“What’s wrong with Vanderbilt? Not that she’d get in necessarily,” Mrs. Holtzmann said to no one in particular. “There are plenty of good schools in the South.” She stood in the doorway of her classroom with her arms crossed.

“Heil Holtzmann,” Audrey said under her breath. It was Monday. She was kneeling at her locker a few feet away, collecting books and papers for her next class, Trigonometry. Mrs. Holtzmann was her European History teacher, a petite woman with the faint beginnings of a mustache. Her hairstyle was modeled after Jaclyn Smith’s in Charlie’s Angels.

“Mrs. Holtzmann hates me,” Audrey said to Gordy when she went to see him at lunchtime.

“Now, that is simply not possible.” His accent made two syllables out of “that.” “Teachers are simply not capable of expressing something so primitive as hatred for their students.”

“You mean they don’t feel it?” Audrey asked. She was sixteen, a junior.

“No, my dear. Because it’s against the rules, the unwritten code of conduct among pedagogues. It’s like the Hippocratic oath among doctors. We pledge to educate, but more importantly to preserve your fragile, childish vanities.”

“So even if they don’t express it they can still feel it.”

Gordy was the kind of person who would never use the word teacher when there was a word like pedagogue to use instead.

“Gordy” was a nickname for Mr. Gordon, the Honors English teacher at Lyndon Johnson High School. His first name was Henry, but no one, not even the other teachers, called him that. To everyone he was “Gordy,” and the simplicity and uniformity of the nickname seemed to please him. If every high school has one teacher who must assume the role of the beloved eccentric, then Gordy played the part at Lyndon Johnson with the precision of a method actor. He was an orderly man; his dark blond hair was always scrupulously parted and firmly in place.
He was whimsical. “What can we say about your case?” is what he said to every student who came to his classroom when they were supposed to be in the cafeteria, at gym, or in study hall. Even the students who didn’t understand what he meant were cheered by the words.

Audrey always went to hear about her case at lunchtime. She sat on a chair next to his desk while he wandered the room, his hands behind his back. The room was a standard issue high-school classroom: a laminated map of the world, an aging chalkboard, an anachronistic set of encyclopedias, and plants in green plastic pots on a stand near charmless, institutional windows. Every stripe of high-school student was present at these lunchtime caucuses. There were athletes who towered over Gordy and clapped him on the back; anxious cheerleaders who described to him their romantic dilemmas while they made eyes at the athletes; nerds who bunched in the corners and mocked the jocks in a silent, elaborate vocabulary of facial expressions; losers who skulked at the threshold and muttered under their breath. Gordy was fluent in the language of each tribe, and moved between them without prejudice, dispensing his singular wisdom to all in need.

“I must tell you in confidence that Mrs. Holtzmann did ask me the other day what it is that you and I talk about when you come in here,” Gordy said as he landed on the chair behind his desk. One leg floated across the other; he held his face in his hand.

“See?! She’s obsessed with me. She won’t leave me alone.”

“Have you considered the possibility that it’s me she’s obsessed with? Or even better, perhaps she imagines that something untoward is going on between us.” Gordy stared at her and raised an eyebrow.

Audrey felt her face get hot. She made up a taunting sing-song and played it in her head, You have a crush on Go-r-dy.

Henry Gordon was thirty-five years old and neither handsome nor stylish. He was thin in an eerie, ageless way; no one ever knew him to gain an ounce. His narrow frame was filled out exactly, so that his body itself looked like a suit that was snug but not tight. His rigid, military bearing accentuated the lack of give in his build. He wore brown plastic glasses that were decidedly out of fashion. He stood in the doorway of his classroom between classes with his hands behind his back, one upturned palm on top of the other. The collar of a bright white T-shirt always peeked out from under a crisp white shirt. He stood perfectly still, smiled a thin-lipped smile, and watched teenagers glide up and
down the hallway. Other teachers passed by him, or stood beside him, and sometimes said things to him. Gordy would answer without moving his eyes away from the river of boy and girl bodies undulating in front of him.

