

CHRISTINE SNEED

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## *Clown Testimonies*

Q. Why the lone teardrop?

A. Try to think of it is an exclamation point instead.

In the eighth grade, Iris Sparke was allowed to spend the last period of the day in the company of non-virgins and soon-to-be non-virgins. This, in any case, was how she defined high school students. Her guidance counselor and straight A's made it possible for her to join the small group of envied and tormented eighth-graders who walked the three blocks from Eleanor Roosevelt Middle School to Wingley High at 2:15 p.m. five days a week. Some of the students studied Advanced Algebra, some Computer Science II, some Beginning Journalism as Iris did, having chosen the class from a list of eleven, Health and Hygiene not among them because the one time it was offered, parents had complained aggressively about the condoms the teacher had handed out by the armload.

Each afternoon she tried to disappear into the stream of older students and avoid eye contact with anyone who would know for sure that she was still a kid whose mother bought all of her clothes because she was too young to earn enough of her own money at an after-school job. Babysitting did not count; it was a job almost anyone could do,

and she had had enough of its humiliations and nuisances: twice in the last month she had been caught snooping by malicious seven-year-olds who were supposed to be sleeping, not spying on her as she rummaged through their parents' dressers and cabinets looking for contraband to pass the interminable hours with: the binger's imported chocolates, dirty magazines, unlocked diaries. In two years she would be old enough to get a job at the movie theater or the bookstore in the mall where she could buy all of the trashy novels that her mother wouldn't let her read now. The distance from here to there, however, seemed no shorter than the cosmic path to Pluto.

Beginning Journalism was taught by Mr. Sanders, a tall man with imposing eyebrows and a sonorous voice who gave his students long, penetrating looks while waiting for them to answer his questions. Some of the sophomore girls in the class passed notes when Mr. Sanders lectured, snickering and whispering in the back of the room until one of the notes was intercepted and read aloud. Mr. Sanders read it in the same commanding tone as always, not pausing when he came to the words, *I wonder if Mr. S. has a girlfriend. Do you think he does it with her? He's really cute. You'd let him, wouldn't you?*

"Journalistic integrity," he said, folding up the

note and tucking it into his shirt pocket, gazing calmly at his flabbergasted students, only one of them daring to titter. “Spare no one in your work, including yourself. Strive for absolute honesty. Miss Mayes and Miss Ziedler have kindly supplied me with an excellent opportunity to demonstrate this principle.”

He then sent the girls to the room where detentions were served, the class still dazed while the note-passers gathered their books and purses before slinking out to the hall.

Iris spent the rest of the hour with her ears buzzing, unable to concentrate on the ethics lecture that followed. (He had actually read those words *out loud*. It was the third week of classes and already high school seemed as lawless as advertised—Wingley High was *Playboy*; stodgy Eleanor Roosevelt Middle School her grandmother’s inevitable monthly copy of *Reader’s Digest*. Here people were more than happy to confirm that like dinner and mail delivery and thunderstorms, sex happened. That it would, on some as-yet-unforeseeable occasion, happen to her too). Her mother initially had been uneasy about letting her take the journalism course but had been assured by her boyfriend, who was a geometry teacher at Wingley High, that statistically speaking Iris was in more danger walking down the street than sitting in a high school classroom.

“Know your subject,” said Mr. Sanders, looking from student to student, many of them unable to meet his eyes. “Do your research in the library before you write the article. Don’t expect everything of vital interest to be on the Internet.

Computers, of course, are here to stay, but contrary to what many scientists have predicted, the books and newspapers of the world have so far refused to give up the ghost.”

Her first assignment was to interview a contributing member of the community and write a biographical article. Contributing member was defined as someone who paid taxes and possessed a library card. “You might think my criteria are a little arbitrary,” said Mr. Sanders, “but I challenge you to find an interesting person who doesn’t have a library card.” He smiled directly at her when he said this, Iris feeling her face turn so hot that she worried a rash had spread across her cheeks. “If you have any questions, see me after class,” he added, turning abruptly to the blackboard with a dusty eraser.

