

FLETCHER

RATS LIVE ON NO EVIL STAR

Fletcher walks around his apartment in slippers, listening to Sunny Murray's *Sunshine and an Even Break*. His ankles are cold. He sips a beer, swills it around in his mouth, taps his pointer finger against his lips. The streets outside are bathed in the amber glow of municipal lamplight.

He's been corresponding lately with a woman who responded to his personal ad. *Jane Hirshfield is my favorite poet*, she wrote, in her initial communication. *What's your favorite palindrome?*

Hirshfield, he'd thought. *Good answer*. He located his copy of Hirshfield's book *The October Palace* on his shelf. It's on his desk right now, sitting on top of an unread sheaf of printouts about Iraq that Clark gave him, something about Oliver North and the Iran / Iraq war of the 80s. He's been using Hirshfield poem titles for the subject lines of his responses to this new woman, and she picked up on it, she's been doing the same right back. *Perceptibility Is a Kind of Attentiveness. A Recurring Possibility. The World.* Neither of them have acknowledged what they're doing. He considered titling his last response *The Answering Yes*, after the name of a section in Hirshfield's book, but he chickened out—it almost seems too bold, too naked an expression of interest. And he's not yet ready to tip his hand too much. He doesn't want to be vulnerable; he knows that things may well fall apart the first time they get together. He remembers his coffee date with Charlotte, just before New Year's Eve, talking to her about the Ph.D. program, going into layers of detail about his exams, approaching in March, watching her focus instead on the act of stirring her cocoa, watching her turn to look out the window at shoppers and dogs, and he knew she would rather be anywhere than here, listening to him, and he thought *sweet merciful fuck I am blowing this*.

He doesn't want to blow this one. He doesn't know much about her yet but what he does know he likes. He likes that she's finishing up getting her

graduate certificate in Theory and Criticism at the Art Institute right now. He likes it that she's been to Greece. He liked the question about the palindrome. He noticed that the name he knows her as, 8Cassandra8, the name she has chosen for herself here, has a palindromic quality in and of itself, a symmetry. Even the eights are symmetrical, along two axes. He answered *rats live on no evil star* and when she responded the next day with *satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas* something panged within him. The tiny pain that is the beginning of longing.

And so tonight he's walking around, staring up at the ceiling fan instead of writing to her again. He needs to think about his next move. Her last note to him contained only the following:

Before this goes any further I have a question to ask you and I know it might sound weird but I need to know. How do you feel about kids?

He's not really sure how he feels about kids. He knows that Clark doesn't want kids and so sometimes when he's walking somewhere with her and they pass a playground or something he'll say *oh, look at all the cute little parasites* but he doesn't get the feeling that that joke will go over well in this instance.

He sips his beer, and tries, seriously, to think about the idea of children but all he can summon to mind is the junk that seems to accompany them: brightly-colored plastic tubs, board books, a sprawl of strewn chunky toys, everything filmed with dried formula and drool. As a culture he can't say that it attracts him.

And yet he can see himself as a father. Or so he tells himself. When he attempts it, he finds that it takes surprising effort to get this vision to come through as anything stronger than a flicker. He can summon up a hazy rain of notions, but these do not congeal into an image; he cannot see this future clearly enough to feel drawn towards it.

He sits down at the computer; turns it on. He will try to feel his way to an answer; hopefully something that's better than *I've got nothing against kids*.

But he wonders. Why would she even ask such a thing? He's not sure he likes any of the possible answers.