

I NEVER SAID I WAS A LESBIAN

By Michael Stephen Fuchs

101 is a complete disaster. I sit fidgeting, wiggling my ass on the faux sheepskin and chewing my lower lip. I do not think that my girlfriend will be home when I get there – even at the hour I'm likely to get there. I will have the house to myself; and the cats.

Behind me, a man in a Porsche guns his engine and escapes up an offramp. Unless I am mistaken, he is holding his phone in one hand and his latte in the other. This leaves a disconcertingly limited number of hands for steering the fucking car.

But this is Silicon Valley; nothing's shocking.

The girlfriend, the one who won't be home, is the live-in sort of girlfriend – that's the ultimate statement of commitment in the Bay Area, by the way, going in on a housing search together. She is called Eliza; and Eliza, I can warrant, at virtually no risk to myself, will be working late tonight – advancing vigorously down the corporate treadmill.

I jam the car into gear for another five-foot gain of ground.

For my part, by way of contrast, I have a well-documented inability to give very much of a fuck about my job. Not this one, nor the last, nor the next – all just goddamned jobs, something I do to pay the freight charges incurred by my existence. This is another in a well-reviewed laundry list of differences between Eliza and me. Great, large swatches of her identity, her sense of self, get painted in between the hours of nine and five (or, more often, nine and nine). Me, I'd much sooner lie in green fields with the sun

on my face as drag myself down to the Cubicle Farm every morning to break rocks for the Man.

Still, *entre nous* . . . I do envy Eliza sometimes. I wonder what it would be like to not so abhor what I do for a living. To be *engaged*.

Don't think I haven't tried to find fulfilling work. I've held virtually every job to be had in this Valley: developer, product manager, technical architect, team leader. (Don't even get me started on team leader. Have you ever had direct reports? Have children, instead – they can at least amuse themselves on their own for a while.)

The matrix of motor vehicles once again moves a perceptible distance. I press play on the CD player again.

One upon a time, yes once upon a time, I fell in love with a girl named Eliza – a striking, black-haired, white-skinned, full-lipped Betty Page look-a-like. A woman with a powerful will, and furious and well-articulated opinions – and very large breasts. Let us not play down the appeal of the breasts, not in unguarded moments. Eliza and I drank black coffee, and stayed up late hurling our minds against the barricades of enlightenment, and making love.

That woman can also fuck, let me go on to report. Skill allied with unbridled enthusiasm is a heady combination.

My phone rings.

"This is Lisa," I say into the phone, into the empty air of the car. (There are way too many people in this Valley walking around talking to people who are not there; and I'm turning into one of them.)

"Lisa! Frank!" my StarTac barks at me. I listen on blankly, nodding to no one – eventually apprehending that my employers would like it very much if I turned around, came back to the corporate collective, and repaired some unbidden disasters tonight. I report to Frank that current traffic conditions make this an unhappy impossibility. (I lie about the unhappy part.) My employers, via Frank, indicate they will turn to someone else for aid and succor in their time of need.

If only, if only I could give a fuck.

The *real* problem, the increasingly critical one, is that I've begun to lose the all-important ability to *pretend* that I give a fuck about my job, or the fortunes of my employer. Deep, deep indifference has got to be an unappealing trait, I can only think, in someone to whom you're paying a great deal of money every two weeks.

I lie awake at nights, these days, not sleeping, thinking that soon someone will figure out that I merely masquerade as an employee, drawing pay, fielding those balls batted directly at my position – dreaming of escape.

Home, now, blessed home. The cats assail me on my entrance; I muss the fur of one, then the other, in the foyer, then drop my coat on the couch and make for the wine. I give up drinking about twice a month, lately; I think I'm good for another few nights.

I put on a Curve album (spooky girl-rock, my favorite), and pick up my volume of Cummings. Curve and Cummings. And some cats. And a bottle of Merlot, just one bottle. This is living.

