

Cathy's Book

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Stewart

Bloomsbury

Extract

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Jan 30, Afternoon
(Hour of the Monkey)

- Dumped by boyfriend last night.
- Horrendous fight with Mom this morning.
- Forgot about math test this afternoon.

<screen goes wavy—cue **FLASHBACK** sound f/x for scene from our heroine's morning, orning, rning...>

Mom came in from her graveyard shift while I was getting ready for school. I was scratching this little itchy, sore spot inside my elbow, when all of a sudden Mom grabbed my wrist so hard with her strong nurse hands that her knuckles turned white. "What is this?"

"You're hurting me!"

She tapped the itchy spot. "You think I don't know a needle track? You think I'm that stupid?"

"Oh, great. Now you think I'm shooting drugs." It was so unfair. "Have you been drinking again? Do you know me at all?"

The contempt in her eyes was like a slap. "I suppose you're going to say you got a shot from the school nurse? I can call her, Cathy. Think fast. Pick the right lie."

"Screw you!" I yelled, and I slammed out the front door.

She stood on the porch and yelled, so the whole world could hear. "I see kids just like you in the ER every night. You want to flunk out of school? Be an artist? Here's a bulletin from the real world, Cathy. You know who bought this house? I did. Your Dad got to lie around in his bathrobe all day painting because I made the money. So if you want to flunk out, hey, fine, be my guest. I just hope your latest boyfriend can keep you in style after you graduate, 'cause I sure won't."

—> Should have said, "No fear there, Mom—the boyfriend just dumped me." </flashback>



It was a
cut your ear off"
kind of a
day!!



— cut along dotted line.

Now it's after school. Mom's still sleeping. I'll head over to Emma's in a sec. We're supposed to work on this big research paper for Biology, but the truth is, I just don't want to be in the house when Mom wakes up. ~~It's not like she really gives a damn about me anymore. She just doesn't want more hassle in her life.~~

I'm never going to let myself get that bitter. Never, never, never.

But what about my arm?

There's a little bruise, just inside my left elbow, with a tiny dot in the middle. It **does** look like a needle mark, actually, only I haven't used any. Must have been a mosquito or a spider bite or something.

—Just heard Mom's alarm go off. Spidey-sense tingling. Time to get out.

Jan 30, Evening

(Hour of the Rat. Listen for faint sound of sharp teeth in the dark.) *Over At Emma's Place*

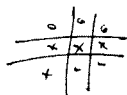
First sound I heard after letting myself into Emma's apartment: her fingers drumming away on her keyboard. Funny, familiar sound: soothing as rain pattering on a window. Coming into her bedroom, I tried to find a place to sit on her bed, which was quilted w/ approximately 1 zillion index cards w/ notes for our essay—each topic written up in a different color of ink.

I felt the first rush of a Science Contact High, so I took out my sketch pad in self-defense and started doodling. I had just managed to sell my first cartoons to an online site. The money wasn't much, but it was a rush to be a Real Artist who got Paid for Work, and I was desperate to do more. Plus it beat trying to follow Emma into the Science Zone... "So, where's your dad today?"

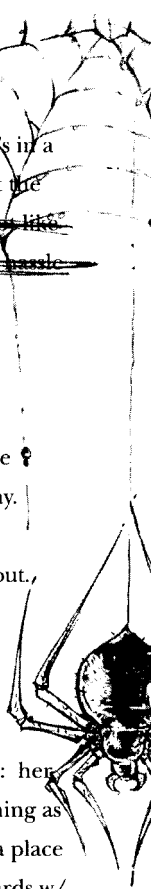
"Tai Pei, I think. Or maybe Shenzhen. He's coming back for Valentine's Day."

*

Emma turned around and put on her Lecturing Nun face, left over from way too many years at the Maryknoll Convent School in Hong Kong. "Did you *know*, Miss Vickers, that many *bats* have lifespans 3 to 4 times as long as we might expect for mammals of their size? Researchers *believe* they have a gene which produces free-radical scrubbing enzymes, which retard



← the height of



POISON

cellular oxidation. Some also show increased telomerase production, and—” She looked narrowly at me. “You do have notes for our paper, right? You promised you would bring notes.”

