

Elizabeth Searle

Sick Play

EM WAITED FOR THE WALK SIGN, noticing the black Jeep Cherokee only because its driver reminded her of herself. A thin-faced full-haired woman hunching over—no doubt clutching—the wheel. Her stare was scared. Her left-turn light stuttered; her windshield wipers scissored away at unnecessarily high speed. Her whole throbbing vehicle seemed to signal: help, help, help.

Get a grip, Em wanted to urge her. But who was she to talk? Drizzle misted Em's flushed face. Her skin still ached and glowed from last night; her tongue still zinged from the Alka Seltzer she always downed before venturing out.

“Honk, honk—” a Trans Am driver shouted. Emasculated, Em guessed, by his broken horn. His orange car bullied its way around the timid Jeep; Em smoothed her rain-dampened skirt. Lightly, she pressed through its cloth the tender bruises on her ass. Maxi's marks; proof that last night had happened.

WARNING: DRIVER DOES NOT GIVE A DAMN ANYMORE

The Trans Am's bumpersticker flashed by. Half-smiling, Em reached for the post beside her. Her fingers found WALK; her gaze snagged a tall tow-headed man on the opposite curb. Through the hellbent Boston traffic, he half smiled back at her, like he knew her. The hollowed out DOES NOT GIVE A DAMN face of a homeless man; the stylish raincoat of a businessman. A thick shock of white hair. Em released the WALK button. A risen-from-dead Andy Warhol?

DON'T WALK, the sign kept advising. Help, help, the Jeep kept pleading.

Bowing her face, Em hid behind her brown cloud of hair, cotton-candied by the drizzle. No, she had to assure herself; no, of course that man probably hadn't seen the limited-release film

she'd appeared in last year. The title she avoided saying even in her mind, though she'd once printed it over and over in the old-fashioned diary she carried with her. She distrusted the privacy of computers. She unzipped her purse's side pocket, fingered her leather diary. Then she slipped her hand from the open pocket. DON'T WALK began to blink.

\$\$ REWARD offered for RETURN of this diary, if lost; It is of NO USE to anyone but me, Em O'Moore; If found, PLEASE call 617-642-2440

Em focused on DON'T WALK. Feeling foolish to have imagined herself recognized. Stifling—as she'd done the past three weeks, since learning she was a finalist—any thought of the New England New Films contest. Any hope. A last car spurted around the still-signalling Jeep. Cars behind jerked with about-to-stop spasms. Em pictured her 34-year-old brother Kenny windmilling his arms. ME? he still asked after pressing traffic buttons. I make ALL th'cars STOP? God, Em thought. She ought to phone Kenny more often; tonight.

WALK. As Em started to step off her concrete island, the Jeep driver started—with a lurch—to turn. Couldn't she see? Em froze, feeling traffic whiz behind her. As if only now noticing the other half of Beacon, the impossibility of completing this left turn, the boxy Jeep veered from its curve. Aiming at Em. Incredulous, Em gaped at the driver's wet-windshield-blurred face. As the Jeep zoomed toward her, Em thought: this can't be happening.

Aug. 15, 1992 (THE Day I've Been Waiting For?)

PM: Maybe because my luck may've changed today, I keep imagining my accidental death: how I'd be found, what those who'd care (Mom&Dad; Maxi&Jeff&Daisy; Gwen&A.; most of all Mol) might conclude based on the clues: those odd mixes that trigger, in the 1st place, my Death Reveries.

Example #1: suppose I'd electrocuted myself as I poked the under-circuitry of my phone w/ a wet Q-Tip? Would anyone notice the spattered Classic Seafood Feast catfood, Moons' cracked saucer, the pushtone dial clogged w/ meaty mush? Would anyone guess I'd dropped the whole phone in sheer shaky-fingered joy after thanking the voice that informed me HER BATH has been chosen as finalist for the N.E.N. Film Fest.'s Prize?

Or if, my robe flapping open, I rushed into my living/bedroom, tripped on Kenny's old leash, dropped the gloppy Q-Tip, climbed onto my unfolded futon & pawed through my bookcase, fishing out a year-old FILM COMMENT on Up-and-Coming Fests? Which I plop down onto my futon to skim for mention of mine. Sitting Indian-style, enjoying the small shock of air in my private parts. Before the mag's scornful New York tone can mess w/ my high, I bookmark it w/ my feather & slap it shut. (My latest lucky charm: the feather Moons laid at my feet this AM like a prize). If, then, I stand on the futon to reshelve the mag & I sniff the feather (ooh; pigeon blood), tickling my nose? So that I sneeze & topple to the floor, not banging my head though I might've, might've died there: FILM COMMENT & feather & flung-open robe & leather leash & fishy Q-Tip scattered around me. What would an outside observer make of that scene?

What, based on it, would they make of the late Em, aka Emmaline, O'Moore?

The hurtling Jeep crashed into the signpost. Staggering backwards, Em felt but couldn't hear herself scream. Drowned-out sound was yanked from her throat. Metal was shrieking; shards were stinging her skin. Beacon Street was shaking. Then not. Em was still standing, stiffly swaybacked, limbs electrified. No, she was telling the Jeep's shuddering mass. And the more subtly shuddering pole, tilted like a chopped tree, beaded with quivering raindrops.

Em's throat ached; her scream had been swallowed whole by this crash that couldn't be. But—the split front grille of the Jeep creaked like a cage door shoved open—yes. Matter-of-factly, the grille collapsed at her feet.

As if part of her were detaching in turn, Em's purse dropped from her shoulder, small objects scattering on the ground. Yes, this has happened.

