

PAULA WHYMAN

Driver's Education

The Simple Safe Solution Driving School offered classes at numerous satellite locations in order to serve a larger geographic area. Our classroom was at the end of a deserted corridor in the basement of the Mackleby-Warner department store. At first I thought the basement looked like the set of a slasher movie: The gray tub filled with naked mannequins and spare body parts was the place where the killer hid his victims. Empty plastic hangers stacked to the ceiling on tall, metal poles, and straight pins covering the floor were instruments of torture. If you stepped on the pins just right, they could go through the sole of your shoe. The main level of the store was like the part of the house visitors were allowed to see, everything clean and perfect, with no indication of what might be amiss (ominous music swelling in the background) just One. Floor. Below.

On the first night of class, I sat next to Kevin Thorpe by accident, and after that I always sat next to Kevin Thorpe because sitting anywhere else would seem like a slight. And whenever I arrived in class first, he sat down next to me, which made me perspire in the armpits. He was my ideal: blond curly hair, blue eyes, golden tan—California surfer-boy, far from home—and a pimply nose just to make him seem real.

There were other girls in the class. I don't remember them, except that one or two were pretty. There were other boys, too, like the boys who sat in the back of the class, slumped in their seats, laughing at secret jokes, coughing out cuss words when the teacher turned his back. I tried not to look at them when I thought they might see. One of them—I think his name was Todd—was tall and broad, bigger than all the other boys, so he filled the doorway when he walked in. He wore a flannel shirt unbuttoned over a tight, white T-shirt, and he carried a pack of Marlboro Reds in his front pocket. He made Kevin, who had a solid swimmer's build, look like a scarecrow. I wondered if Todd

was eighteen or nineteen and hadn't passed the driving test yet. Maybe he went on to take it two or three times, or maybe he never passed. Maybe he's in jail now or on a work-release program; maybe he's straightened himself out, and he'll be at my house next week to patch drywall.

Most of the students were fifteen or sixteen, with learner's permits. I was one of the youngest. We were there because the free driver's ed program available in high school wouldn't fit into our class schedules which were full of college-prep courses or, I suspect in the case of Todd and a few others, because the high school program had proved insufficient preparation for the test. This class consisted of six weeks of lectures, two nights a week. After you passed a written test, you could move on to the good part—eight on-the-road lessons in a car with dual controls.

The classroom instructor was Mr. White. He was a lean black man, fortyish, who walked with a limp. One leg wouldn't bend all the way at the knee, so when he paced back and forth in front of the class, the strain of lifting the bad leg from the floor and launching it to the next position was visible in the tendons that stood out on his neck. It was September, and the room was hot. A fan in the front corner oscillated back and forth but didn't cool anything beyond the chalkboard where Mr. White scribbled complex x-o diagrams, as if a football coach were trying to illustrate the correct way of backing out of a driveway into traffic. Every fifteen seconds or so, the fan would send a small puff of dust from the chalk tray into the air like a smoke signal. It got so I'd wait for it, watch the particles float up then rain down in slow motion, like ash on Pompeii. Each time Mr. White's bad leg came up, we could see where the toe of his boot had dragged through the chalk dust that had been blown to the floor. Finally, he wised up and shifted the position of the chalkboard so the fan couldn't blow on it. Kevin and I snickered behind our hands. This was a bonding moment.

In spite of the heat in the room, Mr. White wore a pinstripe shirt, the sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, and brown Sansabelt pants. His forehead popped with little beads of sweat, which made him seem intense, although his most common facial expression was one of strained tolerance.

Halfway through the second class, he said, "Let's get this outta the way now, so you don't sit there wondering about it instead of

absorbing every word I say, 'cause when you're driving, you better hear my voice in your head until your voice has enough experience"—he enunciated each syllable of the word "experience"—"to take over." I can hear his voice in my head right now, but he's not talking about three-point turns.