I pretended not to hear her, deeply absorbed in doodle of a little bat with Emma’s small round Chinese face and small round English glasses.

“Cathy! This is due in three days! You promised me I wouldn’t end up doing the whole thing by myself.”

“Let’s write about poisons instead,” I suggested. “Curare. Strychnine. Arsenic. Poisons that make your tongue swell until it blocks your throat. Poisons that make blood run out of your eyes and give you anthrax.”

“Anthrax isn’t a poison, it’s—”

“One that you could sprinkle in someone’s hot chocolate and then watch all the blood vessels in his face burst so it turns into a little red sprinkler—”

“I guess this is still about Victor,” she said dryly. “Why not think positive? Maybe he had a really good reason for dumping you.”

I gave her a look. Emma never especially liked Victor, possibly because the first time she met him she threw up all over the back of his airplane. She hates being embarrassed. Still, she could at least have pretended to be sympathetic.

“For instance,” she said brightly, “he worked at a biotech company, right? So maybe he found a hair you shed on his coat and sequenced it in the lab and compared it to his own DNA and discovered that if you ever did get married, you were doomed to give birth to baby weasels.”

“I hate you,” I said.

“I know.”

*

I told Emma about the fight with my mom, and showed her the bruise.

“You can see why she thought it was a needle mark,” she said.

A deep feeling of unease began to creep over me. “Emma, listen. A few days ago Victor took me to this crazy place called the Musée Mécanique, down on Pier 45. We stayed there until they closed up, and then Victor gave me a ride home. He came over to our house, and we stayed up really late talking. Lights low. Soft music.... You know that moment,



3

google -> website (!!!)



when you and a guy both realize you're about to kiss?"

"Sure," Emma said bravely.

[(Yeah, sure, right....)]

"He reached over me to turn the music down, and that moment

happened. It seemed to take forever. His mouth was over mine so long my lips started to tingle. And then he croaked, 'How about some hot chocolate?'"

Emma blinked. "Maybe he's not into girls?"

"I don't know why he stopped! Anyway, he makes this really strong hot chocolate, and we talk some more."

"More talking?"

"Shut up." I gave her a friendly finger gesture. "I'm waiting to get back to the kissing vibe, only now I'm *so sleepy*."

"It was really late," Emma said.

"No, I mean like, sleepier than that. So I decided to take things into my own hands, you know. I hauled myself up, and I put a hand on my neck, and I leaned towards him..."

"And???"

"I fell off the couch."

"You *what!*"

I started to flush. "I fell off the couch. Stop laughing, you cow!" I took the pillow off Emma's bed and belted her with it. "I couldn't make my muscles do anything. It was like the time I went to the dentist and had three valiums by accident."

"That was hilarious," Emma said absently, but her smile slowly faded. Carefully she said, "Did you have your clothes on when you woke up?"

"Yeah. It's not like he needs to drug me to get..."—I felt my face coloring—"Whatever, you know. He could just ask. I'm sure he knows that. Only he never asked. Anyway, here's the weird thing: when I woke up the next day, I was still dressed, but I was upstairs in my bed. I tried to get up a couple of times in the morning, but I felt so stoned I just *couldn't*. It wasn't until Mom's alarm went off at four in the afternoon that I could force myself to get up and pretend I'd been at school all day."

Worry made little lines around Emma's eyes and mouth. "You think



um, no offense right?...

Victor *drugged* you?”

“It doesn’t make any sense. But...” I tapped the bruise inside my elbow. “This was hurting when I woke up.”

She blinked. “Your arm?” I nodded. “And two days later he calls up and says he doesn’t want to see you anymore?”

“Right.”

Emma swirled around in her Science Officer Command Chair, thoughtfully kicking her feet. “Look, I like a good conspiracy as much as the next girl, but if you woke up with your clothes on and no signs of, um, extra activities, Victor probably wasn’t slipping you a mickey. The mark on your arm is probably a spider-bite. And as for him dumping you...”

