

"I can honestly say I never gave it much th—"

"You know your boyfriend got expelled from Auburn for dealing pot out of his fraternity house," he said.

"That's why we're dating."

"You wanted some pot."

"Not so much that. It's just that Eric is my kind of people."

"Eric is—" He stopped himself with a grimace. Then he tried again. "You're an i—"

He was about to call me an idiot. Which I couldn't argue with, considering the present situation. But it was shocking to have a cop tell me so. Or almost tell me so.

"I'm a what?" I taunted him.

He shook his head. "You can't tell a seventeen-year-old anything. They think they're immortal. They don't listen. Seventeen-year-olds have to see it for themselves."

"See what?"

He sighed through his nose. "Before I pulled y'all off the bridge, I glanced in your boyfriend's car. All I saw was two gallon jugs of beer. I don't have anything like possession on you. Come clean with me now, and maybe we won't do a drug screen on your boyfriend. You know if we do, we're charging him with driving under the influence of narcotics."

They certainly were. I backed against the cold car for strength and looked over at Eric's shoulders hunched into the other police car. Actually, I'd been dating him, if you

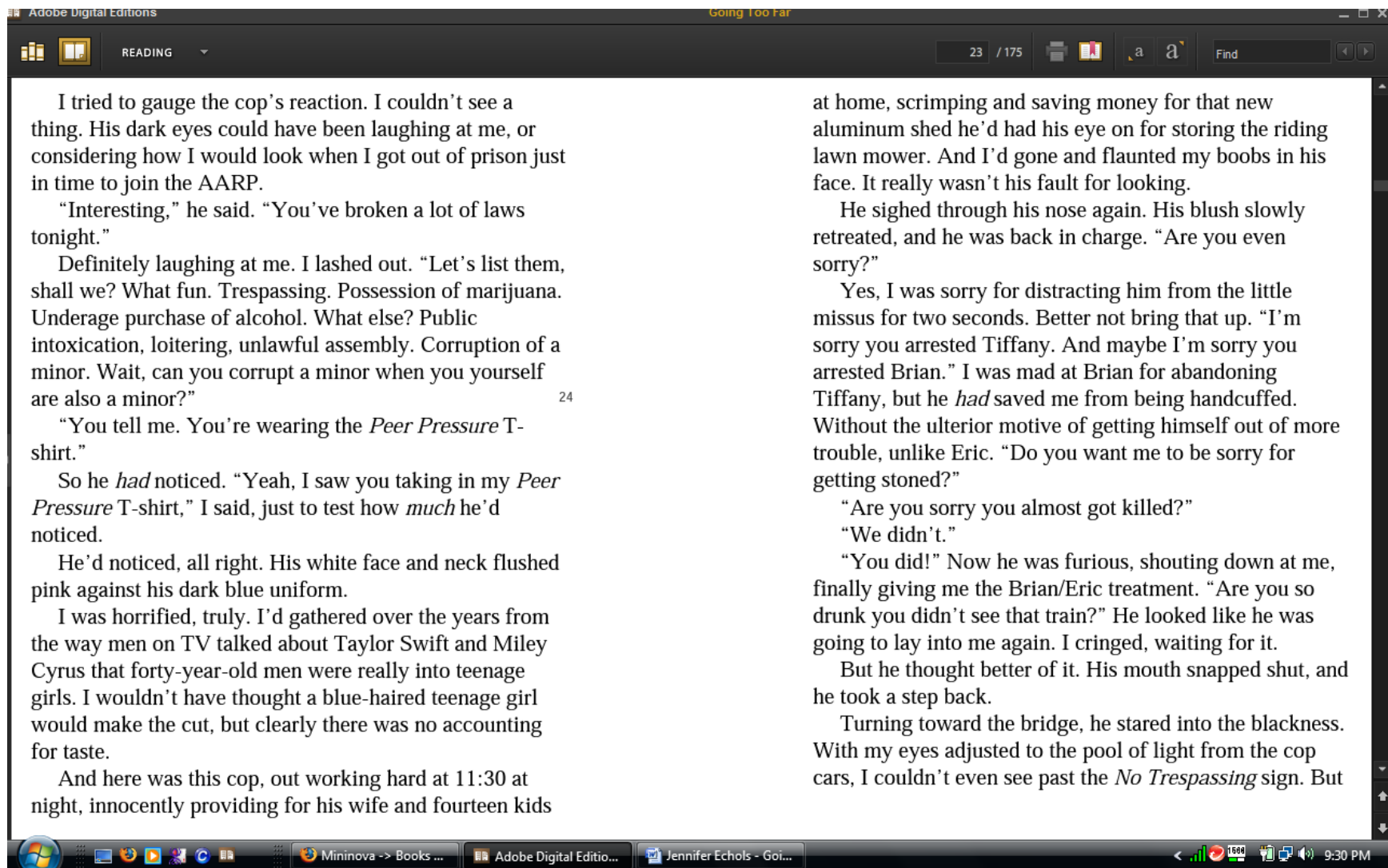
could call it that, for only a few weeks. He had come home to live with his parents and "get his head together" (translation: "smoke a lot of weed") after the aforementioned untimely removal from the institution of higher learning.

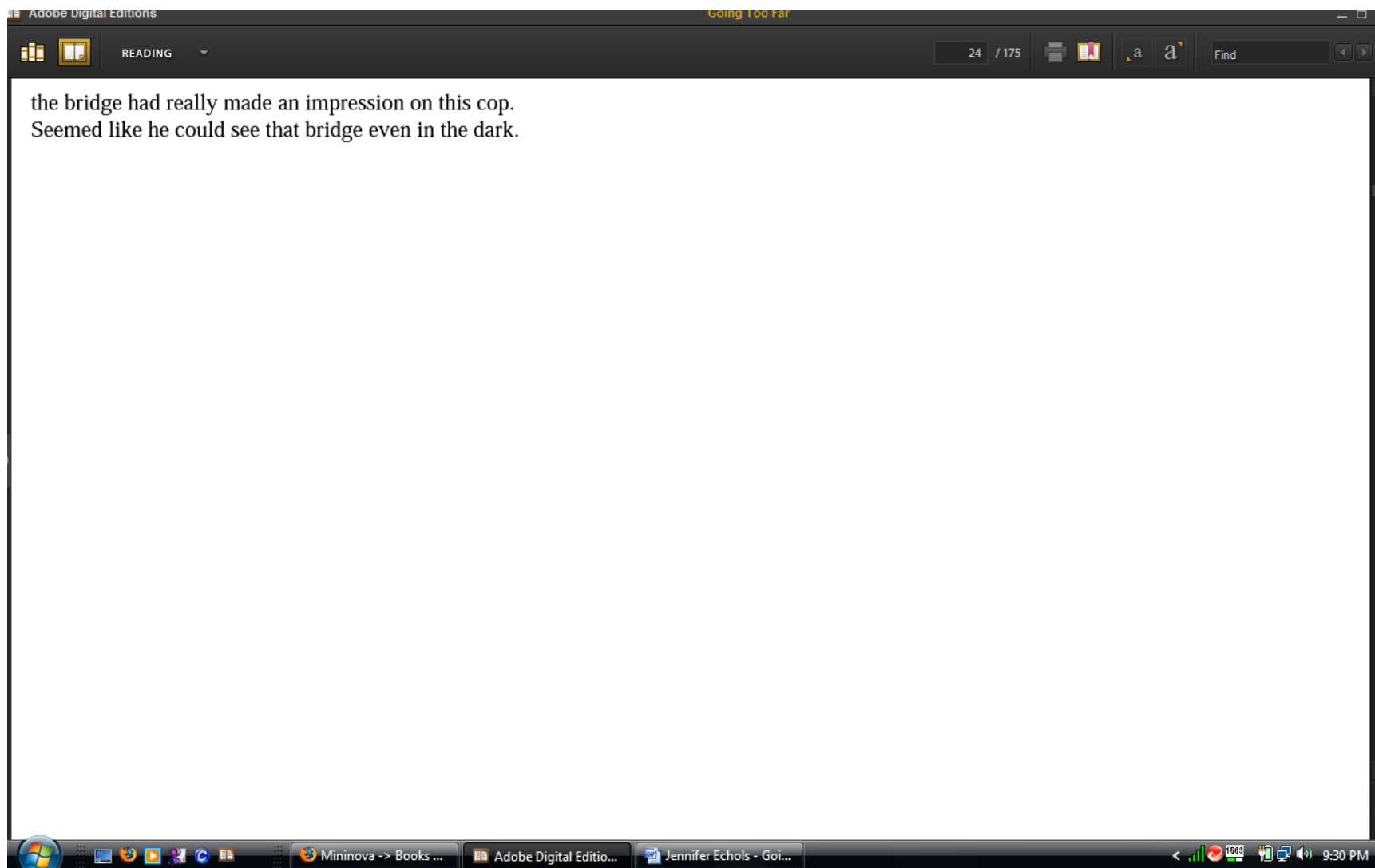
But I knew him well enough to predict what his reaction would be. If I ratted on him and he got in trouble, he would call me a stupid bitch. If I didn't rat on him, they tested his piss, and he got in worse trouble, he would call me a stupid bitch.

"It was just me and him," I said in a rush. "Tiffany and Brian didn't know. They would have wiggled out completely. We smoked it before we ran into them. Eric and I were baked and hungry, and we went to McDonald's for Big Macs. I saw Tiffany in the bathroom. I must have been obviously tanked, because Tiffany hinted she was going on the spring break senior trip next week without ever having a drink. She was afraid of looking naïve. And I'm like, 'Oh! Poor baby. I can buy you some beer.' Brian doesn't drink, either, but he went along with it. Probably for reasons you mentioned previously."

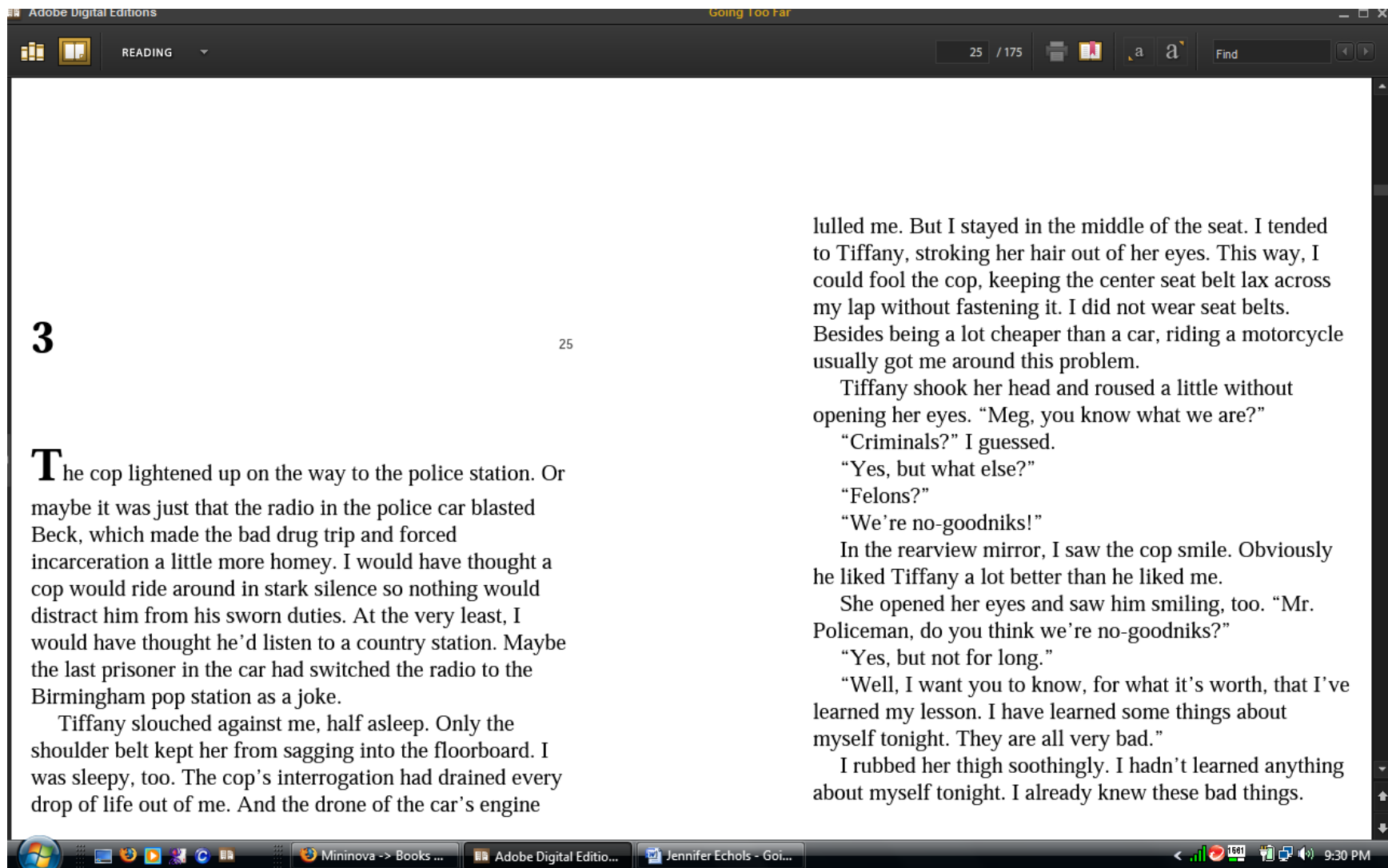
"Mmph," said the cop.

"It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. She never would have done it if she'd had time to think about it. And I never would have done it if I hadn't been stoned. Ditto walking onto the bridge. Completely unpremeditated."

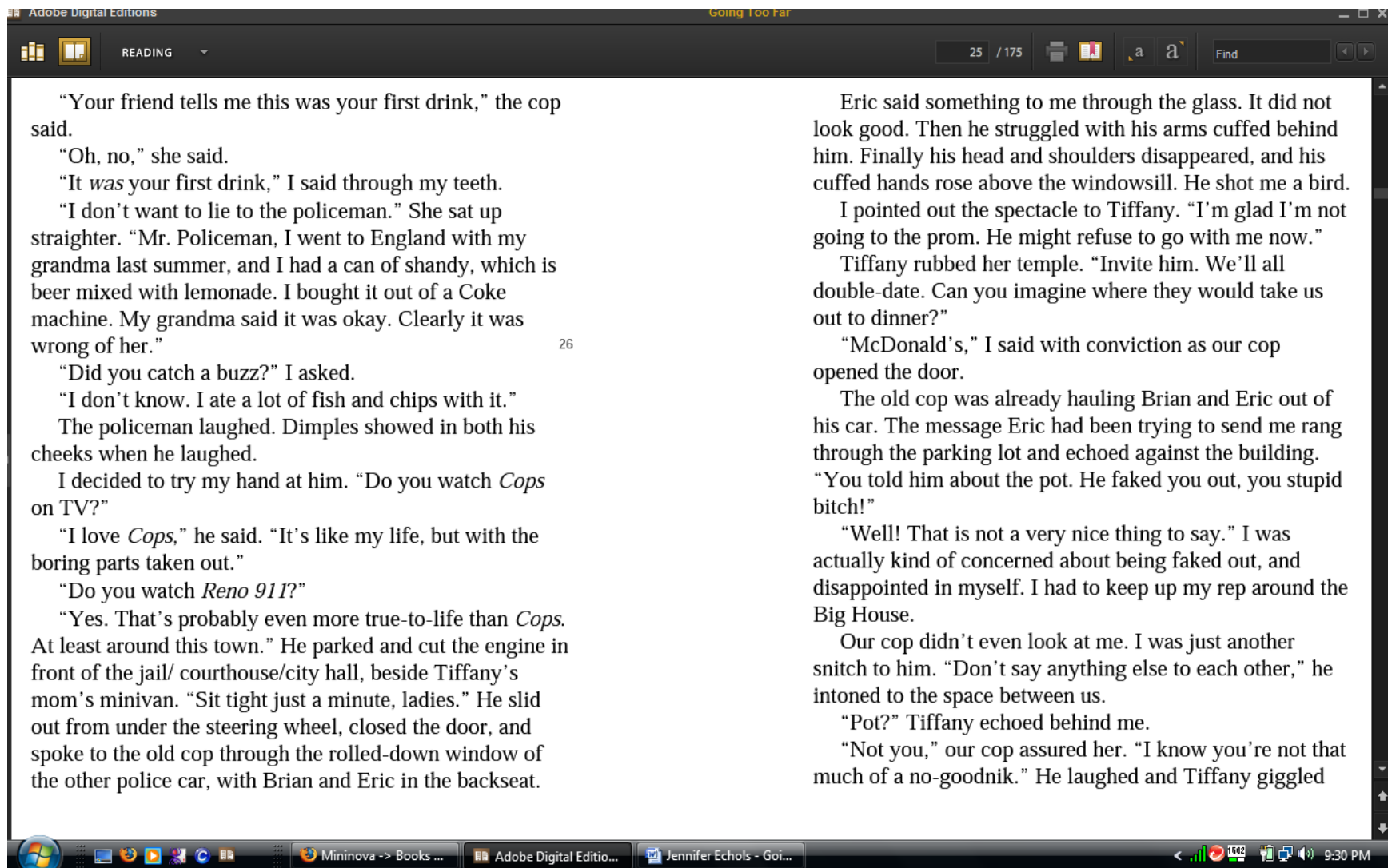












"Your friend tells me this was your first drink," the cop said.

"Oh, no," she said.

"It was your first drink," I said through my teeth.

"I don't want to lie to the policeman." She sat up straighter. "Mr. Policeman, I went to England with my grandma last summer, and I had a can of shandy, which is beer mixed with lemonade. I bought it out of a Coke machine. My grandma said it was okay. Clearly it was wrong of her."

26

"Did you catch a buzz?" I asked.

"I don't know. I ate a lot of fish and chips with it."

The policeman laughed. Dimples showed in both his cheeks when he laughed.

I decided to try my hand at him. "Do you watch *Cops* on TV?"

"I love *Cops*," he said. "It's like my life, but with the boring parts taken out."

"Do you watch *Reno 911*?"

"Yes. That's probably even more true-to-life than *Cops*. At least around this town." He parked and cut the engine in front of the jail/ courthouse/city hall, beside Tiffany's mom's minivan. "Sit tight just a minute, ladies." He slid out from under the steering wheel, closed the door, and spoke to the old cop through the rolled-down window of the other police car, with Brian and Eric in the backseat.

Eric said something to me through the glass. It did not look good. Then he struggled with his arms cuffed behind him. Finally his head and shoulders disappeared, and his cuffed hands rose above the windowsill. He shot me a bird.

I pointed out the spectacle to Tiffany. "I'm glad I'm not going to the prom. He might refuse to go with me now."

Tiffany rubbed her temple. "Invite him. We'll all double-date. Can you imagine where they would take us out to dinner?"

"McDonald's," I said with conviction as our cop opened the door.

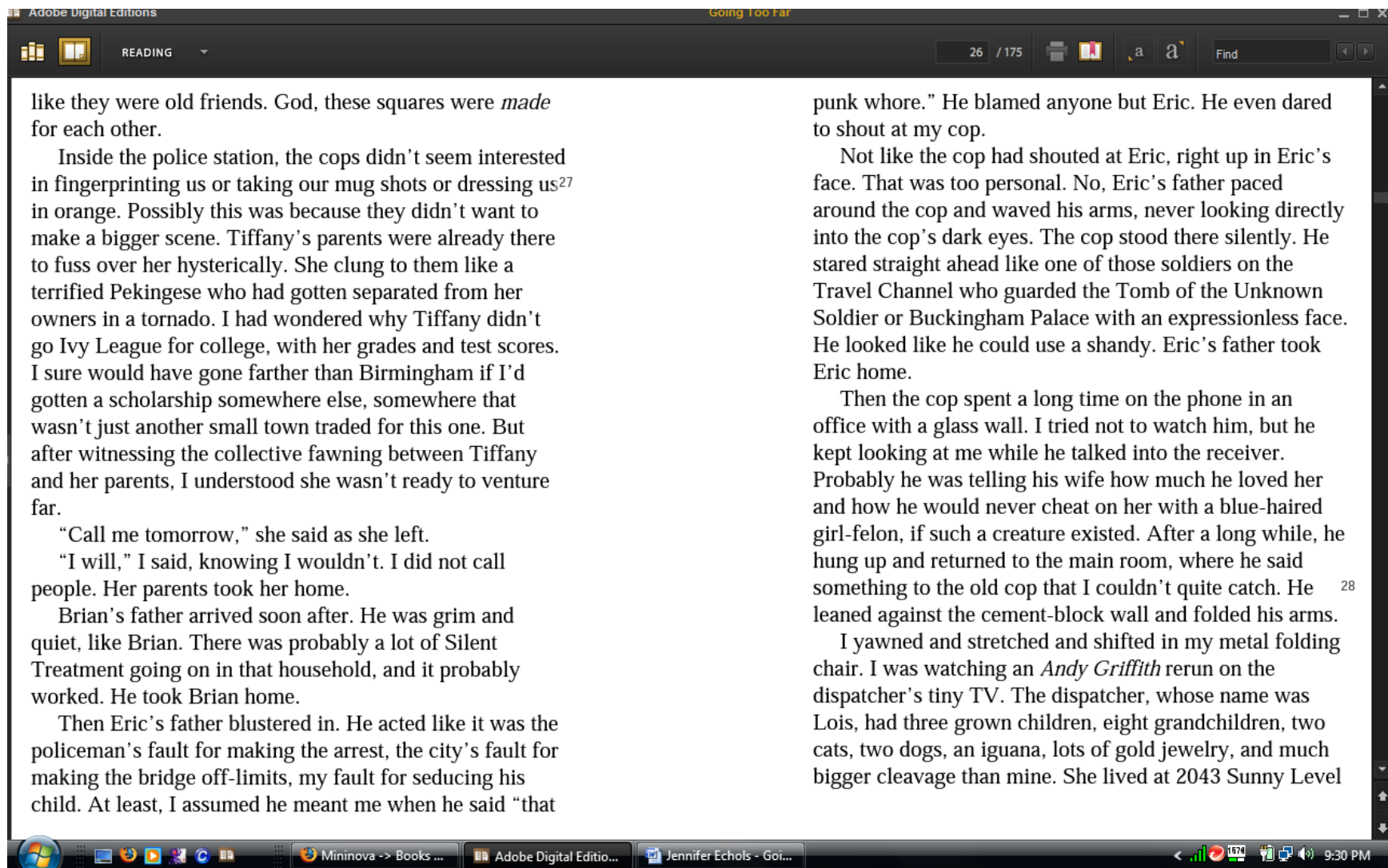
The old cop was already hauling Brian and Eric out of his car. The message Eric had been trying to send me rang through the parking lot and echoed against the building. "You told him about the pot. He faked you out, you stupid bitch!"

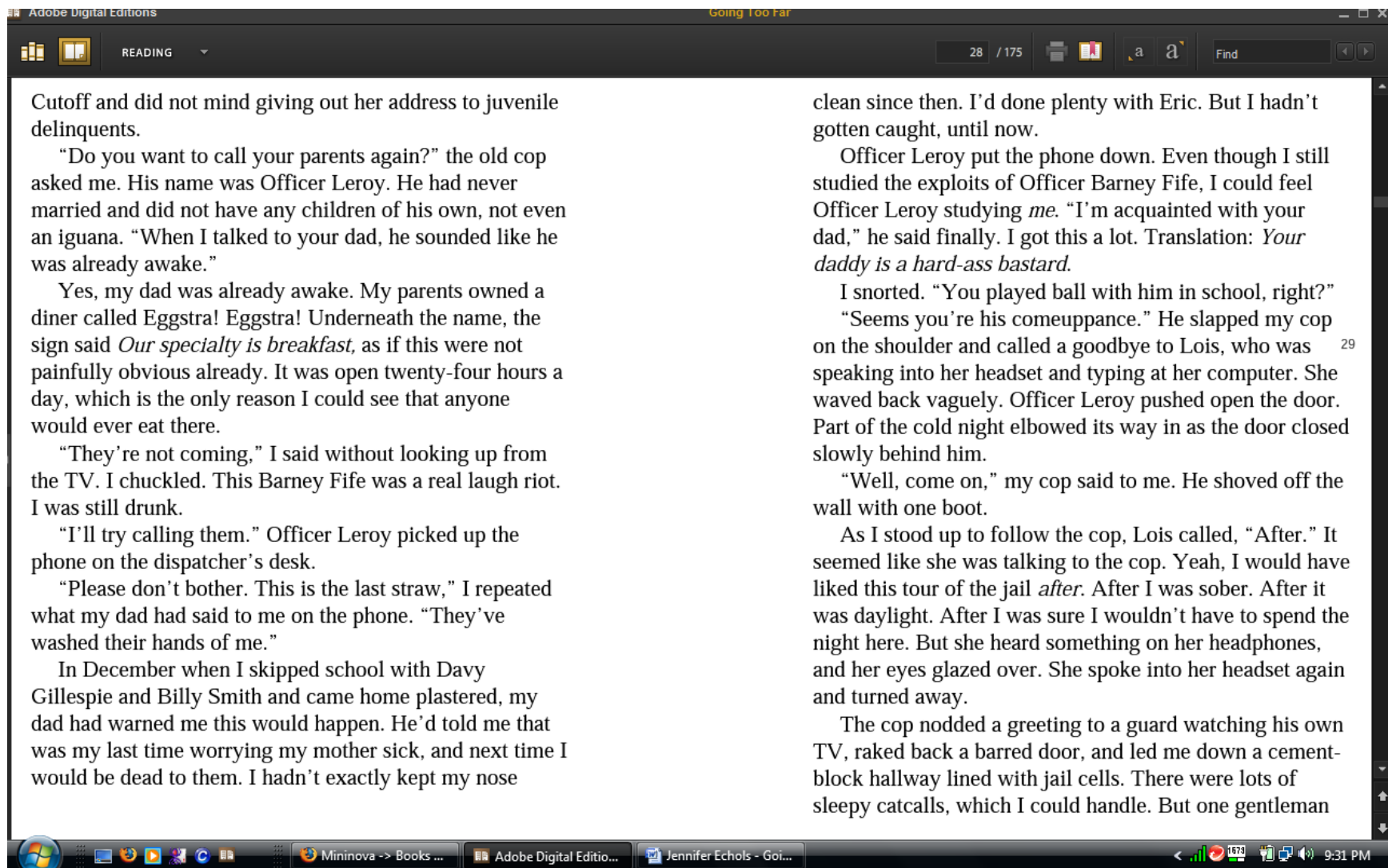
"Well! That is not a very nice thing to say." I was actually kind of concerned about being faked out, and disappointed in myself. I had to keep up my rep around the Big House.

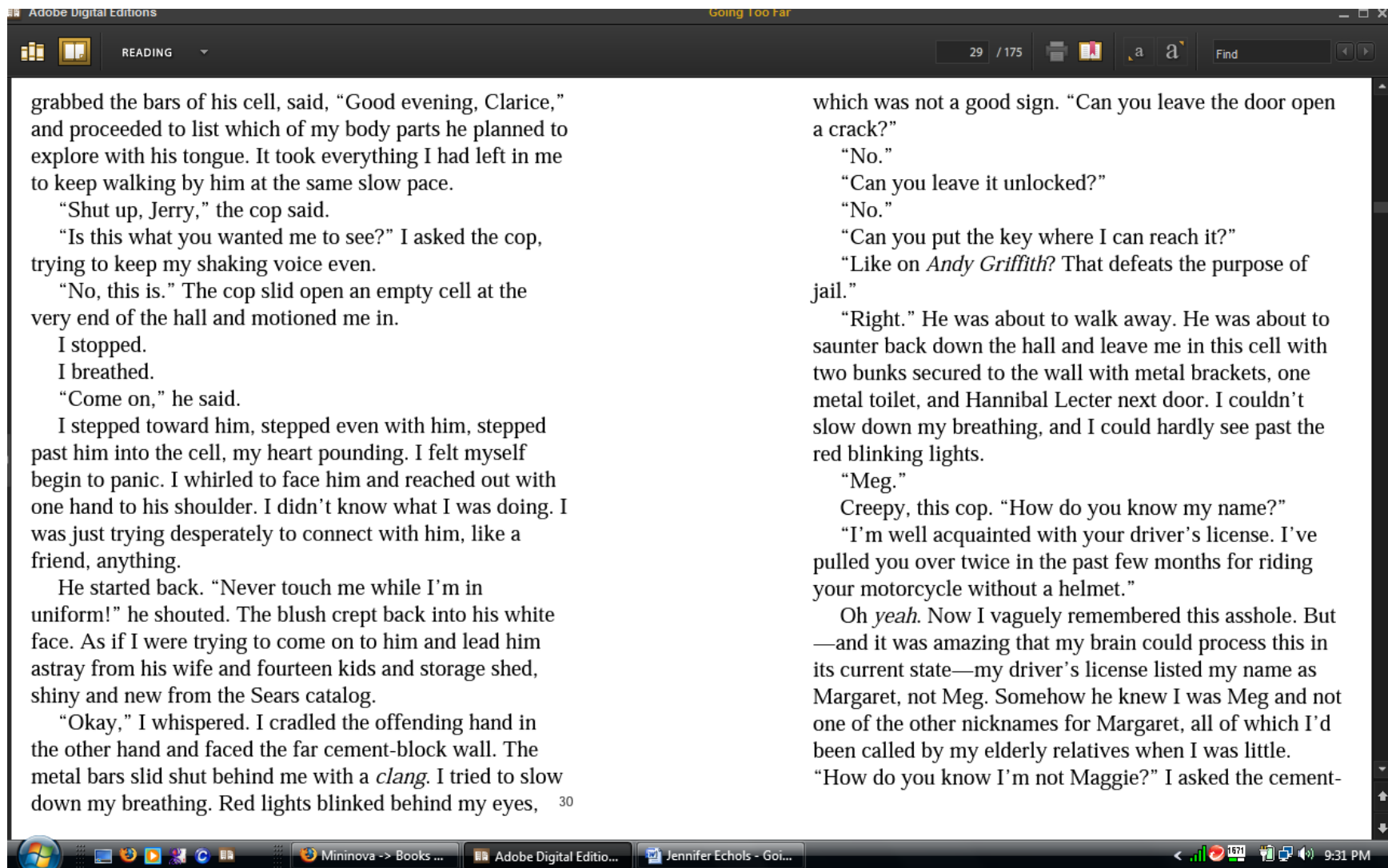
Our cop didn't even look at me. I was just another snitch to him. "Don't say anything else to each other," he intoned to the space between us.

"Pot?" Tiffany echoed behind me.

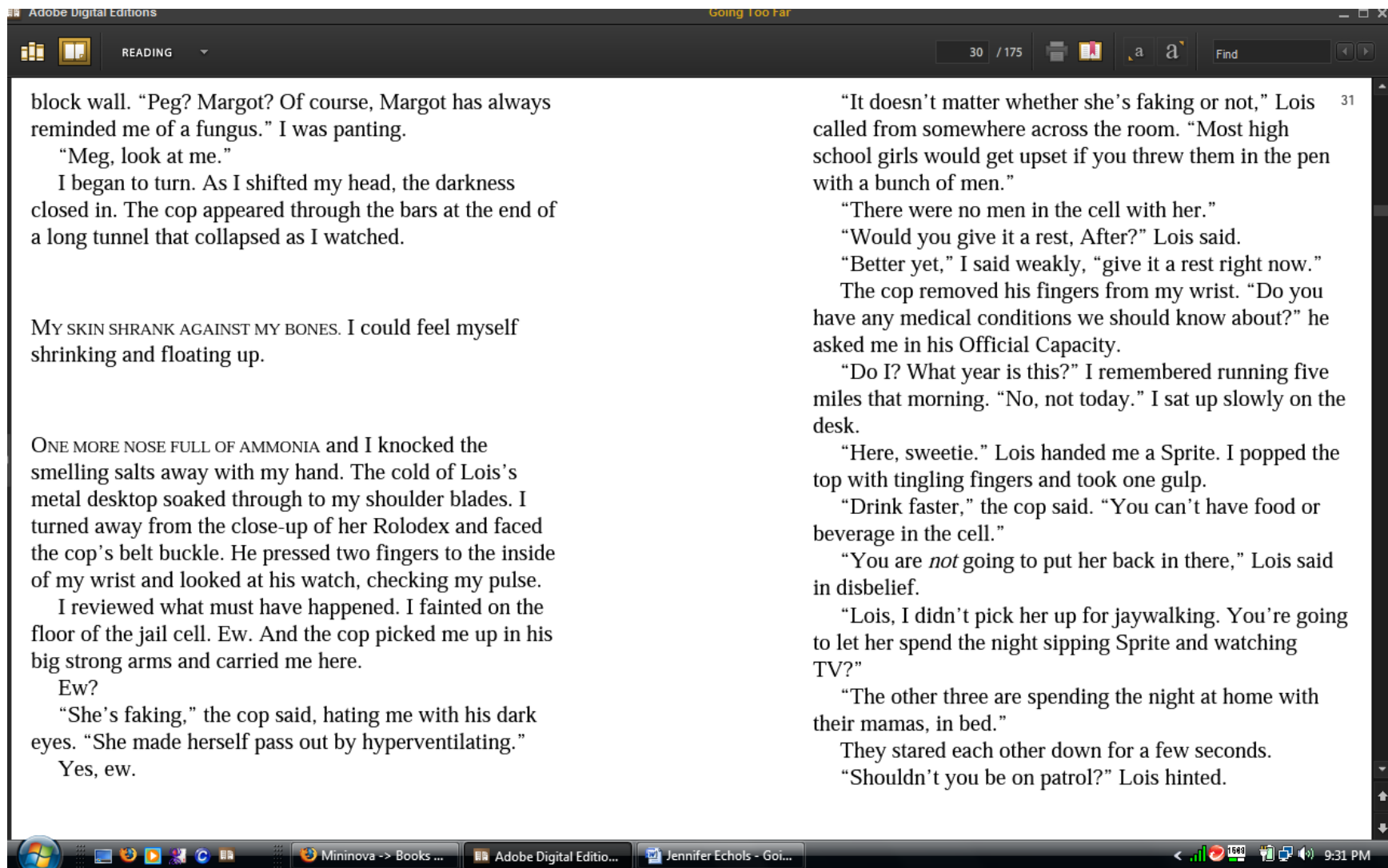
"Not you," our cop assured her. "I know you're not that much of a no-goodnik." He laughed and Tiffany giggled











block wall. "Peg? Margot? Of course, Margot has always reminded me of a fungus." I was panting.

"Meg, look at me."

I began to turn. As I shifted my head, the darkness closed in. The cop appeared through the bars at the end of a long tunnel that collapsed as I watched.

MY SKIN SHRANK AGAINST MY BONES. I could feel myself shrinking and floating up.

ONE MORE NOSE FULL OF AMMONIA and I knocked the smelling salts away with my hand. The cold of Lois's metal desktop soaked through to my shoulder blades. I turned away from the close-up of her Rolodex and faced the cop's belt buckle. He pressed two fingers to the inside of my wrist and looked at his watch, checking my pulse.

I reviewed what must have happened. I fainted on the floor of the jail cell. Ew. And the cop picked me up in his big strong arms and carried me here.

Ew?

"She's faking," the cop said, hating me with his dark eyes. "She made herself pass out by hyperventilating."

Yes, ew.

"It doesn't matter whether she's faking or not," Lois<sup>31</sup> called from somewhere across the room. "Most high school girls would get upset if you threw them in the pen with a bunch of men."

"There were no men in the cell with her."

"Would you give it a rest, After?" Lois said.

"Better yet," I said weakly, "give it a rest right now."

The cop removed his fingers from my wrist. "Do you have any medical conditions we should know about?" he asked me in his Official Capacity.

"Do I? What year is this?" I remembered running five miles that morning. "No, not today." I sat up slowly on the desk.

"Here, sweetie." Lois handed me a Sprite. I popped the top with tingling fingers and took one gulp.

"Drink faster," the cop said. "You can't have food or beverage in the cell."

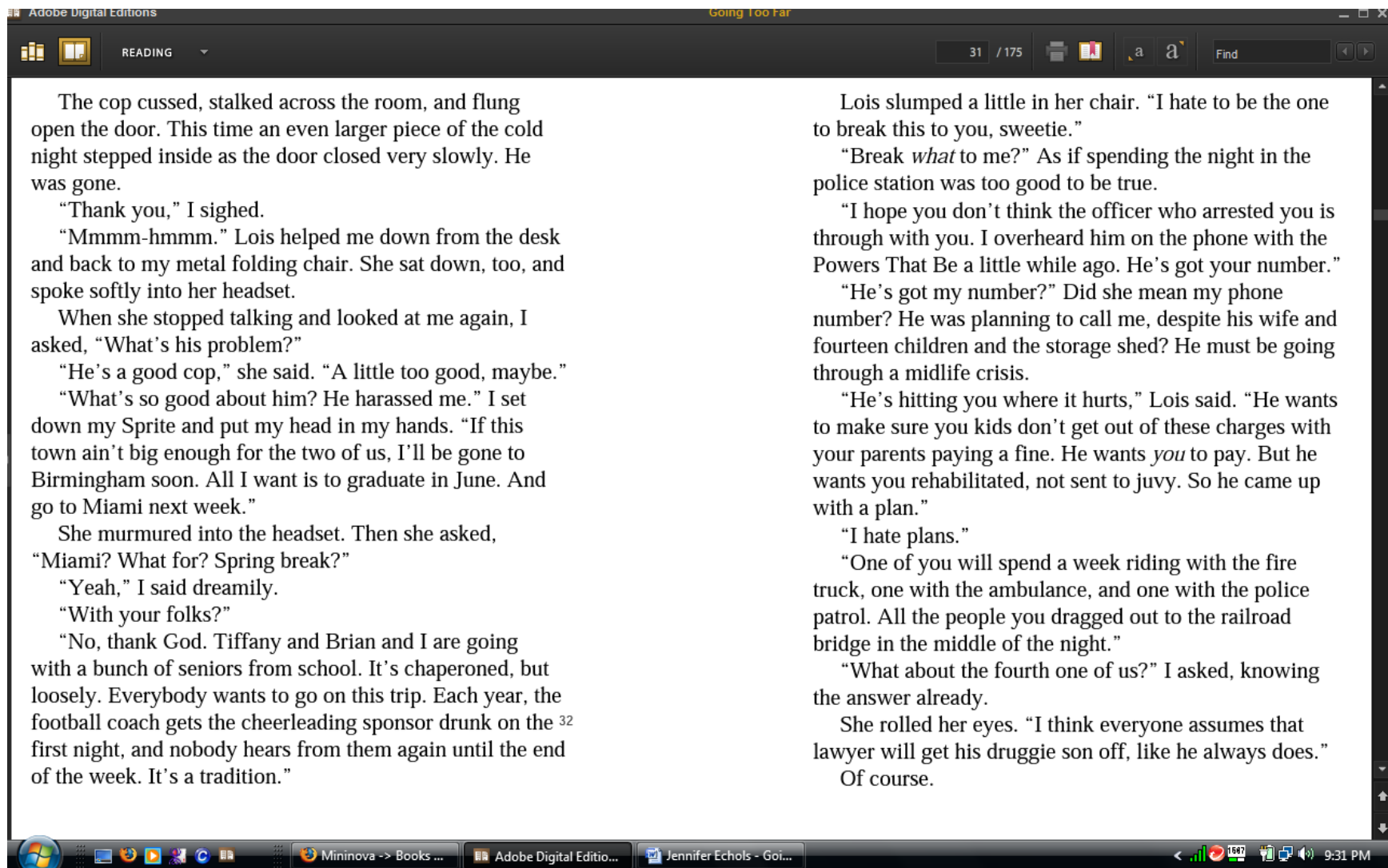
"You are *not* going to put her back in there," Lois said in disbelief.

"Lois, I didn't pick her up for jaywalking. You're going to let her spend the night sipping Sprite and watching TV?"

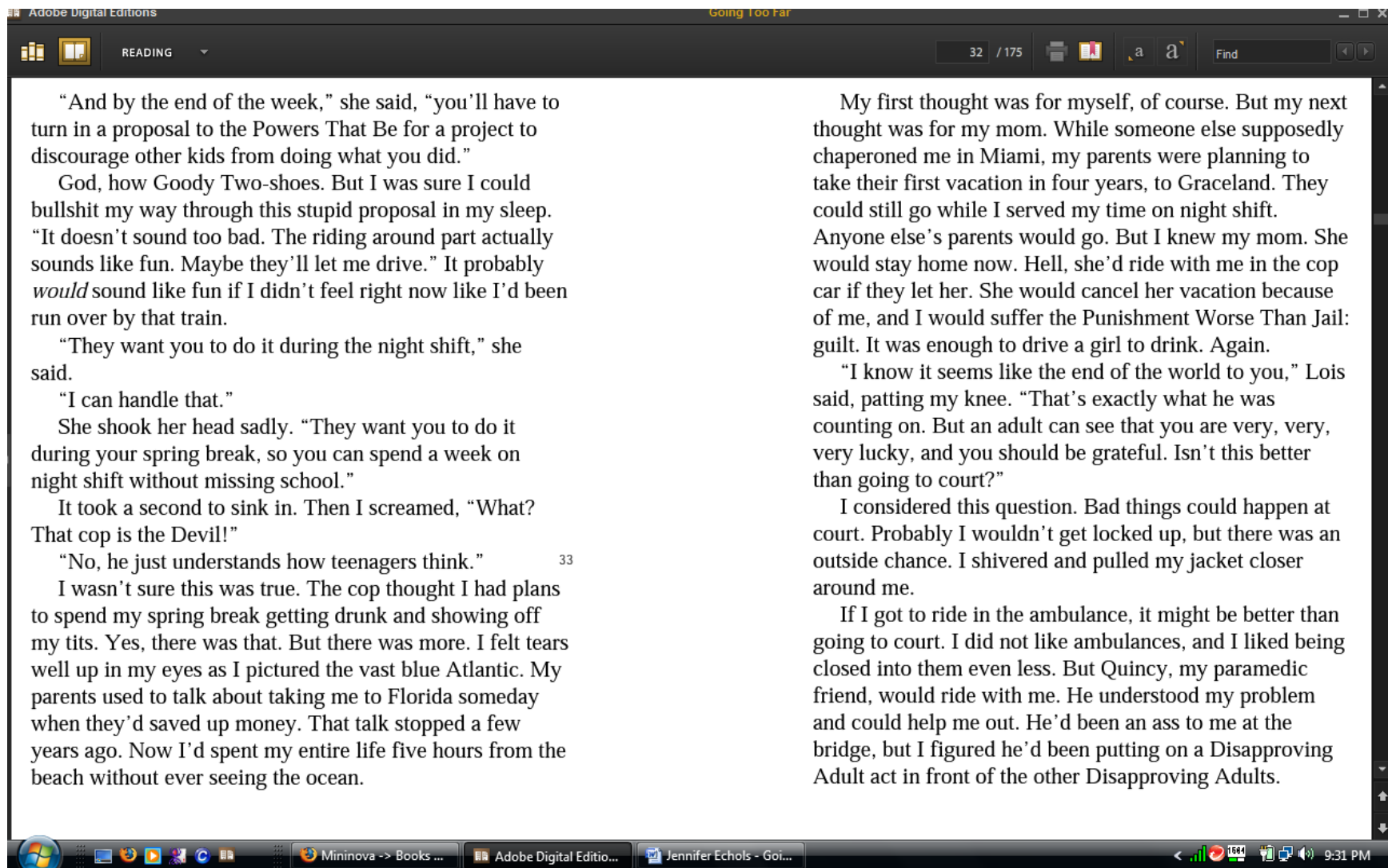
"The other three are spending the night at home with their mamas, in bed."

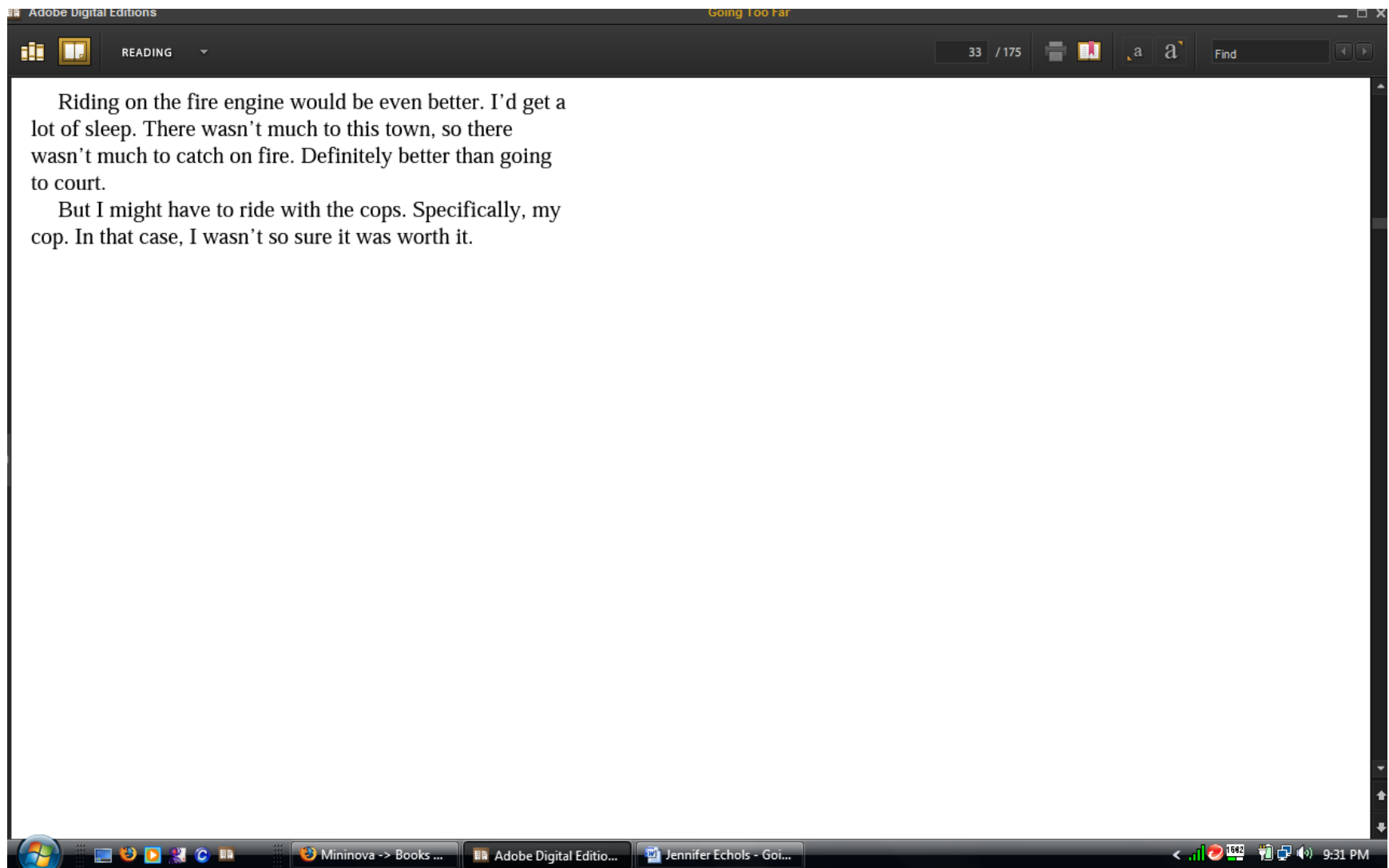
They stared each other down for a few seconds.

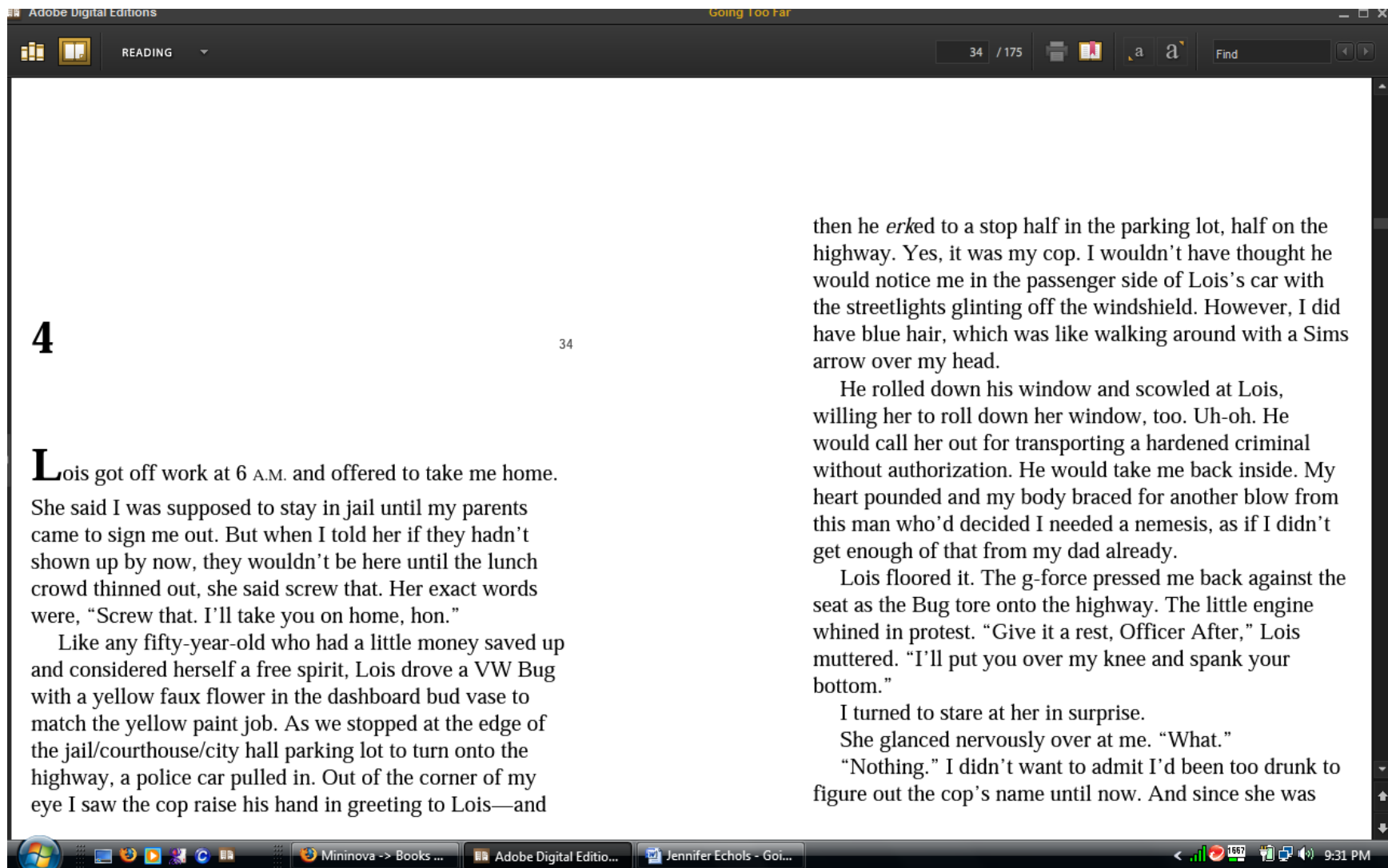
"Shouldn't you be on patrol?" Lois hinted.

