

We are marching to beats most-unheard, no doubt, here at THE2NDHAND co-HQ in Nashville, Tenn., our new home base. We’ve already run into former coworkers from Chicago, fraternized with a coeditor two hours up the road in Louisville and conspired the relaunch of a long-overdue THE2NDHAND reading series, which met with hiccups in November. Catch the launch of **SO YOU THINK YOU HAVE NERVES OF STEEL?** Jan 14, 2010, at the venerable Quimby’s Bookstore, 1854 W. North, Chicago. A featured writer a month riffs on the question in the series’ title, in whatever manner he or she deems appropriate. Consider it a sort of extended experimental collaboration in the style of THE2NDHAND’S Pitchfork Battalion series. Expect verbal, and perhaps literal, fireworks throughout. The rest, well, we hope you expect good things. We do.

In the first installment: THE2NDHAND stalwart **Jill Summers** and Chicago playwright and fiction writer **Chris Bower**. Contributor and Columbia College faculty member **Amanda Marbais**, then, rounds out the program with a new member of the team as host, one **Harold Ray** (aka ACM fiction editor and THE2NDHAND coeditor **Jacob Knabb**), vying for the janitor post with the ever-absent Rufus Bready. On Feb. 8 at Whistler in Logan Square, then, the second installment will feature **Kyle Beachy** (*The Slide*) and the author of this our 33rd broadsheet, **Kate Duva**, a longtime contributor whose work you’ll be familiar with from THE2NDHAND.com. If not, visit her page in the archives: the2ndhand.com/archive/archiveduva.html.

****BACK ISSUES** are available as free pdf downloads at **THE2NDHAND.com** or for \$2 (or three stamps) per issue to editor/publisher Todd Drills at the (note new) Nashville address below. If you like surprises, a sampler package of 5 issues is available for \$4, and lifetime subscriptions for donations of \$30 or more. We shall survive either fire, flood or earthquake, be assured (in the event of nuclear holocaust, all bets are off). Consider it (paypal todd@the2ndhand.com or send check by mail; info: **THE2NDHAND.com**). **RSS:** the2ndhand.com/rss the2ndhand.xml. ****WRITERS:** send prose submissions (2,500 words or less Web, 5,000 print) to THE2NDHAND, c/o Todd Drills, 1430 Roberts Ave., Nashville, TN 37206 (todd@the2ndhand.com) or C.T. Ballentine (email only: ctballentine@gmail.com). THE2NDHAND is **editors** Todd Drills, C.T. Ballentine, Jacob Knabb, Alan Snyder, **FAQ editor** Mickey Hess, and **janitor** R. Bready.

LIFE ON THE FRONTIER

by Kate Duva

I PUT CESAR TO BED AT 7:30 in a yellow t-shirt and ginormous double diapers. He drifts off to a nature cassette, *cricket* and *ribbit*, and a chorus of fans to keep him from overheating. I pat him; he’s already fallen into a sweet snooze. Cesar is a year older than me. He can’t speak. He can’t look me in the eye. He doesn’t understand English; only the language of hand-claps and pats, “Auld Lang Syne” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” He’s cortically blind. *God cut a wire in his brain stem*, they told me. *He can see light, but not shapes.*

Cesar goes to school with a change of clothes, three diapers, and plastic leg braces. He has a correspondence log on the back of his wheelchair so home staff and day staff can communicate: *BM at 10:30 a.m. Soft, large. OTHER NOTES: Cesar had a great time in the ball pit today. He shook a maraca independently.*

WHEN I FIRST FLOATED through homes like this, this is what I thought: *why are they being kept alive?* Then I fell into the groove of it. Now I take care of Cesar like he’s my child. I give him his breathing treatments, outfitting him with a plastic vapor mask that makes him look like a baby elephant. He never whines when I strain to lift him onto his changing table, or put his diapers on backward and have to take them off and do the whole thing again. He doesn’t flinch when I pull his eyelids apart out of curiosity; his eyeballs just flounder.

