

MARVIN

MISINTERPRETATION

OK, yes, there was a time when he was interested in Lydia. He'd love to say that there wasn't—it seems so embarrassing to him now—but if you got him talking about it he'd explain. He'd say *just think for a minute*. You're single. And you live with a woman. And day in and day out she walks around in like her *bathrobe*. You can't help but notice that she's got legs, *nice* legs. Or you're sitting in your room and you see her walk by, she goes into the bathroom and you hear the shower come on. The next thing you know you're picturing her: steam, lather, wet skin, the whole deal. If you're a single guy living with a woman it's inevitable—you're going to wonder about what she would be like in bed. (OK, Paul wouldn't, obviously, but Paul's his own special deal, Marvin's talking about, you know, normal guys.)

For a while he wondered if Lydia was trying to give him a signal, trying to let him know that she was waiting for him to make a move. Like that night when they watched *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*: they're sitting there on the couch, kind of next to one another, and her arms disappeared inside her sweater and a minute later she pulled her bra out through her sleeve. She caught him looking at it, and she kind of shook it in his face before dropping it into her lap. And then there was like this *bra* sitting there and all he could think about were breasts. Her breasts. Cause she had just reminded him that they were like *in there*, under the sweater and the undershirt or whatever, and she must have *known* that he'd be sitting there thinking about them (or so he thought at the time), she must have *wanted him* to be sitting there thinking *wow, she's not wearing a bra* (that's what he thought, but he was wrong, that's the embarrassing part; when he looks back on it now he understands that she must have just *done* it without having thought at all about how he'd react, she took off her bra the same way he'd take off his shoes or something, but at the time he was *certain* that she was trying to trigger some kind of lust in him, and, dead wrong, he spent an hour trying to work up the nerve to move his hand to her leg. It blew the entire rest of the movie for him because his entire frame of attention became focused around the drama of the couch, him, her, the two of them so close that he could smell her shampoo. His hand just barely grazing the scalloped fold of her jeans at the knee. His mind full of questions—*Did she just shift? Towards me or away from me? Is it a sign? Does she want me to keep going?* Eventually the movie ended and she stood up and brushed herself off and said *well, I'm going to bed*, and even then he wondered if she was inviting him to follow.).

He figured it out. You go into someone's room late at night, you sit on the edge of her bed and make tiny offerings of small talk, you wait and wait for her to embrace you and eventually she says *I need to get some sleep; I'll see you tomorrow*. That can only happen so many times before you get the message. The message that she's not trying to send you a message.

It didn't hurt too bad, really. Even at his most optimistic he had always felt like she was out of his league. Look who she's dating now, this guy Austin, some fucking blond-haired *musician* who's probably got like *soulful eyes* or whatever—he can't compete with that, can't compete with a guy who can play the guitar, the kind of guys who are going to like Lydia with her fucking weird CDs; he knows it. Whatever.

It doesn't matter, actually. It all worked out for the best. If he hadn't given up on Lydia, he probably wouldn't have walked away from the Dungeons and Dragons campaign they'd started, and if he hadn't done that he wouldn't have started playing the vampire game, and if he hadn't done that he would never have met Astrid. And Astrid—well, Astrid is an unbelievable dream. The first time they fooled around, the day after Christmas, in her tiny purple room in the attic of her parents' house in Lincolnwood, they kissed for maybe fifteen minutes and then she said *OK, I want you to tie me up now*. He'd never done anything like that before. They'd never talked about it. But she pulled out this box from under her bed that was full of like handcuffs and restraints and leather straps—who knows where she got all this crap—and pretty soon he had her on her stomach with her dress hiked up and he was spanking her with a flat-backed hairbrush and he came without even taking his pants off, pretty much just from listening to her squeal into her pillow. *I'm never going to let go of this person*, he thought right then, lying splayed across her, exhausted.

Lately, Astrid's been talking a lot about Gloria, a tiny Central American girl who just joined the vampire game and who wears her hair in sweet pigtails. Tonight after the game they all went out to a diner and as Gloria was leaving Astrid leaned over and bit Marvin's ear and whispered *I want her; I want you to watch me take her*. And then he went home in a heady fever and lay in bed just thinking about it, thinking about it, thinking about it, trying not to let himself believe that it might actually happen.

He thinks about what she said. *I want you to watch me take her*. No room for misinterpretation there. This is the way every time. She says *I want this; do this*. And every time he has the same reaction: he says *Um, really?* and as soon as he's sure she's serious he says *OK*.