After months of quasi – dating, both Peter and Jennifer have questions.

“And if this time together morphs into a *relationship*?”

“You mean, if I get pregnant.”

Peter’s warm brown eyes regarded Jennifer dispassionately.

“Abortion probably…. though now, there’s the morning after pill. Reams your womb out like gutting a pumpkin for Halloween, but I’d rather have it - than running a gauntlet of angry, chanting fundamentalists, and maybe a gun at my back.”

Peter turned away, flipping his thick auburn ponytail over his shoulder and returned to the bicycle he’d been overhauling on the stand.

Jennifer picked up her overstuffed backpack, “Then I’ll see you tomorrow, dark-thirty a.m. for the *Tour de Hornell*.”

The bicycle mechanic turned and looked at her with a glimmer of a smile, nodding his head.

Peter and Jennifer had ridden on bike trips and training tours, together, and in the group, for over six months. Cooling down by the lakeshore or in Peter’s big kitchen, they’d grown so close it felt like they were blossoming into a relationship. But she knew that her hard driving work ethic towards her career objectives ruined other romances. Could she have a boyfriend and actualize her art career?

As Jennifer trudged the sidewalks of Alfred, New York back to her home on the edge of town, she thought about the banner she’d volunteered to make. In high school she’d mitigated the jocks harassment by painting large, colorful, paper signs for the gymnasium during their home games. Cheerleaders left her alone in the bathroom and her art teacher appreciated it, showing the department contributing to school spirit. The basement studios had been her refuge until graduation. This banner, which now lay on top of a hollow-core door supported with saw horses in her basement, was an entire bale of fabric she’d snared in the Hornell Dollar Store for five dollars. Tight beige cotton, sixty-inch width, perfect for long vertical signs she could roll up and put into one of her larger backpacks with her climbing gear. The fabric weighed a lot. Jennifer thought she’d need more “S” hooks to hang it properly. It had to look good. People wouldn’t notice if it was a half-assed job. Cameras had to read it clearly.

The protest organizing crew of four still had to hear back from the janitor at the site. The thickness of the wall at the top of the concrete cooling tower was critical. Her former biking buddy, Craig, had originally said he’d help, but his union carpenter job at the site was too important. He had two kids. So he found a sympathetic accomplice, especially interested when he found out young women would be there.

Opening the front door she saw her two roommates, Jillian and Anne, putting dinner on the table. They had an arrangement for cooking and household chores. It lightened the load. Their tasty cooking was a perk she hadn’t counted on when they got it all together. Jennifer clumped up to her room and tossed her pack onto the bed.

Unzipping the large back pocket she pulled out two quarts of red and black acrylic fabric paint she’d gotten her friend, Margie, to order with the textile department supplies. Placing her art history books on the desk, she opened the smaller front pocket and pulled out a notebook, tossing it onto the books. She ran her fingers through her short chestnut curls and stretched her arms behind her back, holding both hands together, bending over, and pulling the muscles in the front of her chest for the sweet relief of tension. Untying her shoes, she put the clay-spattered footwear in an open box for that purpose and took off her dirty jeans, pulling on old pair of sweat pants over her muscular legs, and a heavy wool sweater on her trim, t-shirted torso. Food smells finally got to Jennifer and she sauntered down to join the table.

 In the early cold and dark of the next morning Jennifer squeezed into her bike gear, putting on a Gore Tex vest to break the wind until she warmed up. It was uphill until the Canacadea State Forest. After a big bowl of oatmeal and eggs, she walked out to the barn and took her bike off its hooks.

Mounting her Masi, she bumped down the packed gravel driveway. Her skinny tires, skittering along as rocks ricocheted towards tree trunks nearby. Reaching Glen Street, Jennifer smoothly peddled to the stop sign and turned right. Sniffing a drip up her cold nose, she shifted though all fifteen of her gears. Eleven bicycles with riders were assembled. She made a dozen. It was mostly guys, but the four women in the group held their own. Peter led the charge and they straggled into a line rhythmically rotating the pedals towards Alfred Station and Route 21. The town of Almond lay ahead and after that, the forest. They’d all meet at The Half Cup Diner for lunch in Hornell. Jennifer loved their real lemon meringue pie.

Most of the guys moved ahead, as the women maintained an equal distance from one another and kept steadily pedaling. The women took turns as the leader of the pack, giving respite to those behind in her draft. Sun warmed the road and burned off the haze of early morning. Slowly they gained and could see the last of the men against a backdrop of gold, red, and orange foliage. The road between the forest and lake was a beautiful level reward after climbing for six miles. In the flat the women picked up and caught up to the last two males. Peter was not among them.

