

2015

Endymion

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Recommended Citation

Trevor, Douglas. "Endymion." *The Iowa Review* 45.2 (2015): 57-74. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7589>

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Endymion

Cynthia never went to happy hour. She preferred to head straight home, light one of her aromatherapy candles, and take a bath. After her bath, she might make something simple for dinner or order from the Thai place she loved. But news had leaked that day that Corsyth's team had done a number on the Majestic account, so Cynthia felt a fact-finding mission at O'Doodle's, the Irish pub up the street from her firm, was in order.

Cynthia was a senior corporate accountant for a small firm in Porter Square. The firm was arranged into teams, each of which handled different accounts. Cynthia was her own team. She was in charge of all internal audits. Basically she cleaned up everyone else's mistakes.

The CPAs had slid several tables together and were gabbing when Cynthia walked in, gave a perfunctory wave, and headed to the bar in the adjoining room to get an Amstel Light. Cynthia didn't like light beer; she preferred stouts, but she had ruled out the latter, at least until she started going to the gym she had joined several months before. Cynthia was keenly aware of, and exasperated by, the ease with which her squat frame accumulated weight: first beneath her armpits and then again, like a bad joke told twice in too-quick succession, in her already round, full hips. Granted it was the height of tax season, but still: she hadn't worked out once since paying the initiation fee.

Standing at the bar, she felt a man step up behind her, then his hand graze her hip as he raised his arm to motion at the bartender. He was practically on top of her, and the bar wasn't even that crowded. Cynthia turned around to glare and found herself staring at a black T-shirt. She looked up. The man had thick black hair that hung halfway down his neck and olive-colored skin, overlaid with a thin sheet of stubble. He had to be at least six-five. She had no idea how old he was. Twenty-five? Thirty? Thirty-five? All were possibilities.

The bartender had walked over to them by now. "Go ahead," the man behind her said. His voice was gravelly but also—somehow—meek.

But Cynthia Lyly just stared, her back to the bar. She was fairly certain she had never before stood so close to a man this good-looking.

"No, no, you go ahead," she finally muttered.

He shook his head. "Please. What are you drinking?"

“An Amstel Light. Not by choice. I mean, that’s what I’m drinking, but it’s not my preference.”

He tilted his head at her but didn’t say anything in response. Instead he nodded at the bartender. “Just your well whiskey, straight up, and an Amstel Light,” he said.

They waited for their drinks in silence, the tall man looming over her, although in an oddly timid sort of way. She liked how he had said *please* to her. And that now he wasn’t talking. Or at least she liked that he wasn’t chatting her up in some forced, insincere way. Then again, Cynthia wasn’t sure if she had *ever been* chatted up. She had been approached countless times by people asking if she could break a dollar or if she knew the bus schedule. And yes, sadly, in these instances she nearly always *could* break a dollar and invariably *did* know a full range of public transportation options regardless of where she was in Boston. Now she racked her brain, trying to think of something clever and flirty to say. Nothing came to mind.

When the drinks arrived, the man placed a ten-dollar bill on the bar, lifted his glass, and—in one gulp—finished his whiskey.

“Thank you,” she said.

“No worries. You going to join the nerdapalooza in the other room?”

“That’s the plan.”

Before she could trudge off, he reached down to the floor and looped the strap of a tiny, crumpled knapsack over his shoulder.

“Well, this isn’t really my scene; I just wanted a drink. Have fun with your co-workers.”

“Oh, I’m anticipating a real barn burner.”

He turned to leave, but then he stopped. “Why don’t you come with me instead?”

“Excuse me?”

“Let’s just leave. We can walk around, or at least head down Mass Ave. together. That’s where I’m headed—down Mass Ave.”

Two women, standing at a high table off to Cynthia’s left, were looking this man up and down. Really, he could have had a role on a Spanish-language soap opera. He could have been an underwear model.

“I’m sorry, but as you suspected, it’s kind of a work thing.” She pivoted her upper body as if she were about to walk off, but her feet remained planted firmly beneath her. “Thanks again for the drink.”

“I just wish it was something you liked.” He cupped her shoulder with his hand. His black eyes had a sleepy quality to them. “Have a nice night.”

