

HOME, MADNESS, LOVE, AND SUNDRY

SYLVIA TILKE IS TRYING TO hide in a forest of birch trees. During the hour-long ride from the city, she unfocused her eyes, blurring her vision until the trees seemed to pass the car window instead of the window passing the trees. But now she is aware of her own movement. Her ankles strain inside her high tops, her bare shoulders graze the silky white skins of the birches. The trunks are too narrow for her to hide behind, and although the forest is crowded with the soft, tall trees, their branches a thick shawl of leaves and shadows, she can't find anything to completely conceal her.

David counts, "Seven Mississippi, eight Mississippi, nine . . ."

The sounds tick away the seconds. Her blood streams faster. The soles of her feet pound the earth more quickly.

They haven't played hide-and-seek for months, and to Sylvia, their woods seem changed, just a little, just as much as it would be from any one season to the next. Leaves that were erupting buds are now as full as spider webs, and the spindly boughs that had seemed naked and malnourished in the wan light of spring, strain upward, quaffing sunlight, creating tiny veins of unfamiliarity that add excitement to their game.

"Ready or not, here I come," David shouts, mocking the falsetto of a child.

Sylvia crouches behind the branches of a fallen birch, trying to blend into the terrain's black and gray and white patchwork. She hears his feet shuffle and scatter dirt. She rises slowly and turns as he moves, hoping to get behind him. He stops suddenly, but Sylvia cannot. Her foot crushes a pile of leaves. He pivots toward the sound, makes a quick dive, and catches her wrist.

"Got you," he says smiling, pulling her to him, and kissing her hard. His fingers continue to encircle her wrist as they kiss, touching tongues. She tries to pull her wrist from his grasp, to wrap her arms around his neck, but he holds tight, and their kissing becomes another game.



Games, she thinks later, lying flat and bare on her futon. I love you because you don't love me because I love you. Because you don't. Love. David's impression lingers on her body like an angel in the snow.

"I don't want you to come here anymore," she said to him before they made love, thinking that with these words between them, they would not be able to get close. But they did, crushed and flattened the words between their stomachs—did it anyway, and she knows he will be back and she will be glad.

"I don't want you to go," she says now, watching the human heart tattooed on the back of his shoulder disappear as he slips his T-shirt over his head. "Stay until morning."

"No," he says and pulls her up so he can cup her face with the palms of his hands.

His refusal increases her desire to make him stay. She strains to feel his lips touch her skin as he kisses the top of her head. She bites the flesh of his neck, tasting salt. She bites harder, wondering if she might ever have the nerve to draw blood. When he drops his hands from her face, her skin stings a little where earlier the stubble of his beard and the callouses on his fingers have made her cheeks tender.

He backs away to pull on a pair of ripped denim jeans.

She focuses on a patch of tanned leg peeking through a tear in the thigh and calculates her position.

“I have to get up early anyway,” she says abruptly, hooking a little finger through one of his belt loops and leading him to the door. She stands in the doorway, trailing her nail tips across her bare stomach and between her breasts. As he leans across the threshold to kiss her goodbye, she steps back and swings the door shut.



At dawn, she rises, wet, the sheet sticking to her skin. The thermometer outside her window reads 85 degrees. Humidity has carried into her apartment the odor of dead smelt and alewives and perch, which have washed, along with garbage and algae, onto the shore of Lake Michigan. Moving from bedroom to living room to kitchen, she feels she’s swimming through murky water, ankles tangled in seaweed.

In her black hiking boots and a loose black dress with a deep V exposing the wings of her back, she leaves her apartment, taking the L into the Loop. The air conditioning on her train is broken or turned off. The windows don’t open. As the train slithers through the city, perspiration slicks her whole body. To distract herself, she decides which of the passengers she would procreate with if there were a nuclear war and only those in her car were left to repopulate the earth. She passes over both the young man in the knock-off Armani suit who leans against the catchpole reading a Silver Surfer comic and the old man tucked into a wool coat who folds and smooths and refolds a plastic grocery bag.

