

Jody Azzouni: Does this ever happen to you? You hear about someone doing something, and you think: No way I'll ever do *that*. And then a few years later you're doing *that*. Exactly *that*. I sometimes work backwards (so I can see where I'm going). I ask myself: what sort of character would end up doing *that*? It's a puzzle about personality I want to solve. Here's *that*. Now construct the events and personality that led to *that*.

I read science fiction as a kid. A lot of people did. Still do, some of them. But I never found myself writing it. And then it's the summer of 2000, and here I am writing something in the neighborhood of science fiction. It's not science fiction, I tell others. This is coming. This is what I tell people: This is coming *soon*. (And I still think I'm right. You watch.)

This story did well. Really well. It won a fiction prize. And money. How many of my stories can say *that*? And the editors of *Willow Springs* nominated it for a pushcart prize. A literary agent got in touch with me after he read it in *Willow Springs*. A famous one. Write more of *those*, he told me, and maybe we'll make a deal.

It didn't work out. I don't know how to write more of anything I write. This thing inside me that writes is a chameleon. It's so into being a total phoenix. Come on, I say. Everyone else does sequels. Why can't you? Why can't you write six stories about the same people? Why can't you use the same style in more than one story? Why can't you use the same *punctuation*? What is *with* you? (This thing inside me that writes, it never talks to me. It never talks to anyone. Not even therapists. It's so annoying. Stuff pops out. From nowhere. And then *I* have to deal with it.)

Someone dumped me after I gave her the story to read. So the story makes things move. Move away from me, anyway. In the real world, I mean. (Well, maybe I'm exaggerating. Even lying. Sorry. I'll try not to do it again.)

There's autobiography in the story. Sort of. (How many of my stories can say *that*?) I once saw a TV special on giant squid. That's interesting, I said afterwards. And promptly forgot about it. Or so I thought. I once knew someone who would always say: I *hate* that. What an odd thing to always say, I thought. And I promptly forgot about it. Or so I thought.

Giant Squid in High Places

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It's breakfast in LA, on my patio. My husband of the moment sits across from me eating his Cheerios. I've got fresh Romaine yellow cherry tomatoes crisp green peppers in a bowl in front of me. No dressing. I sprinkle a little cayenne on them for flavor and pick. I'm wearing sunglasses because I'm hungover and can't stand light.

He bends his head over his newspaper and rocks back and forth in the squeaking patio chair to the sound of his Walkman. Just a little bit, small motions—I don't want to exaggerate what's happening here. He can't hear his chair. I cross my legs and look out over the picture-postcard scene. Somewhat soothing like meditation, but without having to do the damn thing in your head. Nice legs, I think, looking down at myself, all that work finally paying off.

Last night he confessed to me—supposed deep insight about himself—he gets turned on by cartoons. “I am so filled with self-loathing,” he tells me, “you just cannot imagine.” “Cartoons,” I say back to him. Is he referring to me? I wonder. Trying to suggest I'm dimensionally-impaired? “Jessica Rabbit,” he explains. “Minnie Mouse. Snow White sometimes, although she's really too severe for the likes of me. Those new Japanese chicks—the hot ones I mean—with those big round eyes.” I had no comeback to this. Would you?

“It’s not just this relationship, although there’s that,” I say aloud to no one in particular, since there’s no one in particular to say it aloud to, “it’s the whole world really. It’s gotten really weird lately.” He doesn’t look up from the newspaper. “In case you haven’t noticed,” I add.

Do you have days like this? Ones where you realize that a really normal upbringing was the worst thing of all to have? That it doesn’t equip you for *anything*?

“Today’s Squidman day,” my first assistant director chirps out when I arrive. Her name’s *Julette*—three syllables, if you can believe it. Is this a name or a *typo*? I keep wondering.

“Whatever,” I tell her, pressing my iced-coffee cup to my right temple, massaging the streaking hangover, moving on best I can to my office where I can be alone. She’s new—only two weeks—but I’m already getting ready to fire her. She’s got thick butchy features and the haircut doesn’t help. She wears pink so people will think she’s a girl. Sometimes it works.

The last one quit—that was easier. “I think it’s really important for us to feel bad when we do something wrong,” Andrea had told me—“Andrea” was her name—some sort of religious brochure pressed to her stomach photographs of auras on the cover. She kept standing by my door—against the cheap plastic frame—like she’s waiting for an invitation. *Don’t you dare bring that thing in here*, I’m thinking. “Feeling bad’s a way of keeping track of just where we are in hell,” she says cheerfully, “kind of a geographic thing.” “Hell?” I ask without interest. “This is hell,” she tells me, indicating LA probably, or maybe just my office. “I’m an atheist,” I reply, “so I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” “Standards,” she comes right back with, “you need standards.” I don’t say anything. “Ok here’s a standard for you,” she goes on, “a kind of Heaven on earth sort of thing. Happy plants—colorful, lots of variety, different shapes—all flowering in a landscape together. All friends. *No animals*.” I look at her. “Get it?” she says. “No, I don’t,” I say, “really.”