Cesar rejoices in the freedom of being naked. He swats at his penis in the cool shower while I lather up his spiky black hair. Water beads his black eyelashes, sparkling like diamonds. Fresh and clean. Double diapered. Back to bed.

I dropped Cesar one time. I never told anyone. His eyes popped out when he fell, but I could tell it wasn’t the first time. I had unbuckled him from his wheelchair and scooped him limp into my arms and I just had him wrong. The air was hot and still and he made a slight pig noise as he landed on the carpet. By the time I bolted to the floor, shoved my arms under him, and mustered his body onto the bed, my neck was already wet. I stood there catching my breath before I slapped up the guardrails. Blew on the fan. Set in play his tape of nature sounds.

“We had babbling brook last night. How about forest? ... I’m sorry, Cesar. I’m sorry.” I held his hand. The crickets began to sing. Wind rustled through pines.

In the office, I sign my initials for every pill I’ve given Cesar. I fill out a chart indicating how he spent each hour (*Eating, Personal care, Leisure*). I do the dishes and fold hot laundry. I wipe mashed potatoes off Cesar’s keyboard. The graveyard guy arrives, and I go home.

MY APARTMENT HAS NO furniture besides the Murphy bed. The cat meows for food. The trash bag brims with interesting items: eggshells, urine litter cakes, scrapings from the side of the egg pan, and a rape awareness pamphlet. Dead roses, a gift from my mother, lay crushed on the floor, knocked down in a windstorm. Dingy diagrams from old thrift shop science textbooks line the walls. The life cycle of a daphnia. The impact of an earthquake. The monthly wax and wane of the lining of the womb.

I MOVED TO NEW MEXICO a few months ago simply because it seemed like the most exotic place in the continental United States. Then I looked for an “exotic” job. I like taking care of people, but there’s something else: I’m a voyeur. I took this job for the same reason that I wander the streets at dinner time, trying to spy in everybody’s windows. With this job, I can get inside.

I’m a floater. Staff members call me when they want a day off. *It’s my birthday*, they might say, or *I’ve got jury duty* or *I’m going to Florida. Can you sub for me?* I fill in at the group homes, ranch houses spread across Albuquerque. They’re stocked with warehouse rice bags, rows of canned vegetables, and oodles of Hamburger Helper. Often, the refrigerators are locked. The carpets are always beige and the walls are always white. A Norman Rockwell or faux Monet is a

rare treat; more often the walls are bare, except for various state standards and the federal minimum wage notice in the office, along with the numbers of supervisors, directors, nurses and doctors, therapists and Poison Control.

I attended all my training sessions. I took notes on various types of seizures. I kissed the CPR dummy. My fellow trainees and I practiced restraining one another and we watched hideous first aid videos: how to dress a wound, cool a burn, stop a stump from spurting. I learned to be sensitive. *Say he HAS cerebral palsy, not he SUFFERS from cerebral palsy. He USES a wheelchair, not he is CONFINED to a wheelchair. Focus on the positive. Don’t call them patients. Never call them customers. They are individuals, guys. We refer to them as Individuals.*

“THE INDIVIDUALS NEED showers every day,” said the supervisor at the first home they sent me to. “It’s in their service plans. If they refuse, you gotta give ’em a sponge bath to save your butt. You can get slapped with neglect charges for that kind of thing.”

“Wow,” I mumbled, “*I don’t shower every day.*”

I showered Ben, a lumpy man in his 60s. His feet were dry and flaky, grayish purple from bad circulation. They looked like they were dying. He bent over, sudsing himself, muttering “Mommy... soap up... Mommy...” I put on plastic gloves and pointed out places he’d missed.

Ben combed his hair until every strand fell out that could, and the rest stood perfect and weary. He picked up a second comb and did it again. “Yeah, Mommy,” he grunted. “OK, Mommy.” He picked up a brush and did it one more time. Finally, I shaved him. I had no idea how to shave a man, how hard to go. I cut him once, and he just blinked.