He probably thought she also wanted to have sex with him. He must have noticed her furious blush, though he had to be used to such responses by now, notes like the one he had just read lurking in his classroom with the regularity of ownerless farts. Did he have a girlfriend who did *it* with him? Iris knew the sweaty specifics, having seen most of a pornographic movie at a slumber party—the images of the frantic, twining bodies and severe but hilarious-looking penises forever burned onto her brain. She had also read with guilty interest the heavy-breathing scenes in several potboilers, but considering the hassles sex created for the characters, she questioned sometimes if it was worth the unending hysteria.

Her own sexual experiences had been limited to a number of prolonged and sloppy kisses with

a boy named Mayo Pestone, who had gone out with her to the movies and to the mall for four and a half weeks before dropping her for her friend Charlotte, who had been calling him behind Iris's back, promising to let him see her breasts if he dumped Iris, who would never let him near her tiny breasts for as long as she lived. When she heard this, aside from wanting Charlotte to be ripped to pieces by an enraged lion, Iris contemplated stuffing her bra, but realized she would then be even less inclined to take it off for a boy.

Mr. Sanders was friends with Mr. Wallenga, Iris's mother's boyfriend, and they were possibly the cutest male teachers at Wingley High. In the girls' bathroom, Iris had eavesdropped while two giggling girls put on make-up and compared Mr. Sanders to Ricky Martin and Mr. Wallenga to Enrique Iglesias, but with curly hair. She had almost choked on her laughter, picturing them, chests bared, in a music video with a dozen swooning beauties. Scott Wallenga wasn't bad, but it was hard to see him as anything but her mother's boyfriend; it was also disturbing to think that people other than her mother wanted him, *wanted* being a word that in the past year had begun to set off shrieking alarms in her head. He might someday become her stepfather, which didn't bother her that much, though it didn't really appeal to her either. She had a father already, one she saw in the summer when she visited him in Oregon. For the rest of the year, she was fine with only her mother, Ursula, bossing her around, though besides the daily chores that she was

supposed to do, there wasn't much asked of her since her grades had always been high. "You're my kid, not my slave," Ursula liked to say, especially in front of other people. Her mother was considered cool, the charming envy of Iris's friends; even the now-despicable Mayo Pestone had called Ursula "the coolest chick I know." As for Iris, Mayo had called her "the bomb," an endearment she thought weird and silly but had missed hearing once he was no longer around to say it.

Her mother thought it would be a good idea for her to interview Scott for the contributing-member-of-society assignment. "He'd be perfect. I'm sure Mr. Sanders would get a kick out of it too."

Iris shook her head, watching her mother contort her face as she plucked her eyebrows in front of the steam-streaked bathroom mirror. "I bet everyone will interview a teacher. I'd rather interview you."

"That's nice of you, sweetie, but Scott would be very flattered if you picked him."

"Mr. Sanders will probably think that I'm brown-nosing."

Her mother looked at her, the tweezers in mid-air. "I loathe that word, Iris."

"It's not as bad as a swear."

"It *is* a swear, as far as I'm concerned."

She looked askance at her mother. Ursula was constantly yelling and cursing while driving, or complaining profanely about the neighbors who left their windows open in warm weather so that every word of their innumerable boring phone conversations rang through Ursula's house if she

too had the windows open, which she usually did since she had mistrusted air-conditioning ever since the hotel outbreaks of Legionnaire's disease long before Iris's birth. "I'll think about interviewing Scott," Iris muttered.

Scott, one boyfriend out of the many who had come and gone, had defied the odds and stuck. He was also the one who had told her that a surefire way to become a better student (and a better person, for that matter) was to read *every single word*. No skimming or skipping, no bluffing or boldly faking it in front of the teacher who would always know the truth. Yes, he taught math, but he had read a book or two, had taken an essay test or two. He knew that the best students gave each word of each assignment its due.

When she called him after school, she realized that she had no idea what to ask him. Mr. Sanders had purposely left the assignment open-ended in an attempt to separate the freeloaders from the real journalists-to-be. "Maybe just tell me why you decided to become a teacher?" she said.

