

S K U N K

A Love Story

J U S T I N C O U R T E R

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Only three years ago did I finally decide to get a skunk of my own. This was after a long, tentative courtship of the skunk scent. If I were driving on a country road and smelled skunk, I immediately pulled over and sat, sometimes for hours, with all the windows rolled down, breathing deeply and letting my thoughts drift among whatever daydreams the scent inspired. I often packed a lunch and devoted my Sunday to one of these drives. But I longed for the pleasure of enjoying the scent of the skunk entirely at my leisure.

By the time I was thirty years old, the notion that I was completely self-sufficient and could do, more or less, what I pleased, began to take shape somewhere in my mind. I had a job as a copywriter for Grund & Greene, a publisher of law books, and I had my own small house in New Essex, a relatively tranquil suburb. I was proud of my house—sad, gray shoe box that it was—with its knee-high hedge, which I kept squarely trimmed, running across the front like a fender. Having scrimped and saved, having lived in tiny, roach-ridden apartments for years, I was at last the owner of something more substantial than the old, smoke-colored Eldorado in which I got around on weekends.

As I am one who has learned to prepare for all of life's inevitabilities, I built a six-foot fence along the perimeter of my tiny back yard and constructed a hutch about the size of a dog house. Thereafter, several weekends were devoted to tramping around some woods outside town until the day I came across Homer.

It was a crisp autumn afternoon. The sky was a gray sheet of legal bond resume paper upon which were scribbled the leafless branches of maples and birches, and I strode through woods carrying a large burlap sack. When I first spotted Homer, he was rooting around in a pile of dead leaves. Though I tried to approach him stealthily, my feet crunched leaves and snapped twigs. The skunk stopped what he was doing, turned to face me, and sprung suddenly to attention like a puppet on a string. I froze. He arched his back and seemed to grow taller. I took a slow step forward. The little beast hissed, I took a second step, and he began to thump the ground with his forepaws. He became increasingly agitated, gradually raising his plume of a tail until it stood straight up. Then, when I was still about six feet from him, he spun around, quicker than a gunslinger, and sprayed in my direction. He

wasn't a bad shot. The yellow juice he emitted splattered my trousers, and any other predator he could have considered thwarted. Poor fellow. He couldn't possibly have known that what he was doing was tantamount to slipping an aphrodisiac to a nymphomaniac.

The scent of skunk musk is the richest of all olfactory pleasures. It is a bitter-sweet combination of lilac, tilled earth, McDougal's beer, dogwood blossoms, apple pie, fresh snow and Moschus—the miniature Himalayan musk deer. And the effect on the mind is astonishing. Skunk musk brings the innocence of childhood, the lasciviousness of adolescence and the wisdom of old age to the surface of one's consciousness all at once. I sucked Homer's perfume deep into my lungs. My vision blurred, eyes teared, the burlap sack fell from my hands and I became slightly dizzy. Homer began to mosey off through the forest. I returned to my senses and snatched the bag up from the ground. I simply had to have him. I chased him as he scurried about—under bushes, through piles of leaves—and was able to get the sack over him just as he was about to scoot down a hole at the base of a tree. He writhed around and sprayed more of his delicious scent as I tied a knot at the top of the sack and carried him out of the woods. I placed him beside me on the seat of the car and he continued to wriggle for the first quarter hour of the ride home, at which point he got tired and lay still. I opened the sack in front of the hutch I'd built in the back yard and he moseyed right into his new apartment as if he'd never lived anywhere else. It was then that I decided upon his name. "Welcome home, Homer," I said. But he ignored the hutch after the first night and dug a hole beneath it the next, so that he only used the floor of the structure I'd built as a roof for his subterranean abode.

There was very nearly what one might call a spring in my step on Monday morning when I left the house to walk to the commuter train. Spending the weekend with Homer had given my life an exciting new dimension. I actually waved at Mrs. Endicott, the annoying old widow who lived next door and who owned a high-strung Chihuahua called Tesa. Mrs. Endicott was retrieving the newspaper from her front yard and Tesa stood at her side yapping at me like a battery-operated toy. Mrs. Endicott liked to talk to me practically whenever I stepped outside, providing me with updates on her children, her grandchildren, her rheumatism and other dull topics. She also badgered me with questions. She asked me who my girlfriend was, when I intended to get married, and so forth.

“Hey, Damien,” she said that morning, waving me over to her. I was embarrassed for her because she was standing there in the middle of her yard in a flower-print housecoat, with pink curlers decorating her head. I walked over to her. “What’s going on in your yard, there?” she asked. Her face was wrinkled like a used paper bag, and her sagging cheeks quivered when she spoke. Tesa continued her yapping throughout our conversation.

“Nothing’s ‘going on,’ Mrs. Endicott,” I said. Of the long list of unpleasant qualities this woman exhibited, her prying nature was the most abhorrent.

“You’ve got a dog now don’t you, a little puppy? That’s good, companionship is good. I’m always saying to Noah, my nephew, you oughta get a nice dog, I says, you need a friend. Living all alone like that makes you crazy. But *you*,” here Mrs. Endicott jabbed me in the chest with a bony finger and smiled, “you got a good head on your shoulders. I always said you did. Now all you need is a good woman to take care of you.”

I began turning away. I detest being poked and prodded physically or psychologically. Crazy indeed. Mrs. Endicott had told me that she herself had lived alone for the past ten years. “Thank you Mrs. Endicott. I think I’ll be on my way.”

She grabbed my arm and held me there. “The only thing is, Damien, you gotta clean up after a dog. I can smell it over in my yard. Wait.” She pulled me a little closer and sniffed deeply. This caused a most disagreeable racket—snot burbled in her nose and phlegm rattled in her throat. I doubted she’d be able to smell the smoke if she were sitting on a burning sofa. “I’m a little stuffed up,” she said, “but I can even smell it on you now. It’s not good. You take him on walks or train him to go in the far corner of the yard, you hear?” She smiled, peering with her cataract-clouded eyes into my bespectacled ones for a moment, then released my arm. “Run along now, you’ll be late for work,” she said.

As I turned and began to walk away, I noticed that Tesa had stopped yapping. Then I felt her attack from behind. Her tiny teeth slipping from around my ankle, she contented herself by yanking at my pant leg and growling fiercely, as if truly committed to removing my pants. I shook my leg vigorously and was about to give her a good swift kick with my other foot, when Mrs. Endicott called, “That’s enough now Tesa.” Tesa released my pants and stood barking until I’d reached the end of the street. Luckily, she’d put only a few pin holes in my pants. I always wore polyester suits, which I found practical, affordable and quite durable; I owned one blue, one gray and one

brown. What did trouble me a bit was that Tesa had put a two-inch-long scratch in the leather of my sturdy brown shoes, the same type I'd worn since I was a boy, and on which I always maintained a flawless, military shine.

When I got on the commuter train people parted for me like the Red Sea before Moses. A woman with watery eyes, who appeared to have a sinus irritation, vacated a seat next to where I stood and moved to the front, holding a tissue over her nose. I happily took the seat and opened my paperback copy of Alma Chesnut Moore's *How to Clean Everything*, which is among my favorite works of nonfiction.

I got to the office at ten minutes before nine, as always, and began working immediately. Frank Farnsworth, whose cubicle was adjacent to mine, got in at nine twenty-three, huffing and puffing, and threw his briefcase against the wall of his cubicle that bordered mine. This disrupted my concentration on the wording of a brochure for what may very well have been the definitive text on real estate litigation. I had to submit a draft of this piece to John Hastings, my supervisor, later that morning. I'd already written and revised it several times, but I always double- and triple-checked things before submitting them to Hastings. Farnsworth made a great deal of noise shuffling papers about in his cubicle and muttering to himself. I heard him pick up his phone. Here we go again, I thought.

"Hey honey," he said loudly, "did you get Suzie to school on time?" He paused for a moment. "I know, I know, I think it's because she's still getting over that cold... No, look, now I can't be responsible for everything all the time, okay? I'm running my ass ragged trying to keep on top of things here, and I can't be expected to put everything on hold if I notice the kid's started to sniffle or—what?... Yeah I know about the goddamn wedding, I don't think your sister will let me forget about it for five minutes. Jesus, something stinks in here... Because I didn't have time, not because I forgot. Macy's isn't on my way, and the last time I was late you went ballistic. Man, I think I stepped in something on the way to work... No, listen, I called you just now because I wanted to straighten out something else and now... Okay, fine. Yeah. Okay. Alright, I'll talk to you then." Farnsworth dropped the receiver noisily, got up and left his cubicle. I could hear the clanging of metal and glass from all the way at the other end of the hall as Farnsworth molested the coffee maker. He came back to his cubicle and banged his mug down on his desk.

“Shit,” he said, “God damn it.” Then he was standing there in my cubicle. “Hey Damien, can I bother you for a second?” It had already been much longer than that, so I could see no reason he needed permission to continue the practice. Without moving my chair, I rotated my head to face him. Farnsworth’s necktie was loosened, the top button of his shirt unfastened, his sleeves rolled up, and his hair disheveled. His demeanor suggested that rather than having just shown up at the office, he had already worked an entire day and was preparing to unwind.

