

7

Rozay Is Read

Awake next morning feeling like I'm covered with mold.

Last night her bedroom door locked itself after me. Lucky thing I got stripped in the living room. Power was out there too, switches unresponsive, no air conditioning; but a bit more light to see by. Enough to find most of my clothes.

The roar in my ears continued to rise. Blotting out all else: I went to the kitchen, filled a glass at the tap, drank—but couldn't hear the water running, or myself swallowing, or the empty glass being set on the drainboard.

Only the roar.

I marched over to the bedroom door and knocked three times. Softly or noisily, no way to tell; hard on my knuckles at any rate. The door remained locked.

You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here.

Yet leaving her was out of the question. So onto the sofa after all—though not without trying to peer under it first. Into a gap apparently unoccupied. I sat down, stretched out, prepared to wait till she reappeared. Though the unmoving air was increasingly oppressive. Beyond mugginess. Felt and smelt and tasted more like nox.

You can't stay here.

Up and over to RAP RAP RAP—

—and be engulfed by the R-R-R-R-O-O-O-O-A-A-A-A-R-R-R-R...

Leave nothing behind.

My necktie, still knotted, snaking around her bric-a-brac. Causing disarray as I extricated it from the bite-size flippers and gadgets and ariels.

I at least had to write her a note. At a small tidy desk in one corner of the living room: plenty of stationery but not a pen, not a pencil, not a marker to be seen. She must've turned the lot in to Formi-Dable on her last day. No matter—in my pocket was my trusty Bruynzeel. I used it to charcoal a few words on a sheet of paper that refused to be slid under the bedroom door. Tried again with a second sheet: it crumpled too.

A moment later I found myself outside, in the downpour, her front door locked behind me. Too late to hunt for her purse and Honda key, or even the blue umbrella that matched her coat. What now? Huddle all night on D9's cunning little threshold?

You can't stay here.

The thunderstorm had passed, though rain was still falling. After awhile I started walking home through it. Seven miles or more on Mesher Road; took me three sodden hours. During which I saw no late-night bus, no taxicab, no car of any sort that might possibly have offered a lift.

But the R-O-A-R in my head did begin to subside.

By the time my blistering feet reached Zerfall, I could hear halfway clearly again. Power was restored too, or perhaps Green Creek Lane hadn't been affected. The roar died away as I dragged myself upstairs, sloughed off my waterlogged duds, left them wherever they plopped on the landing. Toweling jadedly as I broke out the bourbon. One shot, two shots, three; tumbling into the sack and down to the bottom of the deep blue sea...

Awake this morning covered with mold, sore in every joint and limb. Not alleviated by a long hot shower or coffee or soup. I keep to the futon as much as possible, attempting to watch videos. *To Have and Have Not?* Pull the other one. *In a Lonely Place?* Consider the alternatives. *Treasure of the Sierra Madre?* Gone with the stinking wind.

Should I phone Knotts? No, by damn! She's got my number; let her do the dialing.

SKRANG goes the screen door. That will be Mrs. Wilson, delivering the Sunday paper's Arts & Entertainment section as she does every week. Groan down and fetch it. For some reason she folded the thing inside-out, so its back page is the first I see: book reviews with mocking titles. *The Demon of Longing. This Blinding Absence of Light. Disappearing*

Ingenue, for crying out loud. And Io MacEvelyn's unwelcome byline, under the header "A Novel-Length Suicide Note"—

Whoa.

Double eyesnag.

Baseless Mime, by M.I.M. Franzia.

Somebody better be kidding me here.

Ecstatic review. The new Plath, the new Woolf, the new Anne Sexton—even the new Anne Frank. If-only-she-had-lived-longer-what-marvels-might-she-have-given-us. Buried in Io's goop is a brief mention that the late author's mother resisted all efforts to publish this suicide journal till her own recent demise, a quarter-century after her daughter jumped off a bridge into the Kaw River at the age of twenty-one.

Oh my God.

I truly do not want to be reading this right now...

*

When I was five years old, my father went from being an assistant professor at the University of Iowa to an associate professor at the University of Kansas. My impression at the time was that previously he just helped professors, but now would be allowed to hang around with them.

We moved into a beige house (that my half-sister swore was gray) at 830 Alpine Drive (a street my half-sister derided as flatter than sea level) in Lawrence, Kansas (a college town my half-sister announced she hated long before we got there).

It was a tradition in our family that Cassandra had claimed me as her own baby when I was brought home from the hospital. Our mother was happy to encourage this misconception, and I have vague Iowa memories of Cassie treating me as a cross between a large doll and a small dog. By the time we got to Kansas, my novelty had worn off and Cass was treating me as a cross to bear, mightily resenting her role of live-in nanny. But she'd just entered her teens and harbored countless resentments, adding to them all the time. So I quickly learned to play Linus to her Lucy, or Pip to her Mrs. Joe.

Periodically she and our mother had epic battles that mystified my father and me. Sometimes my name would be hauled into the fray—"How could you *do* such a thing when

your little brother was just down the *hall??*” “You *always* take that squirt’s side, you never believe *anything* I tell you!!” An hour later they’d go out shopping arm-in-arm.

“Don’t try to figure it out, son,” my father told me more than once.

Cass claimed him as hers as well. Her own father (“a folksinging fellow traveler”) having vanished from the scene long before I was born, she always addressed mine as Daddy—usually in aggrieved tones, and sometimes stretched out to five syllables.

Despite her derision, Alpine Drive was more slanted than flat. Its back yards sloped down toward a thicket of locust and hickory trees (known locally as “the woods”) so that all the back doors were several feet aboveground, and each house had a set of backstairs.