Jan. 1, 1992

NewNotebook/NewYear/NewMe: Saying it Out Loud at Least; a First Step

Last Night / 'First Night': In crazy-crowded Venus D. Milo; Me & Daisy bemoan being alone, being #1 to no one; We watch Maxi dance w/ the girls & Jeff w/ the boys; Daisy confides over our shaky table: "The thing about feeling like a hopeless—" (in stage-whisper under the thump of Rave) "loser" (back to shout) "is you do things you wouldn't've dared to, because, I mean: why not?"

Later, downing what I make her promise will be her last beer, D. tells us her last guy warned her, as if apologizing for his gender: Men are such pigs. Maxi shakes her head, decreeing: Even men who say 'men are such pigs' are such pigs; & I laugh too, but I don't meet Maxi's eyes like she wants. Don't want her thinking I want her like she wants me. Back home, in brand-new '92—maybe high on being wanted that way; for-sure high on beginning HER BATH at last—I tell J&M&D how I want HER BATH to be about Safety and Pain, how I want to film a mind & body stripped. Then I—the director; the boss—tell them casual-like, business-like: here's what we'll do for the Final Fantasy Sequence. Which'll show only my face, close-up; not my body, not what's happening to my body. Which'll be what I acted out in SICK PLAY, only real. So the pain on my face'll be real; so I'll have to have, whipping me, someone I trust.

Gentle Jeff is the one to nod. To slip off his belt & double it in a loop. No, no, I tell him, laughing like I'm drunk too. I've got something better'n a belt; Whatever you want, Jeff tells me. He's willing; he's done it with/for guys & he's Gotten Off too; he's done it onstage & he hasn't; So what'll it be like—he's curious; I act merely curious too—with/ for my camera ? With/ for me?

After, alone; asking myself: but should I? Telling myself: but it IS for my film; I'd only—this part IS true—do such a thing in/for my film-life, work-life. Not that I've got, these days, much of a life-life. Not that that bothers me much as I pace & plan camera angles & sing along w/ the drunks in the street.

AM, first of '92: So below-frozen cold it hurts to go outside.

A short curly-haired man leapt from a dented car that had rear-ended the crunched Jeep. He branded Em with his confused, accusatory glare.

“Outta lane—” he bellowed, swivelling his head so fast he erased Em from the scene. “That fuggin’ Jeep—” He galloped up to the Jeep’s window. Above the broken wave of her bumper, the driver sat upright, seemingly unharmed. Still clutching her wheel; fixing on the madman her dazedly wide-eyed gaze. You, Em thought, pressing her cut finger to her thumb. Almost killed me.

“Yer outta lane!” The man swung his arms like a crazed umpire.

Em—miffed more than anything; her scratches sending out unseen sparks of pain—lifted her purse. Shakily, she made her way across the crosswalk. The drizzle had stopped. DON’T WALK

blinked again. Drivers poked their heads from their cars. Em drifted in front of their bumpers. Weightless as a ghost, she felt, even as one pedestrian noticed her. The stout Grandma stood beside the tow-headed man. He no longer stared at Em, but at the wreckage.

“Ya all right, dear?”

“Yes,” Em answered faintly, gratefully. She stepped onto the other curb as the ghost of Andy Warhol stepped off. She found she couldn’t stop walking.

“Ya might’ve been killed,” the Grandma called after her helpfully.

The “might” confused Em so much she forgot to answer. She walked down two blocks, passing the jammed-up cars, playing the words like different line-readings: *might* have been killed; might *have* been killed; might have *been*. Em shook her head hard to change its channel. Her finger was bleeding now.

“—Family Sleeping style,” a plummy voiced woman ahead of Em was saying, pushing a baby carriage. “Joshua Jr. cuddled between Josh and me...”

Oh what was I *doing* with my life? Em thought in past tense. Picturing herself and Jeff and Maxi and the camera crammed together in her bathtub.

“...Heard it can keep the baby from developing—what’s it called?” a second plodding Mom answered. “Self-Something-or-other Sleep Skills...”

Self-Stimming, Em dimly remembered her brother’s Special School labeling everything from Kenny’s public masturbation to his thumb twiddles. But don’t, Em told herself. Don’t think of Kenny just now. And she skimmed past the Moms, guiltily glad to feel so unencumbered, so light. Whatever else she’d done in life, Em reminded herself, she had maintained her skinny high school body: its effect considerably different once she’d baked off her acne in the sun of UCLA, permed her plentiful baby-fine hair and transformed with contacts her starey dark eyes. Doe eyes, when made up. Shoot you through vaseline, Maxi told her, and you look 20, honey. Which’d serve you well if you’d consider more (Maxi had silently mouthed the title Em hated) *Sick Play*.

Em sucked her bloody finger, Kwick Kopy within sight. Self-Soothing, she remembered. Her stomach—perpetually empty, perpetually upset—rumbled. Her gait stiffened, delayed-action shock setting in. She never had learned, she thought as she lurched forward, how to soothe herself. Booze or pot or Valium or Prozac or even cigarettes too strong for her hyper-sensitive system.

Like Emily Dickinson, her best friend's husband had once told Em. (Would Arthur still romanticize her delicacy, Em found herself wondering now, if he knew her doctor had diagnosed a Spastic Colon?)

Breathing alone is enough to get you high, he'd murmured, Mexican candles lighting his smoky tinted glasses. *You're so supremely—responsive*. For a charged moment no one else at the UCLA dinner party noticed, Em knew Arthur was imagining that she must also be supremely responsive in bed. Am I, would I be? she had longed, still longed, to ask him. Unattainable A. The love of her 31-year-old life. She shouldered the glass copy shop door, asking herself—everything from before the crash seemed so far away—why she was here.

