

FIVE-MINUTE HEARTS

“AVA KISSES THE way she walks,” Matt says about his ex-wife. He speeds down the two-lane highway with no remorse, and as the afternoon light slices through passing trees, it momentarily illuminates the top of his head, creating little halos that slip off, one after the other.

Brenda remembers the way Ava walks. Those kisses must be something. She doesn't mention to Matt that, incidentally, Ava developed and refined that famous walk—a walk that contains expectant, miniature hip swoops, as if she thinks someone might at any second grab those tiny handles and kiss her crotch—circa 1983. Fenderlocken High. Brenda was there, though she doubts Ava ever noticed her.

With the car windows wide open, Matt must be going seventy, though it's hard to be sure; the broken speedometer of his '88 Volvo, "The Rocket," doesn't budge from zero. They—Matt and Brenda and Matt's four-year-old daughter, Iris—are on their way, already late, to an afternoon barbecue hosted by Ava.

BRENDA AND MATT met a month ago at the bookstore where Brenda works. Matt watched Brenda refuse the return of a book on which there was a faint but noticeable coffee ring. He told her he admired a woman who stood her ground. Brenda was delighted that someone would see her that way.

On their first date, Matt mentioned that his ex-wife went to the same high school as Brenda. "Sure, I knew Ava Hobbs," Brenda said in a tone of voice that would indicate she knew Ava fairly well—and didn't quite approve of her. But she'd never spoken to Ava and could barely look at Ava's feet as they passed in the school corridor.

Matt went on to say that he was in the process of changing his life, changing it for good. Brenda was impressed by such an open declaration. She herself had been in the process of changing her life for good since she was about ten.

"My bed's too small, and I fall out of it!" Iris shouts from the backseat, where, with seat belt stretched across her

chest, she lurks and clutches the front seat, expelling her cheese popcorn breath in willful, ragged sighs.

Iris has two beds, one at Ava's place and one at Matt's. Brenda hasn't seen either. Brenda imagines Iris's bed at Ava's, thinks it must be covered in something with a high thread count that incorporates golden rosebuds. Her bed-cover at Matt's is probably nautical themed and hangs crookedly.

Matt scratches the inside of his right wrist, his driving wrist, the wrist that bears a navigator watch, an inscrutable timepiece, which looks like it weighs two pounds and causes his right forearm muscle to shorten under his tanned skin in a curvy, determined way. Matt told Brenda that he used to be a big drinker. He says Ava used to be a big drinker, too. Apparently they were such big drinkers they had to keep a case of Pedialyte in the fridge for hangovers. But those days are gone. Matt even has a new job. He sells a software program to California sheriffs that helps them keep track of criminals.

"Which bed, honey?" Matt says and reaches behind his seat to squeeze Iris's ankle.

Brenda turns completely around to listen to Iris's answer, unlike a real mother. She thinks of the board game Life that she played as a child ("Spin the wheel of fate, then drive the hilarious game path of fortune!"). Brenda recalls loading her tiny car with kids the size of rice and driving as fast as possible around a cardboard square.

Iris flops against the backseat. "My bed at school!"

Iris goes to two different day-care centers, one when she's at Matt's place, one when she's at Ava's. Ava works at a beauty supply store six days a week; Matt also works Saturdays. The only thing upon which Matt and Ava are united is to call day care "school." Brenda has overheard them talking on Matt's cell phone. "When she gets out of school . . . today at school . . ." Iris has been in school since she was six months old.

Brenda never went to day care, doesn't know anyone who did. It wasn't invented yet. She does remember kindergarten, and there certainly weren't beds. There was the laying of one's head on one's hands at a long wooden table, which smelled of grape juice and Cheez Whiz. And there was the listening to fingers tapping, jawbones clunking, and bang-plastered foreheads thudding all the way down the line, sounds that occur when one asks oneself "What Will I Be When I Grow Up?"—or that's what Mrs. Gosseltoff would tell you all that racket was, for she often urged her pupils to "give it some thought" while resting. But Mrs. Gosseltoff's students, each of them in that terrible, alone-forever, face-to-table position, weren't thinking at all about jobs, for they were beating out with tiny skulls and hand bones, the *other* big question, the bigger big question: Who will I love?