Despite my best efforts, the poetry soon goes out of focus and I find myself recalling the day's debacles at work. We had an all-hands meeting in the afternoon, to

announce a "major shift in corporate strategy." Transparent to everyone in the room with brain function was that this is another case of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, hoping to come up with something that will make the ship float.

Does promotion beyond the director level somehow induce dementia? Or is willful ignorance of facts on the ground a key executive management skill? Oh, and did I mention my feeling that our company is not particularly well run?

I don't know. I tend to think that nothing happens by accident – and we all end up where we belong. Sure, I spend a lot of time hurling black curses at my employers – for our clueless management team, for our broken product, for the surprising amount of dead weight on the employee roster. But the fact is, it suits me, in a way. I mean, in a pretty fucked up company, well, I am a pretty fucked up employee. And if I did work someplace where all the people were sharp, and sensible decisions got made, and everything clicked . . . I can only predict that I would get kicked to the curb before I got through my first pay period (never mind a vesting period).

Anyway, deep down, I don't really believe things would be any different somewhere else. I don't really believe in this whole working for a living business. I've got my doubts about the very possibility of human organization.

The rest of the evening passes quietly, including no more cell phone calls. I get through much of the Cummings, and all of the Merlot.

I wish Eliza were home; lately, I spend more time with my vibrator.

I step outside, at last, barefoot, for the day's final cigarette. (No smoking in the house, either because it irritates Eliza, or it irritates the cats, I can never remember

which.) I rub my arms and shiver – if it's freezing at night, and it's summertime, this must be the Bay Area.

I light up, purse my lips and puff serenely off into the icy darkness. I know it's kind of humble, but I have to admit my life's fondest ambition is to blow a smoke ring . . . and then blow a second, smaller, smoke ring through that first smoke ring. Dreams are key.

I pad back inside and retire early, falling into our queen-size futon, slapping at the bed table lamp. At least one cat climbs in with me, and I lie awake for a while, the alarm clock's merciless, fluorescent march toward morning painting the walls a melancholy blue.

Later, in the night, how late I do not know, nor care to look, Eliza makes a cameo, slipping in under the blankets and cuddling up. She wraps her arm around my waist and gently smooths my hair. Still half in my dream, I whisper: "Tell me when you're going public."

"I did tell you," she whispers back.

"Tell me," I pout.

She sighs. "From thirty to a hundred and eighty days of our SEC filing, which was April 25th."

"Bitch . . ." With that, I drift back off. My last thoughts are of Eliza's equity position in her company. There is an outside chance that when they go public she might make bank.

I have absolutely no problem being a kept woman.

When the morning finds me, she is gone.

I read the Merc and eat my waffles in solitude, then shower and drive away, my wet hair growing little ice crystals as the heat warms up. I shiver my way toward gainful employment.

Who was it who said: People don't want freedom, they want security. But of course that is the great thing about money – it gets you both.

I have my own theory about the enduring allure of making bank: *Virtually everything in life is an ongoing effort*. Wouldn't it be great if you could just diet and work out madly for a while, get yourself in ass-kicking shape – and that was it? You were just buff, for good? Or, what if you could develop nice, caring, open relationships with all your loved ones – and then you had them permanently?

But, no; slack off for a while and you're back in the shithouse.

However – it really is possible to make enough *money* so that you never have to make any more. You can earn all the money you are ever going to need, and be done with it, all the sordid hustling. You could notch one damn thing.

Of course, this Valley runs on the steam from that pipe dream.

I pull into the asphalt pasture of our parking lot, give the emergency brake a yank, and abandon the car. I enter the lobby of our glinting building, ignoring the front desk guard through my shades.

I drop the shades in my cube and proceed to the inviolable first business of the day – caffeination. Happily, there's no line at the espresso machine, so I'm out with my

quad latte in minutes. I regain the cube without getting button-holed by anyone. Also, the voicemail light is still and dark; that bodes well. I take a big bite of espresso and log in.