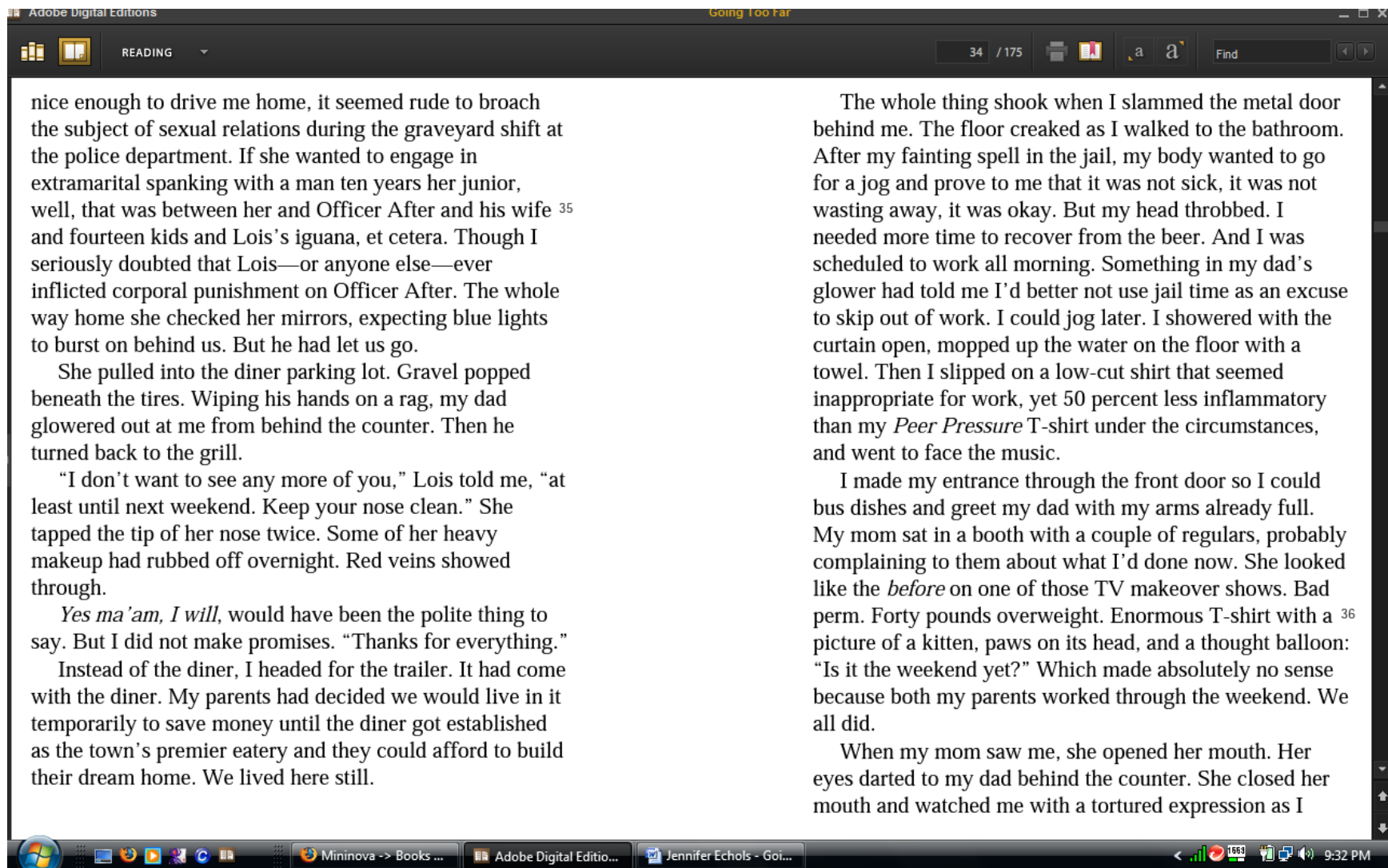


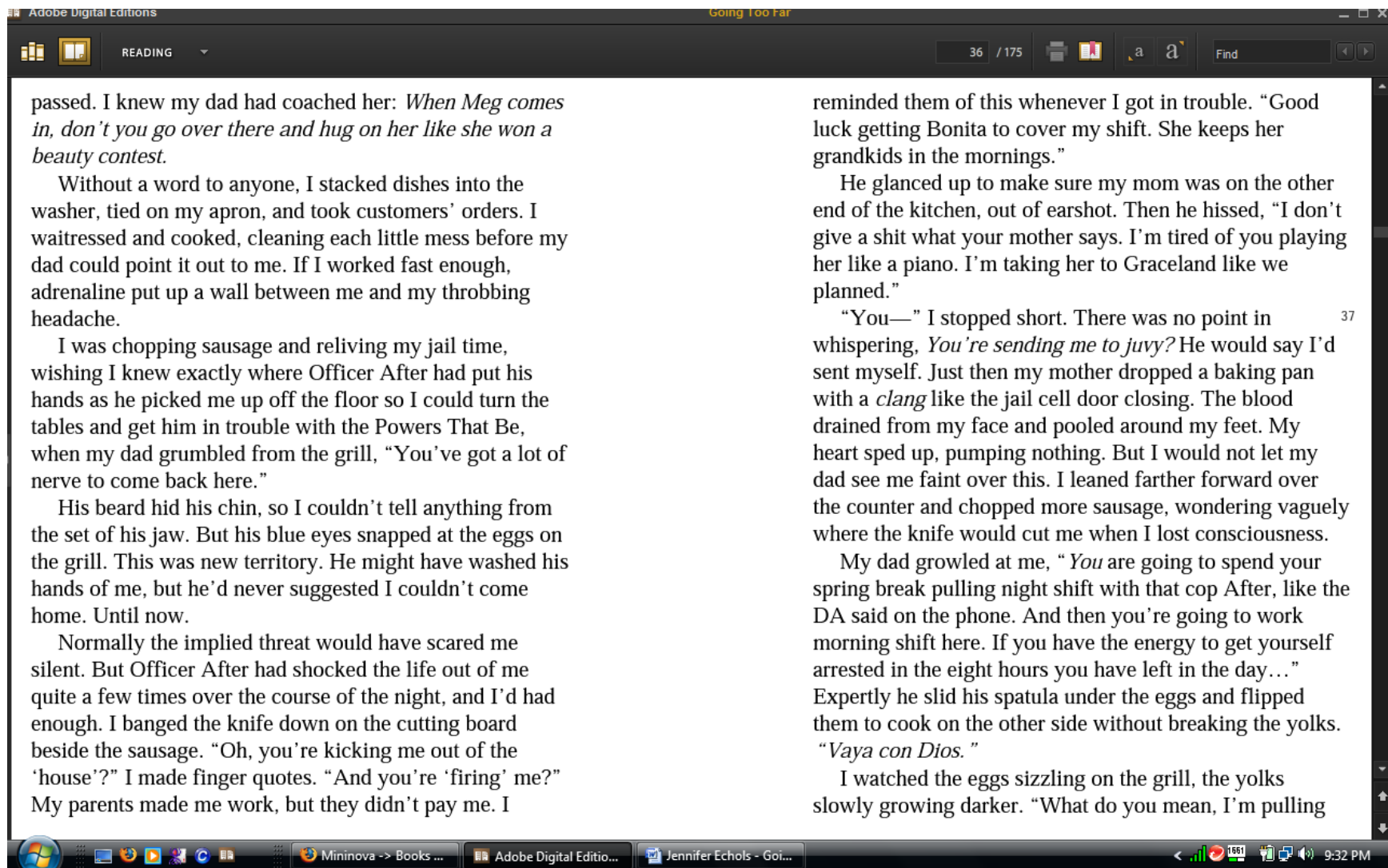




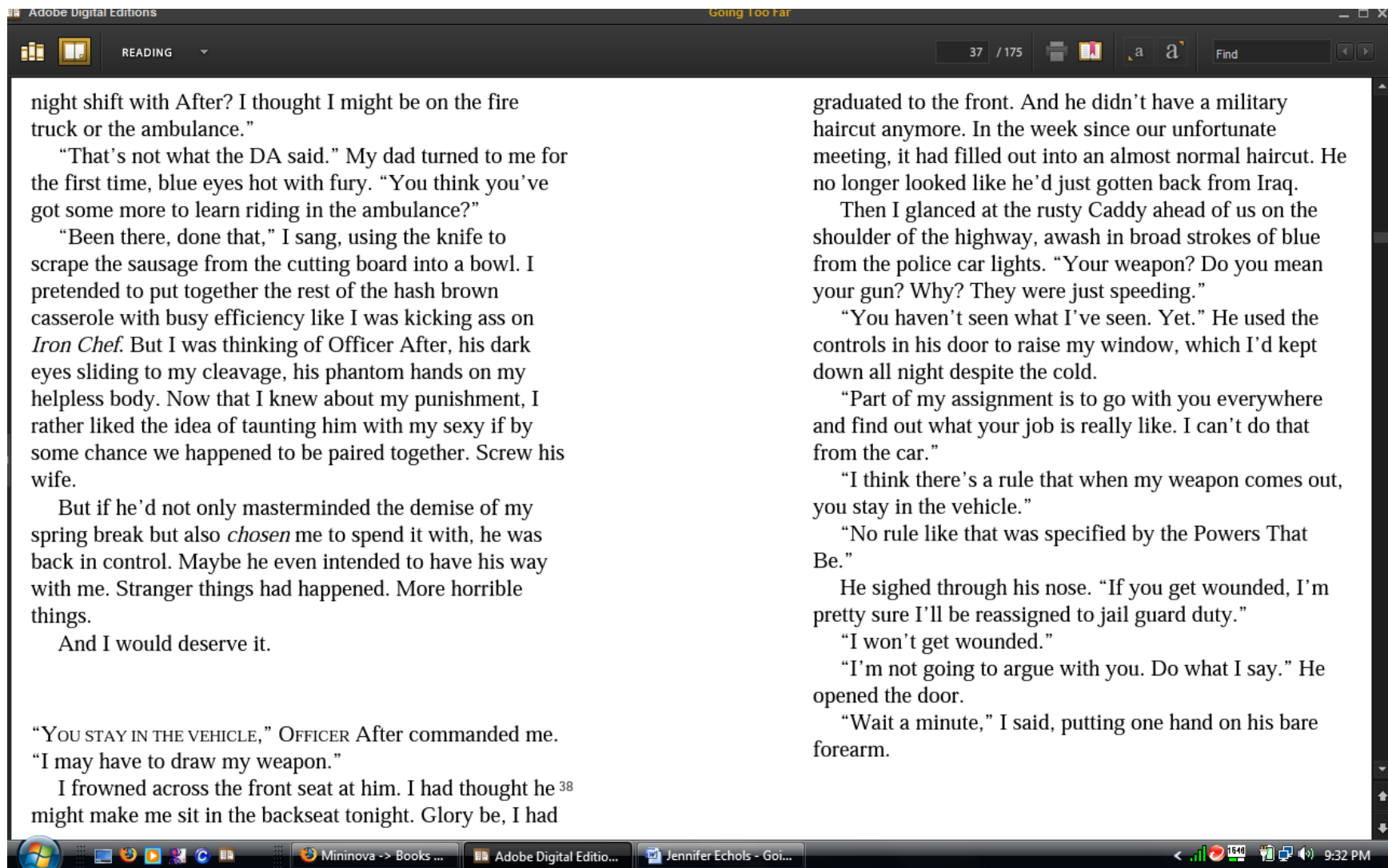




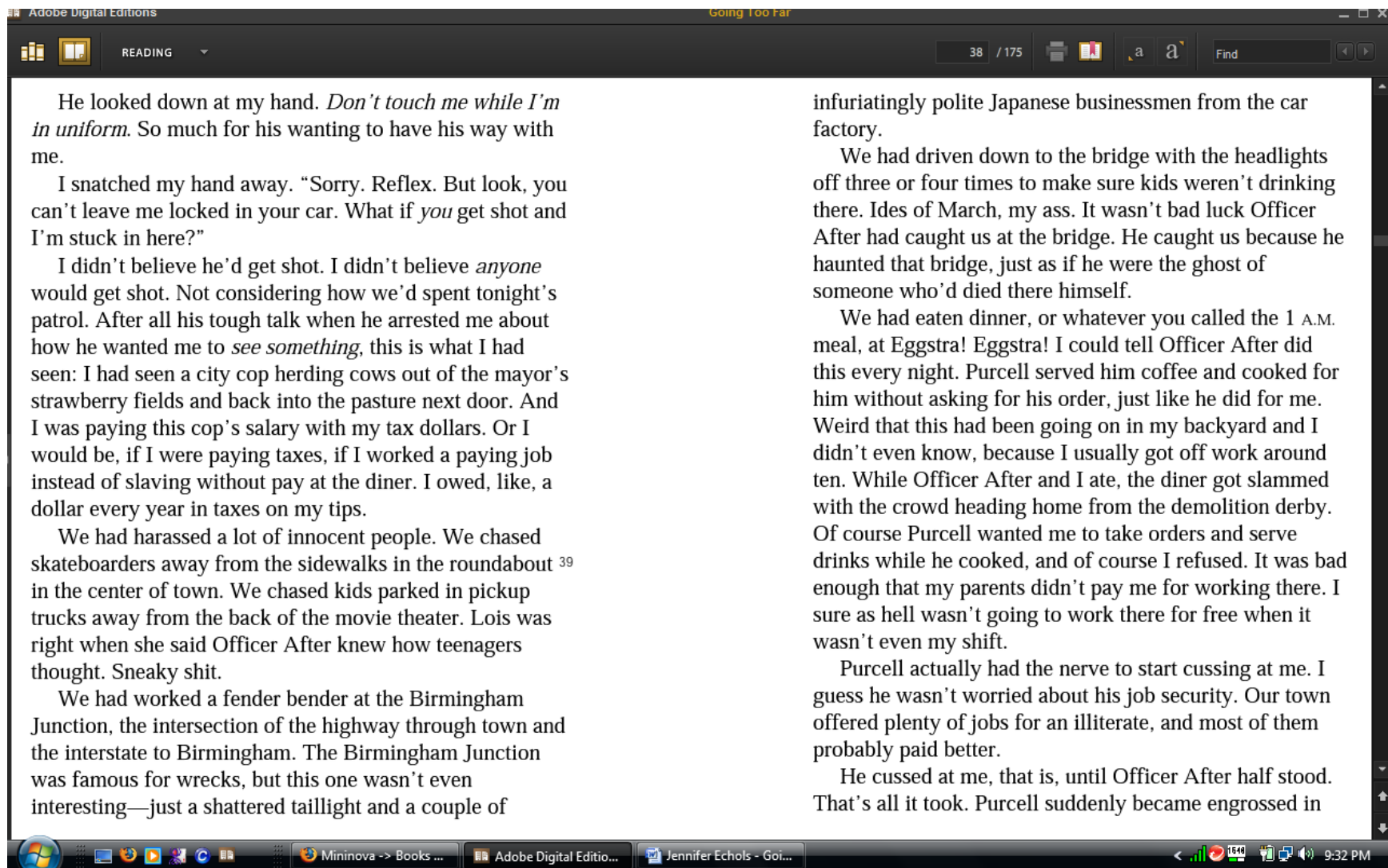


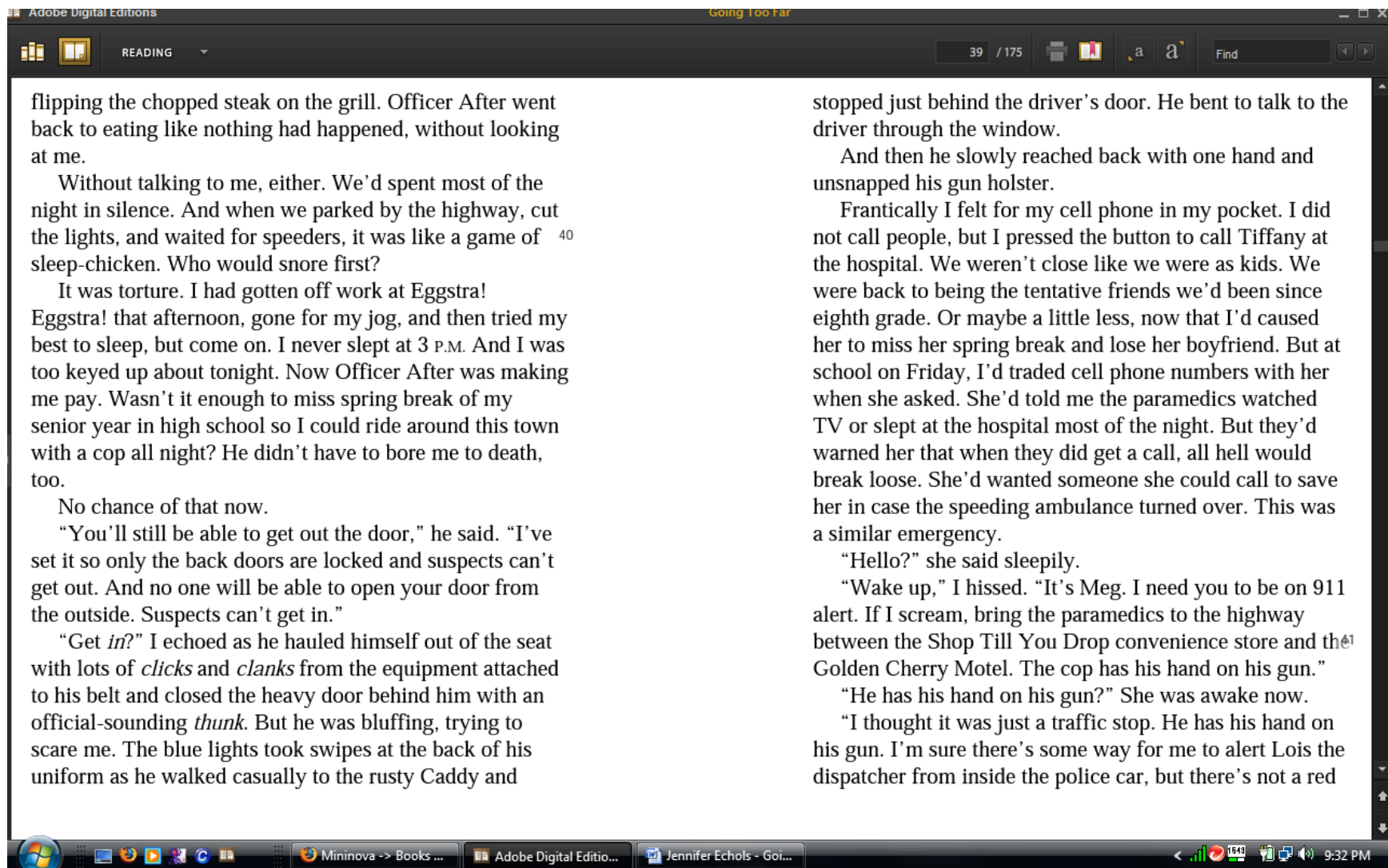


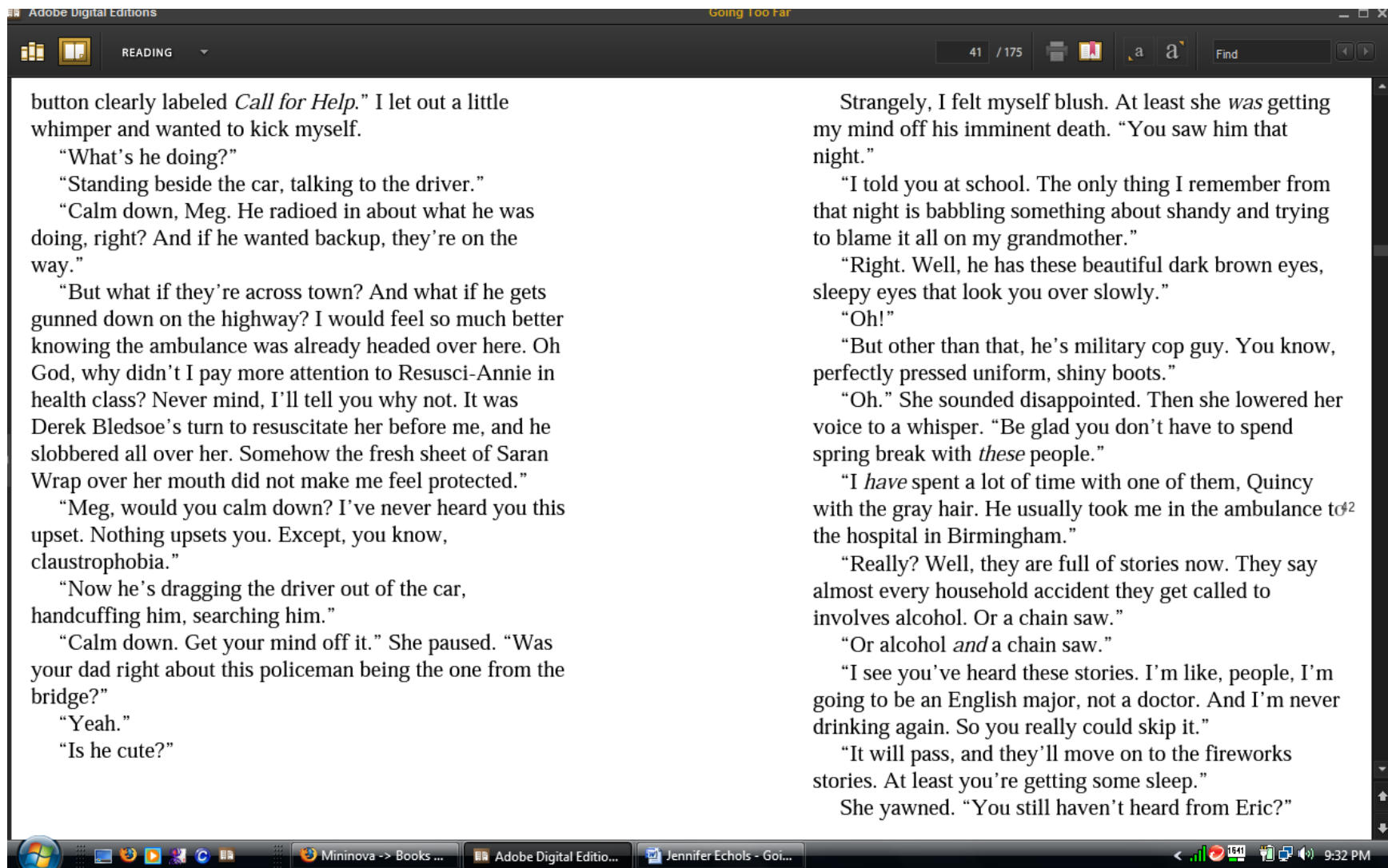


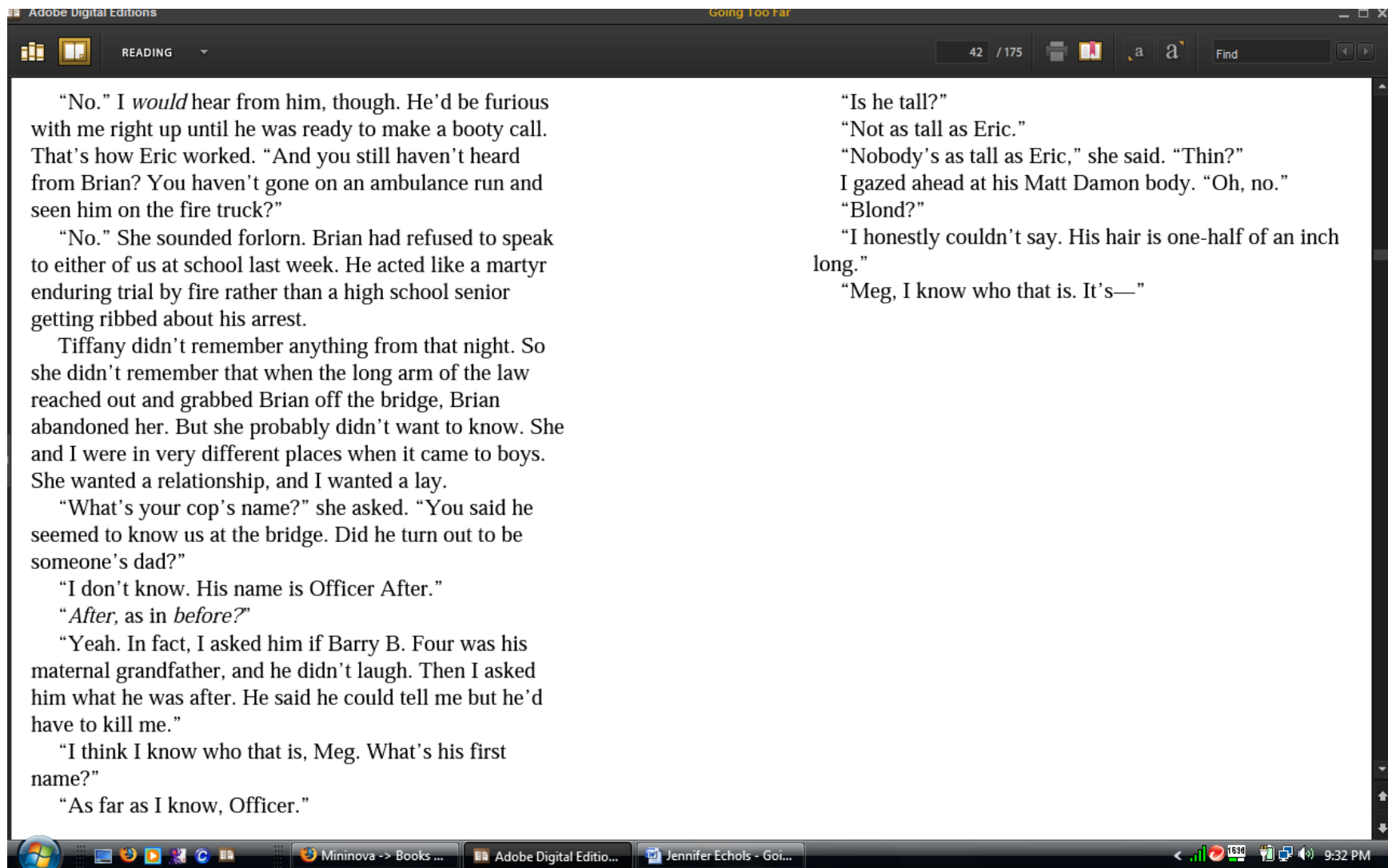


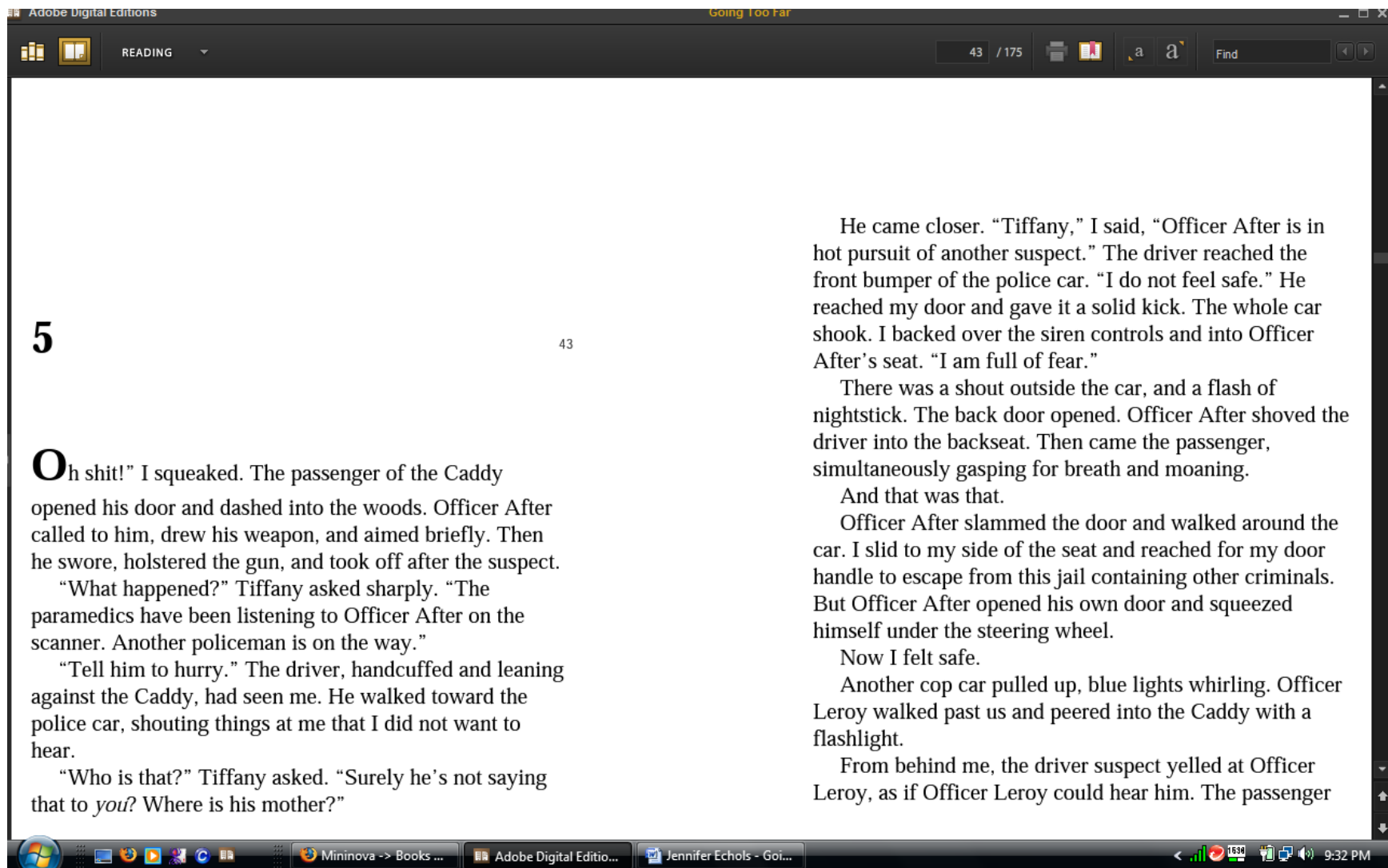




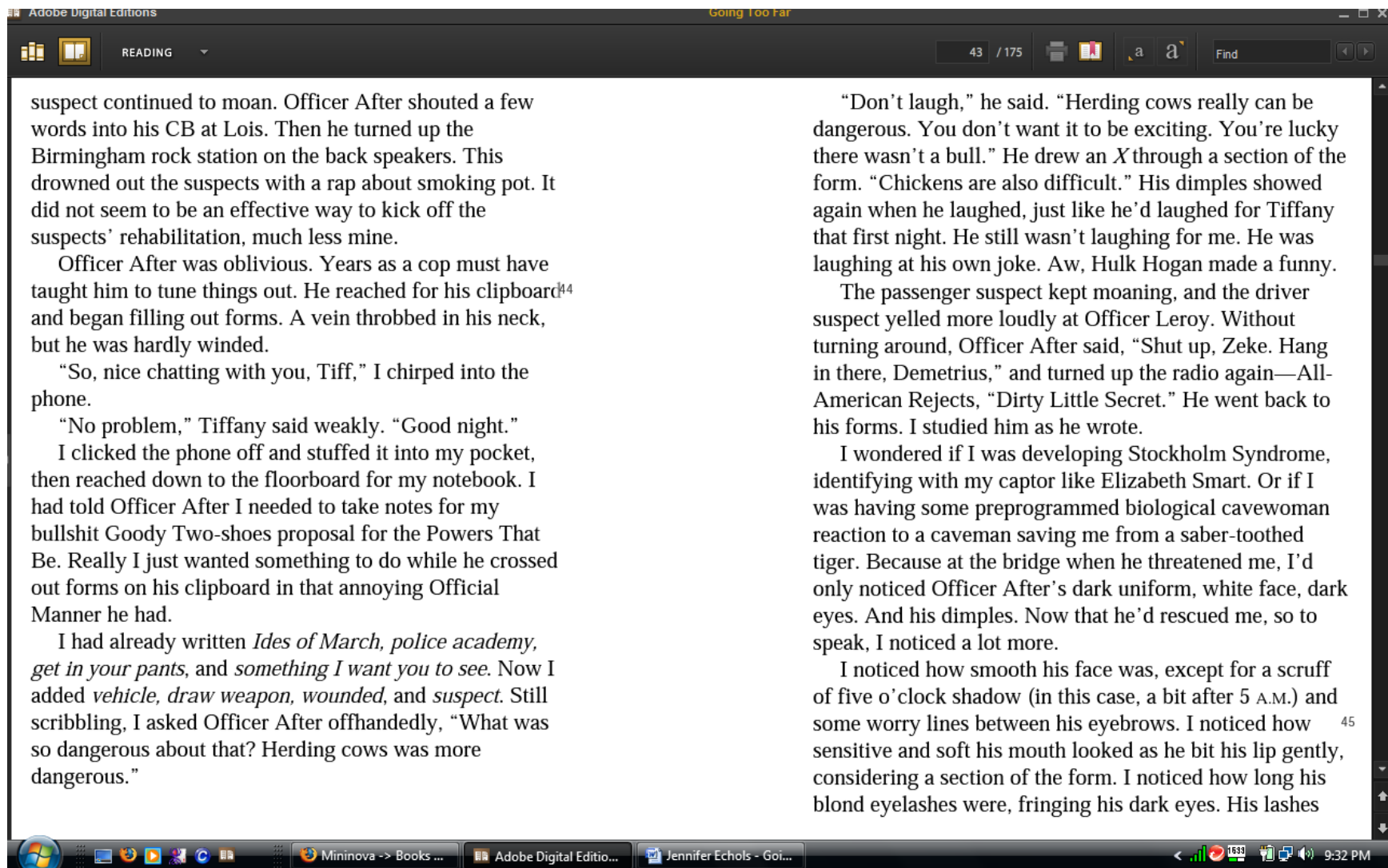


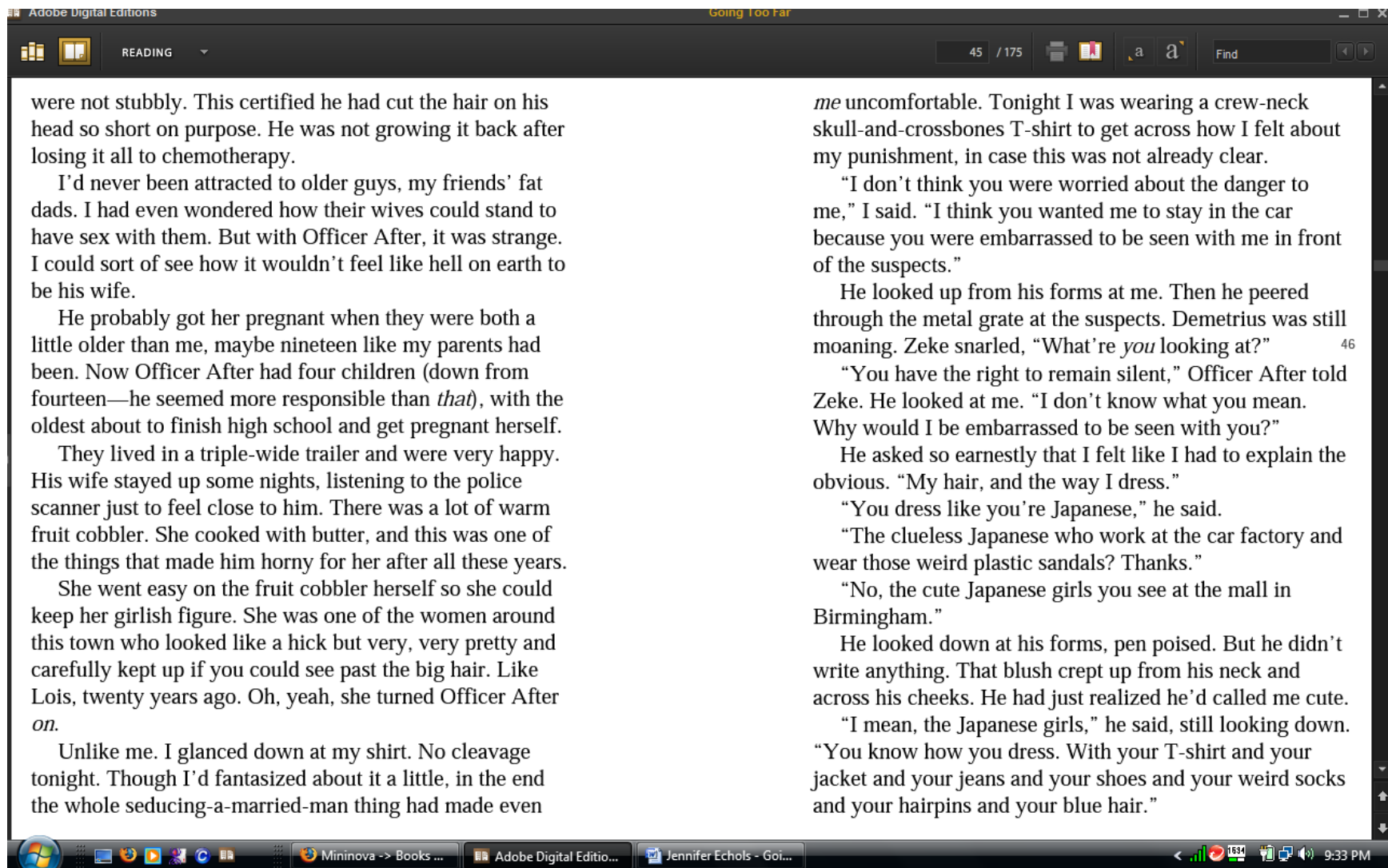












were not stubbly. This certified he had cut the hair on his head so short on purpose. He was not growing it back after losing it all to chemotherapy.

I'd never been attracted to older guys, my friends' fat dads. I had even wondered how their wives could stand to have sex with them. But with Officer After, it was strange. I could sort of see how it wouldn't feel like hell on earth to be his wife.

He probably got her pregnant when they were both a little older than me, maybe nineteen like my parents had been. Now Officer After had four children (down from fourteen—he seemed more responsible than *that*), with the oldest about to finish high school and get pregnant herself.

They lived in a triple-wide trailer and were very happy. His wife stayed up some nights, listening to the police scanner just to feel close to him. There was a lot of warm fruit cobbler. She cooked with butter, and this was one of the things that made him horny for her after all these years.

She went easy on the fruit cobbler herself so she could keep her girlish figure. She was one of the women around this town who looked like a hick but very, very pretty and carefully kept up if you could see past the big hair. Like Lois, twenty years ago. Oh, yeah, she turned Officer After on.

Unlike me. I glanced down at my shirt. No cleavage tonight. Though I'd fantasized about it a little, in the end the whole seducing-a-married-man thing had made even

me uncomfortable. Tonight I was wearing a crew-neck skull-and-crossbones T-shirt to get across how I felt about my punishment, in case this was not already clear.

"I don't think you were worried about the danger to me," I said. "I think you wanted me to stay in the car because you were embarrassed to be seen with me in front of the suspects."

He looked up from his forms at me. Then he peered through the metal grate at the suspects. Demetrius was still moaning. Zeke snarled, "What're *you* looking at?" 46

"You have the right to remain silent," Officer After told Zeke. He looked at me. "I don't know what you mean. Why would I be embarrassed to be seen with you?"

He asked so earnestly that I felt like I had to explain the obvious. "My hair, and the way I dress."

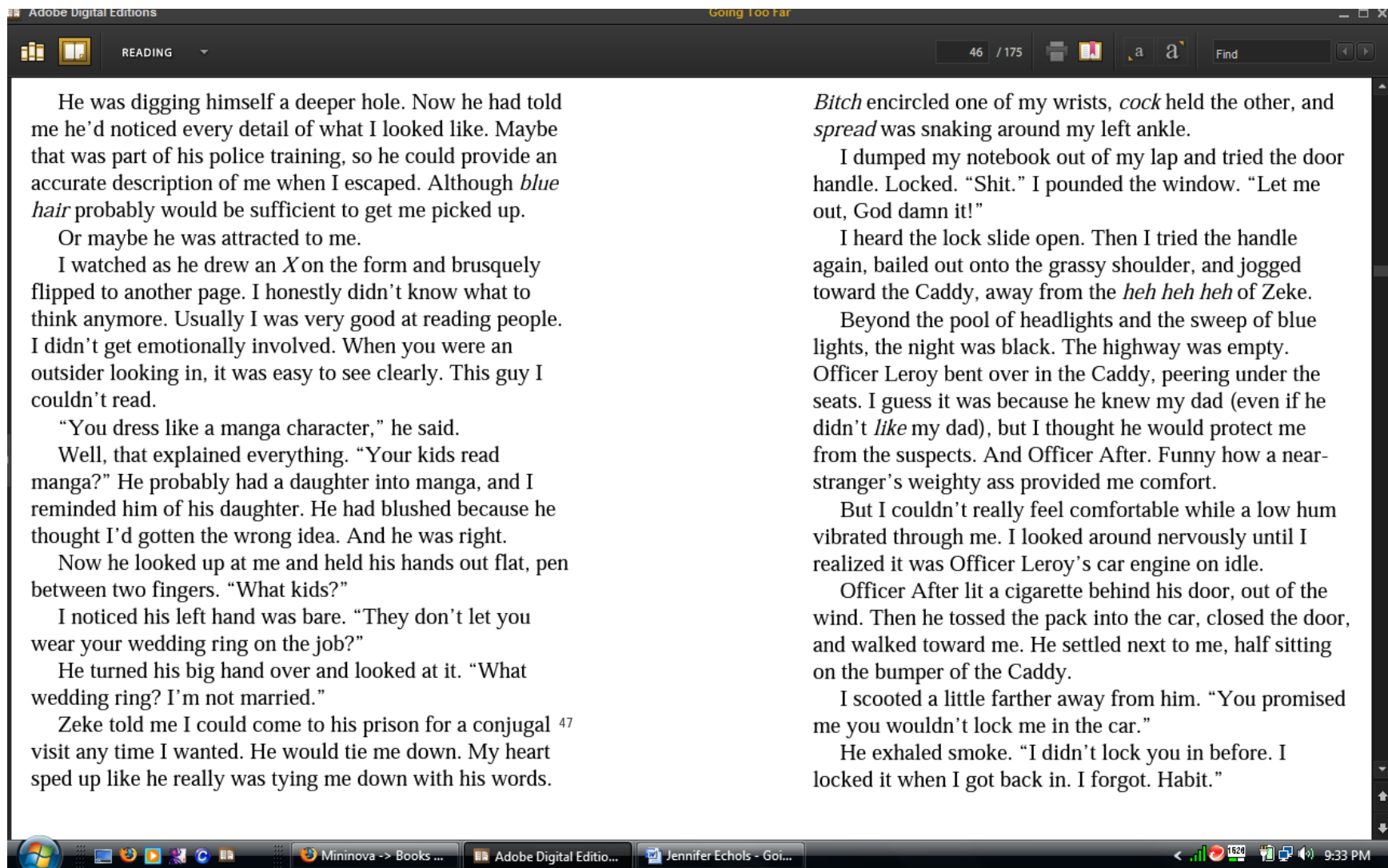
"You dress like you're Japanese," he said.

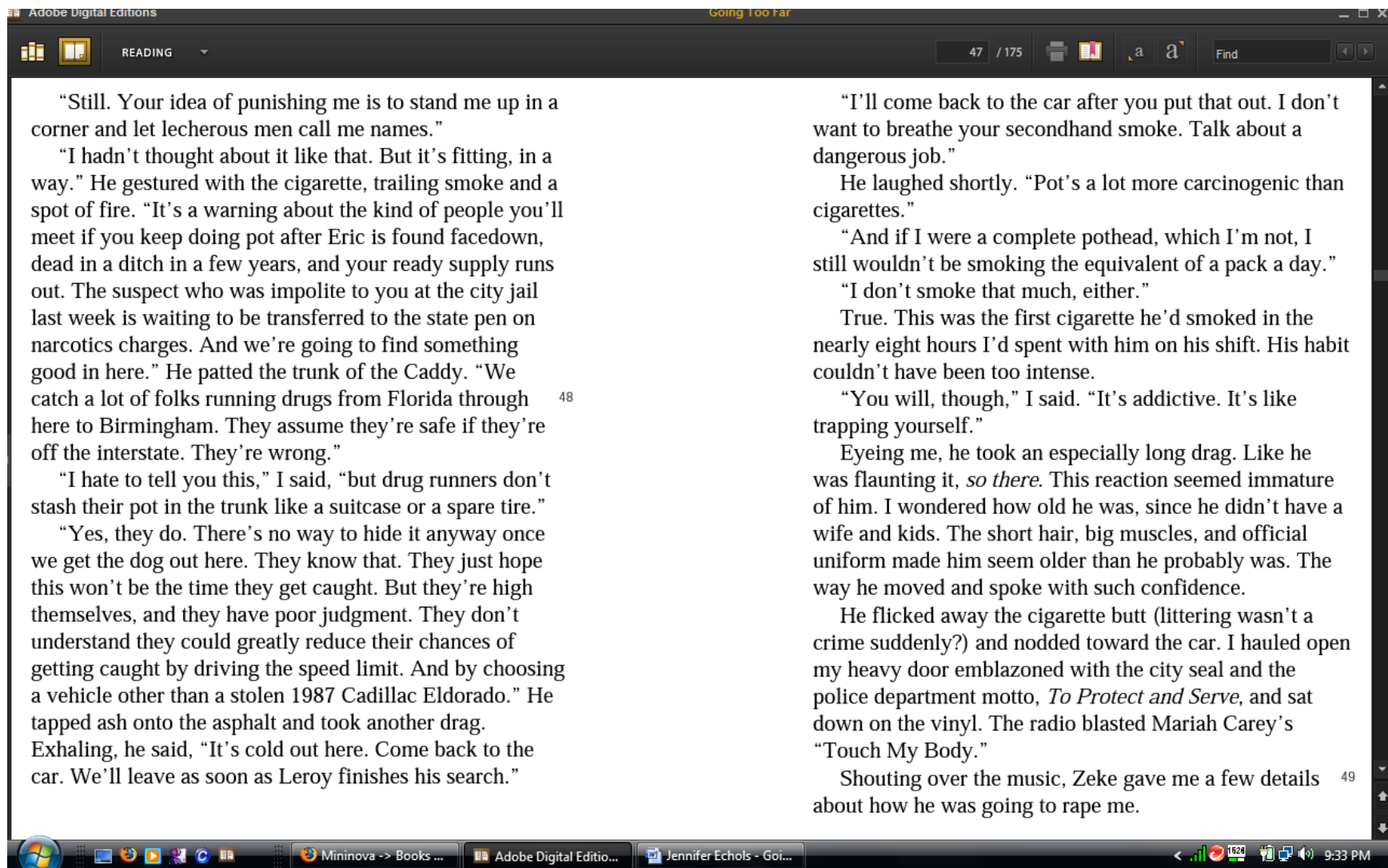
"The clueless Japanese who work at the car factory and wear those weird plastic sandals? Thanks."

"No, the cute Japanese girls you see at the mall in Birmingham."

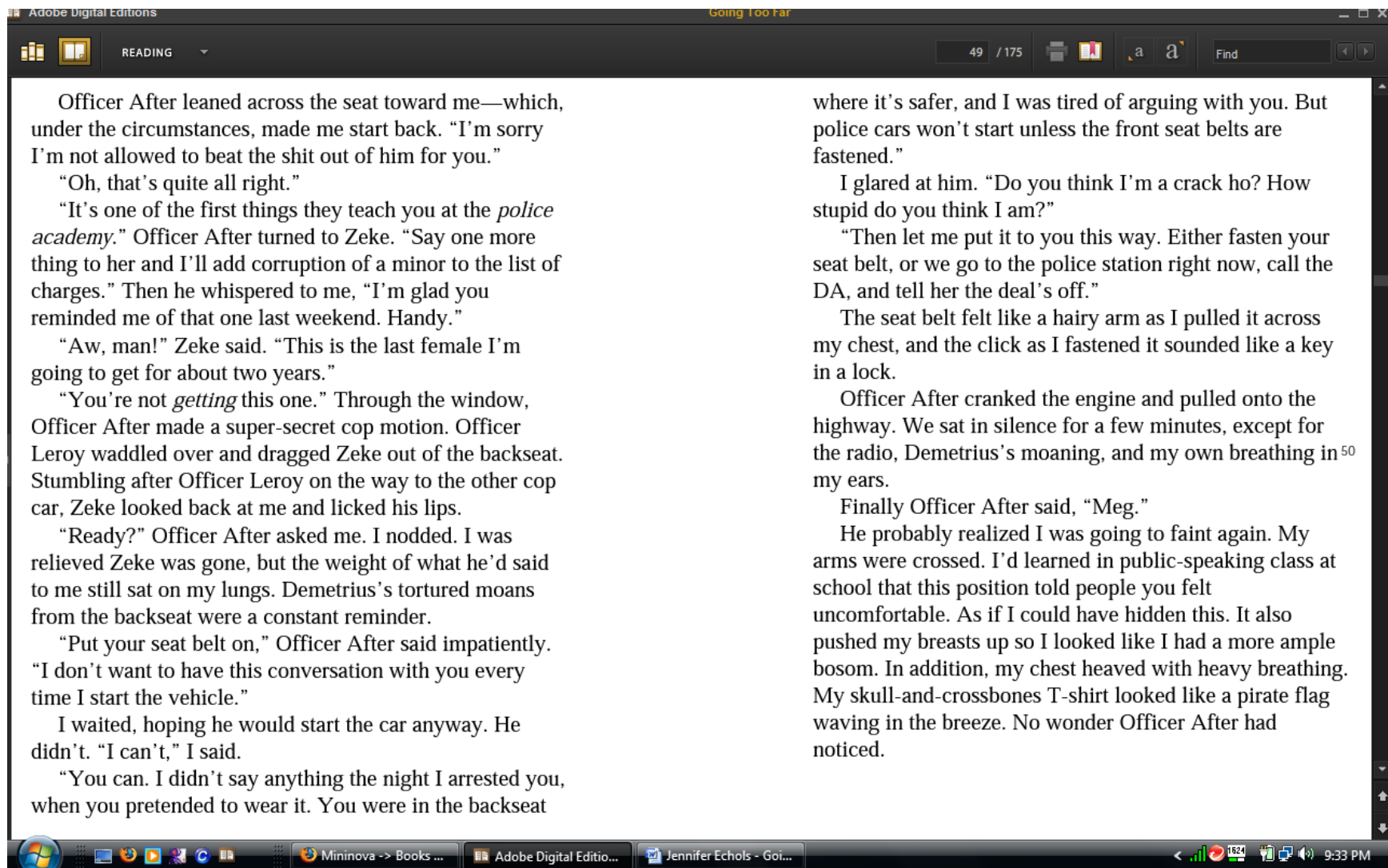
He looked down at his forms, pen poised. But he didn't write anything. That blush crept up from his neck and across his cheeks. He had just realized he'd called me cute.

"I mean, the Japanese girls," he said, still looking down. "You know how you dress. With your T-shirt and your jacket and your jeans and your shoes and your weird socks and your hairpins and your blue hair."

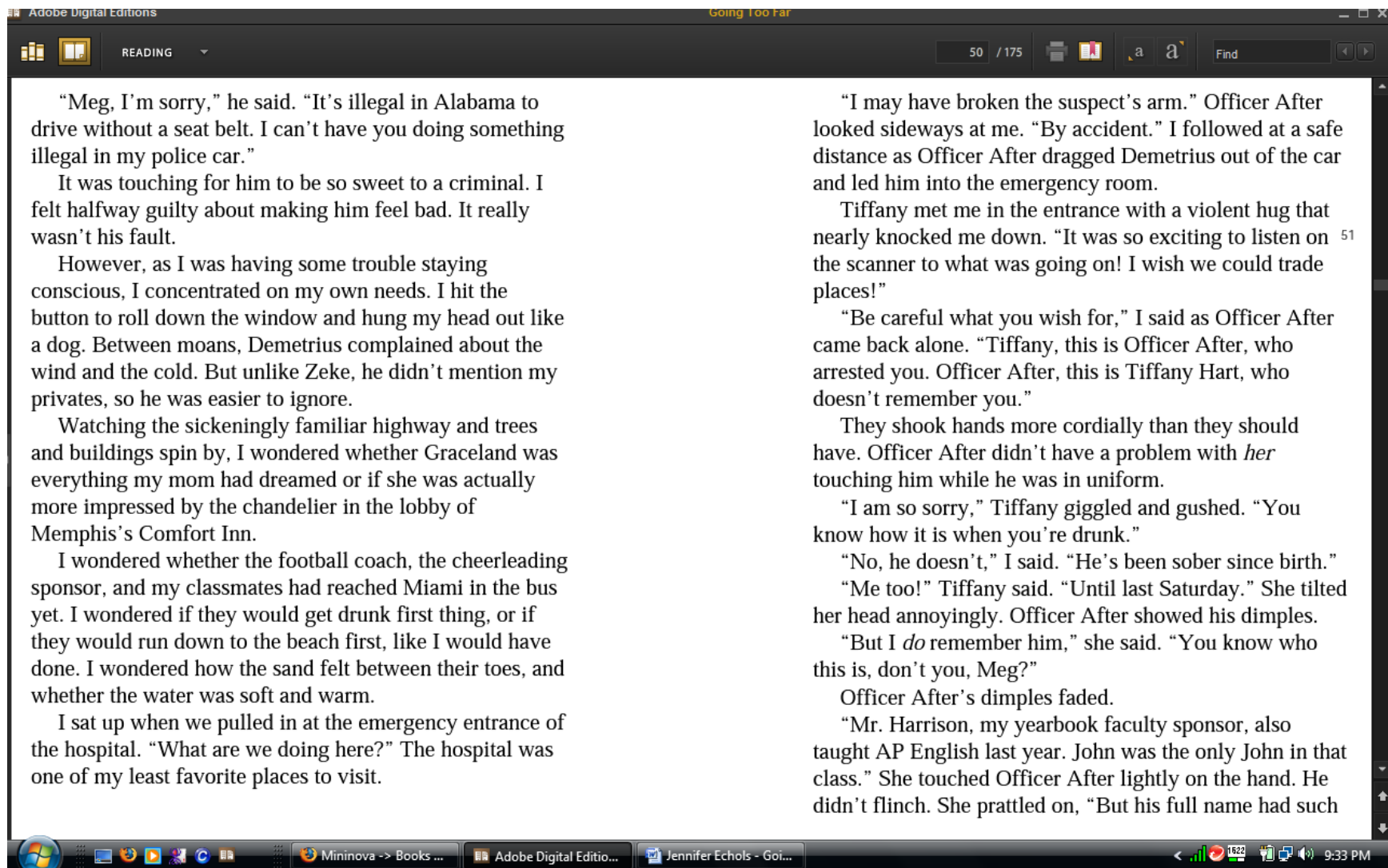


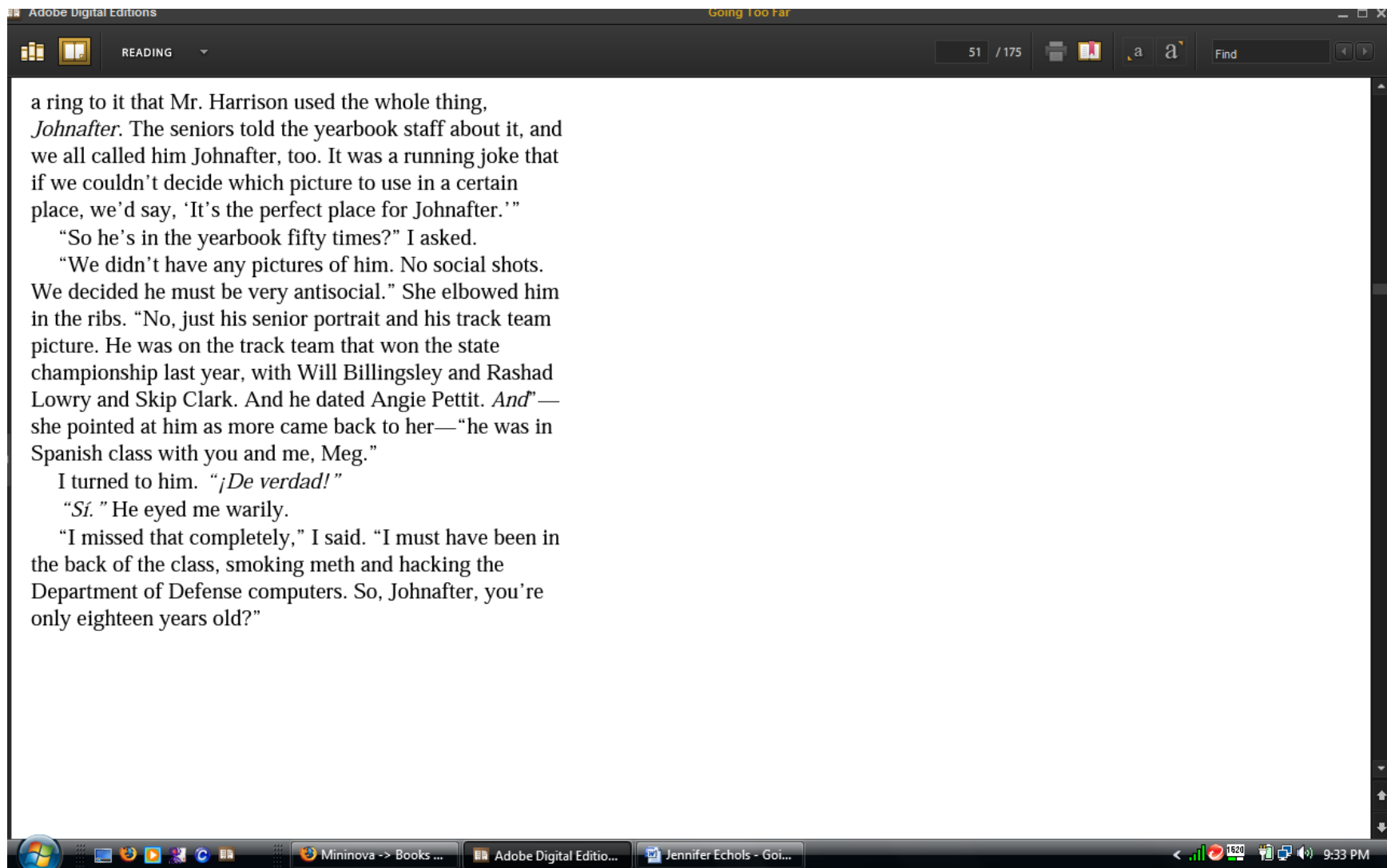


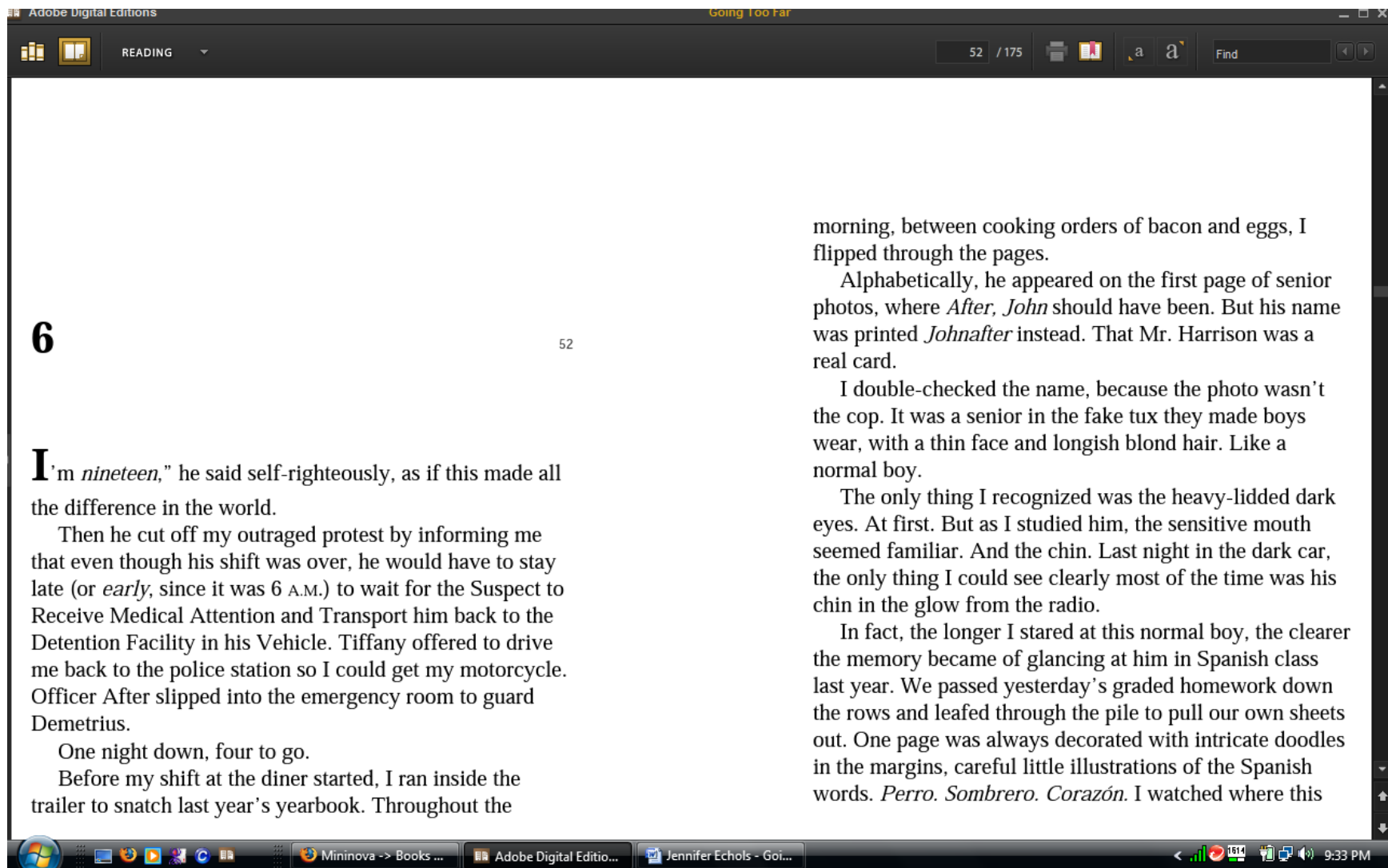


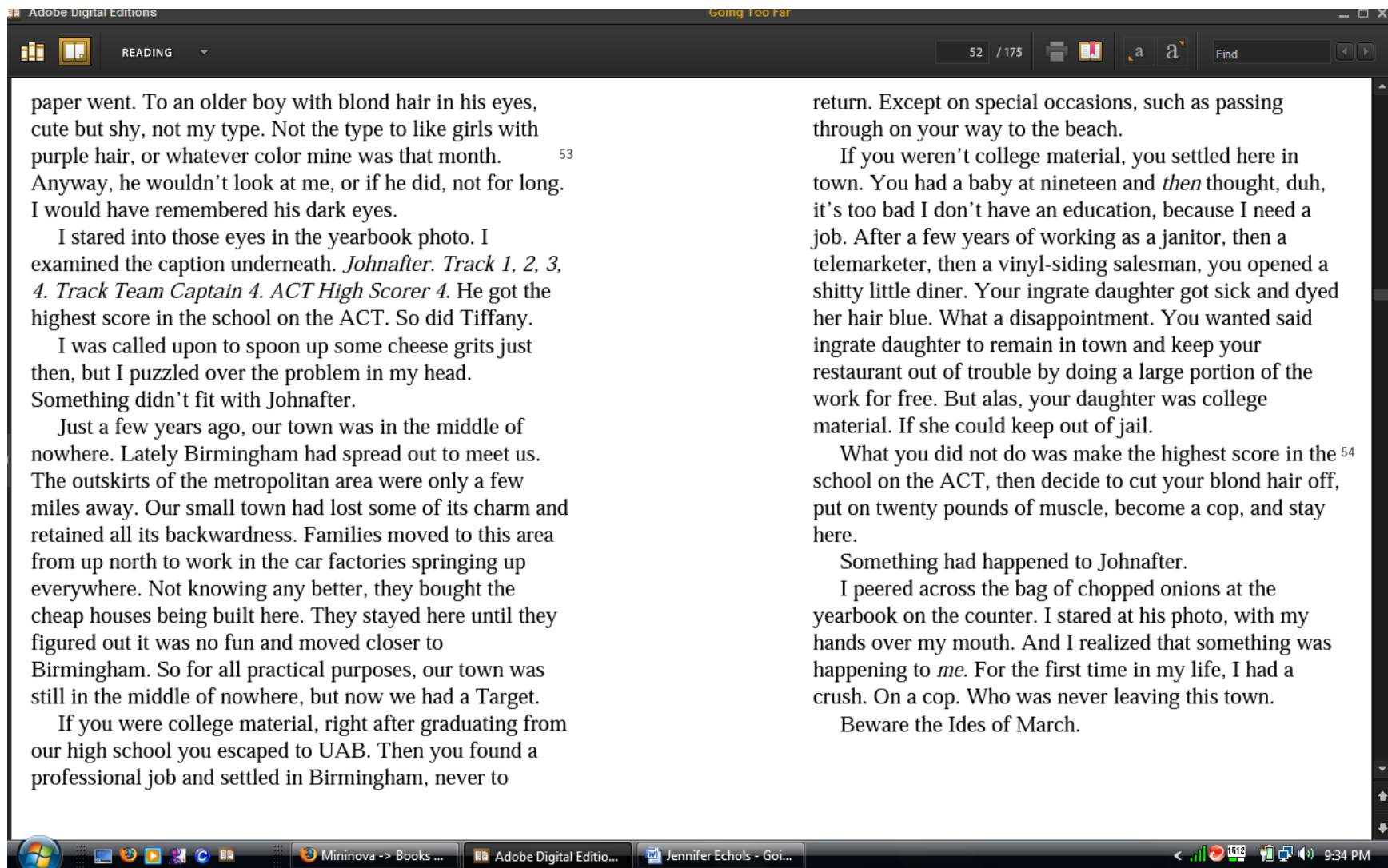


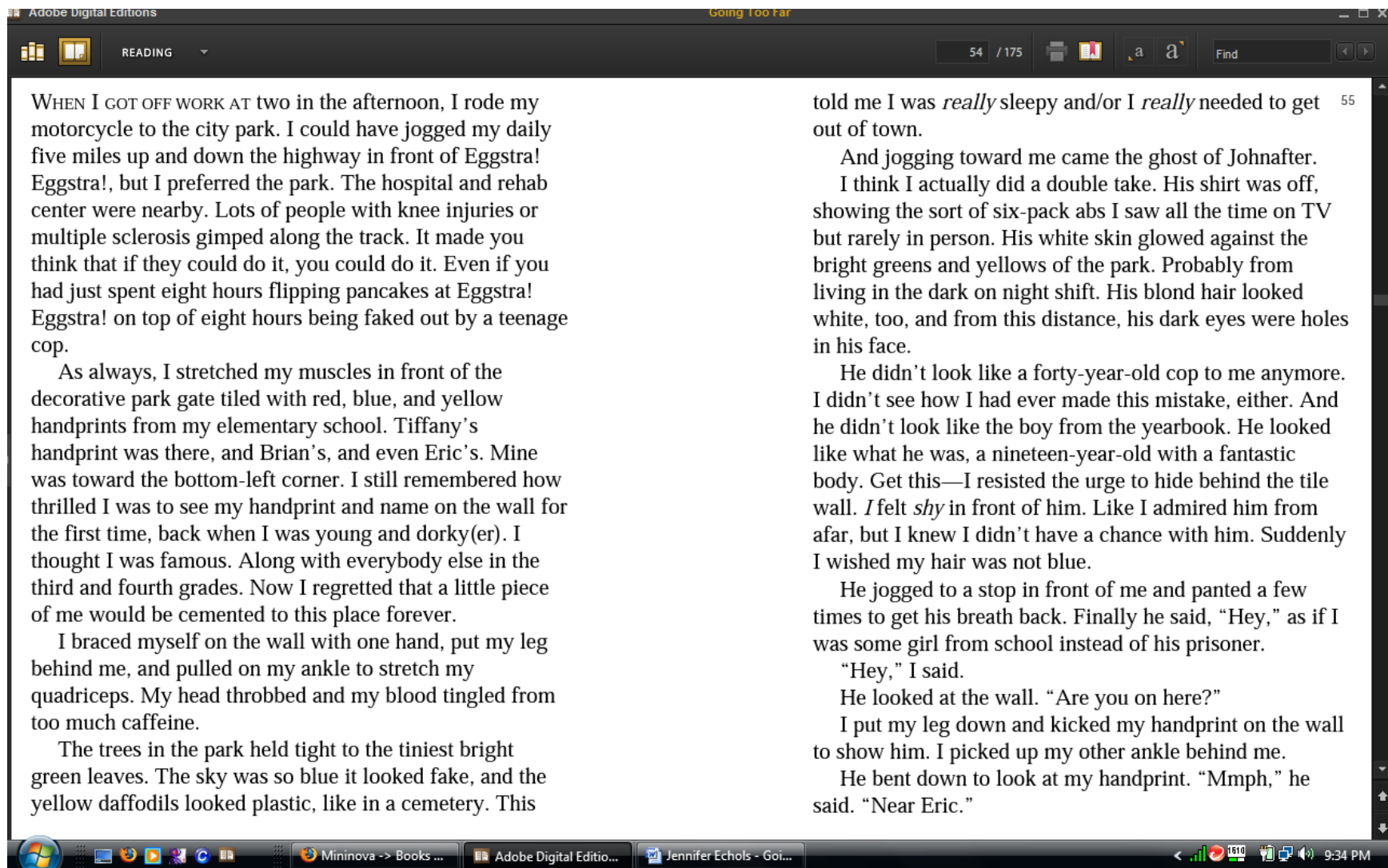




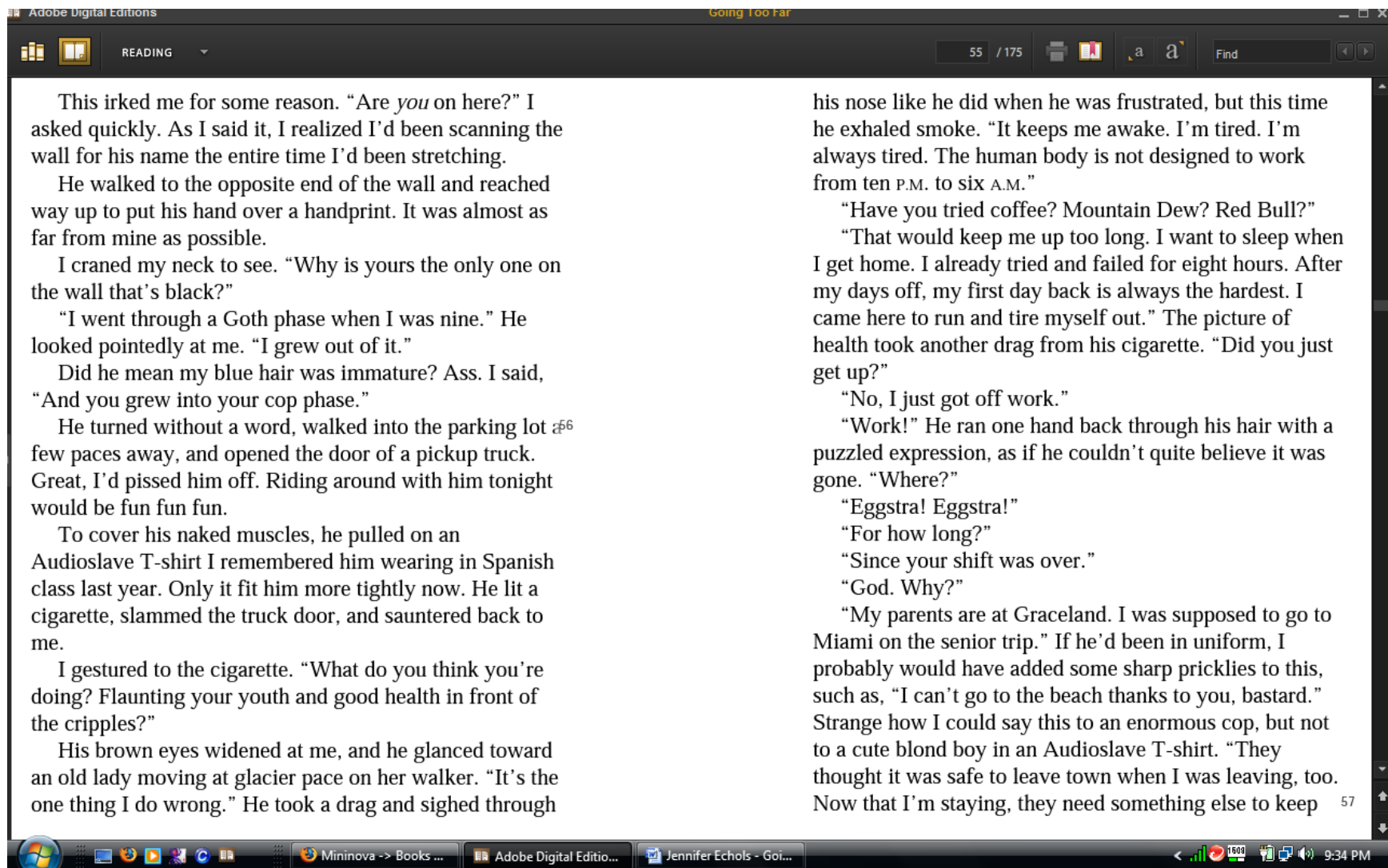












This irked me for some reason. "Are *you* on here?" I asked quickly. As I said it, I realized I'd been scanning the wall for his name the entire time I'd been stretching.

He walked to the opposite end of the wall and reached way up to put his hand over a handprint. It was almost as far from mine as possible.

I craned my neck to see. "Why is yours the only one on the wall that's black?"

"I went through a Goth phase when I was nine." He looked pointedly at me. "I grew out of it."

Did he mean my blue hair was immature? Ass. I said, "And you grew into your cop phase."

He turned without a word, walked into the parking lot a few paces away, and opened the door of a pickup truck. Great, I'd pissed him off. Riding around with him tonight would be fun fun fun.

To cover his naked muscles, he pulled on an Audioslave T-shirt I remembered him wearing in Spanish class last year. Only it fit him more tightly now. He lit a cigarette, slammed the truck door, and sauntered back to me.

I gestured to the cigarette. "What do you think you're doing? Flaunting your youth and good health in front of the cripples?"

His brown eyes widened at me, and he glanced toward an old lady moving at glacier pace on her walker. "It's the one thing I do wrong." He took a drag and sighed through

his nose like he did when he was frustrated, but this time he exhaled smoke. "It keeps me awake. I'm tired. I'm always tired. The human body is not designed to work from ten P.M. to six A.M."

"Have you tried coffee? Mountain Dew? Red Bull?"

"That would keep me up too long. I want to sleep when I get home. I already tried and failed for eight hours. After my days off, my first day back is always the hardest. I came here to run and tire myself out." The picture of health took another drag from his cigarette. "Did you just get up?"

"No, I just got off work."

"Work!" He ran one hand back through his hair with a puzzled expression, as if he couldn't quite believe it was gone. "Where?"

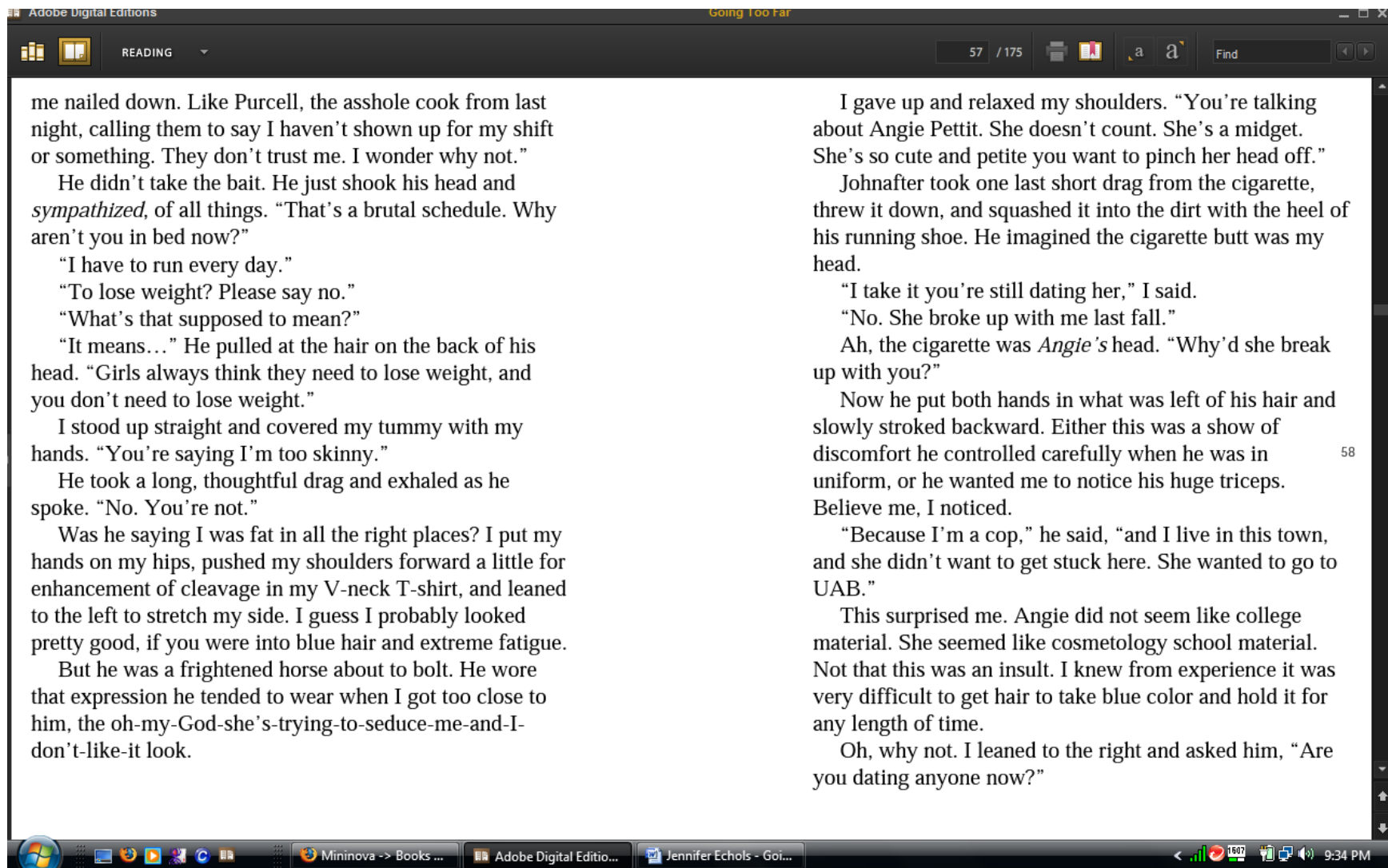
"Eggstra! Eggstra!"

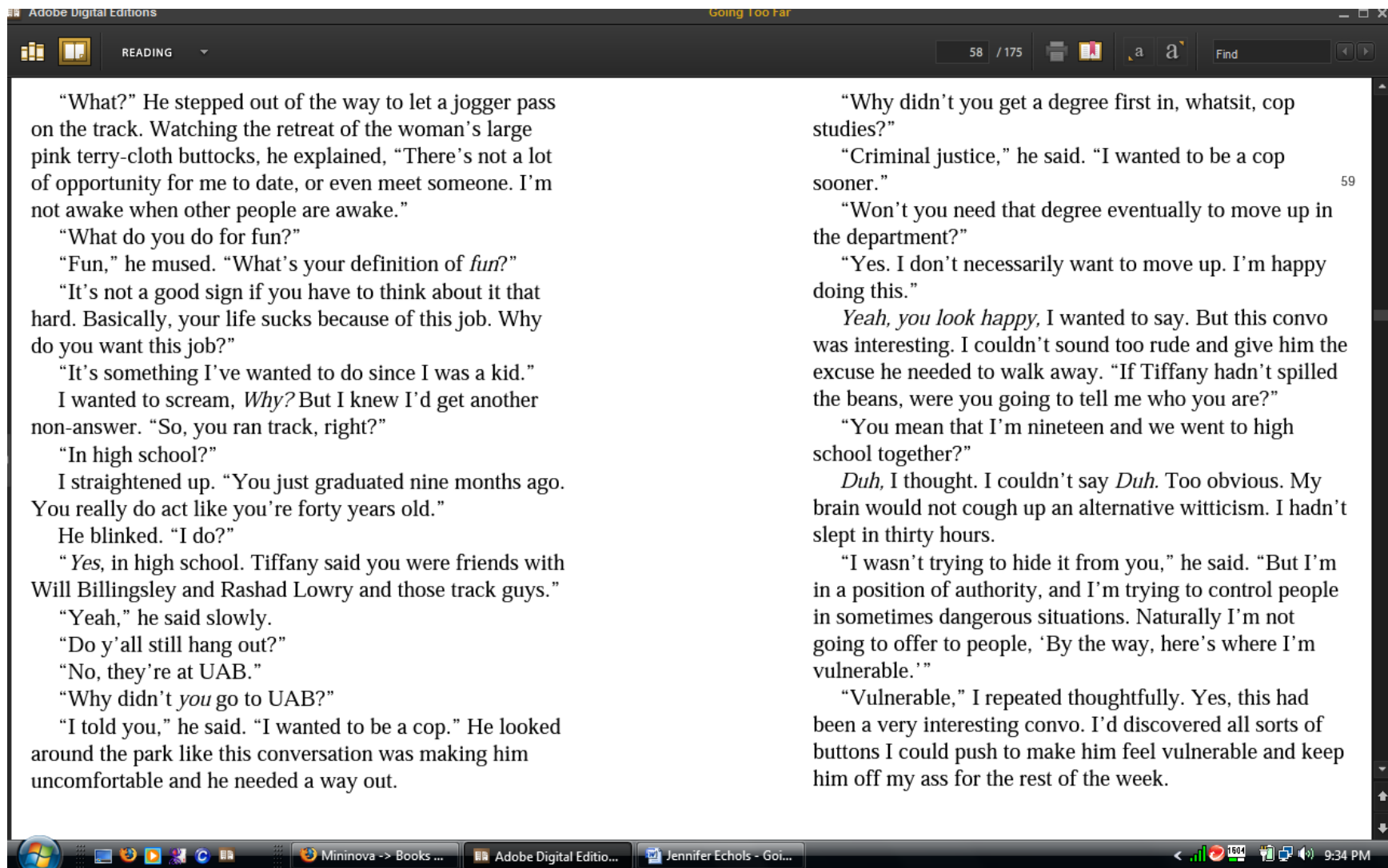
"For how long?"

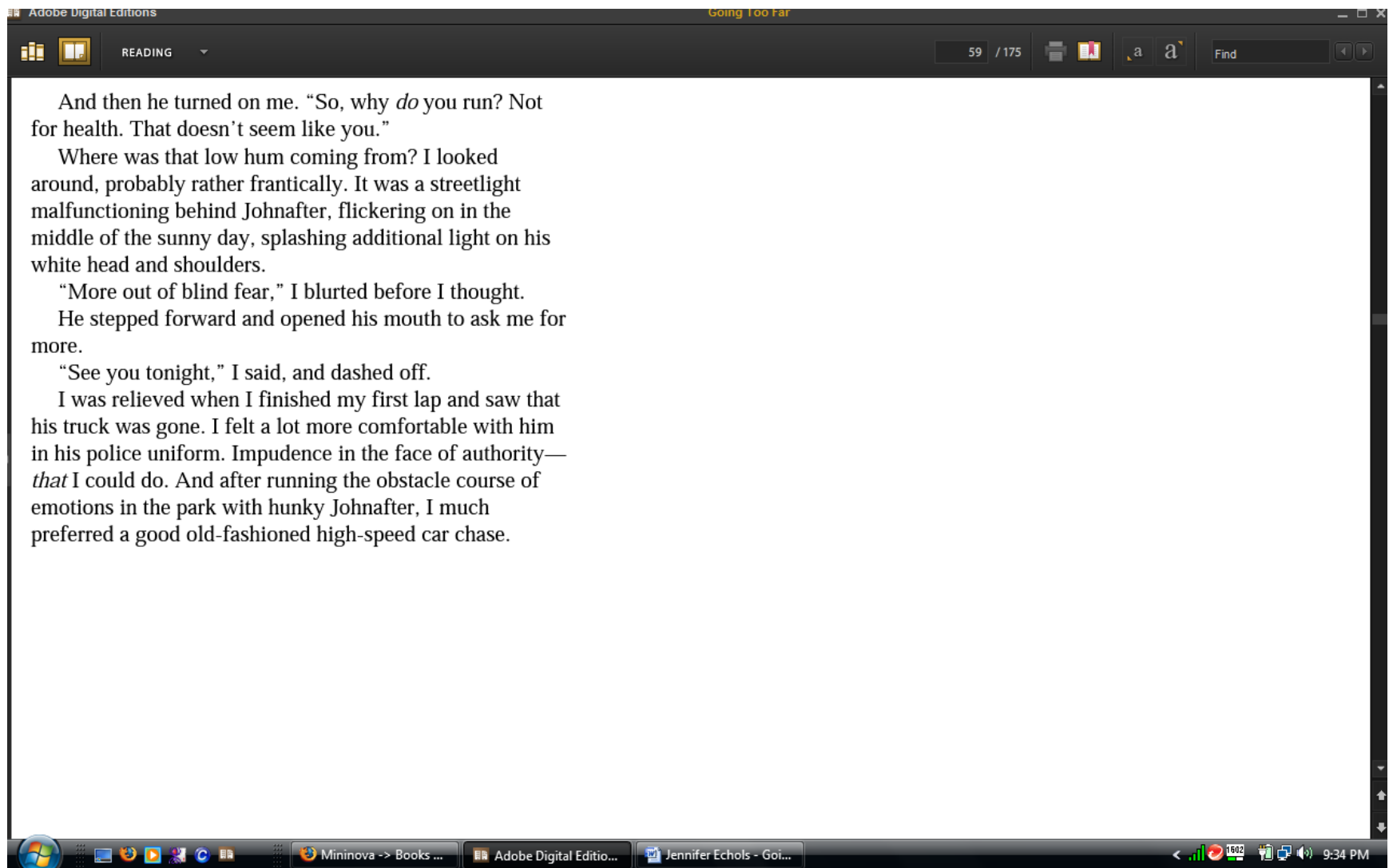
"Since your shift was over."

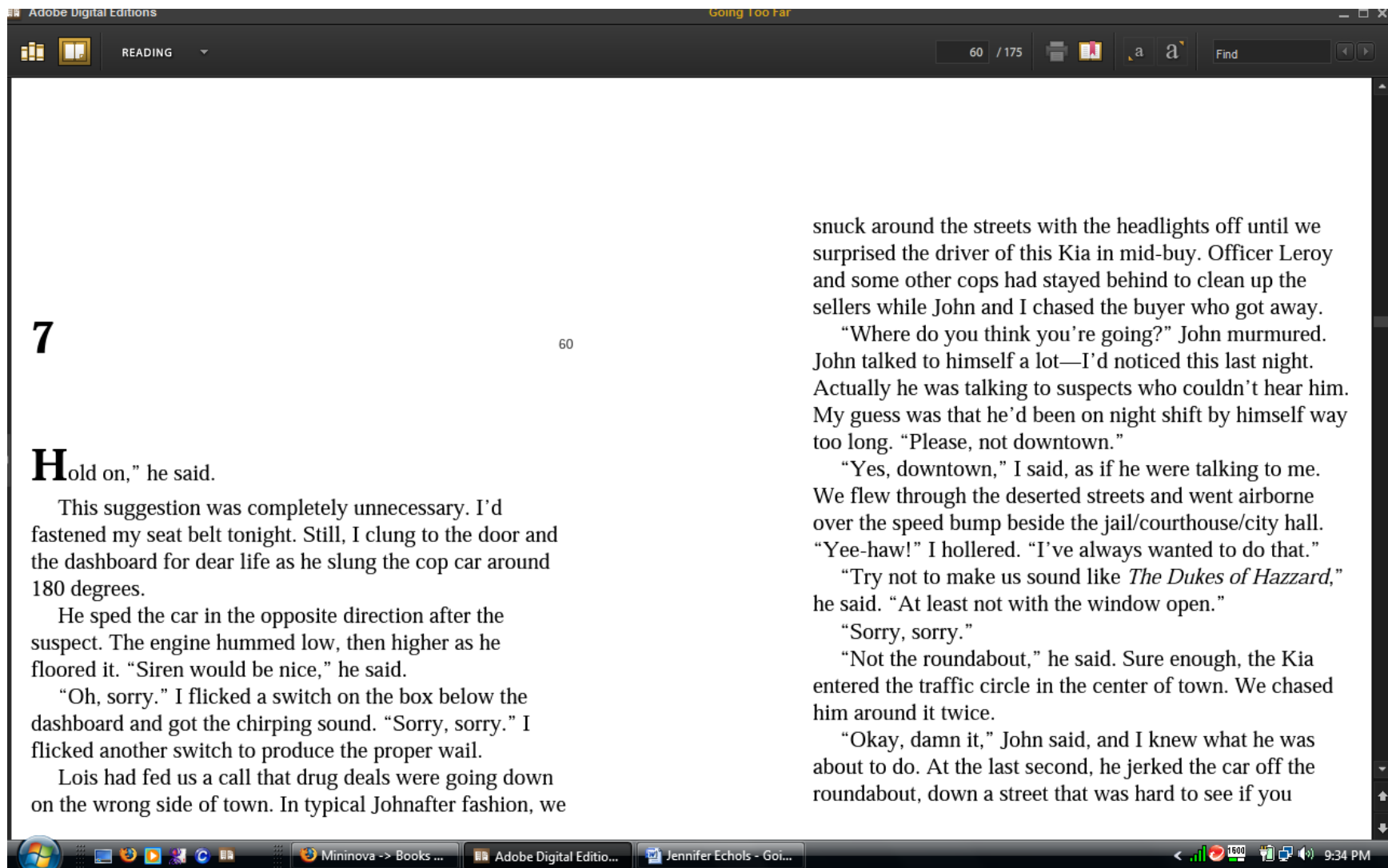
"God. Why?"