Maybe the teachers and administrators at Lyndon Johnson would have been troubled by the rapt attention Gordy paid his students if the gym teacher did not present a relatively more significant cause for concern. His name was Jeffrey Childs, but he was called “The Child Molester.” Whenever the bell rang to signal the end of a class period, inevitably someone somewhere in the school would announce, “Time to get molested!” The Molester had a flaccid, droopy body that made everyone, even other teachers, wonder why he had been hired to teach gym in the first place. He claimed the devotion of only one student, a flat, plain girl who slinked along the hallways, always looking as if something bad had just happened to her. Audrey watched the girl in the hall and wondered what would compel even someone like her to bestow affections on a man who looked like The Molester, and had such a nickname, to boot.

“I’m not interested in Vanderbilt,” Audrey said to Gordy. “I didn’t apply to any schools in the South.”

“You may well rue the day.” He seemed fascinated by her determination to leave the South forever after graduation. “The South has her fair share of noble sons and daughters. Take Jimmy Carter, for instance.” He sighed. “Far too humane for the presidency.”

“My mother says people up North are much more broad-minded.” Audrey, like her mother, meant white people.

Gordy considered this. “The Southern black is in a curious position, by necessity married to Southern customs and rhythms, yet forced to seek, in the words of Mr. Langston Hughes, ‘a colder mistress.’” The bell rang; it was the end of lunch period. He sat on his desk and looked at Audrey, and then turned his head to observe students as they filed in. His hands were laced over one knee, his right leg crossed tidily over his left.

Audrey shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she stood in front of him. “Yeah, I guess so,” she said. “Time for gym.” She excused herself, and left to face The Molester.
The gymnasium was all the way across campus. Audrey knew a shortcut, but today the heavy metal doors of the music wing were chained shut. She turned around and followed the flow of traffic down the stairs.

The trellis that covered the walkway cast an intricate shadow on the concrete. Audrey marched forward, not to let the continuous whirl of students bump her into the mud. When she saw Marshall, she stopped, forcing the kid behind her to stop short, grumble, and then ease himself around her. Greasy stains decorated Marshall’s Guns N’ Roses T-shirt. His hair was in a series of disorganized clumps; it seemed to be a look he was going for. Marshall was one of Gordy’s special cases.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey. Last weekend was cool.” They had met in the park to drink grain alcohol punch with a bunch of other kids. Marshall got drunk and asked Audrey if he could kiss her. Audrey said yes because he was her friend and because he was black.

“Do you want to hang out this weekend?” As she spoke, three black girls in cheerleader uniforms walked past them. She could feel them not look at her. And then one of them pivoted and smiled a good-manners smile. Audrey’s heart sank.

“Nah. I’m getting some new parts for my car.”

Not long ago, Mrs. Holtzmann had stood in her doorway with Mrs. Abernathy, the Social Studies teacher, and said in Audrey’s direction: “I hope she’s not going to the prom with that boy. She’d be better off with one of the retarded kids.” That boy was Marshall; he was “different,” like Audrey. They were the only black students in the honors classes, but Marshall’s grades were plummeting. Maybe it had to do with the fact that he had interest in little else besides his car. Sometimes Audrey went to Marshall’s house after school and sat on the back porch while he lay underneath his rusty blue Camaro and talked to her. Sometimes, they talked about Mrs. Holtzmann and why she hated them.

“Well, call me if the parts don’t come in, or if you get bored, or something.”

Mrs. Holtzmann didn’t have to worry. Marshall was not allowed to go to the prom after he was fingered as the ringleader in a plot to sabotage the senior float. Audrey’s escort was a proper black boy from a nearby private school. On prom night, he brought her to his
house before the dance, where his mother took pictures and fantasized out loud about her future as Audrey’s mother-in-law. “Oh brother,” Audrey’s mother said when she heard about the photography session. Later that night, Audrey ditched the boy and joined Marshall and his friends in the park to drink grain alcohol punch. When Marshall got into trouble for the scheme involving the senior float, Audrey wrote an impassioned letter in his defense and sent it to the principal, who called her mother. Audrey’s mother told her not to waste her energies on a boy so intent on going nowhere.

