

2018

## Disrobed

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### Recommended Citation

Kirschner, Bennett A. (2018) "Disrobed," *Ellipsis*: Vol. 45 , Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46428/ejail.45.10>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol45/iss1/10>

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BENNETT A. KIRSCHNER

## Disrobed

My friend, Pete Pinelli, grew up in a home inhabited by eight to twelve dogs at any given moment. A knock at the door or a ring of the bell would spawn a cacophony of barks and howls through his house, the reverberations bouncing off the marble floors and pulsating into the belly of a cavernous living room. Pete's parents, Ron and Sue Pinelli, were wealthy, and his mom proudly bred two types of dog: Irish Water Spaniels, large and boundlessly energetic, sporting curly black coats and mustard-colored eyes; and Löwchens, small Shih-Tzu-sized creatures whose oblivious affability make them feel more like animate ottomans than close companions. Within hours of my first visit to Pete's house, it became clear that the emotional rhythms of the home were dictated by the dogs, and that no one but Mrs. Pinelli held veto power over their outbursts. The slightest sound—be it a step on a creaking stair or the turning of a faucet—always ran the risk of inciting a chorus of incoherent cries. Only a resounding “HEY!” from her corner of the house could shut them up.

In my first years of friendship with Pete, these disembodied shouts were essentially all I could gather from his parents—rarely did I see or speak to them when I was over, presumably because they both had more pressing matters to attend to. Occasionally, Mr. Pinelli would approach us in the kitchen and, timidly twirling a glass of unknown liquid, try to initiate a conversation about matters that were entirely too adult for us, like politics or the weather. All I knew about Mr. Pinelli was that he had founded a company called AutoData, which I thought served as a sort of secret mediator between automakers, an invisible hand in an otherwise transparent market. Mired in adolescence, I imagined AutoData knocking unannounced on one manufacturer's door, dressed tastefully in a provocative gown and equipped with her most entertaining banter—she was wild with ambition, enamored with life, and irresistible. Over the course of a single night, she would prove her loyalty to BMW by whispering competitors' salacious secrets in his ear, her mouth's proximity suggesting inevitable romance, and he, intoxicated by her sweet breath, would break the most solemn of all oaths—to never share one's own autodata—just for a fleeting taste of her tongue. He'd shower her with gifts, all while telling her about fantasies of future plans and shocking new moves he'd pull out on the automotive dance floor, even divulging stories of childhood trauma and unseen sorrows. Brushing the hair aside from BMW's tear-ridden eyes, AutoData would kiss him on the cheek, thank him for a wonderful night and leave the house, satisfied and prepared to do the same with another, equally

well-off car manufacturer.

Maybe I came up with these fantasies because Mr. and Mrs. Pinelli seemed impossibly distant, resistant to any type of meaningful connection, and downright negligent. I figured parents who had nothing to do with their children were probably just too wrapped up in matters of intrigue to tend to the people they brought into this world, and that that was alright. Pete and his older brother, having recognized their parents' decidedly laissez-faire philosophy from a very early age and not knowing what else to do, spent most of their childhood in the concrete basement engulfed in online role-playing games and fan forums. That family was a mystery to me, and has remained so years after its sudden yet all-too-predictable dissolution.

In the summer of 2009, between my last year of high school and first year of college (perhaps the time in my life when I felt most hopeful), I needed a job. Pete's mom owned a small dog-grooming business and had been looking for cheap, expendable labor for a good while. It seemed like a perfect match. Canine Castle was nestled comfortably between a cell phone repair store and the aptly named "Laundromat" in a town practically identical to my own. It became clear to me within a few days that the Castle served two types of clientele. For some, it was exactly what it intended to be: a grooming service that could dependably wash and tailor a dog's appearance according to an owner's demands. But for others, the Castle acted as a sort of inverse sanctuary for people who'd grown sick of their pets, and not knowing what else to do when they needed a few hours alone at home, decided to get their pets groomed. More often than not, these folks were the Castle's regulars, and their dogs were the ones least in need of a bath. They dropped off their dogs in the earliest hours of the morning, often compensating for any misbehavior by screaming "SHUT UP!" and disdainfully shaking their heads before rushing to the exit as soon as I took the leash from their eager hands.

