

The Way We Met: The Semantics of Romantics

by

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Master of Arts

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Radiation	0821
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Géophysique	0373
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Pharmacie	0572
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Chimie nucléaire	0738
Chimie organique	0490
Chimie pharmaceutique	0491
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THE WAY WE MET:
THE SEMANTICS OF ROMANTICS

BY

LAURAL REGINA PORTH

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

"The Way We Met: The Semantics of Romantics" is, first and foremost, a work of creative fiction examining the intricacies of young, contemporary love. Couples were interviewed individually and a questionnaire sample was completed by forty-six other individuals. The stories were crafted around this collected research.

The content of "The Semantics of Romantics" is based on the foundation that love is, ultimately, unspeakable. In this way, the stories take the form of a scientific experiment and follow a quasi-scientific process: hypothesis, testing and conclusion. The appendix, a selection of the questionnaire responses received, reinforce the notion of a gathering of information.

"Quasi" becomes an important word for describing "The Semantics of Romantics." It is, in the truest sense, a "quasi-fiction," lying somewhere between a journalistic style of reporting and a collection of loosely connected short stories. The work is written, in Wordsworthian style, in the language of the common person of these stories: middle-class twenty-somethings.

The narrator of the story is an enigma. She is unnamed and occupies the space between the binaries of "1" and "0" in the "Me" chapters: representations of male and female. As author and interviewer, the narrator also occupies the difficult space between narrator and author. For as Julia Kristeva writes in *Tales of Love*: "Analysis is not the supposedly detached, subdued writing of a book concerning the love of men; it is an integral part of it." Kristeva also comments that there are two voices in the author: the lover, which is metaphoric, and the analyst, which is metonymic. These two voices are constantly transgressing each other. In "The semantics of Romantics," the narrator's views and emotions bubble to the surface of the pen out of the unconscious -- not only is

this to be expected, it lends a balance to the work. This narcissism is a position, a geography, not an identity.

Finally, Kristeva suggests that the failure of language cannot be represented, it must only be gathered up and related. This is what "The Way We Met: The Semantics of Romantics" aims to do, with the addition of the appendix especially: to gather up words and allow them to be reworked in the mind of the reader in the process of reading.

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This project could not have been completed without the encouragement and work of my advisor, Tony Steele. Thanks.

Thank-you also to my readers, Dennis Cooley and Louise Kasper, who gave me excellent feedback and much to think about.

Thank-you to my family, especially my parents, who have supported me through the rough spots and taught me about love.

And finally, thank-you to S. He knows why.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
1. Me 0	1
2. Dylan	6
3. Lynn	11
4. Helen	17
5. Mike	22
6. Tania	26
7. Troy	31
8. Heather	35
9. Chris	41
10. Brian	45
11. Mark	50
12. Me 1	55
13. Questionnaire	60
14. Appendix	62

Me 0

"Who needs glasses?" I ask through the screen door. The bar cart at the pool is totally cut off from my view, surrounded by people. Lynn takes the tray from me and hands me her drink. "Thanks, Lynn, you're a lifesaver," I say gratefully.

Lynn's perfect red nails land on my shoulder. "Sit *down*. You've been running all evening. The party will take care of itself."

I brush my hair back from my face and open the door for Lynn. As the hot air hits me I take a breath involuntarily and shiver. The noise from the backyard fills my ears with a rush. I close my eyes, relax, and move forward. I hate hosting parties.

I watch Lynn walk away. She's beautiful, in palazzo pants and a long loose vest. She's also quite tall, so she can carry off that look. She stops to chat along the way to the bar, effortlessly balancing the tray on her arm.

"Hey!" Mark's voice breaks my thoughts. "Are you a zombie or what? Sit down and talk to me."

I smile at Mark. We work together and I knew he'd be the life of the party. We sit down on lawn chairs and survey the scene.

"You throw a pretty good shake," Mark says, sprawled out in the wicker chair. His eyes are a glossy but electric; he's had a few.

"I'm glad you're having a good time."

"So these are your friends, eh?" He motions vaguely with his drink. "Everybody seems to have a bit of money."

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess so. Upper-*middle* class, though, Mark. So a bit of money and big credit card bills."

Mark laughs heartily. We silently absorb the party around us, overhearing snippets of conversation.

"What an asshole," a voice cries shrilly. "So he was screwing around on you?"

"Yes," says another. "But that's OK, I was seeing someone else too."

Mark catches my eye and we share another laugh.

"I feel like that story -- "Kew Gardens" -- you know it?" I say.

Mark shakes his head no.

"It's told from the point of view of the garden, which is stationary, of course. It hears pieces of people's lives as they walk by."

Mark's head wobbles from side to side as he focuses on me. "Their love life?"

"Well, no, not really."

"Then what's so interesting about *that*?" says Mark.

My good friend Helen approaches us. "What say, Mark? Wanna go for a swim?"

Mark rises. "Sure," and turns to me. "You in?"

"No, I'll pass."

I watch Helen and Mark head for the house to change and I think about Mark's words. He's right -- people's love lives are fascinating. Really, it's all we talk about. I scan the scene around the pool. Groups of two or three, relaxing, holding drinks, talking about themselves. Work discussion is banned from parties. Men and women joking, laughing, flirting, trying to impress each other. As Leonard Cohen would say, 'partner found, partner lost.'

Dylan approaches from the cluster of women he's been speaking to. I watch them watch him walk away and their whispers float towards me. Dylan is Lynn's ex and since he is single and eligible, I am perceived as a competitor.

"Hey Dylan," I say. "Who are you going home with tonight?"

Dylan positions himself at the back of my chair and begins to massage my shoulders. "I don't know. Let's pick one."

I notice a striking redhead. "Her?"

Dylan's fingers stop for a moment. The massage resumes. "No, she used to date a friend of mine."

Dylan's hands are moving down my shoulders and towards my breasts. I should say something -- like stop. Maybe I'm mis-reading this, though. Maybe this is just friendly. "How about those women you were talking to just now?"

"No way."

"Ummm ... " I make a noise as a reflex; I'm getting nervous.

"I could stay, you know," Dylan caresses my face, looks at me and glides away. I'm hoping he's joking.

I light a cigarette. Dylan must be drunk. Why would he come on to me while Lynn is here? Why didn't I say something?

Chris lands in the chair beside me. He's known me forever -- through high school -- and he knows all my bad habits. "Stop analyzing!" he commands with a smile.

I smile back. "But it's my *nature*," I say, mimicking a joke from *The Crying Game*. It's Chris's favorite movie; I won't have to explain the allusion.

"I met this new girl," Chris begins, and leans toward me.

"Sounds like a story. And ..."

"And she's great. And beautiful. And smart."

"She sounds perfect." And I'm genuinely happy for Chris. He married young and is in the throes of a messy divorce. "What does she do?"

"Well ... I don't want to tell you just yet -- not until you meet her. You may not approve."

Oh great, I think. She's in sales. "OK, Chris, I'll play your little game," I say, jostling his arm. "But just because I like you so much."

Chris looks relieved. "Good. Really, you'll like her. Her name is Heather. She's great."

We watch Helen and Mark splashing in the pool. Mark gets out and drags Lynn in, fully clothed. I laugh under my breath. Bad choice Mark; she'll kill you.

"Did you hear about Tania's baby?" Chris asks me as Lynn emerges dripping and furious.

"No ... do I know Tania?"

"You haven't met her ... she's a friend of Lynn's. I think she used to baby-sit her."

I remember now. "The one that's been having all the trouble?" Lynn has been telling me the story as it went along.

"Yeah, she's had the baby. A little girl. Lynn's having a shower on the fourteenth. You're invited."

"How do you know?"

"I told her I'd help her with the food."

I nod. Chris's cooking is great; Lynn's isn't. Someone I don't know -- a friend of his -- engages Chris in conversation and I slip back into my thoughts. So many stories, I think. Someone should write them down.

This is a recurring thought. The stories we tell everyday -- trying to find love, trying to define it -- they consume us. We're at the threshold, the age of transition to real adulthood. They are about trust and vulnerability. About dominance and weakness. About identity and intimacy. About stories. And most of all, about people and words. I had a professor once who asked, "How do you describe a kiss?" It's the same thing -- how do you describe a love?

I realize Chris is speaking to me.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Yeah, fine. Chris, tell me something. I have an idea for a book. A book of stories. *Our stories*. About love in our age group. And, let's say, just for a minute, that I do this, could I interview you and Heather? Tell your story?"

Chris grins. "Of course. *For you, my dear, my life is but an open book*," he says, mimicking a Shakespearean accent. "Seriously, though, it is a good idea. God knows

some of these stories are pretty bizarre." Chris rolls his eyes and drains his drink. "What would you call it?"

I remember a title that has been bouncing around in my mind and then raise an eyebrow at him. "The Semantics of Romantics."

Dylan

Dylan looked at me over his coffee. He's had some problems with alcohol, he says, and he's trying to stop drinking all together. Later in the evening I find out that it was "boys night out" but he has elected to meet me to talk instead. Besides, he says when I ask him about it, all the boys want to do is go to the bar and drink -- and it's not much fun when you're the sober one watching all your friends get drunk.

Getting drunk was a problem for him and Lynn. She's a good friend of mine and though I don't like to say it, Lynn is a neurotic drunk. Over the eight years I have known her, I couldn't count the times she has made long distance calls to old lovers from the bar. The conversations usually go something like this:

Lynn: "I love you Greg. Like really love you -- whatcha doing now?"

A few moments of silence while she listens, or tries to listen, over ridiculously loud music.

Lynn: "Yeah, that's great. So do you love me? Cause I miss you..." She starts to cry. "So I'll talk to you soon, OK? I'll come visit. Let's get back together. Bye."

And, of course, in the morning, she forgets she ever called.

So Dylan forbade her to get drunk. "I just didn't like it," he said. "You know how she is -- she embarrassed me."

I'm still a little nervous after the other night at the pool party. I avoided Dylan for the rest of the evening, and I guess he took the hint. At any rate, he's not referring to it. It was probably the alcohol talking.

Lynn and Dylan met, not surprisingly somehow, at the bar. I was there too, and Lynn was in her I'm-on-a-manhunt mode. Dylan says he remembers that he and the boys, on another boys night out, were "hunting."

"That's our word for it," Dylan tells me. "When I met Lynn I wasn't much interested in the whole game of it all really. But she was the first girl I was attracted to in a very long time." All I remember is that he bought the drinks.

Dylan had been seeing Katy, an anorexic, messed up eighteen-year-old. But Dylan stresses he wasn't *dating* her -- though Katy eventually ended the relationship between Dylan and Lynn six months later.

"Did you love Lynn?" I ask. I think I know the answer, but I want to watch him when he says it. Dylan is such a character, as he sits there impeccably dressed in careful casualness. His black hair is wavy, short and pushed back from his face; he's a part-time model and clean-cut is his look. Only the signet ring with the diamond overdoes it, but Dylan was always a little on the flashy side. Maybe that's part of it, I think to myself -- Lynn wasn't enough of a show pony for him.

He actually blushes, which I didn't expect. "Umm ... you know, let me tell you about my loves," he says, quickly changing the subject. I smile to myself. The artist as voyeur. I can't help but revel in it.

Dylan fingers the ring on a chain around his neck. I hadn't noticed it before. "When I was fifteen I fell hard for Anna. We dated for a while and she moved to Toronto, but before she left I gave her this ring," which he holds up for me to see. It's silver; it looks like a fifteen-year-old promise ring -- sweet but tacky. "At first we talked everyday, then every couple of days; you know how long distance relationships are. I talked to her one night and she was on her way to a party out of town. And then I didn't hear from her for a few weeks."