We went to Ben’s room, where one wall was plastered with snapshots of himself posing before various fire engines.

“You must really like fire engines, Ben.” “Yeah, Mommy.”

He pulled on his own diapers and plaid pajamas and trudged down the hall, grunting softly.

“Sit down, Ben,” a staff member said. “Sit down and watch TV.”

“Yeah, Mommy.” He sat in front of the television, watching moving shapes, never grasping their pattern.

The TV blared all night long. We saw two court shows featuring sassy judges who told it like it was; a talk show (*Is your teen’s secret sex diary true? TAKE THE TEST!*); and a show in which a sexy, stylish broad agreed to slide down a big black pyramid in Las Vegas and grab a certain number of orange flags along the way. She did not collect enough flags to win \$50,000 and she landed weeping.

Outside the window, beyond rows of ranch homes, the sun set on a chain of ashy, nipplish volcanoes. *What if they matched Fantasia?* I wondered. *What if they had a garden, or went camping, or danced? What if staff turned off the tube and took them for a walk instead?*

Dinner was sloppy joes. Fernando, Ben’s roommate, emerged in a floral apron and cardboard Burger King crown to stir the sizzling beef.

He was bowlegged and thin as a broom; when he smiled, his eyes wandered out of symmetry.

“You’re so cute!” he told me. “You’re cute too!” I said.

Fernando’s favorite place to go was the Family Dollar. After dinner, he showed me his latest purchase: a life-size novelty traffic light.

Picture a very young, pimply blond woman who doesn’t know that she is pretty sitting with two aging retarded Latino men, playing Family Dollar bingo. The traffic light warms their faces, flashing red, yellow, green. Red, yellow, green. *Go.* Fernando churns the plastic bingo balls, squints, and announces each one. *N49. G33.* I catch his eyes and they look like anyone’s: beautiful, human and wise. Eyes are eyes.

ONE FRIDAY NIGHT SOON after I was hired, I checked out Merry-Makers, a monthly community dance party. In a giant rec room, they jammed to salsa and country music, disco and R&B. A thin, moony-faced boy in glasses and a turquoise windbreaker followed me down the hall. “Let’s swap numbers—why not?” he whined. “Come on...”

I witnessed wet washing-machine kisses between a woman with a prominent forehead and a man with hearing aids and a Raiders logo shaved into his hair. Other couples gave each other soft pecks on the lips or let their hands veer gently down each other’s backs during the slow dance.

Everyone who can consent has the right to a sexual relationship, my training echoes in my brain. *But you have to educate them really carefully. We had one lady who ended up pregnant and couldn’t understand why—she said, “We put the condom on the banana every time!”*

BARBARA’S RECORD BOOK is so fat that pages are falling out. Sexually abused by her stepfather, removed from her family by the state.

Barbara reports a happy childhood and a happy family. She left the group home for one month in 1993 to follow a boyfriend to Las Vegas. She came back “disappointed” and lived alone. She met men on the streets and brought them home; she says she was raped.

Barbara has a bird nose, poodle hair, and thick owly glasses. Jigsaw puzzles clutter her walls, glazed with glue and preserved for all eternity. There are puppies, kittens, and two baby fawns. She putters around, arranging her things with a mature dignity. She smooths her pillow with great care. I understand my training better now: *don’t compare them to children. Don’t think of her as seven. Think of her as 38, a woman with a lifetime of experiences.* But she, and many of the people I meet, don’t seem to realize that I have a name, or that when I leave the house, I go somewhere else, not just gone. She and her roommates are oblivious to each other. Are they lonesome? Or just a world of one?

WOMEN IN THE BARS OF Albuquerque call him Senor Pelvis, because of the way he dances. He’s a lean, spry man who wears spectacles and a manatee charm on a silver chain. He used to care

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for sea mammals in a fun park in Puerto Rico, but now he’s a landscaper. He calls me up and says, *My, you look beautiful swinging in that hammock*, and there he is, parked under my window. I remember what it feels like to be touched. On the leg. On the flank. On the butt. Three strawberry daquiris, a few gyrations on the dance floor, and I am his.