“Make sure he doesn’t go down those backstairs by himself, Cassie,” said my mother.

“Listen, Dwarf! Don’t even *think* of going down those backstairs by yourself, ‘cause if you fall down them you’ll have to spend the rest of your life in an IRON LUNG!”

First chance I got, I went down those backstairs by myself. Ridiculously easy if you held onto the banister. But aside from the slope and the woods, I thought our new back yard was unremarkable.

Then I saw a little girl next door struggling to pull a tricycle up *her* backstairs.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” I said.

“My name is Rozay. I’m subject to fits.”

Which I took to mean she had her clothes specially made. Such as the miniature Laura Petrie outfit she was wearing: sleeveless top and Capri pants. I told her my name, and she made a face.

“I don’t like that. Just the first letter. I’m going to call you ‘Aitch.’ Can you help me with this?” There was no fence between our yards, just a low scrubby hedge not difficult to squeeze through. “You hold that end,” I was instructed, and together we lugged the tricycle up to her back door.

“Are you going to take it inside?” I asked.

“No,” said Rozay.

Climbing onto the trike, she rode it dramatically down the stairs and somersaulted over its handlebars at the bottom. Not by intent, it seemed.

“Owww,” she went, sniffing away tears. “Owww...”

I stared aghast, sure that a mob would form to blame me, a boy, for a girl’s getting hurt in my presence—unless I acted fast. Recklessly ignoring the banister, I hurried down to her. “Are you okay?”

Rozay was examining a bad scrape on one elbow. “Doesn’t look like it’ll bleed much,” she said. Fixing me with dewy but narrowed eyes for a second, she held out her other hand. I took it and helped her up.

“Was that a fit?” I asked.

“No! That was a *sperriment*.”

Which reminded me I had a pack of Beech-Nut gum in my pocket, and that it might be a nice absolving gesture to offer her a stick.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll chew it later. Come in while I get a Band-Aid.”

As we entered her kitchen, a lady with a lot of high-piled hair came up from the basement with a basket of laundry. “Mary Iris? What was all that racket?”

“Nothing much,” Rozay told her, and “In here,” to me. Using my shoulder as support, she climbed onto the toilet lid to rummage in a medicine cabinet, handing me down a bottle of iodine, a box of cottonballs, a tin of bandages. “This is Aitch. He’s new next door,” she told the lady with high-piled hair.

“Er, hello,” I mumbled.

“What did you do? Let me see!”

“I’ve *got* it, Mother,” said Rozay, applying iodine to her own elbow; we both winced.

“Was it that boy?” demanded her mom.

Great, I thought—*now* would come the accusations. But Rozay turned from the Band-Aid tin to say, “She doesn’t mean you.”

“Oh of course not, sweetie,” said her mom, patting my head.

“And I just slipped off my trike is all,” said Rozay. “Can Aitch and I have a snack in my room?” To me: “My mother’s a nextlent cook.”

“What’s ‘nextlent?’” I asked, following her down a hallway.

“You mean like church?”

“You said your mom was a nextlent—”

“Oh. That means very good. How old are you?”

“Five. And a half. Almost.”

“Well, *I’m* about to turn six,” she said. With a lofty-learnèd air I would come to know well.

“You said your name was Rozay,” I retorted.

“It is.”

“Then why’d she call you ‘Mary Iris?’”

“That’s what my mother calls me. My dad named me ‘Rozay.’ And *this* is how you spell it,” she added, displaying the cover of a Big Chief tablet on which **ROZAY** was carefully printed. “*Not* with an S and an E.”

Even then, when she was six and I was five-and-a-half (almost), I knew her to be unusually pretty. Fine dark Mediterranean features. Black hair drawn back in a ponytail. Black eyes forever narrowing, focusing, concentrating on you or whatever else they looked at. Obviously a little girl, with a child-sized child’s face; but its expression was one I associated with grownups.

I’d never seen a kid’s bedroom so severely organized as Rozay’s. Everything in it looked double-extra starched. Her mother brought in a tray with an actual teapot and two cups on it, plus a plate of pretzellike crackers I was told were *taralli*. As she placed the tray on a small round table, she gave us an odd glance; then another, longer one as she left the room. Rozay noticed this too, and started giving me odd glances of her own as she poured our tea. “Come stand here a second,” she said, going to a mirror on the wall. I went over and stood beside her, and we regarded ourselves.

We looked alike.

Not identically, but still—same height, same color hair (mine shorter, of course) and similar expressions: the same kind of solemn intensity. And while I would refute ever having been “pretty,” in those days I *was* unusually clean-cut.

“Hmmm,” said Rozay.

At which moment we heard Cassandra’s piercing voice as she hollered my name. I had gone missing, was in for it now. Excusing myself, I hurried out through the kitchen with Rozay at my heels.

“Here I am,” I called over the hedge.

“And you should call him AITCH,” added Rozay.

Cassie stared at us. “Oh good grief, now there’s *two* of them!”

*

The Franzias were the first couple I’d heard of who lived in two separate houses. During the week Rozay stayed with her mother at 832 Alpine Drive. On Friday afternoon Mr. Franzia would pick her up, and she’d spend the night and Saturday at his place north of town—unless Mr. Franzia was “under the weather,” which he seemed to be fairly often. (Heir to no winemaking fortune, he contributed to the profits of distilleries.)

Very early in our acquaintance, Rozay informed me that her father had acted in a couple of recent films. One was a “business movie” about the Reuter factory where he worked, testing pipe organs for churches. The other, she said, was a “ghost movie.” To me that meant sappy Casper and his feeble cartoons. Not till twenty years later, watching late night TV, did I realize she meant *Carnival of Souls*. Near the end of its opening credits, in very small type: RICHARD FRANZIA. And there he was—narrow-visaged, like his daughter—ogling Candace Hilligoss in a scene at the organ factory. His two words of dialogue were straight out of the Chico Marx phrasebook: “Okay, boss.”

