

Now, in his room, Jerome reaches for his stack of *Esquire*, flops down with one on his bed. Whenever his parents are done with the month's issue, they stack it—along with their *New Yorker*, and Amy's *Camera Obscura* and Bill's *Home and Garden*—in the recycling bin. It's one of those generally understood foundational Baumen-Chen family practices that Jerome fishes the *Esquire*'s out and stockpiles them—in the perfect position of not-ashamed-but-mainly-out-of-sightedness—under his coat rack, concealed whenever the door to his room is open.

Beyond just the pictures of girls, Jerome likes the idea of a *man's space*. Knows enough to recognize the sometimes hokeyness of their address to readers—all that finger-wagging, ultimatum business about how many buttons a *man* allows on his dinner jacket or what a *man* should and shouldn't drink, can't help but hear in his head all the million scoffing sounds his mom must make when flipping through it in bed next to Bill, all the "assumptions" she "recognizes" they're making about "modern masculinity"; which is painfully, admittedly, her supposed wheelhouse. Jerome could tell that all his friends sort of thought they had it worse/the worst—whether it was Louis with his *three* older sisters, or Steve with his mom dating a new guy every two weeks, or Sebastian with that painfully hot Icelandic live-in assistant his two dads hired to answer the phone and do laundry—all the constrictions upon and challenges set to these budding American men, reaching and grasping and squirming their way towards...*whatever*. But, really, *honestly*: how many guys had had to become men under the same roof as a mother who believed herself an *expert* on men and their becoming? Who considered it a professional duty

to beat him to every punch, to meet every revelation or outburst or embarrassment with a knowing, footnote'd smile?

This is about a five month old one now, the August issue. There's this spread—shot in Newport, Rhode Island—of girls on sailboats. The "point" of the spread is about the boats, and the square-jawed, weather-beaten Australian World Cup'er standing next to the girls. But really, the *point* of the spread is the girls: blue collared shirts open an absurd amount of buttons down, so you can see the swell of a brown breast; legs turned out and leaning against rig lines suggestively, and—the kicker—this tousled-haired blonde next to the Aussie in the last photo—spanning two pages and featuring the ship at sunset. She's in a bikini bottom and a grey sweatshirt that falls off her shoulder, starring straight at the camera, mouth parted. *Oh shit*, thinks Jerome, as he feels himself harden against his duvet cover. *Oh shit*. He's just looking into that parted O of a pink mouth, and he wants to stop but also doesn't want to, presses himself against his mattress, and everything stiffens more. He gets up, adjusting himself a little as he walks, presses the lock on his door and then climbs back on his bed to settle. Jerome can only really stave things off when it's a crisis—right before gym class, or that time in ninth grade he was about to get onstage with the Multicultural Students Alliance and Eliza Perlman brushed against him. He hasn't yet developed the muscle—or the desire, really—to stave things off when in his room, alone, after school and XC practice and the shelter and like fifteen minutes to dinner anyways so what is he *really* gonna get done...

He starts with the blonde herself, imagines fucking her below deck, which is something he saw in a movie once, her legs parted in this fantastic smooth V, head

banging against the inside of the bow. Jerome always starts by thinking *I'll just do it real quick*, but then gets a little momentum going and starts to feel creative, usually switches the girl up two to three times. Recently he's enjoyed going from the faceless blonde or hyper-waxed brunette to some girl at school. What comes up now is Anam Hosseindizah, a half-Iranian girl he's been at school with since sixth grade. The summer between ninth and tenth she lived in Paris with her dad while he did business, and came back with a new all-black wardrobe and what Jerome guesses must be push-up bras. She's in Jerome's Environmental Science class, and at the end of Amelia Brenner's presentation on the devastation of the polar bear population Tuesday, Mark Lopez did Jerome a favor by patting him on the back and saying loudly, "Not on my boy Chen's watch, am I right? Bone fide *animal* lover over here."

Anam turned in her seat. "What do you mean?"

"All his volunteer work at the shelter," Mark bit off a pink fraction of his No. 2's eraser, grinned.

"My god you're *still* doing that?" she said, looking at Jerome like he was the eighth wonder. "Wow, that's really sweet." Except with her strange French-Persian-Northeast accent it came out a little as "zsweet".

Jerome places her and him in the supply closet of the gym: first she takes him in her hand, works him up, then guides him into her from behind. They knock dodge balls and jump ropes off the push-together metal-shelving units. "Oh, Jerome you're so zsweet," he hears her say. "That's so amazing you work with the animals that's so zsweet, so zsweet."