"My parents are at Graceland. I was supposed to go to Miami on the senior trip." If he'd been in uniform, I probably would have added some sharp pricklies to this, such as, "I can't go to the beach thanks to you, bastard." Strange how I could say this to an enormous cop, but not to a cute blond boy in an Audioslave T-shirt. "They thought it was safe to leave town when I was leaving, too. Now that I'm staying, they need something else to keep

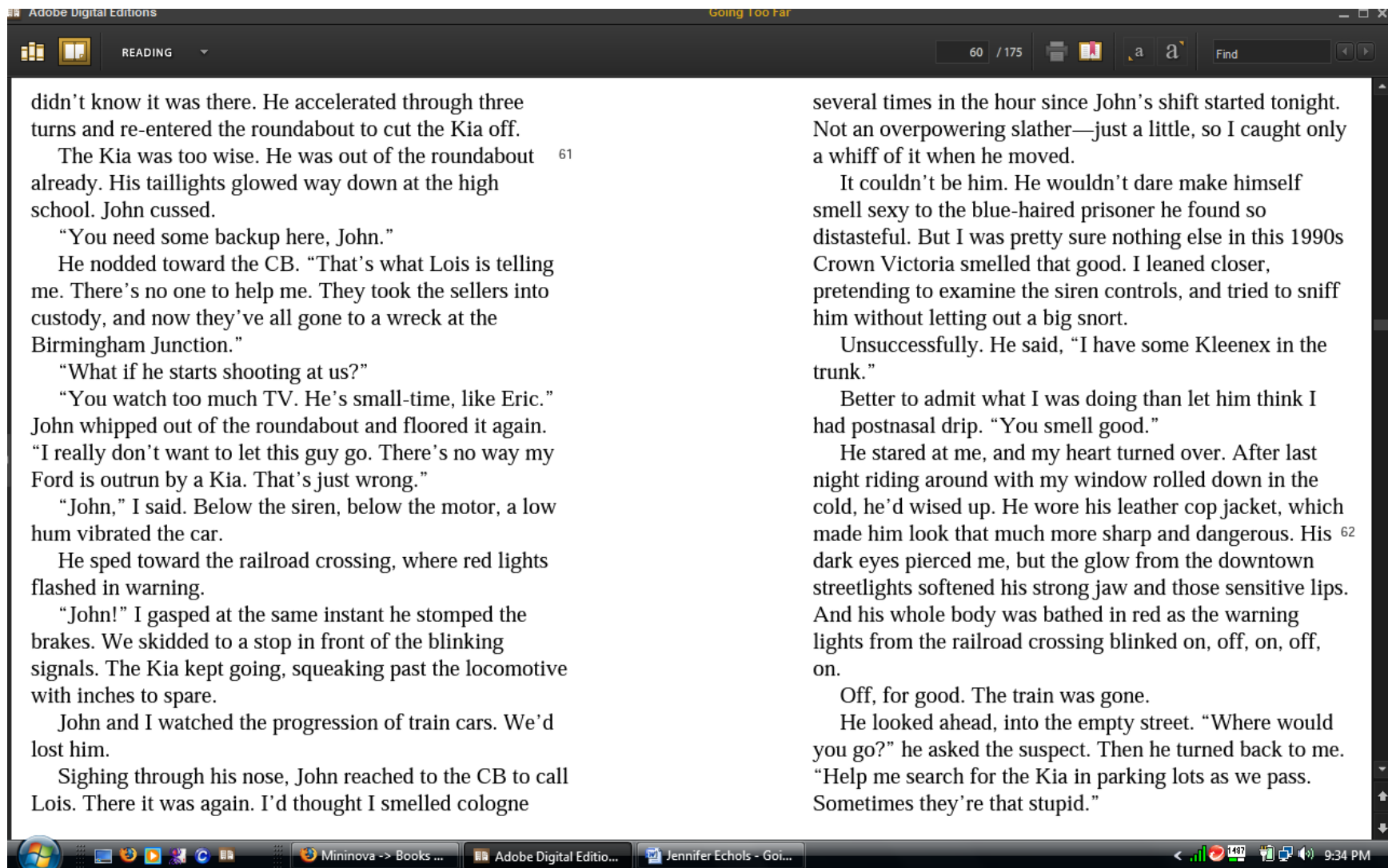


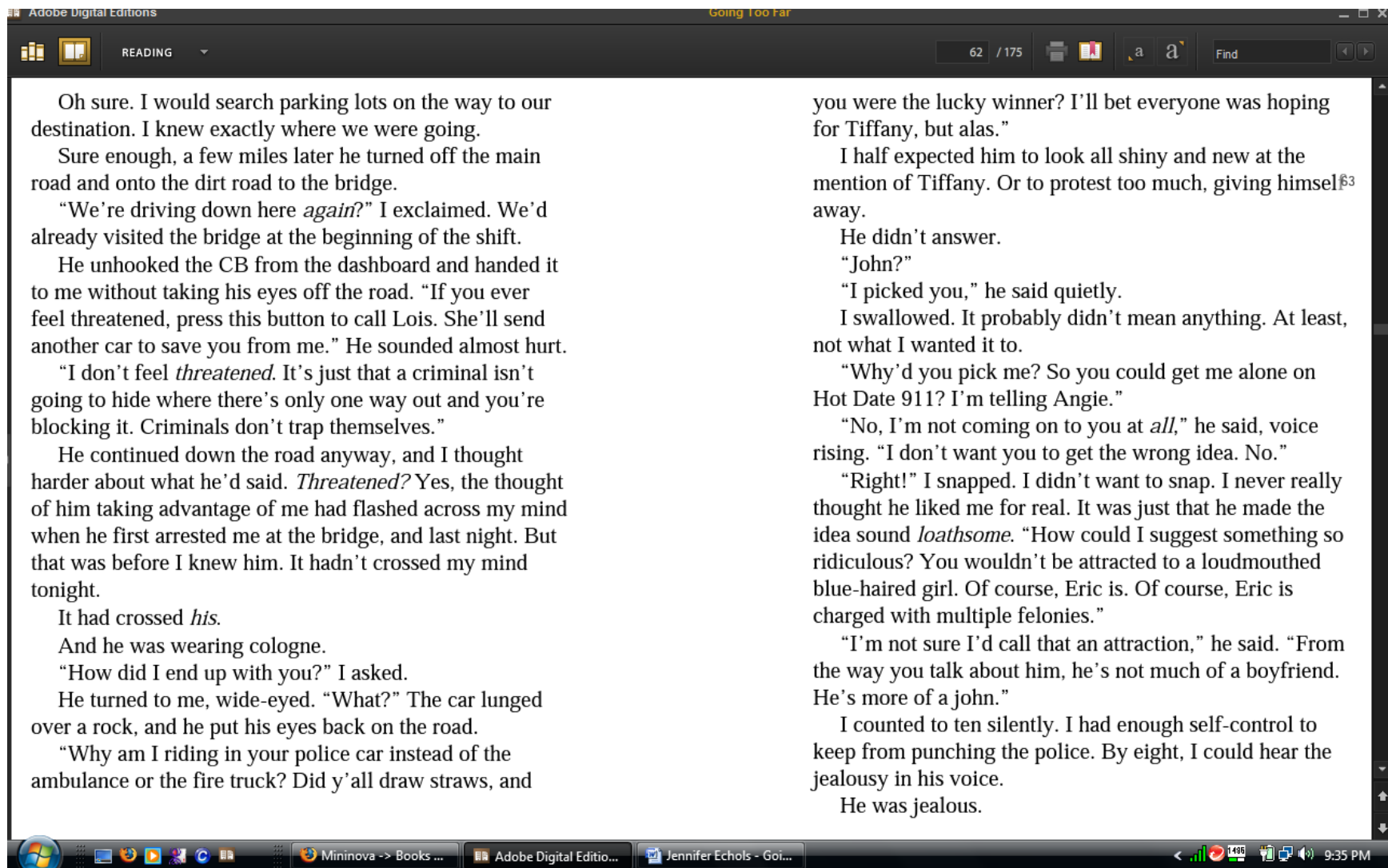


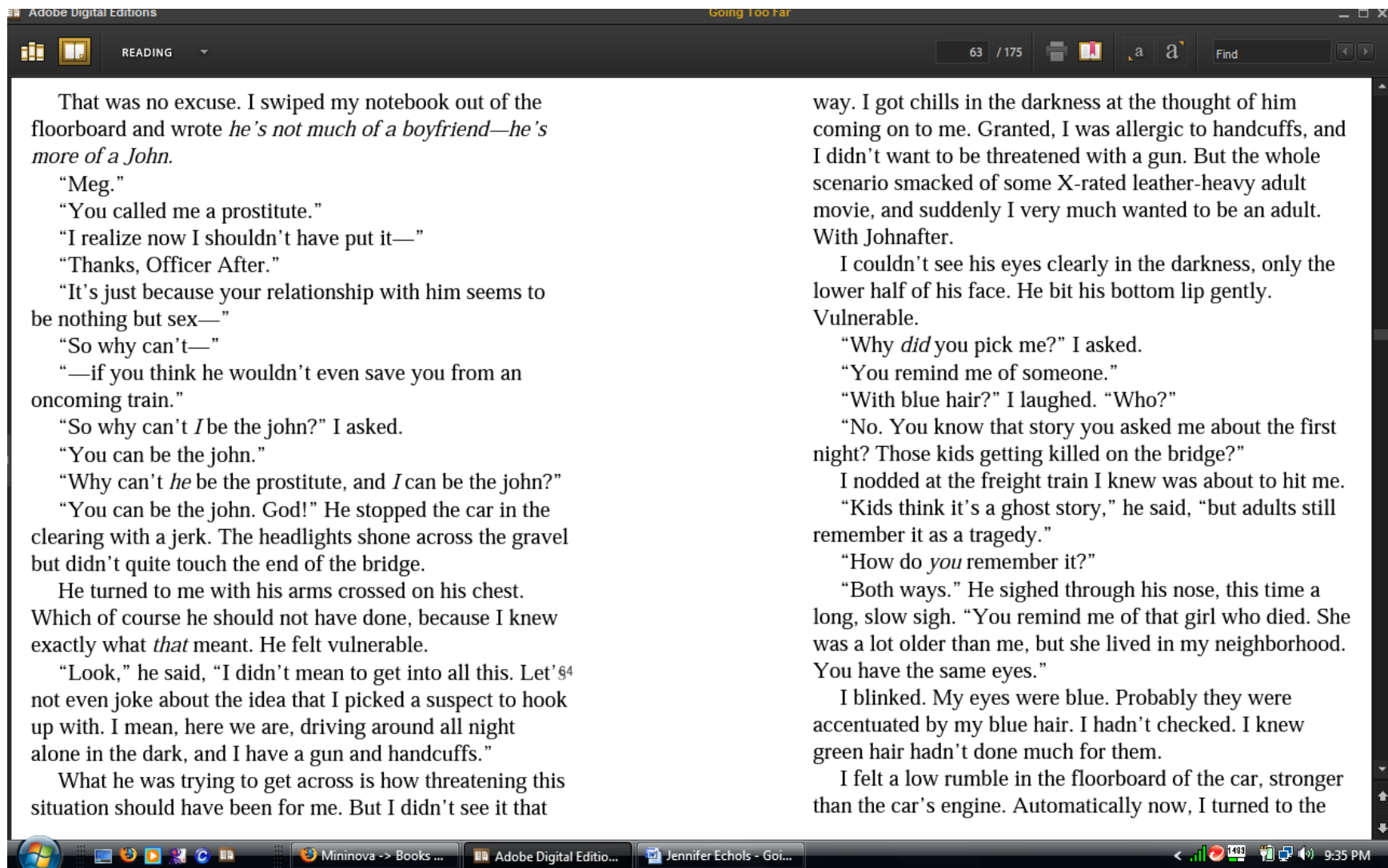












That was no excuse. I swiped my notebook out of the floorboard and wrote *he's not much of a boyfriend—he's more of a John*.

"Meg."

"You called me a prostitute."

"I realize now I shouldn't have put it—"

"Thanks, Officer After."

"It's just because your relationship with him seems to be nothing but sex—"

"So why can't—"

"—if you think he wouldn't even save you from an oncoming train."

"So why can't *I* be the John?" I asked.

"You can be the John."

"Why can't *he* be the prostitute, and *I* can be the John?"

"You can be the John. God!" He stopped the car in the clearing with a jerk. The headlights shone across the gravel but didn't quite touch the end of the bridge.

He turned to me with his arms crossed on his chest. Which of course he should not have done, because I knew exactly what *that* meant. He felt vulnerable.

"Look," he said, "I didn't mean to get into all this. Let's<sup>§4</sup> not even joke about the idea that I picked a suspect to hook up with. I mean, here we are, driving around all night alone in the dark, and I have a gun and handcuffs."

What he was trying to get across is how threatening this situation should have been for me. But I didn't see it that

way. I got chills in the darkness at the thought of him coming on to me. Granted, I was allergic to handcuffs, and I didn't want to be threatened with a gun. But the whole scenario smacked of some X-rated leather-heavy adult movie, and suddenly I very much wanted to be an adult. With Johnafter.

I couldn't see his eyes clearly in the darkness, only the lower half of his face. He bit his bottom lip gently. Vulnerable.

"Why *did* you pick me?" I asked.

"You remind me of someone."

"With blue hair?" I laughed. "Who?"

"No. You know that story you asked me about the first night? Those kids getting killed on the bridge?"

I nodded at the freight train I knew was about to hit me.

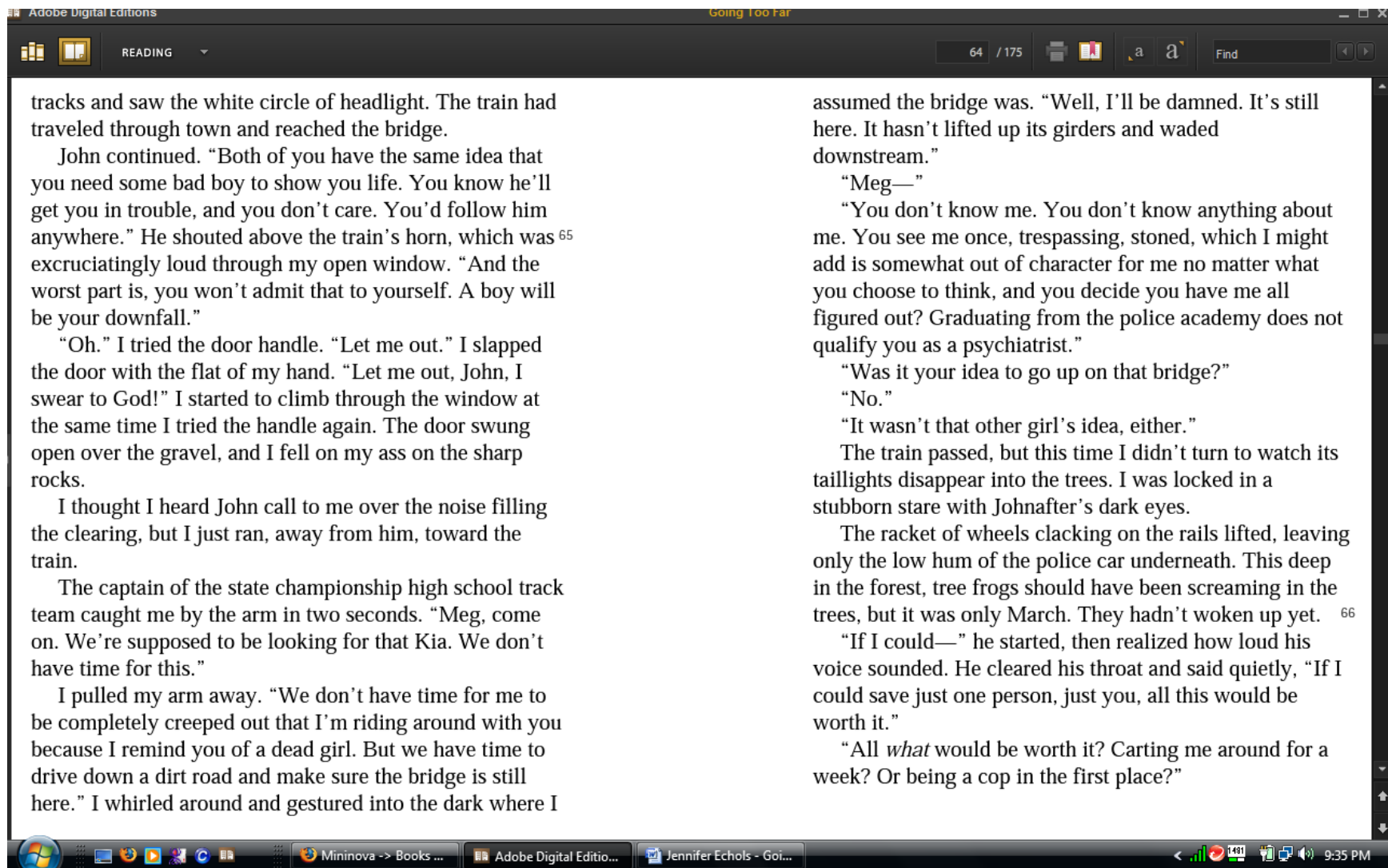
"Kids think it's a ghost story," he said, "but adults still remember it as a tragedy."

"How do *you* remember it?"

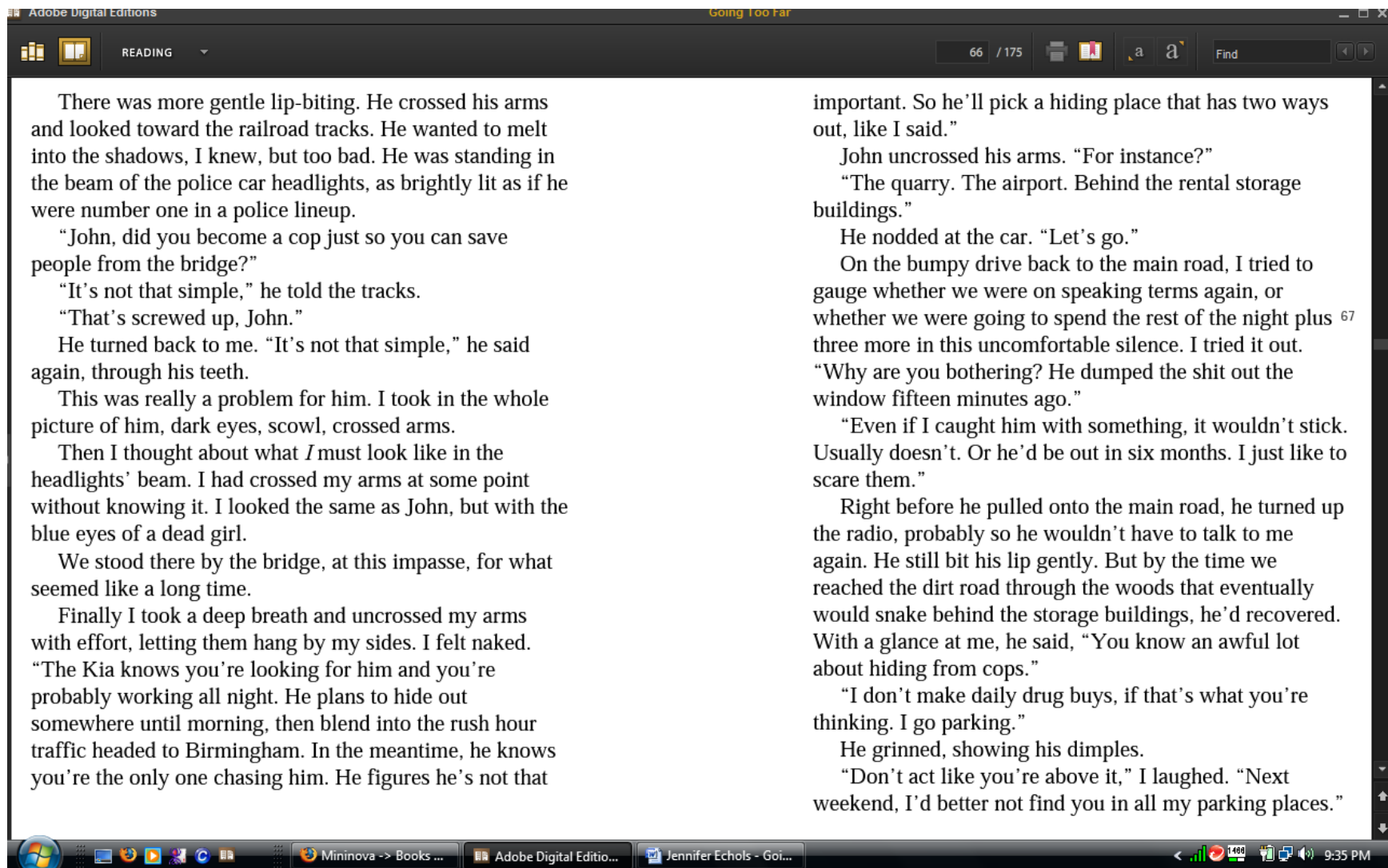
"Both ways." He sighed through his nose, this time a long, slow sigh. "You remind me of that girl who died. She was a lot older than me, but she lived in my neighborhood. You have the same eyes."

I blinked. My eyes were blue. Probably they were accentuated by my blue hair. I hadn't checked. I knew green hair hadn't done much for them.

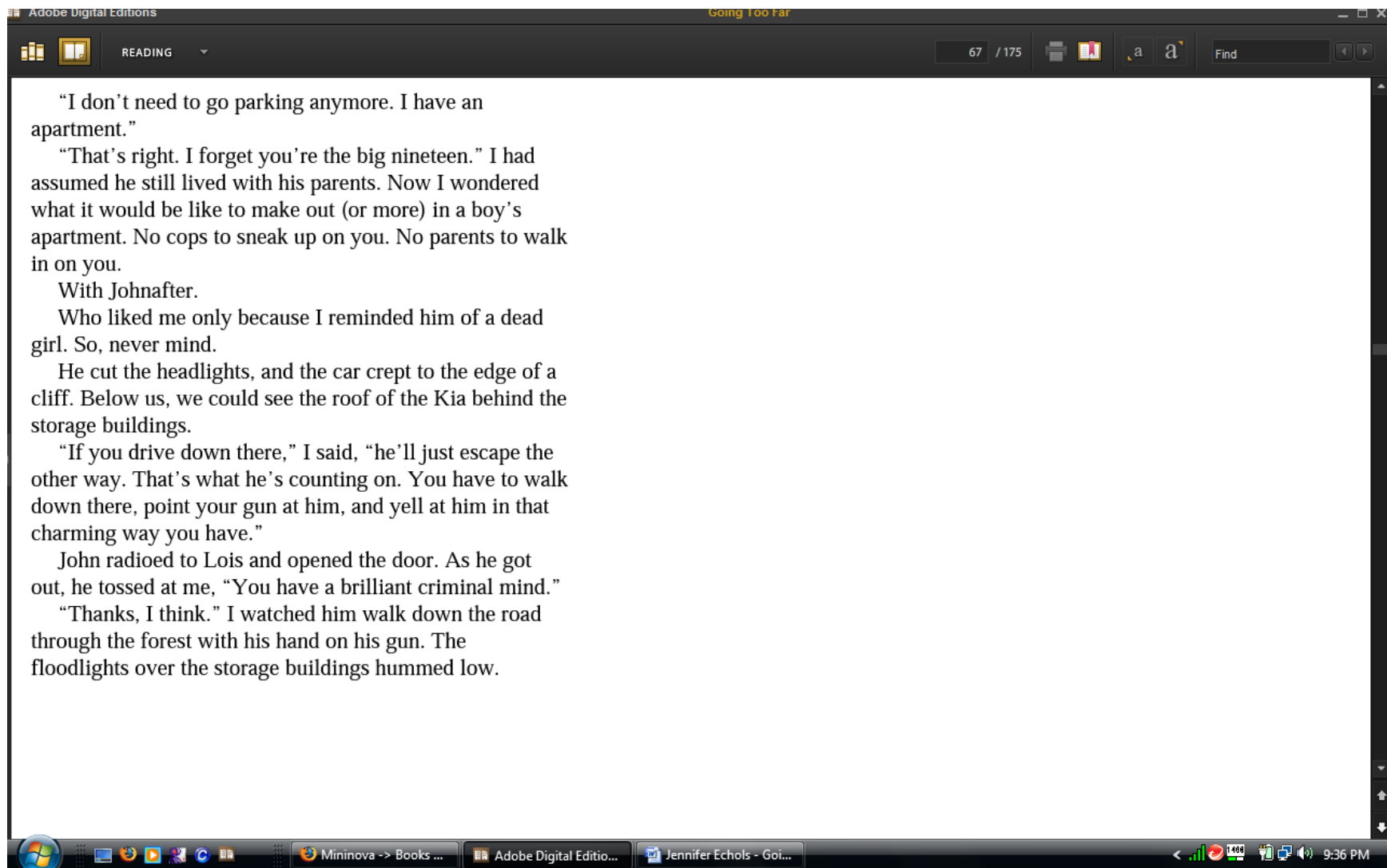
I felt a low rumble in the floorboard of the car, stronger than the car's engine. Automatically now, I turned to the

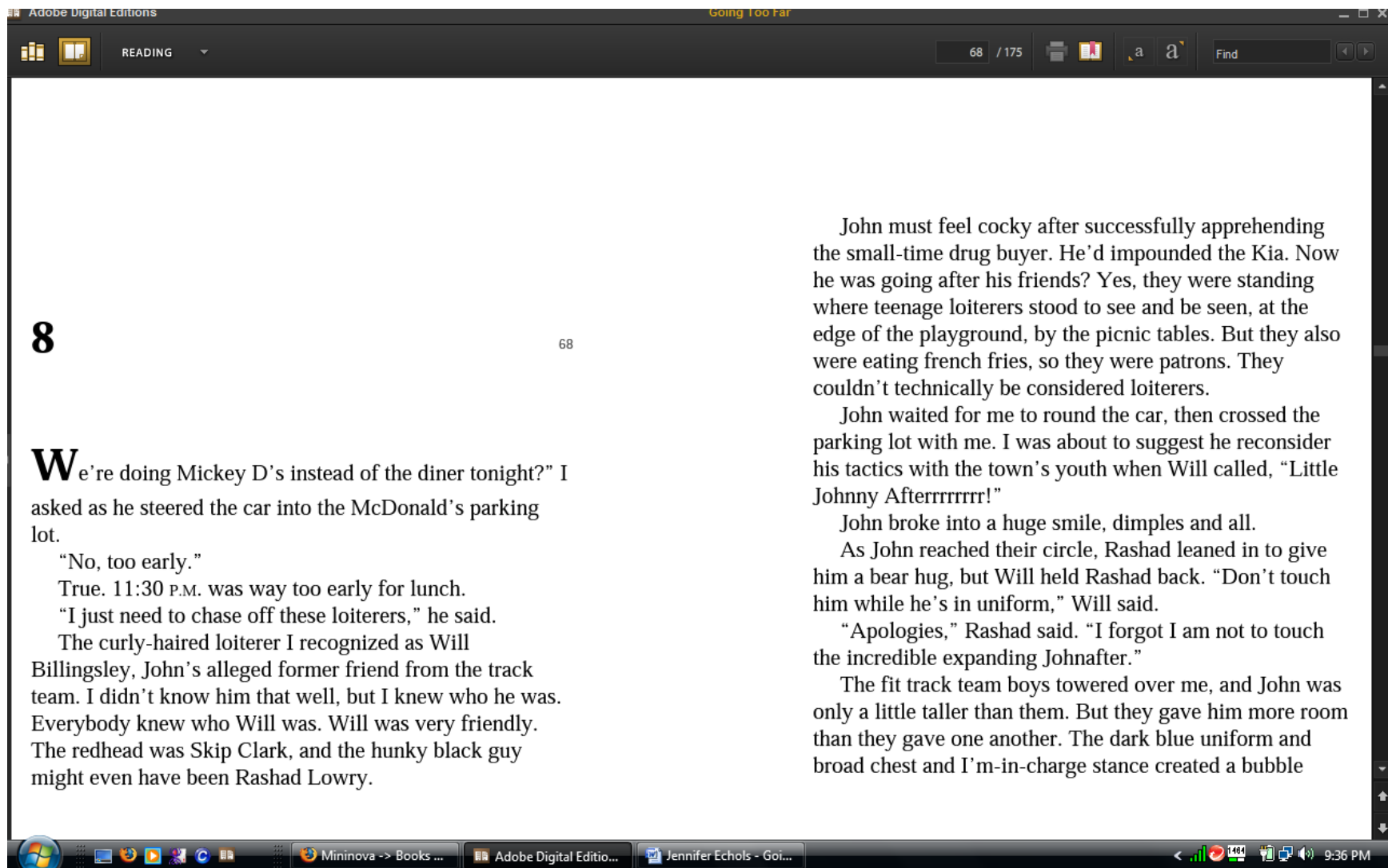


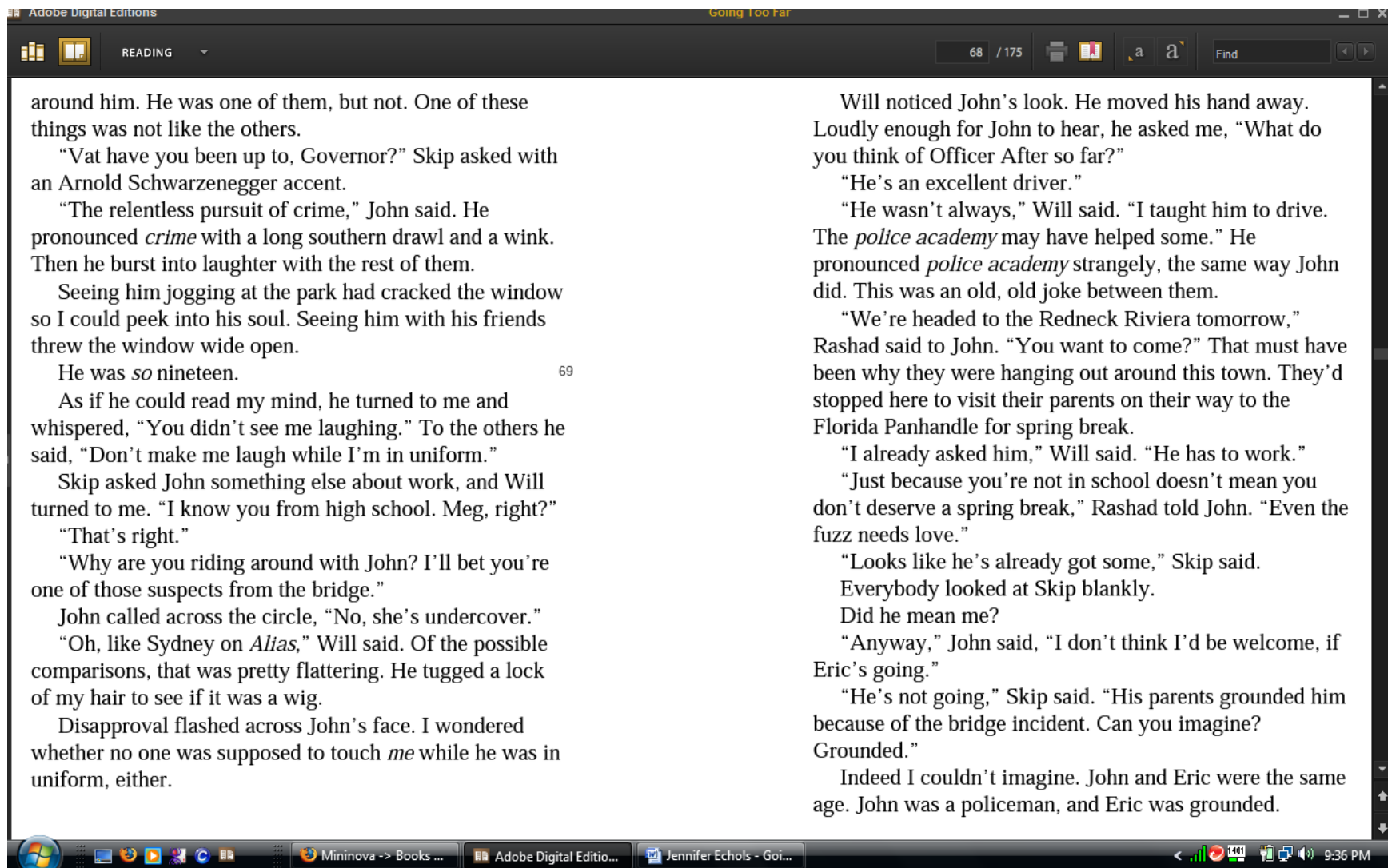


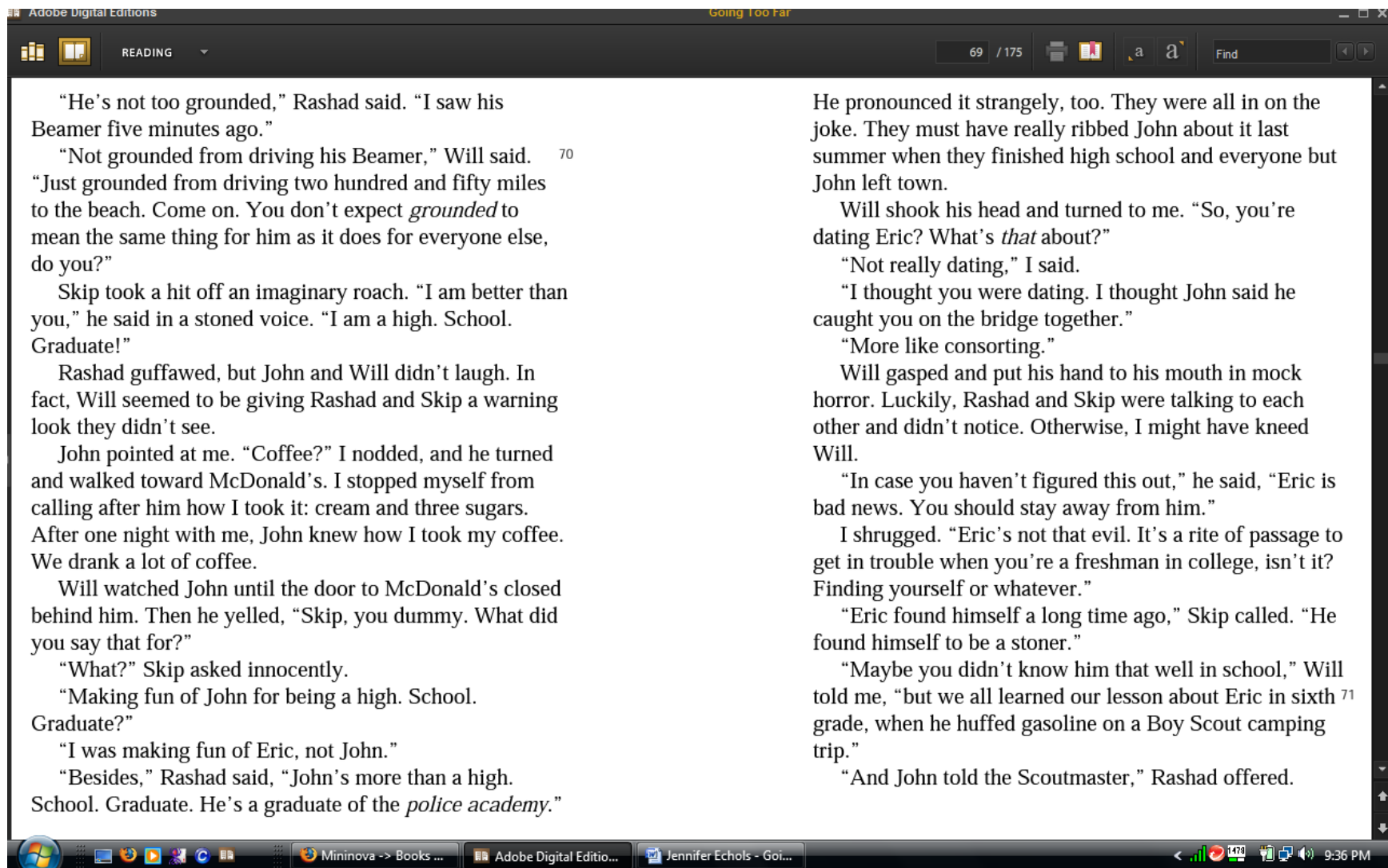


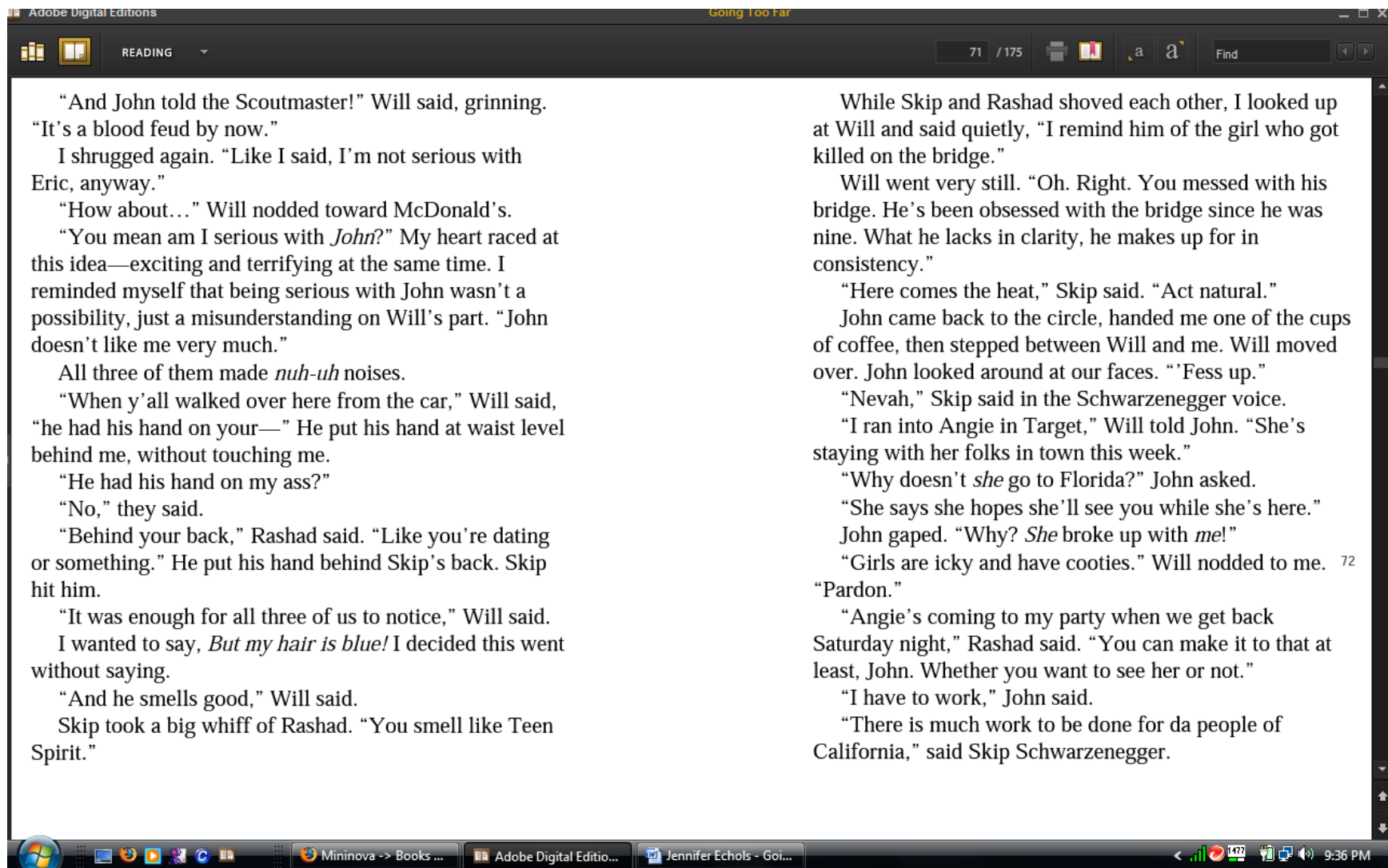




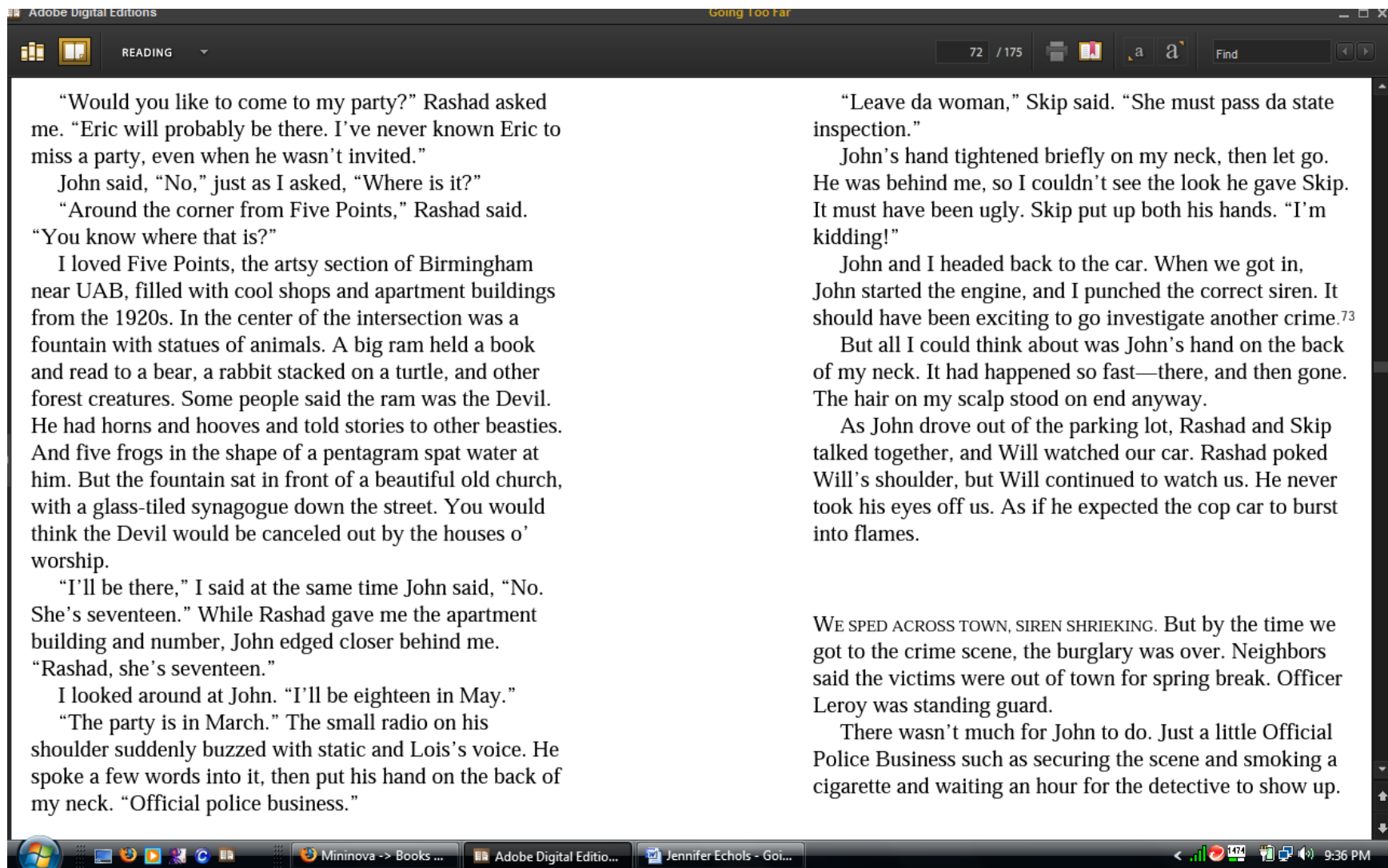












"Would you like to come to my party?" Rashad asked me. "Eric will probably be there. I've never known Eric to miss a party, even when he wasn't invited."

John said, "No," just as I asked, "Where is it?"

"Around the corner from Five Points," Rashad said. "You know where that is?"

I loved Five Points, the artsy section of Birmingham near UAB, filled with cool shops and apartment buildings from the 1920s. In the center of the intersection was a fountain with statues of animals. A big ram held a book and read to a bear, a rabbit stacked on a turtle, and other forest creatures. Some people said the ram was the Devil. He had horns and hooves and told stories to other beasties. And five frogs in the shape of a pentagram spat water at him. But the fountain sat in front of a beautiful old church, with a glass-tiled synagogue down the street. You would think the Devil would be canceled out by the houses o' worship.

"I'll be there," I said at the same time John said, "No. She's seventeen." While Rashad gave me the apartment building and number, John edged closer behind me. "Rashad, she's seventeen."

I looked around at John. "I'll be eighteen in May."

"The party is in March." The small radio on his shoulder suddenly buzzed with static and Lois's voice. He spoke a few words into it, then put his hand on the back of my neck. "Official police business."

"Leave da woman," Skip said. "She must pass da state inspection."

John's hand tightened briefly on my neck, then let go. He was behind me, so I couldn't see the look he gave Skip. It must have been ugly. Skip put up both his hands. "I'm kidding!"

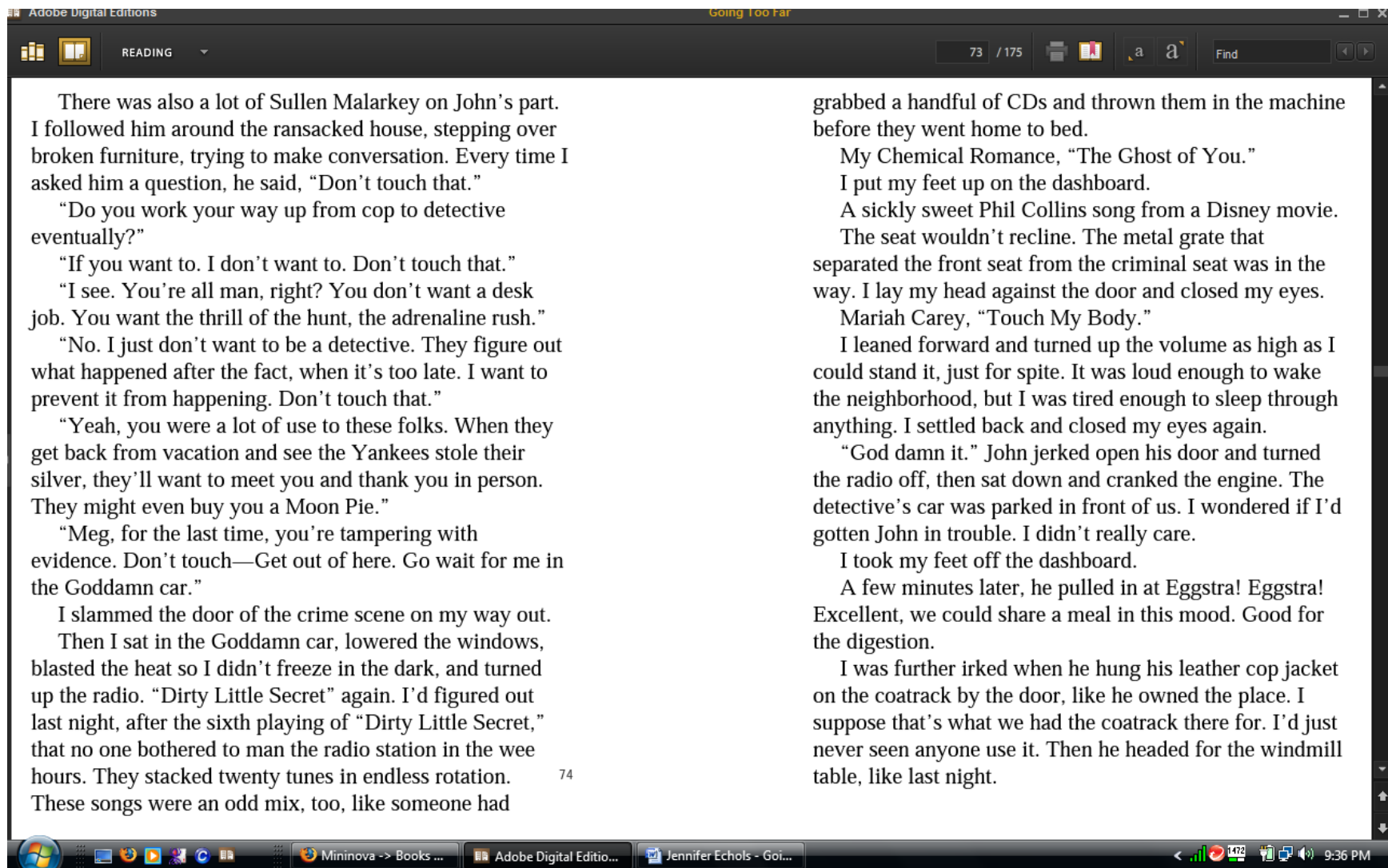
John and I headed back to the car. When we got in, John started the engine, and I punched the correct siren. It should have been exciting to go investigate another crime.<sup>73</sup>

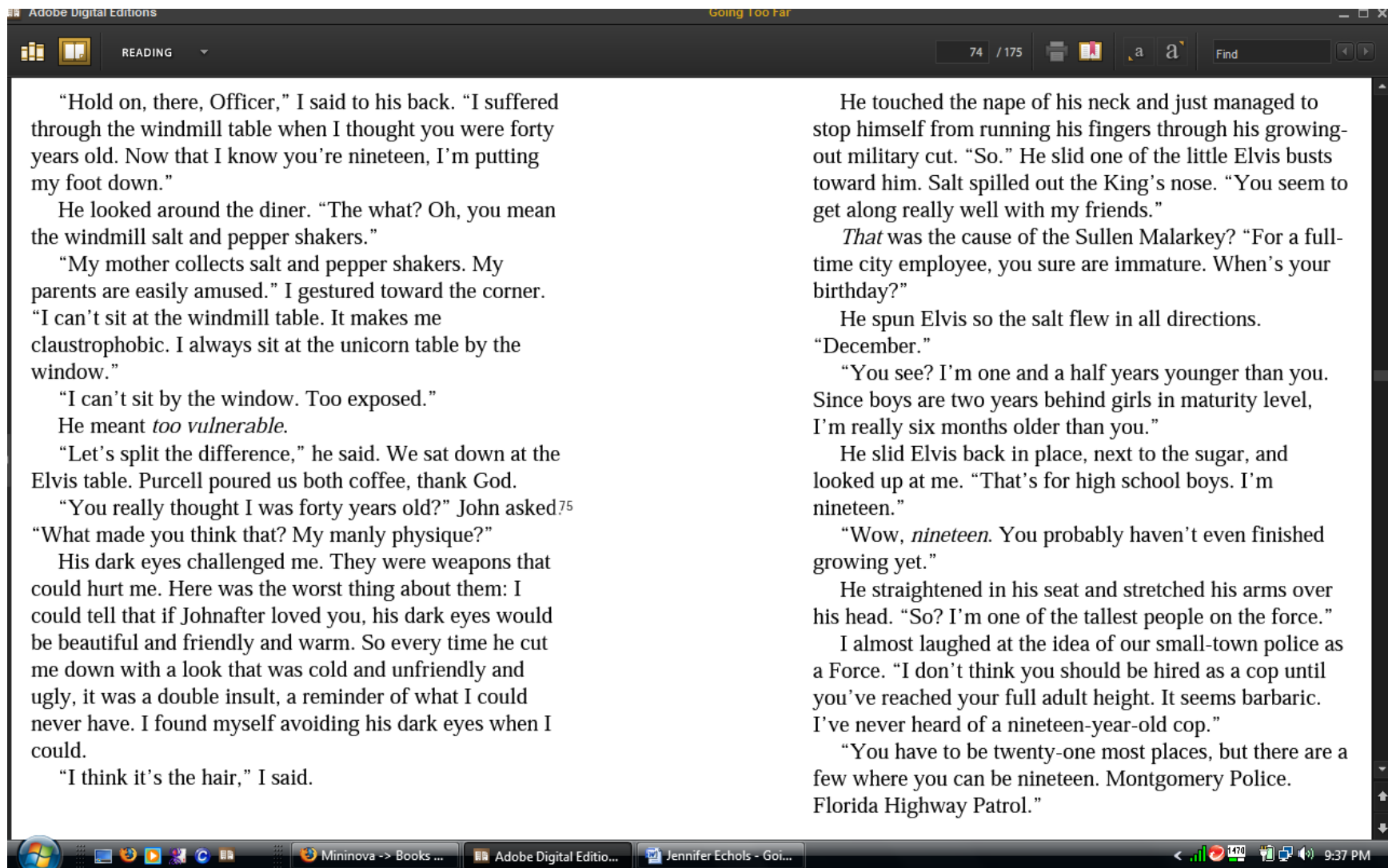
But all I could think about was John's hand on the back of my neck. It had happened so fast—there, and then gone. The hair on my scalp stood on end anyway.

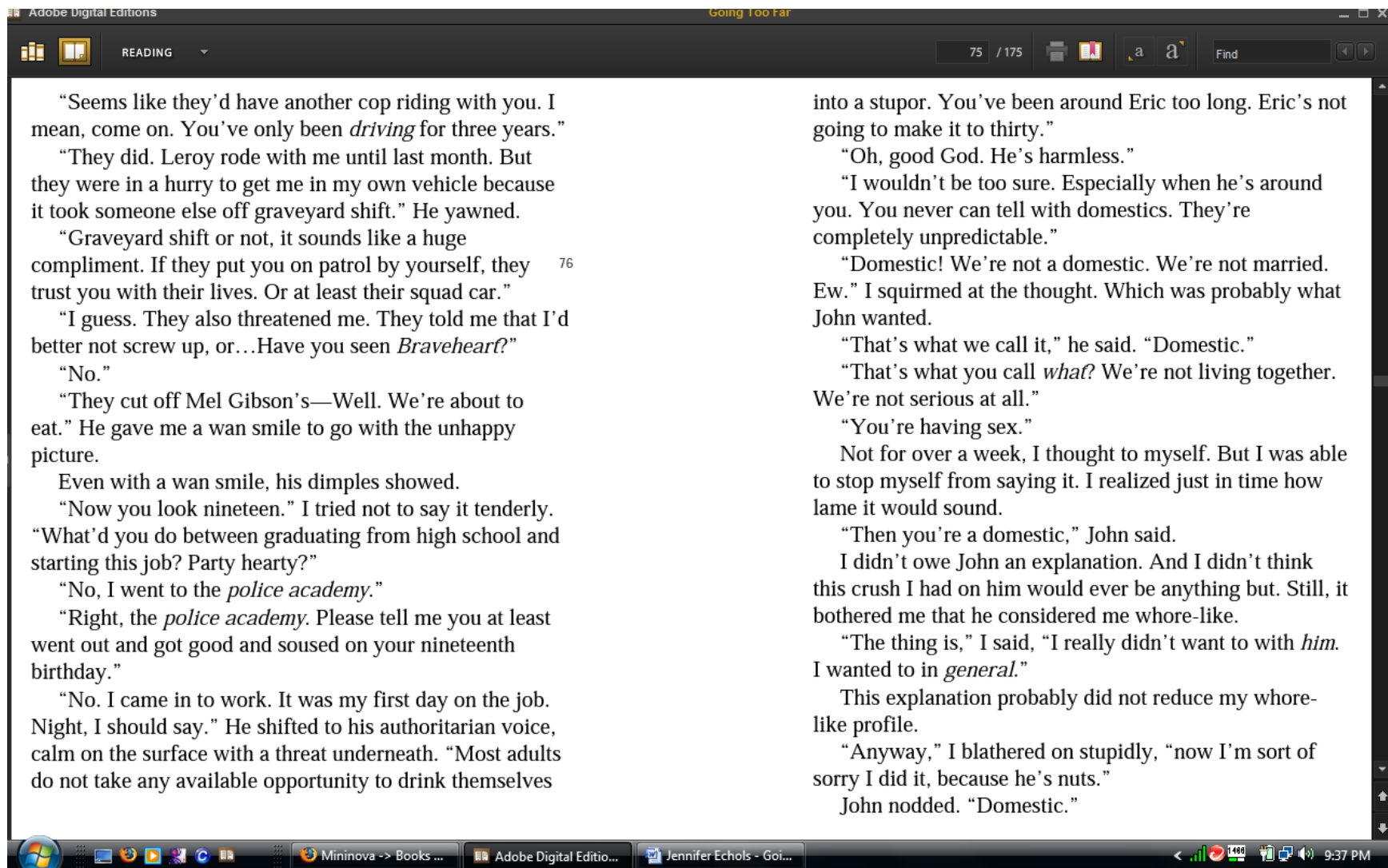
As John drove out of the parking lot, Rashad and Skip talked together, and Will watched our car. Rashad poked Will's shoulder, but Will continued to watch us. He never took his eyes off us. As if he expected the cop car to burst into flames.

WE SPED ACROSS TOWN, SIREN SHRIEKING. But by the time we got to the crime scene, the burglary was over. Neighbors said the victims were out of town for spring break. Officer Leroy was standing guard.

There wasn't much for John to do. Just a little Official Police Business such as securing the scene and smoking a cigarette and waiting an hour for the detective to show up.







"Seems like they'd have another cop riding with you. I mean, come on. You've only been *driving* for three years."

"They did. Leroy rode with me until last month. But they were in a hurry to get me in my own vehicle because it took someone else off graveyard shift." He yawned.

"Graveyard shift or not, it sounds like a huge compliment. If they put you on patrol by yourself, they trust you with their lives. Or at least their squad car."

"I guess. They also threatened me. They told me that I'd better not screw up, or...Have you seen *Braveheart*?"

"No."

"They cut off Mel Gibson's—Well. We're about to eat." He gave me a wan smile to go with the unhappy picture.

Even with a wan smile, his dimples showed.

"Now you look nineteen." I tried not to say it tenderly. "What'd you do between graduating from high school and starting this job? Party hearty?"

"No, I went to the *police academy*."

"Right, the *police academy*. Please tell me you at least went out and got good and soused on your nineteenth birthday."

"No. I came in to work. It was my first day on the job. Night, I should say." He shifted to his authoritarian voice, calm on the surface with a threat underneath. "Most adults do not take any available opportunity to drink themselves

into a stupor. You've been around Eric too long. Eric's not going to make it to thirty."

"Oh, good God. He's harmless."

"I wouldn't be too sure. Especially when he's around you. You never can tell with domestics. They're completely unpredictable."

"Domestic! We're not a domestic. We're not married. Ew." I squirmed at the thought. Which was probably what John wanted.

"That's what we call it," he said. "Domestic."

"That's what you call *what*? We're not living together. We're not serious at all."

"You're having sex."

Not for over a week, I thought to myself. But I was able to stop myself from saying it. I realized just in time how lame it would sound.

"Then you're a domestic," John said.

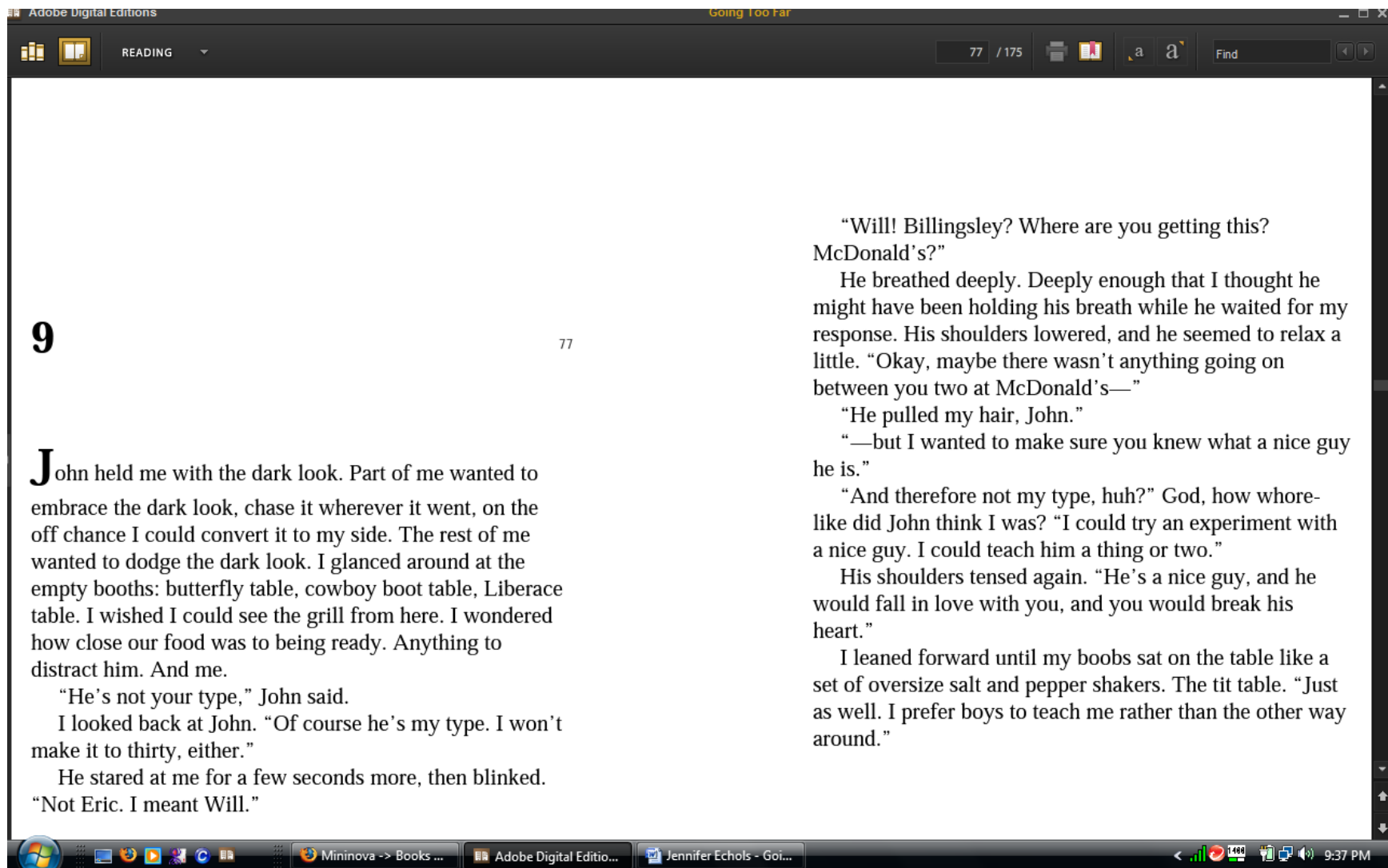
I didn't owe John an explanation. And I didn't think this crush I had on him would ever be anything but. Still, it bothered me that he considered me whore-like.

"The thing is," I said, "I really didn't want to with *him*. I wanted to in *general*."

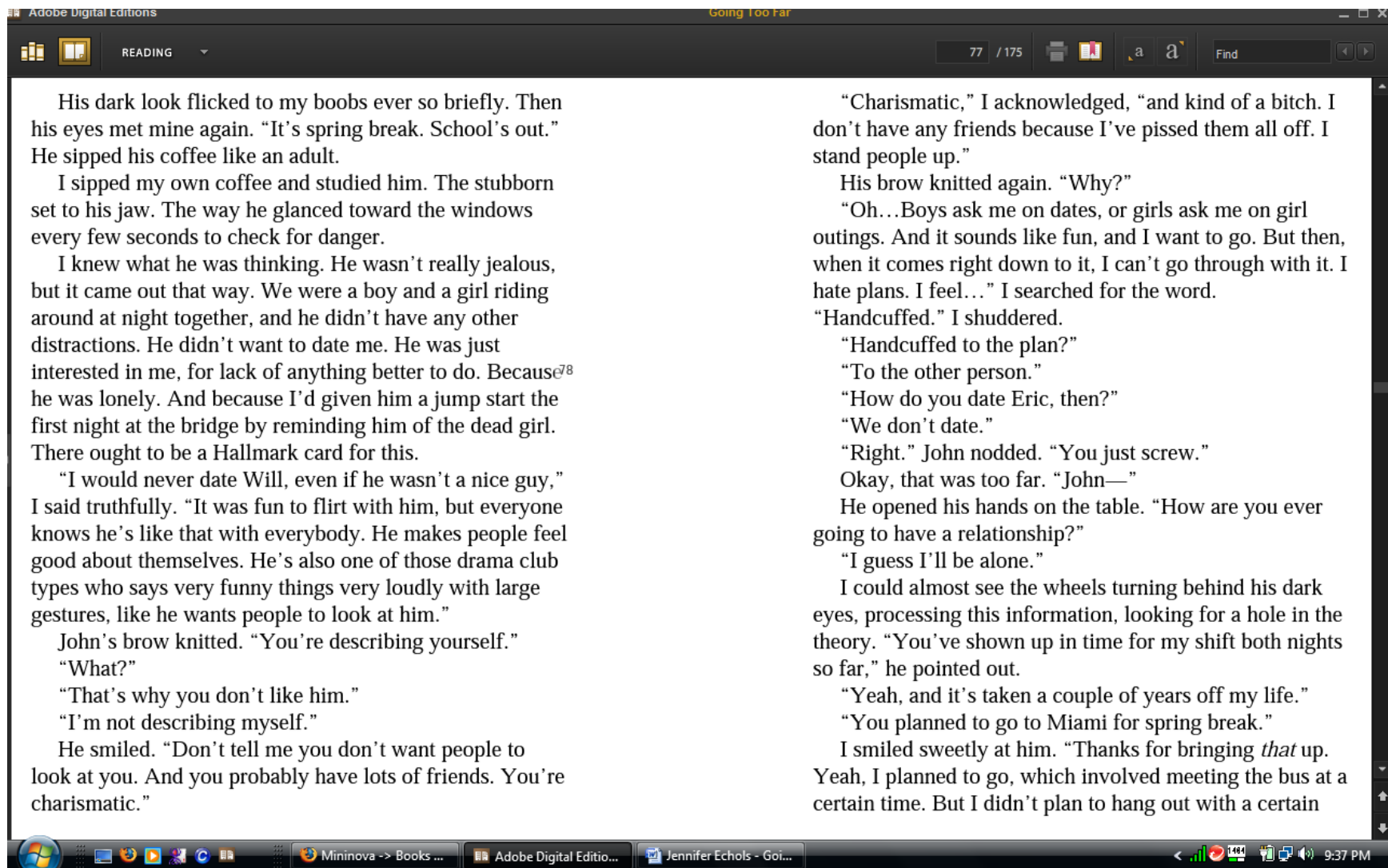
This explanation probably did not reduce my whore-like profile.

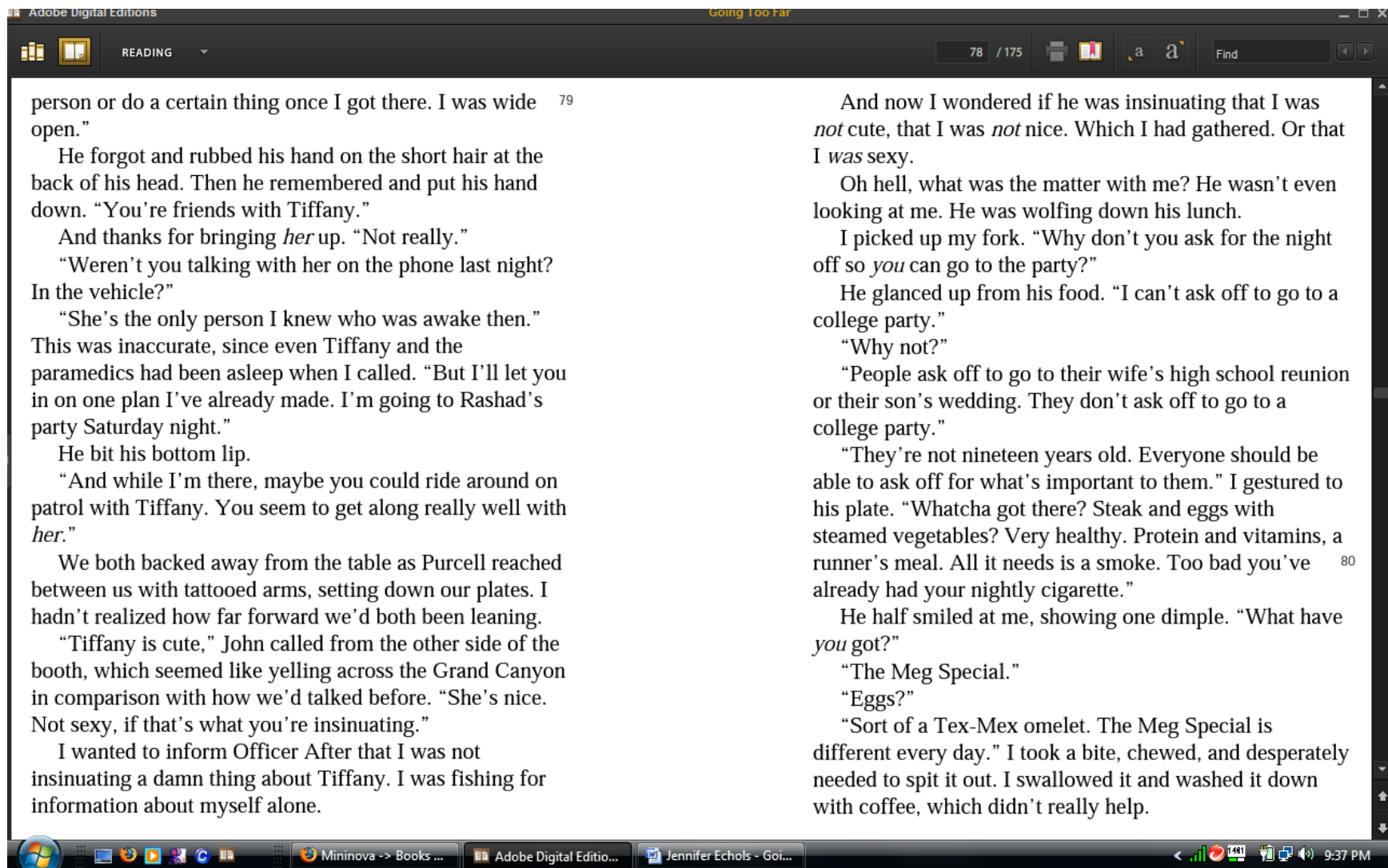
"Anyway," I blathered on stupidly, "now I'm sort of sorry I did it, because he's nuts."

