

Laura Brodie

SPIDERMAN SUMMER

A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.

– Henry David Thoreau

Another hazy morning in Middleton, Virginia, and Irene Bunts sits down to breakfast, contemplates her bitter Folgers and speaks the words that have been weighing on her mind all summer.

“I have a crush on Tobey Maguire.”

It’s a stupid thing to say, with Walter cracking eggs one-handed into a spitting skillet. Now he’ll find some way to use the words against her, to remind her that she is becoming increasingly ridiculous in her middle age. All spring he berated her for one careless compliment lavished on Viggo Mortensen’s cleft chin.

Walter loves to pick apart her favorite celebrities — to chip away at this one’s nose and that one’s capped teeth. And what a gruesome vivisection he would perform if he really knew how much she likes the young Mr. Maguire. That’s why she has chosen her words carefully. “Crush” is such a harmless noun. A syllable for soda fountains and saddle shoes. She might raise her husband’s cynical brows if she used a more accurate term — “fascination, fixation, obsession.” What else can you call it when a forty-six-year-old woman sits up past midnight surfing the pages of *Tobeygalore*, absorbing Tobey trivia, admiring Tobey wallpaper, scouring the postings of adolescents who encountered the man himself on fortunate street corners, asking him to autograph their hats, their shoes, their cocktail napkins. Some of the tales emit a suspicious whiff of fiction. The writers are so insistent on how *lucky* they are, how unbelievably *blessed*, as if they discovered the Messiah at a Lakers game.

Knee-deep in this pubescent swamp, she has felt like an annoying mother, spying on the children. Or worse, she is Humbert Humbert, and Tobey is her faunlet — too old for the part at thirty-one, but Tobey is often cast to play the wide-eyed naif.

Of course it is ludicrous, her ten-week amour with a two-dimensional face. More embarrassing than the time she caught Walter sweating over a website filled with three-breasted women. His interest in those grotesque photos was purely masturbatory, which seems more healthy than her own gut-wrenching adoration. And maybe that's why she has felt driven to confess. Maybe she wants to shame herself into renunciation, to stand and say "I am an addict," just as Tobey did with his drinking, fourteen years ago.

Walter's response is deceptively blasé: "Who?"

"Tobey Maguire."

"Is he that Tom Cruise character?"

"That was *Jerry Maguire*. Tobey is the actor who plays Spiderman."

"The same guy who played that hobbit?"

"No. That was Elijah Wood."

Walter carries the frying pan to the table and slides two eggs onto her plate, sunny-side up. Their yolks bulge like the yellow eyes of the Green Goblin, and Irene stabs them with her fork, watching the fluid seep toward the olive flowers that wreath her Correllware.

Walter is talking again. "I don't like those Spiderman movies much."

"Why not?"

"They missed the best part of the character." He crushes another egg against the skillet's edge. "Do you know what made Spiderman unique?"

Yes, she knows this one. She has heard Tobey say it a dozen times — the stock answer to the stock question asked by a hundred interviewers. "Superman was an alien. Batman was a millionaire. But Spiderman was an average guy with problems people could understand."

"What a load of crap." Walter waves his spatula as if swatting a gnat. "The thing that made Spiderman great was that he was a smart-ass. Superman was a stuffed shirt, and Batman was deadly serious, but Spiderman — whenever he faced a villain he'd start with a wisecrack, and the bad guys gave it right back at him. You'd have this terrific exchange of insults before they ever started swinging, and in the middle of a fight, when Spiderman was down, he'd just look up and give the guy some hilarious putdown. It was funny as hell, and they've missed that completely in the movies. It's all a bunch of gloomy soul-searching — no sense of humor whatsoever. And that Thomas guy —"

“Tobey.”

“Whatever. He mopes around with his mouth open and his eyes all wide, and his constant Spidey-boner for Mary Jane. They probably had to cut the wisecracks because your *boyfriend* couldn’t deliver them.”

There it is. The acceleration into the inevitable insult. A decade ago she would have managed a comeback, or at least popped him over the head with his own spatula, but nineteen years of marriage have exhausted Irene. Walter is usually right, goddamn him. She’s never read the comic books — not Spiderman or Superman, definitely not Wonderwoman — and Tobey does sometimes have that deer-in-the-headlights look. But oh, how she loves those parted lips, those moist, wounded eyes.