“I just spilled coffee all over my stupid keyboard,” he said. “Is that going to ruin it completely? Do you know?” Farnsworth’s face began to look as if he’d taken a bite of a rancid piece of cheese. He began sneezing, and sneezed five times in my cubicle without once covering his mouth, though he did turn his face away from me. When he’d finished he said, “God, do you smell that? I think it’s even stronger in here. Jeez, it’s terrible.”

Though my posture is always nearly perfect, I felt myself sit up straighter upon hearing these words. “To what smell do you refer?” I asked.

He stepped toward me and sniffed. He stepped back again and gave me a puzzled look. “Well, anyway, do you know what I should do about my keyboard?” he asked. “I mean, is it okay to just wipe it off with a damp rag or what?”

“I would do nothing without first consulting Mr. Daltry regarding the matter,” I replied. Sean Daltry was the building’s maintenance man.

Farnsworth rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I guess, I was just wondering if you might know.”

“Well I don’t suppose I do,” I said. In fact, Alma Moore’s book had been written before the advent of the personal computer. “And I don’t suppose I really have all morning to sit here chatting with you about your keyboard, Mr. Farnsworth.”

Farnsworth raised his hands, palms facing outward. “Whoah, take it easy, bud. Forget I was here, okay?” He backed out of my cubicle. I turned back to the screen of my computer. “What the hell’s the matter with everybody today?” I heard Farnsworth say behind me to someone passing in the hall.

That night when I went home, I put a small portion of my dinner in a dish outside Homer’s burrow. I did not try to get him to spray at me. In those first few weeks after Homer’s arrival, I only allowed myself a bit

of skunk musk on the weekends, and then only after I'd completed all my chores, which included going to the dump, doing the food shopping for the week and cleaning the house from top to bottom. I was always extremely meticulous in this exercise—going down on my hands and knees with a toothbrush to get the mildew that grew between the tiles in the corners of the shower, polishing the pipes beneath the kitchen sink, and so on. Then I took a shower, shaved, stretching the skin to get a close swipe at the stubble in the dip beneath my chin, and combed my hair, which is jet black and a bit too wavy. If I let it go for very long it gives me a wild appearance, which I find unbecoming. For this reason I visited the barber once a month, which I thoroughly enjoyed, because I find it satisfying to cut off loose ends. My appearance, I believed, was one of economy, efficiency. I am neither excessively tall nor excessively short. I carry no surplus flesh. My nose, the sense organ I prize the most, is straight and ends in a fairly sharp point. My eyes are as dark as my hair and are extremely weak. For this reason I have worn thick glasses since I can remember. When I worked at Grund & Greene, I still had the same pair of black frames that had served me since high school, though my prescription had changed many times. Despite the fact that I am quite capable of making my way in the modern world, I know what a miserably inadequate creature, despite my efforts, I truly am. My constitution is so delicate and my eyes so weak that I would not have survived if I had dwelt in an earlier era of history, say, in the Stone Age. I would have been one of the casualties of natural selection—either killed by a wild boar during a hunt because I could not see it coming, or maimed by one of the bigger, stronger boys of the tribe before I reached the age where humans begin copulating—and thus would have been unlikely to pass my defective genes on to future generations. Hence, the race would have continued to grow stronger, as indeed it should. I consider it an abomination that I have actually participated in procreation. I never intended to.

Anyway, only after all the previously described observations of hygiene and domestic maintenance were completed would I go out in the yard to chase Homer. I trapped him against the fence and gave him as much of a scare as I could, and in turn he showered me with that sublime scent of his. My head was sent spinning with the strength of his emissions the first few times—my sight blurring and sense of balance temporarily upset—but I began to develop a tolerance to him and by the fifth weekend I was doing my best to get him to spray at me two or three times in an afternoon. I found that the smell made me

hungry and I often went out in the yard to eat my dinner in an appetizing cloud of skunk scent. After doing this a few weekends, I thought to myself, now wouldn't it be even more sensuous if I could actually taste the skunk musk, actually ingest it?

I was not about to butcher poor Homer and eat the little chap, heavens no. I was becoming quite attached to the furry fellow. He had a pleasant enough disposition and kept to himself, which was more than could be said for most people. So I began to look forward, not just to his scent, but to the sight of him when I came home from work at the end of the day. And besides, if I ate him, I'd immediately be back where I'd started, without my own source of skunk musk.

In a single blast, Homer usually emitted about half a fluid ounce of the sticky, oily, yellow substance known as musk. Getting even a small amount of this fluid into my food took some doing. For two or three weekends, when I got Homer out of his burrow and chased him about the yard, I held a hot plate of spaghetti or a vegetable and tofu stir-fry out in front of me, so that when he finally stopped to spray at me, he got at least a few drops of the fluid on the plate. After a time, even the most exquisite dish seemed incomplete without having been seasoned with fresh skunk musk.

One day, about a month and a half after Homer had joined me, I discovered the conspiracy at the office. I left my cubicle at eleven forty-five to get a drink of water. In my peripheral vision, I noticed Farnsworth glancing up at me from his desk as I passed his cubicle. He'd been giving me insinuating looks for some time now, and on returning to my cubicle, I went around the other way, simply to avoid his eyes. He must have assumed I'd gone to lunch, because after I sat down at my desk, before I could put my fingers to my keyboard, I heard my name.

"You really think it's Damien?" the voice said. It was John Schrempp, an annoying little fat person. Whatever he did for our department, it must have involved the consumption of vast quantities of Twinkies, Ho Hos and chocolate Ding Dongs, because I never saw the man do anything else. Once, he came into my cubicle to ask a question about one of my back ads, munching on something chocolate and cream-filled. He spoke while masticating, giving me a full view of the wet, brown mush in his mouth, then licked each of his fingers with a moist smacking sound and placed the copy on my desk with dark brown smears across it.

"I know it's Damien," Farnsworth said. "Didn't you notice how much stronger the smell is right around here?"

I felt the clenching of nervous fear in my stomach. I heard the clomp of Barbara Flemming's high heels coming down the hall.

"Hey Barbara," Farnsworth said, "have you noticed the stench around here?" I didn't think there was much possibility that Flemming could have noticed any scent other than her own. She wore enough perfume to make her presence known from a distance of several yards.

"Yes, I have noticed it. I spoke with Sean about it. He thinks a skunk got into one of the walls and died. He's going to try to find it and get rid of it this week," she said.

"Well he can crawl around every crawl space and rip apart all the walls in the damn building, but Damien will still be sitting right out here in his cubicle," Farnsworth said. Schrempp chuckled. "I'm not kidding," Farnsworth said, emphatically. "I was in his cubicle the other day. The guy smells like a freaking skunk."

I was simultaneously enraged and mortified. I felt like I was in boarding school again. Imagine, people talking behind my back! How very sloppy and juvenile. It was that cootie business all over again. I wanted to say something out loud in my defense, but at the same time I wanted to curl up under my desk and cover my ears with my hands.

"Well, the smell is a lot stronger over here in this part of the office, I'll give you that," Schrempp said.

"You know, I wouldn't doubt that it is Damien," Flemming said. "There's something creepy about that guy. He's so skinny and dark, and he acts like some kind of robotic rodent." While they spoke, I quietly got up from my chair and went and crouched in the corner of my cubicle. From this position I could still hear what they said, but when the others left Farnsworth's cubicle, they wouldn't be able to see me. I remained there for the next twenty minutes.

Of course the inevitable occurred. Homer got used to me. After about three months he could no longer be frightened. When he saw me emerge from the house, he toddled over and rubbed himself against my leg and licked my hand. After all, I fed and housed him, what could I expect? So we became friends. I sat on the porch, rubbed his belly and read to him from the *Collected Works of E.B. White*. He seemed to like *Charlotte's Web* in particular, but also showed great appreciation for *Stuart Little*. He was a much better friend than any I'd ever had. But then, I hadn't had any to speak of since the day I was separated from my mother. I generally don't care for people. At best, they talk constantly about themselves, dig wax from their ears with

their pinkie fingers and indulge in other repulsive habits. At worst, they get themselves involved in such hopeless entanglements as marriage, misuse one another, betray, rape and kill each other. I found Homer's nature much more agreeable.

But alas, though I had gained a friend, I now seldom got to enjoy such a rich emission from Homer as I had in the beginning of our relationship, and found myself lying awake at night wishing for the single strong whiff that would send me into olfactory ecstasy. I was able to frighten him enough now and then to get him to spray, but my methods for doing so became increasingly contrived. And I felt guilty sneaking up on him, or dressing up in costume to frighten him.

Then, one Sunday afternoon, I made my discovery. Homer and I were playfully wrestling about, as we had gotten in the habit of doing. I would lie on my back on the ground and let him walk over the length of my body until he got to my head, at which point I would grab him with both hands, pin him to the ground and tickle his belly. During one of these tickling sessions I squeezed him and he suddenly sprayed. It was one of the greatest blasts of his scent I could have asked for. When I'd recovered from this surprise gift, I tried to figure out what had caused it. I wondered if the squeezing had frightened him in some way, but he seemed quite calm, if slightly bewildered. I squeezed him again, but nothing happened. After a little experimenting, I found that if I placed both thumbs just beneath the rib cage and applied just the right amount of pressure, with a quick, down-and-up massaging motion, it invariably caused Homer to spray. If I pressed too hard, it didn't work—he merely stuck out his tiny tongue and made a gagging sound. Nor did it work if the pressure was too light. With a little practice, though, I found I could control the intensity and the length of the emission that was produced.