I'm about halfway through the deluge of mail from overnight, and from the early birds this morning – when a boy breaks the plane of my cube entrance. A strapping boy, Asian, with oval glasses and a nice smile. An intern. I believe he is nineteen.

"What up, Lisa," the boy says.

"What up, Sean." I'm getting a little older, yeah; but I'm down.

Intern Sean smiles that nice smile and says, "I finished the bug reporting database."

"Did you launch it?" Sean is not officially my intern; but I've been borrowing him quite frequently since his appearance on the scene three weeks ago.

"Yeah," he says. "Last night. It wasn't exactly rocket surgery." I think Sean is like a CS undergrad at Stanford or something. He's smart enough to get bored easily with these kinds of shit projects.

As partial recompense, I dig out a monkey sticker and hand it to him. I make a habit of giving stickers to interns, as rewards. We got sea creatures, we got cuddly farm animals; we got cowboys and Indians. But the monkeys are, going away, the most popular.

"Here's your sticker," I say. "Don't stick it all in one place."

"Kick ass! A monkey!"

"For monkey-work well done."

"Well," he hems, "it wasn't really that bad. This is hardly the worst job I've ever had."

I refuse to bullshit anybody, especially the young and idealistic. "My friend," I say, "we both know that in this organization you are, quite officially, a Piss Boy."

He nods thoughtfully. "There are worse jobs than Piss Boy."

"Like what?"

"Like . . . Assistant Crack Ho."

"Assistant?"

"Yeah. Like, aspiring to be a Crack Ho."

"I see."

"Or you could be a Shitsucker Operator."

This does the unlikely – startles me. "What the fuck's a Shitsucker Operator?"

"The trucks that empty Port-A-Johns," he says. "There are these trucks that drive up to the Port-A-Johns. A guy gets out and attaches this big pneumatic hose to the bottom. And then they suck the shit right out."

I purse my lips. "I could have gone my whole life without knowing that."

"I'm telling you," he says. "Just be thankful you sling code for a living. Sucking shit would suck ass."

"Pretty much by definition."

"I'll see you later." Sean wanders vaguely off.

I sit quietly for a few minutes, contemplating the boon of my job here, genuinely trying to dredge up some appreciation for it. I do have it spectacularly good – much better than 98% of the people on the globe; and better by far than virtually all of humanity, historically. Here I am – warm, safe, dry, healthy, well-fed, respected, non-celibate, and ludicrously well-paid.

Unfortunately, awareness of all this generally just gets mulched into guilt, which sits on top of all the discontent, like layers of a landfill.

I barely manage to finish up mail before it's time to face my morning meeting – to go and meet the marketers. Absolutely nobody meets like marketing people.

I take a seat around the boat-shaped table, last to arrive. Another thing these guys should know by now is that you don't schedule anything you want technical people at before 10:30. I am the token engineer today, on hand should the group want to know whether their nascent plans are remotely technically feasible – which they are almost sure not to want to know.

I lay my pad and pen in front of me, where they will lay for the duration; unless things go long and doodling becomes indicated.

The meeting leader, a marketing type in an actual pink Polo shirt (hello! eighties!) begins talking at us. I affix my official "Person Who Gives A Shit" expression on my face and zone out. Of course, my effective absence from this meeting may well come back to shoot me in the ass later; but it's going to have to line up behind a whole bunch of other transgressions and omissions I've perpetrated recently.

The concerned rictus, by the way, is another item from my deep kit of tools for navigating the adult world of work. I've had to accumulate a lot of these, to make it as far as I have. Consider: There's my not wanting to be here in the first place; there's my not believing any of this will ever work. Then there's the rampant moodiness. Rank unpredictability, I have discovered, really puts people on edge – especially in the workplace. There are lots times when I am just totally unfit for human consumption. But

work will not make allowances for this, will not run on my schedule. If I even just had a door I could close, when things get bad . . .

