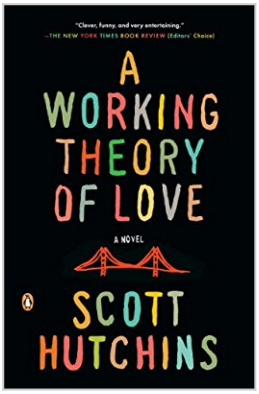

A Working Theory of Love: A Novel

By Scott Hutchins

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Settled back into the San Francisco singles scene following the implosion of his young marriage just months after the honeymoon, Neill Bassett is going through the motions. His carefully modulated routine, however, is soon disrupted in ways he can't dismiss with his usual nonchalance.

When Neill's father committed suicide ten years ago, he left behind thousands of pages of secret journals, journals that are stunning in their detail, and, it must be said, their complete banality. But their spectacularly quotidian details, were exactly what artificial intelligence company Amiante Systems was looking for, and Neill was able to parlay them into a job, despite a useless degree in business marketing and absolutely no experience in computer science. He has spent the last two years inputting the diaries into what everyone hopes will become the world's first sentient computer. Essentially, he has been giving it language—using his father's words. Alarming to Neill—if not to the other employees of Amiante—the experiment seems to be working. The computer actually appears to be gaining awareness and, most disconcerting of all, has started asking questions about Neill's childhood.

Amid this psychological turmoil, Neill meets Rachel. She was meant to be a one-night stand, but Neill is unexpectedly taken with her and the possibilities she holds. At the same time, he remains preoccupied by unresolved feelings for his ex-wife, who has a talent for appearing at the most unlikely and unfortunate times. When Neill discovers a missing year in the diaries—a year that must hold some secret to his parents' marriage and perhaps even his father's suicide—everything Neill thought he knew about his past comes into question, and every move forward feels impossible to make.

With a lightness of touch that belies pitch-perfect emotional control, Scott Hutchins takes us on an odyssey of love, grief, and reconciliation that shows us how, once we let go of the idea that we're trapped by our own sad histories—our childhoods, our bad decisions, our miscommunications with those we love—we have the chance to truly be free. *A Working Theory of Love* marks the electrifying debut of a prodigious new talent.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A brainy, bright, laughter-through-tears, can't-stop-[listening]-until-it's-over kind of novel. Fatherless daughters, mother-smothered sons, appealing ex-wives, mouthy high school drop-outs---damn, this book's got something for everyone!" ---Gary Shteyngart, author of Super Sad True Love Story

About the Author
Scott Hutchins, a Truman Capote Fellow in the Wallace Stegner Program at Stanford University, is the author of A Working Theory of Love.

Rob Shapiro is a voice-over artist, musician, and composer who got his professional start with the Children's Theatre Company & School of Minneapolis.

Chapter One

A few days ago, a fire truck and an ambulance pulled up to my apartment building on the south hill overlooking Dolores Park. A group of paramedics got out, the largest of them bearing a black chair with red straps and buckles. They were coming for my upstairs neighbor, Fred, who is a drinker and a hermit, but who I've always held in a strange esteem. I wouldn't want to trade situations: he spends most of his time watching sports on the little flat-screen television perched at the end of his kitchen table. He smokes slowly and steadily (my ex-wife used to complain about the smell), glued to tennis matches, basketball tournaments, football games—even soccer. He has no interest in the games themselves, only in the bets he places on them. His one regular visitor, the postman, is also his bookie. Fred is a former postal employee himself.

As I say, I wouldn't want to trade situations. The solitariness and sameness of his days isn't alluring. And yet he's always been a model of self-sufficiency. He drinks too much and smokes too much, and if he eats at all he's just heating up a can of Chunky. But he goes and fetches all of this himself—smokes, drink, Chunky—swinging his stiff legs down the hill to the corner store and returning with one very laden paper bag. He then climbs the four flights of stairs to his apartment—a dirtier, more spartan copy of mine—where he lives alone, itself no small feat in the brutal San Francisco rental market. He's always cordial on the steps, and even in the desperate few months after my divorce, when another neighbor suggested a revolving door for my apartment (to accommodate high traffic—a snide comment), Fred gave me a polite berth. He knocked on my door once, but only to tell me that I should let him know if I could hear him banging around upstairs. He knew he had "a heavy footfall." I took this to mean, we're neighbors and that's it, but you're all right with me. Though maybe I read too much into it.