Anyway, who is Walter to criticize her tastes? Walter Lee Bunts, a man who dotes on David Spade. Who thinks that a teenage boy jacking off into an apple pie is the height of cinematic genius.

He lifts a slice of greasy bacon above her tortured eggs, but she covers the plate with her hands.

“I’m trying to be a vegetarian.”

Walter gawks, bacon limp. “Since when?”

Since she read that Tobey is one. A “lacto-ovo” vegetarian (though not particularly fond of dairy) who sprinkles nuts on almost everything he eats. That bit of wisdom sent her hurrying to the grocery store in search of pecans, cashews, almonds. “What the hell are these?” Walter had said, sifting walnuts out of his spaghetti sauce. Now she hides the tofu in the back of the refrigerator.

After breakfast Walter goes upstairs to finish packing. He’s off to Washington for another three-day conference for tax consultants. “The laws keep changing,” he explains every time he announces a new trip, and so Irene is left squirting Palmolive over the sticky plates, wondering what she always wonders: Does Walter have a mistress, some triple-breasted blonde in an apartment near the Pentagon? He never brings home brochures. Never makes contacts to expand his golfing crowd. His ambitions don’t seem to extend beyond his office at H&R Block, located in the shopping center beside Wal-Mart.

Not that her own ambitions are especially grand. For eighteen years she has taught remedial English at Middleton High, becoming a fixture in the lives of the vo-tech crowd. They call her class “Bunts for cunts,” due to her female students’ predilection for pierced tongues. Irene prefers the boys, with their

unwieldy flesh, their slouch of defeat. Each year their jeans dip lower, along with their test scores. When they recite from *Macbeth*, the lines seem redolent of their own drab futures: “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. . . .”

Walter comes downstairs with his garment bag and golf shoes and plants a perfunctory kiss on her cheek. “Don’t forget to take the Beamer to the shop on Friday.”

She flinches whenever he uses that asinine word.

“And the bills should go out tomorrow.” Tomorrow and tomorrow.

Irene watches from the kitchen window until Walter’s car has disappeared beyond the neighbors’ dogwoods. Then she steps back from the dishes and wipes her hands on a paper towel. Four days of solitude are spread before her feet. Ninety-six hours of unbroken Tobeytime, time to stare at the big screen, the little screen, the computer screen. Time to plunge into the obscurest depths of her mind.

She goes upstairs to her bedroom and opens her closet door. From behind mounds of dirty socks and tattered loafers, she extracts three plastic bags and holds them upside down over her bedspread. A mass of DVDs and old videos spills out: *Cider House Rules*, *The Ice Storm*, *Wonder Boys*, *Spiderman*. . . . Tobey’s greatest hits. Yesterday she printed his filmography off the *Tobeytalk* website, fingering it in her pocket like a lover’s note. With Walter busy at the office, she visited three video stores, afraid that if she rented too many films in one place, some former student behind the counter might recognize the pattern and grin into her eyes: “Got a thing for Tobey, Mrs. Bunts?” She couldn’t bear that.

Her best friend, Louise, suggested the Maguire marathon. Louise is Walter’s secretary, the only person who understands the cross Irene bears. The two women meet for lunch every Sunday, while Walter is off somewhere on the back nine, and last week, over cinnamon coffeecake, Irene told Louise about her “little problem.” She explained how she went to see *Spiderman 3* on a Saturday afternoon, and how, immersed in the flashing darkness, Tobey Maguire’s eyes had sunk into her heart like magic pebbles.

She tried to sound casual, as if she were suffering from nothing more than a mild UTI. And Louise was unperturbed. “Honey,” she said, “you’re not in love with Tobey Maguire. You’re in love with Peter Parker. Hell, I’d want to be his girlfriend too, swinging from a skyscraper like some New York City version of Jane and Tarzan.”

But Irene shook her head. She had never wanted to be the screaming female, swept away again in another maniac's tentacles. Kirsten Dunst probably didn't like the job, either, the camera glancing up her skirt as she was perpetually yanked, tossed and tied. Nor did Irene want to be Tobey's real-life girlfriend. The image of her middle-aged flesh, rippling into spongy puddles on Tobey's taut sheets, was too humiliating. If Irene Bunts were queen for a day, all she would request is one hour of conversation with Mr. Maguire, in some dimly lit LA club.

