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AMERICAN PSYCHO

APRIL FOOLS

Abandon all hope ye who enter here is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Misérables* on its side blocking his view, but Price who is with Pierce & Pierce and twenty-six doesn't seem to care because he tells the driver he will give him five dollars to turn up the radio, "Be My Baby" on WYNN, and the driver, black, not American, does so.

"I'm resourceful," Price is saying. "I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*." Price calms down, continues to stare out the cab's dirty window, probably at the word FEAR sprayed in red graffiti on the side of a McDonald's on Fourth and Seventh. "I mean the fact remains that no one gives a shit about their work, everybody hates their job, I hate my job, you've told me you hate yours. What do I do? Go back to Los Angeles? Not an alternative. I didn't transfer from UCLA to Stanford to put up with this. I mean am I *alone* in thinking we're not making enough money?" Like in a movie another bus appears, another poster for *Les Misérables* replaces the word—not the same bus because someone has written the word DYKE over Eponine's face. Tim blurts out, "I have a co-op here. I have a place in the Hamptons, for Christ sakes."

"Parents', guy. It's the parents'."

"I'm *buying* it from them. Will you fucking turn this *up*?" he snaps but distractedly at the driver, the Crystals still blaring from the radio.

"It don't go up no higher," maybe the driver says.

Timothy ignores him and irritably continues. "I could stay living in this city if they just installed Blaupunkts in the cabs. Maybe the ODM III or ORC II dynamic tuning systems?" His voice softens here. "Either one. Hip my friend, very hip."

He takes off the expensive-looking Walkman from around his neck, still complaining. "I hate to complain—I really do—about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is and *you* know and I know that it is a *sty* . . ." He continues talking as he opens his new Tumi calfskin attaché case he bought at D. F. Sanders. He places the Walkman in the case alongside a Panasonic wallet-size cordless portable folding Easa-phone (he used to own the NEC 9000 Porta portable) and pulls out today's newspaper. "In one issue—in *one* issue—let's see here . . . strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis"—he flips through the pages excitedly—"baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis . . . and the joke is, the punch line is, it's all in this city—nowhere else, just here, it sucks, whoa wait, more Nazis, gridlock, gridlock, baby-sellers, black-market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses—" His voice stops, he takes in a breath and then quietly says, his eyes fixed on a beggar at the corner of Second and Fifth, "That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today. I've kept count." Then asks without looking over, "Why aren't you wearing the worsted navy blue blazer with the gray pants?" Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti. Pan down to the *Post*. There is a moderately interesting story concerning two people who disappeared at a party aboard the yacht of a semi-noted New York socialite while the boat was circling the island. A residue of spattered blood and three smashed champagne glasses are the only clues. Foul play is suspected and police think that perhaps a machete was the killer's weapon because of certain grooves and indentations found on the deck. No bodies have been found. There are no suspects. Price began his spiel today over lunch and then

brought it up again during the squash game and continued ranting over drinks at Harry's where he had gone on, over three J&Bs and water, much more interestingly about the Fisher account that Paul Owen is handling. Price will not shut up.

"Diseases!" he exclaims, his face tense with pain. "There's this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who *is* infected then you can also catch *anything*, whether it's a virus per se or not—Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, hemophilia, leukemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes—you can get dyslexia from *pussy*—"

"I'm not sure, guy, but I don't think dyslexia is a virus."

"Oh, who knows? *They* don't know that. Prove it."

Outside this cab, on the sidewalks, black and bloated pigeons fight over scraps of hot dogs in front of a Gray's Papaya while transvestites idly look on and a police car cruises silently the wrong way down a one-way street and the sky is low and gray and in a cab that's stopped in traffic across from this one, a guy who looks a lot like Luis Carruthers waves over at Timothy and when Timothy doesn't return the wave the guy—slicked-back hair, suspenders, horn-rimmed glasses—realizes it's not who he thought it was and looks back at his copy of *USA Today*. Panning down to the sidewalk there's an ugly old homeless bag lady holding a whip and she cracks it at the pigeons who ignore it as they continue to peck and fight hungrily over the remains of the hot dogs and the police car disappears into an underground parking lot.

