

# Harvey & Eck



Erin  
O'Brien

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

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Dumped. I got dumped. How could this be happening? I thought he was different. Talk about a cliché—different. It's actually pretty funny. Sure, this guy's different. Right. He's not like other guys. Uh-huh, believe that. Other guys fuck you for a while then dump you when they get bored. Toss you in the corner like a forgotten broken toy. I remember how Barbie used to look right out of her pink cardboard and cellophane package. So new and pretty. Hair all glossy and makeup perfect. Then, after a few go-rounds with Ken in the Barbie Dreamhouse, she'd be in shambles, let me tell you. The shiny blond hair reduced to a dingy yellow Brillo pad. An arm missing. The elastic in the waistband of her bikini torn. Time to get a new Barbie!

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**ERIN O'BRIEN**

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*For Eric, who is constantly putting me back together.*

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September 22

Dear Mr. Timothy J. Ecklenburg,  
Well, there you are, right there.

You're right there on page 257 of the *Metropolitan Pages Plus* phone book. Right there, printed in tiny black letters under the ragged, chewed-up nail of my left index finger at 2:00 a.m., an hour that should be used for sleeping or other bed-type activities (that being the kind of activities that get stupid girls into big trouble).

So, Timothy—do you mind if I call you Timothy? What could bring me to this? What kind of trouble is so big that it could draw me from the comfort of a featherbed and the easy damp warmth of a sleeping husband? What kind of trouble could disturb my dream of sweet little babies dancing circles around their sad older sisters? What kind of trouble could possess me to select you at random from the phone book and write to you?

Here's four words that are going to give you a real good idea.

Man. Woman. Pregnant. Man.

How's that for starters? Those first three probably didn't cause you any problems. Nope, nothing wrong with that string of words, natural as mother earth and father sky. Then you get to the second "man." It's that second "man" that causes all the problems.

You're probably doing what you should be doing right now, that is, sleeping peacefully under the crazy September moon,

this full moon. Must be nice. Sleeping, that is. Deep, even breaths. Soft pillows. A clear conscience. Sleeping.

Not me.

Me and sleep? Fat chance. Can't sleep with what's on my mind, what I intend to transfer to your mind. I need a little piece of some-one tonight. And guess what? You are the one.

Lucky you.

You have been chosen!

So, by now you're thinking "Why me?"

Because.

Because Dear Abby won't do. Neither will Dear Diary. The same goes for 12-step programs, three hundred dollar-per-hour shrinks and self-help books. I'm Okay, You're Okay? No, I'm not, and you probably aren't, either. Chicken Soup for the Soul from Venus or Mars? I'd be better off with a can of Campbell's and my daily horoscope. Tonight, I need you, a real live flesh-and-blood human male, one who can't hurt me. One who doesn't know me and probably wouldn't want to anyway.

Email? Not as long as it's got that nasty little reply button.

I need you, Mr. Timothy J. Ecklenburg. I need you because you are a breathing, warm-blooded and (hopefully) cognizant adult male. You might even say that you have been selected. Look at it in the right way and it even sounds kind of important.

Mr. Timothy J. Ecklenburg—the Selected.

Let's face it, at 33, I'm a little too old for crying to a teddy bear. And I've got to tell this to someone. But I can't tell it to anyone. Any-one but you, that is. That's right, I can tell you.

And I don't even have to change out of my XXL Capital Tool Co. T-shirt to do it. What a deal.

I have no idea what kind of guy you are. Right now, in my mind (and I'll grant you that's a scary, dark place to be), the entire male population is residing under one category. It is the category of Dickhead. And, if you are there, snorting and rooting amongst all the other dickheads, you won't care much about me or anything I have to confess. But that's all right. It doesn't really matter. And the reason it doesn't matter is that you're there for me.

Like it or not.

You're there at 18960 Hornback Lane, and that's where this letter's headed when I'm done with it, sweetly addressed to you in my best handwriting. In a day or two, when it arrives in your mailbox, you'll pull it from the collection of flyers and bills and envelopes that make up the day's mail. Maybe you'll open it first when you see the handwritten address. Maybe you'll be curious about which long-lost friend dropped you a line when you see there's no return address. Maybe you'll linger for a moment or two before unfolding the nondescript white, blue-lined paper and smile faintly with the anticipation of a personal letter.

Well, Timothy, baby, go ahead and keep smiling because you're bound to get one hell of a kick out of this.

Where to start, where to start. Okay, Timothy, fact is, despite my meticulous use of a diaphragm and countless tubes of spermicidal jelly, I've managed to get (gasp) pregnant. Now, I don't have anything against being pregnant. Pregnant is good. Pregnant is how we keep this here human

race moving along. And there's no reason why I shouldn't be doing my human duties of propagating. I'm a perfectly good candidate. I'm healthy (at least in the physical sense). I'm married to a man (yet another plus), who, truthfully, isn't a Dickhead but could be accurately described as a tire changing, tooth-flossing, relaxed-fit-Dockers-wearing kind of guy. He'd have a *Ladies Home Journal* approved stamp on his ass if there were such a thing. And sensitive? We're talking a will-buy-sanitary-napkins-without-complaining kind of sensitive. Kids? Loves 'em. Bring on the dirty diapers. Job? Accountant. You can call that solid. Housework? No problem. Dishes, windows, toilets—you name it, he'll do it. And everyone loves him. Everyone tells me how lucky I was to net a catch like him.

Unfortunately, this particular catch may be my husband, but he isn't my lover.

Okay, so that's not exactly true. He is my lover in what you could call a bread-and-butter sense. And if all I had been eating was bread and butter, I wouldn't be writing this letter. But that's not all I've been eating, and hence, there's that second man, the one who makes me want to scream hunger fire thirst, the one whose hands make smoke tendrils float from my skin, the one who tastes like hot apple cinnamon and extra icing, the one who takes a manageable little six-letter word like *desire* and turns it into a big, pulsating nine-letter ordeal called *obsession*.

The one who is long gone.

That man would be—oops, excuse me, I should be using the correct tense here and say "that would have been"—my

other lover, the one who dumped me upon finding out I was in a family way.

The filthy rotten dickhead cocksucking son of a—

Okay. Okay, okay. Enough of that. It's just that I'm, well, a little mad.

But have you got the picture now? Huh? Timothy?

He did it gracefully, mind you. He wrapped the bomb in silky, caring words. He made sure it was clear that he was "doing this for me." Oh, yes, he crushed my heart between his fingers "for my own good." This "pulling back" is what's best for me. And don't worry, he said, the baby is surely your husband's baby, he said. I can just feel it, he said. I know you'll be so happy when you start a family, he said. It's time for me to get out of the way and let you get on with your life, he said. It's for the best, he said.

Yep, that's all he said, the son of a bitch, the ass—

Oops, there I go again. Sorry.

Where was I?

Oh, yes, getting out of the way. Pulling back. So, let him pull back. To his wife, to his kids, to his prepackaged life in his prepackaged corner of suburbia. Go ahead and get out of my way so I can shatter into a million pieces. A million sparkling little shards only I can see, but can't seem to pick up. Not that I couldn't have shown him—let's call him Captain Crunch for now. I could have. I could have easily let good ol' Captain Crunch see the hurt and the tears and the destruction and the devastation and the utter ruin. I just wouldn't. Nope.

Hey—pride, you know?

Instead of screaming and kicking and vomiting on him like I should have, I offered wistful, understanding nods. His words carved away at me like a dull butter knife, and I just stood there letting it happen and acting as though he was right and I knew this was the best for everyone involved. Then, with my heart flushed decidedly down the toilet, I kissed him on the cheek and walked away.

So. Me and my pride. Aren't we tough? Am I not a well-behaved adult? What the hell, I figured, it's just another heartache. It'll go away.

But it won't go away. Like an open, festering wound, the thing keeps getting worse. And I'm getting sick of sitting in a puddle of tears unable to tell anyone why. People like to keep their Madonnas and Jezebels apart, far apart. I can't tell the Hub. I can't tell my friends or my mother or that man in the moon for that matter. But I can tell Mr. Timothy J. Ecklenburg of Hornback Lane and hope he smirks or grimaces or shrugs his shoulders or maybe even feels a twinge of pity for poor, pathetic me.

Okay, now let's talk about that for a minute. Let's talk about pathetic. Let's talk about stupid. Stupid. Stupid and me. Me and stupid.

I = stupid.

How could I get into this situation? Why couldn't I have just stuck with bread and butter? What's next? Maybe Jerry, Geraldo and me: Pregnant Love Triangles. I swear I can't believe this. I can't believe I'm pregnant. I can't believe I got dumped. I can't believe anything anymore. Well, I'd better start believing a few things.

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Dumped. I got dumped. How could this be happening? I thought he was different. Talk about a cliché—different. It's actually pretty funny. Sure, this guy's different. Right. He's not like other guys. Uh-huh, believe that. Other guys fuck you for a while then dump you when they get bored. Toss you in the corner like a forgotten broken toy. I remember how Barbie used to look right out of her pink cardboard-and-cellophane package. So new and pretty. Hair all glossy and makeup perfect. Then, after a few go-rounds with Ken in the Barbie Dreamhouse she'd be in shambles. The shiny blond hair reduced to a dingy yellow Brillo pad. An arm missing. The elastic in the waistband of her bikini torn. Time to get a new Barbie!

Pretty humorous, isn't it? I'm sure you're enormously entertained. I know I would be, that is, if I wasn't me. But I am me. And I'm going on my second month of pregnancy. The Hub couldn't be happier. I think he wants a son. Maybe I should introduce him to the Captain's kids. See how they get along, just in case. A preview, of sorts, if things don't turn out like he's planning.

Jesus, this is one hell of a mess.

So now there's someone else who knows, Mr. Timothy J. Ecklenburg of Hornback Lane. Now you can marvel over my stupidity and maybe I can get some sleep. As far as Captain Crunch is concerned, I hope his dick drops off.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

September 24

Dear Mr. Ecklenburg,

Permit me to explain. I think I may have been a little rash in my last letter. In fact, I feel downright foolish. I actually put my boots on, walked to the corner and mailed that letter as soon as I finished it. It was five in the morning. I passed the newspaper boy. He took one look at me in those cowboy boots and that huge Capital Tool Co. shirt and gave a wide berth, you'd better believe. I knew I never would have sent the thing if I'd given myself a chance to reread it, a chance to think about it. For once I was right. I never would have sent it.

But I did.

Must have been that full moon, that harvest moon last night. I guess it had me a little loco. Then again loco isn't a very far stretch for me these days, with Captain Crunch and the Hub and all. But you already know that story, at least part of it. It wasn't as though the Captain dragged me to his bed kicking and screaming. I went along willingly—very willingly in fact. And the Hub isn't what you'd call a Svengali, either. I wish I could explain myself.

What made me do it? Seven-year itch? (Okay, I'd have to call it a three-year itch for the Hub and me.) Maybe it was a case of under-appreciation for bread and butter, or an overactive thirty-something libido driven by the instinct to

multiply (ticktickticktick). Yeah, that's it. That last one sounds good. Almost like it makes sense.

But, of course, nothing makes sense anymore. That applies especially to Captain Crunch. I know I'm a pregnant lady to him. But I still feel like the regular old me. And the old me was a little in love with him, and this new, pregnant me still is. But this pregnant me got dumped. Dumped hurts. Dumped means he doesn't want to see me anymore. Dumped means that he's no longer captivated and interested and utterly intoxicated by me. And, if that isn't bad enough, this dump also confirms everything I've always feared about being pregnant.

That you're different, that your own identity gets drowned out by a little baby. It's not the baby's fault. It's the fault of all the stupid adults around you. They stop seeing you as soon as they find out you're not one, but two. "No wine for you," they say, or "Should you really be eating that?" or "That's too heavy for you to lift;" and then there's "I guess you won't be riding that motorcycle of yours for a while. Maybe you should sell it." Or my personal favorite: "Boy, is your life going to change."

No shit.

My life is going to change. Now there's a piece of genius for you. Webley's going to change everything. (I've been calling the baby Webley instead of "it" or "the baby." A little dignity, for chrissake.) No, it's not Webley's fault. He and I (if it's a he) or she and I (if it's a she) are going to get along fine, of that much I'm sure. I hope I don't have to end up lying to him about who he is. Growing up is hard enough.

I won't do it, that's all. When it comes time to cross that bridge, Captain Crunch and the Hub will have to deal with it. It's not as though I'll be able to hide Webley's paternity. The Hub and I are both brown-eyed brunettes and the Captain is a blue-eyed blond—a regular Aryan. So are his kids.

Okay, wait a second. I can't stand it anymore.

I've got to come clean. I've been doing a little bit of—well, I guess you could call it lying by omission. See, I did have a little problem with the diaphragm that one night with the Hub, making him the infinitely more likely candidate for fatherhood. Okay, it wasn't a little problem it was a big problem. Like, I forgot to use it. And, okay, it wasn't once that I forgot but three times. That night and the next morning and that one other time, so I guess I kind of blew the "who's the father" thing out of proportion. I just wanted to make the Captain out to be a real son of a bitch. And really, did I deserve to get dumped like that? Now that I've had a chance to calm down and blow off some steam, I'm left with the barren truth.

It's over. He's gone, and I'll miss him.

Not just the sex. The grinding, frantic, sweaty, groping animal sex. Oh, yes, I will miss that. I'll miss other things, too. I'll miss the talks. I'll miss the laughs. I'll miss the way he made me feel beautiful, almost like I really was. And his eyes and the way he touched me and everything else that made me fall in love with him. Jesus, this hurts. That bastard.

Sorry, Timothy, I won't get off on that tangent again. I promise, no more male bashing. I'm sure you got enough of that last time. I should also apologize for assuming you were

a dickhead. I had no right. I don't even know you. The dump has had me tied up in knots. To get dropped like that, so fast, and hit the ground so hard. I never realized it before, but I can't stand not having the last word. I mean, I can't stand it.

It was that pride of mine that stopped me this time. That's why I wrote the letter. It was subconsciously driving me crazy, all my emotion bottled up like that, keeping me awake at night. The more I thought about the Captain dumping me, the more it burned. It burned until I was nearly breathing fire. That's when I thought, well, okay, I'll find someone and I'll tell him what's on my mind, by God. I'll get the last word in whether Captain Crunch hears it or not. I guess I ended up getting it, all right. Screaming it, really, by lashing out at you.

Well, I'm sorry. You're probably a very nice guy. You didn't deserve that tirade.

But thanks for giving me the last word anyway, Timothy. I couldn't have resolved this by myself. If it's any consolation, you helped me. You honestly did. Oh, sure, there are still some tears left to cry and hurt left to feel, but now I know I can get over this. It's time for me to focus on my life, my (new) family, my husband. Why, by the time Webley makes an appearance this affair will be just another scar of the heart and these letters will be as long gone as last night's...

Harvest Moon

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September 29

Dear Eck,

I'm not done yet.

Even though it's been two weeks since The Dump, I still can't get the Captain, the Captain Crunch, the Crunch Sonofabitch out of my head. I thought about him while I was driving home, about how I used to love those afternoon phone calls from him. Sexy little coos and dirty talk, makes me want to barf (cry) now.

And when I got home at the usual time, the stupid phone was in its usual stupid place. But it wasn't ringing like it used to at that time of the day, that being the time of day when I'm home alone and the Hub isn't due home for an hour or so. I stared at it like I was willing it to ring. And then it did ring. I jumped straight out of the chair but caught myself before I picked it up and screamed "YES, I WILL!" into the receiver. Instead, I waited for the fifth ring before I answered. After all, hadn't I been dying for this call? And here it was. I would listen to the Crunch try to talk with a broken voice about how he can't live without me and then I'd smile smugly while he groveled and then reluctantly—very reluctantly—I'd tell him that I might, just might, consider meeting him.

"Hel-lo?" Oh, I was cool.

"Good afternoon, ma'am" came a perky voice over the line. "My name is Dick Willing, and I'm calling to ask you if you'd be interested in saving over fifty percent on your monthly heating bill."

"What?" I said, incredulous.

"That's right, ma'am, fifty percent," he said. "That's the difference Therm-O-Don windows can make!"

"Kid?" I interrupted.

"Ma'am?"

"You can shove your thermal underwear up your ass."

I hung up the phone and promptly started to sob. Then I felt terrible. It's not Dick Willing's fault that I'm pathetic and that the Crunch doesn't want to talk to me or hear from me, that he just wants me out of his life.

I hate men.

No, I don't. I love men. That's my problem. I'd probably fall in love with you if we ever met, which, of course, we won't. I could never face you after telling you all of this. And I'm sure the very thought of being face-to-face with me makes your stomach turn. Funny, the way things work out. I can open my soul to you—a total stranger—completely. But the Hub, the Crunch, they can forget it. I let the Crunch in and look what happened. As far as the Hub's concerned, I just can't. Can't tell him about this. God only knows what kind of tear that would put through both our souls. Plus, he's so happy these days. Why ruin it for him? I just can't do it, can't face it. Not right now. There's just no more room for hurt in me. I've reached my depression saturation level. But I can face you, Eck. Or, more accurately, not face you. The beauty of anonymity.

After I dried my tears, it became apparent that the Crunch wasn't going to call me, so I started an intense nail-biting session (call him, don't call him, call him, don't call him—call him). Then I thought, hey, I've been in a hundred different

sexual positions with this man, what's so scary about being on the phone with him?

My finger was hovering over the last digit of his number when the Hub came home from work. I heard the garage door shut and then that telltale lilt he's taken to these days: "Where's my new mom? Where's that Wifey of mine?" That broke my trance, as you might imagine. (I do hate men. No, I don't.) It's a good thing the Hub interrupted me and I didn't depress that last button—I might have gotten an answer. What would I have said to the son of a bitch anyhow? Hello, I hate you? Or worse yet: I love you? Does it matter?

The Hub walked into the kitchen. I was blowing my nose into a soggy Kleenex. He rushed over to me, all concerned. I told him I was reading *Dear Abby*, a letter from this little girl named Brittany from Detroit. She couldn't understand why her puppy Snowball had to go to sleep forever and ever. I said that something about it just got to me (you think I could have done better than that sappy idiotic excuse, but it truly was in the paper).

I got an understanding look.

"It'll be okay, hon," he said. "This isn't you, it's the hormones."

What? The hormones aren't part of me? Then again, it was a lie to begin with. He was right. It really wasn't me.

He put his hands on my shoulders and gave me a smile you'd normally reserve for a kindergartner. I didn't say anything, just sniffed and nodded. He set this enormous bag on the table and said, "Well, I've got something that's going to cheer both of you up." He patted my stomach (yuck).

I pulled this thing out of the bag. It was a toy. Not just any toy, but the Phase One Softie from the Teklo Gifted Infant Series, which is apparently "focused on using colors, shapes and textures to help introduce the wonders of the world to your exceptional baby."

"Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?" I said.

"I'm just trying to enjoy the anticipation," he said, "that's all." Then he looked at his Phase One Softie, and he looked kind of sad. "I just trying to do something nice, to be a part of things." His voice was small.

Okay, okay. Sorry, honey. I kissed him on the nose and started to open the packaging.

The thing is huge—I mean, for a baby toy. It has to be two feet around. And it's weird looking. Kind of like a stuffed, planet-shaped soft-cloth ... well, *thing*. Or maybe it's more like a deformed bagpipe. Hell, I couldn't tell you what it looks like.

You should see it, Eck. It's a riot. It's got soft rubber boingies sticking out all over. Different stuffed things fit onto the boingies. There's about a hundred zippers and buttons and snaps. This thing might introduce a kid to a Nickelodeon cartoon, but the wonders of the world?

I guess a rattle would have been too easy.

The Hub sat there in front of his Phase One Softie, looking pleased with himself, which probably doesn't seem all that unusual unless you consider that this is a guy whose one and only game/toy possession was the original Genus version of Trivial Pursuit up until today.

"Isn't this the coolest thing?" he said, grinning.

"Cool?" I said. "You never say 'cool.'"

"I've never been a father-to-be before."

"What's this thing supposed to be?" I said, turning it around.

"A busy toy." The Hub picked it up. "Like a learning toy."

"Isn't it kind of ... advanced?" I asked. "For a newborn?"

The scratchy sound of Velcro separating filled the room.

"Maybe for just any newborn," said the Hub as he detached a big soft purple ring, "but not for a gifted infant."

Oh.

Well, whoever designed this thing must sure know busy toys because the Hub's been busy for over an hour now. He's moved into the family room (you know, the room where the family is supposed to do whatever families do together) where he can spread everything out on the floor, but he still can't get it back together. He came close, had it all buttoned up, then he found a shiny rainslicker-yellow plastic thing that he'd kicked under the couch. Things have gone pretty much downhill since then. I hope to hell Webley has more luck with that thing than the Hub.

And he probably will. That's because, despite my griping, the Hub's already sent in Webley's application for The Charlemonde Developmental Center, what I've been calling Yale For Tots. Maybe that's what it takes to figure out a Phase One Softie, a preschool with a three-year waiting list and a \$4,500 tuition, which is exactly what each year of trade school cost (I'm an electrician).

I had to leave the room. Every time I looked at him, all frustrated over this ridiculous toy, I busted up, which really

frosted him. But I suppose any man who's been bested by a toy designed for gifted infants has the right to be pissed off.

And the more I laughed, the more pissed off he got. I couldn't help myself. If you could have seen him fighting with this silly thing, his face all red. He got so mad he was swearing—a big no-no ever since the two pink lines indicated that "you are pregnant and should consult your practitioner immediately." If he doesn't get it together soon I think he'll pop a gasket or something.

Maybe I shouldn't be laughing quite so hard. Me and my first diaper? Now that's going to be a real hoot. It'll probably make the Hub and his Softie look like competence incarnate. Poor Webley.

Diapers, baby. Holy shit.

I'm going to be a mom.

Oh, my God. A baby.

A baby!

This happens every time I start thinking about it. I freak. My body, my job—everything's going to change. It freaks me. And I am going to be a mother. Me—a mom. This is crazy.

And, oh, yeah, the Captain's gone.

He's gone. The curve of his upper lip, the sound of his breath against my neck, the feel of his palms sliding beneath my sweater and touching my skin. The way he'd kiss the inside of my wrist. It's all gone. Pass the salt, please, I need to rub a little more into my wound. And damn it all to hell if I'm not starting to cry again...

I've got to pull myself together. Cry, laugh, cry, all in a day's emotional workout. Two men. Two very different sets of feelings. One me. I will be certifiable by the time this is over.

Over? Like, what's going to be over? Just my life, that's all.

I'm sure I'll get caught up in the spirit in no time (no, I'm not). There's certainly plenty of people around to tell me all about how I'm going to change, that being everyone I know who's had a baby. They call. They tell me how happy they are for me. They ask me how I am. That takes about 30 seconds. Then they tell me everything I ever didn't want to know about their pregnancy, their childbirth, their infants and so on. That takes about 30 minutes. And I've only got eight more months to go. Wonderful.

Enough about me. Let's talk about you. How do you like the Eck nickname? I think it's kind of catchy. I like it much better than Mr. Ecklenburg or Timothy. It's more personal. A personal touch seems to help these days, at least in my life, where a torrid affair ends up with me agonizing over whether or not to pick up the stupid phone. Wouldn't be so hard if I knew some great guy with a name like Eck was on the other end of the line.

Eck. eckeckeck. ECK.

Eck.

It is catchy.

Eck the Starting Quarterback. Eck the Big Man On Campus. More likely Eck my most unwilling penpal. These letters have to be enough to make a guy move without a forwarding address and get an unlisted number. Can't be much fun being

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*by Erin O'Brien*

an emotional garbage dump. Well, Eck, if you do decide to stick around, think of me as your crazy ... ?

Harvest Moon

PS: The thermal underwear window guy's name wasn't really Dick Willing.

October 1

Ms. Moon:

I had hoped that your unwelcome correspondence had come to an end. Obviously, it has not. Prompted by yet another of your ghastly monologues, which arrived in the mail today, I have decided to follow your lead and express myself via letter written to an anonymous reader. Since I am not in possession of your real name or address I will author this communication and then discard it, or perhaps file it or drop it in the post addressed to the nebulous Harvest Moon with no return address and let the ever-competent United States Postal Service determine its fate (perhaps to place it amongst other cartoonishly addressed envelopes to persons such as Peter Cottontail, The Bunny Trail, or Santa Claus, The North Pole, whom you realized was an imaginary figure just eight days ago). But that is a decision I will defer for the time being.

In the space of approximately one week, you have shared with me a vast array of information and miscellany. It includes, but is not limited to: your fluorescent vocabulary, a metaphorical description of your own demise as compared to that of an amputee named Barbie and reference to me in general as an emotional garbage dump and one whose cranium and genitalia are melded together (I will not repeat your vulgar slang). I have been subjected to copious details of a romantic life more sordid than I could ever have imagined, the workings of a horrific torture device know as a Phase One Softie (heaven help us if there exists a Phase Two

Softie), the emotional turgidity of early pregnancy (I fear a similar discourse regarding the physical turgidity of advanced pregnancy is forthcoming), endless discussions of a cast of characters with names that, until now, I had thought were reserved for things such as children's cereal, the tedious melodrama of a not-so-harmonious marriage and, most notably for me, a hopelessly inaccurate depiction of myself, one that I cannot let stand without comment.

I am a quiet man. I am a man whose sole social companion is a parakeet named Dickens. I have managed alone quite happily in this four-room apartment for more than three decades. Dickens has accompanied me for ten of the last thirty-two years. My life is as I want it to be: orderly, conservative and predictable. This calm to which I have become so accustomed has been alarmingly disturbed by you, Ms. Moon. Indeed, I have thus far found no need for any of the above-referenced information during my apparently sheltered fifty-six years.

I admit that I am not blameless in this unlikely duet. Although I have come to recognize your atrocious penmanship and can easily identify your envelopes (a task I see you have simplified by including an adolescent sketch of a smirking moon in the space usually reserved for a return address), I open them and read them without fail, as I do each piece of mail I receive, no matter how generic or unwanted it appears. Oh, to have the freedom of your newspaper boy and avoid you by simply allowing you a "wide berth" or to simply ignore your letters.

But I am a man who believes in regimen, and this opening of the mail is a practice I have followed every day of my life, as long as that day has included mail delivery. I refuse to let one emotionally un-stable woman interrupt a routine that has become as regular as the ticking of a metronome.

I have, however, been forced to determine what to do with your letters. As with all things, I have a system for mail organization. Unsolicited handbills and advertisements are reviewed then discarded or placed in a folder entitled *Current*, which resides in a designated cubbyhole of my desk. All payment stubs and personal business items are sorted then filed in a Shaw-Walker file cabinet. Likewise, personal correspondence from my mother is paperclipped to the envelope and filed in a manila folder under M for *Mother*. Christmas cards are filed under C for *Christmas* after the sender has been noted and checked off the subsequent year's list, which currently includes six names. Other receipts of a personal nature are handled similarly.

Since your letters are of a most decidedly personal nature, I have felt compelled to file them even though they are unsolicited. To file them under M for *Moon* is distasteful, as they would be in the same hanging file as Mother's letters. Hence, I have been collecting them in a King Edward cigar box that previously housed only rubber bands whose service prior to residing in the cigar box, as determined by the FoodMore produce manager, was to keep bunches of carrots in their respective bunches.

I am also a frugal man.

Now permit me to explain this letter. I pride myself in being a person whose etiquette is impeccable. This requires me to respond to all personal and solicited correspondence. My quandary lies in the dichotomy of your letters, which are both personal and unsolicited. At first, I assumed you to be some poor, insane (or "loco," in your vernacular) individual who would hopefully vanish. To date, you have not, and your unanswered letters have begun to niggle.

At first, I tried unsuccessfully to convince myself they required no further attention; they had been dutifully read and placed in a place and that was, as they say, that. Despite this logic, an elusive obligation lingered in my cranial docket. Something remained undone, which is an extremely upsetting condition for me.

The cigar box housed a telltale heart, of sorts, constantly thrumming for my ears only. Now that I have received your third letter, I can no longer stand its beating. After all, these frightful episodes of yours are scripted solely for my eyes, and in their own infantile way they are somewhat endearing. So, as one is wise to do when faced with such a dilemma, I am confronting the situation with a tool that has served me throughout my life: conformity. I am answering your letters as if they were like any other. Of course, they are not like any other, since this response will never be read by the person to whom it is written; but this is a discrepancy I will have to accept.

First off, your banal image of me is remarkably off-course. There is no one whom I know who has referred to me as a "great guy," nor was I ever known by the misnomer "Big Man

on Campus" (my height is 5' 4"). However, you did manage to stumble upon one fact and one humble particular. Specifically, I am your most unwilling penpal, and I did answer to the nickname Eck at one time. Although our tentative relationship by no means justifies this type of familiarity, I will be tractable. Have I any choice?

I have not been addressed as Eck since my days back in university, where I was a member of the varsity chess team. My fellow team members took it upon themselves to shorten Ecklenburg to the chummier and more manageable three-letter abbreviation to which you have subscribed. Your use of that obsolete nickname brought back fond memories. There was a day when Froddy, Duff and I were a trio to be feared when poised at the edge of a chessboard.

Well, that was then. I have not spoken with Duff since he married more than thirty years ago, and Froddy's long since passed. The fleeting reminiscence you brought about was duly enjoyed. I am obliged to thank you for that much.

Since I know this letter will never be read, I conclude it frankly and with some self-indulgence.

Your Most Unwilling Penpal,  
Eck

October 5

Dear Eck,

"Oral sex is not recommended during the gestation period as air may be inadvertently be blown into the birth canal and cause horrendous catastrophe."

Bad news.

"Avoid sulfites, aspartame, refined sugar and bleached flours."

The Hub's been reading.

"Fat intake must be closely monitored."

Oh, yeah, and:

"Alcohol consumption will result in immediate death by impalement on a golden spear, which will come hurling from the heavens and pierce your body, forever condemning your soul."

Can you believe this shit?

Breakfast is to include a cereal high in fiber. I'm allowed an unlimited amount of sodium-free carbonated water with lemon or lime (my choice). Permanent waves and hair coloring are discouraged due to the toxicity of the chemicals involved. Of course, none of the rules are strictly enforced, just strongly recommended. And Hub doesn't want me to feel deprived, so we have things called substitutions. Instead of a cheeseburger with a side of fries and an ice-cold draft, I substitute a tomato and lettuce on whole-wheat sandwich and a glass of skim milk.

Who would call that deprived?

But I'm not complaining—wait until you hear about my treats! Once a week, we go out for fat-free frozen yogurt (no sprinkles). On top of that, I also get six "freebies" a week. Try low-fat tortilla chips with salsa (to satisfy a craving) or a bagel with creamless cream cheese.

A cup of coffee? Fat chance.

Our sex life has become as bland as my diet. According to Dr. James Hansdorf, author of *Nine Months: Pregnancy the Safe and Sound Way*, (a tome the Hub quotes frequently and one I avoid like the plague) pregnancy is a time of high anxiety and emotional turbulence for new mothers (brilliant, Hansdorf). Sexual closeness, nonetheless, remains a necessary component of the marital relationship throughout the gestation period. However, caution and common sense guidelines should prevail in the bedroom to make these nine months satisfying and safe for both mother and baby. Unusual positions are discouraged. Masturbation should also be avoided, as it produces an intense orgasm that may disturb the fetus. Don't even think of asking about accessories, anal penetration, or suspension bondage.

I wonder what Hansdorf would have thought of me and the Crunch doing it four times in as many hours when I was about a month along. Maybe I should write him and ask. "Dear Dr. Hansdorf, Is it okay if I put my ankle up here like this (see photo insert) for deeper penetration?" I wonder how that would go over. Should I even mention that the Crunch's absence has been most conspicuously not-ed in the bedroom by yours truly these days?

The things I miss about that man.

But I've stopped crying, at least on a daily basis. The sharp prickly pain has been reduced to a dull ache. Throb throb throb. Now there's a word for you: *throb*.

Throb. Throb. Throb.

THROB.

Oh, my, the things I miss about that man.

I may not have him, but I do have you. I may not have much *throb* in my life, but I do have this pen and paper. As long as I'm pining over Captain Crunch, you're going to have to be my cheap shrink. Head cleansing on a budget, that's what you are, Eck.

Hey, I'm sorry, but writing you helps. Think of the Crunch, write Eck and get it off your mind. I hope you don't care, although I wouldn't blame you if you did. Hell, I wouldn't blame you if you threw these letters out without even opening them. It's all the same to me as soon as I drop them in the mailbox. After I start them on their postal journey, I couldn't care less what happens to them.

So, do with them as you please. Start a Harvest Moon (s)crap book, use them to line the catbox—or maybe you should save them up for poker night. Show them to the guys for comic relief, a bi-weekly feature or something. Entertainment for your beer, pretzel and cheese dip intermission.

Speaking of entertainment, the Hub never got the Phase One Softie back together. Almost, yes. Completely, no. He's still got this one piece he can't find a spot for. Maybe I should add that I couldn't figure out where that shiny rainslicker-yellow triangle goes, either. It's like everything fits a certain

way, like a puzzle, but not like a puzzle, like there's these pockets and...

Oh, my God.

You see how it happens? You slip into it. One day you're a completely normal human being and the next you're talking about baby toys as if they're as important as a Supreme Court judicial nominee. It's some kind of subliminal Disney seduction. Like those sailors, on that boat. The one with the Greek guy. What was his name? And those chicks that sing. What was it called? Oh, forget it.

It didn't used to be this way. Before Hansdorf and Softies and the two pink lines, there was a time when we'd sit on the couch after dinner and talk, flirt around, play some music, even play some games once in a while. Fun games—like, Me On Top games.

But those days seem far away. I guess we were married about a year when the six o'clock news started coming on during dinner. Maybe it was closer to two years. I can't remember the last time the Hub brought home a bottle of merlot or cabernet for us to share on a Friday night. And now he's got his pregnancy education to worry about.

Him in the other room reading. Me in here writing. Both on the same topic. There's plenty of stupid to go around here, Eck.