Audrey bounced her leg as she waited for The Molester to get off the phone.

“How many times do we have to go over the rules? No. Street. Shoes. Get it?”

Despite his obvious annoyance, the timbre of his voice felt like a jovial pat on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I forgot.” She examined his bushy mustache. He had big, straight teeth. He looked like a nice enough guy.

The door swung open. “I have to talk to you.” It was the girl in the hall. She stood just inside the room with her hands on her hips. The ridge of her hipbone was visible between her fingers. Her dingy white socks came all the way up to her knees.

“There’s a line outside,” said The Molester, and gestured with his head. Unkind laughter sounded behind the girl.

The girl in the hall didn’t move. She stared at him as if she could burn her thoughts into his brain.

“Here.” The Molester put a wooden hall pass on the desk in front of Audrey. “Get dressed and go to study hall. Five extra laps on Wednesday.”

Audrey took the pass and left the room. Students were lined up like dominoes outside. They stood on their toes to see the girl in the hall and The Molester, who watched her impassively from his desk. “Freak,” one of the boys sang in an opera singer’s baritone. The Molester got up and closed the door. Before Audrey turned the corner to the locker room, she heard a female voice near the back of the line whisper, “Disgusting.”

Gordy was overwhelmed with cases the next day at lunch, so he invited her to come to his house that night for her “assessment.” Audrey lied
and told her parents she was babysitting. She pulled out of the chilly 
suburbs in her mother’s car, and found her way to Gordy’s house by 
inching along the narrow roads of his neighborhood, looking for his 
pale yellow VW Beetle. She found it, and then saw him sitting on the 
porch. He talked to her as she grabbed her backpack from the car, and 
she thought about how easy this was: car to curb to Gordy.

They held glasses of iced tea. Gordy talked about his youth. “In West 
Kentucky, dating a girl from across the tracks was just like being in an 
interracial relationship,” Gordy said.

“What side of the tracks was Mrs. Gordon on?”

“She was on the right side, my side,” Gordy laughed. “My mother 
was delighted—until she went and got herself pregnant.” He looked 
sharply at Audrey. “That’s a dirty trick to play on a man, my dear. 
Remember my words.”

In the window behind him, she could see the duplicitous Mrs. Gor-
don herd their three sons up to bed.

“My mother said that rearing children is what brings meaning to an 
adult life,” Audrey said. Gordy laughed out loud, and she was pleased the 
way she always was when she managed to amuse him.

Audrey sipped at her iced tea and surveyed the street. It was the 
sort of day her mother would call “balmy.” A man in a green sweat-
suit walked a compact, slow-moving dog. Before Gordy, Audrey had 
thought of marriage as something constant, something that just was. 
Your parents just were your parents, whether you wanted it that way or 
not. Other kids talked about liking and disliking their parents, but to 
Audrey such discussions were pointless because they implied choices 
that kids did not have. When she was younger, like many children, 
she dreamed of more romantic beginnings, but after she accepted the 
disappointment that she was not adopted, she stopped looking to her 
parents for revelations. Gordy taught her that parents weren’t a given 
but sometimes tricked into the role, and that married people actually 
had feelings about each other that had nothing to do with kids, or family, 
or even love.

Mrs. Gordon was short and had frizzy hair. Her glasses were even 
less fashionable than her husband’s. She taught Computer Science at 
another school.

“Does Mrs. Gordon mind my coming over here?”

“Well, you’re hardly the only student who seeks my counsel after

20  Ploughshares
hours. Doug Mitchell was over here yesterday. And Cherise Walker usually stops by after cheerleading practice on Fridays.”

Audrey dropped her shoulders at the mention of the pretty black cheerleader. “Cherise Walker hates me,” she said gravely.

Cherise Walker was a senior. She wore makeup and carried handbags. Audrey wore glasses and sometimes the same kind of shirt, in different colors, for a whole week. Instead of a handbag, she carried a dingy blue backpack everywhere, even to the movies. She was neither experienced nor imaginative in the arts of self-adornment. Still, the next day after school, she gamely made two laps up and down the cosmetics row at CVS before she gave up. Gordy wasn’t the kind of teacher girls competed for; Audrey knew that, even if Gordy didn’t. She bought a Seventeen magazine and some jawbreakers.

