

SCOTT NOEL

Portrait of Bettina, 2014
Oil on linen, 40 x 38 in



COURTESY GROSS MCCLEAF GALLERY

CHRISTINE SNEED

Good Works

To: tdickinson@goodmail.com
From: shannonk@mercersmith.com
Date: 7 May--22:52--

Dear Todd,

I know it's been many years since we last saw each other, and I hope you still remember me. Lately I've been thinking about you. (This isn't the only reason, but there's a moving company in Chicago that shares your last name and their trucks have been in my neighborhood a lot this year.) Was it our ten-year reunion when we last saw each other? And now we're almost forty. My mother likes to say that growing older is better than the alternative, but I don't see how we can grow younger. (She doesn't think it's funny when I say this either!)

I found your email address in the directory that the twenty-year reunion organizers sent around to everyone last summer. I hoped you'd be there, but someone told me you're living in Hawaii now. How is that? Pretty great, I bet. This will probably sound strange, but the question just popped into my head—do you live near a nude beach? I don't know if I'd ever be able to go to one of those. Do you have a boat?

The reason I'm writing is that I recently inherited some money (from my great-aunt Hannah, who was ninety-six and still drove! She didn't die in a car accident though—it

was heart failure, in her sleep). She left part of her money to my brother Peter and me. We were like her grandchildren, she always told us. Proxy grandchildren, because she didn't have any of her own, or kids either, for that matter—lucky for us, I guess you could say. Like the nude beach question, this will probably sound strange, but I decided that I want to give away part of what she left me. You're one of the people I want to give some of it to. I don't have a compelling reason except that you were always so nice when we were in symphonic band together junior and senior year. Do you remember when I broke the reed for my clarinet during practice, and you lent me one of yours because I didn't have an extra one with me that day? When I tried to return it to you the next morning, you let me keep it, even though I'd washed it (at the time, I was kind of offended that you wouldn't take it back, but I think you really did want me to keep it because you were generous, not because you didn't want to put your lips where mine had been).

I'm wondering if you'd be willing to email me your mailing address? I'd really like to send you a gift. It's not going to be big but I thought maybe you could use it to treat yourself to something you don't ordinarily buy for yourself, like that expensive protein powder some guys I know use because they're body builders (or pretend they are)—that powder is around fifty or sixty dollars a container. I once dated a guy who used it and my eyes almost dropped out of their sockets when I looked at his GNC receipt when I was in his kitchen by myself. And this was a guy who'd never pay the extra dollar for a carton of organic blueberries. He always got the conventionally grown ones and I'm sure we both now have a lot of pesticides racing through our bloodstreams. (I know I didn't have to eat the berries, but I don't have a lot of willpower sometimes.)

I'm not implying that you should be using protein powder because you need bigger muscles or anything. I don't know what you look like these days. And even if you were very skinny, that wouldn't matter to me.

Anyway, enough of me putting my foot in my mouth.

One other thing. Just so you know, this isn't a scam where I'll tell you to send me money before I'll send you a check. I've heard about how some people have lost thousands of dollars to scammers in Montreal or Nairobi or Milwaukee, where these thieves are living under the names of the people whose identities they've stolen.

I hope you're doing well?
Sincerely yours,
Shannon Klare
PS Do you have a dog? In high school I remember that you had a golden retriever you kept a picture of in your wallet. What was her name? Jelly?

* * *

Shannon's great-aunt Hannah had left her sixty-five thousand dollars, more money, many thousands more, than Shannon had ever earned in a year, despite working as a paralegal during the week and as a waitress on weekends. The jobs were a two-pronged attack she was waging to pay off within a year and a half the balance remaining on her student loans. The interest kept growing, the financial equivalent of a pernicious creeping mold, throughout her twenties and thirties because she'd only ever been able to make minimum monthly payments.