That was the first and only time I saw Mr. Franzia. Our paths never crossed during my years in Kansas, except once—under circumstances that might not have been the worst imaginable, but came pretty damned close.

Back to the beginning. Mrs. Franzia had a word with my mother, who told me not to be surprised or upset if Rozay ever appeared to get “ill,” but to run find the nearest adult. And very soon I witnessed my first fit: Rozay knocking a flowerbox off her porch railing as she fell over and flailed about. I duly ran and fetched her mom, who was impressed by such level-headed behavior from someone about to enter kindergarten. Judging me to be a reliable Nice Boy, she sanctioned my being Rozay’s playmate and (unspoken) caretaker. But since I often suffered from asthma—the attacks were especially bad in those years—Rozay was able to contend that she was *my* caretaker, as befitted her eight-month seniority. When I had to stay flat on my back indoors, she would come over and read to me. Explaining anything she felt I didn’t understand, even when I said I did.

For a lofty-learnèd girl subject to fits, Rozay was welcome company and seldom annoying. I felt comfortable with her, at ease—fulfilled, even. As if we'd moved here so she could be part of my life: the half-sister I was intended to have all along.

Mrs. Franzia and my mother were soon close friends. Rozay's mom was the only woman I ever knew who smoked more than my mine did; at kaffeeklatsches they seemed to compete as to who could fill an ashtray the fastest. They tried hard not to act too cutesy about Rozay and me, but Cassie frequently wanted to know how hot 'n' heavy we were getting, had we set the wedding date and so on. "Now's your chance!" she told me when we went over one Sunday to behold Rozay in what looked like an extra-petite bridal gown.

This (Rozay explained) was a First Communion dress, and wearing it earned her a second middle name. "Monica" got added to "Mary Iris," and she started printing **M.I.M.F.** on her tablet covers. Knowing that my father had been dubbed Chester Alan Arthur Huffman, I felt equally entitled to a second helping; but Rozay said no.

"You're Aitch. Just Aitch. I keep telling you."

The Franzias were Catholic, which I thought involved worshipping fish. Catholicism did entail our attending separate schools: I went to Brown Elementary, never knowing whether it had been named after John the abolitionist or Charlie of *Peanuts* fame—or simply because its bricks and paint were discouraging shades of that color.

Rozay was enrolled at St. Teresa of Avila, which she always called Sane-Trees-of-a-Villa. She disliked most of the other girls there, saying they either "made fun" or were too timidly religious. As for her teachers, she wouldn't confirm or deny a rumor spread by Snaggle Feist (a dentally-challenged classmate of mine at Brown, who was forever getting hit in the mouth by baseballs or tripping facefirst onto concrete). Snag said if you weren't a Catholic and ventured too close to St. Teresa of Avila, nuns would come out and beat you up.

"Why do you *listen* to people like that?" was all Rozay would say.

She debunked a lot of my notions about what young girls, especially pretty ones, thought and felt and did. No interest in playing house or with dolls, though she once cut open a Chatty Cathy to analyze its voicebox. No obsession with clothes or shoes or hairdos, though she was almost always immaculate: every starchy stitch and strand in place. No fear of bugs, worms, or rodents; she took the lead whenever we explored the Woods at the foot of

our backyards. Nor was she a conventional tomboy—we studied trees without climbing them, and never played catch or ran around yelling. Instead we built immense edifices out of Lincoln Logs, Tinkertoys, and Legos. (Rozay was the visionary, I handled engineering.) We dug through World Book encyclopedias in pursuit of Rozay’s ongoing sperriments, each of which got documented in its particular Big Chief tablet.

We were out minding our business one day, inspecting a dead pigeon at the edge of the Woods, when Jerome Gullip came along to throw rocks at it. Jerome was a BIG boy, maybe ten years old, and at least that many feet tall and tons heavy. His franchise as neighborhood bully included not only Alpine Drive but all the blocks surrounding Brown and Sane Trees, whose mingled students would walk to and from school in defensive clumps. According to Jerome, an odd bump in the street contained a kid he’d pitched into a cement mixer for trying to squeal on him. No one doubted Jerome was capable of this, or that he wouldn’t miss an opportunity to “crack our skulls open” (his standard threat).

I hated every one of his numerous guts. He’d go out of his way to administer a punch or kick or Indian burn. Nor was Rozay immune from hassle: Jerome would shove her in passing, and if she hit the ground as a result, that was her fault. I am proud to remember springing to her defense on a couple of occasions. Both times my nose got bloodied, after which I limited interference to helping Rozay stand up.

Once Jerome used a clothesline to tie Rozay and me to a remote telephone pole, leaving us there while he went off to gather firewood (he said). I knew it was my duty to be a hero and rescue us both, but I only succeeded in proving that rope can abrade human skin. And worrying that Rozay might have a fit. But she was stoic throughout the ordeal, speculating aloud as to how long we might survive if Jerome didn’t return to burn us at the stake. (Cassie and her boyfriend drove by and freed us before that question got answered.)

Nothing Jerome ever did or said seemed to ruffle Rozay. He would call her a dago, guinea, goombah, wop; her rejoinder was always “I’m Greco-Roman.” Jerome had a bunch of slurs for me too, some of which required clarifying.

“Dad, am I a Jew?” I asked after one encounter.

My father glanced up from the physics papers he was grading. “If people ask, son, just say you’re Unitarian.”

“What’re Unitarians?” I asked Rozay.