That evening, Gordy talked about his fate. He had three sons. Stuart was ten, and Daniel and Michael were four and six, respectively. The younger two were wiry, boisterous boys who teased Stuart cruelly about his weight. Audrey felt bad for Stuart. She knew from her own experience that being the oldest boy should be something like having a championship belt, a guaranteed badge of entitlement to lord over younger siblings. It was as if his weight had stripped Stuart of his title. Sometimes he wore the flabby, exhausted look of an ex–prize fighter.

On the porch, in the darkness, Gordy talked about the unjust hand of destiny while his children fought, lounged, and enacted dance routines in the living-room window behind him. He rarely turned the porch lights on. He said the darkness created a sense of elegance and intimacy, but Audrey suspected it was because he liked the fact that he could see but not be seen. What he saw there on the porch with the lights out were his memories and fantasies come alive, so that he wasn’t as much remembering but narrating what he saw in front of him. Audrey sometimes wondered if her presence was even necessary. Sometimes when the boys were making a lot of noise, Gordy would turn to watch, and then it was as if the animation inside the house, too, was a fantasy, a movie, and he was just a spectator, his obligation to the scene no different from any random viewer’s.

He had concerns about her love life.

“What’s wrong with Marshall?”
“I like him. I just don’t like him, like him.”
“You like him but you don’t like him.”
“I mean, I like him as a friend, but not the other way.”
“You mean not in a sexual way.”
“I’m not talking about that, I’m just talking about liking him.”
“You don’t like him enough to have sex with him.”
“I don’t want to talk about that.”
“I see.”

Gordy had been unambiguously disappointed when he found out Audrey was still a virgin. He declared her “a closet Victorian,” which was not necessarily an insult in his vocabulary. The book he considered an autobiography of sorts, at least in emotional terms, was Clarissa. Now Audrey sat on Gordy’s porch in perturbed silence as he lectured her on the value of sexual experience, the hypocrisies of female chastity, and the failure of the “free love” movement to liberate women and men from their antiquated illusions about sexual innocence.

“Marshall is an interesting case,” Gordy persisted, “a boy far too sensitive for the crudeness of his environment. He can only hope that whatever life has in store for him next will be more conducive for his intellectual growth. You could do worse, you know.”

Just because he’s black, Audrey thought.

“How do your parents feel about you dating white boys?” Gordy asked.

“Absolutely out of the question,” Audrey said.

“Alas, Dr. King is rolling in his grave.”

Audrey thought this was a pretty stupid thing to say. She knew that Martin Luther King didn’t march on Washington so that she could date white boys. Still, she imagined that Gordy had some kind of point, just because he usually did.

“I think interracial love affairs are crucial to the country’s moral health. It’s high time I myself contributed to the struggle for harmony between the races.”

“You’re going to—. You mean dating?” Audrey said.

Gordy looked at her. “Remember that I grew up during segregation. I was deprived of the pleasure of black companions. I’m putting an ad in the newspaper. Let’s see.” He cleared his throat. “‘Have we really overcome? WM seeks BF. Let’s realize the dream.’”

Audrey sipped her tea and looked at the street. One streetlight
illuminated a piece of sidewalk that an hour earlier had been crowded with children bumping plastic cars into each other. It was bedtime. In the window, Mrs. Gordon could be seen rounding up toys and boys and books.

“You shouldn’t cut class to come here,” Gordy said the next day when Audrey was supposed to be at gym. There was an assembly, but she was supposed to be at gym, running punishment laps. “In fact, I may have to close down my lunchtime operation,” he said. “Holtzmann appears to be on the warpath.” Gordy had his feet on his desk, his ankles crossed. His arms were folded behind his head. “She must have said something to the principal. She’ll probably squeal on me for skipping assembly too.”

“She’s just jealous because everyone likes you.”

“Perhaps. At any rate, I don’t want to excite her ire.”

“But I can’t go back to gym. I forgot my shoes again, and The Molester will kill me.”

