

DENISE

POTENTIAL

–I don't think Freya likes me, Joshua says.

–What? Denise asks.

Actually she heard him. She's just not sure that he's actually talking to her. He's not looking at her. Instead he is looking at the mobile of dangling rockstars that some employee made long ago out of surplus promo posters and cut-up record sleeves. He is aiming a rubber band at Kim Deal's face.

–Freya? Joshua says. –I don't think she likes me.

Denise considers this. She sees Joshua and Freya work together three times a week, and she hasn't noticed any strong evidence of animosity. If anything she would say the opposite: she has noticed that Freya lingers around him more than an assistant manager would normally be required to linger around a clerk. She has noticed a faint smoldering in the air between them.

–She doesn't seem to *dislike* you, Denise says.

–No, Joshua says. –I guess not. He releases the rubber band; it hits Kim Deal right between the eyes. The cutout face revolves towards Denise, who notices that someone has drawn a speech balloon coming out of its mouth that says FEED ME HEROIN.

–It's weird, Joshua says. –For a while Freya and I were, like, getting together, hanging out after work. He looks at Denise, as though to gauge her reaction, and she is once again glad to be wearing her sunglasses. She feels certain that they mask any sign of her surprise.

–But then she went away, back over the summer, and, I don't know, ever since then we haven't really hung out.

—Her dad died, Denise says.

—Yeah, I know, Joshua says. —I thought about that. But that was like three *months* ago. I mean, it's sad and all, but people get *over* it.

Do they? Denise thinks. She's not so sure. Her own dad died when she was nine; he ran a stoplight while drunk. Thirteen years have gone by since then, but she is aware that his death left something amorphous inside her, a cloudy mass. The part of her that is meant to be shaped by a father. If he had lived he might have taken the cloud and worked it into something solid, a column of rules, a code that would help her find her way in this world. He began this shaping but left it unfinished. This is the way. She got nine years: not much, although she knows that there are people who get less. But it would not have mattered if she got ten years, or twenty-five, or fifty. Parents never finish. There is always the potential for more work to be done, and when you lose a parent that potential is forever left unfulfilled, and you carry the work left undone with you, as a variable, an incalculable weight.

Joshua is still talking. —I kind of thought she was into me, he says.

—Oh, Denise says. —I think she has a boyfriend.

Joshua pauses; a troubled look passes across his face. —I don't think so, he says. —She didn't say anything to me about a boyfriend.

—I think she does, Denise says. —You know that guy who comes in here sometimes? Goes out to lunch with her?

—A guy...?, Joshua says. —No. I think she would have said something to me.

—Maybe he's just a friend, Denise says.

—Maybe, Joshua says. —I still don't know what guy you're talking about.

—Forget it, Denise says.

—OK, Joshua says. —So what about you? Any guys in your life?

There haven't been, not lately, not since she stopped sleeping with Toy and moved out into her own apartment. The spare time and the solitude led her to convert her kitchen into a kind of mini-studio: she set up an easel in there and she's produced a few small canvases, her first since she left SAIC.

Guys. She's felt a few flickers of interest here and there. That guy who came in and interviewed her was interesting. Just by asking one question after the next he got deeper into her than any guy since Johnny. She wishes that she hadn't panicked: it would have been interesting to see where the conversation might have ended up. Maybe she'll talk to him more if she ever sees him again. But she doesn't know if she will. It's like what happened with that guy Gabriel. She ran into him twice in one month and then never saw him again. She still feels her heart leap whenever she sees a tall guy with a brown leather coat, but it is never him.

Mostly she is disinterested in guys at the moment. Their emotions are too obvious. It almost embarrasses her, to look at them, and see desire on their faces so plainly. She looks at Joshua, and sees his coal-black eyes fixed on her. He is waiting for an answer.

—No, she says.