

## Strip Poker

David lives on Mud Island. At night when I am there we sit out on the front steps and look at the other people sitting on their front steps. He smokes a cigarette while I play imaginary piano keys on his thigh. For Elise, the right hand part, which is all I remember from five years of lessons. The street has the cheerful misty look that comes from bright artificial lights at night, and sometimes a breeze shifts the air that sits wet and heavy on my skin. Houses there remind me of childhood beach vacations, the temporary homes I remember seeing squinty-eyed through the car window at night as we pulled, finally, into town. A deep, tired sigh of arrival. The buildings look lightweight, wood painted in pale yellow. The windows angled and huge, and inside ceiling fans, spider plants with their tangled shoots dangling wantonly from the high hanging pots. I can't help but feel that there no one ever has to vacuum, that the dusting and the polishing and the washing is done with precision by unseen maids.

To get to Mud Island I take Poplar downtown to Third, Third past a series of pay-a-dollar-for-an-hour parking lots, over the trolley line to the Auction Street Bridge. I live in Midtown, not far from Overton Park, where the zoo is, and the art museum. In Midtown you know you're in Memphis—trendy purple and pink restaurants next to boarded-up and collapsing old houses, neat residential areas a street over from nightclubs, less than two miles from the projects. We don't go out at night alone, my roommates and I. None of them were home when I blistered my finger on the edge of a burner at nine o'clock at night last week, and later, David scoffed because I hadn't walked to the convenience store on the corner for some ointment. Over the phone from his well-lit

living room, he said, “It’s only a block away, Olivia. What’s the big deal?” I wonder what they told us when we were younger that makes him not think twice about something like that, and makes me refuse to do it, no matter how my finger throbs. I work at the newspaper, and, when he says this, I think of all the rape reports we don’t even run.

Last night I went out with my roommates. We walked down Madison to a beer joint—the P&H, where the ceiling is a mural of Memphis celebrities and a pitcher is five dollars. It is a place for regulars; we have graduated to it from weekends spent wandering with the tourists from bar to bar on Beale Street. I was forcefully drunk, talking loud and taking stands. I told a story about work, about the awful, comes-with-the-territory sort of assignment I often find myself floundering through. They sent me to interview the parents of a child who was murdered last week. What can they say that we have not thought of in those moments when we work to make ourselves believe such pain is possible? Merely to think about it takes a push of the mind. It is testing yourself, to move beyond the automatic frown and “That’s awful,” said in the sort of voice that draws the “aw” out into an approximation of pity. Then a moment of nervous silence, and someone relieves the room with a change of subject.

Last night I told the story. “I got there,” I said, “and the father came out into the yard—mind you, I was not the only reporter there. There were TV people and photographers and a guy from an Arkansas paper, and the father comes out into the yard to meet us, a week after his kid’s been killed, in a T-shirt that has a bottle of Jack Daniels on it with a hand wrapped around the neck of the bottle.” I pressed the side of the frosted mug to my cheek. “Across the top it said, ‘Jack-off Daniels.’”

“You’re kidding,” Natalie said.

“No, I swear,” I said. “Jack-off Daniels. I swear. When the photo people went to take his picture, he went back in the house and put another shirt on over it. Can you believe that?”

“Oh, Olivia,” Allison said. “That’s awful.”

“Isn’t it?” I said. “Isn’t that just awful?” Funny, though. First I told that story to the people at work. Then I told my father. Now them. Every time it seems easier.

Today I sleep until three and wake up without a headache, but with the vaguest hint of pain at the back of my skull. I pick over the clothes and books I threw on the floor when I cleared off my bed last night and go to the kitchen for a glass of water. Hannah is sitting on the couch in her nightshirt eating a bowl of extravagant chocolate cereal.

“They’re still asleep,” she says. “Can you believe it?” I shake my head. There are four of us in the house, a bad number if we have a disagreement, because we tend to pair up, though not always in the same combinations. The most recent fight we had was about strip poker. It was me and Allison against Hannah and Natalie, who had proposed a game to a room full of our male friends. They promptly accepted, though of the four of us only Natalie would play. Hannah sneered and wandered off, and Allison and I sat uncomfortably on the couch, Allison with her knees hugged to her chest and her chin tucked in. “What’s the big deal?” Natalie kept insisting. “Why won’t you play?” She sat there in a T-shirt and underwear while three men in boxers studiously looked at their cards.