Feb. 13, 1992:

PM: Night Before Bath-Shoot: I phone OH; phone Kenny at his new Group Home; he was thrown outa the old for groping girls & God, I've waited too long to call; To calm myself—& to rehearse?—I take the phone into the tub w/ me; I say Hi; he says HI!; I say (as my bathwater sloshes) I'm doing my dishes; he jumps in w/ (as K gets older the odd words he shouts get louder, like he's trying ever-harder to keep my attention) he's the BEST dishwasher in this whole HOME; he can wash MORE'N anyone in HOTTER-WATER'N anyone; Really? I'm asking, clenching my underwater thighs; & he still RUNS, he brags, FASTER'N anyone; How fast? I'm asking & he's reciting his stopwatch times like he used to do for me—me first, always—first thing every weekend, home from his Special School; Great, I'm enthusing, picturing shirtless Kenny pounding down a track; Are you still COMING this summer? Kenny's asking; For the Special OLYMPICS? Yep, I manage, forcing my voice normal. Forcing my free hand not to slip underwater, not w/ Kenny still on the line. I gotta go now, Kenny, OK? NO-OHH, he keens; an O'Moore, Dad'd joke, always wants more.

Feb. 14:

AM: On T-train, on Day 1 of HER BATH, I Camcord-shoot a lucky sign on train door: NO PASSING THROUGH rubbed out to become: NO ASSING ROUGH

PM: Maxi & our rented Arriflex & her grout brush. M. insists on scrubbing soap scum I'd not noticed— in hour-long showers— before she'll shoot my tub; we clean to her Bloody Valentine EP; I say she reminds me of my bossy sister; Of Molly? Maxi demands. The Do-Gooder? She faces me w/ tattooed arms akimbo; Mol's tomboy pose, Mol's blue See-Through-You stare. But I love Mol, I protest & I watch Maxi's tough girl face flush at my careless 'love.'

Scene One; Take One: in spanking-clean (M. jokes) tub, in bubbles, in only bikini-bottoms-that-don't-show; only Maxi crammed into the bathroom w/ me. Aiming the Arriflex, filming me: she pans bubble-glints of my body; she fixes a tight Close-Up on my face, my eyes half-shut behind my old stop-sign glasses, lenses fogging. My expression shifting as I picture each Fantasy we'll cut to; Great Takes, Maxi tells me after; Amazing how relaxed you get, Miss Too-Tense-to-Live, soon as the camera rolls. I give a giddy nod, still hot from its lights.

PM: I phone Mol in AZ; she's breathless from visiting Mom & Dad in Sun City; I offer our code for Selfish: good thing you're not a Shellfish. Like me.

PPM: in bed at last, Moon's out; I sense in my room movement, sense another intelligence. Turn my head super-slow, see in corner of my closet a mouse head, walnut-sized. Twin glint of eyes. Then—as I startle—none.

In Kwick Kopy, in line, Em's legs still vibrated. Light scratches crisscrossed her ankles. She touched her face, felt a fresh red droplet. Was her cheek, like her finger, bleeding? She shuffled forward, lulled by the thump of machines, by the dull ache of her ass. An aging hippie stood in front of her, his ponytail greyish-blond. And Em remembered her Dad's dotting phone message last night. How she'd been crouched on her hands and knees before Jeff as it played; how Maxi had teased her after. Daddy's pampered princess. *Did ya hear from that contest yet, kid? Do ya need anything to tide ya over till ya do?*

A little, she would make herself say when she made herself call back. But how much longer, she found herself wondering, could she live on Dad's loans, on her strung-together part-time jobs? Tutoring English as a Second Language, directing Massachusetts Edu-Film videos, recording books at the Massachusetts

Association for the Blind, where she was due in twenty minutes.

“Next?”

The ex-hippie hugged his manila folder, approaching the Kwick Kopy counter like a supplicant. Poems, Em guessed grimly as she stepped into his place. The machines’ whoosh and clank drowned the hippie’s mumbled request.

“Bound?” the dense-looking counter girl repeated. “Can what be bound?”

“My *pages*.” He sounded embarrassed-to-be-so-loud. “Like a real—a book?”

Em pressed her thumb to her cut, a tiny mouth she was trying to silence. Suppose she *had* been killed? What was one wanna-be star, more or less? One shellfish? She pulled her own envelope from her purse. As if looking it over for mistakes, she skimmed her typed page: those few prizes and professional gigs that separated ‘Emmaline Moore’—didn’t they?—from the true losers.

Second Place in Boston’s First Annual Femme-Flicks Video Contest; paid acting appearances in five films: the last the title—SICK PLAY—she skimmed past fastest; Director of four Edu-Film videos on HIV, STD and Skateboard /Rollarblade Safety; First Prize last year at the Mass. Arts Video Expo., where she’d met Al and Phillipa Ray, freelance producer/composers who’d financed and provided an eerie all-music soundtrack for Em’s Short Subject, HER BATH.

“Next,” the lackadaisical counter girl commanded.

Em stepped up. She set down her Filmography, glimpsing in the far corner of her eye the white-haired Andy Warhol man. He passed Kwick Kopy quickly, looking into his cupped hands as if reading a palm-sized prayer book.

“Miss? Wha’d do you want me to do with this? Miss? Miss?”