He sat down on a tall metal stool and, with a grunt, thrust his bad leg out toward us. Then he tapped on his thigh, just above the knee, with a closed fist. It made a sound like hard plastic.

"I got clipped by sniper fire in the village of Quo Luk, Vietnam," he said. "If you think you need to know more than that, ask now. Next topic, lane changes."

There was a hush in the classroom. Someone's stomach growled. What did I know about the Vietnam War? My history class was still talking about the cotton gin. What did I know about getting shot and hobbling around on a plastic leg? I'm still trying to figure it out, my vision admittedly skewed, a cliché fed by years of war movies: Mr. White walks alone on a dusty road, enters a thatched hut village. He sits down on a fallen tree trunk, fumbles for his rations or for a cigarette. His shoes are covered with muck from marching through the jungle. The place is deserted, eerily quiet. The village seems abandoned. Where's the rest of his platoon? He lights his cigarette and notices a shoe in the dirt behind one of the huts, a shoe just like his, but empty, laces cut, in the stained dirt, dirt stained the color of —And right when he realizes he's the only one left, right when he reaches for his gun, a shot comes from nowhere, then another, tearing open his knee. He drops to the ground and hides behind the tree. His mouth twists in angry agony. The blood flows out from between his fingers as he presses his hands to the wound.

My imagination always gets it wrong. He would not have been alone, walking into a village. If he had been alone, he would not have survived.

Week two was eventful. During the break, Kevin asked me out. The class was two hours long, and the break always came halfway through, for twenty minutes. Twenty minutes was a long time. We went upstairs to the shopping level. Kevin bought me green Jelly Bellies, and we played volleyball with a balled up handout about parallel parking at a net that was set up in sporting goods. He told me his parents were divorced, and his mom still lived in Cal-

ifornia. He wouldn't see her until Thanksgiving. That's so sad, I told him. I thought about how all the cool kids I knew—the ones who were allowed to stay out till midnight, who wore designer blue jeans and had brand new Betamaxes—had divorced parents. But it wasn't their stuff I admired; there was something romantic about their tragic circumstance, the burden borne in solitude, their stoic worldliness. Not that I wanted my parents to divorce, but I tried to picture them living apart, me and my sister going to stay with my dad on weekends. I couldn't. I was better at imagining myself as Jane Eyre, with no family at all.

The store closed at 9:00 P.M., but our class wasn't over until 9:30, so each night we exited through the darkened hosiery department, past rows of mannequin legs that had been severed at the knee and sheathed in various opaque shades of pantyhose. In the dark, they stood above the shopping floor like rent-a-cops, oblivious to the low-lives slipping by in the shadows. I imagined Mr. White's plastic leg standing tall alongside the others, wearing a sheer sandal-toed variety in nude. Gentlemen prefer Hanes.

The first night of week three, the class ran a few minutes late, because Mr. White was going on about the importance of keeping the right amount of empty space in front of you on the highway, one car length for every ten miles of speed. Now, I understand that this will never work, because if you ever have six car lengths ahead of you on I-95, four cars will cut in front of you to fill up the space. But while Mr. White was diagramming car lengths for us, there was a smell of sulfur, and then smoke drifted up from somewhere behind me. I turned around, and it was Todd, sucking on a Marlboro. He narrowed his eyes at me, and I almost looked away. Then, he formed an "O" with his mouth and blew a perfect smoke ring in my direction. Mr. White's voice boomed from the front of the room, and I whipped my head around.

"No smoking during class," he said. This was before the invention of indoor air quality.

"Class is over," said Todd.

"I guess you didn't understand me," said Mr. White. "Put it out, boy."

Everyone watched Todd stand up and shove away an empty desk that blocked the aisle in front of him. The metal feet of the chair screeched against the linoleum at a particularly excruciat-

ing pitch. He strutted out the door into the dark corridor. I saw the circle of red on the end of his cigarette recede. When I turned back, Kevin was staring at me. I smiled, but he looked away. A moment later, one of Todd's friends let out a belly laugh. We looked behind us, and in the doorway was a naked mannequin. Todd was hiding in the darkness and with one hand held the mannequin up by its ample and nippleless breast. There was some half-suppressed chuckling and snorting.