I get it alright. I put in a call to Research. You know about that film where they filmed a garden for weeks? And then speeded it up so we could see what the plants were really up to? Moving around trying to suffocate each other but in slow motion—trying to block out each other's sunlight? Nasty tendrils and all? Roots around necks? I mean stems? National Geographic or something. *Secret Life of Plants*. *Killer Plants on the Move*. *Nature's Red Teeth and Claws* something like that it was titled. Educational thing. "Uh yeah, I think so," the guy in Research says. "Good," I say, "get the film set it up in Viewing Room Two and send a memo to Andrea to see it. Three to four this afternoon, got it?" "Sure," he says. "Unless it runs longer," I add, "Call me back if it does." "Ok," he says. "And Ralphie?" I say. "Yeah?" he replies. He hates being called Ralphie. His real name is Jonathan. "Ralphie," I say again, for emphasis, "make sure there's a box or two of Kleenex in there, ok?" I'm a little tough. But I get along with people a lot better now—ever since I won my second MacArthur. Lots of other grants coming in too. I'm becoming very well known. People like my stuff. I come with my stuff. That's what talent is all about.

We've been auditioning. A lot of people think auditioning's just a total waste—do screen tests, they say. That's lazy—that's what *I* think—*not* auditioning can get you in trouble later. A big part of whether a film is going to work or not is chemistry, and you can't read *any* chemistry off a screen test. The only way to tell what the chemistry is going to be is to put the person up in front of you and tell them what to do. If they get along with you *then* do a screen test. If I'd auditioned my first assistant director I'd have known it was a no-go before I hired her. That's the problem. You don't audition first assistant directors. It's just not done.

We've been auditioning and things have not been going well. When that happens everyone gets on everyone's nerves. "Screen test," *Julette* will say about someone we've just

auditioned. “No way,” I’ll respond firmly, “She’s a little too thin in the legs.” “Don’t be snippy,” *Julette* will snip back, “the main character *isn’t* supposed to *have* legs, remember?” Then the next one will have thick upper arms, no definition at all. Or ugly hands. Big thighs. All morning this is what it’s like. They think because I’m billed as a Feminist I’m going to let this shit pass. I’m just so annoyed. The camera crew—I always make sure I get their input—keep flipping out over the wrong women. I can never figure them out. During the breaks we get when there’s a no-show, *Julette* will hit on the camera operator. She’ll tell him a dream she’s had.

“It starts with the master shot,” she’ll say, “from above.” “Good,” the camera operator will say, “I like it when dreams do that. It’s so rare.” “Light rain—a sheen,” she’ll go on, “floating camera moving in slowly from above coming down on an intersection, lot of traffic, pedestrians, viewpoint coming in close, slight whooshing sound occasional buzzing insects distant mooing of a cow.” “*That’s* weird,” the camera operator will say, “bad sound editor you think?” “I guess,” she’ll reply, “anyway this cars hits a pedestrian, that’s what we close-up on, the pedestrian laid out long shot from the side, and then—get this—the car sort of hunkers down a little on its front wheels you know like one of those wheelchair-friendly buses pushes its grill into the body, starts to eat. Lousy sound effects construction, the eating sounds don’t correspond to what the grill on the car is doing at all. I mean who knows what a chewing car is supposed to sound like but it isn’t going to sound like *that*.” “What’s a wheelchair-friendly bus?” the camera operator will ask. “Oh right,” she’ll say, “you’ve never been to New York.” “Is that like a Greyhound thing?” he’ll ask. “What’s a Greyhound thing?” she’ll ask back. I think she’s making fun of his use of the word “thing.” She does stuff like that. She thinks men find it cute.

One of the camera crew has just offered me a title. “Try saying that aloud a few times,” I tell him, “and notice how many taste buds die off each time as a result.” “Is that funny?” he says

back, “are you like trying to be funny?” You don’t audition the camera crew either. You go with the director of photography and *he* brings in the crew. I hate delegating. Don’t you?

