It was one of those hotels without room service, the type you wouldn’t mind if you were paying your own bill but would complain about if someone else was paying. I was not paying my own bill, and so the deficiencies stuck out and were taken as evidence of my host’s indifference. There was no tub, just a plastic shower stall, and the soap was brittle and smelled like dishwashing detergent. The bedside lamp was missing a bulb, but that could have been remedied easily enough. I could have asked for one at the front desk, but I didn’t want a lightbulb. I just wanted to feel put-upon.

It started when the airline lost my luggage. Time was lost filling out forms, and I’d had to go directly from the airport to a college an hour north of Manchester, where I gave a talk to a group of students. Then there was a reception and a forty-five-minute drive to the hotel, which was out in the middle of nowhere. I arrived at one A.M. and found they had booked me into a basement room. Late at night it didn’t much matter, but in the morning it did. To open the curtains was to invite scrutiny, and the people of New Hampshire stared in without a hint of shame. There wasn’t much to look at, just me, sitting on the edge of the bed with a phone to my ear. The airline had sworn my suitcase would arrive overnight, and when it didn’t, I called the 800 number printed on the inside of my ticket jacket. My choices were either to speak to a machine or to wait for an available human. I chose the human, and after eight minutes on hold I hung up and started looking for someone to blame.

“I don’t care if it’s my son, my congressman, what have you. I just don’t approve of that lifestyle.” The speaker was a woman named Audrey who’d called the local talk-radio station to offer her opinion. The Catholic Church scandal had been front-page news for over a week, and when the priest angle had been exhausted, the discussion filtered down to pedophilia in general and then, homosexual pedophilia, which was commonly agreed to be the worst kind. It was, for talk radio, one of those easy topics, like tax hikes or mass murder. “What do you think of full-grown men practicing sodomy on children?”

“Well, I’m against it!” This was always said as if it was somehow startling, a minority position no one had yet dared lay claim to.

I’d been traveling around the country for the past ten days, and everywhere I went I heard the same thing. The host would congratulate the caller on his or her moral fortitude, and wanting to feel that approval again, the person would rephrase the original statement, freshening it up with an adverb or qualifier. “Call me old-fashioned, but I just hugely think it’s wrong.” Then, little by little, they’d begin interchanging the words *homosexual* and *pedophile*, speaking as if they were one and the same. “Now they’ve even got them on TV,” Audrey said. “And in the schools! Talk about the proverbial chicken in the henhouse.”

“Fox,” the host said.

“Oh, they’re the worst,” Audrey said. “*The Simpsons* and such—I never watch that station.”

“I meant in the henhouse,” the host said. “I believe the saying is ‘the fox in the henhouse,’ not ‘the chicken in the henhouse.’”

Audrey regrouped. “Did I say chicken? Well, you get my point. These homosexuals can’t reproduce themselves, and so they go into the schools and try to recruit our young people.”
It was nothing I hadn't heard before, but I was crankier than usual and found myself in
the middle of the room, one sock on and one sock off, shouting at the clock radio. "Nobody recruited me, Audrey. And I begged for it."

It was her fault I was stuck in a basement room with no luggage, her and all the people just like her: the satisfied families trotting from the parking lot to the first-floor restaurant, the hotel guests with whirlpool baths and rooms overlooking the surrounding forest. Why waste the view on a homosexual? He only looks at schoolboys' rectums. And a suitcase? Please! We all know what they do with those. They might not have come out and said it, but they were sure thinking it. I could tell.

It stood to reason that if the world was conspiring against me, my Mr. Coffee machine was broken. It sat on the bathroom counter, dribbling cold water, and after a brief, completely unsatisfying cry, I finished getting dressed and left the room. There was a staircase at the end of the hall, and beside it a little cleared area where a dozen or so elderly women knelt upon the carpet, piecing together a patchwork quilt. They looked up as I passed, one of them turning to ask me a question. "Yoin' shurch?" Her mouth was full of pins and it took me a moment to realize what she was saying—You going to church? It was an odd question, but then I remembered that it was a Sunday, and I was wearing a tie. Someone at the college had loaned it to me the night before, and I'd put it on in hopes it might distract from my shirt, which was wrinkled and discolored beneath the arms. "No," I told her, "I am not going to church."