But Em was stepping over to the copy-plastered windows. Outside, moving in the opposite direction as the now-vanished Warhol man, a police cruiser whizzed by, its orange light revolving slowly. Its siren half-whooped, then died down as if embarrassed. By the paltry size of her crash? Em spun. She almost ran into the glass doors, thinking, Wait! They can’t have it without me!

Damp wind in her face woke her. How could she sleepwalk away from it, her crash? Its real-life drama, its images? CLINTONGORE, a bumpersticker proclaimed. Em half-ran, half-chasing that car, remembering her Dad's name on a bumper back when he was running for Congress and all cars were gigantic. Seeing O'MOORE so big had made Em feel big too. Wait, she wanted to cry out, pounding down the sidewalk toward her intersection. Her purse bumped her thigh. An orange-lit truck parked importantly askew on Beacon, blocking traffic. One policeman and a few onlookers stood scattered round the wreck, disorganized, like extras awaiting the arrival of the star.

March 11, 1992

Heady AM: I buy fizzy Alka S./Ginger A. breakfast at Seven-11; I shoot w/ handheld Camcorder hand-printed sign taped to Coke can stack:

WARNING: CANS OF CERTAIN LOT #s MAY BURST & PROPEL

PM: Maxi & me & Flashback #1, Tight Shot: me w/ ponytail & stop-sign glasses; I fondle what looks like a dog leash; I unfold its metal-buckled harness, my hands genuinely trembling: the special harness-leash Mom used to use, had to use, on Kenny; I gaze into the empty harness as if recalling—my tears feel shiny-hot in the lights—a small & helpless pet, lost now, forever my fault.

March 31

PM: Despite our warnings, D.'s posted a flyer in the H. Square Divorced Professor bar for a Discussion Group on that book on depression, Darkness Something; She's looking, Jeff claims, for Mr. Sad-Bar; M&D&I laugh, me secretly glad to be looking for no one, to be immersed in HER BATH; We cheer & boo the T. Awards; We deem one speech THE speech: "...& most of all I thank you because I'm an emotionally unstable desperately needy little man."

Post-T-Show: Long-distance call from AZ; Mol w/ news: Kenny's in trouble at new OH Home, same old problem, Inappropriate Touching of Female Residents; & I ask how he was punished—no Track for a week! What could hurt him more?—& how hard he hit his own head & how bad Mom was taking it & finally, in a whisper-burst: God, Mol; do you think anything from Kenny's childhood, anything you or— or I— might've done, might've, I don't know, helped make him this way? This outa control? & Mol cut me short, brisk as Mom: Oh Em, you always think everything leads straight to you.

2AM: *How in high school, as PUNISHMENT, a teacher made me WRITE 100 TIMES what I'd never do again. 4-eyed Goody-Good me; caught lying to the gym coach about a phantom fever; I slashed I,I,I down the page: I WILL NOT PLAY SICK; I WILL NOT PLAY SICK; But now—because I can't stop thinking of Kenny & my/our old showers; because I can't stop worrying that I'll like it too much, The Scene I'll be shooting in mere weeks—now I reverse the words; I write over&over the title I rarely say out loud: I WILL NOT SICK PLAY; I WILL NOT SICK PLAY; I WILL NOT SICK PLAY; I WILL NOT SICK PLAY*

3AM: *correcting ESL papers—twitching as my mouse scabbles in my walls—tears wake my sleeplessly dry eyes; I promise to promise Jin extra help: “My name Jin Yong Lee. By the boat I come. In the boat, the mountain waves. We afear much. Here I most of time make my English better than now. I also am to try to learn the culture of America how they have been living so far. When I leave your country I would expect myself to be different much.”*

Panting, Em alighted the concrete island. What a tableau! If only she had her battered camcorder! The pole-warped Jeep Cherokee was turned around like a bad child facing a corner. The driver stood on the very curb where she'd almost flattened Em, watching the tow truck hook her bumper. Em stepped up behind her, staring too at the Jeep. Inside what Em as a kid had called the “way-back,” she saw a tidy jumble of rolled-up woven rugs and large wooden spoons.

“Excuse me?” Em tapped the driver's tensed shoulder. She pivoted lightly as a dancer. Clutching a fuzzy shawl, her fine blonde hair vibrating with its wool, she studied Em as if trying to place her. “You—” Em began with shaky indignation, displaying her cut finger. “Might've killed me.” The woman gasped as if Em had declared herself dead. Her irises swelled: wet blueberries.

“I'm sor-ry,” she told Em. And Em blinked, hearing her own forgive-me whine when she apologized to her friends or ESL students for spacing out.

“Me too,” Em answered illogically, studying the woman studying her. Hair and eyes as fair as Em's were dark. Yet her fragile good looks did remind Em of her own: just pretty enough to get away with being a Space Case. Or worse.

“That’s all that saved me—” Em pointed to the tilted iron signpost beside them. “It blocked me from, from—” She gestured to the overcast sky, dizzy as if staring from that great height. No: as if feeling someone stare down at her.

“Actually,” the Jeep woman cut in earnestly. “The policeman, he told me that that signpost causes crashes at this intersection! It’s so far *over* you can’t see the No Left Turn sign till you’ve already started the turn— which I *tried* to stop but it was like the Jeep, my father’s Jeep, was *driving* itself—”

“Driving itself?” Em asked, disapproving of her own disapproval. Who was she to feel superior to this 30-something daddy’s girl? Or—Em caught herself by habit—superior for not letting herself feel superior? She sighed, sick of her own useless hair-splitting scruples. “Guess we were both just—lucky.”

“I *am* sorry.” The driver fingered her hand-knit shawl, looking relieved.

