

AUSTIN & LYDIA

# WANTING TO BE A DAD

—I want your cock inside me, Lydia breathes into Austin's ear.

—Yeah, he gasps. —Hang on.

Normally, when they're ready to fuck, he sits up and gets a condom out of the little African carved box, and she keeps her hand around his penis so that he doesn't lose his erection while he fumbles with the wrapper. It's a strategy that's become habit over the past year; it works. Only this time, as he begins to climb off of her, she grabs his shoulders, pulls him back down.

—No, wait, she says. —Just . . . go ahead.

—But, he says. —The condom.

—Don't worry about it, she says.

—No, he says. —Just let me. . . He tries again to get up; and as she releases him she sighs (he can hear the note of exasperation).

He gets the condom on; they fuck. After they finish they're lying there in the dark and she works up the nerve to ask.

—How come you always wear a condom when we fuck? she asks.

She can hear him laugh. A tiny laugh, bitter, almost a cough. —Uh, he says, —there's a little thing called *pregnancy*?

—I'm on the pill, Lydia says. —You know this. It's safe.

In order to say this she has to repress a minor surge of guilt: over the course of the past year she's gotten kind of lax about taking her pill every

day. It seems kind of redundant, because of the condom thing. She takes it almost every day, but some days she forgets—some mornings she takes two, attempting to catch up.

—Yeah, Austin says, but the way I figure it, condoms *with* the pill is safer than *just* condoms, or *just* the pill. I mean, I want to have kids someday, but— and he laughs that bitter cough-laugh again —not *now*.

He remembers Rose here. She had problems with birth control, too. She didn't like condoms, didn't want them in her place, didn't want to know that Austin had them. This was a remnant from her religious upbringing. She was in the middle of a program of getting away from her background—coming to Chicago was part of that plan; she thought that she could start over with a new self if only she could get away from her folks and from all the people who knew her as religious—but the program wasn't complete, and the combination of forces within her had driven her attitude towards sex into a complex grain that Austin could never quite fully map.

Rose's official position was that she wasn't ready to have sex; that they weren't having sex at all. Condoms compromised this policy and so she didn't want them around. But when she and Austin would end up in bed together, they'd spend hours circling closer and closer to the actual act of fucking, yearning for the release that they both knew could be found there. And there were times when she'd pull him inside her. This was how Austin lost his virginity. Sometimes she would let him in for only a second, the duration of one full, deep stroke. And sometimes he could stay in for longer. As long as he pulled out before he came it was OK. They weren't always careful.

He remembers trying to figure out what they should do. Looking down through the overpass fence at cars, angry, wanting to do something stupid and murderous, wanting to throw something heavy through someone's windshield. On one level wanting to be a dad.

—Well, *duh*, Lydia says. —I'm not ready to have kids *either*. But, I don't know, don't you want to be able to, like. . . *feel* me better?

—It's not just the pregnancy thing, Austin says. —I mean, there's also like the *disease* thing. . .

—You think I might be *diseased*? Lydia says.

—No, Austin says. He sighs. —But, I mean, I don't know. . . I just figure better safe than sorry. . .

—I can't believe that you've been thinking about me that way *all this time*, Lydia says. —That like *fucking me* is like a goddamn question of *risk management* for you.

Austin closes his eyes and wishes he was somewhere, anywhere, else.

He's talked to Rose twice since Christmas. The conversations have been tentative and brief, mainly just catching up, sharing their complaints about their respective jobs, joking about resolutions. She hasn't asked if he's involved with anyone, and he hasn't told her. She will be visiting in February.