"Oh, baby," the mannequin moaned. "You can have the right of way with me." A little puff of cigarette smoke wafted into the room from behind the mannequin's head. There was something else: She was missing a leg.

Mr. White's desk creaked. Like in a tennis match, we all turned to the front to see what he'd do. He swung his leg down from the desk, where he'd been half-sitting. Sweat was popping on his forehead like dew, but being the adult, he exercised self-control.

"Class dismissed," he said quietly, though not the acquiescent or soothing kind of quiet, but rather the kind of quiet that carries a foretaste of menace.

Todd was gone before we reached the hallway. The smell of his smoke still hung in the air.

Kevin and his dad picked me up in a white '79 Caprice. Kevin sat in front, so I had the whole expanse of back seat to myself. The leather squeaked every time we stopped at a light, and Kevin would turn around and look at me, but we barely talked until we were alone. Ever try to figure out what you talked about on a date when you were fifteen? Rocket science and Great Books, right? While we ate pizza, I asked him about California. He told me about surfing in Malibu and Santa Monica, about the tiny scar on his chin from a bad wipeout, about seeing Victoria Principal walk down the street.

"Is she pretty in person?" I asked.

"Sure," said Kevin. "But I guess she looks better on TV."

Everything does. I always wanted to go to California because I was sure I'd be instantly transformed into some beautiful, golden creature.

We saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I didn't tell Kevin I'd already seen it, but I suspected he had, too. In between the good scenes, he kissed me, perfectly competent, respectful first-date kissing. I

thought about Mr. White and his leg. There was no blood in this movie. Did his leg actually get blown off, or was it amputated? Either way, I guessed there would be a lot of blood.

At the end of week three, Mr. White showed us slides of drunk driving accidents and talked about the importance of staying sober on the road.

“Drunk driving is no joke,” he said. “You drive drunk, best you can do is lose your license. Worst you can do is kill someone, kill yourself.”

Todd and his friends coughed behind me, “Bud. J. D. Drink Bud. J. D.”

I wondered how Mr. White ended up teaching our class. If he had a teaching certificate, he could have been a real teacher; I knew that much even then. Now, I think he probably was a real teacher, moonlighting for the extra cash. Maybe he went to college on the GI Bill when he got home with his medal and his honorable discharge.

Back then, I wondered what he did in the daytime, but I didn't imagine that he went to work. I figured he slept late, ate corn flakes in his jammies and drew up new diagrams for our class on paper napkins. Or he hung around his apartment in a sleeveless undershirt and boxer shorts, not hiding the plastic leg because there was no one there to see, anyway. Maybe he didn't even put the leg on when he was at home. Maybe he hobbled around on a crutch and sat on the couch watching “Hollywood Squares,” cursing. Why did Paul Lynde always get the center square? Why not Rosey Grier or Nipsey Russell? Why'd they always try to keep the black man down? Or maybe there was somebody there. He didn't wear a ring, but I think he had a lady friend who made him dinner sometimes, and then he didn't take his pants off except in the dark because he hated for her to see the stump. Maybe she waited for him in the dark in a red satin nightie, but after that third week he came home and said, “Not tonight, baby,” because he couldn't get Todd's mocking face out of his head. Maybe he got mad and had to go out for a walk so he wouldn't slap her when she went all sympathetic on him. “Tell me about it, honey,” she'd say, her eyes puppying up. He hated it when she felt sorry for him because of the leg. And she'd pretend she didn't, insist she didn't, but she really did, really. And she hated when he didn't take it off before they made love, because he was in a hurry

or he wanted it for traction. She hated the way the plastic felt rubbing against her thigh, all cold, when the other side was warm, warm, warm.