This was where my work began. As the resident dogwasher (Mrs. Pinelli did the actual *grooming*), I was responsible for taking the dog into the back room and placing it into either the metallic tub or one of many cages stacked into impossibly tall eight-foot columns, where dogs waited to get washed. Once in the tub, the dog was ready to be bathed as soon as his or her collar was fastened to a hook, rendering escape impossible. Then I'd pull out my shampoo hose, a sort of futuristic-looking black gun that spouted two powerful blue streams, and begin covering my subject in the viscous liquid.

Within seconds of the first squirt, any dog that entered the tub flaunting a regal fluff would be instantly reduced to skeleton and muscle. The contours of the dog's body, moments ago concealed by generous tufts, were now undeniable. The dog no longer seemed so dog-like. Its hair, pressed wet against the skin and practically transparent from the glow of the shampoo, literally traced the curves of its body, revealing a glistening pink or staunch white beneath. Every tumor, scab and birthmark had emerged from its hiding place to bask in the cold shower.

This disrobing evoked a wide array of reactions, all of which in some manner were expressions of profound shame. Some, like an old, decrepit Maltese, trembled wildly and looked frantically in all directions, holding onto the vain hope that her owner would show up any second to save her. Others ran in place, deluded into believing that they could escape their disgrace by absconding to an imagined asylum. Still others simply turned directly to me and barked, demanding that I put their clothes back on *immediately*. The only breed standing as an exception to this rule was the Standard Poodle, who in every single case stood stoic, gazing into the metallic distance with absolute dignity and an unmistakable valiance. To this day, I have great respect for the Standard Poodle<sup>1</sup>.

It was in these moments that I came to believe that clothing, having a biological precedent in the fur and hair of all mammals, is a cultural necessity. I imagined myself in the dogs' position, forced to bare themselves completely to a stranger, and I began to understand how much I, too, depended on clothes. Without anything to shield my body from those around me, would I not be just as anxious? Wouldn't I be overwhelmed by the judgment cast upon my nakedness, and immediately try to distract from my flaws with errant screams or wild contortions? In those first weeks of washing, I spent many hours trembling with those dogs, demoralized at the prospect of some day being thrown into the very same position. As long as it was covered by something—anything! even long hair!—my body could be nothing more than a subject of speculation to those I chose not to share it with, and as long as this was the case, I could remain at ease. There's something deeply comforting about living as a mystery—as long as no one is entirely sure of who or what you are, you always stand a chance at personal reinvention.

These dogs understood that. And I could therefore understand why they saw me as their deepest adversary. After a few days, I had no choice but to relinquish all hope of knowing any of the dogs on an intimate level, and quickly learned what it meant to have a “strictly professional” relationship. Though they were not even remotely aware of it, these dogs and I had entered into an unspoken pact, wherein I was to thoroughly wash and dry them, and they were to simply *deal with it*. Some, it goes without saying, were better than others.

There are those rare moments when working in the service industry—and yes, dog-washing is a service—when a client (presumably human) and an employee reach a mutual understanding that transcends the original transaction. Most often, this happens when the client vocally sets apart the person she is interacting with from the role that person must fulfill, and when the server, in turn, removes their obsequious veil to

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1 It is of utmost importance to the author that the Standard Poodle not be conflated with any other type of Poodle. Miniature Poodles, in particular, are some of the most petulant creatures he has ever met, and he insists that they not be given the type of respect owed their larger cousins.

reveal their naked humanity. The priest, adorned in a food-stained apron and astonished by the ravishing beauty of his minion's honesty, exits the booth to look the confessor directly in the eyes, and the two are united. A brief moment of eye contact, an unexplained chuckle, sometimes even a momentary caress will linger interminably before the waiter or cab driver must return to their proverbial booth and reassume their seat for the next customer. I've experienced this only a few times on either side of the booth, but each of these moments reacquaints me with a deep gratitude for life, and an understanding that the most ephemeral relationships can also be some of the most meaningful.

But how could one achieve this type of connection in a factory of canine cleanliness, a bathhouse for four-legged beings who don't know how to express much beyond one-word sentiments such as "me," "no," and "look," and who lack the capacity to understand abstract concepts like "work," "play" and "cleanliness"? Surely I could never look into the eyes of an impetuous pup and tell it that I never wanted to do this, that I just need some money so that I can go eat veggie burgers with friends at the Park Ridge Diner. I saw no choice but to remain disconnected from my clientele.

