

FLETCHER & CLARK

FORMAL CONSTRAINTS

Pigeons congregate on the track and peck at the litter and gravel. Fletcher stands with Clark on the platform, and watches her watch them.

—Thanks for coming down here with me, she says.

—No problem, Fletcher says.

—I don't know why I just couldn't come down here myself. I just really wanted somebody to come with me.

—Glad I could help, Fletcher says.

—I think maybe I'm depressed, Clark says.

Fletcher weighs his responses for a minute. —I think maybe that's going around, he says.

—I wonder if this is how people feel at the onset of a totalitarian regime, she says. —You know? There's this sense that the gates are coming down, and that things are going to get worse before they get better, and that the smartest thing to do might be to run while we still can... Do you get that?

—Uh, Fletcher says. —I think I'm just lonely.

Clark looks over at him, squinting in the cold brightness.

—You know how long it's been since my last date? he says. —Two years.

What he wants to happen here is he wants Clark to snap her fingers and say something like *you know what? We should go out.* But he knows that this is pure fantasy. They've been friends for a damn long time and she's never

shown him even the faintest degree of attraction. But he secretly holds on to an eroded sliver of hope, and when he offers her an opportunity to express an interest in him—some interest that just might be there, that she has maybe somehow kept hidden for five years now—he feels the presence of that sliver. And when she passes those opportunities by he feels it twist within him.

—Two years, she says. —Wow.

—Tell me about it, Fletcher says. A secret rises slowly towards his surface. —I'm actually, he says. He can feel her attention on him. He toes a loose pebble, kicks it down onto the tracks. —I'm actually considering trying an online dating service.

—What? Clark says. —Really?

—Yeah, says Fletcher. —I've been looking at a couple of different online personals sites. It was, uh, originally— I mean the reason I *started* looking at them was not to find a date but because I was trying to get, you know, food for the poem. Language.

—OK, Clark says.

—But the sites are actually kind of interesting, he says.

—How so?

—Well, uh, they give you this questionnaire to fill out, right? You know, height, weight, turn-ons, turn-offs. And everybody tries to answer the questions in ways that will make them stand out, seem appealing, make them come off as, you know, clever, witty, sexy, whatever. So within the question-and-answer format, which is actually pretty restrictive, people demonstrate a lot of inventiveness. It's just like trying to work with a poetic form. How much individuality can you display within a formal constraint? After I read a few of these ads they began to seem like a contemporary version of the villanelle or the sonnet.

—Oh yeah?

—Yeah. So of course I decided to try it.

—So what does your ad say?

—I'm still revising it, he says. —What celebrity do you think I most resemble?

–You're asking the wrong person, she says.

–The best I've been able to come up with is Larry David.

–I don't even know who that is, she says.