This was the third time it didn’t happen for Lars and Matilda. Lars had always considered Matilda the type to wear plain-colored cotton panties. Soft and standard. Maybe salmon, or turquoise with white elastic rounding out the borders. He was taken aback to see black lace coiling about her cheeks. Her entire wardrobe was impeccable, from a Dodger-blue corduroy jacket to Marlboro-red flats. Those were the pieces he noticed most. Though, Lars had always believed underwear would be the weak point in her game. She was supposed to have ugly panties, he thought. “Are these your special-occasion panties?” he asked. She ignored him. Most of her panties were lace and she only thought Lars was stalling. Lars had always thought more of himself than what was actually there to think. Later, she would open her underwear draw and throw two fistfuls at him. “See? Mostly lace,” she would say before padding off to the bathroom. He observed the ones she wore now. Black lace with a diagonal zebra pattern sweeping across the body of the fabric and two hooks, like a strange front-sided bra connecting the midsection. Very avant-garde, thought Lars. He began thinking about how gay men in college always sported the best underwear, better than anyone. Even supermodels, he thought. He remembered attending a strictly gay-underwear party. Lars had worn a pair of tuxedo briefs. He was proud of them until
he saw the host of the party saunter out of the kitchen in a pair of gold jockey underwear and thought, *Damn. How am I supposed to compete with that?* He was reluctant to sleep with Matilda. When he met her, she was twenty-three and had told him she was a virgin. Over the weekend, he discovered she had lied about it. He sat on the edge of the bed now with her on top of him, wondering what else had been untrue. He had preferred she wasn’t a virgin and didn’t sleep with her then.

Sleeping with virgins was no good, he’d learned. The one time he had was with Anne, his former manager at a movie rental store. While reorganizing movies and dusting the tops of shelves, she would suddenly appear from nowhere, like school janitors or principals often do, hold a porno up to him and say, “Lars, would you ever watch this?”

He would respond something like, “Oh. I already have. My mom wanted to see it real bad the other night, so I brought it home to her.” But, she never quit and one night she kissed him and he let it happen. He remembered how Anne kept her mouth open for far too long without moving her lips, as if she only wanted a few seconds to take it all in, but somehow forgot he was there. He remembered how he woke in the morning with her cuddling him from behind, and lying in bed past noon, claiming he was too hung over to get up and waiting for her to leave. But mostly, he remembered the unanswered texts that collected on his phone afterwards, and her softly crying to coworkers at break, and the feeling of never wanting it again. Matilda wasn’t a virgin. She told Lars it was only a joke to feel out guys, but he felt uneasy and said he would never initiate and by consequence, sex became a challenge. The initiator, the loser.

On their first date, she had picked him up from his apartment. He told her the front door was open and was purposely in the shower when she arrived. He leaned out the bathroom door and asked if she’d like to hop in. Annoyed, she declined. “Are you sure?” he asked. “I just got started in here. I’ll probably be at least another forty-five minutes.” She left without a word. “I
have to shave my legs!” he yelled. Lars ran after her in his towel. He jumped in her car and she sped off. They spent the evening eating baked salmon, asparagus, and Spanish rice, he in his towel the entire time. He spent the weekend with her and wore ex-boyfriend’s clothes.

That was summer and they didn’t speak again until the eve of Christmas. Neither had gone home and neither had their own family. Lonely, Lars had gone into Walgreen’s to buy cigarettes and Matilda was perusing the candy aisle, zeroing in on chocolate-covered blueberries. “Dang, those are some nice sweats!” he told her and tugged on the gray cotton pants she wore. Drearily, she rolled her eyes up at him as if he was an ex who slept with her younger sister. They spent the night lying opposite on her couch with the pads of their feet pressed up against each other in the air. “I want a penciled self-portrait to premiere at Cannes,” she told him.

“OK,” he laughed. “I have one. I want the Nobel prize in physics for a poetry collection.”

“You’re trying too hard,” she said and sat up. “But it’s alright. You’re handsome,” and she lightly slapped his cheek. A strand of lights sprinkled with burnt bulbs wrapped a Christmas tree, trying its best to dimly light the room. In the morning, Lars unplugged the lights and vaguely said goodbye. Matilda uncoiled, opened an eye, and sighed back into repose.