"Because I wasn't cut out for the life of a mafia heavy," said Scott. "I faint at the sight of blood. Those big knives aren't easy to hide either. I kept cutting my leg when I had one in my pocket. You can guess how often I was fainting. Usually at the least convenient times."

"You can't expect me to believe that."

"No, really. I wouldn't have been any good at whacking people."

". . . if you're not going to be serious."

"All right." He chuckled. "Just a little joke or two. Paul likes jokes, you know."

"Paul?"

"Mr. Sanders."

"Oh," she said, writing *Paul(!)* in her notebook and underlining it. "Tell me the real reason you're a teacher."

"I guess it's because I wasn't any good with a gun either."

She sighed heavily. "Can't you stop goofing around?"

Scott made the noise of a violent horn blast—his now-familiar laugh of spontaneous delight. "You ask Mr. Sanders why he's a teacher and he'll say the same thing. We're not cut out for a life on the fringe. He faints when he sees blood too."

"I'm going to write whatever you tell me, so if I get an F, I'm blaming it on you."

"Be nice, Scott," called Ursula from the next room. Iris knew her mother's ears had been straining in her direction since she had dialed Scott's number. Ursula was in love. Scott seemed no better off. They saw each other at least three times a week, and sometimes he drove over after Iris had gone to bed, leaving in the morning before she emerged from her room, naively thinking she wasn't aware that he had spent the night in her mother's bed. (But insanelly, even eerily, she had never heard them yelping or moaning behind the closed door, despite her efforts: the glass pressed to the adjoining wall or the breathless vigil outside their room at carefully strategized hours of the night).

He stopped teasing her and finally answered her questions, but when she sat down to write the article the next day, she ended up adding a few of

his wise-guy remarks. She needed them to bring the article up to the required four hundred words. *Journalistic integrity*, she would say if challenged. *Never put words in your subjects' mouths. They're the ones speaking, not you.* If Mr. Sanders made an example of her, she was armed with his own lofty pronouncement.

The following Tuesday when he asked her to stay after class, however, she forgot the exculpatory phrases she had memorized and sat terror-stricken at her desk.

Her classmates filed slowly out of the room, some of them giving her speculative looks. She was afraid they could hear her heart pounding, the frantic racket filling her ears, her stomach seizing. Mr. Sanders opened his briefcase and took out her assignment from the past Friday, *Failed Mobster Finds Success as Math Teacher*. He hadn't yet returned anyone else's paper.

"Not a bad title. A sense of humor is something that I wish journalists were able to make use of more often." He set the paper on top of her notebook. "I gave you a B+, which isn't a grade I hand out like candy."

Iris thanked him, relieved that he wasn't going to yell at her. Her clammy hand dampened the edge of the paper when she stuffed it into her folder.

"Mr. Wallenga told me you're an A student." He smiled at her, very handsome, very tall.

"Yes," she managed. "I like school."

"Me too," he said. "Most days, anyway. Mr. Wallenga and I were talking over the weekend and he recommended you for a little secretarial work that I need done a few hours a week."

Switchboards, fax machines and eighty words a minute? She didn't know how to type and admitted it, staring with chagrin at her desk.

"You won't have to," he said, unconcerned. "I only need someone to help me organize the notes for a book I'm working on so I can start writing it. The pay is seven dollars an hour. Not as much as I'd like, but it's what I can afford right now."

Yes! she wanted to cry. "What's your book about?" she asked instead, wanting to sound like a serious person, not a twit like her note-writing classmates.

"Itinerant circuses, with a focus on the clowns."

"What would I be doing with your notes?"

"You'd have to sort them by topic and put them in chronological order as much as that's possible. Two days a week, maybe two hours each time. Sundays and Thursdays if you're interested. We'd have to do a trial run, but if it worked out, I think I'd have enough work for you to do until Thanksgiving, maybe longer."

"I'll have to ask my mom."

"Yes, of course. You'd be working at my sister's house. She has more space than I do. Maybe you could start this Sunday at four if your mother agrees."