“If you are not careful, you are going to wear out that ruse. And please, stop calling him that awful name, at least when you’re in here.”

“He’s gross. He’s a weirdo. He’s going to fail me,” Audrey groused. “I’m going to fail gym.”

“He’s lonely and misunderstood,” Gordy said, his voice a tender reprimand. “Speaking of lonely and misunderstood, are you free to babysit on Friday? Mrs. Gordon has insisted I join her at one of her school functions.”

“I thought you saw Cherise on Fridays. Why don’t you ask her?”

“Ah, Cherise.” Gordy leaned his head back until Audrey saw the point of his Adam’s apple. He snapped his head forward. “She has a date. A ball player.” He smiled at her. “Now go back to gym and throw yourself at the mercy at Mr. Jeffrey Childs.”

The walkway was empty of people as Audrey made her way to the gym. She slapped her feet on the pavement. Friday was only two days away. “If you get a ride to my house, I will drive you home,” Gordy had told her.

Audrey tried to formulate a new excuse as she walked up the steps leading to The Molester’s office. But as she approached the door, she stopped. She tiptoed forward and leaned her ear against the door. It was unmistakable; the girl in the hall and The Molester were laughing together inside.
Audrey asked Marshall to drop her off at Gordy’s on Friday. He roared up in his blue tin can and popped the steering wheel on and off to impress her. She told her mother that they were going to a play rehearsal at school. Audrey walked out of the house stunned that she bought it.

“How should I come over after the kids are in bed?” Marshall twisted one of his hair clumps as his engine gurgled in Gordy’s driveway.

“Maybe. I’ll call you.”

Inside, the house was unpleasantly aflutter with tears, stern warnings, and fretful dartings back and forth. Audrey sat on the couch and waited. Finally, the Gordons were leaving the house in an irritated hurry. The boys wrapped their arms around their mother’s legs and she leaned down to shush them and stroke their hair. Gordy marched through the living room and out of the door without turning his head.

“Goodnight, Audrey. I’m in the car!” Mrs. Gordon straightened up on cue, reminded Audrey of the basic instructions for bedtime, and followed her husband out the door. By the time Audrey had locked the door behind her, the two younger boys were already on the floor with their toys, deeply absorbed in an ominous-sounding drama involving a soldier, a dog, a spaceship, and a derailed train. Stuart sat in his chair above them, holding a tattered peach-colored animal in a loose embrace. He was wearing a red-and-yellow striped shirt that looked like a failed attempt at whimsicality. He looked dumpy and sad and tired. He regarded Audrey who smiled back at him guiltily as she walked past the boys to the den.

She found the remote and was settling into the couch when suddenly Stuart was beside her.

“My dad says prime time is the barometer of the nation’s anxieties.”

Audrey laughed because that was exactly the kind of thing Gordy would say. Stuart brightened.

“Can I sit with you for a while?”

“OK,” Audrey said, and made room for him. For several minutes, Stuart sat perfectly still on the edge of the couch with his animal close to his chest. Finally, he relaxed and they became engrossed in a television show about rich but miserable teenagers.
Emily Bernard

Audrey woke to Stuart patting her knee. “It’s past the boys’ bedtime,” he whispered to her. She bolted upright, momentarily confused. Then she looked at Stuart in his unhappy happy shirt and remembered where she was and what she was supposed to be doing. The boys grumbled perfunctorily about the unfairness of bedtime as she followed them up the stairs. She stood in the hallway as Stuart helped the younger ones brush their teeth. Once they were in bed, she read to them from an adventure story while Stuart read a book about insects, with his flashlight, his body turned to the wall. When she said goodnight, the younger two were satisfied with “sweet dreams.” Stuart asked for a hug.

Audrey went downstairs to the kitchen and rummaged through the Gordons’ bar until she found some triple sec. She mixed it with some pulpy orange juice she found in the fridge, and brought both ingredients with her into the den. She flipped through cable channels, looking for something her parents would disapprove of. Finally, she found a movie about a high-class prostitute with a drug problem. She watched for a while. Then she found a movie about a corrupt police officer with a drug problem. She replenished her drink and watched until she heard floorboards creak, and then a child’s voice.

