

## EXERCISES

He practiced smiling.

Looking in the mirror, Martin pulled up the corners of his mouth, trying to duplicate the expression of the blond-haired man on the TV with the big forehead. Something wasn't right—the eyebrows? His eyes darted back and forth from the mirror to the television, posing, making adjustments here and there...lips down, more teeth...comparing...nope. After a few minutes, his face started to hurt and he gave up.

He did push-ups instead. Push-ups were easy. He did two hundred before he had to stop and change the channel. A show called *The Nanny* had come on and he leapt up like a cat as soon as he heard her whiny voice. He pressed the remote button with blinding speed—*click, click, click, click, click*—until he found an old black-and-white movie. Good. He liked those. He went back to his push-ups, his face tilted up so he wouldn't miss a thing.

In the movie there was a woman who was worried that this man didn't love her anymore. She didn't know it, but the man was worried that the woman didn't love him either. They spent all this time (he couldn't even count how many push-ups) trying to make each other jealous, hoping that would make the other one love them again. Martin didn't understand any of it. He looked at them laughing and smiling while they tried to trick and embarrass each other, then went to the mirror and practiced again.

It still didn't look right.

Birds were chirping, dogs were barking. It was a bright, bright beautiful cool crisp day in the neighborhood. Junkies were up with their crackhead cousins, prowling the lanes of Tompkins Square Park, looking for a not quite empty vial to suck on or maybe a john so they could buy one. The gentry joggers were up already, circling the park in huffy, puffy laps, their pounding hoofbeats echoing the *clang-whirl-shwoop-crunch* of the mob-owned garbage trucks.

Ho-hum. Rose slowly fingered the ring on her nipple and wondered why she couldn't get back to sleep. The garbage trucks were the obvious reason. The booms and bangs down below sounded like artillery fire. Still, she usually slept like a pile of cannonballs at Gettysburg. When she went down, she stayed down. At least until noon. She worked nights at the tattoo parlor, happily infecting all the ink-crazed kids with HIV and hepatitis C (if they were lucky). She didn't realize she was doing that. She'd been following the sterilization techniques handed down by her creepy boss. Unfortunately, they weren't any more effective than the jar of clear blue liquid that the barbershop used to sterilize combs. In the time she'd been working, she had already been responsible for the possibly fatal infection of eleven pierced and tattooed members of the "tribal community."

So Rose, blissfully unaware of her crimes against humanity, lay wide awake at nine-fifteen in the morning, twisting and turning her nipple ring. She wasn't sure why she was awake, but now that she was, she knew what she wanted to do about it. As she rubbed the two silver rings that held her clit hostage, she wondered again why she was up so early and why she felt so...horny? Hungry? What?

She knocked off a quick O like she was popping a wine cork, light and charming but nothing special. That's when she realized it wasn't a sex thing. So what was it?

She gripped the rings on both nipples and stretched them upward as

far as she could, dragging her small twin mounds along like a pair of stubborn mules. She pulled and pulled until her nipples ached, then held the rings at the Maximum Stretching Point, feeling the pain course through her, then settle back down again. She didn't back off even a millimeter, just took some deep slow breaths for a moment or two and tried to pull them out even farther.

She thought of a dancer doing hamstring stretches, and she figured the technique and level of pain must be fairly equivalent. After slowly yanking them out again, she thought, *I'm in training*, and started giggling so hard she had to let go. *Thwack*. Her tiny tits and sore, swollen nipples bounced back against her chest like a pair of hard rubber balls. *Boing*. Giggle. Hohum. Hmmm. So it wasn't the sex and it wasn't the pain or the sexpain or the painsex. So what was it? She looked out the window at the blue morning sky and the green bushy trees and the squirrel tightrope-walking on the fire escape and the *cling-clang* of the garbage truck and...

She was happy. She was unreasonably, deliriously happy! But why? The "why" brought a tiny frown to her tiny face, but the "happy" was so much stronger that it brushed away the "why" with a single gust of cool fresh air that came blowing through her curtains.

She threw the covers off the bed and let the breeze wash over her until her skin was a textured roadmap of goose bumps, pits, posts, rings and colored ink. She breathed and the ink breathed with her. She sat on the edge of the bed and jingled like Donner and Blitzen. She smiled and she looked out the window and knew something good was coming her way.

Rose stood up and stretched and took a deep breath and yawned and padded into the hallway where her yoga mat was waiting. She spent the next half hour going through her routine, a rare carryover of the training and discipline that dominated her preadolescent life as a competitive gymnast. She could do headstands and handstands and downward-facing dogs like nobody's business. In fact, it took some fairly severe contortions for her to even break a sweat, but by the final lotus pose, a slippery sheen of perspiration coated her arms and chest.