Week four, during a break, Kevin kissed me inside the tent camper that was on display in sporting goods. When we came out, he had his arm around me, and Todd was there, lying on a weight bench and pumping iron, clenching an unlit cigarette between his teeth. A vein bulged in the middle of his forehead, and his face was red with exertion. He'd stripped off the flannel shirt and hung it over the weight stand. I could see the outline of his pectoral muscles and his nipples under the T-shirt. I began to sweat in important places. I wondered if this was how animals felt. I swallowed. Todd's biceps overwhelmed the sleeves of his T-shirt, pushing them back so that when he lifted the weights above his head, I could see the black hair in his armpits. I realized I was an animal. When Todd saw me and Kevin, he curled his lip and snorted. I stood there anyway, staring like an idiot, until Kevin put his hand on my waist and steered me back to the elevator.

"Grit," Kevin muttered. This was another word for redneck. I wonder if it referred to the breakfast cereal or to the axle grease under their fingernails.

"Do they have grits in California?" I asked.

"No. Just freaks. Potheads. Rednecks only live in the South, not the West."

"This isn't the South," I said. "This is a Mid-Atlantic State."

"Tell the grits that," said Kevin. We were standing near the hanger smokestack. Kevin started to spin the hangers on their pole. "Why do you think Todd hates Mr. White so much?" he asked, as if he knew the answer. He had a whole stack spinning at once. It made a loud clatter.

"'Cause White won't let him smoke in the classroom," I said.

"Come on," Kevin leaned into me. "It's 'cause he's black."

"No way. He's just bored with the class. It's a boring class."

"You think it's boring?" Kevin looked annoyed.

"The breaks aren't boring," I said.

"I guess not." And he kissed me again. Come on, baby, surf with me.

Right turn on red. Did I know about that before? I never paid attention when I went places in the car until that class. The

meaning of a red light was always unambiguous: You stop. End of story. Now, it seemed, it was okay to go on red, as long as you took some reasonable precautions. Mr. White used the word “judgment.”

“You must have good judgment,” he said. “Someone could be turning left from across the intersection.” He scribbled a diagram on the board. “Or someone could be coming straight across from the left. And who has the right-of-way in that situation? Mr. Thorpe?”

“The driver with the green light always has the right-of-way,” said Kevin.

“Anybody wanna disagree with Mr. Thorpe?” Mr. White asked.

A girl in front raised her hand. “But at a four-way stop, the driver on the right has the right-of-way. So maybe the person on the left has to let me go?”

“But you aren’t at a four-way stop. You’re at a red light. You got no right-of-way at all. The burden’s on you to make sure the way is clear. Mr. Thorpe is correct. The driver with the green has the right-of-way. Exceptions, anyone?”

No one raised his hand.

“I’m sure y’all thought this was too obvious to mention,” said Mr. White. “A pedestrian in the crosswalk always has the right-of-way. And even when they don’t, even if they’re jaywalking, you let ‘em go. Why?”

Kevin raised his hand again. “Because you don’t want to hit a pedestrian.”

“‘Cause when they’re dead, are you gonna feel good that you had the right-of-way? See, I’m not taking anything for granted in this class,” said Mr. White. “Let’s review. Right turn on red: When to go?”

“When the way is clear,” someone said.

“And you use your what?”

“Judgment,” someone else said.

“Good judgment is innate,” said Mr. White.

“Who’s Nate?” asked Todd.

It was okay to miss one class without making it up, but you couldn’t miss more than one and still graduate to the road lessons. The last night of the fifth week, Kevin missed a class. He had stomach flu. I wondered if I would get it. He’d kissed me just

the other day, in a fitting room during the break. I was about to let him prove that he could undo my bra-hook with one hand, but we got caught by the saleslady in Better Ready-to-Wear. She knocked on the door and asked if I needed any help. Twenty minutes must've seemed like a long time to her, too.