“I know, I know.” Em backed up another crunchy step; then, on impulse, bent. She lifted one shard of Jeep headlight. Orange plastic: brightly faceted, sharp-edged. “Souvenir,” she murmured, slipping it into the unzipped pocket of her purse. That pocket otherwise— Em waggled her fingers— empty.

“Oh my God—” Em turned her back on the driver. “Officer?” The cop stood a few feet away, his meaty arms folded. Em ran up to him, picturing the ghost of Andy Warhol passing Kwick Kopy, bent over his cupped hands. How could she not have guessed then what he was—must’ve been—so eagerly reading?

April 20, 1992

3AM: At last I pour the poison I bought at Star Market. RODENT CONTROL: turquoise granules, a color they must’ve test-marketed; it must look good to a RODENT, look EATable. Granules like chippy colored sand in the terrarium of my childhood chameleon who’d turn green on the turquoise, turn I-forget-what on the yellow. I sniff the bitter granules, imagining their burn on my tongue. Calmly—thoughts are only thoughts—I set the bait in my dark closet.

4AM: Sleepless still; guilty, still & always, about more than my mouse, I replay for comfort Jin Yong Lee’s 2-week-old phone message, left after our first—so far our only—extra session: “Miss O.; you are helping me most-much.”

Faint-light AM: Fingering Kenny's leash in bed, pulling it taut. Snapping its leather on my arm. Then thigh. Then Moons pounces up & bats the leash. So I stand naked on my knees, swinging the leash for Moons, laughing since I wasn't getting anywhere anyhow. Wondering as my cat swipes & jabs like a shadow boxer: God, will I ever get all-the-way off without someone to—only Maxi and the camera, only days away; never again anyone real—watch?

“I lost something in the crash! It fell outa my purse pocket then might've got *stolen* by this man; it's my, my—” Em formed a shaky rectangle with her hands, mentally flipping its pages. Her name and number; her worst secrets.

“Wallet, Miss?” the cop asked with stagey patience, his beige eyes bored.

“No no; more important!” Em pressed her hands to her chest, feeling her heart thump, remembering a story she'd heard at a party: a South American poet losing his own diary notebook and rushing to his doctor, complaining of pains in his chest. Told it couldn't be his heart, the poet asked the doctor to draw an X on his chest where his heart was. Late that night, aiming at the X, the poet shot himself. “See, it's my *diary*, my whole—life.”

“Your what?” the Jeep Cherokee woman piped up behind Em as if fearing she might be accused of murder after all.

Em repeated it as carefully as Jin Yong Lee, trying out a new word. “Life?”

May 1, 1992 / The Scene / aka: Final Fantasy Sequence

AM: How much—I admit only here—I've wanted exactly this. Play; it has to be play; can't be “real” or I'd be real scared; it has to be Play & I have to be Directing; but it has to be hard enough to feel real; It's how I get off is all, Maxi would say; So boring & banal the act itself, we agree, won't be shown; only its effects. Only my face. Is all, is all (I tell myself; half-stripped for the shoot).

Jeff is more than willing; he says he's half turned on & half not, acting; I'm half & half too at first which's how I like it, the best part in a way: I'm on my hands & knees, breasts pointing down, ass up; I'm at home in the lights, the Arriflex steady in Maxi's hand; she's the one who tugs my latex leggings down just so, half-way; & then she crouches in my dry tub; & it still feels like Play, Play-Acting, it's a Fantasy Sequence after all, doubly unreal:

Me doubled-over the tub & Jeff bunching up Kenny's leash, the harness end, its buckles clicking & Maxi's camera fixing on my face, tiny in her lens; Then the tail of leash snaps; I flinch at leather-on-flesh; SMACK, SMACK; Hard enough to hurt but not to mark; My first moan pitched for our mike but not my next & next; I'm gone but not; I'm counting is all, 6, 7, 8 licks; by the end, by 10, I'm whimpering & gasping & flushed in the way that can't be faked.

Once the lights are cut—after a dark dripping moment when we're all hushed, recomposing who we are—I can stand, I can laugh, we're laughing together, I'm high-fiving first Jeff then Maxi in this drippy dark; I'm high, I've come & come back & We got it, Maxi enthuses; We got it all; it's a Take.

Mona didn't blink her pupilless eyes. But her fleshy expressive mouth formed an 'o' of sympathetic horror as Em launched into her story: the Jeep, the pole, the headlight shard—she let Mona finger that—and the lost diary.

"Then the policeman thought I was some kinda nut when I told him I was sure the Andy Warhol man—the cop didn't know who Warhol was and I was a jerk for expecting him to, but still—had stolen my notebook. A real diary, see. Which I keep on paper 'cause I always think someone might break *in*-to a computer file. But he told me, the cop, there isn't anything to go on...."

"War-hol." Mona taste-tested the name. "Maybe this is your 15 minutes?"

"Hope not." Em met Mona's eyes because she sensed Mona sensed it when she didn't. Looking into that blue—blank yet not—reminded her of looking into Kenny's eyes. "Anyhow." Em lifted her shard from Mona's palm.

She followed Mona down the hand-railed corridor to the Soundproof Booth. Em sat at the mike, watching through the plexiglass window. Nimble, Mona threaded tape by touch into the reel-to-reel. "All set, Em—"

"Thanks! Who knows? Maybe next week I won't even be here...."

"We'll see," came Mona's gently skeptical reply. Half-laughing—in case Mona was joking with that "see"—Em heaved shut the booth door: thump-suck. At last. The kind of silence she wished would fill her mind. She hit RECORD.