Under the touch of his fingers and the gaze of his eyes, Cynthia's body tottered. God am I lonely, she thought. Not just lonely emotionally; in recent years, she had felt *physically* alone, *spatially* set apart from others, as if a force field of some kind had been silently conjured around her. She hadn't had sex in four years, and that was with the only truly serious boyfriend she had ever had: Duke Lester, a financial consultant who had dumped her for his secretary. The two of them were married now with a kid out in Dedham. In the years that had followed, Cynthia had mostly declined opportunities to meet men, unwilling to risk heartbreak. Obviously, walking out with this man would be more than just impulsive and irrational. For all she knew he might have a van idling outside, with accomplices ready to tie her up and take her out into the woods somewhere. But his languid pose certainly didn't hint at a planned abduction. Anyway, her loneliness changed the way she calculated risks.

The man had begun to walk away when Cynthia called out after him. "Wait a second!" She left her beer untouched on the corner of the bar and caught up with him.

He pointed at a door on the far side of the bar—one that would enable her to avoid her work associates in the other room. A moment later they were outside, in the chilly spring air.

He remained silent as they moved along, occasionally clearing his throat as if he were about to speak but then catching himself. Cynthia told herself that he was a shy person, imprisoned within his body like the Elephant Man, only burdened by horrific physical perfection rather than imperfection. But of course that was absurd.

They traversed one block, then another. At the corner of Everett Street, she stopped. "You walked me home," she said, pointing across the street.

"Did I?"

There was an awkward pause. Lit by passing cars and streetlights, the man's skin gave off a luminous, otherworldly glow. And Cynthia, much to her surprise, touched him on the elbow. "You can come up, if you want," she said.

His half-drawn eyelids lifted for a moment. "Okay," he said, with neither enthusiasm nor reluctance. They walked over and took the elevator to the third floor.

Cynthia's one-bedroom apartment was filled with potted plants and even some small, flowering trees. Wickerware baskets—philodendron and bougainvillea—hung above her tiny balcony, which overlooked the Cambridge Common.

"I have a green thumb," she said apologetically, setting her keys on the small table in the foyer as they stepped inside.

"I love Italian food," he replied. She hooted with nervous laughter at his non sequitur but he just looked at her distractedly. Okay, so maybe he didn't possess what the wiser sort in Cambridge would have termed blinding brilliance, or a rapier wit, but she liked him all the more for that.

Suddenly, he dropped to a knee and began to rummage through his knapsack. Cynthia, startled by the rapid movement of his hands, stepped back. But then, once more, his languidness reasserted itself. He carefully withdrew a folded black T-shirt—identical to the one he had on—and a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste. Who carried toothpaste and a change of clothes with him? Was he living out of his knapsack? How could someone who looked like him live out of a knapsack? He asked where the bathroom was and, rather than direct him to the half bath just behind him, she led him around the corner, through the small dining room, into her bedroom. She pointed at the door on the other side of her queen-sized bed.

"There you go," she said.

He walked through her bedroom and shut the door behind him. Cynthia sat down on the corner of her bed. She couldn't believe how forward she was being; it was so unlike her, but she was just so attracted to him. She wanted to reapply her make-up, but all of it was in the bathroom. Instead she grabbed the soft brush off her bedside table and began to comb the tangles out of her not-quite-shoulder-length brown hair, the bangs of which rested just above her eyes.

As she combed her hair, Cynthia had no choice but to listen to the racket made by the enormous man in her bathroom. For at least a minute she could hear him, scrubbing away at his teeth. She listened to him expectorate loudly, then gargle with what she presumed was water from the sink. Next she heard the toilet seat crash against the tank. His stream seemed unusually loud to her. In the wake of this waterfall, the toilet flushed meekly. She set down her brush.

He opened the door, crossed her room in two strides, and sat down next to her.

The two of them were still for a moment. Cynthia could feel her palms sweating. She was aware of herself swallowing, again and again. He put one hand on her knee. She shut her eyes. Nothing happened. She peeked. He was sitting there, just staring ahead. Nervously, she leaned over and kissed him.

They kissed for several minutes, very slowly and quietly. Then he stood up and, leaning over her, picked her up in his arms as if she weighed absolutely nothing and gently set her in the middle of the bed. They kissed some more. Time passed. Cynthia finally directed his enormous hands toward the bottom of her sweater, which he lifted off, and next toward the back of her underwire bra, which he unclasped. She squirmed out of her pleated corduroy skirt and black nylons. In contrast, like some enormous bird lifting off a lake with water trailing behind, he gave a tug here and there, and his clothes seemed just to fall away effortlessly from his body.

