

## LEPER COLONY

2-4-6-8, who do we appreciate?

Numbers are the great American obsession. How do we measure up? Our crumbling economy: growth percentage, consumer spending, industrial output, GDP, GNP, the Dow Jones. As a society: homicides, rapes, teen pregnancies, child poverty, illegal immigrants, drug addicts, registered and otherwise. As individuals: height, weight, hips, waist, bust, BMI.

But the number in my head right now is the one that causes most of the problems: 2.

The argument with Miles (6'1", 210 lbs) was trivial, yeah, but containing enough discord to prevent me spending the night at his Midtown (equals ghost town) apartment. The jerk had moaned all evening about his bad back, talking himself out of any action with that crybaby bullshit. As his eyes grew moister, so my pussy became more arid. Not so fucking difficult to comprehend. He actually shushed me during the last few minutes of an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*; like, come on, dude! Also, his chihuahua, Chico, was yelping belligerently and he wouldn't stick him in another room, insisting the bug-eyed little asshole would soon settle down.

Well, fuck that.

He didn't take it well when I opted to split: making like a sulky toddler, all stiff posture and pouting lips. Like, man the fuck up! Some guys are just not cool enough to do anger. Chico, changing his routine by jumping onto my knee, despite me continually lowering him back onto the floor, has a bigger set of balls.

So I'm heading back to South Beach, a couple minutes short of 3:30 a.m. The night had been calm earlier, a hanging moon and a rash of stars providing shards of light which cut through the deep mauve sky. Then, almost as soon as I start up my wheezy 1998 Caddy DeVille, inherited from my mom, I'm aware of the shift in the weather. I'm not concerned as I have Joan Jett's "I Hate Myself for Loving You" rattling out of my speakers, but by the time I get onto the Julia Tuttle Causeway, gusts of wind are shoving at the car head-on. I slow down as sheets of rain batter the windshield, causing me to squint through the rapid swishes of the wipers.

Just as it suddenly eases to a drizzle and the speedometer creeps back to fifty, two men emerge out of the now starless, inky dark, running right down the middle of the almost deserted causeway toward me, waving their arms. The closest one blows hard, hamster-cheeked under the white flood of the overhead highway lights, his crazed eyes bursting into view. At first I think it's some kind of a joke; shit-faced frat boys or crazy druggies playing a fucked-up daredevil game. Then a stark *fuck* hammers into my consciousness as I sense it's some sort of elaborate carjacking, and I tell myself: *don't stop, Lucy, let the pricks move aside*, but they don't, so I brake hard, wrenching the car into a jarring slide. I'm holding onto

the wheel, it feels like a titan is trying to tear it from my grasp, then a thump and a rustling sound and I'm watching one of the men tumble over my hood. The car slows to a halt, thrusting me back in my seat as the engine cuts out, killing the CD just as Joan is about to rock the fuck out on the chorus. I'm looking around, trying to make sense of the situation. A driver in the other lane just in front of me isn't able to react so quickly; the second man ricochets off their hood, twisting in the air like a crazy ballerina and caroming along the highway. The car tears ahead, into the night, making no attempt to stop.

Thank the sanctified asshole of Sweet Baby Jesus that there's nobody else behind us.

Carjackers never had balls that size or were as scared. Miraculously, the guy the other car hit, a small, chunky, Latino, staggers to his feet. He's dripping with terror; it seems to override any pain he's in, as he doesn't even look at the fucker who bounced off my car; he's glaring over his shoulder back into the murky night, as he hauls himself away. Then, in the rearview mirror, I see the guy I clipped, a skinny white dude. He's right up on his feet too; blond hair, greased back in lank tendrils as he hobbles quickly like a semi-crippled spider toward the bushes at the median strip dividing the downtown and beach lanes of the highway bridge. Then I see that the Latino guy has double-backed and is limping toward me. He hammers on my window, screaming, — HELP ME!

I'm frozen in my seat, the burning smell of brake pads and rubber in my nostrils, not knowing what the fuck to do. Then a *third* guy comes marching briskly out of the darkness, down

the highway toward us. The Latino guy yelps out in pain, perhaps the shock has worn off, hobbling to the back of the car, seeming to crouch down at the passenger rear-side window.