Don't get me wrong, I rather like the person that I am – including the drama and mood swings. It's just that these traits do not conduce to being a regular, functioning adult out in the world, earning a living.

Still fully glazed, chin on palm, I remember now a dream somebody told me about once. In it, the person is being chased by organ donors who have come back from the dead, and they don't have any eyes.

Someone speaks my name. I look up absently.

"Lisa," the Polo guy says, "you're the only one in the room who hasn't ringingly endorsed this project plan." Believe it or not, I am familiar with what he's talking about – I did the assigned reading beforehand.

"I think it'll be fine," I mutter.

"Just fine?" he barks. "You've got to get on board and lend your enthusiasm!" He literally gets up, comes over, and shakes my shoulders from behind. "Drink the Kool-Aid! You must drink the Kool-Aid!"

This is way over the top, on anybody's scale. I sit there stunned, lips parted, wishing everyone in the marketing department were dead and in Hell.

Allison, who was in the morning meeting, who is the one marketing person I like, who is nice to me, tracks me down in my cube, at the end of the day.

"I see you lived through this morning," she says brightly.

"I'm always amazed," I say. I gesture, and she sits on the edge of my desk.

"Yes, I know you, Lisa. You never are going to be a Kool-Aid drinker. Even if you really believed this company was going to make it."

"Does anybody believe that?"

"It's all about putting on happy faces," she says, fiddling with my paper clip holder. "C'mon, it's six. Let's go get tanked." Today is Friday. Always the Friday beer bash; as regular as the tides. I log out and follow her toward the sounds of forced merriment.

Standing guard at the keg I find my intern. He smiles, hands me a cup, and begins pumping the tap. His bicep strains at his shirt sleeve, muscle like wound rope. This gives me a little flutter.

Here's an open secret: I do like men. In fact, I've mostly dated men, in a long and storied career. I actually get along with them better, as a general rule. All too many members of my gender are hopeless bitches – and all of us are, at times. I find men more agreeable companions.

But I date women for the sex.

Obviously, I've gone a bit out on a limb actually moving in with Eliza; but she is a rare one. Also, she knows I'm bisexual. We just don't discuss it.

I take my beer and wander off, leaving Sean with a slightly lingering look.

Allison knows better than to subject me to more marketing people today, so we socialize with the technical side of the house. The advantages of this are scanty. I pretend

to be interested in conversations about nothing for ten minutes, then go for a refill. Sean still mans the keg; he tops me off then says,

"There's a full moon tonight. I was thinking about going out to see it. Wanna come?"

"Yeah, Piss Boy. I'd like that."

We thread our way through colleagues, then dark hallways, and emerge into the lovely vacuum: soundless, empty space around us, stars going crazy overhead. And the moon, nine months gone, as warranted. We sit on a curb, in front of some carefully manicured flora, sipping in silence.

After a few minutes, Sean twists at the waist and begins fondling what looks like a tulip. He laughs aloud.

"The flowers amuse you?" I ask.

"That they do," he says. He looks at the sky. "The flowers, and the Heavens."

"Do tell."

He breathes a few breaths, crystallizing out into his lap. "Just if you get some perspective, you know," he says. "Here we are in a finite but unbounded universe – which consists almost entirely of empty, freezing vacuum and huge, burning balls of hydrogen. And a little loose rock, slung out of the stars. And somehow we have *tulips*. How unlikely is *that*?"

The intern, I see, is turning out to be a smarter boy than I had guessed. And not just in the technical department.

"They teach you this stuff at Stanford?"

He laughs. "Think about where you are," he says, "which we never do. Sitting on a damp, spinning stone, whirling around in the void. There is just *nothing* out there." He snorts. "But there are tulips, right here. You could go four billion years without getting anything like this. Which, actually, we did."