John nodded. "Domestic."









person or do a certain thing once I got there. I was wide open." 79

He forgot and rubbed his hand on the short hair at the back of his head. Then he remembered and put his hand down. "You're friends with Tiffany."

And thanks for bringing *her* up. "Not really."

"Weren't you talking with her on the phone last night? In the vehicle?"

"She's the only person I knew who was awake then." This was inaccurate, since even Tiffany and the paramedics had been asleep when I called. "But I'll let you in on one plan I've already made. I'm going to Rashad's party Saturday night."

He bit his bottom lip.

"And while I'm there, maybe you could ride around on patrol with Tiffany. You seem to get along really well with *her*."

We both backed away from the table as Purcell reached between us with tattooed arms, setting down our plates. I hadn't realized how far forward we'd both been leaning.

"Tiffany is cute," John called from the other side of the booth, which seemed like yelling across the Grand Canyon in comparison with how we'd talked before. "She's nice. Not sexy, if that's what you're insinuating."

I wanted to inform Officer After that I was not insinuating a damn thing about Tiffany. I was fishing for information about myself alone.

And now I wondered if he was insinuating that I was *not* cute, that I was *not* nice. Which I had gathered. Or that I *was* sexy.

Oh hell, what was the matter with me? He wasn't even looking at me. He was wolfing down his lunch.

I picked up my fork. "Why don't you ask for the night off so *you* can go to the party?"

He glanced up from his food. "I can't ask off to go to a college party."

"Why not?"

"People ask off to go to their wife's high school reunion or their son's wedding. They don't ask off to go to a college party."

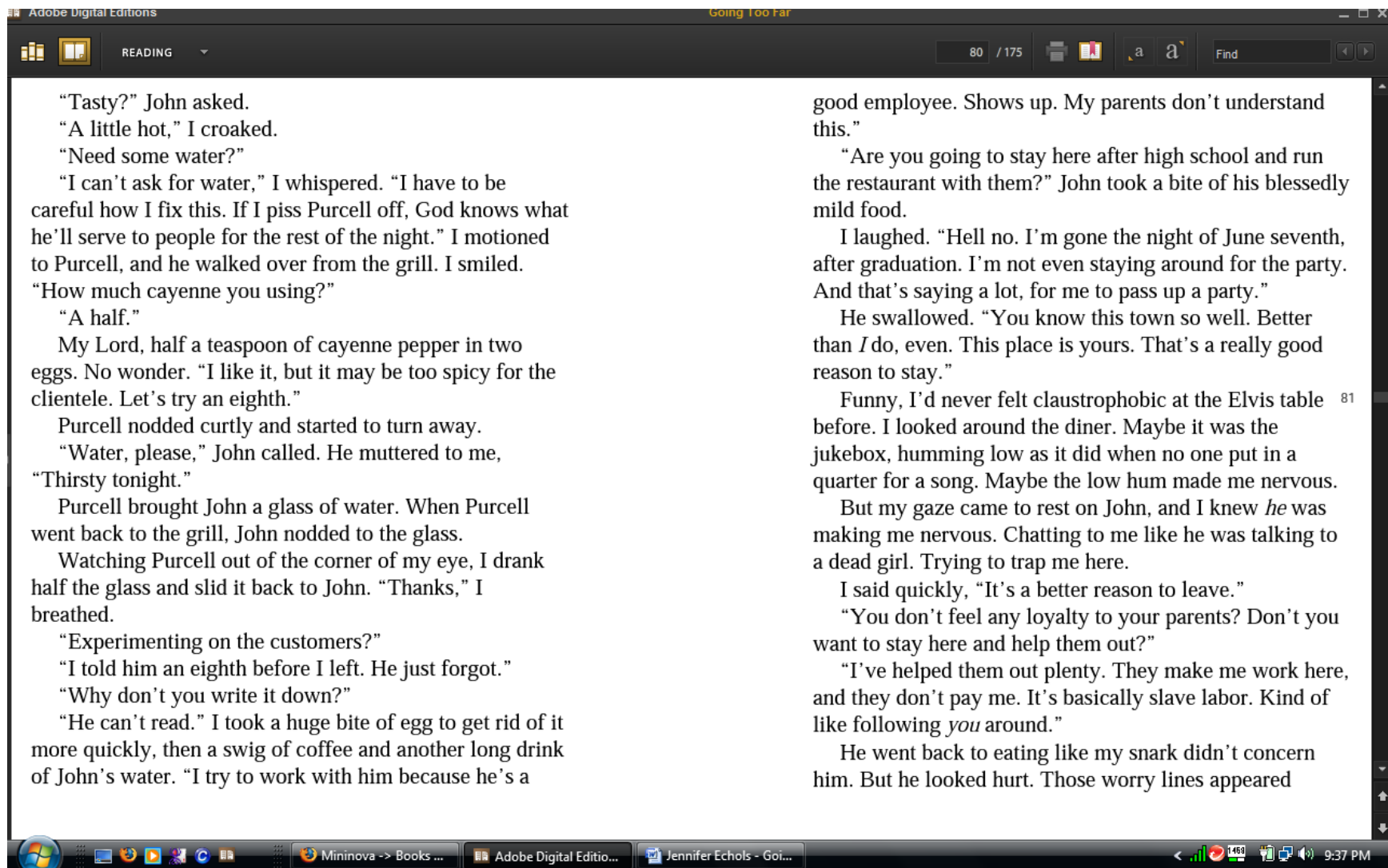
"They're not nineteen years old. Everyone should be able to ask off for what's important to them." I gestured to his plate. "Whatcha got there? Steak and eggs with steamed vegetables? Very healthy. Protein and vitamins, a runner's meal. All it needs is a smoke. Too bad you've already had your nightly cigarette." 80

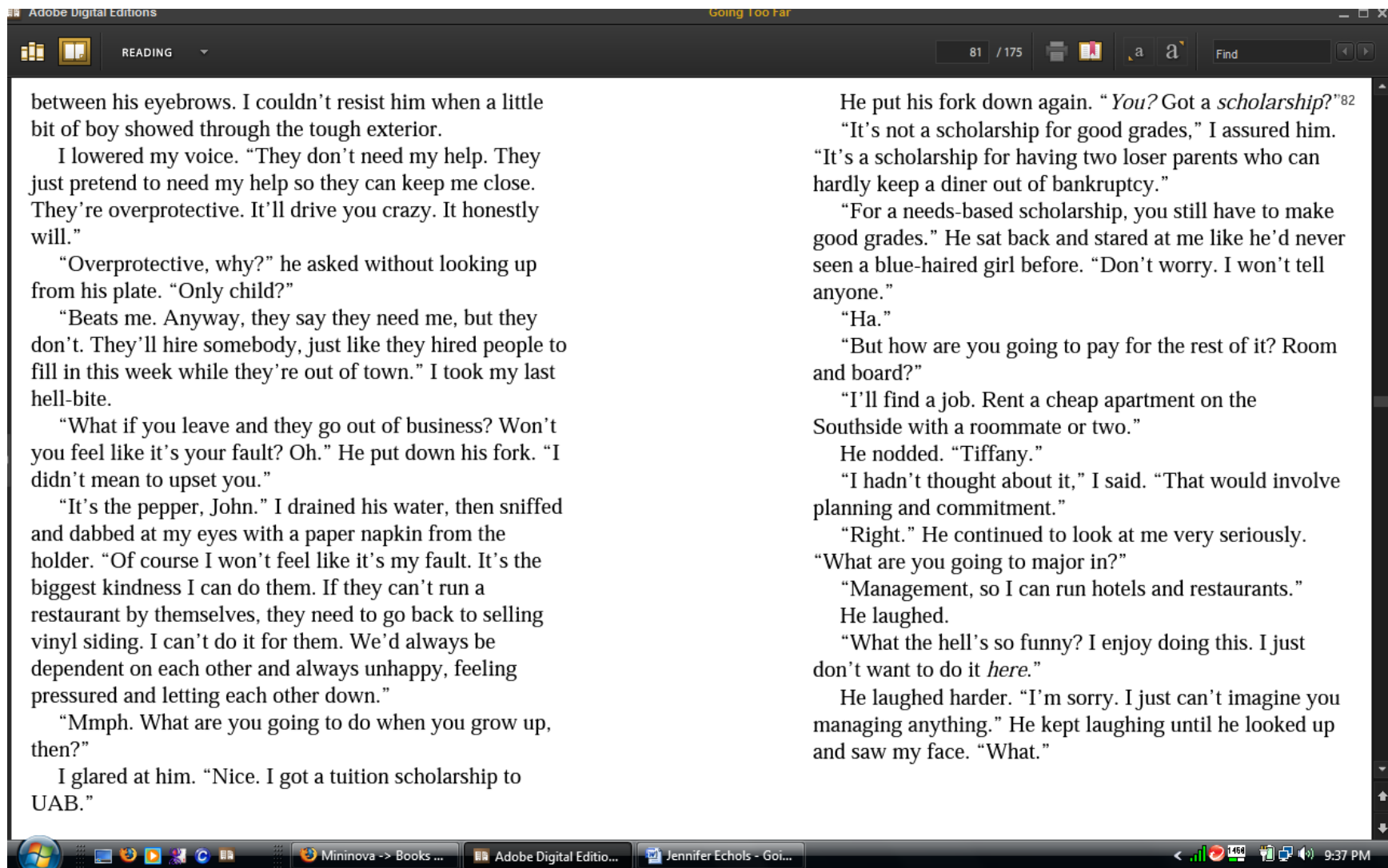
He half smiled at me, showing one dimple. "What have *you* got?"

"The Meg Special."

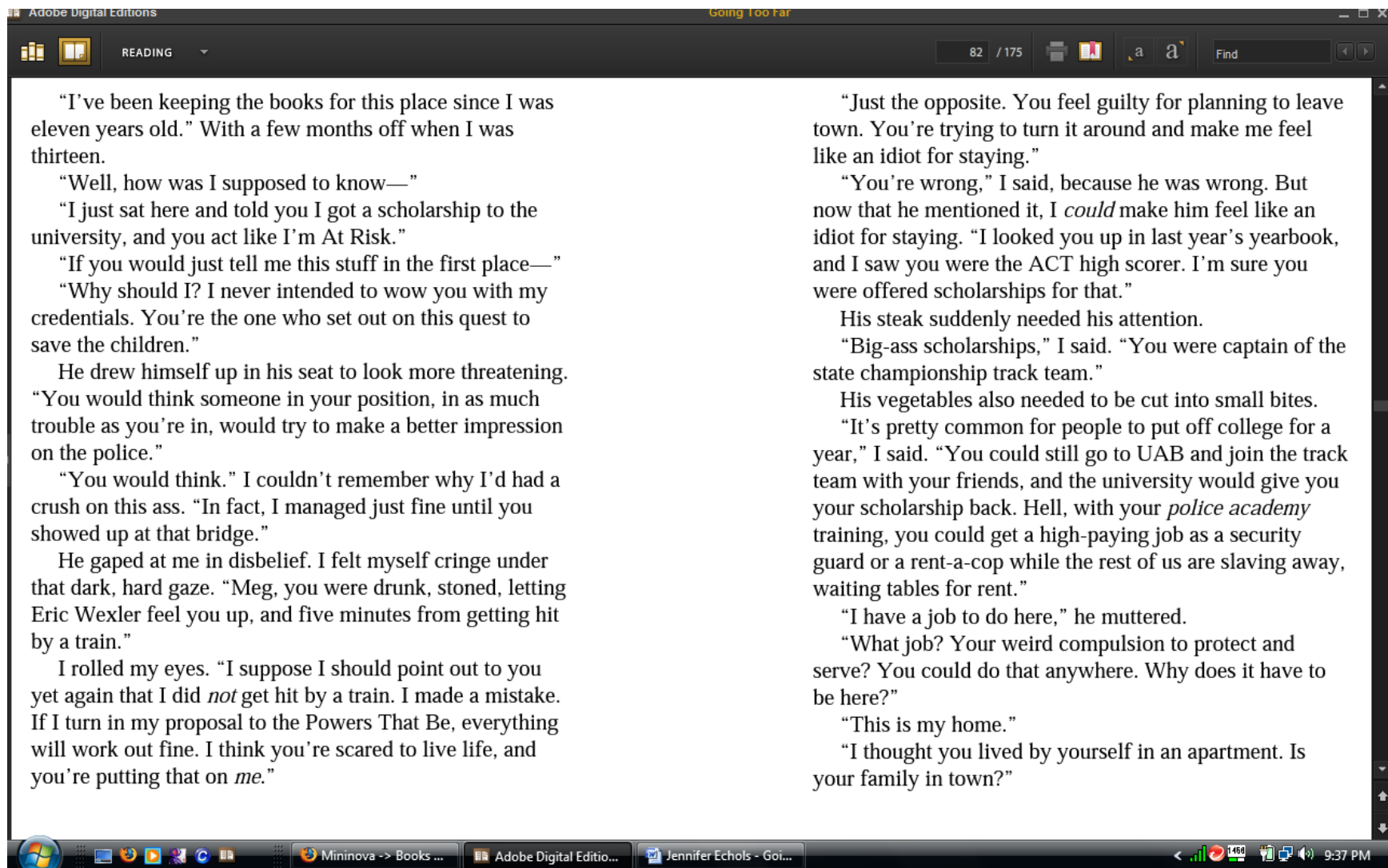
"Eggs?"

"Sort of a Tex-Mex omelet. The Meg Special is different every day." I took a bite, chewed, and desperately needed to spit it out. I swallowed it and washed it down with coffee, which didn't really help.









"I've been keeping the books for this place since I was eleven years old." With a few months off when I was thirteen.

"Well, how was I supposed to know—"

"I just sat here and told you I got a scholarship to the university, and you act like I'm At Risk."

"If you would just tell me this stuff in the first place—"

"Why should I? I never intended to wow you with my credentials. You're the one who set out on this quest to save the children."

He drew himself up in his seat to look more threatening. "You would think someone in your position, in as much trouble as you're in, would try to make a better impression on the police."

"You would think." I couldn't remember why I'd had a crush on this ass. "In fact, I managed just fine until you showed up at that bridge."

He gaped at me in disbelief. I felt myself cringe under that dark, hard gaze. "Meg, you were drunk, stoned, letting Eric Wexler feel you up, and five minutes from getting hit by a train."

I rolled my eyes. "I suppose I should point out to you yet again that I did *not* get hit by a train. I made a mistake. If I turn in my proposal to the Powers That Be, everything will work out fine. I think you're scared to live life, and you're putting that on *me*."

"Just the opposite. You feel guilty for planning to leave town. You're trying to turn it around and make me feel like an idiot for staying."

"You're wrong," I said, because he was wrong. But now that he mentioned it, I *could* make him feel like an idiot for staying. "I looked you up in last year's yearbook, and I saw you were the ACT high scorer. I'm sure you were offered scholarships for that."

His steak suddenly needed his attention.

"Big-ass scholarships," I said. "You were captain of the state championship track team."

His vegetables also needed to be cut into small bites.

"It's pretty common for people to put off college for a year," I said. "You could still go to UAB and join the track team with your friends, and the university would give you your scholarship back. Hell, with your *police academy* training, you could get a high-paying job as a security guard or a rent-a-cop while the rest of us are slaving away, waiting tables for rent."

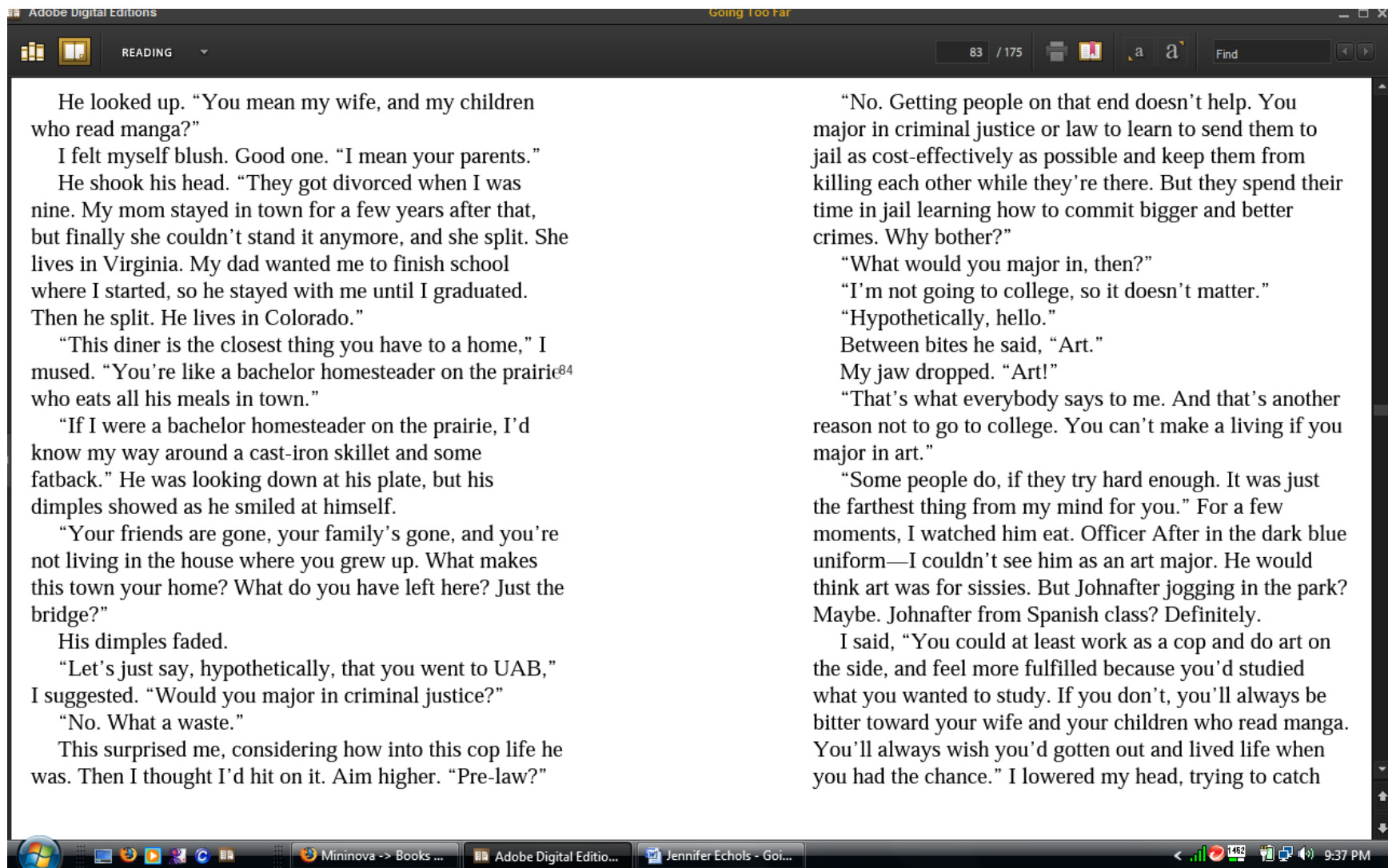
"I have a job to do here," he muttered.

"What job? Your weird compulsion to protect and serve? You could do that anywhere. Why does it have to be here?"

"This is my home."

"I thought you lived by yourself in an apartment. Is your family in town?"





He looked up. "You mean my wife, and my children who read manga?"

I felt myself blush. Good one. "I mean your parents."

He shook his head. "They got divorced when I was nine. My mom stayed in town for a few years after that, but finally she couldn't stand it anymore, and she split. She lives in Virginia. My dad wanted me to finish school where I started, so he stayed with me until I graduated. Then he split. He lives in Colorado."

"This diner is the closest thing you have to a home," I mused. "You're like a bachelor homesteader on the prairie<sup>84</sup> who eats all his meals in town."

"If I were a bachelor homesteader on the prairie, I'd know my way around a cast-iron skillet and some fatback." He was looking down at his plate, but his dimples showed as he smiled at himself.

"Your friends are gone, your family's gone, and you're not living in the house where you grew up. What makes this town your home? What do you have left here? Just the bridge?"

His dimples faded.

"Let's just say, hypothetically, that you went to UAB," I suggested. "Would you major in criminal justice?"

"No. What a waste."

This surprised me, considering how into this cop life he was. Then I thought I'd hit on it. Aim higher. "Pre-law?"

"No. Getting people on that end doesn't help. You major in criminal justice or law to learn to send them to jail as cost-effectively as possible and keep them from killing each other while they're there. But they spend their time in jail learning how to commit bigger and better crimes. Why bother?"

"What would you major in, then?"

"I'm not going to college, so it doesn't matter."

"Hypothetically, hello."

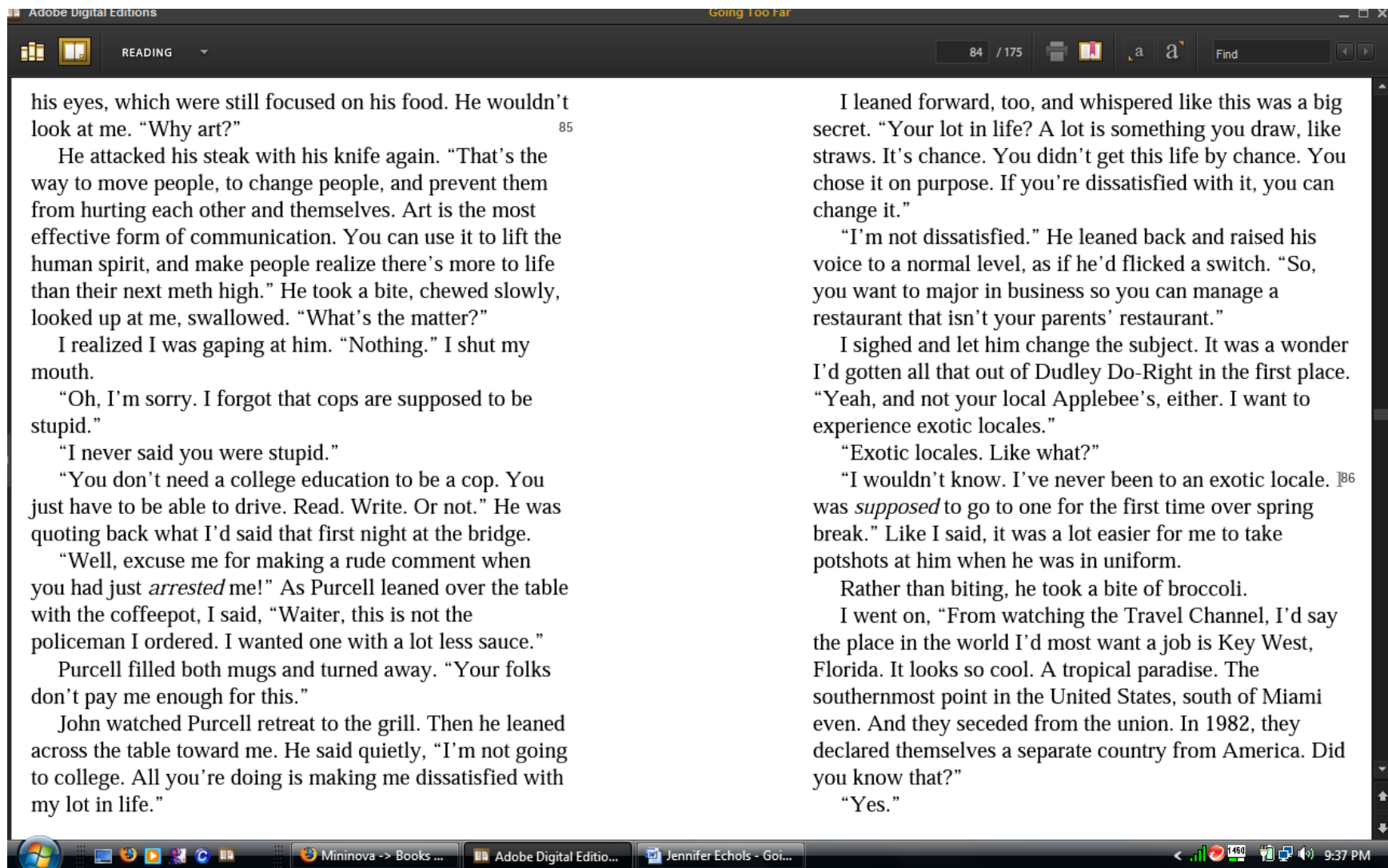
Between bites he said, "Art."

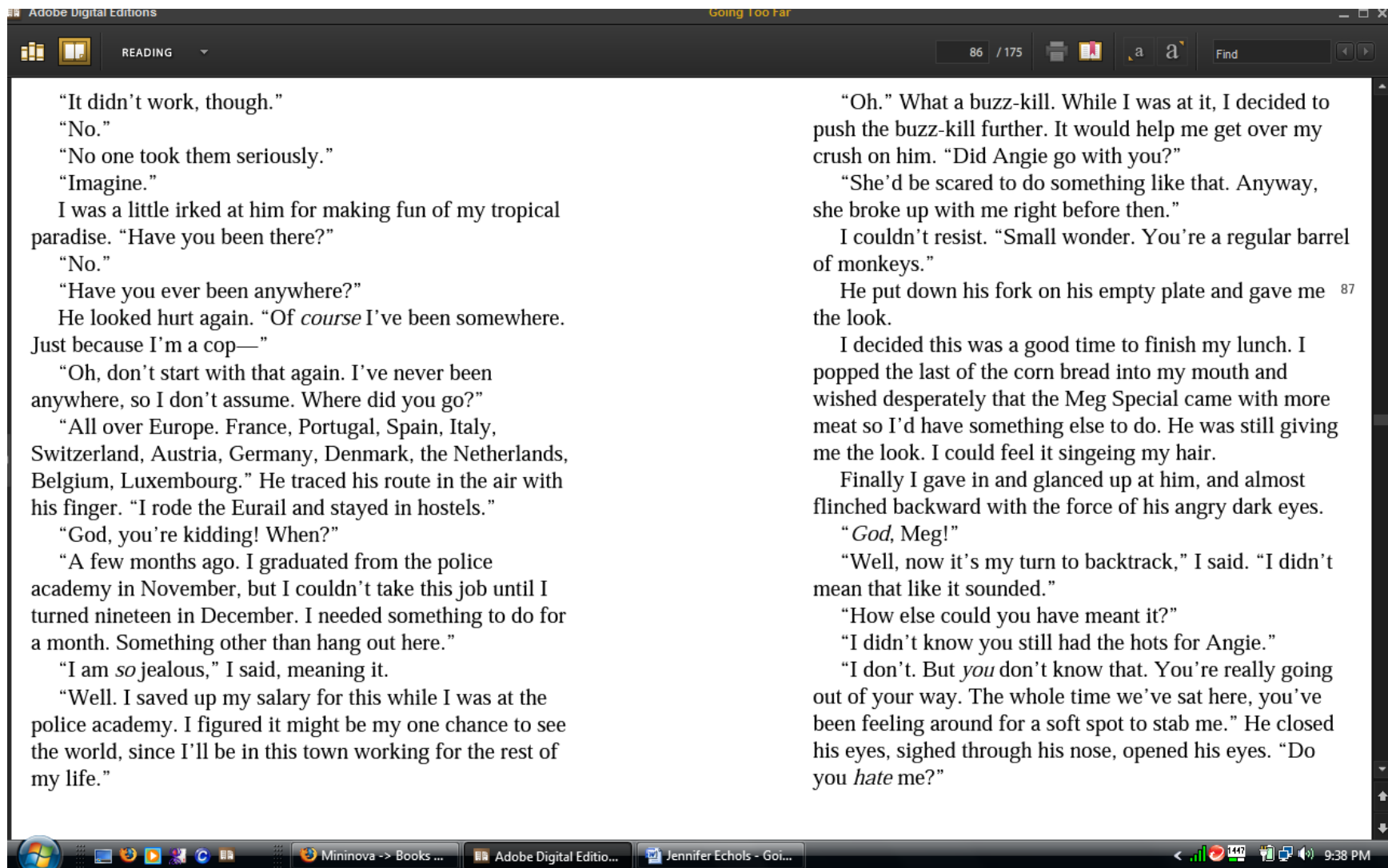
My jaw dropped. "Art!"

"That's what everybody says to me. And that's another reason not to go to college. You can't make a living if you major in art."

"Some people do, if they try hard enough. It was just the farthest thing from my mind for you." For a few moments, I watched him eat. Officer After in the dark blue uniform—I couldn't see him as an art major. He would think art was for sissies. But Johnafter jogging in the park? Maybe. Johnafter from Spanish class? Definitely.

I said, "You could at least work as a cop and do art on the side, and feel more fulfilled because you'd studied what you wanted to study. If you don't, you'll always be bitter toward your wife and your children who read manga. You'll always wish you'd gotten out and lived life when you had the chance." I lowered my head, trying to catch





"It didn't work, though."

"No."

"No one took them seriously."

"Imagine."

I was a little irked at him for making fun of my tropical paradise. "Have you been there?"

"No."

"Have you ever been anywhere?"

He looked hurt again. "Of *course* I've been somewhere. Just because I'm a cop—"

"Oh, don't start with that again. I've never been anywhere, so I don't assume. Where did you go?"

"All over Europe. France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg." He traced his route in the air with his finger. "I rode the Eurail and stayed in hostels."

"God, you're kidding! When?"

"A few months ago. I graduated from the police academy in November, but I couldn't take this job until I turned nineteen in December. I needed something to do for a month. Something other than hang out here."

"I am *so* jealous," I said, meaning it.

"Well. I saved up my salary for this while I was at the police academy. I figured it might be my one chance to see the world, since I'll be in this town working for the rest of my life."

"Oh." What a buzz-kill. While I was at it, I decided to push the buzz-kill further. It would help me get over my crush on him. "Did Angie go with you?"

"She'd be scared to do something like that. Anyway, she broke up with me right before then."

I couldn't resist. "Small wonder. You're a regular barrel of monkeys."

He put down his fork on his empty plate and gave me <sup>87</sup> the look.

I decided this was a good time to finish my lunch. I popped the last of the corn bread into my mouth and wished desperately that the Meg Special came with more meat so I'd have something else to do. He was still giving me the look. I could feel it singeing my hair.

Finally I gave in and glanced up at him, and almost flinched backward with the force of his angry dark eyes.

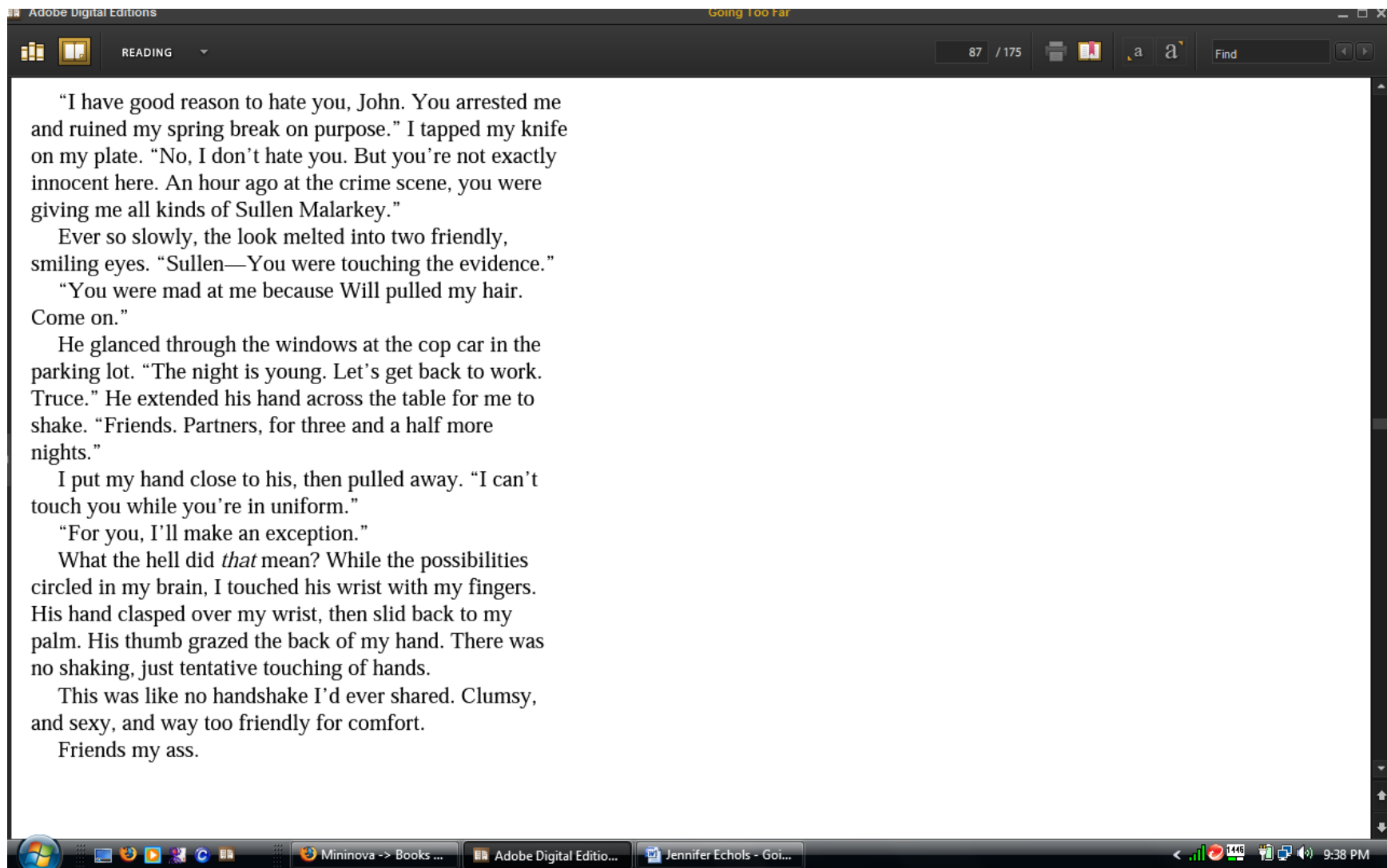
"*God*, Meg!"

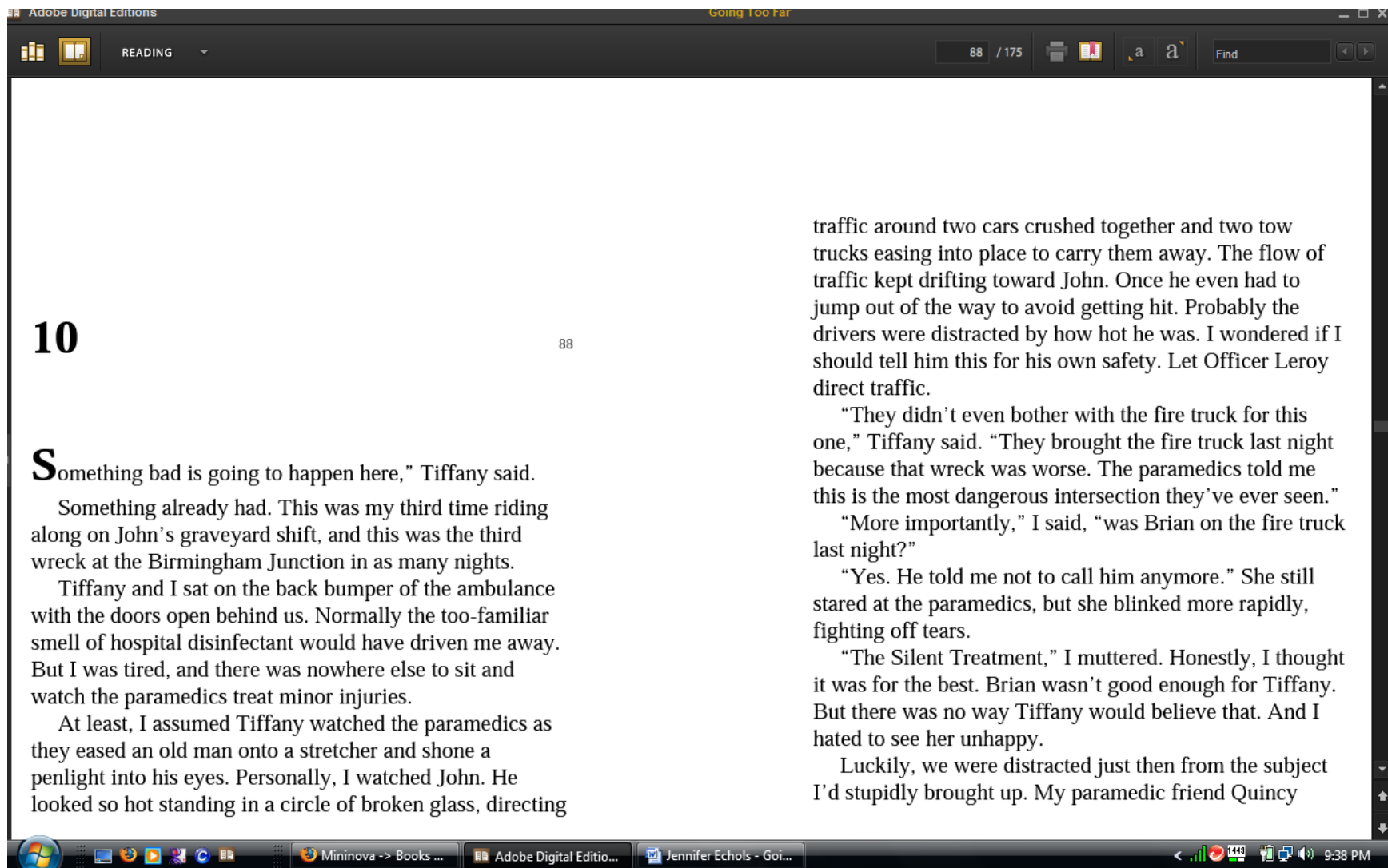
"Well, now it's my turn to backtrack," I said. "I didn't mean that like it sounded."

"How else could you have meant it?"

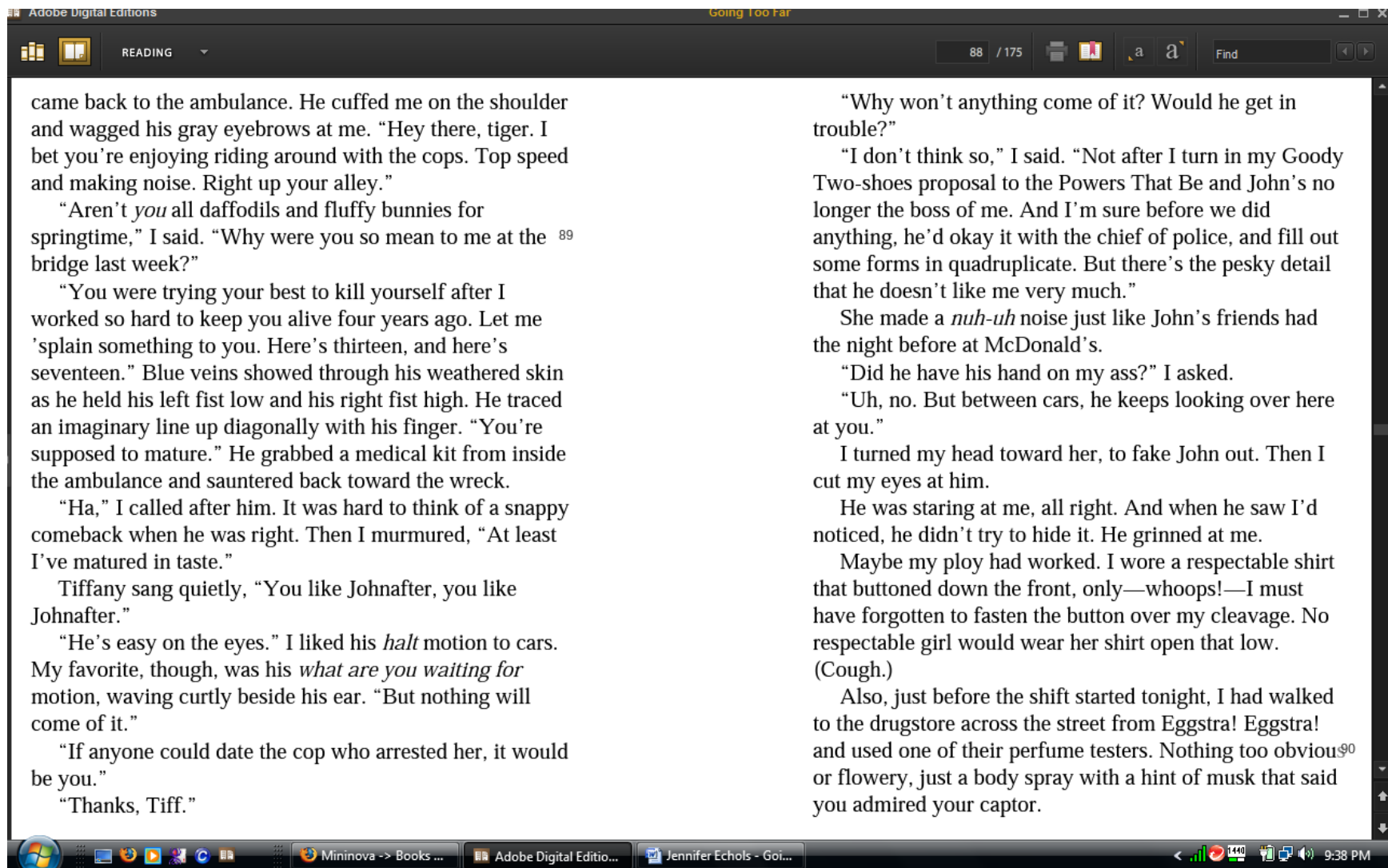
"I didn't know you still had the hots for Angie."

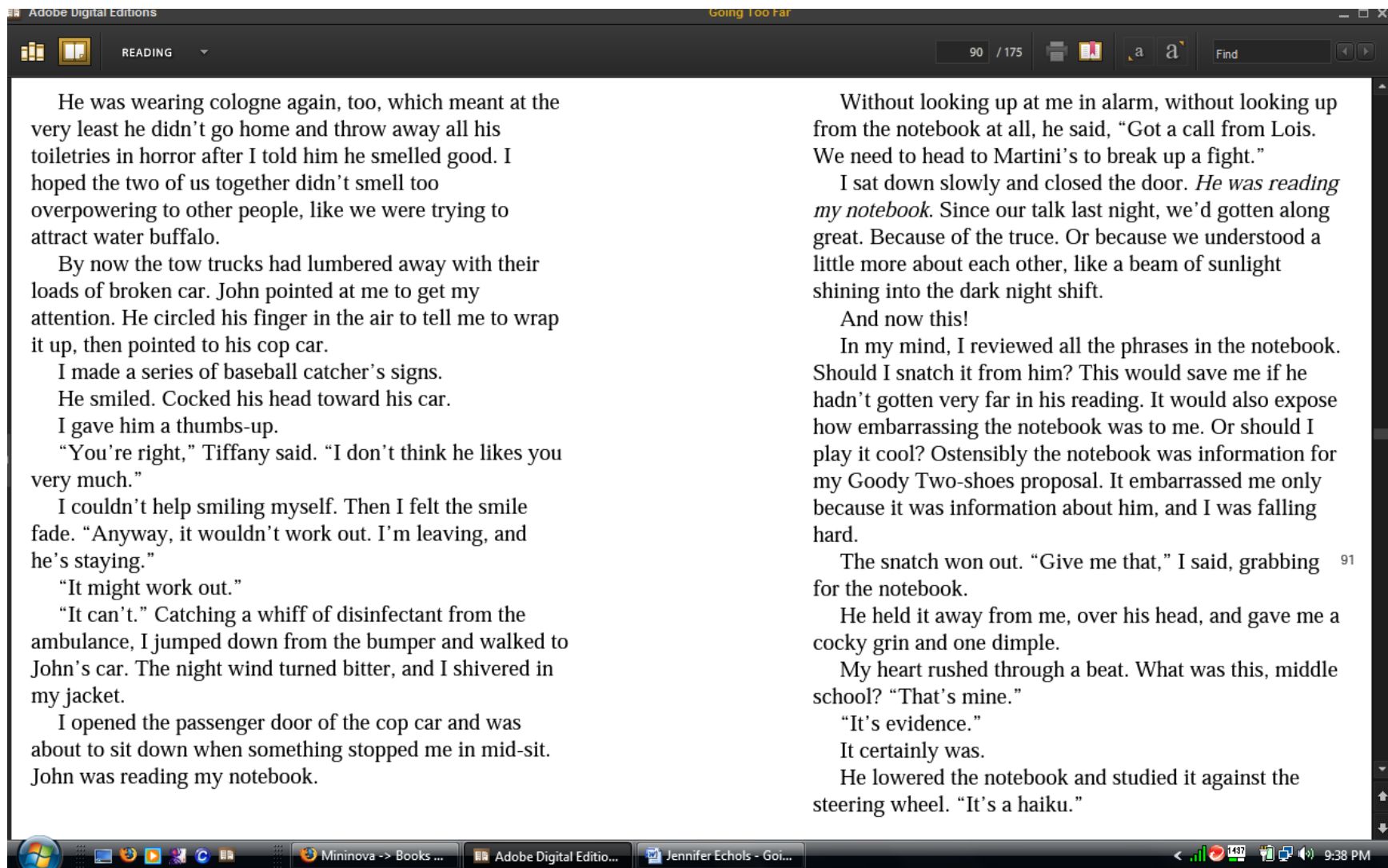
"I don't. But *you* don't know that. You're really going out of your way. The whole time we've sat here, you've been feeling around for a soft spot to stab me." He closed his eyes, sighed through his nose, opened his eyes. "Do you *hate* me?"











He was wearing cologne again, too, which meant at the very least he didn't go home and throw away all his toiletries in horror after I told him he smelled good. I hoped the two of us together didn't smell too overpowering to other people, like we were trying to attract water buffalo.

By now the tow trucks had lumbered away with their loads of broken car. John pointed at me to get my attention. He circled his finger in the air to tell me to wrap it up, then pointed to his cop car.

I made a series of baseball catcher's signs.

He smiled. Cocked his head toward his car.

I gave him a thumbs-up.

"You're right," Tiffany said. "I don't think he likes you very much."

I couldn't help smiling myself. Then I felt the smile fade. "Anyway, it wouldn't work out. I'm leaving, and he's staying."

"It might work out."

"It can't." Catching a whiff of disinfectant from the ambulance, I jumped down from the bumper and walked to John's car. The night wind turned bitter, and I shivered in my jacket.

I opened the passenger door of the cop car and was about to sit down when something stopped me in mid-sit. John was reading my notebook.

Without looking up at me in alarm, without looking up from the notebook at all, he said, "Got a call from Lois. We need to head to Martini's to break up a fight."

I sat down slowly and closed the door. *He was reading my notebook.* Since our talk last night, we'd gotten along great. Because of the truce. Or because we understood a little more about each other, like a beam of sunlight shining into the dark night shift.

And now this!

In my mind, I reviewed all the phrases in the notebook. Should I snatch it from him? This would save me if he hadn't gotten very far in his reading. It would also expose how embarrassing the notebook was to me. Or should I play it cool? Ostensibly the notebook was information for my Goody Two-shoes proposal. It embarrassed me only because it was information about him, and I was falling hard.

The snatch won out. "Give me that," I said, grabbing <sup>91</sup> for the notebook.

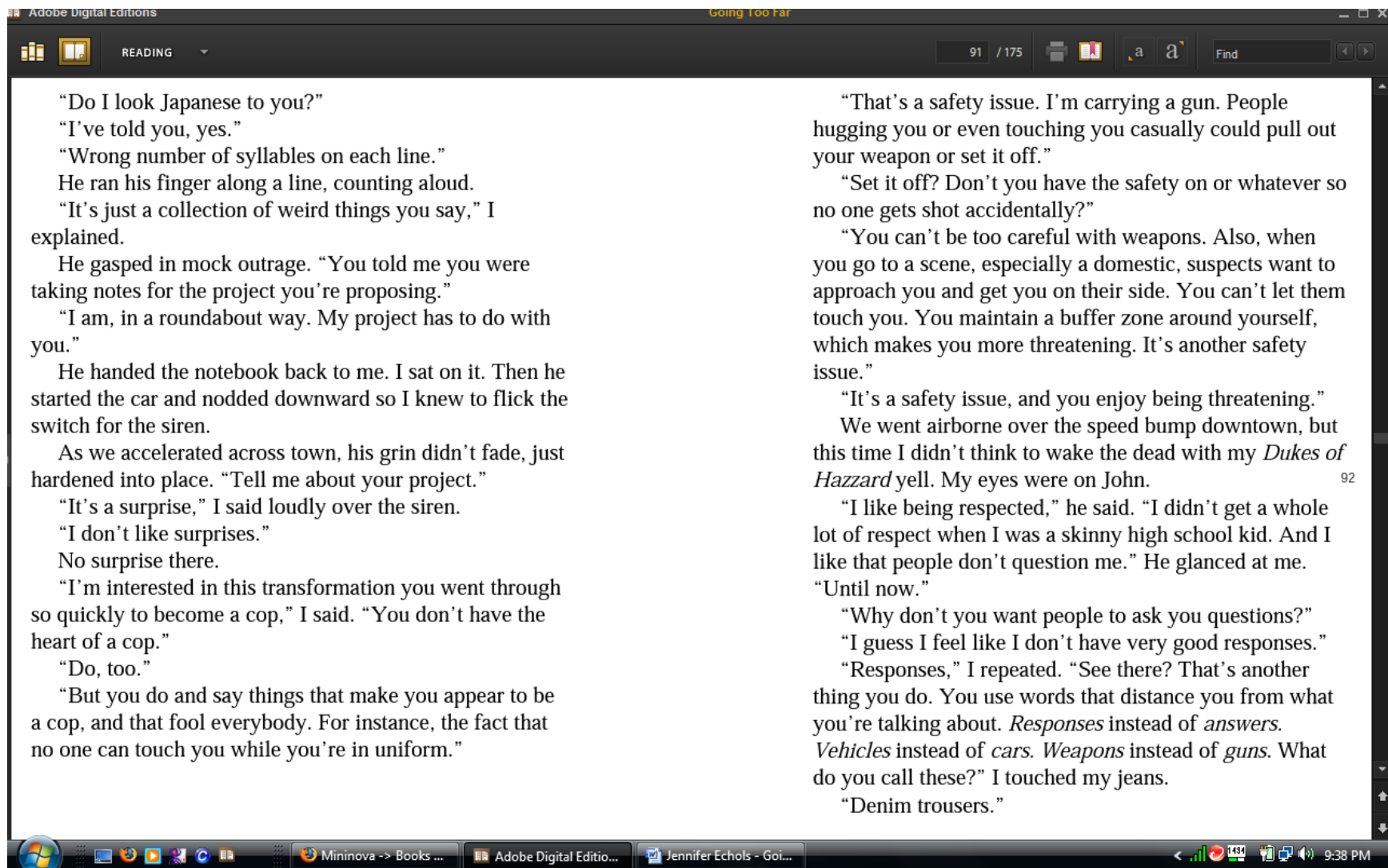
He held it away from me, over his head, and gave me a cocky grin and one dimple.

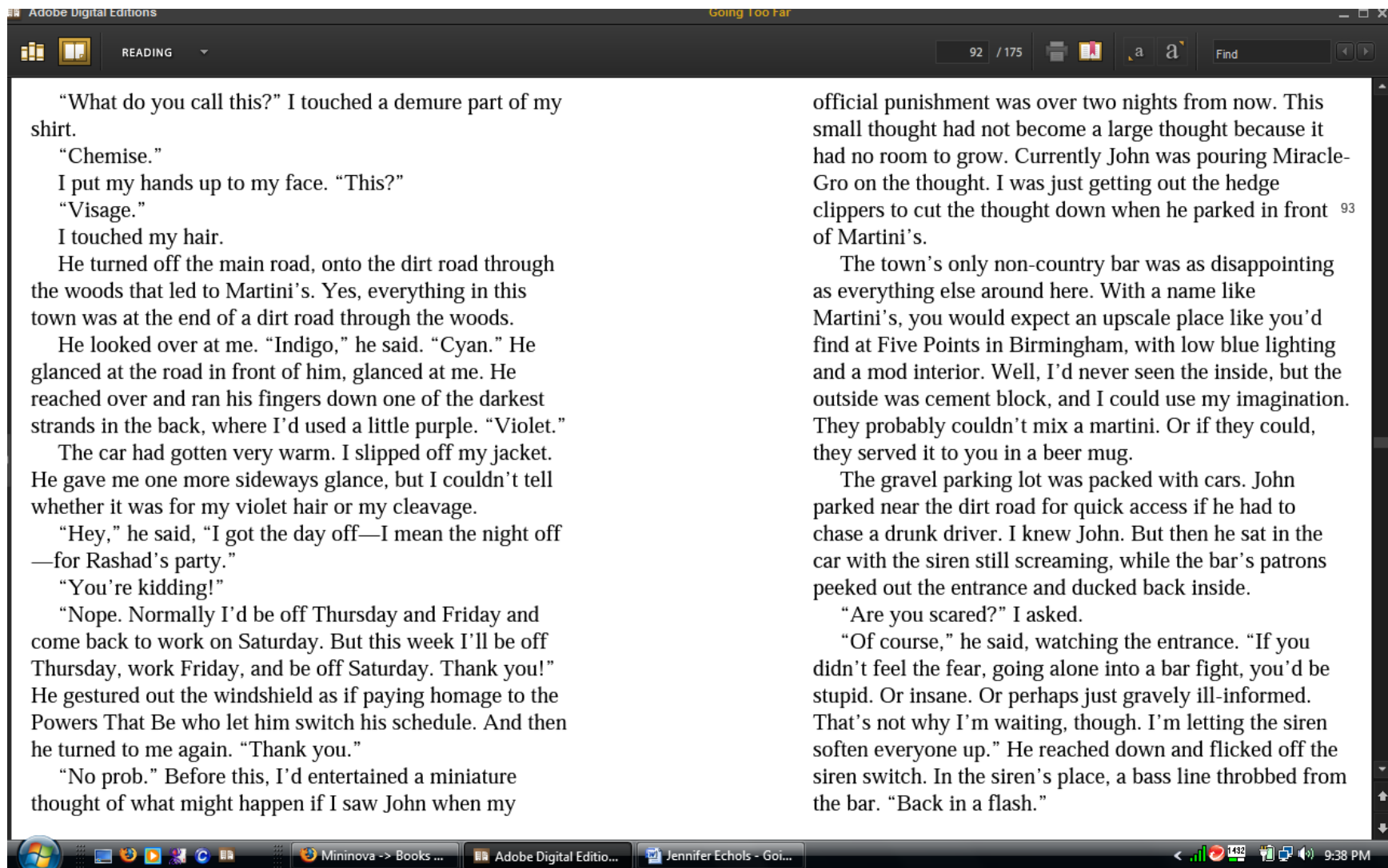
My heart rushed through a beat. What was this, middle school? "That's mine."

"It's evidence."

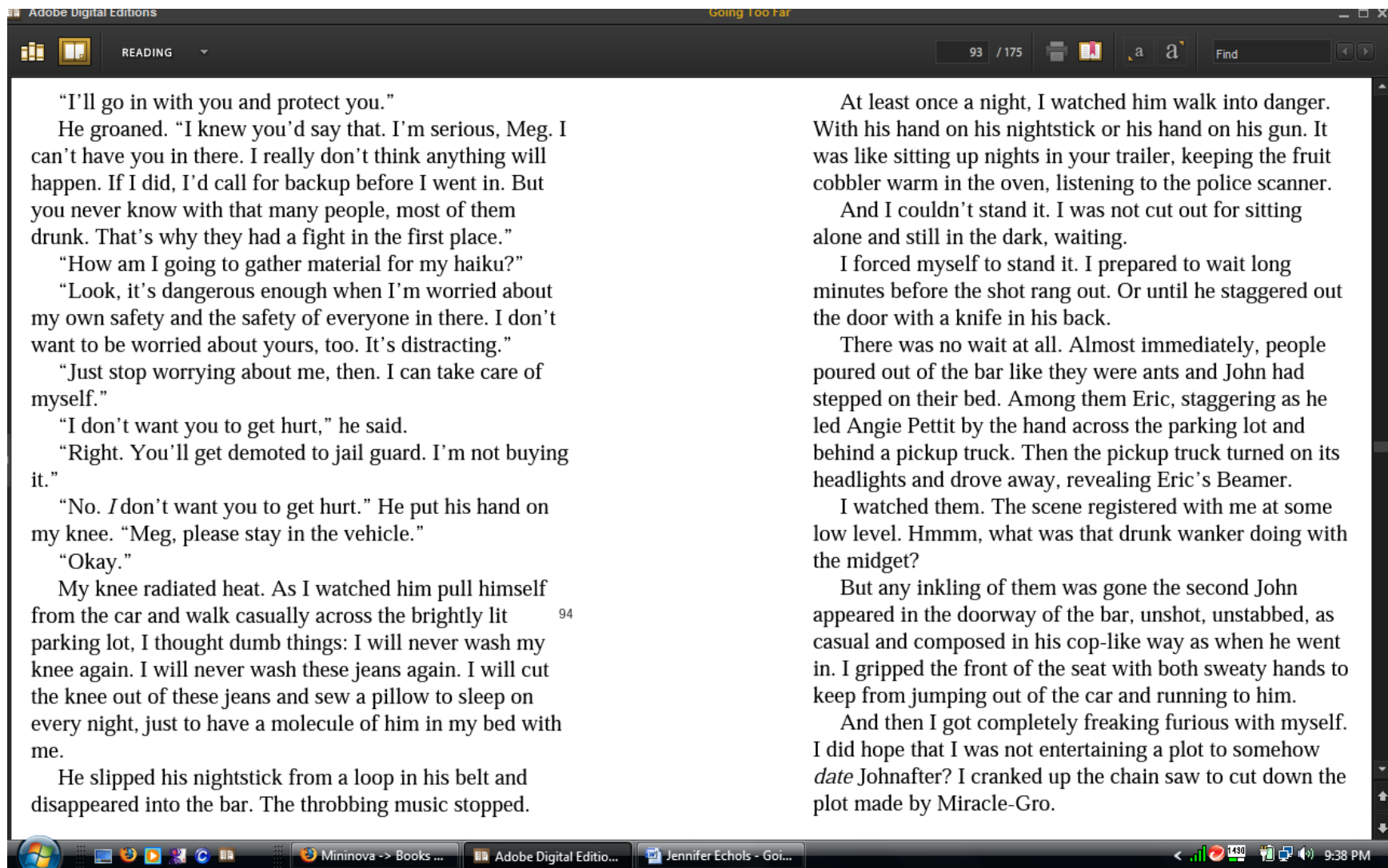
It certainly was.

He lowered the notebook and studied it against the steering wheel. "It's a haiku."









"I'll go in with you and protect you."

He groaned. "I knew you'd say that. I'm serious, Meg. I can't have you in there. I really don't think anything will happen. If I did, I'd call for backup before I went in. But you never know with that many people, most of them drunk. That's why they had a fight in the first place."

"How am I going to gather material for my haiku?"

"Look, it's dangerous enough when I'm worried about my own safety and the safety of everyone in there. I don't want to be worried about yours, too. It's distracting."

"Just stop worrying about me, then. I can take care of myself."

"I don't want you to get hurt," he said.

"Right. You'll get demoted to jail guard. I'm not buying it."

"No. *I* don't want you to get hurt." He put his hand on my knee. "Meg, please stay in the vehicle."

"Okay."

My knee radiated heat. As I watched him pull himself from the car and walk casually across the brightly lit parking lot, I thought dumb things: I will never wash my knee again. I will never wash these jeans again. I will cut the knee out of these jeans and sew a pillow to sleep on every night, just to have a molecule of him in my bed with me.

He slipped his nightstick from a loop in his belt and disappeared into the bar. The throbbing music stopped.

At least once a night, I watched him walk into danger. With his hand on his nightstick or his hand on his gun. It was like sitting up nights in your trailer, keeping the fruit cobbler warm in the oven, listening to the police scanner.

And I couldn't stand it. I was not cut out for sitting alone and still in the dark, waiting.

I forced myself to stand it. I prepared to wait long minutes before the shot rang out. Or until he staggered out the door with a knife in his back.

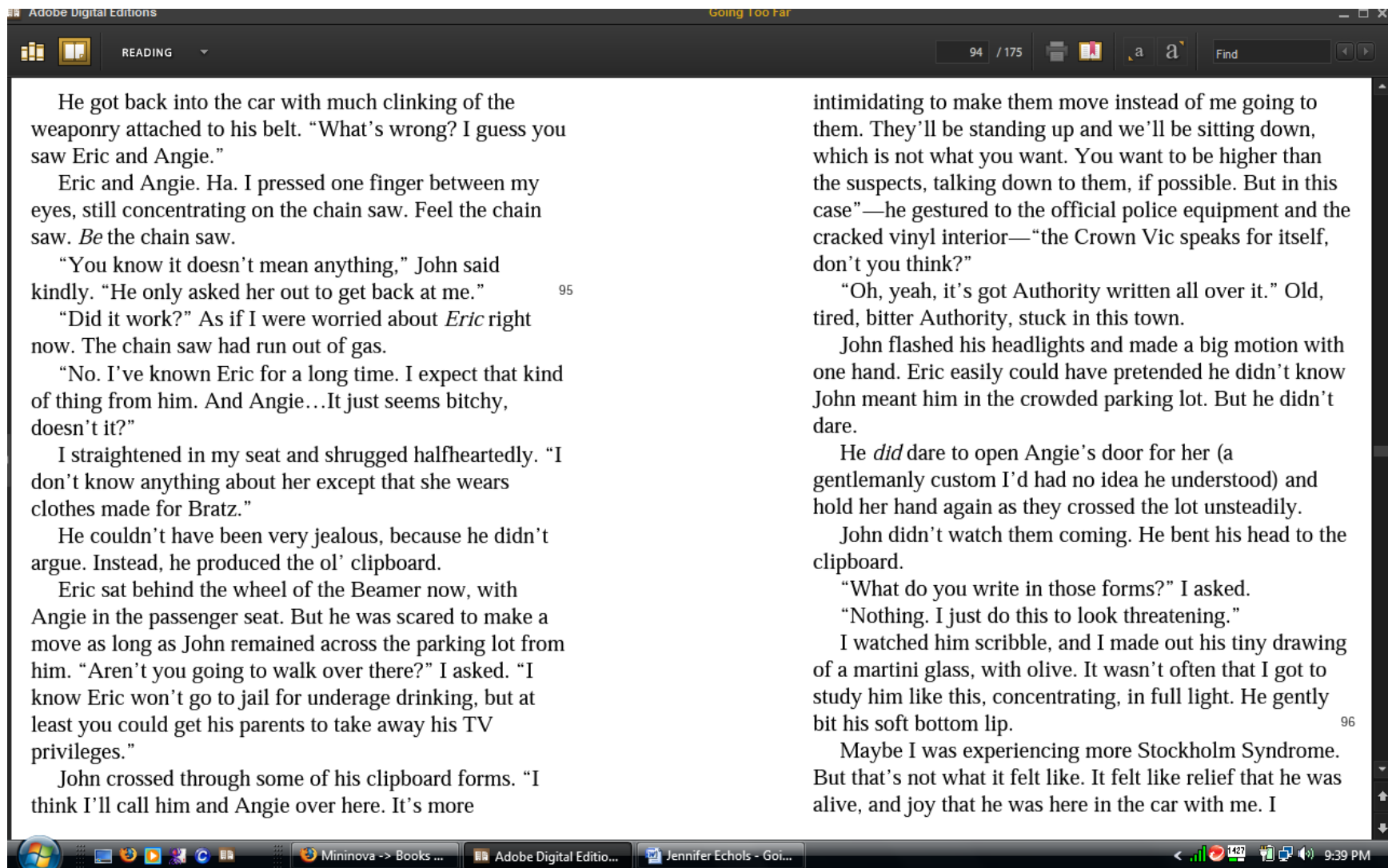
There was no wait at all. Almost immediately, people poured out of the bar like they were ants and John had stepped on their bed. Among them Eric, staggering as he led Angie Pettit by the hand across the parking lot and behind a pickup truck. Then the pickup truck turned on its headlights and drove away, revealing Eric's Beamer.

I watched them. The scene registered with me at some low level. Hmmm, what was that drunk wanker doing with the midget?

But any inkling of them was gone the second John appeared in the doorway of the bar, unshot, unstabbed, as casual and composed in his cop-like way as when he went in. I gripped the front of the seat with both sweaty hands to keep from jumping out of the car and running to him.

And then I got completely freaking furious with myself. I did hope that I was not entertaining a plot to somehow *date* Johnafter? I cranked up the chain saw to cut down the plot made by Miracle-Gro.





He got back into the car with much clinking of the weaponry attached to his belt. "What's wrong? I guess you saw Eric and Angie."

Eric and Angie. Ha. I pressed one finger between my eyes, still concentrating on the chain saw. Feel the chain saw. *Be* the chain saw.

"You know it doesn't mean anything," John said kindly. "He only asked her out to get back at me." 95

"Did it work?" As if I were worried about *Eric* right now. The chain saw had run out of gas.

"No. I've known Eric for a long time. I expect that kind of thing from him. And Angie...It just seems bitchy, doesn't it?"

I straightened in my seat and shrugged halfheartedly. "I don't know anything about her except that she wears clothes made for Bratz."

He couldn't have been very jealous, because he didn't argue. Instead, he produced the ol' clipboard.

Eric sat behind the wheel of the Beamer now, with Angie in the passenger seat. But he was scared to make a move as long as John remained across the parking lot from him. "Aren't you going to walk over there?" I asked. "I know Eric won't go to jail for underage drinking, but at least you could get his parents to take away his TV privileges."

John crossed through some of his clipboard forms. "I think I'll call him and Angie over here. It's more

intimidating to make them move instead of me going to them. They'll be standing up and we'll be sitting down, which is not what you want. You want to be higher than the suspects, talking down to them, if possible. But in this case"—he gestured to the official police equipment and the cracked vinyl interior—"the Crown Vic speaks for itself, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah, it's got Authority written all over it." Old, tired, bitter Authority, stuck in this town.

John flashed his headlights and made a big motion with one hand. Eric easily could have pretended he didn't know John meant him in the crowded parking lot. But he didn't dare.

He *did* dare to open Angie's door for her (a gentlemanly custom I'd had no idea he understood) and hold her hand again as they crossed the lot unsteadily.

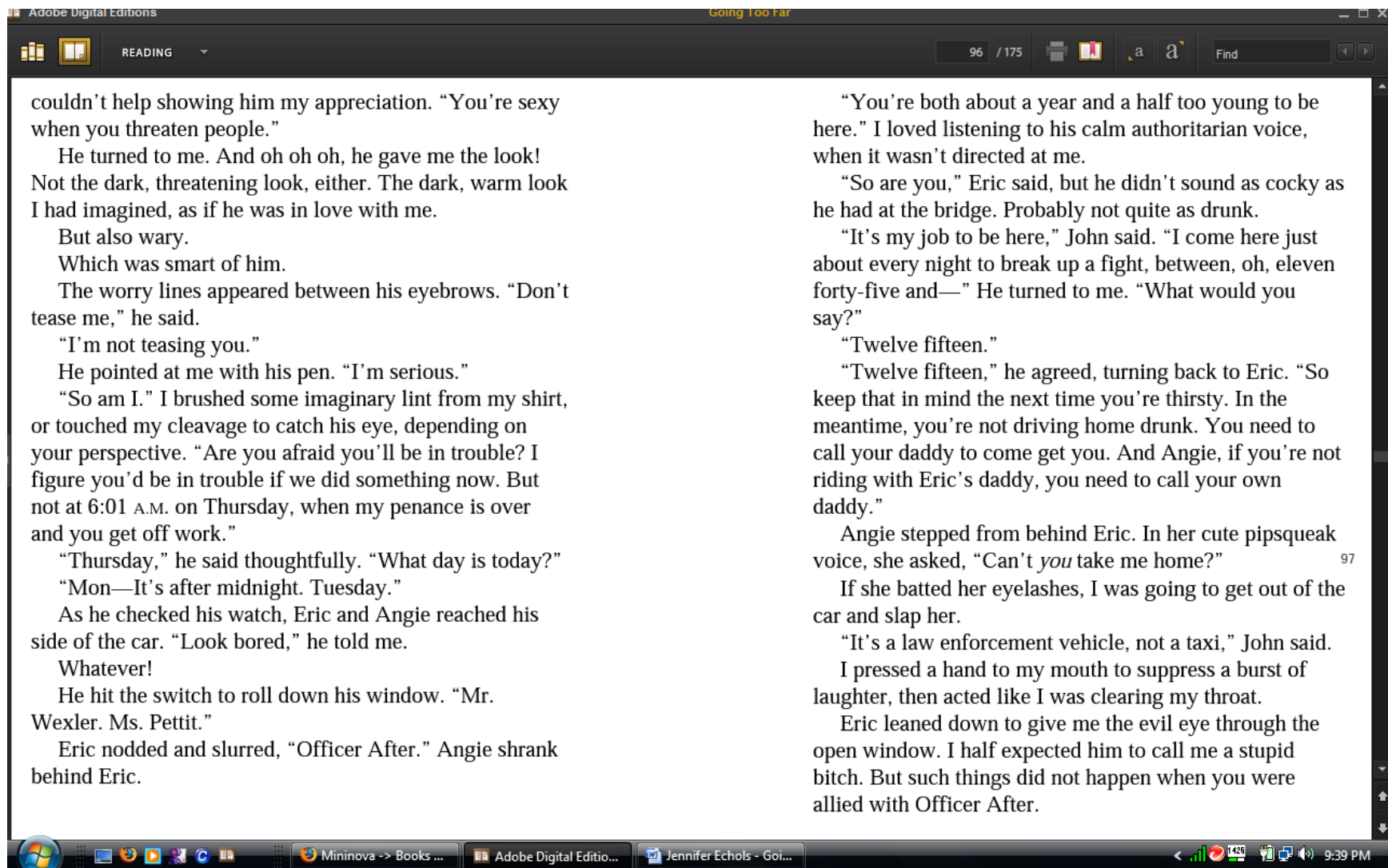
John didn't watch them coming. He bent his head to the clipboard.