I open the door and step out, my legs shaky on the firm concrete, my stomach empty and hollow. As I do this, there's a cracking sound, and something whistles just past my left ear. I realize, with a strange sense of abstraction, that it's a gunshot. I know this because of the way the third man, forming out of the mottled dark, is pointing at the car, something in his hand. It has to be a gun. He's almost alongside me and everything freezes over as I clearly see the pistol. I feel my eyelids rolling back in a primal plea for mercy as I'm thinking *this is how it ends*, but he walks right past me as if I'm invisible, even though I'm close enough to touch him, to see his glazed little ferret eye in profile, and even catch a whiff of his stale body odor. But he's in dedicated pursuit of his hunkered target. — PLEASE! PLEASE! . . . DON'T . . . begs the Latino croucher, hunched down by the side of my car, eyes shut, head bowed, one palm extended.

The gunman slowly lowers his arm, pointing the weapon at his victim. Some instinct takes over, and I jump up and dropkick the asshole between his shoulder blades. He's a light, raggedy-looking guy and he tumbles face forward toward his would-be target, dropping the pistol as he hits the asphalt. The Latino looks bewildered, then scrambles toward the gun. I get there first and kick it under the Caddy, as the prey looks at me for a second, oval-mouthed, before rising and hobbling off. But I'm right down on top of the gunman, slamming my weight on his back, straddling him, my bare knees skidding

roughly and painfully down on the hot surface of the deserted highway, both my hands round the back of his thin, scrawny neck. He's not a big guy (white, around 5'5", 120 lbs), but he doesn't even try to resist, as I'm shouting, — YOU CRAZY ASSHOLE, WHAT THE FUCK DO YA THINK YOU'RE DOIN?

Some broken-voice baby sobs, and between them a plaintive spiel, — You don't understand . . . nobody understands . . . as another car creeps up, then surges past us. I'm feeling that ominous vibe of one more layer of shit falling on me. I glance up and can see the Latino heading toward the bushes of the median strip, in the direction of his fleeing white compadre. The thought grips me, *I'm glad I'm wearing sneakers*, as I was planning on gladiator stilettos to match this short denim skirt and blouse I put on to try to get Miles to think dick and forget spine. Now that this skirt has ridden up, I'm so fucking glad I remembered panties.

Then an excited voice squeals in my ear, — I saw everything, and you are a hero! I phoned this in! I called the cops! I filmed it all on my phone! Evidence!

I glance up to see a small fat chick, eyes almost hidden by long, black bangs, 5'2", maybe 5'3", and about 220 lbs. Like all overweight people you can only speculate on her age, but I'd say late twenties.

— I called it in, she repeats, waving her cell phone. — It's all on here! I was parked over there. She points and I crane my neck in the direction of her car, visible under the overhead lights, on the hard shoulder of the bridge, almost backed into the causeway's barrier of bushes, shrubs, and trees planted

between the road and the bay. She looks at the broken, prostrate figure underneath me, my thighs that lock onto him as he shakes under his convulsive sobs. — Is he crying? Are you crying, mister?

— He will be, I snarl, as sirens tear out and a police car screeches to a halt, swathing us in blue light. Then I'm aware of the gross smell of urine rising from the guy beneath me, turning the hot air fetid.

— Oh . . . the fat chick sings mindlessly, wrinkling her nose. It's like old alcoholic piss, where the bum in question has been drinking cheap rot gut for days. But even as the warm wetness rolls over the asphalt and makes contact with my skinned knees, I'm not relinquishing my hold on this whimpering motherfucker. Then a flashlight shines in my face, and an authoritative voice tells me to stand up slowly. I blink and see the fat chick being pulled away by a cop. I try to comply but my body feels locked astride this pissing wretch, and I'm now conscious of the fact that I'm wearing a short skirt, straddling a urinating stranger on a highway, surrounded by cops, as cars zip by. Then some rough hands tug me to my feet, the muffled cries still coming from the sad bag of bones on the deck. A short, butch Latina in a uniform is in my face, her groping mitts under my armpit, pulling me harshly upward. — You have to step away now!