When the paramedics got upstairs that day, there was the sound of muted voices and then Fred let loose something between a squawk and a scream. I stepped into the hall, and by this time the paramedics were bringing him down, shouting at him, stern as drill sergeants. *Sir, keep your arms in. Sir, keep your arms in. We will tie down your arms, sir.* The scolding seemed excessive for an old man, but when they brought him around the landing, strapped tight in the stair stretcher, I could see the problem. He was grabbing for the balusters, trying to stop his descent. His face was wrecked, his milky eyes searching and terrified, leaking tears.

"I'm sorry, Neill," he said when he saw me. He held his hands out to me, beseeching. "I'm sorry. I'm so

sorry."

I told him not to be ridiculous. There was nothing to be sorry about. But he kept apologizing as the paramedics carried him past my door, secured to his medical bier.

Apparently he had fallen two days earlier and broken his hip. He had only just called about it. For the previous forty-eight hours he'd dragged himself around the floor, waiting for God knows what: The pain to go away? Someone to knock? I found out where he was staying, and he's already had surgery and is recuperating in a nice rehab facility. So that part of the story has all turned out well. But I keep thinking about that apology. *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry*. What was he apologizing for but his basic existence in this world, the inconvenience of his living and breathing? He was disoriented, of course, but the truth holds. He's not self-sufficient; he's just alone. This revelation shouldn't matter so much, shouldn't shift my life one way or the other, but it's been working on me in some subterranean manner. I seem to have been relying on Fred's example. My father, not otherwise much of an intellectual, had a favorite quote from Pascal: the sole cause of Man's unhappiness is his inability to sit quietly in his room. I had thought of Fred as someone who sat quietly in his room.

Not everyone's life will be a great love story. I know that. My own "starter" marriage dissolved a couple of years ago, and aside from those first few months of the revolving door I've spent much of the time since alone. I've had the occasional stretch of dating this or that young lady and sought the occasional solace of one-night stands, which *can* bring solace, if the attitude is right. I've ramped my drinking sharply up and then sharply down. I make the grooves in my life that I roll along. Bachelorhood, I've learned, requires routine. Small rituals that honor the unseen moments. I mean this without self-pity. Who should care that I pour exactly two glugs of cream into my first coffee but only one into my second (and last)? No one—yet those three glugs are the very fabric of my morning.

Routine is why I can't drink too much, and why I've paradoxically become less spontaneous as a thirty-two-year-old bachelor than I was as an even younger married man. I feed the cat at seven. I cook a breakfast taco—scrambled egg, slice of pepper jack, corn tortilla, salsa verde—and make stovetop espresso. I eat standing. Then the cat sits in my lap until 7:40 while I go through email, examining the many special offers that appear in my inbox overnight. One-day sales; free trials; twenty percent off. I delete these notes, grab a shower, and am out the door at eight, a fifty-minute commute door to door, San Francisco south to Menlo Park.

Work is Amiante Systems, a grandiose linguistic computer project. As an enterprise, it's not perfectly designed—the founder thought "Amiante" was Latin for magnetism; my ex-wife, Erin, pointed out it's actually French for asbestos—but it's well funded and amenable. There are three employees, and together we're training a sophisticated program—based on a twenty-year diary from the so-called Samuel Pepys of the South (so called by the obscure historical journal that published the one and only excerpt)—to convincingly process natural language. To converse, in other words. To talk. The diaries are a mountain of thoughts and interactions, over five thousand pages of attitudes, stories, turns of phrase, life philosophies, medical advice. The idea is that the hidden connections in the entries, a.k.a. their personality, will give us a coherence that all previous conversing projects—hobby exercises, "digital assistants"—lack. The diarist, an Arkansas physician, was in fact my late father, which is how in the twisting way of these things I have the job. The diaries are my legal property. Still, my boss has warmed to me. I know little about computers—I spent my twenties writing ad copy—but of the three of us I'm the only native speaker of English, and I've been helpful in making the program sound more like a real person, albeit a very confused one.

