

LYDIA & AUSTIN

A SPACE FOR A SELF

Lydia gets off from work and instead of heading home she decides to go to Austin's. He won't be home. It's Tuesday, and for the past month or so he's been getting together with his friend Darren on Tuesdays for band practice. But she doesn't think he'll mind if she lets herself in. She has her own set of keys.

She hears a gathering rumble as she's coming through the turnstile, and she says *fuck*, and hurries down the stairs while the train pulls in. She catches up to it in time, slipping into the last car a second before the doors close, finding a space for herself among the other people headed home from work. Coming into the electric warmth of the car after just having been out in the blustery Chicago weather makes her nose begin to run, gross. She blots it with the edge of her hand, hopes nobody notices. The train squeals and clatters.

She figures she'll let herself in, watch the new *Buffy* at seven, maybe with some dinner from the Thai place. She'll leave the leftovers for Austin; he'll like that. Afterwards she'll have a shower and curl up in his bed, read one of his books or something, wait for him to get home. He's usually home by ten on nights when he has practice. He'll be so pleased to come home and find her naked in his bed. Probably.

She's been having trouble, lately, feeling certain that Austin is attracted to her. They still have sex a lot, once a week probably on the average, but he never really seems to be *driven wild* by the idea of having sex with her. He just seems sort of *agreeable to the notion*. She wonders if that means that there's something wrong with her. Or maybe it's something wrong with him. *I'm attractive*, she thinks. *I'm twenty-two—in my prime. I've got nice tits—any guy would be happy with me. So what the hell?*

Her train moves northwest, in a line towards Austin, who sits on a stool in front of the stereo in his bedroom. Darren had to cancel practice tonight, on account of being ravaged by some virus, so Austin, lacking anything better to do, decided to practice anyway, by himself. He listens to songs on the *Folk Anthology*, plays along on the guitar, sings.

John Henry said to his captain / I am a Tennessee man / But before I let that steamer beat me down / Lord, I'll die with my hammer in my hand.

A song ends, and the next one begins. Even before any instruments enter Austin can hear recorded noise, crackle from the imperfect surface of a 78. He loves that crackle. It alone has the power to transport him into a different world, an earlier part of the century.

Sometimes he feels like he would love to be back there. The world that's evoked in these songs seems so real, so free of all the trivia of modern life. If he didn't have to know about the relationship between Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, or the situation in Israel for that matter, if his mind wasn't polluted by his knowledge of these things, then he believes that he could concentrate more on the things that matter: work, and love, and death, and the joy of being alive. He sings: Ain't one hammer / in this tunnel / that rings like mine / that rings like mine / It rang like silver / and it shone like gold / it rang like silver / and it shone like gold.

He hears his front door open.

He turns off the stereo immediately, to listen. Who the fuck could be here? His roommate, Craig, is over at his fiancée's place tonight, same as he is just about every other night. He didn't have any plans with Lydia. Could it be a burglar? He's worried about crime ever since he moved into this neighborhood. He's no idiot—he's seen the kids that deal dope on the corner. One of them tried to sell him a bike once; he was sure it was stolen. He knows that they wouldn't think twice about taking his TV or his CDs if they could.

He puts the guitar down as quietly as he can, and creeps over to the bed. He keeps a two-foot length of heavy iron pipe under there. He found it on the street a few years ago and hauled it back to his apartment—he thought maybe he could use it as a sound source, tap on it with drumsticks or something. That never quite worked out, but he's kept it near his bed ever since; he figures that if some crack addict breaks into his house in the middle of the night, he could take him out with one good swing.

He hears footsteps coming towards him. He stands by the doorway, raises the pipe over his shoulder, ready.

Lydia comes in, sees him. He looks so wild-eyed that for a second she doesn't know who it is, all she knows is that she's about to be attacked. She screams. Her purse hits the floor.

—Oh, Austin says. He lowers the pipe. —I thought you were—

Flustered, she asks—What are you doing here?

—What am *I* doing here? he shouts. —I *live* here! What are *you* doing here?
I could've—

—Don't shout at me, she says.

—I'm sorry, he says. He sits down on the bed, shakes his head in an attempt to clear it. He puts the pipe down in his lap, then, after a second, he slides it back under the bed. —But since when do you just come over here unannounced and let yourself in? I could've—

—I just wanted to surprise you, she says. —I thought you'd like it. I thought it would be nice. And she begins to cry.