

tric mirror, there hovers your faint image. You'll be superimposed over every email. Or, lurking in the glassy surface of online porn, there you are. Fewer people shut down their computers anymore, and who can blame them? The moment that monitor goes black, you're looking at yourself, not smiling, not anything. Here's your worst-ever passport photo enlarged to life size. Swimming behind the eBook words of Jane Austen, that slack, dead-eyed zombie face, that's yours. That's you.

The Sears catalogue was better. The paper reflected nothing. You could lose yourself in the Sears catalogue. The one published for the Christmas season they called the "Wish Book," and seldom has a name been more accurate because it held hundreds of pages of toys and food and clothes, tools, and you-name-it. You could never remember it all, and every time you opened that book you found something you'd never seen before. Every time you cracked those pages you fell in love. Children and young people are always looking for an anchor, a tether, some attachment to ground them in the impossible world. The objects in the Sears catalogue baited you into adulthood. You couldn't wait to find a job, any job, and start buying stuff. The vastness of stuff was unknowable. It was the world.

That's how I originally structured this book: to be a little unknowable. Reader friends complained about how the dwindling number of pages, those physical sheets of paper you held between the thumb and index finger of your right hand, suggested when the plot of a novel was reaching its climax. At the time I had no washing machine. We're talking 1991. I took my dirty clothes to a Laun-

dromat called City Laundry every Tuesday after work. The place was cluttered with old magazines, old *Vogue* magazines brought in by the owner, Gretchen. They were the only reading material, and I tried reading them. The pages were seldom numbered. The pages were chockablock with artsy photos and quotes, enlarged and lifted out of context. In articles, the feature copy started near the front of the magazine but quickly "jumped" to pages near the back. Trying to read a story was like trying to navigate through a Las Vegas casino. It was designed to entice and seduce you. It was designed to trap you. I got lost. I loved it. I told myself, *Why can't a novel do this?*

So that's how I originally wrote this book. The story would not unspool as a continuous linear series of "and then, and then, and then's . . ." At the end of the first chapter, the reader would be directed to jump to, for example, Chapter Thirty. At the end of Chapter Thirty, she'd be told to jump to Chapter Sixteen. Following the plot would mean paging forward and backward, and you'd never know where the story might end. It might all come to a head at the physical center of the book. Better yet, as you hunted for the next chapter, you'd glimpse marvelous, ridiculous scenes, and you'd wonder, "How will the story ever get *there?*?"

Most of the book I wrote while watching music videos on MTV. Yes, that's how old I am. Back then MTV still played videos. Now, no doubt, you picture me wearing high-button shoes and rolling a hoop down a dirt road in—I don't know—ancient Thebes?

Nobody ever had so much fun writing a book. I'd be couch surfing with Alexander Graham Bell and Dolley Madison, watching