When I get home from work, I feed the cat and make some dinner for myself. I sit on my new couch. If it's a weekday, I have a glass of wine and watch a movie. If it's a weekend I might meet up with an old pal, or a

new one (though I have few new ones, and fewer old ones), or I might have plans with a lady friend (always plans, never anything left to the last minute). Occasionally, I go to a local watering hole where the bartenders are reliable. I consider this an indulgence, but little indulgences are also key to bachelor life. Parking is one—for three hundred dollars a month I avoid endlessly orbiting my block—but I also have my magazines, my twice-monthly housekeeper, my well-stocked bar, and my heated foot-soaking tub. If I feel overworked, I send out my clothes to wash-and-fold. Twice a year I might schedule a deep-tissue massage. I order in dinner weekly, and sometimes—if I'm feeling resolute—I'll take a book to a nice restaurant and dine solo.

I grew up in the South, but made my home here in San Francisco for what are called lifestyle reasons. I enjoy the rain-washed streets, the tidy view of downtown, the earnest restaurant trends (right now it's offal), the produce spilling from corner stores, farmer's markets, pickup trucks. There are many like me here—single people beached in life—and I make passing friends, passing girlfriends. Right after my marriage ended I went on a crazed apartment hunt in Silicon Valley, closer to work, but soon saw what would become of me. I would disappear into my house, my housework, lawn work. I would become a specter, and this is the great peril of bachelorhood—that you'll become so airy and insubstantial that people will peer straight through you.

I took a different tack (in part inspired by Fred). I decided to stay in the city, in the very apartment that Erin and I shared, and learn bachelor logic. It's a clean system, with little time for sentimentality. It understands that as a bachelor you are a permanent *in between*. This is no time for conventions. When it comes to breakfast, to social life, to love, you must privilege the simple above the complicated. There's nothing cruel about this. The bachelors I've met—temporary friends—have been nice guys. I've never been able to stomach men who refer to women as bitches, teases—though these men do exist, in San Francisco as in all the world. It's not even their misogyny that bothers me: it's their self-betrayal. They are the inept, the lost, the small. The successful bachelors—the ones without bitterness—have taught me many things: to schedule a social life, never to use both a spoon and a fork when either will do. I know a guy who sleeps in a hammock; a guy who allows no organic matter in his apartment, including food; a guy so sure of his childless bachelorhood he underwent a vasectomy (he gave me the recipe for the breakfast taco). Another bachelor once told me about his strategy for navigating the doldrums of physical isolation. When he wasn't in the mood to dance or meet anyone datable, when he just wanted a sweet night with a strange body, a lee in which to pitch the Bedouin tent of his soul, he checked into one of the city's big youth hostels. I said it seemed creepy, but he pointed out that creepy was irrelevant. It was ethical, and that was all that mattered. He was looking for a temporary balm; travelers would be more likely to share his goal. He wasn't preying on anyone; in fact, he was offering his thorough knowledge of the city and his open pocketbook. The only shady business was that you had to concoct a mild alibi to explain why you're checked into a youth hostel. You have elderly relatives visiting; your plumbing is out. Or you can bring your passport as your I.D. and pretend you're traveling.

"It's a melding of desired outcomes," he said. All I could do was marvel at the performance of bachelor logic.

But is it nonsense? Will this friend, this good man, end up strapped to a stair stretcher, hands grasping for his rented walls?

I'm so sorry, Neill.

My father—I stopped calling him Dad when he committed suicide; it seemed too maudlin—would have found a specific and obvious moral to the story. He was such a traditionalist I'm half surprised he didn't go about in period dress. He liked to cite the quotation on his parents' grave marker, "Magnificence there was, but of comfort there was little, and, being unknown, it was unmissed." It's from *Ivanhoe*. We're from an

“old” southern family and are Roman Catholic to boot, so he probably would have insisted I do my duty, which usually was some version of “living for others.” I was in college when he killed himself. I took it hard, but it freed me from a certain worry, a locked-in way of seeing the world. I came to California, where I relinquished my duties as a “scion” of an “old” family. (I could just as easily put “duties” and “family” in scare quotes.) Instead, I took up the responsibilities of the good citizen: recycling, riding my bike, giving money to environmental groups and the Glide Memorial shelter. I belong to the SFMOMA and the Film Society. These are my adjustments, and in many ways they’ve been solid. As good as my brother’s white picket fence life in Michigan, his relentless quest for the banal. And, I fear, better than my mother’s attempt to both keep and escape the old house in Arkansas, a compromise that keeps her on a loop of educational tours, cruising the world’s unpopular coastlines.