. . . since Scott thought it would be a good opportunity for her. Since she was auditing Mr. Sanders' class. Since it was a compliment to have been singled out. And since it would be at his sister's house . . .

Iris had hoped for a pile of notebooks, or at worst, dated slips of paper. Instead, she found only a few notebooks and two cardboard boxes containing a shocking, almost sinister hodgepodge of paper scraps, memo pads with half of the pages blank or else the words crossed out in a profusion of ink splatters. Besides sorting, Mr. Sanders decided that she should rewrite the messier notes in clean, tabbed notebooks, but she found his handwriting difficult to decipher and worried that she would misrepresent much of what he had scribbled down. “Do your best,” he said, sheepish. “You’ll get used to my penmanship the more familiar you become with it. Now you can see why I needed help.”

Her first two hours in the chaos of the borrowed study at Mr. Sanders’s sister’s quiet house left her thinking that she would have to quit before he fired her. He wanted the notes sorted by topic, but many of them were interviews and she would have to cut them up and paste the matching questions onto new sheets of paper in order to follow his strict instructions. “Is that really what you want me to do?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not the interviews. You can leave them intact. The parts I want you to sort are mostly on the scraps. Descriptions of the fairgrounds, the crowds, the pet peeves and diets and hobbies of the performers, snippets of overheard conversation. Any extraneous details. Those have to be sorted before I can start writing.”

She picked up a handful of receipts, coffee-stained flyers, napkins and old envelopes that were covered with Mr. Sanders’s chicken scratch. “There

don’t seem to be dates on most of these.”

He picked up a separate handful, briskly reading through them. “Just try to rewrite as many as you can and I’ll go through them later and put an approximate date on them. Then you can sort.”

“Okay,” she said meekly, thinking that accepting the job had indeed been a mistake. “Wow, there’s so much.”

He set down the scraps with an apologetic smile. “Just do your best. It’s a disaster, I know. If you can’t do it, that’s fine too. I’ve been dreading this work for months, which is why I finally decided to hire someone. I’ll have to go through everything again on my own, but at least it’s a start. I’ve been working on this project for six years, can you believe it?”

Iris gazed at him, wide-eyed. Six years ago, she had been seven. Almost half of her life? He did not need to be reminded of this.

“I spent four of the last six Julys following around a different circus and compiling my notes,” he continued. “This could be magnificent when it’s finally done. *The Tao of the Clown*. That’s the idea, but I doubt I’ll use that title. Too much of a gimmick now. *Clown Testimonies* is probably better. You’ll be floored by some of what you read here.” He plunged his hand into one of the boxes, unearthing a fistful of motley notes. “The circus is the whole world as microcosm. All of the same vices and virtues. A startling range of truly rich characters.” He paused, suddenly grave. “Some of this material might be a little off-color, but I would hope you’re mature enough to handle it.

Nothing too terrible though. You've heard it all before, I'm sure."

This was all he needed to say. Iris decided to commit herself to organizing the madness of four summers' worth of scrambled notes, and on subsequent afternoons, having passed the first week's trial, eagerly combed through the piles searching for scandalous details, but after five visits, she still hadn't found anything worth copying into her diary, other than remarks about grisly hangovers and a few inventive expletives.

Mr. Sanders's sister, Ruthann, tall as her brother but older and plumper, showed Iris to the study each time she arrived, lingering for a few minutes to make jokes about her brother's messiness, musing over the irony that he was so orderly when teaching but such a disaster when handling his private projects and affairs. "But I suppose I'm hardly one to judge," she said. "Neither one of us has ever managed to marry. I'm already forty-two and he's not far behind at thirty-six." It was the end of the second week. Before this, Ruthann had offered sweets and the use of the phone, but no confessions.

Iris tried to look as if she was used to being the confidante of grown women. "You both could still get married, couldn't you?"

"He could without much problem, but by now I'm tainted goods." She squeezed Iris's arm. "He'd be mad at me for talking about these things with you, but that's too bad. I don't have a captive audience very often." She picked up a pencil and tapped the table with it. "One thing you'll eventually realize is that women are devalued

much faster than men are. Maybe by the time you're my age this won't be the case, but I doubt it. I don't really mind living alone anyway. Only my own quirks to deal with." Iris looked at her, trying to breathe very quietly, noticing the grooves on the older woman's forehead, the narrow nose that matched her brother's.