Okay, he's just trying to be a good dad, but Jesus, no cheeseburgers? I feel like I'm in prison. Maybe I'll write a book, call it *Pregnancy, The Nine Month Sentence*. You'd think 33 years of bad living would be enough. It's not. I want junk food. I want sex. I want some sticky, syrupy sin. One of these

days I'll crack, stop at Peterson's Deli for one of those giant pastrami-on-rye sandwiches. They're about four inches thick. I'll bet Webley probably wouldn't even mind. He's probably starving for some real food anyhow.

There are positive results from the Hub's research. He doesn't think I should be exposed to the "chemicals found in many common household cleaning agents." Hence, he's doing all the toilet scrubbing and window-washing. He only wants the best for the baby and me. And, even though I joke around and complain, I do appreciate him. I'm in good hands. I am.

Really.

I thought about the nickname thing. I felt a little left out after the last letter. So from now on, I think I'll sign myself Harvey instead of Harvest Moon. It's short, cute, easy to remember. I hope you like it.

Yours

Harvey

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

October 19

Dear Eck,

I've finally figured it out. *The Odyssey*, read it in high school. That's what I was talking about last time. The Greek guy with the boat and the singing chicks? Maybe you never read it. There's one scene when Odysseus and his crew have to sail by these chicks called the Sirens, who sing and lure any sailors who hear them into a bunch of rocks, where I guess they crash their boats and die and whatnot. Don't ask me why these chicks do this—maybe they're just bored.

But Odysseus is a smart guy. He knows what's coming. So he gives all his guys wax earplugs, and they sail right by the Sirens without letting their ears (peckers, actually) be seduced into the trap. But Odysseus is curious; he wants to hear these chicks sing. So he ties himself to the mast of the boat and listens, screaming and hollering to be untied the whole time.

It dawned on me yesterday. The Hub and I were at a party when it hit me. The party was an open house/clambake at his boss's house—oops, excuse me, I mean the boss's estate. Kind of an employee appreciation thing. Family affair. Bring the kids. Food, games, beer, door prizes, the whole bit. The Hub doesn't mind these things so much. I can't stand them. The women—that is, the wives—they more or less put up with me. I imagine they regard me as someone from the other side of the tracks. That they tell their kids Mrs. Hub is "just a little different" when they ask questions about things like the Harley shirt I wore at last year's baseball game.

The Hub's office group isn't exactly what you'd call blue collar. No one would have to tell you that if you ever went to one of these company things. They're always the same. The men sit around in their designer sportswear. I don't know why they call it that—sportswear, I mean. They never play any actual sports, just watch someone else play actual sports while they smoke their cigars and drink their imported beer. The wives chat and nibble at irritating little canapés and take dainty little sips of their caffeine, sugar and taste-free sodas, the deferential little dopes.

I drink beer.

When it's a family thing, like yesterday, then all the wives congregate around the kids and tend skinned knees and hotdog hunger pangs. I usually sit with Scotto, (who is all right despite the fact he rides a Honda Goldwing). The Hub barely tolerates Scotto, as Scotto has long hair, no college education and is an office file clerk at the age of 37. He's not very upwardly mobile (Scotto likes his job). But the Hub knows better than to say anything about me and Scotto and our beer-drinking—not that it matters while I've got Webley along for the ride, seeing as I can't drink any beer anyway.

The last and only time he gave me a "talking to" about how many beers I drank with Scotto at a company party, I told him if he ever mentioned it again I'd tell the boss's wife about how the boss had about ten beers at that one party and offered to show me his private Jacuzzi adjacent to his private bathroom. The Hub hasn't mentioned a word about it since, but I know it still drives him nuts.

But I'm here in pregnancy prison anyway, and Scotto wasn't there yesterday, so I joined the wives.

That's when I remembered the name of the book. As soon as my pregnancy came up, they all lit up. Now they had something in common with me. Now they could talk to me. Maybe I'm not so bad after all. They started gathering around me, talking about their own pregnancies. They talked and talked. How much weight they gained, how long they were in labor, whether or not they had morning sickness, vaginal or caesarean, blah, blah, blah, blaaaaaaaah.

These women love to talk about this crap. Why? The way I've got it figured is they've been seduced. They've crashed into the rocks. The women they were have died and been replaced with mommyzombies. And what's worse is that they think Webley will make me one of them, that as soon as I hold him in my arms, some baby-goo narcotic will overcome me and I'll put down my tool belt and beer can and stop riding that silly motorcycle, that my eyes will glaze over and I'll start talking endlessly about bowel movements and diaper rash.

I'll get that vacuous look in my eyes.

They're so smug with those heavy-lidded know-it-all nods that say *She'll see. She's just a late bloomer.* They have no hunger, no edge. They're full—completely satisfied. Like parenthood gave them a reason to stop growing, or be even a little bit interesting. They don't belly laugh or joke around. All they are is mothers. I hate them. No, I don't hate them. I hate their simplicity.

They remind me of these lotus-eater guys who are in the same book as the singing chicks.

The men are no different. They stare at their wives with dull expressions. Their voices are listless, dazed. "You fall into a groove," they say. "You'll definitely want more than one. After a while, your kids will reeeeeeally run your life. Jeannie (or Suzy or Penny or Nan) has a fulltime job with the three of them. You'll be so happy. You just wait." Thanks for the advice, Jack. Yeah, that's what I'll do, I'll just wait.

How do I bear down and resist becoming some overprotective Stepford wife? How do I tie myself onto the Harvey I've come to know and love over the years? I know I've got my flaws, but I like me. And I want Webley to know the real me, not some mommyzombie. He's going to need an experienced guide to help him get going on this life-trail. I can't lose myself. I just can't let that happen.

I'm so scared, Eck.

Harvey

October 21

Dear Ms. Moon:

(I believe the name Harvey is reserved for the masculine persuasion and I will not be party to your haphazard gender bending. So it will remain.)

I have read both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* (in both Greek and English), and I found your synopsis of The Singing Sirens to be economical, which is a forgiving description, to say the least. Nonetheless, I laud your Homeric references, however trite they may be. I am heartened to see that a person who has embarked on the journey of procreation has read something other than the drivel the majority of the public consumes. Being an employee of the County Library System for thirty-one years enlightens one to the literary tastes of the masses or, more accurately, lack thereof. For my own peace of mind, I will assume this secondary school assignment does not constitute your complete reading history.

Your epiphany regarding the vapid antics of those who have bred inspired me to write. Twice during my tenure at the library, I have been summoned to the children's reading room to cover for vacationing coworkers. The first instance was for a duration of four days and the second lasted two weeks. In those fourteen workdays, I was subjected to unspeakable human indignities. My tie was repeatedly tugged. My shoelaces were untied. I even had to retrieve a wayward elf from the restroom. Each of those days was peppered by juvenile narration that included yips and squeaks and coos and hopeless attempts at the King's English. I was obliged to

read aloud for two thirty-minute sessions each day to an audience that was thankless despite my frequent pauses to display the ridiculous illustrations in each selection.

None of that, however, was as trying as having to interface with the parents of what I came to call the Lilliputian Terror Brigade.

The mothers and fathers of the Brigade members were as intoxicated by their offspring as any sot by his bottle of rye. As you suggested, they are desperate to include all of those around them in their inebriation. The need for each to inform me of their prodigy's progress in potty training and other such miscellany was quite unnerving. Nevertheless, I managed to return their inclusive nods and engage in the superficial banter of parenthood with my usual decorum. I was, as they say, a trooper. I have not been called upon to cover a post in the children's reading room for over three years. I can only hope my good fortune continues to hold.

Having now read countless pages of your prose, I feel I have an insight into your persona. Although your mental and emotional disorders are considerable, I have faith that your varied talents and singular personality will survive the trials of motherhood unscathed. It would by no means surprise me to find, in the prescribed number of months, the world's tiniest motorcycle in your possession, tuned and waiting for Sir Webley's introduction to hoodlumism. That is to say, that your brand of bubbling parenthood will have its own particular flavor. I suspect it will be described more accurately as natural herb-infused as opposed to the more common sugary-sweet variety.

I, on the other hand, will continue unaltered and without fear of emotional intrusions of any kind. The disarming clutches of infatuation (with precocious tots or anyone else) are long since behind me, which is just as well. Passion and physical love are merely wrinkles of the soul, ones that easily tear—your situation with Captain Crunch, for instance (how these names test me). Dare I say more? I think not.

I choose those more solitary activities that are appropriate for a man my age. Reading (classics for the most part) is one of my favorite pastimes. I am also partial to crossword puzzles. I have even been known to attend the cinema from time to time. I make it a point to dress in a particularly inoffensive manner. My regular outfits consist of white shirts and dark slacks embellished with an understated tie and sport coat (for my daily professional excursions) or a cardigan (for weekend and casual outings). I am diligent to conduct myself conservatively so as not to be mistaken for a dirty old man or one who is simply off his nut. Those who are well into their second half-century without their sexual energy in check are embarrassing for everyone who must endure their behavior.

My neighbor, Mrs. Stein, is an excellent example of someone who is suffering from a second wind. She and the self-proclaimed "sculptor" who lives in 6B often sit barefooted on the front stoop of the building swilling beer directly from the can while exchanging off-color jokes and—to use your phrase—belly-laughing. Considering both of them left their fourth decade some years ago, this type of jocularity is hardly tolerable, although it sounds as though you and Scotto would get on marvelously with them.

They have even gone so far as to ask me to join them "for a cold one" when I have had the misfortune of returning home during one of their impromptu alfresco cocktail hours.

A cold one, indeed.

Perhaps that description is a bit too harsh. Neither Mrs. Stein nor the sculptor in 6B has ever been rude or unpleasant. I suppose they might even think me a bit standoffish. I have declined invitations from both of them ever since that hellish Christmas Eve party I attended—what would be ten years ago now—an event I beg to forget.

I see now that I have deviated from my point. The futile nature of this communication is no excuse for slovenly writing manners.

My point.

A person should live within his own parameters. Sir Webley (despite being of dubious paternal origin) will not force you to become someone you are not just as I do not allow Mrs. Stein and the sculptor in 6B to seduce me into their odious conduct. A person is responsible for whom they are, regardless of external influences. You and you alone have the choice to let yourself become a Stepford wife (something I hope never to encounter), a "lotus-eater" (forgive me, Homer) or a "mommyzombie" (?). There is no reason to be scared.

Yours,

Eck

PS: I should note, however, that I would not be the least bit sorry to see Sir Webley dampen some of your alternative practices, such as using that brutish language of yours.

October 25

Dear Eck,

The end is nigh.

The bosses over at ChemCo would never imply that I was let go because I'm pregnant. Oh, no. My supervisor was careful to explain the cutbacks and the financial reasons behind my layoff. He handed me a tidy little severance check, too, handed it to me right along with lots of papers that needed signing, papers that made it clear I'd be liable to pay back the money if any lawsuits were brought against the company.

And ten years slid down the tubes.

A few years ago one of the operators had an accident on the job while she was pregnant. No big deal, just a twisted ankle. But she went and sued them anyway. Said that the worry over the baby's welfare because of the fall caused her undue "pain and suffering" for the remainder of the term. They settled out of court, but nonetheless, it put a real pall around things at the plant for a while. And when my supervisor found out I was carrying he made a big deal about going over all the safety rules and stuff, saying it was past due for the crew to have a "little refresher."

I'm sure they get more than a little uncomfortable with the amount of chemicals around there. Exposure spells birth defect. Birth defect spells someone else's fault—at least in most people's eyes. And someone else's fault spells lawsuit. Liabilities like pregnant women are better left outside the ChemCo gate.

Bye, guys.

Even as I left, I could tell they were worried I'd sue over sexual harassment. Say I was laid off because of the pregnancy. I'm sure that's one of the reasons for the fat severance check. Quiet money. But the way it is these days, they're probably afraid some lawyer will convince me there's more money in a lawsuit than a severance check. They won't have to worry about that. I'm not too keen on the idea of getting the "Sue Happy" brand on my name because if you start that game, you'd better be sure to win and win big. Work gets mighty hard to find after you've got that label.

No boyfriend, no sprinkles. No job.

The Hub did his best to comfort me. But I think the "Aw, hon" stuff was more of an act and that he's actually glad I'll be staying home. And then there's my in-laws—or outlaws, as I like to call them. They gave me the big doggy eyes and sighs full of sympathy, but then the tone changed. "It's for the best," my mother-outlaw said. "You don't need to be doing all that work on your feet anyhow, plus those awful chemicals and all those wires. Believe me, you're better off at home."

Better off at home. Right.

Doesn't anyone understand that I really liked "all those wires?" I've worked my whole life. What will I do if I'm not working? Keep making babies and let them run my whole life like the lotus-eaters say I will? It'll be nice to be home for a while, but then what? I'm sure as hell not going out job-hunting while I'm pregnant. Who's going to hire an electrician who'll need maternity leave in six months?

Is this really happening to me?

And then there's the money. Okay, that's a lie. The money has nothing to do with it, which might be the worst part of this whole thing. We'll have to watch the spending a little more closely, but we'll be okay on the Hub's salary. And that's a fact I hate. I wish we were strapped to the gills and the Hub was biting his nails down to nubs; that my salary was a big, huge, major component in keeping this juggernaut of a household moving.

But it just isn't.

Which is one more reason for people to think that my job was no more than "a little something to keep me busy," seeing as I didn't have any kids to look after and all. Guess everyone was right. Looks like goodbye, tool belt, hello, Sesame Street.

Everyone thought I was crazy to go to trade school instead of college. But it's what I wanted to do and it was the right decision. Any other career would have been wrong for me. I worked hard for my certification. I worked hard for the title of Senior Electrician. Hell, I wired the new warehouse addition last year by myself, and most of that work was ceiling work. I did all the troubleshooting on every single heating and air conditioning unit in the whole place. And, believe me, Eck, when you're a female tradesman, all the guys are waiting for you to fall flat on your face (I guess I did that a couple of times, too).

Okay, what I'm saying is, it's not easy to build respect when you're a woman in my profession; and I had it at ChemCo, earned every bit of it. I had friends, too. I liked my

job. I had planned to stay on at least another couple of months, through the first of the year, maybe more, then take my maternity leave. I guess that plan's shot. Just have to make the best of it.

Bob (my supervisor) was out of sorts when he gave me my notice. He did say that he'd highly recommend me, and that "you never know when they'll be beefing up the staff around here again;" but there was a doubtful tone in his voice. It sounded so ... so ... final. If I didn't know Bob better, I'd think his unsaid words were something along the lines of "being a mommy in this business moves you from the inside to the outside." Let me be wrong. I'd hate to see all my blood, sweat and tears go to waste.

Part of me has died.

It's just like I thought—all of my fears are being confirmed. Pregnancy does change everything. You lose your lover, you lose your job. What's next? The boogey-man? Maybe he really does live in the closet.

The crew is having a goodbye lunch for me tomorrow. I'm not looking forward to it, but I'll put on my happy face and act as though I'm having a good time. I'm leaving right after the party—Bob told me yesterday I wouldn't be required to work during the severance period. Translation: sure, we'll all have a slice of Honeybaked and a piece of cake, then get your shit together and get out.

Okay, you don't have to tell me twice.

Unemployedfully yours,

Harvey

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

Halloween

Dear Eck,

Fun-size Musketeer anyone?

I'm on my fourth. It's quarter after three. I can't sleep—that's nothing new. I lay in bed for about an hour listening to the Hub snore, click and squeak before deciding to get up, start this sugarfest and bother you. Did you ever notice that Fun-size Musketeers look like little uniform turds?

The kids were cute tonight, except for the lanky teenagers in sweats who claimed to be "joggers" as they piled in the loot. The Hub ate about as many pieces as he passed out. He calls these binges "sympathy cravings." I call that bullshit. He'd have a conniption if he came down here and saw me packing away the choco-turds. Why worry? The guy sleeps like the dead. Nonetheless, a fight is the last thing I need.

He was completely mushy over the little trick-or-treaters, especially the ones with their parents. It was a regular Twenty Questions. How old is he/she? Is this her first year out? Did you make the costume? Then he'd coo and gurgle over the kid and comment on how we're expecting Our First. I felt like I was at a goddamn Tupperware party. Jesus. Shut up and let the kid go get his candy.

I love Halloween. It's all about the nighttime, and I like that. Halloween makes the moon sexier, the velvet blacker. It

has its own distinct feeling, a unique, sparkling magic. And last year, some of that magic was floating around this place. This year's Hub is a far cry from the Hub who was here last Halloween. I haven't thought about that night in ages, nearly forgot all about it. Was it really only a year ago?

After we'd handed out the candy, or at least as much candy as we were going to hand out, the Hub turned off all the lights and led me upstairs. He lit some candles. He was giggling like a kid. I kept looking at him, smiling, thinking, What the hell has gotten into him? Then he handed me a small package. It was wrapped up in paper that had tiny orange pumpkins on it. I thought that was so funny, those little pumpkins.

I opened it up; there was this tape, a cassette tape. He'd made me a tape! It was like we were in high school or something. He had never done anything like that before. He said that he knew I loved Halloween, so this was his way of doing something for me, something unexpected. The tape had all kinds of sexy night tunes on it: "Moondance," "Moonglow," "Witchcraft." Crazy stuff. I loved it.

"I thought we could play it on the old boombox," he said.

There was a gentle wind. I remember the way it felt on my back as it came in through the window. I remember Frank Sinatra singing "Blue Moon." I remember taking a shower together (what the Hub called "intermission"). I remember kissing him with my eyes open. I remember how much love I felt for him. I remember, Eck. I sure as hell do.

I wonder if the Hub remembers. It's as though all he cares about these days is this parent-and-pregnancy stuff. I wish I

had thought about this earlier. If I had, maybe I could have dug that tape out of my car and put it on. Maybe it would have sparked him. Maybe it would have sparked me.

Maybe.

It's too late now. He was preoccupied with the kids most of the night, anyway. Holy shit, I can just see him when Webley's ready for his first trick-or-treat excursion. Here's a tip: buy stock in Kodak.

I kept looking at him tonight, thinking, Why don't I have the maternal instinct yet? Why is he the one with all the prenatal juices flowing? Don't think he doesn't bring this imbalance to my attention. He does. Regularly. The delivery is subtle, but the gist is there. One of my favorites is "Maybe we should practice toning down the, you know, language around here." Then there was "I love the idea of rainbows for the baby's room. What do you think?" He smiled a pretty tight smile when I answered I wasn't thinking about rainbows at all, but that I was very much thinking about how nice it would be to have a beer.

And it's getting to me. I'm starting to feel guilty. I don't have the slightest desire to go shopping for baby stuff. For that matter, I don't feel any different than I did three months ago. Shouldn't I be knitting booties or something by now?

Except I don't know how to knit.

I think not working has a lot to do with it. Since my last day at the plant, I've been kind of discombobulated. There's this constant, dull feeling of being misplaced. It comes from this voice in my head that keeps chanting, "You have no

purpose. You have no purpose." Maybe the voice is right. I'm desperate to feel productive.

I'm writing this, and it occurs to me how stupid I must sound to you. Here I am. I'm about to have my first baby. I'm healthy. I don't have to worry about a job or money. I'm married to a good man who can't wait to be a father. I've got everything going for me and all I can do is whine and complain. I hope you believe me when I say that you get most of it. I don't dump this crap on the general population. Everyone needs an outlet, and I guess you're mine. I need you.

Pregnancy's hard.

It's not just me. Even the Hub's got his moments. Take tonight, for instance. Towards the end of the night, when the Halloweeners were starting to dwindle, a little mouse and his mom came to the door. The Hub started the interview with the mom. Then the kid looked up, revealing the telltale features of Down syndrome.

The Hub didn't pass out any more candy after that.

I guess you just never know, Eck.

Yours,

Harvey

November 3

Dear Ms. Moon:

Unlike you and yours, I am never in the position of not knowing. My All Hallow's Eve celebration consists of reading Edgar Allen Poe. "The Raven," "The Tell-Tale Heart" or another of Poe's masterpieces has graced each October 31st evening since I moved into this apartment. Although I dearly love them all, they do tend to be somewhat monotonous after so many reads.

Yes, the comfort of this predictable lifestyle has its minuscule drawbacks, but the benefits are well worth the cost. I have the advantage of always knowing precisely what each day holds. The same is true for each week, each month and each year. Such is the life I have chosen.

Fun-sized Musketeer, indeed.

My professional routine is no exception. Each morning, I rise at 6:30 a.m. and go to the kitchen and put on to boil enough water for two six-ounce cups of tea. I retrieve the newspaper and immediately discard the sports and classified sections. I sit in the kitchen reading the day's headlines to Dickens and sipping Earl Grey while eating two pieces of toast enhanced with a modest amount of strawberry jam. I then check Dickens's water reservoir and food dish before dressing.

My personal hygiene is complete after I have knotted my tie into a double Windsor, fastened both of my watches (lest one should fail sometime during the day—a catastrophe I encountered once) and checked my shoes for scuffs. At 7:15,

I extract my lunch from the refrigerator and leave my apartment. If, by some miracle, the Metropolitan Transit System is on time, I board the 22N bus for downtown at 7:26.

If the transit system is characteristically late, I am forced to avoid the intellectually bankrupt college student who is inevitably at the bus stop and never fails to initiate conversations regarding local athletic groups; or worse yet, I am subjected to Mrs. Stein's chatter about how delighted she is to be waiting for what she calls "the early bus"—an event indicated no doubt by my reliable presence at the bus stop at the prescribed time each morning. I feel certain such devices time Mrs. Stein's entire day, as her movements seem to me random, at best, and I have never seen her wear a watch.

I arrive at work, weather and Metropolitan Transit System willing, at 7:51. For the next nine minutes, I check the order of my desk. This includes sharpening pencils, removing the previous day's calendar sheet and logging onto the library's MetroNet Catalog and Database. Per the sign hanging over my desk, I am officially available for "Information" when the clock strikes eight.

When I am not doling out directions to the vending machines or public facilities, I am carefully researching topics for unappreciative library users. Only rarely do I hear a mumbled "thank you" when handing a printout of reference materials on venereal diseases or some other unsavory information, such as the next available date for Lorelle Dove's latest adult romance novel, to a perspiration-slick palm. There are those infrequent occasions when I am obliged to assist

someone who has questions that possess a modicum of literary or intellectual merit. It is on those occasions that I truly enjoy my job.

At 11:45, I take my lunch break and leave the entire literary department in the hands of Ms. Beckett (the employee with whom I work) in hopes that she is as dedicated to assisting the ungrateful public as I am while she enjoys her midday repast. I have my reservations about Ms. Beckett. Visitors have confided in me more than once that they were glad to have my attention instead of that of "that other lady," a phrase they have used to describe Ms. Beckett while pointing towards her conspicuously empty desk with a clandestine thumb.

Every day I eat my lunch (a tuna sandwich, a small bag of carrot sticks or, occasionally, celery sticks, a ChocFill Nut Bar, which, compliments of you, I will never again be able to regard without the distasteful phrase "chocoturd" running through my mind, and a grape soda) in the employee lounge. Assuming no interruptions, my lunch is consumed in approximately thirteen minutes. I spend the next 32 minutes reading the rest of the day's paper. I regularly return to my desk fifteen minutes early (a courtesy never afforded me by Ms. Beckett).

The afternoon hours are spent similarly to the morning hours until 4:15, when re-shelving must be done. Ms. Beckett and I alternate this duty, as at least one of us is obliged to remain available for the public in their quests for "Information."

I leave the library at five minutes after five and catch the five-ten 22N bus for home.

I cannot help but note that twice Ms. Beckett has asked me to cover both re-shelving and information assistance while she left early for some unspecified appointment. One of those occasions landed on my re-shelving day and one on hers, and twice I cheerfully accepted the burden without derogatory comments, and twice I was obliged to stay late because of the doubled responsibilities. Although she did make a hesitant offer to return the favor, I have never intruded on her with any such request in our thirteen years of working together in the literary department. Need I add that twice I have had to take the 5:35 22N bus in lieu of the 5:10, for which I was late; and on both of those instances, Mrs. Stein rode with me—in fact, sat right next to me, chattering the entire time and precluding any progress on the day's crossword puzzle?

I greet Dickens when I come home, to which he responds with a crisp chirp. I set the mail on the kitchen table while I mix a vodka martini. The mail is sorted and ready for filing by the time I have finished the martini, unless, of course, I have received an exceptionally long personal letter from Mother or, more recently, you. I rinse my cocktail glass and lately have taken to treating myself to another pimento-stuffed olive before beginning my daily chore, which fills the time until approximately seven o'clock. Chores include drudgeries such as grocery shopping, laundry or cleaning. On Fridays, I handle incidental items such as tax preparation or plant repotting. If there is nothing on the schedule for a Friday evening, I occasionally go to the cinema.

I prepare my lunch for the next day while my dinner heats. Dinner is a barely palatable pre-packaged frozen affair—one of two selections. Those are: Salisbury steak with macaroni and cheese, creamed corn and apple crisp or breaded fish filets with mixed vegetables, au gratin potato and blueberry cobbler. I do not eat the mixed vegetables or apple crisp portions of the respective meals, as both are quite vile. When I am in a restless mood, I will sometimes purchase a better-quality chicken potpie, usually for consumption on a Saturday night.

Although I quite detest frozen foods, I find them convenient and certainly consistent. Food preparation for one is a skill I have chosen not to develop. Indeed, consuming an entire bunch of carrots before they expire is the most complex fresh food challenge with which I care to contend. My most faithful dinner companion is the Weather Channel.

After dinner, I read, work the crossword (if I have not finished it on the bus), watch television or perhaps pen a letter (such as this one) until 11:30, when I ready myself for bed, bid Dickens goodnight and retire.

My weekend schedule is more lax. I rise without aid of an alarm clock but still very close to the usual weekday time of 6:30. On Saturdays, I have breakfast at John's Diner and spend most of the day on chores or projects that are too ambitious to undertake on a weekday evening, such as furniture polishing or shopping for clothing. At five o'clock, I walk to The Starlight Inn, which is located next to John's Diner, and have two martinis. It is here I take in some local color, although I have never spoken to any of the other

customers and I doubt they have ever noticed me. Well, no matter. I cannot imagine anything that I would have in common with any of them if a conversation were to arise.

Sundays are very quiet, with most of the day spent reading the paper. Except for the words I speak to Dickens and to the waitress Gail at Tony's HomeStyle Restaurant (specifically, "spaghetti with Tony's Sauce, please, and a glass of house red with a side order of garlic bread"), which is located across the street from The Starlight Inn, the silence of a Sunday is rarely broken.

Truth be told, I don't like Sundays very much.

I have come to depend on these routines. Unlike your "outlaws," it is not without compassion and feeling that I offer my sincerest sympathy for the loss of your job. I can only guess what would become of me if I were to find myself unemployed. The mere thought of finding another position is absolutely terrifying. At least for some time, if not forever, nearly fifty waking hours a week would require assignment. To fill a time frame of that magnitude is a challenge I hope never to undertake. Although Dickens is a faithful friend and companion—to the extent that the one morning I neglected to latch the door to his cage he remained inside regardless, awaiting my return just as any other day—his conversational ability is somewhat lacking. Without the library and all of its denizens, I would be alone. Quite alone.

I send you my best wishes, Ms. Moon.

Sincerely,

Eck

November 7

Dear Eck,

This is an emergency correspondence. I had a major Crunch attack. I thought he was behind me for good. I was beside myself, crying and sobbing. I was practically howling. What, with no job to keep the little lady of the house busy, it was probably brought on by all this free time. So I sat down and wrote the bastard a letter. I thought maybe it would help. After I finished, I reread it and reread it. I can't send it. I can't save it and I can't throw it away. But now, here it is and I've got to do something with it. I want someone to read it. I want someone to know how I feel. Maybe then I won't feel all alone with the pain. I need someone to see me, or, more accurately, I need to show myself.

As usual, you're elected, Eck. The letter's enclosed.

Yours,

Harvey

Dear You,

You can't know how I miss you. I thought I was completely over you, but I'm not. Just when I think I've dried the last tear, a whole new batch crops up. Anything can set it off—a song, driving by that restaurant where we'd go for hamburgers and beer in the afternoon, a certain stretch of road. And now that ChemCo laid me off (yeah, ChemCo canned me), I've got plenty of time to drive around and pout and think about how gone you are—how gone *we* are.

Six months is longer than I thought. It was long enough to fall for you, fall hard. Now that it's over—and it took a while

for that to sink in—I'm feeling so many things. Hurt is foremost among them. I've had my heart stomped on plenty of times, but I haven't had it broken like this since Lester Mock dumped me in high school by just not picking me up for the senior prom. And even though that was a kid-sized heartache, it was a heartache just the same; and I'd forgotten how it pulls at you. I'd forgotten how tangible and overwhelming it is.

It's as though you died. One day you were here; the next, gone. But that's not a very good comparison. If you had died, you would have left the whole world behind, and unwillingly, at that. When you walked away that day—walked away on your own accord—you just left *me* behind.

That brings me to the other batch of feelings, which fall under the anger category.

Every time I think of you giving me that sincere, teary goodbye then getting up and walking away as though you'd finally rid yourself of a problem and you could get on with your life, I see red. I feel like something to be gotten through, something to get past, a fixed obstacle, a thing.

But I'm not. I'm a whole woman. Hell, a woman and a half now that I'm pregnant. And I do agree with you that it isn't at all likely this is your baby. I did not, however, agree with your dismissal of the whole topic right along with our affair.

The worst part is the things that didn't go away with you. I'm still hungry, hungry, hungry for you, pregnant or not. I know I would forget everything I've gone through in the last eight weeks and kiss you till my lips bled if you were here with me right now. I think of making love with you, of your

taste, your smell, of the exquisite anguish of your climax; and I want all of it again. And again and again. I'm still the woman you remember.

Then there's another part of me that wants desperately to cling to my husband. I want to be there for him and enjoy the sweetness of what's ahead of us. It's not easy. I've changed. That's due in part to the affair. The blind, innocent love I had for him is marred by the things that passed between you and me. I can't get over our passion, its sheer seductive force. Sex is powerful.

I wonder if you're hurting, too, if you've wanted to call me or write, make a connection. I know you and your wife don't have what we had in bed. Do you miss my sex? I guess I should say our sex. It was ours. If you go looking for another woman, you won't be able to reproduce it. Gifts such as that come only once in a great, great while. I know it cost me dearly. Did it cost you, too? Was it worth it?

I want to believe the things you told me when you ended it. I want to believe it was hard for you to walk away, that my doubts over your reasons why are unfounded. I want to believe you were doing the only honorable thing to do and exiting stage left, leaving me and mine to get on with the business of starting a family, that you had no place in this scene. I know you'll confirm all these things if I ever see you, talk to you again, but I still won't be—will never be—convinced.

I can't help thinking that you couldn't handle the woman turning into a mother. Maybe you just didn't want to. Whichever it is, there's one thing you should know. This

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

pregnancy hasn't erased that part of me you adored so much—that sexy-woman part. But when you walked away, your footsteps crushed it right into the ground. And I'm left here to pick up the tiny fragments all by myself, trying all the while not to cut my fingers on the sharp edges. Damn you anyway.

I love you. I hate you. I miss you.

Me

November 9

Dear Ms. Moon:

I am not without compassion.

Although your letters are unsolicited, they are also evocative. I admit that I have even come to look forward to these installments, perhaps much like a housewife enjoys those wretched daytime dramas, a comparison I am loath to draw.

It is disconcerting for me to bear witness to such intimate thoughts, especially ones of a romantic nature. For the past nearly twenty years, my life has been uncomplicated by the fairer sex, yourself and Mother excluded, of course (that is not to say that you are not an upsetting factor in my life). The bed upon which I sleep is designed for one, but many years ago, when I was a much different and younger man, it did snugly accommodate two. And, although the Starlight Inn has become a somewhat mundane fixture in my life, the time I spent there in my increasingly distant past could never be so described. It was the Starlight Inn that brought me my precious Pearl.

Pearl.

So lovely and appropriate a name—a word, a gentle chime in a language full of acute corners and obtuse implications.

Pearl.

How long has it been since I have written her name? How many nights have I spent alone since she severed my heart from my soul? Surely, the magical nights, the enchanted nights, the passionate nights we shared are small in number

when compared to the endless nights without her, those blank expanses of time that stretch between dusk and dawn when I have only my own bitter tears. Each one cried for my beautiful, my dear, my sweet, sweet Pearl. Even now there are times when she remains the captain of my heart, times such as this one.

Duff and I remained friends for years after leaving university. He lived in an apartment much like mine, only one block away. In those days, we were what one would call pals. We shared conversation and chess often. The Starlight Inn was one of our favorite spots. We would talk of books and our jobs and our dreams over martinis. But mostly we would talk of Pearl.

She worked behind the bar at the Inn. She was an attractive woman, just a few years our junior, who aspired to become a veterinarian, although we doubted she would ever actually leave the Inn. Her talk of "getting out from behind the bar" was frequent, but it evaporated as quickly as the vodka she poured so adeptly. She struck us as unremarkable at first, but garnered our attention as the days (and vodka) went by. She was a woman without preconceptions, without guile. When she smiled or laughed, her genuine joy came through. I did not come to fully understand Pearl's rarity until the day, one so long ago, when she entered my apartment and my life.

Pearl's fixation with the animal kingdom was formidable. So much so that, one day over our cocktails, as I was complaining to Duff that my parakeet Bert (Dickens's predecessor) was exhibiting an unhealthy lethargy, her

attention was immediately drawn to us, and she insisted on joining our conversation. Although I felt leery about seeing her outside of the Inn, let alone seeing her in the confines of my own domain, I could not find it in myself to decline her offer to "look over the sweet little thing."

When she came over at the agreed-upon time and opened Bert's cage, I was astonished at what happened. Bert flew directly to her and perched on her shoulder. His listlessness dwindled as she soothed and petted him. I was flabbergasted. Bert was a new bird within hours of her arrival, and I was a new man.

She moved about with Bert on her shoulder, noticing things, noticing me. She opened blinds and peered out of windows. She sipped wine and delighted in the Camembert cheese and apples I put out for the occasion. She even offered Bert a bit of cheese from the tip of her finger. She enchanted me. It was easy to be with her, to talk to her, to laugh with her.

