

PRECARIOUS

Stories of Love, Sex, and Misunderstanding

AL RISKE

LUMINIS BOOKS

PRECARIOUS

LUMINIS BOOKS

Published by Luminis Books

13245 Blacktern Way, Carmel, Indiana, 46033, U.S.A.

Copyright © Al Riske, 2010

PUBLISHER'S NOTICE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Several of the stories in this collection have been published previously, including "What She Said" in *Beloit Fiction Journal*, "Pray for Rain" in *Blue Mesa Review*, "Don't Stop Now" in *Hobart*, and "Skittish" in *Switchback*. Portions of "Precarious" appeared in *Pindeldyboz* as "Disappointed."

Cover design and photography for *Precarious* by Joanne Riske.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Bob Dylan and Special Rider Music for permission to reprint lyrics from "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" in "Just Admit It." Written by Bob Dylan, copyright © 1965; renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Reprinted by permission.

ISBN-10: 1-935462-32-6

ISBN-13: 978-1-935462-32-3

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Joanne—
First, last, and always.

PRECARIOUS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm grateful for the friends and family who were there to give me the encouragement, criticism, and inspiration I needed to put together this collection of stories: Gretchen Clark, Catherine Ryan Hyde, Greg Bardsley, Mark Richardson, Dee Edler, Karen Croft, Heidi Benson, Rachel Canon, Linda Drake, Terry McKenzie, Carrie Motamedi, Judy DeMocker, Jill Berman, Lisa Buchanan, Adair Lara, Amy Rennert, Steve Kettmann, Bronwen Hruska, Dan and Sandra Aunspaugh, Doug and Kristen Edwards, Jane Todd, Dan Rasmussen, Bill Rennie, Daryl Capps, Starline Judkins, Denise Pinto, Doreen Wu, JungAe Kim, and many others along the way. I'm especially grateful to Shawn Gillen, the former editor of the *Beloit Fiction Journal*, who published my first short story. And to Savannah Guz of *Hobart*, Nora Fussner of *Pindelyboz*, Laura Matter of the *Blue Mesa Review*, and Kelly Krumrie of *Switchback*, who published more of them. Thank you all. And thank you, Chris Katsaropoulos and Tracy Richardson of Luminis Books, for bringing out this collection.

AL RISKE

Contents

SLEEPING WITH SMILEY	1
HOLD ON	31
PRAY FOR RAIN	41
X'S	56
SKITTISH	70
PRECARIOUS	74
WHAT SHE SAID	98
DISENGAGED	106
DOUBLE OR NOTHING	109
DON'T STOP NOW	128
MEN ARE SUCH BOYS	134
DANCE NAKED	156
JUST ADMIT IT	187
TAKEN	202
YOUR EYES ONLY	220

Readers and reviewers love the fiction of *Al Riske*:

“The art of the short story is alive and well in the hands of Al Riske, who understands how to walk the tightrope of subtle emotional resonance.”

—**Catherine Ryan Hyde**, *author of Pay It Forward, Love in the Present Tense, Chasing Windmills, and many others.*

“Riske’s characters brim with the fears, desires, and idiosyncrasies of real, complex human beings. In the collision of spiritual and sexual concerns that plague them, we find a truth that makes us believers in the power of his fiction.”

—**Laura Matter**, *Blue Mesa Review*

“Enthusiastically recommended.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“You will enjoy each page of this book and hope that there is just one more when you are finished reading.”

—**Victoria Gonzalez**, *Reader Views*

“The writing is Hemingway lean and it’s clear that one of Riske’s strongest gifts as a storyteller is his witty dialogue.”

—**Gretchen Clark**, *author of “This Is a Woman” and other essays*

“A hugely talented writer, Al Riske beautifully captures the nuanced behavior of relationships and the universal struggle to understand why we do what we do.”

—**Rachel Canon**, *author of The Anniversary*

AL RISKE

“His prose is so sharp and the characters sketched so vividly that I was transported right into the world he created.”

—**Mark Richardson**, *author of “Tattoo Woman” and other stories*

“This book will stay with you long after you close it and put it away. You’ll no doubt pick it up again for a second read, maybe even a third.”

—*Reading at the Beach*

“These are stories that you find yourself in—the highest compliment I can pay an author. You see your own foibles and, if you’re lucky, an occasional glance at your own grace.”

—**Terry McKenzie**, *TMACWORDS*

“Al Riske has taken this form [the short story] and made light in his collection *Precarious*, not that he has made light of his characters, though. He has given them voices of volume, of life. Each story carries weight of its own, leading to the common denominator that we are all flawed.”

—**Sky Sanchez**, *San Francisco Book Review*

PRECARIOUS

Sleeping with Smiley

I REMEMBER THE river and the way it looked at dawn: the glassy water and the wisps of fog. I can still smell the sea air and hear the trawlers chugging out past the jetty in the distance. I remember the feel of my oars catching the water in time with Curt's. The muscles don't forget. I can feel the strain even now in my legs and lower back, in my shoulders and in my arms. I hear the rhythm of our seats sliding up and back in Mr. Alt's racing shell.