I can't use my hands and arms to steady myself, or rotate or lean my torso forward, and as I stand up I'm stepping on the guy. This is so fucking embarrassing. My friend, Grace Carillo, is a Miami cop, and I'd drop her name but I don't want her or anybody I know to see me like *this*. My constricting

tight, short denim skirt has ridden up into a thick, folded belt around my waist, through my action of kicking and straddling this creep. Denim doesn't fall back into place just by standing up, and the fucking cops won't release their grip so I can smooth the butt of my skirt down. — I gotta fix my skirt, I shout.

— You need to step away! the bitch shouts again. My underwear is visible from the back and front and I can see the frozen, waxy faces of the cops in the headlights scrutinizing me as I step off this pants-pissing prick.

I feel like tearing the bitch a new fucking asshole, before I remember Grace's advice that it's always unwise to fuck with a Miami cop. For one thing they are trained to assume that everyone is carrying a firearm. The two other cops, both male, one black, one white, cuff the sobbing gunman and yank him upright, as I finally get to shimmy and smooth the skirt down. The shooter's face is pallid, his wet eyes set on the ground. I realize that he's just a kid, maybe early twenties at the most. What the fuck was going through his head?

— This woman is a hero, I hear the bloated chick shriek in rabid attestation. — She disarmed that guy. She points in accusation at the cuffed kid, who has gone from stone-cold assassin to pitiable wretch, with a big wet stain on his pants. I feel his gross wetness on my scraped knees. — He was shooting at these two men. She points over to the edge of the bridge.

The fleeing cripples are now standing together, contemplating the scene. The Latino guy tries to skulk away, while the white guy has his hand over his eyes, shielding them

from the harsh overhead light. Another two cops head over to them. The chunky little chick is still talking breathlessly to the Latina cop. — She took the gun from him and kicked it under the car, one chubby digit indicates. Then she pushes her sweaty bangs out of her eyes, waving her phone in the other hand. — It's all on here!

— What were you doing stopped over there? the black cop asks her, as I catch another male white officer looking over my Cadillac and then back at me, perplexed.

— I felt sick driving, the fat chick says, — I had to pull over. I guess it was something I ate. But I saw everything, and she's playing back the video recording on her phone to the cops. — Another car hit one of those men too, but they didn't even stop!

Even as I feel the drumbeat of my heart pump more than it does after a cardio workout, I'm thinking how this girl's skin, under the police car's pulsing red lamp, matches almost *exactly* that horrible giant pink T-shirt she's wearing with baggy jeans.

— That's right, he just opened up on us. The white guy with the smashed leg has lurched over, flanked by another cop, pain streaked across his crinkly leather face, as he points to the weaselly motherfucker gunman who is being pushed into the back of the squad car. — This lady saved my life!

My hands are shaking and I'm fervently wishing I hadn't run out on Miles. Even a tepid fuck from an immobilized prick with a bad back would've been preferable to getting caught up in this bullshit. Now I'm being guided into the back of another squad car, the officer saying soothing things



in such a strong Latino accent I can hardly make it out. I get that they are taking the Cadillac and I hear myself mumbling something about the keys probably still being in the ignition and that my friend Grace Carillo is an MDPD officer, working in Hialeah. Our car pulls off, the fat chick riding shotgun, craning her blubbery neck around, telling me and the dykey cop, in some folksy Midwest accent, — It's the bravest thing I ever did see!

I don't feel brave at all, cause I'm shaking and thinking *what the fuck was I doing opening that door?* and I kind of pass out or drift away for a few moments or whatever. And when I'm aware of where I am, we're turning into the garage by Miami Beach police station on Washington and 11th. A TV breaking-news camera crew are here, moving aside as we go through the barrier, and the dykey Latina cop is saying, — Those assholes get quicker all the time, but in an observational way, without resentment. As if on cue, I turn to the window to see a camera lens sticking in my face. The fat chick in the pink, her glassy eyes going from me to the reporter, shouts, almost in accusation, — It's her! It's her! She's a hero! And my reflection mirrored right back in that camera is telling me I'm looking pretty fucking bewildered.