So began our romance, and as it progressed so did my adoration for Pearl. I marveled at her love of life, her thirst and hunger for those things she considered the sweetest gifts. She brought texture and richness to the drab muslin of my life. To me a day was just a day; to Pearl it was a package to be anticipated and opened like those under a Christmas tree to a child, each one new and more wonderful than the last.

Nonetheless, her vivacious enthusiasm was contagious, to the extent that even I began to allow myself blissful abandon. I would revel in the elation each of her tender kisses would

bring me. Life with Pearl was as intoxicating as a dizzying carousel ride and just as ephemeral. When she would leave me in the morning, I would pine for her every moment we were apart. I loved her completely. I loved her innocently.

My days with Pearl were the most wonderful of my life. I never felt worthy of such happiness, but I savored her attentions and cherished her in my own awkward way. She continually refused my offers of marriage, saying she was not ready for such a commitment; I kept on just the same, thinking that one day she would come around. But she held steadfast, claiming she simply was not cut out for marriage, despite her feelings for me.

The blow came two years and sixteen days after that day when Bert and I first fell under Pearl's spell. She and I met Duff for dinner at Tony's—a date I thought was to be just one of our frequent casual get-togethers. When Pearl took Duff's hand and said, "We have something to tell you," it was apparent that the couple within our cozy little trio did not include me.

They said they were deeply in love and were to be married the next day. They went on to explain that their affection happened quite against their will. They both assured me that to go on any longer as we had been would be a hurtful lie for everyone involved—their passion for one another could no longer be denied. I remember when Pearl added with sympathy that she and Duff never meant to hurt me. I remember her face at that moment, the moment she spoke those words, "Oh, Eck, dear Eck, we never meant to hurt

you." She paused then and looked at me. "Honestly." She looked quite beautiful; perhaps she was at her most beautiful.

Thus I learned that it was not that Pearl was opposed to marriage, but that she was opposed to marriage with me. Thus I learned that my best and only friend was not only complicit but also instrumental in this, my undoing. Et tu, Brute?

I somehow managed to keep my shock in check long enough to finish my spaghetti and give them my words of understanding and good wishes. I was a gentleman. Their relief was visible.

"You're a good sport, Eck," said Duff. Pearl's eyes were limpid pools for him, apologetically downcast for me.

"Come be a witness for us, tomorrow," she said. "You are a part of us."

Amid their protestations, I declined to attend their otherwise private ceremony. Duff and Pearl moved to Albuquerque just one week after their nuptial announcement.

It was weeks before I overcame the initial jolt of that impalement. Food tasted like sand in my mouth. My conservative evening cocktail stretched into four or more unsophisticated vodkas drunk in the darkness of my apartment. Eventually, I became disgusted with my skeletal appearance and demeanor. One day, I inhaled, and eventually got back to being myself again.

I have not spoken with either of them since. Nor did I read the letters I received from them in the months that followed their departure. I would sweep my fingertip across the perfectly scripted *Eck* upon each envelope, then mark it with

the words *Addressee unknown* and dropped it back in the post.

Bert died shortly thereafter.

So you see, I truly understand the ambivalence of a broken heart. I, too, have felt the pain of knowing that the only one who can comfort you is the same one who dealt the devastating blow that flattened you. Until now, I have tried to keep that pain at bay by never speaking of Pearl, of our romance or its abrupt end—a detail of little consequence, as I cannot imagine anyone would be interested in this sad and pathetic story. But this writing of it, meaningless as it may be, has been both cathartic and difficult for me. Pearl and Duff may have been absent from my corporeal life, but they have remained painfully present in the desolate landscape of my mind.

The circumstances behind your situation may be different than those surrounding mine (and I daresay more dubious); and I am sure the newness of your wound plagues you with a cruel and constant sting. Mine has become just another scar of the heart, to use one of your phrases. But scars are forever, and mine drums against my soul with a hollow throb whenever I pay it too much attention.

The burn produced when hot tears mix with unanswered passion is one of life's bittersweet trials. It is one you and I have in common. So, tonight, I will take some of your suffering and shed a tear for you and your Captain Crunch and another for a much younger man named Eck and his elusive Pearl.

You are not alone, Harvey,

Eck

November 15

Dear Eck,

One nice thing about not having a job is all the time you have on your hands. After you vacuum the car and alphabetize the medicine cabinet, you can watch television. I watched television for about a half-hour. And, believe me, a half-hour of "Pregnant Transvestite Teens" is more than enough. In the space of about 10 minutes, my eyes glazed over. Brain atrophy began to set in. And when I noticed a deep-seated craving for a deep-fried Twinkie, I knew I was in real trouble.

I clicked off the idiot box and resorted to my least favorite pastime: housecleaning (and, no, this is not nesting). I've been cleaning out closets, drawers. When was the last time you took a good look at the corners of your utensil drawer? Not a pretty sight. Then I got to the bedroom. Specifically, the Hub's top dresser drawer, the one where he keeps all kinds of junk. Tietacks, petrified Wint-o-Green Lifesavers, broken watches. Old letters. Like the ones his now very pregnant Wifey sent him back in the days before she married him.

Major sap.

Kissy-face. Miss-you goo. Sex stuff I think I got straight out of *Penthouse Forum*. You name it—if it was under the bad romance category, it was in the letters. There was lots of kidding about how I'm going to get dolled up and go grocery shopping for a new man. We actually met in the grocery store, saw each other there a few times before he finally

asked me out. We both shopped on Wednesday night. All right, I admit it, after the first time he smiled at me I kept going on Wednesdays, hoping he'd be there. And he always was, looking for me. He would come up behind me and make comments about what I was buying. One time, I had stupid, single-girl shit in my cart. Stuff like a bag of Tootsie Rolls, tampons. Some milk. I was reading a macaroni and cheese box when I heard this voice come over my shoulder.

"Hmmm," he said, "having a party?" I turned around. The future Hub was peering into my cart.

I laughed, looked in his cart. It was full of Hub stuff—a bag of stroganoff noodles, some kind of meat wrapped up in crisp white paper, tomatoes, onions, big heads of garlic.

"I suppose you think you're very funny," I said. "And what's the sour cream for?"

"Chicken paprikash," he said. "I'm hosting poker night this weekend."

"Very impressive," I said. "Most guys would order a pizza."

"Most guys aren't very subtle," he said, smiling at me. "But I can spot a diamond in the rough a mile away."

"I see," I said blushing. "And is there a diamond hidden somewhere in those three boxes of Kleenex?"

"The coupon says I've got to buy three if I want to save thirty-five cents," he said, his bedroom eyes holding mine. "And I surely wouldn't want to miss out on a bargain like that."

"Surely not," I said through a ridiculously wide smile.

"Well, then," he said, "is there a diamond hidden somewhere in that leather jacket?"

"I thought you were the expert."

And so it went. It was always that way with us—the flirting, I mean—intelligent and adult. I don't know why I remember that day so clearly, the way I was kidding him and grinning and trying to keep the conversation going. I desperately wanted to go out with him, but I wanted him to be the one doing the asking for some reason, make sure he wanted me. I had visions of candles and wine glasses and low music. And chicken paprikash.

Eventually, he did ask me out and I got that date, and the way I'd pictured it wasn't too far off.

That's the way the Hub was then. Understated. Low-key. Not exactly straitlaced, but quiet and funny in a sophisticated sort of way. And there I was, the bad girl. Levis and leather and boots. Back then, it all felt like opposites attract; now I'm not so sure. Maybe opposites are just opposites. Is he the same guy I met in the supermarket? Am I the same girl?

When the Captain saw me as the woman in the steel-toed boots, the woman on the motorcycle, and thought she was sexy and exciting, it felt good—too good. The Hub saw that woman, too. And he was thrilled by her. At first. Then he married her.

And now the logical, low-risk, conservative accountant side of him is starting to take over. Enough is enough. Time to get serious about life. Start thinking about a family, get out of those boots and off of that motorcycle. Maybe it was always there, just underneath the surface. Just where I wasn't looking. Unspoken words, disappointed looks. Carefully timed sighs.

Is all of this just my imagination? The hormones talking?  
Are aprons and motherhood and PTA meetings for me?  
What about the part of me that wants to get on my bike and ride it to Utah just because I've never been there. And there's Webley to think about (speaking of which, I'd better look into a sidecar for the bike). I don't want to lose the woman I am—the woman the Captain adored, the woman the Hub used to adore (doesn't he still?)—because of Webley. I don't think Webley would want that, either. I want to be a woman and a mother, not some impossible Virgin Mary. I am still a warm, sexual animal even with a baby inside of me. I want to continue to be one with a baby in my arms. Can't he see that? I need all of me, and so does Webley.

I'm confused. And alone. And scared. I feel small and totally unworthy. Take last night. I woke up at about three a.m. (as usual). I couldn't fall back to sleep. Moonlight was shining through the window, dancing through the leaves onto our bed. It splashed over the Hub's face. He looked younger, and so sweet, asleep there. I wanted to be close. I moved next to him and felt Webley between us. It was an intimate feeling, the three of us there, together and warm and alive, almost like it's supposed to be. I wanted it to last forever, but I fell asleep.

I dreamt I was riding the bike down a desert highway. The sky was blue and endless. I had that feeling you get when you dream you're flying. I could almost taste the desert air. It was wonderful. Then I looked in the rearview. There was this huge Phase One Softie behind me. I mean really huge—not huge like the toy, but huge like ten feet tall. And it had points

and boingies, all right, but they were sharp and steely. And dangling off a piece of dangerous-looking wire was that rainslicker-yellow piece that's bested both me and the Hub. But this one wasn't soft stuffed plastic; it was flat and sharp as a razor.

This thing was mean.

It was coming at me like all get out. Not rolling, but gliding on some hidden mystery wheels. Thing was zoomin'. And it kept gaining on me, no matter how fast I went. I had the bike opened all the way up. My knuckles were white with the effort to get more out of the throttle. It was about to run me over. I woke with a start.

When I opened my eyes, the Hub was staring at me wide-eyed. He had his hand on my forehead. "Honey, are you okay? Are you all right?" he kept asking. Then I realized I was all wet, soaked through. Sweat. I could understand why he was so worried.

To be honest with you, Eck, I was worried, too, but for a completely different reason.

Yours,  
Harvey

PS: Please do me a favor and throw away that horrible letter I wrote to the Crunch. You probably barfed when you read it. I know even the thought of it makes me sick.

November 23

Dear Harvey,

According to my calendar, the last time I inspected and cleaned the corners of my utensil drawer was October twenty-third. The next time will be on December twenty-third.

Moving on. Regarding the opening salutation of this letter, I suppose when people share thoughts as you and I do, it is excusable to succumb to an unfitting nickname.

Harvey, indeed.

But what matter? The Harvey to whom I write is as imaginary as Jimmy Stewart's six-foot rabbit, as imaginary as an enormous and mobile Phase One Softie (a device I suspected to be malevolent from the beginning). Or is my Harvey imaginary? I know she exists, even though I cannot see her or touch her. The Harvey I have come to know has begun to push open a door for me, one I grudgingly admit I left cracked open so imperceptibly it could hardly be noticed.

But it was enough. The sliver of light cast upon the bare floor of my soul has gone undisturbed for too many years. Now you are here, as are these words. There is a liberation of sorts for me in them. With these letters, I may show myself. Widen the gap, so to speak. As you said of me in your first letter, I cannot be hurt by my Harvey.

Perhaps writing letters to someone who will never read them is an improvident use of time. But, just as you and Sir Webley have your moments alone, I, too, have mine; and they are plentiful. I have time in my life for you and so, it seems, do you for me. This symbiotic relationship is beneficial

for both of us in that you now may opt to expend some of your newfound freedom on writing and thinking instead of subjecting yourself to "Pregnant Transvestite Teens" (a wise choice), and this writing of mine is always good practice, improvident or not.

But, unlike you, I am unable to truly share myself. These letters to you sit unread, each signed and sealed in an individual envelope whose only identifying mark is the enclosed letter's date of creation (marked in pencil in the lower left-hand corner) and placed within the nest of faded red rubber bands in the King Edward Cigar box. (Your copious installments have since been filed surreptitiously under Q in the Shaw Walker cabinet, Q having been chosen to terminate its otherwise permanent vacancy.)

I envy your courage to mail each of your soliloquies (a term I use loosely), for even if I had your address or a means of relaying these ramblings to you, the pluck required to actually drop them in a letterbox would surely elude me; and to do so in your nightclothes, no less ... I smile as I think of it. Your impetuous nature can be winning, even though I witness it vicariously. Hub (again, these implausible labels) would do well to recognize and enjoy it.

Pearl also had a youthful nature that I beheld from a distance. I still believe she loved me, at least a tiny bit. I indulge myself and believe she found a certain tenderness in me. If so, it was not enough. Duff possessed the same stability and maturity that attracted her to me, but he was also a free spirit, which is something I could never even hope to be.

This writing has now brought me back to one autumn day. It was a Sunday. Unlike the Sundays of late, during my time with Pearl I anticipated Sundays with great relish. It was on Sundays that we would have our outings—picnics, shows, long walks through the park, whatever struck our fancy.

Pearl had been after me for weeks to go—of all things—rollerskating. I protested week after week until one Saturday she brought it up while Duff and I were enjoying a martini with her during her evening shift at the Starlight Inn. Duff took to the idea immediately, and the two of them began reminiscing and exchanging stories about the skating escapades of their youth. They managed to coax me into trying my hand—or, more accurately, feet—at the ridiculous sport the very next day.

Although I did not admit it, they had roused my interest, so much so that I was actually looking forward to the adventure. I pictured myself gliding along, Pearl at my side, our feet arcing along the varnished floor in perfect synchronicity. I imagined the exhilaration the breezing air would produce in accord with the motion. I imagined I would look dashing and vigorous, that I would finally achieve that for which I had so longed—to be an appropriate match for Pearl.

The three of us met at the prescribed time and made our way to the Blue Holiday Round Roller Rink—a ghastly establishment that was characterized by shoddy neon fixtures and a staff who wore elf costumes despite the fact the calendars had been turned to March weeks earlier; it has since been razed.

When we arrived, Pearl and Duff began to skate around as though they had been doing so every day for years and years. I watched and tried as bravely as I could to master even the simplest gait. It soon became apparent that motion on wheels was not within my humble abilities. I finally gave up, having fallen most ungraciously, legs and arms a-sprawl, unable to get up without the help of a passing tot who stopped and referred to me as "Mister" as he extended a hand.

I resigned myself to the outer benches, where grandparents and matronly looking aunts proudly watched and waved to their precocious companions as they passed by again and again. I watched Duff and Pearl, his arm securely about her waist, glide gracefully by me as the dreadful calliope music blared. I waved and smiled when they would make faces or strike silly poses, all the while hating myself for my inability to join them.

So much became clear to me after my days with Pearl had come to an end. I was never meant for her. This was a savage tear to the flesh of my heart when I first learned of the affair between her and Duff, one that eventually closed and dried up. But before the scar toughened, I spent many nights stewing over my jealousy. Thoughts of them together chewed at me viciously. How long had they been lovers and I their fool?

But time, that reliable healer, slowly lessened my bitterness.

When your letters first started coming, I had no sympathy for your heartache. It was, after all, you and that Crunch chap who had betrayed your spouses, an ordeal of

considerable proportions for the one who remains true, an ordeal with which I am familiar. But now I have come to see your situation differently. I find myself hoping you and Hub close the fissure between you, that you rediscover the people you are and delight in one another once again.

To be sure, there are two sides to every story. The chicken paprikash-making, understated man you married is perhaps not so far away. Perhaps he's lurking just below the surface of the man I have met in your letters. I trust you will not stop looking for him. Perhaps it is not too late to "dig from your car" that inspirational Halloween audiocassette. Do not let it get to be too late, Harvey. Had I learned to join Pearl instead of simply watching her, we might be lovers yet today. But that is a life I allowed to slip through my hands. You and Hub would be fools to make the same mistake.

I wonder if you would take this advice if you were to hear it.

It is nearly 7:30 p.m., and I have not begun to fix my lunch for tomorrow or heat my dinner, so seduced am I with my own words. Strange, I am not concerned about it. In fact, of late, the tuna sandwiches that have been my lunch mainstay for the last thirty-one years have missed the mark, become tiresome. Perhaps my taste buds are aging.

There is a large window in the employee lounge that affords a clear view of Ed. Ed is a hot dog vendor from whom several of the other library employees purchase their lunch on a daily basis. I have been tempted by the aromas emanating from their mysterious paper-wrapped delicacies more than

once, but not so tempted that I thought to venture out and actually interface with Ed. He appears to be somewhat surly.

Perhaps tomorrow I will try something new. Perhaps I will not even pack a lunch and instead purchase one of Ed's Italian Sausage Mammoths for three dollars and fifty cents (information I have gleaned from a handwritten sign Ed props against the stem of his sun-and-rain umbrella—it seems to serve both purposes) and eat it on the street bench, the one adjacent to the William Shakespeare statue. Weather permitting, of course. Perhaps.

Yours,

Eck

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

November 24

Dear Harvey,

The 24 hours that have transpired between last night's writing session and tonight's have been eternal.

Things started out promisingly. At 11:45, I donned my hat and coat, and much to the consternation of my cohorts, I did something they have never seen me do before—I headed out the front door of the library at midday.

Ed was in his usual spot. There were a number of customers surrounding his culinary island, so I kept a few paces away until the crowd dispersed a bit. This also gave me

an opportunity to observe the protocol associated with street vending.

The longer I watched, the more I longed for my neatly wrapped tuna sandwich. The shouting, pushing and pulsating flurry of money-grasping fists gave the whole affair the look of an angry multi-limbed creature. I was, to say the least, intimidated. From the distance afforded by the window in the employee lounge, the daily crowd had appeared much more manageable, as did Ed.

By 11:57, the growling of my innards had crescendoed as the various aromas emanating from Ed's cart wafted my way. The end effect was quite distracting, if not outright embarrassing. I was being silly. Plus, the throng had subsided a bit. It was time to act.

I approached the cart and smiled pleasantly while I waited for Ed to turn his attention toward me. I should note that he appeared far surlier at this close proximity. His swarthy complexion was accessorized by one scar and three festering blemishes. There was clenched, between his conspicuously sparse and yellowed teeth, a cigarette with a precariously balanced ash that was no less than an inch in length. How he managed maintain this with all of his shouting remains a mystery to me.

Eventually, he drew his attention to me and yelled, "Hey, Mr. Chips over theh, what the hell do ya want?" (I am sure my written adaptation of Ed's verbal skills do him no justice, but this is the best I can muster.)

I assumed he was soliciting my order and responded by extracting the three dollars and two quarters placed

beforehand in the front pocket of my topcoat specifically for this purchase and saying, "An Italian Sausage Mammoth sandwich, please."

Ed took my money and regarded it with dissatisfaction. "Three seventy-five, Chips," he yelled. I looked with polite confusion towards the sign that proclaimed the Italian Sausage Mammoth to be priced at three dollars and fifty cents. Ed noticed my averted gaze and explained, "Sign's old, Chips, and I got people waitin' here. You want a Mammy or dontcha?"

Each morning, I supply myself with exactly enough currency for two bus rides, along with three extra dollars for incidentals. Since I have never been compelled to spend the three dollars, this morning I increased my normal daily incidental allowance to three dollars and fifty cents in anticipation of my noon hour excursion. To expend a quarter unexpectedly would leave my afternoon bus fare hopelessly inadequate. The thought of approaching Ms. Beckett to ask for a loan was horrifying, but not as horrifying as the groans and exasperated grunts coming from the other prospective Italian Sausage Mammoth eaters and Ed himself.

There was also the matter of false advertising, but this hardly seemed the appropriate forum in which to discuss the perils of the downtrodden consuming public. In fact, the downtrodden consuming public in my immediate vicinity seemed to care very little, if at all, about their rights, as did Ed. They wanted a resolution to the situation, and they wanted it right away.

I opened my topcoat and fished a quarter from my trouser pocket. With my upcoming bus ride in peril, I bravely handed over the otherwise innocuous coin.

There ensued a conversation between Ed and myself regarding condiments, which was another unforeseen variable. His language and demeanor took a turn for the worse when my indecision became apparent. After a few frenzied moments of silent vacillation, I said the word "mustard," and concluded the transaction.

Throughout our exchange, the growing ash clung to Ed's shrinking cigarette with waning tenacity. Although I was more concerned with the business at hand, I kept an eye on the offending cinder just the same. You can imagine my relief when Ed finally wrapped the white tissue over my Italian Sausage Mammoth and handed it over just as his ash came to its inevitable tumble, narrowly missing becoming an unwanted condiment on my lunch. Thank heavens for small favors.

The weather chose not to cooperate so I abandoned the second part of my plan to dine with the Bard, although he appeared stately and inviting despite the gloomy sky, and went inside to the employee lounge instead. The familiarity it afforded was oddly comforting. The Italian Sausage Mammoth proved to be worth every indignity I endured to obtain it and every subsequent abdominal woe to which it contributed. It was even more delicious than I had anticipated. As I ate, I mentally chastised myself for not bringing additional money. My grape soda was sorely missed.

The rest of the afternoon passed without incident, although the Italian Sausage Mammoth produced gastric effects I will not discuss here. Suffice it to say that I enjoyed its robust flavor for many hours. So much so, in fact, that I forgot all about my monetary circumstances.

I am sure you read (or, more accurately, do not read) these words with the same dread I felt when I boarded the 5:10 22N bus and remembered my fare had been lightened by my rather heavy lunch. For the second time in one day, I was forced to publicly humiliate myself. I turned tail at the fare box and shuffled awkwardly past several pairs of disgusted eyes.

I was at quite a loss. With nothing left to do short of panhandle, I went back into the library via the night entrance after assuring the night watchman that I had forgotten something at my desk and showing him my employee ID badge. I frantically made my way back to the literary department in hopes of finding Ms. Beckett seated at her desk. Of course, she was not there.

I pride myself in keeping my workspace immaculate and knew there was no use in looking through my desk for loose change. I frantically searched the floor. Perhaps a wayward coin would peek up at me. Eventually, I found myself in front of Ms. Beckett's desk. I am embarrassed to admit that I scanned its surface. I was a desperate man.

Upon her desk, Ms. Beckett keeps a green glass pencil pot. It contained three (noticeably dull) pencils with distressed erasers, a pair of scissors proclaiming "Lefty", a nail file, a pushbutton-style ballpoint pen that eternally reminds its user

to Think Sinclair When You Think Flooring and upon its dusty and sticky bottom, one single taunting quarter tarnished almost beyond recognition.

It was nearly 5:40 and the last 22N bus of the evening was due in ten minutes. Suffice it to say I was on that bus.

The stress over the entire day had elevated my dyspeptic reaction to the Italian Sausage Mammoth to an alarming level. During the ride home (spent standing), I anguished physically over the boiling in my stomach and mentally over what I should do about the twenty-five cents I pilfered from Ms. Beckett's pencil pot.

My dinner tonight was precluded by my understandably absent appetite, and now that I have soothed my gullet with more than four times the recommended dosage of antacid, I am ready for bed. I have likewise soothed my conscience by deciding to stay late tomorrow, at least late enough to be left alone in the Literary Department and replace Ms. Beckett's quarter with one I have selected from my own change pot. Although not as tarnished as the one I purloined, I think it will pass unnoticed. I can only hope Ms. Beckett finds no need to inspect her pencil pot too closely tomorrow, or I will be compelled to share with her my depraved and clandestine actions and accept the consequences.

Woefully yours,

Eck

PS: Rest assured that my tuna sandwich, carrot sticks, ChocFill Nut Bar and grape soda are duly packed and waiting in the refrigerator for my usual morning departure.

November 18

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to another edition of "Pregnancy: The Nine Month Sentence," with your lovely hostess, Ms. Harvest Moon!

Oh, shit.

Today's broadcast is LIVE brought to you straight from the Nuptial Bed of one of the most dysfunctional couples on the planet!

I'm still in bed. It's two in the afternoon.

You'll have to excuse our hostess today. It seems Ms. Harvey is feeling—ahem—a little under the weather.

I've got a hangover.

That's right, ladies and gentlemen, our little lady has gone ahead and done something very naughty!

And I'm ready for that golden spear to come hurling from the heavens and impale me. Probably better than whatever the Hub's got planned for me when he gets home.

Can you believe it, ladies and gentlemen? A real live pregnant woman! With a real live hangover!

Enough of that shit already. I've got a story to tell.

The Hub wanted to celebrate "the end of our first trimester" and make me turkey burgers for dinner. Big whoop. So we have the burgers and then he fixes me a scoop of fat-fucking-free frozen yogurt while he pours himself a big snifter of brandy and sits down on the couch. I'm thinking, okay, I can handle this. No one ever said pregnancy was fair. It's not. I can accept that. No, the brandy pissed me off a little bit, but it wasn't what pushed me over the edge.

It took six lousy ounces of Heineken to do that.

He was sitting on the couch, watching the six o'clock news with one eye and reading *Tomorrow's Baby* magazine with the other. I made a big notice-me sigh, but he was too engrossed. I wasn't in the mood for the six o'clock news or *Tomorrow's Baby*, or even listening to the Roxy Music CD I'd just bought.

What I was in the mood for was a beer. Period.

I was sure there were still a few bottles of Heineken peppered amongst the ketchup and horseradish and ReaLemon in the door of the fridge. The Hub had only had one that I could remember since he'd bought the six-pack a few weeks ago. There was no reason there shouldn't be a few left, but, nonetheless, there was a butterfly or two fluttering around inside of me when I reached for the handle on the Amana. I didn't want my big bold move to get shut down before I could even make it.

No worries. There sat one of those jewel-green bottles right next to the Stadium Mustard. I plucked it from the shelf without a moment's hesitation, popped the cap and watched that oozy dry-ice beer fog spill over the rim of the bottle. I sniffed it. It smelled yeasty and bitter and wonderful. It was exactly what I wanted. Exactly. This was perfect craving fulfillment. I poured about half the bottle into a clear juice glass and went to join my dearly beloved on the couch. Now we had us a real celebration.

I suspected he'd be little out of joint. Maybe that's why I went to get the beer in the first place.

Who am I trying to kid?

Of course I wanted to rile him, at least a little. Tug his chain, that's all. But even so, there was another part of me that was hoping he'd say, "Good for you, hon. You deserve that beer."

As I sat down, his eyes shifted, but he didn't look up from his magazine. I sniffed the beer again then took a sip.

Heaven.

Cold, yeasty, bubbly, bitter, beer. Beer. Oh, dear sweet Jesus, how good it tasted. Beer.

"Having a beer?" came the Hub's voice from behind the cover of *Tomorrow's Baby*, which featured a close-up of a crying infant, mouth open to a huge O and two little tooth nubs pushing through the gums. SURVIVING TEETHING was written in Day-Glo orange under the picture.

"That's right," I said. "Just havin' a beer." I took another sip.

He sighed and closed the magazine, tossed it on the coffee table. "That's nice, hon," he said. "I'm sure there's no harm in half a glass of beer."

What happened next didn't register until it was too late.

He got up and picked up the Heineken bottle, walked out of the room. Just as the words "What are you doing?" fell out of my mouth, I heard the tiny sound of pouring liquid coming from the kitchen and then the more distinctive thud of an empty glass container hitting the bottom of the recycle bin.

He came back into the family room and sat down, wordless.

"What'd you do with my beer?"

"I thought we agreed," he said.

"Agreed to what?"

"That half a bottle is enough," he said.

"I didn't agree to anything like that," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders and picked up his magazine and said, "Well, I'm sorry, I thought we'd agreed," in a tone that implied to think anything else would be downright stupid.

I couldn't believe it. "You didn't even ask me," I said.

"What?"

"You didn't even ask me."

"What difference does it make?" he said; then he dismissed the topic with an irritated sigh and shrug of his shoulders.

I stared at him for a minute or two then I stomped off to grab my leather, my keys, some money. I came back in the living room and said to him, "Has this pregnancy made you forget who I am? I'm your wife—a woman, a whole woman. Do you understand anything about me anymore? Do you remember me? Do you remember how I got in this condition? Do you? It was sex? Remember? It was sex with your wife, a woman. Me. It was me." I shook my head, closed my eyes. Maybe he'd chime in and save the night.

He didn't. He just stared at me with a look of confused disbelief.

"Do you even remember my pussy, for chrissake?"

At that point, he opened his mouth but nothing came out.

"Just fuck you," I said (sweet, huh?).

He started to say something, but I turned and walked out the door without once looking back. I stepped into the garage and slammed the door behind me so hard a flowerpot fell

from an adjacent shelf and crashed to the ground. The Hub came into the garage and made a motion for me to stop, but I was already pulling out, my headlights illuminating his pleading look and frantic waves. I careened down the drive in high-speed reverse.

I was fuming, had no idea where I was going. The car was practically driving itself. It must have been thirsty because it drove itself right to the corner bar.

Believe me, Eck, Webley was the last thing on my mind.

My favorite corner seat was open. The usual schmucks were sitting in their usual places. I threw some cash onto the bar and told Marcy I wanted a draft. I was still blind mad.

It took all of the first beer and half of the second just to calm down. That's when I thought, I shouldn't be here. Just finish this one and then have something else, maybe a soda. There's a plan. But by the time I finished the second one, another was starting to seem like a real good idea.

The beers went right to my head. After the third one, I was telling Marcy and the guy sitting next to me (I think his name was Scud) that my husband's a dipshit and even though I'm the one who's three months pregnant, he's the one who's gained ten pounds and that a beer or two can't be all that bad and on and on. I was a little hesitant to order another until Scud reassured me that his old lady drank Jack the whole time she was pregnant with the twins and they had no problems. Well, Corky might be in jail now, but that doesn't mean he wasn't a healthy kid. Even Marcy said that beer's good for pregnant ladies. Scud nodded.

So, in light of this, I bought a round, then Scud bought a round and after about four or five (or six?), I figured I better get home.

The Hub was sitting in the family room in dead silence, the cordless phone sitting conspicuously next to him on the couch. "Have you any idea how worried I was?"

I didn't say a word.

"You could have at least taken your cell."

It was his turn to be mad. God knows I wasn't—by that time I was Miss HappyBeer. After about three minutes of him hyperventilating, the Hub's face was red as a poker and he couldn't stand it anymore. He tore into me.

"How could you drive in this condition?" he said. "You could have at least called me to pick you up."

I laughed.

"Oh? Do we think this is funny?" he said. "Putting two lives at risk?"

I just stared at him, grinning ridiculously.

"This is certainly a fine way to start the second trimester. Don't you care about the baby? You should be ashamed."

I went to get a beer from the fridge after that line, took a long pull right in front of him.

"This is just the beginning of child abuse. Do you realize that?" Then he shot a look full of daggers at me and said, "I'm going to bed," and turned away. "I hope you're satisfied with yourself," he added without stopping.

I yelled after him that I was very satisfied and that I was so satisfied, in fact, I was going to have one more beer before joining him.

Things get a little blurry after that. Even though I'd taken only one swallow from the one already open, I got another beer. Before I could bring it to my lips, I promptly went into the bathroom, where I threw up for what seemed like an hour and a half. I collapsed on the couch and fell asleep until four in the morning, when I woke up and shuffled up the stairs. I could tell the Hub was awake, but he refused to acknowledge me.

Well, that's the story, Eck. Now I've got to do something about this hangover. I need a shower. I've got that greasy bar-film on me, that smell in my hair. My mouth tastes like the underside of a barstool. I feel horrible, and I can't take any aspirin or anything.

As if I don't deserve this.

Christ, do I feel guilty. Just because the Hub did something thoughtless—strike that, I doubt he was without a thought when he picked up that half-empty Heineken. Call what he did completely uncalled-for. Whatever you call it, it didn't justify what I did. I certainly got his attention, though. I hope we can hash through it tonight when he gets home. There's been a lot of things percolating inside of me, and it's time we had a talk.

I was wrong. I know that. Now the question is, will I be the only one willing to admit it?

Yours,

Harvey

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\* \* \* \*

November 29

Dear Eck,

I figured you were entitled to a follow-up of sorts. A follow-up to "the incident" letter, that is. That's what the Hub's been calling my night out—"the incident," as in "Don't mention The Incident to my mother" or "This discussion isn't going to lead us up to another episode like The Incident, is it?" You get the picture.

When he came home that next day he acted as though nothing had happened.

"Let's talk," I said. I was willing to go halfway, or even more than halfway.

"About what?" He dumped an entire can of bean sprouts into the stir-fry (I hate bean sprouts).

"About last night," I said.

He sighed one of those impatient sighs of his. "What happened last night is water over the dam. Spilled milk." Could he have thought of another cliché? "Let's just put it behind us."

"Fine," I said. "Behind us."

"All we can do now is hope no irreversible damage was done to the baby."

"What about irreversible damage done to our relationship?" I said.

"Can't you be a little more adult?" he said.

"Fine," I turned away from him. "It's behind us."

And that was the end of it. Subject closed.

I don't know what he thinks. Part of me wants desperately to talk to him and another part of me wouldn't open my mouth to him if it was full of hornets. Maybe he thinks I did what I did to try and hurt the baby. Nothing could be further from the truth. I'd never want to hurt Webley. I felt—still feel—terrible about drinking that way. I'm not sure why I did it.

No, that's bullshit.

I know exactly why I did it. I was lashing out, trying to get attention, like a snotty teenager. Webley isn't the one who's putting me in a cage, the Hub is. I've got everything to look forward to with Webley, a whole new life to begin, another childhood to enjoy. I think of Webley and see beginnings. I look at the Hub and see someone who's changing, someone who's becoming ... well, a parent.

What did I expect?

My own dad (the original Captain Crunch) left Mom and me when I was ten. He fell in love with another woman and just up and went. One day, he was just gone. Poof.

I remember that day, the day Dad left. I remember it because that day in school this girl who I thought was my friend—her name was Heather—Heather took a sheet of paper and wrote on it, "If you hate 'Harvest Moon' sign this paper." She passed it to everyone in the class and then to me. Everyone had signed it. I started to cry, and the teacher came over to me and looked at the paper. She sent me to the reading room to pick up a video for the next day's lesson. I

knew it was just an excuse to get me out of the room while the other kids got "talked to."