Oh, I was in a horrible mood. Midway up the stairs I stopped and turned back around. "I never go to church," I said. "Never. And I'm not about to start now."

"Shute shelf," she said.

Past the restaurant and gift shop, in the center of the lobby, was a complimentary beverage stand. I thought I'd get a coffee and take it outdoors, but just as I approached, a boy swooped in and began mixing himself a cup of hot chocolate. He looked like all of the kids I'd been seeing lately, in airports, in parking lots: the oversize sweatshirts stamped with team emblems, the baggy jeans and jazzy sneakers. His watch was fat and plastic, like a yo-yo strapped to his wrist, and his hair looked as if it had been cut with the lid of a can, the irregular hanks stiffened with gel and coaxed to stand at peculiar angles.

It was a complicated business, mixing a cup of hot chocolate. You had to spread the powdered cocoa from one end of the table to the other and use as many stirrers as possible, making sure to thoroughly chew the wetted ends before tossing them upon the stack of unused napkins. This is what I like about children: complete attention to one detail and complete disregard of another. When finally finished, he scooted over to the coffee urn, filling two cups, black, and fitting them with lids. The drinks were stacked into a tower, then tentatively lifted off the table. "Whoa," he whispered. Hot chocolate seeped from beneath the lid of the bottom cup and ran down his hand.

"Do you need some help with those?" I asked.

The boy looked at me for a moment. "Yeah," he said. "Carry these upstairs." There was no please or thank you, just "I'll take the hot chocolate myself."

He set the coffees back on the table, and as I reached for them it occurred to me that maybe this was not such a good idea. I was a stranger, an admitted homosexual traveling through a small town, and he was, like, ten. And alone. The voice of reason whispered in my ear. Don't do it, buster. You're playing with fire.

I withdrew my hands, then stopped, thinking, Wait a minute. That's not reason. It's Audrey, that crackpot from the radio. The real voice of reasons sounds like Bea Arthur, and
when it failed to pipe up, I lifted the coffees off the table and carried them toward the elevator, where the boy stood mashing the call button with his chocolate-coated fingers.

A maid passed and rolled her eyes at the desk clerk. “Cute kid.”

Before the church scandal I might have said the same thing, only without the sarcasm. Now, though, any such observation seemed suspect. Though Audrey would never believe it, I am not physically attracted to children. They’re like animals to me, fun to watch but beyond the bounds of my sexual imagination. That said, I am a person who feels guilty for crimes I have not committed, or have not committed in years. The police search the train station for a serial rapist and I cover my face with a newspaper, wondering if maybe I did it in my sleep. The last thing I stole was an eight-track tape, but to this day I’m unable to enter a store without feeling like a shoplifter. It’s all the anxiety with none of the free stuff. To make things just that much worse, I seem to have developed a remarkable perspiration problem. My conscience is crosswired with my sweat glands, but there’s a short in the system and I break out over things I didn’t do, which only makes me look more suspect. Innocently helping to lighten a child’s burden was a good thing—I knew this—yet moments after lifting the coffees off the table I was soaking wet. As usual, the sweat was fiercest on my forehead, under my arms, and, cruelly, on my ass, which is a great mystery to me. If the stress is prolonged, I’ll feel the droplets inching down the back of my legs, trapped, finally, by my socks, which are cotton and bought expressly for their absorbent powers.

If there was a security camera in the lobby, this is what it would have shown: A four-and-a-half-foot-tall boy stands mashing and then pounding the elevator call button. Beside him is a man, maybe a foot taller, dressed in a shirt and tie and holding a lidded cup in each hand. Is it raining outside? If not, perhaps he just stepped from the shower and threw on his clothes without drying himself. His eyes shift this way and that, giving the impression that he is searching for somebody. Could it be this silver-haired gentlemen? He’s just walked up, looking very dapper in his tweed jacket and matching cap. He talks to the boy and lays a hand on the back of his head, scolding him probably, which is good, as somebody needed to. The other man, the wet one, is just standing there, holding the cups and trying to wipe his forehead with his sleeve at the same time. A lid pops off and something—it looks like coffee—spills down the front of his shirt. He leaps about, prancing almost, and pulls the fabric away from his skin. The boy seems angry now and says something. The older gentleman offers a handkerchief, and the man sets down one of his cups and runs—literally runs, panting—off camera, returning thirty seconds later with another lidded cup, a replacement. By this time the elevator has arrived. The gentleman holds open the door, and he and the boy wait as the man picks the other cup off the floor and joins them. Then the door closes, and they are gone.