Now naked, the two of them slipped under the comforter and sheets. His hands pressed against her breasts, then squeezed the excess flesh on her hips and the backs of her thighs. Painfully aware of the tautness of his frame compared to her own pudginess, Cynthia could bring herself only to touch his body with the point of her index finger, which she used to trace the muscles of his torso.

When he entered her, she heard him sigh. She knew she couldn't get pregnant because of her IUD, which she had never bothered to have removed after her relationship with Duke had ended, but of course there was still the risk of STDs. Nonetheless, she didn't ask him to go fish around in that knapsack of his for a condom. At that moment she just wanted to feel as close to him as was physically possible.

He moved very slowly, very timidly, in and out, and together they fell into a rabbit hole where there was darkness and rocking and breathing and nothing else. Then he gasped and convulsed slightly in the shoulders. She pinned him tightly to her waist with her legs.

And Cynthia Lyly felt whatever you might call it, her soul, the kernel of her being, what she preferred to imagine as a seedling, for so long crimped and crippled inside of her, sprout to life.

They lay next to each other, sharing the silence. Then he stood up on her mattress, fully naked, and carefully extracted the battery from the smoke alarm on the ceiling. He lit a cigarette from his knapsack and smoked it next to her, in bed. Cynthia had always believed that smoking should be outlawed. It was a disgusting habit that supported a disgusting industry. But she liked the smell of his cigarette. As she drifted off to sleep, she pulled herself closer to him. She took in his sweat, mixed with burning tobacco and the slightest hint of some other odor, ever so faintly discernible: the barest whiff of dog.

The next morning, when Cynthia woke up, he was not in the bed, but his knapsack remained on the floor. She showered and dressed, the

whole time waiting to feel the onset of acute shame and embarrassment, but she never did. When she walked out of her bedroom, she saw him sitting on the floor in the far corner of the living room, ashing a cigarette into the pot of her jade bonsai.

“Cynthia,” she said.

“I know.” He pointed at the neat pile of bills on her trundle desk. “Damian.”

“What do you do, Damian?”

He looked at her with confusion. “I breathe, I eat, I sleep...”

“I mean, what’s your occupation?”

“Animal control.”

“Oh.”

He tilted his head at her. “Do you have an extra key? I could use one, to get in and out.”

“I don’t think so.” Cynthia looked down at her shoes. Was he kidding? He stared at her inscrutably. “It’s tax season,” she added, since that was the excuse she routinely used to get out of things during the first four months of the year, but of course she hadn’t told him that she was an accountant, so the sentence must have confused him. Nonetheless, he didn’t ask for clarification. As they left her apartment together, Cynthia noticed that Damian didn’t have his knapsack. She didn’t remind him of it.

He said good-bye to her at the Porter Square T stop. Cynthia worked in the brick building across the street. The first thing she did, when she sat down at her desk that morning, was to type a quick e-mail to her sister, Telly. “I think I picked up a homeless guy last night,” she wrote. But she didn’t send it. Sitting in her cubicle, she wondered if perhaps he had come home with her simply because he needed a place to sleep. The explanation made so much sense, she spent the rest of the day slumped in front of her desk, spiritlessly doing her calculations.

That evening, when Cynthia returned from work, Damian walked up just as she was about to enter the building. He must have been waiting for her on the other side of the street. She felt a surge of euphoria when he joined her at the door. They walked inside and stepped into the elevator.

“How was your day?” she asked him.

“Lots of mutts, a few terriers,” he replied. “You?”

“Lots of accumulated depreciations, a few exemptions.”

She was tempted to ask him about his motives but she didn’t. She was just so happy to see him again.

Once they were inside her apartment, Cynthia led Damian into her bedroom. They undressed. The bed was unmade from the night before and they crawled back into it, reentering the hollow shell of their bodies' coupled smells. After they were done, Damian smoked another cigarette. Then he suggested they order a pizza with everything on it for dinner, along with spaghetti and meatballs. "Of course it's on me," he added.

"I hope you're hungry," Cynthia said. "That's a lot of food."