I ponder all this for a moment, trying to formulate some kind of response. Before I do, he says, "It gets better. We've not only got all this lovely, growing greenstuff, on the stone here, in the middle of the void. We've also got *hominids*, with protein-based neural networks inside their craniums – neural nets so complex and subtle they can hold a *symbolic representation* of the vastness of the void – and even an idea of the *unlikeliness of the tulips*. Where did thinking fauna come from? Brains with representations of the universe in them? What are the odds of that?"

In a half-whisper, I say, "Hey, I can top that. Two of those fauna sit here tonight, looking up at the comsos. And they blow air through their throats, channeling it with their lips and tongues in a certain way – and convey to each other a very detailed *account* of the fact that they have these representations." I surprise myself slightly with this observation. You sit in marketing meetings all day; then suddenly there you are talking about things that matter.

"Right on," he says.

I put my hand on his arm. "We are having a *very* existential moment here," I say.

We sit and regard the universe in silence. I look down at my hand, his arm, in what might pass, in me, for wonder and humility.

"We should probably go back in," I say.

Our route takes us through more dim hallways, and by the executive offices. On a lark, I lead us on an invasion my boss's office, which I've never been in without him. I poke around a little on the desk, then plop myself down in his comfy, ergonomic, rolling chair. We sip our beer in the dark.

"Fauna," I venture. "With protein computers in our craniums. That's all we are, then?"

Sean wipes a beer foam moustache. He says, "Well, our minds evolved just like our bodies. Basically, in a nutshell, the Earth is four and a half billion years old. For the first billion years, you just had cooling lava and a lot of solar radiation. Then, suddenly, you got single-celled organisms – algae, and green goop, and whatnot, which was all there was for three billion years. At that point, you got multi-celled organisms, and things got a lot more interesting. To skip a few steps, about a hundred thousand years ago we got *homo sapiens sapiens* – primates enough like us that you could, you know, hold a conversation with them."

I nod. "That brings us up to date."

"Well, the interesting bit, and your question, is where consciousness, or sentience snuck in. If you take a couple of steps back, you can look at, uh, monkeys." He grins in the dark. "Monkeys have rudimentary self-consciousness – they recognize themselves in mirrors, get depressed, ingratiate themselves with their pals. Anyway, as we evolved up from the green muck, we grew some mental tools for perceiving the world around us. Being able to avoid falling off cliffs, and dodge predators, and make sticks into spears, and whatnot, conferred survival and reproductive advantages. But, after a long time of just noticing trees, and bears, and wood – all of a sudden one of these early primates

noticed . . . itself. That is, the self joined the category of things that life was aware of. And it pretty much spiraled out of control from there – we got social climbing, and hair styles, and careers, and hurt feelings, and shit. But, at the end of the day, all 'we' are, is a bunch of sensory apparatuses checking themselves out in the mirror."

I snort at this and say, "So, if consciousness, or sentience, is really just an elaborate set of self-observations . . . then this notion of the *self*, of *me* – a notion to which we are deeply, deeply attached – doesn't actually exist? It's just an elaborate illusion? Mirrors facing each other?"

"Bingo," he says.

I've been spending a lot of time lately examining my larger motives; trying to figure out why the universe and I interact in the prickly way we do.

Sean faces me, half-sitting on the desk. His hands grip its edge, those wound biceps looming large in the dimness.

"We should probably go," I say.

"Yeah," he says.

Eliza is an only child.

I pause in this line of thought to lay on the horn, attempting to wake up the criminally oblivious person merging into the lane I currently occupy.

So there are a couple of things, I think, about only children.

First off, they never really develop any respect for other people's shit, or other people's time. This is because, growing up, everything in the house was theirs to fuck around with; and everybody's schedules revolved around them.

Secondly, and much more damningly: Only children never really quite internalize that *other people are real*. With siblings around, one day you kick a shin, or yank some hair – and there are consequences: yelling, tears, reprisals, punishment. The message is clear: *Other people are real, just like you – when you prick them, they bleed*. The lack of this experience, I think, leads to a mild form of solipsism.