Who will I love?

The inside of The Rocket is now the temperature of

a meat locker, and Brenda asks Matt, who has the window controls, to put hers up.

“What?” he asks.

“People like Brenda make the air cold!” Iris shrieks, and this Matt does seem to hear, since he immediately puts up his daughter’s window.

Brenda figures she’ll tough it out. “Iris, do you want to try your coloring book?” The velveteen-covered mythological coloring book, an item for which she paid too much, even with her employee discount, has been shoved off to the side of the backseat, open to a picture of a minotaur whose right horn is covered in a fine layer of orange popcorn dust.

“Do you like the minotaur?” Brenda asks Iris, who pulls at her pale red eyebrows and stares at her lap. “The minotaur was half man and half bull,” says Brenda.

“Who’s the fool?” demands Iris with all the conviction of a hard-boiled DA.

A chunk of hair blows into Brenda’s mouth, hair she cut only last week. She pulls the tangled lock out of her mouth. “Why are you asking about a fool, Iris?”

“You said, ‘half man, half fool.’” A motorcycle with a broken muffler passes their car.

“I didn’t say that, Iris!” shouts Brenda.

Matt glances at his watch, assessing his heart—its rapidity. Brenda had never seen such a watch before she saw Matt’s. She doesn’t wear a watch herself. Matt accelerates

and The Rocket makes a startling, heart-wrenching noise like a woman crying in her sleep.

“Hold on to your dental work, ladies!” yells Matt as the front end of The Rocket visibly begins to shake.

Brenda wants to tell Matt to knock it off and slow down, but she feels she doesn't know him well enough, and now, due to her infallible politeness, they may all lose their lives. Her hair whips every which way, and she attempts to aim her head in the right direction, the direction that might make it stop, but no such luck, and it occurs to her that she doesn't even have a comb in her purse, and that when she sees Ava in as soon as fifteen minutes from now, and for the first time in eighteen years, she'll look like a total wreck.

A truck the deep black color of charred firewood is overtaking them, and it's unclear why the driver, whose face can't be seen through his window, is going so fast. And why does he need to race Matt and Brenda and Iris in their poor old Volvo—this mocked-up, thrown-together example of a family such as never navigated the Life board—as they speed toward Ava and her amazing walk?

“Who's the fool? Who's the fool?” Iris keeps on.

The truck, upon them now, honks, or more accurately bellows, like an animal about to charge.

Matt, Brenda, Iris, and their new friend, Del Stanger, arc on the side of a barren shoulder just off the 170 in Van Nuys. Del, in his big black truck, witnessed them veer off

the road as a multitude of tiny rocks flew up under the car, clattering like finger bones. The first thing he said to them was, "Everyone's lucky sometimes."

Iris pretends to wash the pavement with her hair.

"Get up, Iris," says Matt as he and Del Stanger assess the damage to the blown back-right tire.

"I want candy," says Iris, and she does lift her head, but not high enough to keep the end of her red ponytail from dragging in the dust.

"Stop this behavior within five, Iris," says Matt.

Del flops down on the embankment, as if he's glad to be in the dirt, and puts his hands up into the wheel well. Matt, who never works on his own car, stands to the side of the passenger door with his hands on his hips. Del makes an unself-conscious kind of grunt, and Brenda notices the strong bones of his face. Long black hair escapes from a baseball cap that reads *Trail*, and it's probably just the brand name of some product that Del once lugged coast to coast, but Brenda finds this romantic. She imagines Del driving in a remote area just before nightfall, thinks of him sitting in the cab of his truck, very alone and overwhelmed by the beauties and mysteries that hourly pass his window. Truckers are unrealized poets, she thinks. Who else would sit in one place, day after day, talking to no one, watching everything, traveling the same piece of life's road, forward and back?

"Thank you for trying to stop us," says Brenda. No comment from beneath the car. "And it's exceptionally

nice of you to help with the tire,” Brenda adds, too formal to her own ears.