She considers the Asian man with thick glasses and a macroeconomics book on his lap, but finally she chooses the black man whose dreadlocks dangle from the inside of his multicolored tam like the limbs of an octopus. The future humanity could do worse than have his jawline’s curve. At the next stop, she slips into the seat behind him and watches the loose ropes undulate as he bobs his head in time to some internal music.

Moist from the heat, his neck gleams like fresh pudding. She imagines touching his skin, drawing her finger over the lithe cords, his sweat surrounding the path of her imprint.

At her stop he remains seated, and she stands, facing him, waiting for the doors to open. When he looks her way she smiles, but his gaze moves past her, then out the window; then she is on the platform, and the train is gone.

She steps out of the subway station, assaulted by bright sunlight and the stench of Soul For A Pound's garbage, rotting in the alley dumpster. The letters of the restaurant's faded orange sign above the door are peeling and read "Sou or Pound." Inside, with no air conditioning, there's no relief from the fetor—a mixture of rancid greens and meat that reminds Sylvia of vomiting in church as a child. Grease coats every surface, the orange booths that line the walls, the tables clustered in the center of the room, the stainless steel counter top that runs the length of the back wall. In moments the grease coats her eyelids.

Antron, the restaurant's owner, maneuvers a mop over the black-and-white-checked floor and among a crowd of chair and table legs. The swirl of the mop's wet strings resembles the hair on her preferred nuclear survivor, and Sylvia wishes she had at least discovered the man's destination, had made even that small connection.

"Morning, Antron," she says.

"Hey, hey, Sylvia," he says, looking up from his mop. He smiles, showing uneven teeth against brown lips. Perspiration flows down his face.

"It reeks in here," she says.

He rests one forearm on his huge belly. "I know, but what am I going to do on a day like this? It'd be bad anyway but Leroi didn't take the garbage out. Left it rotting in the back room all night."

"No one's going to want to eat in a place that smells like this," she says.

"Don't worry," he says. "Once I start cooking, people won't be able to resist. Now you're here, I can start. Here."

He hands her the mop and walks behind the counter to the grill.

Sylvia notices that the menu, nearly as faded as the sign outside the restaurant, hangs above him like a giant cartoon bubble. Fitting, she thinks, for he claims the menu reveals his own divisions of life: HOME, MADNESS, LOVE, and SUNDRY.

“Says in *The Book*, a time for everything,” he often tells customers. “A food for everything, too.”

Antron cooks with such passion that while watching him roll uncooked rice between his palms or massage the skins of catfish while cleaning them, Sylvia has wondered what it would be like to be in bed with him. Would his huge hands be love or madness? What is his recipe for home?

“No recipes,” he told her when she asked him how to make turn corn. “I cook by *vibration*.”

She watches Antron sing with his whole bulky body, percutting with spatulas, adding sizzle when meat meets the grill. He prepares five, six, seven dishes at once, manipulates saucepans and spices with the expertise of a master drummer. And he’s right. As soon as the crushed garlic and chopped onions begin steaming, the air turns savory, sharp. When she inhales, the scents sting her nostrils like a drug.

“What is it?” she asks, counting quarters into the register drawer.

“*L’aimont Jambalaya*.”

“As usual,” she says, “love first.”

“Always, baby.” He laughs, drops a slice of raw onion into his mouth. “Always.”

Heat disheveled professionals become the lunch rush. Antron’s singing becomes a one-man chorus, setting the pace for Sylvia and Helene and Mae, the two other women who work the counter. When the heaviest of the lunch rush eases, Sylvia sips cold Jamaican coffee and listens to Mae explain why she was late this morning.

“So there we are, bunch of people fresh from our showers, and we’re packed so tight—’course there’s no air conditioning—we can already smell each other getting sour.”