"But then, when you've just come to the point when your reaction to the times is one of total and sheer acceptance, when your body has become some *tuned* into the insanity and you reach that point where it all makes sense, when it clicks, we get some crazy fucking homeless nigger who actually *wants*—listen to me, Bateman—*wants* to be out on the streets, this, *those* streets, see, *those*"—he points—"and we have a mayor who won't listen to her, a mayor who won't let the *bitch* have her way—Holy Christ—*let* the fucking bitch *freeze* to death, *put* her out of her own goddamn self-made misery, and look, you're back where you started, confused, fucked . . . Number twenty-four, nope, twenty-five . . . Who's going to be at Evelyn's? Wait, let me guess." He holds up a hand attached to an impeccable manicure. "Ashley, Courtney, Muldwyn,

Marina, Charles—am I right so far? Maybe one of Evelyn's 'artiste' friends from ohmygod the 'East' Village. You know the type—the ones who ask Evelyn if she has a nice dry *white chardonnay*—” He slaps a hand over his forehead and shuts his eyes and now he mutters, jaw clenched, “I’m leaving. I’m dumping Meredith. She’s essentially *daring* me to like her. I’m gone. Why did it take me so long to realize that she has all the personality of a goddamn game-show host? . . . Twenty-six, twenty-seven . . . I mean I tell her I’m sensitive. I told her I was freaked out by the *Challenger* accident—what more does she want? I’m ethical, tolerant, I mean I’m extremely satisfied with my life, I’m optimistic about the future—I mean, aren’t you?”

“Sure, but—”

“And all I get is *shit* from her . . . Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, holy shit it’s a goddamn *cluster* of bums. I tell you—” He stops suddenly, as if exhausted, and turning away from another advertisement for *Les Misérables*, remembering something important, asks, “Did you read about the host from that game show on TV? He killed two teenage boys? Depraved faggot. Droll, really droll.” Price waits for a reaction. There is none. Suddenly: Upper West Side.

He tells the driver to stop on the corner of Eighty-first and Riverside since the street doesn’t go the right way.

“Don’t bother going arou—” Price begins.

“Maybe I go other way around,” the cabdriver says.

“Do not bother.” Then barely an aside, teeth gritted, unsmiling: “Fucking nitwit.”

The driver brings the cab to a stop. Two cabs behind this cab both blare their horns then move on.

“Should we bring flowers?”

“Nah. Hell, *you’re* banging her, Bateman. Why should *we* get *Evelyn* flowers? You better have change for a fifty,” he warns the driver, squinting at the red numbers on the meter. “Damn it. Steroids. Sorry I’m tense.”

“Thought you were off them.”

“I *was* getting acne on my legs and arms and the UVA bath wasn’t fixing it, so I started going to a tanning salon instead and got rid of it. Jesus, Bateman, you should see how *ripped* my stomach is. The definition. Completely buffed out . . .” he says in a distant, odd way, while waiting for the driver to hand him the change. “Ripped.”

He stiffs the driver on the tip but the driver is genuinely thankful anyway. “So long, Shlomo,” Price winks.

“Damn, damn, damned,” Price says as he opens the door. Coming out of the cab he eyes a beggar on the street—“Bingo: *thirty*”—wearing some sort of weird, tacky, filthy green jumpsuit, unshaven, dirty hair greased back, and jokingly Price holds the cab’s door open for him. The bum, confused and mumbling, eyes locked shamefully on the pavement, holds an empty Styrofoam coffee cup out to us, clutched in a tentative hand.

“I suppose he doesn’t want the cab,” Price snickers, slamming the cab door. “Ask him if he takes American Express.”

“Do you take Am Ex?”

The bum nods yes and moves away, shuffling slowly.

It’s cold for April and Price walks briskly down the street toward Evelyn’s brownstone, whistling “If I Were a Rich Man,” the heat from his mouth creating smoky plumes of steam, and swinging his Tumi leather attaché case. A figure with slicked-back hair and horn-rimmed glasses approaches in the distance, wearing a beige double-breasted wool-gabardine Cerruti 1881 suit and carrying the same Tumi leather attaché case from D. F. Sanders that Price has, and Timothy wonders aloud, “Is it Victor Powell? It can’t be.”