"Eureka!" I shouted, jumping to my feet. Homer looked up at me placidly. "Homer, do you know what this means?" I said. "Absolute bliss! No more chasing you around the yard with a Halloween mask and a plate of pork chops. No. I can simply pick you up whenever I want and squeeze a bit of that delightful seasoning onto my plate—a dash on my salad, a liberal squirt into the entrée and perhaps a drop in my tea afterwards. Oh, it is too good to be true!" Homer himself looked pleased. He seemed to get some satisfaction out of being relieved of his musk, just as cows are known to enjoy being milked.

I let Homer move into the house and he soon became an indispensable part of the place. It was comforting to have his warm body

nestled beside me on the couch while I read at night. And I got accustomed to his habit of licking the water from my ankles after I stepped out of the shower. I cut a hole in the bottom of the back door and installed a little plastic flap so he could go in and out as he pleased. And any time I felt like it, I picked him up and squeezed him for a little of his scent. I soon gave up the rule I'd made for myself about only using him on weekends. The first thing I did when I got home from work was pick Homer up from where he greeted me at the front door and give him a little squeeze.

What my discovery of the abdominal manipulation of the musk gland had done was give me the liberty to drink musk whenever I chose. And this is quite different from smelling it from a few yards away, or even from using a few drops of the fluid to season one's casserole. Taken with food, the musk's potency is significantly reduced. Direct ingestion introduces one to a completely different aspect of the juice.

The first time I took skunk musk straight, the effects were overwhelming. I held Homer over my head, squeezed a full shot straight down my throat, and was aware of a burning sensation in my sinuses for an instant before I blacked out. I awoke on the ground, with little idea of how much time had passed. By overdosing the first few times I drank musk, I missed out on much of the experience. Measuring my dosage, I found I could administer myself just enough to induce a sense of euphoria without passing out. Instead of squeezing a full shot directly down my throat, I squeezed Homer over a glass and then used an eyedropper to obtain a single droplet I let fall to my tongue. This I immediately chased down with a glass of water.

Most people are unaware of the fact that the skunk gland is the key to an entirely different realm of sensation. I would say the world of a musk dream is the everyday world seen with better clarity, but this is often said about the effect of such inferior chemicals as THC. When embarking upon a musk dream, one graduates to a higher plane of existence than the one people normally inhabit. I would go so far as to say that a person who has not experienced a skunk musk dream is like one who has seen only two dimensions of a three-dimensional world. For such a person, I will make a comparison (though this is probably akin to describing colors by comparing them to textures for a blind man) based on what I've read about the effects of other drugs. Skunk musk has the anesthetizing effects of an opiate and produces the sense of heightened awareness of a hallucinogen, without the dis-

agreeable side effects of constipation, hallucination and paranoia. But what makes the musk dream even more complex than anything possible with botanically-derived drugs is the exhilaration. Research I later undertook revealed that this is the result of the large quantity of animal endorphins contained in skunk musk. The immediate effect of ingestion of the appropriate dosage of musk is at once subtle and dramatic. All the tedious pressures and concerns of daily life drop away like a suit of clothes so cheap that it actually dissolves in the sudden storm of chemicals, and one finds oneself instead wrapped in a robe of serenity. The musk dreamer's dream is one that emerges from his own subconscious and over which he has complete control.

But of course euphoria is always followed by depression. And as my tolerance for skunk musk increased, so did my need for the sensation that had not been a need before I knew the sensation existed. Developed over a period of time, a tolerance of a beloved substance, and a tailoring of one's lifestyle to the enjoyment of that substance, can enrich one's life. It is one of the tragedies of modern civilization that the tendency to cultivate such a lifestyle is, in ignorance, condemned as an "addiction" by society's sentinels, people who are fundamentally intolerant. They are the same petty, insecure busybodies who took my mother away and whom I shall never forgive or trust ever again.

2

My mother drank quite a lot of beer when I was growing up. She always drank McDougal's—an imported brand that comes in a green bottle and has a slightly skunky aroma. This was the first scent to greet my nostrils in the morning and the last whiff I sniffed before falling asleep at night. I awoke each morning to the clinking of beer bottles as my mother opened and shut the door of the refrigerator to get out her first McDougal's before starting my breakfast. Then I heard more clinking, of empty bottles, as she cleared the kitchen table, filled a large plastic garbage bag with the previous day's bottles and carried them outside to put in a can by the street.

After this, she came into my room and sat down on the edge of my bed. I always pretended to still be asleep because I liked the gentle way she had of waking me up. She sat next to me for a moment and sighed. The bed sagged with her weight. She pushed the hair back from my forehead with her fingertips and ran one finger down the bridge of my nose, over my lips and let it come to rest on my chin, which like hers was fairly pointy. She leaned forward so that her mouth was only a few inches from my ear.

"Damien," she whispered. "Time to rise and shine, my little soldier." I continued to feign sleep, scrunching my eyelids shut so tight she would have had trouble prying them open with her fingers. "I've got a little surprise for you," she always said. Then her body shuddered, the bed shook slightly, and she let out a long, deep belch she blew into my face and which sounded very much like the lowing of a cow. It went on for a few seconds while I gradually opened my eyes. And there it was—a new morning. My mother sat beside me in a yellow bathrobe, a shaft of sunlight sliced into the room from between the curtains and the skunky smell of my mother's first McDougal's of the day filled my nostrils. I threw my arms around her neck and she pulled the covers down and tickled me until I couldn't stand it any longer and jumped out of bed and ran into the kitchen to eat the eggs, oatmeal, French toast or whatever she had prepared for me that morning.

All day long I looked forward to seeing my mother again because I knew she got lonely while I was at school. I was an only child and my father had left shortly after I was born. When I opened the door to the rather rickety old jalopy in which my mother arrived to pick me up from school, I was greeted by the same comforting smell to which

I'd woken up. My mother drove along with a bottle of McDougal's nestled between her thighs, sometimes still dressed in her bathrobe even though it was the middle of the afternoon. She took long swigs of beer between asking me questions about my day at school. Before I went to sleep at night, she sat on the edge of my bed and sang to me—usually her own rendition of an Irish drinking song. "Whisky in the Jar" by the Clancy Brothers was my favorite. After she finished, she kissed me on the cheek, tucked me in, and I drifted off to sleep with that same comforting smell in my nostrils.

When I got a little older I was allowed to walk home from school on my own. Some days I went to a friend's house after school, but that wasn't often because I didn't have many friends, and whenever I asked one of them to come to my house they told me their parents wouldn't allow them to. This was okay with me, since I knew my mother would be waiting for me with milk and peanut butter cookies, and would always be willing to play any game I chose. Sometimes we played monopoly and sometimes we played quarters. My mother was an expert at the latter game and I usually ended up drinking a gallon or so of apple juice, which was my substitute for beer.

One day when I was about eight years old, I was walking home, singing "100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall," swinging my lunch box in one hand and dragging a stick with the other, making a long squiggling trail in the dirt and pretending I was being followed by a snake. All at once, I was acutely aware of the presence of my mother and I stopped walking. I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose, sniffed and looked around. I saw nothing but trees on either side of the road. Not a person or car in sight. I walked along a little further and the smell grew stronger, as if twelve of my mothers were standing right beside me. Following my nose, I walked away from the road through the tall weeds and undergrowth that led up to the woods. I didn't have to go far. A small cloud of flies dispersed from a furry mess on the ground at my feet and revealed a small skunk who had doubtless been run over and then tossed away from the road. I poked the carcass with my stick to make sure it was dead, for its eyes were still open, as was its mouth, which was filled with menacingly sharp, white teeth. The smell was much stronger than what I was accustomed to, but it was unmistakably the same odor that was like an aura about my mother.

Then I had what seemed at the time like a brilliant idea. I would bring the skunk home for her, because this, evidently, was the raw material out of which beer was made. How pleased she would be—she

would be able to make her own beer! I put my lunch box on the ground, flipped the latches and took out my thermos. Lifting the skunk up by the tail and lowering it into the lunch box, I was careful to leave its head facing up, with its tail curled around in front of it the way a cat's often lies when it's sleeping. I skipped the rest of the way home, swinging my lunch box in one hand and my thermos in the other.

When I burst through the kitchen door, my mother was getting a beer from the refrigerator. She was still wearing her bathrobe, which she seemed to change out of less frequently as time went on. I was glad to have something to cheer her up. The kitchen table had sprouted a field of empty green bottles during the time I'd been at school, but nevertheless my place at the table had been cleared and there was a glass of milk and a plate of peanut butter cookies waiting for me.