It was that summer between the end of high school and the start of something else. Curt and I were best friends, and more often than not you could find us sculling on the Rogue at dawn. We had been at it since May, coming out to the river before school nearly every day. The boat was long, narrow, and unforgiving. It dumped us in the river our first time out, and the water felt like ice that had only just melted. I was ready to quit after one day, but Curt convinced me to keep trying—it was a two-man boat—and I found myself enjoying it more and more as we learned to pull together. By summer all we wanted was to go faster. Still, it was a struggle. So many things could go wrong. Then, toward the end of one workout in the first week of June, everything came together.

We were passing near the dock, and there on its weathered gray planks stood Warren Alt, the owner of the boat, a massive man of about fifty, bald except for a short white fringe. Wearing baggy pants

and a hooded sweatshirt, he looked more like a gym teacher than the wealthy East Coast transplant that he was.

“Now, give me a power twenty!” he bellowed, hands cupped around his mouth.

We started pulling hard, really putting our backs into it. Curt was the stroke, the pacesetter, and it took all I had to keep up with him. But that wasn’t the problem. He was short and muscular; I was tall and lean. In a subtle way I hadn’t noticed before, our strokes didn’t *look* the same. I shortened mine so the angle of my oars matched the angle of his, and for the first time we started to glide—really glide—swiftly and smoothly.

Without looking I knew Mr. Alt was pacing slowly along the narrow floating dock, following our progress. His arms would be folded, and he’d stop now and nod to himself.

As the shell continued to gain speed, I felt a smile creep onto my face, and with each stroke—*catch, drive, feather, recover*—it got a little bigger. I couldn’t see Curt’s face, of course, only the back of his wavy hair, wet with perspiration, but I had the sense that he was smiling, too. *Catch, drive, feather, recover.* We were in almost perfect synchronization. You could see it in the ripple pattern left by our oars.

When we finished the twenty power strokes, it was as if we were crossing a finish line. Our oars came up and the shell continued to glide. Curt looked over his shoulder at me and let out a whoop. I tossed my head back and yelled straight up at the sky with all the wind I had left. We had just experienced something we would never be able to describe adequately. But then we wouldn’t really need to. Not to each other.

I WAS JEALOUS of Curt in those days because his girlfriend, Isabelle Smiley, was beautiful, smart, sexy, and crazy about him in a way no girl had ever been crazy about me.

She was only eighteen, same as us, but she looked, sounded, dressed, and acted older. She was a teller at the bank; we had summer jobs washing dishes at a local pizzeria. The night I took her to dinner, she looked sensational. She had dressed up even though it was just me she was going out with. I thought of her as a woman, not a girl, in her little black dress and a pearl necklace.

“Faux,” she said.

“What?”

“Not real.”

We were seated by the window and had a perfect view of the Rogue River harbor. It was almost romantic. Faux romantic. Still, the first words out of my mouth were: “Curt said I should look after you while he’s gone.”

“Oh, he did, did he?”

She picked up a dinner roll and started buttering it.

“Not like that. He just wants me to keep you company.”

“I see. So I don’t get too lonely?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Oh Dean—” She stopped, sighed, started again. “Would it sound too bitchy if I said he didn’t seem too concerned about how I felt last night?”

“Hey, listen, I didn’t mean to butt in. He asked me to come get him and drive him home so I’d have his car—”

She touched my hand, shook her head, and motioned for me to wait. Though Curt was my best friend, it felt odd to be defending him. I was more accustomed to taking Smiley’s side in their frequent feuds.

PRECARIOUS

“It’s not your fault,” she said when she’d finished chewing her bread. “It’s just that I’m not going to see him for two weeks while he’s on that family vacation in Connecticut, and then pretty soon you guys will be off to college in Seattle and—”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s if he comes back,” I said. “Regis could offer him a rowing scholarship while he’s there.”

“He never said anything about that to me.”

“He never mentioned Regis—Mr. Alt’s alma mater?”

“He said he was going to visit there and maybe do some rowing, but he didn’t say anything about a scholarship.”

“Mr. Alt thinks he’s a prime candidate.”

“You think Curt would take it?”

“A free ride would be hard to turn down,” I said.

Smiley shook her head, thinking it over.

“I’m not sure whether to be mad, sad, or what,” she said.

I told her I wasn’t too thrilled about it myself.

After a long pause, she said, “Well, he’s supposed to call me tomorrow, so if you want to come over, maybe he’ll have something to tell us by then.”

LEFT ALONE IN the living room of Smiley’s apartment, I wandered around, looking at the prints on the walls, the fashion magazines on the coffee table.

From the kitchen she said, “I’m having a ginger ale. Would you like one?”

“Sounds good,” I said.

On the end table I spotted a pack of Virginia Slims menthols and a saucer with three butts in it. When I asked Smiley how she could live

with someone who smoked, she acted real funny and finally admitted the cigarettes were hers, not her roommate's. She hadn't smoked since she was sixteen, she said. Not regularly. But lately she'd taken to bumming smokes from one of the other bank tellers during breaks, and on her way home that night she'd stopped off to buy a pack of her own.

She asked me not to say anything to Curt, and I knew why—nothing was more of a turnoff for him than smoking.

Smiley, wearing tight jeans and a loose sweater, came into the living room then, carrying two drinks in short glasses with cubes of ice. She was barefoot and much more relaxed than I was. She handed me a glass, sat down on the couch, and looked at me as if to say, "Aren't you going to sit down?"

"I just can't picture you smoking—especially not at sixteen," I said. "All the girls I knew who smoked at that age were, I don't know, they..."