“I’m not taking my clothes off,” I said, and Allison just shrugged. She kept laughing awkwardly at inappropriate moments, wanting to leave the room, but staying

out of a sense that Natalie might need protecting. I stayed because I wanted to see how far it would go, at what point someone would call it quits and who it would be.

It stopped after Natalie whipped off her T-shirt challengingly. The dealer sat with the cards loosely between his palms. There was a dangerous silence. “It’s awfully late,” Allison said stiffly, and the men began to scrabble around for their clothes as though Allison had released them. After they left, we fought because Allison and I had been so uncomfortable, because Natalie felt defiant and Hannah defended her right to display her body as she chose. Hannah always makes pronouncements like this in her most infuriating voice; “don’t even try to tell me I’m not right,” it says.

More satisfying than arguing was sitting up late in Allison’s room discussing it, saying “I know,” in loud, excited voices to each other’s comments, making extravagant hand gestures. “That was just so weird,” she kept saying. “Why did she do that?” I thought that it was the kind of thing women do in order to say they are not prudes, that men have nothing on them when it comes to the crass side of sexuality. “Natalie did it because she likes to hold the attention of a room full of men,” I said. “She wanted to have them look at her and want her and be uncomfortable, maybe one even squirming a little in his boxers, trying to hide a hard-on.” Allison was looking down. She doesn’t like the word “hard-on,” though she will not flinch at “erection.” She says “aroused” instead of “horny.” “Sometimes Natalie is too much,” she said.

“Natalie wanted to be in control,” I told her. “I don’t think she ever wanted to let it go all the way.”

Today is one of our silent days. Sundays are like this. We are tired, we are disgusted, and the house is a mess. We don’t shower until four in the afternoon, and until

then we rotate around each other through the rooms of the house, cleaning, speaking only as necessary. I scrub the dishes with vigor, great suds splashing up the side of the sink. When I reach up to put away the cups, a trickle of warm water runs down my arm through the sleeve of my nightshirt down my side. It makes me feel dirty, dirty and hot. Hannah goes outside and shakes out the throw rug. After Allison gets up, she vacuums. She stands in the middle of the living room frowning with concentration while the machine whirrs plaintively over a recalcitrant Cheerio. "For goodness sakes, Allison," Natalie finally says. She brandishes a plunger, on her way to the hall bathroom, where the toilet has overflowed again. "Get out of the way." She nudges the vacuum aside, bends and picks up the Cheerio. "Perhaps you shouldn't rely so much on modern technology." Allison grimaces at her.

At five o'clock I am dressed. I feel restless; I don't want to be with people; I don't want to be alone. I go outside and walk without purpose down the block, quickly, hands in my pockets. Walking outside I cannot call David, and I congratulate myself because I have not spoken to him since early yesterday afternoon. Sometimes lately I have felt that it would not be all right for me to take his hand. I wonder if that is odd, thinking about fitting my palm to the back of his hand when it rests on his thigh, curling my fingers into his. An acknowledgement of we, while sex is often an extreme of I.

Now I want him to come and touch me so I will know it is me inside my skin. On my own I'm not sure I can confirm it. Once I called him from work on a Saturday afternoon of special obituaries and checking fatalities with the highway patrol and said I was coming over, a list of phony reasons in my head in case he asked. When I got there he opened the door before I even rang the bell and we walked down the hall, shoulders

bumping. I sat down on the couch and he stretched out and put his head in my lap and began to breathe.

I don't tell my friends this, because I am well aware that this is not the sort of thing you're supposed to say. We are a clever bunch of girls, or perhaps I should say women, talking about sex, the art of giving a blow job, the more important art of achieving orgasm. We do this in matter-of-fact tones, locker-room talk transported to our living room and made clinical. Sometimes when a man is over we gang up on him. We don't equivocate; we use all the right words; everyone but Allison says "fuck." There is a gleefulness about a group of women working to embarrass a man like that. Especially Natalie, who looks so sweet and blond. The delicate flower, we call her. She loves to widen her eyes and say the word "penis" in her dainty voice.