Here’s how Squidman got in the picture. I get a call on Tuesday from my publicist Françoise—she gives me a song and dance about how the last picture went, she does this whenever she wants to maneuver me into something—she makes oblique references to the money I owe her. I rattle my fingernails on the desktop, imprint little dents into the soft wood while I wait for her to wind down, get off this business about interest. Then she starts in on this new biotech firm with ties to MIT and some place in Helsinki. “What are you now, my stockbroker?” I ask. I’m feeling really impatient. She shushes me (*I hate* that), and then she chatters on a bit more about this cross between tobacco and fireflies—hybrid tobacco that glows in the dark, “Do you want to talk to *me* or to someone in *lighting*?” I ask. Then she starts in about squid—giant squid—really big brains but most of the nerves go into their skin. “Yeah?” I say. “Yeah!” she responds, like this is exciting, “and what *skin* they have as a result—it can turn different colors even change shapes really impressive. They’ve got really fine-tuned control over their surfaces, not like us.” I’m skeptical—after all I’ve heard *something* about giant squid—live at the bottom of the ocean I tell her. “Not a lot of light down there,” I say pointedly, “not much to see, you’d think.” She responds like she often does, the way deaf people do, she goes right on: “Anyway, there’s this cross between a giant squid and a human being from China and you’ve just got to audition him.”

This is a command. I bristle of course, but I hold the cellphone away from my head a bit so she can’t hear my teeth grind. I really don’t need this. “This is the official story?” I say, “for all those people out there born yesterday? Guy goes swimming off the coast of China? He’s really high more than a little confused thinks he’s making it with a mermaid? An extra-handed

mermaid one of those blue Indian Goddess things with eight arms? And a tail too?” She’s adamant. “It’s all done in test tubes these days if it’s done at all—you think fireflies lust after tobacco plants on a regular basis?—anyway we don’t care what the truth is here we only care what the buzz is. You do this and *publicity is free from now on*. Auditioning suffices, by the way. No other obligations.” She tells me this too: “Word gets out about this it will make my life a lot easier. Yours too.”

You might think: So you owe her a lot of money. Big deal—plenty of debt all around that’s how this country runs. You just ignore it. Not me—I *honor* my debts. I may not pay them back, it’s true—new money goes to new projects—that’s the nature of grant money—never use it to clean the dust off old accounts, to settle old debts—no granting institution is going to give you money to do *that*. Still, I sure as hell honor my debts. That’s why people trust me. “Ok,” I say, penciling it in on a day on which I’ve got several other appointments already which could run overtime. I can always call back later—blow it off legitimately.

Later that day I get a call from this biologist. That’s *after* the call from some salesguy trying to sell me one of those newfangled cameras that generate their own daylight. *Julette* failed to screen *either call* like she’s supposed to. There’s some sort of passive-aggressive power struggle thing going on here like she thinks her job description doesn’t include screening calls for me. I’m feeling pressured too, and although it’s out of area I just answer it without thinking. Bioguy gets on, talks really slowly like he has to think about each word before he uses it, rotate it in his head a few times to see if it looks just as good upside down or something. He’s the agent for Squidman, his inventor too. I use the word “inventor,” and he doesn’t like it. Squidman is a *person*, he tells me, you don’t invent *persons*. Yeah right. Squidman even has a name—like people do with their pets: *Rodney*. “Last name?” I ask, making a bet with myself. “Well, that’s a

little awkward,” he says. *Bingo!* I think. “We’re not sure yet what to do about a last name.” I let that pass. *BioTherm* is the name of his company, privately owned by him and some other guys. I allude a little to his inexperience as an agent—he’s a biologist, right? Been to LA much? He humhums me. “Why me?” I ask pointedly. “Because I read about your MacArthurs,” he says, “all two of them. And because they also describe your work. The whale stuff. The eight-hour film about sea foam. The dolphin and starfish thing. I thought you might be interested.” “I’m a Feminist,” I tell him, “it’s all symbolic. I’m not really into Nature—all by itself, I mean.” “Uh huh,” he says, “so that means squid are out?” I don’t say anything. “Ok,” he says, “look, I don’t know *exactly* why you seem to be a good choice, it was a hunch. I thought you might be interested. You need more grant money, right?”

Unpromising conversation—what would a biologist know about N.E.H. grants?—but I don’t do anything to fuck up the appointment. What really convinced me to try it at all was some e-mail exchanges at the end of the day with my grant-writer, Sylvia. She’s the absolute best—sixty-year-old sociologist grandma. So sharp. She *definitely* thought I could get grants out of it if I pitched it right. Whether it was real or not. Crucial selling point.