My entire life, to my father, would be incomprehensible. Beneath mention. But my father’s diary—Dr. Bassett, as it’s referred to at Amiante—will engage any question. Since it’s a pretty basic program, a searchable version of the diaries with a few conversational tricks, I can’t say it *understands* anything. It can’t pursue a thought or even distinguish among who’s talking to it. (It doesn’t know, for instance, that I’m Dr. Bassett’s son.) But sometimes I throw in a few words, and the computer—in his Magic 8-Ball way—returns a phrase that has some hidden jolt of insight. This morning we had this exchange:

frnd1: should i stay in or go out tonight?

drbas: fridays are friend days.

frnd1: today is thursday, but that’s a nice thought

drbas: ????

If I say more than one thing—use “and” or “but”—he often comes up empty-handed.

frnd1: your sentiment was a nice thought

drbas: how do you feel about my sentiment being a nice thought?

frnd1: just fine. so should i stay in or go out tonight?

drbas: you’ve moped long enough. it’s time you enjoyed yourself.

I had to correct his response: nothing in our earlier conversation hinted that I had been moping. Nevertheless, he’s right. Outside, dusk is coming down like a cleaver. If I can’t shake myself from this couch, I’ll be trapped, looking out on the black, unforgiving city of my thirties. The street below—as it so often does—will rattle with distant laughter.

At Fisherman’s Wharf—a quick taxi ride away—I watch the Ghirardelli sign flicker to life. My companions are a tall blonde, Rachel, and a pint-sized brunette, Lexie, from Tel Aviv. Neither is a great beauty, but they have the attraction of youth. As they should, since I met them at the youth hostel. It was as easy as my friend had described—Let’s go see the city, I said. Okay, they said. Exactly what I came here for, and yet the whole exchange put acid in my stomach. I should have chosen a simpler alibi—that my plumbing was out—rather than posing as a tourist. But I wanted that feeling of dislocation and here it is: the San Francisco of postcards. The smell of steaming crabs is in the chill air, and the storefronts of this great T-shirt souk glimmer platinum in the dusk. Fog cocoons the Golden Gate Bridge, and Alcatraz sits lit and lonely in the gray water. We couldn’t ask for much better if a cable car bell rang, and presently one does—*king, king*. The Hyde and Larkin Street line.

The girls are lightly dressed, as if we're hitting the clubs in Miami: short skirts with Ugg boots, tube tops skintight and grimacing. They shiver. The blonde, Rachel—the more handsome but less cute of the two—reddens and speckles from the gusting cold.

"What a view," I say. It's their first time in San Francisco.

"It's awesome," Rachel says.

"I can't believe this is fucking August," Lexie says, rubbing her arms. She's round and powdered and young, but she has the deep, raspy voice of an emphysema patient. "So where's the party around here?"

"Can't we just look at the scenery for three seconds?" Rachel says.

"This is our last city." Lexie casts a meaningful look my way. I recognize it: she wants rid of me. I must beam gloominess.

"And you want to do the same thing in this city you do in every city," her friend says.

"It's worked so far, right?" Lexie barks. "We've had fun, right?"

Rachel shakes her head, looking disgusted.

"I'm surprised you're traveling all by yourself," Lexie says.

All by yourself. I test the words with my tongue, like an extracted tooth. "There are pleasures to solitude," I say.

"Sounds like something a loser with no friends would say."

Good point. "A loser with no friends can still be right," I say.

"Are you one of these married guys?" Lexie asks. "That sneaks around looking for sex?"

"I'm not married."

"You got a walk like a married person," she says. She locks her arms in her shoulder sockets and hops robotically down the sidewalk, like a wind-up toy.

"I think you may be confused," I say, "between married and disabled."

"She's confused about a lot of things," Rachel says.

"*She's confused about a lot of things*," Lexie says in a baby voice—a baby with black lung—screwing up her mouth.

The wind picks up, blowing mist from the crab stands, steaming our faces. I remind myself that I'm supposed to be having fun. This is supposed to be a lark, an exultation of liberty. My boss, Henry Livorno, often insists that there's no empirical difference between seeming and being. It's the concept (operationalism) that our project is based on, but it's also solid wisdom for tonight. If I can make things *seem* fun, then maybe they'll *be* fun.

"How does a single person walk?" I ask.