“They live on a planet between Saturn and Uranus,” she said. Not lofty-learnèdly, since it was early summer and we were the same age. Come August she would jump ahead and resume the role of elder; then the following spring I would catch up and be her peer again.

When Rozay was eight and starting third grade (and I was seven-and-a-half and starting second), our mothers began working at the University—mine on her master’s degree, and Mrs. Franzia part-time in the Dean’s office. Everyone’s schedules were coordinated so Rozay and I could go to one or the other of our houses any day after school, and find either a mom or Cassie or Rozay’s grandmother YiaYia (who had high-piled hair too, tinted blue).

One October afternoon Rozay and I were walking up my driveway, she in her Sane Trees jumper that I’d thought was green plaid till she called it “black watch.” Rozay was explaining exactly how and why she’d been chosen to recite “*Tengo un gatito nuevo, su nombre es Pepe,*” on educational TV, when she fell silent in mid-Spanish.

I turned and found her staring hard at nothing—then collapsing to her knees on the pitiless gravel—then flopping onto her back. Head striking the pavement, inadequately cushioned by her ponytail. Hands grabbing hold of her skirt and petticoat, yanking them both to her chin. And there she lay with Lollipops exposed to God and the neighborhood: shaking, quaking, doing unstarched things before us all.

I tried to yell for help, but no sound came out.

So I took a rock and heaved it through my painted-shut kitchen window. The first time in my life I threw anything that hard, that far, or that accurately.

“WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED???” shrieked Cassandra from her room upstairs.

“Rozay’s sick bad!” I managed to croak.

Cassie, I knew, would lose no time in calling a doctor, fetching a first-aid kit, and arriving to take command of the situation. Meanwhile I reached to pull down Rozay’s skirt—and froze. No! If I so much as touched one pleat, Cassie would catch me in what she’d think was the red-handed act. But if I left Rozay as she was, others who heard the window smash might run up and see her. Suppose it was Jerome!! What should I do??

Pull it down.

Hunh?

No one'll see. Pull it down, NOW.

I wrenched the hem out of her clutching fingers, smoothed the skirt over her poor wounded knees, flung my jacket on top for good measure, and was kneeling at a protective distance when Cassandra burst onto the scene.

Told you so.

“Don’t worry, kiddo, she’ll be okay,” said Cass. “The doctor’s on his way, and her mom—hey, maybe you better lie down too. You’re white as a sheet.”

That evening my mother rebriefed me on Rozay’s condition, while my father delivered a brief lecture on alternatives to windowbreaking as a means of summoning assistance.

Rozay herself, slowed but not stymied by convalescent knees, spirited me away a few days later to a secluded spot in the Woods, deep among the locusts and hickories.

“All right,” she said, tablet in hand, “tell me what happened. And don’t say ‘don’t think about it,’ like everybody else does. I need to know!”

What had her face looked like? Did it change expression? How about after she fell down? Were her eyeballs rolled back, all white? Had she frothed at the mouth?

My answers were less than articulate, and I kept skirting certain occurrences till Rozay threw down her pencil. “You’re keeping something from me! They always do, all of them, but *you* can’t. Now what is it?” Suddenly: “Did you *see* anything?”

“Oh, er, uh, well...”

“Aitch! Did you SEE anyth—”

“Yes! Yes, I did!”

Rozay closed her eyes and sat silent for so long I became apprehensive. Then, briskly: “Well, you better go ahead and show me yours. Just so we’re even.”

“What, here?”

“Right now.”

And there in our sylvan hideaway I dropped trou in front of the Girl Next Door. Who surveyed me for what felt like an hour, and began a fresh page of notes.

“What’re you writing?” I demanded as I repantsed myself.

“None of your beeswax!” she replied. Tearing out the page, folding it over, and sticking it down the front of her blouse. Which she then had to tuck inside her waistband, so the page would stay put.

We left the Woods and started back upslope. “Did you...?” I began, and faltered.

“Did I what?”

“Did you... *say* anything to me, when you were... uh, having your... fit?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” sniffed Rozay.

But then, inside my head: *Can you hear me?*

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her. “That is KEEN!” I said (ever hep to the jive). “Do it again!”

If you’re not making believe, tell me what I’m saying.

“Tell you what you’re saying,” I paraphrased.

And Rozay smiled. A thing she did far too seldom for such a pretty girl. Her baby teeth and their permanent replacements were both very small, very white. And could fill her face with delight, when she let them.

So what did I say when I was having the fit?

“Don’t you remember?”

It doesn’t work that way. More like a dream.

I told her what she’d told me, and what I’d done, and what happened after.

She started rubbing her forehead, but smiled again. *I’m glad it was you. I mean, I’m glad you can hear me.*

“What does it feel like?”

As if I’m climbing a ladder. I stay “(sigh) where I am, but my mind goes up or down.”

“Can you show me how?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to try.”

Living as we did in an age of domestic witches and genies, talking horses and favorite Martians and dead mothers reincarnated as vintage cars, we were excited but not astonished by this. If we *had* been granted a superpower, we figured it was no more than our due: I with

my asthma and she with her fits.

But till we began this new sperriment I didn't realize how many different fits Rozay was subject to. Impatient fits, peremptory fits, dictatorial fits. I'd try to offer a suggestion and "We haven't got time for that!"—there were tests to conduct, trials to perform, tablets to fill with data. Could I hear her if my eyes were shut? If I faced away from her? At a distance? How far? Hold this tape measure while she checks. What if I were in a different room, on a different floor, in my house while she was in hers? Could I only receive words, or also see any pictures she might send me? And most critical of all: could I transmit thoughts to Rozay? Use these cards she copied out of a library book—star, circle, square, wavy lines. Bear my mind down on the symbol I see and say its name to her. No; try again. Harder! "Oh, you're not even concentrating!"