It didn't help to know they had gotten caught. All I wanted to do was go home and cry to my dad. I waited on the front step for him to come home from work. I waited until Mom came out and told me that Dad wouldn't be coming home that night or any other night.

The worst part was thinking for weeks that Dad's name could just as well have been scribbled on Heather's sign-up sheet along with everyone else's.

For a few years, he'd call on my birthday and whatnot, but he was pretty much gone after that. I only saw him three times after the day he walked out: high school graduation, Aunt Jane's funeral and my wedding. As a kid, I always blamed myself for his leaving. Mom would never talk with me about it. I was left to try to figure things out on my own.

Dad threw me away.

Mom took care of me and worked hard to make sure I had the things I needed, but there was something unspoken between us. As if I was a daily reminder of him and her failed marriage. Life was never quite the same after Dad left. As the years passed, Mom and I grew more distant. She's in Phoenix now with her second husband. Our relationship is superficially healthy, but we never really talk or help each other.

So there was Dad, my first scar of the heart. Then there was the parade of men I offered my heart to, only to watch them stomp right over it. (I guess I can add the Crunch to that list, the son of a bitch.) I wasn't very picky. Looking back on those single years, I was looking for attention, male

approval. Jesus, Eck, there were some real dogs before I met the Hub.

The Hub.

Even. Solid. There for me. That's what the Hub was—dependable. Plus he loved me. I suppose that particular "plus" is no small thing. He loves me. Whatever we're going through now, I'll always know that. And I know he'll love Webley, and that he'll be there when all the Heathers in this world crush our child to pieces.

Despite everything that's right about him, this wall he's building—it keeps getting taller, and I keep getting less ambitious about trying to scale it. No one sees it but me. Everyone falls at his feet and never lets me forget how lucky I am to have someone like him. I need more, for all of us. We need to start getting closer, but first we'll have to stop drifting apart.

Okay, the Hub loves me, but I miss the man I married, the one who waited for me in the rain for two hours at the Greyhound station that one Christmas Eve, the man who used to bring a bottle of cabernet and a wedge of cheese to my apartment for lunch in bed on Sunday afternoons, the man who is fading away. I have to keep trying to find him, but there's this hopelessness growing inside of me. I've got to keep fighting it. I've got to keep everything in perspective, for our sake, for Webley's sake.

Pregnancy's a big deal. My own insecurities and changes are hard to handle. Coming to terms with my new role as a mom is tough for me. Just like every parent there ever was, I want to do a better job raising my kid than my parents did

raising me. And I'm sure the Hub's going through the same kinds of things as I am—with daddyhood, I mean. Well, he is just going to have to come to terms with me as both a lover and a mother and himself as both a lover and a dad. Right now, it's like all he can see is Parenthood.

Maybe I'm being too tough on him. I can only imagine how I come off to him these days. After the baby is born, after the dust settles, maybe we'll have grown enough to get back to where we once were—before Captain Crunch, before Webley. At least back to where we were as two people, just a man and woman in love.

Do you understand? Are you out there? Are you receiving my signal, Eck? You're the only one I can talk to, tell the truth to—and I don't even know you. But I'm glad I've got you, just the same. Someone to watch over me.

Yours,  
Harvey

December 1

Dear Harvey,

Although I am no stranger to the interior of The Starlight Inn, I have never stayed there long enough to develop a hangover such as the one you described, even back in my salad days. A "greasy bar-film" and a mouth that "tastes like the underside of a barstool" are sensations I never have experienced, nor can I imagine I ever will.

I looked into the effects of binge drinking on an unborn fetus. Considering I was compelled to venture into the science department and bear the certainly questioning, if not downright shocked glances of Mr. Stillard as I gathered material on pregnancy, I am a little frustrated at not being able to share my findings with you directly. My peace of mind will have to serve as my only satisfaction.

Your beer guzzling was of no use to either you or Sir Webley. According to numerous sources, an isolated instance (and I do assume this instance was isolated) can increase Sir Webley's chances of having a problem. But even so, it remains very unlikely, to the extent that I, too, do not recommend dwelling over your "spilled milk." I am more concerned over your cavorting with the likes of persons such as Scud, who besides being named after a beach flea, I think may be akin to Ed the Italian Sausage Mammoth Vendor.

So be it. I can only hope the next time you are moved to rebel against Hub you do so in a more constructive manner, such as going for a brisk walk or perhaps writing to me. Even if my efficacy remains invisible, I am here for you, be

assured. Watching over you is a responsibility I have come to accept.

As far as Heather is concerned, her malicious childhood scheme reminds me of the ceaseless bullying to which I was subjected during my youth. That is not to say I am unsympathetic. The brutality of the female sex is far more emotionally devastating than the more juvenile physical pranks normally associated with the male gender. Clearly, Heather's vicious precursor to your father's abandonment stayed with you for many years and was as cruel as any torture I endured.

However, the poundings I sustained were chronic in nature. So numerous were they that they blended into one prolonged hazing that lasted throughout most of my childhood years.

In prep school, my name was mutilated and amended to form the moniker Eckleburg Jeckleburg. I became intimately familiar with the interior of our dormitory toilets as a result of countless "swirlies." The "ultimate wedgie" was another favorite maneuver of my classmates. Mornings frequently brought unwanted surprises. I once woke thinking I had gone deaf only to find my ears had been filled with peanut butter as I slept. Then there was the morning when my eyebrows were conspicuously absent, having fallen victim to a bottle of depilatory cream during the night.

I was a bookish sort, a characteristic my classmates found endless ways at which to poke fun and one my father detested. Since I was the only child born unto a man whose sporting pursuits were regularly of championship caliber, my

own athletic deficits were a terrible disappointment to him. My father brought this disappointment to my attention in ways that were perhaps less crass than my classmates' schemes; but what my father's methods lacked in crudeness, they made up for in coldness. Holiday vacations at home would have been better described as punitive excursions away from school, as Father always found time to sit me in his den amongst his trophies of polished brass and the more earthy animal heads, interrogating me for hours about failed attempts at joining the squash or soccer or polo team, whichever was in season.

Mother was more forgiving, as mothers usually are, but she never failed to defer to Father in all decisions regarding the management of the household and childrearing. Cancer took Father more than ten years ago, and Mother's own increasing frailty has forced me to move her into an assisted living facility. She is still somewhat mobile and will be joining me for Christmas.

The adolescent teasing that plagued my years at secondary school was not nearly as bad as what I had endured in prep school. Being one of a larger student body enabled me to avoid persecution a little better by virtue of increased invisibility. I had some friends, all of whom were academically inclined, like me. Of course, Father's frustration with me did not abate. It was, in fact, exacerbated by my growing failure to charm members of the opposite sex.

My gentle and heartfelt attempts at dates were generally dismissed without sensitivity on the part of the young lady. With one or two exceptions, I sat in the stag pen during

dances and cotillions. I experienced my first kiss at age 17. The girl—one year my junior and five inches my superior—was one Janet Klantz. Alas, that kiss, which I administered so ineptly, comprised my total romantic experience until I arrived at university where, although still staid by most measures, my social life was quite a bit more active.

Be assured that you and I are not alone in possessing unpleasant childhood memories. Certainly, nearly everyone looks back at his or her youth with some acrimony. Although sometimes one needs to be indulged with sympathy upon baring the details of their growing pains, it is best to just move on. So I hope it is with you. Besides, as you said, you have a second childhood in front of you. Let your experience, as well as your love, nurture it.

Yours,

Eck

PS: "You're the only one I can talk to" is simply atrocious. "You are the only one in whom I may confide" is infinitely better. How do people manage to understand one another?

December 4

Dear Eck,

All night.

It was all I could think about. Like the way the hair on a guy's stomach kind of goes down to a feathery V and disappears into the waistband of his Levis. Or the way their lips taste just after they've taken a sip of beer. Or the feeling of their biceps in your hands.

Driving me crazy. All night.

There was this one trick the Captain used to do with his thumb and his index finger—let me tell you, it was some kind of trick. Or that SuperTease maneuver the Hub uses once in a while. And then there's that certain way it feels when he's inside of you and he's hard—like, really hard—and you're all around him like hot caramel.

Oops. Sorry.

Got a little carried away there. Didn't mean to make you blush, Eck. But that's how it was last night. And I was in luck—the Hub had the next day off. I had it all planned out. Wait until about six. Get up and brush my teeth, run a comb through my hair. A little perfume. Then get back in bed and see what I could cook up for a chilly December morning. Maybe an extra-thick slice of bread-and-butter.

Sounds good, no?

I waited until seven. Did my primp-and-pick in the bathroom, checked the peggys profile, which still looks okay. I even put on a little lipstick. Then I curled up next to him.

"Hey," I whispered. I slid my hand around his chest.

He rolled onto his back and smiled up at me. He looked sexy. Sleepy eyes, messy hair. I thought, Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

But then his grin turned silly, and he put his hand on my belly and said, "What's going on here? Huh? What's your mom doing? She wants to play that funny game again, doesn't she?"

I thought, What kind of shit is this? My mood started fading fast.

He got out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweats. When he saw the disappointment in my eyes, his eyebrows collapsed a tiny bit. I knew what that meant. I pulled the covers up around my neck. I hate it when being naked is embarrassing.

Then he sat in the occasional chair.

The chair—what the Hub calls the occasional chair—was an anniversary gift from the outlaws he won't let me toss for that very reason. The occasional chair is this stupid chair that I hate because it's ugly and uncomfortable. It's so ugly and uncomfortable that we never sit in it, but just throw our not-dirty-enough-to-wash-yet and too-lazy-to-throw-in-the-hamper clothes on it. And since we never sit in it, I've always called it the never chair—you know, like a joke.

But I guess now that the Hub has actually sat in it, I'll have to call it the occasional chair, too.

He looked out-of-place sitting there. There was a stained pair of underwear draped over the back of the chair, next to his right ear. If I hadn't sensed something bad was coming, I would have laughed. Instead, I asked, "What's this about?"

"I have something I want to talk over with you," he said.

"About?"

"Well, I've been feeling a little ... well..." He faltered,  
"...uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable about what?" I asked. He wasn't looking at me.

"Uncomfortable about sex," he said.

The Hub proceeded to gently explain to me in an incredibly irritating tone that this is not at all uncommon. According to *The Expectant Father*, by Dr. James Hansdorf, approximately 63% of all men experience some dip in sexual drive during their partner's second or third trimester. This is due to an underlying fear of harming either the baby or the mother. Although sex is perfectly safe throughout term for most pregnancies, undue pressure to perform can cause unnecessary resentment towards the mother, the idea of pregnancy or the fetus. In most cases, the anxiety subsides when the male becomes comfortable with the pregnancy concept, which usually occurs in a matter of days, or, in a few cases, weeks. It's nothing to get overly concerned about.

Overly concerned. I'm not supposed to get overly concerned at the prospect of no sex for some undetermined length of time. Thank-fucking-you, Dr. James Hansdorf.

A chaste kiss on my forehead concluded The Talk. I lay in the bed wondering how the batteries in my vibrator were holding up while the Hub got in the shower. Thank God for electric companions.

Maybe I'm no goddess, but I'm no dog, either. It's hard enough trying to feel good about yourself when you're going

to take on the shape of an eggplant in the very near future, but it's a real kick in the teeth when your husband sexually dismisses you.

When the reality of The Talk sank in, I felt as unattractive and fat and undesirable as a woman can feel. Sure, I can understand his anxiety, but so soon? Couldn't he at least wait until I started showing? Here's a hint, Eck. I don't know if you're married or not, or if you have kids, so maybe this advice is obsolete, but don't pull a stunt like this on a pregnant woman. Act tired, say you're constipated, play dead, but don't tell her "No, thanks, not right now." It's a rotten thing to do. Plus, do you really want to be replaced by something called a G-Spot Jelly Vibe? Does any man? I doubt it.

So, the Hub's spending his day off cleaning up the yard and the garage and the gutters before the snow flies. He's out there raking, turning spigots off, checking window washer fluid levels. Ain't he dutiful?

I don't feel like doing shit.

I swear my life is over. No beer. No sex. No junk food. Everyone's treating me differently. The only person I'm not disgusted with is Webley.

And you.

Okay, so there are two people I'm not disgusted with, and neither is much for conversation. It's like I enjoy my men in a fragmented sense. I've got the Hub to support me. I've got Captain Crunch to blame all my problems on, fair or not. I've got Webley on the way (male or not) to look forward to. I've

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got you to watch over me. And, easily the simplest of the bunch, now I've got the GSJV for sex.

But, truth be told, I'd much prefer to have them all in one man.

Yours,  
Harvey

PS: Now I really hate that stupid chair.

December 6

Dear Harvey,

I can safely say that yours are the most intimate and personal letters I have ever read. How naïve I was to think that your charm and sensitivity were beginning to displace your—how shall I phrase this?—less polished attributes. I see now you are subjecting me to an analysis of your carnal endeavors that is so meticulous in detail it nearly divulges the status of the power pack in your mechanical marital aid. How endearing.

Is there no subject with which you feel uncomfortable? Even though I was quite alone as I read of your quandary, I did, indeed, find myself with scarlet cheeks before I finished. Regarding your recommendations, I cannot imagine I will ever be in a position to have to take them, thank goodness. However, telling a woman I am incapacitated due to a bowel irregularity would have never occurred to me. What matter? The last time I saw a live nude was at Mrs. Stein's dreaded Christmas Eve party. The very same one she invites me to every year and the very same one I decline invitation to every year. Except, of course, that first year.

It was the first of what has since become the Annual Frank-N-Stein Christmas Eve Party, a name of which you would certainly approve. The origin of the Stein portion of the name is obvious enough. As for the "Frank" portion, I believe that is the forename of the sculptor in 6B. The party is housed for the most part in Mrs. Stein's apartment. I say "for the most part" because it generally spills out of her door and

into 6B as well as the hallway in front of my apartment during the course of the evening.

The sculptor in 6B has taken on part of the host duties since moving in seven years ago. He and Mrs. Stein are very close friends. Suspiciously close.

That first party was enough to demonstrate to me that Mrs. Stein is of a different ilk. The "invitation"—which I still have—was written on a cocktail napkin. It said, "Tim, so many hellos in the hall, why not drop in for a little holiday cheer on Dec. 24 around six? I'm having a few friends." Despite the casual nature of the invitation, I dutifully wrote an acceptance, although there was no RSVP requested.

I was at Mrs. Stein's door with an attractively wrapped hostess gift of mixed nuts in hand at six-fifteen. I was the first to arrive, and the conversation between us was suitable, even enjoyable. Mrs. Stein is a person of eclectic interests and her interpersonal skills are subsequently well developed. Her interior decorating tastes are also varied, and I took in the change of scenery with some relish, as my abode is somewhat sparse, although I like to think of it as tailored.

There was a large papier-mâché parrot in, of all places, the bathroom. There were enough houseplants to rival the jungles of South America. Of course, nearly every square inch of wall space was covered with paintings, one of which was an enormous canvas that featured a surreal image of a four-legged catlike creature with the head of a rather androgynous-looking human. There were odd knickknacks everywhere, including a collection of dolls fashioned after a cartoon character I believe to be named Betty Boop. On every

flat surface there was either a bottle of liquor or a tray of food. The apartment was so cluttered, I wondered how many people would be able to fit amongst the miscellany.

I was not forced to wonder for long. The people came. And came. And came. They were of all ages, from every walk of life. They filled the apartment to a level that would alarm any fire marshal. They ate and drank copious quantities. They chatted together in big and small groups—in closets, in the bathtub, wherever they could find space, although I still to this day do not know how they could hear one another with the racket as it was.

In addition to a woman who insisted on demonstrating her yodeling skills, a group of revelers decided to go caroling at each door in the building. Fortunately, most of the other residents were not at home, being luckily engaged in other holiday festivities. There was another collection of people who deemed themselves the Elves. They were jumping up and down on Mrs. Stein's bed with the effervescence of so many Alka-Seltzer tablets—a remedy of which each of them was surely in need on Christmas morning.

Certain that going home to bed would be a hopeless effort due to all the clamor, I found what I thought to be a safe spot in a corner and settled into observation. It was rather fascinating.

I maintained a precarious refuge until the poker game started. At first, it seemed fairly innocuous. Just another gathering of drunken people seated on the floor was bland fare amongst the Elves, the yodeler and a bikini-clad Mrs. Claus. But as the game progressed, I could see things were

going to get out of control. The first item of clothing bet as collateral was a not-so-sinister pair of suspenders. Then a lone stocking was thrown into the ante pot.

My spectating was interrupted at that point by Mrs. Stein, who attempted to pull me from my seated position to partake in something called a Flaming Shapiro. I stood reluctantly. Mrs. Stein was the hostess, and it would have hardly been polite to deny her wishes. I was following her into the den when a wayward brassiere, given to flight by one of the poker players, made its way across the room in a rare moment of silence. Everyone, even the phonograph, which was at rest between calypsos, suspended their debauchery to watch its trajectory, which concluded atop my own mostly bald head.

For a split second, which seemed endless to me, I found myself alone in a small clearing with everyone staring at me, including one very bare-breasted woman.

The music recommenced and was joined by a chorus of laughter and guffaws that surely could be heard throughout the neighborhood. I tried to pull myself together, but my crimson face betrayed me. It was no help when the unabashed and semi-nude woman approached me and retrieved her lingerie, but not before embracing me in a grandiose fashion and leaving a lipstick imprint upon my already reddened cranium.

I was slapped on the back and congratulated by members of the crowd. A number of flashbulbs expired in my face. Mrs. Stein handed me a small glass filled with a flaming liquid I was to drink. I waited until it extinguished itself and poured it into one of the plants.

Of course, within minutes, everyone's attentions were drawn back to whatever they were doing before the flight of the brassiere, and I was able to slip out the door and back to the sanctity of my own apartment without notice.

The noise continued until well after midnight. Dickens and I tried to ignore it by reading "A Christmas Carol" and sipping hot chocolate. A little after four, my nerves and the cacophony had calmed enough to allow me to take a fitful nap.

Mother and I enjoyed our Christmas together the next day despite my insomnia. Our sober exchange of gifts and a baked ham dinner were a welcome contrast to the night before.

For several weeks after that fateful Christmas Eve, Mrs. Stein approached me in the hall to thank me for being such a good sport and to assure me that I was the life of the party. At these junctures, I would experience the same embarrassment I had felt at the party and would quickly excuse myself.

Each year the party takes place. The invitations have become more formal and have been amended with an RSVP request. I always jot a note (not slipped casually under her door but sent via the formal route of the United States Postal Service) to Mrs. Stein saying that I am obliged to take my mother to dinner. Of course, this is a white lie, but I simply could not bear to subject myself to another Yuletide disaster. I realize that my reluctance to attend each year is irrational but the risk involved by attending seems to outweigh any

possible benefits. As I stated above, Mrs. Stein and the sculptor in 6B are very close.

I can watch the revelers arrive by peering out my front window. It seems as though the guest list changes each year, although the array of invitees is still as diverse. I (involuntarily) listen to the party for most of the night and keep an eye on the comings and goings via my peephole. Once I even saw two uniformed policemen approach Mrs. Stein's door, which was already open, and go inside. I watched and waited for an hour for them to come out. They did not. Perhaps they were seduced by bare-breasted women offering them Flaming Shapiros.

It is now December sixth and I expect to receive my invitation any time. I feel certain that Mrs. Stein and the sculptor in 6B will not be disappointed when I decline. They undoubtedly invite me only to be polite—evidence of the party manifests itself in many ways, including the odor of liquor that permeates the entire building well into the New Year. Since we are neighbors, the absence of an invitation would be a breach of etiquette. As I have stated before, Mrs. Stein and the sculptor in 6B are not without manners.

Yours,  
Eck

PS: Perhaps you should contact that Crunch chap. A visit with him might at least afford some physical relief if nothing else.

December 8

Dear Eck,

I've always said, when all else fails go to the library. Maybe you'll run into a good idea. And since all that was lying around here was a turkey carcass, a bunch of Christmas ads and me, I figured all else had failed. I had to get out of here, so I went to the library. I tossed my ratty old backpack over my shoulder and headed out the door, heavy with mission.

I picked out a few books with cool titles and covers, took a seat and started perusing. I stopped. Did I have my library card? I checked my wallet. No go. Stupid me. Then I remembered the last time I used it, umpteen months ago, I threw it in the inside pocket of the backpack. I went to make sure it was still there.

Holy shit.

Out of the canvas floats this unmistakable scent. It was faint, but it was there. Maybe it was his aftershave, or the fabric softener his wife uses, or his deodorant. Maybe it was some combination of all of those things. Whatever it was, it was the Captain. It was his scent. There was no mistaking it. As tears started to well up in my eyes, I looked inside the pack. There it was, that black lace camisole he gave me a lifetime ago. I'd all but forgotten that night.

The Hub had been out of town on business; hence, the Captain and I took our own little trip to the Magic Motel. I'd used the backpack to carry some sandwiches and a bottle of wine so we wouldn't have to go out if we didn't want to. As it turned out, we didn't want to. I even brought along a portable

tape player and a candle (the Magic Motel isn't known for its plush interior appointments and amenities). He gave me the camisole as a gift. I wore it as we made love again and again and again. We slow-danced to the tinny music that floated from the plastic holes in the tape player. We ate. We drank cheap red wine from cheap motel glasses. We slept. We took a bath together. We kissed, nuzzled, purred, groped, moaned, licked and did all the things you do when you're behind the door of one of those funny motel rooms with the parking spaces right in front.

I must have missed the camisole when I unpacked the bag the next day because there it was, balled up in the bottom next to a few loose wild cherry Lifesavers. It stopped me cold. The Crunch strikes again.

I reached into the bag and touched it, lifted it to my face. That smell, the feel of the silky fabric against my cheek—it brought everything I adored about the Captain back in one big rush. I was inside a cloud, a cloud of him, his essence. And being there ripped open a scab, one I thought would have been a hell of a lot tougher by now.

Ouch.

So there I was, in the library. And the trickle of tears was about to turn into a full-blown sobbing, nose-running event, so I had to get out fast. I scurried off to the exit; there was the trashcan.

Stopped me cold.

I seesawed for a second; then good sense won over and I tossed the camisole through the little swinging door of the metal can. I looked up and caught the eye of the security

guard. I sniffed, looked away and wiped tears from my face. He rolled his eyes and shook his head as I bolted out the door.

When I got home, things didn't get much better. It was raining. The paper was still strewn over the kitchen table and there was nothing good to eat. The telephone was staring me in the face and daring me to call the Captain.

I did want to call him. I mean I *desperately* wanted to call him. I wanted to tell him I missed him. I wanted to tell him to meet me somewhere, to take the rest of the afternoon off and come see me and make love to me and hold me and make me feel beautiful again. I wanted to tell him we could turn back the clock and be the two people we were on that August night in that godawful motel room. At that moment, Eck, I would have done anything to go back, even if it was just for an afternoon. I'd have relived all the hurt and lies and guilt for a few hours with him. Disgusting, isn't it?

It's nearly four o'clock now, and I haven't called him. I think I made it, and I think the torn scab has stopped bleeding. Pretty soon it will start re-healing, but it was a long, long day.

I wouldn't have believed I was still this vulnerable. The surprise factor's what got me—that memory sneaking up on me. Memories are like that—wispy little ghosts, little imps. They flit around your heart playing tricks on you, making you think crazy things.

I've actually been thinking about talking things over with the Hub. You know, sitting down and telling him everything. About the affair, why I had it, the kind of life I'd like to have

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with him, what I miss both in bed and out, my anxieties over Webley, my career, the whole bit. But, Jesus, the way he's been lately, I'm afraid I'll get that patronizing look and he'll say something like "Since it's behind you, let's forget about the whole thing." Could he really dismiss me like that? I'm afraid to find out. I really am. I feel so alone

Alone.

Oh, Eck, I need you. I am alive in here. I am still in here, screaming silently in these letters to poor old Eck. You're the only one who can still hear the real me. Please be patient with me and don't leave me. If you left, I'm not sure I'd make it. I'd lose a few buttons, turn into lotus-eater extraordinaire or a Stepford wife. Please don't let that happen, just be there.

Yours,

Harvey

December 10

Dear Harvey,

There are six doors that may serve as exits from the Main County Library. Three are clearly marked "Emergency Exit" and are amended with signs that warn "Alarm Will Sound." Another is a scratched, large metal affair that is next to the loading dock. The remaining two doors are for the general purpose of human ingress into and egress out of the library. They are on opposite sides of the building, both on the main floor, both adjacent to the two main checkout desks. Both are equipped with a manned security desk and metal trashcan with a swinging lid.

The two posts of security guard are filled by employees of Evermore Sentry, a company which apparently has a high turnover rate since, although their uniforms remain constant, the faces of our security guards seem to be forever changing. Even if this were not the case, and the security guards were persons to whom I was accustomed, the likelihood of me approaching him or her and inquiring about distraught women discarding lingerie and bolting out the door is akin to the likelihood of me donning a tutu and singing the national anthem from the roof of the building at noon on a Wednesday.

Clearly, if your library incident did, in fact, occur in the Main County Branch, you did not see me. Nonetheless, the lingering threat of my identity being exposed was enough to make me remove the discreet seven-by-two-inch nameplate

from the surface of my desk and to regard all female visitors with a careful eye.

Despite this situation and its inherent dread, your letter evoked in me a feeling of compassion. I wish there was some experience upon which I could draw that would tell me things will work out for you and Hub. My own rather fruitless life bears none. This existence of virtual solitude, for all its simplicity, can be both depressing and frustrating.

You are a captive of a different sort, although no less blameless for your plight than I am for my own. The lifelong bond of marriage is one that eludes many who begin it with the best intentions. I know nothing of its nuances, except that, if properly managed, matrimony is not a trap but a spiritual bond that strengthens its participants. Although the mere thought of such a monumental commitment frightens me silly—which was not always the case. There are times when I wish Dickens were not my only companion. At those times, this life of mine seems very empty, indeed. At least the key to marital bliss is within your grasp.

I watch you from 18960 Hornback Lane, #5A, and hope that you persevere with your attempts at reconciliation with Hub and that the pains such as the one you endured over your surprise discovery at the library soften quickly. In this instance, I am not completely without experience. To this day, I can still be caught off-guard and become maudlin when I see a woman with a mannerism that reminds me of Pearl. Perhaps her hand is poised at a particularly attractive angle to stifle a gentle laugh, or her scarf is tied about her neck with the knot draped loosely over her right shoulder. Just the

other day, I caught a waft of yesterday as I passed a bakery and the aroma of fresh bread caressed my senses. Baking bread was one of the things Pearl would do on Sunday mornings, usually after late Saturday nights. These foolish things...

Memories are unbearably slow to evaporate.

\* \* \* \*

I am back at this writing after having been interrupted by my doorbell. It was Mrs. Stein. She came to deliver my Christmas Eve invitation, which was disconcerting enough. To further embellish the effect, she was wearing an orange turban and a floor-length caftan with the word "freedom" spelled vertically along its length in capital letters. Mrs. Stein frequently wears odd and shocking costumes. She works at the Center of Modern Art, which inevitably is the link that connects her to so many unusual characters, her dressmaker amongst them, no doubt.

The vision of her was so distracting that I forgot myself when she handed me the invitation and said that she and the sculptor in 6B sincerely hoped I could make it this year, it being the tenth anniversary for the party. She then confided that she understands why I might be a little bashful, not knowing many of the guests. She went on to say this was specifically the point of the party, to bring people of different backgrounds together in the true spirit of the season. She and the sculptor in 6B invite everyone of whom they can think who knows no one else on the guest list. Hence, I would make an important addition to the event.

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Before I knew it, I found myself caught up in her engaging style. I told her that this year Mother would not be joining me until Christmas morning and that, although I would have to double check my calendar, I was fairly certain I would be free for the party.

Good Gracious, Harvey, now what have I done?

Yours,

Eck

December 20

Dear Eck,

I feel like a fertility goddess. Like one of those Hindu deities you see on a ninth-grade field trip to the art museum and that everyone laughs at? Yeah, one of those. My boobs are like two grapefruits, and my stomach feels like there's a honeydew trying to push out of it. Call it getting ready to bear fruit. And just in time for Christmas.

Speaking of Christmas, if I see one more dewy-eyed Virgin Mary, I think I'll scream. No one ever wants to think of her with hemorrhoids or swollen ankles or even labor pains. Well, my guess is that J.C. came into this world like all the rest of us and that Mary wasn't as springtime fresh after delivering him as everyone would like to think. It had to be a man that came up with that one—I mean that Virgin Mary thing. They get everyone believing that some chick managed to conceive without sex and the now-ideal motherhood is characterized by sweet, blessed innocence. It's supposed to overcome all of us new and soon-to-be-new mothers.

What a pile of bullshit.

Of course, Mary's being a virgin made life easier on Joseph. I'm sure he didn't have to worry about J.C. mistaking the GSJV for his father, like maybe the Hub should. You remember the GSJV, don't you, Eck? The good ol' G-Spot Jelly Vibe? The same one Webley's been seeing so much of lately? You know, that'd teach the Hub a lesson—when the baby finally says "dada" it'll be to a vibrator. I guess that's better than if he says it to the Crunch.

Actually, the Hub's a little frustrated these days. I had my ultrasound last week. He came with me, drove the technician crazy. "Can we see a close-up of that? Is that his big toe? Why are you clicking over there? Is there a problem? What does this mean?" He wouldn't shut up. Then he wanted to know Webley's sex. The technician said that because of the baby's position she wouldn't be able to tell. I laughed out loud, which prompted a kick from Webley. The Hub has been going nuts wanting to know—boy or girl. Me, I don't mind either way, and I can wait until D-day to find out.

The technician couldn't wait for us to get out of there. She practically threw the videotape at us. I'll admit that it's quite a feeling when you see this little baby kicking and moving around, but a videotape? The Hub watched it thirteen times in a row when we got home. Thirteen times. I've got to tell you, Eck, these things aren't that clear. Most of the tape is stuff only the doc understands—big white shapes and scratchy lines. But the Hub didn't care.

What's worse is that he shows the tape to everyone. I've tried to tell him no one cares about it but us, but he says, no, people are interested. Aren't you glad I'm anonymous? If you were a regular friend you'd be subjected to the videotape from hell like everyone else. I can just imagine what the Hub'll be like with his own video cam.

By the way, I decided to put the library black lace camisole incident behind me and go ahead and catch up on my reading, make good use of the time I've got on my hands because it won't be long before these hands are filled with dirty diapers. Plus, I like to think of Webley as having a mom

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

who's well rounded in areas other than her boobs and stomach. The Hub doesn't say much about my library selections, just more or less "hmphs" when I answer his questions about what I'm reading. I'm sure he'd much prefer I spend my time getting ready for Christmas and the baby instead of inside the pages of books by the likes of Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin.

Yeah, well, tough shit for him.

Merry Christmas, Eck.

Yours,

Harvey

December 23

Dear Harvey,

Not only do I have to contend with the dread of attending Mrs. Stein's Christmas Eve Party (officially titled "The Frank-N-Stein Tenth Annual Bacchanalian Unification Celebration of the Human Spirit," according to the invitation—terrifying by virtue of name alone), but I also have the continuing and unbearable pall of wondering whether or not you are a common visitor in the literary department of the Main County Library, my professional home.

When I read your last letter, your casual line regarding your ongoing bibliophilic interests implied to me that your library visits have become somewhat frequent and that the anonymity with which I have become so comfortable remains in jeopardy. Indeed, I found myself quite on edge as I sat down at my desk the next day.

As the day progressed in its usual fashion, my nervousness started to seem a bit silly. After all, my nameplate is still stowed away in my top desk drawer (I should add that I am a bit surprised that no one has mentioned its absence) and the only other public display of my name is the white-lettered "T. J. Ecklenburg, Literary Department" on the black felt Staff Directory board.

Knowing you and your characteristic juvenile flamboyance, it seemed rather unlikely you would be lurking around the literary department, spying on me from behind bookshelves and columns. No, that's not the Harvey to whom I have become accustomed. That Harvey—my Harvey—would not

have revealed herself by making an off-handed, low-key remark about the library had she known I work there. Her revelation would have been much more vocal. She undoubtedly would have come dashing over, introducing herself and creating an unseemly disturbance.

In fact, the more I considered your disclosure, the clearer it became to me that you might very well be attending any one of our satellite branches, many of which have security guards, or that you might, indeed, have been at this branch but during Saturday hours when the part-time staff covers my post. Perhaps you are the loner/browser type who enjoys perusing our carefully maintained selection of titles without assistance from staff such as myself. Perhaps you spend your time in departments other than literary. The possibilities became endless.

But, out of curiosity, I checked the status of the Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin selections in our database. For the first time during my career, I was glad to see that all them were out as usual, checked by persons who are all known to me as members of the Peaceful Christian Censorship Organization, who censor by means of constantly checking out books they find inappropriate (an infuriatingly self-righteous gang of intellectual terrorists—my sense of relief was quickly replaced by the anger this group never ceases to evoke in me).

So, I feel fairly comfortable that my identity remains anonymous. After all, you have my telephone number and address; and had you an overwhelming desire to contact me directly you could have done so ages ago. I will simply have to go on trusting you will respect my privacy. But I will,

nonetheless, continue to inspect each young woman I see for evidence of pregnancy and wonder if she is my Harvey.

My word, as if failing to display my nameplate were not enough, now I am compelled to ogle young women like some libidinous deviant. Pray my superiors take no action against such transgressions. My new practice of purchasing an Italian Sausage Mammoth for Wednesday's lunch in lieu of my more predictable tuna sandwich has prompted more than a few raised eyebrows ... and now all of this.

These are not the only ripples in my what-used-to-be calm life, or what I might call my pre-Harvey life. I am at a loss regarding what to do with the Christmas card in which you enclosed your last letter. I cannot file it under "C" with the six others I have received and add you to the annual list as I usually would. Perhaps the word "usually" does not apply. The same six names have been on my Christmas card list for ten years. The last deletion was a result of Professor Reisenpfeiffer's death—an English professor from my days at university. He was 103 when he died.