Waiting for their meal, she told herself not to think about what the two of them were doing together. She told herself to resist the urge to ask him a million questions. He was a person of few words, after all; she didn't want to scare him off.

When the delivery guy arrived, Damian put a bath towel around his waist, withdrew several bills from his knapsack, and then went off to retrieve their food. He brought the containers back to her bed and they began to devour pieces of pizza, one after the other, while the grease dripped from their fingers onto the comforter and pillows.

Cynthia reconsidered her prior hesitancy to ask him a few questions about himself. There was, after all, an undeniable strangeness to the situation they found themselves in—this bizarre nesting they had apparently undertaken. If he intended to stay at her place, she surely had a right to know more about him.

"So how long have you been..." She dabbed at a string of cheese on her chin. She was ravenous. "I don't know the right word..."

"Wandering?"

"Yes."

"Awhile."

"And the whole time, you've been alone?"

"Yeah." Damian didn't chew his pizza so much as engulf pieces, one after the other, the way a wood chipper might consume logs.

"You aren't using me, are you?"

"Using you? For what?"

"I don't know, a place to sleep?"

He leaned forward, peering at her as if she were a display in a museum. "Are you serious?"

"I don't know," she stammered.

He stood up, the towel still tied around his waist, and walked into the bathroom. Along the base of his neck, she noticed, were green tattoos of numbers, overlapping and faded. Once more, she listened to his powerful stream.

"Where did you live, before you started wandering?"

He said nothing.

“Did you have the same job as the one you have now? Were you in a relationship?” Cynthia wasn’t sure if she had ever heard anyone pee so loudly and for so long before. “Tell me, Damian. I’m curious.”

“I’d rather not talk about my past,” he said, over the sound of the toilet flushing. He walked back into the room and plopped onto the bed. “Can we just go to sleep?”

“No, no.” She playfully slapped him on the arm but he just stared at the ceiling. “What’s wrong?”

He squinted at her. “Nothing, I’m just trying to sleep.” He stared some more. “Do you really think I’m using you for your bed?”

“No, I don’t. I swear I don’t.”

“Have you ever slept beneath the moon, on a still night? There’s nothing more beautiful. Why would I give that up for an off-white ceiling?”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Please, forget it. I’m just...I have doubts. They’re more about myself than anything. You are so, so good-looking and I am...Well, you know the way we see ourselves isn’t always flattering.”

A silence fell between them.

“Can I be honest about something?” he finally asked her.

“Of course.” She sat up on her knees, relieved that he had spoken.

“I think you’re very beautiful. I love your frame. Your legs and buttocks and shoulders. I just wish you were bigger. Would you ever get bigger for me?”

“Bigger?”

“Yeah. Heavier. Rounder. Like the moon. Would you do that for me? Would you get big like the moon?”

She peered at him. “Like the moon? Don’t you mean like a pig before the slaughter?”

“What? Come on, don’t act like you’ve slaughtered an animal.”

“I wasn’t. It was...a figure of speech.”

“It’s nothing to joke about.”

“I didn’t mean to.” She was so confused. “You want me to gain weight?”

“Yes.” He looked at her blankly, then turned away. “There’s nothing more beautiful in the world,” he said softly, as if to himself, “than a full moon, shining in the night, and a woman beneath the moon, but—like her—full and radiant.”

She smiled at him in wonder. Could he really be as innocent, as pure, as he sounded? Or maybe he had fried his brain somehow, on acid, or meth. Did she really care? When he spoke, with his husky, oddly

solemn voice, it was as if they were the only two people on the planet. Everything beyond them seemed to fade away.

She put her hand on his cheek and redirected his gaze back toward her. Their eyes locked. She reached into the box, withdrew another slice of pizza, and took an enormous bite.

In the morning, when her alarm buzzed, Cynthia looked over at Damian. He was lying perfectly still, his eyes open, his hands beneath his head. Cynthia gasped. She thought he was dead. She waved her hand above him and he suddenly started.

“You woke me up,” he said.

“You sleep with your eyes open. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Yes.”

She wished that he hadn’t answered that last question. “Well, time to get up.”

“I don’t work on Wednesdays,” he mumbled.

“Really?” She had started to comb her hair, some of which fell out in the teeth of her brush, loosened by Damian’s hands the night before.

“So what do you do when you don’t work?”