I already *had* a Cassandra in my life, for crying out loud. I didn't need another one making me learn how to scuba dive without a snorkel.

Finally the day came when I pitched a fit of my own. Conjuring up a vivid image of Rozay sprawl in my driveway, and hurling it between her narrow black eyes. Which snapped wide open as she stepped forward to slap me across the chops with her dainty little hard-as-nails hand.

I'll never speak to you again.

Whirl on her heel and begone.

What I did then still makes me cringe to remember. At least I restricted my groveling to telepathy, bombarding next door through the night with apologetic penitence. I said she was the prettiest girl I'd ever known personally and the smartest and most wonderful, and I could only hope when we grew up she might accept me as a genuine boyfriend but knew there wasn't much chance of that since I was so much younger, so far behind her, and she'd have her pick of all the older guys.

In short, I made an abject wuss of myself. If only in my own mind.

But she reappeared the following day.

"You can be so silly sometimes," she said primly. "Here, let me see—" Taking my head in her two hands (soft and gentle now) and leaning in to assess the bruise she'd wrought upon my cheek.

Which she gave a tiny peck.

That'll make it all better.

And may I be damned if it didn't.

*

The home screenings began a few months later: part of my mother's film studies that ultimately led to her career as a movie critic. She got the most she could out of each rental, playing every feature several times, though our projector often balked at rewinding.

None of the films she screened were quite suitable for children, yet Rozay and I got to see nearly all of them. One of the first was Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, where Gregory Peck startled us by telling Ingrid Bergman, "We'll look at some sane trees, normal grass, and clouds without complexes." We also looked at *Wild Strawberries*, *Black Narcissus*, Cocteau's *Orphée*—and *The Innocents*, from which we derived our everlasting catchphrase "IT WAS ONLY THE WIND, MY DEAR." Plus new characters to cast ourselves as, especially when Cassandra escorted us places. No longer did we play Jane and Michael to her almighty Mary Poppins; now she was the hung-up Governess to our Flora and Miles. And the focus of our scrutiny as we conducted a new sperriment in what Rozay called "esping." (I preferred the term "underhear," but that got vetoed as verging on indelicate.)

We'd established that neither of us could impinge uninvited on the other's thoughts—or at least that I couldn't on Rozay's. (She *said* she couldn't on mine.) But what about outsiders? Cassie was a handy target, and we kept tabs on some of her stealthier activities—cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, college boys. Taking refuge when necessary in our *Innocents* roles, staring at Cass with self-possessive otherworldly fleers on our faces.

As Miles told the Governess: we weren't mind readers, but we did *sense* things. Accurately enough to keep Cassie in hot water for weeks at a time. Prompting her to denounce us as weird little snitches, spying finks, and "Wednesday and Pugsley."

We were tempted to try a similar approach with Jerome Gullip, but feared his mental vacuum might trap our esping-selves inside his brain. Instead, after watching *Metropolis*, I offered my tentative prayer that Rotwang "do something" about Jerome—who stole a Vespa scooter the very next day and drove it, plus most of himself, under the wheels of a UPS truck.

At Brown we all had to donate to buy a wreath for Jerome's funeral.

Most gratifying dime I ever spent.

But my mother's you-kids-probably-shouldn't-be-seeing-this conscience kept smiting her, till Rozay and I got banished midway through Peter Brook's *Lord of the Flies*. To see how it turned out, we "borrowed" Cassie's copy of the book and read it together, saddened but not surprised that Simon (with his fits) and Piggy (with his asthma) got brutally killed before The End.

"I guess some of us just have rotten luck is all," I said.

"All nothing," said Rozay. "There ought to be more to The End than a lot of sobs and darkness."

An alternative came to light with tickets to *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, a road show knee-deep not only in psychic phenomena but reincarnation (a feat apparently not unique to *My Mother the Car*). And when Rozay was given an electric organ for her tenth birthday, she set out to master *On a Clear Day's* entire score. No mundane "Heart and Soul" for Rozay Franzia.

*

My half-sister left town the night of her high school graduation. Shedding cap and gown and pinning honest-to-God flowers in her hair, Cassie announced she was taking off with some friends for San Francisco. Our mother blew her stack, and a battle royal began. Mrs. Franzia hustled Rozay and me away to the Castle Tea Room where we were all supposed to adjourn. Some of my aunts came too, bringing Gramps Rhine (who said we could all use a stiff belt) but neither of my parents appeared and certainly not Cassandra. When I got home, Dad was sitting alone reading Rutherford's *Radioactive Substances*.

"Try to be quiet when you go upstairs," he told me. "Your mother's... resting."

Cass did go to California, where she experienced most of what the later Sixties had to offer. I can't say I especially missed her, but in her absence things did start to go out of whack between my mother and father, and between them and me. Even between myself and Rozay, now that we were ungovernessed. That stupid Hammond organ demanded more and more of her attention—that is, when she wasn't spending more and more time at her father's house in the country—that is, a place I was never invited to visit and a part of her life I knew

nothing about—

That August she turned eleven and jumped at the chance to accompany her dad on a trip to Genoa. Her Greco-Romanness was manifesting itself: she'd started sprouting breasts and hips, plus an *arrivederci* derrière that all the neighborhood ladies merrily predicted would get pinched left and right. A prospect Rozay dismissed airily when I went over to wish her *buono viaggio*. She promised me lots of postcards and opportunities to test intercontinental esping.

How can I try when I won't know where you are?

Well, I know where YOU are; so there you go.