“He’s too old to be wasting time with me anyway,” I recited, to save her the bother. I tried to hit Emma with the pillow again, but she blocked with her feet.

“Didn’t you tell me Victor was getting calls from this woman he worked with—”

“Carla. Carla Beckman.”

“Right,” Emma said. “So probably Victor just decided to go out with, you know, a grown-up.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Here to soothe,” she said. “Can we work on our essay now?”

Jan 30, Evening, Even Later, Dammit. (Hour of the Ox)

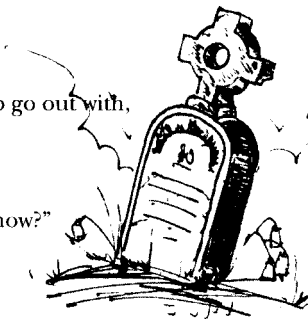
The Hour of the Ox is between 1 and 3 AM. It’s called *Ch’ou* in Chinese. So says this book Victor got me in Chinatown, *The Tung Shu*, which is like a Chinese Old Farmers Almanac for Very Weird Farmers.

*

I’m back from Emma’s place. Mom’s at work. House is empty
empty
empty

So empty it makes my ears ring.

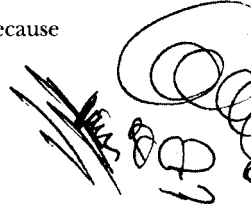
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Sharpest memory of Dad: him padding around in his bathrobe every morning, cooking French toast or pancakes. Most days I never even saw him eat; he was always busy behind the counter, serving us first because

- A) Mom was exhausted from the end of her shift, and
- B) I was late for school.

Now I wish we'd made him sit down with us more often.



*

Found Mom's supply of Gordon's and made myself a gin & tonic, which is what she does when she can't sleep. This is what breakfast looks like, since Dad died: me eating Frosted Flakes and Mom making a g & t so she can get to sleep in the daytime.

So far the gin doesn't seem to be doing much for me. I keep walking and walking around the house, like a wind-up toy that never winds down.

*

Fortune Telling by Physical Sensation

"Ringing in the ears in the Hour of Ch'ou: You will quarrel with a loved one."

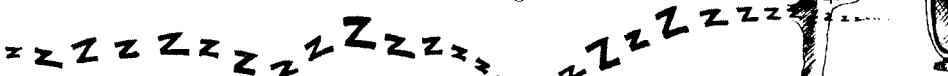
*

Still not sleepy. Going to make another g & t. Think I probably put too much tonic in the first one.

Oh, God, it's late. I should be working on this biology paper. Do it for the team, Cathy! This isn't about your own selfish need for sleep—we have a higher goal here! Maintaining Emma's 4.0!!!!

<groan>

Must remember to set alarm clock when I get back to room.

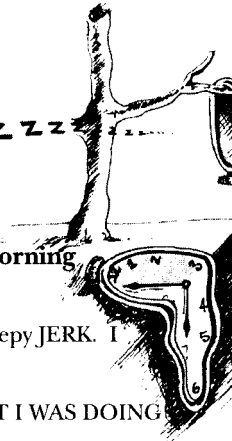


Jan 30 Eve—oops. Jan 31, I mean.

Call it Jan 30+, approximately O'Dark Thirty in the Morning
(Hour of the Gin and Tonic)

Just re-re-read entry for day I met V, creepy worthless lying creepy JERK. I sniveled continuously, no doubt dribbling snot into 4th g&t.

DON'T SEE WHY HE COULDN'T JUST TELL ME WHAT I WAS DOING
WRONG, FOR GOD'S SAKE!!!!!!!



Em - am cutting & pasting original entry for ^{the} day I met Victor.
→ Mm! Just remembered that I used to eat the paste
when we did papier mache in kindergarten. What a weird kid!

November 11, Morning. Veterans Day

Holiday Monday, so no school. Everybody else either working or spending the day w/ family. Even Emma's dad in town for weekend.

Mom still working graveyard shift. House empty and depressing. Looking through my window outside I can see wet leaves on the sidewalk, November trees going bare. Things are always dying on Veterans Day.