The man passes under the fluorescent glare of a streetlamp with a troubled look on his face that momentarily curls his lips into a slight smile and he glances at Price almost as if they were acquainted but just as quickly he realizes that he doesn’t know Price and just as quickly Price realizes it’s not Victor Powell and the man moves on.

“Thank god,” Price mutters as he nears Evelyn’s.

“It looked a lot like him.”

“Powell and dinner at Evelyn’s? These two go together about as well as *paisley* and *plaid*.” Price rethinks this. “White socks with gray trousers.”

A slow dissolve and Price is bounding up the steps outside the brownstone Evelyn’s father bought her, grumbling about how he forgot to return the tapes he rented last night to Video Haven. He rings the bell. At the brownstone next to Evelyn’s, a woman—high heels, great ass—leaves without locking her door. Price follows her with his gaze and when he hears footsteps from inside coming down

the hallway toward us he turns around and straightens his Versace tie ready to face whoever. Courtney opens the door and she's wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk-satin d'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik.

I shiver and hand her my black wool Giorgio Armani overcoat and she takes it from me, carefully airkissing my right cheek, then she performs the same exact movements on Price while taking his Armani overcoat. The new Talking Heads on CD plays softly in the living room.

"A bit late, aren't we, boys?" Courtney asks, smiling naughtily.

"Inept Haitian cabbie," Price mutters, airkissing Courtney back. "Do we have reservations somewhere and please don't tell me Pastels at nine."

Courtney smiles, hanging up both coats in the hall closet. "Eating in tonight, darlings. I'm sorry, I know, I know, I tried to talk Evelyn out of it but we're having . . . sushi."

Tim moves past her and down the foyer toward the kitchen. "Evelyn? Where *are* you, Evelyn?" he calls out in a singsong voice. "We have to *talk*."

"It's good to see you," I tell Courtney. "You look very pretty tonight. Your face has a . . . youthful glow."

"You really know how to charm the ladies, Bateman." There is no sarcasm in Courtney's voice. "Should I tell Evelyn you feel this way?" she asks flirtatiously.

"No," I say. "But I bet you'd like to."

"Come on," she says, taking my hands off her waist and placing her hands on my shoulders, steering me down the hall in the direction of the kitchen. "We have to save Evelyn. She's been rearranging the sushi for the past hour. She's trying to spell your initials—the *P* in yellowtail, the *B* in tuna—but she thinks the tuna looks too pale—"

"How romantic."

"—and she doesn't have enough yellowtail to finish the *B*— Courtney breathes in—"and so I think she's going to spell Tim's initials instead. Do you mind?" she asks, only a bit worried. Courtney is Luis Carruthers' girlfriend.

"I'm terribly jealous and I think I better talk to Evelyn," I say, letting Courtney gently push me into the kitchen.

Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream

silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and the same pair of silk-satin d'Orsay pumps Courtney has on. Her long blond hair is pinned back into a rather severe-looking bun and she acknowledges me without looking up from the oval Wilton stainless-steel platter on which she has artfully arranged the sushi. "Oh honey, I'm sorry. I wanted to go to this darling little new Salvadorian bistro on the Lower East side—"

Price groans audibly.

"—but we couldn't get reservations. Timothy, *don't groan*." She picks up a piece of the yellowtail and places it cautiously near the top of the platter, completing what looks like a capital *T*. She stands back from the platter and inspects it. "I don't know. Oh, I'm so unsure."

"I told you to keep *Finlandia* in this place," Tim mutters, looking through the bottles—most of them magnums—at the bar. "She never has *Finlandia*," he says to no one, to all of us.

"Oh god, *Timothy*. Can't handle *Absolut*?" Evelyn asks and then contemplatively to Courtney, "The California roll should circle the rim of the plate, no?"

"Bateman. Drink?" Price sighs.

"J&B rocks," I tell him, suddenly thinking it's strange that Meredith wasn't invited.

"Oh god. It's a *mess*," Evelyn gasps. "I swear I'm going to *cry*."

"The sushi looks *marvelous*," I tell her soothingly.

"Oh it's a *mess*," she wails. "It's a *mess*."