My man-friend lives in a tiny adobe house guarded by a foam deer, riddled with holes from his bow and arrow. I call him my man-friend because I am 21 and he is old enough to be my father. He’s been alone for a very long time. His bedsheets are black and on his dresser he keeps a receipt from every item he has purchased since he came to America. He has photos of himself in the hills of Colombia wearing a white lab coat, analyzing coffee yields. He pulls special tricks, like feeding me beer in a kiss and swiping cool strawberries between my legs. He sleeps with one arm around me and one arm around my cat. He tells me he can’t wait to see our babies.

MY JOB INTRODUCES ME to people with autism, Organic Brain Syndrome, cerebral palsy, and countless conditions I never learn how to pronounce. I meet victims of Hypoxia: deprived of oxygen for just a few moments at birth, regions of their brains shriveled forever. Some people, I discover, are mentally retarded because they were shaken as babies or abused so deeply they just shut down. Mostly, though, I meet unknowns. *In 70 percent of cases of mental retardation*, says a handout I received at training, *the cause is unknown*.

Jimmy’s an Unknown. He’s a tiny man who scrunches his sweatpants up to his knees, revealing milky white bird legs above his blue cowboy boots. When I first tried to shake his hand, Jimmy’s mouth churned like he was savoring some cud, and a noxious, painful sound rose. He was grinding his teeth. I watched him place his hands on imaginary handlebars and rev up. Standing in place, he rode a motorcycle, bobbing up and down. I could almost see the wind in his hair. Suddenly, he cackled like a cartoon witch, slapped his own ass, and rocketed to his room as if the slap provided the impetus. He trotted right back out, licking his fingers to flip the pages of a ragged catalog. It was a classifieds for motorcycles, crammed with tiny black and white photos. *“Ab-dub-dub-dub-dab! Ditta-dab-dab-dab-dab!”* Jimmy’s speech was indecipherable; he sounded like a stump-tongued, apocalyptic Elmer Fudd. He flopped to his belly on the carpet. While gazing at his catalog, he swiveled his hips slowly, side to side, in the same way I screwed my stuffed animals as a child.

Later, Jimmy lumbered out of his room clutching a shiny compact disc. He shoved it into the stereo and frantically bipped from track to track. Finally he settled on *«Cracklin’ Rosie, get on board...»* He walked away frowning triumphantly, hands in fists above his head, and tottered across the carpet in his cowboy boots. He zigzagged about as if he wanted to dance, but was locked forever on some lonely planet where rhythm escaped like vapor. *«Play it now! Play it now, baby!...»*

“No one really knows why Jimmy’s so obsessed with Neil Diamond,” staff told me. “Our only guess is that a staff member he loved back at the institution might’ve have been a fan.” Jimmy shot his arms in the air and he uttered the only word in his vocabulary: “*YAY-uh!!!!*”

HERBALISTS. HEAD SHOPS. Gun shops. Taxidermists. This is the

frontier. Home of the atomic bomb, top secret military operations, and an annual hot air balloon fiesta. I have neighbors who slap their girlfriends and call them *Bitch*; I have neighbors who worship feathers and bury crystals in the earth under each full moon. I meet mothers who fill their children with soy milk and tofu turkey, and mothers who send their tiny sons to the rodeo in helmets and sequined chaps to be thrown off bucking sheep in the opening rounds. “This is God’s Country.” Now I understand what they mean. Sunsets still knock the wind out of me. Every evening, for a fleeting moment, they turn the Sandia mountains—the *watermelons*—a scrumptious pink. When I first arrived, I was infatuated with the hot sun, slow days and gardens decorated with bones and junk. I was sure I would spend years here. But I’ve given my two-week notice and I’m running back home.

