She cannot know how it will all end, this weekend in Los Angeles for the annual convention. She cannot know that she will have talked herself out of a job and slept with a man with whom she will have no future (there is no connection between the job and the man). It is only the beginning of the conference—Thursday night—and she has just arrived in Los Angeles after changing planes in St. Louis to complete the trip. She has only just arrived and checked into a hotel within walking distance from both the convention headquarters and the Staples Center, and she has just entered her spacious hotel room and deemed herself lucky that her department is willing to provide travel funds to grad students on the job market without requiring them to share accommodations.

Behind her are two full beds covered in white duvets. Just beyond the rest room to her left, two bottles of water too expensive to drink sit atop a cylinder table backed by a wide window and floor-sweeping draperies. To her right is a dresser with six drawers topped by a large flat-paneled television which she will not turn on—not even once—over the next three days.

In the spacious room she does not have to share, she unpacks her interview suit, a basic black number with subtle shoulder pads. It is a serious suit; when worn, it will show no hint of curves. It tells one and all to focus on her mind and not her physical assets. It tells folks to get their minds out of the gutter.

The suit is not her own, but a borrowed one from the graduate pool. She and four other women of similar height and weight pooled their resources to buy this Tahari from Burlington Coat Factory. She is a proud shareholder, owning one-fifth’s interest in the suit. In the early autumn, the department’s Placement Chair brought in two former graduate students to impart their wisdom. Just the year before, they had been preparing to go on the job market; now they were junior faculty members at important institutions who could look back and provide sage advice. They cautioned the group of job market hopefuls to provide themselves with every possible advantage. They told stories of brilliant job candidates who had flubbed their interviews because of inappropriate dress. “Clothes make the scholar,” they said.

She has taken every possible precaution. She has come all the way to Los Angeles, all the way to the other side of the country, and she intends to shine. Like all of the other hopeful
graduate students, she stepped out on faith, booking her hotel room and registering for the convention long before knowing if she’d have even one interview. She has been rewarded for her optimism and faith. She has one interview scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. She does not intend to blow it. She has done her homework, reviewing the university’s mission statement, the department’s website. She knows interesting facts about the two men interviewing her tomorrow and is conversant in their areas of interest. She is prepared to discuss possible courses she could teach. She has brought sample syllabi.

At a time when others have been working for at least five years, she is just now applying for her first full-time job. She is twenty-nine years old and she is ready to put behind the meager graduate stipend upon which she has subsisted for the past six years, ready to begin repaying undergraduate loans, ready to design her own courses, to have her own students, and to teach her own material. She is tired of grading papers for professors, teaching sections of composition and correcting comma splices. She is tired of being addressed as Ms. She cannot wait any longer. There is no indication that next year’s job market will be any better and more reason to believe that it will be far worse. Originally, she’d had three interviews for the convention, but two have been canceled due to budgetary concerns. Universities were canceling searches and dropping new lines and hires without so much as a by-your-leave. She is in no position to be choosy.

So easy to tell the candidates from the conference participants. The next day, she spots them at a glance, picking them out easily from among the other indistinguishable men and women in nondescript black suits. Candidates sit, lost in wide-backed armchairs the color of sand dunes, trying to pass the time before their interviews. They clutter the hotel lobby. They watch the elevator doors and the front desk. They time their calls upstairs to the minute.

She waits among them in the hotel’s main lobby and calls up to get the room number five minutes before her scheduled interview, ignoring the twenty or so other conference interviewees dotting the lobby, conspicuous in their severe suits. She wears the same asexual uniform as the other female candidates. They are identical in their black, gray, navy, and brown pantsuits, their hair pulled away from their faces, their mouths devoid of lipstick. She has been trained not to call attention to herself during the interview process, not to give the search committee any opportunity to think of her as less than equal. She knows the drill. She will greet each search committee member with a firm handshake and sincere eye contact. She will not expect anyone to take her coat or pull out her chair. She will accept a cup of water if offered; if not, she will not ask.

Don’t ask, don’t drink.