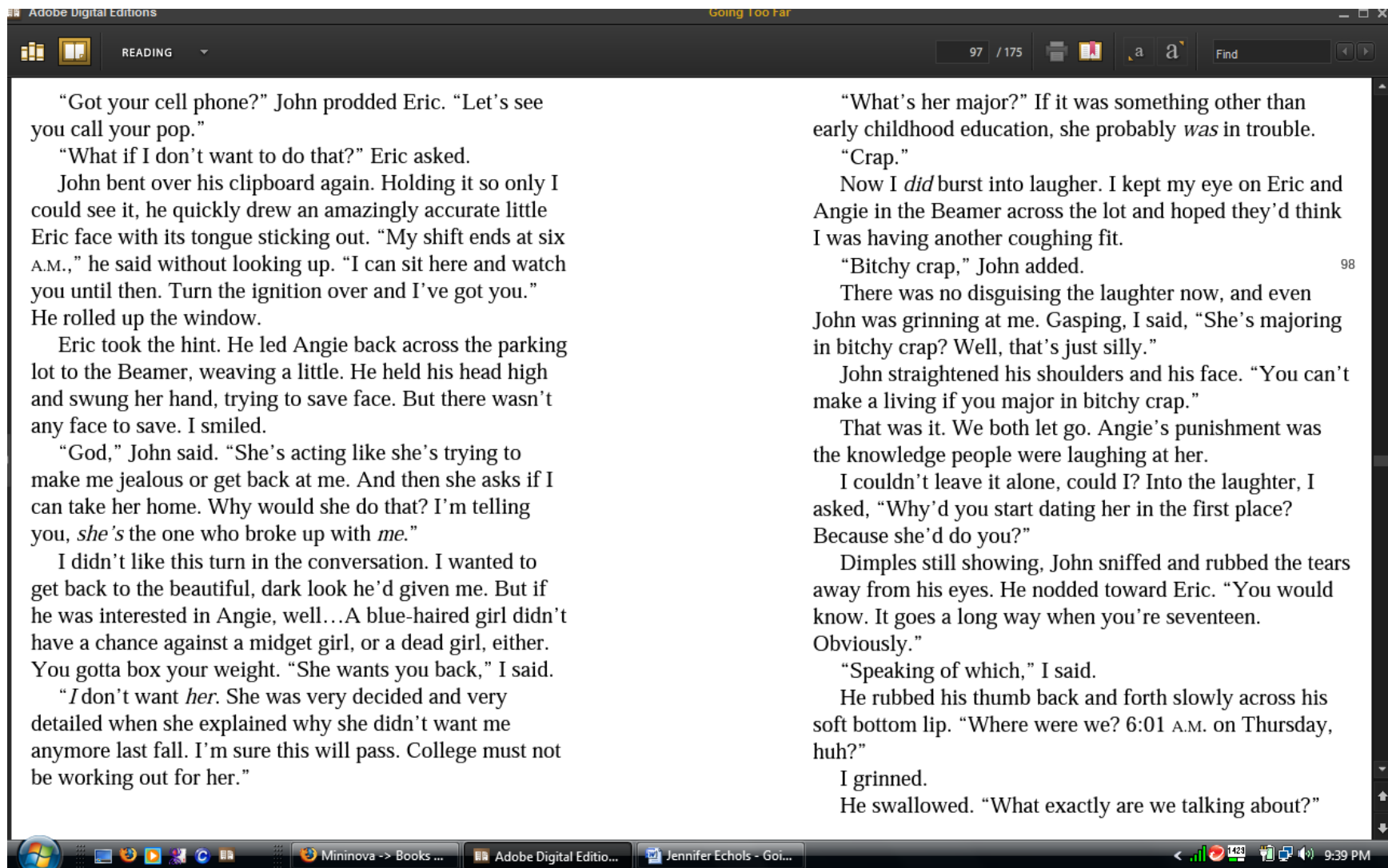
"What do you write in those forms?" I asked.

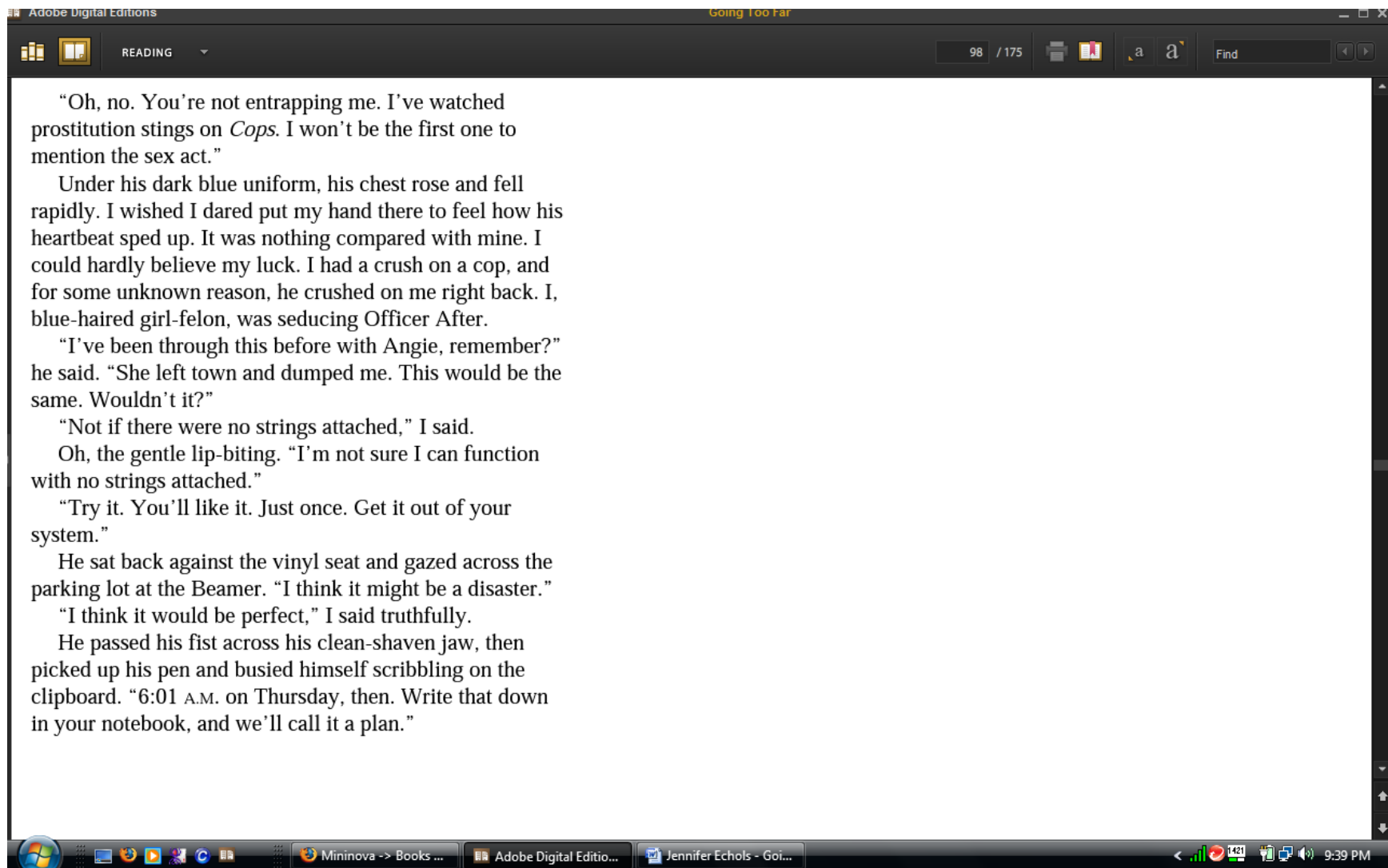
"Nothing. I just do this to look threatening."

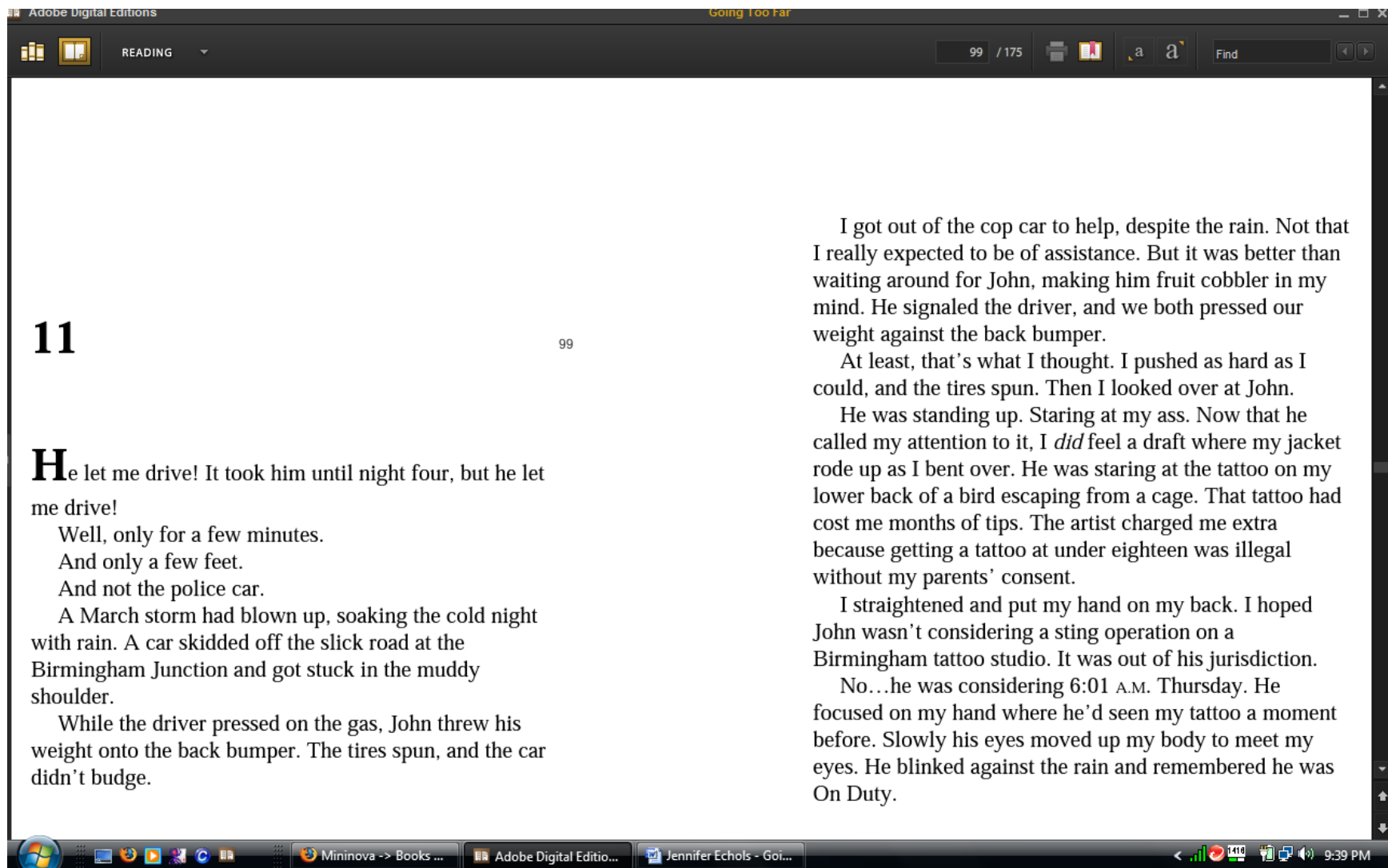
I watched him scribble, and I made out his tiny drawing of a martini glass, with olive. It wasn't often that I got to study him like this, concentrating, in full light. He gently bit his soft bottom lip. 96

Maybe I was experiencing more Stockholm Syndrome. But that's not what it felt like. It felt like relief that he was alive, and joy that he was here in the car with me. I

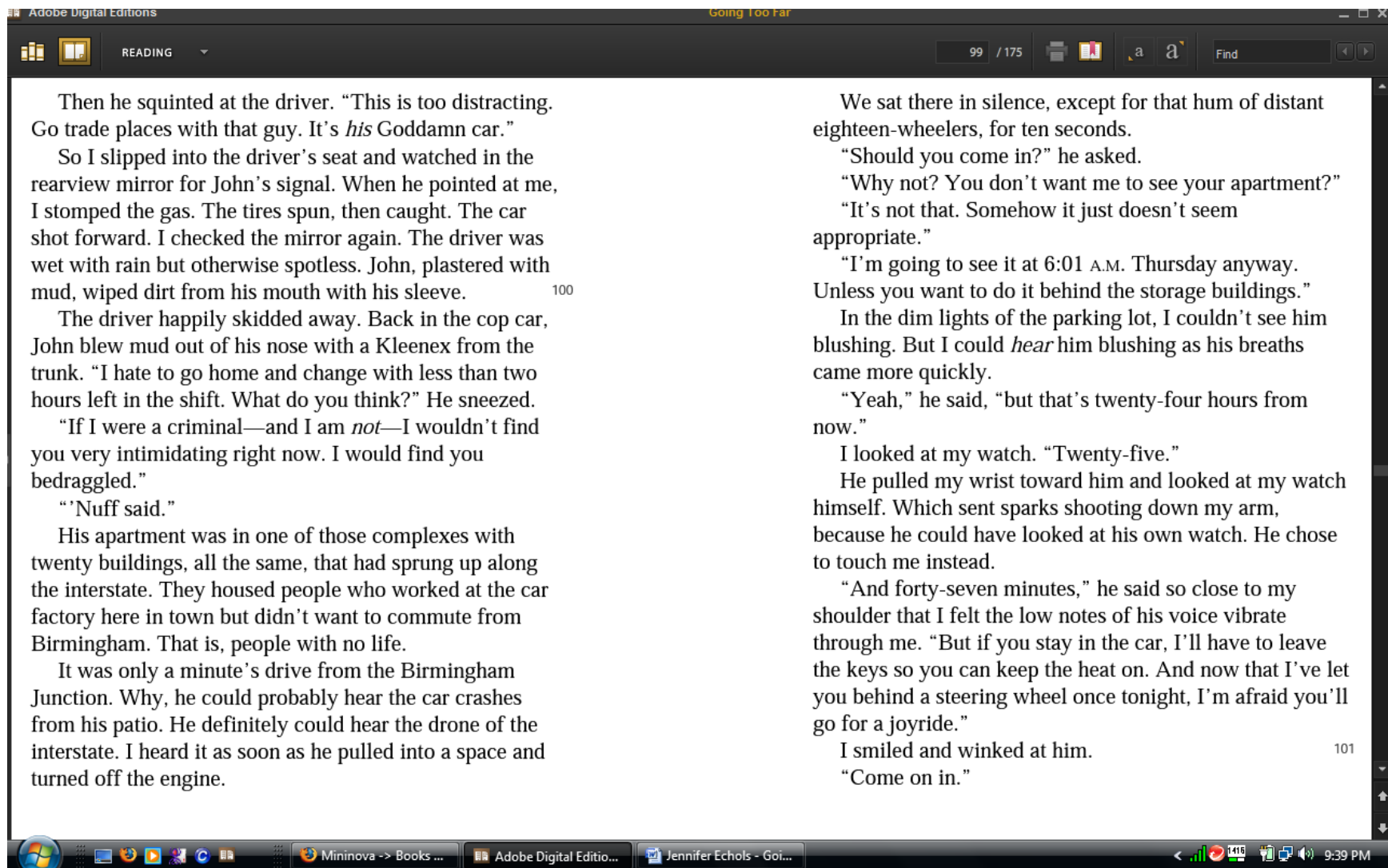


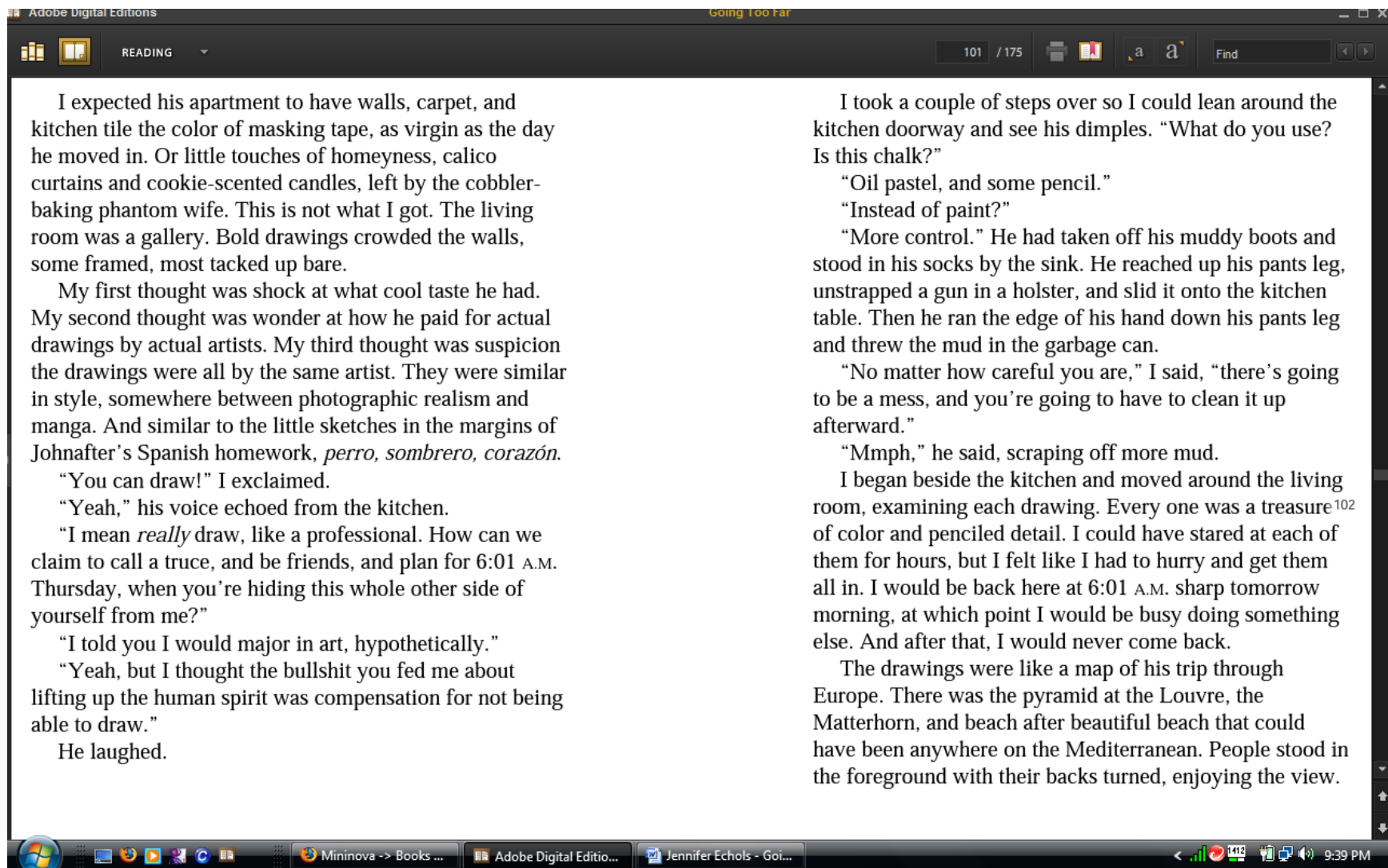












I expected his apartment to have walls, carpet, and kitchen tile the color of masking tape, as virgin as the day he moved in. Or little touches of homeliness, calico curtains and cookie-scented candles, left by the cobbler-baking phantom wife. This is not what I got. The living room was a gallery. Bold drawings crowded the walls, some framed, most tacked up bare.

My first thought was shock at what cool taste he had. My second thought was wonder at how he paid for actual drawings by actual artists. My third thought was suspicion the drawings were all by the same artist. They were similar in style, somewhere between photographic realism and manga. And similar to the little sketches in the margins of Johnafter's Spanish homework, *perro*, *sombrero*, *corazón*.

"You can draw!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah," his voice echoed from the kitchen.

"I mean *really* draw, like a professional. How can we claim to call a truce, and be friends, and plan for 6:01 A.M. Thursday, when you're hiding this whole other side of yourself from me?"

"I told you I would major in art, hypothetically."

"Yeah, but I thought the bullshit you fed me about lifting up the human spirit was compensation for not being able to draw."

He laughed.

I took a couple of steps over so I could lean around the kitchen doorway and see his dimples. "What do you use? Is this chalk?"

"Oil pastel, and some pencil."

"Instead of paint?"

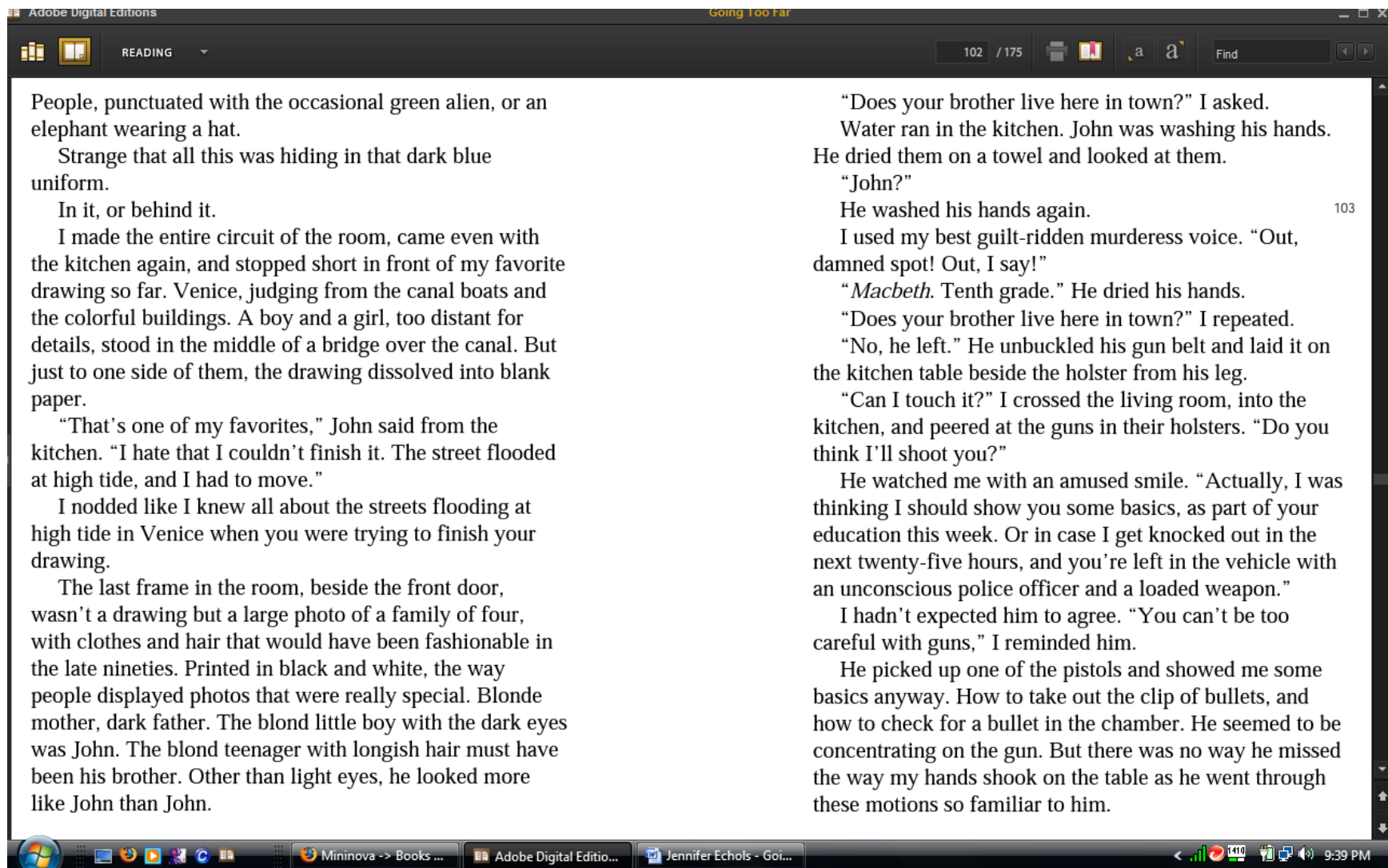
"More control." He had taken off his muddy boots and stood in his socks by the sink. He reached up his pants leg, unstrapped a gun in a holster, and slid it onto the kitchen table. Then he ran the edge of his hand down his pants leg and threw the mud in the garbage can.

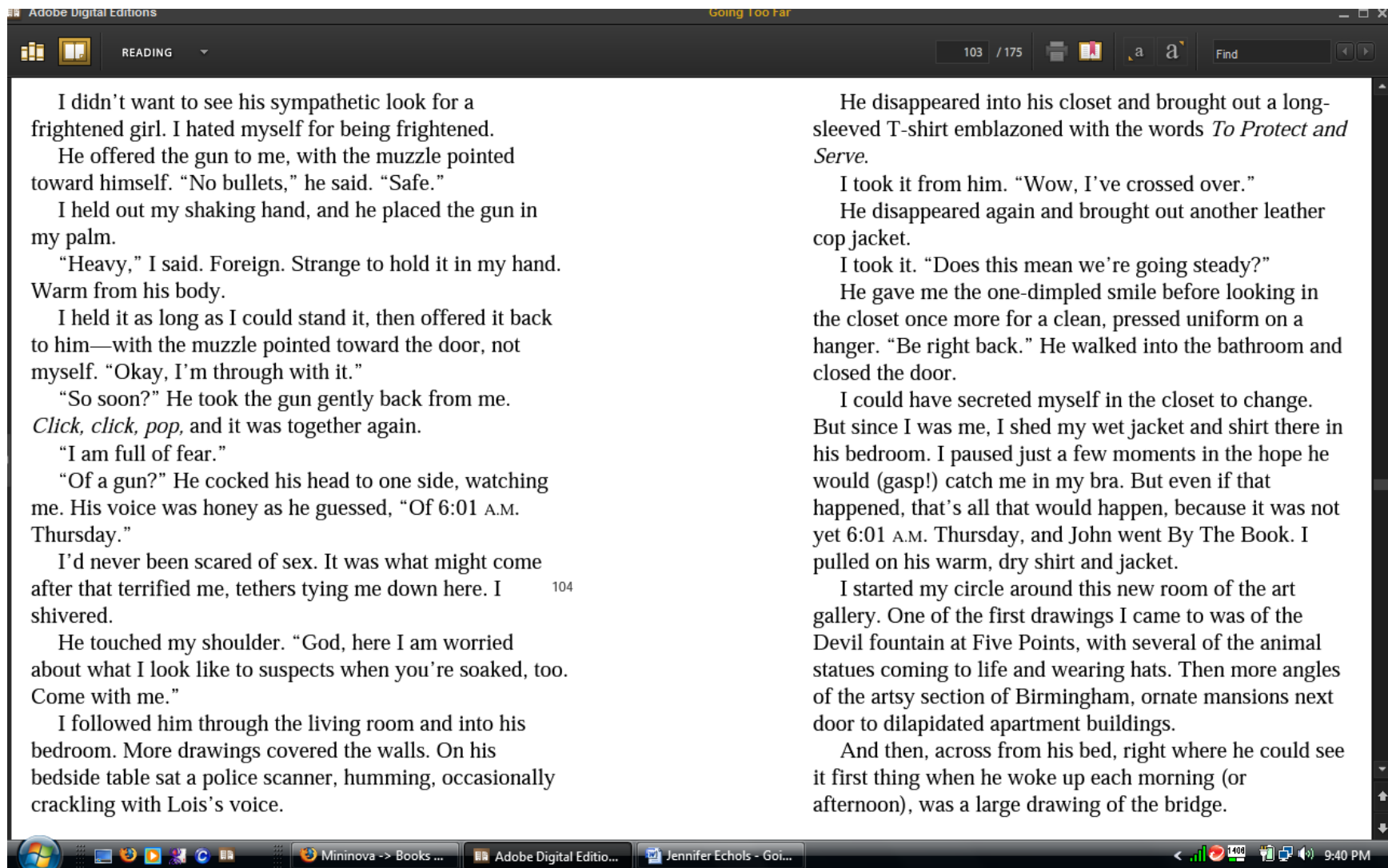
"No matter how careful you are," I said, "there's going to be a mess, and you're going to have to clean it up afterward."

"Mmph," he said, scraping off more mud.

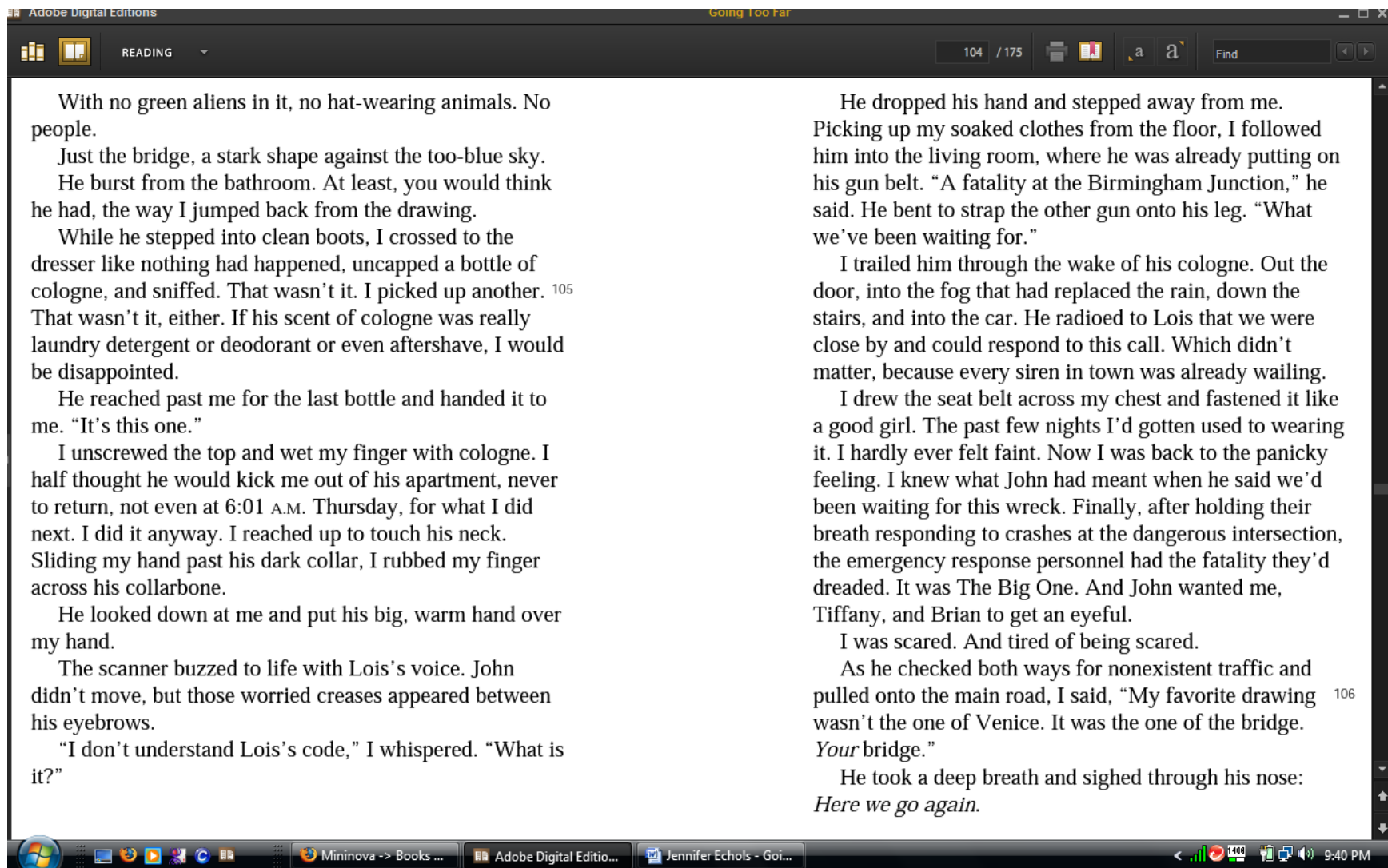
I began beside the kitchen and moved around the living room, examining each drawing. Every one was a treasure<sup>102</sup> of color and penciled detail. I could have stared at each of them for hours, but I felt like I had to hurry and get them all in. I would be back here at 6:01 A.M. sharp tomorrow morning, at which point I would be busy doing something else. And after that, I would never come back.

The drawings were like a map of his trip through Europe. There was the pyramid at the Louvre, the Matterhorn, and beach after beautiful beach that could have been anywhere on the Mediterranean. People stood in the foreground with their backs turned, enjoying the view.









With no green aliens in it, no hat-wearing animals. No people.

Just the bridge, a stark shape against the too-blue sky.

He burst from the bathroom. At least, you would think he had, the way I jumped back from the drawing.

While he stepped into clean boots, I crossed to the dresser like nothing had happened, uncapped a bottle of cologne, and sniffed. That wasn't it. I picked up another. <sup>105</sup> That wasn't it, either. If his scent of cologne was really laundry detergent or deodorant or even aftershave, I would be disappointed.

He reached past me for the last bottle and handed it to me. "It's this one."

I unscrewed the top and wet my finger with cologne. I half thought he would kick me out of his apartment, never to return, not even at 6:01 A.M. Thursday, for what I did next. I did it anyway. I reached up to touch his neck. Sliding my hand past his dark collar, I rubbed my finger across his collarbone.

He looked down at me and put his big, warm hand over my hand.

The scanner buzzed to life with Lois's voice. John didn't move, but those worried creases appeared between his eyebrows.

"I don't understand Lois's code," I whispered. "What is it?"

He dropped his hand and stepped away from me. Picking up my soaked clothes from the floor, I followed him into the living room, where he was already putting on his gun belt. "A fatality at the Birmingham Junction," he said. He bent to strap the other gun onto his leg. "What we've been waiting for."

I trailed him through the wake of his cologne. Out the door, into the fog that had replaced the rain, down the stairs, and into the car. He radioed to Lois that we were close by and could respond to this call. Which didn't matter, because every siren in town was already wailing.

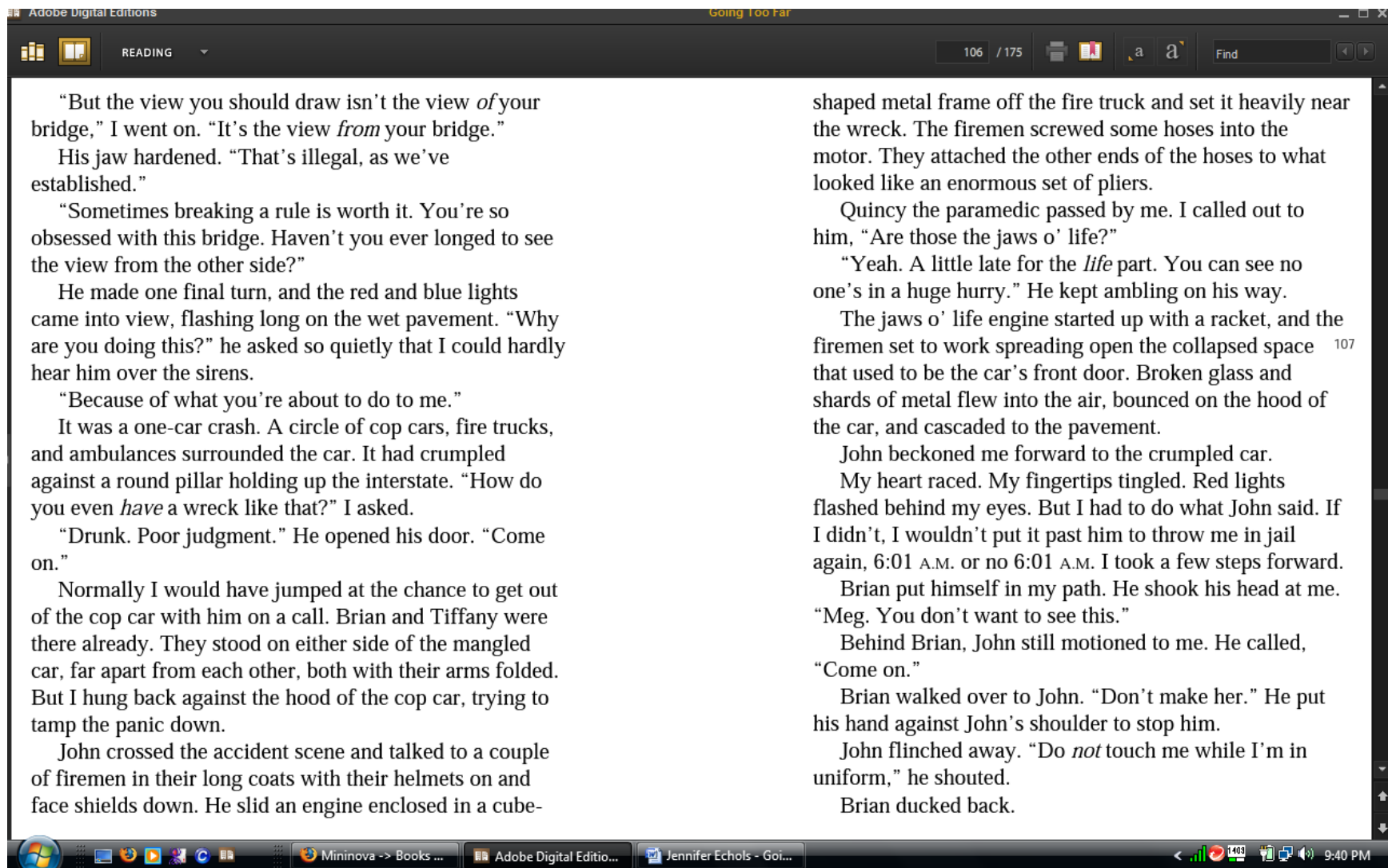
I drew the seat belt across my chest and fastened it like a good girl. The past few nights I'd gotten used to wearing it. I hardly ever felt faint. Now I was back to the panicky feeling. I knew what John had meant when he said we'd been waiting for this wreck. Finally, after holding their breath responding to crashes at the dangerous intersection, the emergency response personnel had the fatality they'd dreaded. It was The Big One. And John wanted me, Tiffany, and Brian to get an eyeful.

I was scared. And tired of being scared.

As he checked both ways for nonexistent traffic and pulled onto the main road, I said, "My favorite drawing wasn't the one of Venice. It was the one of the bridge. *Your bridge.*" <sup>106</sup>

He took a deep breath and sighed through his nose: *Here we go again.*





"But the view you should draw isn't the view *of* your bridge," I went on. "It's the view *from* your bridge."

His jaw hardened. "That's illegal, as we've established."

"Sometimes breaking a rule is worth it. You're so obsessed with this bridge. Haven't you ever longed to see the view from the other side?"

He made one final turn, and the red and blue lights came into view, flashing long on the wet pavement. "Why are you doing this?" he asked so quietly that I could hardly hear him over the sirens.

"Because of what you're about to do to me."

It was a one-car crash. A circle of cop cars, fire trucks, and ambulances surrounded the car. It had crumpled against a round pillar holding up the interstate. "How do you even *have* a wreck like that?" I asked.

"Drunk. Poor judgment." He opened his door. "Come on."

Normally I would have jumped at the chance to get out of the cop car with him on a call. Brian and Tiffany were there already. They stood on either side of the mangled car, far apart from each other, both with their arms folded. But I hung back against the hood of the cop car, trying to tamp the panic down.

John crossed the accident scene and talked to a couple of firemen in their long coats with their helmets on and face shields down. He slid an engine enclosed in a cube-

shaped metal frame off the fire truck and set it heavily near the wreck. The firemen screwed some hoses into the motor. They attached the other ends of the hoses to what looked like an enormous set of pliers.

Quincy the paramedic passed by me. I called out to him, "Are those the jaws o' life?"

"Yeah. A little late for the *life* part. You can see no one's in a huge hurry." He kept ambling on his way.

The jaws o' life engine started up with a racket, and the firemen set to work spreading open the collapsed space that used to be the car's front door. Broken glass and shards of metal flew into the air, bounced on the hood of the car, and cascaded to the pavement.

John beckoned me forward to the crumpled car.

My heart raced. My fingertips tingled. Red lights flashed behind my eyes. But I had to do what John said. If I didn't, I wouldn't put it past him to throw me in jail again, 6:01 A.M. or no 6:01 A.M. I took a few steps forward.

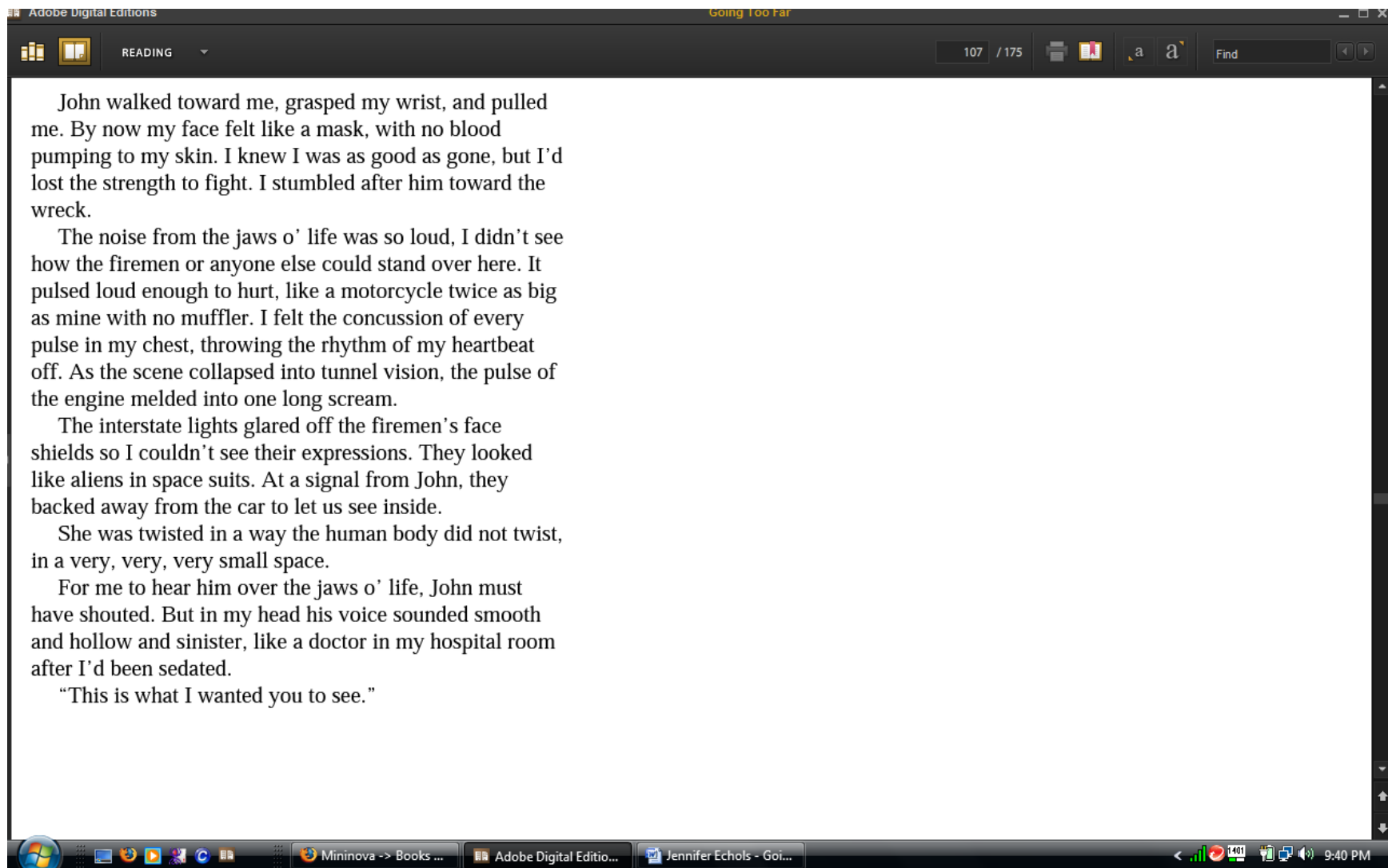
Brian put himself in my path. He shook his head at me. "Meg. You don't want to see this."

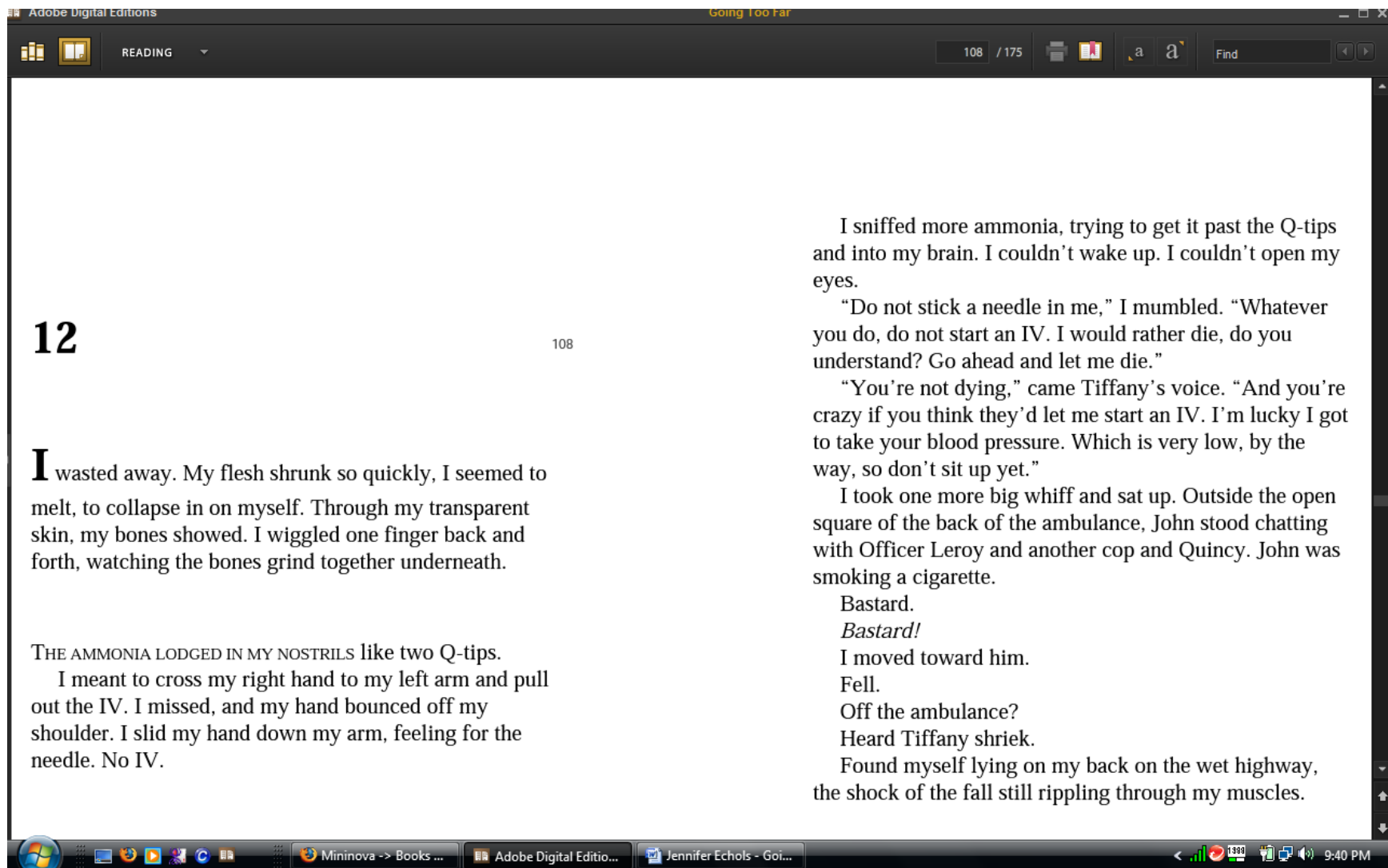
Behind Brian, John still motioned to me. He called, "Come on."

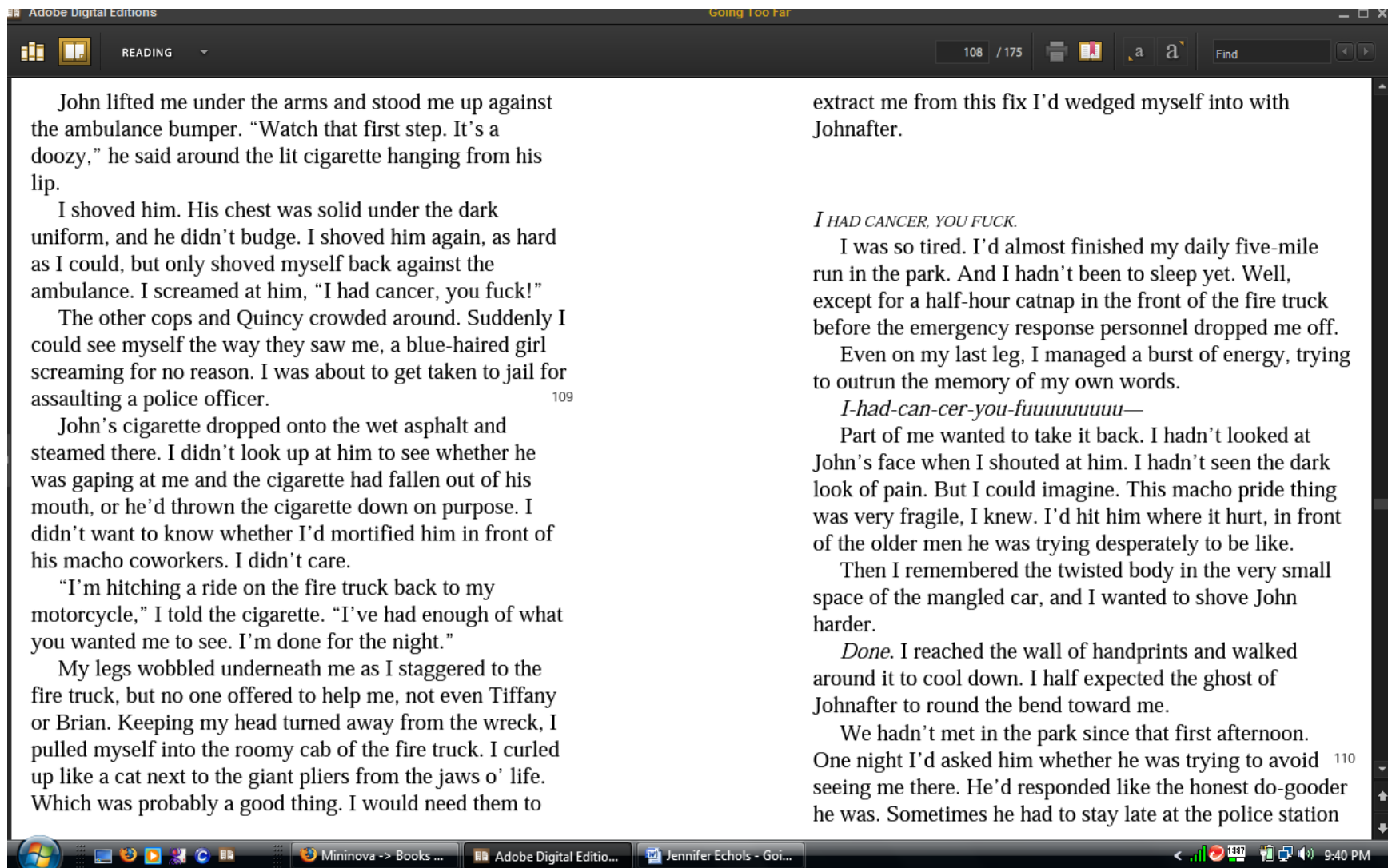
Brian walked over to John. "Don't make her." He put his hand against John's shoulder to stop him.

John flinched away. "Do *not* touch me while I'm in uniform," he shouted.

Brian ducked back.







John lifted me under the arms and stood me up against the ambulance bumper. "Watch that first step. It's a doozy," he said around the lit cigarette hanging from his lip.

I shoved him. His chest was solid under the dark uniform, and he didn't budge. I shoved him again, as hard as I could, but only shoved myself back against the ambulance. I screamed at him, "I had cancer, you fuck!"

The other cops and Quincy crowded around. Suddenly I could see myself the way they saw me, a blue-haired girl screaming for no reason. I was about to get taken to jail for assaulting a police officer. 109

John's cigarette dropped onto the wet asphalt and steamed there. I didn't look up at him to see whether he was gaping at me and the cigarette had fallen out of his mouth, or he'd thrown the cigarette down on purpose. I didn't want to know whether I'd mortified him in front of his macho coworkers. I didn't care.

"I'm hitching a ride on the fire truck back to my motorcycle," I told the cigarette. "I've had enough of what you wanted me to see. I'm done for the night."

My legs wobbled underneath me as I staggered to the fire truck, but no one offered to help me, not even Tiffany or Brian. Keeping my head turned away from the wreck, I pulled myself into the roomy cab of the fire truck. I curled up like a cat next to the giant pliers from the jaws o' life. Which was probably a good thing. I would need them to

extract me from this fix I'd wedged myself into with Johnafter.

*I HAD CANCER, YOU FUCK.*

I was so tired. I'd almost finished my daily five-mile run in the park. And I hadn't been to sleep yet. Well, except for a half-hour catnap in the front of the fire truck before the emergency response personnel dropped me off.

Even on my last leg, I managed a burst of energy, trying to outrun the memory of my own words.

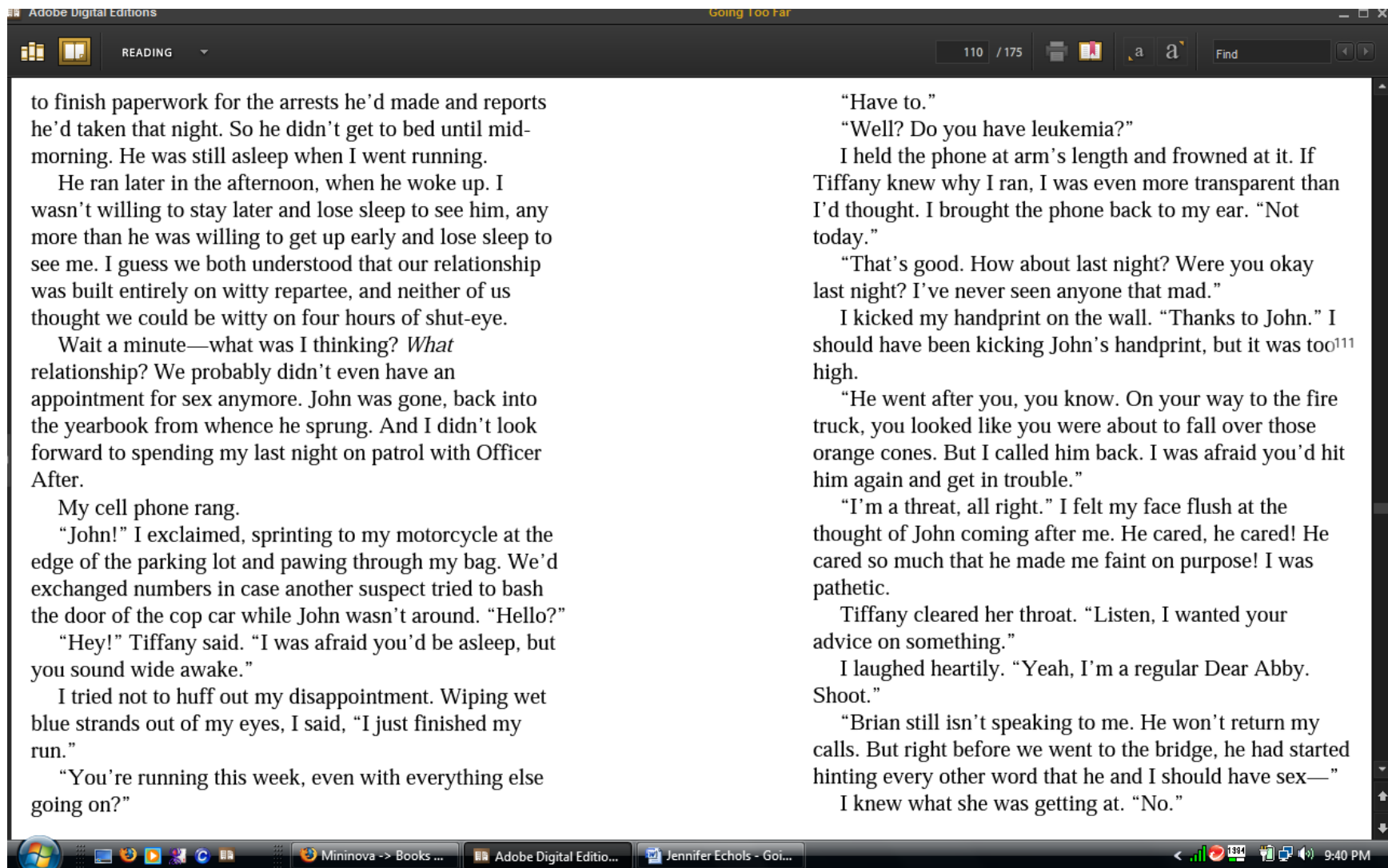
*I-had-can-cer-you-fuuuuuuuuuu—*

Part of me wanted to take it back. I hadn't looked at John's face when I shouted at him. I hadn't seen the dark look of pain. But I could imagine. This macho pride thing was very fragile, I knew. I'd hit him where it hurt, in front of the older men he was trying desperately to be like.

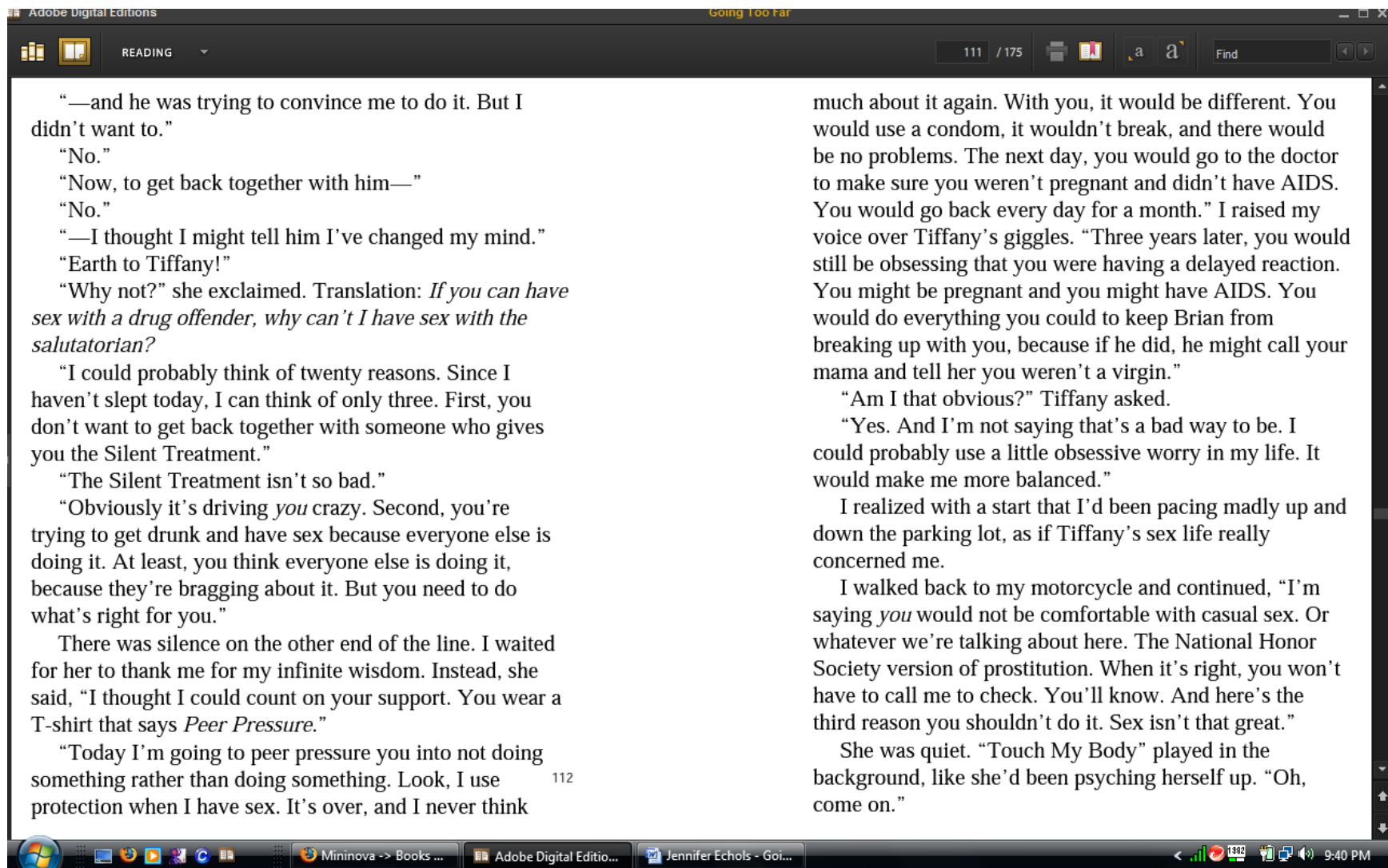
Then I remembered the twisted body in the very small space of the mangled car, and I wanted to shove John harder.

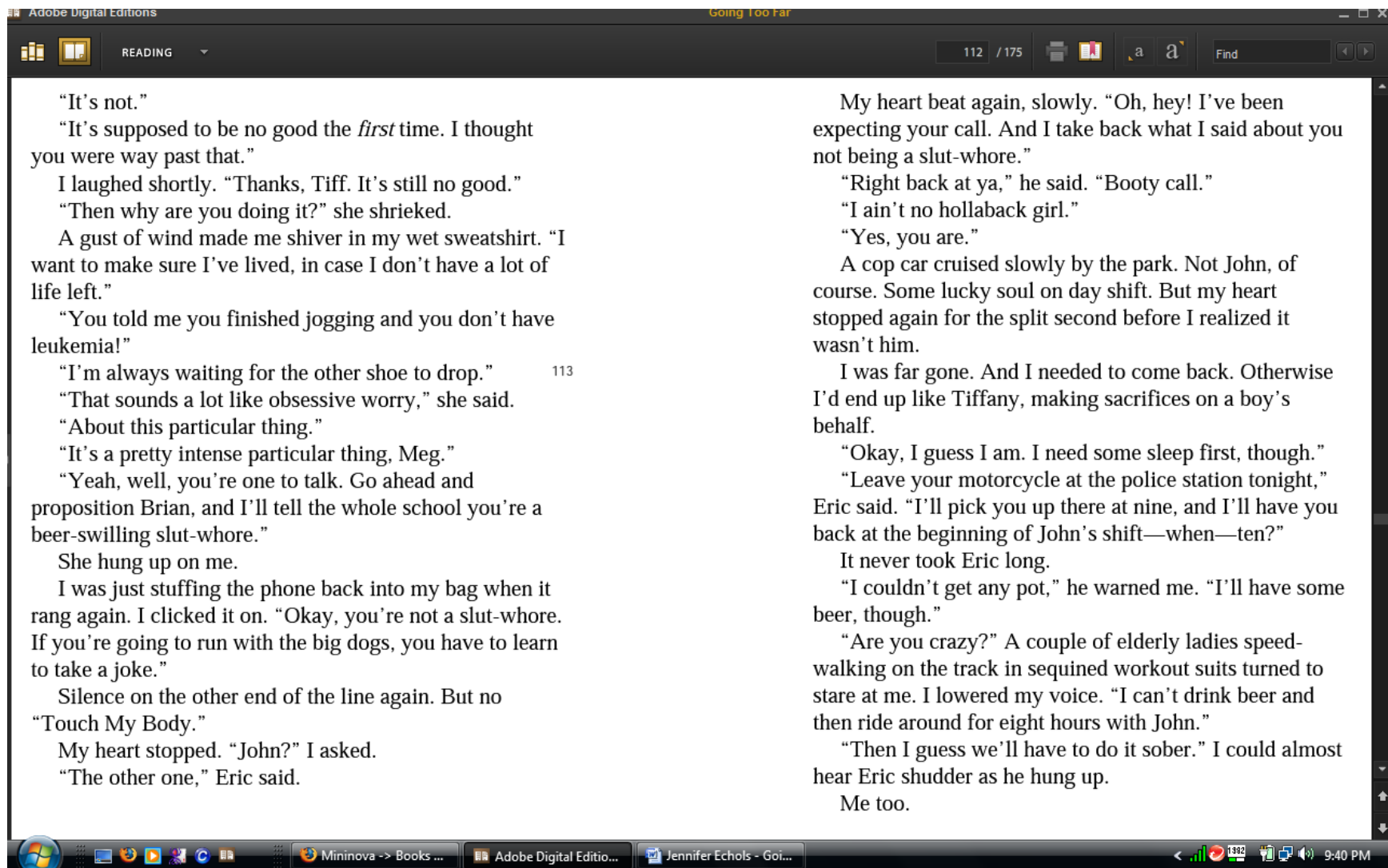
*Done.* I reached the wall of handprints and walked around it to cool down. I half expected the ghost of Johnafter to round the bend toward me.

