing.

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So she starts pulling new moves in bed and Craig can’t believe it. The last time, he found the manual with Picasso’s nude on the cover, but this time, hey his confidence is low, it’s a touchy subject, and he’s not so sure. The decision to follow her is maybe a bad

decision. It's maybe a decision made in the thick haste of the moment. But it's what has to be done. Here is the salt and the pepper. The frying pan hisses. He throws the one with red in the yolk down the drain. He puts the kettle on the stove. The thing is, she's never home late, and as far as Craig can tell, she doesn't plan anything out of the ordinary. Unless it's someone at work. Unless her construct is so elaborate that she writes nonsense in her daily planner.

He calls in sick to the office—food poisoning—and he waits around the block for Leigh's car to coast out onto the street and turn left and enter the onramp. Then he has to wait for some other cars to go first so it isn't so obvious.

There was one time he thought she maybe had a date. He wants to just ask. But she doesn't ever ask him anything. It must've gone badly. She doesn't seem in the least bit concerned. Which must mean that there's nothing going on. Because if there were, well then she would be jealous, then she'd be thinking he's doing the same. He pulls out on to their street. He holds back behind the pickup. He keeps her in his sights. Research lab today, observations tomorrow, he knows, he checked so even if he loses her for a second it's okay, it's no big deal. Neither of them has mentioned the experiment since they signed the papers. Leigh's underwear drawer doesn't look any better stocked. Her diary is nowhere to be found. She gets on the freeway. She's three cars ahead. He changes lanes. Does she want me to marry her, Craig thinks, is that it? Fine, he thinks. I'll ask her. I'll marry her. Fine by me, done deal.

But what he sees when he follows her is not what he wants to see. What he sees even from across the street is a flush rising up Leigh's throat and coloring her cheeks. He sees a tall, stylishly dressed and surely well-endowed man meet her outside the research labs for lunch and then he sees that there is no Wednesday yoga class at six-thirty. Six-thirty comes and goes and her lone car sits like a lost sock in the lab's lot 4C and Craig follows them both packed in together in the man's shiny red truck. The tall man drives a truck. The tall man touches her skin. He talks inches from her ear, he makes her blush. What's worse, they go to the travel store and come out with shopping bags bulging full of things Craig can't see.

Uganda! Jesus Christ, thinks Craig, I have to act fast.

They climb into the car and Craig follows them. Craig thinks about killing them. They stop only once, for milkshakes, like this is some kind of a joke. Women are built to be promiscuous. So are men, but it's no big deal, everyone knows about that. With women it's like a secret. With everything going on inside where no one can see what happens. But there are pros and cons to every system, Craig knows as much. There are fertility clinics everywhere. Probably one in this town. I'll look it up, he thinks, if she leaves me I'll go there. I'll fill out the forms. I'll spread my seed, my genes will propagate and then we'll see what's fair. Then we'll see who wins.

From three cars behind he follows them. Leigh. And that man. Together. SAT scores? Hobbies? Height, weight, coloring. History of heart disease? Favorite foods? Craig pictures the faceless hordes of fertility-seeking women reviewing his sheets, scanning his scores, measuring his dick and passing him on, only just one contestant, only just one in a stack of twenty, fifty, and hundred or more. But he knows he's got what it takes. He knows that there is an inequality. A female failing. A score one for the home team. He envisions his private resources, an army just waiting in the wings, and for every woman who says no thanks, he has inside himself millions more to compensate. He is filled with more of himself than he could ever possibly use. He imagines it and he sits in his car outside of the research lab long after Leigh's Honda has left hugging the curves of the lot behind the truck of her tall man in his fancy well-cut suit. Which is bad, yes. A low point. Yes.

