

August Evans



FOR LORNE

You, Lorne: draped in the haze of the workaday, yet still glamorous with your perpetually magenta lips and nails. You, Lorne: far younger than my decrepit 43, yet humming with the mystery of an ancient yew tree. How can one appear at once wrinkleless and wise? Oh, Lorne, you who iron your lustrous black hair close to your head like a sleek European, just for the steam of the warming hood to puff it in frizz. You wear a sudden black helmet as I ladle beef stroganoff and lemon meringue onto your plate. Oh, Lorne, this is how I love you best, when your veneer begins to crack.

Tonight, Lorne, like every weekday night, only two cars remain in the parking lot of the Pinkus Institute. One is a bright blue Porsche, belonging to Mr. Pinkus himself, Dr. Top-of-the-Stack. You've just emerged from this lewd vehicle, and are now settling inside your peeling auburn Honda four-door, decayed by a decade of Texan dust. The Porsche revs, reverses, tracks up white dust as it fades down the oak-lined drive. Pinkus's iron gates part, allow the rumbling car through before they slide slowly back to closed. Now there's only silence, Lorne. Now there's only me and you.

I spy from my usual spot, squatting deep inside one of the numerous rosebushes planted alongside the metallic bulk of Pinkus. Within the womb of the rosebush, your world is small, navigable, a network of potent pinpricks and razor-sharp brambles.

My presence in the rosebush is as hidden and inconsequential as my tongs of sustenance pawing your plate through the Pinkus food line steam. Though I always say hello, Lorne, you rarely meet my eyes, just keep your head low and mutter a barely audible "Thanks." Sometimes your mouth just moves to make the word, and I hear nothing.

Lorne, have you ever even read my nametag?

Oh Lorne, you know nothing of my life beyond Pinkus. You don't know I read a lot. You don't know how little my identity has to do with ladling desiccated meat and vegetables onto your plate in our shared place of employ, our radical institute of shaky ethics. Oh, Lorne, what intense pleasure and purpose it gives me each morning to think of you as I pull on my cardboard-feeling uniform after the 4:30 alarm zap. Silent in my dark kitchen, coating my teeth in Folgers, I smile softly to myself at the mere thought of seeing you at approximately 12:32. The knowledge that your willowy form will breeze into the drab-lit, pea-green

lunchroom brings a plaster-cast smile to my face. And so, dear Lorne, you sustain me more than these mere words can show.

But Lorne, feelings are tawdry, aren't they? Accessible to everyone. We have one word, and we agree together on what it means. How often in trying to praise you do I curse the vehicle by which I express my love.

But not as often as I curse Mr. Pinkus.

Does Mr. Pinkus love you, Lorne? How could he possibly understand you the way I do? How could he dip inside the pristine hills of your thighs and return home to join a family of five? How I curse the man.

I see you, Lorne, each and every weekday night, through my binoculars' ovular gaze. I see who you have chosen instead of the actually attainable Pinkus cardiologists. I see where your desires really lie: you don't want the doctors, the peons, but the father of the whole grotesque Pinkus enterprise, a very married father of three.

I zoom in on your magenta fingernails dripping down the Porsche's fogged windows. I capture the occasional raven bursts of your shaking hair. Once, even, I caught, in the very center of my view, your pristine, porcelain face, contorted in a grimace. But that was my limit; that was when I turned the binoculars away.

How could I ever, Lorne, witness you in pleasure with origins outside of me?

Oh, Lorne, if Mr. Pinkus wasn't paying you enough before, he's certainly not going to start now.

But something seems to be up tonight, Lorne. You're lingering longer than usual, your engine running. Usually you only wait five minutes after the departure of the Porsche and then hightail it out of there, likely to prevent anyone associating the two vehicles.

But tonight you're rolling down your window, reaching out your long porcelain arm to open the door from the outside (some vital inner latch must be broken), a mass of your dark coral hair flowing out into the night.

Oh Lorne, I could fix that latch for you in a second. Mr. Pinkus's paycheck sure doesn't let you fix everything, does it?

Once out of the Honda, you stretch your willowy arms yogic-high above your head, your black hair snaking luminously down your thin back. I close my eyes and whisper silently, Purify that Pinkus.

My heart is rattling, Lorne, at the sight of this, a fervent staccato that stuns my binoculars from my face, sends them crashing into my chest. I feel my head rumble the rosebush as I wobble and tip from my squat, plunging into the dirt of my cave. A petal floats down, lands in my mouth. It tastes like wet paper, and you, maybe. I hold it between my silent lips, laughing, still watching.

But you get back into your car, quicker than I would like. I guess the stretching session is over. Too bad. But it was nice for a second, Lorne, wasn't it? I wish I could knead your sore shoulders, bring luxury to your aching limbs.

Oh, Lorne, do you remember the hell of last winter, those several months when you brought your own lunch? You sat alone at a corner table, unpacking Tupperware sullenly from a thick plastic bag—someone's idea of an adult lunch sack—probably a free gift at a mall makeup outlet. Maybe you were trying to lose some weight (Pinkus food isn't exactly lo-cal), or maybe you were going through a breakup (your romps with Mr. Pinkus are fairly recent); possibly it was the weather. Either way, you stopped interacting in zero way with the food line, and therefore me (from my long-viewed squint, I even saw you'd brought your own napkins).