“So, who have we got here?” the gentleman asked. His voice was jovial and enthusiastic. “What do you call yourself, big fella?”

“Michael,” the boy said.

“Well, that’s a grown-up name, isn’t it.”

Michael guessed that it was, and the man caught my eye and winked, the way people do when they’re establishing a partnership. We’ll just put on the small fry, what do you say? “I bet a big guy like you must have a lot of girlfriends,” he said. “Is that true?”

“No.”

“You don’t? Well, what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t have one. That’s all,” Michael said.

I had always hated it when men asked the girlfriend question. Not only was it corny, but it set you in their imaginations in a way that seemed private to me. Answer yes and they’d
picture your wee courtship: the candlelit dinner of hot dogs and potato chips, the rumpled Snoopy sheets. Answer no and you were blue-balled, the frustrated bachelor of the second grade. It was an idea of children as miniature adults, which was about as funny to me as a dog in sunglasses.

“Well, there must be someone you have your eye on.”
The boy did not answer, but the man persisted in trying to draw him out. “Is Mommy sleeping in this morning?”

Again, nothing.
The man gave up and turned to me. “Your wife,” he said. “I take it she’s still in bed?”

He thought I was Michael’s father, and I did not correct him. “Yes,” I said. “She’s upstairs . . . passed out.” I don’t know why I said this, or then again, maybe I do. The man had constructed a little family portrait, and there was a pleasure in defacing it. Here was Michael, here was Michael’s dad, and now, here was Mom, lying facedown on the bathroom floor.

The elevator stopped on three, and the man tipped his hat. “All right, then,” he said. “You two enjoy the rest of the morning.” Michael had pressed the button for the fifth floor no less than twenty times, and now he gave it an extra few jabs just for good measure. We were alone now, and something unpleasant entered my mind.

Sometimes when I’m in a tight situation, I’ll feel a need to touch somebody’s head. It happens a lot on airplanes. I’ll look at the person seated in front of me, and within a moment the idea will have grown from a possibility to a compulsion. There is no option—I simply have to do it. The easiest method is to make like I’m getting up, to grab the forward seat for support and just sort of pat the person’s hair with my fingers. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I say.

“No problem.”

Most often I’ll continue getting out of my seat, then walk to the back of the plane or go to the bathroom and stand there for a few minutes, trying to fight off what I know is inevitable: I need to touch the person’s head again. Experience has taught me that you can do this three times before the head’s owner either yells at you or rings for the flight attendant. “Is something wrong?” she’ll ask.

“I don’t think so, no.”

“What do you mean ‘no,’” the passenger will say. “This freak keeps touching my head.”

“Is that true, sir?”

It’s not always a head. Sometimes I need to touch a particular purse or briefcase.

When I was a child this sort of compulsive behavior was my life, but now I practice it only if I’m in a situation where I can’t smoke: planes—as I mentioned—and elevators.

*Just touch the boy’s head,* I thought. *The old man did it, so why can’t you?*

To remind myself that this is inappropriate only makes the voice more insistent. The thing must be done because it is inappropriate. If it weren’t, there’d be no point in bothering with it.

*He won’t even notice it. Touch him now, quick.*

Were we traveling a long distance, I would have lost the battle, but fortunately we weren’t going far. The elevator arrived on the fifth floor and I scrambled out the door, set the coffees on the carpet, and lit a cigarette. “You’re going to have to give me a minute here,” I said.

“But my room’s just down the hall. And this is non-smoking.”

“I know, I know.”

“It’s not good for you,” he said.
“That’s true for a lot of people,” I told him. “But it really is good for me. Take my word for it.”

He leaned against a door and removed the DO NOT DISTURB sign, studying it for a moment before sticking it in his back pocket.

