Class

She wanted to know if I was Catholic.

I was completely unprepared to respond with any degree of clarity to such a dangerous question. After all, we had been talking about the shrimp appetizers (which were covered with an ambitious pesto sauce) and where they fit in terms of quality, in our very separate histories of shrimp appetizers in particular and seafood appetizers in general. I'd just been describing to her how cayenne and lobster seemed to be mortal enemies, one of the more secular and inane culinary observations I'd ever made, when she'd focused her blue eyes on me, really looked at me for the first time in the one minute and thirty-five seconds we'd known each other, and asked me if I was Catholic.

How do you answer a question like that, especially when you've just met the woman at one of those house parties where you'd expected everybody in attendance but had gradually come to realize that you knew only the host couple, and then only well enough to ask about the welfare of the two kids (a boy and a girl or two boys) you thought they'd have? As far as I could tell, there were no priests, ministers, or pastors milling about, so I had no easy visual aids in gauging at the dominant denomination in the room. If I'd ever been a Jesuit priest, Hasidic rabbi, or Tibetan monk drinking a pale ale over by the saltwater aquarium, I might have known the best response, the clever, sin-titillating answer that would have compelled her to take me home for her long night of safe and casual sex.

"Well," she asked again, with a musical life in her voice, "Are you Catholic?"

Her left eye was a significantly darker blue than the right.

"Your eyes," I said, trying to change the subject. "They're different."

"I'm blind in this one," she said, pointing to the left eye.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, mortified by my lack of decorum.

"Why? It was my big brother who stabbed me with the pencil. He didn't mean it, though."

She told the story as if she'd only skinned a knee or received a slight concussion, as if the injury had been temporary.

"He was aiming for my little sister's eye," she added. "But she ducked. She was always more athletic than me."

"Where's your sister now?"

"She's dead. Car wreck. Bang, bang, bang."

So much pain for such a white woman. I wondered how often a man can say the wrong thing during the course of a particular conversation.

"What about your brother?" I asked, praying that he had not been driving the car that killed her sister.

"He's right over there," she said, and pointed at a handsome man, taller than everybody else in the restaurant who was sitting on the carpeted stairs with a woman whose red hair I'd been admiring all evening. Though engaged in what appeared to be a passionate conversation, the brother sensed his sister's attention and looked up. Both of his eyes were the same shade of blue as her good eye.

"He's the one who did it," she said and tapped her blind eye.

"In response, the brother smiled and tapped his left eye. He could see perfectly.

"You cruel bastard," she mouthed at him, though she made it sound like an affectionate nickname, like a tender legacy from childhood.

"You cruel bastard," she repeated. Her brother could obviously read her lips because he laughed again, loud enough for me to hear him over the din of the party, and hugged the red-faced in a tender but formal way that indicated they'd made love only three or four times in their young relationship.

"Your brother," I said, trying to compliment her by complimenting the family genetics. "He's good-looking."

"He's okay," she said.

"He's got your eyes."

"Only one of them, remember," she said and moved one step closer to me.

"Now, quit trying to change the subject. Tell me. Are you Catholic or are you not Catholic?"

"Baptized," I said. "But not confirmed."

"That's very ambiguous."

"I read somewhere that many women think ambiguity is sexy."

"Not me. I like men who see very specific."

"You don't like mystery?"

"I always know who did it," she said and moved so close that I could smell the red wine and dinner mist on her breath. I took a step back.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I'm not drunk. And I just chewed on a few Almonds because I thought I might be kissing somebody very soon."

She could read minds. She was also drunk enough that her brother had already pocketed the keys to her Lexus.

"Who is this somebody you're going to be kissing?" I asked. "And why just somebody? That sounds very ambiguous to me."

"And very sexy," she said and touched my hand. Blond, maybe thirty-five, and taller than me, she was the tenth most attractive white woman in the room. I approached the tenth most attractive white woman at any gathering. I didn't have enough looks, charm, intelligence, or money to approach anybody more attractive than that, and I didn't have enough character to approach the less attractive. Crassly speaking, I'd always made sure to play ball only with my equals.