At the end of the street I stop and turn around. There is no one to look at, no one mowing the lawn or shooting baskets in the driveway or walking the dog. The houses look smug, like they don't need anything. They live here; people don't. People are just passing through, rattling around. Making too much noise.

A door shuts down the street. The sound is from our house, and Hannah comes padding up the sidewalk. She spots me and motions with her head for me to come. "Telephone," she shouts. She is wearing a sleeveless pink cotton sundress that buttons up the front and no bra. Her legs and feet are bare, and she has her arms crossed under her breasts to support them. The dress is a shade of pink that is oddly unsuited to her; it is too pale, too girlish. "Is that Natalie's?" I ask her when she is close enough to hear me.

She looks at me and her eyes twitch in toward a squint. Her face says I have offended her, though she keeps her voice even when she says, "No, it's mine." I wonder

why the question would upset her. Does she think I am implying she is not feminine? All I mean to imply is that she is not feminine in the way that Natalie is—pink, with bows.

Perhaps I shouldn't worry so much about the shadings of words. It's like correcting myself to call us women, which I am continually having to do. If you want the men to do it, Hannah says, first you have to do it yourself. But it's an odd word. I wonder how old I will be before I can call myself that without feeling pretentious. I am 24, and I still feel like a girl.

I am often getting myself into trouble this way—paying too much attention to details. When I get drunk or I get high and I have sex—not just sex but an orgasm, a good one, the kind that itches at you until you can't stand it and you strain into it until you feel it in your teeth—that's the only time that I stop thinking. Otherwise I think too much, about things that other people do naturally. At least I assume they do. The world would be a painfully self-conscious place if everyone spent as much time considering the implications as I do. Allison tells me I should analyze less often. But I don't think I'll take that advice; I look at her and what I see is that she is continually disillusioned. Sometimes she tells herself the truth, but she has an amazing talent for talking herself out of it, at least temporarily. She is capable of being disillusioned about something—a lover, her job, her mother—over and over for as long as it's an issue. Possibly forever. She lacks Hannah's stamina for holding a grudge.

It is my father on the phone, and I try to ignore the disappointment, the feeling of having been tricked, that I get when it is not David. "Hi, Daddy," I say, in the faux-daddy's girl voice I like to use on him sometimes. "What's up?"

"I bought you something today," he says.

I play along. “You bought me a present? What is it?”

“Guess,” he says.

“A new car,” I say. “Diamond earrings. A yacht.”

He laughs. “Something a little less expensive.”

I know what he has bought for me. My father is trying to teach me about music, specifically about jazz and blues. It is an interest he tried to share when I was younger, when I thought he was foisting it on me instead of offering it to me. He is excited that I live in Memphis—he says it gives him an excuse to introduce me to the blues. What he doesn’t say is that he can teach me because I am willing to learn from him now, now that I understand that he knows things worth knowing. “What is it?” I ask, making my voice mystified.

“It’s a CD. Albert King—*Born Under a Bad Sign*. A lot of people think it’s the greatest blues album of the 60s—recorded by Stax/Volt. I’ll mail it to you tomorrow. If you like Clapton, I think you’ll like this. So, anyway.” He pauses for breath. “How are you doing?”

“Just fine,” I say. I like it when my parents will accept that for an answer.

“Good, good,” he says. “Your mother says hello.”

“How is Mom?” I ask.

“She’s good. She’s busy, you know. Work.”

“I can appreciate that,” I say. Hannah wanders in the living room, sits on the couch and flips on the television. She has put a green and blue cardigan on over the dress, though it is not at all cold. She looks as though she has no idea what the season is and is trying to allow for all possibilities.

“Well, sweetheart, I’ll let you go,” my father says. “Just wanted to tell you about King. You give us a call sometime.”

“I will, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” We hang up.