"They wore too much makeup. Is that what you mean? And had dirty mouths."

"Yeah, I guess that's it," I said.

"That was me."

"I don't believe it."

"Oh, I was pretty wild back then—not that I'm proud of it," she said.

I just looked at her, trying to imagine her in that completely different incarnation, and suddenly she said, "I wasn't that wild."

I blushed, and she laughed and blushed, too.

"I guess we all go through a rebellious period," she said finally. "Didn't you?"

I shrugged. "Not really."

"You will."

PRECARIOUS

I didn't know how to respond to that. It put me off balance somehow. I thought: Maybe I'm in my rebellious period right now. But I'd know, wouldn't I?

"So," I said, sitting down and sipping my ginger ale, "how was your weekend?"

"Could have been worse, I guess—though I'm not sure how."

Her voice said it all: She was bored. She was bored and there wasn't much she could do about it. Then the phone rang.

"That must be him now."

She set down her drink, let the phone ring twice more before answering.

"Hello?"

She winked at me.

"Hi, Curt."

I set my drink down and got up. I didn't like the idea of listening to their conversation, or even just Smiley's side of it, but what could I do? I started wandering about again, pretending to be absorbed in Smiley's music collection: The Supremes, Hall & Oates, Fleetwood Mac, Rod Stewart, Frank Sinatra, David Bowie, Emmylou Harris, Ray Charles, the Rolling Stones.

"I've missed you," Smiley said. Then: "Well, thanks a lot! The least you could do is say you missed me, too. Oh, thank you, that's very convincing."

She sounded like she was just kidding around, almost. I excused myself and went into her bathroom just to let her talk. I couldn't tell if the conversation was going to turn ugly or sexy—you could never tell with those two—and I didn't want to find out.

The bathroom was a mess, but it smelled wonderful. Atop the toilet tank was a small, open jar filled with tiny leaves and petals and things, and they filled the room with their scent. The counters were

cluttered—cold cream, talcum powder, toothpaste, nail polish, eyeliner and shadow, Q-tips, cotton balls, perfume. Hanging above the bathtub were several pairs of her thigh-high stockings in black, white, and tan. Damp towels lay scattered on the bare linoleum floor.

I took my time looking around—I had not been in her bathroom since we helped her move into the Imperial Arms three months earlier—and got a curious thrill from handling her things, opening different bottles and jars and smelling their contents. Then I discovered a little wicker basket in one corner. Inside I found garters, panties, and bras in colors my mother never wore—red, black, hot pink, and mint. I took them out one by one and felt the cool, smooth fabric between my fingers and against my cheek. My right leg began to shake. I put everything back in the basket and shut the lid.

When I came back into the living room, Smiley was still on the phone. She said nothing for quite a while, and then: “Oh, um, Dean’s here. Would you like to talk to him? Just a minute.”

She handed me the phone.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I said.

“It’s different here,” Curt said. “You know how Mr. Alt talks? Well, everybody out here sounds like that—only worse.”

“Have you been out to the college?”

He filled me in on what he had been telling Smiley and asked what I’d been doing.

“Me? I’ve been lifting weights every other day, cycling twenty or thirty miles in the afternoon before work . . . You know, the usual.”

He wasn’t buying it.

“I row with Mr. Alt tomorrow,” I said.

“Show no mercy.”

“Right.”

“Well, I’d better get off the line. Let me say good-bye to Isabelle.”

PRECARIOUS

“Isabelle who?” I said, just to tease Smiley—nobody called her Isabelle.

She took the phone away from me.

“Hello? Uh-huh. I’ve thought about that. Yes. Curt!” She blushed. “What? Yes . . .” In hushed tones she added, “Would you cut it out?” And then in her normal voice: “Call me again, okay? Alright. Bye.”

She hung up the phone and looked at me.

“What’s an Ergometer?”

“A type of rowing machine,” I said. “They use it to measure your strength and endurance.”

“I see. And they measured Curt’s.”

“The coach there said he never had a freshman score as well as Curt did.”

“Never had a freshman . . .” It sounds like he’s already signed up for classes.”

All I could do was shrug. I was thinking the same thing.

MR. ALT WAS already in the boathouse, rummaging through his tool box, when I came in through the open door. One of the floorboards creaked under my weight, and Mr. Alt turned around.

“Oh, you’re here,” he said. “I was wondering if you were going to make it.”

I didn’t think I deserved that.

“I’m on time,” I said.

He checked his watch.

“So you are.”

“I was only late once, and I’ve never missed a practice,” I said.

“I know that, but I didn’t think you really wanted to row with me.”

He waited for a response but I didn’t give him one.

“I thought you only rowed because Curt did,” he said.

“What made you think that?”

“I don’t know. Am I wrong?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be doing it if not for Curt, because he’s the one who got me started, but I’ve stayed with it because I like it.”

“And will you stay with it if Curt decides to go to Regis?”

“Why? Is he getting a scholarship from your friend?”

His old rowing partner was now the coach.

“I spoke to Chris last night, as a matter of fact, and he’s most impressed with Curt’s progress.”

“So there’s something in the works.”

“I think that’s a fair assumption. You didn’t answer my question.”

“Will I try out for the team at Orland, you mean? It wouldn’t be the same but, yeah, I suppose so.”

“You suppose?”