My mother turned toward me and smiled. "Hey little soldier," she said. "Back from the wars?" In one fluid motion, she popped the cap off her beer, tossed the cap and bottle opener together onto the counter and took a few long gulps.

"Yup, back from the wars," I said. I pushed aside some of the beer bottles and placed my lunch box and thermos on the table. I didn't want to give away my secret yet, but I must have been grinning crazily, because my mother, smiling, cocked her head and said, "What are you so jolly about?"

"Oh, nothing," I said, sliding onto my chair and taking a bite out of a peanut butter cookie. "I just came across something you might be interested in, that's all."

Her smile evaporated. "Damien, what's that smell?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Just a part of my little surprise for you," I said.

She didn't look like she was in the mood for a surprise at that particular moment. "Damien, what in the world do you have in that lunch box?"

This wasn't going how I'd planned at all. I decided to just get it over with. "It's a present," I said, and with a mouth still full of cookie, I stood up, turned the lunch box toward my mother and sprang the lid. The nestled skunk stared up at my mother with its teeth bared. A shriek filled the air as my mother dropped her beer on the floor and backed away. The McDougal's bottle lay on its side, pouring beer that spread like a disease over the lime-green linoleum.

"Good God!" my mother exclaimed. I wasn't used to hearing my mother scream or swear, and I too jerked away from the table, overturned my chair and almost fell over backwards.

“Get that thing out of here,” she said.

“But it reminded me of you!” I protested.

“Out!”

I whisked the lunch box from the table, ran out the door and burst into tears. It’s remarkable how a certain scent can conjure a memory and return one to a whole different time and place, or for that matter, cause one to be rejected from a place. After unceremoniously burying the skunk in the back yard, I must have psychologically buried the entire incident, because I had completely forgotten it ever happened until some time during the first weeks of Homer’s stay with me. Not that I had had much time to ponder it back then—only a few days after I’d brought home the dead skunk, I was taken out of school in the middle of the day and told my mother had suffered a breakdown. She had been put in a hospital and I was sent to live with my aunt. This aunt had never gotten along with my mother and wanted nothing to do with me. I could not have stayed with her for more than a couple of days, for I have only the vaguest memory of her and her home, though I have a very distinct memory of my first days at Rigby, the boys’ boarding school where I was to spend the next eight years of my life. Naturally, at the time, I thought my mother had left me because she was still angry about the skunk I’d brought home, or that my actions had caused her supposed breakdown.

Whoever had had my mother taken away—relatives, neighbors, other parents from the school—I never did find out. Somewhere in a murky adult world, it had been decided that my mother was not a fit parent and she’d been extracted from my life. This noble humanitarian gesture left me without a family. My housemates and houseparents at Rigby were a shabby substitute, to put it mildly. To put it harshly, they were poor specimens of human life whose moral lapses led to cruel and criminal behavior.

The Rigby School occupied a huge, sprawling old farm and was founded to accommodate boys who were orphans of one kind or another. Most were from broken homes, on neither side of which was there adequate money or competence for child rearing. One can imagine what a happy bunch of young men we were. A married couple, the houseparents, resided in each dorm. My houseparents’ strategy for managing a house full of unruly boys was to ignore them completely, keep the doors to their quarters shut and let us resolve our conflicts on our own.

I don't care to delve too deeply into this period of my life because it is irrelevant. Suffice it to say that my roommate was a twisted sadist about twice my size whose idea of a good time was to give me a wedgie, then hang me from the top of the open door to our room by my underwear and announce to the rest of the boys that it was piñata time. They then took turns blindfolding one another and whacking at me with a Wiffle-ball bat. My roommate also liked to remove and hide the wooden slats from my bed frame so that when I got into bed the mattress fell through the frame to the floor. After the fourth or fifth of these incidents I was unable to find the slats and eventually gave up looking for them and slept on the floor for the rest of the year.

Another activity that amused my roommonster and won him a higher standing among the other boys, was to steal my diary from under my pillow and read it aloud to a room full of our housemates. Of course, a high percentage of the information contained in the diary was about my mother. Organized readings of my diary were arranged, after which I was forced to kneel on the floor while my twelve housemates lined up behind me, each giving my buttocks two whacks with a paddle that one of the older boys had made in a woodshop class. There was nothing to be done about these adolescent male rituals and the random thrashings to which I was treated by my roommonster and others, since I was considerably shorter and thinner than the other boys and had no allies. Often I was too nervous to eat much during meal times and thus became even thinner and weaker while the others sprouted like redwoods around me. I treated my emaciation like an epidermal disease, attempting to conceal it by wearing heavy sweaters in cold weather and by avoiding any outdoor activities in warm weather that might require the shedding of my shirt.

There were further inconveniences. Occasionally, someone would steal my glasses and I was forced to go through an entire day without them, unable to take notes in class because I could not see the blackboard. Boys I didn't even know accosted me between classes to tease me about my mother—the “alky” as they referred to her—and everyone on campus, each of them a needy, orphan bastard himself, was relieved to know that his background, however disgraceful, was at least not as sordid as mine.

My introverted nature intensified until I scuttled furtively about the campus like a pair of ragged claws, speaking to no one, participating in no sports or other extracurricular activities. Instead, I read. I read book after book, hiding from the world among the pages of nov-

els, usually adventure stories. On the weekends I found refuge in the world of television. While the other boys were at sporting events or relatives' homes, I had the television lounge to myself, where I became a rock of a man, a loner who blew into town after robbing a wagon train and who could vanquish his enemies with a sardonic glare, or if necessary, a few plugs of hot lead.

I returned from classes one afternoon toward the end of my first school year at Rigby and was informed by my houseparents that my mother was dead. She'd committed suicide, they said, and my aunt didn't see any reason I should attend the funeral. As I was one of the few boys with no relatives or friends with whom to stay (my aunt had let the school know she would be too busy during the summers to take me), I spent the summers working with the groundskeepers on the Rigby campus. I looked forward to those months of long, hazy afternoons when the campus was peaceful, as it might have been in the days when it had been a farm. I was left to work on my own most of the time, and occasionally, while I was weeding a flowerbed or raking the freshly-mown grass, I caught a whiff of skunk. I stopped whatever I was doing, stood there and sniffed. It made me tremble. There was something voluptuous, something forbidden about that smell. By that first summer at Rigby, I had already blocked out most memories of my mother and had completely forgotten the lunch-box incident. Loss has always been intolerably painful for me and I'd already found that the best way to deal with that pain is to do one's best to obliterate its source, memory.



I knew Mrs. Endicott was spying. She poked her nose over the fence to watch Homer and me while we spent quiet Sunday afternoons together on the back porch. He sat with his head resting in my lap while I drank tea and read the newspaper aloud. There was a little space between the bottom of the fence and the ground where I could see a sliver of the blue plastic milk crate on which Mrs. Endicott stood. Cataract-obscured though her vision was, I don't believe she could have maintained the illusion that Homer was a dog for very long.

Homer was living quite high on the hog at this time. He slept at the foot of my bed and only used the burrow now and then. He ate whatever I ate—from beef stroganoff to fruit crepes. It was quite a cushy life for such a savage skunk as Homer had so recently been. He

was always a little groggy in the morning, but I woke him up when I got up and had him follow me through my morning rituals. This way I could ensure that he was fully awake by the time I left for work, that he would have the opportunity to get a jump on whatever animal kingdom business might be on his current to-do list. It wasn't until later that I learned that Homer's lethargy at this hour was not by any means due to a flaw in his character, but to an aspect of his nature that I hadn't taken into consideration because it hadn't yet occurred to me.

I set Homer beside me on a stool by the sink each morning so he could watch me shave. Even though he was now living in the house, he still seemed to have the blues, and one morning, glancing at his reflection in the mirror while I rinsed my razor, it seemed to me that he looked particularly melancholy. "What's the matter, Homer?" I asked, stretching the skin to get at the stubborn stubble along my jawline. "Domestication getting you down, old boy?" Then it struck me. I put the razor on the edge of the sink and turned to him. "Of course. How selfish I've been. Here I am, getting ready to go off to work, knowing very well that you'll be left alone all day. What you need is a friend." I patted him on the head and turned back to the mirror to finish shaving. I looked at his reflection out of the corner of my eye. "And I bet you'd like a lady friend, wouldn't you?" See, whereas I had always regarded contact with other animals of my own species as a disagreeable, though necessary, evil, Homer—a helpless little slave to instinct—might actually desire the company of his fellow creatures. I had my intellect to keep me company. Through reading, I could, at my leisure, listen to the thoughts of some of the best minds ever to flourish on this planet and I could always shut them up when I liked by simply closing the cover of the book. Homer, without this advantage, might have been experiencing bona fide loneliness. I rinsed my face, towed it dry and then, as I'd started to do quite often in the mornings, picked Homer up and gave him a little squeeze, sweeping him across my chest as I did, and giving myself a dash under the arms, so I wouldn't have to go all day without a single whiff of skunk—it would already be on me.