“Audrey, are you there?” His whisper was full of fear and excitement, as if he were addressing a ghost during a séance.

“I’m in the den, Stuart. What’s the problem?”

“I can’t sleep. I’m having bad dreams. You said you would come if I did.”

Audrey remembered making no such promise, but she said, “Just a minute.” Before she could hide the liquor bottle or change the channel, Stuart was in the room.

“What are you doing?” He stared in confusion. The obnoxious kingpin begged for his life while the police officer dangled him over a bridge by his ankles.

“Nothing, Stuart. Just watching TV.” As far as Audrey was concerned, the kingpin was a cruel braggart who deserved to be dropped into the river after he begged for his life. But she understood that between his sadism and his drug problem, the police officer was hardly a saint himself. Audrey turned off the television.

“You’re letting oxygen into the orange juice,” Stuart said.
He was wearing a two-piece pajama set that was too young for him; it had feet. His outfit had faded to a soft, creamy yellow, and featured washed-out images of imaginary creatures all over it in blue and pink. Audrey recognized the creatures from a book-turned-movie that had been wildly popular some years back. She wasn’t surprised when he held out his hand. She took it.

“Let’s go back up,” she said.

She followed Stuart upstairs. On the way to his room, Stuart said, “Wait. I want to show you something.” He pulled her into his parents’ bedroom. “Sit there.” He pointed to the bed and then made for the closet. He stuck his bedraggled animal between his knees as he moved around the detritus on the floor of the jam-packed closet. Audrey knew that Gordy considered Mrs. Gordon’s “hoarding” to be one of her larger sins. “Freud would see a natural connection between her indiscriminate saving and her inability to stay faithful to a weight-loss regimen,” he once sniffed.

Stuart joined her on the bed with a magazine in his hand, and when she saw the busty girl on the cover, she understood what this was all about.

“It’s my dad’s,” he said. Audrey started to respond sarcastically, but was stopped by the memory of a stack of dirty cartoons she once discovered at a friend’s house. She returned to them again and again every time she went there to visit, until they one day disappeared. She had the same sped-up feeling in her heart and stomach then as she did now.

Audrey flipped through a few pages of the magazine. She knew she should probably take this moment to lecture Stuart about privacy, and how-would-you-like-it-if-someone-went-through-your-things, but she couldn’t stop her hands from turning the pages as she stared, hypnotized by the girls in front of her. Stuart observed Audrey’s hands and then looked up at her face.

“That’s totally gross,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” Audrey said as she continued to turn page after totally gross page.

A few years ago, Audrey had accompanied her father on a visit to Mr. Covington, his mechanic and partner in a small business venture. She was reading a book in the waiting room when she was startled by the sound of the male laughter. She wandered down the hallway to Mr. Covington’s office with plans to whine until her father agreed
to take her home. When she looked through the door, she saw girls everywhere. There were pictures of them leaning against cars with their skirts hiked up, straddling motorcycles in bustiers and dark glasses, wet and laughing at a car wash, buckets in mid-fling. A calendar was pinned to the wall right behind Mr. Covington’s head. It was December, and above the boxes and rows for the days and weeks was a picture of a woman in a Santa Claus outfit, only she wasn’t the kind of Mrs. Claus you saw down at the mall. This Mrs. Claus had her head to one side, her lips puckered into a kiss and a long, blood-red fingernail to her mouth. Her round brown breasts were ripe and shining against the white fur of her costume. Everything else was lost on Audrey as she stared at the breasts, whose nipples were halfway exposed, so that the breasts looked like a pair of round brown olives, their pimentos nearly spilling out.

“Audrey! Good to see you, honey!” Mr. Covington smiled broadly. She slid inside the circle of her father’s arm sheepishly, afraid to look up. The big brown breasts shined and winked at her out of the corner of her eye. And when she closed her eyes, she could see nothing but long legs blooming out of hiked skirts, and big breasts nearly escaping from bustiers and wet and free under white T-shirts.

As they walked to the car, she asked her father about the pictures.