"I suppose I should let you get back to work," Ruthann finally said, taking a book from a pile by the door on her way out. When she returned a little later to give Iris a snack, she said nothing more about her brother or herself, leaving Iris oddly disappointed, as if she had been promised then denied a memorable gift. What did Ruthann do when she was horny? Iris wondered. Surely she did something—women of her age were entitled to sex. This, among other things, was what Iris had learned from the gloriously meaty sagas of Sidney Sheldon and Judith Krantz. Maybe Ruthann had a boy toy—a twenty-year-old apprentice electrician who made unscheduled house calls like those enjoyed by the aging housewives in Iris's favorite smutty novels.

In class she watched Mr. Sanders with proprietary interest, feeling protective of him and jealous of the attention he gave others, though he treated everyone the same as he had since the start of the term, singling her out no more or less than the others, but it became clear that she was one of the better students. Christa and Valerie, the two hairsprayed, oversexed note-passers, noticed this and ostracized her for it. "Ass-kisser," they whispered when she took her seat before Mr.

Sanders strode into the room. “Loser. Go back to day care with the other babies.” Iris glared at her notebook or her feet or the blond head of the boy who sat in front of her. She fumed over each insult but rarely raised her hand to ask or answer questions unless one or both of her critics were absent. A month after she had started working for Mr. Sanders, the girls ambushed her in the bathroom, snatching her pencil case and throwing it into the toilet. “Boo hoo!” they cried. “What’s Mommy going to say now? Go back to your playpen and suck on your bottle.”

Iris looked at them stonily, thinking how ugly they were. They both wore green eyeliner and long fake nails. One had the eyes of a chihuahua, the other the lipless regard of a snake.

“What a retard,” snorted Christa, the chihuahua. “She can’t even talk.” They left her looking into the toilet, Iris ignoring her disgust and fishing out the case.

She made the mistake of telling her mother what had happened. Ursula shot up from the table and nearly spilled a cup of hot tea on her lap. “Are you sure this has nothing to do with you working for Mr. Sanders?”

Iris shook her head. “I haven’t told anyone at school.”

“I think you should say something to him about those two girls. He could talk to the class about respecting each other.”

“No way,” cried Iris. “They’ll know I told on them. Don’t say anything. I’d die.”

“What if they do something worse?”

“They won’t. I can handle them anyway. I’m

not a wimp. They just surprised me.”

Her mother shook her head, her jaw rigid. Iris realized that Ursula would tell Scott who would tell Mr. Sanders. But on Thursday, only Ruthann was at the house. Mr. Sanders hadn’t stopped by to check on Iris’s progress in over a week, and he had said nothing to her after class in the three days since the incident.

“Why did Mr. Sanders pick clowns to write about?” Iris asked Ruthann. “Did he want to be one when he was a kid?”

Ruthann shook her head. “My brother wanted to be the President of the United States, but he couldn’t even get elected to student council, so he gave up that dream in college.”

Iris made a face. “I’m glad he’s a teacher.”

Ruthann grinned. “So am I.” She hovered by the work table, glancing at the colorful piles of notes that Iris had sorted and was now recopying. “I suspect he was first interested in clowns because he was in love with a young woman who became one, but she only did it for a couple of years before she got married and settled down.”

Iris stared at Ruthann. “Does he still talk to her?”

“I don’t think so. It was a while ago now. Just after college. Now I think he’s more interested in what motivates people to dress up in ridiculous costumes and knock themselves out day after day to get a few laughs from a crowd of strangers. He says it’s an act of heroism on the scale of rescuing people from burning buildings. Like teaching, I suppose. Clowns and teachers don’t do it for the money, that’s for sure.”