Hugging me goodbye, which was not a habit of ours. With me uneasily (not yet acutely) conscious of her sproutings, and how warm she felt, and how nice she smelled.

I received no postcards. Nor any messages after an initial *Testing 1-2-3, we are at the airport*. Nor did she return on time, which freaked out her mother and YiaYia. Not till three days into the new school year did Rozay come back, all *ciao* and deep olivaceous tan and so many layers of Audrey Hepburn sophistication I would've been sick to my stomach, had I not sensed something else.

Are you okay?

Of course.

C'mon, something's the matter.

You wouldn't understand.

Sure I would. Now what is it?

"Only the wind, my dear."

Flesh and blood and the sandman, whistling down the wind.

I might not have understood, but I could sure as hell be jealous of any supplanters. No doubts by now that she could have her pick—though if I knew Rozay, she'd probably go for some fitful mystic like Simon in *Lord of the Flies*.

Nor was I far wrong. She chose Robert F. Kennedy.

With a sudden constant "Bobby why" and "Bobby wherefore" and "Bobby inasmuch-as-which." What really stuck in my craw was her taking for granted that I was foursquare behind her on this. But her candidate always struck me (and my craw) as a cold-eyed, frosty-

blooded bastard; the type of sandman who'd put you out by funneling grit beneath your eyelids.

He had the gall to open his campaign on the KU campus, right there in River City. You'd've thought the Beatles were parading down Jayhawk Boulevard after winning the Final Four. I found myself trapped on the Field House bleachers by 20,000 demented groupies, with Rozay squealing at my side. It took all my strength to avoid having an asthma attack until the rally was safely over. Rozay had to help me home—solicitous with half her mind, supportive with one of her arms, and full of Bobby-babble every step of the way.

Then he had to go get *shot*, for crying out loud.

When I heard the news I didn't think about him or Ethel or their dozens of children or the future of America, but only how Rozay would react. She'd had no fits for years—none, at least, that I was aware of—thanks perhaps to better medication, or oncoming pubescence, or our telepathic outlet. Now fearing the worst, I sent a variety of solicitous messages next door before going over to check on her in person.

To have Rozay, with eyes dry as sand, tell me aloud that esping was childish, and she would not be doing it any longer.

*

After that there was a gap that only widened. For awhile she got involved with ecology and the environment, enlisting me as her assistant. But despite our efforts and everyone else's on Alpine Drive, the water department chopped down the Woods at the foot of our backyards to lay new sewer pipes. Drainage didn't improve, but Rozay got more morose and unsociable.

Our relationship dwindled to formal occasions, such as her frequent organ recitals. Mr. Franzia was always supposed to come to these and never quite made it—not even to the debut of Rozay's original nocturne, inspired by Alexander Key's *The Forgotten Door*. Her performance excited some coverage in the local press (as did her appearance, “in carnation-colored miniskirt and Marlo Thomas flip”).

Each time I saw her she was a little less recognizable.

The gap between us turned to a gorge when Rozay began her final year at Sane Trees. As an eighth-grader she was entitled to wear a black watch blazer with Bernini's *Ecstasy* as

badge; but one day in October she put on a sleeveless peasant top and Jamaica shorts and went to participate in a campus Moratorium against the war. Trailing me (so much younger, so far behind) in her wake.

Mrs. Franzia had asked me privately to “look after Mary Iris.” I was glad to accept the commission, though uncertain whether I could protect her from drug-crazed collegiate hippies. Or how welcome such protection might be.

A year and a half had passed since the RFK rally, but my companion (if I could still call her that) bore scant resemblance to the little girl she’d been then. She remained a source of lofty-learnèd scholarship, plying me with observations about Nixon and Vietnam and Guerrilla Theater and the Chicago Eight’s trial and whether Paul McCartney was dead.

For my part, I limited observations to the left armhole of Rozay’s loose peasant blouse, through which much of a pink bra cup was visible. Plus much of its olive-tan contents, depending on how Rozay responded to the Moratorium speakers. Less squealing this time than righteous indignation, but a lot more jiggle and jounce.

Thus did I look after Mary Iris. Chiding myself for drinking a whole Mountain Dew and bringing on what felt like an overfull bladder—

Get a good look? popped into my head.

Yes thank you, I replied politely.

You could almost hear a door slam.

Another one opened that night in my solitary bed as I reviewed the events of the day, and physiology advanced to its logical conclusion. Not for the last time, either.

Rozay definitely seemed to avoid me after that. Unwilling to encourage anybody’s wank-fantasies, least of all mine.

Compared to her the girls at Brown Elementary were a measly lot, slow to bloom. Luckily Snaggle Feist’s older brother had a collection of *Playboys* available for rented perusal. (Snag himself won fame, of a sort, by pointing at one centerfold and announcing, “That’s her airbrush.”)

Awkward autumn gave way to unpleasant winter and then an ugly spring: the Days of Rage in River City. There were strikes and sieges and emergency curfews, sniping and firebombing; arsonists burned the KU student union. Without abating at home, the rage

spread nationwide—Kent State, Jackson State, hardhats rioting against war protesters.

It upset my mother dreadfully. She'd lost all track of Cassandra, and her friendship with Mrs. Franzia had lapsed after a quarrel over how NOT to raise a teenage girl. (My own thirteenth birthday, incidentally, got lost in all the *sturm und drang*.) Finally Mom told me to pack a suitcase—we were going to Gramps Rhine's in Terre Haute.

That is, she and I were. "Your father's staying here."

I figured we were being evacuated while Dad bravely held the fort, and we'd return after the dust settled. My father seemed to believe this too, telling me to take care of Mom and counting out extra allowance for traveling expenses. We shook hands at parting, which should've made me feel like a responsible man of affairs.