“Stop stalling!” she said and hit him in the shoulder. “Do you need another drink?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, sprawled on her bedroom rug. Matilda’s Pomeranian lay on the edge of the bed looking down at him. He saw the upside down reflection of the room and himself in the eyes of the dog and realized how unsure of the world he was. “I hate you,” he whispered to the dog as Matilda came back into the room.

“You’ll like that,” she said. “It tastes like high school.” Lars was unsure what she meant,
but took a swig anyways. *We’re finally here and I can’t even do it,* he thought. Later, he promised it never happened.

“I’ve never, just, couldn’t get it up,” he told her. “Especially, not after all this foreplay.” It was a lie, there were other times, but even this was unusual for Lars and he had been stalling all night.

“Are you gay?” she asked. “I’m lying here naked and I want you. What’s the problem?” Aggravated, Matilda rode him until she finished while he was flaccid.

“I know how so, so many women feel now,” he said.

“Foreplay can only last so long,” she snapped back.

In the morning, they tried again, but neither could get the other going. Nearing noon, after Lars had been silently awake for hours, he kissed her shoulder roughly and said, “Hey. We should get married.” She responded with a sigh and turned into him, draping her arms around his neck.

Lars and Matilda thought they had been the only ones, and maybe they were initially or of an incidental handful, but soon the entire world, or rather the whole human population, joined them swiftly. It took nearly a month to notice and several more months for the scientific community’s recognition. Everyone was queasy about the topic, like describing the face your great aunt wore at her open-casket funeral. Economic spikes and plummets were the first indicators. High heel sales dropped dramatically, while the sales of sticky notes soared. Gym memberships doubled, the Do it Yourself sections at home improvement stores expanded, bike lanes were repaved, former capitalistic regimes swayed towards communism, and the architecture of bird houses was reinvented. The human population was sexless. And nobody cared.
That was the strangest thing—not the physical inability to copulate—but the loss of desire. Some said the same had occurred to a particular breed of birds on the Galapagos Islands and sea turtles in the Caribbean. “Both species, however, regained their ability to mate after an uncertain duration,” said a spokesperson on the evening news. “As of now, we are considering it a cordial intervention by nature, bringing the human population to a healthy, balanced equilibrium.” Matilda shut off the TV and wondered why no real studies had been conducted, but even for her it was a brief thought, as if she couldn’t remember if the trash came on Mondays or Wednesdays. She began to clean off the table and said, “Here’s one,” aloud to herself. “I want my face at the top of Maslow’s hierarchy in psychology textbooks next to Self-Actualization,” and wondered where Lars had been the past three years.

Lars, since his last night with Matilda, had given up on becoming a theatre actor. He worked for a demolition crew alongside his partner, Beach who claimed to be from Missouri and was of an indiscernible race. Most days, the two broke up the tile flooring of decrepit, unoccupied homes. On occasion, when workers were short, they also had the privilege of disassembling walls.

In the beginning, Lars had been weary of Beach. His coworker bragged that he could recall nights solely based on beer caps, which he’d been saving them since he was nineteen. He confided in Lars that The Black Door, an office downtown converted into a bedroom, except with lots of booze and a white leather couch and shag carpet, like a scene straight out of Boogie Nights, was his. He said at first the plan was to pick up girls at bars and take them there, but it never worked out. Beach always told Lars he was bad with girls, even though Lars had always thought him an attractive man. Instead, it became a hangout for him and his buddies to pregame at and sometimes, when he was too drunk, a place to sleep after closing. He said everyone who knows of it knows it by a different name, like the Pink Martini or The Piano Lounge, or Harry Houdini’s. “Casual names,” Beach told Lars. “So nobody catches on.” But actually, most knew
of it as The Black Door and Lars had heard of it before. It had become sort of a local legend, especially in regards to times past. It was like a water marker down at the river to measure the highest the tide had ever risen. He wasn’t sure if Beach was the real renter, or if he had only heard of it like everyone else.

“How do you get out of a burning house, Larson?” asked Beach while holding a sledgehammer.

“How?” replied Lars, bored.