He's a good storyteller, I think to myself. Engaging. He's telling the story with his eyes, casting them down and then catching mine with instant intensity. I'm hooked. Dylan scares me though; I've known him for almost a year and yet I can't tell if he's genuinely vulnerable or if he's just acting. I guess it doesn't matter, really.

"Then I get the ring in the mail with a note from one of her friends. She'd driven home from the party -- I'm sure she was drunk, though no one ever said. There were five people in the car; there was a head-on collision. Her friend got the ring at the morgue and mailed it to me. She thought I would want to have it, but no one ever called me." He's wooden now. It sounds like a well-worn story but I'm in there with him. How tragic. But I don't just drive by a traffic accident. I have to know.

"Did anyone live?" I ask, watching him carefully. He sighs. Now he's playing it up.

"One guy's a vegetable."

I still can't let it rest; besides, is any of this really true? I think to myself, 'Fifteen - that's about the right age.' So I ask.

"Was she your first for sex?"

His head snaps back and he looks offended. "God, no. Do you wanna hear that story? It's short."

"Sure."

"When I was thirteen I had my first part-time job at this little store by my house; just stocking shelves. My boss was a middle-aged woman going through a bad time in her marriage. She seduced me."

Surely the shock registers in my face. "What?" I cough out. "You're not serious!"

I can feel him watching my eyes, trying to judge if I believe him or not. It was that word *seduced*. I mean, it's just a soft word for rape.

"Oh yeah, I'm serious. I mean, it wasn't bad." He laughs. "It was the first time I ever saw a naked woman, I mean, other than a mom or a sister. I was shit scared." He laughs again, and the spell is broken.

I realize we haven't been talking about Lynn and I've changed my mind. I don't think he ever really loved her. The thing about Dylan is that he has this over-inflated

sense of responsibility, and Lynn always loved a caretaker. With Katy, for example, he had a little "talk" with the guy she was seeing after him.

Now I know all about this guy, Katy's boyfriend, because while he was dating Katy he was also dating my friend Helen, something we all found out later. What a small city this is. But it boils down to this: there are only so many people in our middle-class age group and in some way or another, we're all connected. The irony of the story is that I too dated this guy (about three times) in my early teens. And as we slowly found out, this guy was deranged.

"Jason took pictures of all the women he ... *was with*," Dylan says carefully, his body clenching up.

"What kind of pictures?" Dylan just looks at me. I thought I knew a lot, but this shocks the hell out of me too. "*Even of Helen?*"

"I don't know about Helen. But me and the boys strong-armed him into returning the negatives to Anna. He got out of town pretty fast after that."

That part is true, I know, because Helen lamented over his leaving for ages, though, in my estimation, he sexually abused her.

"Anyway, I was seeing Anna while I was seeing Lynn," he confesses, looking at me out of the corner of his eye, waiting for my reaction. I'm surprised but I pretend not to show it.

"Were you sleeping with them both?" I ask, knowing that for the last couple months of the relationship, Lynn and Dylan weren't sexually active.

"No!" he says, looking disgusted. I feel like I missed some important point.

"Then what do you mean?" I'm confused. What's the difference between "dating" someone and "seeing" them?

"I wasn't sleeping with anyone then. I had too much on my mind."

I assume he's referring to school. His parents want him to be a lawyer but so far he hasn't been able to get high enough LSAT marks. I remember him saying once that his

mother repeatedly tells him that he has "the heart of a mediator" and that he just has to keep trying until he gets in. I don't think he realizes how much pressure there is on him to perform, or maybe he does. At any rate, Lynn took "no performance" to mean "no interest" and got rid of him. Besides, she had found out that he was still in touch with Anna, and Lynn would never tolerate infidelity. Period.

"Are you dating anyone now?" I ask timidly.

"No, not since Lynn," he says, looking at me knowingly. "I have a lot to figure out."

Lynn walks up at that moment, as planned. She and Dylan are still friends, and we all go out together once in a while. I suggest we change venues, to change the mood. I'm not sure how I feel about people telling me their life stories. The telling act creates a false sense of intimacy between me and the interviewee. After all, honest, serious discussions of private relationships only happen between the two people involved. Where do I factor in?

Lynn pulls me behind Dylan. "What'd he say about me?" she says, eyes wide.

"Not much," I say quietly. "Not much."

Lynn

"Lynn, Lynn, full of sin."

One of Lynn's co-workers first formed this affectionate phrase and it stuck. It doesn't seem to bother Lynn. In fact, she seems to rather like it. I don't know -- maybe it's the remnants of my Sunday School morality talking -- but it bothers me. It makes me feel protective of her, like she can't take care of herself. That's not a feeling I have a right to have, and besides, it's probably not even true.

It's Mother's Day and Lynn is on her way over to the family home for dinner when she drops by to visit me. She's dressed in beige -- her favorite colour, which means I rarely borrow clothes from her -- and as usual, she looks like a young innocent, not the business tycoon she's training to be.

She, too, eyes the recorder nervously. "Do you have to tape this?" she asks. I sigh. God, is this going to be a contentious issue with *everyone*? Lynn must sense my annoyance (she's known me forever) because she offers, "It's just that...the *permanence* makes me nervous. I guess Dylan'll read this eventually, though," she muses, mostly to herself.

"Is that a problem? Wouldn't Dylan already know how you felt about the relationship?"

"Let's just say we leave a lot unsaid."

"Lynn, if you're uncomfortable "

"No, whatever," she says as she shakes her head. "Let's go."

I'm noticing more and more that the tape recorder melds my personality with its mechanistics when it goes on. It's as if I'm a receptacle, I think to myself, a cyborg archivist. I smile. I like that. I'm not afraid of machines.

Lynn glosses over her first meeting with Dylan. "The thing I remember the most is thinking, 'Who is this big *geek* buying all the drinks?'" Now Lynn, retract those claws.

She feels my disbelief. "No, *really*. I totally wasn't attracted to him at first."

"Why do you think he was attracted to you?"

She settles back in her chair. "Because I carried a cellular phone."

Uh-oh, I think. I'm in for it now.

"I was just so *tired* of men at the time," she starts. "I'd been through that awful relationship with Pat -- God, I even hate to say his name -- and then through a few throw-away mates and I just wasn't looking."

Over the years, I listened to Lynn discussing Pat for hours. Pat was Lynn's first love, and only, according to her. "That kind of love only happens once in your life," she says flatly. "And it's over for me. So that's it."

"What was 'that kind of love?'" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

"You know," she says.

"I do?"

"Yeah, yeah -- you're elated all the time, knowing that person thinks you were the most important thing in their life; when he fills a void ..." I laugh. "Get a grip," she chastises me. "I'm not talking sexually. Or maybe I am." She rolls her eyes and we laugh.

"So what ends *that kind* of love?"

"Well, I guess it was my fault," she says, looking away. "Before I dated Pat I slept with his best friend, Luke. He didn't know about Luke and I until eight months into the relationship and he thought it was this total betrayal."

"How'd he find out?" I ask.

Lynn looks surprised. "Oh ... I told him. Stupidest thing I ever did. My mom said to me, 'Lynn, honey, there are some things that men don't need to know.' God, I wish I had listened to her." Then her face changes. "But I just hate that male-ownership thing. Like if you have sex with a friend of theirs you're off limits. I call it the Dirty Laundry Syndrome. Nobody wants anybody else's dirty laundry."

So how is any of this your fault? I ask myself. I hope she knows it isn't. Equal rights in all arenas but sex. Is it *ever* going to change?

And Lynn, I would like to say non-pejoratively, is a very sexual person -- it almost defines her. So, true to form, she skips to the end of her first evening with Dylan as the two of them lay in bed together.

"We talked *forever*," she says in her sing-song-story-voice. Lynn, Lynn, loosen up, I chant silently. Tell me the truth.

"Did you sleep with him?" I ask, knowing the answer. "Actually, I mean, why *didn't* you sleep with him?"

Lynn narrows her eyes. "I decided to try something new -- the tease thing. He wanted to, of course. He left his number, but he called the next day." Then she starts to laugh. "And, you know, in the morning I said to Kerry," (her roommate) "his name sounds so familiar. Don't we know a Dylan? And Kerry starts to howl and says, 'Yeah, Dylan on *Beverly Hills 90210*.' And she was right, that's exactly who I was thinking of."

I laugh too. Sometimes TV is more real than real life. But I'm confused, so I ask: "If you didn't like the guy, and you thought he was shallow, why did you date him for six months?"

"I don't know," she answers defensively.

"Bullshit."

"Well ... he was cute, and super sweet, super attentive -- at first, at least." She really has nothing good to say. But after watching them through that relationship, I think that the biggest draw was companionship, which I suggest to Lynn.

"Oh, exactly," she agrees. "One day he actually said, 'You know, I'm not going to tell you I love you,' and I stared back at him and said 'Whatever.'"

Lynn is acting tough but her body says otherwise. She's lost at least thirty pounds since she broke up with Dylan and her bones arch alarmingly at me as she leans in to

swirl a nacho in salsa. She plays with it for a while and eventually leaves the chip in the red sauce.

"Could you describe yourself for me?" I ask abruptly, wondering if she sees in herself what I see in her.

"Can't you do that for me? I mean, that's what you *do*, isn't it?"

I am only a little surprised by her hostility. There are always so many things at play in conversations between peers -- egos and affirmations. I remind myself that Lynn is sweet and caring though it's not transmitting in this discussion, and so I try and stifle my competitive instinct and say gently, "Well yes, of course...but I want to hear it from *you*."

"It's impossible to describe yourself -- especially for women. If you're proud of your accomplishments and you talk about them, you're a braggart. If you're demure you have no self-esteem." She's quiet for a moment thinking over what she has said. "I'm passionate. And Dylan never was. He was the definition of a social chameleon -- he wanted to be all things to all people. He wasn't a pathological liar like Jeff, though," she says straightfaced. Avoiding the question, she decides to circumvent that self image quandary and instead takes a direct jab at me: Jeff is one of my exes. Interestingly, though, Lynn pursued the aforementioned pathological liar several days after our break-up. That ended our friendship for the next two years -- I guess women aren't immune to the dating code: men may not date dirty laundry because the goods are less valuable but women won't *allow* each other to date exes because their value has risen.

Obviously, Lynn isn't willing to talk about herself. So I ask about a favorite topic left over from adolescence : appearance.

"I think I'm fairly attractive," she concedes. "I need to lose some more weight, of course, but the good news is I've lost my appetite." I'm jealous in spite of myself. "I just hired a personal trainer; his name is Ben. He's just like a puppy ready to jump in my lap. It's funny too -- I'm totally not attracted to him. I'm just not interested in sex, you know?"

I'm just dead, ambivalent -- I don't know. I simply can't *believe* Dylan and I stopped having sex and I stayed in the relationship. Actually, I think that's what did this to me. Too many months of feeling like I was too unattractive to be sexually interesting."

I'm exhausted after that soliloquy so Lynn must be too. It's her manner of speech, though, to speak in those torrents of feelings; she's right, she *is* passionate.

"How did it end?"

"I let it dissolve. I stopped calling, he stopped calling. I didn't want to break up with him because he's been dumped by every girl he's ever gone out with," she laughs sarcastically. "But it was harder than any break up I've ever had. That feeling of unfinishedness -- is that a word? -- and guilt, sadness and sexual frustration. Even though I was in control, it still did a number on my self-esteem."

I've never seen Lynn in a state like this. Well, that's not true -- she was almost as bad when we went for AIDS tests when she first started dating Dylan. I remind her of that.