Don't get me wrong, only children generally *pick up* on these things – are forced to pick up on them – later in life. But they only understand them *intellectually*, not viscerally – and definitely not empathetically.

I worry that I've always held this against Eliza – unfairly. Because she has never been anything but nice to me.

But she's always nice to her cats, too.

To my surprise, and other mixed emotions, she is home when I arrive.

Sometimes I feel like Eliza is my imaginary friend; like someone is going to call me on it, tell me Eliza doesn't really exist. And I won't be able to prove she does.

"Hello, sweetness," she says, kissing me in the kitchen. But then she retires to the second bedroom, the one with the computers. As I walk by, I can see the monitor glow reflected on her pale skin.

I putter around for the hour or so remaining until bedtime.

Eliza comes outside and finds me with my non-negotiable, pre-bed cigarette. We sit on the driveway, side by side, holding hands. The valiant little torch of my ember spreads a dim cone around the two of us, sitting in silence. She kisses me on the cheek.

This is sweet.

And I start to feel bad that I fucked my intern on my boss's desk.

I bumble through the following morning until Allison invites me to lunch. We drive to the periphery of high-tech office park Purgatory and stop at a place with a pretty patio, taking a table in a patch of sunlight. Our waitress appears, adding the light off her teeth to the general brilliance. The people at the next table, I realize, are laughing too loudly – and passing their PDAs around the table. I scan the sky for clouds, which there aren't any.

"So the problem," I say to Allison, unprompted, "is that this Valley is like Lotusland – with this incredible economic miracle underneath the hood. Everyone you meet is pleasant because they're making a shitload of money, and the sun is shining on their faces."

"Lotus-eaters really get you down?" she asks.

I sigh. "The Lotus-eaters – and the goddamned Kool-Aid drinkers. The ones who really, on some deep level, believe that they are changing the world with this crap."

"You don't believe in the New Economy, I take it."

"Whether I believe isn't the point. You can go ahead and believe it down to your boot soles. Let's say it's all true." I look ruefully off at nothing. "Who gives a fuck? E-commerce: buying more crap from the comfort of your swivel chair. B2B: helping monolithic corporations squeeze pennies out of their supply chain budgets. Job creation: every year another three hundred thousand sorry assholes who get to stare into electron guns and wheel themselves around their eight-by-eight cubes for twelve hours a day. And

what for? Money to buy more crap online – and worthless stock options to wallpaper their dens."

Allison actually starts to look concerned. She says, "Well, you don't have to be a cheerleader for the industry to work in it."

"Yeah. I already have one cheerleader at home."

"Trouble in paradise?" she asks with a twinkle.

"Not precisely. But I do have a significant other who's on a steady diet of the cherry stuff."

Allison pauses as our food hits the table. She pokes at her sandwich, then develops a wry expression. "Does Eliza know," she asks, "the Parable of the Mexican Fishing Village?"

"If she does, she hasn't told me."

"You should really know the Parable of the Mexican Fishing Village."

"I'm all ears."

Around mouthfuls of hummus and sprouts, Allison regales me: "So, there's a Mexican fellow," she says, "who lives near a little Mexican fishing village on the Gulf Coast. Each day, he goes out in his little boat and fishes for two or three hours. With his catch for the day, his family makes their meals – and has a little left over to trade in the market, for some money, for their sundry expenses. With the rest of his day, the fisherman plays with his children, and works around the house, and lies in his hammock on the beach.

"One day, a group of American businessmen come through the village, on a package tour, and they come across the man as he's setting out in his boat for his day's

fishing. They say to him, 'What are you doing there?' And he replies, 'I'm going out to fish for two or three hours. I do this every day; it's how I make my living.' And the businessmen reply, 'Well . . . if you can catch enough fish to get by in that time, these waters must be brimming! You know what you should do . . .' and at this point the businessmen get all animated and start finishing each others' sentences . . . 'is start fishing eight or ten hours a day – by that means, soon you'd have enough money to buy yourself a much *bigger* fishing boat, with trawling nets, and lines – and it would be so productive you could hire a crew, to help you with the boat. Then, with the profits from *that*, you start building a whole *fleet* of fishing boats. Then you could hire a business manager to run the operation, and you could retire from the whole thing!'