Kevin answered in a falsetto, "No thanks, honey."

I smacked him on the arm.

"Everyone's called 'honey' around here," he said afterward.

So the night he was sick, he called me at home to say he couldn't come to class, but I'd already left. I wasn't sure what to do at break time without Kevin. A bunch of people were walking to the Orange Bowl for pizza, but I wasn't hungry. I thought about playing basketball in sporting goods, but they'd removed the hoop and replaced it with a dart board. Instead, I haunted the Estée Lauder counter, testing the lavender eye shadow. When I looked in the big round mirror, I could see the reflection of Todd and his friends smoking in the mall, just beyond the store entrance. I sampled some lipstick, "Plum Pretty," and ambled back through sporting goods.

"Hey."

I looked around but didn't see anyone.

"Babe."

I stopped and put my hands on my hips. "All right. Who's there?"

"It's not Ke-*vin*," the voice sang. It was coming from the general vicinity of the camping display. I walked slowly in that direction. "Boo-hoo!" the voice continued. "Loverboy's left you all alone. What will you ever do?"

"Shut up," I said as I got closer.

A cough came from inside the tent camper. "Tough chick. Don't hurt me. Oh, hurt me, please."

I lifted the flap of the tent, and there in the half-light was Todd. "You," I said. "I knew it." I swatted the flap closed and turned to walk away, but Todd was quicker and grabbed my wrist, pulling me into the tent.

He flicked on his cigarette lighter, so I could see his triumphant smile and the dark stubble on his chin. He did not let go of my wrist. "What's the rush? There's ten more minutes." He wasn't wearing a watch, but he was right.

In English class at school, we read *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and

there was the part where Stanley says to Blanche, "We've had this date from the beginning." I thought of that when Todd put his other arm around my waist and pulled me against him. I could feel his dick pushing at me from inside his chinos. I giggled. He kissed me short and hard, then backed off. He smelled like cigarettes, but he tasted like Trident. He had chewed gum for me.

"What you laughing at?" he asked. He tossed his head, and his brown forelock swung in front of his eyes.

"I don't think I'm your type, exactly," I said.

"What's my type, exactly?"

"You know. Bleached hair, black eyeliner, French-cut jeans. Names like Serena."

"Takes one to know one," he said. He bowed his head to suck on my collarbone where it was revealed at the open neck of my polo shirt and worked his way up to whisper in my ear. "So, that's why we're here," he said, as his hand slithered under my shirt, "'cause I like slutty chicks, not prissy-ass goody-goods." He licked my ear. "And you like Kevins." He straightened up suddenly and stared down at me. "I'm a dumb redneck to you, right, babe?" Without warning, he reached out with the hand that wasn't around my breast and brushed my hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear in a way that was at once overly familiar and oddly tender. Now, when men do that to me I want to shrug them away. But when he did it, I couldn't say anything. I was having a rare epiphany. Todd, I realized, was a fraud. And it really was easy to unhook my bra one-handed.

Then he kissed me again, and if Kevin kissed like a fish, a teasing nibble here and there, Todd was a shark, carnivorous, devouring. I would sit in class for the rest of the evening feeling like I was covered with a protective film of Todd, and at the same time feeling like I had him inside me, because when I breathed, it was his breath that came out of my mouth, and when I swallowed, it was his spit that ran down the back of my throat.

When I stepped out of the tent to go to class, I saw Mr. White limping by on his way to the elevator. He nodded to me as he passed. Todd came out behind me, and I thought I saw Mr. White's eyes get narrow. Todd had a Plum Pretty face. Ten minutes could be a long time.

Todd missed the next class. I heard he had stomach flu.

The last night of class, everyone was there. I sat with Kevin like

always, but I could feel Todd eyeballing me from behind. What if he said something? I didn't want to hurt Kevin's feelings, and anyway fooling around with Todd didn't mean anything, not really.