“Covington is crazy, you know, girl crazy.” He laughed and twirled his finger around the side of his temple.

“But what does his wife think?”

Her father looked at her seriously, and misreading her curiosity as concern, said gently, “Don’t worry about it, honey. It’s nothing, just some bimbos on the wall. It’s no big deal.”

Stuart tapped her wrist. “Hey, what do you and my dad talk about out there on the porch?” Audrey closed the pages of the magazine.

“Nothing much,” she told him.

“Does he ever talk about me?” He asked. Audrey looked at the shabby animal under the crook of one arm.

“Of course. Yeah. He talks about you all the time.” She put her arm around his shoulders. The bosomy blonde on the cover of the magazine smoldered up at them.

“OK, Stuart, you really have to go to bed now.”

“I know. But I gotta put the magazine back first.”

“I’ll put it back,” Audrey volunteered.
Stuart narrowed his eyes at her. “OK. But you won’t tell my dad, right?”

“And you don’t tell about me in the den, you know.” She poked his chest playfully.

“We have a deal,” he said. His animal in one hand, he stuck out the pinky of the other one. She hooked hers around it. They smiled at each other. Stuart turned around and clumped down the hall on his padded feet.

Audrey made sure Stuart was asleep before she went back into the Gordons’ bedroom and opened the magazine. Her hands quivered a bit, and she felt her heart beat in her stomach. For some reason, she made herself go through the magazine from beginning to end, not letting herself skip around like she wanted. She waded through reviews of garage door openers, razors, wristwatches, and speakers. Some of the cartoons were funny, but they were spoiled when she thought there must be a requirement that every woman in them had to have enormous breasts. The flowery writing in the “Confessions” column made her snicker and feel superior. When she got to the pictorials, she was surprised at how obvious the scenarios were—sexy secretaries menaced by vulgar bosses, housewives in lingerie caught unawares by well-endowed gardeners, etc. All of the women were white.

The pull-out featured the “Kitten of the Year.” Her name was Elysian and she had no pubic hair. The baldness of Elysian’s vagina surprised and repulsed Audrey so much that she lifted her head in embarrassment. When she looked back, she tried to concentrate on the little paragraphs about Elysian’s life and ambitions, but she found them nearly too painful to read. As she turned the pages, she examined Elysian’s body in various positions through the alternating lenses of pity and excitement. When she got to the end, she flipped back to the beginning and started again.

Some of their expressions looked fake, of course, but there was something almost unbearable in the hunger she also saw in the girls’ eyes, the nakedness of the expectation on their faces. If a woman didn’t have a penis in her mouth, then she held it open, gaping, waiting. Audrey heard the threatening sing-song of her mother’s voice in her ear as she sat slack-jawed and spaced out in church: “Close that mouth or catch flies.” The women in the magazine had legs that were open as
wide as their mouths. This exhilarated Audrey, who had been instructed from a young age to keep her knees together always, even when she was at home. “I don’t want you to get into the habit,” her mother explained. The open mouths and gaping legs were trusting and daring, vulnerable and powerful too. They seemed to speak to her of endless possibilities, of desires that could be shown but not spoken, of voluptuous, elaborate stories without endings.

“Stuart wanted to show me some girlie magazine Gordy has in his closet.” Audrey talked to Marshall on the phone in the kitchen.

“Gordy, all right!” Marshall said.

Audrey rolled her eyes into the receiver.

“My father has that stuff too.” Marshall paused. “I think it’s really unfair to women,” he said confidently.

“But what if those women, like, want to do that? What if they get something from it too?”

“No way!” Marshall sounded shocked. “Then they bring it on themselves, I guess. Do you want me to come over?”

“I don’t think so. I’m way too tired. And Stuart’s on me like a hawk. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Audrey went into the den and gathered the glass and bottles. She straightened the fuzzy green afghan that draped the back of the couch. What exactly were they bringing on themselves? Were the photographs like mug shots, a punishment for the crime of their gaping desires? Or did the women have yearnings that only the camera and the men who looked at their pictures could understand? Audrey thought about the secret world of women and men and the unmet hungers of Gordy while she washed her glass, sniffed it, then washed it again. What about Mrs. Gordon? What did she want? Audrey imagined that all Mrs. Gordon probably wanted was for Mr. Gordon to come in from the porch and help her get the kids ready for bed. This thought depressed her.