Brenda and Matt stand apart from each other, both staring at the lower half of Del’s body, which reveals a tan line between his jeans and T-shirt. Now Brenda has her hands on her hips, too. Cars pass, people look at the dumpy green Volvo stopped at a crazy angle. Some of them slow, none of them stop.

“I want candy,” repeats Iris, and she stands up, seemingly aware that exactly five minutes have passed. Brenda fishes for a Lifesaver in her purse.

“*Why* do you want candy, Iris?” asks Matt. “Give me one abstract reason.”

Matt says he likes to make Iris’s brain work. He’s helping her create paths. He read an article about it in the parenting section of his electronic record storage professionals’ magazine. This kind of thing makes Brenda’s skin crawl, this overworking of matters. And in that instant Brenda knows that she and Matt aren’t a fit. Immediately she feels a sort of internal sliding over the fact.

“Because I like candy,” Iris answers after great deliberation.

“That’s a concrete reason, honey,” says Matt.

“It is?” Brenda says.

The bookstore where Brenda works was recently voted “The Expensive Person’s Bookstore” in the local hipster’s weekly, although the book prices, set by publishers, are the

same as everywhere else. Brenda and her underpaid coworkers are the type who read Proust for kicks, who crack each other up with subtle jokes that encase the obscure fact, the scrap of unusable knowledge. Since the newspaper article, they've begun to make comments like "*That's an expensive statement.*" Most, like Brenda, would hope to seem smart and funny, though they're all riddled with sensitivities and quirks, the oddness of which they try to mitigate through enlargement.

Everyone teases Brenda about her lack of a watch and *great* disinterest in time, which she exaggerates for the sake of a joke and to lessen the fact that she desperately worries about her hours and days, the fact that they are slipping by so easily and still, true love has not been found.

"Well, the wheel rim is all right, and I thought your axle was tweaked, but it's not."

Del stretches a long leg out from under the car and rocks his head side to side. No one has ever looked so comfortable on the earth.

"So?" says Matt.

"So, you need a tire." Del offers to take Matt up the road to get one, and Matt questions Brenda and Iris's safety.

"Don't worry," says Del. "Mostly canine breeders in these parts. People here would sooner kill you over your dog than your wife."

"That's not my wife," says Matt as he checks his back pocket for his wallet.

Del looks at Brenda, seems to really look at her for the first time, and an expression crosses his face, as if he's remembered something, and again Brenda imagines that his thoughts are rich and deep, and she suddenly wishes she could know him.

"Thank you, again," she says and extends her hand.

Iris throws herself around his knees. To the Lexus-load of businessmen passing at this instant, Iris and Brenda and Del might look like a family saying goodbye to one another.

"You'll be okay with Iris?" Matt asks Brenda as he steps closer to her and clamps his arm around her, pinning her to him. Brenda knows that Matt will later give Iris some complicated lecture about how you can't just give your heart to a stranger because he shows up in your life for five minutes.

The men drive away in the black truck, and Brenda and Iris stand there, looking at each other. For once Iris is absolutely still. "Let's sit down, Iris," says Brenda, and immediately Iris does, too hard, right on the pavement. She even folds her hands, and this seems like something she was told to do in day care, and it occurs to Brenda how stressful it is to be a child, with everyone telling you what to do, what to want, trying to create trails in your head every other minute.

Iris starts to yawn, or it looks like a yawn, but it suddenly and vociferously mutates into crying, and this crying has

a rhythm to it: sob hard, no breathing, then wait—sob hard, no breathing, then wait. This crying is more like questioning, though Brenda doesn't know what Iris is asking. It seems like asking.

And what would Ava do? But all Brenda can imagine is a girl walking away from her down a hallway, the cold hallway, the one outside the gym, where the exit door was always propped open to blow away sweat, a girl with an arm lined with silver bracelets, a girl with a walk like no other girl on earth, the exact girl that Brenda would have been, if she could have been any other girl.