“Excuse me if I’m not all gung-ho. I feel like I’m having the rug pulled out from under me, you know.”

“You can be a good rower if you want to be.”

I gave him a look that I hoped would say what I was too reticent to say out loud: *Yeah. Right. But not as good as Curt. Not good enough for your alma mater.*

Mr. Alt continued: “I’ve known other rowers just like you, Dean. Very smooth—like they were born with an oar in each hand. But they would never push themselves beyond a certain point. Curt is different. He doesn’t have great technique, but he has something else. He has guts, and—”

“And I don’t. Is that it?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t think you know. I don’t think you’ve ever tested yourself.”

“What am I supposed to do? What do you want from me?”

PRECARIOUS

“I think you have to decide what you really want and then go after it.”

I said, “Let’s row.” That’s what Curt would have said.

THERE WERE HALF a dozen cars parked along the south bank of the jetty, and the people in them—including me and Smiley in Curt’s Mustang—were eating take-out lunches. It was a nice day, not too windy, and of course we had the top down.

“I come out here a lot on my lunch hour,” Smiley said.

“Great idea.”

I bit into my bacon cheeseburger, Smiley stabbed her taco salad with a plastic fork, and we both watched a small powerboat cross the bar, its bow slapping the waves loud and hard.

“Heard any more from Curt?” I asked.

“No, he said he was going to call me again, but he hasn’t so far. You?”

“Not so much as a postcard.”

Smiley, trying the words on for size, said: “You know, I don’t think I even want him to come back.”

I knew better, or thought I did.

“You don’t mean that,” I said.

“Maybe I do.”

I remembered the flushed look on her face when she opened the door that night I came down to drive Curt home so I’d have his car while he was gone, and I remembered the way she blushed on the phone with him.

“We shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” I said. “I mean, for all we know—”

“Right. What do we know? He’s not telling us anything.”

I tried to shrug it off, but obviously I wanted to know more than I did.

Smiley poked around in her salad for a moment, lost in thought. Then she said, “I don’t get it, Dean. Sometimes he treats me like I don’t even matter to him. And the stupid thing of it is it just makes me want him all the more.” She paused, and I could see the frustration in her knit eyebrows. “It doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Not to me,” I said.

“Me either.”

Even though I wasn’t too happy with Curt myself at that moment, my first impulse was to come to his defense somehow. He had his reasons for everything he did, and I could understand them, most of the time; I just couldn’t explain them very well. I wondered if he could. But then I suppose if he could explain, he wouldn’t . . . ah, who knows?

“I want someone who—who puts me first. You know? Who thinks of me as the most important person in his life.” She stopped herself. “That sounds kind of self-centered, doesn’t it?”

“Not really.”

“I’ll tell you one thing,” she said. “I’m getting damn tired of waiting around for him to call. I want to get out—do something. Have some fun.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. Anything. I’d like to go somewhere. I’m tired of the bank, my apartment, this town.”

I reached for my blackberry milk shake and pulled a sip through the straw.

“We should go somewhere,” she said. “This weekend.”

“I’ve got the Mustang. Might as well take advantage of it.”

“You want to?”

PRECARIOUS

“Why not?”

Her eyes had a brightness in them I hadn’t seen for some time.

“Where should we go?” she asked.

“Wherever you want.”

“Really?”

“Within reason.”

“Well, that narrows it down some.”

She smiled and I no longer cared if it was reasonable or not, but in the next instant I was having second thoughts.

“Curt’d probably call as soon as we left,” I said.

“Tough. Let him wonder what’s going on for a change.”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to go to San Francisco—”

“San Francisco would be fun.”

“That’s a long trip for one day.”

“We wouldn’t have to do it in one day,” Smiley said, a bit tentatively. “We could stay in a hotel.”

I sucked hard to pull more ice cream through my straw.

“I guess that’d be the only way to do it, wouldn’t it?” I said finally.

Smiley put one hand on her hip and said, “Don’t make it sound like Chinese water torture!”

“Oh, no, no . . . ”

I smiled. She made me feel light and innocent somehow.

“I don’t snore or anything. At least I don’t think so.”

Thinking out loud, I said, “I should be able to get George to cover for me at the restaurant so we could leave Saturday . . . ”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Let’s do it.”

IT WAS EASY to pick Smiley up early Saturday morning—we lived in the same apartment complex. I just went downstairs and knocked on her door.

“Almost ready,” she said.

I was stowing my suitcase in the trunk of the convertible when she came out. Her hair had been cut since I’d seen her last, and it was now very short, almost boyish.

“You look like a different person,” I said.

“Is that good or bad?”

“I’m not sure.”

I put her suitcase in the trunk with mine.

“I’m still trying to get used to it myself,” she said.

My mother came down the stairs then, her car keys in one hand, a sack lunch in the other, on her way to work at the cannery. She waved.

“I really appreciate this,” Smiley said, a little louder than absolutely necessary.

“No problem,” I said, turning up the volume a bit myself. “It’s right on the way.”

I had told my mother I would be dropping Smiley off in Brookings to visit her parents—she couldn’t drive herself, I pointed out, because her Riviera had been acting up. Which was true, conveniently enough. Then I’d pick her up and bring her home on my way back.

“My parents never would have bought a story like that when I was at home,” Smiley said as we drove down the hill.

“My mother trusts me. I’ve never given her any reason not to.”