But you're back to eating hot food now. And your suitors are back, too, stronger than ever. You, Lorne, so impenetrable that you deny even the most handsome Pinkus cardiologists, who frequently approach you at your table, hovering awkwardly, hands clasped and wriggling behind their backs. Though these are some of the most eligible men in the world, Lorne, never once do you invite these potential wooers to join you. Many are fresh from various countries, permanently in the Texan pit where Pinkus is housed, seeking a real wife. With your looks, you could have any of them, Lorne. All you would have had to do is point your finger at one and he would buy you a house, make you pregnant, eliminate entirely your need to work in your secretarial (albeit, high) position for the Mr. Pinkus, CEO.

And yet, oh Lorne, how I love you as you keep your gaze low and withdrawn, rarely give them both of your eyes, all in the same spirit with which you handle me at the food line. Believe it or not, Lorne, I take some solace in this, knowing that I, a lowly food worker, receive equal treatment of the Pinkus superheroes.

Suddenly, in the distance, I hear the rumble of the Pinkus gates, spreading wide.

Two headlights, brazen and obscene as a semi's, barrel down the gravel drive. Never have I seen the Porsche from this direct view.

Why, Lorne, would the blue Porsche need to return? What more could Mr. Pinkus possibly need from you tonight?

Mr. Pinkus's Porsche squeals up next to yours, so your two cars are facing opposite directions. He cuts the engine and gets out, revealing an anonymous, doughy face, perfect for corporate work. A cigar is going in his hand. He exhales a hard line of smoke. His cough sounds like an egg landing in oil.

Oh, dear Lorne, that you would have to taste such a mouth.

Your car is still going, Lorne. You do not roll down your window to open your door.

The color rushes woozily to my cheeks. I tug the bramble guts of the rosebush, bloodying my hands, grasping for a few decadent seconds, the universe I sense will not be mine for long.

Because you're not getting out of your car, Lorne, and Mr. Pinkus is walking in my direction.

I plead internally, in these final moments of hidden interlude, that if there is a god I will be granted a break. I swear solemnly to end my innocent spying, to take the simple human route of courtly affection in wooing you. I vow to never return to the rosebush. Places seal themselves in my memory if I visit them more than once. I will always have the decadent aroma of this rosebush. I will revisit it frequently in my fantasies, but, I swear, I will never return here, if only god will bring me you.

But Mr. Pinkus is leaning down and in, his sack of a face interrogating my special space. It's not fair, I think, and scream, "You jerk," as his doughy hands reach into my private jungle and fumble for my shoulders, my face. I stay absolutely and completely put, laughing as I hear him swear at the pain of the thorns plunging into his skin.

"Him or me!" I hear myself scream, my tone acrid, nothing like the voice I know myself to have. This is more goat's bleat than human call as Mr. Pinkus gets a firm grip, and heaves me out of the rosebush by the shoulders.

As I emerge from the rosebush, I glimpse the meticulous lawn bordering the entry path leading up to Pinkus's front door. Plant life blooms in profusion, of colors misplaced in this Texan drab: bright purples, reds, magentas—plants of huge cups and leaves. In just small tracts of grass are a stunning array of disc-shaped flowers, flown in from Japan.

Soldering my eyes on your car, I will you to reach out your porcelain arm and unlatch your door. I will you to stop seeing me as invisible, to affirm my yearning, to choose pure love over Pinkus power.

I beat the coarse fabric of Mr. Pinkus's finely tailored suit as his grip on me firms. Through Lorne's blurry windshield, I see a vague image, an object close to her head. A phone.

It's funny where your mind goes in moments of disbelief and horror. Looking at Mr. Pinkus's muscled, expensively tailored chest, I understand he does not possess a human heart. How else could he have birthed the idea of this horrendous institute, where there is no hint of red, raw, pumping humanity? The sprawling from the concaves and the apertures of the earth is the source of being itself, and no man should engage in the kind of science that involves morphing animal hearts into human ones.

Mr. Pinkus's molasses-hued heart surely seeped out from his suit long ago, replaced by a porous, clotted ball of madness.

Hawkish eyes low, mouth a hard, tight line, Mr. Pinkus is no man at war, but a dictator scrutinizing a spontaneously out-of-control landscape. He is taller than I am, his right shoulder nearly grazing my left temple.

The right thing to do would be to use all my human power and run up and pull my dear Lorne from her derelict Honda. But my legs are stolid and frozen, in involuntary protest.

But in this failed contact, I see Lorne remove her phone from her alabaster ear. She grows taller in her car, stacking her shoulders in an act of self-defiance that reminds me of my own hesitation. I feel we are the same person, ruled by identical radar.

Come, red razor blades, police sirens. Seal shut my eyes. Blare your hot red staccatos because I will never belong to you, you who will never take Lorne from me.

Mr. Pinkus's hands move down to grip me by the waist, like he's about to conduct the Heimlich. Heaving for air, I see drool at the edges of his mouth, and smell his oniony huffs.

I stay still.

Oh, Lorne, how you become with every new glimpse even more a fellow of my heart. How similar you are to me, craving only the unattainable, the eternal rosebush, in perpetual bloom.