“Your dad?” Hannah says. She is watching a music video; a very young, very undressed girl with frighteningly wide eyes is looking bewildered in a close-up. Her hair is straight and the kind of stringy that looks unwashed. She is so thin that the thrust of her lips seems almost violent after the deep hollows of her cheeks. “How could anyone find that attractive?” Hannah says. I notice that she does not change the channel. Hannah has a fascination with the sexist, with the things she calls “degrading to women.” I think this is true of a great many women, though some to do it with less detachment than Hannah. I have seen Allison and Natalie flip through the pages of a fashion magazine making noises of exasperation at the disgraceful anorexia of the models, and then turn to one another and say, “I have to go on a diet.” Their faces pained. It is like getting up real close to the glass protecting you from a tarantula, even though you’re afraid of spiders and if you look at it too long you start imaging its pinpoint feet on your hands, your face. Slipping your feet blithely under the sheets only to discover that it’s nesting in your bed. Ready to scurry vilely over your toes.

“Are you going to David’s tonight?” Hannah wants to know.

I shrug and wander over to the bookshelves. College texts, classic novels, feminist readings, the latest and most critically received in contemporary fiction. “Don’t we have any pulp?” I say.

“What?”

“You know, pulp. Thrillers, mysteries. Romance novels.” I walk up behind her and make my voice a throaty murmur. “Don’t we have any sex books? Bodice rippers?” Cecelia gasped when she saw Derek’s pulsating manhood before her. Her loins tingled, her full, rose-tipped breasts surging forward to . . .”

“Shut up,” Hannah says. She waves a hand at me dismissively. “Read something educational.”

“Ha.” I climb over the back of the couch and sit next to her. “That’s educational.”

“You don’t need any more education of that sort,” she says, in the kind of voice that would produce a collective “oooo” if there were others in the room. “Speaking of which, are you going to David’s?”

“I don’t know.” I take the remote control from her and turn to the news. “He hasn’t called.”

“So?”

“So I don’t know.”

“What—you have to wait for his invitation? Why don’t you call him?”

This conversation is going to get ugly. “I don’t like doing that,” I say.

“Why not?” She is facing me firmly now, easing into lecture mode. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t like it.” It is not easy to get Hannah to drop a subject. Long before now Natalie would have backed off; at this point, Allison would turn away thoughtfully for a moment, and then start talking about what was on television tonight or what horribly worthless piece of trite had just topped the bestseller list.

“Why not?” Hannah insists.

“I don’t like to seem demanding,” I say. I can tell that is going to set her off, so I jump in. “What I mean is, I don’t like to feel demanding. Some days I decide I will wait until he calls because I like to know that I’m capable of it. That the day goes on just the same when I don’t know where he is or what he’s doing or if I’ll see him later. It’s not for him. It’s for me.”

She frowns. She will accept this as explanation, but she’s not sure if she believes it. It is, at least, partially true, which, when you are having a talk, is better than not true at all. Like saying, “It’s OK,” with a shrug of the shoulders when someone asks how I like my job, like complaining to my worried parents and then qualifying with, “But I really like the people.” What I’d rather say is that it’s not what I thought it would be, that it’s harder and more boring, and that it takes an hour to work myself up to making the phone calls I have to make in the morning. But that would be petulant. After all, my mother would say, no one *really* likes their job. Not *really*.

Ah, I would have to say, but David does. A week ago at dinner he expounded on this during the irritating period between ordering and having the plate set in front of you. He is a public relation man, which is not so far removed, he likes to tell me, from what I do. He does not say this in a combative way. It is more like an amen a summing-up avowal of faith in the rightness of our relationship. We have things in common! he is saying. Yes! Once, when he was on vacation, David sent me a postcard. Every sentence ended with an exclamation point. The beach is gorgeous! We went swimming! I miss you! Only the “Love, David” went without one.

“I heard a great band last night,” David said. “I gave the guitarist my number, told them to give me a call.” David works for a small record label. “Someday I’m going to

discover someone,” he said. “Memphis is due for another Al Green. It’s been twenty years since the world’s had a soul man they could dig.” Under the table, he was rapidly jiggling his knees. I put the side of my foot against the side of his and vibrated slightly. “You’ll see, Olivia. I’ll be the one they quote in the documentary . . .” He deepened into voiceover. “David Eugene Hodgson witnessed the birth of stars.”

I laughed. “You’re going to let them say your middle name?” It was two months before he’d tell me what it was.

“When I’m famous,” he said, “it won’t matter.”