I went out the door excited with the anticipation of the surprise gift I would soon bestow upon my little chum. My feet crunched the frozen ground and my breath turned into fog as I walked across the dead grass of my front yard. Winter is my favorite season. People stay in their homes, the leaves stay in their branches, everything is calm, quiet, cold. I looked forward to getting on the commuter train and

burying myself in a book. My spirits were so high, I went as far as to call out a good morning to Mrs. Endicott, who was coming down her walk with Tesa, who I was happy to see on a leash. As soon as I'd called out, Tesa began yapping and straining toward me.

"Good morning," Mrs. Endicott said, and then, barely audibly, "ya stinker."

John Piper was hovering around my cubicle when I got to work. With a tense grunt meant to indicate the word "Morning," he asked to see me in his office. I followed him in and sat down. The window of his office looked out over the rooftops to the river, glittering coldly in the sunlight, a white fringe of ice along its banks. Piper sat down behind his desk. There was a framed studio photograph of his family, as well as individual photos of his four children. In each of the individual shots, the child was either smiling and holding a tennis racket or smiling and waving from where he sat in a sailboat with an orange life preserver around his silly neck. There was a large silver paperweight in the shape of a cocker spaniel sitting on Piper's desk. A sanguine man with jowls, a thick neck, and white hair that he kept swept straight back over his head, Piper himself looked something like a bulldog crossed with an East European politician.

"Damien," he said, "I've been meaning to have a word with you." Then he interrupted himself to walk across the room to open a window before sitting down to begin talking again. "Damien, you've been doing good work with us for several years now."

"Six," I said. If we were going to sit around discussing things we already knew, I thought, we might as well at least be precise.

"Beg your pardon?" he said.

"Six years, sir. Six years, three months and seven days."

"Yes, six years. Well, in that time I've had nothing but positive reviews from Mr. Hastings regarding your work. You've been quite efficient and everyone agrees that you're extremely professional."

I really wished he would get to the point. We both had a lot of work to do. He should have known that. Unaccustomed to idle chatter, my discomfort may have shown, because Piper cleared his throat, leaned forward and put his forearms on the desk in a getting-down-to-business pose.

"You're a young man, Damien, and I think there's a good future for you here," he said. He cleared his throat again. "And I'm sorry that what I have to talk with you about is a personal matter." Then he was at a sudden loss for words. He lifted the paperweight and turned it

from one side to another, looking at it as if he expected it to bark a cue to him. I sat with my hands folded in my lap, waiting. Piper's pink face flushed red right up to the white of his hairline. "Um, where do you live, Damien?"

"New Essex," I said.

"Ah yes, that's a nice area," he said, setting the spaniel back down on the desk. "A very clean area."

"Yes, very. That's why I chose it in fact."

Piper looked stumped again for a moment. "I'll cut to the chase, Damien. A few people have been complaining that you have a certain odor about you they find offensive."

My back stiffened. I'd thought I was dealing with full-fledged adults in this company, not childish tattletales. Now, did I complain to Piper about Hastings's habit of picking his nose while he spoke to me? No. Or of how Farnsworth liked to make a slurpy, lip-smacking noise that sounded like someone walking through deep mud, and that he did it approximately once every sixty seconds for a full hour after eating lunch? No. Nor did I complain of the twenty-foot radius of perfume fumes that surrounded Barbara Flemming like a force field. Nor of how Piper himself left your hand reeking of some heinous cologne for the rest of the day after he shook it.

"It's nothing to be alarmed about," Piper went on. "As I said, everyone agrees that your work and your work habits are impeccable. It's just that maybe you should walk to the office by a different route if you think you're picking up a strange odor along the way. Or maybe try a different cologne."

Oh, yes, I thought—cologne. That's probably Piper's solution to all his problems: things aren't quite going your way, something's a little off? Just add a little more cologne to your life. I sat regarding Piper as before and said nothing, which seemed to frustrate him. The only movement I made was to push my glasses up my nose quickly with one finger, which I often found necessary to do when I began to perspire.

"So, whatever it is, I'll expect no more complaints," Piper said, suddenly blustering. He smiled aggressively, stood up and came around the desk to clap a cologne-soaked hand on my shoulder as I rose from my chair. "Well, I guess we'd better get to work," he said. "Enough small talk, eh?"

I nodded, turned and walked out of his office. I thought of poor Homer, sitting around the house by himself. Cute, cuddly little Homer and that magnificent aroma of his which was being mistaken by

the uninitiated in my office for—for what? Some fetid thing left in a dumpster that I walked by on my way to work perhaps, or an inferior brand of cologne? And the notion that my colleagues were conspiring against me because of a personal preference was absolutely odious. It was dirty. It was a filthy, rotten trick. I was a man of few comforts. They'd taken away my mother, my diary and the slats for my bed. I'd been ill at ease in the company of other people all my life and had never found pleasure in any of the social games with which they amused themselves. But now they wanted to take this from me—my new hobby, my greatest pleasure and my only solace. Well, god damn them. God damn them all to hell.

And furthermore, I thought, is it not my own business what I do at home? Mine and no one else's? Is there no division between a man's professional and private lives? We all choose our own smells. Some choose one that comes in a can or bottle. Some secrete a garlicky odor, others a cheesy one. Some smell of coffee, some of vinegar, and some of onions. My odor was different, but not grounds for crucifixion. I tried harder than ever to ignore Farnsworth and of course I did not alter my habits with Homer in the least.

After work on Friday, I went to the pet store and bought the sort of traveling kennel one uses for cats. It was time to hunt for Homer's surprise. When I got home, I retrieved my camping gear from the basement and packed it, along with a copy of *The Last of the Mohicans*, in the trunk of my Eldorado. I went to the bedroom to change into the hiking boots (to which I'd applied a liberal amount of waterproofing gel) and khaki hunting pants with eight pockets I had laid out after making the bed that morning. When I've made my bed, one can throw a coin down on the taut bedspread and a watch it pop back up in the air like a miniature person on a giant trampoline. Homer meandered into the bedroom and stood there watching me change.

"Homer, old boy, I'm going on a bit of a safari," I said. "Now, I've left you with plenty of food and I'll be back by dinner time on Sunday at the very latest. Can I trust you to hold down the fort for me?" I paused to let the news sink in. Homer hadn't been alone for such a long period since we'd started living together. He continued to stare at me with his dark, intelligent eyes. "Good," I said. "You're a young skunk and I think you've got a good future ahead of you. So just keep a stiff upper snout and don't do anything I wouldn't do." With that, I stooped to give him a pat on the head and went out the door.

It was a couple hours' drive to the place I had in mind—not too far from where I'd found Homer. Dusk had dissolved into a lonesome darkness by the time I pulled into my site and set up camp. I cooked up some pork and beans over my propane stove. Towering evergreens surrounded me like the walls of a dark cathedral whose ceiling was a clear, starry sky. I've always found it simultaneously peaceful and unnerving to sleep outdoors. On the one hand, it's a relief to be alone and away from the distracting noise of other human beings, but on the other hand, it *is* the out-of-doors, and there's no telling what can happen. Getting in the tent and having walls around me, though they were only nylon, made me more comfortable. I curled up in my sleeping bag with my earmuffs on, reading from Mr. Cooper's *Mohicans* by the light of my kerosene lantern. Though I did not need the eye covers I usually required to achieve the total darkness I prefer for slumber, I found getting to sleep difficult because no matter which way I lay there always seemed to be one troublesome rock gouging into my spine.

I had my tea and toast before sunrise the next morning, packed a lunch in my knapsack and set out into the woods with my compass to guide me. I reveled in my preparedness as the frost on the undergrowth began to melt and bead on the tops of my protected hiking boots. But one can revel in such things for only so long. My enthusiasm had substantially diminished by the time I'd returned to camp at sundown, having tramped around in the wild for an entire day without any sign of a skunk.

The next morning I started out early again, divided the area into quadrants, and combed each of these one at a time, very thoroughly, keeping an eye out for a bushy tail or any hole that might possibly be a burrow. I found a fallen tree on which to eat my lunch and contemplate the fruitlessness of my skunk hunt. Here it was Sunday afternoon, and still no sign of a playmate for Homer. I realized then that it would have been wiser to have brought Homer along and perhaps walked around with him on a leash, since he would be better than I at seeking out other skunks. Then I remembered something so blindingly obvious that I was shocked by my own stupidity: skunks are nocturnal animals. Finding Homer out and about in the middle of the day had been an anomaly. Furthermore, it was possible that what I'd interpreted as despondency and loneliness could have been the effects of sleep deprivation caused by my forcing Homer to get up early in the mornings. I threw down my cucumber sandwich in disgust. "Stupid!" I exclaimed aloud. I stood up and began slamming

my head against a tree. "You stupid, stupid man!" I yelled. I banged my head until I became dizzy, stumbled over a root and rather unexpectedly found myself sitting on the ground, which was covered with frosted, crusty leaves. I gathered myself up, went back to my campsite and took a nap.