MATT HAD TOLD Brenda that Ava lived in a typical California condo and Brenda pictured a Mexican-tiled entryway, a courtyard with calla lilies and freesia. She hadn't expected the single-story units all in need of paint, the smell of Pine Sol, cigarettes, and, everywhere, burnt teriyaki chicken.

Everyone here looks like they could use a little help.

Two young men box dangerously close to a hibachi. An older man, wearing a leather vest over his bare chest, sits across a picnic table from a woman whose peach-colored hair matches her lipstick and nails. They both look a few beers in. Between them are three snack bowls, all of them empty. It's five o'clock, and the sky, a rinse water blue, is lined with stretched-thin clouds that look like so much illegible handwriting.

Looking up at Matt and Brenda, the woman says, "Sherry Taylor," vehemently, as if someone had disputed her name. "My Pete," she says, waving a long orange fingernail at the man. Pete nods at the two shirtless boxers and says, "Dale," then "Pixie." Dale wears high white knee socks and long green shorts that hang low on his hips. Pixie ties a yellow bandana around his head. The two begin to circle each other.

"Family business," Sherry says without looking at Matt or Brenda.

"Fighting?" Brenda asks.

"Boxing," Sherry indignantly corrects her.

There are no other guests. This is Ava's barbecue? Where is Ava?

Matt, holding Iris's hand in his left, nervously flexes his right arm, his navigating arm. Last week he bought a two-hundred-dollar electric stimulus box to work his muscles. Brenda lay in her bed—Matt had spent the night—watching him attach all those electrodes; it took some doing. But Matt is committed.

Brenda spots Ava sitting in a lawn chair on an unprosperous patch of lawn. She smokes with one hand and holds a conch shell ashtray in the other, though she flicks her ashes onto the beat-up grass. Her back is to Matt and his troupe as they cross the lawn, and she is hunched over, as if she were watching late-night TV—a way that no one would sit if they thought anyone were watching.

Iris runs toward Ava's chair and Ava, as if she feels a sudden burst of sun upon her back, turns around. But Iris stops halfway across the scrubby courtyard, fascinated by the boxers. Ava gives Brenda a "what can you expect?" look, and Brenda thinks she sees a flash of recognition in Ava's still wide, still beautiful green eyes. Brenda feels a small surge of pride at being able to look directly at her.

Then Ava smiles, and Brenda notices how yellow her teeth are. They were never like that. And somehow, Ava is so very pulled in upon herself. When she stands up she seems shorter than Brenda remembered. "I thought you weren't coming," she says to Matt, and her words seem loose inside her mouth. Matt mentions the blown tire as he turns his body sideways to hug her. Ava starts coughing violently. They look like two people at the end of a dinner party that didn't go so well.

"I guess you remember Brenda," says Matt, looking at his navigator watch instead of either woman's face.

"You guess?" Brenda says, trying for a joke and an appearance of offhand confidence.

Ava nods and smokes, but Brenda can tell Ava has no idea what he's talking about. Matt might as well have said, "Would you agree that Brenda has a head?"

Ava fixates on the last half inch of her cigarette. Her hair, once thick and glossy, has been curled at the ends, but sections have been missed, and some lie absolutely straight between the waves. Ava runs her fingers through her locks, and Brenda notices how red and angry her nail

beds are. She remembers a thing she once heard about Ava, a thing she forgot because she couldn't believe it.

Halfway through Brenda's junior year at Fenderlocken High, Ava had disappeared. A rumor circulated that she'd left to go to a fashion institute in San Francisco. Perhaps she was studying to be a designer. Of course she would be accepted at sixteen. She was Ava.

Brice Manelli told Brenda that Ava actually had gone to "sewing school," which was something completely different, a young women's halfway house that sheltered girls with drug, drinking, and behavioral problems, as well as indistinct or compound problems that no one could quite unravel. Brenda didn't believe any of this. What problems could Ava have?

Brice said, "Well, all I know is that I sat next to her in Home Ec, and she spent the whole time sticking pins and needles under her fingernails. And you know what she said when I asked her about it? She said, 'It always heals.'"

But of course Brenda hadn't believed that either.