“Until now,” Smiley said.

“It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong.”

“You lied to her,” Smiley reminded me.

“It was easier than trying to explain.”

“It does look pretty risqué, doesn’t it?”

PRECARIOUS

She sounded rather pleased.

WE CAME INTO San Francisco over the Golden Gate Bridge, and by then the sun was high and the sky was pure blue—not a trace of fog anywhere. Smiley had a guidebook with a map of the downtown, thank God. The hills were every bit as steep as they say and kind of scary to drive on for the first time, especially in a car with a clutch. Traffic was crazy. There were trucks double parked on every other block, it seemed, and I always managed to get stuck behind them. But I think I managed to appear calm. I just turned wherever Smiley told me to turn.

We'd been in the car for something like seven hours already, so as soon as we could we parked and just walked around Fisherman's Wharf and the Marina for the rest of the afternoon. I had on jeans and a T-shirt, the same clothes I'd been wearing all summer, but now the shirt felt tight across the chest and the pants were a bit loose around the waist—the effects of rowing, I suppose. Finally, I took the shirt off—the high that day must have been eighty degrees or more—and spread it on the grass so Smiley could sit down. She had on a pair of white shorts and was afraid of staining them. I wasn't worried about my jeans, but she shared the T-shirt with me anyway, and I remember our hips touching while we talked.

“What made you decide to cut your hair?”

“I don't know, I'd been thinking about it a long time, and finally I just did it.”

“I like it. It's cute.”

“I don't think Curt's going to think so.”

“No?”

“He wanted me to grow it longer.”

“He’ll change his mind once he sees it. Well, once he gets used to it.”

“Wanna bet?”

There were more than a dozen boats on the bay and their sails were puffed with wind but you had to watch closely to see that they were moving.

Smiley said, “I’m glad you brought me here. Curt never would have. He hates big cities.”

“You’ve been finding fault with him a lot lately.”

“Have I?”

I shrugged.

“We’re always competing,” she conceded.

“In what way?”

“Well . . . whenever we’re alone together, we . . . each of us tries to see who can get the other one more, you know . . . excited.”

I said, “I know who I’d put my money on.”

She had on dark glasses that slid down her nose as we talked, and she looked at me now over the rims.

“Oh, I wouldn’t underestimate Curt,” she said. “He can definitely get me hot.”

She nudged the glasses back into place on the bridge of her nose, and dimples formed at the corners of her lips. Her cheeks flushed. I never understood how she could be so knowing and so easily embarrassed at the same time.

“From the very beginning he had this sort of reserve about him when it came to that, and it was always sort of a challenge to break through that,” she said. “He liked to be in control.”

As she looked out across the bay, a gust of wind blew her hair around and then it all fell back into place just as before.

I said nothing, and after a moment she continued.

PRECARIOUS

“Sometimes I felt like he was Samson and I was Delilah.” She laughed through her nose. “That was one of the few Bible stories I could really relate to—in a perverse way.”

I said, “Samson doesn’t, uh, come out too well in that story, as I recall.”

“It wasn’t like I was going to hand him over to the Babylonians or whoever.”

“The Philistines.”

“I just wanted to think I could make him lose control once in a while.”

I raised my eyebrows and waited.

“I succeeded a few times,” she said. “And don’t look so surprised!”

WE FINALLY FOUND a hotel we could afford in the Pacific Heights district. Our room was on the first floor and it wasn’t much, but it had everything it was supposed to have—a queen-sized bed, color television, two vinyl chairs, a small round table by the window that looked out on the parking lot. It was already dark out.

“Oh, well,” Smiley said. “I’m starved. Let’s go get some dinner.”

WE DROVE AROUND North Beach getting hungrier and hungrier just trying to find a place to park, and when a space finally opened up—“Over there! They’re just pulling out”—we were no longer near any of the restaurants mentioned in Smiley’s guidebook. So we just started walking, hoping to come across a place that was nice, but not too nice. Finally, in a little alley, we spotted a red neon sign saying *Culinaria Italiana*. We had to wait longer than I had ever waited in my life for a table: forty-five minutes.

Smiley wore a simple backless dress and bangles on her wrists, and I thought, not for the first time, that I could never get tired of looking at her. I was thinking, too, of Delilah: “Come now, tell me how you can be tied . . . ” I had always thought that Samson had to be a complete dolt not to see what she was up to, but now I realized it didn’t matter.

Our waiter, a distinguished gentleman with eyes for Smiley, asked if we would care for cocktails before dinner. Smiley and I exchanged glances.

“Oh, I don’t know . . . Smiley?”

She asked the waiter if she could have a rum and Coke. That sounded good to me, too, since I couldn’t recall the name of any other drink at the moment.

“Very good,” the waiter said. “I will need to see some ID, however.”

I tried to think of something face-saving to say.

“Um, just the Coke then.”

“Ginger ale, if you have it,” Smiley added.

I waited until the waiter was gone and then said, “Why did he do that if he thought we were under age?”

Smiley gave him the benefit of the doubt.

“Maybe he wasn’t sure.”

I took a sip from my water glass and said no more. I was sure he had done it to make me look small.

Looking around, Smiley said, “I think we may be the youngest couple in the whole restaurant.”

“You could be right.”