It's too bad, really. I would have rather enjoyed adding you to the otherwise dull collection, but I suppose I will have to be content with simply attaching this correspondence to a festive card I shall select especially for you and placing it along with the rest of these futile ramblings. One good deed deserves another, and you were so thoughtful as to send a holiday card chosen exclusively for me—at least, I hope it was, judging from your portrayal of the outlaws and Hub's business associates. I doubt they would capture the intended Christmas spirit from a card that features a fleet of nude

women on motorcycles clad only in red Santa caps with white trim—I can do no less for you.

But enough of this, I see the time runs dear and I have yet to purchase my host and hostess gifts for tomorrow's festivities. I have decided on a fruitcake for the sculptor in 6B and a package of individually wrapped chocolate-covered rum cherries for Mrs. Stein, so I am off to the gourmet delicatessen—but not before I send my warmest holiday thoughts to Harvest Moon, Sir Webley and Hub.

Yours,  
Eck

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

Christmas Night

Dear Harvey,

I am indebted to you, indebted one apology. I believe I wrote to you some time ago about how I could never imagine myself in a hungover state. I am forced at this time to humbly recant that statement.

Although my symptoms are a bit different from your "barstool mouth" and "greasy bar-film," they are equally vile. In addition to having lost control of my small motor functions, there is an inexplicable twitch in my left thumb that has been with me throughout the day. It repeats itself five times in rapid succession, with each batch of palpitations occurring

every nine minutes. It is now nearly ten o'clock on Christmas night, and fortunately, there are some small improvements in my self-induced condition. The throbbing in my head has subsided to a continuous dull thud, and although the sandpaper that had taken the place of my tongue today is still there, it has been replaced with a finer grade.

When I arrived at Mrs. Stein's at six-fifteen, I was, once again, the first guest. The sculptor in 6B reintroduced himself to me as Frank. He and Mrs. Stein were scampering about, ensuring all was ready for the party. As I expected, they were both very polite and engaged me in animated conversation, which helped to dispel the awkwardness I felt at being the first to arrive. Mrs. Stein offered me a glass of punch. I accepted, which was my first step toward utter social destruction.

By seven o'clock, the other guests were arriving in droves. Predictably, the crowd was utterly unpredictable. Since our hosts were busy receiving guests, I helped myself to another glass of punch and a bite of rumaki. (I should also say that my gifts were carefully displayed by the coffee urn. Although I did not track the fate of the fruitcake, the last I saw of the rum cherries was when a young woman—I think it was a woman—named Didi was serving them to other guests off her tongue. Everyone commented on how delicious the cherries were. I was glad to see they were enjoyed. I have always maintained that a thoughtful hostess gift never goes unappreciated.)

The rumaki, along with the other tidbits, was very good. The punch was especially refreshing, and I was filling my cup for a third time in no time.

As the party progressed, I found I was enjoying myself, even having a good time. I had a lengthy discussion with Frank, who, it turns out, is a most agreeable and interesting fellow, and another man, who wore an excessive amount of eye paint. We talked at length about the homoerotic literature of the ancient Greeks. Both gentlemen were very well read.

I found out later in the evening that Frank is among those who practice an alternative lifestyle, as were a number of the other guests. This was demonstrated most notably when Mrs. Stein announced that the "Celebratory Dance of Sexual and Human Freedom" was beginning. A lurid version of the tango ensued. The dancers may have been overtly sensual, but they were all very skilled. One of the other guests informed me that the dance goes on every year and that all the participants are men, a fact I found fascinating, as some of the dancers were, by all outward appearances, very attractive and feminine women. As you say, I guess you never know.

Frank and his partner (who was a man dressed as a man) performed marvelously and were awarded with a trophy fashioned after a large phallus. Judging from the statue's numerous lipstick stains, marks and scuffs, I gleaned that this was also an annual tradition.

Being one who has always found homophobia an odious affliction of the immature and uneducated, I was not put off by any of this. I was, however, astonished at my own realization that Frank and Mrs. Stein were not, are not and

will probably never be romantically involved, as I had previously suspected, a revelation of great interest to me.

When Mrs. Stein started the piñata festivities, I am unsure exactly how many cups of punch I had had, but the number was sufficiently large enough to eliminate most, if not all, of my usual sensibility. When my turn at the piñata came up, I donned the blindfold and dealt my blows with sufficient vigor to loose the cache. Everyone yipped with delight, and I was able to collect one of the prizes on the floor before they were all scooped up. It was a chocolate confection on a stick shaped as what, I think, was a vagina.

This was only one of my stellar performances. During the course of the evening, I did the hokey-pokey, sang along with a group of women to a song called "Having My Baby" without benefit of knowing the words (I may have even shouted a dedication to you at some point during the chorus) and partook of several Flaming Shapiros.

I have no idea what time it was when Mrs. Stein asked if we could perhaps sneak off to my apartment for a nightcap. This seemed like an excellent idea, and I told her I would be delighted to finish off the evening with her and a chilled martini.

The relative quiet of my apartment gave us both a second wind, and we each had three nightcaps. Despite my altered state, there is no doubt that Mrs. Stein is charming company, a compliment I doled out repeatedly last night. When I finally bid her Merry Christmas with a prolonged kiss (which I still cannot believe), it was nearly six in the morning.

I awoke at noon to the sound of my doorbell. It was Mother, right on time. I sat up and realized I was still wearing my suit from last night but thought, in my cloud of lingering semi-inebriation, no matter, and answered the door.

Mother came in and regarded me with some disdain. I looked down to see what had got her attention and noticed that the chocolate vagina sucker was protruding from my breast pocket. I excused myself for a moment and invited her to make herself at home while I showered.

In the bathroom mirror, I found that, in addition to an appalling pallor, I had a number of lipstick marks upon my collar and face. As I stated at the beginning of this letter, my internal condition was also in a dire state. Four aspirins and an excruciatingly hot shower strengthened me for the day's (thankfully) understated holiday celebration.

Mother dismissed the entire subject of my initial physical appearance. This was just as well—it is best to simply get past some things. We spent the day as we always do with a brief gift exchange followed by an early baked ham dinner at Francisco's. I am ashamed to admit that the cocktail I reluctantly ordered before our meal not only tasted better than I expected but eliminated a large portion of the hangover's fogginess. I believe the common term for this phenomenon is "hair of the dog."

After dinner, Mother and I returned to my apartment for sherry and fruitcake. The senior community bus picked her up at eight-fifteen. I have since been stewing over my own shame and embarrassment.

The realization of my actions is just now maturing. What of my early-morning rendezvous with Mrs. Stein? I cannot have her regarding me as some sort of philandering rogue. I suppose I shall be obliged to ask her out to dinner, maybe a movie. That is to say, I suppose I will have to ask her for a date.

A date.

Of all the things I would never have believed, this is easily foremost among them. Dates have been absent from my life since those long-ago days with Pearl; and as I have said before, I was a very different man then. Last night's spell of gallantry was brought on in no small part by the enormous amount of alcohol I consumed.

But I will eventually have to face Mrs. Stein while sober and do so with dignity and grace. How I will manage to do this eludes me as yet, and this is only the resolution to one of last night's indiscretions. What of my other shenanigans? All I can do is hope that the other guests failed to notice me, which is not so farfetched. Granted, my behavior sounds outrageous when described singularly, but, in the company of transsexual tango dancers and persons eating chocolate rum cherries off one another's tongues, it was not remarkable. There is also the reassurance that nearly everyone at the party had had a great deal to drink.

How far I have come, from a moderate and controlled user of alcohol, to this—a drunken sot whose only hope of salvation lies in the memory-erasing effects of demon rum. Ugh.

Fortunately, I had scheduled my remaining vacation over the next few days. I will judiciously use that time to repair myself and ready a plan for my next encounter with Mrs. Stein.

Your wretched confidant,  
Eck

January 8

Dear Eck,

So, I get this package on Christmas Eve. It was from an old friend, from back in my single days. Nice to get something unexpected once in a while.

Mark and I met years ago at a motorcycle parts shop where he worked at the time. First I was his customer (a very frequent and flirty customer), then his lover; and then, when that didn't work out so well, we ended up as friends—and pretty good ones at that. Probably should have started on the friends square and saved ourselves a lot of embarrassment. Yeah, well. What are you gonna do?

So, there was this letter, Hihowyadoin'-things-are-still-the-same-with-me-it's-sure-been-a-while sort of thing. The letter was shoved inside of a book—*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Mark always accused me of being too philosophical, which for a guy like him means knowing your Zodiac sign. I suppose that's all right. The world needs more simple men.

But in his letter, he said there was a line in the book that reminded him of me. I tore into the thing right away. When I got to page sixty-one I found the line Mark was talking about. The author claims that women avoid mechanical maintenance because of its dirt, grease and negative romantic appeal. That passage was underlined for my benefit. I smiled when I saw it, glad to see Mark's still got a sense of humor. And if a line like that makes a man think of me, I don't mind. Mark

probably didn't get too much farther than that because the book does get really, really weird.

But I enjoyed the motorcycle stuff. I always have liked to do my own repairs and mechanical work. Considering my new reading kick, I thought the gift was pretty perceptive for someone I haven't seen in nearly five years.

The book got me thinking that I should take some time and clean up my own scooter. Good for the soul. If it weren't so damn cold out...

After New Year's, I thought, what the hell, I'll wheel the bike in the house where it's warm and go over it. No harm in that. I got it into the utility room without any problem. I started giving it a real going-over. Disassembled the carburetor, took a look at the fuel line and filter—the whole bit. I was having a pretty good time. I hadn't done any tools-n-grease stuff in ages—since ChemCo—and I missed it more than I realized. I got so involved that I didn't even notice the time.

I put the spark plugs back in (they looked fine) and wanted to see if she'd start. Just for a second, who wouldn't? Well, she did. And with a huge puff of black smoke at that. Unfortunately, at the precise moment when she did, the Hub walked in.

He probably wouldn't have been so mad except for all that smoke and exhaust-stink. Plus, she was making quite a racket. He started hollering and waving his arms like all hell. I cut the engine as soon as I saw him. He spent the next hour airing out the utility room with fans, opening the doors,

muttering and grouching the whole time. I think it was about fifteen degrees in the house by the time he was done.

It took the better part of the evening, but I finally convinced him to let me keep the bike in the utility room for one more day, finish the tune-up and then clean her up, polish the chrome and whatnot. He reluctantly agreed, provided I swore up and down that I wouldn't start it in the house again. Even I had to admit that it stunk the place up in a hurry. Fair's fair.

So, there I was the next day, happy as a clam, humming and going over various nuts and bolts, dabbing oil into crevices. Making spokes gleam. I had Van Morrison on the stereo and I was feeling fine. That's when the phone rang.

Lo-And-Fucking-Behold if it wasn't the Crunch, just in time to ruin a perfectly good love-in between a girl and her motorcycle. Excuse me, a four-and-a-half-month-pregnant girl and her motorcycle.

I couldn't believe it. Bear in mind, I hadn't talked to him in over three months. His voice alone threw me off-balance. The last time I even thought about him was when I wrote you after I found that stupid black lace camisole.

He started with his bullshit. Hello and how am I feeling and how were the holidays and the usual long-time-no-see stuff. I told him I got laid off. He sympathized, sounded sincere. I managed to stay aloof, tried to keep in mind that he had no idea what I went through after he dumped me. For all he knew, I drove away that day with a heart that was light as a feather.

Then he got to the heart of the call, started talking about the wife and how things haven't been so good at home. How one of the kids got picked up by the cops with a bag of grass and the other one is flunking out and the wife is blaming him for that and everything else that's wrong in the world, including the shitty weather. While he was talking I was thinking, Gee, let me guess. Along with all that, things aren't going so good in the bedroom, either, are they?

But I didn't say a word. I kept uh-huh-ing and what have you. Funny how a few months and a river of tears can change what used to be the most passionate conversations into the most perfunctory. There was a time when he would have detailed every activity he and Wifey were (or were not) carrying out in the bedroom, and I would have let it bleed about the Hub and me and our own sexual dissolution. But things were different, and he knew it, knew he'd have to handle me carefully. He made sure the conversation stayed on a better-than-friends level and didn't move to a way-better-than-friends level. And actually, he was doing pretty good. For a while. Then he had to go and do it.

"I was wondering if you were busy later this week," he said.

"Busy?" I said, "Why?"

"Well, I was thinking the two of us could have lunch." Lunch.

Right. Lunch. Uh-huh. I know all about lunch. Lunch seems innocent enough, but it can turn very seedy very fast. The Crunch and I have finished off lunch in a motel room on more than one occasion. And I know the Crunch well enough to

know that any moral dilemma he'd have about getting the pregnant me in bed is directly related to how horny he is. And I know I keep talking about how I look like a fertility goddess, but I actually have been pretty lucky in the weight gain department. I've only put on about ten pounds so far and half of that's in boobs. And I know the Crunch could easily overlook a lot of things, including a little potbelly. Hell, he might even think it's cute.

"Maybe that place you used to love so much," he said.  
"The one with the potato pancakes."

"And the fresh flowers."

"I'd love to see you," he said, his voice a regular purr. "If only for an hour or two."

"I don't know," I said, grinning from ear to ear. "How about I get back to you. There's no rush is there?" Let him stare at the phone for a day or two.

There was a pause. "I miss you," he said quietly.

"I call you later this week," I said, feeling the beginning of hot tears in the corners of my eyes despite the smile on my lips. "I've got to go."

"Call me."

I hung up the phone.

It's funny, Eck, there's so much temptation. And it's pulling me in two very different directions. I'm tempted to not call at all or to call and tell him I'll be there and then not show, or maybe call him and be really hurtful and mean. Then there's that other temptation, that age-old temptation we all know and love. I know it wouldn't be very difficult to get him in bed. And I know how good it can be in bed with him. And by

now I know everything there is to know about the GSJV, which, to be honest with you, has its limitations. Vibrators can be competent, but they haven't read any good books lately, if you know what I mean. And I do love those potato pancakes.

Creature comforts. Jesus.

Eck, what the hell am I going to do? That son of a bitch. Just when he was honestly starting to fade away, the son of a bitch has to call and start this kind of shit. That bastard. That wonderful bastard.

Yours,  
Harvey

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

January 12

Dear Eck,  
Here goes.

I waited until the eleventh hour—Friday morning—to call the Crunch. It was nice to feel in control of something. I got his absolutely annoying voice mail. I left a message saying I'd be at the café around noon; then I left the phone off the hook for the rest of morning. If his plans didn't coincide with mine, tough shit. I would wait for him until ten after then leave if he wasn't there. And, assuming he did show up, I would behave like an adult, have lunch and some talk and then leave.

Alone. Yeah, that was my plan all right. I would be Harvey the Confident.

But to be honest, as I was getting ready—and I did spend a long time getting ready—I was nervous as a cat. What would it be like? Would I burst into tears when I saw him? Would I be the aloof-one-minute-sexy-the-next girl he always found so seductive? Would he try to seduce me? What if he didn't? What if he took one look at me and rolled his eyes?

I tried on about every outfit I own and ended up wearing the very first one I had tried on and rejected—a black sweater that's big enough to pass as a dress with a pair of black tights and my high-heeled boots (what I call my hooker boots, the ones the Crunch used to love, the ones he used to ask me to leave on while we did it).

Anyhow, the outfit seemed to hide all evidence of pregnancy, which is why I chose it. When I figured I looked as good as I was going to look, I gave myself a final once-over in the mirror and decided I would let the afternoon unravel all on its own. I've never been good at putting on airs anyway. Off I went.

He was there when I got there. He was exactly as I remembered. And when his head turned and our eyes met, it was like the first time I ever saw him. Everything came right back at me like—zing! There was even a little bit of that old tickly, tingly excitement he used to stir in me. Crazy, just crazy.

He was all there. All of him, right there.

That smile (God, how I loved his mouth and all the wonderful things he could do with it). Those blue eyes (God,

how I loved his eyes and the way they used to look at me and make me feel like the most gorgeous creature on earth). Those hands (God, dear sweet Jesus, his hands). His shirt was opened at the top, and I could see some of the hair from his chest peeking out. (God, that fine, curly hair). Yeah, I remembered the Captain all right.

"You're wearing the boots," he said, one eyebrow arched.

I laughed, sat down. "I wasn't sure you'd remember."

"How could I forget?"

And he was leaning forward, elbows on the table. And he had that wry little grin. And he was looking into my eyes and I was turning into, well, melted butter. And don't think for a minute that I wasn't laying it on every bit as thick. Sideways glances, chin on fist. Licked lips.

"So," I said, "how come you're not wearing a tie?"

"Took the rest of the afternoon off."

"Oh?"

"Didn't want to feel rushed," he said.

"I see."

The restaurant hadn't changed. The potato pancakes were delicious, and served under a mountain of steaming baked apples. It was all coming back to me. There was a reason I got involved with this guy. This was fun.

"Sure you won't have a little wine?" he asked.

"Okay," I said. "Why not? I'd love a glass."

And I had forgotten how sexy and charming the Captain could be, how powerful our chemistry was. Believe me, Eck, sitting across from him and flirting, it was fun and it felt good to be the center of attention, to have a man interested in me

for me—Harvey, the woman—instead of being interested in me because I'm the world's most unlikely Madonna. And it was a welcome change to talk to someone about something other than all that baby and pregnancy stuff.

"*Tropic of Cancer* is one of my all-time favorites."

"You probably only liked the dirty parts," I said.

"But of course."

He kept telling me how great I look, in a way that made me believe him. Could I really be almost five months pregnant? And he's missed me. A lot. I was important to him. On and on he went, pushing all the right buttons.

It was nearly two-thirty when the last sip of wine sluiced down my throat and I noticed we were alone in the restaurant. The bill was on the table. I felt like we'd just sat down, but it was time to go.

"This is on me," he said.

"Thanks."

"So what's next?" he asked.

"I don't know." I shrugged my shoulders. "Childbirth?"

He laughed. "I mean this afternoon. What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Laundry."

"Sounds captivating," he said.

"You've never really lived until you've looked the rinse cycle straight in the eye."

"Really?" he said. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out the key. He set it on the table and pushed it towards me with a deliberate finger. Room number 119. "Can't the rinse cycle wait?"

And that feeling started way down deep inside of me. That craving, that need. That unmistakable desire. The insistent want of sex, whole body sex. Instinct. It was that age-old female animal need for the male body. Hard and hairy and musky and...

"Meet me there?" The words came out of my mouth like so many birds from a newly opened cage.

"Ten minutes," he said.

"Ten minutes too long." I swallowed hard.

The drive was endless. I was blinded. All I wanted to do was get into bed with that man. I wanted to wrap myself around him and be one hundred-and-ten percent woman. I wanted to gorge myself with sex, with his sex, take out my frustration on him. I wanted to consume him until there was nothing left. I was crazed. Nothing was going to stop me.

We parked next to each other right in front of the room. There were no other cars in the lot. A blustery cold wind was blowing snow all around. I huddled next to him and watched his hands as he fumbled with the key. It got stuck for a minute, and I stamped my feet and pulled my coat around my neck as he jiggled the thing and kept saying "shitshitshit." When the door finally unlocked, we were in the room and on each other in a flash.

And then it was kissing and hands and clothes coming off. And more kisses and moans and hands on flesh. I guess you'd call it a frenzy. And he was everything I remembered. Everything.

And then, Eck, something happened.

I caught my reflection in the mirror. Side view. And it struck me. Something about the way I looked. I stopped. I put my hands on his chest.

"Wait," I said.

His hands dropped to his sides. I walked to the mirror. It was as though I was seeing myself—really seeing myself pregnant—for the first time. I put my hands on my round belly. I was alive, full of desire and creation and energy. He came up behind me and looked in the mirror. I studied his face. It was empty.

"I can't do this," I said. "I'm sorry."

When he saw the look in my eyes and realized there was no changing my mind, his eyebrows collapsed.

"But..." He started to say something. I shook my head and crossed my arms over my chest. He let his hands drop from my shoulders to his sides and sighed a sigh that was flavored with a little bit of anger and a lot of disappointment.

We said goodbye. My goodbye was aloof and apologetic, his was tight and full of frustration. I think it was the abruptness of the thing that got to him. He really thought we were going to fall back into it. Who could blame him? We were naked in a motel room. But when my button turned off, it turned all the way off, and I know he felt it, too. I couldn't do it. The girl that was about to get between those flimsy motel sheets was the same girl who gets between the crisp white sheets at home. And the satisfaction I might have gotten there in room 119 wouldn't have lasted as long as a snowflake on the tongue.

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

So I drove through the storm, feeling a little bewildered. I thought I would have felt disgusted with myself, or maybe victorious. Something. I didn't. I felt like me. And I've got one man who doesn't want me sexually and another who wants me only sexually. I'm not sure I want either of them. I'm not sure of anything anymore.

I went home and started the laundry.

Yours (I think),

Harvey

January 15

Dear Harvey,

I am continually amazed at the unsolicited education regarding female sexuality with which you provide me. Furthermore, although your letter ended on an odd note, I am glad you found the wherewithal to fend off the formidable charms of that Crunch chap and room 119.

However, with things the way they are with you and Hub, I could not have faulted you too much had you succumbed to your desire. Perhaps you should continue to focus your attention on that mechanical jelly device to which you refer so often, at least for the time being. Perhaps it is lacking in range and not as physically complex and intriguing as "whole body sex," but at least it delivers dependably and without emotional baggage, which can be said of neither the Hub nor that Crunch chap when it comes to matters of the bedroom.

And now here I am discussing a mechanical jelly marital aid as though it were a perfectly appropriate everyday topic, suitable for dinner conversation. It is, indeed, a good thing that these ramblings will never be read by anyone. I should amend that statement and say although this education has been highly inappropriate, it is not unappreciated. Particularly if I am ever called upon by Mrs. Stein (or any member of the fairer sex) in a carnal sense.

But I suppose I am getting ahead of myself. I have only seen Mrs. Stein once since Christmas Eve. It was two days after the party. She was waiting in the main foyer of the building for a taxicab to take her to the airport. I was on my

way out to the Starlight Inn for a martini and already approaching her when she turned and our eyes met.

I would not have avoided her, but I was a bit embarrassed, as I had not yet sent her or Frank a thank-you note, and although I knew the two of us might happen upon one another, my plan regarding what to say in such a case was fragmented at best. But there we were, face-to-face. If the temperature increase of my head was any indication, I bloomed to an alarming shade of red.

Mrs. Stein smiled in that fetching way of hers and said hello. Still unable to speak with any fluency, my mouth fumbled out the word "Trip?" as I pointed to her luggage. She nodded and said she was going to visit her sister in Florida for a few weeks. My uneasiness must have been obvious, as she took the conversational lead and started to make small talk, giving me a chance to collect myself.

Eventually, I found my voice. I thanked her for inviting me to the party and told her that I had had a splendid time. I commented on what superior hosts she and Frank were. She said they had been friends for some time. So, we continued.

I should add that Mrs. Stein had the good sense and discretion not to embarrass me by bringing up either our Christmas morning tryst or any of my party antics. In almost no time, I found myself at ease with her much as I had been during our previous moments alone, and this time my nerves did not have the benefit of anesthetic.

All too soon, her cab pulled into the drive. I carried her bags out to it while wishing her bon voyage. After she was settled in the back of the taxi, she opened the window and

avored me with another radiant smile. Evening was falling, as was a delicate snow. I was for that moment enchanted.

I blurted, "Please, Mrs. Stein, allow me to repay the favor of the party and take you to dinner when you return. I would be so delighted."

She cast down her eyes with what I can only call a girlish coyness, and an attractive rise of blush overcame her cheek this time. She simply said, "Excuse me, Mr. Ecklenburg, but I think we know each other well enough for you to call me Kate;" and with that she faced forward, tapped the cabby on the shoulder and the taxi pulled out of the drive.

My gaze followed it until the taillights twinkled away. Even the usually ceaseless traffic seemed to take an intermission to watch this tender scene. For those moments, I felt the most exhilarating tingle.

Then the herd of internal combustion beasts resumed their trek. But even their clamor was not enough to squelch my mood. The streetlights reflected on blue-white diamonds in the snow, and I was beckoned to walk along the renewed virgin sidewalks for what must have been an hour before settling down at the Starlight Inn. Be assured, the intoxicating effects of my two martinis were nothing compared to those of Mrs. Stei—excuse me—Kate. (I must get used to that.)

So, I await her return. I am prepared to talk to her—no, that is an insufficient description. More accurately, I find I am giddy with anticipation and I am delighted to be so. Imagine, a man of fifty-six...

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

I wish I could bottle my infatuation and send some along to you and Hub. I know you could both use some romantic inspiration these days. However, I can well understand how being welcomed home by the ominous bombilations of a motorcycle emanating from the utility room could dampen a man's more affectionate tendencies. Really, Harvey, perhaps your charm school instructors neglected to mention that starting your motorcycle in the house is considered poor form in most circles.

Yours,  
Eck

January 20

Dear Eck,

It's the middle of the endless winter.

I'm five months pregnant.

I'm sick of housework.

None of my clothes fit.

All of my friends go to work during the week and to the bar on Friday night.

I don't have a job. I'm too fat to go to the bar.

I don't want to go shopping.

I don't want to do the baby's room.

That was me this morning, staring out at the icicles and snowdrifts. My tea was cold. The paper was filled with page after page of bad news I didn't want to read. I felt so cooped up—in my house, in my own body.

I felt like shit.

I was thinking maybe I'd go to the library, but I was sick of that, too. Then something caught my eye. It was a perfect image of myself staring back at me from the lower lefthand corner of page 9E. It was one of those fertility goddesses. Just like I remembered from the ninth grade field trip. She had big boobs, a big stomach and sullen expression. She was chipped out of rough gray stone.

Me.

It was an ad for the Art Museum. The caption said:

Looking for a date? So is she.

Do something different.

Do art.

Not a bad idea. I hadn't been to the museum since the field trip. Do art.

I prepared to *carpe diem*. I showered, makeupped, perfumed, put on something other than the sweatshirt and stretch pants I've been living in (Okay, I didn't want to say it, but I put on MATERNITY PANTS).

Do something different.

It was mostly forced motions, but at least it was something. I dutifully walked through the galleries, but instead of feeling enlightened, I only got more depressed. Beautiful paintings created by people who were long since dead. Huge woven tapestries hanging on walls that were thousands of miles from the walls upon which they were intended to hang. Ancient pieces of pottery that were once someone's lunch dish. Who cares? Would someone want to look at my chipped Corning Ware casseroles in a thousand years?

It was worse than I'd imagined. I couldn't even do art successfully.

I got on the elevator, figured I could at least do the snack bar. There was a woman there, about my age. She was with her kid, a little girl. Really cute kid, a toddler in a stroller.

But this woman wasn't wearing pastel slacks and a cardigan, or sweats, or a wrap-around skirt. She was wearing jeans and (real) workboots and a thick, cable-knit sweater. I looked at her and wanted to scream, "Aha! Finally! Someone's made it to the other side intact!" I smiled politely instead.

The elevator stopped. There was a sign that said Contemporary Gallery one way and Art a la Carte Bistro the other way (apparently the nachos-and-cola snack bar I remembered from high school had been upgraded). The woman headed towards the Gallery, which was behind a huge set of glass doors. Her shoulder bag fell to the floor as she struggled with the stroller and the heavy door.

I ran up behind her. "Let me," I said, opening the door for her.

She deflated with a sigh of relief. "Thanks," she said.

I didn't know how to continue the conversation, so I walked in behind her and started walking around—maybe the new stuff would give me the lift I was looking for.

But the huge black canvas, the four giant Elvises compliments of Andy Warhol and the six-foot-tall inflating/deflating ice bag left me flat. I sat down on a bench in front of some gigantic, unidentifiable sculpture. I must have looked as bad as I felt, because the woman from the elevator came up to me and nodded hello. She sat down next to me and started rummaging through her bag. She pulled out a baby cup and gave it to the little girl. Plastic baby cups. How do you learn that stuff?

"Mind if I ask you something?" she said.

"No," I said.

"You okay?"

I snorted a little laugh. "I'm five months pregnant, it's the middle of January, and I'm worried that I'll never know to carry a purple-and-green plastic cup that's shaped like an elephant head in my shoulder bag."

"Oh, so that's it," she said. "You looked like you were about to jump off a bridge."

"Don't tempt me," I said.

"I remember those days."

I didn't know what to say. I looked down. Her kid was so good. Looking around and drinking from that cup. Would my kid be that good?

"So, what do you think of *Simple Bond*?"

"What?" I asked.

"This sculpture," she said "It's called *Simple Bond*."

"It's all right, I guess."

"You don't see it," she said. "Come on, get up. I took a course with the guy who did this. Guy was unbelievable. Come on."

I felt kind of stupid, but I stood just the same.

"This piece was meant to be in the center of a rotunda, on a rotating platform, but he lost the commission with the airport. You've got to walk around it to see them. Keep looking at it and moving. You'll see."

I walked around. I didn't see anything other than a hunk of dull gray metal. She looked at me. I smiled uncomfortably.

"Keep looking," she said.

And then it started to come out. Like one of those 3D pictures in the Sunday comics you have to stare at a certain way to get. It was amazing. Every still view of it meant nothing. It was all about the motion, the rotating. It was two giant hands, like two people walking hand-in-hand. But the way it worked—like magic.

"Ah," she said, "you see it."

I nodded. "It's amazing," I said. "But *Simple Bond*? There's nothing simple about it."

"Exactly," she said.

And I looked at her, and I looked at her kid. And I wanted to cry. And I wanted to laugh. I wanted to start the day over.

"Well, gotta go," she said.

I nodded. "Nice talking to you," I said, unable to think of anything else.

"Don't worry," she paused. "You'll be okay." She turned the stroller to leave.

I wanted to run after her. I wanted to tell her that I lost my job and I lost my boyfriend and that I'm on the brink of losing my husband. I wanted to tell her that most of my friends are electricians, men who can only understand so much, and that my one best friend doesn't have any kids and doesn't know how I feel. I wanted to ask her how she seemed so at ease, how she seemed like a normal, adjusted, put-together woman with a kid attached. I wanted to ask her where she got the confidence. I rushed to where she was struggling with that huge door again.

"Here you go" was all I said as I opened it.

"Thanks again," she said as she pushed the stroller through.

And she got on the elevator, with her kid and her tan leather workboots and her cable knit sweater and her olive drab canvas backpack that did not look like it contained plastic baby cups and diapers.

Bye.

Bye, person who might have been my friend, my soul mate.

Going to some snazzy bistro called Art a la Carte by myself was way too depressing. I walked around the sculpture again. *Simple Bond*.

There's nothing simple about it. Two hands.

Exactly.

My gloominess of just minutes before began to melt away. That beautiful statue. I was in on its secret. *Simple Bond*. There's nothing simple about it. Or motherhood—or wifedom, for that matter. Or any part of this. But I see the hands. I get it. I see it. It's okay.

I get it.

Me. Mememememe. I get it. Me.

A jolt of confidence coursed through me. It told me, *Yes, you*.

You can do this!

It was the first time I'd felt this way since this whole thing started. I felt it all at once. It was going to be okay. I was going to succeed, plastic elephant baby cup included. I was going to make it. Everything faded into a easy kind of wonderful. I wanted to get home, tell the Hub. Let him know that I figured it out. The light came on. There's nothing simple about it, I'd tell him. But don't worry, honey, I can do this!

I drove home feeling exhilarated, finally in control of something.

He listened. He straightened a dishtowel. He gave me a smile of encouragement.

"There's nothing simple about it," I said.

"Of course there isn't," he said. Then he leaned on the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "But while we're on the subject, I'm not too keen on the idea of you driving around, you know, downtown. Particularly in the neighborhood around the museum. And particularly when you're alone."

"I didn't realize we were on that subject," I said. "But now that you've brought it up, that's right. I'm alone. I know I'm alone," I said. "I'm alone all day every day. Do you have any idea of how cooped up I get?"

He came over and hugged me. "Oh, sweetheart," he said. "I know you're lonely. I know that the ChemCo thing is still bothering you. It's only a few more months. And then the baby will be here and everything will be different."

I pushed him away. "What's going to be different? You? Me? What's going to be different?"

"Everything. Trust me," he said. "We'll be a family."

"And a family is made up of people. See, that's what I'm talking about. Our relationships, how we're in control of this. Of us. You. Me. Webley."

"Don't call him that," he snapped.

"What?"

"Webley," he said. "Don't call the baby Webley. It's stupid. It doesn't mean anything."

"Webley," I said, my lips curling into a smart-ass smile.

"WebleyWebleyWebleyWebley."

The Hub sighed, shook his head. "Are we done now?"

"WebleyWebleyWebleyWebleyWebley."

"I'm turning on the news." He turned and started walking away.

So he went into the family room while I kept up the Webley chant to his back. I heard the television come on. That's when I went to the den to sit down and write you. I had to get my thoughts down before they evaporated completely. I wanted to hold on to the confidence I'd gotten in the museum.

It's no help. I still feel like shit, just like I did when I gazed at that stone goddess this morning.

Maybe I should have dove into that bed with the Crunch. No, that's stupid. I'm just frustrated. Nothing is clear anymore. Stupid museum. Stupid sculpture. Woman was probably just another jerk. I should have gone to the library.

Yeah, yeah,

Harvey

January 25

Dear Harvey,

I suppose, short of turning in my resignation, I have no choice but to continue to go to my job each day and try not to obsess over whether or not you will present yourself to me. I will try not to worry about whether or not you will one day step in front of my desk and deflate when you discover that the Eck to whom you write is, in reality, a small and insignificant man. I will try not to think about the look of disappointment that might overcome your face when you find your Eck is far from a Big Man on Campus, or a "great guy." I will try not to imagine your forced politeness when your Eck is revealed as a shy man who wears two wristwatches and whose pate is as bald and reflective as a bowling ball. I will try, each day, not to think how you might try to disguise your repugnance when you find that your Eck is a somewhat punctilious man whose life thus far has been drab and sheltered and hermit-like, and whose only true companion is a parakeet named Dickens.

As I read your last letter, it drew my attention to a rather astonishing realization about myself. I am also guilty of "mostly forced motions." That is to say, although I know the history of the place I have been working for the past thirty-two years, I don't believe I've considered the humanity of it.

