

DENISE

NOT AFRAID

She lets Johnny into her apartment—her first visitor. He looks around, lingering especially over the two *Forest Fire* paintings in the kitchen. She shifts nervously in the doorway. —Do you want a beer or something? she asks. —I really like these, Johnny says. He looks at her. —They're really good. She looks at the doorframe. —Thanks, she mumbles.

He has that beer after all, and she has one too, and they get caught up. She learns what happened after Johnny's parents came and took him away. They put him in a Ohio halfway house for six months. She presses him for the details and he says —It sucked. I didn't get straight until they kicked me out. The whole halfway house *thing* is totally fucked. The guys in town who are pushing shit know where the halfway house is; they pretty much know everybody in there; after you're in there for a while they know who you are. So you'll go out to like walk down to the fucking supermarket for some cigarettes and one of these guys will pull up next to you and offer you a ride; and it's like a mile to the supermarket so you're like, sure, why not, it couldn't hurt, just accepting a ride, what the fuck, just two people riding along in a car, no trouble, but you know, secretly, that this guy's got junk and you're hoping, secretly, that he's going to offer you some—and so the next thing you know you're in dude's apartment all afternoon stuck in this fucking unearthly conversation with dude and dude's girlfriend who's like this strung-out snaggle-toothed skank who left home to follow the Rainbow Family or something and now she's like permanently on acid, laying on a mattress with this *stink* coming off of her, like a fucking rancid can of Spaghetti-Os, and all you want is to fucking *shoot* already even though you know that you'll get caught, and you don't have any money so you end up doing things for them, things you never in a million years thought you'd end up doing. He laughs and drinks from his bottle. —So, yeah, he says, —that was the halfway house experience.

He doesn't want to talk any more about the past after that. He wants to talk about the future. One of his old friends from Philly is out in Amsterdam now, with some other punks, starting up some kind of arts collective. —They're going to be doing like puppets and fire performance and shit, Johnny says. —They're getting a space in this old church; he wants me to come out and be a part of it, do sculpture. I think it sounds like a really good thing. So basically, yeah, I'm going to go.

She asks when he's planning to leave. —I don't know, he says. —I need to get like my passport and stuff. It's going to be a fucking pain in the ass because my parents don't want me to go. I lost my driver's license and my folks have all my other ID, like my birth certificate and Social Security card and shit, they keep it in their safety deposit box, and they won't release it to me, I can't get new copies delivered to the house because my mom is always going through my mail and shit—so I was like fuck it, fuck you, I'll go out to Chicago, stay with Rick and Gerhard, use their address until I get the paperwork together, then go. I didn't even tell my parents that I was coming here; I just hopped on a Greyhound and went.

—They don't want you to go to Amsterdam? Denise asks.

—No, Johnny says immediately. —Cause they're scared. See, that's the thing about adults. I've been figuring this out. The thing about adults is that they're afraid of everything. They're actually *more afraid* of things than like kids or teenagers are. That's the kick in the balls about it. You become an adult and you finally have the *money* and the *power* that you need to do something *cool*, and by then you're too afraid to do it, you're so afraid that you don't want your own *kids* trying anything either, and eventually your kids *internalize* this and end up as just another set of frightened adults. I don't want to end up that way. And that means that in my life I have to *combat fear*. I have to wake up, every day, and say *I am not afraid*.

Denise can't imagine what it would be like to not be afraid. She's afraid all the time. Even right now, sitting here in her own kitchen with the man who came closer than anyone else to being someone she could love, she is still too afraid to say what she really wants to say: *I told them. I was the one. I told your parents that you were a junkie. They took you away from your life here and put you in a halfway house because of what I said. It was my fault. I'm sorry.*

She is still too afraid to do what she really wants to do: take off her sunglasses and let him look into her eyes. Let him see everything there is inside her.