“How old would you say she is?” Smiley nodded in the direction of a blond woman in a black cable-knit sweater. Her breasts stretched the yarn so far that you could see her pale skin through the loose weave.

PRECARIOUS

“Hard to say. Thirty-four, thirty-five.”

Smiley lifted her water glass.

“Do you think she’s attractive?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t kick her out of bed for eating crackers.”

Smiley choked back a laugh and barely managed to set her glass down without spilling it.

“Haven’t you heard that before?” I said.

She shook her head and tried to swallow.

“It’s one of those things guys say to each other all the time.”

“The way you said it was so matter-of-fact.”

I shrugged.

“What else do guys say to each other?”

“About girls?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Nothing terribly enlightening, I’m afraid.”

The waiter returned with our soft drinks and asked if we were ready to order.

“I’d like to try the cioppino,” Smiley said.

The waiter asked what kind of dressing she wanted with her salad, and Smiley kept looking into his eyes, studying his face as he described the house dressing for her. I felt sure that she was wondering what he would be like in bed.

“I’ll have that,” she said.

She seemed very sure of herself, very poised, and very sexy. I had to look back at the menu to remember what I wanted, a calzone.

We gave our menus to the waiter, and he disappeared once more. Smiley was still full of questions.

“What do you find attractive in a woman?” she asked.

“Me? It depends.”

“A big bust?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Or are you a leg man?”

“I like nice legs, sure.”

“I’ll bet you’re a butt man.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know,” she said, an inexplicable gleam in her eye. “Are you?”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Am I embarrassing you?”

“A little,” I said.

“I was just curious. Isn’t that the way guys talk when they get together?”

“There’s a lot of that.”

“So, do you have a preference? Or don’t you want to tell me? You don’t have to.”

“No, it’s okay. Legs, I suppose.” For some reason that seemed like the safest response.

“I always wished I had nice legs,” she said.

“You do.”

“My thighs are too . . . thick.”

“No, they’re not. They’re fine. I think you have very attractive legs.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. What else do you like?”

“Your eyes.”

“Not on me. I mean in general. What do you consider sexy?”

“Eyes, definitely. A certain look in the eyes. And hands. Hands can be very sexy.”

PRECARIOUS

We paused while the waiter served our salads, using a long wooden pepper mill to grind pepper over them as we nodded our approval.

“Go on,” Smiley said.

“What do you consider sexy?”

“In a man I like broad shoulders,” she said, watching the waiter walk away, “and narrow hips.”

“Like his?”

“Our waiter? He is pretty well proportioned, isn’t he?”

I shrugged.

“Don’t you think he’s good looking?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. I suppose he is,” I said, grudgingly.

“What else do you find attractive—in general?”

“The things you mentioned: bedroom eyes . . .”

“Bedroom eyes?”

“You know—a sort of sleepy, sensual look.”

“Like this?”

“Mmmm, yes, you’ve got the idea.” She cleared her throat. “The salad is good, isn’t it?”

“Very tasty.” I imagined her draped across a big feather bed in just her nylons.

“Stop that; you’ll make me blush.”

She looked down at her salad, and I looked away, finally. I pretended to be taking in the décor, but all I could see was the image in my head. When I faced Smiley again her head was still down but she had raised her eyes and was looking at me steadily.

OUTSIDE, THE AIR had turned chilly, and Smiley rubbed her bare arms as we stopped on the sidewalk to look around at the city lights, the slow-moving cars, the people passing in clusters of three and four.

“So,” I said, “what should we do now?”

“I can’t believe you still have any energy left.”

“I don’t really. It’s just that we’re here, you know?”

“I know. But it’s late and I’m really pooped—and I’ve got to get out of these shoes. Would you mind if we just went back to the motel?”

“Not at all.”

“I’m freezing,” she said. “Put your arm around me.”

ALONE IN THE room, getting warmer now with the heat cranked up, I didn’t know quite what to do with myself—as usual. I could hear running water and other noises from the bathroom, where Smiley was changing. I sat on the bed, took off my shoes and socks, then stood and unbuttoned my shirt, turned down the bed, paced.

Smiley came out in an oversized man’s shirt with tails that reached almost to her knees. Modest but sexy nonetheless.

“All yours,” she said.

It took me a second to realize she meant the bathroom.

When I came out, Smiley was in bed, looking the other way while she took off her wristwatch and placed it on the nightstand. (Was her timing premeditated?) Then she reached for the lamp, and waited.

“Are you getting in?” she asked.

“You can look,” I said. “I’m decent.”

She looked over her shoulder then. “Well, I didn’t know what you’d have to wear.”

I had on a pair of striped boxers that extended halfway to my knees. I bought them especially for the trip, in a three-pack from Hamilton’s, the local men’s store, but had not tried them on beforehand.

“Kind of sexy, huh?”

“Oh, yes, very.”

PRECARIOUS

She smiled at me and—I still think this is remarkable—stifled a clear impulse to laugh. I got into bed and she turned out the light. The room went black.

“I had a good time,” she said.

“Me too.”

“Well, sweet dreams.”