And the next day's even worse. It's true. Because the next day—observation day—Craig lurks like an assassin in the crowds at Leigh's workplace, just to discover the extent of it. I mean does this guy come for her every day, or what? Hold her hand in the enclosure? Feel her up while she charts data? Suckle her toes over their mutual joy at punctuated equilibrium? Craig doesn't even use the family pass they share, no he buys his anonymous zoo ticket for full price and he loses her as she passes through security clearance, but he's visited before, he figures where to slip between the buildings, how to climb past the fake moats, and how to watch from far away. He knows where she sits. He has his binoculars in case he needs them. He has come prepared.

What he discovers is this: a woman is an animal.

It might not be clear at first but that is a fact.

Leigh sits still with her clipboard, crouching just inside the enclosure checking off things on her chart like who grooms who and how often and under what circumstances. Craig knows as much. She's shown him her weekly forms often enough. He's even walked past here before, on the public zoo tour, but what he hadn't noticed before, and what he notices now, is the sheer animal stench of them, all these hairy, hooting apes, swaying together under San Diego's pathetic attempt at jungle trees and cavorting and copulating and grinning and stinking. As he settles in Craig feels enveloped in the stench like it's a tent zipped up behind him. Surrounded with leaves of camouflage Craig tries to let the greenery and the concrete of the zoo calm him down—get it together, he thinks, just relax, no one can see you—but when he touches the unforgiving ground the dirt's packed tight and it wafts up into the air and into his dry mouth and becomes just another part of the thick living smell of them.

He envisions the tall man touching Leigh in the back of the truck and there's that and then there's the meaty thick fur stench and he wants to heave. This has to stop, he thinks, I have to stop this. All the while he has the ring in his pocket and the checkbook balance to prove it's deadly seriousness. He pictures the way her face looked. He has the black velvet box with the ring inside and whatever else pours out when he opens up that box for her tonight, the ring inside is pure undistilled hope. It can be taken care of fair and square, he thinks, and we can move on from this and get married and be normal and no one will ever have to know. Uganda, he thinks, you never know what Uganda might be like. He peeks over the bushes at Leigh and like it or not there it all is in all its glory spread out right before his very eyes.

It is the sex. The sex is happening.

In person it is so much faster. My god, the smell. All Craig had ever seen were the slides. He'd only ever read about it. When he'd taken the tour they'd been grazing or something but Jesus Christ they weren't doing this. They weren't eating bugs from each other's heads and smearing wet sticky fruit on their overlarge handlike feet and rolling on their backs in autoerotic acts that involve all the apparent ecstasy fruit offers to those who use it well and without shame. But here they are doing it all now, right in front of him, this unsettling sex in the flesh right here in front of his hidden, stooping self, here they are without shame engaged in the sex act not twenty feet from Leigh and her clipboard,

rolling together like that right there, face to face, arms clasped, rumps swinging wildly in focused concentration. Wheezing. Hollering. Straining. For Craig the most deeply upsetting aspect is the sweet shit smell. In his mouth. The static warmth in that salty dank scent as it settles in around him, and in his lungs and in his nose and his mouth the stink blooms. G-G rubbing, groin to groin, females together, sliding past each other and clutching at each other and sharing food while they're at it, sliding past each other not leisurely, no, at a frantic hundred beats a second, so fast so that it's like they're joined together at that sticky pink fleshy mound and struggling in a blur of motion to break free. Standing there proudly on two legs they're like cavemen, not like apes, not like magazine articles. It is a violence of the senses. Those sexual swellings. Naked, bulbous and shining pinker than bubblegum. The grotesque grinning lips they pull away to reveal sharp overlarge teeth is clearly a warning, clear as any Craig has ever seen. The shrieking and the putrid reeking warm rotten-dog stench. The electric crackle in the air. The enormous hands, the over-long arms. And here's Leigh, in the middle of it probably thinking of that tall bastard in the fancy suit. Here is Leigh, with these apes all calling out to her and to each other, hooting and panting like pornographic foreigners or seals or tribesmen with sharpened sticks and jackals howling at the moon.

And she doesn't notice. She doesn't care. In a trembling unnerved panic of alarm, from in his small dirty hiding place Craig stares out across the enclosure at Leigh. She hears them. She sees them. And like an animal without shame she is at home amongst them.

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