I only needed to smoke for a minute, but realized when I was finished that there was no ashtray. Beside the elevator was a window, but of course it was sealed shut. Hotels. They do everything in their power to make you want to jump to your death, and then they make certain that you can’t do it. “Are you finished with your cocoa?” I asked.

“No.”

“Well, are you finished with the lid?”

“I guess so.”

He handed it to me and I spit into the center—no easy task, as my mouth was completely dry. Fifty percent of my body water was seeping out my ass, and the other half was in transit.

“That’s gross,” he said.

“Yeah, well you’re just going to have to forgive me.” I stubbed the cigarette into the spit, set the lid on the carpet, and picked up the coffees. “Okay, where to?”

He pointed down a long corridor and I followed him, gnawing on a question that’s been troubling me for years. What if you had a baby and you just . . . you just needed to touch it where you knew you shouldn’t. I don’t mean that you’d want to. You wouldn’t desire the baby any more than you desire a person whose head you’ve just touched. The act would be compulsive rather than sexual, and while to you there’d be a big difference, you couldn’t expect a prosecutor, much less an infant, to recognize it. You’d be a bad parent, and once the child could talk and you told it not to tell anyone, you would become a manipulator—a monster, basically—and the reason behind your actions would no longer matter.

The closer we got to the end of the hall, the more anxious I became. I had not laid a finger on the boy’s head. I have never poked or prodded either a baby or a child, so why did I feel so dirty? Part of it was just my makeup, the deep-seated belief that I deserve a basement room, but a larger, uglier part had to do with the voices I hear on talk radio, and my tendency, in spite of myself, to pay them heed. The man in the elevator had not thought twice about asking Michael personal questions or about laying a hand on the back of his head. Because he was neither a priest nor a homosexual, he hadn’t felt the need to watch himself, worrying that every word or gesture might be misinterpreted. He could unthinkingly wander the halls with a strange boy, while for me it amounted to a political act—an insistence that I was as good as the next guy. Yes, I am a homosexual; yes, I am soaking wet; yes, I sometimes feel an urge to touch people’s heads, but still I can safely see a ten-year-old back to his room. It bothered me that I needed to prove something this elementary. And prove it to people whom I could never hope to convince.

“This is it,” Michael said. From the other side of the door I heard the sound of a television. It was one of those Sunday-morning magazine programs, a weekly hour where all news is good news. Blind Jimmy Henderson coaches a volleyball team. An ailing groundhog is fitted for a back brace. That type of thing. The boy inserted his card key into the slot, and the door opened onto a bright, well-furnished room. It was twice the size of mine, with higher ceilings and a sitting area. One window framed a view of the lake, and the other a stand of scarlet maples.

“Oh, you’re back,” a woman said. She was clearly the boy’s mother, as their profiles were identical, the foreheads easing almost imperceptibly into blunt freckled noses. Both too had spiky blond hair, though for her I imagined the style was accidental, the result of the
pillows piled behind her head. She was lying beneath the covers of a canopy bed, examining one of the many brochures scattered across the comforter. A man slept beside her, and when she spoke, he shifted slightly and covered his face with the crook of his arm. “What took you so long?” She looked toward the open door, and her eyes widened as they met mine. “What the . . .”

There was a yellow robe at the foot of the bed, and the woman turned her back to me as she got up and stepped into it. Her son reached for the coffees, and I tightened my grip, unwilling to surrender what I’d come to think of as my props. They turned me from a stranger to a kindly stranger, and I’d seen myself holding them as his parents rounded on me, demanding to know what was going on.

“Give them to me,” he said, and rather than making a scene, I relaxed my grip. The coffees were taken, and I felt my resolve starting to crumble. Empty-handed, I was just a creep, the spooky wet guy who’d crawled up from the basement. The woman crossed to the dresser, and as the door started to close she called out to me. “Hey,” she said. “Wait a minute.” I turned, ready to begin the fight of my life, and she stepped forward and pressed a dollar into my hand. “You people run a very nice hotel,” she told me. “I just wish we could stay longer.”

The door closed and I stood alone in the empty corridor, examining my tip and thinking, *Is that all?*