Prior to her afternoon interview, she’d visited the book exhibit room and attempted to interest publishers in her fledgling book project. In the area just before the exhibit room, makeshift walls had been erected to list conference changes and
candidates had clustered around them, young men and women in somber suits standing on tiptoe, scanning to see if a last-minute interview had come through. She eyed those candidates with pity, taking comfort in not being one of them. Like her, they had taken a chance on coming to the convention. In the crowded elevator, she pushes thoughts of the unlucky out of her head.

It is all a gamble, she tells herself.

The search committee consists of only two members. The two men greet her and usher her in. One shakes her hand and the other follows suit. They direct her to the hot seat, a chair placed at an angle that allows her to face them both across the coffee table. They offer her a choice of water or coffee; they ask about her flight and her overall trip.

The man seated to her right then says, “Tell us a little about your dissertation,” the academic counterpart to the corporate “Tell us a little about yourself,” signaling that—niceties over—the interview can begin.

She describes her dissertation succinctly, in under two minutes flat, delivering the rehearsed recitation she has been trained to memorize. She answers every follow-up question admirably. The two men take turns asking about her teaching, her courses, her research. It is all going very well.

In the middle of discussing the unique advising system implemented at their university, which has now become a model for many other research universities with a focus on undergraduate education, she is asked, “Do you have any questions about opportunities for partners?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” she says. When the Placement Chair brought in the former grads, they’d advised the hopefuls to be honest during interviews and not try to bluff one’s way through any questions one failed to understand. Bluffing, they said, would only make it worse.

Silence fills the awkwardness and she sees the exchange of glances over her head. She has not read anything on the department’s web page, or the university’s mission statement mentioning a program called Opportunities for Partners. She suspects it is a program wherein which the university partners with the local community. Perhaps it is a new microlending project. Opportunities for Partners. How has she missed reading about this? It is obviously important enough for them to change the direction of the interview and interject a question about it. Opportunities for . . . partners. Partners; their politically correct way of alluding to a significant other without making presumptions about one’s sexual orientation. “Oh,” she says. “You mean ‘Partners’ with a little ‘p.’ I understand now.”

“And do you have any questions?” she is asked.

“No, thank you.”

As one, the two men stand and extend their hands. The one to her left says, “Thank you for coming. We intend to be in touch with all of our candidates early next semester to arrange campus visits.” The one to her right says, “Enjoy the rest of the convention.”
At the conclusion of the interview, she returns to the room, which has yet to be cleaned by housekeeping. Stepping carelessly over strewn pajamas and balled nylons, she strides to the window and parts the draperies to look at the view that is no view. Though her window is as wide and high as the wall, it looks out only onto a pebbly area, beyond which is a well-loved city important only to her because it is hosting the convention. She steps out of her sensible shoes, losing two inches in height, and feels her smallness. In this city, she is nothing and in the hotel suites where the interviewers convene, she is even less, a number on a list of candidates, a dossier that has made it thus far but will go no further.

Back at her hotel room, she slips the Privacy Please placard onto her room door’s outer handle. She weighs her options and realizes she has none. Her graduate funding has run its course. The only way to secure more funding is to teach adjunct courses, which would only hinder her research agenda.

She undresses. Carefully, she folds her black suit and packs it in her suitcase, hoping it will serve someone else a better turn. She has no more need for it. The look between the two men had been subtle but definite. There will be no campus visit. She lies down on her unmade bed.

Just the other night, upon her arrival, she took comfort in the expensive and spacious room she had all to herself. Now she longs for a roommate, or any other person to explain it all to her, help her to understand just what went wrong. Now there is no comfort in the small cube refrigerator, discreetly hidden behind the faux mahogany door panel, nor the granite marble sink with the individual coffee-maker beside it, accompanied by two packets of coffee—one regular and one decaffeinated—and an inadequate supply of sugar packets. She takes no comfort in the waxy cups individually wrapped in plastic nor in luxury soaps and conditioners she will not use, preferring the familiarity of her own toiletries.

After two hours of lethargy and self-doubting, she heads downstairs for dinner, hoping to get there while everyone else is still at cash bars and receptions, hoping to beat the convention crowd. The hotel boasts two restaurants—a bistro and a pub—on opposite sides of the lobby. She decides she will stuff herself on the department’s dime. She will order dessert. Maybe she will have a drink. All she has to look forward to now is reimbursement.