"And what would you ask him?" Louise inquired.

She didn't know. Maybe she would ask how he got his scar, that distended horseshoe imbedded in his cheek like a permanent good luck sign. Or maybe she'd ask if he had a favorite charity, now that he'd gone from food stamps to Gucci. It wasn't a matter of asking so much as sitting and watching. She wanted to see the three-dimensional man drink a glass of water.

"Well," Louise shrugged, "I don't think there's anything wrong with having an imaginary fling with a movie star who lives three thousand miles away. You know, half of America's wives are having internet affairs. That's right," she nodded vigorously, black roots bobbing. "I read it in *Cosmopolitan*. All these women are sending erotic emails to people they've never met. At least you've seen this Tobey fellow. You know he's not some horny twelve-year-old getting his kicks masquerading as a grownup and flirting with bored housewives."

True. She hadn't reached the bottom of the pathetic barrel. But she had to shake this malady before the start of the school year. Otherwise, she'd spend the opening days searching her students' faces for the slightest Tobeyism — the parted lips, the cracking alto, the understated talent. And when she found no signs she would be so disappointed, so resentful of her classes' collective mediocrity. Or if she chanced to glimpse a trace of Tobey in some boy's sweet eyes — *that* would be worse.

That's why Louise suggested a Tobey film festival: "Two pieces of chocolate are heavenly. Two hundred will make you vomit." Irene would watch Tobey Maguire movies until she puked.

NOW, AS IRENE walks downstairs with the videos stacked to her chin, she doubts whether it is possible to overdose on Tobey. His style is so low-key, his mouth barely moving as he delivers his lines, the darling ventriloquist. She lets

the tower of films collapse on her carpet and decides to proceed chronologically, picking up *The Ice Storm*. “Ang Lee’s masterpiece,” it says on the box. By the time she settles into her corduroy La-z-Boy, Tobey is already on screen, nineteen years old and looking remarkably like her own awkward students. Pasty and floppy-haired, the perfect protagonist for *Harold and Maude*. Thank God he is aging well.

Irene doesn’t understand the film’s appeal. All these grownups and teenagers bumbling through their inglorious sex lives. Maybe it’s a California thing; she’s never heard of a “key party” in the Piedmont.

She picks up the next video and reads the title aloud: *Deconstructing Harry*. Late Woody Allen, God help us. Luckily Tobey’s performance is early and brief. Still pale and loose-fleshed, acting out an orgasm with a clenching fist. It’s almost a relief when the Grim Reaper comes knocking at his door.

THE TELEPHONE RINGS just as she is ejecting the film. It’s Walter calling from the road. He’d forgotten to tell her that the plumber is coming on Friday afternoon. And don’t forget about the Beamer.

No, she won’t forget, and no, she hasn’t started on the bills yet, but she is getting to it. Yes, she’ll pull the shades and lock the doors before going to bed. And yes — she rolls her eyes — smooches to him, too.

She goes back to the living room, surveys the pile of films and decides to forget chronology. *Cider House Rules* boasts seven Oscar nominations, so she pops it in, aims her remote and here is Tobey as Homer Wells, another quiet soul. Too quiet. She thinks that his character is supposed to be mildly retarded. But no, he’s meant to be really smart — doctor smart, with a surgical bag hidden under his cot. He doesn’t look very sharp next to Charlize Theron. Beside her divine beauty Tobey is just a lump of mortal clay. Caliban on the beach, Ariel riding his back.

She inserts another Ang Lee film, *Ride with the Devil*. Tobey and a bunch of long-haired boys pretending to be Missouri Confederates. What an ill-fated concept; she despises fake Southern accents. With Tobey’s drawling mouth still open on the screen, she commits an act which, just that morning, would have been unthinkable. She points her remote and presses Stop. *Please Stop*.

By now Louise is looking pretty brilliant. Nothing about pre-Spiderman Maguire produces even the slightest flutter in Irene Bunts’ heart. *O ye of*

little faith, she thinks, strolling into the kitchen to fix herself a grilled cheese sandwich.