So that brings us to *now*. We’re all sitting around waiting—everyone’s interested I guess, Françoise already at work I can tell, practicing her publicity art on my internal memos. And then they show up. No big surprises, really. Françoise is *really* going to have to work hard on this one, I’m thinking. Bioguy looks like I pictured him: short, geeky-looking, owly glasses, eyes looking like they’re popping out a little back there—*wow, so this is what the world looks like*—pear-shaped body, definitely a long nights at the lab sort of guy, late fifties, a virgin. Squidman—the star of the show—looks pretty ordinary, he’s ok I mean, nice butt and all, but nothing special. A little greenish I notice. I lean over towards the camera operator who’s pushing back his thinning

cowlick. “What about that?” I ask. “I don’t know,” *Julette* butts in, “his skin is a little too weird kind of puckered somehow.” “No problem,” *Cameraguy* says, “it might even contribute to his on-camera allure—the way Tommy Lee Jones’ skin does. Eric Roberts too. Billy Zane, Edward James Olmos—” “Enough already with the bad skin people,” I say, a little louder than we’ve been whispering. “He really creeps me out, *especially* his skin,” *Julette* hiss-whispers, in that narrow-minded way of hers. *A lisp*, I think, *she had a lisp once*. I bet she paid plenty to get rid of that.

I notice *Squidman* doesn’t talk much, smiles a lot, walking around looking at the cables. He’s probably wondering: *Creepers? New kind of seaweed maybe? Weird sort of sea-snake?* Nice smile, though. That’s promising at least, I think. *Bioguy* is talking at me from below, talking about his firm, so much so I almost think he wants me to be an *investor*. The lab is in *China*. I heard that before. “Funny,” I say, looking at *Squidman*’s green skin, his really round eyes, “he doesn’t *look* Chinese.” “That’s where the *lab* is,” *Bioguy* snaps, fastest he’s ever said anything. “So sorry to annoy you,” I snap back. “Sorry,” he replies, “I get this all the time.” “So this is typical?” I ask, sliding the subject to something else that’s still bothering me, “your being the agent I mean?” “Absolutely, we biologists have been the fall guys for Capitalism long enough—nowadays *we* take out the patents the trademarks—that’s all it takes these days to be a business—hire a lawyer.” One of the crew walking by rolls his eyes when he hears the word *Capitalism*. “So this guy, he’s patented?” I ask, looking at *Squidman*’s butt while he’s bending down, looking over a cable, wondering if he can eat it. “Not *Rodney*, you can’t patent a person—his *genes*, I’ve got dibs on his genes.” *Dibs?* I think. This is a *biologist* talking? *Dibs?* “*Squidsie* doesn’t seem to talk too much,” an electrical guy says, drifting by. “Wait until the audition,” *Bioguy* says back, and with pride in his voice.

The audition. Bioguy gets up on the stage with Squidman. “Not you—we’re not auditioning *you*,” I say, “we don’t audition agents.” “Wait, wait, I have to tell you guys some information,” he says, “do an introduction thing.” I wave my hand wearily, people wander off to do stuff while he talks. He starts off—stuttering a little—and talking even more slowly, if you can believe it. Some of the meaner camera guys audibly yawn while they idly move some boxes. Sort of a union joke: “Let’s move this here.” “Ok.” “Now let’s move it back.” “Ok.” And so on.

Human actors, Bioguy tells us—I’m paraphrasing loosely here—you know like movie stars the best ones emote make us respond to their faces because they have more nerve endings there bigger blood vessels than normal people do—the gaffer snorts at this and some of the camera crew laugh. Bioguy pretends he hasn’t heard anything and Squidguy just keeps smiling in a pretty directionless way. I’m beginning to think serious retardation here. So anyway, Bioguy goes on, that’s why we react, it isn’t just looks it isn’t just good voice projection although that matters too—don’t get me wrong. Chorus at this point of “wouldn’t want to do that; not us; no way.” That’s the difference between, say, Kevin Spacey and Keanu Reeves, he tells us. Or Gary Oldman and and and “and E.T.,” someone helps out. “R2D2,” someone else says. Chorus now: “Darth Vader.” “Yoda.” “Pet rocks.” More laughter. “Actually, I was thinking of George Clooney actually,” Bioguy stutters out. Giggling from electrical. “Who?” someone says. “You know, ER—” he starts to explain. “I think we all understand what you’re trying to get at,” I say out of sheer pity, “why don’t you just step off the stage, join us down here where it’s safe and let uh let whosisdidst there do his whatever he does—” “Rodney,” he says. “Rodney, right,” I say, amidst more guffaws, “Rodney, why don’t you show us what you can do.”

So Rodney *acts*, and that’s when I lose it: I laugh, I fight back tears (twice!), I cry, I smile wistfully, I feel bittersweet but knowing, nostalgic but deep. Connected to humanity, we’re one-

rooted, pulsing in love together, outraged at evil everywhere. Hitler, for example. In love with our future, hopeful at the plight of small children, respectful of family life. Not to mention entertained and yet educated. Truth, Humor, Humanity. *He is amazing*. Dead silence all around: no one takes their eyes off his face *for an hour*, and neither do I.