"You're Indian," she said, stretching the word into three syllables and nearly a fourth.

"Do you like that?"

"I like your hair," she said, touching the black braids that hung down past my chest. I'd been growing the braids since I'd graduated from law school. My hair impressed jurors but irritated judges. Perfect.

"I like your hair, too," I said and brushed a pate strand away from her forehead. I counted three blemishes and one mole on her face. I wanted to kiss the tips of her fingers. Women expected kisses on the parts of their bodies hidden by clothes, the private places, but were often surprised when I paid more attention to their public features: hands, hairline, the soft skin around their eyes.

"You're beautiful," I said.

"No, I'm not," she said. "I'm just pretty. But pretty is good enough."

I still didn't know her name, but I could have guessed at it. Her generation of white women usually carried two-syllable names, like Becky, Trudy, and Wanda, or monosyllabic nicknames that lacked any adornment. peg, deb, or saw Efficient names, quick-in-the-shower names, just-brush-it-and-go names. She mother and her mother's friends would be known by more ornate
impressive than swashing. I was just some time lagging behind the way he did. I
needed to get into the swing of things. But I was really looking forward to
meeting him. He was supposed to be a good-looking guy, and I was excited to
see what he looked like. And it was fun to be around someone who was also
looking forward to the meeting.

So on the day of the meeting, I made sure to dress up nicely. I wore a
smart outfit, with a nice blouse and a skirt. I even put on some makeup to
make sure I looked my best. When I arrived, I saw that he was already there,
looking handsome as always. We talked for a bit and found out that we had
a lot in common. It was a great start to our relationship.

We continued to see each other regularly and started getting to know
each other better. We went on a couple of dates and had a lot of fun. One
date that stands out in my mind was when we went to the movies. We
chose a romantic movie that we both liked and enjoyed ourselves. It was a
great way to spend the evening together.

As our relationship progressed, we became closer and more committed
to each other. We decided to take things to the next level and moved in
together. It wasn't an easy decision, but we were both ready for it. We
shared a lot of happy moments together in our new home.

Unfortunately, things didn't stay that way. We started to have some
differences and arguments. It was hard to see our relationship crumble,
but we tried to work through it. We had a few counseling sessions to
help us navigate our issues, and it helped a lot.

In the end, we couldn't make it work. We decided to end our
relationship. It was a tough decision, but we knew it was for the best.

Looking back, I can see that it was a learning experience. I learned
about my own needs and what I want in a relationship. I also learned
about the importance of communication and understanding.

Although it was a difficult time, I'm grateful for the experience. It
helped me grow as a person and made me stronger. I'm ready for what
comes next.
affair with the architect named Harry. She'd begun the affair a few days after our first anniversary and it had gone on for seven months before she'd voluntarily quit him, never having known that I'd known about the tryst, that I'd discovered his love letters hidden in a shoe box at the bottom of her walk-in closet.

I hadn't been snooping on her when I found the letters and I didn't bother to read any of them past the conclusion that began each. "My love, my love, my love," they'd read, three times, always three times, like a chant, like a prayer. Brokenhearted, betrayed, I'd kept the letters sacred by carefully placing them back, intact and unread, in the shoe box and sliding the box back into its hiding place.

I suppose I could have exacted revenge on her by sleeping with one or more of her friends or coworkers. I'd received any number of letters—offers to do such a thing, but I didn't want to embarrass her. Personal pain should never be made public. Instead, in quiet retaliation, I patronized prostitutes wherever I traveled out of town. Miami, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, Houston.

In San Francisco for a deposition hearing, I called the first service listed in the Yellow Pages.

"Ava’s Escort," said the woman. A husky voice, somehow menacing. I was sure her children hated the sound of it, even as I found myself assuaged by its timbre.

"Ava Escort," she said again when I did not speak.

"Oh," I said. "Hi. Hello. Uh, I’m looking for some company this evening."