I realize that I need to butch the fuck up here, so when the fat pinko says for the umpteenth time in that simpering, fey voice, — Gosh, you really are a hero, I'm feeling a little smile playing on my face and I'm thinking to myself, *yeah, maybe I am.*

## LENA'S MORNING PAGES 1

I'll try anything once, I told Kim. She said she was getting so much out of doing this thing called Morning Pages. You just free-associate anything that comes into your head. Well, for once, plenty happened to me last night! So here goes me!

*I had pulled up on the causeway, got out the car into the thick, wet air, had my hands on the metal barrier, looking out, staring over the black, choppy waters of the Biscayne Bay. Then the heavy rain that was beating down just stopped, this somehow synced with the angry horns, ripping through the night, trailed by the screeching of brakes. Then out of the darkness: the cars, the men, and her.*

*Shouting, screaming, then the sharp whistle of what I knew, from my hunting experiences with my father, was a gunshot. I should have gotten right back into the car and taken off, but for some reason, which I still can't explain to myself, let alone those darned persistent police officers, I didn't. Instead, I took several steps closer into the road and started filming on my phone.*

*I'm not stupid, I told the police officers. Because by the way they looked at me, judging and dismissive, I could tell they weren't taking me seriously. But it was my own fault, I was talking nervously, overexplaining myself out of insecurity and excitement. — It's her, I shouted, and I pointed to the girl, the woman, who had just overpowered the gunman.*

*Then I showed them the phone. The picture was dark at first as she decked the shooter, but it became clearer as I advanced toward them. She was on top of him, holding him down.*

*It was obvious that once they'd seen my film, even the police officers were in awe of this Lucy Brennan. She looked the part with her long, chestnut hair, streaked with honey by the Floridan sun. Thick brows sat over big, piercing, almond-shaped eyes and she had a sharply defined, trapezoidal jawline. In contrast to this Amazonian severity was her dainty snub-nose, which gave her a paradoxical cuteness. She wore a short denim skirt, a white blouse, and white ballet-laced sneakers. One of her knees was skinned, probably due to the way she pinned down the gunman with those sculpted, muscular thighs.*

*They took us all (me in the same car as the heroine, and the perp and his target in another) back to the station in South Beach. Then they separated me from Lucy Brennan. I was escorted into a stark, gray-walled interview room with just a table, several hard chairs, and skull-splitting fluorescent lights. They put on a tape recorder and asked me all sorts of questions. All I got from them was: Where was I going? Where had I been?*

*Damned if they didn't make me feel like I'd done wrong, just for stopping on the bridge and getting out of my car to take in some air!*

*What can you say? I told them the dull truth; that I felt bad about the email I'd gotten from my mom, messed up by what had gone on with Jerry, frustrated about my work, guilty about the animals, about using their bones. Just pretty darn shitty about everything. I felt a migraine come on so I just stopped for some air, was all. They listened, then a woman cop, the Latina officer who had first been on the scene, asked me once more, — What happened next, Ms. Sorenson?*

*— It's on the phone, I told her. I had already forwarded the clip to them.*

*— We need to hear it in your words too, she explained.*

*So I went through it again.*

*Lucy Brennan. She'd told me in the police waiting room that she was a trainer, like a fitness trainer. It made sense; she radiated health, bristling with power and confidence. Her hair, skin, and eyes shone.*

*And through my fatigue I was burning with excitement, just being around her. Because I felt that somebody like Lucy could help me. But when the police were done with me, giving me a token for my car keys in the downstairs lot (they'd insisted I couldn't drive my own car back here), I looked for her and hung around, but she was gone. I asked a police officer at the desk if I could get in contact with her. He just fixed me a stern look and said, — That is not a good idea.*

*I felt like a reprimanded child. So when that news-crew guy talked to me outside, in a civil, proper way, I was happy to let them interview me and I forwarded them the clip of my footage.*

So that's my Morning Pages. I write Kim an email explaining the same thing, but not Mom, as she and Dad worry enough about my being in Miami. After driving home I was exhausted but still exhilarated. So I went to my studio and started sketching. I'm no portrait artist, but I needed to try and capture Lucy's fantastic golden-brown mane and those searing, vigilant eyes. All I can think about is picking up the phone and calling her.

But where in hell do I start?