Mr. White told us he'd review everything during the first half of class, and after the break, we would take the written test. If we passed, we could go on to the road lessons. He was going over the part about emergency handling and accident avoidance.

"That's right. Always turn the wheel in the direction of the skid," he said. "And how do you avoid the most common type of accident?"

"Keep enough space between you and the car in front of you," said Kevin.

"Dork," coughed the boys in back.

"Right on, Mr. Thorpe," said Mr. White. "And what do you do if someone cuts you off?"

"Slow down to maintain your distance," someone said.

"Flip him the bird," said Todd. "Ram his ass."

"Beat his brains out," said one of Todd's friends.

"Blow his legs off," said another.

"Slow down," Mr. White wrote on the board in large letters and circled it. Then he turned quickly, grimacing with the effort of propelling his leg around, and stood glaring at the back of the class. After a moment of silence in which we all had a chance to read the doom imprinted on his furrowed brow, he said, "Get. Out." He didn't shout or lose control. "You. You. You," he pointed. "Outta here. Now."

Todd's friends looked like they hadn't heard right. "What about the test?" asked Todd.

"Now you're worried about the test?" Mr. White shook his head in frustration. "Take it from somebody else. Make an appointment at the central office. I don't care. Get out of my classroom."

We stared at the three of them while they stood up and shoved their chairs over, lit their cigarettes, and headed for the door. They took their time leaving so they could smoke and flick their ashes on the floor. One of them muttered, "Fuckin' nigger," on his way out, loud enough for everyone to hear. The collective gasp of the class in response seemed to suck all the air out of the room. I was sure it wasn't Todd. When they were finally gone, and we could all exhale, Kevin reached over and squeezed my leg to say "I told you so." Mr. White sat down heavily on the desk, resting

his bad leg on a chair, and stared into the space between him and all of us. I felt sorry for him, more sorry than I felt about his leg. He didn't say anything. No one did. A few minutes later, he called the break. It was early, but he said we'd had enough reviewing; we were ready for the test.

Kevin and I stood in the corridor with the rest of the class, waiting for the elevator. "Do you wanna study during the break?" Kevin asked.

"I don't think we need to, do you?"

"No," said Kevin. "Wanna go camping?" That was his cute way of saying he wanted to fool around. He put his hand on the back of my neck and left it there. It made me feel a little like a dog on a choke chain. I didn't know what to say. I was half-afraid we'd open the tent flap and find Todd in there. Was Todd right about me? Was I a Todd-kind-of-girl or a Kevin-kind-of-girl? Why did I feel like I had to choose? Did anyone else have to? While I was figuring it out, the doors opened, and there was Todd standing in the elevator instead, smacking his palm with a brand new baseball bat from sporting goods. He looked at me and then at Kevin. I didn't meet his eyes but watched the muscles move smoothly under the skin of his forearm as he raised and lowered the bat.

"Shit," said Kevin, not moving except to lift his hand off my neck.

"What the hell?" It was Mr. White's voice coming from somewhere behind me, and before I had a chance to tell Kevin that the tent sounded pretty good about now, Mr. White growled, "Outta my way," and we all got out of his way. Kevin took me by the arm and dragged me backwards so fast I almost fell on the floor. We stood with our backs pressed against the mannequin dumpster.

"You want a piece of me, you dumbass? You want a piece of me?" Mr. White had instantly assumed this martial-arts-type stance, his fists gathered up near his collar in a pre-strike position. He stood with his legs apart, not at all clumsy on the fake one. "You think you can take me?" Mr. White hissed. "I'm trained in hand-to-hand combat, you white-fucking-trailer-trash."

Todd's eyes widened, as if he'd temporarily blacked out and come to holding the bat with no idea how he got there. I had a sudden image of his parents at home. There was his dad, the biceps all gone to fat around a tattoo of a fiery cross, nailing AstroTurf to the front stoop with a staple gun, while his mom

chucked the broken toaster out on the lawn next to the broken TV set.