“I sleep,” he said.

“With your eyes open?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“All day?”

“Yeah.”

“That sounds depressing. Are you depressed?”

“No.” He pushed his black hair from his eyelids. “I just love to sleep. Are you depressed?”

“I used to be,” she said.

“But no longer?”

“Nope. Not anymore.”

He put his hand on her knee, which was covered with black nylon. It pained her not to be able to feel the rough texture of his palm. They sat still for several minutes.

“I know you don’t like questions,” she began, “but could you tell me your last name? It feels funny, not knowing it.”

He paused. Then again, he always seemed to pause before speaking. “Endymion,” he said. “Damian Endymion is my full name. Go ahead, if you want to run a background check.”

“I’m not going to run a background check.” Cynthia smiled, then bit at her thumbnail. She was thinking again. “What kind of name is Endymion?”

“Greek.”

“It doesn’t sound Greek.”

He stared at the ceiling. Or he had fallen asleep. She wasn’t sure which.

“Damian?”

“Yes.”

“I said it doesn’t sound Greek.”

He didn’t say anything. She decided to let it go.

Right when Cynthia arrived at work, she Googled *Damian Endymion*. At first, none of the results appeared the least bit creepy. Then she began to read about the myth of Endymion—a beautiful young shepherd who slept with his eyes open and never aged. Selene, the moon, fell in love with him. But in another version, Endymion fell in love with Selene. How peculiar. And nothing Cynthia found online seemed to explain what happened between the shepherd boy and the moon, just that one loved the other, or vice versa. What a weird, amorphous myth—one without even an ending. Still, the similarities between her Damian Endymion and this mythic figure were too obvious to be a coincidence. She wondered how in the world she would broach the subject with Damian.

When lunchtime arrived, rather than dart across the street, as she normally did, for a cup of soup and salad from Au Bon Pain, Cynthia remained at her desk. She worked right up until six o’clock without taking any breaks, except to go to the restroom a few times. Once more, when she arrived at her apartment building, he was waiting for her outside. In the elevator, just as the doors shut, she snapped at him.

“Do you think I’m so insecure, Damian, that you can get me to do whatever you want? Follow along with whatever twisted script you’ve come up with?”

His mouth opened slightly in shock. “What in the world do you mean?”

“I’m not going to get bigger for you. No way. If anything I want to lose weight.” As she spoke, Cynthia realized how famished and irritable she was.

His sleepy eyes bore into her. “Okay. I’m so sorry.” He put his enormous hand on her cheek. “Of course, it’s your body, and I treasure it in whatever form it takes. Forgive me, please.”

And she did. Before the elevator doors opened on her floor, she told herself that sure, what she had read online had an uncanny bearing on their situation, but it was just a crazy coincidence, nothing more. It was

easy to think in such a manner standing next to Damian. He had a way of making logic and rationality disappear.

A short time later, when they were making love, Cynthia felt their two bodies fold into and around one another, so that where one form stopped and the other began was no longer discernible. Afterward, she apologized profusely for acting the way she had in the elevator, but Damian told her she had done nothing wrong. He ordered lasagna from Sabatino's and together the two of them finished the entire tray.

The next day, at work, Cynthia canceled her gym membership. For lunch, she had a cheeseburger and large fries delivered to her desk.

That Saturday, Cynthia proposed to Damian that they go for a drive somewhere, in the car she owned but never used. She explained that they needed to get out more—experience the world together, that sort of thing.

“I don't have a license,” he said.

“That's okay. I can drive. Where should we go? How about one of your old haunts?”

“I'd rather not.”

“Come on! It'll be fun.”

He was silent in a brooding rather than a blank sort of way. “I think it's a bad idea,” he said finally.

“Well, we can't just sit inside all day.”

“Why not?”

“Because it's boring.”

“I don't think it's boring.”

Cynthia didn't either, but she felt that she couldn't back down now. “Doing things together, Damian, things outside, that's important.”

“Okay,” he shrugged. “If that's what you think.”

She led him out the back door of her building, into the parking lot, and over to her black Camry. For someone without a license, he seemed to know the web of Boston's highway system exceptionally well. He directed her out to Lowell. They parked and walked around the downtown. Damian seemed particularly quiet. She asked where he had lived, where he had worked, where he had hung out. She tried her best to sound upbeat and laid back. He answered her with shrugs and vague hand gestures. “Over there,” he mumbled more than once. Before heading back to Boston, Cynthia suggested that they get something to drink. Damian said he wasn't thirsty, but she led him to the coffee shop across the street from where they had parked.