The girls ignore me. Lexie looks off into the distance as if far away she might catch sight of the people she seeks. Rachel's attention is on a nearby seafood stand. She watches the portly attendant adjust his toque and then remove a series of steaming white crabs from the boiling pot.

"Those things are huge," she says.

"They're Dungeness crabs," I say. She has a willowy dancer's figure and wears no makeup, but her clubbing clothes don't flatter her. They fit awkwardly, like a disguise. "You want to try one?"

"Rachel's kosher," Lexie says. She gives me a nasty grin.

"You shouldn't push me tonight," Rachel says, hugging her elbows. "I'm cold, and I'm about ready to go back."

"Mark Twain once said . . ." I begin.

"It is fucking cold," Lexie says, serious now. "You want to change?"

"Yeah, probably," Rachel says.

This would not be the first time an evening slipped away from me. I'm not one of these men blessed with pure desires, who to the game of life bring the virtue of single-mindedness. But I think of Fred and I rally. I invite the girls under the awning of the closest T-shirt shop—*OLDE TIME SOURDOUGH SOUVENIRS*—and offer to buy them matching sweatshirts with funny names. This will keep them warm. And out.

"I'm trying to not, like, acquire," Rachel says, apologetic. "Simplify, simplify."

"You're reading Thoreau?" I ask, and I get a new look from her—one of surprise, maybe gratitude.

At a dim bar in the Marina, we glow vaguely in our baby blue sweatshirts. Lexie is David. Rachel is José. I'm Gina. The black carpet smells of beer, of which I've had a few. I'm feeling better. The air is hazy with something—maybe there's a smoke machine hidden somewhere. Rachel and I sit on stools. Lexie holds on to the tabletop, which is almost chin-level for her. She has a goofy French manicure, nails pearly as plastic, square as chisels. There's some sort of hump-hump music playing, and she gyrates reluctantly, as if someone talked her into it. She wouldn't charm Herod out of the Baptist's head, but she demonstrates four or five basic hip motions used in intercourse. Who is this girl? She must be a type of some sort, a type I'm not familiar with. She's clearly a conformist—an attitude that gets a worse rap than it ought to; what's more egalitarian than conformism?—but I don't know what she's conforming to. There's probably a TV show that I, alone in this bar, have not seen. A hit TV show. Something that plugs into the dreams of this crowd—she's getting plenty of attention from men at tables, men at the bar, men in the shadows by the jukebox. Marina types—taller than average, who hit the gym often, who wear pointy shoes. A more rarefied breed of conformist.

Lexie turns to me, mid-gyration. "Are you going to buy us more drinks?" she shouts.

"You don't sound like you're from Tel Aviv."

"Because I speak English? What are you, an anti-Semite?"

Rachel reaches into her travel neck pouch, which she wears as a purse, and directs a twenty toward Lexie. "Go yourself."

“This isn’t enough,” Lexie says. “I want a Sambuca shot.”

I hold out another twenty. “Get whatever you like,” I say.

“You’re fishy,” Lexie says. “I think he’s like a rufie rapist.”

“Look,” Rachel says. She’s holding her palm flat on the top of her beer bottle, miming its undruggableness.

“You know me and her are girlfriends,” Lexie says. “And I don’t mean friends that are girls.” To demonstrate her point, she makes a remarkably crude gesture with two fingers and her tongue. Rachel has a fit of coughing. I think she’s horrified. “So I don’t know where you think this is going, but it’s not going there.”

I indicate the bar. “Don’t forget to tip.”

Lexie pats Rachel’s hand over the beer bottle. “Until I’m here again,” she says, walking backwards into the crowd. She holds two fingers up to her own eyes, then points at me. *I’m watching you*.

“She knows to tip.” Rachel watches her friend, frowning. Outside, Rachel’s eyes were crystalline green and bright, but here they’re dark and dull, the color of old limes. Her skin is waxy white; a broad brush of young blood runs from cheek to jaw. Blood, as my father once said, is both vital and mortal. He was a physician, after all. “We’re not from Israel—we’re from New Jersey. And we’re not girlfriends. I don’t know why she needs to say that shit.”

I understand. “It’s fun to shed ourselves once in a while.”

“I thought the goal was to find yourself.” She thrums her fingers on the table, pushes her sprung hair back. “I don’t mean to mess with your mojo. I know she’s hot.”