At dusk I set out again with a powerful flashlight and eventually came across the spot where I'd eaten lunch. I shined my flashlight at the base of the log, and low and behold, a skunk was devouring the remains of the sandwich I'd thrown down that afternoon. As one might imagine, it is more than a little awkward trying to hustle a skunk into a burlap sack with hands numb from the cold, while simultaneously holding a flashlight and being clawed and sprayed at by the irate little creature in question. When I got it back to camp and put it in the kennel, I discovered I'd been fortunate enough to bag a female. I clapped my gloved hands. Homer was going to be absolutely delighted. And as for me, the capture meant twice the amount of skunk musk available in the house. On the way home, I thought about what to name the new member of the household. I decided on Louisa, a name that has always appealed to me. It sounds like the name of a quiet person who does not often go out or nose about in other people's affairs. I looked down at Louisa, who was circling around in the kennel as I drove. It seemed only yesterday that I'd brought Homer home with me in a slightly less dignified fashion.

Homer greeted me at the door and followed me into the den where I set Louisa's box down and opened it. She stepped cautiously out and looked around. Homer was immediately circling and sniffing at her. "Homer, meet Louisa," I said. "Louisa, Homer." They paid no attention to me whatsoever. Louisa began exploring her new surroundings and for the most part ignored Homer as he sniffed at her and followed her about. I decided to leave them alone to get better acquainted. I put some Tchaikovsky on the stereo and went into the kitchen to bake a cake. This is how I always celebrate accomplishments. If it had been a slightly less significant event, I might have postponed my baking celebration until the next day, since it was so late on a Sunday night, but the compulsion to bake was overwhelming. So I made an angel's food cake, put two slices on separate plates and set them on the floor of the den for Homer and Louisa, then ate my own slice on the couch. After they had finished their cake I pronounced Homer and Louisa skunk and wife and took several photographs of them together in front of the fireplace.

The next morning on my way to work I dropped off the film at a shop around the corner from the office and picked up the photos and a frame on my lunch hour. Homer and Louisa had globs of icing and crumbs of cake on the fur around their muzzles in all the pictures. I chose what I believed to be the most flattering photo, put it in the frame and set it up on the desk beside my computer. Unlike the Piper types, who regularly construct shrines to their families and pets in the workplace, this was the first time I'd allowed any evidence of my personal life to manifest itself in my professional life. The effect was to cause me to be late for the Monday department meeting. I was gazing at my only cubicle decoration when I suddenly realized it was two-ten. The meeting began at two and ordinarily I was as punctual as I was punctilious, arriving at the conference room at twenty seconds before the hour with my project report up to date. Usually, I spoke about my progress while many of the others unabashedly threw their reports together on the spot, scribbling away while I talked, or gave up altogether and said by way of excuse that they had family obligations that had kept them from completing their reports. But now here I was, lost in sentimental contemplation of a photograph, late and unprepared for the department meeting. I dashed down the hall, into the conference room and slipped into an empty seat next to Farnsworth at the end of the long table.

"Jesus Christ!" Farnsworth swore under his breath the moment I sat down. He covered his mouth and nose with his hand and leaned away from me. Then Hastings interrupted his own typically self-aggrandizing Monday meeting opening oratory to say, "Excuse me, but could someone crack a window please?" Barbara Flemming immediately got up to do so. I glanced around the table. Conspiracy. I could see it in each and every smug, disapproving face. And not one of those faces dared let their eyes meet mine. But what did I care? I'd never needed the approval of these vermin. Let them air their disgust, I thought, for they disgusted me as well. My true friends, the bearers of the delicious and transporting musk, were waiting for me at home.

When I got home that night, Homer was not at the door to greet me. I called out his name but he did not come. A sudden panic overcame me and I flew through the house in search of him, going down on my knees to peer under the bed, overturning chairs, pulling back the sofa to look behind it, all the while calling out "Homer, Homer!" at the top of my lungs. "For goodness sake, they've eloped!" I cried. Then I remembered the burrow, which I'd practically forgotten exist-

ed since Homer had moved into the house. I ran into the backyard, threw myself on the ground and squinted down into Homer's burrow. And there were Homer and Louisa, somewhat startled by the sudden appearance of a huge moon of a face at the entrance of the burrow, but hardly roused out of what was quite obviously a postcoital stupor. I turned away, embarrassed and perhaps a bit jealous. But if they were happy together, I decided, I was happy. I might feel rejected if Homer stopped greeting me at the door, or never again wanted to spend the afternoon reading, but I wouldn't get in his way if he wanted to become a family man. Though I would prefer to be his closest friend, all I really needed from him and Louisa was their musk.

I read up on skunks to learn what to feed Homer and Louisa. In the following weeks, I made frequent trips to the pet store to purchase crickets, spiders, mice, etc. But this did not work out satisfactorily for two reasons: it cost more money than I cared to spend on skunk food and I kept buying out the entire store. So I took a few field trips with Homer and Louisa and observed as they foraged for their own food. Making a note of what they ate, I went on a few field trips of my own, during which I kidnapped several species of insect, arachnid and a few mice. I set up a bug zoo in my garage at very little expense, where the insects bred faster than Homer and Louisa (and later, the rest of the family) could eat them. I had two types of grasshopper and one type of cricket, a ground beetle and potato beetle. I also had a common meadow spider, two ant farms—one of black and one of red ants—as well as moths, caterpillars and white grubs. It was a veritable skunk's smörgasbord. I kept my car parked in the street, as the garage quickly became a metropolis of boxes and cages in which these various insects were housed. The centerpiece was a large, plywood mouse house with a floor of wood shavings and a wire-mesh ceiling.

It was a morbid kind of pleasure to watch the relish with which Homer partook of a furry brown field mouse. He grasped the tiny fellow between his forefeet and twisted his body until a faint snap could be heard. He then took the smaller rodent's head between his jaws, crushed the skull and gobbled the mouse quite quickly, though he always left a generous portion of the remains for Louisa if she had not been given a mouse of her own. I collected a small herd of mice, but they did not multiply as quickly as the insects, so I saved them as treats that were doled out on special occasions.

One Monday morning, a week after the department meeting for which I'd been late, I found Piper waiting for me again upon my ar-

rival at the office. He was pacing in front of my cubicle, looking even more flushed and disturbed than he had the last time. He summoned me into his office, closed the door and opened the window.

“Damien,” he said, “I thought we had an understanding that you were going to clear up the matter we talked about.” I gave him as blank a stare as the one Homer usually gave me when he wasn’t sure what I might be hinting at. “However,” Piper went on, “I received several complaints after the department meeting last Monday, and it’s obvious to me right now that you haven’t done anything about it.” He looked as if he expected me to say something for myself, to make some excuse—the way others made excuses for failing to complete their project reports, I suppose—but he hadn’t yet asked me a question and I wasn’t about to fall into the pattern of groveling obsequiousness displayed by so many of my colleagues. And besides, I was sick of all this tiptoeing around the issue, of being black-balled by my coworkers, of being ridiculed behind my back. I wanted someone to confront me head-on if he really had a problem with me.

And as it happened, Piper was willing, finally, to give me what I wanted. His face grew redder and redder, contrasting sharply with his white hair, while I refused to speak. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me about?” he tried. I shook my head. He began to tremble with rage and I found I could easily imagine steam shooting from his ears. “Are you unhappy working here? Would you like to say anything regarding the complaints of your coworkers?” Finally he exploded. “Goddamnit man, you smell like a skunk! You stink! Can’t you understand that this is a professional environment, and we can’t tolerate this sort of thing? We’re not running a farm here—”

For one of the first times in my life I acted spontaneously. I don’t believe in spontaneity as a rule; I prefer a carefully considered plan, a deliberate course of action. But the logic of the idea that popped into my head at that moment seemed infallible.

“Would it be alright with you,” I asked calmly, “if I continued my work as an employee for this company but did my work at home? I have my own computer, a fax; there is no reason I couldn’t do everything I do here from my own house.” The red began to recede from Piper’s fleshy face as he considered my proposal. He said he’d have to talk it over with Hastings, but by five o’clock I’d been given the OK and I cleaned out my cubicle and began working as a freelancer the very next day.

3

I was quite thrilled by the prospect of never again having to endure Farnsworth's revolting lip-smacking performances or Hastings' nose-picking. And come to think of it, every person in the entire claustrophobic office clicked his pen, tapped his foot constantly, or had some other irritating habit that seemed calculated to drive me out of my mind. Not to mention those soporific and inconsequential department meetings. Without these distractions I would be more productive than ever. But most importantly, I would be at liberty to give myself a dose of skunk musk whenever I liked. I could be absolutely whimsical.

So my life went on quite happily for several months. I worked for eight hours each day, maintaining a strict regimen. At first, I sat down to work at precisely seven AM, finished at three PM and had the rest of the afternoon and evening to do as I pleased. But after the first week, while working the same number of hours, I pushed my starting hour back to eight. Then after a while to nine, then ten. During the summer I found it preferable to work in the evening when it was cooler, and pushed my schedule back so far that I wasn't getting out of bed until rather late in the afternoon. Part of this may have been the influence of living with Homer and Louisa, who of course were late risers.