Iris said nothing. Mr. Sanders in *love*? Was he in love with anyone now? She almost blurted out the question but knew Ruthann would be suspicious. Love would undoubtedly hurt; besides the constant worry of him leaving her for someone else, there were the fabled nighttime negotiations to deal with—hard things forced into soft places, teeth bared, the thrashing head pulled back by its hair. Images from the dirty movie ambushed her ceaselessly. Mr. Sanders naked. Some unknown woman naked and fiercely willing. The notion appalled her, made her shiver with fear and jealousy.

Ruthann was, in fact, looking at her oddly. “Did you know that I’m almost old enough to be your grandmother?” she murmured. “If I’d had a daughter at seventeen, and she’d had a daughter at seventeen, I’d be the grandmother of a girl just a little bit younger than you are. Jesus, how strange.”

Iris regarded her, baffled.

“Just ignore me, Iris. Sorry. Too much coffee.”

*Each of the four circuses I’ve traveled with has at least one pedophile, a few sex addicts, several alcoholics, a couple of seriously deviant ex-cons and a number of bisexuals and transvestites. Orgies aren’t uncommon, apparently, though they haven’t yet invited me.*

*When I’ve asked the clowns during the second or third interview how they handle the sex thing, they usually give me mystified looks. “How does anyone handle it?” one of them said the other day. “We take*

*what we can get. Man, woman, animal. We’re not too picky.” He laughed after that. I suppose he was kidding, but to be honest, it was hard to tell.*

*Here* was something interesting. At long last. The fifth Thursday—the paragraph written on a piece of yellow paper tucked inside one of the interview notebooks that he had told her not to worry about. She put it in her knapsack and took it home, hiding it in the drawer with her long underwear and the little girl’s undershirts she no longer wore. At bedtime she took out the note and read it so many times she involuntarily memorized it. Probably the secrets of adulthood were contained in these few lines—those who could have orgies and then go about their more ordinary business surely ruled the world.

Since Ruthann had made it sound as if Mr. Sanders hoped to marry but couldn’t find the right woman, Iris had been thinking that if he didn’t mind waiting another six or seven years, she would marry him. Though she did not want to share him. He should want to have sex with her—his wife—but sex with anyone else would be dishonest. (*Take me and only me*, she wrote on the back of the yellow paper. *But remember this—I won’t share my Lover, Mr. Sanders!*)

When he came by to work with her for one, sometimes both, of her two hours on Sunday afternoons, he had whiskers, dark ones that made his face look smudged from some mysterious and entirely male exertion. During the week, he was always clean-shaven and smelled of Irish Spring. The Sunday whiskers seemed to her the

embodiment of masculinity, as did his slightly clothes-hamperish smell, though he usually wore slacks and a good shirt, not the jeans and T-shirt she hoped for. She wanted to know if he had hair on his chest and tried to picture the dark hair in his armpits, which Mayo Pestone had bragged about already having grown, but hadn't except for a few spiritless hairs. She listened to Mr. Sanders chuckle while reading through some of his notes, the gravelly sound making her skin prickle with goosebumps. She sneaked looks at his long fingers, his wrists, the pinkness of his neck where it met the collar of his cotton shirt. On some nights, in her bed with only the reading lamp on, she wrote his name in her diary, thrilling over how illicit it felt to replace *Mr.* with his first name—*Paul Sanders: total babe. Paul Sanders: sex maniac. Paul Sanders: a man.*

(She refused to view Scott Wallenga in the same dusky light; such a thing was disgusting. He was her mother's boyfriend and therefore a proxy father. Paul Sanders, however, was only her teacher, a sort of friend, an unexplored possibility).

The second time Iris was cornered by the chihuahua and the snake, this incident in the stairwell after school, she told them to fuck right off. They stared at her, incredulous then scornful. Christa grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. "*You* fuck right off," she barked. "You little shit. I'll kill you if you ever say that to me again."

"Let's go," hissed Valerie nervously. Three other students had stopped to watch.

"Who gives a shit." Christa tightened her grip on Iris's arm before pushing her into the wall.

"Why don't you and Valerie marry Mr. Sanders if you love him so much?" said Iris, the words out before she could stop them.

The girls froze, then Valerie laughed.

"What did you say?" sneered Christa.