I’m surprised. Have I betrayed an attraction to her friend? Am I attracted to her friend? I watch Lexie waving her arms at the bartender, her skirt pulled up high over her slightly wide thighs. She does have the argument of simplicity.

“What makes you think I’m interested in her?” I ask.

Rachel drinks from her beer. “She has really great boobs. They’re so round. And they’re real.”

“Better question: what makes you think she’s interested in me?”

“You’d be about middle of the pack for her.”

Middle of the pack. I don’t know if I’ve ever been described more accurately. This probably means bad things for Rachel’s own attitude toward me. She’s been nice, but maybe too nice. She seems the type to have a boyfriend. I watch Lexie coming back with three bottles clutched in one hand and three shots balanced on the other, all conveyed with the care of an offering.

“Americans yell so much.” She flips back her hair. “And just stand around.”

“People don’t stand in Tel Aviv?” I ask.

She gives me a glimmer of a smile, the first of the evening. It’s almost flirtatious. “They dance, dummy. We have the best clubs. Dome. Vox.”

“Will you put me up if I visit?”

She shrugs and looks out into the crowd, resuming her hip motions. If she’s interested in me, she’s not very interested. Or I’ve pressed my case too forcefully. Or she’s just trying to make me jealous. In the darkness, she scans other applicants, not exactly observing them, but observing them observing her. The men’s faces are bland and hostile. They look at Lexie, at Rachel, at the other women, with a free-floating menace, as if they could easily slit their throats. It’s all playacting, a script borrowed from a vampire romance, the savage tamed by a woman’s wiles. And yet there’s a sweetness to the convention. It feels like safer ground than the hipsters and the humanists—my people—who booze and jaw to establish a plausible case: we *could* care deeply about this person, we just happen not to. Here, there are rules to the game, as clear as if posted next to the dartboard, and the whole enterprise is aided by an honest offering of the wares. Clothes cling to breasts, to delts, to glutes, to abs. They know we’re all real estate, and while they probably hold the eventual hope of making love’s Ultimate Purchase, they’re clearly open to renting. It’s all disconcertingly logical, this straight-arrow wisdom of the meatmarketplace.

“You can stay with me,” Rachel says. “We’ll party at the Dome and the Box.”

“Is that one place or two?”

“You’ll have to ask the mayor here.”

“I didn’t know you were the mayor,” I shout at Lexie.

“What?” She looks insulted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

What am I talking about? I don’t know. I think again about that TV show that I, alone in this bar, have not seen. What’s it about? Two crazy girls traveling across the country in tube tops? What do the male characters look like? Not me, I’m sure. I’m miscast. But maybe like these guys—like this young professional by the bathroom—in his pointy shoes, his distressed wide-legged jeans, his hair pushed together in a point, as if someone has been sitting on his head bare-assed. Who is *he* supposed to be? I push myself off the stool. “Bathroom,” I shout to the girls.

Up close, the young professional is tall, with a gym-rat buffness and a tattoo across his very bare (shaved?) chest that seems to match the embroidery on his shirt. Hopefully, I’ve got that backwards. He smells of a cologne I can’t place, oddly floral. His arms are crossed, beer bottle held like a club. He has the unsmiling poker face of a psychopath.

I turn to look at the girls. They’re staring in opposite directions, not speaking to each other. The trip has taken its toll.

“What’s your feeling about brunettes?” I say.

The young professional eyes me up and down, as if looking for some slice of me to respect. Or maybe it’s a tranche—isn’t that a term these people like?

“You bring your sisters to the bar, dude,” he says, “they might get eaten up.”

“I love the word ‘dude,’” I say. Tranche. Dude. These people are on to something. “They’re not my sisters.”

“Your name Gina?” he asks.

“Ha!” I say. “Gina! No, I’m talking about the brunette. Why don’t you go, you know, work your magic on

her?”

“The little one?” His face opens up, as if he recognizes me, an old friend he’s always known. He hits me on the arm, hard. He’s smiling, I’m smiling. We’re bros before hos. “I love the little ones,” he says.

“Awesome,” I say. And in the bathroom, I think, “This is awesome.” It seems awesome, and it is awesome. It’s Thursday night. Thursday! And here I am in my own town, a wayfaring stranger, with two girls from New Jersey via Tel Aviv. And I’ve got this strange guy, who looks like someone famous probably—*from a TV show I alone have never seen!*—swooping in to wingman this situation. Or maybe he’s piloting. Of course he is. In his mind. It’s all a question of perspective! I shake my head in the bathroom mirror, scrubbing my hands. So much of life—a question of perspective!