"The Mexican fisherman nods, and looks very thoughtful, and he asks, 'Well, how long would all this take?' and the businessmen reply, 'Well, maybe fifteen or twenty years.' And the Mexican fisherman nods, and asks, 'Well, after I did all this, and retired . . . what would I do then?' And the businessmen answer, 'Well – you could do anything you wanted! You could . . . retire to a little Mexican fishing village . . . and just go fishing for a couple of hours every day . . . and play with your kids, and work around the house, and lie in a hammock on the beach . . .'"

"Damn," I manage.

"Yeah," says Allison, attacking her sandwich again, "that's pretty much the story most in need of repeated retelling in this Valley."

I spend the afternoon avoiding the intern; nor does he come by my cube. The day passes like tramp steamers in fog.

"You fucked a man? An Asian man?" Eliza sort of staggers away from the sink, a colander in her hand, dripping suds on the kitchen tile. She and I have a pretty open relationship; but I'm coming to understand this doesn't extend outside of our gender.

I lean against the counter in the dimness, fingering my cigarette pack in my pocket. It's past my bedtime. I had to stay up late to get an audience for my confession.

"An intern? You banged your copy boy?"

"Actually, he works on our intranet."

"Fuck right off!" She presses her fingertips to her temples. "Okay, I'll bite," she says more quietly. "Why?"

To this I have no prepared answer. I thought only as far as stating my thesis, not defending it. I look in various directions and chew my lip. "We were the two of us talking," I venture. "About life, about meaning. He said some things, a bunch of things, really, that just seemed pointed right at me. Like maybe he was sent with answers to my personal questions."

She sighs. "And you impute some significance to this?"

I don't know what she means. "I don't know what you mean," I say.

"These coincidences. You must be asserting that all that *means* something." My silence conveys that I'm not getting her drift. She looks at me. "Even clouds have patterns, Lisa. But they don't necessarily *mean* anything."

"I see your point."

"Was there anything to this, in addition to your mystical thinking?"

This kind of pisses me off and, before I can stop, I say, "Sometimes you just need a cock in you. You know?"

"Jesus Christ! What kind of lesbian are you?"

I squint severely at her, holding her eye for the first time tonight. "I never *said* I was a lesbian."

She looks away. We stand in silence, and I see a tear on her cheek. This clues me in that I have done a not-good thing.

"Also," I say in a whisper, monitoring the tile, "you know . . . you're not really ever here."

"Well, I'm not off having sex with people," she says.

"Touché."

"Are you leaving me?" she asks, trembling.

I practically run to her, and hold her face in my hands. "I *love* you," I say. I look down into the space between us. (Her breasts are there.) "I want you in my life. I want you *here*."

"I'm sorry," she says, both of us crying now.

From there, we hurl ourselves onto the futon and go at it like crazed minks (albeit homosexual minks). After, we snuggle tightly, drowsy and in love.

"What's today?" I ask sighingly.

"Today is the 7th of June," she says.

"Kick ass. I get paid today." That is the difference between working for a start-up, which Eliza does, and working for a slightly more established firm, which I do. I know

that at 12:01AM, on the seventh and twenty-second of each month, a precise amount of money will get direct deposited into my account. "It's moments like this," I add, around yawns, "that I really appreciate my job."

"And how long," asks E, smoothing my hair, "will this euphoria last?"

"I suppose I will have to get by on it for fifteen days."

We lie awake together in the dark, caressing each other. And I think, despite my best efforts, about the boy Sean's account of the history of the self – of us whirling around the endless void, riding our moist boulder, touching tulips, brains with the whole universe inside of them, mirrors watching mirrors, three and a half billion years getting to where we are tonight.