As she peels the plastic off her separate slices of American cheese, Irene's computer beckons from its lonely desk in the corner. Soon she has clicked her way into the *Tobeytalk* gallery — hundreds of thumbnail photos of Tobey in tuxes, Tobey in tanktops, Tobey and his buddy Leo, both sixteen years old and jolly as pixies. She leans her eyes toward Tobey's face and asks herself: "What is it?" She guesses it isn't the man himself so much as what he represents — youth, health, self-discipline, success achieved through hard work. Everything that abandoned her somewhere in her late thirties. It is the illusion of Hollywood — the promise that in some small, enchanted kingdom, life does not settle into a monotonous average.

Irene scrapes the burnt crust off her sandwich, carries her metal TV tray into the living room and picks up another movie.

SO IT GOES until the sun dips behind the Eastern pines, and so it continues the next morning, over toast and coffee — popping films like a vial of valium, never finding the perfect escape. *Pleasantville* is nice enough, and *Seabiscuit* has its moments, but Tobey could never pass for a jockey. To see a man of Spiderman's build sticking his finger down his throat is an insult to every miserable bulimic in the audience.

She inserts *The Wonder Boys* and pulls the handle on her recliner. Lo and behold, here is a work of genius. Michael Douglas as an English professor, the author of one great novel who can't manage a second, whose private life is unravelling over the course of one long weekend, while Tobey stands in the shadows, a morose undergraduate author-in-training with a brilliant manuscript in his backpack. Now this — this is charming. Not only because of Tobey, in his suicidal perfection, but because the entire cast seems comfortable. No performance is overwrought, no lines overwritten. The pieces fit together like a delightful puzzle.

She watches it twice, then watches it again. Confirmation that she has not wasted her heart on a middling talent. Filled with self-congratulations, Irene decides to celebrate — how else? — by going to the movies.

Spiderman 3 is in its final week at the second-run theater. There, the floor will be sticky, the screen narrow and Tobey will have extra stripes crackling

down his webbed costume. But this is double-feature night, with *Spiderman 2* as prelude, and eight dollars buys Irene a ticket and a bottomless popcorn-and-Coke combo.

She sits in the fourth row, close enough for the screen to engulf her. From the depths of her vinyl pocketbook she extracts a pair of black-rimmed spectacles. Another person ventures in, and instinctively Irene crouches. Don't let it be the principal, or the new P.E. teacher. Don't let it be that obese boy who never mastered prepositions. From the corner of her eye she sees the same red-headed teenager who's been here several times before.

"Psst," he whispers from three rows back. "Hey, lady."

She turns and watches a smile split his pimpled face.

"How many times is this for you?"

She blushes and lies. "Seven. . . . How about you?"

"Seventeen."

"You must be crazy."

He shrugs. "I've got most of the comic books. Have you ever read the original series?"

She shakes her head.

"The comics blow the movies away."

"So I've heard."

Irene is grateful when the previews flicker into life. She prefers to worship Tobey in anonymous silence. And here he is, looking comical in his little red helmet. Lips parted as usual. Being fired from another job. She leans back in her seat and lifts a piece of popcorn with the tip of her tongue.

She likes this second movie even better than the third; evil is more compelling one villain at a time. To think that Tobey almost couldn't make the film due to his chronic back troubles. When Peter Parker falls from the roof and rises, moaning, "My back, my back," Irene aches to help him, to take his elbow and offer a heating pad. Oh, to be his chiropractor — no pleasure could be more sublime than to align that lovely spine.

But even *Spiderman 2* has its flaws. She winces every time she hears Tobey deliver the ridiculous line to Mary Jane — "Punch me, I bleed." What pretentious screenwriter had the idiocy to make Peter Parker echo Shylock? And yet, when the train passengers lift the unconscious Tobey above their heads, passing him from hand to hand like a swooning rock star, or the ancient equivalent —

their crucified savior, arms spread wide with the sacred wound bleeding in his side, Irene feels, for the eleventh time that summer, the absolute conversion of her agnostic soul.