"No, no, the sushi looks *marvelous*," I tell her and in an attempt to be as consoling as possible I pick up a piece of the fluke and pop it in my mouth, groaning with inward pleasure, and hug Evelyn from behind; my mouth still full, I manage to say "Delicious."

She slaps at me in a playful way, obviously pleased with my reaction, and finally, carefully, airkisses my cheek and then turns back to Courtney. Price hands me a drink and walks toward the living room while trying to remove something invisible from his blazer. "Evelyn, do you have a lint brush?"

I would rather have watched the baseball game or gone to the gym and worked out or tried that Salvadorian restaurant that got a couple of pretty good reviews, one in *New York* magazine, the other in the *Times*, than have dinner here but there is one good thing about dinner at Evelyn's: it's close to my place.

"Is it okay if the soy sauce isn't exactly at room temperature?" Courtney is asking. "I think there's ice in one of the dishes."

Evelyn is placing strips of pale orange ginger delicately in a pile next to a small porcelain dish filled with soy sauce. "No, it's not okay. Now Patrick, could you be a dear and get the Kirin out of the refrigerator?" Then, seemingly harassed by the ginger, she throws the clump down on the platter. "Oh forget it. I'll do it."

I move toward the refrigerator anyway. Staring darkly, Price reenters the kitchen and says, "Who in the hell is in the living room?"

Evelyn feigns ignorance. "Oh who is that?"

Courtney warns, "Ev-el-yn. You *did* tell them, I hope."

"Who is it?" I ask, suddenly scared. "Victor Powell?"

"No, it's not Victor Powell, Patrick," Evelyn says casually. "It's an artist friend of mine, Stash. And Vanden, his girlfriend."

"Oh so that was a *girl* in there," Price says. "Go take a look, Bateman," he dares. "Let me guess. The East Village?"

"Oh Price," she says flirtatiously, opening beer bottles. "Why no. Vanden goes to Camden and Stash lives in SoHo, so there."

I move out of the kitchen, past the dining room, where the table has been set, the beeswax candles from Zona lit in their sterling silver candleholders from Fortunoff, and into the living room. I can't tell what Stash is wearing since it's all black. Vanden has green streaks in her hair. She stares at a heavy-metal video playing on MTV while smoking a cigarette.

"Ahem," I cough.

Vanden looks over warily, probably drugged to the eyeballs. Stash doesn't move.

"Hi. Pat Bateman," I say, offering my hand, noticing my reflection in a mirror hung on the wall—and smiling at how good I look.

She takes it, says nothing. Stash starts smelling his fingers.

Smash cut and I'm back in the kitchen.

"Just get her out of there." Price is seething. "She's doped up watching MTV and I want to watch the goddamn MacNeil/Lehrer report."

Evelyn is still opening large bottles of imported beer and absently mentions, "We've got to eat this stuff soon or else we're all going to be poisoned."

"She's got a green streak in her hair," I tell them. "And she's smoking."

"Bateman," Tim says, still glaring at Evelyn.

"Yes?" I say. "Timothy?"

"You're a dufus."

"Oh leave Patrick alone," Evelyn says. "He's the boy next door. That's Patrick. You're not a dufus, are you, honey?" Evelyn is on Mars and I move toward the bar to make myself another drink.

"Boy next door." Tim smirks and nods, then reverses his expression and hostilely asks Evelyn again if she has a lint brush.

Evelyn finishes opening the Japanese beer bottles and tells Courtney to fetch Stash and Vanden. "We have to eat this now or else we're going to be poisoned," she murmurs, slowly moving her head, taking in the kitchen, making sure she hasn't forgotten anything.

"If I can tear them away from the latest Megadeth video," Courtney says before exiting.

"I have to talk to you," Evelyn says.

"What about?" I come up to her.

"No," she says and then pointing at Tim, "to Price."

Tim still glares at her fiercely. I say nothing and stare at Tim's drink.

"Be a hon," she tells me, "and place the sushi on the table. Tempura is in the microwave and the sake is just about done boiling . . ." Her voice trails off as she leads Price out of the kitchen.