MY MAN-FRIEND HAS INSISTED on scrubbing my floors to save my security deposit. “I know why you are leaving,” he says as he dips for suds. “I am old. I’m ugly. I know.” He’s wearing a polo shirt silk screened with a photograph of his Rottweiler, who died three months ago. When I mention the dog, he gets tears in his eyes.

I CRUISE TO THE MALL with a man named Chuck listening to achy-breaky tunes on a Sunday morning. At 8:15, we pull into the vast, eerily empty lot and sit on a bench waiting for the doors to open. Chuck is nearly bald but sports a ducktail. He tells me that he’s divorced; that he once had a driver’s license; and that he has a girlfriend named Phyllis. I wonder if he knows he is retarded.

Once granted entrance to the mall, we pass the jewelry pagoda, where Chuck tells me he purchased a diamond ring for Phyllis. But this week he blew his allowance on bowling and a pack of cigs, and has 14 cents to his name. He stops to gaze at Betty Boop paraphernalia. “My mom loved Betty Boop,” he says solemnly. We pass an outlet for rebels, painted in flames; a black leather bra and matching miniskirt hang in the window. “I could picture you in that,” Chuck says to me.

Chuck is only borderline retarded, the supervisors told me, *but he’s severely depressed*. The kitchen knives are under lock and key in the office. Chuck seems fine to me. But he downs six different antidepressants a day.

We go to a brand-new church—“they spent a million dollars to build it,” Chuck tells me—situated amidst suburban sprawl at the edge of the desert. There is a vat of holy water big enough to be a hot tub, a jocular priest and some gentle musical praises to our Lord. The guitarist’s hair is parted severely on one side; he avoids all rhythm. A severely disabled woman in another pew bangs her head to her own rhythm. The place resounds with the cries of babies. Chuck whispers in my ear, “let’s go.”

In the car, he confesses, “I kinda get bored in church. But it reminds me of my Mom. She’d be happy to know I go.”

Some moms, like Chuck’s, are dead. Some swoop in for Sunday brunch and disappear for the rest of the week. Other moms, like Cesar’s, disappeared decades ago.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES. Each individual has a chart of goals and objectives on file. Chuck would like to

get more exercise by walking in the neighborhood or at the mall. Fernando would like to get a girlfriend. *He needs to learn that relationships start first as friendships, before they can move on to the next level*. Cesar’s official goal is to *pick up his juice cup, take a drink, and set it back down on his tray*. Every evening I am to record how well he achieved this goal on a scale of 1 to 3. I put the sipper cup in his hands; he throws his head back and chugs. And chugs. And chugs. He flings the cup to the floor; cranberry gurgles onto the carpet. To hell with it. I initial the chart and mark a 3. “Very successful.”

I look at Cesar, sitting in his wheelchair, slamming his hand blindly on a keyboard, *whoa, whoa, whoa...* Flute mode. “Jingle Bells” begins to play, and he bops his head and grins. *I love it when he thinks he’s made a song!* a staff member tells me. She’s been here 8 years and she knows him like a son. *Put on COPS during dinner*, she tells me, *that’s his favorite show*.

He has a favorite show? I say. *He’s blind*. It’s the siren sounds. Of course. He loves the sound of sirens.

I snap on Cesar’s bib. He can’t chew, so I puree everything and feed it to him bite by bite, slipping his anti-anxiety drugs in the pudding. A lucky finger strikes the cha-cha key and the keyboard breaks into Latin beats. *Gneee!* He squeals and grins, with his big knobby teeth—his eyes are slits, his head is jelly, it rolls around and around in circles. Cesar’s fist bonk-bonk-bonks on his tray, sending the ground beef and mac-and-cheese flying. His head is in the groove, and his grin is growing wider.

After dinner, when I come back from loading the dishwasher, Cesar will be hunched in his wheelchair, his arm smashed dead against the keys; they’ll emit an endless drone, and he’ll look blank, like he’s vacated his body. On the television, a handcuffed woman will scream a stream of obscenities, each drowned out by its own *beep*.