If circumstances hadn't deteriorated to damn near worst imaginable.

It happened the Friday before Memorial Day. I went down the 830 Alpine backstairs, glancing at where the Woods used to be, then across at 832's empty yard. *Hello*, she'd said; *Hello*, I'd said; almost as many words as we'd exchanged since the Moratorium. *My name is Rozay. I'm going to call you—*

"Aitch."

Sounding subterranean. Halfway, anyway: the rear ends of Alpine Drive basements were at groundlevel. I went through the hedge and into their laundry room and there she was, sorting the wash, looking impossibly grown up in paisley jeans and leopardskin top. Her mother—"Irene," she called her—was at the Dean's office; her father—"Dick," she called him—was under the weather, as he'd been on many another Friday. We had the place to ourselves. The basement radio played "Let It Be" over and over, along with "Come Saturday Morning," "Instant Karma (We All Shine On)," "Love Grows (Where My Rosemary Goes)," and "Up the Ladder to the Roof."

I found her smoking, though not tobacco.

"Can I have a puff?"

"Toke," she corrected me. "No you can't. Your asthma." She finished loading the washing machine, turned it on, turned back to me. "We ought to have a drink. *A buono viaggio* toast." From behind bleach and detergent she produced a full fifth of Smirnoff.

"Where'd you get that?"

“Dick’s house. They’re ‘hidden’ all over. Do you want a drink or not?”

“Sure,” I said, wondering whether it would singe my mouth. “Even though Indiana’s not much of a voyage. And we’ll probably be back in a couple of weeks.”

Her dark eyes narrowed. “You really don’t know what’s going on, do you?”

“Oh, and I suppose you’re going to tell me.”

Rozay tapped out her doobie, poured vodka into plastic glasses. “You’ll understand these things when you get a little older—”

I broke in to remind her I’d caught up again last month, we were both in our teens now so why didn’t she drop it? Which she nearly did with my glass, clapping a dismayed hand over her mouth.

Oh my God I forgot.

You’re damn right you did.

“Well,” she said, clearing mind and throat, “let’s drink to that, then.”

The stuff tasted like insipid medicine, a great disappointment—till I finished my second glassful and found most of my skeleton had gone AWOL. Rozay was perched nearby atop the busy washing machine, gazing at me with indefinite infinitude.

You look older.

You look beautiful. But then you always did... that...

Look—if I do anything— “(sigh) it’s only because we’ll probably never see each other again.”

Why? Are YOU moving away?

“Oh, Aitch,” she sighed again, taking my head in her two hands. *You’re so—*

A sentence never finished, as her lips landed on mine.

Withdrawing after awhile to purse meditatively. I almost expected her to produce a speckle-covered theme book and start jotting notes.

Instead, she unbuttoned my shirt. Then her leopardskin. Reaching back to unclasp her pink bra—my peekaboo catalyst?—which slipped down and off and onto the basement floor. As I might have reacted myself, had I not been anesthetized by Smirnoff.

But it all got etched eternally onto my retinas: her bare breasts, the peace sign and yin-yang and crucifix dangling from a chain just above them, how roseate were her areolae

and how “nip it in the bud” now meant the opposite of what I’d always thought—

She smiled at me. Holding out her arms. *Well, come here—*

Whereupon I did. Without moving any other muscle. Miserably.

What’s the matter?

What do you THINK?

“Oh!” she went. “Well... that’s” *okay: less pressure that way. We can take our time. Irene won’t be home till late. We’ll put your pants through the next wash.*

(Meaning I should take them off? Would she do the same to hers? Could I do the same to hers?)

The washing machine shuddered to a halt, but Rozay made no move to shift its load to the dryer. Instead she took my hands, lifted them up, pressed herself into them. And with that contact came a surge—

—not of static electricity, but more dynamic—

—as my hands touched her bosom and became Hands. Knowing precisely where to go and what to do. How they should bear down, when they should ease up.

My lips rejoined hers and all four were capitalized. She introduced her tongue, I promoted mine, there was twining, there was sealing as we kissed. And caressed. And ached, and strained, and throbbed—and not just with our bodies. In that instant it was disclosed that esping could extend far beyond message-exchange. We vibed together at the edge of singlemindedness: one psyche, one eros, mutual self-possession. Our thoughts merged and thundered toward bright hot enlightenment—

—a prolonged screech on the driveway outside—

—a jarring thump that shook the house—

—a hoarse voice raised in narrow darkness—

Dick!!

Hunh??

It’s my dad, my father’s here, he’s coming inside oh God oh God—

Frantic efforts to pull ourselves not together but apart *oh hurry* stumble and blunder and spin the bottle *oh help me* spill your Smirnoff on the ground footsteps overhead *I can’t I can’t* draw a breath to say “we meet at last, Mr. Franzia” as Rozay imploded with an

—*AITCH*—

writhing on her back anointed with potato juice sightless eyes heaving breasts bucking hips
staring down at black *Friday* glaring up from pink panties no Lollipops these but just as
unstarched as the doorknob turned

—*AITCH*—

Hightail through the basement window, whirl through the hedge and begone.

It was not the proudest moment of my life. Then or since.

I put my brain on lockdown, battened every hatch, plugged my inner ears till I wasn't
in Kansas anymore. All the way to Terre Haute I don't think I inhaled once. Many days and
many miles had to pass before I could believe there wouldn't be any fallout, consequences,
repercussions from my ignominious egress.