I was lying on my back, looking at the ceiling and letting my eyes adjust to the dark. Smiley was on her side, facing away from me. We stayed that way for a long time. I was thinking about a lot of things—movies, magazines, a pink blanket moving up and down in the woods by the river on a summer afternoon when I was just old enough to know what it meant. My mind was a tangle of images, but the one thought I kept coming back to was this: *Nothing is going to happen. I'm in bed with Smiley and nothing is going to happen.*

Finally, I turned toward her, put my arm around her, and snuggled against her back. She didn't say anything, and she didn't move. I wondered if maybe she was already asleep, but I didn't think so. Her body felt warm and soft—relaxed but not limp—and I loved the smell of her, which was not the smell of perfume anymore but her own subtle scent.

I wasn't really sure what I was doing or what I might do next. I tried not to think at all.

The headlights of a car turning around in the parking lot swept across the room. Brushing Smiley's hair up against the grain, I kissed her on the back of her neck. It was a soft, lingering kiss. She stretched and squeaked like a cat. I squeezed her and she turned in my arms and we were kissing. The kiss grew and multiplied until Smiley pulled back slowly, kindly, careful not to be abrupt.

“Dean?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything more,” I told her.

I kissed her again on the lips and the neck and began to slowly unbutton her nightshirt. The first two buttons went quite smoothly, but on the third there was a snag.

“Oh!”

“Sorry,” I said, looking around, patting the sheets. “It just sort of popped off.”

She put her hand on mine and said, “We’ll find it later.”

Stroking my head, she kissed me, and I kissed her, moving down to her neck and lower still.

When I had finished with the buttons, I pulled her shirt back behind her shoulders and looked at her in the dim light that came in through the curtains. My right knee was between her legs and I held myself up on my hands, arms extended so I could see better. Her hair, so short now and easily tousled, stood out in sharp contrast to the white pillowcase. Her eyes were closed but moving under the lids.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I said.

Opening her eyes, she smiled and ran one finger down my cheek and along my chin.

I kissed her again and she rolled me over on my side, throwing back the covers in the process. Her hand slid under my arm, down my back, and onto my shorts. Her head fit neatly under my chin, and she buried her lips in my neck. I felt warm and happy.

Then her fingers curled under the waistband of my boxers and she pulled them down until my butt was exposed. I could feel her smile against my shoulder. She tugged harder, but my shorts would go no farther, not even when she snaked her other hand down there and pulled from both sides.

PRECARIOUS

My erection had poked through the fly and was holding things up. She looked down at it, then up at me. We both shook our heads and rolled our eyes.

I felt silly, but Smiley had such a friendly, easy manner that my embarrassment soon passed. She simply unhooked me and lowered my shorts as far as her arms would reach, then finished the job with her feet.

I was naked and it felt good. I kicked the covers off the end of the bed, and Smiley stroked me slowly, her head on my chest.

“That, uh, that’s good for now,” I said.

She sat up and I helped her out of her nightshirt, which was in a tangle around her elbows and behind her back.

There were four pillows on the bed, and by now they were scattered far and wide. Smiley grabbed the one closest to her and tossed it up against the headboard. I did the same with the two I could reach, then we scooted up and sank into the pile. Smiley put the fourth pillow between the headboard and the wall, I wasn’t sure why. When I looked at her, she just smiled and guided my head down to her breasts, one of which she cupped in her palm and fed into my mouth. Whenever she shifted positions, my lips would slip from her nipple and the result was some rather loud slurping noises. I felt self-conscious at first, but Smiley seemed to like it. I think she was amused, but not in a way that made me feel belittled in any way. Her amusement was mixed with understanding and pleasure, it seemed to me.

I caressed her thighs and the curve of her hip, the rough lace and smooth satin of her panties. My thumb found its way under the narrow band—little more than a ribbon—that stretched across her side. All I had to do was inch her undies down over her hips, slide them down her legs . . .

My hands were rough, the calluses thick at the base of my fingers and around the joints where the skin had been pinched and worn while gripping the oars of a racing shell day after day with Curt. I grew hesitant and finally motionless.

“What is it, Dean?”

“I’m not as sure as I thought I was.”

CURT CALLED ME when he got back into town.

“You remember Bob Pritchard, don’t you?” he said.

Bob worked for Curt’s dad. He was a big guy, very athletic in a loping sort of way. One summer, years earlier, he had been our camp counselor. (For some reason I remember him being fond of the word “prowess.”) He gave us advice about dating, and one of his rules was that a goodnight kiss should last no more than fifteen seconds. When somebody balked, he asked all of us in the cabin to be silent. He looked at his watch, at us, and at his watch again. It did seem like a long time then.

“Who could forget?” I said.

“He tried to warn me about you and Smiley.”

“He what?”

“He said you guys were getting awfully—oh, what was the word he used? Chummy.”

Chummy was another of his favorite words.

I said, “He called you in Bridgeport?”

“He had to talk to my dad about something, but then he asked for me. I thought it was really strange. I told him I asked you to keep Smiley company, and he said, ‘I think he’s doing more than keeping her company.’”

“Unbelievable.”

PRECARIOUS

Curt just wanted to be sure I was home, he said. His dad was going to drop him by to pick up the Mustang.

“DEAN, I WAS just telling Smiley what Bob Pritchard said.”

The dust was still settling from Mr. Hutton’s departure in his rusted old pickup.

“Can you imagine,” Smiley said, “if he’d known about the trip to San Francisco?”

“The what?”

“Uh-oh . . . Dean? You didn’t tell him?”

“I was just about to.”

Curt raised his eyebrows and folded his arms.