"God, wasn't that awful? They treated us like criminals. I'm sure they thought we were lesbians."

"How did that make you feel?" I ask, using my best journalistic straight face.

She doesn't even stop to think. "Oh, I wouldn't care. I've thought about it a lot lately -- about becoming a lesbian. I *like* women. I understand them, they talk like me and think like me. But the more I thought about it seriously the more I realized I couldn't do it. You just know, you know?"

"No," I'm confused.

She leans back and puts on her I'm-talking-to-a-person-of-markedly-lower-intelligence face. "I *know* I'm not a lesbian. C'mon -- we've had this conversation a million times. There are two types of homosexuals: those who are born that way, like *genetic* homosexuals, and those who are recruited. I'm know not genetic."

Then why can't you describe to me how you know?

But her interest is waning. I ask my final question: do you think the good dating experiences outweigh the bad ones?

"I don't know," she answers. Then her whole demeanor changes and Lynn gets reflective. "Talking about this makes me think -- you know that passage by Margaret Atwood? About the boyfriends marching by in a line like soldiers?" I nod. "I just keep wondering: are they soldiers to protect you or to attack you?"

I don't have an answer.

Helen

Helen is discernibly nervous, which I didn't expect. She's twenty-four and on her second Bachelor's degree, a good friend and always ready to talk about her love life. She's wearing a huge hand-knit sweater, silver hoop earrings and a black leather studded belt -- soft and hard at the same time. Many people think Helen is coarse, including her mother, who constantly encourages her to be "a lady." She does speak and act rough-'n-ready at times -- God, I've made her sound like a Hefty bag -- but she's really very warm and open. And yet today, I had to beg her to go on record with her thoughts on love.

Part of the problem, I'm sure, is that she is about to leave on a four-month internship which means leaving Mike behind in the city. She says she trusts him, but her demeanor says otherwise. Her whole body is tense as she watches the tape recorder warily. Before the recorder went on, her attitude and posture were open and keen in conspiracy -- if somewhat dulled by her impending departure.

Helen had just given me a letter to read. She was trying to decide whether or not to give the letter to Mike before she left. It explains -- in eight pages -- how worried she is about leaving him to the "young savages" as she calls them, and apologizes for her breakdowns over the past three months that they've been dating.

"It's so frustrating," she says, shredding her napkin. "The only way he'll listen to me when I have a problem is if I cry. It's getting really *tiring*." How interesting, I think. I hate crying; for me it's weak -- being overwhelmed with emotion. For Helen it's a tool. Maybe I could take some lessons.

Helen's letter (a work of art in itself) also speaks of her rape at fifteen and of her past lover, Jason.

...Jason had some strange power over me. I knew he was bad for me; I knew he was fucking other girls, I hated him. But when he was near me I couldn't say no. I let him do whatever he wanted to me. He ruined me, he crushed my self-esteem.

He's back in town; I saw him. I got in my car and drove away as fast as I could. That power might be still there.... I didn't tell you all this sooner because you never gave me the chance. (Helen's letter)

Real anguish marks these words, and my heart goes out to Helen as it did when she was this powerless.

"So should I send him the letter?" she asks anxiously, needing reinforcement.

I wait and consider. Is she really asking for my advice? Which answer does she want? "No," I say. "This seems more like an exercise for you than for Mike. Besides, you're leaving in a few days. Let those be happy ones."

"You're right," Helen says, defeated. Wrong answer, I think to myself. She wants to share her tragedies with Mike; I just don't think he's that kind of guy.

The tape recorder goes on.

"Tell me about Mike," I say. Helen's eyes brighten and she smiles involuntarily. People are really wonderful, you know, I think to myself. Sometimes in the sham and broken drudgery of the world I forget that. I feel warm as Helen speaks, insulated against the blackness outside.

"Well, he's six-foot-three and he has green eyes -- the most beautiful green eyes -- I think that's why I fell in love with him. He's, like, a really *nice guy*, you know? When I met him I trusted him right away. I thought: 'This guy won't hurt me.'"

There's so much fear in Helen; I feel the blackness creeping back into me. She's telling me things now that I have to promise not to write about -- a promise I have honoured -- but it occurs to me that her life is chronicled by secrecy and mystery. Helen seems to need not only drama but emotional turmoil to be interested.

The first time she met Mike (at a hockey game -- how Canadian) the evening turned into extend-a-date -- wonderful if you like the person and hell if you don't. After the game, the pair headed for a university beer bash and finally ended up at his house watching a movie. They were together for thirteen hours straight.

"Mike remembers the date of the beginning of our relationship," Helen says proudly. "He calls it our official anniversary." Jaded, I figure that Mike remembers the date because of the hockey game instead.

"Yeah," says Helen, reading my mind. "He knows all those useless sports stats. Boring. He was over at my house the other night and he went *downstairs* to watch hockey while I was upstairs watching X-files. Can you *believe* it?"

"Does that bother you about him?" I ask.

"No, not really...it's just that," she pauses. "He just doesn't *talk* like a girl, you know? He thinks I analyze things too much. Maybe I do. Hell, maybe we all do."

I nod. I do know what she means.

Helen must have scared herself with that comment because after that, her answers become rote. What do you look for in a boyfriend? Honesty, integrity, trust. How do you know when you're in love? When you think about that person more than you think about yourself.

I don't buy it. The more people I talk to, the more cliches I hear. I should start a collection: *Cliches of Love for the Beginner and Advanced*. It's so circular; I keep coming back to the question: why is it so hard to talk about love and yet we still talk of it constantly? I'm losing faith in words and their ability to translate emotions. The written word has more power. I decide to make up a questionnaire and give it to an equal number of men and women. Maybe that will isolate this word and definition problem. Because I'm tired of looking for the hidden meaning -- say what you want to say, I silently implore, in plain language, the language of everyday, the simple semantics of love.

I snap out of it. You've fallen into the cliché trap, I think to myself. 'Speaking the unspeakable' -- *please*. As I tune back into the conversation I realize Helen is saying that she is in love with Mike and he with her. I figure I'll continue in the traditional so I ask about marriage and family. She answers:

"Yeah, it's something I'd like to do," and her eyes gloss over. "I think that there's one person in the world for each of us -- your lifemate, The One. And family is important; so important."

"So you believe in marriage," I know without asking that Helen is not religious.

"Yeah, sure," she looks surprised, then her eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

"I was just wondering...do you think that monogamy, which I guess, historically at least, is what marriage was trying to regulate, is a natural state or a created one?"

Helen puts her face in her hands. "You see! You see! This is what I was afraid you'd ask! Bizarre, theoretical questions!"

I keep pushing. "But don't you think about these things?" I ask, pulling her hands away from her face.

She sighs. "No I do not. Now you got any normal questions?"

Guess I'm not getting an answer.

"Alright, alright. What about kids?" I go back to my notes.

"Oh, I want kids, for sure. In fact, I'm not even sure if I want to work."

Finally, I think, the conversation takes a turn for the interesting.

"You'd be a stay-at-home?" I ask slyly.

Helen looks uncomfortable. "Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say *that*," she says, backtracking. "I just have those days where I think 'God -- wouldn't it be nice not to work?' You know -- go to aerobics, have your nails done, shop," her voice changes to a high-pitched valley-girl mimic. We both laugh; it's a voice reserved for several of our acquaintances that have married for -- what's the politically correct term now? -- *lifestyle*.

I let Helen off the hook on this thought and she brings the conversation back to Mike.

"I'm going to miss him so much," and I see her eyes brimming with tears. Mine start too, biologically sympathetic to anyone who cries. Helen notices this and we laugh again. "You're the *worst*," she hoots.

"So could you marry Mike?" I ask, while emotions are still running high.

Helen considers. "Yeah, I could see it. He's very comforting. Besides," she says, only half joking. "My Cosmo Bedside Astrologer says that Taurus is my best match-up."

We laugh again and I turn off the tape recorder. Helen returns to normal.

Mike

"How did you and Helen meet, Mike?" I ask.

"I had to blow my nose."

Once upon a time, on a hockey rink far, far away, a relationship was born. Well, it wasn't exactly like that, but it's a good story anyway.

I'm still laughing at Mike's initial comment. We're at his house, constantly interrupted by the phone, the doorbell and people attempting to buy his car, which is for sale. He's dressed comfortably in a sweatshirt and shorts and he's wearing glasses. I've never seen him in them, he's always wearing contacts and the glasses distort his eyes slightly because of their thickness. They make him look kind of awkward, and I keep comparing a mental picture of him in his tux at a formal event we all attended. I've never seen him this relaxed, in spite of all the disturbances.

"Yeah, it's thirty-five below and we're playing hockey outside and my friend's girlfriend and this girl I've never seen before are sitting in a car on the edge of the rink watching the game. My nose was running from the cold so I went over to the car and asked them if they had any Kleenex."

"What an original line," I say, tongue-in-cheek.

"No line, no line," he shakes his head vehemently. "They didn't have any Kleenex, so I gave them a hard time about women and purses and carrying useless stuff and the girl I don't know grabs a handful of McDonald's napkins and shoves them at me."

"What did you do?"

He looks at me incredulously. "I took them. And then I had a better look at the girl. I remember thinking 'why is she here?' So I asked her, and she said, 'I was sick of studying so I came to watch the game with Karen.' And I figured anybody who'd come out and watch a game in this weather must be pretty cool."

Mike is a self-described sports nut. I ask him to tell me more about himself and he begins to look uncomfortable. "Oh, I didn't know these were going to be introspective questions," he says. "I don't know ... I'm into sports ... oh, I said that...I'm easy to get along with, not hard to please. That's it, I guess, off the top of my head."

"Can you describe Helen for me?"

He starts to chew his knuckles. "Umm ... she's emotional. Nice ... fun."

I ease off a little. I think I'm pushing him too hard. I'm getting better at reading people. "When were you first attracted to her?"

He brightens. "Later in that hockey game evening, we went to this beer bash at the university and we talked a bit and had a few drinks. I invited her back to my house to watch a movie."

"Do you think it was love at first sight?"

"Umm ... ," he evades the question. "I think love at first sight is *possible*," and he thinks for a moment.

"So you are in love with Helen?" I say, remembering they've been dating only three months.

"Yes," he says simply and I marvel in his ease of speech. Yes. What a simple word. He's strong and sure of it. I decide to share my appreciation with him.

"You know, some people have trouble saying 'I love you' ... like ... " I stop, aware that I'm giving away too much and unaware of what I'll say next. I'm fighting to keep my decorum but part of me wants to talk about *me*, what I think about love and all its intricacies. I breathe in and remember I'll have my chance, later, in front of my computer. But no one hears me as I type and I feel cheated out of the reality of sharing. An extended study of voice is a dangerous thing -- I feel like I'm losing my own. And on the other side, the side of Mike and Helen and all my interviewees, I can't shake the idea of the writer as taker and not giver -- it seems like a selfish process. So I stick with silence. It's the safest.

I realize an uncomfortable silence has occurred in my moments of reflection and Mike is waiting for another question. Quick -- give him a long one so I can gather my thoughts.

"Can you describe love for me?" That should be good for a few minutes.

"Love ... that's a hard question. It's about compatibility, I think."

Wow, a sarcastic answer. My esteem for Mike is growing steadily. "So do you think that you can be in love with more than one person? Or is there one person for each of us?" the words come tumbling out in my haste and anticipation of a new answer.

"Yes to both. There's a person who you could love more than any other, but you can love, really love, a lot of people, as long as you're compatible."

"What does that mean, 'compatible?'"