Despite my longstanding doubts, I was eventually able to share spiritual communion with a canine customer. We were introduced about a month into my first summer at the Castle, one balmy August morning. Perhaps what drew me to this particular dog was his uncanny resemblance to one of my sister's stuffed animals. He was a shaggy grey and white pooch named Doggy who I often puppeted and, despite proudly bearing his given name, accosted anyone who claimed he was anything other than human. Doggy was a gift for my sister from my father's father, a man whose relative absence in my life left me curious but altogether disinterested, so Doggy was quickly imbued with conflicting sentimental associations.

Maybe it was my customer's cheery disposition that drew me in, the unassuming kisses he showered my hand, the same hand which held the hose squirting shampoo onto his body, which remained entirely unashamed even after he had been reduced to about half of his original volume. As far as I could tell, this dog was the first, perhaps the only dog who forgave me, who understood that this was nothing more than a job, that I was not some sadistic undertaker who took pleasure in covering pups with unforgiving sterility.

But in truth, I think it was the small bulbous sac hanging from the center of his stomach, a benign growth resembling a half-empty water balloon. The sac dangled about three inches below his stomach, low enough for me to see it when he was propped up in the tub but not so low that one could notice it while simply standing next to him. It reminds me now of friends who have tattoos which require at least a few minutes of interaction before they can be noticed, feathers quietly rendered behind an ear or situated on the inside of an ankle.

When I first noted the sac, my trigger finger slowly eased off the shampoo gun,

as I was suddenly overcome with a strong sense that this dog only had a few more weeks to live. Sympathetic, I held open my palm as if to accept alms from a weary traveler and carefully placed it beneath the dog's veiny vesicle. It was soft to the touch and paper-thin, the shape of a perfectly symmetrical raindrop. I delicately stroked the cyst, twisted it, and eventually held it up to the chest of the dog and released it so that it would swing back and forth. The dog, ever affable, seemed just as unconcerned with my probing of his cyst as he'd been with the bathing. He licked my arm a few more times and glanced at me expectantly, as if to inquire what the hold-up was. The tumor had grown so large, I thought, that nerve endings had been destroyed and he could not even feel his own skin. Nevermind weeks, the poor guy only had *days* left.

Before I go on, you should know I am a hypochondriac. Any bodily irregularity on my own person, no matter how small, always indicates an obscure, incurable affliction. Days will pass in which something as trifling as a pimple or a memory lapse have me consumed in visions of impending death, or worse, a slow and irreversible decline (what most of us might call "aging"). And while I don't reserve the right to diagnose (or even acknowledge) the illnesses that other people may have, since they can make those determinations for themselves, I have always felt comfortable assessing animals' bodily conditions and making the same hysterical assumptions about their bodies as I would my own. It should come as no surprise, then, that a few days after this bath, I found out that the dog's growth was nothing more than a cosmetic nuisance called a polyp and that he was in perfectly good health. "That dog?" Mrs. Pinelli tittered. "He's had that damn bag since he started coming here, maybe three years ago."

But as long as I was so certain that he was bound to imminent death, the oblivious joy on the dog's face—quick pants, those enthralled eyes, his genial nature—suggested an uncanny awareness and acceptance of death's inevitability, a gentle resignation that gave way to a deep existential calm. For a few days, at least, I came to think of him as an earthly incarnation of Gratitude.

The workday at Canine Castle soon became something of a meditative act for me. As Mrs. Pinelli talked to customers and trimmed dogs' coats in the front of the store, I remained in the back, either washing or drying the guests. Sharing a space with no one but her and the dogs could be trying at times, since we didn't have much to talk about. She drowned out the silence by blasting New York's premiere pop radio station, Z100, overplaying odes to modern life intermingled with the barked complaints. I tried best I could to reduce their echoes to established, unalterable fact by focusing on concepts of cleanliness. Out of sheer necessity, my repertoire of bathing methods started expanding: knots of hair and gunk that had accumulated beneath the eyes had any number of potential solutions and were usually enough to distract from the Castle's hellish soundtrack. But when all else failed, drying offered the most effective means of muting the racket, since the blow-dryer belted a deafening moan that made everything else sound like birds anticipating a rising sun. The air hose, while a necessary part of

the primping process, also became a mark of absolute desperation. Once a dog was fully dried, I brought it out to the front so that Mrs. Pinelli could put her finishing touches on the pup's appearance. She and I would exchange a few genial words over the course of a day—maybe a friendly joke or two about how lazy Pete was and a satisfied smile as we closed the shop—but usually nothing more.

