

FLETCHER & CLARK

SOMEONE TO KISS AT MIDNIGHT

Clark and Fletcher are at the laundromat. They sit in uncomfortable plastic chairs. Fletcher looks down at the orange tiles beneath his feet, which are filthy with winter scut: salt, grit, grime the color of car exhaust.

—So what do you want for Christmas? asks Fletcher.

—I'd ask for *peace on Earth, good will towards men*, but I don't think I'm going to get it, says Clark. —At this point about all I can hope for is that we don't start bombing Iraq on *Christmas Day* itself. She rubs her face. —I don't know, she says. —What do you want?

—Not much. True love.

—So you've got about as much chance as I have, Clark says.

—Hey, Fletcher says.

Clark shrugs, leans over, and takes a cigarette out of her pack with her mouth.

—I'll have you know that *I* have a date, he says.

—I heard that, Clark says, around the cigarette. She flicks her lighter until she gets flame. They come to this crummy laundromat only because it has ashtrays. She drags, then exhales a great loopy cloud. —Is this from your online dating thing?

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —Somebody finally responded to my ad. We're getting together this weekend.

—Cool, Clark says. —What's her name?

—Charlotte, Fletcher says.

—Nice name, Clark says.

—That's what I thought.

—What do you know about her?

—Not much, Fletcher says. —I've seen a picture of her. She's cute.

—Cute is good, Clark says.

—This is my logic, Fletcher says. He tries to remember the picture. A mass of dark curly hair. A simple black T-shirt. A grin that reminds him obscurely of girls he knew in high school. She looks like she might have once sang in the school musical. There is nothing unattractive about her, but if he saw her on the subway or in the grocery store she probably would not register. He supposes the word that best describes her is *plain*. But in the background of the picture he can see a reproduction of one of Jasper Johns' flag paintings, and this serves as evidence of an intriguing inner life. Plus she knows about poetry.

—She knows about poetry, he says.

Clark nods, then releases a lungful of smoke. —That's cool, she says.

At least Fletcher thinks she knows about poetry. In Fletcher's ad he specified: *successful applicants will have a favorite contemporary poet*. Charlotte said that her favorite contemporary poet was E. E. Cummings. A respectable enough poet, but when Fletcher says *contemporary* what he really means is a poet who is still alive, not one that's been dead for forty years. He wonders how much of Cummings she's read. He knows that there are people out there who think that Cummings is their favorite poet because they were struck by "in Just—" in the one Intro to Poetry course they took. But he'll give her the benefit of the doubt. He can't afford not to.

—If it goes well I'll have a date for New Year's for the first time in, uh, a long time. You planning to go to Freya's party? Fletcher asks.

—Yeah. And I hope *not* to have a date. I never really got why it's so *important* to have a date for New Year's Eve.

—You need someone to kiss at midnight, Fletcher says.

—Whatever, Clark says. —All I really want is to be around friends. Last year I spent New Year's Eve drinking with a bunch of Economics guys. That sucked.

—I bet, Fletcher says.

He goes over to the dryer and waits out the last few seconds of the cycle. The machine clicks and his clothes come to rest. He gathers them up; they are hot in his arms. For a moment he is filled with the urge to press them up against his face. To relax into their warmth.