A smart, very stingy man (who tipped, at most, 12 percent, and more than once Shannon had slunk back to the table to leave a few more dollars) who she'd dated the previous year told her that she needed to make the biggest payments she could each month in order to stop financing drone attacks in the Middle East. She had trouble understanding what he meant, but he explained that her hard-earned money was going into the coffers of financial institutions run by men who likely were also, in some circuitous way, to be defense contractors who, in their spare time, successfully lobbied the government to buy their weapons and continue to rain down terror on bearded men and veiled women in faraway lands that Shannon could not clearly imagine. "Anyway," her stingy boyfriend had said, irritated by her many questions (she just wasn't sure what he was talking about), "you should pay them off as fast as you can. You owe it to yourself, and you'll get them off your credit report too."

Several months after Shannon broke up with the bad tipper, and about a month before the news of her inheritance arrived, she'd gone to a self-empowerment conference that her friend Billy begged her to attend with him. When he offered to pay half of her admission, she agreed to go. The keynote speaker at the conference, which was held in a shabby, underheated Holiday Inn near the airport, kept using the word karma and urging Shannon and the

other hopeful or skeptical attendees to do good works. "To be generous and selfless so that the benign maternal and material forces at work in the universe will wake up and notice you. Good works!"

She was tired and at first regarded the speaker as yet another member of what seemed to her to be an ever-expanding club of self-help charlatans, and she was sure that his preposterous name, Ram Powers, wasn't the one he was given at birth. After about fifteen minutes of rolling her eyes at his cant, she realized that he reminded her of her junior-year Russian history professor, a vain and handsome man who lectured with urgency and enthusiasm about Stalin and the horrors of the gulag. This macho, broad-shouldered blowhard had given her a C+ for the course, which she was sure she hadn't deserved. She'd worked hard on every assignment, but he was unmoved by her plea for an improved final grade. "Mediocre work equals mediocre grade," he'd replied with an unsympathetic smile.

After another fifteen minutes passed, she was surprised to find herself agreeing with some of Ram Powers's opinions. It probably was true that everyone needed to slow down, to pay more attention to the present moment, to do more good works. To her left, Billy appeared apathetic; he kept yawning and checking his phone for texts from his boyfriend Sid, who was in Santa Monica on a shoot with the food photographer he assisted, a fierce, caffeine-addicted woman who insisted on traveling with her aging Siamese cats, companions Sid found more onerous than their mistress.

When they left the conference that Saturday afternoon, Shannon had to hurry home to take a shower before work. Her shift at Nick and Joe's, a steak and seafood restaurant with enormous, rich desserts, stretched from five-thirty until close, a coveted, lucrative spot in the schedule that she wasn't often assigned. The night, however, went off the rails almost immediately. One of the cooks was so drunk that he could barely stand up behind the grill, but no one would report him and break the unspoken rule of covering for each other when the much less popular of the two managers was on duty. Before this reviled manager realized what was happening in the kitchen, two of Shannon's orders were botched so badly that one of those parties' checks had to be comped, and neither table left her a tip.

She didn't get home until one in the morning—her

closing side work dragged on and on and so did the drunken evening of the people at her last table, and although she couldn't truly imagine a future with him, she sometimes missed the cheapskate boyfriend after a bad night. She wished that he were waiting for her in her bed, despite the fact he snored when his allergies were acting up.

She glanced unhappily at the brochure on her kitchen table as she shucked off her waitressing clogs, a full-color pamphlet she'd taken home from the empowerment conference, Ram Powers's sun-browned face smiling up at her. His cheerful smile was deeply dispiriting; the message it transmitted was that she should be doing more with her life.

* * *

Throughout the following week, Powers's exhortations continued to intrude on her thoughts. *Remember: good works today and every day! There is always time in your life for more good works!*

Did he mean that she should do charitable deeds for others or find a better job? Both? Maybe he wasn't a native English speaker and didn't actually know how to phrase things in a way that could be properly understood by his Midwestern acolytes. But he had sounded American, except for a kind of British-y affectation she thought she'd detected when he said the words *lifestyle*, *potential*, and *stupendous*.

Even though it wasn't practical, considering that she still owed nine thousand dollars in student loans to the Bank of America, she sent ten dollars to the March of Dimes and another ten to PETA. She collected plastic bottles and soda cans tossed from car windows or dropped by schoolchildren on their meandering walks home from the elementary school near her apartment building. People eyed her quizzically as she picked up this trash and stuffed it into the nylon bag she kept in her purse (reusable—more good works, she wanly hoped), and which she emptied into the recycling bin, but these witnesses to her good deeds never said anything. She felt like berating them for not helping her but was sure that this would negate any benefits of this particular series of good works.

