

LYDIA

STANDBY

Austin's place is dark when she lets herself in; she flips on the lights and turns up the heat. Tonight's Tuesday; Austin is over at Darren's. He won't be back until ten or so. It used to be that she wouldn't have bothered coming over on a night when Austin has band practice, but she doesn't want to go home; she doesn't want to see Marvin, not after that business with the girls. Even thinking about it skeeves her. So she stays at Austin's as often as she can now.

Which is to say *as often as he'll let her*. Sometimes she'll call him in the morning to ask about what he wants for dinner and he'll say something like *tonight's not good; I've got some stuff I need to catch up on*. Stuff. Quote unquote. He never says what. Sometimes she'll ask and he'll get annoyed and huffy: *I don't know. Just stuff. I need to, you know, wash the dishes, clean up my room*. What she thinks is *you can do those things with me there* but she's learned enough not to say something like that. When a guy asks for space you just have to suck up and *give it to him*; trying to *negotiate* with him will only lead to disaster.

Blob, the cat, pads into the kitchen and looks up at her with a look of grouchy incomprehension, the look a crusty old man would give to a nurse who has roused him from reverie.

—Hey, Blob, she says, and she goes to scratch him on the head. He pulls away. When she tries again he opens his mouth and shows his tiny cat teeth and tries to bite the flesh between her thumb and her hand.

—Fine, she says. —Fuck you then.

She heads into the living room, puts My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* into the CD player, and sits on the sofa for a bit. She takes off her shoes and socks and checks out how the black polish is holding up on her toenails. She tries to read her book but for some reason she can't concentrate on the words.

She decides she'll check her e-mail, even though she checked it ceaselessly throughout the day at work. Maybe she'll send some. She's owed mail to her old friend Maria for a while now.

She goes over to the computer; Austin has left it in standby mode. She smiles, because it's familiar. Austin is always leaving things half-finished; he can be right in the middle of working on some project and he'll get up and walk away from it, distracted by something else. *It's easier to pick it up again later*, he's claimed; she thinks he's just absent-minded.

The screen snaps on and she sees that Outlook Express, his e-mail program, is open. She slides the mouse pointer up to the upper-right-hand corner, preparing to minimize the window, or close it, but she pauses; something has caught her eye: maybe half of the e-mails visible on the screen are from someone named Rose Thaden. She stops.

What the fuck? she thinks.

She's heard Austin mention someone named Rose before, some ex from the distant past.

Slowly, she scrolls down through all the e-mails in his Inbox. There's probably fifty e-mails in there from Rose Thaden. She stares at the subject lines. *Why you matter* is the one that stands out to her.

Don't do this, she says to herself. But she clicks on the e-mail, and she reads it. When she's done she moves on to the next.