“This is Tape 1, Track 2 of *The Heat Death of the Universe, Essays on Thermodynamics*.” Em bent over the book. Pretending to be her old friend Gwen: reading Proust to her legally blind French professor husband Arthur. Known in Em’s diaries as A. “...According to the 2nd principle of thermodynamics, the trend of events in physical nature is to states of maximal disorder...” What would that Warhol weirdo make of her love for A? Wouldn’t he, anyone, find it pathetic? “...with the so-called heat death of the universe as the final outlook.” Em blinked, picturing the black Jeep hurtling toward her, exploding into vaster black. Sound-proof silence; tape rolling on the other side of the plexiglass. Her stomach gave a queasy stir. Who’d have cared all-the-way, really? “And life as we know it will cease to be, to be—shit.” STOP.

Em stood so abruptly her headphone cord tugged. She bowed, her stomach burbling. Kenny, she thought. He’d have been heart-broken if she’d died. She made a fist, thumb jutting up. ‘T’ for “toilet”; a sign Kenny was taught to use when he needed to piss or masturbate. So sad, teenage Em had felt, that sex meant “toilet” to him. She wrenched off her headphones. God, God; what would Warhol, would anyone think of her teenage showers? Letting Kenny watch: letting one part of his sex life connect to love. Or so she’d told herself. Gripping its space-capsule lever, Em forced the booth open. She fell out.

July 4, 1992

“A spinkle-whirl! A spinkle-whirl!”

Little Gwenny & I prance between spurting sprinklers on the green grass of UCLA, of my film-school days, where A. & Gwen spread a taco picnic under the CA sun that’s burnt A’s face so brown strangers address him in Spanish; where in the dark after the fireworks—gold chrysanthemums, red duds like long-tailed comets—I hold A’s long-boned arm, awaiting Gwen & Gwenny & the car; Black-haired A. towers beside me, his dark glasses no longer passing as sunglasses; He taps the fluorescent tip of his cane, determining our curb; Our first & last moment alone this trip & I ask, shyly, playfully: How come, d’ya think, I’ve got no love life? What’s your theory, Professor? & A. considers, thoughtful as always; A. murmurs: You act as if, if kissed, you’d burst into tears.

Aug. 1

AM-PM: Driving home from the OH Special Olympics—Kenny won his 50 meter run & lost his Sprint but in both races was roundly cheered stagger-twitching over the Finish Line, flopping his limbs as if in a Seizure (but of Joy!) colliding w/ me, his wide-armed sunburnt sister, half knocking me over; Sun shining on his sweaty strong arms, his oily-dark hair, his blank yet bright blue eyes; Kenny doing a victory dance w/ me, stabbing his index finger to the sky, shouting Numb ONE! Numb ONE!—driving home, too, from Kenny's Group Home, where this AM I ran the guest-room shower but didn't climb in; too much like our old OH shower, its opaque pebble-texture door; how in my double blur w/o my stop-sign glasses on, I'd hear the bathroom door creak above my water; My brother; Watching & only watching; or watching & maybe self-stimming, which all would've been normal if he'd been a normal nasty big brother; if I'd shouted him away like a big sister should; if I hadn't lathered myself slow, then slower still; Drawing out that feeling, who besides Kenny knows what-all Kenny was feeling? maybe—like me—not-alone, not-lonely; Sometimes I'd hear the door thump & sometimes not; But always I'd sense when I was, again, alone—driving home from Kenny's Home fast w/ my windows all the way open to a furnace blast of August air, breathing the subtle funk of my slept-in underwear; driving almost straight through OH, PA, NY, then being sucked like a T-train into a tunnel into the deserted Berkshires.

Miles & miles; dark & darker; Only truckers whizzing by me in their elevated cabs; Me thinking of A., of K., of nothing much; Me peeling down the underwear I'd worn too long; Me self-stimming w/ my free-hand, free finger; tiny wet circles whilst driving one-handed, straight straight straight; Getting off on getting off at 70 mph; getting off on the headlight-lit glimpses I imagine those truckers catching; Perfect way for me to go, I think as I bump-bump; Self-stimming myself into Oblivion—O, O—I burst & propel, burst & propel.

Em stumbled to her feet. She rushed past shelves of *Dog Fancier* magazines and Romance novels and Philosophy textbooks yet to be recorded. She slammed into the Blind-Accessible bathroom. The lightswitch was outside but Em didn't open the door again. Didn't want light when she felt so clearly someone watching her, someone judging her almost-cut-short life. Em groped in the dark, making a mental list as if for a New Year diary. New Life Resolutions.

Call Kenny more; Obsess on Kenny less.
Accept no more Loans—so-called—from Mom and Dad.
Get a Real Job, Useful Job.
Give Up/Tone Down Ambitions for Filmmaking as Career.
Give Up/Tone Down Unrequitable Love for A; Find a Real Guy.
Give Up Altogether Getting Off on Punishment, etc.
Give Up Altogether Getting Off on Watching, Being Watched, etc.

Em backed over to the toilet, holding the handrails. She hiked up her skirt, remembering in this dark silence the absolute silence on the cheapo SICK PLAY set as she pulled off her clothes behind a scrim, pulled on black Lycra leggings, drew her diaphragm—deep actress breath. Then knelt in the light. A shirtless actor with minty cologne stood above her. He was gay; he was a pro; he wielded the belt so it barely stung. Nothing-but-nothing was happening, really. Yet Em had played and re-played that silly silhouetted scene in her head, imagining sharper lashes. Her body lashing too, like Kenny's in *Seizure*.