If this were a war year, if this were 1918 or 1944, I wouldn't be the only girl whose dad was never coming home. Think of that: a whole generation of us, daughters or young wives, waiting for a car that will never roll into the driveway. Waiting for a door that will never open again.

*

November 11, EVENING

Met the strangest guy today. Sort of a jerk, but an interesting jerk.

Not sure how I should feel. Not sure how I do feel.

*

Decided to catch a bus into the City & Golden Gate Park. Took my sketchbook down on the seawall. Partly cloudy, partly foggy—light the color of salt glinting over the ocean. Rocks slimy with seaweed, mottled fans and strings of it. White rush of surf, smack of it dropping onto the shingle.

10 yards out, a black cormorant was standing on a boulder. He had his wings stretched wide, wide. Our eyes met. That shouldn't happen with a bird, but it did. His were yellow: ancient: inhuman.

Victor

"You got the wings wrong."

I looked up. Good-looking jerk leaning over my shoulder, scoping out my sketch. "Get lost," I said. → very ladylike!

"Head's okay, I guess."

"Glad you approve. Get lost."



ARTGIRL



MISSION:

TARGET:

Golden Gate Park

Sketch with great passion!
Develop technique and
Enlarge soul!

man's bottle green,
vintage, silk shirt,
unbuttoned & untucked,
as if by accident.
(No such thing as accident
with us. See Artgirl
with tousled just-woke-
up hair, bet your bottom
dollar she spent 20 mins
in the mirror to get the
exact perfect tousle!
This is what it means
to be Artgirl!!)

black leather
jacket

black T

GEAR

① 1x attaché case,
filched from Mom's
supply: russet colored
leather, soft sided
- Classy!

② 1x classic matte black
sketch book.

③ Faber-Castell PITT
charcoals

④ Koh-I-Noor inks

⑤ 2 pens and 2 brushes

⑥ steel wool, nylon fixative
(one good jostle on Bart
can smudge 2 hrs of work)

black
pants

mid-calf
boots
(to go with
jacket)

"Victor Chan," he said. He stuck out his hand.

Confession time: he was a really, really good-looking guy. Early twenties, maybe, half-Asian, with a fascinating face: pale skin, black hair, unexpected eyes: dark green, like wet jade. I imagined a Chinese father and the mother a Scot, red-haired and hot tempered. I appreciate guys' bodies more than most girls. I look at them. The history of art is a thousand years of nude studies, after all: I like the weight and shift of muscles moving under skin. Two accessories with a bit of style: a jade pendant that he wore around his neck, and a nice old pocket watch that hung from his belt loop on a short steel chain.

I pegged him as the kind of jock that has a thing for smart girls. You see these guys, second-stringers on the football team; they stand around the edges of the Jock Huddle listening to raunchy talk about cheerleaders, but they fall for the smart girl with library eyes. I wear the Smart Girl colors (Edgy Division)—black outfits or vintage clothes, sketch pad, glasses with interesting frames—so I get these hits every now and then.

I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, Victor Chan. Go away."

"A real artist has to know how to take criticism," he said.

"I'm not a real artist. I'm just a sulky wannabe." I smiled and gave him a well-known finger gesture. "Bye-bye, Victor Chan."

He laughed and bent down beside my shoulder, studying my sketch, a little closer than necessary. I meant to tell him to get lost, meaning it: but in the pale slant light of the afternoon I got distracted by the exact fall of the fine hairs along his forearm. Time slowed down, then: opened up: stretching the pause between one wave breaking ...

...and the next.

I had the strangest feeling the cormorant was holding time open for me. Pushing it back with his wings.

Dare

"It's a good drawing, but the wings are too big."

I said, "I got his mouth the right size."

He grinned. "Draw me."

"I don't think so."



"Scared?"

"Better things to do with my time."

"Drawing birds?"

"For example."

Stalemate.

BLAH

I have a good Scornful Stare™—cold, distant, belittling. I know it's good because I practice it in the mirror. I tried it on him.

He laughed. "Draw me. I'll pay you what the picture's worth."