## HERO

Couldn't sleep. Didn't even try. As the sun rises I'm stretching out in Flamingo Park, preparing for my early-morning run. I'm not going to let Miles, a Motor Vehicle Accident, some asshole shooting off a gun, or even the entire Miami-Dade Police Department fuck with my routine. So I'm pushing down 11th Street toward Ocean, at an easy 7.5ish mph. Roadworking Latinos hoist fallen palms back upright, supporting them with wooden stays. The rehabilitated trees gratefully swish and wave in the cool breeze.

When I first came down here, a resentful high-school sophomore, I recall Mom's boyfriend, Lieb, explaining to me that palm roots were shallower than those of most trees, so although they were easily blown over in hurricanes and storms, they didn't suffer such great trauma and could survive this. I was missing Boston and made some bratty comment about how, in Miami, even the trees have superficial roots. But I didn't pay much attention to them at the time, my disdain was fixed on the red patch on Lieb's balding dome. Of course, a couple of months later, when it turned out to be an aggressive skin cancer, which he thankfully got removed, I felt bad for my previous disgust.

As I hit Washington, I slow down to a 4 mph jog for a

couple of blocks, opting to take in the mess of tattoo parlors, sports bars, nightclubs, and stores selling tacky beachware. Even this early some drunk groups are still about, looking into closed store windows for future purchases. Shrill girls check out thongs emblazoned with slogans like DON'T BE A PUSSY, EAT ONE, while snickering guys earmark tees with the silhouette of naked pole dancers and the proclamation I SUPPORT SINGLE MOMS. From plush cocktail lounge to tacky sports pub to seedy dive bar, you can find all social levels in SoBe. Only one thing holds it together: a love of pure, unadulterated sleaze. Convertibles cruise past, their blaring sound systems often as expensive as the car, rolling downmarket as obviously nobody on Ocean or Collins is paying attention, no doubt lost in their own narcissistic concerns. A trio of shivering junkies share a cigarette in one doorway. A little farther down, two people of indeterminate sex lie asleep under a pile of unwashed laundry.

Enough of this B.S.; I turn toward Collins and Ocean, the sand and the sea, skipping past a stumbling drunk who mutters something unintelligible. Without this kickstart to my day, I'd be lost. A day without a morning run is a day you fumble through, rather than one you attack.

I rack it up a few notches to around 10 mph, running down the beachside tarmac path as far as South Pointe, picking up more speed on the way back. I'm flying past them all now, my sneakers slapping the ground in light rhythm, my breathing controlled and even. This is how it feels when you know you are with the gods. The rest of them, the shambling mortals, are just losers; so slow, so limited. Tailing off to what



feels around an even 7.5 mph, I cross over Ocean, oblivious to the sleepwalking cars, and head down 9th before turning onto Lenox. Up ahead, I see a crowd of people in the street, outside my condo. Like others in the area, our building facade is art deco but ours is unique in being painted lavender and pistachio with an abstract geometric design of ocean-liner stripes and portholes. But why are there guys with cameras, shooting pictures of the outside of the property? I suddenly worry there's a fire or something, then, as I get closer, I realize in mounting panic: *this shit is for me!*

I quickly spin off down 9th Street, heading for the back entrance to my home, but one asshole has clocked me and shouts, — LUCY! ONE MOMENT, PLEASE!

A stampede of paparazzi; a pack of red-faced, morbidly obese wheezers and skinny vampire alcoholics, blinking in the sun, suddenly give an unlikely pursuit. I'm not letting up, though; ripping my keys out and opening the caged metal door to the back stairs, I slip in and slam it shut, just as the snapping pack crush each other up against its mesh. I'm climbing the staircase, ignoring their cacophony.

Inside the apartment, the open back window streams in cool morning air as sweet as creek water, as I try to regulate my breathing. The buzzer is going intermittently, and I eventually break down and answer it, raising the phone to my ear. — Lucy, *Live!* magazine, we really want to talk to you about an exclusive!

— Not acceptable! Get the fuck away! Stop ringing my buzzer or I'll call the police! I slam the phone down into its wall mounting. A dark instinct makes me go to the cupboard

where I keep my .22 air pistol. I bought it last summer when a prowler was hanging around the building. He somehow gained entry and molested a girl who lives downstairs. I didn't know her, although I'd obviously her seen around. I'm not sure exactly what happened, it wasn't reported in the press, but you heard stories from other people in the apartment building. Some say the asshole raped her, others that he just bound her with duct tape and ejaculated on her. Whatever went down, he was one sick fuck.