While they waited in line, Cynthia noticed that the young girl behind the counter was staring at Damian differently from the manner in which most women stared at Damian: less like she wanted to undress him and more like she was unsettled by his appearance. When it was their turn to order, the girl slipped away into the back room. A heavyset, older woman, perhaps the manager, came out and prepared their espresso drinks. The whole time, she never once looked at Damian.

“Did you know that girl in the coffee shop?” Cynthia asked him during their drive home. Damian just shrugged and Cynthia felt this incredible frustration, bordering on anger. Why couldn’t he just answer her questions?

That night, rather than abandon herself to his caresses, Cynthia claimed to be tired. The entire next day, she tried but failed to put the coffee-shop encounter out of her mind. She told herself she was imagining things. Still, she couldn’t stop thinking about what might have transpired in Lowell. The following morning, when it was time to leave for work, she offered Damian a ride. “I have to drive in,” she lied. “I have a meeting to go to.” Damian said he preferred to take the T. Cynthia phoned work and told them she’d be in a little late that morning. Then she drove out to Lowell and returned to the coffee shop. The young girl was behind the counter. She was a wisp of a thing, bony and pale. If Damian really liked big women, what could he have possibly seen in her?

When it was her turn to order, Cynthia asked for a triple-sized caramel latte with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. While fumbling with her billfold, she tried to formulate the impossible question she wished to ask this girl, but the girl made it unnecessary.

“Do you know what he does for a living?” she asked Cynthia.

“Who?”

“Damian.” She pulled the sleeves of her long-sleeved T-shirt up to her elbows. “He kills dogs. For the city of Boston. Strays.” Purple scars traced her forearms, some bulging, others very faint, like rivers and streams. “He did this to me,” she whispered.

Without picking up her drink from the counter, Cynthia rushed out of the coffee shop. Back in her car, she sobbed with her head on the steering wheel. *I am so stupid*, she said to herself. *So, so stupid*.

That same night, when Damian tried to kiss her, Cynthia pulled away from him. When he asked her what they should have for dinner, she snapped at him, “Anything but Italian.” So he ordered tacos and burritos. But when the food arrived, Cynthia refused to eat any of it. Finally,

he asked her what was wrong, and she confessed that she had lied to him and driven back to Lowell to interrogate the girl in the coffee shop. She didn't even ask if he had cut her arms. She just said, "How could you?" And Damian replied, "I didn't touch her, not like that. She did it to herself, after I left her, to try to get me to come back."

"She carved up her arms?"

"Yeah. It was really disturbing." He said this without sounding very disturbed. But then again, his intonation, his gravelly voice, always sounded the same, regardless of what he was saying.

"She said you kill dogs? For the city?"

"I euthanize strays, yes. Someone has to. There are too many to keep in the cages."

"So you kill them! You? You do that?"

His eyelids shut for a moment. Cynthia wasn't sure if he was just blinking or internally weighing her shock.

"It's humanely done."

"But how can you do that? Day after day..."

"It's very hard."

"No, I mean *how* do you do it. I need to know. Is it violent?"

"Of course not." He looked into her eyes. "Okay, I'll tell you. First," he whispered, "I move very slowly, so as not to alarm them. I pet them like this." He put his fingers on her cheek and let them drift toward her chin. "I pet them for as long as it takes for them to calm down." Once more he ran his fingers down the side of her face. "Then I administer an injection right here." And he put his other hand just below her rib cage on the left side, beneath her heart.

Cynthia couldn't help it. Under the touch of his fingers and hand, she closed her eyes and felt herself float away.

The next day, Cynthia couldn't concentrate at work. She thought of Damian, out there in the city, euthanizing dogs. She thought of the girl working in the coffee shop in Lowell with the scars on her arms. Desperate for someone to talk to, she phoned Telly.

"What's going on?" Telly asked her before her sister even had a chance to ask her how she was doing. Cynthia proceeded to give her a very censored version of her situation with Damian, in which she excluded—for example—the girl from Lowell, any direct references to the myth of Endymion, and Damian's job. All those details that were troubling her the most. When she finished, Cynthia could hear Telly clicking her tongue in her mouth, a sound she had always hated.