"Someone who can put up with me and my idiosyncrasies, someone I can tell anything to, someone with common interests or at least respect for mine." I start to ask another question but he interrupts me. The house is eerily silent all of a sudden. "You know," he begins. "I've often thought that I could make any marriage work, I mean, within reason -- like my wife wasn't a child molester or something. But I have this theory: I think that in a relationship, it's each person's job to find the good in the other person and focus on that. Cause there's good in all people, you know -- you just have to find it. And then you have to take turns making sacrifices for each other."

"Doesn't that inevitably lead to an imbalance?" I ask. "Like, one person assumes the role of pacifier and peacemaker and the other gets to show their bad side more often?"

"I don't know, I hadn't really thought about it that way. I guess when you say it, it makes sense," he pauses to think. "I guess that would make me the peacemaker then. I don't mind that responsibility," he smiles.

Helen's wrong -- and so is Mike himself -- he *is* introspective, or in Helen's definition "talks like a girl." Maybe she's not getting the answers she wants because she's asking the wrong questions.

Then again, maybe not. I decide to test Helen's accuracy and I ask Mike, "Do you remember the date of that infamous hockey game?"

He thinks for a minute. "Umm ... no. But it must have been a Wednesday, cause we always play on Wednesdays." Maybe Helen knows him better than I do. I mean, *obviously* she does, but at what level of truth do lovers operate? And what level of truth do they give me?

Tania

Tania is nursing her baby as she talks to me. I haven't been around babies for a while and the act intrigues me, though I'm not sure where to put my eyes. Her baby shower (which Lynn held) is now over and Tania looks small and exhausted as she cradles Mia, her two-month-old baby girl.

"Wasn't this lovely?" Tania asks perfunctorily.

"Oh, yes," I say, catching Lynn's sharp laughter as she rids the house of well-wishers. Tania hears it too and involuntarily pulls Mia closer to her.

"At least I didn't hear anyone talking about me," she says quietly, and looks away.

Tania is seventeen. Tiny, blonde and cherub-faced, she looks like a child-madonna with Mia, whose dark hair is a perfect contrast. Troy, the baby's father, is due to arrive in half an hour to collect them. Troy is eighteen, a recent high school graduate who works full time at a gas station.

"We can reschedule this if you like," I say. God knows I wouldn't want to talk to anyone at this point in the day.

"No, no," Tania says wearily. "I can handle anything after that shower."

Tania and Troy have been together about two years and have lived in Tania's parent's basement for the last twelve months. Tania has had some trouble finishing school -- she's transferred schools three times in the last two years hoping to find one where she feels she fits in -- but she's stopped entirely now. The baby was a surprise but readily welcomed into the family.

"So how did you and Troy meet?" I ask. Tania settles comfortably back in her chair and smiles.

"Working at Pizza Dome."

Both Tania and Troy have been working since they were fourteen. They haven't had to, nor really been encouraged to, since both sets of parents support them. But both

say that they work to see their friends -- either the ones they work with or the ones who hang out at the places they work.

"Yeah," she continues, "I had just transferred schools again -- to the Tech school; I was in ballet in the afternoons -- and there was this restaurant about two blocks away that everyone worked at. I had no friends so I figured I could meet some that way."

"Was that tough," I ask, "always being the new kid?"

Tania's blonde curls bounce no. "I loved it. I loved always being the new girl. It was like 'who's *she*?' and everyone always paid attention to me."

"So Troy..."

"He was the assistant manager at Pizza Dome and he trained me. I saw him the first day and I go to the girl beside me, 'who's that?' and she goes, 'that's Troy -- watch out for him' and I was hooked right away."

"Then it was love at first sight?"

"Yeah, exactly. That very first shift we took our break in the storeroom....," she laughs and Mia stops nursing and looks up at her.

I have mixed feelings watching the two. On one hand, Tania is really attentive to Mia, but on the other she's just so ... *young*. I try and remember what I was doing at seventeen -- oh, yes -- I was in first year university. I ask Tania about school.

"I'm done, for good," she says.

"Troy just graduated, didn't he?" I ask. "Was school tough for him too?"

Tania smiles resignedly. "Well, Troy isn't, like, *school smart*, if that's what you mean. But everybody liked him. The teachers gave him extra help and stuff, when he showed up for it. Actually he got forty-eight percent in Math but his teacher passed him anyway."

"How'd you do in Math?" I ask suspiciously.

"Well, I never study, but first term I must have been lucky 'cause I got, like, eighty percent but then I met Troy and second semester I didn't go to class much and I guess I didn't do very well 'cause I failed on my report card."

"How come *you* didn't go for extra help?"

Tania looks away. "Nobody asked. I guess they thought I was too much trouble - you know, not worth it."

When Mia starts to fuss and Tania takes her away to change her I am left to remember the shower and Tania's words. She's right -- people are talking about her and it's the older ladies that are saying the worst things. Her own generation is very supportive and in some senses it seems like Mia belongs to all of them; her female friends are always around to help. There's a grand sense of community among these eighteen year olds, much different from men and women in their mid-twenties. The age of eighteen to twenty-five -- most aptly called the age of transition -- has manifested itself differently in Tania's generation within a generation. They are communal-above-all -- they share clothes, money, children. Their interpersonal relationships are closer, if their intimate ones are not.

Lynn's age group, by contrast, is still defined by individualism and autonomy. Earlier in the day, as she watched Tania from across the room, Lynn had murmured to me under her breath, "You have to look out for number one, always. Nobody else will."

"What?" I said back to her out of the side of my mouth.

"Tania. I'm thinking about Tania." Lynn took a drag of her cigarette. "She should get rid of Troy and start living her own life. That's the *only* thing that works these days -- focus and commitment to *yourself*. How else are you going to find a career and a life? Life mates only complicate matters; hold you back. They're only beneficial if you're both working towards the same goals."

"What if the goal is Mia?"

Lynn looked straight at me and shot back: "Who's gonna pay for it?"

I think Lynn's wrong, though: instead, I see a huge tidal push from the youth in their movement back to the communal -- a push to equalize the force of marginalization their older brothers and sisters feel. And I think it's a good thing.

Now the oldest generation (well-represented at today's shower, as they always are in dying traditions) is one I cannot understand at all. Though I don't know this Tania well, I still felt the need to defend her when, earlier at the shower, I overheard the following conversation:

"I can't believe how careless these young ones are," said an older woman in pearls.

"I know, a baby at seventeen, not married; the poor family," the other said. "Thank God none of my children were that stupid." I closed my eyes and counted to ten but the feeling didn't subside.

"Well," I said tersely. "She could have had an abortion and then *none of you* would have anything to talk about." I was greeted by a steely silence.

"Don't *you* have it all figured out," said the woman in pearls.

I have no answer to that.

Tania returns without Mia and sits back down. I decide to ask.

"You don't have to answer this, you know, but I was wondering: did you and Troy think about an abortion?"

Tania puts her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. "Ask me when I *didn't* think about it," she sighs. "But I liked the idea of a little thing growing inside me, and I loved Troy and he wanted it, so we said 'why not?'"

"How did you know Troy loved you?"

"He told me," Tania says, looking at me like I've asked a stupid question. Then her face changes and she says, "and his friends told me. And he moved in with me.

What else could I ask for?"

One of Tania's friends interrupts us as she flies by with Mia. "Say 'hi' to Mommy," she coos in our direction. Tania smiles at her and watches as Mia is passed off to another friend.

She reads my mind. "Our friends have been really great. Everybody's been babysitting and the basement is never empty -- Mia always has company. My Mom warned me that it only lasts for a while but I don't think so -- we think our friends are the most important thing. Everybody shares everything, and they think Mia's just the best. It's just my parents' friends I'm worried about."

I'm trying not to pity Tania, because it's too trite and it's too judgemental. But I wonder if she realizes how much is on her tiny little bird shoulders. I ask about the future.

"Well," she thinks carefully, "Troy has his job at the gas station, and I'll take care of Mia for a couple of years."

"Will you move out?" I ask.

"Oh, no," she looks surprised. "My parents are great."

I pause to digest this. How did a seventeen-year-old become so selfless? For some reason, I am reminded of a butterfly. It's much the same transition: when a butterfly is coming out of its cocoon, and it's no longer a larvae and not yet a butterfly, what is it? And more importantly, how does it feel?

"What about *you* Tania?" I ask softly.

She cocks her head to one side. "I don't know." She's silent for a moment as the baby whizzes by in another pair of arms. "Sometimes I feel like a ghost person, you know? Like, no one can see me or hear me and I'm just part of the scenery." She shakes her head. "I better get Mia ready to leave."

Troy

Troy is early picking up Tania and Mia, so I herd him into the basement to ask him my questions. Tall, African-Canadian and congenial, he settles down into the sofa and asks me for a beer.

"Sure," I say. "Upstairs fridge."

Troy looks at me a little incredulously but gets up and heads for the stairs. When he returns, he picks a green leather easy chair and sits heavily in it, limbs everywhere. He's wearing a Bulls hat so I ask him about it.

"Are you a basketball fan?"

"Yeah, sure -- but I'd rather play NBA Jam on Sega," Troy says, smiling and showing all his teeth.

I laugh.

"I just bought a Sega," he continues. "I waited till after the baby was born cause they're expensive."

"Which," I ask jokingly, "the baby -- or the Sega?"

"Both, man," Troy shakes his head. "But I really like 'em both, too."

"Tania told me you chose the name. How'd you pick 'Mia?'"

He looks up at the ceiling. "You see *Pulp Fiction*?" I frown quickly, wondering if he's changing the subject.

"Well ... yes. A few times. Great movie."

"I named her after Marcellus Wallace's wife. You know -- the girl who ODs and gets that huge needle in her chest."

"How come? I mean, what did you *like* about her?"

Troy reflects for a moment, dangling his beer along the side of the chair. "She's cool, man. She tells Vincent Vega where it's at." He gets animated. "She goes:

'Marcellus is *your* boss and he's *my* husband and he told *you* to take me out and do what I want.' She knows who she is, and she doesn't take any shit."

"So you wanted that for Mia?"

"Yeah." Troy looks around the room and then longingly at the TV. "Is this going to take long?"

"Only as long as you talk, Troy."

I look to my notes as Troy drinks his beer. He doesn't seem to mind the silence, which I suppose is in keeping with his laid-back attitude. I'm beginning to be disappointed: not in Troy, really, but in everybody. I undertook these interviews with so much hope and I'm slowly realizing that *no one has anything to say*. Is it because they don't know themselves? Was I mistaken in supposing that people are naturally self-conscious beings? Or am I asking the wrong questions?

I straighten my shoulders and command Troy: "Tell me about meeting Tania."

He looks up and squints, trying to remember. "It was at work -- Pizza Dome -- and I saw this cute little chick looking at me, and I knew I had to train some new girl, and it was great, ya know what I'm saying, when I realized it was her."

"So what happened?"

"I went up to her, and she was all excited and trying to act cool and we trained for a while and then I took her for a break in the storeroom, if ya know what I mean."

I pause and choose my words carefully. "Do you think," I say, tapping the paper with my pen semi-consciously, "that you ... maybe ... took *advantage* of your position as assistant manager?"

Troy looks hurt. "I never forced her into anything, no way. She was interested right away." But he starts to move uncomfortably in the green leather easy chair anyway.

"Were you?"

Troy makes a face at me. "Well, *ya*," he says as if that was obvious. "She was *cute*."

He's not getting away on this one. "How do you think Tania felt when she started the Tech school and Pizza Dome?"

"I don't know," Troy says, getting annoyed. "She changed schools a bunch of times ... I guess she was bored."