When she asked Billy over the phone a couple of weeks after the conference if he was doing good works too, he laughed. "What a load of BS. Two hundred bucks a head

for that drive! Sid nearly killed me when I told him we went, and that I paid for half of your admission too. I'd like to see that Rod Power guy or whatever his name was do some real work and stop robbing innocent people."

She hesitated. "I could pay you back if you need the money. Just give me another week or two."

"No, no," he said. "Don't worry about it. I roped you into going. I should have paid for the whole thing. But holy shit, what a waste of time."

"I didn't realize you thought it was that bad."

"At the time, I guess I didn't, but thinking about it later, I realized that nothing I heard that guy say was new."

Had Billy actually expected Ram Powers to be original? she wondered. Hadn't she suggested to him before they went that as far as she could tell, most self-help gurus spouted tired slogans one could just as easily find on a neighbor's bumper sticker? But if that was true, why had Ram Powers's speech inspired her to pick up Laffy Taffy wrappers and donate to PETA?

There was no real answer, not one that she could think of, anyway. It was like someone asking her to explain why she preferred cantaloupe to honeydew.

* * *

The following week, the news arrived that her great-aunt Hannah had died, and a few days later, an attorney with a whispery voice called to tell her that Hannah had remembered Shannon in her will. Sixty-five thousand dollars was more money than all Shannon's earthly goods were collectively worth, she was certain. Her brother Peter had been given the same amount, which he also needed because he had two kids in private school, a wife, and an ex-wife who still received maintenance payments, and although he made a respectable salary as a software designer, he could barely cover his monthly overhead.

It seemed, eerily, as if her good works were paying off. But what would Ram Powers say? During his talk, he hadn't mentioned a quid pro quo for good works, as if somewhere there was an office with a kindly, avuncular accountant who patiently bore the burden of keeping track. Whatever the reason for this windfall, if there was one at all—it was absurd that she should feel guilty for having received it.

* * *

At thirty-nine, she had never been married but had lived with two different men, the first for three years directly following college, the second for two years in her early thirties. With no husband and no current boyfriend, she had time to brood over past crushes. Todd Dickinson had made two or three erotic appearances in her dreams in the last year, and the inheritance offered the kind of improbable excuse to contact him that she hoped would charm him. Just after Hannah’s money was deposited into her account, she wrote to him; she also paid off the balance on her student loans and began searching for a better apartment, one that didn’t overlook an alley where the neighborhood’s surly teenagers congregated to smoke and curse and make out. She liked Chicago—its ragged energy and scruffiness, its rare and precious beautiful days—but now, thanks to Hannah, she would be able to move to quieter Evanston, where she hoped to live near friendly, fragrant cafés and the public library, rather than ailing taverns, understocked convenience stores, and dilapidated apartment buildings filled with neglected dogs barking their distress at all hours.

Todd Dickinson did not reply to her first email. Nine days later, she sent a second email, the last one, she promised herself, if he didn’t reply to this note either.

To: tdickinson@goodmail.com
From: shannonk@mercersmith.com
Date: 16 May--14:26--

Hi Todd,
I’m not sure if my last email made it to you. Maybe you don’t check this account very often? Or else my message went to spam. I thought I’d write one more time to ask if you’d send me your mailing address. We graduated together from Libertyville High School in 1994. I sat next to you in symphonic band junior and senior year—long reddish-brown hair, fingernails usually painted with some kind of fluorescent polish, green, pink, or yellow (I know, I know). You used to tease me about them. You also teased me about the high-heeled black leather boots I wore in the winter, even when the sidewalks were so icy. Those were for you, by the way.
I had the worst crush on you, as you’ve probably guessed by now. (I can say this here because you likely won’t ever read this message.) You were the cutest guy in our class, in

my opinion, but you didn’t seem to know it. I was so jealous when you got together with my friend Quince, who knew I had a huge crush on you but she was always so competitive with me, in part because I got better grades than she did. She’s the one who ended up marrying the rich doctor though, isn’t she. I haven’t gotten married. Maybe I will at some point, but I haven’t met the right guy yet. I don’t have any kids but have never been sure if I want them, which I suppose is one reason why I don’t have a husband. No real rush, right? Especially if I don’t know if I want the baby, the station wagon, and the garage to put it in at night. (Actually, I wouldn’t mind a garage—street parking in my neighborhood is the absolute pits. I live in Chicago, in Rogers Park, but anyway, at least I’m close to the lake.)