DALE DANCES AROUND Pixie, who has pulled the yellow bandana from his head and wrapped it around his upper arm like a tourniquet. They stare into each other's eyes as if mesmerized. Then Pixie springs at Dale and takes a swipe, hitting him squarely in his right rib.

"That's it," Sherry Taylor calls.

Once again, Ava starts hacking, this time before she gets a chance to cover her mouth.

From his plastic lawn chair, Matt says, "Have another cigarette, why don't you." Ava stiffens. The air seems to quicken and gather between them. Matt starts to ask something, then stops, sighs.

"Because I'm too high-strung," Ava says, seemingly joyless at her ability to know what he would have asked.

"More like lazy." And this is where it starts. It's as if there was a blue flash in the air, and even Sherry and Pete shift their attention to Ava and Matt. In one of the condominiums someone puts on music, an old speed-metal song, and Iris immediately starts spinning to this tune that has no discernable melody or rhythm.

"Why can't you stop smoking?" Matt says. "I just want to know," he adds, as he glances at Brenda, then folds his arms across his chest, affecting the stance of a reasonable man.

"Why do you bring a different woman to my home every month?" says Ava, gesturing toward her front stoop. It features a penicillin-pink door behind a slab of cement littered with pizza flyers. She attempts to light another cigarette. "I just want to know."

Brenda walks over to the empty snack bowls. Just last week Matt told her she was the first woman he'd dated since his divorce eight months ago.

"This is about smoking," Matt says to Ava in a tone that one would use on an unruly child in church.

"This is *not* about smoking."

"Besides, you've been drinking."

"I've not been drinking."

"Well, you're on *something*."

"I am not." Ava gestures wildly with her cigarette, as if to poke holes in the sky.

"Then why are you acting this way?"

"What way?" Ava chews at a cuticle. "What way?" she repeats.

Matt's face shows no emotion. He could be a man waiting at a stoplight.

"Oh, am I embarrassing you in front of your new friend?" Ava does a little rocking step back and forth.

"Stop it, Ava."

"Stop it yourself, you box."

"Oh, I'm a box."

"You're a box," and here Ava's voice cracks, "and you have no understanding about real people who feel real things, people who've been through a thing or two and know something about the accordion of life on down!"

Iris twirls past them.

Then simply, as if their past life together has suddenly come unzipped, Matt and Ava's entire history of disagreements tumbles out. Words flash and spin in the air: *Liar, wrong, can, don't, you, fuck, mine, care, stop, always, you, why, shouldn't, try, you, said, why, didn't, help, me, you, you, you.* Matt and Ava stand absolutely still. At this moment

they look curiously formal and attentive and, in some small way, in love.

Iris spins faster and faster.

Ava tries for one last drag. Matt reaches for her forearm, which is pale and bears not a single silver bracelet. Someone turns up the ugly music, which seems to rip sideways on itself and sounds impossibly tangled. Iris spins so hard she falls on the ground. She does not cry. Matt, still holding on to Ava's forearm, shouts for her to drop the cigarette. Dale and Pixie stop boxing.

"I said, drop it!" With arms lifted, Matt and Ava are frozen for a moment, a statue of furious unity. Then Ava bites Matt's wrist. His navigating wrist. A vein in her forehead sticks out. Ava, the beautiful.

Matt falls down on one knee as if she'd bitten his leg. Ava stands with her hands covering her face. Brenda runs to Matt and puts one palm on his shoulder, but he pulls away from her. The mystery DJ has turned down the music, but not all the way, and Brenda can hear a tiny scrap of bass that urgently repeats, sounding like a fly caught against a screen. Tap, tap—tap, tap.

Sherry and Pete and their sons huddle around Matt. Sherry quite practically asks if there's blood. Considering her family business, this must be small potatoes. Pixie gives Matt his yellow bandana. Pete, with his hands on his thighs, leans into Matt, speaking quietly and directly, saying something that no one can hear. Ringside, there's always some fellow like

this. Matt gives his complete and utter attention to this man with whom he's not previously exchanged two words.