And so Troy filled the boredom. And the loneliness. Where is the ambition in Troy and Tania, I wonder, that is so prevalent in people closer to my age? How are they so able to live in the present and exclude the future? But I realize my own prejudices are showing: I've always felt to stand still is a failure; that progress needs constant motion and constant analysis. Maybe I'm not giving them a chance; maybe they're right. I think that scares me most of all.

"What did your friends think of Tania being pregnant?"

"My best friend, Jeff goes 'Get *out* man -- this is your life!' but most of the guys didn't say anything, ya know what I'm saying? No advice. It's one man's business, and ya just don't mess with that. It's private."

"Did you think about abortion?"

"No way -- it's against my religion."

"Would you have been upset if Tania had chosen that option?"

Troy looks at me coldly. "I would have told her to have Mia and give her to me and I would have raised her on my own. I know what you're gonna ask next --," he mimics my voice " 'Do you think Tania has the right to make the final decision?' No way. There's such a thing as father's rights. And I got mine."

Troy is getting hostile and maybe I'm out of line, so I decide to use the older generation as a benchmark. "What do your parents think of the situation, Troy?"

He relaxes a little and shrugs, then starts playing air guitar. "Well, my parents would be happier if the baby had a black mother, but they like Tania alright. I dated a lot of white chicks who go for black guys; it's a status thing." For who? I wonder, but I'm afraid to ask. He pauses to drain the beer can. "Tania's parents freaked when she brought

me home the first time, ya know what I mean? Like, not in front of me or anything, but I knew that they didn't want their daughter" His voice trails off, and I imagine he's wondering if he can say 'fucking' to me.

"Their daughter what?" I say evenly, to see what word he will choose.

Troy flings his empty beer can into the green wrought iron garbage basket across the room. "You know."

I take a deep breath. "What do you think about love, Troy?"

He looks back at me and the room is icy-still. "I love Mia. I guess I love Tania. We could never break up because I like Mia too much. Who the hell knows what love is?" In one swift motion, Troy pushes himself out of the easy chair and vaults towards the stairs.

"I'm done talking," he says over his shoulder.

Heather

I'm meeting Heather at a lounge tonight to talk and as I walk in she spies me and shouts. I shudder slightly and try and make myself smaller as everyone looks in my direction. Heather can be abrasive at times.

Heather is the newest girlfriend of Chris, with whom I went to high school. Chris is currently going through a messy divorce from his wife Nicole, and the feeling among our friends is that Heather is a rebound relationship, though they have been dating on and off for almost a year. Heather is five-foot-six, bottle blonde and carefully made up. She works as a dancer at one of the local strip clubs.

The lounge is well-lit and expensive and as I approach Heather she is sitting on the edge of a stool, legs crossed, body thrown forward and balancing a cigarette in one hand, a Caesar in the other and the bartender in the throes of an attempted pick-up in front of her. I take a quick breath and sit down. I've only spoken to Heather once before; all I know of her what I've heard from everyone else.

She cold-shoulders the bartender and instantly turns her green eyes on me. "How ya doin'?" she asks. "Can I get ya a drink?"

"Sure," I say. "Diet Coke."

"BARTENDER!" she hollers. He trots over. "What was your name again?"

"Rob," he answers.

"Rob, my friend here needs a diet Coke." Rob salutes her and walks away.

"I was so excited when Chris told me you were going to interview me," she says, and I watch her perfectly manicured fingers reach for another cigarette. "I mean, you could write a whole book on my life. You know when you're watching those made-for-TV movies and you think 'Shit! That's ME!'?"

Well, no actually. "Yeah, I know exactly."

She nods emphatically. "So where do you want to start? How about I tell you about my life?"

I turn on the tape recorder and smile. "Go."

"My parents divorced when I was five," she starts. "My dad turned out to be gay and left my mom. She went *psychotic*. She used to beat up me and my three sisters all the time. I was in Child and Family when I was nine and on the streets when I was twelve."

It never ceases to amaze me the horrible things people will tell me. "Child and Family Services didn't help?"

"Well," she flips her long hair back, exposing a necklace with a heart pendant. "My mom was such a good liar, eh, that she'd look at the social worker and say: 'I didn't do that. I don't know how she got those bruises.' And I'd almost believe her myself."

"So what did you do with yourself at twelve?"

Heather sits up confidently. "I was never, ever, a prostitute. I knew, eh? Even at twelve I knew that that would fuck me up. So I lived where I could -- with my aunt when she had room, with my dad and his lover, with my friends when I had no place to crash."

"What did you do for money?"

She laughs. "I started working at McDonalds but I couldn't afford to live. Then when I was fourteen I got a job working as a cashier at the club I'm at now. It was way better money, and me and my sister moved out."

She stops abruptly. "What about you? Chris says you're at university. Tell me about school," and she leans forward conspiratorially.

I'm a little dazed trying to process all this information. "Wow, Heather. Have we ever had opposite lives." I turn off the recorder. "My parents are happily married; I went to university straight out of high school. I've *never even been in a strip club*."

Heather laughs. "Well, we'll have to fix that. Let's go, we'll talk on the way." She looks down the bar. "HEY ROB! WE NEED OUR BILL OVER HERE!" and then back to me. "I'm going to the bathroom -- back in a minute."

Rob walks over with the bill. "So, is that girl single?"

I avoid a direct answer. "Can I ask you a question?" I say to him.

"Yeah, sure."

"How old do you think I am?" He eyes me carefully, in my sundress and sweater.

"Twenty-two." He's right.

"How old do you think Heather is?"

He reflects again. "Twenty-seven?" I shake my head. She's the same age as me.

We're in my car, headed for the club and Heather and I are talking like old friends. "Yeah, I've had some pretty awful relationships," she says. "I figure that it gets to the point where I can only take so much shit, and when the guy crosses that line, I'm outta there."

"What about Chris?"

She smiles at me. "Chris is a lot of work, eh? With his divorce and all. But I really like him, so I'm trying to help him work through all his problems."

"Don't you have any problems?"

She starts laughing -- hard. "Are you for real?" she asks me. I must look hurt because her voice changes and she says, "No, no, I don't mean it that way. *Of course* I have problems. All that stuff from my childhood, all the rest -- you get the idea. But I've dealt with that. I made it this far. I can do whatever I want -- with or without Chris."

I realize I am in *way* over my head. So much for the narrator as voice of authority. We round the corner to the club and I wonder ... "Where did you meet Chris?"

"Here. He was at a stag."

We walk in the door and the place is quiet and dark, save for the neon lights around the stage and a few house lights. It's three o'clock in the afternoon and the club

opens at four; the bartenders are there setting up and the servers are sitting at a table near the bar, talking. Heather steers me towards the tables, pulling at my sleeve as I look up and around as quickly as I can. One of the servers spots Heather. "Hey, Soleil," he shouts. "Why are you here so early?"

"Soleil is my stage name," Heather whispers to me. "I'm showing my friend around. She's a *writer*."

The group makes room for us at the table and chairs magically appear as we reach it. I sit down shyly and everyone looks at me. Heather makes introductions: there are Kevin and Mark, both servers, Cara and Suzie, dancers, and Christy, a bartender.

Kevin slides his chair over to me. "So what are you writing about?" he says, his face inches away from mine.

I draw back involuntarily. "It's a book. A novel. Well, not really a novel -- a collection of short stories. It's about people and the way they talk about love."

"Cool," Mark says and then changes his voice to lounge-singer-esque. "Let me tell you baby, the stories I have about lovin' -- "

Cara interrupts him. "What's it called?"

"The Way We Met: The Semantics of Romantics."

Now there is silence. Heather saves me when she says, "'Semantics' is just another word for 'words', right?" she looks at me.

"Yes. Exactly." Out of nowhere the music system comes on and it breaks the tension. The group goes back to discussing shop-talk and I lean back and relax.

Quietly, Suzie draws me into conversation. She's a tall young woman, late-twenties-ish with long red hair huge brown eyes. "So are you asking Heather about Chris?"

"Oh, yes," I say, startled. "Do you know him?"

"I was here when they met."

"Could you tell me about it?"

Suzie smiles a killer smile. "Sure. It was about a year ago. I've known Heather since she was fourteen. I met her when I was nineteen and I had just started dancing here."

I don't let on that I know Chris well. "What was Chris like?"

She cocks her head to one side. "He was well-dressed but low-key -- short hair; good suit. Looked like he had a few bucks. Heather was dancing and she picked him out of the crowd, looking for tips. He was pretty reserved, but he gave her a twenty with his business card attached to it with a paper clip."

I laugh heartily and Suzie smiles at my amusement. "So she thought 'Why not?' and called him. He was still together with his wife at the time, but Heather would never put up with that. She told him as soon as she found out 'If you don't move out, you don't see me.' And I couldn't believe it -- he actually did."

"You think it's a good relationship?" I ask.

Suzie thinks for a moment. "Actually, yes. He's a decent guy -- and trust me, I meet all kinds." She rolls her eyes, and then stands up. "Heather, honey, I gotta go get ready. See you later." And to me: "Nice to meet you."

"You, too," I say genuinely. "Heather, I better be going. Thanks for bringing me here."

"You're not going to stay for the show? We could go for drinks later," Heather looks disappointed.

"No, I've got to be home for supper." I realize how ridiculous that must sound, but it's true.

"I'll walk you out then," she says, jumping up.

We get to the door and I say, "One last thing, Heather: are you in love with Chris?"

She smiles. "Oh, no. But that might come in time. I like him enough to stick around, as long as he doesn't turn into an asshole."

I smile too and shake my head. "What about marriage someday?"

Heather holds the door open and the late day sun renders me sightless. "My aunt," says her disembodied voice, "says marriage is an institution for the blind."

"Good-bye."

Chris

I arrive home for dinner after the club and the phone rings. "Hey," says Chris. "So what did she say about me?"

"Chris!" I say. "You know the agreement! There's no discussing what *anyone* said until this is all written!"

Chris chuckles. "Yeah, I know. I'm just giving you a hard time. I'm calling from my cell -- I'll be over in ten minutes. You can interview me now."

"Oh, *can* I," I say sarcastically.

"Hey, I'm doing you the favor," Chris says innocently and then laughs again. "No, seriously, I'm dropping by to visit, and you can interview me if you like."

I hang up and shake my head thinking about Chris. He's much like what Suzie described -- appearance oriented -- but he's also a very hard worker. He married Nicole at eighteen and started his own construction business that same year. He has the tendency to spend more than he makes (often on toys like the cellular) but as a friend he's been beyond reproach.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rings and there is Chris, all six-foot-four of him, standing on my porch in beige khaki shorts and a crease-free white button-down.

We sit down and (mostly out of habit) I ask about Nicole. "That witch. She's still trying to suck me for every penny I'm worth. Thank God Heather forced me to get out of there."

"Why? You wouldn't have left otherwise?"

"Yeah, yeah, I would have. I'm just a coward. I needed an excuse -- and I knew there would be no going back after she found out about Heather. Actually, the story makes great copy for Nicole's friends: the headline reads 'Chris-the-Bastard runs off with Stripper (can you believe it).' It's been a good way for her to save face and gain sympathy."

"What went wrong in that marriage, do you think?"

Chris sighs. "We had dated since we were fifteen. Nicole had never dated anyone else -- you know how she is."

Actually, I do, since she and Chris were a couple all through high school. I never liked Nicole, even before they were married. She was one of those women who had their sights set on the Junior League and not far beyond.

"How do you feel about Heather, then?"

Chris looks taken aback. His voice changes from the sarcastic to a lyrical once I haven't heard him use in a long time. "That woman has *power*, let me tell you. She's got it all figured out."

"Are you attracted to that?"