*Spend all your time waiting. For that second chance.*

Jerome groans, squints his eyes harder, tries to keep going. Mom's playing Sarah McLachlan while she sets the table. If he listens, he can even hear the metallic jangle of the silverware drawer opening—no, shit, he doesn't wanna listen, he can focus, if he just—focuses—

*There's always some reason. To feel not good enough.*

And now his mom is singing along in her reedy almost-alto, totally unselfconscious, disrupting him and Anam in the supply closet. *Goddammit.* He doubles down, suction his grip a little, quickens the pace. *Ok, he thinks...So I'm in a Jacuzzi. Uh, sitting on the side. And she's kneeling in the water, sucking on my dick. Yeah that's good*—Sarah is approaching the chords of the chorus downstairs but he's in the Jacuzzi—*Maybe in like Aspen, yeah*—a place he's never been but heard of. And she's below water, it's...she's... Reese. Reese? Reese is a janitor at Hillhouse, a woman with one of those semi-ageless faces that loop their way out of the chronology game by just settling deeply into *homely*. She scowls more than she speaks. He's not sure why the thought of her--her crooked jaw that cuts up too high on one side, her gruffness--is working so well but it is. *Ok, yeah*—he doesn't stop, doesn't wanna let go or he'll be susceptible to more sounds from downstairs, wind up biting his pillow, *no ok...Reese.* He performs a quick transfer in his brain and places them both in one of those classy-as-fuck wooden saunas. Her blue jumpsuit is half-unbuttoned, tied around the waist and she's not wearing anything underneath. Jerome, seated on a heated ledge, reaches down to grope her—sometimes his fantasies are slightly Cubist. For some reason, the idea of Reese is really working he barely hears the kitchen sounds from down below, Jerome gets carried away, mind goes loose, and

he can feel he's about to come, mounting toward it, reached that moment—the zero-gravity moment he sometimes gets when it's really good where he can tell he's already crossed the threshold but doesn't feel anything yet but will if he just keeps going and—he gets this image. Of Reese's hands gripping his thigh really hard. And her hands are crusted with dirt and he lets go of himself and suddenly feels tears in his eyes because he realizes why Reese was working and so hates himself.

Hard-on nearly completely gone, he grabs three *Esquires* at once and slams them against the wall. Sarah turns off.

"Jerome?" his mother calls up.

Jerome is biting his fist, fighting back tears, and her name is coming in a rush through his brain, like those action potentials you have to draw endless times in freshman Bio, all those K+'s surging through holes only this time it's *Lou Lou Lou*. He pushes his tears back in with his free fist, clenches all his muscles, then releases, expended. Because he's not some sweet guy with animals, right?

The bottom of his stomach feels both sticky and heavy at the same time.

*Lou Lou Lou*, it's still throbbing away through him like a heartbeat, that name. She moved away a year later, and became another one of his parent's loopy stories, and he had indigestion and stomach problems for most of fourth grade—embarrassing incidents at sleepovers and incontinence issues in the public restrooms at the community pool and mom took him off gluten for a few months, and then—right when fifth grade happened and kids started slow dancing, and *who you liked* became a key question and some guys started walking up to you in the locker room and grabbing your balls and you couldn't get pissed cuz they'd call it a

"joke" and say, "Why you care, you a faggot?", Jerome realized that he could be a weirdo with the stomach problems and the jumpiness or he could *just forget about it*. It was the force of will, plain and simple. He worked on it a little everyday.

Initially he couldn't get through first period without thinking about it: hearing the sound of the shovel make impact, Lou squatting next to him, the sound of her voice "*I thought you were helping me, this whole time...*" By the end of two weeks he could make it the whole school day, but seeing her old house when they got home would set it off again. By the end of the month, he only saw her face, and Wally's face, sometimes at night. Force of will. He squeezed it out. But still—make no mistake—punished himself about a million little ways, every single day, of which, to be honest—if he were really honest, and why not be, lying here as he was with wet cheeks and drying jerk-off sweat and a half-flaccid dick—one of the punishments of which was almost getting bitten by cat fangs nine times every day, and digging his fingernails into his palms first thing every morning, and the general thrum of not-trusting, not-trusting he'd learned from pushing it down but carrying with him this thing, the knowledge of this thing that he'd done, as a *kid*, before it could be taught or smoothed out of him, and Lou had seen it in him and wanted him to know she saw it, and wanted to get—literally—down on his level, and say: "We are one and the same". And so on top of everything else he jerks it to her, of course, because what better release than acknowledging you're a shitty person who pokes dogs in the eye with a stick, who tortures animals and finally becomes an accomplice in their killing. What better release than to acknowledge?