“You can’t date a guy,” Telly began, “who sleeps all the time and wants you to get fat. I’m sorry, sis. Regardless of how...hard it’s been for you the last few years, you just can’t be with a guy like that. That’s just the way it is.”

Cynthia had expected her to say as much. She thanked her for listening and hung up the phone. In her cubicle, over a large pastrami sandwich, she choked back tears and wondered why she hadn’t kicked him out of her apartment the minute she had read about the myth. Was it just because of his beauty? He certainly wasn’t a fascinating conversationalist.

When she was finished at work, she scurried down Mass Ave., let herself into her apartment, and marched into her bedroom. Damian was asleep with his eyes open, his shirt off, the sheet just barely covering his midsection. She caught her breath, then kicked at the mattress.

“Get up!” she screamed. “Get out of here!”

He lifted his head with confusion. “Cynthia?”

“Get out!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t treat me like an idiot. You know what’s wrong. You’re...you’re trying to turn me into the moon.”

“What?”

“The moon. You’re...I’m gaining all of this weight—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t try to make me crazy.”

“I’m not trying to make you crazy.” He wiped the sleep from his eyes. “I’m in love with you.”

“Stop it, Damian. Or whatever your real name is.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Just shut up.”

“Why are you screaming at me?”

“SHUT UP!”

He was silent for a moment.

“If you just believed what I’m saying we wouldn’t be fighting.”

She wiped the tears from her eyes and caught her reflection in the standing mirror in the corner of the room. With her round shoulders and her head leaning down and forward, her body seemed almost spherical.

“What are you saying, Damian?”

“I think you’re beautiful.”

A few nights later, in the throes of intercourse, Cynthia felt as if she were sliding down the bed, toward the floor. She opened her eyes just as Damian—his own eyes open, although Cynthia didn't know if they were open such that he could see around him or open such that he saw nothing—tumbled off her. In fact they were both sliding onto the floor. The bed frame had broken. Behind them, the headboard had come unscrewed from the frame and was slumped—as if exhausted—against the wall.

The two of them crawled out from beneath a mass of blankets and pillows. Then Damian dragged the mattress off the box spring and dropped it onto the floor. He took the sheets and resituated them atop the mattress. Together they reclined on the improvised bed. With his hands, he began once more to roam about her body, but Cynthia pushed him away. He leaned back.

“What is it now?” he asked.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. She felt exposed and fat and unattractive. “I just don't see how you can be with someone like that girl and then someone like me. How old is she? How old are you?”

He shrugged. He seemed, now that she had started to keep track, to shrug an awful lot.

“Answer me!” she cried out. She couldn't help it. She was consumed by the opacity of Damian's story. His vague past, his unknowable future. She found herself awash these days with morbid thoughts. Damian had dealt drugs. He had stolen cars. He had run some kind of sex ring. He had been a pimp, a thief, a rapist, a murderer. He had committed crimes against the elderly and infirm. He had never paid his taxes. He was going to be murdered by someone he had wronged. He was going to be arrested. She was going to be arrested for harboring him.

He turned away. Through the doorway, the dining-room light shone faintly on his profile, and he looked horribly, excruciatingly beautiful.

“Can I ask you a question?”

She was caught off guard. He never asked questions. “Of course.”

He cleared his throat. “Why do you think it's so hard for people not to dwell on what they don't know, what they can never really know? Why is that so hard for people?”

She shifted her weight, propping herself up on an elbow. She couldn't focus on what he was asking; she was distracted. She felt as if she could glimpse her own dark sadness, cast on the same wall at which Damian stared, waiting to envelop her once he was out of her life. And yet, even as she loathed this darkness, she felt herself moving toward it, inexorably.

“I have no idea,” she said. “Why do you think it’s so hard?”

He stroked her hair with his hand. “I think because, deep down, most people are afraid of being happy.”