As I worked with Mrs. Pinelli each day, I came to recognize the ways in which her general attitude helped shape Pete's character. Her face evoked a kind of insistent indifference, a militant scoff that left little room for honest emotional connection. Faced with such a stoic facade, I can see why Pete, with nowhere else to turn, looked inward: he became a self-taught man of ideas whose mind can warp reality into intricate braids or pierce its membrane in moments, depending on what sort of mood he's in. He's a writer, a dancer, a person who effortlessly turns a moment into absurd reflections on culture or those unspoken expectations that we tend to forget just as quickly as we obey. But he's quiet, and sometimes doesn't know exactly what to say. This isn't for lack of thought, but rather because the flood of ideas in his mind is *too* large and forms a sort of neurological bottleneck, a crowd of ideas, all of them contradictory in some way, shouting at the top of their lungs as they vie for his approval. Sometimes I think that part of him is still sitting in that basement, swimming in his thoughts and never seeking personal affirmation because he never received it as a child and therefore never learned to *need* it. He recently said to me, "When art is good, it expresses new possibilities, and allows one experiencing the art to ride that wave. The wave is a sort of stand-in for love, like a human-sized doll." In lieu of a real one, Pete's family became the platonic world, the universe of ideas. With their company he taught himself how to become a deeply self-dependent person.

On a Wednesday in late August, close to the end of my second summer at the Castle, I made an unfortunate and perhaps avoidable discovery. Mrs. Pinelli poked her head into the backroom and started glancing around to make sure everything was in proper order. A few dogs were in their metal crates post-bath, dripping slowly onto the linoleum floor, and a Pomeranian was sitting in the tub, trembling in anticipation of the dreaded hose. She scratched her scalp for a moment and inspected her nails before finally looking at me.

"Hey, could you run to my car and grab my phone? I'm in the middle of a trim." She tossed me her keys and went back to the front.

Just as she had asked, I left the store and walked across the CVS parking lot to get to her car, a brand new SUV that had been a token of affection from Volkswagon to his red-hot mistress, AutoData. The phone was plainly visible, waiting on the arm rest.

This is where the story gets tricky. What I've always told Pete is that I unassumingly picked up the phone, and that right as I cast it a cursory glance before placing it into my pocket, a message five-words-long and impossible *not* to read popped up on her phone. It's entirely possible, though, that I "absent-mindedly" pressed a

button to illuminate the screen. Maybe, I don't know, I just needed to check the time? The truth is that I've told this story enough that a fictionalized version where I'm less culpable might have completely supplanted the actual memory. I therefore have no way of knowing what truly happened. In either case, though, I did see the message, and its implications were clear:

From: Bronn

Love you, honey.

Bronn always joined us at the Castle on Saturdays, the busiest day of the week, to help out around the shop. Her name, or its homonym, offers an apt enough description of her physical presence: tall, muscular, with short, dyed white hair and a naked mermaid prominently tattooed on her left calf. She was one of a few exceptional figures in an otherwise stereotypical suburb. Her 150-pound Saint Bernard, Elvis, would always accompany her to be bathed – his lips, too heavy to cover his teeth, would droop and shed long strands of saliva so thick that they sometimes took minutes to reach the floor. As long as he wasn't in the post-bath sop stage, he'd be given the sacred privilege of a small pillow to rest on, a throne from which he could look on the dogs who were confined to microcosmic condominiums. Bronn was a lively contributor, running back and forth between the back and front rooms to shuttle dogs between stations, snipping or bathing whenever either was called for, and helping me lift Elvis's massive ass into the tub. She made my life easier, without question, and her inclusion was always welcome as a result.

But in the seconds after I read that message, an assortment of seemingly trivial, disjointed details about Bronn and Sue started to align into a consistent story. Saturdays were the one day when Mrs. Pinelli could not give me a ride to and from the Castle, because she and Bronn always went to Bronn's house for what they'd always referred to as their weekly "Grooming Sleepovers," an innocuous enough label for an 18-year-old whose sleepovers had only ever been rooted in the deep glow of youthful, platonic friendship. The fact that I had never seen Mr. and Mrs. Pinelli interact in any meaningful way had never meant much to me. It just seemed to be an essential part of the Pinelli code of conduct, implicitly littered with preventive advisories: don't wake up anyone who is already asleep, clean up after yourself as much as possible, and try not to say anything to anyone unless it relates to essential material matters. Surely, the two family founders didn't speak to one another in public so that they could keep the unspoken family edict fully intact. Their nights in the same bed, I'd imagined, were abundant with tender words of comfort and displays of unbounded affection, clandestine kisses and gentle embraces that no one but they could ever know about. Sue would clutch Ron's shining bald head in her two hands like a crystal ball, her retinas cutting through his like needles through cloth, and the two would spend hours