"How could I not be? She's unlike anyone I've ever met. She's had this incredible life -- I don't know if she told you about it -- and she survived because she's smart and ... *tough*. She's probably done three times the stuff in her life that I've done in mine."

Chris's eyes are glowing as he speaks.

"She told me a bit. But she didn't have much to say about her father. What do you think about all that?"

He looks reflective and says, "Actually, I have a theory about that."

"Go."

"Well, Heather really liked him, but he didn't have much time for her after he came out. I think that he didn't want anything to do with his former life, and that included the kids. It just reminded him he'd been living a lie for so many years. And I think Heather felt that she didn't belong to anyone after that -- her mother was abusive and her father didn't want to recognize her existence. He wasn't a bad guy, I don't think -- and he wasn't a failure because he was gay, he was a failure because he wasn't around to be a *father*."

"That's quite a theory, Chris."

He shrugs. "It's just what I think."

"OK, so tell me about how you met her."

Chris runs his left hand through his wavy brown hair and as he does so I notice that he's finally taken the ring off. This is a recent development.

"I was at this strip club ..."

"Yes, I know. Heather took me there."

Chris starts to hoot. "*You?* She took *you* there?"

"Hey, knock it off. I'm not such a *naij*, you know."

Chris looks ready to contradict me and then changes his mind. "OK, the club. It was for Wayne's stag. There were a few dances on before 'Soleil,' and they were alright -- strip clubs don't really do it for me, if you know what I mean, and then there was this little bundle of Heather on stage. She caught my eyes right away, and Wayne leaned over and said, 'Hey, Chris, Wolf Eyes is all over you.' It was a perfect description."

"So how did you approach her?"

Chris rubs his chin in embarrassment. "Well, first I thought I'd ask the manager to see her after the show, but I figured that I'd have no chance if I did that. And as I was thinking I put my hands in my pockets and suddenly, at the same time, I felt business cards in one and a paperclip in the other." He pauses to look directly at me. "The biggest bill I had was a twenty so I clipped my card to it, and when she got close to our table, I met her eyes and tossed the bill at her feet."

"How did you feel when you met her wolf eyes?"

"Scared ... and, I don't know, what's the word -- *thrilled*? That rush of excitement that goes through your body like static on a wool rug."

"What about Nicole?"

"Nicole was the furthest thing from my mind at that point."

Stags have always fascinated me. I decide to ask Chris a nagging question, mostly because I trust him and I know he'll tell the truth.

"Chris," I begin. "At stags ... do guys actually -- *sleep with* any women?"

Chris looks at me in amazement. "It's funny you should mention that. We had hired a hooker for Wayne -- a last hurrah, so to speak -- but by the end of the evening (when we were back at Andy's place), he claimed he was too drunk to keep it up. Actually, I think he was afraid his fiancée would kill him if she found out. But the guys let him off the hook."

"So did you pay the stripper anyway?"

"Well, see, that's the funny thing. We knew we were going to have to pay her either way, so we decided somebody should have some fun -- "

"Chris!" I'm fuming. "You took part in all of this?"

"Wait, wait," he says, pacifying me with his hands. "So Andy pulls out a deck of cards and says 'Poker. Five card stud. Highest hand takes her.' And I got dealt three queens. That was the highest hand."

I'm ready to jump in with a lecture about exploitation when I see the disquiet in Chris's eyes. I'm silent, indicating for him to continue.

"You know I'm not proud of any of this."

"Uh-huh." I remain unconvinced.

"I'm in front of all the guys, and I can't back out, so I take her into the bedroom. She looks at me and says 'So what'll it be?' like it's ... it's ... *McDonalds* or something, and I fish around in my pockets and give her whatever money is left and say 'No, nothing. Just hang out here with me for a bit and then don't say anything to anyone.' And that's what happened."

"Chris! What were you thinking?"

He looks at me with a pained expression of sorrow and pleasure. "I was thinking of the girl I had seen, Soleil."

"Are you in love with her?"

"Yeah," he says quietly and looks out into the garden. "Like no one ever before."

Brian

It's five-fifteen and we're sitting in Brian's office waiting for the dregs of the workforce to leave. Brian's deskplate with "President" engraved on it shines ominously at me. Brian is my boss, and truthfully, I'm surprised that he agreed to do this interview.

Brian rises and closes the door. "I want you to understand," says Brian, as if reading my mind, "that I only agreed to do this interview for two reasons: one, because Mark has been hassling me to, and two, because I have some political things to say."

Brian settles back down in his large leather chair. "Now let's begin," he says in a commanding baritone. I turn on the recorder.

"Can you tell me about meeting Mark?" I ask timidly.

Brian reflects. He's a tall man, wiry and steely-eyed. He's not exactly good looking, rather average, in fact, but the situation and his presence make him larger-than-life.

"I hired Mark two years ago. I could see in the interview that he was a charmer. He just needed a little guidance to make that charm work for him -- in the business world."

"How did you get involved with him?"

"We became friends. I encouraged him to join the softball team I was on and he did. We got together one night, continued our friendship, and then got together permanently six months ago."

"Can you tell me more about your relationship?"

Brian leans across his desk. "No. Quite frankly, it's none of your business." My face falls. This is awkward for me to begin with -- Brian and I have a very professional and rather mechanical association. I work hard, accurately and consistently. He signs my paychecks.

Brian must sense my dismay because he adds, "Let me say what I want to say and then if you have more questions we'll go from there. OK?"

"That sounds fair," I say dryly.

Brian doesn't notice. "First of all, I want to make it clear that I am, and always have been, a homosexual. There was no wavering for me; I knew at thirteen I was attracted to males." Brian pauses and lights a cigarette. "That's one of the interesting things about gay relationships," he says, warming up. "The realization -- and coming out -- is its own story of origin. It's as if homosexuals are born twice. In fact," he says, shuffling some papers around on his desk, "I was reading an article about debutantes and their coming out -- a 'herstory', really -- and it occurred to me that gay coming outs are a history -- in the his-story sense."

I'm bewildered. Where is all this coming from; did he rehearse it? I look blankly at Brian's desk and then my eyes focus. Notes. *He's reading from notes.*

"Is it my imagination, or are you reading from notes?" I ask him.

Brian looks slightly embarrassed and pushes them away. "I never enter a meeting without notes," he says gruffly.

"Oh," I say, fighting a smile. I look at my own. "Well, if you want to talk about gay relationships in general, can you give me any distinguishing characteristics?"

Brian begins to nod vehemently. "You have to remember that the *people* aren't different, only the social construction of the relationships are."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the history. Oppression. Marginalization. Rejection. The 'Other.'"

"Can you give me a concrete example?"

"There are millions. I think the most straightforward is asking out a person who turns out to be a heterosexual and having them not only reject you, but ridicule you. That rarely happens in heterosexual attempts, or at least to a lesser degree."

I mull over this for a few moments. "What about AIDS? Do you think that homosexuals are, in general, more concerned with it?"

Brian snorts in disgust. "Did you ask that in your *straight* interviews?"

"No," I answer. He has a point.

"I'm *so sick* of talking about AIDS. Yes it's a reality. Yes it's an issue. But it's as much a stereotype as the domineering mother/distant father routine. The trouble is that society at large still equates AIDS with homosexuals, and then there are a million equations that can be set up. Homosexuality equals disease. Breakdown of 'morality' equals disease. Therefore homosexuality equals breakdown of morality. *Heterosexuals get AIDS too*. But society still thinks that it's our fault that they do."

"Is that why you've kept your sexual preference hidden from the office?" I suggest.

"NO," he says loudly, shifting his eyes away. "I keep it private because relationships should be private. I act straight -- and believe me, straight is always an act - - because it's neutral. Actually," Brian pauses. "Neutral is a better word."

"I see. So neutral is something else -- not gay, not straight?"

Brian shakes his head again. "No, the old idea that homosexuality is a third gender is bullshit. All I do is date the same sex. Our bodies are the same; that's all and everything."

I stop writing and look at him.

"Personally," he continues, and I catch him taking a peek at his notes, which I ignore, "I think it's the male body that society at large finds the most frightening. That's why male frontal nudity is so rare in TV and movies. It encourages the homospectatorial gaze."

"Then why is female nudity so accepted?"

Brain chuckles, which I have never heard him do before. "Are you really that naive?"

My lips tighten and my back straightens. "Give me your opinion."

"This is still a patriarchal world, dear."

"Where does that leave the heterosexual woman, then?"

"Where she always was -- looking as a lesbian."

"*What?*"

Brian sighs and slows the rate of his speech. "Are you heterosexual?"

"Yes."

"And are you offended by female nudity?"

"Not in general, but yes if it's exploitive in films and advertising."

"But on the whole you can accept it."

"Sure," I say, for sake of argument.

"As a heterosexual woman, you have two choices: first, you can identify with her -- want to be her -- or you can be attracted to her -- want to have her."

"OK, so what?"

Brian makes a face, probably because I'm not getting it. "If you're watching an exploitive movie and you choose to identify with her, then you become as much of a victim as she. If you're attracted to her, you're a lesbian."

"Where did you get this idea?" I'm bewildered.

"There's an article by Diana Fuss. Look it up."

"And why doesn't this happen with men?"

"Because society is more afraid of male homosexuality. In fact, there's an author -- John Clum -- who says that when communism fell, homosexuality replaced it as society's number one evil. It's all about power."

"You certainly are well-read on the subject," I say. I had no idea that Brian, my boss, thought this much.

I pause for a few moments to digest. "I just have one more question, Brian, about Mark, if you'll let me -- why do you think your relationship with Mark works?"

Brian looks straight into my eyes. "I've got the knowledge and power, he's got the looks. We balance. Incidentally," he continues, "how does the whole office know that Mark and I are living together? I worked hard to keep that a secret."

I shake my head. "Don't look at me. I knew *after* everyone else."

Mark

Mark and I are sitting drinking wine in his apartment this Tuesday evening. His partner, Brian, is playing Tuesday-night roller hockey. The three of us work together, and it's odd to see Mark in his own home instead of in front of a computer.

Mark is what I would call a beautiful man: tall, carefully coifed light hair, muscled and strong. When he arrived at our workplace two years ago, the women in the office went wild -- and you could tell that the attention wasn't new to him. He took it all with good grace though, in his cordial and charming way. He did date a few of them, but rarely for longer than a few weeks.

"So how come you never asked me out?" Mark asks me, trying to keep a straight face.

"Well ...," I blush involuntarily. He's only a year older than me, and the truth is I had a crush on him, but the office was too public a forum to act on it.

"I would have gone out with you, you know," Mark says, leaning in towards me to fill my wine glass. His closeness makes my breathing stop short. I struggle to regain control and as I do so, I think of -- of all things -- *Spiderman*. 'Must ... get ... control ... before ... I ... lose ... consciousness' I giggle involuntarily.

"Well, that's nice of you to say," I reply conventionally. "But I'm asking the questions, remember?"

Mark laughs and leans back, resting his arm on the back of the couch behind me. "OK."

Normally I would take this as a sign that a man was coming on to me, but with Mark I know it's different -- not just because he's with Brian, but because I've seen Mark work for years now, and he has that quality that enables him to make each person he talks to feel special. I'm not sure how he does it (or I'd do it myself) but I think that being the center of attention to one so attentive and attractive is -- just for a moment -- thrilling.

"First tell me about Brian," I say. I'm still a little nervous so I avoid his eyes.

"What do you want to know that you don't know already?" his voice says as I look down at my notes.

"I want to hear it in your words, with your definitions," I say, raising my gaze to his.

Now it's his turn to feel uncomfortable. But he smiles and gets up from the couch. "He's twenty-nine," says Mark, heading to the kitchen. "Average height. Good-looking. Semi-athletic." He returns to the couch with a new bottle of wine and an opener.