The women passed and kept steadily increasing their pace together as they rounded the end of the forest. The long descent stretched in front of them. Bud’s Sohio Gas was a tinker toy in the distance. Six male bicyclists flew ahead on the highway. The women stepped it up. They stayed alongside of the three end men, trying to break in, until a car honked and they slipped back. Jennifer was leading; she turned to her teammate behind and made a signal with her hand. The three women understood what was happening. Sometimes they were like a flock of birds.

After a line of cars passed the women, Jennifer put her oatmeal and eggs to work. She gained on the three guys at the end of the men and could see, in the distance, Peter’s trim butt above his seat pumping its all. It looked like a space was opening up within the six. Those huge expenditures of energy at the beginning of a ride could finally catch up with you. Jennifer shot over, in front of the middle guy in the male pack, her thighs and buttocks groaning. Blessing her patience and stamina. The bicyclists behind her fell farther back. The pack of three women cruised past the dispirited men and flew to Jennifer. Only three guys ahead, plus Peter, and town was approaching. Jennifer took a left at Bud’s Gas and the four women cruised down a back alley with a blind opening. If pedestrians were on the street when they exited they’d be mowed down. If they succeeded, they’d head through another alley and be further than the others, ending up facing the front-runners as they came down the street the opposing way, approaching the diner.

No pedestrians. The women shot over to the next alley. At its opening onto the street they slowed and cut to the left, spreading out on the asphalt briefly so that Peter and the front three bicyclists could see them as a flank of four Amazons approaching. Peter’s jaw dropped and then flexed into a smile looking at the sweaty beaming faces of the women who were laughing as they pulled up and hopped off their bikes. The three stragglers in the *Tour* caught up with them five minutes later.

Inside, the dozen bikers filled the counter. Jennifer had worked in a place like this during high school and knew the lingo and ribbing. She got along with the cook at The Half Cup. He made sure they had lemon meringue pie every first week of the month in good weather when the group did their *Tour de Hornell*.

It would be a faster ride home. Climb the hill from town and cruise the lake, and then it was downhill all the way. Jennifer followed Peter back to his shop as the others peeled off to their homes and assignations. After tall glasses of water, they kissed, smelling the fresh air sweat on each other’s bodies and tasted each others salt. But an Art History paper called and Jennifer broke off reluctantly. Besides she wasn’t sure about this deeper involvement with the bicycle mechanic.

At home, after a shower, and her share of dinner prep, Jennifer read and took notes for about an hour, then made a cup of tea and thought about how she’d approach her paper. She had a week. With her percolator mind, thinking came up with many angles, but slowly. She was going to surprise her professor. On her last trip to New York City she had bought a book on Artemisia Gentileschi, an artist of the seventeenth century. In the lectures and in her textbook, the only women featured were Mary Cassatt, Louise Nevelson, and Georgia O’Keefe. These were artists within the last one hundred years. Jennifer knew there were earlier women and she had started to find them. This would knock the jockey shorts off Rick Freeman.

The next day, Sunday, Jennifer devoted most of her time to sketching in the letters on the banner. Measuring out the length of the fabric, she gently folded it accordion fashion on a large area of newsprint she’d scored from the first-year drawing classroom. Taking the beginning edges she neatly pulled it along the seven and a half foot hollow-core door. She’d work in seven-foot sections. There were one hundred and twenty feet of fabric, enough for two signs sixty feet long. She had seven letters for the first one and thirty-two for the second. After doing the math she decided to make the letters for the first banner eight feet high with one and one half feet between them. It was simple, NO NUKES. She started sketching.

After the first sign was laid out she cut the banner at sixty feet and hot glued a hem on each end to give it a finished look. She fashioned it into a roll and placed it on a clean table behind her. Next were the thirty-two letters and numbers of PLUTONIUM 239 - Half Life 24,110 Years. She calculated they would be a foot-and-a-half high with eight inches between each. But after the first banner, she was tired. People didn’t realize the physical exercise of art. Drawing the first letters had been a workout for her torso and arms.

Jennifer slunk between her sheets and rested her head on the soft down pillow. Monday would bring an Art History class, an afternoon ceramic chemistry lab, and English Literature. Maybe Peter would like to go out to the little Mexican place in town. She’d call him. Her aggressiveness unnerved him, but maybe in a good way. He wasn’t used to being pursued. Thinking about Artemisia Gentileschi lulled her to sleep.