"I don't want to." I felt out of my element. He must have been only four or five years older than the guys at my high school, but it felt like a big difference. "Hey, jerk. No Means No." I stuffed my sketchbook into my leather case. Stood up and checked my pockets for bus fare.

The cormorant shook his head at me, displeased. He flapped his wings once, twice, and paddled his feet irritably up and down.

"Okay, so you're not ready," Victor said. "Keep writing only in your diary and showing your pictures only to your best friend, then."

"Screw you!" I glared at him. "How much will you pay for that drawing?"

"Depends on what it's worth."

I pulled the sketch book back out of my case and grabbed a pen.

"Sit up on the wall there."

He grinned. "Oh, I see. You're one of those girls that needs to get mad before she—"

"Shut up!"

He shut up.

I drew.

*

Portrait

I drew him as he would look at age sixty, imagining the droop at the corners of his mouth and the hollowing under the cheeks. He'd go lean, not fat, I thought. Pouches under the eyes, flat bone showing under thin skin at the temples. The smooth skin around his eyes creased up and leathery. A liver-spot or two.

I almost always draw people a different age than they actually are. It's like





a compulsion. Some people are shocked when they see my portraits. They think I'm just trying to be a witch. I'm not. Well, mostly not. Anyone can do a likeness. That's in the hand. Art should be in the eye, too. In the heart.

When I finished, he looked at the drawing for a long time. I figured he'd hate it and I wouldn't get any money, but that was okay.

"Getting a little revenge?" he said at last.

"Don't flatter yourself. This is what I do. I imagine how people are going to look. Fast-forward them. Here are my friends." I flipped over the sketch book, showing a few others—me and Emma at 28 and 40 and 60 and 75. Mom at 90, withered up in a nursing home bed.

He gave me a curious look. "Do people like it when you draw them like this?"

"They hate it."

"I bet." He turned away for a moment, looking out over the sea. "It's a funny thing, watching people get old. ...You know what they call this day in Canada? It's not Veterans Day there. It's Remembrance Day. It's a big deal there, bigger than Memorial Day here. They lost so many men, you know, at Ypres, and Verdun. Eight hundred thousand men killed at the Somme. Flanders, and god-forsaken Vimy Ridge. 'In Flanders Fields the poppies grow...' Everyone wears poppies." He trailed off.

I tried to think of something to say, so I wouldn't look dumb for not being up on the First World War. "There's this painting by Chagall called *Cemetery Gates*," I said. "He did it during the war. No soldiers, no battles, it's really very peaceful and beautiful, in a way, but you can feel the weight of the war in every brushstroke. Like a, a requiem." The guy was looking at me, very serious now. I felt awkward. "My dad was a painter. He used to quiz me on pictures—date and artist, you know. *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt, 1642. *Las Meninas*, Velazquez, 1656. *Cemetery Gates*, Chagall, 1917. It sounds stupid, but I guess that's really the way I know history. World War One is *Cemetery Gates* and Otto Dix's *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. World War Two is *Guernica*... Do you know Chagall?"

"No."

"Oh," I said, feeling stupid.