If my calculations are correct, I estimate I've spent more than 124,000 hours at my post in the Literary Department of the Main County Library. Although I would not venture a guess regarding the number of miles I have walked upon the

floor of our department, I do know that each of my steps and each irritating clack of Ms. Beckett's heels has occurred on a tile mosaic floor. I can easily recount the mundane facts regarding the floor. *Celestial Creation* measures fifty-seven by thirty feet and contains more than two hundred thousand hand-cut tiles. It was designed by John Dylan, who died by his own hand prior to the completion of the project. The actual construction took more than a year, and was completed by a team of four craftsmen. And, although the full effect of the mosaic cannot be appreciated due to freestanding bookshelves and furniture, the blazing sun, the tranquil moon and the meticulous depiction of Earth are undeniable.

What of these things? Why have I never considered the love and obsession that went into this creation? And this man, John Dylan, what of him? Imagine being such a man, full of imagination and beauty one moment, then lost in hopelessness and pain the next. Perhaps the obsession that drove him to create is the same one that ultimately drove him to his demise.

How can it be that I never before considered these things?

Of course, I know that three young men died in the construction of the grand old lady known simply to most people as "the library," but what of their families? Perhaps there are still relatives who pass through the giant columns of the front entranceway and remark to their companions "My great-great-grandfather died here." Would pride or regret accompany words such as these?

I have been unaware, a dullard, a cow as she chews upon her cud and gazes vacantly at a passing train. I have smugly garnered particulars and details and facts, imagining all the while that this encyclopedic knowledge lent me a certain superiority.

But it is unspeakably insufficient.

No one recorded the stoic expressions on the faces of the craftsmen as they cut their fingertips on the sharp edges of the tiny ceramic tiles, or how many drops of blood mixed with the mortar of the resulting fractured masterpiece.

All this to house a book.

First a simple book, plain words upon a page, pages between two covers; then books upon shelves, each categorically and alphabetically and numerically organized. Gazing at an orderly bookshelf has always had a calming effect on me.

I was wrong yet again.

There is nothing further from calm than a shelf full of books. For these are the screams and the shouts and the moans of humanity, quiet only on the outside. Each volume might appear dignified and solemn as it sits between its brethren, but all of that changes as soon as you open the pages and look through a window to another's soul.

I well imagine the hordes of people who sit day after day in cubicles, staring at indifferent computer screens that offer them dull statistics and bar charts. All the while I am upon a chair that is positioned over a blazing sun, and surrounded by an endless hall of rainbows painted with words. I am a lucky man.

A lucky man who is now hungry in a cerebral sense and will soon be hungry in a corporeal sense. To that end, I have asked Kate (a familiarity to which I still cannot become accustomed) to lunch with me at Art a la Carte (the cafe in the art museum, the very same as your updated nachos-and-cheese snack bar). I thought this would appeal to her bohemian side and simultaneously satisfy the curiosity you have raised in me. Kate, being an employee of the Center of Modern Art, ought to be able to tell me all about *Simple Bond*, in which I am still interested despite the dismal tone of your last letter's end. Plus an outing of this sort is completely respectable, and it should offer a nice change from my mostly mundane Saturdays.

Eck

February 8

Dear Eck,

When I finally pried my eyes opened this morning at ten after eleven, I thought, Oh, joy, another day of being pregnant and clueless. I peered out the window. The sun was shining brilliantly, which only meant that every dust plume created by my enormous heft as it plopped upon any given upholstered surface in our house would be dazzlingly illuminated. I got up, threw on a ratty bathrobe and went to face the world.

The Hub wasn't in the house. I went to see if he was in the garage. When I opened the door, the mild air hit me.

It was warm out.

"It's warm out," I said to the Hub, who was fumbling under the hood of my car.

"Fifty-three," he said.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Figured I'd take advantage and do a safety inspection on the Toyota," he said.

"On a day like this?" I said. "In the middle of February? You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Lannnguage."

I rolled my eyes and went back inside. I had to do something, couldn't waste a day like this. I went and got dressed, put on my new pair of maternity jeans—and believe me, I need them. It's like I turned into that eggplant overnight. I put on my boots, a jacket. Then I grabbed my helmet.

I pulled the bike out of the garage, and the Hub looked up from *Rollman's 25 Point Safety Inspection Guide* and said,

"What, may I ask, are you doing?"

"Going for a little ride," I said.

"Honey," he said, "do you remember that you're starting your third trimester of pregnancy?"

"Hmm, let's see." I said. "Uh, no, I mean yes. Yes. I think I can remember that."

"And do you really think this is a good idea?"

"It's fifty-three degrees," I said.

"I know," he said. "I'm the one who told you."

"In the northeast United States, during the months of December, January and February, whenever the temperature goes above fifty, you've got to take your scooter out. It's a law."

"A law."

"That's right, a law," I said.

"Okay, fine," he said. "It's a law. But is it a good idea?"

"Gee, let me think." I swung my leg around the bike, sat down and put finger to chin. "Yes," I said. "Yes, I do think it's a good idea." And like some kind of beautiful miracle, I press the electronic start button and she starts right up. Must have been that tune-up I did last month.

I strapped on the helmet and sat there for a minute while she warmed up. The Hub was glaring at me. I flipped up the face visor, smiled sweetly at him and said, "See ya in a little bit, sweetheart."

As I was about to pull away, the Hub held his hand out, said, "Wait." He ran into the house, came back out with an

oversized sweater in his hand. He held it out to me, and with a pleading look on his face he said, "Why don't you put this on?" he said. "Under your jacket." I got the eyes. "Please," he added, "for me?" I smiled, put the sweater on. "And have a good ride," he said and smiled back.

I took off down the road, jubilant, the Hub was yelling after me, "Be careful!"

It was glorious. The air smelled electric. I felt like the regular old me again, replete with smug smile and 650cc's. Nearly everyone I passed did a double take—even the extra sweater and jacket couldn't hide Webley. Some gave me the thumbs-up, others stared, horrified.

Screw 'em.

I rode through the park, parked and sat for a while by the river and watched the ice melt. I stopped at my favorite bar

"Billy," I said to the bartender, "give me a cup of joe."

"You sure?" he said. "That pot's been on the burner since eight o'clock."

"Sounds perfect," I said. "And how about a beef on weck?"

"Grandma or Industrial?"

"Industrial," I said. "And with extra horseradish."

A cup of hot coffee never tasted so good. Some of my old group was in there. It was great to see them. I flirted with the guys. They flirted back. I watched the end of the game with them before I took off, promising that I'd return with Webley in tow and have a beer with everyone in not so many months. I didn't want the day to end, but it was getting cold and it wasn't as though I was out to prove something. I was

just out for a nice little motorcycle ride. Mission accomplished.

It was starting to get dark. Time to go home.

When I pulled in the drive, the outlaws' car was there. Now, there's an "oh, shit" if I ever saw one. What could I do? I parked the bike and went inside. I was met with three of the most disapproving purse-lipped smiles you've ever seen in your life. Hellos were exchanged and changed quickly to goodbyes. Too bad they couldn't stay, I said, with me just walking in and everything. Oh, well, they said, they really had to scoot. Oh, well, I said, maybe next time. Okay. Yeah. Bye.

Things got very quiet when the door shut behind them. Calm before the storm.

I got the silent treatment for about half an hour. Then it started. The Hub sat on the couch, let out a big sigh and picked up *Nine Months: Pregnancy the Safe and Sound Way* (fucking Hansdorf). He opened it up to a page he had marked with a slip of paper and started reading a passage out loud regarding "risky behavior." He droned on and on. I thought he'd never finish. I really didn't pay any attention until his voice crescendoed near the end: "Any activity involving excessive turbulence, vibration or jerky motion is to be avoided altogether during the last trimester. This cannot be stressed enough."

"So?" I said. "I didn't hear anything about motorcycle riding."

"Well, maybe he doesn't specifically mention motorcycle riding, but I'm fairly sure that it would qualify as turbulent, jerky motion."

"And I'm fairly sure it wouldn't," I said. "My machine rides on a cloud."

He ignored me. He set that book down and opened up to another marked place in another book and started reading about the fetus's ears and how they can hear after the 24th week. Then I got the two eyes over the book again.

"Did you really need to expose those tiny little eardrums to over five hours of motorcycle racket?" he said. "Did you? Why not a simple spin around the neighborhood? Did you have to stay out all day?"

He was concerned. And for a minute, I felt bad. That feeling didn't last long. Okay, so he's concerned. He's not the one who's pregnant and unemployed and feeling like her very identity is getting smaller as her belly gets bigger. I should have said something, but I didn't. I picked up the Hansdorf book.

For the most part, I've avoided looking at these things, especially if the author is a man. Being pregnant gives you enough reasons to worry without reading a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. And no man I know of has ever been pregnant, so I'm especially not interested in any male mumbo-jumbo. Who needs to feed the fire?

I opened the book and started leafing through it. Right away, I noticed it wasn't right. It smelled like ... well, it smelled old. And it looked old, too, which I guess I had kind of noticed before but I hadn't really paid any attention. So I flipped to the front of the book. That's when things started making sense.

"Gee, Hon," I said. "Did you happen to notice that the good Doctor Hansdorf was born in 1901 and that this book was first published in 1960?"

"Well," he looked away, "I guess I did." Then he straightened and said, "But there's still some very valuable advice in there."

I nodded, said, "Uh-huh. I see. Even though it's over forty years old?"

He nodded, shrunk a little. "I'll admit that some of the information is, well, a little out of date, but even so..."

Just then, I opened up to a photo of a very pregnant woman, complete with circa 1959 beehive, cigarette and martini. I read the caption aloud. "One or two evening cocktails are an excellent way to relax both your wife and her little bundle." I held the book up so the Hub could see the picture and said, "So, how's about you shake me up a couple of 'tinis, Hon?"

The Hub snapped the book out of my hand, said, "Well, I told you some of it was out-of-date."

I said, "Uhhhhh-huh."

"I don't think any of this is very funny. Do you know how worried I was all day?" He wasn't laughing; in fact, he was mad, really mad. "Every time that phone rang, I nearly had a heart attack," he said. "You were gone over six hours."

"Maybe you want to tell me why didn't you get this concerned about my riding when I wasn't pregnant," I said. "Am I more valuable now?"

"Of course not," he said. "But pregnant women, unlike non-pregnant women, are prone to dizzy spells and being

pregnant makes you ... well..." he stammered, "...being pregnant makes you vulnerable."

"That's bullshit," I made a throwaway motion with my hand, but he didn't want to let it drop.

"Now, look," he said, his voice low. I looked up and I could tell he was about as steamed as I've ever seen him, "I don't want you on that bike again. Do you understand?" I stared at him. I was stunned. He went on. "I realize I'm not the one who's pregnant, but I am the father of that baby and I should have some say about what you subject him to."

I found my voice. "It was just a little ride—"

"I don't care about any of that," he barked. "I don't want you on the bike again while you're pregnant. You can do this one thing for me." He raised his voice. "This one thing."

I said, "All right, already," but I wasn't very serious. I got up to put the bike away. The Hub yelled, "I mean it!" after me. I didn't say anything.

I know it's not like me, but I decided to leave it alone. The weather reports are calling for plenty more winter, so I figured it wasn't worth the fight. Let the Hub win this one and tuck the bike away in the shed until spring. But I'll tell you something, Eck, I had a great time today. I felt alive for the first time in a long time. And if there is another thaw, or an early thaw (Webley's not due until mid-May) and I feel like taking a spin, I'll be damned if anybody's going to stop me.

And I think the Hub knows that, too.

Yours,

Harvey

February 11

Dear Harvey,

Although I did not awake on that wisp-o-spring Saturday fearing another day spent "clueless and pregnant," the day did begin with a certain anxiety. I was to escort Kate to the art museum. The date was upon me.

I opted for a tall glass of seltzer in lieu of my usual breakfast, to quell the dancing of my stomach. After shaving, I applied cologne to my face that I had purchased especially for the occasion. Then the thought occurred to me—what if Kate finds men's cologne offensive? What if it clashes with her perfume? Removing the stuff from my skin required four scrubblings, and even so, the faint scent lingered.

Dressing was equally gut wrenching. A tie would clearly be too formal, but my usual cardigan wouldn't do, either. Escorting a lady without a jacket? I simply couldn't. Then there was the matter of a shirt. Striped? A pastel hue? Eventually, a tweed sport coat and a traditional button-down white oxford-cloth shirt prevailed (top button left rakishly undone). Thus attired, I presented myself to Kate.

When she opened the door for me at seven minutes past the prescribed time of ten-thirty, however, my own appearance dwindled to a mere nothing. Kate was stunning, dazzling. She was breathtaking. She was a sonata in magenta and black with a prelude drenched in charisma. I offered an undoubtedly ridiculous smile and a corsage that was not at all worthy of her. She took it graciously and asked me to help her pin it on.

How my hands did tremble.

We situated ourselves on the 22N. It felt strange to be there at such a strange hour, and on a Saturday. I surmised Kate was thinking the same thing as she turned to me and her forehead pinched a bit. Then she asked me if I wouldn't mind skipping the museum's contemporary gallery.

I said I wouldn't mind at all, although, internally I wilted a bit after you had built up that sculpture so. I was a bit surprised and wanted to inquire about her request, but did not. I wanted to ask what was the reason behind the fleeting sadness in her eyes that accompanied it, but did not. I was by no means ready to embark on a public transportation inquisition.

Once we entered our destination, however, whatever specter had darkened my lady in the bus flew away. She was marvelous, but more astonishing was the way she affected me. In no time, I found myself saying things such as "Do you suppose he carved it while standing on his head?" and laughing at my own quips. I wanted to run from exhibit to exhibit. I even mimicked a pose of the Hanuman monkey god, which elicited a great guffaw from Kate. I was having something I don't have often—fun.

The hour grew late; our stomachs grew empty. It was time for lunch. But when the elevator doors opened, it seemed our plans would change.

You neglected to mention that *Simple Bond* can clearly be viewed from the corridor, which is where Kate froze, right next to the sign that offers the options Art a la Carte or Contemporary Gallery. I waited for her to make a move. I

placed my hand on her shoulder and said her name quietly—a question, a supplication. She did not answer. She was paralyzed. Tears welled in her eyes.

Finally, she took my hand and said that she had something to tell me. The look on her face indicated it was something I might well not like hearing.

"Over lunch," she recommended.

Neither the attractive glasses of chardonnay nor the stylish bowls of steaming lobster bisque nor the crusty bread could distract me from my trepidation. Then Kate began her story.

*Simple Bond* was created by Richard Stein, her first husband. It was his last piece, commissioned by the city for the airport. When he finished it, the two of them toasted with champagne. He dedicated it to Kate. The installation was to be the following month.

Then a fateful trip to the doctor changed everything. After ten years in remission, the melanoma had returned with a vengeance. It was in his organs, his spinal column, his brain. Richard Stein lived only three months longer.

Kate cried then, in a sad quiet sort of way. I said nothing save an awkward encouragement here and there.

After his death, she sank into a severe depression, not leaving the house for weeks on end, spending days in bed. Had it not been for Frank (the sculptor in 6B) and her sister, she might still be dwindling away in that dark bedroom, if not dead.

She called those years "the dark place."

Eventually, she found help. And after a year of counseling, Frank got her the job at the Center of Modern Art. Then the

apartment came up for rent, and Kate was ready to stand on her own feet. The last ten years were more or less known to me, my having lived right across the hall.

*Simple Bond* had apparently spent the first thirteen years of its life in a storage facility, after airport politics and design changes precluded its installation. It was one year ago that it had been installed at the Municipal Art Museum, and that is why Kate had suggested we skip the Contemporary Gallery altogether. The dark place was sad and terrible. She had been afraid of evoking its claustrophobic grip by finally seeing this neglected work of art in public.

I wanted very much to hold her then, but I did not. I sipped the chardonnay—it tasted sour and flat. The soup had gone cold. Shall we order something else? I offered, but Kate shook her head and blinked.

"Let's go see it," she said.

I assumed she meant the sculpture, but I asked nonetheless. She did. Maybe doing this would put yet another step behind her for good. I paid the bill.

At first, she met the imposing hands with a strained smile. More quiet tears followed. I was at a loss, but did not feel uncomfortable. In fact, with Kate's delicate fingers quivering on my elbow, I felt needed.

We sat for a while. Eventually, her tears dried; and she went on to tell me about her late and obviously dearly loved husband. She remembered the smell of his pipe tobacco as he worked late into the night, the fierce depressions that accompanied his dry spells, the alternative elation during

periods of creative profusion. She said that it was good we did this—came here and saw this beautiful set of hands.

We walked around it then. Kate did not let go of my arm once.

"They ought to at least have installed it on a rotating platform," she said. Relief washed over me.

We started back to the bus stop a few minutes after three. Kate insisted on this despite my sincere offer to call a cab. No, she said, the weather was too good to waste.

On our way, we passed a confectionery. Kate steered me inside. She wanted a Popsicle, of all things; specifically, something called a "banana Twin Pop." We dug through an ice cream case that had probably not been freshly stocked since July and found one near the bottom. I shudder to think how old it was, but it delighted Kate.

After I settled with the proprietor, she cracked it in two on the counter and handed half to me. Egads, I thought, but I accepted it without protest.

We continued our walk. I have no idea what she saw, or thought of, for that matter; but for some reason Kate began to laugh, really laugh. It was infectious. So much so that I started to chuckle then laugh. I laughed so hard I thought I might choke. I hadn't had a laugh like that since ... well, perhaps I've never had a laugh like that. It was uncontrollable. The memory of it alone makes me want to start all over again. It was utterly renewing, a resuscitation for the soul.

Everything struck us as horrendously funny. As soon as we would settle into a quiet spell, something else would pop into

the conversation; and we would start all over again. It was as though we had been temporarily possessed by some mischievous impish spirit. We laughed so hard that we walked right by the bus stop and continued until we finished our ice pops. We were nearly all the way to the end of town before we realized we were at the last in-town stop for the outbound 22N.

Once on the bus, we were exhausted. We were quiet. Kate fell asleep on my shoulder. I remained awake.

I am, in a manner of speaking, still awake.

I don't know when I will see her again. I have not spoken to her since our day together. My confidence is waning. The appropriate amount of time one should let pass between approaches is unknown to me. I had forgotten so much about this mating dance, how vulnerable it makes one. Perhaps I will call her tomorrow and invite her to dine with me at Tony's HomeStyle Restaurant this Sunday. In the meantime, all I can do is hope she has one fleeting thought of me for every ten times she comes into my mind.

I believe, Harvey, I am smitten.

I am truly indebted to both you and Kate. Not so many months have passed since you came into my life and things began to open up for me. How satisfying to know I saw those motionless hands and comforted a woman who abetted in their creation instead of dismissing their gentle message before even looking for it. It was way past due for me to stop behaving like an old man in a young man's body. It is time for me to live the life ahead of me. To do that, I must peel back the protective shell I have built around my heart. So be it.

To feel a longing, an uncertainty, a precious heartache, is to feel alive. I will find it in myself to be brave, set my fears aside and welcome it.

Yours,

Eck

PS: I did some research on that Hansdorf character. You were wise to disregard him. He was convicted for embezzlement in 1965. According to the March 31, 1965, edition of *The Chicago Tribune*, he was sentenced to seven years in jail. It is interesting to note that his medical license was not revoked despite his conviction, which caused some controversy. It turned out to be of little consequence, as Hansdorf never practiced again. He killed himself shortly after incarceration. He was, surprisingly, childless. Not surprisingly, the County Library System no longer has any of his books on the shelves. Perhaps the Hub got his copies from his mother or a used bookstore.

February 20

Dear Eck,

Goddamn son of a bitch shit. Fuck shit. Shit.

This started last Thursday after a dinner of whole-wheat pasta and 100% organic marinara sauce. We had finished the dishes and were sitting down to relax. I had my second ultrasound appointment scheduled for the following day. The Hub couldn't go with me because he had an out-of-town meeting. He was filling me in on all the things he wanted me to ask the technician in his absence.

He kept going on and on. "Are you listening to me?" he said. "Promise me you'll ask about the weight estimation, okay?"

I didn't look up from my *Cycle* magazine, just nodded my head and offered an unconvincing "Mm-hm."

"It's important." I could feel his eyes on me. "Honey?" He was getting exasperated. "It's important. Honey?"

I let the magazine fall to my lap. "Look," I said, "these people know what they're doing. I'm not about to go in there and make an ass of myself like you did last time."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "You with your snotty tone to that technician? I thought she was going to crack you over the head with the videotape."

"I did not use a snotty tone."

I didn't want to get into it. "Okay, fine," I said, "you didn't." I picked the magazine back up.

"Oh, I see we're done?"

I looked over the magazine. "Yeah, we're done."

"Well, I'm not done," he said. And he was hot. He stood up and walked to the center of the room. "I have done everything within my power to make you comfortable. I have tried to be sensitive and caring and supportive through this whole thing. And all I have gotten back is snide comments and attitude and a general feeling of being shut out."

"Shut out?" I said. "You think you feel shut out?" I threw the magazine on the coffee table. "Do you have any idea how shut out I felt when you told me no more sex? Do you have any idea how alone I feel all day?" I was yelling. "And then you come home and I still feel alone because all you do is read these stupid magazines." I picked up a *New Parent* magazine that was on the table and shoved it at him. "And watch the news. Do you know how dehumanizing it is to be told what to eat and what to do and then feel guilty for taking a lousy sip of beer?"

"What?" he said, "I never—"

"The hell 'you never.' Do you think I like the fact that the only sex I get is from a something called a G-Spot Jelly Vibe? Which, I might add, does as good a job as you ever did, maybe an even better job..." At that point, I actually heaved my enormous pregnant self up off the couch and went over to him, grabbed his crotch and said, "Than this monster ever did!"

"Is this what it's going to be like?" He put his hands on his hips and snorted, bobbed his head up and down. "Vibrators and beer and God knows what else?"

"You can add motorcycles to that list," and for some reason that I still haven't figured out, that shut him up in a hurry and he got this sheepish look on his face. I didn't ask. I'd had enough. "I'm going to bed," I said, even though it was only eight o'clock, "in the guest room."

It was ugly.

I don't think my heart rate got back to normal for another hour. I didn't sleep. I spent the majority of the night staring out the window and up at the moon. And it stared right back. Hell, that moon, he couldn't care less. All he's got to do is hang up there in the winter sky, like he's been doing for a million trillion years and like he'll keep doing for a million trillion more. Lucky, worthless bastard. Okay, not worthless—at least it gave me something to do all night, watching it make its way across the sky.

The Hub was awake, too. I could tell by the sound of his throat-clearings and sniffs. He's not good at sleepless. Probably couldn't think all day at work today. Not like I cared.

I finally fell asleep around six in the morning. The Hub was gone when I got out of bed a couple of hours later. I felt terrible. I was still mad at him. I was tired. I was a little disgusted with myself, too. I had said some pretty nasty things, but then again, so had he. The whole thing was like a miserable nightmare.

After the doctor's appointment, I was driving home when I passed that tattoo parlor down on Sharp Street—maybe you know the one. I stopped at the light in front of it and I got an idea. After I parked the car, I thought, The Hub would have a fit if he knew I was even considering walking into a place like

this. No, the Hub wouldn't like this idea at all. That galvanized it.

I checked myself in the rearview and put on a coat of lipstick (this isn't the kind of thing a girl does without a little makeup to give her confidence). Sufficiently satisfied with myself, I got out of the car and headed towards Easy Dan's Tattoo Emporium.

It wasn't as scary as I thought it would be in there, despite all the weird devil and death-stuff patterns on the wall. It was clean, and the people running it seemed all right. I mean, they were like anyone else at work. There was even a plate of homemade cookies by the coffee pot, the kind that are like chocolate chip cookies but not really because there's M&M's in them instead of chocolate chips. I really like that kind and I wanted one, but didn't ask.

I looked big-time out-of-place, as I was without my leather jacket or my motorcycle to speak for me. Let's face it, without those props I'm just a pregnant housewife from the 'burbs—probably not their usual customer. I looked around uncomfortably, thinking, What the hell am I doing here?

Then this guy came out of the backroom.

"Hi," he said. "My name's Jeff. Want a cookie?"

"Sure," I said, and knew I'd come to the right place.

I was full of indecision. Jeff showed me a book of designs called *The Celestial Collection*. I leafed through, not really seeing anything that caught my eye. Until I got to the end of the book—specifically, the last page.

There was this beautiful moon. It had a face, one like I imagine that old devil moon having when I stare out into the night. I loved it. I smiled at Jeff. He smiled back.

About two hours and three hundred bucks later, I was driving home thinking, This tattoo is cool. My own moon, right in the center of my back between my shoulder blades. This is something he can't take away—I'll be who I am no matter what he says. Fuck him. I'll do what I want when I want, even get a tattoo when I'm starting my seventh month of pregnancy. Goddamn if anyone's going to tell me what to do. Goddamn right.

It was about 6:30 when I got home. I knew something was up as soon as I walked in. The stereo was on instead of the news, my favorite Van Morrison was playing. I could smell something wonderful coming from the kitchen. I walked into the family room. There was a fire going in the fireplace, and the table where I pay the bills was cleared off and set with a cloth, the good plates, wine glasses, the whole bit.

I stood in the midst of all this, said to myself, "What the hell?" Then I felt two arms curl around me, and I got this sweet little kiss on the back of my neck. A whisper—"I'm sorry"—floated into my ear.

The Hub.

Good and goddamn anyway.

"Hungry?" he said.

"Starved," I said.

"How about a plate of chicken paprikash?"

"You did not." I got misty and started to laugh all at once.

"I certainly did."

We had a wonderful dinner. There was fresh bread, softened butter (real butter), sauteed mushrooms, asparagus (with hollandaise). We even had wine. Can you believe it? Wine, yes, wine. The Hub actually poured me a glass of cabernet (my favorite) while saying "Tonight, to hell with that diet."

Just when I thought we were done, out came two servings of an absolutely decadent cake from a nearby Italian bakery. We took our time enjoying it and talking over coffee (real coffee, not that decaf garbage). Everything was delicious. Everything was perfect. It was like a date. I started thinking that, Hey, maybe things are going to be all right.

He felt terrible about the night before. He wanted to do something special, something for me. He even canceled his meeting so he could come home early and cook the dinner himself. I told him I felt bad about the argument, too. He apologized for losing track of the woman and paying too much attention to the mother. I apologized for not giving him more credit for being such a caring dad. He told me he would stop being such a prick about all those pregnancy rules. I told him I wouldn't go on any more motorcycle rides. He said, in truth, he felt awful about not being able to perform in the bedroom.

"I never meant to hurt you," he said.

I said I understood his reservations and that I didn't prefer the GSJV to him, I was only being mean. He told me he loved me. I told him I loved him—and I meant it, too.

We left the dishes for later and went upstairs. I felt so good about everything that I actually forgot all about the

tattoo. We got in bed and things warmed up fast. We were hungry for each other, and it felt sweet and good to be together after so long. I had missed him more than I realized. We stayed in bed for a while. He was tender and gentle. We whispered things into each other's ears. He didn't mention the baby once.

Bread-and-butter.

Afterward, we lay there, holding each other, being quiet. I had put a little silky thing on top to make us both feel a little more comfortable—I figured it'd be easier to forget about Webley if we weren't looking at this mountain of a stomach between us. It honestly felt like we'd gone back five years. It was hard to believe these were the same two people who were screaming at each other less than 24 hours ago.

Then it happened.

"What's this?" the Hub wanted to know. "Did you hurt yourself?" He fingered the gauze patch.

"What?" I played dumb.

He propped himself up on an elbow. "Can I?"

"What?"

"Look underneath?"

"Go ahead," I said. I cringed a little as he peeled the tape from my skin.

He sighed, said, "When?"

"Today," I said without turning around. And as fast as it had come down, the wall was back up. The discussion was over. I could feel it. And I could feel that sweet, sexy man slipping away and the Hub returning in his place. Yes, I'd

managed to destroy and rebuild and destroy my marriage in the space of 24 hours.

The Hub got up and started dressing. I heard him say he'd start the dishes as he went down the stairs. His voice was absolutely flat. I turned my head into the pillow and started to sob.

Goddammit, Eck. Goddammit all to hell.

Harvey

February 26

Dear Harvey,

I cannot imagine what would possess a person—any person, including a seven-months-pregnant person—to enter an establishment called Easy Dan's Tattoo Emporium, and, no, I do not "know the one." Then again, there is a world of things I now imagine that not so long ago I could never have imagined imagining. But, honestly, why a tattoo? Why not choose something less permanent? A new hairstyle, for instance.

It seems that your line in the sand was not so fleeting. It also had a greater cost than three hundred dollars. Of course, I know nothing of these matters, but nevertheless, I question the sincerity of Hub's reconciliation efforts. He was suspiciously quick to abandon them, and you were suspiciously quick to allow him. I wonder what Kate would think of your situation.

Not to worry, Harvey. I have never told anyone about these correspondences. I always assumed that the things you have shared with me were to be kept in confidence, and heaven knows that anyone reading my half of the dialogue would send me to the booby hatch straightaway. But now that Kate and I are becoming an item (!), the temptation to share you with her is rising.

Even though you are important to me, I do not relish the idea of having a clandestine mistress, which, of course, you are not. Still, something about our relationship smacks of secrecy. I would never want to deceive Kate. Am I doing so

by not telling her about us? I have let too much of my life slip away to allow any sort of a wall to grow between Kate and me. Surely, I am being silly. These letters of ours are nothing more than a journal of sorts, which is not something I would feel compelled to show her.

I cannot seem to convince myself of that, though. You are real, as are the things you tell me. But they are secret things, things you have entrusted to me. I will simply have to keep this improbable part of my life to myself. It is the only proper thing to do.

I feel a modicum of guilt. For reasons I cannot quite identify, you have had a part in bringing Kate and me together. The irony of our respective romantic relationships is a source of discomfort to me. If I could, Harvey, I would send you every possible tool to help you mend the bond between you and Hub, or if I thought that unworthy Crunch chap could mend your psyche, a task for which I am certain he is unqualified, I would will you together just as fervently.

Had you wanted me to play a more active role in your life, however, you would have revealed yourself to me long ago. I will do what I can and continue being a silent listener for as long as you need me to be. I want you to be happy. I mean that sincerely.

From my distant yet close vantage point, I watch your relationship with Hub suffer cruel disenchantment. The contrast of my own infatuation with Kate serves as a vibrant benchmark. It grows with unprecedented ardor every day. I am surprised at my own willingness to open my heart to such vulnerability. Kate makes everything wonderful, even the

most ordinary things. For instance, dinner at Tony's with her was not my usual Sunday evening nourishment, but an epicurean event given texture by her very presence.

Kate ordered a salad and four pieces of garlic bread with cheese without hesitation. When Gail left, Kate leaned forward and confided to me something I already knew, that the garlic bread is the most notable item on the menu. Not surprisingly, I had ordered my usual spaghetti with Tony's Sauce and a glass of house red with a side order of garlic bread. Kate's decadent order seemed outlandish at first. However, a growing concern over whether or not I might be obliged to kiss her later in the evening and the inequity of my breath, infused by just one piece of garlic bread and that of Kate's, infused with four, inspired me to call Gail back to the table and change my order to mirror Kate's exactly.

Then, with an inexplicable burst of uncharacteristic imagination, I amended my request by telling Gail to cancel the two glasses of wine and bring an entire bottle of their better chianti. Kate rewarded me with an adoring smile. It occurred to me then that, for all these years, I have endured plate upon plate of Tony's spaghetti while only truly enjoying the carefully timed bites of buttery garlic bread. Hence, last Sunday no mandatory bites of flaccid, tasteless pasta intruded upon my garlic bread or my conversation with Kate. It was easily the best meal I had ever had at Tony's.

Every moment with her is like a gift to me. I believe she looks forward to our meetings, too, perhaps not with the same anticipation as I do. Perhaps she does. That is to say, I don't know.

I don't know.

How lovely. I don't know! Oh, sublime revelation. For once in my life, I don't know, and, by duchess, I am happy not to know. I would rather dance this enchanting dance and let its wonders unfold one at a time, surprising me again and again. I relish Kate's secrets and all of her mystery. I wonder if she has thoughts like this about me. If so, I wonder if she shares her feelings with a confidante as I do with you.

Oh, Harvey, the rapture of it all.

Eck

March 15

Dear Eck,

It's been what? Nearly a month since I last wrote? There's not much to report. In fact, I'm kind of bored. I'm out of books. I just finished one called *Ethan Frome*. God only knows what inspired me to read the whole thing, here in the middle of the endless winter, with things the way they are between me and the Hub these days and all. Here's a recommendation: if you're depressed, don't read this little number. I'll have to ask the librarian for something that's not so damn seasonal next time.

Ever since that night when the Hub discovered the tattoo, things have been as cold and depressing around here as last week's snowfall. It's like some kind of trap you get into. I feel as though I can't get beyond this tumor, this screen, this ... whatever it is. How many times have I thought things over and readied myself to have a discussion with him; then he comes home and something always comes between us before I can open my mouth. It doesn't take much to squelch me. An impatient sigh can dampen my good intentions.

He's been close a few times, too—I could see that look of pain and apology come into his eyes, and then I'd think he was going to start talking. But the look always seems to vanish almost as soon as it appears. I wonder what little things I do to discourage him at those moments.

Regarding that beautiful night we had together about a month ago, about a million years ago, he hasn't spoken of it since. We were so close to bridging the chasm and that stupid

tattoo had to go and ruin things. As did his stupid attitude towards it. But, of course, this isn't about a tattoo it's about something much bigger. Something that makes me love the tattoo more and more while he hates it more and more. We're so far apart. Will this ever get better?

If that isn't bad enough, the rest of the world has also ceased to recognize that I'm still a cognizant human being. All I hear is "You haven't had that baby yet? When are you due?" Or then there's the really nice comments like "Don't worry, dear, you'll take the weight right off." And then there's the people who throw all tact aside and come right out with stuff like "My word, you've gotten simply enormous."

My mother is probably the worst one of all. Mom's recollection of my introduction into the world nearly 34 years ago is very vivid, never mind that she can hardly remember what happened two weeks ago. Take weight gain, a popular topic among pregnant women past and present. Mom tells me how she can't understand my weight gain. When she was pregnant, she only gained about ten pounds and had no problems. In fact, she was a bona-fide superwoman during her pregnancy, cleaning and wallpapering and singlehandedly putting an addition on the house. She still had the paintbrush in her hand when they wheeled her into the delivery room.