I was thinking that if we were in a movie they would show us ten years later watching the documentary, and he would be wearing a tuxedo, and I would be smiling proudly and, with casual dignity, holding loosely to his arm. I like the idea that life could resonate like that. That the person to whom you say, when you are lonely, that you have never been sailing is the person whose hand you will be holding when you finally go. But I don’t know if that ever happens. I don’t know anyone it’s happened to. Or, at least, anyone who recognized it when it did.

The next time we go to the P&H, Hannah consumes at least a pitcher completely on her own. “Why don’t you quit your job?” she says. “You hate it.”

“I don’t hate it,” I say.

Hannah giggles. “Why do you lie?” she says. “You hate it.”

I shrug. “It’s OK.”

“What should we do after this?” Allison says.

“Don’t change the subject,” Hannah says. “Why do you hate your job?”

“I’m a bad reporter,” I say. “I don’t have the guts.”

“What do you mean?” Natalie says. “I thought you were good at it.”

“I can do it,” I say. “But it’s harder than it should be. I don’t ever get that feeling the good ones get—that excitement of chasing a lead that takes you through the obnoxious question and the endless phone calls, that buoys you over that. I just feel . . . anxious. Painfully anxious.”

No one responds. I wonder what they are thinking—that they all hate their jobs? Maybe they try not to think about it and now I’ve forced them to. Maybe now they all want to explain away what I’ve just said so it won’t have to sink into their own experience. “Let’s drop it,” I say.

“OK.” Hannah grins. “What does David say to you before you fall asleep?” Natalie rolls her eyes.

“What are you talking about?” I say. I start looking around for the waitress.

“What does David say to you in bed?” she says. “Before you fall asleep?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I love you, I guess.”

Hannah grins. She holds her beer up to the dim light and swishes it, squinting. “Ha,” she says. “I thought so.”

I sit, saying nothing, feeling insecure. Maybe Hannah’s lovers tell her something better, more meaningful. It never seemed to me before that that was the wrong thing for him to say.

One morning at David’s house, two months ago, I got up before him and went to the living room to open the blinds. Outside a young redheaded woman was walking a large white dog. Across the street a father sat on the porch, jiggling his baby on his knees. Trot your horsy, down in town. I saw a piece of paper sticking out from under the couch,

and I bent to pick it up. A notebook came with it, a small memo pad of the sort that David uses to make his lists of things to do. It was covered with his handwriting, but it was a scrawl, as though he'd written it drunk or drop-dead tired. It said, "Sometimes I wonder if I still love Olivia." It said, "Today I thought about telling her it was over." It said, "Goddamn, goddamn I'm tired." I felt the shock of realizing that the people you love are thinking things that don't show in their expressions. The shock of realizing that they lie to your face, calmly, almost every day.

I threw it in the trash, pulled out the bag and took it outside to the big green dumpster waiting for the garbage truck. Then I went inside and put on my jeans and my socks, not even thinking at all, just burning, burning. I went outside and paced. It was so much worse because he had been willing to write it down. And then I thought, "But you don't even know when he wrote that." And I thought, "If he hasn't said it, he might not mean it anymore." I went inside and took off my jeans and got back in the bed. I put my cold hand on his warm stomach and pressed my cheek into his back. He turned his head and smiled at me, gave me an awkward kiss on the nose. I never asked. Other women would have. Hannah would have gone into the bedroom brandishing the notebook. I can hear her shouting, "What is the meaning of this?" at his sleepy, bewildered face. Natalie would have kept the secret for a week or two, and then she would have cried and said, "You don't love me," wrenchingly sorrowful, over and over until he cried, too, and sobbed, "I do, I do, I do." Allison I'm not as sure of. I think no matter what she did she would have forgiven him. Which I didn't, quite. I just never asked, and at times, now, I don't believe.

The other night Hannah and I went to hear a band at a small club. Everyone who sat sat quietly in their seats; everyone who stood swayed politely. The only exception was one long-haired girl near the front of the stage. She danced as though she and the band were alone in the room, as though her body was the beat. Nothing else could touch her. I thought, “My God, she must be fucked up.” I thought maybe I should want to be her, but I didn’t.