I shake my head. "No, I mean, what's he *like*? He's so quiet at work -- and he is the boss -- we lowly serfs don't get to know him, the person."

Mark laughs again. "I don't know ... he's kind to animals? C'mon -- ask me an easier question," he says, punctuated with the pop of the cork. More wine flows into my glass.

"Alright then -- how did you two meet?"

Mark reflects. "Well, you know how we met -- at work. Probably the more interesting story is how we got together."

I nod. The wine and the atmosphere have made me warm and hazy and I listen like a child to a bedtime story.

"It was about this time last year," Mark begins. "Brian and I had been getting progressively closer as friends during the first year I worked for him. I had no idea that he was gay. We joined the same softball team -- co-ed -- and he'd laugh at the dates I had with some of the female players. There was never any woman in Brian's life, but I guess I just thought he was going through a dry spell."

Mark pauses to renew the wine. I imagine Mark has never had a dry spell in his life.

"You have to realize that up until this point in my life, I was completely heterosexual."

I wake up a little. "You mean Brian is your only homosexual experience?"

Mark holds up his wine glass and looks through it. "Well, not only," he chuckles and looks back at me. "But first."

I watch Mark as the light fades in the window behind him. His outline becomes illuminated and his hair glows -- he looks like a religious painting. That's his manner, I remind myself. He may not be a saint, but he is blessed.

"So how did you begin, then?"

"It was after softball. We had headed to the usual bar for drinks and both Brian and I got a little more loaded than usual. At closing time, we realized that neither of us could drive, so we took a walk down to the river. It was about three a.m. and a hot, quiet summer night. We sat down on the river bank and Brian leaned over and kissed me."

My eyes widen. "What did you do? How did you feel?"

Mark chuckles at my slightly indistinct speech. "I pulled back right away and thought 'What the hell is going on?' Then I looked at Brian and I saw he was ... what's the word ... 'in earnest?' and I just kind of melted. We had sex right there."

My head is reeling. "So what happened then? And what was it like the next morning at work?"

"Well, that sobered me up pretty fast. We walked back to the cars and said good-night. The last thing Brian said to me was 'See you in the morning.' I remember it because it's usually the last thing *I* say to a woman before falling asleep beside her. The irony was intense."

"And the next morning?"

Mark sips his wine. "Brian called me into his office. He explained to me that no one in the office knew he was gay and he preferred to keep it that way. He coldly apologized for the night before and said he didn't get involved with staff."

"What did you say?"

"I was surprised but not *really* surprised. I had no intention of getting involved. This whole new world had opened up to me and I was ready to take the bull by the horns, so to speak." He laughs at his joke.

"And did you?"

"You bet. Suddenly everyone -- male or female -- was a potential love/sex partner. Wait ... did you write that down as one word?"

"What?"

"Love/sex."

"No, why?"

Mark frowns. "Because it should be. Lovesex is different than love or sex alone. Before Brian I could always *love* a man, but I could only have lovesex with a woman. Now I can have any of the three possibilities -- love, sex, lovesex -- with either gender."

I blink my eyes, which has become an effort. I think I understand what Mark means, but I'll have to listen to this tape again later to be sure.

"Weren't we talking about you and Brian?"

"Oh, yeah. So for the next six months I experimented with all types of relationships -- short ones though." He frowns and then laughs. "Brian and I kept up our friendship, and actually we started spending *more* time together. I had a million questions for him: where do I meet gay men? How do I approach them? What happens if they're heterosexual? After six months of flinging, Brian re-approached me. He said he had wanted to give me that time to experiment, and now he was interested in a real relationship. We started dating exclusively."

"When did you move in together?"

"Four months ago. Brian had another phone line installed so we had two separate numbers -- a precaution for work."

"I don't get it."

"I mean, it would look bad if work had to phone me and my number was the same as the boss's. So we don't answer each other's phones."

I rub my shoulder and wince. "I'm not sure how to tell you this, Mark, but the whole office knows you're living together."

"Really," says Mark, raising an eyebrow. "I guess I must have let something slip." He feigns innocence and looks at the ceiling. "Actually, all that secrecy is the only thing about Brian that bugs me. So I fixed it."

"That's the *only* thing? That's pretty good."

Mark smiles again. "Yeah, I know." He stops, and I watch him struggle to drop the facade, the attitude, the trappings of a contrived situation. "If there's one thing this relationship has taught me, it's that the gender of your lover isn't relevant."

A pause. "Then what is?"

"The only thing left, I guess. The love."

Me 1

During the writing of these stories, many things happened. Helen and Mike broke up -- at Mike's insistence -- two weeks after I interviewed him. I received a distraught and teary phone call at two a.m.

"Is that you?" asked Helen's voice.

"Yes," I say, struggling to wake up. "What's the matter?"

"Mike ... broke up with me " Helen's voice breaks into tears.

"Where are you?"

"I'm calling long distance.

"What happened?"

Helen sighs a shaky sigh and starts, "I don't know," and the tears flow again.

"Hey, hey -- it's OK. Take your time."

"He -- he -- he said that he couldn't handle it. Me. He doesn't want to see me anymore."

"But why?" I ask. Now I'm fully awake.

"He said it was the interview. It made him realize things." Helen's voice gets strong. "*So what did he say?*"

I bite my lip in the dark and sit up in my bed. What do I do? What's my role here? Is it more important to honour the interview relationship or to break it and comfort a friend in need?

"You know I wouldn't be asking if I didn't really need to know," Helen whispers, bringing me out of my reverie.

"I know," I say quietly. Another pause and I take a deep breath. "He didn't give me any indication *whatsoever* that he was thinking of breaking up with you. In fact, he told me he loved you."

Helen starts sobbing on the other end. "*WHY? Then why?*"

"Helen, honey ... I don't know. I don't have all the answers."

Helen quiets. "Then can you fax me your interview notes tomorrow?"

There is no second thought for this. "No, Helen," I say gently but firmly. "You know you can't have those."

Helen is silent. "OK, I understand."

We talk for a while longer and I promise to call her in the morning. But I'm up now and I wander into the living room and look out the big bay window. It's quiet outside, peaceful, and I stop.

This work has become many things. It's an exploration of voice, yes, but it's more an exploration of boundaries -- and Helen has just tested mine. The boundaries are more than personal, though, they're between fiction and non-fiction, between narrator and author, between partners in relationships, between perceptions and reality, between disclosure and exploitation. Above all though, I think as I settle down into the window seat, this has been a journey -- a journey shaped by experiences and the difficulty of translating those experiences into words. Maybe the survey has more answers

I remember the questionnaire now and my eyes dart to the dining room desk where they lie, untouched. Well, I think, you're not going back to sleep. You might as well do some work.

I walk over to the desk and switch on the lamp. The hardwood floor shines where the small light rays catch it as I sit down to the desk. I begin counting.

Forty-three. I've received forty-three responses -- twenty-six female and seventeen male. This doesn't surprise me, somehow. It's usually harder to get men to talk about their relationships -- let alone write anything down. I begin to read and tabulate.

The next time I look up rays of sun break through the window. The questionnaires are fascinating. I think I'll include them as an appendix to the story. The numbers, the averages and the percentages are all important, but it's the written comments that have

the most value. There's something about trying to record experiences that makes people more pensive and generally more articulate. One part of the survey is a word association exercise on the word "love." The results both satisfy me and surprise me.

The word most frequently associated with love is "friendship" with thirty-six of forty-three circling it. It's pretty close gender-wise too -- 92% of the women and 71% of the men. Runners up are "respect" with thirty-three (88% female and 59% male) and "passion" with thirty-two (77% female and 71% male).

The favorite female words are "romance" and "friendship" -- with 92% each -- but the males are less unanimous in their consent. They choose "passion" and "friendship" the most, but only at 71%.

All of this seems pretty standard, I think to myself, if a little depressing in its perpetuation of male/female stereotyping. If you believe popular sociology -- such as Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* -- then these word choices are a good representation of gender differences. Females are (reportedly) more concerned about the "softer" side of relationships: romance, talking. Males are seen as the active force -- more interested in procreation. What's really interesting, then, are the aberrations. "Urge" was circled only four times -- all by females. "Appetite" and "mating" were chosen only twice as well -- but also by females. The only word males chose more than females was "luxury."

What do these statistics mean? Marlene Mackie, also a sociologist, concludes that gender roles in relationships are self-fulfilling prophecies; that females are conditioned to circle "romance," as it implies a quiet, gentle role, and men to circle "passion" for an active role. But perhaps those roles are changing, as exemplified by those few women who chose to circle "urge," "appetite" and "mating." I realize that this isn't a scientific sample, but I suspect that for this age group and socio-economic level it's probably pretty accurate.

Like a bashful lover, I hesitate to say that love is, finally, unspeakable. I don't want to believe that people can't find the words for their particular experiences. In the interviews, people can speculate in the beginning of a relationship and analyze at the end but in the middle, they have great difficulty talking about love.

Lynn once said, "I know what love is, how it should feel and when it works, I just can't talk about it. It's always too late."

And so I said, "My theory is that the words break down in the experience. What we call "love" becomes an endless cycle of experience followed by explanation, failure followed by analysis. You're right Lynn -- it is always too late."

I shake my head, yawn and turn off the lamp. You better get some sleep, I think. You've got a date tonight.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE
THESIS PREPARATION -- "THE WAY WE MET: THE SEMANTICS OF
ROMANTICS"

Instructions: Please answer the following questions on your views about love and relationships in the 18 to 30-year-old age group. Your name is optional, as are any questions you do not wish to answer. Thank-you for aiding me in my research.

I. NAME (optional): _____
AGE: _____
GENDER (circle): M F

II. a) Are you currently involved in a relationship? YES NO (skip to section III)
b) If yes, for how long? _____
c) How did you meet this person?

d) Describe him/her (include age):

e) Describe yourself:

f) Why were you attracted to him/her?

g) What is the most exciting adventure/date/experience you have had with him/her?

III. a) When was your last relationship? _____
b) Describe the circumstances (including break-up):

c) How many relationships have you engaged in? _____

IV. a) What other words do you use for "dating"? _____

b) What words do you most associate with "love"? (circle all that apply)

- | | | |
|------------------|---------------|------------|
| attraction | lust | sex |
| sensuality | desire | mating |
| indulgence | luxury | pleasure |
| hunger | communication | need |
| covet | craving | appetite |
| urge | space | like |
| strangeness | affection | fondness |
| passion | rules | longevity |
| unpredictability | romance | equality |
| fiction | story | family |
| tenderness | warmth | regard |
| respect | uncertainty | loss |
| sexuality | friendship | distance |
| longing | attention | durability |
| tales | devotion | feelings |
| rage | carnal | kindness |
| despair | gentleness | similarity |
| fantasy | faith | experience |

other: _____

V. a) Do you believe in "love at first sight"?

b) Do you believe "true love" is a one-time occurrence?

VI. Comments:

QUESTIONNAIRE

THESIS PREPARATION -- "THE WAY WE MET: THE SEMANTICS OF ROMANTICS"

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I. NAME (optional): _____

AGE: _____

GENDER (circle): M F

- II. a) Are you currently involved in a relationship? Y N (skip to section III)**
b) If yes, for how long?
c) How did you meet this person?

Well, I was leaning against the bar, so drunk I could barely see, when I'm introduced to a friend of a friend. I was trying to be charming but it was as if I had marbles in my mouth. I thought I blew it, but the next time I saw her she had love in her eyes and the rest is history.

- male, 24.

We went to school together -- since grade 1.

- female, 24.