Hope all’s well in Hawaii. (If that’s where you are?)
Yours truly,
Shannon

* * *

Late the next afternoon when she was at the post office, waiting in line to buy ten stamps, the eight people ahead of her taking twenty-five minutes to send off their air mail packages, registered letters, and bridal shower invitations, she looked at her phone and saw, her stomach leaping, the hoped-for alignment of letters that formed his name. Todd Dickinson had written back.

To: shannonk@mercersmith.com
From: tdickinson@goodmail.com
Date: 16 May--17:47--

Hi Shannon,
Of course I remember you. It’s so nice of you to write. I didn’t respond the first time because I really did think your account had been hacked and someone pretending to be you was up to no good.
What a world we live in, no?
So Quince married a rich doctor. Good for her. I haven’t talked to her since the summer before freshman year in college. Ancient history, to be frank.
I really hope you’re not serious about sending me any of the money you inherited. It’s so nice of you to think of me, but please keep it all for yourself.
Your former bandmate, Todd

PS If you really do want to send me part of your inheritance, please do this instead—give it to these folks (they have a portal that lets you donate through their URL: mauiallcreaturesrescue.net). They take in old farm animals and the occasional injured raccoon and rabbit and care for them until they die of natural causes.

PPS My dog’s name was Benny, not Jelly. Sort of close? ;)

* * *

It was the winking smiley face that convinced her. Staring at it and the rest of his message on and off for the next several hours, she was sure that because he’d added the wink at the tail end of his reply, he wanted her to write back. She would wait a little while, maybe even three full days, to do it. She was busy looking for a new apartment and had put in her notice at the waitressing job. She also paid off her student loans with one check, a nearly sexual thrill flaring through her as she signed her name. After slipping this momentous payment into one of the post office mailboxes instead of into the graffitied mouth of the box down the street from her apartment, she took herself to dinner at an Italian restaurant she hadn’t previously been able to afford. That particular financial noose, the usurer’s student loan, was no longer looped around her neck, threatening violence. How full of potential and possibility her life now seemed. She wondered if the rich felt this way every single day, but no, of course they didn’t. The rich people she’d served at Nick and Joe’s were as often as not just as grouchy and obnoxious as everyone else.

When she mailed the loan payment, she’d also sent Billy a check for the hundred dollars he’d paid for her to see Ram Powers. He texted her after it arrived to say that he wouldn’t cash it, but two days later, she noticed while looking at her bank account online that he had, just as she’d assumed he would. By then, she’d also written back to Todd.

To: tdickinson@goodmail.com
From: shannonk@mercersmith.com
Date: 19 May--19:12--

Hi Todd,
Yes, it’s really me, Shannon Klare. I don’t blame you for being suspicious though. My friend Trina’s email was

hacked once and I almost sent \$150 to the people who were pretending to be her, but before I did, just to be sure, I wrote to them one more time and asked, “Who was your favorite singer when you were twelve?” (It was Rick Springfield). When they wrote back, “OMG. That was so long ago! I don’t remember,” I knew it wasn’t her because sometimes she still laughs about how insane she was for Rick and how she had plans to run away from home and find his mansion in Malibu (where he lived with his kids and his wife, who I’m sure would have been thrilled to see Trina knocking on their front door).

Benny, not Jelly! I knew I was close.
Maui All Creatures Rescue looks like a great place. How did you find out about it? I made a donation in your name, so they’ll probably send you a thank you note if they haven’t already. Do you volunteer for them? Is it on Maui that you live? I’ve heard it’s the best island, after Kauai.