And after he's run through a bit of the fresh stuff he's prepared, a monologue by a guilt-ridden fisherman, a dialogue between mackerel, he does some of the tried and true: the Hamlet bit, Tennessee Williams, Wendy Lasser, a smidgen of Shepard. Then he imitates *other actors*—mimics—no *masquerades* as Jackie Gleason, puts on flab on the spot for it, Robin Williams, but better material, a dying Rodney Dangerfield. Eddie Murphy, *all* the Klumps serially presented, then both Laurel *and* Hardy. At the same time. “No makeup, this is amazing,” *Julette* says to me. I shush her. “You didn't tell me he could do voices,” I call out to Bioguy accusingly. He shrugs. Maybe *he* didn't know either. Needless to say we go the full hour, and I am *emotionally exhausted* at the end of it. Smitten too.

It's been looking like Rodney is baby-sat pretty closely by Bioguy. But it turns out it's not true. Bioguy is easily lured away by Françoise who's shown up with this scriptwriter I've dealt with before. The one who's always got ink on her hands like she doesn't use computers like the rest of us. They're hammering out deals for me over dinner, doing an LA smoothie on him. This time though I'm going to make sure the idiot lawyer doesn't give her too much control like she had last time. And with Sylvia researching for appropriate granting institutions, things are going just right.

So me and Rodney spend the night in a hotel. Nice suite. Great room tone. Guess what? He likes walking around nude and wet. That's ok with me. He says all the right things. And he makes all these faces. “Cary Grant,” I say, “a young one.” We make love. “Warren Beaty.” We

make love again. “George Clooney,” I say. We make love. Women like monogamy? Says who? “George C. Scott,” I say. (Ok, sometimes my tastes run a little far out—but we’d been going at it for quite a while by then.)

During a short break, I make phone calls. I cancel my therapy until further notice. No kidding. And I leave a message with my lawyer, the new one, to start divorce proceedings. “Seize everything,” I say into his voice-mail. It’s sort of a joke. Impulsive you think? Not really. I’ve been thinking about all this for a while—just needed a little jolt to get me started. How it usually works.

Next day I come in, *Julette* is talking to the camera operator of course. She’s got one of those transparent purses with her, so you can see the clunky makeup case, old tissues, what might be female condom packaging—*everything* is visible. So weird. “Intrinsic human sympathy,” she’s saying, “people are designed by evolution to feel bad when they do bad things to other people.” “No kidding,” the camera operator says to her, “did you know that the Roman word for ‘slave’ was ‘self-moving furniture’? Did you know that?” “You could just disagree with me,” *Julette* says back, “would it kill you just to say, ‘*Julette*, I’m not sure you’re right about that’? ‘*Julette*, maybe you’re wrong’?” “You know,” he says, “I really hate your name. I don’t like saying it at all.” Ouch.

What a mess, I think. I’m exhausted. *Julette* comes over when she sees me. Forty-nine, I get out, but barely, my voice husky. *Julette* just uh-huhs me really coldly. Makes me a little mad. She’s wearing pink again. I don’t say anything. I behave myself.

I spend the day on the cellphone, for the most part. Argue with Françoise, then a nice supportive chat with Sylvia. I venture out of the office at one point, order a sandwich, see the key makeup artist—he’s really upset with me. “Bad trend,” he says to me, walking away. “Bad

trend.” He hates confrontation. He only disagrees with you when he’s walking away. Bunch of calls from Bioguy. Rodney’s missing, he thinks. *Julette* screens them: not missing, she tells him. Screen tests this, lighting test that, screenwriter wants to go to dinner with you again tonight, what do you say? I’m impressed. *Julette*’s behaving too.

I’m starting to feel normal towards noon. I get—by messenger—a large glossy photograph of my husband of the moment, cardboard boxed, wearing a tee shirt, begging, business people doing the wide swathe around him. He looks haggard, unshaven, unslept with. Post-It on the photo, scripted, “Do you want the shirt off his back too?” I laugh, take it around, show people—most of them remain expressionless. “Nice contrasts,” the camera operator volunteers. “It’s a joke,” I explain, “he’s not that bad off—new graphics software, my lawyer having fun with it.” “Oh,” people say.

“*Eating Raoul*,” *Julette* says to me when I’m rushing out. “Didn’t quite catch that,” I say. “Nice movie,” she says. “Oh,” I say.

Second night: the extra arms come out for the first time. He keeps them tucked up in his rib cage—convenient there, won’t scare the more conservative girls, and it gives his chest a really good shape. I am touched everywhere—that’s the idea and god does it work. My thighs have just the right circumference for his arms, he tells me, all six of them. I just go with the feelings. Nothing like this in my life, not ever.