The following Wednesday, she awoke to the now familiar sound of his stream in the toilet, then the toilet flushing, then water running in the sink. Cynthia felt cheerful, even giddy; she had no idea why. Perhaps it was just that she had slept well the night before, her head nestled in Damian’s armpit, his hand resting in her hair. She knocked softly on the bathroom door. Damian let her in. Together they brushed their teeth. Cynthia opted to get dressed and then apply her make-up after he was done shaving. She put on one of her no-nonsense work outfits, then found herself standing in the doorway, watching as he dragged the razor slowly down his cheek before reversing direction and going from the base of his neck to the bottom of his jaw. Her eyes lingered on the base of his neck.

“Where do you get tattoos like that?” she asked him.

“What?”

She paused. She told herself that she should not repeat her question. Then she told herself that she should. “Those green numbers, all around the base of your neck. Where do you get tattoos like that?”

He took his razor and threw it into the sink. The blade detached, flipping into the air and landing on the floor. “Where do you think!” he said, his fists clenching. And then he suddenly screamed, his voice garbled with rage, “WHERE THE FUCK DO YOU THINK!”

Cynthia backed away from the doorway. Turning to scurry out of the bedroom, she tripped over the mattress on the floor. She hopped to her feet and rushed out of the room, past the dining-room table and into the narrow kitchen of her apartment. There she stood, waiting. What did she want to happen next? Did she want him to follow her here, into this space? To trap her? Maybe grab her by the shoulders and push her down onto the floor? Oh God, she realized, pressing her hands against her mouth and inhaling sharply. That was exactly what she wanted.

But he didn’t come after her. The minutes passed. Although there was no sound of running water, no sound of the toilet seat crashing against the tank, no sound of anything except the traffic outside, Damian remained in the bathroom. Finally, after calling out to him and hearing nothing in response, Cynthia left for work with her hair uncombed, her make-up unapplied.

She decided that she was going to end their relationship before the close of the workday. She was going to call and tell Damian to be out

of her place by five. He would be sleeping, since he didn't work on Wednesdays. So she was going to wake him up. Then, after he had left, she'd call a locksmith and get new keys made, just to be safe. But all her planning was for naught; she couldn't bring herself to pick up the phone.

When Cynthia arrived back at her apartment, rather than rouse him and subject herself to his statuesque form, splayed across her mattress, she called to Damian from the dining room. Once he had stumbled out of the bedroom, she asked him to sit across the table from her.

"You know, Damian—" she began, but he interrupted her.

"I'm sorry I screamed this morning," he said. "There is pain in my past. There is confusion and pain." His eyes lingered over her. "Please forgive me, Cynthia."

She leaned back in her chair. "Does this feel...sustainable to you, Damian?"

"What?"

"This. What we have. Our relationship. Does it feel like it's working?"

His milky eyes lingered over her. "We seem to talk a lot more than is probably necessary," he observed. "But you are what I've always wanted. When I'm awake, when I'm not sleeping, you're all I want."

He leaned toward her, across the table, and beckoned her to lean toward him. And she did. Perched like this, Cynthia could see the individual, tiny hairs that made up Damian's scruff. She could see the edges of the pores out of which the hairs grew.

She looked into his sleepy eyes. All the plants in the apartment were dead from his cigarette ash. He slept all the time. He killed dogs for a living. It was not a viable relationship.

"You need to leave," she said with finality, her nose starting to run. She was determined not to let herself fall into the black holes of his eyes. Even though she wanted to, she told herself she couldn't permit it to happen. "Before the sun rises. Before the morning comes. You need to be gone."

Afterward, they lay in bed for a long time without saying anything. Cynthia was convinced she would never fall asleep, but she did. When she awoke in the middle of the night, she looked across the room, toward the far wall, for the dark outline of Damian's knapsack, but it wasn't there. She looked back, over her shoulder. Damian was gone.

She sat down at her desk, in the moonlight. Had he done anything wrong to her, other than stare at her and encourage her to eat like a horse and raise his voice that one time? She wasn't sure if he had. Had the whole affair been some kind of ruse, intentional or otherwise? She had no idea. Was she afraid of being happy, as he had implied? But why

would she be? Because she didn't think she was worthy of being loved, or couldn't bring herself to trust in what others told her wasn't normal? As if normalcy had ever brought her anything beautiful in her life, anything joyous.

Cynthia didn't move. She sat perfectly still under the cold moon. She was alone once more. There was just the real around her, nothing else. In her solid flesh and heft, she could hear—beyond the rumble of the traffic outside and the heater clicking on—her soul, squirreling away once more, deep into the shadows.