Do you still play the clarinet? I gave it up right after high school; I couldn’t wait, but sometimes I wish I’d kept playing, though I don’t know what the point would be. I wasn’t good enough to join an orchestra or a quartet or a professional marching band (are there professional marching bands?).

I’m sorry to be bothering you with my emails—it’s just been such a strange time lately. My great-aunt dying and leaving my brother and me such a big gift—it’s gotten to me. I went to this ridiculous seminar given by a self-help guru named Ram Powers several weeks ago with my friend Billy (it was his idea and he begged me to go with him—I would never be caught dead at something like that otherwise), and since then, everything has felt a little off-kilter in my life. Mostly in a good way though. I quit a second job I was working for a while because I decided I had to pay off the balance of my student loans in a year and half if it killed me. I didn’t want to turn forty and still be paying for college almost twenty years later. But then my aunt died and I was able to write one check to the crooks at the Bank of America and now it’s done.

The phone call from Hannah’s lawyer telling me about my inheritance was like something out of the movies. I know these things happen, but they usually happen to other people.
Yours truly, Shannon

PS Do you have any pets now? I'm guessing you're a real animal lover. I don't have any but I'm thinking of adopting a dog now that I have enough extra money to care for one properly.

* * *

She'd made a two hundred dollar donation to the Maui animal rescue center, and within the hour, they replied with an appreciative email that included a photo of a very bristly-looking gray-and-white pig and an old Holstein cow, which appeared to have a walleye. The note accompanying the photo read:

Dear Ms. Klare,
Dotty the cow and Mr. Briggs the pig thank you for your very generous donation. They'll have new hay for their beds and they'll be able to eat very well for the next few weeks due to your gift. We will also use your donation to pay for two weeks' worth of Mr. Briggs's hypertension medicine and a pedicure for Dotty (which is what we call a hoof-trimming). Any time you are in the area, please stop by to say hello!
Your friends at Maui All Creatures Rescue Center
PS Dotty says hi (moo), and Mr. Briggs says hello too (oink oink)!

* * *

A few days passed without a reply from Todd. Shannon wondered if the animal rescue people had forgotten to send him a note too, or maybe it was being sent through regular mail? She worried he wouldn't believe that she'd made the donation. She thought about forwarding him the email the center had sent to her but didn't want to seem like she was desperate for compliments or for his friendship, because she recognized now that this was what she was hoping for. Billy also tactlessly pointed it out to her when she told him about her emails.

"Of course he thinks you want something from him," said Billy. "You guys haven't seen each other since high school and you write to him out of the blue telling him you want to send him a check and that you used to be in love with him? That's weird, Shannon. I'd have run screaming if I were him."

"He didn't. He knows it's me. He knows I'm harmless too."

"He doesn't know that, not really. You haven't seen him in ten years," said Billy, his voice uncharacteristically harsh.

She wondered if he and Sid were fighting.

"Why give him a gift?" he asked. "Why not someone you actually are friends with?"

"Like you?"

"Obviously," he said. "I'm not too proud to admit it."

Shannon looked at him uneasily. She was treating him to breakfast at a busy brunch place in downtown Evanston, where she had managed to find a new apartment the previous afternoon, but it would be two months before the current tenant moved out. This was all right though—now her new lease would only overlap with her old one for a month.

"I'm doing good works," she said softly, looking down at her plate where two overripe blueberries mingled with toast crumbs and the grease from the mushroom omelet she'd eaten all of while Billy drank black coffee and nibbled at an English muffin.

Billy laughed. "Oh God, you didn't really say that."

"I didn't buy into anything else Ram Powers said, but I like the idea of doing good deeds without any hope for reward."

"But you do want to be rewarded. You want to go see this guy in Hawaii and fuck him silly."

"Billy," she cried. "Don't say—" She put a hand over her mouth and laughed, his crassness both startling and a little thrilling.

"Well, am I wrong?" he asked. Since the last time she'd seen him, he'd dyed his light brown hair and eyebrows midnight black. The eerie malamute blue of his eyes, which she had always envied, was even more striking now.