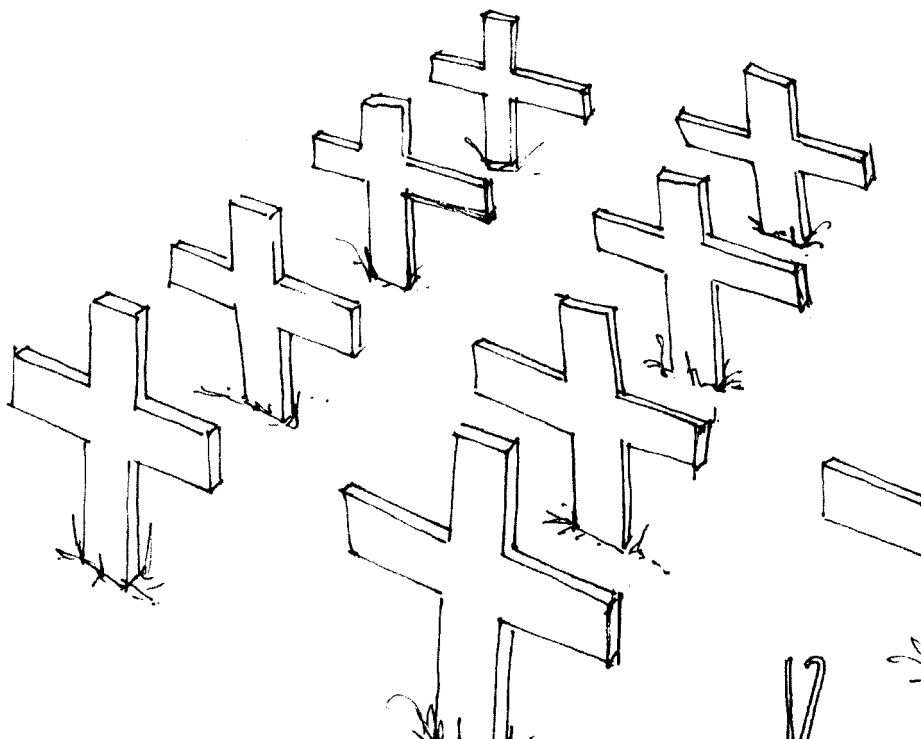


He regarded me. "You're an interesting girl." I kept my mouth shut. "I have this...friend," he said, stumbling over the word. "It's her fifty-seventh birthday today. Makes you think," he said.

"Remembrance Day," I said.

He smiled. "Yeah."

"My name's Cathy," I said. I tore Victor's portrait out of the sketch book.
"So what's it worth to you?"



BACK TO JAN 30th NOW

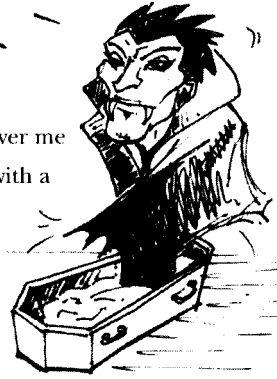
Jerk.

New theory about my arm.

VICTOR IS A VAMPIRE!!!!!! Can just see that creep squatting over me on my VERY OWN COUCH and SUCKING OUT MY BLOOD with a TINY CONCEALED FANG in his TONGUE!!!!!!

Oh, gross.

I think I'm going to throw up.



Jan 30++, 3:17 AM

(Hour of the Late Night DJ)

Washed mouth out with Scope. Feel much better now. Clear-headed. Have regained perspective. No longer interested in V. Not jealous type. DO wonder what is wrong with *him!*

Jan 30+++, So Late At Night It's Early

(Hour of the Street Cleaner)

Our First Date

Victor took me flying in his Uncle's private plane. I'm not making this up. He said my picture made him see the world differently, and he wanted to do the same for me.

Emma hated the idea of being trapped in a little plane, but I made her come along anyway to make sure the Big Bad College Boy didn't try any funny stuff.

Air feels *slippery* at 4000 feet. With no road or sidewalk, it feels like you're just about to slide off the sky. But it was beautiful, and exciting—> fields, hills, sea checkerboarding under us.

*

So we're up in Victor's plane, Emma turning green in the seat behind me. The first time we turned, my shoulder thumped into the door. I found myself looking at the ground through my window and I sort of squeaked.



He was funny and kind and his bomber jacket had all these tough, exciting smells: leather and machine oil and cold mornings.

Q: "When did you learn to fly?"

A: "Junior High Shop class was full, so I took Pilot's License instead."

Wiseass.

He asked if I had a job and I said I was a student and he said, Berkeley? And I said, *mumble mumble*, even though I could hear Emma's eyes rolling behind me, because I didn't want him to think I was just another high school kid.

Then we hit some turbulence and Emma found out there weren't any airsickness bags in the plane.