communicating telepathically under the starry sky. But in that moment, I realized that a bed like theirs was large enough, perhaps even conceived, so that two grown people could sleep, toss, and never touch if they were so inclined.

My mind racing, I crossed the suburban moat-street and quietly re-entered the Castle. Mrs. Pinelli was engrossed in an intricate trim on a löwchen who was to be presented in a grooming show that week. You should know that out of all of the outlandish cuts that people requested for their dogs, the competitive löwchen's is perhaps the single most preposterous. The front three-quarters of the dog, carefully shampooed and combed, are sculpted into long, glorious falls that flow beneath the dog's torso. The idea is that when the löwchen saunters down the runway, the faint wind will pick up the wisps, and the hair will elegantly curl backwards to display the löwchen's whimsical yet courtly nature. The tip of the tail, impossibly curled upwards and grazing the löwchen's back, is also kept long, perhaps so that the disoriented viewer can look to the löwchen and determine which direction the wind is blowing in. But the most critical part of the cut is the dog's hindquarter which, ass included, is almost completely shaved. The only exceptions to this are the dog's feet, where the bare knees give way to upside-down anemones that delicately droop and graze the floor. Löwchen is German for "little lion," and this cut is supposedly intended to arouse images of the otherwise inimitable jungle king. But all I can see is an old man with a very long beard, wearing a large fur coat and cossack, knee-high boots, and no pants.

I stopped for a moment, ostensibly to admire her handiwork on Donny the löwchen and silently handed her the phone. She didn't even look at me. "Get back to work," she said, and so I retired to my chambers and returned my attentions to the fear-stricken Pomeranian.

All of this left me in a difficult position. As far as Pete could tell, his family nucleus was just as intact as ever, and though I don't think he was so emotionally invested in it, news that his mother was having a lesbian affair would probably shatter his understanding of the family dynamics. I felt just as obligated to tell him as I was to keep a secret that his mother had never intended to divulge.

For the next two weeks, I silently sat on the secret, considering all of its ramifications: Mrs. Pinelli was a lesbian, or at least romantically involved with a woman; Bronn wasn't just a friend who shared a passion for dogs; Mr. Pinelli was, for all intents and purposes, a single man. Surely, I thought, he must know what is going on, since it wasn't normal for any member of a middle-aged, married couple to spend every Saturday night three miles from home at a friend's place for "grooming sleepovers". In the shop, I began to notice furtive glances between Bronn and Sue that looked just like the ones I'd imagined Mr. and Mrs. Pinelli exchanging in their bed, and I saw a decidedly uncharacteristic smile spread across Sue's face when she and Bronn were in the same room.

I began to wonder. Did Mrs. Pinelli have any intention of ever telling her two

sons what was going on? Was the affair simply going to continue indefinitely, until Pete and his brother left the house and Mrs. Pinelli no longer had a reason to pretend she was just your typical suburban mom? Was Mr. Pinelli seeing other women to ease the pain, and did he even give a shit to begin with? Was it possible that he really didn't know? Right around the same time, he'd been watching *The Perfect Storm* starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg every night in the living room at full volume – was this some sort of coping mechanism? Were the raging tempests and the movie's general sense of helplessness apt reflections of his own existential crisis? Was he blasting the volume every night to piss off his wife, an exceptionally light sleeper, or was he doing it so that he could better immerse himself in someone else's desperate condition and leave leave his own behind? And what was my role in all of this? Did I have any right to poke my head into that dark basement and tell Pete, “Hey, your mom is having an affair with a woman?” To whom was I more beholden, my employer or my closest friend?

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About two years later, long after I'd finished spending my summers at the Castle, Pete called me late in the night. We hadn't spoken for a few weeks.

“Hey, how's it going?”

Pete stammered for a bit. He usually does when a conversation is starting. “I'm doing alright,” he said. “I've got bad news.”

“What's up?”