"That's not what I was thinking," she whispered.

"I don't believe you," he said, taking a prim sip from his coffee cup. "You want to fuck him senseless. Just write to him and tell him this. I'm sure you'll get a response right away."

"I can't do that. I can't even be sure what he looks like now."

"Liar. You Googled him."

"You mean I ogled him."

"Yes," he said, laughing. "Cyber-ogler."

"Googler-ogler."

"Just write to him and say you want to see him."

"Maybe he wishes I were a guy."

Billy raised one shoulder, his version of a shrug. "Maybe he does. Only one way to find out."

"I don't think I can do that."

"Then I'll do it for you. I know how to pick up guys."

She laughed. "I know you do, but I'd better figure this one out for myself."

That night she had trouble sleeping because the specter of her loneliness and its companion, foolishness, arrived in the grim hours after midnight to mock her. Todd wasn't even remotely interested in her. There was no reason for him to be. His one email had been sent to her out of politeness and a respect for their shared but brief (and ancient, as he'd said himself) history. She surveyed the bad romantic choices she had so far made, all of them lined up to leer at her, a shambling parade of exes led by the tightwad, who was also judgmental and prone to jealousy, though in bed he'd sometimes made up for it. But this hadn't been enough. When they broke up, he claimed that he had been planning to propose that weekend, and this revelation had chilled her. She knew she'd made the right decision, but being celibate for the last five months had been an oppressive drag.

It was 3:04 a.m. when she got out of bed to make chamomile tea and check her email—there would be nothing more than a few PACs exhorting her to sign petitions and make donations and sixty-eight emails from Amazon also exhorting her to open her wallet; a week earlier she'd bought a dent puller for a side panel on her car and now she was getting emails, almost hourly, it seemed, advertising Bondo, the Club, and duct tape.

Todd had written back.

To: shannonk@mercersmith.com
From: tdickinson@goodmail.com
Date: 28 May--00:43--

S—I don't live in Hawaii anymore. I'm actually back in the Chicago area again, in La Grange.

Please keep this between you and me, but I think you should know this about me. I'm in AA, for eight months now, and I would like to see you, but I don't think we should meet yet.

Your kindness, your funny emails, the donation you made to All Creatures—I can't tell you how—well, it felt like a hand extended in the darkness.

I won't go into it, but things were pretty difficult for quite a while, and they're only now starting to get easier.

My parents died within seven months of each other when I was twenty-nine (Dad had a heart attack, Mom killed herself with pills, though it's possible it was an accidental overdose), and after that, I was pretty much a wreck. My brother Sam (he was two years older than me—maybe you remember him) died a few years later in a motorcycle crash. You must have heard about some of this? No, maybe not. My parents moved to Seattle a couple of years after you and I graduated from high school, and I don't suppose you would have heard about any of it. Sam was living in New York City when he died.

If you think you'd like to, maybe we can talk on the phone sometime. Though it's probably better if we wait until I've been in the program for a full year. That's what we're supposed to do.

Your friend, Todd

PS If you'd like to make a donation to AA sometime too, that'd be cool.

* * *

She wanted to call Billy and read Todd's email to him, but she was pretty sure she'd wake him and Sid up, and she wasn't supposed to tell anyone that Todd was in AA. She knew what Billy would say anyway, "Don't get involved. Stay away. That guy is in a vulnerable place. And so are you, for that matter."

Her cheeks were wet. She'd been crying as she read and reread Todd's email. She hadn't known about his parents or his brother. Their obituaries hadn't come up in her Google searches, but unless he'd specifically been named in them—if any had even been published—she supposed they wouldn't have.

For three months in her mid-twenties she'd dated a man who was an alcoholic, and very little about dating him had been pleasant—he'd stood her up multiple times; he'd thrown her wallet into the Chicago River one night, thinking it an original and hilarious joke; he'd vomited in her kitchen, on her shoes, on her roommate's sofa. He'd also been extremely good-looking, and for the first two months she was willing to try to ignore his problems for the privilege of looking at him and having him in her bed on the rare occasions when he was sober enough to have sex with her.

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



COURTESY GROSS MCCLEAF GALLERY