

"You know Charles," Mindy said in her sleep.

Allen got the camera off the floor, and sat down, and tried until he was sweating to get the roll of film unentangled.

"I feel so regretful!" Mindy called.

Allen looked in on her. She was awake, but in the same prone position. Water still splashed from the opened faucet.

"This is disgusting, I know," she said. "It must be disgusting for you to see, Allen. A young boy, I'm really so, so sorry."

"You're forgiven," Allen said.

"Do you mean it? You're not really angry?"

"Hell, no. Not at all," Allen said.

Whistling to himself, he borrowed a tailored shirt from a hanger in Mindy's closet. He rolled the cuffs, where there were flower-shaped pearl buttons. He turned the collar under, uncomfortably.

In the kitchen, Allen poured coffee into one of his aunt's pretty teacups. He sat in the tiny dining annex, his legs crossed. He sipped coffee and considered his day. He thought he'd drive out around the Baltimore zoo—maybe buy himself some dinner.

MARY ROBISON

I AM

TWENTY-ONE

I HEARD RINGING, AND I REALIZED THAT WHAT I HAD DONE was continued my answer to Essay Question I—"What effect did the discovery of the barrel vault have on the architecture of 13th century cathedrals?"—writing clockwise in the left, top, and right-hand margins of page one in my exam book. I had forgotten to move along to page two or to Essay Question II. The ringing was coming from in me—probably from overdoing it with diet pills or from the green tea all last night and from reading so much all the time.

I was doing C work in all courses but this one—"The Transition from Romanesque to Gothic." I needed to blast this course on its butt, and that was possible because for this course I knew it all. I needed only time and space to tell it. My study notes were 253 pencil sketches from slides we had seen and from plates in books at the Fine Arts Library and some were from our text. I had sixty-seven pages of lecture notes that I had copied over once for clarity. Everything Professor Williamson had said in class was

recorded in my notes—practically even his throat clearings and asides about the weather. It got to the point where if he rambled, I thought, yeah, yeah, cut the commercial and get back to the program.

Some guy whose hair I could've ripped out was finished with his exam. He was actually handing it to the teaching assistant. How could he be *finished*, have given even a cursory treatment to the three questions? He was a quitter, a skimmer, I decided; a person who knew shit about detail.

I was having to stop now and then, really too often, to skin the tip of my pencil with the razor blade I had brought along. I preferred a pencil because it couldn't dry up or leak. But this was a Number 2 graphite and gushy-gummy and I was writing the thing away. The eraser was just a blackened nub. Why hadn't I brought a damn box of pencils?

The teaching assistant was Clark—Clark Something or Something Clark, I didn't know. He was baggy and sloppy, but happy-looking. He had asked me out once for Cokes, but I had brushed him off. That was maybe stupid because he might've been in charge of grading exams.

I decided to ignore Essay Question II, pretend I hadn't even seen it. I leaned hard into Question III, on church decoration, windows, friezes, flora, fauna, bestiaries, the iconography in general. I was quoting Honorius of Autun when the class bell fired off.

I looked up. Most people were gone.

"Come on, everyone!" Clark called. "Please. Come on now. Miss Birtle? Mr. Kenner, please. Miss Powers?"

"Go blow, Clark," I said right out loud. But I slapped him my exam booklet and hurried out of Meverett, feeling

let down and apathetic all of a sudden, and my skin going rubbery cold.

I BIKED HOME WITH A LOT OF TROUBLE. I WENT ON THE sidewalks. I was scared that in the streets I'd get my ringing confused with car warnings.

I was still ringing.

Last semester I had had a decorating idea for my apartment, this monastic idea of strict and sparse. I had stripped the room down to a cot, a book table, one picture. The plaster walls were a nothing oatmeal color, which was okay. But not okay was that some earlier renter had gooped orange—unbelievably—paint on the moldings and window frames. So where I lived looked not like a scholar's den, finally, but more like a bum's sleepover, like poverty.

My one picture up wasn't of a Blessed Virgin or a detail from Amiens of the King of Judah holding a rod of the Tree of Jesse. Instead, it was an eight-by-ten glossy of Rudy and Leslie, my folks. Under the backing was written *Gold Coast, the first cool day*. The photo had been shot out on North Lake Shore Drive around 1964, I'd say, when I was three. Leslie, my mom, was huddled into Rudy, sharing his lined leather jacket. They appeared, for all the eye sparkle, like people in an engagement-ring ad. I kept the picture around because, oddly, putting away the *idea* of my folks would've been worse than losing the real them. In the photo, they at least *looked* familiar.

They had been secret artists. Rudy was a contractor for a living, Leslie a physical therapist. So they worked all their art urges out on me—on my school projects, for

instance, which they hurled themselves into. One project "I did" for seventh grade that they helped me with was, I swear, good enough for a world's fair. It was a kind of three-dimensional diorama triptych of San Francisco Bay with both bridges—Oakland and Golden Gate—that may have even lit up or glowed in the dark. We had to borrow a neighbor's station wagon just to get the thing safely over to Dreiser Junior High—it lined up as long as an ironing board.

I GOT MY BIKE TUGGED INSIDE, LEFT IT LEANING AGAINST the wall under the photograph. I clapped a kettle onto the midget stove in my kitchen part of the apartment, and paced, waiting for the water to heat. The pitch of the steam when it got going was only a quarter tone below the ringing in my head.

My folks were two and a half years gone.

I used to drive out to the site of their accident all the time—a willow tree on Route 987. The last time I went, the tree was still healing. The farmlands were a grim powder blond in the white sun, and the earth was still ragged from winter. I sat there in my tiny Vega on the broken crumbly shoulder. The great tree and the land around—flat as a griddle for miles and miles—didn't seem as fitting as I had once thought, not such a poetic place for two good lives to have stopped.

I had my tea now and grieved about the exam. Leaving a whole essay question unanswered! How could I expect to get better than a C?

Just before my first sip of tea, my ringing shut off as though somebody had punched a button, said, "Enough of that for her."

I decided it was time to try for sleep, but first I used a pen with a nylon point to tattoo a P on the back of my hand. This meant when I woke up I was to eat some protein—shrimp or eggs or a green something.

On the cot I tried, as a sleep trick, to remember my answer to Essay Question I—word for fucking word.