My ex-fiance that I hadn't spoken to in five years but he maintained friendship with my sister and her spouse. They re-introduced us.

- female, 28.

I knew some people, she knew some people, and I guess we just hooked up!

- male, 19.

d) Describe him/her (include age):

He is 25 years old, hard-working; not as responsible as he should be. He is very loving and romantic, emotional and stubborn.

- female, 24.

Female, 17 years old, brown hair, blue eyes, glasses, 5'4". Likes to sing. Funny. Loves pets (2 cats, 1 dog, 3 fish). Nice figure.

-male, 18.

18 years old. 5'7" (approx.). Doesn't really care about much except booze. Lives with family, Mom, Dad, 2 cats, 1 brother (great guy).

- male, 19.

He's 27, funny, conservative, likeable, easy going; very good with money, affectionate, can be emotional, happy, he treats me well and with respect, giving, understanding, patient.

- female, 28.

24 years old, witty, intelligent, passionate, gentle, sexy.

- male, 26.

25 -- arrogant, intelligent, really into physical fitness, sweet and caring (but only I get to see those).

- female, 24.

26,



- female, 24.

e) Describe yourself:

I am about 5'8 1/2", short black hair and chocolate eyes. A little bit athletic. I like to have a good time and good-natured. Funny too and smart.

- male, 21.

Confident regarding my abilities yet hesitant to commit to any one path. Outspoken. Hyper-sensitive. Thoughtful. Dependable. Eager to put best foot forward in work/relationship. Talk altogether too much. Opinionated yet flexible. Open-minded. Fairly progressive. Giving (perhaps too much).

- female, 22.

26 years old. A dreamer.

- male, 26.

Arrogant, self-confident (to a degree) -- this is too hard to do!

- female, 24.

f) Why were you attracted to him/her?

Originally sexual attraction but grew to personal and caring attraction.

- male, 18.

*Because he looked like a fish out of water at this party but acted like a pig in shit.
I was intrigued and wanted to know who this guy was.*

- female, 24.

He's very gregarious and has a 'no fear' approach to everything. He's extremely creative and has terrific insight into human nature. I trust his judgment above all others. He has a bizarre sense of humor.

- female, 31.

He seemed sweet, healthy, a good partner type and father type. Connected to his family, feminist.

- female, 25.

Because he looks like the lead singer of Moist and he was really down to earth and friendly.

- female, 19.

g) What is the most exciting adventure/date/experience you have had with him/her?

Going to a Justice of the Peace two months after we met and getting married!
- female, 23.

We had a weekend retreat for marriage classes, but it only lasted 1 day because we escaped at night. We left our donation. Ran with our bags ... took a cab to (a hotel) and had a wonderful night/day. (Guess you had to be there -- just kidding!)

- female, 28.

This is a one word answer: SEX.

- male, 18.

Every minute I spend with her is exciting and fresh. There really isn't one event that jumps to mind because they've all been great. (Probably a lame answer, but it's true.)

- male, 21.

Crashed a professor's party, then went to dinner, then went to the Fort Garry Hotel in a lounge where some guy sang to us, after we broke into a boardroom with a view and embraced.

- male, 18.

At camp when we met. The 2 nights we spent on the beach. We missed breakfast both mornings -- when we came back up everyone was clapping and bugging us. It was embarrassing but for me it was fun (for him too).

- female, 19.

I guess the first dates would be the most "exiting" -- the ambiguity of not knowing if they were dates -- walking the line -- ordering wine, being conversationally bold.

- female, 25.

Getting up in the morning.

- male, 26.

I can't think of one in particular. Probably camping and canoe trips -- any holiday ALONE.

- female, 24.

This may sound like Hallmark, but 'everyday tops the one before.'

- female, 24.

III. a) When was your last relationship?

b) Describe the circumstances (including break-up):

Very casual. Too casual, in fact. Essentially based on sex. I went away for the summer and he needed to have sex and did with a number of other women.

- female, 22.

"I deserved better than what I could be given," or whatever the real reason or whoever the other guys were.

- male, 19.

He was (unknown -- for certain -- to me) gay and very hateful towards women. He had a ridiculous ideal woman theory and was the master of mental cruelty. These

characteristics didn't emerge until after our engagement and slowly he wore down my self-esteem to where I was unable to leave. Somehow I did...

-female, 33.

We went out for about three weeks, but we sort of just got sick of each other and the fact that she lived out of the city; we barely saw each other anyway and I don't think she was faithful.

-male, 21.

He said he needed time with his friends, meanwhile he really needed to see other women. I believe he was my one true love.

-female, 24.

I really liked him at first, but then we started fighting a lot. I kept going out with him because he lived in (another city) and I lived in Winnipeg and I was having problems at home so it was an escape from my home life. I moved to (the other city) knowing it was doomed and I stayed there for 2 months while we fought constantly. I got to the point where I couldn't argue anymore, so I moved back home. Despite all the fighting, it was a friendly, mutual break-up.

-female, 28.

We didn't know if we wanted to go further so she came up with all these definitions and I just didn't want to love in a lenient relationship.

-male, 19.

She was crazy. I was scared of her. Not a very comfortable place to be.

-male, 19.

He told me that I shouldn't talk about certain things because it bored him (eg. my friends). He also told me that he cheated on me (supposedly).

- female, 19.

Must I? The wounds are still fresh.

- female, 22.

I acted like an alley cat.

- male, 26.

Ripple tummies, fast cars, drinks, money ... distance always takes its toll.

- female, 24.

c) How many relationships have you engaged in?

Female average: 7.8

Male average: 3.6

Female minimum: 2

Male minimum: 0

Female maximum: 32

Male maximum: 6

IV. a) What other words do you use for "dating"? (fill in the blank)

seeing	16/26 females, 10/17 males	Total: 26/43
going out	9/26 females, 5/17 males	14/43
courting	1/26 females, 2/17 males	3/43
flinging	2/26 females, 0/17 males	2/43
together	2/26 females, 0/17 males	2/43
involved	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
good friends	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43

going around	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
taken	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
styling	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
scoping	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
working	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
attaching the leash to collar	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
with	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
spending time	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
married	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
does not use "dating"	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43
chillin'	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
hanging out	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
partying	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
meshing well	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
shacking up with	0/26 females, 1/17 males	1/43
partnered	1/26 females, 0/17 males	1/43

b) What words do you most associate with "love"? (circle all that apply)

attraction	20 F, 6 M	26/43
lust	6 F, 4 M	10/43
sex	14 F, 10 M	24/43
sensuality	13 F, 7 M	20/43
desire	13 F, 6 M	19/43
mating	2 F	2/43
indulgence	2 F, 2 M	2/43
luxury	2 F, 3 M	5/43
pleasure	17 F, 8 M	25/43

hunger	3 F	3/43
communication	21 F, 8 M	29/43
need	5 F, 3 M	8/43
covet	3 F, 1 M	4/43
craving	3 F, 1 M	4/43
appetite	2 F	2/43
urge	4 F	4/43
space	4 F, 2 M	6/43
like	9 F, 2 M	11/43
strangeness	2 F, 1 M	2/43
affection	18 F, 8 M	26/43
fondness	8 F, 8 M	16/43
passion	20 F, 12 M	32/43
rules	1 F, 1 M	2/43
longevity	11 F, 5 M	16/43
unpredictability	5 F, 3 M	8/43
romance	24 F, 9 M	32/43
equality	19 F, 5 M	24/43
fiction	1 F, 1 M	2/43
story	1 F, 1 M	2/43
family	14 F, 3 M	17/43
tenderness	18 F, 9 M	27/43
warmth	18 F, 9 M	27/43
regard	3 F, 1 M	4/43
respect	23 F, 10 M	33/43
uncertainty	5 F, 1 M	6/43
loss	1 F	1/43

sexuality	11 F, 4 M	15/43
friendship	24 F, 12 M	36/43
distance	2 F, 1 M	3/43
longing	8 F, 2 M	10/43
attention	13 F, 8 M	21/43
durability	2 F, 1 M	3/43
tales	2 F, 1 M	3/43
devotion	20 F, 7 M	27/43
feelings	18 F, 8 M	24/43
rage	2 F, 1 M	3/43
carnal	3 F, 2 M	5/43
kindness	16 F, 6 M	24/43
despair	3 F	3/43
gentleness	13 F, 9 M	22/43
similarity	5 F	5/43
fantasy	5 F, 4 M	9/43
faith	16 F, 5 M	21/43
experience	7 F, 5 M	12/43
other:		
trust	3 F, 1 M	4/43
game	1 F	1/43
ritual	1 F	1/43
depth	1 F	1/43
safety	1 F	1/43
admiration	1 F	1/43
connection	1 F	1/43
openheartedness	1 F	1/43

commitment	1 F	1/43
fate	1 F	1/43
hard work	1 F	1/43
spontaneity	1 F	1/43
excitement	1 F	1/43
sensitivity	1 F	1/43
open-mindedness	1 F	1/43
understanding	1 F	1/43
hell	1 F	1/43
tail	1 M	1/43
money	1 M	1/43
control	1 M	1/43

V. a) Do you believe in "love at first sight"?

Yes	16 F, 9 M	25/43
No	8 F, 8 M	16/43
Not sure	2 F	2/43

b) Do you believe "true love" is a one-time occurrence?

Yes	10 F, 3 M	13/43
No	15 F, 12 M	17/43
Not sure	1 F, 2 M	3 /43

No. I think you can spend your whole life looking for something better. I think there comes a time that you make a decision because you're going to make the relationship work, that this person means so much to you that you give all you can to

make it successful, but you have to be careful that you don't lose the "me" in becoming part of the "us."

-female, 22.

Love or the outward act of sex is really gross ... talking and being with someone is truly enjoyable.

- male, 19.

No, I believe that there are certain groups of people that all share the same traits you like and you have to offer. There are lots of people out there that fit into this category, however, meeting them is a different story. It's all chance, it might only happen once to someone, but may happen 2 or 3 times to someone else. Hence -- cheating or affairs in families which are strong.

- male, 19.

I'm not sure because I haven't been in love with someone more than once yet.

- male, 19.

VI. Comments:

It's hard to choose among these words since I've had distinctly different types of love relationships -- some based on love at first sight, and the impulse towards a self-annihilating passion (death drive) and the one I'm in now which is more family-oriented and life-oriented and I wouldn't want to validate one at the expense of the other.

- female, 25.

My responses are not close to complete. There are many things to say -- many other ways of describing.

- male, 24.

Most people don't know what love is and therefore when they experience it it scares them and they throw it away to settle with something more comfortable and familiar; therefore mediocre.

- female, 20.

Being only 20 there is a big difference between love and sex and it really depends (feelings, that is) on what your focus is.

- male, 20.

I think love is different for/to everyone and it takes a person a long time to find out what love is to them.

- female, 24.

Girls are a real strange breed.

- male, 19.

I found through my years of dating that a lot of the time the more passionate the relationship, the more we didn't get along. Passion and sex sure aren't everything!

- female, 28.

As all great lovers know, Love is perfect kindness.

- male, 26.

I don't really feel that I totally understand love. So many people say the words "I love you" but then do things that go against those words. I feel that actions are more important and 'showing' someone that you love them is better than saying it.

- female, 19.

Sex (is associated with love) in the context that it is something shared, you give your partner the pleasure. Sex should not be used for self-pleasure.

- male, 19.

It's so difficult to find someone who fits my five ideals: attractiveness, intelligence, sense of humor, confidence, sensitivity. Unfortunately I refuse to settle for 4 out of 5, so I may be enjoying the single life for a while longer.

- female, 25.

This was hard to do.

- female, 24.