My "pistol" isn't a proper gun; it just blasts out lead pellets through air pressure. I'm not down with guns. Jails and morgues are full of feeble clowns who thought that carrying a firearm would compel folks to take them seriously. The incident spooked me, though, and I responded positively and started up a well-attended self-defense class for women.

I check my phone; it must have hit the TV news already as there are missed calls and voice and text messages of support from Mom, Dad, my sister Jos (a "wow, well done . . ." in her low, passionless voice), Grace Carillo from the MDPD (who ran the self-defense classes with me), Jon Pallota, the absentee owner of Bodysculpt (the fake gym I work out of), Emilio from Miami Mixed Martial Arts (the real gym I work out of), friends like Masterchef Dominic, and a host of old college buddies, and clients past and present.

This cheers me, and I take a long shower, the cold tap on full blast but never better than tepid against my burning skin. When I get out I peek through the slats of my blinds. The crowd seems to have dispersed, but stragglers could be

lurking. The buzzer goes again. I answer it, right in the fucking zone to tear some cocksucker's head off! — YES!!?

But this time it's a woman's voice, the honeyed tones smooth and reassuring. — I'm Thelma Templeton, VH1 programming. I'm not paparazzi and I'm not from a news channel. I don't want a picture or a press interview. I give you my word if you let me in, I'll be the only one who comes up. I want to speak to you about a fitness-slash-lifestyle show.

Fuck, yeah! I immediately buzz her in. Then it hits me that it was possibly all bullshit and I've been played. So I open my door and peer down the the hallway, ready to step back inside and slam it shut, should some asshole appear. After a few moments I hear reassuring heels on the stairs and see a woman emerge onto my floor. There's no sign of her carrying anything, like a camera. She's around forty, dressed in a business suit, with smooth blond highlighted hair and a Botoxed face, unnervingly immobile as she strides forward, a slightly bowlegged gait. I stand my ground, and when she gets close she's suddenly gushing, — Lucy, shaking my hand and stepping into my cramped apartment. — This is cozy, she smiles, sitting, at my invitation, on my loveseat, and accepting my offer of green tea.

This ol' girl's pins are gym-toned; no cellulite or dimpled fat visible, and Thelma begins to outline her proposition. It's a makeover show. I take some overweight, low-self-esteem bloat-bag who hasn't dated this century or whose husband hasn't boned her in years, and get her to lose weight and boost her confidence. Once I've licked her into shape, I hand her over to some fag designer, who will oversee phase two,

the makeup and clothes component. — We have a few concepts, but this is the strongest and simplest model. We'd work with you developing the idea, shoot the pilot, and if the numbers stack up, go straight to series, she explains, then going through the spiel in some detail. When she's done she stands up and asks, — Who reps you?

— I'm, uh, still deciding on representation, I lie.

— Don't wait too long. Strike while the iron's hot, she half warns. — There are some good people we work with regularly, I could pass on your contact details to them if you like. There's no pressure, you have to find the person best for you, but I know one woman you really should meet, she's called Valerie Mercado. I think you two would get along like a house on fire!

— Great!

She hands me her card, and I give her one of my totally rad embossed ones that Jon Pallota made for me:

LUCY BRENNAN  
HARDASS TRAINING

No Excuses, Just Results — Be The Best You Can Be!

lucypattybrennan@hardass.com

She takes it in a well-manicured hand. — Wow! That is so impressive, you really do have that no-nonsense, hard-edged persona we've been dreaming of. Somebody to shake America right out of its complacency. Somebody even more out there than Jillian Michaels!

— I'd go head-to-head with her anytime, on the treadmill, the pull-up bar, or in the ring, I tell her, feeling my jaw jut out.

— I doubt that will be necessary, Thelma laughs, — but you never know!

I escort her out the door and down the hall to the front stairs. — Wow, I'm just so stoked that I could have a series!

— Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Thelma pats her hair in place against a nonexistent breeze, as she steps toward the front door. I jump ahead, checking the coast is clear. It seems to be. Thelma's hand grips the edge of the door, as her eyes blink in the sunlight. — A pilot first, then see how the numbers play out, she says cheerfully. — It's all about numbers, and she pulls a pair of sunglasses from her bag and sticks them on, — Bye, Lucy!

— Bye. I hear my voice, low-key, cheerless, as I let the door swing shut, feeling strange layers of both anxiety and excitement. Through the glass door I wave Thelma off, then bound up the stairs, going back to my pot of green tea.

I grew up in a family obsessed with numbers and measurements. Dad, a former PE teacher, punctuated only by some undistinguished service with the Boston Police Department, would take me to Fenway and bombard me with every player's stats. When a poor or decent performance confirmed a hypothesis he'd made based on those figures, he'd lean in to me and say knowingly, "The numbers never lie" or "Don't ever trust man's subjectivity, math comes from God. Watch the stats, pickle, always watch the stats."

With me the numbers that dominated my youth were my standardized test scores (high = expectation) and my GPAs (low = disappointment). The discrepancy between the two made me an enigma to my mom; she could never figure me

out. This deficit had to be explained in terms of character. Or lack of. My dad couldn't have cared less about my scores, though he shared with Mom the lack-of-character paradigm. Only, for him, it was explained by my sporting failures.

Home was Weymouth, MA, a town swallowed by the Boston sprawl, and part of the South Shore "Irish Riviera." My younger sister by eighteen months, Jocelyn, was quiet, academic, and hopelessly non-athletic. Dad tried with her, but even he had to concede defeat, so then she pretty much flew under his radar. Instead, he set about training every weakness of sloth and indolence out of me. He made me hate those characteristics in others and fight them tooth and nail in myself. And for that, and that alone, I thank him. Jocelyn, the "sugar" to my "pickle," became my mom's pet project. It's very hard to say who got dealt the worst hand there.

I finish my tea, as a tired yawn rips through me, and get out to my first appointment of the day. It's quiet now, as I check my mailbox. A card from the MDPD, telling me I can pick up the Caddy from their lot. They had to keep it in to examine the damage to the hood.

I walk up to Bodysculpt, one of the two SoBe clubs I work from. Marge Falconetti appears, a CEO's wife who is 5'7" and 285 lbs of puffy slug (don't think tits—waist—ass, just beachball). After some warm-ups, I get her raising a ten-pound kettlebell.

— Full extension, Marge, that's the way, I cajole the ol' girl, and I'm just settling into the day, battling the fatigue, and the strange creeping silence in this place. So ungymlike and even worse than normal today. Marge is actually trying, but

all the time glancing at me and then past me in sheer awe. Then, horror of horrors, I follow her bug-eyes to one of the myriad television screens we have positioned around the walls. A local news channel, then, on the next screen, another one, are repeating last night's story, *me* featuring prominently. Lester, one of the other trainers, lets out a loud cheer, leading off some clapping, as I reappear onscreen, blinking and candy-assed-looking.

— They show this again and again, on the half-hour, he grins.

— You're so brave, Marge smiles painfully. I respond with a thin leer to let her know there will be no slacking, as I crane my neck back at the screen.

There I am, kicking the gun-toting weakling into submission. It's a pretty fucking neat front kick, farther up than I thought, the ball of my foot striking him at speed between his shoulder blades. I'm right on his back as the camera moves closer, my ass in my panties where the skirt has ridden up blacked out by digibars. I see myself slam a couple of hooks into his body which I honestly couldn't remember throwing. His passivity looks spooky, as if I'm sitting on a corpse. I hear a voice screaming, — I phoned this in, as the image shuffles, then I'm in midshot and the tarmac darkens with his urine. Then, a more professional shot of me through the glass of the police car.

Jesus, I'm even keeping pace with the two fifteen-year-old conjoined twins from Arkansas. The girls have had a falling-out as one of them wants to go on a date, meaning that the other, the physically weaker one, will literally be dragged along

against her will if she disagrees. I'm thinking of how it might have been to be attached to Jocelyn, have to drag her along to my shit, or, worse, be taken to hers. No fucking way.