I’ve shifted on my eye makeup, face powder—I’m exploring blues and greens. Something new. “You ok?” guy asks me on the street, as I’m getting out of my car. Blazing LA sun overhead. “Fuck you,” I respond.

“Shit,” *Julette* says, looking me over as I come through the door, “and I thought X-files was cheesy.” I behave, I don’t say anything. She’s wearing pink again. It isn’t going to get her

anywhere. Not with the thinning cowlick camera guy, not with anyone. I only make it through a half-day, a quarter-day actually. There's some sort of fuck up with the cable and the computers anyway. Dozens of phone calls from my husband of the moment. And from some woman whose son is missing. Bernie or something. We were supposed to have auditioned him. No one remembers anything. I leave. "*Bonnie and Clyde*," Juliette says to me on the way out. "Nice movie," I say. "Beaty sure is cute," she says. "You don't know the half of it," I say back. "*The Fly*," she adds. Jeff Goldblum? God does she have lousy taste.

He likes pot. It makes me horny. It gives him the munchies. So we order some food. I make calls while we're waiting for room service to finally arrive—forty minutes it takes, we make love again a couple of times: Tom Conti, Cary Grant again, Sean Penn—but that weirds me out halfway through—too ugly—and we break it off, switch to a youngish Harrison Ford, not too early. Much better.

The bellhop or whatever he is, shows up. Real short guy, I notice. He pushes the cart into the room, and then while I'm fumbling with my purse, something happens. *Rodney eats the bellhop*. Admittedly he's short, but it's still hard to believe what I'm seeing, or what I think I'm seeing. Sort of a sucking sound, Rodney expands his mouth or something, I'm just not able to see what's going on clearly, it's like a dream, and suddenly the bellhop's *gone*. No blood no biting no chance just *whomp*—and he's gone. I'm shrieking, I really am, I'm hyperventilating, you name it. Collapsed on the floor, can't move can't breathe. *Me*. He comes over, puts his arms—all of them—around me, tries to comfort me. I'm whimpering between gasps, whimpering silly stuff like *please don't eat me please don't eat me I'll be good I'll be sweet I know I can be a bitch never again I believe in God too*. He strokes me, this goes on for an hour or so, curls himself all over me the way only he can. I keep shuddering, keep shaking, keep hyperventilating, can't

breathe, gasping. And then I come again, very hard. Very hard. Can you believe it? It's all done with *hands*. Lots of them. "I know about entropy," he tells me. Ohohoh, I say. "Ebb and flow," he continues, "nothing permanent. Nothing is permanent." "Oh god," I respond. Stockholm Syndrome, you think?

Missing bellhop alert. Yes we saw him, yes we tipped him too. Very well of course, although not enough for him to run off to Mexico with it, heh heh heh. "You ok lady?" I'm asked several times. "Time of the month," I say, and cover my mouth so I don't gag publicly. Rodney is wonderful all around. So sincere. Brilliant forehead wrinkling: conveying simultaneously both concern for the missing bellhop and the naturally selfish worry a customer would have that maybe something is going on in the hotel that we don't know about that maybe we should check out now. A little like Ted Bundy, but with even more charm. Oh no no no, we're told, probably nothing. *This sort of thing happens all the time*. Sure it does. Man to man, Rodney does it really well, ahem we were in the middle of something if you know what I mean, Rodney conveys it all neatly, nonverbally. Disheveled. You know, hard at work here. Oh right, by all means get back to it sorry to disturb you plenty of champagne on us. Drink up. Smiles all around. Rodney belches. Excuse me.

This is a horror story, I've realized, and there has to be payback. That's the nature of the genre. Never something for nothing—those women who marry guys from prison, I understand where they're coming from: the intensity, the want. They've killed people, sure, not a nice thing to do at all—but the way those deepset eyes focus *on just you*. And then there's that guy in Kansas, advertising on the web: **COME TO KANSAS. BE MY SLAVE**. Advertisement on a *website*! And women do. Several anyway. Downside: they end up in parts in pickle barrels.

Weird Kansas thing apparently. But that intensity—I understand, it draws us in every time. No ordinary man comes close.

I am *not* in a good mood this morning. I'm on the phone with Bioguy. Outside Julette, that evil mind-reader, bright pink vinyl, hammer-thumbs, is singing *Stand By Your Man* off-key. *Sweeney Todd*, she'd told me when I first came in. *Natural Born Killers*. "Theme?" I ask. I can barely bring myself to do it, challenge her. I'm scared, I really am. "There's a theme here?" "It's sort of like jazz," she tells me back, "you keep playing with a theme until the other person can't stand it anymore." "Oh boy," I say.