Roughly, Em pulled down her panties. She pictured Kenny: his head thrown back so his Adam's apple popped out, his strong-boned long-jawed face clenched in what looked like—*was* it? Em always wondered—ecstatic pain.

Em lowered herself onto the toilet, wincing at the bruises Maxi had made last night. Wondering with a gusty sigh which of her PM scenes old Warhol was reading. How much of her tiny writing he'd deciphered. Not that it mattered now. Not when—she told herself as she endured burning diarrhea, as she scrubbed her hands—she was giving up all that. She cranked off both sink faucets. Her filmmaking, yes: which had made her feel more alert and alive than anything else. Which was all the more reason why she ought to give it up.

Right? Em pressed her damp hand to her chest. But where was it, exactly: her heart? She moved her hand like a metal detector over her shirt, her harness-marked breasts. Tenderest flesh. Finding the beat, she pressed hard to slow it. Control it, the grown-ups urged Kenny as they gripped his wrists and ankles. Control it. Em stared into the dark ungleaming sink mirror.

Aug. 31, 1992

PM: Jeff & Maxi & me celebrate HER BATH being named a Finalist; They drink & drink & tease me for not; Jeff wields Kenny's leash half in fun & half not, our encore; Maxi plays Director this time; Maxi seizes the leash, saying she'll show Jeff how it oughta be done, how Daddy's girl wants it done; & she makes me—I knew she'd make me—wear it first; the adjustable harness Kenny wore till age eight or so; its worn leather cutting into my breasts, its buckles strapped round my skinny ribcage; Maxi tugs my leash, making me crawl; & then when she roughly unbuckles me, when she flourishes the leash like a lion tamer, I know she'll whip me hard enough to mark; & as soon as I know that, I can't not want it; at least down on my hands and knees like a dog I can't; Maxi playing Butch Bully, aiming to scare me; But maybe I'm the one who scares her, takes her aback, whimpering for more & she hesitates, panting, asking: Em? You sure? Which wakes us both from the spell; So I make myself say: No I'm not; No I don't want—but O'Moores always want—more.

“Just want to check my messages,” Em called weakly into the Blind Library’s back room, feeling too low to raise her voice. Too hollowed out.

No answer. No doubt Mona couldn’t hear over the heavy-metal clatter of the Braille machine. Torture Typewriter, Em thought as she dialed the office phone, picturing reams of paper imprinted with stiff permanent goosebumps.

Her sexless answering machine voice told her she had two messages. If Dad had left another, she’d call back. She’d say: no more money. Two beeps sounded.

The first message-checking call she’d made in weeks in which she didn’t actively imagine a message from the Film Festival. So Em was surprised—which she’d have to be, she’d always sensed, for anything like this to actually happen.

“—trying to reach an—Emmaline Moore? From—this is, speaking—Hillary Simms at the New England New Films Festival? To tell you your short-subject, *Her Bath*, has been selected as first prize—”

Em squealed over the word “winner,” jolting upright.

“—in our contest and that your film—”

My film, my film! Em bounced, the phone cord vibrating like a jumprope.

“—screened at this year’s Festival. Please call us for more—”

But Em was slamming down the phone, shouting, “Mona! Mona!” like a deranged diva. The braille machine clattered on, grandly indifferent. And Mona wasn’t, anyhow, the right first person to tell. Em seized the phone again. She stabbed the dial. As Mol’s Arizona phone rang, Em realized she should’ve charged this to her Calling Card, but Mol answered on the second ring.

“It’s me!”

“Em? Hi! Whatever-it-is, can it wait? ‘Cause Dr. Mack’s about to call—”

“What? Oh my God, is it Dad; is he having more problems or—”

“He’s OK; he’s OK; We’re just expecting his new blood-pressure meds and I’ve got another date with that guy tonight and look: Can I call you back?”

“Sure, sure; good news’ll keep, like Mom used to say, or was that bad?”

“You sound so weird, so up. Hey, are you finally, like—seeing someone?”

“No, no; think better; think bigger. It’s my movie, Molly—O! It’s gonna be *screened*, a Feature *Screening*, at this real *Film Festival*—”

“Really, a screening? Wow, Em! Does that mean it’ll be, like, whatchamacallit, distributed? Into real theaters and all?”

“Well, it’ll have a *chance* to be; I mean there’ll be distributors all *over* the place; I mean this’s not a *huge* festival, but it’s a good one; it’s called, the New Films—I mean, the New England New Films Festival—”

“What? New England? It’s a local thing? Sorry, my beeper’s going and it might be Mark or Dad and—Congratulations and all but—”

“OK, OK. Give Mom and Dad a hug from me and tell ’em I’ve got news then don’t tell ’em what, OK?” Em slammed down the Blind Library phone, her head still spinning, though slower. The braille machine hammered. Dots and dots: dozens of small films screened at dozens of Film Fests every season. Em shouldered her purse, remembering as if from years before that her notebook was gone. This bad news felt as unreal as the good.

“Gotta leave *early* today, Mona,” she hollered. “It’s an *emergency*—”

“Oh-oh?—” Mona called back in sing song, as if to a child crying Wolf.

Chill air hit Em like a welcome slap in the face. Telling her: yes. This is real. She trooped past the wooded MAB grounds, past a tied-together group of blind students. No—Em did a quick double-take—not tied. Each of them had a grip on a long leash-like rope, led by their slumped shuffling teacher.

“Scuse me—” Em hurried by. Marching up the sidewalk, sucking a Tums, she decided she’d next call her first UCLA mentor, Geraldine Grant—I live off Grants, GG joked—a distinguished but obscure feminist filmmaker such as Em herself might now become. If Em didn’t up and become something even bigger. Darkhorse winner (a giant jump cut) of an Oscar; her old high school tormentors, now blowsy housewives, watching their TVs with incredulous envy.