All America is enthralled by the so-called morality issue, which really is a degenerate's wet dream. Reading between the lines, one chick wants to fuck her boyfriend, the other is giving it the religious shit. Those girls have divided the nation. I caught some of it with Miles last night, before we got fractious when he contracted pussy vertebrae. Guys like him think that the would-be beau of Annabel, one of the twins, is one sick but lucky little fuck. I remember those twin chicks at high school, always getting hit on by guys about threesomes, who then genuinely wondered why they were grossing the girls out. Would any of those morons want to fuck their brothers? It's called, like, empathy, but even that basic emotion is barely part of Miles's makeup. However, some squeaky-clean kid, Stephen Abbot, who makes Justin Bieber look like the bastard love child of Iggy Pop and Amy Winehouse, is pouting at the screen. — I've known the girls awhile and I really like Annabel. It ain't like I'm some pervert. It's just about going to a movie and grabbing a soda and maybe some candy. But some folks just got dirty minds and there's always some tryin to make it into somethin it ain't.

As Annabel nods, the other twin, Amy, cuts in and says, — That ain't all it is. They kiss a lot and it's gross!

I tear myself away and watch Marge grunt her way through the last set. Then it's time to load her stout carcass onto the treadmill. I flick it onto 3.5 mph, enough to force her to get



with the project, then ramp up to 5 mph, solid trotting speed. — Go, Marge, I shout as she reluctantly lumbers into her stride.

— Jesus H. Lester (5'11", 185 lbs) is looking to the TV and saying to his client, some nice thirtysomething, *motivated* college professor chick, who strides evenly on the next treadmill. — It's tough on those girls, that's for sure.

What-fucking-ever. Let them debate the philosophical issues; I tweak the groaning Marge up to 6 mph, as I start pondering another number: 33. My birthday last week. The age that most real athletes seize up. That's when you can tell it's a real sport and not a game: are they finished at 34? They say that 35 is officially middle-aged. I *cannot* afford to buy into that. Part of me cheers when every gangbanger or lardass, like the sweating Marge, ends up on a slab before their time. Bullets or burgers, I don't care how they bite, as it sends the stats for those of us who *try* to avoid either soaring to the heavens. Marge busts out with some pathetic protest as I push her up to 7 mph. — But—

— You're good, honey, you're good, I coo.

— Heugh . . . heugh . . . heugh . . .

But I'm at an age when a woman is expected to have certain things: a husband, perhaps a child or two, a home, and plenty of debt. I got the last to the tune of \$32,000 in student loans and credit cards. No mortgage, just a thousand bucks rent to make each month on a crappy one-bedroom apartment on the Beach. I look at the row of photographs of us all, the personal trainers: me, Lester, Mona, and Jon Pallota, who opened this place. Jon looks tan, fit, with his wavy hair and easy smile, and how I'll always remember him, but that

was before his accident. Life can change so quickly: if you don't grab the fucker it'll slip by you.

— OH . . . OH . . . OH . . . Marge is petrified, her ass swinging like a semi-truck fishtailing back and forth across a three-lane highway.

— Nearly there, honey, and FIVE . . . and FOUR . . . and THREE . . . and TWO . . . and ONE, and the machine slides back to 4 mph, for the cool-down, and Marge is gripping the handles now, splattering the belt with sperm-thick sweat. — Well done, girl!

— Oh . . . oh my God . . .

I slap the red halt button. — Right, climb off and pick up that kettlebell again and gimme a two-handed swing for twenty reps!

Oh, there's that you-just-ritually-slaughtered-my-firstborn expression.

— Go on!

As Marge sweatingly complies, I think about my other significant numbers. Height: 5'7". Weight: 112 lbs. Number of regular clients: 11. Number of clubs attached to: 2. Parents: 2 (divorced). Siblings: 1, female, playing the fucking saint out in India or Africa or some shithole. Yes, Jocelyn works for a nongovernmental organization, trying to save poor people of color in the Third World; possibly compensating for Dad's somewhat unreconstructed stance on the issue of race.

Marge is playing at this! — Bend down at the knees, get that butt low! KEEP THOSE SHOULDERS BACK! DO NOT LET THEM PASS YOUR KNEES! Better! That's it! Good!