At the pub, she gives her name to the hostess and is told she’ll have to wait for a table to become available. She is welcome to eat at the bar, but she doesn’t feel like having her feet dangling from a too high stool just now. She wants to sink into something; she wants her back supported by the cushiony leather of a booth.

Scholars and critics fill the small pub. All around her, people are eating or standing in line in collegial groups. She catches snatches of conversation on material culture, historicity, and the subaltern. She appears to be the only one intending to eat alone. When the hostess moves...
to lead a group of five to a back booth, she is nudged into the man in front of her.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “We’re packed as tight as sardines in this vestibule.”

He looks out over her head and then back at her. “An apt metaphor,” he says. “Although not the most original.”

“I’m all out of originality,” she says. “Tough day?” he asks. His dark cheeks are dusted with short dark hairs, his lips lost beneath a mustache and goatee. His name hangs from a plastic sheath secured at either corner by a clip, dangling from a navy blue lanyard, but she cannot make out his institutional affiliation.

She smiles noncommittally.

“Did you give a paper?” he asks, glancing at his watch absently. Behind them, more people are filing into the restaurant, though none of the tables seem to be emptying.

“No,” she says. “Were you on a panel?”

“I’m chairing a search,” he volunteers. “It’s pretty much the only kind of service the department can rope me into. I’ve already done everything else. You name it. Undergraduate Studies Committee. Graduate Admissions. Placement Chair. Honors College. Faculty Senate Rep. Been there, done that. Now I get to pick and choose the ways in which I prefer to be a good university citizen. I’ve paid my dues.”

The hostess returns and tells him his table is ready.

“Would you be averse to joining me?” he asks. “Otherwise, I think you’re in for a good long wait.”

Early on in her program, she learned to be wary of the seemingly sympathetic professor, especially the black faculty members in her department. (Actually, no one ever called themselves ‘black’ in her department. In academia, they became ‘people of color.’ Whenever she identified herself as black rather than as a woman of color, they eyed her with the pity and contempt reserved for the unlearned.) She grew disillusioned with her female professors of color who promised her women of color gatherings, potlucks and writing groups, “community” as they called it, and then begged off, whining and complaining about being overburdened and underrepresented. They expected her to understand when they unapologetically returned her papers late or not at all, when they ushered her out of their office hours because they had not yet prepared their day’s teaching and needed to encroach upon the time they’d set aside for students. They expected her to understand and view them as role models when all they showed her was ineffective time management. But she has very little experience with male professors of color, so she does not bother to be wary of this man inviting her to join him for dinner. Right now, crowded into the small waiting area at the front of the pub, jostled between the hostess’s stand and the coat rack, surrounded by a camaraderie and conviviality from which she is excluded, it seems harmless enough to view his offer to join him as one of collegiality, harmless enough to accept.

He strides to the table with a long, loose-limbed gait, indifferently navigating the obstacles on the
way to their booth, dodging chairs pushed too far back, bulky coats dragging from the backs of chairs, the wayward straps of laptop bags looping out across the tiled floor, ready to trip the passerby. He strikes her as one who perches on desks, leans against dry erase boards. She’s had one professor like that before, an energetic man who could summon Madame Merle with one gesture of his hand and make Henry James, American Realism and Portrait of a Lady come alive. This man whom she is joining for dinner makes her feel at ease. He seems as if he could be at home anywhere.

She cannot know that there will be more to it than dinner.

She cannot know that when he later identifies himself as a feminist scholar—albeit a new wave one—that his commitment to respecting women and championing their equality is limited only to his research and scholarship and will not actually be extended to her. She cannot know that one day from now, he will offer to visit her after they both return to their respective cities. Nor can she know that after she has slept with him, the offer will become vague and indefinite. Two days later, when she mentions spring break will be a good time for him to come, he will explain that he did not intend a visit so soon, but was thinking of sometime in the fall during the next academic year when he would already be in the area for a discussion panel at another university. The flattered sense of excitement that washed through her at his initial overture will slow to a trickle once she understands that his intention to see her is motivated more by convenience than desire. Once they have left the conference, and they have taken to talking over the phone, that muddied invitation will transform and reverse itself into a suggestion that she visit him instead because he is simply too burdened with academic commitments to travel to her. When she asks him about the glaring contradictions in his request—for surely, if he is too busy to take a weekend to see her, then surely he is equally too busy to spend time with her if she should come to him—he will shut down completely, awkwardly defensive, accuse her of interrogating him and refuse to answer her question or discuss the issue any further, forgetting all about his touted feminism as he preempts her right to speak.