Brenda sits in the lawn chair that Ava earlier vacated. Iris runs to her side, flushed from spinning. "I've got a bed here," she says matter-of-factly. Brenda tries to pull Iris onto her lap, and Iris does allow this, but once there she swings her feet sideways and sits quite straight. She might as well be taking a seat on a bus. Iris will be held, but she won't be comforted.

Ava hasn't moved from the spot where she bit Matt. She absently wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Then, without taking one look at Matt or Brenda or Iris, she goes to the picnic table, picks up the three empty snack bowls, and with great finality stacks them one inside the other. She turns and heads toward her front door. The way she walks, she could be shoveling dirt.



WHATEVER IT IS that Pete said to Matt causes him to jump up and follow Ava. He still holds the bandana around his wrist, and as an afterthought he calls to Iris, who runs to him. Brenda trails after, but Matt and Iris are already behind the closed pink door before she's halfway across the lawn. She turns around and almost bumps into Pete and his sons. Pixie smiles, though Dale and Pete give her a look as if they've never seen her before. Brenda stands in the middle of the yard for a few moments, completely directionless.

Finally Sherry Taylor waves Brenda over to the picnic table. “My Pete knows what’s what,” she declares as Brenda joins her. Brenda nods and Sherry adds, “The first time we slept together that man spit on my face to see what I really looked like.”

“That’s something,” Brenda answers, but what she’s really listening to is a sound coming from behind the pink door. Iris is singing a nonsense song, and much of it is unclear except the part she keeps repeating about a man and a fool.

“Because in those days, I just lathered on the makeup.”

“Sure,” Brenda answers. Behind Sherry, Brenda sees Ava and Matt framed in Ava’s kitchen window. She cranes her neck to get a better view.

“My Pete believes in the reality of passion.” Sherry Taylor taps her fingernails against an empty beer can, and it is clear she expects something from Brenda.

“He must be very passionate.”

Sherry Taylor giggles wickedly.

Through the kitchen window Brenda sees Matt hold up his forearm, watches Ava wrap his wrist in gauze. Then she cuts the gauze with scissors—huge scissors, the wrong scissors. Matt lets her do it anyway. The trust.

Matt disappears from the window and Brenda sees Ava standing there alone, head tilted in an old familiar way, a way that in high school had seemed proud and arrogant but now looks resigned. And free of something, too. Ava

has quit her own beauty, the whole complex freight of it. But for a moment Brenda can still see it, almost see it, now more like a ring around her, something vaporous, something vanishing.

Matt pokes his head out the door and shouts, "Brenda, I'm calling you a taxi. Okay? Okay?" Just like that. Brenda doesn't give him an answer, and he doesn't wait for one.

Sherry Taylor looks at Brenda and gently asks, "What do you *do*, Brenda?"

For an instant, it seems to Brenda that she's inquiring into her past line of relationship errors, or perhaps what she will do in the future to avoid them.

"I work at a bookstore."

"Oh, I like bookstores. So nice and quiet." Sherry winks at her, as if she understands something further about bookstore work, something impractical or silly.

It would be closing hour now. Time for easing out the last customer of the day. Time to pick up the book left carelessly on the floor, splayed open, aisles from its proper home.

Sherry says, "The great thing about the book business is that people will always need to read. Just like my business. Just like boxing."



AFTER SHERRY TAYLOR leaves, Brenda sits at the picnic table, waiting for her taxi. The smells of chicken, Pine Sol, and cigarettes have at last lifted, and now there is only cold

night air to breathe. Brenda looks up at the darkening sky, at the fast clouds charging by, clouds that in moments will be in the next town, or the one after that. She thinks of Del Stanger, imagines him driving his black truck around the world, seeing beauty at every turn. Where is he now?

Then Brenda recalls something else about Life, a thing she hadn't thought of in years, about how everyone tried to avoid the "Flat Tire Miss Next Turn" square. Because while one's car was stuck, the rest of the players whizzed on by, collecting with the roll of the dice all sorts of things—jobs, marriage, kids. But of course, everything was random, everything could be lost, and none of it had to do with love.