I am wondering where Evelyn got the sushi—the tuna, yellow-tail, mackerel, shrimp, eel, even *bonito*, all seem so fresh and there are piles of wasabi and clumps of ginger placed strategically around the Wilton platter—but I also like the idea that I *don't* know, will *never* know, will *never ask* where it came from and that the sushi will sit there in the middle of the glass table from Zona that Evelyn's father bought her like some mysterious apparition from the Orient and as I set the platter down I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the surface of the table. My skin seems darker because of the candlelight and I notice how good the haircut I got at Gio's last Wednesday looks. I make myself another drink. I worry about the sodium level in the soy sauce.

Four of us sit around the table waiting for Evelyn and Timothy to return from getting Price a lint brush. I sit at the head taking

large swallows of J&B. Vanden sits at the other end reading disinterestedly from some East Village rag called *Deception*, its glaring headline THE DEATH OF DOWNTOWN. Stash has pushed a chopstick into a lone piece of yellowtail that lies on the middle of his plate like some shiny impaled insect and the chopstick stands straight up. Stash occasionally moves the piece of sushi around the plate with the chopstick but never looks up toward either myself or Vanden or Courtney, who sits next to me sipping plum wine from a champagne glass.

Evelyn and Timothy come back perhaps twenty minutes after we've seated ourselves and Evelyn looks only slightly flushed. Tim glares at me as he takes the seat next to mine, a fresh drink in hand, and he leans over toward me, about to say, to admit something, when suddenly Evelyn interrupts, "Not there, Timothy," then, barely a whisper, "Boy girl, boy girl." She gestures toward the empty chair next to Vanden. Timothy shifts his glare to Evelyn and hesitantly takes the seat next to Vanden, who yawns and turns a page of her magazine.

"Well, everybody," Evelyn says, smiling, pleased with the meal she has presented, "dig in," and then after noticing the piece of sushi that Stash has pinned—he's now bent low over the plate, whispering at it—her composure falters but she smiles bravely and chirps, "Plum wine anyone?"

No one says anything until Courtney, who is staring at Stash's plate, lifts her glass uncertainly and says, trying to smile, "It's . . . delicious, Evelyn."

Stash doesn't speak. Even though he is probably uncomfortable at the table with us since he looks nothing like the other men in the room—his hair isn't slicked back, no suspenders, no horn-rimmed glasses, the clothes black and ill-fitting, no urge to light and suck on a cigar, probably unable to secure a table at Camols, his net worth a pittance—still, his behaviour lacks warrant and he sits there as if hypnotized by the glistening piece of sushi and just as the table is about to finally ignore him, to look away and start eating, he sits up and loudly says, pointing an accusing finger at his plate, "It moved!"

Timothy glares at him with a contempt so total that I can't fully equal it but I muster enough energy to come clean. Vanden seems amused and so now, unfortunately, does Courtney, who I'm begin-

ning to think finds this monkey attractive but I suppose if I were dating Luis Carruthers I might too. Evelyn laughs good-naturedly and says, "Oh Stash, you *are* a riot," and then asks worriedly, "Tempura?" Evelyn is an executive at a financial services company, FYI.

"I'll have some," I tell her and I lift a piece of eggplant off the platter, though I won't eat it because it's fried.

The table begins to serve themselves, successfully ignoring Stash. I stare at Courtney as she chews and swallows.

Evelyn, in an attempt to start a conversation, says, after what seems like a long, thoughtful silence, "Vanden goes to Camden."

"Oh really?" Timothy asks icily. "Where is that?"

"Vermont," Vanden answers without looking up from her paper.

I look over at Stash to see if he's pleased with Vanden's casually blatant lie but he acts as if he wasn't listening, as if he were in some other room or some *punk rock* club in the bowels of the city, but so does the rest of the table, which bothers me since I am fairly sure we all know it's located in New Hampshire.

"Where did *you* go?" Vanden sighs after it finally becomes clear to her that no one is interested in Camden.

"Well, I went to *Le Rosay*," Evelyn starts, "and then to business school in Switzerland."

"I also survived business school in Switzerland," Courtney says. "But I was in Geneva. Evelyn was in Lausanne."