She can know none of this as she slides into the booth beside him, believing that her day is certainly looking upward and that this offer of a friendly meal is a harbinger of good things to come.

Once seated, they agree to ask for separate checks before they order. Their departments will reimburse them.

He says, “You look like you need a drink,” and removes the drink menu from among three tall waxy candles.

“I had an interview earlier this afternoon, and I’m sure I bombed it.”

“Oh?”

“I’d really prepared for it. Perhaps even over prepared. Have you ever done that? Read every single thing about the university that you possibly

Crazyhorse
could, just in the hopes that something might be useful? You know, trying to make yourself knowledgeable and unstumpable? Is that a word?"

“No,” he says.

The server comes and takes their order. When he leaves, her dinner companion helps himself to the bread and says, “It might not have been as bad as that. Sometimes you’ve done better than you think, but you misread the cues because you’re misled by your own nervous energy. I see it all of the time. You get so nervous during the interview that you block out or misinterpret signs of encouragement. You probably did as well as the next candidate. In any case, the interview is over and there’s nothing you can do about it now. It will be up to the committee to determine who they’d like to invite to campus. It’s all about chemistry from this point on. You want to believe that it’s about your erudite writing sample and your glowing letters of recommendation. Maybe it was about all of that before the convention started. That’s what got you in the door, but now it’s all about chemistry. They want to know if they like you, if you and they click, if they can see themselves working in the same department with you for the next twenty or more years, whether they think the students will find you engaging and approachable.”

Their meals and drinks are placed before them. They have both ordered gourmet sandwiches and thick-cut fries. He has ordered her his favorite beer.

“How can they surmise all of that from just thirty minutes?” she asks, feeling ever more hopeless.

“Something tells you whether or not the candidate will be a good fit. You’re sitting there, listening, and then you see an image of him or her at the front of the classroom, interacting with students. It’s just like that moment in dating where the initial chemistry between two people blossoms into a second date.”

“So academia is like dating?”

“Very much so.” He nods and removes the tomato from his sandwich. “Let me ask you this. Do you like men?”

“Excuse me?” Then, as if she is being interviewed, she answers, “I mean, yes. Yes, I like men.”

“Can you, with any semblance of accuracy, pinpoint the exact moment wherein romantic interest is developed?” he asks. “Of course not. Something clicks, and you just know. It’s instinctual.”

She fidgets. “I don’t think I can really measure something like that. Attraction takes time,” she says, watching his throat work as he drinks his beer.

He eyes her appreciatively. “Believe me, it doesn’t.”

She is twenty-nine years old, but in PhD years that is like being only twenty-three. So—despite her age and academic wisdom beyond her years—an unfeigned innocence induces her to accept his offer to walk her back to her hotel without reading
anything into it. Unlike others her age, she has not enjoyed her twenties. She has not had six or seven years after graduation to discover herself, to burn out on parties, heartbreaks, and just getting by, or to come to the place where she feels ready to settle down. In the years immediately following college, when others were partying and spending, she was barely subsisting on a meager graduate income, going without health benefits, and eschewing relationships and the complications they could bring in favor of passing her comps, orals, and field exams.

She has no idea how they have ended up here. She has no desire to be the person who attends the convention merely to misbehave. The laxity and impropriety, the wickedness of being strait-laced and then letting loose, has no appeal for her. Yet here she is. Dinner is over and he has come back to her hotel room. It began as mere courtesy, a casual offer to walk her back to her hotel in the warm southern California air. They pass by the Staples Center and a large statue of Magic Johnson, past the Wolfgang Puck’s and the large convention center. There are two Marriotts in use for the convention, but she is not in the nearby one, so he offers to walk her since she is too thrifty to take a cab. That offer brings him up to the door of her hotel room when they both know he could have said good-bye in the lobby. Then—at the door—he experiences an urge to use the restroom. May he come in? And now he is in and there is no polite way to ask him to leave.