Iris hesitated, knowing it would be smartest to keep her mouth shut. "Why don't you marry him if you love him so much?"

The older girl narrowed her eyes. "You're an eighth-grader, right? Don't ever talk to me again or you're dead, you dumb bitch."

Valerie pulled on Christa's arm and hurried her away, the other students lagging behind, one boy turning to leer at Iris who managed to scowl back. Her stomach pitched, threatening to disgorge its contents all over the stairs. At home a half-hour later, she examined her arm, seeing that little red bruises had formed where Christa's fingers had bitten into her skin. Her shoulder ached where it had hit the wall, but this time she knew well enough not to say anything to her mother.

The next day Mr. Sanders was waiting for her at Ruthann's house. "I think one more week should do it. Whatever you haven't finished recopying by then I'll finish myself."

She felt lightheaded, wobbly with terror. She would only be able to see him at school if he didn't want her to work for him anymore. "You don't have to pay me," she offered. "I wouldn't mind."

He shook his head. "You should be out with your friends having a good time. Not holed up here at my sister's place. My conscience is getting

the better of me these days.”

“But I like this job. I don’t want to stop before I’m done.”

He picked up a notebook and paged through it, pretending to inspect her work, uncomfortable about something she hoped had to do with the scene in the stairwell, not his suspicions about her feelings for him. One of the three witnesses must have told him.

“They didn’t scare me,” she said.

He gave her a blank look. “What?”

She stared at him. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“Who, Iris? Who do you mean?”

“I don’t know their names,” she lied.

He gazed at her for a long second, unconvinced. “Did someone try to pick a fight with you? Was it someone from our class?”

She shook her head.

“Iris, please tell me the truth.”

“It was a stupid thing. I don’t want to talk about it,” she said. “Why do you want me to stop working for you?”

He set down the notebook, his slim fingers drumming its cover. His face was clouded, as if he would force her to name her tormentors. He opened his mouth, then closed it before opening it again. “Iris, are you sure you’re all right?” His fingertips suddenly grazed her shoulder.

She nodded and looked at his shoes. Bright blue and white Adidas. Long navy-blue legs. “You look nice,” she said.

He tilted his head. “In this? I look like a pimp for Foot Locker.” He stalled, embarrassed. “I suppose I shouldn’t have used that word.”

“I’ve heard it before.”

“Yes, I’m sure you have. But please excuse me anyway.”

“I want to keep working for you.”

“By having you do all of this, I’m taking the easy way out here. There might be a revelation or two that I’ll miss if I don’t go through everything myself. But you’re doing such a good job that I think we’ll keep the status quo for now.”

The next day was Friday and Mr. Sanders added to its reliably celebratory tone when he caught Christa and Valerie passing notes for the second time. He stood before the class with the scribbled contraband and prepared to read it out loud, but the moment ended in disappointment for most of the students: he hastily folded it in half after skimming the page in silence. “This time we’ll make an exception and not read Miss Mayes’ little love note to Miss Ziedler out loud. Think of it as a lesson in censorship,” he murmured. “Unfortunately, our freedom of speech and the press are not always so free.”

The students protested, hooting and catcalling, but Mr. Sanders raised his voice with unaccustomed anger, announcing that anyone who continued protesting was welcome to join Miss Mayes and Miss Ziedler in the detention room for the next three classes.

Iris knew the note was about her and concocted it in her head during the last half of the class while staring firmly at her desk:

*Hey V—Let’s kill the 8<sup>th</sup> grade bitch-baby after school. Throw her out with the bathwater. Poison her*

*milk. Strangle her with her diaper. Love always, C  
P.S. Sanders looks hot today. I'd fuck him any  
time old time. Just name the place, 'kay?*

When the bell rang, Mr. Sanders asked her to stay behind while the others packed up and fled into the hall. "I'll walk you back to Eleanor Roosevelt," he said. "I want to make sure you get on the bus there without any problems."

I love you, she almost yelled. "No, I'll be fine."

He shook his head. "No arguments, Iris. I'm going with you."