And childbirth? No problem. Mom's labor lasted, hmmm, maybe fifteen minutes. But it wasn't labor like we call it labor today. They didn't have labor back then. Well, they had it, but the Better People went to doctors who gave you medication for that type of thing. Nothing like that natural-childbirth-which-is-for-the-birds all you kids do today.

So, Mom had no pain to speak of. In fact, she was out scaling Mount Everest just hours after having me. And even though she only gained six pounds while pregnant, I weighed eighteen at birth and was not only potty-trained at three weeks, but was speaking four languages fluently before I was three months old and and and...

Yeah, sure, Mom. Sure.

Then there's my mother-outlaw, who's at the other end of the spectrum. The Hub's mother gained 95 pounds during her pregnancy despite the fact that she ate only one-third of one carrot each day, which she promptly threw up due to an unprecedented case of nausea that plagued her throughout the nine-month gestation period. I have no idea how fortunate I am to have such an easy time of it. She was in labor for two hundred and fifty-four hours and actually gained weight in the delivery room. Maybe things wouldn't have been so difficult for her if she had had a caring model of perfection for a husband like I do (her son) instead of my father-outlaw, who was an utter tyrant during her entire pregnancy and through much of the Hub's infant years.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Okay, so maybe I'm exaggerating, just a little bit. But, Eck, trust me—be glad you're a man and don't have to do this pregnancy thing. Even all my friends blab endlessly. Everyone has to top you, one-up you, one way or the other. Oh, the pains they had to endure were the worst of all, much worse than any piddly little problems you're having. Or, conversely, you're having what kind of a problem? They never had anything like that happen. Nooooo, they had no problems.

I've resigned myself to stop thinking that anyone really cares about how I feel and to just plow through this bullshit for two more months. Jesus Christ, two more months.

Webley, hurry up and get out of there.

Poor Webley, it's not her fault. Yes, Webley's a she. And doing fine—I think I forgot to tell you that last time. I'm going to have a daughter. She and I will be best friends. I love her already. We have a name picked out. It's pretty and I'm sure she'll love it. It's funny, though, I keep thinking of her as Webley. Maybe that will be my own private nickname for her.

So, this concludes your Harvest Moon pregnancy update. It's strange how I have this feeling of commitment to you, Eck, even though I don't know you. Throughout these days, you've been the most compassionate friend of all, hands down. It's too bad you won't be here when Webley makes her grand entrance. You know more about her and her mom than anyone else.

Yours,  
Harvey

March 18

Dear, dear, tender Harvey,

You were nothing like what I expected. When that sad little girl walked across the rays of a tile sun and over to me, I never even considered she could be you, despite her obvious maternal burden. I pictured you to be taller, more animate, a visual feast of expression, a walking, talking burst of emotion, love, anger. Life.

But you were not.

You were small. You were fragile. You were vulnerable. You were alone and you looked so young in that enormous college sweatshirt, like someone who had barely taken leave of her 21st birthday.

I am not frequently asked to give a recommendation; hence, I remember those instances when it does occur. Which is why I remember the forlorn young woman who approached me and asked if I knew of a book that would fit her mood, a cold winter mood. Now, of course, I know that she was you.

I don't believe I have seen you before, certainly not that I remember. Had I any idea you were you, I never would have extracted *Ethan Frome* from the shelf. That tale of unfulfilled longing and desolation was the last thing you needed. *Little Women* might have been a better choice, especially considering that Sir Webley is actually a Miss Webley and that you and she will soon be doing a great deal of growing together in the coming eighteen years.

The library computer system keeps only the current lender on file, with no running log of previous lenders. This is a

mandatory rule as determined by privacy laws. Hence, there is a chance that you have not yet returned *Ethan Frome* and that I could access its stocking number and get your name, your address. But I will not.

How odd this is. I have fantasized about meeting you. In those daydreams, I always portray you as an untamed and feral thing captivated by my contrasting demeanor, lulled by my relative calmness. Heavens, I can hardly believe I would disclose such a thing, that is, if simply writing it is a disclosure. As if putting it in words gives it a certain power over me, exposes me. But this is not about me; it is about you.

Now that I have encountered you, I see you are not the two-dimensional Harvey sent to me in episodic spurts via the United States Postal Service. You are whole and three-dimensional, yet so very delicate, and, even after everything you have told me, I have no right to barge into your life and risk disrupting the tenuous membrane that surrounds you. I know that it would be an intrusion of sorts to reach out to you, to actually touch you. I have not been invited.

I hope you will come in again soon and allow me to assist you, though. It would be an honor, not to mention a pleasure to study your face and look for a trace of that sparkle. That same peep of a twinkle in your eye that I saw for a split second when you thanked me. It accompanied the lopsided smile you gave me before you turned to go.

If there is a next time, I will know that smile belongs to you and seeing it will be like peering through a tiny crack in a delicate shell. Inside, Harvey will be on her motorcycle. She

will be gazing out at the moon, writing letters to a man she has never met. Perhaps she will again be picking up the pieces of her hapless heart after it has been carelessly dropped by someone with whom she should never have entrusted it. Certainly, one day in the near future, she will be holding Miss Webley in her arms.

I promise you, Harvey, you will always be safe with me.  
Eck

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\* \* \* \*

April 2

Dear Harvey,

After your identity was exposed to me. I thought these ramblings would come to an end. But, instead I find that I, too, feel a commitment of sorts to you. That you have become a sympathetic listener. Hence, I am still drawn to this pad and paper, and to my sweet Harvey. You see, of late I have been learning what it means to be, of all things, a boyfriend.

Kate and I have fallen into the habit of sharing our afterwork martinis. She has even got me using an ort of peanut butter to coax Dickens from his cage to join us during our cocktail hour. Frank will also drop in on occasion. What a caper it is with the four of us. This evening, in fact, not only did Frank come over with his Tom Jones albums but Kate

whipped up a smashing tray of hors d'oeuvres for us, complete with peanut butter balls for Dickens.

I am endlessly amazed at Kate's interest in me and my life. She snoops about my apartment, astonished at my quirky, orderly life, it being so different from her own abstract and impromptu way of living. She was unusually intrigued by my calendar, for instance. That anyone would earmark dates for replacing their toothbrush or the baking soda in their refrigerator was a source of vast entertainment for her. She found my alphabetized condiments (cornichons [tiny French pickles, the newest and easily most daring addition], horseradish [the label upon which advises "Keep it cold to keep it hot!"], mayonnaise, mustard [both "m" entries embolden tuna fish], olives [the common pimento-stuffed variety has recently been replaced with a "gourmet trio" jar of garlic-, jalapeno- and blue cheese-stuffed Spanish beauties to further elevate the martini experience], ranch dressing [to enhance the taste of frozen breaded fish] and strawberry jam) in the door of that same refrigerator equally fascinating .

Just as she is amused by my meticulously ordered existence, I am in awe of her carefree *c'est la vie* attitude and lifestyle.

Kate subscribes to the carpe diem way of life to which you have referred in the past. Other than simply being alive, she has no daily plan, no schedule of which to speak. Even her working hours are self-determined. She eats anything for which she has a craving whenever she is hungry. I have even seen her pluck leftover stuffed grape leaves from a doggy bag and eat them for breakfast, all the while demonstrating her

enjoyment of each bite with copious eye rolling and moans of pleasure. I was so enticed by her example that I accepted one when she offered the open bag. Alas, I found it to be a disturbing shock to my strawberry-jam-toast-trained and weary taste buds. I suppose I must take this education in small doses.

Keep in mind that diet is only one component of life. She is also constantly moving the furniture in her apartment. Whenever I visit, I must pay particular attention to my every step for fear of barking a shin or stubbing a toe, especially if the lights are dimmed.

I should also add that her unstructured way of life carries with it the irritating quality of chronic tardiness. There is a perfectly obvious reason for this characteristic. Kate is, in fact, the only person I have ever known who does not own a timepiece—not one. She has no clocks of any kind. I had considered purchasing one for her as a gift, but was discouraged when she commented one day on my two wristwatches, saying, "You know, dear Tim, you might try not wearing those things one day. You might try just letting it all hang out."

Letting it all hang out is something for which I do not feel quite ready, at least in a sense that is not done vicariously through Kate and Frank. Hence, I will have to continue to cope with Kate's maddening inability to be punctual and less maddening but somewhat more dangerous ability to move furniture. In one of her more unconventional floor plans, she had her bed situated in the center of the den so she and Frank could watch television (they do so without benefit of a

television guide) from a supine position, a luxury that her sofa affords only one adult at a time (or two very chummy adults).

No, it is not farfetched to say that her entire existence revolves around change. Why she has any interest in me is absolutely confounding. All I can do is continue to adore her in hopes she will continue to allow me to hold her in my arms like so many flowers.

Yours,  
Eck

PS: Incidentally, I found that Kate also sports a tattoo. I came upon it during one of our ... well, I just came upon it one evening. Although it would be ungentlemanly of me to disclose the location of that alluring little angelfish, suffice it to say that I was once again guilty of a rush to judgment. I rather enjoy the silly thing, so coquettish! I am sure yours is as endearing and that it is only a matter of time until Hub comes to adore it as a unique part of you.

April 12

Dear Eck,

So here I am again, writing about the man who won't go away. The Crunch. He called again. He called on April Fool's Day. In fact, when he first started talking, I thought it was a prank. He was all choked up, sounded terrible. He's called back a couple of times since then, too. He's feeling a little sorry for himself.

Looks like there's real trouble over in Blue Heaven. Looks like he and Wifey are getting a divorce. And it sounds like it's for real.

I imagine the idea of divorce is scary to anybody, but it's got to be especially scary to a guy like the Crunch. He was always protective of his family, which maybe I'll understand a little better after Webley's been around for a while, and we feel more like a family and less a couple, like two people, like separate human beings. And family was the Crunch's core, his center, his lifeblood; and now it's falling apart. I suppose that's why he's been calling me. He's grabbing for anything that might break his fall, and I've been a good handle in the past. But I'm afraid I can't help him this time.

I wonder what happened. Maybe he said some doll's name in his sleep. Maybe it was mine. Whatever happened between Mr. and Mrs. Crunch, it doesn't bode well for them. Poor Crunch really sounded desperate. I guess Wifey left for a few days, what's now turned into a few weeks. The kids are starting to realize there are problems, real problems. And the Crunch is starting to realize that what he's always come home

to is disintegrating. Part of him is disintegrating right along with it.

It was strange to hear him talk, so broken up and everything. It made me a little mad, thinking how he really is a selfish bastard. He only cared about me when he had something to gain and now that he's got needs again, here he is. Up until that day when I was working on the bike, he never called once to see how I was doing after the dump, couldn't have cared less. I had to swim upstream through a river of tears all by myself (that is, until I found you, Eck). Well, okay, I suppose he didn't really know how broken up I was about it. I suppose I could have called him. But a girl's got her pride to think of.

I let him babble on about the traumas of life without Wifey. I didn't say anything, no use gloating. I actually started to feel bad for him. His kids are completely discombobulated. Stupid things like the laundry have become big upsets in his life. Christ, he is a sorry bastard.

Why did I ever go to bed with him?

Maybe not realistically, but I think somewhere in the back of his mind, the Crunch was hoping I'd say "Harvey to the Rescue!" and come dashing over there, tie an apron around my waist and assume the duties associated with happy homemaking. That I'd take Wifey's place, and his life would come back together. That all he needs to do is find a replacement woman and everything will be all right. Nice to think I was on the short list of potential stand-ins (wonder what number I was).

But I can't help him. He's going to have to sort through this and get to the other side on his own. Maybe it's not as bad as he made it out to be, and they'll patch things up. I hope so, I honestly do. In the meantime, he'll have to find someone else to play the part of Little Woman by Proxy. I wonder if he's called his mom yet. God, would he do something that pathetic?

Towards the end of the call, he really tried to get to me. Talked about what he missed about me. Did I remember that one night this and that one afternoon that. He misses my touch. He misses my smile. He misses my eyes (what a sap). He's sure I'm as beautiful as ever, third trimester and 25 pounds since then or not. Yeah, from what I could tell, his dick is feeling fine.

I guess I am over him, completely over him. His me-me-me talk didn't even budge me, and I didn't have any smug, sweet-revenge feelings, either. Well, I should say that any revenge cravings I ever had were satisfied during one of my many sick, insomnia-induced fantasies. Those hot-awake dreams about calling his wife or sending her copies of letters and notes he wrote me. They always disappeared when the sun rose. I wouldn't ruin someone else's life just because I felt like shit.

No, I'm not the vicious type. Those ideas stayed where they belonged—in my head. Even so, there's not a hell of a lot of compassion in me for the Crunch now. When he realized he wasn't getting anywhere, he still didn't let it drop. He almost begged me to meet him. He sounded as though he

meant it, too. I think he really does need a friend, to be there for him.

But I told him I wasn't feeling up to it, which isn't exactly a lie. I'm *not* feeling up to it. I don't want to deal with it, simple as that. He'll have to find someone else to throw him a pity party. It shouldn't be too difficult. He is a very good-looking guy and those looks are an asset he knows exactly how to use.

I did get a little shook over his problems, though, for selfish reasons. It was kind of like a wake-up call. I was a big part of that affair, too, and as far as the marriages attached to the affair participants are concerned, things aren't going so well. The Hub and I have our own problems, and they're not getting any better. They keep pushing us apart.

I don't want to go where the Crunch is. I really don't, Eck. And unless the Hub and I start figuring out what's wrong between us, I'm afraid we'll be headed for splitsville right behind the Crunches.

Sometimes I wish I'd kept copies of all these letters I've written you. Then I could show them to the Hub, and it would be like telling him everything without having to open my mouth. That's almost as pitiful as the Crunch wanting me to come over and play house for an afternoon. I could no more tell the Hub the things I've told you than I could skateboard to China.

Yours,  
Harvey

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

April 15

Oh, Eck,

This cannot be happening.

Guess I might as well start at the beginning. I'd been reading *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (great book). And, even though it was still only 30 degrees out, a road book that good gets a girl thinking about things like her motorcycle. I decided to go start her up and make sure everything was okay for whenever I'm ready to ride after Webley gets here.

For whatever reason, I'd put her in the tool shed after that February ride like I sometimes do instead of parking her in her regular spot in the back of the garage, which I know now was a big mistake. Silly me. Anyway, I finished off Hunter Thompson and went to grab the keys.

The nail that sticks out of the wall next to the washer and dryer was conspicuously bare. The keys were gone. That was my first indication something was wrong. A mini-wave of panic sped through me. Okay, I thought, calm down. Maybe I left the keys with the bike or in my saddlebag. No big deal. I went out to the shed.

She was gone. Eck, the bike was gone. My tool kit and my helmet were lying there on the dirt floor of the shed like a couple of lonely little orphans. But the bike and the cover were gone gone gone.

Right away, I figured we'd been robbed. What else could have happened? At that point, I didn't even think about the missing keys. I ran to double check the garage, hoping that maybe the Hub had moved the bike back to its usual spot for some reason. I stared motionless for a minute in disbelief at the empty space behind the lawnmower before running back into the house. I called the Hub at the office.

"Honey," I said, "the bike's been stolen." I got utter silence on the other end of the line. I repeated myself. "Honey, the bike's been stolen. Do you understand what I'm saying? We've been robbed. The bike is gone. Stolen."

Silence.

"Are you listening to me, Hon? The bike's been stolen. It's gone."

Then I remembered the missing keys and the connections started forming in my brain like crystals in a Petri dish.

"I'll call the police," I said, waiting for a second, hoping he'd join in with me. Hoping he'd be shocked, indignant, mad, something—anything, for chrissake. But no, nothing. No such luck. More silence, more crystals. Then he started.

"Don't call the police," he said. "Just calm down. We have to talk." His voice was low but strange and panicky, too. And he was breathing really hard. He went on. "It wasn't stolen. I sold it."

He sold it, Eck. The Hub sold my motorcycle. My motorcycle. Jesus, just writing the word makes me sick.

So I'm there in the kitchen, holding the phone and feeling like someone took a full throttle swing at my stomach with a sledgehammer. I said, "You what?"

"I was going to tell you. Honestly. And after we had that fight I tried—"

"When?"

"I tried to buy it back. I did. I knew I shouldn't—"

"When?"

"A couple of days after you took that long ride."

I didn't say anything. I held the receiver to my ear and more or less was a witness to his rambling.

"...just that I was worried, really worried after you were out riding all day and I was griping about it here at the office to some of the guys and Joe asked me if we were selling it and, well, I guess it just seemed like a good idea." He paused. "Honey? Are you still there?"

"Barely."

"And then we had that fight and the next day, the very next day—I asked Joe about it. I tried. I knew I'd made a mistake. I did. And I asked Joe about buying it back. But it was gone. Gone with his kid to Utah, back to school. And then I thought that maybe I'd tell you about it that same night, the night I made dinner, but then the tattoo—"

"Why?"

He was quiet for a while. I could hear him chewing his thumbnail, which he only does when he's really worried or upset. "Well, for one thing, I wanted to get my mother off my back. You can't know how she hounded me. She actually came to the office that following Monday to bitch about it. And then she got me worried. And it was so easy. You were going to be gone that Saturday to go hear that Auster guy

speaking at that bookstore and there was Joe, ready to go with his pickup and his five hundred bucks—"

"What?"

"His five..." he stammered. "Five hundred, um, dollars."

"You sold my motorcycle for five hundred dollars!"

"I'm sorry, honey. I really am. I even thought that—"

I hung up.

So *that* was the reason he acted so funny when I brought up the motorcycle that night we had the fight. So *that* was the reason he made me dinner and took me to his bed. Trying to loosen me up before he dropped the bomb.

I don't know, Eck. I don't know if I can get over this.

I had that motorcycle for over ten years. I had it for three years longer than I've known him, for chrissake. It was the first thing I bought after I got the job at ChemCo. It was the first (and only) whole, new Harvey-craft. I spent months researching what I'd buy. I looked all over for the best deal. I took care of that bike. I did all my own work on it. I loved that motorcycle, Eck. Even as I'm writing this I'm getting mad all over again. I still can't believe that it's gone, that he sold it. I'm still numb over this. It hasn't sunk in yet.

He sold it.

He fucking *sold* it.

Predictably, he called right back. I listened to him on the answering machine.

"I know it doesn't make any sense. I know you're there, Hon. Please pick up."

I stared at the little speaker holes where his voice was coming out of that electronic box.

"It's hard sometimes, you know. It's hard sometimes to feel like I'm a participant in this baby thing. I love you. I do. I didn't mean to do it. I mean ... I don't know what I mean. I didn't think about what I was doing. Honey? I know you're there. Let's talk. Come on, Hon, please pick up."

But I didn't pick up. Maybe I should have, but I was too pissed. I left the kitchen in the middle of his pathetic monologue to go pack a bag, an overnight bag. I had to get out of there. And I did get out of there, but not before I put the goddamn occasional chair out on the lawn, right next to the street. I practically kicked it down the stairs and then dragged it outside, put it out for display. Some guy was loading it into the back of an El Camino as I was pulling out of the drive. I smiled at him, thought, Good fucking riddance.

You'll never guess where I went.

Course, that's pretty stupid, seeing as I'm writing this on Magic Motel stationary. Yep, that's where I am. Right here in trusty room 119. And if you could see me, Eck, you'd think I was one sad, sorry-ass sight.

I've been here for 36 hours. This late-season snowstorm is the last thing I need. I'm sick of all this cold weather; and the stand-alone heater unit that sits under the window is on full blast, which amounts to a measly stream of lukewarm air coming out of a cracked plastic vent. Hence, I'm wearing three pairs of socks, an extra-large Hanes men's T-shirt and a sweatshirt on top of that and a sweater on top of that. On the bottom, I've got my maternity jeans and a pair of sweats. Basically, I'm wearing every piece of clothing I packed.

Let's move on.

Next to the bed is this totally cheesy fake wood nightstand that's kind of banged in on one side and has seen better days in general. Lying on it is a half-eaten bag of Ruffles and an assortment of Chinese take-out containers. There's at least a half-dozen open cans of Coke all over the room—on the floor, the nightstand, on the edge of the bathtub. I also happen to know that inside the trash can there's a Nestles Crunch bar wrapper shoved inside of an empty nacho cheese dip can and at least one crushed-up bakery box that contained a selection of cookies, cupcakes and pastries (all of which were frosted) handpicked by yours truly.

Hungry?

I've had the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door since I got here. I don't even want to see the maid.

I did call the Crunch. I had to do something. I don't feel like talking to any of my friends. I don't want to go through the gauntlet of questions being eight months pregnant invariably raises. And what if the Hub told people I'd left for a while? Not that I think he would, but I really don't feel like hearing a bunch of advice. One thing I can say about the Crunch is that he knows when to shut his mouth.

I'm supposed to meet him for dinner. I don't even know if I'll go. Why should I go? At least it would get me out of this hole. Watching television from an orange upholstered chair in a room with moldy green carpet while eating dry Lucky Charms cereal from the box can be pretty dehumanizing.

Wish I could call you.

Don't worry, Eck. I won't. I'm just lonely and feeling sorry for myself. I miss home. I want to dry off with a real towel. I

want to shower with an actual bar of soap instead of a 0.05-ounce soap sample. I want to sleep in my own bed instead of this lumpy mattress that's been humped into submission by God-only-knows-who (I shouldn't say that, I know at least two people I can put on that list). And I'm pretty sick of listening to the other Magic Motel patrons doing the actual humping.

And you know what, Eck? With this little baby girl kicking and squirming inside of me, there have been a few times over the past 36 hours when I've wanted the Hub, too. I wanted him next to me. I wanted to cry to him. I wanted to make things right. Then I'd think of the motorcycle, and just as fast, I'd be furious all over again. I keep thinking about how broken things are, what a mess things are.

I could leave. Empty out the savings account. Get in the car and drive to Phoenix and stay with Mom for a while.

Yeah, right.

Or maybe I could go to Denver and look up my old motorcycle buddy Mark, see if he could help me find a job or something. I wouldn't be the first or the only mom out there on her own. I *am* a certified electrician. I could figure something out.

I don't want to go to Denver, or Phoenix. I don't even want to go to dinner, for chrissake. And I don't want to go home and let the Hub think he's won yet, either.

Oh, Eck, I don't know what I'm going to do.

Incidentally, happy tax day,

Harvey

April 17

Dear Harvey,

You move me to distraction. The very thought of you huddled in that wretched motel room chills me. I suppose I can understand your desire to be alone. I daresay I would have been there had you looked up "Ecklenburg" in the motel's phone book and dialed the number listed. Yes, I would have picked up the phone. I would have been there for you. I might have had to overcome a bit of shellshock, but I would have been there to talk to you, although I have no idea what I would have said.

Sitting at my desk each day has become a waiting game. Waiting for Harvey. I keep hoping you will release yourself from your self-imposed exile to come and select a book. Ms. Beckett is in a silent tizzy over my antics. She peers over her reading glasses, only to spy me checking the entranceway again and again. Then she will look to see what could possibly have me looking to see. Then I turn and catch her eyes. She reacts by immediately burying her nose in whatever nonsense she had her nose buried in before the eye darting started in the first place.

I call Ms. Beckett's business nonsense only because I have seen her reading Lorelle Dove novels during work hours. She does this by propping the flimsy paperback betwixt pages of a more reputable tome or magazine. These days her cover literature has been, of all things, Fiona Pitt-Kethley's *The Literary Companion to Sex*. I think she logs these feverish clandestine reads as "research" on her weekly time

management log. Our six-hour weekly research time allotment is to be spent reviewing novels and information on authors in the interest of better serving the public. God forbid anyone should ever ask Ms. Beckett a literary question other than one pertaining to the latest bodice-ripping techniques of Lorelle Dove's over-inflated heroes.

Speaking of literature, I was heartened when I saw the title *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Your Hunter Thompson was located in our journalism department. That fact and the title led me to the extrapolation that it was an essay regarding the deterioration of a community caught in the clutches of gambling and debauchery. Need I even begin to describe my disappointment when I started reading the dreadful narrative? "Great book," indeed.

Since both of our copies were available for lending, knowing the title of your most recent reading fancy was no use in tracking you. Of course, I realize there are any number of book sources in the city, or maybe a friend lends you copies of things. I cannot expect to find you through the library, I know.

I have no idea why I feel so compelled to contact you. Perhaps your mention that having your letters back might be a helpful tool to aid in mending the woes between you and Hub. Perhaps I want you to know that I am here. I wish I had gotten your name from the database when I had the chance; and then, just as quickly, I dither and think, No, it is not my place to contact you. You have been free to include your address in your letters for all these months, yet you have

never done so. I promise, Harvey, to protect your anonymity always.

Of course, I only hear one side of the story, but the Hub's decision to sell your property without your advice or consent was deplorable. No matter how slanted your story may have been, the realization that you had not been burgled but betrayed must have been a shattering blow. I know how you coddled that motorcycle of yours. I know it meant a great deal to you.

In a selfish way, I am glad to protect your identity. I would be very reluctant to part with your letters, give them back to you. They have become a significant keepsake for me. I read them over and over, especially when I find myself feeling maudlin or when I am alone. These instances have been greatly reduced of late, with Kate in my life. More honestly, imagining a meeting between you and me is one thing. Actually going through with it is quite another. Would I have the gall to drop a letter in the mail to you if I were in possession of your address? I honestly cannot answer that question.

Of late, Kate continues to keep me busy. Her latest scheme has particular relevance to your last letter. Kate has told me that she would like to purchase a motor scooter this spring and that I should do the same so the two of us could sputter around town on them instead of relying on cabs and busses. I admit that I have been seriously considering the idea. It could prove to be quite a hoot, bounding around together. I suppose you could say that your two-wheeled endeavors did not repel me as much as I let on. However, I

am not ready to subscribe to one of those specialty magazines that I have seen in the journalism department. (What sort of person reads something called *Outlaw Biker*?)

Life is strange, Harvey, and on rare occasions, even magical. I am gazing out my window, and I see that a playful little zephyr is lifting some of the snowflakes that fell two days ago when you wrote me, picking over what I hope is Winter's last deposit, the one he will leave before succumbing to youthful Spring. I believe the snowflakes would laugh if they could, or giggle, perhaps. They appear tickled.

Instead, they make do with the tools at hand and simply glitter in the sunshine, reveling in their second chance at flight before falling back upon the blanket of white. There they join their not-so-lucky brethren, whose one and only chance to be alive is now gone, and their bleak future of melting from microscopically unique and beautiful crystals into formless water droplets will have no reprieve. Their singularity will soon be lost to an early spring run-off, and all they can do while they wait for their demise is watch the few chosen snowflakes dance with a breeze.

So hold on. Hold on, Harvey, and wait for a zephyr.

Yours,  
Eck

May 21

Dear Eck,

Sorry I didn't write sooner. I've been kind of blue. As you can see, I'm writing on my normal old paper again. I left the motel. Three nights was enough. It was all too miserable. And I didn't empty the bank account. And I didn't go to Denver, or Phoenix.

I came home.

I had dinner that night with the Crunch. I didn't eat much. No surprise, what with all that junk food I'd been shoveling in at the motel. I shouldn't have met him. He tried to talk and be good company. I stared out the window and let myself float around in melancholy and self-pity. I had no desire for him, which probably makes sense, seeing as I was a few weeks short of D-day (I'm four days overdue). I've got to give him credit, though. He asked me if I wanted any company back at the room. Even if I was my regular size, I couldn't have let anyone see that place. It was disgusting.

No, I went back alone. That night I woke up about three. I felt horrible. My stomach was churning. I thought I was going to throw up. I was scared, really scared. I called the Hub. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to drive the way I was.

And he came and got me. And he brought me home. And he made sure I was all right. I was. It was just a little indigestion from, well, the whole situation. And there the two of us were, with a perfectly good opportunity to talk it

through. But the next few days, it was unsure glances and constipated looks that begged to be put right.

He's tried a couple of times, and I've responded with brutal silence, hating myself for it. Sometimes it feels like being on the merry-go-round and reaching for the brass ring. Every time we pass it, we can't quite get it.

I shouldn't worry too much at this stage of the game. I can't think of much other than Webley and her arrival (childbirth) and her well-being (fitting into a pair of jeans again in this lifetime) and her nursery (enjoying a beer) and her first day of school (graduating from incubation device to Mom) and her first date (another motorcycle) and her college education and and and ... you get the drift. The worries over the emotional health of this marriage are going to have to wait. That's all there is to it.

Despite all of this, I'm feeling a little dreamy tonight. It's that full moon doing it to me. It's big and bright and round, like it was the first time I wrote you, Eck. That seems so long ago, that Harvest Moon. I think of everything that's happened since then. All those tears over Captain Crunch (what a name) and losing my job. All this stuff with the Hub, the books I've read and this sweet little life growing inside of me the whole time. Oh, I nearly forgot, my tattoo.

Crazy moon.

I wish you could see it, Eck. My tattoo, not the moon—the moon in the sky, I mean. I wish you could see the moon on my back—that's what I mean. I love it. I know you'd like it, too. How could I know? I just do. I wouldn't mind looking at

the full moon up in the sky with you, either. It's really something tonight. So bright. So full of magic.

The moonlight is coming through the trees and making its own lace on the ground—delicate patterns.

The moon.

Watching lovers in the night. Hiding behind a cloud. The moon's smarter than the sun. And what's moonlight anyway? Just reflected sunlight.

Lazy moon.

The sun. Somewhere else in the sky, taking care of sun business, growing things, making cold things warm. And sending sunbeams over here to the moon, who sends them down to me so I can stare out at the midnight lace and think about that fickle lover moon of mine.

It's some night, Eck, with you and me and Webley. Maybe I'll share these nights with her when she gets older. But tonight, it's just the three of us and the moon. We're all wee creatures beneath it. And the moon knows that, too. He's seen a million dreamy, hopeful faces. But he doesn't make any promises, just grins and winks and goes on about being the moon and enchanting us. Enchanting me, especially. I'll let him do it, too.

Webley must know I'm up. She's squirming. I know she understands, not like her dad. He probably thinks the moon's just some big rock. Webley knows better. She knows that magic witch moon. I know she does. I hope she finds a man to share these lunar spells with. One who understands her, the beauty of her, of her life. And a man who knows the moon.

That is, of course, if she ever gets here. Come on out of there, Webley, you've got a life to live and you've already wasted four days.

You can go ahead and laugh at me, Eck. You should be used to me by now. You do deserve to know what's happening. In a way, you've been with me this whole time. You've gone from "cheap shrink" to someone I'm obliged to, someone I look forward to talking to. I can give myself to you and you'd never hurt me or trap me or want me to be anyone other than who I am.

I have wondered about you, Eck. I almost called your telephone number a few times. I came very close that time in the motel room. I even drove by your apartment building once. I liked it, that old brownstone, the neighborhood, liked to think of you living in a nice tidy little place like that. I parked the car and went into the building. There you were, Mr. T. J. Ecklenburg, in number 5A. I touched the button but didn't press it. I thought, No, I can't scare him like this, come trudging into his life. I've already intruded with pen and paper, can't do it physically, too. The way I feel about you is special, unique. I didn't want to ruin it. You can't break what you can't touch.

And what about you, Eck? Have you wondered about me? My face, my eyes? Do you understand the moon? Or the heart of a woman? Have you ever seen the diamonds in an evening snowfall or the tears of a star? Are you gentle and good, the way I've always pictured you? Do you know the sweet pain of a broken heart? I love you in a special way. My Eck.

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

Oh, my God. There's something. A pain? It's there. It was—it is—definitely there. It's ... it's starting. Oh, yeah. Oh, God. I mean, I think it's starting. I've got to go wake the Hub. It's not my imagination, Eck, it's starting. Good thing I have your envelope ready to go. I'll have to drop this letter off on my way into the deliver

ECK! Eck?

GOODBYE ECK!

September 23

Oh, Harvey, Harvey, Harvest Moon,

I finally received the birth announcement. I am confident that you filled in the name slot with "Webley" only for my benefit and that the lovely dreamlet of a child pictured in the photograph has a more fitting name. Your "Hello, Eck! Mom and W. doing fine!" at the bottom of the otherwise preprinted note was appreciated but disappointingly short. I might add that word of your and Webley's well-being was inexcusably late.

I have been beside myself with worry. Over these last four months, there were times when I almost wished you had never sent your last letter. It ended so abruptly. That shift from your dreamy, soft HarveySpeak to your apocalyptic ranting was no comfort, either. I had no idea what happened. Well, I had an idea, but no way of being sure about it. You should have written again as soon as possible and saved me the worry. Your lack of manners can be no less than exasperating sometimes, Harvey.

But I don't want to be too harsh. Motherhood, particularly brand new motherhood, is surely both time-consuming and overwhelming. Short of being in the delivery room (an ordeal I cannot begin to fathom), I was there up until the very end. I am glad for that. It was as satisfying a way to complete the experience as I could have wished.

Judging from the snapshot you enclosed, Miss Webley is easily the most exquisite child I have ever seen. No doubt the genuine article is an earthbound cherub of unequalled beauty.

Such heavenly stock will certainly not grow up to be a member of the Lilliputian Terror Brigade. She is too utterly angelic.

I feel akin to her in a way. I like to think I would be elevated to the status of honorary uncle if you and I were actually acquainted. I cannot stop gazing at this photograph. She has your eyes. Of course, I am calling upon a six-month-old memory, and a fleeting memory at that.

Then again, perhaps not so fleeting. That glimpse of you back in March has stayed with me. I still gaze at the entranceway of the literary department from time to time and think of you.

Even though I have frequently entertained thoughts of you, I have not written in these months, either, a breech of etiquette on my part and another reason not to be angry with you. I should also add that your absence was noted not only with concern, but also with sentimentality. In fact, Dickens let out a particularly resounding chirp when I came home with the unopened birth announcement and told him that I had finally received something from our old friend Harvey.

We've missed you.