Audrey was in front of the television when the Gordons arrived. She tried to make polite responses as Mrs. Gordon chattered about their evening and asked after the kids. Gordy came over to the couch and looked at her. “Let’s go,” he said.

In the car, Gordy talked about the recent developments in his romantic life. A few days ago, he received a positive response to his
newspaper ad. The woman had agreed to meet him at a motel just out of town that afternoon. He had decorated the room with flowers and music, but the woman never showed up.

“I’m sorry about that, Gordy.” Audrey felt genuine sympathy as she imagined Gordy sitting anxiously at the edge of a motel bed, his fingers laced around his knee as he waited for a mystery woman who would be the final piece in his puzzle. But then she saw Gordy sitting on the bed holding a dirty magazine in his lap, one hand down his pants. She pushed the image away, and recalled instead a time on the porch when he was talking to her about her future, and said, “Don’t become a teacher. People never remember you, at least not for the reasons you want them to.”

Instinctively, she had tried to comfort him. “But you’re a great teacher, Gordy. Everybody loves you.” Now she suspected that, in some way, this was exactly the problem he was talking about.

They were silent for a while and then Gordy cleared his throat. He tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs. “You know I was thinking of you being in my house while I was at that party…The thing is I rented that room for the whole weekend. We could meet there, say, tomorrow afternoon?”

Audrey sat up. “OK. That sounds like a plan,” she said. She imagined standing in a hotel room in front of Gordy, thanking him for flowers she would soon ditch, complimenting him on music she didn’t like. Maybe he would lecture her on the music. Or worse, maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe he would lay her on the bed and tell her the things he wanted to tell Cherise Walker, or Elysian, or the woman who answered his ad. What were these things?

“I don’t know, actually. You know my parents have all this stuff for me to do tomorrow, in the yard, and stuff.”

She felt terrible when she saw Gordy clutch the steering wheel more tightly. “You could make up a story,” he laughed. “You’re good at that.”

“So are you, Gordy,” she said, but it came out much more sharply than she intended.

When he drove into her driveway, Audrey opened the door immediately. She had one foot on the pavement when Gordy put his hand on her arm and stopped her. “You know, Audrey,” he said gravely, “there are some choices in life that are too obvious to make. They come to you, in fact, already made.”
“Yeah.” Audrey laughed lightly. Then she worried that he might think she was laughing at him. She remembered then the story he once told her of a boy who had graduated several years earlier, one of his favorite “cases.” On a break from college, he had come to Lyndon Johnson to visit Gordy, as recent graduates often did. They talked for a while, and then the boy looked at him and said, “You know, I think I’ve outgrown you.” When he told Audrey this story Gordy laughed like someone who took pride in the fact that he could laugh at a joke about himself. Audrey had laughed too, but she knew then, like Gordy must have too, that the boy had not been kidding.

She waited a minute, but Gordy looked ahead and didn’t say anything else. “I don’t know if I can meet you tomorrow, but I’ll call you. Goodnight.” Audrey got out of the car and went to the door.

When she looked back, Gordy was still there. She thought again of him in his hotel room, a naked need on his face, and she knew that he had wanted something more than just her, and that she had been the one to take it away.

Gordy and Audrey never discussed the fact that she never went back to his house during those last few weeks of school. They chatted amiably in the hallways, but Audrey no longer went to Gordy’s classroom during lunchtime for a dose of his instruction and advice. “Somebody’s not so special anymore,” Mrs. Holtzmann said to the air as Audrey gathered her things for Trigonometry.

In the fall, when she was at college up North, Audrey heard that The Molester had been fired because of the rumors circulating about his “improper” relationship with the girl in the hall. And then she heard that he was filing a lawsuit because the rumors were proved false, his relationship with the girl turned out to be nothing other than a friendship. Gordy was right, Audrey thought, and wrote him a letter to that effect. He never wrote back.