Em crested Avery Street’s hill, glimpsing a phone booth at the corner of Avery and Beacon. She cocked her head, framing a possible shot for her next—her next! she’d won most of all the right to make a next!—film. Something struck her in those two street signs, crisscrossed. Two messages, Em remembered her answering machine telling her. God; what if the second was the New Films Festival calling back to say they’d made a big mistake?

Em stumbled into a beeline for the phone booth. As she gripped the cold receiver and heard her second message, a voice she’d never before heard; as her cherry Tums turned to chalk on her tongue, she remembered GG’s sunny UCLA office. Whenever her Art Films opened, GG had confided to Em there, she found herself wondering if it all wasn’t happening only inside her own head.

“Hurts you to go outside, Miss O? Don’t know if you’ll hear this message, but I’m giving you the—chance. Your friend’s right, y’know. The good thing about feeling like such a—” (in whisper) “loser” (coolly expressionless again) “is you do things you wouldn’t’ve dared, because, Why not? Why not rough her—rough your—ass? Harder’n your little friends’d dare. None of this half-acting half-not crap for me. For you either, if you’d give

it half a try. I could tell from across Beacon, babe, you're a born actress. All normal-nice, but with me you can drop that act. Drop your fancy-pants. Get real.

But maybe I'm not, babe. Maybe I'm just a—crazy voice on your machine. Maybe I'm that baby-brained brother you used to cock-tease with your showers. Or maybe I'm a—real man. Wearing a real dead-leather belt; waiting for you, maybe, at the address printed right, er, smack next to your name in the Boston Directory, Miss Director. Can't hide from me. Come on home, babe, and we'll climb those mountain waves. Burst and propel; have you ever?

When you leave my country, Miss O., you'll be different much."

She tried to slow her headlong steps. She knew she should talk to the police again. Walk to the police right now (but where were they on peaceful Beacon?) before heading home. She should tell them that a stranger knew where she lived, knew her secrets. But would they then demand: what sorts of secrets? Em's emptied-out guts fizzed. Would they insist on hearing the message, the brother part and all? So unreal, it felt: that whole message.

Em walked at a brisk clip, passing sleek doctor's offices and kosher delis and Turkish rug shops. Control it, she'd told herself in the Blind bathroom. Distant flimsy words now, as she left behind Beacon. *None of this half-acting half-not crap for me*, he'd told her. As if he knew she had permission, now, to live like a real artist. To experience whatever she wanted, as long as she hurt no one but herself. She bumped off the curb, forgetting to stop. God; what was she thinking? Her helium heart, full yet light, bopped with her steps. She was heading home as automatically as she'd headed to Kwik Kopy after the crash.

Her skirt brushed her dulled bruises. She was picturing that Warhol stare. Seen it all, tried it all. *Have you ever, really?* he'd asked. And if he whipped her already-bruised ass, whipped her for real, would she finally totally lose control? Bucking and flailing like Kenny in seizure, his whole body straining to burst into violent flight? Would she, in fact, be *different, much?*

Em marched now to a braille machine beat. Kenny's hand on his face; slaps Em had felt in her bones. Kenny's outflung hand smacking Em once, hard. What—Em had wondered, clutching her sore elbow as the grown-ups pinned him down—what, oh what, was her brother feeling?

She veered onto her quiet sidestreet. But what if that Warhol man wouldn't—of course he wouldn't—stop? That stranger who knew her secrets. What if—at last, she slowed her steps—he told? Looked up her parents, phoned every O'Moore in Sun City, Arizona? Could she somehow stop him if she met him face to face? Would he—surely not, she felt deep down—be there at all?

She half-staggered onto her block of dingy brick buildings. It was dusk, she noticed, panting. The time of day for window-peeking. Each one Em passed flashed its story: a woman sorrowfully adjusting a lampshade; a punk couple chattering with aggressive animation. Em gazed up into their window, the brightest, catching her breath, picturing audiences gazing into HER BATH.

Em fingered her sharp-edged headlight shard. A lucky charm, now. Reminding her that she'd won. She: Em, director and star. Determinedly, she turned. God; she hadn't felt so powerful inside since she'd ruled Molly and Kenny and their whirling make-believe worlds. *Have you ever?* Em stepped toward her building. Ready for anything, she half believed, provided she lived. And she *had* to live now that her life seemed worth so soaringly much. No stopping her now; no pinning her down. Not when she'd worked and worked for this big day, big break. She kept stepping forward like a car driving itself. No one was going to take it from her: this day she deserved.

She halted across the street from her entrance. Her heart was hammering out its own hard code, sharpening her happiness and her fear. Both at once. A car whooshed by; Em squinted after its flashing, vanishing lights. Anything—chrysanthemums electrify the sky above LA, exploding in every direction—anything at all might happen. To me, she thought. Today. She eyed her building's glass doors, its number. Then her unlit 2nd floor window. Did its shade stir? Stiffening like a soldier, Em imagined him watching

her across the street. *Can't hide from me*, he'd said. That much felt certain. Whether, she thought clearly, he was there or not. Today, the first of the new month. Em touched the throbbing base of her throat, pressed with her slit fingertip. No missing it now; no wondering where it was. Her heartbeat filled her chest and head. She blinked, remembering the too-timid Jeep driver. How she'd tried too hard to stop the dangerous turn she'd already started to make. Em drew a diaphragm-deep breath. Looking both ways, she stepped off the curb.

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