MY MAN-FRIEND AND I stand on a garbage bin and he hoists me onto the roof of his little adobe home. He hands me a six-pack. We will sleep up here tonight. He will hold my hand as I pee off the roof. In the morning, he will give me a pen and ask me to select five numbers for the week-end Powerball jackpot.

“What, do you think I’m magical?” “Yes, mi amor.”

My identity is gas, scattering and dissipating everywhere. I got what I wanted—I got inside all kinds of places. I got all kinds of people inside of me.

I SPEND MY LAST FULL day in New Mexico with Jimmy. I should be packing, but when I get the call to fill in, I can’t resist. I watch him ride his imaginary motorcycle, slap his own ass, and attempt several disastrous somersaults. Then he goes nutty for buttons, flipping wildly through the channels of the TV, twisting knobs, saturating the screen with color, then draining it.

“Hey Jimmy. Do you wanna go to the aquarium?” He rockets his arms in the air. *“YAY-uh!”* Before we leave, I give him his noontime pills in a dinosaur Dixie cup. He swigs them dry and chews them like candy.

Jimmy brings the case of his Neil Diamond CD along for the ride. When he tires of gazing at Neil, he sets his sight on some buttons. He plows through the radio—ranchero, R&B, country twang... Heat blows in my face, and the rear

defroster kicks up. We cruise quite a while before I realize the emergency lights are blinking. “Let’s leave Neil here,” I suggest in the parking lot. “You don’t wanna lose ‘im.” I try to wrestle the jewel case from his grip. “You don’t need Neil now, we’re gonna go look at fish!” Jimmy explodes. He thrashes against his seatbelt like a bucking bronco, flails his arms in the air, smacks his own head, brutalizes the dashboard, and finally takes a violent chomp on my arm.

“OOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWW!” Jimmy’s teeth sink through my pink sweater and break the skin. “JIMMY! Whoa! Calm down, Jimmy! Do you wanna go home?”

He stops and stares at me with his tiny little boy-old man face. His eyes are moist. They say, “jay-uh.”

Jimmy sits with his hands on his knees the entire ride home. At a long red light, as the turn signal tic-tic-tics, he peels my hand off the steering wheel and kisses it. The kiss says, *“I’m sorry.”*

«SONG SUNG BLUE, WEEPIN’ *like a willow...»*

Jimmy takes the spot right next to me on the couch. He frowns; maybe he would like to leave his lonely planet. I fill out an Incident Report, and follow my supervisor’s orders—every employee involved in an Incident must go take a drug test. Immediately. As soon as another floater comes to replace me, I’m gone.

Rain has rocked the desert, like the bursting of a million bags. The skies are lavender, sweet and smeary. The whole world looks wistful and weary, like it’s had a good cry. I pull up to a glassy highrise on the edge of a dusty wasteland and enter the same laboratory where I proved my chemical innocence six months ago in order to get hired.

The process of analyzing my piss begins. I produce my state-issued picture ID. I clear my pockets and lock all my possessions in a cubby. A woman waits outside the door while I pee into blue toilet water, catching a sample in a cup labeled with my name and social security number. *Don’t flush*, she has told me. *If you flush, it’s all over!* When I’m done, she checks the toilet and wastebasket for signs of urinary fraud. I sign on a line, swearing that my fluids are “unadulterated”; she takes the urine’s temperature, to make sure it’s been inside my body, not inside my sock.

I LEFT MY MAN-FRIEND behind and I drove home through the desert and the plains. My bruise grew to the size of a fist and bloomed into a series of outrageous, dirty rainbows. My mother took one look at it and took me for a tetanus shot. I rolled up my sleeves and showed it off to my friends, my family, people I met in bars. When I met the man who would become my husband, the bruise was only a shadow.