And then she talked about needing more money. "I'm so glad I reached you," Bioguy tells me when I get him on the line, "Rodney—". I cut him off. "So," I say, making sure he can hear how pissed I am, "do giant squid eat *people* by any chance?" "People?" he says, sounding puzzled. *Don't try that shit on me*, I think, *I hang around actors all fucking day long. The goddamn frauds*. "You mean like scuba divers?" he asks. "You trying to be funny?" I snap back, "scuba divers, swimmers, whatever happens to be human, wet, and in the vicinity." "Not that I've heard," he says, "I mean, why are you asking me this?" *He knows, the shit knows*, I think. "So they don't idle near shores, like sharks," I say, "giant squid I mean." "Sharks don't idle near shores," he says back, "except in the movies. Sharks don't idle at all. They can't." "You know what I mean," I say. There's a pause. "Well," I go on, "so you've never heard of a giant squid eating a person. Or a part of a person." "No," he says. "Well, *what do they eat?*" "Fish?" he says, like he's asking a question. "Fish?" I say, imitating him. "Are we *sure* about this? I mean is this the latest buzz among biology folk?" "Well, that's what's swimming around down there, right?" he says. Like I couldn't figure this one out for myself. "They're hard to study in their native habitat," he drones on, in that slightly stuffy way of his, "because it's so deep. And we've never

had a live one in captivity.” Then he adds helpfully: “Whales dive down and eat them.” Another pause. “Rodney’s ok?” he asks. “Rodney’s *fine*,” I say, “Rodney’s just jimdandy.”

I’m not getting anything out of this guy. I put him on hold, let *him* figure out when he should hang up, and then, when I leave the office, I have to circumvent some mom, there’s this guy named Bernie who’s missing, you must have seen him, she’s telling me, we knew he was special right from the beginning we all did unusual child used to like to memorize long strings of zeros and ones. Right, I say, Bernie—ask around, if he’s auditioned for us *someone* will remember. *I* don’t remember any Bernie. Stumpy? Fat? Looks something like you? Who remembers something like that? This is LA, remember? People are supposed to be good looking? This stuff, though, I keep in my head. I’m really polite to her, I really am. Even kind of sweet. She looks like she might call the police.

By mid-afternoon, Ralphie has gotten me an educational film about *whales*—they attach cameras to the backs of whales when they dive down for squid lunch. Nothing much in it about what giant squid eat—a picture or two of something or other snarfing up fish. *Nobody* chews down there near as I can tell. Like Rodney. Stuff about their skin—how they can change colors—and that they grow *really fast*—probably *eat each other to do it* (nothing else around that’s big enough to explain their growth, the narrator says in passing). Cannibals. Rodney is a cannibal. Cold sweats. I never get cold sweats (*I hate* that). Gets it from his mother. Or maybe Dad.

I’ll be honest. Somehow it’s soothing. It really is. It’s a *family thing*. They all do it. Somehow I find this reassuring: he’s not a weirdo or anything. Long tradition in the family. *That’s* what’s wrong with serial killers. They’re *oddballs*—they stand out. The things they do in their backyards. Or in other people’s backyards. No one like oddballs. If we were *all* like that—

serial killers I mean—you know like Vikings—then it would just be a way of life, a style of Being. Moral relativism. It gives perspective to things.

The camera operator is talking to *Julette*. I guess they've gotten past the name thing. "Almost from day one," he says, "vampires, werewolves, frankensteins—rrrhhh, rraah, *bad guys*—you know, like *monsters*—big scene at the end of the movie have to kill them, they talk in monosyllables; foreign accents: *I vant to suck your blud*—and then all of a sudden—in the seventies I guess—" "Long ago and far away when *Hare Krishnas* roamed the land," she says to him. She's in her twenties, he's in his forties, and she's being mean about it. She's still interested, that's the message, but he needs to know what a good deal he's getting. "Yeah whatever," he says, not understanding, what's going on I mean—just barreling on dimly, "anyway all of a sudden we're in the monster's *head*. Nice sensitive monster. Sounds a little like us. 'Gosh gee—I'm kind of in a bind here because I need blood bad. Do you think maybe we can work something out?' I mean, what *is* this?"

I burst into tears (*I hate* that). Later that day I tell *Julette* that I think we have to let the camera operator go. "Not until after I sleep with him," she tells me right back like she's blackmailing me. "Oh great—" I say through my tears, "geeks having sex together. Just what we need." Who made her the goddess all of a sudden?