But of course there would: karma is as karma does. And it was and it did, and it
came to my attention seven years later. Thanks to the resurfaced Cassandra, then in her
gypsy hogback phase, passing through the Midwest like a nostalgic tornado. Cass phoned
me at college in Wisconsin, saying she was sorry to report that the little weirdo chick I used
to hang out with had come home from Julliard a month or so ago, and jumped off a bridge
into the Kaw River.

"I hear she left a suicide note as long as a novel."

"Well," I said, "I guess some of us just have rotten luck is all."

Not to worry, kiddo; remember this is part of our evolution on the Wheel of Samsara,
passing from one level to the next till we attain Nirvana and can break the cycle. Speaking
of which, she had to go get her Harley serviced. She and Krishna loved me; so long Dwarf.

I hung up and looked around at the sculptures I was trying to create, molding flesh of
clay over wire bones. Feeling muddily mortal about it.

Seeing them all as *lumps*.

And smashing them, one by inert one.

*

Now it's a quarter-century later and I am entering a Borders Books and heading for
New Releases (Non-Fiction) around which customers are clustered, more than you'd expect

this early on a Monday morning. Will they point and whisper “That’s him!” to each other?

They do not. They disperse toward other parts of the store, to the café for espresso and biscotti, without a word or a look at me.

Look for the word.

MIMF.

Author’s holograph on a mustard-yellow cover.

Baseless Mime, by M.I.M. Franzia. Saltear Press. Blurb on the flap: *Why did a beautiful, brilliant music student with a future full of promise choose to die by her own hand at only 21? She gives us the answer in this moving, poignant self-profile that will break your heart and provoke your thoughts.*

Yeedge.

At least there aren’t any photos.

Except for the one on the back of the dust jacket: an edgy young woman with hair cropped gamine-short, giving the camera her best Flora fleer.

Peek at the preface. Girl from Kansas gets whirled away to New York, wows them all at Juilliard, wins acclaim for her *H.D. Sonata for Organ in G Minor* (inspired by the poetry of Hilda Doolittle) before succumbing to the affliction of genius. Returning to her hometown in the boondocks to write this novel-length suicide note, then throwing herself off a bridge and into a river.

Followed by an epigraph from Doolittle’s “Eurydice”:

*If I should tell you,
you would turn from your own fit paths
toward hell,
turn again and glance back
and I would sink into a place
even more terrible than this.*

I purchase the book and hustle it out to the truck. Plenty of room in the parking lot at this hour; no need to leave anytime soon. So open the log of her final sperriment and face up to whatever lies inside.

About this note. I've been told before you take your own life you're supposed to write a note explaining yourself. Testify your testament and say goodbye. Catholic doctrine would have you damning your soul whatever the explanation. Hell awaits, so abandon all hope or go repent your pants off. Aquinas claimed it's better for a woman to be violated than kill herself to avoid violation, "since without consent of the mind there is no stain on the body, as the Blessed Lucy declared."

Trust her to be lofty-learnèd to the end. I flip through the pages and find terms like "eschatological" and "supererogatory." Then three little words jump out to snag my eye:

—till next Lent—

"You mean like church?" I mumble.

Back to the beginning. I steel myself to pore over the text paragraph by paragraph, line by line; but time and again my eyes skim ellipses.

- ☉ *Is he talking about the Lucy who gets gang-staked by four pious men in Dracula? The Skewered Lucy whose head is chopped off and mouth stuffed with garlic?...*
- ☉ *Crossroads burials—suicides, adulterers, the unbaptized—are ready-made Nosferatus, staked to the out-and-out damned spot...*
- ☉ *And lying like Ophelia, her rites maimed and remembrance rueful, having lost her father to what's behind the curtain...*
- ☉ *Call it doubtful, her descent from weeping willow through glassy water to muddy death, so they lay her among the unsanctified...*
- ☉ *Then Hamlet and Laertes leap in after her, onto her, trampling out the vintage of her virgin cants—sweets to the strewments, hey nonny diddle diddle...*
- ☉ *Call us gifted and leave us speechless, groundless, baseless mimes. Hand movements only. And body contortions. I'm used to those—all stops out...*
- ☉ *A mime knows timing but no sense of time. It's as if mimicry provides camouflage, protection from predators by posture and gesture...*

- ☐ *The grayhawks beat dusky wings about you like Tippi in her tollbooth, drowning out the world, dissolving your belonging and trapping you inside...*
- ☐ *Anti-Oz, without an Auntie Em. It's neither a question nor answer. That said, the "get you, my pretty" of the gulchettes is just as painful...*
- ☐ *How it hurts to sleepwalk a tightrope in rose-colored slippers. Adrift in solitary confinement with echoes for intercourse, drainage from dreams...*
- ☐ *Till the little voice inside your head tells you to fly into the night, the blackness against which you will have more fervour, more thoughts that no god can take...*
- ☐ *Amplius lava me ab iniquitate mea et a peccato meo munda me: wash me from my iniquity and cleanse me of my sin (whether I sink or swim, or burn to purge...)*
- ☐ *I don't think I remember how to float. "Thank you for having me" sounds the wrong note. Cruel worlds need no farewell. Harmony is but a knell...*

Then at the bottom of the last page:

Addio, addio, senza rancor. I'd give anything to get out of Anti-Oz altogether. Thrown in a basket, tapping my heels. Closing my eyes as colors cease to exist—sepia is all. Home is like no place. And damnation isn't for everybody, despite what they said at Sane Trees. It's not like you're guaranteed admission. They don't let just anyone in. Chances are you'll flunk the entrance exam.

Finally, going Sartre one smarter:

Hell is overparticular.

I turn back to "About this note" and start over, straight through the unskimmed book. Then once again from beginning to end, this time peering between the lines. But reaching the same conclusion, no matter which way I read it.

There is no mention of me at all.