"Where are you?"

"The Prescott."

"Nice place."

"Yeah, they have whirlpool bathtubs."

"Water sports will you cost extra."

"Oh, no, no. No, I’m, uh, rather traditional."

"Okay. Mt. Traditional, what are you looking for?"

I’d slept with seventeen prostitutes; all of them blond and blue-eyed.

Tobin or her had been busy while the other five had been small-breasted.

Eight of them had claimed to be college students; one of them even had a chemistry textbook in her backpack.

"Do you employ any Indian women?" I asked.

"Indian? Like with the dot in the forehead?"

"No, no, that’s East Indian. From India. I’m looking for American Indian. You know, like Toronto."

"We don’t have any boys."

"Oh, no, I mean, I want an Indian woman."

"Tobin or her was a long silence on the other end. Was she looking through some kind of catalogue? Searching her inventory for the perfect woman for me? Was she calling some other escort services, looking for a referral? I wanted to hang up the phone. I’d never had intercourse with an Indian woman."

"Yeah, we got somebody. She’s a pin."

"What do you mean by pro?"

"She used to work pornos."

"Pornos?"
“Nothing!” he asked. “Do I look like nothing to you?”

“No, mo, that’s not what I meant. I mean, I was just watching you play pool. That’s all.”

He stared at me, studied me like an owl might study a field mouse.

“You just keep your eyes to yourself,” he said and turned back to his game. “I thought I was safe. I looked down at the bartender, who was shaking her head at me.

“Because I just, I just want to know,” spattered the big Indian. “I just want to know who the hell you think you are.”

Furious, he shouted, a prismatic sort of noise, as he threw the cue stick against the wall. He rushed at me and lifted me by the collar.

“Who are you?” he shouted. “Who the fuck are you?”


“Put him down, Junior,” said the bartender.

Junior and I both turned to look at her. He held a pistol down by her hip, not as a threat, but more like a promise. Junior studied the bartender’s face, examined the level of her commitment, and dropped me back onto the stool.

He took a few steps back, pointed at me.

“I’m sick of little shits like you,” he said. “Fucking urban Indians in your fancy fucking clothes. Fuck you. Fuck you.”

I looked down and saw my denim jacket and polo shirt, the khakis and brown leather loafers. I looked like a Gap ad.

“I ever see you again,” Junior said. “I’m going to dislocate your hips.”

I flinched. Junior obviously had some working knowledge of human anatomy and the most effective means of creating pain therein. He saw my fear, examined its corners and edges, and decided it was large enough.

“Jesus,” he said. “I don’t know why I’m even talking to you. What are you going to do? You fucking wimp. You’re not worth my time. Why don’t you get the fuck out of here? Why don’t you just get in your BMW and get out of here before I change my mind, before I pop out one of your eyes with a fucking spoon, all right?”

I didn’t drive a BMW. I drove a Saab.

“Yeah, fuck you,” Junior said, thoroughly enjoying himself now. “Just get the fuck back to your fucking mansion on Mercer Island or Edmonds or whatever white fucking neighborhood you live in. Drive back to your white wife. She’s white, isn’t? Yeah, blood and blue-eyed, I bet. White, white. I bet her pussy hair is blond, too. Isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

I wanted to hate him.

“Go back to your mansion and read some fucking Telelobbies to your white fucking kids.”

“What?” I asked.

“I said, go home to your white fucking kids.”

“Fuck you,” I said and completely surprised Junior. Good thing he hesitated for a brief moment before he rushed at me again. His hesitation gave the bartender enough time to visit the bar and step in between me and Junior.

I couldn’t believe how fast she was.

She pressed the pistol tightly against Junior’s forehead.

“Let’s go, Junior,” said the bartender.