“You know, the Mustang gets pretty good mileage on the highway,” I said, handing him the keys.

“And you took my car. Great. What else did you do?”

“Nothing,” Smiley said.

I said nothing, too, but not out loud.

“Where did you stay—a hotel?”

“Of course we—”

Curt turned to me.

“You screwed her, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Oh, I see, so she screwed you.”

“Curt—”

With his back to me, he muttered something to Smiley and she slapped his face. He spit on the ground by her feet. I grabbed his shoulder.

“Always jumping to her defense, aren’t you? Well, come on then.”

He motioned me to take a swing. I stood still.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I know you want to.”

He looked down at my hands and I realized they were fists.
Smiley walked away.
Then so did we.

THE SUN WOKE me in the morning. I was lying on my back, and the insides of my eyelids were so red I had to squint. Then I came awake with a start, threw back the sheets, and sat up. I looked at my clock—the alarm had not gone off. With good reason. I had not set it.

I had been dreaming of the river, but I didn't really know if I was supposed to be there now. My guess was that Curt would not be. I went back to sleep.

I QUIT MY job at the restaurant and spent the next few days avoiding people.

I wanted to deposit my paycheck, but I figured I'd get Smiley as a teller and I wouldn't know how to act. I spent hours on the beach sitting in a little fort some kids had made of driftwood. I had a dozen conversations going on in my head and not one of them was coming out well.

On the second day I returned to the fort, but I wasn't there long before I knocked down the walls, ramming them with one shoulder, then the other. After that I walked along the coast until I no longer recognized my surroundings. Stretching out in the tall sea grass, I fell asleep. When I awoke, the tide was in and the sky was dark.

I WAS COMING up the hill after a long solitary run the next morning when I spotted Curt sitting cross-legged on the grass in front of the Imperial Arms. He was right on the edge where the lawn is still flat, then slopes steeply down. He waved and I walked over to him slowly.

PRECARIOUS

My legs were heavy, but even though I'd been running for over an hour, I wasn't winded.

"How far'd you go?" he asked.

"No idea. Can't even say where all I've been."

I sat down and was surprised by just how good it felt to be off my feet. I knew I should do some stretching, but I just couldn't bring myself to move.

"I gather you quit the restaurant," he said. "How come?"

I shrugged. We were both facing downhill now and said nothing. I pulled off my shoes and felt cool air through my damp socks.

Finally I said, "Listen, Curt, about that trip—"

"I know."

"What do you mean, 'I know'?"

"I know. Nothing happened."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, God, don't get all insulted."

"Sounds to me like you thought it over and decided—"

"To believe you?"

I said nothing.

Curt said, "Sorry I flew off the handle yesterday."

I pulled up some grass and scattered the blades to the wind.

"You should have fucked her brains out," he said.

"Now you tell me."

We laughed and then he said, "I'm glad you didn't."

I nodded.

CURT HAD TO leave—he was late for work—but we agreed to meet down by the river the next morning. We had left one thing unresolved, and, with time running short, we both knew the river would make the subject, if not easier to broach, impossible not to.

As we carried the shell out of the boathouse, Curt said, very matter-of-factly, “What would you think about going to Regis?”

I said, “They offered you a free ride, didn’t they?”

“That’s not the point. It’s a—”

“But they did.”

“Well, yeah. But it’s a great school, Dean. You’d really like it.”

We hoisted the shell over our heads and started walking down to the river, Curt in front with his back to me.

“I’ll stick with Orland,” I said.

“I knew you’d say that. What about us sticking together, going to the same school. That was the plan.”

“I’ve done nothing to change that.”

“Me either! We still can.”

He looked over his shoulder at me, but I said nothing. We just kept walking until we got to the dock and set the shell in the water. Aside from a few ripples along the banks, the river was calm, and for a moment we just stood there looking at it.

“You just want to go to Orland because they have a good design program,” Curt said. “What reason do I have to go there?”

“None. Take the scholarship, Curt. I would.”

“But you could get one, too. Maybe not the first year, but Mr. Hill said if you make the team—”

“I don’t think so.”

“No, you could. I know you could.”

“No, I mean . . . no.”

A soft breeze came up, and I watched as it brushed across the surface of the water. It made me feel calm.

“I tried, man, but they have a limited number of scholarships to pass around, and—”

“It’s okay. Really.”

PRECARIOUS

“It’s not okay.”

“It can’t be helped,” I said.

“It could if you weren’t such a stubborn S.O.B.”

With a straight face, I said, “You know, if you were any kind of a friend at all, you’d turn down that scholarship.”

“So I can pay top dollar to go to the school you want to go to?”

I couldn’t hold back my smile any longer.

“My point exactly,” I said.

Curt nodded and smiled slowly.

As we went through our normal warm-up routine, Curt setting the pace as always, I felt a growing impatience, but soon we were rowing in earnest. I wanted to make that boat move—make it glide—and get that feeling of being in synch once more. But we just couldn’t make it happen.

I STILL HAVE the button from Smiley’s nightshirt. I found it the morning after, far from the bed, and put it in my pocket without saying a word to Smiley. As I look at it now, I wonder why I’ve kept it.

She told me she was glad I stopped when I did.

“Not glad at the time, maybe, but—”

“Me, too,” I said.

That was a lie, of course.

I know I did the right thing that summer, but sometimes you can do the right thing and still regret it.