

JEFF LONDON

ROCK AND ROLL AIR FORCE

ON THE TRAIN BACK FROM NEW YORK, two in the morning, a towheaded boy paces the aisle in yellow rain boots, untied. He stops beside Cary. He's wearing a sweatshirt that says Green Monkeys on the front. Cary toasts the boy with a plastic cup of red wine. He loves to drink on trains and every other place.

"You know what?" says the boy. "My friend? Her dog has a rash."

"That's bad," says Cary. "They'll probably have to put it down, like Old Yeller."

Cary wears a black trench coat over his boots, jeans and t-shirt. He's forty-six, with a stubby ponytail. He's buzzed, but not nearly enough. He's scanning a fashion magazine that someone left behind on the bucket seat. A few years ago, all the models looked like heroin addicts. He wonders what happened to them all.

"I don't feel good about myself," he tells the boy. "If you think I do, you're mistaken."

He places his feet flat on the floor to feel the motion and clatter of the train. It's sort of sexual. Everything is sort of sexual. He closes his eyes and thinks about his mistress. His ex-mistress. It didn't work out, the reunion. He misses her already, even though, of course, it was a bad idea all along.

"I like Fruit Loops," says the boy. "I don't even have a *dog*. My mom wants me to sit down now."

"Good," says Cary.

CARY'S WIFE DRIZZLES BUTTERSCOTCH SAUCE on her cup of French vanilla ice cream. She's wearing a short skirt and low-slung heels. She's done something different with her hair.

"Hi, Beth," says Cary. "I'm going to mow the lawn today."

"You're drunk," says Beth. "How fun. I need to work."

"Let's go to the lake this weekend," says Cary. "We could rent a sailboat."

Beth pops a whole grain waffle from the toaster. Cary likes that moment when the waffle takes flight and Beth snags it mid-air. She's wearing glossy red fingernail polish again—it's been years.

"You're working this weekend," Beth says. "You're putting in your ten-hour work week."

Cary clams up.

"I have some leads, babe," he says. "I'm trying here."

"Cary," Beth says. Her lipstick smudges her front teeth, and Cary can't stop staring at it.

"Your teeth," he says.

"Cary," Beth says. "You're late. You're twenty hours late and you didn't even call."

She palms her keys off the lowboy and almost slams the door, leaving. Cary watches her leave. He's standing by the bay window, and looking at her legs. Next door, twin girls play hopscotch on the sidewalk. The chalk lines are wavy, watery.

IN THE BAR, for lunch, a young man sidles up to Cary and says, "Shoot some pool, fifty bucks?" He has a ponytail, too. He has enough hair to cover eight bald men.

"OK," says Cary, knowing it's a bad idea. The bar smells like fried fish and pee. Pictures of the owner cover the green walls: the owner holding fish, big fish, on small, docked boats.

"I'm Lou," says the guy. "I'm in the rock and roll Air Force!"

"Oh," says Cary. "I work at weddings."

The pool game lasts a few minutes, but Lou is toying with Cary, missing shots on purpose, and at the end, it's a mercy when he sinks the eight ball. Cary sighs and downs the rest of his beer. It's cold. His beers never get warm.

"I don't have the money on me," he says. "I live around the corner."

"I don't do guys," says Lou.

"Me, neither," says Cary.

They walk out into the brilliant white morning. Both of them use their hands to make visors against the glare.

"Rock and roll Air Force!" Lou shouts, pumping his fist in the air. "Hey, you got a name? You got any weed?"

Cary is tired.

"A little bit," he admits.

WHEN BETH COMES HOME, Lou is in the shower. He's been in there for a long time, although, to be fair, he smelled exactly like a man in dire need of a long shower.

"Where's the TV Guide?" Cary asks. "Lou's in the shower."

"I don't know," says Beth. "Who's Lou? Do we have any beer?"

She rarely drinks, and when she does, it's usually a bad idea.

"We have Dr. Pepper," says Cary, too brightly.

Beth sorts through the pile of mail on the floor.

"Not to change the subject," she says, "but how did you meet this Lou person, and why is he in our shower?"

"At the bar," Cary says. Beth nods her head as if she understands completely. She sits on the couch beside Cary. She unbuttons the top two buttons on his shirt and looks at his downy hair. She closes her eyes and leans closer against Cary. He can smell her perfume—it smells like tangerines.

"You're leaving, right?" says Cary.

"Yeah," she says. "Of course."

Lou walks into the living room, wearing Beth's white robe. He leaves tiny hills of baby powder with every step. He must have used an entire bottle of it. The smell—it's a good smell.

"This is Lou," Cary says. He sits with his hands cupped on his knees. "He's with the rock and roll Air Force."

Beth kisses Cary on the cheek. She's so pretty, Cary thinks.