“Well, uh...my dad is dead.”

Ever since Sue had divorced him and moved with Bronn to a large plot of land in rural Virginia, Mr. Pinelli had taken up a number of old hobbies that he'd neglected for years: boating, motorcycling, and, most frequently, ballroom dancing. The last time I'd seen him, about three months earlier, he was arriving home from a salsa class and possessed of an unusually gregarious attitude. The top three buttons of his shirt were undone and his grey chest hairs peered out at us like newly hatched chicks. A vibrancy I hadn't encountered before seemed to emanate from the man, a lust for life that up until that moment I never thought he had. He laughed wildly, drank his whiskey unabashedly, made some stupid jokes about nothing at all. Pete and I, sitting awkwardly in the kitchen, had had no choice but to laugh. Now, I'd found out he had had a fatal heart attack in the middle of a dance class.

He left behind an unwieldy assortment of objects to his two sons: about 30 guns, including handguns, semi-automatics and hunting rifles that he kept in two separate lockers in his bedroom closet; an extensive toy train collection; a vast inventory of wines and liquors, including an unopened bottle of Death's Door Vodka that Pete had gotten him for his most recent birthday; and, of course, an abundance of cars. Sorting through

the artifacts unearthed by his death amounted to a kind of unveiling of his truest self, or at least what could be made of it. The guns suggested fear of an impending apocalypse; the colognes, a refined olfactory palate. Pete found a journal in which his dad had jotted down notes during a Carnival cruise to the Bahamas – “It *feels* good to *look* good,” he’d written in the middle of an otherwise blank page.

The memorial was held a month later in an Italian restaurant not too far from Canine Castle. Pete would later find out that this was in fact the same restaurant where his father attended ballroom dance classes, and, yes, where he had unexpectedly died of a heart attack. It strikes me as bizarre that the owners would allow such a service to take place in their restaurant, a memorial for what I’d imagine is the only soul to have ever perished inside their walls, and what’s more, that they would accept payment for the event without telling the grieving family that this was the same place where the man had died. But business, I guess, remains business.

The urn holding Mr. Pinelli’s ashes sat in front of a screen which scrolled through pictures of him on the dance floor, in the office, at dinner and on the beach. People watched the pictures, ate selections from the buffet, sat next to each other and reminisced. I sat with Pete, told him I loved him and that I was sorry for his loss, but we had little to say beyond that. A palpable sense of confusion permeated the room, a speechlessness induced both by the suddenness of this man’s death and his relative anonymity to each of us. Two people clinked their glasses midway through the service and had generic but warm things to say about Ron: that he was a kind man, a funny man, a hard-working fun-loving risk-taking back-breaking son-of-a-gun who had so much more time to live on this earth, and who had had it all taken away from him in a fleeting second, that microscopic moment between one beat and the next.

Sue, who had come to the service to pay her respects to her late ex-husband, took a moment to sit next to Pete when he was alone. Even though she and Bronn had moved to Virginia months before, and even though Pete had visited them in their new home, she had never explicitly acknowledged their romantic involvement, and I guess she assumed that Pete was too oblivious to know any better. As she sat with him at the table, and emboldened by the shock of loss, or perhaps compelled to truth by it, she turned to him and took his hand for what might have been the first time in years. “I want you to know something,” she said. “For the past few years, Bronn and I have been romantically involved.”

A silence, almost but not quite infinite. And then Pete responded in the most un-Pete-like manner possible – impulsively. “I know,” he blurted, “Bennett told me.”

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I’ve since spoken to Sue, almost always to ask for a job recommendation for some place or another, and she’s more than happy to oblige – “Yeah, put my name down!” she

consistently exclaims over the phone. It's bewildering to me that she doesn't loathe me for telling Pete her secret, or that she isn't mystified by how I knew in the first place. But then, I come to think, maybe she always wanted him to know, or even *expected* him to know. Maybe she hoped he would approach her about it with his arms open and his eyes glistening, ripe with tears of forgiveness. Maybe what's scary about being exposed isn't the exposure itself, but rather the assumption that in *choosing* to reveal ourselves to another, we make it abundantly clear that we want, or even need, their approval and acceptance. Clothing—physical, emotional, and otherwise—becomes compulsory not because we don't want to be seen, but because we don't want other people knowing that we *do* want to be seen. So we stand in the tub, waiting for someone else to strip us bare before we have no choice but to do it ourselves.