*

Five Most Amazing Things About Victor

- 5 Our first evening date, he took me out to a Cambodian restaurant called Angkor Wat. *Cambodian?!?* We split a Banana Blossom Salad and a creamy chicken curry with lemon grass that came in a coconut shell, with sweet Cambodian coffee afterwards. Victor paid for it all in cash. My last date with GrungeGuy was Dutch treat at Burger King. Of course I would NEVER say a BF *has* to be funny and sophisticated and take you nice places and pay for it afterwards. But he should *try*.
- 4 Victor knows how to cheat at cards. Says he grew up in Nevada, where they put a pack of cards in every baby's crib. I made him teach me how to use a Mechanic's Grip to deal off the bottom of the deck, but he made me promise first that I must Use The Art Only For Good and Never For Evil.
- 3 His hands, strong wrists, quick brown fingers, bending back a pack of cards for a waterfall shuffle. Omigod.
- 2 He knows not one word of Chinese, but he is fluent in *French*. I only found this out because one day we were out



together and his cell phone rang and suddenly he was gabbling away *En Francais*, laughing and making jokes. I asked why on earth he had picked up French. He said, "I spent some time with this bunch of French guys in Algeria and their English sucked, so I figured I better learn."

... and the #1 most amazing thing about Victor Chan...

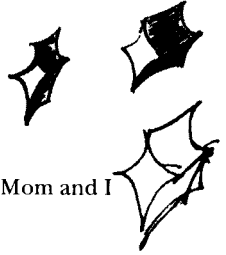
<drumroll>

1 He laughs at my jokes.

*

I wish he hadn't dumped me. I wish Dad hadn't died. I wish Mom and I didn't fight all the time.

God, I'm tired.



Jan 31, —Meaning, the Morning After the Night Before —(Hour of the Splitting Headache)

Forgot to set the freaking alarm!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Woke up to the sound of my answering machine getting the phone. Emma's voice blaring irritably through the speaker. "Cathy? Cathy? Are you there? I know you're there." I thought about crawling out of bed, but someone had turned up the gravity and it seemed too far. "Okay, then, be that way," Emma said. "Just *don't go to his house, and don't set anything on fire!*"

<Click.>

"*Don't go to his house*"— How offensive! Like my best friend thinks I would hang around and *beg*? As for that fire-setting crack, that was almost three years ago, it was a really old cheap car, and I think I have my temper under a lot better control.

Besides, that was Jenny's older brother Brad, and he *so* deserved it.

*

Took a long shower to clear my head. Feel better now.

Checked e-mail. One message from Emma:

"Don't go to his house!"

Jeez. As if.



Jan 31, Evening
(In Which a Bear of Very Little Brain Goes To
Victor's House and Finds a Very Curyus Messaj)

I'm not the jealous type. I just don't like being jerked around.

All I was going to do was show up on his doorstep and ask what the hell was up. It wasn't like I wanted another date. I wouldn't take him back if he came CRAWLING ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES.

After school I took BART into the city and then a bus to Haight-Ashbury. My ArtGirl costume was OK camouflage for mingling with the Haight's tat-and-piercing crowd. I was wearing my Guess What You're Missing outfit: fitted black leather jacket, low-rider jeans and boots that went Stomp, Stomp, Stomp up the hill to Victor's uncle's house.

Victor had brought me by this place once, when he had to pick up some keys, but he said he wasn't supposed to have visitors, so I had never actually been inside. Victor didn't say it directly, but I got the feeling his uncle was kind of traditional, and didn't approve of Victor slumming with Western girls. I figured the uncle was another Astronaut, like Emma's dad—HK Chinese, with a residence in the States, but spending most of his time in Asia. I'd never actually met him, but obviously he was loaded. There was the plane, of course, and this gorgeous place, a two-and-a-half story Victorian House on the Hill right next to Golden Gate Park. That's probably a five million dollar house.

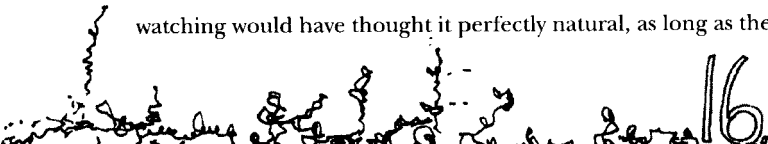
My thighs were burning by the time I got to the top of the block. The property hid behind a high wall, backed by a bamboo hedge and pierced by a single arch. I leaned into the curve of the gate for a second, gathering my courage and my breath.