He does nothing untoward, merely sweeps assessing glances over her room, over the bucket of melted ice, the three cans of diet soda lined up near the alarm clock, the Gideon Bible open and nestled on her pillow (she read in it earlier and offered a quick prayer that her interview would go well), the damp twisted towel she has deliberately left lying on the floor in defiance of the hotel’s request at ecological preservation, the earbuds of her MP3 player dangling from her laptop, the folder of supplemental materials she has brought with her, the bra hanging off the back of the desk’s chair, which she cannot remove without drawing undue attention to its presence.

“May I?” he asks, lifting the folder from the second bed.

He opens it and flips through extra copies of her dissertation abstract, three sample syllabi, a copy of the interviewing university’s mission statement, a photocopy of its faculty handbook.

“Looks like you really did your homework,” he says. “I wish some of our candidates today had been half as conscientious.”

She wants to ask him everything, to pick his brain and know—for future reference—what she could have done better.

He lies beside her on the bed. She is fully covered by the sheet; he lies above it on his side, answering question after question. He tells her about his own department, and what it felt like years ago when he was a recent hire.

It begins as a murmur, a small negligible sound on the other side of the wall. Then the walls seem to purr and she understands that the couple in the room on the other side of hers is
having loud and enthusiastic sex. It becomes harder and harder to talk over them. As he tells her of the hard time he is having acquiring all of the necessary permissions for his forthcoming book, she can only imagine the bodies in the next room over, slick with sweat, entangled in sheets.

“It must be good to have a book coming out,” she says, unwilling to count the years it will take her to transform her dissertation into a monograph.

“It looks like getting a tenure-track job is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow when you’re in graduate school,” he says. “But that’s just the beginning. One book will never do. Each promotion requires a book. And then there’s service and administration.”

As he speaks, he rolls closer to her, until their hips are touching.

“You’re like a tonic,” he says. “I wish I could keep you around me all the time. You’re a natural confidence booster.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, unsure if he is mocking her.

Hands casually roaming, he says, “Seeing this world through your eyes is restorative. When you first become a faculty member, you spend all of your time comparing what life is like on the other side, but pretty soon that feeling of self-satisfaction kicks in and you realize that you’ve made it. Maybe you don’t have tenure yet, but you’re on the tenure track, which seems like the most amazing accomplishment when your friends and cohorts have taken visiting instructor positions, become adjuncts, or left academe altogether. Soon you forget how lucky you are to be on the other side. Pretty soon you forget there ever was any other side and you forget all about grad school and its attendant worries. You forget that grateful feeling you had when the contract letter came, spelling out your salary and moving expenses. Talking to you reminds me of that old feeling I’d felt then and it feels like I’m waking up after a deep sleep and opening my eyes for the first time.”

“Professor Van Winkle,” she teases, preening under the compliment, momentarily confident enough for a rejoinder. She does not think to move when he eases the sheet from around her neck and lowers it to her waist. Nor when he lowers the strap from her shoulder and licks the now bare skin. It does not occur to her that perhaps he does this type of thing at conferences all of the time, namely because she does not think of what they have begun as this type of thing.

She cannot know what awaits her the next afternoon, the next evening. None of this can she know as she checks into her hotel room and proudly hangs her borrowed suit. It is only the beginning of the conference—Thursday night—and she has just arrived in Los Angeles. She has tipped the bellhop. She has unpacked her things. She has an interview tomorrow afternoon and she intends to wake up bright and early in the morning. Despite what the clocks here say, her body tells her it is three hours later. She will not lollygag the night away. She needs her rest so that she can be ready, prepared for any possibility.

Candidate
She calls her mother to say she has arrived safely. She spends an hour reviewing the information she has printed. She showers, taking an extra ten minutes to shave and sing, then completes her toilette and readies herself for bed. Her hotel room has two full beds and she flips a penny to see which one she will sleep upon tonight. Bright and shiny, the copper coin lifts into the air—she has heard these things now cost more to produce than they are actually worth and it requires little effort for her to draw comparisons between the production of pennies and humanities PhDs—the penny soars and then comes down easily. She catches it in her right hand and slaps it onto her left, eager to know her luck.