“You knock down the nearest wall!” screamed Beach and began smashing over and over. Lars for a moment considered the notion of a house fire, reaching for a doorknob and it burning his palm, the smoke slinking underneath a doorway, the crackles like the clapping of rough sex, and then joined him.

Ever since the world had stopped running on sex, marriage had become nearly obsolete. Couples with families remained, but even few of those had lasted. Housing had become more efficient. People lived in large mixed gender groups. It was a taboo and rare instance when a man and woman lived alone. Are they? Do you think? No, no. It’s not possible. Who would want to? The houses Lars and Beach worked on were family homes, relics. Some areas of the world began partaking in devastatingly bitter wars over simple matters, slight tax increases on the import of spices. Religious extremists sprouted like weeds and were ill-received. Although, mostly, the world arrived to a calm, a post-puberty. Drinking was more casual, cancer rates slowed. Jewelry and Starbucks went the way of the home telephone and everyone tried their best to take a moment for breath.

Beach and Lars tossed their sledgehammers into the bed of a pickup. “OK. Let’s hear one,” said Lars.

“Alright. Charlotte, our landlady, told me this one. Did you know in Minnesota, in a
small open-pit mining town with mostly Yugoslavian immigrants, there’s a beluga whale named Dusty who only speaks Cantonese?”

“Dammit, Beach. That’s not how you play,” sighed Lars and wondered where Matilda had been the past three years.

While Lars had given up on his theatre dreams, his interest in cinema remained hard and fast. Art was a place where sex still existed. He thought most of it hurried and flat. People forgot how sex could be reminiscent of a grandmother’s creaky couch, the first snow of winter, even the sunburn from a day at the river. It was conveyed better in literature, but Lars wasn’t much of a reader and besides, in film one could actually watch it, or pretend to watch it. Lars went to the movies alone often. He enjoyed watching a show and not having to hear a friend criticize it afterwards. Sometimes, he found himself lipping the words along with an actor, wishing the curve of life’s toss had been different. It also gave him a break from Beach, who said he preferred telling his own stories than watching someone else’s. Lars didn’t enjoy talking about Matilda and Beach knew this, but once he told Beach about the black laced panties—how different they were and how shocked he was. “I expected granny panties,” he told Beach. “She was the daughter of a preacher. They moved constantly when she was a kid. I should have known better, but the ones she had wore, were marvelous. Like nothing I had seen before.”

Beach responded with his own panties story. He said when he was sixteen he lost his virginity to his high-school sweetheart and she let him keep her panties as a keepsake. “Those were real granny panties,” he said. Anyways, Beach always kept them under his bed, but three hundred and sixty days of the year, he forgot about them. “It was like they weren’t even there,” he said. “But, for some reason, whenever I had a girl over they just managed to scoot out, like they had a pair of legs.” So, one day a girl spent the night and woke up late for work in the
morning, jumped out of bed, and in the rush jumped into his sweetheart’s panties. “Oh man, was she was mad,” said Beach.

“What the hell is your problem?” said Lars. “Like what’s the point of that? I can tell when you’re full of shit.”

“OK,” said Beach. “Fine. Don’t believe me.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I bet you’re not even from Missouri. And everyone knows you’re Greek.”

“Greek? I’m no Flease! Alright, Larson. Hike up your skirt and believe this. It’s over by The Flats. You can’t use the front entrance. Remember that. You have to go down the alley between Fourth Street and Maricopa. You’ll see a black door halfway down. It’ll be locked. But, there’s a water meter next to it and a combination locked attached to it with a key hooked on. It’ll be dark and you’ll have to look for it, but the code is BEER, 2337. The key opens The Black Door.”

“Oh, get fucked,” said Lars.

Lars couldn’t always put up with Beach’s stories. *He always has a story like that. All hot air,* thought Lars. *What was the point of it? What was he getting at? I know he’s not from Missouri.* He routinely asked to be taken directly to The Black Door, but Beach refused. Sometimes, he even went as far as pretending he didn’t know what it was. “You’re out of it Larson. You’re fucking messed up, man,” he would say and continue smashing tile, without even glancing up. On occasion, he almost convinced Lars. *Maybe, I am the one who’s lost it,* he thought. Though, the conversation turned serious when they talked sex.