One afternoon, while I was sitting at my desk working, Louisa walked by and brushed against my foot. I decided I would allow myself a five-minute break, and I picked her up and squirted her musk into a shot glass I kept on my desk beside the wedding photograph of her and Homer. By this time I was beyond using the eyedropper, but I could only imbibe about half a shot of musk at a time. I held Louisa in my lap for a moment before putting her down on the floor. There was a significant bulge in her stomach, but I hadn't fed her a field mouse for days and I wondered how she could be putting on weight so quickly. As she sauntered out into the kitchen, I noticed something in her walk, that touch of pride one often sees in the way a female carries herself when she is carrying a second life within her. With this sudden realization, I got up from my chair, staggering slightly under the effects of the musk I'd just drunk, and followed Louisa into the kitchen where she stood contemplating her empty food dish.

"My dear lady," I said. "I thought you were gaining weight due to lethargy, but I understand now what you must be going through." I

knelt down and took one of her forepaws in my hands and shook it. "I'd like to congratulate you and Homer in advance. May your children be as handsome and pungent as are the two of you." She continued to gaze down into the food dish after I released her paw. "Of course," I said. "You're eating for six. I'll go get some crickets right away. How about a mouse, hmm?"

She voraciously devoured the food I brought her and I made sure to give her double rations for the next few months. I also excused her from the duty of providing me with musk and relied entirely upon Homer.

I had always been a creature of habit and now I gradually began to recognize that such a creature is compatible with skunk living. I made a complete shift to a nocturnal schedule. My wardrobe changed. It felt strange at first to do my work without a necktie, but dispensing with it seemed to have no dilatory effect on my performance. It may even have improved it. I have always suspected that neckties, by constricting the arteries in the neck, reduce the amount of blood reaching the brain and thereby retard its functions. Neither Homer nor Louisa seemed to care whether I wore a tie or not. I began, now and then, to absentmindedly slip off my shoes while I worked. After experimenting a bit, I eventually discovered that I preferred to spend my working and my relaxing hours in slippers. My time was so economically managed that I seldom left the house, and when I did, I had an errand route mapped out that enabled me to drastically minimize the amount of time wasted in the world of human beings, whose company I found to be increasingly tiresome the less time I spent around them. Even a few minutes spent in conversation could drive me to distraction.

One evening, Louisa gave birth to a litter. It was a field-mouse day and I was bringing Homer and Louisa fried ant hors d'oeuvres. Since Louisa had been reluctant to leave the burrow for the past week or two, I'd started bringing their meals out to them. When I peered into the burrow to look for a good spot to put down their dishes, I found Louisa in the throes of labor. Homer sat in the corner looking perplexed, as I imagine I did, neither of us being very well versed in what to do in such situations. I cursed myself for not having been prepared for this. It was unlike me. Here was an event I'd seen coming for months and I hadn't read up on it to find out what equipment one might need to deliver a litter of skunks. Had it been out of spite that I'd decided to leave the responsibility to Homer, because lately I'd felt neglected by him, and envious of Louisa? I hoped not. I went into the

kitchen and filled a large salad bowl with steaming hot water, brought it outside with a couple of fresh towels and placed these articles next to the entrance to the burrow. Homer and Louisa could use them at their own discretion. Then I went back into the kitchen where I'd left the hot water running. Steam rose up from the basin of the sink. I held my hand under the scalding stream, watched my hand turn red and tremble as I lost control of it. "You bastard!" I yelled aloud. "That will teach you, you lousy bastard!" After a few minutes of this, I turned the water off, dried my hand and slammed my head against the counter until I'd calmed down.

In the following weeks, Louisa was extremely busy nursing and looking after her young pups. There were five of them (not including Bradley, whom I had to bury in a corner of the yard two days after he was born). They were Elsbeth, Rupert, Gertrude, Nathaniel and Helga. Ugly little things, baby skunks: hairless, pale pink like little pigs, they spend the first vulnerable days of their lives blind, their eyes shut tight, suckling at their mother's teats. After a week or so, however, Rupert and Elsbeth began trying out their legs. They poked their tiny snouts out of the burrow, or stepped outside momentarily, wiggled their whiskers, and then jumped back into the burrow to hide behind Louisa. I brought all Louisa's meals to the burrow during this period, though Homer came to the kitchen to eat from his dish and seemed happy to spend as much time as possible in the house with me and away from Louisa and the children.

After a while, the pups' black-and-white fur began to grow in. They explored the yard and then, tentatively, following their parents, ventured into the house. I let them have the run of the place. At first they went nowhere without their mother. They followed Louisa from room to room, out into the yard and back again, in a pleasingly tidy single-file line. Sometimes, if I were going from one room to another myself, I had to stop at the doorway like a motorist at a crosswalk and wait for all six of them to parade by. Either Helga or Gertrude, who were slower than the others, brought up the rear. These two were the least practical-minded of the group. Helga was easily distracted. She would stop to sniff at something and Gertrude would walk right into her and they would both go tumbling over. Gertrude also had a habit of tripping over her own feet and falling forward on her snout, emitting a sound like the release of air when one opens a can of soda. Of course I had to wait until they were mature, but I must confess I tried my darndest to get some musk out of them long before they were ca-

pable of giving me any. I'd squeeze one of the little buggers over my cup until he let out a shrill squeak and I put him down, apologizing profusely and swearing not to try it again until I was certain he was old enough.

It was shortly after the children were born that I began to have real problems with Mrs. Endicott. She was constantly peering over the fence or muttering about "evil odors" as she collected her laundry from the clothesline in her backyard. One evening at dusk, while I was taking my morning tea in the backyard, I caught her. The orange glow of the sun was just barely visible over the rooftops to the west and Homer was rough-housing with Rupert and Nathaniel when I glanced over and saw Mrs. Endicott's eyes and the curly top of her head above the wooden fence. She ducked down as soon as I saw her. There had been several occasions already that month when I'd noticed similar espionage operations. I was growing perturbed.

"Is there something I can help you with, Mrs. Endicott?" I called, the next time she reared her graying head. Again she disappeared behind the fence. I took a few more sips of tea and then noticed her peeking again.

"Oh, what *is* it?" I said, not even caring that my voice betrayed irritation.

This time her face remained above the fence. "It's just that," she whined, "well, I've noticed you have some skunks over there."

"Is there a law against skunks?"

"I'm not sure," she said, and as she spoke, a strain of animosity strengthened until it dominated her tone. "But see, I hang my laundry out back, and all my clothes and sheets started to reek like skunk. That was bad enough, but now that those things have started breeding it's even worse. You've practically got a skunk kennel over there. The smell gets into the house unless I keep the doors and windows shut all the time, which makes it stuffy, which is bad for my sinuses. Do you realize I go through four containers of nasal spray every week—four every week!"

"Mrs. Endicott," I broke in, "I really do not care to sit here while you stand on a milk crate and preach to me about your overindulgence in pharmaceuticals."

"Well, listen. Now the smell of your damn skunks gets into my house no matter what I do. My friend Edna was over the other day. 'What've you been doing in here?' she says, 'cooking skunk cabbage all day?' 'No,' I say, 'it's that Damien, next door. He keeps skunks in his

backyard.' 'That grumpy bachelor?' Edna says, 'I thought he was kind of strange, but I wouldn't've guessed he was weird too.' 'Well, he quit his job and started sleeping all day,' I says, 'and now he's got these disgusting skunks running all over the place and it stinks to high heaven.' 'Isn't there a law against things like that?' she says, 'A public nuisance law, I think.' 'I don't know,' I says, 'but he'd better do something about them soon.'"

"What do you mean, I'd 'better do something about them,'" I said. "Is that some kind of threat?"

"Well, you'd better, because I'm not going to be able to stand living like this for very long. You know, what you need is a good woman to take care of you. A young man like you," she shook her head. "Maybe then you wouldn't be so grumpy, and you'd get rid of those god-awful skunks."

I could actually feel my temperature rising. She was slandering skunks—and right in front of Homer and the children. I stood abruptly, letting the tea cup and saucer go clattering to the cement floor of the porch. "That's quite enough, Mrs. Endicott!" I roared. Her head disappeared from above the fence and I heard her back door slam shut a second later.

Homer and the boys had stopped playing and stood there in the yard, staring at me. The poor, trusting little chaps. What would Mrs. Endicott have me do, send them off to some wretched boarding school? My hands were shaking. I hadn't conversed with another person for quite some time, and renewing that experience had been unpleasant enough, but I'd thought I'd left behind petty reprobations like Mrs. Endicott's when I left Grund & Greene and started working at home. "Is there no end to it, Homer?" I said. Homer shook his head sadly.

Life was becoming busier and busier with such a large family in the house. By the time the children were about four weeks old, their fur was almost as full as their parents. They had even begun to venture into different rooms of the house on their own and get into mischief. One night I almost murdered Rupert by the unlikely method of washing him to death. He must have been playing in the hamper and fallen asleep among my dirty clothes. I noticed the sleeve of one of my shirts was wriggling with life after I'd already put the clothes in the washing machine and was sprinkling detergent over them. Then Rupert popped his curious little head through the end of the sleeve and looked around, blinking.