She could barely speak as they walked the three blocks to her school, half listening as he explained that she would undoubtedly have to deal with Christa and Valerie again, especially since she would be a freshman in the fall and the older girls would still have two more years to go before they graduated. "You're an extraordinary person, Iris," he said before leaving her across the street from the middle school. "Don't let other people's stupidity or cowardice affect you too much. That's what does so many of us in." He forced a smile and patted her shoulder before turning back toward the high school. The light changed from green to red to green again before she crossed, the traffic thundering by unnoticed.

On Sunday she moved slowly through the piles of notes, returning several times to one scrap that had been separated from a longer interview sequence.

Q. Why did you decide to become a clown?

A. Laughter is the nicest thing we can give to another person, besides an orgasm. So you might have to agree that clowns and lovers are the closest things to gods on earth.

After an hour, Ruthann came into the study with a cake. Mr. Sanders appeared behind her, all boyish smiles. "Have some cake with us, Iris?" he said. "Today, I'm sorry to say, is my birthday."

Ruthann had presents for him too—a new tennis racquet and the *Gay Talese Reader*. Iris was shocked to learn that Gay was a man and almost broke into giggles.

"I was thinking about it some more," said Mr. Sanders, helping himself to a second piece. "I'd like to keep you on until the end of the semester, or a little longer if necessary."

"I don't want the project to end," said Iris. "I like your clowns. They're a lot different from how I thought they'd be."

"Obviously I like them too, but I'm looking forward to putting them to rest. Six years is long enough."

"There'd better not be a *Clown Testimonies, Part 2*," teased Ruthann. "I couldn't take six more years of those jokers."

"No," he said firmly. "Never."

Outside it was already dark and he offered to drive her the half-mile home. "Ruthann hopes you'll keep visiting her when we're done," he said, disconcerting her when he threw his arm over her headrest as he backed out of the driveway. "I hope you will."

"I like her a lot. She's funny."

“You’ll have to help me with the next book I write,” he said after a moment. “Once I figure out what it’ll be.”

“Yes, I’d like to.” Her hands felt as heavy as dictionaries. Her lap would have *dents* on it when she lifted them off.

She stared at the glove box when he stopped in front of her house. Something had to at last be done, but she did not know what exactly to do or declare. *Kiss me now, Paul Sanders!* She had been thinking about the proper words for days, testing them in her diary: *We could get married if you don’t mind waiting. I love you madly. You can have your way with me if you’re not too rough.*

“Well,” he said loudly, waiting for her to open the door. “Four more weeks and we’re done with the semester. It’s gone by so fast, hasn’t it.”

“Yes,” she said, almost lunging across the seat then, the knapsack in her lap making her clumsy. She tried to put an arm around his shoulders, thinking that she would hug him, feel his whiskery cheek against her face. A hug was friendly, nothing serious. Even Scott hugged her once in a while.

“No, Iris,” he said quietly, drawing back. “Please.” He looked at her, his face resigned, saddened. She saw, as if just handed some very bad news, that he thought she had tried to kiss him. He kept his gaze steady while her eyes filled from humiliation and disappointment, all of her

ridiculous hopes suddenly exposed.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sanders,” she mumbled, her hands groping for the straps of her knapsack before she climbed out of the car and ran past the neighbor’s rock garden, past the rosebushes whose roots her mother had covered with leaves the night before in preparation for winter. She ran into the house, nearly tripping on the back stairs, steadying herself against the door frame. She ran past her mother who stood in the kitchen stirring a soup pot with the old wooden spoon that smelled perpetually of onions, her face smiling then bewildered in the flash of a second. She ran into her room and shut the door, knowing that Mr. Sanders had already driven off, as smooth and cautious as he had driven her from Ruthann’s house to her mother’s. She knew he would block her from his mind, block the kiss that he thought he had stalled between them, block any thoughts of her until he saw her again in class. Even then he would try not to look at her or think of her.

He was old enough to be her father, to marry her mother and live with them and tell them both what to do each day. The idea of this could almost make her laugh, rescue her from grief and disgrace. She told herself that her mother knew nothing. Mr. Sanders knew nothing. No one could claim to know her at all.