"Eat him," I tell Rodney later, "as soon as possible." "No can do," Rodney says, "we've broken bread together. Eaten sushi like brothers. It would be immoral." What *is* this? We have long talks together between fucks. Well, talks anyway. Marriage, children. Rodney has hopes and dreams too. "That eating people thing," I say, "it's got to stop." "Ok," he promises. I know what that means, I've slept with alcoholics. Ok, they say too. Thing is, I'm thinking—I'm amazed I'm thinking this—killers get caught because there's evidence around: blood, bones,

stuff in the garden. This suck-up business is really convenient—I mean if you’re into that sort of thing. No evidence. I’m amazed I’m thinking about this, it’s just the strategy-module in my brain running on automatic, I think. Am I really willing to start a family now?—Junior living in the bathtub until it’s time for kindergarten? “Hugh Grant,” I say. We make love. Then I say, “Hugh Grant,” again. Maybe I *am* planning to settle down. I don’t use room service. Not even once.

Cops show up. I knew this was going to happen, I just knew it. Only took a couple of weeks. Bernie something. Zeros and Ones. Time for the zeros. A bad ending is looming. “Like Hitchcock stuff?” *Julette* asks me when I first arrived this morning. “DePalma? *Postman Rings Twice? Crime and Punishment?*” “Are these questions *pointed?*” I ask. “Money,” she says, elegant index finger—tapered fingers, beautiful nails—rubbing against stumpy hammer-thumb, “and credits. Percentages. New job title.” *Credits!* I just gave her a raise. Two, in fact. Bonuses. When the cops show up, *Julette* whispers, “Argentina,” and then she giggles. I wonder if she can be nailed as an accomplice.

Cops talking to me. Awful lot of people have been disappearing around here lately. “Anyone with *talent?*” I ask acidly. Big mistake, big mouth. Mine. My husband of the moment said once: “You don’t have a very nice mouth. It’s been a real problem.” He said, “You should try to keep it full more often.” And how. They don’t like me anymore, I can tell. And then I do it again. “We’re in LA,” I tell them, “people disappear all the time.” “That true?” the fat one says, “I hadn’t heard that. You heard that?” he asks his partner, the thin one. They’ve got a routine going here, “you heard that people disappear *all the time?* In Los Angeles?” “Not me,” the thin one says. “Maybe,” the fat cop says to me, “maybe you’re confusing the real Los Angeles with the one you think you know about from the movies. That possible?” I feel really threatened by these guys. They simply do not like me. “Maybe you’ve *seen* too many of those movies about

Los Angeles,” the fat one says. Other cop: “Maybe you’ve *made* too many of those movies about Los Angeles.” Me: “I’m not that kind of filmmaker.” I mention a title, then another title. Fat cop: “You made *that*?” “Yeah,” I say. Now we’re finally getting somewhere, now we’re on the right foot here, it’s about time. “My wife *loved* that film,” he says, just like he wants to punch me in the face. “Oh,” I say, “my stuff’s very controversial, it gets a wide range of responses.”

I’m told by Bioguy that Rodney’s getting *lots* of offers. “I’d say Sylvia’s PR kind of backfired,” *Julette* tells me. “Do you think we can hang onto him anyway?” the camer operator asks. “Oh yeah,” I say grimly, “*that* won’t be a problem.” “Got him by the balls, I think,” *Julette* says chirpily, “or whatever those are.” You’re next, I think, just you wait. Whomp. I don’t say anything. I behave. No period. I haven’t had a period. Way overdue. Pregnancy test? Would you want to know?

Sylvia, me and Rodney are at the beach. Bioguy is getting the drinks. Second round. We’ve been negotiating. Renegotiating. I’m trying to decide if I can handle this. Meanness and all. Cops. No evidence, there’s no evidence, I keep telling myself. Digestion is really effective: breaks things down into proteins and stuff. Neater than a boiler or a fireplace. Or acid in a bathtub. No boxes that have to be shipped off to Alaska or wherever. No evidence. Dogs eat bones all the time, what comes out the other end doesn’t look like bones. That’s why they need pooper scoopers in New York. *Julette* told me about them. Who’s going to know? Ever? And people just love Rodney. “Star material,” Sylvia tells me, “just amazing.” I *know*. “This is your chance, it’s come it’s really come. No way we can lose on this one. All the way we’re going. Make that contract air-tight. They don’t know what they’ve got yet.” I *know*. I nod. “Is that still makeup you’re wearing or are you alright?” she asks me. “I’m alright,” I say. I’ve put on weight. She knows. I gag a lot. Morning sickness all day long.

Rodney and Sylvia wander off towards the water where children are playing. I gag again, but try to repress it. Hold my breath. Breathe in and out slowly, try to get the panic to go away, or whatever it is I'm feeling. Some guy comes up to me, he picks litter off the beach or something, stuffs it in a bag. He looks really mad. "Poor people," he says to me, "I like poor people. Many of them are still human."