My eye fell on the mailbox.

Of course, it would be wrong to pry into Victor's mail. Obviously. But there couldn't be any harm in just carrying it—unopened of course—up the steep path to the front door, could there? That would be positively *helpful*, right?

I reached into the mailbox casually, as if I did this every day. Anyone watching would have thought it perfectly natural, as long as they couldn't hear

If it wasn't for
your message, I
NEVER
would have thought
of going to his
house, and so I
CERTAINLY
wouldn't have
in and see
stuff
ALL YOUR
mess



my heartbeat rattling like a runaway train. Stupid guilty heartbeat.

I don't know what I was expecting—a Valentine from the odious Carla From the Lab, maybe?—but there was nothing hand-addressed, just standard computer-printed letters to Victor Chan: a LensCrafters Savings Alert, two credit card come-ons, and a property tax notice, along with grocery circulars and a thin magazine called *Science News*. Nothing exciting.

—Wait a sec. *Property tax notice?*

I stuffed the rest back in the mailbox, took my cell phone out of my purse, and called Emma. “You weren't in school today,” she complained. “We were supposed to work on the Biology paper. I know you say you can't get interested in school any more, but jeez, Cathy—just hold it together six more months and you can at least get your GED. Besides, it's my mark, too.”

“Gosh, wouldn't want to bring you down to a 3.95,” I said impatiently. “Listen, remember how Victor has this rich uncle?”

“With the plane?”

“And the house—Victor was house-sitting for him.”

“Okay.”

“Do you think the IRS would send property tax notices to a house-sitter, or the legal owner?”

“Owner, obviously.”

“That's what I thought, too. Thanks, Em.”

“Cathy, wait,” Emma said suspiciously. “Why are you asking this? Where are you?”

“Gotta go,” I said. “Catch you later.”

“You aren't at his *house*, are you? You aren't looking through his *mail*?”

“My lawyers advise me to take the Fifth. Look, he lied to us. This is *Victor's house*.”

“Cathy! Maybe it's in his name as a legal convenience. The uncle spends most of his time in Asia. Dad pays my apartment bills, but lots of them come addressed to me.”

“From the IRS?” Silence. “I've never seen the famous uncle, Em. *What if he doesn't exist?* What if it really does belong to Victor—the house, the plane, everything?”

Emma snorted. "How would a twenty-three-year-old guy get that kind of money?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's just what I'm asking myself."

"Oh," Emma said. And then, slowly, "Oh."

"Could have inherited it," I said.

"Patent," Emma said. "Software. Bio-tech. This is Silicon Valley, after all. Or he could be a pop-star or something."

"Right. Sure."

"But that's not what you're thinking, is it?"

"No," I admitted. Victor had never talked about computers—or being a rock star, for that matter. According to him, he was just another lab tech at Intrepid Biotech—\$15/hour sequencing DNA from fruit flies or something.

"You're thinking about drugs," Emma said.

"Yeah."

"You're thinking he's young and rich and he has a private plane, and that means he's smuggling drugs."

"Yeah."

I could practically hear the whir of Emma's brain spinning over the phone. "Or you're thinking he's young, he's rich, *he works in a lab and he does a lot of overtime*," she said. "So maybe he's not smuggling drugs ... maybe he's making them? XTC. Rohypnol. Or designer stuff. He stumbled across something in the lab, some freaky Human Growth Hormone high or Fetal Tissue Extract Elixir of Life. That's what you're thinking."

"It is now."

"Jesus," Emma said.

"Yeah," I said. I looked up at the tall bamboo hedge that walled off Victor's property from the rest of the world. "If he has the job he says he does, he shouldn't be making enough to afford a cardboard box in San Francisco, let alone this place."

"Cathy, you get away from that house," Emma said. "You get on the bus and come straight home."

"What? I can't hear you. Terrible reception."

"Cathy!"