So much has happened since I last wrote that I could not even think of putting it all down. Once again, it seems that I am in the midst of a dizzying carousel ride, but this one is with Kate and now I am riding high upon life's jumping horses instead of watching them from behind the railing. Perhaps I shouldn't say carousel ride, but instead say scooter ride. We did end up buying a matching pair. What freedom! We zip

around together all over town. Why, it is wanderlust like I have never known.

I have even taken to riding mine to work. I imagine I look ridiculous leaning forward into the wind with my tie flapping insanely over my shoulder, my tattered old briefcase strapped on the small-but-adequate luggage rack and the unlikely metallic red—excuse me—candy apple-silver-red helmet capping off the whole thing. The strangest part is, I don't care one toot. I don't miss the 22N at all, the miserable exhaust fountain. I abhor the thought of having to get back on the wretched thing this winter. Although I know it is dastardly of me, I have been known to taunt its daily passengers with a jaunty wave if, by chance, I end up next to them at a stop light, a pleasantry they undoubtedly find unpleasant. Ha!

How perfect that I should hear from you on this, my day of days. I have been waiting with great anticipation for tonight, this September's harvest moon, to carry out a most exciting, most fantastical plan. After all, the harvest moon is a celestial event with a mystical aura, one that brought me you; and if ever I needed a mystical boost, tonight is the night.

I have planned an intimate late-night dinner for Kate and me. I have even prepared the menu myself as directed by a cookbook referred to me by Mr. Stillard: *The Bachelor Chef Entertains*. Hopefully, the confetti rotini cheesy beef casserole will go off without a hitch. Then, after we've finished our strawberry shortcake, the most thrilling part of the evening will unfold.

I have done something completely out of character. After hours of fiddling and jiggling and mechanical coercing, I have

managed to pick the lock on the door that leads to the rooftop of 18960 Hornback Lane. I plan to lead Kate up there after dinner, to where I will have set up two chairs and a small table, complete with white linen tablecloth, ice bucket and champagne. The two of us will toast the harvest moon without the intrusion of a windowpane. Then, at the stroke of midnight, I will pull from my sport coat pocket a small velvet box and present to Kate one unusual yet sophisticated emerald ring and my proposal of marriage.

I am beside myself with anticipation. This writing has been a boon. What else was I to do with my time other than watch the clock and await the punctuating "ting" of the kitchen timer to signal me that the sauerkraut balls I have prepared to accompany our martinis are due to come out of the oven?

Wish me luck, Harvey, wherever you are!

Eck

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January 1

My Dearest Kate,

I can only hope that you have gotten through all of this and are actually reading this letter. I had thought about putting this installment on top then decided that it would be best if you read the entire collection chronologically. If you have, you now know how I had intended to end our last evening together, beneath the harvest moon. Of course, your speech over those two sad and uneaten servings of strawberries, cream and angel food cake brought my plans to an abrupt end.

I know you asked me not to contact you, but as I hope you now understand, I had no choice. You are my only salvation. I hope the words I write here at this uninspired desk in this uninspired room are vibrant despite the grey cold of the January day that has wrapped itself around me. Please know that, although the author's hands are icy, his heart burns with a passionate desperation.

I will not let you go without a fight, Kate. These words are my action. Dear God, let them make their mark. This is not a trick or a lure, or an enticement of any sort. You must believe that despite the fact I have enclosed the ring, which belongs to you no matter what becomes of you and me—of us—this packet is me, exposed and honest. This is Tim, asking you to come back to me because we belong together.

I love you, Kate.

I did not want to call you. It seemed too trite. I thought of traveling to your sister's address in Florida to implore you to

return, but that simply is not my style. I was nearly out of ideas. Then Christmas Eve came dreadfully along, as I knew it would. I sat alone in my apartment and recalled our first kiss a year ago. So acute was my longing for you that I thought surely I would retire and never wake, that I would die of a broken heart.

Other than fleetingly, I had not thought of my old friend Harvey since I had received that birth announcement on the day you told me we could not go on together. I thought reading her letters might help me get through the endless night. There was little else to distract me. Frank decided that the party simply would not be the same without you, and with your old apartment rented to an airline hostess who is almost never home, 18960 Hornback Lane was deadly quiet, as still as it has ever been on a Christmas Eve since before you came and filled it with life.

Frank had invited me to dine with him and a friend. I thanked him, but declined. I wanted to be alone.

And alone I was when I retrieved all of Harvey's letters and my own and started to sort through them. How could I shuffle through without reading a passage here and a sentence there? Very soon, I found myself compelled yet again by the stories of these unlikely pen pals. Of course, Harvey's installments afforded a smile or two despite my bleak state of mind. I trust you have been indulgent with her. I imagine, in fact, that you and Harvey would get along marvelously if you ever were to meet.

I knew I had to include her pages along with mine, that to show only my letters would paint only half a picture. As I read

them that night, they felt like the old friends they have become. But my letters, Kate, mine were a very different story. Having gotten this far, I suppose you know that, too.

I sat there among the tattered and crumpled assemblage of papers. Huge and tremulous tears welled in my eyes. I felt as empty as the King Edward Cigar box, which save for a number of rubber bands that were cracked with age, their elasticity long since gone, was relieved of its contents. It had given everything it had to offer and now appeared as an abandoned shell, dingy and spent.

The man who first sat down and wrote Harvey never would have imagined revealing himself the way I am revealing myself to you right now. Can you see me? Can you see through the looking glass? Can you see what you have given me? Can you see how completely you possessed me in your open hands? Can you see how you put dimension and texture and kaleidoscope color into a life that was little more than a droning monorail ride?

The most frightening part of my excruciating and emotionally raw Christmas Eve was being presented with the man I was and knowing that if you never come back I will be sentenced to his life once again. But this time, I will trudge through the days with the devastating knowledge that the grass is not simply greener on the other side, but that it is tangible and luxuriant and utterly alive, and that it is peppered with flowers for Algernon.

I need you, Kate.

I understand the ordeal you endured after Richard died, and I know that loving again and risking a return to what you

call "the dark place" is an unbearable thought. I am 57, and though healthy, I cannot promise I will never die. But I can offer you this. I can promise you that if you are ever in the dark place, I will light for you a hundred candles. If you are ever lonely, I will hold you until you are again warm and connected. If you are ever vulnerable, I will protect you from all things fierce. If you are ever hurt, I will heal your every wound. Just please, please come back to me, Kate, and let me love you.

With all that I am,  
Tim

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March 31

Dear Harvey,

I suppose it is best to tell the rest of the tale as it actually happened.

I waited for Kate's response. And waited and waited. I waited through January and its interminable snow. And I waited through the beginning of February, when January's snow turned dirty and old and depressing. I fell back into the unchanging routine that included droopy tuna fish sandwiches and the 22N bus. I donated my scooter to the Purple Heart Association. Even Dickens's chirp was missing the mark.

To make the situation even worse, I was "strongly urged" by the head of personnel to consider taking my retirement. The official-looking letter was sent via certified mail. Its message was clear. The "recommended date" for the retirement was to be April first, which in and of itself was a cruel and ironic joke.

My undoing was to be complete. I resigned myself to go through the next nearly eight weeks as though nothing had happened. I would embark on new opportunities when my duties at the library were behind me.

It was, day of days, February fourteenth when I got the call from Kate. Oddly enough, I found I was quite speechless, which seemed strange. She and I had been on a very intimate basis for a time. After all, I had seen her angelfish. Yet there I was, barely able to carry on a simple dialogue.

How was she feeling?

Fine but sad.

Was she still staying with her sister?

No, she had moved to an apartment.

And so went the conversation along a stilted path. The questions I really wanted to ask would not come from my mouth. Had she gotten my package? Was she seeing someone else? And, most importantly, was there any chance of us getting back together?

Finally, after I lamely reported that, yes, Ms. Beckett and I were still both holding posts in the Literary Department (I omitted the detail of my impending retirement), I heard her sigh. Then she was quiet. I could not contain myself any longer.

"Did you receive my parcel?" I asked. Yes, she said, she had received it.

Then, an unbearable silence. The possibility that she had read the letters and found she detested the man therein exposed shook the very self-confidence it took to send her those pages. I stammered. "So, did you...?"

"I haven't opened it, Tim."

She went on to tell me that she had been in therapy for some weeks, that the depression she experienced after she left me was severe, that she had not wanted to see me—or anyone for that matter. I asked her if she had kept in touch with Frank, as it was he who helped her through the period after Richard's death. No, she said, she had not spoken with Frank, either.

The entire time, she was distant and not at all like the Kate I remember. I was terribly concerned. I wanted to tell her that I would come see her right away, that I would do anything to help her get through this. Had she given me any opening, I would have. But, instead, she drifted further away.

After we had been connected only a scant five minutes, she ended the conversation by saying she had wanted to let me know she had received the package and touch base. Then it was goodbye, and I was left there in my apartment with as many unanswered questions floating through my mind as there had been before her call.

There was some satisfaction in knowing she had not read the pages. A chance still remained for me.

February turned into a cold March. Still no word from Kate. My hopes were beginning to wane. I started to feel old again;

in fact, I began to actually feel in need of my upcoming retirement. I trudged through the days. Tuna fish sandwiches and frozen dinners seemed appropriate nutritional punctuation in the bland sentences of my life.

It was the Ides of March, which I will remember for a long, long time. I went to the employee lounge with my brown paper sac at 11:45. As I sat down, I looked out the window and felt a sentimental pang shudder through my chest. It was the first day characterized by passable spring weather, and Ed the street vendor was in his usual spot for the first time this year, taking advantage of the comparably warm temperatures and dry weather. His sign, although still propped against the stem of his umbrella, had been updated and now indicated that the price of an Italian Sausage Mammoth was four dollars. Apparently, the rest of the world was moving along smoothly. I looked away.

If that wasn't enough, that familiar aroma, however faint, came to my nostrils. Someone in the lounge had purchased one of Ed's sandwiches and was in the process of unwrapping it, allowing the distinctive, mouth-watering smell to taunt me further.

As I raised my tuna sandwich to my mouth to bite, a voice came from behind. "Hey, over theh, Mr. Chips," it said, "you want mustard with this Mammy or don'tcha?"

With my mouth still open, I looked up to see, standing there like a vision, with a white-paper-wrapped sandwich in either hand, my darling of darlings, my Kate.

Not really believing my own eyes, I looked into hers and found them welling with tears and vulnerability. Before I

remembered where I was and before I even knew what I was doing, I was on my feet. I embraced her. I put my hands on her face and looked at her again. I kissed her. She coughed a teary laugh and embraced me without benefit of her hands, which still held the sandwiches.

Then I remembered where I was. I looked from side to side and discovered that virtually every eye in the employee lounge was upon us and every mouth was agape at my actions. Kate smiled.

"Looks like we've got their attention," she said.

I asked her to sit down and wait for me. I was in quite a frenzy as I went to Ms. Beckett's desk and made the unprecedented and imploring request for her to cover my duties for the rest of the day. I explained, rather breathlessly, that a matter of great importance had unexpectedly arisen.

"Of course, Mr. Ecklenburg," she replied, her face ablaze in shock. "I should say I owe you as much."

So, we took our Italian Sausage Mammoth sandwiches and boarded the 22N at the unlikely hour of quarter-past noon.

It was a rather teary tete-a-tete. Her depression had been significant, and she would require further counseling. She was still taking medication. She never expected a relapse such as the one she had endured. Then, with not a small amount of insecurity, she asked if I would be available to go with her to a session or two. And, with not a small amount of coquetry, she asked if she could stay at my place for a little while, until she re-established herself and settled into a home base. Need I say how eager my responses were?

Then we talked about all those letters. She hadn't felt strong enough to open the package until two days ago. After she did, she tore through the pages voraciously. The discovery was, in fact, so epiphanic that she had scarcely set down the last sheet before she was reaching for the telephone and dialing the airlines.

After hearing all of this, my heart was soaring. Had anyone told me that something could make me feel even better, I would have thrown my head back in laughter. Then I noticed, on the third finger of her left hand, the sparkling emerald ring I had nearly forgotten.

Oh, my, the wonderful Kateness of her.

After the shadows had grown long and the martinis were poured, she wanted to talk about you. She felt a kindred bond to you, as I imagine anyone reading your letters would. She felt, as I have on many occasions, that I should try to contact you. I assured her that I had only seen you once in the library and did not have your name and address, or any idea of how to track you down. I added that actually meeting me or hearing from me might be a bit presumptuous, for reasons I have previously outlined.

But her concern for you was considerable, and she would not let the subject drop. She insisted that the letters are so significant, and that they moved her so, they could only do the same for you. I brought up the fact that, after all this time has passed, your situation may have changed a great deal. It may or may not include the Hub, Captain Crunch or some other man. Kate said it made no difference. She felt that we must "hand you this mirror," as she put it, or at least

make a substantial effort to get these installments to you and let you do with them as you see fit. She felt we owed you this much, and I was compelled to agree.

With that, she came up with the Beckett plan, part of which is this letter. We both hope it works. If it goes as we intend, you will, like Kate, read all these letters chronologically as she did and conclude with this one.

So, if we have been successful, it's nice to formally make your acquaintance, Harvey.

I have already spoken to Ms. Beckett about you. It was a daunting task, having to ask her a favor. As I should have guessed, she was lovely about it. Any misgivings I previously had towards her were surely caused by my own pathetic insecurities. She took me a bit off-guard, I must admit. After I had described you to her (including your tattoo), she said that, yes, she thought she had seen you (not your tattoo) browsing around the library. I then asked her if she would be kind enough to give you a parcel if you ever came in again. With my impending departure, I would not likely have the chance to do it myself. She graciously agreed to the favor.

At that point, Ms. Beckett told me something she had undoubtedly been withholding until the perfectly opportune moment. She said, "I do this favor only because I know something about you, Mr. Ecklenburg, that you do not know I know." She offered a smug smile and continued, "That is to say, I know that *you*," she accentuated this with a fingertip poised in my direction, "are human and fallible like the rest of us." She moved that same finger to a vertical position and twirled it around the arc of a complete circle, indicating all of

humanity, "And *you*," the finger pointed back to me, "can do something as common as forget a quarter for bus fare, despite your irritating superiority."

Much to my chagrin, she then confided in me that she spied me on that day when I purloined a quarter from her pencil pot. Apparently, she was returning to her desk for a forgotten package when she spotted me rummaging around. She remained hidden until I left. She admitted that the discovery of these unsavory tendencies had shocked and repulsed her. When she discovered the replacement quarter two days later, however, it endeared me to her, and she ultimately decided that I was not a vicious criminal after all, nor was I so uppity that I would not take care to ensure a covert loan was promptly repaid. She never said a word about it until we had the conversation I have recounted here.

Tomorrow, I am going in for half a day, it being my last. I will be leaving this package with Ms. Beckett. She has assured me she will deliver it if she ever sees you again. I have faith she will diligently watch for you. Even this entrusting is a result of the new Eck. The old Mr. Timothy J. Ecklenburg would have never trusted anyone to carry out such a personal task and, therefore, would have deemed it impossible and would have abandoned the idea of trying to make a connection with you altogether. Eck, on the other hand, will leave it in the hands of fate with confidence.

Kate and I have decided to take a two-month vacation and get to know one another again. Her therapist in Florida has approved our trip to Palm Springs and has even reduced her

medication. How strange that the retirement I dreaded so fervently has ended up being welcome.

I have made copies of the letters, all of them. I hope you are not offended. The diary of a rebirth is too dear to let go. Kate urged me to forego packing them away and to take them with us for good luck. I suppose she is right. In fact, I suppose I will keep them close to me wherever I go.

But, now, Harvey, I must move on. Kate and I are off to take in this magnificent sunset together. Read your story, read mine. Then read them again. And again. Show Hub, show him all of it and lick your wounds together. When all is said and done, it will be clear whether you are meant to succeed together or not. Kate and I are rooting for you.

With all of our Love,  
Kate and Eck

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

December 19

Dear Kate and Eck,

I am attaching a letter I wrote about three months ago. It was returned to sender. My plan now is to go back to the library and see if Ms. Beckett can help. So much time has passed. So much has happened. I hope, hope, hope and pray this gets to you eventually. There are things I want you to know. After all, we're soul mates. If this ever does get to you, I'd love to hear back from you (my address is listed below). I'm also leaving my real name there. But I prefer you always think of me as your...

Harvest Moon

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September Something or Other

The Night of the Full Moon

My Dearest Friends Kate and Eck,

It's now about a year and a half since you wrote me and sent me that gift of a million words. That Ms. Beckett is one remarkable lady. I hadn't been in the library for the longest time. Just thank God I chose a ninety-plus-degree day to revisit one of my favorite haunts. Needed to beat the heat, I guess. Good thing, too, the hot weather made me decide to

wear my sloppiest halter, the one that best shows off my tattoo. Imagine that.

Webley and I were about to leave when I heard a pair of clackety-clack heels coming across that tile sun you're so fond of.

"Harvey! Harvey! Harvest Moon! I've been looking for a tattoo like that for God only knows!"

I turned to see that lady librarian, looking almost as shocked as I felt. I couldn't believe what she said, and she couldn't believe she had said it. No one, I mean, no one knew about that nickname. At least, no one other than some guy I used to call Eck. At least that's what I thought. Surprise, surprise.

I followed her back to her desk. She explained that she worked with a man named Mr. Ecklenburg for many years and that he had retired more than a year ago. He left this package for a woman fitting my description (all except the hair) and answering to the name Harvey. (Thank God I wore the halter that day. My hair's been short and dyed red for months. Ms. Beckett agreed she would have never recognized me.)

We talked for a few minutes. She told me she hasn't heard from you since your last day of work. I was actually dying to get out of there (so was Webley) and open the package. I couldn't believe you had reached out to me. My mind was going a mile a minute. I was thinking of all that stuff I wrote you, plus the realization that you were there at the library the whole time. I knew I'd probably seen you once or twice. I even thought that maybe I'd talked to you. You confirmed all of it in your letters.

Those letters. Oh, my God, the letters! But I'll get to that later.

I hope you're still there on Hornback Lane. I thought of phoning right after I read this pile of blood and guts that is all of us. I shelved the idea until the next morning. I'm glad of it, too. I was a real mushy mess after I finished reading. Talk about an emotional overload—I don't think I stopped crying for an hour. Even then, I'd go and reread one of the letters and start sobbing all over again. I didn't pull myself together, really together, until the next day. That's when I thought, no, let it sink in for a little while, make a decision and then write them about everything. Might as well keep your silly soap opera consistent.

This letter-writing business is a great form of communication. It's not like talking or emailing, which I have to admit I've taken to quite a bit these days. But you know what? When it comes to writing, the best way is to exit the superhighway and put it on paper and send it through the US Mail. It's more human, more personal. A letter means you've thought it out. You've taken your time. A letter is different from a few typed words and a click of the "send" button. Old-fashioned, yeah, but the handwritten word (even when it's broadcast in—how did you put it?—my "atrocious penmanship") is the best way for me to say what I want to say and the only way worthwhile.

I kept putting off writing this, which is kind of funny when you think about how I used to write all the time. I didn't know where to start. But tonight is the September full moon—the Harvest Moon—and I've got to write. It was probably best to

wait, anyway, with the way things have worked out and all. I finally have something to say. So much—so, so, so much—to say.

After Webley came along, I guess I did kind of turn into a lotus-eater. I know, I know. I said I wouldn't let it happen, but when you have a baby, it's such a sweet, special thing. And really, it wasn't that bad. I was the natural, herb-infused variety you predicted. I may have gotten a little carried away, like when I painted the little angel babies on winged motorcycles all over Webley's bedroom ceiling, but the old Harvey hung on. And compared to the Hub and his video-cam, I was downright negligent.

Yeah, motherhood brings changes, no doubt about that. Most are for the best. I all but forgot about the Crunch (these names seem so funny to me now) and I also all but forgot about a man you've always known as the Hub.

Having a kid doesn't repair a blowout in a marriage. After Webley (I swear these names kill me) made her entrance, we were okay on the surface. But in truth, it still felt like we were two people living alone together under one roof. If anything, Webley made it easier to distance ourselves from each other. She was there, with all the needs of a newborn, and it was easy to put off addressing what was—or, more accurately, what was not—going on between the Hub and me.

Sex even took a backseat in my life. Babies are breathing birth control. When you think about it, it makes sense. I mean, your sex drive did its job, you've got the baby. It can go on vacation for a while. Right? Yeah, right, for a while.

Right around the time Webley was celebrating her first, my libido returned from post-birth vacation. Then I did think about Captain Crunch, and all those horizontal memories started to get that attractive, hazy glow around them. The Captain's fog coming back. Looking over my shoulder, it looked pretty good. So I called him.

He had remarried. Traded in the original Mrs. Crunch for a 22-year-old. Talk about a bomb. Yeah, I know. Twenty-two. And get this—her name is Canda. Can you believe that? (Hey, I just realized, I really have cleaned up my language. Not so long ago, I would have said, "Can you fucking believe that?" You got your wish, Eck. Chalk one up for Webley.) Yeah, Canda. Canda Crunch. I thought I was his young cupcake. Guess not. Guess I look like a tough old piece of leather next to that tenderoni.

I asked him, "What do you talk about? What she did in school every today?" I was trying to be funny, but the Crunch didn't see the humor. What the hell, it's not for me to judge. I hope they're happy together. You know what, Eck? Even before he told me about the new Mrs. Crunch, I felt something wasn't there anymore—for me, anyway. I'm not sure I would have wanted to see him even if he hadn't remarried. Sounds like sour grapes. I don't know. Maybe it was. Does it matter?

Anyhow, the Crunch was no longer available whether I wanted him or not. So there I was. I felt like one of those snowflakes you talked about, sitting on the ground, knowing I'd already done my big trick and the only thing left to do was melt. Not very fun thoughts, so I kept my focus on Webley.

She is a true joy. Raising your own kid is no waste of time. Looking back, I'm glad I got laid off and was forced into full-time mommyhood. It's worth it, a thousand times over.

And it was a way to at least interface with the Hub. Although I had no idea of how to get close to him, really close, Webley served as our most vital link. We both care so much for her. She is everything to us. In fact, it was Webley who reunited you and me, Eck.

She and I were downtown to see the clowns in the park, and I thought it was as good a time as any to introduce her to the Main County Library. I wanted to take her into your favorite place (the children's reading room) and take a stroll through my favorite old Grand Lady to see what was new. I hadn't been there in so long. That's when I ran into Ms. Beckett.

So, for a while there, Webley was my whole life. I was starting to get restless and hungry. I knew it wouldn't be long until all that woman came bursting out again, and I didn't want to keep her down because that would mean risking turning bitter and edgy at age 35. I've seen it happen to other women, and I didn't want it to happen to me. I was getting worried. Time was running out. Waiting on a zephyr...

Then the letters.

It's not often that you have a crystal-clear moment. And the one I had after the tears dried up was profoundly clear. Most of my initial reaction was to you and Kate. To think that I'd touched a life—it meant a lot to me. And I was amazed at you, Eck. All my selfish babbling, and you honestly cared about me. I loved learning about you, your life. Your

sweetness and sensitivity. And all your funny quirks, like your lunch! After I read that you'd been eating tuna—no, wait, let me get this right—a tuna sandwich, a small bag of carrot sticks or, occasionally, celery sticks, a ChocFill Nut Bar and a grape soda for 31 years, I knew I'd never look at a can of StarKist again. Sorry, Charlie.

Oh, Eck. I'm so happy you and Kate found each other. I know you will take care of one another, that you will taste life together, that you belong together.

And don't worry. You're everything I ever could have wanted in a penpal and so much more. You really were there for me. When I was worried, when I cried, when I was scared. When I felt so alone. That's exactly it. I was never alone. You were watching over me the whole time. Life is strange.

A few days passed. I reread the letters, focusing on mine. It wasn't until the third time through that I started to realize what was there. Talk about taking a look at yourself. I wrote those words to get things out, remove them. I never expected to see them again, and here they were floating back to me. I thought it over long and hard, and finally I decided I would take your advice and show the Hub, show him all of it. It was a chance, maybe our last chance, to repair this relationship. I had to take it.

It wasn't easy for either of us. In fact, it was probably the hardest thing I'd ever done and easily the most painful thing he'd ever done. But I handed him the packet of letters and he read them. Yours and mine. I told him it was important to read the whole thing.

It was right before he was supposed to take Webley to the outlaws' place for a weekend visit. Perfect timing. I told him to go ahead and start reading, I'd take Webley. He looked a little confused but took the packet anyway. I told him everything he needed to know was in those dog-eared pages. Then I took my time getting home. I stopped for a beer, went to the store to pick up a couple of steaks for dinner. I figured it would be a good to give him a little breathing room, a little time to react privately.

I was gone for about five hours, the longest five hours of my life. I had no idea what would be waiting for me when I got home. When I did get home, he was almost done. He said he'd skipped some of your stuff to get to mine. Okay, fine. I wasn't about to complain. He was very calm. I didn't know what to make of it. I started to get a little worried. Truth be told, I started to get a lot worried. I put the steaks on the grill.

Dinner was quiet, tense, ominous.

"Pass the salt, please."

"Steak okay?"

"Fine."

"Good, good."

I thought we'd never finish. But when the plates were clean and a second glass of wine was poured into both our glasses, it was time.

The Hub got up from the table, picked up his glass and sat down in a chair he never sits in—I've learned that's not a good sign. Now I was really quaking inside.

He let out a big sigh. "I don't know what's going to happen now," he said, "but I was hoping to make this a nice weekend for you." He started fishing something out of his pocket, "Well, maybe it still can be because what I've got for you is yours no matter what happens between you and me."

At this point, I didn't know what was going on. I figured I'd follow his lead. Whatever he was up to, it was clear he wasn't finished. He took a sip of wine then set down his glass. He got up and walked over to where I was standing. He took my hand. He said, "Come on, we'll talk about all of that," he pointed to the stack of letters, "in a few minutes. There's something for you in the shed."

He led me out the back door and across the lawn.

And I'll be goddammed, Eck, if he didn't open that shed door and sitting there inside was this absolutely beautiful, brand-spanking-new Candy Apple Lipstick Red low-rider, complete with two new matching helmets and a new cover. He dropped the keys in my hand. The title and a dozen roses were propped up in front of it. And believe me when I say he had done a pretty good job of getting it right. He even got the flame decals right. How's that for something?

Wow.

All I could do was put my head in my hands and sob. I think he even let go a tear or two. He was talking about how he had been running around the last couple of days trying to get it all together, how he had arranged for Webley to be gone for the weekend and how glad he was that the weather was going to cooperate and be nice. He was apologizing about how long it took to replace, but he had to squirrel away the

money behind my back and it was quite a bit of money. The whole time he was talking, I was blubbering apologies about my shitty timing, about how I didn't mean to ruin his big surprise and that I loved the bike despite my shitty timing.

But then we were both quiet for a minute and he finally said, "Maybe the timing was perfect."

And then I looked at him and I knew that it wouldn't be easy, but I knew that it was going to be okay. That bike sitting there was a hard thing for him to do. But he did it. And he did it right, he put thought and time into it. He could have bought the first bike he found and given it to me in an effort to hurry up and put the whole incident behind us, make life easier for him. But he didn't do it that way. Instead, he set out to make it as right as he could. He did it for me, and he did it with his whole heart. I wasn't the only one who wanted a complete marriage again.

We were up all night. We talked about everything. He was terribly hurt over all the Crunch stuff, but surprisingly, he wasn't surprised. He'd had his suspicions all along. I apologized again and again, as much for telling him as for doing it.

But those letters broke the ice; in our case, that ice was pretty thick in some places. With everything out on the table, we were able to look at it and start the beginning of the healing.

I never realized it, but the Hub was starved for passion, too, and here I was spending all of mine in a dingy motel room. Yeah, I learned a lot about what he was going through all that time, too. The distance between us was created by

both of us walking in opposite directions. Not just by him walking away from me like I thought. I wasn't the only one in search of validation, but I was so wrapped up in myself, I never even thought to think about what he was going through.

And he never meant to suffocate me, didn't even realize how I felt. And was he really as bad as that guy called "the Hub" in the letters? And no, he doesn't think the moon is "just a big rock." And sure, he fell in love with the woman in the black leather jacket. He still loves her. And maybe she should try offering him a Budweiser in bed some time. That tattoo isn't so bad; in fact, it isn't bad at all.

And I never meant to overlook all that was right about him. I fell in love with the man in the rain at the bus station. I still love him. And yeah, I'm pretty sure that Halloween tape is still in my car and, yeah, I'd love to share a beer with him in bed. Don't get up, honey, I'll get it.

So we kept talking even after we went to bed; and by sunrise, we'd both had enough emotional gore for one night. It was some kind of a beautiful morning, and it gave me an idea. I said, "Come on, Hon, let's see how she rides."

So we got out of bed and threw on some jeans. We went out back. God, it was a gorgeous day. I opened up the shed and starting to cry again when I saw that bike. I wiped my eyes, started her up. And did she purr. The Hub grabbed the helmets. We put them on, and I drove the thing out next to him. He climbed on back.

We rode around all morning. The Hub held on tight, his arms around me, his chin on my shoulder. We stopped for coffee and rolls. It was good, Eck. It was very good.

Even after that ride and everything we talked about the night before, it was still tender-footed around here for the next couple of weeks. But we were working through it. We started talking again. And, after a few false starts, things warmed up again in the bedroom. Bread-and-butter started tasting pretty good. It wasn't like that night when I was pregnant—there was an honest feeling of reconciliation between us. We'd earned this. We'd been through a lot together. Our time had come. We both understood that this was about our lives and, more importantly, about Webley's life.

Successful marriages aren't made up of perfect people, but of people who have learned how to deal with each other's imperfections. That learning isn't easy or painless.

So it's been a couple of months. We've got the big pieces back together. At first I thought it was the letters that caused the breakage. Now I know that it was slow deterioration, and that the letters were a means of peeling back the sheet and showing us the wounded patient. Well, the doctor is in, and we're on the road to recovery.

Tonight's the Harvest Moon. The same one I looked out on that night I wrote you, but this one's three years older. Me, I'm a hundred years older and that much younger. Sounds like you're a hundred years younger. Now we both know it feels wonderful to glide on a zephyr. Thanks for sending one my way. I'll think of you—both of you—often.

Your Friend,

Harvey

Postscript:

So that's how it was three months ago and pretty much still is. Webley's going on three. The Hub and I are even thinking of having another. Who'd have thought ... it's just that kids are so amazing.

Last night, for instance, I got up to get a glass of water. Webley's door was open, and I turned to peek in on her. I'll be damned if that kid hadn't climbed up onto her nightstand, and that tattered Phase One Softie (her favorite toy) was in one hand and the other hand was pressed against the window. She was staring at that devil moon. Two and a half years old, and she found her first love.

She didn't hear me, which was fine. I know I should have gone in and told her to get down, but I didn't want to disturb her. This was the beginning of a lifelong love I was witnessing, and I wouldn't want to interrupt a girl during a time like that. It's a love she can count on. I should know—the moon's always been there for me.

LoveLoveLove—H. M.

February 18

Dear Harvey and Co.,

You were right, Ms. Beckett is a woman of remarkable resource. Your letter was mailed along with my quarterly pension check to the post office box Kate and I keep for such purposes. Frank checks it every other week and forwards the contents to us, wherever we may be.

We were both delighted to learn that you and Hub have begun your lives again, and that you have done so together—on the back of a new motorcycle, no less. How smashing!

Kate and I had such a marvelous time in Palm Springs we decided to extend our adventure indefinitely. So, after I completed the course on driving and my operator's permit was in hand, we went to purchase a brand new travel van. In fact, we chose a Winnebago that is outfitted with virtually every convenience. There's even a spice rack and a special light specifically designed for viewing maps, and the roof is sturdy enough to support us as we make our annual toast to the harvest moon.

It took me a good bit of time; but with Kate as my cheerleader, I finally managed to reign victorious over The Leviathan (a name I selected for the Winnebago, an appropriate sobriquet if I do say so myself), and we set off for the open road. We were enjoying a New Year's celebration in Craig, Colorado, when we got your letter. It was a lovely holiday surprise.

We are holing up here for the winter in a small furnished loft. It has been simply wonderful, like a long honeymoon. I

suppose it *is* a long honeymoon—Kate and I tied a knot. I call it *a* knot instead of *the* knot as it was by no means a conventional ceremony. Kate would not consent to "some ridiculous, unimaginative old wedding," which did not surprise me. She is the original original.

We chose (actually, Kate chose) to exchange private vows in the midst of a patch of Rocky Mountain forest. Our witnesses were the trees and indigenous creatures (and Dickens, who sat atop my shoulder). My bride wanted to speak the nuptials without benefit of clothing such that "nothing would come between us and the honesty of our words." I drew the line there—if not for reasons of modesty, for reasons of common sense, it being a scant 24 degrees on the day of our Natural Human Union (a name Mrs. Ecklenburg composed after hours of dithering).

Everything has changed so drastically in my life since your first letter arrived. I scarcely look like the same man. I have taken to sporting a neat ponytail, even though the hairs that make it up are few; and I haven't had a tie on since my last day of work. I wear denim dungarees most of the time. Kate thinks they look—well, to use her word—sexy. I have even stopped wearing two wristwatches. Kate has tried to convince me I don't need a timepiece at all, but old habits die hard. I have compromised by wearing only one watch, set twelve minutes fast. Kate has promised to use those twelve minutes towards correcting her tardiness. Thus far, I have not noticed an improvement, but truth be told, I have not been keeping track.

Harvey and Eck  
*by Erin O'Brien*

I don't know when the three of us will get back East. But when we do, we will certainly ring you up. I suppose all of us are ready for that now, after having been through everything we have been through. I feel confident that I am, and Kate—she is ready for anything at any time. So take care, Harvey and Hub and Webley. You are always in our hearts, whether they are traveling across the deserts of the Southwest or along the Pacific Coast.

We will always remain your most faithful friends. Love and warm wishes—

Kate and Eck (and Dickens, too)

END

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin O'Brien lives and works in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. She's been a mom for eight years and a wife for twelve. She abandoned her career as an electrical engineer in 1995 to write. She is a contributor to a number of local publications and the editor of the *Broadview Journal*. She owns a little red motorcycle, a Mini Cooper and a lamp that is shaped like a martini glass.

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