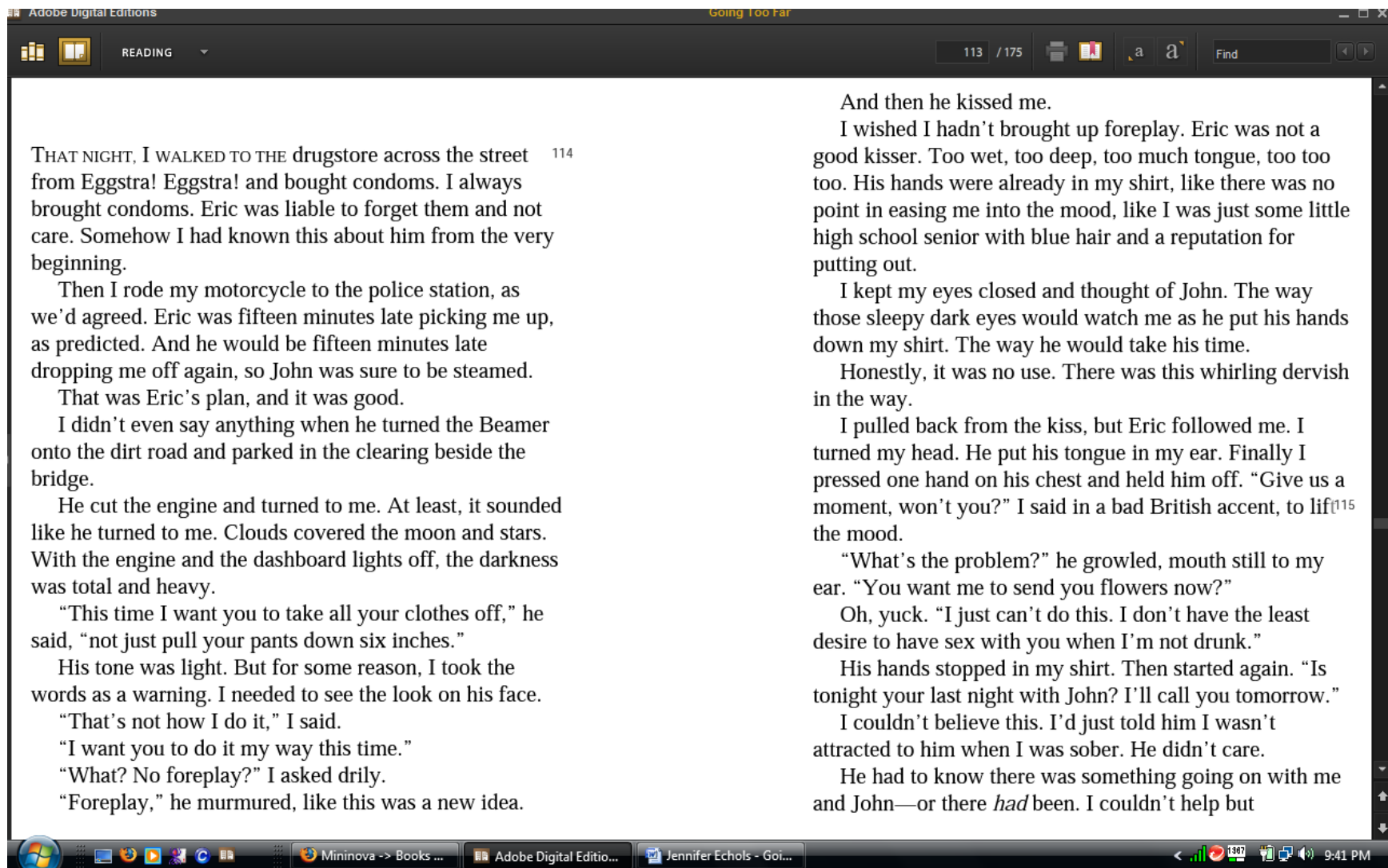
We hadn't met in the park since that first afternoon. One night I'd asked him whether he was trying to avoid seeing me there. He'd responded like the honest do-gooder he was. Sometimes he had to stay late at the police station 110

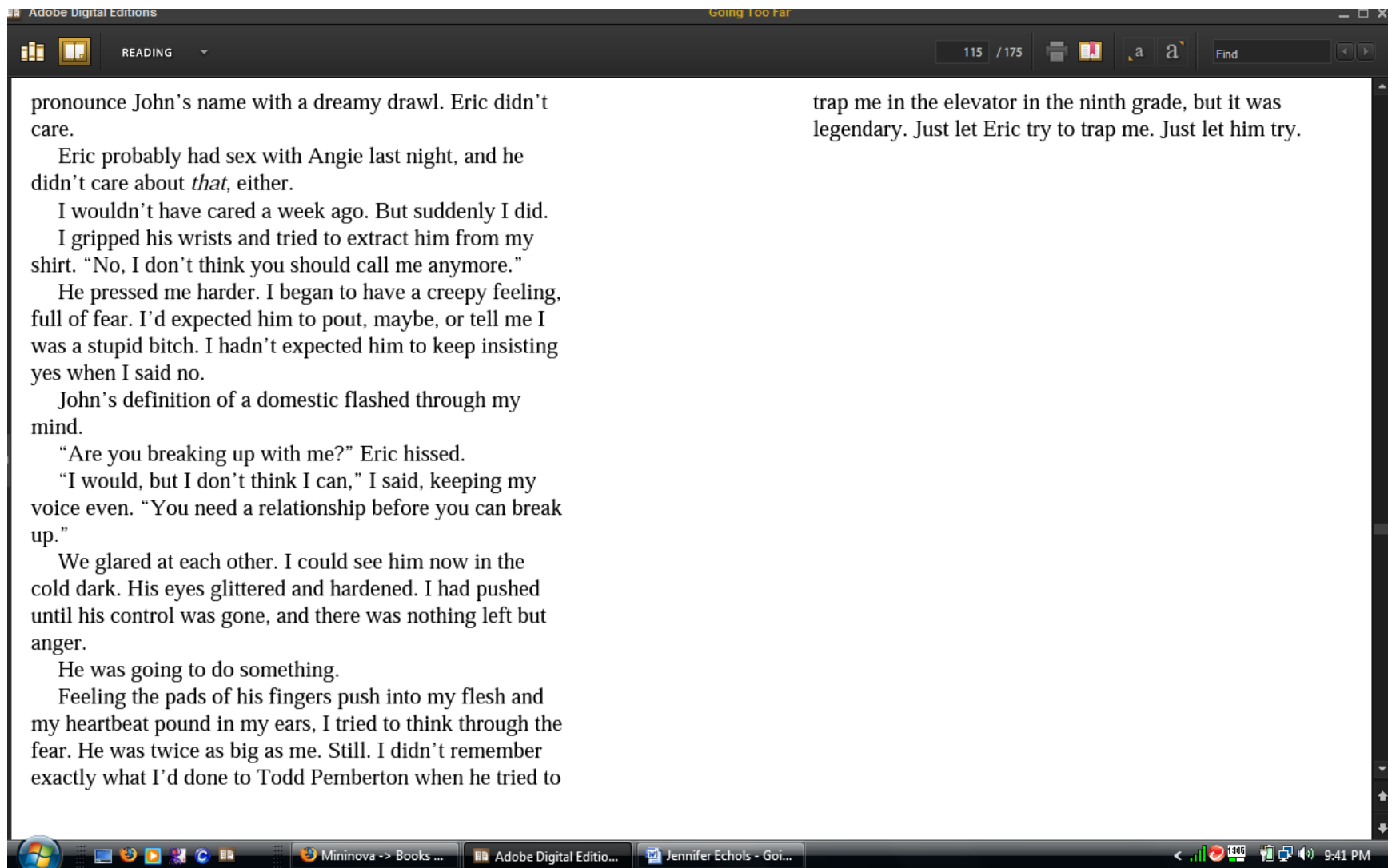


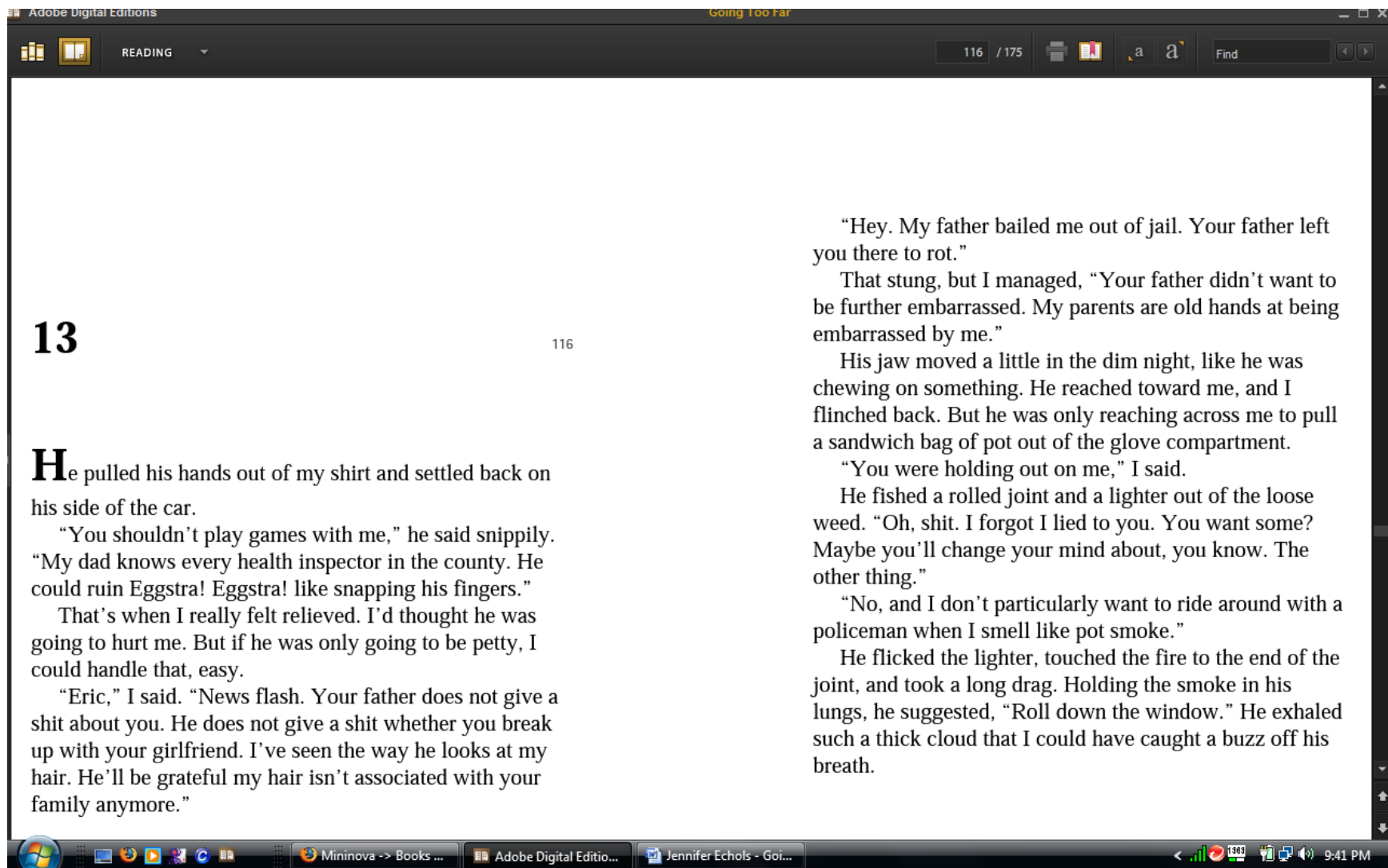




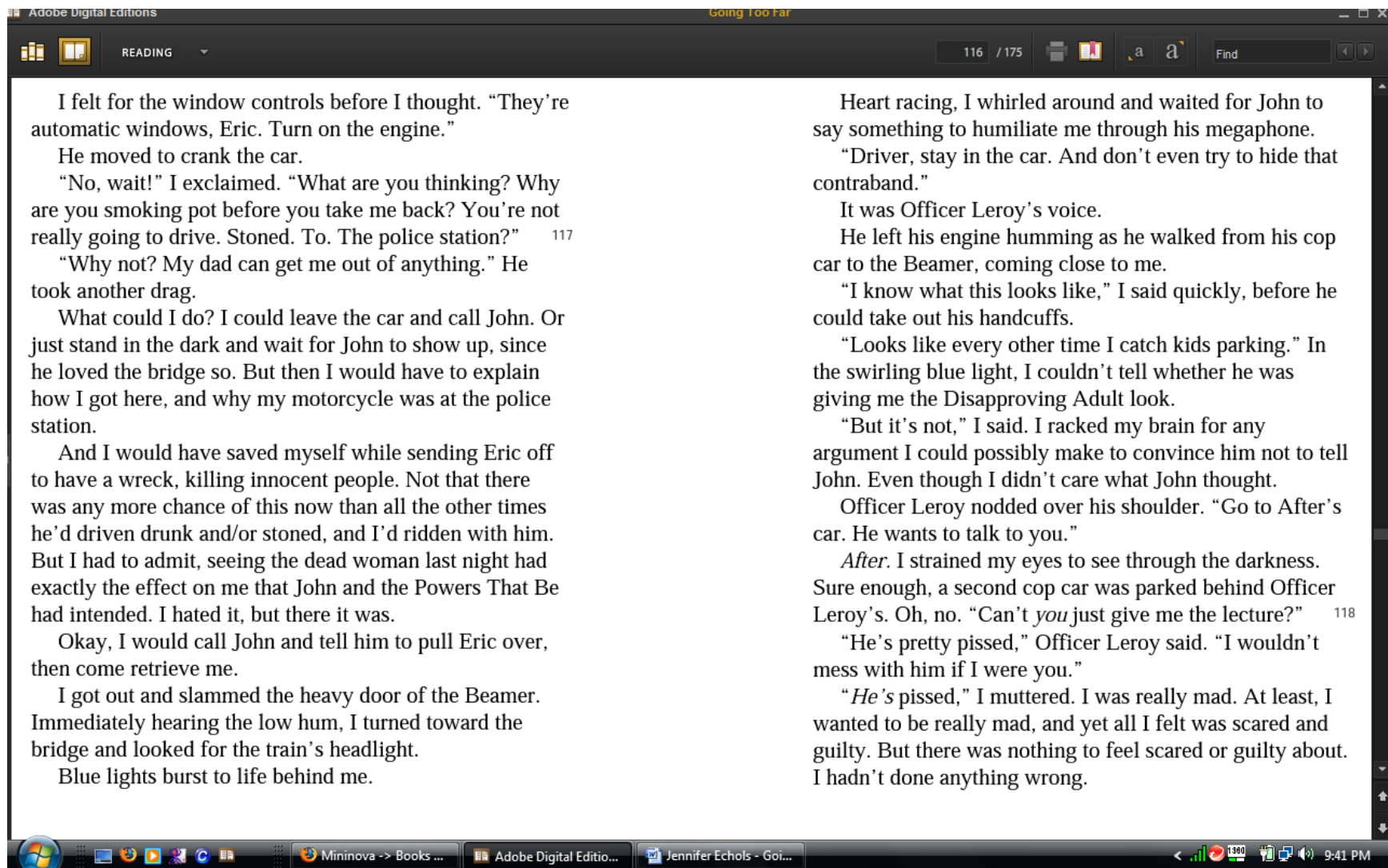


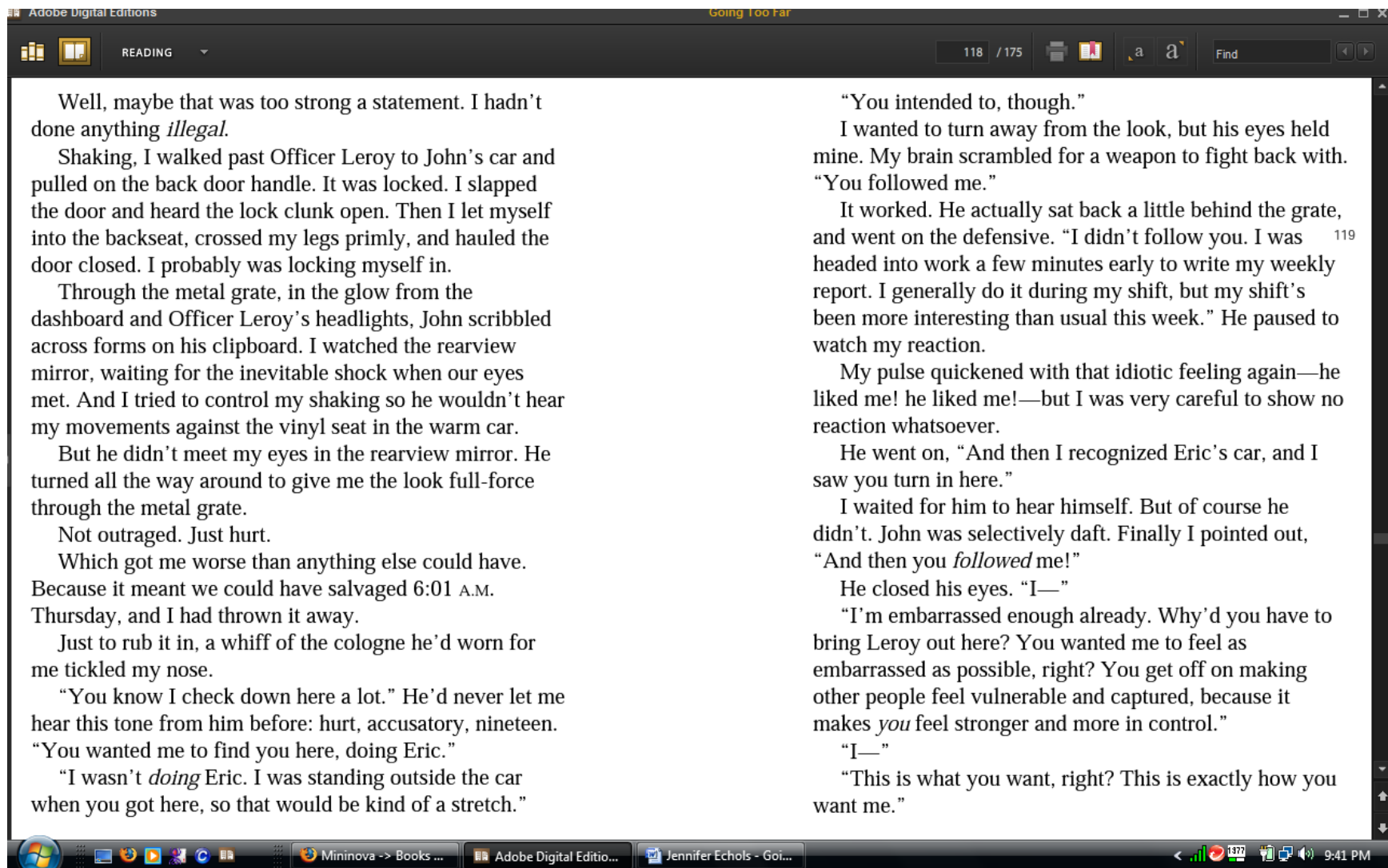


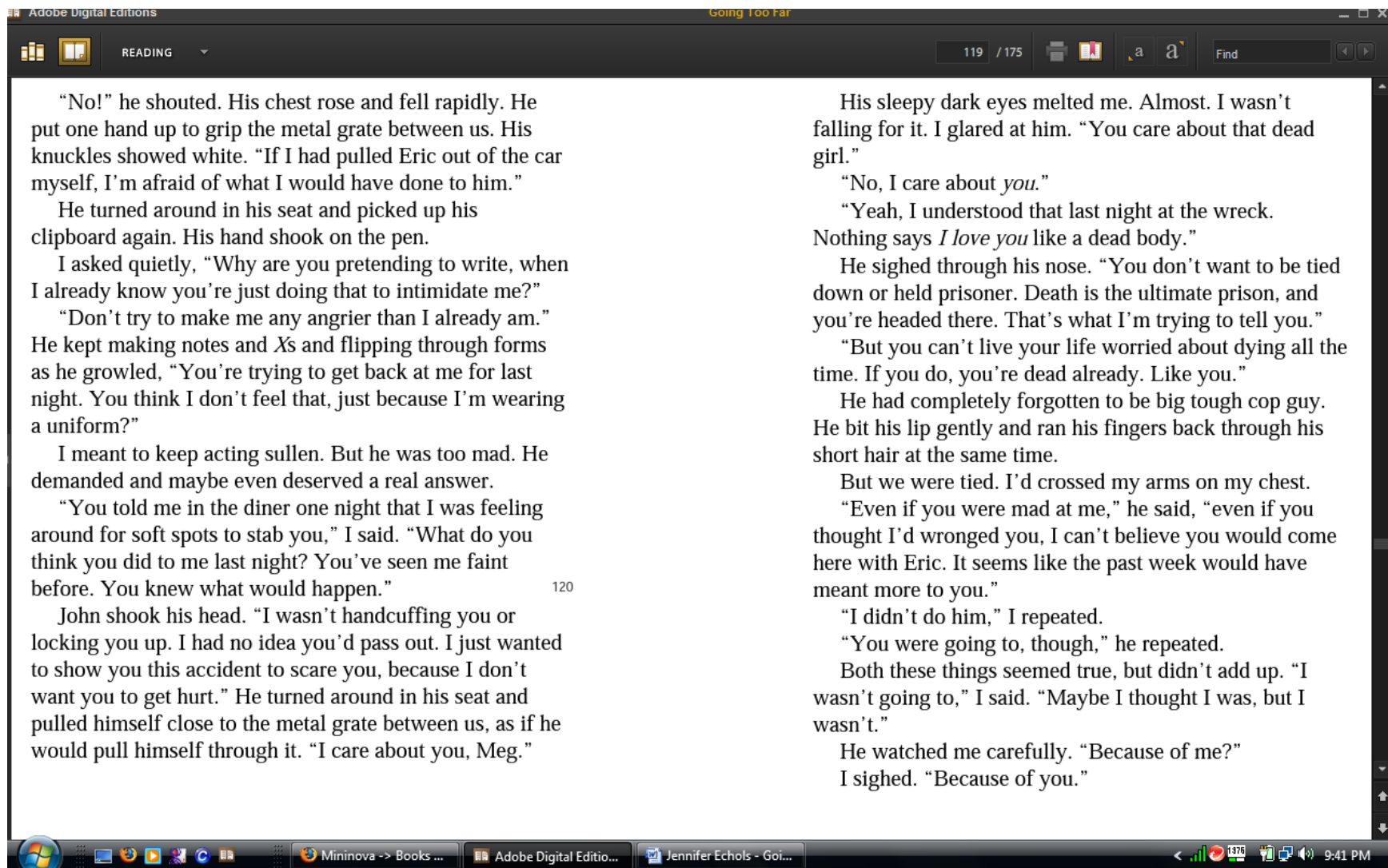


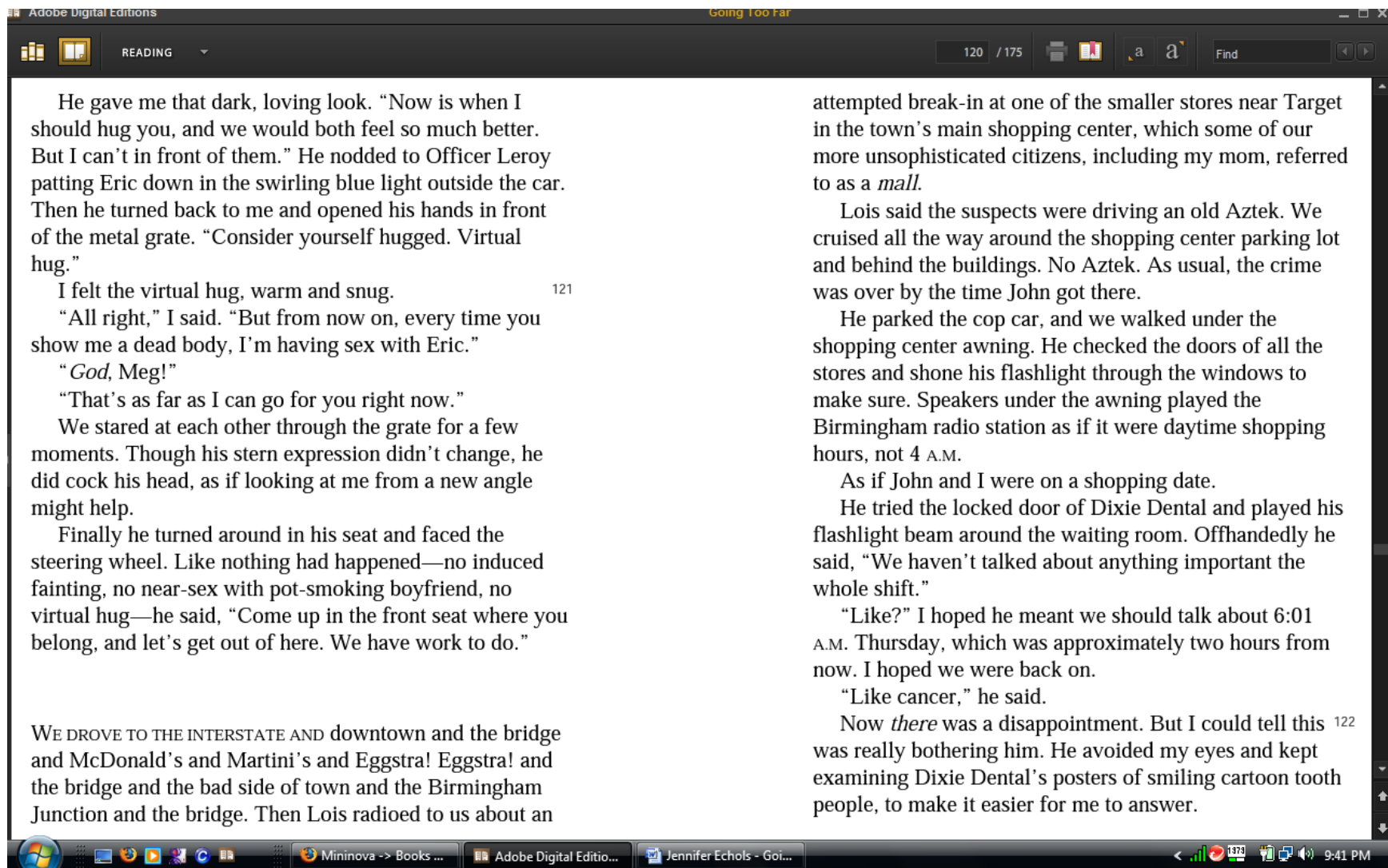




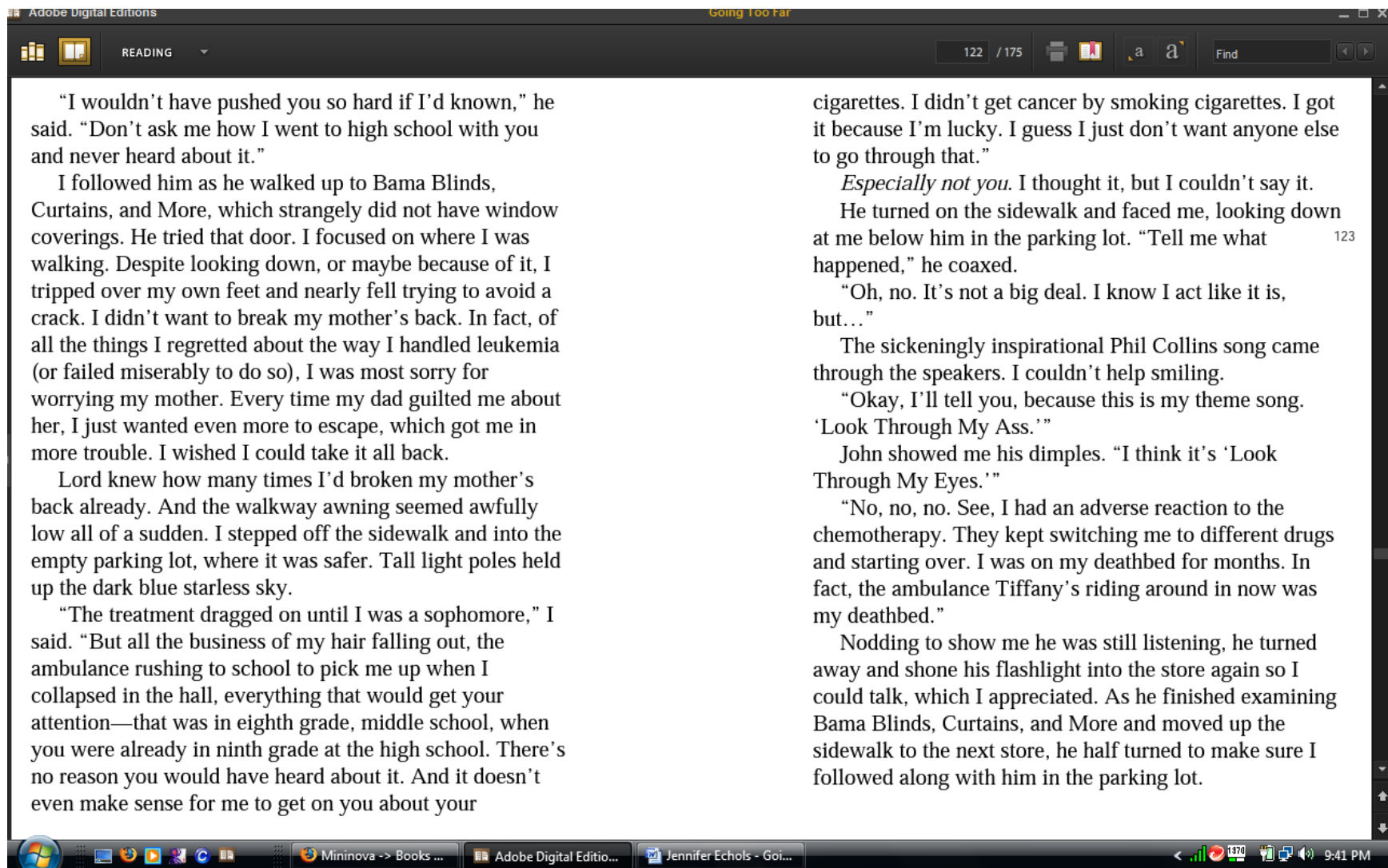












"I wouldn't have pushed you so hard if I'd known," he said. "Don't ask me how I went to high school with you and never heard about it."

I followed him as he walked up to Bama Blinds, Curtains, and More, which strangely did not have window coverings. He tried that door. I focused on where I was walking. Despite looking down, or maybe because of it, I tripped over my own feet and nearly fell trying to avoid a crack. I didn't want to break my mother's back. In fact, of all the things I regretted about the way I handled leukemia (or failed miserably to do so), I was most sorry for worrying my mother. Every time my dad guilted me about her, I just wanted even more to escape, which got me in more trouble. I wished I could take it all back.

Lord knew how many times I'd broken my mother's back already. And the walkway awning seemed awfully low all of a sudden. I stepped off the sidewalk and into the empty parking lot, where it was safer. Tall light poles held up the dark blue starless sky.

"The treatment dragged on until I was a sophomore," I said. "But all the business of my hair falling out, the ambulance rushing to school to pick me up when I collapsed in the hall, everything that would get your attention—that was in eighth grade, middle school, when you were already in ninth grade at the high school. There's no reason you would have heard about it. And it doesn't even make sense for me to get on you about your

cigarettes. I didn't get cancer by smoking cigarettes. I got it because I'm lucky. I guess I just don't want anyone else to go through that."

*Especially not you.* I thought it, but I couldn't say it.

He turned on the sidewalk and faced me, looking down at me below him in the parking lot. "Tell me what happened," he coaxed. 123

"Oh, no. It's not a big deal. I know I act like it is, but..."

The sickeningly inspirational Phil Collins song came through the speakers. I couldn't help smiling.

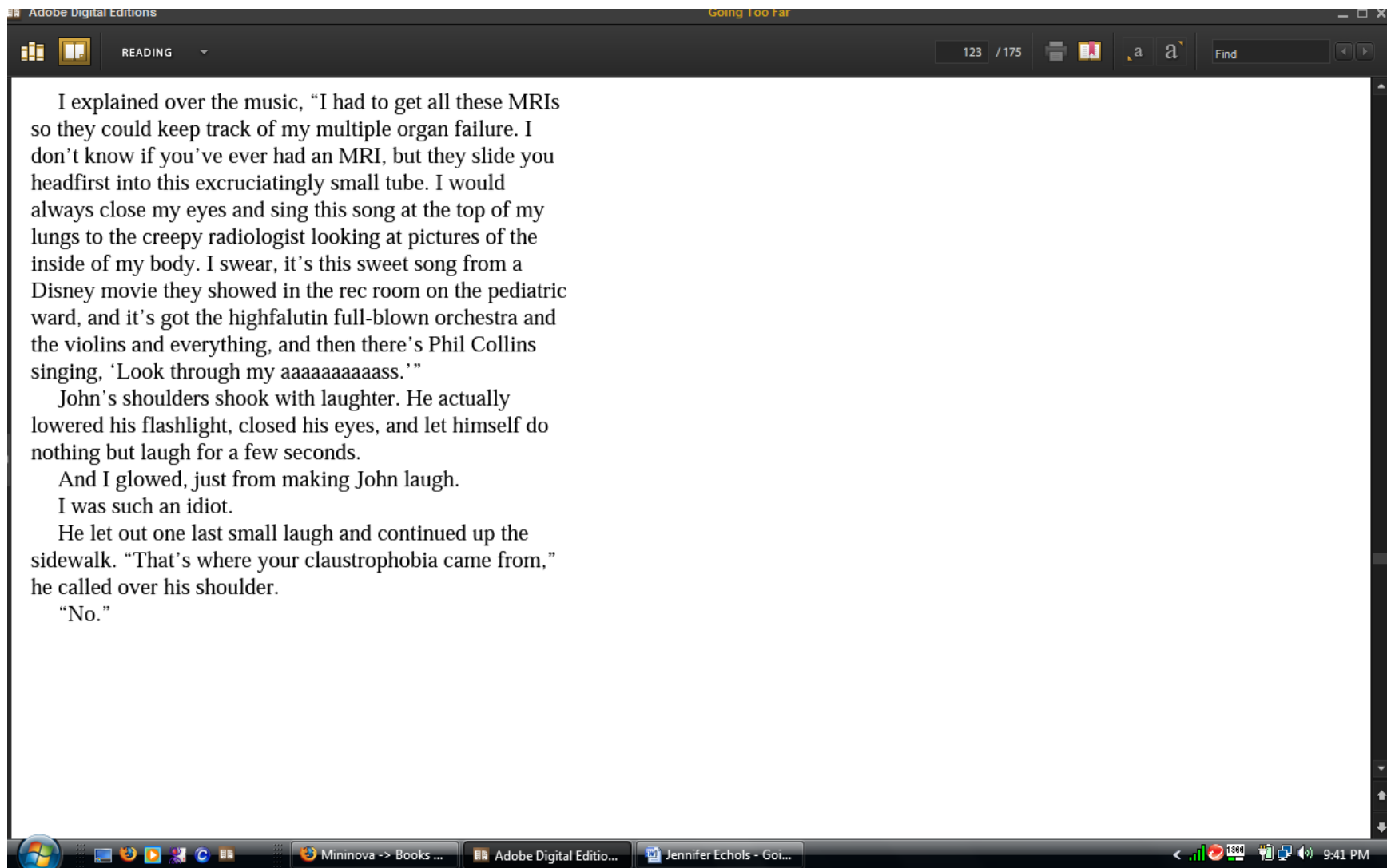
"Okay, I'll tell you, because this is my theme song. 'Look Through My Ass.'"

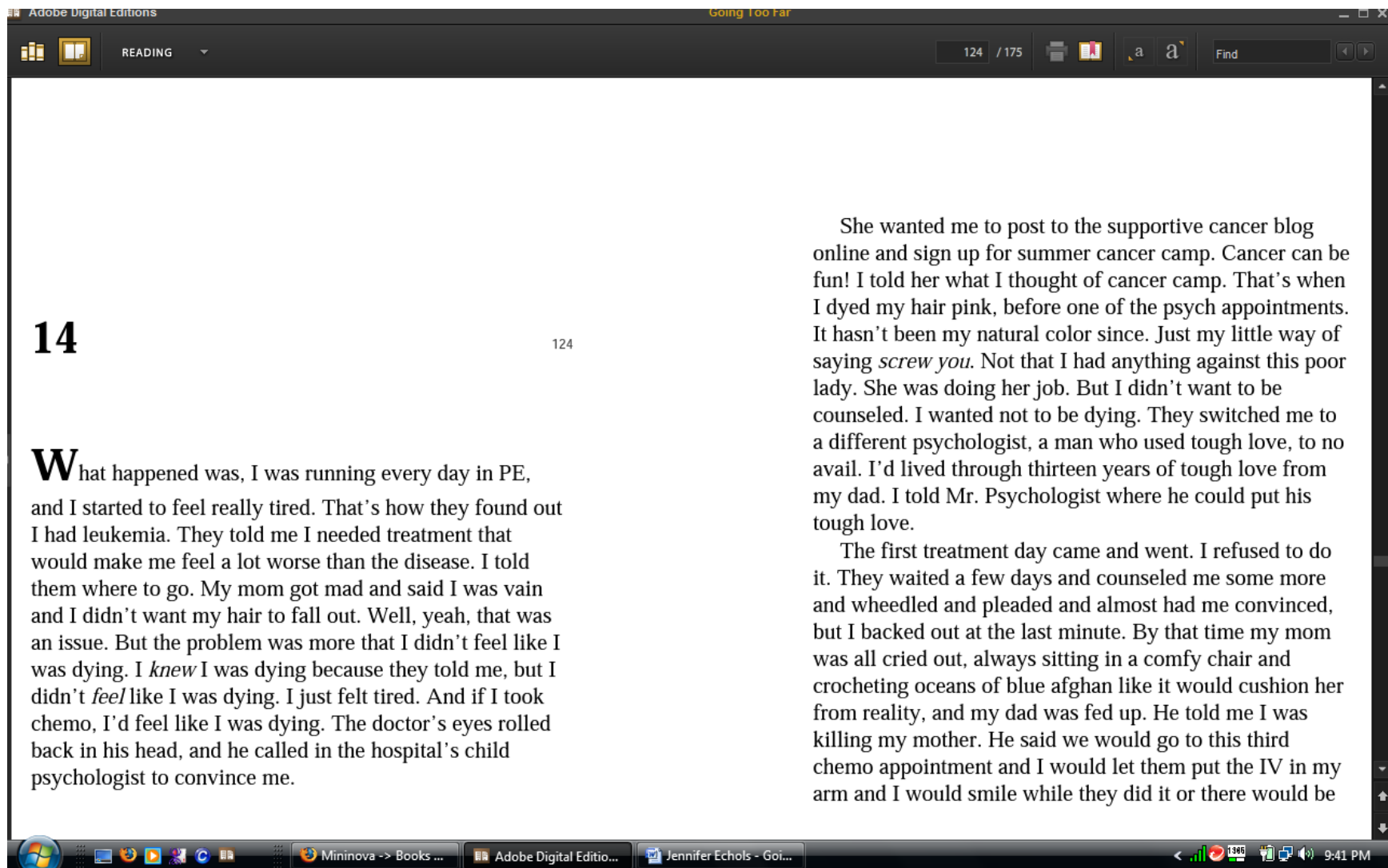
John showed me his dimples. "I think it's 'Look Through My Eyes.'"

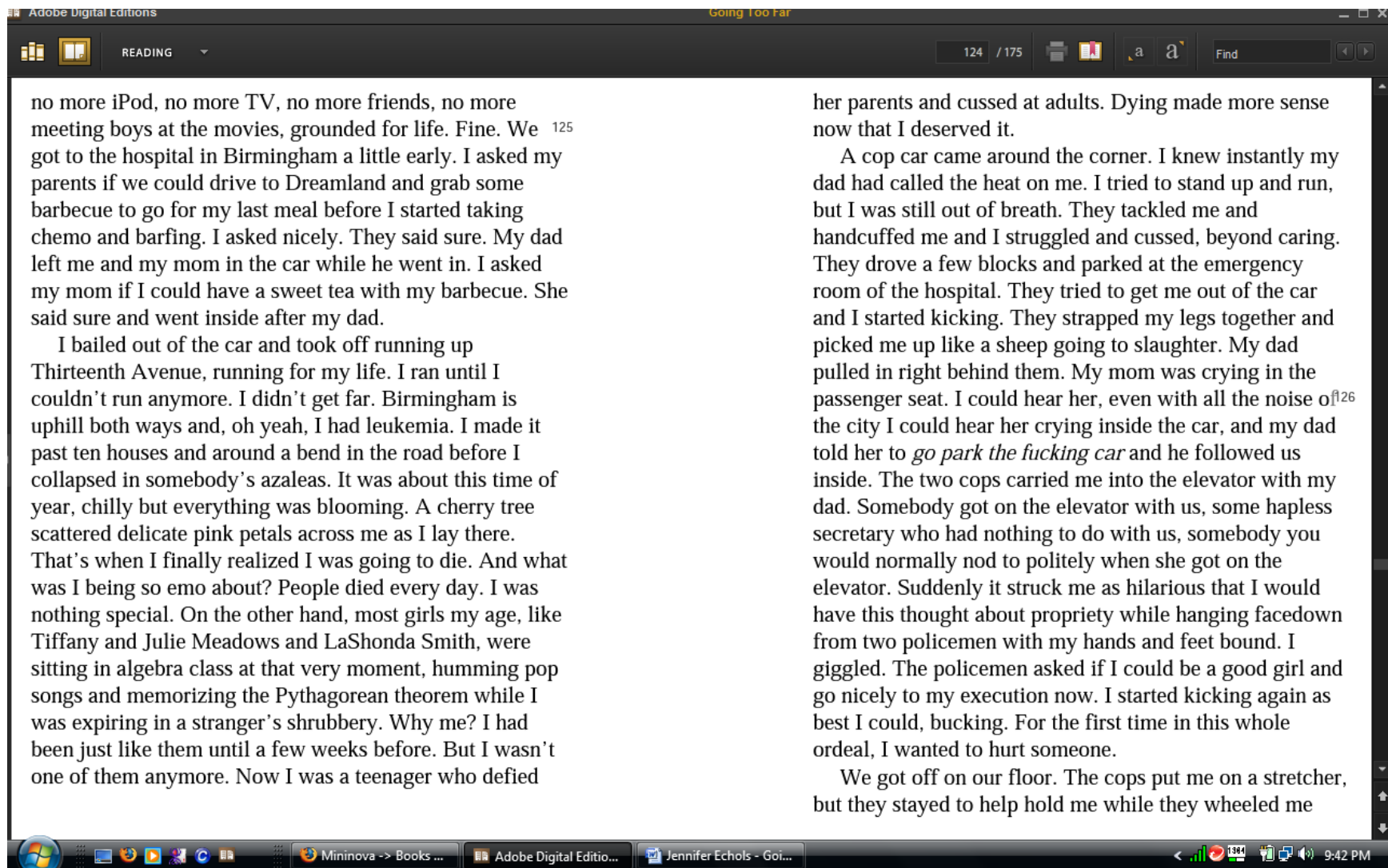
"No, no, no. See, I had an adverse reaction to the chemotherapy. They kept switching me to different drugs and starting over. I was on my deathbed for months. In fact, the ambulance Tiffany's riding around in now was my deathbed."

Nodding to show me he was still listening, he turned away and shone his flashlight into the store again so I could talk, which I appreciated. As he finished examining Bama Blinds, Curtains, and More and moved up the sidewalk to the next store, he half turned to make sure I followed along with him in the parking lot.









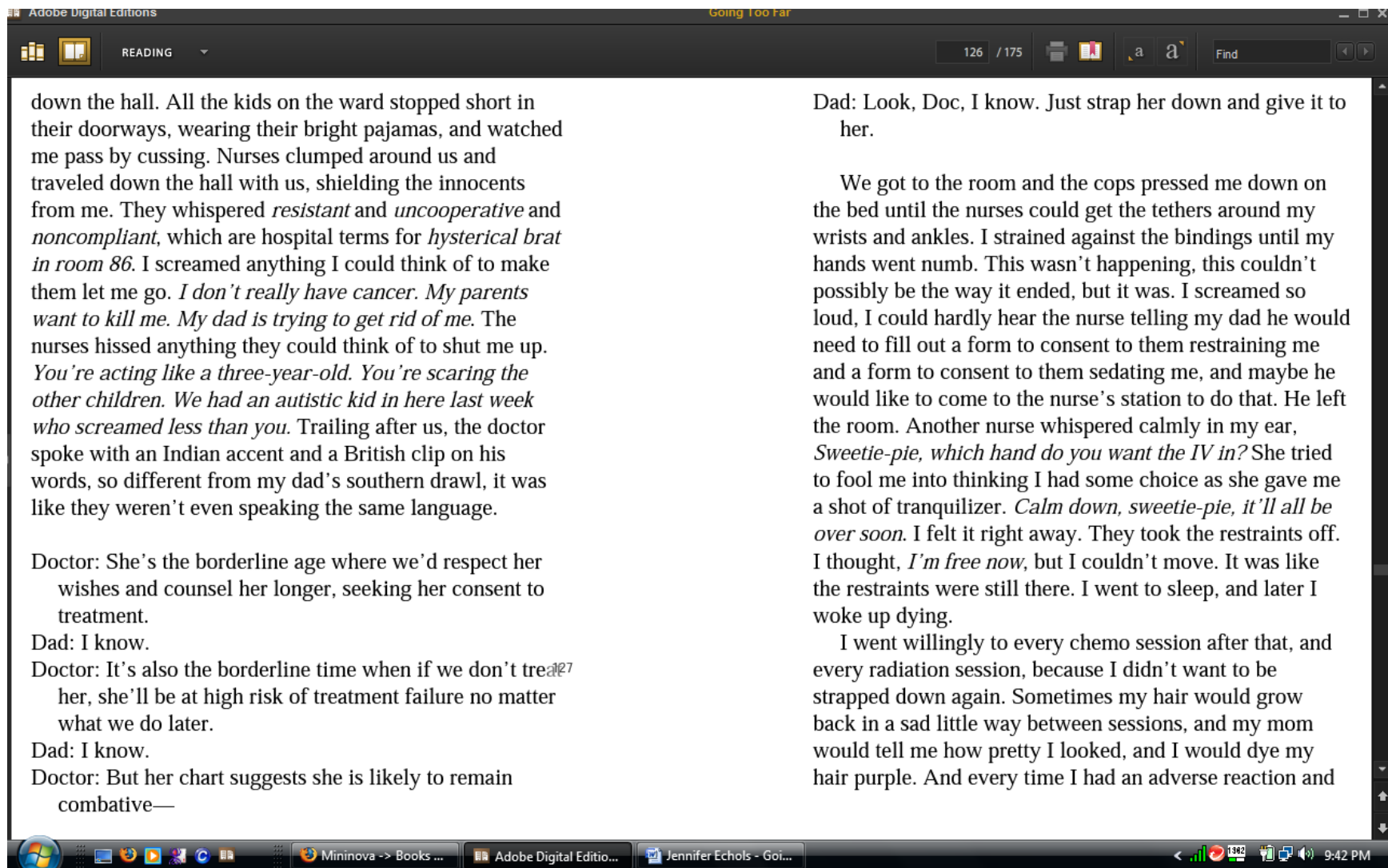
no more iPod, no more TV, no more friends, no more meeting boys at the movies, grounded for life. Fine. We <sup>125</sup> got to the hospital in Birmingham a little early. I asked my parents if we could drive to Dreamland and grab some barbecue to go for my last meal before I started taking chemo and barfing. I asked nicely. They said sure. My dad left me and my mom in the car while he went in. I asked my mom if I could have a sweet tea with my barbecue. She said sure and went inside after my dad.

I bailed out of the car and took off running up Thirteenth Avenue, running for my life. I ran until I couldn't run anymore. I didn't get far. Birmingham is uphill both ways and, oh yeah, I had leukemia. I made it past ten houses and around a bend in the road before I collapsed in somebody's azaleas. It was about this time of year, chilly but everything was blooming. A cherry tree scattered delicate pink petals across me as I lay there. That's when I finally realized I was going to die. And what was I being so emo about? People died every day. I was nothing special. On the other hand, most girls my age, like Tiffany and Julie Meadows and LaShonda Smith, were sitting in algebra class at that very moment, humming pop songs and memorizing the Pythagorean theorem while I was expiring in a stranger's shrubbery. Why me? I had been just like them until a few weeks before. But I wasn't one of them anymore. Now I was a teenager who defied

her parents and cussed at adults. Dying made more sense now that I deserved it.

A cop car came around the corner. I knew instantly my dad had called the heat on me. I tried to stand up and run, but I was still out of breath. They tackled me and handcuffed me and I struggled and cussed, beyond caring. They drove a few blocks and parked at the emergency room of the hospital. They tried to get me out of the car and I started kicking. They strapped my legs together and picked me up like a sheep going to slaughter. My dad pulled in right behind them. My mom was crying in the passenger seat. I could hear her, even with all the noise of <sup>26</sup> the city I could hear her crying inside the car, and my dad told her to *go park the fucking car* and he followed us inside. The two cops carried me into the elevator with my dad. Somebody got on the elevator with us, some hapless secretary who had nothing to do with us, somebody you would normally nod to politely when she got on the elevator. Suddenly it struck me as hilarious that I would have this thought about propriety while hanging facedown from two policemen with my hands and feet bound. I giggled. The policemen asked if I could be a good girl and go nicely to my execution now. I started kicking again as best I could, bucking. For the first time in this whole ordeal, I wanted to hurt someone.

We got off on our floor. The cops put me on a stretcher, but they stayed to help hold me while they wheeled me



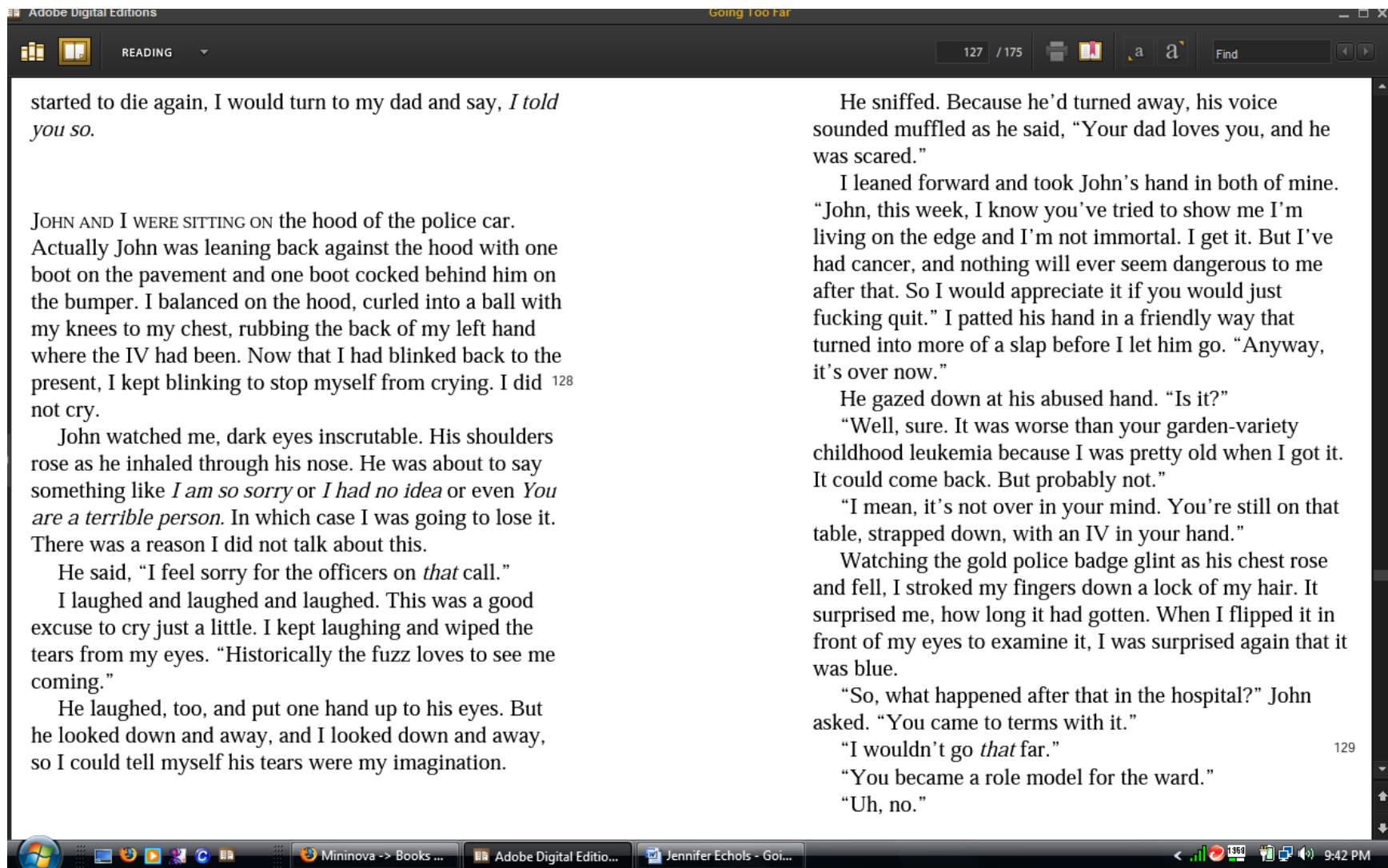
down the hall. All the kids on the ward stopped short in their doorways, wearing their bright pajamas, and watched me pass by cussing. Nurses clumped around us and traveled down the hall with us, shielding the innocents from me. They whispered *resistant* and *uncooperative* and *noncompliant*, which are hospital terms for *hysterical brat in room 86*. I screamed anything I could think of to make them let me go. *I don't really have cancer. My parents want to kill me. My dad is trying to get rid of me.* The nurses hissed anything they could think of to shut me up. *You're acting like a three-year-old. You're scaring the other children. We had an autistic kid in here last week who screamed less than you.* Trailing after us, the doctor spoke with an Indian accent and a British clip on his words, so different from my dad's southern drawl, it was like they weren't even speaking the same language.

Doctor: She's the borderline age where we'd respect her wishes and counsel her longer, seeking her consent to treatment.  
Dad: I know.  
Doctor: It's also the borderline time when if we don't treat her, she'll be at high risk of treatment failure no matter what we do later.  
Dad: I know.  
Doctor: But her chart suggests she is likely to remain combative—

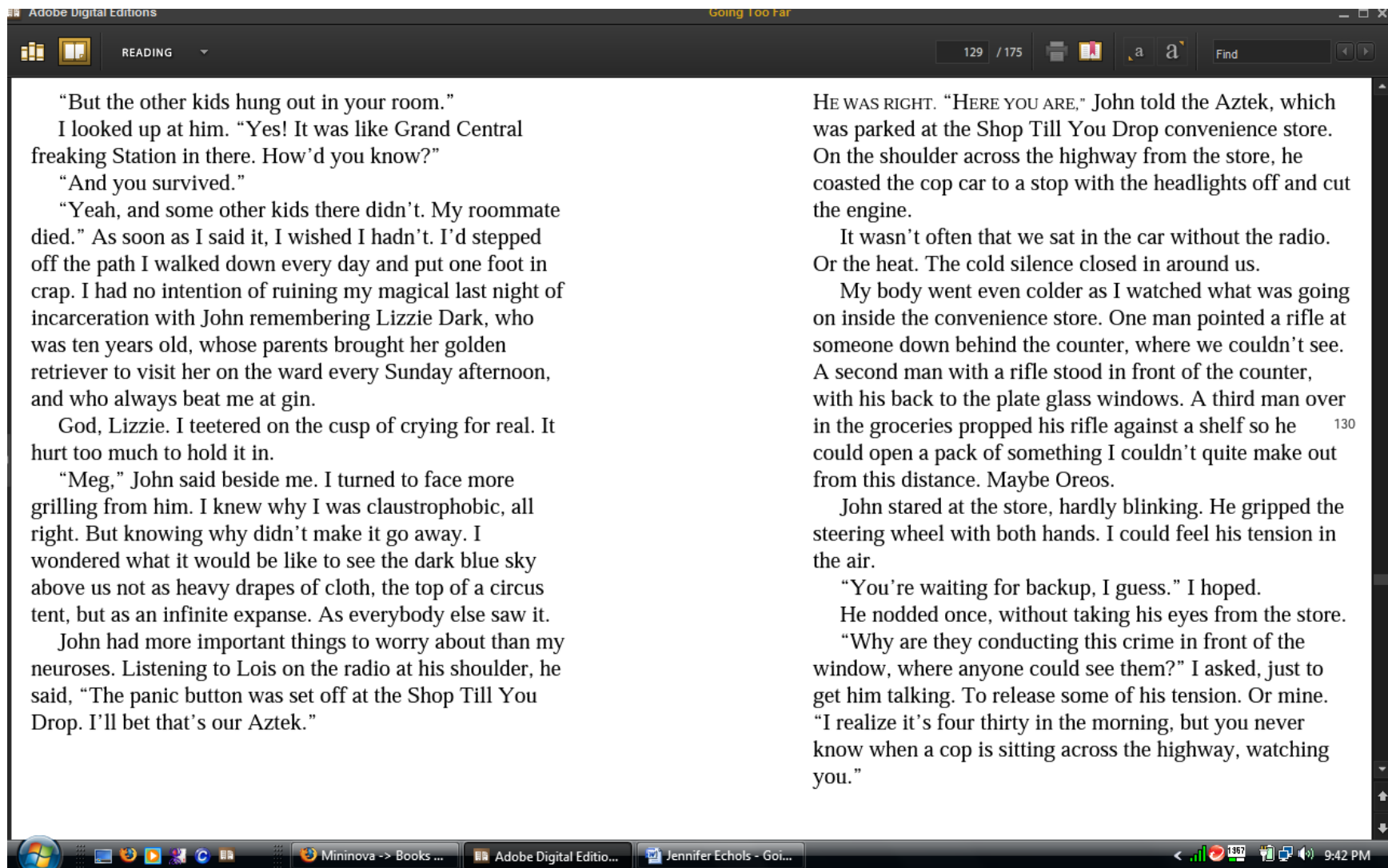
Dad: Look, Doc, I know. Just strap her down and give it to her.

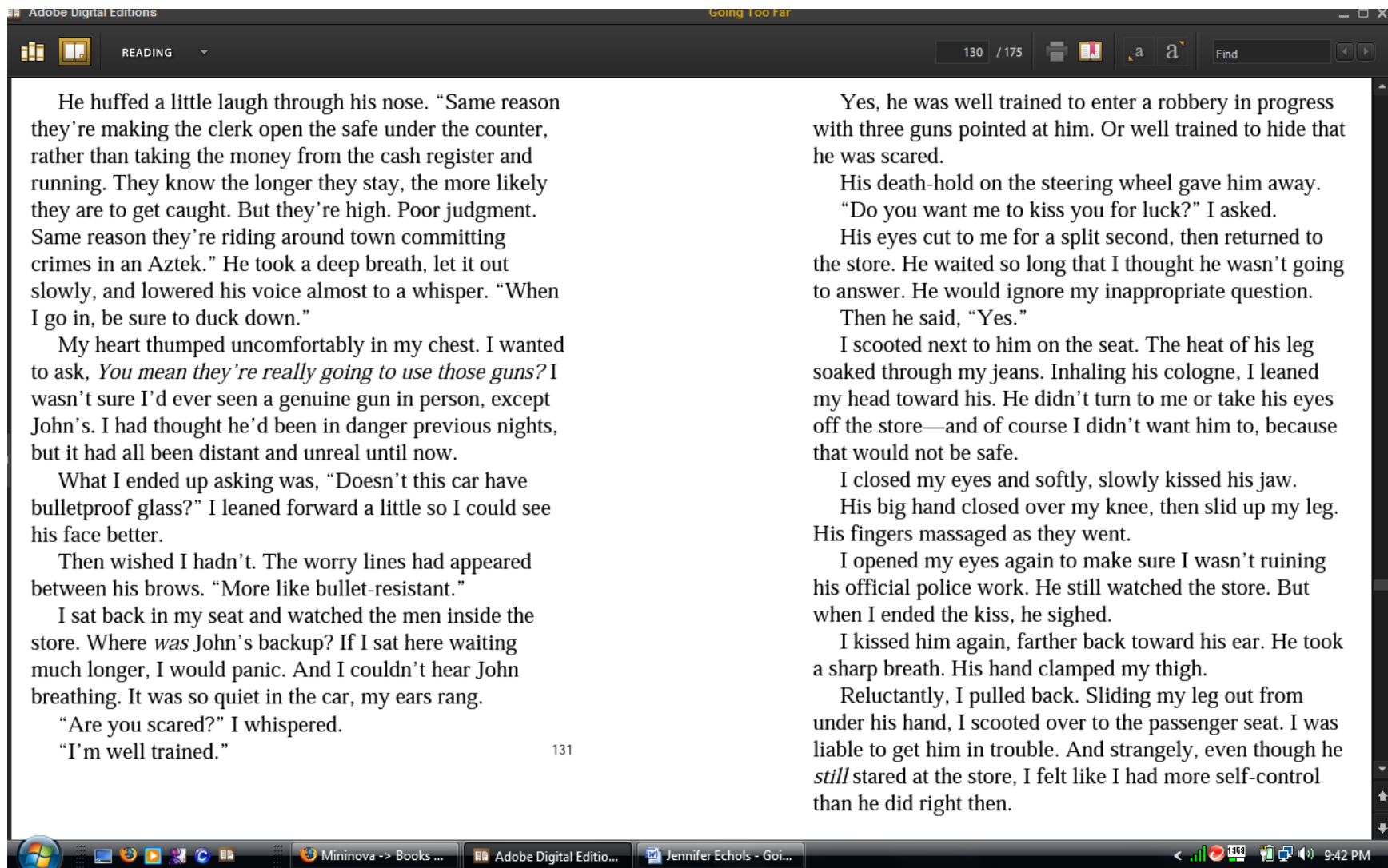
We got to the room and the cops pressed me down on the bed until the nurses could get the tethers around my wrists and ankles. I strained against the bindings until my hands went numb. This wasn't happening, this couldn't possibly be the way it ended, but it was. I screamed so loud, I could hardly hear the nurse telling my dad he would need to fill out a form to consent to them restraining me and a form to consent to them sedating me, and maybe he would like to come to the nurse's station to do that. He left the room. Another nurse whispered calmly in my ear, *Sweetie-pie, which hand do you want the IV in?* She tried to fool me into thinking I had some choice as she gave me a shot of tranquilizer. *Calm down, sweetie-pie, it'll all be over soon.* I felt it right away. They took the restraints off. I thought, *I'm free now*, but I couldn't move. It was like the restraints were still there. I went to sleep, and later I woke up dying.

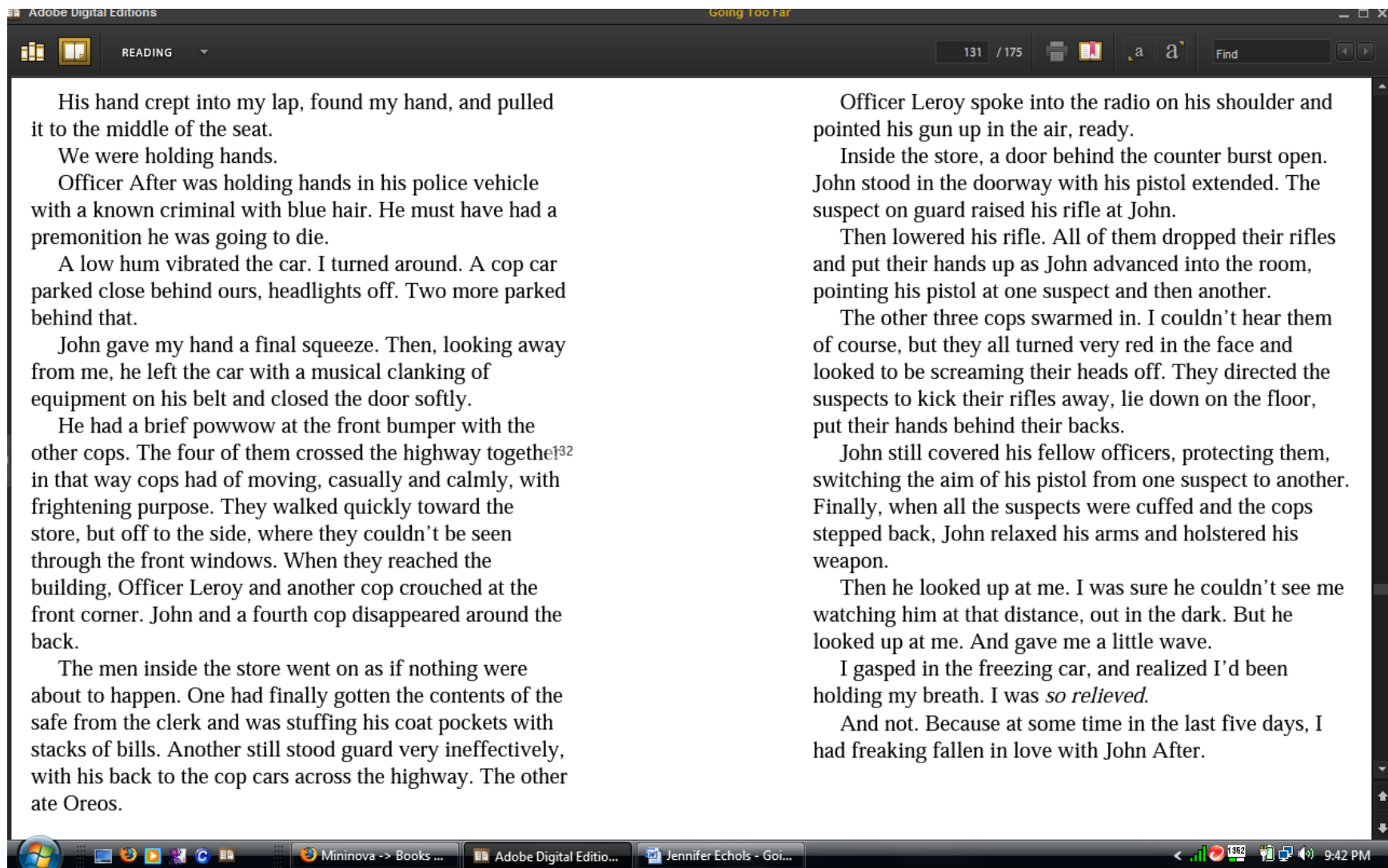
I went willingly to every chemo session after that, and every radiation session, because I didn't want to be strapped down again. Sometimes my hair would grow back in a sad little way between sessions, and my mom would tell me how pretty I looked, and I would dye my hair purple. And every time I had an adverse reaction and

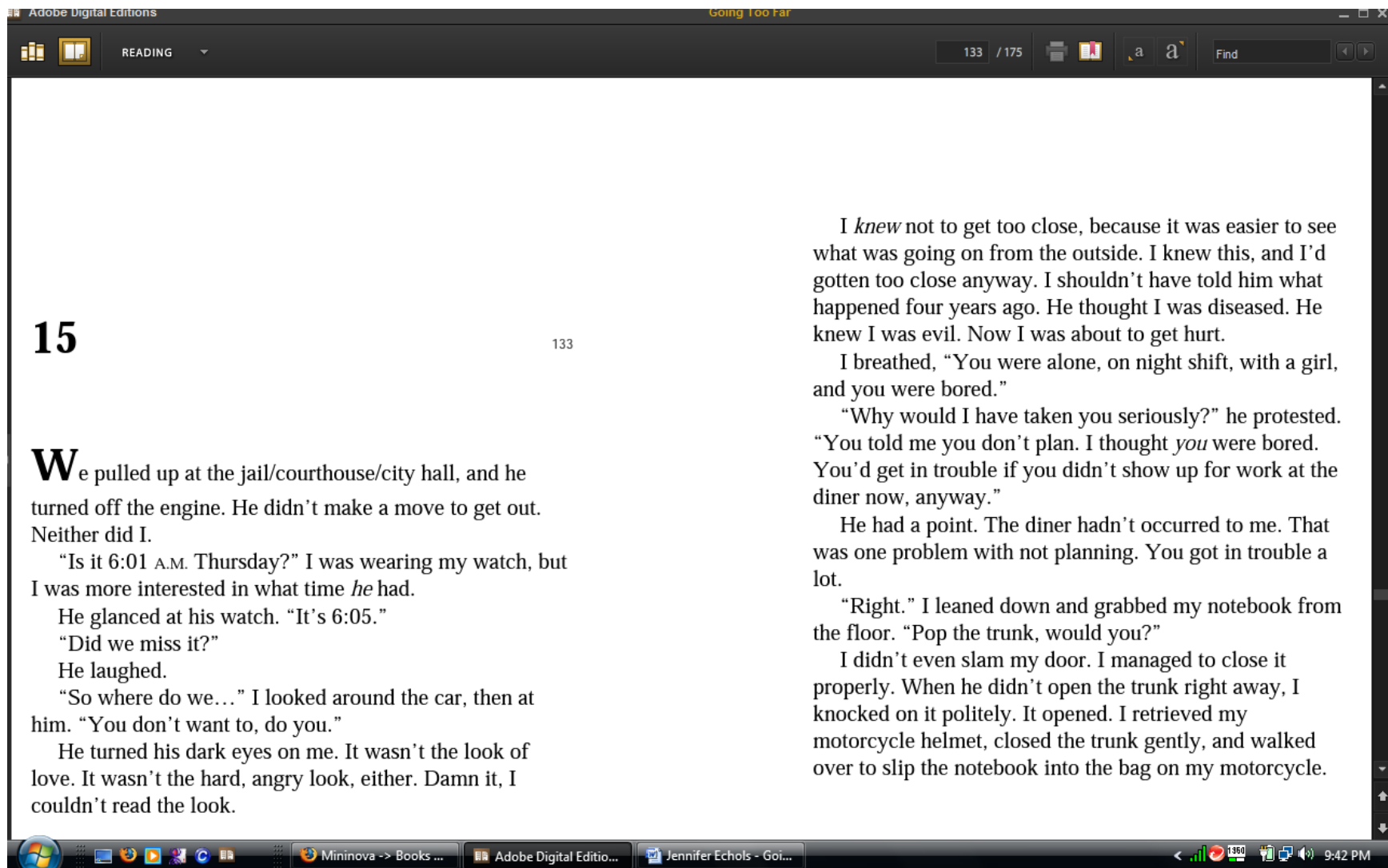




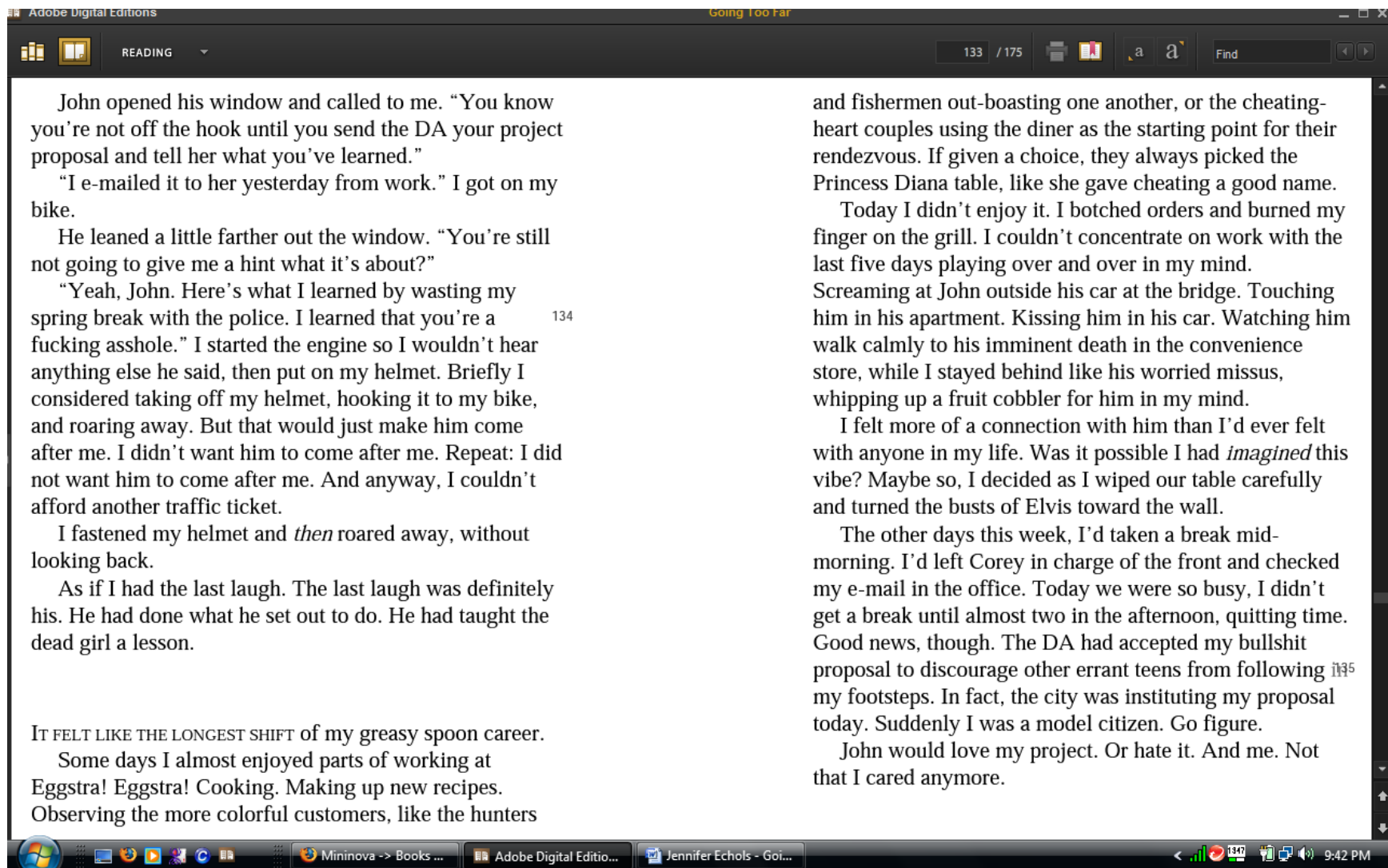












John opened his window and called to me. "You know you're not off the hook until you send the DA your project proposal and tell her what you've learned."

"I e-mailed it to her yesterday from work." I got on my bike.

He leaned a little farther out the window. "You're still not going to give me a hint what it's about?"

"Yeah, John. Here's what I learned by wasting my spring break with the police. I learned that you're a fucking asshole." I started the engine so I wouldn't hear anything else he said, then put on my helmet. Briefly I considered taking off my helmet, hooking it to my bike, and roaring away. But that would just make him come after me. I didn't want him to come after me. Repeat: I did not want him to come after me. And anyway, I couldn't afford another traffic ticket.

I fastened my helmet and *then* roared away, without looking back.

As if I had the last laugh. The last laugh was definitely his. He had done what he set out to do. He had taught the dead girl a lesson.

IT FELT LIKE THE LONGEST SHIFT of my greasy spoon career.