Vanden tosses the copy of *Deception* next to Timothy and smirks in a wan, bitchy way and though I am pissed off a little that Evelyn doesn't take in Vanden's condescension and hurl it back at her, the J&B has relieved my stress to a point where I don't care enough to say anything. Evelyn probably thinks Vanden is sweet, lost, confused, an *artist*. Price isn't eating and neither is Evelyn; I suspect cocaine but it's doubtful. While taking a large gulp from his drink Timothy holds up the copy of *Deception* and chuckles to himself.

"The Death of Downtown," he says; then, pointing at each word in the headline, "Who-gives-a-rat's-ass?"

I automatically expect Stash to look up from his plate but he still stares at the lone piece of sushi, smiling to himself and nodding.

"Hey," Vanden says, as if she was insulted. "That affects us."

"Oh ho ho," Tim says warningly. "*That* affects us? What about the massacres in Sri Lanka, honey? Doesn't that affect us too? What about Sri Lanka?"

"Well, that's a cool club in the Village." Vanden shrugs. "Yeah, that affects us too."

Suddenly Stash speaks without looking up. "That's called The *Tonka*." He sounds pissed but his voice is even and low, his eyes still on the sushi. "It's called The *Tonka*, not Sri Lanka. Got it? The *Tonka*."

Vanden looks down, then meekly says, "Oh."

"I mean don't you know anything about Sri Lanka? About how the Sikhs are killing like tons of Israelis there?" Timothy goads her. "Doesn't *that* affect us?"

"Kappamaki roll anyone?" Evelyn cuts in cheerfully, holding up a plate.

"Oh come on, Price," I say. "There are more important problems than Sri Lanka to worry about. Sure our foreign policy is important, but there *are* more pressing problems at hand."

"Like what?" he asks without looking away from Vanden. "By the way, why is there an ice cube in my soy sauce?"

"No," I start, hesitantly. "Well, we have to end apartheid for one. And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger. Ensure a strong national defense, prevent the spread of communism in Central America, work for a Middle East peace settlement, prevent U.S. military involvement overseas. We have to ensure that America is a respected world power. Now that's not to belittle our domestic problems, which are equally important, if not *more*. Better and more affordable long-term care for the elderly, control and find a cure for the AIDS epidemic, clean up environmental damage from toxic waste and pollution, improve the quality of primary and secondary education, strengthen laws to crack down on crime and illegal drugs. We also have to ensure that college education is affordable for the middle class and protect Social Security for senior citizens plus conserve natural resources and wilderness areas and reduce the influence of political action committees."

The table stares at me uncomfortably, even Stash, but I'm on a roll.

"But economically we're still a mess. We have to find a way to

hold down the inflation rate and reduce the deficit. We also need to provide training and jobs for the unemployed as well as protect existing American jobs from unfair foreign imports. We have to make America the leader in new technology. At the same time we need to promote economic growth and business expansion *and* hold the line against federal income taxes and hold down interest rates while promoting opportunities for small businesses and controlling mergers and big corporate takeovers."

Price nearly spits up his Absolut after this comment but I try to make eye contact with each one of them, especially Vanden, who if she got rid of the green streak and the leather and got some color—maybe joined an aerobics class, slipped on a blouse, something by Laura Ashley—*might* be pretty. But why does she sleep with Stash? He's lumpy and pale and has a bad cropped haircut and is at least ten pounds overweight; there's no muscle tone beneath the black T-shirt.

"But we can't ignore our social needs either. We have to stop people from abusing the welfare system. We have to provide food and shelter for the homeless and oppose racial discrimination and promote civil rights while also promoting equal rights for women but change the abortion laws to protect the right to life yet still somehow maintain women's freedom of choice. We also have to control the influx of illegal immigrants. We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people."

I finish my drink. The table sits facing me in total silence. Courtney's smiling and seems pleased. Timothy just shakes his head in bemused disbelief. Evelyn is completely mystified by the turn the conversation has taken and she stands, unsteadily, and asks if anyone would like dessert.

"I have . . . *sorbet*," she says as if in a daze. "Kiwi, carambola, cherimoys, cactus fruit and oh . . . what is that . . ." She stops her zombie monotone and tries to remember the last flavor. "Oh yes, Japanese pear."

Everyone stays silent. Tim quickly looks over at me. I glance at Courtney, then back at Tim, then at Evelyn. Evelyn meets my glance, then worriedly looks over at Tim. I also look over at Tim,