“Holy shit,” Kevin whispered excitedly. “This is gonna be like Bruce Lee.”

“They’ve had this date from the beginning,” I said.

“What?” said Kevin.

Sometimes in movies, the fight scenes happen in slow motion, and that’s how it seemed to me when I watched Todd and Mr. White. Even though it was over in a matter of seconds, the whole scene plays back slow and dreamy in my mind’s eye.

Todd stepped off the elevator and paused as if he hadn’t planned on this course of action at all but felt compelled toward it now like a salmon who suddenly realizes how stupid it is to swim upstream yet can’t quite stop itself all the same, and then he swung the bat at Mr. White’s head. I’m guessing that Todd had a good five inches and forty pounds on Mr. White. He missed anyway. The two men circled, with Todd taking another swing and Mr. White ducking to avoid the bat, his fake knee bending ever-so-slightly. Then, White made his move. It was so fast that even though I was watching the whole time, I felt like I didn’t see it happen. When Todd swung the bat again, Mr. White grabbed it with both hands. Todd hung on, and White whomped him in the chest with the handle of the bat, knocking the wind out of him. Now, I’m thinking that the only reason Mr. White didn’t bat him in the nose when he had the chance was that he was trying not to draw blood. Anyway, Todd was on the ground hyperventilating. Mr. White stood over him until he looked like he was going to catch his breath, and then White was on him, pinning him to the linoleum by pressing the side of the bat against his neck and his good knee in Todd’s crotch. I tried not to remember the feeling of that crotch grinding against me on the floor of the tent. Todd grabbed for White’s neck, squeezing the veins that stood out there as White pressed down on the bat. He held on briefly, his arms shuddering with the effort, but finally he had to let go. Todd was struggling to breathe, his eyes bulging out, when Mr. White leaned in real close to his face and cleared his throat, as if he was about to hock a big loogie on Todd’s cheek. But he didn’t.

“You’ll be glad to see the cops, won’t you?” Mr. White said. “Someone call the police,” he ordered.

“Come on,” said Kevin, grabbing me by the wrist.

“Wait a minute,” I said.

“Come on,” he repeated, dragging me past the rest of the students who were standing around gawking, and past Todd, who was making gurgling sounds from underneath the bat. I hated to see him like that. His eyes, wet and startled, flitted to me as I walked by, but I pretended not to notice.

“Can you believe how White took him down? Man, that was awesome,” said Kevin.

Upstairs, we walked to the make-up counter, and Kevin asked the saleslady to call the police. I put on some misty blue eye shadow.

“Do you think we still have to take the test?” I asked.

“Maybe they’ll pass us all because of emotional trauma,” said Kevin.

It ended up we had to take the test by appointment at the Simple Safe Solution offices. I half-expected to see Todd there. I still didn’t think he had called Mr. White the Name. I wonder if he ever showed up.

After the class was over, Kevin called me a couple of times and asked me out, but I made up excuses.

About a month ago, I stopped into Mackleby-Warner. I hadn’t been there in years, since I got married and moved from the neighborhood and divorced. I was driving back from the lawyer’s office, George Thorogood howling on the oldies station, when I passed the store and pulled an illegal U-turn into the lot. I saw right away that the whole place had gone downhill. All the fabrics looked too shiny and cheap, the lighting was too bright and yellow, and the carpet was gray and unraveling. On a whim, I went to the cosmetics counter and put on the thickest, blackest eyeliner I could find. I prowled the sporting goods department, not really looking for the tent camper, I told myself, and the place where I thought it had been was stacked with paintball guns and in-line skates. There was a hoop, though, so I shot a few baskets.

I walked out onto the mall past some guys who were hunched over their cigarettes, slouching against the wall. Not much had changed, after all. As I passed, I heard a tar-laden voice say, “Babe,” and I half-turned, not even half, just enough to see if he meant me.