She sniffed her armpits, bowed to the altar at the end of the hall and lit three candles. The candles were nestled between a variety of crystals and minerals, some so brightly colored she often wondered how something that vibrant and wondrous could actually be growing like a plant on the walls of caves in total darkness. Or like her amethyst geode, actually growing inside a rock, like an egg hatching a million-year-old purple crystal baby. Her favorite gemstone was one her mom gave her, a brilliant red crystal she called a bloodstone. Its smooth, squarish surface was easily five inches across and three inches thick, one of the largest of its kind, she'd been told. She rubbed it for good luck like she did almost every day, then pranced into the bathroom for a very long, very hot shower.

She hummed a happy song while she soaped and scrubbed and rubbed and shaved and shaved and shaved. She wasn't sure what the song was or where she'd heard it before. After three more humming choruses, it suddenly came to her and she could see Natalie Wood dancing in that dress shop, looking in the mirror while the other girls scolded her for being so silly. Rose looked in her defogging shower mirror, liked what she saw and sang out right along with them, "I feel pretty...oh, so pretty..."

## MONSTERS

You tell your children not to be afraid. You tell them everything will be all right. You tell them Mommy and Daddy will always be there. You tell them lies.

Paul looked out the filthy window and watched the little girl playing in the filthier street below. Hopscotch. He didn't think kids played hopscotch anymore. Not in this neighborhood. Hip-hopscotch, maybe.

"Hhmpf! What do you think about that?"

Paul watched the little black girl toss her pebble or cigarette butt or whatever it was to square number five, then expertly hop, hop, hop her way safely to the square and back. She was dressed in a clean, fresh, red-gingham dress with matching red bows in her neatly braided pigtails. She looked so fresh and clean and happy that he wondered what she was doing on this shithole street.

The girl was playing all by herself. Hop, hop, hop. Hop, hop, hop. She was completely absorbed in her hopping and scotching and Paul was equally absorbed watching every skip and shuffle. No one walked by and only a single taxi ruffled the otherworldly calm.

Paul leaned closer, his keen ears straining to pick up the faint sound of her shiny leather shoes scraping against the grimy concrete. He focused even more intently and heard the even fainter lilt of her soft voice. Was she singing? He pressed his ear against the glass and listened. Sure enough, she was singing. Paul smiled and closed his eyes and let the sound pour into his ear like a rich, fragrant wine.

"One, two, buckle my shoe. Three, four, shut the door..."

He listened with his eyes closed. Her soft sweet voice rose higher and higher until...the singing suddenly stopped. Paul's eyes snapped open. The girl was gone. He craned his neck quickly to the left and saw her being pulled roughly down the street. The puller was a large, light-skinned black man, tugging on her arm every two seconds like he was dragging a dog by

its leash. At first, he guessed that the man was her father, a commodity as rare in this part of town as a fresh-scrubbed girl playing hopscotch. Then he wondered if he wasn't her father after all. Maybe he was one of *those* kinds of men, one of those monsters that would take a sweet, pure thing to a dark, dirty place and...

And do whatever a monster like that wanted to do.

Paul pressed his face against the glass and caught a last fleeting glance of the big brown man and the tiny red-checked girl. He watched the way he yanked on her arm, how he shook his finger, how he stooped down to slap her face and finally concluded that he was indeed her one and only Daddy dear. Who else would dare to act that way in public?

"Kids!" Paul huffed. "The kids these days!"

He laughed loud enough to rattle the windows. Then his face hardened by degrees as he pictured the yanking daddy and the formerly happy girl. Hmm, maybe he was one of those prowling monsters after all. Paul shuddered at the thought of what a man like that would do. He imagined the scene unfolding step by step, grunting as the vision became more and more precise. "Hhmp!" he snorted after a particularly gruesome imagining. "What kind of a bug could get inside your brain and make you do a thing like that?"

"Monsters! Monsters!" he shouted, rambling back into the wasteland of his labyrinthine apartments, twisting and turning through the maze of lightless hallways as if being led by a seeing-eye dog. He walked and turned and walked some more, comforted as always by the darkness. Finally, he came to a halt and pushed hard against a wall.

His hidden sanctuary opened like Ali Baba's cave, glowing with the treasures it contained. He stepped inside and saw the figure resting (well, not exactly resting) between the flickering candles. At the sound of his footsteps, the body on the altar twitched frantically. Paul moved closer, rubbing a smooth fingertip across the wet, trembling skin and raised it to his lips. It tasted like fear. He gazed down at the man, his eyes moving slowly from his ashen face to the rusty nails holding him so firmly in place.

The warm, dark blood shining on the wooden altar made him think about the red-gingham bunny again.

“Monsters,” he said, more softly this time, wishing he weren’t so busy. As much as he would enjoy it, there simply wasn’t enough time to clean up this mess, prepare for his guests and track her down. Well, not her, precisely. Her angry, tugging dad. Not that Paul had any trouble killing little girls, you understand. It just wasn’t his thing. Given a choice, he would much rather kill her father. And make her watch.