Some days I almost enjoyed parts of working at Eggstra! Eggstra! Cooking. Making up new recipes. Observing the more colorful customers, like the hunters

and fishermen out-boasting one another, or the cheating-heart couples using the diner as the starting point for their rendezvous. If given a choice, they always picked the Princess Diana table, like she gave cheating a good name.

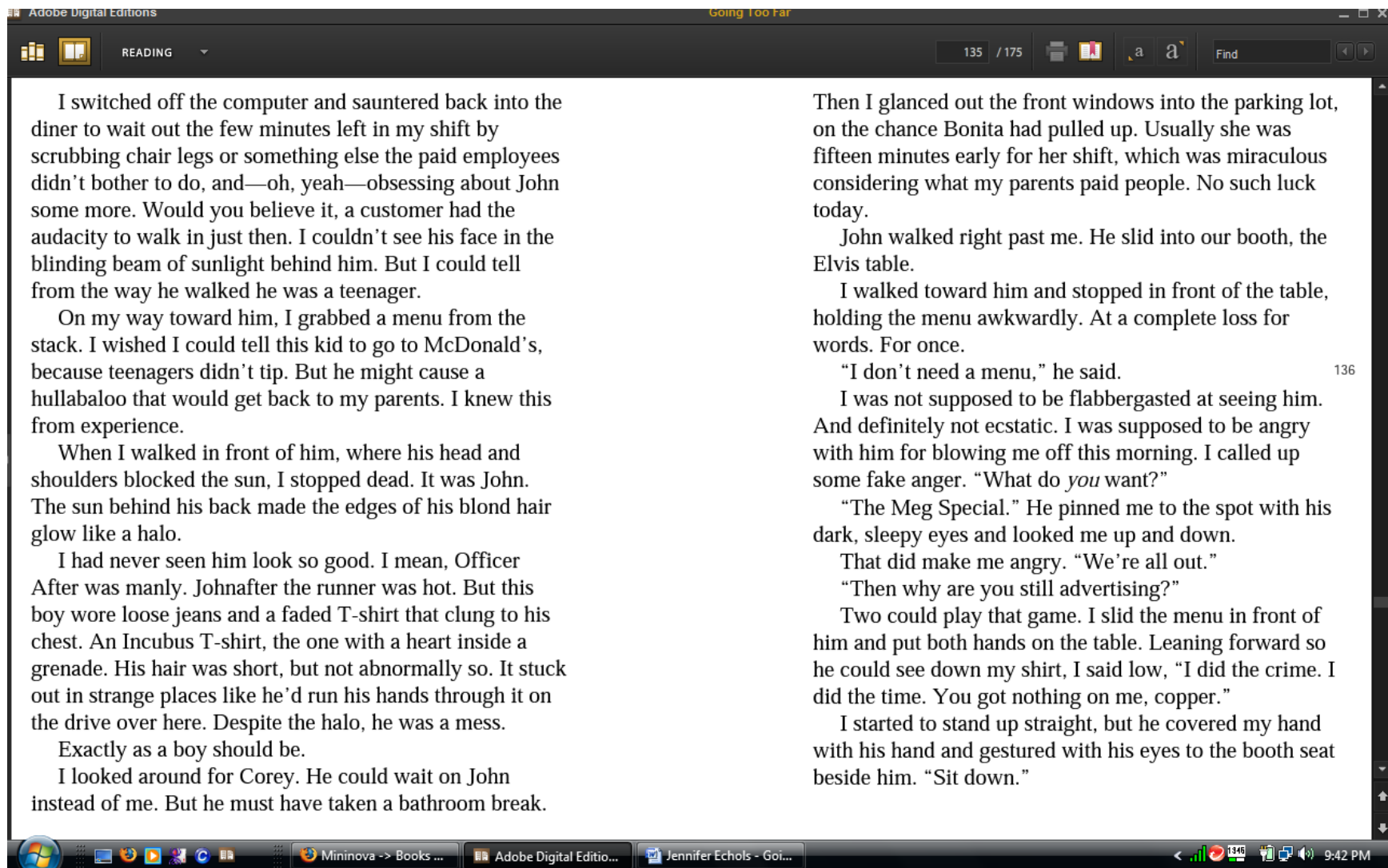
Today I didn't enjoy it. I botched orders and burned my finger on the grill. I couldn't concentrate on work with the last five days playing over and over in my mind. Screaming at John outside his car at the bridge. Touching him in his apartment. Kissing him in his car. Watching him walk calmly to his imminent death in the convenience store, while I stayed behind like his worried missus, whipping up a fruit cobbler for him in my mind.

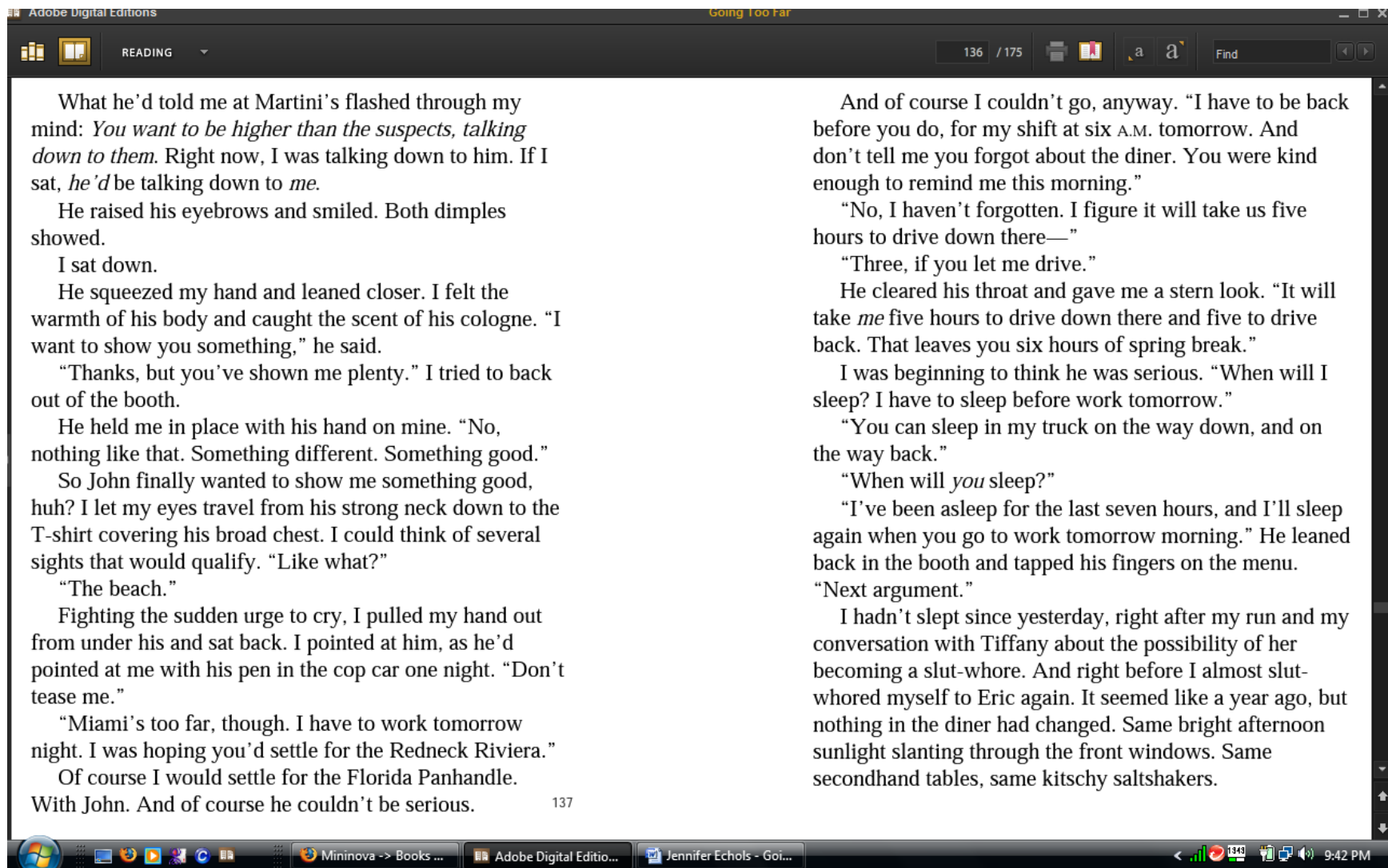
I felt more of a connection with him than I'd ever felt with anyone in my life. Was it possible I had *imagined* this vibe? Maybe so, I decided as I wiped our table carefully and turned the busts of Elvis toward the wall.

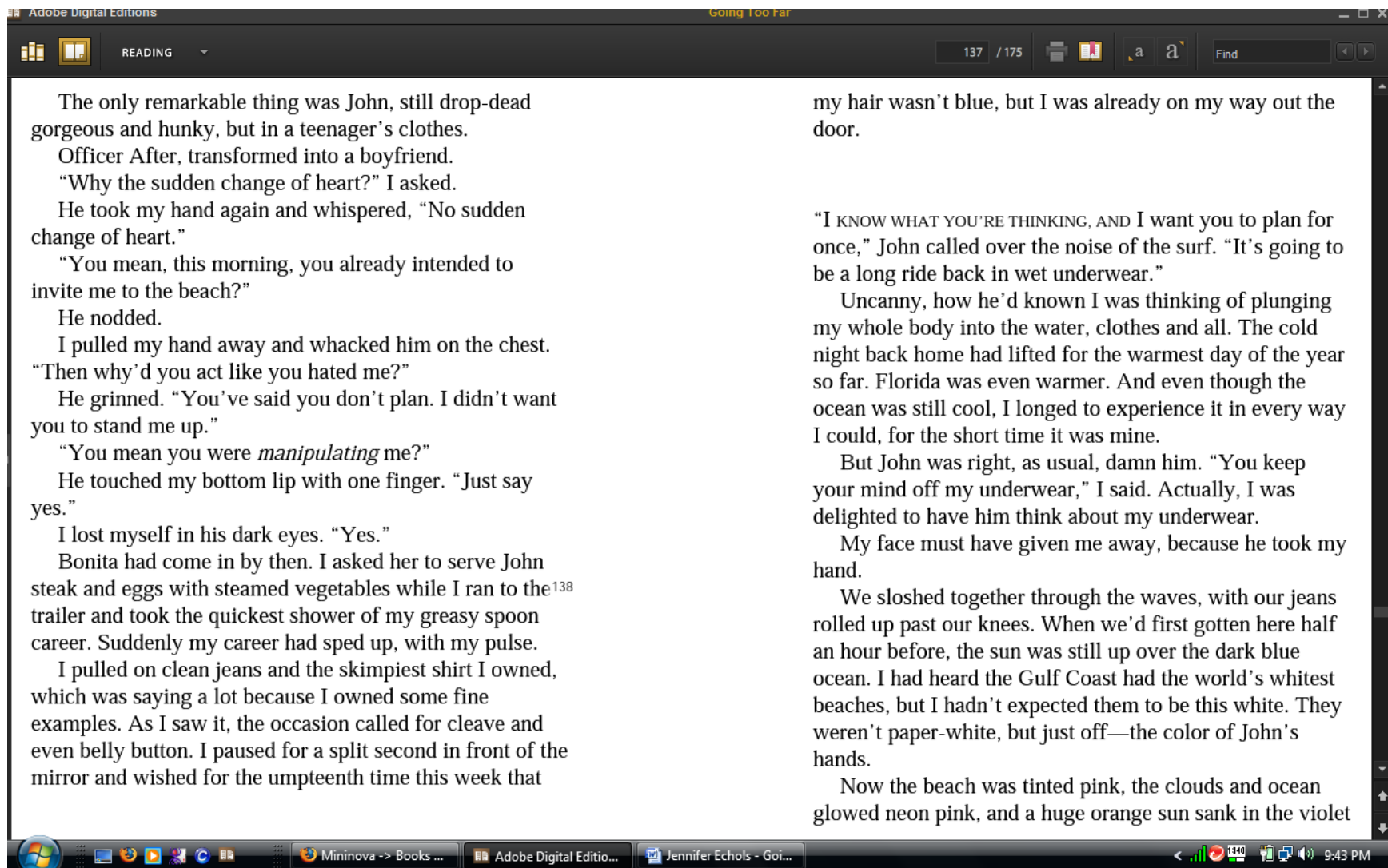
The other days this week, I'd taken a break mid-morning. I'd left Corey in charge of the front and checked my e-mail in the office. Today we were so busy, I didn't get a break until almost two in the afternoon, quitting time. Good news, though. The DA had accepted my bullshit proposal to discourage other errant teens from following my footsteps. In fact, the city was instituting my proposal today. Suddenly I was a model citizen. Go figure.

John would love my project. Or hate it. And me. Not that I cared anymore.









The only remarkable thing was John, still drop-dead gorgeous and hunky, but in a teenager's clothes.

Officer After, transformed into a boyfriend.

"Why the sudden change of heart?" I asked.

He took my hand again and whispered, "No sudden change of heart."

"You mean, this morning, you already intended to invite me to the beach?"

He nodded.

I pulled my hand away and whacked him on the chest. "Then why'd you act like you hated me?"

He grinned. "You've said you don't plan. I didn't want you to stand me up."

"You mean you were *manipulating* me?"

He touched my bottom lip with one finger. "Just say yes."

I lost myself in his dark eyes. "Yes."

Bonita had come in by then. I asked her to serve John steak and eggs with steamed vegetables while I ran to the trailer and took the quickest shower of my greasy spoon career. Suddenly my career had sped up, with my pulse.

I pulled on clean jeans and the skimpiest shirt I owned, which was saying a lot because I owned some fine examples. As I saw it, the occasion called for cleave and even belly button. I paused for a split second in front of the mirror and wished for the umpteenth time this week that

my hair wasn't blue, but I was already on my way out the door.

"I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING, AND I want you to plan for once," John called over the noise of the surf. "It's going to be a long ride back in wet underwear."

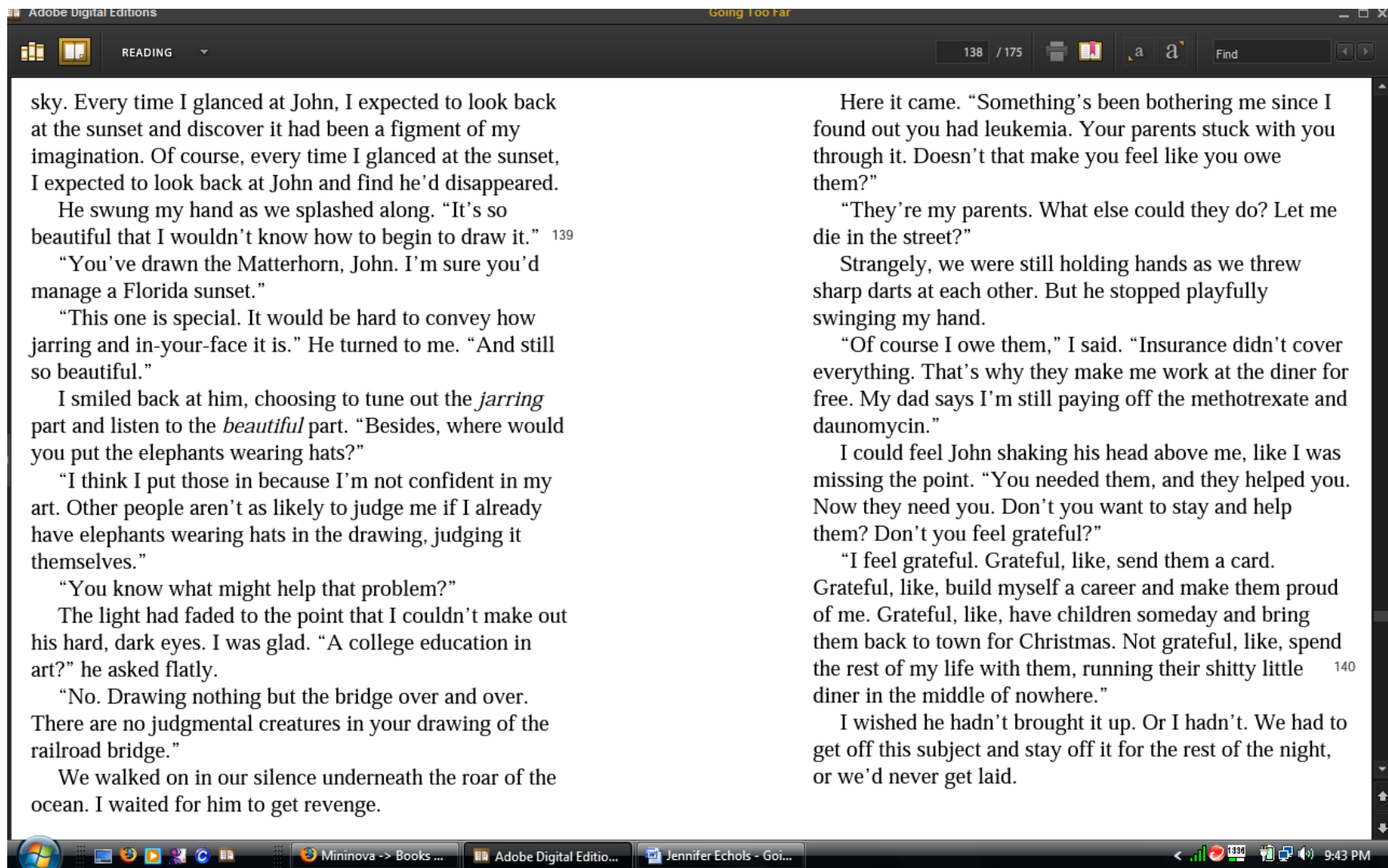
Uncanny, how he'd known I was thinking of plunging my whole body into the water, clothes and all. The cold night back home had lifted for the warmest day of the year so far. Florida was even warmer. And even though the ocean was still cool, I longed to experience it in every way I could, for the short time it was mine.

But John was right, as usual, damn him. "You keep your mind off my underwear," I said. Actually, I was delighted to have him think about my underwear.

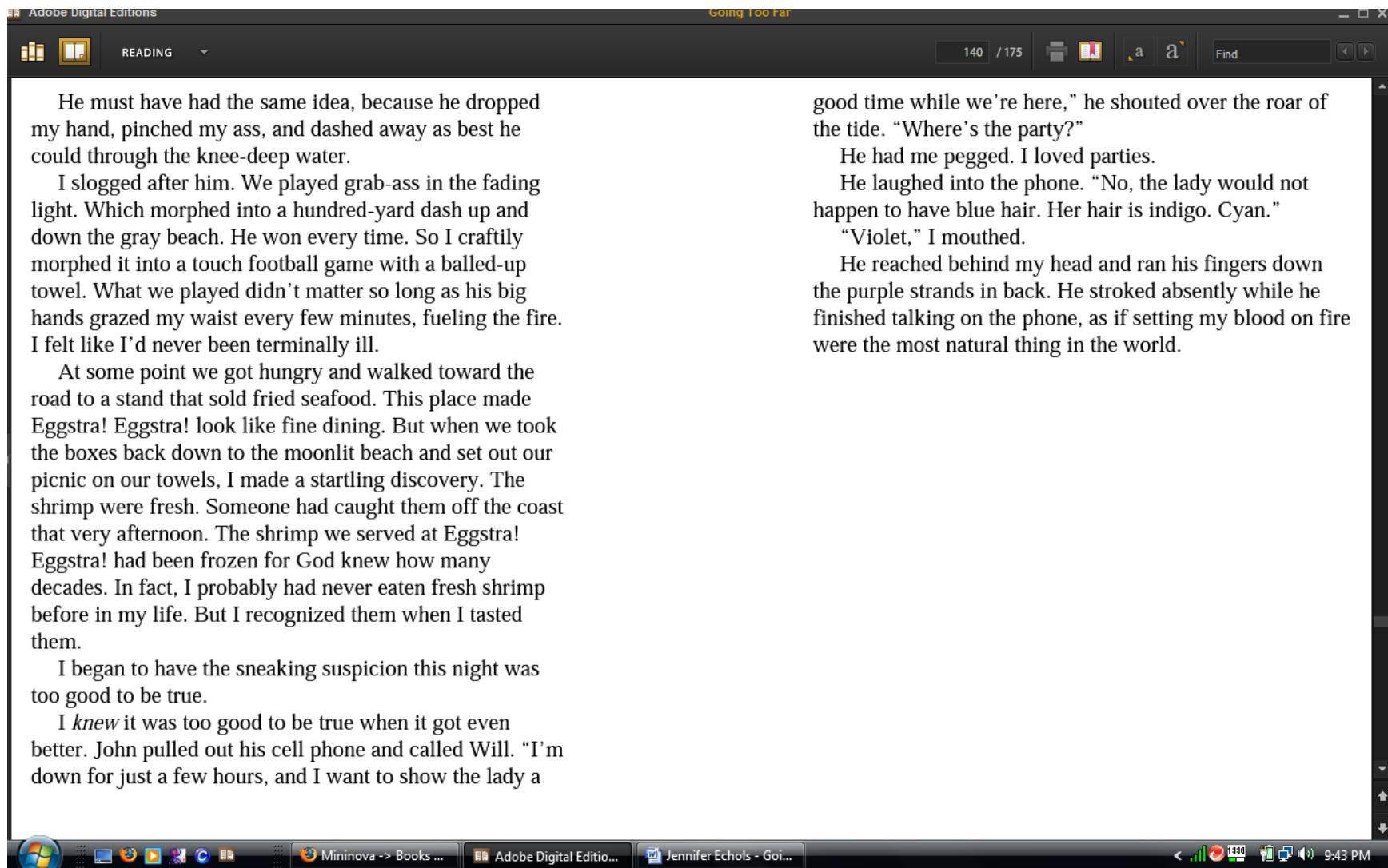
My face must have given me away, because he took my hand.

We sloshed together through the waves, with our jeans rolled up past our knees. When we'd first gotten here half an hour before, the sun was still up over the dark blue ocean. I had heard the Gulf Coast had the world's whitest beaches, but I hadn't expected them to be this white. They weren't paper-white, but just off—the color of John's hands.

Now the beach was tinted pink, the clouds and ocean glowed neon pink, and a huge orange sun sank in the violet







He must have had the same idea, because he dropped my hand, pinched my ass, and dashed away as best he could through the knee-deep water.

I slogged after him. We played grab-ass in the fading light. Which morphed into a hundred-yard dash up and down the gray beach. He won every time. So I craftily morphed it into a touch football game with a balled-up towel. What we played didn't matter so long as his big hands grazed my waist every few minutes, fueling the fire. I felt like I'd never been terminally ill.

At some point we got hungry and walked toward the road to a stand that sold fried seafood. This place made Eggstra! Eggstra! look like fine dining. But when we took the boxes back down to the moonlit beach and set out our picnic on our towels, I made a startling discovery. The shrimp were fresh. Someone had caught them off the coast that very afternoon. The shrimp we served at Eggstra! Eggstra! had been frozen for God knew how many decades. In fact, I probably had never eaten fresh shrimp before in my life. But I recognized them when I tasted them.

I began to have the sneaking suspicion this night was too good to be true.

I *knew* it was too good to be true when it got even better. John pulled out his cell phone and called Will. "I'm down for just a few hours, and I want to show the lady a

good time while we're here," he shouted over the roar of the tide. "Where's the party?"

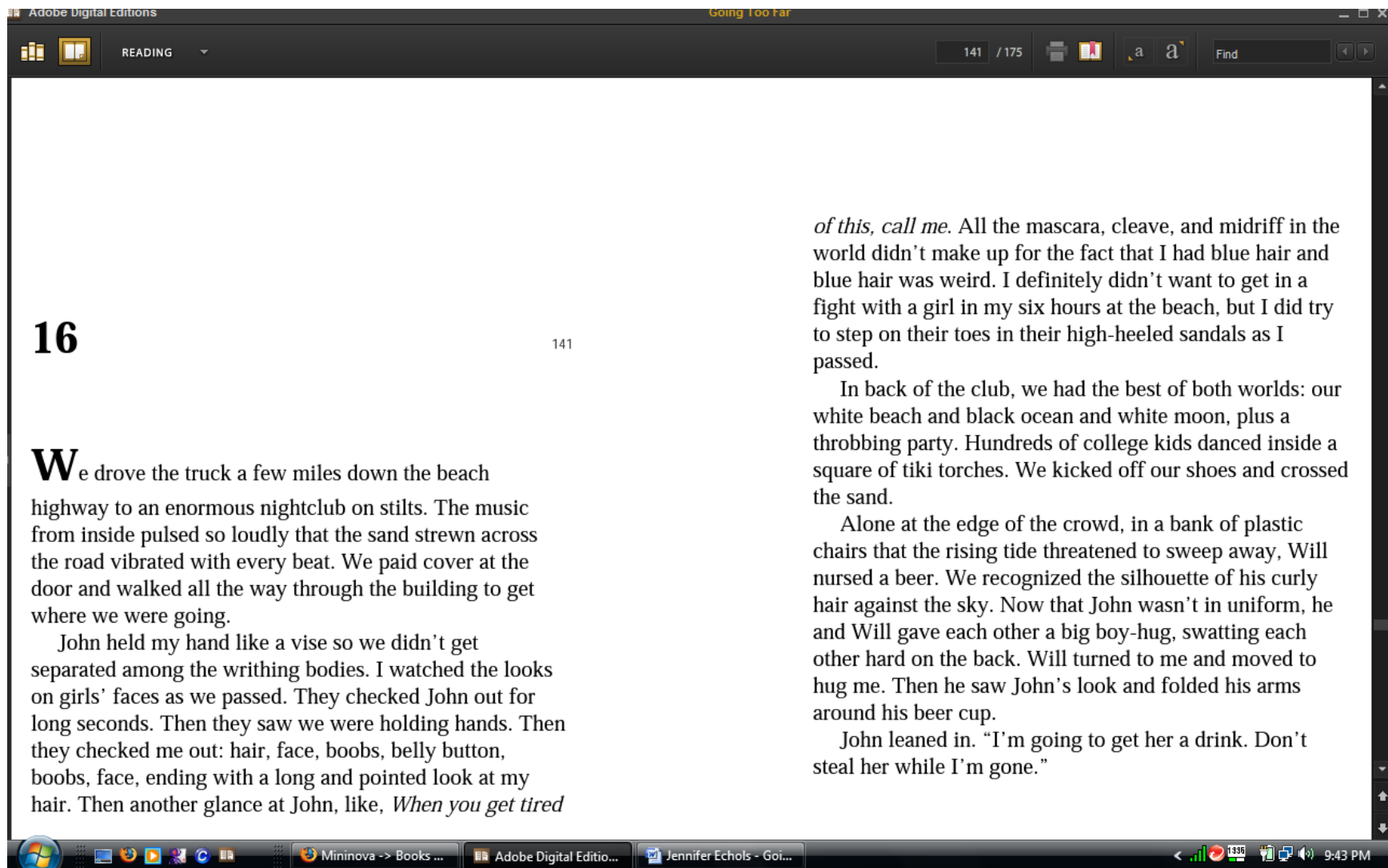
He had me pegged. I loved parties.

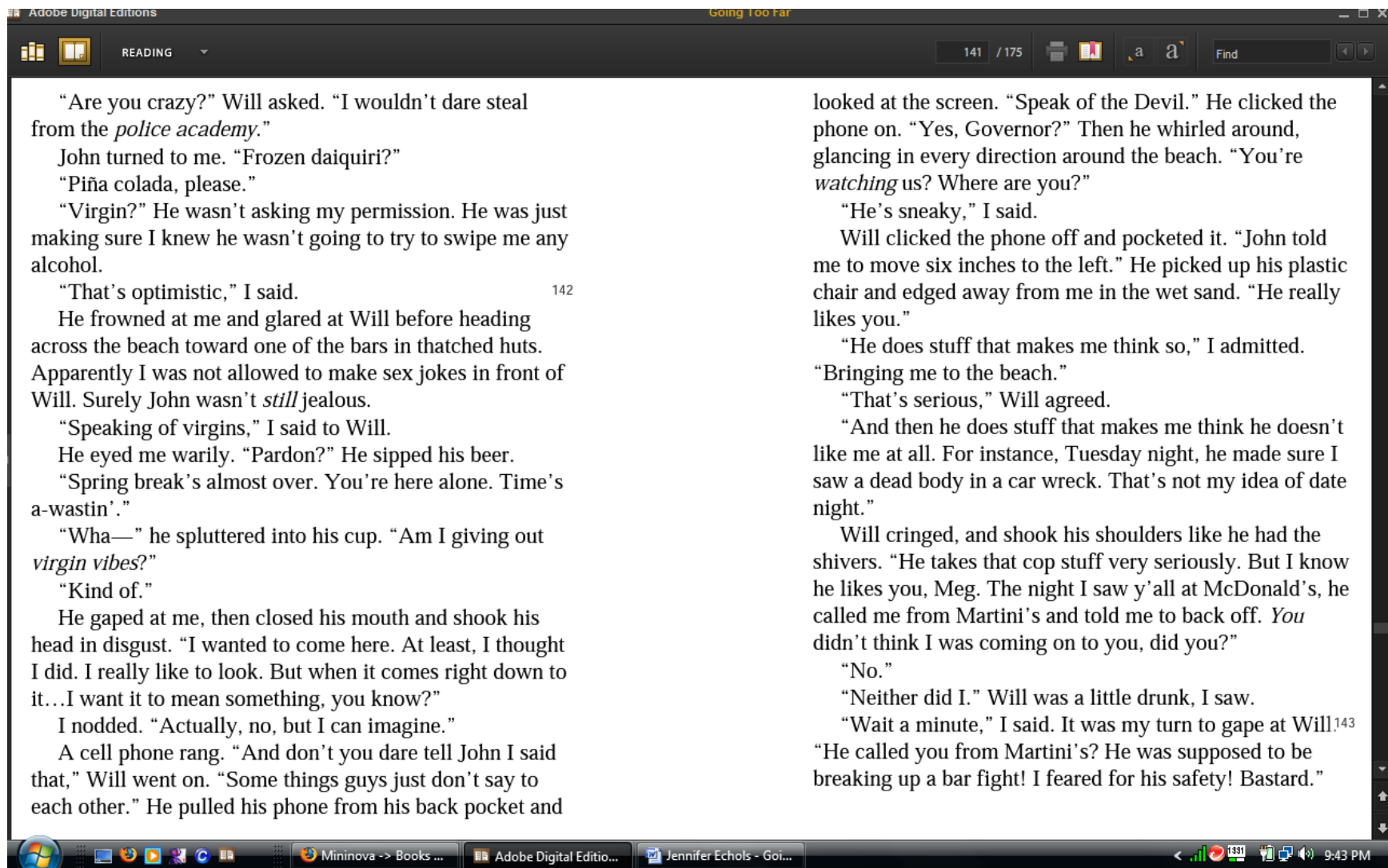
He laughed into the phone. "No, the lady would not happen to have blue hair. Her hair is indigo. Cyan."

"Violet," I mouthed.

He reached behind my head and ran his fingers down the purple strands in back. He stroked absently while he finished talking on the phone, as if setting my blood on fire were the most natural thing in the world.







"Are you crazy?" Will asked. "I wouldn't dare steal from the *police academy*."

John turned to me. "Frozen daiquiri?"

"Piña colada, please."

"Virgin?" He wasn't asking my permission. He was just making sure I knew he wasn't going to try to swipe me any alcohol.

"That's optimistic," I said.

142

He frowned at me and glared at Will before heading across the beach toward one of the bars in thatched huts. Apparently I was not allowed to make sex jokes in front of Will. Surely John wasn't *still* jealous.

"Speaking of virgins," I said to Will.

He eyed me warily. "Pardon?" He sipped his beer.

"Spring break's almost over. You're here alone. Time's a-wastin'."

"Wha—" he spluttered into his cup. "Am I giving out *virgin vibes*?"

"Kind of."

He gaped at me, then closed his mouth and shook his head in disgust. "I wanted to come here. At least, I thought I did. I really like to look. But when it comes right down to it...I want it to mean something, you know?"

I nodded. "Actually, no, but I can imagine."

A cell phone rang. "And don't you dare tell John I said that," Will went on. "Some things guys just don't say to each other." He pulled his phone from his back pocket and

looked at the screen. "Speak of the Devil." He clicked the phone on. "Yes, Governor?" Then he whirled around, glancing in every direction around the beach. "You're *watching* us? Where are you?"

"He's sneaky," I said.

Will clicked the phone off and pocketed it. "John told me to move six inches to the left." He picked up his plastic chair and edged away from me in the wet sand. "He really likes you."

"He does stuff that makes me think so," I admitted.

"Bringing me to the beach."

"That's serious," Will agreed.

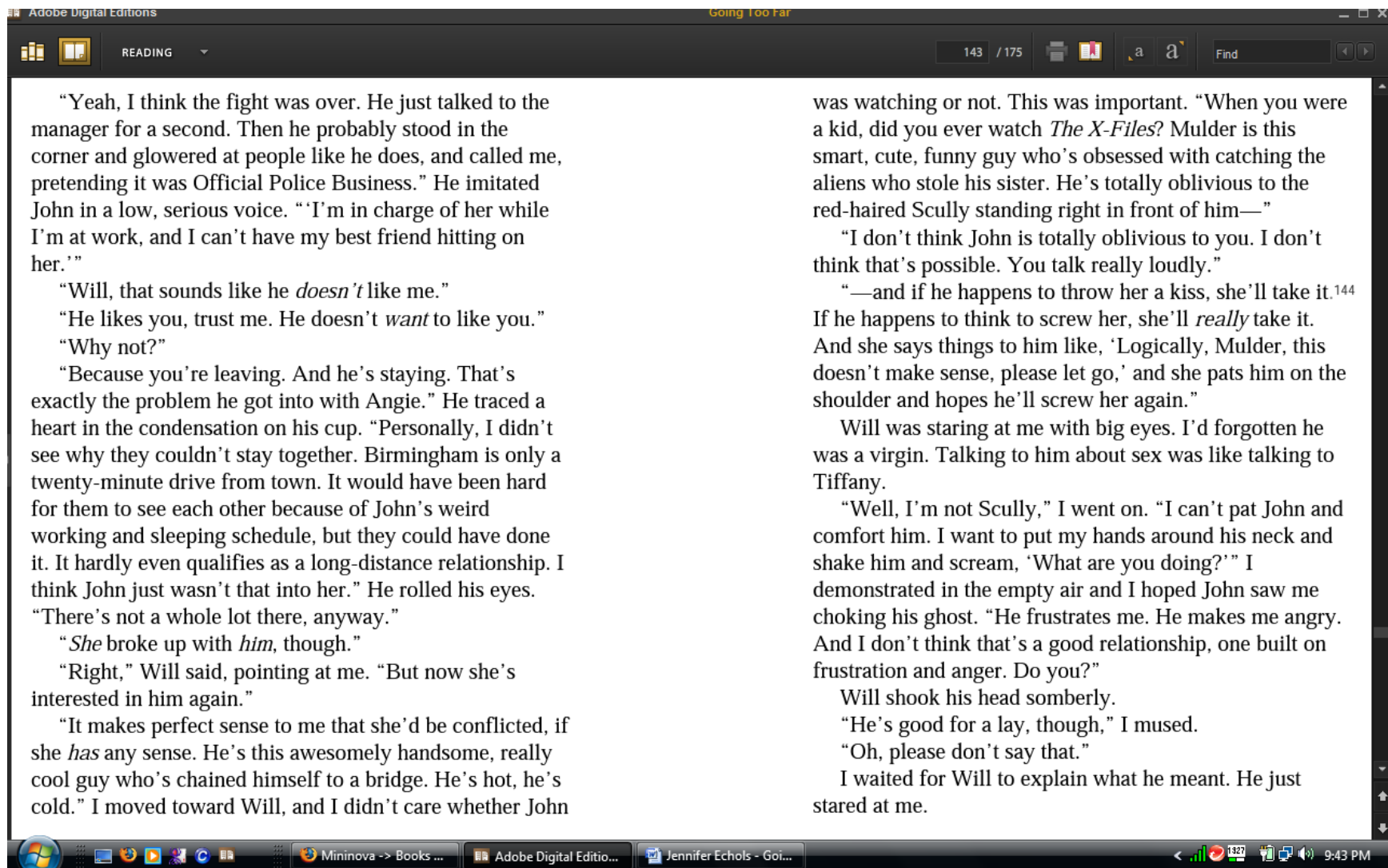
"And then he does stuff that makes me think he doesn't like me at all. For instance, Tuesday night, he made sure I saw a dead body in a car wreck. That's not my idea of date night."

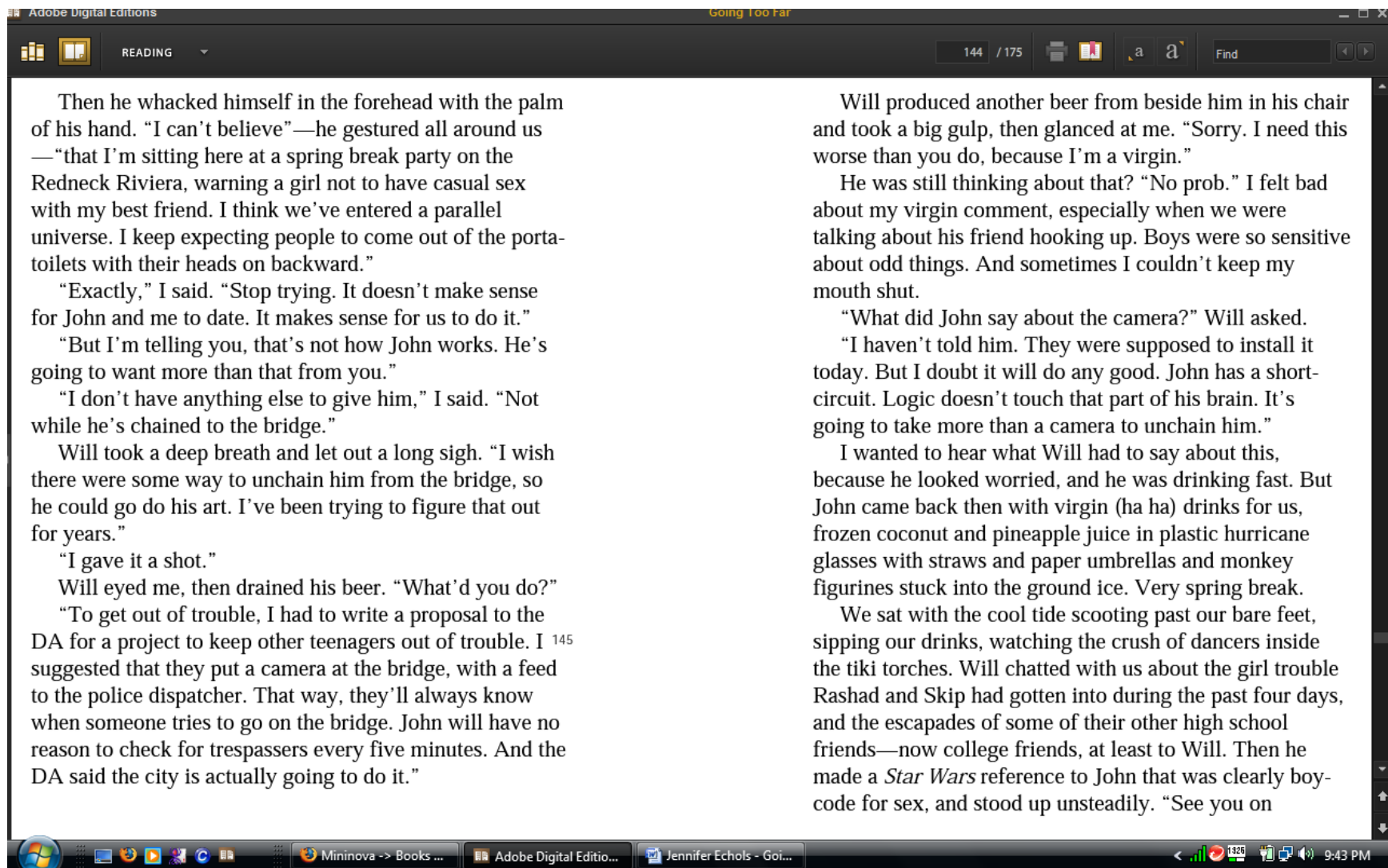
Will cringed, and shook his shoulders like he had the shivers. "He takes that cop stuff very seriously. But I know he likes you, Meg. The night I saw y'all at McDonald's, he called me from Martini's and told me to back off. *You* didn't think I was coming on to you, did you?"

"No."

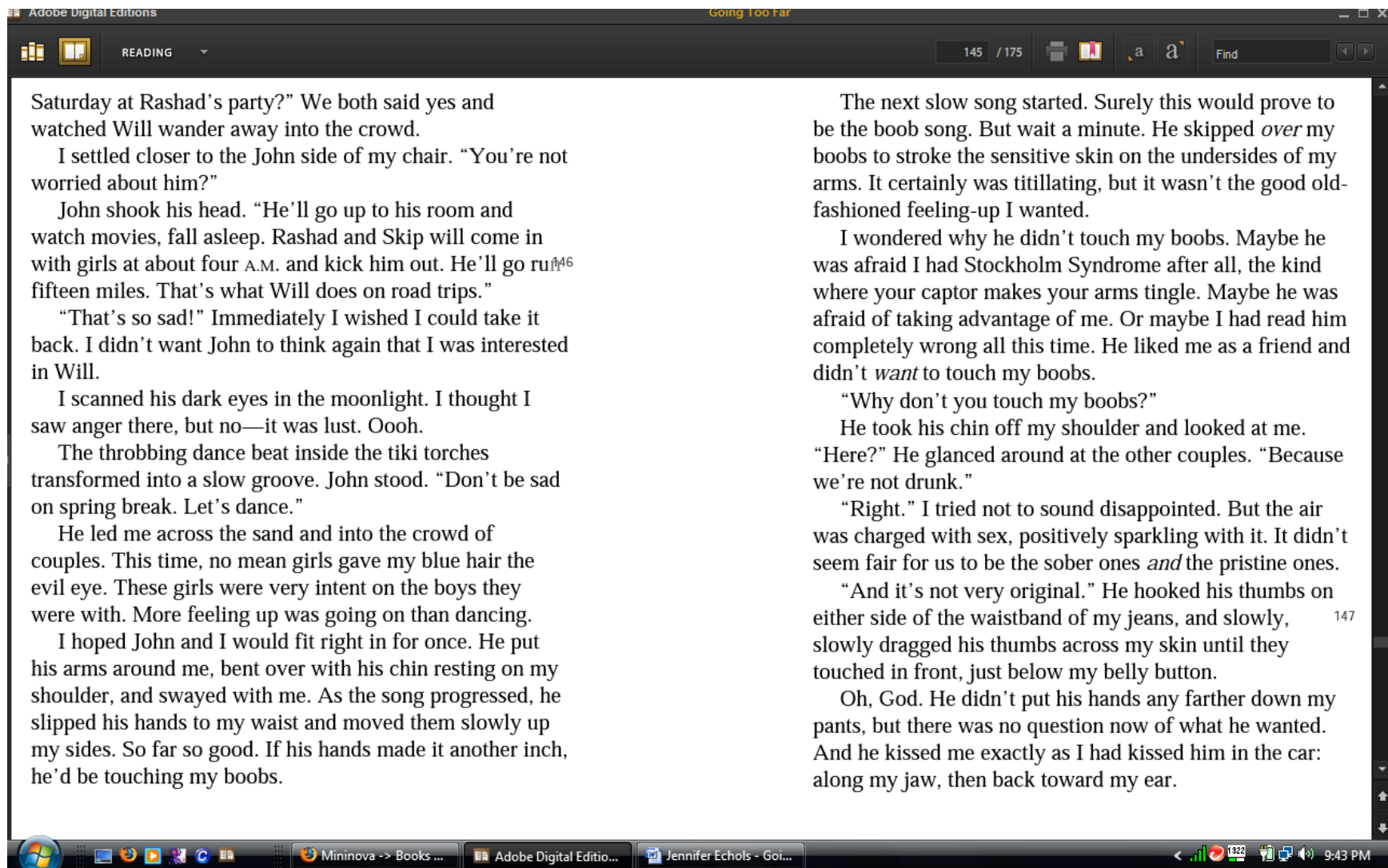
"Neither did I." Will was a little drunk, I saw.

"Wait a minute," I said. It was my turn to gape at Will.<sup>143</sup> "He called you from Martini's? He was supposed to be breaking up a bar fight! I feared for his safety! Bastard."

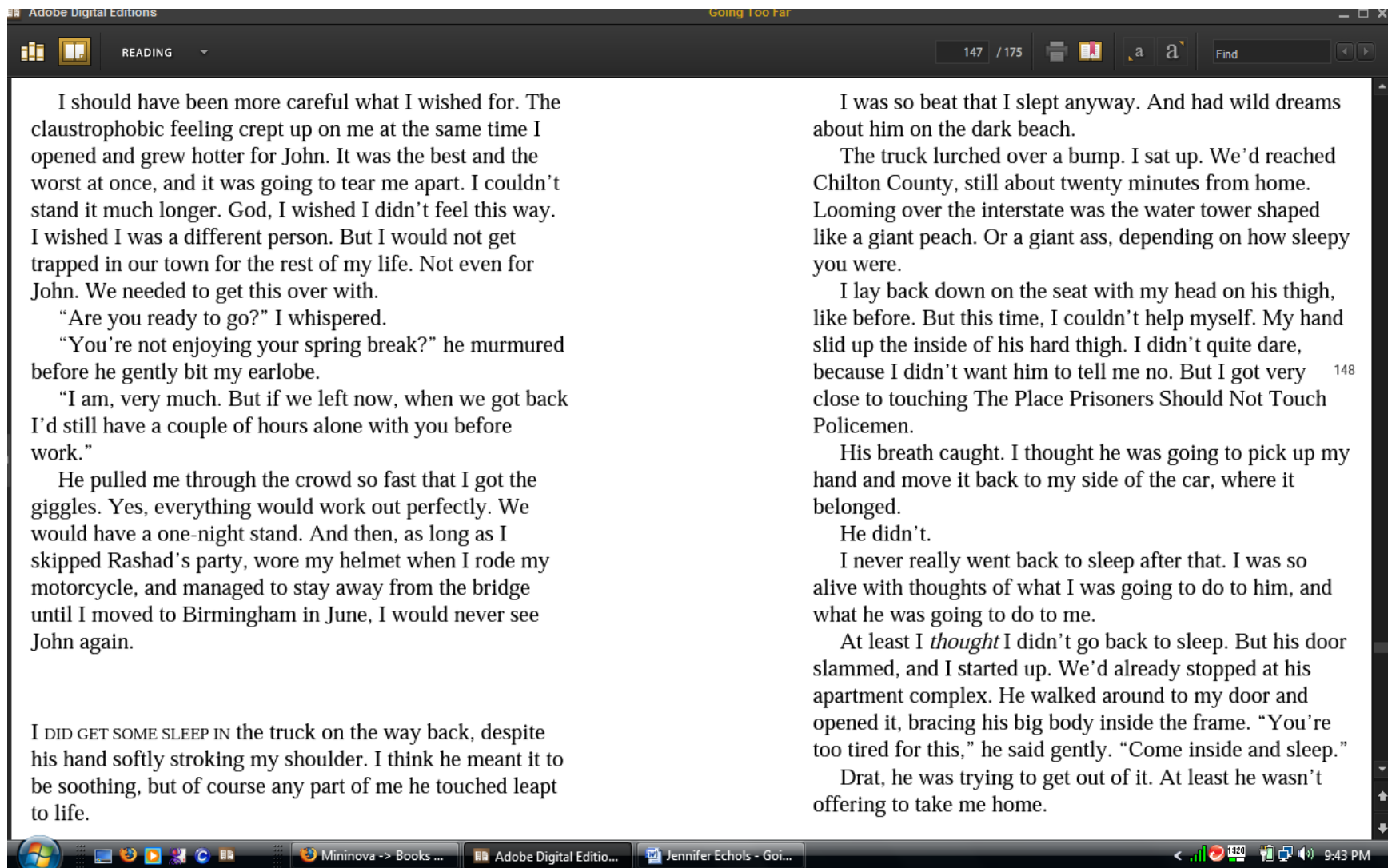


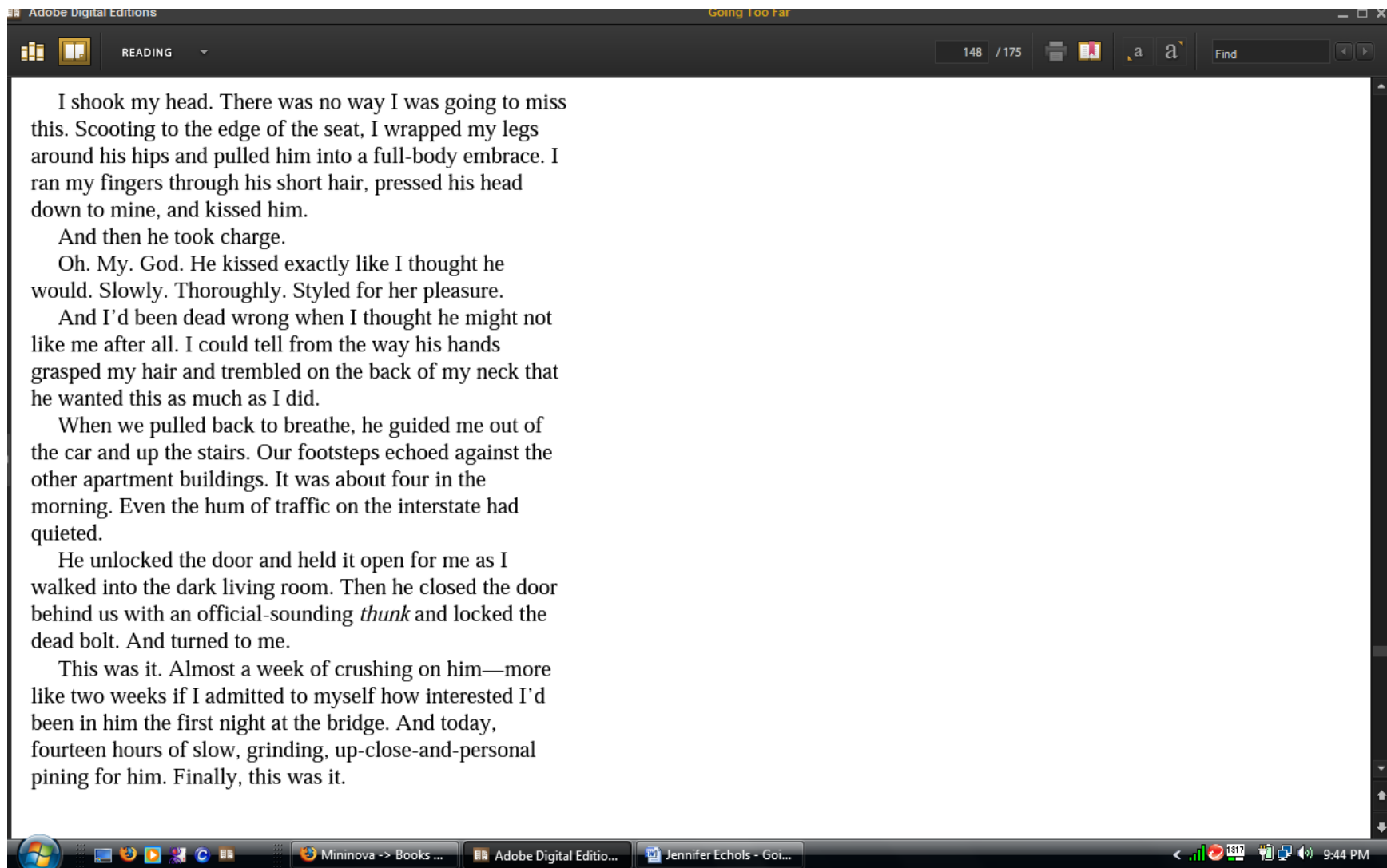


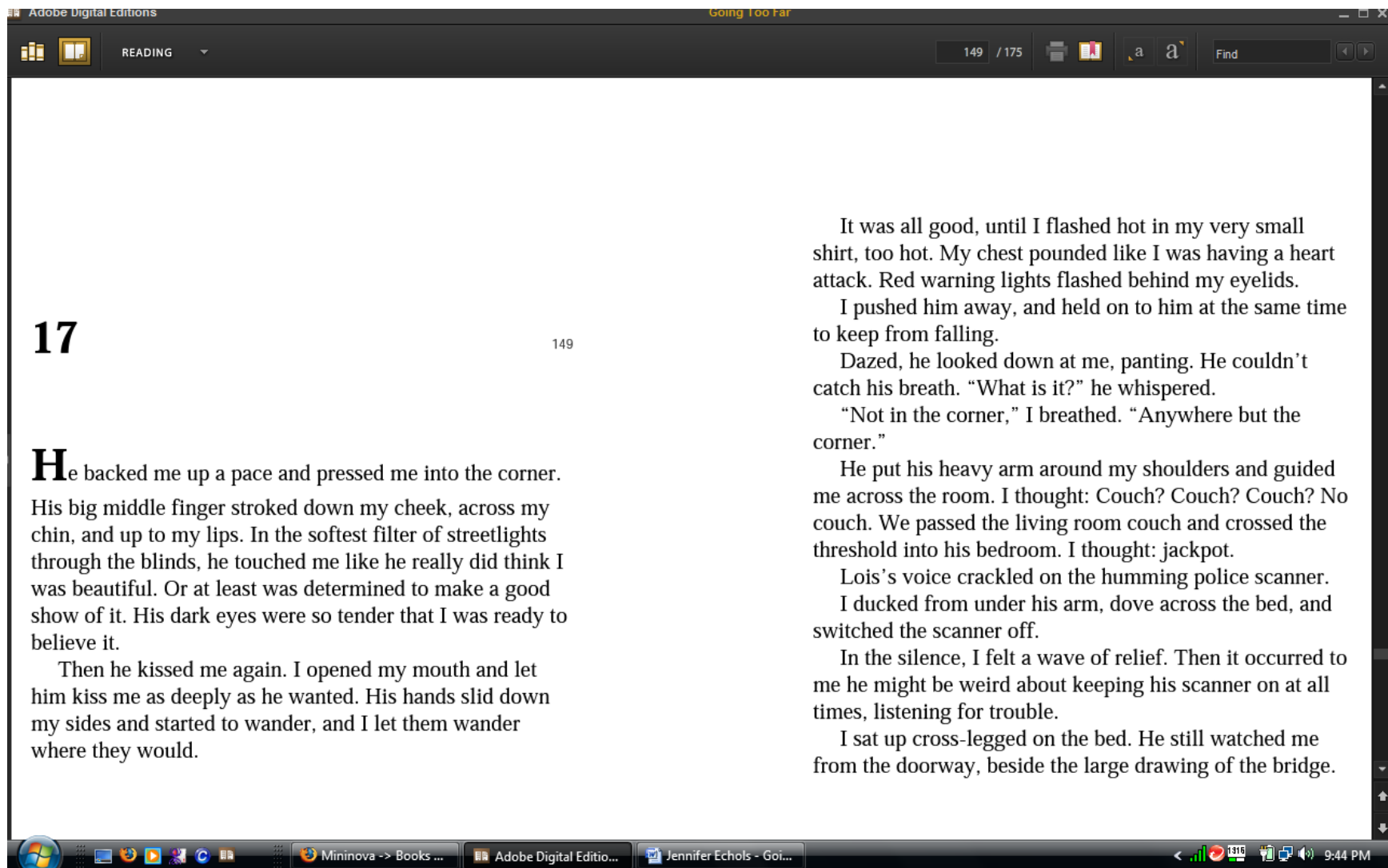


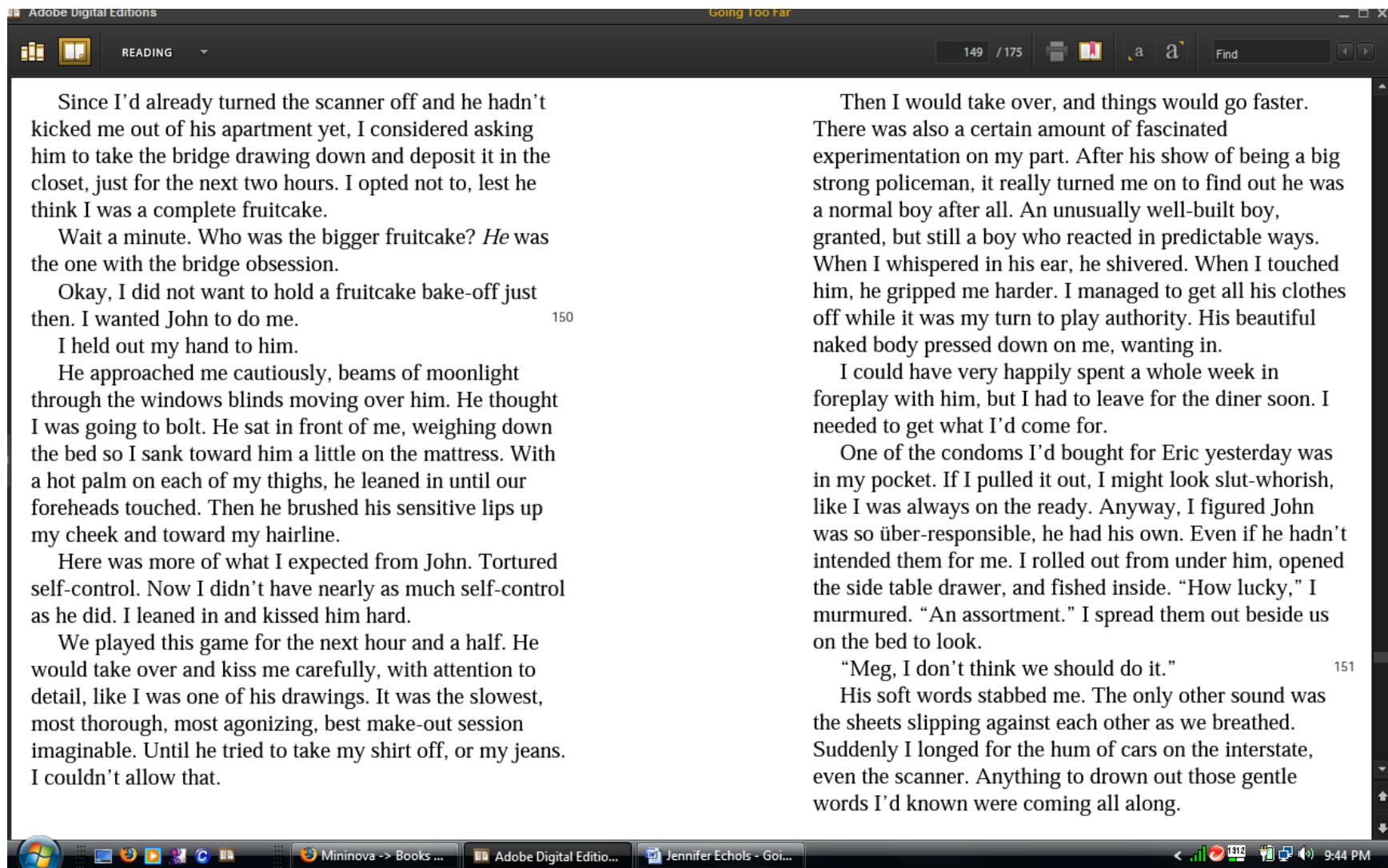


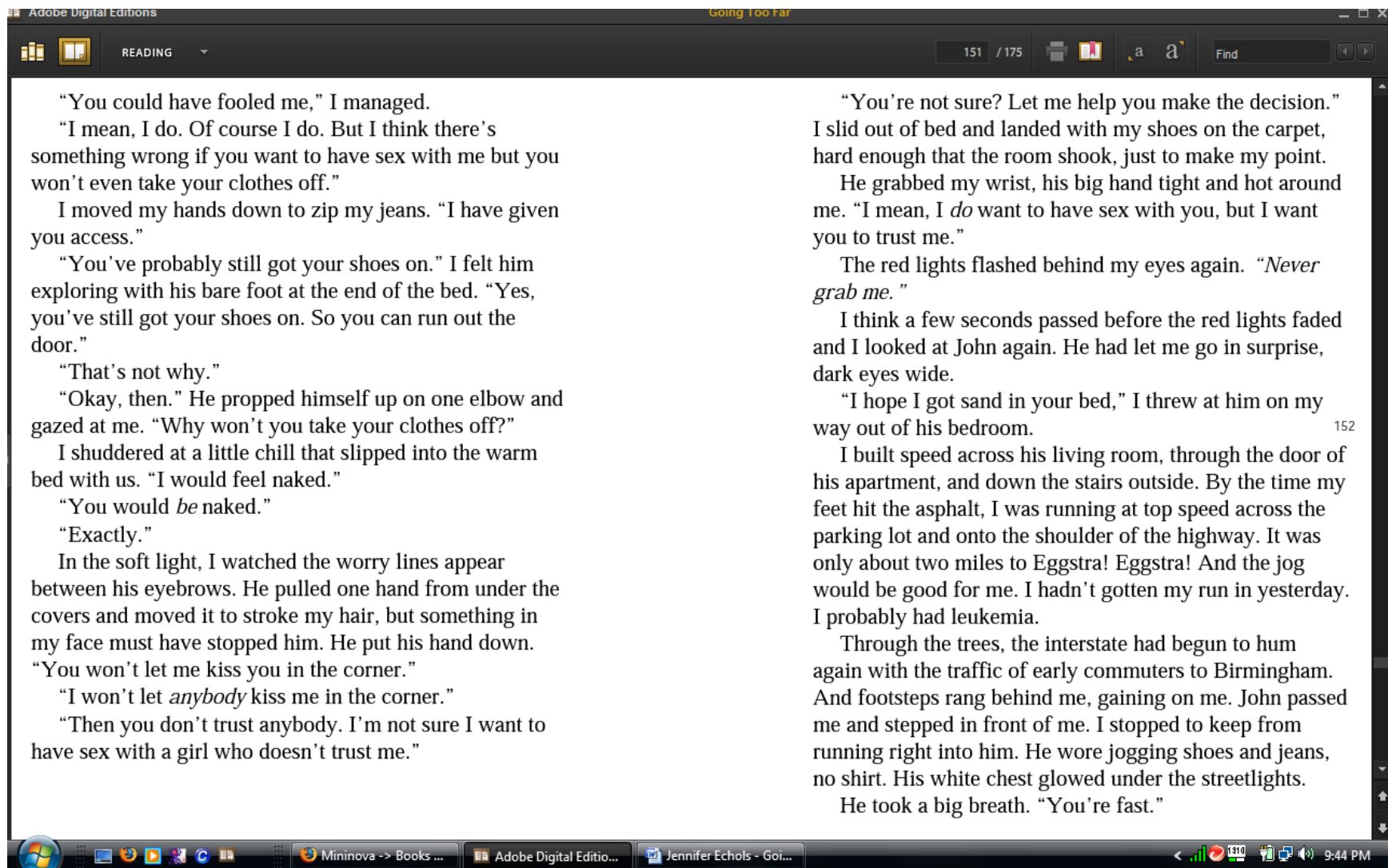




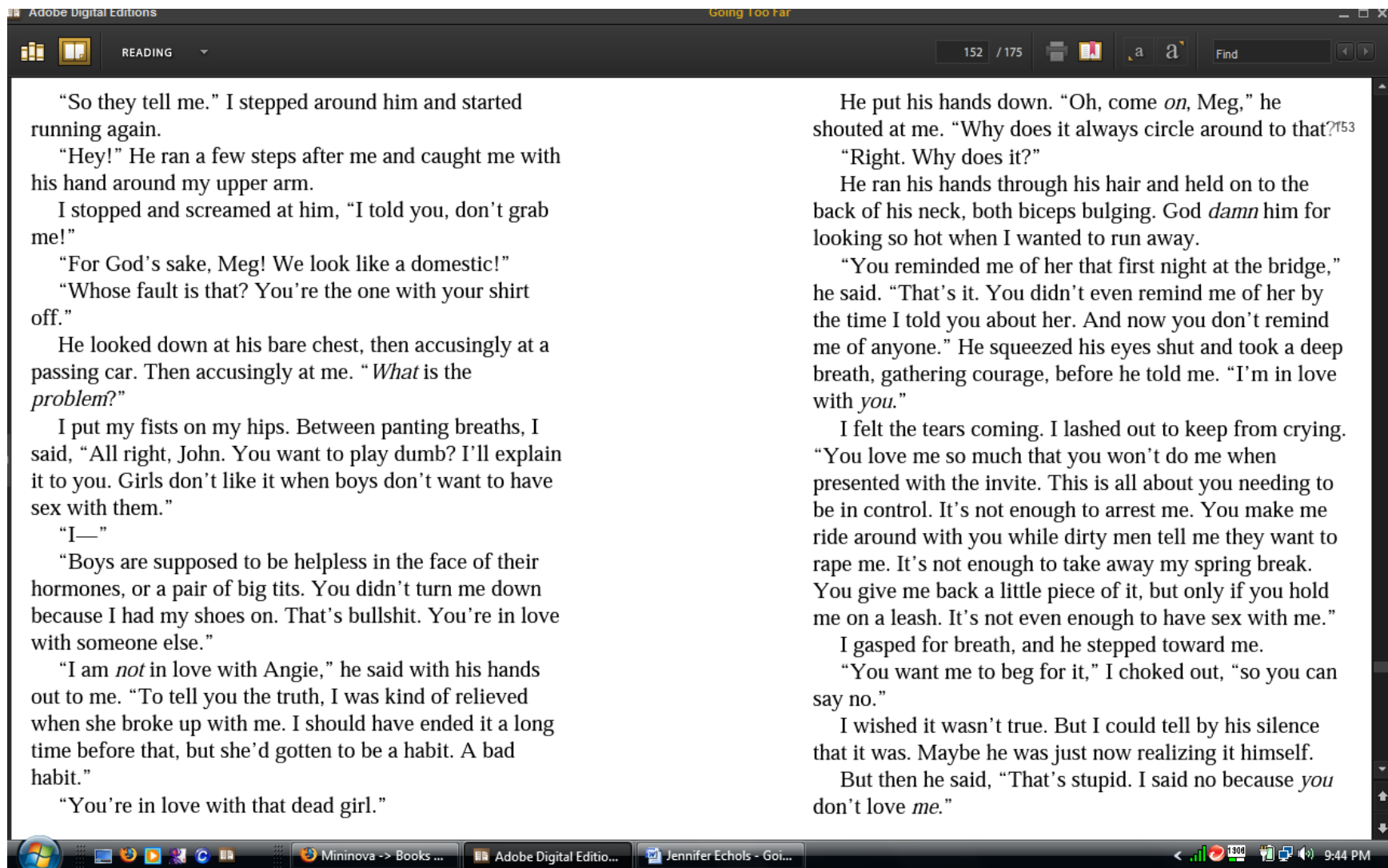


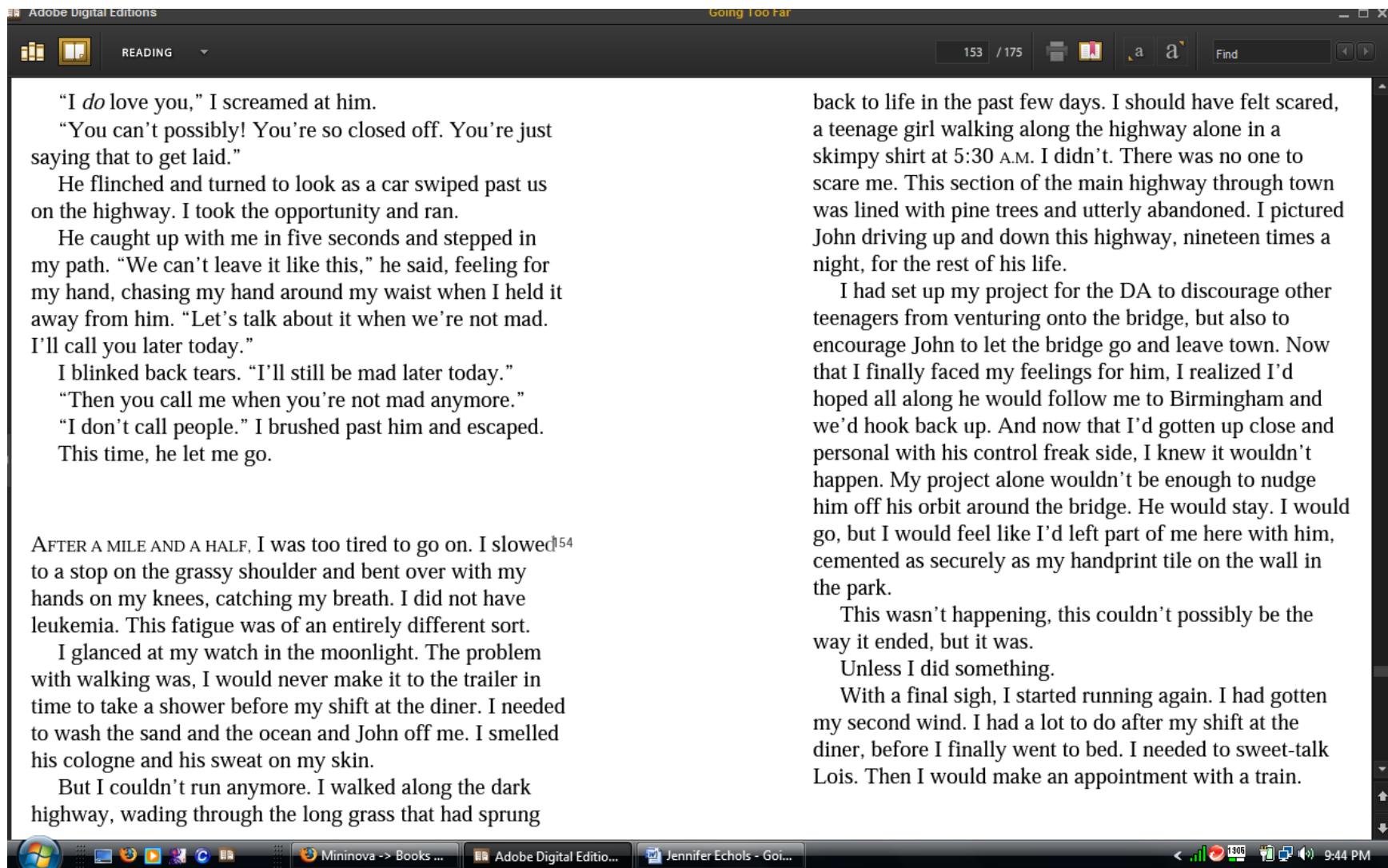












"I *do* love you," I screamed at him.