THE NEXT MORNING she lies inert in front of the TV, watching the deluxe DVD edition of the first *Spiderman*. Outtakes, screentests, trailers, commentaries, a blonde producer who calls Tobey “The greatest actor of his generation.” Even Irene wouldn’t go that far. Great acting is Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot*, or Dustin Hoffman in half a dozen films. Measured on the Hoffman scale, she’d say that Tobey has mastered *The Graduate* but is not yet ready for *Tootsie*. Then again — she takes a sip of Folgers — Hoffman never spent four months transforming his body into a tapestry of muscles. That metamorphosis is more impressive than the application of breasts and buttocks. She thinks of Hoffman ripping the hair from his upper lip, and then of Tobey, the hair torn from his legs when they pulled off the body cast for his *Spiderman* costume fitting. Alter egos, secrets, depilatory sacrifices — in a way, *Spiderman* is Tobey’s *Tootsie*.

She doesn’t hear the telephone until the fourth ring. “Mrs. Bunts?” Another young man, somewhere in his twenties. “Your husband’s car was scheduled for a ten o’clock appointment.” Irene’s eyes leap to the clock — one p.m. “If you bring it in right now we might still have time to look at it, otherwise we’ll need to reschedule for next week.”

Oh, yes, yes. She will come right away. She hangs up and runs upstairs, tossing her nightgown on the bed and grabbing a dress from the closet. Walter’s silver sedan is his Viagra. What a firestorm she’ll face if she misses the appointment.

With unbrushed hair and sour breath she screeches out the driveway, leaving the garage door open. The dealership is thirty minutes across town. If she hurries she’ll make it in twenty-two. Squirrels dart, robins scatter as she races down the avenues of wooded suburbia.

Tobey has a car like this, a new Mercedes. “A nice car,” as he put it, and “a nice house” in Beverly Hills. She can see him in a kidney-shaped pool, floating on an inflatable lounge chair, face back, eyes closed, ultraviolet rays dipping down to kiss his scar. She cannot say whether he is handsome. The tabloids have labeled him a “Hollywood hunk”; his fans call him “hot.” But most of

the time he looks like an average Joe, which is a blessing for a serious actor. Hoffman, Hanks, Malkovich — they aren't going to win any beauty contests. Leave that to Orlando Bloom, or the young Mel Gibson in *Gallipoli*, when his eyes still glowed.

Tobey's beauty surfaces in unexpected moments. For most of a film he might linger in thick normality, but with the dip of a lens, the turn of his jaw, behold! The duckling is a swan.

Irene sees the arrows too late. Anti-lock brakes shudder as the car fishtails across the road, over the curb, through a white fence, pickets flying like shattered teeth. The sedan's right headlight slams into an oak tree, while front and side air bags smack Irene against her seat. She's immovable, a pressed leaf. The engine gives one long sigh that dwindles into silence.

Deep in a foggy dream she sees Tobey rise from his lounge chair, slip into the pool, then ascend a silver ladder, glistening. He has heard the commotion in his front yard and is walking across the lawn, tying the belt on his monogrammed robe.

"Are you all right?"

The air bags deflate as she looks into his beautiful eyes. He opens the door, offers his hand, and she places her palm in his.

But this is not Tobey's hand at all. This hand belongs to the boy from the movie theater, peering into her face with an indelible smirk. *Seven* times indeed.

No. It isn't him either. It's a stranger. They are all strangers.

The young man helps extract her from the car. Nothing bleeding, nothing broken. Too bad. Walter couldn't excoriate a woman in a cast. The car is the only shattered thing; the tree has planted its fist into the Beamer's halogen eye.

"It was a deer," she says to the boy. "A deer made me swerve."

That's what she tells the policeman before blowing into the breathalyzer. "A deer," she murmurs, and it's true. A deer distracted her.

Thirty minutes later a tow truck lurches the car off the tree, bits of glass falling on the lawn like shimmering tears. Irene walks over and begins to pick them up, one by one. "Forget it," the policeman says. "You need to lie down."

But she refuses to go to the hospital. Her problems are not physical, she assures the paramedic. So the policeman drives her home, watches her wave

from the door. Inside, the kitchen smells of garbage. Dishes teeter in the sink. The laundry in the washer has been steeping for two days, and a stack of overdue bills waits beside the computer.

She enters the living room, where the TV is still on. Peter Parker is walking away from Mary Jane, resigned to a life of solitude and misunderstanding. Irene kneels before the image, kissing the tip of her finger and touching it to Tobey's injured cheek.

The screen feels flat and cold. He never looks at her.