“It’s like everyone just stopped listening to Jackson 5, or decided not to ever play with Legos ever again,” said Lars.

“Fuck birdhouses, man.”
“Yeah,” said Lars. “Although, I’m actually working on a pretty nice one.”

“I noticed your A-frame the other day and the pastels you’re using to contrast the sharpness of the structure. Tremendous,” said Beach.

Roger Ebert’s The Valley Beyond the Dolls was playing at the two-dollar cinema downtown. Lars walked excitedly, thinking, Real sex. No, not real sex. But sex written and acted by people who were actually having sex. Lars was enthralled. It wasn’t the plot, that was a parody, but the sex. It was alive, it was bad. There was giggling. It was tangible and human. But, he was somewhat disappointed by the crowd, or lack thereof. Only a handful of people had showed. Lars had always thought art was the best way to get people interested in sex again.

Leaving the theatre, he noticed the back of a woman exiting in front of him. He thought about how years back, he might have taken the opportunity to talk with her, maybe ask her if she enjoyed the movie and if it went well maybe even if she’d like to get a drink. “Hey there,” he said and stopped, realizing it was Matilda.

“Oh, God,” she said as if he was an ex who slept with her best friend. They both paused.

“Look, we should go for a drink,” he said. “It’s been a while, a long while.”

“How’d you like the movie?” she asked.

“It would have been nice to be in it.”

“I’m glad you weren’t,” she said. “It was old and a little too raunchy.”

“I guess,” said Lars.

“I think I’m just going home,” said Matilda. “It’s late.”

“Let’s at least go for a walk,” he said.

She agreed and told him that she’d begun teaching high school since they last met. She was disappointed Lars had stopped pursuing his acting career and didn’t like what she heard of
Beach. “He sounds like an asshole,” said Matilda.

“That’s reasonable,” he responded. “He is, but he’s different. Different enough to keep a demolition job interesting.”

She didn’t like that he had been destroying old homes of families. He told her sometimes, he found photos of couples, of weddings even, and sometimes of their children. All of it was strange he told her. It took a long time to cope with. She said high school was different without crushes and break ups. Some of the older teachers said it was easier to teach. The kids were more studious and well behaved. “They have direction nowadays,” they said. “Velocity.” Still, Matilda felt the absence and missed the note passing, the irrevocable distance boyfriends and girlfriends dramatically endured during classes.

“Hey,” said Lars. “Can we check something out real quick?”

“What? No, really I should head home,” said Matilda.

“It’s my old stamp collection,” said Lars. “It’s down this old alley.”

“Really Lars. What are we doing?”

“Beach, the asshole, he told me he actually set up The Black Door and gave me directions to get in.”

He found The Black Door and the water meter and began to fumble with the combination. “That place always sounded disgusting,” said Matilda. “Like a sex dungeon or something. I didn’t know it was real.”

“I didn’t either,” he said while opening the door. They descended a stairway. Matilda didn’t like the situation. She told Lars she only wanted to watch an old movie with real sex and then go home. Lars promised her if it was strange or perverted, they would leave, but he had to give it a look first.

It was surprisingly charming inside. “Look at the lights,” said Matilda. They dimmed
from low to high. The white leather couch was there along with the fridge filled with drinks, ranging from Heineken and Guinness to cider. There was even a cabinet Beach hadn’t mentioned filled with a dozen different handles. Lars poured himself a shot of tequila and cracked open a cider. “Pour two,” said Matilda.

“It’s like a little boy’s hideout,” he said. “I can’t believe he’s been paying for this for years.”

They spent hours talking and lying on the couch, with the lights dimmed low listening to vinyls on a record player Beach also didn’t mention. “He really talked this place down,” Lars said. “He never let on it was this nice. I told him about your panties once and he told me this terrible story about a girl he was with and how she put on the panties of his ex.”

“You told him about my panties?” she asked. “God, why would you do that?”

“They were stellar,” he said. “Remember? They were your special-occasion panties.”

“No,” she giggled. “I remember you thinking they were special-occasion panties.” They were quite for a moment. “Hey Lars, do you need another drink?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said. She poured two and eased down beside Lars. And then she moved a little bit closer, and then still a little closer.