"You can't possibly! You're so closed off. You're just saying that to get laid."

He flinched and turned to look as a car swiped past us on the highway. I took the opportunity and ran.

He caught up with me in five seconds and stepped in my path. "We can't leave it like this," he said, feeling for my hand, chasing my hand around my waist when I held it away from him. "Let's talk about it when we're not mad. I'll call you later today."

I blinked back tears. "I'll still be mad later today."

"Then you call me when you're not mad anymore."

"I don't call people." I brushed past him and escaped.

This time, he let me go.

AFTER A MILE AND A HALF, I was too tired to go on. I slowed to a stop on the grassy shoulder and bent over with my hands on my knees, catching my breath. I did not have leukemia. This fatigue was of an entirely different sort.

I glanced at my watch in the moonlight. The problem with walking was, I would never make it to the trailer in time to take a shower before my shift at the diner. I needed to wash the sand and the ocean and John off me. I smelled his cologne and his sweat on my skin.

But I couldn't run anymore. I walked along the dark highway, wading through the long grass that had sprung

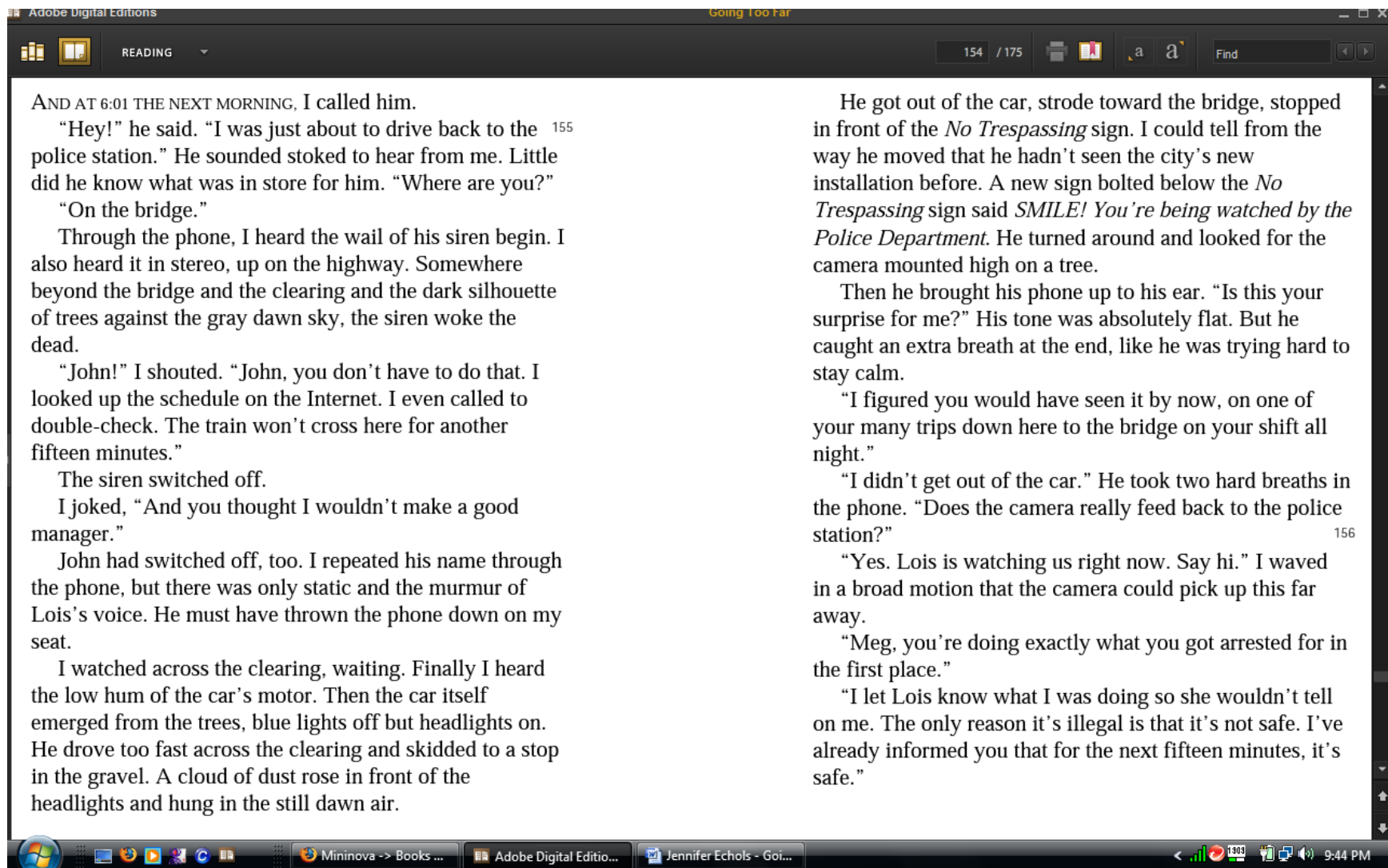
back to life in the past few days. I should have felt scared, a teenage girl walking along the highway alone in a skimpy shirt at 5:30 A.M. I didn't. There was no one to scare me. This section of the main highway through town was lined with pine trees and utterly abandoned. I pictured John driving up and down this highway, nineteen times a night, for the rest of his life.

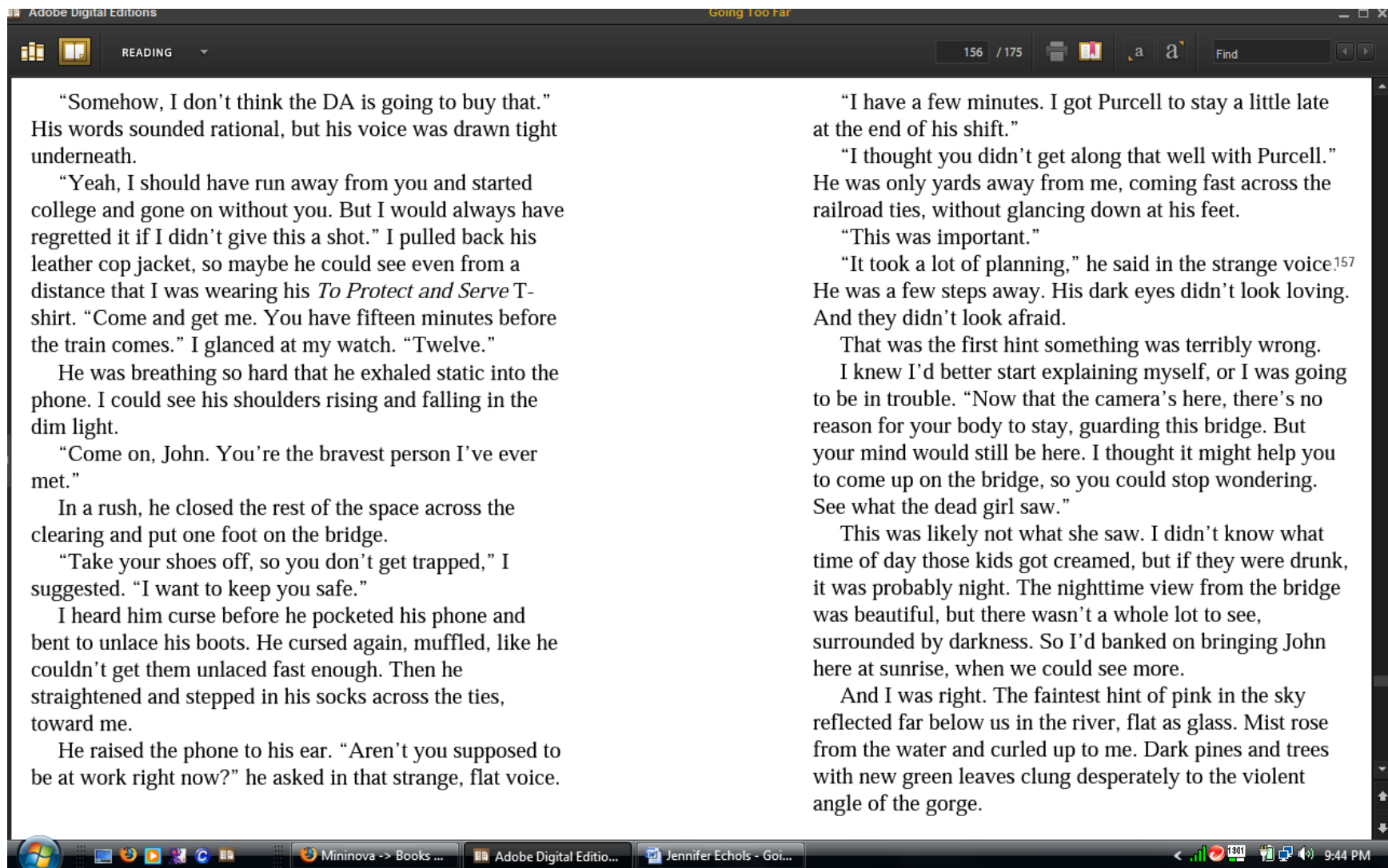
I had set up my project for the DA to discourage other teenagers from venturing onto the bridge, but also to encourage John to let the bridge go and leave town. Now that I finally faced my feelings for him, I realized I'd hoped all along he would follow me to Birmingham and we'd hook back up. And now that I'd gotten up close and personal with his control freak side, I knew it wouldn't happen. My project alone wouldn't be enough to nudge him off his orbit around the bridge. He would stay. I would go, but I would feel like I'd left part of me here with him, cemented as securely as my handprint tile on the wall in the park.

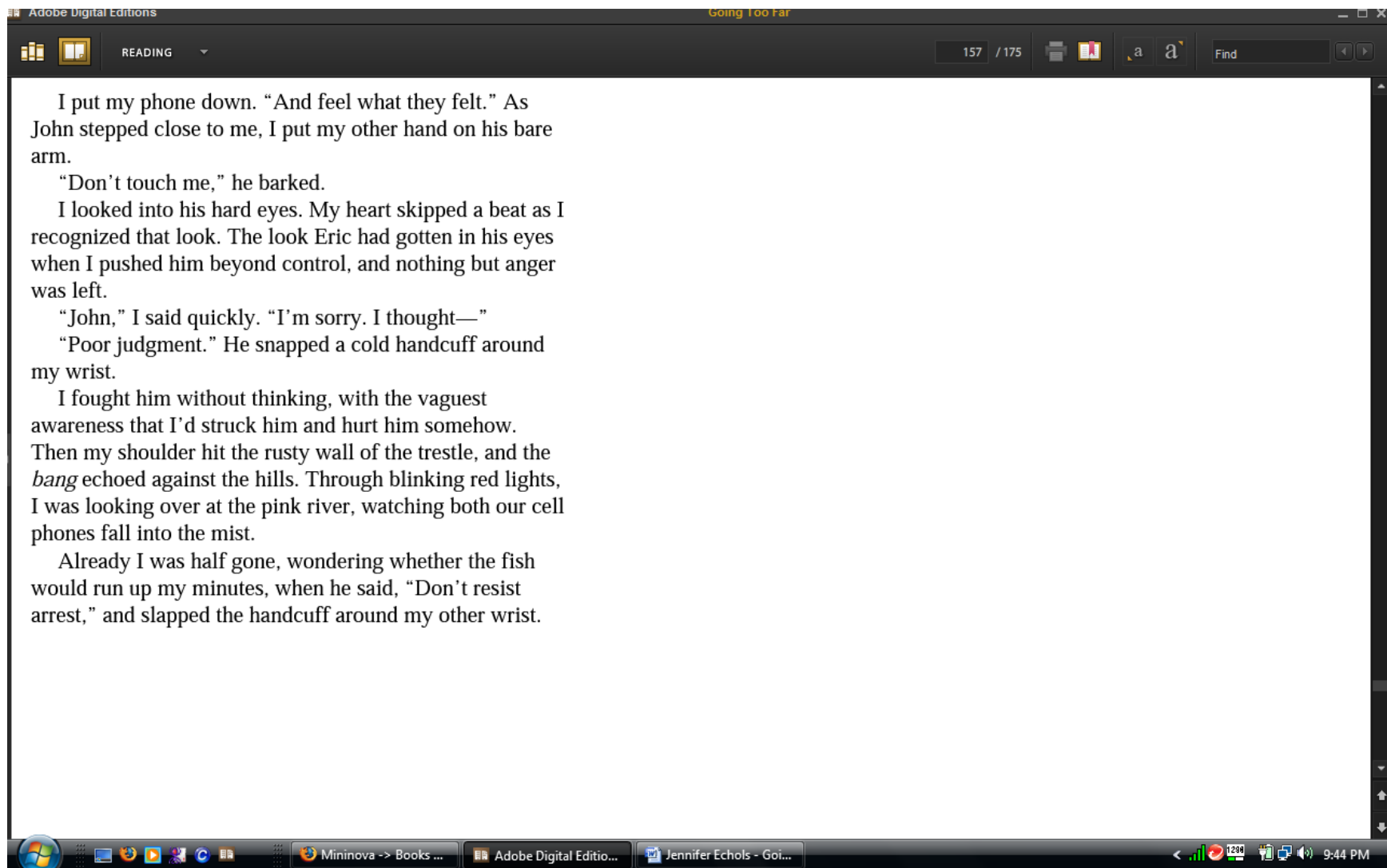
This wasn't happening, this couldn't possibly be the way it ended, but it was.

Unless I did something.

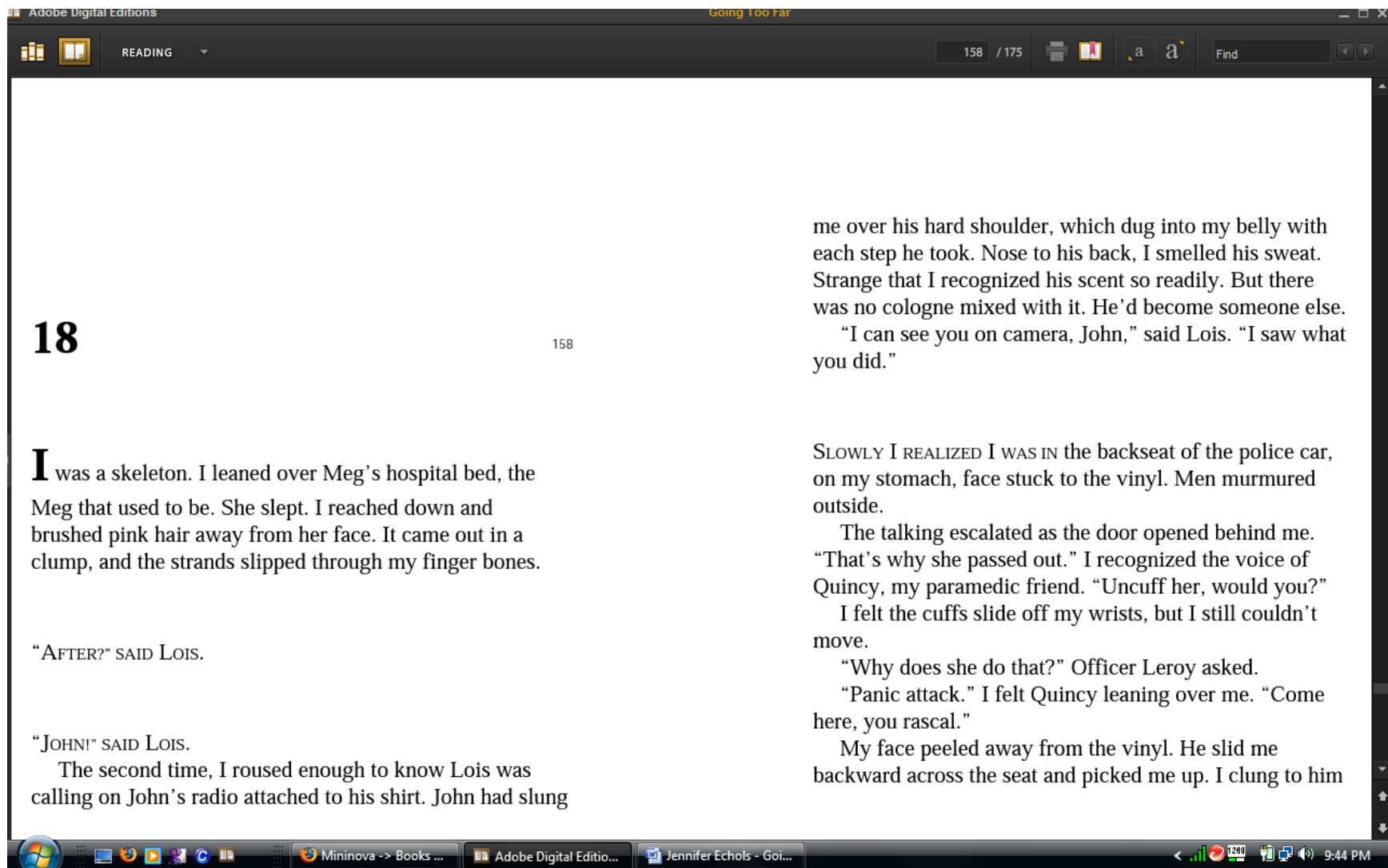
With a final sigh, I started running again. I had gotten my second wind. I had a lot to do after my shift at the diner, before I finally went to bed. I needed to sweet-talk Lois. Then I would make an appointment with a train.

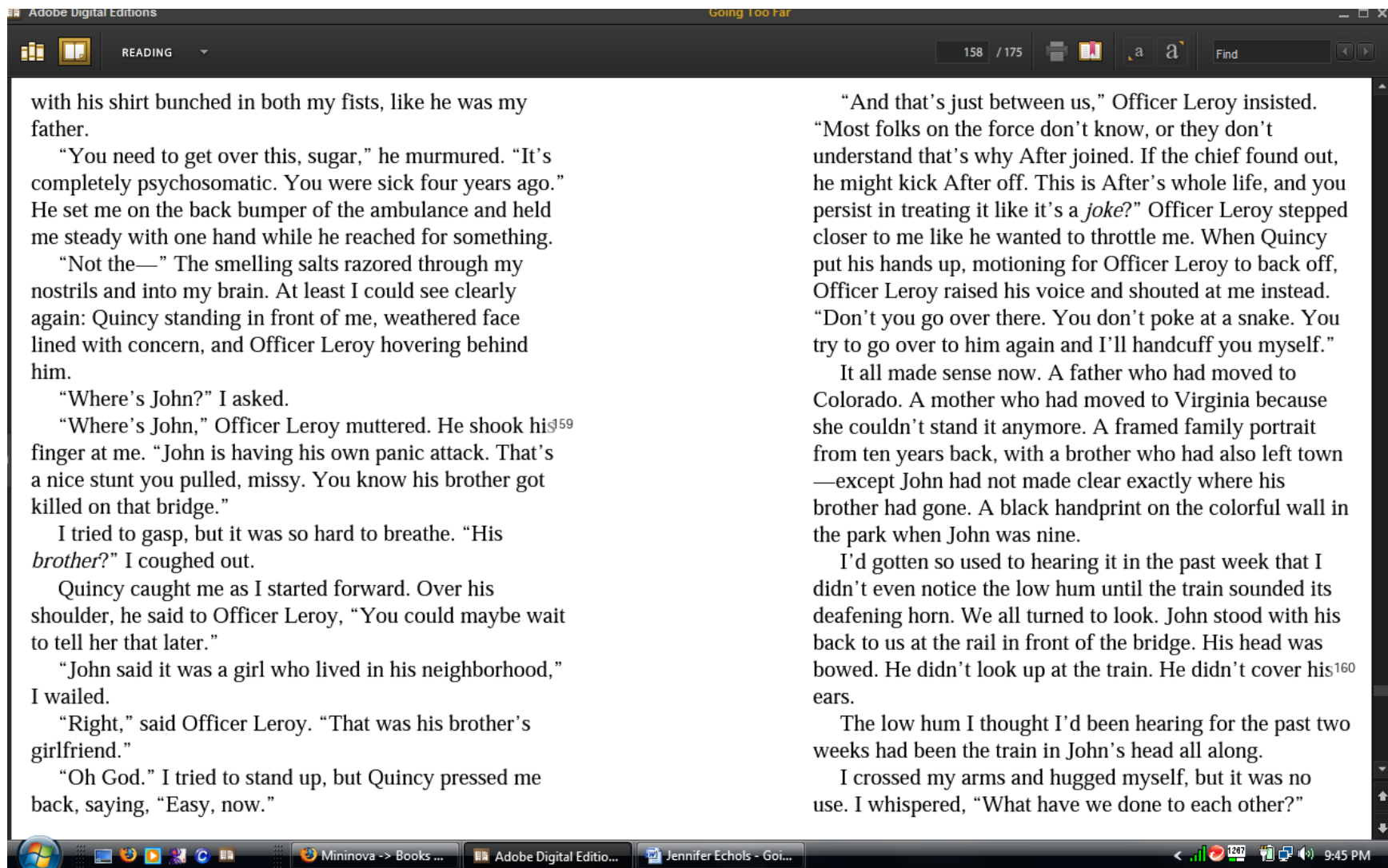


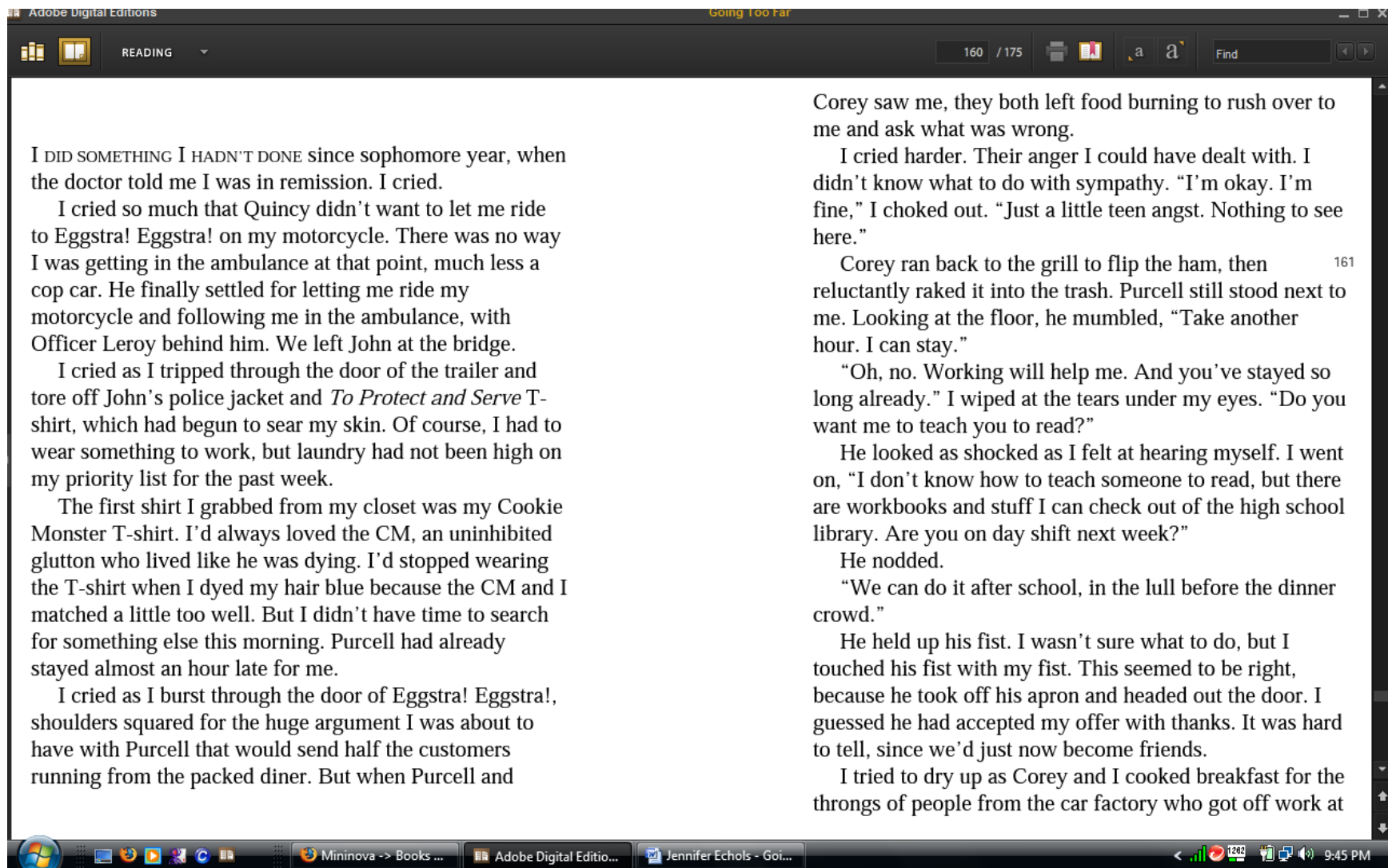


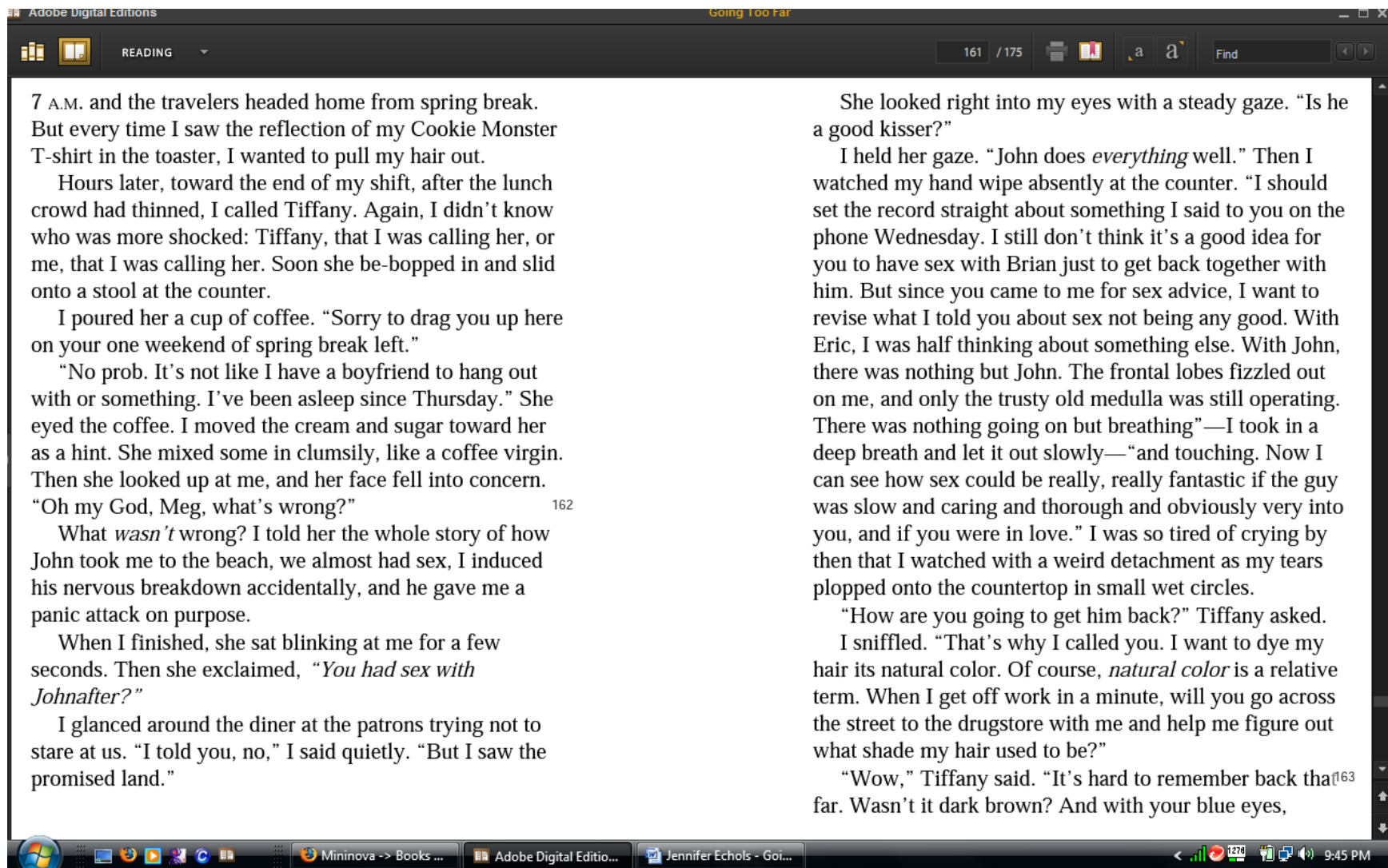




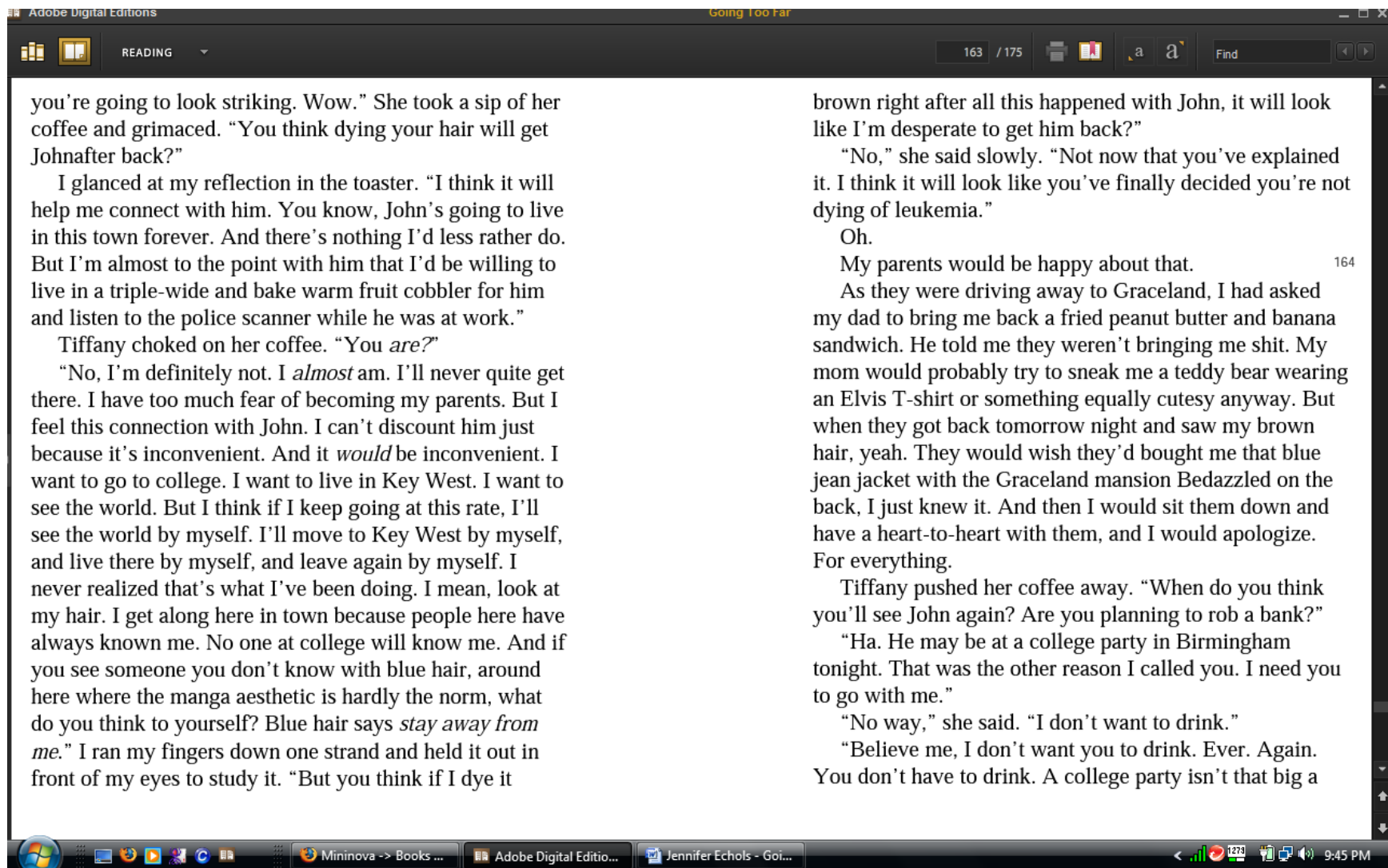




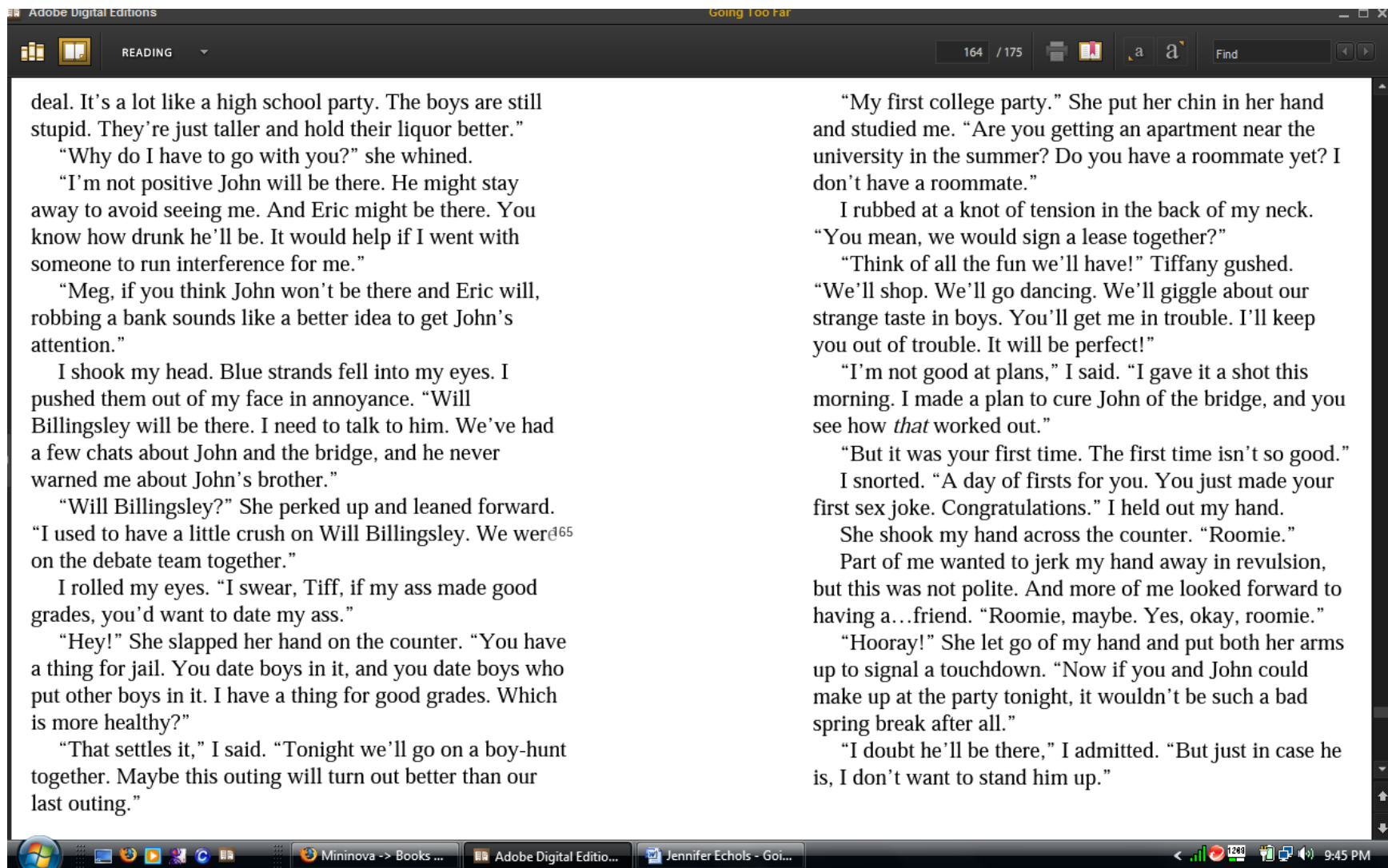


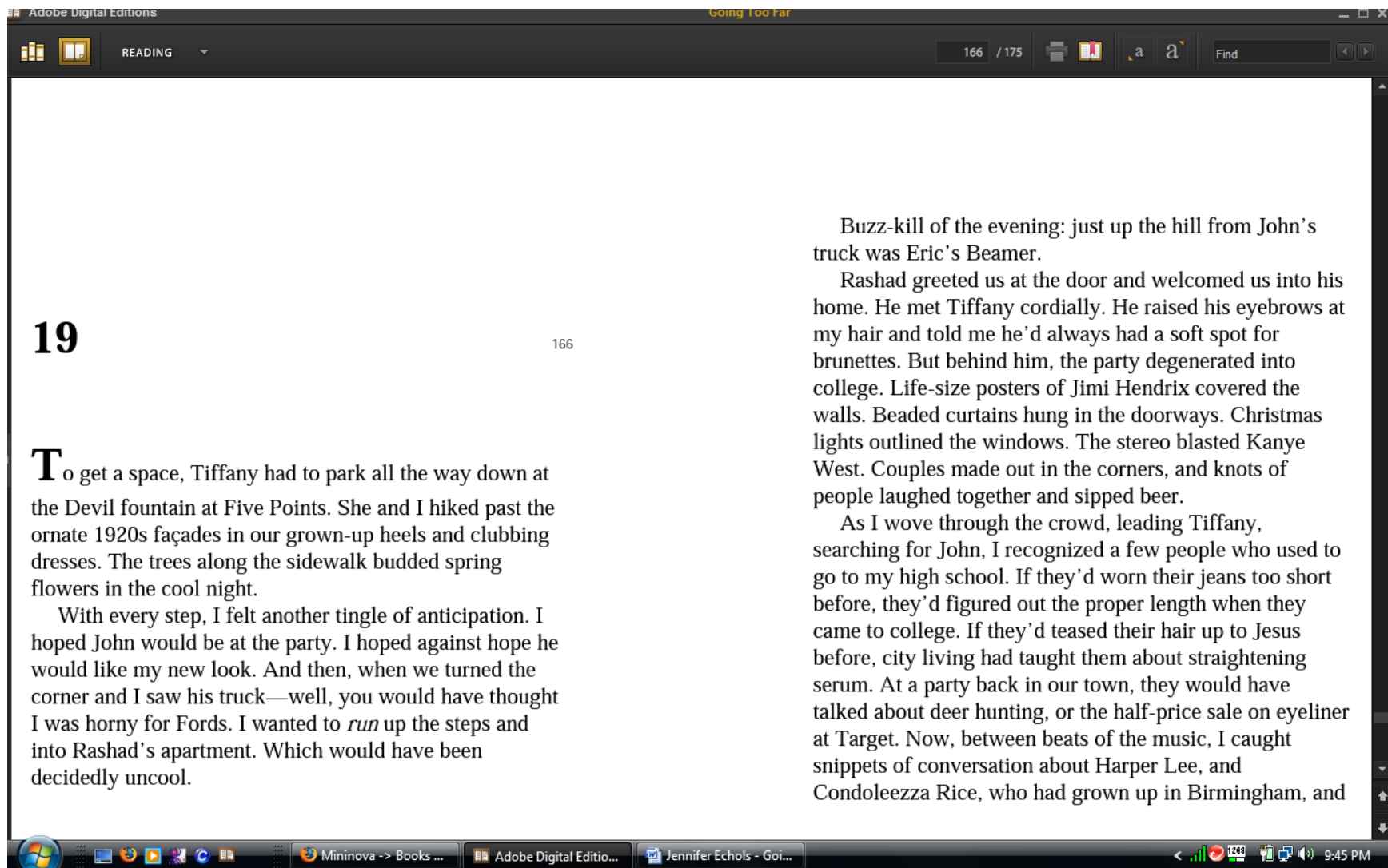


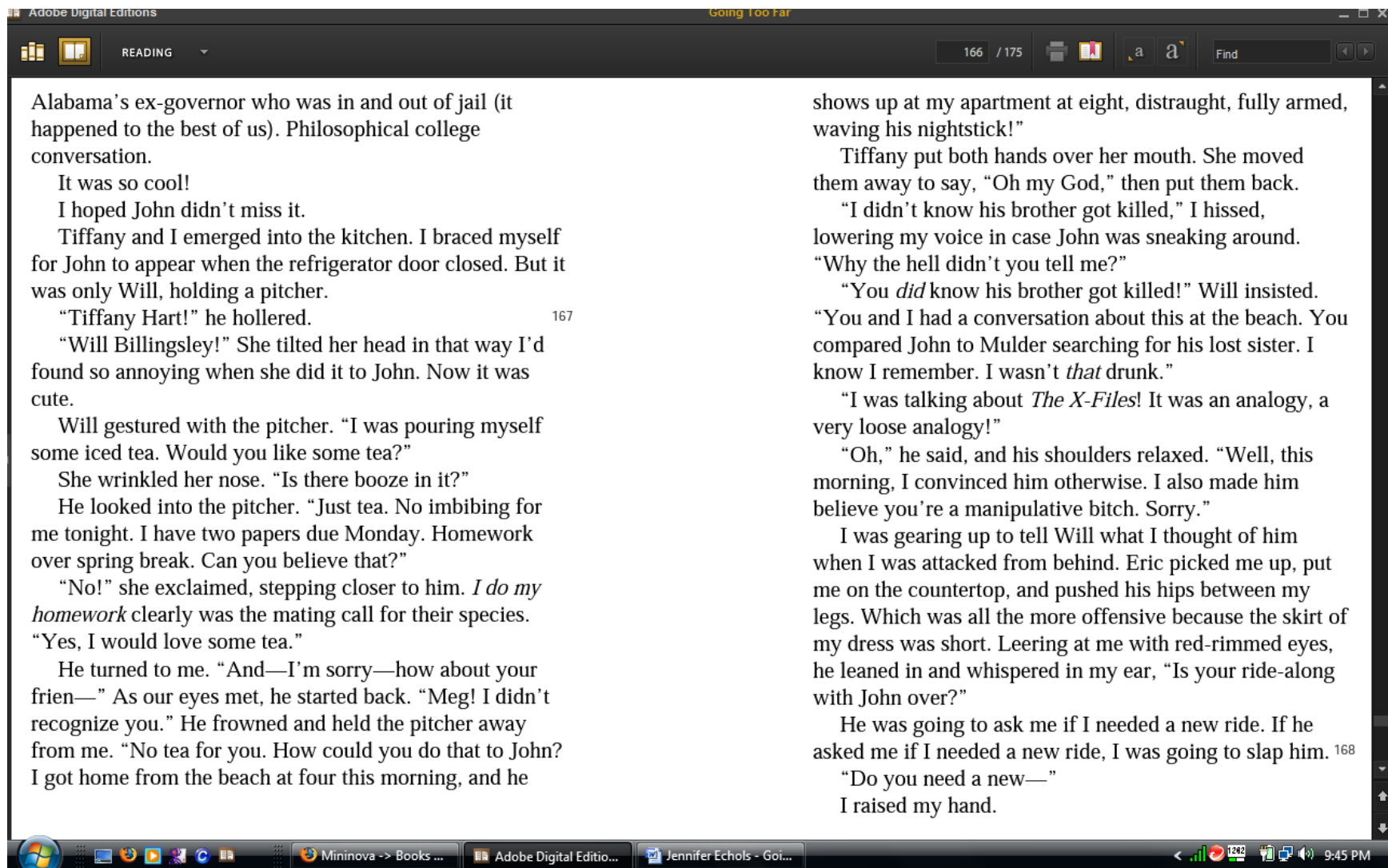


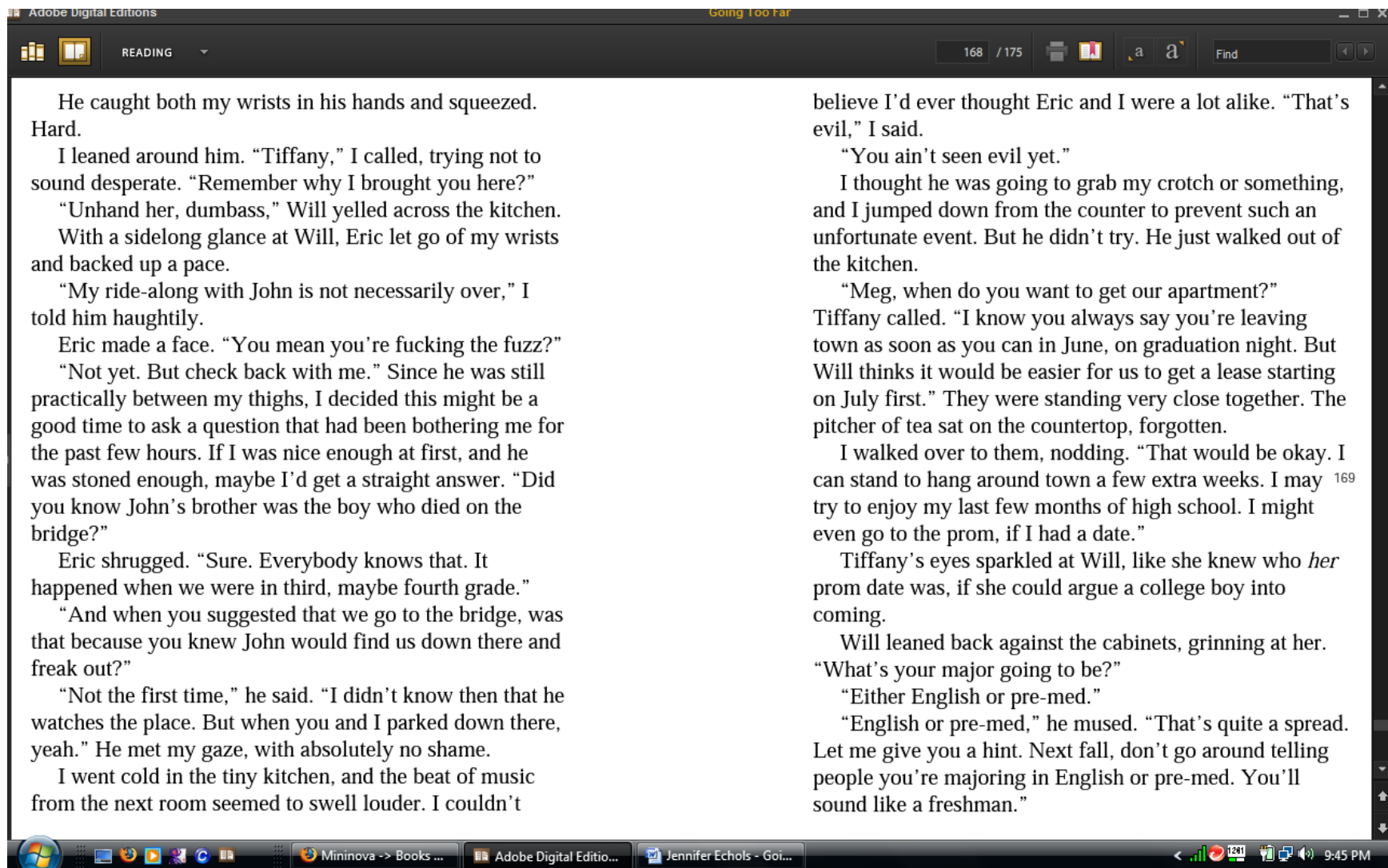




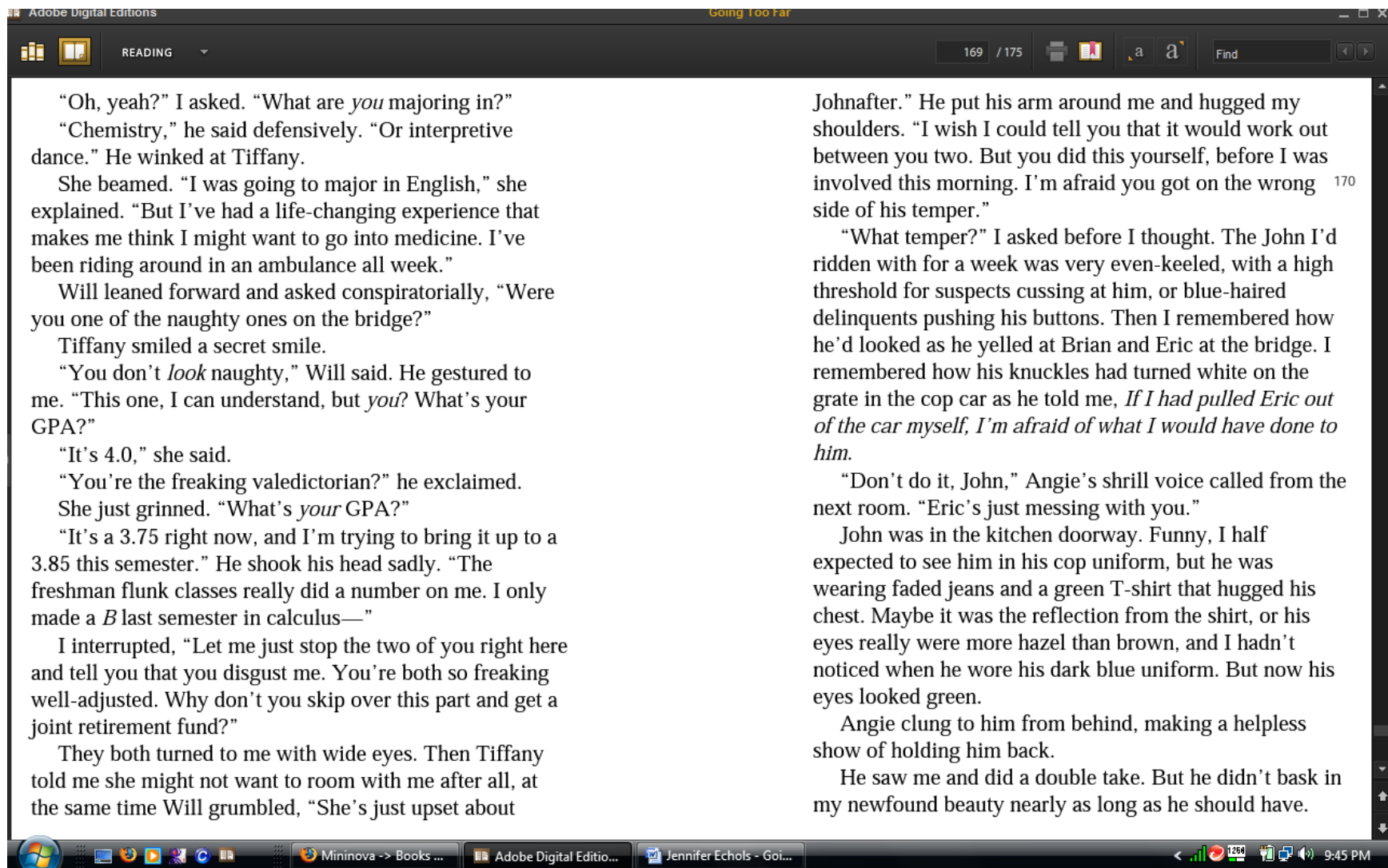












"Oh, yeah?" I asked. "What are *you* majoring in?"  
"Chemistry," he said defensively. "Or interpretive dance." He winked at Tiffany.

She beamed. "I was going to major in English," she explained. "But I've had a life-changing experience that makes me think I might want to go into medicine. I've been riding around in an ambulance all week."

Will leaned forward and asked conspiratorially, "Were you one of the naughty ones on the bridge?"

Tiffany smiled a secret smile.

"You don't *look* naughty," Will said. He gestured to me. "This one, I can understand, but *you*? What's your GPA?"

"It's 4.0," she said.

"You're the freaking valedictorian?" he exclaimed. She just grinned. "What's *your* GPA?"

"It's a 3.75 right now, and I'm trying to bring it up to a 3.85 this semester." He shook his head sadly. "The freshman flunk classes really did a number on me. I only made a *B* last semester in calculus—"

I interrupted, "Let me just stop the two of you right here and tell you that you disgust me. You're both so freaking well-adjusted. Why don't you skip over this part and get a joint retirement fund?"

They both turned to me with wide eyes. Then Tiffany told me she might not want to room with me after all, at the same time Will grumbled, "She's just upset about

Johnafter." He put his arm around me and hugged my shoulders. "I wish I could tell you that it would work out between you two. But you did this yourself, before I was involved this morning. I'm afraid you got on the wrong side of his temper." 170

"What temper?" I asked before I thought. The John I'd ridden with for a week was very even-keeled, with a high threshold for suspects cussing at him, or blue-haired delinquents pushing his buttons. Then I remembered how he'd looked as he yelled at Brian and Eric at the bridge. I remembered how his knuckles had turned white on the grate in the cop car as he told me, *If I had pulled Eric out of the car myself, I'm afraid of what I would have done to him.*

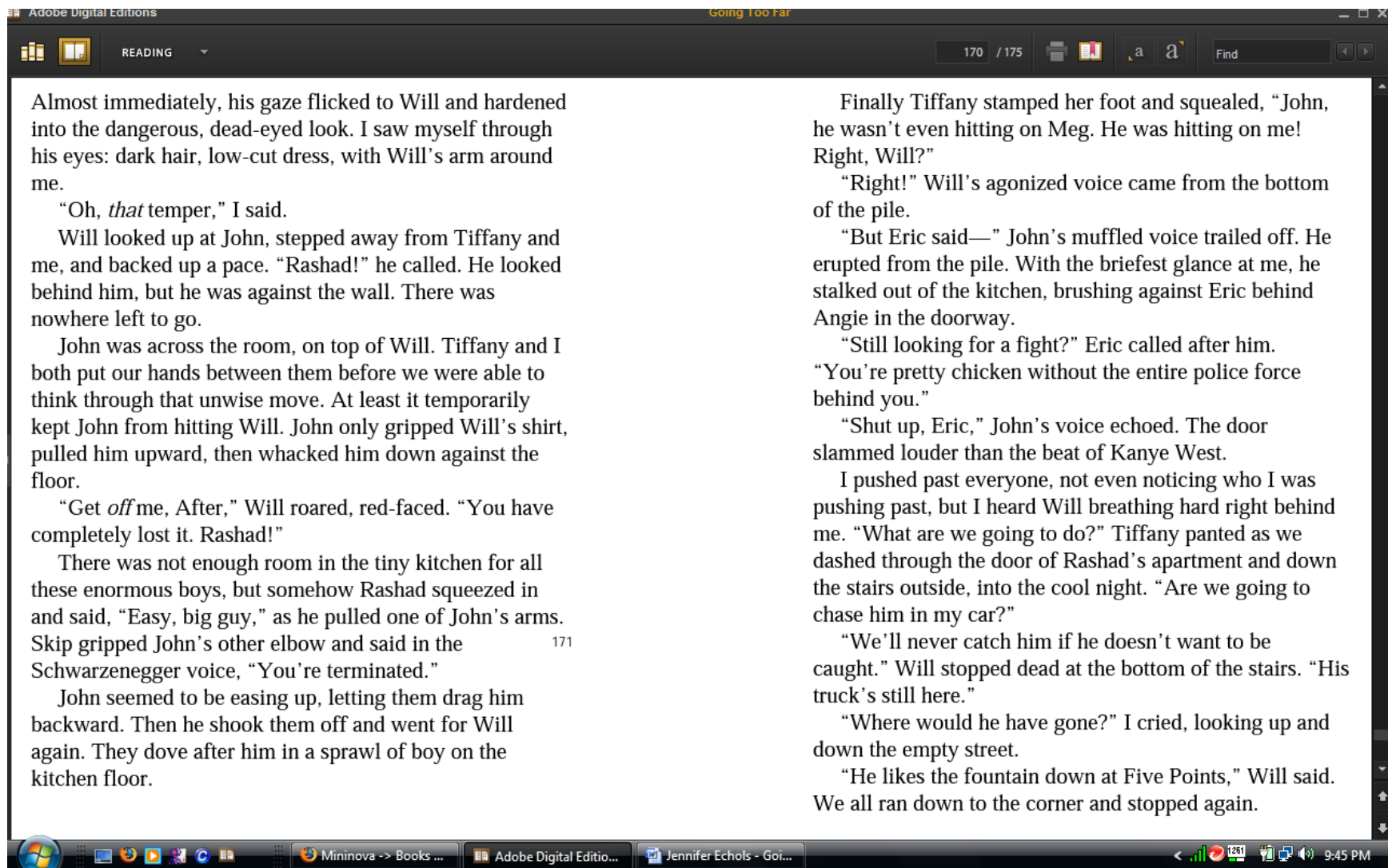
"Don't do it, John," Angie's shrill voice called from the next room. "Eric's just messing with you."

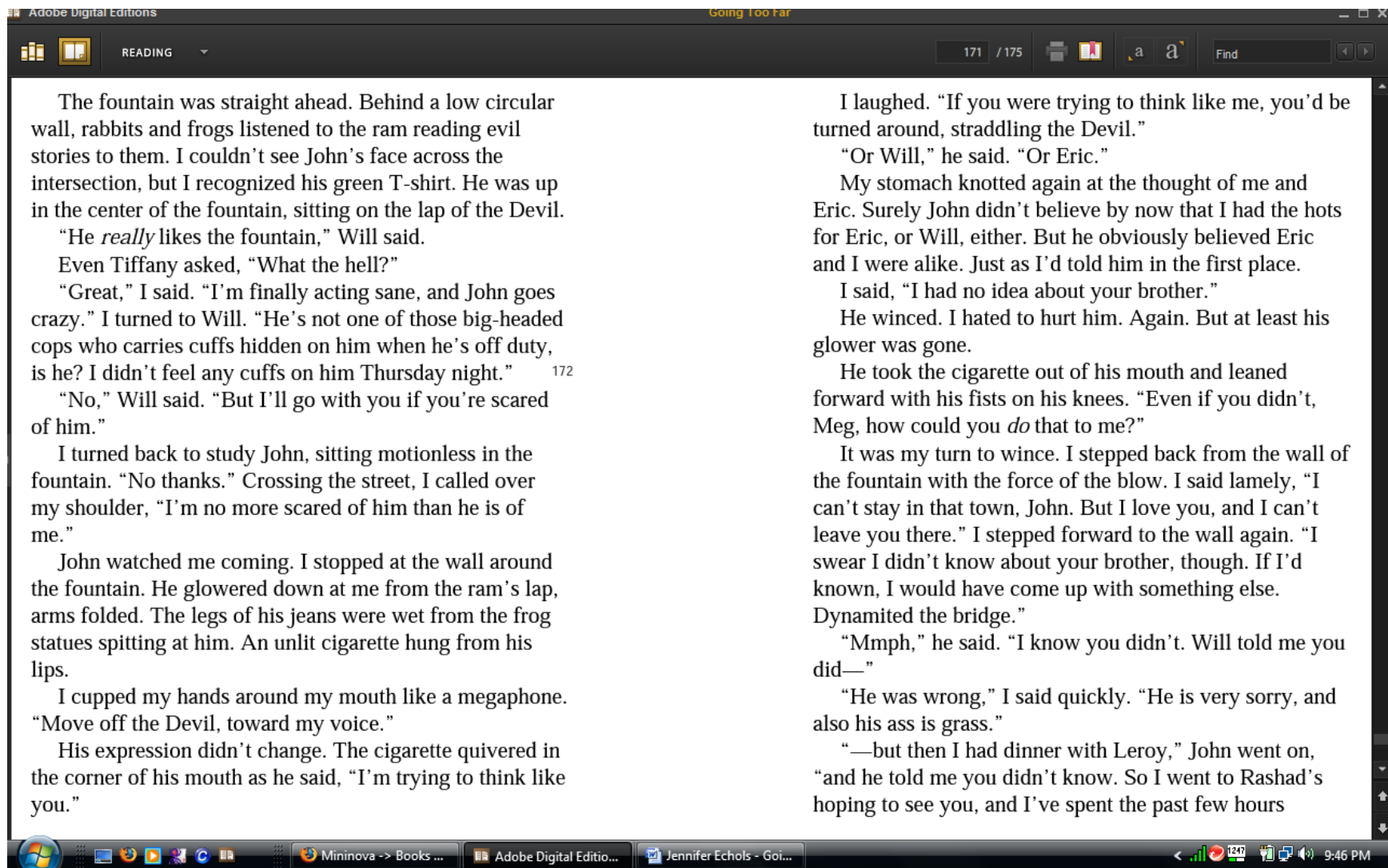
John was in the kitchen doorway. Funny, I half expected to see him in his cop uniform, but he was wearing faded jeans and a green T-shirt that hugged his chest. Maybe it was the reflection from the shirt, or his eyes really were more hazel than brown, and I hadn't noticed when he wore his dark blue uniform. But now his eyes looked green.

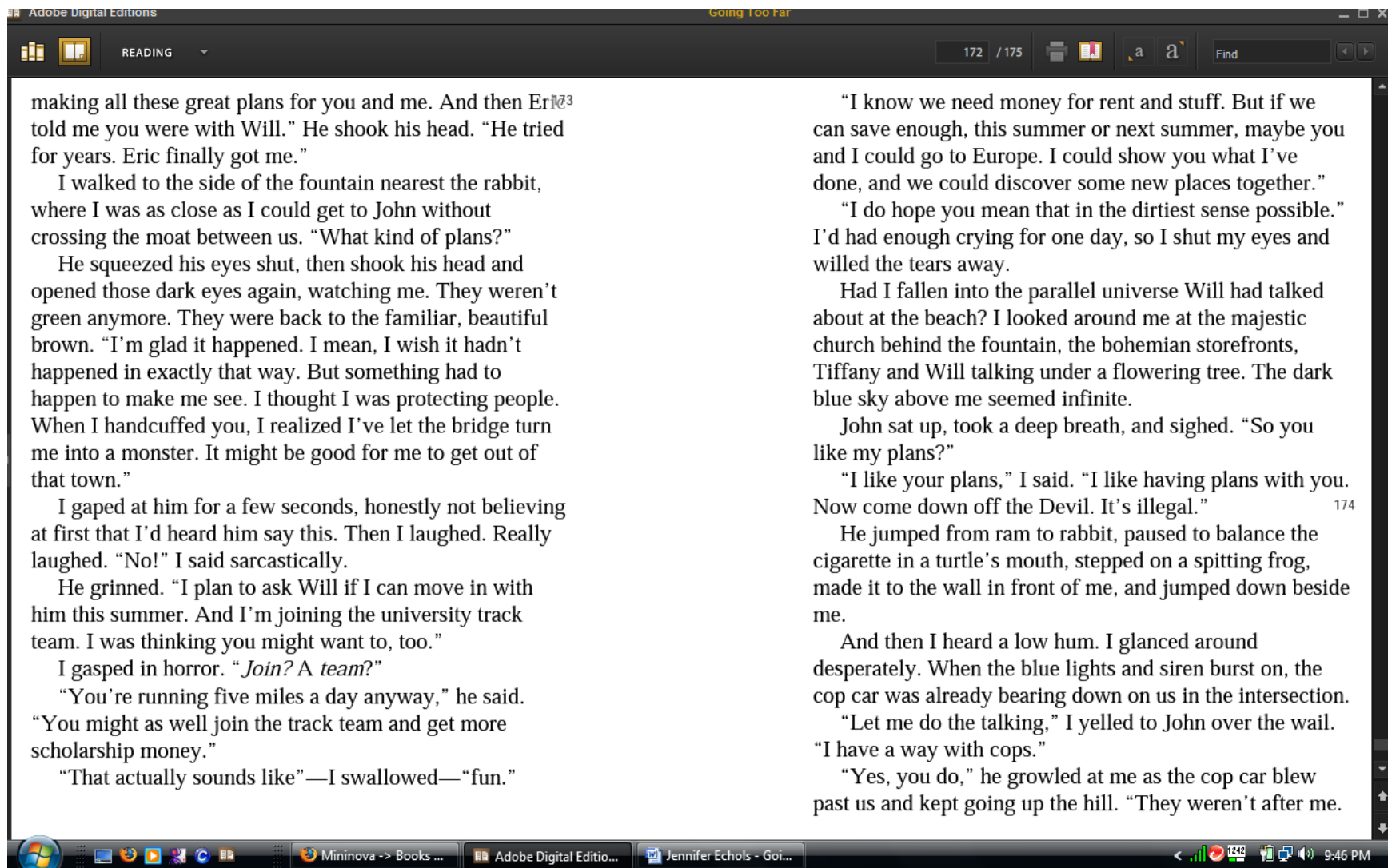
Angie clung to him from behind, making a helpless show of holding him back.

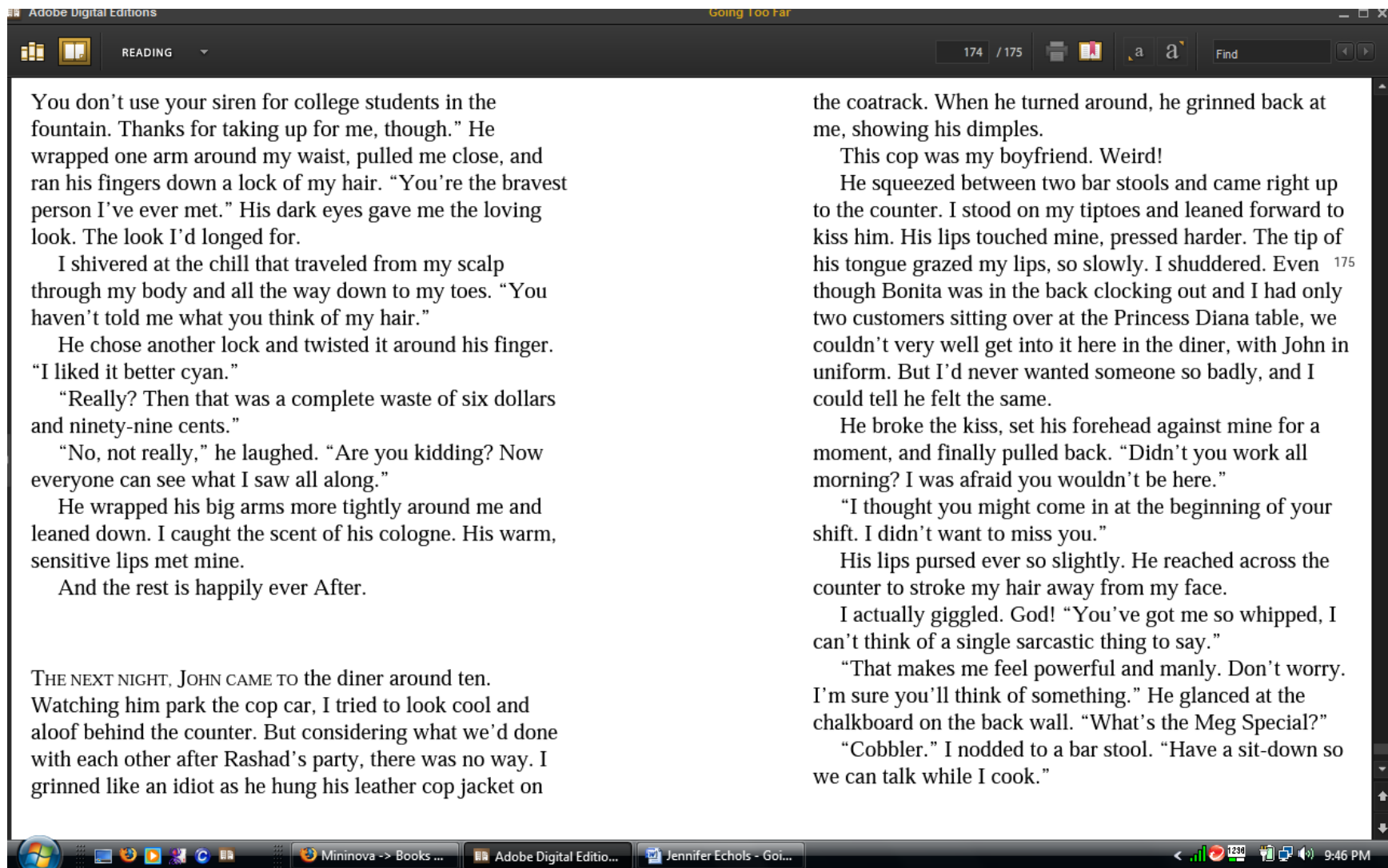
He saw me and did a double take. But he didn't bask in my newfound beauty nearly as long as he should have.











You don't use your siren for college students in the fountain. Thanks for taking up for me, though." He wrapped one arm around my waist, pulled me close, and ran his fingers down a lock of my hair. "You're the bravest person I've ever met." His dark eyes gave me the loving look. The look I'd longed for.

I shivered at the chill that traveled from my scalp through my body and all the way down to my toes. "You haven't told me what you think of my hair."

He chose another lock and twisted it around his finger. "I liked it better cyan."

"Really? Then that was a complete waste of six dollars and ninety-nine cents."

"No, not really," he laughed. "Are you kidding? Now everyone can see what I saw all along."

He wrapped his big arms more tightly around me and leaned down. I caught the scent of his cologne. His warm, sensitive lips met mine.

And the rest is happily ever After.

THE NEXT NIGHT, JOHN CAME TO the diner around ten. Watching him park the cop car, I tried to look cool and aloof behind the counter. But considering what we'd done with each other after Rashad's party, there was no way. I grinned like an idiot as he hung his leather cop jacket on

the coatrack. When he turned around, he grinned back at me, showing his dimples.

This cop was my boyfriend. Weird!

He squeezed between two bar stools and came right up to the counter. I stood on my tiptoes and leaned forward to kiss him. His lips touched mine, pressed harder. The tip of his tongue grazed my lips, so slowly. I shuddered. Even though Bonita was in the back clocking out and I had only two customers sitting over at the Princess Diana table, we couldn't very well get into it here in the diner, with John in uniform. But I'd never wanted someone so badly, and I could tell he felt the same.

He broke the kiss, set his forehead against mine for a moment, and finally pulled back. "Didn't you work all morning? I was afraid you wouldn't be here."

"I thought you might come in at the beginning of your shift. I didn't want to miss you."

His lips pursed ever so slightly. He reached across the counter to stroke my hair away from my face.

I actually giggled. God! "You've got me so whipped, I can't think of a single sarcastic thing to say."

"That makes me feel powerful and manly. Don't worry. I'm sure you'll think of something." He glanced at the chalkboard on the back wall. "What's the Meg Special?"

"Cobbler." I nodded to a bar stool. "Have a sit-down so we can talk while I cook."

