

AUSTIN

SUMMER

Austin's getting the A/V equipment hooked up when his new students begin trickling into the Center. The first one to come in is a pudgy Hispanic kid.

—Hey, Austin says, —what's your name?

—Alfonso, says the kid.

Austin holds out his hand. —Gimme five, he says, and Alfonso does.

—All right, Austin says. He's in a fine mood today. Last week the spring session at the Center wound up, and he had a few days to kill before the summer session started, so he decided to take advantage of the opportunity, cough up the hundred bucks (which he doesn't really have) for a rental car, and drive out to Minneapolis to see Rose.

It was good. His second night there he lay in bed with her, and they looked up at the ceiling and talked and held hands. He had forgotten how powerful holding hands could be. He had forgotten how erotic it can feel to have someone stroke your fingers, to have someone run a thumb across your palm.

The third night—his final night out there—he kissed her, and she kissed him back for a minute, but then pulled away and sat up. *I don't know if I'm ready for this*, she said. *I don't want a long-distance relationship. They don't work.*

This isn't a relationship, Austin responded. *This is us. Just us. This is it working.* And she sighed as though she'd released something inside her, something that she'd held onto very tightly for a long time. And they kissed some more. And eventually they just fell asleep like that, holding one another. And then the next day they went out and had some brunch, and he kissed her goodbye and drove six hours back to Chicago.

He's not sure what will happen next. He's not sure what he's doing. He keeps asking himself *why not Minneapolis?*

Okay, the winters would suck. But he likes Minneapolis: he likes its bohemian flavor, its dingy record stores and funky old-school movie theatres. He likes its laid-back pace. One of his nicest memories from the trip is of spending an entire afternoon sitting with Rose out on her porch: she worked on her knitting and he strummed his guitar, making a kind of aimless soundtrack for the kids riding by on their bikes, off being kids, exploring, having adventures. The light was green in the trees and it felt like summer. He can see that as his life.

So maybe the question is more *why Chicago?* What keeps him here?

He hooks the last few cables into the video decks and then wanders among the gathering students. He moves among them to disrupt their emerging rowdiness.

—Hang on, he says, smiling. —Let's give the others a chance to show up before we totally start busting loose, OK?

It's around then that Tanesha, the assistant director of the Center, sticks her head in.

—Hey, Austin, she says. —Got a minute?

—Uh, sure, Austin says. —What's up?

—James wants to talk to you.

—I'm kind of with this group right now, Austin says. —Do you know what he wants?

—He said it would only take a minute, Tanesha says. —I'll watch the kids for you.

—OK, says Austin. —Hey everybody? he says to the kids. —Just stay here for a sec. Tanesha's going to watch you. Be nice to her, OK? I'll be right back.