All the children had matured enough to spray by this time and for me their coming of age was the beginning of my connoisseurship. I had noticed that Louisa's musk was slightly more acidic than Homer's, but I hadn't thought much of it until after the rest of the family came along. Sampling each one, I learned that the flavor of each skunk's musk was as distinct as his or her personality. For example, Nathaniel's musk had an earthy aroma and a bold but simple flavor, while Elsbeth's had a comparatively faint aroma, though it was full-bodied, higher in acidity and had a more complex flavor. I developed a routine, by which I squeezed each of the skunks over a mason jar each evening, after they'd had the day to sleep and replenish their musk glands. They seemed to like this ritual and after a while they came into the kitchen after they awoke, loitered around their food bowls and patiently waited to be milked of their musk. I had a different mason jar for each of them, with the name of the skunk whose musk it contained taped on the side. This way I could choose from among the jars at my leisure, depending on what sort of mood I was in, or what sort of meal I was preparing, without having to go searching around the house for the right member of the family.

I usually ran my weekly errands late on Friday afternoon. I had timed this excursion and gotten it down to under two hours, plus or minus a few minutes depending on the line at the bank. That was only two hours per week I had to spend away from my house and my skunks; eight hours per month, ninety-six hours per year. Though fairly minimal, even this was plenty of time for me to get more than my fill of humanity. The grubbiness of the buying and selling of goods, the greedy expressions on the faces of people in the stores I was compelled to enter, the strangulating exhaust fumes and cigarette smoke, foul body odor and even fouler deodorants and perfumes, the nerve-grating glances, the harsh blasts of car horns, the offensive, careless shouts of greeting, the impudence and naked lasciviousness of strangers, the fearsome grinding of young people's skateboards, the oppressive neon lights, garish posters advertising films that promised further immersion in the swill bucket of greed and violence in which we were already drowning, and to top it off, the grime, the streets littered with fast-food containers, cigarette butts, bums begging for change—it all made me sick. And this was only a relatively small suburb. After a time, I wondered at how I'd ever summoned the nerve to go into the city each day. I often got migraines after my weekly outings and had to spend an hour or two in the den with all the shades down, languishing in a

musk dream while my skunks climbed over the furniture and over me as I lay on the couch.

One day during my weekly tour through the Dantesque horror known as downtown New Essex, I noticed, or rather, found myself utterly galled by, a fantastically rude, brusque woman in the canned-foods aisle of the supermarket. I was just about to pick up a can of sardines when it was snatched out from under my fingertips by a hand that was wrinkled like a prune. At the same moment, I noticed a strong odor of fish. I was near the end of my errands and could already feel my head beginning to throb at the temples. My distaste for conversation had grown so strong that I almost let the incident pass, but my aggravation got the better of me.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but I was just about to pick that up.” The woman was so busy sweeping stacks of sardines off the shelf and into her cart that she hardly seemed to notice me at all. She cleaned out the entire section. Her cart was filled almost exclusively with canned sardines.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I have to have these.” She glanced at me, only for a moment, but long enough for me to notice that she had a walleye. Then she started on the canned clams and anchovies. Dumbfounded, I watched as she made her way down the aisle and noticed that, like me, she was wearing bedroom slippers. She also wore a long, grayish-white terry cloth bathrobe.

That night I had trouble getting to sleep. There was something familiar about the woman and something strangely exciting as well. Anyone seen at the supermarket in a bathrobe and slippers, buying a whole cartload of canned fish, must be the keeper of at least a few interesting secrets. I found myself longing to know what those secrets were. Over and over, I rewound and played the scene in which she glanced up at me in the midst of swiping sardines from the shelf. The frizzy brown ringlets that framed her face seemed to have a life of their own, made her look even more vital, more vigorous than her swift motions suggested. And the way she looked at me! That one walleye stared off in another direction, as if she were wary of an ambush, while the other eye, an aquamarine pool pierced by the black of a large pupil, bore into me—qualitative, distrustful, competitive and considerate all at once.

I woke up several times in the morning from dreams in which this strange woman’s face appeared and I asked her for a can of sardines. Then the face became my mother’s, and no sooner had I asked for

peanut butter cookies and milk than the face turned into the sardine woman's and I was hopelessly embarrassed for having asked her for cookies and milk. "Mother!" I yelled, sitting bolt upright in bed and tearing off my eye covers. It was eleven AM—the middle of the night for me—but I was wide awake. I realized two things. One was that it had been nothing but the woman's bathrobe that had reminded me of my mother. Otherwise they were opposites. While my mother was slow and languid, this woman was quick and energetic. So I could dispense with the nagging notion that I was committing an Oedipal offense. The second thing I realized was that I had never had the time, or allowed myself the time, to grieve for my mother. So I sat there on the edge of my bed in my diamond-patterned pajamas and cried for the loss of a woman who had been gone from my life for some twenty-odd years. I cried for about an hour. My sobs echoed through the house and woke Homer, who came into the bedroom, lay down at my feet and fell asleep again.

I would not have noticed the woman the next week if I hadn't been looking for her. Normally, as I went about my errands, I scrupulously avoided contact, even eye contact, with other people. But this time I was on the lookout. I saw the sardine woman at the end of the canned foods aisle. I made sure to check out at the same register, just behind her. Again there were the towering heaps of canned sardines, tuna and clams. I followed her out of the supermarket and watched as she put her groceries in her car and took a large, empty plastic bucket out of the trunk. She carried out all these actions with the certainty of one who has a long-established and satisfying routine. I hurriedly got my groceries into the back seat of my own car and trotted after the woman to see what she might be doing with the bucket. It was so far out of character for me to be blatantly minding someone else's business that I would almost not have been surprised to discover someone else following me with a movie camera. I followed the gray bathrobe and curly hair, keeping a safe distance, down the street and into the fish market.

One of the men behind the counter seemed to recognize her. He was a heavily muscled fellow with a twisted nose, large hairy ears and a white apron smeared with fish scales and entrails. He nodded, and even though there were a couple of people in line ahead of the bathrobed woman, he reached across the counter to relieve her of the bucket and took it through the plastic curtain into the back room. I found I was absurdly jealous of this fishmonger. I can't be much uglier

than that great big Neptunesque boob, I told myself, certainly I can't be much uglier. The great goon came back out a minute later with the same bucket filled to the brim with fish heads and tails. He grabbed a lid from a stack beside the counter and pressed it down on top of the bucket and snapped it into place.

"Anything else for you today?" he asked, as he put the bucket on the counter and slid it forward.

"Yes, I'll take three pounds of salmon and four of bluefish," she said. The man nodded and began to weigh out the fish she'd asked for. This really is something else, I thought. She must live on a diet of nothing but fish, fish, and shellfish. I noticed that she was considerably undercharged for her purchase. She thanked the man and I followed as she carried the bucket, which must have been quite heavy, and the bag of fresh fish, back to her car with apparently little exertion. Her car, a blue Tempest, was parked close to mine. I got in my car, started the engine and watched this strong woman swing a bucket of fish ends into the trunk of her car.

I couldn't say precisely why I continued to follow her. I made sure to keep at least a few car lengths between us, but she must have kept a constant watch on the rearview mirror with her walleye. I followed her into a residential neighborhood that was a few miles from my own and pulled over to the curb when I saw her pull into a driveway. Instead of taking her groceries out of her car, she walked directly over to mine and tapped on the driver's side window, a few inches from my ear. At a loss as to how to address a situation that had veered completely off course, I pretended to be deep in thought for a moment, stared straight ahead through the windshield and hoped the woman would go away. She rapped on the window again. She was bent over, looking in at me like someone peering into a fishbowl, wondering how the creature manages to breathe under all that water. I rolled down my window and my nostrils were immediately assailed by the odor of fish.

"What do you want?" she asked, staring at me with her left eye, while the right one gazed off into the back seat.

"Want?" I said.

"Why are you following me?" She had a rather husky voice.

"I'm not following... I was just driving..." I trailed off into silence, having failed to find an appropriate lie. "I live near here," I said finally.

"Did they send you from the university?" she said.

This one really baffled me. “Well, I did attend college, if that’s what you mean. But they didn’t give me much in the way of guidance there. In fact I despised them.”

She was snub-nosed and now her nostrils began to flare and collapse rapidly as a rabbit’s. “You have a skunk in here?” she asked.

I felt my cheeks growing warm, perspiration springing to the surface on my back and forehead. As she leaned forward to peer into my car, her scraggly mass of brown ringlets fell forward and the top of her robe parted to reveal a V of fair, freckled skin. The cool air had added a touch of blush to her cheeks in the area just below her pronounced cheekbones. Her scent made me think of the sea, fishing boats tied to a tired old wooden dock, lopsided pilings with seagulls perched on them in a snug, foggy little harbor somewhere on the Maine coast. She was so absorbingly beautiful I had to look away. Neither of us said anything for a moment.

“Do you have a skunk fetish?” she asked.

I was taken by surprise. I’d never thought of my hobby as fetishistic. It sounded perverse. “I suppose one could put it that way,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she hastened to add. “I’m a fish fetishist.”

I nodded, wondering if there were some underground society of fetishists into which I was about to be initiated.

“My name’s Pearl,” she said, sticking a hand, wrinkled as if it had been immersed in water for too long, through the open window. I shook it. Slightly slimy. “You wanna come in for a drink?” she asked.