I never looked back. It was a long time before I realized that those people must still be alive, being shaved by other floaters, having their pads changed, riding to church and foraging through the mall. Puttering, patting pillows, basking in the sun, playing with flashing lights, and thrashing in their sleep, stuck in those same murky dreams we all have, the ones that last all night but never let us in on their secrets. If they’re lucky, some may be dancing, as loving hands veer down their backs. Calling out, *Bingo!* Sucking luscious juice from sipper cups while savoring sounds of sirens in the dark. I walked out the door and forgot about them. But they’re still there, living on the frontier.

END



GROCERY STORE LAUNCHPAD
by C.T. Ballentine
Merth and Carmen always hold hands when they walk to the grocery store. Even when it's cold. On their way home the weighted plastic tears into their fleshy palms. Sometimes they buy a large bag of long grain rice. Sometimes they buy a sack of potatoes. But never on the same trip-that's too much weight. They learned that the hard way.
Outside the front gate Merth has something to say.
"Did you ever..." he starts.
"Did I ever what?" asks Carmen.
"Oh, never mind."
"No, tell me."
"It's nothing. I forgot already."
"You did not."
"I did."
Carmen's father calls. They talk for a while; then Carmen starts cleaning the apartment. She always does that after her father calls. Now she's scrubbing at coffee stains with a blue sponge. Those stains have been there for a while. They're not going anywhere.

Merth is watching a documentary about the space program. He doesn't want to clean the apartment. But he hates feeling lazy.
"Do you need help?" he asks.
"No, I'm fine."
"Are you sure?"
"I like doing this."
"You do not."
"I do. It relaxes me."
"You don't look relaxed."
"That's why I need relaxing."
Merth gets up and hugs her from behind. He turns the television off. He kisses the back of her neck. He's pretty sure she likes that, but he can't remember. Maybe it was one of his old girlfriends who liked that.
Carmen does like it. She smiles. Who doesn't like having the back of their neck kissed?
For dinner, Merth and Carmen have potatoes and broccoli.
"Do we have any more rice?" he asks her.
"You want rice with your potatoes?" She wrinkles her nose.
"No, I was just wondering." He takes a bite. "I thought I might pick some up tomorrow. If we were out."
"Oh. There's about half a bag left. We should

be fine. For about a week, anyway."
"That's good."
They finish eating and wash their dishes with the blue sponge. They've never had a dishwasher. Merth doesn't like them. Carmen doesn't care either way. Merth washes and Carmen dries. Afterward they sit on the couch together.
"Do you want to finish watching that documentary now?" asks Carmen.
"It's already over," he tells her.
"Oh," she says.
"It'll be on again, I'm sure."
"I thought it was a tape."
"No."
"I'm sorry."
"That's OK. It'll be on again."
Carmen rubs the back of his neck. Her palms are soft and warm. Merth smiles.
They go to bed together, Carmen and Merth. They cuddle close and kiss. They do not make love. Merth doesn't mind. Carmen does, sort of.
Merth dreams that he is an astronaut. In his dream, he has always wanted to be an astronaut. He has worked long and hard to get where he is. Today is the big day. Today he is going to the moon. In his dream Merth is very old.
Outside the launch pad Merth is kissing

Carmen goodbye. They hug close. Merth feels Carmen's hands on his skin. They are no longer soft; they are rough and calloused. Merth's rocket explodes into the dreamy sky.
In his dream, Merth is sad. This is all he has ever wanted, to be out in space, but he is sad nonetheless. All he can think about is Carmen's hands, how they aren't as soft as they used to be. As the Earth fades into a tiny ball below him, he wants to leap from the rocket's tiny window and fall all the way to the grocery store.
"I love you, Carmen," he says, but she can't hear him because he is in space.
When they wake the next morning Merth wants to make love. Carmen smiles.
"There isn't time," she says.
"We could make time," says Merth.
"We have to go to work," says Carmen, still smiling.
The two walk to work together, Merth and Carmen. They hold hands the entire way to the train.