Back in the bar, I find Rachel sitting alone. I point at my ears to indicate how deafening it is. She nods, points at her ears too.

“Where is Lexie?” I ask.

“Motorcycle,” she shouts.

“That was quick.” I look out the purple-tinted window but see nothing.

“You should have seen her in Phoenix,” Rachel says. “It’s pathetic.” She slurs it: it’s spathetic.

“Phoenix?”

“Tucson. Austin. Santa Fe.”

“Okay,” I say. Tucson, Austin, Santa Fe—like a railroad jingle. I try to feel cheered.

“This is what we do,” she says. “Girls where we’re from.”

“I’ve known plenty of girls from New Jersey. It didn’t seem that bad.”

She puts her elbows on the table. “But were they free?”

“They seemed pretty liberated.”

“I don’t mean liberated.”

I look again to the window. “Lexie seems free.”

“You’re confused, my friend. Between free and easy.”

The hostel is an old military barracks, cold, drafty, and sonorous. I can hear the occasional voice in the common area, the lone footsteps of a late night trip to the bathroom. Rachel sits on the bed in my tiny room and tugs at her boots like an exhausted farmhand. “Talking computers,” she says, swaying under the exposed bulb. I tried to explain my work (minus its location) on the freezing walk over. She said she wanted to know, but she hasn’t absorbed much. She’s so drunk she looks deboned.

“You want some water?” I say. I hold her calf in my hand and pull the boot free. Then the other. Free and easy. I’m about to say we don’t have to do this, but why wouldn’t we? What else would two people, similarly situated, do? I put my hand under the heavy band of her sweatshirt and help her take it off, feeling

the ridges of her ribs. A clavichord, a scallop shell. Her deodorant smells warmly of cloves. “One more,” she says, and I roll her top up like an inner tube.

“Are you sad she’s gone?” she asks.

“Who?”

“Good answer.”

I stand up and flick off the light switch. In the sudden, blue darkness, the weak glow of Sausalito comes into focus, bobbing in the tree branches. I approach the window, lean my forehead against the cool glass. It’s just a little town across the bay, but right now it looks like a holy city in the distance, a mirage.

“Your computer,” Rachel says. “Does it have a weird robot voice?”

“He doesn’t actually talk. He text chats.”

“Do you tell him everything? Are you going to tell him about your trip?”

“I don’t know.” The wind whips reedlike through the trees, a thousand knives on a thousand whetstones. Sausalito is erased. I turn to look at her. “What’s there to tell?”

“You could tell him you met a really cool girl,” she says. “Moving to California to start a new life.”

“You’re moving to SF.”

“Bolinas. I’m going to live with my aunt and uncle in Bolinas. I’m going to finish high school.”

The wind stops, turned off like a spigot. The noises of the hostel clarify—the mumble of the television, the clinking of bottles.

“Jesus. How old are you?”

“Twenty. Don’t ask me why I haven’t finished already.”

“Twenty,” I say.

She collapses back on the mattress with a thump. The springs wheeze. “Promise me you’ll tell him that. A really cool girl moving to California. New start on life.”

“New start on life.”

“You got it.” She pushes herself up, reaches a hand out for me, signaling for me to come over. “I need to tell you something.”

“I hope I can share it with my computer.” I push off the window. She’s a warm dark form on the white bed, and this close I can smell her, touch her wavy hair. She looks up at me, serious, as if we’re about to make a pact.

“First, you have to tell me your fantasy.” She speaks quietly but firmly—not ashamed, not abashed. In the dark, her body is a monochrome ivory, clearly visible. Her small breasts, the slight chubbiness at her waist, her long legs, the dull maroon flash of her underwear. But I can’t discern her face. Above the neck, she’s all

shadows.

“You can tell me anything you want,” I say. I’ll carry her secret—it’s something strangers can do for each other.

“Your fantasy. Tell me *yours*.”

I lean in close. There’s no blush of blood in her cheeks; her eyes are not green. Her face is white, black, grey—a mask. A fantasy, I think. Any old fantasy. Just one thing I dream about in bed alone, one way I want to be touched. Where I want her hands, where I want her mouth, what I want her to say. Something. I just have to come up with something.

Users Review

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