“Why are you protecting him?” Junior asked.
"Really?"
"No, not all. I'm lying. You come in a week from now and Junior will break your thumbs."
She laughed again, laughed until she had to lean against the bar for support.
"Stop it," I said.
She kept laughing.
"Stop it," I shouted.
She kept laughing.
"Sweetheart," she said, trying to catch her breath. "I could kick your ass."
I struggled off my denim jacket and marched for the back door. Sissy tried to stop me, but I pulled away from her and stepped into the alley.
Junior was surprised to see me. I felt a strange sense of pride. Without another word, I rushed at Junior, swinging at him with a wide right hook, with dreams of connecting with his jaw and knocking him out with one punch.
Deep in the heart of the every Indian man's heart, he believes he is Crazy Horse.
My half-closed right hand whizzed over Junior's head as he expertly ducked under my wild punch and then rose, slowly and accurately, with a left uppercut that carried it with the moon and half of every star in the universe.
I woke up with my head in Sissy's lap. She was washing my face with a cold towel.
"Where are we?" I asked.
"In the storeroom," she said.
"Where is he?"
"Gone."
My face hurt.
"Am I missing any teeth?"
"No," said Sissy. "But your nose is broken."
"Are you sure?"
"I trust me."
I looked up at her. I decided she was still pretty and pretty was good enough. I grabbed her breast.
"Shit," she said and shoved me away.
I sprawled on the floor while she scrambled to her feet.
"What's wrong with you?" she asked. "What is wrong with you?"
"What do you mean? What?"
"Did you think, did you somehow get it into your crazy head that I was going to fuck you back here? On the goddamn floor in the goddamn dirt?"
I didn't know what to say.
"Jesus Christ, you really thought I was going to fuck you, didn't you?"
"Well, I mean, I just...
"You just thought because I'm an ugly woman that I'd be easy."
"You're not ugly," I said.
"Do you think I'm impressed by this fighting bullshit? Do you think it makes you some kind of warrior or something?"
She could read minds.
"You did, didn't you? All of you Indian boys think you're Crazy Horse."

I struggled to my feet and walked over to the sink. I looked in the mirror and saw a bloody mess. I also noticed that one of my braids was missing. Junior cut it off," said Sissy. "And took it with him. You're lucky to be liked. Otherwise, he would have taken a toe. He's that way before."
I couldn't imagine what that would have meant to my life.
"Look at you," she said. "Do you think that's attractive? Is that who you want to be?"
I carefully washed my face. My nose was most certainly broken.
"I just want to know, man. What are you doing here? Why'd you come here?"
My left eye was swelling shut. I wouldn't be able to see out of it in the morning.
"I wanted to be with my people," I said.
"Your people?" asked Sissy. "Your people? We're not your people."
"We're Indians."
"Yeah, we're Indians. You, me, Junior. But we live in this world and you live in your world."
"I don't like my world."
"You pathetic bastard," she said, her eyes swelling with tears that had nothing to do with laughter. "You sorry, sorry piece of shit. Do you know how much I want to live in your world? Do you know how much Junior wants to live in your world?"
Of course I knew. For most of my life, I'd dreamed about the world I currently resided.
"Junior and me," she said. "We have to worry about having enough to eat. What do you have to worry about? That you're lonely? That you have a mother? That your wife doesn't love you? Fuck you, fuck you. I have to worry about having enough to eat."
She stormed out of the room, leaving me alone.
I stood there in the dark for a long time. When I walked out, the bar was nearly empty. Another bartender was cleaning glasses. He didn't look at me. Sissy was gone. The front door was wide open. I stepped into the street and saw her sitting at the bus stop.
"I'm sorry," I said.
"Whatever."
"Can I give you a ride somewhere?"
"Do you really want to do that?" she asked.
"No," I said.
"Finally, you're being honest."
I stared at her. I wanted to say the exact right thing.
"Go home," she said. "Just go home."
I walked away, stopped halfway down the block.
"Do you have any kids?" I shouted back at her.
"Three," she said.
Without changing my clothes, I crawled back into bed with Susan. Her skin was warm to the touch. The house ticked, ticked, ticked. In the morning, my pillow would be soaked with my blood.
"Where did you go?" Susan asked me.
"I was gone," I said. "But now I'm back."