

She'd been unhappy for long stretches of her adulthood, but she knew that her disappointments had been ordinary, never tragic. She'd made no brave choices either; she was simply making do, getting by, avoiding trouble. It seemed to be what everyone she knew was doing. Even friends with more money, with pretty houses and dogs and children uproariously inhabiting these houses, seemed no happier than she; for one, they always had more to complain about than she did.

To: tdickinson@goodmail.com
From: shannonk@mercersmith.com
Date: 28 May--05:56--

Dear Todd,

Thank you for your email. It couldn't have been an easy one for you to send. I didn't know about your parents or your brother, and I'm so very sorry. I can only imagine what you've been through, and here I am, sending you all these dopey emails, full of goofy stories about the past, but I'm so glad that you didn't mind them. It's been nice for me too to be in touch with you again.

I'm here when you need me. Is it wrong for me to say that I can hardly wait to see you?

Yours, Shannon

* * *

"You sent him that?" asked Billy, condemnation in his voice, when Shannon called at eight, unable to wait any longer, and woke him up.

"Yes," she said.

"It's your funeral," he said.

"God, you're so negative," she cried.

"No, just realistic."

"I want to live," she said, thinking of the old movie with the same title, wondering if Billy would catch the allusion. "I want to be happy."

"Don't we all," he said. "Just promise me one thing, Shannon."

"What?" she asked, wary.

"Do not, under any circumstances, loan this guy any money. Don't tell him how much your aunt left you either."

"I'm not an idiot. And in four months, who knows what my life will be like. Maybe I'll finally get serious about

applying to law school." But this would require another, much larger student loan, and she didn't know if she could face this.

"You should," said Billy.

"And maybe I'll meet someone else," she said. "Or Todd will fall off the wagon and move back to Hawaii and I'll never hear from him again."

But she knew that she was going to see him again, that they were moving inexorably toward each other. She didn't say it aloud though. She didn't want to hear Billy tease her, warn her that Todd might be fat or have lost half his teeth or else have assassinated so many brain cells that it would be all he could do to have a conversation about a topic other than the weather and that day's breakfast.

She didn't care; she wanted to see for herself. It might all be fine, possibly even good.

"Ram Powers," said Billy, laughing. "I can't believe we went to see that guy."

"He changed my life," she said. "I think."

"No, he didn't. You did," he said with finality. "He's just a fraud with a good haircut."

She said nothing. He could believe what he wanted to believe. She was tired and needed to go back to bed to see if she could sleep for another hour or two. It was a Sunday, and the day stood before her with its daunting, luxurious expanse of unstructured hours. She wondered what Todd did on Sundays, if he went to an AA meeting in a church basement, if he had become religious. He was a stranger now. She needed to remember that, but it didn't matter very much. Everyone, at first, was a stranger.

Christine Sneed is the author of four books, the most recent of which, a short story collection titled *The Virginity of Famous Men*, will be published in September 2016. Her work has appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, *O. Henry Prize Stories*, and various literary journals. She lives in Evanston, Illinois, and teaches for Northwestern University's and Regis University's graduate writing programs.

SCOTT NOEL

Portrait of Tom, 2014
Oil on Linen, 24 x 28 in



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